

Edited by David Leonhardt

The Upshot
RACE IN AMERICA

Areas With Large Black Populations Have the Smallest Shares of Black Men

APRIL 21, 2015

Justin Wolfers

Why do some places have so many more missing African-American men than others?

In a recent article, we detailed a severe demographic imbalance: There are 1.5 million fewer prime-age black men (25 to 54) living in their communities than black women, census data show. The largest causes of the trend appear to be higher incarceration rates and higher mortality rates for black men than for any other large demographic group. But the extent to which black men are outnumbered by black women varies tremendously across the country.

State by state, the largest disparities are evident in Alabama, New York, Illinois, Mississippi and Georgia: In each state there are fewer than 78 prime-age African-American men living in households for each 100 black women. Add Arkansas, Maryland, South Carolina, North Carolina, Louisiana, New Jersey, Delaware, Pennsylvania and Missouri to the list, and there are 14 states in which there are fewer than 80 prime-age black men living in households for each 100 black women.

These states are drawn from the South, the Midwest and the Mid-Atlantic

region, and are among the most populous states. Most important, these are all places where a large share of the population is African-American.

By contrast, there are 18 states in which the number of prime-age black men living in households actually outnumber black women. These states — Montana, South Dakota, Hawaii, Idaho, Wyoming, North Dakota, Utah, Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, New Mexico, Alaska, Oregon, Washington, Colorado, West Virginia, Iowa and Arizona — are mostly smaller in population, with relatively fewer black residents.

This contrast points to a striking correlation, in which the problem of missing black men is particularly evident in states with substantial black populations.

It may be tempting to focus on the 18 states where prime-age black men outnumber women, and conclude that the phenomenon of missing black men is geographically limited. However, these 18 states are collectively home to less than 3 percent of the black population. In turn, this implies that 97 percent of African-Americans live in states in which prime-age black men are outnumbered by black women. By this metric, the problem seems pervasive.

Nonetheless, the fact that the demographic pattern differs so sharply among states is intriguing. There is no clear reason why it must be the case. You could imagine a situation in which black men were most likely to die young or be sentenced to prison in places where the black population was smallest.

There is even a grim, mechanical reason this might happen: Greater mortality or incarceration among black men directly lowers the share of African-Americans in a state.

Instead, the opposite is true: Places with the largest black populations tend to have the lowest male shares. It's true both among states and among counties within a state.

The roughly "L-shaped" relationship suggests two distinct observations. First, in counties where African-Americans make up less than around 5 or 6 percent of the population, prime-age black men may outnumber their female counterparts, and in some areas, they do so to a striking degree. And second,

in those counties with substantial African-American populations, prime-age black men are systematically outnumbered by black women, again, to a striking degree.

This pattern holds within every major region of the country, and not just in the South, the Mid-Atlantic and the Midwest.

None of this answers the question as to why some areas — like Ferguson, Mo. — have larger numbers of missing black men relative to the nation as a whole. This is a purely descriptive analysis, trying to show where demographic imbalances are most acute. Correlation should not be interpreted as causation, and this applies particularly in this case, given that areas with more missing black men are strikingly different in many dimensions. They not only have larger black populations, but also different criminal justice systems, different social and economic conditions and a very different history of race relations.

In the course of the analysis, we also looked at another potential correlation: Are the places in which the black population is heavily female also places in which the nonblack population is also heavily female? To put it another way, is gender driving these patterns as much as race?

For sure, there are mining-dependent areas in Alaska, Wyoming and North Dakota that attract more men of all races. But these are the exception, and over all, there is little correlation between the gender breakdown of an area's black population and the gender breakdown of its nonblack population.

All of which suggests that race is the driving factor. In the parts of the country with large African-American populations, thousands upon thousands of men are missing, with many of them deceased or in prison.

Justin Wolfers is a senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics and professor of economics and public policy at the University of Michigan. Follow him on Twitter at @justinwolfers

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