

BIRTH RATES AMONG RURAL MIGRANTS IN CITIES¹

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IN CONTRAST to fairly adequate knowledge of rural-urban differences in fertility is the dearth of even the basic facts concerning birth rates among rural migrants in cities. This situation arises mainly from difficulties in securing adequate data. Pertinent material is not available from official sources and it will probably be a long time before a registration system similar to that in Sweden is adopted in this country. It is, therefore, necessary to depend largely upon field studies for desired materials.

Worthy of investigation are varied aspects of the problem such as the influence of migrant fertility upon reproductive rates of cities and the bearing of rural migration upon the commonly observed occupational differences in urban fertility. A fundamental element of the problem concerns the immediacy and intensity of the depressing effects of urban life upon the birth rates of migrants. Is the lowering of birth rates visited upon migrants themselves or is the full force postponed until the children of migrants mature and marry? If the fertility of migrants is reduced, is it fairly readily curtailed to the levels observed among individuals who were born in cities?

A limited amount of data pertinent to the latter questions was collected during 1930-1933 as part of population field studies conducted, or participated in, by the Fund. The surveys embraced: (1) approximately 3,000 white families enumerated in selected areas of Columbus, Ohio; (2) approximately 4,000 white families enumerated in selected areas of Syracuse, New York;² and (3)

¹From the Milbank Memorial Fund. The author wishes to acknowledge the helpful suggestions of Dr. Frank W. Notestein of Princeton University.

²(a) Notestein, F. W. and Kiser, C. V.: Fertility of the Social Classes in the Native White Population of Columbus and Syracuse. *Human Biology*, December, 1934, vi, No. 4, pp. 595-611. In addition to the data described in the above citation, the present Syracuse

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approximately 2,300 Negro families in a selected section of Harlem (New York City).³

Since an important purpose of these surveys was to study class differences in fertility, the schedules provided necessary data such as nativity of the husband and wife, occupation of the husband, age of wife, records of separations and previous marriages, and a complete roster of all children born to the union. In addition, information was secured on two items pertinent to the present discussion: (1) the type of community—city, village, rural—in which husbands and wives were born, and (2) the residence history of the couple since marriage.⁴

The above constitute the essential items used for the present attempt to secure suggestive evidence concerning the impact of urban life upon the fertility of rural migrants. Initial tabulations indicated that the most hopeful attack on the problem was that of restricting all comparisons to couples reporting exclusive residence in cities since marriage. The subdivision of this group according to type of native community yielded the city-born, village-born, and rural-born husbands and/or wives, all of whom were married in cities and reported continuous residence therein during the experienced potentially fertile years of married life.⁵

The basic procedure of this report was simply to compare the sample includes families enumerated in the "Health and Depression" survey of that city. For a description of the latter survey, see: (b) Perrott, G. St.J. and Collins, S. D.: Relation of Sickness to Income and Income Change in Ten Surveyed Communities. *Public Health Reports*, United States Public Health Service, May 3, 1935, 50, No. 18, pp. 595-622.

³ Kiser, C. V.: Fertility of Harlem Negroes. *The Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly*, July, 1935, xiii, No. 3, pp. 273-285.

⁴ Native communities were coded "city" if the population was 10,000 or more at the time of the individual's birth, "village" if under 10,000 population, and "rural" if the individual was born in the open country. For convenient reference to sizes of communities since earliest census, the coders used *Population*, Vol. 1, Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930. The "city-village-rural" coding of residence history since marriage was based upon size of community during the calendar years involved. In each case the period involved was the experienced potentially fertile years of married life.

⁵ The chief reason for the restriction of the data to couples residing in cities since marriage (or throughout the potential childbearing period if the wife was 40 years of age or more at the time of the enumeration) was the relatively small number of family migrants in the samples. The results of the present surveys resembled findings from more general studies

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marital fertility of city-born groups with that observed among rural and village-born groups, holding virtually constant age, social status, and urban residence since marriage. The birth rates based upon total number of children ever born were standardized for age⁶ as were the accompanying percentages of childless couples. For the two surveys of white families, the above indices are presented for wives under 45 and for wives of all ages; for the Negro survey, the data were restricted to women under 45 years of age. The samples analyzed were confined to unions in which neither spouse was foreign born or previously married. They were further restricted to marriages in which the husband and wife were living together or had lived together until the wife's forty-fifth birthday. After the above restrictions were made, the numbers of village-born and rural-born individuals were too small for separate analysis, so these groups were combined for comparison with those of urban origin.

The results secured are interesting, but by virtue of the small samples have little more than suggestive value. There is the suggestion, however, that wives who were born in rural or village areas, but spent their experienced fertile years of married life in cities of 10,000 or more population, were no more fertile than wives

of migration in their indication that rural-urban migration is selective insofar as preponderance of young unmarried individuals is concerned. The cityward movement has been, in large measure, that of young adults drifting away from parental ties. It is readily apparent, of course, that migrant couples moving to the city *after the families were completed* should not be included in analyses purporting to indicate the impact of urban life upon fertility. For migrant-nonmigrant fertility comparisons of urban dwellers, the married couples who migrated to cities before the end of the wife's childbearing period could justly have been combined with migrants who married after arrival in cities, if a current annual birth rate had been available for comparisons of fertility. In this study, however, the fertility index is based upon total number of children ever born to the union. For valid comparisons of birth rates among city-born urban dwellers with those among rural or village migrants in cities, the groups were therefore restricted to individuals residing in cities during their experienced exposure to the risk of childbirth.

⁶ The standard was that used in previously published studies of fertility in the Columbus, Syracuse, and Harlem samples. For women of all ages, standardization of rates was derived by applying the age distributions of samples of 92,619 native born white married women drawn from the 1910 census. For women under 45 years of age, the same method of standardization was used, based upon the age distribution of 65,070 native born white married women under 45 years of age.

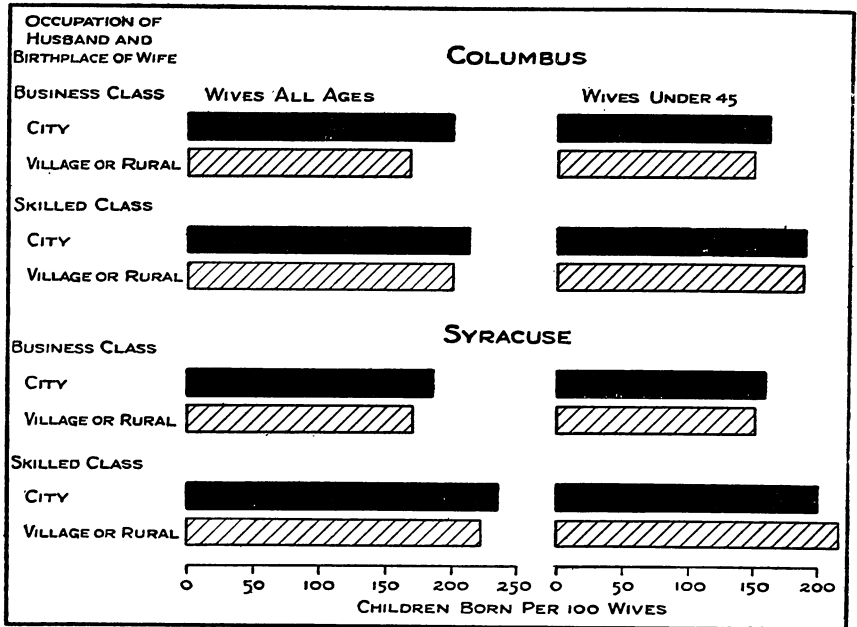


Fig. 1. Standardized birth rates among native white married women enumerated in Columbus and Syracuse and reporting exclusive residence in cities during the potentially fertile period of married life, according to age of wife, occupation of husband, and type of community in which the wife was born. (From Table 1.)

born in cities of that size. As indicated in Figure 1, this situation appeared to exist among native white wives of business men and of skilled workers⁷ in Columbus and in Syracuse. It appears to hold true among women of all ages and among women under 45. The small differences actually observed were usually in the direction of higher birth rates among the city-born groups, but the numbers involved do not warrant attaching significance to such differences. Additional classifications based upon the birthplace of husband alone, and birthplace of both husband and wife, are given in Table 1, but these show no substantial deviation from the charted picture.

The proportions of childless couples⁸ among city-born and village or rural-born groups are also presented in Table 1 for the classes

⁷ The numbers in the professional and unskilled classes were too small for analysis.

⁸ That is, those reporting no live birth to the existing union. Couples reporting stillbirths only were classified as childless, but those reporting deceased children only were not

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previously considered. It is evident from Figure 2 that childlessness was as frequent among the canvassed wives who migrated from villages and rural areas as among comparable city-born women. Indeed, the differences observed were more often in the direction of higher rates of childlessness among the migrant groups. Such differences, however, were generally small and not of statistical significance.⁹

Despite the fact that ages of wives were held virtually constant in the foregoing fertility comparisons, it is pertinent to inquire whether the failure of the migrants from villages and rural areas to surpass the city-born groups in fertility levels might be due to possible association of migration with postponement of marriage. This factor, however, did not appear to be of much importance in the present samples.¹⁰ Marriages were a little later among migrant wives than

classified as childless. It should be emphasized that the percentages of childlessness presented above are based in normal part or in entirety upon the experience of women of childbearing age.

⁹ Given below are the differences $\pm \sigma$ of differences between city-born and village or rural-born groups with respect to percentage of childless couples (standardized) among marriages in which the wives were under 45. Except in cases marked (*), the observed differences were in the direction of higher proportions of childlessness among the groups born in village or rural areas.

	SPOUSE CONSIDERED IN CLASSIFICATION BY BIRTHPLACE		
	Husband	Wife	Husband and Wife
	Diff. $\pm \sigma$ Diff.	Diff. $\pm \sigma$ Diff.	Diff. $\pm \sigma$ Diff.
Columbus, Business	0.8 \pm 4.3*	4.4 \pm 4.2	4.2 \pm 5.3
Columbus, Skilled	9.0 \pm 4.3	3.0 \pm 4.3	9.2 \pm 5.6
Syracuse, Business	1.1 \pm 5.0	2.4 \pm 5.2	4.3 \pm 7.3
Syracuse, Skilled	0.3 \pm 3.9*	6.3 \pm 4.0*	5.2 \pm 5.3*

¹⁰ The median ages at marriage among wives under 45 were as follows:

	<i>Columbus</i>	<i>Syracuse</i>
Business—wives born in cities	22.1	23.2
Business—wives born in village-rural areas	23.1	23.3
Skilled—wives born in cities	20.8	22.2
Skilled—wives born in village-rural areas	21.5	21.3

OCCUPATION OF HUSBAND AND BIRTHPLACE OF HUSBAND AND WIFE	CHILDREN BORN PER 100 WIVES		PER CENT CHILDLESS		NUMBER OF WIVES	
	All Ages	Under 45	All Ages	Under 45	All Ages	Under 45
COLUMBUS						
<i>Business Class</i>						
Birthplace of Husband						
City	192	150	19	23	249	176
Village or Rural Area	185	158	22	22	337	202
Birthplace of Wife						
City	201	162	17	20	260	185
Village or Rural Area	168	149	24	25	334	199
Birthplace of Husband and Wife						
City	206	159	16	19	145	106
Village or Rural Area	166	153	24	23	226	126
<i>Skilled Class</i>						
Birthplace of Husband						
City	216	207	19	17	246	180
Village or Rural Area	194	170	24	26	293	192
Birthplace of Wife						
City	213	192	20	20	268	193
Village or Rural Area	200	189	23	23	276	183
Birthplace of Husband and Wife						
City	218	197	19	19	154	114
Village or Rural Area	191	169	25	28	181	115
SYRACUSE						
<i>Business Class</i>						
Birthplace of Husband						
City	170	151	26	25	363	269
Village or Rural Area	187	166	23	26	157	103
Birthplace of Wife						
City	186	160	25	25	373	285
Village or Rural Area	171	152	24	28	148	94
Birthplace of Husband and Wife						
City	170	151	27	26	282	217
Village or Rural Area	159	134	25	30	70	43
<i>Skilled Class</i>						
Birthplace of Husband						
City	233	203	21	23	494	352
Village or Rural Area	219	214	23	23	242	167
Birthplace of Wife						
City	236	201	22	25	510	371
Village or Rural Area	222	218	21	18	245	159
Birthplace of Husband and Wife						
City	232	193	22	24	378	277
Village or Rural Area	200	200	24	19	124	84

Table 1. Birth rates and proportions childless among native white couples enumerated in Columbus and Syracuse according to type of community in which husbands and wives were born, and by occupational class of husband. All rates were standardized for age and relate exclusively to couples residing in cities since marriage or until the wife reached 40 years of age.

among the urban-born wives in the Columbus business and skilled samples, but no difference was found in the Syracuse business sample, and a slight discrepancy in the reverse direction was found among wives of skilled workers in Syracuse.

Limitations of a different character are more worthy of consideration and should be mentioned here. In the first place, the groups compared are, by definition, based upon place of birth and do not take into account the type of community in which the individuals were reared. In the second place, unfortunately, small numbers prohibited the establishment of pure rural-born groups for comparison with groups restricted exclusively to individuals born in the specific cities surveyed or in cities of equivalent size. Instead, however, it was necessary to combine the village and rural samples, and the city-born group includes individuals born in localities with a lower limit of only 10,000 population.

Whatever the importance of the above limitations may be, it is interesting to find that essentially similar results were secured in the Harlem survey, and the migration of Southern Negroes to Harlem is often pointed to as a prime example of abrupt transition in modes of life. In view of the importance of the northward migra-

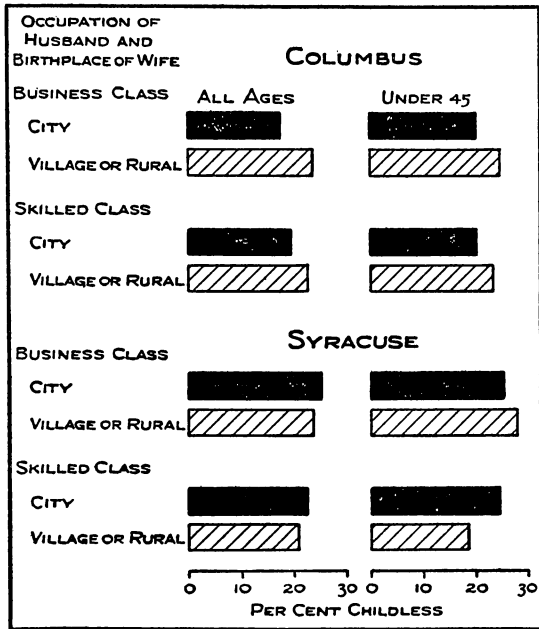


Fig. 2. Proportions childless (standardized) among native white married women enumerated in Columbus and Syracuse and reporting exclusive residence in cities during the potentially fertile period of married life, according to age of wife, occupation of husband, and type of community in which the wife was born. (From Table 1.)

tion of Negroes, coding provided for classification by geographic area, as well as by type of community, of the birthplaces of husbands and wives included in the Harlem investigation. In this instance, too, it should be noticed that all comparisons are limited to wives under 45 years of age who reported continuous residence in *Northern cities* since marriage. Due to the marked concentration of Negroes in the laboring classes, the classifications refer either to "all classes" or to "laborers."

The initial groupings, top of Table 2, present the data on the basis of North-South origins of husbands and/or wives, without regard to type of native community. Practically identical birth rates were found for wives of Northern-born husbands and for wives of Southern-born husbands. This held true for all occupational classes combined and for laboring classes considered separately. When classified on the basis of place of birth of the wife alone, the Southern-born women exhibited rates a little higher than those observed among natives of the North. When "type of community" is used as an additional criterion for classification, however, the higher rate for Southern-born women in this sample of Harlem residents appears to have arisen not from women born in villages or rural areas, but from those born in Southern cities, Figure 3. The birth rates of women born in rural and village areas of the South were practically identical with those exhibited by wives born in Northern cities and lower than those for women born in Southern cities of 10,000 or more population. More adequate data are needed for substantiation or refutation of the tendency observed in this sample for Negro women born in Southern cities to manifest higher birth rates after they arrive in Northern cities than do comparable women of rural or village origin.¹¹ The point of chief pertinence to the present topic, however, is the suggestion

¹¹ In this sample, the wives born in Southern cities were characterized by somewhat younger ages at marriage (median 21.1) than those born in Southern villages or rural areas (median 22.4), or in Northern cities (median 22.0). The above mentioned comparison of fertility persisted, however, when years of married life were virtually controlled.

BIRTHPLACE OF HUSBAND AND WIFE	ALL OCCUPATIONS			LABORERS		
	Children Born Per 100 Wives	Per Cent Childless	Number of Wives	Children Born Per 100 Wives	Per Cent Childless	Number of Wives
<i>Birthplace of Husband</i>						
North	80	56	182	84	54	137
South	81	54	450	83	54	389
<i>Birthplace of Wife</i>						
North	76	58	198	80	58	150
South	84	53	434	86	52	376
<i>Birthplace of Husband and Wife</i>						
North	89	57	104	97	55	73
South	86	53	356	87	52	312
<i>Birthplace of Husband</i>						
Northern City	82	56	166	86	54	122
Southern City	88	53	269	90	51	223
Southern Village or Rural Area	75	55	167	78	54	153
<i>Birthplace of Wife</i>						
Northern City	74	58	173	79	57	130
Southern City	94	48	245	93	48	212
Southern Village or Rural Area	71	60	182	75	59	156
<i>Birthplace of Husband and Wife</i>						
Northern City	82	58	88	88	55	60
Southern City	109	45	137	107	45	116
Southern Village or Rural Area	78	54	94	85	53	83

Table 2. Birth rates and proportions childless among native Negro couples enumerated in Harlem according to birthplace of husbands and wives and by occupational class of husbands. All rates were standardized for age and relate exclusively to wives under 45 years of age reporting exclusive residence in Northern cities since marriage.

that Harlem married residents who migrated from the rural South before they were married resembled comparable groups born in the urban North insofar as birth rates are concerned.

The extent of childlessness among the surveyed Negro wives of

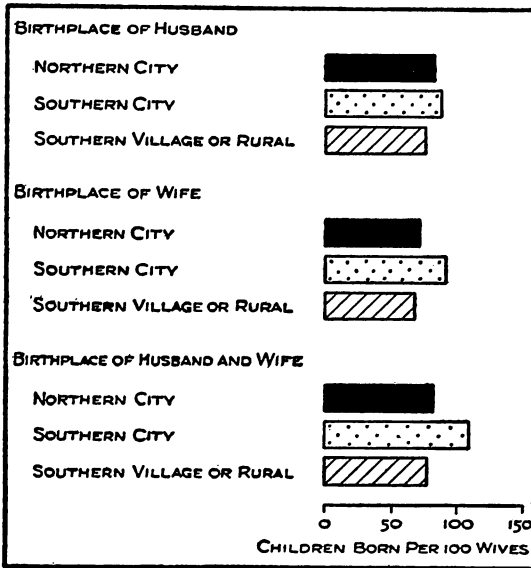


Fig. 3. Standardized birth rates among native Negro wives under 45 years of age enumerated in Harlem and reporting exclusive residence in Northern cities since marriage, according to birthplace of husband and/or wife. (From Table 2.)

child-bearing age is indicated for the various groups in Table 2. Figure 4, relating to part of the data presents the characteristic comparisons. With the exception of a somewhat lower proportion of childlessness among Negro wives born in Southern cities, the observed rates for various groups were not substantially different.¹²

In passing, attention should be called to the generally low birth

¹² Given below are the differences $\pm \sigma$ of differences between the standardized percentages of childless wives under 45 years of age. Except in cases marked (*), the differences observed were in the direction of higher percentages of childlessness in the groups mentioned first in the respective pairs.

GROUPS COMPARED	SPOUSE CONSIDERED IN CLASSIFICATION BY BIRTHPLACE		
	Husband	Wife	Husband and Wife
	Diff. $\pm \sigma$ Diff.	Diff. $\pm \sigma$ Diff.	Diff. $\pm \sigma$ Diff.
<i>All Occupations</i>			
North-South	1.6 \pm 4.4	4.9 \pm 4.3	4.0 \pm 5.6
Northern City-Southern City	3.1 \pm 4.9	9.6 \pm 5.0	13.6 \pm 6.8
Northern City-Southern Village/Rural	1.1 \pm 5.5	2.2 \pm 5.2*	3.7 \pm 7.4
Southern Village/Rural-Southern City	2.0 \pm 4.9	11.8 \pm 4.9	9.9 \pm 6.7
<i>Laborers</i>			
North-South	0.7 \pm 5.0	5.7 \pm 4.8	2.6 \pm 6.5
Northern City-Southern City	2.4 \pm 5.6	8.8 \pm 5.6	10.6 \pm 7.9
Northern City-Southern Village/Rural	0.2 \pm 6.1	2.1 \pm 5.9*	2.8 \pm 8.5
Southern Village/Rural-Southern City	2.2 \pm 5.2	10.9 \pm 5.3	7.8 \pm 7.2

rates and high proportion of childlessness in Harlem as compared with corresponding indices among white women under 45 in Columbus and Syracuse. Identical age standards and scales for plotting were used for whites and Negroes; so the Harlem birth rates in Figure 3 are comparable with those for white women under 45 (section at right, Figure 1). Similarly, Figures 4 and 2 are comparable. It is seen that birth rates were generally about twice as high among the white women, whereas childless couples were from two to three times more prevalent among the Negroes.¹³ Such comparisons, of course, demand certain qualifications. The data for Negroes relate to a highly congested area in New York City and those for whites were derived from differing types of neighborhoods in two cities of considerably smaller size. Also one would expect some diminution in the observed Negro-white differences in birth rates and extent of childlessness if the analyses were not restricted to marital fertility. Both types of limitations were vir-

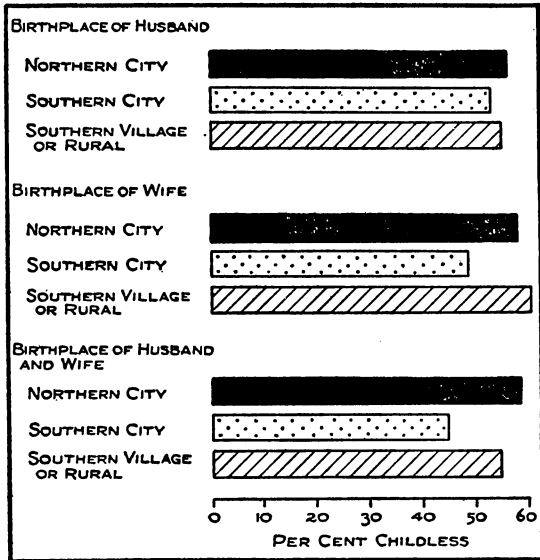


Fig. 4. Proportions childless (standardized) among native Negro wives under 45 years of age enumerated in Harlem and reporting exclusive residence in Northern cities since marriage, according to birthplace of husband and/or wife. (From Table 2.)

¹³ From Table 2 it will be seen that approximately 55 per cent of the Harlem wives of childbearing age reported childless marriages at the time of the survey. A side analysis confined to 139 native Negro wives of all classes 40 years of age and over indicated that approximately 44 per cent of such virtually complete families in Harlem were fruitless (confined to marriages which remained unbroken and were spent in Northern cities during the fertile years of married life). Comparable percentages for 228 wives of skilled workers in Columbus and for 305 in Syracuse were 18 and 22, respectively.

tually removed by Notestein's recent analysis of a comprehensive body of previously unpublished 1930 census data pertaining to number of resident children under 10 and number of unbroken marriages of five to nine years' duration in areas of specified size in the East North Central States.¹⁴ In cities of 250,000 population or more, fertility rates (computed from the above data) were about 20 per cent higher among families with native white heads than among comparable Negro families. The families of similar description reporting no child under 10 at home constituted 28.0 per cent among native whites and 52.5 per cent among Negroes.

In commenting upon low birth rates among urban Negroes, students have sometimes attributed the situation to the temporary period of maladjustment incident to the recency of the migration. The present data are not sufficiently adequate to refute this interpretation, but they do suggest that the low birth rates and high proportions of childlessness also characterize Negro wives who were born in Northern cities. A virtually untouched field of research is open to those having the means and the interest to investigate the factors underlying childlessness among urban Negroes.

A few remarks should be made concerning the provisional conclusion that migrants from village and rural areas who marry in cities and reside therein are no more fertile than are comparable individuals who were born in cities. There would appear to be a fairly immediate impact of urban life on the fertility behavior of such migrants, plus any possible selective factors. Possibly the act of migration to cities tends to select individuals without important interests in large families. If such a selection is present, it might at first appear to vitiate the comparisons made. Nevertheless, as previously stated, young unmarried adults constitute the important segment of migrants to cities, so it is with this group that studies of birth rates among rural migrants in cities should be concerned.

¹⁴ Notestein, F. W.: *Differential Fertility in the East North Central States*. The Milbank Memorial Fund *Quarterly*, April, 1938, xvi, No. 2, pp. 173-191.

The objection may be made that in former decades the foreign inhabitants of our cities were conspicuously fertile and that these immigrants, generally, landed in our large cities before they were married. First of all, however, it should be remembered that much of the apparent native-foreign contrasts in urban fertility was probably associated with differences in economic status. A further explanation, admittedly speculative, is that segregation into Ghettos possibly retarded the infiltration of native urban ways of life. The native youngsters who drift from rural areas to our cities are not so effectually barred from primary contacts with city-born individuals. Negroes, it is true, are virtually segregated from whites in the cities, but the relevant point is that rural-born Negroes are not segregated from the city-born Negroes.

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that the small numbers available in this investigation preclude more than tentative conclusions. From family survey data secured for native white marriages in Syracuse and Columbus and for Negroes in Harlem, the points of chief significance appear to be as follows:

1. The urban marital fertility among native white individuals who moved from villages and rural areas to cities before marriage was not higher than that observed among city-born individuals of comparable age and social status.
2. The marital fertility within Northern cities was about the same for Negroes who migrated from Southern villages and rural areas as for Negroes of comparable age and social status who were born in the urban North.
3. The data do not support the hypothesis, sometimes stated, that the extremely low birth rates and high proportions of childlessness among urban Negro marriages arise from difficulties of adjustment inherent in the recency of Negro migration. Birth rates were as low, and percentages of childlessness as high, among Negroes born in Northern cities as among those born in Southern villages and rural areas.