

# The Causes of Enduring Poverty in Alabama's Black Belt\*

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### **Introduction**

An understanding of the prospect for Alabama's Black Belt in the future requires that we take stock of the current situation and venture into the realm of futurism - a formidable agenda for a fifteen minutes' talk. Neither the current situation nor the future are transparent, and there is no assurance that even a thorough-going appraisal of either will reveal the secrets we seek. Still, questions about the causes of enduring poverty in Alabama's Black Belt and the future of the region are compelling to those who study and care about the well being of people in the changing countryside. What are the causes of enduring poverty in Alabama's Black Belt? A search for answers is what we must undertake if, working in the footsteps of founders of the applied science of rural sociology, we would seek to contribute to the solution of poverty in the south.

Alabama's Black Belt, the site selected for this study, is an ideal case for research examining the prevalence and severity of poverty in rural southern areas of the United States. The region is identifiable by the concentration of black people that inhabits it. It is a desperately poor place – among the poorest places in the United States. It is home to persistent poverty, poor employment, unemployment, limited education, poor health, single parenthood and heavy dependence on public assistance programs (Zekeri 2003). The residents are, as the President's National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty put it in 1967, "people left behind." In 2004, it is still a place left behind in many respects. The poverty - stricken character of the area contrasts sharply with the affluence of white society. Majority of the counties in the area are among those

counties categorized by the USDA as counties of “persistent poverty.” The intent of the Johnson’s Administration’s Great Society program “to eliminate the paradox of poverty in the midst of plenty”, continues to remain a paradox in the area.

The purpose of this paper is to review the background of the persistent poverty, identify the causes of this persistent, agonizing problem of poverty, and suggest an approach that could be taken to turn the poverty crisis into a new era of community development in Alabama’s black Belt. It is important to understand the causes if the problem is to be solved.

### **Theoretical Approaches to Poverty**

Three general theoretical orientations have prevailed in the study of poverty. The most frequently cited theoretical explanation of poverty is the "culture of poverty" theory advanced by Oscar Lewis. Lewis first suggested this thesis in 1959 in a work entitled "Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty. According to this theoretical perspective, people are poor because of some personal or cultural defects. For example, blacks and the poor in general have been characterized as participating in a "culture of poverty" (Banfield 1970; Glazer and Moynihan 1970; Lewis 1968). People are poor because that is all that they know how to be. In this portrayal of the poor, Lewis says that:

Poverty becomes a dynamic factor which affects participation in the national culture and creates a subculture of its own. One can speak of the culture of the poor; for it has its own modalities and distinctive social and psychological consequences for its member. It seems ... that the culture of poverty cuts across regional, rural-urban, and even national boundaries the remarkable similarities in family structure, the nature of kinship ties, the quality of husband-wife and parent-child relations, time orientations, spending patterns, value systems, and the sense of community found in lower-class settlements in London Puerto Rico, Mexico City slums and Mexican villages, and among lower-class (blacks) in the United states (1959:2).

In other work, Lewis contends that the "culture of poverty" is a "subculture of Western society with its own structure and rationale, a way of life handed on from generation to generation

along family lines ... a culture in the traditional and anthropological sense that it provides human beings a design for living" (1966:19). Implicit in this statement is that a person learns a coherent set of values, attitudes and beliefs (culture) which hinder participation in the larger society. Lewis feels that conditions of poverty generate a set of values and behavior patterns that are unique to the poor and inclusive of such characteristics as fatalistic attitudes towards life, lack of initiative and deferred gratification, strong feelings of alienation, helplessness, dependence, and inferiority.

Lewis's theory is controversial and has been widely debated and adequately critiqued, most notably by Valentine (1968) and Leacock (1971). Critics claim that behavior associated with the poor is the result of poverty, not its cause. They maintain that the culture of poverty explanation is an example of "blaming the victims" for their condition (Valentine 1968; Ryan 1976). One of the serious shortcomings of this culture of poverty is its limited application in the United States (Valentine 1971:215). The culture-of-poverty theory assumes an overly uniform view of culture and values in industrial societies like the United States (Gang, 1972). The poor may differ in some respects, but so do many group in the society. Contrary to this theoretical view, the poor do not constitute a homogenous group because most of the poor are not poor for life or come from generations of poor (Evans, 1981).

The second theoretical framework is the "Situational view of poverty." This theoretical approach views people as poor because of some personal characteristics that makes them less competitive in the labor market. Low educational attainment, primary allegiance to the family rather than the workplace, and inadequate intelligence or motivation are some examples of these characteristics (see Banfield 1970). This theory focuses mainly on social and psychological variables and perceive cultural values of those in poverty much the same as middle-class values, simply modified in practice because of situational stress. Thus, situationalists are critical of cultural theories for failing to consider poverty in its full context, the community (Billings, 1974:321). If the latter were incorporated, Valentine (1968:54-59) avers that so-called pathogenic traits of the poor would also be recognized as healthy and positive aspects, indicative of a creative

adaptation to conditions of deprivation.

Situationists would argue that an understanding of patterned group behavior serves as an important conduit in explaining the response of those in poverty to disadvantaged situations.

Differences between the culture-of-poverty theory and the situational view of poverty may seem trivial, but they are not; they view the causes of poverty in a very different light. For example, the culture-of-poverty theory view the characteristics of the poor as part of the problem; for the situational view of poverty, although the poor may have some differences from the middle class, the differences are not part of the causes of poverty-only a reflection of their situation. And where the culture-of-poverty theory suggests that the poor must be changed if we are to reduce poverty, the situational view suggests that if the situation of poverty is changed, if there are opportunities and jobs, any differing characteristics of the poor will not prevent them from taking advantage of new opportunities.

Both theories do have similarity; they are primarily concerned with the individual characteristics of the poor. The culture-of-poverty theory is concerned with these characteristics because proponents see them as part of the problem of poverty, while the situational view is concerned with these individual characteristics more to show that the culture-of-poverty theory is incorrect.

The third theoretical framework to be examined is the "structure of poverty" argument. This theory challenges the assumption inherent in the "culture of poverty" theory and suggests that poverty is a condition of society, not a consequence of individual characteristics (Easterlin 1987). Thus, a deficient social structure is the basic cause of poverty. Further, the argument holds that "distinctive patterns of social life at the lowest income levels are determined by structural conditions of society beyond the control of low income people, not by socialization in the primary groups committed to a separate cultural design .. the design for living received by the poor through socialization is not significantly distinct from that of the society as a whole, but the actual conditions of the low income life are importantly inconsistent with actualization of this cultural

design" (Valentine 1963). In this approach to poverty, the poor are considered as having limited economic opportunities, either because of present discrimination and labor-market segmentation or because a lower-class background prevented the acquisition of education skills or credentials necessary to operate effectively in the labor market (Gordon et al. 1982). Proponents of this approach cite studies showing that the poor share the general values and aspirations of American Society such as high educational and occupational attainment (Valentine 1968). Society, however, limits the opportunities for some people to break the bonds of poverty.

Structuralists not only ignore the tenet of the culture of poverty, but explicitly adheres to the idea that different social strata share the same cultural values. Furthermore, examples of faults in the social structure that contribute to poverty include: 1) racial discrimination in employment where minority groups have been last hired and first fired and relegated to dead-end jobs; 2) educational opportunities, which are related to employment, are more accessible to upper and middle-class youth than to lower-class youth, and 3) conditions of employment of migrant farm workers are seasonal, uncertain and low paying.

While the cultural, situational and structural explanation of poverty have been presented separately, they are not mutually exclusive. For example, Hassinger (1978:339) asserted "it may lead only to frustration or worse to train and motivate persons for jobs that don't exist; contrariwise it is of little value to open high level positions to blacks and women if qualified people are not available to fill them." Billings (1974:315) contends that 'culture' is responsive to 'situation.' Therefore, the structural and individualistic theories are employed in this paper. The probability of an individual being poor varies from place to place as a function of local opportunity as well as of individual credentials. The extent of poverty in a nation, state, or city is related to the proportion of positions in those localities that provide only poverty-level income. Some of these positions are tied to labor market at low wages, while others are defined in terms of exclusion from the labor market because of shortfall in employment opportunity. The structural differences and differences in individual attributes both explain poverty in an area.

A useful general approach to this issue is to recognize the theoretical perspectives on poverty. The causes of enduring poverty might be said to differ depending on which perspective is of interest.

## **REASONS FOR ENDURING POVERTY**

### **1. RACE-High Concentration of African Americans**

The Black Belt has two major forms of poverty, one based on economic differences and the other on ascribed characteristics such as race, age, and gender. In the Black Belt, these two forms of poverty converge with staggering results (see Table 1). Many communities in the Black Belt are predominantly black and the blacks in these counties are concentrated in the least favorable positions. The literature on poverty extending back to the 1960s has generally pointed out that poverty and race are entangled in the United States. For example, poverty and race, Stringfellow (1966:143) contended, are profoundly entangled in America... poverty remains most stubborn where it is associated with those who are not white... notably ... (Blacks)." This is true in the five Black Belt counties that I have been studying. The Alabama's Black Belt has the highest poverty rates because it has the largest concentrations of African Americans. There is evidence that the growth of industry has bypassed the Black Belt because of its large black population (c.f. Falk 1982:100).

In Alabama's Black Belt Counties one will find residence (rural), race (large African American population), and region (the South) coalescing and giving rise to poverty.

The pervasiveness of high poverty in the Black Belt is an example of a faulty social structure. From slavery to sharecropping, to displaced agricultural workers, economic opportunities have been systematically curtailed for blacks in the area. In addition, discrimination exists in other elements of the opportunity structure such as education and health services. Many social scientists

(Jensen and Tienda 1989; Lichter 1989; Summers et al. 1990;1991) supported this structural argument. Perlman (1976:68-72) argued that "blacks are trapped in a vicious circle of institutionalized racism as well as overt discrimination that exacerbates the difficulty of avoiding poverty."

## **2. Family Structure-High Concentration of Female-Headed Households and Single Parents**

Apart from the racial aspects of poverty, prior research has documented high poverty rates among women and children living in female-headed, single-parent families (Goldberg and Kremen 1990; Eggebeen and Lichter 1991; Lichter and Eggebeen 1993; Lichter and Jensen 2001; Snyder and McLaughlin 2004). Female-headed households are prevalent in Alabama's Black Belt areas (see Table 1). Increase in female-headed families is an important correlate of enduring poverty in Alabama's Black Belt. Women who are heads of families typically have many handicaps when it comes to securing an adequate living. For example, the presence of minor children in the home may make it extremely difficult for the mothers to work outside the home. The impoverishment of female-headed families occur mainly because of a combination of labor market discrimination and a special imperative to rear children. This pattern persists across race and ethnic groups in Alabama's Black Belt Counties.

## **3. Lack of Jobs and Income**

Other factors that contribute to the enduring poverty in the Alabama's Black Belt are the increased in costs per person of providing services, lack of job opportunities creating unemployment, lower wage in rural areas and the out-migration of companies to areas where they can obtain cheap labor. These factors contribute to increasing percentages of Alabama's

Black Belt poor because they restrict opportunities for individuals to find employment with good pay and provide for themselves.

### **3. Business Closings**

Job provides an important route to economic self-sufficiency. Unemployment has followed closely on the heels of the deterioration of Alabama's Black Belt economy, pushing many residents and their children into poverty. Along with the decline of the farm sector, many other rural based industries—timber, oil, gas, mining (which have been the backbone of the rural economy) have been adversely affected by national and global economic changes in the 1980s and 1990s. This economic upheaval has resulted in increased poverty. A concentration of low-skilled jobs within a single industry, coupled with geographic isolation, makes Alabama's Black Belt areas more susceptible to economic downswing and poverty. The jobs available in the area are often unstable, offer few benefits and pay low wages. Residents of these counties are concentrated in the least favorable positions.

There is also enduring poverty in Alabama's Black Belt because of business closings and firms that are reluctant to locate in areas with large number of African Americans (See Walker 1977). Business closings are common in these areas and operate as significant barriers to employment. Alabama's Black Belt residents face higher rates of unemployment and underemployment. Jobs that pay a living wage are less available because the area is likely to find favor only with employers who are seeking a low wage and relatively unskilled pool of labor. The lack of desirable employment alternatives in Alabama's Black Belt forces the better educated residents to migrate to urban areas where their skills and abilities can be better

compensated.

## **5. Age – High Concentration of Children and the Elderly**

The aging population structure of Alabama's Black Belt areas is on the increase and this has implications for the proportion of poverty. Out-migration of young ones has increased steadily since 1980 and there is over representation of the elderly. Persons sixty—five years of age and older have the highest incidence of poverty of all age groups in the population. Poverty among Alabama's Black Belt elderly is exacerbated by the problems associated with aging process such as inadequacy of welfare, social security and other public assistance on which the rural elderly are heavily dependent.

It is also widely recognized that poverty among children has grown dramatically in the past decades (Duncan 1991; Eggebeen 1991), but it is not widely noted that this increase has hit Alabama's Black Belt children disproportionately and that it is occurring most often among families where both the mother and father are working or seeking work. Among African American children under six in female-headed households, 80 percent were in poverty in 2000.

## **6. Human Capital Endowment**

In Alabama's Black Belt, functional illiteracy rates are higher than in the urban south. High school and college completion rates are very low (See Table 1). Data on educational attainment are presented in Table 1. These data show that the percentage of residents who graduated from college education is substantially low. To employers seeking qualified workers, Black Belt residents would be judged to functionally illiterate and suitable for only low-skill, marginal employment. Residents have limited educational and job training opportunities. The area has few physicians per capita of the urban south. This is true for both whites and blacks. Given the historical pattern of racial differences in the region, one can hypothesize that rural African American communities are even

more disadvantaged in both human capital and earnings. One consequence of living in a poor area is that local funds for schooling are more limited.

### **7. Social Cost of Space –Physical Isolation**

Sparsity of settlement and distance from the center of economic development and power produced a rural condition that sociologist/economists Carl Kraenzel (1980) called “the social cost of space.” The cost of rural space has three dimensions. The *friction of distance* inflates rural costs of goods and services and depresses Black Belt’s access to needed resources. The political economy of space makes Alabama’s Black Belt vulnerable to exploitation in the system of capitalism. The isolation of space impedes Alabama’s Black Belt mobilization for self help. The consequences are glaring deficits in jobs and income, services, and equality in Alabama’s Black Belt. Such deficits give direct evidence of problems or rural well-being, and their persistence suggests an even more serious underlying problem of poverty. Isolation is contributing to enduring poverty in Alabama’s Black Belt.

### **8. Globalization: Dependency on Outside Profit-Seeking Firms**

The tendency for profit-seeking firms to move into and out of Alabama’s Black Belt, taking many of the benefits of development with them leaving many of the costs of development to be endured by the community have widespread effects on well-being of residents. As the investments come and go, so do the jobs and incomes of Black Belt workers. Local economic instability results from concentration of a single sector of a production process in any community, a common practice among multi-site firms in Alabama’s Black Belt. Dependency on increasingly mobile outside investments has contributed to Alabama's Black Belt vulnerability to shifts and cycles in the larger economy. Dependency also increases the probability that profits will leave the community quickly because decisions by firms that affect Alabama’s Black Belt well-being often are made with little

apparent regard for the well-being of residents. The goal of decision-making in large multi-site firms in the Black Belt typically is to maximize profits and this often means hastening the flow of capital from operations the Black Belt and converting Black Belt resources as quickly and efficiently as possible into profits for the benefit of investors who rarely reside in the Black Belt.

### **9. Poor Public Goods and Services**

Many rural communities in Alabama's Black Belt lack some if not all of the services (health, education, recreation, transportation, safety, justice, water, wastewater treatment, solid waste disposal, energy, telecommunications, fire safety, and others) people have come to rely upon for meeting their daily needs. In Alabama's Black Belt, this has two severe effects. First, it means that rural community well-being is depressed by problems of access to vital resources; and, second, it means that the local area is not a complete community. Both of these play a role in enduring poverty.

### **Conclusion**

Against this background of problems, I want to close with some comments about the future, particularly about efforts needed to build a better future – a truly “better Black Belt” – than the present. It seems to me that efforts are needed at three levels, namely at the level of federal and state government, at the local level and in science and education. Federal and state

efforts are needed to articulate and implement rural development as a policy goal in the Black Belt and to address structural sources of the Black Belt problems. Most of the Black Belt problems have their origins in the larger society and therefore beyond local control. Actors in the larger society, such as state and federal governments have to clear the way for local efforts to be relevant to the solutions of poverty problems. At the local level, efforts are needed to build local capacity for collective action and self-help. Increasing the ability of local people to make and implement decisions about their communities is the key to rural development, in my opinion. In science and education there is a continuing need to provide assistance to those who act in the local society and in the larger society in response to the Black Belt problems.

What is needed in research, from my viewpoint, is to focus on rural deficits in the fundamental requirements for social well-being, namely jobs and income, services, equality, and community. Jobs, income and services are needed to meet needs in Alabama's Black Belt but also to remove barriers to community development. In promoting these at whatever levels, emphasis should be put first on the needs of people and those process by which people gain the skill and knowledge but also the power and opportunity to build their own future. With opportunities and support, the people in Alabama's Black Belt can be the most effective advocates for and agents of their own well-being.

The main idea is to mount a real national effort to attack poverty in Alabama's Black Belt where the rural poor are disproportionately concentrated and to do so by getting the community into the act. Building the capacity of Alabama's Black Belt residents to work together to solve local problems is the key to solving the poverty problems. Figuring out how to build local capacity is the central challenge of the decade and will be the central challenge of the 21<sup>st</sup>

century for rural sociology. The problems facing Alabama's Black Belt are real ones, not theoretical ones. They call for real solutions, and rural sociology has an important role to play in identifying and applying those solutions.

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