

## In Focus

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# FOCUS

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## "WHITE FLIGHT" TO THE SUBURBS: A DEMOGRAPHIC APPROACH

by

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Over the past two decades, the plight of America's cities has become almost a commonplace of social comment. While city tax bases are eroding and their job markets declining as companies seek cheaper, newer, or more accessible facilities in the suburbs, their schools and services struggle against the combined impact of inflation, unemployment, and shrinking federal assistance. The cities are seen increasingly as deteriorating ghettos for the poor, the

unemployed, and the disadvantaged—above all, for minorities. In 1973, 64% of the metropolitan poor lived in the central cities.<sup>1</sup>

Linked to this decline has been the phenomenon described as "white flight." Between 1960 and 1970 the white populations of central cities in U.S. metropolitan areas declined by 9.6%—in the Northeast, the figure was 16.2%. In 1968 the Kerner Commission issued a stark warning that the nation was headed on a course toward "two separate societies"—a white, affluent society located primarily in the suburbs and a black society concentrated within large central cities. Most ominously, the bulk of those leaving appeared to be upper-class, high-status whites whose withdrawal would affect the city directly, through a reduced tax base, and indirectly, by contributing to further deterioration of the social and physical environment in the central core.

It is apparent that central cities can ill afford to sustain additional reductions in their nonpoor, nonminority populations. It is small wonder that policy proposals aimed at lowering unemployment or achieving greater racial equality are being carefully scrutinized for their potential impact on further white flight. In the debates that arise, however, conventional wisdom and anecdotes are all too often substituted for empirical evidence. Is white flight racially motivated, or is it merely a continuation of the metropolitan community's natural expansion process, which includes dispersion of both jobs and housing? Depending on the answer, the consequences for policy are very different. But despite the fact that whites have been moving to the suburbs since at least the end of World War II, we still have no firm explanations. Moreover, much of the research that has been done merely describes past patterns; it does not provide insight into the selective migrational responses that might be associated with various ecological, demographic, or policy-relevant attributes of individual cities, nor does it allow us to predict the consequences of a policy or to map out the most effective procedures for alleviating urban problems.

## A Demographic Analysis of White Flight

Over the past two years William H. Frey, of the Center for Demography and Ecology and the Institute for Research

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The purpose of FOCUS is to acquaint a wide audience with the work of the Institute for Research on Poverty, by means of short essays on selected pieces of research.

The material in any one issue is, of course, just a small sample of what is being done at the Institute. It is our hope that these summaries will whet the appetite of the reader to learn more about the research itself, and more about other research on poverty—an area of vital social concern—by Institute staff.

The views expressed are those of individual members of the Institute; they do not represent the position of the Institute for Research on Poverty, the University of Wisconsin, the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, or other funding agencies.

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on Poverty, University of Wisconsin-Madison, has developed and refined an analytic migration framework that can be applied to the examination of aggregate data on population change in metropolitan areas.

The causal relationships between the characteristics of a geographically delimited community and the population movement that takes place across its boundaries are complex and hard to specify. The net migration that large central cities experience results both from streams of local movers changing residences between the city and its suburbs, and from streams of migrants coming into or leaving the whole metropolitan area. The size of each stream reflects the sum total of each mover's decisions and evaluations.

Why do people decide to move? And how do they choose their destinations? These two questions must be analyzed separately, for we know that different explanatory factors are in operation at each phase.<sup>2</sup> An individual household's decision to move is linked to the stage in its life cycle—the age of the parents, the number of young children, and the community services the family requires. Younger people, for instance, move more often than older people, and those without children may not look closely at school systems. A family's choice of destination, however, more clearly depends upon a strict cost-benefit analysis, in which the mover evaluates the relative attributes of different destinations. When one is considering movers in the aggregate, it is this latter choice that is most crucial in determining both the size and the direction of central city population changes.

In his analysis Frey has isolated several key factors that enter into the residential choice made by a local mover or metropolitan immigrant. These can be divided, very generally, into two categories: (1) attributes that serve as demographic "controls," in that they shape the underlying demographic growth structure of a metropolitan area but cannot effectively be manipulated by policy, and (2) attributes that may be considered "policy relevant," in that some of them have become a focus of public debate and that the status of most of them in a particular metropolitan area can be altered by public policies.

## Demographic Controls

There are three important demographic controls affecting white flight. First and most significant is the city's share of the population of the larger metropolitan area—the Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMSA). Historically, the jurisdiction of the American city has been rather strictly limited to a small central core; the suburbs have in most instances successfully fought off efforts by the city government to extend its authority, especially in matters of taxation. Not least of America's urban problems is the fact that most metropolitan areas remain a patchwork of fragmented authorities. There is, notwithstanding, substantial variation. In Dayton, Ohio, in 1965, city residents composed 32% of the population of the SMSA; in Dallas, 57% (a difference that reflects very real regional variation in city/suburb population ratios).<sup>3</sup> The larger the city's share of metropolitan population, the more potential residential

choices within the city an individual has, and the less likely he or she is to move to the suburbs.

Two other factors relevant to city-suburban migration patterns are the extent of suburban development since 1950 and the age of the central city—the number of years between the census year when it first attained a population of 50,000 and 1970. On the whole, cities with histories of recent suburban growth continue to experience a high loss of population to the suburbs, and all other factors being equal, old cities, by virtue of their aging housing stock and high density levels, will be less attractive as destinations than their suburbs.

## Policy-Relevant Attributes

Under this heading Frey has examined a variety of factors that may affect the extent and nature of white flight. Some are financial: For instance, declining city revenues compel an increase in taxes, and that, in turn, tips the balance in favor of the suburbs, where taxes are generally lower (among 39 SMSAs studied, 36 had lower taxes in the suburbs). The quality of a community's school system, in contrast, is a powerful attractant, especially for families with younger children. In general, the suburbs spend more per capita for education (the average suburb/city ratio, for the same 39 SMSAs, was \$1.2: 1).<sup>4</sup>

Other types of variables may come under consideration in this category: region, crime rate, extent of school desegregation, percentage of the city population that is black, and age distribution within the city. These have all been considered as part of the explanation for white flight, and all

William H. Frey, "Central City White Flight: Racial and Nonracial Causes," Institute for Research on Poverty Discussion Paper no. 420-77.

William H. Frey, "White Flight and Central City Loss: Application of an Analytic Migration Framework," Institute for Research on Poverty Discussion Paper no. 453-77.

William H. Frey, "Class-Specific White Flight: A Comparative Analysis of Large American Cities," Institute for Research on Poverty Discussion Paper no. 507-78.

William H. Frey, "The Changing Impact of Migration on the Population Compositions of Origin and Destination Metropolitan Areas," Institute for Research on Poverty Discussion Paper no. 520-78.

### *Related Publications:*

William H. Frey, "Black Movement to the Suburbs: Potentials and Prospects for Metropolitan-Wide Integration," Institute for Research on Poverty Discussion Paper no. 452-77.

William H. Frey, "Population Movement and City-Suburb Redistribution: An Analytic Framework," *Demography* 15, no. 4 (1978). Also, Center for Demography and Ecology Reprint FY-1 (Madison: University of Wisconsin).

are to some degree open to measurement. The choice of variables for emphasis will depend, in part, upon the questions that are being asked.

As part of a larger study of metropolitan migration patterns, Frey has attempted to answer specific questions about white flight: To what extent is it racially motivated? To what extent is it class-specific—that is, largely a movement of upper-class, highly educated whites? And finally, what are its implications for aggregate demographic change in the city?

### Is White Flight Racially Motivated?

It seems fairly clear that the massive suburban relocation of whites immediately after World War II resulted in part from racial motivations.<sup>5</sup> But has the recent white out-movement from large central cities been heavily influenced by interracial housing dynamics? Frey has argued that current white flight can be explained much more fully by nonracial economic and environmental factors than by those directly related to race. Since the 1950s the nature of black migration has changed and its pace slowed, while white attitudes toward racial integration have, however formally, altered: A majority of whites now endorse such integration, at least in principle.<sup>6</sup>

Frey examined census data dealing with white movement from the city to the suburbs between 1965 and 1970, in 39 SMSAs with a population of half a million or more. He used three indices of racial influence: the percentage of the city population that was black, the degree of desegregation in central city schools, and the prevalence of racial disturbances in the late 1960s. Juxtaposed to these were several factors not directly related to race, measuring the decline of the central city relative to the broader metropolitan area (educational expenditures, tax rates, crime rates, and suburban relocation of job opportunities), the recency of suburban development, the age of the city population, and the percentage of its residents who owned their own homes—factors whose relationship to residential mobility is well documented.

Using standard statistical analytic methods, Frey was able to confirm partially his hypotheses. By far the largest total effect on white suburban movement in the 39 SMSAs can be attributed to the extent of postwar suburban development—although in these newer and more rapidly growing cities there tend to be large counterstreams that balance and to some extent mitigate the effects of the outflow of whites. Next in influence was the percentage of the city population that was black—a factor that to some extent measures the degree of daily contact between blacks and whites in the central city. We cannot, therefore, wholly discount racial factors in our analysis of the causes of white flight. Of equal influence, however, were the suburb/city tax differential, and the degree to which employment opportunities had recently moved to the suburbs (measured by the percentage of city dwellers commuting to the suburbs to work). Some recent studies purport to show that school desegregation, as carried out in the 1970s, may under certain circumstances have spurred extensive white suburbanization. Because there has been no census since 1970 it is not possible to apply Frey's methodology to a

**Table 1**  
Losses to White City Population in Each Education Class as a Result of Movement to the Suburbs, 1965-70

City	Education Class					
	Elementary		High School		College	
	Under 8	8	1-3	4	1-3	4+
Detroit	-15.9%	-16.4%	-21.7%	-31.9%	-38.8%	-42.7%
Buffalo	- 8.9	-10.0	-14.4	-25.0	-29.6	-28.7
Hartford	-13.2	-18.6	-22.2	-32.9	-32.8	-32.2
Dallas	- 7.8	-10.5	- 9.8	-11.6	-10.5	- 9.5
Atlanta	-20.4	-23.6	-29.1	-41.1	-35.2	-26.2
Sacramento	-10.2	-11.2	-21.2	-23.4	-25.9	-24.3

**Source:** U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Mobility for Metropolitan Areas," *Subject Reports, Final Report PC (2) -2c* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1973).

thorough evaluation of post-1970 migration patterns. His findings based on the 1970 census, are, however, quite clear. School desegregation ranked as the least significant factor in this analysis; racial disturbances were very nearly as unimportant. The term "white flight," viewed in this context, appears to be somewhat of a misnomer.

### Is White Flight an Upper-Class Phenomenon?

Once again, Frey examined 1970 census data for 39 large SMSAs, using the same variables as in his study of racial motivations but adding another to probe for regional variations between North and South. He asked three questions:

1. How did white city-to-suburb movement affect the social composition of large cities between 1965 and 1970?
2. Which demographic and policy-alterable attributes of a metropolitan area determine movement to the suburbs for whites at each of six educational levels?
3. How would changes in city-suburb fiscal disparities, the city crime rate, and its racial composition affect short-run changes in suburbanward movement from specific central cities?

The answer to the first question was unequivocal. For 1965-70 the most consistent pattern of class-selective redistribution occurred within older, northern SMSAs. Detroit, Buffalo, and Hartford, for instance, lost 30-40% of their college-educated city population, but only around 16% of those whose education stopped at or below eighth grade. In contrast, movement to the suburbs in southern cities affected all six education classes about equally; roughly 10% of all classes in Dallas, for example, moved to the suburbs (see Table 1).

The second question evoked different answers for different education classes. In northern SMSAs, the percentage of the city that was black appeared to be a more important determinant of suburban migration among the college-educated than did any other policy-relevant factor, although

educational expenditures were also important. For those with less than an eighth-grade education a different set of migration determinants appeared: Recent suburban employment growth and tax differentials were more significant than racial composition or educational expenditures.

To answer the third question, Frey estimated the short-run migration effects that would be associated with a hypothetical situation in which city-suburb fiscal disparities were eliminated, and both the crime rate and percentage of the city population that was black were reduced. In none of the situations posed in the study did he find a substantial immediate reduction in city-to-suburb movement, or significant increases in the city's upper-status population.

## White Flight, Public Policy, and Central City Demographic Change

The studies of white flight were motivated in part by recurring debates over the indirect effects on white migration of proposed public policies. These policies range from ghetto enrichment programs for inner city minorities, like those spawned by the Kerner Commission in the late 1960s, to recent attempts to desegregate city public schools. Frey's demographic analyses make it clear that racial factors in white movement to the suburbs cannot be discounted; they do not, however, support the contention that increases in levels of integration or numbers of central city blacks will send a substantial flow of whites to the suburbs. The results from these studies indicate that other factors, particularly city-suburb fiscal disparities, are equally important causes of white city-to-suburb movement.

Another reason that racially-instigated city depopulation should not be feared is embedded in the demographic dynamics of city-suburb redistribution. Frey's causal analyses and simulations demonstrate clearly that even a significant change in the residential attractiveness of the city versus its suburbs affects mobility primarily by influencing the destination choices of movers, and not by instigating movement among otherwise stable residents. One positive consequence is that policies that would seem to have deleterious migration consequences for large cities and their tax bases are unlikely to affect greatly the magnitude and character of city population change over the short run. In a more pessimistic vein, we may conclude that policies aimed explicitly at halting the suburban movement of upper-class whites or promoting a "return to the city" of suburbanites are likely to be neither practicable nor very effective.

<sup>1</sup>U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Social and Economic Characteristics of the Metropolitan and Nonmetropolitan Population: 1974 and 1970," *Current Population Reports*, Series P-23, no. 55 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1975).

<sup>2</sup>A. Speare, Jr., S. Goldstein, and W.H. Frey, *Residential Mobility, Migration, and Metropolitan Change* (Cambridge, Mass: Ballinger Publishing Company, 1975).

<sup>3</sup>U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Mobility for Metropolitan Areas," *Subject Reports*, Final Report PC (2) - 2c (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1973).

<sup>4</sup>Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations, *City Financial Emergencies: The Intergovernmental Dimensions*, Appendix B (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1973).

<sup>5</sup>K.E. Taeuber, "Racial Segregation: The Persisting Dilemma," in *The Annals*, The American Academy of Political and Social Sciences, 422 (November 1975):87-96.

<sup>6</sup>T.F. Pettigrew, "Attitudes on Race and Housing," in A.H. Hawley and V.P. Rock (eds.), *Segregation in Residential Areas* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy of Sciences, 1973).

## NEW INSTITUTE SPECIAL REPORTS

SR 20 *Labor Force Concepts and Definitions in View of Their Purposes*. A report prepared for the National Commission on Employment and Unemployment Statistics, by Glen G. Cain.

How, and to what end, are data on the labor force accumulated? The question is only apparently a technical one, and the stakes at issue are high: New definitions of unemployment may reflect different philosophies, different theoretical perspectives, and, at the level of public policy, determine different levels of aid to some groups and localities.

This report examines the usefulness of labor force statistics both as a measure of actual economic conditions—a cyclical indicator—and as a policy guide. Cain pays detailed attention to current criticisms based on the changing demographic composition of the labor force and the developing systems of income transfer, among other forces, and offers suggestions for improving the validity of statistics in this area. He examines several proposed alternatives to the unemployment rate as a measure of cyclical conditions, and argues that their shortcomings outweigh their advantages.

Unemployment statistics, Cain points out, were never intended as a measure of economic hardship, although they have been used in allocating federal funds to local areas. Less weight should be given to unemployment statistics for this purpose, and improved methods of measuring unemployment in local areas are needed.

SR 21 *The Implications of Changing Family Patterns and Behavior for Labor Force and Hardship Measurement*. A report prepared for the National Commission on Employment and Unemployment Statistics, by Harold W. Watts and Felicity Skidmore.

Our labor force concepts and their measurement were designed over thirty years ago; today, the authors argue, they are an inaccurate measure of economic hardship. Recent trends in family patterns and the development of public income support programs to alleviate hardship have combined to destroy the relationship between individual earnings and family income. The incidence of multiple-earner families is increasing rapidly, as married women enter the labor force in ever larger numbers, while the family unit itself is a rather volatile structure. Moreover, labor force status and behavior can no longer be inferred from demographic and family status: People, especially the young, move in and out of the labor force more readily, and are more prone to make substantial career changes in midlife.

In light of these facts, the authors make specific recommendations for revisions in the gathering of data. They urge a major new longitudinal survey of the material resources of families, and argue for revisions in the forms and functions of the gathering of labor market data from individuals.