

# The Appalachian mountains of North America: 40 years of disaggregated poverty data

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Image:

Map of Appalachian Regional Commission work region



Although there may be a lack of poverty data disaggregated by mountain region for most of the world, mountain-specific data do exist and so does poverty in the Appalachian Mountains of North America. Over four decades of surveys and analyses of 406 mountain counties, 22 million people, and 200,000 square miles of mountain landscape show that the Appalachian mountain region, when compared to national averages, has and continues to be disadvantaged in terms of income, employment, and poverty levels.

Geographically, the Appalachian Mountains span nearly the entire length of the eastern coast of North America, 2,600 km from the St. Lawrence River of Canada southwest-ward to Georgia and Alabama in the U.S. Its people have been referred to as a mosaic of cultures, comprised of peoples of numerous ethnic and religious backgrounds (Schelling et al. 1992). Germans and Scots-Irish came in the early 1720s, and were later joined by Welsh, French, Huguenots, Irish, and Swiss in the central and southern Appalachians. The Hudson valley became home for the English and Dutch in New England, and the Middle Atlantic was settled by English and German religious refugees. Ethnic architectural styles and agricultural practices are still reflected in each group's settlement area, and landscape type can also serve as an indicator of cultural heritage--German ancestry in farms located on valley floors, Scots-Irish ancestry on farms of the mountainsides. Large-scale extractive logging and coal mining, supported by outside interests with finance, technology, and legal sophistication behind them, accelerated in the late 1800s that left little behind for these mountain people but poverty, convalescing clear cuts, and strip-mined landscapes (Schelling et al. 1992).

For the past 100 years, the Appalachians have been home to some of the largest concentrations of impoverished people living in the United States. Contributing factors are thought to include the rural and geographically isolated nature of the region, lack of high skill/high wage manufacturing, limited industrial diversity, sensitivity of the region's industries to recession, dependence on extractive industries, export of capital, and lack of investment in the human capital of the region (Applied Population Laboratory 2000: 9). These are neither the myths nor conventional wisdom of an international mountain advocacy group, but the facts as determined by a copious literature and data base disaggregated by mountain region.

Although geographically the range extends from Canada to Georgia, a different map of the region was developed in the 1960s that has played some role in today's common association of the word "Appalachia" with "poverty". In 1965, the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) was established by Congress to support economic and social development in the region, defining "Appalachia" as a 200,000 square-mile region that follows the SW-NE strike of the mountains from southern New York to northern Mississippi. All of West Virginia, and parts of 12 other states, are included in the region, representing 406 counties inhabited by 22 million people (Figure 1). 42 percent of the region's population is rural compared with 20 percent of the national population. The counties included are those originally ranking a "distressed county" status, based on poverty rates and three-year unemployment rates that are 150 percent or more than the national average, and per capita market income that is two-thirds or less than the national average (Wood and Bischak 2002: 1).

Although poverty is still high compared to national averages, recent studies have shown that significant improvement has taken place since the ARC was

first established, i.e., the number of distressed counties within the region has decreased by more than half since 1960, although one quarter of the counties that were distressed more than four decades ago remain distressed today.

Factors identified that contributed to the movement of counties out of distressed status included the following (Wood and Bischak 2002: iii):

- A higher share of manufacturing employment, particularly in the south,
- Counties that became part of metropolitan areas, particularly in the south,
- A more diversified economy as reflected by a non-specialized local economy
- Higher educational attainment rates for both high school achievement and some college,
- A higher percentage of the population living in urban areas (i.e., towns and small cities) and
- The ability of a county to attract retirees to establish residency.

Factors identified that contributed to the counties that remained within the distressed status included:

- A higher share of mining employment (half of the persistently-distressed counties were mining-dependent),
- A higher share of minority populations,
- A higher share of children and elderly dependent populations, and
- A higher dependence on government transfer payments.

Such insights are important to the continued identification of strategies that can help reduce poverty within the Appalachian mountain region, some of which will be highlighted in a forthcoming case study on the growing role of micro-enterprise. However, several states would have been eliminated from the analyses had they been evaluated on the basis of being more than 50 percent mountainous or less than 50 percent mountainous, as described in Mr. Rasmussen's excellent paper, which would have led to questionable comparisons, interpretations, and results. That is, only the mountainous regions of all 13 states were included, and their mountain-specific poverty and unemployment data then compared with the national averages.

In summary, the Appalachians represent a case study where mountain data have indeed been disaggregated, the poverty is real, and the contributing factors such as isolation, dependence on extractive industries, and lack of investment in human capital are documented.

## References:

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## Notes to readers

This paper is a case study on Sustainable Livelihoods and Poverty Alleviation. A Mountain Forum e-consultation for the UNEP / Bishkek Global Mountain Summit. 23-28 April 2002.

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