A faint, grayscale background image showing a group of children, possibly orphans, sitting on the steps of a train. The train has multiple sets of parallel tracks visible in the distance.

# Geography and Opportunity: Evidence from the Orphan Trains

Scott Abrahams   Dan Keniston

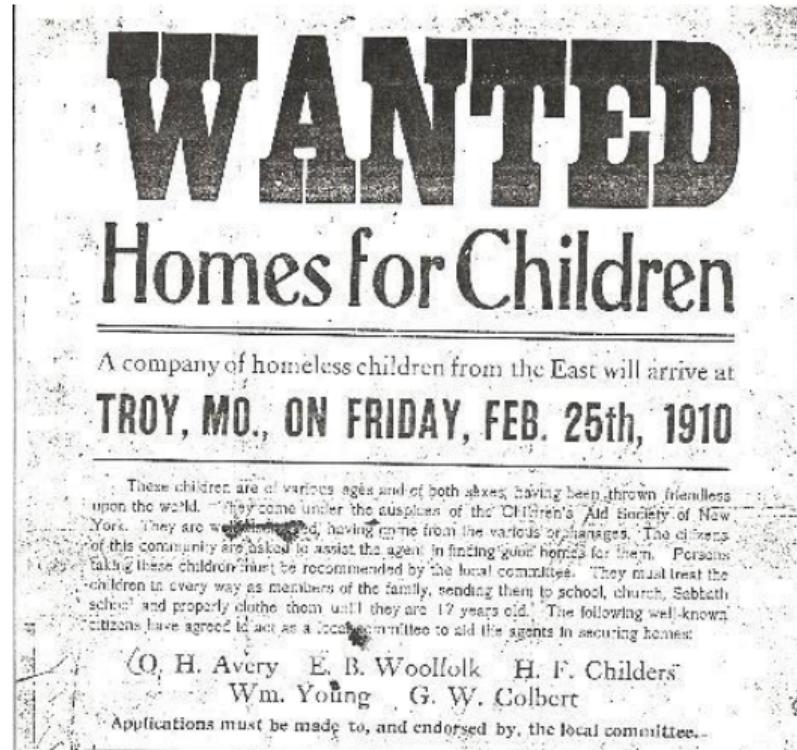
Louisiana State University

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# What was the Orphan Train movement?

Between 1853 and 1929, about 200,000 children sent from East Coast cities to new homes in distant locations

- A charitable, economical solution to endemic urban child destitution, criminality
- Managed entirely by private charitable organizations
- Key feature: “The decision about where to place a child was made almost entirely on the basis of which alternative was most readily available at the moment the child needed help.” (O’Connor, 2001)



# Research Questions:

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## 1: What was the effect of going West?

- Compare long-run outcomes of children sent West on orphan trains with those that stayed in NYC
- Combined effect of place and family vs. foster household
- Identified by annual variation in share of children sent West

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## 1: What was the effect of going West?

- Compare long-run outcomes of children sent West on orphan trains with those that stayed in NYC
- Combined effect of place and family vs. foster household
- Identified by annual variation in share of children sent West

## 2: How did characteristics of the destination affect children's outcomes?

- Compare outcomes of children sent to counties with varying opportunities
- Effect of place and foster household
- Identified by random assignment to destination

# Data: The New York Juvenile Asylum records

- “Company Books”: train records of children sent West
  - Date, destination sent, name of foster
- “Reception Register”: background data on children
  - Child birth year, nationality, education, reason admitted
  - Parent mortality, sobriety, occupation, religion

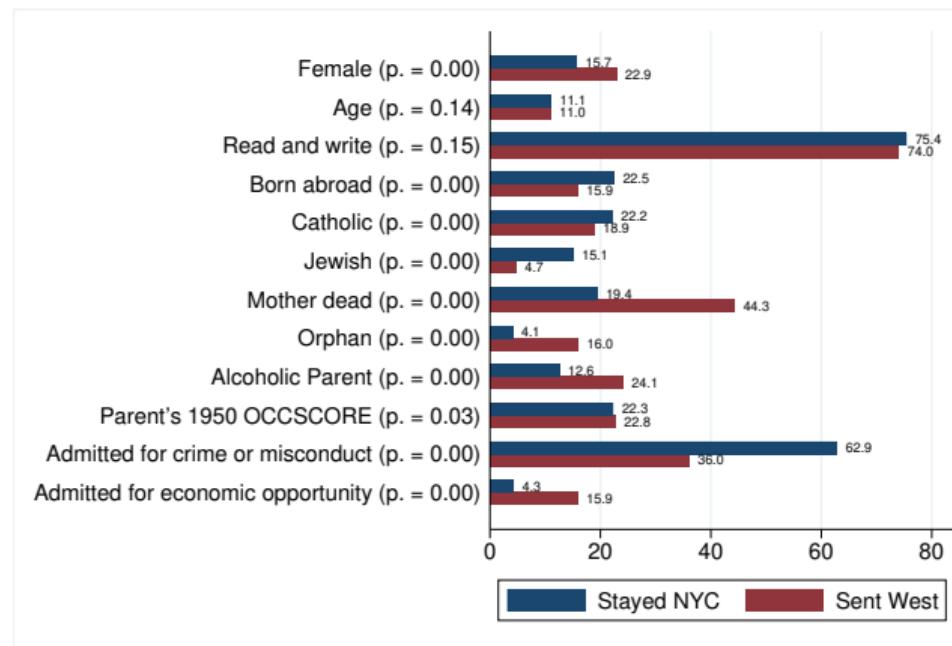
144-23

Number	Date	Name	Age	Nativity	By whom Committed	Whose Request	Cause	Education	Parents
33,920	1899	Mch. 31. Annie Sleix	July 23, 1898.	Very	Orphaned Grandmother	Autumn	1378 Ave. A.	1378 Ave. A.	Joseph. No dead.
Residence		Nativity	Occupation	Habits	Religion	Notice	Disposition	Date	
1378 Ave. A.		Polonia	Cigar Mfr. Imp. Prof.			Address to father deceased in this April 1, at 1378 Ave. A. 350 p.m. E.M.K.	Reform	May 6	
Previous Commitments	None.			Date of Application	References of Applicant				
Father died May 6, 1899.									
Name, Residence and Relation of Applicant for Discharge					Report of Superintendent	Health	Department	Grade	Class
Result of Inquiries as to Parents and Applicant by					13 TO GO WEST NOV 1900 A.C. Marling, CHAIRMAN				
See preceding page.									

# Who were the Orphan Train riders?

- Children were sent West when not claimed by relatives
- Few were “true” orphans
- American-born Protestants most likely to be sent

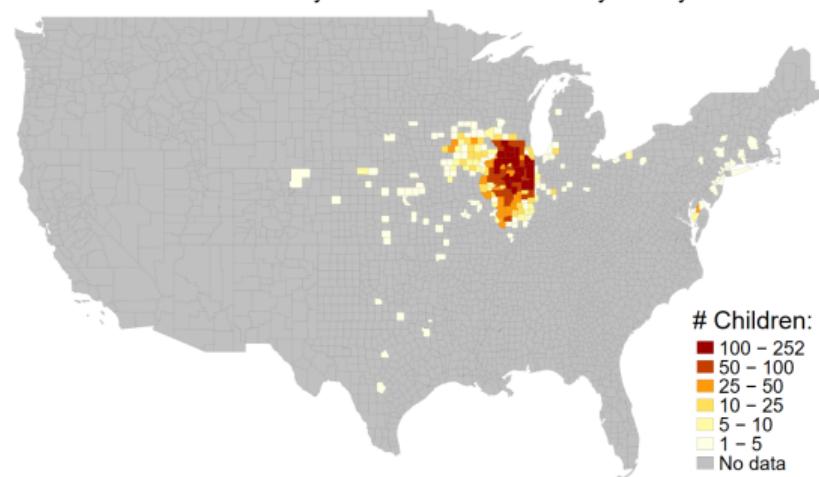
Key feature: No evidence that NYC staff matched children to Western destinations, or were even aware of the characteristics of those destinations.



# When and where did the “Orphans” go?

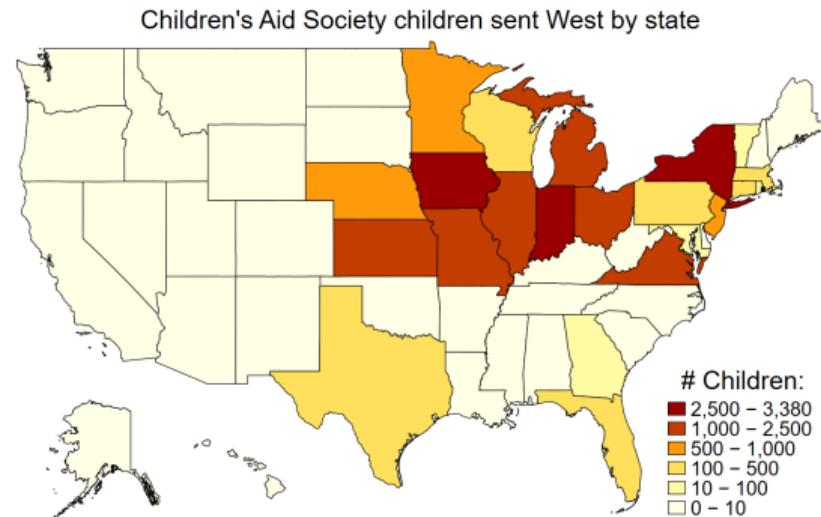
- NYJA children mostly sent to Illinois, Iowa
  - Today's presentation focuses on these children

NY Juvenile Asylum children sent West by county



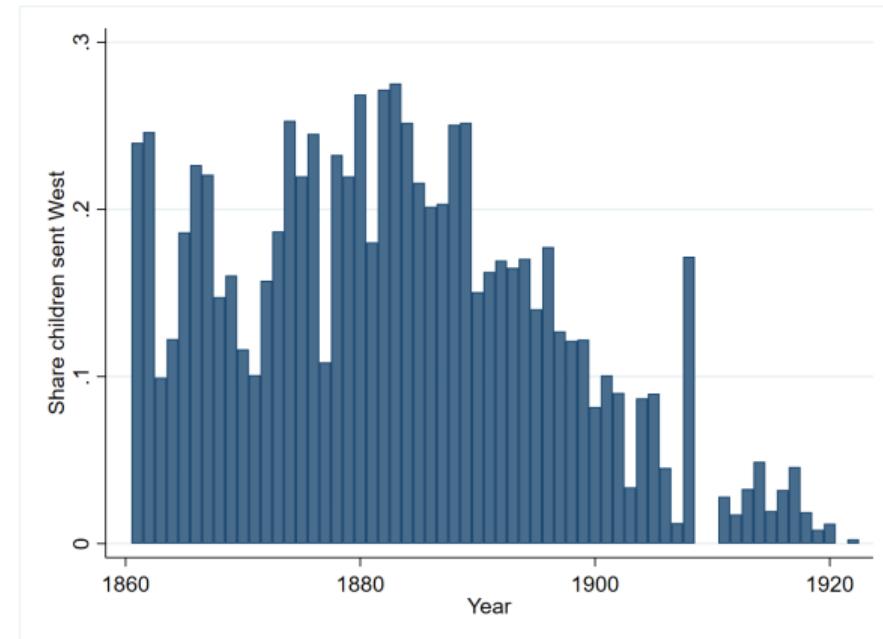
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- Other agencies (e.g. CAS) sent children to a much wider range of locations.



# When and where did the “Orphans” go?

- NYJA children mostly sent to Illinois, Iowa
  - Today's presentation focuses on these children
- Other agencies (e.g. CAS) sent children to a much wider range of locations.
- Substantial variation in share sent West per year



# What happened to the “Orphans”?

We link children sent West with 1870-1940 Censuses, matching on name, age, birthplace, foster name, destination state. N = 7,961.

Boys sent West were later more likely to live on a farm, have lower earning occupations, and be less likely to marry.

	OLS			IV		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	On farm	Occ score	Married	On farm	Occ score	Married
West	0.149*** (0.0104)	-1.789*** (0.319)	-0.0123 (0.0101)	0.405** (0.203)	-22.54*** (8.413)	-0.758*** (0.275)

Standard errors in parentheses. Controls: age, age-squared, Census year.

\*  $p < 0.1$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

# What happened to the “Orphans”?

Being sent to a high manufacturing area is a strong predictor of a child's later occupational earnings score.

	Location chars.	Child chars.								N	
	Fraction in manufacturing	Fraction of kids in school	Both parents deceased	Admitted for misconduct	Any prior education	Age sent West	Jewish	Catholic	Born abroad	Parent occ score	
(1)	17.55*** (6.59)	5.10* (2.85)									4446
(2)	15.74** (6.69)	4.93* (2.98)	1.22** (0.55)	0.54 (0.42)	0.55 (0.51)	-0.01 (0.08)					4265
(3)	20.51*** (7.92)	4.96 (5.39)	1.29* (0.67)	0.62 (0.49)	0.84 (0.62)	-0.01 (0.11)	2.32 (1.97)	0.72 (0.58)	-0.22 (0.71)	0.017 (0.03)	2778

Standard errors in parentheses. Additional controls: age, age-squared, Census year. Outcome is occ score in all three regressions.

\*  $p < 0.1$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

# Conclusion/next steps

## Further sources of data: (currently digitizing)

- Children's Aid Society: Huge program (113,503 children, 1853-1918), sent to all regions of the US
  - Sent whole families West-similar to Moving to Opportunity program
- NY Foundling Hospital: Randomly matched children to destination *and to foster household*

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## Next Steps:

- Disentangle location vs. foster HH effects
- Demand for children—benevolence or cheap labor?