URBANIZATION AND DE-URBANIZATION OF THE BLACK POPULATION BEFORE THE CIVIL WAR

Jane Riblett Wilkie
Department of Sociology, The University of Connecticut
Storrs, Connecticut 06268

Abstract—Pre-Civil War black urbanization is examined using data from federal census records, 1790 to 1860. The black population is found to be as urban as the white population initially, but its urbanization underwent relative decline in the last two decades before the Civil War. Foreshadowing current patterns, the northern black population was heavily concentrated in the largest cities, and the free black population was the most urban of all groups. The timing of black urban decline in the North, as well as regional and size of place differences in that decline, suggest that both competition with immigrants in major eastern seaboard cities and the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850 contributed to black de-urbanization. For the South, the explanations of black urban decline proposed by Wade, Conrad and Meyer, Goldin, and Bonacich are evaluated, and Bonacich's split labor market theory is judged to be most consistent with the demographic trends.

It is interesting that the black population, our greatest and all but latest urban dwellers, were also the most urban of our first settlers. Pre-Revolutionary data indicate that the black population was heavily concentrated in urban areas, particularly the northern black population. Blacks provided an important early source of labor in northern cities and, in 1720, constituted almost one of every four residents of New York City and one of every six Bostonians (Bridenbaugh, 1964, p. 249). While the colonies of the South had a smaller urban population than those in the North (North, 1966, pp. 130-131), in the leading city of the South, Charleston, half the population was black in 1709 (Bridenbaugh, 1964, p. 249). When national data first became available in 1790, the black population was as urban as the white population; but by the outbreak of the Civil War the white population had become almost three times more urban than the black population.

This paper traces the growth and decline of the black urban population from the first decennial census until the outbreak of the Civil War, a crucial period in urban development (Weber, 1967, pp. 23-25; Williamson, 1971, pp. 433-434). Distributional patterns of this population by region and by size of place foreshadow current patterns of concentration in the largest cities. Several theories explaining black urban decline are evaluated using new data.

PROCEDURES

Demographically, we know little about the urban population of the United States during the pre-Civil War period, and even less about the black urban population. Census publications do not provide information on the urban population until 1874 (Truesdell, 1949), and data on the black population, particularly slaves, are more limited than that on the white population throughout the period. Published census volumes and census schedules do, however, list the population by place of residence and thus permit a reconstruction of the urban population for this pe-
Regional differences in urbanization of the black and white populations were striking. In the North, the black population was more likely than the white population to live in urban places for the entire period before the Civil War. In the South, the black population was increasingly less likely than the white population to live in urban areas.

In the Northeast, the proportion urban of the black population increased more rapidly than that of the white population up to 1840 (when 39 percent of blacks resided in urban places compared to 18 percent of whites) and then declined relative to whites in the last two decades (47 and 36 percent, respectively, in 1860). The decline was quite substantial in the Middle Atlantic states, where the black lead in proportion urban in 1840 (38 compared to 18 percent) was cut in half by 1860 (45 compared to 35 percent). In the East Northcentral division, urbanization of the black population relative to the white population peaked ten years later than in the Northeast and declined only in the last decade before the Civil War.

In the South Atlantic states, from a slight excess in the proportion of whites over blacks residing in urban places in 1790 (2.3 white, 2.2 black), white urbanization rates increasingly gained over those of blacks—slowly through 1840 (8.7 white, 6.4 black)—but in the two follow-