

# Rural America

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This issue of *Rural America* focuses on recent economic and population trends in the South. The region's rapid economic growth in the latter half of the 20th century brought a new level of prosperity to most of its residents. The South has become predominantly urban since World War II, with its urban population much like the rest of the Nation in terms of jobs, lifestyles, and level of affluence. The story of the rural South is also one of convergence and economic progress, but it retains its own unique set of possibilities and challenges rooted in its often difficult past. Today, the prospects of the rural South, with 43 percent of the Nation's rural population, are tightly linked with those for rural America as a whole.

The rural South did well during the 1990's, but many of the old problems—high poverty rates, low education levels, and low earnings—persist in many rural Southern counties. Robert Gibbs traces the connections between Southern well-being and education, and shows that rapid population and job growth by themselves do not automatically raise low incomes.

Moreover, growth follows well-established channels, as John Cromartie demonstrates. His analysis of rural Southern migration since the 1970's finds that, despite the surge of migrants into the South, many rural counties gain migrants only in the best of times. These counties tend to have fewer natural amenities or are more remote from urban centers. The resulting uneven growth causes problems in both fast- and slow-growing areas. Although rural policymakers have focused mostly on the poverty and unemployment of slow-growth areas in the South, the very success of amenity-rich counties has unleashed new challenges such as sprawl, congestion, and environmental degradation.

One of the longstanding drawing cards of the rural South was its relative abundance of low-cost labor. As late as the 1970's, prospective employers, especially in manufacturing, overlooked the paucity of skills and education because wage rates were commensurately low. Since then, globalization opened lower cost labor markets to U.S. manufacturing overseas, while domestic production shifted toward the use of high-skill labor. David McGranahan shows that counties with low average education levels have fared poorly during this transformation, and argues that only by emphasizing education and skills training will policymakers solve the fundamental economic dilemma of a low-skill workforce in a high-skill economy.

Lionel Beaulieu takes a closer look at the current state of educational attainment in the rural South. He observes that long-term improvements in rural education will come not from a narrow focus on immediate school needs, but rather from the development of local leadership capacity and a recognition of the connections between education and skills training on the one hand, and local economic opportunity on the other.

Relatively few rural Southern counties with persistently high poverty rates have shown significant improvement in recent years. Linda Ghelfi identifies 44 counties that have slipped below the 20-percent threshold, but 110 more whose poverty rates climbed above it between 1990 and 1995. Compared with counties that may have lost persistent-poverty status in the 1990's, recently poor counties had less intercounty commuting and slower population and earnings growth. They were more likely to be mining-dependent and less likely to be manufacturing-dependent.

Carolyn Rogers documents continuing high poverty rates among rural Southern children, about twice the national average poverty rate as of 1998. Children in minority households, living with a single mother, or whose parents have limited education and unstable employment histories are most at risk.

The passage of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) promised a new approach to alleviating poverty among families and communities. Mark Henry and Willis Lewis's analysis finds that welfare reform has proven highly successful at reducing the number of welfare recipients in most Southern States. Yet many counties with the largest welfare caseloads can only offer very low wages and limited opportunities to move up, making it difficult for recipients to make the transition to family-sustaining employment in the formal labor market. In these areas especially, long-term work supports, such as child care and transportation, are necessary ingredients in the mix of policies addressing economic change in the rural South.

Robert Gibbs