



Rural Population Research Network

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Addressing Black-White Economic Inequality in Rural America: Structural Racism and the Legacy of Slavery

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As of 2019, Black Americans living in rural areas had a poverty rate more than two times higher than that of their White counterparts at 31% and 13%, respectively.¹ Additional racialized groups occupy a similar position of disadvantage relative to non-Hispanic White Americans, yet the extent of disadvantage and potential connection to the historical institution of chattel slavery sets rural Black Americans apart. Some scholars argue that the historical system associated with the exploitation of Black labor by White colonialists is a fundamental explanation of the racialized inequality that we see today. The contemporary consequences associated with this specific form of racialized labor exploitation has been dubbed “the legacy of slavery”.^{2,3} Slavery has been abolished for more than a century, yet its legacy remains. Places that have a history of chattel slavery continue to record higher levels of contemporary Black-White inequality than places with weaker connections to the institution. Understanding the institutionalized legacy of slavery is valuable for addressing racial inequality throughout the U.S. South, particularly for rural areas where the historical institution was most deeply entrenched.

We draw attention to the consequences of this legacy for rural places and their populations through a discussion of recent work on how the key relationship between historical slavery and contemporary Black-White inequality changes over time from 1900 to 2018. We discuss implications that extend beyond the U.S. South by analyzing how the relationship between slavery and current inequality differs between states within and outside of the South.

KEY FINDINGS

- Black-White economic inequality remains rooted in the structural racism stemming from slavery.
- The importance of this “legacy” extends beyond places historically attached to the institution.
- Declines in the place-based association between historical slavery and later inequality vary across states.
- State-level policies are needed to address the multifaceted structural racism affecting rural and urban places.

Historical Racist Institutions with Contemporary Consequences

Southern counties where the concentration of enslaved labor in 1860 was higher show exacerbated levels of Black-White economic inequality, on average, in eight out of the nine decades of data that we examined and as recently as 2000. Our results suggest that the average level of disadvantage of local Black Americans relative to White Americans within the U.S. South increases by 8 percentage points for every 10 percentage point increase in historical slavery. This difference adds up to a substantial gap in economic security in counties that had high historical slavery.

As a demonstration, consider the ratio of Black poverty relative to White poverty in 2000 for places with differing historical connections to chattel slavery (see figure 1). For southern counties that had a 10-percent concentration of enslaved labor in 1860, the average Black-White poverty ratio was just under two. This value translates into an average poverty rate for Black Southerners that is nearly two times as high as the poverty rate for White Southerners in the same counties. The disparity is even larger in counties that had a higher concentration of enslaved labor in 1860. For example, in 2000, the average poverty rate for Black Southerners was over 3 times as high as the rate for White Southerners among counties with an historical concentration of enslaved labor at 30 percent. In general, average inequality increases alongside higher levels of historical enslavement.

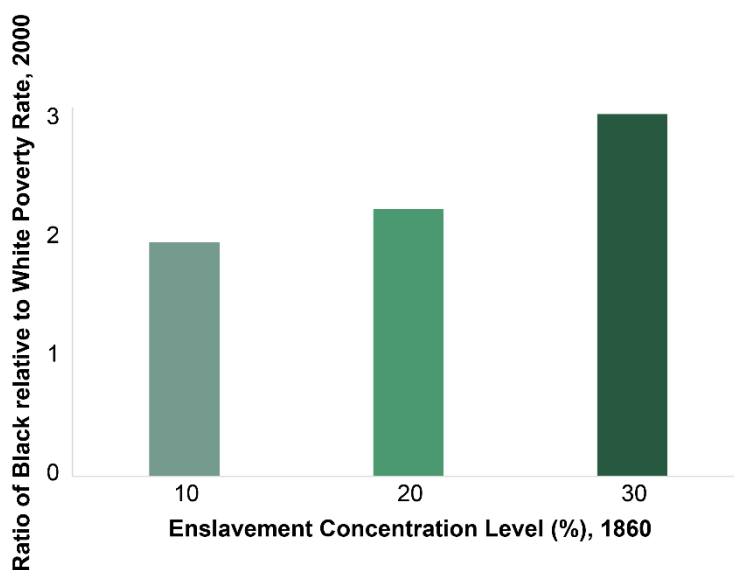


Figure 1. Black-White Poverty Inequality by Historical Enslavement in Southern U.S. Counties

Data Source: 1860 and 2000 U.S. Census

Note: Ratio values above one indicate Black disadvantage relative to White residents in the county.

The relationship between the historical practice of chattel slavery and subsequent levels of Black-White economic inequality is consistent with previous research and is suggestive of the persistence of institutionalized racism within place.^{4,5,6} Racial inequality is supported by laws, segregation, and everyday practices that are rooted in the structures and ideas stemming from U.S. slavery.^{7,8} These social forces form the foundation of the legacy of slavery that has been embedded in places over time.

Relationship Changes over Time: The Legacy Weakens Over Time and Spreads Across Counties

Despite the remarkable persistence of the legacy of slavery within a place, our research finds evidence of change over time. Notably, the relationship between the historical practice of slavery and later Black-White economic inequality declined across the decades. By the last measure in 2014-2018, the average relationship between historical concentrations of slavery and Black-White inequality is smaller in magnitude and no longer statistically significant relative to earlier periods. These findings are visualized in figure 2 and suggest that while the place-based relationship is persistent, it is also weakening over time.

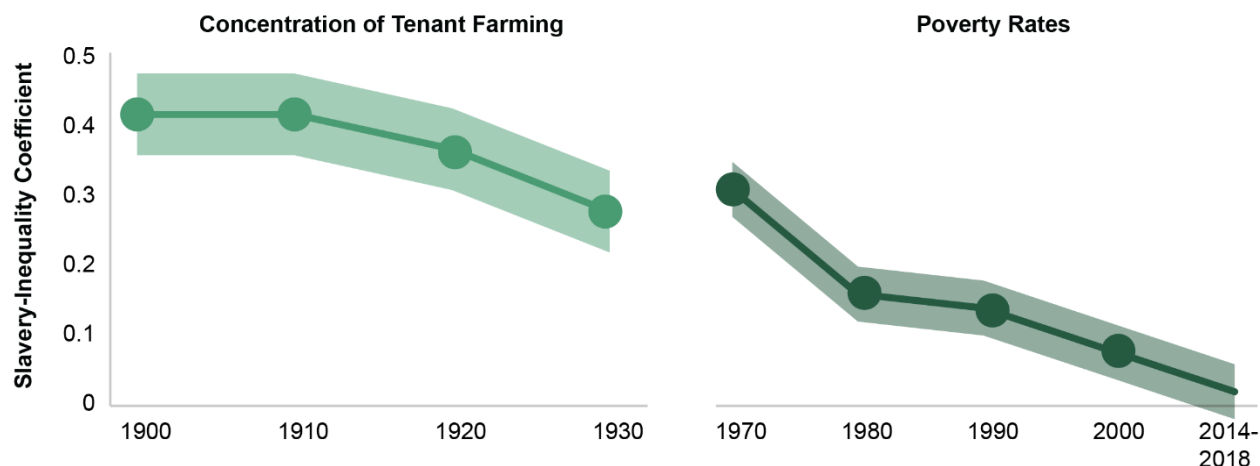


Figure 2. Changes in the Relationship between Black-White Inequality and Historical Enslavement in Southern U.S. Counties

Data Source: 1860, 1900-1930, and 1970-2000 U.S. Census; and 2014-2018 American Community Survey 5-year estimates.

Notes: Economic inequality is represented by two different measures to cover a larger span of time. All of the displayed coefficients are statistically different from zero at a high level of confidence ($p < .001$) until the most recent period, as indicated by the large circles. Estimates are derived from specialized models that account for the complexities of the spatial panel data employed.

Our research shows the decline in the strength of the relationship coincides with the spread or diffusion of the legacy of slavery across other counties.⁹ Rather than being concentrated within slavery strongholds, over time White people transplanted the institutionalized racism to counties throughout the South. As a result, the legacy of slavery has been decoupled from its historic, place-based roots, and has spread to other places that do not have the same historically high concentrations of slavery.

Longer History, Earlier Spread of the Legacy of Slavery

The timing of when the diffusion of the legacy of slavery started varies significantly across the southern states. We find three broad categories of timing, which we refer to as “never”, “declining”, and “delayed” states (see figure 3). “Declining” states like North Carolina broadly reflect the regional trend shown in Figure 2. However, other, states exhibit a notably distinct pattern. For example, there was no evidence of a relationship between slavery and economic inequality at the start of our observed data in 1900 in “never” states like Maryland where historical concentrations of slavery were lower than in other areas of the South but also started sooner (i.e., 1600s compared to 1800s). The absence of a county-level relationship indicates an early diffusion of the legacy of slavery across places and institutions within the state. This means the legacy persists throughout the state rather than

remaining isolated within specific areas within the state. In other southern states, including Deep South states like Mississippi, the timing of decline in the relationship is “delayed” and more gradual than the regional average suggesting that any diffusion happened later. The uneven geographic patterning of when the slavery-economic inequality relationship declines suggests that the legacy of slavery spread more quickly and or more easily in states where slavery had been in place longer.

Addressing the Roots of Rural Racial Inequality

Black-White economic inequality is persistent within and across rural America. Our research identifies structural racism – measured by the historical practice of slavery – as a key and potentially diffusive foundation of contemporary inequality. Addressing racial inequality means identifying policies that can diminish or dismantle structural racism.

Structural racism is multidimensional and interconnected, meaning that it manifests and is self-reinforcing across state institutions, such as the economy, education, politics, and the justice system¹⁰. This suggests interventions across multiple domains are necessary to address Black-White economic inequality. Interventions will likely include economic and social policies aimed at reducing the disproportionately negative outcomes experienced by Black Americans in the labor market.

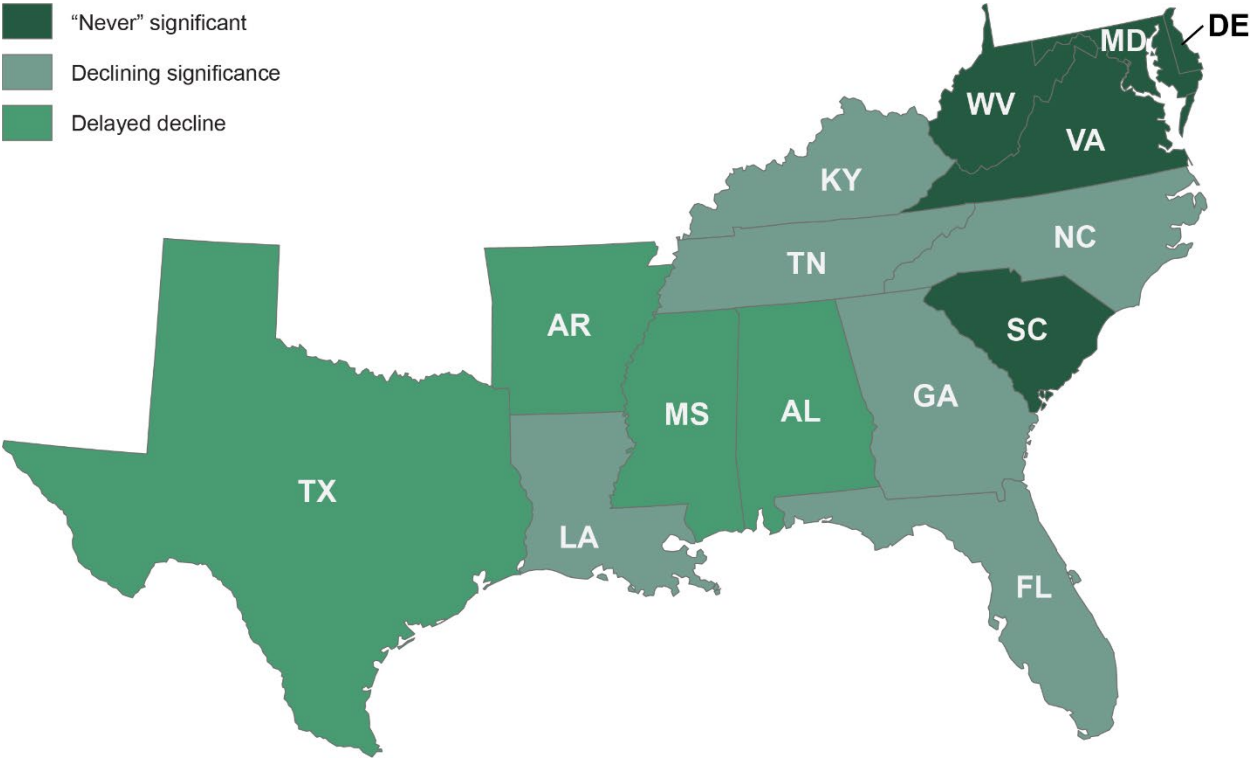


Figure 3. Timing of Changes in the Slavery-Inequality Relationship across Southern States
Data Source: 1860, 1900-1930, and 1970-2000 U.S. Census; and 2014-2018 American Community Survey 5-year estimates. The final typology was developed based on coefficients from county-level models (see O’Connell et al. 2024).

Data and Methods

Data was obtained from multiple sources, including historical census estimates of the enslaved population in 1860¹¹; IPUMS National Historical Geographic Information System on county-level census data for all decades spanning 1900-2000 with available data¹²; and the American Community Survey five-year period estimates for 2014-2018. To capture racial inequality related to economic vulnerability, we measure Black-White differences in the economically precarious occupation of sharecropping between 1900-1930 and poverty status between 1970-2018. We used a specialized regression framework called Integrated Nested Laplace Approximation (INLA) models that test for differences in the county-level slavery-inequality relationship across decades and states. Full details about the modeling approach are included in the published article upon which this report is based.¹³

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The Rural Population Research Network is a USDA NIFA supported network of scholars who conduct research on the most pressing demographic, economic, social, and environmental challenges faced by rural communities in the United States. Our current project (2022-2027) is titled ‘W5001: Rural Population Change and Adaptation in the Context of Health, Economic, and Environmental Shocks and Stressors.’ <https://nimss.org/projects/18897>.