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Education and Socioeconomic Well-Being in Racially Diverse Rural Counties

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This paper examines trends in the socioeconomic well-being in rural counties where Black residents represent one third or more of the population. These racially diverse rural counties (RDRCs) are located exclusively in the rural South and generally have low levels of economic well-being. On a positive note, college education levels in RDRCs are found to have increased rapidly between 1990 and 2000. Regression analysis suggests that these increases were in part due to the concentration of Historically Black Colleges and Universities in the region. Local investments in K–12 education are also found to be linked to county education levels.

Key Words: Blacks, public education, public investment, rural South

JEL Classifications: R12, I21, R53

Two factors show a strong association with the level of family economic well-being in rural America: race and geographic location. U.S. racial disparities in economic well-being have been well documented. Historically, Blacks have lower returns to education and lower levels of educational attainment than Whites. Legacies of segregation and continuing discrimination in labor markets are contributing factors to persistent differences in economic well-being (Darity and Mason). Receiving less attention is the strong geographic dimension of racial disparities in economic well-being (Kodras).

The rural South has historically been the poorest region of the country. U.S. Bureau of Census Current Population Survey (CPS) data on economic well-being in the year 2001 indicates that in the rural South, 18.0% of persons lived in families below the poverty line compared to 11.9% for the nation as a whole.[1] Blacks show a particularly strong concentration within the rural South, with over 89% of all rural Blacks living in the region. Blacks also show an exceptionally high rate of poverty in the rural South (31.6%) compared to their national average (23.0%).

Blacks with lower levels of economic well-being are also highly clustered geographically within rural areas of the South (Cook). For example, Beale finds that in over half of the persistently poor rural counties with poverty rates above 20% in each U.S. Census from 1960 to 1990, Blacks are either the majority of the poor or their incidence of poverty alone

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[1] This paper uses 1993 U.S. Census designations of nonmetropolitan and metropolitan counties. Metropolitan counties generally have populations greater than 100,000 (75,000 in New England) or a town or city of at least 50,000. Nonmetropolitan counties are those counties not classified as metropolitan. For ease of exposition, we refer to nonmetropolitan counties as rural.

accounts for the total poverty rate of above 20%. In summary, rural counties with high proportions of Black residents are located almost exclusively in the South and many are consistently among the poorest counties in the United States. The chronically high incidences of families with low levels of economic well-being in these counties create serious barriers to economic development. Low income levels limit the tax base and the level of local public services that can be provided. Low levels of public services, combined with historically low levels of educational attainment, limit the attractiveness for business. Almost half of all firms surveyed in predominantly Black rural counties cited the poor quality of local schools as a major problem for their plant's ability to compete (Cook). As a result, firms demanding skilled labor do not locate in these areas and educated young adults are often forced to migrate in order to find skilled employment (Mills and Hazarika). Low education levels among those remaining in turn limit potential earnings, limit the local tax base, and constrain local funding for public schools.

State and federal support for public education can potentially assist local governments in improving area education levels, attractiveness for business, local labor market opportunities, income and well-being, and the local tax base. However, racially diverse rural counties (RDRCs) often have few inherent political advantages in lobbying for such support. As state and federal resources are increasingly limited and funding decisions are decentralized, localities must be able to document the effectiveness of local infrastructure investments in order to compete for funds. Even if state and federal assistance is not forthcoming, RDRCs need to clearly identify areas where local assets can be employed most effectively in order to improve economic well-being. But to date, few studies have formally identified the contribution of investments in education and other areas to economic well-being in RDRCs.

This paper uses 1990 and 2000 U.S. Census of Population and Housing data to examine recent trends in economic and socioeconomic well-being in rural counties with large shares of Black residents. Although these racially diverse counties are located exclusively in the rural South, conditions and trends are compared to rural U.S. counties as a whole for reference. County-level measures of public expenditures and their association with social indicators, particularly education levels, are then examined. This is followed by an analysis of the role that Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) play in providing accessible higher education in RDRCs.

Location and Population

Counties defined as nonmetropolitan on the basis of the 1990 U.S. Census of Population and Housing are designated as rural in this study.[2] The base U.S. Bureau of Census STF3C data for 1990 contain 2,300 rural counties. Consistent with the Economic Research Service. We designate RDRCs as those counties where Black residents comprise one third or more of the population.[3] U.S. Census data indicate that, under this definition, there were 208 RDRCs in 1990. The geographic location of these counties is shown in Figure 1. Consistent with previous analysis, RDRCs are located exclusively in the South and are strongly clustered. Furthermore, the concentration of Black residents in these counties is striking; although accounting for only 8.8% of the total rural population in 1990, 44.0% of the rural Black population lived in RDRCs (Table 1).

It is also worth noting that the concentration of Blacks in RDRCs showed no signs of dispersion between 1990 and 2000. RDRCs showed a slower rate of population growth between 1990 and 2000 (6.9%) than rural coun-

[2] The same counties are designated as rural for the year 2000 even though some of these counties might be reclassified as metropolitan following analysis of the 2000 U.S. Census data.

[3] Native Americans are the other racial group with significant concentration in rural counties. Predominantly Native American counties are not examined in the analysis because few counties with a third or more American Indians are located in the rural South (Economic Research Service). Ethnically diverse counties with large concentrations of Hispanics are also not examined in the analysis.

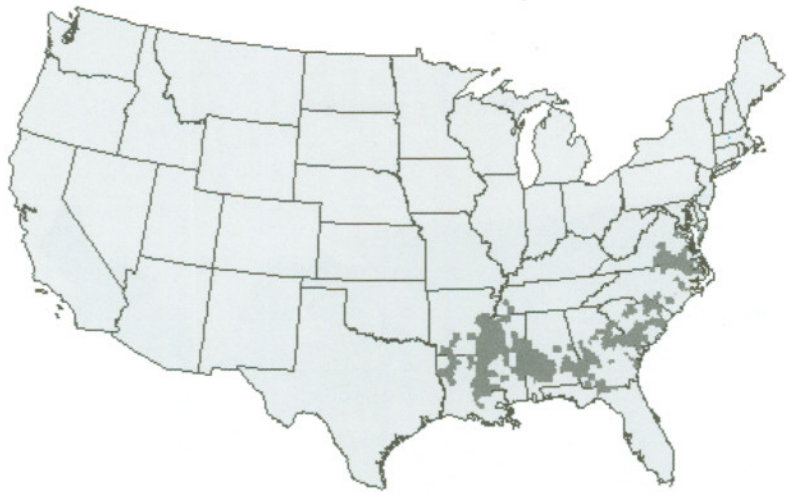


Figure 1. Locations of Racially Diverse Rural Counties (Source: 1990 U.S. Census of Population and Housing)

ties as a whole (9.7%). But Black populations showed a higher rate of growth in RDRCs (8.1%) than in rural counties as a whole (6.5%). As a result of these trends, both the percentage of the rural Black population living in RDRCs and the Black population as a share of the total population of RDRCs increased slightly between 1990 and 2000.

Measures of Socioeconomic Well-Being

The distribution of rural county per-capita income for the year 2000 is shown in panel A of Figure 2. Rural counties with average per-capita income below one standard deviation of the population weighted mean for all rural counties are located mainly in the South, in Appalachia, near the border with Mexico, and on Indian reservations in the northern plains. Panel B of Figure 2 shows that a disproportionate number of RDRCs have per-capita income below the rural county mean. In fact, 27 RDRCs are among the 100 poorest rural counties in the nation. Even within RDRCs there appear to be geographic differences in well-being, as Virginia and North Carolina RDRCs have generally higher per-capita income than do RDRCs in the deep South. Overall, RDRCs show significantly lower average per capita income than U.S. rural counties as a whole (Table 2). Similarly, the incidence of poverty is significantly higher in RDRCs than for rural counties as a whole. Two factors appear to contribute to this gap in per-capita income. First, rural Blacks have lower per capita incomes in general. Second, the Black and general populations have especially low per-capita income in RDRCs.

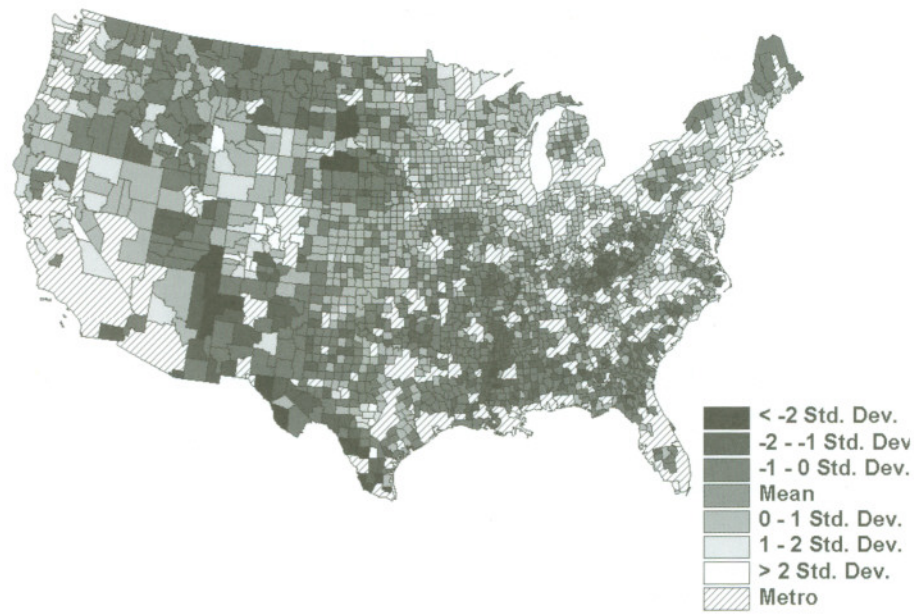
On a more positive note, there are signs that both the gap between rural Black per-capita incomes and those of the rural population as a whole and the gap between RDRC in-

Table 1. Population and Race

	Rural Counties			Racially Diverse Rural Counties		
Variable	1990	2000	Change (%)	1990	2000	Change (%)
Total Population	51,189,163	56,165,270	9.7	4,243,841	4,538,480	6.9
Black Population	4,499,601	4,795,709	6.6	1,980,005	2,140,034	8.1
% Black	8.8	8.5	−3.4	46.7	47.2	1.1

Source: U.S. Census of Population and Housing, 1990 and 2000.

Panel A



Panel B

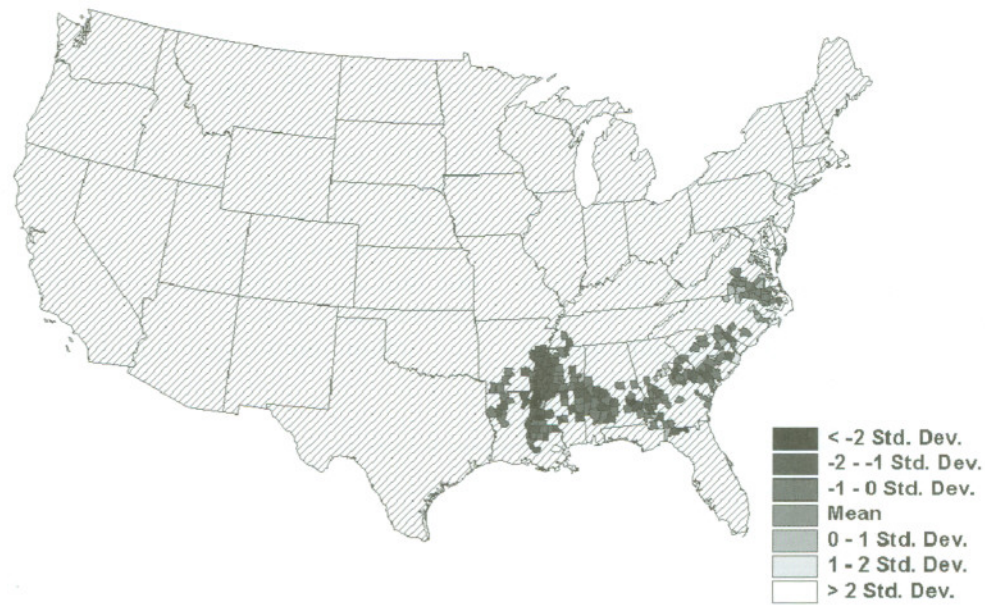


Figure 2. The Distribution of County Per-Capita Income in the Rural United States (Source: 2000 U.S. Census of Population and Housing)

Table 2. Economic Well-Being (in Real $2000)

	Rural Counties			Racially Diverse Rural Counties		
Variable	1990	2000	Change (%)	1990	2000	Change (%)
Per-Capita Income						
All	14,381	16,950	17.9	11,941	14,511	21.5
Blacks	7,804	10,516	34.8	7,196	9,884	37.4
Poverty Rates (%)	16.6	14.1	−15.0	26.0	21.7	−16.5

Source: U.S. Census of Population and Housing, 1990 and 2000.

comes and those in all rural counties decreased between 1990 and 2000. Black real per-capita income in all rural counties increased 34.8% between 1990 and 2000, versus 17.9% for rural counties as a whole. Real per-capita income levels in RDRCs grew 21.5% in the same period. Black residents in RDRCs apparently benefited from income growth among both rural Black and RDRC residents in general because they saw real per-capita income rise an impressive 37.4% from 1990 to 2000. Poverty rates also saw faster percentage point declines in RDRCs than for rural counties as a whole.

The socioeconomic well-being of a community is not, however, exclusively measured by per-capita income levels and poverty rates. Other indicators of social well-being are presented in Table 3. These indicators present a somewhat less optimistic portrait of changes in RDRCs in recent years. For example, between 1990 and 2000, the rate of workforce participation among 18 to 65 year old adults increased slightly in all rural counties from 59.9% to 60.6%. However, in RDRCs the workforce participation rate started at a lower base in 1990 of 57.6% and then declined to 55.3% in 2000. The rate of serious crimes was initially lower in RDRCs than in rural counties as a whole in 1985, but showed a far greater increase between 1985 and 1995 (up 49.2% versus 10.9%). Voter participation in 1986 elections was lower in RDRCs than for rural areas as a whole and fell more rapidly. Although the infant death rate in RDRCs declined more rapidly between 1986 and 1996 than for rural areas as a whole, by 1996 it remained 44.1% higher in RDRCs than for rural areas as a whole. Overall, the figures show that RDRCs have persistently lower levels of social well-being than rural counties as a whole, suggesting that significant investments to support economic opportunities and social well-being are needed.

Educational Attainment

The education levels of county adult residents also provide an important indicator of social well-being. Differences in adult educational

Table 3. Indicators of Social Well-Being

	Rural Counties			Racially Diverse Rural Counties		
Variable	1990	2000	Change (%)	1990	2000	Change (%)
Workforce Participation (%)	59.9	60.2	0.5	57.6	55.3	−4.0
Infant Death (/1,000)	10.7	8.2	−23.4	15.72	11.84	−24.7
Serious Crime (/100,000)	2,804	3,110	10.9	2,682	4,001	49.2
Voter Participation (%)	39.2	37.2	−5.1	35.6	33.0	−7.3

Sources: Bureau of Labor Statistics, National Center for Health Statistics, Federal Bureau of Investigation.
Notes: Figures on infant deaths per thousand are for the years 1986 and 1996. Figures on serious crime per hundred thousand are for the years 1985 and 1995. Voter participation rates are for the 1986 and the 1996 elections.

Table 4. Educational Attainment

	Rural Counties			Racially Diverse Rural Counties		
	1990	2000	Change (%)	1990	2000	Change (%)
% of All Adults Age 25 or Over						
No High School Diploma	31.0	23.2	−25.2	41.7	32.2	−22.8
High School Diploma	34.7	35.5	2.3	30.2	33.1	9.6
Some College No B.S.	21.2	25.7	21.2	17.2	22.0	27.9
B.S.	8.4	10.1	20.2	7.3	8.4	15.1
Graduate Degree	4.4	5.4	22.7	3.6	4.3	19.4
% of Black Adults Age 25 or Over						
No High School Diploma	50.1	39.4	−21.4	55.8	42.3	−24.2
High School Diploma	26.9	33.6	24.9	26.2	32.4	23.7
Some College No B.S.	14.1	19.3	36.9	11.9	17.6	47.9
B.S.	3.9	4.7	20.5	4.0	4.8	20.0
Graduate Degree	2.0	2.5	25	2.1	2.9	38.1

Source: U.S. Census of Population and Housing, 1990 and 2000.

attainment between RDRCs and rural counties as a whole, and between the Black and general populations within both areas, show the same pattern found for per-capita income. Among the general population in rural counties in 2000, 23.2% of adults 25 years of age or older did not have a high school diploma and 41.2% had some postsecondary education (Table 4). For the rural Black population 25 years of age or older, 39.4% had no high school diploma and 26.5% had some postsecondary education. Black residents in RDRCs showed even lower levels of educational attainment. In 2000, 42.3% had no high school diploma and only 25.3% had some postsecondary education. It is interesting to note that Black residents in RDRCs have higher rates of noncompletion of high school and generally lower rates of postsecondary education than rural Black residents as a whole but have higher incidences of adults with a B.S. or graduate degree. It is also worth noting that postsecondary education levels increased between 1990 and 2000 in rural areas generally and most notably among the Black residents in RDRCs, but education levels in RDRCs, particularly for the Black population, remain well below rural area averages in 2000.

Table 5. Local Government Finances

	Rural	Racially Diverse Rural
Total Revenue (U.S.$)	1,870	1,628
Total Expenditures (U.S.$)	1,828	1,611
Education	909	833
Health	189	239
Public Welfare	60	21
Police Protection	69	68

Source: U.S. Census of Government (state and local government finances).

Infrastructure

Low education levels in RDRCs and poor performance on other measures of social well-being could stem in part from scarce local public infrastructure in education, health, and police protection. Data on local government finances show that both revenues and expenditures are lower on a per-capita basis in RDRCs than in rural counties as a whole (Table 5). Lower total per-capita expenditures arise mainly from lower expenditures on education and public welfare. RDRCs actually spend more per-capita on health and roughly the same per-capita on police as rural counties in general.[4] Correlation coefficients between local public ex-

[4] The latter could be due in part to fewer private hospital facilities.

Table 6. Correlation Coefficients for Local Sector Expenditures and Associated Social Indicator

	All Rural Counties Spending in Sector	Racially Diverse Rural Counties Spending in Sector
Share, No High School Degree[a]	−0.13	−0.39
Rate of Serious Crime[b]	0.43	0.60
Rate of Infant Death[c]	0.00	0.04

[a] Coefficient is for the correlation between the county share of adults 25 years of age with no high school and local expenditures on public schooling.
[b] Coefficient is for the correlation between the county rate of serious crimes and local police expenditures.
[c] Coefficient is for the correlation between the county rate of infant deaths and local health expenditures.

penditures for specific sectors and associated social indicators are also revealing (Table 6). For all rural counties, the percentage of adults age 25 or older with no high school shows a slight negative correlation (−0.13) with local spending on kindergarten through 12th grade (K–12) education. In other words, in counties where local spending on K–12 education is low, the percentage of adults with no high school degree is high. In the RDRCs, the negative correlation between local spending and the percentage of adults with no high school is notably stronger (−0.39), suggesting that available resources for local education and educational levels have a particularly strong link in these counties. By contrast, the correlation between the rate of serious crime and local police expenditures is strongly positive both for all rural counties and within RDRCs. Thus, in counties with higher crime rates, more resources are being devoted to address crime. But in counties with high rates of high school dropouts, fewer resources are being employed, particularly in RDRCs, for local K–12 education. Infant death rates, on the other hand, show no correlation with local public expenditures on health care.

Lower expenditures on public education are particularly worrisome for those concerned about the intergenerational transmission of low levels of socioeconomic well-being in RDRCs. Bowles and Gintis find that educational attainment is the most important mechanism for the intergenerational transmission of economic inequality in the United States, with the transmission of earnings differences associated with race being the second most influential mechanism. It is less clear what role local educational expenditures play in promoting education attainment and, eventually, higher earnings. Hanushek suggests that school resources have little effect on educational outcomes and eventual earnings. However, Card and Krueger find that vast differences in resources devoted to the primary and secondary school education of White and Black youth in North and South Carolina had a strong effect on educational attainment and eventual earnings.

College Access and the Role of HBCUs

A number of factors other than recent low levels of local expenditures on education play a role in the low rates of educational attainment observed among Black residents in RDRCs. Lower returns on investments in education could reduce the demand for postsecondary education among Blacks. Lower parental income might also restrict access to funds for education among Black youth. In the rural South, the legacy of segregation is a particularly strong factor in the current low levels of postsecondary education. The effect of these policies continues to be felt across generations because of the strong crossgenerational correlation of educational attainment (Bowles and Gintis).

HBCUs have historically played an important role in fostering postsecondary education among rural Blacks. Historically Black colleges and universities were established to provide

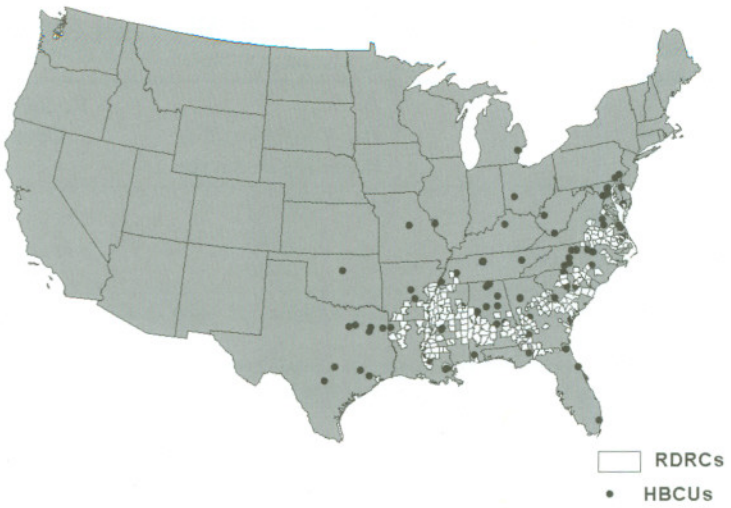


Figure 3. Location of Historically Black Colleges and Universities

equal educational opportunities for students denied admission to their States' original 1862 land-grant university system. The Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended, defines an HBCU as "any historically black college or university that was established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and is, the education of black Americans, and that is accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency or association determined by the Secretary [of Education] to be a reliable authority as to the quality of training offered or is, according to such an agency or association, making reasonable progress toward accreditation." This analysis focuses on the 105 HBCUs that are nationally or regionally accredited, 18 of which were established as 1890 Land Grants and 51 of which are publicly funded.

HBCUs continue to play a major role in the postsecondary education of Black students. In 1995, HBCUs matriculated 26% of all Black students enrolled in four-year colleges, awarded masters degrees and first-professional degrees to about one in six Black men and women, and awarded 27% of all baccalaureate degrees earned by Black students nationwide (U.S. Department of Education). The geographic location of HBCUs would suggest they play a particularly important role in the postsecondary education of Blacks in the rural South (Figure 3).

Given that HBCUs were created and supported in an effort to increase postsecondary education among mostly rural Blacks with historically restricted access to postsecondary education, observed low rates of postsecondary education might call into question the efficacy of HBCUs. A linear regression equation is specified and estimated to address the question: Has access to HBCUs increased college education levels in RDRCs? A number of empirical modeling issues arise when attempting to measure the county-level response of RDRCs to HBCU access. We briefly discuss the major issues of measuring access, identifying the marginal influence of HBCUs, and addressing potential endogeneity in HBCU location, before turning to the results.

Measuring Access

Improved access to postsecondary education can occur over a number of dimensions. The presence of HBCUs can improve the social, financial, and physical dimensions of access to postsecondary education among rural Blacks. The social distance associated with going to college can be reduced by providing an educational environment where postsecondary education can be obtained among individuals with similar backgrounds. More frequent contact with HBCU students and faculty in the community can also increase the perception that a college degree is a feasible and desirable

goal. HBCUs could make postsecondary education more financially accessible by providing relatively low-cost college education. At the same time, HBCUs, by being predominantly located in the South, decrease the physical distance an individual residing in the rural South must travel in order to enroll in a college or university. This reduction in physical distance is also likely to reduce the social and financial costs of postsecondary education for rural Blacks. In this paper, we use the geographic information system ARC-VIEW, along with data on college and university zip codes and county center coordinates, to generate simple measures of straight-line distance from the center of each county to the nearest HBCU granting a bachelors degree. Although not an all-encompassing measure of access to postsecondary education, the straight-line distance measure is expected to be strongly correlated with transport, social, and physical costs associated with HBCU attendance.

Marginal Influence of HBCUs

HBCUs are not the only, and often not the closest, college or university available to rural Blacks. In order to understand the unique effect that HBCUs have had on postsecondary educational attainment, the differential effect of access to a HBCU must be isolated from the effect of access to the nearest college or university and the effect of access to the nearest public university with a mandate to provide broad access to postsecondary education. Therefore, measures of straight-line distance to the nearest degree-granting college or university and to the nearest public university are also included in the analysis. The basic empirical model to be estimated is

$$y_i = \mathbf{X}_i\mathbf{B} + \varepsilon_i,$$

where y_i is a measure of the percentage of Black adults 25 years of age or older with a college degree or more in RDRC county i; $\mathbf{X}_i$ is a vector of the independent variables, distance to the nearest college or university (All), distance to nearest public college or university (Public), and distance to the nearest HBCU; and ε_i is an error term that is assumed to be normally, independently, and identically distributed.

Endogenous Location

One of the greatest concerns associated with the estimation of the above regression equation is that the location of HBCUs might not be independent of either county levels of educational attainment or income levels that underlie them. A biased positive estimate of the influence of HBCU access on educational attainment would arise if HBCUs were established in counties with high levels of postsecondary education. Neither the historical mandate of HBCUs to provide postsecondary education to southern, mostly rural, Black residents who historically had limited access, nor the fact that the per-capita incomes of rural counties hosting an HBCU were in fact lower in the year 2000 than the RDRC average for both the Black ($8,728) and general ($14,239) populations provides evidence to support this concern. However, two alternative regression models are run to assess the robustness of the results.

Under the first alternative specification, the effect of HBCU access on the percentage of the general population attaining a college degree in RDRCs is estimated. In this case, a coefficient estimate on the HBCU access variable of similar magnitude to that in the initial specification would suggest the observed county level relationship between HBCU access and postsecondary education does not stem from improved access among rural Black residents. Under the second alternative, the percentage point change in county rates of adults with college degrees is regressed on the same set of independent variables. Because HBCU location remains fixed in both periods, the HBCU access measure cannot be dependent on changes in the incidence of adults with a college degree.

Results

Regression results are presented in Table 7. In Model 1, the county percentage of Black

Table 7. Regression Results

	% County Population with College Degree				Change in % County Population with College Degree			
	Black Population (Model 1)		Whole Population (Model 2)		Black Population (Model 3)		Whole Population (Model 4)	
Variable	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE
Intercept	10.004	0.487	14.855	0.689	2.057	0.308	2.092	0.332
All	−0.072	0.036	−0.026	0.051	0.032	0.023	0.038	0.025
Public	−0.004	0.034	−0.081	0.048	−0.044	0.021	−0.044	0.023
HBCU	−0.058	0.010	−0.030	0.014	−0.016	0.006	−0.001	0.007
Adjusted R^2	0.226		0.096		0.041		0.003	
F-Value	21.150		8.300		3.955		1.237	

Note: SE is the standard error.

adults 25 years of age or older with a college degree is regressed on distance to the nearest college or university, distance to the nearest public college or university, and the distance to the nearest HBCU. Distance to the nearest college or university shows a negative relationship ($p = 0.05$), with the percentage of county Black adults with a college degree, whereas distance to a public college or university does not show a significant relationship with the percentage of Black adults with a college degree. Distance to the nearest HBCU also shows a significant negative relationship ($p = 0.01$) with the attainment of a college degree by Black adults. Thus, as access to HBCUs decays with distance, the percent of Black adults with college degrees declines even after controlling for the presence of other colleges or universities in the area. In fact, the parameter estimate suggests that a 100-mi. increase in distance from the nearest HBCU leads to a 5.8 percentage point decrease in the incidence of college degrees among Black adults. The significance of access to HBCUs suggests that they provide a unique stimulus to postsecondary education beyond just closer physical access to a college or university. We speculate that this stimulus stems from related reductions in social distance created by the presence of an HBCU in the area.

Model 2 regresses the percentage of all adults in RDRCs with college degrees on the same set of independent variables. As discussed, if the HBCU parameter estimate is of the same magnitude in this model, then the county level association between HBCU access and college degrees among Black adults could stem from a third factor that is correlated with both county distance from an HBCU and attainment of college degrees among the general population (e.g., HBCUs might be located in areas with higher levels of economic well-being). However, the parameter estimate on HBCU distance, although still significant ($p = 0.05$) in Model 2, is much closer to zero. Thus, the association between county rates of college degrees and HBCU access appears to largely stem from Black adults. The association between the closest college or university and the percentage of all adults with college degrees in RDRCs is now not statistically significant. On the other hand, the parameter estimate for the distance to the nearest public college or university variable is now negative and weakly significant ($p = 0.10$). Thus, the general population sees some decay in county rates of college degrees with increasing distance from the nearest public college or university, but the strongest association between HBCU access and increased attainment of college degrees appears to occur among Black residents.

Models 3 and 4 use the same set of independent variables, but in Model 3, the dependent variable is now the change from 1990 to 2000 in the percentage of RDRC Black adults with a college degree. In Model 4, the dependent variable is the percentage point change

from 1990 to 2000 in the general adult RDRC population with a college degree. The results from Model 3 suggest that the distance to the nearest college or university has had no effect on 1990–2000 increases in the percentage of Black adults holding a college degree. But closer access to public colleges and universities is significantly associated ($p = 0.05$) with increases in the percentage of Black adults holding a college degree. Access to an HBCU also continues to result in significant additional gains in college degrees ($p = 0.05$). In this case, living 100 miles closer to an HBCU is associated with a 1.6 percentage point increase in Black adults with a college degree between 1990 and 2000. For the general population in Model 4, distance to the nearest public college or university continues to show a negative association ($p = 0.10$) with the incidence of college degrees. But the HBCU distance coefficient estimate is positive and not significant. In fact, the *F*-test indicates that the regression equation as a whole is not significant. This, again, suggests that in RDRCs, the effect of access to HBCUs on improved rates of postsecondary education occurs primarily among Black adults.

Conclusions

The results of this paper show that RDRCs have lower levels of economic well-being and poorer performance on many indicators of social well-being than rural counties as a whole. Many conditions that underlie these low levels of socioeconomic well-being are not, however, unique to RDRCs. Low education levels, weak workforce attachment, and low wages are found in many other counties in the rural South. The prevalence of Black adults with low education levels arises from the cross-generational legacy of segregation, low demand for skilled labor in the region, and continued low levels of resources devoted to K–12 education. Low education levels, in turn, promote the continuation of these underlying conditions.

Some positive trends in RDRCs are, however, found in recent U.S. Census data. From 1990 to 2000, education levels among Black residents in RDRCs increased rapidly, particularly at the postsecondary level. The regression analysis in this paper suggests that these increases in postsecondary education were due in part to the access to college education created by a concentration of HBCUs in the region. The analysis also reaffirms that HBCUs continue to have a unique role in drawing young Black adults to college, as the percentage of Black residents in RDRCs with college degrees is 5.8 percentage points greater when 100 miles closer to a HBCU relative to the effect of being 100 miles closer to any college or university. The findings also suggest that local investments in both K–12 and postsecondary education infrastructure are linked to local education levels. Further research, including an analysis of the effect of access to colleges and universities at the subcounty level and the joint estimation of per-capita income and education levels, is needed to fully understand the nature of this link.

Policy options in most southern states to assist RDRCs to further strengthen local school systems are limited by the current fiscal climate. But the documentation of successes, like the effect that HBCUs have had on postsecondary education of Black residents in RDRCs, are important for preserving existing allocations and demonstrate that a future recommitment to public infrastructure can have positive effects on economic well-being.

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