

Abstract

Internal migration refers to the movement of people within a country; internal migration patterns vary by differing demographic groups, socioeconomic factors, and temporal factors. Internal migration is an important mechanism for individuals to improve their socio-economic status and find new employment opportunities. Those most likely to internally migrate are the unemployed, college-educated, and those of working age.

Prior research has found that interstate migration has been declining since the late 20th century, consistently reaching historic lows. This paper examines the prevalence of interstate migration for the years 2000-2025, with an emphasis on the COVID-19 pandemic years. Using data from the Current Population Survey (CPS) and its Annual Socio-Economic Supplement (ASEC), this paper finds a widespread decline in interstate migration across all socio-economic demographic groups consistent with prior literature. Additionally, interstate migration did not decrease discernibly more during the COVID-19 pandemic than prior to it. The adjusted odds of interstate migration were lower for Hispanic at 0.70 (95% CI: 0.68 to 0.73) and 0.93 (95% CI: 0.90 to 0.97) for Non-Hispanic Black compared to Non-Hispanic White. Compared to individuals with a high school diploma or equivalent (adjusted for sociodemographic characteristics), the adjusted odds were higher for those with at least some college at 1.35 (95% CI: 1.32 to 1.38) and lower for those with less than a high school education at 0.83 (95% CI: 0.79 to 0.86). Compared to those born in the United States, the adjusted odds of interstate migration were lower for naturalized citizens at 0.85 (95% CI: 0.81 to 0.90) and higher for Non-citizens at 1.30 (95% CI: 1.25 to 1.36), adjusted for sociodemographic characteristics.

Overall, these findings suggest that long-term structural factors, rather than short-term disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic, continue to drive patterns of interstate migration in the United States.

Introduction

- Internal migration lets individuals improve socioeconomic status and access employment; the U.S. historically had high internal migration, from the Great Migrations to postwar Sunbelt migration [1][2].
- Since the late 20th century, interstate migration has declined. The inter-county rate fell from 6.4% in 1984 to 3.5% in 2010 [3]. The unemployed, college-educated, and working-age adults (18–44) migrate most [1][6].
- Gap: COVID-19's effect on interstate migration is unknown, despite the pandemic's major economic disruption — unemployment rose from under 4% to over 14%, with GDP losses of \$3.2–4.8 trillion [4].
- Two hypotheses: (1) pandemic-driven economic hardship is associated with declining interstate migration; (2) non-White groups are more likely to migrate than Non-Hispanic White individuals, reflecting socioeconomic inequality.

Methods

- Data: ASEC of the CPS, 2000–2025, administered by the U.S. Census Bureau (~60,000 households, nationally representative, all 50 states + D.C.). Excludes those under 15, active armed forces, and institutionalized residents [5].
- Outcome: interstate migration — classified as a migrant if the respondent lived in a different U.S. state the prior year.
- Covariates: age, sex, race/ethnicity, educational attainment, marital status, employment status, citizenship status.
- Analysis: (1) distribution of each characteristic; (2) weighted prevalence of interstate migration over time and by group; (3) weighted logistic regression predicting interstate migration. Analyzed in R 4.5.3, $\alpha = 0.05$.

Results

- Sample: N = 3,503,633 respondents (2000–2025).
- Overall interstate migration fell from 3.1% (2000) to a low of ~1.3% (2020); it rose slightly to 1.5% in 2022–2023 during the pandemic, then continued its long-term decline (Figure 1).
- Decline was broad across every subgroup (sex, education, marital status, race/ethnicity, employment, age, citizenship).
- Adjusted odds (vs. reference group): 2025 vs. 2000 = 0.46; 18–29 yr = 2.21, 65+ = 0.38 (vs. 30–54); Hispanic = 0.70, Non-Hispanic Black = 0.93 (vs. NH White); some college = 1.35, less than HS = 0.83 (vs. HS); divorced = 1.35 (vs. married); unemployed = 1.83 (vs. employed); naturalized = 0.85, non-citizen = 1.30 (vs. U.S.-born) (Table 2).

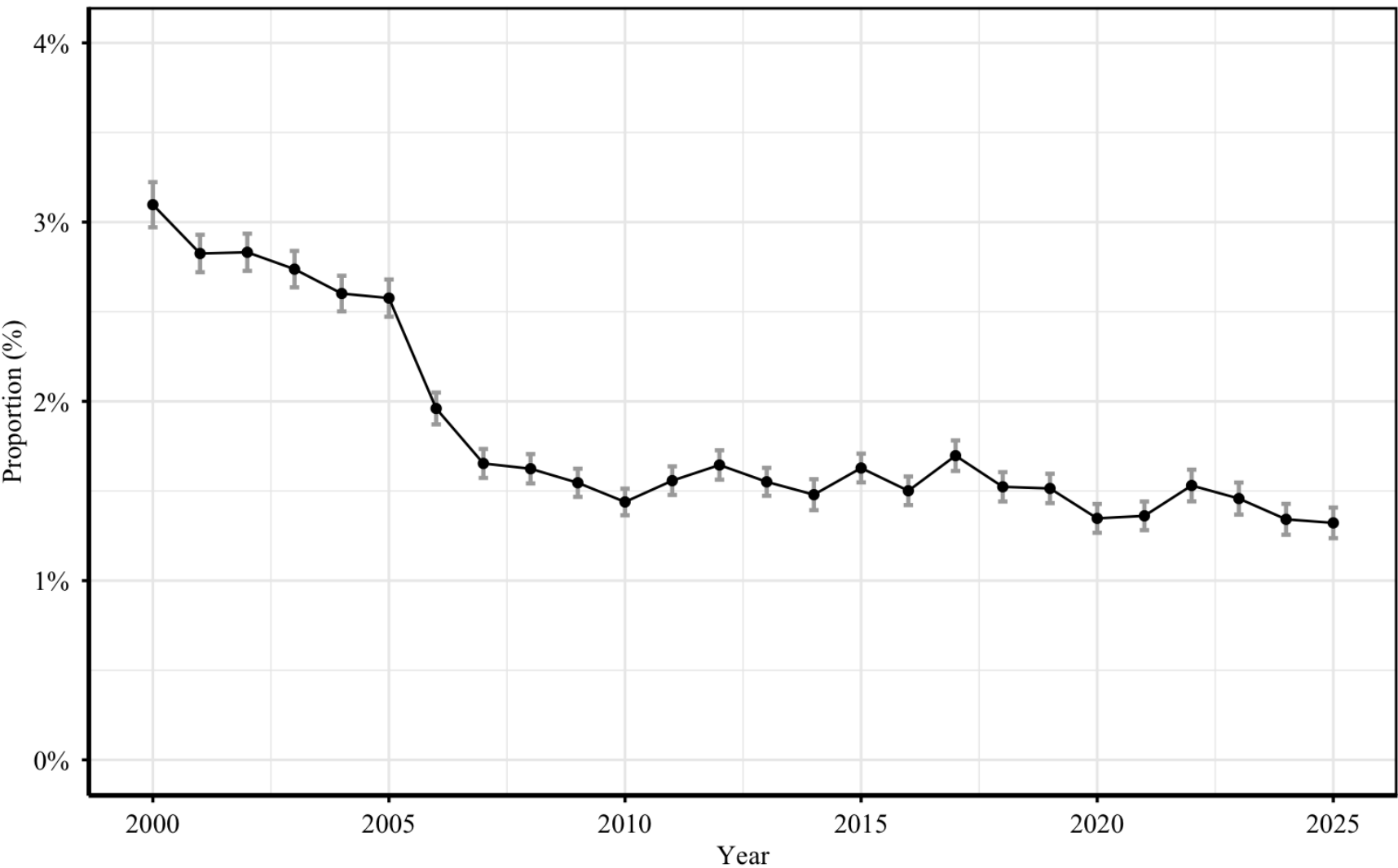


Table 2 (Modified) Regression Results			
Characteristic	OR	95% CI	p-value
Year			
2000	—	—	
2019	0.51	0.47, 0.55	<0.001
2020	0.44	0.41, 0.48	<0.001
2021	0.45	0.42, 0.49	<0.001
2022	0.53	0.49, 0.57	<0.001
2023	0.50	0.46, 0.54	<0.001
2024	0.46	0.42, 0.50	<0.001
2025	0.46	0.42, 0.49	<0.001
Age (years)			
30–54	—	—	
18–29	2.21	2.14, 2.28	<0.001
Race/Ethnicity			
Non-Hispanic White	—	—	
Hispanic	0.70	0.68, 0.73	<0.001
Non-Hispanic Black	0.93	0.90, 0.97	<0.001
Educational Attainment			
High school diploma or equivalent	—	—	
Less than high school graduate	0.83	0.79, 0.86	<0.001
At least some college	1.35	1.32, 1.38	<0.001
Citizenship Status			
Born in United States	—	—	
Naturalized citizen	0.85	0.81, 0.90	<0.001
Not a citizen	1.30	1.25, 1.36	<0.001
Abbreviations: CI = Confidence Interval, OR = Odds Ratio			

Discussion

- Three findings: (1) interstate migration declined substantially 2000–2025 across all groups; (2) odds stayed consistently lower through 2025; (3) racial/ethnic patterns persisted even as all rates fell.
- Results align with prior literature showing a long-term, broad-based decline not explained by demographic composition or cyclical shocks [1] [6]. Movers are disproportionately college-educated, unemployed, and working-age — consistent with migration as a path to socioeconomic improvement [1][2][6].
- Post-2020 uptick in migration likely reflects the economic recovery, vaccine rollout, and deferred moves. A more modest, transient deviation, not an upheaval of prior trends[7].
- Addresses hypotheses: H1 is not supported (no distinct pandemic-driven decline); the race findings partially support H2, but Hispanic individuals actually moved less.
- Limitations: interstate-only (misses intrastate moves); CPS excludes dorms/barracks (young, mobile groups); self-report recall bias [5][9].

Conclusion

- Interstate migration continues to decline, with implications for economic opportunity, labor reallocation, regional income convergence, and social mobility [8].
- Long-term structural forces, not short-term disruptions like COVID-19, drive interstate migration in the U.S.
- Future research should examine structural drivers: housing affordability, remote work, labor market change, and regional economic disparities.

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