

HIGH NEED RURAL AREAS AND POPULATIONS

Border Colonias

Zavala County, Texas

Central Appalachia

Hancock County, Tennessee

Farmworkers

Kern County, California

Lower Mississippi Delta

West Feliciana Parish, Louisiana

Native American Lands

Shannon County, South Dakota



High Need Rural Areas and Populations

Introduction

Poverty and substandard housing conditions are particularly pervasive among several geographical areas and concentrated populations in rural America. Central Appalachia, the Lower Mississippi Delta, colonias along the U.S.-Mexico border, Native American lands, and farm-workers have experienced decades, if not centuries, of poor economic conditions and have been designated by HAC since the 1970s as high need areas and populations. Many of these areas' and populations' problems originate from historical patterns of exploitation, unsustainable use of land and natural resources, and a lack of economic development. These systemic problems have been further exacerbated by decades of neglect and continued disinvestment, which produce a cycle of poverty that is extremely hard to break.

Each of these high need rural areas and populations has distinguishing characteristics. The primarily white population of the rugged Appalachian Mountain chain has been deeply affected by the area's natural resources and extractive economies. The Lower Mississippi Delta has a large African-American population that has traditionally worked in the region's agricultural economy. Near the U.S.-Mexico border, a large Hispanic population has proliferated over the last half century, severely challenging the area's underdeveloped infrastructure and resources. Native Americans living on designated reservations and tribal lands often experience intractable poverty and housing conditions that are further complicated by an array of legal land issues. Finally, farmworkers are a vital part of our nation's agricultural economy, yet they are often among the poorest and worst housed groups in the United States.

Extremely high poverty rates are the most common characteristic to all these locations and populations. In general, these high need rural areas have poverty levels above the national rate. However, poverty within these regions is much more prevalent among specific populations and minorities. For example, the poverty rate for African Americans in nonmetro areas of the Lower Mississippi Delta is 40 percent compared to 12 percent for the nation as a whole. Furthermore, nearly one-third

of Native Americans living on reservations and tribal lands and non-metro Hispanics in the border/colonias region live in poverty. In Central Appalachia, the poverty rate among white non-Hispanics is twice the poverty rate of whites nationwide, and farmworkers have a 61 percent poverty rate. The high poverty of these regions is also persistent and lingering. Over half of all nonmetro counties with 20 percent or higher poverty rates since 1960 are located in these high need areas.

One very visible impact of the economic distress experienced by each of these geographic areas and populations is poor housing conditions. Quality of housing and affordability are the primary housing problems among all of the high need locations. Like poverty rates in these areas, poor housing conditions are much more problematic for minorities and sub-populations. For example, 10 percent of Native American households residing on Native American lands lack adequate plumbing — 10 times the national level. Likewise, among the border/colonias' Hispanic households the crowding rate is four times the national rate. Over one-third of farmworkers live in substandard housing. Another common housing trend among all of the high need areas and case study sites is the increasing role of manufactured housing, which has become much more prevalent in the past few decades, particularly in Central Appalachia, as a form of affordable or low-cost housing.

While the high need regions and populations share common housing problems, each also has unique challenges — such as contract for deed issues in the colonias, the impact of seasonal housing need for farmworkers, and legal land issues on Native American lands. Affordability problems in the Lower Mississippi Delta and the lack of suitable building lots in Central Appalachia exacerbate housing problems and stifle strategies for improvement.

In addition to wide scale regional analyses of these high need areas, *Taking Stock* includes a more detailed look at life in these regions. In the early 1980s, HAC researchers visited several locations across the United States representing these high need regions and

populations to better understand their housing conditions and resources. With subsequent visits in 1994 and in 2002, HAC continues to chronicle the needs and issues of these areas to better illustrate conditions of extreme economic depression and housing need in rural areas.* The locations selected by HAC were, and continue to be, among the poorest rural communities in the nation. They include Hancock County, Tennessee in the Central Appalachian mountain chain; West Feliciana Parish, Louisiana in the Lower Mississippi Delta region; Zavala County, Texas near the U.S.-Mexico border; Shannon County, South Dakota, which encompasses much of the Pine Ridge Indian reservation; and Kern County, California, which is home to a significant number of resident and migrant farmworkers.**

The locations and populations discussed in this report share positive elements as well. While resources are scarce among these communities, they have become

adept at making the best of their circumstances. Strong family bonds and vibrant social support networks are noted in each case study. All of these case study counties exhibit a strong sense of community that is often anchored through religious or community-based institutions. When government agencies and nonprofit organizations access these resources, they have been successful in promoting economic growth and improvements in housing conditions.

Finally, the case studies demonstrate the need to tailor solutions to fit the specific circumstances of economic and housing problems. Federal and state programs achieve the best results when they follow the guidance of local stakeholders. The success stories in each county are due in large part to the active participation of local government and nonprofit organizations, as well as the community members themselves.

* 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 during February and March 2002. Some telephone interviews were also conducted.

**Kern County was not an original case study site in the 1984 *Taking Stock* report. It was included in this publication to provide a site that illustrates farmworker housing conditions.