

UNEQUAL LIVES

The State of Black Women and Families in the Rural South



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

“Whatever problems facing America, whether it’s poverty, unemployment or a failing education system—it is magnified here in the rural South, and for women. There’s no doubt about it.

We have a poor education system, which means quality employers don’t locate to the [Mississippi] Delta. Even if people are educated, they are underemployed or not employed at all ...That means incomes are low and then you don’t have access to quality healthcare and food. All of these things are connected.”

— Ms. Arnell, Leland, Mississippi

In the rural South, more than 1 in 4 children and nearly as many women live in poverty. When race and ethnicity are taken into consideration, the poverty rate is more than double for African-Americans and Latinos compared to their white counterparts.

For women and children living in the rural South, poverty is the result of unequal social, political and economic conditions—failing school systems, high levels of unemployment, poor public infrastructure and housing, and the lack of access to quality healthcare—that have persisted over many decades.

This report, **Unequal Lives: The State of Black Women and Families in the Rural South**, by the Southern Rural Black Women’s Initiative, aims to shed light on the most significant and persistent barriers to success, opportunity, and economic security for lower-income women and families in the rural South. It also provides an in-depth analysis of the economic security, health, and overall wellbeing of women living in nine counties across the rural South in the states of Alabama, Georgia and Mississippi.

Using the most recent data available from the U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey, various city and regional agencies, and other relevant sources, the report focuses on six main issue areas that shape the lives of women and families, including poverty, income and employment; education and health; and public infrastructure and housing.

The report focuses on nine counties in three states that are persistently poor as defined by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). These are counties where 20 percent or more of the population have lived in poverty for five consecutive census years.¹

The overarching goals of the report are to:

- Provide baseline quantitative and qualitative data on the economic, social and health status of women in the rural South;
- Advance two-generational, parent-child models to alleviate poverty and promote economic security;
- Identify strategic opportunities for collective impact across the region and in local communities;
- Inform public policies, resource allocation, and advocacy efforts at the local, state and federal levels; and
- Provide practitioners, government officials, community leaders, and other key stakeholders with easily accessible data and information on low-income women and families in the rural South.

LIMITATIONS OF THE REPORT

While this report tells us much about the economic security and overall wellbeing of Black women, children, and families in the rural South in the nine counties studied, it does not paint an all-encompassing picture. At the outset, we recognized the severe gap in data and information available on Latino and Native American women, LGBTQ communities, women with disabilities, and women who are incarcerated in the rural South. We were also limited by the lack of available data at the county levels on critical issues such as domestic violence and incarceration. However, we intend for this report to spark further conversations and provide the impetus for additional research and data collection in these key areas.

KEY FINDINGS

In the rural South, poverty and economic vulnerability are exacerbated by other community challenges, including poorer health outcomes, the lack of strong public infrastructure such as transportation and broadband access, inadequate housing, and lower levels of educational attainment than in comparable metropolitan areas. For example, in the rural counties studied, nearly 1 in 4 residents reported being in poor or fair health, compared to just 1 in 10 in the top-ranked metro counties in each of the three states.

Race and ethnicity, along with familial status, are strong predictors of economic security among women in the rural South. In the rural counties studied, the poverty rate of single-mother-headed households is 30 percent higher than that of similarly situated households across the three states. When race and ethnicity are taken into consideration, Black women heads of households in rural counties are nearly twice as likely to be poor as their white counterparts.

Philanthropic investments in the South on efforts to support programs aimed at building the long-term economic security and well-being of women and girls has not kept pace with need. In 2012, just 5.4 percent of all foundation funding in the South went to programs focused on women and girls, and less than 1 percent to programs focused on Black women and girls.

The loss of major industries and jobs in the rural South has had a direct impact on employment opportunities and the long-term economic security of women. The unemployment rates of the counties studied are more than double that of the state level and nearly triple the national rate. For Black women in rural counties surveyed, the unemployment rate was 23.6 percent, a rate four times higher than that of white women in the same counties, at 5.9 percent.

The lack of strong public infrastructure, such as a reliable transportation system and broadband access, creates isolation from the economy, jobs, healthcare, education, and even quality grocery stores and restaurants for low-income women in rural counties. In rural counties in Mississippi, only 59 percent of residents have access to the Internet—the lowest rate in the nation—and the public transportation system is a patchwork of local transportation services and an overburdened bus system that has limited availability, especially when it comes to routes through certain communities.



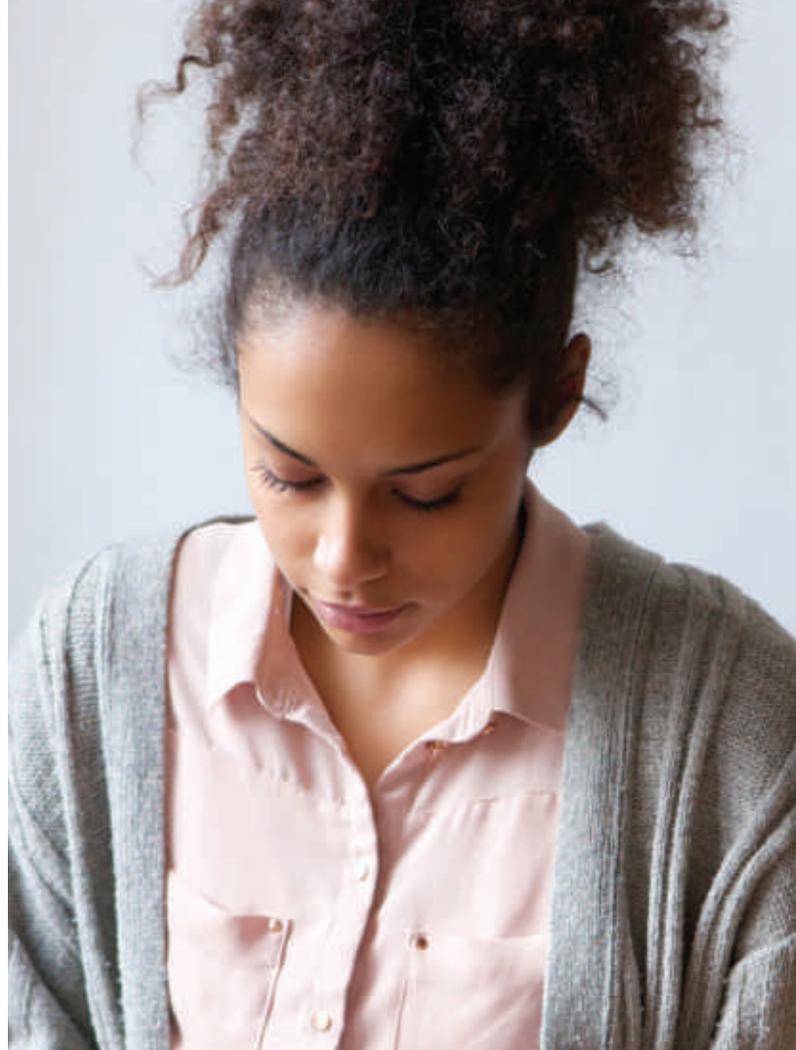
ECONOMIC SECURITY

- **The poverty rate for women in rural counties is significantly higher than the level of the state in which each county resides.** In Georgia, the state level poverty rate for women is 10.6 percent, and in the rural counties studied, the rate is 38.7 percent. In Alabama, the state poverty rate is 10.6, and in rural counties half of women live in poverty. Likewise, in Mississippi, the poverty rate for women is 24 percent and the rate in rural counties is nearly double.
- **The poverty rate for households headed by single, Black mothers in the rural counties studied is three times higher than households headed by white women with children, at 61 percent and 20.6 percent respectively.** By state and county, Black single mothers residing in Clay County in the state of Georgia had the highest rate of poverty of all counties included in this study, at 70.4 percent, with a similar rate found in Bolivar County, Mississippi.
- **In the rural counties studied in the states of Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi, Black women experienced higher levels of poverty and economic vulnerability than white women.** Between 85- and 95 percent of Black women in the rural counties studied lived in poverty, and they were also more likely to have lower median incomes than either Black men or white women.
- **The ability to obtain secure full-time employment is a significant hurdle for Black women in the rural South.** Across the nine counties examined, the unemployment rate for Black women is 23.58 percent, a figure five times higher than for white women in the same counties. Of the counties studied, the most glaring disparity in the unemployment rate for women is in Wilcox County, Alabama, where the rate for Black women is 36.1 percent, compared to just 2.1 percent for their white counterparts.
- As many as one-third of the families with children under the age of 18 across the rural counties studied in each of the states relied on SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) to make ends meet, a rate on par with the national average.
- **The poverty rate for younger women between the ages of 18-24 was highest among Black girls in the three counties studied in the state of Mississippi.** In Bolivar County, the poverty rate for younger Black women is nearly 2.5 times higher than the rate for their white counterparts.



EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

- **Disparities in educational attainment among women were significant across the nine counties studied in Alabama, Georgia and Mississippi.** Across the counties, Black women were as much as three times less likely than white women to complete high school or its equivalency, and nearly two times less likely to hold a bachelor's degree or above than their white counterparts. The gap in educational attainment among women was starkest in Clay County, Georgia, where 36 percent of Black women had less than a high school education, compared to 8 percent of white women.
- **In Alabama, the educational attainment rate of women throughout the state as a whole is significantly higher than that of rural counties surveyed.** At the state level, only 6 percent of women lacked a high school diploma or its equivalency. In the rural counties studied—Wilcox, Lowndes and Conecuh—25 percent failed to graduate from high school or its equivalent.
- With few exceptions, when gender is taken into consideration, Black men in the counties studied are even less likely to complete high school or its equivalency or to obtain a bachelor's degree or better, compared to their female counterparts.



HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

- **Compared to residents in metropolitan counties in the three states studied, individuals in rural counties were more likely to indicate that they were in poor or fair health.** Lowndes and Wilcox counties in Alabama reported significantly higher rates, at 36 percent and 31 percent respectively: 40 percent higher than the rate for the state as a whole at 21 percent.
- **Close to 1 in 10 of new HIV diagnoses are in rural areas.** Half of rural HIV/AIDS diagnoses occur among African-Americans, with a disproportionate number of newly documented infections in the South.
- **In the South, the maternal mortality rate is alarmingly high.** Black women are 3.2 times more likely to die due to pregnancy and childbirth than white women. In the state of Mississippi, the mortality rate for Black women, 54.7 per 1,000, was much higher than the rate for white women, 29.3 per 1,000.²
- **The infant mortality rates in seven out of the nine counties studied were higher than the national rate of 6.1 infant deaths per 1,000.** The rate for Conecuh, a predominantly Black county in Alabama, was more than five times the national rate of 29 per 1,000.
- **Food insecurity and access to healthy food options is a major impediment to wellness in the rural South.** In the counties studied, 25 percent to 30 percent of residents reported food insecurity, and between 25 percent and 60 percent of low-income residents lived more than one mile from the nearest supermarket or grocery store.
- **Nationally, more than one-third, or 78.6 million Americans are obese. The South has the highest rate of adult obesity: 30.2 percent.** Across race and ethnicity, Blacks have the highest obesity rate at 47.8 percent. In the rural counties studied in Mississippi, just over 50 percent of women are obese, a rate slightly higher than the state average: 40 percent.
- **For many low-income families, housing costs can consume a substantial part of their monthly budget, and as much as fifty percent of individual earnings.** In the rural counties studied, 1 in 5 residents experienced severe housing insecurity, defined as one or more of the following: overcrowding; lack of adequate facilities to cook, clean, or bathe; and/or a severe cost burden.

- **Early motherhood is highly influenced by race and poverty in rural counties in the South.** Of all of the states and counties studied, Mississippi, a state that mandates abstinence-plus education in schools, had the highest rate of teen pregnancy, at 76 per 1,000, and a live birthrate of 50.4 per 1,000. Twenty-three percent of babies born to teens in Mississippi were repeat births. For Black girls between the ages of 15-19 in Bolivar County, the pregnancy rate is 118 per 1,000, and the live birthrate is 104.4 per 1,000.

PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE

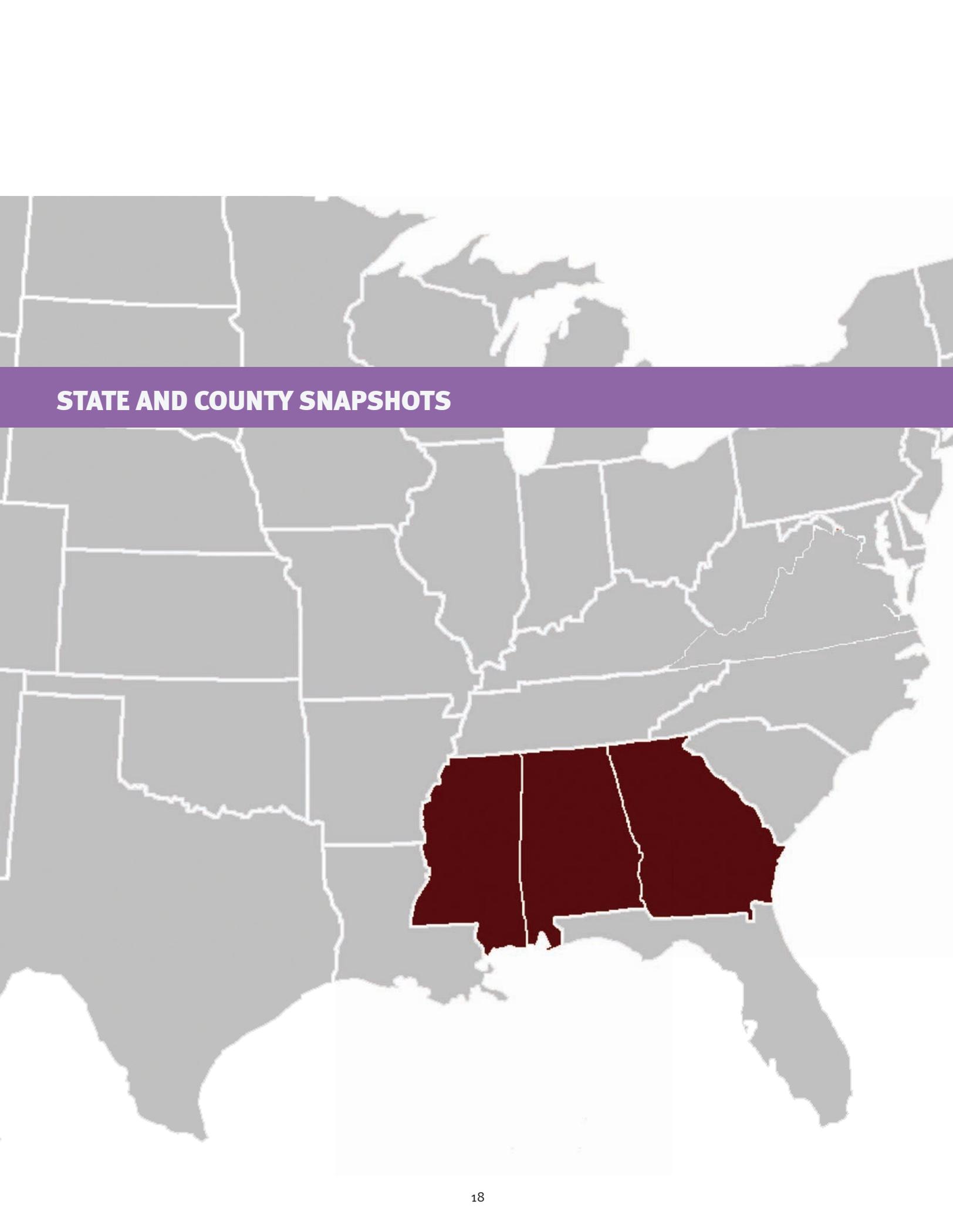
- **Although progress has been made on broadband accessibility, gaps persist. Of the 19 million Americans without broadband access, 14.5 million live in rural counties.** Access to the Internet is essential to the economic security and wellbeing of low-income women, families, and communities. In rural counties in Mississippi, only 59 percent have Internet access, the lowest rate in the nation.
- Reliable and timely transportation for low-income women and families is a critical steppingstone to establishing long-term economic security. Public transportation is available in 60 percent of rural counties across the United States, with 28 percent of these providing limited service.

In the United States, success, opportunity, or long-term economic security should not be determined by income or geographic location, including proximity to the nearest metropolitan area. However, low-income women, children, and families in the rural South continue to face hurdles and threats to their full economic integration and participation in their communities and in society as a whole.

The report confirms the need for increased investment in rural communities, both financial and programmatic, to build the long-term economic security and wellbeing of Black women, children, and families in the rural South. On nearly every social indicator of wellbeing, from income and earnings to obesity and food security, Black women, girls, and children in the rural South rank low or last.

It is our intent that this report will be used by stakeholders, legislators and practitioners, and philanthropic organizations to strengthen policies at the local, state and federal levels to improve outcomes for women, children and families in rural communities; spark national dialogues on the persistence and unyielding effects of poverty on current and future generations; and create a two-generation, parent-child model for working families in the rural South.



A map of the United States showing state boundaries. The Southeastern region, including Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia, is highlighted in a dark red color. A purple horizontal bar is positioned across the top of the map, containing the text 'STATE AND COUNTY SNAPSHOTS'.

STATE AND COUNTY SNAPSHOTS

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATIONS

Support alternative enterprise development, along with job creation and training for low-income women and families in the rural south in occupations and fields with opportunities for career advancement and mobility. Job creation and training efforts should focus on disconnected mothers, youth, and the long-term unemployed. Efforts should work to address both emerging economic opportunities and barriers to employment facing low-income families and communities. These barriers include transportation, childcare, broadband access, lower levels of educational attainment, and the lack of access to quality schools.

Provide targeted investments and tax incentives to small- to medium-sized enterprises and corporations for place-based alternative economic development. Emphasis should be placed on the promotion of worker-ownership models and creating systems, facilities, and networks that make economic progress possible. The overarching goals of efforts should be to generate sustainable jobs for those lost in the region as a result of federal trade policies, strengthen local communities and businesses, and improve the long-term economic prospects of low-income women and families.

Support early links to the labor market for young Black women and men in the rural South. Job training programs and efforts focused on young adults should focus on long-term outcomes and opportunities, rather than short-term job placement. They should also provide the skills and training necessary to compete in a global society. Training and education programs should work to improve math and literacy skills; prepare for two- or four-year colleges; or provide training for vocations with higher pay and career advancement.

Expand work supports for low-income families in the rural South. Work supports, such as transportation, childcare, and tax credits are critical to low-income women and families, particularly Black women and families, as they work to build long-term economic security. The eligibility for the Earned Income Tax Credit and Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit (CDCTC) should be expanded and improvements made permanent, along with a tax break for low-income families. Additionally, there should be targeted funds and resources for transportation and childcare supports for low-income women in the rural South due to the lack of reliable public transportation and quality childcare options in many areas.



Increase philanthropic investments in the rural South. Less than 1 percent of all philanthropic dollars go towards efforts to support low-income Black women, girls, and families in the rural South. Directed and intentional funding and support would accelerate progress in communities and help to close gaps and barriers to equity and opportunity.

Build the public infrastructure in the rural South by providing tax incentives and subsidies to small businesses and corporations. In order to create reliable transportation systems and to attract quality supermarkets and financial institutions to the rural South, businesses and corporations that are vital to the overall health and economic wellbeing of rural residents should receive tax incentives and support to locate in high-need or USDA-designated persistently impoverished rural areas and communities.

Alleviate food insecurity among low-income children in communities throughout the rural South by providing nutritious food in the summer and during school breaks. It is estimated that 6 of 7 low-income kids who eat a free or reduced-price school lunch during the academic year do not receive a free meal during the summer or during mandated school breaks.⁴⁶ Funnel resources and help build the infrastructure of community-based organizations, schools, and churches to provide breakfast and lunch programs for low-income children in rural areas. Additionally, invest in mobile feeding units to serve children with limited transportation or mobility.

To reduce obesity in women and children, provide healthy food options in community-based health education programs. In addition to tax subsidies and incentives to increase the number of supermarkets in rural areas, there should also be incentives to establish local farmer's markets, food cooperatives, and mobile food stores. In terms of health education, work with schools, churches, and communities to create programs that teach the skills needed for buying and cooking healthy foods.

Provide health and recreation resources to rural communities to promote fitness, physical activity, and healthy lifestyle choices for children and families. Increased financial investments in parks and recreation in rural areas can help reduce poor health outcomes and obesity over the long term and can strengthen communities through physical movement and participation in team sports and activities.

Promote and provide reproductive health education in communities, schools and churches in the rural South to reduce early motherhood, infant mortality, and the transmission of STIs. Schools and communities should provide comprehensive sex education, along with accurate information and resources on the full range of reproductive health choices.

Expand access to high quality childhood education for low-income children in the rural South. Provide increased support and resources for rural communities to train providers and teachers, ensure that quality, affordable community-based care is available to all needy families, and expand the number of children enrolled in Head Start programs in rural areas.

Improve school quality in rural communities by investing in teachers, technology, libraries, and supplies. In order to prepare students to compete in an increasingly global society, communities and localities should work to strengthen the pipeline of qualified teachers in rural areas, ensure that schools have up-to-date technology, broadband access, textbooks, lab equipment, and other related supplies.

Increase research and data collection on the impact of poverty on health outcomes for Black women and young women in the rural South. There is a need to collect data on the link between poverty and chronic disease, obesity, and maternal mortality among Black women and young women in the rural South and to identify strategies and interventions based on lived realities and experiences of these women and their families.

CONCLUSION

Over the last several decades, the wealth and income equality gap in the United States has increased significantly, and the number of individuals living in poverty has remained persistent. The most recent recession, compounded by the loss of jobs and industries in rural areas, has also made it increasingly difficult for families struggling to gain their footing in the new economy.

From strengthening public infrastructure to fixing failing schools to ensuring that children in rural areas have a fair and equal start from the beginning, findings in this report affirm the critical need for targeted programs, initiatives, and alternative economic models to build the long-term economic security and wellbeing of low-income women, children and families in the rural South and to infuse resources in communities.

Through the promotion of alternative economic models and partnerships with women and families in rural communities throughout the South, the Southern Rural Black Women's Initiative (SRBWI) will continue to work across communities to practice and promote policies, practices and programs that create access to jobs and educational and training opportunities for low-income women and families. We call upon leaders, advocates and practitioners to join us in this important work in order to help all communities in the U.S. to flourish.

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