Black Pioneers, Inter-metropolitan Movers, and Housing Desegregation

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Abstract submitted to the Annual Meeting of Population Association of America
Washington, DC, March 31- April 2, 2016

When effective fair housing laws are passed, the incidence of housing discrimination should go down and groups who have experienced discrimination should have greater mobility. It would thus follow that African-Americans, who were highly segregated in American cities when the Fair Housing Act fully went into effect at the end of 1969, should show increased mobility in the 1970s. Still, even if discrimination suddenly dropped to zero, we would not expect black moves within a metropolitan area to suddenly look exactly like white moves. Blacks might tend to move within or close to segregated areas because of ties to families, jobs, and churches, or because of a preference not to live in a predominantly non-black environment. So, to the extent that we do observe blacks in the 1970s (or later) not moving out of segregated areas, is this because discrimination has not declined, or because these other considerations dominate choices?

A way to separate these factors is to study blacks who move from one metropolitan area to another. An African-American family moving from, say, Pittsburgh to Chicago, might be expected to have fewer ties to any specific location in Chicago, because it is entering the metropolitan area de novo. Comparing the location choices of inter-metropolitan versus intra-metropolitan black movers may thus give us insight into changes in freedom of mobility as well as the influence of intra-metropolitan ties upon desegregation.

In this project, we examine the mobility choices of black households between 1960 and 2010. We use household-level Decennial Census and American Community Survey (ACS) data
geocoded down to the census tract level to examine the mobility histories of black households. Our preliminary results indicate that, for black households, one’s status as an “inter-metropolitan” migrant – especially from an urban area outside the South – is a powerful predictor of “pioneering” into a white neighborhood. Moreover, and perhaps even more importantly, the ratio of these inter-metropolitan black arrivals to the incumbent metropolitan black population is a powerful predictor of whether a metropolitan area experiences substantial declines in housing segregation.

Understanding Variation in African-American migration

We start with the observation that during the decades between 1950 and 1990, integration in urban America generally occurred through the movement of black households into white neighborhoods, rather than vice versa. These movers often faced discrimination, and sometimes hostility or outright violence. They were sometimes exploited by “blockbusting” real estate agents or fraudulent mortgage brokers. Their arrival might set the stage for stable integration, but often triggered declines in white demand and eventual re-segregation. Because of the many difficulties and uncertainties they faced, and because their migration played such a pivotal role in urban evolution, it seems appropriate to refer to these movers by the shorthand of “black pioneers.” Specifically, in this paper the term “black pioneers” refers to black households that move into majority white census tracts.

Our paper illustrates two dimensions of black migration that demographers currently understand to only a limited degree, but which we can robustly analyze through our access to restricted Census data geocoded to the neighborhood level.
First, we examine the significance of intra-metropolitan and inter-metropolitan moves in either solidifying existing racial boundaries or reducing segregation levels. Intra-metropolitan moves are constrained by one’s existing network of relatives, friends, jobs, and institutional connections. These networks tend to shrink the distance of intra-metropolitan moves and in the case of African-Americans, may restrain the willingness of households to act as pioneers at all, or, if they are pioneers, to concentrate their moves into a handful of “white” tracts close to existing black concentrations. Inter-metropolitan moves are less constrained by existing networks. In an environment (such as the post-Fair Housing Act environment of the 1970s) where discrimination barriers are lowering and where integration is embraced by a significant segment of society as a desirable goal, inter-metropolitan black movers may treat the new metro area they are entering as a unified (rather than racially bifurcated) housing market. Therefore, the comparison between intra-metropolitan and inter-metropolitan black household moves speaks to perceived barriers to housing integration. As this discussion implies, we are interested in four distinctions: the decade in which migration is happening; whether particular black households are making “pioneer” moves or staying within largely black communities; how far pioneering moves are from existing black communities; and whether the mover is making an intra- or inter-metropolitan move. Our data allow us to easily distinguish all these variables, while at the same time controlling for such factors as the SES of the moving household, the SES of the host census tract and the metropolitan area.

Second, we examine who becomes an inter-metropolitan black mover, and what characteristics of such movers are most strongly associated with becoming a “black pioneer.” During the Great Migration (roughly from 1915 to 1965), millions of African-Americans moved from the rural South to urban areas in both North and South. These movers tended to settle
within segregated enclaves in the cities, following the “port of entry” model that has generally applied to international migrants to the United States. During the 1960s and 1970s, however, black migration patterns changed sharply. The net flow from South to North slowed, halted, and reversed. Migrants became more likely to originate from metropolitan areas rather than rural communities. Our hypothesis is that this shift towards inter-metropolitan migration, usually originating in the North and urban South, was much more likely to produce “pioneer” moves rather than “port-of-entry” behavior, but of course the extent of this shift should be influenced by the demographic characteristics of the mover.

Third, we are interested in how the volume of arriving black inter-metropolitan migrants might have affected the evolution of segregation across different metropolitan areas. Segregation levels after 1970 fell at different rates across different metropolitan areas. The proportion of blacks in 1980 metropolitan areas who had arrived from outside the metro area after 1975 also varied widely. If inter-metropolitan black movers were especially likely to be “pioneers,” then the volume of these movers, relative to the incumbent black population, may have had a powerful effect on the degree to which segregation levels dropped in the 1970s. This is especially true if these inter-metropolitan movers tended to have a more “single market” perspective on the metro area in which they arrived. Given the other constraints on their locational choices, and perhaps their skepticism about whether fair housing laws would really change long-standing patterns of discrimination, blacks making intra-metropolitan moves, when they were willing to “pioneer” into a white neighborhood, might be particularly likely to choose a neighborhood close to existing black communities. Since many other blacks were making the same type of moves, such pioneers were very likely to end up in neighborhoods that re-segregated. Inter-metropolitan black movers, in contrast, had fewer locational constraints and
may well have taken a more “unified market” view of their new metropolitan home. If so, then the sort of pioneering they did may have been, disproportionately, in white communities that were further from existing black enclaves, and therefore areas that were less likely to quickly re-segregate. Thus, we hypothesize that both the volume and the content of inter-metropolitan black moves could have had a meaningful (and possibly powerful) effect upon an urban area’s desegregation path.

Data and Methods

We use restricted household-level Decennial Census and American Community Survey (ACS) data for the years 1960-2010 through the Census Research Data Center (RDC) network. One of the advantages of RDC data is that it makes possible for the first time, on a large scale, the identification of inter- versus intra-metropolitan black movers at a high level of geographic resolution. Moreover, it is possible to study and analyze a wide range of demographic characteristics of black households who move a significant distance away from existing “black districts” within metropolitan areas.

The availability of neighborhood-level identifiers for all households counted in the U.S. Census also allows us to generate statistics of the neighborhood environment of each household and gives us a significant advantage over the publicly available data, in which neighborhoods with few minority members have suppressed racial counts and race-related socioeconomic data. Since we have access to all household-level and individual-level responses to both the short-form and long-form Census questionnaires, we can generate variables that are not subject to any of the suppression, top-coding, or confidentiality rules that may make it hard to study the first African-American “pioneers” into white neighborhoods.
In order to identify black “pioneers” into white neighborhoods we use the migration and residence questions in the Census data. These questions capture how long ago every household head moved into their present housing unit. Our analyses take two forms. First, we generate statistics for each metropolitan area in the United States representing how likely it is that a black household would “pioneer” into a white neighborhood depending on whether that household is a newcomer to the metropolitan area or whether that household moved from the South into their current metropolitan area.

Second, we use a series of logistic regression models to compare the probability of making a “pioneering” move to the probability of making a “non-pioneering” move and the probability of not moving. The key independent variables in our regression models control for whether a household made an inter-metropolitan move or an intra-metropolitan move. We also control for the age and gender of the head of household, the educational attainment of the head of household, the marital status of the head of household, the presence of children in the household, the household income, and housing tenure. We also generate variables at the neighborhood level and at the metropolitan level to control for the distance to an established black enclave from the current census tract of each household and metropolitan-level population size, percent black, and segregation levels between blacks and whites. We run separate regression analyses for each Census year.

In order to avoid endogeneity in our regression models, we classify households as movers only if they had moved in the year prior to each census. In this way, all household-level socioeconomic variables are measured as contemporaneously as possible with the decision to move to a different neighborhood. Moreover, we compute all neighborhood- and metropolitan-level independent variables only for the population that did not move in the year prior to each
census. Therefore, these aggregate measures precede temporally the mobility behavior of black “pioneers.”

**Preliminary results and next steps**

Our results are powerful and highly robust. Inter-metropolitan black movers from the North and West are substantially more likely to move to “outlying districts” than are other black movers. The effect increases sharply in the 1970s and remains high. Moreover, the degree to which a metropolitan area attracted inter-metropolitan black movers from the North and West during the 1970s and 1980s is strongly associated with the degree to which the metropolitan area as a whole experiences black desegregation. We hypothesize that achieving a critical mass of movers to “outlying districts” has a catalytic effect upon “pro-integrative” intra-metropolitan moves. In subsequent analyses, we will model the size and structure of that critical mass to specify under just what circumstances the “pioneering” moves of black households produce widespread stable integration at the metropolitan level.