

Can Black workers escape spatial mismatch? Employment shifts, population shifts, and Black unemployment in American cities

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Abstract

This paper uses a spatial mismatch index that measures the extent to which residential and employment locations differ across a metropolitan area to determine whether the spatial separation of Black residential locations and employment locations impacted Black labor market outcomes from 1980 to 1990. It is found that between 1980 and 1990 unemployment rates for Black workers were negatively affected by a growing divergence between Black residential locations and metropolitan employment locations. Metropolitan employment shifts increased Black unemployment rates by 0.63 to 4.32 percentage points while Black population shifts did not fully offset the impact of employment shifts.

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1. Introduction

The spatial mismatch hypothesis, first formulated by Kain [3], suggests that there is a connection between the increased suburbanization of employment in American metropolitan areas and the inferior labor market outcomes of central city minority residents. As job locations shift from more centralized locations to areas that are farther away from the central cities, central city residents are now, on average, more geographically distant from employment opportunities. If there is a relationship between

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labor market outcomes and the extent to which jobs are near to residential locations, then central city residents face worsening labor market conditions.¹

In order to determine whether the proximity of Black residents to jobs affects their labor market performance, the typical spatial mismatch study tries to establish a relationship between the inferior job access of Black residents and their relatively poor labor market outcomes. To test this relationship, researchers use observations taken at a single point in time to evaluate the relationship. If poor labor market outcomes are related to poor job access in a statistically significant way, then this is taken as evidence in favor of the spatial mismatch hypothesis.

However, when considering the question of whether or not policy intervention is warranted in response to the existence of spatial mismatch, there is an additional factor that must be considered. The relationship between the geographic distribution of jobs and employment outcomes creates the incentive for central city workers to respond to the shift of job opportunities to the suburbs by seeking out new residential locations that provide better access to job opportunities. Studies that rely on cross-sectional data at a single point in time are unable to identify whether or not this adjustment is occurring.

In order to identify whether mismatch is being reduced, it is necessary to compare the conditions at two points in time. If a metropolitan area seems to be “locked in” to a persistent or worsening mismatch, then policy intervention may be warranted. In order for policy intervention to be warranted two things must be shown. First, it is necessary to show that disparities between the metropolitan distributions of jobs and Black residents lead to inferior labor market outcomes for Black residents. Second, it is necessary to show that Black residents are unable to respond to changes in the location of job opportunities by moving to areas that give them access to the new job sites. If both of these can be demonstrated, then policy intervention may be necessary to offset the impact of employment decentralization on central city residents.

A previous paper by the author [5], created a spatial mismatch index (SMI) that can be used to measure the extent to which a metropolitan area’s geographic distributions of employment and Black residents differ. Based on the disparity index, a well-known measure of residential segregation (see Massey and Denton [6]), the SMI is calculated by measuring the percentage of a metropolitan area’s Black residents who would have to move in order for the area’s employment and population distributions to be identical. The index was applied to a sample of thirty-nine American metropolitan areas to determine two things. First, it sought to measure the impact of changes in the geographic distribution of jobs within the metropolitan areas on their SMIs. The paper found that from 1970 to 1990 changes in the spatial distribution of employment, holding the residential distribution fixed to reflect 1970 conditions, increased the percentage of Black residents who would need to move by 10.8 percentage points while lowering the overall SMI for metropolitan residents by 6.8 percentage points.

The second objective of the paper was to determine the extent to which changes in the distribution of Black residents offset the negative impacts of employment shifts. It found

¹ Recent work [7–11] has provided fairly strong evidence of a spatial component to the relatively poor labor market outcomes of urban Black workers. Reviews of the spatial mismatch literature can be found in [1,2,4].

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