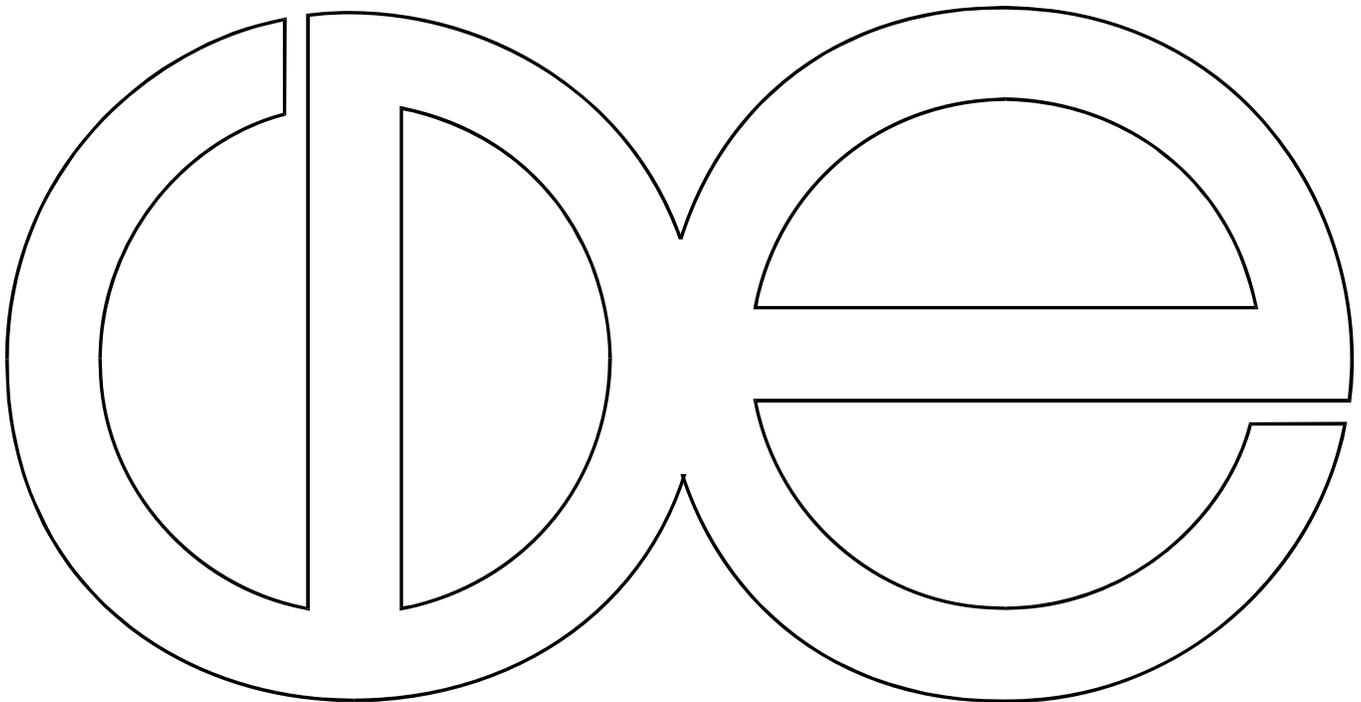


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**U.S. Return Migration and the Decline in
Southern Black Disadvantage, 1970-2000**

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**U.S. RETURN MIGRATION AND THE DECLINE IN
SOUTHERN BLACK DISADVANTAGE, 1970-2000**

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ABSTRACT

Objective. This study investigates how the Return Migration altered racial inequality in poverty in the American South.

Methods. I disaggregate southern poverty into its separate constituents using household data from the IPUMS for 1970 through 2000.

Results. The prevalence of poverty declined most dramatically for black southern households and the racial gap in poverty narrowed to the extent that once substantial regional differences disappeared. A central focus is the contrast between higher poverty and inequality among migrants who returned to their birth state relative to other southern-born migrants who returned to the South.

Conclusions. The migration experience is diverse and has conflicting consequences for racial inequality; for some, migration maintained economic vulnerability. Given the complex force of migration, I conclude that a nuanced theoretical approach to migration that gives weight to economic and non-economic motivations is critical to understand the racial dimensions of migration and the associated changes in racial inequality.

U.S. RETURN MIGRATION AND THE DECLINE IN SOUTHERN BLACK DISADVANTAGE, 1970-2000

The late-20th century marked a unique period of regional economic restructuring and net migration gains in the South. The region has experienced significant change in its labor market structure and, concurrently, its population composition since the 1970s. Among the remarkable changes was a notable decline in racial inequality in household poverty (Figure 1). Black southern poverty dropped substantially between 1970 and 2000. White southern poverty also fell, but more moderately. As a result, the racial gap in southern poverty dramatically declined. Historically staggering regional differences in black poverty and racial inequality were eliminated by 2000 as the southern racial difference reflected that of the non-South. The timing of the remarkable narrowing of racial differences in southern poverty corresponded with the “Return Migration” to the South. The Return Migration brought to the South many people, black and white, from the northern and western destinations of the historical southern Great Migration. Some were non-southerners in pursuit of jobs accompanying the expanding southern economy, some of whom may have had ancestral roots in the South. Others were southern-born participants of the Great Migration who returned “home” to live out their retirement years or to be closer to kin.

[Figure 1 about here]

Did the Return Migration contribute to the dramatic decline in black southern poverty and the reduced race differential? Previous research has left this question open. Research consistently shows that poverty in the United States is disproportionately experienced by African American households (Bishaw and Iceland 2003). Research also identifies mechanisms that link migration to trends in black poverty and, related, the racial gap in poverty. Migration might affect racial differences in poverty by changing the composition of the southern population in terms of the overall distribution of households that are migrants, and accompanying migrant-specific characteristics correlated with poverty. For southern black households (and southern white households), changes in poverty between 1970 and 2000 could be due to changes in the percent of the households that are migrants and non-migrants, and changes in the poverty rates for migrants and non-migrants. The racial disparity in poverty is owed to the balance of these factors for blacks in the South versus the balance of these factors for whites in the South.

With the broad migrant versus non-migrant comparison in mind, there is reason to suspect that the various

migrant profiles comprising the Return Migration had different and competing impacts on black southern poverty and the associated black-white gap in poverty. In addition to demonstrating differences in characteristics between migrants and non-migrants, migration research also suggests southern-bound migrants differ from each other in their characteristics and settlement patterns largely according to race, gender, family status, and birthplace (Adelman et al. 2000; Alexander 2005; Falk et al. 2004; Li and Randolph 1982; Long and Hansen 1975; Stack 1996)—factors correlated with poverty.

This study's central insight is that the differences between the southern-bound migrants should have consequences for the prevalence of poverty and, in turn, the racial distribution of southern poverty. That is, return migration might reduce *and* increase racial inequality in poverty depending on the type of migration. Rather than modeling the selective process of migration, this study treats prior work on selection as the starting point to pursue one consequence of divergent migration experiences: racial inequality in economic vulnerability. Using the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS) for 1970, 1980, 1990 and 2000, I disaggregate the southern family household population to examine how migration impacted poverty disparities among southern households according to the specific type of migration. There is no singular migration experience; therefore, it is essential to examine the heterogeneity of migration and potential variation in its relationship to poverty. Differences between the experiences of those who returned to their birth state ("homeward bound" migrants) and other southern-bound migrants is a central focus.

BACKGROUND AND THEORY

A Great "Return" Migration

Between 1910 and 1970, black southerners engaged in a "Great Migration" searching for opportunity, primarily in northern and western cities. The first wave of this southern exodus began around 1915 when World War I interrupted the flow of inexpensive laborers from Europe, increasing demand for northern industrial workers (Fligstein 1981; Henri 1975; Johnson and Campbell 1981; Long 1988; Marks 1989). Momentum increased after World War II and continued to climb through 1980 (Gregory 2005), dramatically altering race relations across the United States. The social, economic and political impacts of southern migration, however, likely did not end with the Great Migration. In what has become known as the "Great Return Migration" (Stack 1996), African American southerners returned and presumably reshaped the South in the later part of the 20th century.

Expanding Sunbelt employment opportunities, coupled with the demise of Jim Crow segregation, presented former southerners with a strong incentive to return to their native region in recent decades. The relative attractiveness of the South intensified as economic opportunities for African Americans in northern cities deteriorated (Kasarda 1989, 1995; Robinson 1986; Wilson 1987, 1996), launching what Carol Stack has termed the “Great Return Migration” (1996:7). The fundamental transformations in northern and southern societies increased the probability of return migration for blacks. Whites who migrated out of the South in earlier decades were also returning “home” (Berry 2000), continuing a trend that began as the depression in the 1930s settled in. In addition to kin ties, economic changes over the last thirty years played a role in the return migration of white migrants. White migrants have consistently out-numbered and out-paced black migrants, although the number of black migrants and the rate of black migration have continued to increase over time (Hunt et al. 2008; Long and Hansen 1975).

Variation among the Return Migrants

The contrasting flow sizes, settlement patterns and individual characteristics between black and white southern-bound migrants have implications for racial differences in poverty. Research on return migration to the South primarily concerns general trends in the flow of return migrants, as well as their contribution to the region’s recent population growth (Campbell et al. 1974; Li and Randolph 1982; Long and Hansen 1975, 1977; McHugh 1987; Newbold 1997; Robinson 1990, 1986). This literature reveals: black return migration accelerated after 1970 (Adelman et al. 2000; Falk et al. 2004; Long and Hansen 1975; Robinson 1986); African American southern-born migrants living in the North were less likely than white southern-born migrants who returned to the South (Adelman et al. 2000; Lee 1974; Long and Hansen 1975); African American return migrants were more likely than whites to move to their state of birth (Adelman et al. 2000; Long and Hansen 1975; McHugh 1987); and southern-born return migrants accounted for one-half to two-thirds of all blacks moving to the South (Campbell et al. 1974; Cromartie and Stack 1989; Falk et al. 2004).

There is comparatively little research on the trends of white return migration. However, Adelman et al. (2000) show that white women returned at higher levels than African American women throughout the 20th century, although black women’s return migration increased steadily. Long and Hansen also find that 11% to 13% of white out-migrants returned to the South in the 1960s and 1970s, and while more whites returned to the South, African American return migrants were somewhat more likely to return to their birth state than whites; 57% of whites

compared to 66% of African Americans (1975:609) (see Stack 1996). Sociologists have inferred white return migration was informed by labor market opportunities rather than emotional connections to home in part due to the settlement patterns, yet this thesis is challenged by historical and anthropological research.

Compared to black migrants, white southern migrants had a much higher rate of return even during the peak years of the Great Migration, and a reputation among their northern compatriots as highly transient (Alexander 2005:605). In his articulation of the “divided heart,” anthropologist Chad Berry (2000) suggests that many of the white out-migrants had longed if not expected to return to the South. Ties to kin and connectedness to place ranked high on the list of pulls home and were amplified by demographic events; return migrants were of retirement age, their parents were ailing, and their children had moved into adulthood and initiated migration trajectories of their own. Thus, the call to the South could be heeded and the great migrants were (non-economically) motivated to return home.

Although dichotomized in the current migration literature, both theses could be true; black and white southerners could be motivated to return to the South by economic opportunities *and* by kinship or cultural connections. Both economic and non-economic motivations could occur separately among the individuals comprising the overall migrant streams, or they could occur simultaneously for individual migrants. That is, migrants may have been struggling economically in the non-South and sought support from kin in the South. Alternatively, southern kin may have been struggling economically, thus prompting the migrant to return home to provide support. Differences in the extent to which black and white migrants move for economic or kinship reasons could impact the overall contribution of the Return Migration in reducing inequality in poverty.

The extensive literature on migration suggests that the migration experience is not monolithic; therefore, it is essential to examine the heterogeneity within the migrant population. This theme has been implicit in research on selection and settlement patterns of migrants, and made explicit in recent work on southern migrants by Tolnay and Eichenlaub (2006) and Eichenlaub et al. (2010). To date, however, most research has treated all southern-born people returning to the South, and sometimes all people moving to the South, as a single collective of return migrants (exceptions include Falk et al. 2004; and Hunt et al. 2008). Yet there is reason to believe that migrants returning generally to the South may differ from those returning to their birthplace. Importantly, differences in migrant characteristics have consequences for poverty. Thus, it is essential to disaggregate the return migrant

population on the southern-born and the birth state dimensions for a nuanced understanding of the overall contribution of the Return Migration to the reduction in poverty inequality.

Migration, Poverty, and Race

I examine the impact of the Return Migration on black southern poverty and the associated decline in racial differences in poverty. In general, I anticipate the likelihood of poverty to vary between migrant households since the type of migration reflects distinct selection processes on characteristics that are consequential for poverty. The basic thrust of classical migration research suggests that migrants should have lower poverty rates relative to non-migrants perhaps after an initial period of adjustment that might include unemployment and low income since, according to this perspective, the desire for economic advancement dominates all other motivations for migration (Lee 1966; Ravenstein 1889; Sjaastad 1962 see also Eichenlaub et al. 2010). Therefore, migrants will be competitive in terms of labor market credentials and skills; thus, migrants are at lower risk of living in poverty relative to non-migrants. Yet research demonstrates that connectedness to non-economic aspects of place are a factor in the Return Migration (Berry 2000; Stack 1996). Among migrants to the South, primary migrant households (northern-born households that move to the South), return migrants and regional migrants most clearly fall within the classical migration perspective since these groups' settlement patterns suggest economic motivations rather than familial or cultural ties to place. In contrast, by staying in place or returning "home," southern non-migrants and homeward bound return migrants exhibit settlement patterns that are suggestive of culturally- or family-motivated moves as opposed to economically-focused moves.

There are three potential ways migration might be associated with racial inequality in poverty; racial disparity could be aggravated, ameliorated, or remain stable. Disparity in poverty among southerners might have been aggravated by migration through two processes. First, although recent literature shows that return migrants were positively selected on socio-economic and socio-demographic characteristics (Adelman et al. 2000; Alexander 2005; Falk et al. 2004; Vigdor 2002, 2006), African American migrants might have fallen far enough behind white migrants on factors associated with poverty to perpetuate racial inequality in poverty. For example, female return migrants were more likely to be without a spouse (Falk et al. 2004). This tendency, combined with the general pattern of greater female-headed households among the black population relative to the white population (Ruggles 1994; Tolnay 2004) and female-headship's connection to poverty (Cancian and Reed 2001; Eggebeen and Lichter

1991; Iceland 2003; Martin 2006) could have further aggravated racial disparity in southern poverty. The returns to migration, then, would have been lower for the African American population for all migrant groups. According to this scenario, the observed decline in black poverty and the racial gap would have been greater in the absence of the Return Migration given the composition of the black migrants relative to the white migrants.

Second, some studies suggest that African American return migrants had a greater tendency to migrate for familial or cultural reasons compared to white return migrants (Adelman et al. 2000; Long and Hansen 1975; see Berry 2000 for an exception and Herting et al. 1997 for a discussion of the socio-cultural draw of all migrants to the South) or other types of southern-bound black migrants (Falk et al. 2004; Hunt et al. 2008). Non-economic motivations might have led African Americans to destinations with fewer economic opportunities and, thus, could have put blacks at a greater risk of poverty. Similarly, if motivated by kin connections, African Americans might have moved home to take care of aging or ailing family members (Stack 1996; Stack and Burton 1993), also putting this group at a greater economic risk or reflecting an already higher risk of poverty (Goldschieder and Bures 2003; Stack 1975; Tienda and Angel 1982). This suggests return migration would have increased racial inequality in poverty via differential rates of returns “home” among blacks. Returning “home” could have had greater negative impacts on African Americans relative to whites because their kin is more likely to be impoverished; the impacts of care-taking are compounded by the greater need for care among the African American southern population given racial health disparities (Williams and Collins 1995; Wolf et al. 2008). Thus, declines in black southern poverty and the racial gap would have been larger in the absence of the Return Migration given the settlement patterns of black migrants.

Yet migration might be associated with a *reduction* in racial inequality through similar mechanisms. First, black migrants might have been less positively selected than their white counterparts (e.g., lower education), but they could have had more positive characteristics relative to those of non-migrant African Americans, including difficult to measure attributes like social and political capital gained through experiences outside of the South (Berry 2000; Stack 1996). This type of change in the southern black population spurred by the Return Migration would have narrowed the racial gap among migrant groups and, in turn, the total southern population. Second, African Americans might have been more likely to move “home” to places with fewer economic opportunities or into multigenerational households, but the presence of a social support network could have reduced the chances of poverty. That is, the social support system may have counterbalanced the potential negative risks associated with

moving to an economically disadvantageous labor market or living arrangement (Stack 1975), and would have reduced racial inequality among migrants who returned home. In this scenario, black poverty and the racial gap would not have declined in the absence of the Return Migration given the composition of black migrants and/or the settlement patterns of the black migrants relative to the existing black southern population.

It also is reasonable to expect that migration might have had no association with racial differences in poverty. First, blacks and whites could have had similar propensities for moving home (e.g., Berry 2000); therefore, potential implications for poverty would not have cleaved along racial lines. Second, household attributes associated with selection into various migrant statuses might explain any racial differences. For example, black and white primary migrants could have had higher education than same-race non-migrant or return migrant counterparts, but African American migrants still could have had lower education than white migrants. The race difference among migrants would be explained by racial inequalities in education. Finally, deeply rooted racial discrimination persists in the South in ways that could continue to disadvantage African Americans despite differences, and similarities, between blacks and whites, and between migrants and non-migrants. Drawing from these arguments, the observed reduction in black poverty and inequality in poverty could have been due to forces other than the Return Migration.

DATA, MEASURES, AND ANALYTICAL APPROACH

I use the 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000 PUMS files (Ruggles and Sobek et al. 2003) to examine the prevalence of poverty among black and white southern households separately for each migrant group.¹ For each decade, I selected heads of married-couple and female-headed households, age 25 and older, living in the census-defined South. I attached household racial and migration characteristics to the head. For example, a married-couple household was considered African American if the head reported being African American.² Household weights were applied to the 1980, 1990 and 2000 data to correct for oversampling but were unnecessary for the 1970 data since they are representative of the general population. The household approach eliminates redundancy in the data that would otherwise result from analyzing individual members of the same households. Also, the focus on family households squarely engages on-going research on family and child poverty.

I examine whether the household was living in poverty using a measure the official poverty threshold available in the IPUMS series (Orshansky 1965). The measure is criticized for underestimating poverty in the general and metropolitan populations, and overestimating poverty among the non-metropolitan population (Iceland

2005; Nelson and Short 2005). Still, its use enables comparisons over multiple years and maintains consistency with a vast literature on poverty that continues to use the official measure.

The southern households are disaggregated according to migrant status, which is based on place of birth, place of residence five years ago, and current residence. To examine heterogeneity in migrant experiences, five migrant types were identified: two types of return migrants (those returning to their birth state and those returning to another southern state); primary migrants; regional migrants; and non-migrants. Return migrants are disaggregated by birth state to further assess potential differences between economic and kin motivated moves. The household was *homeward bound* if either the head or the spouse was born in the South, lived in the non-South five years ago, and lived in her birth state at enumeration. The household was a *return migrant* household if either the head or the spouse was born in the South, lived in the non-South five years ago, and lived in a southern state other than her birth state at enumeration.

Among other migrant groups, the household was a *non-migrant* household if either the head or the spouse was born in the South, and lived in the same place within the South five years ago and at enumeration. The household was a *regional migrant* household if either the head or the spouse was born in the South and lived in the South five years ago and at enumeration, but in a southern location different from her birthplace. Finally, the household was a *primary migrant* household if the head or the spouse was born in the North and lived in the South at enumeration.

While treated as a single group, there is heterogeneity among primary migrants. That is, “southernness” might be transmitted across generations (Cromartie and Stack 1989; Stack 1996). Primary migrants include northern-born children of southern migrants who maintained a strong connection to the South and, themselves, may have been returning “home” – where their families were from, but not where they were born. Unfortunately, the data do not permit separate analyses of primary migrants of southern ancestry from other primary migrants. Thus, differences between primary and return migrants may be underestimated.

Primacy was given to specific migrant statuses for married couple households that were composed of more than one migrant status (Table 1). For example, if a household included a return migrant and a primary migrant, it was designated a return migrant household. If a household contained a primary migrant and a non-migrant, it was a primary migrant household. This strategy does not capture moves between birth and five years prior to enumeration or between enumeration and five years prior. Detailed migration histories for each household would be ideal, yet

these data do not exist and general trends should be accurate (Rogers 1995; Schoen 1987). The PUMS data are suited to provide a series of snapshots of the southern population over a unique period in the regional history. Moreover, while these data do not permit one to identify the precise means through which migration might influence racial inequality in poverty, they are ideal for estimating the overall contribution of migration in reducing southern racial inequality.

[Table 1 about here]

RESULTS

Changes in Southern Poverty

Racial inequality in poverty (Figure 1) persisted in the South between 1970 and 2000. However, the overall proportion of southern households living in poverty decreased during the Return Migration and, accordingly, racial differences in poverty also narrowed. The declining southern race gap is due to a steeper reduction in poverty among African American households relative to white households. For example, in 1970 approximately 36% of southern African American households were living in poverty compared to 9% of southern white households, marking a 27 percentage-point difference. By 2000, the race gap narrowed to 12 percentage-points; 52% fewer black southern households were poor at the end of the Return Migration whereas 33% fewer southern white households were living in poverty.

Differences between the regions in overall and race-specific poverty rates also declined to the extent that racial inequality in the South was on par with the non-South by the end of the Return Migration period. The racial gap in poverty outside the South remained stable between 1970 and 2000. Consequently, regional differences in the racial gap disappeared, falling from 17 percentage-points in 1970 to no difference in 2000.

Population Composition and Poverty

The question is whether the Return Migration prompted the remarkable decline in southern black poverty and the associated narrowing race gap in poverty. If the Return Migration was to have an impact on southern poverty, it would have done so by changing the composition of the southern population in two ways. First, the distribution of population by migration status could have shifted over time, and differentially for black and white

households. Second, the levels of migration-specific poverty could have shifted over time, and differentially for black and white households.

The proportion of black southern households comprised of primary and return (general and homeward bound) migrants steadily increased over time (Figure 2). At the beginning of the period, migrants to the South made up less than 4% of black households. By 2000, nearly 20% of black southern households were composed of primary and return migrants. This is likely an underestimate since the data structure does not capture homeward bound migrants who returned to the South more than five years prior to enumeration; the measure reflects recent (moved 5 years-ago) homeward bound migrants while older homeward bound migrants fall within the non-migrant category in subsequent decades.

[Figure 2 about here]

The substantial growth in the migrant population is meaningful insofar as it reflects a change in the characteristics of the black southern population that are associated with poverty. The distribution of poverty for black southern households over the period is complex. Poverty declined for all groups during the Return Migration, yet some groups experienced greater declines relative to others.³ The fall in poverty was most dramatic for homeward bound migrants in each decade and over the period in general. In the first decade, the proportion of black homeward bound migrant households living in poverty was halved, decreasing from 48% in 1970 to 23% in 1980. The 1980s were the exception; all groups witnessed an increase in poverty in this decade, most especially the homeward bound migrant households. The least amount of change in poverty was reported for southern non-migrant households. Nearly 40% of this group was living in poverty in 1970, second only to homeward bound migrants (48%). In 2000, black southern non-migrant households reported the highest poverty rates at 23%, nearly 5 percentage-points higher than the next highest poverty group, homeward bound migrants (18%).

Despite the dramatic declines in poverty among homeward bound households, poverty for these households was higher than all other migrant groups throughout the period. Return migrants and primary migrants had the lowest reported poverty rates in each decade. Among black return migrant households, 14% were in poverty in 1970 as compared to 8% in 2000. Poverty among black primary migrants was higher and fell more modestly from 21% in 1970 to 12% in 2000. Regional migrants also had lower poverty rates than homeward bound migrants. In 1970, 28%

of black regional migrant households were in poverty, a rate significantly higher than return and primary migrants but much lower than homeward bound migrants and non-migrants. By 1990, black regional migrants had poverty rates that were on par with primary migrants.

The patterns of change in population composition and the rankings of poverty are comparable across the black and white southern households. As with the black southern households, the proportion of the white households comprised of migrants to the South also increased over the period. Migrants from outside of the South made up 27% of the total white southern households in 1970 and grew to 42% in 2000. A larger share of the white households was made up of migrants in all decades as compared to black households.

At the same time a greater share of white southern households became migrants from outside of the South, white southern poverty steadily declined. Similar to the black southern population, poverty declined most dramatically for white homeward bound migrants. Still, this group reported higher poverty rates than all other migrant households throughout the period. As with black households, poverty among white homeward bound households closely tracked with southern non-migrants; 10% of both groups were in poverty in 1970, marking the highest poverty rate among all white southern households, while 7% of homeward bound migrants and 8% of non-migrants were in poverty in 2000. Also similar to the black population, white primary and return migrant households reported the lowest poverty rates followed by regional migrants. This migrant ranking held throughout the period.

A comparison of the levels and trends in black and white southern poverty reveal that the experience of poverty was unequally felt by black southern households throughout the Return Migration. It also shows that declines in poverty among white southern households were not nearly as dramatic as the decreases reported for black households, in part because there was less ground to make up. The largest decline was observed for homeward bound migrants for both race groups. Poverty dropped by 30 percentage-points over the period for white homeward bound migrants, as compared to 60 percentage-points for black homeward bound migrants.

The comparison also shows a wide range in poverty rates among southern households, thus demonstrating the diversity of migration experiences for black and white households alike. Some groups maintained higher rates of poverty with slower rates of decline over the Return Migration relative to other migrant groups. Drawing from migration theory, the ranking of poverty among the different migrant households is suggestive of the differences between migrants with and without cultural or kin ties to destination; households more often characterized as kin or culturally connected to the South had higher poverty than households typical of economic migrations without kin or

cultural connections. The diversity of the overall southern-bound migration has implications for the total change in black southern poverty and the associated racial gap in poverty.

Implications of Migrant Variation in Poverty

The consequences of the Return Migration for the racial disparity in poverty are demonstrated by considering different migrant distribution and poverty rate scenarios (Table 2). This is accomplished through a straightforward decomposition of overall poverty into its constituents: the distribution of the households by migration status and the corresponding poverty rate. Racial disparity in southern poverty declined by 57% during the Return Migration. When comparing the alternative scenarios, the largest difference from the observed decline in racial disparity is found when holding the migration-specific poverty rates constant during the Return Migration. Had the migrant distribution continued to change as observed (Figure 2) but group-specific poverty rates remained unchanged, the racial disparity would have declined by only 7% over the 40-year period. Results suggest that changes in the characteristics of the migrant types contributed to the sizeable reduction of black-white inequality in poverty. Poverty declined at different rates for the migrant groups, yet the cumulative impact of the divergent declines in poverty is dramatic.

[Table 2 about here]

Had the migrant distribution of southern households maintained the 1970 pattern, the racial disparity in poverty would have changed by 51%; the race gap in poverty would not have declined as much had the distribution of migrants remained stable throughout the Return Migration. The 6 percentage-point difference indicates that the changing distribution of southern households by migrant status helped reduce racial inequality in poverty. However, the impact was comparatively lower than the contribution of the change in migrant characteristics (6 percentage-points versus 50 percentage-points).

There is comparatively little difference in the observed and estimated racial gap in the remaining scenarios where all southern migrants were either homeward bound or return migrants; the race gap would have declined by 56% under these scenarios as compared to 57%. However, there are considerable differences in the level of poverty for black and white southern households in the scenarios.

To better understand the dynamics underlying overall racial disparity, I present the race-specific poverty levels under the various scenarios (Figure 3). In the first scenario, black southern poverty would have been higher and grown increasingly higher than what was observed had southern-bound migration maintained the 1970 pattern over the course of the Return Migration, and the migration-specific poverty rates changed as observed. Assuming that 4% of the black southern households were comprised of migrants from the non-South throughout the period, poverty among the black households would have been 7% higher in 1980 and, even more pronounced, 17% higher in 2000 (a 3 percentage-point difference). The growth in the differences in poverty rates demonstrates the cumulative impact migration has had on black poverty and the associated racial differences in poverty.

[Figure 3 about here]

Applying the same approach to white southern households shows that overall white poverty also would have been higher had the population distribution of migrant status remained the same from 1970 through 2000. Assuming that 27% of white southern households were comprised of migrants from the non-South throughout the period, poverty among whites would have been 6% higher than what was observed in 1980 and 18% higher in 2000 (a full percentage-point difference). These percentage changes reflect a relatively modest impact of migration on the level of white poverty as compared to black poverty owed to the lower prevalence of poverty among white southern households.

Black southern poverty would have been remarkably higher had the 1970 migrant-specific poverty rates remained constant throughout the period. This and the preceding scenario together indicate that migration reduced poverty in two ways: first, most vividly through changes in the characteristics of the migrants; and second, less dramatically through changes in the relative representation of the various migrant groups. Recall, poverty declined for all migrant groups over the period but was lowest for primary and return migrants and, at the same time, the largest gain in proportionate representation was reported for primary migrants and return migrants. By comparison, white poverty also would have been higher, yet the difference is not nearly as large given the relatively low prevalence of poverty among southern white households.

The Return Migration impacted the racial difference in poverty most clearly through its effect on black southern households. Yet taken together, the changes in poverty for black and white households resulted in a 57%

reduction in the race gap, falling from 27 percentage-points to 12 percentage-points between 1970 and 2000. By comparison, racial inequality would have been 17% higher (nearly 2 percentage-points at 11.6 versus 13.5) at the end of the period had the distribution by migrant status remained the same for black and white southern households during the Return Migration. More radically, racial inequality would have been 120% higher (nearly 14 percentage-points at 11.6 versus 25.3) at the end of the period had the distribution by migrant status changed, but migrant-specific poverty rates remained the same.

Results indicate that the association between migration and poverty differs across migrant groups. While the overall impact of migration on racial inequality is to reduce racial differences in poverty, the extent of the reduction differs according to the type of migration. The divergence in migration experiences is shown in the trends in poverty rates among the households discussed above (Figure 2). Most critically, the trends show that the greatest divergence in poverty is among the two return migrant groups. Of the migrant households, return migrants living in their birth state at enumeration consistently had the highest poverty rates. In contrast, return migrants living in southern states other than their birth state had the lowest poverty rates throughout the period. Although they are part of the larger Return Migration, the implications of the migration for southern poverty and the racial gap in poverty are in direct opposition between the two return migrant groups. Returning “home” appears to have been detrimental for migrants, whereas returning to other southern places was beneficial.

This finding gives rise to the question: what is driving the stark migrant difference? General theory suggests that migration would impact black poverty and the racial gap in poverty by changing the population composition, largely through the process of selection. Research examining the selection process suggests that the various migrant streams have dissimilar socio-demographic characteristics. For example, previous research on return migrants has shown that the educational levels and labor force participation for southern-bound migrants are higher than the stable northern and southern populations during the Return Migration (Falk et al. 2004; Hunt et al. 2008). Research also has found that return migrants have a higher proportion of divorced or separated households relative to primary migrants (Falk et al. 2004); this suggests that while primary migrants to the South might be economically motivated, those who return “home” may have fewer economic resources. Separate from migrant characteristics, the places in which migrants settle impact economic vulnerability through factors such as labor market opportunities and discrimination. Additionally, research suggests that homeward bound migrants, namely African American homeward bound migrants, are more kin-connected and are more likely to return to non-metropolitan areas

especially in the later decades of the 20th century. Perhaps this is due to non-economic desires to be closer to family, economic necessities to call on family or provide family with economic support, or some combination of both motivations.

Among the black and white southern households analyzed, and consistent with previous research, comparisons of homeward bound and return migrant households show that all homeward bound migrants have a higher proportion of female-headed households, and black homeward bound migrants are more likely to live with relatives other than children (i.e., 15% versus 12% in 2000) and in multi-generational households (i.e., 11% versus 7% in 2000). Also, in 2000, 41% of homeward bound migrants live in non-metropolitan areas compared to only 9% of return migrants. Differences in these characteristics likely contribute to the higher poverty rate among homeward bound migrants relative to other southern-born return migrants.

Building from research on the selective process of the Return Migration, I assess the extent to which the observed differences in compositional qualities of the migrant groups contributed to the overall reduction in black poverty and the associated racial gap in poverty by focusing on two alternative migration scenarios (also Figure 3). The first counterfactual reflects poverty rates for black and white southern households had all migrants to the South been return migrants. The second counterfactual shows the prevalence of poverty had all migrants been homeward bound migrants.

Southern poverty would have been notably different under the alternative return migration scenarios. Poverty among southern black households would have been 16% higher in 1970 than the observed poverty rate had all southern migrants been homeward bound migrants in that decade (6 percentage-points higher). Even more remarkable, the prevalence of black poverty would have been 23% higher in 2000. In direct contrast, had all black southern migrants been return migrants (households that settled in places other than their birth state), poverty would have been nearly 10% and 4% lower in 1970 and 2000, respectively (3 and 1 percentage-points lower). The differences between migration scenarios are considerably smaller for white southern households given the comparatively lower prevalence of poverty. Still, the general pattern persists; poverty would have been lower than observed had all migrants been return migrants and substantially higher had they all been homeward bound migrants.

As with overall poverty, racial differences in poverty would have been different under the alternative migration scenarios. The racial gap would have been 21% higher at the end of the Return Migration had all southern

migrants been homeward bound in 2000 (a 14 percentage-point gap instead of the observed 12 percentage-point difference). In contrast, the race gap would have been nearly 8% lower by the end of the period had all southern-bound migrants been return migrant households (a full percentage-point lower). These findings further support the assertion that the two types of return migration streams are on opposite ends of the disparity spectrum. Variation between migrant groups in poverty and the associated racial gap in poverty suggests that the larger Return Migration simultaneously ameliorated *and* perpetuated racial inequality in southern poverty through divergent migration types.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study have implications for migration theory and for our understanding of the role of migration in racial inequality in poverty. The deep literature on poverty identifies individual and structural factors that promote or reduce racial differences in economic vulnerability. Research on migration has demonstrated how these features are distributed across the migrant population. However, studies have not adequately investigated the range of impacts owed to migrant diversity in the socio-demographic and settlement characteristics.

This research offers a clear example of the diverse influence of migration on racial inequality in poverty. The racial gap in southern poverty has narrowed since the 1970s to the extent that regional differences between the South and non-South were eliminated by 2000. Critically, the narrowing of the racial gap was due to dramatic declines in black southern poverty, not an increase in white poverty. At the same time, the South experienced positive net migration at an increasing rate. Traditional migration theory suggests in-migration might affect the race gap since, in essence, migration can alter the composition of an area's population in terms of the proportionate representation of migrants and the characteristics of migrants.

This research set out to address the question of whether the end of the Great Migration and the ensuing Return Migration contributed to the dramatic decline in black southern poverty and the reduced racial differential in poverty. The answer is yes, the overall effect of the Return Migration was to reduce black poverty and the related racial gap. The steady increase in the proportion of migrant households and the change in migrant characteristics dramatically reduced black southern poverty and, related, racial differences in southern poverty. Yet this conclusion comes with a crucial qualification. The different streams comprising the Return Migration did not uniformly contribute to the reduction. In fact, black poverty and racial inequality would have been higher had certain flows made up a larger proportion of all southern-bound migration given the diversity in the prevalence in poverty among

the distinct migrant groups. How can we reconcile the apparent diversity?

An increase in labor migration generally, if not always, accompanies regional economic growth. Perhaps one of the most powerful examples of the linkages between U.S. economic development and internal migration is the Great Migration of southerners who left the economically contracting South in favor of greater opportunities in the North and West. Although economic opportunity was among the primary reasons for leaving the South, blacks were also motivated by promises of better social conditions; those free of Jim Crow and racial violence (Tolnay and Beck 1992). The importance of non-economic motivations is not inconsistent with general migration theory, and not exclusive to the Great Migration. There is room within traditional migration theories for decision-making to include social factors, and there is strong evidence of such motivations in the foundational qualitative research on the Return Migration (Stack 1996) and suggestive evidence in recent quantitative analyses (Falk et al. 2004; Hunt et al. 2008). The divergent motivations for migration are important for the study of poverty insofar as they help frame migration as a diverse experience that can both exacerbate and reduce economic vulnerability. Further, the extent to which different motivations (expressed as the type of migration) are unevenly shared by race groups illuminates the way in which racial inequality in southern poverty changed during the Return Migration.

In this analysis, I assessed the impact of the Return Migration on a perennial issue facing sociologists: racial disparity in poverty. I found that migration both positively and negatively contributed to racial inequality and the direction of the association varied according to migration type. Households with settlement patterns characteristic of economically motivated migration experienced lower poverty whereas households with settlement patterns suggestive of non-economic motivation (either exclusive of or in combination with economic needs) experienced higher poverty. Following, had the Return Migration been entirely comprised of homeward bound migrants, racial inequality would have been 21% higher in 2000. In contrast, inequality would have been 8% lower in 2000 had all southern-bound households been return migrants to places other than their birth state.

Findings shed light on the complexity of migration and demonstrate that there is no singular migration experience. This research builds most heavily on the compelling work by Stack (1996) who discusses the conditions, motivations and consequences of returning home by placing her important qualitative work in a broader empirical context. It also extends the foundational descriptive research by Falk et al. (2004) and Hunt et al. (2008) by examining the implications of the type of southern-bound migration; here, I focus on economic vulnerability. The study informs other valuable research on the Return Migration that treats the movement as a singular experience,

sometimes due to limitations in aggregate data (e.g., Fuguitt et al. 2001). Findings clearly show the type of migration has important and divergent consequences for racial inequality in poverty and, therefore, future research on poverty, race and migration would be much improved if the diversity in the migration experience, for African Americans and whites, was explicitly considered.

Combined, results show that the competing effect of migration is tied to race. The extensive research on the Great Migration demonstrates that although conditions generally improved for African American migrants to the North and West, racial differences were not obliterated by leaving the South.⁴ My findings show the same can be said for the Return Migration; migration to the South did not guarantee racial equality but, for some migrants, maintained economic vulnerability and inequality. Poverty and racial differences in poverty were not the same for all migrant households. By demonstrating the complex and sometimes contradictory force of migration, results emphasize that a nuanced theoretical framework of migration, one that gives weight to economic and non-economic motivations, is crucial to understand the racial dimensions of migration and, ultimately, to understand changes in racial inequality in southern poverty.

NOTES

¹ The 1970 Form 1 state sample, 1980 state 5% sample, 1990 metro 1% sample, and 2000 5% sample were analyzed. The 1970 is a proportionally weighted stratified sample and 1-in-100 nationally representative sample of the U.S. population. The 1980 is a 1-in-20 national random sample. The 1990 and 2000 data are weighted 1-in-100 nationally representative samples of the U.S. population. For 1970, metropolitan status is available for respondents in the state samples except for those residing in several states. Among those pertinent to the current study are Delaware and the rural parts of Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, and West Virginia. Respondents without information on metropolitan status were excluded from the analysis. This has the potential to underestimate the extent of poverty. The 1% sample for 1990 was selected over the 5% sample because metropolitan status was not available in the latter.

² Interracial marriages between African Americans and whites were excluded since there were too few cases to support analysis (0.12% of the households in 1970, 0.18% in 1980, 0.23% in 1990, and 0.37% in 2000).

³ Although the proportion of households living in poverty declined over the period, hardship may have intensified. The official poverty measure has not been updated to account for changes in the standard of living; therefore, poor households in 2000 likely experienced greater relative poverty compared to impoverished households in 1970.

⁴ Research by Eichenlaub et al. (2010) demonstrates male southern migrants of the Great Migration did not improve their economic conditions relative to southern migrants but experienced short-term and long-term losses. Advantages of southern migrants were relative to African American and white non-migrants at the destination rather than non-migrants at the place of origin.

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Table 1. Primacy and Description of Migration Statuses for Married-Couple Households, (PUMS) 1970-2000

Primacy (if either spouse qualifies)	Migration Status	Description
	Return Migrant	
1	Homeward Bound Return Migrant	Southern-born, lived outside of South 5 years ago, lived in southern birth state at enumeration
2	Return Migrant	Southern-born, lived outside of South 5 years ago, lived in South but not birth state at enumeration
	Non-Return Migrant	
3	Primary Migrant	Northern-born, lived in or outside of South 5 years ago, lived in South at enumeration
4	Regional Migrant	Southern-born, lived in South but not birth state 5 years ago or at enumeration
5	Non-migrant	Southern-born, lived in southern birth state 5 years ago and at enumeration

Table 2. Racial Differences (White Advantage in Percentage-Points) in Poverty Rates under Alternative Migration Scenarios

	1970	1980	1990	2000	% Change (1970-2000)
Adjusted, 1970 Migration Patterns	27.4	16.5	18.9	13.5	-50.8
Adjusted, 1970 Poverty Rates	27.4	26.2	26.4	25.3	-7.4
Adjusted, Return Migrants Only	24.1	13.2	17.1	10.7	-55.7
Adjusted, Homeward Bound Migrants Only	31.5	15.9	20.7	14.0	-55.6
Unadjusted (Observed)	27.2	15.4	17.0	11.6	-57.5

Note: Adjusted values were calculated by permitting the indicated migration or poverty proportions to vary while holding the alternative migration or poverty proportions constant.

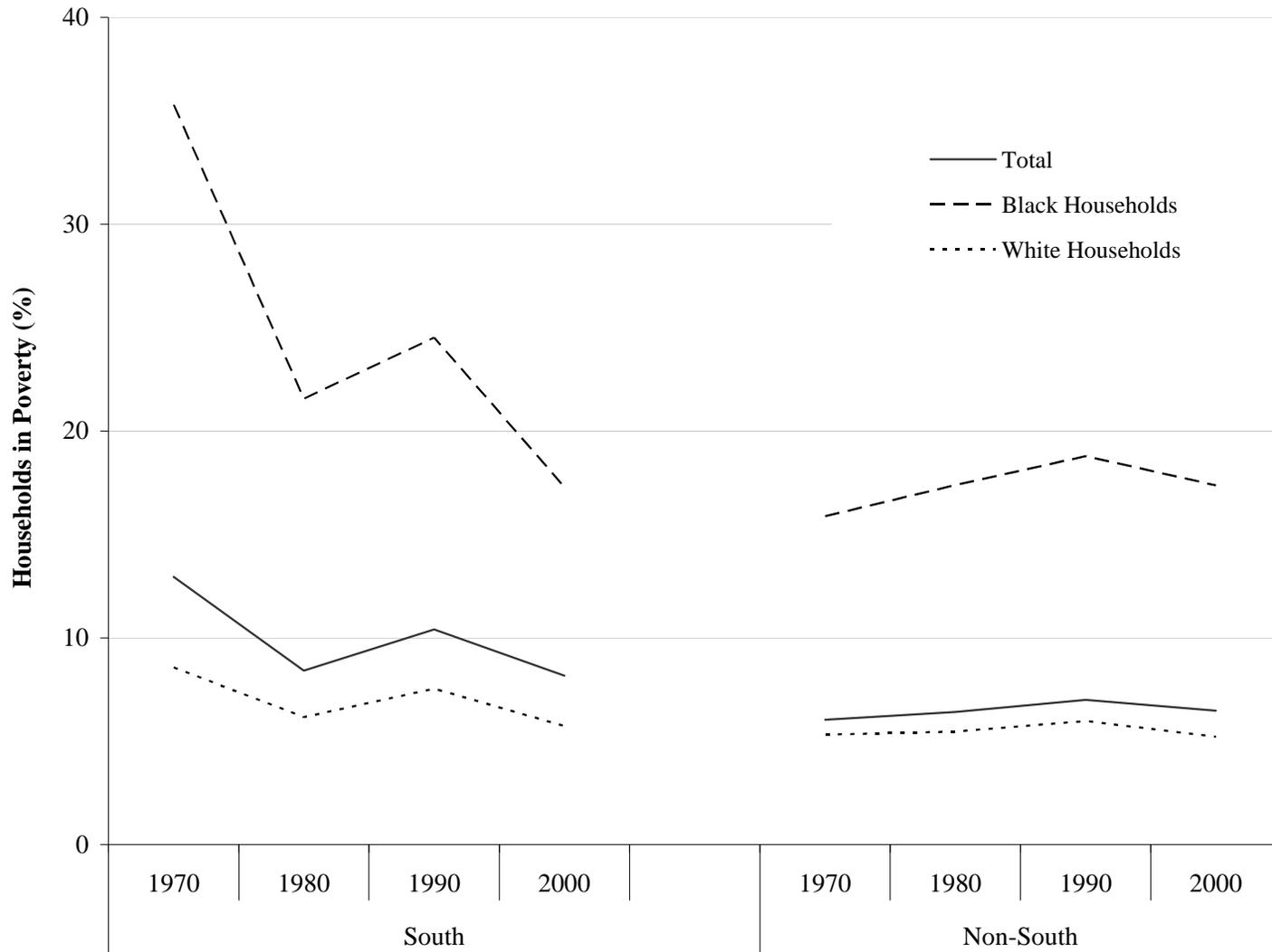


Figure 1. Percent of Households in Poverty by Southern Status and Race, (PUMS) 1970-2000

Note: The 1980, 1990 and 2000 samples are weighted. The South includes Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, West Virginia, and the District of Columbia.

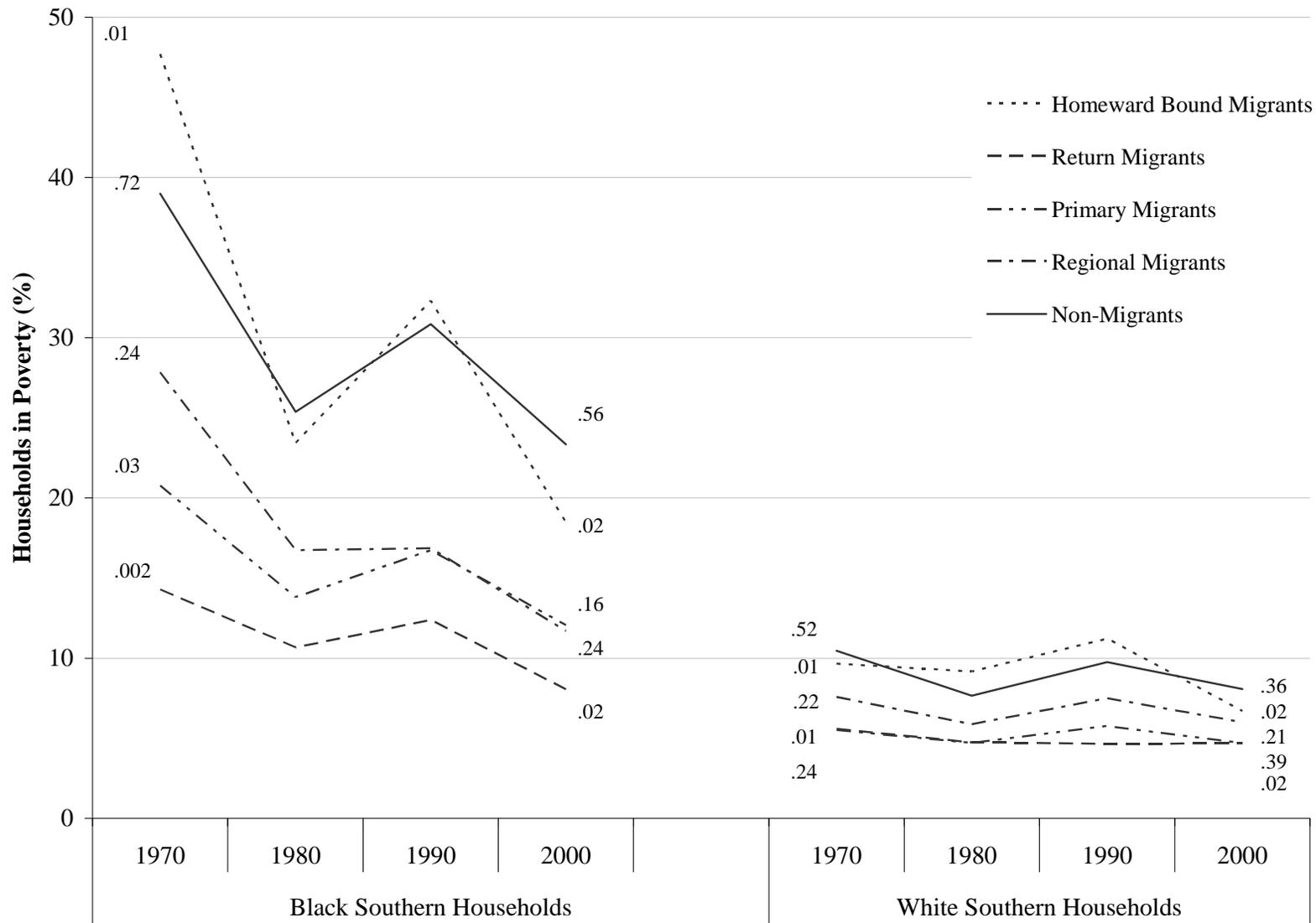


Figure 2. Poverty Rates for the Black and White Southern Population (Households) with Proportionate Representation by Migrant Status, (PUMS) 1970-2000

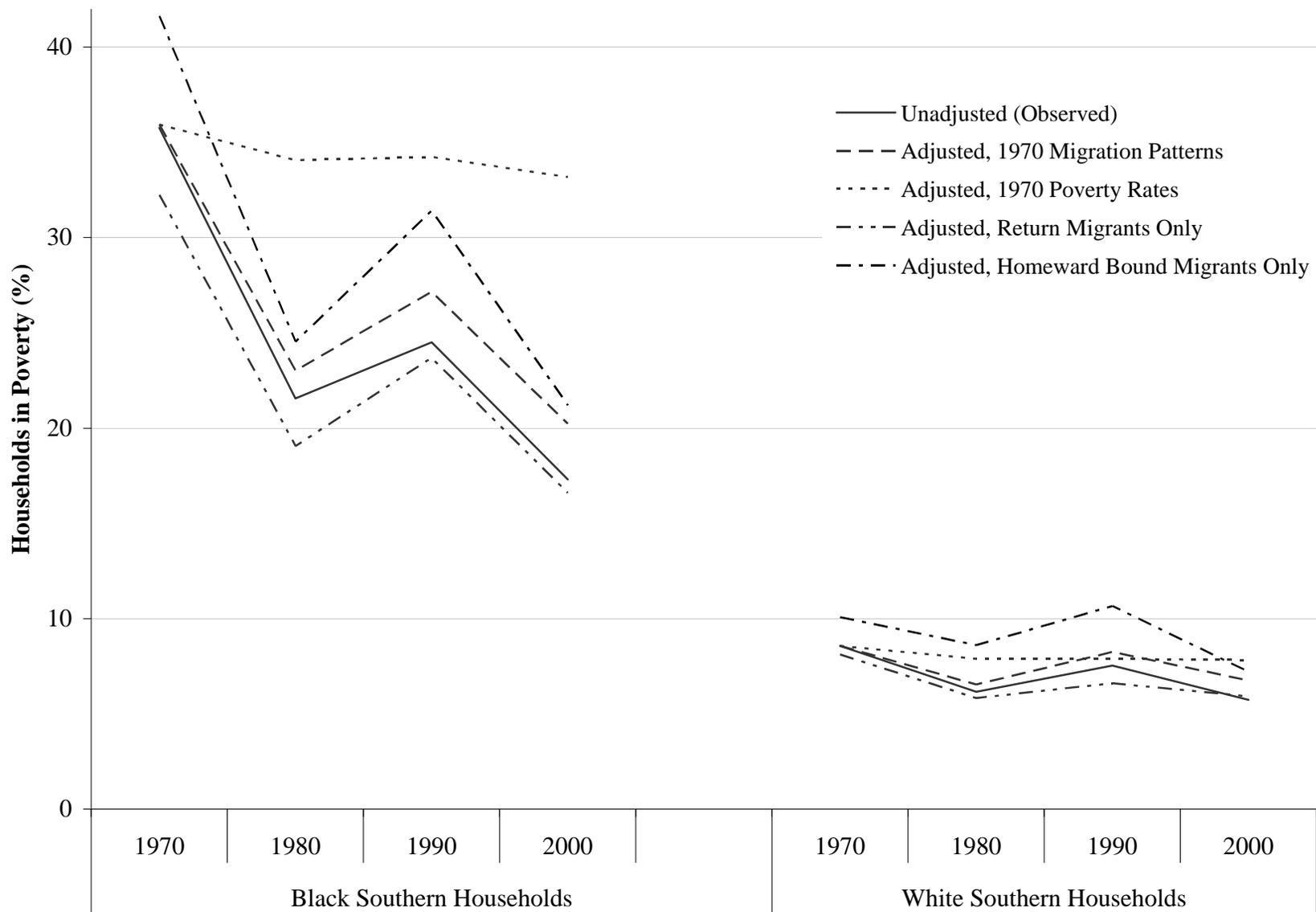


Figure 3. Poverty Rates for the Black and White Southern Population (Households) for the Total and Adjusted Migrant Population Scenarios, (PUMS) 1970-2000

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