

HIGH POVERTY RURAL AREAS AND POPULATIONS IN THE UNITED STATES

OVERVIEW

Beginning with the first *Taking Stock* report published in 1984, researchers from the Housing Assistance Council (HAC) have examined the conditions impacting rural America in general and among high poverty regions and populations. For four decades, HAC has assessed economic and housing conditions in Central Appalachia, the Lower Mississippi Delta, Native American lands, the U.S.-Mexico border, and among farmworkers. HAC's analyses illustrate how these vulnerable communities have endured historical circumstances and benign neglect.

The stress and uncertainty of the recent national economic recession has been a reality for residents of the high needs regions for decades. Unlike much of rural America and the rest of the nation, these regions and populations experience widespread and persistent poverty. A high proportion of residents are unable to find jobs that provide a living wage. Low incomes are visible in the substandard housing conditions where there are still homes without plumbing and electricity, and where sewage may still run open in the streets. The economic downturn has only served to exacerbate these condi-

tions as more jobs have been lost and assistance is more difficult to access. It is not surprising that many youth consider leaving these areas to be their best option.

Although rural areas face common challenges, the causes and results of each region's economic conditions are unique. In some cases, intense need is juxtaposed with the incredible wealth of natural resources. The Central Appalachian region is well known for its energy resources in the form of coal and, more recently, natural gas. It is equally well known for the continued economic depression left after the coal industry declined and jobs disappeared. Ironically, the mountains that fueled the region's economy also act as a barrier to services and make it prohibitively expensive for thousands of households to access water and sewer lines. The natural wealth of the Lower Mississippi Delta's fertile soil has produced food and cotton that has fueled the nation and also helped to create and maintain an economic system built on a racial divide that continues to have repercussions. In the rural Delta, nearly 25 percent of African Americans live in poverty, higher than the region's overall rate of 21.9 percent.

The ownership and regulation of land plays a critical role on Native American lands and in the border Colonias communities. Land is a central issue for Native Americans, who were first relegated to reservations and who later had those sovereign lands further reduced. Today, the three U.S. counties with the highest poverty rates are entirely or predominantly located



on reservation land. Along the U.S.-Mexico border, lax enforcement of land regulation led to the widespread development of informal subdivisions, called colonias, which are characterized by substandard housing and infrastructure. Often with large Hispanic populations, colonias present additional issues due to “under-the-table” financing mechanisms used by developers.

Finally, farmworkers continue to do the back-breaking labor required to bring food to the nation’s table in exchange for low pay and increasing anti-immigration sentiment. Migrant farmworkers, in particular, face poverty and poor housing conditions as they move around the country in search of employment, often at less than subsistence wages. Half of all individual farmworkers earn less than \$16,250 annually. Given these low wages and the nature of their work, many farmworkers are forced to take whatever shelter they can find.

Despite this dismal picture, there are indications that conditions are improving. Poverty levels have fallen throughout the high need regions, and housing indicators have improved dramatically over the past few decades. These signs of improvement can be easily missed without closer inspection. Local leaders and residents maintain hope for the future of their communities and continue to protect places that many others have forgotten.

A CLOSER LOOK

In every *Taking Stock* report, HAC highlights the demographic and housing conditions of high poverty rural areas in addition to national figures for rural America. To better illustrate how poverty and housing conditions manifest themselves within these regions, *Taking Stock* also provides an “on the ground” perspective from five distinct communities in rural America: Hancock County, Tennessee in Central Appalachia; Shannon County, South Dakota on the Pine Ridge Reservation for Native American lands; West Feliciana Parish, Louisiana in the Lower Mississippi Delta; and Zavala County, Texas near the U.S.-Mexico border. In addition, Kern County, California was visited in 2002 and 2011 to provide a closer look at the farmworker population.* HAC has conducted research in these communities for each of the past four decades. Through these profiles the everyday reality of life in high poverty regions comes into focus and the resilience of these places and their residents becomes clearer. Some areas have changed very little over the past 40 years, while others have undergone significant change. Detailed case studies of these high poverty communities can be found on-line at www.ruralhome.org.

* Most of the data collected for the case studies in this publication came from on-site interviews of local housing practitioners and community officials in the selected counties. The site visits took place between October 2010 and April 2011. Some telephone interviews were also conducted.