Rural Areas Attract Young Families and College Graduates

The rural population increased, especially in the South and West, due to net migration from urban areas. The largest rural gains were among people in early career ages (26-30), including many young families. College graduates were well represented among rural inmigrants—a trend that began in the early 1990's and represents an important reversal of the rural "brain drain" of earlier decades.

During the 2-year period ending in March 1997, 3.8 million people moved into rural America from urban areas while 3.0 million moved in the opposite direction. The net rural gain of 415,000 persons per year is evidence of increased economic opportunity and residential amenities in rural areas and, at the same time, provides a human resource base for economic growth. In the rural-urban migration exchange, rural areas attracted a disproportionate share of young families and persons in early career years. Rural areas also attracted their fair share of college graduates, unlike earlier decades when rural areas lost a large proportion of their college graduates to urban areas. The rural South and West were the most popular migration destinations. Hispanics were over-represented in the rural migration gains, and the rural South recorded a net influx of Blacks from both the urban South and from cities outside the region.

Highest Rural Migration Gains Were in Early Career Years and for Young Families

An average of 15 percent of rural residents moved each year during 1995-97 (table 1). Mobility was highest in the post-high school years (ages 18-25), with about 30 percent of people in that age group moving each year. Mobility during this stage of life is important for the development of human capital as people move to further their education and to explore and respond to job opportunities. Somewhat more than half of the moves were within the same county, but even some of these moves represented changes of employment or educational pursuit as did most of the moves between nonmetro counties and to and from metro areas.

Net movement into rural areas was highest in the early career period (ages 26-30), with rural areas gaining 2 percent per year. The 1.3-percent per year net rural gain for children ages 1-17 indicates that young families were well represented in this urban-to-rural migration. In the immediate post-high school period (ages 18-25), migration both into and out of rural areas was high, but net movement into rural areas was negligible. This is not surprising because many people move to cities or suburban areas to attend college after completing high school. Both mobility rates and net urban-to-rural migration were lower in

Table 1

Average annual percentage of nonmetro residents who moved, by age, 1995-97

Mobility was highest during the post-high school years (18-25), but net migration into nonmetro areas was highest in the early career ages (26-30)

	Age group						
Mobility/migration status	1-17	18-25	26-30	31-40	41-64	65+	All ages
	Percent						
Total mobility of nonmetro residents[1]	18.2	30.5	26.8	16.2	8.2	4.2	15.0
Moved within same county	10.9	18.6	15.7	9.4	4.4	2.3	8.8
Moved between nonmetro counties	3.1	5.2	4.0	2.7	1.4	.8	2.5
Moved from metro to nonmetro	4.2	6.7	7.1	4.1	2.4	1.1	3.7
Moved from nonmetro to metro	2.9	6.5	5.1	3.4	1.7	1.0	2.9
Net migration from metro to nonmetro	1.3	.2	2.0	.7	.7	.1	.8

[1]Total mobility is the percentage of the current nonmetro residents who moved during the previous year, whether within the same county, between nonmetro counties, or in from a metro area.

Source: Prepared by ERS using data from the March 1996 and March 1997 Current Population Surveys.

mid- and late-career years, but the rural gain in these age groups was still substantial (0.7 percent per year). Mobility was lowest in retirement years (ages 65 and up), and the net rural gain of retirees was negligible.

Life-cycle migration patterns varied among regions. The highest net migration rates were into the rural South and West (table 2). Younger migrants dominated migration gains in the rural South, while workers in mid- and late-career years were predominant in the West. Migration gains in the rural Northeast were fairly uniform across the age spectrum. The Midwest was the only region that lost population through domestic migration, and its losses were mostly in the mid- and late-career age group. Retirement-age migrants moved, on balance, into the rural Northeast and South and out of the rural West. Net migration of retirement-age persons in the rural Midwest was negligible.

Rural Migration Gains Include Fair Share of College Graduates, but High-Income Households Are Under-Represented

Recent migration patterns differ from those of previous decades in the educational composition of the migrant streams to and from rural areas. In the early 1990's, for the first time in many years, more college-educated people migrated into than out of rural areas (see "Rural-Urban Migration Patterns Shift" in *Rural Conditions and Trends,* vol. 6, no. 1, p. 11). This pattern continued and strengthened in the mid-1990's. Net rural inmigration of persons with a college degree increased from under 0.5 percent per year in 1992 and 1993 to about 1 percent per year in 1996 and 1997 (fig. 1). Average net rural migration gains for the 1995-97 period were similar for all education categories (fig. 2). In- and out-migration rates were higher for persons with more education, reflecting their generally higher mobility.

Comparing migration rates across income categories gives a picture somewhat at odds with the comparison of education categories, however. The poor (incomes below the

Table 2
Nonmetro average annual net migration, by region, 1995-97

Rural areas in all four regions gained college graduates

Characteristic	Region				Nonmetro
	Northeast	Midwest	South	West	U.S.
			Percent		
Total	0.38	-0.16	1.40	1.32	0.81
Age:					
1-30	.44	-.02	2.12	1.22	1.16
31-64	.29	-.34	1.02	1.96	.67
65+	.51	-.05	.39	-.52	.14
Educational attainment (age 25+):					
Less than high school graduation	.37	-.10	.86	2.75	.79
High school graduation	.65	0	1.49	-.48	.63
Some college	-.46	-.24	.57	2.50	.59
4-year college degree or more	1.90	.40	.72	1.53	.92
Poverty status:					
Poor	4.08	-1.63	1.52	3.22	1.26
Nonpoor	-.07	.04	1.38	.92	.72

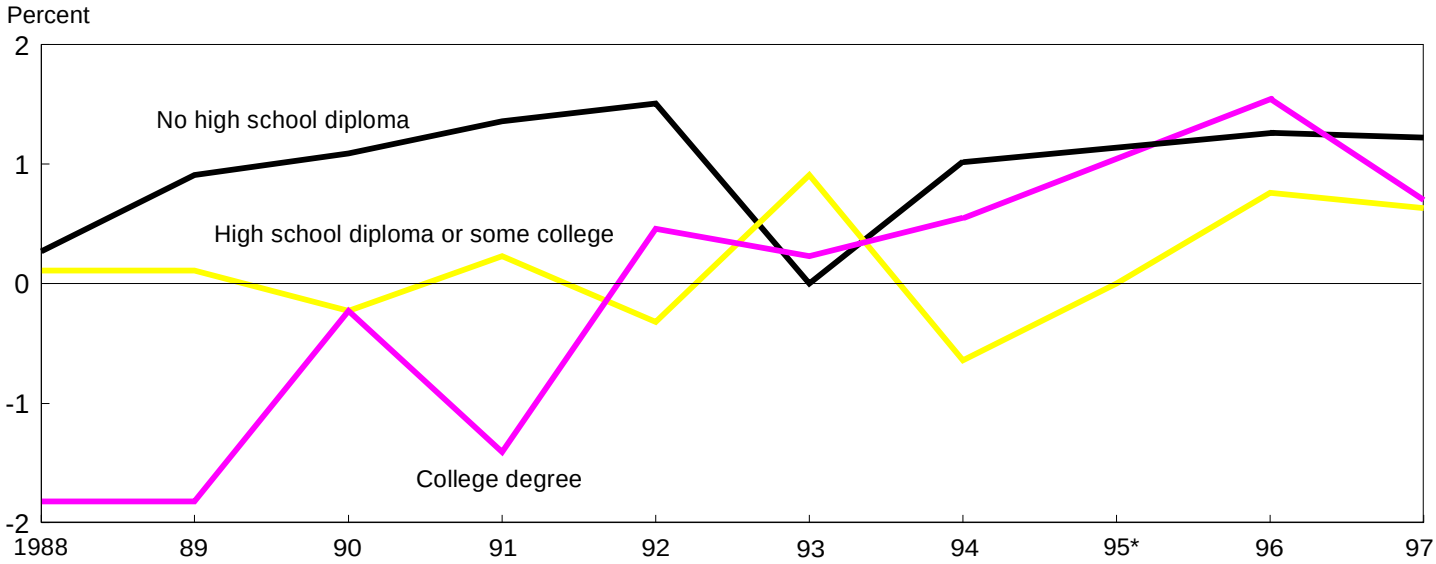
Notes: Table values are net migration exchange with all metro areas and with nonmetro areas in other regions.
See appendix for definition of regions, pp. 118-119.

Source: Prepared by ERS using data from the March 1996 and March 1997 Current Population Surveys.

Figure 1

Change in the nonmetro population ages 25-64 from net migration, by education completed

Net migration of college-educated persons into rural areas has increased markedly in the 1990's

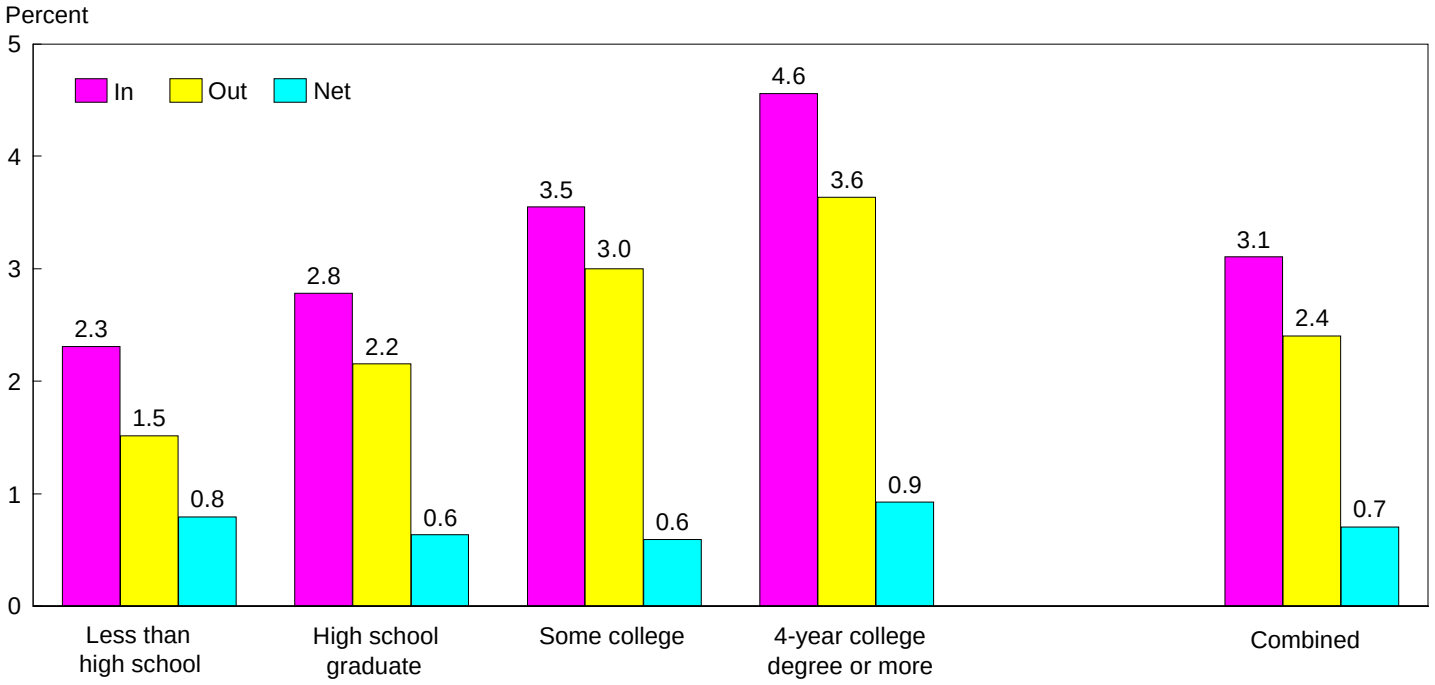


*Data not available for 1995.
Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the Bureau of Economic Analysis.

Figure 2

Average annual domestic migration rates to nonmetro areas, by education, 1995-97 (persons age 25 and over)

People with more education were more mobile, but net urban-to-rural migration rates were similar for all education levels



Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the March 1996 and March 1997 Population Surveys.

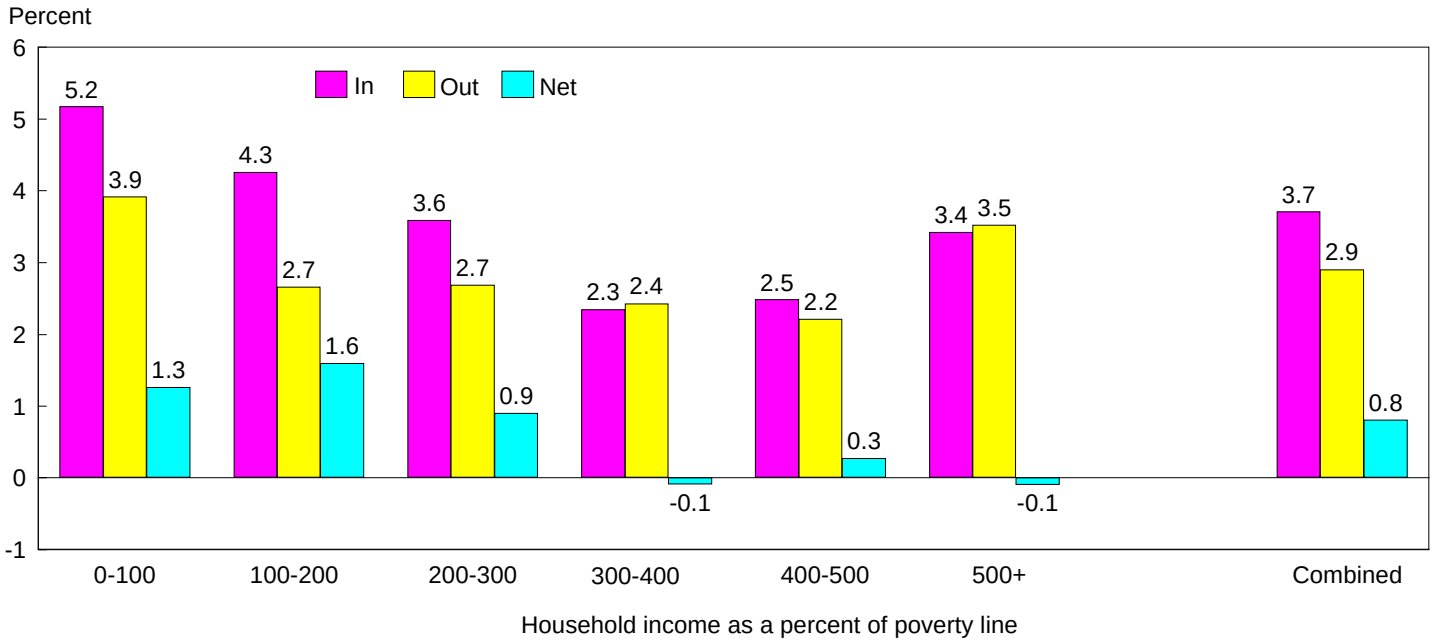
poverty line) migrated into rural areas at a net rate of 1.3 percent, those just above the poverty line (incomes from 100 to 200 percent of the poverty line) migrated in at a net rate of 1.6 percent, and those in the lower-middle income category (incomes from 200 to 300 percent of the poverty line) migrated in at a net rate of 0.9 percent (fig. 3). For households with income higher than 300 percent of the poverty line, net migration rates were near zero. Rural areas already had a disproportionate share of households with income less than 300 percent of the poverty line (see *Rural Conditions and Trends*, vol. 8, no. 2, p. 32), so this migration pattern further increased the rural-urban disparity in income. To some extent, this pattern reflects the inmigration of young families with their generally lower incomes.

The education and income-specific rural migration patterns described above were widespread geographically (table 2). Net migration of college-educated persons was positive in all four regions and exceeded that for the total regional population in all regions except the South. Net inmigration of the poor to rural areas exceeded that of the nonpoor in all regions except the Midwest, where the poor migrated out of rural areas, on balance. Inmigration of low-income households and persons with less than high school education was particularly high in the rural West (3.22 percent and 2.75 percent, respectively). This partly reflects adjustment to high international immigration of less educated persons to the urban centers of the West. The excess low-skill labor supply creates a migration "push" out of the cities. At the same time, robust service sector growth in fast-growing, high-amenity areas of the rural West creates a migration "pull" for less educated workers.

Rural South Was Most Popular Migration Destination

Rural gains from domestic migration were concentrated in the South and West (fig. 4; see pp. 118-119 for description of regions). Of the annual average net rural gain of 415,000 persons, three-quarters was accounted for by the South and one-quarter by the West.

Figure 3
Average annual domestic migration rates to nonmetro areas, by income level, 1995-97
Rural migration gains were highest among low- and middle-income households

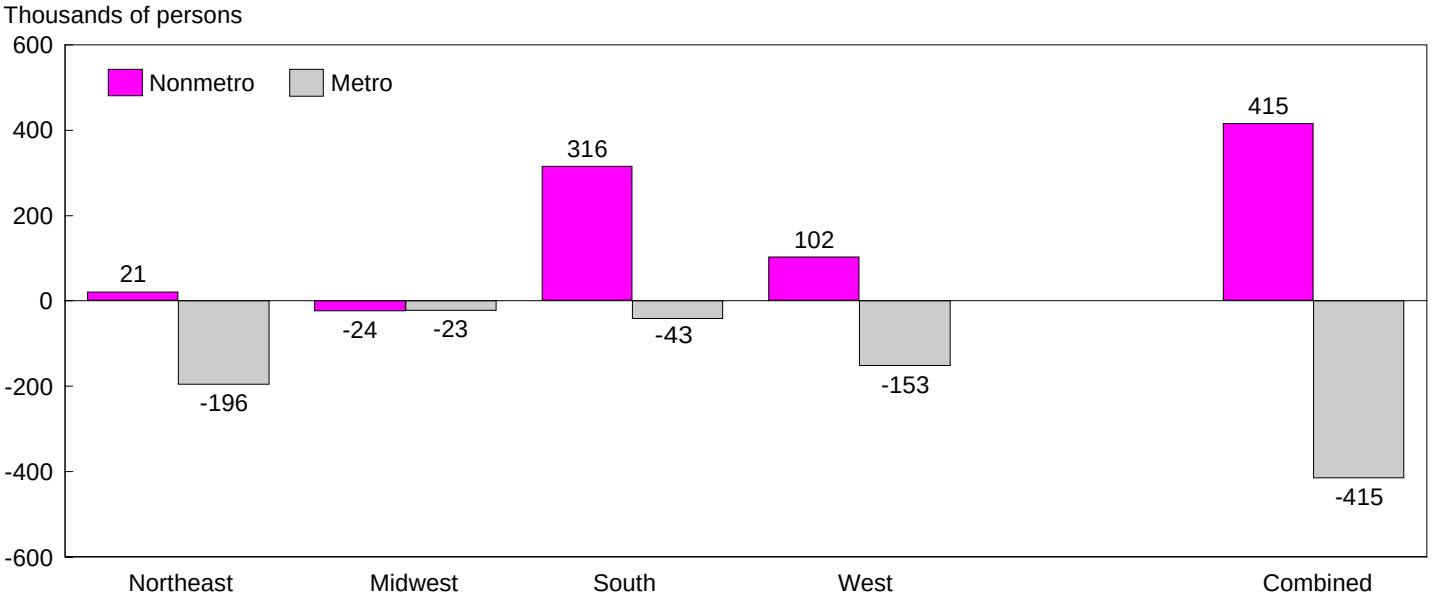


Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the March 1996 and March 1997 Current Population Surveys.

Figure 4

Average annual net domestic migration, by region and residence, 1995-97

The rural South was the most popular destination for domestic migrants; metro areas in all four regions registered net outmigration as did the rural Midwest



Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the March 1996 and March 1997 Current Population Surveys.

Urban areas in all four regions lost population through domestic migration, with the highest losses in the Northeast and West.

The large net influx to the rural South (1.4 percent per year) is unprecedented in recent decades. A detailed examination of migration flows (not shown here) reveals that most of the gain in the rural South was the result of net exchange with the urban South. Smaller gains to the rural South came from net exchange with urban areas outside of the South and from the rural Midwest. Within the rural South, Texas and Georgia were the most popular migration destinations.

Net Rural Inmigration Highest for Hispanics

The racial and ethnic composition of the migrant streams to and from rural America resembled that of the resident rural population, except that Hispanics were over-represented among the urban-to-rural migrants (fig. 5). This resulted in a net annual migration gain of 2.4 percent for rural Hispanics. International immigration of Hispanics (not shown) contributed an additional 2.0 percent to the rural Hispanic population, although this was partially offset by an unknown amount of international emigration. Given these migration rates and the relatively high rate of natural increase (excess of births over deaths) of rural Hispanics, it is not surprising that they constitute the fastest growing racial-ethnic group in rural America.

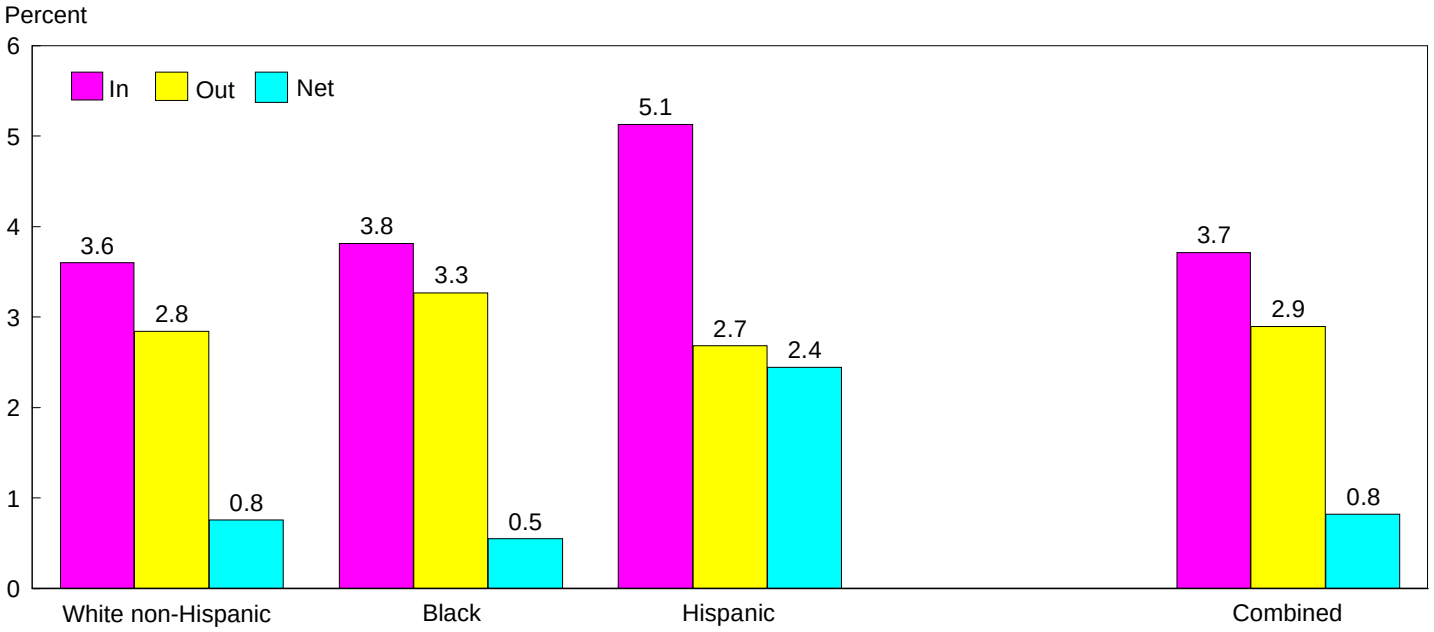
Blacks Returning to the Rural South

For several decades, Blacks migrated, on balance, out of the rural South, going mostly to urban industrial centers both in and out of the region. In recent years, that trend has reversed, and during the 1995-97 period, Black inmigration to the rural South exceeded outmigration by 29,000 persons per year. Almost all of the Blacks moving into the rural South came from the urban South (fig. 6). This is a new pattern. Since the 1970's, the

Figure 5

Average annual domestic migration rates to nonmetro areas, by race and ethnicity, 1995-97

Urban-to-rural migration was much greater for Hispanics than for non-Hispanic Whites and Blacks

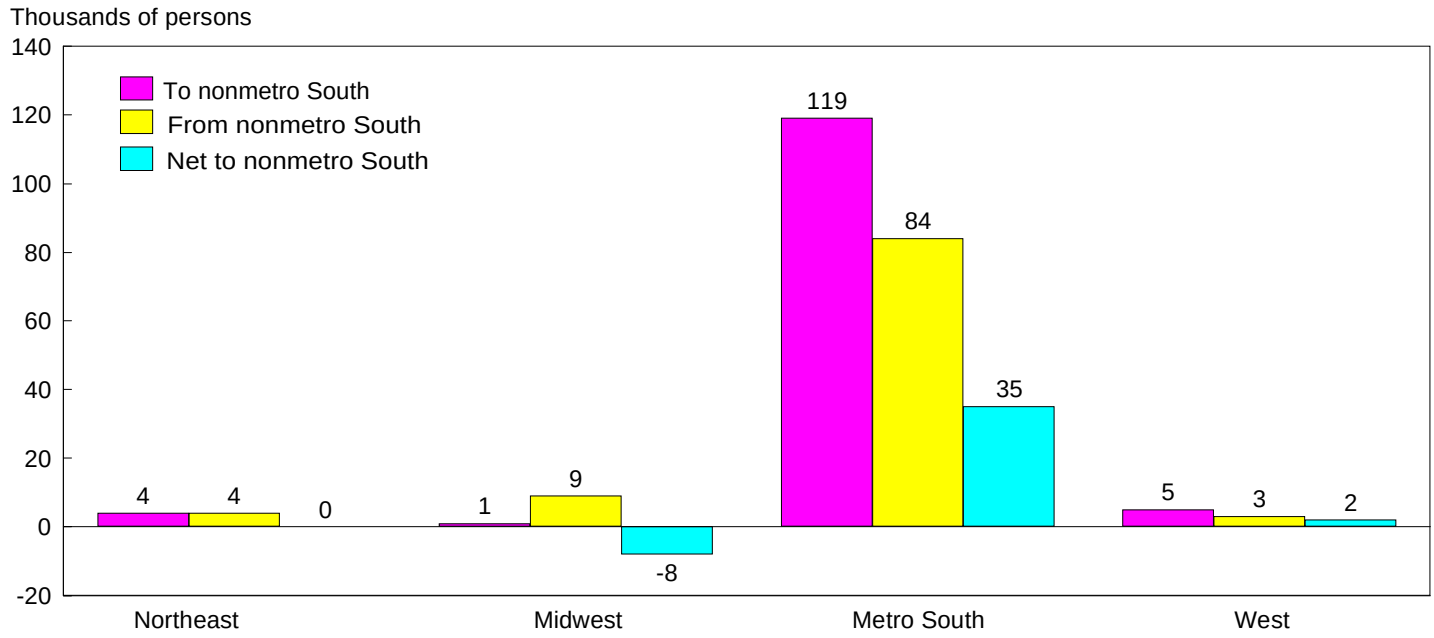


Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the March 1996 and March 1997 Current Population Surveys.

Figure 6

Average annual migration of Blacks to and from the nonmetro South, 1995-97

The overwhelming majority of Black migration to the rural South was from the urban South



Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the March 1996 and March 1997 Current Population Surveys.

rural South has gained Black population from urban centers outside the South, but not previously from the urban South. This trend should be interpreted cautiously, however, until confirmed by an additional year of survey data. Net migration is a small difference between two much larger migration streams—inmigrants and outmigrants—and can fluctuate considerably from year to year. Estimates based on sample surveys can also fluctuate even when actual net migration is stable. *[Mark Nord, 202-694-5433, marknord@econ.ag.gov; John Cromartie, 202-694-5421, jbc@econ.ag.gov]*

About the Data

These migration statistics are based on data from the Current Population Surveys of March 1996 and March 1997, which together provide data on migration during the period 1995-97 (see appendix, p. 115, for information on the Current Population Survey). Combining two annual surveys increases the reliability of the migration estimates. We concentrate in this article on domestic migrants, and especially on those who moved between rural and urban areas. International immigration contributed an additional 100,000 persons per year to rural areas, and 1.2 million persons per year to urban areas. However, international immigration is partially offset by emigration out of the United States to other countries, and the extent and character of migration to other counties is not captured by this survey of U.S. households.