

Rural Opportunities: Changing the Narrative and Shifting Ownership of Land

SAVI HORNE

Executive Director
Land Loss Prevention Project

LIVIA MARQUES

Principal
Food Driven Strategies

MIKKI SAGER

Consultant

The views expressed in this article are those of the individual author/authors and do not represent the views of or an endorsement by the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, the Federal Reserve Board of Governors, or the Federal Reserve System.

“In the settler mind, land was property, real estate, capital, or natural resources. But to our people, it was everything: identity, the connection to our ancestors, the home of our nonhuman kinfolk, our pharmacy, our library, the source of all that sustained us.”¹

—Robin Wall Kimmerer, citizen of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation

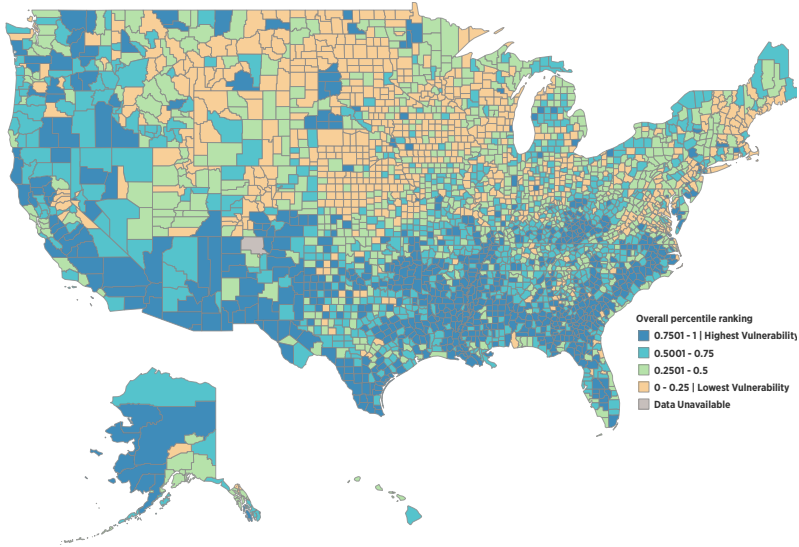
LAND IS POWER. Land is not only a key to the agricultural system in the United States, it is a critical factor in multiple other systems, including: a store of wealth, recreation, environmental/ecological stewardship, spiritual re-creation, familial stability and political power.²

Land is the basis of the modern rural economy—alternately revered and used wisely and for sustenance, and overlooked, abused and taken for granted. It was stewarded by, then seized and used to oppress and enslave, Indigenous peoples and survivors of the African diaspora. It is sought by some as a source of great material wealth, and by others for individual and communal sustenance, self-sufficiency, self-determination and sustainability. In this chapter, we will explore the myth and the reality of who and what is rural America, and the opportunities and community benefits that can accrue from changing the narrative and shifting ownership, control and stewardship of land for the greater good.

Where Are We?

By the numbers, rural America is distressingly behind urban counterparts, according to many indicators, with disproportionately high percentages of people living in poverty, sustaining job losses, having poor health outcomes, lacking access to healthy foods, attaining lower levels of education, and more. The Economic Research Service (ERS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has identified a total of 353 U.S. counties designated as having “persistent poverty” and a total of 708 counties designated as having “persistent child poverty.”

FIGURE 1
Social Vulnerability, 2018



SOURCE: SOURCE: U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, Social Vulnerability Index, 2018

Eighty-five percent of persistent poverty counties and 79% of persistent child poverty counties in the U.S. are designated as nonmetro. These counties tend to be geographically clustered in the South, Appalachia, Indian Country and the Southwest. The Social Vulnerability Index maps of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry reveal similar geographic patterns of socioeconomic distress (dark blue on the map).

The notion that rural America is predominantly white farm families is perhaps one of the most misleading myths. In fact, rural America has historically been home to large numbers of racial and ethnic minorities, although unlike for their white counterparts, it was often not by choice. Colonization, genocide, slavery and racial subjugation resulted in geographically and socially isolated communities of color, especially in the South, in the *colonias* and on American Indian reservations. While segregation is often seen as an urban

issue, Black, Indigenous and other people-of-color (BIPOC) communities in rural areas abound yet are often invisible and therefore easily forgotten.

Land has played a key role in the creation, retention and loss of wealth in rural America, and it provides the foundation for the food we eat, the water we drink and the air we breathe. Many public and private investments in rural counties have declined, because only 14% of the U.S. population lives in rural areas. Yet, with rural counties comprising more than 72% of the country's total land base,³ the environmental health of our country relies on strong economies in rural and tribal communities sustainably using and stewarding these lands.

How Did We Get Here?

“Indigenous people have been growing food, creating complex systems of agriculture, gathering, and practicing land stewardship long before the formation of any discipline, area of study, or social movement describing the relationships between environments and humans. Violent colonization and willful ignorance of these Indigenous land stewardship systems have led to the destructive replacement of the Indigenous relationships with our environment with parasitic, extractive systems, which now urgently need to be corrected.”⁴

—A-dae Romero Briones, director of programs, Native Agriculture and Food Systems Initiative, First Nations Development Institute

Systemic racism, policies and power: The root causes of disproportionately high poverty, unemployment, poor health, and other negative outcomes in some rural communities are found in governmental policies, racism and injustices, many of which impacted land ownership or control. The forced relocation of Indigenous nations from ancestral homelands has been well-documented, though the resulting starvation, disease, and loss of languages and culture may be less well-known. The enslavement of African, Indigenous and other peoples produced great wealth for the enslavers and, in many cases, created the generational poverty and wealth gaps we see today.

“The Mexican War brought not only soldiers to the lower border country, but also a host of Anglo-Americans who began almost immediately to challenge the Mexicans for control of the land. ... Anglos ultimately took advantage of their growing economic power, used new laws to gain land, and occasionally

resorted to devious means to subvert the Mexicans' position as dominant landholders.”⁵

—Armando C. Alonzo, associate professor of history, Texas A&M University

While it is tempting to categorize the impacts on low-income and BIPOC communities as “broken systems” or “system failures,” grassroots and BIPOC conventional wisdom would argue the system is working exactly as it was designed to work—to benefit the few at the expense of the many. Despite efforts to push back against these systems over the years, “backlash” policies gave powerful non-BIPOC individuals the upper hand, resulting in the loss of land. For example:

- Indigenous nations were forced from their ancestral homelands by federal actions, with treaties benefiting white negotiators, as well as settlers who received lands seized by the federal government. Most treaties were not honored, and in the 1950s, Congress adopted policies designed to terminate federal obligations to tribes. Through the Bureau of Indian Affairs relocation program, more than 33,000 American Indian and Alaska Native people were removed from reservations and villages and relocated to urban centers for “training and employment.” Over 100 tribes were terminated, and more than a million acres of land were removed from trust status when Congress passed House Concurrent Resolution 108 (HCR 108) in 1953.
- The descendants of slaves overcame Reconstruction, sharecropping, lynchings and other efforts meant to keep them marginalized to eventually acquire, own and farm millions of acres of land by 1920. But Jim Crow laws—state and local statutes that codified racial segregation and barred African Americans from voting, holding jobs, and more—were in effect for almost 100 years following the Civil War. Racially discriminatory practices by public agencies and private lending institutions led to the loss of millions of acres of land, homes, livelihoods and, in too many cases, lives. Countless family lands were seized when African Americans fled to the North to escape these conditions.
- Landowners in Appalachia lost wealth and power with the sale (typically for pennies on the dollar) of mineral rights to family lands, resulting in the wholesale depletion of the region’s natural resource base. A 1978 review of land deeds from 80 counties in Alabama, Kentucky, North Carolina,

Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia found that 40% of the property and 70% of the mineral rights in sampled counties were owned by corporations, and less than half of the individual-owned lands were owned by “local individuals.” This loss of local control created “patterns of inadequate local tax revenues and services, lack of economic development, loss of agricultural lands, lack of sufficient housing ... and land use.”⁶

The resulting poverty rates have been consistently higher in rural areas than metro areas ever since measurement began in 1960.⁷ In minority-dominated persistent poverty counties, the poverty rate for Blacks dropped from 59.8% in 1960 to 27.2% in 1980. But little has changed since then. In 2018, the rural Black poverty rate remained highest of all rural race/ethnicity groups at 31.6%, followed by American Indians at 30.9% and Hispanics at 23.8%.⁸ The resulting multigenerational poverty in rural BIPOC communities has continued to be exacerbated by systemic, institutional abuses of political and economic power, along with lack of access to capital, and public policies, statutes and systems that enable outright theft of land from those with lack of access to legal support.

Numerous studies have documented the disproportionate levels of environmental degradation that result from racism and multigenerational poverty. Landfills, confined animal feeding operations, prisons, and other environmentally and socially degrading industries are recruited to high-poverty rural areas and communities of color to create jobs or replace jobs lost to mechanization and the global economy. In recent years, many of the most distressed rural communities have also been disproportionately impacted by climate change and severe weather events. And, in 2020-21, the same communities were severely and disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

What Does the Future Hold?

“Creating a more equitable agriculture system will be impossible unless Black farmers have control over their own financial destinies. ... Years of racist policies at the USDA have taken an enormous toll on Black-operated farms. Consider that, in 1910, 14% of the nation’s farmers were Black. By 2017, that number had fallen to 1.4%. ... America needs to finally address the legacy of discrimination that pervades our farm sector. But as long as loan decisions are made by white-dominated institutions, Black farmers will never break free of the racism that

has held them back for generations. That's why a credit and financing institution owned and controlled by Black farmers is long overdue. Congress can help create such an organization and devote \$50 [million] to \$100 million for a credit and financing institution modeled on the Farm Credit System.”⁹

—Lloyd Wright, former director of USDA Office of Civil Rights and Virginia farmer

The future of rural America’s most vulnerable communities will depend on the degree and comprehensiveness of actions that are taken now and in the coming years. We recommend the following three actions—some of which are in process; the others will need broader regional and national support, including public and private investments, to advance.

1. Change the Narrative and Increase Investments in Rural and Tribal Communities

Nationally, philanthropic support for rural America has lagged behind its support for urban areas, with only about 6% of philanthropic dollars invested in rural communities. As interest increases in investing in organizations led by and serving BIPOC communities, it will be vitally important to do the following:

- Raise awareness and change the narrative about who lives in rural America
- Support community-defined and -led strategies that build on rural and tribal communities’ assets, sustain the rural land base, and create local jobs and small-business opportunities to reverse the challenges facing these communities
- Increase private support to *at least* 14% of philanthropic dollars, reflecting the rural percentage of the overall U.S. population, to:
 - o More equitably support locally controlled rural and tribal development and community capacity-building efforts, with an emphasis on increasing local ownership and control of land and increasing access to capital
 - o Leverage support that is targeted to socially, economically and environmentally distressed communities and provide nonfederal-matched funds to leverage public dollars
 - o Help rural BIPOC communities reconnect with their urban counterparts to raise awareness and create new markets that will help rural/

tribal farmers and business owners retain land, increase their incomes, and strengthen the vitality and viability of rural communities

- Increase access to capital through cross-sectoral public-private partnerships. Given the intersectionality of rural and tribal challenges, combining funds for community development, social justice, health, education, food systems, climate and the environment can strengthen economies, advance racial justice, and protect the landscape and the people by supporting ownership, control and management of the land by the original stewards.

2. Incorporate Racial and Social Equity into Public Policies

Recognizing that public policies and institutional racism have been the root causes of many of rural America's challenges, it will be vitally important to revise existing, and create new, policies that help rural communities—especially BIPOC communities—break the cycle of systemic racism and poverty. A few suggestions include:

- **Incorporate racial and social equity into *all* public policies**, including:
 - o Using poverty rates and social vulnerability data to shape public policies and target funds to communities and regions of multigenerational persistent poverty. For example, legislation might set aside 10% of federal, state and local funding for areas that have had a child poverty rate of 20% or more for 30 years or longer.
 - o Setting aside federal, state and local funds to be distributed to historically underserved communities, organizations and agencies to increase access to other public dollars.
- **Invest in BIPOC ownership of land.** Community and tribal forests or farms can ensure that wealth is created and retained locally, and can advance community-driven agroforestry, food sovereignty and equitable food systems. Federal, state and local funding programs that support land purchases could be examined to identify and eliminate barriers that low-income communities and communities of color face in accessing these public dollars, and rural and tribal access to these public dollars could be increased.
- **Invest in Indigenous land management and restoration practices** to restore soil and land health and improve water quality, especially on tribal lands. Many tribal lands have been degraded because federal policies have allowed non-Native land practices to deplete soils and water quality.

Support of Indigenous land management and restoration, combined with return of these lands to tribal nations, will help to reverse the economic, social and environmental conditions in tribal communities.

3. Shift Ownership, Control and Stewardship of Land for Broader Community Benefits

Case Study: In Georgia, McIntosh S.E.E.D., a Black-led community-based organization, purchased 1,150 acres and created a community forest that is sustainably managed for timber production and used as a venue to help landowners learn to manage family lands and access conservation resources. The educational workshops and landowner assistance are paying off in increased incomes for hundreds of landowner families, healthier forests and increased engagement of younger generations. Long-term plans call for extensive community-based programming, agroforestry-based food production, construction of a meeting facility, ecotourism, and propagation of sweetgrass to support small businesses that are generating income and keeping alive the basketmaking traditions of Gullah-Geechee ancestors.

Returning rural land to BIPOC communities and organizations, and providing the resources needed for long-term ownership and control, must be the centerpiece of future strategies. There are extraordinary efforts in place in rural America that—with supportive policies and intentional public and private investments—can help rural leaders realize the true potential of rural people and places through land ownership, control and stewardship. Some strategies have been tested before, often gaining and then losing ground, when economic, social or political power was used against BIPOC communities. Intentional public-private support will help rural and tribal communities grow self-sufficiency, self-determination and social justice.

Case Study: In 1969, New Communities Inc. (NCI) was established as one of the original community land trusts in the U.S. The Black-led organization amassed 5,735 acres of land, with 1,800+ acres communally farmed and managed, including a farmers market and a greenhouse. There was severe local backlash, including buildings being shot

at, fertilizer being diluted, and crops receiving lower prices than white farmers' crops. When severe drought hit the region, NCI was denied drought relief funds by local USDA officials, crops were lost, the land was seized, and improvements were bulldozed by the government. After 10 years of litigation, NCI prevailed in its discrimination claim against the USDA and, with the settlement funds, purchased Resora, a former plantation with vast land and natural resources. The organization is farming the land, implementing conservation practices, and launching cultural heritage and ecotourism programming.

In the wake of severe weather events and natural disasters, communities that were consigned to low-lying lands by racism and abuses of power continue to be inundated. Rural resilience and resourcefulness, however, continue to prevail. In rural southeastern North Carolina, for example, Youth Ambassadors for a Better Community, a program of the Men and Women United for Youth and Families, is growing entrepreneurship skills and connecting Black farmers to new markets through a youth-led, community-supported agriculture program for beachgoers. Its “Rural Food Justice Summit: Addressing Climate Change From the Ground Up” program has brought together young people of color from across the state to explore land-based solutions to disaster preparedness, climate resilience, mitigation and adaptation—all driven by community priorities.¹⁰

LAND IS POWER. Rural America is at a pivotal place in history and can reach its full potential with equitable public policies, intentional and substantive levels of financial support and investments in community-defined priorities and strategies. Initiatives such as the case studies included in this chapter demonstrate that shifting ownership, control and stewardship of those lands to rural communities will shift the power to local residents and unleash the power that has existed within rural and tribal communities for countless generations. We urge investments in changing the narrative, changing policies and implementing land reform for a brighter, and locally driven, future for rural America.

“[In Hawai‘i], we are more than farmers, more than planters, more than plantation workers. We are descendants of the land and it is our kuleana (responsibility and privilege) to care for our ancestor. Kuleana is [a] very weighted term that provides insight into the relationship that Hawaiian people have with their ‘āina [land]. Kuleana means responsibility but it also means right, privilege, interest, liability, or concern. The term also relates to property, tenure, and ownership.”¹¹

—Julie Au, former program coordinator, ‘Āina Momona,
a Native Hawaiian nonprofit organization

References

- ‘Āina Momona (website). See kaainamomona.org.
- Alonzo, Armando C. “Mexican-American Land Grant Adjudication.” *Handbook of Texas Online*, Texas State Historical Association. See tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/mexican-american-land-grant-adjudication.
- Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force. *Land Ownership Patterns and Their Impacts on Appalachian Communities: A Survey of 80 Counties*. 1981. See crmw.net/files/1981_Land_Ownership_Study.pdf.
- Briones, A-dae Romero. “Regeneration—from the Beginning.” First Nations Development Institute, *Nonprofit Quarterly*, Oct. 13, 2020. See nonprofitquarterly.org/regeneration-from-the-beginning/?bbeml=tp-pck9Q6QNPEiuBt3JmyTokQ.jlsXG1dyBJOaKR65n-Jugyhg.rakJt7oLHUk-XIErOnDOjow.lyLOWGSXkGUKJLpBioEeuMQ.
- Cromartie, John. “Modest Improvement in Nonmetro Population Change during the Decade Masks Larger Geographic Shifts.” *Amber Waves, Population & Migration*, USDA, Economic Research Service, July 6, 2020. See ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2020/july/modest-improvement-in-nonmetro-population-change-during-the-decade-masks-larger-geographic-shifts.
- Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Editions, 2015.
- McGee, Leo; and Boone, Robert. *The Black Rural Landowner—Endangered Species: Social, Political, and Economic Implications*. Greenwood Press, 1979.
- McKinney, Robin. “Teens Use Their Voices to Become Environmental Advocates.” The Conservation Fund, June 17, 2019. See conservationfund.org/impact/blog/client/2049-teens-use-their-voices-to-become-environmental-advocates.
- USDA. *ERS Charts of Note*. Economic Research Service, last updated Dec. 21, 2020. See ers.usda.gov/data-products/charts-of-note/charts-of-note/?topicid=9765719c-f9ee-4db1-baca-303c78fab0a9.
- USDA. “Rural Poverty & Well-Being.” Economic Research Service, last updated June 17, 2021. See ers.usda.gov/topics/rural-economy-population/rural-poverty-well-being.

Wright, Lloyd. "Discrimination Has Become a Fact of Life for Black Farmers—That Must End." *Fortune*, Oct. 9, 2020. See fortune.com/2020/10/09/black-farmers-usda-racism-pigford.

Zabawa, Robert. "The Black Farmer and Land in South-Central Alabama: Strategies to Preserve a Scarce Resource." *Human Ecology*, March 1991, Vol. 19, No. 1, pp. 61-81. See [jstor.org/stable/4602999?refreqid=excelsior%3Ad465c5b019e968abd99b140ba125372f](https://www.jstor.org/stable/4602999?refreqid=excelsior%3Ad465c5b019e968abd99b140ba125372f).

Endnotes

¹ See Kimmerer.

² See McGee and Boone, and Zabawa.

³ See Cromartie.

⁴ See Briones.

⁵ See Alonzo.

⁶ See Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force.

⁷ See USDA, 2021.

⁸ See USDA, 2020.

⁹ See Wright.

¹⁰ See McKinney.

¹¹ This quote appears in an unpublished paper written by Julie Au titled "Ahupua'a." For more information about the nonprofit, see 'Āina Momona (website).

