

Issue Brief № 66

Off the Beaten Path: Roadways and Commuting in Alabama's Black Belt

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“Since the Rebuild Alabama Act was enacted, new road and bridge projects have broken ground in all of our 67 counties... Another major Rebuild Alabama project is the west Alabama corridor, which involves the widening of U.S. 43 from Tuscaloosa to Mobile. This is a vital road project to open up economic development along Alabama’s western border while also improving the lives of many thousands of Black Belt residents.”

- Governor Ivey on the West Alabama corridor
project at 2023 State of the State luncheon¹

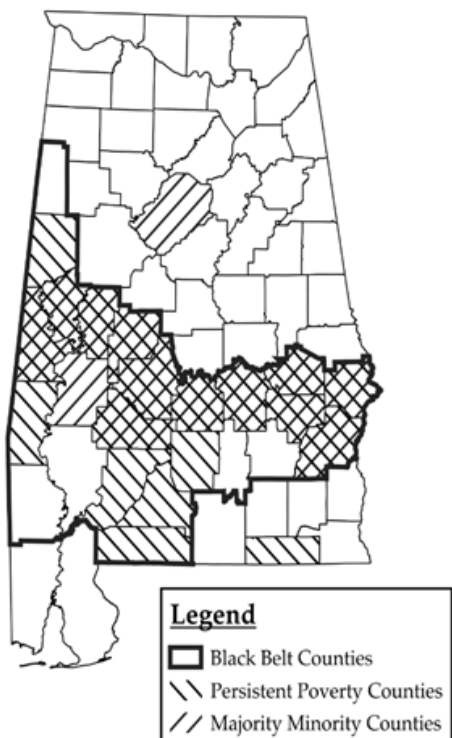
Infrastructure has evolved substantially in the last century, expanding from sewage systems and roadways accommodating 117 million Americans and their 22 million cars (~1 for every 5 citizens) to accommodating triple that population and over one-hundred times the amount of cars (~4 cars for every 5 people), power grids lighting and warming homes across the U.S., and phone and internet services that connect the world. These various facets of what defines modern infrastructure shape opportunities everywhere, but nowhere is it more vital than in rural America. This brief will primarily focus on the state of and implications for the roadways in Alabama. As this and our previous brief on broadband have shown, research on infrastructure as a whole is no small feat. We aim to give each facet the attention it deserves and resume this conversation on the state of wastewater in a future brief. Roads determine whether residents can reach jobs, schools, and health care; water systems affect whether communities can maintain basic public health; and transportation networks influence whether businesses thrive. Nowhere in Alabama are these connections more visible than in the state’s Black Belt, a historically rural region marked by persistent poverty, aging public works, and limited local economic opportunities. For decades, underinvestment in highways, bridges, and utility systems has constrained economic mobility and reinforced geographic isolation, making infrastructure not simply a matter of convenience, but of equity and access.

In recent years, the state has undertaken renewed efforts to address these challenges through dedicated transportation funding mechanisms such as the Rebuild Alabama Act, alongside major corridor projects including the West Alabama Highway. These

investments signal recognition that rural connectivity is critical to statewide growth. Yet debates over how funds are allocated, whether toward heavily traveled interstates like I-65 or toward rural corridors serving regions like the Black Belt, reveal ongoing tensions about whose infrastructure needs should take priority. At the same time, commuting and travel-time data suggest that Black Belt residents rely heavily on regional highways to access employment, with a disproportionate share traveling long distances each day, underscoring the essential role of safe and efficient transportation networks.

Infrastructure in Alabama's Black Belt in 2025 examines the state of infrastructure in Alabama's Black Belt by analyzing recent funding initiatives, legislation, and transportation outcomes alongside indicators of daily access, including commuting patterns. In partnership with the University of Alabama's Center for Business and Economic Research, the Education Policy Center, UA's oldest center or institute, has published 7 reports on Education & Workforce Development, 6 on Economic Development, Poverty, & Employment, 3 on Healthcare, and 4 on Infrastructure & Community Capacity. We draw from this extensive research, building on our 2022 brief, "*Infrastructure in Alabama's Black Belt*," to examine and analyze the state of infrastructure within this brief.²

Figure 1: Alabama's Black Belt



Data analyzed by the Education Policy Center at the University of Alabama, 2025

About Alabama's Black Belt

That the 24 counties of Alabama's Black Belt (see Figure 1) hosts 13 of the state's 14 majority-minority counties does not explain the name. "Black Belt" describes the black soil of Alabama, where slaves were imported to grow cotton.

Key civil rights history events happened here, including the 381-day Montgomery Bus Boycott that propelled Martin Luther King, Jr., to prominence, and the founding of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The Bloody Sunday police riots at the Edmund Pettus Bridge, and the Selma-to-Montgomery march, which preceded the Voting Rights Act of 1965, happened here. The Black Belt is characterized by searing poverty. All 24 counties were in persistent poverty in 1970; 50 years later, in 2020, 19 still were. In 2023, the Black Belt's labor force participation rate was 52%, compared to national and state rates of 63% and 57%, respectively. The rates of single-parent households in 2023 in Dallas, Perry, and Wilcox counties were 54, 72, and 59 percent, respectively. Selma's population was ~28,000 in 1960 and ~17,000 in 2025.* The Black Belt's persistent poverty is found in 180 counties and parishes across Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, & South Carolina.

Footnote: * Katsinas, S.G., Bray, N.J., Till, G.A., Jacks, K.R., Keeney, N.E., and Ogunniran, M.O. (2023, October) *Alabama's Prime Age Employment Gap: Addressing Persistent Poverty in the Black Belt*, Issue Brief No. 61, Tuscaloosa, AL: Education Policy Center and the Center for Business and Economic Research

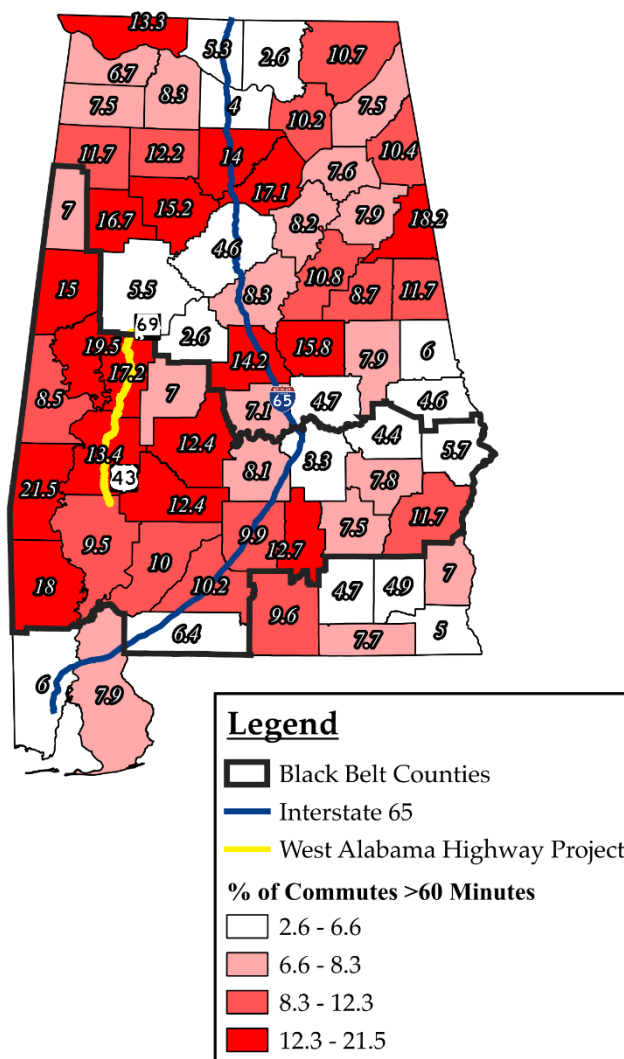
The West Alabama Corridor Project

Corridor upgrades like the West Alabama Highway are often justified in terms of safety and economic development, especially for rural counties seeking industrial recruitment, faster freight movement, and improved access to interstate nodes. When routes remain two-lane, narrow, or structurally deficient, the costs fall disproportionately on rural residents through longer travel times, higher vehicle wear, and increased crash risk. Local leadership in West Alabama maintains that the West Alabama highway project will lead to economic growth in their communities. Speaking to the press, Demopolis Mayor Woody Collins said of the project “We are excited to support this effort and look forward to seeing the long-term, positive impact this highway will have on our region.”³

Similarly, State Senate Minority Leader Bobby Singleton (D-Greensboro) noted that “The West Alabama Highway will connect communities, attract business opportunities, provide safer travel, and create jobs.”⁴

However, the long-term viability of the project remains a point of contention. Critics like House Pro-Tem Chris Pringle (R-Mobile) have raised alarms over the lack of federal matching funds. Pringle contends that the next administration will likely “shut that project down,” asserting that the continuous draw on the state’s 2019 gas tax revenue is unsustainable for the state’s broader infrastructure budget.⁵

Figure 2. Major Alabama Roadway Projects and Commuters > 60 Minutes



"Go Wide I-65"

In addition to broader debates over how transportation funding is allocated, senior state leaders have actively contested the prioritization of highway projects, often reflecting an urban–rural split in infrastructure preferences. Lieutenant Governor Will Ainsworth, for example, has publicly criticized the use of state funds to back large rural corridor projects like the West Alabama Corridor. Ainsworth has described this plan as “the biggest abuse of taxpayer funding in Alabama history,” arguing that the project lacks sufficient federal matching funds and diverts state bonding capacity from other needs.⁶ Instead, Ainsworth has made the expansion of Interstate 65, a major north–south interstate that carries heavy traffic through Birmingham, Montgomery, and Mobile, a central focus of his infrastructure agenda. He actively promotes widening I-65 to six lanes statewide, asserting that it would reduce congestion, boost economic development, and provide greater traffic-flow efficiency for the largest number of Alabamians. This position has been articulated in public remarks, social media posts, and in broader legislative advocacy such as the “Go Wide I-65” campaign, which emphasizes interstate expansion over reallocating large amounts of state funds to rural corridor projects.^{iv}

Investments and Fundings

Over the past decade, Alabama’s infrastructure strategy has increasingly relied on dedicated revenue streams and targeted programs to address long-standing transportation needs, particularly in rural regions where limited local tax bases make major road and bridge upgrades difficult to fund. A central pillar of this strategy is the Rebuild Alabama Act, signed in March 2019, which increased state gasoline and diesel excise taxes beginning September and a long-term framework for transportation revenue.⁷ Rebuild Alabama created the Alabama Transportation and Rehabilitation Improvement Program-II (ATRIP-II) to fund local roadway projects across the state, using Rebuild’s gas tax revenue. The Governor’s office notes that the Act requires ATRIP-II to be an annual program setting aside a minimum of \$30 million from the Alabama Department of Transportation’s (ALDOT).⁸ This investment is especially crucial for the Black Belt because many counties face a double bind: high infrastructure needs and low fiscal capacity to fund large-scale repairs and safety improvements without state support.

A signature example of how Rebuild Alabama-era funding is being directed into major corridor upgrades is the West Alabama Highway, highlighted in Figure 2. This project is a multi-segment effort to widen U.S. 43 and SR-69 toward a continuous four-lane

divided corridor connecting the Mobile area to Tuscaloosa through rural counties. Project documents and official descriptions emphasize that the corridor adds capacity, improves safety, and strengthens connectivity for communities that have historically lacked four-lane access to the interstate system.⁹ Framing this investment as both overdue and transformative, Kay Ivey has repeatedly linked Rebuild Alabama funding to a promise of safer, stronger, and more connected communities, stating in a 2025 announcement: “Through the Rebuild Alabama Act, we are delivering on that promise to make meaningful investments in local roads and bridges across the state.”¹⁰ While statewide in scope, these investments, shown in Figure 3, have particular significance in the Black Belt, where infrastructure conditions and historical underinvestment have produced heightened barriers to economic mobility, health access, and basic services. Recently, Governor Ivey announced more than \$76 million of Rebuild Alabama funding for road and bridge projects, several of which are in the Black Belt region, as shown in Figure 3.¹¹

County	City	Project Description	Annual Grant Award	Local Funds	Total
Bullock	Union Springs	0.695 mile resurfacing project	\$250,000.00	\$0.00	\$250,000.00
Choctaw	Butler	0.64 mile resurfacing project	\$250,000.00	\$0.00	\$250,000.00
Crenshaw	Glenwood	0.91 mile resurfacing project	\$250,000.00	\$35,000.00	\$285,000.00
Hale		4.5 miles resurfacing and widening project	\$350,000.00	\$173,861.46	\$523,861.46
Marengo	Sweet Water	1.06 mile resurfacing project	\$250,000.00	\$0.00	\$250,000.00

Table: Data Analyzed by The Education Policy Center at the University of Alabama, 2026 • Source: Alabama Department of Transportation News • Created with Datawrapper

Commuter Data

Transportation infrastructure is not just a “roads” issue; it is a daily access system that determines whether residents can reliably reach jobs, schools, medical care, and essential services. Commuting patterns provide a measurable way to evaluate how dependent a region is on cross-county travel, and therefore on the safety, reliability, and capacity of the highway network.

The average percentage of workers who worked outside their county of residence, seen in Figure 4, shows that Black Belt counties remain dependent on regional travel for employment; combined with Figures 2 & 5, it shows that these commutes can be taxing on the residents, their vehicles, and roadways. In 2023, the weighted Black Belt average was 20.85%, compared to 23.06% for non-Black Belt counties.¹² While slightly lower than non-Black Belt Alabama, this still reflects that roughly one in five Black Belt workers must leave their home county for employment. Figure 4 highlights the almost even layout of cross-county commuting rates during 2023.

This has two major implications:

1. A significant share of Black Belt workers rely on cross-county travel. At least one in five workers depend on reliable highways to access employment. In rural regions where alternative routes are limited and public transit is scarce; transportation reliability becomes an economic necessity. Road deterioration, long travel distances, and limited redundancy can increase costs and reduce job stability for already vulnerable households.
2. The Black Belt’s commuting dependence is similar to non-Black Belt Alabama, but the infrastructure context differs. In many non-Black Belt areas, higher cross-county commuting often occurs alongside stronger highway connectivity and more robust local infrastructure investment. In the Black Belt, similar commuting rates imply a mismatch: comparable travel demand, but frequently fewer high-capacity routes, fewer safety upgrades, and fewer redundant connections when corridors fail.

In short, commuting data suggests that Black Belt infrastructure functions as a regional lifeline, linking residents to employment centers beyond county borders. Therefore, evaluating infrastructure in the Black Belt should focus not only on pavement conditions but also on whether corridors provide safe, efficient access to the job markets that residents already rely upon.

Black Belt counties are in black.

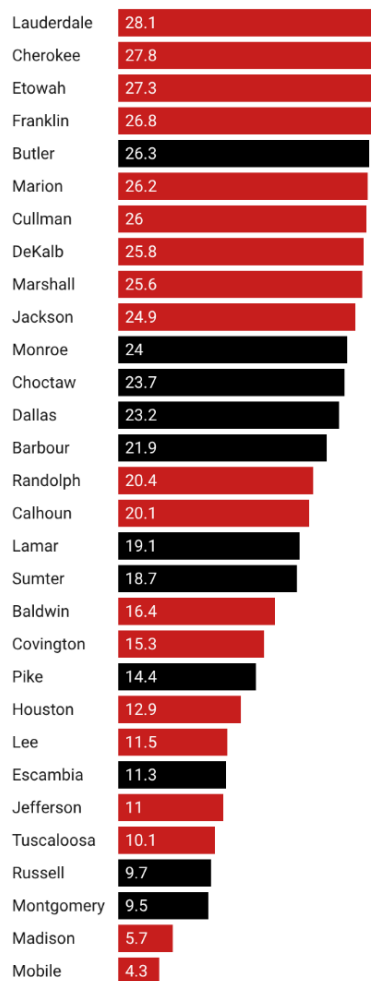
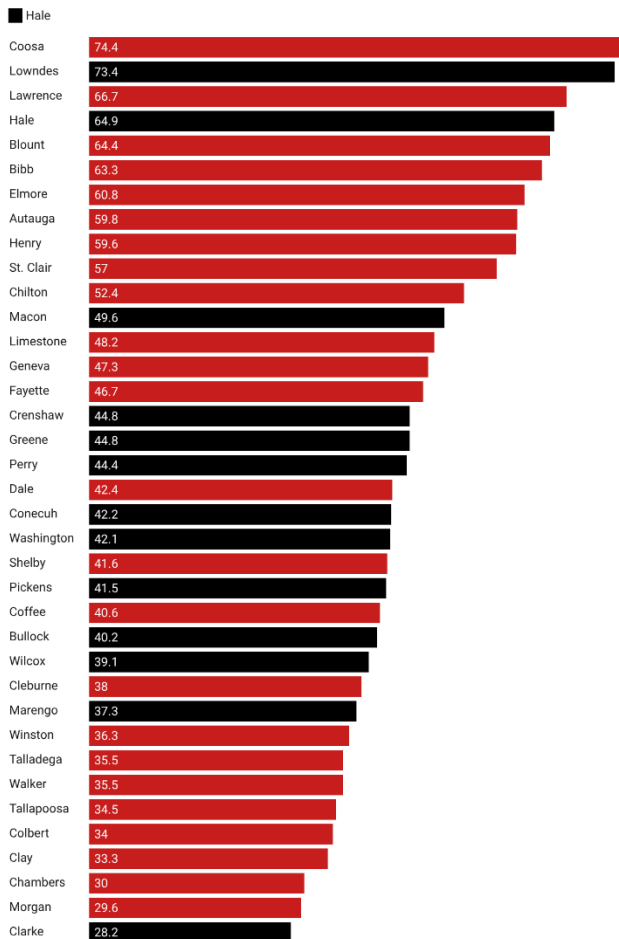
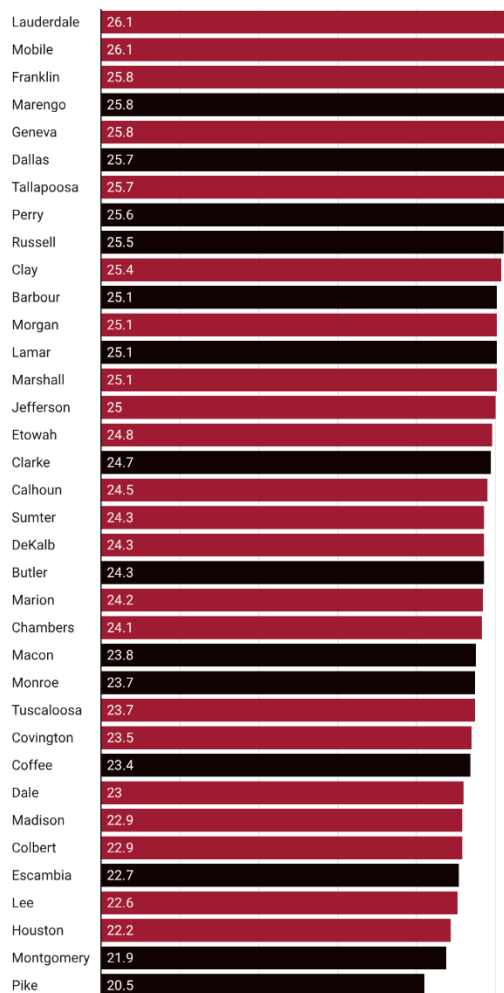
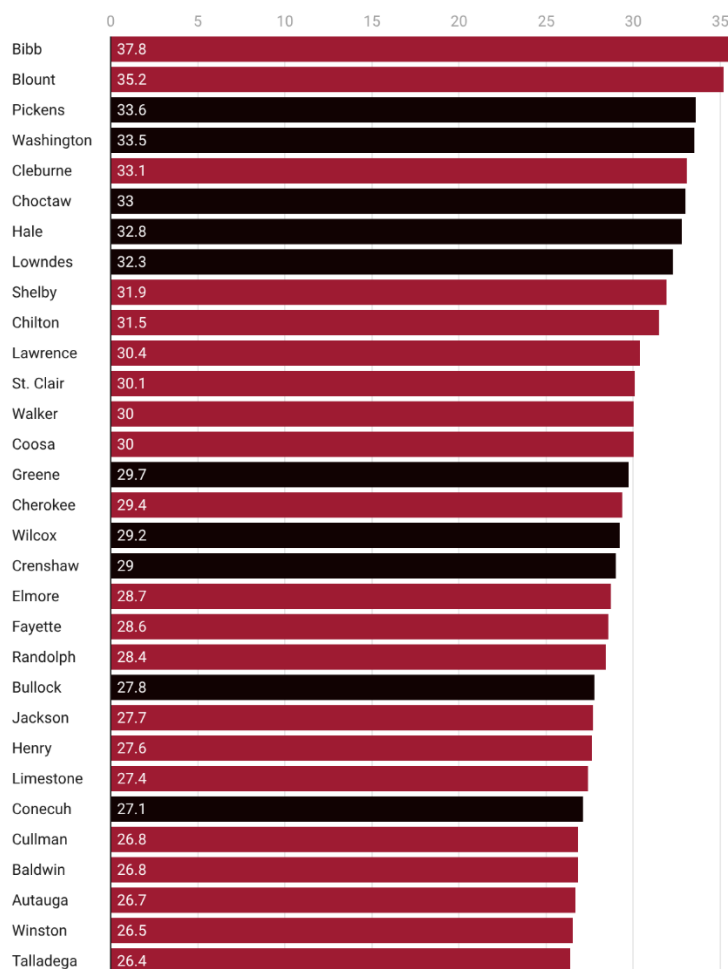


Chart: Data analyzed by the Education Policy Center at The University of Alabama, 2026 • Source: U.S. Census Bureau • Created with Datawrapper

Commute time further illustrates the Black Belt's dependence on regional transportation infrastructure. While 17 percent of residents report very short commutes under ten minutes, the region simultaneously exhibits disproportionately long travel times: nearly 21 percent of workers commute forty-five minutes or more, compared to roughly 15 percent statewide.¹³ This polarized pattern, very short or very long commutes with fewer moderate trips, suggests limited local employment options and a reliance on distant job centers connected primarily by highways. In rural areas where many routes remain two-lane or indirect, extended travel times may also reflect infrastructure inefficiencies rather than distance alone. Figure 5 (on following page) looks a bit closer at the estimated average commuter time by county (based on the U.S. Census Bureau's time ranges). Taken together, these findings reinforce that highway connectivity in the Black Belt functions as a critical economic lifeline, linking residents to employment opportunities beyond county boundaries and underscoring the importance of sustained investment in corridor improvements.

(In Minutes)

Black Belt counties are shown in Black



Data analyzed by the Education Policy Center at the University of Alabama, 2026
Source: U.S. Census Bureau • Created with Datawrapper

Policy Recommendations

To address persistent infrastructure challenges in Alabama's Black Belt, particularly those related to transportation access, fiscal capacity, and essential service delivery, we recommend the following steps:

1. Prioritize Need-Based Transportation Funding Allocation:

State policymakers should adopt a funding framework that accounts for rural conditions, fiscal capacity, and reliance on cross-county commuting rather than relying primarily on traffic volume metrics. Commuting data indicate that roughly one in five Black Belt workers must travel outside their county for employment, while nearly one-fifth face commutes exceeding forty-five minutes. These patterns demonstrate that highways in the region function as essential economic infrastructure rather than optional conveniences. Agencies such as

ALDOT should incorporate travel-time burden, commuting reliance, and safety risks into project evaluation criteria while continuing to support corridor investments such as the West Alabama Highway that address longstanding connectivity gaps.

2. **Expand Grant-Based Infrastructure Financing for Rural Communities:**

Policymakers should expand grant-based funding mechanisms to better support rural communities with limited tax bases and borrowing capacity. Traditional loan-based approaches often fail to meet local needs in the Black Belt, where structural constraints such as non-permeable soils, dispersed populations, and limited local revenues increase project costs. Expanding grant-heavy funding models, building on programs such as ATRIP-II and ARPA infrastructure investments, would enable counties to pursue long-term capital improvements while reducing fiscal strain on local governments.

3. **Strengthen Technical Assistance and Local Capacity:**

State and federal agencies should expand technical assistance to help Black Belt counties navigate grant applications, engineering requirements, and compliance processes. Many local governments lack the administrative staffing and expertise needed to fully access available funding. Partnerships with regional planning commissions, universities, and federal agencies would help ensure that available resources translate into completed infrastructure projects rather than unrealized opportunities.

Conclusion

Alabama's Black Belt demonstrates that infrastructure is a determinant of economic opportunity, public health, and regional equity. Across the region, residents rely disproportionately on cross-county commuting to reach employment, with roughly one in five workers traveling outside their home county and nearly one in five facing commutes of forty-five minutes or longer. These patterns reveal that highways function as economic lifelines rather than conveniences. When routes are narrow, indirect, or underfunded, the costs are born directly by households through longer travel times, higher transportation expenses, and reduced job access. Critically, the burden is not simply one of crossing county lines—many Black Belt communities also face substantial distances to interstate highway access itself. Counties such as Choctaw, are not directly served by a major interstate, with residents typically driving forty-five to sixty minutes along state routes and U.S. highways before reaching I-20/59 to the north or I-65 and I-10 to the east and south. This layered isolation—from both employment centers and

high-capacity highway corridors—means that commute burdens in the region are systematically underestimated when measured in county-to-county terms alone.

At the same time, the region's fiscal capacity limits its ability to address these needs independently. Legislation like the Rebuild Alabama Act has begun to channel dedicated resources toward local road and bridge improvements, and corridor investments like the West Alabama Highway signal recognition of rural connectivity gaps. Yet persistent debates over whether to prioritize high-traffic interstates or rural corridors illustrate that infrastructure allocation remains a policy choice about whose mobility matters most. In the Black Belt, where poverty rates are higher and local tax bases are smaller, underinvestment compounds existing socioeconomic disparities.

The costs of continued underinvestment in the Black Belt are not confined to the region. When workers cannot efficiently access employment, when businesses face unreliable infrastructure, and when residents absorb the expense of distance through fuel, time, and vehicle wear, the cumulative drag on productivity and economic participation is felt across the state. Transportation and water infrastructure are not amenities — they are preconditions for market function. Regions that lack them do not simply grow more slowly; they are structurally excluded from the conditions that make growth possible. Alabama's broader economic trajectory is therefore bound, in part, to whether policymakers treat the Black Belt's infrastructure deficit as the fiscal and economic liability it is — one that compounds with each year of deferred action.

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.

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¹ Ivey, K. (2023, August 10). *Remarks at the Athens-Limestone County Chamber of Commerce luncheon* [Speech]. Athens-Limestone County Chamber of Commerce, Athens, AL

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³ "West Alabama Highway Project Set to Boost Connectivity and Create Jobs." Yellowhammer News, 30 Apr. 2025, <https://yellowhammernews.com/west-alabama-highway-project-set-to-boost-connectivity-and-create-jobs/>

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¹³ Ibid.