

The Myth of the Black Middle Class Exodus:
Where the Black Middle Class Has Lived, Invested, and Engaged from 1960 to 2015*

Junia Howell and Candice Robinson
University of Pittsburgh

September 16, 2018

Working Draft: Please do not cite or distribute without authors' permission.

*Extended abstract submitted for presentation at the 2019 annual meeting of the Population Association of America, April 10-13, 2019, Austin, Texas. Please direct correspondences by email to Junia Howell at juniahowell@pitt.edu.

THE MYTH OF THE BLACK MIDDLE CLASS EXODUS: Where the Black Middle Class Has Lived, Invested, and Engaged from 1960 to 2015

In his monumental work, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, William Julius Wilson (1987) argued the unintended consequence of the 1968 Fair Housing Act was the increasing isolation of Black impoverished residents. Specifically, Wilson conjectured outlawing housing segregation enabled Black middle class residents to move into more affluent White neighborhoods. This exodus of the Black middle class subsequently left Black inner city communities without stabilizing economic establishments, engaged community activists, and essential middle class role models. In turn, impoverished Black communities perpetuated generational poverty, criminal behavior, and civic unrest. Wilson's argument was widely accepted by sociologists and demographers who built upon his reasoning to explain changes in residential segregation (Massey and Denton 1993) and how neighborhood disadvantage was responsible for persistent inequities in the Civil Rights era (Brooks-Gunn et al. 1993; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2000; Small and Newman 2001; Turley 2003; Sharkey 2013; Wodtke, Harding and Elwert 2011; Sampson 2012).

Although none of these studies—Wilson's included—examine to what extent the Black middle class moved out of Black communities post the 1968 housing legislation, together they reinforced the notion that part of the 'problem' in disadvantaged neighborhoods is the lack of economically and civically engaged Black middle class residents. This empirically unverified contention not only has theoretical consequences on how academics understand persistent inequalities but real world implications. Specifically, when discussing urban inequalities—especially after unrest or uprisings—the news media, civic organizations, and policy makers routinely posit the exodus of the Black middle class is a key factor that has contributed to observed inequalities (Smith 2014; Allen 2017; Grant 2017). This in turn influences how government officials, organizations, and residents conceptualize the persistent inequality and their decisions regarding where to live, invest, and engage. Thus, investigating the empirical validity of these claims is important to refine the theoretical explanations of neighborhood effects, neighborhood change, and neighborhood segregation as well as recast colloquial conversations regarding contemporary inequality.

In the present study, we provide an empirical examination of Wilson's claims by exploring where the Black middle class has lived, economically invested and civically engaged from 1960 till 2015. Using the historical Integrated Public Use Microdata Series National Historical Geographic Information System Data, we examine where the Black middle class has lived in each decade. We then use hybrid longitudinal models to examine what factors have contributed to divergent levels of Black middle class segregation over time. Finally, we use restricted geocoded longitudinal data from both the Portraits of American Life Study (PALS) and the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) to illuminate where the Black middle class is economically investing and civically engaging.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

We begin our investigation by examining where the White and Black middle class has lived in each decade. For the purposes of our investigation, we define the middle class as families with an annual income of 60,000 dollars or more in 2015 dollars. Additionally, we classify working class families as those with an annual income between 20,000 and 60,000 dollars and lower class families as those

with an annual income of 20,000 dollars or less.¹ Using these definitions, we find the size of middle class varied as U.S. economy experienced booms and bust. For both Whites and Blacks, the middle class grew between 1960 and 1980 but after the 1980s recession the middle class contracted and was smaller in 1990 than it was in 1980. Nevertheless, the economic boom of the 1990s once again expanded the middle class which grew until the housing crash of the late 2000s. The economic consequences of the housing crash led to declines in the middle class in 2010. However, these trends have now reversed and the middle class is once again expanding. Yet, more importantly for our purposes, across all these ebbs and flows the proportion of Black families who are classified as middle class is consistently lower than the proportion of White families. For example, in 2015, 55 percent of the White population was middle class compared to only 31 percent of the Black population. Inversely, the proportion of Black families who are both lower and working class is higher than the proportion of White families in these economic classes. These findings are not novel but are an important to contextualize the relative size of the Black middle class compared to their White counterparts.

Turning now to the neighborhood demographics of U.S. families, we first consider the proportion of Black residents in an average U.S. neighborhood.² This proportion has increased over time from nine to 15 percent. Over the same time period, the average Black resident lived in neighborhoods with fewer Black neighbors. In fact, the Black proportion in the average Black resident's neighborhood decreased from 0.63 to 0.49. In other words, the Black population has diffused across U.S. neighborhoods increasing their proportion in the 'average' neighborhood while decreasing their overwhelming majority in a few communities. Likewise, the average Black middle class residents went from living in neighborhoods that were 55 percent Black to only 43 percent Black. At first glance, these findings seem to support the notion that the Black middle class exited Black communities. Yet, their demographic trends mirror the broader diffusion of the Black community. In fact, where the Black middle class lived in 2015 was more similar to their lower and working class counterparts than where the Black middle class lived in 1960. Furthermore, unlike Wilson's prediction, the fair housing legislation was not followed by a dramatic decline in Black middle class residents living in Black communities. Instead, the Black middle class lived in neighborhoods with higher Black proportions in 1980 than they did in 1960.

These trends paint a convincing picture that the Black middle class is not living Black communities. However, it might be the case that the Black middle class is simply living in Black middle class neighborhoods and not with other less fortunate Black residents. To investigate this possibility further, we examine what proportion of the average Black middle class resident's neighborhood is Black lower class, working class, and middle class. As seen in Table 1, across the time period the proportion of Black middle class residents neighborhoods inhabited by Black lower class residents did not change. However, the proportion of these communities inhabited by Black middle class residents did rise and the proportion inhabited by the Black working class fell. Yet, this is merely

¹ Using the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics inflation calculator, we derived lower, working and middle class categories by adjusting each year's income values to 2015 dollars. For example, in 1960 2,507 dollars is equivalent to 20,000 dollars in 2015. Thus, our lower class category in 1960 was defined as less than \$2,507. Likewise, working class was defined as 2,507 dollars to 7,522 dollars (equivalent to 60,000 dollars in 2015) and middle class was categorized as 7,522 dollars or more.

² For consistency over time, we only examine counties that had defined census tracts across our entire time period. These 239 counties are disproportionately concentrated in large metropolitan areas with substantial Black populations. This has not only has methodological benefits for our analysis but ensures we are centering our analysis on the communities that are more theoretically relevant for conversations regarding the Black middle class.

reflecting the general changes in the increase of the Black middle class discussed above. To further adjudicate this claim, we examine the distribution of the Black middle class across the Black community using the Segregation Index. This index shows that the Black middle class became *more* equally distributed across the Black community across the last five decades.

These summary parameters contradict the commonly held assumption of the Black middle class exodus which beckons the question: what are the racial and class demographics of the Black impoverished neighborhoods frequently discussed in the literature. Building off the work of Wilson and neighborhood effects scholars, we define Black impoverished communities as those where at least 50 percent of the population is Black and 20 percent or more of the population lives in poverty. Table 2 displays the racial and economic demographics of just these census tracts. On average, in 1960 majority Black impoverished communities were 46 percent Black lower class families and only 4 percent Black middle class residents—a trend that reflected the low proportion of Black middle class residents in the country. Additionally, these communities were overwhelmingly Black—89 percent on average—yet, on average, 10 percent of the residents in these communities identified as White. In other words, these communities were not entirely Black as often depicted.

Over time these communities have become less Black—decreasing from 89 percent in 1960 to 75 percent in 2015. Likewise, the proportion of these communities that are Black lower class families have fallen. However, the proportion of Black middle class residents has risen. In other words, instead of leaving Black impoverished communities, *the Black middle class is now more likely to live in Black impoverished communities than they were in 1960*. Yet, unlike their Black counterparts, White residents are no more likely to live in Black impoverished communities in 2015 than they were in 1960. In fact, the decrease in Black proportion in these communities is due to the influx of the Latinx population.

Although by themselves these findings paint a convincing picture regarding where the Black middle class has lived nationally, they do not illuminate whether these patterns differ across cities. This is important given that theorists and demographers have primarily focused on specific cities, like Chicago and New York, in the Midwest and Northeast when hypothesizing about the Black middle class exodus. Patterns might differ by city. To adjudicate this possibility, we turn to a county level analysis of Black middle class segregation across the Black community. As seen in Table 3, overall Black middle class segregation has not changed much over time despite decrease in Black segregation and increases in the Black middle class and Black population. Additionally, as visualized in Figure 1, these trends do not have strong geographic associations.

Using hybrid-effects longitudinal models, we examine how Black middle class segregation differs between counties as well as within them over time. As expected, when the total Black proportion in a county rises the segregation of the Black middle class across the Black community decreases. Likewise, when the Black middle class increases their segregation also declines. Confirming Wilson's hypothesis, we also find as the Black segregation across the total population decreases, the Black middle class moves away from the rest of the Black community. However, our year variables illuminate this trend did not occur after the passage of the Fair Housing Act and is not increasing over time. Instead, it is a more general correlation between Black segregation and the segregation of the Black middle class from other Black residents. In short, Wilson is correct that as Blacks disperse across an entire city the Black middle class becomes more separated from working and lower class Blacks. Yet, these trends do not have the historical trajectory or magnitude that he presumed, nor does it account for the totality of lived experiences.

Central to Wilson's argument was the notion that when the Black middle class physically moved away from Black communities, they no longer financially or civically engaged with these communities. To investigate this aspect of Wilson's claims, we are using two restricted geocoded longitudinal datasets to compare the economic and civic engagement of Black middle class residents living in and outside of Black impoverished communities. Generally speaking, Blacks and Whites give a comparable proportion of their incomes to charitable causes yet the Black population volunteers more hours than their White counterparts (see Table 5). Likewise, the Black middle class gives comparable amounts to their White middle class counterparts but volunteers more. In fact, Black middle class residents living outside of Black majority impoverished communities are most likely to give of their time and financial resources. We are currently geocoding the organizations where residents volunteer and donate to examine whether this engagement is within or outside Black impoverished communities. However, many of these organizations are predominately Black churches. Thus, we hypothesize not only are the Black middle class who reside outside of Black impoverished communities civically engaged but they invest in the very communities they have been theorized to "abandon."

Wilson's (1987) argument that the Black middle class left impoverished Black communities after the Fair Housing legislation of 1968 and subsequently left Black communities in worse condition than they were before the Civil Rights era was a convenient explanation for the persistent disinvestment and inequities observed in the U.S. Black community. In fact, it echoed a long held tradition in the literature of asserting that the Black middle class held responsibility to address the issues afflicting the Black community (e.g. Du Bois 1899, Du Bois 1903; Frazier 1957). However, this argument has yet to be empirically substantiated. In this study, we evaluate these claims using demographic and survey data and find the Black middle class has not exited the Black community. Instead, they were more integrated across the Black community in 2015 than they were in 1960. Additionally, they continue to give their time and money to serve the community. These results contradict the long-held assumption that more privileged Blacks can adjudicate inequities. Curtailing these inequalities will require addressing the ongoing role structural racism and the White community plays in perpetuating racial inequality.

As we continue to conduct analyses for this paper in advance of the annual PAA meeting in Austin, we will further refine these findings as well as their implications for understanding inequality generally. For now, though, we hope that we have provided sufficient demonstration of the power of our multilayered approach.

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TABLES

Table 1. Distribution of the Population Across U.S. Census Tracts from 1960 to 2015

	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2015
<i>White Population</i>							
Lower Class	0.11	0.07	0.09	0.11	0.11	0.13	0.13
Working Class	0.46	0.36	0.32	0.38	0.33	0.34	0.32
Middle Class	0.44	0.57	0.59	0.51	0.56	0.53	0.55
Total	26,681,628	28,064,380	23,899,942	43,760,132	42,173,696	41,968,688	41,617,596
<i>Black Population</i>							
Lower Class	0.35	0.19	0.28	0.27	0.26	0.29	0.29
Working Class	0.52	0.52	0.39	0.43	0.40	0.42	0.40
Middle Class	0.12	0.29	0.33	0.30	0.34	0.30	0.31
Total	2,673,440	3,365,187	3,959,275	7,266,849	8,726,500	9,749,362	10,175,753
<i>Black Neighborhood Proportion</i>							
Total Population	0.09	0.11	0.14	0.13	0.14	0.15	0.15
Black Population	0.63	0.70	0.71	0.58	0.54	0.51	0.49
Black Middle Class	0.55	0.68	0.66	0.52	0.49	0.46	0.43
<i>Black Middle Class</i>							
Black Lower Class	0.14	0.11	0.18	0.13	0.13	0.13	0.13
Black Working Class	0.31	0.34	0.27	0.24	0.22	0.22	0.20
Black Middle Class	0.11	0.25	0.28	0.21	0.22	0.21	0.20
<i>Black Working Class</i>							
Black Lower Class	0.20	0.16	0.25	0.22	0.21	0.21	0.21
Black Working Class	0.33	0.41	0.34	0.32	0.29	0.30	0.28
Black Middle Class	0.07	0.19	0.23	0.17	0.19	0.16	0.16
<i>Black Lower Class</i>							
Black Lower Class	0.19	0.08	0.25	0.22	0.20	0.22	0.22
Black Working Class	0.20	0.16	0.25	0.22	0.21	0.21	0.21
Black Middle Class	0.03	0.06	0.15	0.09	0.11	0.09	0.10
<i>Segregation Index</i>							
Black Lower Class	0.21	0.24	0.23	0.27	0.26	0.27	0.26
Black Working Class	0.09	0.07	0.10	0.11	0.11	0.15	0.14
Black Middle Class	0.34	0.23	0.23	0.26	0.23	0.29	0.28

Table 4. Coefficients from Hybrid-Effects Models Predicting Black Middle Class Segregation Across the Black Population, 1960-2015

	Model 1	Model 2
<i>Between-Effects (Standardized)</i>		
Black Proportion	-0.33 (0.04)	-0.34 (0.04)
Black Middle Class Proportion	-0.43 (0.03)	-0.43 (0.03)
Black Segregation	-0.15 (0.04)	-0.15 (0.04)
Total Population (Logged)	0.08 (0.04)	0.05 (0.04)
<i>Within-Effects (Standardized)</i>		
Black Proportion		-0.16 (0.02)
Black Middle Class Proportion		-0.42 (0.03)
Black Segregation		-0.38 (0.03)
Total Population (Logged)		0.03 (0.03)
<i>Region (Ref. Northeast)</i>		
Midwest	-0.12 (0.08)	-0.12 (0.08)
South	-0.15 (0.09)	-0.15 (0.09)
West	0.13 (0.11)	0.13 (0.11)
<i>Year (Ref. 1960)</i>		
1970	-1.09 (0.07)	-0.20 (0.07)
1980	-0.91 (0.07)	0.16 (0.08)
1990	-0.41 (0.07)	0.08 (0.09)
2000	-0.75 (0.07)	-0.13 (0.10)
2010	0.05 (0.07)	0.45 (0.10)
2015	-0.15 (0.07)	0.27 (0.10)
Constant	0.54 (0.08)	-0.01 (0.09)
Overall R ²	0.3727	0.5051
Number of Counties	239	239

Table 5. Donation and Volunteering Averages across Groups

	Donation Proportion of Income	Volunteering Hours
Black Population	0.02 (0.00)	9.86 (1.47)
White Population	0.02 (0.01)	7.18 (0.74)
Black Middle Class	0.01 (0.00)	14.31 (4.39)
White Middle Class	0.01 (0.00)	6.57 (0.70)
Black Middle Class in ‘Ghettos’	0.01 (0.00)	4.00 (1.00)
Black Middle Class in Non-Ghettos	0.01 (0.01)	16.18 (5.00)

FIGURES

Figure 1. Black Middle Class Segregation across Black Community, 1960-2015

