

The Changing Demographic (Re)Distribution of African Americans: Implications for Marriage  
Transitions

By:

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## **Abstract**

The central aim of this research is to understand the particular dynamics that affect African American marriage processes with a particular examination of context: Rustbelt, Southwest and New South metropolitan areas. This analysis examines how the demographic profiles of African Americans in three metropolitan areas, Detroit, Phoenix and Atlanta, are linked to the proportions of the never-married populations in these regions and how these demographic profiles have changed over time. Like the general population, the African American population has been shifting over the course of the last 20 years largely due to changes in labor markets. The literature suggests that these population shifts may have an impact on marriage market trends for African Americans in these contexts. Data from the U.S. Census and American Community survey data suggest favorable conditions for marriage transitions in the New South and Southwest and less favorable conditions in the Rustbelt region.

## **Background**

In recent decades, there has been a relatively marked increase of the “never married” proportion of the African American population when compared to the marriage patterns of other racial/ethnic groups in the United States. Demographers and sociologists have often referred to African Americans’ “retreat” from marriage as especially important as it provides insight to the future of African American families (Dixon, 2009; Lichter, et al. 1992; Lichter, LeClere & McLaughlin, 1991). Studies have shown that the decline in marriage has led to an increase in the number of women and children that live in poverty, as well as increases in negative social and health-related outcomes (Myers, 1995). Current research that focuses on African American marriage transitions find that rates are on a steady decrease, and much lower than the marriage rates of whites and Hispanics (Oropesa & Landale 2004; Cherlin 2009). While social scientists have studied a variety of factors that lead to African Americans’ declines in marriage, many of these studies occurred before the 2000s, and focus on African American marriage dynamics historically mostly up until the late 1990s or early 2000s (Tolnay, 1998; Tolnay, 2003; Stewart, 2007; Fossett and Kiecolt 1993). Central to this literature are marriage market conditions, but this body of work has yet to focus on the most recent developments in African American migration patterns. In particular, this paper aims to link how larger demographic processes, such as recent internal migration waves to the Southwest and return internal migration to the Southeast, have affected the size of the African American, never married population in these regions, when compared to a more historical internal migration destination such as the Great Lakes or rustbelt region. Understanding these demographic components may help us to

understand how African American marriage behavior continues to be shaped by a variety of contextual factors.

In general terms, there has been significant population growth in the both the Southeastern and Southwestern (or Sunbelt) regions of the United States over the course of the last twenty years (U.S. Census Bureau). Much of the growth in these areas can be linked to the constriction of the manufacturing sector and its tributaries in the rustbelt regions, attracting both retirees and young, college educated populations to converge on the Southeastern and Southwestern metropolitan areas of the United States. Because of these factors, cities such as Phoenix, Las Vegas, Houston and Atlanta have attracted thousands of migrant men, women and families from Northern regions as well as from other areas of the South (U.S. Census Bureau). Meanwhile, traditional manufacturing centers such as Detroit, Cleveland and Pittsburg have undergone shrinking populations as opportunities in these labor markets have continued to decline (Dickerson, 2007).

Past literature has linked domestic migration to education, employment, and marital outcomes (Tolnay & Eichenbaub, 2006; Price –Spratlen, 1998; Tolnay, 1998). This research aims to uncover the secondary factors that affect marriage markets including variation in employment opportunities, education, and segregation levels. Because of selectivity factors, the dynamics within a receiving location in migration processes may have both single men and women with higher levels of educational attainment and higher employment rates (Stewart, 2007). While prior research has attempted to uncover these intricacies, there is no research that highlights the current demographic shift in terms of African American in-migrants to various locations in the West. Geographically, the western United States was selected because it is a region that has seen substantial growth in the past twenty years, including the substantial growth

of the African American population. For instance, the African American population of Arizona has increased 141.1% in the period between 1980 and 2005 (U.S. Census Data as cited in Alozie, 2008). This is significant in that prior research demonstrates a selection effect in regards to individuals that have resources to migrate (Stewart, 2007). This could therefore have a direct effect on the marriage market for African American women and men in-migrants, alike.

## **Hypotheses**

H<sub>1a</sub>: There is a negative relationship between population growth and the size of the never married population such that metropolitan areas that have grown since 1990 will have a smaller proportion of never married African Americans.

H<sub>1b</sub>: The African American “never married” populations will be greater in the metropolitan areas with depressed employment markets and with higher levels of segregation. In other words, Sunbelt cities will have increasingly lower proportions of African Americans in the “never married” category as compared to Rustbelt cities for the 1990-2010 period.

## **Data and Methods**

Using data from the 1990 and 2000 5% Public Use Microdata (PUMs) files and from the 2006-2010 American Community Survey Population Estimates, the following preliminary report demonstrates the general changes in the demographic composition of three selected U.S.

Metropolitan Statistical Areas as designated by the U.S. Census Bureau: Detroit, Atlanta, and Phoenix. These areas typify the Rustbelt, the New South and the Southwest (Frey et al. 2009).

They were also selected as they represent three very different population compositions, especially in regards to their racial/ethnic distribution both historically and contemporaneously.

Each of these central cities and metropolitan areas have undergone substantial changes in growth

and decline, especially in recent years, as domestic migration flows have shifted toward the southern half of the United States in general (Frey et al. 2009). The American Community Survey was used in lieu of the 2010 Census information, as many of the data used to compile this report are no longer available in the short-form decennial Census questionnaire.

## Preliminary Results

**Table 1.**

<b>Percentage Non-Hispanic Black and White by Metropolitan Area by Year*</b>						
	Atlanta		Detroit		Phoenix	
	Black %	White%	Black%	White%	Black%	White%
1990	28.5	69.25	22.06	76.21	3.84	92.7
2000	31.49	63.03	23.34	71.93	4.57	88.02
2010	36.96	55.56	23.72	70.65	6.42	84.11

*Source: U.S. Census Bureau and the 2006-2010 American Community Survey*

*\* Weighted*

Table 1. displays the percentage of each metropolitan area that is comprised by Non-Hispanic Whites and Blacks. For the Atlanta metropolitan area, the White population has declined from approximately 70% of the total population in 1990 to just over 55% by 2010. Meanwhile, the African American population has increased its share from 28.5% in 1990 to nearly 37% in 2010. In the Detroit metropolitan area, the African American share of the population increased just over 1% between 1990 and 2010, demonstrative of stagnant growth. The proportion of the White population in the Detroit area has declined to just over 70% from approximately 76% in 1990. Finally, the Black population in the Phoenix area has nearly doubled to over 6% since 1990,

while the Non-Hispanic White proportion has declined from almost 93% in 1990 to just fewer than 85% in 2010.

**Table 2.**

<b>Marital Status of the population ages 20-34 by race and metropolitan area: 1990, 2000, 2006-2010*</b>							
		Atlanta		Detroit		Phoenix	
		Black%	White%	Black%	White%	Black%	White%
Currently Married							
	1990	37.96	51.87	27.71	51.01	37.62	52.18
	2000	33.10	51.61	26.71	46.29	34.39	47.93
	2010	25.23	44.45	17.43	36.48	24.93	38.99
Divorced/ Widowed							
	1990	6.94	8.04	5.98	6.93	12.29	9.50
	2000	6.32	6.93	4.62	6.15	6.89	6.97
	2010	4.21	5.35	3.65	4.47	3.85	5.90
Never Married							
	1990	55.09	40.09	66.32	42.06	50.09	38.32
	2000	60.58	41.46	68.67	47.56	58.72	45.10
	2010	70.56	50.20	78.92	59.06	71.22	55.11

Source: U.S. Census Bureau and the 2006-2010 American Community Survey

\* Weighted

Table 2. displays the marital status of the population ages 20-34 by race and by metropolitan area. Ages 20-34 are used here as it limits the sample to the population most likely to experience first marriages when marriage transitions do occur. This is also the “currently married” proportion in this sample. The table shows an overall increase for the never married population in this age group, regardless of race. However, these declines are striking for the African American population. Notably, almost 79% of the 20-34 age group in the Detroit metropolitan area has never been married. This is compared to a high of almost 60% for the Whites

population, also in the Detroit area. This may be linked to the drastic employment challenges faced by this area when compared to the overall industrial growth in the Atlanta and Phoenix metropolitan areas. Both African American and Whites seem to fair better with marriage in these areas. As Table 3. illustrates, both populations have underwent non-negligible declines in marriage since 1990. Net of the general trends toward marriage decline, the sharper decline of African American marriages and its link to internal domestic migrant (both sending and receiving) contexts is important.

**Table 3.**

**Change in never married percentage points by metropolitan area, 1990-2010\***

	Black	White
Phoenix	+ 21.13	+ 16.79
Detroit	+ 12.60	+ 17.00
Atlanta	+ 15.47	+ 10.11

*Source: U.S. Census Bureau and the 2006-2010 American Community Survey*

*\* Weighted*



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