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America's Forgotten People and Places: Ending the Legacy of Poverty in the Rural South

Joyce E. Allen-Smith, Ronald C. Wimberley, and Libby V. Morris

ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the longstanding impoverishment of the rural South and three of its subregions–Appalachia, the Mississippi Delta, and the Black Belt. The poor quality of life in rural Appalachia and along the Mississippi Delta has been publically acknowledged by programs and commissions for improving conditions. However, the more comprehensive Black Belt subregion that links parts of Southern Appalachia and the Southern Delta has not received such regional policy attention. While the South as a whole is more rural and impoverished than other U.S. regions, this is largely due to the poor conditions in the Black Belt. In addition to region and rurality, a third feature of the pattern is race. It is in the Black Belt that the South's poor socioeconomic conditions are most concentrated. Policy and program attention are needed for regional solutions that take rurality and race into account along with demographic and other subregional characteristics.

Key Words: *Appalachia, Black Belt, Mississippi Delta, policy, poverty, quality of life, rural, South.*

As we begin a new century, the rural South continues to struggle with problems that have plagued it through the twentieth century—persistent poverty and uneven development. Geographic areas of concentrated poverty are scattered across the South from Appalachia through the Lower Rio Grande Valley and including the Black Belt from Virginia to Texas. Every southern state except Delaware contains a group of contiguous counties with relatively high poverty rates, and these counties lag behind the rest of the United States on key indicators of socioeconomic well-being. Living in these pockets of poverty diminishes the life chances of adults and especially children. As Duncan points out, "It is harder to be poor and harder to escape poverty in depressed communities (p. 131)."

The South does not quite have a monopoly on areas with concentrated poverty. Indeed, persistently poor counties and uneven development can be found in every region. Yet the greatest concentration of poverty is in the South. More than four in ten of the nation's poor are southerners (Wimberley and Morris 1996, p. 43). Furthermore, the region does not

Allen-Smith is an Associate Professor in the Department of Agricultural and Consumer Economics at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; Wimberley is a William Neal Reynolds Professor of Sociology at North Carolina State University; and Morris is an Associate Professor and the Graduate Cordinator in the Institute of Higher Education at the University of Georgia.

share proportionally in the prosperity enjoyed by the nation as a whole or in other U.S. regions.

In this analysis we review socioeconomic conditions for several high-poverty areas of the rural South, examine the characteristics of the population in these distressed areas, report factors found to contribute to impoverished conditions, and review past policies and programs to alleviate poverty and promote economic development. Our focus is on Appalachia and the Mississippi Delta along with the larger southern Black Belt subregion that connects them.

Appalachia

Appalachia has "symbolized poverty, exploitation and regional underdevelopment" (Billings and Tickamyer, p. 7). The report issued by the President's Regional Commission in 1964 characterized Appalachia as "a region apart—geographically and statistically." The Commission found that Appalachia trailed the nation in income and education levels and in population and employment growth and surpassed the nation in poverty and unemployment rates. The boundaries for the area officially defined as Appalachia were set by Congress and thus reflect political considerations.

Stretching from New York to Mississippi, Appalachia is a subregion of the Northeast, Midwest, and South. It encompasses 404 counties in 13 states. Three-fourths of these counties are in the South. About 111, or 28 percent, of the Appalachian counties are classified by the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) as distressed due to low per-capita income plus high poverty and unemployment rates. A relatively high proportion of the Appalachian population lives in rural areas. Using the last classification of rural and urban geography as found in the 1990 U.S. Census, 53 percent of the Appalachian people are rural compared to 25 percent nationally (Wimberley and Morris 1996, p. 13). Important sectors of the economy include manufacturing and coal mining, and—more recently—services and tourism.

Stereotypical images of Appalachia have prevailed since the 1800s. Lewis and Billings note that Appalachia is depicted by scholars, policymakers, and reporters as "a homogenous region which is physically, culturally, and economically isolated from mainstream America" (p. 16). They concluded that "the creators of the Appalachia myth were not of the people they described, and what the inventors saw was refracted through their own particular set of cultural and class lenses" (p. 16). Moreover, Lewis and Billings found that generalizations about Appalachia were based on studies conducted in isolated rural communities. They contend that there is a body of sound research which indicates, "a much more diverse and dynamic Appalachia than is presumed to have existed (p. 16)."

Lewis and Billings' review of the literature provides some useful insights into the early history of the region and its economic evolution. Although the mountains made travel difficult, a network of roads and pikes along with the railroad facilitated access to markets and enhanced communication beyond the region. In addition to subsistence farming, early settlers engaged in diverse economic activities including raising livestock such as cattle and hogs, growing corn, harvesting timber, and trapping animals for their pelts. Early manufacturing industries included salt and iron and, later, coal mining. Lewis and Billings report that two Appalachias emerged before the twentieth century and noted that counties with sizable towns (i.e., growth centers) were at the forefront of the economic diversification. However, "counties without growth centers failed to develop much commercialization or diversity" (p. 20). The legacy of two Appalachias continues. One has poverty rates at or below the national level and has a vibrant economy. The other has relatively high poverty rates, unemployment rates, and a low ratio of jobs to people.

Parts of Central Appalachia—counties in West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee—fit the profile of the "other Appalachia." Indeed, Billings and Tickamyer argue that Central Appalachia "most closely resembles the stereotype of persistent poverty and underdevelop-

Table 1. Selected Socioeconomic Conditions in Appalachia by Subregion

Appalachia Subregion	Mean Household Money Income	Poverty Rate	Unemployment Rate	Percentage of Adults with High School Diplomas
Central	$23,858	25.9	10.2	53
Northern	$30,686	14.0	7.3	73
Southern	$31,858	14.1	5.7	66

Source: 1990 data from Cushing and Rogers "Income and Poverty," and Isserman, "Appalachia Then and Now: An Update of 'The Realities of Deprivation' Reported to the President in 1964."

ment and that consistently has social indicators far below those of other areas of the country (p. 9)." Notwithstanding, parts of Northern and Southern Appalachia are severely impoverished, particularly in some counties of Mississippi and Alabama as well as Ohio in the Midwest. Central Appalachia contains a disproportionate number of small nonmetropolitan counties that tend to be more impoverished compared to metropolitan counties.

Data from the ARC document the disadvantaged status of Central Appalachia compared to the rest of the United States and the rest of Appalachia. As reported in Table 1, mean household income in 1990 averaged only $24,000 in Central Appalachia or 61 percent of the average for the rest of the United States. By contrast, mean household income in Northern Appalachia averaged 78 percent of the rest of United States and Southern Appalachia averaged 81 percent. In 1990, 13.1 percent of the U.S. population lived in poverty. The poverty rate in Northern and Southern Appalachia was slightly higher than the U.S. average while the rate in Central Appalachia was nearly double the U.S. average.

Given the relatively high poverty rates in Central Appalachia, it is not surprising that the subregion had a relatively high rate of unemployment and low educational levels. Data show a 10.2 percent unemployment rate in Central Appalachia in 1990 compared to 7.3 percent in Northern Appalachia and 5.7 percent in Southern Appalachia. Isserman argues that the number of jobs per 100 people indicates a deficit in jobs in Appalachia and particularly in Central Appalachia and in nonmetropolitan parts of the region. Indeed, nonmetro Appalachia had 45 jobs per 100 people in 1992 whereas the rest of the nonmetro United States had 49 and metropolitan Appalachia had 51.

Cushing and Rogers provide evidence that educational attainment—a significant determinant of poverty—is lower in Central Appalachia than in the rest of the region. For example, only 53 percent of those persons of ages 25 and over in Central Appalachia had completed high school in 1990 versus 73 percent in Northern Appalachia, 66 percent in Southern Appalachia and 76 percent in the rest of the United States.

Living standards have improved in Appalachia during recent decades. Rogers and Cushing point out that, "while Central Appalachia might still be characterized as a 'world apart,' even compared with the rest of Appalachia, Appalachia as a whole no longer fits this image (p. 31)." Indeed, Appalachia is on par with the rest of the United States on several key indicators of well-being including infant mortality rates, home ownership rates, percent of occupied housing units with complete plumbing facilities, and percent of occupied housing units with a vehicle available.

The Mississippi Delta

The Lower Mississippi Delta Development Commission, chaired at the time by Governor Bill Clinton of Arkansas, elucidated the Delta as a place,

> . . . where jobs are scarce and job skills training almost unknown; where infant mortality rates rival those in the Third World;

> where dropping out of school and teenage pregnancy are commonplace; where capital for small farmers and small business is severely limited; where good housing and health care are unattainable for many; where industrial technology lags a decade behind and funds for research and development barely trickle to college and universities; where illiteracy reigns as a supreme piece of irony; [and where] the region has produced some of the best writers and worst readers in America (p. 101).

In a similar vein, Hyland and Timberlake contend that "the Delta is to the United States as poor countries of the Third World are to the industrialized countries of Western Europe, North America, and Japan (p. 77)."

The region, as defined by Congress, stretches from Louisiana to southern Illinois and comprises 186 counties in the seven states of Louisiana, Arkansas, Mississippi, Tennessee, Kentucky, Missouri, and Illinois. These counties are connected by their ties to the Mississippi River as well as their economic, social, and cultural traditions. Like Appalachia, the Delta is heterogeneous. Indeed, Reinschmiedt and Green found that socioeconomic conditions are worse in the Central Delta subregion (the 43 nonmetropolitan counties "lying entirely within the flatland Delta region in Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Missouri (p. 3)" than in the other two subregions designated as the Fringe Delta (nonmetro counties not in the Central Delta) and the Metropolitan Delta. For instance, poverty and infant mortality rates were higher in the Central Delta than in the other subregions while total personal income per capita and percent of population over 25 years who completed high school were lower.

Reinschmiedt and Green also note that economic structure varies by subregion in the Delta. In particular, agriculture—broadly defined to include agricultural services and the manufacturing of food and kindred products and textiles—accounts for a larger share of the industrial base in the Central Delta (40 percent in 1984–86) than in all Delta counties (16 percent). Furthermore, the structure of agriculture varies across the Delta subregions. Farms tend to be much larger in the Central Delta than in the Fringe Delta (659 acres versus 272 acres at the time of their analysis). The plantation system that evolved in the Central Delta left a legacy of uneven distribution of wealth that the region is still struggling to overcome.

The Black Belt

Within the South, however, there is an even larger but often unrecognized subregion that covers nearly half of the South, overlaps most of the southern Mississippi Delta, and claims a surprisingly large part of the Appalachian South. This is the historic Black Belt.

What exactly is the Black Belt? Taking the starting point from Booker T. Washington's use of the term, the Black Belt is a southern subregion of counties with greater-than-average concentrations of African-American residents. This is a social definition rather than one based on the geography of the South's rich agricultural soils.

Wimberley and Morris (1996, 1997) operationalize Black Belt counties as being in the 11 Old South states and having at least the national percentage of black population. In the 1990 baseline census year—and the latest decennial census at the time of this writing—the United States was 12 percent African-American. Therefore, counties where at least 12 percent of the population was black are designated as the Black Belt counties. There are 623 such counties in the 11 Old South states, a few others in the remaining southern states, and fewer still in states outside the South.

To consider either the Mississippi Delta or the southernmost Appalachians apart from the Black Belt is inadequate for understanding the socioeconomic conditions of the U.S. South. Alabama, Georgia, Florida, North and South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia are not in the Mississippi Delta. Neither are Texas, Louisiana, and Arkansas in Appalachia. But along with Mississippi and Tennessee, these states constitute the 11 states of the Old South and are the states containing the South's largest subregion—the Black Belt. The Black Belt connects the South's other subregions and pro-

Table 2. Selected Demographic and Socioeconomic Conditions for the U.S., South, the Black Belt, and Appalachia

Area	Total Pop. (1000s)	% White	% Black	% Non-metro	Total Poverty Rate	Non-metro Poverty Rate	Non-metro Black Poverty Rate	Non-metro White Poverty Rate	Non-metro % 25 and Over W/O Hi. Scho. Diploma
Black Belt (623 Counties)	45,250	69	27	23	17	23	42	13	39
Appalachia (404 Counties)	20,702	92	7	42	15	19	36	18	38
Total South (1,425 Counties)	85,446	77	19	26	16	21	41	16	39
United States (3,141 Counties)	248,710	80	12	20	13	17	40	14	31

Sources: 1990 U.S. Census as reported in Wimberley and Morris (1996), *The Reference Book on Regional Well-Being*, and Wimberley and Morris (1997), *The Southern Black Belt: A National Perspective*.
Notes: The census-defined South consists of 16 states plus Washington, D.C.: Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, Kentucky, Florida, Georgia, North and South Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, West Virginia, and Delaware. The Black Belt includes parts of the 11-state Old South: Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, Florida, Georgia, North and South Carolina, and Virginia. The South's Appalachian Region includes parts of Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee, North and South Carolina, Kentucky, Virginia, West Virginia, and Maryland. The nonsouthern Appalachia states are Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New York. The Black Belt includes 47 counties of Appalachia: 18 in Alabama, 17 in Mississippi, 4 in Georgia, 4 in South Carolina, 2 in Virginia, 1 in North Carolina, and 1 in Tennessee.

vides a common, socioeconomic denominator linking poor living conditions across the larger South.

A product of the 1700s and 1800s, the Black Belt is quite discernable even today. The historic Black Belt did not disappear with the rural and southern outmigrations of the early and mid-twentieth century. Neither did its poor conditions go away with the coming of New South prosperity in urban areas or with technological advances and social programs. The Black Belt's socioeconomic quality-of-life conditions remain some of the worst in the nation. As Wimberley and Morris describe the situation, "The Black Belt is still home to persistent poverty, poor employment, low incomes, low education, poor health, high infant mortality, and dependence (1997, p. iii)."

With one-third of the nation's people, the South is by far the largest demographic region of the country. The census-defined South consists of the 11 Old South States plus Oklahoma, Kentucky, West Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, and Washington, D.C. The Northeast and West each contain about one-fifth of the U.S. population, and the Midwest has slightly over one-fourth.

Like the South itself, the Black Belt is large both geographically and demographically. The Black Belt's 623 counties hold 18 percent of the U.S. population. This is over half of the South's population and is nearly as many as the population of the highly urbanized Northeastern United States. Some of these demographic details are provided in Table 2 along with data on several social conditions to be discussed. While the nation is 12 percent African-American and the larger South is 19 percent African-American, the Black Belt is 27 percent black and 69 percent white.

The South and its Black Belt are not only large in population. They also have disproportionately large shares of the nation's poor socioeconomic conditions. In light of the fact that the South has the major portions of Appalachia and the Mississippi Delta in addition to the Black Belt, this may come as no surprise. The South's historically high standings in impoverishment are well above those of the other major U.S. regions. Somehow the better socioeconomic quality of life gained by those living in other U.S. regions has left behind many people and places in the South, its Delta, southern Appalachia, and—particularly—in the Black Belt.

Unfortunately for the South, the 31 percent of the U.S. residents who lived in the South at the time of the 1990 census had 41 percent of the nation's poverty (Wimberley and Morris 1996, p. 43). Similarly, the South holds 40 percent of the nation's people who have not graduated from high school.

It is in the Black Belt that the South's poor quality-of-life conditions are concentrated. The Black Belt's 18 percent of the U.S. people experience 23 percent of the nation's poverty, and represent 21 percent of the U.S. residents who have not finished high school. Not only do these conditions characterize the region and subregion, such conditions are further associated with rurality and with race.

For example, the South is home to 45 percent—nearly half—of the nation's nonmetropolitan (i.e., rural) people. But these nonmetro residents have 55 percent–over half–of the nation's nonmetro poverty. As a rule, poor conditions in rural areas, as measured by various indicators, exceed those of urban areas.

The same pattern applies to racial differences. While rural quality-of-life conditions are generally poorer than those in urban areas, racial minorities in the South and many other regions typically have lower levels of living, and rural racial minorities typically have the worst situations of all. Wimberley and Morris (1996, 1997) show that poverty rates, the lack of high school graduation, and unemployment run highest among nonmetro blacks in the South, the Black Belt, and Appalachia. To illustrate with statistics from Table 2, the poverty rate of nonmetro blacks in the Black Belt is 42 percent in comparison to 13 percent for nonmetro whites living in the Black Belt.

While the Black Belt essentially encompasses the lower Mississippi Delta, it shares 47 counties with the area served by the Appalachian Regional Commission. With this in mind, how do conditions compare between the Black Belt and Appalachia? As shown in Table 2, the Black Belt has more than twice as many people as Appalachia—about 45 million vs. 21 million. And although 42 percent of Appalachia and 23 percent of the Black Belt are nonmetro, the larger Black Belt has numerically more nonmetro residents.

The overall poverty rate in the Black Belt is 17 percent and is 15 percent in Appalachia. Both subregions have poverty rates exceeding that for the South as a whole or for the nation. Nonmetro white poverty runs high at 18 percent in Appalachia. Within nonmetro Appalachia, however, the 36 percent poverty rate for blacks is twice that for whites. And the nonmetro Black Belt poverty rate of 42 percent for blacks is higher than the 36 percent poverty rate for blacks in Appalachia. Regardless of the comparisons, poverty rates are high by U.S. standards for rural Appalachian whites and blacks, and high for rural blacks in the Black Belt.

In summary, poor conditions are worse in the South than in other U.S. regions, and are worse for blacks than for whites. Furthermore, rural conditions are worse than the urban. When these factors of race, region, and rurality are combined as they are in the Black Belt, socioeconomic conditions are the worst of all.

The People Left Behind

The poor in the United States tend to share certain characteristics. A disproportionate number are racial or ethnic minorities, are children, live in female-headed families with no husband present, are poorly educated, have work-limiting disabilities, and live in nonmetropolitan areas. In the rural South, the faces of the poor tend to vary according to region. In Appalachia where 92 percent of the population is white, an overwhelming 85 percent majority of the poor are white, while in the Black Belt including much of the Lower Mississippi Delta, 57 percent of the poor are African-Americans. Although African-Americans are only 7 percent of the population in Appalachia, they are still besieged by poverty. In fact, they are over twice as likely as whites to live in poverty (Wimberley and Morris 1996, p. 37).

Also, the youngest U.S. citizens have the highest poverty rates. For example, 20 percent of children under five years of age were poor in 1990. In impoverished areas such as Appalachia, the rate was even higher at 23 percent (Cushing and Rogers). Because of the negative outcomes associated with childhood poverty (e.g., being more likely to drop out of school or more likely to be poor as adults), the high poverty rates for children suggest that another generation will grow up without reaching its full potential and the United States will not reap its full economic potential. For socioeconomic well-being and quality of life, estimates of the costs of childhood poverty in terms of lost productivity alone are staggering. The Children's Defense Fund estimated that the aggregate cost of child poverty for approximately 14.5 million children was $130 billion in 1998.

Only recently have social scientists used the concept of age-related dependence as a measure of well-being. Since virtually all children and many of the elderly rely on others for economic support, dependence ratios provide an indication of which places may be more vulnerable to poverty because of their demographic characteristics.

The U.S. elder dependence ratio was 20 per 100 persons of working age in 1990 whereas the youth dependence ratio was 41 youths per 100 persons of working age (Wimberley and Morris 1996, pp. 87–89; Morris and Wimberley 1997). Elders are defined as persons 65 years old or older while youths are persons below 18 years old, and the working-aged are 18 to 64 years old.

The overall demographic dependence ratios for the South and the Black Belt are essentially the same as those for the United States. However, due to the disproportionate number of whites in Appalachia and due to the longer life expectancies of whites, Appalachia had a slightly higher elder dependence ratio of 23.

Demographic dependence also varies according to metropolitan and nonmetropolitan locations. For example, nonmetro portions of both the Black Belt and Appalachia have higher dependence ratios than the U.S. average. Nonmetro Appalachia has an elder dependence ratio of 24 and a youth dependence ratio of 42. The nonmetro Black Belt has a lower elder dependence rate of 24 but a slightly higher youth dependence ratio of 47. Basically, the high youth-to-elder dependence burdens make it more difficult to escape poverty for those living in distressed areas.

In regard to escaping poverty, Duncan offers a vivid portrait of the Appalachian poor that may be generalized to other areas of southern poverty. She states that,

> Poor Appalachians live precarious lives in unstable, unpredictable communities, vulnerable to individual setbacks such as job loss, illness of a family member, or even a broken-down car, as well as to the pervasive arbitrary control of those in power. They become trapped in poverty because there are few opportunities for steady work and income in their own communities and few opportunities to develop the skills and educational background necessary to find work elsewhere (p. 112).

Factors Contributing to Poverty

Empirical studies have enriched the social-scientific understanding of factors that contribute to rural poverty. The studies can be divided into two categories. Some studies explain the variation in poverty at the community or county level. Other studies explain household or family poverty. The former studies have found that the percentage of families headed by women, the percentage of the population that is African-American, the percentage of the unemployed civilian labor force, the percentage of the population that did not complete high school, and proximity to a high-poverty county significantly affect poverty rates (Allen-Smith and Appiah).

The latter studies (e.g., Allen and Thompson, Thompson and McDowell) indicate that certain characteristics—including rural location, female-headed family type, presence of preschool children, race, and human capital—

are statically significant predictors of poverty at the household level. Still others have emphasized the importance of human capital—e.g., education, migration, health—in reducing the likelihood of living in poverty and promoting economic development. For example, Bellamy and Parks argue that improving human capital must be a top priority in Black Belt counties. They contend that without improvements, the Black Belt will, "continue to attract certain types of labor-intensive industries which may bring low-paying jobs or they will become chronically dependent areas (pp. 99–100)." This argument can also apply to Appalachia and the Mississippi Delta.

Some researchers (e.g., Schiller) contend that restricted opportunity, or discrimination, impacts the distribution and extent of poverty. Others (e.g., Bellamy and Parks) argue that a better understanding of the opportunity structure is needed. Recent studies have documented inequality of opportunity in education and employment in the rural South. For example, Duncan describes a social system in Appalachia where education, jobs, and training are allocated on a patronage system. She states, "The inequality is apparent to people on both sides of the [income] spectrum; they agree that your family's name—and which side of that divide your family has historically been on—is of the utmost importance in determining your opportunities (p. 121)." Hyland and Timberlake indicate the public schools in many Delta counties are poorly funded and largely black as a result of white flight. They show that per-pupil spending for education is much lower in the Delta than in the United States overall and that much of the disparity is due to differences in contributions at the local level. Hyland and Timberlake contend that, "This lack of local support for public education must be understood not only in terms of the poverty and subsequent weak tax base of Delta counties, but also in terms of race relations (p 82)."

The R^2 coefficients of determination for the statistical models with poverty as the dependent variable indicates that very little of the variation is explained. Thus, other factors beyond economics may be critical in explaining the continued existence of concentrated poverty. The sociological literature provides insights that can help enrich our understanding of factors that contribute to poverty. In particular, some scholars contend that fractionalism and fatalism play a role in entrenched poverty. Fractionalism refers to differences in attributes (e.g., race, ethnicity, class, age, length of residence) which pit one group against another and keep them from working together to improve economic conditions. Given the racial diversity in the Mississippi Delta, it is not surprising that fractionalism is often displayed between blacks and whites. According to Hyland and Timberlake, "the role of race and class relations in determining access to educational and political resources in the region has been fundamental (p. 77)."

Hyland and Timberlake also acknowledge that fatalism is "a dominant characteristic of interpersonal relations (p. 86)" in the Mississippi Delta. They explain that, "Partially conditioned by historical religious beliefs, many perceive their own destiny as controlled by forces larger than themselves. The trust that residents put in government or a benign boss to take care of them often leads to a lack of risk taking and a lack of personal and institutional accountability in the educational and business worlds (p. 86)." They further note that fatalism may be "as much an accurate assessment of risk as it is a product of a unique regional culture (p. 86)." Appalachian people have also been found to be fatalistic. Lewis and Billings report that fatalism may "have followed from the harshness of life in the mountains for some of the population (p. 7)." They contend that research indicates that the poor may have adapted fatalism as a defense mechanism although it was not a core cultural trait of the region.

Duncan's research on the patronage system in Appalachia helps to put the concept of fatalism into perspective. She notes that there tends to be a consensus regarding who controls jobs in the both the public and private sectors. She argues, "This concentrated power . . . means that one cannot challenge the local elite without losing one's own job or having one's relatives lose theirs. It is a complete system in which jobs are awarded on the basis of who you know and who you support. People throughout the area take the system for granted, and even those who want community change in the region feel that the system is too entrenched to fight (pp. 126–127)." Recent articles in the popular press (e.g., Janofsky) suggest that fatalism continues to exist even during periods of unprecedented national growth.

Swanson *et al.* suggest that a legacy of discrimination contributes to high poverty rates in the Black Belt. They define legacy as social values, assumptions, and fears that are transmitted from one generation to another. Factors that have shaped the legacy of African-Americans in the Black Belt include slavery, sharecropping, segregation, marginal employment opportunities, and limited educational choices (Swanson *et al.*). As part of the Black Belt, the Mississippi Delta has the same legacy. Swanson *et al.* empirically estimated the impact of legacy in the South excluding Florida, Texas and the counties that comprise Appalachia.[1]

As mapped by Wimberley and Morris (1997), Swanson *et al.* found that concentrations of African-Americans in nonmetropolitan counties were associated with poverty, service sector employment and unemployment. Swanson *et al.* concluded that, "pockets of southern poverty are not the consequence of the inability of their residents to improve their own conditions or of a culture of poverty, but are intrinsically tied to the historical fate of the region (p. 117)."

Federal Policies and Programs

The New Deal (1933 to 1939) represented the first large-scale federal initiative to ameliorate poverty and hunger, to spur development, and to improve living conditions among impoverished people and places. Initiated during the Great Depression, it consisted of programs to enhance the nation's infrastructure while providing jobs to the unemployed (e.g., the Public Works Administration), protect the environment (e.g., the Civilian Conservation Corps), and provide income support (e.g., Social Security and Aid to Dependent Families). World War II ushered in a period of low unemployment and growth in personal income. Despite the post war boom, millions continued to struggle to satisfy their basic needs.

Launched in 1964, the War on Poverty attempted to address the root causes of poverty. Programs were established to provide job training (e.g., the Job Corps), education (e.g., Upward Bound, Elementary and Secondary School Act which established compensatory programs such as Head Start) and to aid communities in planning and implementing programs to reduce poverty (e.g., the Community Action Program, Volunteers in Service to America). The War on Poverty, of course, did not eliminate poverty, but data indicate that poverty declined from 22.2 percent in 1960 to 11.1 percent in 1973. Since the 1960s, the poverty rate has fluctuated with the unemployment rate—rising during recessionary periods and falling as the economy recovers.

Given the estimated national poverty rate of 12.7 percent (34.5 million poor) in 1998 and pockets of poverty when the national unemployment rate was 4.5 percent, some have wondered if poverty is intractable. Others have suggested that the policy problem has been misdiagnosed and that appropriate strategies have not been implemented.

Regional development planning was launched in 1965 with the establishment of the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) and the Ozarks Regional Commission. In October 1988, the Lower Mississippi Delta Development Commission was formed. While these commissions represented opportunities for partnerships and collaborations across state lines, they have not been without controversy regarding programs and funding.

The ARC's programs and activities are aimed at improving transportation (e.g., the Appalachian Development Highway System),

[1] The dependent variable in the model was percent of blacks in a county. Independent variables included percent of labor force in manufacturing, percent of the labor force in the service sector, percent of the labor force unemployed, percent of employed population who commute outside the county for work, percent of the adult population that graduated from high school, and percent of families in poverty.

economic and human development (e.g., education, civic development), health care (e.g., the J-1 Visa Waiver Program to facilitate placement of international health-care professionals), and business development (e.g., the Entrepreneurship Initiative and the Business Development Revolving Loan Fund Program). In addition, the ARC targets assistance to the poorest communities through its Distressed Counties Program.

Programmatic disagreements surrounding the ARC can largely be traced to whether the emphasis should be on infrastructure for the development of places or human capital for the development of people. Moreover, the large sums of money expended by the ARC–$7.4 billion over 35 years–have been questioned along with the impact of those funds. And from 1981 through 1988, the Reagan administration attempted to eliminate the ARC.

In a landmark study, Isserman and Rephann conducted an empirical assessment of the commission. They used quasi-experimental control group methods to compare income, earnings, population, and per-capita income in the ARC counties with counties outside the region with similar characteristics (e.g., economic structure, per-capita income, population and income growth rates) in 1959. They found that the ARC counties grew significantly faster on each of the measures of well-being and that the results also held for Central Appalachia, the poorest subregion in Appalachia.

The ARC and the Lower Mississippi Delta Development Commission (LMDDC) differed in their activities and approaches. The LMDDC conducted hearings and listening sessions to obtain input from policymakers, community and business leaders, and the general populace regarding the economic problems in the Delta and alternative strategies for overcoming them.

In the final report, referred to as a *Handbook for Action,* LMDDC chairman Bill Clinton specified that the Delta needs to, "develop leadership; change attitudes regarding tradition and image; improve education at all levels; build institutional know-how and capacity; achieve comprehensive approaches to problem solving; improve abilities to function in a multicultural society; face race and class problems and bridge the gap; build on and protect existing resources; streamline institutional processes; increase capital for development; create and penetrate markets; improve physical infrastructure; [and] build technical competence." The LMDDC existed for two years, 1988 to 1990, and was then scaled-down into a development center that has had difficulty in obtaining funds from member states. Lack of state support jeopardized federal contributions.

In January 1999, President Clinton announced a "New Markets" initiative that would view economically distressed urban and rural areas as untapped markets for new commerce. Proposed activities include incentives for firms investing in high poverty areas, tax rebates for investments, loan guarantees, and interest deferrals. According to the administration, "New Markets" would cost about $1.6 billion over five years and generate $15 billion in new investment. However, Congress has not acted upon bills to move the New Markets program from proposal to action.

Conclusions

Regarding lagging growth and high poverty rates in rural areas, Deavers raised the question, "Do we care?" Currently, the United States enjoys unprecedented economic growth that provides an opportunity to close the gap and reduce inequality among regions and people. There is some consensus in the literature about needed programs and directions. The suggested strategies tend to emphasize both economic infrastructure development and human capital development. The scientific literature also points to the need to build sustainable communities, develop local leadership, and change the opportunity structure.

If the impoverished people and places of the South and its historically poor subregions are to finally improve to the level enjoyed by Americans in other U.S. regions, the twenty-first century must bring the political will to adopt and fund these strategies.

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