

Marginalization of Rural Communities in the U.S.

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Chronic Rural Poverty and Deliberate Marginalization

Rural America evokes strong and pleasing images for most people who live in urban areas: the vast Western landscape and big sky, farms with neatly tended crops and a barn full of animals, mountains and valleys, lakes and forests. But there are rural places where many people endure real hardship and have for decades. This chapter examines the marginalized, chronically poor places in rural America.¹ These persistently poor places include much of the rural South, Appalachia, the *colonias* and other borderland communities, and Indian Country—places where people have been denied opportunities, where racism often permeates daily life, and where critical community institutions are weak.

Persistent rural poverty is often assumed to follow from geographical remoteness or sparse population that limits economic opportunity, compared to denser areas with access to urban markets. Indeed, much policy to improve rural conditions has been designed on the premise that poor places need to overcome isolation (and the “cultural deficits” that accompany isolation). We argue that, in most cases, persistent rural poverty stems not from spatial isolation but from a historical political economy and, in all cases except Appalachia, deep structural racism. These are places where many poor people were deliberately kept vulnerable to powerful elites and where local corruption undermined local institutions, especially educational institutions, denying the poor access to a decent education and economic opportunity.²

We use the word *marginalization* to describe these places, signaling agency and intent: people are “kept down,” relegated to the periphery by the elite who gain from their lack of power. Some use the concept of social exclusion: “shut out,” emphasizing “the processes by which the distribution of power and resources are controlled.”³ In many persistently poor rural places, there are only two classes—“haves” and “have-nots”—and almost no middle class. The haves marginalize the have-nots, stigmatizing them, to differentiate themselves from the poor to preserve their own higher status,

and to keep the poor dependent on those who control access to opportunities.⁴ The poor's cultural toolkit—to use Ann Swidler's concept of culture as the habits, stories and relationships that shape a sense of what “people like us” do—includes that stigma: that branding as a failure with little chance for participating in the mainstream.⁵

Failed institutions play an important role in the perpetuation of poverty. Development economist Amartya Sen and ethics professor Martha Nussbaum think about poverty through a capabilities framework. Sen describes the poor as those who have been deprived of basic capabilities: to be healthy and literate, and to lead creative lives. Like marginalization and exclusion, the word *deprivation* reminds us that poverty is not about choosing to be poor. Nussbaum argues that we need to think about what people can do, what they are capable of, and that supporting the development of people's capacity requires “affirmative material and institutional support, not simply ... a failure to impede.”⁶ The poor need institutions to provide the resources that build their capacity to live healthy, creative lives as full participants in the mainstream.

Economist Albert Hirschman identified three paths people can take in poor, tightly controlled communities: Exit, Loyalty or Voice.⁷ Exit refers to out-migration, leaving the place where opportunities are limited and tightly controlled by the powerful elite. Out-migration is more often an option for those with education, and the prospect of migrating can be stymied by a cultural toolkit that sees limited prospects. Some scholars and policymakers have considered encouraging and facilitating Exit as a way to address rural poverty.⁸

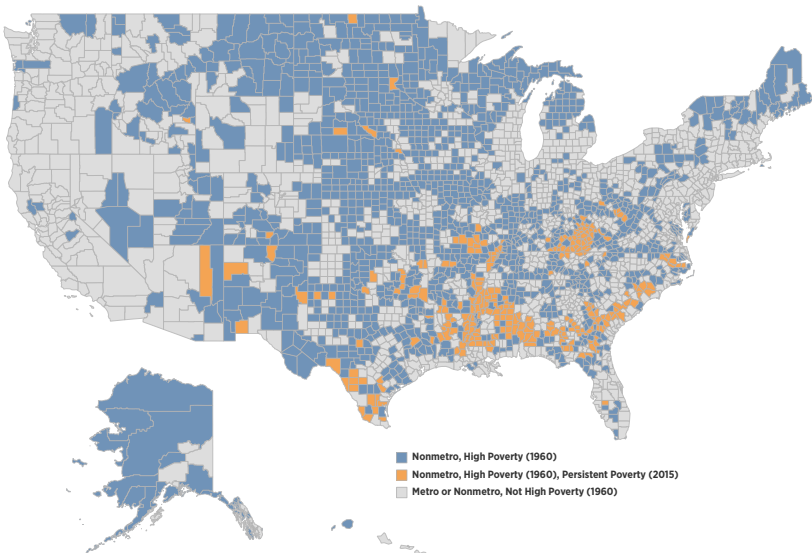
By Loyalty, Hirschman meant allegiance to the status quo, accepting the oppressive conditions and divided patron-client social relations. Sometimes people stay and don't make trouble because they want to be close to family. But other times, they come to accept their circumstances, unable to imagine a different scenario.⁹ As one Black woman described her father: “A way of thinking, it's that Delta mentality ... my father was a sharecropper. He did the fields and everything, and he was kept in debt, and his mindset had gotten to the point, ‘This is all I can do.’”¹⁰ While they understand its source, local change agents deplore the “mindset” of Loyalty, of accepting things as they are.

Voice refers to speaking and acting for change, resisting the status quo, and working to build a more equitable and inclusive community, often at real risk of personal and family punishment or blackballing by elites.

What Characterizes Rural Marginalized Communities?

In 1960 there were 1,689 high-poverty counties in rural America (blue counties in Figure 1). Most have shed their high-poverty status in recent decades. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Economic Research Service (ERS) classifies counties as “persistent poverty” when they have high poverty over multiple decades. The counties in blue with bold borders in Figure 1 are the places that remain persistently poor today. There are 301 such marginalized, persistently poor counties, and strikingly, four out of five are concentrated in the rural South.¹¹

FIGURE 1
U.S. High Poverty Nonmetro Counties, 1960, and Persistent Poverty Nonmetro Counties, 2015



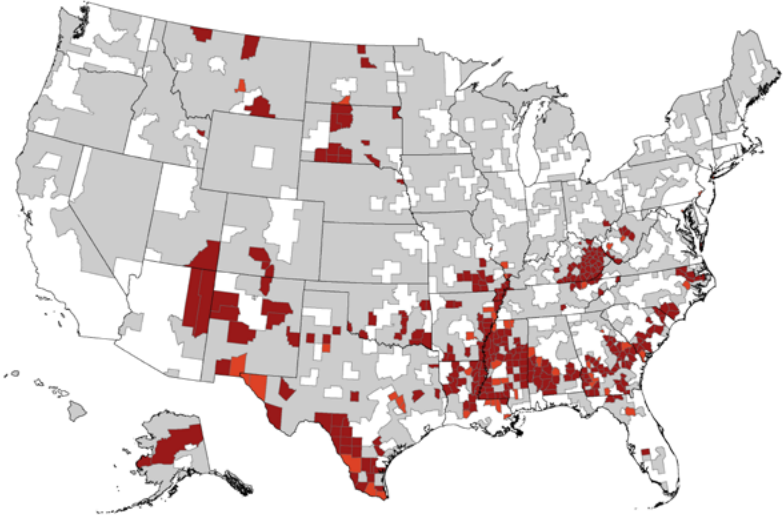
SOURCES: Nonmetro, High Poverty, 1960 county data: U.S. Census Bureau.¹² Nonmetro, Persistent Poverty, 2015 county data: USDA, Economic Research Service.¹³

NOTES: Nonmetro counties are outside the boundaries of metro areas and have no cities with 50,000 residents or more. Persistent poverty counties are those where 20% or more of county residents were poor, measured by the 1980, 1990 and 2000 censuses, and the 2007-11 American Community Surveys. Similar to those in the ERS, counties are classified as high poverty if they have 20% or more of residents in poverty each decade as determined by historical data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

Economic restructuring has dramatically changed work across the rural U.S. in recent decades. Low-skilled service-providing jobs are replacing goods-producing jobs, contributing to an overall decline in the quality and quantity of jobs, and the loss of the work that generations may have relied on and which they felt defined by in their rural communities—their heritage.¹⁴ Rural residents have seen job loss everywhere, but chronically poor rural places have fewer adults working full time, many more families with no workers at all, and more residents with disabilities than other rural places.¹⁵

Chronically poor rural places also tend to have low educational attainment levels. Of the 301 rural marginalized counties in 2015, 57% were what the ERS considers to be “low education,” meaning 20% or more of adults have not finished high school (see Figures 2a and 2b). In 2010, only 11% of adults were college graduates in our Appalachian study area and 13% in

FIGURE 2A
Persistent Poverty Counties in the U.S., 2015



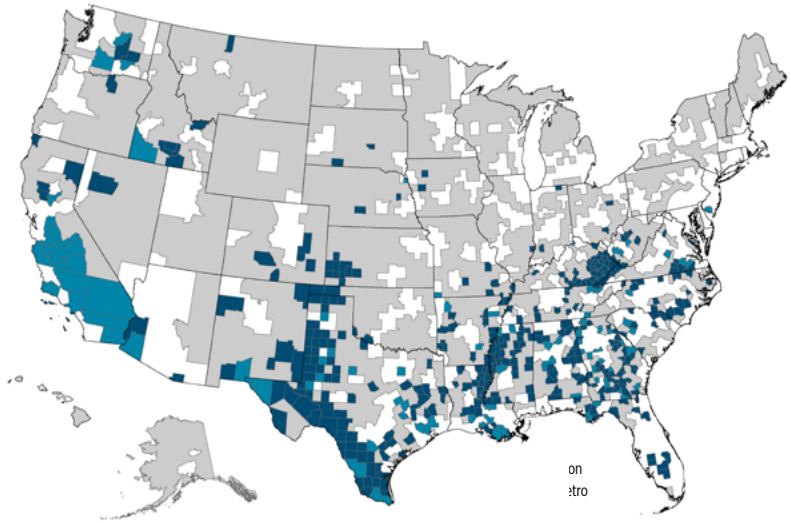
SOURCE: USDA Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

NOTES: Persistent poverty counties are those where 20% or more of county residents were poor, measured by the 1980, 1990 and 2000 censuses, and the 2007-11 American Community Surveys. County boundaries are drawn for the persistent poverty counties only.

the Mississippi Delta, compared to 28% in the U.S. as a whole. Not only do current residents of chronically poor rural areas have low levels of education, their parents also had far less education, indicating a disadvantage that persists across generations.¹⁶ When we surveyed rural Americans in the mid-2000s, we found that 30% of respondents living in chronically poor rural counties said the highest level of education completed by their fathers was eighth grade or less.¹⁷ In our study of coal-dependent Appalachian and plantation-dependent Delta counties in the 1990s and 2013, we found local schools serving the poor were chaotic and ineffective, full of patronage and with little accountability.

There are 424 frontier counties in the rural U.S.—places where the population is sparse, and distance to metro areas is far.¹⁸ As Figure 3 shows, they are mostly west of the Mississippi River. Despite the common assumption

FIGURE 2B
Low-Education Counties in the U.S., 2015

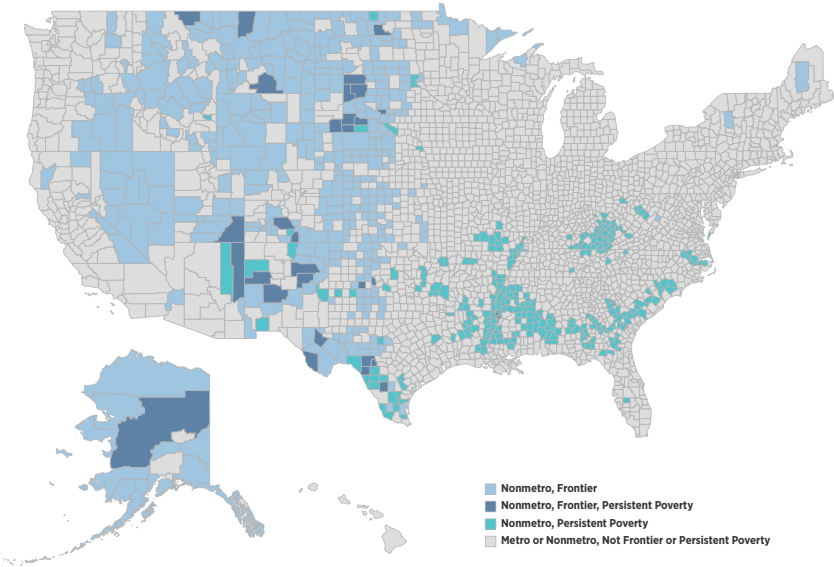


SOURCE: USDA Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

NOTES: Low-education counties are those where 20% or more of county residents aged 25-64 did not have a high school diploma or equivalent, determined by the American Community Survey five-year average data for 2008-12. County boundaries are drawn for the low-education counties only.

FIGURE 3

Nonmetro Counties in the U.S. by Frontier and Persistent Poverty Status, 2015



SOURCES: Nonmetro, Frontier, Persistent Poverty county and Nonmetro, Frontier county data: U.S. Census Bureau 2010. Nonmetro, Persistent Poverty county data: USDA, Economic Research Service.¹⁹

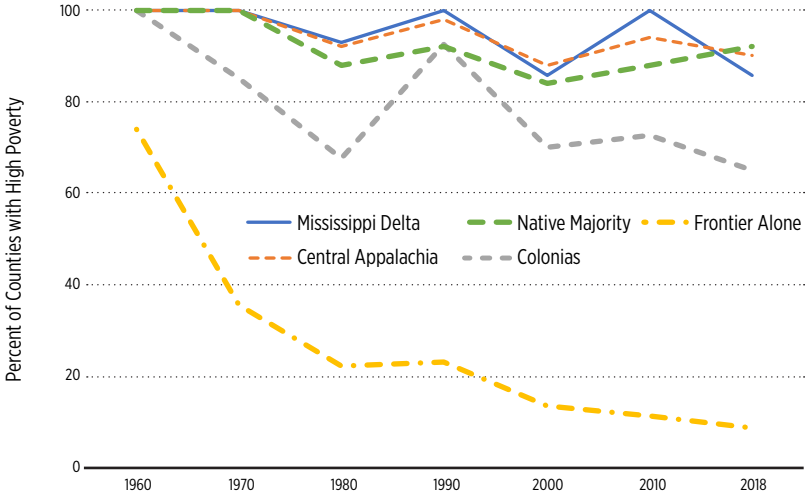
NOTES: Nonmetro counties are outside the boundaries of metro areas and have no cities with 50,000 residents or more. Persistent poverty counties are those where 20% or more of county residents were poor, measured by the 1980, 1990 and 2000 censuses, and the 2007-11 American Community Surveys. Frontier counties are nonmetro counties with population densities of fewer than seven people per square mile according to 2010 data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

that rural poverty is perpetuated by spatial isolation, most persistent poverty counties are not frontier. Only 34 are both persistent poverty and frontier counties—remote places in the West where either low-income Hispanics or Native Americans reside.

In persistently poor areas of the U.S., high poverty has become less prevalent over time, but it remains much higher in these areas than in frontier counties (see Figure 4). More-remote rural places are not necessarily marginalized. For instance, 86% of Mississippi Delta, 68% of central Appalachia and 55% of colonias counties are low-education counties. In comparison, only 9%

of frontier counties are ERS low-education counties. The median household income for non-high-poverty frontier counties in 2018 was \$50,728, while it was closer to \$30,000 in all the persistently poor areas we studied.

FIGURE 4
Poverty Trends in Nonmetro Persistently Poor Counties and Frontier Counties by Decade, 1960 to 2018



SOURCES: Poverty rates 1960-2010: U.S. Census Bureau.²⁰ Poverty rate 2018: American Community Survey. Nonmetro county data: USDA, Economic Research Service.²¹ County types: U.S. Census Bureau 2010, and 2018 American Community Survey.

- NOTES:
- “N=X” statements represent the number of counties classified into each type.
 - Nonmetro counties are outside the boundaries of metro areas and have no cities with 50,000 residents or more.
 - Mississippi Delta counties (N=14) are nonmetro counties located in northwest Mississippi between the Mississippi and Yazoo rivers.
 - Central Appalachia counties (N=50) include nonmetro counties in Kentucky and West Virginia.
 - Native Majority counties (N=27) are nonmetro counties where 50% or more residents are Native.
 - Colonias counties (N=40) are nonmetro counties identified according to Carlos G. Vélez-Ibáñez, and Jordana Barton et al.²²
 - Frontier Alone counties (N=383) are nonmetro counties with population densities of fewer than seven people per square mile.
 - Similar to those in the ERS, counties are classified as high poverty if they have 20% or more of residents in poverty each decade as determined by historical data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

Legacies of Oppression²³

The maps and graph above indicate that rural chronic poverty is not only concentrated in remote areas. In nearly every case in which high poverty and low-educational attainment persist, we can find a historical period when local elites kept people vulnerable and blocked or neglected investment in key institutions. They did so to maintain segregation by race and class, ensure low wages for the poor, and thus maintain wealth and privilege for the powerful.

After decades of slaughtering American Indians, infecting them with deadly diseases and pushing them off their land, European Americans established Indian Territory and then Indian reservations to keep American Indians contained, to free up land for white settlement of the West. Indian Country was deliberately and harshly marginalized. Although there was a period of attempting to assimilate American Indians into white society through improved health and education on reservations,²⁴ racism, as well as the day-to-day control exerted by unscrupulous “agents” who were supposed to support the Native Americans, ensured ongoing marginalization. There was little opportunity for asset acquisition, educational attainment and civic engagement to build resilient institutions.²⁵

The legacies of a slave-based plantation economy and then failed Reconstruction after the Civil War in a period of stark racism make the rural South the poster child of rural chronic poverty.²⁶ Slavery is the most severe marginalization. The Jim Crow laws and brutal racist enforcement of segregation After the Civil War and the failure of Reconstruction, the Jim Crow laws and brutal racist enforcement of segregation kept Blacks vulnerable to whites for work, credit, housing and every aspect of daily life. Historians Eric Foner and James Cobb are among the scholars who have documented the periods’ racial violence and cruel outcomes of segregation and oppression of rural Blacks that have left their legacies today.²⁷

That re-subjugation lived on into recent decades across the rural South. A 72-year-old woman we interviewed in North Carolina in 2014, one of nine children of Black sharecroppers, began working in the peanut and tobacco fields for the “boss man” when she was 8. She became pregnant at 14, and later married and raised seven children who farmed as sharecroppers, and all were kept in debt: “I had a hard life. We came up hard ... the end of the

year would come and we looked for Christmas money, but they said we came out even.” She concludes, “I wish I had gotten more education, so I could have gotten a better job.”²⁸

But even if she had stayed in school, she would have faced obstacles to upward mobility. Schools for Blacks in the rural South were overcrowded, underfunded and often chaotic.²⁹ Until the 1950s, rural Black children attended one-room schools on the plantation, and when it was time to pick the crops, schools closed so the children could work. Until the 1960s, high school was out of reach for most Black children—only a select handful could attend a church-sponsored high school. In the 1990s, one white school teacher described going to teach in a Black school when public schools were desegregated: “Nine hundred students and a faculty of thirty, and one functioning bathroom ... cotton-patch black children—bathrooms were unheard of, running water was few and far between in the homes. It was the most different and difficult thing that I had ever, ever seen in my life.”³⁰ Twenty years later, a Black leader summed up the marginalization of Blacks in a Mississippi Delta community, where whites controlled jobs in the private and the public sector: “We had to go outside of [the community] to get jobs. We were locked out of everything, and also deprived educationally.”³¹

Black leaders deplored the “marginalization mindset” of the poor rural Blacks they were trying to mobilize. One leader observed: “Because they think they are inferior, you know? It’s just so depressed in these black neighborhoods, not having jobs so long and having to depend on welfare and food stamps and not being able to be sufficient on your own. ... Our men have taken a backseat. ... So I would say the influence of the white community on our people, we’re trying to change that mindset. That will be the only thing that holds us back from growth, [being] scared of change.”³²

Appalachia is a white majority, chronically poor region, a region where the competitive coal industry, under the thumb of Northeastern utilities, needed cheap labor to ensure they made a profit and survived. But even before outside timber and coal interests arrived, as Dwight Billings and Kathleen Blee’s history of poverty in Appalachia found, local elites—land-owners, merchants, business owners—kept have-nots down to preserve their own wealth and power, and this fed corruption, which undermined civic institutions.³³ The coal industry exacerbated and deepened these early

patron-client relations. Historians Curtis Seltzer and Ronald Eller describe how coal companies deliberately created a two-class society to separate and control workers and prevent union organizing. The result was no middle class and no public institutions; miners had separate institutions, and many “simply withdrew from active participation in local and county politics, leaving a truncated political system to be controlled by the managerial elite.”³⁴ Everyone in our study of coal country could name the coal and merchant families who run things and warned that opposing them would lead to blackballing. Family names were a shorthand separating the elite from the poor, and as one young woman said in the 1990s: “Now my family, they’ve always been a bad family. There are places we can’t even rent a house because of our last name. And that’s just the way it is.”³⁵

When we returned 20 years later to this coal community, national “friends of coal” advocates had infiltrated the communities to support the coal industry in opposition to environmental restoration, polarizing locals, and, as jobs continued to evaporate and unscrupulous doctors prescribed opioids, the opioid addiction crisis had overtaken the region. Many younger families who could have chosen to Exit the community, and those able to organize for Voice were discouraged. As in the rural South, local leaders blamed the Loyalty mindset, saying, “It’s a mindset. It’s folks who’ve been outta work for years. They will still get that signal from the [coal] operators.”³⁶ Like their Delta counterparts, local change agents realize that the experience of being out of work and the local power brokers’ control over political and economic forces are real: “Until we diversify this coal, and I know it sounds clichéd, but until we do something about that, it’s not going to change. ... Politics and economics are joined at the hip here.”³⁷

The Hispanic Southwest has both historic and contemporary patterns of marginalization.³⁸ Robert Maril’s account of the Rio Grande Valley’s development into a ranch economy portrays the same strong control by local elites over jobs, land and politics that we found in the Mississippi Delta and Appalachia.³⁹ Spanish explorers and colonists found a harsh environment in the period between the 1500s and 1700s. When Spanish colonists were given incentives to settle and farm the land to counter French influence in Louisiana and mitigate Indian uprisings, they overgrazed the fragile land. Maril describes a region along the Rio Grande where lack of water and

ongoing violence made life hard. However, some ranches survived, and “ranch workers fell into a condition resembling peonage; their servitude was premised upon their debt to the ranch owners.”⁴⁰ Later Anglos came to the region as merchants seeking control over regional trade. They created a political machine, “political bossism,” that offered protection from the widespread violence and thrived on patronage. Although the elite families consisted of Mexicans, Mexican Americans and Anglos, racism persisted and served the elite—increasingly an Anglo elite. Maril sums up the 1800s in the Valley: “The rigid class system in the Valley towns and on the ranches, enforced in part by an ideology of racism, was well suited to the particular demands of life along the Rio Grande.”⁴¹

In the 1900s, Anglo farmers from the Midwest developed productive agricultural operations with irrigation, dependent on Mexican and Mexican American laborers. As Maril puts it: “Mexican-American laborers were not only incredibly cheap but renowned for their hard work, their dependability, and their lack of viable economic options.”⁴² Maril found that the powerful used racism to reinforce their power and to shut Mexican Americans out of civic and political participation. Throughout the 20th century, workers’ efforts to unionize were squashed by the powerful farmers and ranchers. Mexican laborers continued to cross into Texas for work, and many settled in what became known as the colonias along the border, where nearly 100% are Hispanic or Latinx. Today, more than 40% of Texas colonias residents live in poverty, and over half the residents have not completed high school.⁴³ Maril describes a school system undermined by patronage, just like we found in Appalachia and the Delta. Those who spoke up for improvements in schools or other institutions lost their jobs.

Conclusion

In all of these regions, there are examples of resistance, of brave Voices of individual leaders and groups.⁴⁴ Native Americans resisted marginalization, evidenced by many sad and infamous conflicts. Rural Blacks organized for civil rights at great risk. Coal miners and farmworkers organized unions, often in violent contexts. Robert Korstad and James Leloudis describe the fusionists in North Carolina as a fragile but truly biracial Republican-Populist alliance to challenge the policies of white elites at the turn of the

century. They describe how white elites were able to marshal racist fears and stop the resistance, ensuring that North Carolina Blacks stayed poor and stayed rural.⁴⁵ Since President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, local and regional community development organizations have invested in businesses and developed programs to support children and workers. But the concentrated power over jobs and the legacy of oppression, corruption and failed institutions present enormous challenges to individual mobility and community development.

Power over job opportunities mostly remains tightly held in these poor places, and the patron-client social system undermines the institutions necessary for change. Some change agents in our Appalachia study community pointed to a nearby county where new jobs in companies supplying a big Toyota plant were outside the control of the local elite, enabling people to reject Exit and use their Voices to challenge the status quo: "The people who might have left, with an education, stayed when new jobs came in. And they started to do things differently. ... People who cared about education started running for the school board. People started letting the county judge know what they wanted—not jobs for their cousins, but roads and litter control, garbage pickup. And all of these things, all these civic concerns, brought them together. ... But for any of this to happen, people got to have education, and they have got to have a job outside the reach of the power structure."³⁶

While we have emphasized the power local elites wield in most of these places, there have been extraordinary policy failures at the national level. Policies toward Native Americans, particularly during the last half of the 19th century, were clearly designed to keep them down, even remove them completely, through violence or assimilation, and there have been limited policies to support their opportunities to live healthy, creative lives. Policies toward African Americans have not expanded opportunities, but rather have bowed to racism and the needs of the Southern agricultural economy. Southern political leaders were able to prevent agricultural workers and domestic workers from being eligible for Social Security benefits because that small stipend would have upended the very low-wage economy they had created and relied upon. Likewise, labor and immigration policies affecting Hispanics and Latinx have served agricultural interests, not the workers

and their families, ensuring a low-wage labor force. And even when we have proven, evidence-based policies to support working families, children and youth, we have failed to fund them adequately to have a real impact.

But as we argue in *Worlds Apart*, the greatest national policy failure is in education: early childhood education and basic elementary, middle and high school education. Unlike many other advanced nations, we do not invest in inclusive quality education.⁴⁷ Locally controlled schools become part of the patronage system in poor rural communities, enhancing the power of local elites who control jobs. In addition, other programs to support early childhood education and stabilize families are woefully underfunded. To truly make a difference in these marginalized communities, we as a nation need to invest in quality education for all living in the U.S.

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Endnotes

- ¹ We use the terms "chronic poverty" or "chronically poor," "marginalized," and "persistent poverty" or "persistently poor" throughout the chapter to indicate places with sustained high poverty rates.
- ² See, for example, Duncan, 2013, 2014; Ulrich-Schad and Duncan; and Ulrich-Schad.
- ³ See Brown and Schafft, p. 43.
- ⁴ See Ridgeway.
- ⁵ See Swidler.
- ⁶ See Nussbaum.
- ⁷ See Hirschman.
- ⁸ See, for example, National Committee on Employment of Youth
- ⁹ See Lukes.
- ¹⁰ See Duncan, 2014, p. 184.
- ¹¹ See, for example, Thiede et al., and Weber and Miller.
- ¹² See U.S. Census Bureau.
- ¹³ See USDA.
- ¹⁴ See, for example, Brown and Schafft, Institute for Research on Poverty, and Falk et al.
- ¹⁵ See Ulrich-Schad and Duncan.
- ¹⁶ See Ulrich.

- ¹⁷ We are referring here to the Community and Environment in Rural America (CERA) survey and respondents who took the survey from 2007 to 2011 in a variety of rural place types. (For more details, see Ulrich-Schad and Duncan.)
- ¹⁸ USDA's ERS defines frontier and remote areas on the basis of sparse settlement and distance from urbanized areas.
- ¹⁹ See USDA.
- ²⁰ See U.S. Census Bureau.
- ²¹ See USDA.
- ²² See Vélez-Ibáñez, and Barton et al.
- ²³ In this section, we draw on others' historical and contemporary studies of these marginalized places, as well as our own qualitative work in Appalachia and the rural South, and studies we conducted with focus groups of tribal leaders in Montana in collaboration with the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI).
- ²⁴ See Snipp.
- ²⁵ In 2010, we conducted focus groups with tribal leaders in the West in collaboration with the NCAI, and encountered frustration and ongoing mistrust based on the historical treachery and current racism Indians experience. Peter Morris, Emily White Hat, Mil Duncan and Jessica Ulrich submitted the memo "Summary of Themes That Emerged in Focus Groups with Native Leaders from Montana" to the National Congress of American Indians and Carsey School of Public Policy, who shared it with focus group participants. NCAI requested that the memo itself remain confidential.
- ²⁶ About 85% of persistently poor nonmetro counties in the Southern Black Belt have at least 30% Black, non-Hispanic residents.
- ²⁷ See Foner, Korstad and Leloudis, and Cobb.
- ²⁸ See Duncan, 2013, p. 23.
- ²⁹ See Duncan, 2014.
- ³⁰ See Duncan, 2014, p. 102.
- ³¹ See Duncan, 2014, p. 185.
- ³² Ibid.
- ³³ See Billings and Blee.
- ³⁴ See Seltzer, and Eller.
- ³⁵ See Duncan, 2014, p. 9.
- ³⁶ See Duncan, 2014, p. 87.
- ³⁷ See Duncan, 2014, p. 88.
- ³⁸ California's agricultural valley is also high in poverty. See Martin et al. for a good discussion.
- ³⁹ See Maril.
- ⁴⁰ See Maril, p. 24.
- ⁴¹ See Maril, p. 34.

⁴² See Maril, p. 37.

⁴³ See Barton et al.

⁴⁴ See Stock and Johnston, Goodwyn, and Danbom.

⁴⁵ See Korstad and Leloudis, ch. 1.

⁴⁶ See Duncan, 2014, p. 71.

⁴⁷ See Schleicher.

