

RETURN AND OTHER SEQUENCES OF MIGRATION IN THE UNITED STATES

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Abstract—We examine repeat migration sequences in the United States especially those that entail a return, using data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics. Our guiding hypotheses derive from the concepts of location-specific capital and imperfect information. Descriptive analysis elucidates the dynamics, tempo, and differential frequency of repeat migration among various socioeconomic groups. Results disclose differences among migrants who choose to return or move onward to a new location, or do not move again, and lend support to our analytical framework. Major findings are: (1) the propensity to return to an area varies directly with the amount of location-specific capital that is left behind and inversely with the ex-resident's length of absence, (2) which repeat migration sequence unfolds—return or onward—depends on the ex-resident's educational level and experience of unemployment.

SIGNIFICANCE OF RETURN MIGRATION

Return migration refers to the movement of people to places where they have lived before—often, where they were born and raised. A common form of mobility, it is a distinctive one as well, since people who return to a place may have different motives in mind from those of people who are moving for the first time or who move onward repeatedly without backtracking. Return and nonreturn migrants also differ in (and hence are selected according to) their skill levels, education levels, and other socioeconomic attributes.

Approximately 20 to 30 percent of all migrants in the United States are returnees by one definition or another (Lee, 1974; Long and Hansen, 1977a; Lansing and Mueller, 1967; Vanderkamp, 1973). But standard migration statistics fail to record much of the back-and-forth movement that takes place. Such moves are inherently difficult to distinguish as a separate type. For example, a person who moves from Detroit to Atlanta is registered simply as a migrant. Only further

knowledge of the migrant's past can reveal whether the move is *back* to Atlanta (or to Georgia, or merely to "the South").

Differences between migrants who return to an area and those who depart from it for some new destination may assume considerable importance in areas that attract comparatively few newcomers as in-migrants (e.g., severely distressed areas). Although the resulting net migration may be numerically small, these separate migration streams operating together may remove certain types of individuals from that area's population (see, for example, Deaton and Anshel, 1974; DaVanzo and Morrison, forthcoming; Lieberman, 1978). In general, nonreturn migrants tend to be younger, better educated, more highly skilled, and better informed about opportunities and amenities at an array of possible destinations than are return migrants.

Returnees do not inevitably conform to the general pattern just mentioned. When they are returning with new industrial skills or professional training acquired in other places, such migrants will add to an

area's stock of human capital, improving the skill composition of the residential labor force and contributing essential services. Returnees who live on pensions or other forms of retirement income infuse new money in the form of consumer spending and thereby create new jobs.

Returning migrants appear to have figured prominently in recent streams of movement that have reversed the direction in which net migration has traditionally flowed. The former net outflow of black migrants from the South, for example, is now exceeded by its counterstream, two-thirds of which is composed of returnees to that region (Long and Hansen, 1975; also see Johnson, 1971; Campbell et al., 1974; Long and Hansen, 1977b; Lieberman, 1978). The renewed migration into certain nonmetropolitan locales (e.g., parts of the North Central region and of Mississippi) during the 1970s also has been composed disproportionately of returnees (Williams and McMullen, 1979; Snow, 1979a, 1979b).

These unanticipated reversals of long-standing migration streams alert us to the immense possibilities for spatial reorganization of the U.S. population which, owing to its extensive history of migration, contains so many potential returnees. The paths beaten by migrants run both ways, and many persons who traverse them in one direction may harbor a lasting predisposition to journey back. The fact that few actually *do* ought not obscure the possibility that so many *could*, a point that directs attention toward that 20 to 30 percent of migrants who are returnees.

Our objectives in this study are both theoretical and descriptive. Theoretically, we have formulated an analytical framework within which we can integrate the theoretical orientations of different disciplines (especially economics and sociology) and apply them to *sequences* of migration rather than isolated moves. In this respect, repeat migration is an especially interesting phenomenon since the contrasts among return migrants, onward mi-

grants (those destined for some new area), and "stayers" (migrants who remain at their destination) may be equally as revealing as the contrast between migrants and nonmigrants.

Descriptively, we have sought to measure and examine how the process of return migration "works"—i.e., its dynamics, tempo, and differential frequency among socioeconomic groups. In this respect, it is revealing to compare return migration with other forms of repeat migration and with total migration.

Traditionally, U.S. migration has been measured (and hence conceived of) as a once-and-for-all affair in which a person abandons one location and settles in a new one. The standard definitions of migration suggest such permanency. Our findings invite a different (albeit not yet fully articulated) biographical perspective, in which people's lives are subdivided into time segments spent in different locations (Goldscheider, 1971, p. 72). In this view, the sum of migratory decisions constitutes a sequence of social attachments which change and evolve in accordance with the sociological life course. If migration for some is a matter of starting a new biography at the place of destination, for others it may be a continuation of the old biography. As shown below, the sheer frequency with which migrants move again after a short time undermines the "permanent" viewpoint and suggests important biographical aspects of the process. The challenge is to formulate a theory of migration that can account for *sequences* of migration and why they unfold in different ways under different circumstances.

In the following sections, we present our analytical framework and certain guiding propositions derived from it; describe the Panel Study of Income Dynamics and how this data set was analyzed; examine the comparative frequency and tempo of various repeat migration sequences; consider how the propensities for primary, return, and onward migra-

tion vary with age, education, and employment status; and state the theoretical and policy implications of these results.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Our analytical framework is a melding of economic and sociological perspectives. Drawing on economics, we view migration as an investment in human capital that entails costs and produces benefits. People migrate if they expect the benefits to outweigh the costs. The perceived net benefit of migration, a function of both pecuniary and nonpecuniary factors, is regarded as the deciding factor in whether and where to move. Drawing on the sociological perspective, we recognize that the migrant's information system is highly selective. Decisions about moving may not always appear to be entirely rational *ex post facto*. Information is not costless. Its flow is powerfully shaped by networks of kinship and friends, by people's conceptions of distance, and by their preconceived notions about what various places in the nation are like (see Downs and Stea, 1973; Hendrix, 1975a, 1975b; Zelinsky, 1980).

We assume that people weigh the advantages and disadvantages of moving as they *perceive* them in the light of their individual locational preferences, however derived. In some instances, such perceptions and preferences may be so shaped by sociological influences as to dominate the decision to move and the choice of destination. Consider "chain migration": A series of friends and relatives follow each other to a single destination, having considered no other alternatives (see Brown et al., 1963; Schwarzweller et al., 1971; Choldin, 1973).

Different types of migrants vary in the kind of information they have, the manner in which they acquire it, and how they use it to form expectations. Potential return migrants, having once lived in the destination area, should have superior information about conditions there. More

generally, potential repeat migrants, having moved before, should be more efficient in acquiring information and forming accurate expectations about the characteristics of destination areas; and their broader spatial awareness (based on having lived in several places) should have crystallized into clearly defined locational preferences. However, repeat migrants also include some persons with poor judgment, whose inability to form accurate expectations necessitates additional moves. Potential primary migrants face more uncertainty than the other two types because they have not had the learning experience of moving and they lack first-hand information on destination areas. They may be the least migration-prone of all the types (Bowman and Myers, 1967; Kau and Sirmans, 1976, 1977).

Challenged to explain why someone should move back to a place he previously decided to leave, this analytical framework can offer several guiding hypotheses, derived from two concepts that are central to this analysis: *location-specific capital* and *imperfect information*.

"Location-specific capital" is a generic term denoting any or all of the factors that "tie" a person to a particular place. It refers to concrete assets and other features specific to a place that are more valuable to the person if he lives there rather than somewhere else: for example, job seniority, an established clientele (as in the case of a well-regarded doctor or carpenter), a license to practice a particular profession in a certain area, personal knowledge of the area, community ties, and close friendships. The concept of location-specific capital suggests the following two propositions to explain return migration:

1. *A person who has migrated previously should, when moving again, favor a previous area of residence as the destination, since the person will have location-specific capital there. The propensity to return to an area should be greater the more loca-*

tion-specific capital in that area, other things equal.

2. *The propensity to return to that area should be lower the longer the person stays away, since most location-specific capital depreciates in value.* The carpenter's clientele cannot wait indefinitely for the migrant to return; old friends may die or become migrants themselves; and the value of information about an area depreciates as conditions there change.

Beyond the inevitable surprises the future holds, there is the possibility that a move will turn out to be an unwise investment in human capital. The migrant may have overestimated the net benefits of living in the new place; or the anticipated benefits may not materialize at all (e.g., the migrant may not reap greater earnings, or may fail to find a job). If so, the person is likely to see the light reasonably soon—within a year or two, not ten or twenty—and “reinvest” in migration soon thereafter. Moreover, the act of moving itself may entail “learning by doing,” gaining information about the moving process itself (Bowman and Myers, 1967). Accordingly, we derive the following two explanatory propositions from the concept of imperfect information:

3. *The concept of imperfect information accounts for repeat migration as a prompt “corrective” act.* A return move may be the most attractive course of action to the discouraged migrant who finds he has “miscalculated”: His reinvestment is naturally guided by his superior information about a familiar area.
4. *Each move entails some “learning by doing.”* Through moving, a migrant gains experience with the relocation process. This experience should reduce the monetary, information, and psychic costs of subsequent moves. The success or failure of the initial move may serve as one important determinant of the propensity to migrate subsequently, and of whether the repeat move will be back to a previous area or onward to a new one. A person who migrates from A to B and likes the outcome may decide to stay there, or may be emboldened to try for

still greater success by moving to C. The migrant who is unhappy with the outcome at B not only may be less inclined to stay there, but also may be far less venturesome in the future (once burned, twice cautious). Consequently, if this unsuccessful migrant decides to move at all, he may do so in the hope of regaining an earlier equilibrium of life by returning instead of braving the unknown (and risking failure) once more. After returning, he may think twice about “trying” migration again (see DaVanzo, in press). Through a process of self-selection, migrants who return should differ from those who do not in their motives, characteristics, and circumstances both before and after the initial move and any subsequent moves.

These four propositions suggest how the propensity to return should change as the interval of absence lengthens, and why some people return while others do not. Although not fully applicable to some types of “pre-planned” return moves (e.g., those associated with military service or, in some cases, attendance at a university), the propositions enable us to extend the human capital framework beyond individual moves to the explanation of many typical *sequences* of repeat migration.

DATA SOURCE AND METHOD OF ANALYSIS

Source of Data

This study is based on data from the University of Michigan Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), a longitudinal survey of a national sample of approximately 5,000 families interviewed annually between 1968 and 1975 (Institute for Social Research, 1972). The PSID is an uncommonly rich source of information on the dynamics of change in people's lives over this eight-year period and has several advantages for our purposes. Because the PSID followed up respondents who migrated, it discloses *sequences* of moves, within which individual moves can be interpreted. Because migration can

be measured at one-year intervals, the PSID enables us to detect a large fraction of all moves that are made. Moves inferred from the data can be classified as *primary* (apparently first-time) or *repeat* moves; repeat moves can be further subdivided into *return* and *onward* (apparently nonreturn) moves.

Although it is possible with the PSID data to analyze migration down to a county level, we have employed a somewhat larger aggregation. To approximate labor markets, we have combined counties into Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas (SMSAs) and nonmetropolitan State Economic Areas (SEAs); henceforth, then, our use of the terms "migration," "area," and "move" will refer to this level of geographic aggregation.

The eight-year PSID contains 5,725 records, each on a family that (1) was in the initial 1968 sample (or was formed from a family in the initial sample), and (2) was surveyed in the eighth year (1975). For each family in the sample, one person (usually the husband, in the case of married couples) was specified as the family head, designated as the respondent, and administered an extensive questionnaire. The working sample for this study was restricted to these *family heads*. It is not strictly representative of all U.S. family heads, however, because the PSID oversampled certain types of families (e.g., those with low incomes). Although the PSID data file contains weights for restoring such representativeness, we could not use them in this study, for reasons detailed below.

Following procedures suggested in Speare et al. (1975, pp. 106–108), we have restructured the PSID data into "person-years," which are the units of analysis in this study. (For a description of how this restructuring was done, along with additional technical detail on the PSID, see DaVanzo and Morrison, forthcoming, Appendix.) A person-year represents a one-year segment of a respondent's life, during which the person may or may not have moved. *Sample members* are not

people but one-year segments of their lives during which they were family heads. These segments are derived from as many years of a given person's life as can be tracked in the data while that person is the head of his or her family. Our measurement is subject to the usual limitations associated with a fixed-length migration interval (here, a single year). The record will not show multiple moves within the year, nor any sequence of moves within the year that concludes with a return (and therefore self-cancelling) move—as when a professor spends one semester away at another university.

For unavoidable reasons, the PSID sample weights were inapplicable to our "sample members." First, the weights might not validly apply to our units of analysis (person-years, derived from same-head segments of the household record). Second, and more important, our sample itself became distorted by the necessary exclusion of all person-year observations derived from same-head segments that were too short (less than three successive years) to reveal a multi-move sequence. Since our results are based on a nonrepresentative sample of household heads, possibly subject to further distortion through exclusion of certain same-head segments, our findings must be regarded as indicative, not conclusive.

Definition and Measurement of Moves

The PSID recorded the respondent's area of residence annually between 1968 and 1975, along with the area where the person lived when "growing up." (The latter information was elicited through two questions: "Did you [family head] grow up on a farm, in a small town, in a large city, or what?" followed by "In what state and county was that?") The time span covered by "growing up" cannot be defined precisely beyond saying that it is an early period of life. We refer to the "growing up" location as the person's "origin." We classify moves over each one-year migration interval as follows (refer to Table 1 for illustrations):

Table 1.—Hypothetical Illustrations of Moves and Associated Migration Intervals (MI)

Type of Move Illustrated	Origin	Location of Residence in:							
		1968	1969	1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975
Primary move	A	A	A	A B	B	B	B	B	B
Short-interval return move									
MI = 1	A	A	A	B A	A	A	A	A	A
MI = 6	A	B	C	C	C	C	C	C B	B
Origin only return move	A	B	B	B A	A	A	A	A	A
Onward move	A	A	B	B C	C	C	C	C	C

1. *Primary move*: A first move, defined as one that was made between years t and $t+1$ by a person who has grown up in and (while tracked by the PSID) remained in the same area through year t . (Note that some of what we call primary moves may follow earlier moves unregistered in our data and hence will have been misclassified.)
2. *Short-interval return move*: A move between 1969 and 1975 back to an area where the person previously lived in any year between 1968 and 1973. The maximum possible interval of absence, or migration interval (MI), that can be measured in our data is 6 years (an initial move in 1968–1969 and a return move in 1974–1975).
3. *Origin return move*: A move between 1968 and 1975 back to the area where the person grew up. An origin return may also be a short-interval return, of course, as when a native of A leaves A in 1969 and returns in 1970 (refer to MI = 1 illustration in Table 1). Origin returns that are not short-interval returns are designated origin-only returns and the migration interval is indeterminate.
4. *Onward move*: Any nonreturn repeat move. The destination of an onward move does not duplicate (as far as we can determine) a previous area of residence. Onward moves, like return moves, have

a migration interval; the longest MI that is measurable in our data is 6 years.

A major strength of the PSID data is that they enable us to define one-year rates of migration with respect to a true population at risk. For example, a rate of primary migration can be calculated as:

$$\frac{\text{No. of primary moves between years } t \text{ and } t + 1}{\text{No. of sample members who have not migrated before } t} \quad (1)$$

The other rates that we shall use are defined in the section on Patterns of Primary, Return, and Onward Migration.

THE INCIDENCE AND TIMING OF RETURN MIGRATION

This section considers two questions: what is the comparative frequency of the specified forms of repeat movement, and how does the tempo of return vary with length of absence? (See Howard [1975] for related evidence.)

Incidence of Return Migration

Classification of moves was the starting point of our analysis. During the eight-year span of observation, 1,112 moves were registered. These moves are not representative of individual migrants in our

sample, of course, since many moves are multiple moves by a single person. Table 2 classifies these moves into those that can be identified as primary moves and those identified as repeat moves. Repeat moves are subdivided into return moves (according to the type of return) and onward moves.

Most moves in our sample are repeat moves, not primary. At least 71 percent of them were made by persons who had moved at least once (and are, therefore, candidates for return migration). Because we cannot observe locations between origin and 1968, some of the 320 primary moves undoubtedly would have been classified as repeat moves if we had full information. The preponderance of repeat moves is consistent with previous studies showing that migration is frequently a repetitive episode (Goldstein, 1964; Morrison, 1971).

A considerable fraction of repeat moves are returns. Of the repeat moves in our sample, 37 percent can be identified as returns. Of these, 76 percent are returns to origin; 62 percent are short-interval re-

turns; and 38 percent are both (i.e., short-interval returns to origin).

Overall, return moves make up about one-quarter of the moves in our sample. This fraction is consistent with other independent estimates of the incidence of return moves (Lee, 1974; Long and Hansen, 1977a; Lansing and Mueller, 1967).

The Tempo of Return

How soon a person returns to an area bears directly on our second proposition (the longer the person stays away, the weaker should be the propensity to return). The relationship between the interval of absence and probability of return is shown graphically in Figure 1.

Referring first to "all returns" (the solid-line curve), note that the propensity to return generally declines with lengthening absence, especially during the initial two years of absence. The overall trend offers some support for our assertion that location-specific capital left behind depreciates over time.

The dotted and dashed curves in Figure

Table 2.—Types of Moves Made Between 1968 and 1975

Type of Move	No.	Percent
All moves	1112	100%
Primary	320	29% of all moves
Repeat	792	71% of all moves
Return, all types	294	26% of all moves 37% of repeat moves
Short-interval	183	62% of return moves
To origin	222	76% of return moves
Short-interval and to origin	111	38% of return moves
Onward	498	45% of all moves 63% of repeat moves

Source: Panel Study of Income Dynamics

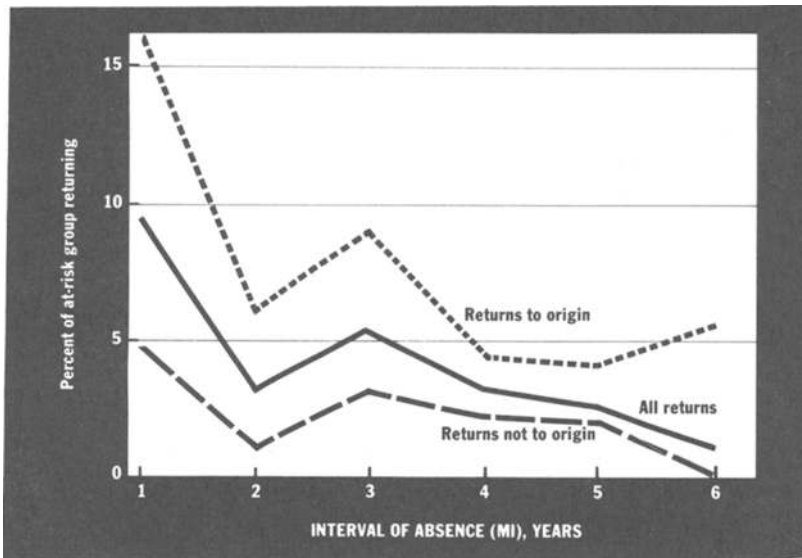


Figure 1.—Average Annual Rates of Short-interval Return Migration, By Interval of Absence and Type of Return

I show rates of return migration for two component subgroups: returns to origin and returns not to origin. Comparison of the two furnishes some support for our first theoretical proposition, which suggests that the propensity to return should be greater the more location-specific capital is left behind. At each interval of absence, the probability of a return is at least twice as high if the location returned to *also* is the person's origin, where the migrant presumably has more location-specific capital than in other areas.

The anomalous dip at $MI = 2$ is puzzling. We have examined the pattern of decline for various subgroups to see if one or several of them might account for it, but nearly every age, race, education, sex, marital status, employment status, and occupational group considered exhibited this dip. Returnees may be an amalgam of: (1) disappointed movers, who quickly decide that they were better off where they came from and double back within a year, and (2) fixed-term migrants, whose returns are a premeditated part of a long-term plan (e.g., going to school, moving

up the corporate hierarchy by service in a branch office, military service, and the like). In general, the likelihood of self-selection complicates interpretation: if those who are most inclined to return do so shortly after their initial moves (e.g., with $MI = 1$), the stayers still at risk to return after longer intervals of absence (e.g., with $MI \geq 2$) would be a self-selected, or censored, sample of persons who are less prone to return.

Implications for Detecting Return Moves

As is well known, many moves go unregistered in conventional statistics that measure migration by comparing a person's residences at two points in time separated by several years (see Long and Boertlein, 1977; Rees, 1977). Although return moves make up a sizable fraction of all moves, they are especially susceptible to such underregistration since, as just shown, they tend to follow soon after a previous move. To examine the extent of underregistration, we have tabulated our data in a form that allows comparison with census-type measures. (Whereas

U.S. Census procedures classify *people*, we are classifying *moves*.) Figure 2 refers to 497 domestic moves that were registered in our data during 1970–1975, a five-year period chosen to correspond with a typical census migration interval. (We restrict ourselves here to members of our sample who could be observed throughout this interval.) These moves, which have been classified according to the type of sequence of which they are a part, can be regarded as “visible” or “invisible” in a five-year census-type measure.

The largest block—55 percent of the moves—are by people who made a single (hence, visible) move during the five-year period. Another 16 percent make up part of a multi-move sequence, in which an eventual return move rendered itself and all preceding (intermediate) moves in the sequence invisible to a five-year-interval measure: 1970 and 1975 areas of residence would agree, just as though no move had been made, and migrants making such totally invisible sequences would be classified as nonmigrants. The remaining 29 percent of moves are in partially invisible multi-move sequences, where one or more onward moves go unde-

tected. Out of this 29 percent, 13 percent would be recorded as one-time moves.

Altogether then, 32 percent of all recorded domestic moves in the PSID, and seven-tenths (32% + 45%) of the moves that make up multi-move sequences would be invisible in a five-year comparison of residence. Half of these unregistered moves are self-cancelling initial-and-return moves. Although we cannot generalize from these figures directly to census data, there can be little doubt that a disturbing percentage of multi-move sequences—especially those involving returns—must go undetected.

PATTERNS OF PRIMARY, RETURN, AND ONWARD MIGRATION

This section compares rates of primary, return, and onward migration for different segments of our sample stratified by age, education, and employment status. Five types of migration rates, each defined with respect to its appropriate population at risk, will be considered:

1. *Total migration rate*: The number of moves, divided by the number of person-year observations during which these moves could have been made.

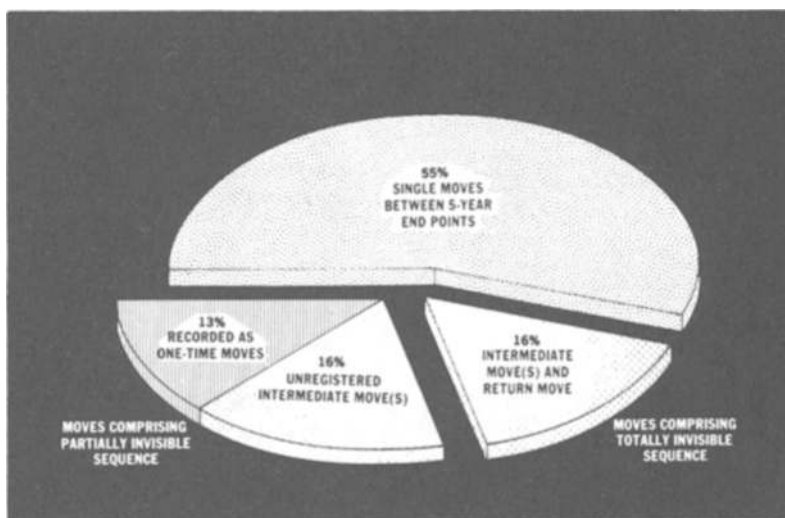


Figure 2.—PSID Sample of 497 Moves Between 1970 and 1975, Showing “Invisible” 32 Percent

2. *Primary migration rate*: Same as (1), but restricted to person-years not known to be preceded by a move.
3. *All repeat migration rate*: Same as (1), but restricted to person-years preceded by at least one move, including a previous move.
4. *Short-interval repeat migration rate*: Same as (3), but restricted to person-years for which the previous move occurred since 1968. (This rate is based on short-interval return and onward moves.)
5. *Fast repeat migration rate*: Same as (4), but restricted to person-years for which the post-1968 previous move occurred within the previous year.

Briefly, then, the "total" migration rate refers to all moves by our entire sample. The "primary" and "all repeat" migration rates divide this sample into its two component subgroups. The "short-interval repeat" rate (4) refers to the subset of those at risk to (3) who are eligible for a short-interval ($MI \leq 6$) repeat move, while the "fast repeat" rate refers to the subset of those at risk to (4) who are eligible with $MI = 1$ (i.e., the immediately preceding area). Throughout our analysis, repeat moves are subdivided into returns and onward moves.

The magnitudes of these five migration rates vary widely, from 2 percent for primary migration to 21 percent for fast repeat migration (see Figure 3). As in previous studies, family heads are much more likely to move if they did so before, especially if the previous move was in the recent past. For all repeat migration and each of the subsets, nearly half of the repeat migrants were returning to a place where they lived before.

Patterns By Age

Figure 4 shows each of the "total," "primary," "short-interval repeat," and "fast-repeat" migration rates separately for broad age groups. The characteristic decline in migration propensities with age is evident for total migration. The rate ranges from 11.0 percent for the under-25 age group to only 1.3 percent for those 55

and older (panel A). The corresponding decline in the primary migration rate is from 5.6 percent to 0.7 percent (panel B).

It is difficult to interpret the "all repeat" migration rate, because interval of absence (which is likely to be systematically related to age) is unspecified. More informative comparisons can be made with reference to the short-interval and fast repeat migration rates, for which migration intervals are known ($MI \leq 6$ and $MI = 1$, respectively). These data, shown in panels C and D, indicate that these two repeat migration rates also decline with age, but the relative differences among age groups are smaller than for "total" or "primary" migration.

A more interesting aspect of panels C and D is the absence of any consistent decline in the return migration rate for sample members over age 25. Once people have left the highly migratory mid-twenties behind, age is unrelated to the propensity to migrate back to places recently departed. The factors precipitating a short-interval return move, unlike those prompting other types of migration, may not weaken in typical fashion over the life cycle.

This finding is not strictly comparable with results of other studies (e.g., Miller, 1977; Lee, 1974) that have found a declining propensity to return to one's birthplace as age increases. The Census data on which those studies are based do not permit any control on interval of absence, which is likely to confound the age effect: as age increases, the average interval of absence most likely increases also. Indeed, studies using Census data find rates of return migration to be the highest for the 5-to-9 age group, for whom the length of absence from birthplace is shortest and corresponds most closely to what we define as short-interval repeat migration. However, consistent with studies based on Census data, we do find that the probability of returning to an origin left before 1968 (a statistic corresponding closely to the Census measure of return to birthplace) declines markedly with age:

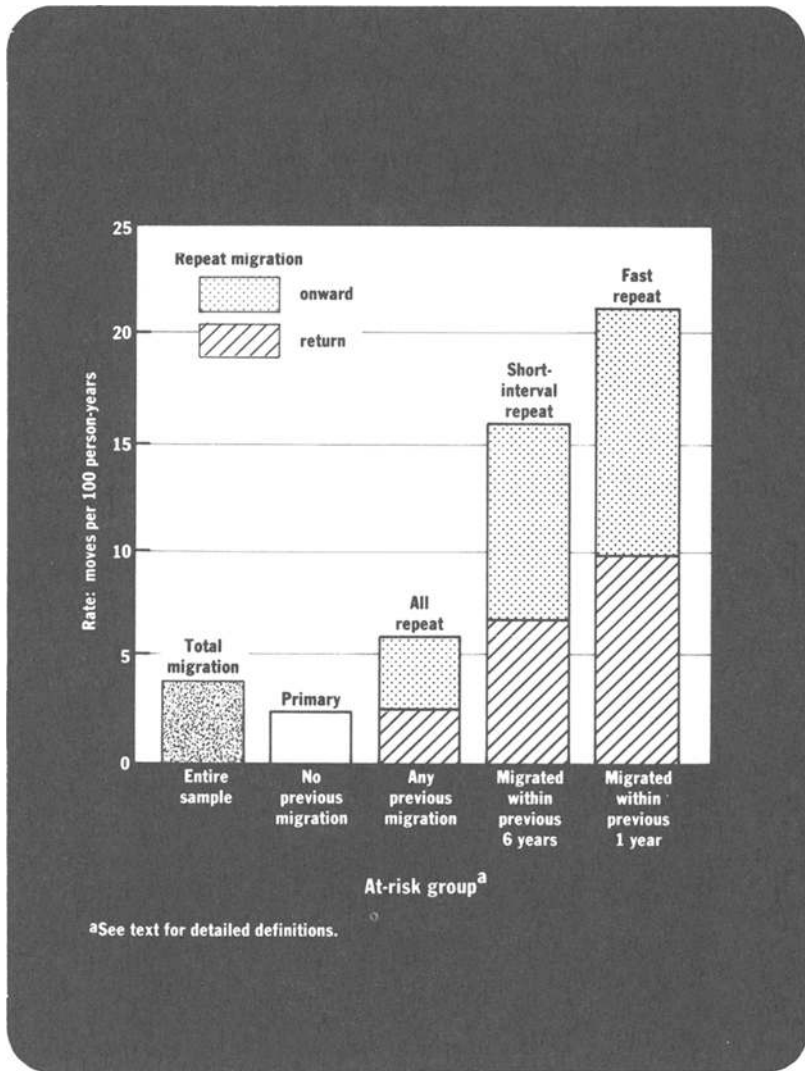


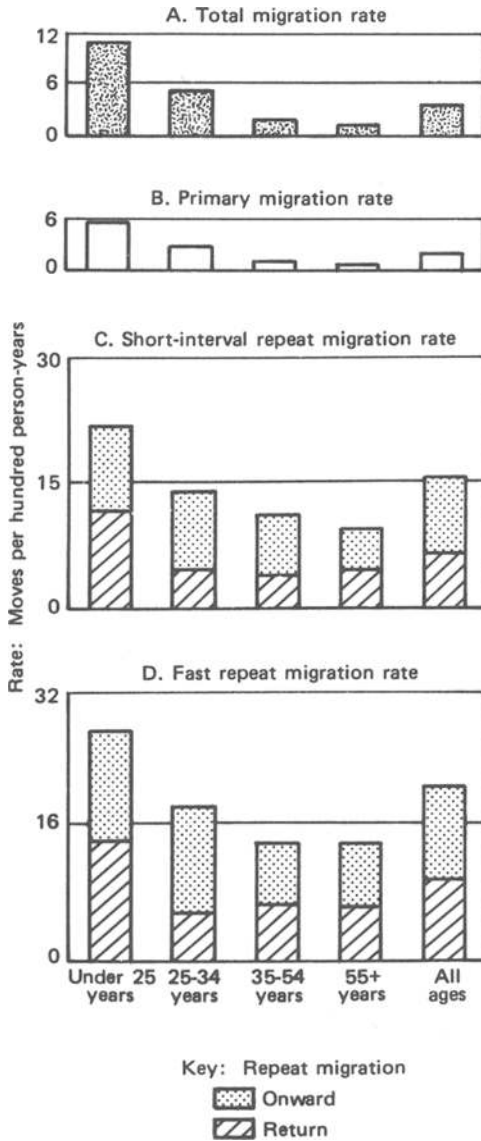
Figure 3.—Migration Rates by Type and Move

Age group	Probability of returning to an origin left before 1968
<25	5.4%
25 – 34	1.5%
35 – 54	0.4%
55+	0.1%

Both these points are consistent with our

suspicion that failure to control for interval of absence confounds the age effect.

Many persons who are now elderly left their areas of origin in early adulthood, and there has been speculation that some may now be returning, after long absences, to the places where they grew up. The few studies on the topic offer little support for this view, although it appears



Note: The bases for all rates exceed 100, except for the "55+ years" group in panel D, where $n = 93$.

Figure 4.—Migration Rates by Age

that experience varies widely from state to state (Serow, 1978; Longino, 1979). Although our data can neither confirm nor refute this speculation, they suggest that the act of returning is exceedingly rare later in life, usually occurring only when

the interval of absence is short. The infrequent repeat move among these older adults is more likely to be an onward move than a return move.

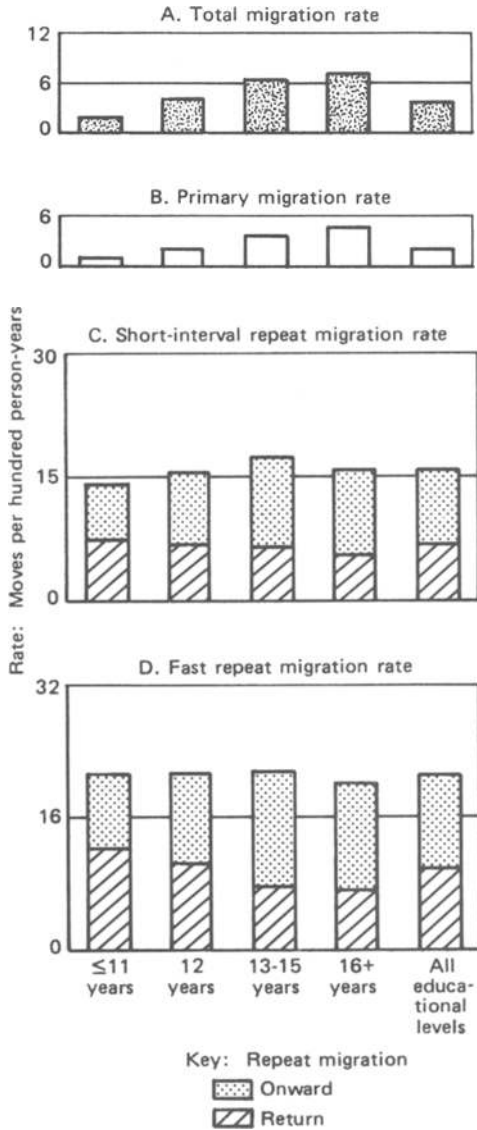
Patterns By Educational Attainment

The characteristic positive association between educational attainment and the propensity to migrate appears clearly in panels A and B of Figure 5. The total migration rate increases monotonically from 2 percent for family heads who have not finished high school to 7 percent for college graduates; the primary migration rate exhibits the same pattern, at a lower level.

The propensity to make a repeat move generally increases with education through 15 years of education but then declines slightly for college graduates (panel C). Moreover, where the interval of absence is very short, the propensity to make a repeat move is totally unrelated to education (panel D).

Closer inspection of panels C and D reveals that onward migration exhibits a positive association with education and that only return migration is the exception to the characteristic rule. In these two panels, the propensity to return is highest among the *least* educated and declines with successively higher educational attainment. This reversal of the usual relationship is most apparent for fast repeat migration, where the return rate is 12.2 percent for the least educated but 7.2 percent for the most. The onward rate exhibits the usual pattern, increasing from 9 percent to a level of 13 to 14 percent for the more highly educated.

Overall, the most educated members of our sample are the most prone to migrate and, when making a repeat move, to favor a *new* destination. The least educated members are the least migration-prone and, when making a short-interval repeat move, tend to retreat to areas they lived in before. This result is consistent with other findings (e.g., Deaton and Anshel, 1974) showing return migration to be selective of the less educated among out-migrants. The net effect of this con-



Note: The bases for all rates exceed 100.

Figure 5.—Migration Rates by Educational Level

trasting pattern of selectivity is to intensify the selective effect of out-migration: it is the most educated who depart and also stay away.

This opposite pattern between return and onward repeat migrants may indicate systematic differences between less and

more educated persons in the underlying factors that precipitate repeat migration. More educated persons possibly have a greater store of reliable information about opportunities elsewhere, due both to their superior ability to process information and to their tendency to compete for jobs in labor markets that are more national in scope. By contrast, the information on which less educated persons base their initial moves may be more limited, and the moves themselves may be less likely to prove “successful” and more likely to eventuate in a “corrective” return move. Another possible explanation may be the comparative advantage that onward migration offers to more highly educated persons as a means of reinvesting in human capital. For the less educated, such reinvestment may be less advantageous (hence less likely), and their well-documented reliance on family and friends in deciding where to move may bias their destination choices toward places where they formerly lived.

Patterns By Employment Status of Family Head

It can be expected that the outcome of each move a person makes will have a continuing influence on the sequence of migration that the person follows. The migrant’s success or failure in securing a job may affect both the propensity to migrate again and the type of repeat move he will venture upon. The migrant who is unable to find or keep a job after one move may have no realistic alternative to returning. The migrant who improves his employment circumstances may remain where he is or perhaps be tempted to try for something even better by moving again.

A matter of particular relevance for our theory is how employment disequilibrium—either looking for another job or being without one—shapes a sequence of moves. Migration rates in Figure 6 are classified according to the following employment statuses into which members of our sample can be grouped.

These statuses are measured at the time of the survey before the move in question (hence up to a year before that move).

1. *Unemployed*: sample members who were unemployed at that time.
2. *New-job seekers*: those who were employed but reported they were looking for a different job.
3. *Satisfied jobholders*: those who were employed and not looking for a different job.
4. *Outside the civilian labor force*: those who were outside the full-time civilian labor force, subdivided into military personnel, students, and persons who are retired or permanently disabled.

The total migration rate varies considerably by employment status. Within the labor force, the new-job seekers and the unemployed are more migration-prone than the satisfied jobholders; outside the civilian labor force, military personnel are highly migration-prone. Other groups outside the labor force are notable for their low rates of migration. The primary migration rate exhibits the same general pattern.

Focusing on repeat migration, unemployed sample members are especially prone to make return moves, particularly when the migration interval is short. For example, 20 percent of the candidates for $MI=1$ repeat migration who experienced unemployment in the year following their initial move made a return move the next year; an additional 11 percent migrated on to another area. In all, *nearly one-third of those who found themselves unemployed after one move migrated again within a year*. By comparison only 5 percent of the candidates for primary migration who experienced pre-move unemployment made a move the next year. (See DaVanzo, in press, on this point.)

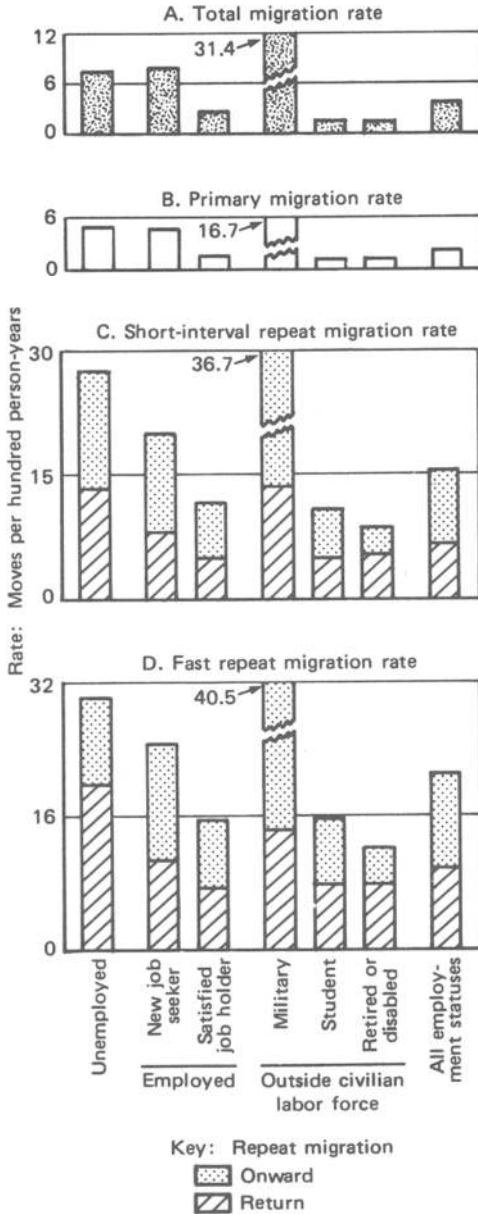
New-job seekers are another group prone to repeat migration, but they are likelier to maintain an onward sequence. For $MI=1$, 14 percent migrate onward and another 11 percent return, for a combined repeat rate of 25 percent. Viewed from another perspective, returns account

for two-thirds of the fast-repeat moves by unemployed persons, but considerably less than half of those made by new-job seekers.

Satisfied jobholders exhibit the lowest propensity for repeat migration among those in the labor force and when they do move, they tend to move onward more often than to return.

In interpreting these results, recall that other important variables are not controlled. For this reason, the higher rates of short-interval and fast-return migration by the unemployed may be associated partly with the characteristically younger age and lower educational attainment of unemployed people. (As shown in Figures 4 and 5, these groups have high short-interval and fast-return migration rates.) Indeed, multivariate analysis reported elsewhere indicates that the explanatory power of unemployment before the repeat move is reduced when education is controlled. The interpretation is complicated, however, since unemployment before the initial move remains a significant determinant of who ultimately makes a fast-return move (DaVanzo, forthcoming).

The above patterns lend themselves to the following interpretation within our analytical framework. The immediate security of a job may enable the employed family head to "afford" to search more systematically than the unemployed one for a better job in a new labor market. That more systematic search may enhance the likelihood of an onward migration sequence by the employed, whereas a less systematic search may predispose the unemployed to retreat to the supportive environment of friends and relatives and perhaps regain a previous job. This suggests why, when unemployment is a factor, the fast-repeat migration sequence so often ends in a return. Location-specific capital may act as a powerful force to attract the migrant back in cases where other opportunities are not apparent. This tendency to return is less pronounced when the average migration interval is longer (as in panel C). Here, the depreciation of location-specific capital can be ex-



Note: The bases for all rates exceed 100, except for the following groups in panel D: unemployed ($n = 56$), military ($n = 84$), student ($n = 51$), retired or disabled ($n = 67$).

Figure 6.—Migration Rates by Employment Status of Family Head

pected to have weakened the attraction of the destination of return, lowering the proportion of repeat moves that are returns.

For family heads outside the civilian labor force, patterns of repeat migration resemble those of total and primary migration. For both types of repeat migration, rates are very high for those in the military service but well below average for students and persons who are retired or permanently disabled.

CONCLUSIONS

Every year, several million household heads in the United States migrate to a new labor market area, in most cases for reasons easily interpreted within conventional theoretical frameworks. Such migrants frequently “undo” their moves, however, by moving back after a short time to where they came from. Why should a person move back to a place he previously decided to leave? Our analytical framework suggested four guiding propositions.

The first proposition suggested that the propensity to return to an area should be greater the more location-specific capital that is left behind. Consistent with this proposition, we found that, with interval of absence controlled, the propensity to return is always higher if the potential return destination is also the person’s area of upbringing, where the migrant presumably has more location-specific capital than in other areas.

The second proposition suggested that since location-specific capital depreciates in value, the propensity to return should be lower the longer the person stays away. Consistent with this proposition, we found that family heads are most prone to return within a year; thereafter, the propensity to move back weakens (although erratically) as time passes.

The third proposition characterized repeat migration as a “corrective” act. A return move is likely for the discouraged migrant, whose “reinvestment” in migration is guided by superior information about a familiar area. Consistent with this proposition, we found that the most educated members of our sample (who, we hypothesize, possess more information

about opportunities elsewhere) were most prone, when making a short-interval repeat move, to favor a *new* destination; their less educated counterparts, in contrast, tended to retreat to areas where they lived before. Moreover, the fact that the return migration propensity is highest when interval of absence is shortest is consistent with the notion that people are most likely to return when their information about a previous location is still "fresh."

The fourth proposition suggested that each move entails some "learning by doing." We found that people with previous migration experience are prone to migrate again (i.e., rates of repeat migration are far higher than those of primary migration). When people move repeatedly, those who experienced unemployment after one move tend subsequently to make a return move, whereas others move onward. Our interpretation here is that the migrant who ends up being unemployed tends to fall back on return migration (i.e., the location-specific capital in a previous area), while the migrant who meets with success may have "learned" to seek new opportunities instead of old friends.

Return migration appears to be a widespread but frequently undetected form of mobility. About one-fourth of all moves and over one-third of the repeat moves recorded in our sample can be identified as returns. (Our data are capable of revealing only a portion of all return moves; others are misclassified as primary or onward moves.) Yet, many return moves are not detected at all in conventional statistics, since such moves tend to follow so soon after a previous move. Altogether, 32 percent of all recorded domestic moves in our data, and over 70 percent of the moves that make up multi-move sequences, would be invisible in a five-year comparison of residences.

Overall, these findings demonstrate the utility of the analytical framework we have adopted. We hope our findings will encourage other applications of this

framework to diverse forms of human mobility, which will offer further opportunities for its testing and refinement.

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