Was Postwar Suburbanization “White Flight”? Evidence from the Black Migration

Abstract: Four million rural blacks migrated to northern cities in the postwar period (1940-1970). Cities with large black in-migrations lost white population to the suburban ring. This pattern is consistent with a white flight from black arrivals. Alternatively, black migrants may have been attracted by lower housing prices in the wake of white departures, or by the same economic factors that underlie the demand for suburbanization (for example, rising wages). I develop an instrument that predicts migrant flows from southern states using changes in agricultural production, and assigns these exogenous flows to northern cities using settlement patterns established during World War I. Even after accounting for migrant location choices, conservative estimates suggest that, if not for black migration, the growth in white suburbanization from 1940 to 1970 would have been 20 percent lower.