



Singleton v. Allen
2:21-CV-01291-AMM-
Date 2/10/2025
Plaintiff Exhibit Label No. 44

A Partnership of

THE UNIVERSITY OF
ALABAMA

College of
Education
Education Policy Center

THE UNIVERSITY OF
ALABAMA

Culverhouse
College of Business
Center for Business and Economic Research



July 2022

Dear Colleague:

The University of Alabama's Education Policy Center (EPC) partnered with *AL.com* and the University's Center for Business and Economic Research (CBER) to renew its Black Belt issue brief series. Black Belt 2022 included six new issue briefs, tackling COVID-19, STEM in K-12 education, educational attainment and community college transfer, poverty & housing, infrastructure, and profiles of community leaders in the Black Belt.

First partnering in 2020, *AL.com* and the EPC began the Black Belt 2020 series, a project aimed to raise awareness and present the data behind the challenges facing Alabama's Black Belt region. Returning in 2022, with the generous support of our donors, the Black Belt 2022 series has expanded with the same objective, while also recruiting the Center for Business and Economic Research at UA to provide further expertise on issues and challenges afflicting one of America's poorest regions.

The data collected and lessons learned through these series provided a strong foundation for the EPC to successfully lead the University of Alabama's *Driving Regional Innovation through Vehicle Electrification (DRIVE)* grant proposal. EPC's expertise on the Black Belt helped UA secure \$500,000 in Phase I funding for *DRIVE* and is now positioned to compete for up to \$80 million in Phase II. If funded, *DRIVE* will bring together public and private partners to expand job training opportunities and services for Black Belt residents.

The EPC and CBER's efforts, coupled with the press briefings following the release of each of the series briefs, has equipped *AL.com* and other Alabama media outlets to analyze and visualize the challenges of the Black Belt and create stories published for all of Alabama's residents to see.

In the words of Ramsey Archibald, *AL.com's* Data Reporter, "*The work the Education Policy Center has done to shed light on the issues residents of this region continue to face is vitally important. Especially important is their focus on solutions. Anyone can see the problems in the region – data is plentiful, and people often overlook the stories about what's going wrong there. But solutions and suggestions like the EPC has offered are harder to come by. I hope that people in power in the state and federal government take notice, and continue to provide resources for the region.*"

Stephen G. Katsinas & Nathaniel J. Bray
Education Policy Center
The University of Alabama

Dr. Sam Addy
Center for Business and Economic Research
The University of Alabama

LETTER OF TRANSMITTAL

May 2022

Dear Colleagues:

We are pleased to present *Black Belt 2022*, a series of issue briefs aimed to advocate for and lift up Alabama's Black Belt. This series examines the causes and effects of a variety of policy issues in the region, including COVID-19, STEM in K-12 education, educational attainment and community college transfers, poverty & housing, infrastructure, and profiles of community leaders throughout the Black Belt. Our work with the EPC this year has proved more beneficial than we could have hoped for with its network, academic, and personal opportunities it has carried with it.

We first wish to thank our Education Policy Center colleagues Noel Keeney, Stephanie Paul, Michael S. Malley, Jr., and Associate Director Nathaniel Bray. We also thank The University of Alabama's Master of Public Administration faculty, including MPA Program Director Dr. Dana Patton and Dr. Richard Fording. Additionally we would like to thank the staff at the Center for Business and Economic Research including Dr. Sam Addy, Dr. Nyesha Black, and their Executive Director Ahmad Ijaz. Geospatial Services Manager Eric Courchesne, the Center for Economic Development Executive Director Nisa Miranda, and Alabama Tombigbee Regional Commission Executive Director John Clyde Riggs assistance in our writing, research, and data collection throughout cannot go unrecognized. Finally, we thank EPC Director Stephen Katsinas, whose guidance, support and expertise in the field has been crucial throughout the writing of this report.

We need to do more to expand opportunities across Alabama, specifically in the Black Belt. In the Alabama High School Class of 2019, 41% of the graduates did not enroll in college, 29% enrolled in a 4-year institution, and 26% in 2-year institutions. Our state's community colleges do a good job with the resources given, but they're underfunded. With Pell funding dwindling and more young minds leaving the Black Belt for better opportunities, Alabama needs to work in further educating and developing this region of Alabama and not let these resources go to waste. Our continued partnership with *AL.com* is doing wonders for the center and Alabamians abroad, as the range of readers is greatly increased, raising further awareness for the neglected region. We commend to you the work and it is a privilege to be of service. Any mistakes or errors are ours alone.

Garrett Till, Emily Grace Corley & Sean O'Brien, MPA students and Research Associates, Education Policy Center, The University of Alabama

TABLE OF CONTENTS

COVID-19 and Alabama’s Black Belt.....1

 Featured Articles.....16

K-12 STEM Education in Alabama’s Black Belt.....21

 Featured Articles.....35

Educational Attainment, Community College, and Transfer in the Black Belt.....39

 Featured Articles.....58

Poverty, Housing, and GDP in Alabama’s Black Belt.....62

 Featured Articles.....83

Infrastructure in Alabama’s Black Belt.....88

 Featured Articles.....103

Profiles of Community Leaders in the Black Belt.....106

Misc. Featured Articles and Media.....124

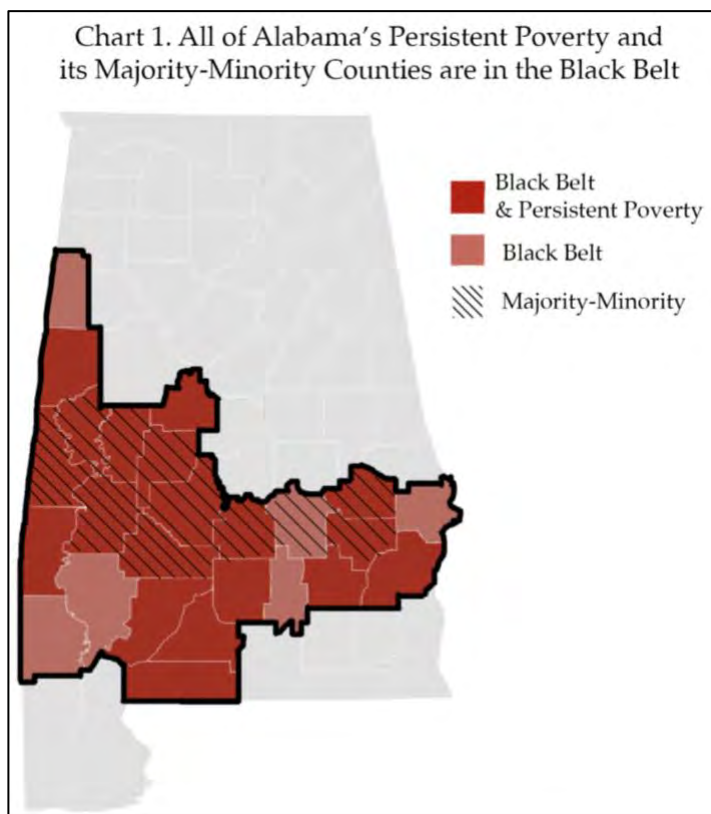
Issue Brief № 55

COVID-19 and Alabama's Black Belt

by Emily Grace Corley, Garrett Till, Sean O'Brien,
Stephen G. Katsinas, and Nathaniel J. Bray

Alabama's Black Belt is named for the region's dark, rich soil, and it is part of an arc of persistent rural poverty extending from Virginia, south to Georgia and west through Mississippi and Alabama to East Texas.¹ In 2019, the Economic Research Service (ERS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture defined 310 counties as persistent poverty, with poverty rates consistently over 20 % in 1980, 1990, 2000 and on average for 2007-2011 and 2015-2019.²

Of these 310 persistent poverty counties, 267 or 86 % are rural. As the ERS notes: "These rural counties were concentrated in historically poor areas of



the Mississippi Delta, Appalachia, the Black Belt, and the southern border regions as well as on Federal Indian reservations." More than 5 million people live in these counties.³ Additionally, 180 of the 310 persistent poverty counties are in six Deep South states: Alabama (19), Arkansas (17), Georgia (49), Louisiana (31), Mississippi (52), and South Carolina (12). All 19 of Alabama's

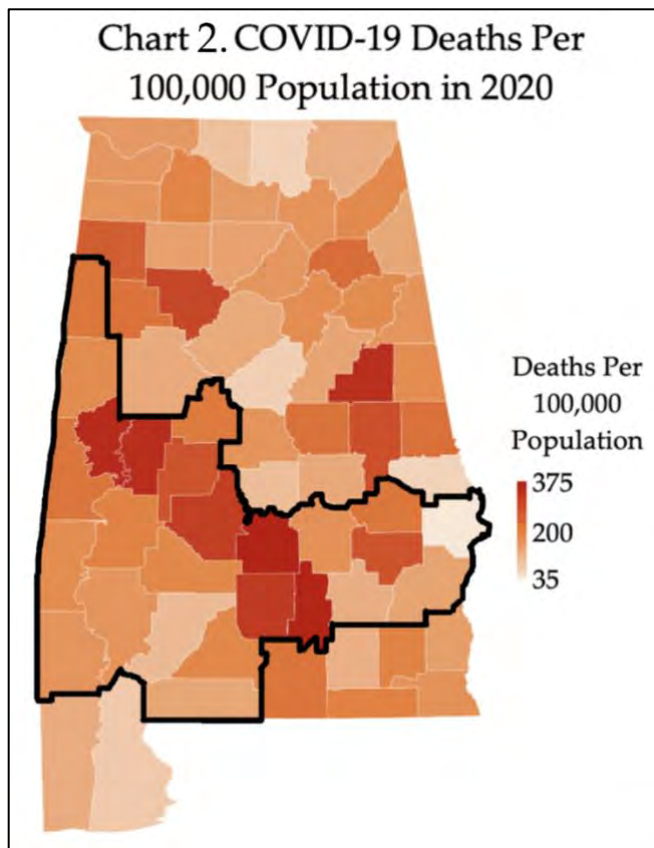
persistent poverty counties are in the Black Belt (Chart 1), and every majority-minority Alabama county lies in the Black Belt.

The emergence of the COVID-19 virus in March 2020 has amplified historically rooted disparities between urban and rural communities. The disparities exist across a wide scope of public policy areas and are even more pronounced in rural, persistent-poverty counties. In the fall of 2020, The University of Alabama's Education Policy Center (EPC) released the *Black Belt 2020* issue brief series. *Black Belt 2020* investigated population decline; unemployment and labor force participation; healthcare and broadband access; and manufacturing prospects, among other topics.

This year, with the generous support of donors for which we are grateful, the EPC is pleased to partner with the University of Alabama's Center for Business and Economic Research (CBER) and *AL.com* on a new series, *Black Belt 2022*, which will investigate new public policy topics and update issues covered in 2020. This issue brief, the first in our new series, reviews the ongoing impact of COVID-19 in the Black Belt and assesses disparities of health outcomes between the Black Belt and the rest of the state. We close with policy proposals to move the Black Belt forward. Any mistakes or errors in the transcription of data or interpretation are the responsibility of the authors.

COVID-19 Death Rates

Across the country, rural Americans are dying of the COVID-19 virus at higher rates than those in metropolitan areas.⁴ This trend is no different in

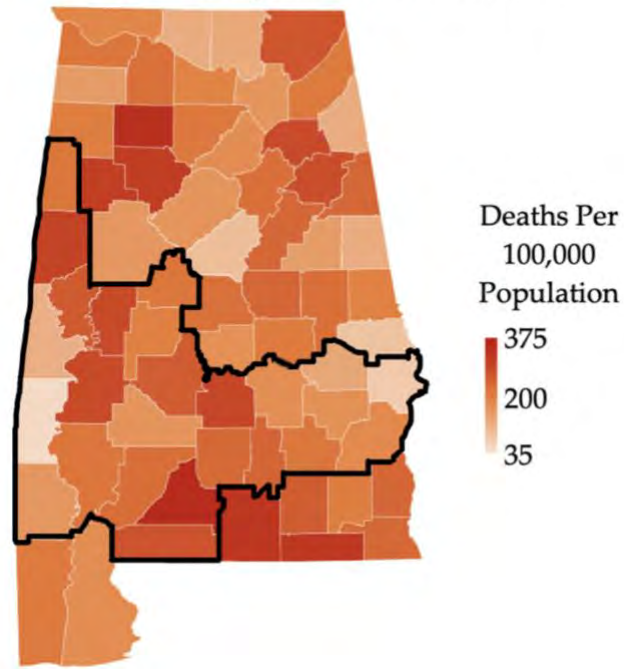


Alabama: over the last two years, rural Alabama counties have had higher rates of death from COVID-19 per 100,000 population than their metropolitan counterparts. However, the Black Belt region—which the Education Policy Center defines as 25 counties in the southern half of the state, including 19 persistent poverty

counties—has borne the brunt of impact from COVID-19.⁵ Chart 2, displaying 2020 COVID-19 death rates per 100,000, shows that Black Belt counties have experienced higher death rates than other rural counties and the state overall. Lowndes, Crenshaw, Greene, and Hale counties, 4 of the top 5 Alabama counties with the highest death rates, are all in the Black Belt and are all classified as persistent poverty. *The average 2020 COVID-19 deaths per 100,000 for the 25 Black Belt counties is 218, nearly 30% greater than the average of 168 COVID-19 deaths per 100,000 in the non-Black Belt counties.* None of the top 20 Alabama counties for COVID-19 death rate in 2020 are classified as metropolitan counties.

By 2021, COVID-19 deaths per 100,000 population in non-Black Belt rural areas across Alabama “caught up” to the levels in the Black Belt (Chart 3). Average COVID-19 deaths per 100,000 population in Black Belt counties hardly fell from 2020 to 2021— from 218 deaths per 100,000 in 2020 down to 213 in 2021. However, death rates in

Chart 3. COVID-19 Deaths Per 100,000 Population in 2021

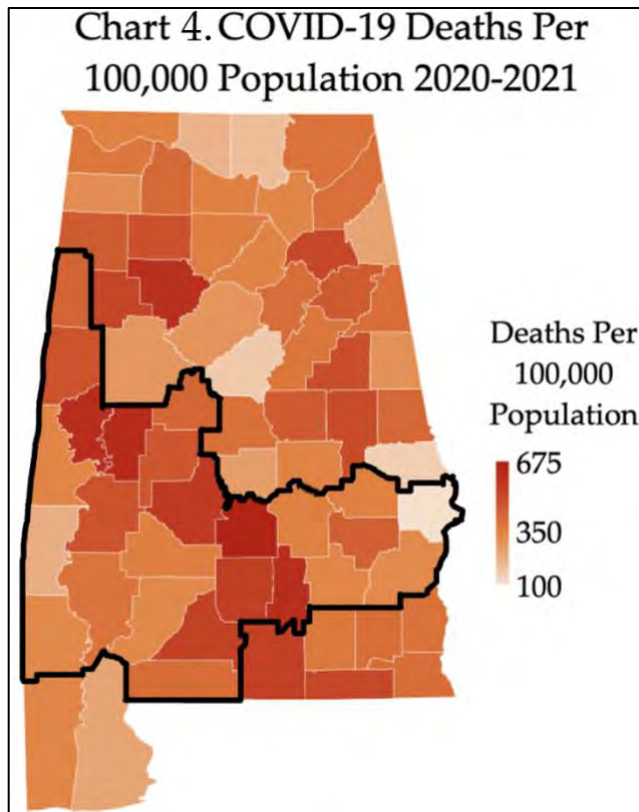


non-Black Belt counties surged close to levels observed in the Black Belt, increasing by roughly 25% from 168 to 211 in 2021. *Overall, 5 of the top 10, and less than half of the top 20 counties by COVID-19 death rate in 2021 were in the Black Belt.*

The difference between the average 2021 COVID-19 death rate in Black Belt counties (213) and non-Black Belt counties (211) is less than 1%. However, there are still no metropolitan areas in the top 20 counties by COVID-19 death rates. This suggests that COVID is problem for rural Alabama as a whole and is marginally worse among the Black Belt’s vulnerable citizens.

The difference between statewide death rates in 2020 versus 2021 is puzzling, considering the stark contrast in COVID-19 deaths rates in 2020 between Black Belt and non-Black Belt counties. During the summer 2020

surge, *AL.com* reported that over a quarter of cases could be found in the Black Belt as well as a quarter of all deaths in the state to that point.⁶ Additionally, in June 2020, Lowndes County had the highest per capita infection rate in the state, which tracks with its status as the county with the highest COVID-19 death rate both in 2020 and overall.⁷ The nearly identical 2021 death rates between Black Belt and non-Black Belt counties might be explained by several factors discussed below. Still, as Chart 4 shows, Black Belt counties have experienced the highest COVID-19 death rates overall.



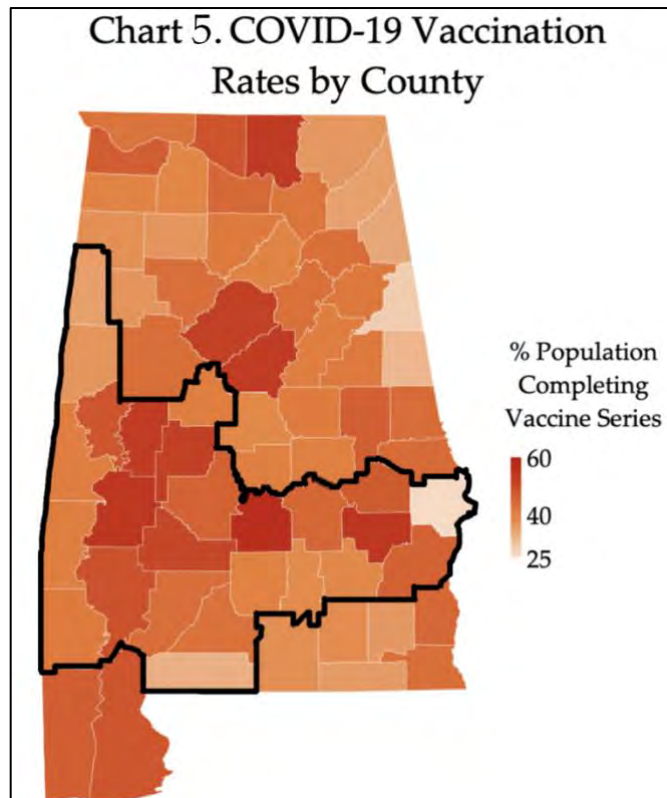
When considering the combined deaths from 2020–2021, Lowndes, Hale, Greene, and Crenshaw are still the top 4 counties by COVID-19 deaths per 100,000 population. This is of particular importance, since the Black Belt is already suffering from population loss—the region lost over 40,000 residents from 1998 to 2018—as the

rest of Alabama has grown.⁸ Clearly, the Black Belt has struggled with the COVID-19 pandemic over the last two years, yet the problem is really for rural Alabama as a whole.

Reasons for Higher Black Belt COVID-19 Death Rates

We now turn to explanations for the patterns of COVID-19 deaths captured in this data, particularly the concentration of deaths in the Black Belt and rural areas. Rural Americans tend to be older and more vulnerable to disease.⁹ According to Jessica McGraw, CEO/Administrator of John Paul Jones Hospital in Wilcox County, hospitalized COVID-19 patients in rural areas tend to have higher rates of chronic diseases or underlying conditions, such as diabetes, obesity, or heart disease.¹⁰ Rural populations in Alabama also tend to be poorer.¹¹ The Black Belt's large African American population, a demographic disproportionately affected by the pandemic across the country, is also relevant in explaining the health disparities.¹²

The explanations we explore in this brief are vaccination rates by county and access to health care. Chart 5 shows the COVID-19 vaccination rates for those completing a full vaccine series, not including booster shots (1 Johnson & Johnson shot or 2 Pfizer/Moderna shots).¹³ Despite national



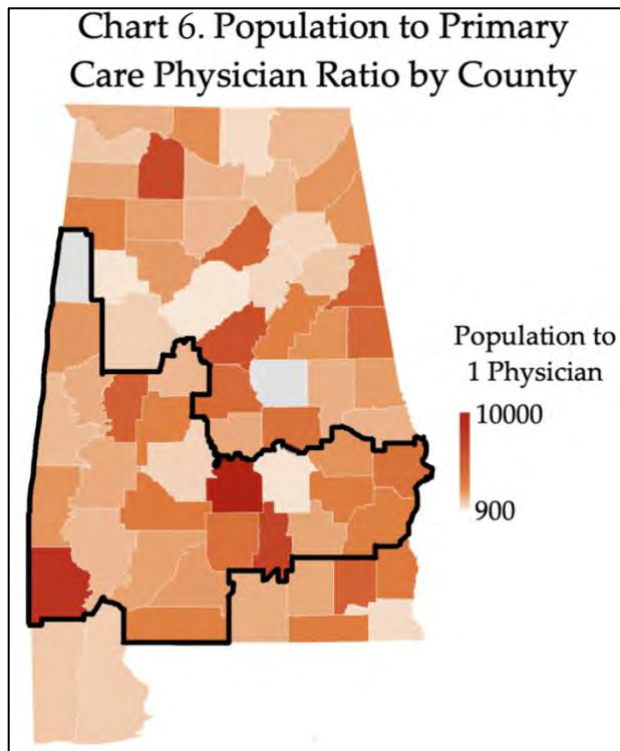
trends showing that rural populations are less likely to be vaccinated than metro areas, as well as the historically-rooted vaccine hesitancy among

African Americans, 7 of Alabama's top 10 most vaccinated counties are in the Black Belt: Lowndes, Marengo, Bullock, Hale, Perry, Wilcox, and Clarke.^{14,15,16} The other 3 counties in the top 10 are Madison, Shelby, and Jefferson—home to two of Alabama's largest metropolitan areas.

This high vaccination rate among majority-minority Black Belt counties might explain the data in Chart 3, where the impact of COVID-19 deaths was more equally dispersed across rural Alabama as a whole. During the latest Omicron surge in January 2022, Black Belt counties with higher vaccination rates tended to have lower COVID positivity rates, while the reverse held true for lesser vaccinated non-Black Belt rural counties.¹⁷ This may speak to the success by state and county officials to extend COVID-19 vaccinations to vulnerable, older Black Belt populations, since the Black Belt's population is on average older than the rest of the state; yet it may also speak to the lower vaccination levels in rural non-Black Belt counties.¹⁸ There is also strong national evidence that COVID-19 vaccination rates differ sharply along partisan lines, with counties voting for Democrats in 2020 having a nearly 13% higher vaccination rate than those voting for Republicans—and six out of the seven Black Belt counties in the top 10 by vaccination rate voted for Democrats in 2020.^{19,20}

The Lack of Primary Care Physicians and COVID-19

Our *Black Belt 2020* series found Black Belt counties are losing rural hospitals, with residents having to travel farther to receive healthcare.²¹ Chart 6 shows the ratio of population to primary care physicians by county.²² Similarly to the 2021 COVID-19 death rates in Chart 3, however, no clear pattern emerges. While Black Belt counties face severe challenges



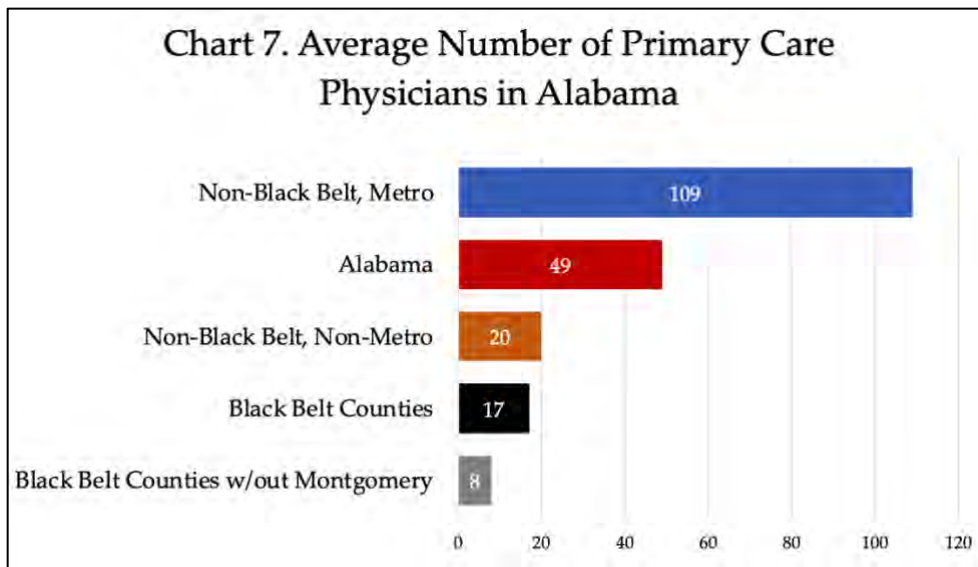
to access primary care physicians—Lowndes County shares one physician for nearly 10,000 residents—*access to primary care physicians is a general problem for all of rural Alabama.* Primary care physicians provide essential preventative and primary care and make referrals for specialized care. Inadequate

access to healthcare has detrimental effects on health outcomes, and this likely contributes to the wider spread of COVID-19 deaths across rural Alabama in 2021 (Chart 2).

Chart 7 shows the staggering difference in the number of primary care physicians available in the Black Belt and non-metro areas versus the rest of Alabama. Non-Black Belt Metro counties (which includes Jefferson, Madison, Mobile, and Tuscaloosa) have an average of 109 primary care physicians per county—more than twice the state average of 49.²³ The state average is more than two times greater than the non-Black Belt, non-metro counties' average of 20 primary care physicians. The non-Black Belt, non-metro average is only marginally better than the average for all Black Belt counties at 17—less than a quarter of the metro average. If the Black Belt's only metropolitan county—Montgomery, an outlier in the Black Belt—is excluded from the count, the average number of physicians in Black Belt

counties falls from 17 to just 8. While these numbers are not adjusted for population, they demonstrate the limited access to healthcare that rural Alabamian's face, especially in the Black Belt.

Because primary care physicians are key to preventative care, limited access to these healthcare providers has a cascading impact. Combined with the fact that hospitals in the Black Belt have limited capacity to treat advanced



illnesses, many people in the Black Belt and rural Alabama must travel great distances to seek the care they need. This has undoubtedly

contributed to the trend of COVID-19 deaths hitting rural Alabama generally, and the Black Belt specifically, the hardest.

Implications and Policy Recommendations

COVID-19 has clearly devastated the already financially and medically stressed Black Belt region of Alabama. Healthcare has become one of Alabama's fastest growing industries, with some of the highest demands for labor. The COVID-19 pandemic has only increased this demand over the last two years.²⁴ The Black Belt and other rural parts of Alabama have especially struggled with this, as the few hospitals and clinics that remain open in the region met their capacities almost instantly, and the region's

few hospitals have strained to maintain personnel and supplies.²⁵ According to Loretta Wilson, CEO/Administrator at Hill Hospital in Sumter County, the unknowns of the COVID-19 pandemic also strained staffing at hospitals as fear fell on doctors and nurses and caused some to exit the health care field altogether.²⁶

The pandemic has made clear that the Black Belt is not well-equipped for public health emergencies. In Wilcox County, according to Jessica McGraw, CEO/Administrator at John Paul Jones hospital, COVID-19 patients requiring intensive treatment had to be transferred to hospitals in Montgomery, Greenville, or Birmingham due to lack of adequate supplies.²⁷ To better prepare the Black Belt for future emergency scenarios, there needs to be significant investment to ensure there are enough supplies and facilities, as well as to incentivize healthcare professionals to work in the Black Belt and rural Alabama generally.

The healthcare industry is already known for generally offering higher-wage jobs, but as the COVID-19 pandemic has shown, much more is at stake than just a paycheck. For Ms. Loretta Wilson, CEO/Administrator at Hill Hospital and a native of the Black Belt, her stake in the Black Belt is a personal passion for her family and community.²⁸ Potential incentives for healthcare workers should make it attainable and sustainable for motivated and passionate people to stay and work in their Black Belt communities. Some incentives that have succeeded in other states include, but are not limited to, housing accommodations, student loan forgiveness for extended contracts in rural areas, and assistance with childcare.

The Black Belt continues to struggle with lacking or inadequate institutions essential for everyday life, health, education, and prosperity. The region has made efforts in recent years to recruit businesses and retain health institutions, but the lack of outside investment in the Black Belt—combined with population decline—has consistently stunted the region’s progress. For example, Selma’s population declined from 25,000 to just under 18,000 between 2010 and 2020. This population decline has challenged the recruitment and retention of a skilled-workforce, particularly for hospitals and healthcare providers in the region in light of COVID-19. Investment in all aspects of the Black Belt—such as expanding broadband infrastructure to improve telemedicine access—can uplift communities like Selma, but also the state as a whole.

THE EDUCATION POLICY CENTER AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA

Established in 1924, the Education Policy Center is The University of Alabama's oldest center or institute. Through its ongoing nonpartisan research and programs, it seeks to assist the College of Education and the University to fulfill their mission to improve the quality of life for all Alabamians. The EPC promotes expanding access and success, strengthening equity, and advancing economic and community development with special emphasis on telling the story of the Deep South to policymakers in Alabama, the region and nation. In 2020, EPC released the *Black Belt 2020* issue brief series examining policy issues pertinent to the Alabama Black Belt. *Black Belt 2022* builds upon this work and will examine new issues as well as revisit previous issues.

Director: Stephen G. Katsinas, Ph.D.

Associate Director: Nathaniel Bray, Ph.D.

Project Coordinators/Managers: Brandi M. Stacey, Michael S. Malley, Jr., & Stephanie Paul

Senior Fellow & Issue Briefs Editor: James E. "Ed" Davis, PhD (Emeritus, MS State University)

Associate Issue Briefs Editor: Phillip D. Grant, Ph.D. (University of West Georgia)

Senior Fellows: Arleene P. Breaux, Ph.D., James E. "Skip" Dotherow, Ph.D., Phillip D. Grant, Ph.D., Ray Huebschmann, Ph.D., Brian K. Johnson, Ph.D., Vincent A. Lacey, Ph.D., R. Frank Mensel, Ph.D., David Murphy, Ph.D., J. Warner

Fellows: Mark D'Amico, Ph.D., Janice Friedel, Ph.D., Linda Hagedorn, Ph.D., Michael Kennamey, Ph.D., Dustin Smith, Ph.D.

Research Associates: Emily Grace Corley, Noel Keeney, Sean O'Brien, & Garrett Till

***THE CENTER FOR BUSINESS AND ECONOMIC RESEARCH AT
THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA***

The primary roles of the Center for Business and Economic Research (CBER) are in research and service to the State and people of Alabama and the nation at large. The Center, established in 1930, is committed to promoting economic development throughout Alabama. CBER's research spans economic and fiscal policy analysis, business, environmental, economic and workforce development studies. CBER also collects, maintains, analyzes, and releases business and socioeconomic data. CBER clientele include federal, state, and local government agencies, private companies, other academic institutions, financial institutions, individuals, and the media. As a resource for in-depth studies/analysis/forecasts, CBER provides insight and information with the aim of improving the quality of decision-making by our clientele. CBER is an outreach/research center of the Culverhouse College of Business, one of the leading business schools in the country.

Associate Dean for Economic Development & Senior Research Economist: Samuel Addy, Ph.D.

Executive Director: Ahmad Ijaz **Associate Director of Research & Outreach:** Morgan Cordle

Director of Socioeconomic Analysis & Demographics: Nyesha Black, Ph.D.

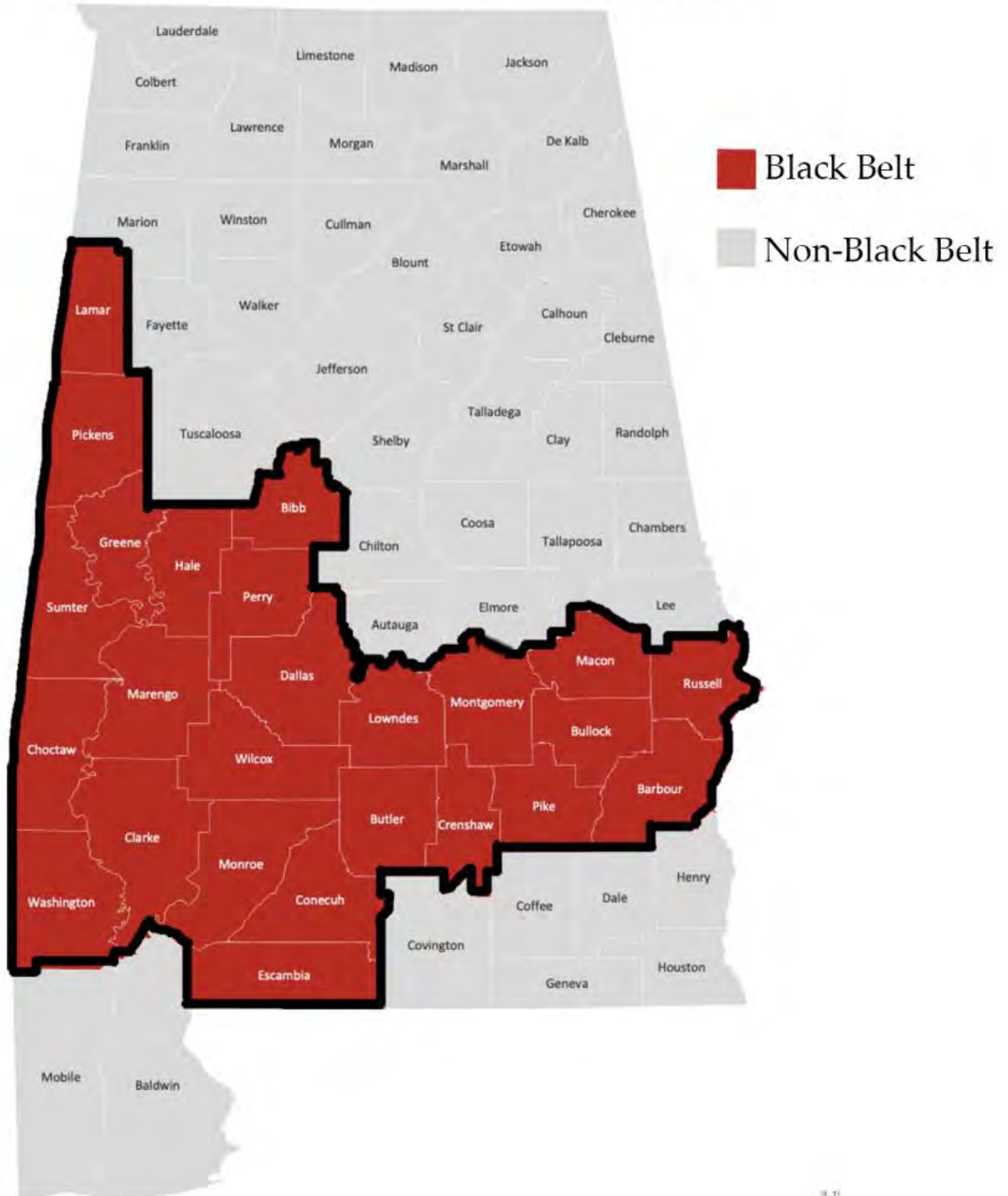
Assistant Research Economist: Kilungu Nzaku, Ph.D.

Socioeconomic Analyst: Susannah Robichaux **Economic Forecaster:** Stephanie Normanyo

1500 Greensboro Avenue, Suite 1 Box 870221, Tuscaloosa, Alabama 35401 •

Telephone: (205) 348-6191 • <https://cber.culverhouse.ua.edu>

Appendix 1. Black Belt counties vs. Non-Black Belt counties



¹ Katsinas, S.G., Keeney, N.E., Jacobs, E., and Whann, H. (2020, October). "Defining Alabama's Black Belt Region," Tuscaloosa, AL: Education Policy Center, The University of Alabama, Issue Brief No. 48, http://edpolicy.ua.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/201009_defining-al-black-belt.pdf.

In our extensive review of state and federal reports, including the Appalachian Regional Commission and the Delta Regional Authority, we found no generally accepted definition of which Alabama counties are included or excluded from the Black Belt. For this reason, Black Belt 2022 uses the inclusive, 25-county definition denoted in Chart 1.

² Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture. (2022, n.d.) "Rural counties with high and persistent poverty in 2019 were mostly located in the South" <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/chart-gallery/gallery/chart-detail/?chartId=101781>

³ Ibid, ERS, 2022.

⁴ Marema, T. (2021, December 20). *Analysis: Rural Covid-19 Deaths in Four Graphs*. The Daily Yonder. <https://dailyyonder.com/analysis-the-rural-death-rate-in-four-charts/2021/12/20/>

⁵ Alabama Department of Public Health. *Alabama's COVID-19 Data and Surveillance Dashboard*. <https://alpublichealth.maps.arcgis.com/apps/dashboards/6d2771faa9da4a2786a509d82c8cf0f7>

⁶ Archibald, R. (2020, June 19). *Black Belt Hit Hard as Coronavirus Cases Surge in Rural Alabama*. AL.com. <https://www.al.com/news/2020/06/black-belt-hit-hard-as-coronavirus-cases-surge-in-rural-alabama.html>

⁷ Ibid, Archibald (2020).

⁸ Katsinas, S.G., Keeney, N.E., Jacobs, E.M., & Whann, H. (2020, August 25). *The Black Belt's Population Decline Explains Why Alabama May Lose a Congressional Seat in the 2020 Census*. Education Policy Center. The University of Alabama. http://edpolicy.ua.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/201009_defining-al-black-belt.pdf

⁹ Carey, L., Marema, T. (2021, December 20). *Why are Rural Americans Dying Twice as Fast From Covid-19?*. The Daily Yonder. <https://dailyyonder.com/why-are-rural-americans-dying-twice-as-fast-from-covid-19/2021/12/20/>

¹⁰ J. McGraw. (2022, February 8). Personal communication.

¹¹ McClure, S.M., Lichtenstein, B., Oths, K., Payne-Foster, P., & Ross, L. (2021, September). *From Equitable Crisis Response to Healthy Populace: CommuniVax Alabama, Final Local Report*. CommuniVax. Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Center for Health Security. <https://www.centerforhealthsecurity.org/our-work/Center-projects/communiVax/local-reports/210915-CommuniVax-Local-Report-Alabama.pdf>

¹² Ibid, McClure (2021).

¹³ Alabama Department of Public Health. (2022). *Alabama's COVID-19 Vaccine Distribution Dashboard*. Accessed February 8, 2022. <https://alpublichealth.maps.arcgis.com/apps/dashboards/e4a232feb1344ce0afd9ac162f3ac4ba>

¹⁴ Ibid, Carey (2021).

¹⁵ Ibid, McClure (2021).

¹⁶ Ibid, ADPH (2022).

- ¹⁷ Archibald, R. (2022, January 22). *Omicron Wave Now Hitting Rural Alabama, State Still Setting New Records: Week in Review*. AL.com. <https://www.al.com/news/2022/01/omicron-wave-now-hitting-rural-alabama-state-still-setting-new-records-week-in-review.html>
- ¹⁸ Ibid. ADPH (2022).
- ¹⁹ Kates, J., Tolbert, J., & Orgera, K. (2021, September 14). *The Red/Blue Divide in COVID-19 Vaccination Rates*. Kaiser Family Foundation. <https://www.kff.org/policy-watch/the-red-blue-divide-in-covid-19-vaccination-rates/>
- ²⁰ *Election Results 2020: How Alabama Voted in the Presidential Election*. (2020, December 11). WVTM 13 Digital. <https://www.wvtm13.com/article/alabama-election-results-2020-county-map/34935044>
- ²¹ Jacobs, E.M., Whann, H., Corley, E.G., Bowen, J.R., & Keeney, N.E. (2020, October 13). *Healthcare: A Key Challenge in Alabama's Black Belt*. Education Policy Center. The University of Alabama. http://edpolicy.ua.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/201014_healthcare-challenge-al-black-belt.pdf
- ²² *Alabama, Primary Care Physicians*. (2021). County Health Rankings and Roadmaps. University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute. <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/app/alabama/2021/measure/factors/4/description>
- ²³ United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. (Last Updated 2020, December 10). *Rural-Urban Continuum Codes*. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/rural-urban-continuum-codes.aspx>
- The other non-Black Belt metro counties as classified by the USDA-ERS are Autauga, Baldwin, Blount, Calhoun, Chilton, Colbert, Elmore, Etowah, Geneva, Henry, Houston, Lauderdale, Lawrence, Lee, Limestone, Morgan, Shelby, St. Clair, Walker.
- ²⁴ *News Release, Bureau of Labor Statistics*. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Nov. 4, 2021. <https://www.bls.gov/bls/newsrels.htm>.
- ²⁵ Yurkanin, A., & Archibald, R. (2020, June 16). *Hospitals in Several Alabama Cities Now Seeing All-Time Highs in Coronavirus Patients*. AL.com. <https://www.al.com/news/2020/06/hospitals-in-several-alabama-cities-now-seeing-all-time-highs-in-coronavirus-patients.html>
- ²⁶ L. Wilson. (2022, February 11). Personal communication.
- ²⁷ Ibid, McGraw (2022).
- ²⁸ Ibid, Wilson (2022).



Advertisement

News

Lack of doctors helped fuel Black Belt's high COVID death rate, says University of Alabama

Published: Mar. 01, 2022, 9:25 a.m.

516
shares

By [Ramsey Archibald | rarchibald@al.com](#)

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic in Alabama, and especially early on, the Black Belt region - one of the poorest regions in the nation - has been hit hardest.

Six of the seven Alabama counties with the highest per capita death rates since the start of the pandemic are in the Black Belt, led by Lowndes County, with a death rate of nearly 700 per 100,000 residents.

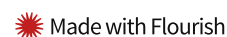
The University of Alabama Education Policy Center this week issued a report on the high death rate in the Black Belt as part of its renewed series Black Belt 2022, which examines issues unique to the region and aims to offer solutions.

Advertisement

The COVID death rate for Alabama counties in the Black Belt, which runs in a band through the south-central part of the state, comes despite some of the state's higher vaccination rates. However, residents tend to be older in many of the Black Belt counties and researchers found they have far less access to health care.

That complicates what should be simple health problems, said Emily Grace Corley, a graduate student at the University of Alabama and one of the authors of the brief.

"Simple health issues can get pushed off really easily," she said. "And they just get worse. Really easy to treat health issues get pushed off and become hard to treat, more expensive to treat."



[Can't see the map? [Click here.](#)]

Lowndes County is a tiny, rural county just west of Montgomery, and was hit hard early during the pandemic. And that's a trend that holds true for much of the Black Belt.

There are just over 700,000 people living in the 25 counties defined by the University of Alabama's Education Policy Center as part of the Black Belt. They are among Alabama's poorest, most rural counties, and the Black Belt contains all of the state's 11 majority-minority counties.

The COVID death rate in those Black Belt counties sits at 413 deaths per 100,000 people as of Monday, the most recent date for which data was available. That's significantly higher than the rate for non-Black Belt counties, which sits at 355 deaths per 100,000.

However, the Black Belt saw some of the highest rates of vaccination in Alabama.

At the very early stages of the pandemic, many Black Belt counties saw large death totals, but after vaccines were made widely available to all adults in April of 2021, death rates in the Black Belt and the rest of the state have started to even out.

Black Belt counties saw a death rate of 154 deaths per 100,000 residents after vaccines were made available, compared to a death rate of 147 for non-Black Belt counties.

[Can't see the chart? [Click here.](#)]

One of the reasons the death rate was so high at first is that the residents of those counties were already likely to have bad outcomes due to COVID - the Black Belt is, on average, older and less healthy than the rest of Alabama. But another key issue is the lack of access to healthcare.

According to research by the Education Policy Center, the average Black Belt county, not including Montgomery, which as an urban county is an outlier, has an average of just eight primary care physicians. And there are many counties in the Black Belt without a hospital.

The Education Policy Center on Tuesday suggested the Black Belt was set up to fail at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. And if nothing is done, the region is destined to fail again during future healthcare emergencies.

"Nobody is going to want to move into an area if they don't have that amenity of healthcare," said Corley. "If you don't have a hospital, or any kind of physically close medical facility, most people aren't going to have time to drive to go to the hospital."

But it's not just the lack of hospitals, clinics or other healthcare infrastructure - it's the lack of personnel. Doctors, nurses and other healthcare professionals are very hard to recruit, especially to a place like the Black Belt which lacks other key amenities like entertainment, education and jobs, according to Ahmad Ijaz, with Alabama's Center for Business & Economic Research, a partner on the Black Belt 2022 project.

And it's not a simple problem, Ijaz said. The lack of a strong workforce makes it hard to attract businesses, and the lack of businesses makes it hard to attract other

amenities.

“It would have to be a long process, but it has to start somewhere,” he said.

Stephen Katsinas, head of the Education Policy Center, said the best hope for the region is a comprehensive approach, and that one solution won’t solve the Black Belt’s many issues. But one possible idea was offering incentives for healthcare workers who take jobs in the Black Belt and stay for a number of years.

One such incentive could be student loan forgiveness, Katsinas said. Similar to existing programs that offer loan forgiveness for some public service workers, loan forgiveness for nurses, doctors and other healthcare workers in the Black Belt could get people to come to the region, and potentially to stay there.

That would better prepare these counties for future healthcare emergencies, but would also help the average person living in these counties who wouldn’t need to drive as far for a simple doctors visit, and might help convince a teacher or mechanic to come live in the area, too.

“We didn’t get into this situation overnight,” Katsinas said. “And we’re not going to get out of it overnight, either.”

Do you have an idea for a data story about Alabama? Email Ramsey Archibald at rarchibald@al.com, and follow him on Twitter [@RamseyArchibald](https://twitter.com/RamseyArchibald). Read more Alabama data stories [here](#).

Note to readers: if you purchase something through one of our affiliate links we may earn a commission.

**ADVANCE
LOCAL**

Registration on or use of this site constitutes acceptance of our [User Agreement](#), [Privacy Policy and Cookie Statement](#), and [Your California Privacy Rights](#) (User Agreement updated 1/1/21. Privacy Policy and Cookie Statement updated 5/1/2021).

Cookies Settings

© 2022 Advance Local Media LLC. All rights reserved ([About Us](#)).

The material on this site may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, cached or otherwise used, except with the prior written permission of Advance Local.

[Community Rules](#) apply to all content you upload or otherwise submit to this site.

[Ad Choices](#)

Issue Brief № 56

K-12 STEM Education in Alabama's Black Belt

by Sean O'Brien, Emily Grace Corley, Garrett Till

*"Our rural communities have always valued STEM skills, but few of our schools have adequate resources to ensure our students acquire those skills. Now, in the wake of a year like no other, we have a once-in-a-generation chance to strengthen our rural communities by improving STEM education for our students."*¹

In the Education Policy Center's (EPC) *Black Belt 2020* series, an issue brief on K-12 enrollment in Alabama's Black Belt noted a 13% reduction in enrollment from 1995-96 to 2019-20;² in the following school year, 2020-21, combined Black Belt school enrollment fell nearly 4% more—from 106,801 students to 102,697.³ While population decline in the Black Belt continues to reduce enrollment in its K-12 schools, it also struggles to provide adequate access to STEM resources and fails to meet STEM proficiency metrics compared to the rest of Alabama.

Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) is increasingly emphasized as a necessary field of study for students in primary and secondary education. From 2020-2030, STEM jobs will grow by more than 10%, while non-STEM jobs will only grow 7.5%.⁴ Jobs in STEM also provide median annual wages that are more than double that of non-STEM—\$89,780 compared to \$40,020.⁵ Given the current and projected growth of STEM jobs, it is no surprise that institutions are becoming more concerned with providing the tools for better STEM education.

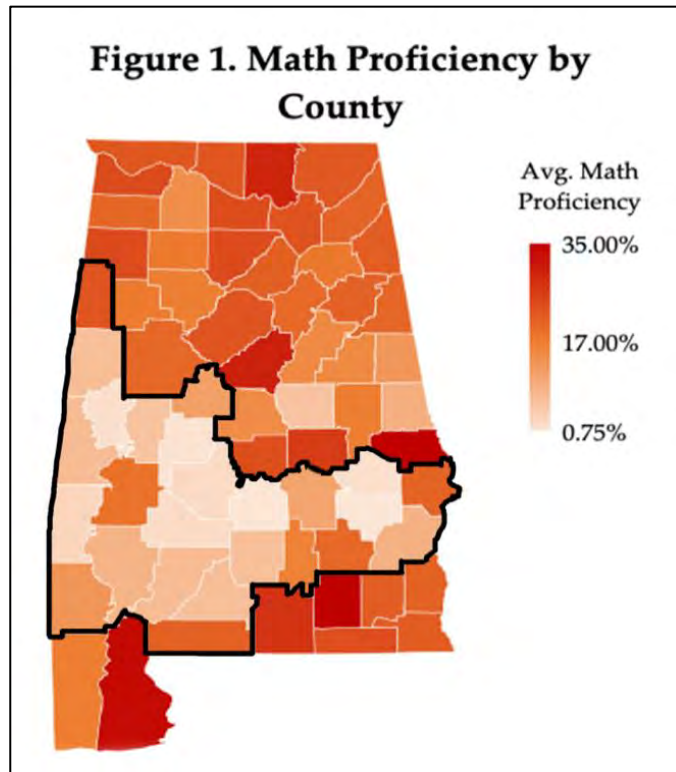
Alabama is no different, as Governor Kay Ivey noted the continued growth and demand for labor in STEM sectors as she established the Alabama STEM Council in 2020. The Council “will play a vital role in ensuring that our state’s future leaders have the opportunity to learn STEM-based skills that will help them transition into successful career pathways upon graduation.”⁶

Math and Science Proficiencies

Alabama’s statewide proficiencies for math and science are one of the lowest in the nation, receiving a grade of “F” from Education Next, Alabama’s National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP).⁷ The state ranked in the bottom 20% of states in each of the following assessments: 4th grade math, 8th grade math, 4th grade science, and 8th grade science.⁸ ACT scores in math and science reveal low benchmarks (benchmarks are the ACT’s minimum scores required for students to have a reasonable chance of success in college-level courses) at the high school level as well, with less than 25% of students in Alabama benchmarking in either subject area.⁹

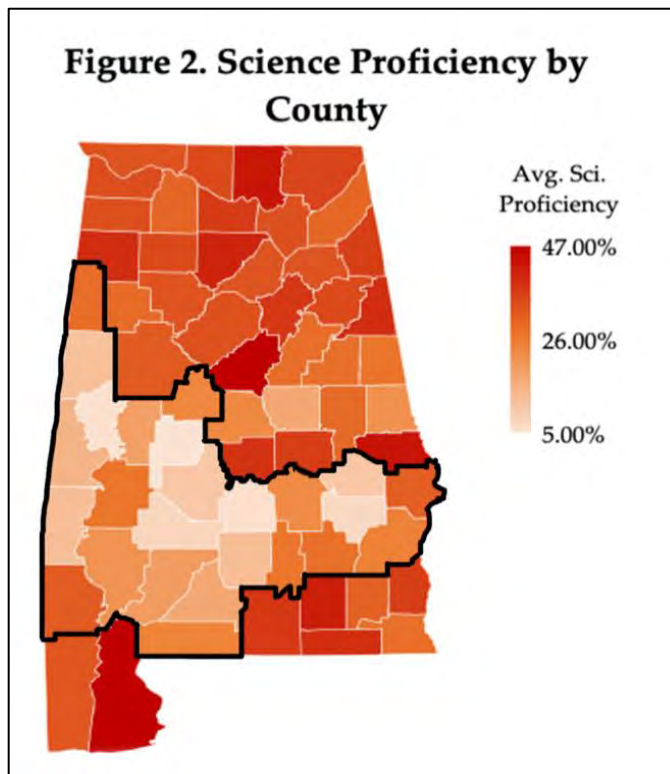
The disparities run even deeper when analyzing Alabama at the county level. The best performing counties are those with typically higher income levels and/or lower poverty rates like Baldwin, Shelby, and Madison counties. The worst, by contrast, reside in Alabama’s Black Belt. Despite schools in the Black Belt spending, on average, \$800 more per student than non-Black Belt schools (\$10,538 compared to \$9,734), Black Belt schools perform significantly worse than the rest of the state in math and science.¹⁰

The percentage of students scoring “proficient” on state assessments, adjusted for student population, shows that math proficiency rates are just 11% in the Black Belt—less than half of the 23% in non-Black Belt counties. Figure 2 displays this stark contrast. None of the



top 10 math proficient counties are in the Black Belt, but they account for 9 of the bottom 10 and 18 of the bottom 20 counties. Of those 9 poorest performing Black Belt counties, 8 are majority-minority counties, and the bottom 2, Lowndes and Bullock counties, score below 1% math proficiency.¹¹ Only one of the 25 Black Belt counties, Lamar County, exceeds the state’s math proficiency average of 21.5%.

Science proficiency yields similar results, with Black Belt schools reaching



only 22% proficiency compared to 36% for non-Black Belt schools. Out of the 67 counties in Alabama, not one of the top 30 in science proficiency is in the Black Belt; yet 23 of the bottom 30, and all 10 of the least science proficient are Black Belt counties. Seven of those worst-

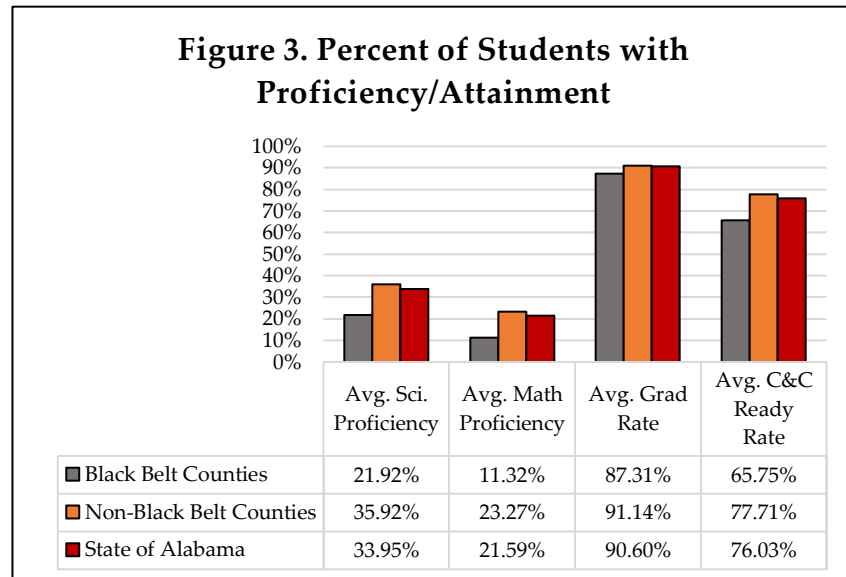
performing 10 are the following majority-minority counties: Dallas County (11%), Macon County (11%), Wilcox County (8%), Bullock County (7.5%), Lowndes County (6%), Greene County (6%), and Perry County (5%). Combined, the majority-minority counties average a science proficiency an additional two percentage points lower than the Black Belt, at just under 20%. None of the counties in the Black Belt meet the state's average of 34% proficiency, as shown in Figure 2, highlighting that students in the region are significantly underprepared for the STEM workforce or college education.¹²

Graduation and College & Career Readiness

By 2025, it is estimated that 60% of Alabama's jobs will require education beyond a high school.¹³ Figure 3 underscores that Black Belt schools are

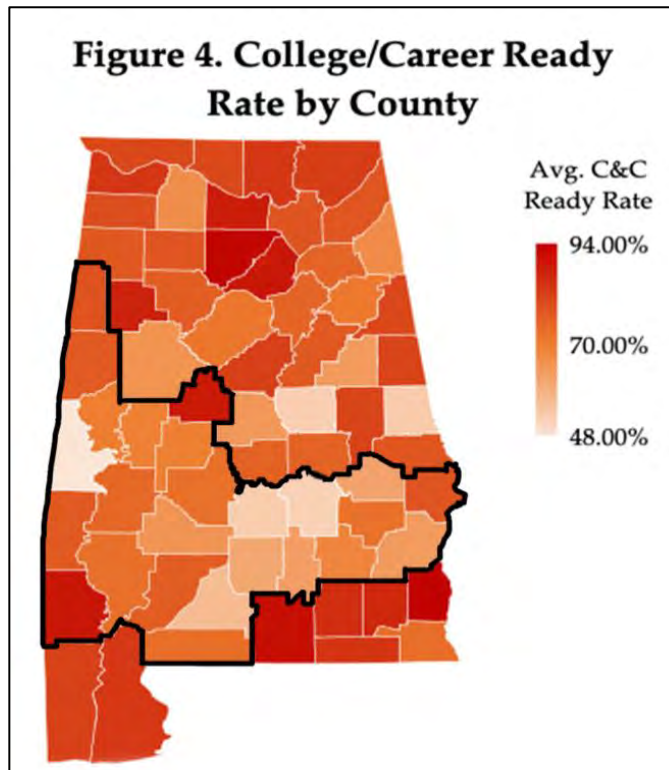
disproportionately lower performing than non-Black Belt by graduation and college & career readiness rates.

Graduation rates among Black Belt schools (87%) are roughly 3% less than the state average of 90.6% and nearly 4% less than non-



Black Belt schools' average of 91%. The twelve majority-minority counties located in Alabama's Black Belt have even lower graduation rates, averaging just over 85%. The data on graduation rates is, however, more dispersed than that of math and science proficiency; while Black Belt counties make up 8 of the bottom 10 counties (5 of which are majority-minority counties), many Black Belt counties fall near the middle of pack and the two counties with the highest graduation rates—Pickens County (98%) and Washington County (96%)—are also in the Black Belt.¹⁴ The counties with sub-90% graduation rates are distributed nearly equally within and outside of the Black Belt: 16 Black Belt counties and 14 non-Black Belt counties.

The average College & Career Readiness rate for the state of Alabama is 76%, with non-Black Belt schools supporting that score with their nearly 78% rate and Black Belt schools dragging it down, as shown in Figure 4, due to their average rate of just 66%. Similar to the other statistics, the rate for majority-minority counties in the Black Belt is even lower—only 59%. Black Belt counties only account for 18% of the top half of counties by College & Career Readiness, while making up 58% of the state's bottom half. Further, 8 of the bottom 10 counties—5 of which are majority-minority counties—are Black Belt counties.¹⁵ The lower graduation and college & career



readiness rates reveal among Black Belt schools reveals a deeply-rooted institutional problem with preparing Black Belt students for life after K-12 education.

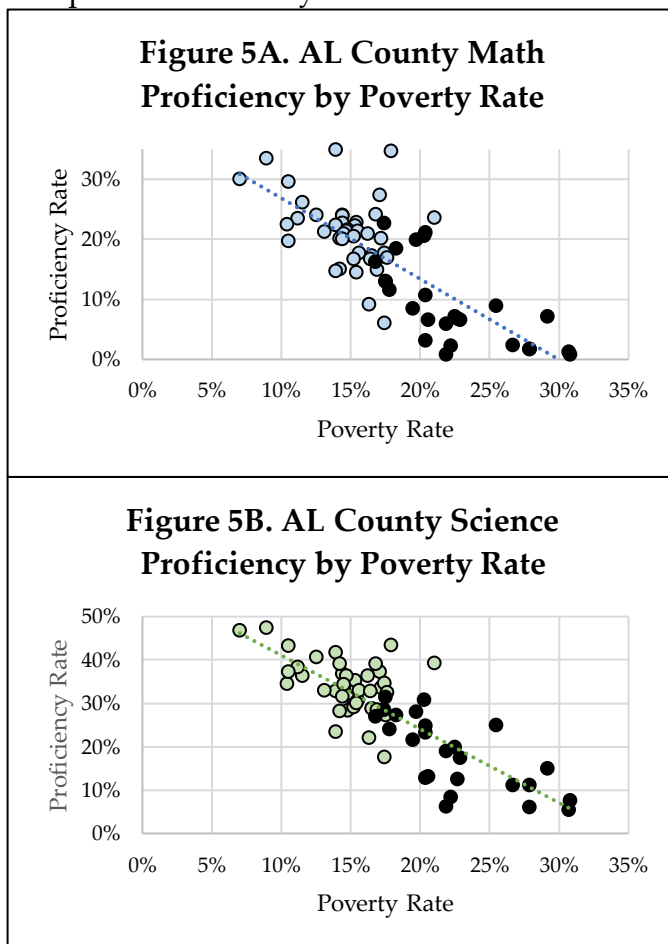
Potential Factors for Lower Black Belt Proficiencies

The disparities between Black Belt and non-Black Belt schools are significant but explaining why and how these disparities exist is complex. From the causal effects of countywide disparities like poverty—which often disproportionately impact minorities and other marginalized

communities—to inadequate technology and teacher shortages, there are a wide array of factors which are impacting the access and outcomes of STEM education throughout the state.

Poverty is an issue which has consistently afflicted the Black Belt, and it also “has become one of the most prevalent indicators of academic achievement.”¹⁶ While Alabama has a statewide poverty rate of just under 15%, the Black Belt’s average poverty rate is over 22%.¹⁷ And as the University of Alabama’s Center for Business & Economic Research (CBER) noted in 2019, the Black Belt suffers the worst child poverty in the state.¹⁸

A quantitative analysis of the link between county poverty rates and math



In Figures 5A & 5B, black points denote Black Belt counties, while blue or green points denote non-Black Belt counties.

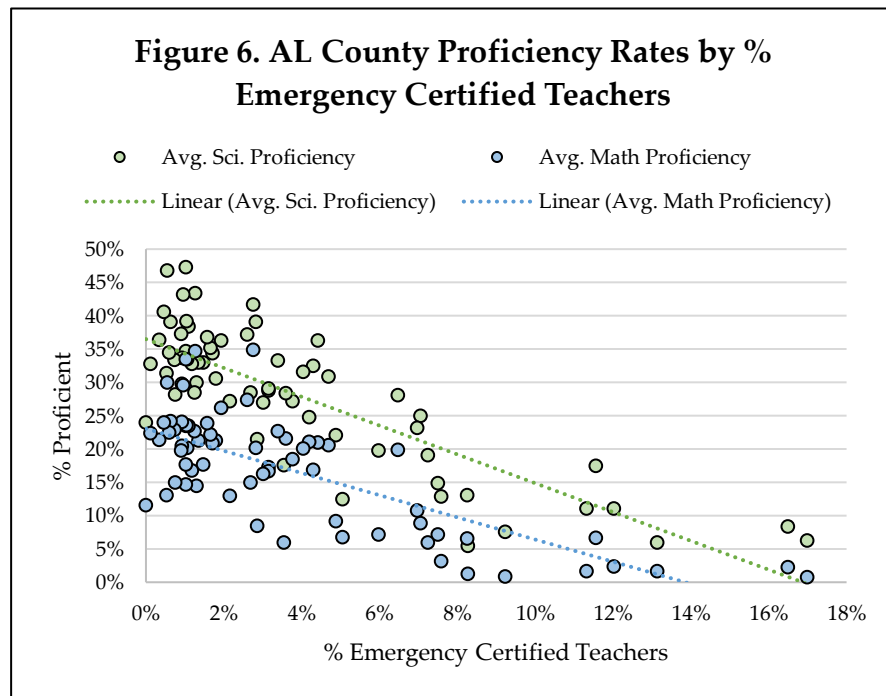
& science proficiency rates shows that a statistically significant relationship does, in fact, exist between them.

As Figures 5A & 5B show, as a county’s poverty rate increases, its proficiency rate, in either math or science, will generally decrease; each point represents a county, with Black Belt counties being denoted by their black color. The quantitative

analyses of relationships between county's poverty rates and proficiency rates further show that for approximately every 1% increase in the county's poverty rate, a decrease of 1.3% and 1.7% is expected for math and science proficiencies, respectively. The connection between socioeconomic status is incredibly evident, as the most impoverished counties, like Bullock or Perry, rank worst or near worst in math and science, while low-poverty counties like Shelby or Baldwin maintain some of the state's highest proficiency rates.

Another factor affecting STEM education and proficiency in Alabama's Black Belt is the shortage of teachers, especially highly trained teachers.

Counties in the Black Belt are much more reliant on emergency certified teachers—who have a bachelor's



degree but no education experience in the area they're teaching. A study from 2018, which focused on eighth graders in Alabama's Black Belt, found that a negative, statistically significant relationship exists between emergency teacher certification and math achievement standards.¹⁹ Figure 6 backs up the assertion of a negative relationship between proficiency

and emergency certified teachers. This is particularly concerning, given that a list of shortages—created by the Alabama Math and Science Teacher Education Program (AMSTEP) in 2019—revealed that some counties, like Perry and Marengo County, have approximately 80% of their math and science teachers teaching without full certification.²⁰ Overall, more than 7% of all of teachers in Black Belt schools are emergency certified, compared to less than 2% among non-Black Belt K-12 teachers; nearly 17% of all teachers in Lowndes and Wilcox County schools are emergency certified. As with proficiencies, the problem of emergency certified teachers is concentrated not just in the Black Belt, but specifically in its majority-minority counties—as 7 of the 10 most heavily emergency certification reliant counties are majority non-white. Figure 6 supports the findings of previous studies, showing that as the percentage of emergency certified teachers increases, proficiency rates will generally decrease.

Policy Recommendations

In order to alleviate some of the disparities seen between the Black Belt and non-Black Belt counties in Alabama, it is integral that substantial measures be taken to mitigate and eliminate poverty, attract and retain quality educators, and invest in adequate technologies for students. While there are additional factors which likely contribute to the worse STEM outcomes in the Black Belt's K-12 schools, focusing on the following improvements would be an important start.

Alleviating poverty has always been an objective by governments and non-profits, the Black Belt being no exception. Despite many attempts, persistent poverty remains an issue for much of the Black Belt.²¹ Given the complex

nature that surrounds the persistence of poverty, a holistic strategy that focuses on new economic development and opportunities is needed. Additionally, youth development and educational improvements—like quality pre-K programs, afterschool programs, tutoring, and e-learning opportunities—support long-term economic well-being and mitigate the cycle of poverty. The poverty factor can be alleviated by utilizing other strategies, such as welfare expansions, financial literacy initiatives, and/or community development, to improve educational outcomes, given that poverty both affects and is affected by the educational attainment of a community. Breaking that cycle—between education and poverty—requires other interventions and improvements, like those below.

One of the biggest challenges limiting educational institutions in Alabama's Black Belt is their shortage of teachers. The COVID-19 pandemic has only worsened the state's shortages, as more than half of school staff and teachers in Alabama's K-12 system reported considering leaving their jobs at the end of 2021; they cited low pay, high student-to-teacher ratios, large workloads, burnout, and general disrespect as reasons for considering retirement or re-location.²² Some programs have already been implemented to recruit and retain teachers in the Black Belt, like the Black Belt Teacher Corps (a program which offers financial support to current and future educators in exchange for teaching in the Black Belt), but it hasn't been enough. While the Black Belt Teacher Corps has seen some success, the demand for teachers, especially qualified STEM teachers, remains incredibly high; alongside the need for statewide legislation, districts can offer increased pay and benefits, student loan repayment/forgiveness programs, and other incentives to recruit and retain teachers, according to

the Alabama Commission for Higher Education's (ACHE) director Jim Purcell.²³

To address both teacher shortages and student technologies, Black Belt schools should utilize the American Rescue Plan's funds distributed amongst the states' educational agencies. These funds can help connect rural teachers and collaborate with other schools and students, as well as empower students by bringing technology into their community; funding could be utilized to improve the limited or complete lack of quality internet and broadband access in the Black Belt. Broadband access opens the door to many industries, interests, and e-learning opportunities that aren't currently available. Pam Buffington, the Director of Rural Initiatives at the Education Development Center, argues that the funds can also uniquely bring students together with their environments in a STEM-enriching manner.²⁴ By attaching STEM to the environmental issues and concerns of Black Belt communities, they can become more adept in fields and careers within the STEM sector that are unique to the Black Belt; further investing in technologies for those students only makes it easier for them to connect with their environments and communities, as well as improve their educational opportunities.

THE EDUCATION POLICY CENTER AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA

Established in 1924, the Education Policy Center is The University of Alabama's oldest center or institute. Through its ongoing nonpartisan research and programs, it seeks to assist the College of Education and the University to fulfill their mission to improve the quality of life for all Alabamians. The EPC promotes expanding access and success, strengthening equity, and advancing economic and community development with special emphasis on telling the story of the Deep South to policymakers in Alabama, the region and nation. In 2020, EPC released the *Black Belt 2020* issue brief series examining policy issues pertinent to the Alabama Black Belt. *Black Belt 2022* builds upon this work and will examine new issues as well as revisit previous issues.

Director: Stephen G. Katsinas, Ph.D.

Associate Director: Nathaniel Bray, Ph.D.

Project Coordinators/Managers: Brandi M. Stacey, Michael S. Malley, Jr., & Stephanie Paul

Senior Fellow & Issue Briefs Editor: James E. "Ed" Davis, PhD (Emeritus, MS State University)

Associate Issue Briefs Editor: Phillip D. Grant, Ph.D. (University of West Georgia)

Senior Fellows: Arleene P. Breaux, Ph.D., James E. "Skip" Dotherow, Ph.D., Phillip D. Grant, Ph.D., Ray Huebschmann, Ph.D., Brian K. Johnson, Ph.D., Vincent A. Lacey, Ph.D., R. Frank Mensel, Ph.D., David Murphy, Ph.D., J. Warner

Fellows: Mark D'Amico, Ph.D., Janice Friedel, Ph.D., Linda Hagedorn, Ph.D., Michael Kennamer, Ph.D., Dustin Smith, Ph.D.

Research Associates: Emily Grace Corley, Noel Keeney, Sean O'Brien, & Garrett Till

401 Queen City Avenue Box 870249, Tuscaloosa, Alabama 35487

Telephone: (205) 348-6004 • <http://edpolicy.ua.edu>

**THE CENTER FOR BUSINESS AND ECONOMIC RESEARCH AT
THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA**

The primary roles of the Center for Business and Economic Research (CBER) are in research and service to the State and people of Alabama and the nation at large. The Center, established in 1930, is committed to promoting economic development throughout Alabama. CBER's research spans economic and fiscal policy analysis, business, environmental, economic and workforce development studies. CBER also collects, maintains, analyzes, and releases business and socioeconomic data. CBER clientele include federal, state, and local government agencies, private companies, other academic institutions, financial institutions, individuals, and the media. As a resource for in-depth studies/analysis/forecasts, CBER provides insight and information with the aim of improving the quality of decision-making by our clientele. CBER is an outreach/research center of the Culverhouse College of Business, one of the leading business schools in the country.

Associate Dean for Economic Development & Senior Research Economist: Samuel Addy, Ph.D.

Executive Director: Ahmad Ijaz

Associate Director of Research & Outreach: Morgan Cordle

Director of Socioeconomic Analysis & Demographics: Nyesha Black, Ph.D.

Assistant Research Economist: Kilungu Nzaku, Ph.D.

Socioeconomic Analyst: Susannah Robichaux **Economic Forecaster:** Stephanie Normanyo

1500 Greensboro Avenue, Suite 1 Box 870221, Tuscaloosa, Alabama 35401 •

Telephone: (205) 348-6191 • <https://cber.culverhouse.ua.edu>

¹ Pam Buffington. (2021, August 2). “Commentary: On STEM– Our Once-in-a-Generation Moment Is Now,” The Daily Yonder, Center for Rural Strategies, <https://dailyyonder.com/commentary-on-stem-our-once-in-a-generation-moment-is-now/2021/08/02/>

² Stephen G. Katsinas, Noel E. Keeney, Emily Jacobs, and Hunter Whann. (2020, October). “School Enrollment in Alabama’s Black Belt Continues to Decline,” Tuscaloosa, AL: Education Policy Center, The University of Alabama, Issue Brief No. 44, http://edpolicy.ua.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/200831_school-enrollment-decline-al-black-belt.pdf

³ Alabama Department of Education. (2021). “Alabama State Department of Education Report Card,” Alabama Department of Education, <https://reportcard.alsde.edu/SelectSchool.aspx>
The data utilized from the report cards was compiled and categorized into Black Belt and non-Black Belt schools/counties by the Education Policy Center.

⁴ Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2021, September 8). Table 1.11: “Employment in STEM occupations, 2020 and projected 2030 (Numbers in thousands),” Bureau of Labor Statistics, <https://www.bls.gov/emp/tables/stem-employment.htm>

⁵ Ibid, BLS (2021).

⁶ Office of Governor Kay Ivey. (2020, September 21). “Governor Ivey Establishes The Alabama STEM Council,” Montgomery, AL. Office of the Governor of the State of Alabama, <https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/09/governor-ivey-establishes-the-alabama-stem-council/>

⁷ Paul E. Peterson and Matthew Ackerman. (2015, April 8). “States Raise Proficiency Standards in Math and Reading,” Education Next Institute, University of Chicago Press, Vol. 15, No.3, <https://www.educationnext.org/states-raise-proficiency-standards-math-reading/>

⁸ National Math and Science Initiative. (2019). Stem Opportunity Index <https://www.stemopportunityindex.com/>

The Stem Opportunity Index utilizes several metrics, including but not limited to NAEP assessment scores, to identify STEM opportunities and resources in each state.

⁹ Ibid, NMSI (2019).

¹⁰ Ibid, AL DOE (2021).

¹¹ Ibid, AL DOE (2021).

¹² Ibid, AL DOE (2021).

¹³ Lumina Foundation. (2021, February). A Stronger Nation: Learning beyond high schools builds America’s talent: Alabama’s Report 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.luminafoundation.org/stronger-nation/report/2020/#state/AL&s-tsId=byAttainment&s-tsrvs=1>

¹⁴ Ibid, AL DOE (2021).

¹⁵ Ibid, AL DOE (2021).

¹⁶ Kendra McKenzie. (2019). “The Effects of Poverty on Academic Achievement,” BU Journal of Graduate Studies in Education, Vol. 11, Issue 2, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1230212.pdf>

¹⁷ U.S. Census Bureau (2021). *QuickFacts: Alabama, Income & Poverty*. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/AL/IPE120220>

¹⁸ Center for Business and Economic Research. (2019, August 7). "One-fourth of State's Children Live in Poverty, Black Belt Counties Fare the Worst, Shelby Best," Tuscaloosa, AL: Center for Business & Economic Research, The University of Alabama, [https://cber.culverhouse.ua.edu/2019/08/07/one-fourth-of-states-children-live-in-poverty-black-belt-counties-fare-the-worst-shelby-best/#:~:text=Live%20in%20Poverty%2C-,Black%20Belt%20Counties%20Fare%20the%20Worst%2C%20Shelby%20Best,released%20today%20\(Thursday%2C%20Dec.](https://cber.culverhouse.ua.edu/2019/08/07/one-fourth-of-states-children-live-in-poverty-black-belt-counties-fare-the-worst-shelby-best/#:~:text=Live%20in%20Poverty%2C-,Black%20Belt%20Counties%20Fare%20the%20Worst%2C%20Shelby%20Best,released%20today%20(Thursday%2C%20Dec.)

¹⁹ Debra G. Gosha. (2018, September). "A Causal-comparative Study on the Effect of Teacher Certification Type on Eighth-grade Mathematics Achievement in Alabama's Black Belt Region," Northcentral University, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2138762178/F0B6033BEC074CA7PQ/1?accountid=14472>

²⁰ Trisha Powell Crain. (2019, March 3). "Teacher shortage hits hardest in rural Alabama," AL.com, <https://www.al.com/news/2019/03/teacher-shortage-hits-hardest-in-rural-alabama.html>

²¹ Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture. (2022, n.d.) "Rural counties with high and persistent poverty in 2019 were mostly located in the South" <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/chart-gallery/gallery/chart-detail/?chartId=101781>

²² Rebecca Griesbach. (2021, December 13). "Report: Half of Alabama school staff, teachers are thinking about leaving jobs as shortages worsen," AL.com, <https://www.al.com/news/2021/12/half-of-alabama-school-teachers-could-be-considering-leaving-survey-says.html>

²³ Ibid, Griesbach (2021).

²⁴ Ibid, Buffington (2021).



Advertisement

News

Black Belt K-12 students perform far worse in math, science than rest of Alabama

Published: Mar. 08, 2022, 9:00 a.m.

133
sharesBy **Ramsey Archibald | rarchibald@al.com**

Students in Alabama's Black Belt - one of the poorest regions in the United States - perform significantly worse in math and science than students in other parts of the state, despite Alabama's already low math and science rankings nationwide.

In the average Black Belt county, just 11% of K-12 students scored well enough on state assessments to be considered 'proficient,' a measure used to determine whether a student is ready for the next step after graduation. That's less than half the math proficiency rate of non-Black Belt counties, according to data released today by the [Education Policy Center](#) at the University of Alabama.

Advertisement

And just 22% of Black Belt students were considered proficient in science, compared to 36% of non-Black Belt students.

[Can't see the chart? [Click here.](#)]

The Education Policy Center released a brief Tuesday on the issue of STEM education in the Black Belt as part of Black Belt 2022, an ongoing series on issues facing the region.

According to the brief, there are some counties in the heart of the Black Belt with scores even lower than the region's average. In Lowndes and Bullock counties, both of which border Montgomery, less than 1% of students were considered proficient in math. And just over 5% of student sin Perry County were proficient in science.

"The scores, they are dismal," said Julie Swann, a long-time educator in the Black Belt and Alabama Education Association UniServ Director of District 31, who spoke at a press briefing on the issue held by the Education Policy Center on Monday.

The STEM field is a particularly important one going forward. The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates STEM jobs in Alabama will increase by 10% by 2030, significantly faster than other jobs. And STEM jobs pay roughly double those in

other fields, on average.

“It puts our children at a disadvantage,” Swann said. She spoke of her own daughter, who attended public school in the Butler County, part of the Black Belt. Swann said her daughter needed tutoring throughout college to compete with students from other, wealthier parts of the state. Her daughter is now in med school, but she’s put in a lot of work to get there, Swann said.

“She’s still playing catch up.”

And it’s not just an issue of funding. The Education Policy Center found that the average Black Belt County actually spends more per student than non-Black Belt counties.

Causes and solutions

Persistent poverty and a lack of qualified teachers are two huge driving forces behind this issue, according to the Education Policy Center and Swann.

“The teacher shortage is real in Alabama,” Swann said.

It’s a problem affecting all fields, but qualified math and science teachers are particularly hard to come by. According to data provided by the Education Policy Center, many Black Belt counties are forced to rely on emergency certified teachers - that is, teachers with a bachelor’s degree but no formal training in the field they teach. That puts teachers without science or math expertise in classrooms teaching those subjects.

“The biggest challenge we face in our Black Belt counties is qualified math and science teachers, and relying on people who are on emergency certification who are teaching math and science who don’t have a background in math and science,” Swann said.

The result is students with worse test scores, who aren’t as prepared for college or STEM careers, according to the Education Policy Center.

Swann said schools systems in her district and others are getting creative to address the issue, installing STEM classrooms adding robotics teams, but ultimately, in order to fix this problem, Alabama has to find ways to recruit qualified teachers to the region, and then keep them there.

The other issue is poverty. Persistent poverty has been linked to poor education outcomes, according to the Education Policy Center. And the Black Belt is by far Alabama's poorest region. The area's poor performance on standardized testing makes it hard not only to get into college, nearly impossible to earn scholarships. For a region as poor as the Black Belt, that's a huge issue, Swann said.

"When you look at these proficiencies, they translate over, sadly, into the ACT, which is your indicator of getting into college, your indicator of scholarship dollars," she said. "These students need as much money as they can to go to college."

This results in a cycle, where poverty in the region leads to bad test scores and no scholarship money, which means students can't gain access to high paying STEM jobs in the future.

"We must collectively find a way to close the achievement gap or systemic poverty will continue to exist in these areas," Swann said.

Reducing poverty in the Black Belt isn't something that can happen overnight. The Education Policy Center will release a future issue brief addressing poverty in the Black Belt later in the series.

This data is part of Black Belt 2022, a new series from the Education Policy Center focusing on problems in the Black Belt, and attempting to find solutions.

Do you have an idea for a data story about Alabama? Email Ramsey Archibald at rarchibald@al.com, and follow him on Twitter [@RamseyArchibald](https://twitter.com/RamseyArchibald). Read more Alabama data stories [here](#).

Note to readers: if you purchase something through one of our affiliate links we may earn a commission.

**ADVANCE
LOCAL**

Registration on or use of this site constitutes acceptance of our [User Agreement](#), [Privacy Policy and Cookie Statement](#), and [Your California Privacy Rights](#) (User Agreement updated 1/1/21. Privacy Policy and Cookie Statement updated 5/1/2021).

Cookies Settings

Issue Brief № 57

Educational Attainment, Community College, and Transfer in the Black Belt

by Garrett Till, Emily Grace Corley, Sean O'Brien,
Stephen G. Katsinas, and Nathaniel Bray

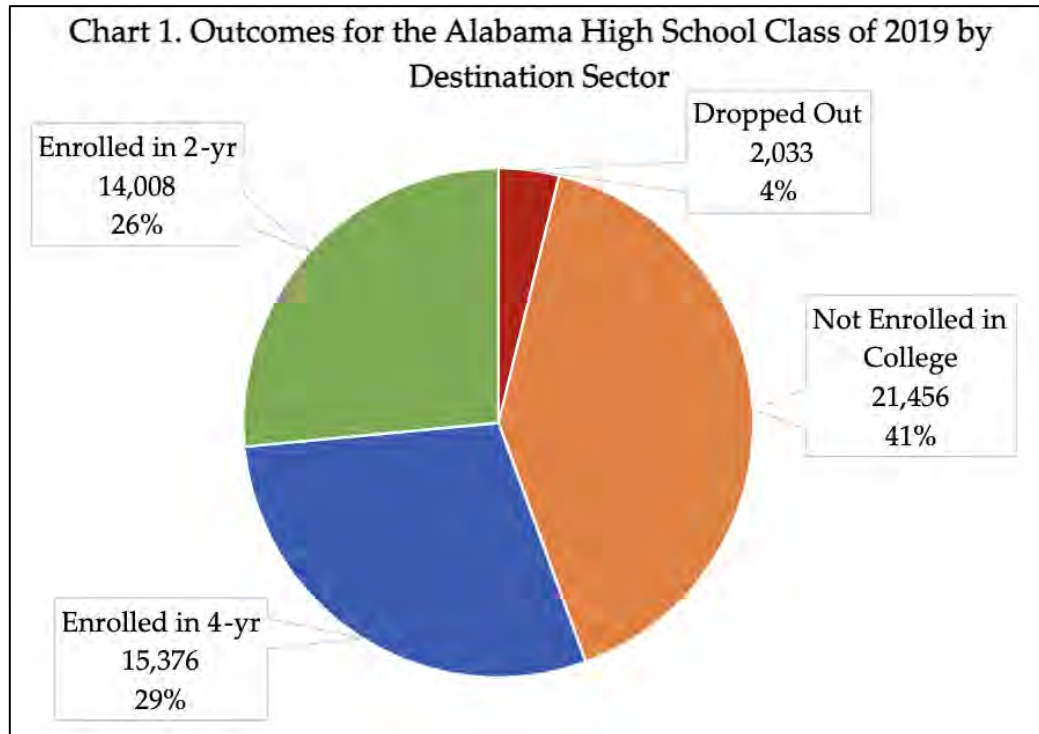
“Alabama business leaders have voted education and workforce training as the state’s primary issues for the last five years... [In the 2020 survey...] panelists provided specific comments, which included concerns about the lack of funding for education, the shortage of qualified workers, and a desire for more short-term training opportunities for all fields.” —Center for Business and Economic Research, The University of Alabama, April 2021¹

Home to 14 community college campuses (5 main and 9 satellite campuses) and 4 public four-year institutions, the Black Belt has the foundation to make great strides in postsecondary education in the coming decade if properly paired with further investment in students and institutions. In this brief we discuss educational attainment in the Black Belt, the role of community colleges and transfer, as well as policy recommendations to improve postsecondary outcomes in the Black Belt. We begin by noting national experts including the National Student Clearinghouse document the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has had on U.S. higher educational enrollments, excepting community colleges.²

High School Outcomes

Chart 1 shows that among Alabama’s high school class of 2019—the last year prior to COVID—four percent of students dropped out and 41 percent did not go on to enroll in college.³ Of the 55% of the 2019 cohort that did enroll in a postsecondary institution, roughly half enrolled at a community

college, and the other half at four-year colleges and universities. Alabama is a long way from achieving outcomes to show community colleges are the default from high school.



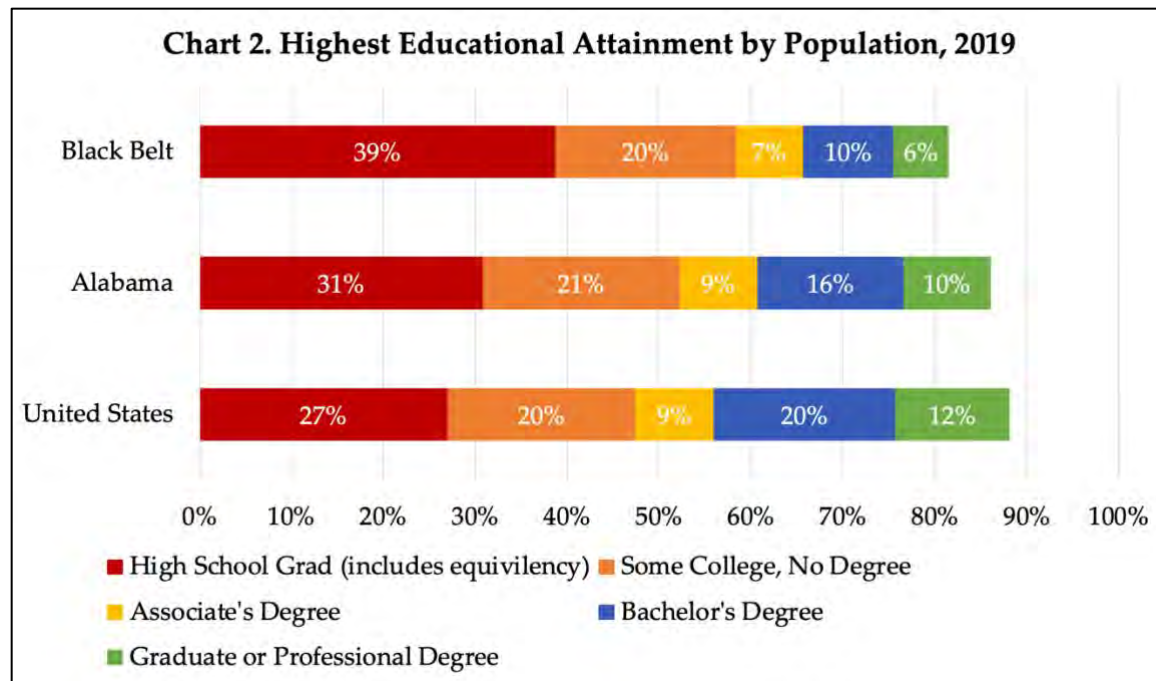
Universal postsecondary access is not as attainable as it should be for large numbers of Alabama youth, and COVID has made the situation worse. “Stop-outs”—students who graduate high school but do not go on to postsecondary education—increased from 41% in the class of 2019 to 49% in Alabama’s class of 2020.⁴

In the first brief of this *Black Belt 2022* issue brief series, *COVID-19 and Alabama’s Black Belt*, we noted that the pandemic impacted all of rural Alabama, and the Black Belt even more so. These same trendlines are not surprisingly found in the data here. *Six of the ten Alabama counties with the highest stop out rates for the class of 2020 were in the Black Belt, where*

the average stop out rate across all 25 Black Belt counties is over 50%. As the COVID-19 pandemic drove education online, the number of students going on to a 2-year college in 2020 increased to 27% statewide. Not surprisingly, though, given the gaps in broadband access exposed by the pandemic (also documented in EPC's *Black Belt 2020* series), the Black Belt average was slightly lower.⁵ Meanwhile, only 3 of the top 10 counties with the highest community college-going rate were in the Black Belt. With the stop out and community college-year going rates rising statewide, the 4-year going rate decreased from 29% to 24% in 2020. The Black Belt average 4-year going rate was lower at 22%; just 2 of 10 counties with the highest 4-year going rate are in the Black Belt—Montgomery and Macon, both home to or nearby to several four-year colleges and universities. All of Alabama's metro counties were in the top 10 for 4-year going rate except for Mobile.

Educational Attainment on a State and National Scale

To address the 51% of students who pursued higher education in the class of 2020, we now compare the Black Belt to the state and nation. Chart 2 displays the highest level of educational attainment for persons over 25 in 2019.⁶ 20% of the population of the Black Belt attended but did not complete college, with just another 7.5% and 10% going on to attain their associate's and bachelor's degrees, respectively. While the Black Belt seems to be ahead of the curve by population with high school degrees, and keeps pace with population with some college and associate's degrees, the Black Belt falls behind once bachelor's degrees and higher are considered.

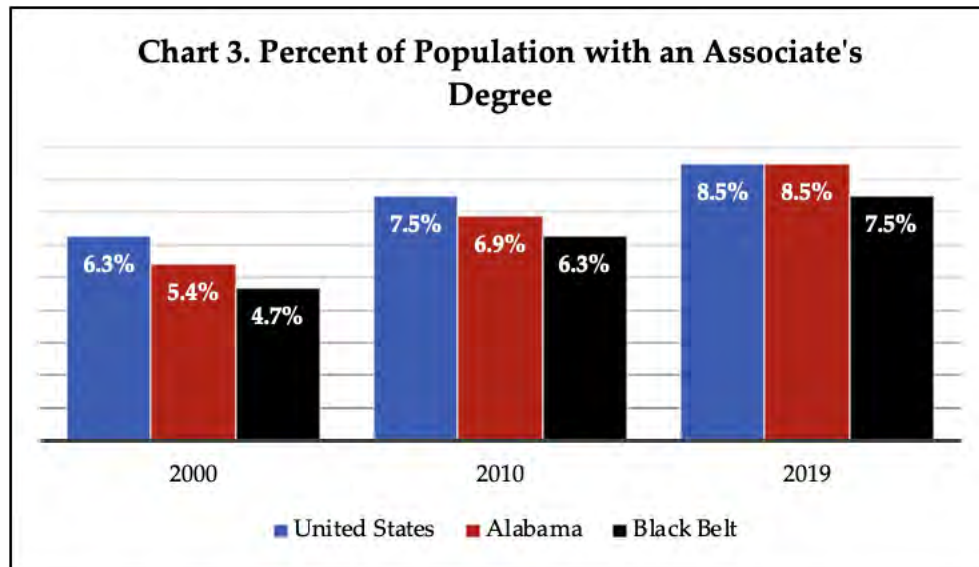


The Black Belt is still behind the state and nation in its share of adults over the age of 25 with some sort of educational attainment, beyond a high school diploma. Based on the data above, we see a total of 81% of the Black Belt adults over age 25 having attended and/or graduated from a secondary or postsecondary institution, leaving 19% of the Black Belt out of the postsecondary academic market as they did not obtain their high school diploma or equivalent or attempt higher education.

Associates Degree Attainment Over Time: The Black Belt is Catching Up

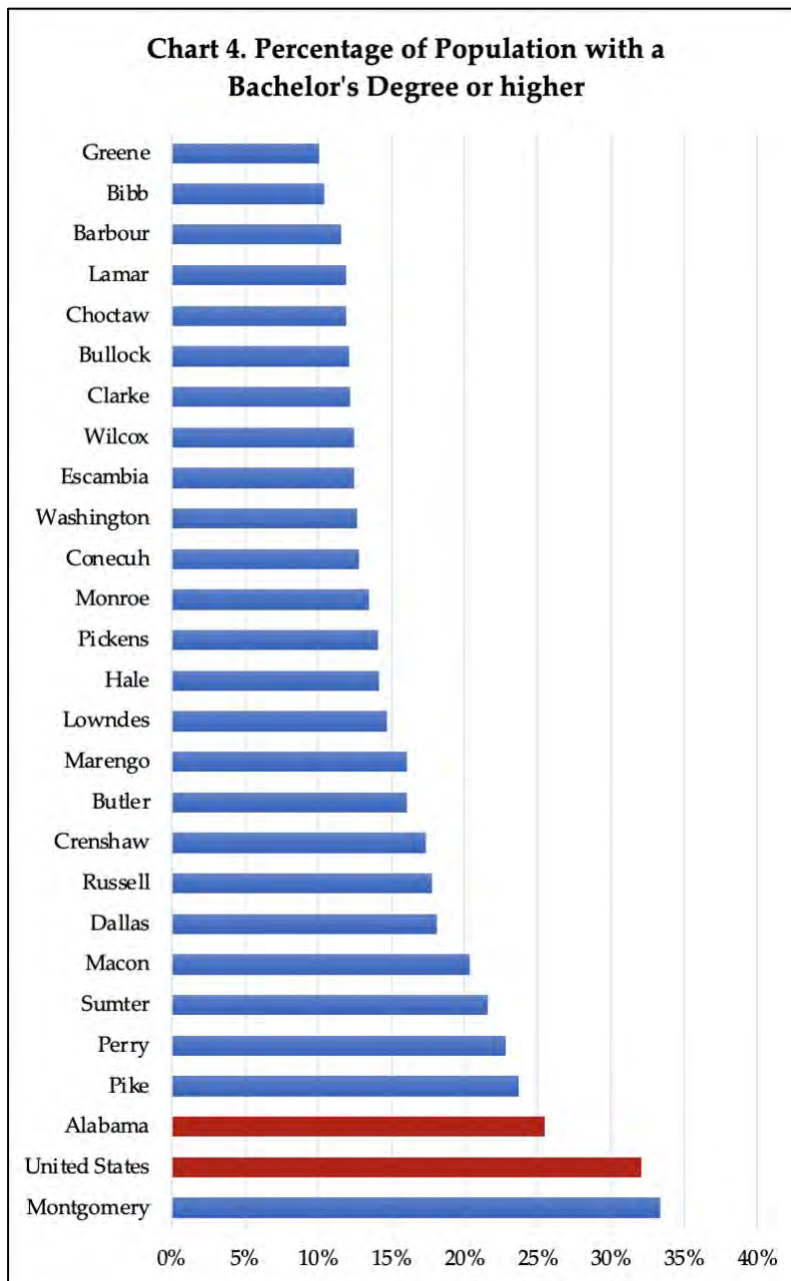
Chart 3 compares the percentage of the U.S., Alabama, and Black Belt population with an associate's degree over three decennial census periods going back to 2000.⁷ The Alabama statewide average, well behind the national average in 2000, had caught up to the nation by 2019, but the Black Belt average continued to lag. In fact, while both the Black Belt and statewide averages improved compared to the national averages, the gap

between the Black Belt and the Alabama statewide average widened, from .7 to 1.0, between 2000 and 2019.



The small percentage differences displayed in Chart 3 might be explained by prior EPC research in 2020 documenting the Black Belt's declining overall population and declining elementary and secondary school enrollments: in other words, even as both population and high school graduations decline, more pursue life-changing community college degrees. This is an important public policy subject that deserves further study.^{8,9}

That associate's degrees are steadily increasing in popularity in the Black Belt likely reflects the policy shift by the Alabama Community College System to create comprehensive community colleges in the 1990s, rather than single-purpose technical colleges that had limited (if any) general education transfer programs that led to associate's degrees. We applaud successive leaders of ACCS for their commitment to this policy shift.



Bachelor's Degrees in the Black Belt

Chart 4 shows the percentage of population with a bachelor's degree or higher for the 25 Black Belt counties, the Alabama statewide average, and the national average for 2019. The Black Belt average of 17% by itself is not explanatory, because Montgomery County is an outlier, exceeding the state and national rates for this level of educational attainment.¹⁰ Montgomery's higher than average bachelor's

degree attainment reflects its physical proximity to more four-year institutions, both in Montgomery County (Alabama State University, Troy University–Montgomery, Auburn University at Montgomery) and nearby Lee County (Auburn University). This also reflects Montgomery County's largest employer: state government. Roughly 25% of nonfarm employment in Montgomery is state or local government, compared to just 16% in Birmingham, and these jobs are more likely to require a bachelor's degree.¹¹

In contrast to Montgomery (which is in the eastern Black Belt), there are few four-year institutions that serve the western Black Belt—the University of West Alabama, which is deeply committed to serving the Black Belt, is the only public four-year college or university in a western Black Belt county. There are also fewer private four-year institutions in the western Black Belt, as several have closed in recent years, including Concordia College (an HBCU in Selma) and Judson College (in Marion). The lack of state-supported student aid could not have helped these institutions reach more high school students and adult learners in the sparsely populated western Black Belt. This limited the state’s ability to maximize progress made in the community college sector.

There are many geographic factors associated with rural persistent poverty areas that limit access to higher education.¹² In 2022, for Black Belt communities, often geographically isolated with limited financial resources, delivering on the promise of better education and economic opportunities for their young people and young adults are often out of reach. For nearly 75 years, there have been promises to extend state and federal roadways through the Black Belt with no action. In 2019, Governor Kay Ivey and the state legislature finally made good on those past promises to build a four-lane road through the Black Belt with the approval of the Rebuild Alabama Act of 2019, while congressional leaders continue to consider expanding Interstate-85. Reliable transportation and infrastructure (i.e., maintained roads in this instance) are some of the greatest geographic barriers preventing Black Belt residents from pursuing higher education. This is why the 2002 statement of Robert Pedersen—that

in rural America access to higher education in practice means access to a reliable used car—still rings true today.¹³

Community College Enrollment and Pell Grants

As in Chart 3 shows, there has been growing interest in community colleges in recent years because of their low cost and greater availability. However, in the Black Belt, community college enrollment appears to be lower due to the higher out-of-pocket expenses (especially child care and transportation) of living in sparsely populated area that spans over 20,000 square miles across 25 counties (larger than 9 U.S. states by area).¹⁴

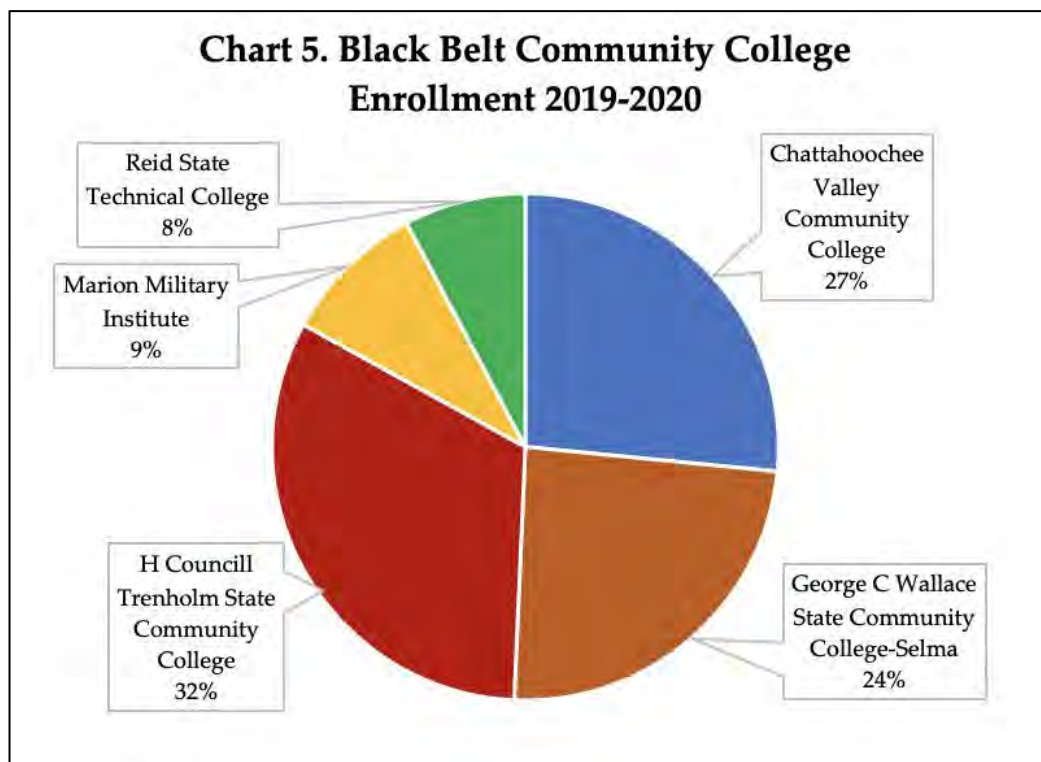
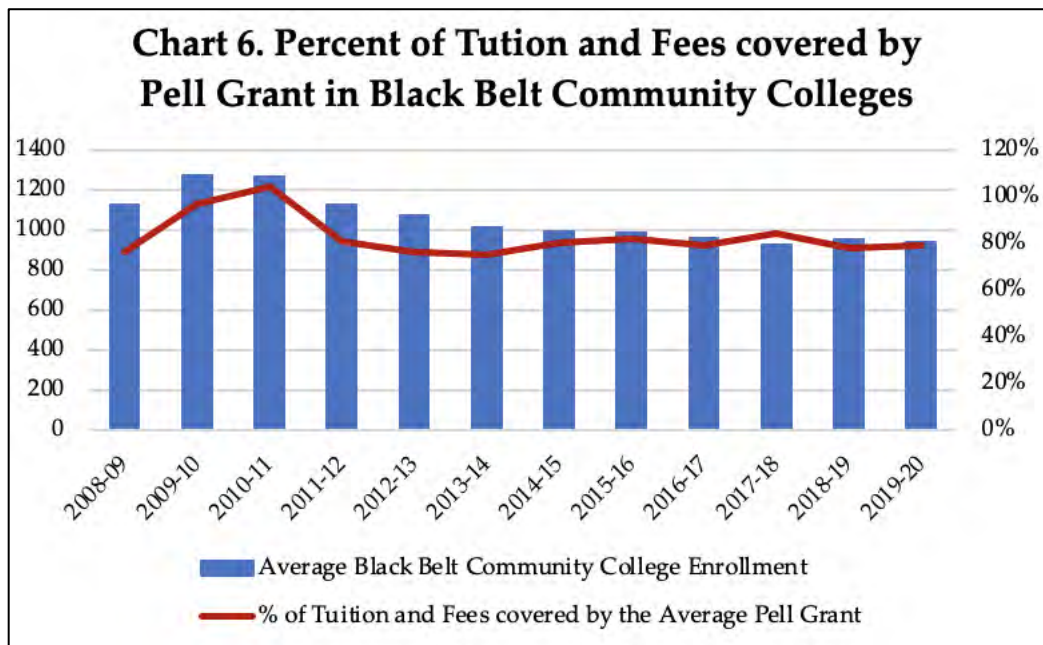


Chart 5 shows the enrollment of all 5 main community college campuses located inside the Black Belt.¹⁵ Chattahoochee Valley Community College (CVCC) in Russell, H Council Trenholm State (Trenholm) in Montgomery, and George C Wallace State Community College–Selma (WCCS) each

enroll about 30% of the students attending Black Belt community college main campuses. This is likely due to their proximity to major roadways and cities, as well as their well-respected industrial maintenance, early education, and nursing programs.



A consistent theme running across the Education Policy Center's 20 studies on Pell Grants is that with state investments in the state student aid at the bottom of the 16 Southern Regional Education Board states (under five percent of the total), federal Pell Grants are Alabama's *de facto* state student aid program. Alabama students rely on Pell, but congress cut federal Pell grants five straight years starting in Fiscal Year 2012.¹⁶ Not surprisingly, enrollments fell five straight years, and eventually lower completions resulted across Alabama.¹⁷ Chart 6 would suggest there is some correlation between the share of tuition and fees covered by Pell grants and the enrollment in the Black Belt's five main community college campuses.¹⁸ Prior to the cuts, the average Pell grant covered up to 104% of tuition and fees, with enrollment exceeding 1,200 students at each institution on

average. After the cuts, Pell in the 2019-2020 school year covered less than 80% of tuition and fees, and enrollment has since averaged below 1,000 at each campus.

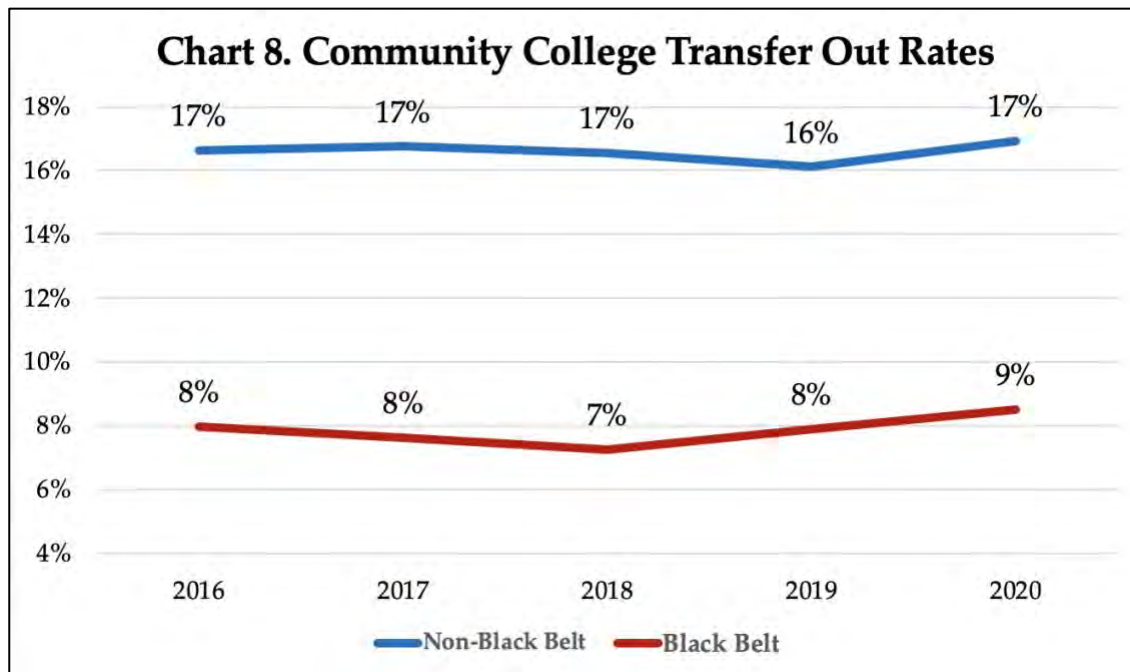
Community Colleges as Transfer Pathways

In Fall 2021, 7,618 students across Alabama started their journeys at Alabama community colleges before transferring to four-year institutions. James C. Palmer calls community colleges “the neighborhood schools of higher education,” due to their easier, more affordable transition to the collegiate environment, with smaller classes, more personal attention, and much lower cost (roughly half of public university charges).¹⁹

The Alabama General Studies Committee (AGSC) oversees the Statewide Transfer & Articulation Reporting System (STARS), which oversees a 41-course guaranteed acceptance of community college coursework for the state’s 14 public universities.²⁰ When AGSC&STARS was created in 1994, Alabama was one of five states in the country to have a bottom-up structure to guarantee transfer credit acceptance, with a committee of two- and four-year professionals to oversee the process. Today AGSC&STARS is housed at Troy University, and we turn to an analysis of STARS Guide usage to consider Black Belt students’ transfer intent.

Chart 7. Unique STARS Guide Requests for the Black Belt Community Colleges – Fall 2020					
Campus	Unique STARS Guide Requests	Fall 2020 FTE Enrollment	% of Alabama Total FTE Enrollment at Community Colleges	% of Alabama Total Unique Stars Guide Requests	% Difference
Chattahoochee Valley	314	893	2.1%	2.6%	23.3%
Marion Military Institute	17	432	1.0%	0.1%	-86.2%
Trenholm State	539	942	2.2%	4.4%	100.6%
Wallace State – Selma	79	765	1.8%	0.6%	-63.8%
Note: Data on STARS requests was not reported for Reid State Technical College					

In Fall 2020, the average share of total Full Time Equivalent (FTE) students requesting a STARS Guide across all of Alabama’s community colleges was 31%—so, nearly a third of all 2-year students are potentially interested in transferring to a 4-year institution.²¹ However, for community colleges in the Black Belt, this is not always the case. At Wallace State Community College Selma, only 10% of students requested one or more STARS Guides (significantly below the state average), and Chart 7 shows that this amounts to less than 1% of all unique STARS Guide requests compared to nearly 2% of all FTE community college students in Alabama. The last column in Chart 7 shows that Wallace State–Selma students are under-represented among STARS Guide requestees by over 60%. On the otherhand, Chattahoochee Valley and Trenholm State students are over-represented among STARS Guide requests relative to their total FTE enrollment. In total, students at Black Belt community colleges are over-represented among STARS Guide requests compared to non-Black Belt students by about 9%.



Despite this Black Belt community colleges being slightly over-represented among STARS Guide requests overall, Chart 8 shows that the statewide average transfer-out rate for Black Belt community colleges is much lower than for non-Black Belt community colleges. Transfer-out rates refer to the number of students transferring out to another community college or four-year university; the strikingly different patterns mean fewer Black Belt students are able to overcome the financial and other barriers to transfer.

In addition to STARS Guide requests, the AGSC reports data on 2-year students' transfer institutions of choice among the state's 14 public universities, four of which are in the Black Belt (ASU, AUM, Troy-Montgomery, and UWA).²² In Fall 2020, enrollment at these four universities comprised about 18% of total public university enrollment statewide, however only about 16% of transfer-intending students list one of those four institutions as their 1st or 2nd choice of transfer institution on their STARS Guides. This, combined with lower rates of STARS Guide

requests at some Black Belt community colleges, may indicate a lower level of interest among these students in pursuing further education beyond the first two years, in that the cost is seen as a bridge too far. We note that national experts including longtime former Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education President James Longendecker advocated for policy alignment across state appropriations, tuition, and state student aid policies—something Alabama can never attain with such a small state student aid program.

With no state student aid program, Black Belt community college students face geographic challenges other community college graduates in the state do not: in the western Black Belt in particular, the act of transfer requires physical relocation, for the distances are too far for daily commuting to get to the junior and senior year. While a bachelor's degree is clearly not required to attain a well-paying job, some form of postsecondary education is, and the more on-ramps to lifelong learning opportunities that can disrupt the cycle of persistent poverty, the better.²³

Policy Recommendations

Postsecondary education is increasingly important for Alabama to attract and retain high-wage, high-skill jobs in all sectors, and the more people obtaining degrees and certificates, the better. By 2025, it is estimated that 60% of people in the state will need a degree or credential beyond a high school diploma.²⁴ In the Black Belt, a post-secondary degree or credential can offer more than a path to a good-paying job. In a region historically and currently struggling with high levels of poverty, promoting education beyond high school can be a key tool for disrupting and ending the cycle of

poverty. The overarching recommendation of this brief is to increase investment into post-secondary education in the Black Belt, to help make community colleges the default from the Black Belt's high schools, and to facilitate transfer and degree completion at four-year universities and colleges. There is a large market of potential postsecondary students in the Black Belt—made up primarily by adults who graduated high school but did not go on to college—and catering to these students will require careful alignment of education with well-paying employment opportunities.

Building on the recommendations of the previous briefs in this series, which have emphasized incentives to draw and retain healthcare workers and teachers to the Black Belt, investment in post-secondary education in the region should also focus on increasing enrollment in high-demand fields of healthcare and teaching, as well as advanced manufacturing, which is a growing industry in the Black Belt. Such investment should target both students and institutions. Scholarships for students pursuing degrees in the identified high-demand fields would make it more financially feasible for them to pursue these degrees, and additional student loan forgiveness would incentivize students to stay and work in the Black Belt for an extended period. Increasing investment at the institutions would also increase the resources available to these high-demand programs to engage in more recruitment efforts, expand course offerings, hire more instructors, and increase resources available to students for things like transfer counseling.

Further, this brief has shown a correlation between Pell availability and post-secondary enrollment.²⁵ Since Alabama has over the past seven

decades chosen not to make significant investments in state-funded student aid, the federal Pell Grant is the *de facto* state student aid program in the Black Belt. For this reason, it is essential that students are counseled on how to complete the Free Application for Student Aid (FAFSA) to access regular academic and summer Pell Grants, which the EPC worked to make available nationwide. Last year, Alabama took steps to improve FAFSA completion statewide, as the state board of education voted to require high school seniors complete the FAFSA to graduate high school (though students can still opt-out with a parental waiver).²⁶ We strongly support this initiative, though we note that many Black Belt school superintendents have expressed concern that impoverished parents are not filing their federal tax returns, an essential piece of information for students to complete the FAFSA. For this reason, we strongly support pairing the FAFSA high school graduation requirement with increased state investment in counseling targeting at Alabama's 19 persistent poverty counties, all of which are in the Belt, so that students and parents can get the help they need to navigate the federal student aid application and college process.

We also call for a statewide lottery to fund free community college beyond high school, to bring hope not only to the Black Belt's 34,000 rising middle and high school students, but also to young adults statewide. The EPC proposed a plan for Alabama modeled after Tennessee Achieves, the nation's first statewide promise program, signed into law by former Governor Bill Haslam, a Republican, in 2015.²⁷ This was the first statewide Promise program; today twenty-eight other states have Promise programs of some kind. It is time for Alabama to join this national movement.

Finally, a common route taken by many prospective students (traditional and non-traditional age) in the time of COVID is online schooling. However, with much of the Black Belt having extremely limited (and in some cases zero) access to high-speed broadband internet, online classes are of a limited value for students from the region.²⁸ This same issue is discussed in a previous brief concerning the Black Belt's STEM education. Broadband expansion in this rural region is necessary to increase the access and viability of online schooling, which offers a more flexible alternative to in-person learning, particularly in terms of time and transportation.

THE EDUCATION POLICY CENTER AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA

Established in 1924, the Education Policy Center is The University of Alabama's oldest center or institute. Through its ongoing nonpartisan research and programs, it seeks to assist the College of Education and the University to fulfill their mission to improve the quality of life for all Alabamians. The EPC promotes expanding access and success, strengthening equity, and advancing economic and community development with special emphasis on telling the story of the Deep South to policymakers in Alabama, the region and nation. In 2020, EPC released the *Black Belt 2020* issue brief series examining policy issues pertinent to the Alabama Black Belt. *Black Belt 2022* builds upon this work and will examine new issues as well as revisit previous issues.

Director: Stephen G. Katsinas, Ph.D.

Associate Director: Nathaniel Bray, Ph.D.

Project Coordinators/Managers: Brandi M. Stacey, Michael S. Malley, Jr., & Stephanie Paul

Senior Fellow & Issue Briefs Editor: James E. "Ed" Davis, PhD (Emeritus, MS State University)

Associate Issue Briefs Editor: Phillip D. Grant, Ph.D. (University of West Georgia)

Senior Fellows: Arleene P. Breaux, Ph.D., James E. "Skip" Dotherow, Ph.D., Phillip D. Grant, Ph.D., Ray Huebschmann, Ph.D., Brian K. Johnson, Ph.D., Vincent A. Lacey, Ph.D., R. Frank Mensel, Ph.D., David Murphy, Ph.D., J. Warner

Fellows: Mark D'Amico, Ph.D., Janice Friedel, Ph.D., Linda Hagedorn, Ph.D., Michael Kennamer, Ph.D., Dustin Smith, Ph.D.

Research Associates: Emily Grace Corley, Noel Keeney, Sean O'Brien, & Garrett Till

401 Queen City Avenue Box 870249, Tuscaloosa, Alabama 35487 · Telephone: (205) 348-6004 ·

<http://edpolicy.ua.edu>

**THE CENTER FOR BUSINESS AND ECONOMIC RESEARCH AT
THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA**

The primary roles of the Center for Business and Economic Research (CBER) are in research and service to the State and people of Alabama and the nation at large. The Center, established in 1930, is committed to promoting economic development throughout Alabama. CBER's research spans economic and fiscal policy analysis, business, environmental, economic and workforce development studies. CBER also collects, maintains, analyzes, and releases business and socioeconomic data. CBER clientele include federal, state, and local government agencies, private companies, other academic institutions, financial institutions, individuals, and the media. As a resource for in-depth studies/analysis/forecasts, CBER provides insight and information with the aim of improving the quality of decision-making by our clientele. CBER is an outreach/research center of the Culverhouse College of Business, one of the leading business schools in the country.

Associate Dean for Economic Development & Senior Research Economist: Samuel Addy, Ph.D.

Executive Director: Ahmad Ijaz **Associate Director of Research & Outreach:** Morgan Cordle

Director of Socioeconomic Analysis & Demographics: Nyesha Black, Ph.D.

Assistant Research Economist: Kilungu Nzaku, Ph.D.

Socioeconomic Analyst: Susannah Robichaux **Economic Forecaster:** Stephanie Normanyo

1500 Greensboro Avenue, Suite 1 Box 870221, Tuscaloosa, Alabama 35401 ·

Telephone: (205) 348-6191 · <https://cber.culverhouse.ua.edu>

¹ CBER, Staff. "Top Issue Facing Alabama: Education and Workforce Training." Center for Business and Economic Research, August 31, 2021.

<https://cber.culverhouse.ua.edu/2021/08/31/education-and-workforce-training-remain-top-concern-for-alabama/>.

² National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2022). *Term Enrollment Estimates, Spring 2021*.

³ Education, Alabama State Department of. 2019. *College and Career Readiness - 2018-2019 Graduation Rate*. Alabama State Department of Education.

⁴ 2022. *Term Enrollment Estimates, Spring 2021*. Estimates, National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

⁵ Stephen G. Katsinas, Noel E. Keeney, Emily Jacobs, Emily Grace Corley, and Hunter Whann. 2020. *Internet Access Disparities in Alabama & the Black Belt*. Brief, Tuscaloosa, AL: The Education Policy Center at the University of Alabama.

⁶ Federal Reserve Economic Data, Education Attainment, Annual. Available at <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/release/tables?rid=330&eid=391443>

⁷ Federal Reserve Economic Data, Education Attainment, Annual. Available at <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/release/tables?rid=330&eid=391443>

⁸ Katsinas, S.G., Keeney, N.E., Jacobs, E., Whann, H. (Aug. 2020). School Enrollment in Alabama's Black Belt Continues to Decline. The Education Policy Center at the University of Alabama. Available at <http://edpolicy.ua.edu/research/black-belt/>

- ⁹ Katsinas, S.G., Keeney, N.E., Jacobs, E., Whann, H. (Aug. 2020). *The Black Belt's Population Decline Explains Why Alabama May Lose a Congressional Seat in the 2020 Census*. The Education Policy Center at the University of Alabama. Available at <http://edpolicy.ua.edu/research/black-belt/>
- ¹⁰ U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 5-year estimates. Available at <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?hidePreview=true&tid=ACSDP1Y2019.DP02>
- ¹¹ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. *Economy at a Glance: Montgomery, AL & Birmingham-Hoover, AL*. Retrieved March 8, 2022 from https://www.bls.gov/regions/southeast/al_montgomery_msa.htm
- ¹² Shannon, Mary Lee Rice. 1976. *Poverty in Alabama: A Barrier to Postsecondary Education*. Study, Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama: Institute of Higher Education Research and Services.
- ¹³ Katsinas, Opp, and Alexander, "Preserving Access with Excellence: Financing Rural Community Colleges, 2003 issue brief for the Rural Community College Initiative.
- ¹⁴ Bureau, U.S. Census. 2021. *State Area Measurements and Internal Point Coordinates*. Census Report, U.S. Census Bureau.
- ¹⁵ Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System accessed by the Education Policy Center at the University of Alabama on February 23, 2021
- ¹⁶ Stephen G. Katsinas, Nathaniel J. Bray, Noel E. Keeney, Hunter D. Whann, And Michael S. Malley, Jr. 2020. *Keeping the Promise: Stabilizing the Pell Grant Program*. Policy Brief, College Promise.
- ¹⁷ Stephen G. Katsinas, Nathaniel J. Bray, Jonathan P. Koh, and Phillip D. Grant. 2012. *A Study of Pell Grants in Alabama*. Study, Tuscaloosa: Education Policy Center at the University of Alabama.
- ¹⁸ Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System accessed by the Education Policy Center at the University of Alabama on February 23, 2021
- ¹⁹ Alabama Community College System. *2-to-4 Transfer*. ACCS. Retrieved February 27, 2022 from <https://www.accs.edu/academics/2-to-4-transfer/>.
- ²⁰ AGSC & STARS. *History and Background*. AGSC & STARS. Retrieved February 27, 2022 from http://stars.troy.edu/history_background.html.
- ²¹ AGSC & STARS. *Two Year Student Usage Report by Institution July 2020 to June 2021*. AGSC & STARS. Retrieved February 27, 2022 from http://stars.troy.edu/ura_2020_2021/annual-2yr-institution.htm.
- ²² AGSC & STARS. *Transfer Institution Choices by Two-Year Students*. AGSC & STARS. Retrieved February 27, 2022 from http://stars.troy.edu/ura_2020_2021/annual-2yr-choice.htm.
- ²³ Bureau, U.S. Census. 2019. *Poverty Status In The Past 12 Months Of Individuals By Educational Attainment*. Accessed March 2022. <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=C17003&tid=ACSDT1Y2019.C17003&hidePreview=false>.
- ²⁴ Lumina Foundation. (2021, February). *A Stronger Nation: Learning beyond high school builds America's talent: Alabama's Report 2019*. <https://www.luminafoundation.org/stronger-nation/report/2020/#state/AL&tsid=byAttainment&s-tsrvs=1>

²⁵ Stephen G. Katsinas, Nathaniel J. Bray, Jonathan P. Koh, and Phillip D. Grant. 2012. *A Study of Pell Grants in Alabama*. Study, Tuscaloosa: Education Policy Center at the University of Alabama.

²⁶ Crain, T.P. (2021, April 8). *Alabama becomes fourth state to require FAFSA to graduate high school*. Al.com. <https://www.al.com/news/2021/04/alabama-becomes-fourth-state-to-require-fafsa-to-graduate-high-school.html>.

²⁷ Bowen, J.R., & Corley, E.G. (2020, December 16). *A Lottery-Funded Alabama College Promise & Alabama Opportunity Scholarship*. The Education Policy Center at the University of Alabama. http://edpolicy.ua.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/201214_Alabama-College-Promise.pdf

²⁸ Ibid, 5.



Advertisement

News

University of Alabama researchers share plan to close education gap in Black Belt: State lottery

Updated: Mar. 22, 2022, 10:31 a.m. | Published: Mar. 22, 2022, 8:00 a.m.

By **Ramsey Archibald | rarchibald@al.com**

Alabama's Black Belt region suffers from a gap in educational attainment with the rest of the state, and experts at the University of Alabama think a lottery might help fix the problem.

"We favor a scholarship program funded by a lottery," said Dr. Stephen Katsinas, head of the Education Policy Center at the University of Alabama, which hosted a briefing on the subject of educational attainment in the Black Belt - one of the poorest regions in the nation - on Monday.

Advertisement

educated workforce it can possibly have. The challenge is, we don't invest enough. So we get what we pay for," Katsinas said. "Persistent poverty counties deserve more investment for their students to be able to go onto college."

Monday's briefing was part of Black Belt 2022, an ongoing series tackling issues facing the 25-county Black Belt region.

More from Black Belt 2022: Black Belt K-12 students perform far worse in math, science than rest of Alabama

Lack of doctors helped fuel Black Belt's high COVID death rate, says University of Alabama

"We've been proposing a lottery for the past 15 years," Dr. Ahmad Ijaz, director of the Center for Business & Economic Research at the University of Alabama, said at the briefing Monday. "The state just doesn't have enough money... The way to do

that would be to either increase taxes or bring a lottery or gambling money. That's up to the state legislature."

Residents in the Black Belt are less likely to attend college and less likely to earn a degree than residents in other part of the state. In 2020, more than half of high school graduates in the Black Belt didn't go on to enroll in a two-year or four-year college. That was slightly higher than the statewide rate, and up from before the pandemic.

And Black Belt residents 25 or older are less likely to be highly educated, with a larger percentage than the rest of the state having a high school or equivalent degree as their highest level of educational attainment.

[Can't see the map? [Click here.](#)]

The lack of higher educational attainment for Black Belt residents is a big issue in a state like Alabama where an estimated 60% of jobs will require some kind of degree by 2025, researchers at the Education Policy Center said.

"All of the data that we've seen shows that the jobs of the future are going to require some post-secondary education," Katsinas said. "90%-plus of all the jobs created since the Great Recession required some post-secondary education."

The Education Policy Center also showed data on Pell grants and their relationship with college enrollment. The federal government cut Pell grants in 2012, and Alabama enrollment at nearly all community and regional colleges and universities fell in the years following. Pell is Alabama's form of public student aid, Katsinas said. Basically, he said, if you can provide the money for people to go to college, they'll go.

That's where the lottery comes in.

Katsinas and the Education Policy Center called on the Alabama Legislature to create a lottery and use the funds to help pay for scholarships to make community college free for Alabama residents, especially in the Black Belt region, which is home to several community college campuses.

But there are steps outside of a lottery that could help.

One important step is ensuring students in the Black Belt get help filling out the Free Application for Student Aid, known as the FAFSA, which is critical for students looking to earn scholarships to go to college.

Katsinas also mentioned that because of changes to Alabama's education trust fund more than 10 years ago, funding for the state's education system is less "boom or bust" than it used to be. For that reason, there is some money that can be spent in Alabama already.

“Now we can start to think about targeted investments in persistent poverty schools,” Katsinas said. “This state has not done much of that. And it’s time for us to start doing some of that.”

Ijaz also mentioned that big manufacturing companies are already doing some of the work that could help teach residents in these communities about the jobs of the future, and said spreading those outreach programs farther into the Black Belt could help.

“Alabama has one of the best workforce development programs in the country,” he said. “There are a lot of manufacturers working with community colleges to match the skills they will need two years from now or three years from now. We need to expand those programs to reach these Black Belt counties.”

There’s also the issue that residents in the Black Belt may not think college is an attainable goal. That’s where FAFSA and Pell grants are key, making the prospect of college more realistic.

“We have to create a lot more hope in the Black Belt than what we have,” Katsinas said.

This data is part of Black Belt 2022, a new series from the Education Policy Center focusing on problems in the Black Belt, and attempting to find solutions.

Do you have an idea for a data story about Alabama? Email Ramsey Archibald at rarchibald@al.com, and follow him on Twitter [@RamseyArchibald](https://twitter.com/RamseyArchibald). Read more Alabama data stories [here](#).

Note to readers: if you purchase something through one of our affiliate links we may earn a commission.

**ADVANCE
LOCAL**

Registration on or use of this site constitutes acceptance of our [User Agreement](#), [Privacy Policy and Cookie Statement](#), and [Your California Privacy Rights](#) (User Agreement updated 1/1/21. Privacy Policy and Cookie Statement updated 5/1/2021).

Cookies Settings

© 2022 Advance Local Media LLC. All rights reserved ([About Us](#)).

The material on this site may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, cached or otherwise used, except with the prior written permission of Advance Local.

Issue Brief № 58

Poverty, Housing, & GDP in Alabama's Black Belt

by Stephen G. Katsinas, Garrett Till, Emily Grace Corley,
Sean O'Brien, Eric Courchesne, and Nathaniel Bray

*"The Black Belt has a storied history, and was once the bastion of the state's economy, as it produced vast wealth for selected families by forcibly extracting labor from enslaved Africans. The region failed to transition into a vibrant industrial economy following the abolition of slavery, and the mass migration of people following crop infestation and the draconian practices of Jim Crow exacerbated the problems that we continue to see the vestiges of today. However, looking forward, there is still a case to invest in the region as it still boasts rich soil and vast natural resources."*¹

- Dr. Nyesha C. Black, Director of Socioeconomic Analysis & Demographics

Poverty in the Black Belt is not a new phenomenon, with historical roots tracing back to the post-Civil War Reconstruction, and Jim Crow eras when newly emancipated, formerly enslaved people were left without any money, property, or other resources needed to be successful. Instead, Black Codes and Jim Crow laws forced the formerly enslaved into sharecropping arrangements that were essentially an extension of the previous system of chattel slavery. The consequences of slavery and sharecropping hindered the Black Belt and its majority African American population in the wake of the Civil War by preventing the accumulation and transfer of intergenerational wealth, which contributes to persistent poverty that continues today.

While technology and society have progressed exponentially since Reconstruction, the wealth of many Black Belt natives has changed far less. Poverty is a complex statistic to parse, especially given the rapid changes to

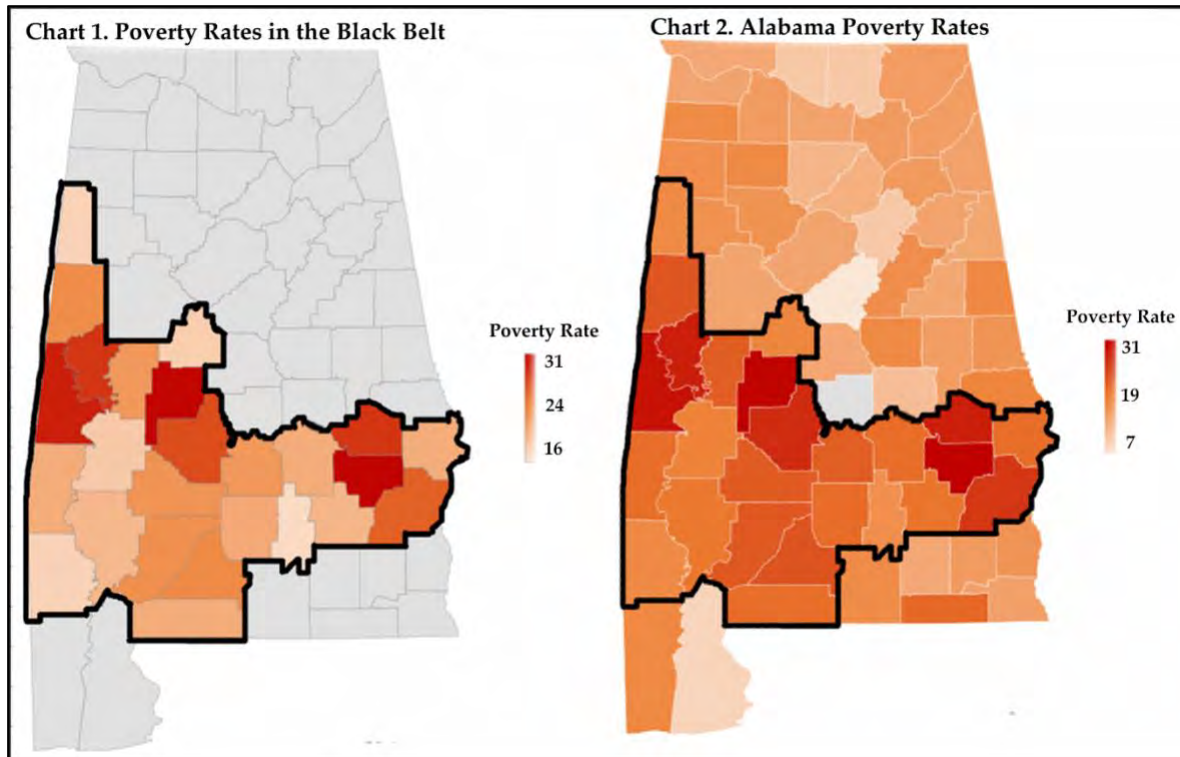
technology and society over the last century; given its complex nature, this brief will explore various aspects related to poverty, including poverty rates, access to capital, income inequality, households and the housing market, and poverty-reduction programs throughout the Black Belt.²

The Black Belt's Poverty Border

Charts 1 and 2 show the poverty rates within the Black Belt and across the entire state respectively. In the most recent census data, 6 of the 25 counties located in the Black Belt have at least 25% of their population below the poverty line, while the average for the region is 23.8%. Chart 1 shows just how much the Black Belt contributes to the statewide poverty rate of 17.6%.³

All 25 Black Belt counties lie in the top 35 counties with the highest poverty rate; Bullock (30.8%), Perry (30.7%), and Sumter (29.2%) counties having the highest poverty rates in the Black Belt, and nearly double the rate in Crenshaw (16.8%), Washington (17.5%), and Bibb (17.8%), which have the lowest poverty rates in the region. Non-Black Belt counties have an average poverty rate of just 14.8%.

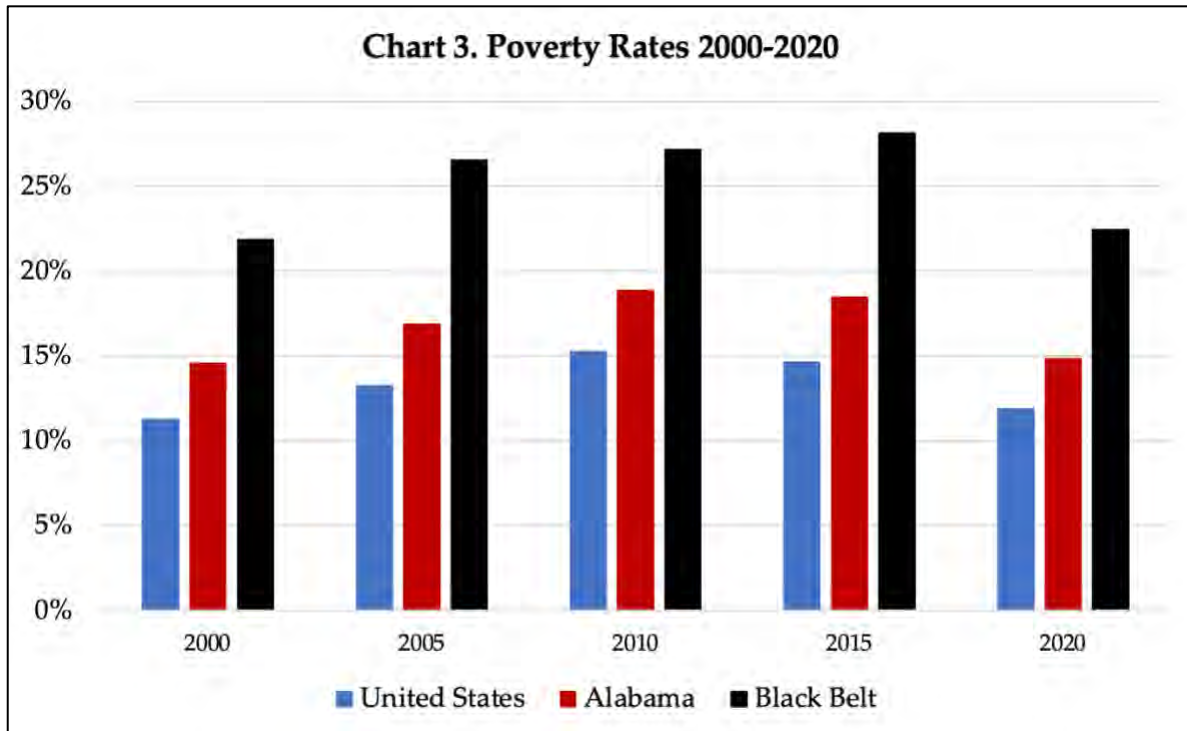
Poverty is an even greater challenge for Black people in Alabama. Black or African Americans make up 26.8% of the state's population but make up over 42% of people below the poverty level.⁴ The eleven Majority-Minority counties in Alabama (all located in the Black Belt) have an average poverty rate of 25.3%, greater the Black Belt average of 23.8%. These eleven majority-minority counties also include the three counties with the highest poverty rates: Bullock, Perry, and Sumter.



The Great Recession and the Black Belt

During the recent Great Recession (2007–2009), the number of impoverished people in the Black Belt increased by roughly 51,000 across the 25 counties. During the recovery period (2015–2020), the Black Belt’s population in poverty decreased by roughly 38,000 people; this would be equivalent to the entire population of Florence, Alabama living in poverty for ten years, and managing to financially recover in just five.

Chart 3 shows that, unlike the state and nation, the Black Belt experienced more rapid increases of poverty *prior* to the Great Recession—increasing by 5% from 2000–2005. The Black Belt’s poverty levels remained elevated during and after the Great Recession, not returning to pre-recession levels until 2020. Alabama and the United States saw more gradual decreases over a longer period (from 2010–2020).



The Great Recession significantly impacted Americans across income levels, but the Black Belt—as Chart 3 shows—was experiencing an economic downturn of its own *prior* to the recession.⁵ It wasn’t until after 2015 that the Black Belt was able to recover from its climbing poverty rates, doubling the pace with which the state and nation recovered; from 2015-2020, the Black Belt reduced its poverty rate by 6%, compared to less than 3% for Alabama and the entire U.S., though the Black Belt still faces significantly higher poverty rates than the state and nation.

Income Inequality

In recent years, there has been increasing media attention paid to America’s income and wealth gap. The Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis found that, “median Black/White income gaps vary considerably, but in all states White median household income is greater than Black median household

income.” This is true in Alabama, where every \$1 per White household median income, equated to \$0.58 in Black household median income.⁶ The median household income of Majority-Minority counties (\$33,075) is nearly \$7,000 less than that of Majority-White (\$39,852). Given all the Majority-Minority counties are in the Black Belt, it is unsurprising that the Black Belt suffers worse income and wealth inequality than the rest of the state.⁷

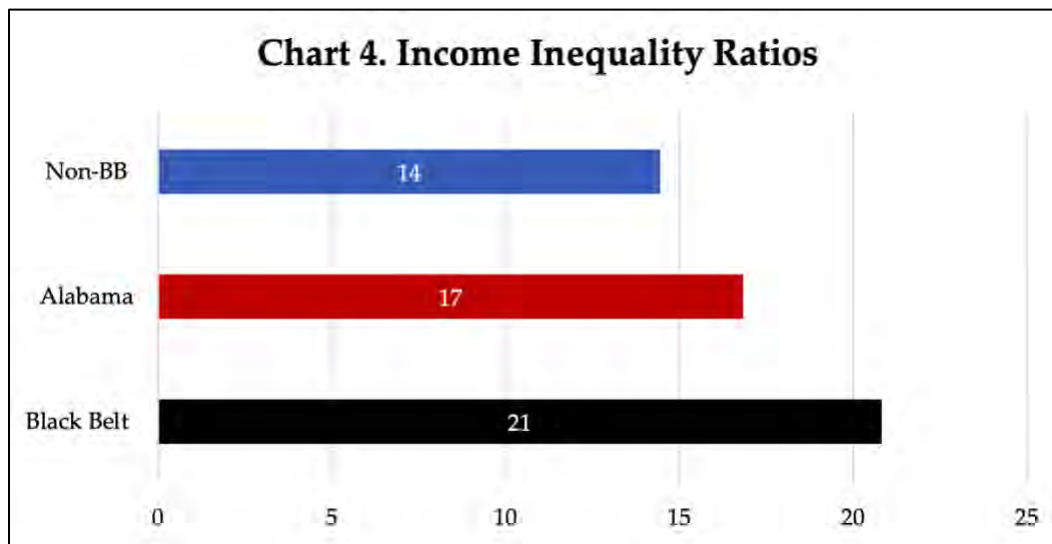


Chart 4 shows the top 20% of the highest incomes in Alabama make 17 times more than that of the bottom 20%, an instant indicator of financial disparities across the state. And despite there being no significant gap between per capita income amongst Black Belt and non-Black Belt counties, non-Black Belt counties have a smaller gap between the richest and the poorest, with the top 20% of earners making only 14 times more than that of the bottom 20%.^{8,9}

Comparatively, the top 20% of earners in the Black Belt make 21 times more than the bottom 20%, with the greatest income inequality existing Monroe and Clarke counties. The top 20% of those two counties make \$49 and \$34

for every single dollar made by the bottom 20%, respectively. Greater income inequality within the Black Belt is less a measure of high wealth concentration, and more an indicator of significantly lower income for its lowest-earning residents.

Federal Aid

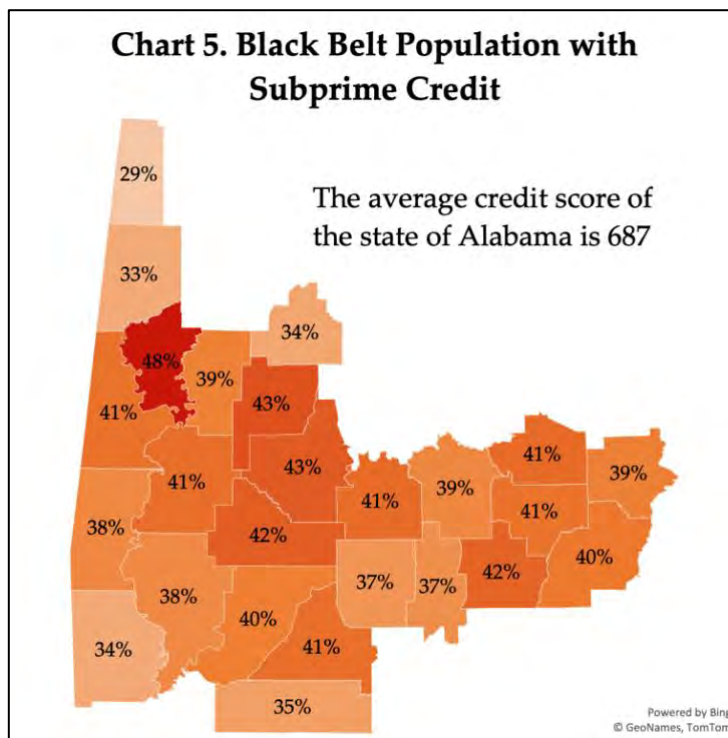
Poverty in Alabama is nothing new, and government agencies have made efforts to address the consequences of poverty. The Federal USDA Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) has aided over 730,000 Alabama residents as of 2020, accounting for 96% of the total number of Alabama residents in poverty. As of 2019, 16% of the households in the congressional districts serving mostly Black Belt counties (districts 1, 2, and 7) are enrolled in SNAP. To further address poverty in Alabama, those enrolled in the Federal Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) Program will receive an additional \$375 coronavirus stimulus check. The P-EBT program is intended to serve families with children enrolled in SNAP, indicating that by the end of 2021, over \$65 million will be available to mitigate the impact of poverty on families across the Black Belt region.¹⁰

Compared to the high level of participation and general success of the SNAP program, the Federally-funded Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)—formerly Aid to Families for Dependent Children (AFDC)—has extremely low participation levels and provides limited help for those who do participate.¹¹ Since AFDC has transitioned to TANF in 1996, the number of families in Alabama receiving TANF cash assistance per 100 families with children in poverty (“TANF-to-poverty-ratio”) has fallen by 24 points, with just 8 families per 100 with children in poverty

receiving cash assistance in 2019.¹² The decline in TANF participation is not an indicator of the program's success, though, because poverty remains high in the Black Belt—where all 19 of Alabama's persistent poverty counties are located.¹³

Access to Capital

Chart 5 examines the Black Belt's population with a subprime credit score according to Equifax.¹⁴ In over half of the Black Belt counties, more than four of every ten residents have subprime credit scores. With a credit score



below 660, these residents are typically denied access to capital and opportunities which reduce or mitigate poverty, like obtaining personal, business, or student loans, as well as paying off surprise expenses and bills.

While a 660-credit score is considered average, having that score does not guarantee access to a loan. One of the most important uses of credit scores is the ability to purchase a vehicle. While our upcoming brief on infrastructure in the Black Belt will further elaborate on the importance of obtaining a car, the hours needed to travel between sprawling towns and

jobs, exacerbated by the general lack of public transportation, has created a car-dependent environment, and many residents cannot easily afford to get to work.¹⁵

Homeownership in the Black Belt

In addition to purchasing a car, good credit scores are important for purchasing a home. Although it is possible to obtain a mortgage with a lower credit score, it typically means the homeowner will pay higher interest rates, another example of how poverty is institutionally persisted.¹⁶ Homeownership rates are therefore closely related to subprime credit populations. In Dallas County (where the city of Selma is located), for example, where 43% of the population have a credit score below 660, only 58% of people live in homes they personally own or co-own—over 10 percentage points below the state average, and 20 percentage points below the county with the highest homeownership rate.¹⁷ There are only two Black Belt counties (Washington and Choctaw) among the State's top ten for highest homeownership rates, but half of the bottom 20 are in the Black Belt.¹⁸

Not surprisingly, a gap exists in homeownership rates between Black and White households. Despite efforts to prohibit discriminatory mortgage lending, selling, and renting practices—following the passage of the Fair Housing Act of 1968—the gap between White and Black homeownership has widened, and today is the largest it's been in 100 years.¹⁹ Nationally, at the end of 2021, Black households had a homeownership rate of about 44%, more than 20 percentage points below the national average (65%) and 30 percentage points below the homeownership rate of White households

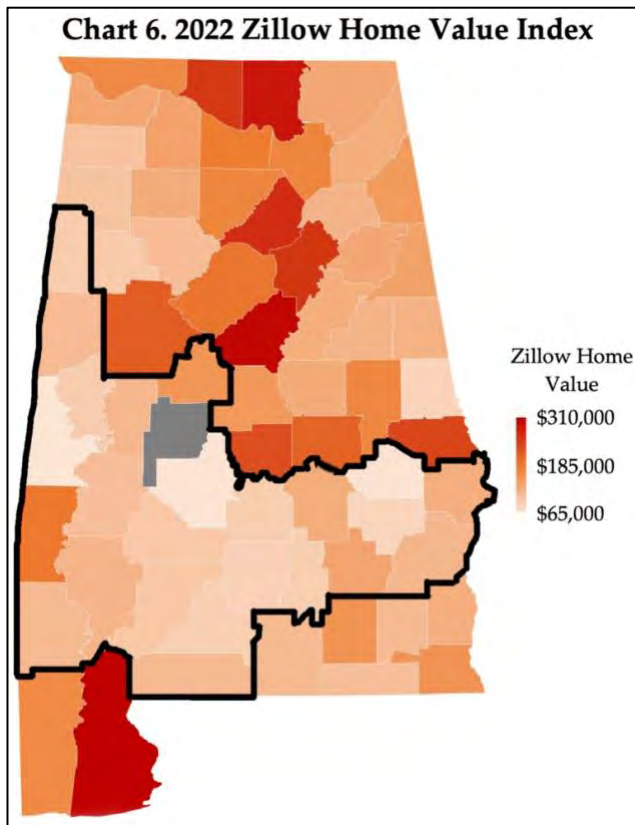
(74%).²⁰ In Montgomery, the Black homeownership gap is slightly lower (about 28 percentage points), with a Black homeownership rate of about 49% and a White homeownership rate of about 77%. The legacy of slavery and legally sanctioned racial discrimination in the Black Belt has exacerbated the large gap between Black and White homeownership, and the inability for Black people to own a home has prevented the accumulation and transfer of intergenerational wealth for decades.

The Wealth Divide

Homeownership is a key tool for building personal wealth, which in turn generally improves quality of life for the homeowner and their children.²¹ The gap between Black and White homeownership, combined with discriminatory practices, have compounded the widening wealth gap between Black and White families.²² Nationally, in 2016, the typical Black family had a wealth of \$16,000, about ten times less than that of the typical White family's wealth of \$163,000.

A typical homeowner's net worth is hundreds of thousands of dollars greater than a renter's net worth, which can help insulate homeowners from surprise expenses or periods of unemployment, as well as build the family's generational wealth.^{23,24} Conversely, renters are more vulnerable to surprise expenses or bouts of unemployment because they have fewer assets to fall back on; the lack of financial insulation from emergencies can result in families falling into poverty for brief or extended periods of time — In 2019, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, forty percent of households in America were one missed paycheck or financial shock from poverty.^{25,26} In the Black Belt, the lower rate of homeownership, lower median household

income, and lower median home values likely depress intergenerational wealth transfers, exacerbate the growing racial wealth divide, and contribute to the region's persistent poverty.²⁷



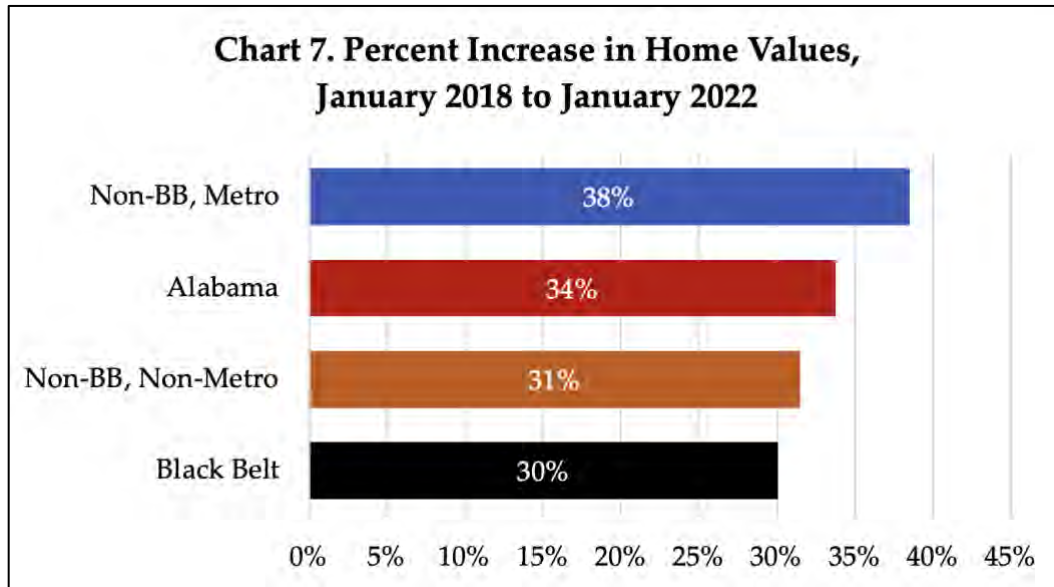
Median Home Values

Chart 6 displays the 2022 Zillow Home Value Index for each county (except Perry, which was not reported).²⁸ The Zillow Home Value Index captures the level and appreciation of home values across geographies and housing types; it can also be interpreted as the dollar value of a typical home in a

given area.²⁹ The Black Belt has a median home value of roughly \$107,400, a full 25% lower than the state median home value of \$144,800. Compared to the non-Black Belt median home value (\$167,200), the Black Belt median is over 35% lower.

Since owning a home is a primary tool to build personal wealth, the lower home values in the Black Belt relative to the rest of the state automatically puts residents at a long-term disadvantage to accumulate wealth. In the four *least* impoverished Black Belt counties (Bibb, Crenshaw, Marengo, and Washington), the median home price is over 50% greater than the median

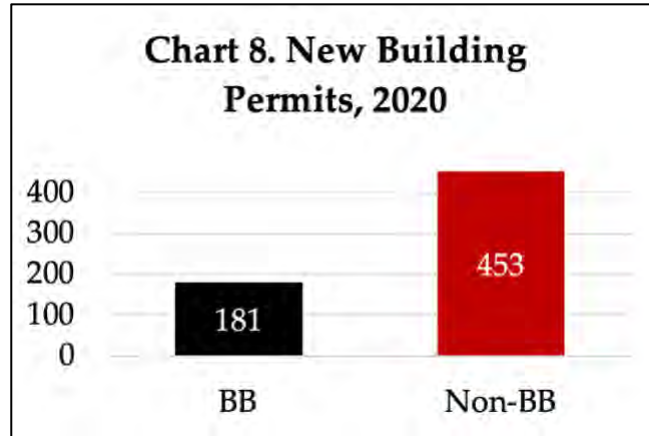
price of the four *most* impoverished Black Belt counties (Bullock, Greene, Macon, and Sumter).



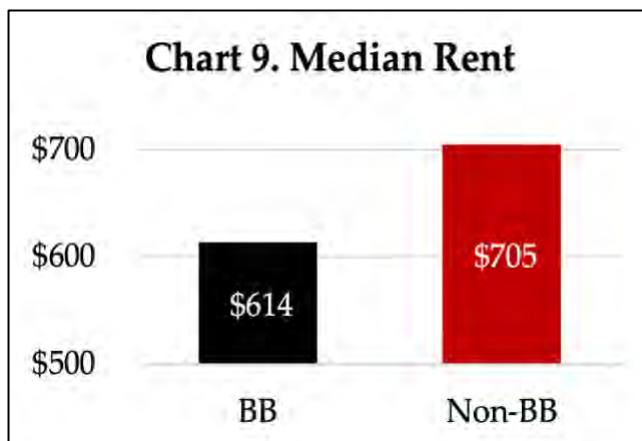
Over the last two years, as the housing market has experienced a boom in sales and sharp increase in prices, median home values have increased at similar rates in the Black Belt and non-Black Belt areas alike. However, over a four year period, Chart 7 shows that home values have increased more slowly in the Black Belt than the rest of the state. Black Belt and non-Black Belt, non-metro counties have experienced similar rates of growth in home values during this period, but because non-Black Belt, non-metro counties have a higher median home value (\$134,600 in 2022, over \$27,000 greater than the Black Belt median home value), residents of these counties are at less of a disadvantage for wealth-building personal wealth than relative to Black Belt residents.

New Building Permits

Additionally, as our report in *Black Belt 2020* found, the Black Belt is losing residents.³⁰ New building permits, as reported by the U.S. Census Bureau,



provide a general indicator of construction activity in the local real estate market—though it does not represent total new construction—and therefore demand for new housing units.³¹ Chart 8 shows that there were significantly fewer new building permits in Black Belt counties than in non-Black Belt counties; by extension, we can conclude there is much lower demand for new housing in the Black Belt. The slower rate of increases in home value combined with the lower number of new building permit requests in the Black Belt indicates less investment as well as less interest in moving to the region, worsening the region's declining population.



Median Rent

Median rent in the Black Belt, shown in Chart 9, indicates, at face value, that Black Belt renters pay about \$100 less per month in rent than do non-Black Belt renters. However,

when evaluating median rent relative to median household income, it becomes clear that rent is a greater financial burden for those in the Black

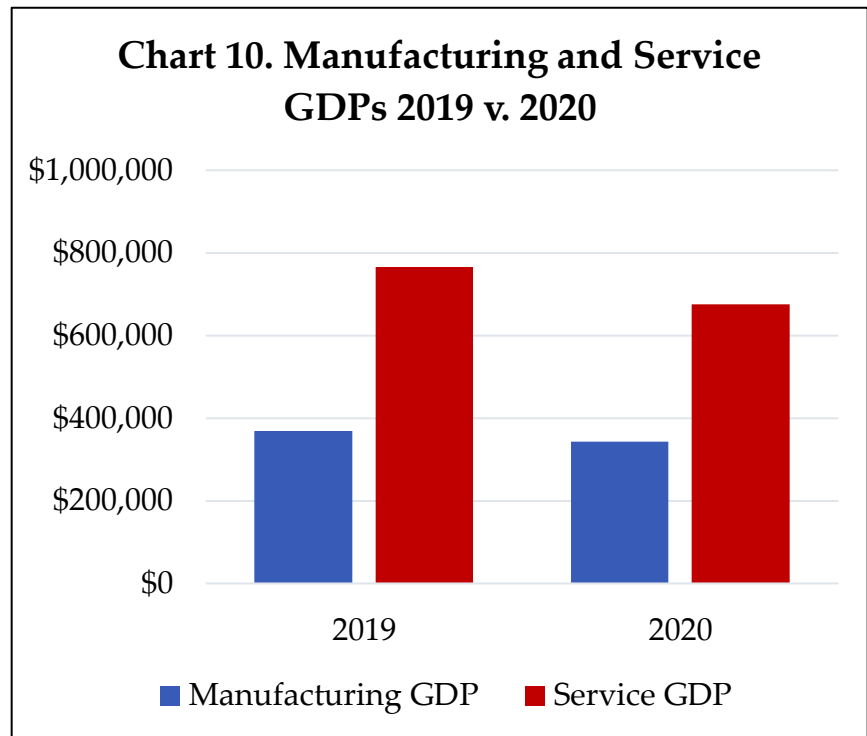
Belt. On average, rent is a higher share of median household income in the Black Belt (19.2%) compared to non-Black Belt counties (17.5%). All of the top ten counties with the highest rent as share of median income are in the Black Belt, where the average rent was about thirty dollars more than the bottom ten counties. The median income in the top ten counties with the highest rent as a share of median income is nearly \$20,000 lower than the bottom ten counties, requiring more household income to be used on rent, resulting in burdened households.

The statistic of “burdened households,” represents the percentage of the population whose rent is 30-34.9% or more of their household income. As of 2019, the burdened household rate across the Black Belt was 29%, falling below the national average of 30%. Households in Perry County, AL has the highest share of burdened households, with 43.6% of households in the county considered burdened. To put this into perspective, homeowners in the Black Belt have a 1-in-3 chance of spending over 30% of their household income to a mortgage and related expenses; homeowners in Perry County have over a 2-in-5 chance of spending over 30% of household income to a mortgage.

Industry Reliance in the Black Belt

There is a distinct lack of manufacturing jobs in the Black Belt region. As such, residents rely heavily on often lower-paid service sector employment. Recruiting manufacturers has been difficult in the region for a number of reasons and represents an area that needs further attention. A majority of the Black Belt population in poverty work in the service industry³² In 2019, Choctaw, Crenshaw, and Washington counties, had greater manufacturing GDPs than service, contrary to the rest of the Black Belt counties; however, since the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a transition in counties relying on service GDP over manufacturing GDP. In Table 1 on the following page, data drawn from four counties within the Black Belt shows

changes in GDP indicating a greater reliance on service industries than manufacturing industries.³³ While this trend is almost solely blamed on the restrictions of the pandemic, we want to look at potential future predictors of



this data. Following current trends in Table 2, manufacturing GDP is predicted to surpass service GDP as soon as 2025. At the current trends shown in Table 1, the Manufacturing Industry GDP is predicted to surpass

the Service Industry GDP by 2025-2026. With the pandemic continuing to expose the many faults of service industry jobs (long hours, low-wages, burnout, mismanagement, etc....) experts at McKinsey (one of the oldest and largest management consultancies) see the service industry becoming stronger, post-pandemic as businesses continue to apply lessons learned during the pandemic. “Through the coronavirus crisis, few industries have escaped sudden and significant demand shock,” a Senior Partner at McKinsey & Company wrote, “For example, today’s downtime can be used to pull forward scheduled maintenance, inspections, and repairs—all steps that can help reduce future downtime as customer demand increases.”³⁴

Policy Recommendations and Implications

Given the complex and various factors that contribute to poverty, it is impractical to assume any single solution will miraculously solve persistent poverty in the Black Belt. There are, however, certain systematic steps that can be taken to reduce poverty and its negative effects. Systematic “barriers to economic self-sufficiency” created by the structure of government assistance programs, like TANF, are known as benefits cliffs. These barriers have a real-world impact on poverty alleviation. For example, they can reduce incentives for those below in poverty to pursue more sustainable economic

Table 1. Changes in GDP by Sector over Time

Federal Reserve Economic Data analyzed by the Education Policy Center at the University of		2019		2020	
Location	Manufacturing GDP	Service GDP	Manufacturing GDP	Service GDP	
Bullock County (AL)	\$93,534	\$128,375	\$105,204	\$106,735	
Conecuh County (AL)	\$147,927	\$216,156	\$208,027	\$158,170	
Crenshaw County (AL)	\$209,327	\$205,258	\$185,928	\$147,724	
Greene County (AL)	\$80,336	\$136,563	\$84,224	\$85,288	

opportunities, or simply leave them vulnerable to falling back into poverty when assistance is removed before an individual is fully self-sufficient, such as when starting a job that does not fulfill their economic needs but exceeds the program's income requirements. Steps should be taken to mitigate the impacts of benefits cliffs across all poverty-related programs, including legislation to smooth the transition for people transitioning off government assistance programs.

To address the lower median incomes—which undoubtedly contribute to the higher levels of poverty—and the economic reliance on the service industry in the Black Belt, steps should be taken to better prepare for, connect, and incentivize people with the better-paying jobs, such as in Alabama's growing advanced manufacturing sector in Alabama. The new electric vehicle sub-sector is ramping up in Alabama's auto manufacturing industry, and there are growing opportunities to connect new and existing workers to well-paying jobs at one of the many EV Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEMs) and their suppliers located in or on the periphery of the Black Belt. Hyundai, based near Montgomery, has been working with the Mayor of Montgomery and the Chamber of Commerce to bring new jobs to the area. But the workforce pool isn't growing and is in fact shrinking. Reversing that trend is critical for Hyundai's and other manufacturers' labor pool.

This will require innovative approaches to expose young people to the opportunities available to them as well as the workforce on-ramps available to them, including attaining a post-secondary degree or credential. Efforts to dramatically expand counseling for rising middle and high school

youths, to connect new tech-based tools that empower students—such as the Alabama Office of Apprenticeships’ dashboards linking high school and community college careers and technical education programs to industry-supported apprenticeships—should be expanded in the Black Belt. The modern manufacturing industry in Alabama is one of the most resilient and lucrative in the nation and has the potential to be truly transformative in Alabama’s fight against poverty, if these connections between education, workforce, and industry can be made and sustained.

Other briefs in the *Black Belt 2022* series have noted the impact of poverty on various issues in the region, highlighting the significance of swiftly and effectively addressing it now. Poverty is a “wicked problem” that cannot be solved overnight, but inaction is not an option. The scope of poverty in the Black Belt, combined with the educational system failures, healthcare access inequities, and infrastructure challenges will require a comprehensive and multifaceted approach to truly uplift the Black Belt and its people—the policy recommendations contained in this brief and broader *Black Belt* series are just some of the potential tools leaders and policymakers should consider.

THE EDUCATION POLICY CENTER AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA

Established in 1924, the Education Policy Center is The University of Alabama's oldest center or institute. Through its ongoing nonpartisan research and programs, it seeks to assist the College of Education and the University to fulfill their mission to improve the quality of life for all Alabamians. The EPC promotes expanding access and success, strengthening equity, and advancing economic and community development with special emphasis on telling the story of the Deep South to policymakers in Alabama, the region and nation. In 2020, EPC released the *Black Belt 2020* issue brief series examining policy issues pertinent to the Alabama Black Belt. *Black Belt 2022* builds upon this work and will examine new issues as well as revisit previous issues.

Director: Stephen G. Katsinas, Ph.D.

Associate Director: Nathaniel Bray, Ph.D.

Project Coordinators/Managers: Brandi M. Stacey, Michael S. Malley, Jr., & Stephanie Paul

Senior Fellow & Issue Briefs Editor: James E. "Ed" Davis, PhD (Emeritus, MS State University)

Associate Issue Briefs Editor: Phillip D. Grant, Ph.D. (University of West Georgia)

Senior Fellows: Arleene P. Breau, Ph.D., James E. "Skip" Dotherow, Ph.D., Phillip D. Grant, Ph.D., Ray Huebschmann, Ph.D., Brian K. Johnson, Ph.D., Vincent A. Lacey, Ph.D., R. Frank Mensel, Ph.D., David Murphy, Ph.D., J. Warner

Fellows: Mark D'Amico, Ph.D., Janice Friedel, Ph.D., Linda Hagedorn, Ph.D., Michael Kenamer, Ph.D., Dustin Smith, Ph.D.

Research Associates: Emily Grace Corley, Noel Keeney, Sean O'Brien, & Garrett Till

401 Queen City Avenue Box 870249, Tuscaloosa, Alabama 35487 • Telephone: (205) 348-6004 •

<http://edpolicy.ua.edu>

**THE CENTER FOR BUSINESS AND ECONOMIC RESEARCH AT
THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA**

The primary roles of the Center for Business and Economic Research (CBER) are in research and service to the State and people of Alabama and the nation at large. The Center, established in 1930, is committed to promoting economic development throughout Alabama. CBER's research spans economic and fiscal policy analysis, business, environmental, economic and workforce development studies. CBER also collects, maintains, analyzes, and releases business and socioeconomic data. CBER clientele include federal, state, and local government agencies, private companies, other academic institutions, financial institutions, individuals, and the media. As a resource for in-depth studies/analysis/forecasts, CBER provides insight and information with the aim of improving the quality of decision-making by our clientele. CBER is an outreach/research center of the Culverhouse College of Business, one of the leading business schools in the country.

Associate Dean for Economic Development & Senior Research Economist: Samuel Addy, Ph.D.

Executive Director: Ahmad Ijaz **Associate Director of Research & Outreach:** Morgan Cordle

Director of Socioeconomic Analysis & Demographics: Nyesha Black, Ph.D.

Assistant Research Economist: Kilungu Nzaku, Ph.D.

Socioeconomic Analyst: Susannah Robichaux **Economic Forecaster:** Stephanie Normanyo

1500 Greensboro Avenue, Suite 1 Box 870221, Tuscaloosa, Alabama 35401 •

Telephone: (205) 348-6191 • <https://cber.culverhouse.ua.edu>

- ¹ Dr. Nyesha C. Black, Director of Socioeconomic Analysis & Demographics, email to author, Feb. 8, 2021.
- ² Ashmore, Susan Youngblood. *Carry It on: The War on Poverty and the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama, 1964-1972*. Athens, GA: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2008.
- ³ U.S. Census Bureau, Poverty Universe, All Ages for Counties: Alabama [PUAAAL01109A647NCEN], retrieved from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis; <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/PUAAAL01109A647NCEN>, March 7, 2022.
- ⁴ U.S. Census Bureau. (2019). *2019 American Community Survey: Poverty Status in the Past 12 Months, Alabama and United States*. Retrieved March 24, 2022 from <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=alabamapoverty&g=0100000US&tid=ACST5Y2019.S1701>.
- ⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates. Available at: <https://www.census.gov/data-tools/demo/saipe/>
- ⁶ Kent, Ana. "Examining U.S. Economic Racial Inequality by State: St. Louis Fed." Saint Louis Fed Eagle. Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, December 9, 2021. <https://www.stlouisfed.org/publications/bridges/volume-3-2020/examining-us-economic-racial-inequality-by-state#>.
- ⁷ Carey, Liz, and The Daily Yonder June 17 Liz Carey. "American Families Plan Will Help Lift Rural America out of Poverty, White House Says." The Daily Yonder, June 17, 2021. <https://dailyyonder.com/american-families-plan-will-help-lift-rural-america-out-of-poverty-white-house-says/2021/06/17/>.
- ⁸ Federal Reserve Economic Data, Income Inequality by County: Alabama.
- ⁹ Aversa, Jeannine. "Distribution of Personal Income." Distribution of Personal Income | U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA). The Department of Commerce, 2020. <https://www.bea.gov/data/special-topics/distribution-of-personal-income>.
- ¹⁰ Binkley, Dominic. "Latest Round of Pandemic EBT Benefits to Arrive Starting This Week." Alabama Department of Human Resources. ADHR, December 7, 2021. <https://dhr.alabama.gov/latest-round-of-pandemic-ebt-benefits-to-arrive-starting-this-week/>.
- ¹¹ Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. (2020, November 30). *TANF Cash Assistance Should Reach Many More Families in Alabama to Lessen Hardship*. https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/tanf_trends_al.pdf
- ¹² Ibid, CBPP (10).
- ¹³ *Building a Better TANF Program*. (2013, February 13). Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/building-a-better-tanf-program>.
- ¹⁴ Federal Reserve Economic Data, Equifax Subprime Credit Population, Quarterly: Alabama. Available at <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/release/tables?rid=409&eid=294905#snid=294967>
- ¹⁵ Pucher, J., Renne, J.L., "Urban-Rural Difference in Mobility and Mode Choice: Evidence from the 2001 NHTS," Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, Rutgers University (2004)

- ¹⁶ Lake, R., and Hicks, C. (2021, August 20). *What Credit Score Do You Need to Buy a House?*. U.S. News & World Report. <https://loans.usnews.com/articles/what-credit-score-do-you-need-to-buy-a-house>.
- ¹⁷ U.S. Census Bureau. (n.d.) *QuickFacts, Housing, Alabama*. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/AL/PST045221>
- ¹⁸ Ibid., Census Bureau (5).
- ¹⁹ Richardson, J., Devine, J., Buell, J., & Asante-Muhammad, D. (2022, January). *NCRC 2020 Home Mortgage Report: Examining Shifts During COVID-19*. National Community Reinvestment Coalition. <https://ncrc.org/ncrc-2020-home-mortgage-report-examining-shifts-during-covid/>
- ²⁰ Federal Reserve Economic Data. (2021). *Homeownership Rates by Race and Ethnicity in the United States*. <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/BOAAAHORUSQ156N#0>
- ²¹ Yun, L. (2016, August 12). *Why Homeownership Matters*. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/lawrenceyun/2016/08/12/why-homeownership-matters/?sh=61d24ff9480f>
- ²² Bhutta, N., Chang, A., Dettling, L., Hsu, J. (2020, September 28). *Disparities in Wealth by Race and Ethnicity in the 2019 Survey of Consumer Finances*. Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System. <https://www.federalreserve.gov/econres/notes/feds-notes/disparities-in-wealth-by-race-and-ethnicity-in-the-2019-survey-of-consumer-finances-20200928.htm>.
- ²³ Ibid, Yun.
- ²⁴ Aliprantis, D., and Carroll, D. (2019, February 28). *What is Behind the Persistence of the Racial Wealth Gap?*. Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland. <https://www.clevelandfed.org/newsroom-and-events/publications/economic-commentary/2019-economic-commentaries/ec-201903-what-is-behind-the-persistence-of-the-racial-wealth-gap.aspx>
- ²⁵ Choi, Jung Hyun, Laurie Goodman, and Jun Zhu. “We Must Act Quickly to Protect Millions of Vulnerable Renters.” Urban Institute. Urban Institute, April 9, 2020. <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/we-must-act-quickly-protect-millions-vulnerable-renters>.
- ²⁶ Prosperity Now. (2019, January). *Prosperity Now Scorecard: Vulnerability in the Face of Economic Uncertainty*. https://prosperitynow.org/sites/default/files/resources/2019_Scorecard_Key_Findings.pdf
- ²⁷ Ibid., Richardson et al.
- ²⁸ *Alabama Home Values*. Zillow. Last updated February 28, 2022. <https://www.zillow.com/al/home-values/>
- ²⁹ *Zillow Home Value Index Methodology, 2019 Revision*. (2019, December 18). Zillow Research. Zillow. <https://www.zillow.com/research/zhvi-methodology-2019-highlights-26221/>
- ³⁰ Katsinas, S.G., Keeney, N.E., Jacobs, E., Whann, H. (Aug. 2020). *The Black Belt’s Population Decline Explains Why Alabama May Lose a Congressional Seat in the 2020 Census*. The Education Policy Center at the University of Alabama. Available at <http://edpolicy.ua.edu/research/black-belt/>
- ³¹ Ibid., Census Bureau (5).

³² Maclay, Kathleen. "Fast Food, Poverty Wages: The Public Cost of Low-Wage Jobs in the Fast-Food Industry." UC Berkeley Labor Center. UC Berkeley, December 22, 2020. <https://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/fast-food-poverty-wages-the-public-cost-of-low-wage-jobs-in-the-fast-food-industry/>.

³³ Federal Reserve Economic Data, Real Gross Domestic Product by County: Alabama. Available at <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/release/tables?rid=397&eid=1070215#snid=1070247>

³⁴ Guzman, Nicolas, Mitesh Prema, Rohit Sood, and David Wilkes. "Coronavirus' Impact on Service Organizations: Weathering the Storm." McKinsey & Company. McKinsey & Company, December 17, 2020. <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/operations/our-insights/coronavirus-impact-on-service-organizations-weathering-the-storm>.



Advertisement

News

Alabama Black Belt's struggle with poverty a 'chicken and egg' problem, but there are solutions

Published: Mar. 31, 2022, 7:00 a.m.

137
shares

By [Ramsey Archibald](#) | rarchibald@al.com

Alabama's Black Belt - one of the poorest regions in the United States - has struggled with poverty since the time of slavery, and remains stuck in a difficult-to-solve situation, experts at the University of Alabama said this week.

"In simplistic terms, it's kind of a chicken and egg problem," said [Dr. Richard Fording](#), a political science professor at UA, in a press briefing on poverty in the Black Belt on Monday. "The solutions are just not there."

Advertisement

Fording spoke at a press briefing as part of Black Belt 2022, a series of such briefings hosted by the University's Education Policy Center, aimed at issues facing Alabama's Black Belt region, and possible solutions.

More from Black Belt 2022: [Black Belt K-12 students perform far worse in math, science than rest of Alabama](#)

"Everyone agrees that lack of economic development is one of, if not the major problem in some of these areas. But the ingredients for economic development are just not naturally present," he said. "And actually trends in that area are working in the wrong direction."


Problems with the labor force, selective outmigrations, transportation, education, geographic concentration of poverty, and racial and class segregation were all reasons Fording gave to explain why the Black Belt's economic situation is getting worse, not better.

There are many ways to demonstrate the severe poverty in Alabama's Black Belt. Income, credit scores, home values and GDP are just a few of the ways researchers at the Education Policy Center examined the issue in their brief released earlier this week.

But no matter how you examine it, poverty in Alabama is inextricably linked with race, researchers said.

"The consequences of slavery and sharecropping hindered the Black Belt and its majority African American population in the wake of the Civil War by preventing the accumulation and transfer of intergenerational wealth, which contributes to persistent poverty that continues today," the brief reads.

The Black Belt - Alabama's poorest region - is home to all of the state's majority minority counties, and many of the counties with the highest poverty rates in Alabama.

 Made with Flourish

[Can't see the map? [Click here.](#)]

All 25 Black Belt Counties are among the top half of counties in the state for poverty rate - the percentage of residents living below the poverty line. Each of the top 14 counties with the highest poverty rates are in the region, led by Bullock and Perry counties, with poverty rates of nearly 31%.

But even within those already poor counties, there are big discrepancies when controlling for race, with white households earning more than Black households. That's a fact that's true across Alabama and the nation, but which holds firm in the Black Belt, as well.

"Poverty in the Black Belt, the fundamental roots lie in the history of the exploitive economic system that persisted for many decades after Reconstruction that was based on racial subjugation," Fording said. "But, importantly, and maybe even primarily, the need to preserve the economic system that had been previously supported by slavery."

"The conditions in the Black Belt now were intentional," he said.

Other poverty indicators

Researchers also looked at credit scores - and important way to access and build wealth. The Black Belt, in general, suffers from relatively low credit scores. A good credit score is vital for loans used for education, transportation and housing. In the Black Belt, transportation is particularly vital, since resources in the area are particularly far apart. Without access to a car, and with no public transit to speak of, getting or maintaining a job is nearly impossible.

And home ownership is one of the most important ways to build generational wealth, according to the Education Policy Center. And while those with poor credit may be able to get a mortgage, they would face higher interest rates, furthering the cycle of poverty, the center noted.

And those who can't afford to buy a home are force to rent. In the Black Belt, rent is less expensive than in the rest of Alabama when looking at raw dollar values, but it's actually often less affordable.

[Can't see the map? [Click here.](#)]

When controlling for income, Black Belt residents end up paying a higher percentage of their income than residents in other counties.

Fording said Alabama residents don't have much help in terms of a social safety net.

"We have a weak safety net in the United States compared to other countries, and then also in Alabama compared to other states," he said. "The one bright spot in the safety net is the expansion of the SNAP program over the years, and during the pandemic. But you can't live on SNAP, you can't pay rent with

The chicken and egg problem, and solutions

The nature of the Black Belt's history makes its poverty problem hard to solve, but that doesn't mean there aren't solutions. One suggestion brought up Monday was increasing wages.

"I think an increase in the minimum wage would have a significant impact in the Black Belt, maybe more than other areas," Fording said. "Because in more Urban areas, just naturally because of the labor market conditions, the low wages are higher than the minimum wage. I would suspect that the increase in purchasing power would be more significant in places like the Black Belt if we were to increase the minimum wage."

One of the biggest reasons for the Black Belt's struggles is the lack of a strong workforce, Dr. Fording said. The workforce in these areas has been hurt further by years of "selective outmigration," he said.

"What I mean by that is, the people who are most able to leave - in terms of being qualified for good jobs, being able to go to college... are not likely to come back," he said.

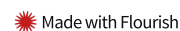
That leaves an aging and unskilled workforce behind, and makes the region less attractive for potential new industries.

"If there were some programs that could incentivize people to stay in or move to the Black Belt in a way that enhances the attractiveness of the labor force in the eyes of outside industries, maybe that would be a way to sort of neutralize or even reverse this trend," Fording said.

Dr. Stephen Katsinas, head of the Education Policy Center, noted that other states have tried strategies to do just that.

"Other states have begun to use student loan forgiveness as a vehicle to attract people to economically depressed areas with skills that are in demand. That might be a strategy Alabama could look at," Katsinas said.

Another potential avenue for bringing people in is the relative affordability of the area. Home prices in the Black Belt are generally lower than the rest of the state, and the pandemic has made moving there an option for some people, with some limitations.



[Can't see the map? [Click here.](#)]

"There are lots of financial incentives, especially now," Fording said. "One recent development, because of the pandemic, is because so many industries have been able to go to telework... You might be able to keep your job, earn the same salary, and cut your living expenses in half."

But that relies on the area having good, reliable internet, something [the Black Belt still struggles with](#).

Fording said the issue of broadband and other infrastructure problems is something that should be high on Alabama's priority list.

"Fundamental infrastructure development... I think that's a great priority to have on the list. Because that's not a chicken and egg type problem, that's one that policy makers in Montgomery can solve," he said.

"These basic infrastructure problems, those need to be addressed. That's fundamental to me."

One way to tackle those fundamental infrastructure issues - and other problems in the Black Belt - is to get them to the front of state lawmakers' priority list, Fording said.

"Highlighting these problems is extremely important - this needs to be at the top and not at the bottom for priorities," he said. "It was pretty embarrassing for this state when the [United Nations came in and exposed some of the conditions](#) that we tend to associate with the least developed countries around the world. That seemed to have some impact in Montgomery, at least. This is one strategy, simply to expose some of these problems, not just at the macro level, but also in terms of the actual consequences in the real lives of the people who live there."

This data is part of Black Belt 2022, a new series from the Education Policy Center focusing on problems in the Black Belt, and attempting to find solutions.

Do you have an idea for a data story about Alabama? Email Ramsey Archibald at rarchibald@al.com, and follow him on Twitter [@RamseyArchibald](#). Read more Alabama data stories [here](#).

Issue Brief № 59

Infrastructure in Alabama's Black Belt

by Stephen G. Katsinas, Emily Grace Corley, Garrett Till,
Sean O'Brien, and Nathaniel J. Bray

"The Connect Alabama Act is a transformational piece of legislation that I am proud to support and sign into law. This landmark new law ensures that Alabama will expand much-needed broadband access and further position Alabama for a robust 21st century economy, education system and health care system."

—Governor Kay Ivey, July 2020¹

From the Tennessee Valley Authority and Rural Electrification Acts of the 1930s that brought electrification to rural Americans left behind, to the Eisenhower Interstate Highway System that connected America in the 1950s and 1960s, expanding infrastructure represents a major achievement for the United States in the 20th century. But decades of neglect and under-investment, as American Society of Civil Engineers reports consistently document, have left our nation's roads, bridges, and other key infrastructure elements in a state of decline.² Alabama's infrastructure has seen similar long-term deterioration. However, since 2019 the state has taken major steps to improve its physical infrastructure, rebuilding roads and bridges through 2019 Rebuild Alabama Act³, and expanding broadband internet access through the 2021 Connect Alabama Act.

Alabama policymakers have put into place entities and structures to maximize the state's already strong fiscal position going into the 2020 pandemic—Alabama was one of just five states not taking education funding cuts in the pandemic. Sound conservative fiscal management

practices and these recent enactments position Alabama to better deploy its share of the \$2.2 billion one-time funding through the March 27, 2020 federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES)⁴, the \$900 million Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 signed into law by President Trump on December 27, 2020⁵, and the \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan Act signed into law by President Biden on March 11, 2021.⁶

As a February 2022 feature on rural infrastructure noted, “Funding from the bipartisan infrastructure bill passed by Congress last fall is starting to hit the ground in earnest, and elected officials are coming out of the woodwork to let their constituents know about new spending available for water projects, highways, high speed internet, bridges, and more. The hype train is happening in rural newspapers, radio stations and social media, as opportunities for legislators to cut ribbons and show off are simply too juicy to miss.”⁷ This brief separates fact from hype, by reviewing recent infrastructure investments and noting areas in need of improvement.

Recent Progress on Broadband in the Black Belt

Our *Black Belt 2020* issue brief, *Internet Access Disparities in Alabama & the Black Belt*, concluded that the region “is markedly behind the rest of the state when it comes to internet access.” At the time the issue brief was released in October 2020, Alabama ranked 47th in the country in broadband connectivity, and *all but two of the 25 Black Belt counties were below the statewide average of 86 percent high-speed (100+ mbps) internet coverage, with half below 50 percent coverage*. Perry and Choctaw counties had zero percent coverage of high-speed internet, and Greene had only 2 percent coverage. The problem is decidedly rural: the Federal Communications Commission

found 1.4 million of the 2 million rural Alabamians, or 73%, had fixed broadband access, while 98% of Alabama's 2.8 million urban residents have fixed broadband access.

Jimmy Parnell, President of the Alabama Farmers Federation noted the real-world consequences of these disparities: "Farmers and other rural Alabamians are at a significant disadvantage without high-speed internet access."⁸ Parnell's point was underscored in interviews of Perry and Greene county residents conducted for a March 2022 University of Alabama doctoral dissertation. One would-be remote worker said, "I interviewed to do a work-from-home job, but when they ran the test on the towers in this area, it wasn't sufficient, so I wasn't able to land that job." Another said "I have the opportunity to teach educational classes. But to host, I need an adequate internet connection. To do a virtual class or do one-on-one consultations that I can charge a class fee for, I need high speed internet. But it's impossible for me to do that because the internet is so slow..."⁹

Since publication of the *Black Belt 2020* brief, Alabama has made steady progress in expanding internet access. Broadband and internet access across rural Alabama—and indeed rural America—is now a major public policy priority that enjoys strong bipartisan support.¹⁰ In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, Governor Kay Ivey utilized the Alabama Broadband Accessibility Fund to award \$17 million in grants to expand internet access, and later signed the Connect Alabama Act of 2021.¹¹ This act created three entities—the Alabama Digital Expansion Authority, the Alabama Digital Expansion Division within the Alabama Department of Economic and

Community Affairs (ADECA), and the Alabama Digital Expansion Finance Corporation, to advise, develop, and execute a statewide connectivity plan, as well as to administer the Connect Alabama Fund.¹² With the passage of the Connect Alabama Act, the state became the last in the southeast to adopt an official broadband plan.¹³

Prior to the passage of the Connect Alabama Act, the state ranked 47th in broadband connectivity, with an estimated 73% of its population lacking access to an affordable broadband plan. Alabama thus was the last state in the southeast to adopt an official broadband plan.¹⁴ With Connect Alabama in place, Governor Ivey on January 28, 2022 signed House Bill 1, which passed a special legislative session with strong bipartisan and business support, appropriating \$300 of its \$772 million American Rescue Plan Act fund allotment to improve broadband access.¹⁵ Much of the responsibility for administering these funds will fall to the Digital Expansion Division within ADECA created by the 2021 Connect Alabama Act.¹⁶

Taken together, while broadband access has a long way to go, noticeable improvement in the Black Belt of those with access to high-speed internet (100+ mbps) has occurred. Since October 2020, high-speed internet access in Choctaw and Perry counties has expanded from zero percent to 24% and 9%, in each county, respectively.¹⁷ There is still much room for improvement, however, since the Black Belt region's average high-speed coverage is less than 50%—nearly 30 points lower than the rest of the state. While Alabama now ranks 38th overall, the increasing focus of legislators and policymakers to expand broadband, especially in rural areas of the state, could propel Alabama forward in coming years.¹⁸

Water and Sewage Infrastructure

A United Nations (UN) investigation into poverty and inequality in the United States brought Philip Alston, a special rapporteur for the UN on extreme poverty and human rights, to Lowndes and Montgomery County (among several other locations) in December 2017.¹⁹ Lowndes and Montgomery are both majority-minority counties in the Black Belt, and an earlier brief in this *Black Belt 2022* series found that Lowndes experienced the highest rate of COVID-19 deaths in Alabama from 2020 to 2021.²⁰

The UN report to its Human Rights Council exposed the world to the abysmal state of the Black Belt's water and sewage infrastructure. CBS' 60 minutes ran an unflattering feature on Lowndes County in December 2021²¹, where UN officials had found "cesspools of sewage that flowed out of dysfunctional (or nonexistent) septic systems, which has led to a resurgence in diseases that officials believed were eradicated," referring to the corresponding hookworm outbreak.²² Like other parts of Alabama's rural Black Belt, most of Lowndes County is unincorporated and outside of city limits, leaving infrastructure like roads and sewage at the discretion of poorly funded county governments. In most rural areas, this practically means residents are responsible for their own septic maintenance.

In 2021, the U.S. Department of Justice launched an investigation into the Lowndes County Health Department and the Alabama Department of Public Health. They specifically examined the onsite wastewater disposal and infectious disease and outbreaks programs for "environmental justice concerns and their impact on the health, life, and safety of people across

Lowndes County, Alabama.” Despite the absent wastewater infrastructure and backed up septic systems, the Lowndes County Unincorporated Wastewater Program Sewer Boards’ \$2 million grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture was taken back on account that they could not meet requirement to match 25 percent to the 75 percent federal funding for the project.²³

Unsurprisingly, the American Society of Civil Engineers’ (ASCE) report card on America’s infrastructure found that Alabama’s water systems are severely underfunded with deteriorating conditions, meriting the grade “D” from ASCE.²⁴ Alabama’s wastewater systems—including treatment systems, conveyance networks, and septic tanks, have an estimated \$3 billion in maintenance and expansion needs over the next 15 years.²⁵ The report noted that 25% of the state’s septic tanks are failing, an issue of particular note for the Black Belt and rural Alabama where septic tank systems are more prevalent.²⁶ Swift action is required to address the inadequate water and sewage infrastructure in the Black Belt that undoubtedly contributes to the health problems plaguing the region.

Roads, Bridges, and Highways

The ASCE 2021 infrastructure report card gave Alabama’s roads and bridges grades of C+ for bridges and C- for roads, deeming them “mediocre.”²⁷ There are about 70,000 miles worth of roads spanning rural Alabama, about 60,000 of which are maintained by state’s 67 county governments. Inasmuch as the 25 Black Belt counties account for over half of the rural roads and even more of the state’s rural county roads, it is not surprising that the “mediocre” condition is estimated to cost drivers over

\$500 a year in annual car maintenance.²⁸ There is a vastly different playing field for rural Black Belt residents compared to their urban counterparts.

State policymakers have taken steps to address many of these problems, the most notable being the ever-elusive West Alabama Corridor project. Building a road from Florence to Mobile through the western Black Belt to make the region more accessible to economic development has long been a goal of Alabama leaders dating to James “Big Jim” Folsom’s successful 1948 run for governor. Seventy-three years later, in 2021 as part of Rebuild Alabama, Governor Kay Ivey announced a four-lane highway from Thomasville to Tuscaloosa, to bring connectivity to this most isolated region of Alabama. Despite its good intentions, the project has its critics, including Demopolis Mayor Woody Collins, who called it a “nightmare for Demopolis,” because the highway bypasses his city by nearly seven miles.²⁹

Worker Commutes and Roads

Across the state, about 85% of Alabama’s workforce drives to work alone. These percentages are similar across both the 25 Black Belt and 52 non-Black Belt Alabama counties.³⁰ This underscores how good roads are essential for individuals and Alabama businesses. Among workers who commute in their car alone, 41% in the Black Belt drive more than 30 minutes to work, compared to about 37% of commuters in non-Black Belt counties (a percent difference of roughly 8%).³¹

In 2015, roughly 40% of commuters in the Black Belt were commuting to a workplace outside their county of residence, for a total of over 75,000 commuters.³² For Black Belt commuters staying within the state, the top

commuting destinations are Tuscaloosa (7,851), Montgomery (6,646), Lee (3,661), Mobile (2,677), and Jefferson (2,698).^{33,34} The top feeder counties for each of these destinations are the bordering counties. That Tuscaloosa and Montgomery were top commuting destinations is not surprising since they host Mercedes and Hyundai, respectively, as well as their many suppliers.

There are also large numbers of Black Belt residents commuting to work out-of-state. In 2015, more than 13,000 residents of Russell County alone commuted to bordering Muscogee County, Georgia, home to Georgia's third largest city—Columbus—as well as many insurance, banking, and digital technology firms.^{35,36} We note the Kia Motors' North American plant is in LaGrange, Georgia, just over the state line on I-85.

Long commutes, in addition to increasing the cost of transportation, can have negative consequences for individuals' health. This can include higher blood pressure, less physical activity, greater risk of obesity, and poor mental health.³⁷ Such negative health consequences can contribute to the disparities in health outcomes between Black Belt and Non-Black Belt counties as documented in previous issue briefs in this series.³⁸

Implications and Policy Recommendations

Poor infrastructure costs Alabama citizens time and money, and negatively impacts access to individual educational and corporate business opportunities. It even impacts health outcomes, as the UN report connecting inadequate wastewater infrastructure to poor Black Belt health outcomes, demonstrated. ACSE's 2021 report card identified average Alabama utility rates of just two-thirds the national average—which likely

is inadequate to fund maintenance of current wastewater systems, much less improving them.

Turning to roads, Alabama should continue its ramped-up leadership efforts to improve poor road conditions, which costs drivers over \$500 per year in individual vehicle maintenance. While the state has made strides in road quality since the last ASCE infrastructure report card in 2015, improving from a “D+” to a “C-,” there is still plenty of room for improvement. Continued and consistent investment, particularly in the Black Belt, is needed.³⁹

While many issues already addressed in this *Black Belt 2022* series require comprehensive approaches to tackle problems from multiple angles, infrastructure is that rare issue that can be addressed more simply through increased public sector investment, once good plans have been put into place. While assessing future long-term investment needs lied beyond the capacity of the researchers for this brief, it is abundantly clear that Alabama has dramatically improved its long-term planning process in recent years, especially since 2019.

Beyond the obvious critical role that the Alabama Department of Transportation plays in road construction and maintenance, we note the important leadership role that the Alabama Department of Community Affairs (ADECA) plays, along with the Alabama Department of Commerce, to coordinate state economic and community development initiatives. ADECA coordinates Alabama’s representation on the Appalachian Regional Commission and the Delta Regional Authority, two programs of

special interest to the Black Belt and rural Alabama. ADECA also administers for the State of Alabama the federal Low Income Household Water Assistance Program⁴⁰ that assists low-income households with water and wastewater bills.⁴¹ We also note that ADECA coordinates Alabama's new statewide plan for developing its electric vehicle charging infrastructure that was issued on January 26, 2022.⁴²

This is why ADECA's Broadband Map Connectivity Plan, issued on January 5, 2022, is of special note. This interactive Broadband Map addresses well-known deficiencies in the Federal Communications Commission mapping system, by identifying and evaluating census blocks that are only partially served with broadband. Because Alabama has already worked with its Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to map the state, the state is in an enviable position when additional federal funds come down the pike, as occurred with CARES and ARPA. It also means that state broadband grants awarded—90 of which have been issued by ADECA since 2018 through the Alabama Broadband Connectivity Fund—are more likely to fill identified holes in access.

The FCC, the federal agency charged with developing the nation's broadband map, expects to issue a major update on September 1, 2022.⁴³ That Alabama has already worked with its Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to map the state puts the state in an enviable position when additional federal funds come down the pike, as occurred with CARES and ARPA under national administrations of both political parties. It also means that state broadband grants awarded—90 of which have been issued by ADECA

since 2018—through the Alabama Broadband Connectivity Fund—are more likely to fill identified holes in access.

Good state-level administration means that when one-time funds come available, they can be more efficiently, effectively, quickly deployed—and that those plans are likely to include the Black Belt. In March 2022, ADECA announced \$11 million in one-time grant funds through its LIHWAP program, to households below the 150 percent threshold of federal poverty.⁴⁴

In recent years, Alabama statewide infrastructure policy has moved from a reactive approach to an initiative-taking approach. Continued good state-level administrative leadership is essential to improve the Black Belt's critical physical infrastructure investments in wastewater systems, highways, and broadband access. This is especially important given the region's small county and city governments, which often lack specialized staff to monitor these critical issues. Moving forward, wastewater and road improvement investments clearly should be paired with continued expansion of high-speed broadband throughout the Black Belt to extend new opportunities and connectivity to the region. Improving infrastructure can create new jobs, promote commerce, and facilitate economic growth and development.⁴⁵ But it takes commitment and investment from policymakers—investment that long has been neglected in the Black Belt.

THE EDUCATION POLICY CENTER AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA

Established in 1924, the Education Policy Center is The University of Alabama's oldest center or institute. Through its ongoing nonpartisan research and programs, it seeks to assist the College of Education and the University to fulfill their mission to improve the quality of life for all Alabamians. The EPC promotes expanding access and success, strengthening equity, and advancing economic and community development with special emphasis on telling the story of the Deep South to policymakers in Alabama, the region and nation. In 2020, EPC released the *Black Belt 2020* issue brief series examining policy issues pertinent to the Alabama Black Belt. *Black Belt 2022* builds upon this work and will examine new issues as well as revisit previous issues.

Director: Stephen G. Katsinas, Ph.D.

Associate Director: Nathaniel Bray, Ph.D.

Project Coordinators/Managers: Brandi M. Stacey, Michael S. Malley, Jr., & Stephanie Paul

Senior Fellow & Issue Briefs Editor: James E. "Ed" Davis, PhD (Emeritus, MS State University)

Associate Issue Briefs Editor: Phillip D. Grant, Ph.D. (University of West Georgia)

Senior Fellows: Arleene P. Breau, Ph.D., James E. "Skip" Dotherow, Ph.D., Phillip D. Grant, Ph.D., Ray Huebschmann, Ph.D., Brian K. Johnson, Ph.D., Vincent A. Lacey, Ph.D., R. Frank Mensel, Ph.D., David Murphy, Ph.D., J. Warner

Fellows: Mark D'Amico, Ph.D., Janice Friedel, Ph.D., Linda Hagedorn, Ph.D., Michael Kenamer, Ph.D., Dustin Smith, Ph.D.

Research Associates: Emily Grace Corley, Noel Keeney, Sean O'Brien, & Garrett Till

***THE CENTER FOR BUSINESS AND ECONOMIC RESEARCH AT
THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA***

The primary roles of the Center for Business and Economic Research (CBER) are in research and service to the State and people of Alabama and the nation at large. The Center, established in 1930, is committed to promoting economic development throughout Alabama. CBER's research spans economic and fiscal policy analysis, business, environmental, economic and workforce development studies. CBER also collects, maintains, analyzes, and releases business and socioeconomic data. CBER clientele include federal, state, and local government agencies, private companies, other academic institutions, financial institutions, individuals, and the media. As a resource for in-depth studies/analysis/forecasts, CBER provides insight and information with the aim of improving the quality of decision-making by our clientele. CBER is an outreach/research center of the Culverhouse College of Business, one of the leading business schools in the country.

Associate Dean for Economic Development & Senior Research Economist: Samuel Addy, Ph.D.

Executive Director: Ahmad Ijaz **Associate Director of Research & Outreach:** Morgan Cordle

Director of Socioeconomic Analysis & Demographics: Nyesha Black, Ph.D.

Assistant Research Economist: Kilungu Nzaku, Ph.D.

Socioeconomic Analyst: Susannah Robichaux **Economic Forecaster:** Stephanie Normanyo

1500 Greensboro Avenue, Suite 1 Box 870221, Tuscaloosa, Alabama 35401 •

Telephone: (205) 348-6191 • <https://cber.culverhouse.ua.edu>

NOTE: The University of Alabama strives to remain neutral on public policy issues. The Education Policy Center may facilitate interviews or share opinions expressed by faculty, staff, students, or other individuals regarding policy matters. However, those opinions do not necessarily reflect the views of the University or its leadership, and do not constitute a statement on behalf of the University.

¹ Alabama Public Radio Staff. (2021, May 10). *Governor awards nearly \$17 million to provide broadband services to Alabama communities*. Retrieved from

<https://www.alreporter.com/2021/05/10/governor-awards-nearly-17-million-to-provide-broadband-services-to-alabama-communities/#:~:text=Governor%20Kay%20Ivey%20has%20awarded,the%20Alabama%20Broadband%20Accessibility%20Fund.>

² ASCE. (2021). *America's Infrastructure Scores a C-*. American Society for Civil Engineers. Retrieved from <https://infrastructurereportcard.org>.

³ Act 2019-2, Rebuild Alabama Act (March 18, 2019). <https://revenue.alabama.gov/act-2019-2-rebuild-alabama-act/>

⁴ Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (2020, March 27). Pub.L. 118-136. <https://home.treasury.gov/policy-issues/coronavirus/about-the-cares-act>

⁵ Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021 (December 27, 2020). Pub.L. 116-260. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consolidated_Appropriations_Act,_2021

⁶ American Rescue Plan Act (March 11, 2021). Pub.L. 117-2, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/1319/text>

⁷ Oates, B., & Bryce Oates, T. D. Y. J. 25. (2022, February 3). *Keep it rural: Flip-flopping on infrastructure isn't a good look*. The Daily Yonder. Retrieved April 6, 2022, from <https://dailyyonder.com/newsletter/keep-it-rural-flip-flopping-on-infrastructure-isnt-a-good-look/>

⁸ Davis, D. (*+*+ Mar ./). *Students and Employees Go Online, Highlighting Need for Broadband Access*. Alabama Farmers Federation. <https://alfafarmers.org/students-and-employees-go-online-highlighting-need-for-broadband-access/>.

⁹ Drummonds-Whiteside, H. (2022). *Social justice and the digital divide: A narrative inquiry of how digital inequities contribute to the underrepresentation of low-income African Americans in STEM careers.* The University of Alabama. Unpublished doctoral dissertation.

¹⁰ Katsinas, S.G., Noel Keeney, Emily Jacobs, Emily Grace Corley, Hunter Whann. (2020, October 29). *Internet Access Disparities in Alabama & the Black Belt*. The Education Policy Center at The University of Alabama. Available at http://edpolicy.ua.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/201018_internet-access-disparities-al-black-belt.pdf

¹¹ IBID, APR Staff. (2021, May 10).

¹² Marsh, Del. (2021, May 6). *Connect Alabama Act*. Alabama State Legislature. Retrieved from <https://arc-sos.state.al.us/ucp/L0623329.AI1.pdf>

¹³ Alabama NewsCenter Staff. (2021, July 13). *Gov. Ivey signs Connect Alabama Act to drive broadband expansion*. Alabama NewsCenter. Retrieved from

<https://alabamane.wscenter.com/2021/07/13/gov-ivey-signs-connect-alabama-act-to-drive-broadband-expansion/>

¹⁴ Alabama News Center Staff. (2021, July 13). *Gov. Ivey signs Connect Alabama Act to drive broadband expansion*. Alabama News Center. Retrieved from

<https://alabamane.wscenter.com/2021/07/13/gov-ivey-signs-connect-alabama-act-to-drive-broadband-expansion/>

¹⁵ Elebash, R. "NFIB Commends Governor Ivey for Signing American Rescue Act Plan Act Bill," Montgomery, AL: National Federation of Independent Business.

<https://www.nfib.com/content/news/alabama/nfib-commends-governor-ivey-for-signing-american-rescue-plan-act-bill/>

¹⁶ Currier, J. Bradford. (2022, February 2) *Alabama Allocates More Than \$276 Million for Broadband Under American Rescue Plan*. Bradley. Retrieved from

<https://www.bradley.com/insights/publications/2022/02/alabama-allocates-more-than-276-million-for-broadband-under-american-rescue-plan>

¹⁷ BroadbandNow. (2021, November 1). *Alabama Internet Coverage and Availability*.

BroadbandNow. Retrieved from <https://broadbandnow.com/Alabama>

¹⁸ Ibid., BroadbandNow.

¹⁹ Alston, P. (2018). *Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights on His Mission to the United States of America*. United Nations General Assembly, Human Rights Council, 38th Session. Retrieved from

<https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G18/125/30/PDF/G1812530.pdf?OpenElement>.

²⁰ Corley, E.G., Till, G., O'Brien, S., Katsinas, S.G., & Bray, N.J. (2022, March 1). *COVID-19 and Alabama's Black Belt*. Education Policy Center at The University of Alabama.

http://edpolicy.ua.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/220301_covid-19-al-black-belt.pdf.

²¹ Serven Smith, R. (December 19, 2020). Catherine Coleman Flowers on '60 Minutes': Alabama Sewage Crisis 'America's dirty secret'.

<https://www.al.com/news/2021/12/catherine-coleman-flowers-on-60-minutes-alabama-sewage-crisis-americas-dirty-secret.html>

²² Slevin, Jeremy, Claudia Flores, Jason Fernandes, Greg Kaufmann, and Matthew.

Gerring. (2018). *The UN Just Published a Scathing Indictment of Us Poverty*. Talk Poverty.

Retrieved from <https://talkpoverty.org/2018/06/01/un-just-published-scathing-indictment-us-poverty/>.

²³ Sheets, Connor. (2021). *Lowndes County Group Loses \$2m Federal Grant to Address Sewage*

Woes. Al.com. Retrieved from <https://www.al.com/news/2021/07/lowndes-county-group-loses-2m-federal-grant-to-address-sewage-woes.html>.

²⁴ ASCE. (2021). *Alabama: ASCE's 2021 Infrastructure Report Card*. ASCE's 2021

Infrastructure Report Card, April 2, 2022. <https://infrastructurereportcard.org/state-item/alabama/>.

²⁵ Ibid., ASCE, *Alabama*.

²⁶ Ibid., ASCE, *Alabama*.

²⁷ Ibid., ASCE, *Alabama*.

²⁸ Ibid., Katsinas et al.

²⁹ Alabama Now. (2021). *It's Not Going to Do Anything but Kill Us' Alabama Mayor Looking for Prayers for Town after Unveiling of State's New Highway Project*. Alabama Now.

Retrieved from <https://www.alabamainow.com/2021/12/16/its-not-going-to-do-anything->

[but-kill-us-alabama-mayor-looking-for-prayers-for-town-after-unveiling-of-states-new-highway-project/](#).

³⁰ County Health Rankings & Roadmaps. (2021). *Driving Alone to Work – Alabama*. University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute School of Medicine and Public Health. Retrieved from

<https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/app/alabama/2021/measure/factors/67/data>.

³¹ County Health Rankings & Roadmaps. (2021). *Long Commute – Driving Alone*.

University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute School of Medicine and Public Health. Retrieved from <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/explore-health-rankings/measures-data-sources/county-health-rankings-model/health-factors/physical-environment/housing-transit/long-commute-driving-alone>.

³² United States Census Bureau. (2015). *Table 1: Residence County to Workplace County Commuting Flows*. Retrieved from <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/demo/tables/metro-micro/2015/commuting-flows-2015/table1.xlsx>.

³³ Ibid., U.S. Census Bureau.

³⁴ Sandel, C. (2022). *Worker Commute Data Parser*. Worker_Commute_Data.py.

³⁵ Ibid., Sandel.

³⁶ Grimsley, R.L.. (2018, October 31). *Muscogee County*. New Georgia Encyclopedia. University of Georgia Press. Retrieved from

<https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/counties-cities-neighborhoods/muscogee-county/>.

³⁷ Ibid., *Long Commute – Driving Alone*.

³⁸ Ibid., Corley et al.

³⁹ Ibid., ASCE, *Alabama*.

⁴⁰ Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs. Low-Income household Water Assistance Program (n.d.). <https://adeca.alabama.gov/lihwap/>

⁴¹ Low Income Household Water Assistance Program. Office of Community Services, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ocs/programs/lihwap>

⁴² ADECA releases statewide Electric Vehicle Infrastructure Plan (January 26, 2022).

<https://adeca.alabama.gov/2022/01/26/adeca-releases-statewide-electric-vehicle-infrastructure-plan/>

⁴³ Perkins, J. FCC Sets June Date to Begin Collecting ISP Data for Improved Broadband Map. (February 23, 2022). *Broadband Breakfast*.

<https://broadbandbreakfast.com/2022/02/fcc-sets-june-date-to-begin-collecting-isp-data-for-improved-broadband-maps/#:~:text=The%20agency%20said%20Tuesday%20it,widely%20anticipated%20national%20broadband%20map>.

⁴⁴ “Local agencies receive \$11 million from Gov. Ivey to assist low-income families with water costs (March 17, 2022). Press release. <https://adeca.alabama.gov/2022/03/17/local-agencies-receive-11-million-from-gov-ivey-to-assist-low-income-families-with-water-costs/>

⁴⁵ Ibid., ASCE, *Alabama*.



Advertisement

News

Alabama making strides on broadband access, infrastructure in the Black Belt

Published: Apr. 20, 2022, 8:00 a.m.

1,279
sharesBy **Ramsey Archibald | rarchibald@al.com**

Infrastructure in Alabama's Black Belt region - and in rural Alabama in general - lags far behind the rest of the state, but some progress is being made.

From roads and bridges to sewage systems to broadband internet access, there has been a shift among Alabama's leadership in the last few years that will benefit rural areas in the long run, according to researchers at the University of Alabama's Education Policy Center.

Advertisement

"In recent years, Alabama's state infrastructure policy has gone from being reactive to proactive," said Dr. Stephen Katsinas, head of the Education Policy Center, at a press briefing on infrastructure in the Black Belt this week. "I give Gov. [Kay] Ivey a lot of credit."

Katsinas spoke at the press briefing as part of Black Belt 2022, a series on issues residents of the Black Belt face. Previous issues include ¹⁰³educational attainment and

For years, Alabama's Black Belt - the poorest region in the state and one of the poorest in the nation - trailed in infrastructure. Lack of access to proper sewage systems in Lowndes County brought a UN representative to investigate the area in 2017, and there are whole counties where 0% of residents had broadband internet access as recently as 2020, according to the Education Policy Center.

Some of that is now starting to change.

The Education Policy Center indicated that over the past couple of years, spurred in part by the COVID-19 pandemic, broadband access has become a major public policy issue with bipartisan support.

"The pandemic exposed wide holes in the state's broadband," Katsinas said. "We learned it's not enough to have broadband access, you have to have high-speed broadband access. And that's what we're lacking in rural Alabama."

Gov. Ivey used \$17 million from the Alabama Broadband Accessibility Fund to help expand rural broadband access during the pandemic, and signed the Connect Alabama Act of 2021, both of which have already started to help.

"While broadband access has a long way to go, noticeable improvement in the Black Belt of those with access to high-speed internet (100+ mbps) has occurred," a brief released Tuesday from the Education Policy Center reads. The brief pointed to data that showed significant increases in high-speed internet access in Choctaw and Perry counties, which previously had no such access at all.

Statewide, Alabama went from 47th in broadband connectivity to 38th after Ivey signed the Connect Alabama Act, which provided a plan for evening the playing field in rural counties. In passing the plan, Alabama became the last state in the Southeast to commit to a plan, researchers at the Policy Center said.

"We were late to the game, but we're moving fast now," Katsinas said. "This is a problem that we are on the verge of fixing."

Reliable internet access has never been more important. The pandemic showed that many jobs can be done from home, but that's only true if you can get good internet where you live. In many parts of Alabama, that still isn't possible. And recruiting industry and workers to a region without the infrastructure in place for high-speed internet is also difficult, researchers at the Education Policy Center said.

"If you don't have high speed internet at home, you can't do the remote work jobs,"

Katsinas said.

Alabama has also made small strides in terms of roads. The American Society of Civil Engineers rated Alabama's roads at a C- in their 2021 infrastructure report card, up from a D+ in 2015. While not a huge gain, it's a step in the right direction.

And there are plans in place to help connect the Black Belt physically with the long-discussed West Alabama Corridor, a project that would turn two-lane U.S. 43 into a four-lane highway that would run from Thomasville to Tuscaloosa, looping one of Alabama's most remote areas.

The vast majority of Alabamians commute to work by driving alone, according to data from the U.S. Census Bureau. And those in rural counties have longer to go, often on worse roads. That means a higher cost to the commuter in terms of mileage - gas money and vehicle wear and tear - but can also involve greater risk of mental and physical health problems, according to the Education Policy Center.

Unlike some of the other issues facing the Black Belt, where solutions are messy and complicated, many of the problems with the region's infrastructure can be relatively simple to solve - it's just a matter of money. And Katsinas said the state's new, proactive approach is good for the region, because small rural counties like those that make up the bulk of the Black Belt need help from the state to take advantage of opportunities to get federal dollars.

He said some of the state's smaller counties lack specialized staff to do things like apply for grants. For that reason, when the state government is being more proactive in these areas, it's the smaller counties that benefit the most, he said.

Do you have an idea for a data story about Alabama? Email Ramsey Archibald at rarchibald@al.com, and follow him on Twitter [@RamseyArchibald](https://twitter.com/RamseyArchibald). Read more Alabama data stories [here](#).

Note to readers: if you purchase something through one of our affiliate links we may earn a commission.

Issue Brief № 60

Profiles of Community Leaders in the Black Belt

by Emily Grace Corley, Garrett Till, Sally Grace Shettles,
Sean O'Brien, Nathaniel J. Bray, and Stephen G. Katsinas

“Building a sense of place, collaborating with neighbors and being opportunistic about funding—requires what I heard one community leader describe as “scrappiness.” It’s a hard thing to define, but we know it when we see it: a mix of determination, optimism and creativity that sets some places apart. Every town I’ve mentioned has scrappy local leaders who just won’t give up.” —Tom Barkin, *The Daily Yonder*¹

Black Belt 2022 began as a follow up to the Education Policy Center’s fall 2020 nine-brief *Black Belt 2020 series*. Both series investigated a wide range of public policy areas, ranging from economic issues to education and health care. The purpose of these briefs is to shed light on the region that has often been neglected by state and national policy makers for decades. This final edition in the *Black Belt 2022* series aims to highlight the good work of leaders in various roles who are on the ground and already making a difference in their Black Belt communities.

To gather the information for this brief, the authors interviewed three community leaders in three different counties:

1. Dr. James Mitchell, President of Wallace Community College Selma (Selma, AL in Dallas County)
2. John Clyde Riggs, Executive Director of Alabama Tombigbee Regional Commission (Camden, AL in Wilcox County)
3. Dr. Marcia Smiley, Superintendent of Perry County Schools (Marion, AL in Perry County)

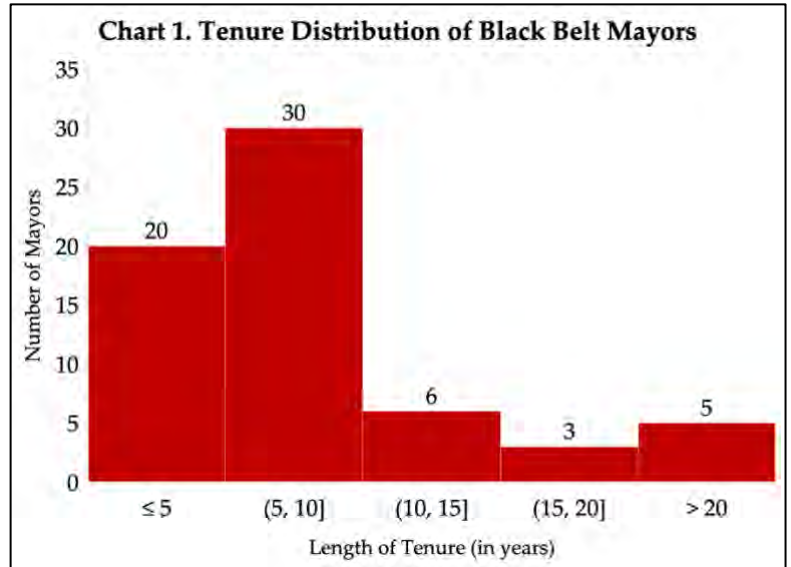
Additionally, the authors gathered data on the demographics of mayors and school superintendents in the Black Belt by consulting town and city hall websites, Facebook pages, and news articles.

Tenure of Community Leaders

Of the three community leaders interviewed for this brief, all have been in public service for almost their whole career. In a previous role at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina, Dr. Mitchell gained valuable and diverse experience rebuilding the Historically Black University in the 1980s that prepared him for his current role as president of Wallace-Selma, a position he has now held for 22 years. Similarly, Mr. Riggs has served as Executive Director of the Alabama Tombigbee Regional Commission (ATRC) for 25 years. Prior to becoming executive director, Mr. Riggs began working at ATRC in 1975 as an assistant accountant, before eventually moving into an economic development role. Dr. Smiley is now in her second year as the Superintendent of Perry County Schools after beginning her career as a middle school math teacher, then later serving as the Perry County Schools federal programs coordinator, assistant superintendent, and in other roles.

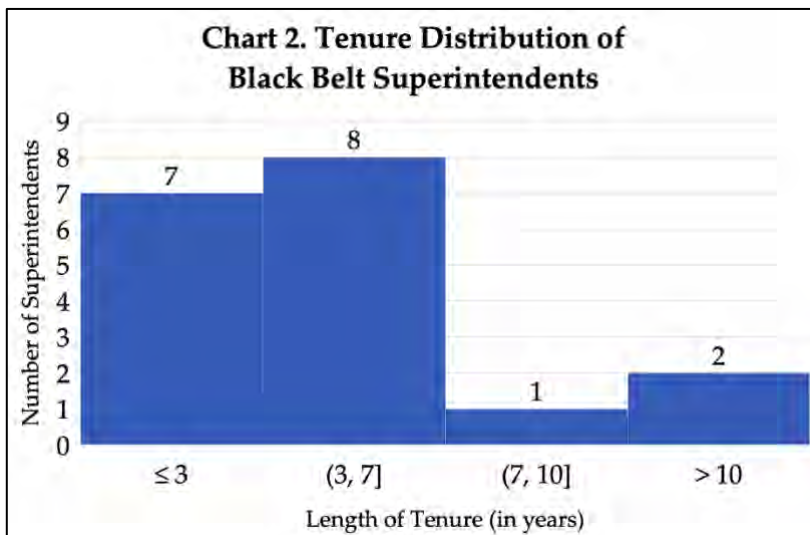
In order to determine how reflective of the leaders in the Black Belt the interviewees are, the authors gathered data on the tenure of current mayors and school superintendents. While none of the three leaders interviewed is a mayor and just one is a school superintendent, these data were easily accessible and provided a larger sample size than the 5 community colleges and 7 economic development districts that serve the Black Belt's 25 counties.

An examination of almost 70 current mayors in Black Belt cities shows that the long tenures (more than 20 years each) of Dr. Mitchell and Mr. Riggs are outliers when compared to mayors across the region in 2022. Chart 1 shows that the overwhelming

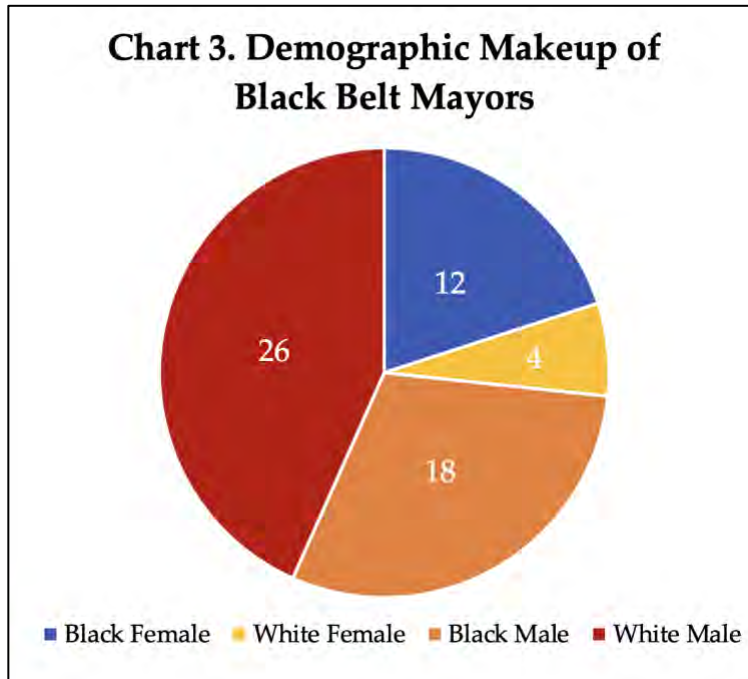


majority of the 64 current mayors in the data set have held their position for no more than 10 years, and nearly a third have served in their current positions for no more than 5 years.²

Dr. Smiley's tenure as superintendent of Perry County Schools is more reflective of the trends of both mayors (Chart 1) and superintendents (Chart 2). Like mayors in the Black Belt, most of the 15 current school superintendents included in the data set have served in their position for



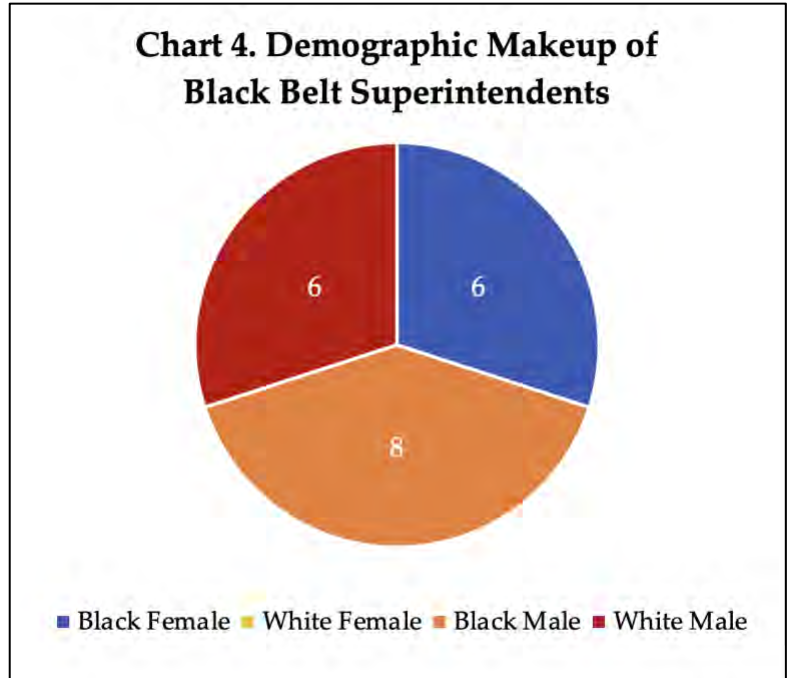
no more than 7 years.³ Of the 15 superintendents serving 7 years or less, nearly half have served in their current role for 3 years or less, including Dr. Smiley who is in her second year as superintendent of Perry County Schools.



Additionally, since the Black Belt is home to all 11 of Alabama's majority-minority counties, it is important to consider whether the leaders are reflective of the larger community. Of the 60 mayors in this

data set, 38 served communities located in a majority-minority county, and 20 of the 38 mayors in majority minority counties are Black—just over half.⁴ Overall, 30 of the 60 mayors in this set of data are Black, including some Black mayors serving in counties that are not majority-minority. While the leaders in these communities generally seem to be reflective by race, there is still room for improvement for gender representation, since women—both Black and White—make up less than one-third of all Black Belt mayors in this data set. It should be noted that the average tenure of current male mayors in this set is 2.7 years longer than their female counterparts across all races. This likely indicates a trend of women only recently getting increasingly elected in a historically male-dominated political arena.

There are 20 current Black Belt school superintendents in the data set represented by Chart 4.⁵ Of these 70% (14 of 20) are Black. There are 12 Black Belt school districts in majority-minority counties in this data set. Of these 12 districts, 10 are led by a



Black man (7) or woman (3). While the current Black Belt superintendents are very reflective of their communities by race, like the mayors, they are less representative by gender, with women making up less than one-third of all current superintendents (with zero white women currently serving as superintendent in the Black Belt in this data set). Overall, the group of leaders interviewed for this issue brief is very demographically reflective of current leaders in the Black Belt.

Addressing Challenges in the Black Belt

In each of the interviews, the three leaders were asked to identify the challenges facing their communities. Given their different roles and perspectives, they each identified different weaknesses within their communities. Dr. Mitchell said Selma's status as a symbol can be a weakness, saying, "While everyone comes to Selma once a year to celebrate, nothing has been done to transform it from a symbol to a better place. We don't have all the resources from the state we should have, even though

Selma is one of the highlights of state tourism marketing. When we have the Bridge Crossing Jubilee, every president and vice president (except the Trump administration) has visited Selma since Clinton, but it hasn't brought funds."⁶

Mr. Riggs, in Camden, said the Black Belt struggles with an image problem, recalling Birmingham-based newspapers calling the Black Belt a "third-world country" in the early 2000s.⁷ Riggs argued that while the Black Belt does have extreme poverty, those negative narratives detract from an area that is "rich in culture."⁸ Dr. Smiley, in Perry County, said the main weakness in her community is "attracting and retaining teachers because of how rural it is. If the choice is between [a position in] Tuscaloosa, Montgomery, Jefferson, and Perry, we know which one they're *not* going to choose."⁹ An earlier brief in this series cited the Black Belt's difficulty attracting and retaining certified teachers as a significant factor affecting math and science proficiency, a problem that has only been worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁰

While each offered different perspectives on challenges facing the Black Belt, there were also several common threads across the interviews. Dr. Mitchell and Dr. Smiley both identified a lack of state funding and commitment to the Black Belt as a major challenge, whether in investment in social, human, economic, or physical capital and infrastructure. This includes the ongoing challenge of limited high-speed broadband access throughout the rural Black Belt, which Mr. Riggs and Dr. Smiley both stressed as one of the biggest challenges. Dr. Smiley noted that "broadband would allow additional opportunities for business, industry, and satellite

college campuses, and allow Perry County Schools to expand opportunities for students.”¹¹ A previous edition of the *Black Belt 2022* series, which covered infrastructure in the Black Belt, found that since 2020, high-speed broadband access has expanded from 0% to 9% coverage in Perry County.¹² However, the recent influx of investment in broadband expansion is expected to build on this progress in the coming years.¹³ Furthermore, Dr. Smiley said that “additional state funding would help expand teacher retention and recruitment” by leveling the playing field between more affluent school districts (that have larger tax bases and extra revenue) and school districts like Perry County which “may need more [state] resources.”¹⁴

As the *Black Belt 2022* and *Black Belt 2020* series have highlighted, there are many challenges facing the Black Belt and its leaders. These interviews reveal that it is not necessarily a lack of knowledge on the issues in the Black Belt impeding progress in the region—Dr. Mitchell, Mr. Riggs, and Dr. Smiley are all very familiar with the challenges in their communities—rather, there is a general lack of outside resources and support.

Efforts to Improve

When asked what their organizations were doing to improve their respective communities (or the greater Black Belt region), the three leaders spoke of the numerous community partnerships they’ve formed to take action and address a wide range of issues. At Wallace-Selma, Dr. Mitchell highlighted the work the college is doing with the Center for Nonviolence to write grants that will fund and sponsor nonviolence training with hopes to address “the high Black on Black murder rate in Selma.”¹⁵ Dr. Mitchell

also spoke of a collaboration with Craig Field Airport & Industrial Authority to bring aviation opportunities and industries back to Selma. Wallace-Selma is providing aviation training to prepare the workforce for current and future opportunities in the industry, and last year the college was accepted as an affiliate member of the Federal Aviation Administration's Center of Excellence program.¹⁶ Most recently, a coalition of about five to seven organizations (including Wallace-Selma) put together a proposal to develop physical, human, social, and economic infrastructure and presented it to Vice President Kamala Harris when she visited Selma for the annual Bridge Crossing Jubilee.

In the interview with Mr. Riggs, he spoke extensively on the community development initiatives ATRC is involved with. Within the ten-county service area—comprised of Choctaw, Clarke, Conecuh, Dallas, Marengo, Monroe, Perry, Sumter, Washington, and Wilcox—the Alabama Tombigbee Regional Commission works with the local chambers of commerce and economic development agencies.¹⁷ Mr. Riggs said they encourage these counties to “focus on using the existing features and resources to promote the community and attract visitors” because they may not ever have more than one big industry, but there is an abundance of natural and cultural resources already in the Black Belt.¹⁸

The ATRC also engages in economic development grant writing to create jobs and opportunities through different avenues. Mr. Riggs highlighted a revolving loan program for small business, noting the program distributed over \$10 million in loans to small businesses through the program. Other programs Mr. Riggs emphasized were a rural transportation program that

serves four counties, a Medicaid waiver program to help keep elderly people in their own homes with healthcare, and a recent grant from COVID-related funds to address broadband inadequacy in the ATRC service area of the Black Belt.¹⁹ Mr. Riggs noted that the impact of COVID-19 “has given a lot of opportunities, especially for grant opportunities—there seems to be money everywhere,” for projects ranging from infrastructure improvements to recreation development, and 7 of 10 ATRC counties have received money from COVID funds.²⁰

Like Dr. Mitchell and Mr. Riggs, Dr. Smiley underscored the community partnerships Perry County Schools are engaged in to make a difference for their students and larger community. Sowing Seeds of Hope is one of PCS’ biggest partners, and they previously partnered to provide basic school supplies (e.g., pencils, notebooks) for students. This year, PCS was able to provide school supplies for all its students (about 1,200), so they didn’t have to buy any supplies on their own. Dr. Smiley said that Sowing Seeds of Hope’s “tell me what you need mentality” led to them partnering to provide students with things outside the realm of “normal” school supplies, like earbuds and uniforms.²¹ Sowing Seeds of Hope has an extensive network of connections on its own and has brought other organizations into the partnership, like Sight Savers, which provides free glasses to students in need.²²

Dr. Smiley said that PCS is also utilizing grants, like the 21st Century Grant, to bring in resident artists, technology, and other opportunities to expose students to opportunities they wouldn’t normally have access to. Another partnership Dr. Smiley highlighted is with WCCS to create a welding

program at Robert C. Hatch High School in Uniontown, that they hope can expand to serve students at Francis Marion High School in Marion as well. Dr. Smiley noted that “we provide the space, and Wallace-Selma provides the instructors and the instruments. Without that partnership, we would not have been able to afford this program because we couldn’t afford the teacher.”²³ These partnerships help not only to meet the needs of students, but also to prepare them for the future by exposing them to a wider range of opportunities.

Dr. Mitchell emphasized that “to resolve a problem, you can’t sit in a government office and change a problem—you have to be on the ground.”²⁴ That is exactly what these leaders and their organizations are doing. Through the partnerships they’ve forged, these three leaders are facilitating collaborations that are meeting previously unmet needs in their communities, expanding the horizons for their young people, and changing the narrative of what is possible for the Black Belt.

Strengths and Resources

In addition to asking about their communities’ weaknesses and the ongoing efforts to improve it, the three leaders were also asked to identify their communities’ greatest strengths. Dr. Mitchell, who had identified one of Selma’s weaknesses as its status as a symbol, also was quick to say that “Selma’s strength is its symbol and what it represented to the world for voting and civil rights—and it remains that symbol today.”²⁵ This iconic symbol is a key part of history for Alabama and the nation, and Dr. Mitchell noted that it continues to inspire people: “More young people are getting involved in the community, running for office, bringing creative and

innovative ideas, getting involved in local organizations to promote the city, and growing community collaboration and cohesiveness.”²⁶

Dr. Mitchell also identified his own institution, Wallace-Selma, as one of the greatest resources for the Black Belt, calling it “the beacon of the Black Belt.”²⁷ “Wallace-Selma,” he said, “is bringing opportunities to people who can’t go to Montgomery, Tuscaloosa, or Mobile.”²⁸ WCCS offers GED sites, workforce development training, mobile labs for computer and coding training for K-12 students, and dual enrollment programs for high school students.^{29,30} “Education is one of the greatest transformers of human behavior. And we are going to offer whatever the community needs. We can’t be everything to everyone, but [we can do] things we can do well, that are sustainable, and have a direct impact on the skill level of the workforce, which is why we’ve been successful.”³¹

Mr. Riggs emphasized the quality and character in the Black Belt as one of the region’s greatest strengths, saying “the Black Belt is rich in culture, recreation, fishing, and hunting.”³² He argued that those are things that can be capitalized on to make towns more attractive to outside visitors. One of ATRC’s projects, Black Belt Treasures, was started in 2005 to sell and promote goods and services created in the Black Belt, and Mr. Riggs called it “one of the greatest resources currently capitalizing on the culture and history.”^{33,34} Black Belt Treasures has brought visitors to Camden, Alabama in Wilcox County from all 50 states and over 27 foreign countries since it opened and reflects the collaborative spirit that Mr. Riggs said makes the Black Belt unique.³⁵

Similarly, Dr. Smiley emphasized the strong community support in Perry County as a strength of the community, saying “everyone is very supportive and have the same goal in mind. We’re working towards the betterment of the community, and we know that means bettering the school district.”³⁶ Dr. Smiley also emphasized the thriftiness often found throughout the Black Belt, speaking about how the school district has actively pursued grants to supplement state funding to provide the best opportunities possible for the students, noting that “In Perry County, we have crafted the skill of doing more with less. We make sure that our students are able to be competitive because they are going to leave Perry County, and the goal is to make sure students are able to compete—and they are.”³⁷

On the Ground and In the Dirt

The “on the ground” accounts in this brief corroborate the findings of the *Black Belt 2022* series: that the Black Belt struggles with health/healthcare disparities, K-12 teacher recruitment and retention, high levels of poverty, and inadequate infrastructure, especially broadband. But they also add to the narrative in a critical way. *While Dr. Mitchell, Mr. Riggs, and Dr. Smiley are intimately familiar with the challenges facing their communities, they are hopeful despite those challenges, and are confident in their own abilities to make a difference in the Black Belt.* The overwhelming sentiment in each of the interviews was pride in their communities rooted in a love for the people and the place; Dr. Smiley noted the familial atmosphere in Perry County that breaks down social barriers “because everyone knows each other.”³⁸

Careers in public service are not easy, much less in a place such as the Black Belt that is so wanting for resources, but the leaders interviewed for this brief expressed a strong dedication to serving the region. Dr. Mitchell, who is not a native of the Black Belt, came to Wallace-Selma in 2000 thinking his role as president would be the first of several college presidencies in his career. Originally, he saw Wallace-Selma as a steppingstone to other opportunities, and he planned to “spend a few years here then move to another college or university,” as so many people starting their career in the Black Belt do.³⁹ Instead, Dr. Mitchell was drawn to stay in the Black Belt by a belief in the area and the thought that “I can make a difference in the position I am in.”⁴⁰ As a product of the Civil Rights Movement, Dr. Mitchell also said he has a strong belief that he needs to be a part of the solution to rebuild his community, and that drove him to help places that need the most support from all levels. Dr. Mitchell emphasized that “Selma has nowhere to go but up,” and spoke about how in his position, with the resources of Wallace-Selma, he has done everything he can do to make the community stronger, to rebuild Selma, and rebuild the Black Belt.⁴¹

For Mr. Riggs, who was born and raised in Camden, his career in public service simply began as a job. After about five years, though, “it became a passion just solving the problems that we had with economic development.”⁴² Something Mr. Riggs noted was how the job opened his eyes to the poverty in the area because he attended segregated schools growing up, saying “As I went to work here, my eyes started opening and I started seeing the need in the Black Belt. I wanted to get into economic development because I saw an opportunity to write grants and bring potential job opportunities to increase people’s standards of living in the

Black Belt.”⁴³ Now, Mr. Riggs believes that we need to do a better job showing young people that there are a lot of people who don’t have what they need because so many people’s eyes are closed to the need in their communities.

Dr. Smiley is a native of Perry County, attending the same schools as a child that she now is superintendent over. She said, “I have always loved children and being from a rural community, I wanted to go into a field where I didn’t have to leave home looking for a job, and I wanted to be immersed in a field that I’m passionate about.”⁴⁴ This passion for students evolved over the course of her career as Dr. Smiley eventually took on roles in the school district outside of the classroom. But her commitment to serving students as not changed, and she noted “As I’ve been elevated over the years, I continue to make a difference for the students even if not working directly in a classroom with them. My stance has always been that I’m going to be the voice for the children who don’t have a voice, who don’t have an option, who don’t have the same opportunities. I want to make a difference at a place where it really counts.”⁴⁵

The passion, dedication, and commitment to the Black Belt exhibited by Dr. Mitchell, Mr. Riggs, and Dr. Smiley in these accounts reflects the pride they feel for their communities and a deep affection for the Black Belt. This pride fuels the hope they have for a better future in the Black Belt, and it is evident in each of their track records, as they have worked tirelessly to improve and expand opportunities in the region—even in the face of challenges some would find insurmountable.

Given the relatively short tenures among most leaders throughout the Black Belt (Charts 1 & 2), however, implementing leadership development initiatives—like the proposed Black Belt Leadership Academy of the Education Policy Center’s *Driving Regional Innovation through Vehicle Electrification (DRIVE)* grant—can aid new mayors, superintendents, and other community leaders throughout the region become stronger and more well-rounded.

The various public policy issues addressed across the *Black Belt 2022* and *Black Belt 2020* issue brief series do not have simple solutions. Creating sustainable improvement in the Black Belt will require comprehensive approaches as well as collaboration between public, private, and non-profit entities. The leaders profiled in this brief, who are making great strides to improve their own communities already, clearly understand the power of collaboration for community improvement, and it was a point of emphasis across all three interviews. So often, the focus is on what is going wrong in the Black Belt, but this brief has aimed to spotlight what is going right and the leaders who are on the ground and in the dirt making a difference. To succeed, long-term strategies will need to start with the Black Belt’s greatest assets—it’s people—and give to as many of them as possible 21st Century skills that our global economy needs.

THE EDUCATION POLICY CENTER AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA

Established in 1924, the Education Policy Center is The University of Alabama's oldest center or institute. Through its ongoing nonpartisan research and programs, it seeks to assist the College of Education and the University to fulfill their mission to improve the quality of life for all Alabamians. The EPC promotes expanding access and success, strengthening equity, and advancing economic and community development with special emphasis on telling the story of the Deep South to policymakers in Alabama, the region and nation. In 2020, EPC released the *Black Belt 2020* issue brief series examining policy issues pertinent to the Alabama Black Belt. *Black Belt 2022* builds upon this work and will examine new issues as well as revisit previous issues.

Director: Stephen G. Katsinas, Ph.D.

Associate Director: Nathaniel Bray, Ph.D.

Project Coordinators/Managers: Brandi M. Stacey, Michael S. Malley, Jr., & Stephanie Paul

Senior Fellow & Issue Briefs Editor: James E. "Ed" Davis, PhD (Emeritus, MS State University)

Associate Issue Briefs Editor: Phillip D. Grant, Ph.D. (University of West Georgia)

Senior Fellows: Arleene P. Breaux, Ph.D., James E. "Skip" Dotherow, Ph.D., Phillip D. Grant, Ph.D., Ray Huebschmann, Ph.D., Brian K. Johnson, Ph.D., Vincent A. Lacey, Ph.D., R. Frank Mensel, Ph.D., David Murphy, Ph.D., J. Warner

Fellows: Mark D'Amico, Ph.D., Janice Friedel, Ph.D., Linda Hagedorn, Ph.D., Michael Kennamer, Ph.D., Dustin Smith, Ph.D.

Research Associates: Emily Grace Corley, Noel Keeney, Sean O'Brien, & Garrett Till

***THE CENTER FOR BUSINESS AND ECONOMIC RESEARCH AT
THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA***

The primary roles of the Center for Business and Economic Research (CBER) are in research and service to the State and people of Alabama and the nation at large. The Center, established in 1930, is committed to promoting economic development throughout Alabama. CBER's research spans economic and fiscal policy analysis, business, environmental, economic and workforce development studies. CBER also collects, maintains, analyzes, and releases business and socioeconomic data. CBER clientele include federal, state, and local government agencies, private companies, other academic institutions, financial institutions, individuals, and the media. As a resource for in-depth studies/analysis/forecasts, CBER provides insight and information with the aim of improving the quality of decision-making by our clientele. CBER is an outreach/research center of the Culverhouse College of Business, one of the leading business schools in the country.

Associate Dean for Economic Development & Senior Research Economist: Samuel Addy, Ph.D.

Executive Director: Ahmad Ijaz **Associate Director of Research & Outreach:** Morgan Cordle

Director of Socioeconomic Analysis & Demographics: Nyesha Black, Ph.D.

Assistant Research Economist: Kilungu Nzaku, Ph.D.

Socioeconomic Analyst: Susannah Robichaux **Economic Forecaster:** Stephanie Normanyo

1500 Greensboro Avenue, Suite 1 Box 870221, Tuscaloosa, Alabama 35401 •

Telephone: (205) 348-6191 • <https://cber.culverhouse.ua.edu>

NOTE: The University of Alabama strives to remain neutral on public policy issues. The Education Policy Center may facilitate interviews or share opinions expressed by faculty, staff, students, or other individuals regarding policy matters. However, those opinions do not necessarily reflect the views of the University or its leadership, and do not constitute a statement on behalf of the University.

¹ Barkin, Tom. "Commentary: Small Towns Making It Work." The Daily Yonder, October 1, 2021. <https://dailyyonder.com/small-towns-making-it-work/2021/10/04/>.

² Data compiled by the Education Policy Center, 2022.

³ Ibid., Education Policy Center, 2022.

⁴ Ibid., Education Policy Center, 2022.

⁵ Ibid., Education Policy Center, 2022.

⁶ J. Mitchell, personal communication, April 14, 2022.

⁷ J.C. Riggs, personal communication, April 19, 2022.

⁸ Ibid., Riggs, 2022.

⁹ M. Smiley, personal communication, April 21, 2022.

¹⁰ O'Brien, S., Corley, E.G., Till, G., & Courchesne, E. (2022, March 8). *K-12 STEM Education in Alabama's Black Belt*. The University of Alabama's Education Policy Center. http://edpolicy.ua.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/220308_stem-in-k12-black-belt.pdf.

¹¹ Ibid., Smiley, 2022.

¹² Katsinas, S.G., Corley, E.G., Till, G., O'Brien, S., Bray, N.J. (2022, April 19). *Infrastructure in Alabama's Black Belt*. The University of Alabama's Education Policy Center. http://edpolicy.ua.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/220419_infrastructure-in-black-belt.pdf.

¹³ Ibid., Katsinas, 2022.

¹⁴ Ibid., Smiley, 2022.

¹⁵ Ibid., Mitchell, 2022.

¹⁶ Wallace Community College Selma. (2021, March 18). *Wallace Community College Joins the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) Centers of Excellence Program*. Press release, WCCS. <https://www.wccs.edu/blog/wallace-community-college-joins-the-federal-aviation-administration-faa-centers-of-excellence-program>.

¹⁷ Alabama Tombigbee Regional Commission. (n.d.). *About*. <https://www.atrcregion6.com>.

¹⁸ Ibid., Riggs, 2022.

¹⁹ Alabama Tombigbee Regional Commission. (n.d.). *Rural Transportation Program*. <https://www.atrcregion6.com/rural-transportation-program/>.

²⁰ Ibid., Riggs, 2022.

²¹ Ibid., Smiley, 2022.

²² Sowing Seeds of Hope. (n.d.). *Our Story*. <https://ssohope.org>.

²³ Ibid., Smiley, 2022.

²⁴ Ibid., Mitchell, 2022.

²⁵ Ibid., Mitchell, 2022.

²⁶ Ibid., Mitchell, 2022.

²⁷ Ibid., Mitchell, 2022.

²⁸ Ibid., Mitchell, 2022.

²⁹ Wallace Community College Selma. (n.d.). *Adult Education*.
<https://www.wccs.edu/programs/adult-education>.

³⁰ Wallace Community College Selma. (n.d.). *High School Programs*.
<https://www.wccs.edu/programs/high-school-programs>.

³¹ Ibid., Mitchell, 2022.

³² Ibid., Riggs, 2022.

³³ Black Belt Treasures Cultural Arts Center. (n.d.). *Our History*.
<http://www.blackbelttreasures.com/store/pg/44-History.aspx>.

³⁴ Ibid., Riggs, 2022.

³⁵ Ibid., Black Belt Treasures.

³⁶ Ibid., Smiley, 2022.

³⁷ Ibid., Smiley, 2022.

³⁸ Ibid., Smiley, 2022.

³⁹ Ibid., Mitchell, 2022.

⁴⁰ Ibid., Mitchell, 2022.

⁴¹ Ibid., Mitchell, 2022.

⁴² Ibid., Riggs, 2022.

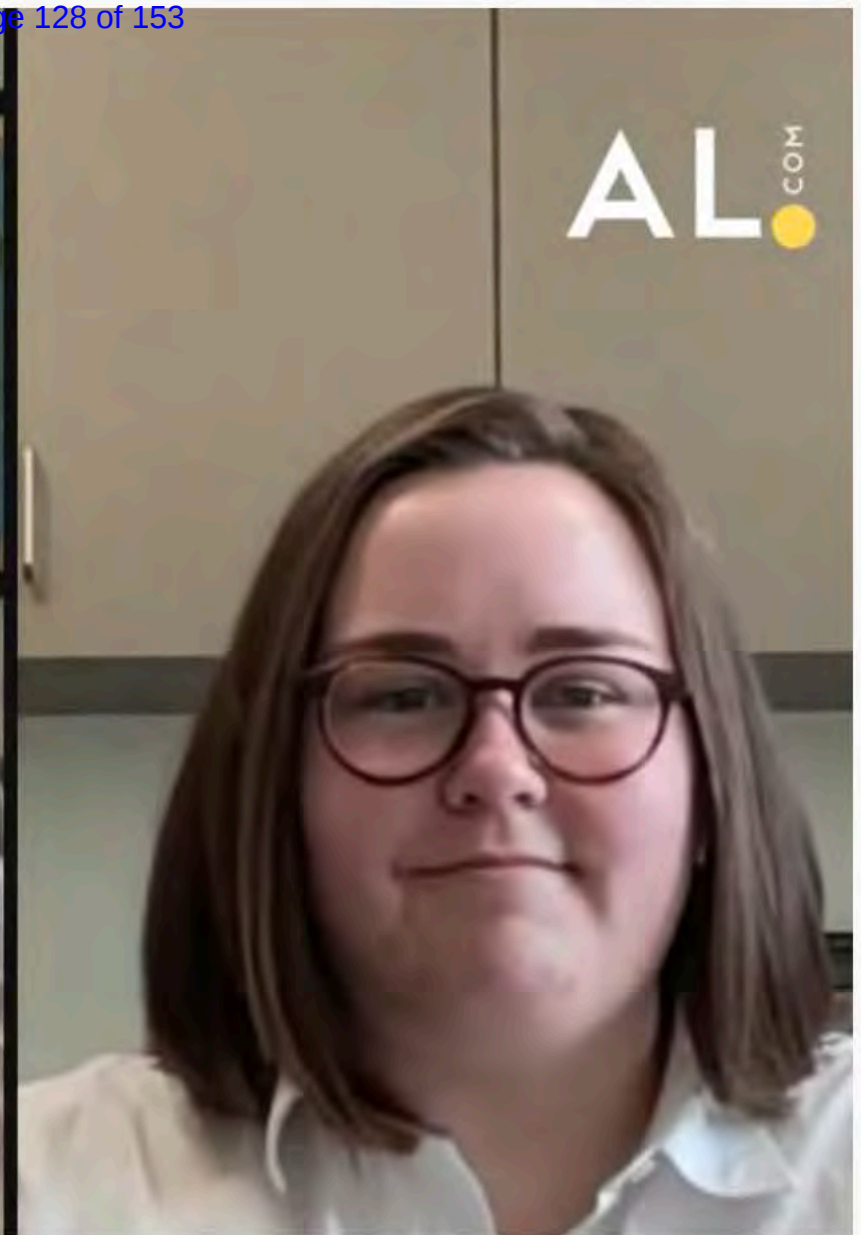
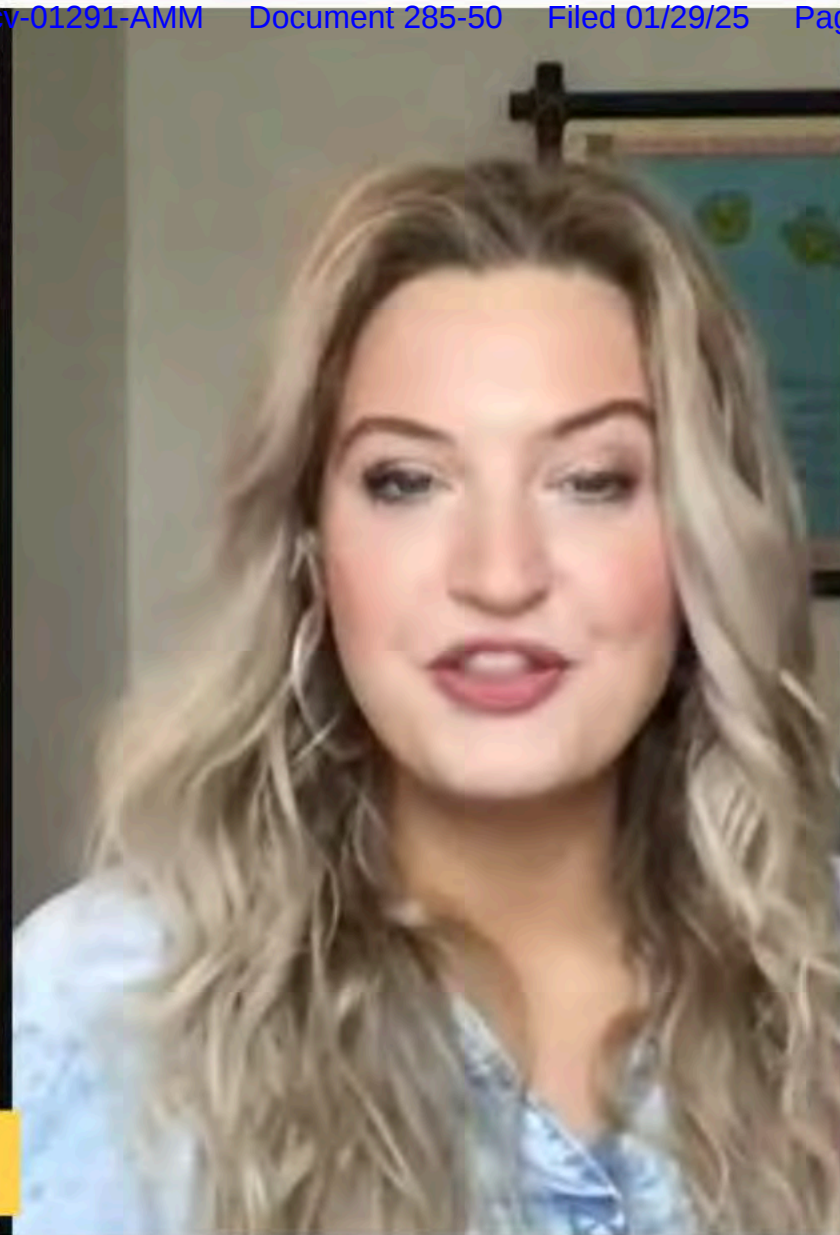
⁴³ Ibid., Riggs, 2022.

⁴⁴ Ibid., Smiley, 2022.

⁴⁵ Ibid., Smiley, 2022.



IVANA'S LUNCH BREAK LIVE




University of Alabama team: Black Belt region hit hardest by COVID-19

COVID-19

Get the latest information from the CDC about COVID-19.

[LEARN MORE](#)

 See more resources on Google [↗](#)

Alabama Black Belt hit hardest hit by COVID: University of Alabama team explains

2022
ELECTIONS

COVID
MYTHS

COVID
TESTING

ABOUT

CONTACT US

NEWSLETTER

PODCAST



ALABAMA POLITICAL REPORTER

COVID-19

GOVERNOR



■ EDUCATION

Alabama Education Policy Center releases report on STEM in Black Belt's K-12 schools

Poverty and teacher shortages are drivers for lagging science and math proficiencies in Black Belt schools, the report finds.

By **EDDIE BURKHALTER** • Published March 8, 2022



(STOCK) IMAGE

here's expected to be a 10 percent increase in the STEM field jobs by 2030, but students in Alabama's Black Belt aren't being prepared to get those science, technology, engineering and math-related jobs nearly as much as students elsewhere in the state, according to a brief released today.

That brief, titled "[K-12 STEM Education in Alabama's Black Belt](#)" and published by the University of Alabama's Education Policy Center, looks at how students in Black Belt schools do in math and science, what impacts those outcomes and ways to improve them.

"Black Belt schools average less than half the math proficiency of non-Black Belt schools, with 11 percent compared to 23 percent," Garrett Till, a student in the Masters of Public Administration program at the University of Alabama who helped research and write the report, told reporters during a briefing Monday.

None of the top 10 math proficient counties are in the Black Belt, but they account for nine of the bottom 10, and 18 of the bottom 20 counties, according to the brief.

TRENDING

Alabama's contract with prison construction company being redacted

Opinion | A state holiday with a purpose

Opinion | Putting the care back in healthcare

Opinion | A Mo Brooks story

Opinion | Katie Britt will fight for Alabama's law enforcement officers, families

Former Alabama woman starts church in wake of anti-trans laws

Ivey campaign announces new legislative endorsements

daily newsletter

email briefing on all things Alabama politics.

YOUR EMAIL

SUBSCRIBE

ADVERTISEMENT

privacy policy. You can unsubscribe at any time.

“Of those 9 poorest performing Black Belt counties, 8 are majority-minority counties, and the bottom 2, Lowndes and Bullock counties, score below 1 percent math proficiency,” the report reads. “Only one of the 25 Black Belt counties, Lamar County, exceeds the state’s math proficiency average of 21.5 percent.”

Black Belt students scored similarly on science proficiency, with 22 percent showing proficiency compared to 36 percent for non-Black Belt schools.

Graduation rates among Black Belt schools was closer in line with those in other areas of the state, researchers found, with an 87 percent graduation rate compared to a 90.6 percent rate elsewhere in the state.

The center defines the Black Belt as consisting of 25 counties in the southern central and western areas, which includes all of Alabama’s majority minority counties.

Authors of the report wrote that a factor affecting STEM education in the Black Belt is the shortage of teachers, and especially highly trained teachers. Black Belt schools arely much more heavily on teachers who have emergency certification, meaning they have a bachelor’s degree but no training in the subject matters they teach.

The report notes that some counties, including Perry and Marengo counties, have approximately 80 percent of their math and science

teachers teaching without full certification.

“Overall, more than 7 percent of all of teachers in Black Belt schools are emergency certified, compared to less than 2 percent among non-Black Belt K-12 teachers,” the report states.

“I’m not shocked by what I’m seeing,” Julie Swann, a UniServ director for the Alabama Education Association, said during the briefing, adding that the teacher shortage is real in Alabama.

“We’re gonna have to see more loan forgiveness, quite honestly, from the federal government to attract people to our rural counties. There’s going to have to be some more money,” Swann said.

Sean O’Brien, the primary author of the brief and another in the Masters of Public Administration program, discussed poverty’s impact on STEM education in the Black Belt.

“Poverty is now considered one of the most prevalent indicators of academic achievement. Poverty across the state the average statewide poverty rate is 15 percent. While Black Belt, the average in the black vote is 22 percent.

The most impoverished counties, including Bullock or Perry, rank worst or near worst in math and science, while low-poverty counties like Shelby and Baldwin have some of the state’s highest proficiency rates, the brief states.

Poor STEM educational outcomes aren’t just a Black Belt problem, however. Less than 25 percent of students statewide meet the benchmarks on the math and science portions of the ACT, O’Brien said.

The lower proficiency scores in the Black Belt may not be the result of school funding, however. Black Belt schools spend approximately \$800 more per pupil than non-Black Belt schools, O'Brien said.

"So it's clearly not just a problem of spending on the school's part. It's poverty in the surrounding community. It's the shortage of teachers," O'Brien said.

Tuesday's report was the second in a series of studies on the Black Belt, slated to be released by the center in the coming weeks. Other studies will focus on educational attainment and community college, poverty and housing market, mean worker commute time and infrastructure, goods versus services GDP and profiles of Black Belt community leaders.

The first report in the series, which looked at [COVID-19 in the Black Belt](#), was published last week.

The "Black Belt 2022" series is a follow up to the center's "Black Belt 2020" series of reports, which looked at First Class Pre-K in the Black Belt, labor force participation, unemployment, internet access, access to healthcare and how to define the Black Belt.

Eddie Burkhalter

a

kh



[Uncategorized](#) [Home](#) [News](#) [Obituaries](#) [Legal Notices](#) [Classifieds](#) [Contact/Advertise](#)

UA’s Education Policy Center says Black Belt students lag in STEM proficiency, Perry at only 5%

March 16, 2022 0 0

Share this post?

[Facebook](#)
[Twitter](#)
[Pinterest](#)

The Education Policy Center at the University of Alabama, released a brief on STEM education in the Black Belt region as a part of Black Belt 2022, a series tracking issues impacting the region. The brief detailed that students in Black Belt counties perform significantly lower in STEM programs and testing, compared to non-Black Belt counties. This analysis comes after Alabama was revealed as one of the lowest ranking in STEM education nationwide.





On average, 11 percent of Black Belt students in K-12 scored well enough on state exams to be deemed ‘proficient’, which determines a student’s preparedness post-graduation. This is less than half the proficiency rate of counties outside the Black Belt. Only 22 percent of Black Belt students gained that status in science, versus 36 percent of students in non-Black Belt counties.

Perry County ranked at just over 5 percent of students in proficiency for science, lower than most other parts of the region. This comes at a disadvantage, as the Bureau of Labor Statistics found that Alabama will see a 10 percent increase in STEM jobs by 2030, a greater increase than in other fields.

Although the Black Belt spends more per student than most counties, funding remains one of many hurdles between academic successes in rural counties. Poverty and a shortage of teachers also remain a significant obstacle. Many Black Belt counties have recently relied on an increase of emergency-certified teachers, with more than 7 percent of educators in the region emergency-certified, five percent higher than other regions in Alabama. A lack of expertise in STEM among these educators also leads to lower test scores among Black Belt students. Lower test scores make accessibility to higher education not only more difficult, but harder to fund when scholarships begin to dissipate. A lack of incentives for educators, combined with low test scores, leaves students ill-prepared for higher education, with 80 percent of STEM teachers in the Black Belt being emergency certified. Ultimately, students could lose access to futures in the areas of STEM as low test scores and lack of scholarships make college out of reach, keeping area students in a cycle of poverty.

Recent policy like the Teaching Excellence and Accountability in Math and Science bill, is one of the few hopes the Black Belt has for incentivizing educators to teach STEM in the region. Student loan forgiveness from the federal government for teachers in low-income areas, is another route to securing more STEM-proficient educators.



2022
ELECTION
S

COVID
MYTHS

COVID
TESTING

AB
OUT

CONTA
CT US

NEWSL
ETTER

POD
CAST



ALABAMA POLITICAL REPORTER

COVID-19

GOVERNOR



■ EDUCATION

Report notes educational attainment gap in Alabama's Black Belt

The report notes that just 6 percent of Black Belt students obtained graduate or professional degrees in 2019, compared to 10 percent statewide.

By **EDDIE BURKHALTER** • Published March 22, 2022



(STOCK) IMAGE



brief on COVID-19 and
Alabama's Black Belt

published Tuesday by the University of Alabama’s Education Policy Center shows that in 2020 nearly half as many students in Alabama’s Black Belt transfer from community colleges to four-year colleges compared to the rest of the state.

Researchers noted that the reduced number of students transferring to four-year colleges was due to a lack of opportunity to do so. It’s one of several findings in the brief that shed light on the educational attainment differences between Black Belt students and others statewide.

The brief, titled “[Educational attainment, community college and transfer in the Black Belt](#),” also found that the Black Belt has the highest population with only a high school education, at 39 percent compared to 31 percent statewide.

The center defines the Black Belt as consisting of 25 counties in the southern central and western areas, which includes all of Alabama’s majority minority counties.

TRENDING

Alabama’s contract with prison construction company being redacted

Opinion | A state holiday with a purpose

Opinion | Putting the care back in healthcare

Opinion | A Mo Brooks story

Opinion | Katie Britt will fight for Alabama’s law enforcement officers, families

Former Alabama woman starts church in wake of anti-trans laws

Ivey campaign announces new legislative endorsements

daily newsletter

Email briefing on all things Alabama politics.

YOUR EMAIL

SUBSCRIBE

privacy policy. You can unsubscribe at any time.

ADVERTISEMENT

“Black Belt counties keep pace with state, nation in some college and associate degrees,” the report reads. “For bachelor’s degrees and higher Black Belt counties fall far behind.”

Just 6 percent of Black Belt students obtained graduate or professional degrees in 2019, compared to 10 percent statewide, and 12 percent in the U.S., the report states.

Montgomery County is the only Black Belt county that exceeds state and national bachelor’s degree attainment, which may be due to the county’s proximity to four-year institutions in Montgomery and nearby Lee county, researchers noted.

ADVERTISEMENT. SCROLL TO CONTINUE READING.

“Over half of the Black Belt counties have levels of bachelor’s degree attainment that are less than half of the U.S. average,” the brief states.

Enrollment in community colleges in the Black Belt have fallen by 25 percent over the last decade, according to the report, while in non-Black Belt counties enrollment has fallen by just 20 percent.

The gap in community college enrollment could be due to a reduction in tuition and fees covered by the federal Pell grants, researchers found, which covered 104 percent of tuition and fees pre-2012 but less than 80 percent now.

The brief concludes with recommendations to expand broadband access in Black Belt counties to knock down barriers to education, as well as the need to educate students on how to complete the FAFSA application to access Pell grants.

Tuesday’s report was the second in a series of studies on the Black Belt, slated to be released by the center in the coming weeks. Other studies will focus on access to STEM in K-12 schools, educational attainment and community college, poverty and housing market, mean worker commute time and infrastructure,

goods versus services GDP and profiles of Black Belt community leaders.

The “Black Belt 2022” series is a follow up to the center’s “Black Belt 2020” series of reports, which looked at [First Class Pre-K in the Black Belt](#), [labor force participation](#), [unemployment](#), [internet access](#), [access to healthcare](#) and [how to define the Black Belt](#). ■

ADVERTISEMENT. SCROLL TO CONTINUE READING.

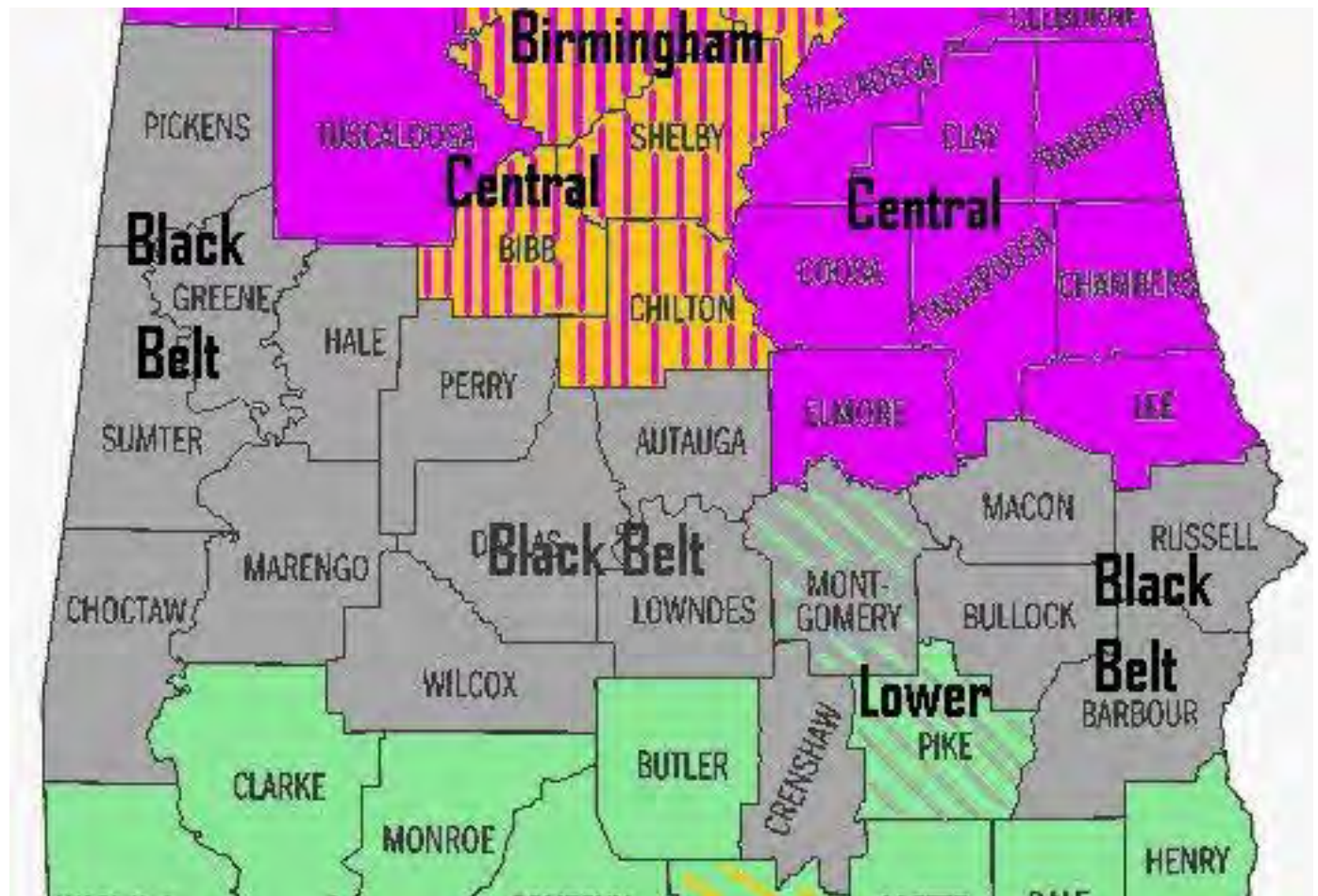
Have a question or a scoop? Send us a tip. We'll track it down.

Eddie Burkhalter

https://selmasun.com/news/study-from-ua-finds-education-disparities-in-black-belt-students/article_9a5e6ada-aae7-11ec-9481-c78b58deb770.html

Study from UA finds education disparities in Black Belt students

Nathan Prewett
Mar 23, 2022



A study by the Education Policy Center at the University of Alabama has shown disparities in the education of Black Belt students compared with the rest of the state.

Part of the study focused on the highest level of educational attainment of people over 25 in 2019. It notes that 20% of the Black Belt population in attended college but did not complete it.

Only 7.5% attained their associate's degree, with 10% attaining their bachelor's.

"While the Black Belt seems to be ahead of the curve by population with high school degrees, and keeps pace with population with some college and associate's degrees, the Black Belt falls behind once bachelor's degrees and higher are considered," it says.

Selma and Marion were no exception. The study mentions that there were fewer private four-year institutions in the western portion, noting the closure of Concordia College in Selma and Judson College in Marion.

"The lack of state supported student aid could not have helped these institutions reach more high school students and adult learners in the sparsely populated western Black Belt," it said.

"This limited the state's ability to maximize progress made in the community college sector."

A chart in the study showed the amount of two-year institution students requesting STARS guides that assist in finding four-year institutions to transfer to. According to the chart, only 10% of Wallace Community College Selma (WCCS) students requested STARS guides.

It also states that WCCS students are underrepresented by more than 60%.

The study, uploaded by Alabama Political Reporter, can be seen here.

Nathan Prewett

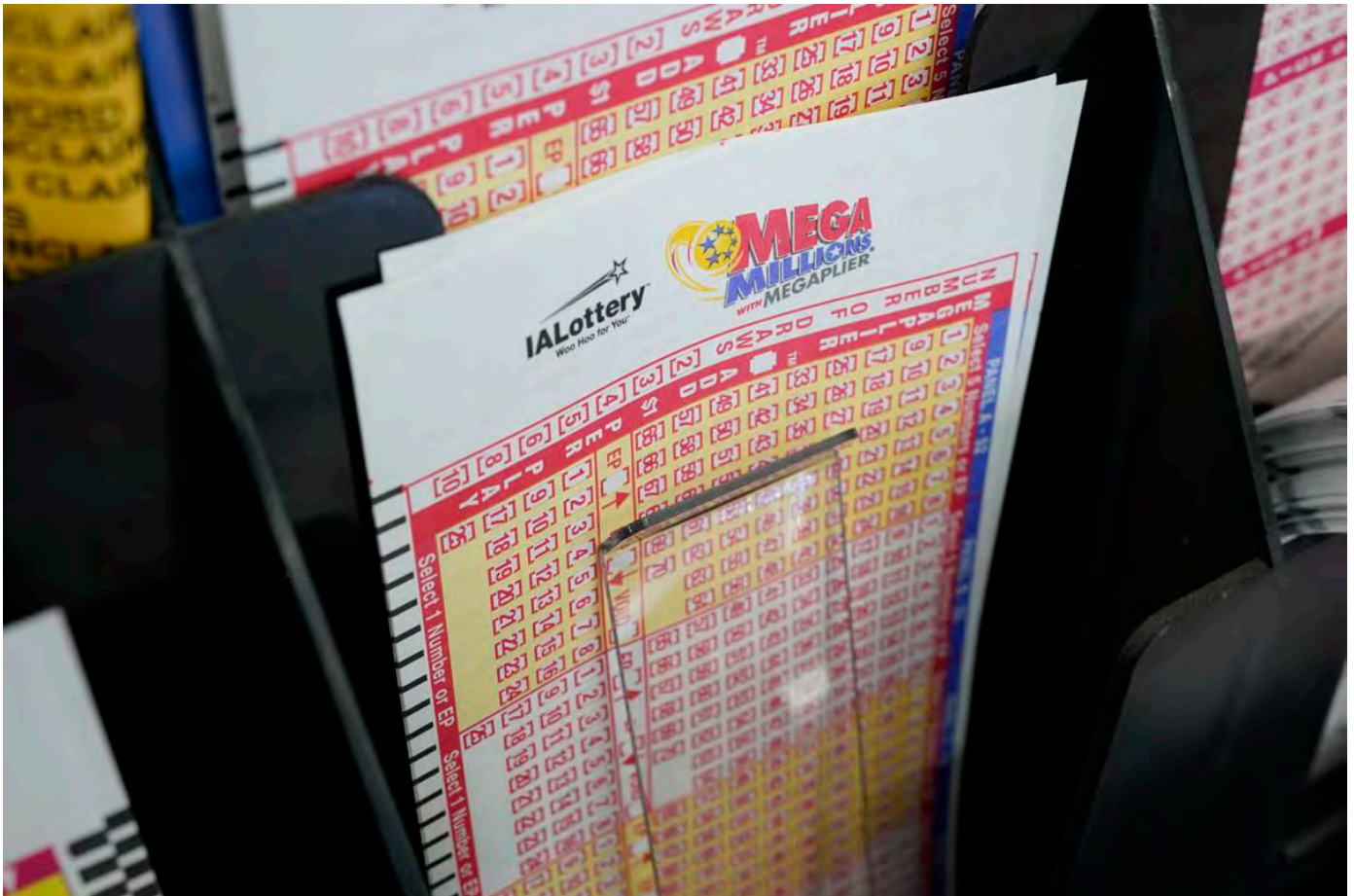
Web editor

<https://www.al.com/news/2022/03/university-of-alabama-researchers-share-plan-to-close-black-belt-education-gap-with-lottery-state-and-regional-news-dotheagle.com>

UA researchers share plan to close Black Belt education gap with lottery

Ramsey Archibald al.com

Mar 22, 2022



Blank forms for the Mega Millions lottery

Charlie Neibergall, AP

Ramsey Archibald al.com

Alabama's Black Belt region suffers from a gap in educational attainment with the rest of the state, and experts at the University of Alabama think a lottery might help fix the problem.

"We favor a scholarship program funded by a lottery," said Dr. Stephen Katsinas, head of the Education Policy Center at the University of Alabama, which hosted a briefing on the subject of educational attainment in the Black Belt - one of the

poorest regions in the nation - on Monday.

“The best longterm economic development strategy for Alabama is to have the best educated workforce it can possibly have. The challenge is, we don’t invest enough. So we get what we pay for,” Katsinas said. “Persistent poverty counties deserve more investment for their students to be able to go onto college.”

The briefing was part of Black Belt 2022, an ongoing series tackling issues facing the 25-county Black Belt region.

“We’ve been proposing a lottery for the past 15 years,” Dr. Ahmad Ijaz, director of the Center for Business & Economic Research at the University of Alabama, said at the briefing. “The state just doesn’t have enough money... The way to do that would be to either increase taxes or bring a lottery or gambling money. That’s up to the state legislature.”

People are also reading...

- 1 **Answer Man: Why was Denton Road widened?**
 - 2 **Who is Mike Durant?**
 - 3 **Houston Academy sweeps Prattville Christian in 3A baseball playoffs**
 - 4 **Why Disney World has own special district in Florida and what happens if it goes away**
-

Residents in the Black Belt are less likely to attend college and less likely to earn a degree than residents in other part of the state. In 2020, more than half of high school graduates in the Black Belt didn’t go on to enroll in a two-year or four-year college. That was slightly higher than the statewide rate, and up from before the pandemic.

And Black Belt residents 25 or older are less likely to be highly educated, with a larger percentage than the rest of the state having a high school or equivalent degree as their highest level of educational attainment.

The lack of higher educational attainment for Black Belt residents is a big issue in a state like Alabama where an estimated 60% of jobs will require some kind of degree by 2025, researchers at the Education Policy Center said.

“All of the data that we’ve seen shows that the jobs of the future are going to require some post-secondary education,” Katsinas said. “90%-plus of all the jobs created since the Great Recession required some post-secondary education.”

The Education Policy Center also showed data on Pell grants and their relationship with college enrollment. The federal government cut Pell grants in 2012, and Alabama enrollment at nearly all community and regional colleges and universities fell in the years following. Pell is Alabama’s form of public student aid, Katsinas said. Basically, he said, if you can provide the money for people to go to college, they’ll go.

That’s where the lottery comes in.

Katsinas and the Education Policy Center called on the Alabama Legislature to create a lottery and use the funds to help pay for scholarships to make community college free for Alabama residents, especially in the Black Belt region, which is home to several community college campuses.

But there are steps outside of a lottery that could help.

One important step is ensuring students in the Black Belt get help filling out the Free Application for Student Aid, known as the FAFSA, which is critical for students looking to earn scholarships to go to college.

Katsinas also mentioned that because of changes to Alabama’s education trust fund more than 10 years ago, funding for the state’s education system is less “boom or bust” than it used to be. For that reason, there is some money that can be spent in Alabama already.

“Now we can start to think about targeted investments in persistent poverty schools,” Katsinas said. “This state has not done much of that. And it’s time for us to start doing some of that.”

2022
ELECTION
S

COVID
MYTHS

COVID
TESTING

AB
OU
T

CONTA
CT US

NEWSL
ETTER

POD
CAS
T



ALABAMA POLITICAL REPORTER

COVID-19

GOVERNOR



■ ECONOMY

Report: All 25 Black Belt counties are among 35 counties with the highest poverty

Alabama's average poverty rate is 17.6 percent. The Black Belt's average is 24 percent.

By **EDDIE BURKHALTER** • Published March 29, 2022



(STOCK) IMAGE

■ **LAST UPDATED** ON MARCH 29, 2022, AT 07:25 PM

The Alabama Black Belt’s historical high poverty rates, low homeownership rates, lower incomes and a lack of economic development are complicated matters that warrant attention, according to a report released today by the University of Alabama’s Education Policy Center.

The brief, titled “[Poverty, Housing, & GDP in Alabama’s Black Belt](#),” begins with a historical look at poverty in the Black Belt, which researchers note has roots in slavery.

“Poverty in the Black Belt is not a new phenomenon, with historical roots tracing back to the post-Civil War Reconstruction, and Jim Crow eras when newly emancipated, formerly enslaved people were left without any money, property, or other resources needed to be successful,” the brief reads. “Instead, Black Codes and Jim Crow laws forced the formerly enslaved into sharecropping arrangements that were essentially an extension of the previous system of chattel slavery.”

The consequences of slavery and sharecropping hindered the Black Belt and its majority Black population following the Civil War by preventing the accumulation and transfer of intergenerational wealth, the report reads, which contributes

TRENDING

Alabama’s contract with prison construction company being redacted

Opinion | A state holiday with a purpose

Opinion | Putting the care back in healthcare

Opinion | A Mo Brooks story

Opinion | Katie Britt will fight for Alabama’s law enforcement officers, families

Former Alabama woman starts church in wake of anti-trans laws

Ivey campaign announces new legislative endorsements

to persistent poverty that continues today.

'daily newsletter

email briefing on all things Alabama politics.

YOUR EMAIL

SUBSCRIBE

privacy policy. You can unsubscribe at any time.

The center defines the Black Belt as consisting of 25 counties in the southern central and western areas, which includes all of Alabama's majority minority counties. All 19 persistent poverty counties statewide are in the Black Belt.

Richard Fording, a political science professor at the University of Alabama and the co-author of "Disciplining the Poor: Neoliberal Paternalism and the Persistent Power of Race" and "[Hard White: The Mainstreaming of Racism in American Politics](#)," told reporters during a briefing on the report Monday that the poverty in the Black Belt's fundamental roots lie in the history of the exploitive economic system that persisted for many decades after Reconstruction.

"Which was based on racial segregation, but importantly, and maybe even primarily, a need to preserve the economic system that

had been previously supported by slavery," Fording said. Economic development was discouraged by that system, and inactively persistent, he said.

Fording explained that a lack of economic development and selective out-migration negatively impacts the Black Belt.

"There's also the intense class and race segregation in the community that creates a dearth of social capital within the community," Fording said. "And makes it even more difficult for communities to come together to solve these problems on their own, even if they could."

Alabama's average poverty rate is 17.6 percent, but the Black Belt's average is 24 percent, with all 25 Black Belt counties being in the top 35 counties with the highest poverty, according to the report.

"Poverty is an even greater challenge for Black people in Alabama. Black or African Americans make up 26.8% of the state's population but make up over 42 percent of people below the poverty level," the report states. "The eleven Majority-Minority counties in Alabama (all located in the Black Belt) have an average poverty rate of 25.3 percent, greater the Black Belt average of 23.8 percent."

Income inequality among white and Black Alabamians is highest in the states Black Belt, researchers wrote in the brief, noting that the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis found that "median Black/White income gaps vary considerably, but in all states White median household income is greater than Black median household income."

"This is true in Alabama, where every \$1 per White household median income, equated to \$0.58 in Black household median income," the brief reads. "The median household income of Majority-Minority counties (\$33,075) is nearly \$7,000 less than that of Majority-White

(\$39,852). Given all the Majority-Minority counties are in the Black Belt, it is unsurprising that the Black Belt suffers worse income and wealth inequality than the rest of the state."

In over half of the Black Belt counties, more than four of every ten residents have subprime credit scores, the report states. Those low scores impact Black Belt residents' ability to access capital and buy homes, researchers found.

In Dallas County 43 percent of the population have a credit score below 660, and just 58 percent live in homes they own or co-own, which is more than 10 percentage points below the state average, and 20 percentage points below the county

with the highest homeownership rate, according to the report.

Despite passages of the federal Fair Housing Act of 1968, which was meant to prohibit discriminatory mortgage lending, selling, and renting practices, 1968—the gap between white and Black homeownership has widened, and today is the largest it’s been in 100 years, the report states.

“George Wallace has not been the governor of Alabama for 35 years, and we have to take responsibility for discussion and propose solutions in our era,” Stephen Katsinas, director of the university’s Education Policy Center, said during the briefing.

Good public policy starts with good data, Katsinas said.

“So we hope that this brief will help facilitate the discussion about these things,” Katsinas said.

Tuesday’s report was the third in a series of studies on the Black Belt, slated to be released by the center in the coming weeks. Other studies focus on access to STEM in K-12 schools, educational attainment and community college, COVID in the Black Belt, poverty and housing market, mean worker commute time and infrastructure, goods versus

services GDP and profiles of Black Belt community leaders.

The “Black Belt 2022” series is a follow up to the center’s “Black Belt 2020” series of reports, which looked at First Class Pre-K in the Black Belt, labor force participation, unemployment, internet access, access to healthcare and how to define the Black Belt.



Eddie Burkhalter

S
C

2022
ELECTIONS

COVID
MYTHS

COVID
TESTING

ABOUT

CONTACT US

NEWSLETTER

PODCAST



COVID-19

GOVERNOR



INFRASTRUCTURE

Report: Alabama's Black Belt infrastructure needs investments, attention

The Education Policy Center report notes Alabama has made strides since 2019 toward addressing infrastructure problems, but more is needed.

By **EDDIE BURKHALTER** • Published April 19, 2022



(STOCK) IMAGE

A

labama's infrastructure —
roads and bridges, sewer
systems and broadband

networks — are in dire need of attention, and in no place is that more so than in the state’s Black Belt counties, according to a report released Tuesday by the University of Alabama’s Education Policy Center.

While Alabama’s decades of infrastructure decline mirrors closely that of the rest of the country, the state has taken strides since 2019 in addressing the critical problems, according to the report, titled “Infrastructure in Alabama’s Black Belt.”

A United Nations investigation into water and sewer problems in Alabama’s Black Belt counties showed systemic problems that resulted in the spread of diseases that had been nearly eradicated, according to the report.

Garrett Till, a student in the Masters of Public Administration program at the University of Alabama who helped research and write the report, said during a briefing on the research Monday that a large share of the black belt consists of unincorporated areas where there’s no city or municipal jurisdiction over water and sewer infrastructure.

TRENDING

Alabama’s contract with prison construction company being redacted

Opinion | A state holiday with a purpose

Opinion | Putting the care back in healthcare

Opinion | A Mo Brooks story

Former Alabama woman starts church in wake of anti-trans laws

Opinion | Katie Britt will fight for Alabama’s law enforcement officers, families

Ivey campaign announces new legislative endorsements

YOUR EMAIL

SUBSCRIBE

privacy policy. You can unsubscribe at any time.

Instead, many of those unincorporated areas are dependent on private systems, which can be expensive to operate, Garrett said.

“Unsurprisingly, the American Society of Civil Engineers’ (ASCE) report card on America’s infrastructure found that Alabama’s water systems are severely underfunded with deteriorating conditions, meriting the grade “D” from ASCE,” the report reads.

“Alabama’s wastewater systems—including treatment systems, conveyance networks, and septic tanks, have an estimated \$3 billion in maintenance and expansion needs over the next 15 years.”

“The report noted that 25 percent of the state’s septic tanks are failing, an issue of particular note for the Black Belt and rural Alabama where septic tank systems are more prevalent,” the report continues. “Swift action is required to address the inadequate water and sewage infrastructure in the Black Belt that undoubtedly contributes to the health problems plaguing the region.”

Sean O’Brien, another student in the Masters of Public Administration program at the University of Alabama and an author of the report, said during the briefing that there have been modest improvements in Alabama’s roads and bridges.

“The ASCE report from 2021 graded Alabama’s roads a C minus, deeming them mediocre,” O’Brien said, which was an improvement from previous years, when the state received a D plus.

“But we do have 70,000 miles of road spanning rural Alabama, 60,000 of which are maintained by county governments, and over half of those highways and roadways are in Black Belt counties,” O’Brien said. “These poor and mediocre roadways cost Alabama drivers \$500 per year.”

Emily Grace Corley, a student in the Masters of Public Administration program at the University of Alabama and an author of the report, said that approximately 40 percent of commuters in the Black Belt have to drive to a workplace outside of their county of residents, typically to larger counties like Tuscaloosa and Montgomery, or even outside of the state, to Georgia and Mississippi.

“But these long commutes have real consequences for the driver, for the workers,” Emily said.

Those long commutes mean increased transportation costs, Corley said, as well as negative health effects that can potentially contribute to health disparities between non-Black Belt and Black Belt counties.

The report noted the importance of the Rebuild Alabama act of 2019, an expansive plan to invest and rebuild the state’s roads and bridges, as well as the Connect Alabama Act of 2021, which laid the groundwork to expand the state’s broadband extensively.

“Because of the Rebuild Alabama we now have a plan for the highway infrastructure. Because of the Connect Alabama Act we have a plan for broadband,” Stephen Katsinas, director of the university’s Education Policy Center, said during the briefing.

Katsinas noted that \$300 million of the \$772 million Alabama is receiving through the American Rescue Plan Act were approved by the state Legislature in the latest special session to go toward broadband.

“I give the state of Alabama high marks for the steps that it’s taken since 2019, to position itself in a proactive way,” Katsinas said.

The report does make policy recommendations, which includes “Continued good state-level administrative leadership is essential” to improve the Black Belt’s critical physical infrastructure investments in wastewater systems, highways, and broadband access.

The state should also continue its ramped-up leadership efforts to improve poor road conditions, the report states, and “Continued and consistent investment” in roads and bridges, particularly in the Black Belt.

The “Black Belt 2022” series is a follow up to the center’s “Black Belt 2020” series of reports, which looked at First Class Pre-K in the Black Belt, labor force participation, unemployment, internet access, access to healthcare and how to define the Black Belt.