Sociation Today®
The Official Journal of The North Carolina Sociological Association: A Refereed Web-Based Publication
ISSN 1542-6300

Sociation Today®
Volume 1, Number 2
Fall 2003

U.S. Poverty in Space and Time: Its Persistence in the South

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Poverty in the United States is not randomly distributed across the country in an even or fairly even pattern. Places with the worst poverty levels tend to cluster together. In fact, U.S. poverty is concentrated in certain regions and subregions and is located mainly in the South (Wimberley and Morris 1997; Allen-Smith, Wimberley, and Morris 2000; Wimberley and Morris 2002).

Locations of poverty also change very little from one decade to the next. Rather, poverty tends to persist in the same geographic places decade after decade. Poverty, like the conditions with which it is associated, appears entrenched and enduring. Not only is U.S. poverty located mainly in the South, it is also persistently located there. Within the South, poverty is primarily in the Black Belt subregion, a roughly contiguous set of counties that stretch through parts of the 11 Old South states where it has persisted for decades.

These findings underlie analyses contributed by the authors to a 2002 study of persistent poverty sponsored through Senator Zell Miller of Georgia with additional support from Georgia businessman Benjy Griffith. This 2002 study of persistent poverty study was conducted by scientists at the University of Georgia, Tuskegee University, and North Carolina State University. The study came in response to a line of recommendations by Wimberley, Morris, and Bachtel (1991) and Wimberley and Morris (1997) that a federal regional commission be established to comprehensively address the long-standing impoverishment of the Black Belt South in a manner similar to that done by the Appalachian Regional Commission for the Upper South and Northeast

regions of the United States.

Some of the questions raised by the Miller Study were whether poverty persists in the Black Belt and other areas of the South and whether this region could or should be targeted by a federal regional commission. The general findings of the Miller Study are reported in *Dismantling Persistent Poverty in the Southeastern United States* and at www.cviog.uga.edu (Carl Vinson Institute of Government 2002).

In Space

To measure poverty, the authors used U.S. Census data for the 1980, 1990, and 2000 decennial censuses. Cross-sectional data were mapped for all U.S. counties at each census period. Counties were shaded on the maps to show whether they were in the worst quartile of poverty at each census, in the second worst quartile, or in the lower half of poverty.

The first map shows poverty data from the 2000 U.S. Census. Counties falling into the worst quartile of poverty are colored in red. The second worst quartile is colored yellow. As the map reveals, census 2000 poverty concentrates in central Appalachia, various counties in the Northwest, the Southeast, and the South. Relatively little poverty is shown in the Northeast and North Central Regions.

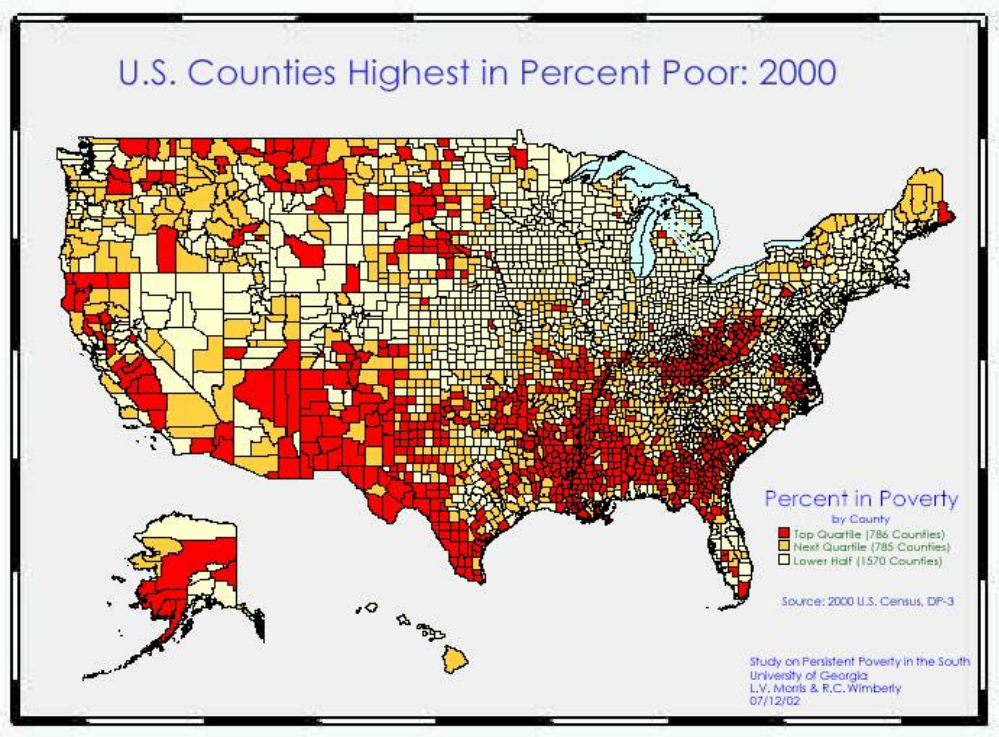
Because the counties in the western half of the United States are much larger than counties in the eastern half, the visual effect of larger geographical counties in the West can be deceiving. If shrunken to the size of eastern U.S. counties, they would all easily fit into a couple of the southern states.

As it turns out, the South is the most populated region of the country, and the South's poverty counties contain larger populations of the poor. The South, defined as a region containing 16 states and Washington D.C. by the U.S. Census Bureau, contains 100 million of the country's 281 million population in year 2000, and accounts for 36 percent of the U.S. population. That compares to 23 percent of the U.S. population found in the in the Midwest, 22 percent in the West, and 19 percent in the Northeast.

In terms of regional poverty, the South's 13.6 million poor represent a 40 percent share of all U.S. poverty. Not only is this disproportionately higher than the South's 36 percent of the nation's population, it is higher than the share of poverty contained in the other major U.S. regions. Of these, the Northeast has 17 percent poverty, the Midwest 19 percent, and the West 24 percent of the U.S. poverty.

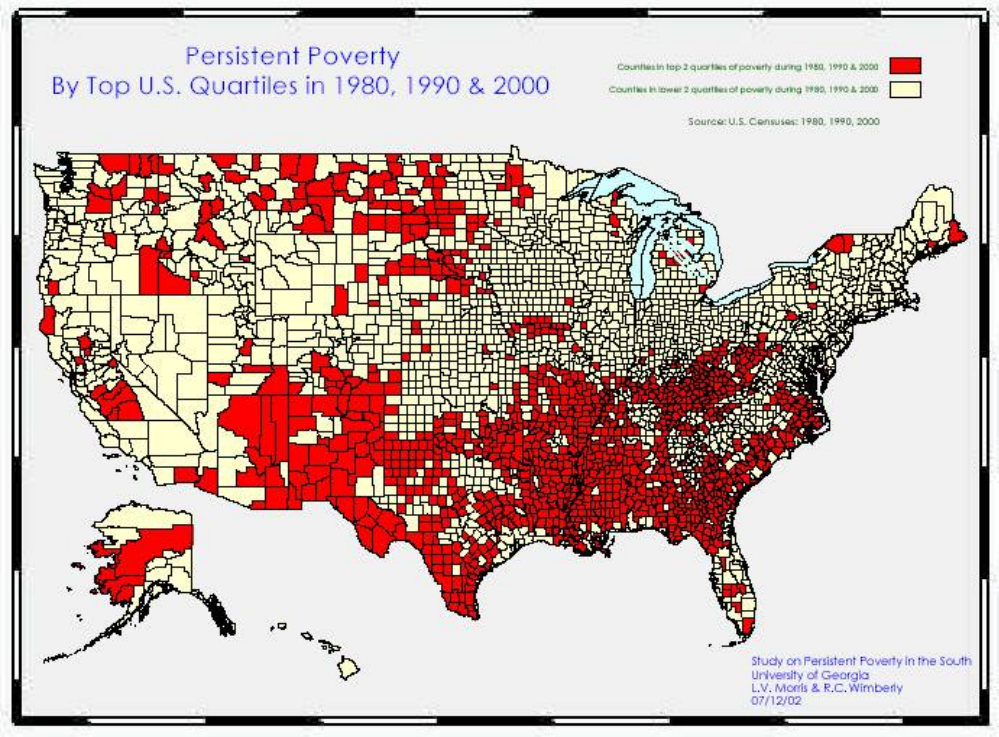
Therefore, the largest region of U.S. poverty is spread across the South and is observed from the map to be densely concentrated in the Black Belt subregion that forms a crescent of the eastern and lower South from Virginia to East Texas and up the Mississippi Delta.

Whether in the South or elsewhere, poverty is concentrated in certain locations. The geographic pattern of U.S. poverty is by no means random. The high-poverty counties tend to coincide with disproportionate populations of various ethnic groups: Appalachian whites, Northwest Indians, Southwest Hispanics and Indians, and Southern blacks. Furthermore, most of these counties are nonmetropolitan. In brief, the 2000 map of U.S. poverty as would be observed in earlier decades as well is regional, racial, and rural.



In Time

To measure persistent poverty, we looked at the counties that were in the worst two quartiles of poverty in the 2000 census and whether these counties were also in the worst two quartiles of poverty in the 1980 and 1990 censuses. When mapped, these counties form the pattern shown in the "Persistent Poverty" map. The red counties are those that were in the worst half of poverty reported in 1980, 1990, and 2000. Note, of course, that the number of counties that can be persistently poor potentially decreases as each previous decade is added to the period covered.



Still, 1,446 of the 3,141 U.S. counties and county-unit equivalents are classified as persistently poor across the three most recent census periods. Of these persistently poor counties, 2 out of 3 are in the South where 8.021 million poor people live in persistently poor counties.

Quite similar to the 2000 census' cross-sectional poverty map described earlier, the persistent poverty map's multicounty and multistate subregions of U.S. poverty are again observed in central Appalachia, areas scattered across the Northwest, the Southwest, and in the Black Belt South from Virginia to East Texas.

While poverty maps could be generated to show where poverty has existed in censuses since 1960, inspection of earlier maps shows essentially the same geographic patterns. Prior to the 1960s, the official techniques for defining poverty were not in use, but other mappings of socioeconomic conditions also suggest the basic patterns observed in the 1980-1990-2000 map of persistent poverty.

An alternative approach to measuring persistent poverty has been developed and used by researchers in the Economic Development Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (Bender *et al*. 1985; Cook and Mizer 1994; Ghelfi 2001; Economic Research Service 2003). Their maps also show the same basic pattern, but with a more restrictive definition of persistent poverty requiring that persistently poor counties to be in the worst quintile of poverty in four consecutive censuses. The lower percentage level and the additional census periods, of course, leave fewer counties on the map.

Using the ERS criteria, Miller, Crandall, and Weber (2002; 2003) take an even more stringent look at the persistently poor counties by combining the 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000 census poverty data. Still, the core of persistently poor counties is seen primarily in the Black Belt South and in other subregions shown here in the 1980-1990-2000 persistent poverty map.

While the ERS approach shows patterns and shifts among the worst of the poorest counties, the approach used to draw the 1980-1990-2000 map reported here is considered to include a more representative picture of the places in need of special assistance from public and private resources. In brief, the persistent poverty map shown here is more inclusive of the places that should be targeted for help.

Conclusions

U.S. poverty is unequally distributed across geographic space and over time. Of the several areas where poverty is concentrated over time, the South is the largest. In the South, poverty is concentrated in the Black Belt of the lower southern crescent, in the central Appalachian subregion of the upper South, and in the Texas Border area of the Hispanic Southwest. As in other U.S. poverty areas, much of these southern subregions is rural.

These findings have implications for any policies and programs aimed at alleviating poor quality-of-life conditions in the United States. Welfare reforms--whether they work or not--will affect the South and the rural South more than other U.S. regions (Wimberley and Morris 2002). Also, regional efforts to improve the socioeconomic well-being of people and communities in multistate areas need to be targeted where comprehensive help is missing but needed the most, e.g., the Black Belt South.

U.S. poverty areas are clearly discernible and geographically persistent. These counties and subregions are essentially sitting targets for long overdue policies and programs to finally address historic impoverishment and its related socioeconomic conditions in a manner that will bring U.S. poverty areas up to the level of quality-of-life enjoyed by other people and places of the United States.

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