

Issue Brief № 48

Defining Alabama's Black Belt Region

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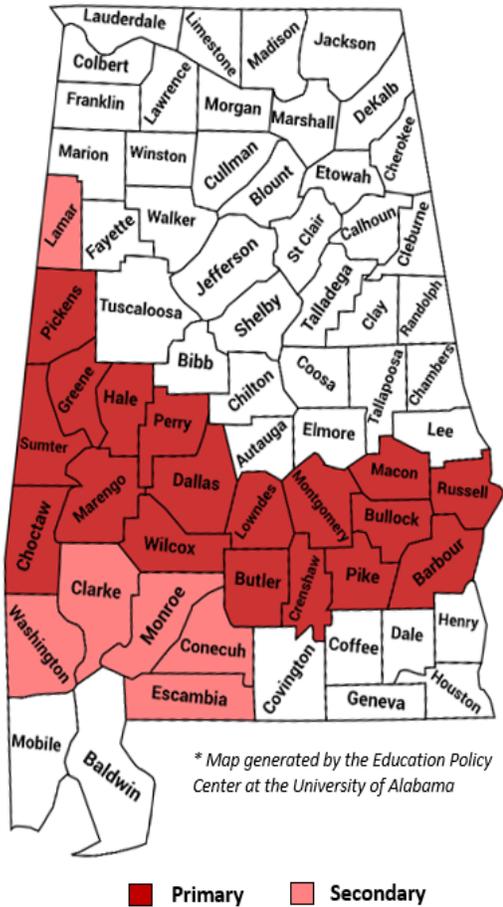
For the purposes of this issue brief series, the University of Alabama's Education Policy Center used an expansive definition of the Black Belt encompassing 24 counties. But we note that Crenshaw, Montgomery, Pike and Russell counties have had modest growth, which means that the population loss,¹ K12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

1 INCONSISTENT DEFINITIONS

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

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

**Chart 1: The Black Belt
Region of Alabama**



include the federal Delta Regional Authority, the State of Alabama’s Black Belt Action Commission, the University of Alabama-led Institute for Rural Health Research, and the University of West Alabama’s Alabama Black Belt Heritage Area. Inconsistent definitions make it difficult to develop and sustain political coalitions over time to positively impact policies and programs on the ground.

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

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

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

1.1 Federal agency definitions

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

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

1.2 State definitions

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

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

Inconsistent definitions of Black Belt counties make it difficult for funded programs to lean on each other

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

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

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

2 DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

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

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

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

THE EDUCATION POLICY CENTER AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA

Established in 1924, the Education Policy Center is The University of Alabama’s oldest center or institute. Through its ongoing nonpartisan research and programs, it seeks to assist the College of Education and the University to fulfill their mission to improve the quality of life for all Alabamians. The EPC promotes expanding access and success, strengthening equity, and advancing economic and community development with special emphasis on telling the story of the Deep South to policymakers in Alabama, the region and nation.

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