

### **The Promise of Freedom: Fertility Decisions and the Escape from Slavery (Allen, 2015)**

By the nature of their circumstance, slaves had limited agency over their decisions. There is evidence that former slaves dramatically changed their behavior once they've freed. For instance, presumably infertile women had children after they were freed. However, can the *promise of freedom*, not actual freedom, be enough to change the captive slaves' behavior?

#### **One Sentence Summary**

A change in the geographical distance to freedom, interpreted as the *promise of freedom*, leads to a change in captive slaves' fertility decisions.

#### **Main Findings**

Slave mothers wanted to have children but didn't want to bring their offspring into slavery. Owners pressured slaves to have children in labor-intensive plantations. These two kinds of pressure lead some slave mothers to go as far as to kill their children.

Using data from slave plantations in 1840 and 1850, the author measures the distance to freedom using the geographical distance of the slave's plantation to the nearest location a slave needed to escape to be considered free. Before 1850, a slave that escaped to Mexico or any of the Union states<sup>1</sup> was considered "free"<sup>2</sup>. The Fugitive Slave Law (FSL) changed in 1850 and now slaves needed to reach either the Mexican or Canadian border to be considered free. Thus, the distance to freedom increased for those slaves in states part of the Confederacy<sup>3</sup>.

Using this variation in the distance to freedom, pre and post-1850, the author found that decreasing the distance to freedom by 100 meters increased slaves' fertility rates by 5.1%. This finding has two important implications. First, the promise of freedom, not freedom itself, was enough of an incentive to change their decision. Second, it proved that slaves had agency over their fertility decisions.

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<sup>1</sup> One of the states in the northern U.S. that did not support slavery during the Civil War.

<sup>2</sup> Before 1850, Northerners had no incentive to bring back the escaped slave to his owner.

<sup>3</sup> The southern states that supported slavery during the Civil War.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This paper shows the importance of possible outcomes on people's behavior. In this case, the idea of freedom changed the slave's fertility decisions without being free. This same idea can be applied to financial problems. If people with high amounts of debt see "financial freedom" as impossible, then "financial freedom" might judge people into paying their debt.

### **References**

- Allen, T., 2015. The Promise of Freedom: Fertility Decisions and the Escape from Slavery. Rev. Econ. Stat. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43556187>