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# Social Stratification in the New/Old South: The Influences of Racial Segregation on Social Class in the Deep South

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**ABSTRACT.** The Deep South has often been characterized as the poorest and most backward region in the United States. The Deep South is also unique in that it is the most racially diverse part of the United States and it has the powerful social history of chattel slavery. In this paper, we examine the relationship between race and poverty at the macro (rather than individual) level. Using county-level census data we examine the effects of social segregation on well-being. We find that indeed there is an extremely strong and significant relationship between the racial composition of a county and many measures of well-being (poverty, home ownership, educational attainment, infant mortality and so on). Second, our analysis tests for the effects of racial segregation for whites and African Americans separately. The poverty rate for whites varies little based on the racial composition of the county they live in whereas for African Americans, living in integrated or predominately white counties is significantly correlated with lower levels of poverty. Furthermore,

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the African American-white poverty gap is significantly lower in integrated and predominately white counties and significantly higher in counties that are racially segregated. Thus, our analysis demonstrates that racial segregation has a more negative and profound effect on the lives of African Americans than it does on whites. We conclude with a discussion of the illustration Hurricane Katrina provides of this general pattern and we offer a set of suggestions for addressing this kind of structural poverty. doi:10.1300/J134v11n01\_03 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2007 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

**KEYWORDS.** Poverty, south, rural

Poverty in the United States is not randomly distributed across the country in an even or fairly even pattern. Places with the worst poverty levels tend to cluster together. In fact, US poverty is concentrated in certain regions and sub-regions and is located mainly in the South.

–R. Wimberley and L. Morris, 2003

### **INTRODUCTION**

Mississippi and Alabama are widely perceived as nations unto themselves, places very different from the rest of the United States (Escott and Goldfield 1991; Rubin 2002). In this paper, we analyze US Census data for all 67 Alabama counties and all 82 Mississippi counties to examine the relationship between indicators of well-being (e.g., poverty, housing, education, and infant mortality) and the racial composition, “blackness” or “whiteness” of the counties of Alabama and Mississippi. Even a cursory analysis suggests that by certain measures of extreme poverty, such as infant mortality rates, the Deep South is comparable with, and, in some instances, worse than many developing countries. Our analyses suggest a strong relationship between segregation and social class: Specifically, the more “white” a county, the more affluent its residents and the more “black,” the more pervasive the poverty. We conclude that in the Deep South, quality of life and consequent life chances are shaped heavily by race and patterns of racial segregation. Residential segregation by race and the subsequent poverty that arises leave us asking, did the civil rights

movement and the reforms that ensued bypass the Deep South, especially Alabama and Mississippi?<sup>1</sup> Our county-level analysis of Alabama and Mississippi examines the ways in which racially segregated housing patterns that persist today correlate with a series of indicators of well-being: educational attainment, housing, access to health care, and poverty.

Think of pretty much of anything you did today. Got up, took a bus or train to work. Went out to lunch. Did a little shopping on your break or anything you might want to do tonight go out to dinner or a movie. Now imagine that it's in a year before 1964 and you are Black. And you live in Birmingham. There is a whole set of rules that define your existence. . . . Only a couple of blocks away, they might as well have been a continent away. The institutionalized segregation was a daily humiliation; it demeaned at every turn. (Peoples 2004)

Birmingham is probably the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States. (Martin Luther King 1963)

Though these quotes are from the civil rights era, they remain pertinent today: The Deep South is still highly racially segregated and this segregation impacts virtually every aspect of life.

### ***Context***

The late Southern historian H. Aptheker succinctly described “The Central Theme of Southern History”:

One may define the South in geographical terms: from Maryland south to the tip of Florida, from the Atlantic to the western reaches of Texas; and in climatic terms: that region having the longer and hotter summers, shorter and warmer winters, more humidity than any other in the United States. Noting the momentous effects locations and weather have on every aspect of living, from architecture to zoology, it remains true that geography and climate are to history what stage and props are to drama: necessary to the acting out of the play, but not the play itself. . . . In the rather clearly defined geographical and climatic entity called the South, there is also a clearly demarked history, full of complexity and variety, of course, and intertwined within a larger matrix, which, in its diversity, nevertheless has a discernable unity and is Southern history. (1971, p. 17)

One of the most important factors in the political-social economy of the South is its history of slavery. By the time the colonists were declaring their independence from the British, philosophers were espousing a radical idea that “all men are created equal.” They proposed and carefully laid out these principles in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States of America. Americans’ love for freedom was nurtured in plain view of massive slavery. The founding fathers cherished their liberty all the more because they knew what its opposite was like (see Rosengarten 2004). More than 200 years later, it is still clear that our founding fathers and their successors never really intended a classless society. In fact, equality was structured by race, class, gender, and religion. The Deep South, especially Alabama and Mississippi, developed an economy more dependent on slavery and, later, Jim Crow segregation than any other region, including other parts of the South (e.g., Virginia and North Carolina). Here, African Americans were and are relegated to a second-class status in comparison with their white counterparts (Hendrickson 2003; Wilgoren 2005). No examination of contemporary race or class relations can be understood without understanding this particular socio-political economy of the American South, a region that has always been characterized as a class-divided society with great distinctions between rich and poor (Aptheker 1956).

Today, 40 years after the gains of the civil rights movement, there has been a steady reversal of these gains,<sup>2</sup> as evidenced at a recent Harvard Civil Rights Project conference,<sup>3</sup> and though this retrenchment is felt among all African Americans, regardless of social class, it is felt most profoundly in the rural south where poverty is concentrated. Because these poor counties (the Black Belt counties in Alabama and the Delta counties in Mississippi) are clustered, anyone living in the middle of the Black Belt or the Delta lives 50 or 100 miles from a county in which poverty rates are closer to the state or national average. Just as poor people are clustered in the rambling housing projects of New York or Chicago or Detroit, here the poor are concentrated in the rural counties of the Deep South.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Empirical Evidence***

*Poverty in the Deep South.* According to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs theory (1987), people meet their basic needs before other needs are fulfilled. In Alabama and Mississippi, the basic needs of many men, women, and especially children are unmet, including, but not limited to, food, clothing, and shelter. Jolliffe (2004) notes that poverty is structured by

region and location in the city or country: “Although most of the Nation’s poor live in metropolitan (metro) areas, poverty rates have been consistently higher in nonmetropolitan (nonmetro) areas in every year since the 1960s, when poverty rates were first officially recorded” (p. 11). He notes that:

[A] strong regional pattern of poverty and persistent poverty also emerges. No persistent-poverty counties are found in the Northeast, and only 60 of the nonmetro persistent-poverty counties are in the Midwest and West. The remaining 280 nonmetro persistent-poverty counties are in the *South*, comprising 25 percent of the total nonmetro population there. Furthermore, the nonmetro South, with over 40 percent of the U.S. nonmetro population, has a significantly higher incidence of poverty, estimates for 2002 indicate that, in the South, 17.5 percent of nonmetro residents were poor compared with 14.2 percent of all nonmetro residents. (p. 11)

The South is not, by any definition save that proclaimed by the citizens of Mississippi,<sup>5</sup> limited to Alabama and Mississippi. The region is diverse yet generally it is the most rural, slowest to industrialize, most traditional, and *poorest region* of the United States. Therefore, we begin by examining state-level data for the contiguous southern state of Georgia to better situate the case of Alabama and Mississippi.

Georgia provides an interesting “comparison case” with neighboring Alabama because of its catapult into the twenty-first century. Atlanta, one of the most important southern cities for both whites and African Americans, has become one of a few outstanding banking and professional centers not only for the South, but also for the nation. Downtown Atlanta could be any city in the United States. Despite its rural regions, on most measures of poverty, Georgia looks less like neighboring Alabama and more like states nearer to, or on the other side of, the proverbial Mason-Dixon Line (Escott and Goldfield 1991).

Turning to an examination of the Deep South (Alabama and Mississippi) we see that citizens here are almost twice as likely to live below the poverty line than the general US population. In Alabama, 12.5% of households and fully 16% of Mississippi households (nearly twice the national average) are below the poverty line, as compared with only 9.2% of total households in the rest of United States.

However, just as income is not distributed equally, neither is poverty. The poverty rate among children 18 and younger is *higher* than 30% in

11 of the Black Belt counties in Alabama and in all 18 Mississippi Delta counties, with some Delta counties having rates as high as 38 to 40%. Four out of every 10 children in the Mississippi Delta are living below the poverty line, which is an extremely conservative measure of poverty.<sup>6</sup> These data provide the impetus for our county-level analysis. The demographics of our selected states versus the whole of United States are given in Table 1.

*Racial Segregation in the Deep South.* Poverty is “cordoned off” (see Wright 1997) in the Deep South. That is to say, it is concentrated in specific counties, especially the Black Belt in Alabama and the Delta

TABLE 1. Demographic Statistics on the United States and US Southern States: Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi

	Alabama	Georgia	Mississippi	United States
Race (%)				
White	71.1	65.1	61.4	75.1
Black	<b>26.0</b>	<b>28.7</b>	<b>36.3</b>	<b>12.3</b>
Poverty				
Mean household income	34,135	36,372	31,330	41,994
Female-headed households in poverty (%)	<b>35.6</b>	<b>33.3</b>	<b>40.2</b>	<b>26.5</b>
Children under 18 in poverty (%)	44.6	22.8	48.1	34.3
Employment (%)				
Unemployed	3.7	3.7	4.3	3.7
Education (%)				
HS/GED	66.9	70.9	64.3	69.0
BA	12.2	19.3	11.1	15.5
Homeownership				
Median value	85,100	111,200	71,400	119,600
Infant mortality*				
Rate per 1,000 births	<b>9.5</b>	<b>8.6</b>	<b>10.0</b>	<b>7.0</b>
Tippah County, Mississippi: 38**				
Mexico: 25				
India: 69				

\*Most developed nations are under 5.

\*\*Countries in the Americas with infant mortality rates *higher* than Tippah County, Mississippi: Dominican Republic (41); Guyana (45.2); Bolivia (66); and Haiti (88.9).

counties in Mississippi, rather than spread equally across the states. Why? Wilson (1978) challenges us to consider the “declining significance of race,” yet Massey and Denton (1993) as well as others (Conley 1999) note the persistence of racial segregation in US housing patterns. Based on Massey and Denton’s (1993) findings, we examined the ways that poverty is distributed across Alabama and Mississippi counties by race.

The US Census reports that African Americans make up 26% of Alabama’s population and 36% of Mississippi’s, making Mississippi the “blackest” state in America. However, preliminary analysis demonstrated that county lines are also color lines. With the exception of Jefferson County, Alabama, in which Birmingham is located and Hinds County, Mississippi, in which Jackson is located, most counties are arranged like a patchwork quilt, in which the patches are rather homogenous—either 75% African American or 95% white. We hypothesize, then, that in a region ravaged by poverty, inadequate housing, unemployment, and limited access to education, economic resources would be distributed unequally, and these distribution patterns will narrowly follow lines of race, and specifically racial segregation patterns.

## **METHODS**

### ***Sample***

Our dataset was compiled using data from the US Census (available online at [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)) as well as from the City-County book<sup>7</sup> dataset. We were able to compile data on our independent variable (the county’s racial composition) and our dependent variables (educational attainment, poverty, housing, and infant mortality) for all 67 Alabama and 82 Mississippi counties. This technique allows us to examine the role that race and racial segregation plays in structuring inequalities in the poorest state in our United States.

### ***Measures***

Our independent variable, racial composition, is continuous and constructed as the percent of county residents who are African American. In Alabama, counties range from “white” Winston County (99.6%) to “black” Macon County (84.6%). In Mississippi, the range is similar,

from “white” Tishomingo County (96.9%) to “black” Jefferson County (86.5% black).

Our dependent variables fall into three categories—poverty, education, and housing.

*Poverty.* Poverty measures include median household income, per capita “money” income, percent of households below the poverty line, percent of households with children under 18 below the poverty line, percent of female-headed households below the poverty line, and percent unemployed.

*Housing.* Housing measures include homeownership rates and median value of homes owned.

*Education.* Education measures include percent of residents who have completed high school or the equivalent and the percent of residents holding a bachelor’s degree or higher.

*Infant Mortality.* Infant mortality, a measure of both poverty and well-being, is a continuous variable that is measured as a rate: The number of babies dying before their first birthday per 1,000 babies born. It is available for all counties as well as states and all countries.

### ***Dependent Variable Scale***

Because examining the relationship between the independent variable (racial composition in the county) and each of the 12 indicators of well-being is cumbersome, we created a composite measure of well-being. To do this we first “ranked” each county (separately in each state) on each measure of well-being (poverty rate, home value, percent of citizens with a high school degree, infant mortality, and so on). The highest rank on each measure was assigned to the county with the best level of well-being on that measure. For example, the highest rank on “home value” was assigned to the county with the most expensive median home value, whereas the highest rank on “infant mortality” was assigned to the county with the lowest infant mortality rate. Next, we summed the ranks on each dependent variable indicator into a total score for each county. We used this rank analysis because it is a straightforward and streamlined way to test the hypothesis across all counties simultaneously. In addition, it allowed us to work with measures that varied from dollar amounts (home value, household income) to percents (percent of families below the poverty rate, percent of citizens owning homes, percent of citizens with a high school diploma) to rates (infant mortality, unemployment). [Note: All of the scoring, summing, and analyses were performed separately for each state.] Reliability analyses

were performed on the composite measure for both Alabama and Mississippi. In both cases, the composite was highly reliable: alpha = .858 (Alabama); alpha = .893 (Mississippi).<sup>8</sup>

### FINDINGS

The data tell a discouraging story both in terms of overall poverty and inequality in the Deep South as well as racial differences in inequalities, particularly poverty. The overall findings hold true across both Alabama and Mississippi. We begin with an examination of the correlational data for each measure of well-being. The correlational data are all available in Table 2. This analysis is a series of correlations between the rank of the county's population (e.g., the county with the highest percentage of

TABLE 2 . Correlations Between the Racial Composition of a County and Various Measures of Well-Being for Mississippi and Alabama

Variable	Pearson	Sig.	Pearson	Sig.
	Correlation	(2-Tailed)	Correlation	(2-Tailed)
	Mississippi (n = 80)		Alabama (n = 67)	
Correlation by <i>Percentage "Black"</i>				
Education				
Percent High school graduates	.534**	.000	.088	.479
Housing				
Home ownership rate	.330**	.003	.180	.145
Median home value	.557**	.000	.365**	.002
Poverty/Wealth				
Median household income	.778**	.000	.489**	.000
Per Capita <i>money</i> income	.669**	.000	.510**	.000
Percent Below poverty line	.866**	.000	.750**	.000
Percent Children < 18 below poverty line	.817**	.000	.775**	.000
Percent FHH below poverty line	.737**	.000	.659**	.000
Percent Unemployed	.417**	.000	.412**	.001
Infant Mortality/1,000	.260*	.020	-.046	.714

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

whites being ranked “1”) and the county’s rank on each of the indices of well-being and poverty.

*Homeownership.* In the United States, we most often use the indicator “homeownership” to show how well off Americans are. A homeowner has wealth that can be liquidated and, just as important, borrowed against in times of economic need. In Mississippi, the lowest rate of homeownership was in Tunica County (51%) and the highest was in Greene County (87%). More than two-thirds of counties in Mississippi have homeownership rates above 75%. Mississippians have relatively high rates of homeownership. However, in Mississippi there is a clear and inverse relationship between racial composition and homeownership: Counties with a *higher* African American population have *lower* rates of homeownership than do counties in which the population is primarily of European decent ( $r = .330^{**}$ ). Patterns are similar in Alabama though they do not reach statistical significance (see Table 2).

Initially we were struck by how high the rates of homeownership were in many “black” counties, but when we examined the median home value, a very different picture emerged. Yes, many people own their own homes. However, citizens in the poorest and “blackest” counties are accumulating much less wealth through homeownership ( $r = .557^{**}$  for Mississippi and  $r = .365^{**}$  for Alabama). In the wealthiest, “whitest” counties, owning a home means the accumulation of wealth: The “typical” home in DeSoto County, Mississippi (94% white) is worth \$103,000. In contrast, the median home value in Tunica County, Mississippi (78% African American) is only \$56,000, and in Quitman County, Mississippi where home values are the lowest across all of Mississippi and Alabama, the “typical” home is worth only \$37,000 (see Table 2).<sup>9</sup>

Thus, when we consider both homeownership rates and home values, a much more complex picture emerges. The “whitest” counties have both high rates of homeownership and the most valuable homes. In the “blackest” counties even those who own homes, own homes of low value. This suggests that homeownership is contributing to an even bigger wealth gap than we might have expected. As is typical for the Deep South, this gap is racialized. As Conley (1999) notes: “The one statistic that reflects the continuing racial inequality in post-civil rights America is net worth—wealth, equity, assets.” Our data provide confirmation of Conley’s (1999) finding that on average, whites have ten times more wealth than African Americans (\$79,400 compared with \$7,500).

*Educational Attainment.* Educational attainment is a measure of inequality that also represents access to the opportunity structure. It is both a predictor of poverty or wealth and an outcome of it; those with

more education tend to earn more money across the lifespan, and those who grow up with wealth are more likely to attain higher levels of education. “According to the Census Bureau, over an adult’s working life, high school graduates earn an average of \$1.2 million; associate’s degree holders earn about \$1.6 million; and bachelor’s degree holders earn about \$2.1 million” (Day and Newburger 2002).

We examined education rates at both the high school and college levels. Overall, the picture in both Alabama and Mississippi is dismal, with no more than 80% (DeSoto County) of Mississippians earning a high school diploma in the best counties. At worst, in a handful of Mississippi counties, barely half of residents graduate from high school. In Humphreys County, Mississippi, for example, only 53% of residents over 18 have graduated from high school. In the majority of Alabama’s Black Belt counties, fewer than 55% of residents over 18 have graduated from high school. In comparison, in other rural states, such as North Dakota, it is rare to find a county with high school graduation rates below 65%, let alone below 50%. In rural Kansas, for example, in Waubensee County, a rural county of only 6000 residents, fewer than 10% of adults *have not* graduated from high school.

There is a robust correlation ( $r = .534^{**}$ ) in Mississippi between the county’s racial make-up and its high school graduation rates, with African Americans over-represented in counties where the high school graduation rates are low, and this pattern holds in Alabama, though it is not statistically significant (see Table 2).

A similar pattern emerges for college education. Hinds County, Mississippi, where the capital, Jackson, is located, boasts the highest college graduation rates at over 27%. In Jefferson County, Alabama, where Birmingham is located, college graduation rates are 19.9%. This rate is consistent with national levels. However, no other counties in Mississippi have college graduation rates approaching 20%, and several have rates below 10%. Fully half of all counties in Alabama, both in the Black Belt and many poor rural white counties, have college graduation rates *below* 10%. The correlation between racial composition of the county and college graduation rate does not reach significance for either state. This is most likely due to the fact that overall citizens of Alabama and Mississippi have *very low rates* of college graduation and thus racial differences do not reach a significant level (data not shown).

Taking a closer look at the data we see that though there is a strong racial pattern, clear exceptions exist in Winston County, Alabama, and Itawamba County, Mississippi, which are virtually completely white and yet have among the lowest rates of college graduation.

Research on education and occupational attainment indicates that education gives a much stronger boost to African Americans and other minorities than to whites (Zweigenhaft and Dumhoff 1998). Thus, we suspect that two different forces are operating in the attainment of education. First, African Americans in the Deep South have less access to higher education, which is consistent with the low high school and college graduation rate data as well as the struggles to desegregate universities, especially in Mississippi. In addition, we suspect that the low rates of college education in some rural white counties reflect the lack of importance that education plays in social mobility for some whites, particularly rural, landowning whites. For example, Itawamba County, Mississippi, has one of the lowest rates of college graduation but one of the highest median home values.

*Teen Birth Rate.* It is widely known that births to mothers under age 20 have serious implications for both mother and child. Pregnant teenagers receive less prenatal care, suffer higher rates of infant mortality, and are more likely to deliver low birth weight babies (Maynard 1996). They are also more likely to drop out of school and end up on welfare than are teens who do not become pregnant or women who delay childbearing until their twenties and thirties (Maynard 1996). Thus, teen birth rate can be both an outcome and a cause of family poverty. Though teen birth rates are high across all of Mississippi<sup>10</sup> (70% of counties have a teen birth rate higher than 20%), the highest rates of teen pregnancy in Mississippi are in the Delta counties, the poorest and the “blackest” in the country. In Delta counties, the teen birth rates are all near 30% with the high being Tunica County, Mississippi where the rate reaches 35%. The correlation between the racial composition of the county and the teen birth rate is strong ( $r = .506^{**}$ ). The Delta counties also have the highest rates of infant mortality and the lowest rates of high school graduation, confirming the relevance of teen birth rate to family poverty in the poorest counties in the country (see Table 2. Data not available for Alabama).

*Infant Mortality Rates.* Infant mortality rates, measured as the number of deaths before the first birthday per 1,000 live births, are a common measure of poverty and well-being globally because they are a standardized measure. These rates reflect a sense of overall health and well-being, and data are available for all countries. Table 1 includes data on infant mortality for the United States, Alabama, Mississippi, and selected Mississippi Delta counties as well as selected countries worldwide. These data put conditions in Alabama and Mississippi counties in perspective. The data are dismal. Infant mortality rates in predominantly

African American counties are not only higher than their respective state rates and the United States rate, but, in fact, an infant born in parts of the Deep South is more likely to die before its first birthday than one born in many developing nations. Unbelievably, only four *countries* in the Western Hemisphere have infant mortality rates *higher* than Tippah County, Mississippi: The Dominican Republic (41); Guyana (45.2); Bolivia (66); and Haiti (88.9). We cannot emphasize enough the importance of these data on infant mortality. The United States is not the richest nation just in the western hemisphere; it is by far the richest nation in the world. When children born in rural Mississippi are more likely to die before their first birthdays than children born in many “second world” countries that have a significantly lower overall standard of living, this is strong evidence for the serious poverty, income, and racial disparities present within our own borders (see Table 1).

*Poverty.* In a region known to be poor, the poorest residents are not spread around in a haphazard fashion. Rather, the poorest Alabamians and Mississippians live in counties that are almost entirely populated by African Americans. For example, in Mississippi, when we look at the median household income, the two poorest counties are those with the two highest ratios of African Americans to European Americans, and 3 of the 4 counties with the highest median household incomes are those with the lowest percentage of African Americans. Furthermore, the counties with the lowest median household incomes, all of which are in “black” counties, report median household incomes that are less than 50% of the median household incomes of the richest, “whitest” counties. With some slight variations, the pattern is similar for Alabama; the poorest counties, defined as those with the greatest percent of households below the poverty line, have the highest percentage of African American residents; and the counties with the fewest African American residents have the lowest poverty rates in the state.

Because the percent of people living below the poverty line is arguably one of the most basic and most important measures of overall standard of living and well-being of citizens, in Table 3 we report the percent of African American residents living below the poverty line by county for both Alabama and Mississippi. A close examination of the table reveals that though the picture is dismal in Alabama it is devastating in Mississippi. More than three-quarters of the counties (76%) in Mississippi have more than 40% of their African American citizens living below the poverty line. Even more disturbing is the number of counties in which the poverty rate for African Americans is higher than 60%.

TABLE 3. Poverty Data by County for African Americans in Alabama and Mississippi

County name: Mississippi	Black Poverty Rate*	Black-White Poverty Gap**	County Name: Alabama	Black Poverty Rate*	Black-White Poverty Gap**
Alcorn	<b>42.4011</b>	2.39	Baldwin	<b>40.13</b>	3.90
Amite	<b>50.4969</b>	3.54	Barbour	<b>40.26</b>	3.27
Attala	<b>48.2943</b>	2.75	Bibb	<b>45.63</b>	3.19
Benton	<b>43.0240</b>	2.06	Blount	28.02	1.90
Bolivar	<b>58.0795</b>	<b>4.86</b>	Bullock	<b>43.45</b>	<b>4.31</b>
Calhoun	<b>41.1473</b>	3.01	Butler	<b>52.72</b>	3.19
Carroll	<b>52.9557</b>	<b>4.28</b>	Calhoun	29.01	2.44
Chickasa	32.5741	2.37	Chambers	34.65	3.61
Choctaw	<b>51.5928</b>	<b>4.09</b>	Cherokee	23.70	1.38
Claiborn	<b>40.3426</b>	2.68	Chilton	<b>40.36</b>	2.90
Clarke	<b>40.7395</b>	2.95	Choctaw	<b>48.07</b>	3.05
Clay	38.7360	<b>4.21</b>	Clarke	<b>46.20</b>	<b>4.60</b>
Coahoma	<b>61.9732</b>	5.34	Clay	29.32	2.00
Copiah	<b>48.8793</b>	3.88	Cleburne	<b>46.51</b>	3.38
Covington	<b>50.0431</b>	2.39	Coffee	33.64	2.90
DeSoto	39.8501	<b>6.28</b>	Colbert	28.61	2.48
Forrest	<b>46.6311</b>	2.90	Conecuh	<b>47.98</b>	3.00
Franklin	<b>56.0572</b>	2.87	Coosa	26.73	2.03
George	<b>54.3163</b>	2.61	Covington	<b>45.66</b>	2.54
Greene	<b>47.4476</b>	2.47	Crenshaw	<b>45.32</b>	2.73
Grenada	<b>40.9601</b>	<b>4.77</b>	Cullman	29.82	1.99
Hancock	<b>45.0613</b>	2.25	Dale	29.69	2.84
Harrison	36.5385	2.95	Dallas	<b>53.94</b>	<b>5.23</b>
Hinds	33.7223	<b>5.00</b>	De Kalb	23.54	1.39
Holmes	<b>65.1176</b>	<b>5.63</b>	Elmore	32.85	<b>4.17</b>
Humphrey	<b>60.0584</b>	<b>4.28</b>	Escambia	<b>48.23</b>	2.67
Issaquen	<b>67.1642</b>	2.55	Etowah	31.94	2.35
Itawamba	27.5202	1.93	Fayette	31.55	1.70
Jackson	35.3590	3.26	Franklin	38.67	1.97
Jasper	<b>43.3061</b>	2.55	Geneva	37.08	2.20
Jefferson	<b>49.1669</b>	<b>5.20</b>	Greene	<b>54.02</b>	<b>7.18</b>
Jefferson Davis	<b>43.3100</b>	2.58	Hale	<b>50.14</b>	<b>4.02</b>
Jones	<b>43.0047</b>	.38	Henry	32.40	3.64
Kemper	<b>51.7338</b>	<b>4.96</b>			

County name: Mississippi	Black Poverty Rate*	Black-White Poverty Gap**	County Name: Alabama	Black Poverty Rate*	Black-White Poverty Gap**
Lafayette	36.2030	2.27	Houston	39.06	<b>4.19</b>
Lamar	<b>42.5900</b>	2.75	Jackson	27.95	1.79
Lauderda	<b>44.9277</b>	<b>4.58</b>	Jefferson	30.50	<b>4.04</b>
Lawrence	<b>47.5557</b>	2.69	Lamar	31.42	1.96
Leake	<b>45.1815</b>	2.36	Lauderdale	32.70	2.61
Lee	31.7176	2.95	Lawrence	37.24	2.16
LeFlore	<b>53.9572</b>	<b>4.54</b>	Lee	34.76	1.74
Lincoln	<b>44.8882</b>	3.14	Limestone	20.89	1.70
Lowndes	<b>43.3692</b>	<b>5.00</b>	Lowndes	<b>49.43</b>	<b>8.89</b>
Madison	<b>46.5256</b>	<b>8.10</b>	Macon	34.42	2.80
Marion	<b>52.8558</b>	2.89	Madison	24.07	3.37
Marshall	<b>43.0550</b>	<b>2.92</b>	Marengo	<b>48.99</b>	<b>5.10</b>
Monroe	39.3620	3.06	Marion	27.71	1.51
Montgome	<b>54.8897</b>	3.26	Marshall	33.58	2.00
Neshoba	<b>41.5094</b>	2.21	Mobile	<b>42.34</b>	3.94
Newton	37.6779	3.14	Monroe	<b>43.11</b>	<b>4.80</b>
Noxubee	<b>55.5543</b>	<b>6.34</b>	Montgomery	33.01	<b>5.87</b>
Oktibbeh	39.9286	2.14	Morgan	30.53	3.15
Panola	<b>53.2512</b>	3.64	Perry	<b>56.31</b>	<b>5.15</b>
Pearl	<b>42.8494</b>	2.47	Pickens	<b>53.75</b>	<b>5.17</b>
Perry	<b>51.2056</b>	2.31	Pike	<b>42.94</b>	2.64
Pike	<b>51.2973</b>	3.15	Randolph	35.45	2.66
Pontotoc	28.4042	1.87	Russell	33.46	2.86
Prentiss	28.9310	1.45	Shelby	32.35	2.12
Quitman	<b>55.2236</b>	2.92	St. Clair	27.38	<b>4.63</b>
Rankin	26.5914	3.86	Sumter	<b>49.03</b>	<b>4.35</b>
Scott	<b>44.1064</b>	2.64	Talladega	34.16	2.63
Sharkey	<b>65.0021</b>	<b>5.87</b>	Tallapoosa	29.41	2.70
Simpson	34.6258	2.16	Tuscaloosa	34.84	2.71
Smith	<b>51.2022</b>	3.11	Walker	<b>41.52</b>	2.70
Stone	<b>51.1519</b>	3.05	Washington	39.45	2.30
Sunflower	<b>52.4986</b>	<b>5.13</b>	Wilcox	<b>60.03</b>	<b>6.12</b>
Tallahatchie	<b>57.5723</b>	2.98	Winston	<b>47.37</b>	2.43
Tate	<b>40.2184</b>	3.40			
Tippah	38.4473	2.03			
Tishomin	<b>57.5277</b>	3.07			
Tunica	<b>70.2017</b>	<b>5.09</b>			

TABLE 3 (continued)

County name: Mississippi	Black Poverty Rate*	Black-White Poverty Gap**	County Name: Alabama	Black Poverty Rate*	Black-White Poverty Gap**
Union	32.4308	2.49			
Walthall	<b>58.0938</b>	3.03			
Warren	<b>45.9874</b>	<b>6.76</b>			
Washington	<b>50.7590</b>	<b>5.39</b>			
Wayne	<b>50.0791</b>	2.81			
Webster	<b>45.7409</b>	2.57			
Wilkinso	<b>55.6185</b>	<b>4.34</b>			
Winston	<b>44.5515</b>	3.55			
Yalobush	<b>43.7251</b>	2.80			
Yazoo	<b>59.6072</b>	3.89			

\*Black poverty rate: Counties with a rate higher than 40% are bolded.

\*\*Black-white poverty gap: Counties with a ratio greater than 4 times are bolded.

In Tunica County, home of 15 casinos, 70% of all African Americans live below the poverty line.

With some exceptions, these general patterns hold across both Alabama and Mississippi for other measures of poverty, such as the percent of children living below the poverty line and the infant mortality rate (see Table 2).<sup>11</sup>

This finding, along with the patterns of extreme racial segregation in housing, underscore why data on indicators of poverty and well-being must be examined at the county level. It is clear that national- and state-level data hide the incredible gap between the “haves” and the “have-nots” in the United States and in the Deep South in particular. On most measures of inequality, with the single exception of access to baccalaureate-level education, the poorest counties in both Alabama and Mississippi are those with the highest percent of African American residents.<sup>12</sup>

*Composite Rank.* With so many different measures of poverty and inequality, we decided to compile a composite rank. For each county, we summed the ranks on all of the inequality measures to create a summary rank. We could then rank each county on overall well-being relative to the other counties in the state. Simply put, for both Alabama and Mississippi we correlated the “race” rank and the “well-being” rank of each county. We used correlation coefficients to test the relationship

between the racial composition of the county and the overall quality of life for its residents (the composite). The results are shown in Figure 1 (Mississippi) and Figure 2 (Alabama).

What emerges is an extremely clear pattern of racial inequality in the counties of the Deep South. Comparing “race” rank with the composite well-being rank reveals a near-linear relationship. The correlation coefficient for Alabama is .5\*\* and for Mississippi it is .75\*\*. The more “black” a county, the poorer its residents, the less access they have to education, and the less wealth they accumulate. Overall life chances across the counties of both Alabama and Mississippi are better when the county has a higher proportion of white residents. Life in the Deep South is worse than in the rest of the country, but inequalities are not distributed randomly or equally. They are structured, and the main variable structuring them is race. Mississippi ranks last even among its neighbors in terms of poverty, education, and infant mortality, but its African American citizens face the most daunting barriers.

FIGURE 1. The Relationship Between Race and Poverty, by County, in Mississippi

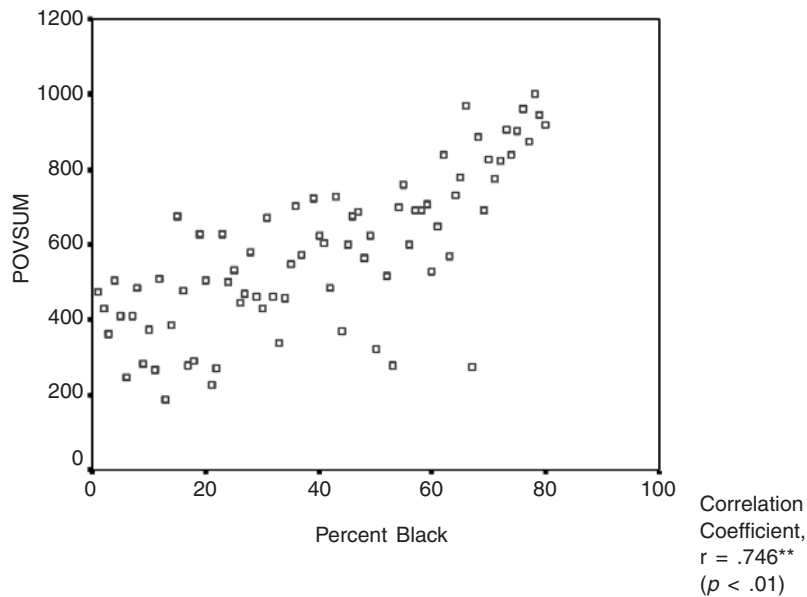
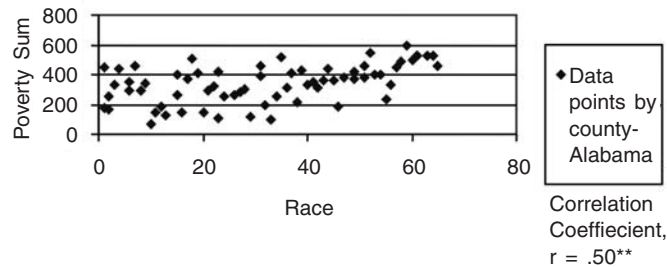


FIGURE 2. The Relationship Between Race and Poverty, by County, in Alabama



Finally, we note that it is important to examine the relationship between individual well-being and the overall situation. Often individual problems can be alleviated, in part, by simply putting poor people into middle class settings. A North Carolina study of school integration programs based on socio-economic status rather than race revealed that low-income African American students were more likely to be working at grade level when they were in well-resourced (socio-economically diverse) schools regardless of the school's racial makeup (Finder 2005).

Based on this finding, we wanted to test this "theory" in terms of race and poverty in the counties of Mississippi and Alabama. We hypothesized that racial composition of the county would have little effect on whites but would have serious implications for African Americans. Specifically, we hypothesized that African Americans would fare better in "whiter," more integrated counties than they would in segregated counties.

To do this we took the poverty rate for whites and African Americans in each county and we created a ratio measure: African American poverty rate/white poverty rate. This ratio allows us to test the effects of segregation and integration on whites and African Americans separately. In both Mississippi and Alabama, there is a strong and significant correlation between the racial composition of the county and the poverty ratio or gap among its white and African American citizens. ( $r = .450^{**}$  for Mississippi counties and  $.708^{**}$  for Alabama counties) (Figures 3 and 4).

Overall, African Americans are more likely to live in poverty in every county in Alabama and Mississippi than are their white counterparts. However, the gap between the percent of poor whites and poor African Americans is narrower in counties that are predominately white

FIGURE 3. The Relationship Between Racial Composition of the County and the Poverty Gap Between Whites and African Americans in Alabama

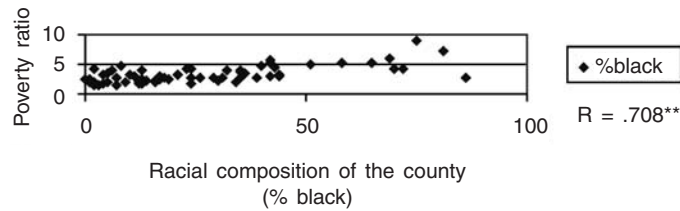
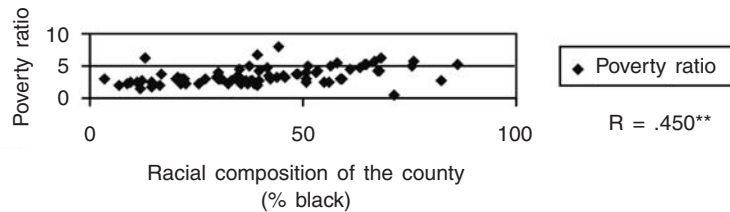


FIGURE 4. The Relationship Between Racial Composition of the County and the Poverty Gap Between Whites and African Americans in Mississippi



or integrated and wider in counties that are predominately African American. In other words, racial segregation has different outcomes for whites and African Americans, and furthermore, the direction of the segregation is also significant. Racial segregation has very little effect on whites' life chances. The rate of poverty for whites varies very little (ranging from 10 to 20%) regardless of the racial composition of the county. In contrast, the poverty rate for African Americans varies from 20 to 70% and more importantly, it is strongly linked to patterns of racial segregation. In counties that are either racially segregated and predominately "white" or integrated, the poverty rate for African Americans is lower, and significantly closer to that of whites who live in the same county. In contrast, the poverty rates for African Americans are highest in counties that are racially segregated and predominately "black." Furthermore, it is in these counties that the gap between African Americans living in poverty and their white counterparts is greatest. African Americans in these counties are seven or eight times more likely to be poor than the whites living in these counties. In sum,

whites who live in “black” counties are *not* more likely to live in poverty, but African Americans are significantly (seven or eight times) more likely to live in poverty. In contrast, African Americans who live in “white” counties are both less likely to be in poverty, and not significantly more likely to be in poverty than their white counterparts.

How can this be explained? We argue that this is similar to the findings on school segregation. African American children attending predominately white schools score higher on a variety of measures of education (SAT scores, GPA, and graduation rate) than African American children attending predominately African American schools (Mickelson 2001). More than a century ago, the US Supreme Court ruled in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that “separate but equal” was constitutional. Only 50 years ago, in *Brown v. Board of Education*, did the Supreme Court of the United States rule that “separate can never be equal.” Our study confirms that ruling using empirical data on well-being and segregation at the county level for all counties in the southern states of Alabama and Mississippi. We conclude that segregation significantly and negatively impacts the life chances of African American citizens whereas integration significantly and positively affects the life chances of these same citizens. Yet, segregation has very little effect on the life chances of whites.

The bottom line, then, is that the patterns that create social segregation for the poor are important in ways that both overlap with, and diverge from, the patterns of racial segregation.<sup>13</sup> In the same vein, we argue that part of what makes poverty in the rural South so insidious is that the rural poor are even more isolated than the poor in urban areas. For example, residents of housing projects are often able to take public transportation to free libraries and museums as well as to emergency rooms in high-quality hospitals, whereas the rural poor may live 100 miles or more and without a car from any of these amenities of middle class life.

### CONCLUSION

It is utterly exhausting being Black in America—physically, mentally, and emotionally . . . there is no respite or escape from your badge of color.

—Edelman, 1992

This study is centrally concerned with poverty, race, gender, and class stratification in the Third Millennium. In re-examining the literature

on poverty and race, we learned that while scholarly arguments have become more sophisticated, and research methods more precise, there is still a long way to go to displace, for example, Dollard's (1989) early work on stratification in the old South. Instead of relying on individual accounts of poverty and its intersections with race and gender—as in the classic work *Tally's Corner* (1967), where thick descriptions of the problems of poverty and its impact on families are laid bare—we relied more on data that reveals a structurally embedded poverty and its links to race, which impact both individuals and families, including children. This characterization proves more rewarding in demonstrating that the “New South,” used to depict metropolitan centers like Atlanta, does not extend to the larger rural South. The big battles over school desegregation that continue to this day expose low high school graduation rates for African American students and college attainment rates that are almost nonexistent in the counties we examined. Education is not taking place in these communities, where, at the same time, traditional agricultural production, which requires little education of laborers, is also on the decline (Alabama 2001).

As we revised this article, Hurricane Katrina was ravaging the coastal regions of Louisiana and Mississippi. Biloxi, Mississippi, was virtually destroyed. Further inland in both states, high winds and severe floods devastated cities, including Hattiesburg, and several rural counties. Our most vivid pictures of Katrina's devastation were broadcast in our homes, our offices, into airports and restaurants from New Orleans. These images resembled a “third-world” country. Most Americans were stunned to see their fellow citizens fighting for their lives in deep water or being rescued from rooftops by Coast Guard helicopters. Equally troubling was the new reality that many New Orleans residents were living in impoverished conditions and almost total racial segregation. New Orleans was 67% African American with virtually no contact between the races. Many neighborhoods were 90 to 100% black, and, fewer than 20% of all these residents' interactions are with whites (Rogelio 2005; “Exposure Indices” at CensusScope: [www.censuscope.org/index.html](http://www.censuscope.org/index.html)). While the pictures shocked many Americans, they profoundly illustrated what our research shows with numbers and maps: The South, the nation's most “diverse” region, remains as highly segregated today as it was 50 or 150, or even 350 years ago.

Among the important concepts that Hurricane Katrina exposed was the high level of both social segregation and racial segregation in the United States as a whole and in the South in particular. The images were powerful, in part, because New Orleans is a large city contained in a

small area. The challenge in this paper was to paint a similar picture but in a rural area, where the patterns of racial segregation are harder to see because people are spread out across an entire county rather than within a few city blocks. However, as we demonstrated, the patterns are the same. African Americans and whites live in isolation from one another, and just as in New Orleans, African Americans live in the areas where poverty is more extreme, making successful life chances less probable.

The tragedy in New Orleans underscores our principal thesis: That poverty, access to education, the opportunity to own a home that accumulates value, and the likelihood that a child will survive its first year of life vary by county across Alabama and Mississippi, and that this variance is clearly *structured* by racial and social segregation. The more residents of African American descent who live in a particular county, the lower the standard of living, the higher the rate of poverty, and the less access to the opportunity structure. This narrow opportunity structure perpetuates the poverty, sub-standard housing, and educational deficits.

Our visits in the region further suggest that poverty is concentrated as a result of the proximity of these impoverished counties to one another. Living here means living as much as 75 to 100 miles away from an area where people graduate from high school, are employed most of their lives, and live to put their sons and daughters through college. The concentration and isolation of rural southern poverty for African Americans may be even more severe than urban poverty, and its consequences are just as severe. We call for a much closer look at this distinct region, where a baby born here is *less* likely to survive its first year of life than a baby born in Brazil or Mexico.

Professor Barbara Reskin (2002) in her American Sociological Association Presidential Address, "Including Mechanisms in our Models of Ascriptive Inequality," said that the only way to change the restrictive policies and practices that disallow full access to the opportunity structure is to put in place mechanisms that stop both individual and institutional decisions that discriminate on the basis of gender, sexual preferences, race, and age.<sup>14</sup> *We agree.*

The next important phase for sociologists and others interested in equity, equal opportunities, and bettering the quality of life for all American citizens, not just the elite, is to shape decisions and policies that begin to eliminate poverty, illness, and inadequate access to health care, bad schooling, sub-par housing, police brutality, and many other social problems that plague US citizens, especially African Americans, who are not rich. We are mindful that easy prescriptions for large-scale social change usually produce superficial outcomes. As sociologist

William Julius Wilson said, “Programs based solely on the principle of equality of individual opportunity are inadequate to address the complex problems of group inequality in America” (1987, p. 113).

Furthermore, we do not intend to argue with Wilson (1987) on the “declining significance of race,” for in many ways, we agree that the economy changing from agriculture and manufacturing to the provision of services correctly describes contemporary America.<sup>15</sup> Conversely, we must point out that on every index we examined, the salient difference between citizens in Alabama and Mississippi was race. *Race* matters in a big way in the contemporary Deep South, especially in Alabama and Mississippi. Racial and ethnic differences resonate large there, and none of the Great Society programs instituted during the Johnson and Nixon administrations did much to erase racial differences in key institutional areas such as schooling, health care, housing, and employment.<sup>16</sup> Deep South is a laboratory for sociological research that has many practical applications for race, class, gender, and family living patterns. A place of rich natural beauty and unique history, race structures life chances here so brutally that the children—full citizens of the wealthiest nation on earth—have less access to education and less chance for survival than children in most developing nations in the Western Hemisphere.

Finally, we ask, when the majority of African American children living in Mississippi live below the poverty line (50 of 82 counties have rates that exceed 50%), and clearly, their basic needs are not being met, what are the outcomes for education and for obtaining gainful employment as adults? What are their chances for staying off welfare as adults? What are their chances for staying out of Parchman “Farm,” the penitentiary that houses more than 4000 prisoners, roughly one Mississippian in 700. Parchman is 73% African American, even though only some 37% of Mississippi’s population is African American (Mississippi Department of Corrections; US Census and Oshinsky 1996). As scholars we hope that the attention brought by Hurricane Katrina to the outcomes of racial and socio-economic segregation and isolation in New Orleans will extend to the rural regions of the Deep South.

We close where we began, by recognizing the role that history, specifically chattel slavery, the plantation economy, and Jim Crow-style segregation plays in the contemporary situation. The racial differences in poverty and life chances for residents of Alabama and Mississippi are the residual effects of centuries of structured inequality. Only 150 years ago in the *Dred Scott v. US Supreme Court* decision it was determined that people of African descent were not fully human and thereby could not be citizens of the United States. And, though legal citizenship is now

extended to African Americans, we believe the impact of these kinds of decisions lives on such that today African Americans in Mississippi are seven or eight times more likely to be poor, especially in counties in which they are the majority. Any study of these issues in the South cannot ignore the importance of the social, economic, and political history of this region.

“The Old South was a region of diversity and complexity, contrast and contradiction” (Starobin 1975). So, too, is the contemporary South. This paper has placed before social and behavioral scientists a perspective and methodology for continuing to plow this fertile ground for answers to these complex problems that are found in today’s south.

### NOTES

1. We note a similar analysis by Ronald Wimberley, Professor at North Carolina State University, whose research has been used to create maps. See *Wimberley and Libby v. Morris*. 1997. *The Southern Blackbelt: A National Perspective*. Lexington, KY: TVA Rural Studies, University of Kentucky Press.

This study grows out of a Wake Forest University Department of Sociology and American Ethnic Studies undergraduate course and its summer field components taught in spring 2003 and 2005. Faculty and students examined issues of class and race/ethnic stratification and then traveled to examine first-hand the social, economic, and political structures of what some social scientists and journalists call the New South. C. Vann Woodward. *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1951. See also Carole Merritt, “African Americans in Atlanta: Community Building in a New South City.” In *American South.Org.*, @ <http://www.AmericanSouth.org/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=24>

2. Beginning with the end of the Nixon administration (Summers 2001) through the Reagan administration (Morris 1999) and that of George W. Bush.

3. Held at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill on August 30, 2002, *The Re-segregation of Southern Schools? A Crucial moment in the History and the Future of Public Schooling in America*. Recently appeared a new book *School Resegregation: Must the South Turn Back?* by John Boger and Gary Orfield. The University of North Carolina Press (September 12, 2005).

4. We highly recommend the HBO documentary “Lalee’s Kin” for an illustration of the isolation of poverty in this region in the Mississippi Delta.

5. Rubin (2002) notes that Mississippians consider themselves the only true southerners. Based on his work as a news journalist in Greenwood, Mississippi, he has told us that outside of Mississippi is not considered the “real” south.

6. Poverty guidelines can be accessed at the Department of Health and Human Services Web site <http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/poverty.shtml>

7. All data come from Census data compiled by the City-County Data book and available online at <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/ccdb/>

8. Factor analyses on both states yielded similar results.

9. We digress here to make an important point about home values and the importance of teaching a course like our own where young women and men get to “see, feel,

and touch” the reality of what they are studying. Hence, the price of the SUVs that crowd the student parking lots on the Wake Forest University campus are equivalent to and more expensive than the homes in many of the counties we studied in Alabama and Mississippi. The powers of these comparisons (homes and cars) are invaluable. Also, see the HBO documentary “Lalee’s Kin.” Lalee’s “home” is valued at \$12,000.

10. Though there are a variety of factors that affect the birth rate, we do note that there is only one abortion clinic in the entire state of Mississippi. It is in Jackson. Thus, abortion is not a realistic option for most Mississippi teens, especially those living in the rural, isolated counties of the Delta region.

11. Detailed, county by county data are available for all measures of well-being. However, because there are so many measures (12) and there are so many counties (82 in Mississippi and 67 in Alabama), we include tables only for select variables (infant mortality, poverty rate, and poverty gap). However, tables for all other variables can be obtained by contacting the authors.

12. Tables with the rank for each variable for each county in both Alabama and Mississippi are not shown but can be obtained by contacting the authors.

13. One reviewer wanted a clear definition of social segregation and racial segregation. In this paper, we use these terms to mean different things. While it would be easy to say we use the terms interchangeably, we don’t. Following the work of Duncan and Duncan (1955) social segregation is to mean, herein, the separation of individual, families and groups within the context of occupations, housing, schooling that have little or nothing to do with race and or ethnicity. Racial segregation is to mean, herein, separation of the races [in occupations, housing, and schooling] on the sole basis of race. This could include *de jure* racial segregation that existed in the Jim Crow US South and during apartheid in South Africa and racial segregation can mean *de facto* segregation that is practiced in the California State prison system placing white inmates in separate tiers and cells away from African American inmates. We contend the terms are different.

14. Reskin, p. 13. In his discussion about holding allocators responsible for their discriminatory actions, Professor Reskin provides several examples, including the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission’s successful suit against Alamo Car Rental agency, which argued that preventing female employees from wearing head scarves is discriminatory, especially when a Muslim woman wore one for Ramadan and was subsequently fired.

15. Two pieces of good sociological research help to bring this point out: George Ritzer, 1996, *The McDonaldization of Society: An Investigation into the Changing Character of Contemporary Social Life*. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage), and Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed, 2001* (NY: Henry Holt and Company), discussing persistent poverty among the working poor.

16. See John Andrew, (1998), *Lyndon Johnson and the Great Society* (Chicago, IL, Ivan R. Dee Publishers).

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