

Black Flight: Racial Shuffling in American Metropolitan Areas

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Scholars usually refer to "Black Flight," or the rapid geographical mobility of African-Americans, as the return migration of African-Americans to cities in the American South (Frey 2011). Black population gains from 2000 to 2010 mostly occurred in the metropolitan areas of the South, led by Atlanta, Dallas, and Houston. In contrast, black population in metropolitan New York, Chicago, and Detroit fell for the first time.

In addition to this black inter-metropolitan mobility, there is evidence of intra-metropolitan movement as well. In line with Chicago School theory (Frey 1979; South & Crowder 1997a, b), urban sociologists have applied the conventional term "white flight" to middle- and working-class African-Americans who move out of neighborhoods where the black poor move in and who move into neighborhoods from which whites fled. For example, Woldoff (2011) demonstrates that after white flight, the initially "pioneering" blacks flee to other neighborhoods or adjust to the new segregated residential environment into which an incoming second wave of black neighbors arrive (see also Patillo-McCoy 2000). Patillo (2007), Hyra (2008), and Freeman also discuss how all black neighborhoods have gentrified, creating class conflicts within the same areas. The class-selective understanding of Black Flight can be confused with "black suburbanization" more generally. The latter is racially-specific outward movement from the "inner city" to the periphery, which is in line with the familiar Chicago School concentric zone theory. However, at a time when middle class whites (Brown-Saraceno, 2010; Lees, 2003) and immigrants of all colors (Winnick, 1990; Portes and Zhou, 1993; Logan, Zhang and Alba, 2002) are moving into the central city and suburban areas, racial dynamics in metropolitan space are

more complex than the simple outward movement or racial “invasion-succession” models help explain.

To confuse matters further, metropolitan levels of racial segregation have largely persisted even though there is a lot of shuffling and churning of diverse populations occurring. Older and northern metropolitan areas remain the most segregated for minority groups. Blacks are still more residentially segregated from whites than are Hispanics or Asians, but blacks’ average neighborhood segregation has declined between 2000 and 2010 (Frey 2011). On one hand, areas thought of as “hyper-segregated ghettos” were depopulating as African-Americans left, making room for new immigrants, the new “invaders.” Thanks to housing vouchers, even low-income African Americans are relocating within central cities, although they usually move to other nearby poor, largely black neighborhoods (Clampet-Lundquist, 2004; Briggs, 2005; Popkin and Rosenbaum, 2007; Goering 2010). On the other hand, concentrated poverty neighborhoods have gained population during the last decade (Kneebone, Nadeau, & Berube 2011). Yet black and white gentrifiers are restoring older properties or rebuilding once vacant lots in poor neighborhoods, contributing to an increase in these “mixed income” areas.

This paper aims to distinguish the various patterns of black population movement. It analyzes data from the 2010 US Census and the 2000 Census (Longitudinal Tract Data Base with constant census tract boundaries from US2010) to identify various patterns of Black Flight in six large American metropolitan areas; we focus on their relationship to white middle class and immigrant movements. The six MSAs – Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, New York -- are selected because case studies suggest they exemplify some of the black mobility trends discussed. They are also very racially segregated, have histories of racial (especially black-white) animus, and were studied in the MCSUI surveys. Combining decennial population

censuses with ACS five-year estimates, the study explores the predictors of absolute changes in black population with a variety of census tracts, principle (central) cities, and metropolitan characteristics. The paper distinguishes various patterns of “black flight” in US metropolitan areas during the past decade in the hopes of contributing to ongoing debates about residential segregation, black residential mobility and place stratification.