

Essays on Veteran Status, Race, and Labor Mobility

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Dissertation Abstract

This dissertation examines the effects of wartime mobilization, race, and origins on labor mobility in the United States between 1890 and 1930. It provides a significant new longitudinal microdata sample and contributes to our knowledge of the labor market outcomes of World War I (WWI) veterans relative to nonveterans and our understanding of the selectivity of emigrants in the early phases of the mass Southern out-migration. After an introductory chapter reviewing the literature on American labor markets during this period, it proceeds with three essays.

The first essay is a methodological paper examining the construction of the new, longitudinal microdata sample. It then uses this sample to estimate the determinants of WWI draft probability. The sample observes nearly 7,000 native-born black and white Americans in 1917 and in 1930, observing both veterans and non-veterans. Black men and Southern out-migrants of both races are oversampled. Comparisons with the 1930 Census suggest that this sample is representative of the cohort of draft-age men. Looking at the question of draft probability, the results suggest deep racial discrimination in the issuance of draft exemptions and deferments, as expected. Although white agricultural workers had diminished probability of conscription, equivalent black farmers and farm laborers did not. Marriage and dependents reduced the probability of being drafted for both white and black men, but the magnitude of these effects was smaller for blacks.

The second essay estimates the treatment effect of WWI military service on post-war occupational attainment, occupational mobility, and geographic mobility. The effect of WWI

military service varied substantially by race. Service slightly increased the probability of holding a white-collar or skilled blue collar occupation by 1930, controlling for observed biases in the assignment of veteran status. White veterans who held such jobs before the war were less likely to end up in unskilled labor occupations in 1930. Black veterans enjoyed no such protections from downward occupational pressures. WWI service did not offer upward occupational mobility to low-skilled workers or a transition out of agriculture for farmers and farm laborers. White veterans were more likely to make an interstate or interregional geographic move after the war, but black veterans had the same rates of migration as black nonveterans.

The final essay uses the sample to observe black and white Southern out-migrants and non-migrants before and after migration. Compared with their sending population, black migrants were more literate and disproportionately from urban areas. Black migrants were more likely to have left from non-farm occupations in the South and, among non-farm occupations, professional blacks were more likely to leave. White migrants were more literate than their sending population, but otherwise representative. This suggests that a focus on agricultural forces as a direct cause of the Great Migration may be misplaced. Black migrants may have been better prepared for work in the North than previously thought.