

## **QUALITY OF LIFE TRENDS IN THE SOUTHERN BLACK BELT, 1980-2005: A RESEARCH NOTE\***

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### ABSTRACT

Previous research shows that the Southern Black Belt compares badly to the rest of the U.S., in terms of poverty, median incomes, mortality, unemployment rates, and educational levels. This study updates those earlier studies with 2000 and 2005 data to statistically assess these problems' recent severity, and examines trends since 1980 to assess the Black Belt's progress or regress relative to the rest of the South and the Non-South. I used Census and other federal data for the analysis. The Black Belt's education levels have improved substantially, nearly catching up with other regions. Yet compared with the rest of the U.S., the Black Belt lags on other indicators. This lag is narrowing somewhat for poverty rates, but not for unemployment or median family income. Perhaps most seriously, although the Black Belt's infant mortality has declined, it remains much worse than in other regions – and that chasm has grown dramatically. Government programs have mitigated such economic, educational, and health problems in the past, and should serve this role again.

Sociologists and others have focused on the Southern Black Belt and its living conditions for nearly two decades (Bukanya 2004; Carl Vinson Institute of Government 2002; Davis 2000; Falk and Rankin 1992; McDaniel and Casanova 2003; R. Wimberley 2008; Wimberley and Morris 1996; 1997; 2002), often advocating government action to attack the region's problems. As this journal's frequent readers know, the Black Belt is a crescent of disproportionately rural counties sweeping from eastern Virginia southwest to northern Florida and then west to the Mississippi Delta and eastern Texas, roughly corresponding to the old Plantation South. Collectively, the Black Belt counties also correspond closely to the Southeastern non-Appalachian "persistent poverty" counties (Morris and Wimberley 2002). No place is more Southern than the Black Belt, yet the region's substandard socioeconomic conditions distinguish it from the rest of the South, a paradoxical contrast with the "New South's" often-emphasized economic vitality of recent decades (Kasarda, Hughes, and Irwin 1991). Indeed, the Black Belt's presence accounts for the South's poor rankings on many socioeconomic indicators compared with the rest of the U.S.

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This research note updates earlier socioeconomic comparisons between the Black Belt and other U.S. regions, by examining trends in these data over a quarter century, augmenting recent related map-based analyses (Morris and Wimberley 2002; Wimberley and Morris 2003) with numerical pictures of the Black Belt. Specifically, I compared the Black Belt with other regions as to population size, poverty, median incomes, infant mortality, unemployment, and educational attainment beginning as early as 1980 (or 1979, for income-related data collected in 1980) and as recently as 2005, depending on county-level data availability. The analysis used data from the U.S. Census Bureau and other federal agencies.

Several factors evidenced the need for this analysis. First, updated statistical regional comparisons were needed to examine 2000 Census data and later sources; the studies cited above relied heavily on data from 1990 and earlier. Second, analyzing these trends over time helps establish how much the Black Belt's problems have persisted, and reveals whether some problems are improving or worsening. Third, prospects have recently grown for government involvement in solutions, and this study's findings should help inform such efforts. The 2008 national election was partly a referendum on extreme "free market" policies that began dismantling social wage programs and government aid to low income people around 1980 (Harrison and Bluestone 1990), and those free market policies lost. The new Congress and President are more inclined to intervene against social inequities than their predecessors, as exemplified by 2010's modest health insurance reforms. Even before the election, Keynesian economic policies had regained a foothold in government responses to the emerging economic crisis (Stiglitz 2010). Furthermore, one long-term goal of social scientists studying the Black Belt – establishing a Black Belt counterpart to the Appalachian Regional Commission – was partly achieved when the 2008 U.S. Food, Conservation, and Energy Act (2008) established the Southeast Crescent Regional Commission (as yet unfunded, except minimal startup expenses authorized in late 2009). This commission includes many counties in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia. Part of its mission is to "assess the needs and assets of its region based on available research [and] develop . . . comprehensive and coordinated economic and infrastructure development strategies" (Food, Conservation, and Energy Act 2008: 2232-2233). The Delta Regional Authority already serves a similar role for counties and parishes further west in Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee, and some Non-Southern states.

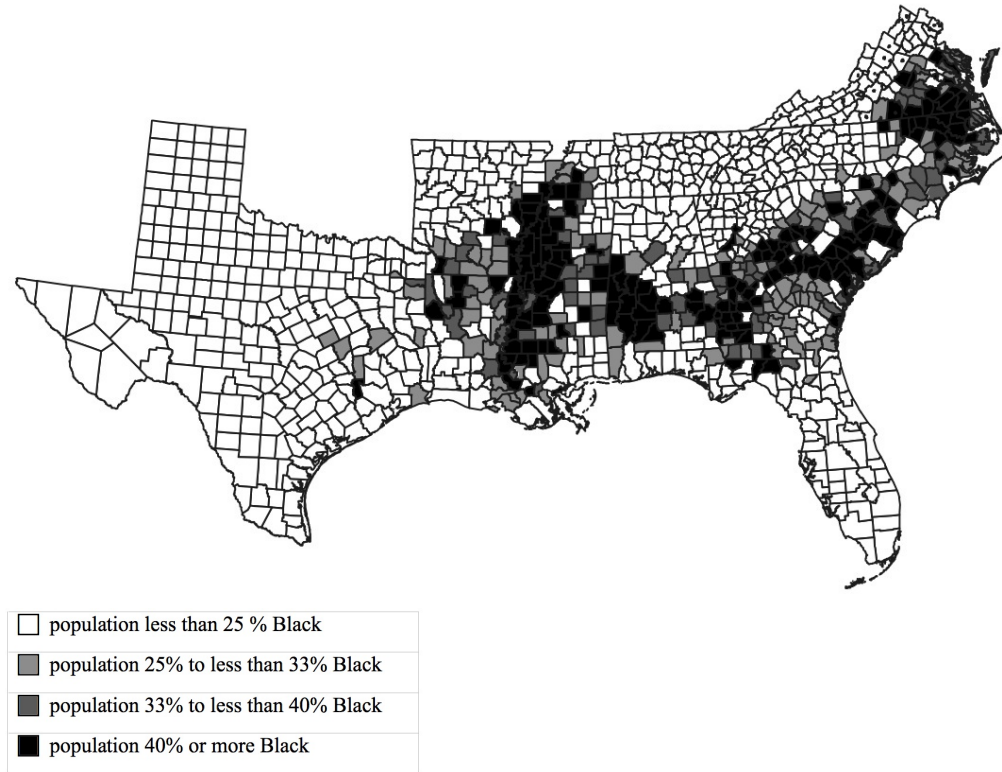
## DATA AND METHODS

W.E.B. Du Bois (1903) and Booker T. Washington (1901) originally described the Black Belt as a set of Southern counties with disproportionately high Black populations. Contemporary research consistently locates the Black Belt within the 11 former Confederate states – Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia, which I also call “the South” – and assigns a county to the Black Belt if African Americans’ percentage in its total population reaches a certain threshold. The threshold varies, ranging from 12 percent (Blacks’ percentage in the total U.S. population in the 1980 and 1990 Censuses), to 25, 33, and 40 percent (Allen-Smith, Wimberley, and Morris 2000; Falk, Talley, and Rankin 1993; D. Wimberley 2008; Wimberley and Morris 1996; Wimberley, Morris, and Bachtel 1991). Ronald Wimberley, Libby Morris, and their coauthors’ seminal work on operationalizing the Black Belt used criteria spanning this range.

Admittedly, any numeric criterion used to operationalize a complex historical phenomenon is partly arbitrary. In this study I have typically defined the Black Belt as former Confederate states’ counties whose populations were at least 25 percent Black in 1980; I used an additional criterion only to compare regions’ population sizes. Two principles point to this 25 percent criterion’s utility. First, an argument against using a smaller percentage: Black Belt scholarship’s emphasis on the region’s Plantation South legacy casts the region as distinct from the rest of the South. In the 1980, 1990, and 2000 Censuses, Blacks constituted 19 to 20 percent of the former Confederacy’s population, suggesting we conceptualize a distinct Black Belt as Southern counties with Black populations higher than this average. Second, a reason to avoid using a criterion larger than 25 percent: this study’s value would be lessened if it excluded numerous Southern residents who may be affected by the Black Belt’s socioeconomic conditions; and, if defined by the 1980 40-percent-Black criterion, the Black Belt would include only 7 to 10 percent of the South’s total population from 1980 to 2005, whereas the Black Belt defined by the 25-percent criterion includes 23 to 29 percent of the South’s total population during this time. Figure 1 shows the Southern counties that form the Black Belt by the 25 percent criterion, and identifies counties that would also meet the 33 or 40 percent criteria.

In this study I analyzed key quality of life indicators used by Black Belt research cited above: measures of poverty, median income, mortality, employment, and education. Comparing these indicators between the Black Belt and other regions requires county-level data sources, constraining the indicators available. Due to

FIGURE 1. THE SOUTHERN BLACK BELT, BASED ON 1980 POPULATION



confidentiality restrictions, government agencies withhold county-level data for many potentially useful quality of life measures, such as race-specific indicators and indicators for years not reported below.

Except where noted otherwise, I used data from the latest version of *USA Counties* (U.S. Census Bureau 2009). This source includes both early and revised 1980 and 1990 total population enumerations; I used the latter here. Unemployment rates are those from the decennial census, which are not fully comparable with Bureau of Labor Statistics rates. Because the Census Bureau now allows for multiple racial identities, beginning in 1999 the race-specific statistics used here signify people who identified themselves as that one race only. Race-specific 1989 poverty rates came from an earlier version of *USA Counties* (Haines and ICPSR 2006). Infant death counts for 1980 came from the Mortality Detail File (NCHS 1985). All dollar amounts are constant 2005 dollars based on the Consumer Price Index (CPI-U) (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2009). Note that the Census Bureau collected 1979, 1989, and 1999 income data during the following years' population censuses, and collected 2005 income data in a 2006 sample survey.

The analytic procedures calculated regional- and national-level statistics from county-level data. I checked computational procedures' accuracy by comparing their national-level results with official reports (either published or, most often, included with the source dataset) of the same national statistics. Only median family income differed from official reports, because the median could not be directly aggregated from county to regional levels like the other indicators. For this analysis, I calculated median family income as the regional or national mean of county-level median family income, weighted by the number of families in each county; the resulting national weighted mean is higher (always by less than 3 percent) than the national median family income provided in the dataset because the Census Bureau computed the latter directly from family-level data.

## RESULTS

Table 1 lists total, Black, and White resident populations of the Black Belt compared with other regions for 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2005, defining the Black Belt two different ways: with the 1980 25-percent-Black criterion used in the rest of this study, and with the 1980 40-percent criterion that identifies what might be thought of as the Black Belt's nucleus. Defined by the 25-percent criterion, the Black Belt accounts for approximately one-fourth of the South's population and one-twelfth of the nation's population. About one-half of Southern Blacks live there, as do about one-fourth of all U.S. Blacks. Approximately one-fifth of Southern Whites live in the region. Its population grew in absolute terms, albeit slowly, over the 1980-2005 period. However, it accounts for a declining fraction of the nation's and the South's population, a trend that holds across races. Of all White Southern residents, the percentage living in the Black Belt declined from about 23 to 17 percent over the period examined, and the percentage of African American Southern residents similarly declined from 56 to 47 percent.

Defined by the more stringent 40-percent criterion, the Black Belt experienced more intermittent population growth during the study period. From 1980 to 2005, the percentage of Southern residents living in this core Black Belt region fell from 10 to 7 percent. In absolute terms, the region's Black population hardly changed from 2000 to 2005. Its White population had a pronounced absolute decline from 1980 to 1990, though it later increased.

Below, results are limited to analyses of the Black Belt defined by the 25-percent criterion. I made two kinds of quantitative comparisons between the Black Belt and other regions: absolute differences, meaning the Black Belt's statistic minus the other region's corresponding statistic; and proportional differences, meaning the

TABLE 1. ALL-RACE, BLACK, AND WHITE RESIDENT POPULATION (25 AND 40 PERCENT BLACK BELT CRITERIA).

	1980	1990	2000	2005	
<i>Population, all races (1,000s)</i>					
U.S. total.....	226,542	248,718	281,422	295,896	
South.....	61,281	70,774	84,284	90,877	
Black Belt Criterion: 25%					
Black Belt	17,649	18,337	20,205	20,769	
Remainder	43,632	52,437	64,079	70,108	
Black Belt Criterion: 40%					
Black Belt	6,124	6,128	6,588	6,660	
Remainder	55,157	64,646	77,696	84,217	
Non-South.....	165,261	177,944	197,138	205,019	
<i>Population, all races:</i>					
Black Belt population as percentage of South and U.S. total populations					
Black Belt Criterion: 25%	% of South	28.8	25.9	24.0	22.9
	% of U.S.	7.8	7.4	7.2	7.0
Black Belt Criterion: 40%	% of South	10.0	8.7	7.8	7.3
	% of U.S.	2.7	2.5	2.3	2.3
<i>Black population only (1,000s)</i>					
U.S. total.....	26,495	29,986	34,658	37,852	
South.....	12,016	13,574	16,396	17,946	
Black Belt Criterion: 25%					
Black Belt	6,734	7,151	8,196	8,427	
Remainder	5,282	6,423	8,200	9,519	
Black Belt Criterion: 40%					
Black Belt	3,045	3,093	3,388	3,387	
Remainder	8,971	10,481	13,008	14,559	
Non-South.....	14,479	16,412	18,262	19,906	
<i>Black population only:</i>					
Black Belt population as percentage of South and U.S. total populations					
Black Belt Criterion: 25%	% of South	56.0	52.7	50.0	47.0
	% of U.S.	25.4	23.8	23.6	22.3
Black Belt Criterion: 40%	% of South	25.3	22.8	20.7	18.9
	% of U.S.	11.5	10.3	9.8	8.9
<i>White population only (1,000s)</i>					
U.S. total.....	188,372	199,686	211,461	237,483	
South.....	47,290	53,773	60,679	69,181	
Black Belt Criterion: 25%					
Black Belt	10,695	10,842	11,121	11,677	
Remainder	36,595	42,931	49,558	57,504	
Black Belt Criterion: 40%					
Black Belt	3,028	2,950	2,976	3,098	
Remainder	44,262	50,822	57,703	66,083	
Non-South.....	141,081	145,913	150,782	168,302	

Table 1. Continued.

		1980	1990	2000	2005
<i>White population only:</i>					
Black Belt population as percentage of South and U.S. total populations					
Black Belt Criterion: 25%	% of South	22.6	20.2	18.3	16.9
	% of U.S.	5.7	5.4	5.3	4.9
Black Belt Criterion: 40%	% of South	6.4	5.5	4.9	4.5
	% of U.S.	1.6	1.5	1.4	1.3

NOTE: This table presents the Black Belt operationalized by two different criteria based on the 1980 population: 25 percent or more Black population, and 40 percent or more Black population. Decennial year quantities are April 1 Census enumerations; 2005 quantities are July 1 estimates.

Black Belt’s statistic as a percentage of the comparison region’s corresponding statistic. Both kinds of comparisons indicate practical differences, and a poor outcome on either type would justify concern.

Table 2 presents poverty and income comparisons between the Black Belt and other regions. The Black Belt’s poverty rate for persons of all ages was near 20 percent in 2005, and has hovered around that level since 1979 – a much higher rate than for the rest of the South or the Non-South. The Black Belt’s absolute and proportional differences with the rest of the South and the Non-South did shrink somewhat from 1979 to 2005; the Black Belt’s poverty rate fell from 149 percent to 134 percent of the Non-Black Belt South’s rate, and it fell from 184 percent to 154 percent of the Non-South’s rate. However, this convergence was partly due to increased poverty elsewhere in the U.S. Similarly, the Black Belt’s child poverty rate (i.e., for persons under age 18) trended absolutely and proportionately closer to those of both the rest of the South and the Non-South. Nevertheless, the Black Belt’s child poverty rate remained quite high over the entire period – between about 24 and 28 percent, with a slight increase from 1979 to 2005 – making its comparative “improvement” a function of the other regions’ larger increases in child poverty.

Publicly released county-level quality of life data allow few comparisons between races, but race-specific all-age poverty rates are available for 1989 and 1999, as shown in Table 2’s rightmost columns. Though poverty increased in the U.S. from 1979 to 2005, national all-race poverty rates dipped in the late 1990s, reaching lows not seen in two decades. In the Non-South, in the Non-Black Belt South, and nationally, Black poverty rates improved more than all-race rates from 1989 to 1999. But Blacks in the Black Belt made even greater gains – especially compared with the Non-South, closing the gap vis-à-vis this region from about 10

TABLE 2. INCOME AND POVERTY INDICATORS (25 PERCENT BLACK BELT CRITERION)

	1979	1989	1999	2005	BLACK POPULATION		WHITE POPULATION	
					1989	1999	1989	1999
<i>Poverty rate for persons (all ages, percent)</i>								
U.S. total.....	12.4	13.1	12.4	13.3	29.4	24.9	9.8	9.2
South.....	15.7	16.0	14.1	15.5	33.2	26.4	11.0	10.1
Black Belt.....	20.5	20.5	17.8	19.2	36.4	29.3	10.0	9.2
Remainder.....	13.8	14.4	12.9	14.4	29.6	23.6	11.3	10.3
Non-South.....	11.2	12.0	11.7	12.4	26.2	23.6	9.3	8.8
Black Belt absolute difference with:								
Remainder of South..	6.7	6.1	4.9	4.8	6.7	5.7	-1.3	-1.1
Non-South.....	9.4	8.5	6.1	6.8	10.1	5.7	0.7	0.5
Black Belt proportional difference with:								
Remainder of South..	149	142	138	134	123	124	88	89
Non-South.....	184	171	152	154	139	124	107	105
<i>Poverty rate for persons under age 18 (percent)</i>								
U.S. total.....	16.0	17.9	16.2	18.5				
South.....	20.2	21.7	18.7	21.9				
Black Belt.....	27.0	28.4	24.3	27.4				
Remainder.....	17.3	19.2	16.9	20.2				
Non-South.....	14.4	16.4	15.1	17.0				
Black Belt absolute difference with:								
Remainder of South..	9.8	9.2	7.4	7.2				
Non-South.....	12.6	12.0	9.2	10.4				
Black Belt proportional difference with:								
Remainder of South..	157	148	144	136				
Non-South.....	188	173	161	161				



TABLE 2. (CONTINUED).

	1979	1989	1999
<i>Median family income (constant 2005 dollars)</i>			
U.S. total.....	56,155	59,666	62,432
South.....	48,209	50,243	54,637
Black Belt.....	44,072	45,313	49,689
Remainder.....	49,796	51,966	56,199
Non-South.....	56,155	59,666	62,432
Black Belt absolute difference with:			
Remainder of South.....	-5,724	-6,653	-6,510
Non-South.....	-12,084	-14,353	-12,743
Black Belt proportional difference with:			
Remainder of South.....	89	87	88
Non-South.....	78	76	80

NOTE: The Black Belt is defined as counties in the South whose populations were 25 percent or more Black in 1980. The Census Bureau collected the income-related data in this table the year after the year to which they apply. See text for definitions of "absolute difference" and "proportional difference."

points to about 6 points. However, just as noteworthy as these trends is the Black-White poverty rate comparison: in both 1989 and 1999, Black Belt Blacks had higher rates than Blacks elsewhere, but Black Belt Whites had *lower* poverty rates than Whites elsewhere in the South. For poverty, Whites actually seem to have benefited from living in the Black Belt as opposed to elsewhere in the South.

Unlike these poverty rate trends, from 1979 to 1999 the Black Belt gained no ground compared with other regions in terms of median family income (Table 2). Black Belt median income stayed at just less than 90 percent of median income in the rest of the South, and at 76 to 80 percent of median income outside the South.

Table 3 presents quality of life indicators not based on incomes: infant mortality, unemployment, and high school completion. Infant mortality did fall in the Black Belt at least until 2000, but proportionally the Black Belt lost ground against other regions in infant mortality during the period examined here. In 1980, Black Belt infant mortality was 125 percent of that in the rest of the South, and 133 percent of that in the Non-South; by 2004, the most recent year with complete county-level infant death counts available, those figures rose to 148 and 163 respectively.

The Black Belt's civilian unemployment rate is consistently 1 to 2 points higher than in the Non-Black Belt South and the Non-South, except in 1980 (Table 3). That year the Black Belt's unemployment rate was better than the Non-South's, but given the Northern Rustbelt's severe economic downturn at the time (Bluestone and Harrison 1982), this is perhaps best interpreted as an anomaly.

TABLE 3. MORTALITY, EMPLOYMENT, AND EDUCATION INDICATORS (25 PERCENT BLACK BELT CRITERION).

	1980	1990	2000	2004
<i>Infant mortality rate per 1,000 live births</i>				
U.S. total.....	12.6	9.2	6.9	6.8
South.....	13.9	10.0	7.5	7.7
Black Belt.....	16.1	12.7	10.2	10.3
Remainder.....	12.9	9.0	6.7	7.0
Non-South.....	12.1	8.9	6.6	6.4
Black Belt absolute difference with:				
Remainder of South.....	3.2	3.7	3.5	3.4
Non-South.....	4.0	3.8	3.5	4.0
Black Belt proportional difference with:				
Remainder of South.....	125	141	152	148
Non-South.....	133	142	153	163

TABLE 3. (CONTINUED).

<i>Civilian unemployment rate (percent of civilian labor force)</i>			
U.S. total.....	6.5	6.3	5.8
South.....	5.5	6.3	5.7
Black Belt.....	6.7	7.4	7.1
Remainder.....	5.0	5.9	5.3
Non-South.....	6.9	6.3	5.8
Black Belt absolute difference with:			
Remainder of South.....	1.7	1.4	1.8
Non-South.....	-0.1	1.0	1.3
Black Belt proportional difference with:			
Remainder of South.....	134	124	134
Non-South.....	98	117	123
<i>Persons aged 25 and older who have graduated from high school or completed a higher level of education (percent)</i>			
U.S. total.....	66.5	75.2	80.4
South.....	59.8	71.0	77.4
Black Belt.....	56.0	68.2	75.9
Remainder.....	61.3	72.0	77.9
Non-South.....	68.9	76.9	81.7
Black Belt absolute difference with:			
Remainder of South.....	-5.3	-3.8	-2.0
Non-South.....	-12.9	-8.7	-5.8
Black Belt proportional difference with:			
Remainder of South.....	91	95	97
Non-South.....	81	89	93

NOTE: The Black Belt is defined as counties in the South whose populations were 25 percent or more Black in 1980. See text for definitions of “absolute difference” and “proportional difference.”

From 1980 to 2000, Black Belt unemployment increased, whereas the Non-South’s unemployment decreased. The economic crisis that began around 2008 may be transforming these inter-regional unemployment trends, but the crisis is too immediate and data are too scarce to draw any such conclusions at the time of final revisions on this article. In any case, this study is concerned with long-term trends, not with business cycles’ effects.

On the other hand, Black Belt residents’ education levels have improved. From 1980 to 2000 the U.S. as a whole saw a 14-point increase in the percentage of people 25 and older who had completed high school, but the Black Belt improved by 20

points – from 56 to 76 percent (Table 3). By 2000 the Black Belt's high school completion rate nearly matched that of the rest of the South, and rose to 93 percent of the Non-South's rate. Of all the quality of life indicators analyzed in this study, this education measure is the Black Belt's best performance.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study statistically examined several quality of life indicators previously used to assess the Southern Black Belt's living conditions, updating them and tracing their trends as far back as 1979–80. By the twenty-first century's first years, some Black Belt indicators – unemployment rates, median family incomes, and race-specific poverty rates – had changed little relative to other regions. Other indicators improved while another deteriorated, but most tell the same story: in the past, living conditions for the Black Belt's disproportionately rural residents were much worse on average than for the rest of the U.S., and the most recent data show that they still are. Given this finding, the Black Belt's slow population growth – overall, as well as for both Blacks and Whites – is unsurprising (McDaniel and Casanova 2003). Note that, although the early-to-middle 20th century “Great Migration” of Southern Blacks to Northern industrial cities has reversed since the 1970s, too few Blacks have migrated from the North to the Black Belt to offset the latter region's diminishing share of the South's or the United States' Black population. Their personal knowledge of Black Belt living conditions may have motivated such migrants to go elsewhere in the South. Conversely, given that Blacks who migrate from North to South are relatively better-educated, those who did move to the Black Belt may have made that region's quality of life indicators better than they otherwise would be (Hunt, Hunt, and Falk 2008; Tolnay 2003).

Measured by proportional differences between the Black Belt and other regions, the Black Belt performed best in the government-dominated educational sphere, specifically in the fraction of people over 25 who had graduated from high school. Only this Black Belt indicator comes within 10 percentage points of its counterpart in both the Non-Black Belt South and the Non-South, a finding underscored by a Black Belt dropout rate for 16 to 19 year olds that almost equaled the Non-Black Belt South's rate in 2000 and actually bested it in 1990 (results not shown). Thus, it appears that Black Belt schools increasingly retain students until they graduate, *and* that these high school graduates often remain in the region. Still, despite the common American belief that individuals can avoid poverty if they exercise the good judgment to stay in school, and although education truly can boost non-educational dimensions of one's quality of life (Carl Vinson Institute of Government

2002), education's impact depends on social structural context. In the Black Belt, laudable educational advances have not yet brought this study's other indicators near national standards. Effective public policy reforms must recognize this fact.

The Black Belt's all-age and child poverty rates narrowed their gaps with the other regions from 1979 to 2005, yet these gaps remained large in 2005. The region's Black poverty rate can be described in the same way during the 1989-1999 period for which race-specific data are available. The race-specific poverty rates also tell a more complex story. In a sense, the fact that the White poverty rate is lower in the Black Belt than in the rest of the South is a positive outcome, but coupled with Black Belt Blacks' *higher* poverty rate compared with Blacks elsewhere, the White poverty rates signify racial inequity. However, readers should not assume that Black Belt residence always hurts Blacks and helps Whites. A study of 1980 data shows that both Blacks and Whites suffered higher infant mortality rates and lower life expectancy in the Black Belt compared with same-race groups elsewhere, and that Black Belt Whites experienced more excess deaths than the region's Blacks (D. Wimberley 2008).

Infant mortality performs worst of all of this study's Black Belt quality of life indicators. Black Belt infant mortality did decline during the 24-year period examined here, but not nearly as rapidly as infant mortality fell elsewhere in the nation. Conditions may have worsened since. In 2005, just after the latest county-level infant mortality rates reported here occurred, statewide infant mortality rates rose in some Southern states. Mississippi experienced the most startling increase from a rate of 9.8 in 2004 to 11.35 in 2005, on the heels of state Medicaid spending cuts that had recently gained political momentum (Eckholm 2007). This Mississippi case may represent a long-term national phenomenon. Krieger et al. (2008) found that premature mortality disparities between poorer and richer U.S. counties shrank from 1966 to 1980, during a period of welfare state expansion that included the Medicaid program, but widened from 1980 to 2002, precisely when welfare state programs were being decimated; evidence strongly suggests the policies shaped these disparities. The Black Belt's abysmal infant mortality performance and its literal life-and-death significance underscore a need to examine recent adult mortality in the Black Belt, which requires more specialized, less accessible data than the infant mortality data examined here.

The quarter century covered by the present study corresponds closely to a time when dominant political rhetoric denied the government's ability to accomplish much except wage war, punish street criminals, and promote business. According to this view, government intervention can aggravate poverty and related problems

(Murray 1994). Thus, beginning around 1980, public officials and powerful interest groups undermined many potential solutions for Black Belt residents and other Americans: minimum wages; unemployment compensation; labor rights protection; Social Security disability benefits; antidiscrimination enforcement; progressive taxation; adequately-paid government jobs (often replaced with privatized services); government-supported medical care; and government-provided income, food, and housing support for the poor. Officials and interest groups also blocked universal national health insurance. This study's empirical findings suggest that these ideological attacks on low-income assistance programs and the social wage have hurt the Black Belt. Judicious government intervention such as the recent moderate federal health insurance reforms, if designed to break social structural obstacles and incorporate intended beneficiaries' concerns, could raise the Black Belt much closer to national living standards.

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