

THE DECLINING SIGNIFICANCE OF RACE AMONG AMERICAN MEN DURING THE LATTER HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY*

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The extent to which racial minority groups face discrimination in the labor market is the subject of considerable debate. Using William J. Wilson's thesis of the declining significance of race as our theoretical context, we provide further empirical evidence about labor market discrimination by investigating wages among African American, American Indian, Chinese American, Hispanic white, Japanese American, and non-Hispanic white men. We find, during the period before the civil rights movement, that a substantively significant wage disadvantage is evident for these minority groups with controls for observed labor force characteristics. In recent data, these net disadvantages are reduced substantially for each of these groups except Hispanics. With the exception of Hispanics, the results support Wilson's thesis.

In *The Declining Significance of Race*, Wilson (1980) argues that the net disadvantage associated with being African American in the labor market has been declining since the civil rights movement of the 1960s. In this paper we extend Wilson's hypothesis to other minority groups. We investigate racial inequality not only between non-Hispanic white and African American men, but also between non-Hispanic white men and American Indian, Chinese American, Hispanic white, and Japanese American men. Following Wilson's historical perspective, we estimate the net racial effects on wages for these minorities, using data that are representative of the periods before and after the civil rights movement.

SOME PRIOR RESEARCH AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The Declining Significance of Race

Wilson (1980) presents a historical analysis of black-white race relations. He refers to the industrial stage as the period from the latter part of the nineteenth century to about the time of World War II. During that stage, African Americans faced direct racial oppression. Applying Bonacich's (1972) split labor-market theory to this period, Wilson argues that

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the interests of the higher-paid white working class were promoted primarily by racial discrimination and racist ideology.

The modern industrial period refers to the post-World War II era, but "really begins to crystallize during the 1960's and 1970's" (Wilson 1980:3) with the passage of civil rights legislation. Wilson describes this period as the "progressive transition from racial inequalities to class inequalities" (1980:3). That is, it is characterized by "a shift which has increased the importance of economic class position, thereby decreasing the importance of race in determining the extent to which individual blacks have access to or are able to develop resources deemed important for life chances and survival" (p. 88). Wilson does not investigate other minority groups, but his hypothesis is applicable to those groups. The racist ideology promoted by the dominant white working class during the industrial period asserts the general superiority of European-origin whites. Minority groups who were racially and/or ethnically distinguishable from whites of European origin were therefore subject to derogation and discrimination. Such discrimination reinforced the racist ideology of white superiority; in addition, the economic opportunities denied to minority groups then became more widely available to whites. In short, the split labor-market theory that Wilson uses to explain black-white race relations during the industrial period may also be applied to whites' relations with other minority groups during that time. McLemore and Romo (1998) provide a general overview of the histories of discrimination against these groups during the industrial stage of race relations.¹

The modern industrial period—that is, the "progressive transition from racial inequalities to class inequalities"—also applies to other minority groups because the civil rights legislation of the 1960s was phrased in terms of the protection of the labor market opportunities of racial minorities in general, not only those of African Americans. Furthermore, with the demise of the racist ideology of white superiority, whites of European origin should become more accepting toward the broad array of racial and ethnic groups (and accordingly, a resurgence of ethnic pride and identity in a variety of mi-

1. It is commonly forgotten that Wilson (1980) borrowed the split labor-market theory from Bonacich (1972), whose discussion considered Japanese and Chinese Americans more than African Americans. Other references that provide relevant information on discriminatory practices against minority groups in the period before the civil rights movement include Bonacich and Modell (1980), Healey (1998), Ichihashi (1932:356–63), Kitano (1976:31, 91), Lyman (1974), Okihiro (1994), Sakamoto, Liu, and Tzeng (1998), Thomas (1952:41–42), and Zhou (1992).

nority groups has occurred); such a change would foster more meritocratic labor market practices. Finally, Wilson (1980), in his discussion of the importance of education in obtaining employment in the corporate sector or in better-paying occupations, suggests that these jobs also would become accessible to individuals of other minority groups, provided that they had the requisite education. Wilson's hypothesis of the declining significance of race is thus applicable to minority groups other than African Americans.

Some Previous Research on African American Men

Some previous empirical studies support the hypothesis that the net disadvantage associated with being an African American man (relative to being a white man) has been reduced in recent decades in the labor market. Most of these studies calculate the net disadvantage as the effect of being African American on some socioeconomic outcome after controlling for relevant independent variables that reflect human capital or productivity-related characteristics, such as education, region, and years of work experience. Because of space limitations, however, we focus here on males' socioeconomic attainment. Females' socioeconomic attainment may be somewhat more complex because of important interactions with family structure, fertility, marriage patterns, and labor force participation rates; all of these have been changing dramatically throughout this period.

Farley (1984) investigates the Public Use Microdata Samples (PUMS) from the U.S. censuses from 1960 to 1980. He finds that the net effect of being African American on earnings declined from about 35% in 1960 to about 25% in 1980 (p. 74); in terms of hourly wages, the corresponding figures are 19% for 1960 and 12% for 1980 (p. 75). Smith and Welch (1989) analyze weekly earnings using a slightly wider range of the PUMS data sets, namely those from 1940 to 1980. Their results indicate a net disadvantage ranging from about 50% to 55% in 1940 to about 20% to 30% in 1980 (Smith and Welch 1989:533). Thus both of these studies find that the net disadvantage of being African American declined in recent decades, although a substantially significant disadvantage is still evident in the 1980 data. Furthermore, the net disadvantage is usually somewhat greater in terms of annual earnings than in terms of hourly wages because blacks tend to work fewer hours per year than do whites (Farley 1984:196).

Cancio, Evans, and Maume (1996) investigate wages for young men and women in the 1976 and 1985 Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID). These researchers find that the net disadvantage of being African American did not decline between the two periods covered in their data. In fact, their estimates indicate that the net disadvantage of being an African American man actually increased slightly, by about 4 percentage points. Although this latter result is not statistically significant in their analysis, other studies based on larger data sets also have found a slight increase, from the 1970s to the 1980s, in the net racial disadvantage for black men (Bound and Freeman 1992; Juhn, Murphy, and Pierce 1991).

In a reply to Cancio et al. (1996), Farkas and Vicknair (1996) investigate wages for a young cohort of men from the 1991 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY). In their model, these authors find a net disadvantage of 19% for being African American; the model includes a conventional set of control variables such as education, age or years of work experience, and region. The NLSY, however, contains an additional control variable that was not considered in any of the studies mentioned above: an indicator of cognitive skills. When Farkas and Vicknair (1996) add cognitive skill into the model, the net disadvantage apparently is eliminated. In their words, "With cognitive skill included in the model...the finding of race discrimination against Black men is gone!" (p. 557).

The results reported by Farkas and Vicknair, however, pertain to young men who work full-time. Many young men (and especially young black men) do not work full-time, and different cohorts may experience somewhat different patterns of socioeconomic attainment; therefore we believe that more evidence is needed before strong generalizations can be made about the effects of cognitive skills on processes that generate racial inequalities in the labor market. Rodgers and Spriggs (1996) reinforce our concern for the judicious analysis of the influences of cognitive skills: Their results suggest that the verbal component of a commonly used measure of cognitive skills (the AFQT) may have substantially different effects than its mathematical component and that, furthermore, these effects may vary by race. On the basis of those findings, Rodgers and Spriggs argue that the AFQT composite score contains "racial bias"; after this bias is purged from the measure, they say, it explains much less of the black-white wage gap.² Although we do not necessarily subscribe to this view, we believe that more research is needed on the effects of cognitive skills on socioeconomic attainment because this complex topic has not received much systematic analysis in the past.³

Some Previous Research on Other Minority Groups

Though less numerous, other studies have investigated the labor market disadvantage observed among male workers in other minority groups. With controls for education, experience, region, and urban status, the PUMS data indicate that Japanese Americans' net disadvantage has declined substantially since 1960. In fact, since about the 1980s, the earnings and occupational attainment of Japanese American men have reached parity with those of white men or have surpassed

2. Also see Maume, Cancio, and Evans (1996) for a related argument regarding bias in the AFQT.

3. One also must be attentive to the various methodological issues that are involved in attempts to reach general conclusions. In their footnote 1, for example, Farkas and Vicknair (1996:557) state that only 79.5% of the black-white wage differential is explained by the "nondiscriminatory variables" when the regression coefficients for whites are used as the standard rates in the regression decomposition. The figure of 79.5% implies a net racial disadvantage of 20.5%, which is obviously very different from the conclusion that the net racial disadvantage essentially disappears when cognitive skills are controlled.

them slightly (Barringer, Gardner, and Levin 1993; Hirschman and Wong 1984; Iceland 1999; Sakamoto and Furuichi 1997; Sakamoto et al. 1998). A similar conclusion seems to apply to native-born Chinese American men (Chiswick 1983; Iceland 1999; Ko and Clogg 1989; Sakamoto et al. 1998).

Sandefur and Scott (1983) use the 1976 Survey of Income and Education (SIE) to compare the wages of white, African American, and American Indian men. Their models include education, work experience, region, and health status as well as occupation and industrial sector. Sandefur and Scott state that “blacks experience more discrimination than Indians” (p. 66) because the net disadvantage of being African American is considerably larger in absolute value than that of being American Indian. In fact, the net effect of being American Indian is not statistically significant in their models (Sandefur and Scott 1983:57). These authors conclude that “blacks must overcome both the consequences of past discrimination as well as the consequences of present discrimination in order to succeed in U.S. society, whereas American Indians must ‘only’ be concerned with overcoming low educational levels and poor health status due to past discrimination” (p. 66). In other words, Sandefur and Scott argue that the class characteristics of American Indians explain why their wages are lower on average than wages for whites.

Regarding earnings among Hispanic white men, Reimers (1985) uses the 1976 SIE and disaggregates by national origins. She finds a net disadvantage of 18% for Puerto Ricans, 6% for Mexicans, 36% for Central and South Americans, and 12% for “other” Hispanics (p. 55). Much of her discussion, however, involves disentangling effects by nativity status (foreign-born versus native-born). For example, Reimers states that “U.S.-born Mexican men have as high a return to education as U.S.-born Anglos, while the Mexican-born have a much lower return, as do the other minority groups” (p. 56). She also notes that “[l]ow levels of education are apparently a much more serious problem than discrimination for Mexicans” (p. 55).

Theoretical and Methodological Issues Raised by Prior Studies

In regard to the interpretation of the net effects or disadvantages of race as discrimination, we agree with the basic explanation offered by Jones and Kelley (1984:324), that “discrimination is said to exist when the market values the same bundle of productivity related characteristics differently for one group (say, women) than for another (say, men)...Discrimination is measured as a residual left after controlling for differences in endowments.” Insofar as the productivity-related controls are sufficiently complete and accurate to eliminate all systematic residual difference between the groups in their capacities for labor market productivity (and under the assumption that the minority group has, on average, equivalent preferences for the reward under study), the finding of a net effect of minority status can be interpreted as evidence of racial discrimination. The limitations inherent in data collection prevent the analyst from ever controlling completely for all possible productivity-related variables. Such studies of

racial effects are informative, however, because they increase our certainty about the possible range and severity of labor market discrimination, as well as our understanding of trends across time regarding this important phenomenon.

One noteworthy methodological issue is that some previous studies probably “overcontrolled” (Barringer et al. 1993; Hirschman and Wong 1984; Sandefur and Scott 1983). Indicators of job attainment (e.g., occupational status score and whether employed in the primary industrial sector) should not be included in the earnings function because this strand of research is not intended primarily to clarify the organizational processes that influence wage inequality. When structural variables such as occupational or industrial sector are included in the earnings functions, the results no longer indicate the total effect of minority status. To obtain the total effect, one then would be required to add in the indirect effect of minority status on obtaining a job in the primary industrial sector because minorities may face not only direct wage discrimination (a lower wage in a certain type of job) but also indirect employment discrimination, through exclusion from higher-paying occupations and industries. In view of the research objective of investigating the extent to which a minority group may face labor market discrimination (both direct and indirect), the earnings function should include only the human capital investments, credentials, productive abilities, and other endowments that workers bring to the labor market for remuneration (as well as regional variables that indicate area differences in price levels and wages).

For example, Sandefur and Scott’s (1983:57) regression results indicate that the net effect of being American Indian is small and not statistically significant after controlling for individual characteristics as well as occupational attainment and industrial sector. For a given set of human capital characteristics, however, American Indians may be less likely to obtain employment in higher-status occupations or in the primary industrial sector. This type of employment discrimination cannot be ascertained in a model that already controls for occupation and industry as exogenous variables. In Wilson’s (1980) analysis, the second stage of black-white relations is characterized by racial discrimination and racist ideology that are used to maintain a split labor market; therefore a regression that controls for industry and occupation would clearly be inappropriate for testing the hypothesis of the declining significance of race.

On the other hand, we argue that the earnings functions used by Hirschman and Wong (1984) and by Barringer et al. (1993) implicitly have “undercontrolled” at the same time. This shortcoming exists because the target population that is compared with whites is too broad: It does not permit realistic consideration of the assumption that there are “no systematic between-group residual differences” in capacities for labor market productivity or in preferences for the reward under study (even after controlling for measured productivity-related variables). More homogeneous, more narrowly defined target populations of minorities need to be compared with the corresponding white groups so that the “all else being equal” assumption becomes more realistic.

This problem of “undercontrolling” arises especially when immigrants of a given ethnic background are assumed to be readily comparable to their native-born counterparts. Immigrants, however, typically do not speak and write English as well as the native-born, and the education they received outside the United States is not necessarily comparable to education obtained here, nor valued as highly. (This is true at least in regard to socioeconomic attainment in the American labor market.) In general, determination of earnings among immigrants is complex and is not well understood, although it probably differs in significant ways from determination of earnings among the native-born (e.g., Duleep and Regets 1997; Reimers 1985). Because of the selectivity of immigrants as well as the potentially large number of interactions that characterize earnings determination for immigrants, it is inadequate merely to add a dichotomous variable into the regression to indicate native birth or otherwise.⁴

DATA AND METHODS

Data

We use the 1950 and 1990 PUMS data. These data sets provide a large, nationally representative sample of all sectors of the labor force.⁵ We restrict the analysis to native-born, noninstitutionalized men age 25 to 64 who were not enrolled in school and who worked at least one week during the year preceding that particular census.⁶ The 1950 PUMS provides systematic empirical evidence about the net racial disadvantage before the civil rights movement; these data reflect a period fairly close to the industrial stage of race relations. The 1990 PUMS provides systematic empirical evidence about the net racial disadvantage well after the civil rights movement; therefore those data clearly indicate labor market conditions during the modern industrial stage of race relations.

Regression Models of Wages

The dependent variable for the regression using the 1950 PUMS is the log of weekly wage, which refers to the log of the individual's total 1949 earnings divided by his total weeks worked in 1949. The independent variables are (1) years of

schooling completed; (2) a dummy variable indicating whether the individual attended college; (3) years of age; (4) the square of years of age; (5) whether he lives in a metropolitan area; (6) four dummy variables indicating geographic regions (with the north central region as the omitted category); (7) two dummy variables indicating military service during World War I and World War II; and (8) five dummy variables indicating racial minority groups (with non-Hispanic white as the omitted category).⁷ The five minority groups are African Americans, American Indians, Chinese Americans, Hispanic whites, and Japanese Americans. These minority groups are all that are identified in the 1950 PUMS and that also include sufficient numbers of native-born men.

In regard to the definition of Hispanic whites, the 1950 census does not include any questions about whether one self-identifies as Hispanic. The 1950 PUMS does, however, include the “1950 Spanish surname code” and the “1980 Spanish surname code” identifiers. We tried to be as inclusive as possible by defining a Hispanic white as any white man in our sample who had a Spanish surname, as defined by either the 1950 or the 1980 identifiers.⁸ We also classified as Hispanic those with a parent born in a South or Central American country or in a Spanish-speaking Caribbean country.

The 1990 PUMS includes information on the usual number of hours worked per week in the year before the survey. We used that information in constructing the dependent variable in the regression model for the 1990 PUMS. In particular, the dependent variable is the log of the hourly wage: This is the log of total 1989 earnings divided by the number of weeks worked in 1989 multiplied by the usual hours worked per week. The independent variables include (1) five dummy variables indicating the highest level of schooling completed (less than a high school diploma is the omitted category); (2) years of work experience (not including years of military service); (3) the square of years of work experience; (4) years of military service; (5) whether the individual lives in a metropolitan area; (6) four dummy variables indicating geographic regions (with the north central region as the omitted category) following the same classification as we used in our regression for the 1950 PUMS; and (7) five dummy variables indicating the same racial minority groups as we identified in our regression for the 1950 PUMS.⁹

4. We hypothesize that the inadequacy of this approach causes Hirschman and Wong (1984) to conclude that the net disadvantages for Chinese Americans have not declined in recent decades. Their conclusion, however, contradicts the implications of other findings for native-born Chinese American men (Chiswick 1983; Ko and Clogg 1989; Sakamoto et al. 1998).

5. The 1940 PUMS includes data on wages and salaries for paid employees, but its information on income from self-employment is largely incomplete. Qualitative and historical literature indicates that self-employment among minorities is often increased by discrimination in the labor market for paid employees (Bonacich and Modell 1980; Butler 1991; Kitano 1976; Zhou 1992); therefore using the 1940 PUMS wage and salary income would probably underestimate the total net disadvantage faced by minorities in the labor force.

6. In connection with analyses using the 1950 PUMS, we use the term *native-born* to refer to persons born in any of the 48 continental states. For the regressions using the 1990 PUMS, however, *native-born* refers to persons born in any of the 50 states. In short, we do not include as native-born those persons who were born in regions defined as “outlying areas” when the data were collected.

7. Although many studies transform age into years of potential labor force experience—by subtracting out a constant and years of schooling—we did not do so for these data because military service interrupted the labor force careers of many members of our sample. Military service is indicated by dummy variables in our model, but we do not know the exact number of years of service. Because this information is given in the 1990 PUMS, however, we transformed age into years of potential labor force experience (not including years of military service) for the analysis of that PUMS.

8. Persons born in Puerto Rico are not included in our sample.

9. To identify Hispanic whites in the 1990 PUMS, we used that sample's “Hispanic origin codes,” which are based on self-identification. Our coding of schooling for the 1990 PUMS takes into account more nonlinearities at the higher levels than does our coding for schooling in the 1950 PUMS because the 1950 data do not distinguish between the different levels of educational attainment beyond a bachelor's degree and because postgraduate education was much less common at that time.

Wilson's hypothesis of the declining significance of race can be tested for each racial minority group. He hypothesizes that, for each j th group, the net racial effect is less negative in 1990 than in 1950. This may be set up as a one-tailed hypothesis test where $H_a: \beta_j^{50} - \beta_j^{90} < 0$, which is contrasted with $H_o: \beta_j^{50} - \beta_j^{90} \geq 0$. This test may be stated equivalently as $H_o: \beta_j^{50} \geq \beta_j^{90}$ versus $H_a: \beta_j^{50} < \beta_j^{90}$.

Adjusted Mean Log-Wage

To provide additional empirical evidence regarding the hypothesis of the declining significance of race, we also use regression standardization to compute the net racial disadvantage for each minority group in each of the two time periods. For a given PUMS data set, we first compute the j th group's adjusted mean log-wage, which is obtained by multiplying the vector of regression coefficients for non-Hispanic whites by the vector of means on the corresponding independent variables for the j th minority group:

$$\bar{y}^{j*} = a^w + \sum_{k=1}^K b_k^w \bar{X}_k^j, \quad (1)$$

where \bar{X}_k^j refers to the observed mean on the k th class characteristic for the j th minority group, b_k^w refers to the regres-

sion coefficient for the k th class characteristic for non-Hispanic whites, a^w refers to the intercept for non-Hispanic whites, and \bar{y}^{j*} refers to the adjusted mean log-wage for the j th minority group. The net racial disadvantage (i.e., the "rates" or "discrimination" component) for the j th group is equal to that group's observed mean log-wage minus its adjusted mean log-wage (i.e., $\bar{y}^j - \bar{y}^{j*}$ where \bar{y}^j refers to the observed mean log-wage for the j th minority group). Because OLS estimation always results in a fitted regression surface that passes through the means on all the variables, the net racial disadvantage is equal to

$$\bar{y}^j - \bar{y}^{j*} = (a^j - a^w) + \left(\sum_{k=1}^K b_k^j \bar{X}_k^j - \sum_{k=1}^K b_k^w \bar{X}_k^j \right). \quad (2)$$

We calculate this net racial disadvantage or "discrimination" component (i.e., Eq. (2)) in each of the two time periods so that it can be compared (for each j th group) with the net racial effects obtained from the pooled regression models described earlier. The purpose of these comparisons is to assess the degree to which our conclusions about the size of the net racial effects are sensitive to the inclusion of interaction terms. We do not include interaction terms in the pooled regression model, but the entire set of those terms is implic-

TABLE 1. SAMPLE MEANS FOR WORKING-AGE MEN, BY RACE

Variable	Non-Hispanic White	Black	Hispanic White	American Indian	Japanese American	Chinese American
1950 PUMS	(<i>n</i> = 76,866)	(<i>n</i> = 7,801)	(<i>n</i> = 1,008)	(<i>n</i> = 130)	(<i>n</i> = 61)	(<i>n</i> = 13)
Weekly wage	71.64	41.44	59.52	38.40	53.99	53.40
Log of weekly wage	4.01	3.43	3.79	3.32	3.73	3.58
Years of age	41.31	41.12	37.15	41.80	31.85	36.31
Years of schooling	9.96	6.37	7.23	6.40	11.70	9.77
Residence in northeastern region	0.26	0.14	0.07	0.05	0.07	0.00
Residence in southern region	0.27	0.64	0.39	0.22	0.02	0.00
Residence in Mountain region	0.03	0.01	0.21	0.42	0.10	0.08
Residence in Pacific region	0.10	0.04	0.27	0.10	0.72	0.77
Residence in a metropolitan area	0.57	0.58	0.57	0.11	0.80	0.92
1990 PUMS	(<i>n</i> = 13,913)	(<i>n</i> = 36,125)	(<i>n</i> = 2,924)	(<i>n</i> = 3,423)	(<i>n</i> = 1,253)	(<i>n</i> = 589)
Hourly wage	16.56	12.38	14.45	11.85	19.64	21.70
Log of hourly wage	2.51	2.23	2.41	2.18	2.68	2.82
Years of work experience	20.62	20.23	18.23	19.48	20.47	16.90
Years of schooling	13.32	12.10	12.90	12.10	14.44	15.37
High school graduate	0.32	0.33	0.30	0.34	0.20	0.13
Some college	0.26	0.26	0.31	0.28	0.33	0.26
Bachelor's degree	0.17	0.08	0.13	0.07	0.30	0.33
Master's degree	0.06	0.03	0.05	0.03	0.07	0.13
PhD or professional degree	0.04	0.01	0.03	0.01	0.06	0.12
Residence in northeastern region	0.22	0.13	0.24	0.06	0.02	0.16
Residence in southern region	0.32	0.59	0.25	0.32	0.03	0.09
Residence in Mountain region	0.06	0.02	0.20	0.21	0.03	0.03
Residence in Pacific region	0.13	0.09	0.23	0.23	0.89	0.67
Residence in a metropolitan area	0.71	0.80	0.81	0.51	0.88	0.95

TABLE 2. OLS ESTIMATES OF THE REGRESSION OF LOG-WAGES

Variable	Coefficient
1950 PUMS	
Intercept	2.1241
Years of age	0.0592
Years of age, squared	-0.0006
Served in World War I	0.0586
Served in World War II	0.0612
Years of schooling	0.0480
Attended college	0.0400
Residence in northeastern region	-0.0284
Residence in southern region	-0.1824
Residence in Mountain region	0.0425
Residence in Pacific region	0.0454
Residence in a metropolitan area	0.3014
Hispanic white	-0.0734
African American	-0.3415
American Indian	-0.4035
Japanese American	-0.4598
Chinese American	-0.5751
R^2	0.1690
1990 PUMS	
Intercept	1.5607
Years of work experience	0.0358
Years of work experience, squared	-0.0005
Years of military service	0.0119
High school graduate	0.1932
Some college	0.3389
Bachelor's degree	0.6330
Master's degree	0.7603
PhD or professional degree	1.0606
Residence in northeastern region	0.1117
Residence in southern region	-0.0835
Residence in Mountain region	-0.0843
Residence in Pacific region	0.0877
Residence in a metropolitan area	0.1719
Hispanic white	-0.0429
African American	-0.1419
American Indian	-0.1583
Japanese American ^a	-0.0211
Chinese American	0.0731
R^2	0.1892

^aCoefficient is less than twice its standard error.

itly involved in the calculation of the “discrimination” component, in which the effects of the k class variables are allowed to vary for each j th group.

RESULTS

Results From the 1950 PUMS

Table 1 shows the sample means on the variables by racial group in each of the PUMS data sets. The 1950 PUMS data contain 76,866 non-Hispanic whites, 7,801 African Americans, 1,008 Hispanic whites, 130 American Indians, 61 Japanese Americans, and 13 Chinese Americans.¹⁰ The mean weekly wage (in 1949 dollars) is \$71.64 for non-Hispanic whites, \$59.52 for Hispanic whites, \$53.99 for Japanese Americans, \$53.40 for Chinese Americans, \$41.44 for African Americans, and \$38.40 for American Indians.¹¹ In regard to mean years of schooling completed in 1950, Japanese Americans have completed the most years (11.70 years), followed by non-Hispanic whites (9.96 years), Chinese Americans (9.77 years), Hispanic whites (7.23 years), American Indians (6.40 years), and African Americans (6.37 years).

Most Chinese and Japanese Americans live in the Pacific region, whereas African Americans are concentrated most heavily in the southern region. American Indians are much more likely than non-Hispanic whites to live in the Mountain region. Sizable proportions of the Hispanic white population are located in the southern, Mountain, and Pacific regions. All of these groups are over 50% metropolitan except American Indians; this group is distinctive in that only 11% lived in a metropolitan area in 1950.

The top panel of Table 2 shows the results from the OLS estimation of the regression of the log of weekly wage for the pooled sample. As expected, schooling has a positive effect, with a positive nonlinearity, associated with attending college. Age, a proxy for labor force experience, has a positive effect that declines with the usual quadratic specification. During this period, the coefficient for living in the southern region is highly negative (-.18), whereas the coefficient for living in a metropolitan area is highly positive (.30).

The results for 1950 displayed in Table 2 indicate that the net effects of belonging to a racial minority are all negative; the t -ratios are statistically significant at the .05 level. The coefficient for Hispanic whites is -.0734, which implies a net effect of -7.1%. For African Americans, the coefficient is -.3415, implying a net effect of -28.9%. For American Indians, the coefficient is -.4035, which implies a net effect of -33.2%. For Japanese Americans, the coefficient is -.4598, implying a net effect of -36.9%. For Chinese Americans, the coefficient is -.5751, implying a net effect of -43.7%. Thus, in terms of 1950 weekly wages, these minority groups expe-

10. One of the limitations of the 1950 PUMS is that earnings and education data are available only for a subsample known as the “sample line” persons. This subsampling reduces the number of observations that are available for the study of socioeconomic inequality among the smaller minority groups.

11. Because the distribution of log-wage is concave, the antilog of the mean log-wage will necessarily be less than the arithmetic mean of the dollar wage (for a discussion of Jensen’s inequality, see Goldberger 1991:32).

TABLE 3. RESULTS FOR REGRESSION STANDARDIZATION, BY RACE

	Observed Mean Log-Wage	Expected Mean Log-Wage	Diff.	Exp(Diff.) – 1 (Percentages)
1950 PUMS				
African American	3.4279	3.7705	-0.3426	-29.01
White Hispanic	3.7868	3.8554	-0.0686	-6.63
American Indian	3.3206	3.7259	-0.4053	-33.32
Japanese American	3.7285	4.1764	-0.4479	-36.10
Chinese American	3.5830	4.1424	-0.5594	-42.84
1990 PUMS				
African American	2.2321	2.3731	-0.1410	-13.15
White Hispanic	2.4116	2.4635	-0.0519	-5.05
American Indian	2.1780	2.3440	-0.1660	-15.29
Japanese American	2.6791	2.6904	-0.0113	-1.12
Chinese American	2.8236	2.7760	0.0476	4.87

rience a substantial net disadvantage after controlling for age, schooling, military service, region, and metropolitan status.

The top panel of Table 3 shows the results for the regression standardizations based on the 1950 PUMS results. For African Americans, the observed log weekly wage is 3.43; the adjusted log weekly wage is 3.77. This constitutes a difference of -0.34 , which represents a net effect of -29% . This result is almost the same as the net effect obtained above with the pooled regression model. In the other results shown in Table 3, the regression standardizations for each of the minority groups yield estimates that are very close to those obtained earlier with the pooled regression model. These findings therefore increase our confidence about the robustness of our estimates for 1950.

Results From the 1990 PUMS

The bottom panel of Table 1 shows the sample means using the 1990 PUMS. The sample contains 13,913 non-Hispanic whites, 36,125 African Americans, 2,924 Hispanic whites, 3,423 American Indians, 1,253 Japanese Americans, and 589 Chinese Americans.¹² The mean hourly wage (in 1989 dollars) is \$21.70 for Chinese Americans, \$19.64 for Japanese Americans, \$16.56 for non-Hispanic whites, \$14.45 for Hispanic whites, \$12.38 for African Americans, and \$11.85 for American Indians.

These findings for average hourly wages in 1990 indicate notable changes regarding racial stratification since 1950. In our results for 1950, non-Hispanic whites stand out as the group with the highest average wage. In 1990, however, the average wage for Chinese Americans is 31% higher than that for non-Hispanic whites, and the average wage for Japanese Americans is 19% higher. In 1950 these two Asian

American groups were in the middle of the racial hierarchy in terms of income, but currently they are at the top. The “model minority” image of Asian Americans has been criticized (Hurr and Kim 1989), but this expression at least suggests one aspect of a major change that has occurred during this period of American racial stratification.

Regarding educational attainment, the 1950 PUMS results suggest that the mean wages across the racial groups did not correlate highly with mean years of schooling. By contrast, the results for the 1990 PUMS show quite a high correlation: The rank-order of the races in mean hourly wage is virtually identical to their ranking in mean years of schooling. Mean schooling for Chinese Americans is 15.37 years, followed by Japanese Americans (14.44 years), non-Hispanic whites (13.32 years), Hispanic whites (12.90 years), African Americans (12.10 years), and American Indians (12.10 years).

The estimates of the pooled regression model using the 1990 PUMS are shown in the bottom panel of Table 2. The results indicate a large effect of education. For example, the coefficient for being a college graduate is .6330, which implies a net effect (relative to a high school dropout) of 88%. By contrast, the regression results for the 1950 PUMS, reported earlier, imply that a college graduate earned just 31% more than a person who did not finish his senior year of high school. The coefficient for a master’s degree is .7603, implying a net effect (relative to a high school dropout) of 114%. The regression results for the 1950 PUMS imply that a man with a master’s degree earned just 44% more than a man who did not finish his senior year of high school.

For African Americans, American Indians, Chinese Americans, and Japanese Americans, the net racial disadvantages are clearly smaller in the 1990 PUMS regression model than in the 1950 model. For example, for Japanese Americans the coefficient is -0.4598 in 1950; in 1990 it is -0.211 . In 1950, Chinese Americans show the most negative coeffi-

12. With our extraction procedures, we selected all minority men from the 1% 1990 PUMS, but we selected non-Hispanic white men randomly because of their larger population.

cient of all the racial groups (-.5751). In 1990, by contrast, their coefficient is .0731, which implies that Chinese Americans actually earn slightly more than non-Hispanic whites after class characteristics are controlled. These results for the two Asian American groups are consistent with the view that they no longer face systematic disadvantages in the labor market. In contrast, 40 years earlier, their net disadvantages were the largest among these minority groups.

For African Americans, the coefficient declines from -.3415 in 1950 to -.1419 in 1990. These results indicate that the net disadvantage of being black was reduced by more than half over this period. For American Indians, the coefficient declines from -.4035 in 1950 to -.1583 in 1990, also a reduction of more than half.

For Hispanic whites, the coefficient declines from -.0734 in 1950 to -.0429 in 1990. Although these results suggest a reduction in the net disadvantage of being Hispanic, the decline is not substantial in absolute terms. Hispanics, however, are somewhat distinctive in that their net disadvantage in 1950 is substantially smaller than those for the other minority groups.

Table 4 shows the *t*-tests examining whether the differences between the net racial effects in 1950 and in 1990 are statistically significant (i.e., $H_a: \beta_j^{50} - \beta_j^{90} < 0$). The *t*-ratios in the last column of Table 4 indicate that these differences are statistically significant at conventional levels for all groups except Hispanics. In other words, the *t*-ratios show that our results from these data are consistent with the hypothesis that the significance of race declines for each of these minority groups except Hispanics.

The bottom panel of Table 3 presents the results for the regression standardizations for the 1990 PUMS. For American Indians, the observed log hourly wage is 2.18; the adjusted log hourly wage is 2.34. This constitutes a difference of -.16, for a net effect of -15%. This result is very similar to the net effect obtained above with the pooled regression model for the 1990 PUMS. The last column of the bottom panel of Table 3 shows that, for each minority group, the estimates from the regression standardization procedure are similar to the net effects obtained from the pooled regression model.

The only slight exception is Chinese Americans, for whom the net racial effect is somewhat smaller in the regression standardization procedure (4.9%) than in the pooled regression model (7.6%). This result suggests that, for Chinese

American men in 1990, the net racial effect is affected slightly by the presence of interactions. In view of our purposes, however, the basic substantive conclusion remains the same: Chinese American men do not face a net racial disadvantage in 1990 because their wages are not lower than those of white men with comparable measured class characteristics.

To assess the robustness of our findings, we estimated additional regressions using these data (the results are available on request). Although the 1950 PUMS does not include information on usual hours worked per week in the previous year, information on hours worked during the week before the 1950 census is available. Using this latter information to calculate an hourly wage for the 1950 PUMS, we then estimated the 1950 regression model with the log of the hourly wage as the dependent variable. The results are essentially the same regarding the net racial effects. Furthermore, the *t*-test statistics for the hypothesis of the declining significance of race indicate the same conclusions as those reported in Table 4: The hypothesis is supported for all of the minority groups except Hispanics.

As an additional check on our findings, we estimated the 1990 regression model, in which the weekly wage is the dependent variable (rather than the hourly wage, as shown in Table 2). This model also yielded similar results, although the net racial disadvantages are slightly more pronounced in 1990, when the weekly wage rather than the hourly wage is the dependent variable. Even so, the net racial disadvantages are clearly smaller in 1990 than in 1950. Again we reached the same conclusions regarding the *t*-tests of the declining significance of race: The hypothesis is supported for all of the minority groups except Hispanics.

Finally, we also estimated a modified version of the 1990 regression model, in which we recoded the independent variables to correspond as exactly as possible to the coding of the independent variables in the 1950 regression model. In this modified specification for the 1990 regression model, we used age rather than years of work experience; a dummy variable indicating military service rather than total years of military service; years of schooling completed rather than dummy variables to indicate the highest completed level of educational attainment; and a dummy variable to allow for nonlinearity in the effect of college schooling. We used this modified specification once with the hourly wage as the dependent variable and then again with the weekly wage as the dependent variable.

TABLE 4. *t*-TESTS FOR THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN TWO REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS (1950 AND 1990) FOR EACH RACE

Race	1950 Coefficient	SE	1990 Coefficient	SE	<i>t</i> -Ratio
Hispanic White	-0.0734	0.0241	-0.0429	0.0137	-1.1002
African American	-0.3415	0.0096	-0.1419	0.0070	-16.7998
American Indian	-0.4035	0.0661	-0.1583	0.0130	-3.6398
Japanese American	-0.4598	0.0962	-0.0211	0.0206	-4.4592
Chinese American	-0.5751	0.2080	0.0731	0.0284	-3.0877

The results from this modified specification of the 1990 regression model are substantively similar to those reported in Table 2 for 1990. This similarity is evident when either the hourly wage or the weekly wage is used as the dependent variable. In addition, regarding the *t*-tests of the declining significance of race, for either dependent variable we reach the same basic conclusions about the contrast between the 1950 and the 1990 net racial effects: The hypothesis is supported for all of the minority groups except Hispanics. On the basis of these additional results, we believe that the evidence supporting the declining significance of race, as displayed in Table 4, cannot be attributed to the slight difference in model specifications for 1950 and for 1990, as shown in Table 2.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Although Wilson does not discuss racial minorities other than African Americans, our results suggest that the net effect of race has declined not only for African Americans but also for American Indians, Japanese Americans, and Chinese Americans.¹³ We estimated comparable models with data that span the civil rights movement; our results indicate a substantial reduction in the net racial effects for four of the five minority groups that we investigated. In addition, for the two Asian American groups, the results do not provide much evidence for the hypothesis of substantial and systematic disadvantage in the labor market: Our findings suggest that Chinese and Japanese American men have reached approximate parity in earnings with comparable white men.

We do not claim, however, that Wilson's hypothesis applies to Hispanics. The decline in their net effect is not statistically significant (see Table 4). In the additional models that we estimated, the difference in the net effects for Hispanics between 1950 and 1990 was never statistically significant at any conventional level. The data for Hispanics therefore are not consistent with Wilson's hypothesis, but we would point out that one reason for this inapplicability is that the net disadvantage of being Hispanic was not very large in 1950. Thus we see less of a range within which one can find consistent evidence of a decline.¹⁴

Regarding the identification of Hispanics, it is difficult to assess exactly the consequences of using parents' nativity and the Spanish surname codes in 1950 as opposed to self-identification in 1990. We believe, however, that the two subpopulations are adequately comparable. First, because our analysis is restricted to men, we do not encounter the problem of identifying Hispanic women who have intermarried and have acquired a non-Spanish surname. Second, we use not only the 1950 but also the 1980 Spanish surname

list. The former is restricted to southwestern states near Mexico, whereas the latter is applied to residents in all of the states, and thus ensures a broader representation of Hispanics. This is enhanced further by the additional use of parental nativity. Although Guttman and Gratton (forthcoming) use the 1970 PUMS, are subject to fewer sampling restrictions, and follow a slightly different identification procedure than ours, they find that the sample sizes of Hispanics are similar when defined by self-identification and by Spanish surname and parental nativity. Their results suggest that the two identification methods are fairly comparable, at least for this general period.

Although the net racial effect for American Indians declined across this period, that group suffers the largest net racial disadvantage in 1990 (–15%). Our conclusion thus differs from that of Sandefur and Scott (1983), who argued that the net income disadvantage faced by American Indians is close to zero after controlling for class characteristics. Their regression models, however, “overcontrolled” by including occupation and industrial sector as independent variables. Their models, unlike ours, do not estimate the total net racial effect for American Indians in the labor market.

As noted in our literature review above, Farkas and Vicknair (1996) used 1991 data for young men in the NLSY and found that the net racial effect for African Americans appears to be largely eliminated after controlling for cognitive skills. In our models, however, we cannot control for cognitive skills because the PUMS data do not offer a measure of these skills. For some of the groups, our estimates of the net racial effects may be somewhat biased because of this omission.

To assess the hypothesis of the declining significance of race across this period, we used $b_{*j}^{50} - b_{*j}^{90}$ as the point estimate to evaluate $H_0: \beta_j^{50} - \beta_j^{90} \geq 0$ for each *j*th group. If the omitted-variable bias—due to the lack of a control for cognitive skills—is the same in both years, the hypothesis test still will be evaluated correctly because the bias will be subtracted out. That is, because the hypothesis concerns the change in the net effect of race across this period, omitted-variable bias will not be problematic as long as it is a constant. In this case, we can still evaluate accurately the hypothesis of the declining significance of race because the difference between the two estimated net racial effects will differ out the omitted-variable bias component.

Insofar as the omitted-variable bias differs between 1950 and 1990, the test statistic obtained from $b_{*j}^{50} - b_{*j}^{90}$ will be a biased estimator for assessing the hypothesis of the declining net effect of race. The omitted-variable bias consists of two multiplicative components: the net effect of cognitive skills (after controlling for the measured variables included in the model) and the partial correlation between the *j*th racial dummy variable and the measure of cognitive skills. If the latter has not changed while the net effect of cognitive skill has increased, the test statistic will be more likely to erroneously reject Wilson's hypothesis for minorities who have a lower level of cognitive skill net of the measured variables. In this case, minorities with a lower level of cognitive

13. Wilson (1980) does not emphasize increases in the returns to education, but the evidence that we find for this trend is consistent with his general argument that class characteristics have become more important.

14. Our results differ substantially from those of Hirschman and Wong (1984), perhaps because our analyses are restricted to the native-born. As we mentioned above, those authors' failure to include interaction terms by nativity also may account in part for the differences between their results and those of Reimers (1985). The differences in their general conclusions are certainly unexpected, given that the two studies use the same data set.

skill will appear to face greater “discrimination” in 1990 than in 1950, when in fact their continued disadvantage reflects the increased returns to cognitive skills (which they are more likely to lack in relation to whites). If the net effect of cognitive skill has remained the same but the partial correlation between the j th racial dummy variable and the measure of cognitive skill has become less negative, then the above test statistic will be more likely to erroneously accept Wilson’s hypothesis. In this case, minorities with a lower level of cognitive skill will have a lower net disadvantage in 1990 than in 1950, but this decline will be due to an improvement in their cognitive skill (i.e., a less low level of cognitive skill in 1990 than in 1950), and not to a reduction in the net disadvantage of being a minority in the labor market.

Other cases obviously are possible regarding the components of omitted-variable bias discussed above. We do not believe, however, that there is sufficient demographic evidence to support strong claims about trends in the effects of cognitive skills net of education, work and military experience, region, and urban status. Although Herrnstein and Murray (1994) as well as Murnane, Willett, and Levy (1995) make this argument, some high-quality evidence is inconsistent with their position (see Hauser and Huang 1997). In general, we agree with Hauser’s (1997) assessment that “we actually know very little about trends in the relationships between cognitive skills and success in schooling, jobs, or earnings” (p. 41). We also do not know of strong evidence indicating large changes in racial differences in cognitive skills net of the variables measured in our models. Furthermore, as stated earlier, some studies have raised methodological issues regarding the extent to which measured cognitive ability affects estimates of net racial effects in the labor market (Rodgers and Spriggs 1996). For all of these reasons, we believe it would be premature to conclude that our test of Wilson’s hypothesis is obviously misleading or erroneous.¹⁵

In general we are impressed that, for four of the five minority groups, the results are consistent with the hypothesis of the declining significance of race. For these four groups, the decline in the net disadvantage between 1950 and 1990 is substantial—more than 50%. We interpret these declines across these demographically diverse racial groups as indicating a general improvement in the labor market opportunities for minorities during this period.¹⁶

15. We do not believe that the evidence strongly supports Herrnstein and Murray’s (1994) hypothesis that the net effect of cognitive skills on socioeconomic outcomes has increased in recent decades. If their view is correct, however, then the t -ratios shown in Table 4 actually should be even more negative (at least for those minorities that show lower average levels of cognitive skills). Such a result would only strengthen our conclusion that we should reject the null hypothesis of no reduction in the net racial effect across this period.

16. For evidence about attitude changes regarding labor market discrimination against blacks, see Farley (1996), who states “The civil rights revolution involved a shift of white attitudes such that racial discrimination is now seen as morally and legally wrong” (pp. 32–33).

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