
8-4-2022

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Citation

Baran, Cavit, Eric Chyn, and Bryan A. Stuart. 2022. "How the Great Migration Changed Black Children's Educational Attainment." *Employment Research* 29(3): 4-6. [https://doi.org/10.17848/1075-8445.29\(3\)-2](https://doi.org/10.17848/1075-8445.29(3)-2)

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How the Great Migration Changed Black Children's Educational Attainment

Cavit Baran, Eric Chyn, and Bryan A. Stuart

The twentieth-century migration of Southern-born African Americans—the Great Migration—was a landmark event in American history. More than seven million African Americans left the South between 1915 and 1970 in search of better economic and social opportunities for themselves and their children. Prior research has found evidence that the Great Migration had mixed impacts on adults. While Black migrants earned substantially more than their counterparts who had stayed in the South, they also died earlier and faced higher incarceration rates. Less is known about how the Great Migration affected the outcomes of migrants' children.

In our paper, we provide new evidence on how moving north affected the children of African Americans who migrated during the early years of the Great Migration. Several features of our setting suggest that Black children may have benefited from moving

during this period. For example, school quality was generally lower in the South, and fewer economic and social opportunities existed there.

Based on an analysis of 1940 census records, we find that moving to the North during the Great Migration substantially improved the educational outcomes of children. Using an approach that accounts for selective migration, we find that moving from the South to the North increased completed schooling by an average of 0.8 years as of 1940. Our analysis also reveals that, although the average impact was positive, the benefits of migrating varied widely across places. Some places in the South—such as Birmingham, Alabama—were comparable to the best places in the North, while others—such as New Orleans, Louisiana—offered poor prospects for children.

Overall, our findings suggest that the Great Migration played an

important role in narrowing U.S. educational disparities by race. Between the 1900 and 1970 birth cohorts, the education gap between White and Black individuals shrank from 4.0 to 0.9 years—a 78 percent reduction. Previous research has found that improvements in Southern schools played a key role in the relative rise in Black educational attainment. Our research demonstrates how the Great Migration promoted schooling achievement, thereby extending our understanding of the relative increase in African Americans' education levels during the twentieth century.

Measuring the Effects of Migration to the North

Using the full population records from the 1940 census, our approach centers on estimating place-specific effects of migrating on the educational outcomes of children. We estimate place effects at the county level for all destinations chosen by Southern-born migrants. This allows us to compare the effects of moving to the North relative to those of staying in the South, which is key to assessing the impact of the Great Migration on children. Using the county-level estimates of place effects, we compute the overall impact of moving to the North as the migrant-weighted difference in place effects between counties in the North and those in the South.

The 1940 census records are ideal for our analysis for three reasons. First, our key outcome of interest is educational attainment, which was first recorded by the census in 1940. Second, these records provide a sufficiently large sample for studying migration to more than 720 destinations. Third, because in 1940 most children completed their education before leaving home, we can observe children's educational attainment and the characteristics of migrant parents. Our main analysis is restricted to children aged 14–18 who were living with at least one of their

ARTICLE HIGHLIGHTS

- *We provide new evidence on how the Great Migration affected children's opportunities—a driving force behind the migration that has received relatively little attention.*
- *Moving to the North during the Great Migration substantially increased educational outcomes of children: accounting for selective migration, we find that the average move from the South to the North increased schooling by 0.8 years as of 1940.*
- *We present suggestive evidence that these benefits were partly driven by higher school quality, better labor market opportunities for adults, and greater social capital.*
- *Overall, our findings suggest that the Great Migration helped narrow U.S. educational disparities by race.*

parents. This coresidency is required to ensure that we can identify whether children have a migrant parent.

The main challenge when estimating the benefits of migration is the difficulty in finding an appropriate comparison group. Black households that chose to move out of the South systematically differ from their counterparts who opted to stay. To estimate the impacts of moving, we follow other recent research on place effects by comparing outcomes among movers using a two-step approach.

In the first step, we examine differences in education for children aged 14–18 whose migrant parents moved to different destinations, controlling for the head of household’s state of origin and the characteristics of children and families observable in the census data. The second step addresses remaining selection on household characteristics that we cannot observe in the data (for example, latent motivation or networks of relatives) by adjusting our comparisons for the correlation between migrant destination choices and the family characteristics we do observe.

Intuitively, the idea is to compare children in migrant households from the same state of origin that moved to different destinations. To the extent that children in certain destinations obtain higher schooling than they would elsewhere (for example, by moving to Pittsburgh, where children had relatively high levels of achievement, rather than Baltimore, where children had lower achievement levels), this comparison suggests the presence of causal place effects. However, the methodology additionally asks whether parents who moved to areas with better outcomes were more educated (or otherwise advantaged) than parents who moved to areas with worse outcomes, and this information is used to refine the estimates.

Analysis of these estimates of county-level place effects reveals large variation in the effects of moving on

educational attainment. Figure 1 is a county-level map of place effects for all locations in our estimation sample. (The sample is restricted to locations that had at least 25 children of Black migrants.) On the map, counties with darker green shading are destinations where children gained more years of education relative to the average location chosen by migrant parents. Counties with lighter green shading show the opposite.

Many of the best places for Black children are in the North. Sixty-eight percent of destinations in the North have a positive place effect, compared to just 13 percent of counties in the South. Based on the migrant-weighted averages of place effects in the North and South, we estimate that the overall effect of moving to the North was an increase in schooling of 0.81 years. This magnitude is sizable—about 12 percent

of the average education level for Black children in our sample.

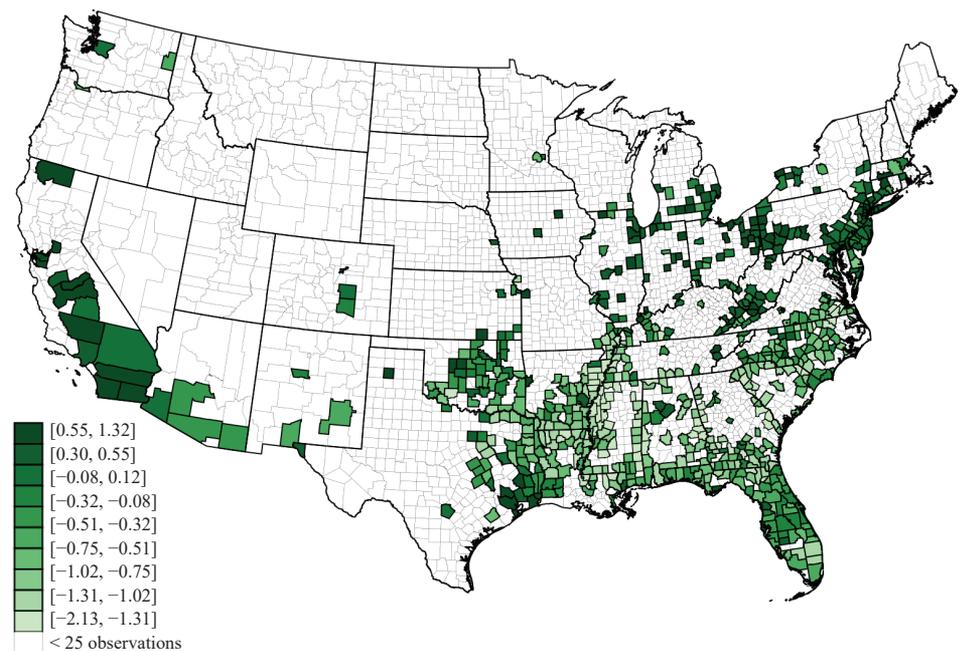
Why Did Moving North Generate Benefits for Children?

To understand possible mechanisms associated with the benefits to moving to the North, we relate our county-

We estimate that moving to the North increased schooling by 0.81 years, on average. This magnitude is sizable, about 12 percent of the mean education level for Black children in our sample.

level estimated place effects from 1940 to a range of historical measures of local area characteristics. Figure 2

Figure 1 Place Effects on Years of Schooling in 1940, Black Children Aged 14–18



NOTE: Figure shows estimates of county-level place effects on completed schooling, in years, of moving to that location relative to the average effect of moving across all locations. Dark-green shading represents counties with schooling gains that were larger than the average, while light-green shading represents counties with schooling gains smaller than average. Counties with fewer than 25 children of migrant households do not have estimates and are left in white.

SOURCE: Authors’ analysis of the 1940 census.

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summarizes this analysis by reporting positive (green circles) and negative (red triangles) correlations for each characteristic that we consider. To summarize, we find that place effects were considerably larger in areas where school quality was higher, homicide

Conclusion

We provide new evidence on how the Great Migration affected children’s opportunities. Seeking better opportunities for one’s children was one of the driving forces behind the migration that has received relatively little attention. Our research complements studies examining impacts of the Great Migration on adults and cities, as well as recent work showing that the Great Migration reduced long-term economic opportunities for Black children born in Northern cities during the 1980s because of a decline in local conditions (Derenoncourt 2022). We show that the children of Black migrants who moved north during the first wave of the Great Migration benefited substantially.

Most importantly, our analysis of mechanisms provides evidence that the opportunities available to Black children depended strongly on the place-specific policies and characteristics in our setting. Opportunities were greater in destinations that offered higher earnings to adults, invested more in their schools, developed greater social capital, lowered crime, and placed fewer individuals in prison. These results highlight the potential importance of local factors in driving further progress toward closing the Black-White opportunity gap.

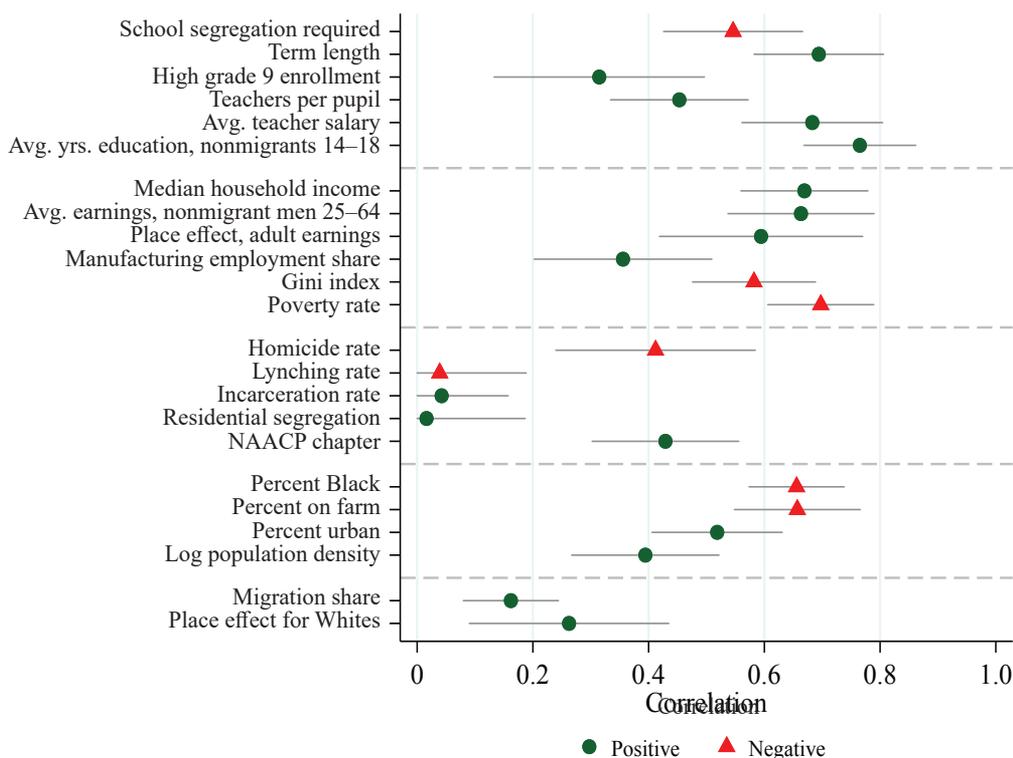
Reference

Derenoncourt, Ellora. 2022. “Can You Move to Opportunity? Evidence from the Great Migration.” *American Economic Review* 112(2): 369–408.

We show that the children of Black migrants who moved north during the first wave of the Great Migration benefited substantially.

rates were lower, and Black adults had better labor market opportunities. Northern counties typically had more favorable levels for each of these characteristics relative to counties in the South.

Figure 2 Correlates of County-Level Place Effects, 1940



NOTE: The figure displays equally weighted correlations between place effects on schooling attainment and county characteristics.
SOURCE: Authors’ analysis of the 1940 census.

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For additional details, see Upjohn Institute Working Paper No. 22-367 at https://research.upjohn.org/up_workingpapers/367.

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