

**IT'S OUR MOST RURAL REGION; IT'S THE POOREST; IT'S THE  
BLACK BELT SOUTH; AND IT NEEDS OUR ATTENTION**

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The South is home to far more rural people than any other region of the United States. That is something rural social scientists in the South—as well as those elsewhere—should know and remember.

I first began attending Rural Sociological Society (RSS) meetings as one who grew up in the rural South like a long line of rural sociologists before me. In my case, I was a sociologist who never had a formal course in rural sociology until I taught one myself. It was through the RSS network and later the Sociology Section of the Southern Association of Agricultural Scientists, their annual meetings, and land-grant university regional research projects that I began to learn interesting things about rural America from friendly and supportive rural sociologists around the country.

I discovered that rural sociology and the rural social sciences usually deal with real and substantive issues including food, the environment, poverty, health, community development, and human and social well-being. This was refreshing. I found rural sociology to contrast with the issues of many other sociological specialties that were often caught up in amorphous clouds of vague ideas about topics that usually mattered far less.

Yet somehow or another, I learned things about rurality in the Northeast, Midwest, and West, as well as rurality in other countries. Although my continuing education in rural sociology grew as I attended the RSS meetings and worked with rural sociologists on various projects, rarely did I ever hear a rural sociologist speak of the extensive rurality in the U.S. South. What I heard and began to think was deceptive. It got to the point where I began to wonder if maybe the South was not so rural in comparison with other regions after all. Perhaps rural sociologists from other regions did not know better; I should have. The Southern Rural Sociological Association (SRSA), of course, helped to provide a counterpoint to what I heard in national professional circles.

## WHO WE ARE

According to currently available, but soon to be updated, 2000 U.S. Census Bureau (2002) figures, the South holds 46 percent of all officially-counted rural people in our nation. This number will change a bit, but probably not by much, when the 2010 Census results are released in a few months. As measured by nonmetropolitan residents, the South's share stands about the same. Of course the South also has more people than the other U.S. regions—about 36 percent of the nation's population—but the issues of race, region, and rurality occur in even greater proportions. To eliminate the three northeastern-most states from the U.S. Census' 16-state plus D.C. South would decrease these southern demographic shares only slightly. The point is that the nation's rural population is concentrated largely in the South.

There are many ways in which rurality may be conceptualized. In my own view, I see these as related to spatial, demographic, social interaction, cultural, rural occupational and natural resource economy, and quality of life perspectives. Beyond such conceptualizations, however, rural sociological research typically operationalizes rurality through the demographic perspective in terms of rural or nonmetropolitan people and places in rural space.

Based only on the talk about rurality in other regions that I heard from RSS friends and colleagues during my early years as a rural sociologist, I would not have believed that the South holds nearly one-half of our nation's rural people. Indeed there are rural people and rural social problems in the Midwest, West, and Northeast. Yet throughout our careers and lifetimes there have been, and still are, more rural people in the South than in any other region.

The same lack of understanding seems to apply to the United States' longstanding poor rural socioeconomic conditions. Unfortunately these, too, are concentrated in the South. At the beginning of this century, Census (U.S. Census Bureau 2002) data show that 40 percent of our country's poverty is southern, and the rural or nonmetropolitan South's share of rural poverty is even higher. The situation is essentially the same for the South's lower levels of educational achievement, as well as unemployment, health problems, low birth weights, demographic dependence of the young and old upon those of working age, and various other quality of life indicators. Data from the Census Bureau's American Community Survey for all sizes of counties should soon be available to show the current southern share of several such poor socioeconomic conditions. Given the longitudinal history of previous decades, they probably have not changed much.

Given the large, over-proportionate shares of rurality in the South, it is not surprising that the South is the only U.S. region to have a professional association—the Southern Rural Sociological Association—devoted specifically to the sociological and rural social scientific character of the region.

The South's socioeconomic impoverishment is further concentrated into a crescent of more than 600 counties with higher than average populations of African-Americans. These counties stretch from Texas to Virginia among the 11 Old-South plantation states. This is based on the 12-percent national proportion of black population that we used in our 1990 baseline analysis data (Wimberley and Morris 1996, 1997; Wimberley, Morris, and Bachtel 1991). Indeed, over half the African-Americans in the United States live in the South. The early-to-mid-century out-migration into northern urban areas did not change that. This, too, is a surprising piece of information to many social scientists and citizens alike.

#### WHERE WE'VE BEEN

Despite the social and technical advances of the twentieth century, the disparities between the rural and Black Belt South and the rest of the country remain unresolved. The technologies for automobiles and roadways; air travel and shipping; tractors, cotton harvesters, and other agricultural technologies; electricity; modern plumbing and sanitation; refrigeration and air conditioning; radios; home appliances; telephones; television, microelectronics, mobile phones, and telecommunication systems; large and small computers; biotechnology and the genome; and space travel did not bring an end to long-standing southern impoverishment.

Neither did medical care that included penicillin and antibiotics; polio and other vaccines; anesthesia; the birth-control pill for women; modern surgery; X-rays and scans; endoscopic procedures; the pill for men; other medical technologies; modern hospitals; and ambulance services.

Nor did social advances in rural free mail delivery; workers' rights; income taxes; social security; suburbanization; unemployment benefits; transfer payments for the elderly, disabled, and disadvantaged; civil rights; voting rights for women and minorities; a female workforce; integrated schools, businesses, and workplaces; credit cards; world wars; the World Wide Web and the Internet; a highly productive agricultural system; environmentalism; or globalization.

No doubt, such advances helped make social and health-related quality of life better in the South and other regions, but these changes have not closed the gap of disparity for southern and Black Belt people and places. For them, the promise of

the American Dream—or at least something close to it—is yet to be realized. Race, region, and rurality still combine to restrict both children and adults from enjoying many social advantages and opportunities held by U.S. residents of other regions or, for that matter, of the New South, which is primarily metropolitan and typically leads the nation in economic growth and in-migration for work and leisure.

#### WHAT TO DO?

The problems of the South and its Black Belt have been largely neglected since the War on Poverty and civil rights legislation of the 1960s and through the 1980s. Nevertheless, during the last couple of decades, social scientists specializing in rurality—and located primarily in southern universities—have begun to describe, analyze, and bring public attention and policy solutions these issues.

Public awareness of the problems of the Black Belt South and adequately funded policy responses still need greater attention from southern social scientists; agency and elected officials; public leaders; and the public. Too often it appears, the persistent disadvantages of the Old South—essentially in the rural and Black Belt South—are assumed away by the successes of the New South.

In the applied, extension, and outreach tradition of rural sociology, my research colleagues and I have advocated three levels of solutions particularly to help alleviate the impoverishment and disparity of the Black Belt South (Morris et al. 2002; Wimberley and Morris 1997; Wimberley et al. 1991). These are solutions aimed at the personal, community, and regional levels (Wimberley 2008).

First, human resource development is needed for persons and families. Roads, bridges, buildings, and other physical infrastructure will not be effective for those living in the Black Belt or rural South if people cannot effectively read, write, and do math; or if they lack basic skills and health for children and working-age adults to become employed in the high-tech, global workforce, or to get sustainable jobs of whatever description. To wait for physical infrastructure and economic development alone to bring such personal and household success for the indigenous populations of the Black Belt and broader South would take a very long time. Human resource development should be addressed directly and immediately.

The same is true for community development. Black Belt and rural southern communities need to be able to offer the full range of services that provide for the communities themselves and for the people and households within them. We call this comprehensive community development, our second recommended solution. Physical infrastructure and economic development are part of this but not the only part. Public and private agencies and institutions play a major role. Community

residents and groups must be linked together internally as well as connected to external private and public resources to be successful.

Finally, the South and especially its Black Belt subregion should be the object of a concerted common effort to bring the region up to, if not beyond, the living standards and opportunities enjoyed by people and communities in other U.S. regions. Toward this end, it was clear from our earliest analyses of Black Belt conditions that a regional commission for the Black Belt—similar to the Appalachian Regional Commission—might make a substantial impact on the neglected lower South's Black Belt areas.

We first made the recommendation for a federal Black Belt commission in a 1990 presentation at Tuskegee University (Wimberley et al. 1991) and elsewhere have described the ensuing line of activities since then (Wimberley, Morris, and Harris 2010). In the past decade, the Delta Regional Authority became active in the western portion of the Black Belt. Moreover, the Southeast Crescent Regional Commission was authorized by Congress in the 2008 Farm Bill although it is yet to be appropriated. The latter originated in a congressional bill that Libby Morris and I recommended in seminars we conducted for members and staffs of the U.S. House of Representatives in 1992 and 1993. Of course, funding for regional commissions has become more difficult during the economic downturns of the early 2000s.

*The greatest challenge facing rural sociology and related social sciences in the United States today is the goal of turning the historic and contemporary course of rural impoverishment and poor quality of life conditions in the South and in the Black Belt Region.*

This challenge is amplified by the recent immigration of Hispanics—also impoverished and undereducated—into the rural as well as urban areas of the Black Belt states. Some of the greatest growth in Hispanic populations has been in rural and agricultural areas of Georgia and the Carolinas. Interestingly, Hispanic immigration has often avoided areas such as the rural counties of the Mississippi Delta where there are high percentages of African-American residents (Wimberley 2009). A basic social scientific understanding of these patterns and new ethnic relationships is also needed to devise meaningful plans and policies for the South.

The effort to improve and to obtain sufficient congressional appropriations for the newly-authorized federal regional commission for much of the Black Belt South must continue. We must also carry on with efforts to build a formal if not informal consortium of southern rural sociologists and other scientists who will work with community, government, and regional grassroots groups in search of solutions to

the historic disadvantages of people and communities across the Black Belt South. This will establish a research and outreach base in each of the southern and Black Belt states, as well as a regional network of interdependent social scientific specialties to more comprehensively work on the enduring problems of the Black Belt and the greater rural South.

As a research-based, long-term method to measure and evaluate our progress, we can continue to map the counties or other spatial units of analysis within the worst quartiles—or other particular percentiles—for indicators of socioeconomic and physical well-being in the United States. My research collaborators and I find that maps communicate the problems much more emphatically than the underlying descriptive statistics and statistical models. In fact, maps of different demographic, social, and health conditions reveal the underlying correlations among the spatial patterns across their different maps. Counties, for example, are not merely statistical data points in a scattergram; they are data points in geographic space that shows places where people live and with which they can identify. They are also places in the districts of elected officials who can see where political coalitions may be formed for policies and programs.

I think of these overlays among the maps of various conditions as visual correlations. Built upon quantitative data, these visual correlations—say, between poverty and race, poverty and nonmetropolitan counties, or race and education levels—create qualitative impressions that appear more meaningful and memorable than statistical coefficients. This seems to work for social scientists as well. In scores of presentations, I do not recall anyone ever asking for the statistical correlations after seeing visual overlays among maps of the associated patterns of socioeconomic indicators.

Poverty rates, high school graduation rates, and similar measures will continue to move up and down over time. Yet if we are successful, the county quartile maps of the nation's worst conditions should no longer show them to be concentrated in the counties of the rural South and its Black Belt. When inter-regional inequalities disappear, for example, the maps will show the worst quartiles of poverty and the like to be scattered randomly and proportionately to the number of counties in each region. The southern and Black Belt counties—or nonmetropolitan counties—will no longer claim a disproportionate number of the worst quartiles of social indicators—whatever the poverty rates—across U.S. regions and across time (Wimberley and Morris 2003).

The time has come. As rural social scientists we can no longer ignore, neglect, or assume that the Old South heritage will simply go away with the emergence of

the New South. In addition to the disparities between the southern region and the rest of the United States, rural-urban disparities also continue for poverty and related living conditions. For a truly New South, we and our nation can no longer afford to waste the chance to close the wide disparities in quality of life for present and future generations of people and communities in the South and the Black Belt.

#### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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The south is the most rural area of the country, if you go by the real definition. The west has very few towns in the vast majority of the area. Please register to participate in our discussions with 2 million other members - it's free and quick! Some forums can only be seen by registered members. After you create your account, you'll be able to customize options and access all our 15,000 new posts/day with fewer ads. View detailed profile (Advanced) or search site with. Search Forums (Advanced). The south is the most sprawled out place that i can think of. And we are talking the deep south like the old confederate states. Even the midwest and newer south (like texas/oklahoma) doesn't compare. Cheap land causes this horrible sprawl. And you wannabe farmers, please don't.