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## **Ever-More Rooted Americans**

**(Draft: November 2000)**

by

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## **Ever-More Rooted Americans\***

by

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*Draft of November, 2000*

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## Ever-More Rooted Americans

### *Abstract*

Many scholars attribute contemporary ills to greater “rootlessness” among Americans. Residential mobility may be of some concern because local communities are disordered and vulnerable individuals are at risk when turnover is especially rapid. However, rates of residential mobility actually *declined* between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and continued to decline between 1950 and 1999. Analysis of Current Population Surveys shows that: in the population overall, the decline in mobility rates occurred for *local* moves – rates of cross-county moves stayed almost constant; Americans of different ages, household types, races, genders, and classes all experienced the decline; but certain specific groups experienced either no drop or a slight increase in mobility. The latter seem distinctive in being the most economically marginal members of the population.

## EVER-MORE ROOTED AMERICANS

Sociologists and public intellectuals alike often assert that Americans' increasing residential mobility is a major contributor to the social and emotional difficulties that American families faced at the close of the twentieth century. But this assertion is founded on a false assumption. American residential mobility, commonplaces about "modern rootlessness" notwithstanding, has *not* increased. (Also, it is *not* clear that typical mobility does cause problems.) Mobility has *decreased*, both in long run, since the mid-nineteenth century, and in the short run, since the mid-twentieth century. This is not a startling new discovery. It is well-known to social historians and demographers (I have reported it a few times in print myself), but seems unknown to the general public and to many scholars. In this paper, I describe the general trends in mobility and then look more closely at trends in mobility for specific groups.

### Fable and Fact

Generations of sociologists may have been misinformed about mobility from their first encounter with the discipline. Peter Berger, in his classic 1963 textbook, Invitation to Sociology, wrote about the "unprecedented rate of geographical . . . mobility in modern society" (p. 49). The assumption that mobility has and is increasing appears in the writings of many excellent sociologists. Here are a few assorted examples: Robert Wuthnow (1994: 5, 22) wrote that "we *no longer* live in the same neighborhoods all our lives . . . [and this] geographic mobility uproots families from neighborhoods and kin [italics added];" Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney (1987: 65) wrote that "increased geographical mobility is also a factor responsible for the weakening of traditional social ties. . . . So staggering are the numbers of people moving that Vance Packard some years ago entitled a book on the subject A Nation of Strangers. Such movement takes a heavy toll on social relationships. It results in weakened ties – to family and kin, to neighborhood and community – and often a sense of homelessness, or a metaphysical loss of home." David Popenoe (1985: 120) cited the "high rate of residential mobility" to explain why neighborhoods are (supposedly) becoming more anonymous. James Jasper, in a recent book which characterizes America as a Restless Nation, states that Americans' current mobility is the *same* as that of earlier generations (Jasper 2000:71).<sup>1</sup> Other examples are easy to find. A noteworthy exception to this consensus is political scientist Robert Putnam's (2000) recent book, Bowling Alone. Putnam asks whether the decline in Americans' civic participation could be the result of increasing residential mobility and answers, "No," because mobility has declined.<sup>2</sup>

To demonstrate the point, I turn immediately to Figure 1. The data are drawn from the Current Population Surveys, large Census Bureau surveys done every month for about 50 years. The annual March survey addresses

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<sup>1</sup> On a different page, 95, Jasper allows that rates "have gone down ever so slightly in the 1990s."

<sup>2</sup> Mobility seems to have decreased in twentieth-century Europe, too (Hochstadt 1981; Darroch 1981).

residential mobility (excepting for several years in the 1970s). Interviewers ask respondents whether they had lived elsewhere the year before. The figure shows the percentage of Americans who changed homes in the prior 12 months from 1948 through 1999, differentiating those who moved locally, defined as within a county, from those who moved farther, across county lines. (I use “within-county” as a proxy for local, realizing that, of course, it is only a crude one.)<sup>3</sup> Figure 1 shows that, over the course of the half-century, the chances that Americans moved in any given year declined, mainly because Americans became less likely to move *locally*.

— Figure 1 about here —

For students of the American family, it is important to realize that trends of the last half-century – rising rates of divorce and unwedded motherhood, earlier sexual initiation, mothers’ participation in the labor force, increasing work hours, declining fertility, and so on – have coexisted with increasing residential *stability*. “Rootlessness” cannot be easily blamed or credited for such changes in family life. Not only have Americans as a whole become more settled, so have, as I show below, “typical” middle-class families and American children.

Much of this paper is devoted to exploring the details of the trends shown in Figure 1, asking how mobility rates have changed in recent decades for different groups within the American population, for different classes, races, types of households, and so forth. But before turning to those analyses, I address two preliminary questions: Why should we care about residential mobility? And, how have mobility rates changed over the long term?

### Does Residential Mobility Matter?

In typical discussions of mobility (outside the specific research literature), authors take as given that residential mobility is deleterious. But is it? Or, better put: for whom is it? A sensible answer requires us to make three sorts of distinctions when we can. We should treat separately the consequences of mobility for *communities* from those for *individuals*. And for the latter, we need to distinguish *voluntary* moves from *forced* moves. Finally, we should also distinguish *local* from *distant* moves.

Research suggests that *neighborhoods* with high rates of residential turnover do experience more problems

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<sup>3</sup> In some cases, people move many miles within the same county and, in others, county lines are only a few blocks away. Absent data with specific mileage for moves, we must rely on this measure of “local.” It is, as we shall see, an important distinction. Generally, the inter-county rate is split roughly evenly between people who moved in-state and those who moved interstate. A small number, about a half of one percent of all American residents, have moved from abroad in the prior year. They are folded here into “across county.” The heavy curves are best-fitting cubic functions of year and serve here simply as “smoothers” to assist in reading the trends. Such smoothers, by definition, oversimplify and, in some cases, exaggerate trends at the end points. But the conclusions stand independently of the smoother, as is evident by comparing the early and late points.

than stable neighborhoods: fewer social ties among residents, more disorder, more crime. These negative consequences probably arise because residents in unstable neighborhoods know one another less well, are less likely to act in concert, less frequently “police” the neighborhood (controlling youngsters and watching strangers), and are less committed to the neighborhood. Although this is the conventional interpretation of research findings, note that the causality could be the reverse. Perhaps, problem-ridden neighborhoods drive residents away. It is also important to understand that the people who suffer in high-turnover neighborhoods may not be – probably are not – the ones who leave, but the ones who stay put while people all around them move in and out.<sup>4</sup>

For *individuals*, the proposition that mobility is damaging is even more problematic. For adults at least, there is little evidence that changing homes is generally harmful. Most contemporary moves by far are voluntary – to take a better job, to live in a better home – and are thus life improvements. Also, most moves are relatively short, making changes in social ties and life habits less wrenching. Adjustments are necessary when people who move a significant distance lose touch with some kin and friends, but, even then, movers re-establish ties relatively quickly. Indeed, there are some people, particularly poor people in poor neighborhoods and minorities in segregated neighborhoods, who would benefit from moving away but cannot.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, there are people for whom mobility poses a greater social and emotional risk – in particular, those who are forced to move. This category includes victims of natural or man-made disasters, the poor who cannot meet housing costs, dependent wives who must follow their husbands’ job changes or residential preferences, spouses who experience divorce unwillingly, and children. Even in such cases, mobility still is usually benign, but coerced movers do face higher risks than voluntary movers (Fischer et al 1977:177-85).

Researchers have focused, in particular, on how residential changes affect children’s emotional well-being and performance in school. They have found that children who move often tend to have greater problems than do other children (see, e.g., Long 1975; Haveman et al. 1991), but that finding is best explained by the fact that such mobile children are likelier to be in poor and troubled families (Probesh and Downey, 1999). One study’s (Tucker et al., 1998) results suggest that children suffer only if they make many moves or live in a single-parent or a step-parent household. The fair conclusions are that frequent moves are more often a *sign* of problems than a *cause* of one, but also that moving *is* a moderate risk factor for children, especially for otherwise vulnerable children (see also Hagan et al 1996).

Here, then, is one place for concern about residential mobility: It may work well for the people who decide to

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Sampson (1991; 1988); Sampson et al (1999); Ross et al (2000); Bergesen and Herman (1998); Miethe et al (1991); Sampson and Grove (1989); Sampson et al (1997); and Warner and Rountree (1997).

<sup>5</sup> A review of the literature to 1977 appears in Fischer et al (1977:177-85); see also Long (1998). More recent studies are consistent with this summary – e.g., Ross et al (2000), Buckhauser et al (1995), Massey et al (1987), Alba et al (1994), and South and Crowder (1997). One ethnographic example of the “trapped” elderly is Ginsburg (1975).

move but may put the ones they drag along – and the neighborhoods they leave behind – at slightly greater risk. The next question is, How have rates of mobility changed over the long course of American history?

### **Increasing Residential Stability: The Long View**

For centuries, foreign observers have described Americans as constantly on the move, “almost nomadic” in the words of Englishman James Bryce (Woodward, 1991:71-5). Fragmentary evidence about the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries suggest that Americans were indeed more mobile than Europeans (Friedeburg 1995). And contemporary statistics demonstrate that Americans still move more often than Europeans do (Long 1988; 1992). The question at hand, however, is the historical comparison. Americans of several generations past moved at least as often and probably far more often than Americans do today. High population turnover is, summarized a social historian, “one of the central findings and now one of the central themes of nineteenth-century social history” (Darroch 1981:217). For example, in Sangamon County, Illinois, only two of every ten households living there in 1840 stayed to 1850 (Faragher 1986:144-45); in rural Missouri, only about one-fourth of heads of households enumerated there in 1860 were still there in 1870 (Gregson 1997); and in Boston’s Jamaica Plain district, half of the household heads listed in the 1880 census could not be found there by the 1890 census-takers (von Hoffman 1994:32). Death accounts for only a small fraction of the many “disappeared” residents; another fraction were missed by census-takers; the great majority of them had moved on.<sup>6</sup>

The rates at which Americans left town actually underestimate total mobility; they do not take into account *local* moving, changing homes within towns. Moving locally was even more frequent than moving out of the area. This local churning is symbolized by New York City’s famous “Moving Day.” Rental leases traditionally expired on May 1. Thousands of people filled the streets of the city on that date, carrying their possessions to and fro in a massive game of musical chairs. One visiting English woman wrote in 1842, “from the peep of day till the twilight may be seen carts, which go at a rate of speed astonishingly rapid, laden with furniture of every kind, racing up and down the city, as if its inhabitants were fleeing from a pestilence” (quoted in Scherzer 1992:20, 234 n.20). A 1926 Rodgers and Hart hit song (“Mountain Greenery”), made famous by Bing Crosby, begins:

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<sup>6</sup> Methodological difficulties make any conclusions about mobility patterns 100-150 years ago tentative (see, e.g., Sharpless and Shortridge 1975). However, the variety of data historians have used – censuses, city directories, tax, and voter lists – clearly point to the conclusion that nineteenth-century mobility was greater than late twentieth-century mobility, perhaps as much as twice as great (see, also, Thernstrom 1973).

On the first of May/  
 This is Moving Day/  
 Spring is here/  
 So blow your job/  
 Throw your job away/  
 Now's the time to trust/  
 To your wanderlust.

Short-Term Developments. But in the second half of the twentieth century Americans seemed to curb that wanderlust. The nineteenth-century patterns of annual moving, with legions of transient boarders and lodgers and of floating “hobo” populations, essentially ceased. We lack reliable numbers on residential turnover for the early part of the 1900s, but we do have them for the last several decades. As Figure 1 showed, residential mobility declined slowly but steadily since 1950.<sup>7</sup> This greater rootedness is particularly striking given all the other changes that Americans experienced during the period which would have encouraged them to move: increasing proportions of Americans living alone, cheaper and easier transportation, expanding mass media displaying alluring pictures of other places Americans could live, increasing travel exposing people to various corners of America, the expansion of higher education, the rise of the Sunbelt, and the development of retirement and retirement towns. That geographic mobility nevertheless *dropped* testifies to the importance of countervailing influences. What might those be?

I do not know of any comprehensive answer to this question. Most historians would probably agree that mobility declined over the generations in part because the great migrations of the past – migrations from Europe, from the settled states to the frontier, from the farms to the cities – ended. Also, many of the intense and uncontrollable shocks to normal family life – deaths of breadwinners, farm failures, natural disasters, job layoffs – became less common, affected fewer people, or were cushioned by an expanding social net. Because fathers lived longer, workers earned more, government provided farm support, people bought home insurance, the state created income guarantees for the unemployed, disabled and retired, fewer American families were forced to move. (This also implies that the most damaging kinds of moves declined the fastest.) Easier daily travel probably contributed to stability, too. When living more than a couple of miles from one’s job was impractical, changing jobs required changing homes; when a half-hour’s drive can easily cover a dozen miles, people can change jobs and stay in their homes. Also, increases in home ownership probably reduced mobility. Homeowners are much less likely than renters to move; between 1998 and 1999, for example, only eight percent of owners moved, compared to 33% of renters (Bureau of Census 2000a). So, as affluence and government subsidies encouraged home ownership to expand from 47% in 1900 to 55% in 1950 and 67% of households in 2000 (Bureau of the Census 1975:646; 2000b), it in all likelihood contributed to stability. Indeed, three historians (Tobey et al 1990:1413) have argued “that the [New

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<sup>7</sup> The zero-order correlation between year and the percentage of Americans who moved, from 1947-48 through 1998-99, is -.87, with percentage who changed counties, -.52, and with percentage who moved between states, -.64.



Deal] federal government deliberately changed the conditions of home buying [through various financial devices] in order to decrease geographic mobility in the United States,” with the further intent of encouraging “conservative” civic involvement. Some of these trends, such as increasing job security, family affluence, and, for some groups, home ownership, stalled in the last quarter century, and yet, Americans still settled down.

In the remainder of this paper, I turn to examining how these recent trends in mobility differ for different sorts of Americans. To set the background for that analysis, we need to understand which groups of people are most likely to move.

### Who Moves?

A well-known fact is that stage in the lifecycle strongly shapes moving patterns. This can be seen in Figure 2, which shows the percentage of Americans who moved between March, 1998, and March, 1999, by their age and by how far they moved (Bureau of the Census 2000d). We can see the sharp peak in moving in the early twenties as Americans leave home, marry, and have their first child. The secondary peak in the lines, that among the youngest, reflects the experiences of the children of young adults. After the early family-formation years, the chances of moving drop off rapidly such that older children and their parents are relatively *immobile*. Figure 3 tells a similar story in terms of the types of households in which Americans lived. The most mobile were those who were “primary individuals” – either people living alone (over 80% in 1990) or with non-relatives (as roommates, “cohabitators,” boarders, and such) – or were single parents. Least mobile were members of married couples.

— Figures 2 and 3 Here —

An important methodological point should be noted: The characteristics of movers and non-movers are assessed by the Current Population Survey *after* the period in question. In many analyses, this is unimportant; people’s ages, genders, races, and the like do not change with a move. But for a few traits – and household structure is one of them – the category a respondent falls into may be different before and after the move. A couple who had moved into separate homes upon suing for divorce are categorized by the CPS as “primary individuals” who had moved even though they were a married couple when they experienced the move. Similarly, home owners and renters are categorized after the move. This certainly creates some “noise” in the data, for example, underestimating the risk of moving for a married person. But given that moving is typically a repetitive pattern, we can still be confident, as other studies of mobility indicate, that the risk of moving is greater for the unmarried than the married and for renters than for owners, although perhaps not at the simple rates observed in the CPS.

Because age is so determinative of moving, most analyses of other factors need to hold age constant. Educational differences, for example, show up largely among those aged 25 to 35. Those without a high school diploma are more likely than others to move *locally*, but those with a college degree are more likely to move *across*

county lines. (Those with post-graduate degrees were, in 1998-1999, about 2.5 times likelier than high school graduates and over three times likelier than those who failed to finish high school to move across regions – Bureau of the Census 2000e.) Crudely summarized, better-educated people move some distance in response to career opportunities and less-educated people move locally in response to housing situations or difficulties. Similarly, African- and Latino-Americans move locally at a slightly higher rate than do whites (Bureau of the Census 2000e). Other factors statistically held constant, total rates of mobility are higher for adults who are: young, male, white, unmarried, non-parents, poorer, renters, and new to the neighborhood (South and Deane 1993: table 2). The last attribute, new to the neighborhood, underscores the common observation that much of American residential mobility is composed of repeat moves by the same people.

The 1998 Current Population Survey also provides us with reasons people gave for moving. Their answers fall into these categories (from our analysis of the C.P.S.):

These numbers pool all kinds of moves. For distant	Family Reasons.....	26%
	To establish own household .....	8
	Change in marital status.....	7
	Other family.....	12
	Career Reasons.....	20
	New job or transfer.....	10
	Be closer to job.....	3
	Attend college.....	2
	Retire.....	1
	Look for work / lost job.....	2
	Other job-related reason.....	2
	Housing Reasons.....	45
	Wanted better house/apartment.....	19
Wanted to own, not rent.....	9	
Wanted better neighborhood.....	4	

nt, cross-state moves, job-related concerns account for the bulk of reasons people give (Long 1988:237ff), while housing reasons dominate local moves (see also Fischer et al 1977:177-80). The lifecycle changes people often cite as reasons for moving – particularly, marriage and parenting – are essentially housing issues, too, because people seek new housing that they think appropriate to their new statuses.

Having reviewed some of the basics about residential mobility, I turn to the question of whether the recent historical decline in mobility identified in Figure 1 is a general one or is specific to particular parts of the American population. For the remainder of this analysis, I draw on our own analyses of the raw data from Current Population Surveys for 1965 through 1998, supplemented where possible by data drawn from published sources for earlier

years.<sup>8</sup> For some parts of the analysis, the data allows us to describe trends from mid-century on; for others, we are restricted to roughly the last quarter of the twentieth century.

### For Whom has Mobility Declined or Not?

Lifecycle and Household. Is the decline in mobility over the last few decades a general trend or due to changes among particular groups? Figure 4 begins by charting mobility rates for only members of middle-class families (defined as adults or children living in households that included children, a married couple, and at least one spouse who had attended college). The figure shows that mobility dropped in the last three decades of the twentieth century for these Americans, too, although their decline in mobility was almost entirely due to fewer *long-distance* moves; rates of *local* moving were almost flat. Therefore, the gross decline in mobility that we saw in Figure 1 was not due to trends among special subgroups of Americans, but was experienced by middle-class families.

— Figure 4 about here —

Because age and lifecycle so much determine rates of mobility, I address the question of whether the decline was specific to certain ages or households. Figure 5 shows the rates of total, distant, and local mobility for five different age groups from 1950 through the 1990s. We see that *total* mobility (left-hand panel) roughly declined more or less monotonically for all groups with the notable exception of the highly mobile 18-to-24-year-olds. Their rate soared from 31% in 1949-50 to 40% by 1965 before dropping rapidly to 30% in 1997-98. It appears that long-distance mobility (middle panel) largely accounts for the 1955 to 1975 peak among the 18-to-24-year-olds. One speculation is that this period covers the great expansion of higher education in America, the Vietnam War, and also the first big economic boom of the post-war period. (One puzzle, then, is why the current, second boom has not generated similar rates of mobility for 18-to-24-year-olds.) Figure 5 also shows that Americans outside this highly mobile subgroup moved *long distances* about as often at the end of the period as at the beginning but moved less often *locally* by the end of the century.<sup>9</sup> The general “settling in” of Americans over the last half-century is mainly the result of middle-aged and elderly Americans making fewer moves *locally* than did their parents and grandparents at mid-century.

— Figure 5 about here —

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<sup>8</sup> These data were organized and the analyses run by Stephanie Mudge and Jon Stiles.

<sup>9</sup> Close attention to Figure 5 reveals that 25-to-44-year-olds and 0-to-17-year-olds moved *long distances* at slightly higher rates in the 1980s than before or after. The 25-to-44-year-old adults were essentially the same people who, as 18-to-24-year-olds had moved so much in the 1960s and the 0-to-17-year-olds were their children. Perhaps this slight, 1980s rise-and-fall may be an echo of the earlier moves the same people had made in the 1960s.

Figure 6 shows the historical patterns for Americans sorted by the kinds of households in which they lived, although we only have the data for 1975 on and thus do not capture the 1960s upswing among the young adults. (Recall, also, the methodological caution noted earlier.) We see a general decline in *total* mobility for most groups (left panel), the exception being the more erratic pattern of those in extended households. Most striking is the decline in mobility for people in married couples, especially those without children. But even “primary individuals” – mainly, people living alone or as the heads of households with non-relatives such as roommates or spouse-surrogates – moved at rates a few points lower in 1997-98 than in 1975-76 (as did “non-relatives,” individuals in households headed by a non-relative).<sup>10</sup> These trends largely reflect the patterns in *local* moves (right-hand panel). *Cross-county* moves, not shown, varied little, between five and eight percent, for all groups. Single-parent and extended households, both types of households that tend to be in some economic distress, experienced the least decline in mobility – a point to which I will return later.

— Figure 6 about here —

As I noted earlier, household tenure is important. In recent decades, renters were about four times likelier to have recently moved than homeowners.<sup>11</sup> There is a *prima facie* case that increasing home ownership explains decreasing mobility.<sup>12</sup> Figure 7 displays the trends from 1976 to 1998 in annual moving rates for owners and renters separately. (Respondents are classified as renters or owners based on their status *after* a move. This creates a bit of a distortion, but we can assume that most current renters were renters before their move and the same for owners. Also, some of the error balances out. For example, a youth who leaves her parents’ home for a rented apartment is misclassified as a renter moving, but when she later becomes a home-owner is misclassified as an owner moving.) We see in Figure 7 that the downward trend for each group, a trend that is even stronger for renters than owners. Thus, we cannot attribute the decline in national levels of mobility to renters becoming owners.

— Figure 7 about here —

Further undercutting a home ownership explanation for the post-1960s decline in mobility is the fact that

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<sup>10</sup> I do not show non-relatives in Figure 6 for simplicity of presentation, given their high rates of mobility. Those rates declined from 51% to 41% (21% to 15% across counties and 30% to 26% within counties).

<sup>11</sup> Between the 1960 and 1990 censuses, the proportion of renters who had moved in the prior 15 months *increased* from 38 to 42% and the proportion of homeowners who had moved dropped from 12 to 9% (Bureau of the Census 2000f). Our annual, 1976-1998 CPS data do not show such a trend difference, with a couple of exceptions noted below.

<sup>12</sup> Using CPS data from 1965 through 1999 (Bureau of the Census 2000a, b), the correlation between annual national mobility rates and national homeownership rates is -.71. For such aggregated data and without controls, this statistic is only mildly suggestive of a causal connection.

home ownership did *not* increase across all age groups – it decreased for some – and yet, as we saw in Figure 5, mobility generally declined for all groups. Specifically, between 1976 and 1998, the proportion of children living in owner-occupied homes declined from 71 to 66%, but their mobility rate stayed the same, at 17%; among 18-to-24-year-olds, rates of ownership dropped from 57 to 55%, but mobility also dropped, from 35 to 30%; and for 25-to-44-year-olds, ownership rates sank from 67 to 63%, yet mobility also declined, from 22 to 20%. (Home ownership was steady among 45-to-64-year-olds, 80 to 81%, and increased sharply among the elderly, 74 to 82%.)<sup>13</sup> Within age groups, then, home ownership rates both fell and rose, but mobility generally declined.

In searching for exceptions to the generality of declining mobility, I found one group that bucked the trend: *renters* over age 44. Older renters actually experienced slightly *more* mobility over the period than did other groups. This was true for local mobility, but even more so for cross-county moves. Figure 8 displays rates of *cross-county* mobility for renters only, by age group. Those 45 to 64 years old and those 65 and over were the least mobile age groups, but they moved slightly more often in the late '90s than earlier on. Perhaps, these were older persons who have sold off their homes to become retired renters; perhaps these were economically marginal older persons, the roughly one of five who could not afford (or did not want) to own.

— Figure 8 about here —

Stratification. I turn next to the question of whether and how the trends in mobility might differ by persons' locations in the stratification system, by race, class, and gender. The answer about gender is simple: The difference between men and women in rates of total mobility between 1965 and 1998 vary from one-half to one percent with no secular trend. (Data not shown.)

Figure 9 displays the racial differences in three pairs of lines. *Total* and *local* mobility declined among both whites and non-whites, although a little bit more for non-whites. The pattern for *cross-county* moves is somewhat different. White and non-white rates converged as the former moved less and latter moved more. The changes in the non-white rate may reflect increasing movement of blacks (and Asians in the later years) out from city to suburban locations.

— Figure 9 about here —

We can observe class differences in at least two ways, by the occupation of the respondent (for those employed) and the education of adult respondents. Figure 10 displays mobility trends for three general occupational categories: service (maids, guards, waiters, janitors, and such ), blue-collar (crafts workers, machine operators, laborers, and so on ), and white-collar (professionals, managers, sales, and clerical workers). For simplicity, I do not

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<sup>13</sup> These figures are based on our analyses of the CPS data. Typical census reports on home ownership are by age of head of household, but the focus here is on the individual resident.

show the trends for cross-county moves; those rates were compressed between 5.2 and 8.3% and declined modestly for all three class groups from at least the mid-1980s. Figure 10 identifies a group for which the general trend of declining mobility does *not* apply: those in service work. Their rates of total mobility were about 1.7 percentage points *higher* in 1998 than in 1970.

— Figure 10 about here —

Educational differences also tell us about class effects on mobility, but are complicated by the strong association between age and education. Are the differences we see by educational level simply explained by the fact that young adults at the end of the twentieth century were much likelier to be college-educated than their parents were? How much does the fact that 18-to-24-year-olds, the most mobile group, are often in the middle of their college careers affect the patterns? Figure 11 simply shows the residential mobility trends by level of education. It displays large educational differences that converge downward between 1965 and 1998, a trend largely due to changes in cross-county moves. However, the “> H.S.” group is disproportionately young in the earlier years and the “<H.S.” population is exceptionally old in the later years. This calls for more complex analyses including age.

— Figure 11 about here —

Figure 12 breaks up the data by age group, looking closely at those 25 to 44 years old and those 45 to 64 years old. Although the complexities multiply, controlling for age and education simultaneously does highlight a particular group that has *not* shared in the decline of mobility: the least-educated. Those who had not graduated high school – an increasingly small group as the twentieth century drew to a close – experienced an *increase* in mobility, specifically local mobility, after 1980. The simplest explanation, one connected to Figure 10's display of occupational differences, is that these are the people who are most likely to live on the economic margin, they became distinctively marginal as the years passed, and their mobility testifies to their precarious housing situations. (Recall that within-county mobility is largely connected to housing changes, not moves for new jobs.)

## Conclusion

A quick historical review tells us that, over the long term, residential mobility has declined substantially in the United States. Americans today move less often than did their ancestors. Statistical analyses of the Current Population Surveys show that since the middle of the twentieth century, Americans continued to move less and less frequently. In particular, Americans were less likely to move *locally*; rates of distant moves – across county lines or farther – stayed roughly constant. Closer examination of mobility trends for different groups of Americans shows that the story of increasing rootedness generally applies across age, family type, gender, race, and class groups, and even for both renters and owners (– with different initial rates, of course). The social forces that have encouraged

stability, particularly the drop in local moving, must be deep and pervasive.

The analyses reveal certain specific groups that experienced constant rates of mobility or even an increase in mobility: those who lived in one-parent or extended households, older people who rented, service workers, and the least educated. What these groups have in common, it seems, is economic marginality. And their increasing mobility, however modest those increases, may reflect their increasing marginality over the last four decades. Certainly, to lack a high school diploma was both rarer and more disadvantageous in the 1990s than in the 1960s. Also, increasingly expensive housing and widening inequality may have made their housing situations more difficult. I am speculating that these groups, already disadvantaged, may have experienced more forced moves over the period, just the kinds of moves that are most socially and emotionally costly.

Yet, most Americans – and the typical middle-class American family – were more *settled* at the tend of the twentieth century than at its middle, and indeed, probably more settled than at any earlier time in American history.

#### Final Note

The long-term decline in residential mobility is well-known to historians. The annual declines are annually publicized by the Census Bureau (e.g., Bureau of the Census 2000h) and often reported in the press. Articles on the decline have appeared before (e.g., Fischer and Stueve 1978). Then, why do off-hand references to “rootlessness” and increasing mobility appear so often, not just in popular publications, but also in sociological articles? One possibility is that increasing rootlessness fits too well the “grand narrative” of modernization latent in sociology and much other social science – that modernity is socially disorganizing and psychologically alienating – to be abandoned. When a fact, like that displayed in Figure 1, clashes with a grand narrative, the fact is soon forgotten and the narrative chatters on.

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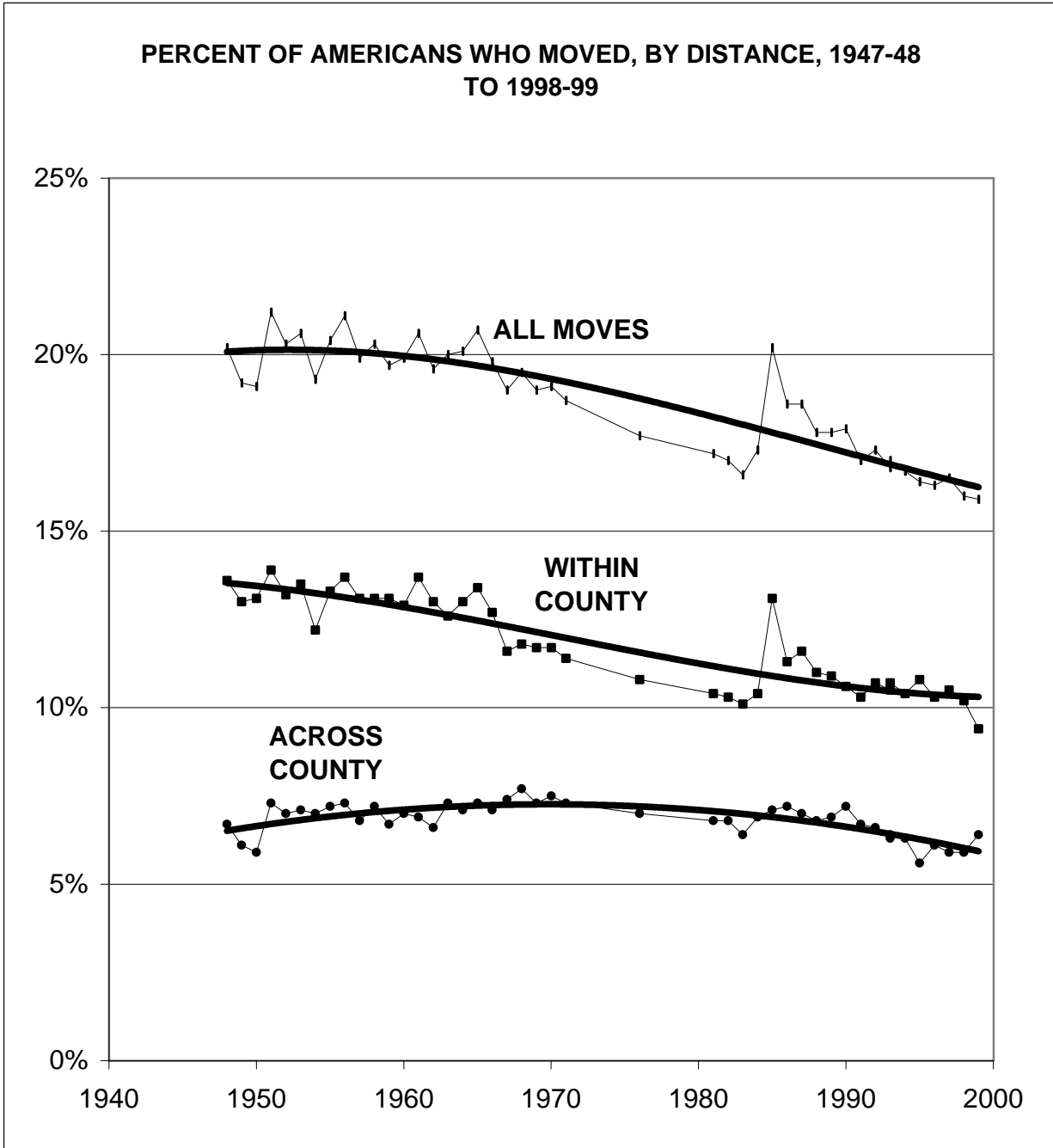
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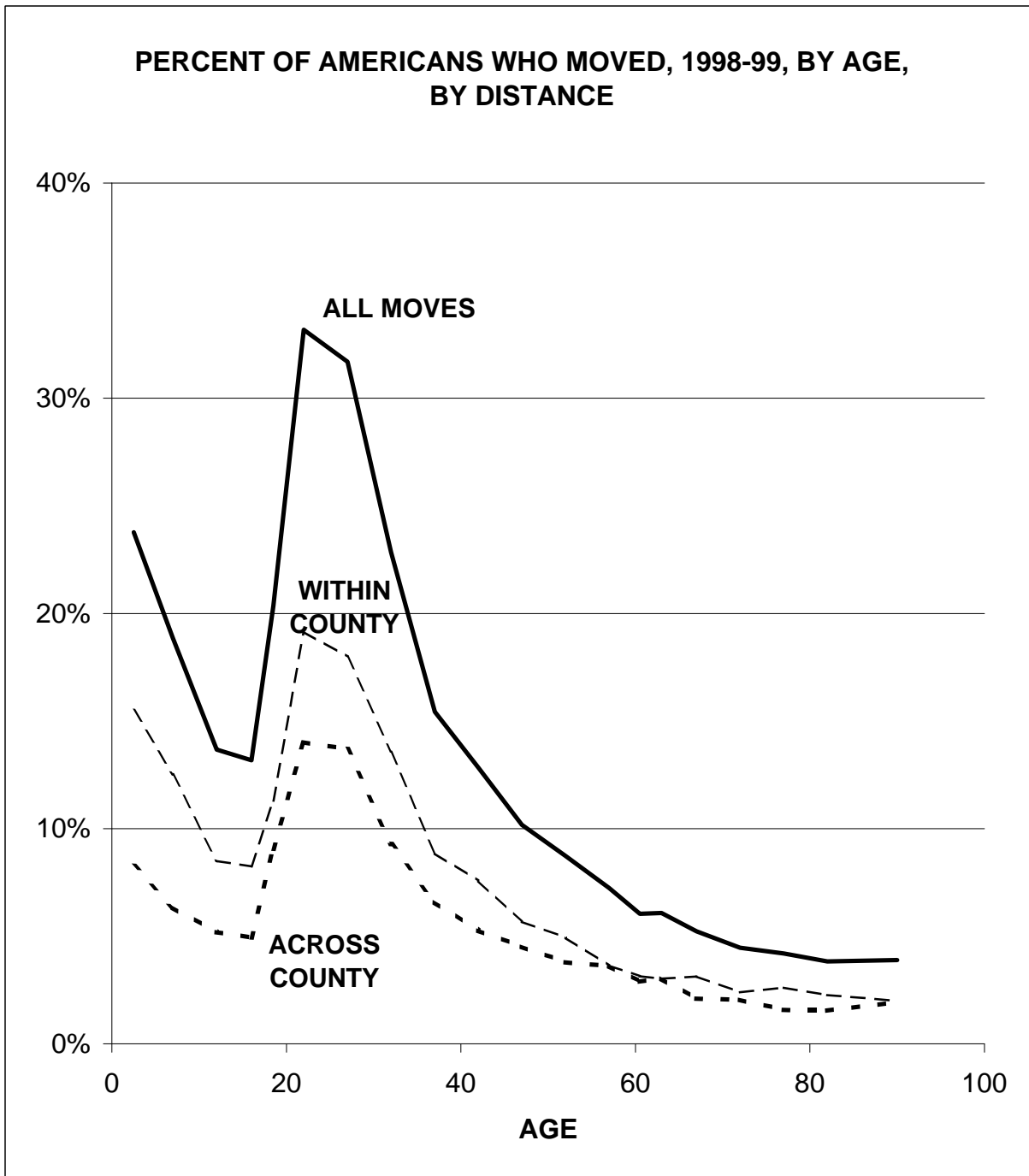
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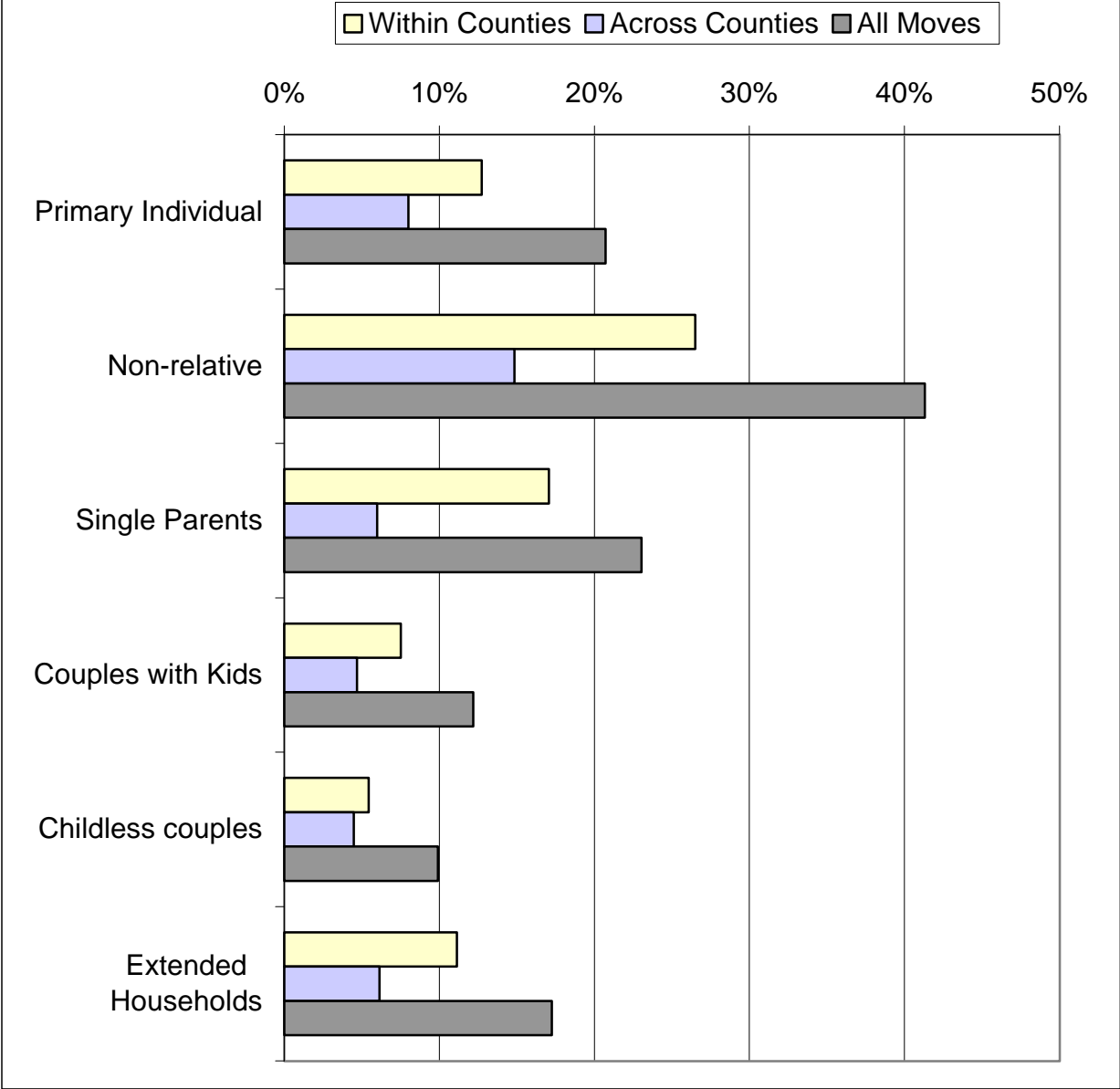


**Figure 1. Residential Mobility of Americans, 1947-48 to 1998-99, by Distance c  
(Source: Current Population Surveys reported by Bureau of Census [2000c].)  
The bold lines represent best-fitting cubic functions of year.**



**Figure 2. Residential Mobility of Americans, 1998-99, by Age and Distance of Move.**  
 (Source: Current Population Surveys; U.S. Census Bureau Webpage, 2000.)

**PERCENT WHO MOVED, 1997-1998, BY TYPE OF HOUSEHOLD, BY DISTANCE**



**Figure 3. Residential Mobility of Americans, 1997-1998, by Type of Household, by Distance. (Source: Analyses of Current Population Surveys).**

### PERCENT OF MEMBERS OF MIDDLE-CLASS FAMILIES WHO MOVED, BY YEAR, BY DISTANCE

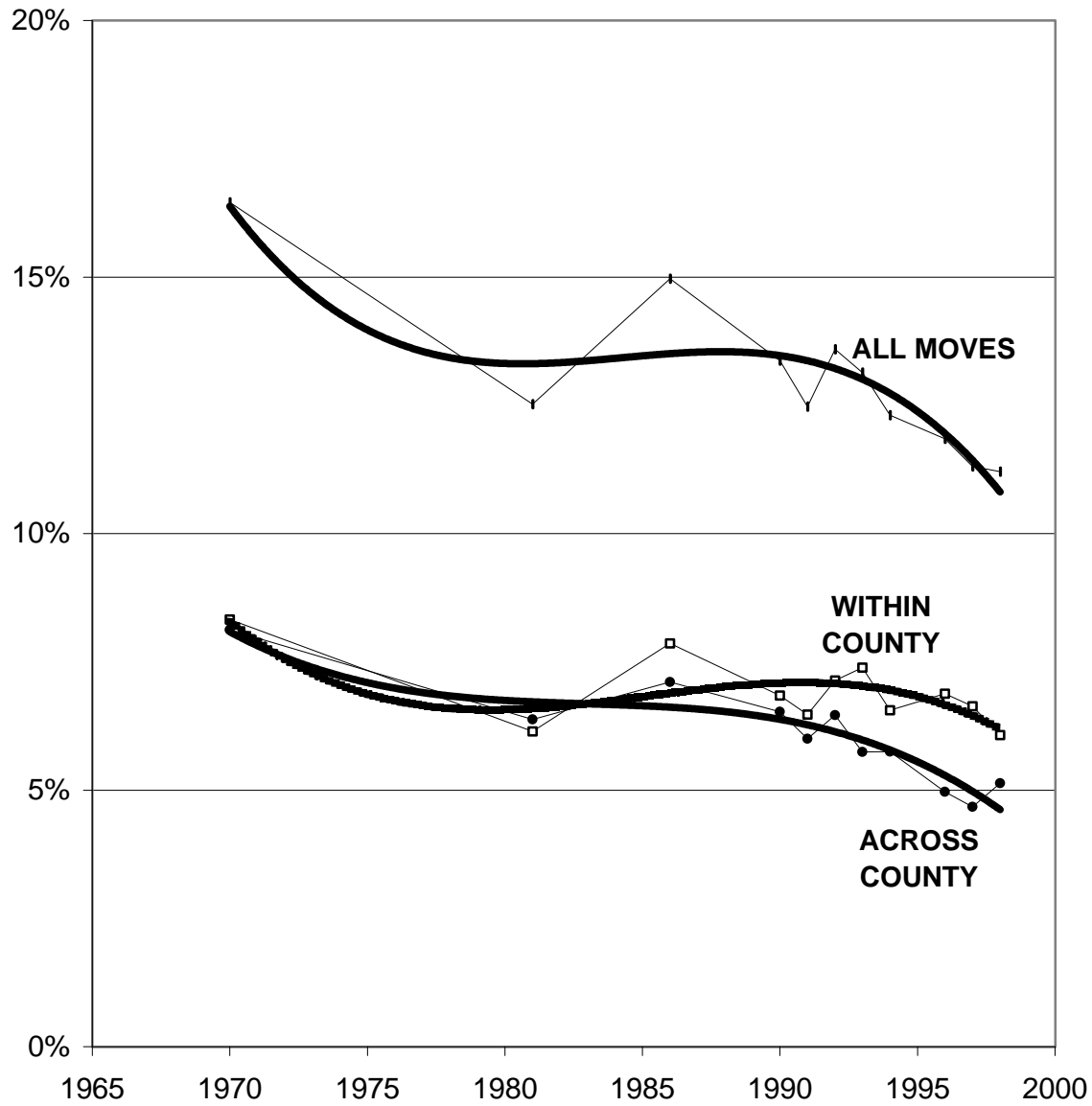
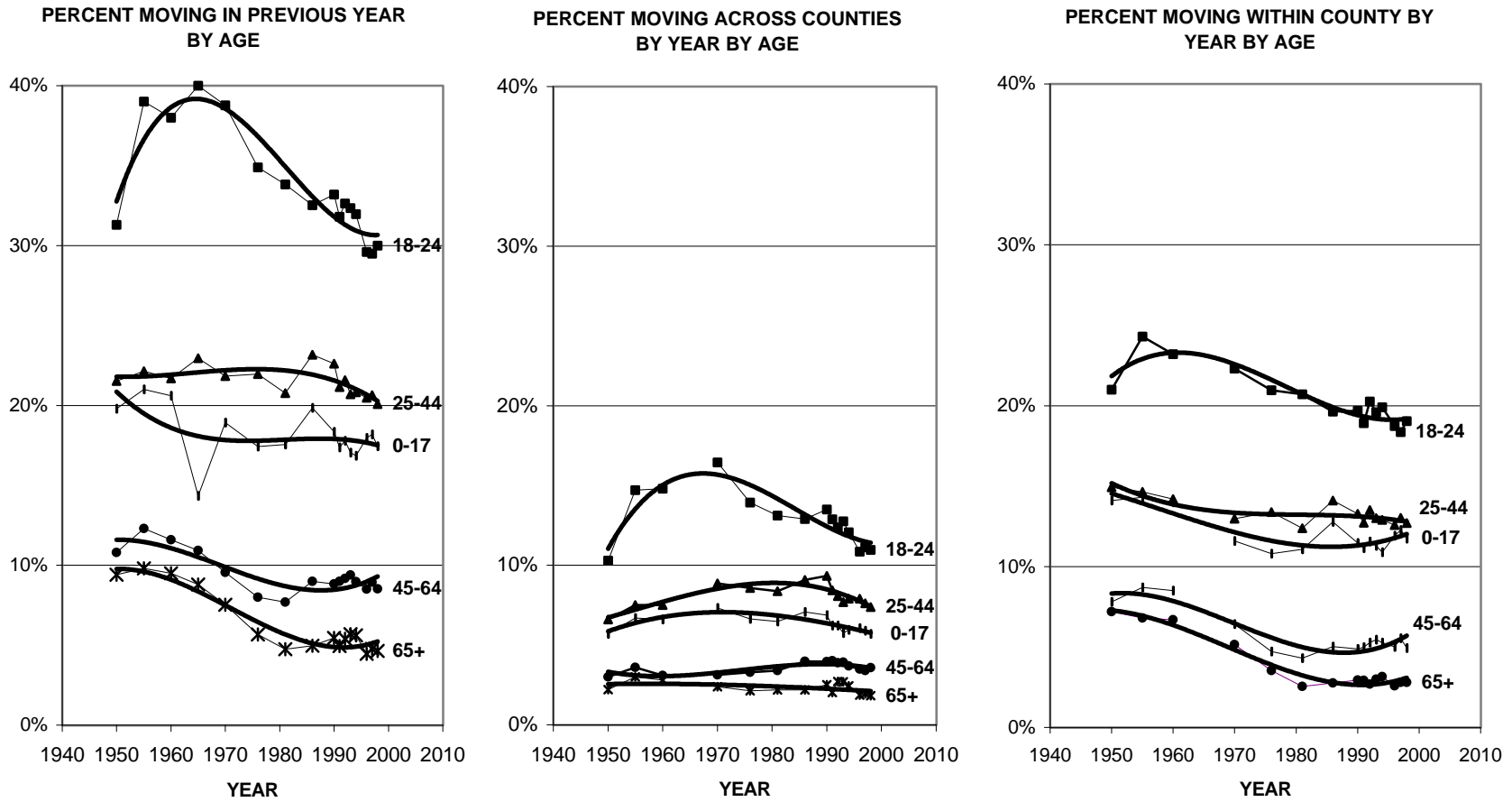
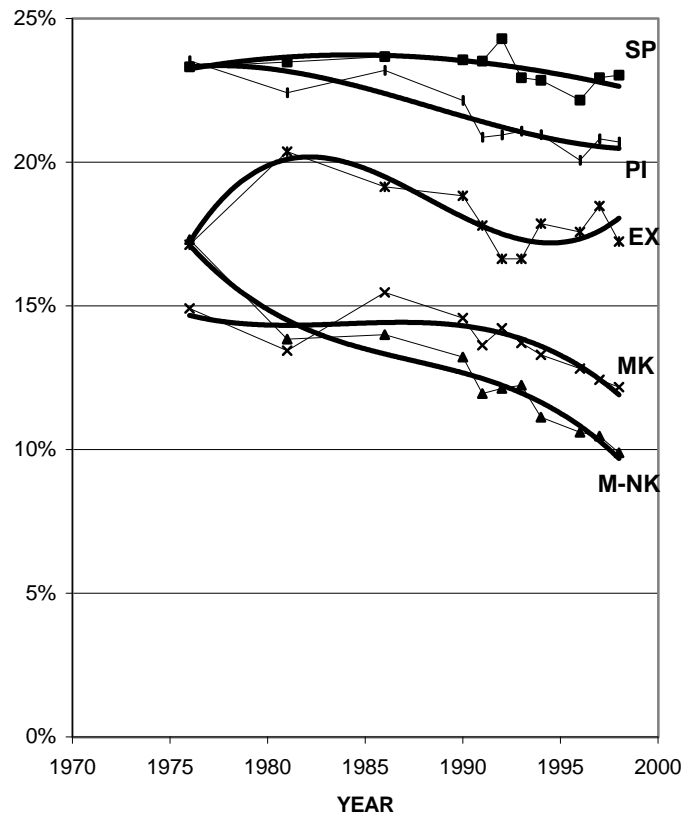


Figure 4. Residential Mobility of Americans in Middle-Class Families, 1970-1999, by Distance. (Source: Analysis of Current Population Surveys.)

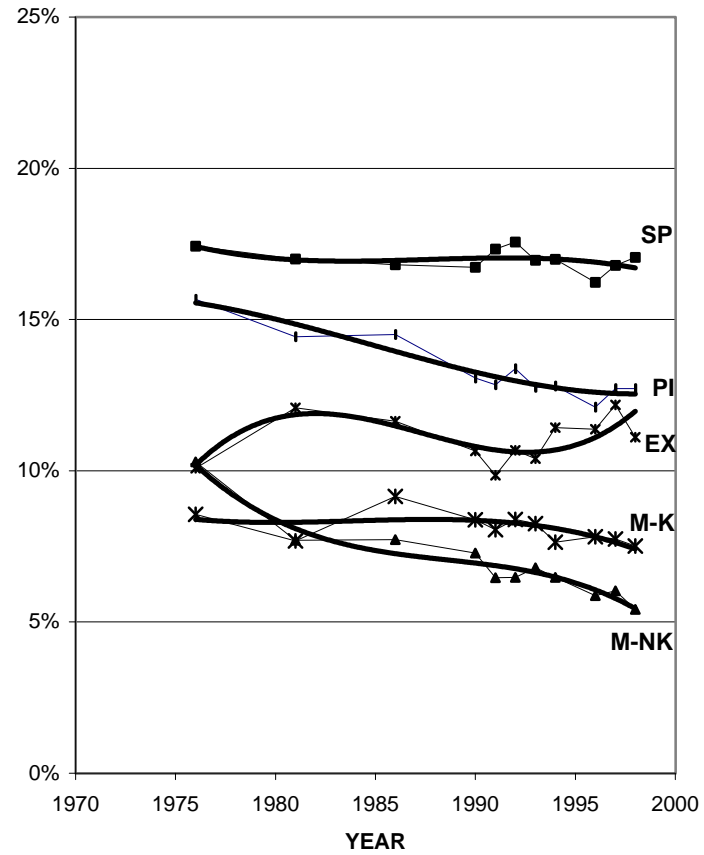


**Figure 5. Residential Mobility of Americans, 1950-1998, for Different Age Groups, by Distance.**  
 (Source: Analysis of Current Population Surveys.)

**PERCENT WHO MOVED, BY HOUSEHOLD TYPE**



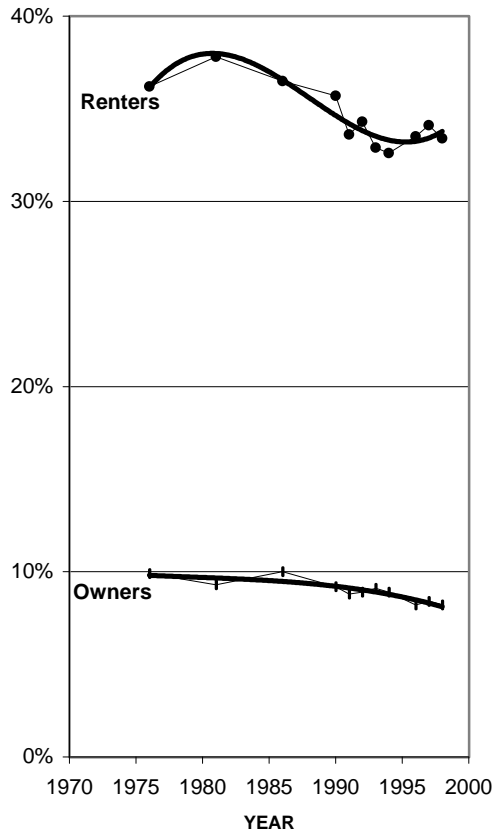
**PERCENT WHO MOVED WITHIN COUNTY, BY HOUSEHOLD TYPE**



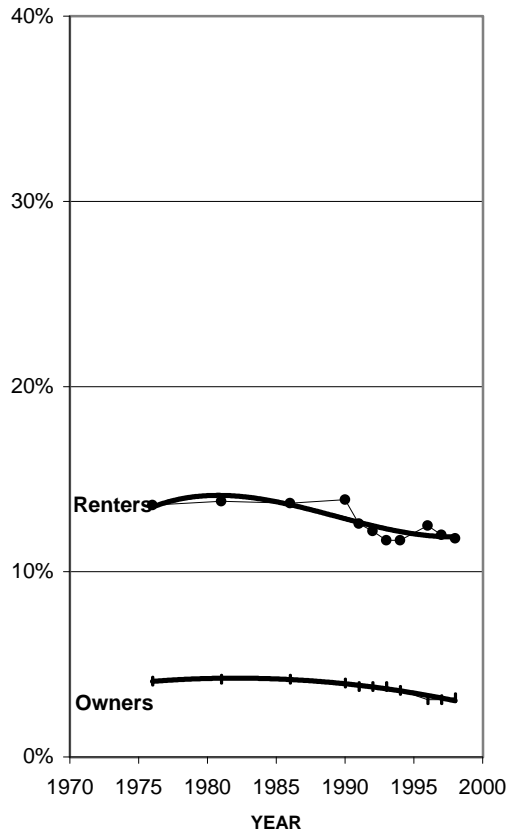
**Figure 6. Residential Mobility, 1975-1998, by Respondent's Household Type, by Distance.**  
 (Source: Analysis of Current Population Surveys.)  
 (Key: SP: Single Parent; PI: Primary Individual; EX: Extended household;  
 M-K: Married, with child in the household; M-NK: Married, no child in the household.)



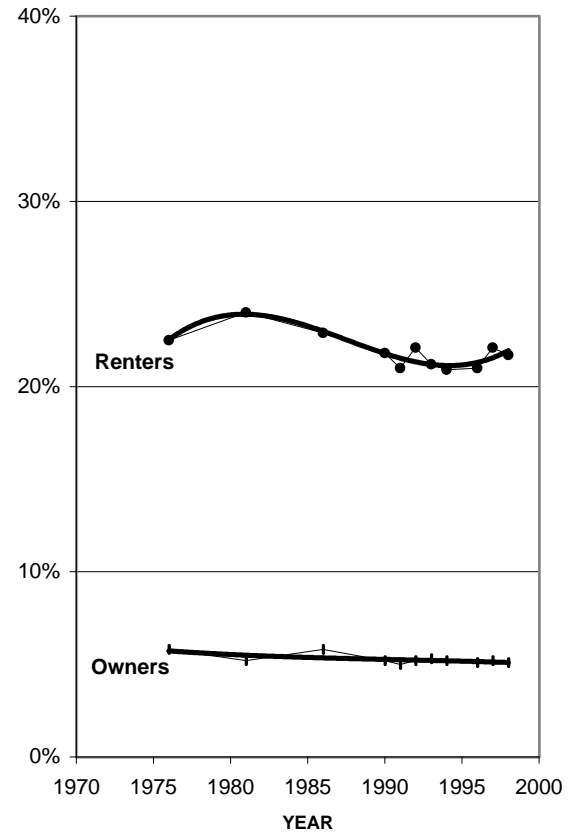
**PERCENT WHO MOVED, 1976-1998, BY TENURE**



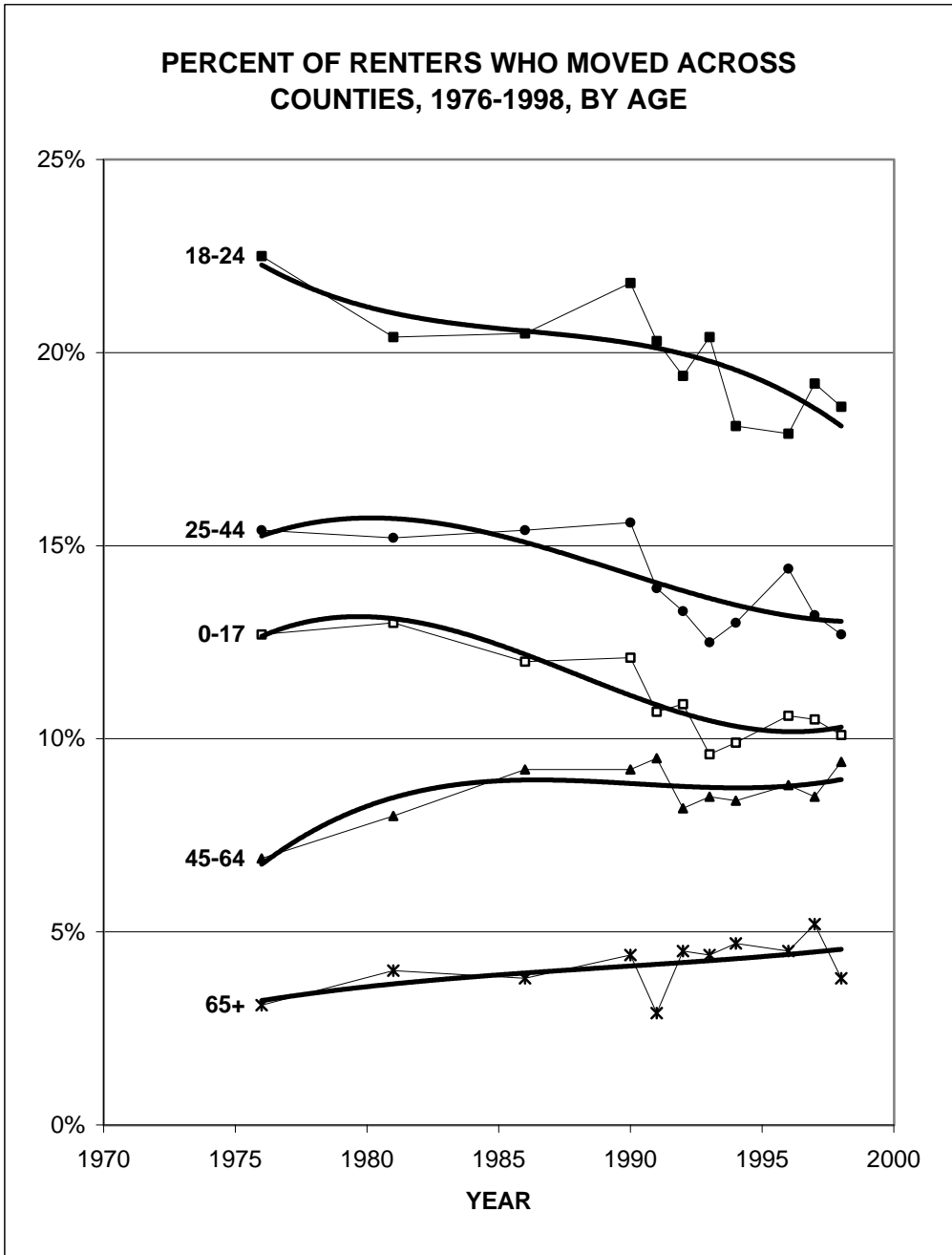
**PERCENT WHO MOVED ACROSS COUNTIES, 1976-1998, BY TENURE**



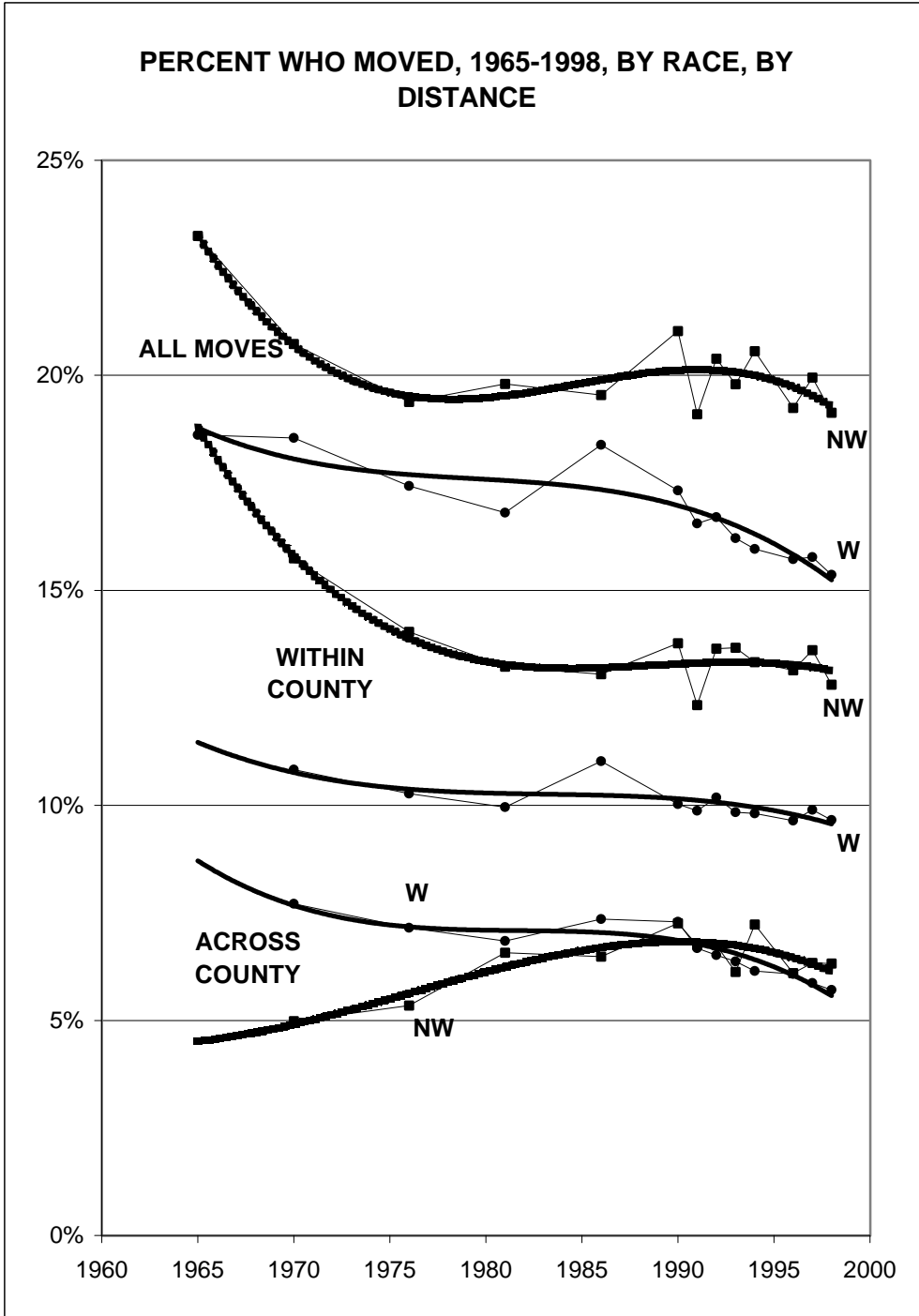
**PERCENT WHO MOVED WITHIN COUNTY, 1976-1998, BY TENURE**



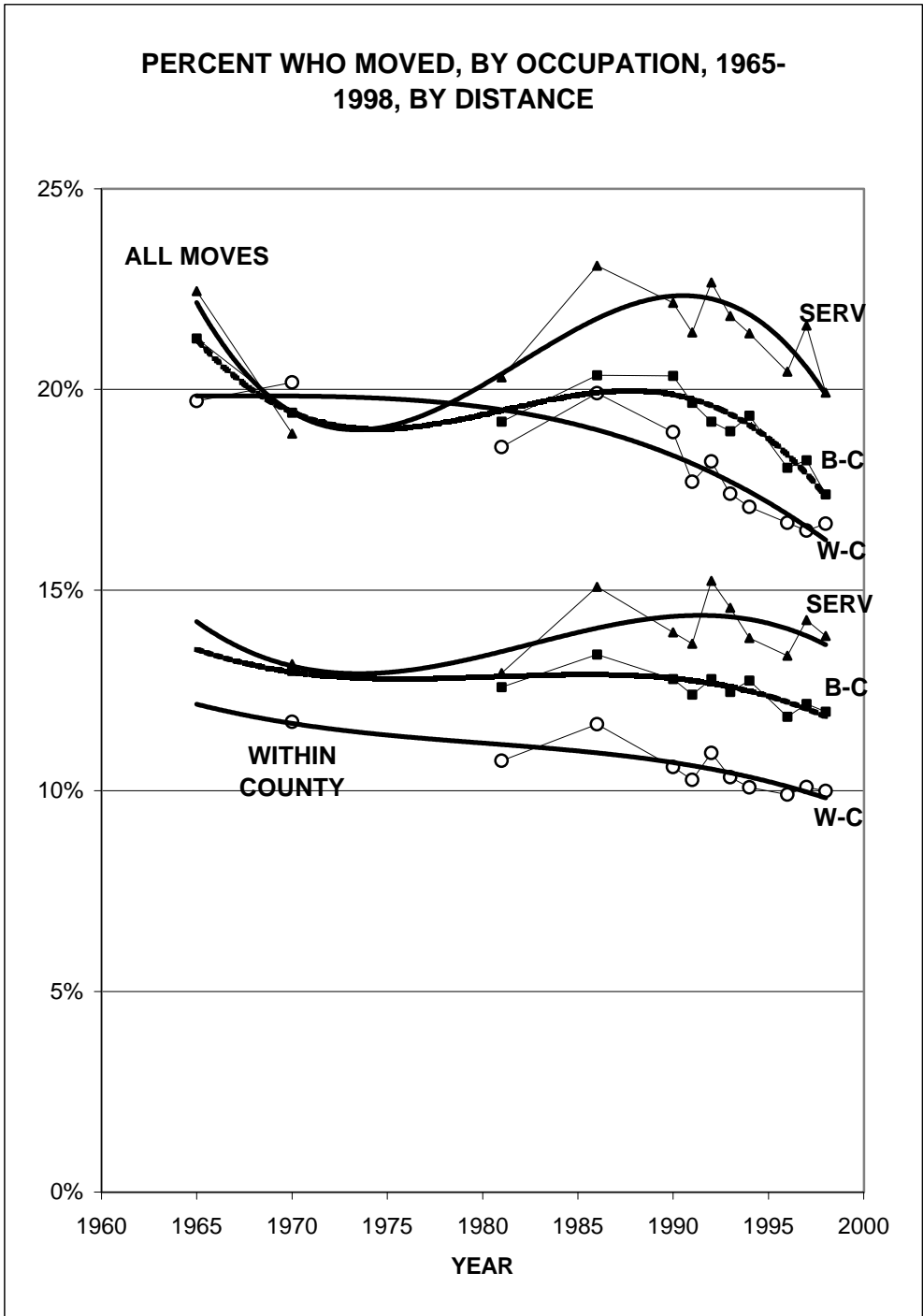
**Figure 7. Residential Mobility, 1975-1998, by Home Ownership, by Distance.**  
 (Source: Analysis of Current Population Surveys.)



**Figure 8. Long-Distance Residential Mobility of Renters, 1976-98, by Age.**  
 (Source: Analysis of Current Population Surveys.)

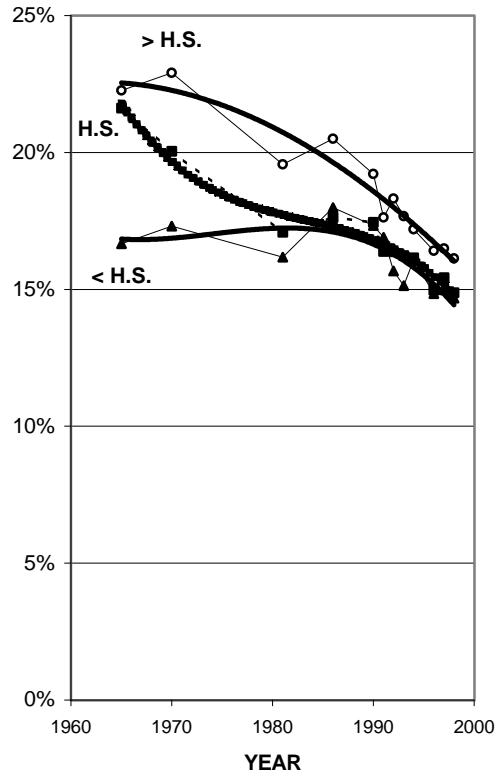


**Figure 9. Residential Mobility, by Race, 1965-1998, by Distance.**  
 (Source: Analysis of Current Population Surveys.)  
 (Key: NW - Nonwhite; W - White.)

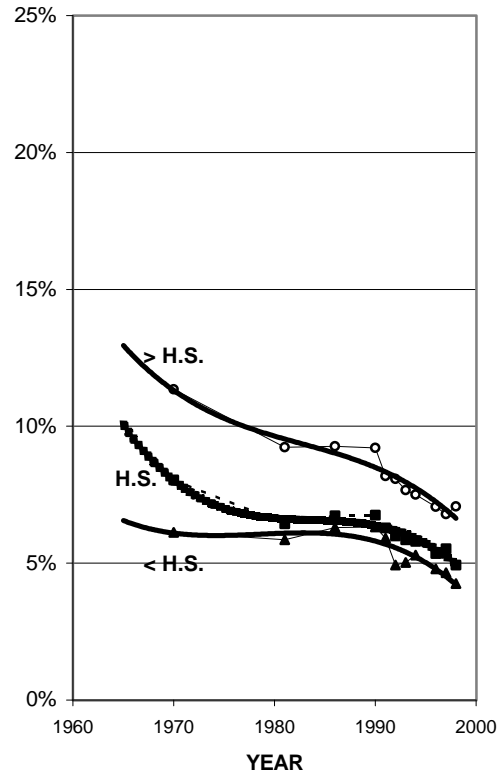


**Figure 10. Residential Mobility, by Occupational Type, 1965-1998, by Distance.**  
 (Source: Analysis of Current Population Surveys.)  
 (Key: SERV - Service; B-C - Blue-Collar; W-C - White Collar.)

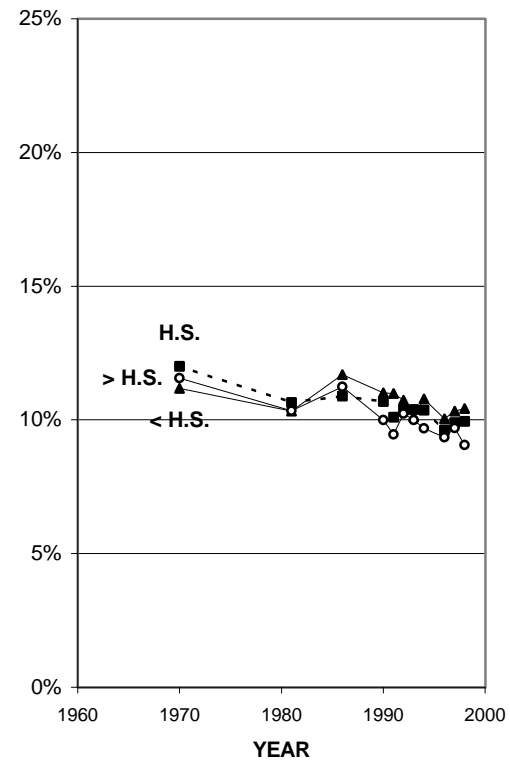
**PERCENT WHO MOVED, 1965-1998,  
BY EDUCATION**



**PERCENT WHO MOVED ACROSS  
COUNTIES, 1970-1998, BY EDUCATION**



**PERCENT WHO MOVED ACROSS  
COUNTY, 1970-1998, BY EDUCATION**



**Figure 11. Residential Mobility, 1975-1998, by Respondent's Educational Attainment, by Distance**  
(Source: Analysis of Current Population Surveys.)  
(Key: > .H.S. - Education after high school; H.S. - Graduated high school; < H.S. - Did not graduate high school.)

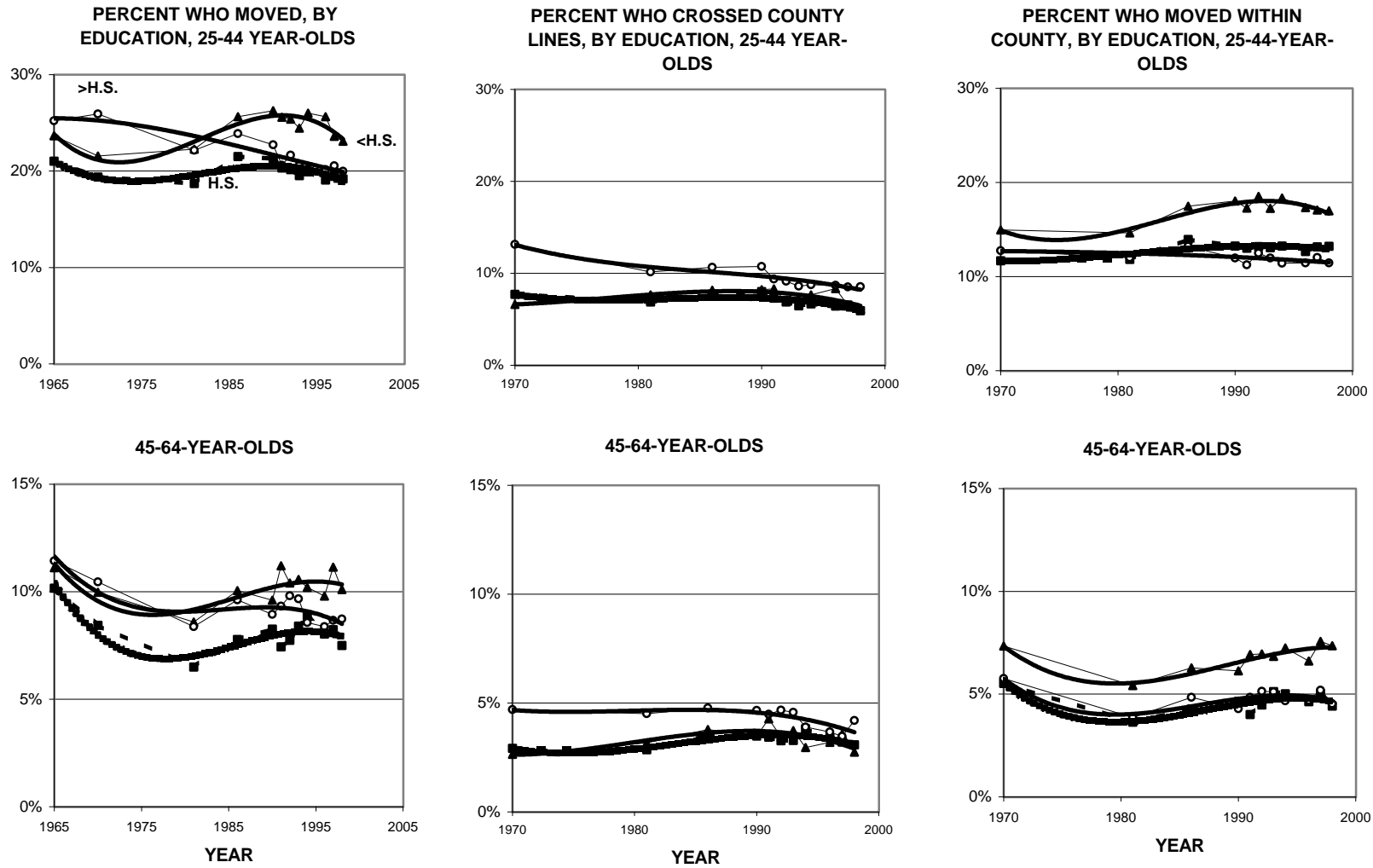


Figure 12. Residential Mobility by Respondent's Education and Age, by Distance.

(Source: Analysis of Current Population Surveys.)

(Key: > H.S. - Education after high school; H.S. - Graduated high school; < H.S. - Did not graduate high school.)