The Great Migration to the North and the "Black Metropolis" of the early twentieth century: A reevaluation of the role of Black community size

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ABSTRACT

By some accounts, large Black populations in northern cities aided Blacks' employment in occupations of the "Black Metropolis" at the start of the Great Migration. Yet, the present study, analyzing Census data, refutes these accounts. Blacks' odds of employment in such occupations – for example, mass media and cultural expression – were often greatest in major northern cities with the smallest Black populations, consistent with the proposition that small and stable minority communities avoid intense discrimination. Overall, however, there is little evidence that Black population size substantially affected Blacks' employment in Black Metropolis occupations.

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1. Introduction

Social scientists have a longstanding interest in how a minority group's migration and population growth affect its labor market prospects. This interest has produced two lines of scholarship. One is the view that a minority group's population growth improves its labor market prospects. According to this view, an ethnic economy arises when the group's population increases through migration, enhancing group members' employment opportunities. In particular, the view suggests, group size and growth significantly bolster group members' employment opportunities in professional and entrepreneurial pursuits that serve consumers from the group (e.g., physicians and retail merchants). The other view is that a minority group's population growth reduces its labor market prospects. This view proposes that group members' employment opportunities decrease when (1) labor markets are saturated by the group's population increase and (2) prejudice and discrimination are intensified because the group's enlarged visibility creates the perception that it is a competitive threat to the majority group. Owing to these negative outcomes, the view further implies, large and growing minority groups find it difficult to acquire material and human capital resources needed for professional and entrepreneurial pursuits.

Social scientific interest in these two views is now focusing on the consequences of the "Great Migration" of southern Blacks to northern cities during the twentieth century. Sociologists (Eichenlaub, Tolnay, & Alexander, 2010) and economists (Boustan, 2009), as well as journalists (Wilkerson, 2010), are reconsidering the conventional wisdom that the urban North is a "Promised Land" of employment opportunities for Blacks. In doing so, these scholars are casting doubt on the once popular belief that northern Blacks realized a substantial economic payoff from the migration. The present study advances this literature by exploring how the first wave of the Great Migration

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(circa 1915–1930) affected Blacks' employment in occupations linked to the "Dream of Black Metropolis," applying the views discussed above.

2. Literature review

Inspired by Black leaders' exhortations for self-help through racial solidarity, the Dream of Black Metropolis is the idea that in northern urban centers, Blacks can collectively build communities that function independently of the larger society (Meier & Rudwick, 1976, p. 252). Sizable numbers of Black customers, voters, and patrons, according to this belief, are the basis of a Black "city within a city" in which Blacks pursue economic gain, social autonomy, and political influence (Massey & Denton, 1993, pp. 115–116). Specifically, the belief is that large Black communities arising from the massive influx from the South in the economically prosperous 1920s allow Blacks in northern urban centers to establish and operate their own economic and social institutions. The latter include the practices of Black professionals who serve a Black clientele in medicine, dentistry, and law. They include the businesses of Black entrepreneurs who, in banking, insurance, and retailing, among other lines of commerce, sell goods and services to Black consumers. And they include churches, newspapers, art galleries, theaters, and nightclubs of confident and assertive artists and performers who produce and disseminate innovative and unique forms of Black cultural expression for Black and, occasionally, racially mixed audiences. In addition, the Dream of Black Metropolis stimulates hope that in northern urban centers, large Black communities will generate robust Black activist groups and voting blocs that compel the local power structure to include Blacks in positions of municipal government and public service.

The belief that large Black populations in major northern cities are mainsprings of vibrant Black communities is plausible. Building on historical literature (Osofsky, 1966; Spear, 1967), one account of the Black Metropolis calls the tremendous number of Blacks in these cities "an enormous new resource," not only for Black professionals and entrepreneurs but also for Black artists, musicians, and writers who form an influential "cultural apparatus" (Gregory, 2005, p. 124). In line with this account, a critical mass of Blacks bolsters Blacks' employment in show business and music in northern cities (Boyd, 2005). This account, furthermore, tallies with the sociological proposition that a large migrant community forms an ethnic economy or enclave that benefits group members, particularly in occupations supplying goods and services to co-ethnics (Portes & Grosfoguel, 1994). A large ethnic community "is likely to develop certain internal strengths that will support some occupational activities even if outsiders are totally against their holding the position" (Lieberson, 1980, p. 297). Thus, "if the black population base is large enough, there will be support for black doctors, black clergy, and so on, even if they remain totally unacceptable to others" (Lieberson, 1980, pp. 297–298). Consistent with this account, the most successful Black entrepreneurs are in the largest Black communities of northern cities (Boyd, 2006, 2008), and Black migration to these cities is selective of southern Blacks who are literate and skilled (Marks, 1989; Tolnay, 2001).

Nevertheless, the lofty aspirations of the Dream of Black Metropolis often went unfulfilled, in many cases, clashing sharply with reality. As Black communities in major northern cities grew and became more noticeable, Blacks were more likely to be seen by Whites as rivals in labor markets and political arenas. Responding to this perception, and to interracial friction in workplaces, neighborhoods, and public settings, anti-Black prejudice and discrimination in the urban North rose to new heights, taking the form of implacable social, and in some cases, legal, restrictions against Blacks (Lieberson, 1980; Massey & Denton, 1993; Wilson, 1978). Moreover, the economic and social organizations of Black communities in these cities were swamped by new arrivals (Sowell, 1981; Tolnay, 2001), and contemporary ethnographic studies (Drake & Cayton, 1962; Frazier, 1966) infer that in the wake of the influx, northern Black communities were distressed not only by racial constraints imposed from the outside but also by internal discord resulting from social class divisions within Black America itself.

These accounts are consistent with three sociological propositions about negative effects of minority group-size. First, a large and growing minority group is (1) highly visible and thus an obvious target for the majority group's bias and hostility and (2) usually regarded as a "power threat" and, therefore, is highly susceptible to economic and political exclusion (Blalock, 1967, p. 150; Jiobu, 1990, p. 136). Second, a large and growing minority group has difficulty exploiting occupational specialties that exist because of the group's distinctive history, unique skills, and/or opportunities (Lieberson, 1980, p. 379). Such "niches" are saturated when, owing to large group-size and increase, the number of potential entrants into the niche exceeds the number of occupants that the niche can support, displacing group members from the niche (Waldinger, 1996, p. 451). Third, a large and growing minority group, due to its unwieldy size, is difficult to mobilize for collective actions that influence the majority through pressure tactics and voting blocs (Blalock, 1967, pp. 176–180). In sum, the propositions of power threat, niche saturation, and mobilization incapacity predict that the Great Migration's effects are largely negative, undermining the Dream of Black Metropolis in northern Black communities.

3. Competing hypotheses

The above review leads to competing hypotheses about the relationship between (1) northern Black communities' size and growth at the start of the Great Migration and (2) Blacks' employment in occupations associated with the Dream of Black Metropolis. Hypothesis 1 is that the relationship is positive, owing to potential advantages of large and growing Black communities, notably, a sizable population of Black supporters of Blacks' endeavors in professions, business, public service, the arts, entertainment, and mass media. Hypothesis 2 is that the relationship is negative due to possible disadvantages of large and growing Black communities, including greater exposure to prejudice and discrimination, increased saturation of