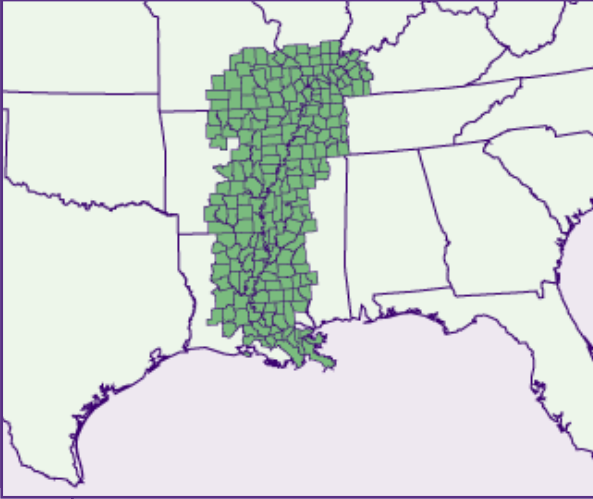


Lower Mississippi Delta Counties



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Lower Mississippi Delta Overview

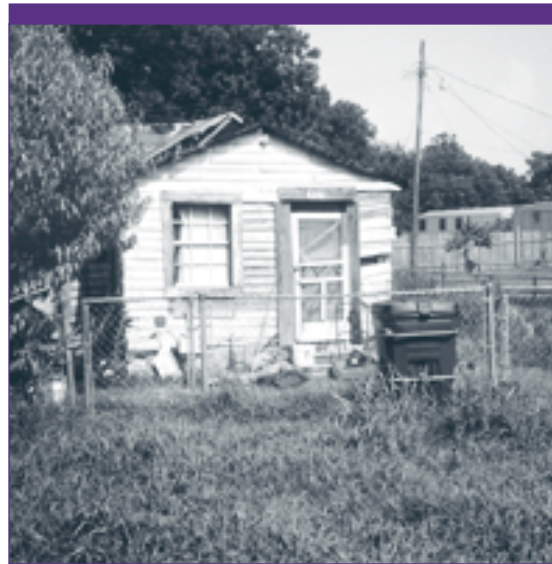
The mighty Mississippi River cuts through the rich alluvial plains and swamps of the deep South before it empties into the Gulf of Mexico. This area of the nation, commonly referred to as the Mississippi Delta, or the Delta, has its own economy, culture, and in some areas even languages that distinguish it from the rest of America.* The Delta is a paradoxical place where Antebellum mansions are located next to hamlets of dilapidated shotgun shacks. Both are legacies of a fading agricultural economy and the race-based system that drove it. Today, change and modernization have come to the Delta. Strip malls, new ranch homes, and gaming are increasingly emerging. Yet the Delta continues to reflect systemic and long-term economic depression that stifles the quality of life for many of its inhabitants.¹

Defining the Delta

In 1935, David Cohn stated that the Mississippi Delta “begins in the lobby of the Peabody Hotel in Memphis and ends on Catfish Row in Vicksburg.”² Geographically, the Delta actually begins 28 miles south of the Peabody and it is not technically a delta; the region is a 200-mile long plain.³ This broad area covers more than 90,000 miles of rivers and streams and more than 3 million acres of land. The Lower Mississippi Delta Commission, an entity created by Congress in 1988, to create an economic plan for the region, defines the Lower Mississippi Delta (LMD) as 219 counties and parishes in portions of Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Illinois, Tennessee, and Kentucky.** However, the Mississippi Delta is defined by more than its geographic boundaries. The region has a rich and dynamic history that shapes both its past and its future. One of the most compelling parts of this history is the racial diversity of the area and the racially based disparities that exist, as they relate to education, economics, and housing.

* While the terms Mississippi Delta and the Delta are used throughout this report, the data and analysis reflected in this section refer to the southern region of the Mississippi Delta, designated as the Lower Mississippi Delta.

** See Appendix A for a list of Lower Mississippi Delta counties.



The Delta possesses a rich culture and diverse heritage given the various groups of people that have settled there over the years. During the 19th century, many groups were attracted to the Delta by economic opportunities. For example, a community of Filipinos established a small fishing village in Louisiana in 1830. Native Americans, French, Arab, Spanish, African, German, English, Irish, Scots-Irish, Jewish, Italian, Chinese, Mexican, and Southeast Asian people have become part of the cultural landscape of the Delta and often have intermingled to form new elements that can be found only in the Delta.⁴ The names of cities and towns located along the Mississippi River — Ste. Genevieve, Kaskaskia, Wittenburg, Cape Girardeau, Cairo, Vicksburg, Natchez, Baton Rouge, and Venice — serve as a constant reminder of the region’s diverse heritage.⁵

The experience of enslaved Africans and of generations of African Americans in the region is in many ways the defining characteristic of the Delta. Wealthy landowners bought African slaves to cultivate the land in order to make a fortune in the cotton industry. For enslaved Africans, the Delta was notoriously the worst place in America to be a slave, and getting “sold down the river” became synonymous with receiving a death sentence.⁶ Since white landowners in the Delta had to rely on the black slaves for the cultivation of their crops, they were forced to coexist with a people they both feared and depended upon for their wealth. This uneasy situation, racial animosity combined with forced proximity, set the tone for tense race relations in the Delta.⁷

While race has played a negative role in much of the Delta's history, the racial diversity of the region's population has also had a positive impact on local and American culture. The Delta's contribution to music, specifically, is renowned. The region is the birthplace of Cajun music, jazz, and zydeco, and is best known for the blues. While being forced to work under repressive conditions, slaves used music as an emotional and spiritual release. Songs were also used by enslaved Africans to send messages to one another that the slave owners could not understand. Blues music, which evolved from these early slave songs, has become a worldwide phenomenon, which has influenced other musical styles.⁸

Social Characteristics

Approximately 8.9 million persons live in the Delta. Between 1990 and 2000 population growth in the region was stagnant with only a 1 percent increase in the LMD population compared to 13 percent growth for the nation as a whole. Population actually declined in many Delta counties, particularly those along the Mississippi River in northwestern Mississippi, southeastern Arkansas, and northeastern Louisiana.

The Delta's population is slightly older than the nation as a whole, which is consistent with trends in many rural areas. An increasing elderly population places additional burdens on community resources and

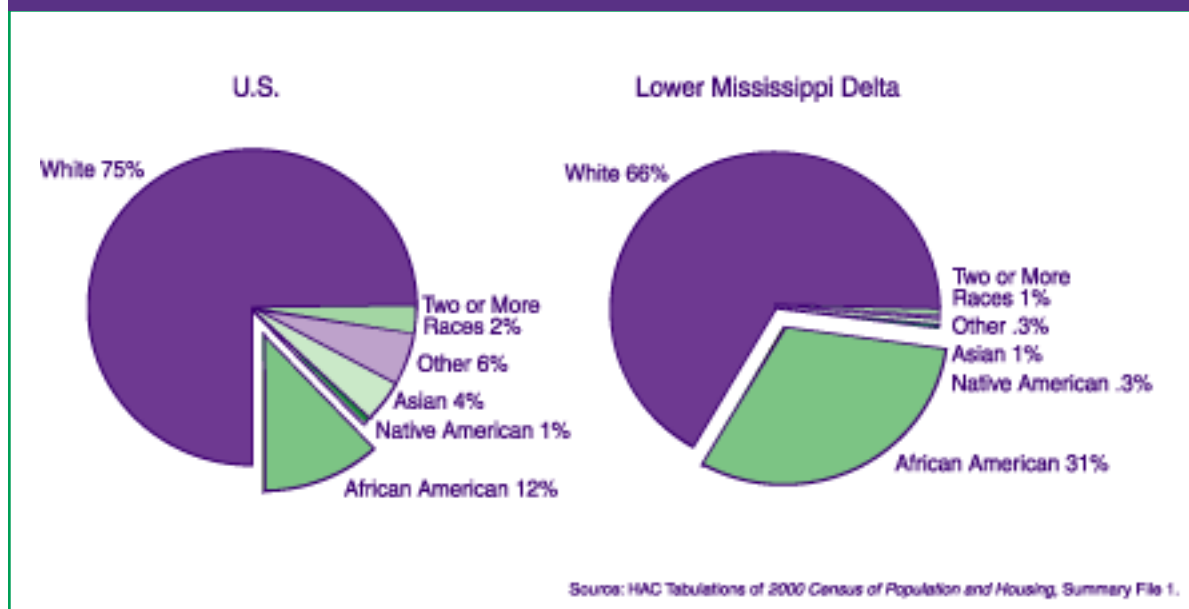
in some ways a reduced tax base. One of the contributing factors to the aging of the Delta is the "brain drain" that has occurred. Many young, educated rural residents migrate out of the area in order to find more lucrative employment. While this allows individuals to explore better opportunities for themselves, it has a detrimental effect on the region's economy. Poorly educated and unskilled laborers are left behind, discouraging prospective industries from locating in the area, due to the lack of a qualified work force.⁹

As noted above, race has traditionally been a central issue in the Delta. While whites make up two-thirds of the region's population, African Americans are concentrated in the LMD at more than twice the national level (31 percent versus 12 percent nationally) (Figure 5.1). American Indians, Alaskan Natives, Native Hawaiians, Asians and Pacific Islanders combined comprise the remaining 1.9 percent of the region's population. The Hispanic population of this region is also much smaller proportionately than it is nationwide, representing only 2 percent of the area's total population.

Although whites constitute the majority in the region, they comprise the minority population in many Delta counties. For example, Tunica County, Mississippi's population is 70 percent African American and 27 percent white, and Claiborne County, Mississippi's population is 84 percent black and 15 percent white. By comparison, DeSoto, Mississippi's population is 85 percent white and only 11 percent African American.

FIGURE 5.1

Race in the Lower Mississippi Delta



The Delta region is notorious for both individual and institutional acts of racism, which have hindered interactions between blacks and whites and stunted economic development.¹⁰ Education, a large factor in regional economic development and personal wealth attainment, illustrates this point. In Mississippi in 1916, the state spent \$10.60 on each white child and \$2.26 on each black child. After 30 years the ratio was still \$8.27 for whites and \$1.75 for African Americans.¹¹ After the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision, the state still discouraged the enrollment of blacks in all-white public schools. A vast majority of children in the Delta still attend separate schools; white children attend private schools, while African American children attend public schools that are overwhelmingly black.¹² In 1995, Homes County, Mississippi had a school district population that was 21.9 percent white; however, the public school enrollment was 0.1 percent white. These figures are indicative of many school districts in the Delta.¹³

Approximately one-quarter of LMD residents age 25 and over do not have high school education compared to 20 percent for the nation. Over one-third (36 percent) of the region's black residents never completed high school. Likewise 18 percent of all LMD residents have a college degree or higher, but only 11 percent of the region's African-American residents do. Both levels are much lower than the national higher education rate of 24 percent.

Economic Characteristics

Slave labor and the invention of the cotton gin were two significant factors that made cotton the premiere crop in the Delta in the early 1800s, and it remained so until the Civil War. Sharecropping and tenant farming replaced the slave-dependent plantation system after the Civil War. During the 1920 and 1930s, the Depression and the mechanization of farms had a tremendous impact on the Delta's agrarian economy. During this time, many sharecroppers lost their land and mechanization forced many farm laborers out of their jobs.¹⁴

Agriculture continues to be a dominant piece of the Delta's economy. Cotton is still a booming crop in the Delta. In Mississippi alone, the cotton industry provided 29,734 jobs and produced over \$2.2 billion in revenue in 1999. In Tennessee, cotton producers and manufacturers provided 14,880 jobs and earned over \$3.3 billion in cotton revenue in 1999 and in Arkansas, there was over \$900 million in cotton-related revenue in the same year.¹⁵

The economic base of the region is beginning to diversify. Twenty-one percent of the jobs in the LMD



are in education, health, and social services; nearly 15 percent are in manufacturing; and nearly 12 percent are in retail trade. The major industries in the region are now cotton, catfish, tourism, and gaming. The Mississippi Delta leads the nation in the production and processing of pond-raised catfish. Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi account for 95 percent of the nation's catfish production with Mississippi producing 70 percent of the total. The total impact of the catfish industry on the economies of the four states exceeds \$4 billion annually and sales total approximately \$600 million annually.¹⁶

The Delta has also relied heavily upon the tourism industry for revenue. Every year millions of travelers visit the Delta and provide over \$17 billion in direct revenue to the counties and parishes. There are nearly 300,000 travel-related jobs in the Delta, which have an annual payroll of over \$3 billion.¹⁷ Heritage tourism, which allows visitors to experience the places and activities that authentically represent the stories and people of the past in the Delta, has given the region opportunities for economic development by preserving and utilizing natural, historic, cultural, and recreational resources.¹⁸



Gaming has been a recent addition to many local Delta economies. Although gaming has long had a presence in urban areas such as New Orleans, by the 1990s many small towns and rural areas began using gaming as an economic development tool. Tunica County, Mississippi, was once known as the poorest county in the nation and stood as a symbol of rural poverty. It now has eight major casinos that contribute to the tax base and provide jobs and whose revenues have led to improved infrastructure.¹⁹ Mississippi is a popular location for casinos, mainly because the state collects relatively low taxes on the gaming industry; neighboring Louisiana's assessment rate is more than twice as high as Mississippi's. Mississippi also grants an unlimited number of licenses, while most other states restrict the number of casinos that can be built. Tunica's geographic location as a central point in the nation, as well as its proximity to Memphis (which has over 1 million residents) have also contributed to the success of its casinos. The casinos report revenues of \$60 million a month and the property values of potential development sites have skyrocketed.²⁰

Although Tunica's casinos have created opportunities for the region and its residents, the industry does have its downsides. Many people in the area claim that the casinos make it worse for the county's poor people who

gamble the small amount of money they have, hoping to make it big, but often losing. Also, the Mississippi Gaming Commission does not have an equal employment reporting requirement, which makes it difficult to determine whether African American applicants and employees are being given equal opportunities with respect to hiring, promotions, and conditions of employment.²¹

It must also be noted that the eight casinos in Tunica provide more jobs than there are residents in the county. However, most of the jobs, especially the jobs with higher salaries, are given to people from outside the county. Supporters of the gaming industry claim that the casinos have dramatically reduced unemployment in the area; however, the data do not support these claims. In September 1995, the county's unemployment rate was 14.5 percent, which is only a .6 percent decrease from the year before the casinos opened (1991).²²

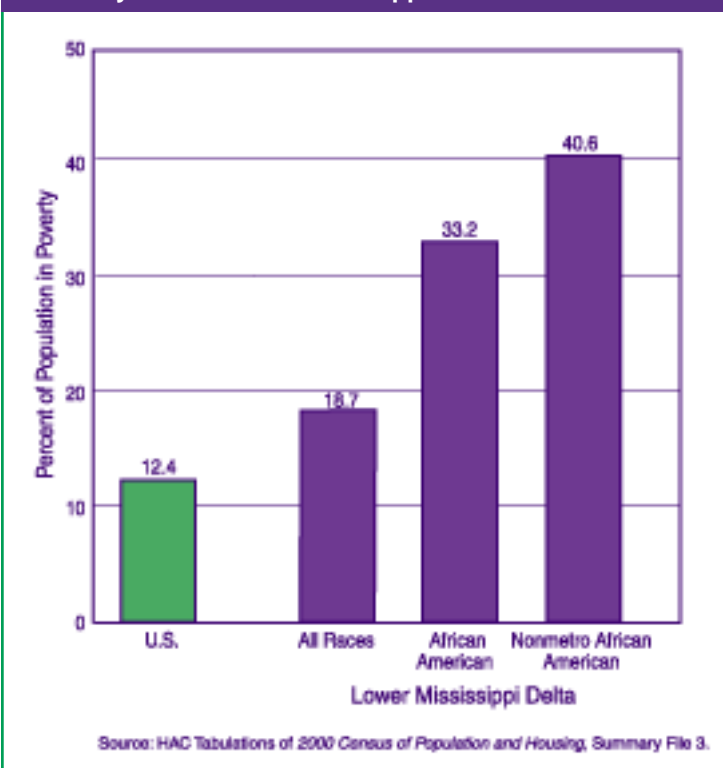
The average unemployment rate for the Lower Mississippi Delta region declined from 7.5 percent in 1993 to 4.2 percent in December 1999. During the same time period, 184 of the 219 LMD counties experienced job growth.²³ Some rural areas experienced decline in the unemployment rate, such as Madison Parish, Louisiana, where the rate went from 14 percent in 1990 to 7.5 percent in June 1999. However some Delta areas, particularly those in rural counties, continue to exhibit unemployment rates that are two to three times as high as the national average. Rural unemployment in the Delta presents a great challenge to future development in the region.²⁴

Income levels in the Delta provide a snapshot of the economic hardships from which the region suffers. While less than 10 percent of the nation's households have an income of less than \$10,000, more than 15 percent of LMD households fall into this income bracket. Nearly 9 percent of the Delta's households have an income between \$10,000 and \$14,999, while the national percentage is 6.3 percent. On the other end of the spectrum, less than 7 percent of the Delta population earns \$100,000 or more, compared to 12 percent for the nation.

Residents of the Delta experience extreme rates of poverty that are much higher than the national level (Figure 5.2). Nineteen percent of the LMD population is living in poverty, much higher than the 12 percent of the nation living in poverty. Poverty is prevalent among the Delta's African-American population; over one-third of the region's African-American residents live in poverty and in nonmetro areas the Delta's black poverty level is 41 percent. The Delta has a higher

FIGURE 5.2

Poverty in the Lower Mississippi Delta



concentration of poor African Americans than any other region in the country and African Americans in the Delta are more likely to be poor. Female-headed households with children experience even more astounding levels of poverty as 47 percent of these households have incomes below the poverty level.

The poverty that plagues the Delta is reflected in the lives of its residents in differing ways. In 33 of the 35 Mississippi state school districts, more than half of the students are poor enough to qualify for the federal free lunch program.²⁵ In many districts in the Delta, 80 percent or more of the students qualify for the program. Research indicates that the higher the free-lunch percentage, the poorer the students, and the worse they perform on standardized tests.²⁶ Every county in the Mississippi portion of the Delta is designated by the federal government as a medically underserved area.²⁷ This designation is given to any geographic area that is in need of additional primary health care services and has an unusually high presence of infant mortality and poverty, both of which exist in the Delta.

The Delta's debilitating racial legacy, which also includes the sharecropping system, Jim Crow laws, the concentration of wealth in the hands of a minority white population, the political disenfranchisement of African Americans, and segregation of the races, is viewed by many as the primary factor contributing to the Delta's position as possibly the poorest part of the nation.²⁸

Housing Characteristics

Housing problems in the Mississippi Delta, in large part, result from the social, political, and economic agenda of the region, which has historically created, sanctioned, and nurtured the economic exploitation and social isolation of the region's African-American population.²⁹

There are a total of 3,369,770 occupied housing units in the Lower Mississippi Delta. The regional homeownership rate is 69 percent, which is similar to the national homeownership rate of 66 percent (Figure 5.3). However, minority and in particular African-American householders in the Delta are less likely to be owners than white householders. Only 53 percent of African American householders in the LMD own their homes.

Most of the Delta's housing units (67 percent) are one-unit detached homes and the second most prevalent type of housing are mobile homes, making up 13 percent of the housing stock in the LMD. Housing values tend to be lower in the Delta than in other parts of the country. While approximately 40 percent of the housing stock in



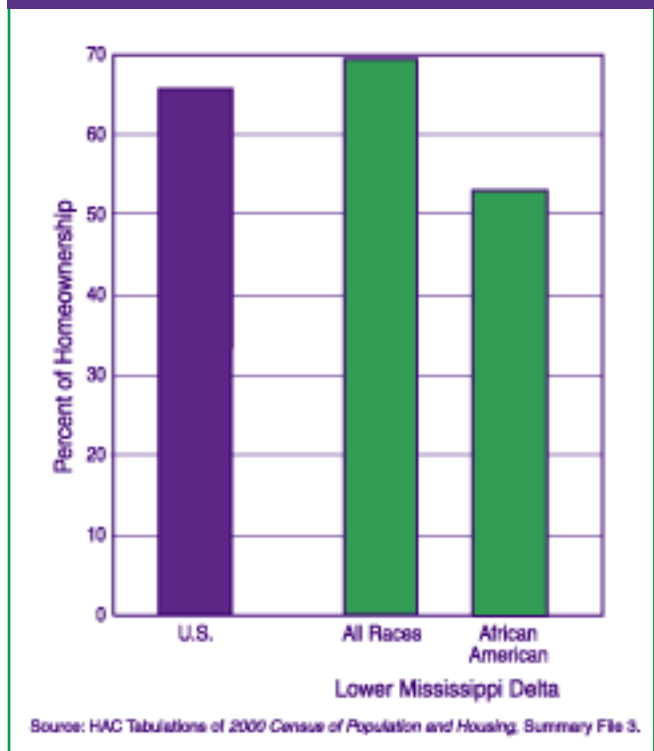
the nation is worth less than \$100,000, nearly 68 percent of the homes in the Delta are worth less than \$100,000.

Despite the prevalence of lower cost housing, the Delta has high rates of cost burden (i.e., households paying more than 30 percent of income for housing). More than 35 percent of all LMD households are cost burdened, consistent with the national cost-burdened rate, approximately 37 percent.

Approximately 4 percent of Lower Mississippi Delta households are crowded, having one or more person per room, compared to the national rate of 6 percent. Yet crowding is more problematic for renters and minorities.

FIGURE 5.3

Homeownership in the Lower Mississippi Delta



The 9.3 percent crowding rate among African Americans in the LMD is more than twice the overall regional rate.

There have been some improvements in the Delta's housing stock since the 1990s. Similar to dynamics across the nation, the level of inadequate housing in the Delta declined between 1990 and 2000. Among all LMD housing units, 25,680 or 1 percent currently lack complete plumbing; however, half of the units without plumbing are occupied by African Americans. Another 22,802 (1 percent) units lack complete kitchens, and 161,218 or 5 percent of Delta homes are without telephone service.

Addressing the Needs

The Delta has an overwhelming need for the development of decent affordable housing and related infrastructure. Persistent poverty and a lack of resources make it difficult to create positive changes in the region. However, there are many efforts being made to alleviate the housing problems in the Delta. For example, USDA's Rural Development (RD) has been a significant resource in addressing the housing and community facilities needs of rural residents in the Delta.

RD housing programs provide subsidized rental housing, subsidized homeownership loans and guarantees, and home repair loans and grants. RD also offers rental housing for farmworkers as well as a self-help housing program. RD's extensive network of field offices, although reduced somewhat during the 1990s, has given RD the opportunity to improve the quality of life in some of the most rural areas of the Delta. The agency has provided more than \$2.2 billion in direct loans and guarantees between 1993 and 1999 to allow 43,000 Delta families to become homeowners for the first time. It also provided \$254 million to build more than 10,000 new rental units in the region. The average annual income of the tenants in these units is approximately \$7,000.³⁰



Housing conditions in the Delta are inextricably linked to economic conditions for Delta residents. In 1988, Congress established the Lower Mississippi Delta Development Commission by Public Law 100-460. This Commission was developed to create a ten-year economic plan for the Mississippi Delta. There have also been social capital developments in the region to take advantage of the resources. The Delta Compact is one organization created to address the Delta's community and economic development needs. The Compact is directed by a steering committee comprised of a wide variety of Delta stakeholders. The organization is comprised of several public and private organizations that have agreed to collaborate to promote community and economic development in the region. These organizations have pledged \$40 million in resources and technical assistance to promote the improvement of the Delta.³¹ Some of the primary objectives set by the Delta Compact include identifying and procuring new resources and leveraging existing resources, advocating for change in the Delta, sharing information and data, and creating a leadership network.³²