

Alabama's Black Belt

Life after cotton

Poor, poorly serviced, underemployed—but not lacking for aid or ideas

Print edition | United States
Aug 28th 2003 | eutaw and selma

Well behind

Selected indicators, 2000

	Black Belt*	United States
% black	52.9	12.3
Median household income, \$ ⁱ	23,954	41,994
Life expectancy, years	72.2	76.9
% with at least high school degree	64.0	74.2
Unemployment rate, % [‡]	11.0	6.2

Sources: University of Alabama; Alabama Department of Industrial Relations *19 Alabama counties
†1999 ⁱJuly 2003





CROSS the Edmund Pettus Bridge into Selma, Alabama—best known as the site of a bloody 1965 civil-rights confrontation—and you will find yourself on Broad Street, one of the wide boulevards peculiar to the South. In the brutal heat, locals fan themselves in front of beautifully preserved turn-of-the-century churches. But the shop windows are mostly dusty, the signs faded, and there are few signs of new businesses. Dallas County, where Selma sits, has nearly 14% unemployment, more than double the state average.

Get our daily newsletter

Upgrade your inbox and get our Daily Dispatch and Editor's Picks.

Dallas is one of 19 Alabama counties that make up the state's portion of the “Black Belt”, a band of rich soil that stretches from eastern Texas to southern Virginia. In Alabama's section, more

of rich soil that stretches from eastern Texas to southern Virginia. In Alabama's section, more than half the people are black; and almost everyone is poorer, unhealthier, less well-educated and with worse jobs than those in the rest of the state. Almost half the counties have 12% unemployment or higher. Median household income in the Black Belt is more than \$10,000 less than Alabama's average, and life expectancy nearly two years shorter.

Alabama as a whole, with its economy heavily reliant on manufacturing, has managed to offset the downturn a little. A Mercedes-Benz plant outside Tuscaloosa, opened in 1995, has brought jobs, and two more plants, from Honda and Hyundai, will be running by mid-2005. But of 25 new deals announced in the state between January and May bringing more than

[Subscribe: 12 weeks for \\$12](#)

**Each week, over one million
subscribers trust us to help them
make sense of the world.**

Join them. **Subscribe** to *The Economist* today and
enjoy your first 12 weeks for only \$12

or **Sign up** to continue reading five free articles

might still be tempted to move there. "Look at it this way," says Neal Wade of the Alabama Development Office: "if you're a company that depends on federal support, you make four senators happy, not just two."

Many local communities have taken to buying, and marketing, their own industrial parks. Philis Belcher, who heads the Greene County Industrial Development Board in tiny Eutaw, frequently drives visitors to the county's 1,000-acre park. There she pulls out what she calls "my favourite map", showing the park as a transport hub: a railway crossing, a port on the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway and Interstates 20 and 59 less than a mile away. Nearby Demopolis has two industrial parks; Selma has five.

Like Mrs Belcher, the Black Belt's economic developers are optimistic, advertising a loyal workforce largely untouched by unions—and plenty of tax breaks. The state has also promised worker training and other forms of aid. Alabama can ill afford to lose the corporate cash, but such incentives could be the best way to break the Black Belt's cycle of poverty.