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Contributions of Rural Migrants to the Urban Occupational Structure¹

By Anne S. Lee and Gladys K. Bowles

Rural-urban migrants in the United States do not appear to contribute unduly to the lower status urban occupations. Nationally, their shares in 1967 were about equal to their share of urban population in the professional and managerial occupations, higher among craftsmen and operatives, and lower for clerical and sales people. They were represented proportionally in the service and nonfarm labor categories, and excessively among private household workers. Some differences in occupations of rural-urban migrants were noted for race-sex groups and for the South compared with the non-South.

Keywords: Population; Migration; Occupation; Residence; Race.

One of the major forces in American urban growth has been migration from rural areas. So great has this influx been that in 1967, for example, at least one out of every five urban residents 17 years old and over was of rural origin. For most of these rural migrants, the moves to urban areas had been from areas with declining economic opportunities and limited occupational choices. Once in an urban area, however, many of the migrants were forced to compete for jobs with urban natives who were better educated and who had better knowledge of and easier entree into the urban occupational structure simply by virtue of having been there longer. Given these circumstances, one might hypothesize that rural-urban migrants would be at a disadvantage in seeking employment and would be disproportionately concentrated in lower status occupations. This paper explores that proposition, using data for 1967 and 1940, by examining whether rural-urban migrants held shares in nine broad occupational groups proportionate to their share in the total urban employed population.

One of the largest bodies of data for examining rural-urban migrants is the 1967 Survey of Economic

Opportunity (SEO).² This was the second of two special surveys conducted by the Bureau of the Census for the Office of Economic Opportunity to obtain detailed information about poverty at the national and regional levels. The SEO contains the most recent data available. Migrants were defined in the SEO as persons who had ever lived 50 miles or more from their 1967 residences, and information was obtained about the last residence at least 50 miles away and the residence at age 16. Rural-urban designations for 1967 were the same as for the 1960 Census of Population. Earlier residences described as in a town or village, in the open country but not on a farm, or on a farm were classified as rural. Occupational categories were the same as those used in the 1960 Census but referred to the longest occupation held during 1966 rather than during the week preceding the survey.

Rural-Urban Migrants in the Urban Occupational Structure

Just as rural-urban migrants comprised a fifth of all urban residents in the country as a whole in 1967 (table 1), so too did they constitute a fifth of all urban persons 17 years old and over who reported having been employed at some time during 1966. But if their share of all urban employed persons was the same as for the total urban population, their shares of the nine occupational groups being examined here were not. Significantly larger proportions of rural-urban migrants were found in three categories—craftsmen, operatives, and

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²For a full discussion of the 1967 Survey of Economic Opportunity, see Gladys K. Bowles, A. Lloyd Bacon, and P. Neal Ritchey, *Poverty Dimensions of Rural-to-Urban Migration: A Statistical Report*, Population-Migration Reports, Rural-Urban Migrants, Vol. 1, Part 1 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1973).

Table 1. Urban population by origin, 1967

Origin	Population		Employed persons	
	Num-ber	Per-centage	Num-ber	Per-centage
	Thous.	Pct.	Thous.	Pct.
Total urban	88,510	100.0	59,346	100.0
Rural-urban migrants	18,417	20.8	11,787	19.9
Urban population of urban origin	70,093	79.2	47,559	80.1

private household workers—while the proportions engaged in clerical and sales activities were significantly lower than their proportion of all employed persons (table 2).³ In two of the four white-collar occupations, the share of rural-urban migrants was no different from their share of the total group. This was true of two lower status occupations as well—service workers and nonfarm laborers. It appears then that rural-urban migrants as a group were proportionately represented in higher status occupations and were not contributing excessively to the lowest groups, with the exception of private household workers.

Underlying this occupational structure of the total urban population was the distribution by occupation of

³Throughout this article, statistical significance was tested by the application of standard errors developed by the Office of Economic Opportunity for the 1967 Survey of Economic Opportunity. See Bowles et al., *op. cit.*, chapter 20.

each race and sex group. Since the occupational classifications of whites and Negroes and of males and females differ considerably, the proportion of rural-urban migrants in each occupational group could be affected by the relative success of each race-sex group in attaining employment in a given occupation. Table 3 shows the proportions for each race and sex group calculated separately. Rural-urban migrants comprised varying shares of the occupational classes among race-sex groups; in few occupations were their shares significantly different, in terms of the SEO sample size, from the share they comprised of urban employed people. The only clearcut evidence of excessive shares in lower status occupations was found among female private household workers, both white and Negro.

In comparison with all urban employed persons, rural-urban migrants were somewhat more likely both to live in the South and to be of Southern origin as well. Whereas 40 percent of the employed rural-urban migrants had initial residences in the South, the figure for all urban employed persons was about 28 percent. About a third of the Southern rural-origin migrants were in the non-South in 1967, and they were almost as likely to be Negroes as whites. The contributions of rural-urban migrants to the urban occupational structure for whites and Negroes in the South and non-South are shown in tables 4 and 5.

The South

Rural-urban migrants were relatively more important in the urban occupational structure of the South than of

Table 2. Urban population 17 years old and over by occupation in 1966, and percentage of rural-urban migrants, by race and sex, United States, 1967

Major occupational group	Total ^a	Rural-urban migrants				
		Total ^a	White males	White females	Negro males	Negro females
		Thousands	Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent
Professional, technical, and kindred workers	8,141	19.4	11.7	6.9	0.2	0.4
Managers, officials, and proprietors	5,897	18.6	15.1	2.8	0.4	0.1
Clerical and kindred workers	11,658	15.8	3.5	11.1	0.4	0.5
Sales workers	4,274	16.5	7.8	7.9	0.1	0.4
Craftsmen, foremen, and kindred workers	7,056	23.1	20.4	1.0	1.3	0.1
Operatives	10,767	22.3	12.0	6.4	2.5	1.1
Private household workers	1,487	29.9	0.0	14.6	0.1	14.7
Service, except private household	6,491	21.0	6.7	9.4	2.1	2.5
Laborers, except farm and mine	2,822	19.2	11.7	0.2	6.6	0.1
Total reporting employment ^b	59,346	19.9	10.4	6.7	1.3	1.1

^aIncludes whites, Negroes, and other races.

^bIncludes persons with farm occupations and persons not reporting occupation.

Source: 1967 Survey of Economic Opportunity.

Table 3. Urban population 17 years old and over by occupation in 1966, and number and percentage of rural-urban migrants, by race and sex, United States, 1967

Race and major occupational group	Males			Females		
	Total	Rural-urban migrants		Total	Rural-urban migrants	
		Number	Percentage		Number	Percentage
	Thousands	Thousands	Percent	Thousands	Thousands	Percent
White:						
Professional, technical, and kindred workers	4,797	952	19.8	2,895	562	19.4
Managers, officials, and proprietors	4,712	890	18.9	991	165	16.6
Clerical and kindred workers	2,645	413	15.6	8,094	1,295	16.0
Sales workers	2,184	334	15.3	1,934	336	17.4
Craftsmen, foremen, and kindred workers	6,275	1,441	23.0	237	72	30.4
Operatives	6,001	1,290	21.5	3,177	691	21.7
Private household workers	17	0	—	698	217	31.1
Service, except private household	2,172	433	19.9	2,844	608	21.4
Laborers, except farm and mine	1,971	329	16.7	75	7	—
Total reporting employment^a	31,182	6,180	19.8	21,106	3,993	18.9
Negro:						
Professional, technical, and kindred workers	141	19	13.5	208	32	15.4
Managers, officials, and proprietors	107	25	23.4	30	4	—
Clerical and kindred workers	277	43	15.5	566	64	11.3
Sales workers	47	5	—	85	18	21.2
Craftsmen, foremen, and kindred workers	458	95	20.7	27	5	—
Operatives	970	270	27.8	520	121	23.3
Private household workers	4	1	—	755	219	29.0
Service, except private household	559	135	24.2	823	162	19.7
Laborers, except farm and mine	698	187	26.8	37	3	—
Total reporting employment^a	3,359	799	23.8	3,107	646	20.8

^aIncludes persons with farm occupations and persons not reporting occupation.

Source: 1967 Survey of Economic Opportunity.

the non-South; close to a quarter of all employed workers in the urban South had originated in rural areas. By and large, these migrants were white and had come from the South itself; most of them reported no residence in any other region. Their proportion in any given occupational group was about what one would expect from their proportion among total employed workers. The proportion for private household workers

was higher than average but this difference was not statistically significant.

The relative shares of each occupational group for each race-sex group tended to be proportionate as well. This was true for white males and for white females in every occupation. Two-fifths of all white private household workers were of rural origin, but this was not a major occupation for white females. Among Negroes,

Table 4. White urban population 17 years old and over by occupation in 1966, and percentage of rural-urban migrants, by selected characteristics, South and non-South, 1967

Sex and major occupational group	Urban South ^a					Urban non-South ^a				
	Total	Rural-urban migrants			Total	Rural-urban migrants				
		Total	Within South	Return South		To South	Total	Within non-South	Return non-South	To non-South
	Thous.	Pct.	Pct.	Pct.	Pct.	Thous.	Pct.	Pct.	Pct.	Pct.
Males:										
Professional, technical, and kindred workers	1,083	24.0	15.1	1.0	7.9	3,502	18.0	15.6	0.9	1.5
Managers, officials, and proprietors	1,276	23.2	17.9	1.6	3.7	3,259	16.5	13.9	0.8	1.8
Clerical and kindred workers	653	21.0	14.1	2.0	4.9	1,881	13.1	10.0	1.1	2.0
Sales workers	502	19.3	15.5	2.4	1.4	1,613	13.1	11.8	0.2	1.1
Craftsmen, foremen, and kindred workers	1,470	27.4	22.6	2.1	2.7	4,385	20.1	15.8	1.2	3.1
Operatives	1,381	25.5	20.5	3.5	1.5	4,187	17.5	12.5	0.6	4.4
Private household workers	0	--	--	--	--	13	--	--	--	--
Service, except private household	329	23.0	18.5	1.2	3.3	1,593	15.0	12.2	0.4	2.4
Laborers, except farm and mine	352	21.1	13.4	5.4	2.3	1,470	13.3	9.5	0.5	3.3
Total reporting employment ^b	7,131	24.2	18.3	2.3	3.6	22,182	16.8	13.4	0.8	2.6
Females:										
Professional, technical, and kindred workers	632	22.8	16.6	1.3	4.9	2,114	18.5	14.6	1.7	2.2
Managers, officials, and proprietors	220	21.8	15.9	4.1	1.8	708	14.4	14.0	0.4	0.0
Clerical and kindred workers	1,886	22.8	18.0	1.6	3.2	5,882	13.3	11.2	0.6	1.5
Sales workers	464	25.9	13.4	5.2	7.3	1,400	14.4	12.0	0.8	1.6
Craftsmen, foremen, and kindred workers	47	--	--	--	--	176	32.9	28.4	0.0	4.5
Operatives	685	20.0	15.8	3.2	1.0	2,065	19.3	13.4	0.9	5.0
Private household workers	147	40.9	36.1	0.0	4.8	443	21.0	17.6	0.0	3.4
Service, except private household	534	25.0	19.5	2.1	3.4	2,075	18.9	14.7	0.5	3.7
Laborers, except farm and mine	24	--	--	--	--	49	--	--	--	--
Total reporting employment ^b	4,680	23.3	17.6	2.3	3.4	15,014	16.3	13.1	0.8	2.4

^aPersons with initial residence outside the United States omitted.^bIncludes persons with farm occupations and persons not reporting occupation.

Source: 1967 Survey of Economic Opportunity.

Table 5. Negro urban population 17 years old and over by occupation in 1966, and percentage of rural-urban migrants, by selected characteristics, South and non-South, 1967

Sex and major occupational group	Urban South ^a			Urban non-South ^a		
	Total	Rural-urban migrants		Total	Rural-urban migrants	
		Total	Within South		Total	To non-South
	Thousands	Percent	Percent	Thousands	Percent	Percent
Males:						
Professional, technical, and kindred workers	44	---	---	83	15.7	9.6
Managers, officials, and proprietors	42	---	---	56	26.8	25.0
Clerical and kindred workers	84	16.7	15.5	188	14.9	10.6
Sales workers	12	---	---	34	---	---
Total white-collar	182	15.4	13.7	361	16.1	12.2
Craftsmen, foremen, and kindred workers	180	23.3	22.2	270	18.8	17.8
Operatives	372	26.9	24.5	579	28.5	26.9
Private household workers	1	---	---	1	---	---
Service, except private household	260	22.7	20.8	290	25.2	23.8
Laborers, except farm and mine	372	27.2	26.1	319	25.4	23.8
Total reporting employment^b	1,404	24.3	22.6	1,876	23.3	21.4
Females:						
Professional, technical, and kindred workers	98	19.4	19.4	102	9.8	9.8
Managers, officials, and proprietors	13	---	---	16	---	---
Clerical and kindred workers	138	14.5	11.6	410	9.8	8.0
Sales workers	34	---	---	49	---	---
Total white-collar	283	16.5	15.1	577	10.9	9.7
Craftsmen, foremen, and kindred workers	6	---	---	20	---	---
Operatives	153	13.1	12.4	355	27.3	25.9
Private household workers	480	28.5	27.5	263	30.5	28.5
Service, except private household	368	19.3	18.5	442	19.0	17.4
Laborers, except farm and mine	6	---	---	31	---	---
Total reporting employment^b	1,331	21.6	20.6	1,715	19.8	18.3

^aPersons with initial residence outside the United States omitted.

^bIncludes persons with farm occupations and persons not reporting occupation.

Source: 1967 Survey of Economic Opportunity.

too, for those occupations where the base was large enough for comparisons to be made, most occupational groups did not vary significantly from the total share. For Negro males, the combination of white-collar occupations did have a lower share of rural-urban migrants. Among Negro females the variant groups were operatives, with a deficit, and private household workers, with a surplus. Thus, in comparison with other urban persons of the same race, rural-urban migrants tended very much to contribute what might be termed a fair share to the Southern urban occupational structure.

Virtually all the Negro rural-urban migrants in the South in 1967 had originated in that region. For whites, three types of rural-urban migrants were distinguishable—those whose moves took place within the South, those returning to the South after an intermediate residence in the non-South, and those who had an initial residence in the non-South. By far the most important group were migrants from within the South itself, comprising as they did three-fourths of the total. Intraregional white males had shares of every occupational group which were generally proportionate to their shares of all employed white males. The same was true for white intraregional migrant females, but this class of migrant comprised a third of all white female private household workers. Return migrants and in-migrants were less important numerically and they also tended to be found in proportionate numbers in each occupational group. An exception was professional workers, who comprised a third of the white male in-migrants. These migrants contributed 8 percent of all white male professionals in the urban South in 1967.

The Non-South

The position of rural-urban migrants in the non-South was different in several ways. For one thing, they comprised a smaller proportion of all urban employed persons than in the South. This tended to be true of each occupational group as well. This occurred because rural-urban migrants from the non-South were proportionately less than intraregional migrants were within the South. A large share of this difference reflected the fact that the non-South had few rural Negroes from which to attract urban migrants, but there were proportionately fewer whites as well. The differences between the South and the non-South would also have been greater if the South had not exported more migrants than it received. Even though they entered a much larger region, in-migrants from the South comprised almost a quarter of all rural-urban migrants in the non-South and their share among all employed workers was larger than that held by non-Southerners in the South. Like the South,

however, rural-urban migrants as a group tended to hold proportionate shares of most occupational classes. Exceptions were clerical and sales workers, for which there were deficits.

White rural-urban migrants outside the South, whether male or female and no matter what their regional history, were found in proportions which were usually not significantly more nor less than their respective share of all employed persons of the same race and sex. White operatives of Southern origin were an exception. They totaled over 400,000 and accounted for about one in 20 of the non-Southern urban operatives.

To be a Negro rural-urban migrant meant to be from the South. Very nearly a fourth of the Negro males and a fifth of the Negro females in the non-South who reported employment were rural-urban migrants. Furthermore, these proportions for the non-South were little different from the proportions within the South itself. Nor was there any occupational group of Negro males, except white-collar workers, whose share differed from its share of the total employed group, and shares were little different from the same occupational group in the South. In other words, rural-urban migrant Negro males, whether they stayed in the South or left, provided proportional shares in all except white collar occupations when compared with all Negro males in the same area. Negro females were less fortunate. In the urban non-South, they comprised a smaller than proportionate share of white collar workers and a larger than proportionate share of both operatives and private household workers. In comparison with their Southern counterparts, they were at less of a disadvantage. Except among operatives, where the comparison favored the non-South, their share of each occupational grouping was about the same in the South as in the non-South.

Comparisons with Other Data

Since these data reflect lifetime migration histories, it can be argued that the rural-urban migrants had had time to adjust to life in urban places and hence their tendency for equal shares in each occupation. Two-thirds of those aged 30-49 had been residents of urban areas before 1960.⁴ Questioned at some time closer to their leaving the rural sector, migrants might well have been more disadvantaged in their occupations. To examine this, comparable data were assembled insofar as possible for 1935-40, the only census for which data on rural-urban migration are available. These figures are shown in table 6, for total males and females. No racial data were

⁴Ibid., table 28.

published. Migration here is measured in terms of residence in another country 5 years before the census, and occupation was that in the week preceding the census.

These data, taken decades ago and using a different definition of migration, generally substantiate the 1967 findings. Given the shorter period for migrating, rural-urban migrants were less important in the total structure in 1940. Still, the evidence is that they were more important in the South than in the non-South, and that no occupation with the possible exception of domestic service in the non-South was disproportionately composed of rural-urban migrants. This same pattern held when males were compared with males and females with females in each region. For females, however, there

appeared to be an excess of rural-urban migrant professional workers in both the South and the non-South, as well as the excess of domestic service workers in the non-South. Also, in this earlier period Southern-origin migrants comprised a less important part of the rural-urban migrants in the non-South. In all, 12 percent of the non-South's migrants had come from the South, a proportion that was little higher than that for non-Southerners in the South. Two factors are probably at work here—the heavy out-migration from the North Central States during the 1930's and the diminished role of Negro migration before World War II.

One problem, of course, is that both the SEO data and the 1940 data lack any information about occupation either before or at the time of migration. National

Table 6. Urban population 14 years old and over by major occupation group, and percentage of rural-urban migrants, by selected characteristics, South and non-South, 1940

Sex and major occupational group	Urban South				Urban non-South			
	Total	Rural-urban migrants			Total	Rural-urban migrants		
		Total	Within South	To South		Total	Within Non-South	To Non-South
	Thousands	Percent	Percent	Percent	Thousands	Percent	Percent	Percent
Males:								
Professional and semiprofessional workers	278	7.7	6.1	1.6	1,143	3.7	3.4	0.3
Proprietors, managers, and officials, except farm	517	4.3	3.7	0.6	1,899	2.1	1.9	0.2
Clerical, sales, and kindred workers	717	6.0	5.2	0.8	2,895	2.5	2.3	0.2
Craftsmen, foremen, and kindred workers	647	6.5	5.8	0.7	2,946	2.6	2.3	0.3
Operatives and kindred workers	778	8.1	7.5	0.6	3,483	3.0	2.6	0.4
Domestic service workers	48	5.0	4.8	0.2	47	4.7	3.1	1.6
Service workers, except domestic	380	7.1	6.3	0.8	1,353	3.6	2.8	0.8
Laborers, except farm, and occupation not reported	480	7.2	6.9	0.3	1,460	3.4	2.8	0.6
Total employed workers	3,912	6.7	6.0	0.7	15,366	2.9	2.5	0.4
Females:								
Professional and semiprofessional workers	222	10.1	9.1	1.0	829	5.7	5.4	0.3
Proprietors, managers, and officials, except farm	67	3.7	3.2	0.5	237	2.3	2.1	0.2
Clerical, sales, and kindred workers	509	5.6	4.9	0.7	2,193	2.3	2.2	0.1
Craftsmen, foremen, and kindred workers	14	4.0	3.6	0.4	77	1.6	1.4	0.2
Operatives and kindred workers	305	6.0	5.8	0.2	1,328	1.7	1.5	0.2
Domestic service workers	555	6.2	5.9	0.3	808	8.6	7.2	1.4
Service workers, except domestic	240	8.4	7.8	0.6	767	5.5	4.9	0.6
Laborers, except farm, and occupation not reported	31	6.0	5.6	0.4	123	3.0	2.7	0.3
Total employed workers	1,949	6.7	6.2	0.5	6,365	3.8	3.4	0.4

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census. *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940. Population, Internal Migration, 1935 to 1940. Economic Characteristics of Migrants* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1946), tables 5, 9, and 10.

Data on occupational and geographic mobility from the 1970 Census⁵ indicate that persons living in different States in 1965 and 1970 were more likely to report a different occupation than those living in the same State. The range among occupations, however, was wide and the proportion reporting the same occupation at the later date tended to increase as occupational status increased. The extent, then, to which rural-urban migration was a concomitant of occupational mobility cannot be determined with data currently available in national surveys or censuses, but might be a fruitful avenue for research in the future.

Summary and Conclusions

These findings, then, tend to refute the idea that rural-urban migrants contribute unduly to the lowest status occupations. The only evidence to support the idea was the excessive contribution of female rural-urban migrants, white and Negro alike, to private household or domestic service. Indeed, rural places had supplied close to a third of the urban private household workers in 1967 and this group was evenly divided between the two racial groups. At the upper end of the occupational scale, there was little to indicate that rural-urban migrants were underrepresented and there was some evidence that professional workers in particular might include a slight excess of rural-urban migrants.

This attainment of proportionate shares of most urban occupations can be regarded to some extent as a measure of assimilation for rural-urban migrants. In the case of Southern-origin migrants to the non-South, this level of assimilation was truly remarkable in light of the

⁵U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of Population: 1970, Detailed Characteristics*, Final Report PC(1)-D 1, United States Summary (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1973), table 230.

large proportions whose educations ended in elementary school. In 1967, not quite two-fifths of the white and half the Negro migrants from the rural South to urban non-South had completed 8 years of school or less, proportions which were well above those of the urban populations they joined. Despite this, less than 19 percent of the whites and 42 percent of the Negroes held jobs which were classed as service or laborer. Moreover, their relative success occupationally helps account for the fact that rural-urban migrants were about as likely to be in poverty as the urban population of urban origin.

Note, however, that only broad occupational classes were compared. We do not know the extent to which rural-urban migrants were concentrated in specific occupations within those categories in which incomes are higher or lower than the average.

While this paper has focused on the urban occupational structure, there are implications for rural areas as well. Even though rural-urban migrants may have had some handicaps in comparison with the urban population, they compared favorably with persons who never left rural areas. Their relative occupational success in urban areas indicates that, as a group, these migrants had considerable capability. Whether or not they attained their occupational skills in rural areas before leaving or in urban areas after migration could not be ascertained. Some of these demonstrated skills, however, can be regarded as movable assets which could be transferred back to developing rural areas, given the proper incentives. There has been a demonstrated potential for rural return migration. Data from the Survey of Economic Opportunity indicate that as many as one out of every five persons who had migrated to urban areas was back in a rural area in 1967. Rural development programs then might well consider rural-urban migrants a trained manpower pool which could be tapped to provide leadership with both urban experience and an understanding of rural problems.