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## Urban Appalachians in Hamilton County: A Retrospective Analysis of Greater Cincinnati Survey Results

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### Introduction

The great African-American historian, Carter G. Woodson, identified one of the earliest Appalachian migration streams into Cincinnati when he wrote: "...during the period between 1826 and 1840...Cincinnati had to grapple with the problem of the immigrating Negroes and the poor whites from the uplands of Virginia and Kentucky." Woodson himself was a migrant from his birthplace on the edge of the Appalachian uplands in Virginia's Buckingham County. He worked as a miner in the Kentucky coalfields before attending Berea College, and later served as dean of West Virginia State College. These experiences piqued his scholarly interest in the social conditions of black and white Appalachian migrants.<sup>1</sup>

As a migrant himself, Woodson was fairly typical. He was born poor in a rural area, but pursued a successful career in several different urban locations. Like Woodson, many Appalachian migrants had experience in the coalfields and some were black. And like Woodson, although they moved away, most never forgot where they came from.

Young and old, men and women, miners and farmers, white and black, people have been moving from the rural environs of the Appalachian mountains to urban and metropolitan areas for a very long time. Long enough, in fact, that they are no longer referred to as migrants but as urban Appalachians. As used in this working paper, the term 'urban Appalachian' includes both migrants to cities outside of the region and to their descendants. The original migrants are referred to as first-generation migrants, their children born outside the region as the second generation, and so on.<sup>2</sup>

Most urban Appalachians have now lived outside of the region for all or the greater portion of their lives. Because millions of Appalachians have made the transition from rural newcomers to long term residents of urban neighborhoods, several questions arise. Given

the fact that it has been well over forty years since Appalachian outmigration peaked, how are these people and their descendants doing in Hamilton County? How do they compare on basic demographic indicators with other urban groups? Do they show signs of economic and social assimilation?

### **Methodology and Data: The Greater Cincinnati Survey**

To answer these questions Urban Appalachian Council researchers placed a series of questions on the Greater Cincinnati Survey (GCS) in 1980, repeated them in 1989, and repeated them again in 2001. The GCS is conducted by the Institute for Policy Research at the University of Cincinnati using random-digit-dialing techniques to contact approximately 1,100 residents of Hamilton County. As a consequence, the Urban Appalachian Council now has two decades of longitudinal information about the urban Appalachian residents of Cincinnati and its surrounding county. These are the data used in this working paper to address the questions asked above.<sup>3</sup>

### **Findings: Appalachians in Hamilton County**

The proportion of all first- and second-generation Appalachians in Hamilton County has remained fairly constant at just over 20% for the past twenty years. As might be expected, the percentage of first-generation migrants has declined from 52% in the 1980s to 40% at the end of the 1990s. This decline has been compensated for by the growth in the proportion of second-generation Appalachians from 48% to 60%, and by a slight gain (1%) in the proportion of black Appalachians over the last decade. Black Appalachians now constitute equal proportions (17%) of both the county's African Americans and of the urban Appalachian population. Clearly black and white Appalachians remain a substantial part of the county's population.<sup>4</sup>

Appalachian women outnumber Appalachian men by close to a three-to-two ratio (61% to 39%). Mortality rates among the first generation may account for a portion of this difference because women typically outlive men; another contributing factor may be the rising divorce rate among white Appalachian couples because divorced men may be more transient. At the end of the 1980s the white Appalachian divorce rate (8%) was comparable to that of non-Appalachian whites (8%), and was well under that of non-Appalachian blacks (26%). By the close of the 1990s this situation had changed significantly with the white Appalachian divorce rate rising to 16% and exceeding that of either the non-Appalachian white (12%) or black (12%) cohorts. Conversely, the proportion of white Appalachians who are married (60%) dropped to its lowest point in twenty years. After decades of stability, urban Appalachian nuclear families have begun to experience a substantial decline.

Because we are dealing with migrants, the first generation of whom came to the Cincinnati area at a specific age, over time the Appalachian cohort will artificially appear to be aging faster than the general population. The survey data reinforces this perception: in 1980 there was no significant difference in the average ages of Appalachian whites (41), non-Appalachian whites (41) and non-Appalachian blacks (42), but by 2001 the average age for the Appalachians was 49, for the other whites 43, and for the blacks 42. Nevertheless, the

actual age distributions of white Appalachians in the surveys are skewed toward an older cohort in a way that differs significantly from the other two culture groups. Many of greater Cincinnati's Appalachians are among the area's older residents.

Over the two decades encompassed by the survey data, age has played an important role in Appalachian household composition relative to the comparison groups. Greater Cincinnati's Appalachians have generally lived in households of a size comparable with non-Appalachian whites and smaller than those of non-Appalachian blacks. Overall, urban Appalachian households have more adults and fewer children than do those of the comparison groups. To the extent that Appalachian households differ from the others, the variation can be attributed to age.

A different perspective comes from observing the number of years a respondent has lived in Hamilton County. Given that the peak years of Appalachian migration occurred in the late 1950s and that the non-Appalachian residents of greater Cincinnati have typical mobility rates, one would no longer expect to find important differences among the three culture groups for this variable. This is in fact the case -- by 2001 all three cohorts had lived in the county for an average of about 33 years. Although the migration factor still affects Appalachian age distributions, it is no longer a significant influence on their time of residency. Appalachian migrants have truly become urban Appalachians.

The number of white Appalachians over 18 years of age with less than a high school education has declined from 1980 to 2001, yet nearly one in four (24%) still does not have a high school diploma. Appalachian high school graduation rates dropped by 10% from 1989 to 2001, but are almost identical to those of the non-Appalachian cohorts for the same period. In 2001 more Appalachians (28%) reported having taken some college courses than ever before, but only small gains have been made by white Appalachians in acquiring a college degree or some post-graduate education. In 1980 only 17% of Appalachians had this level of educational attainment, by 1989 the proportion had risen slightly to 20%, and by 2001 the rate was 21%. White Appalachians have improved their educational status over the last two decades, but still are not on a par with non-Appalachian whites in overall educational attainment.

Ninety-five percent of white Appalachians in the labor force were employed in 2001, either in full-time (80%) or part-time (15%) work. The work ethic among Appalachians that manifested itself in earlier surveys remained intact, but in this they were no different than members of the other two cohorts. White Appalachian, white non-Appalachian, and black non-Appalachian workers in greater Cincinnati all took advantage of the high-employment trends that swept the nation in the 1990s.

The high rates of employment resulted in substantial income gains for white Appalachian families in Hamilton County. In 2001 only 5% of the Appalachian families surveyed reported incomes of less than \$20,000 as compared with 10% of non-Appalachian white families, and 31% of non-Appalachian black families. At the other end of the income spectrum 44% of Appalachian families reported incomes of over \$50,000 while the same was true for 53% of non-Appalachian white families and 25% of non-Appalachian black families in the county. Just over half of all Appalachian families in the most recent survey (52%) are in the middle-income bracket with incomes ranging between \$20,000 and \$50,000, which is a proportion substantially higher than that for either non-Appalachian white families (37%) or non-Appalachian black families (44%). In the period 1989-2001 considerably more white non-Appalachian households were earning over \$50,000 a year

compared with white Appalachian households. Nevertheless, well over nine out of ten Appalachian families surveyed in Hamilton County are in the middle or upper income brackets.

Between 1980 and 1989 the population from each of the three culture groups grew in the city of Cincinnati. From 1989 to 2001, however, all three groups lost population within the Cincinnati city limits while gaining population in the Hamilton County jurisdictions outside of Cincinnati. Black non-Appalachians in Cincinnati had the greatest loss (-13%), followed by white Appalachian (-6%) and non-Appalachian white city residents (-6%). Members of all three culture groups appear to be participating in the national trend toward suburbanization.

Although they remain predominantly Protestant (66%) in 2001, white Appalachian religious affiliations have gradually changed in the past twenty years. While Catholic affiliation has decreased for non-Appalachian whites and blacks over this period, the Appalachian Catholic affiliation rate has risen from 15% in 1980 to 19% in 2001. Moreover, survey respondents could designate their affiliation as Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, or other/none; the proportions of all three groups opting for the other/none category rose substantially between 1989 and 2001. The proportion was greatest for non-Appalachian blacks (32%), followed by non-Appalachian whites (24%) and white Appalachians (15%). These gradual but definite changes in religious affiliation may indicate that the process of assimilation is in fact well underway among urban Appalachians.

Comparing the two generations adds little to our understanding of urban Appalachians. The first two generations of Appalachians in greater Cincinnati had achieved nearly equal educational backgrounds by 2001. Both have high rates of employment, although second-generation migrants are more likely to have part-time jobs. Well over a third of both generations are city dwellers with the balance living in the rest of the county. Second generation Appalachians are somewhat less likely than the first to be Protestant and more likely to respond "other/none" to questions about their religious affiliation. They are also less likely to be married and tend to live in larger households with more children than the first generation. Where these small differences do occur, nearly all of them can be explained by the age differentials between the two Appalachian groups. The average age of first generation Appalachians is 60 and only 12% of them are under 30; conversely the average age of second generation Appalachians is 43 and 20% of them are under 30.

A sample of third-generation Appalachian migrants was also studied in the 2001 survey.<sup>5</sup> Again, it is their relatively low average age (22) that determines much of their demographic profile; fifty-three percent are under the age of 18. Their sex ratios are about even, half are in school, and nearly two-fifths are working full time. The most distinctive finding about this cohort is that 62% live within the city limits of Cincinnati.

## **Discussion**

The survey data show that white Appalachians in Hamilton County have consistently had a demographic profile situated between that of non-Appalachian whites and blacks. Appalachians still trailed their white non-Appalachian counterparts in terms of educational attainment and in the distribution of household incomes in 2001. Urban Appalachians

continue to close the demographic gap between the two white groups, while the gap between white Appalachians and black non-Appalachians has grown. At the outset of the 21st century, however, important issues surrounding aging, education, and income parity face the Appalachian community in Hamilton County.

First generation Appalachians in particular are a significant component of the county's older adult population. Older Appalachians appear to be staying in the greater Cincinnati area, rather than moving "down home" for retirement.<sup>6</sup> Because their roots are in the Appalachian region, however, they may respond better to programs for seniors that take into account their heritage than to generic "services for the elderly."

The first two surveys showed Appalachians in Hamilton County to be a heavily blue-collar group. The most recent survey did not collect occupational information, but indicated that in terms of income and employment levels Appalachians are still predominantly a working-class group. As economic conditions change, this cohort will be strongly affected. Finding work and generating a reasonable income in the boom times of the 1990s may not be sustainable activities for large numbers of Appalachian workers in an economic downturn. The rising divorce rates among Appalachians may also mean fewer adult workers will be available in each household, resulting in lower average household incomes in the future.

Jobs migrated to the suburbs in the 1990s and so did urban Appalachian workers. The prosperity of the 1990s enabled many city residents to move into suburban jurisdictions within the county. This movement can be expected to slow in economic slumps and accelerate in good times, but to continue unabated as an overall trend.

Getting a good education is still a key issue facing Appalachians in greater Cincinnati. This is especially true for students living in the city where over three-fifths of the third-generation Appalachians identified in the surveys reside. Between 1989 and 2001 high school completion rates dropped substantially for all three groups discussed in this working paper, and college completion rates for Appalachians have not risen appreciably in twenty years.

Aging and divorce will affect Appalachian women in the county. The older Appalachian cohort will become more female over time, requiring appropriate services. Female heads of single-parent households also require support services, and are often at risk for falling into poverty.

It should be carefully noted that the demographic data acquired by the surveys used in this working paper are an important tool in furthering our understanding of the urban Appalachian population in the county, but they leave many questions unanswered. The data show, for instance, that white Appalachians in Hamilton County seem to be well along in the process of social and economic assimilation. While this phenomenon is clear, especially for second-generation migrants, the question of cultural assimilation remains unexplored by these surveys. There are indications that the county's urban Appalachians are slowly undergoing changes in family structure and religious affiliation, yet the surveys cannot speak to the stereotyping and discrimination they may also be experiencing. In similar fashion, although Appalachians have many middle- and upper-income households in the county, the broad-scale nature of the survey research cannot identify pockets of concentrated Appalachian poverty. These areas are most likely to be found in the city of Cincinnati and to affect the members of the youngest Appalachian cohort identified in this

study, the third generation.

## Conclusion

During the twentieth century urban Appalachians in many American cities have become a fixture on the urban landscape. As Carter Woodson has pointed out, Appalachian people have been coming to greater Cincinnati to make their homes for well over 175 years. For the most part that seems to have been a good decision, but contemporary urban Appalachians, and their organizations, will have to be flexible and creative in responding to an ever challenging urban environment.

## Notes

1. See Carter G. Woodson. 1916. "The Negroes of Cincinnati Prior to the Civil War," and "Freedom and Slavery in Appalachian America," *Journal of Negro History*, 1, pages 1-22 and 132-150; see also The Carter G. Woodson Institute for Afro-American and African Studies at <http://www.virginia.edu/~woodson/welcome/name.html>.
2. The term 'urban Appalachians' is also used to describe the population of urban centers within Appalachia like Pittsburgh and Knoxville, but this usage is less frequent. For more information on Appalachian migration and urban Appalachians see the selected bibliography at <http://www.uacvoice.org/bibliography.html>.
3. See Thomas Shaw. 2001. "The Greater Cincinnati Survey, Project Report for the Urban Appalachian Council," Institute for Policy Research, University of Cincinnati. Hamilton County encompasses the city of Cincinnati and for the purposes of this paper we consider Hamilton County and greater Cincinnati to be coterminous.
4. Their low numbers in each of the survey samples (1980 N=36, 1989 N=20, 2001 N=50) make the cohort of black Appalachians too small for statistically reliable subanalysis in any given survey year. Moreover, in order to avoid confounding race with ethnicity, black Appalachians are not included in either the Appalachian cohort or the black cohort in the balance of this working paper. For more information about black Appalachian migrants see William W. Philliber and Phillip J. Obermiller, 1987. "Black Appalachian Migrants: The Issue of Dual Minority Status," pp. 111-116 in Obermiller and Philliber, eds., *Too Few Tomorrows: Urban Appalachians in the 1980's*. Appalachian Consortium Press. For other sources of information on black Appalachians see William H. Turner and Edward J. Cabbell, eds., 1985. *Blacks in Appalachia*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky; John C. Inscoe, ed., 2001. *The Mountain South from Slavery to Segregation*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky; and J. Trent Alexander. 2001. "Great Migrations: Race and Community in the Southern Exodus, 1917 - 1970." Ph.D. dissertation at Carnegie Mellon University.
5. If a second-generation Appalachian respondent had children living in Hamilton County, OH, he or she was asked five demographic questions about up to four of those children. In this way information was gathered for 184 third-generation Appalachians.

6. For information on recent patterns of Appalachian migration into and out of Hamilton County, see Phillip J. Obermiller and Steven R. Howe, "Urban Appalachian and Appalachian Migrant Research in Greater Cincinnati: A Status Report," November, 2000. Urban Appalachian Council Working Paper No.16, at <http://uacvoice.org/workingpaper16.html>.



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