

## Minority Counties Are Geographically Clustered

*In 333 rural counties, a minority group makes up one-third or more of the population. ERS delineated these counties to help researchers and policymakers better understand the diversity of rural economic well-being and current economic changes. Poverty rates for minority populations in these counties are higher than for minorities elsewhere.*

**A**lmost half of rural America's 7.2 million minority population lived in counties with substantial or predominant minority representation in 1990 (see box, p. 8). Such counties were small in number—333 out of 2,288 rural counties—and contained only 12 percent of the total rural population (table 1). However, they were geographically clustered according to the residents' race or ethnic group, providing them with a disproportionate presence in specific subregions. Rural minorities often live in geographically isolated communities where poverty is high, opportunity is low, and the economic benefits derived from more education and training are limited. Now as in the past, many growing up in these areas who develop the skills to succeed must use them elsewhere, leaving behind an even poorer community.

This article describes a new Economic Research Service classification of rural counties into areas of substantial and predominant minority concentration for three minority groups identified by the 1990 Census of Population: Blacks, Native Americans (American Indians, Eskimos, and Aleuts), and Hispanics (app. table 2). Another major group identified in the census, Asians and Pacific Islanders, is not considered here (except in app. table 2) because of its very small rural presence. The delineation is based on 1990 census population numbers because these are the most recent by race and ethnicity that are reliable at the county level. Like other county types identified by ERS, such as manufacturing-dependent or persistent-poverty counties, minority counties help explain economic and social diversity within rural areas and why conditions are changing (or not changing) in the 1990's (see appendix, p. 118, for definitions).

Minority counties were identified separately for Blacks, Native Americans, and Hispanics. If a specific group made up one-third or more of a county's population, that county was classified as a minority county. Minority counties were further classified as substantial (one-third to one-half minority) or predominant (more than one-half). Some counties with smaller but still sizable minority populations are left out, but the relatively high threshold makes it more likely that indicators of social and economic well-being reflect conditions among the resident minority population in minority counties. However, a change in economic conditions within those counties, such as the current improvement in per capita incomes among Black minority counties, may not apply equally to the race/ethnic groups living there.

Table 1  
**Population by race and ethnicity in rural minority counties, 1990**  
*Over 40 percent of rural minorities live in high-minority areas*

County type	Counties	Total	Native			Total	Native		
			Black	American	Hispanic		Black	American	Hispanic
	Number	Thousands			Percent				
Nonmetro	2,288	50,898	4,329	882	1,902	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Minority concentration—									
Low	1,955	44,624	2,301	508	1,062	87.7	53.2	57.6	55.8
High	333	6,274	2,028	374	841	12.3	46.8	42.4	44.2
Substantial	197	3,908	1,214	134	328	7.7	28.0	15.2	17.2
Predominant	136	2,366	813	240	513	4.6	18.8	27.2	27.0

Notes: 1993 metro definition.

Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the Bureau of the Census.

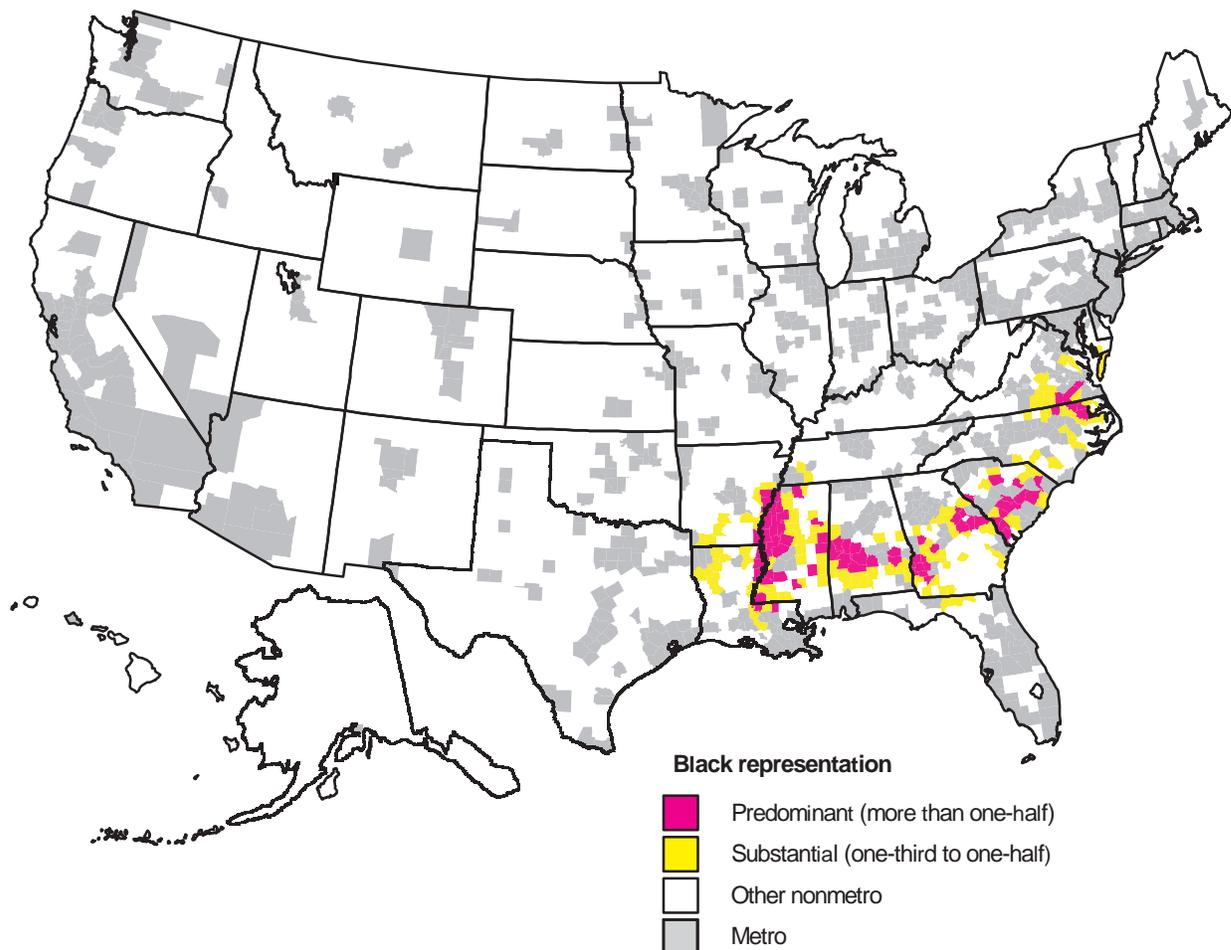
In 1990, 208 Black counties, 37 Native American counties, and 88 Hispanic counties were identified. Cibola County, New Mexico, the only county with substantial representation of two race/ethnic groups (its population was 38 percent Native American and 34 percent Hispanic in 1990), was classified as a Native American county. Taken together, over 45 percent of rural minorities lived in these minority counties along with just 7 percent of the rural nonminority population. Data are not available to estimate reliably the growth of minority populations in rural counties since 1990. However, the number of minority counties and the overall share of population groups they contain most likely have shifted only slightly during the 1990's.

### Black Counties Are in the South's Traditional Plantation Areas

Rural counties with one-third or more Black population are found only in the South but are well distributed throughout the region's lowland districts from southern Maryland to Louisiana (fig. 1). The 77 counties in which Blacks are in the majority are clustered in the Mississippi Delta and the Alabama Black Belt and in smaller clusters extending through Georgia, South Carolina, and along the Virginia-North Carolina border. Close to 20 percent of rural Blacks live in predominantly Black counties. A larger number live in substan-

Figure 1  
**Rural Black counties, 1990**

*Rural Black counties are found throughout the Southern Coastal Plains and Mississippi Delta*



Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the 1990 Census of Population, Bureau of the Census.

tially Black counties, mostly located near predominant counties but also extending into south-central Virginia, eastern North Carolina, and western Arkansas and Louisiana.

Black counties coincide with the South's traditional plantation areas, once largely dependent on cotton and, in some places, on tobacco and peanuts. Southern agriculture's dependence on the low cost of Black labor did not end with emancipation in 1863 but was maintained through various noncash, "sharecropping" arrangements and legal segregation in schools, neighborhoods, and jobs up through World War II. Few Blacks were able to make the transition from small-scale tenant to large-scale commercial farming and, as a result, under 20,000 Blacks operate farms today. In many areas, the slow but steady improvements in basic civil rights, educational attainment, and nonfarm employment opportunities have not solved such problems as the low availability of year-round full-time work, lack of transportation, and other characteristics associated with low-income areas. While Blacks have gained in education and income, many have had to migrate out of these counties for further education and economic opportunity. A large gap persists in education levels and earnings between Blacks and Whites who remain in Black counties.

### **Native American Counties Lack Access to Urban Centers**

Over 95 percent of the 1.8 million Native Americans are American Indians, and the rest are Alaskan Natives (Eskimos and Aleuts). Just under half of all Native Americans lived in rural areas in 1990, and 42 percent of those lived in Native American counties. Though few in number, Native American counties are clustered in three areas: the northern High Plains, the Four Corners region in the Southwest, and Alaska (fig. 2). All of the counties in the first two clusters contain reservations, on which American Indians have exerted greater political and economic control since Congress passed the American Indian Self-Determination and Education Act in 1975. Many more reservations exist throughout the country in counties where the American Indian minority population is less than one-third of the total. This is due in part to the susceptibility of many reservations to White settlement in the early years of their existence.

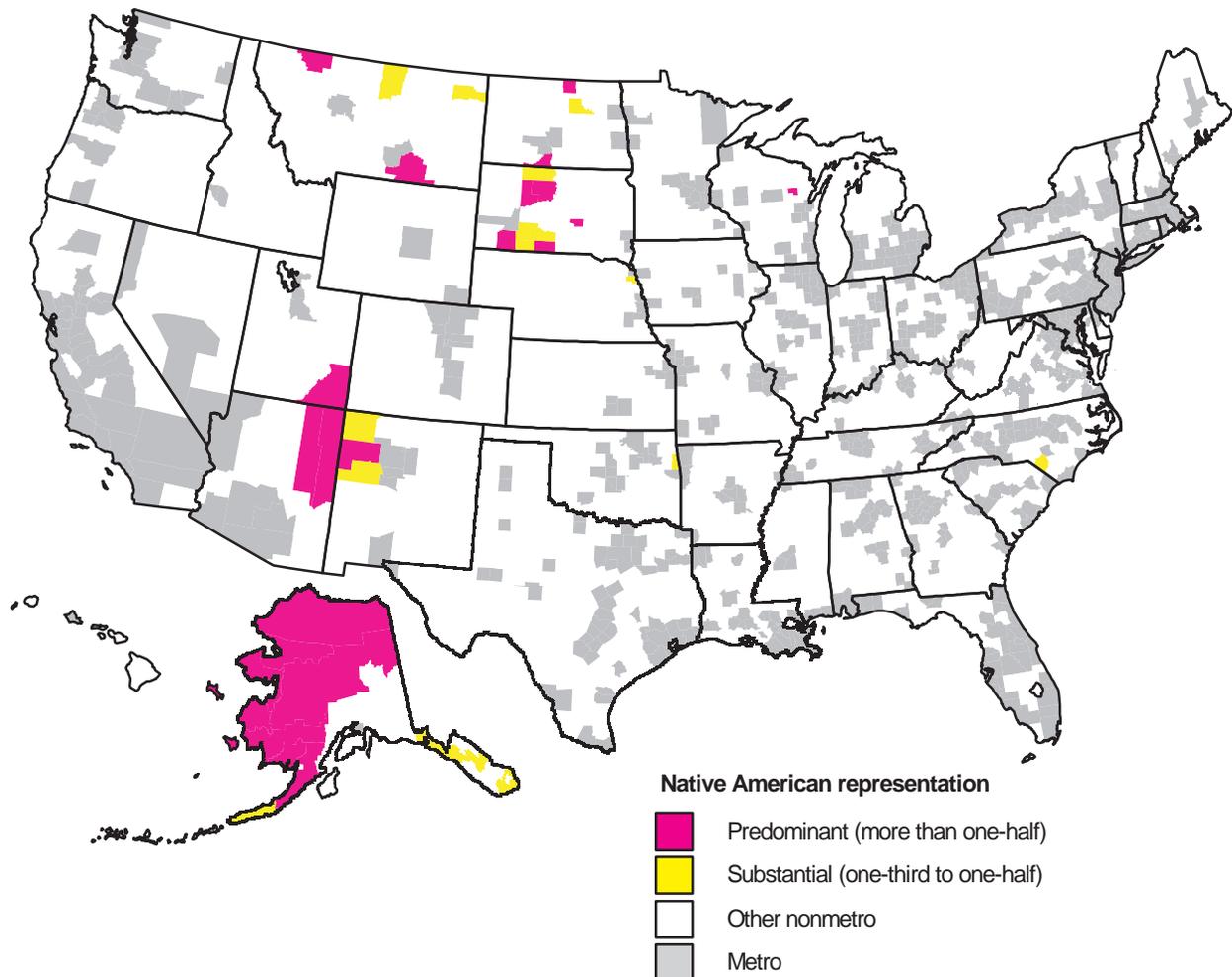
In contrast to Black and Hispanic counties, Native American counties tend to be thinly settled and far from major population centers. Only 14 percent of Native American counties are adjacent to a metro area, compared with 42 percent of all rural counties, and less than one-half contain a city or town of 2,500 or more people, compared with two-thirds nationally. This geographical isolation combines with a long history of discrimination to create economic hardship on many reservations, where opportunities for work have been typically limited to low-wage manufacturing and seasonal or part-time consumer service jobs. In recent years, tribal sovereignty has given Native American groups a level of economic self-determination not available to other minority groups and allowed them to undertake a variety of private enterprise ventures, including tourist-related gaming. For now, however, the potential for such economic development projects to alleviate the high levels of poverty found in many of these Native American counties remains largely untapped.

### **Hispanic Counties Are Clustered in the Rio Grande Valley**

One-half million Hispanics live in rural counties where they make up more than one-half of the population. Most of these predominantly Hispanic counties lie near the Rio Grande, along the entire length from its headwaters in southern Colorado to the Gulf of Mexico (fig. 3). Other areas of Hispanic concentration include California's Central and Imperial Valleys and the southern High Plains of Texas and New Mexico. Substantial Hispanic counties tend to be farther from the core of Hispanic settlement in the Rio Grande Valley and in more sparsely settled territory. Although there are more substantial Hispanic counties compared with predominant counties, far fewer Hispanics live in them.

European settlement of the Rio Grande Valley originated from Mexico, and the area was well populated by the time it became part of the United States. The Valley was and is a cultural crossroads so that many Hispanic counties also include sizable American Indian populations. Hispanic settlement in the High Plains and in California grew following the

Figure 2

**Rural Native American counties, 1990***American Indians, Eskimos, and Aleuts are concentrated in a few very isolated settings*

Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the 1990 Census of Population, Bureau of the Census.

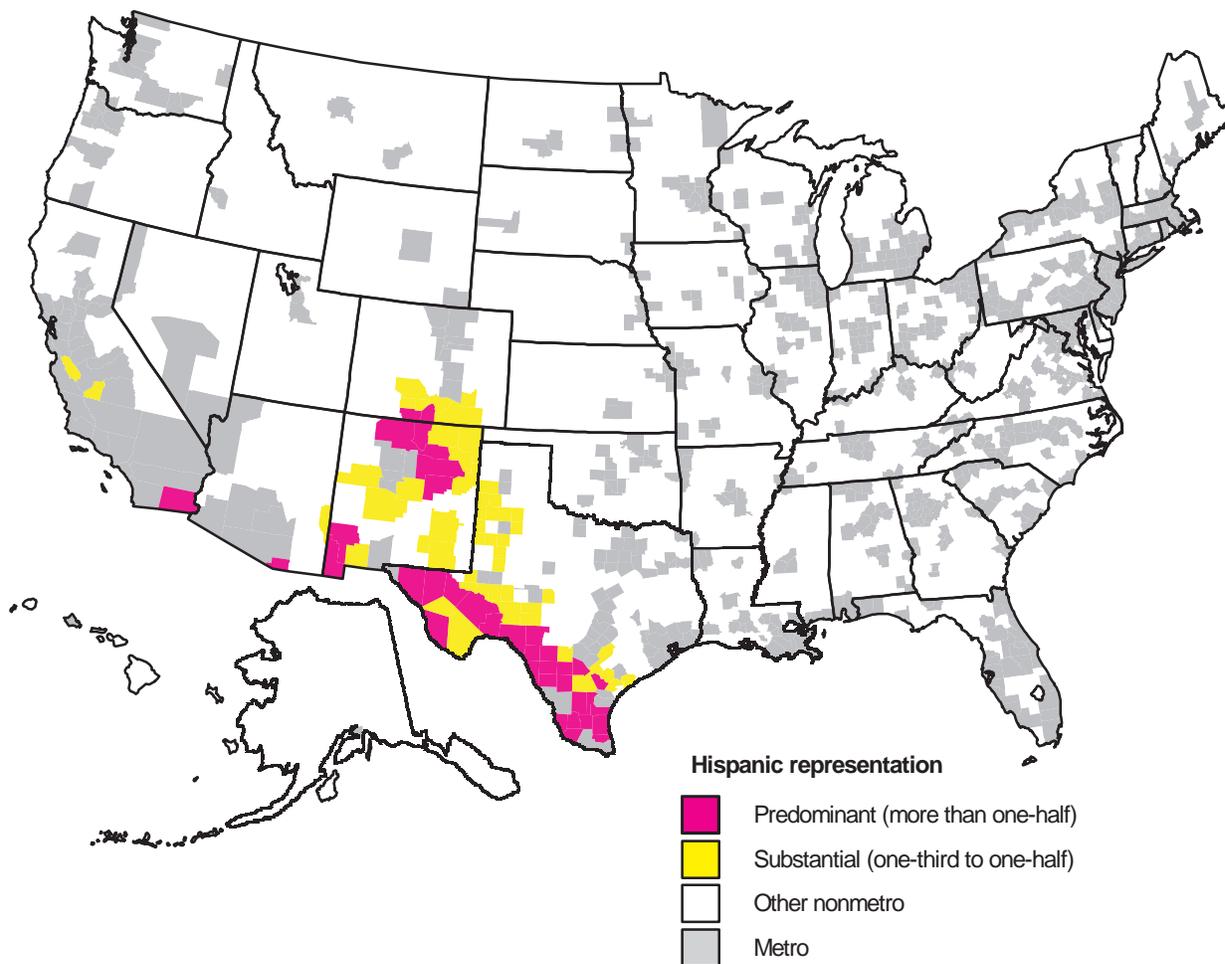
introduction of large-scale irrigated agriculture early in this century. From the outset, these enterprises depended on the low-cost mobilization of Mexican-American and immigrant farm laborers. Unlike rural Blacks, a large percentage of rural Hispanics still work in farming, the vast majority as relatively low-paid, seasonally hired farmworkers and not full-time operators. They still make an essential contribution to western agriculture despite widespread mechanization.

Hispanics are the fastest growing rural minority group, and new growth is occurring both in and far from Hispanic areas in the Southwest. Agricultural areas in Washington, ski resorts in Colorado, and meatpacking centers in Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa have seen new or greatly expanded Hispanic settlement since 1990.

#### **Minority Counties Have Higher Poverty Gap**

Rural poverty is found throughout the country and is less concentrated than in urban areas. Nonetheless, the incidence of poverty is quite severe in minority counties, especially in predominantly Black and Native American counties where it reached nearly 50 percent in 1989 (fig. 4). Whereas minority poverty increases substantially with increasing

Figure 3  
**Rural Hispanic counties, 1990**  
*Most rural Hispanic counties lie in or near the Rio Grande Valley*



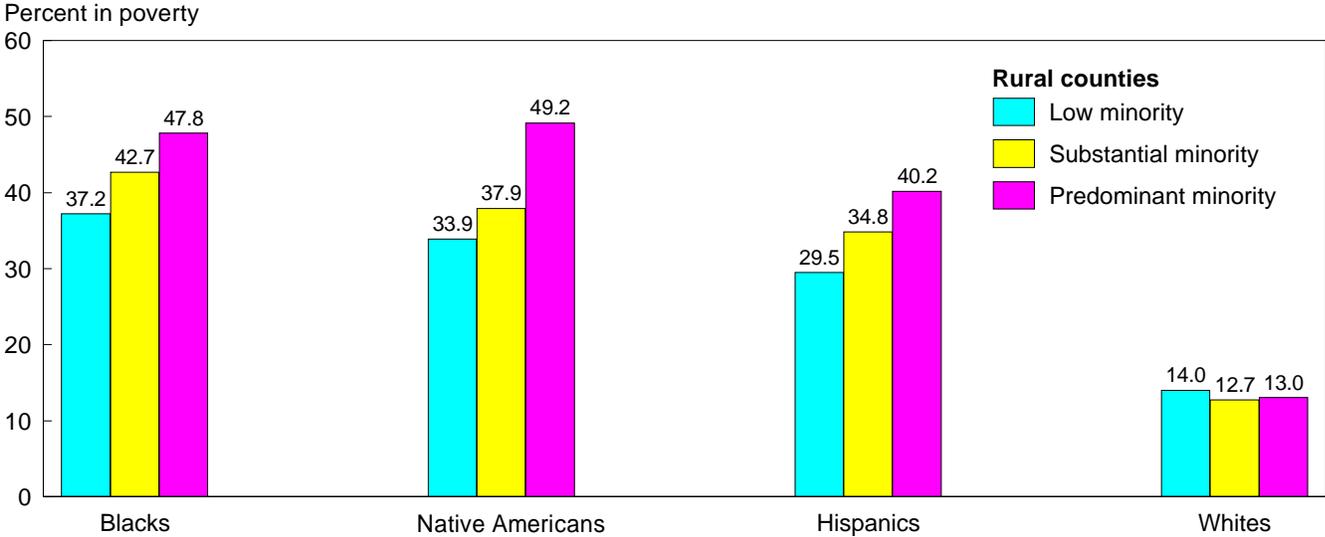
Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the 1990 Census of Population, Bureau of the Census.

minority presence, the poverty rate of Whites remains essentially the same, suggesting greater income inequality in minority counties. Ninety percent of predominantly minority counties were also persistent-poverty counties, as defined by the ERS typology, compared with 15 percent for other rural counties (app. table 3).

This new ERS typology of Black, Native American, and Hispanic rural counties is meant to help researchers and policymakers investigate some of the complex structural factors that contribute to rural economic well-being. Although each minority group has a unique history and rich cultural diversity, the areas where many of them live share similar problems based on geographical, social, and economic isolation. If we were to look within these minority counties, we would find additional separation by race and ethnicity at the municipal and neighborhood level that, in most cases, signals comparative economic disadvantage for the minority groups involved. Increasingly, rural Blacks live in predominantly Black towns; Hispanic workers and their families in small, marginalized settlements known as “colonias”; and most rural American Indians in or near geographically isolated reservations. These communities typically must deal with poor housing, limited transportation, inferior public services, few industries tied to the outside economy, and few retail and other service establishments. Rural policy that addresses the unique economic

concerns of geographically isolated minorities would benefit by focusing on infrastructure needs and the delivery of basic services provided by public and private institutions serving these communities. [John B. Cromartie, 202-694-5421, jbc@econ.ag.gov]

Figure 4  
**Poverty rates by race and ethnicity in rural counties, 1989**  
*Minority poverty increases with concentration*



Note: See p. 8 for definition of minority concentration areas and p. 118 for definition of poverty.  
Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the Bureau of the Census.