

Spatial Decomposition of Persistent Poverty in the United States

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The relationship between historically high poverty rates and population composition has been explored with respect to race/ethnicity and also with respect to the pattern of migration among the poor. Research has shown that regional pockets of poverty tend to be related to racial concentration, particularly among minority groups. In the Texas Panhandle, poverty has a predominantly Hispanic face, and it has a black face in the Mississippi Delta. Studies have also examined where the poor move to as well as migration between poor and non-poor counties. However, to our knowledge, there has been no work on how migration (or non-migration) of the poor has contributed to geographic patterns of persistent poverty in the U.S. Do persistently poor regions account for an ever increasing share of total U.S. poverty, or are they merely a small component of overall poverty? Understanding these patterns is particularly important in light of work requirements imposed by welfare reform and recent increases in internal migration among African Americans and Hispanics.

The continuation of persistent poverty in regions and counties can be decomposed into exits (out-migration) of the non-poor, entries (in-migration) of the poor, and increased impoverishment of the population. Identifying the process by which poor regions have remained poor over a long period of time will make a difference in what kind of policy intervention can be attempted. For example, do some regions of the U.S. remain persistently poor because they have disproportionate rates of in-migration among the poor and disproportionate rates of out-migration among the non-poor? Do persistently poor regions lose the non-poor, have little in-migration, and steadily become smaller? Or does the long-term poverty of a region represent an ever smaller population share of both the total population and the poor population? Each of

these cases would require different policies to intervene successfully in the cycle of persistent poverty.

Using the U.S. Decennial Census from 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000, we employ geographic analysis, population decomposition methods, and shift-share analysis to assess changes in the geographic concentration of poverty in the U.S.. Following previous research, we focus on counties that have had a poverty rate of at least 20 percent for three decades or longer. We then place these counties in the context of subregions for our regional analyses. We will make use of aggregate tables, the PUMS microdata and, to the extent available, the Census' special migration tabulations. We will decompose regional population change, taking into account net migration of the poor and non-poor. In addition, we will estimate the proportion of changes (or persistence) in poverty rates attributable to in-migration of the poor, out-migration of the non-poor, and general impoverishment of the regions' population.