

African Americans in the Twentieth Century

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The nineteenth century was a time of radical transformation in the political and legal status of African Americans. Blacks were freed from slavery and began to enjoy greater rights as citizens (though full recognition of their rights remained a long way off). Despite these dramatic developments, many economic and demographic characteristics of African Americans at the end of the nineteenth century were not that different from what they had been in the mid-1800s. Tables 1 and 2 present characteristics of black and white Americans in 1900, as recorded in the Census for that year. (The 1900 Census did not record information on years of schooling or on income, so these important variables are left out of these tables, though they will be examined below.) According to the Census, ninety percent of African Americans still lived in the Southern US in 1900 – roughly the same percentage as lived in the South in 1870. Three-quarters of black households were located in rural places. Only about one-fifth of African American household heads owned their own homes (less than half the percentage among whites). About half of black men and about thirty-five percent of black women who reported an occupation to the Census said that they worked as a farmer or a farm laborer, as opposed to about one-third of white men and about eight percent of white women. Outside of farm work, African American men and women were greatly concentrated in unskilled labor and service jobs. Most black children had not attended school in the year before the Census, and white children were much more likely to have attended. So the members of a typical African American family at the start of the twentieth century lived and worked on a farm in the South and did not own their home. Children in these families were unlikely to be in school even at very young ages.

By 1990 (the most recent Census for which such statistics are available at the time of this writing), the economic conditions of African Americans had changed dramatically (see Tables 1 and 2). They had become much less concentrated in the South, in rural places, and in farming jobs and had entered better blue-collar jobs and the white-collar sector. They were nearly twice as likely to own their own homes at the end of the century as in 1900, and their rates of school attendance at all ages had risen sharply. Even after this century of change, though, African Americans were still relatively disadvantaged in terms of education, labor market success, and home ownership.

Table 1: Characteristics of Households in 1900 and 1990

	1900		1990	
	Black	White	Black	White
A. Region of Residence				
South	90.1%	23.5%	53.0%	32.9%
Northeast	3.6%	31.8%	18.9%	20.9%
Midwest	5.8%	38.5%	18.9%	25.3%
West	0.5%	6.2%	9.2%	21.0%
B. Share Rural	75.8%	56.1%	11.9%	25.7%
C. Share of Homes Owner-Occupied	22.1%	49.2%	43.4%	67.3%

Based on household heads in Integrated Public Use Microdata Series Census samples for 1900 and 1990.

Table 2: Characteristics of Individuals in 1900 and 1990

	1900				1990			
	Male		Female		Male		Female	
	Black	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black	White
A. Occupational Distribution								
Professional/Technical	1.3%	3.8%	1.6%	10.7%	9.9%	17.2%	16.6%	21.9%
Proprietor/Manager/Official	0.8	6.9	0.2	2.6	6.5	14.7	5.4	10.0

Clerical	0.2	4.0	0.2	5.6	10.7	7.2	29.7	31.9
Sales	0.3	4.2	0.2	4.1	2.9	6.7	4.1	7.3
Craft	4.2	15.9	0	3.1	17.4	20.7	2.3	2.1
Operative	7.3	13.4	1.8	24.5	20.7	14.9	12.4	8.0
Laborer	25.5	14.0	6.5	1.5	12.2	7.2	2.0	1.5
Private Service	2.2	0.4	33.0	33.2	0.1	0	2.0	0.8
Other Service	4.8	2.4	20.6	6.6	18.5	9.0	25.3	15.8
Farmer	30.8	23.9	6.7	6.1	0.2	1.4	0.1	0.4
Farm Laborer	22.7	11.0	29.4	2.0	1.0	1.0	0.4	0.5

B. Percent Attending School by Age

Ages 6 to 13	37.8%	72.2%	41.9%	71.9%	94.5%	95.3%	94.2%	95.5
Ages 14 to 17	26.7	47.9	36.2	51.5	91.1	93.4	92.6	93.5
Ages 18 to 21	6.8	10.4	5.9	8.6	47.7	54.3	52.9	57.1

Based on Integrated Public Use Microdata Series Census samples for 1900 and 1990. Occupational distributions based on individuals aged 18 to 64 with recorded occupation. School attendance in 1900 refers to attendance at any time in the previous year. School attendance in 1990 refers to attendance since February 1 of that year.

These changes in the lives of African Americans did not occur continuously and steadily throughout the twentieth century. Rather, we can divide the century into three distinct eras: (1) the years from 1900 to 1915, prior to large-scale movement out of the South; (2) the years from 1916 to 1964, marked by migration and urbanization, but prior to the most important government efforts to reduce racial inequality; and (3) the years since 1965, characterized by government antidiscrimination efforts but also by economic shifts which have had a great impact on racial inequality and African American economic status.

1900-1915: Continuation of Nineteenth-Century Patterns

As was the case in the 1800s, African American economic life in the early 1900s centered on Southern cotton agriculture. African Americans grew cotton under a variety of contracts and institutional arrangements. Some were laborers hired for a short period for specific tasks. Many were tenant farmers, renting a piece of land and some of their tools and supplies, and paying the rent at the end of the growing season with a portion of their harvest. Records from Southern farms indicate that white and black farm laborers were paid similar wages, and that white and black tenant farmers worked under similar contracts for similar rental rates. Whites in general, however, were much more likely to own land. A similar pattern is found in Southern manufacturing in these years. Among the fairly small number of individuals employed in manufacturing in the South, white and black workers were often paid comparable wages if they worked at the same job for the same company. However, blacks were much less likely to hold better-paying skilled jobs, and they were more likely to work for lower-paying companies.

While the concentration of African Americans in cotton agriculture persisted, Southern black life changed in other ways in the early 1900s. Limitations on the legal rights of African Americans grew more severe in the South in this era. The 1896 Supreme Court decision in the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* provided a legal basis for greater explicit segregation in American society. This decision allowed for the provision of separate facilities and services to blacks and whites as long as the facilities and services were equal. Through the early 1900s, many new laws, known as Jim Crow laws, were passed in Southern states creating legally segregated schools, transportation systems, and lodging. The requirement of equality was not generally enforced, however. Perhaps the most important and best-known example of separate and unequal facilities in the South was the system of public education. Through the first decades of the twentieth century, resources were funneled to white schools, raising teacher salaries and per-pupil funding while reducing class size. Black schools experienced no real improvements of this type. The result was a sharp decline in the relative quality of schooling available to African-American children.

1916-1964: Migration and Urbanization

The mid-1910s witnessed the first large-scale movement of African Americans out of the South. The share of African Americans living in the South fell by about four percentage points between 1910 and 1920 (with nearly all of this

movement after 1915) and another six points between 1920 and 1930 (see Table 3). What caused this tremendous relocation of African Americans? The worsening political and social conditions in the South, noted above, certainly played a role. But the specific timing of the migration appears to be connected to economic factors. Northern employers in many industries faced strong demand for their products and so had a great need for labor. Their traditional source of cheap labor, European immigrants, dried up in the late 1910s as the coming of World War I interrupted international migration. After the end of the war, new laws limiting immigration to the US would keep the flow of European labor at a low level. Northern employers thus needed a new source of cheap labor, and they turned to Southern blacks. In some cases, employers would send recruiters to the South to find workers and to pay their way North. In addition to this pull from the North, economic events in the South served to push out many African Americans. Destruction of the cotton crop by the boll weevil, an insect that feeds on cotton plants, and poor weather in some places during these years made new opportunities in the North even more attractive.

Table 3: Share of African Americans Residing in the South

Year	Share Living in South
1890	90%
1900	90%
1910	89%
1920	85%
1930	79%
1940	77%
1950	68%
1960	60%
1970	53%
1980	53%
1990	53%

Sources: 1890 to 1960: Historical Statistics of the United States, volume 1, pp. 22-23; 1970: Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1973, p. 27; 1980: Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1985, p. 31; 1990: Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1996, p. 31.

Pay was certainly better, and opportunities were wider, in the North. Nonetheless, the region was not entirely welcoming to these migrants. As the black population in the North grew in the 1910s and 1920s, residential segregation grew more pronounced, as did school segregation. In some cases, racial tensions boiled over into deadly violence. The late 1910s were scarred by severe race riots in a number of cities, including East St. Louis (1917) and Chicago (1919).

Access to Jobs in the North

Within the context of this broader turmoil, black migrants did gain entry to new jobs in Northern manufacturing. As in Southern manufacturing, pay differences between blacks and whites working the same job at the same plant were generally small. However, black workers had access to a limited set of jobs and remained heavily concentrated in unskilled laborer positions. Black workers gained admittance to only a limited set of firms, as well. For instance, in the auto industry, the Ford Motor Company hired a tremendous number of black workers, while other auto makers in Detroit typically excluded these workers. Because their alternatives were limited, black workers could be worked very intensely and could also be used in particularly unpleasant and dangerous settings, such as the killing and cutting areas of meat packing plants, foundry departments in auto plants, and blast furnaces in steel plants.

Unions

Through the 1910s and 1920s, relations between black workers and Northern labor unions were often antagonistic. Many unions in the North had explicit rules barring membership by black workers. When faced with a strike (or the threat of a strike), employers often hired in black workers, knowing that these workers were unlikely to become members of the union or to be sympathetic to its goals. Indeed, there is evidence that black workers were used as strike breakers in a great number of labor disputes in the North in the 1910s and 1920s. Beginning in the mid-1930s, African Americans gained

greater inclusion in the union movement. By that point, it was clear that black workers were entrenched in manufacturing, and that any broad-based organizing effort would have to include them.

Conditions around 1940

As is apparent in Table 3, black migration slowed in the 1930s, due to the onset of the Great Depression and the resulting high level of unemployment in the North in the 1930s. Beginning in about 1940, preparations for war again created tight labor markets in Northern cities, though, and, as in the late 1910s, African Americans journeyed north to take advantage of new opportunities. In some ways, moving to the North in the 1940s may have appeared less risky than it had during the World War I era. By 1940, there were large black communities in a number of Northern cities. Newspapers produced by these communities circulated in the South, providing information about housing, jobs, and social conditions. Many Southern African Americans now had friends and relatives in the North to help with the transition.

In other ways, though, labor market conditions were less auspicious for black workers in 1940 than they had been during the World War I years. Unemployment remained high in 1940, with about fourteen percent of white workers either unemployed or participating in government work relief programs. Employers hired these unemployed whites before turning to African American labor. Even as labor markets tightened, black workers gained little access to war-related employment. The President issued orders in 1941 that companies doing war-related work had to hire in a non-discriminatory way, and the Fair Employment Practice Committee was created to monitor the hiring practices of these companies. Initially, few resources were devoted to this effort, but in 1943 the government began to enforce fair employment policies more aggressively. These efforts appear to have aided black employment, at least for the duration of the war.

Gains during the 1940s and 1950s

In 1940, the Census Bureau began to collect data on individual incomes, so we can track changes in black income levels and in black/white income ratios in more detail from this date forward. Table 4 provides annual earnings figures for black and white men and women from 1939 (recorded in the 1940 Census) to 1989 (recorded in the 1990 Census). The big gains of the 1940s, both in level of earnings and in the black/white income ratio, are very obvious. Often, we focus on the role of education in producing higher earnings, but the gap between average schooling levels for blacks and whites did not change much in the 1940s (particularly for men), so schooling levels could not have contributed too much to the relative income gains for blacks in the 1940s (see Table 5). Rather, much of the improvement in the black/white pay ratio in this decade simply reflects ongoing migration: blacks were leaving the South, a low-wage region, and entering the North, a high-wage region. Some of the improvement reflects access to new jobs and industries for black workers, due to the tight labor markets and antidiscrimination efforts of the war years.

Table 4: Mean Annual Earnings of Wage and Salary Workers

Aged 20 and Over

	Male			Female		
	Black	White	Ratio	Black	White	Ratio
1939	\$537.45	\$1234.41	.44	\$331.32	\$771.69	.43
1949	1761.06	2984.96	.59	992.35	1781.96	.56
1959	2848.67	5157.65	.55	1412.16	2371.80	.59
1969	5341.64	8442.37	.63	3205.12	3786.45	.85
1979	11404.46	16703.67	.68	7810.66	7893.76	.99
1989	19417.03	28894.69	.67	15319.29	16135.65	.95

Source: Integrated Public Use Microdata Series Census samples for 1940, 1950, 1960, 1970, 1980, and 1990. Includes only those with non-zero earnings who were not in school. All figures are in current (nominal) dollars.

Table 5: Years of School Attended for Individuals 20 and Over

	Male	Female
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	Black	White	Difference	Black	White	Difference
1940	5.9	9.1	3.2	6.9	10.5	3.6
1950	6.8	9.8	3	7.8	10.8	3
1960	7.9	10.5	2.6	8.8	11.0	2.2
1970	9.4	11.4	2.0	10.3	11.7	1.4
1980	11.2	12.5	1.3	11.8	12.4	0.6

Source: Integrated Public Use Microdata Series Census samples for 1940, 1950, 1960, 1970, and 1980. Based on highest grade attended by wage and salary workers aged 20 and over who had non-zero earnings in the previous year and who were not in school at the time of the census. Comparable figures are not available in the 1990 Census.

Black workers relative incomes were also increased by some general changes in labor demand and supply and in labor market policy in the 1940s. During the war, demand for labor was particularly strong in the blue-collar manufacturing sector. Workers were needed to build tanks, jeeps, and planes, and these jobs did not require a great deal of formal education or skill. In addition, the minimum wage was raised in 1945, and wartime regulations allowed greater pay increases for low-paid workers than for highly-paid workers. After the war, the supply of college-educated workers increased dramatically. The GI Bill, passed in 1944, provided large subsidies to help pay the expenses of World War II veterans who wanted to attend college. This policy helped a generation of men further their education and get a college degree. So strong labor demand, government policies that raised wages at the bottom, and a rising supply of well-educated workers meant that less-educated, less-skilled workers received particularly large wage increases in the 1940s. Because African Americans were concentrated among the less-educated, low-earning workers, these general economic forces were especially helpful to African Americans and served to raise their pay relative to that of whites.

The effect of these broader forces on racial inequality helps to explain the contrast between the 1940s and 1950s evident in Table 4. The black-white pay ratio may have actually fallen a bit for men in the 1950s, and it rose much more slowly in the 1950s than in the 1940s for women. Some of this slowdown in progress reflects weaker labor markets in general, which reduced black access to new jobs. In addition, the general narrowing of the wage distribution that occurred in the 1940s stopped in the 1950s. Less-educated, lower-paid workers were no longer getting particularly large pay increases. As a result, blacks did not gain ground on white workers. It is striking that pay gains for black workers slowed in the 1950s despite a more rapid decline in the black-white schooling gap during these years (Table 5).

Unemployment

On the whole, migration and entry to new industries played a large role in promoting black relative pay increases through the years from World War I to the late 1950s. However, these changes also had some negative effects on black labor market outcomes. As black workers left Southern agriculture, their relative rate of unemployment rose. For the nation as a whole, black and white unemployment rates were about equal as late as 1930. This equality was to a great extent the result of lower rates of unemployment for everyone in the rural South relative to the urban North. Farm owners and sharecroppers tended not to lose their work entirely during weak markets, whereas manufacturing employees might be laid off or fired during downturns. Still, while unemployment was greater for everyone in the urban North, it was disproportionately greater for black workers. Their unemployment rates in Northern cities were much higher than white unemployment rates in the same cities. One result of black migration, then, was a dramatic increase in the ratio of black unemployment to white unemployment. The black/white unemployment ratio rose from about 1 in 1930 (indicating equal unemployment rates for blacks and whites) to about 2 by 1960. The ratio remained at this high level through the end of the twentieth century.

1965-1999: Civil Rights and New Challenges

In the 1960s, black workers again began to experience more rapid increases in relative pay levels (see Table 4). These years also marked a new era in government involvement in the labor market, particularly with regard to racial inequality and discrimination. One of the most far-reaching changes in government policy regarding race actually occurred a bit earlier, in the 1954 Supreme Court decision in the case of *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. In that case, the Supreme Court ruled that racial segregation of schools was unconstitutional. However, substantial desegregation of Southern schools (and some Northern schools) would not take place until the late 1960s and early 1970s.

School desegregation, therefore, was probably not a primary force in generating the relative pay gains of the 1960s and 1970s. Other anti-discrimination policies enacted in the mid-1960s did play a large role, however. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed discrimination in a broad set of social arenas. Title VII of this law banned discrimination in hiring, firing, pay, promotion, and working conditions and created the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to investigate complaints of workplace discrimination. A second policy, Executive Order 11246 (issued by President Johnson in 1965), set up more stringent anti-discrimination rules for businesses working on government contracts. There has been much debate regarding the importance of these policies in promoting better jobs and wages for African Americans. There is now increasing agreement that these policies had positive effects on labor market outcomes for black workers at least through the mid-1970s. Several pieces of evidence point to this conclusion. First, the timing is right. Many indicators of employment and wage gains show marked improvement beginning in 1965, soon after the implementation of these policies. Second, job and wage gains for black workers in the 1960s were, for the first time, concentrated in the South. Enforcement of anti-discrimination policy was targeted on the South in this era. It is also worth noting that rates of black migration out of the South dropped substantially after 1965, perhaps reflecting a sense of greater opportunity there due to these policies. Finally, these gains for black workers occurred simultaneously in many industries and many places, under a variety of labor market conditions. Whatever generated these improvements had to come into effect broadly at one point in time. Federal antidiscrimination policy fits this description.

Return to Stagnation in Relative Income

The years from 1979 to 1989 saw the return of stagnation in black relative incomes. Part of this stagnation may reflect the reversal of the shifts in wage distribution that occurred during the 1940s. In the late 1970s and especially in the 1980s, the US wage distribution grew more unequal. Individuals with less education, particularly those with no college education, saw their pay decline relative to the better-educated. Workers in blue-collar manufacturing jobs were particularly hard hit. The concentration of black workers, especially black men, in these categories meant that their pay suffered relative to that of whites. Another possible factor in the stagnation of black relative pay in the 1980s was weakened enforcement of antidiscrimination policies at this time.

While black relative incomes stagnated on average, black residents of urban centers suffered particular hardships in the 1970s and 1980s. The loss of blue-collar manufacturing jobs was most severe in these areas. For a variety of reasons, including the introduction of new technologies that required larger plants, many firms relocated their production facilities outside of central cities, to suburbs and even more peripheral areas. Central cities increasingly became information-processing and financial centers. Jobs in these industries generally required a college degree or even more education. Despite decades of rising educational levels, African Americans were still barely half as likely as whites to have completed four years of college or more: in 1990, 11.3% of blacks over the age of 25 had four years of college or more, versus 22% of whites. As a result of these developments, many blacks in urban centers found themselves surrounded by jobs for which they were poorly qualified, and at some distance from the types of jobs for which they were qualified, the jobs their parents had moved to the city for in the first place. Their ability to relocate near these blue-collar jobs seems to have been limited both by ongoing discrimination in the housing market and by a lack of resources. Those African Americans with the resources to exit the central city often did so, leaving behind communities marked by extremely high rates of poverty and unemployment.

Over the fifty years from 1939 to 1989, through these episodes of gain and stagnation, the ratio of black mens average annual earnings to white mens average annual earnings rose about 23 points, from .44 to .67. The timing of improvement in the black female/ white female income ratio was similar. However, black women gained much more ground overall: the black-white income ratio for women rose 50 points over these fifty years and stood at .95 in 1989 (down from .99 in 1979). The education gap between black women and white women declined more than the education gap between black and white men, which contributed to the faster pace of improvement in black womens relative earnings. Furthermore, black female workers were more likely to be employed full-time than were white female workers, which raised their annual income. The reverse was true among men: white male workers were somewhat more likely to be employed full time than were black male workers.

Comparable data on annual incomes from the 2000 Census are not available at the time of this writing. Evidence from other labor market surveys suggests that the tight labor markets of the late 1990s may have brought renewed relative

pay gains for black workers. Black workers also experienced sharp declines in unemployment during these years, though black unemployment remained about twice as great as white unemployment.

Beyond the Labor Market: Persistent Gaps in Wealth and Health

When we look beyond these basic measures of labor market success, we find more disturbingly large and persistent gaps between African Americans and white Americans. Wealth differences between blacks and whites continue to be very large. In the mid-1990s, black households held only about one-quarter the amount of wealth that white households held, on average. If we leave out equity in one's home and personal possessions and focus on more strictly financial, income-producing assets, black households held only about ten to fifteen percent as much wealth as white households. Big differences in wealth holding remain even if we compare black and white households with similar incomes.

Much of this wealth gap reflects the ongoing effects of the historical patterns described above. When freed from slavery, African Americans held no wealth, and their lower incomes prevented them from accumulating wealth at the rate whites did. African Americans found it particularly difficult to buy homes, traditionally a household's most important asset, due to discrimination in real estate markets. Government housing policies in the 1930s and 1940s may have also reduced their rate of home-buying. While the federal government made low interest loans and loan insurance available through the Home Owners Loan Corporation and the Federal Housing Authority, these programs generally could not be used to acquire homes in black or mixed neighborhoods, usually the only neighborhoods in which blacks could buy, because these were considered to be areas of high-risk for loan default. Because wealth is passed on from parents to children, the wealth differences of the mid-twentieth century continue to have an important impact today.

Differences in life expectancy have also proven to be remarkably stubborn. Certainly, black and white mortality patterns are more similar today than they once were. In 1929, the first year for which national figures are available, white life expectancy at birth was 58.6 years and black life expectancy was 46.7 years (for men and women combined). By 2000, white life expectancy had risen to 77.4 years and black life expectancy was 71.8 years. Thus, the black-white gap had fallen from about twelve years to less than six. However, almost all of this reduction in the gap was completed by the early 1960s. In 1961, the black-white gap was 6.5 years. The past forty years have seen very little change in the gap, though life expectancy has risen for both groups.

Some of this remaining difference in life expectancy can be traced to income differences between blacks and whites. Black children face a particularly high risk of accidental death in the home, often due to dangerous conditions in low-quality housing. African Americans of all ages face a high risk of homicide, which is related in part to residence in poor neighborhoods. Among older people, African Americans face high risk of death due to heart disease, and the incidence of heart disease is correlated with income. Still, black-white mortality differences, especially those related to disease, are complex and are not yet fully understood.

Infant mortality is a particularly large and particularly troubling form of health difference between blacks and whites.

In 2000 the white infant mortality rate (5.7 per 1000 live births) was less than half the rate for African Americans (14.0 per 1000). Again, some of this mortality difference is related to the effect of lower incomes on the nutrition, medical care, and living conditions available to African American mothers and newborns. However, the full set of relevant factors is the subject of ongoing research.

Summary and Conclusions

It is undeniable that the economic fortunes of African Americans changed dramatically during the twentieth century. African Americans moved from tremendous concentration in Southern agriculture to much greater diversity in residence and occupation. Over the period in which income can be measured, there are large increases in black incomes in both relative and absolute terms. Schooling differentials between blacks and whites fell sharply, as well. When one looks beyond the starting and ending points, though, more complex realities present themselves. The progress that we observe grew out of periods of tremendous social upheaval, particularly during the world wars. It was shaped in part by conflict between black workers and white workers, and it coincided with growing residential segregation. It was not continuous and gradual. Rather, it was punctuated by periods of rapid gain and periods of stagnation. The rapid gains are attributable to actions on the part of black workers (especially migration), broad economic forces (especially tight labor

markets and narrowing of the general wage distribution), and specific antidiscrimination policy initiatives (such as the Fair Employment Practice Committee in the 1940s and Title VII and contract compliance policy in the 1960s). Finally, we should note that this century of progress ended with considerable gaps remaining between African Americans and white Americans in terms of income, unemployment, wealth, and life expectancy.

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