

The Great Migration

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Adapted by Fishtank Staff



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- 1 The Great Migration was the relocation of more than 6 million Black Americans from the rural South to the cities of the North, Midwest and West from about 1916 to 1970. Driven from their homes by unsatisfactory economic opportunities and harsh segregationist laws, many Black Americans headed north, where they took advantage of the need for industrial workers that arose during the First World War. During the Great Migration, Black people began to build a new place for themselves in public life, actively confronting racial prejudice as well as economic, political and social challenges to create a Black urban culture that would exert enormous influence in the decades to come.

What Caused the Great Migration?

- 2 After the [Civil War](#) and the [Reconstruction](#) era, racial inequality persisted across the South during the 1870s, and the segregationist policies known as "[Jim Crow](#)" soon became the law of the land.
- 3 Black Southerners were still forced to make their living working the land due to [Black codes](#) and the sharecropping system, which offered little in the way of economic opportunity, especially after crop damage resulting from a regional boll weevil infestation in the 1890s and early 1900s.
- 4 And while the [Ku Klux Klan](#) had been officially dissolved in 1869, the KKK continued underground after that, and intimidation, violence and lynching of Black southerners were not uncommon practices in the Jim Crow South.

Did you know?

Around 1916, when the Great Migration began, a factory wage in the urban North was typically three times more than what Black people could expect to make working the land in the rural South.

The Great Migration Begins

- 5 When [World War I broke out](#) in Europe in 1914, industrialized urban areas in the North, Midwest and West faced a shortage of industrial laborers, as the war put an end to the steady tide of European immigration to the United States.
- 6 With war production kicking into high gear, recruiters enticed Black Americans to come north, to the dismay of white Southerners. Black newspapers—particularly the widely read *Chicago Defender*—published advertisements touting the opportunities available in the cities of the North and West, along with first-person accounts of success.

Life for Migrants in the City

- 7 By the end of 1919, some scholars estimate that 1 million Black people had left the South, usually traveling by train, boat or bus; a smaller number had automobiles or even horse-drawn carts.
- 8 In the decade between 1910 and 1920, the Black population of major Northern cities grew by large percentages, including [New York City](#) (66 percent), [Chicago](#) (148 percent), [Philadelphia](#) (500 percent) and Detroit (611 percent).
- 9 Many new arrivals found jobs in factories, slaughterhouses and foundries, where working conditions were arduous and sometimes dangerous. Female migrants had a harder time finding work, spurring heated competition for domestic labor positions.
- 10 Aside from competition for employment, there was also competition for living space in increasingly crowded cities. While segregation was not legalized in the North (as it was in the South), racism and prejudice were nonetheless widespread.
- 11 After the U.S. [Supreme Court](#) declared racially based housing ordinances unconstitutional in 1917, some residential neighborhoods enacted covenants requiring white property owners to agree not to sell to Black people; these would remain legal until the Court struck them down in 1948.
- 12 Rising rents in segregated areas, plus a resurgence of KKK activity after 1915, worsened Black and white relations across the country. The summer of 1919 began the greatest period of interracial strife in U.S. history at that time, including a disturbing wave of race riots.

- 13 The most serious was the [Chicago Race Riot of 1919](#)—it lasted 13 days and left 38 people dead, 537 injured and 1,000 Black families without homes.

Impact of the Great Migration

- 14 As a result of housing tensions, many Black residents ended up creating their own cities within big cities, fostering the growth of a new, urban, Black culture. The most prominent example was Harlem in New York City, a formerly all-white neighborhood that by the 1920s housed some 200,000 Black people.
- 15 The Black experience during the Great Migration became an important theme in the artistic movement known first as the New Negro Movement and later as the [Harlem Renaissance](#), which would have an enormous impact on the culture of the era.
- 16 The Great Migration also began a new era of increasing political activism among Black Americans, who after being disenfranchised in the South found a new place for themselves in public life in the cities of the North and West. The [civil rights movement](#) directly benefited from this activism.
- 17 Black migration slowed considerably in the 1930s, when the country sank into the [Great Depression](#), but picked up again with the coming of [World War II](#) and the need for wartime production. But returning Black soldiers found that the [GI Bill](#) didn't always promise the same postwar benefits for all.
- 18 By the 1970s, when the Great Migration ended, its demographic impact was unmistakable: Whereas in 1900, nine out of every 10 Black Americans lived in the South, and three out of every four lived on farms, by 1970 the South was home to only half of the country's Black population, with only 20 percent living in the region's rural areas. The Great Migration was famously captured in Isabel Wilkerson's *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*.