Southern Blacks Appear to Stay or Return There

By JAMES CARY
(Cathy News Service)

WASHINGTON — There once was a time when blacks left the South by the millions to escape racial bigotry, discrimination in jobs and wages and Jim Crow laws that filled their lives with rage and bitterness.

Today that migration is definitely slowing and may even have been reversed, although fully documented statistics to support such a conclusion are still lacking.

"I think it is clear the South is experiencing no significant out-migration of blacks now," says Dr. Larry H. Long, a Census Bureau migration expert.

But it is not clear whether there is a slight plus or a minus in blacks returning to the South, over the number leaving.

Actually he says he suspects this is not the most significant change in increasing southern population. Rather it may be that the South is demonstrating a greater capability of holding on to its native born—both blacks and whites—than it did in the past, Long says.

A study made by the Census Bureau on the mobility of population in the United States between March 1976 and March 1975 points toward such possible conclusions, but only in part.

"During the three-year period following the 1970 census the South experienced net in-migration of whites, just as it had throughout the 1960's," the study states.

"In fact, during the 1960's, the South's net in-migration of whites more than offset its net out-migration of blacks, resulting in the region's coming to experience net in-migration for the first time in many decades."

The movement of blacks into and out of the South has had a somewhat different pattern. In the 1940's, the South lost about 1.6 million blacks. During the 1950's, about 1.1 million left. And during the 1960's, the loss was another 1.4 million.

The South's share of the total population also fell during those decades from 69.7 per cent in 1940 to 68.5 per cent in 1946, 68.0 per cent in 1950, 67.5 per cent in 1960 and from 62.5 to 45.8 per cent in the 1970's.

Presumably the improvements in civil rights for blacks in the South in the 1960's, access to better schools and public accommodations, and more equal treatment under the law have made it much more desirable for blacks to return to the South. But the Census Bureau study states emphatically:

"During the 1960's the South experienced net out-migration of blacks, but during the 1970-72 period no clear pattern is established."

Dr. Long said the population survey made for the 1970-72 study is based on far too small a sampling to determine whether blacks are now returning in greater numbers than they are leaving. But the study is clear on other major trends in U.S. population.

U.S. metropolitan areas are still losing population, it says. They had a net loss of 944,000 during the 1970-72 period. Central cities suffered even worse migration of 4,011,000 persons in the same three years, while suburban areas lying outside central cities, but still within metropolitan areas, had a net in-migration of 3,077,000. This was not enough to offset the loss from central cities.

The study cautioned these changes, however, did not indicate a total population loss for metropolitan areas or a decline in urbanization, stating: "The metropolitan out-migration, in combination with changes in rates of natural increase and immigration, have brought about a slower rate of metropolitan growth in recent years, but not a reversal of the long-standing trend toward increasing urbanization of the population of the United States."

One of the things that is happening, the study shows, is an increase in economic development around the fringes of metropolitan areas. During the 1960's employment in metropolitan areas outside the central cities increased faster than the population.

On a purely statistical basis, 12,260,000 persons moved to metropolitan areas between March, 1972, and March, 1973, and 6,600,000 people moved from metropolitan areas. Another 26,600,000 persons moved within metropolitan areas, and 8,871,000 moved from one metropolitan area to another. These shifts were more than offset by the natural increase in population within metropolitan areas.

The increase in in-migration to the South was attributed to a combination of several forces: (1) a reduction in the tendency to move out of the South, Dr. Long's suggested thesis; (2) an increase in the rate of movement to the South by persons born outside the South, and (3) return migration of Southern-born persons who had previously left the South.

For purposes of the study the South was defined as being made up of Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and West Virginia.

The Census Bureau study showed the West had had a net in-migration during the 1970-72 period. The West and South together had a net migration gain of 2,250,000 persons. The Northeast and North Central regions had a corresponding net migration loss of 1,259,000 persons.