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Table of Contents

AL.com Partnership/Introduction.....	1
The Black Belt's Population Decline Explains Why Alabama May Lose a Congressional Seat in the 2020 Census.....	2
School Enrollment in Alabama's Black Belt Continues to Decline.....	7
Persistent Unemployment in the Black Belt.....	13
The Black Belt's Labor Force Participation Lags Behind the Rest of Alabama & The Nation.....	20
Access to Early Childhood Interventions and First Class Pre-K in Alabama & the Black Belt Region.....	29
Defining Alabama's Black Belt Region.....	37
Healthcare: A Key Challenge in Alabama's Black Belt.....	43
Internet Access Disparities in Alabama & the Black Belt.....	52
Black Belt Manufacturing and Economic Prospects.....	61

AL.com and University of Alabama Partnership Sets Sights on Black Belt

By AL.com Staff

Alabama's largest statewide news organization has partnered with an arm of the state's flagship university to shine light on a neglected region of the state and to examine what could be done to improve life there for many people.

"Black Belt 2020" is a project aimed to raise awareness of the data behind the unique challenges across a swath of the state referenced widely as Alabama's Black Belt region – one of the poorest areas in the United States. And as AL.com continues to report on the trends in the region, an area that was once the most powerful in the state, affiliated professors from the Education Policy Center at the University of Alabama continue to search for solutions.

Dr. Stephen Katsinas, head of the Education Policy Center at UA, first reached out to AL.com to explore a partnership.

The series will have eight initial entries, and is tackling population loss, education, unemployment and other issues that disproportionately affect the region. It also is attempting to firm up which Alabama counties are part of the Black Belt, as there is no absolute accepted definition.

AL.com has taken on the role of data analysis and visualization for the project – thoroughly examining data collected by the Education Policy Center and creating original maps, charts and stories based on that data also being published in the Birmingham News, the Huntsville Times and the Mobile Press-Register.

The Education Policy Center is collecting the data and has invited experts, stakeholders and members of the media to discuss each issue in a weekly online panel.

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The Black Belt's Population Decline Explains Why Alabama May Lose a Congressional Seat in the 2020 Census

By Stephen G. Katsinas, Noel E. Keeney,
Emily Jacobs, and Hunter Whann

"The 2020 Census is more important than ever to Alabama... it helps us secure \$13 billion in funding for education, healthcare, communities, and economic development opportunities; and it will help us maintain our current Congressional representation."

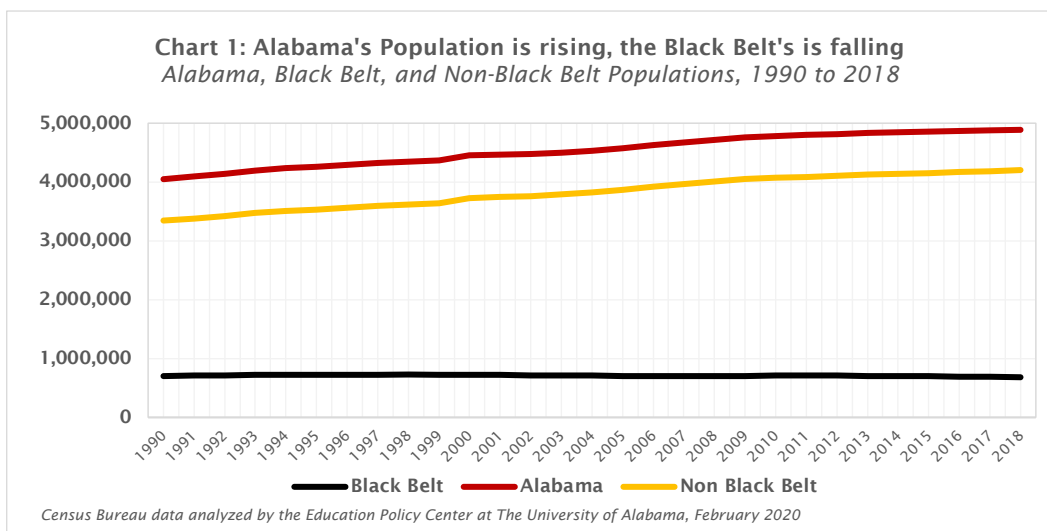
—Governor Kay Ivey¹

Will Alabama lose its seventh congressional seat after the 2020 Census? In this issue brief, the first in a series of eight The University of Alabama's Education Policy Center will publish on demographic, economic, and education issues, challenges, concerns, and options facing the Black Belt, we argue that if our state loses a seat, it will be the direct result of stagnant or declining population in Alabama's 24 Black Belt counties. The challenges of rural life in Alabama, and indeed rural America, are driving away its most valuable resource: its people. Economics, lower access to information-age broadband and healthcare, as well as the inability of 19th century systems of governance and taxation frozen in Alabama's antiquated, race-based 1901 Jim Crow state constitution are key forces underlying this decades-long trend. This is the policy context for the critically important 2020 Census, which cannot be divorced from any discussion of the Black Belt's population decline. Losing a congressional seat will jeopardize billions in federal investment dollars over the next decade. This is why Alabama policymakers on a bipartisan basis are working tirelessly to insure a full and complete count for the Census.

The Black Belt is not keeping up with the rest of Alabama

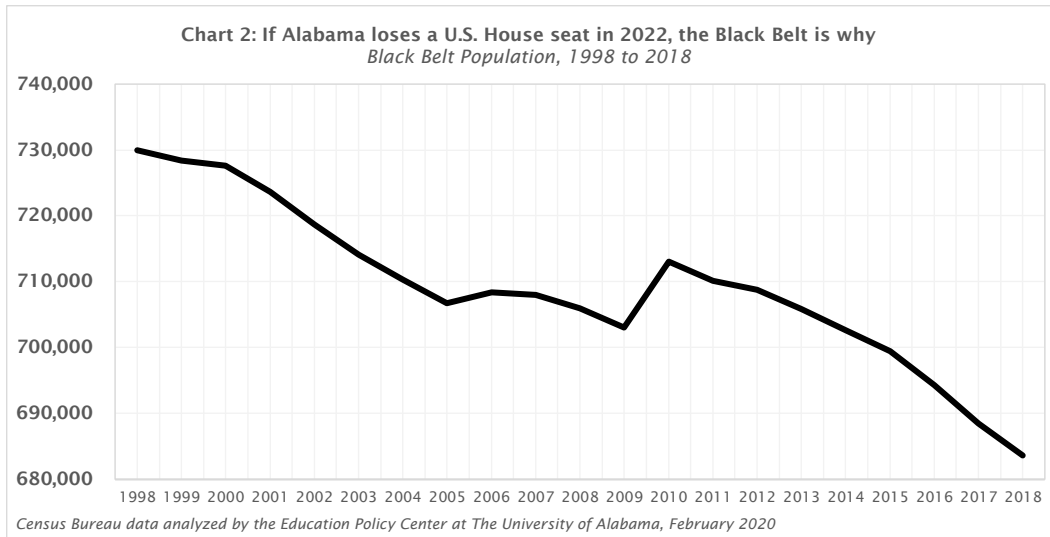
By whatever definition is used to define it—and we acknowledge that no generally accepted, consistent definition exists—the rural counties that constitute Alabama's Black Belt are losing people. Chart 1 shows the populations of Alabama,

Black Belt counties, and non-Black Belt counties from 1990 to 2018. Alabama's statewide population steadily rose between 1990 and 2018, and the population changes for Alabama's 43 non-Black Belt counties exactly paralleled changes in the state's population over these three decades. By contrast, Alabama's 24 Black Belt counties have seen persistent stagnation or decline.



Of the 24 Black Belt counties, 16 lost population both in the twenty years from 1990 to 2010 and after the Great Recession from 2010 to 2018. One county, Pickens, lost population from 1990 to 2010, and gained afterwards. Three counties—Escambia, Hale, and Washington—saw rising populations from 1990 to 2010, and loss to 2018. Four counties—Crenshaw, Montgomery, Pike, and Russell—saw population rise in both periods.² The county and city with the largest population loss was Selma, the world-famous county seat of Dallas County, where Martin Luther King, Jr., John Lewis, and other civil rights protesters led the epic Voting Rights march over the Edmund Pettus Bridge in 1965. Selma's population fell from just over 21,000 in 2010 to 17,200 in 2019, a staggering 17 percent decline.³

Chart 2 isolates just the 24 Black Belt counties. It reveals the region lost over 40,000 residents from 1998 to 2018. Sadly, this trend may continue in for the foreseeable future, as persistent issues such as hospital closures and lack of broadband access drive people away. The sudden requirement for remote learning due to the pandemic exposed crevasses in available broadband services that echo the gulf in electricity access in the 1930s between the rural have-nots and an urban America that had been wired for nearly two generations.



Why are people leaving?

Alabamians, and Americans across the country, have been leaving rural areas in search of better quality of life and greater economic opportunity for some time. “[From] rural hospital closures to the rise of hookworm in Lowndes County,” healthcare in the Black Belt and other areas like it remains a policy challenge.⁴ Meanwhile, internet access—the electricity of the twenty-first century—is clearly not available to all. “According to a study by Microsoft in 2018, about 3.3 million Alabamians do not use the internet at broadband speeds,” which equates to 67% of the state’s population just two years ago.⁵ It simply is not making sense for rural Alabamians, especially its younger residents, to live so far from healthcare or internet—let alone a combination of the two. A future issue brief in this series will zero in on the challenge of rural broadband.

Implications

The population loss in non-metro Alabama—which includes every Black Belt county regardless of the definition—has long-term political consequences for the state. National media outlets such as Politico predict Alabama will lose a congressional seat in the reapportionment

following the 2020 Census.⁶ State policymakers recognize the importance of retaining the seventh seat and are developing strategies to make sure a full and complete Census count occurs in 2020. Governor Kay Ivey cited the need for a

full 2020 Census count in both her January 2019 Inaugural Address⁷ and her March 2019 State of the State Address.⁸

Challenges remain, however. *The Moulton Advertiser* reports that Alabama is behind 30 other states in filling out the 2020 Census.⁹ As of June 15, the national self-response rate was 61.4% while Alabama's was 59.3%, according to the US Census Bureau. Complications from the COVID-19 pandemic have delayed Bureau deadlines for responses, so there does remain time for Alabama to increase its response rates.

We conclude with a hopeful note: There's still a chance Alabama may *not* lose a House seat after the 2020 Census. CNN, CBS, and Politico all predict Alabama will lose a seat, but the nonpartisan Election Data Services notes that if the state can count between 11,000 and 19,000 more people, it may retain its seventh congressional seat. But even if Alabama does not lose a seat in 2020, unless the trend of Black Belt population loss is reversed, one or perhaps two congressional seats could be lost in 2030.¹⁰ This underscores the need for a major effort to lift Alabama's Black Belt, over and above the full-court press Alabama leaders are presently engaged in to ensure a full and complete 2020 Census count.

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Box 870231, Tuscaloosa, Alabama 35487 · Telephone: (205) 348-6004 · <http://edpolicy.ua.edu>

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Issue Brief № 44

School Enrollment in Alabama's Black Belt Continues to Decline

By Stephen G. Katsinas, Noel E. Keeney,
Emily Jacobs, and Hunter Whann

"The migration shift of residents from Alabama's rural Blackbelt areas to more suburban areas where resources and supports such as hospitals, larger and new schools, tranquil parks, community recreation, plentiful job opportunities, and other quality of life factors exist is a real threat to the continued sustainability of rural Alabama."

— Dr. Jacqueline A. Brooks, Macon County Superintendent¹

Overall enrollment at Alabama public schools increased at the onset of the 2019-20 school year for the first time since 2013-14. According to *Al.com*, "[there] are 724,178 students enrolled across the state in kindergarten through 12th grade."² Despite this increase, enrollment is "down 12,000 from six years ago, when overall enrollment began to shrink across Alabama."³ At the same time, however, most enrollment growth is centered in city rather than county school districts. This trend, present in the Black Belt but also other parts of rural Alabama, is greatly challenging local funding for school districts as taxpaying residents relocate and local economies decline. In this issue brief, published by the University of Alabama's Education Policy Center, public K-12 enrollment data for the state and the Black Belt is examined.

Declining Enrollment in the Black Belt

From 1995-96 to 2019-20, total school enrollment in statewide fell by 10,421 from 734,899 to 724,178, a decline of one percent. In the same quarter-century when statewide public school enrollment was essentially flat, public school enrollment in the 24 counties that comprise Alabama's Black Belt fell from 139,739 in 1995-96 to 106,801, a decline of thirteen percent. This means that school enrollment across the rest of Alabama *increased* by 22,217. The 32,938 decline in the 24 Black Belt counties over the past twenty-five years represents a community

roughly a third larger than the size of Selma. Moreover, the problem in some Black Belt counties may be even more severe, because school enrollment increased in three of the 24 counties.⁴

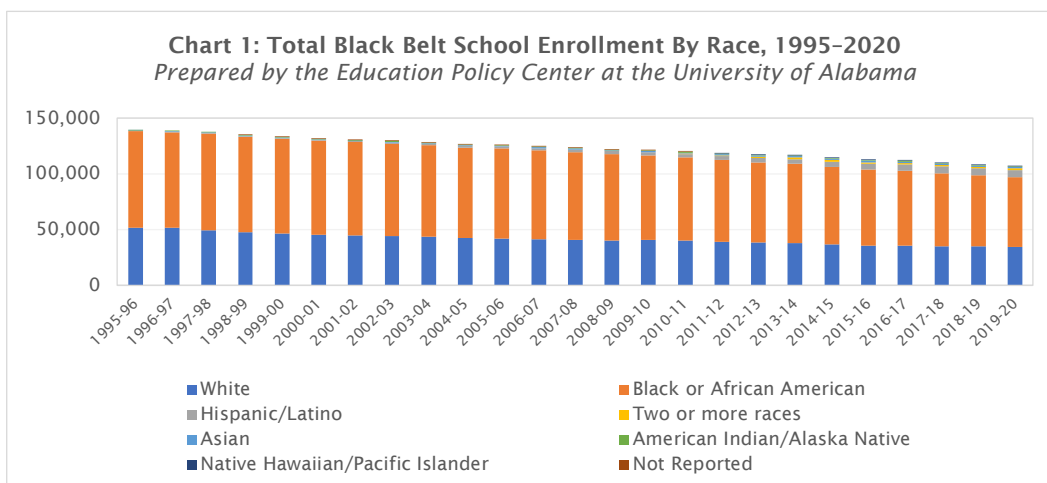
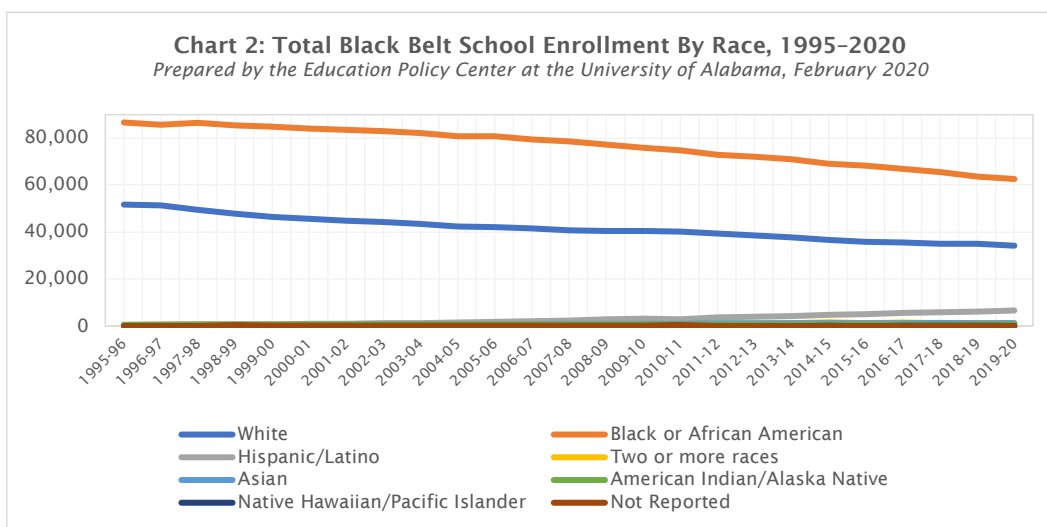
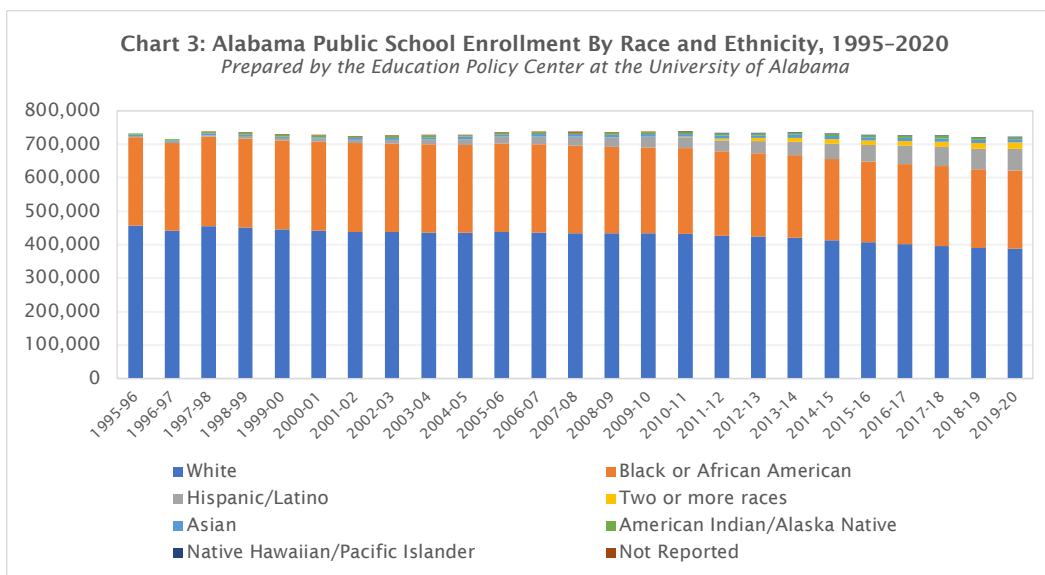


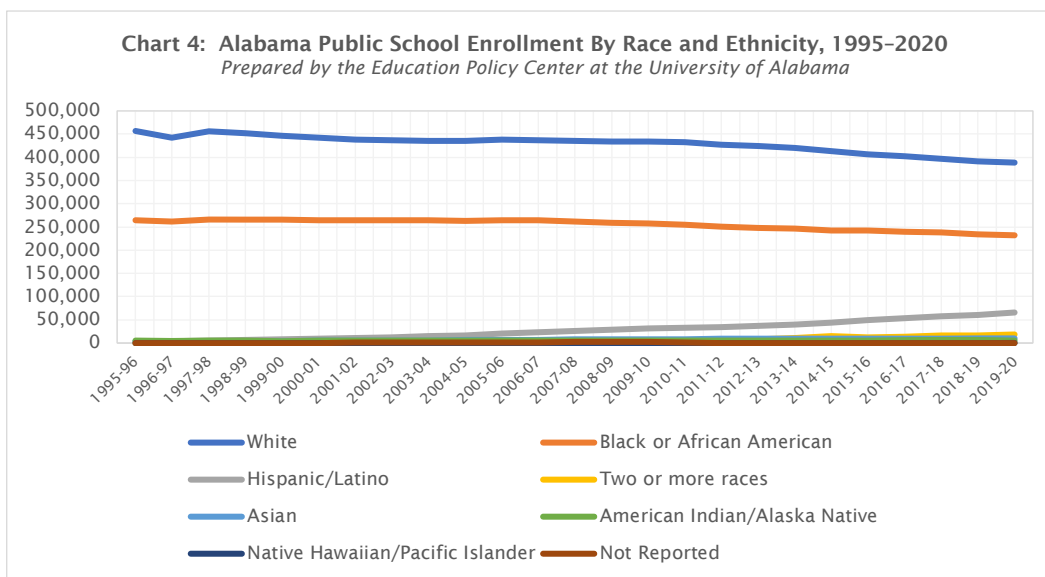
Chart 1, above, and Chart 2, below, provide a historical perspective on public school enrollment in Alabama's 24 Black Belt counties over the past quarter-century. From 1995–96 to 2019–20, African American enrollment in the Black Belt's public schools fell from 86,680 to 62,209, a decline of 24,471 (28 percent), and white enrollment fell from 51,724 to 34,218, a decline of 17,506 (34 percent). The increase in Hispanic enrollment from just 432 students in 1995–96 to 6,638 in 2019–20 could not cover this difference. The result is many school closures and the loss of community identity that goes with it in many small Black Belt towns.



School Enrollment, Statewide



Charts 3 and 4 examine Alabama’s statewide enrollment by race and ethnicity from 1995–96 to 2019–20. While total enrollment was flat, there were differences among major racial and ethnic subgroups. White and African American enrollments declined at about the same rates statewide, while Hispanic enrollments grew significantly.



“Failing” Schools in Alabama & the Black Belt

The Alabama Accountability Act of 2013 requires the bottom 6 percent of schools to be labeled “failing.”⁵ The most recent list of these “failing” schools was released on November 1, 2019, and included 74 schools in 28 school districts (plus one public charter school).⁶ Of the 74 schools on the list, 32 (43 percent) are located in the Black Belt. As stated before, the declining population of the region is shrinking local tax bases, challenging funding for schools, and in all likelihood making a turnaround more challenging. Governor Ivey has expressed interest in changing the “failing” label, but the last effort to do so—in 2017—was unsuccessful.⁷

Declining Rural Enrollment is a National Problem

“Rural students and the schools they attend receive little attention in either policy or academia,” writes Megan Levalley, research analyst at the Center for Public Education, “...despite the fact that more than 46 million Americans live in nonmetropolitan areas.”⁸ Furthermore, rural areas often rely on their schools for more than just education. The National Education Association explains: “[rural] school districts are often the largest single employer in their area and rural schools serve as the social, recreational, and cultural foundation of their communities.”⁹ Despite their prevalent role in rural America, these schools face persistent poverty, achievement gaps, teacher retention, and funding. “On average,” Levalley writes, “rural district receive just 17% of state education funding...[considering] that one in two districts is rural and serve one in five students...this distribution is severely lacking.”¹⁰ Nationally, rural education presents a major challenge to lawmakers at the local, state, and federal level.

Conclusion

In a statement to the EPC, Alabama State Superintendent Dr. Eric Mackey commented: “[the] success of the Black Belt is important to all Alabamians. We are glad to see the University of Alabama research and analyze the needs of the Black Belt so we can continue to improve and provide better educational resources to help the students of these communities.”¹¹ Enrollment decline in the Black Belt is symptomatic of deeper challenges facing rural America. The loss of residents is hurting rural economies and prompting them to seek opportunity elsewhere. In the long-term, schools—and the students who stay—are left hanging. The first

issue brief in the EPC's series focusing on the Black Belt noted a decline of 40,000 residents since 1998.¹² While indicative of deeper issues, without a state strategy to focus special help for these schools, the continuing enrollment decline spells hardship for the Black Belt, which in turn further exacerbates the issues herein discussed.

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Issue Brief № 45

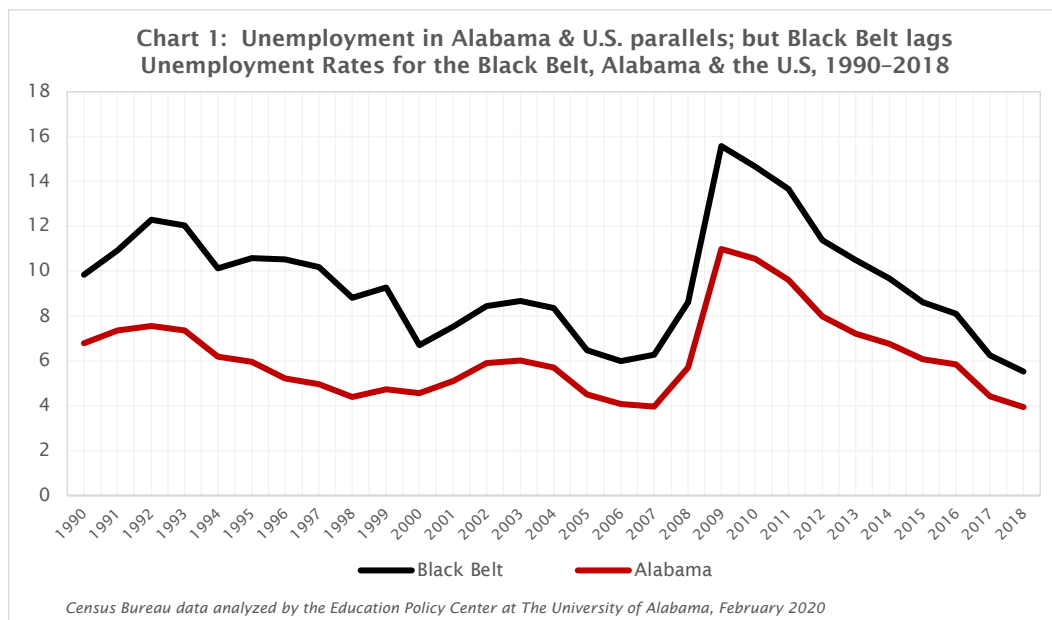
Persistent Unemployment in the Black Belt

By Hunter D. Whann, Noel E. Keeney,
Stephen G. Katsinas, and Emily Jacobs

The unemployment rate is one of the most prominent ways economists, policy-makers, and everyday Americans gauge the health of the economy. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics defines it as “the number of unemployed people as a percentage of the labor force.”¹ Analysis of the unemployment rate alone does not offer a complete picture of an economy, however. The Education Policy Center’s next issue brief will focus on the Labor Force Participation Rate. In this brief, persistent unemployment in the Black Belt, relative to the rest of Alabama and the nation, is examined.

The Black Belt alongside the rest of Alabama

Chart 1 shows that the Black Belt’s unemployment rate closely parallels that of Alabama, but is often two, three, or even four percentage points higher—and this does not include discouraged workers.



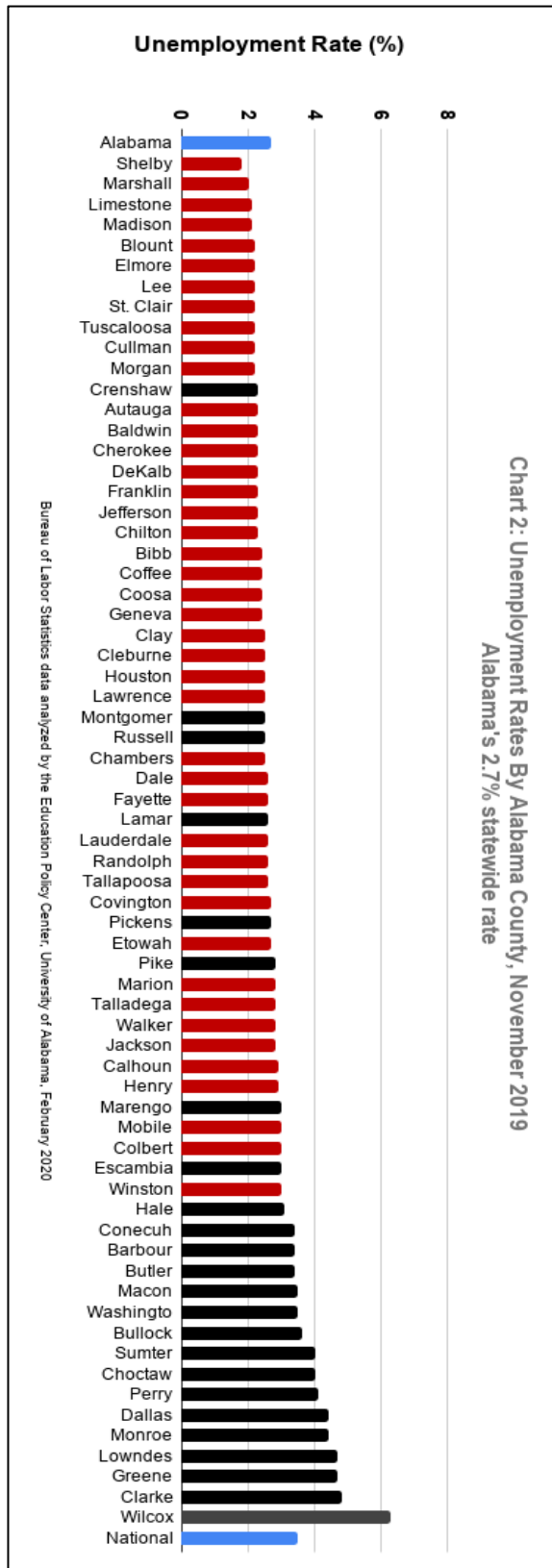


Chart 2, left, shows the November 2019 unemployment rates of Alabama Counties. Black Belt Counties are marked in black. **The 18 Alabama counties with the highest unemployment rates were all in the Black Belt.** The three counties with the highest unemployment rates—Wilcox, Clarke, and Greene counties, at 6.9%, 5.9%, and 5.8%, respectively—were all in the Black Belt, and had unemployment rates double the statewide rate of 2.7%.²

While every county in Alabama saw improved unemployment rates in 2019 compared to 2018, Black Belt counties had a very different and higher starting point, as Chart 3 (on the following page) shows. Nationally, Alabama saw the largest percentage decline in its unemployment rate among all fifty states from November 2018 to November 2019 (-1.2% compared to -0.4%). The Alabama statewide unemployment rate of 2.7% rate was tenth lowest in the United States.³ This sparkling performance has not fully extended to the Black Belt region, however.

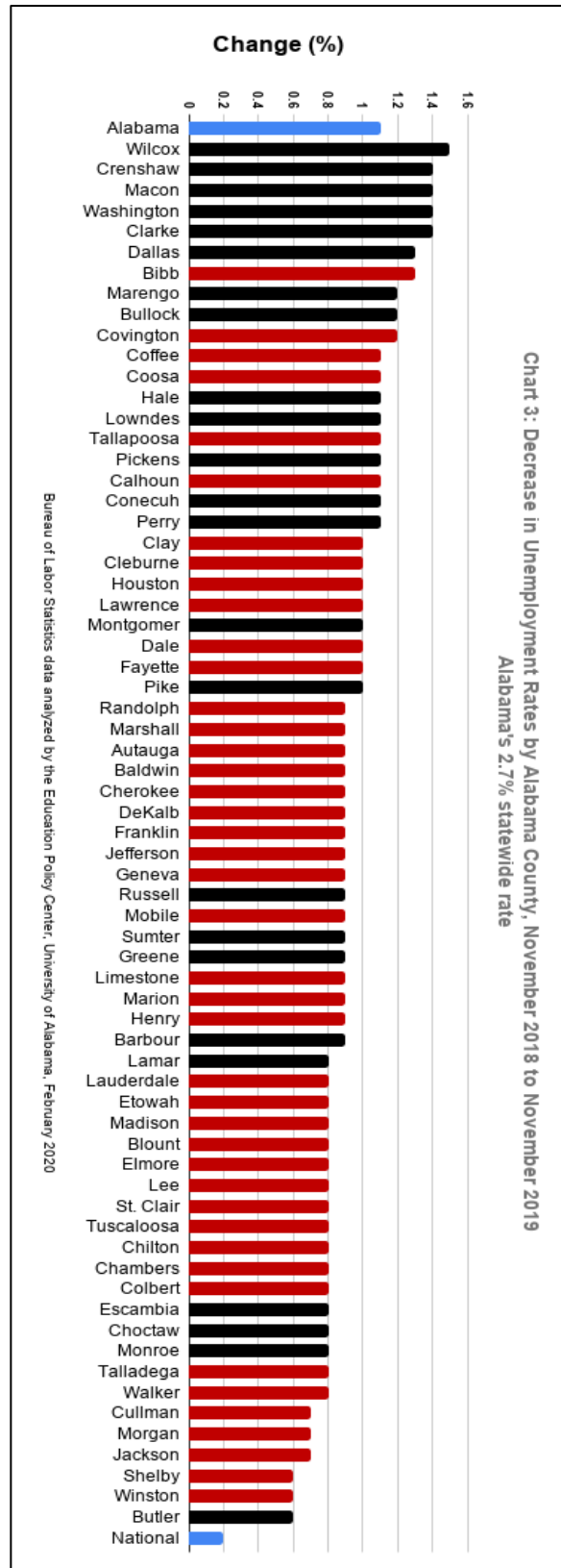
Assistance from the State

Governor Kay Ivey has awarded over \$1 million in grants to spur

job growth in the Black Belt in this year alone. On August 27, \$750,000 was awarded to the Sumter County Commission to improve infrastructure.⁴ “This project,” Ivey announced, “will produce much needed jobs in Sumter County and throughout much of Alabama’s Black Belt region.”⁵ This follows a \$600,000 grant earlier this year to improve the Port of Epes “to attract industry and improve commerce.”⁶ These grants are a welcome, concerted effort from the state of Alabama to assist the Black Belt region’s economic development.

The Impact of COVID-19 on Unemployment in Alabama & the Black Belt

So much of the country’s economy—indeed the world’s—is reeling from the coronavirus pandemic and related lockdown measures. Following a period of extended low unemployment across the country, and historically low unemployment in Alabama, unemployment rose to over 14% nationally.⁷ As Chart 1 showed, there has existed a considerable chasm between the Black Belt and Alabama as a whole in terms of unemployment.



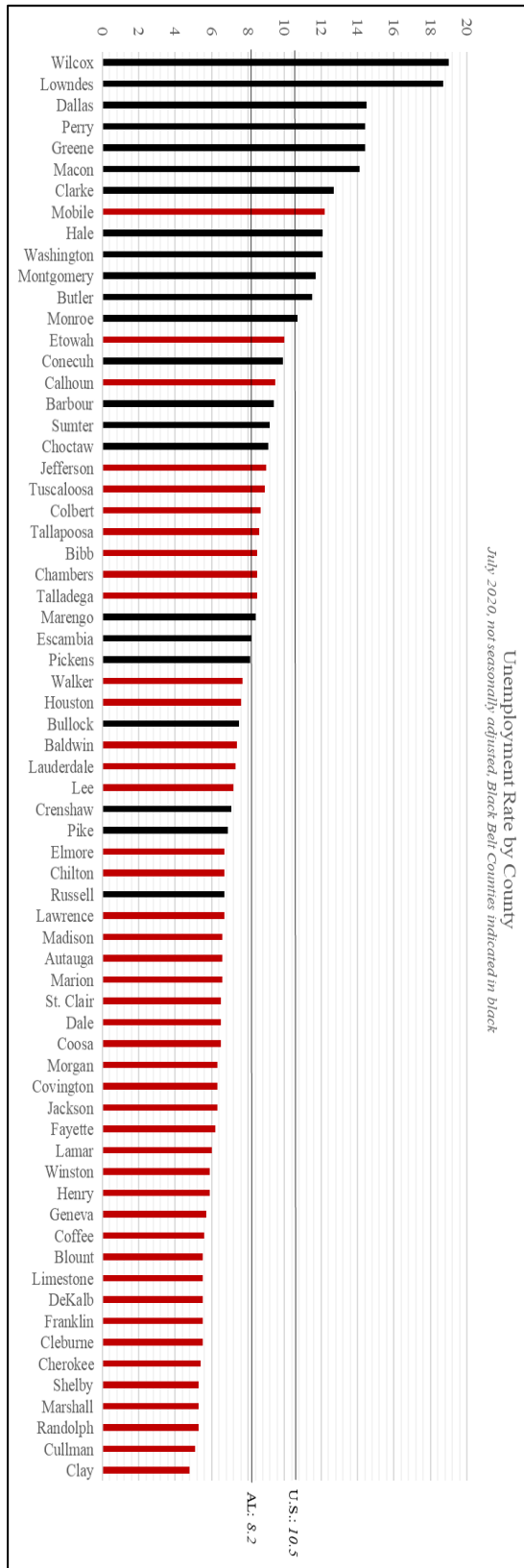


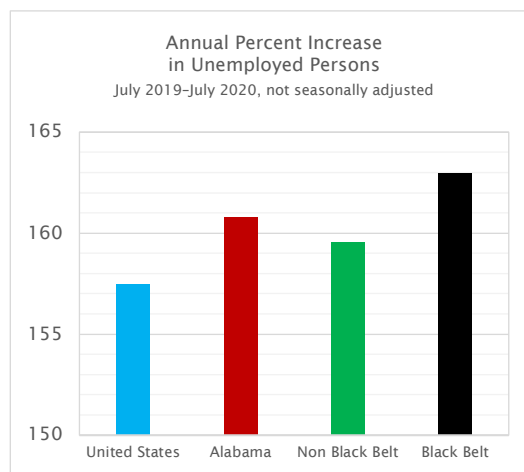
Chart 4 shows the June 2020 unemployment rates by county. **Nine of the 10 counties with the highest rate of unemployment are in the Black Belt, while 17 of the 24 Black Belt counties are above the Alabama average of 8.2%.** These figures suggest a long recovery ahead for Alabama's Black Belt—a region that, despite significant growth, was behind the rest of the state going into the pandemic recession.

Community Efforts

"Life can be tough even on a good day in the Black Belt," the Associated Press reports, "where some of the poorest people in America are...their struggle has become even more difficult with unemployment intensifying and coronavirus infections raging."⁸ In the face of such adversity, Black Belt residents are trying to rise to the task. The Black Belt Community Foundation is distributing 100,000 face masks as well as tips and resources to protect against COVID-19. West Alabama Food Bank workers have distributed an estimated 1.4 million pounds of food since mid-March. This comes in addition to more than \$4 million in federal assistance for agencies that serve Alabama's Black Belt for "food, rent and medicine."⁹

Conclusion

“The number of people seeking and receiving state unemployment benefits fell at the end of August,” Eric Morath of *The Wall Street Journal* writes, “signs of a slow improvement in a U.S. labor market still deeply damaged by the coronavirus pandemic.”¹⁰ The economic recovery from COVID-19 will take time, and it will take longer for some areas than others. Chart 5, on the next page, compares the increases in unemployment for the US, Alabama as a whole, non-Black Belt Alabama, and the Black Belt. It too suggests a long recovery for the region.



The Education Policy Center has released issue briefs on population decline¹¹ and public school enrollment decline¹² in the Black Belt. With this brief, the aspects related to *why* Alabamians are leaving the Black Belt are beginning to be explored. A future brief will examine labor force participation in the region to provide a fuller economic perspective. As this brief’s data demonstrate, the Black Belt has for decades experienced unemployment at higher rates than the rest of the state. Despite the stellar gains of recent years, the region’s counties remain some of the most unemployed. Efforts by the state of Alabama and Black Belt residents to assist and develop the region are promising, but there remains much room for progress.

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Issue Brief № 46

The Black Belt's Labor Force Participation Lags Behind the Rest of Alabama & the Nation

By Stephen G. Katsinas, Noel E. Keeney,
Emily Jacobs, and Hunter Whann

"Companies are changing the way they do business, what goods and services they provide, and they are constantly reevaluating the type of workforce they employ. With those changes, we are also seeing a shift in the skills needed to compete in today's workforce. In order to stay competitive in a global economy, Alabama must prepare our workforce to be ready for the jobs of tomorrow. We will be working with business and industry to ensure we have the training necessary to equip Alabamians with the skills needed for these high-tech, high-skill jobs."

— Governor Kay Ivey, May 14, 2018¹

In adopting the recommendation of the Alabama Workforce Council, Governor Ivey formally committed the State of Alabama's education and workforce training systems to work with business and industry partners to produce 500,000 more workers with college degrees, certificates, and credentials by 2025. Earlier, the Governor convened a special Statewide Educational Attainment Committee of industry, government and policy experts to set priorities and measure economic progress to develop a strategy to address Alabama's skills gap. *Alabama-Works! Success Plus* sets the goal of 500,000 more working Alabamians, as the report notes: "Alabama needs to add more than 350,000 additional high-skilled workers to its workforce by 2025 to meet projected industry needs. Of these, more than 180,000 are projected to be the result of new job opportunities, while the remaining 170,000 are needed to fill current jobs expected to be vacated as retirees leave the workforce."²

While unemployment figures are instructive in gauging general economic conditions, just as telling are the labor force participation rates. In the UA Education Policy Center's recent issue brief on unemployment,³ we found that the 24 counties included in Alabama's Black Belt in the various reports we analyzed have experience consistently higher rates of unemployment than the rest of the state.⁴

This brief builds upon EPC analysis of Black Belt population and elementary and secondary school enrollment, as we examine labor force participation.

Defined by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics as “the percentage of the population [age 16 and older] that is either working or actively looking for work,” labor force participation provides a fuller portrait of the economic health of a given area.⁵ Alabama’s overall statewide rate is not far off from the national average, but the Black Belt is woefully behind the rest of the state and the country, negatively impacting both. This brief examines these issues, presenting long term data, both before the COVID-19 pandemic and at present, and discusses possible solutions including expanding apprenticeships, Career and Technical Education, and rural broadband, the subject of a future brief in this series.

Labor Force Participation: Black Belt, Non-Black Belt, State and National

If today’s Alabama’s labor force participation rate was equal to the pre-COVID national average of 63.2 percent, another 196,000 Alabamians would now be working, contributing to the state and local tax rolls, and enjoying better lives. Raising Alabama’s labor force participation rate to the national average is roughly 40 percent of the total needed to accomplish Governor Ivey’s ambitious goal of 500,000 new Alabamians added to the labor force by 2025.

In April 2017, however, Alabama’s statewide labor force participation of 57.1 percent lagged far behind that national rate of 63.3 percent.⁶ This was the impetus for the Ivey Administration to work with legislative and business leaders to create a comprehensive, more integrated education and training system. Business-led regional workforce councils are to lead the creation of the 21st century high skill workforce Alabama needs. A four-bill bipartisan package unanimously passed the Alabama Legislature in 2019. The initiatives and targeted new investments are showing progress, with a full percentage point improvement in labor force participation rate in just 2.5 years, to 58.1 percent in January 2020.⁷ This one-year improvement from 2018 to 2019 was sixth best among all states.

With the statewide rate moving in the right direction, **Alabama’s 24 Black Belt Counties together have a labor force participation rate that is 20 points below the statewide average.** This reality has important consequences on every aspect of life in these rural counties and the people who live in them. Our challenge is to make work pay, so that the Black Belt’s best export is not their people.

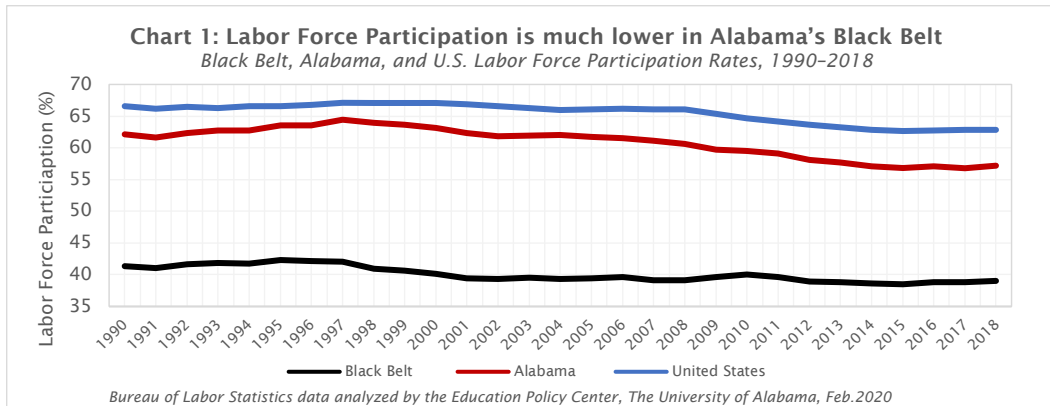


Chart 2 shows the percentage of Alabama's total labor force contained within the Black Belt from 2010 to 2019 declined from 13.6 percent in 2010 to 12.6 percent in 2019, reflecting the population decline discussed in our first issue brief in this series.⁸ The Black Belt's total labor force declined from 298,000 persons in 2010 to just over 280,000 in 2018, before ticking up in 2019. Charts 3 and 4 show stark differences in labor force participation rates between the 24 Black Belt counties and the rest of the state prior to the pandemic. The uptick after 2017 forward may portend a promising future.

Labor Force Participation in Alabama Black Belt Counties in the Pandemic

Attention is now turned to specific county by county data. Chart 5 shows labor force participation rates for each of Alabama's 67 counties in 2019. The data are not seasonally adjusted. Black Belt counties are indicated in black. When combined with the data presented above, it shows that Alabama has made progress in recent years, both statewide and in the Black Belt, but much more progress remains to be made to approach the national averages.

Charts 6 and 7 (on page 6) provide an initial glimpse into labor force participation during the pandemic. Chart 6 presents the annual percentage change in labor force participation for all 67 Alabama counties comparing July 2019 to July 2020. Chart 7 isolates monthly data just for the 24 Black Belt counties, revealing a recent uptick in labor force participation of interest. This trend could be explained by a rise in the number of job seekers looking to support their families during the pandemic. To reiterate, labor force participation includes both employed and unemployed workers seeking jobs; while more Black Belt residents could be looking for jobs, it does not necessarily mean they are finding them. This issue deserves further investigation.

Insight: Most of Alabama's future workforce in the Black Belt and statewide is already here. Alabama needs to provide opportunities to make them the most highly skilled possible, so they are ready for the jobs of the future.

Chart 2: The Percentage of Alabama's Total Labor Force in the Black Belt Declined from 2010-2019 (not seasonally adjusted)

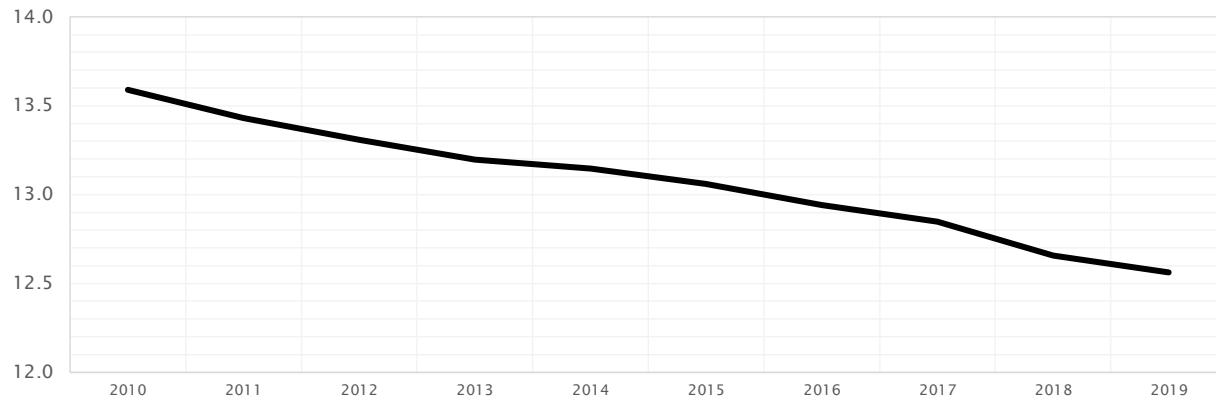


Chart 3: Percentage Change in Labor Force by Region, 2010-2019 (not seasonally adjusted)

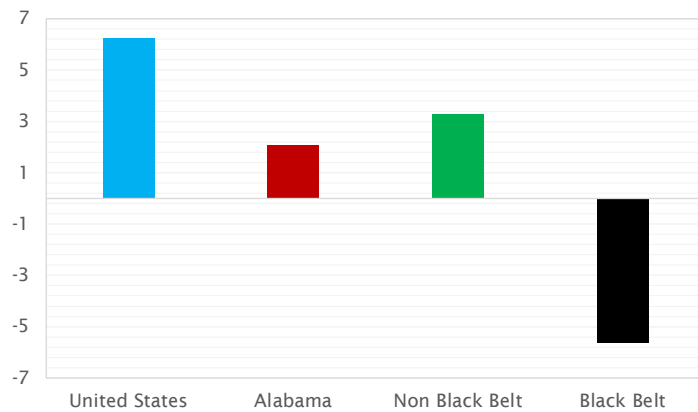


Chart 4: Labor Force Participation Rates, 2010-2019 (not seasonally adjusted)

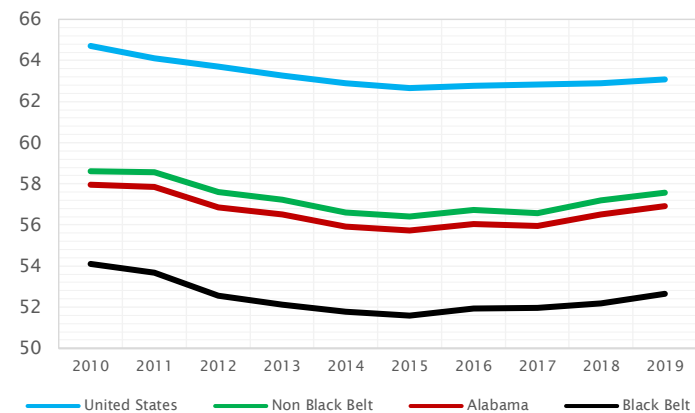


Chart 5: Labor Force Participation Rates by County, 2019
(not seasonally adjusted; Black Belt counties are indicated in black)

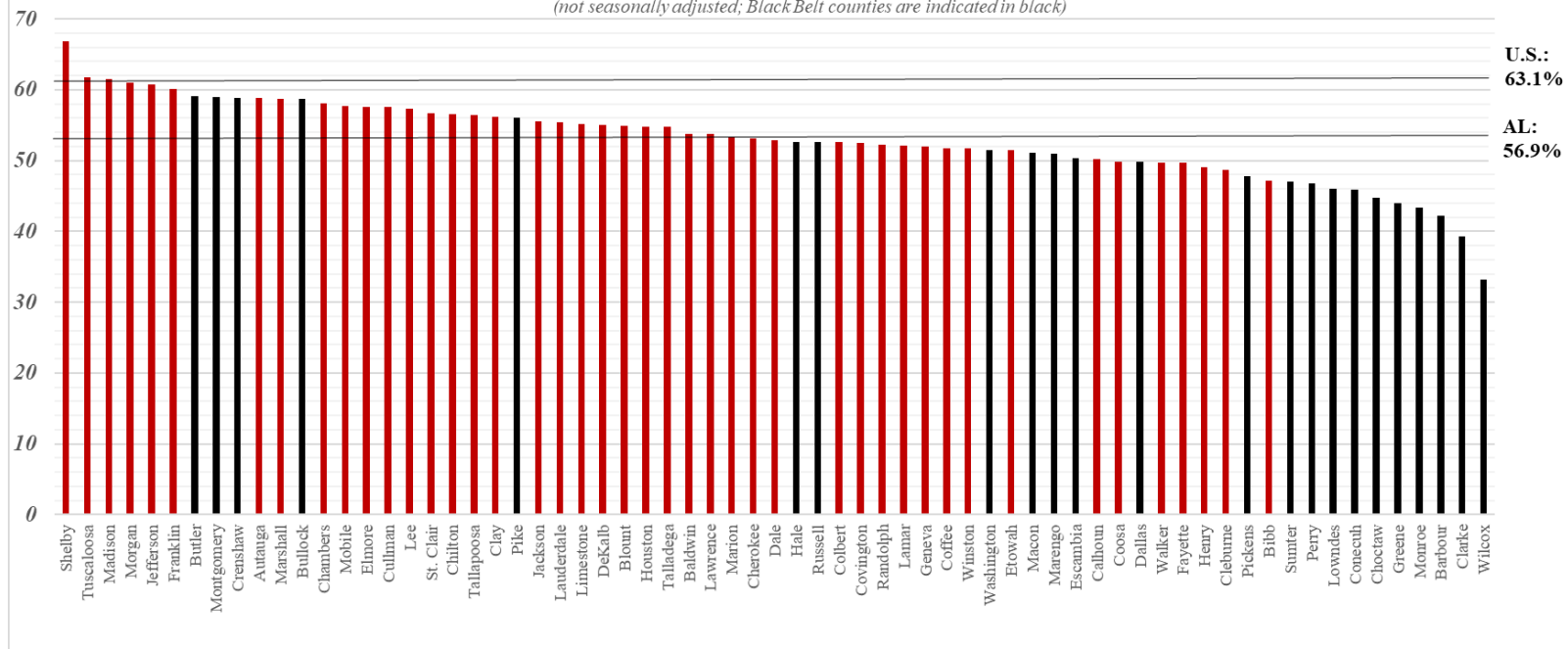


Chart 6: Annual Percentage Change in Labor Force Participation by Alabama County, July 2019 to July 2020
(not seasonally adjusted, Black Belt counties indicated in black)

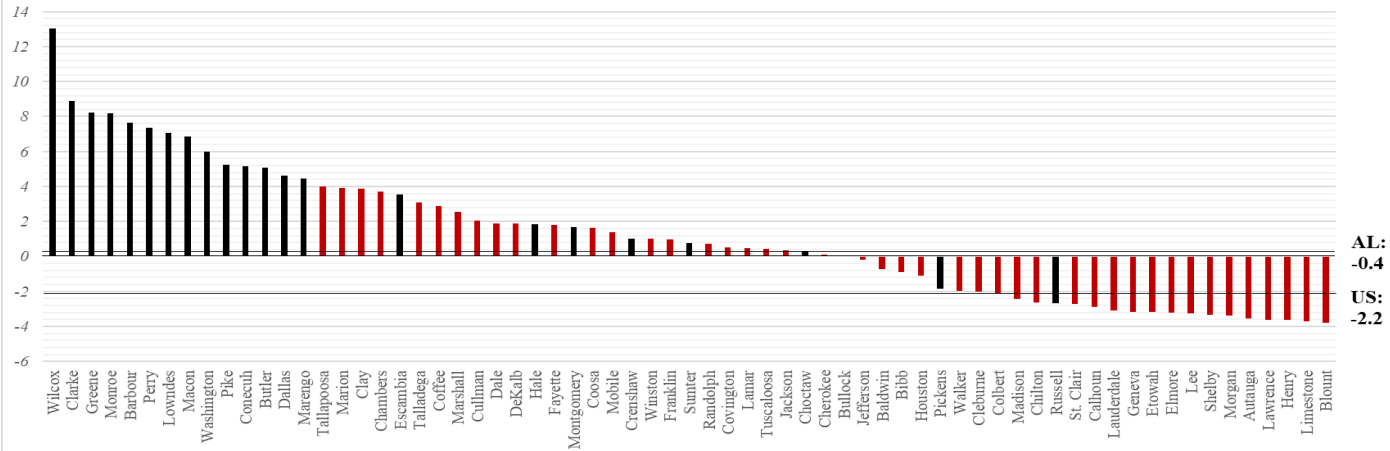
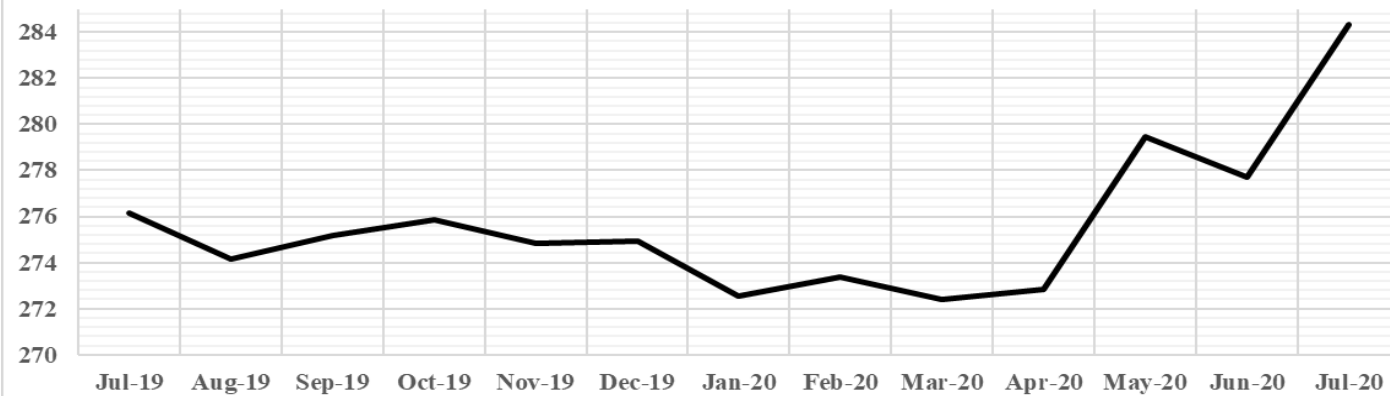


Chart 7: Annual Change in the Black Belt's Labor Force, July 2019 to July 2020
(not seasonally adjusted (in thousands))



Reflecting on the Rural-Urban Divide

As with many other aspects of American life, a wide chasm exists between rural and urban labor force participation rates. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, “Between 2008 and 2017 the rural labor-force participation rate fell by 4.1 percentage points, compared to a decline of 2.7 percentage points in urban areas.”⁹ A large factor is rural America’s aging-in-place population. When data were isolated for “prime age” adults—those aged 25 to 54—the labor participation rate remained 2.7 percent below 2008 levels, indicating that retiring workers were not the only issue holding rural American back. The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s 2019 edition of *Rural American at a Glance* points to lower educational attainment and higher disability rates, in addition to aging-in-place residents.¹⁰

The geography of rural areas—distant as they are from urban centers—entails issues of access to internet access as well. Providing broadband is widely believed to be a key strategy in developing rural economies. A 2019 U.S. Chamber of Commerce Technology Engagement Center study found that “[digital] tools and technology boosted gross sales of rural small businesses by 17.2 percent during the past three years, the equivalent of \$69.8 billion per year.”¹¹ The report advocates expanded access to high-speed internet, mobile phone connectivity, information technology assistance, and courses in digital programs to help bridge the rural-urban economic divide. A forthcoming EPC issue will specifically explore broadband access in the Black Belt.

Conclusion

In our initial report on population in the Black Belt, even if Alabama does not lose a congressional seat following the 2020 Census, a comprehensive strategy to address the Black Belt is needed, or the state could lose two House seats in 2030. It is important to note that prior to the pandemic, other states were faced with the same demographic challenge of slower rural population growth rates. They too are focusing on strategies to bolster their labor force participation rates. Put differently, pandemic or not, other states are moving forward, and Alabama cannot be satisfied or content by being average.

Not only does the Black Belt region experience higher incidences of unemployment, data show the region’s labor force participation rate has consistently been

20 percentage points lower than the rest of Alabama and the nation for almost three decades. Such persistent low levels of participation in the region where Dr. King and John Lewis spent so much time clearly justifies state policy interest now.

Consideration should also be given to strategies to expand apprenticeship and Career and Technical Education partnership programs between rural high schools, community colleges, and industries. The Education Policy Center is currently working with the Alabama Office of Apprenticeships to provide research and technical assistance for the development of industry-recognized competency models, career lattices, and career pathways for occupations identified as in-demand, which, among others, form the infrastructure for curricula and assessment of apprenticeship programs. Providing higher per student CTE funding to give high schools and rural community college campuses resources to make up for the lack of economies of scale they clearly lack, and matching state grants to give new programs in small, rural communities more time for the programs to take root could wise state investments.

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.

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Box 870231, Tuscaloosa, Alabama 35487 · Telephone: (205) 348-6004 · <http://edpolicy.ua.edu>

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Access to Early Childhood Interventions and First Class Pre-K in Alabama & the Black Belt Region

By Hunter Whann, Noel E. Keeney,
Emily Jacobs, and Stephen Katsinas

In April of 2020, the National Institute of Early Education Research ranked the Alabama First Class Pre-K program as the highest quality state-funded pre-kindergarten program in the country for the 14th consecutive year.¹ “In 2019,” Governor Kay Ivey office announced, “Alabama First Class Pre-K received its largest-ever single year funding increase...which expanded pre-k access to more than 38% of four year-olds in the state.”² This issue brief, part of the Black Belt 2020 series produced by the Education Policy Center in the College of Education at the University of Alabama, explores pre-k access across Alabama with special attention paid to the Black Belt region.

The earliest intervention: first teacher home visiting

The Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education’s (ADECE) is making broad-based strides to promote school readiness, family and child health and well-being, and helping parents access resources in their own communities. The First Teacher Home Visiting program seeks to improve health outcomes for mothers and babies, reduce children’s emergency room visits, improve school readiness, reduce child injuries and reduce cases of child abuse and neglect. Three evidence-based home visiting models—Parents as Teachers (PAT), Nurse Family Partnership (NFP), and Home Instruction for the Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY)—are used to match families with trained professionals who provide support and information. Some programs can enroll pregnant women and continue to serve the family until the child enters kindergarten, with the home as the primary service delivery setting. First Teacher Home Visiting programs can provide telehealth services in both visits to the home and remote visits utilizing technology, including cell phones and iPads. This alternative way of “visiting” with parents is especially beneficial when it comes to serving millennial parents:

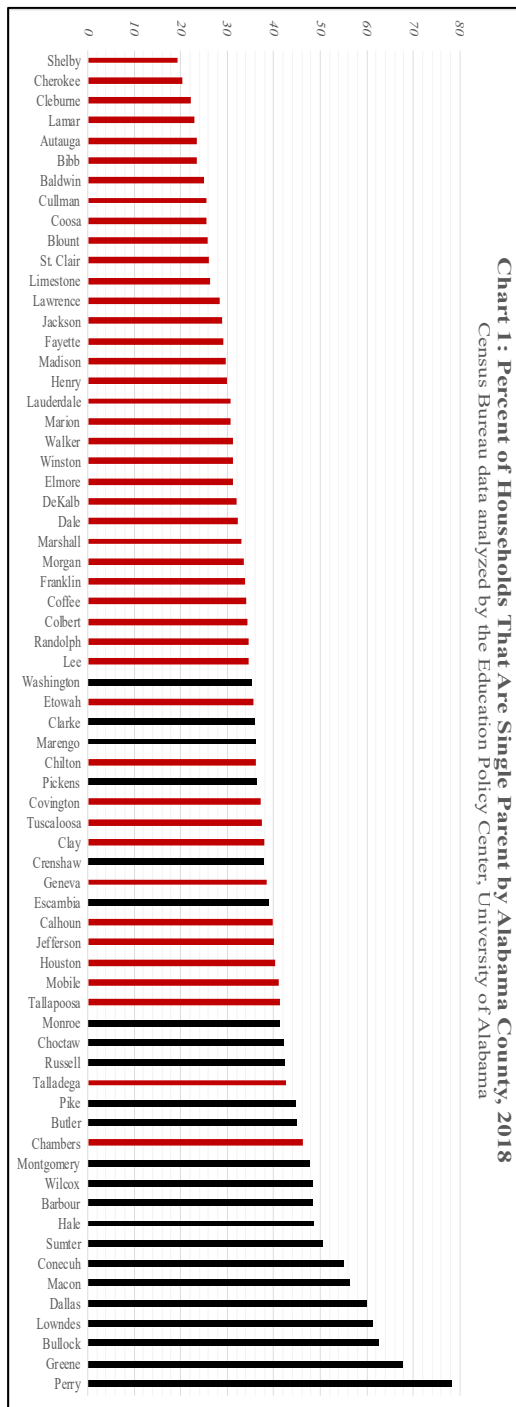


Chart 1: Percent of Households That Are Single Parent by Alabama County, 2018
Census Bureau data analyzed by the Education Policy Center, University of Alabama

“First Teacher serves some of Alabama’s most vulnerable families. Nearly two-thirds meet the federal definition for poverty and the majority of those are in extreme poverty, 50% or less of the poverty threshold. 65% of families served by First Teacher Home Visiting are single-parent homes. In 2018, 2,477 children received home visiting services with a focus on supporting the child’s growth and development. 1,467 families engaged in efforts to increase parent-child interactions that include enriching learning experiences in the home. Overall, 50,000 home visits were provided, offering families a foundation for future success through support, strategies, and relevant community resources. The First Teacher Home Visiting program saw marked improvements in tobacco cessation efforts. Through 22 First Teacher programs using the HIPPY model, almost 2,000 children received home-based instruction from parents or guardians, committed to increasing literacy and parent-child interactions in the home.”³

Chart 1, left, shows the percentage of households with children that are single parent households by county. The

data show markedly higher rates of single parents in the Black Belt. As the EPC previously researched, the region has experienced high rates of unemployment and low labor force participation for decades.⁴ These two factors combined make for a precarious position for countless children.

Partnerships and infant and early childhood mental health

The ADECE's alignment efforts have increased collaboration and partnerships among early childhood agencies and providers. The ADECE's partnerships include the Alabama State Department of Education, the Alabama Department of Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention (CANP), the Alabama Department of Mental Health (ADMH), the Alabama Department of Human Resources (DHR) and the non-profit group Alabama Partnership for Children (APC). There are now more than 20 Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health endorsed professionals across ADECE. There is now also an Early Childhood Development team with mentor coaches and specialized infant-toddler coaches.

Meanwhile, Alabama has joined the international Alliance for the Advancement of Infant Mental Health, a consortium of 25 states, Australia, and Ireland with the goal of positioning efforts in developing the early childhood workforce that can earn nationally recognized endorsements, increase services, and expand services access to the state's infant and toddler population. A new position, State Coordinator for Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health, was created in partnership with ADMH the state's lead agency for Project LAUNCH (Linking Actions for Unmet Needs in Children's Health), to address the need for system-wide change across the state. Clearly, the State of Alabama has made the care and education of its future citizens and workforce development a high priority.

Narrowing achievement gaps with First Class Pre-K

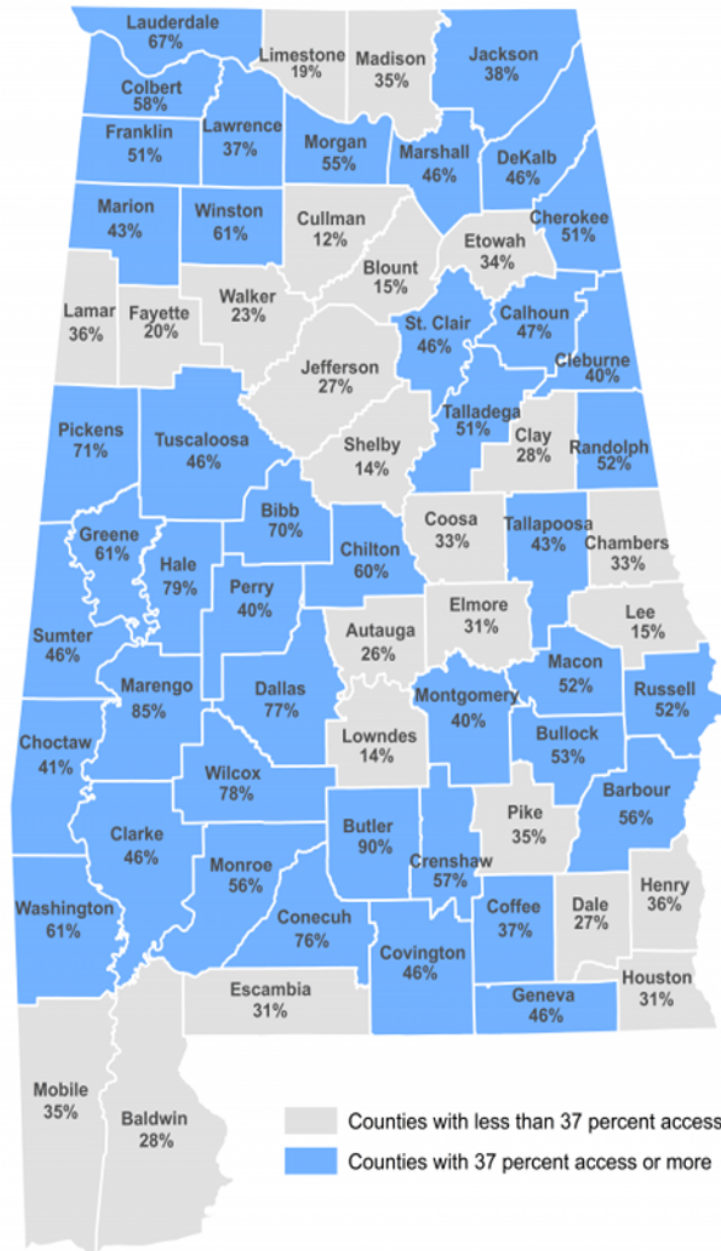
As these investments have spread more widely across the state, achievement gaps are narrowing. A study of third graders found that in both reading and math proficiency, First Class Pre-K narrowed achievement gaps between children in poverty and more affluent peers, and between minority children and non-minority children. Children in poverty receiving First Class Pre-K consistently outperformed their peers who did not, with the largest gains observed for Black and Hispanic children. First Class Pre-K closed the gap in reading proficiency by 28% for children in poverty compared to statewide proficiency levels, with a 12% gain (increase) in reading proficiency. First Class Pre-K closed the gap in math proficiency by 57% for children in poverty compared to statewide proficiency levels, with a 13% gain (increase) in math proficiency.⁵

Chart 2 on the following page shows the status of First Class program access in Alabama in 2019-2020. Of the 24 Black Belt counties, four—Escambia, Lamar, Lowndes, and Pike—had less than 37% of their four-year-olds enrolled in what the ADECE has defined as First-Class Pre-K programs. Data were researched by the University of Alabama at Birmingham’s School of Public Health. In the longer term it is important to collect objective data on what children know and can do, each year, and in particular, to measure the educational, physical and social developmental levels of children, from the ages of 4 to 7. ADECE utilizes the Teaching Strategies GOLD assessment to survey 38 objectives across six domains associated with school success.⁶ Positive results for First Class Pre-K participants include:

- Fewer than 50% of children arrived in First Class Pre-K meeting development and learning predictors of school success. However, by the end of the year, nearly all were meeting or exceeding expectations. Across social-emotional, physical, language, cognitive, literacy, and mathematics tests, upon entry in Fall 2018, students in First Class Pre-K averaged about 45 percent, improving to about 90 percent by the exit testing in the Spring 2019.
- In both reading and mathematics, there was a 29.6% gap in proficiency between poverty and non-poverty students. First Class Pre-K closes this gap.
- Children who received First Class Pre-K had lower rates of absenteeism, and fewer of the children were in need of special education services.
- As of Fall 2019, 8.7% of children participating in First Class Pre-K were retained at least once between kindergarten and the seventh grade, 3.2 points lower than the 11.9% retained with no First Class Pre-K—a one-fourth reduction in retention, or 13,763 fewer children retained, with an estimated potential cost savings of \$126,798,519.⁷

The number of First Class Pre-K classrooms across the state has steadily grown over the years from 281 in 2013 to over 1,200 in 2019.⁸ The Ivey Administration announced in May 2020 the addition of another 55 classrooms, bringing the total to over 1,250—an increase of 350% since 2013.⁹ At the same time, the percentage of 4-year-olds in Alabama with access to First Class Pre-K has nearly tripled from 13% in 2014 to 37% in 2019.¹⁰ Chart 3, below, shows the average number of children under 5 by per First Class Pre-K classroom by county. In the case of the Black Belt, generally lower population means a lower number of students eligible for First Class Pre-K.

Chart 2:
Percentage of four-year-olds enrolled in First Class Pre-K
2019-2020



UAB School of Public Health 2019

Source: Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education¹¹

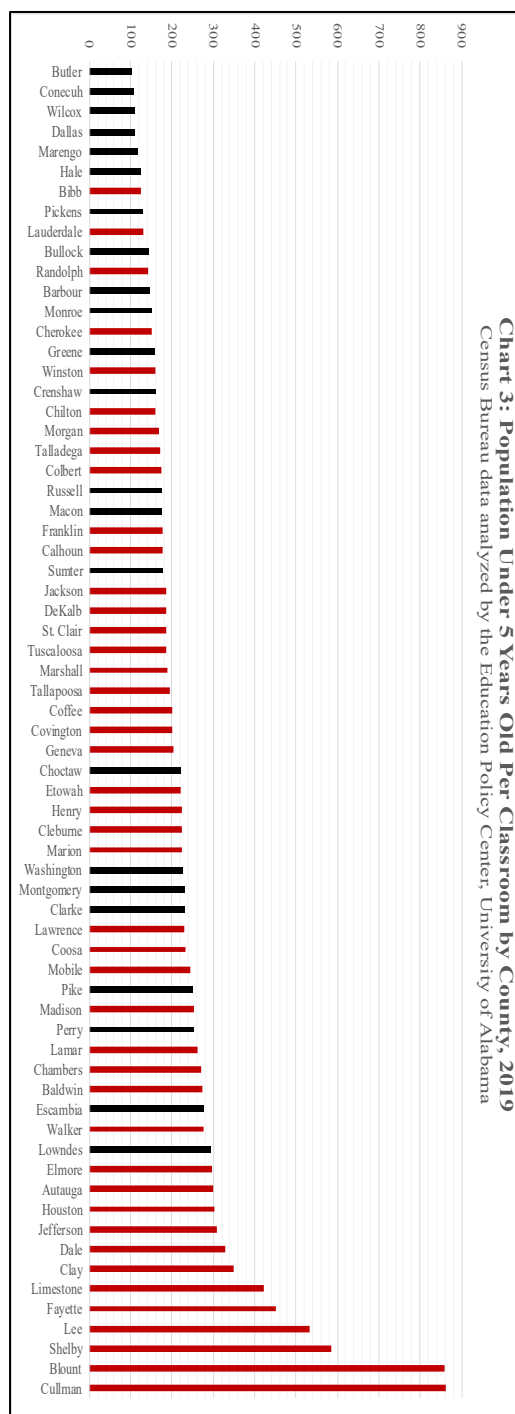
Census concerns

The Education Policy Center's recent brief posited that the Black Belt's population decline may explain the prospective loss of a congressional seat for Alabama.¹² At the same time, more than \$13 billion in federal assistance for Alabama is at stake.¹³ In 2015, federal obligations for the Head Start/Early Head Start program totaled close to \$132 million, while the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children totaled just over \$113 million.¹⁴ While these federal dollars relate specifically to early education efforts, hundreds of millions more go to K-12 education. With the pandemic challenging the Census count, these funds may be jeopardized.

Conclusion

Recent EPC briefs have examined issues such as population decline,¹⁵ persistent unemployment,¹⁶ low labor force participation¹⁷, and K12 enrollment decline¹⁸ in the Black Belt. In this instance, pronounced efforts on the part of the Alabama legislature and Ivey Administration to develop its nationally preeminent First Class Pre-K program gives cause for optimism.

While federal assistance may be jeopardized by low Census participation, such a program represents an invaluable investment in the state's future and is poised to pay dividends in terms of economic and social development.



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Defining Alabama's Black Belt Region

By Stephen G. Katsinas, Noel E. Keeney,
Emily Jacobs, and Hunter Whann

For the purposes of this issue brief series, the University of Alabama's Education Policy Center used an expansive definition of the Black Belt encompassing 24 counties. But we note that Crenshaw, Montgomery, Pike and Russell counties have had modest growth, which means that the population loss,¹ K12 enrollment decline,² lower employment³ and labor force participation rates⁴, and other issues identified are likely more severe in the remaining Black Belt counties—especially those west of Montgomery. Readers should keep this in mind as they review the data presented below. All of this speaks to the need for a uniform, agreed-upon definition of the Black Belt, an issue discussed in detail in this brief.

1 INCONSISTENT DEFINITIONS

Every Alabamian knows the Black Belt. They know it from their history books as the area in south central Alabama where the cotton was and is still grown. The Black Belt is where slaves tended the fields, and where sharecropping replaced plantations after Reconstruction. Everyone knows the Black Belt from iconic novels such as Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Alabama's political, civic, and business leaders know the Black Belt as well for its lower levels of high school completion, lower college attendance and completion, lower wages and employment, and lower numbers of high-wage, high skill jobs. The Black Belt is where Dr. King's supporters marched and organized, and where white planters used legal and extra-legal means to defend Jim Crow racism. For far too long, the Black Belt was known for exporting its most talented young.

But the Black Belt has been poorly defined. There are different definitions of which counties constitute it for federal, state, and local/regional programs. These

A map of Alabama showing its 67 counties. The counties are color-coded into two categories: Primary (dark red) and Secondary (light red/pink). The Primary counties are: Lamar, Pickens, Greene, Hale, Perry, Dallas, Wilcox, Lowndes, Montgomery, Macon, Russell, Bullock, Barbour, Pike, Butler, Crenshaw, and Escambia. The Secondary counties are: Lauderdale, Limestone, Madison, Jackson, Colbert, Franklin, Lawrence, Morgan, Marshall, Dekalb, Marion, Winston, Cullman, Blount, Etowah, Cherokee, Fayette, Walker, St. Clair, Calhoun, Cleburne, Tuscaloosa, Shelby, Talladega, Clay, Randolph, Bibb, Chilton, Coosa, Tallapoosa, Chambers, Lee, Sumter, Marengo, Autauga, Elmore, Choctaw, Washington, Clarke, Monroe, Conecuh, Baldwin, Mobile, Covington, Coffee, Dale, Geneva, and Houston.

* Map generated by the Education Policy Center at the University of Alabama

■ Primary ■ Secondary

Despite a widely understood if not generally accepted knowledge base about the region, no consistent Black Belt definition is used by state or federal agencies, or by researchers. The index of Wayne Flynt's magisterial, 602-page *Alabama in the Twentieth Century* includes a map of geo-political regions that places parts of 17 counties in the Black Belt.⁵ This same definition is presented in the online *Encyclopedia of Alabama* definition: Barbour, Bullock,

Butler, Choctaw, Crenshaw, Dallas, Greene, Hale, Lowndes, Macon, Marengo, Montgomery, Perry, Pike, Russell, Sumter, and Wilcox.⁶ This definition does not include counties such as Cochtaw, Clarke, and Monroe—the home of Harper Lee—that are commonly thought of as being in the Black Belt.

To initiate a discussion about the Black Belt, the Education Policy Center (EPC) chose to use a more expansive definition of the region—shown on Chart 1 above—for the purposes of this brief and the others included in this series. This definition differentiates between “primary” and “secondary” counties, with “primary” counties being more often cited as part of the Black Belt and “secondary” counties being less cited but statistically consistent with the higher unemployment and other common factors in the region.

1.1 Federal agency definitions

The Delta Regional Authority (DRA) is a federal-state partnership formed to invest in economically distressed regions of the Mississippi River delta. The designated counties across the eight Mississippi Delta and Deep South states include Alabama, Arkansas, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, and Tennessee. Because the DRA formally defines and often mentions Alabama's Black Belt counties on its website, we describe in some detail the criteria. Twenty Alabama counties are among the 252 counties and parishes included in the DRA. All twenty Alabama counties are referred to as Black Belt counties. To qualify for DRA funding, these counties must be "distressed," and meet the following criteria: (1) "[an] unemployment rate of one percent higher (5.2 percent) than the national average (4.2) over the most recent 24-month period" and (2) "[have] a per capita income of 80 percent or less of the national per capita income."⁷

The 20 Alabama DRA counties include: Barbour, Bullock, Butler, Choctaw, Clarke, Conecuh, Dallas, Escambia, Greene, Hale, Lowndes, Macon, Marengo, Monroe, Perry, Pickens, Russell, Sumter, Washington, and Wilcox counties. The DRA definition excludes counties in the middle of the state often considered part of the Black Belt, such as Macon, Montgomery and Pike counties, as well as Lamar County in west Alabama. From this analysis, the federal government has defined in statute the "Black Belt" of Alabama. But as we shall see, the federal definition is not consistent with state definitions, to which we now turn.

1.2 State definitions

The Black Belt Action Commission was created by Governor Bob Riley via Executive Order in 2004. Riley's *Governor's Commission for Action in Alabama's Black Belt* targeted 12 counties: Bullock, Choctaw, Dallas, Greene, Hale, Lowndes, Macon, Marengo, Perry, Pickens, Sumter, and Wilcox. Charged with "[creating] an action plan for these 12 counties," the Executive Order itself did not provide a concrete definition of the Black Belt for the Commission or the state.⁸

The University of Alabama's Institute for Rural Health Research has performed recognized and respected work across Alabama. It has prepared young, aspiring doctors to become general practitioners in areas of the state that increasingly lack access to healthcare. The Institute's definition of the Black Belt includes 19 counties. Conecuh, Escambia, Pickens, and Washington counties are included, but Montgomery, Pike, and Russell counties are not.⁹

Inconsistent definitions of Black Belt counties make it difficult for funded programs to lean on each other							
	Federal	State				Institutional	University of
Black Belt Counties	Delta Regional Commission ^[1]	Alabama Black Belt Adventures ^[2]	Black Belt Action Commission ^[3]	Alabama Department of Public Health ^[4]	Black Belt Community Foundation ^[5]	Alabama Black Belt Heritage Area ^[6]	Alabama Education Policy Center Definition ^[7]
Barbour	✓	✓					✓
Bibb						✓	
Bullock	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Butler	✓	✓				✓	✓
Choctaw	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Clarke	✓	✓				✓	✓
Conecuh	✓	✓				✓	✓
Crenshaw		✓					✓
Dallas	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Escambia							✓
Greene	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Hale	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lamar							✓
Lee		✓					
Lowndes	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Macon	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Marengo	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Monroe	✓	✓				✓	✓
Montgomery		✓				✓	✓
Perry	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Pickens	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Pike		✓					✓
Russell	✓	✓					✓
Sumter	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Tuscaloosa		✓					
Washington	✓					✓	✓
Wilcox	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Source: Various Sources, as analyzed by the Education Policy Center, The University of Alabama. Notes:

The Alabama Black Belt Heritage Area is a grassroots initiative of the Center for the Study of the Black Belt at the University of West Alabama, designed to bring economic development to 19 counties in the Black Belt region. Its mission is to “to shape a sustainable future for the Black Belt region through the preservation, interpretation, and marketing of unique cultural, historical, and natural assets, and to create a better quality of life for its residents through education and development of community capacity and pride.”¹⁰ The Alabama Black Belt Heritage Area definition consists of 19 counties, including Bibb, Conecuh, Pickens, and Washington counties, which are sometimes left out, but excludes the eastern Alabama counties of Barbour, Pike, and Russell in DRA’s Black Belt definition.¹¹

2 DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Chart 2, on the previous page, compiles the aforementioned—as well as some additional—government, state, and institutional definitions of Black Belt. The first step in any comprehensive, research-based approach to help lift up Alabama's Black Belt region is to develop a consistent definition. This is a necessary precursor to creating actionable programming for the long-term, and to synchronize state and federal policy. In a press statement that accompanied his signing of the 2004 Executive Order creating the Black Belt Action Commission, Governor Bob Riley declared:

“This is not another effort to study the Black Belt. I’m not appointing the commission so we can have another report on conditions in the Black Belt. The Black Belt has been studied and studied. The problems there have already been identified.”¹²

Until agreement occurs as to exactly which counties are and are not in the Black Belt, it is difficult to propose comprehensive, long-term solutions that allow for ownership, action, and progress; particularly in small rural areas with limited local resources. It follows that the lack of a consistent definition makes it difficult to synchronize policies across federal and state agencies and organizations. For this reason, we encourage Governor Kay Ivey to convene an ad-hoc committee of citizens—including demographers, agriculturalists, and educators—and charge them to develop a clear definition of the Black Belt for the state government, because you cannot measure what you cannot define.

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Box 870231, Tuscaloosa, Alabama 35487 · Telephone: (205) 348-6004 · <http://edpolicy.ua.edu>

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Healthcare: A Key Challenge in Alabama's Black Belt

By Emily Jacobs, Hunter Whann, Emily Grace Corley,
Jonathan Bowen, and Noel Keeney

Healthcare is cited by Pew Research Center as one of the most important issues to voters in 2020, second only to the economy.¹ This is not likely to change anytime soon—even after the election—as communities continue to grapple with the coronavirus pandemic. Just as the past several months have exposed inequities in access to internet (the subject of a forthcoming issue brief), so too has the pandemic revealed stark differences in access to healthcare. In this issue brief, part of a series produced by the University of Alabama's Education Policy Center, access to healthcare in Alabama—and specifically the Black Belt—is examined alongside national healthcare trends.

The Black Belt lacks access to healthcare

Employing an expansive definition of the Black Belt that includes 24 counties, the Education Policy Center (EPC) produced several charts outlining the state of healthcare access in the region and across Alabama.² Chart 1, on the following page, displays the number of hospital beds per 1,000 residents by county. It shows that the majority of Black Belt counties—17 of 24—are below the statewide average of 3.9 beds per 1,000 residents. In fact, 4 Black Belt counties (Lamar, Lowndes, Perry, and Pickens) simply do not have a hospital. It should be noted that, as of 2018, Alabama ranks #13 in the country in hospital beds per 1,000 residents.³ Though the total number of hospital beds in the Black Belt is proportional to its total population—the Black Belt constitutes 14 percent of the state's population and contains 13 percent of the hospital beds—a closer look reveals that many of those counties are underserved.

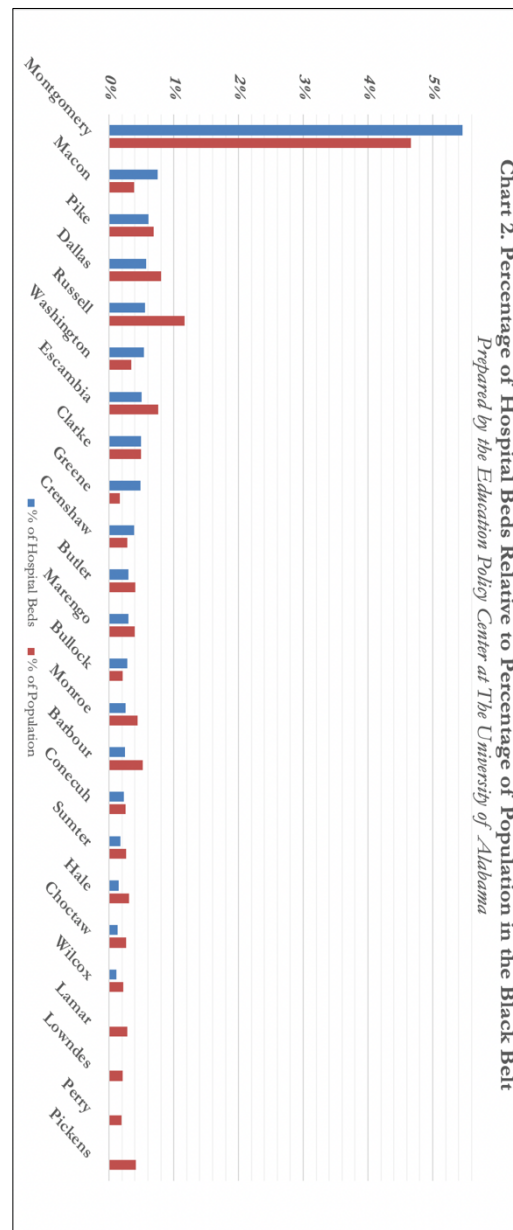
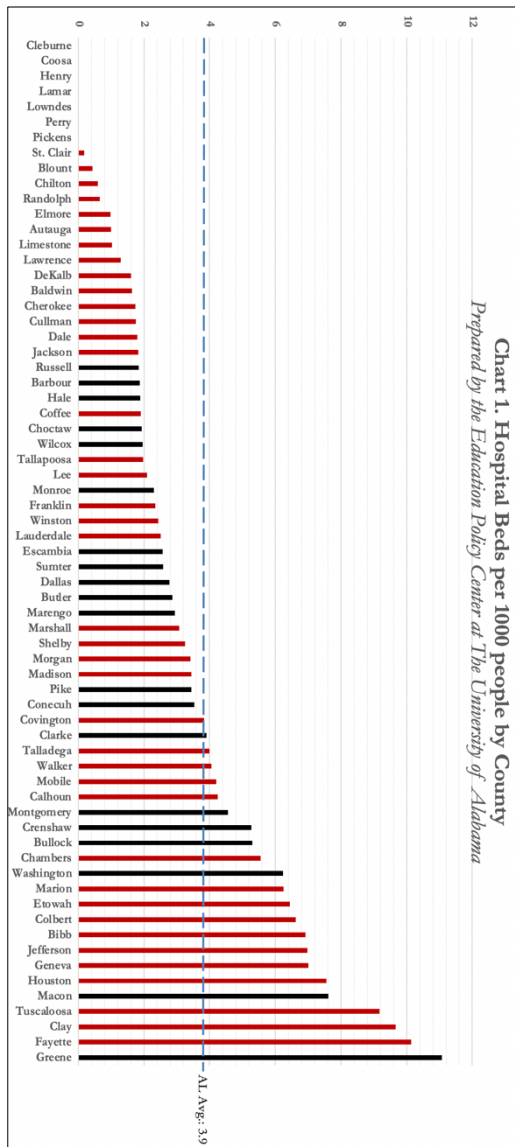


Chart 2, above, compares the percent of hospital beds per Black Belt county alongside that county's percentage of the population of Alabama. Of the 24 Black Belt counties, 6 have a greater percent of hospital beds than population. Another 14 have a lesser share of hospital beds relative to their population. The other 4, once again, lack a hospital altogether. These data suggest that the Black Belt is largely underserved in terms of healthcare. Specifically, it indicates that Black Belt residents lack *physical* access to healthcare, i.e. the nearest hospital or clinic can be over an hour away.

Rural hospitals are closing, and residents are suffering

Easy physical access to a nearby healthcare facility, indicated by the above data, is a luxury fewer and fewer rural Alabamians – and rural Americans—enjoy. Researchers at the healthcare analytics Chartis Group report that as of February 2020, 6 of Alabama’s rural hospitals have closed (a 7th in Pickens County closed, within weeks after this report was published) and 17 more remain vulnerable.⁴ One Black Belt mayor, Jerome Antone, was recently hospitalized 65 miles away from his town of Georgiana.⁵ “As COVID-19 continues to spread,” the Kaiser Health Network reports, “an increasing number of rural communities find themselves without their hospital or on the brink of losing already cash-strapped facilities.”⁶ Mayor Antone is quoted saying “you may have to go four or five hours away” if one’s local community does not have beds available.⁷

Rural hospital closures are a national problem, with immediate and often severe consequences for the communities no longer being served. The University of North Carolina’s Cecil G. Sheps Center for Health Services Research estimates that from 2005 to the present, 174 rural hospitals across the country have closed their doors.⁸ Communities losing their healthcare facilities face a corresponding 8.7 percent increases in mortality, according to the National Bureau of Economic Research. “As has been the case recently,” researchers Kritee Gujral and Anirban Basu explain, “economic downturns can lead to outmigration of rural residents to urban areas.”⁹ As the EPC’s own research has found, this appears to be the trend in Alabama’s Black Belt.¹⁰ Gujral and Basu continue: “[shrinking] populations imply lower patient volumes at hospitals, which can prevent hospitals from achieving economies of scale.”¹¹ As more hospitals close, residents are required to travel further for healthcare. Longer travel times for patients mean delays in treatment and worse health outcomes.

COVID-19 is straining already fragile healthcare

As explained above, the state of healthcare access for rural residents was tenuous before the coronavirus pandemic. Now, Americans who were already struggling to access healthcare are under more strain than ever. A poll conducted by the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, National Public Radio, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation reported 24 percent of all rural households “unable to get medical care for a serious problem when they needed it during the coronavirus outbreak.”¹² Of those, over half (56 percent) reported “negative

health consequences as a result.”¹³ “When it comes to healthcare,” the report concludes, “the coronavirus outbreak has dramatically affected delivery, with systems facing disruptions, delays, and deferrals in care for many patients.”¹⁴

The CARES Act impact in Alabama

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act was signed into law by President Donald J. Trump in March 2020. Since then, roughly \$3.7 billion has been allocated for use in the State of Alabama.¹⁵ Of the \$3.7 billion total, \$1.9 billion was provided via the Coronavirus Relief Fund for discretionary use by the Governor and Legislature, the remaining assistance was issued to state agencies. A total of \$449.4 million, the largest single share, went to 4,652 Alabama health care providers and systems. An additional \$191 million went specifically to 175 rural hospitals, clinics, and community health centers. With nearly 80 percent of the state’s rural hospitals beginning 2020 “with negative balance sheets and about eight days’ worth of cash on hand” the CARES Act funds “helped rural hospitals with the immediate storm,” according to Dr. Don Williamson, Alabama Hospital Association president and former Alabama State Health Officer.¹⁶ The future of Alabama’s rural hospitals remains unclear, however, as COVID cases remain prevalent and Congress stalls on new relief.¹⁷

Poor health outcomes are common across Alabama

While Charts 1 and 2 show physical access to healthcare as a problem for the Black Belt, other data analyzed by the EPC did not find Black Belt counties to be significantly any worse-off than the rest of Alabama. Poor health outcomes are instead common across the state, irrespective of a rural-urban divide. Charts 3 and 4, on the following page, examine percent change in premature deaths and the rate of preventable hospital admissions, respectively by county.

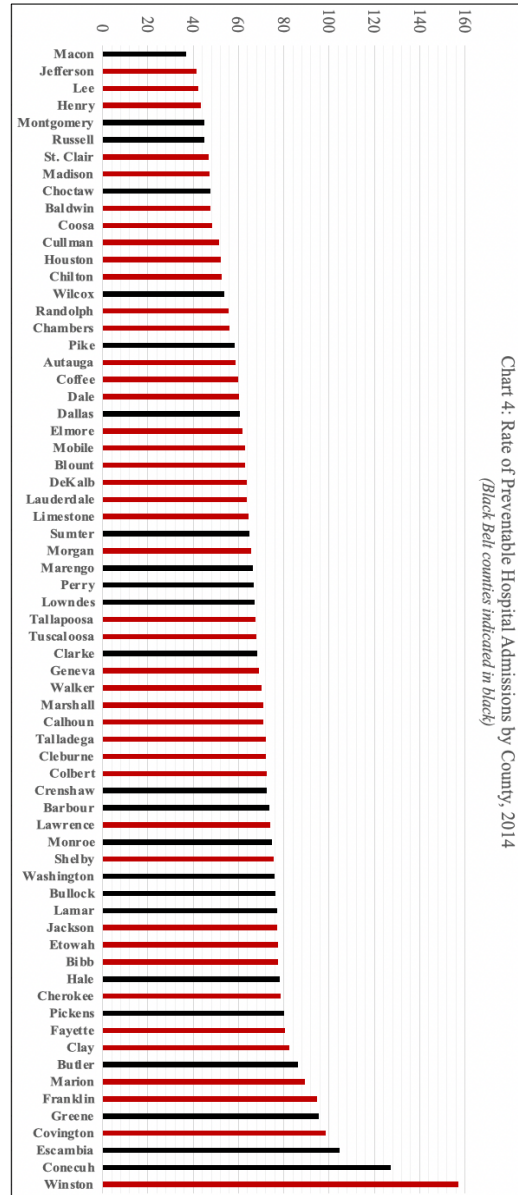
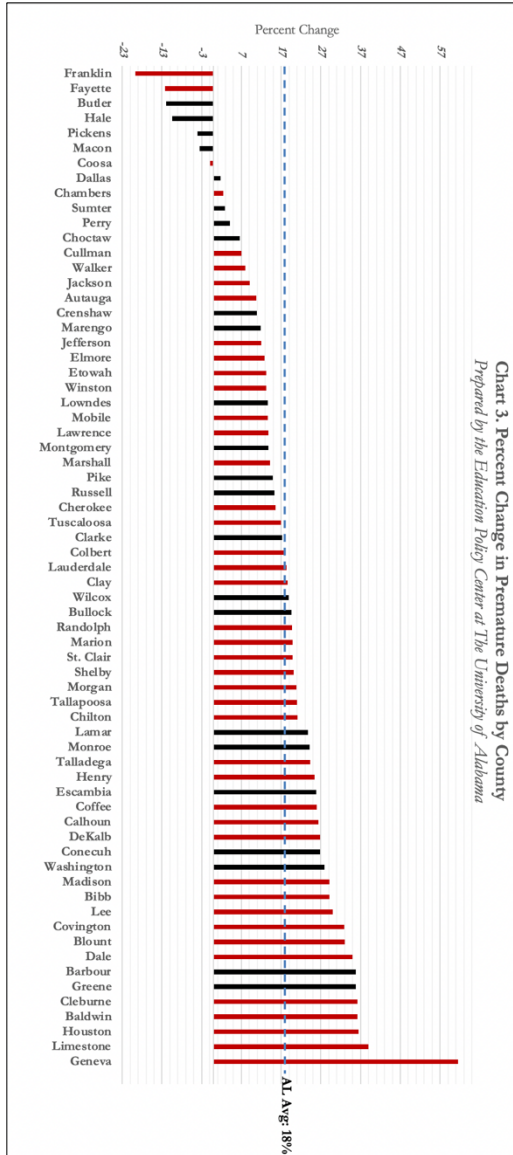
From 2008 to 2017, almost every single Alabama county saw increases in the premature death rate. Black Belt counties were both above and below the statewide average increase of 18 percent. In fact, a majority of the 7 counties (4) that saw decreases fall under an expansive definition of the Black Belt. Meanwhile, in 2014, the rate of preventable hospital admissions was evenly distributed across Black Belt and non-Black Belt counties. The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention define preventable hospital admissions as “admissions to a hospital for certain acute illnesses...or worsening chronic conditions...that

might not have required hospitalization had these conditions been managed successfully by primary care providers in outpatient settings.”¹⁸ Residents either don’t have access to primary care or must drive miles to receive it, as we noted earlier in the brief. Rural and urban, affluent and impoverished; that so much of Alabama is seeing poor healthcare outcomes speaks to the need for comprehensive policy reform, to which we now turn.

Not expanding Medicaid has cost Alabama billions

Since 2014, Alabama has chosen not to accept federal financial assistance to expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act (ACA). The federal government provided generous incentives for states to take ACA funding in the initial years of the program. Had Governor Robert Bentley chosen to do so, a University of Alabama at Birmingham study estimates it would have cost the state \$771 million from 2014 to 2020 as coverage expanded to an additional 300,000 more Alabamians.¹⁹ Over the same period, however, the federal government would have invested an additional \$11.7 billion to impact healthcare outcomes.²⁰ The state’s share would have steadily increased over the years, as the initial 100 percent reimbursement from the federal government fell, but, at the same time, as the UAB study estimates, Alabama tax revenue would have enjoyed an additional \$1.7 billion in added revenues. Over the next decade, Alabama could lose an *additional* \$4.9 billion in federal dollars for not accepting ACA funding.²¹

States that expanded Medicaid under the ACA have experienced significant secondary benefits. A 2018 study from the Louisiana State University found that the infusion of \$1.85 billion in Medicaid-related federal dollars created or retained over 19,000 jobs and supported \$3.6 billion in economic activity statewide.²² Health Matters, a pro-Medicaid expansion advocacy group sponsored by the Alabama Hospital Association, estimates that expansion could similarly generate \$11.4 billion in new economic activity²³ and 30,000 jobs.²⁴ Additionally, hospitals in states that expanded Medicaid are 84 percent less likely to close.²⁵ A 2018 study²⁶ showed that beyond immediate healthcare coverage for the uninsured, states that expanded Medicaid have enjoyed significant economic benefits while at the same time avoiding Hospital closures that are especially hard on rural communities.



Conclusion

Healthcare continues to be one of the most important issues facing Alabama. In this brief, the Education Policy Center showed that a lack of physical access to healthcare services exist in Alabama's Black Belt. This was clearly an important issue before the coronavirus pandemic. As the pandemic continues to unfold, rural Americans are under duress to access healthcare—with often negative consequences. We are concerned that without intervention, the trend of rural hospital closures may continue or even accelerate.

A large number of Alabama residents are presently experiencing declining healthcare outcomes. This is a matter of concern to informed Alabama policy-makers. In addition to focusing state resources to control the pandemic, Governor Kay Ivey's efforts to improve healthcare outcomes in Alabama include, but are not limited to, expanding behavioral-health services for many children and youth, reducing infant mortality and opioid overdoses, and requiring state licensing at more child-care centers.²⁷ In its 2021 agenda, the Alabama League of Municipalities advocates expansion of telehealth medicine tied to expanding broadband (the subject of a future Black Belt 2020 issue brief). There are many other initiatives underway that together can make a positive difference.

Sadly, in retrospect, it appears that the choice made by former Governor Robert Bentley in 2014 to not expand Medicaid has *both* cost the state billions and has produced negative, not positive, healthcare outcomes for rural Black Belt counties. Today, some leaders in Congress are working to reinstitute the same federal financial incentives for ACA participation that were initially in place in 2014, to encourage more states to participate if they choose to.²⁸ We endorse such efforts as they constitute good public policy. Should such legislation pass, it might be possible to simultaneously improve healthcare outcomes in Alabama's impoverished Black Belt counties and statewide and put the system in better long-term financial footing so that rural hospitals don't have to close.

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Issue Brief № 50

Internet Access Disparities in Alabama & the Black Belt

By Stephen G. Katsinas, Noel E. Keeney,
Emily Jacobs, Emily Grace Corley, and Hunter Whann

“Farmers and other rural Alabamians are at a significant disadvantage without high-speed internet access. This pandemic illustrates many of those problems, particularly those who need access to telehealth services, as well as employees and students who need to stay connected.”

—President Jimmy Parnell, Alabama Farmers Association¹

Since the beginning of the pandemic, millions of Pre-K, elementary, secondary, and post-secondary students and instructors throughout the country have had to adapt to online learning. While many today take broadband and wi-fi access for granted, there remains a significant number of Americans—particularly those in rural areas—who struggle to find a connection. This issue brief, part of a series produced by the University of Alabama’s Education Policy Center, presents original data on internet access in Alabama with particular interest in the Black Belt region. National trends are also examined, with potential solutions explored.

The Black Belt Lags Behind in Access to Broadband

Alabama’s Black Belt region is markedly behind the rest of the state when it comes to internet access. Chart 1 on the following page shows the percentage of the population by county who enjoy access to 100+ megabits per second (mbps) broadband as of 2020. Of the 24 Black Belt counties found by EPC in various reports to be part of the region,² all except two are below the statewide average of 86 percent coverage, and half are below 50 percent. Further, Choctaw and Perry counties zero percent coverage of 100+ mbps internet (Greene County has a negligible 0.02 percent coverage).

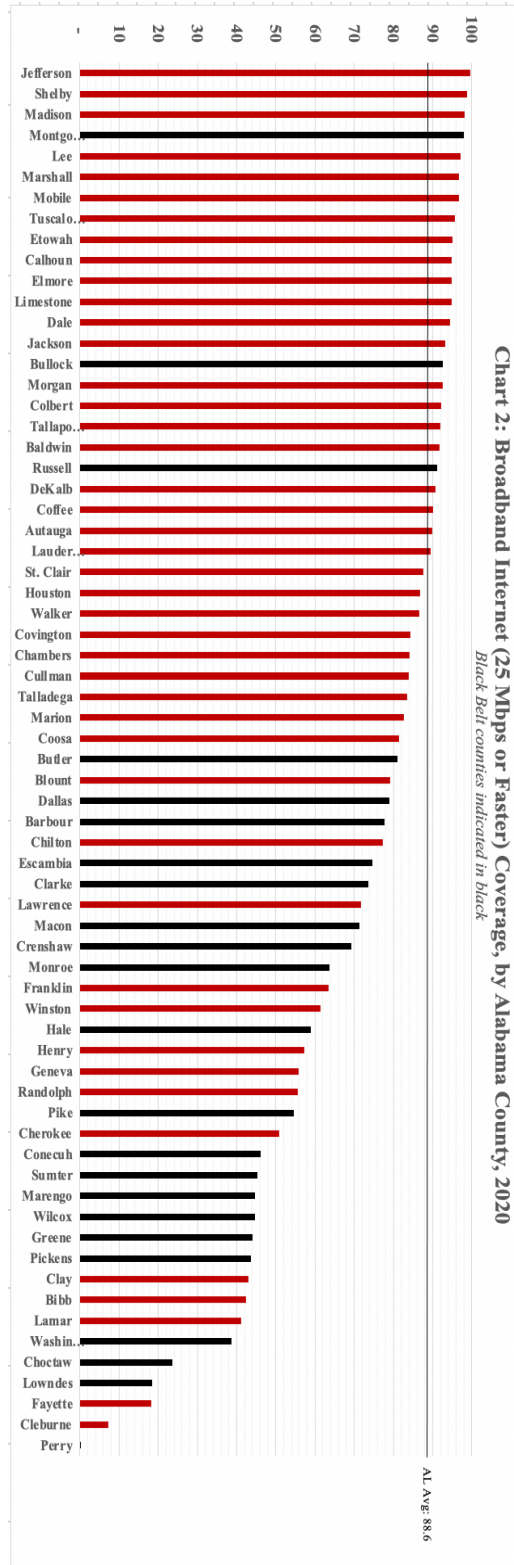
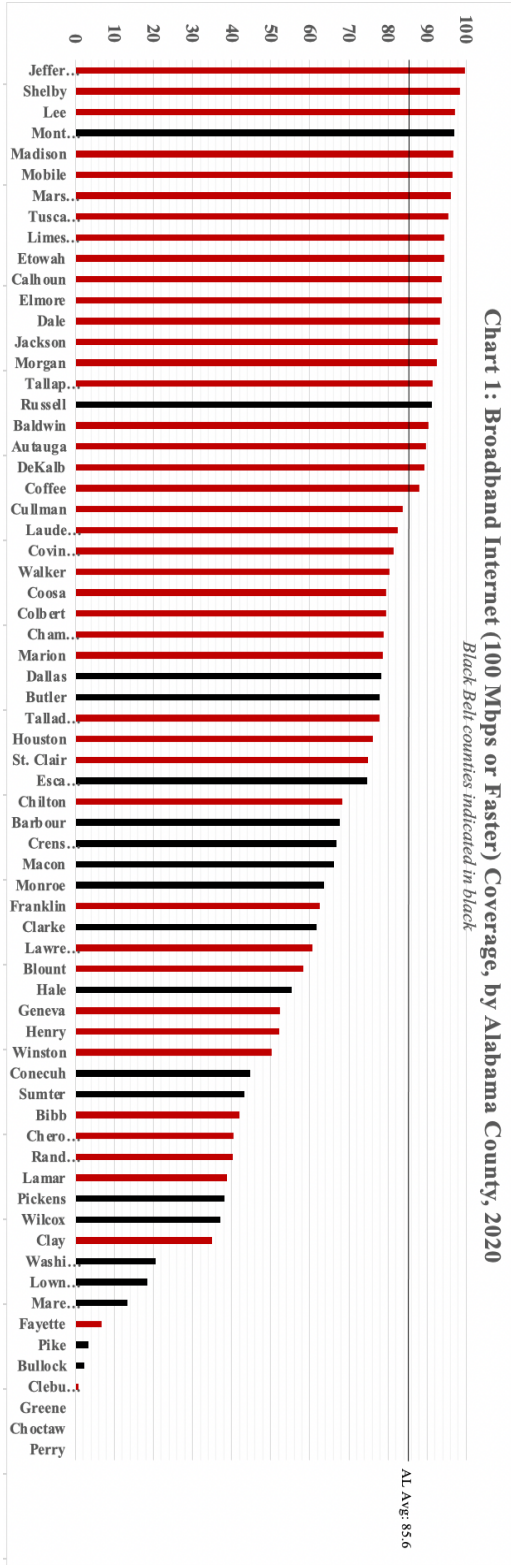


Chart 2, above, displays similar mbps data but at a much lower speed. While access levels are above 100+ mbps levels, the overall standing of the Black Belt remains similar. Three Black Belt counties are above the Alabama average of 89 percent coverage, while 10 are at 50 percent or below.

“The global COVID-19 pandemic,” says Perry County Commission Chairman Cedric Hudson, “is exposing one of the many problems in poor rural counties like Perry County—internet access is simply lacking or nonexistent...[poor] internet is limiting the knowledge and quality of life for the citizens in Perry county and all rural counties in the state.”³ University of Alabama student and Education Policy Center intern Branden Glover, a native of Linden, Marengo County, struggled to continue his studies at home in the Black Belt. Interviewed for this issue brief, Mr. Glover attested to the lack of high-speed broadband in rural Alabama: “It has been quite a difficult challenge,” he explained, “due mainly to the fact that internet access where I stay is either working [in] poor condition or not at all. Thus, making it nearly impossible to get work or other tasks done.”⁴

BroadBandNow, an internet access policy research center, ranks Alabama 38th in the nation for broadband access.⁵ “While the northern and east-central parts of Alabama, as well as the southwest tip of the state, are relatively well-connected,” *BroadbandNow* reports, “there remain a number of counties with low broadband coverage.”⁶ The area just described is essentially the Black Belt. The policy center spotlights availability and affordability as the two main factors contributing to the “digital divide” in Alabama. The former was discussed in connection to Charts 1 and 2. Regarding the latter, data show only 44.4 percent of Alabamians have access to an “affordable” internet plan of \$60 or less per month.⁷ In other words, a majority of the state’s residents lack access to affordable internet—a twenty-first century *necessity* for business, education, and communication—and most those Alabamians are in the Black Belt.

Alabama is Investing to Expand Access

“While expansion was already a priority,” writes Josh Moon of *Alabama Political Reporter*, “[Senate President Del] Marsh said the pandemic has now made it the top priority.”⁸ In March of 2018, Governor Kay Ivey signed into law the Alabama Broadband Accessibility Act, creating the Alabama Broadband Accessibility Fund to expand access to underserved communities—a major step in addressing the issue.⁹ Just this year, the Ivey Administration has awarded millions of dollars

in grants and other targeted funding to expand internet access in Alabama. In March, Gov. Ivey awarded \$9.5 million in broadband expansion grants, with a significant amount going to Black Belt communities.¹⁰ This was followed by \$5.1 million in additional grants in May.¹¹ Thanks to the Broadband Accessibility Fund and broadband providers,” Governor Ivey announced, “we are making progress in ensuring that Alabamians have access to high-speed internet services.” She continued: “[But] there is no question we have a long way to go on completing this mission.”¹²

The State of Alabama also allocated \$100 million in federal CARES Act-related dollars for “equipment and service for broadband, wireless hot spots, satellite, fixed wireless, DSL, and cellular-on-wheels” to increase access for K-12 students undergoing distance learning.¹³ An additional \$100 million in CARES funding was allocated for local education agencies to facilitate virtual learning for Alabama’s public school students,¹⁴ as well as \$72 million for higher education.¹⁵ Recent federal assistance to expand internet access has bolstered a steady stream of investment by the State of Alabama to ensure widespread access to broadband.

Broadband Expansion Efforts in Rural Alabama

In addition to public investments to expand broadband in rural Alabama, there are also ongoing private efforts to bring broadband to underserved rural areas. Currently, there is a movement building among rural electric cooperatives to tie existing electric systems to highspeed fiber internet networks and bring this critical service to rural Alabamians. The Alabama Rural Electric Association of Cooperatives (AREA) includes 22 member distribution co-ops across the state of Alabama plus PowerSouth, a generation and transmission co-op, with 10 distribution members serving Black Belt counties.¹⁶ Much like how rural electric co-ops paved the way for rural electrification in the 1930s and 1940s, these same community-based organizations have the opportunity to bring rural Alabama into the 21st century.¹⁷

Of the 22 AREA members, three organizations have already begun efforts to bring fiber internet access to the people in their service areas: Cullman Electric, Central Alabama Electric, and Tombigbee Electric. Only Central Alabama Electric serves residents of the Black Belt, but the model used by these organizations could be applied to the other 9 co-ops serving the region. Each project has received grant funding to create fiber internet networks from sources such as the

Alabama Broadband Accessibility Fund¹⁸ and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Utilities Service.¹⁹ Between these projects, thousands of miles of fiber cables will be strung or laid to bring highspeed (100 mbps+) internet to thousands of rural Alabamians over the course of the next few years.

Internet Access & Healthcare During a Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought telehealth into the spotlight like never before. The Mayo Clinic defines telehealth as “the use of digital information and communication technologies, such as computers and mobile devices, to access healthcare services remotely and manage your health care.”²⁰ Its use has skyrocketed from just 11 percent of US consumers in 2019 to 46 percent as of May 2020, with 76 percent of Americans interested in using it going forward.²¹ If this trend continues after the pandemic, the telehealth industry could see its value rise from an estimated \$3 billion as of 2019, up to **\$250 billion** as healthcare expenditures are “virtualized.”²² Telehealth is indeed important like never before.

Of course, telehealth by its very definition requires an internet connection—which as this brief has shown puts many at an instant disadvantage. The Education Policy Center's issue brief on healthcare showed significant disparities in access in rural areas like the Black Belt.²³ As discussed in this issue brief, the 24 Black Belt counties are also among the least internet-connected parts of the state. Of the \$1.9 billion provided to the State of Alabama in COVID-19 relief, \$300 million has been designated for remote learning technology and infrastructure—which could ostensibly assist telehealth.²⁴ The Federal Communications Commission has more directly assisted telehealth, awarding UAB \$1 million in July “to purchase iPads, webcams, and remote patient monitoring devices to facilitate the huge increase in telehealth that UAB has experienced.”²⁵ Similar US Department of Agriculture grant awards of \$72 million to expand telehealth access infrastructure—i.e. broadband—nationally, \$3 million of which was awarded to Alabama specifically, speak imperatively to the nature of internet access as a first-order issue for other public policy challenges.²⁶

Broadband Access is a National Issue

Students and instructors across the country are adapting to new policies and procedures designed to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, but many are at a disadvantage due to a lack of easy access to the internet. The *Atlanta Journal*

Constitution reported in April how some college students were relying on fast food restaurants for wi-fi. They had to “sit in the local parking lot to connect to free Wi-fi—often unreliable and unstable—to complete assignments.”²⁷ A University of Georgia student is quoted “[our] grading system assumes that we have similar access to resources to complete our education...that just isn’t true.”²⁸ Elementary and secondary students are also struggling to get the education they need because of inconsistent internet access. A *Los Angeles Times* editorial explained “the same old problems—lack of internet access or computers for doing homework...are exacerbated now that students are required to learn not in a classroom, but remotely.”²⁹ This is especially true in rural schools that lack the funds to assist its students.

Nationally, expanding broadband access is a high priority for the federal government. In March 2020, President Trump signed into law the Broadband Deployment Accuracy and Technological Available (DATA) Act. According to the Benton Institute for Broadband & Society, the law “requires the [Federal Communications Commission] to adopt new rules... that mandates the biannual collection, verification, and dissemination of granular data relating to the availability and quality of service with respect to terrestrial fixed, fixed wireless, satellite, and mobile broadband internet access service, from which the FCC will compile broadband coverage maps.”³⁰ It also requires the FCC to create and update a common dataset for all locations in the U.S. where fixed broadband service can be installed, meant to focus its efforts in rural and insular areas. By mapping where in the country internet is unavailable, the FCC will then be able to pinpoint areas for broadband to be installed and made accessible. This is a huge development for residents in areas like Alabama’s Black Belt who cannot today enjoy the benefits of internet access.

Conclusion

The digital divide, initially identified in the late 1990s, has clearly existed since the introduction of the internet to society at-large. This stark divide has been laid bare and called to attention by the COVID-19 pandemic. With millions of students at all levels and in all education sectors now having to adapt to remote learning, a significant number will be left behind due to lack of internet access. Rural areas like Alabama’s Black Belt are particularly hard-hit as lack of access to the internet—combined with other issues like population decline,³¹ high

unemployment,³² and strained healthcare access³³ — is forcing residents to leave. This issue will remain after the pandemic has passed, underscoring the importance of formulating policy to ensure the broadest access to internet possible for Americans.

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.

Director: Stephen G. Katsinas, Ph.D.

Associate Director: Nathaniel Bray, Ph.D.

Project Coordinators/Managers: Brandi N. Stacey, Michael S. Malley, Jr.

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: John Bruno, Emily Grace Corley, Brandon Glover, Emily Jacobs, Noel Keeney, Stephanie Paul, Hunter Whann, Jonathan Bowen

Box 870231, Tuscaloosa, Alabama 35487 • Telephone: (205) 348-6004 • <http://edpolicy.ua.edu>

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Black Belt Manufacturing and Economic Prospects

by Stephen G. Katsinas, Nathaniel J. Bray, Jonathan Bowen,
Emily Grace Corley, Noel E. Keeney, Hunter Whann, and Emily Jacobs

An inability to attract and retain talent was the top issue identified in National Association of Manufacturers' Manufacturing Institute survey.¹ This is true in rural Alabama and especially in its 24 Black Belt counties. With workforce development and education at the forefront of rebuilding the post-COVID economy, we see business stepping forward and teaming up to solve the skills-gap challenge. In this issue brief, the ninth and final in the Black Belt 2020 series by the University of Alabama's Education Policy Center, we review manufacturing and economic prospects in the Black Belt, and offer proposals for policy and further study, drawing upon the entire series of issue briefs.

Manufacturing Has Lifted Black Belt Counties on the Periphery

While the "Big 3" American automakers have operated in Alabama for decades, it was Mercedes-Benz' 1993 arrival in Tuscaloosa that began Alabama's rise as an auto manufacturing leader. Mercedes has invested more the \$6 billion in its North American plant east of Tuscaloosa,² and with its commitment to a 100% electric-powered fleet by 2022 is building a new electric battery plant that will employ 600 more workers. Montgomery County, home to Hyundai Motor Manufacturing's \$1.7 billion plant, employs about 3,000 workers, and with its second and third tier suppliers employs nearly 14,000.⁴

As of 2018, Alabama ranked 3rd nationally among the states in motor vehicle exports at \$6.5 billion.³ State economic development efforts are building on these successes. In addition to a \$1.6 billion joint venture between Mazda and Toyota, an additional \$830 million investment in Huntsville was announced in August 2020 that includes enhanced training for its growing workforce.⁵ Governor Kay Ivey commended their "belief in the future of manufacturing in America."

The U.S. Department of Commerce recently announced a grant of \$1.7 million to the University of West Alabama to support a \$175 million economic development project at the Port of Epes Industrial Park.⁶ Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross said it funds “transportation infrastructure, improved barge access and increasing the port’s operational capacity.” The International Automotive Components Group is building a new \$55.9 million plant that will create 182 jobs in Cottdale and Anniston,⁷ with 119 jobs in Tuscaloosa County.⁸

As Mercedes human resources officials told us—and as the heavy daily traffic on I-20/59 at the crack of dawn each morning clearly shows—workers are willing to drive up to a little more than an hour each way to go to work. Even though no hard evidence exists, abundant anecdotal evidence suggests the high likelihood that the new manufacturing plants established in counties on the periphery of Black Belt over the past 25 years have helped workers and families in many of the state’s poorest, most impoverished counties.

The Black Belt Lags in Business and GDP Growth

Chart 1 on the page following shows that eleven Alabama counties are at or above the statewide average of 22.4 business per 1,000 residents. This includes the counties hosting four of Alabama’s five largest cities. *Only 4 of the 24 Black Belt counties are above the statewide average, and eight were at or below 15 business per 1,000 residents* (Bullock, Greene, Lowdnes, Marion, Perry, Pickens, Russell, and Washington). With fewer businesses per 1,000 residents, it is no surprise the region has experienced high unemployment over the past several decades.⁹

Chart 2 shows Gross Domestic Product, the measure of the market value of the final goods and services produced within each Alabama county in the 2018 year. With no agreed upon definition, we deployed an expansive definition that includes 24 counties in the Black Belt.¹⁰ Of the 24 counties, just three—Montgomery, Washington, and Choctaw—were above the state’s average.

Further, Chart 3, below, shows the statewide average of personal income in 2018 was \$43,229. All 24 Black Belt counties except Montgomery County were below the statewide average of Personal Income per Capita by County. *In fact, 10 of 14 counties with the lowest personal income per capita in Alabama are in the Black Belt.*

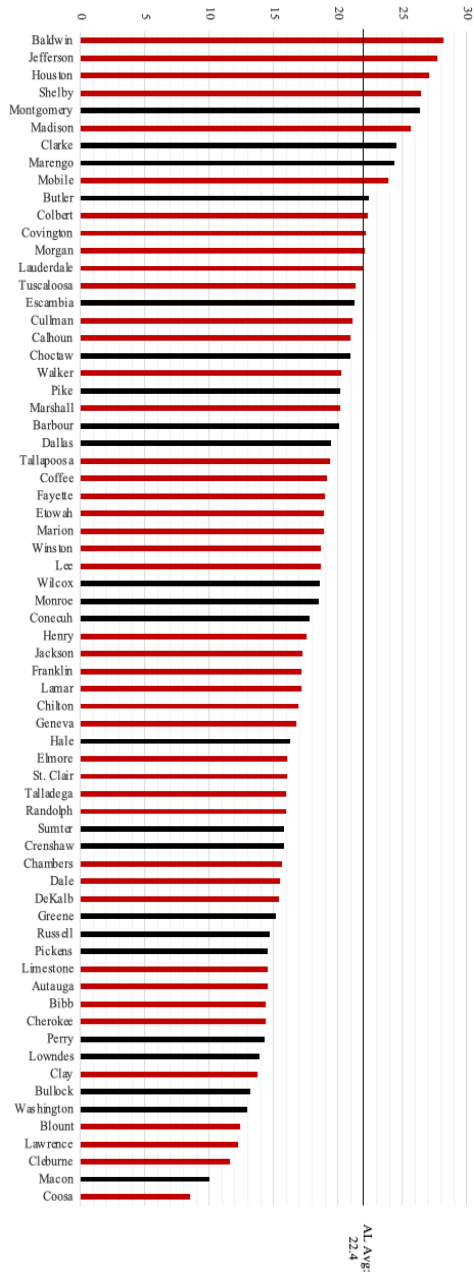


Chart 1. Number of Businesses Per 1000 Residents by County, 2018

Black Belt counties indicated in black

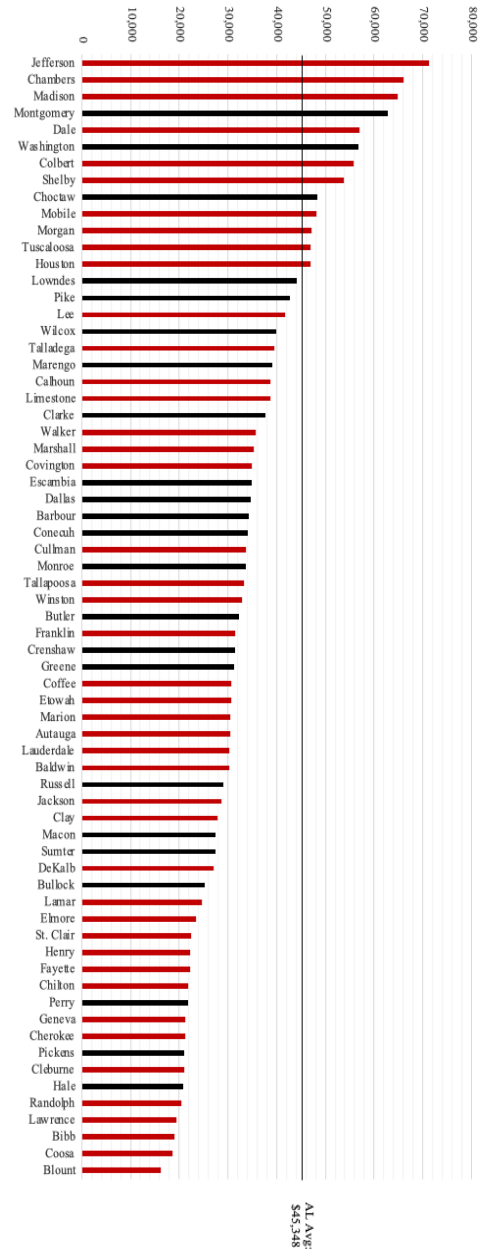


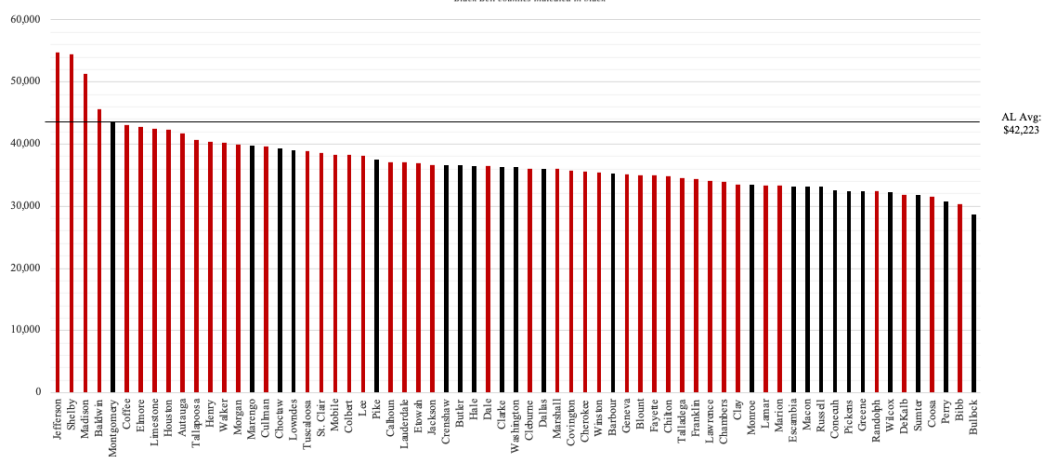
Chart 2. Gross Domestic Product Per Capita by County, 2018

Black Belt counties indicated in black

Alabama's Comprehensive Workforce Development & Lifelong Learning System

We now turn attention to describing Alabama's approach to workforce training and manufacturing, and prospects for the Black Belt. In prior works in this series, we documented how the Black Belt's declining population in turn meant lower elementary and secondary school enrollments, which in turn lead to challenges related to economies of scale for rural, small high schools to offer high-cost

Chart 3. Personal Income Per Capita by County, 2018



technology rich curricula. We also documented how unemployment rates in the 24 Black Belt counties are well above the state average, and how the labor force participation rates are roughly 20 points below.

For Alabama to expand its labor force participation rates to meet current and future business and industry needs, it must first train and then have a lifelong learning system in place to retrain and retain talented workers. Governor Ivey undertook the ambitious mission of adding 500,000 highly-skilled workers who are already here to the workforce by 2025 through her administration’s *Alabama Works Success Plus* initiative.¹¹ This comprehensive “all hands on deck” approach entails convening high school educators, post-secondary institutions and adult education programs to better align pathways to careers in high-demand fields. Its goal is to raise labor force participation rates to the national average by 2025.

Between the time Governor Ivey took office in April of 2017 and March of 2020, Alabama stood among the top states in improved labor force participation rates. This did not happen by accident: A four-bill package passed with unanimous support in the 2019 Alabama Legislature, which established a new Alabama Office of Apprenticeships (AOA). Prior to this time, all apprenticeship programs paid with federal Perkins Career and Technical Education (CTE) funds had to be submitted for approval by the regional U.S. Department of Labor office in Atlanta. Under the new streamlined process AOA, headed by Josh Laney, AOA is part of the Alabama Department of Commerce in Montgomery. This is one of many of a dizzying number of initiatives coordinated by the Governor’s Office of Education and Workforce Transformation, that include but are not limited to:

- *The Success Plus Education Attainment Committee* identified intended targets critical to meet the needs of Alabama industry so that business are provided with workers possessing the skills that are needed.¹²
- The process of submitting *Alabama's 2020 Combined Joint Workforce Investment Opportunity and Perkins Career and Technical Education Plan* created a common language across Alabama's workforce community, its business-driven 7 Workforce Regional Councils, and education partners.
- *The Alabama Terminal on Linking Statistics (ATLAS)* on Career Pathways is an inter-agency data-sharing system to allow education and workforce agencies to share data to create reports across sectors.
 - It will permit education and workforce data to be combined to create the *Alabama College and Career Exploration Tool (ACCET)*, which allows Alabamians of all ages to explore career pathways in each of the 16 industry clusters; employers can also use the ACCET to identify job seekers compatible for job openings and encourage inserting credentials into job descriptions, with the ultimate goal of enhancing credential currency and producing wage increases for those earning additional credentials of value.
- *The Governor's Survey of Employer Needs*, supported by UA's Education Policy Center, assessed post-COVID employer needs (June & July, 2020).

The mission of *Alabama Works* is to "recruit, train, and empower a highly skilled workforce driven by business and industry needs."¹³ Through partnerships with the Departments of Commerce and Labor, the Alabama Community College System, and the Alabama Industrial Development Training (AIDT), *Alabama Works* pairs business and job seekers at all skill levels. There are three workforce councils serving the Black Belt's 24 counties. Our focus is on the award-winning Region 3, *West Alabama Works*, which serves western Black Belt counties.¹⁴

In December 2019, *West Alabama Works* opened its Black Belt Workforce Center in Demopolis to better connect businesses looking to train employees in the Black Belt.¹⁵ The Center develops new business as it maximizes existing Black Belt talent. *West Alabama Works* partners closely with Career and Technical Education programs at local secondary schools and community colleges. For students, CTE high school courses are an effective, affordable way to learn job readiness skills, earn industry recognized credentials that demonstrate immediate readiness to

enter the work force, and credit towards an Associate's degree.¹⁶ AIDT and WIOA are important funders of non-credit customized workforce training.¹⁷

Benefits Cliffs: A Challenge in Alabama's Black Belt

To reach the goal of 500,000 more Alabamians with degrees or credentials by 2025, the business-driven *Alabama Works Success Plus* connects high-skilled labor to jobs. Bringing more underemployed and unemployed Black Belt citizens into the workforce means aligning programs, and establishing a wage premium for workers now unable to enter or stay in the labor force due to benefits cliffs.

Benefits cliffs occur when unemployed or underemployed workers receiving assistance from multiple programs (Alabama Medicaid, SNAP, WIOA, housing vouchers, etc.) begin to earn too much money to qualify for a specific benefit. Upon losing a single benefit such as childcare, the beneficiary then makes the sadly rational decision that taking care of children is more important than work.

Benefits cliffs can be reduced by better aligning welfare-to-work, employment and training, adult literacy, food security and education programs. The concept is not new—aligning programs around community colleges was identified back in the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁸ Better aligned programs is a goal of the Dallas County Promise, where new Dallas County Community College students receive food bank vouchers and bus passes as they enroll.¹⁹ Eliminating barriers and program alignment is a priority for business, education, and civic leaders involved in the many College Promise launched in 320 communities and 29 states since 2015.²⁰

On October 22, 2020, Governor Ivey and Atlanta Federal Reserve Bank President Raphael Bostic announced a new online dashboard to aid workers to see how rising wage levels impact their benefits curves, noting, "It is important to address the issue of increased marginal tax rates—or benefit cliffs—in a coordinated way, to make sure that the incentives are not sending the wrong signal to people, but rather are pushing and driving them to invest in themselves and get to a more stable place. This is one way we make sure that this economy works for everyone." Ivey said, "We are the first state to take a benefits cliff calculator and merge it with a workforce development career path planner...we are proud to, once again, be leading the way with innovative workforce development solutions for the people of Alabama."²¹

Moving Forward – Prospects and Possibilities

Charts 4 and 5, obtained from the Alabama Department of Labor, show that few advanced and automotive manufacturing industries are located in the 24 Black Belt counties. The notable exception is Montgomery County and the counties that lie between the large Kia plant in LaGrange, Georgia, just over the Alabama line on I-85. Thus, we see again the theme that many manufacturing plants exist on the periphery of the Black Belt, but not in it. Since the economic development literature consistently emphasizes the need to build on existing strengths, we offer these options for policymakers, and note many are already underway:

Chart 4

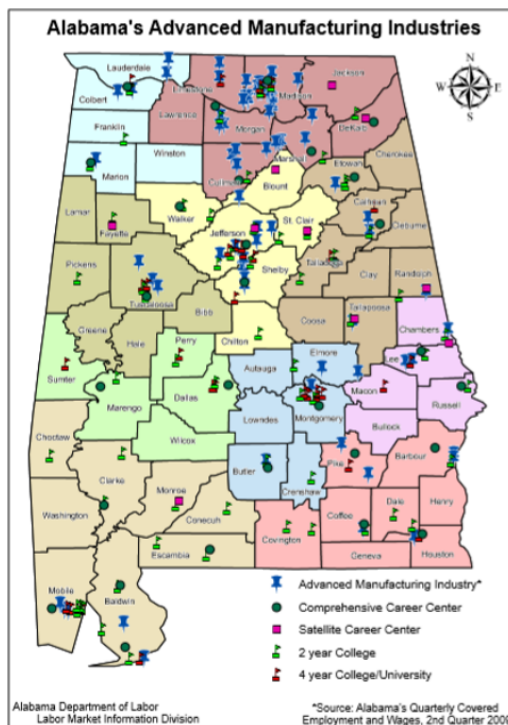
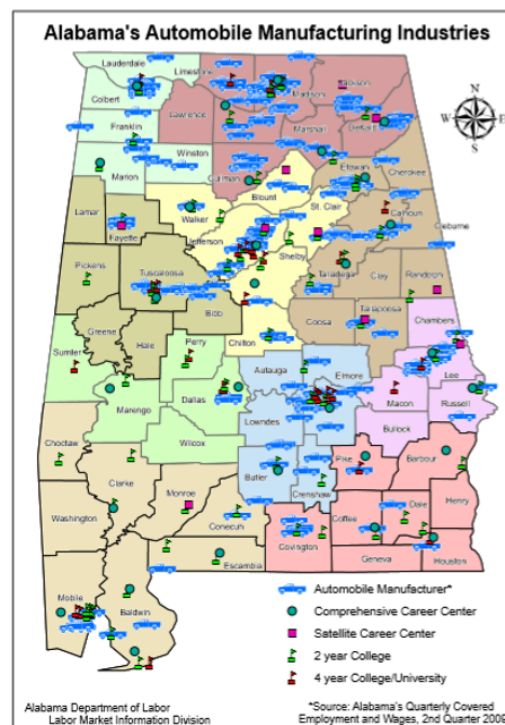


Chart 5



- Target second and third tier suppliers related to the automotive industry for development and location in western Black Belt counties.
- Establish and strengthen CTE programs targeted to work opportunities in the automotive industry in county schools on the periphery of the Black Belt adjacent geographically to plants in central Alabama and Montgomery.
- Establish and strengthen CTE programs targeted to work opportunities in aerospace and shipbuilding in county schools on the periphery of the Black Belt adjacent

geographically to plants in Baldwin and Mobile Counties, targeting these industries' second and third tier suppliers.

In addition to programs targeted to help Black Belt counties on the periphery of major manufacturing plants, we also suggest efforts to effectively reach counties inside the Black Belt that are not. We note, at the outset, that the approaches that would work in an urban area will not be successful in rural, sparsely populated rural areas like the Black Belt. For example, *West Alabama Works* has two vans equipped with mobile high speed wifi—our broadband brief preceding this one found virtually no high speed internet in some west Alabama Black Belt counties—that “go to where the people are.” This specifically includes schools, churches, and childcare facilities.

The point is that while the goal is the same in urban and rural areas—connect/reconnect people to the labor force through a lifelong learning system that makes work pay—the strategies to accomplish this must necessarily be very different to be effective in sparsely populated rural areas with persistent poverty. In addition to encouraging other Alabama workforce regions to carefully study the strategies *West Alabama Works* has used to reach people in the dirt, we recommend these programs to enhance the rural infrastructure already in place:

- *Establish a Rural-Small Schools Workforce Development Fund.* Since many federal programs are grant-funded on three-year cycles, it is clearly in the state's interest to create a level playing field for their small, rural schools to be competitive in both writing grants and sustaining them after receipt. A cost-effective Rural-Small Schools Workforce Development Fund could give small, rural schools a fourth, fifth and sixth year boost above the normal three to sustain grant-funded programs. This would improve the odds for rural, small Black Belt schools to apply for grant-funded high-tech programs, including CTE funded apprenticeships, and vastly improve the odds that such programs take root. If successful, this model could be extended to include rural Appalachian school districts.
- *Establish a Rural Colleges Workforce Development Fund.* With fewer revenue streams, rural community colleges like rural, small K-12 school districts, are more vulnerable to economic downturns and are more conservative in their budgeting practices.²⁰ A Rural Community Colleges Workforce Development Fund can with state funding extend by two or three years any National

Science Foundation, National Institutes of Health, or other three-year federal grant programs. This would spur submissions by colleges serving high poverty Black Belt counties at relatively low-cost.

- *Encourage federal officials to include rural dispersion policy provisions in federal grantmaking.* Rural dispersion policies whereby if the population is below 20 persons per square mile, or if the poverty rate is 150% or above, small, rural schools and rural community colleges and universities are eligible for points in grants competitions or enhanced funding are needed. Alabama's congressional delegation should be encouraged to insert language into federal programs that help their rural, small schools and colleges overcome economy of scale issues wherever possible.

We also offer these suggestions for further study:

- *Convene an ad-hoc group of experts to formally define the Black Belt,* as suggested in our *Defining Alabama's Black Belt Region* issue brief. What cannot be defined cannot be measured. With so many definitions out there, it is in the interest of the State of Alabama to once and for all gain clarity on which counties are in the Black Belt and which are not.
- *Examine the actual migration patterns of Black Belt high school graduates since 2010,* to determine not only how much out-migration of graduates from high schools, community colleges, and four-year institutions is actually occurring, but also the actual patterns themselves. If they are leaving, are they migrating to other areas of Alabama, or leaving the state altogether? Reasons for departure need to be specifically identified, so that actionable policies, including potential loan forgiveness, might can be developed.
- *Examine why industrial investment/employment is not coming to the Black Belt.* Investors care about transportation infrastructure and the availability of workers who are well trained. Are there differences within and across the Black Belt (i.e., are western Black Belt counties lagging behind the rest of Alabama in industrial production due to issue with transportation infrastructure?) Studies going beyond surface issues are needed.
- *Examine inter-generational wealth transfer for minority-owned rural manufacturers and entrepreneurs.* How much intergenerational wealth was transferred from rural Black family-owned businesses pre-Civil Rights movement to their descendants, and if the answer is very little, might the state consider a program to support entrepreneurship in rural Black Belt Counties?

- *Examine the experiences of minority-owned rural manufacturers and entrepreneurs to see how they might be replicated.* Alabama should identify successful rural minority-owned manufacturers and entrepreneurs, and make sure majority-minority school children visit those businesses, to see exemplary role models.
- *Examine if the region lacks a critical mass of key certificates and degrees.* This could include Associate's in Applied Sciences (AAS) degrees that are manufacturing related. If so, can state policymakers address the economies of scale issue so that the Black Belt's higher education institutions and their campuses can be more fully deployed to help lift up the region?
- *Establish a Black Belt Scholars Program,* to provide scholarships for Black Belt high school graduates to attend Alabama community colleges and four-year programs in STEM, healthcare, and manufacturing majors. If it is true that firms will locate by following the workforce, then the question begs: Can Alabama invest to allow its Black Belt to become a manufacturing area as well?

Concluding Thoughts

With labor force participation rates some 20 points below the statewide average, the focus on benefits cliffs is undoubtedly important to Alabama's Black Belt. In addition to making work pay, more must be done to encourage workers to join a lifelong learning and employment, training, and adult literacy system that has multiple points of egress. Postsecondary education—particularly community colleges—positioned between secondary education and senior institutions, play a critically important role in lifelong education. Community colleges have long been the nation's largest delivery system of for-credit and non-credit education to adults, dating to the Job Training Partnership Act of 1982, when President Ronald Reagan—a former two-term California Governor—linked community colleges to America's workforce training system.²² In Alabama, the good news is the commitment is there, as Alabama Community College System Chancellor Jimmy Baker noted in January 2020 at the Hyundai Training Center, when he said that at ACCS, all hands *are* on deck to support *Alabama Works Success Plus*.

In this brief, we have shown that businesses are coming to Alabama but aren't coming to the Black Belt at the same pace as the rest of the state. Thanks to the efforts by Governor Ivey and partners throughout the state, Alabama has established itself as a destination for business, but more can be done to bring investment to the Black Belt. For this reason, we encourage continued cooperation and

formation of new partnerships that will educate, train, and maximize the talent that already exists in rural Alabama.

This is why the Education Policy Center is pleased to work with the Governor's Office of Education and Workforce Transformation, assisting with aspects of the joint 2020 WIOA-CTE Plan, the Alabama Career Pathways Model, the Alabama Committee on Career and Credential Pathways, and the Alabama Terminal on Linking and Analyzing Statistics. Our partnership with the Alabama General Studies Committee and the Statewide Transfer and Articulation Reporting System housed at Troy University, seeks to update Alabama's original alignment program, created in 1994, to help students and families save time, credits and money. Alabama's higher education community has come together to move the current paper-based transfer system onto a mobile platform tied to labor market data, so users can map their entire course-taking from high school to community colleges, to four-year institutions (2+2+2). State Senator Jimmy Holley has called the AGSC Alabama's most successful education reform effort in his long career in state government. We are pleased to partner with the Alabama Department of Commerce' new Alabama Office of Apprenticeships, to create dashboards linking U.S. Department of Labor apprenticeships to employer needs.

There can be no doubt that a comprehensive approach is the only one that will work, and all of the wagons must be hitched and headed in the right direction. This is what Governor Ivey and the State of Alabama are trying to do with its myriad of workforce training and education initiatives.

Moving forward, our state should no longer accept being 49th of 50 on measures of education progress. In June 2009, the EPC hosted the Assistant Secretary of Rural Education at the U.S. Department of Education and convened a focus group of six Black Belt school superintendents. Five reported borrowing money from local banks to make monthly payrolls. The Rolling Reserve Act passed in 2011 ended the “boom and bust” funding cycles for Alabama schools. Now, as we move beyond the pandemic, Alabama is poised to chart a new and innovative course. The state’s challenge is to spell the word “vision” with upper and not lowercase letters.

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.

Director: Stephen G. Katsinas, Ph.D.

Associate Director: Nathaniel Bray, Ph.D.

Project Coordinators/Managers: Brandi N. Stacey, Michael S. Malley, Jr.

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: John Bruno, Emily Grace Corley, Brandon Glover, Emily Jacobs, Noel Keeney, Stephanie Paul, Hunter Whann, Jonathan Bowen

Box 870231, Tuscaloosa, Alabama 35487 • Telephone: (205) 348-6004 • <http://edpolicy.ua.edu>

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