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## Poverty, the U.S. South, and the SRSA\*

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**Abstract:** This paper is a broad expansion of an SRSA Research Fellows Address presented in Roslyn, Virginia on April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2019. In it, I extol the virtues of poverty research, particularly that focused on the U.S. where households living on less than \$4/day/person compose the largest shares of county populations. I note that two factors that are the hallmark of such extreme poverty – lack of a vehicle and lack of internet service – are forcing poor household to perceive themselves as ever more isolated, for greater accessibility for the rest of the U.S. population amplifies the gap created by their deficiency. This is because others expect everyone has such access. Southern areas with persistent poverty – the Black Belt, the Mississippi Delta, and Appalachia – have concentrations of such extreme poor and also have deficient access to the rest of the world. I suggest that Americans should find away to ameliorate this condition. I conclude by encouraging my SRSA colleagues to do what they do best, but with a poverty tilt, as a means of petitioning policy makers and the public.

*Keywords:* poverty policy, spatial isolation, poverty

*JEL Codes:* R1, J0, R20

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*We are no longer going to measure compassion by the number of programs or the number of people on those programs. We're going to measure compassion and success by the number of people we help get off of those programs and get back in charge of their own lives.*

**- Mick Mulvaney, Director, White House's Office of Management and Budget, May 2017.**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Presidential candidate Donald Trump declared he had no interest in altering Medicaid or other entitlements. Once his administration stepped into the White House, however, it started overhauling America's safety net for the disadvantaged. His appointment of Seema Verma as the Administrator of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) was most telling. She sought regulatory pathways to state-by-state Medicaid reform (Rosenbaum, 2017). Then, in April 2018, the President asked his Cabinet to review their affiliated programs to enforce current work requirements and to reduce administrative costs. Not long afterward, the President's Council of Economic Advisers (CEA) recommended the expansion of work requirements in non-cash welfare programs. America's safety net was under attack.

I point out the turmoil above to suggest the United States welfare system is facing extreme reform. Yet, political uncertainty has always made it tough, even in the U.S., to ascertain the scope and context for economic change. I focus on the welfare system since Niño Zarazúa and Tarp (2016), among others, point out that inequality is perhaps the most critical political issue of the century. This is because growth of income has been tilting in favor of upper-income households. In 1970, 14 percent of all U.S. adults reaped 29 percent of all U.S. income; and while this group's share had risen to 20 percent of all U.S. adults by 2018, its share of all U.S. income had risen to 48 percent (Horowitz et al., 2020).<sup>1</sup>

Information from tax returns, as opposed to self-reported via surveys, suggests that the bottom half of the U.S. income distribution fell from 20 to 11 percent from 1980 to 2017 (Piketty et al., 2018; York, 2020). In light of this, the time appears ripe to re-consider substantial innovations in anti-poverty policy. Rather than suggest some comprehensive anti-poverty strategy, I review current and expected poverty-related trends, lay out evidence on the prime causes of those trends, and point out what regional scientists can do attenuate these causes. I start by examining our knowledge of poverty.

## 2. A BRIEF HISTORY OF AMERICAN KNOWLEDGE ON POVERTY

Why does our federal government appear to be punishing those who most need its help? Some of us can recall successes in eradicating some key symptoms of poverty. During my lifetime, a twelfth-grade education became compulsory, plumbing arrived to nearly every home, private bus service had been available to most small towns and along rural byways, and low-interest loans made college affordable. The playing field appeared to be levelling. What happened? To answer this, let me quickly review the ever-changing history of poverty knowledge.

Bremner (1956) perhaps best depicts America's awakening to poverty. He recounts that America's war on poverty is deeply rooted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Covering a period from 1850-1920, he notes that the public view of poverty transformed from a view that poverty is the result of defects in character and unequal endowments to a more progressive view

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<sup>1</sup>The Pew Research Center, whose data is cited, defines "upper-income" Americans households as those households with income that is more than double the national median, adjusted for household size (Kochhar, 2018).

that poverty, insecurity, and insufficiency are primarily the result of social and economic conditions and are, therefore, remediable by social action. The idea that scientific knowledge is a possible key to solving social problems came to the fore early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although Booth's 1903 *Life and Labour* was undoubtedly a turning point in poverty research, it was Mill (1884) who argued that technological change would remove poverty, war, and other world atrocities. Still, since then, arguments for and against the welfare state have not changed much. The main reaction to the idea that science could help, even then, was that interference with the "invisible hand" of the market would induce laziness and immorality. That is, poverty measures would likely harm the very people they were meant to benefit. Meanwhile, frustrated by a paradox of poverty in a land of plenty, it is hard not to believe that politics and ideology should at least partly shoulder the blame of our nation's poor record of lifting people out of poverty. In any case, like Bremner's book, this piece is meant to remind us about some matter – poverty and anomie – that some of us typically avoid thinking about.

Like any enterprise, poverty knowledge has a diversity of perspectives that results in internal tensions of social thought. For example, it reflects differences in how to manage the economy – elitist top-down and politically empowering bottom-up approaches to reform – that includes a seemingly endless debate on class-based versus cultural (or "identity") politics that pits race against class (Lewis, 1966; O'Connor, 2001). A clear central tension is whether poverty is best understood (and, hence, addressed) as an individual experience or as structural matter and, thus, manageable via institutional reform. For now, it seems an individualist interpretation dominates, particularly in the regional science literature on the subject. This is reflected in the absence of class as an analytic category in poverty research in favor of such measures as an individual's family background and human capital investments with race and gender reduced to binary variables.

Of course, our nation's postwar economic affluence and the stirring of socio-political movements in favor of racial and gender egalitarianism certainly enabled some grand thinking toward attacking the poverty problem. Indeed, many policies of the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon Administrations (1961 – 1974) were guided by Keynesian economic theory, which suggests that economies at times need to be stimulated by government fiscal policies.<sup>2</sup> Keynesian thought's larger role for government permitted a greater focus on public goods and relief from inequality. Since poverty was linked to sluggish growth and less-than-full employment as well as to individuals with poor education and low skills (Moynihan, 1965; President's National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty, 1967, 1968), Keynesian policies appeared to be a solid way to cure the poverty problem. Nothing was more important to poverty research in the U.S. than President Johnson's declaration of the War on Poverty in his January 1964 State of the Union Address. He established the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) with the hope it would cut bureaucratic channels and enabled the development of Mollie Orshansky's poverty line in 1965 (Fisher, 1997).

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<sup>2</sup>Keynes focused his attack on the classical theory of the labor market to show that Say's Law governs classical thinking on the employment of all factors of production. He believed since Say's Law suggests that not spending is as good for effective demand as consumption, it was absurd and should be rejected (Mann, 2015). Moreover, at least in the short run, Keynes asserted that workers are not focused on their real wages and, instead, accept reduced real wages (clearly many did as he wrote in the 1930s).

To insure full employment and under the OEOs advisement, the President's National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty (1967, 1968) recommended the federal government do what it can to improve education and job training at all levels, upgrade employment services, extend legislated wages-and-hours provisions to all occupations, modernize government planning, and facilitate family-planning counseling. It also recommended reducing sources of discrimination, helping people move, and reducing penalties placed on the labor compensation of participants in welfare programs. For those unable to work, the President's National Advisory Commission recommended increases in direct income transfers (emphasizing cash rather than in-kind services or materials) as well as the expansion and modifications of existing programs in kind for health, food, clothing, and housing. In essence, it laid the ground work for a welfare state and many institutions, including the Appalachian Regional Commission in 1965, and programs were founded to support the recommended actions.

But the Keynesian consensus collapsed when the U.S. economy suffered a confluence of high unemployment and high inflation (so-called "stagflation"). This pair of phenomena arose under Nixon and lasted through Carter's Administration, when the prime rate jumped above the inflation rate. The poverty rate rose and federal government action was stymied by this two-horned menace. If government stimulated demand to reduce unemployment, inflation would climb even higher; but if it dampened demand to fight inflation, unemployment would rise. This fueled the rise of the political Right under President Reagan, which O'Connor (2001) tells us drew the political discourse away from the "good" work enabled by taxation and regulation of "big government" and toward personal responsibility as framed under a rubric of "family values." This direction of discourse largely has driven poverty policies since, with most welfare-related funds tied to work or disability requirements.

Founded in 1962, the Southern Regional Science Association (SRSA) has been clearly part and parcel to the effort to seek remedies for the concentration of poverty, at least in the U.S. South. Many current and past members of our association have a long history of producing research related to poverty and regional economic development. The severity and persistence of poverty in particular locales remains a real concern. Poverty among families, particularly those with children, in the Deep South's Black Belt,<sup>3</sup> the southern Borderlands,<sup>4</sup> and the core of Appalachia<sup>5</sup> are within the SRSA's spatial and academic purview. There is a broad array of symptoms of the poverty experienced by the South's poor, and during my presentation in Roslyn, Virginia, on April 5, 2019, I elaborated upon them by displaying a number of the symptoms on maps. Rather than spending your time and journal space showing you what results from long-run poverty, it seems the time and space would be better placed showing what "new" issues may be perpetuating the problem and, perhaps, even making it more severe for some Southern households. My idea is to encourage the

<sup>3</sup>Though originally the name of the rich of region with dark, calcareous soils good for growing corn and cotton, the term Black Belt has come to be used by social scientists to denote areas of the U.S. South in which antebellum plantations concentrated.

<sup>4</sup>The area close to the U.S.-Mexico border.

<sup>5</sup>Appalachia is a cultural region in the eastern U.S. that stretches from the southern tier of New York to northern Alabama and Georgia. The core here is composed of the southern- and western-most counties of West Virginia and the very eastern counties of both Kentucky and Tennessee.

minds of fellow SRSA members to drift toward this subject matter at some point in their career, just as mine does now.<sup>6</sup>

### 3. WHO IS IN POVERTY?

Poverty is a condition of an individual, or collection of them, that has a dearth of necessary resources; it is sometimes defined more broadly as social exclusion. For some, it conjures images of poor families in developing countries in a struggle of securing what Maslow (1943) identified as basic needs. With this in mind, federal policy advisors in the 1960s (Tobin, 1967; Lampman, 1971) predicted that an end to poverty in the U.S. was nigh. It is now clear that such predictions were naïve at a minimum. But were Tobin and Lampman truly so splendidly misguided? Is some degree of poverty in a nation like the U.S. really so inevitable? It seems fairly clear that the poverty experienced in the U.S. now is quite different from the nature of poverty experienced a century earlier. In this vein, surely some parallel difference, albeit from the late 1960s, was observed from Tobin and Lampman's vantage point. Nor is the U.S. standard of poverty akin to that used for the developing world. The World Bank Group (2018) estimates for 2015 show 736 million people worldwide lived on less than \$1.90/day (2011 PPP). About 6.6 million were in relatively wealthy western countries plus Australia, Japan and South Korea. Over half of this population (3.7 million) was credited to the US. These are the poorest of the poor, and represent just 1.2 percent of the U.S. population. Giroux (2017) suggests this exceptional condition within the U.S. was prompted by four decades' worth of policies produced by the financial elite, who treat America's "most vulnerable with contempt, relegating them to zones of social abandonment and forcing them to inhabit a society increasingly indifferent to their misfortunes, deprivations, and human suffering." I suspect it has deeper roots.

Edin and Shaefer (2015) and Shaefer et al. (2015) document the lives of Americans who somehow manage on \$2 per day; and despite the lurid detail these authors provide, it is hard to imagine such destitution. You see, while the World Bank may have achieved intercountry price parity, it neglected differences in the bundle of needs. A villager in the tropics can live wearing a minimum of clothes and in a structure without walls; this is not the case for a farmer in North Dakota who must regularly clear out thorny brush, not to mention wade through snows drifts in frigid temperatures to slop hogs in mid-January. After making adjustments along these lines, Allen (2017) suggests that the US equivalent should be more like \$4.00/day (2011 PPP) if we apply \$1.90/day to define poverty in India. This suggests that the number of Americans in deep poverty would be something more like 5.5 million, a rate of 1.7 percent. This is, of course, still small compared to shares of South Asians in poverty, it is also far below official U.S. estimates for 2018. Semega et al. (2016) report 38.1

<sup>6</sup>This is by no means my first time examining the issue of poverty in the U.S. I wistfully recall hand-coloring county-level maps of the South with markers or crayons as a graduate student with classmate Robert Gibbs (2003 SRSA President). One map dealt with the percent of population under the poverty level in 1980 and another with the density of tractor use in 1950. I think we colored on the order of ten maps on various topics. Printing out color maps was expensive and the maps themselves had to be hand programmed in 1985, assuming files of geographic turning points were readily available.

million Americans in poverty or 11.8 percent. Still, 1.7 percent in deep poverty is by no means a hollow share of the population.

Case and Deaton (2015, 2017) show that despite our generally better food, sanitation, and water quality plus widely available health care, the life expectancy of Americans – particularly the poorest of us – is unexpectedly low. This is unquestionably the case Americans in the Deep South, and most pointedly in the Mississippi Delta and Appalachia. Case and Deaton show that drugs and alcohol are taking their toll on America’s poor with mortality rates rising, mostly due to enhanced suicide rates and a halt to the long historical decline in mortality from heart disease. Shaefer et al. (2017) acknowledge that the well-being of Americans is highly stratified by income, education, and race; moreover, they find that life expectancy, infant mortality rates, homicide rates, and incarceration rates of America’s poorest are similar in experience to poor in countries with GDP per capita that is a fraction ours.

McClusky (2003) contends that the financial elite believe that a central social goal of government is to enable low-wage labor services. He suggests that these elite deem social welfare re-allocation to the poor as being inherently inefficient and, moreover, a moral hazard that inevitably leads potential workers to opt for dependence on the state. There is a substantial lineage of evidence that suggests otherwise, however (Danziger et al., 1981; Moffitt, 1989; Bitler and Hoynes, 2016; Ziliak, 2016; Allard, 2017). It notes that the disincentives of social transfers to work, gain an education, and marry are, at best, small. In other words, empirically speaking, dependence on social assistance appears to be a consequence, rather than a cause, of poverty. This then advocates that alleviating poverty should be a core concern of society.

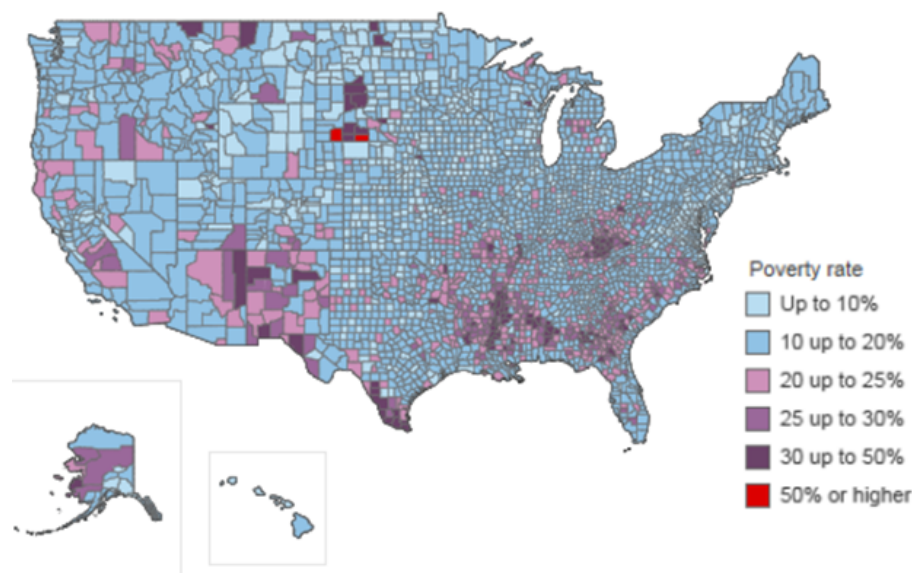
For certain, poverty has adverse effects on physical as well as psychological well-being of a society’s members (Malat et al., 2018). The long-run health ramifications are particularly notable for children (McLaughlin and Rank, 2018). Combined, these can lead to serious social and political consequences, when the poor believe themselves to be a large group that is ever more becoming marginalized by society. A breakdown in public confidence of democratic institutions predictably ensues. Perceptions of social alienation reign among the poor. These, in turn, can provoke social discord; distrust in public safety officials and, hence, crime; and, minimally, widespread drug and alcohol abuse.

In the end, the ability of poverty policies to be effective is limited by the role of government that a society is willing to support. Circularly, public sentiment is affected by trust in government, the breadth of social institutions the public is willing to support, and the commitment of societal values towards attaining a common good. Discrimination, parochial concerns, and misunderstandings of poverty and its causes are impediments to fighting poverty. The role of this paper is to enable a better understanding of poverty; one with a peculiar focus on the increasing technological isolation of poor in modern society.

#### 4. POVERTY’S TREND DRIVERS: ACCESS TO IT AND AUTO

Our nation has often called the “land of opportunity.” Compared to most other nations, personal success here in the U.S. can depend far less on one’s background. But I agree

**Figure 1: Poverty Rates by County, 2013-2017  
Average**



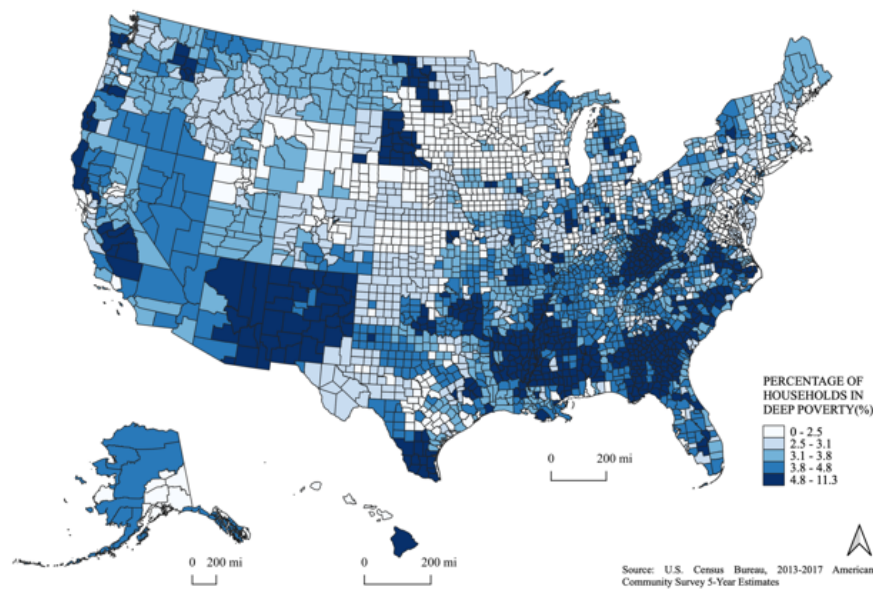
with Chetty et al. (2014a), who suggest that the U.S. is a collection of societies in which some get to enjoy “lands of opportunity,” while in others few progeny can manage to escape poverty. Intergenerational mobility remains surprisingly stable (Chetty et al., 2014b), given that increasing gaps persist across income groups with regard to test scores, parental inputs, and social connectedness (Snellman et al., 2015).

Problems of poverty and inequality over the next 30 years will undoubtedly be shaped by recent spatial shifts in need and hardship across America. Poverty has become more concentrated and increasingly persistent in certain communities over the period, and the Great Recession seems to have hardened the causes of these trends. Allard (2017) notes that poverty rates rest near historic highs in urban and rural areas. The Affordable Care Act (ACA) and Medicaid have helped alleviate the severity of this substantially since 2012. Figure 1 shows the most recently reported poverty rates by U.S. county. Note that poverty remains persistent among many counties of the Black Belt, the southern Borderlands, and the core of Appalachia, plus a number of counties that are physically dominated by Indian reservations.<sup>7</sup> Figure 2 shows the uneven distribution across space of the 1.7 percent of Americans who are in deep poverty, this time using quintiles. Note the spread is so not much different than that in Figure 1.

While economic factors like economic downturns and industry structural shifts are important factors that place individuals in poverty, they are but one set. Rupasingha and Goetz (2007) suggest that characteristics of local social, political, and religious institutions are nearly as important. Further, it seems ethnic diversity induces some social fragmentation and, hence, can discourage agreement upon growth-reducing policies at the local level (Alesina et al., 1999). So, it is interesting that Suro et al. (2011) note that native-born

<sup>7</sup>An Indian reservation is a legal designation of an area managed by a federally recognized Native American tribe under the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs.

**Figure 2: Percentage of Households in Deep Poverty (\$4/person/day), 2017 (shaded by quintile)**



Americans largely drove recent poverty trends, not the recent influx of undocumented immigrants as one might grasp from recent political rhetoric. Ultimately, however, a rather complex array of factors shapes poverty's geographic distribution (Partridge and Rickman, 2006).

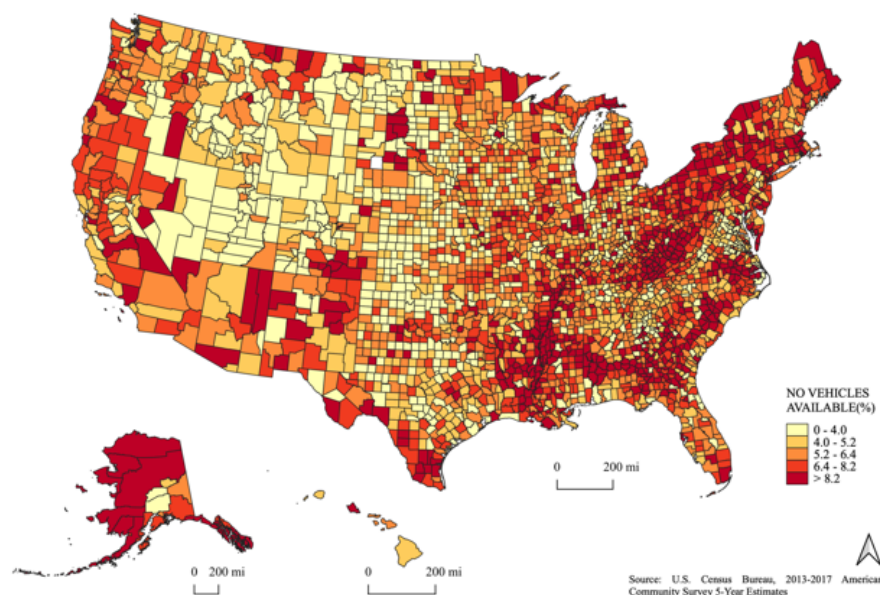
But which of the most polarizing factors are changing fastest? One is internet connectivity, and another is auto ownership. Fortunately, in both instances the “have nots” are becoming an increasingly small slice of the U.S. population. Household internet connectivity has soared in U.S. In 2000, 6.7 percent of all U.S. households had some sort of internet access; by 2017 that share had rocketed to 87.5 percent.<sup>8</sup> This means that 12.5 percent of households lack an internet connection of any kind. The 2018 American Community Survey reports that about 8.7 percent of U.S. households also lacked access to a vehicle of their own. A problem is that, except for households in our largest cities where public transit is often quite accessible, those who lack vehicles are also liable to lack internet access. Therein lies the rub as taxis are fast becoming a dying breed, since they are giving way to ride-sharing firms – the likes of Uber and Lyft – the use of which relies on internet service, particularly via applications (apps) on smartphones. For the very poor, such technological isolation is further exacerbated by the decline of intercity bus service (U.S. Department of Transportation, 2005).

Trends like the above seem to me (and some others) to be most distressing. That is, just as our society seems to be making some headway into ameliorating many of the effects of poverty, a seemingly new issue crops up to make the poverty divide appear to be an even

<sup>8</sup>Statista. (2019) Percentage of population using the internet in the U.S. from 2000 to 2017, available on line in October 2019 at <https://www.statista.com/statistics/209117/us-internet-penetration/>



**Figure 3: Percentage of Households with No Vehicles Available by U.S. County, 2017 (shaded by quintile)**



wider chasm to cross. King et al. (forthcoming, p. 2) disclose the risks through isolation suffered by people without vehicles:

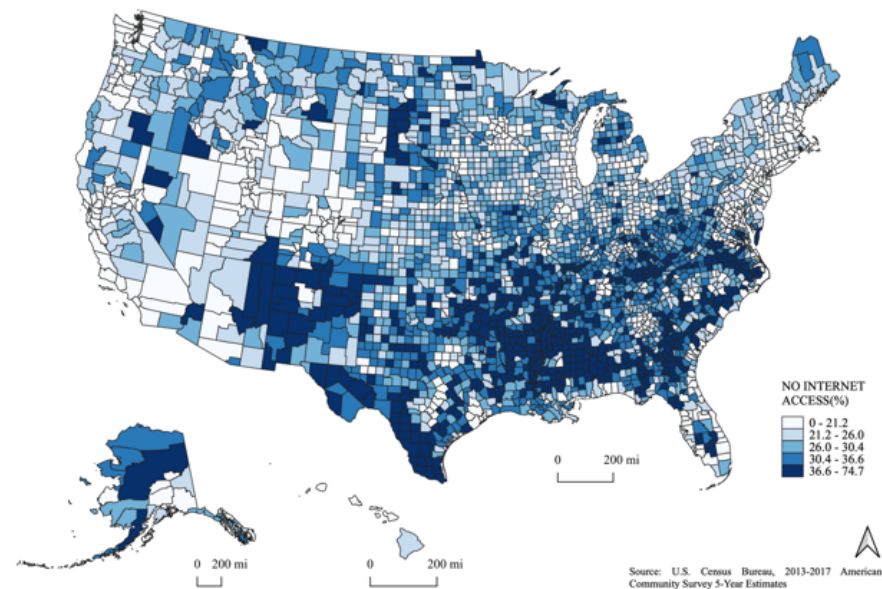
*This exclusion occurs not just because people with cars can cover more ground more quickly than people without them, but because changes made to accommodate automobiles can affirmatively disadvantage other ways of moving around. The physical changes that enable high-speed automobile travel, like low-density development and expansive surface parking, also penalize low-speed modes by pushing destinations apart and making roads less safe for people outside of vehicles.*

They predict that any household that can even remotely buy a vehicle will do so. So, greater shares of the population will own automobiles, but also that not owning a car will become an ever more pronounced hallmark of poverty.

The relationship between auto access and economic outcomes is rife with endogeneity problems, however. It reminds me of trying to land my first job, when most job listings that I perused demanded experience. That is, acquiring a vehicle can improve the earning power of poor households, but, if you are poor, you must have fairly high earnings power in order to buy a vehicle. If we can ever figure out a policy intervention for this one,<sup>9</sup> it is fairly clear that vehicle access is associated with less stress, more employment, and higher earnings (Gurley and Bruce, 2005).

<sup>9</sup>Interestingly, King et al. (forthcoming) suggest allocating to the poor something like vouchers to access vehicles.

**Figure 4: Percentage of Households without Internet Access by U.S. County, 2017 (shaded by quintile)**



King et al. (forthcoming, p. 4) contend that “vehicle ownership has both a network effect and a feedback effect: mass auto ownership transformed America’s landscape, and the landscape’s transformation further encouraged mass auto ownership.” They tell us that empty intercity spaces have become interrupted by strips of commerce so that, in reply, governments wound up granting cars the right-of-way, essentially regulating pedestrians off of streets. This enabled speed, and speed enabled rapid low-density suburbanization. “Low densities required driving and undermined other forms of mobility” (p. 5). Unfortunately, available evidence suggests that even low-cost vehicles prove to be a substantial financial burden on our nation’s poorest households. Figure 3 shows where households lack access to a vehicle. It indicts many of the same counties that have concentrations of deep poverty (Figure 2), although a surprising number of counties in the rural northeast U.S. also crop up.

Internet use is fundamentally affecting the ways in which individuals, households, and businesses interact. Evidence suggests that, at least incomewise, the technologized world is not distributed equitably. In the U.S., the good news from Rideout and Katz (2016) is that more than 90 percent of the families with school-age children living below the median household income report having Internet access. The focus on children in Internet use research derives from their apparent role as a leading indicator in that they tend to exhibit a higher frequency and diversity of Internet use than do their parents. This results from their early life exposure to technology (Zillien and Hargittai, 2009) and also potentially from their higher levels of social isolation (Eynon and Helsper, 2011). Nonetheless, Rideout and Katz (2016) tell us that more than half of poorer families report interrupted or slow connectivity, outdated devices, or are allotting individual family members time in which to share access.

This is unfortunate since Internet use is fundamental nowadays to the maintenance and development of social capital (Helsper, 2012; van Deursen et al., 2014). Moreover, Americans use the Internet for a variety of reasons: accessing health information, shopping and making travel reservations, banking and paying bills, and being entertained are among an array of uses that continues to expand. Interestingly, Sakar et al. (2017) note little variation across U.S. geography and household type in basic composition of these uses of internet where it is available. But in mapping ICT use by US county, Sakar et al. (2016) reveal its spatial pattern, in 2012 at least, comports all too well with that for poverty rates (see Figure 1). Figure 4 shows where counties in which high shares of households lack internet access and where a digital divide exists in America in 2017. It may be evolving but, like automobile usage, is embedded in isolation and poverty.

Isolation due to a lack of ICT access appears to be a prominent feature of the U.S. South, although counties dominated by Indian reservations also appear to suffer as well. It may be that matters have improved ICT-wise since 2017, but it seems unlikely. It, therefore, may be no wonder then that workers in this region as well as in darkly shaded areas of the Midwest in Figure 4 were among those regions of the US that protested most for opening up as the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 was waning. Their connectedness to the rest of the world was weakest.

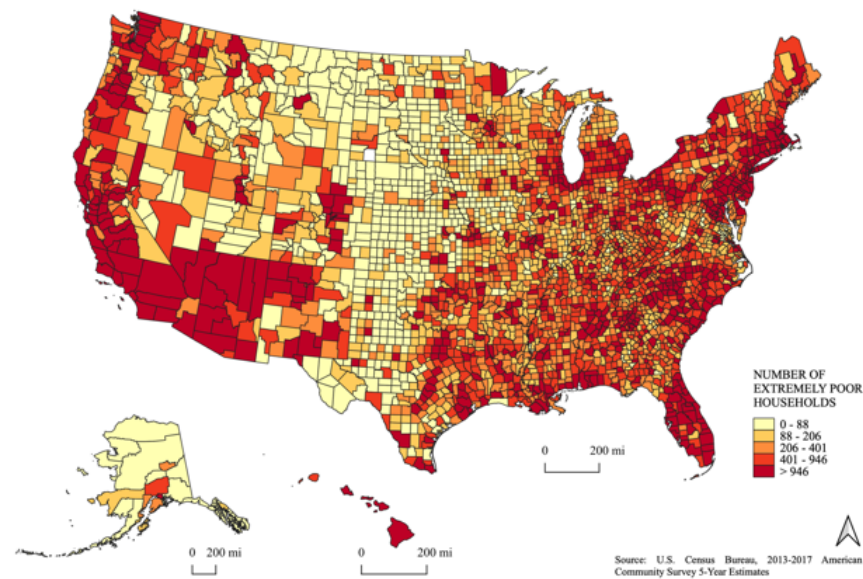
As the percentage of ICT “non-adopters” has shrunk, an even smaller share among them has risen – households who have **discontinued** their use of ICT – so-called “un-adopters” (Dailey et al., 2010). Un-adopters comprised about 3.3 percent of all households and about 12.1 percent of non-adopters in 2013 (Whitacre and Rhinesmith, 2016). They are notable because the calculus of these households apparently reveals that their relevant costs of residential broadband connection outweighs its benefits to them. As Whitacre and Rhinesmith note, any policy developments toward more digital inclusion has much to learn from an understanding of un-adopters, given their previous interactions with and rejection of the use of the technology. They apparently un-adopt for a wide array of overlapping reasons beyond the expense; primary among them, according to Whitacre and Rhinesmith, is a lack both of need and of an adequate computer. These authors also show that un-adopter households have higher income and education levels, are younger, and are more apt to have children than never-adopting counterparts.

Pooling together data on vehicle availability and internet access (see Figure 5), we see an almost-perfect reflection of Figure 2, which showed the locations of households in deep poverty. Isolation appears to be the core problem.

## 5. U.S. POVERTY IN SPATIAL PERSPECTIVE

It should be clear from the above that the experience of material hardship in the U.S. is one of isolation and marginalization from mainstream society. Moreover, it seems apparent, at least given the concentrations shown in Figure 2, that the experience of deep poverty is likely to be different across space, between urban and rural areas if not also suburban areas. To be sure, however, it is a problem that transcends them all.

**Figure 5: Number of Extremely Poor Households by U.S. County, 2017 (shaded by quintile)**

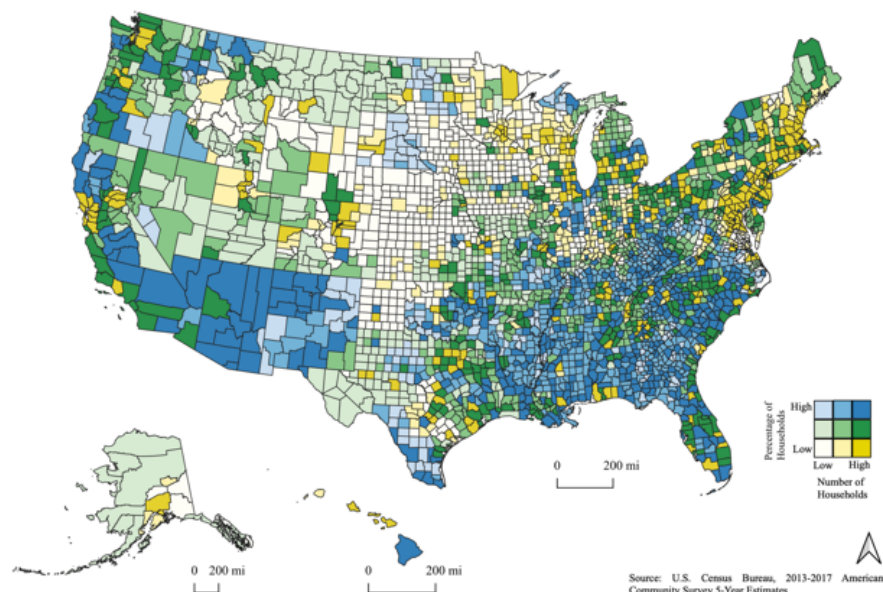


Poverty was already framed as a rural and urban phenomenon as early as the War on Poverty under Johnson's Administration (Humphrey, 1964). And while poverty problems in rural America have remained severe and persistent, it has since received far less attention compared to urban poverty. Until recently, even less attention was paid to suburban America. Berube and Kneebone (2006), who typically get initial credit for examining suburban poverty, note that the U.S. count of suburban poor exceeded that of urban poor.

Much of the observed rise in poverty across America over recent decades is tied closely to nationwide economic structural changes and the extent of labor-force attachment. In the face of growing employment, ever-lower unemployment rates and highest-ever job vacancy rates, the nation's labor force participation has been falling as potential workers become discouraged by the possibility of never being hired (Hamermesh, 2019; Tüzeman and Tran, 2019). Moreover, inflation-adjusted earnings of prime-age working adults in the bottom half of the wage scale have swayed or stagnated since national manufacturing employment peaked in 1979. Key causes of these trends include labor demand and supply factors (such as automation, immigration, and limited college attainment); changing labor market institutions (such as declining unionism and stagnant federal wage/hours laws); rising alternative staffing arrangements, informal and piece work, freelancing and "fissuring" of workplaces; and uneven labor-market progress and policies that affect women, minorities, and youth (Groshen and Holzer, 2019).

In essence, skills demanded by employers and the composition of job opportunities changed rather radically over recent decades. The shares of low- and high-skill jobs have risen at the expense of that for semi-skilled job, a phenomenon called "job polarization" (Autor et al., 2006) after it was well underway. The pay rates for these semi-skilled jobs, which were fairly routine (in that they were procedural or rule-based) cognitive or manual

**Figure 6: Share and Number of Households in Deep Poverty by U.S. County, 2017 (shaded on each dimension by tercile)**



jobs, subjected jobs of such workers to be threatened by both offshoring and automation as labor unions weakened (Wyly et al., 1998; Goos et al., 2014). Tüzeman and Tran (2019) report that individuals who lacked a college education bore the brunt of these job losses; and that the decline of routine jobs was paralleled by a rise in nonroutine cognitive jobs – what Reich (1991) called “symbolic-analytic services.” These same authors tell us that college-educated workers accrued almost all net job gains from 2008 to 2019, including those in routinized jobs. Interestingly, they also tell us that nonparticipating prime-age men most commonly reported disability or illness as reason for their lack of labor-force participation; prime-age women reported family care-taking.

Wang et al. (2018) have examined the role of publicly provided economic development incentives for private organizations in battling the sort of income inequality discussed above. They reveal evidence that supports the role of the financial elite as reported by McClusky (2003) – a so-called “reverse Robin Hood effect” in which more generous incentives are associated with redistribution of income from the bottom to the top of the income distribution.

Of course, observing the spatial distribution of poverty rates as shown in Figure 2 does not reveal well where poverty is actually concentrated. In this regard, Figure 6 paints things more clearly. Extreme poverty is not just a problem for the U.S. South. It also persists in U.S. urban areas, although among a smaller share of households. Still, they are concentrated. Only the expanse of the Great Plains appears to be untouched. Figure 7 contrasts discoveries of Figure 2 and Figure 6 yellow and green counties having high counts but low shares of households in extreme poverty. The lighter-shaded counties of the U.S. South in Figure 2 become filled in with darker shades of yellow and green, suggesting that



an extraordinary bout of extreme poverty prevails throughout nearly all counties of the U.S. South.

## 6. SUMMARY

Isard (1974, p. 2) explicitly tells us that above all “regional science as a discipline concerns the careful and patient study of social problems with regard to regional or spatial dimensions, employing diverse combinations of analytical and empirical research.” I managed that in this piece by tending to one of the foremost social problems – poverty – although I purposely refrained from displaying statistical skills. My point in doing so shows that we regional scientists do not always need to display the methodological machismo that distinguishes us and still be regional scientists. On that same page, Isard goes on to tell us that “a typical regional scientist wants to surround himself with research assistants and a computer for a long time in order to collect all of the relevant information about the problem, analyze it carefully, try out some hypotheses, and finally reach some conclusions.” I managed that partially by trading cash for maps that I requested a few of my faithful to develop for me, although it has been some time since a social science laboratory has needed to exist as a single room or a spatial concentration of rooms. I say this, given I have not now seen my younger colleagues in person for two months, although we have met face to face via WeChat, WhatsApp, Skype, WebEx, and/or Zoom.

And that brings me to the point of this paper: our poorest fellow citizens cannot meet in a face-to-face manner with almost anyone. They lack a vehicle that can get them to interview for a job or even a computer or smartphone that could facilitate such an interview at a distance. And, while a phone interview might be sufficient, an interviewee undoubtedly sends a negative signal to the interviewer if they are unable to make the effort to enable such a face-to-face interview. This does not address the issues of insufficient modern childhood education, acute psychological need for social discourse, higher costs of shopping, lack of ready access to emergency medical services, ignorance of current events, and the lack of free and independent media outlets that derive from a lack of access to internet service. And I report this as I read rumblings that our President intends to defund the U.S. Postal Service, which is probably the first geographically neutral service, at least cost-wise, that was ever provided by our federal government. Such rumblings make the isolation of those in extreme poverty sound like an insurmountable or, at least, intractable problem.

So, armed as we are with chambers filled with poverty research, where do we go from here? We petition the world with research. We do what we do best, with a tilt toward concerns for the poorest in our nation. We then amplify and disseminate those concerns, along the lines I have discussed elsewhere (Lahr, 2009). Readers who are members of the Southern Regional Science Association place problems of our home turf within the scope of our rubric. Persistent poverty is one of those problems.

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