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The Regionalization of Poverty: Assistance for the Black Belt South? *

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ABSTRACT Rural poverty is largely regional. The nation's primary region of rural poverty is the Black Belt South that stretches through 11 states from Virginia to Texas. In this area, like in other rural expanses of the United States, urban places typically fall within state lines while rural areas run across state lines and create multistate regions of rural poverty. The federal government provides block grants to address many of the public assistance needs of state populations. State-level block grants may be appropriate for serving urban areas within states, but they do not address regional-level poverty and welfare requirements across multistate rural regions. Regional organization is required to address public assistance in rural regions and to equitably coordinate the major effort necessary to turn the course of poverty in the Black Belt South.

Poverty has three r's. They are race, region, and rurality, and all are major factors in southern poverty (Wimberley and Morris 1995; Allen-Smith, Wimberley, and Morris 2000). Poverty and other poor quality-of-life conditions are neither evenly nor randomly distributed across the United States; they concentrate in the South. And because poverty is associated with welfare in one form or another, welfare and welfare policies have their greatest impacts–for good or ill–on the South.

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Poverty, of course, is just one among many quality-of-life conditions. But in the United States as a whole, county poverty rates correlate strongly with public assistance as delivered through federal and state supplementary security income payments to the aged, blind, or disabled; with aid to families with dependent children; and with general assistance, yielding an r correlation coefficient of .84. This relationship grows even stronger to .89 in the counties of the Black Belt South.[1]

The Black Belt South

Using the characterization of the South by Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois over a century ago, we regard the Black Belt as a region of counties within the Old South where black residents are concentrated (Wimberley, Morris, and Bachtel 1991; Morris, Wimberley, and Bachtel 1993; Wimberley and Morris 1996, 1997). Nationally, 12 percent of the U.S. population in the 1990 decennial census was African-American. This proportion expanded to 12.9 percent in the 2000 census for those who identify themselves as either wholly or partially African-Americans (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2001).

In the 11 Black Belt states of the Old South–Virginia, North and South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Texas–the baseline 1990 U.S. Census shows 623 counties that have African-American populations of at least 12 percent. In 2000, the U.S. Census again shows a net of 623 counties with 12 percent or more in African-American populations in the 11 Black Belt States. Of these, 604 had 12 percent or more black populations in 1990 and in 2000. Nationally, there were 705 counties with 12 percent or more black in 1990. These increased to 722 by year 2000. Map 1 shows these 722 U.S. counties for the 12, 25, and 40 percent or higher population levels of those reporting to be black or black plus other races in the 2000 census.

Residing in the 623 counties of the 1990 Black Belt were 40 percent of the nation's African-American population, nearly one of four

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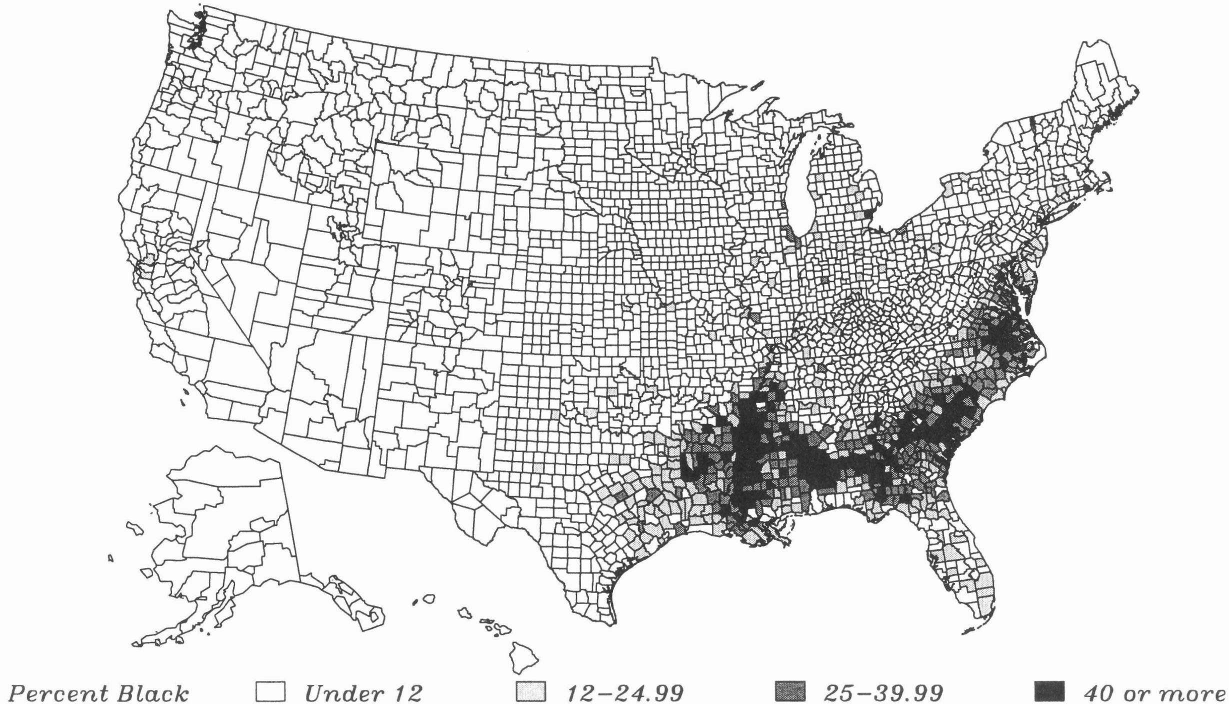
[1]These calculations are for the baseline, 1990 census data prior to the welfare reforms of the 1990s.



Map 1. U.S. Counties with Populations of 12 Percent or More Black or Black and Other Races Compiled by R.C. Wimberley and L.V. Morris from 2000 U.S. Census SF1 data

of the nation's poor, and nearly three of ten of the nation's nonmetro poor. In addition, the Black Belt held 84 percent of all nonmetro black poverty (Wimberley and Morris 1996).

Decades before the advent of official poverty definitions, the South was known as the major region of low income, low educational levels, and other impoverishment in the United States (Du Bois 1903; Odum 1934; Mangus 1940; Bogue and Beale 1961). Longitudinal analyses by USDA's Economic Research Service confirm that the nation's persistent poverty is concentrated in the nonmetro, southern region (Cook and Mizer 1994). Furthermore, those studies reveal that by 1990, the last decade of their analyses, persistent poverty increased to include more nonmetro, Black Belt counties than in 1980.

Poverty levels can also be compared for the southern census region and the Black Belt states from 1990 to 2000 to show both the disproportionality and the persistence of the poverty in these regions during the most recent decade. These comparisons are shown in Table 1. In 1990, for example, the larger, 16-state, census-defined South–that includes the 11 Black Belt states plus Oklahoma, Kentucky, Maryland, Delaware, West Virginia, and Washington, D.C.–held 34 percent of the nation's population and 41 percent of the nation's poverty. A similar disproportionate pattern persists in 2000 when the South's 36 percent of the national population was home to a 40 percent share of all U.S. poverty. Of the other four regions of the United States, only the poverty in the West reaches as much as half that found in the South.

Within the larger South, the 11 Black Belt states held 28 percent of the U.S. population in 1990 and 34 percent of the poverty. By 2000, the Black Belt states had 30 percent of the U.S. population and, again, 34 percent of the nation's poor. In fact, the Black Belt subregion of the South holds far more of the nation's poor than any of the other major regions of the country. Consequently, over time, poverty is quite disproportionately over-represented in both the larger South and its 11-state Black Belt subregion. Comparatively, poverty continues to be under-represented in the rest of the United States.

At the time of this writing, the 2000 census data are not yet available on poverty for racial groupings. Nevertheless, as shown in Table 1, nonmetro poverty can be compared across the recent decades, and the South and Black Belt states continue to have the plurality of the nation's nonmetro population and the majority of the United States' nonmetro poor. In both 1990 and 2000, the larger South had 45 percent

Table 1. Regional Populations and Shares of U.S. Poverty.

U.S. Regions and Census Years	U.S. Population				U.S. Poverty			
	% of Total Pop.	% of Nonmetro Pop.	% of Black Pop.	% of Nonmetro Black Pop.	% of Total Poor	% of Nonmetro Poor	% of Black Poor	% of Nonmetro Black Poor
South 1990	34	45	53	91	41	55	57	95
South 2000	36	45	54	89	40	55		
Northeast 1990	20	9	19	2	16	6	15	1
Northeast 2000	19	9	18	2	18	7		
Midwest 1990	24	32	19	6	22	25	21	4
Midwest 2000	23	31	19	7	19	23		
West 1990	21	15	9	2	20	14	7	1
West 2000	22	15	10	2	24	16		
U.S. Total N 1990	249 Mil	50 Mil	30 Mil	4.4 Mil	32 Mil	8.4 Mil	8.4 Mil	1.6 Mil
U.S. Total N 2000	281 Mil	55 Mil	36 Mil	4.9 Mil	34 Mil	7.7 Mil		
11 Black Belt States 1990	28	35	45	86	34	43	52	90
11 Black Belt States 2000	30	36	46	83	34	43		

Notes: Data are from the 1990 and 2000 U.S. Censuses. Nonmetropolitan designations are from the Office of Management and Budget, 1993. In this table, counties with any metro population are counted as all metro. The 1990 data are adapted from Wimberley and Morris (1996). Year 2000 data are adapted from www.census.gov. African-American poverty and nonmetro poverty data are unavailable for year 2000 at the time of this analysis. Several column totals of the four regions at each census year sum to 99 or 101% due to rounding.

of the nation's nonmetropolitan residents but had 55 percent of the nation's nonmetro poverty. Showing the same pattern, the 11 Black Belt states in 1990 had 35 percent of the U.S. nonmetro population and 43 percent of the nonmetro poverty; in 2000 their share of the national nonmetro population was 36 percent while maintaining 43 percent of the nation's nonmetro poverty.

Along with the Black Belt, another rural subregion that includes areas of southern states as well as midwestern and northeastern states is Appalachia. Officially, the Appalachian Region contains about 400 counties from northern Mississippi to southern New York with most counties being in the Appalachian range of the southern states. This predominantly rural region is also one of the United States' poorest (Wimberley and Morris 1996; Allen-Smith, Wimberley, and Morris 2000). In the 1990s, Appalachia contained 8 percent of the nation's population and 10 percent of the U.S. poverty. This compares to 18 percent of the U.S. population and 23 percent of the poverty accounted for by the 623 counties of the 1990s Black Belt. The nonmetro poverty rate of the Black Belt at 23 percent also exceeds that of nonmetro Appalachia at 19 percent.

Overall, the Black Belt is by far the largest region of U.S. poverty.[2] As a subregion of the South, the Black Belt alone has more of the poor than any other U.S. region–Northeast, Midwest, or West. These are major components of the nation's context of race, region, and rurality in which the welfare reforms of the 1990s are benchmarked.

Welfare Reform

Since welfare reform has special significance to the people and places of the largely nonmetropolitan, Black Belt South, it becomes particularly important to consider the implications of congressional welfare reform bills in the 1990s for this and other rural regions. Various forms of public assistance are a product of the nation's welfare policies and programs. To reform the welfare system, Congress focused on such features as grants to states, welfare time limits, and requirements that welfare recipients work.

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[2]Maps of U.S. poverty and graphics of related demographic and socioeconomic conditions are provided elsewhere (Wimberley and Morris 1996, 1997).

State Block Grants for Poor Rural Regions?

Impoverishment is not merely a problem for individual states. Poor rural quality-of-life conditions cross state lines and form regions sharing similar kinds of problems as well as geographic, ethnic, and historic identities. In the 11 Black Belt states, for example, many poor socioeconomic life conditions converge. In fact, these states are often ranked among the worst for many quality-of-life conditions (Morris, Wimberley, and Bachtel 1993) while, paradoxically, many of the metropolitan areas of the same states are commonly rated as some of the best places to live or to do business (Labich 1993; Smith and Nance-Nash 1995).

Urban areas are generally located within single states. Rural regions, including poor rural regions like the southern Black Belt, are not. Therefore, the state-level orientation of block grants has major implications for welfare programs if they are to provide equitable public assistance or if they are to reduce poverty in rural American regions and especially in the rural South. For despite the regionality of rural poverty, grants to individual states do not address the larger regional nature of impoverishment in the Black Belt South or other poor, multistate, and primarily nonmetropolitan regions across the country.

While block grants stop at state lines, rural poverty does not. Consequently, state and, implicitly, urban-oriented formulas for funds parceled through grants to states add further to the problems of larger rural regions of poverty.

The political intent of block grants to states is to allow states to experiment and better adjust the delivery of assistance to needs *within* each state by combining various programs for assistance, child services, and other social services. States gain more autonomous control over the administration of their funds, and there is less federal responsibility for equal standards from one state to the next. However, state-level block grants do not provide the flexibility and procedures to allow equitable coordination on a regional basis *across* states.

Furthermore, the internal flexibility of state grants can allow some states to be less forthcoming than others in delivering assistance and social services. In other words, with its own restrictive, cost-saving measures, it becomes possible for a state to be less rather than more resourceful in meeting the needs of its potential welfare recipients. For example, the discretion of block grants makes it possible for a state to engage in low-bid competition over welfare benefits in order to prevent out-of-state recipients from in-migrating to obtain better benefits.

Regardless of the extent to which such inequalities may occur, state-defined limits for assistance vary from state to state and are quite low in certain Black Belt states. In this process, social well-being, the region, the states, and potential recipients who would qualify in other states lose. Rather than the opportunity for negative competition, mutually beneficial regional coordination is needed among states to assure equality in the distribution of individual and family benefits to those in multistate rural regions.

Remediation versus Development

As shown here, poverty is generally higher in rural areas such as those of the Black Belt and South, and services there are more difficult to provide. Grants to states appear to further institutionalize these persistently poor rural conditions. While separate grants to states may help the region on average, singular state improvements do not resolve longstanding regional problems.

Furthermore, the primary intent of the welfare reforms of the 1990s did not appear to be to reduce rural poverty nor does the new system appear likely to achieve such an objective. The current welfare system does little to create rural jobs or offer employment. The welfare system does not provide the comprehensive system of community services that are necessary to get or to keep a contemporary workforce at work in rural regions. Community development as a means of regional development is not a part of the equation. Rather, the reform effort places ill-fitting requisites on some of the least advantaged citizens of our society.

The current approach, although it may be effective for some, is also fundamentally flawed by the policy focus on *remediating* the individual with time limits and work requirements as opposed to *educating* the individual and creating systematic, community-based support systems for change. Decades of community development research appear to fall on deaf ears.

In light of the high levels of impoverishment in rural regions such as the Black Belt South, and in absence of meaningful employment or services that enable workers to work, we ask, what will be the longterm human and social costs?

Further Reform for Poor Rural Regions

The post-civil-war Black Belt has now entered its third century. Yet this historic rural region is still burdened by poor employment and the lack of adequate human and social services available to support a rural Black Belt workforce or others who are too old, too young, or too disabled to participate in the workforce.

Regional organization is needed among the federated states of poor and what are typically poor-rural regions. Regardless of work requirements, time limits, and grants to states, there are still federal roles in welfare programs at the regional level that seek to improve the well-being of disadvantaged people and places. To reduce poverty and improve quality-of-life conditions across the Black Belt or in rural subregions across other states, there is a need for regional commissions through which governmental resources may be equitably administered to places experiencing common regional problems.

A meaningful reform of public assistance that would direct it to address the conditions of the nation's rural regions would be welcomed were this to occur. However, it is doubtful that welfare or public assistance policy alone, even at the level of the multistate Black Belt or other rural regions of the United States, would be sufficient to alleviate rural poverty and its related conditions. Regional efforts are also necessary to change the conditions that foster poverty. This goes beyond direct assistance to the individuals and families who are already its victims.

Based on more than a decade of our research on the Black Belt South, we have encouraged regional solutions for rural poverty that are modeled, in part, after the Appalachian Regional Commission (2002) which appears to have helped that large, poor, rural region since congress funded the commission in 1965. In 1990, we called for such an approach at Tuskegee University's annual Professional Agricultural Workers' Conference (Wimberley, Morris, and Bachtel 1991). In 1993-1994, our seminars for the House Agriculture Committee and its staff led to the introduction of H.R.3901, a bill to establish a southern regional development commission for the Black Belt.

There are other examples of regional approaches. The Association for Quality of Life in America, supported by a small foundation, began projects in some of the poorest communities of several Black Belt States (Morris and Gilbreath 1996). The Southern Growth Policies Board, the economic development think-tank for the southern governors, established an emphasis on "The Next South" as one of its areas of work. To date, however, many of these public and private efforts have had limited success, and some have waned as financial support was exhausted, as political leadership changed, or as personnel behind some of the efforts moved to other positions.

At present, several new efforts to address the problems of rural regions are in various stages of development. In addition to the Appalachian Regional Commission, the Delta Regional Authority for Mississippi Delta states and the Denali Commission in Alaska have been funded by congress. Another, the Northern Great Plains Regional Authority for the Dakotas, Minnesota, Iowa, and Nebraska has been approved thus far by the Senate. Along these lines, several other commissions have been formally proposed in Congress. One is the Southwest Border Partnership for the largely Hispanic region along the Mexican border areas of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California.

For the South and at least the southeastern portion of the Black Belt, a bill, H.R. 3618, was introduced to establish the SouthEast Crescent Authority which follows the economic development emphases of the Appalachian Regional Commission. On the Senate side, Senator Zell Miller of Georgia has initiated a study through the University of Georgia with further funding from a Georgia businessman (Poe 2002; Eversley 2002). This study is assessing how persistent poverty in the South and Black Belt might be addressed by a regional, commission-type program (Chapman 2002).

Prior to the Miller study, the University of Georgia had also launched a group of university, business, and grassroots representatives from Black Belt states to seek solutions to the region's poor socioeconomic quality of life. Having now emerged independent from the University of Georgia's support, this group, the Black Belt Initiative, is in the process of formally organizing itself as a regional advocacy group for Black Belt interests (Poe 2002).

Few of the current regional efforts have reached the point of congressional authorization and appropriations for commissions to serve the multistate rural regions of our country. Inevitably, their attempts to succeed will be met with competition from other national interests and other national budget concerns. But, hopefully, such regional commissions will be authorized and sufficiently appropriated to address the human, community, and rural resource development needs that will allow poor people and those at risk to improve their status and move from impoverishment.

This means that regional commissions must focus directly on education, health, and other community services and not just simply or primarily on economic development infrastructure. If comprehensive human and community resource development is accomplished in our nation's rural regions, the need for other forms of welfare assistance should be minimized.

The historic 11 states of the Black Belt South that contain the nation's largest region of rural poverty have never been privileged to have such a concerted level of organization working on their common regional problems. Regional commissions should be able to equitably address rural problems that block grants to states cannot resolve. Rather than limited state-level outlooks, the level of organization must expand to the level of the rural regional problems.

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