

4 County Profiles

4.0 County Profile Introduction

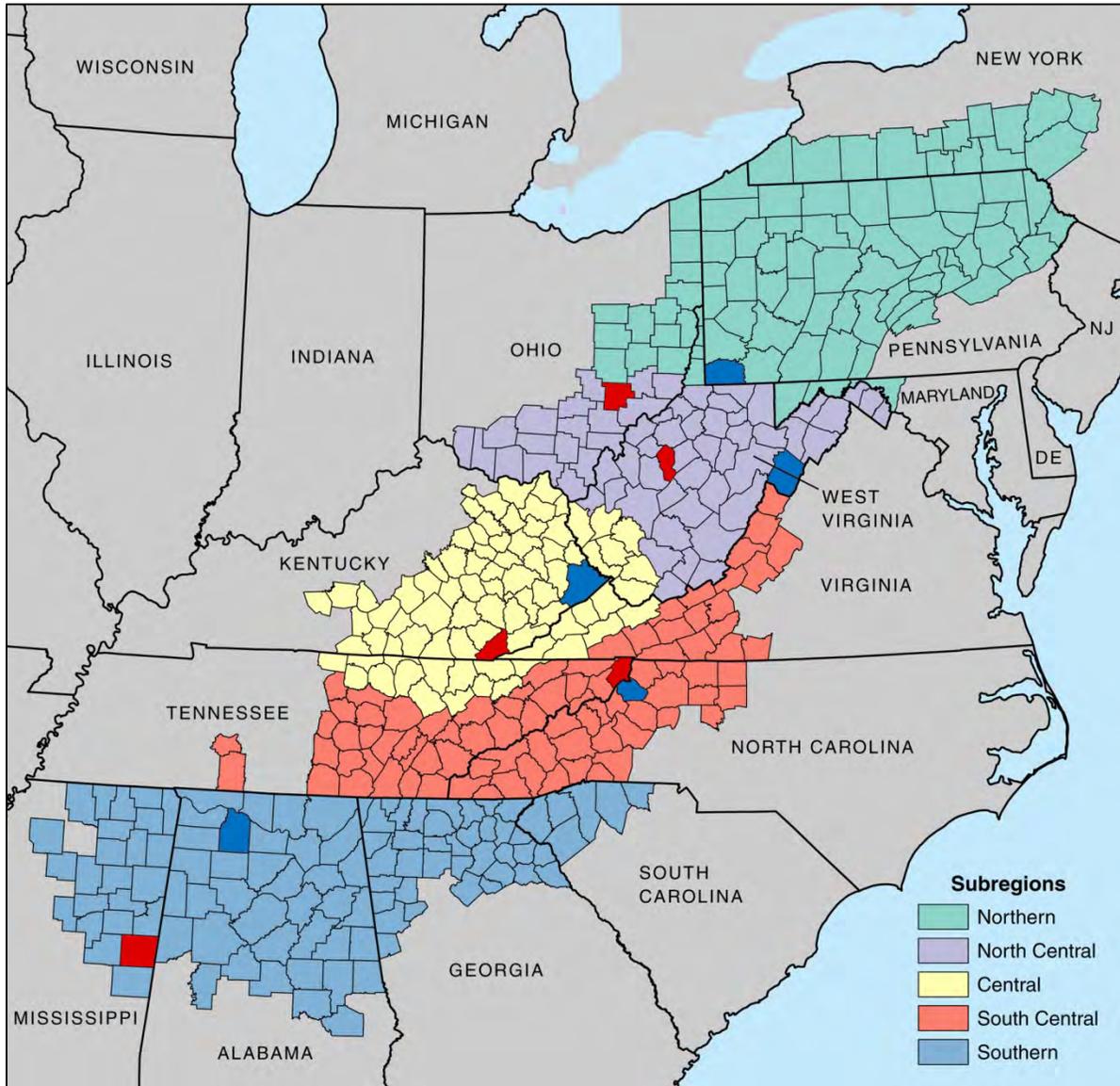
The ten counties will appear in this chapter by sections in north-to-south subregion order, beginning with the non-distressed county then followed by the distressed county in each subregion.

Section	County	Subregion
4.1	Greene County, Pennsylvania	Northern
4.2	Morgan County, Ohio	
4.3	Pendleton County, West Virginia	North Central
4.4	Calhoun County, West Virginia	
4.5	Pike County, Kentucky	Central
4.6	Bell County, Kentucky	
4.7	Avery County, North Carolina	South Central
4.8	Johnson County, Tennessee	
4.9	Lawrence County, Alabama	Southern
4.10	Noxubee County, Mississippi	

Within each of the county sections listed above, nine subsections will follow similar format across nine common topics to present relevant characteristics of each county.

Subsection	Topic
1	County Introduction
2	Population Profile
3	Access and Infrastructure
4	Economic and Housing Conditions
5	Tourism
6	Local Leadership and Planning
7	Health
8	Education
9	Summary and Lessons Learned

Figure 4-1: Map of the ARC Region with the five ARC subregions. The 10 study counties are highlighted by their economic distress designation (red is a distressed county, blue is a non-distressed county). This chapter examines a distressed and a non-distressed county from each ARC subregion.



Distressed County	ARC Subregion	Non-Distressed County
Morgan County, Ohio	Northern	Greene County, Pennsylvania
Calhoun County, West Virginia	North Central	Pendleton County, West Virginia
Bell County, Kentucky	Central	Pike County, Kentucky
Johnson County, Tennessee	South Central	Avery County, North Carolina
Noxubee County, Mississippi	Southern	Lawrence County, Alabama

4.1.1 Greene County Introduction

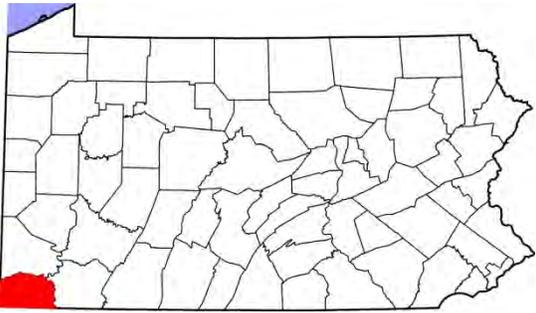
Located in the southwest corner of Pennsylvania, Greene County is notable among the ten study counties in several respects. Greene County is the northernmost county in the study and the second most populated. The county is also among the most urban, being nearly equidistant to both Pittsburgh, a major urban center, and Morgantown, WV, an important and growing mid-sized city.

Greene County is just one of two counties in the study to have a four-year college within its boundaries. Unlike other communities in this study, the county seat of Waynesburg is a busy and vital community that developed just off the Interstate 79 corridor. With this excellent transportation access, trucks of every size roar through the busy borough, and “Help Wanted” signs are visible on the windows and doors of business along local streets.

“After the Civil War, West Virginia and Pennsylvania fought a war and the loser got Greene County.”

Perhaps most importantly, the county still has an active coal industry and resides at the epicenter of the current Marcellus Shale natural gas boom. The extraction of natural gas largely accounts for the county’s recent economic progress and hearkens back to the community’s long association with coal mining.

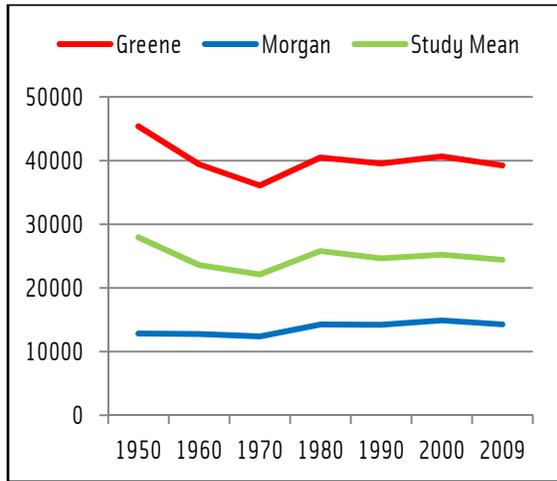
Resource extraction has long been the base of the local economy. Even today, a coal facility located on a local ridge top looms over the Waynesburg skyline. As such, Greene County provides an important case study in the future of Appalachian resources extraction and, perhaps, illustrates both the benefits and consequences of these practices.

Quick Facts	
Greene County, Pennsylvania	
	
Founded	1796
County Seat	Waynesburg
Land Area	578 sq. mi.
Water Surface Area	2 sq. mi.
Population	38,686
Density	67.2 per sq. mi.
Per Capita Income	\$19,832
Unemployment Rate	7.3%
ADHS Highway	No
Miles to State Capital	211
Miles from county seat to nearest Interstate	2 (I-79)
Miles from county seat to nearest commercial airport	41 (Pittsburgh, PA)

4.1.2 Population Profile

With nearly 40,000 residents, Greene County is among the most populated counties in this study. Despite its size, proximity to larger urban areas, well-developed downtown, and the Waynesburg University campus, the county remains quite rural. The county seat of Waynesburg has just 4,175 residents. Survey participants noted this fact, with “rural” being the word most frequently used to describe the county. As in many Appalachian

Figure 4-4: 60-year population trend with cohort (Morgan County, OH) and study average.



counties, diversity is low with almost 95% of the county population being white.²³

Age distribution in the county is weighted slightly toward middle-aged residents with the county having more males than females. This distribution likely reflects the presence of transient gas drilling and mine workers in the local labor force. These workers were a source of concern for survey participants, who blamed the workers for increased crime and other issues.

4.1.3 Access and Infrastructure

Greene County is easily accessed via Interstate 79, which runs along the eastern third of the county. The county boasts four interstate exits, and roads throughout the county appear to be in good condition. Survey respondents were divided over the quality of local roads, however, with 43% of residents rating them as adequate or fair. Thirty-nine percent of participants found road maintenance to be adequate, while 46% viewed it as inadequate and 14% rated it as poor.

²³ 2010 US Census.

These views were confirmed by discussions with local residents, who complained about large trucks associated with the coal and gas industries damaging roads. The majority of residents surveyed found public transportation to be either inadequate (43%) or poor (32%). In particular, they blamed road wear on the seemingly endless stream of trucks carting water to local shale-gas hydraulic fracturing or “fracking” operations.

“Our roads are good, but heavy truck usage is tearing them up.”

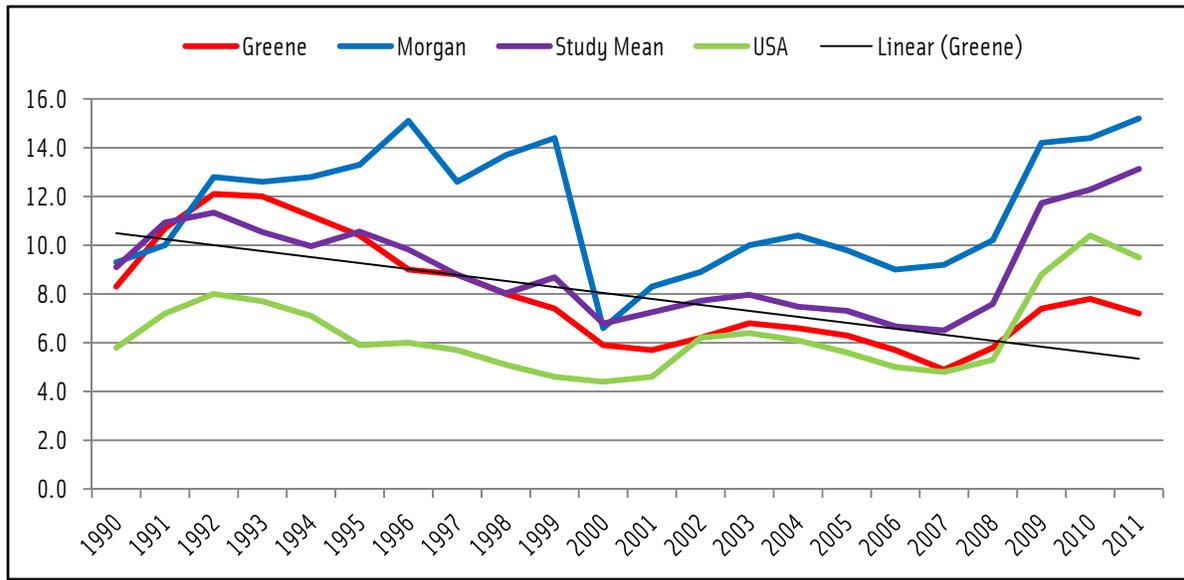
Fracking is a process in which water and other fluids are injected at high pressure into shale deposits to fracture the rock and release natural gas trapped inside. The process, which uses millions of gallons of water and other proprietary fluids, allows drilling companies access to previously untapped supplies of natural gas. The practice, however, also carries potentially serious environmental risks, particularly with surrounding water supplies. As such, the practice is becoming increasingly controversial throughout northern Appalachia.

It is not surprising, then, that Greene County residents raised concerns about the accessibility and quality of local drinking water. Greene County has some of the lowest water quality scores among

Figure 4-5: Waynesburg residential area with the local coal mine operation on a nearby ridge.



Figure 4-6: Greene County unemployment rate comparison, percentage by year.



the study communities, with 32% of respondents finding water services to be inadequate. In some cases, this is due to poor water access. Many residents, however, voiced concerns about the impact of gas drilling on local water supplies.

“Extractive industries are good for the economy, but at what cost? Of the 4-7M gallons of surface water in the county needed for fracking, 70% doesn't come back and the 30% that does is polluted.”

Local extension staff reported a record distribution of water test kits among county residents. These residents are concerned about the long-term safety of water supplies and, in many cases, are trying to establish pre-fracking baseline data. Penn State University extension service is working to help residents deal with fracking and gas drilling issues, though their services appear underutilized.

Internet access across all of Greene County appears to be uneven. Survey participants were generally favorable, with 18% reporting excellent service and

54% finding it adequate. One-fourth of residents, however, stated Internet access was inadequate. Discussions confirmed that while broadband availability in Waynesburg was good, some portions of the county still lacked broadband access. Those with high-speed access stated that while service was generally reliable, speeds were often slower than advertised. Cell phone service is very good in Waynesburg and areas near the interstate. Residents reported, however, that access was less reliable in more rural parts of the county.²⁴

4.1.4 Economic and Housing Conditions

Greene County is clearly benefitting from coal and gas extraction. County unemployment, at 7.3%, is the second lowest in Pennsylvania.²⁵ Residents, however, report that the low unemployment rate is

²⁴ Broadband access maps of the county also show service gaps in many areas, especially western Greene County. <http://www.bakerbb.com/pabroadbandmapping>

²⁵ US Bureau of Labor Statistics, February 2011.

somewhat deceiving. Many jobs are held by out-of-town drilling firms and are probably temporary. The local economy also benefits from revenues accrued through gas-well leases. Many local property owners are flush with cash and some spend freely. While this newfound wealth is a boon to local businesses, this influx of "found money" raises concerns about its impact on local values.

Given the relative state of prosperity in Greene County, entrepreneurship is surprisingly low. Empty storefronts are commonplace in Waynesburg, and the downtown area has only three restaurants. This lack of retail and dining options, despite the presence of college students, nearby workers, and steady highway traffic, is baffling, especially considering the relatively robust local economy and the current spate of gas lease payments.

Local officials blame the lack of local startup businesses on a risk-averse population and believe

small business development and entrepreneurship programs should be a high priority for future development efforts. In spite of this, one-half of survey respondents found the Greene County Chamber of Commerce to be adequate and another 21% judged it excellent.

The coal industry, long a fixture in the local economy, continues to be a major employer. Not surprisingly, local residents and officials are, for the most part, fiercely protective of the coal and gas industries. Local residents also express pride in their coal heritage. When asked what Greene County was best known for, "coal" was the leading response among survey participants.

The county boasts some industrial development, especially near the interstate exits. Manufacturing, however, appears to play a secondary role in the local economy, behind the dominant extractive industries. Residents were divided about the effects of globalization, with the largest

Figure 4-7: Downtown Waynesburg hosts several festivals each year. (courtesy Greene County Chamber)



percentage of survey participants, approximately one-third, stating they were “unsure” about local benefits of international trade.

The county is well-poised for residential growth. The community borders both the Pittsburgh and Morgantown Metropolitan Statistical Areas. Continued growth in those populated areas should eventually spill over into Greene County.

“We are the ham in the sandwich. Morgantown [WV] is out of land, and Washington County [PA] has casinos. Nobody wants to live near a casino.”

The county experienced a housing boom in the 1970s suburban development era, but the market has since cooled considerably. Local leaders point out the housing problems relate most to homeowners of 25-35 years who have not made home improvements.

A lack of land-use controls may also discourage growth. There is no county-wide zoning, and there are few rural land-use controls that are monitored. Waynesburg, however, has developed a well-executed master plan and is working towards downtown redevelopment. These plans would benefit from well-coordinated historic preservation ordinances or incentives, such as historic zoning or facade easements.

According to the community survey, 48% rate the performance of planning and zoning departments to be inadequate. Perhaps because of this, home values appear to be relatively low. Median home values are about 40% below the state average and Waynesburg features a number of stately historic structures that are either underutilized or in poor

repair.²⁶ Given its location, the community seems ripe for transformation. However, the nature of the local economy, and fears related to environmental risks, may deter investment.

Residential growth may be slowed by the county’s continued emphasis on extraction. Coal mining, fracking, and gas extraction do little to attract suburban growth, young families, or retirees.

“We’re excited about Marcellus Shale, but it presents lots of challenges.”

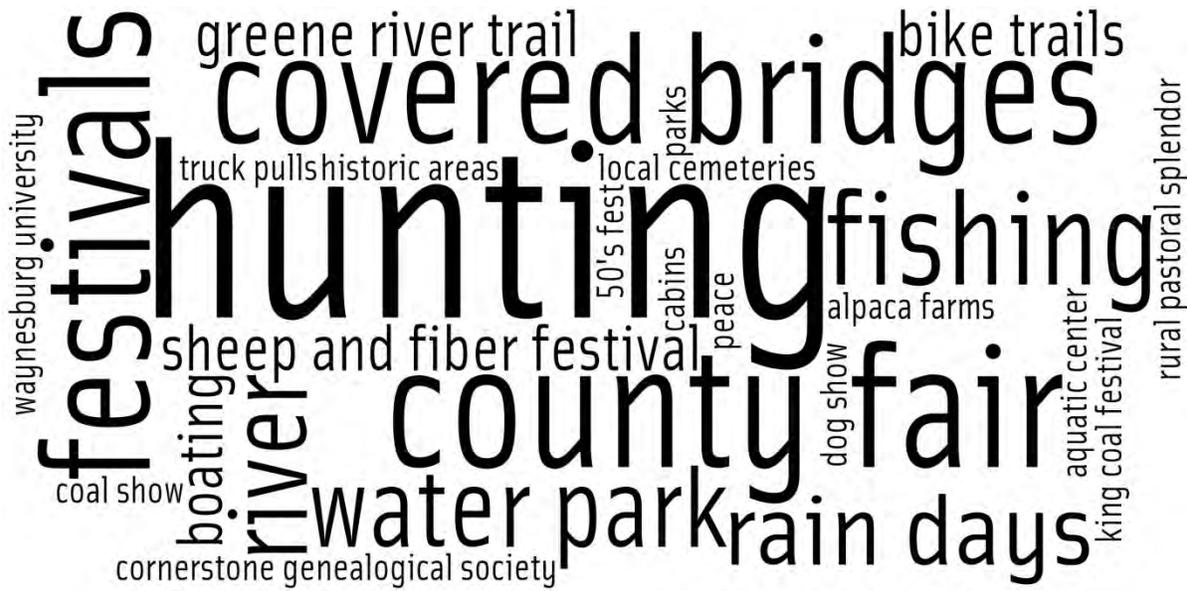
4.1.5 Tourism

Greene County has significant tourism potential. The county’s proximity to urban centers and its location on the I-79 corridor make it ideal for day trips or a weekend destination. The county boasts a number of tourism resources, including heritage and outdoor recreation sites. The county also promotes agritourism and has launched a number of attractions, including pick-your-own vendors, local vineyards, farmers markets, and overnight farm stays to help nurture a budding market.

The county benefits from excellent tourism marketing resources and the capacity of the county Tourism Promotion Agency is high. The county has an excellent tourism website that includes links to local sites, discount coupons, and pages devoted to agritourism, heritage sites, and outdoor recreation. The website even includes a “Kid’s Corner” with activities for young visitors. Print media, also downloadable from the website, is of high quality and includes lodging guides, bike trails, and driving tours. Marketing materials were readily

²⁶ Home value statistics are based on figures from the 2000 US Census.

Figure 4-9: Word cloud responses to the question, "What is your county's top attraction for tourism?"



available in both Waynesburg and in state Welcome Centers. The Tourism Promotion Agency also maintains a Facebook page for prospective visitors that helps promote local events and businesses.

The county has a number of lodging options, including national chain motels, rental cabins, and bed and breakfasts. Local residents report, however, that motels are often filled with itinerant gas industry workers and drilling crews, creating an atmosphere that might not be welcoming to casual visitors. The county also lacks dining options, creating a significant gap in services.

Downtown Waynesburg contains a number of historic structures and has the potential to become a regional destination. Currently, however, many of these structures are ill-maintained and the streets are, at times, dominated by loud and large hydrofracking water trucks. Recent efforts at downtown revitalization, however, are likely to resolve many of these issues. Improved land-use controls, preservation incentives and better traffic management will likely have a positive effect on the local visitor's experience.

It remains unclear how or if the emerging debate over fracking will impact tourism. Greene County will no doubt serve as an important case study to gauge the impact of this industry on local tourism.

Figure 4-8: Decorated barns and covered bridges provide an enjoyable touring experience through Greene County. (courtesy Greene County Chamber)



As such, county tourism development should be assessed in the coming years and findings should be incorporated into discussions related to shale gas drilling.

4.1.6 Local Leadership and Planning

Satisfaction with county and local governments is generally good. Nearly 70% of survey respondents found county government to be adequate or excellent. Satisfaction with municipal government was also good, with 61% rating it as adequate and another 14% finding it excellent. Good communication and transparency may help account for the favorable opinions from the surveys and public discussions. Greene County appears to have the best online outreach with a comprehensive website and public documents readily available. The three county commissioners also have a Facebook page to help maintain contact with residents. County leadership appears to be strong, and elected officials demonstrate energy and enthusiasm and appear to have a well-defined vision for the community.

Figure 4-10: Waynesburg University is a vital partner in many community activities.



Perhaps the most dynamic leadership in the community, however, comes from the local liberal arts college, Waynesburg University. The university is a vital partner in local development activities and helps drive many significant efforts in the community. Foremost among these is the revitalization of downtown Waynesburg.

“Waynesburg University is our most prized asset. If it was gone, we don’t know what we’d do.”

The college worked with the local Chamber to establish several public-private partnerships including, “Waynesburg Prosperous and Beautiful,” an impressive revitalization campaign, for which it maintains a Facebook page, the “Downtown Lowdown” to promote businesses and events. Local officials have also initiated a “buy-local” campaign to help promote local businesses.

Planning, conducted in conjunction with Waynesburg University, is strong in Waynesburg, but is less evident outside of the county seat. Execution may be hindered by a lack of strong land-use controls. County government is well-trained and well-versed in existing best practices.

The county enjoys a good relationship with the Southwest Pennsylvania Development District. The capacity of the development district, county government, and local governments all appear to be high. Information flows seem to be adequate for the county’s size, and there is an appropriate awareness of grants and external funding sources.

4.1.7 Health

Access to health care appears to be very good, and the Southwest Regional Medical Center was identified as a major asset. Waynesburg boasts a modern and convenient hospital with a range of

services. Major health care facilities are readily available in Pittsburgh, less than an hour away. This proximity may explain the remarkable lack of local physicians.

Greene County claims just 46 physicians per 100,000 residents, a fraction of the national average of 267 and below the state average of 297. Dental services are available, though services may be limited. The county has 28 dentists per 100,000 residents, about half the national average of 60 per 100,000. As with physicians, easy access to urban areas may help ameliorate this local deficiency.²⁷

Perhaps reflective of available services in the county, public health remains relatively poor – Greene County ranks 66th of 67 Pennsylvania counties in health outcomes. The county also ranks 63rd among Pennsylvania counties in health factors and 58th in morbidity.

"People who live next to mining compressors are getting sick."

Proper nutrition plays a part in a healthy populace, and while the county does provide a seasonal farmer's market, the county falls short in access to healthy food, with just 9% of residents having easy access to healthy food vendors.²⁸

Perhaps most telling, the county places 66th in the quality of its physical environment, exceeding state averages in air pollution and ozone days, with 19 days per year.

²⁷ US Department of Health and Human Services, "Community Health Status Report, 2009"

www.communityhealth.hhs.gov; US Census, "Doctors per 100,000 Population, 2006" www.census.gov/statab/ranks

²⁸ Robert Wood Johnson Foundation "County Health Care Rankings, 2010"

www.countyhealthrankings.org/pennsylvania/greene

Figure 4-11: Southwest Regional Medical Center was identified as an important asset in the county.



Five percent of county residents are dependent on SSI disability income. While this figure is double the national average, it is below the levels found in many active coal producing counties.

Drug use in Greene County, as with the other case study counties, is problematic. The drugs of choice in the county seem to be heroin and methamphetamine. So bad in fact, that prescription drug related home invasions were mentioned several times during the focus groups.

4.1.8 Education

Educational attainment figures are encouraging, and have shown steady improvement over the past twenty years. The graduation rate has risen over 15% since 1990, and is now near the national average. The county still lags behind the nation, however, in the percentage of college graduates and residents with graduate degrees, but has shown improvement in the number of Associate degrees earned.

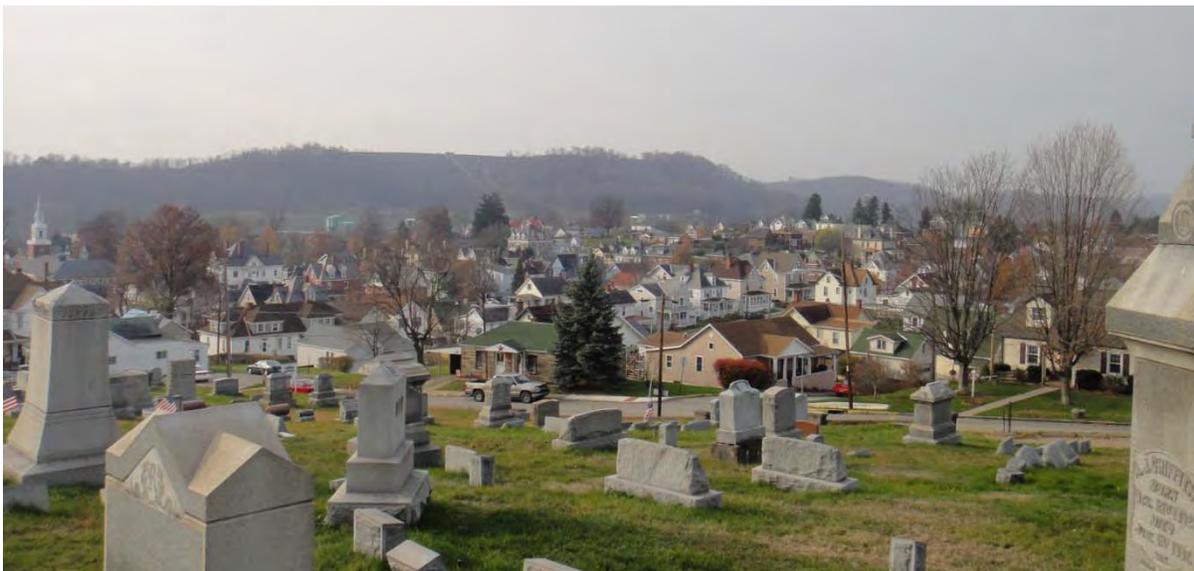
Administrative issues are a major complaint. The county is divided into townships and, as a result, has five different school districts. These multiple districts, while providing local control, also exhibit considerable redundancy and administrative waste. They may also contribute to high local taxes, which were described in survey returns as "crippling." Residents also complain about the uneven

Residents show a deep attachment and affection for their home, and community pride appears to be high. Uncertainty related to the gas boom and drilling practices hang over the area, though, and the prevailing mood is one of anxious optimism.

Among the lessons learned from Greene County are the following:

- Strong partnerships with higher education can be vital to local development efforts. Greene County's partnership with Waynesburg University is commendable and a model for asset-based cooperation. The success of this relationship is a model for the Appalachian region that could be replicated elsewhere. The relationship with extension is significant and demonstrates how these services are among the most underutilized resources in the region.
- Greene County's success demonstrates the importance of capacity and cooperation among local government officials. The community generally benefits from sound decision making by strong leadership and a common vision among local leaders.
- Low levels of entrepreneurship and risk-averse residents can threaten long term development. Because of this, the community remains overly dependent on resource extraction - a reliance that may deter residential growth because of lack of diversification.
- Greene County is a leader in the use of social media to promote government transparency and local business development. Success in this area should serve as a model for other communities in the region.
- Greene County is a significant case study in shale gas extraction. The county is at the forefront of this industry, which promises to soon spread to other parts of the Appalachian region. As such, it has much to teach other communities about the promise, potential, and dangers of this rapidly growing activity. Greene County's experiences in the coming decade should be studied closely and shared with other shale-rich communities.

Figure 4-13: Waynesburg residential area as seen from a hilltop cemetery near downtown.



4.2 Morgan County, Ohio

Figure 4-14: Word cloud responses to the question, "What are three words that describe your county?"



Figure 4-15: Word cloud responses to the question, "What is your county best known for?"



4.2.1 Morgan County Introduction

Morgan County is located in southeast Ohio, between the micropolitan statistical areas of Athens and Zanesville. Once among the largest coal producing areas of the world, Morgan County is now a quiet rural community. Thanks to extensive remediation efforts, evidence of past mining operations are difficult to see and the surrounding countryside is dominated by scenic, rolling hills.

While the local environment is much improved, Morgan County's economic landscape is still visibly scarred from mine and plant closures. The county is classified as distressed by the ARC and unemployment is fourth highest in Ohio. In spite of this hardship, Morgan County remains hopeful and is implementing an impressive program to promote economic growth. The community's leadership, planning, and approach are among the most innovative in this study and rightly serve as a model for other distressed rural communities.

4.2.2 Population Profile

With less than 15,000 residents, Morgan County is one of the least populated counties in Ohio. Like many rural counties, the local population declined slightly during the last decade, dropping by 4.1%. The county's population distribution, however, has remained fairly well balanced. Nearly a quarter of the local population (23.1%) is under 18 years of age. Diversity is low, with whites making up 93% of the county population.

4.2.3 Access and Infrastructure

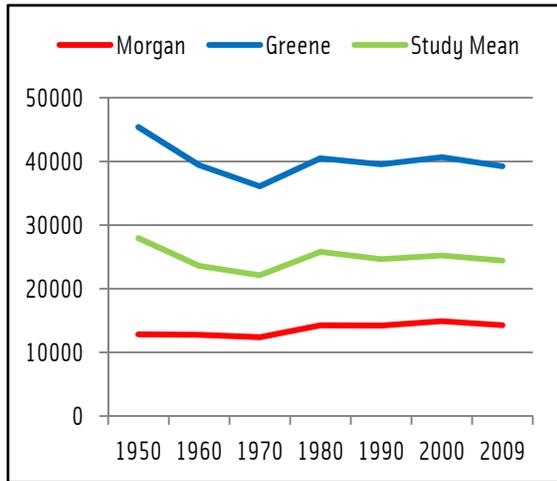
Morgan County is the only county in Ohio without a four-lane highway. To residents, this has been viewed as a mixed blessing. The lack of a major highway has probably deterred investment and made the drive to urban areas and other communities more difficult and time consuming. On

Quick Facts	
Morgan County, Ohio	
	
Founded	1817
County Seat	McConelsville
Land Area	418 square miles
Water Surface Area	4 square miles
Population	15,054
Density	36 per sq. mi.
Per Capita Income	\$17,526
Unemployment Rate	15.2%
ADHS Highway	No
Miles to State Capital	82
Miles from county seat to nearest Interstate	27 (I-70); 25 (I-77)
Miles from county seat to nearest commercial airport	80 (Columbus, OH)

the other hand, the two-lane highway has allowed the county to retain a tranquil rural landscape and has helped the county seat of McConelsville remain a viable community with an active historic downtown.

Even without four lane access, the drive to McConelsville is not especially difficult from any direction. Distances to nearby Athens, Zanesville, and Marietta are manageable and less than an hour's drive from the county seat. Roads appear to be well-maintained in well-traveled areas, but may be wanting elsewhere. Nearly half (49%) of the

Figure 4-16: 60-year population trend with cohort (Greene County, PA) and 10-county study average.



county's survey respondents found road maintenance to be inadequate and another 11% classified it as poor. Morgan County received high marks, however, for public transportation. More than 60% of respondents found public transportation to be adequate and another 18% reported it to be excellent.

Results on other types of infrastructure appeared to be mixed. Not surprisingly, disparities exist between populated and more rural areas. For example, residents are almost evenly split in their opinions of water and sewer services.

More than half of survey respondents (56%) found water service to be adequate or excellent, and the remainder classified it as inadequate or poor. Likewise, 53% of participants had unfavorable

views of sewer service, while 42% found it to be adequate. Less than 6% of respondents classified sewer service as excellent.

Internet and mobile access are a major concern among residents. Almost 90% of survey respondents classified internet access as either inadequate or poor. Focus group participants identified poor access as a major local weakness and a significant barrier to economic growth. Discussions with local leaders, however, suggest that service providers are making improvements in the more populated areas of the county. Mobile phone reception, while good in McConnelsville, is spotty in other areas. State broadband access maps, developed by Connect Ohio, confirm the lack of telecom services in many areas.

4.2.4 Economic and Housing Conditions

Over the past two decades, Morgan County has been hit with a succession of negative economic impacts. Plant closures, the depletion of local coal reserves, and increased globalization have contributed to local economic distress and the fourth highest unemployment rate in Ohio. The county also recently experienced the loss of several auto dealerships. While jobs were lost, the financial impact of these closures was somewhat mitigated by Ohio tax policies, which directs the tax from the sale of automobiles to the county where the auto is titled, not where the auto is sold.

Figure 4-17: The McConnelsville town square, with the Twin City Opera House and Morgan County Courthouse anchoring an active downtown of restaurants, markets, and entertainment.

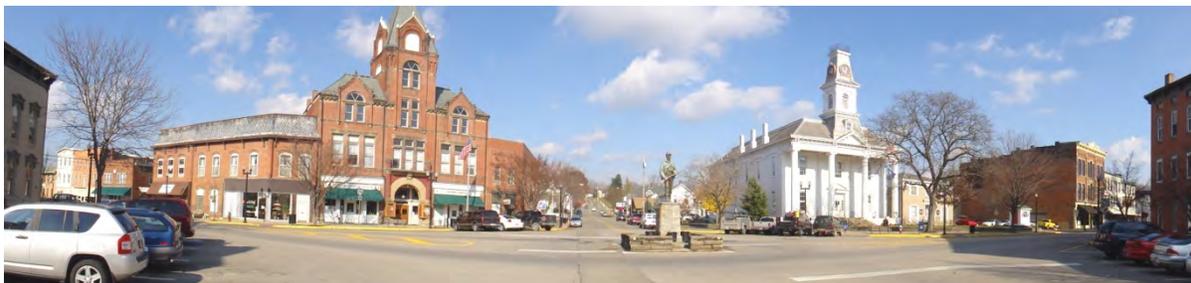
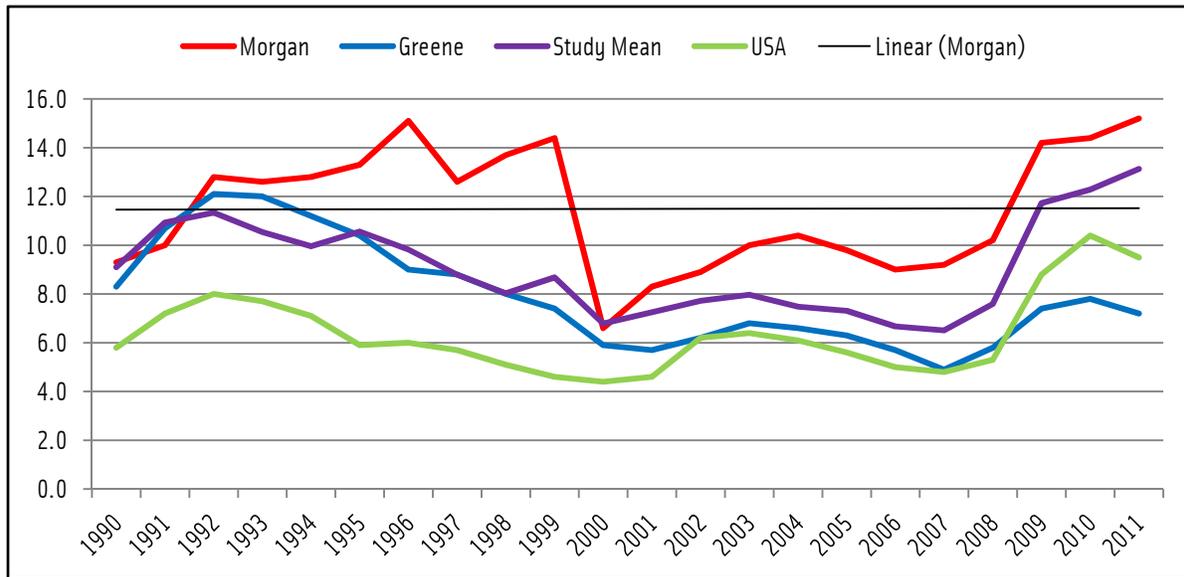


Figure 4-18: Morgan County unemployment rate comparison, percentage by year.



Yet, while local officials acknowledge the significance of these external forces, they also point fingers at themselves for complacency during good economic times.²⁹ Interestingly, while Morgan County certainly qualifies as distressed, it neither looks nor feels like a distressed county.

"We didn't plan. Had we planned 20 years ago, we wouldn't be in the shape we're in now."

McConnelsville is a picturesque and vibrant community with a number of attractive local businesses. Only when one gets outside of the county seat do signs of hardship emerge. Other townships and villages in Morgan County, while sharing aesthetic qualities with the county seat, show more signs of financial stress. Housing characteristics are similar. While housing within

²⁹ Based on March, 2011 unemployment rates compiled by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics.

McConnelsville is generally good, lower quality housing stock is visible in more rural areas.

There is no local Wal-Mart or clothing store, which means upwards of 2,700 residents drive out of the county for retail purchases. To offset this leakage, local leaders recently initiated a "buy local" campaign, in hopes of boosting local sales by a realistic 10%, which leaders say will equate to \$100,000 in added tax revenue in each of the first years of the program.

"We are an emerging county, awakening from a deep sleep of past complacency. We are ready for change and are willing to adapt to new ways of doing things."

Local officials are generally optimistic and hopeful for the future. In discussions, they seem to regard their current economic status as an anomaly and not as a permanent condition. Residents, however, seem less certain. Half of survey respondents expressed a lack of optimism about the county's future. Community leaders say that are actively

addressing these issues by changing a defeatist attitude to a "can do" attitude among our citizens.

Residents also expressed concerns about entrepreneurship, particularly among local youth. Local officials are working with both The Ohio State University and Ohio University to help promote small business development. In one case, for example, Ohio University staff received funding from the ARC to help the local farm bureau promote agricultural products. The county also benefits from a strong working relationship with their local development district, the Buckeye Hills-Hocking Valley Regional Development District.

4.2.5 Tourism

Morgan County has significant potential as a tourism destination. Downtown McConnelsville is a picturesque and historic attraction, with ample retail space and existing shopping and dining options. The town square features the Twin Cities Opera House, a historic entertainment venue. The

Opera House currently provides a full range of events and activities, including movies, theater, and live music. It is also home to the Ohio Valley Opry, a monthly country music concert and is even used for ghost-hunting tours and big-screen video gaming competitions.

Stockport, another village in Morgan County, is also a tourist destination and boasts a historic mill that has been converted into a restaurant and inn. Other local assets include the "AEP ReCreation Land," which is 42,000 acres of reclaimed mine land that is now used for a wide range of outdoor activities, including hiking, fishing, camping, hunting and horseback riding. Another popular attraction is the Miner's Memorial Park, a monument to the county's mining heritage. The park's centerpiece is the bucket from Big Muskie, a massive earth mover once used by the coal extraction industry.

Given their resources, Morgan County has done an excellent job of promoting local tourism. The county maintains a welcome center on the square in downtown McConnelsville. The center is operated

Figure 4-19: Word cloud responses to the question, "What is your county's top attraction for tourism?"



Figure 4-20: Morgan County staffs an accessible visitor information center and does a good job of promoting tourism assets.



by knowledgeable staff and offers helpful information and advice for visitors. Brochures and maps are professionally done and readily available.

While staffing and visibility of the tourism information center is adequate, tourism infrastructure is lacking in other areas. Roadside signage is sparse and the number of overnight accommodations is limited. While the county has a handful of local motels and bed and breakfasts, it lacks the exposure of a national hotel.

"We had a great white tablecloth restaurant. It sold, the buyers were clueless, and it closed. The closure reduced our quality of life and makes it difficult for management-type people to relocate here."

Morgan County, with its natural and cultural amenities, has significant potential as a weekend destination. In fact, ARC assistance with the development of promotional media and other marketing materials has played a significant role in the rise of the local tourism sector. Additional investment in tourism development and training would likely help foster this growing local industry.

4.2.6 Local Leadership and Planning

Local leadership is very strong and is a model of vision, cooperation, and innovation. Partnerships between elected officials, nonprofit organizations, and the local business community are strong. Across the board, leaders express a common vision, which also seems to cross local party lines.

"There are no 'Rs' and 'Ds' when it comes to turning this county around."

An important early step for local leaders was the creation of the Morgan County Community Improvement Committee (CIC). Among the first decisions of the CIC was the disposition of an older industrial site. Sale of the site was, according to residents, a difficult and controversial decision. In hindsight, though, they recognized that it was a watershed moment. It allowed the CIC to break with the past and move forward with a new vision for the community. Local leaders, working through the CIC, would go on to form another critical nonprofit - a community foundation - to help raise private and philanthropic funds for local improvement projects.

Plans for local economic development are impressive and innovative. A comprehensive plan was followed by a site-specific plan for an industrial/innovation park. In an effort to promote entrepreneurship, the proposed park will include a business incubator tied to school entrepreneurship programs. This incubator is also impressive in that it incorporates "cross-pollination" ideas. The facility is designed to include both "high-tech" and "old-tech" businesses, so that digital and mechanical innovators can interact and combine their efforts and expertise. This creative and visionary effort is rooted in current and emerging best practices in joining college-bound and vocational types of education.

Local officials and survey participants both bemoan the difficulty in securing matching funds for infrastructure improvements. So while local leaders say everyone works together, they also note state level political challenges to needed improvements.

"We have a 3:1 ratio of Republicans to Democrats. State politicians know they have our support and never have to produce anything. We get forgotten."

Not surprisingly, local officials get high marks for their efforts with 80% of survey participants having rated local officials as "excellent" or "adequate." Opinions of county officials, however, were less positive. Almost 66% of respondents rated county officials as "inadequate" or "poor." These differing perceptions are perhaps indicative of the evident disparity between McConnelsville and more rural parts of the county.

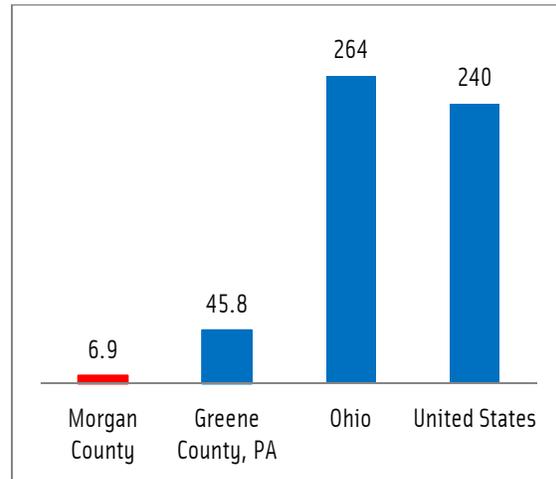
Residents appear less enthusiastic about current local land-use planning. Over 76% of survey respondents found planning and zoning to be inadequate or poor. While this figure is cause for concern, it may indicate a community that desires better land-use planning or stronger enforcement of existing policies and ordinances.

4.2.7 Health

With no full service hospital in the county, access to health care is limited, with 88% of survey participants reporting they live 30–60 minutes from the nearest full service hospital. Of the 88 Ohio counties, Morgan County ranks 57th in mortality and morbidity health outcomes, with heart disease the leading cause of death followed closely by cancer and stroke.

Poor health habits and socio-economic factors contribute to the relatively low health outcomes,

Figure 4-21: Comparison of Physicians per 100,000 county, state, and national residents



but the lack of a local hospital also contributes to a low number of local physicians. Morgan County reports 6.9 physicians per 100,000 residents, well less than its study cohort of Greene County, PA, and far below state and national averages.³⁰

Access to dental care, with 20.7 dentists per 100,000 residents, is better, though still well below the national average of 60 per 100,000 residents. It should be noted, however, that Morgan County's proximity to larger communities, such as Zanesville and Marietta, may help make up for these shortages. Residents benefit, however, from a relatively hospitable physical environment, ranked the 8th best in Ohio.³¹

Dependency on federal SSI is relatively low, at 3.4% of the county population. While this figure is above the national average of 2.5%, it lower than

³⁰ US Department of Health and Human Services, "Community Health Status Report, 2009" www.communityhealth.hhs.gov

³¹ Robert Wood Johnson Foundation "2010 County Health Care Rankings" www.countyhealthrankings.org

many rural Appalachian counties, particularly those associated with the mining industry.³²

4.2.8 Education

From the outset, the Morgan County Community Improvement Committee (CIC) recognized the importance of education and youth in the long-term economic recovery strategy. Improving schools was a key component of early development efforts and results are impressive. The percentage of residents with a high school diploma or higher stands at 83.5%, tied with Greene County for the best performance among study counties. The figure also represents a nearly 12% increase since 1990. The county also posts the highest literacy levels of the 10-county study, with 11% of residents estimated to be lacking basic prose literacy.³³

Test scores are also very impressive. High school reading and math proficiency scores, both in the 93rd percentile, are the highest among the counties in this study. Remarkably, these scores are comparable to those at Oak Ridge, TN, traditionally among the best performing school systems in the nation. Leaders of the CIC plan to continue this pattern by introducing STEM (Science, Technology, Math and Engineering) curricula into the schools in the near future.³⁴

Per pupil expenditures, at \$10,676, are slightly above average the ten-county average of \$10,745.

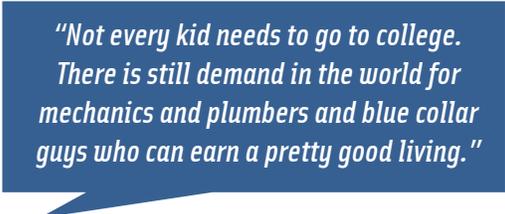
³² Social Security Administration, "SSI Recipients by State and County, 2009," (2010, SSA Publication No. 13-11976)

³³ 2010 US Census; National Center for Education Statistics, "National Assessment of Adult Literacy: State and County Literacy Estimates," nces.ed.gov/naal/estimates/stateestimates

³⁴ Ohio Department of Education, "2009-2010 School Year Report Card, Morgan Local School District" www.reportcard.ohio.gov

The majority (52%) of local students receive free or reduced price lunches.³⁵

Ironically, while high school student performance is very high, degree attainment remains well below the national average. Just 9.5% of residents have a bachelor's or advanced degree, the second lowest figure among study counties. This is in due, in part, to the county's level of economic distress. It also reflects the limited opportunities for local college graduates. Leaders are hopeful that investments in entrepreneurship and business development programs will expand opportunities to bring back local young people after they finish college. Local graduates appear to be making better use of community colleges. In fact, 7.7% of county residents hold associate degrees, third highest among study counties.³⁶



"Not every kid needs to go to college. There is still demand in the world for mechanics and plumbers and blue collar guys who can earn a pretty good living."

Despite the low number of local college graduates, the community enjoys strong partnerships with both Ohio University and The Ohio State University. OSU extension is well-utilized and is an active partner in community development efforts. Continued activity by these and other institutions and the positive trajectory of the CIC could pay dividends in the future.

³⁵ Federal Education Budget Project, "Morgan Local School District," <http://newamerica.net/k12/oh>

³⁶ 2010 US Census

4.3.1 Pendleton County Introduction

Pendleton County, West Virginia, is located at the eastern edge of the state, just thirty miles from the fast-growing city of Harrisonburg, Virginia, and the busy I-81 corridor. Yet, while the county is adjacent to the Harrisonburg Metropolitan Statistical Area, it remains isolated and remote. Mountainous terrain and winding roads contribute to this isolation and help deter growth and investment. This terrain, however, also imparts a serene beauty to the local environment and, while an obstacle to conventional growth, makes the county a potential tourism and retirement destination.

Residents of the county have overcome this isolation through a combination of hard-work, resourcefulness, and luck. Yet, despite their relative success, community members feel far from secure. Most believe they are “treading water” and fear they will be unable to maintain their current economic status or quality of life. These fears are now exacerbated by recent changes in energy costs and political leadership. Improved access to available resources, however, could alleviate many fears and help the county reach its full potential.

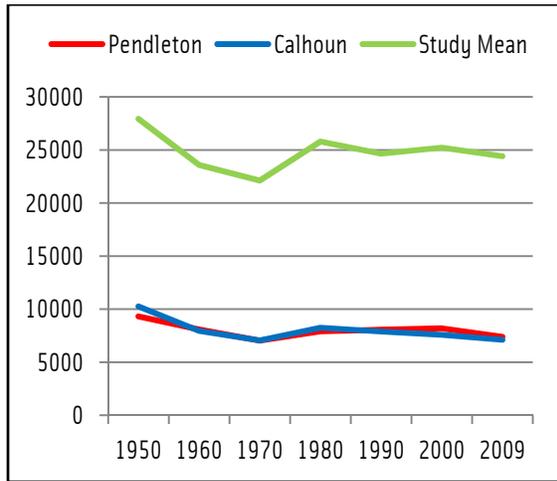
4.3.2 Population and Demographic Profile

Pendleton County’s population is, in some respects, indicative of its rural topography. On the one hand, it is West Virginia’s fifth largest county, with an area of 698 square miles. At the same time, however, it has the sixth smallest population, with 7390 residents. As such, Pendleton has the one of the lowest population densities in the state with 11 residents per square mile. The population dropped by nine percent during the past decade.

Quick Facts	
Pendleton County, West Virginia	
	
Founded	1787
County Seat	Franklin
Land Area	697.87 sq. mi.
Water Surface Area	.28 sq. mi.
Population	7,390
Density	11
Per Capita Income	\$20,570
Unemployment Rate	9%
ADHS Highway	No
Miles to State Capital	197
Miles from county seat to nearest Interstate	51 (I-81)
Miles from county seat to nearest commercial airport	152 (Dulles, VA)

As with many Appalachian communities, diversity is lacking. The local population is almost 96% white. In discussions, residents expressed concerns related to this lack of diversity. For one, they felt that this lack of familiarity promotes unintentional racism among some residents. The lack of diversity may also contribute to poor post-secondary school performance. Some young people, they believe, are overwhelmed when confronted with a diverse college environment and have difficulty adjusting to college life.

Figure 4-25: 60-year population trend with cohort (Calhoun County, WV) and 10-county average.



Age distribution is good, with a near even proportion of youth and senior residents. The senior distribution is slightly higher than the state average, but this is likely the result of the county's small, but growing population of retirees. The county also boasts a cadre of part-time residents who own second homes in the area.

4.3.3 Access and Infrastructure

Transportation access to the county is a major issue. Approaching from the west, drivers are confronted by a flashing sign at the county line announcing steep grades and stating "all trucks must stop." Access from other directions, while less foreboding, is also challenging.

"The roads aren't going to get any better."

Roads are in good condition and residents give them high marks. Over 16% of survey participants rated county road conditions as excellent and 55% found them adequate - among the highest rankings

among study communities. Most residents accept transportation access issues as a fact of life.

Water and sewer services also received fairly high marks, with approximately three-fourths of residents finding them to be adequate or excellent. Residents in remote areas, however, experience somber water issues.

"Last summer people ran out of water because the springs and wells were dry. My spring was dry so we hauled in water from another location in a tank on the pickup. Not everyone can do this because we have so many poor families."

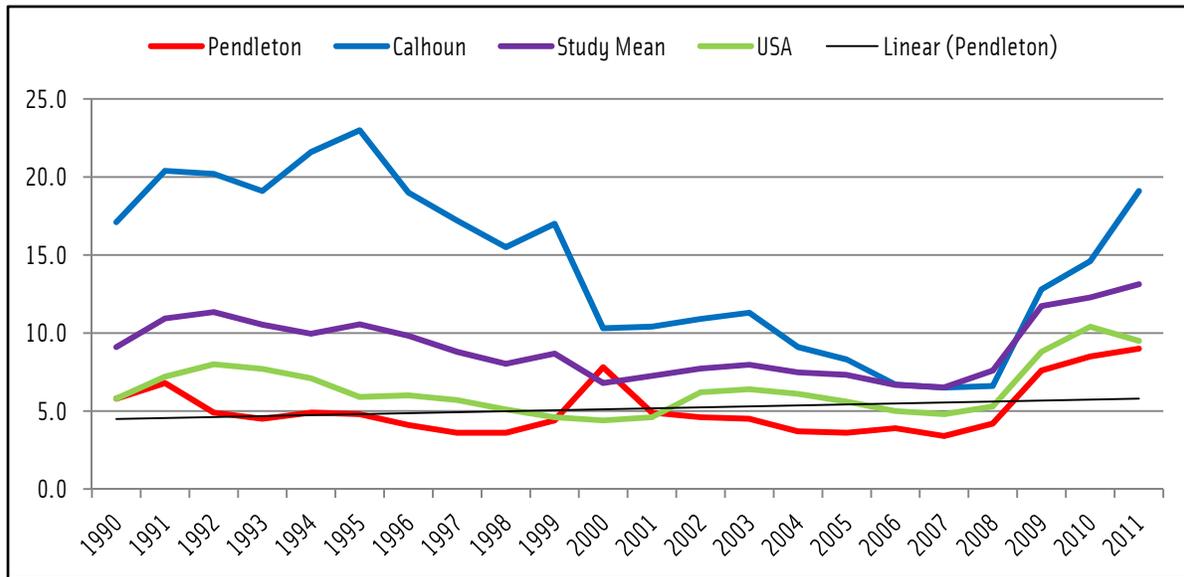
Internet and cell phone access are very limited and a major concern among local residents. Few residents have high-speed Internet access and those who do complain that broadband speeds are slower than those outside the county. Cell phone service is nonexistent in many parts of the county.³⁷ Residents and local leaders expressed a strong desire for ARC telecommunications assistance.

"We need a new type of infrastructure."

Officials expressed concerns about their ability to implement future grant-funded infrastructure improvements. The often required matching funds are a major obstacle for the small rural county and could deter potential improvements or other projects.

³⁷<http://www.wvcommerce.org/business/wvbmp>

Figure 4-26: Pendleton County unemployment rate comparison, percentage by year.



4.3.4 Economic and Housing Conditions

Despite the remote location, the county seat of Franklin appears to be well maintained and the housing stock is generally good. Empty storefronts, however, plague the main street of town. The county has no car dealerships and just one grocery.

The town does, however, have a number of well-established retailers, including two hardware stores, a hunting and fishing supplier, and a couple of small restaurants. The local Chamber of Commerce recently launched a buy-local campaign to help promote local businesses.

Aversion to risk and a lack of entrepreneurship are all cited as major barriers to local improvement. Residents believe that small business development is the key to their community's future. Participants are frustrated that while they can obtain support for large scale industries, which they cannot either attract or retain, they feel that they cannot obtain help to develop or support small businesses.

Despite the number of vacant storefronts, retail rents remain relatively high (\$400 per month) and

the community has little funding to help develop or sustain new businesses. Residents expressed a strong desire for microloan, business development, and entrepreneurship programs.

Although Pendleton County is classified as transitional, local residents feel far from secure. Most focus group participants expressed surprise, in fact, that their county is not distressed. The county's largest employer, a shoe factory, closed down a decade ago and since that time, officials state they have been "treading water" trying to sustain the local economy. They feel they are unable to move forward, and constantly struggle to maintain the status quo. Fear of change and a lack of vision may also deter growth efforts.

"We have too many retirees who fight any type of job opportunities that show interest in this county."

The Pendleton County Economic Development Association (EDA) is heavily burdened by a legacy or inherited industrial properties. The county has a

number of these properties in industrial parks and other areas of the county. The scale of these developments is no longer viable in the county, as they are too large for existing needs. Many are older properties, and are increasingly inefficient in their energy use. The county lacks the funding to adapt or improve these sites and the costs of maintaining the structures are increasingly unsustainable. Unless these issues are resolved, leaders feel these costs may threaten the survival of the local EDA.

The consensus among residents is that the local economy is largely supported by the existence of the Sugar Grove Navy Information Operations Command, a military communications facility that intercepts and processes telecommunications traffic for military and national security agencies. The facility pumps several million dollars into the local economy, supports local nonprofits, and provides direct funding for local schools. It also

attracts career military personnel, many who often choose to retire or remain in the area. The main drawback to the facility is that it creates a shortage of rental housing and drives up the price of non-owned housing stock.

Residents and officials believe that this facility is largely responsible for keeping the county out of distress and expressed concerns about the future of the base. It had been slated for closure in the past, but managed to remain open – perhaps due to the influence of Senator Robert Byrd. The passing of Senator Byrd was a subject of serious concern among all residents and, in their view, pointed towards an uncertain future for the state.

Unemployment is high and conditions for those with jobs are often difficult. A large number of residents work outside of the county and long commutes are common. This factor, combined with increasingly high fuel costs and flat wages, make many jobs increasingly untenable.

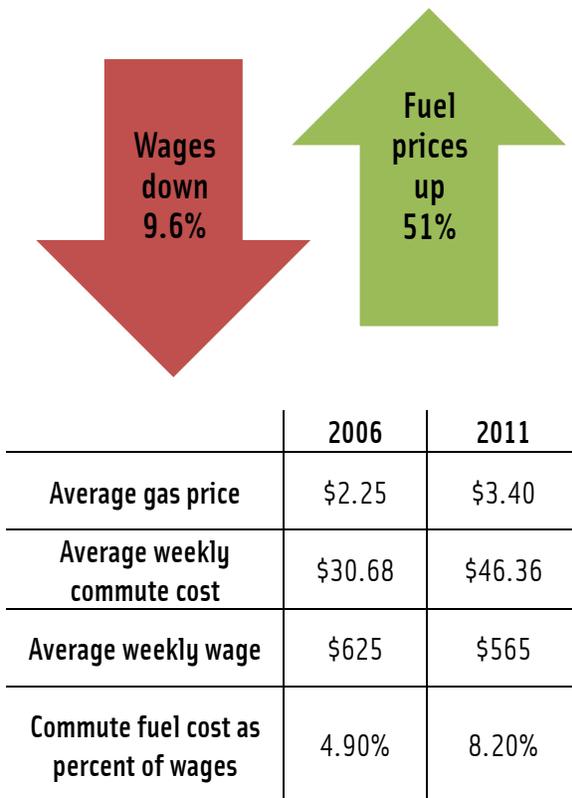
Figure 4-27: Geological “fin” patterns along ridgelines in the region provide for unique outdoor recreation experiences and have allowed tourism opportunities to prosper. (photo courtesy Nelson Rocks Outdoor Center)



Adding to these already difficult situations, since 2006, average wages in the state have dropped 9.6% while fuel prices have increased by over 50%, as detailed in the table below. Though employed, some residents struggle to merely break even.

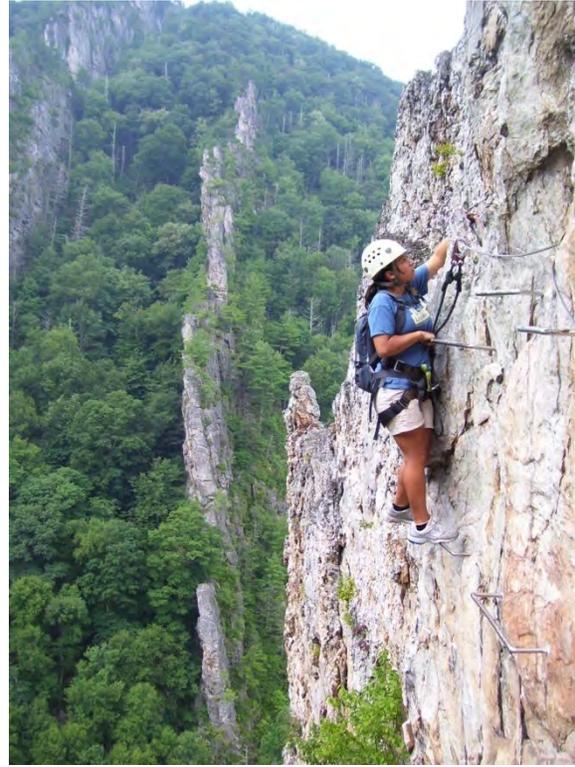
Local officials criticized ARC for not including these sorts of factors when determining a county's economic status. They also cited the human costs of these long but necessary commutes and the strain they placed on marriages and families.

Figure 4-28: Between 2006 and 2011, the cost of being employed outside of Pendleton County dramatically changed.³⁸



³⁸ Hypothetical West Virginia commuting costs, assumes five day work week, daily commute of 60 miles, and 22mpg fuel economy. Historical average state fuel costs from gasbuddy.com; Weekly wages from Bureau of Labor and Statistics, www.bls.gov.

Figure 4-29: A rock climber at Nelson Rocks and the Via Ferrata. (photo courtesy Nelson Rocks Outdoor Center)



4.3.5 Tourism

Pendleton County has tremendous potential as a tourism destination. The area is blessed with natural beauty and natural amenities, most importantly, Seneca Rocks and Nelson Rocks, which are recreation areas named for large rock walls or “fins” that have resisted erosion along the crest of prominent ridge lines in the region.

Collectively, “the Rocks” are a major local attraction and draw a range of visitors, from day-hikers to serious rock climbers. Two climbing school and guide services exist in the county to serve these visitors and the Rocks are credited with helping attract a climbing equipment manufacturer. The Via Ferrata, a climbing experience using a system of permanently installed handles and footholds, is part of Nelson Rocks Outdoor Center.

Other tourism and recreation attractions include Germany Valley, Judy Gap, and Seneca Caverns, a local cave attraction. The town of Franklin also has tourism potential. It is a quaint and scenic community, with tree lined sidewalks and a number of historic structures.

Tourism development is hampered by a lack of local infrastructure - another indicator of low levels of entrepreneurship. Lodging options, while well maintained, are dated and limited. The county also has few dining options. Marketing efforts and materials, while adequate, could also be improved. Local sites are not well promoted at state welcome centers and the Visitor's Center at Seneca Rocks, maintained by the National Forest Service, is often closed. Local leaders, for their part, are keenly aware of the deficiencies, but lack the resources to address them. They are also unaware of some programs or funding sources that may exist to assist them, including some ARC resources.

4.3.6 Local Leadership and Planning

Survey respondents have a favorable opinion of local and county government. Seventy-one percent

of participants rated county officials as adequate or excellent. Local officials were viewed similarly, with 69% of respondents sharing this perception.

The capacity of local governments appears to be good, and most services were generally viewed as adequate or better. While the county has a website, it is largely geared toward visitors and there is no clear link to government or local officials. Most participants believed the county would benefit from having a clearly designated point of contact.

Political representation at the state level is also an issue. As a small and rural area, Pendleton County shares representation with adjacent counties with larger populations. As a result, county residents feel they have little impact on state elections and, as a result, are rarely a priority for its state representatives.

The leadership exhibited by local nonprofits and community organizations is impressive and reflects a high level of social capital. The community has a young, bright, and energetic Chamber leader who has initiated some innovative programs, including the recent buy-local program.

Figure 4-30: Word cloud responses to the question, "What is your county's top attraction for tourism?"



Figure 4-31: A view of the town of Franklin, the county seat of Pendleton County, West Virginia.



Another innovative Chamber program was the development of a young professionals association. This dynamic group appears to be assuming a significant leadership role in the community and should provide a new generation of local leaders.

Established and traditional service organizations such as the Ruritans, Lions Club, and Sertoma also play an important role in community affairs. Often forgotten in more urban areas, these groups have initiated several major community projects and appear to be an important local asset. In one case, for example, local leaders were concerned about a lack of recreational activities for local youth and families. These organizations addressed this need by combining resources and constructing a local bowling alley, a facility that provides safe, affordable and family-friendly recreation.

Planning, or rather a lack thereof, is a significant local issue. During discussions with local officials, the lack of a comprehensive strategic plan for the county was identified as a major barrier to continued development. The county has virtually no planning. A couple of *pro forma* plans had been created in the past for specific projects, but they were essentially boilerplate documents created with no community input. Because they had no plan, the local development district, the Region 8

Planning and Development Council, determined the county ineligible for some grants and declined to pursue them. Curiously, officials stated that Region 8 did not offer to assist them with creating plans and did not appear to assist them in identifying funding sources for planning services.

4.3.7 Health

Pendleton County ranks first among West Virginia counties for health outcomes and ranks among the top three counties in the state for morbidity, mortality, and health behaviors. A number of factors contribute to this high ranking, including the presence of military personnel, access to outdoor recreation, and good local schools.³⁹

Residents also have access to affordable health care. The community boasts a local sliding-scale health care facility and offers affordable dental services to local residents. Physician access, at 52.8 per 100,000 residents is below the national average, but good for an isolated rural county. Dental access, at 79.1 dentists per 100,000 residents, is even better.

³⁹ Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. "County Health Care Rankings, 2010" www.countyhealthrankings.org/west-virginia/pendleton

While access to routine health care is good, hospital services require remain distant. Just 3% of survey respondents stated they lived within 30 minutes of the nearest hospital. Nearly half of respondents, 48%, reported they lived more than an hour's drive from the nearest facility.⁴⁰

Just 3.2% of residents rely on SSI disability income, a low figure compared to other counties in this study. Pendleton County has the lowest number of SSI recipients among West Virginia counties.⁴¹

4.3.8 Education

Educational results are mixed. On the one hand, Pendleton County has one of the best public school systems in West Virginia. Pendleton County High School is ranked the seventh best high school in West Virginia and boasts a high number of experienced teachers and educators with advanced degrees. Not surprisingly, test scores are slightly above average when compared to other communities in this study. Almost 76% of county residents have a high school diploma or higher.⁴²

Surprisingly, though, local schools were among the worst in the state in "lack of follow through" – the gap between students taking the ACT exam and those enrolling in college. The county system was fourth worst in the state, with 19.3% of ACT

students failing to enroll in post-secondary institutions. In discussions, local residents noted this fact and blamed it on a number of factors. These include isolation, lack of preparation, lack of family support systems, and inability to cope with a college environment. With limited local opportunities, youth who do graduate from college rarely return home. As in other Appalachian communities, this "brain drain" is a cause for significant concern among residents.

In spite of these issues, the county has demonstrated remarkable progress in degree attainment. The percentage of residents with a bachelor's degree has nearly doubled since 1990, rising from 8.2% to 15.2% in 2010.⁴³

The county enjoys a good relationship with University of West Virginia Extension staff. The extension office is an important and, perhaps, underutilized local asset.

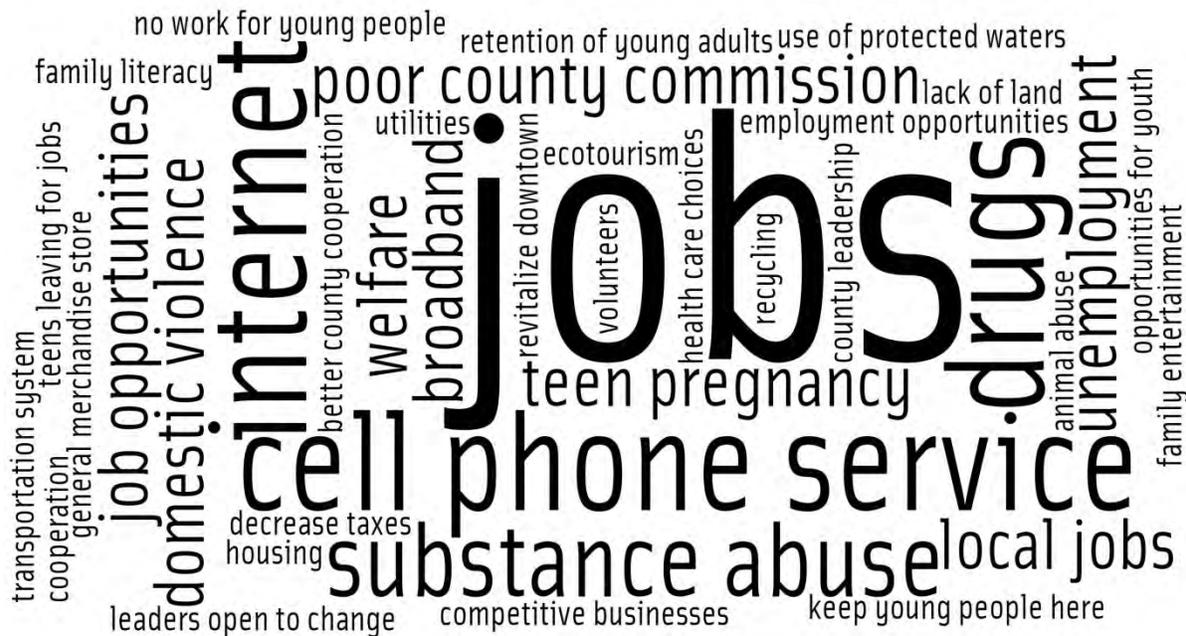
⁴⁰ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "Community Health Status Report, 2009" www.communityhealth.hhs.gov

⁴¹ Social Security Administration, "SSI Recipients by State and County, 2009" (2010, SSA Publication No. 13-11976), 106.

⁴² "West Virginia's Best Public High Schools, 2007-2008," www.wvreport.com/highschool/index.html; West Virginia Department of Education, "NCLB Report Card: Pendleton County, 2008-2009;" <http://pendletoncountyschools.com/pchs/staff.htm>; 2010 Census.

⁴³ www.wvreport.com/highschool/index.html; 2010 Census.

Figure 4-32: Word cloud for the question, "What are three problems that need solved in your county?"



4.3.9 Summary and Lessons Learned

Pendleton County is a community with vast potential. It possesses great beauty, is relatively close to growing urban areas, and has good leadership. In order to reach this potential, it needs better access to assistance programs and increased awareness of important opportunities.

Access to information is an issue for both community residents and local officials. Local leaders are unaware of many funding opportunities and government programs, many of which might prove beneficial to the community. Residents also expressed a desire for more data about their community and easier access to information related to their status and performance.

Modest investments in Pendleton County could yield dramatic results. Without this investment, however, residents may continue to "tread water" trying to avoid an era of economic distress.

Among the lessons learned in Pendleton County are the following:

- Legacy industrial sites can become a liability for communities and may draw resources away from more viable development strategies. Communities would benefit from assistance in converting such sites to other uses.
- Access to telecommunications is far from universal. Improved Internet and cell phone access is needed to promote development in isolated areas.
- Tourism can be a viable industry; however, limited infrastructure, such as the lack of lodging facilities, can limit this growth. Entrepreneurship programs are needed to help communities overcome such barriers.

- Local Development Districts are charged with providing planning and funding assistance to small and rural communities. It appears, however, that delivery of these services may be uneven in some areas.
- Good schools alone cannot assure success in college. Mentoring and college prep programs may be necessary to help rural students adjust to the demands of the collegiate academic and social environment.
- Non-governmental leadership can play a major role in a community's development. Pendleton's organizations, ranging from the young professionals association to traditional service clubs could serve as a model for other isolated communities.
- Pendleton County has no full service hospital, yet maintains a very healthy population through good access to basic health services. The county's sliding scale clinic may be a model for other rural communities lacking hospital facilities.

Figure 4-33: The geography of the region is one of ridges and valleys with limited access across ridges. Germany Valley is a community in the northwest part of Pendleton County.



4.4 Calhoun County, West Virginia

Figure 4-34: Word cloud responses to the question, "What are three words that describe your county?"



Figure 4-35: Word cloud responses to the question, "What is your county best known for?"



4.4.1 Calhoun County Introduction

Calhoun County is a community in crisis. Economically distressed well before the recent financial crisis, the small rural county now finds itself on the brink of insolvency. The sources of this distress would be familiar to many of Appalachia's poorest communities. Globalization, isolation, population decline, and a lack of local resources have all conspired to deter growth and development.

Given its status, Calhoun County is a compelling case study of the barriers and obstacles facing many of the region's most troubled communities. At the same time, however, it also serves as a model of Appalachian resilience, determination, and improvisation. Residents and local officials persevere in the face of dire circumstances and, more often than not, prevail in providing important services and resources.

4.4.2 Population Profile

With 7,118 residents, Calhoun County is the fourth least-populous county in West Virginia. Calhoun is also among the least diverse counties, with whites comprising 98.9% of the local population; African-Americans make up just .1% of the total population.

"More cultural awareness would improve the community."

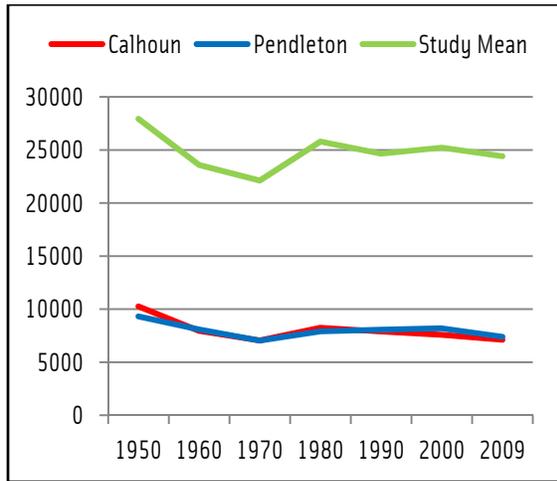
This lack of diversity is a cause of concern among some residents, and the issue of racism was raised by both survey respondents and focus group participants. Most attributed the problem to a lack of familiarity and persistent local attitudes.

Quick Facts	
Calhoun County, West Virginia	
	
Founded	1856
County Seat	Grantsville
Land Area	281 sq. mi.
Water Surface Area	0.02 sq. mi.
Population	7118
Density	26 per sq. mi.
Per Capita Income	\$17,340
Unemployment Rate	18.3%
ADHS Highway	No
Miles to State Capital	75
Miles from county seat to nearest Interstate	33 (I-79); 41 (I-77)
Miles from county seat to nearest commercial airport	75 (Charleston, WV)

Age distribution is weighed towards older residents, and the number of adult residents in their thirties and forties is below average. The county's population has declined steadily since 1980.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ 2010 US Census

Figure 4-36: 60-year population trend with cohort (Pendleton County, WV) and 10-county average.



4.4.3 Access and Infrastructure

Buried amidst the remote hills and valleys of central West Virginia, Calhoun County's location illustrates the challenges faced by many isolated Appalachian communities. As the crow flies, the county seat of Grantsville is just 50 miles from Charleston, the state capital and the nearest commercial airport. The county has no four-lane highway access, so the winding local roads extend the travel distance to more than 75 miles and the time distance between the two points is at least 90 minutes. The nearest Wal-Mart is located in Spencer, WV (pop. 2,100), which is almost 30 miles away - a 40 minute drive on local roads.⁴⁵

State roads appear to be in fair to good condition, but local roads may be more challenging. More than half (58%) of survey respondents rated local road maintenance as "inadequate" or "poor." For those with jobs, long commutes are common and may

⁴⁵ Distances and time distances calculated using Google Earth and Mapquest.

contribute to the declining population. High fuel prices may increase this trend.

Water and sewer services generally received good reviews, but may be limited in some remote areas of the county. Future improvements, however, may be difficult to attain. The financially strapped county lacks matching funds required for grants to fund infrastructure improvements or other types of projects.

"Those who do work eventually move due to the long commute and poor roads."

Many parts of the county lack broadband access. The hospital has a single T1 line, hardly adequate by today's standards. Many county residents rely on dial-up connections. Large portions of the county also lack cell phone access. Residents claim that some residents located in remote areas of the county still lack land-lines. According to local officials, the county has just one public Internet terminal, a single library computer - and its use is strictly controlled.⁴⁶

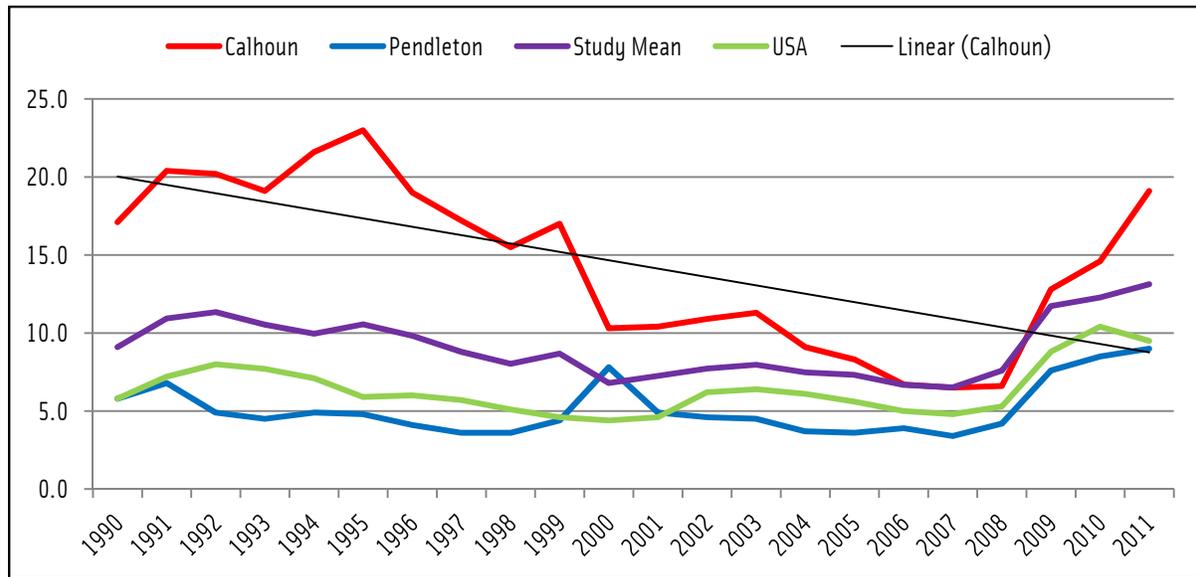
The lack of Internet access deters business development and may also increase the isolation felt by local residents, particularly local youth. The lack of communications services is also an issue for public safety and emergency services and limits their ability to respond to critical incidents.

4.4.4 Economic and Housing Conditions

Economic conditions are dire. Unemployment, at 18.3%, is the highest in West Virginia. Poverty and public assistance appear to be the norm among county residents. When asked what residents in the

⁴⁶ <http://www.wvcommerce.org/business/wvbmp/default.aspx>

Figure 4-37: Calhoun County unemployment rate comparison, percentage by year.



county do for a living, the answer, given by a local elected official, was succinct: "they don't."

Globalization has had a devastating effect on local employment. Factories once located in or near the county have moved overseas and virtually no manufacturing employers remain. The remaining employers appear to be the local hospital and the school system. The only other good paying job is working as a "pipeliner" - work that takes men away from their families for months at a time, with predictable effects on families and children.

Local businesses are limited in both number and scope. The county has no Chamber of Commerce, but shares some business development services with a neighboring county. The county has no car dealership and just one grocer. Residents report that entrepreneurship is low and small-business development skills are limited.

Local officials have little awareness or connection to regional development strategies and view such efforts with bitter cynicism. A road sign, designating the county as a "Certified Business Location," was characterized as "bullshit" by a local official, who added "it does nothing."

Welfare dependence is high. Almost 10% of local residents are dependent on SSI disability income, four times the national average. According to one local leader, the "dream of the middle class is gone."

"Many are content to not work and live off government assistance, because that is what their family has always done."

The built environment in Grantsville and other county communities appears to be dated and worn. Almost 23% of local homes were built before World War II. Another 23% are manufactured structures or mobile homes. Twelve percent of homes in the county still lacked complete plumbing in the 2000 census.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ 2000 US Census

Figure 4-38: Word cloud responses to the question, "What is your county's top attraction for tourism?"

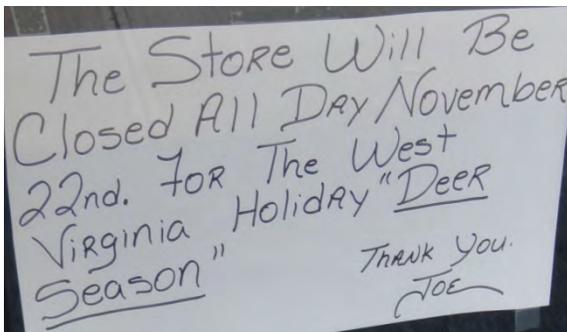


4.4.5 Tourism

Calhoun County has few tourism resources with no supporting tourism infrastructure. Lodging is virtually nonexistent and dining options are very limited throughout the county. Tourism potential is low. The main attraction according to local residents "is darkness." The undeveloped rural county has little light pollution, making the night sky ideal for stargazing.

Five public parks, along with seasonal deer hunting and a couple annual festivals attract local visitors, but with no overnight accommodations other than rough camping, any significant economic benefits

Figure 4-39: A sign in the window of a downtown Grantsville business.



of these activities are lost to neighboring communities. With no Chamber of Commerce, marketing materials and other county awareness building resources are scarce.

4.4.6 Local Leadership and Planning

Most survey participants described county government as adequate, but expressed some dissatisfaction with local government. While 63% of respondents found county government as good or adequate, 47% of residents described local government as poor or inadequate. Residents portrayed local elections as a "popularity contest." With no Chamber of Commerce and no organized economic development effort, the county lacks a clear point of contact.

Calhoun County has an operating budget of just \$1.3 million. At the time of the site visit, November 2010, the county was facing a deficit of over \$200,000. Some of the county's 13 employees had not been paid in weeks and were facing termination at the start of 2011. County commissioners had discussed dissolution of the county government and the possibility of declaring bankruptcy.

The lack of public resources is visible in some public facilities and services. The county courthouse is in need of renovation, hand-painted signs designate parking for public buildings, and a skeletal deer carcass could be seen alongside the main road into Grantsville shortly after passing the "Entering Calhoun County" sign.

Recreational facilities are limited and a source of concern. The closest public swimming pool, for example, is 25 miles away, almost a 45 minute drive for residents. The lack of facilities contributes to poor public health and youth issues. Almost three-fourths of survey participants rated youth recreation programs as inadequate or poor.

Residents and officials of the county feel they have no voice and are forgotten by their state and the nation. A small county, they have to share representation in Charleston with two larger counties. As such, they feel they have no effective representation in state government and are passed over or ignored.

Awareness of ARC programs appears to be low. Residents did, however, express antipathy towards the ARC. Some believed that ARC cared only about the larger or more prosperous counties and had little understanding of the region's poorest communities. Counties like theirs, they believed, were often bypassed in favor of those with more political clout. One resident spoke of the disconnect between the "Washington people...in

their suits" and the rural poor. To their knowledge, no one from the ARC had ever visited their county.

There is virtually no planning and over 60% of survey respondents classified local efforts as poor. Codes enforcement appears to be weak - junked cars line the sides of the road along one entrance into Grantsville. Residents, however, recognize the need for planning and have some awareness of their local assets. Resistance to change is an issue, but some feel that innovation may be possible given the county's desperate situation.

The staffs of local extension offices are equally frustrated - they have a unique opportunity to assist the community, yet, outside of a few important areas, lack the expertise and funding to do so. In 2001, the West Virginia University Extension assisted the county with development of a strategic plan through a non-profit community development corporation serving Calhoun and neighboring Wirt County, the Little Kanawha Area Development Corporation.

The relationship with their LDD, the Mid-Ohio Valley Regional Council, appears to be lacking. Grant writing is a challenge and local stakeholders stated they received little to no outside assistance. Matching funds are all but nonexistent and applications from this county would likely not be competitive against those from better-funded areas. There appeared to be no effective mechanism in place to help level that playing field.

Figure 4-40: The Grantsville town square anchored by the Calhoun County Courthouse and flanked by an automotive parts store, a couple law offices, a realtor, a few retail shops, and a diner.



4.4.7 Health

The county's "lone shining star" is the local health care center, the Minnie Hamilton Health System. The hospital, which has remained open despite huge obstacles, is an important source of local jobs and community pride. Though limited in scope - the hospital has basic emergency care and no surgery - it nonetheless provides vital health and dental care to a wide range of local residents. The facility's odds-defying story of growth and survival is commendable, but the facility continues to face serious obstacles. Among these are recruiting physicians willing to serve in a challenging environment and retaining necessary grant support in a world of diminishing resources.

Food choices at the grocery store are limited and the quality of fresh produce is poor. As a result, nutrition is an issue for many residents and diabetes rates are among the highest in the state. The county ranks 34th of 55 West Virginia counties in health outcomes. Drug abuse is a problem, particularly the misuse of prescription medications. The teen birth rate, at 51 per 1000 females age 15-19, is above the state average of 45 per 1000.⁴⁸

4.4.8 Education

Educational statistics reflect the county's economic status. More than 32% of residents lack a high school diploma. Just 7.5% of residents hold a bachelor's degree or higher, the lowest among the ten counties in this study. High school graduation rates have improved over the past twenty years, from 56.3% to 67.4%. The percentage of residents with bachelor's or advanced degrees, however, has

⁴⁸ Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. "County Health Care Rankings, 2010" www.countyhealthrankings.org/west-virginia/calhoun

Figure 4-41: The former Calhoun County High School building sets vacant. Vacant public structures are a burdensome issue for many Appalachian counties.



declined from 9.3% in 2000 to 7.5% in 2010. An estimated 18% of county residents lack basic prose literacy skills.⁴⁹

The county school system is ranked 76th among the state's 102 school districts. Local officials report that facilities are adequate, but teachers are difficult to recruit and retain. Test scores are second lowest among the ten counties in this study. According to these scores, just 34% of high school students are reading proficient and 44% are math proficient. Per pupil expenditures, at \$9,579, are lowest among the study counties.⁵⁰

Residents report that students who attend college often find themselves overwhelmed in a large and diverse environment and fail to finish. Vocational training is available, but students are trained for jobs that often do not exist locally. Many students, for example, study building trades, yet few construction jobs exist in a poor county with a declining population.

⁴⁹ 2010 US Census; National Center for Education Statistics, "National Assessment of Adult Literacy: State and County Literacy Estimates"

⁵⁰ "West Virginia's Best Public High Schools, 2007-2008," www.wvreport.com/highschool/; West Virginia Department of Education, "NCLB Report Card: Calhoun County, 2008-2009; Federal Education Budget Project, "Calhoun County School District" <http://newamerica.net/k12/wv>

Figure 4-42: Word cloud to the question, "What are three problems in your county that need solved?"



4.4.9 Summary and Lessons Learned

Apathy and a lack of hope are major problems. Many residents appear to have "given up." Youth retention is an important concern, and adults feel that most youth are simply "waiting to leave." Yet, despite these issues, social capital remains high.

It is important to note that residents of Calhoun County recognized that things, as bad as they are, remain better than they were 50 years ago. Progress for them, however, seems to have stalled some time ago and now, in their eyes, they are caught in an unending backward slide.

"People here have an innate ability to help each other."

In short, the county serves as a sobering reminder of the issues facing Appalachia and points towards possible deficiencies in both politics and policies.

Among the lessons learned from Calhoun County are the following:

- The Minnie Hamilton Health System is a major success story and points to the importance of health care, not only in maintaining quality of life, but as a local source of employment. The system is largely dependent on grants and external funding, however, and changes in the national health care system could have a devastating effect on places like Calhoun County.
- Inadequate telecommunications, such as broadband and cell phone service, continue to be an issue in poor and remote areas. This lack of infrastructure increases isolation, prevents growth, and limits emergency services.
- Resources and services designed to assist rural counties and help level the playing field do not appear to be adequate in helping the region's poorest counties.

- Matching funds, even in-kind services, may be unattainable for places like Calhoun County. A county that cannot pay its workers or paint the courthouse walls is in no position to even raise a modest match.
- Poor counties may feel they have little voice at the national, state, or even regional level. As such, there appears to be frustration between these communities, their representatives, and the agencies designed to assist them. It is little wonder then that residents of Calhoun County characterize their community as “abandoned” and “forgotten.”
- Improved marketing materials and basic tourism infrastructure could increase visitation, but could prove difficult to obtain without a local Chamber of Commerce.
- At times, local officials express similar frustration with the ARC staff in Washington. Local leaders and residents feel the ARC leadership is isolated or insulated from small, poor communities. There appears to be no direct engagement between the ARC and these poorest communities. Instead, the ARC appears to rely heavily on intermediaries, such as the LDD system, whose reporting may not be timely, effective, or equitable.
- Regional development strategies do not appear to benefit rural, isolated counties. In fact, long commutes and high energy costs may, in fact, contribute to local poverty and the growing exodus from rural areas.

Figure 4-43: A rustic sign along a local road near Grantsville.



4.5 Pike County, Kentucky

Figure 4-45: Word cloud responses to the question, "What are three words that describe your county?"



Figure 4-44: Word cloud responses to the question, "What is your county best known for?"



4.5.1 Pike County Introduction

The culture of coal permeates all aspects of life in Pike County. Cars are adorned with stickers and license plates that identify their occupants as "Friends of Coal." The county courthouse features displays of carved coal and local officials embellish their offices, and lapels, with symbols of their allegiance. Residents are commonly wear shirts and hats proclaiming their loyalty to the coal industry. Throughout the area, the coal miner is portrayed as an iconic folk hero, a depiction that reflects local pride along with a measure of shared defiance.

Pike County brands itself as "America's Energy Capital," and holds a trademark on the phrase. Local officials view energy, long the staple of the local economy, as the path to future growth. The county's development strategy is largely based on energy extraction, production and research. To their credit, local leaders are taking a broad-based approach to energy, one that includes renewable sources. Coal, however, remains king in Pike County and mining remains a key element in the local development strategy. The county is at the heart of the Appalachian coal industry and, as a result, is an important case study in the impact and future of this vital and historic industry.

4.5.2 Population Profile

Pike County is the largest county in this study, both in terms of area and population. With over 65,000 residents living across 788 square miles, it is, by far, the most urbanized and developed community in the Eastern Kentucky Coal Belt. As such, it serves as the de facto capital of the state's coal industry, if not the entire ARC Region.

Yet, in spite of this size and importance, the community lacks diversity. Whites comprise 98% of the county's population. The community does boast, however, a small but prominent Asian Indian

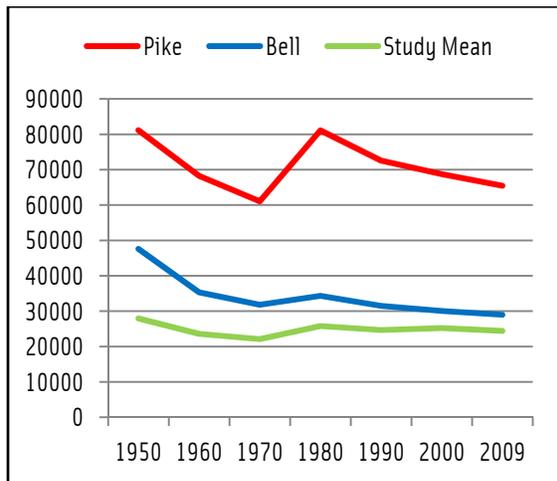
Quick Facts	
Pike County, Kentucky	
	
Founded	1822
County Seat	Pikeville
Land Area	788 sq. mi.
Water Surface Area	1.15 sq. mi.
Population	65,446
Density	83 per sq. mi.
Per Capita Income	\$19,012
Unemployment Rate	8.8%
ADHS Highway	Yes (Cors. B, Q, G, F)
Miles to State Capital	165
Miles from county seat to nearest Interstate	71
Miles from county seat to nearest commercial airport	65 (Huntington, WV)

community. Age distribution is close to average for the state but displays a slightly higher percentage of senior residents.⁵¹

Historically, Pike County's population has fluctuated considerably. The county's population and the local economy are inexorably tied to coal production and both appear to rise, and fall, with the fortunes of the global energy market.

⁵¹ 2010 US Census

Figure 4-46: 60-year population trend with cohort (Bell County, KY) and 10-county study average.



4.5.3 Access and Infrastructure

Highway access to Pike County is excellent. Pikeville, the county seat, is the nexus of several Appalachian Development Highway System (ADHS) roads converge on the county, including ADHS Corridors B, F, G, and Q. Highways are well-marked and well-maintained. Yet, despite the good roads, the community remains somewhat isolated. The nearest interstate access points are about 90 miles away and the nearest large city, Charleston, West Virginia, is a two-hour drive from Pikeville.

Because of the county's terrain, air access is also a major constraint. The county maintains a regional airport built atop a reclaimed surface mine. The facility is capable of accommodating small private aircraft, but has no commercial air service. Currently, residents and visitors must use commercial airports in Huntington or Charleston or secure a charter flight into Pikeville. Local officials are working to recruit a commercial carrier for the community, including the use of Essential Air Service funds. To date, however, these efforts have been unsuccessful.

Local water services receive high marks from residents. Three-fourths of local survey participants rated water services as "adequate" or "excellent." Sewer access is somewhat limited however, especially outside of Pikeville. Straight-piping and failed septic systems are a problem and improved wastewater treatment was mentioned as a local priority. Flooding remains an issue in parts of the county where runoff from hilly watersheds converge during heavy rain events.

For the county's challenging topography, mobile phone access is surprisingly good and Internet access is among the best in the region. Residents report good reception and speed along transportation corridors and better in the more developed and populated areas of the county.

Remarkable when compared to the other counties in this study, over 80% of Pike County survey participants classified local Internet access as "adequate" or "excellent." This exceptional level of Internet connectivity is largely credited to ConnectKentucky, a statewide public-private partnership initiative to extend broadband access to all residents of the state. While the entire county is far for being completely served with residential broadband, progress is underway. Due to this widespread connectivity, the county has an excellent and comprehensive E-911 emergency response system.

Transportation access to Pikeville was dramatically enhanced by the completion, in 1987, of the Pikeville Cut-Through.⁵² This monumental project, begun in 1973, moved the Levisa Fork of the Big Sandy River and routed a four-lane highway, ADHS Corridor B, and a rail line through a massive wedge

⁵² Pike County Chamber of Commerce, "The Pikeville Cut-Through Project," <http://www.pikecountychamber.org>

Figure 4-47: The Pikeville Cut-Through. Two ridges were cut through, which allowed the river, a major highway, and the railway to be re-routed. Soil and stone removed from the mountain filled the former riverbed, which was redeveloped as part of Pikeville. Remaining rock and soil filled nearby mountain hollows to create flat land for ball fields and other public facilities.



cut through two local ridges. The project, designed to eliminate devastating flooding and improve highway and rail access to Pikeville, required removal of 18,000,000 cubic yards of earth and rock and represents the second largest civil engineering project ever undertaken in the Western hemisphere. Since its completion, the Pikeville Cut-Through has become a symbol of local determination and a source of community pride.

4.5.4 Economic and Housing Conditions

Pike County is one of a handful of counties in east Kentucky not classified as "distressed" by the ARC. Currently, the county is designated as "at risk," but for much of the past decade its status has been "transitional," making its performance exceptional

Figure 4-48: Water tank in Pikeville.



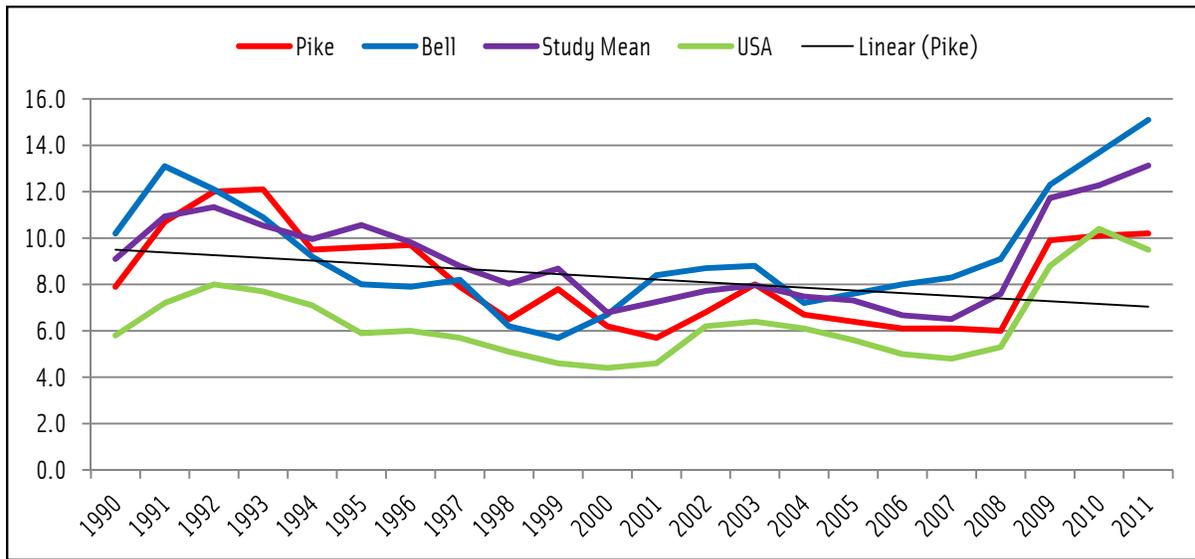
for the ARC's Central subregion.

Local officials and residents attribute this success to a number of factors, including cooperation among stakeholders and government. Pike County has also benefitted greatly from government investments. During the 1970s, Pikeville was designated as a growth center by the ARC. This designation helped the city attract a host of improvements, including improved roads and other infrastructure.

Coal is the lifeblood of the local economy. Local leaders refer to their county as the "Saudi Arabia of America." The county produces more coal than all other Kentucky counties combined and is the tenth largest producer in the nation. In addition to local blue-collar jobs, Pikeville houses the offices of several major energy companies, creating white-collar jobs and giving the community a global presence. Natural gas is also produced in the county, but it is secondary in importance to coal.

Local officials acknowledge the need for diversification, but their options appear to be limited. Steep slopes and hillsides, common to the area, limit potential growth opportunities. According to local business leaders, just 15% of the local terrain is developable. Local topography makes it difficult to attract manufacturing or other industries and even large retail facilities face difficulties.

Figure 4-49: Pike County unemployment rate comparison, percentage by year.



The difficult local terrain also creates other issues that impede growth. Housing, for example, is in short supply. Over 50% of survey respondents reported that the existing housing stock did not meet current needs. Land constraints also limit space for recreational facilities, such as ball fields and park space. Local residents and officials view reclaimed mine sites as an important solution to this problem.

While outsiders and environmentalists may view mountaintop removal as an abomination, Pike County residents view the practice as a win-win. The extraction of coal from the site provides much needed coal and energy. Soil and rock removed from the site is used to fill in low areas, a practice known as "hollow-filling," which then creates space for development. The reclaimed mine site, resembling a level plateau, also becomes developable space. Thus, a single mine site often yields, in addition to the coal, two subsequent sites for commercial, residential, or recreational use.

Given their historical ties to mining, it should come as no surprise that local residents and officials have a dim view of environmental regulations. Many residents view regulatory agencies, such as the

EPA, and environmental activists as ill-informed and a threat to their community and livelihood. While most acknowledge the importance of protecting natural resources, few view current coal practices as environmentally unsound. Both residents and community leaders fear that increased regulation will be the death knell of the coal industry and will drive their community and the surrounding region into perpetual despair.

Local residents, in fact, have a difficult time imagining a future without coal. When pressed, however, most agree that, should coal decline or run out, Pikeville would be a very different place. Entrepreneurship and education, most believe, are essential in developing small businesses and non-coal jobs.

Such entrepreneurship and economic development activities are well organized and lead organizations, including the local Chamber of Commerce, display a high capacity for planning and project development. The county has a well-formed strategy to promote the local economy. The approach, which leverages heavily on unique local strengths, is largely based on energy research,

development, and production. Among the notable activities underway:

- Research into alternative fuels for use in large earth moving equipment used in the mining industry.
- A research partnership with Oak Ridge National Laboratory to explore secondary coal products and the development of other local energy products and technologies.
- A partnership with a coal producing region in China.
- The development of plans for an energy research center located in Pikeville that would direct a wide range of local energy projects.

Despite this progress, welfare dependence is high and remains a major concern for local leaders. Access to welfare system appears to be a thriving local industry and has become a visible feature of the local landscape.

Advertisements for SSI disability lawyers line local highways and dominate local television broadcasts. At times these efforts are comically absurd. One local lawyer, for example, operates a sprawling roadside "law complex," complete with a physician's office, for on-site disability diagnoses, and the "world's second largest seated Lincoln statue." This same attorney erects a giant inflatable

Figure 4-50: A model of a proposed energy research center that would facilitate a range of value added innovations around coal and natural gas.



of himself at public events, airs a 3D television commercial touting his SSI services, and produced a music video that has him dancing with Jesco White and "Obama Girl" while bluegrass legend Ralph Stanley sings about the Social Security Board.

"Adults are financially rewarded for their children's disabilities or poor school performance in the short term with long term negative consequences. There is not perceived value in hard work for some."

Currently, 8.2% of the county is dependent on SSI disability income.⁵³ In part, this is due to the physical risk associated with mining jobs, but this is also indicative of a culture of welfare reliance. Intergenerational welfare dependence is common and eligibility for benefits is almost regarded as a rite of passage for some families.

"The current welfare system makes people prisoners when they draw."

Local leaders acknowledge the problem, but solutions seem beyond their control. Current policies related to unemployment and disability benefits provide few incentives for recipients to find work, no transition period for those who want to work, and no disincentives for those who abuse the system and never seek work.

⁵³ Social Security Administration, "SSI Recipients by State and County, 2009," (2010, SSA Publication No. 13-11976), 39

4.5.5 Tourism

Pike County boasts significant tourism potential. The county is home to Breaks Interstate Park, a 4,500 acre natural park operated by the states of Virginia and Kentucky. The park, which draws over 300,000 visitors annually, is known as the “Grand Canyon of the South” and offers a wide range of recreational activities and amenities.

Pike County is famous for the Hatfield-McCoy feud, which lasted near the end of the Civil War until the 1890s. Several sites and attractions in the county draw on that heritage, and include a Hatfield and McCoy historical tour and an annual festival each June. Pike County is also home to Hillbilly Days, a popular festival held every April. The event began in 1976 as fundraiser for the state’s Shriner’s children’s hospital. This event, started by a small group of grassroots organizers, has grown into a major local event. Today, it is Kentucky’s second largest public festival, after the Kentucky Derby, and draws over 200,000 visitors annually.

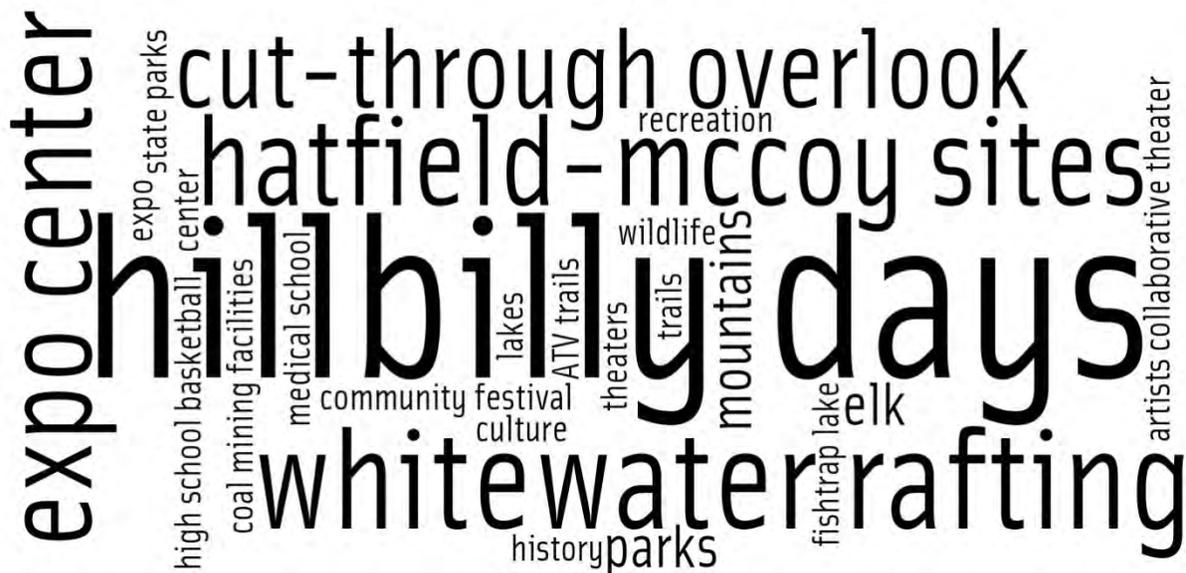
Tourism infrastructure in the county is generally good. Websites and marketing materials produced

by the Pikeville-Pike County Tourism Commission are first-rate, and the county has high visibility at state Welcome Centers. Pikeville also has the recently constructed Eastern Kentucky Expo Center, a 7000 seat area that hosts concerts and sporting events. Pikeville has a number of lodging options, including a new Hampton Inn that claims a 98% weekday occupancy rate.

Dining options, however, are less abundant and hospitality training is also lacking. When asked, for example, a hotel desk clerk could only name two local restaurants. Chamber officials, to their credit, offer hospitality training to local businesses but complain that few take advantage of the service. Lingering environmental issues also inhibit tourism. Raw sewage from straight piping, for example, constrains efforts to promote local rafting and whitewater recreation.

While Pike County departments have a web presence, the county government has no comprehensive website and no Facebook page. Pikeville does have a website and a limited presence on Facebook.

Figure 4-51: Word cloud responses to the question, “What is your county’s top attraction for tourism?”



4.5.6 Local Leadership and Planning

The capacity of local government is high. Facilities and resources are on par with those found in large and affluent urban environments. Local officials, for example, have access to satellite imagery and uses pictometry systems to help determine property tax rates. The county government provides a full range of local services, funded, in part, by excise taxes on local coal production. Little surprise, then, that local officials get good reviews. About 80% of survey respondents rank both county and local government as excellent or adequate.

Local leaders, both elected and non-elected, generally receive high marks. Residents praised the spirit of cooperation among local leaders and credited them for local progress. However, some residents complained of poor communication between leaders and residents.

"City leaders often make decisions with very little input from the community...and it only takes one or two voices to influence their decisions. Mostly they make decisions with very little thought or debate."

Leaders across the board appear to have a shared vision along with common concerns. They are aware of their strengths and weaknesses and are acting on opportunities Leadership development is a high priority and is integrated into both educational and corporate programming. Leadership programs exist, for example, in K-5 schools and in the local bank and hospital.

Planning efforts are laudable. Both county and city governments have or engage professional planning services. Pike County is currently developing an updated comprehensive plan using a nationally

recognized design firm. The county also has a good working relationship with their local development district, the Big Sandy Area Development District, who worked with them to develop a Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy.⁵⁴

Survey participants give the community high marks for planning, as 70% of residents rated local efforts as adequate or excellent - the highest score of the ten communities in this study. Evidence of good planning can be seen throughout Pikeville. Some residents fault the county, however, for a lack of county-wide zoning. They also noted the lack of business licensing or registrations.

"The county does not know how many businesses are in the city."

The town is clean, well maintained, and boasts a number of attractive parks and public spaces. Pikeville has also benefitted from a Main Street program, established in 1991, which has helped revitalize its historic downtown business district.

Planners appear to be addressing the local land constraints by encouraging vertical development. Parking garages and increasingly tall structures are evident downtown, demonstrating more efficient use of valuable open space. This practice was less evident outside of downtown, however, where traditional development patterns remain evident.

4.5.7 Health

Access to health care is excellent. Pikeville boasts both a large regional hospital, Pikeville Medical Center, and a small medical school at Pikeville College. The hospital is nationally ranked, features

⁵⁴ Plan available at www.pikecountychamber.org

a full range of medical services, and is a source of community pride. The College of Osteopathic Medicine, with approximately 300 students, is considered a leader in the field of rural medicine and is expanding with construction of a new facility named, somewhat appropriately, the Coal Building. The facility is being constructed, in part, with \$500,000 in ARC funds.⁵⁵

Access to physicians is relatively high for a rural Appalachian community, with 79.6 physicians for every 100,000 residents. Local hospital officials report, however, difficulties in recruiting physicians to serve the area. Dental access, at 62.8 per 100,000, is also good.

Yet, despite a high level of health resources, overall public health is surprisingly poor. The county ranks 114th of 120 Kentucky counties in health outcomes and surpasses state averages in average poor health days (7.9 to 4.7) and poor mental health days (6.9 to 4.4).

Residents attribute public health issues to poor health habits and a lack of health education. Other factors include the nature of the mining industry, poor nutrition, obesity, smoking and other negative health habits.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ *Pikeville College holds groundbreaking for new medical school facility,* www.pc.edu/news/articles/Pikeville_College_holds_groundbreaking_for_new_medical_school_fa,836.aspx; *Interestingly, the name "Coal Building" sparked debate among college supporters. Comments included "there is just something wrong with a medical school naming its clinical building after something that causes many people to become patients themselves," and "People from other regions such as myself, will either laugh at the building or be disgusted by it."* <http://forum.pc.edu/discussion/13/university-of-the-coal-fields/p1>

⁵⁶ *U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "Community Health Status Report, 2009,"* www.communityhealth.hhs.gov; Robert Wood Johnson

The greatest health concern, by far, is drug abuse – particularly the misuse of prescription medications. Prescription painkillers are a major problem and the county has a lawsuit pending against Purdue Pharma for aggressively marketing Oxycodone. Officials report that addiction takes places across all strata of society and affects young people, the elderly, professionals, and housewives. The county has some success in developing treatment programs and alternatives to prosecution.

4.5.8 Education

Educational attainment has increased dramatically over the past twenty years. Residents with a high school diploma have increased by almost 22% since 1990, from 50.2% to 72%. The level of college graduates has also increased. Currently 12.1% of residents hold a bachelor's degree or higher. The percentage of community college graduates has doubled in this same period, from 2.5% to 5.2%.⁵⁷ While these numbers still lag behind national averages, they represent a significant improvement in a relatively short period of time.

Test scores are average when compared to the other counties in this study. Pikeville city schools, in general, performed better than the county system. Economic factors may contribute to this disparity, as 67% of county students receive free or reduced lunches compared to 32% of city school students. Proficiency scores show a drop between middle and high school, particularly in math. An estimated 16% of residents lack basic prose literacy skills.⁵⁸

Foundation. "County Health Care Rankings, 2010," <http://www.countyhealthrankings.org/kentucky/pike>

⁵⁷ 2010 US Census

⁵⁸ *Kentucky School Testing System, "District Report Card," Pike County and Pikeville Independent School Districts, 2008-2009,* <http://applications.education.ky.gov/KTR>

Over 98% of students receive financial aid. Campus officials recently announced that the institution will become Pikeville University later in 2011.⁵⁹

4.5.9 Summary and Lessons Learned

As an ARC growth center, Pike County has benefitted greatly from public investments. Highway construction and the Pikeville Cut-Through have helped the community grow into the de facto capital of the Kentucky Coal Belt. Local leaders, with a shared vision, have created a development strategy that focuses on their historic ties to the energy industry and are creating new jobs through services such as tourism, education and health care. The region's heavy reliance on coal, however, casts a long shadow over these efforts. The viability of the coal industry is key to the community's growth and a decline in this sector would likely be disastrous to the county's economy.

Pike County offers a number of important lessons for other Appalachian Communities:

- In Pike County, as in other communities, higher education partnerships play an important role in the development and implementation of local development strategies.
- The Kentucky Coal Academy is both an excellent example of a vocational training program and of local educational resources stepping up to meet an industry need. The success of this program could help inspire similar programs related to other energy resources or important regional industries.
- The growth of the local health care industry shows how Appalachian communities, given

proper resources, can address regional health care needs. It also demonstrates the importance of health care as a job source.

- Pike County shows the potential of public investment. Roads, the Pikeville Cut-Through, the Expo Center, and other projects have helped the county evolve into an important regional hub. The impact of this growth on surrounding counties, however, is unclear.
- Local efforts to combat drug abuse, an issue common across Appalachia, are commendable and could be replicated elsewhere.
- Local tourism efforts are also very laudable and provide an excellent case study for other communities. The county's success in marketing local attractions is especially noteworthy. The Hillbilly Days Festival should be promoted as a model for the region.
- Kentucky has done an excellent job of providing Internet access to rural areas. Compared to neighboring states, residents of Pike County have much better access to high speed internet and cell phone services. However, utilization of broadband by the county's business and entrepreneur community appears to need support.
- Excise taxes on local coal production have enabled local officials to undertake many much-needed changes and improvements. The continued dependence on the coal industry, however, is a cause for concern - particularly as many power producers are considering non-coal generation plants.

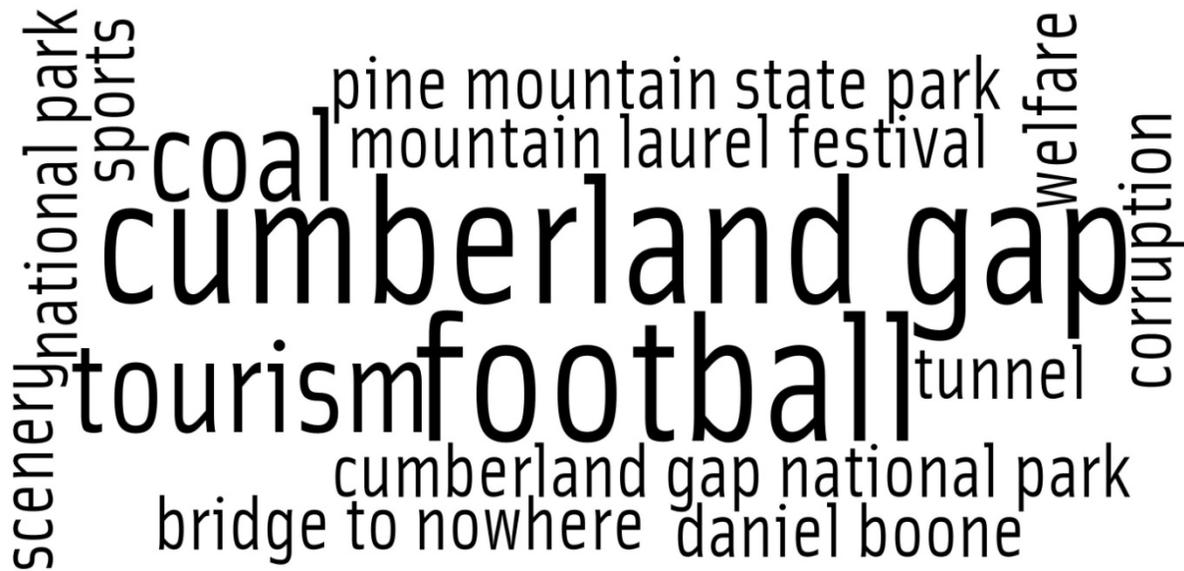
⁵⁹ Data on Pikeville College available at <http://www.pc.edu>.

4.6 Bell County, Kentucky

Figure 4-54: Word cloud responses to the question, "What are three words that describe your county?"



Figure 4-55: Word cloud responses to the question, "What is your county best known for?"



4.6.1 Bell County Introduction

Bell County, Kentucky was once gateway to the West and is home to the Cumberland Gap, the natural passage that once brought settlers into western Kentucky, east Tennessee, and beyond. Today, visitors travel to Bell County beneath the famed gap, via the 4,600 foot Cumberland Gap Tunnel. This ambitious engineering project, completed in 1996, provides quick and easy access between Bell County and neighboring Tennessee communities. While this project has brought benefits to Bell County, it has also created new challenges unforeseen during the project's development. For this reason, Bell County vividly illustrates the costs and benefits of infrastructure investments.

The county also provides important lessons in other areas. Among the poorest counties in this study, Bell County offers insight into ARC's most distressed subregion. At the same time, local leaders have demonstrated creativity and resourcefulness in addressing a host of issues, including drug abuse, youth retention, and tourism.

4.6.2 Population Profile

With almost 29,000 residents, Bell County is among the most populous counties in this study. However, the county's population has declined steadily since the 1980s and is significantly lower than its peak levels in the 1950s. This decline can be attributed to a number of factors. Historically, the decline of the local coal industry has been a major factor. In recent years, however, other issues have also contributed to the loss of residents.

Chief among these would be the shortage of local jobs. Increasing numbers of residents have moved away to find work, a trend exacerbated by rising fuel costs and stagnant wages that make long commutes increasingly untenable. A migration

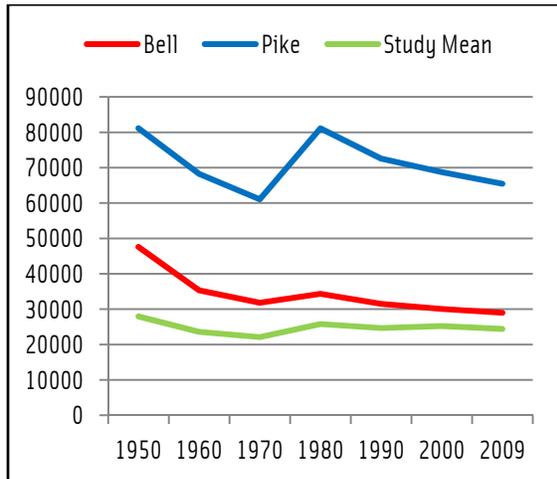
Quick Facts	
Bell County, Kentucky	
	
Founded	1867
County Seat	Pineville
Land Area	360.77 sq. mi.
Water Surface Area	0.6 sq. mi.
Population	28,691
Density	79.5 per sq. mi.
Per Capita Income	\$14,111
Unemployment Rate	15.1%
ADHS Highway	Yes (Corridor F)
Miles to State Capital	144
Miles from county seat to nearest Interstate	34 (I-75)
Miles from county seat to nearest commercial airport	85 (Knoxville, TN)

analysis, based on 2008 tax records, shows outmigration to nearby employment centers of Knoxville, TN, and the London-Corbin Combined Statistical Area.⁶⁰

Kentucky tax policies also contribute to population losses. Many residents are moving to adjacent communities in Tennessee, which has no income or

⁶⁰ 2010 US Census; John Bruner, "Where Americans are Moving," <http://www.forbes.com/2010/06/04/migration-moving-wealthy-interactive-counties-map.html>

Figure 4-56: 60-year population trend with cohort (Pike County, KY) and 10-county study average.



personal property taxes. Topographical constraints also appear to play a role as nearby areas in Tennessee have more developable land and, as a result, newer and more affordable housing options. Census statistics appear to confirm this trend. In the past decade, the population of Bell County has declined 3.6% while the population of adjacent Claiborne County, TN, has increased 4.4%. Local officials believe that the Cumberland Gap Tunnel has helped facilitate this trend.

Other population statistics are typical for a rural Appalachia community. Diversity is low, with 95.6% of county residents are white. Population distribution is weighted toward older residents, a possible indicator of young adults and families moving somewhere else for housing or employment.⁶¹

4.6.3 Access and Infrastructure

Road access to the community is very good and main roads appear to be in good condition. Survey results tend to confirm this finding, with about 65%

of respondents reporting local road conditions as excellent or adequate. The county has access to the ADHS via Corridor F, which passes through the county seat of Pineville and the largest city, Middlesboro. Access to a major north-south interstate corridor, I-75, is 30 miles west of Pineville via U.S. 25, a modern four-lane highway.

Access has improved thanks to the Cumberland Gap Tunnel. Prior to the tunnel construction, residents driving between Bell County and Claiborne County, TN, had to pass through the Cumberland Gap via a steep and winding route. This treacherous stretch of highway, built along an old wagon road, earned the grim moniker "Massacre Mountain" for the number of fatalities it produced. The tunnel, constructed over five years at a cost of \$280 million, now provides a safe, fast and direct route between the two states. According to local officials, 36,000 vehicles pass through the tunnel each day.

Without exception, local leaders and stakeholders agree that the tunnel has been a positive development for their community. At the same time, though, all also believe that the project brought a number of unintended and unexpected consequences. Among these are the aforementioned population shifts and changes in local business dynamics.⁶²

The closest commercial airport is located in Knoxville, TN, just over an hour's drive from Middlesboro. The local regional airport can, however, accommodate a business jet. The county enjoys good rail access.

Water and sewer services appear to be adequate and generally receive good marks. An impressive 96% of survey participants rated water services as

⁶¹ 2010 US Census

⁶² National Parks Service, "The Cumberland Gap Tunnel," <http://www.nps.gov/archive/cuga/tunnel.htm>

adequate or excellent, and 80% of respondents expressed a like view of sewer services.

Bell County has benefitted from ConnectKentucky, a public-private partnership initiative to extend Internet access to all communities in the state. ConnectKentucky has become a national model that inspired the creation of the Connected Nation, a private-public partnership organization currently active in 22 states and Puerto Rico that promotes the expansion of broadband infrastructure.⁶³

A remarkable 96% of Bell County survey respondents rated local Internet access as excellent or adequate, an astounding figure for a distressed rural county. Mobile phone access is also very good and coverage is available in most populated areas of the county.

4.6.4 Economic and Housing Conditions

Bell County is among the poorest communities in this study, ranking last among the ten study counties in household income and second-to-last in per capita and family income. Median household income, at \$22,559, is just 44% of the national average. Unemployment stands at 14.1%, tenth highest among Kentucky's 120 counties.⁶⁴

Officials attribute high unemployment to a number of factors, including the decline of the local coal industry and the loss of local manufacturing jobs. Good local jobs are scarce. Most local jobs offer only temporary or part-time employment, and those with good jobs often work outside of the county. Most full-time employment opportunities

are in neighboring Tennessee and some local residents drive as far as Knoxville to work.

Retail sales are a strength of the local economy, particularly in Middlesboro. Tennessee residents frequently travel through the tunnel to take advantage of Kentucky's lower taxes on food, fuel, tobacco, and other consumable goods. As such, the part of Middlesboro near the tunnel is a hub of retail activity and the town supports a number of businesses, fast food restaurants, a movie theater, and a shopping mall. These establishments provide much-needed employment, but many of the jobs offer low wages, limited hours, and few benefits.

Downtown Pineville is a picturesque community with considerable potential, but many storefronts remain empty. Local residents blame this on a lack of planning, a lack of entrepreneurship, and unrealistic rents charged by a small cadre of downtown property owners. However, the county and city are participating in a main street program to revitalize the area and some successes are already evident. A Subway franchise, for example, has opened near the courthouse and a historic theater has been restored and converted into a performance space.

Industrial development is challenging. As with most eastern Kentucky communities, topography limits development opportunities. Local leaders are quick

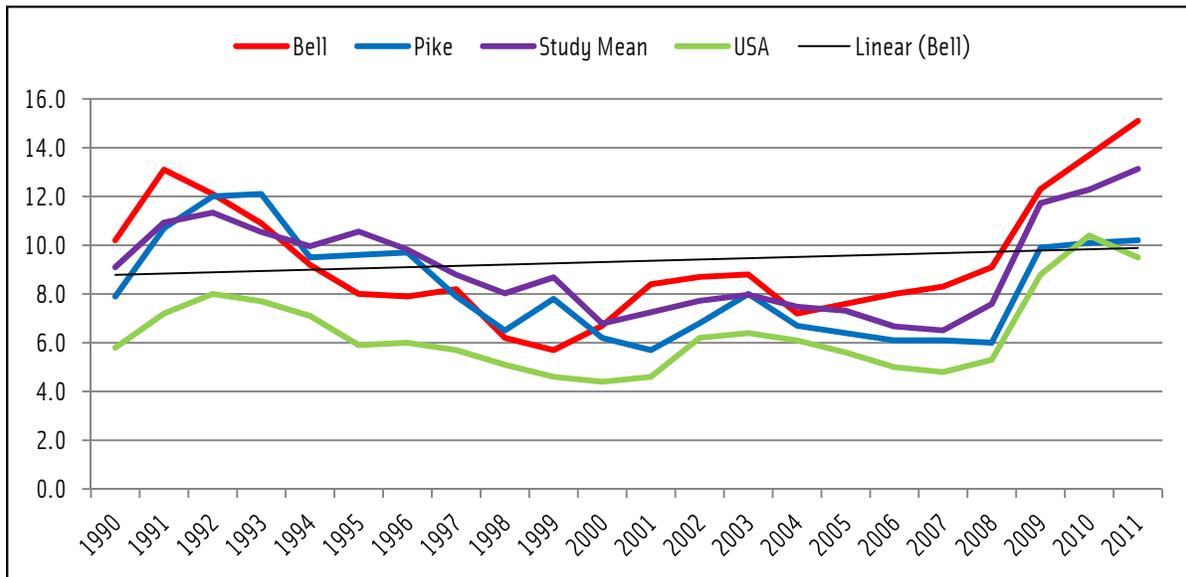
Figure 4-57: The Bell County Courthouse anchors the attractive county seat of Pineville.



⁶³ <http://www.connectednation.org>

⁶⁴ 2010 US Census; Unemployment rate based on figures from the Kentucky Office of Workforce and Training, March 2011; www.workforcekentucky.ky.gov/admin/uploadedPublications/1081_March_11_UR.pdf

Figure 4-58: Bell County unemployment rate comparison, percentage by year.



to tout the benefits of remediated ridge-top mine sites. In spite of these constraints, the county maintains and markets several industrial sites. Local leaders have elected to develop "slab sites" rather than existing structures. By developing only the foundations of industrial sites, they have none of the upkeep cost of a standing structure, yet they are in a position to erect a building quickly when the need arises.

Figure 4-59: Friends of Coal window stickers are common on cars and trucks throughout the region.



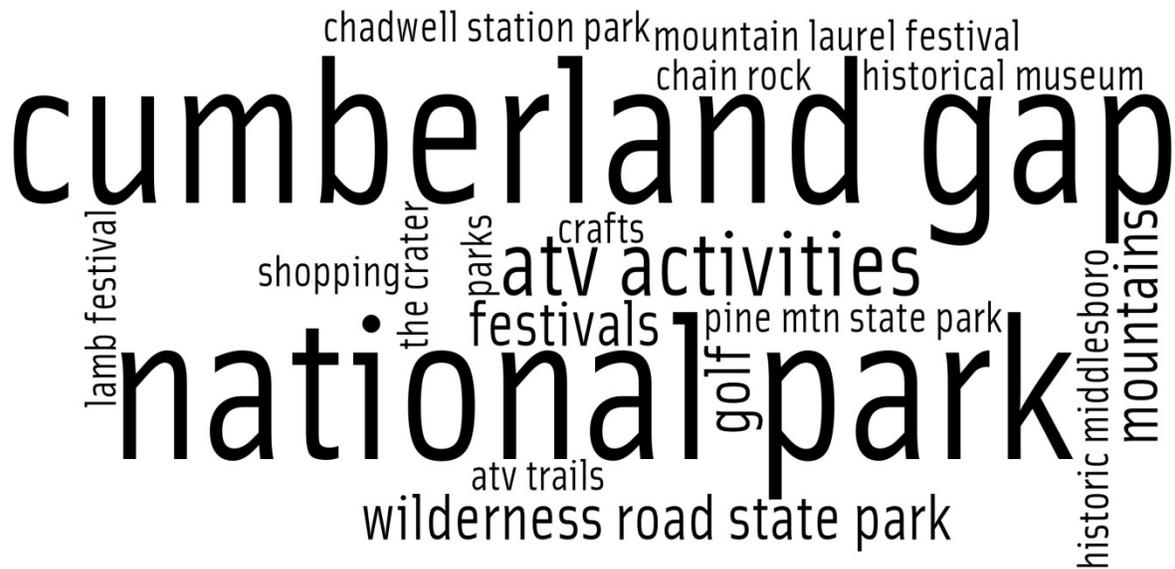
Local officials hope to stimulate industrial development through the construction of a coal-fired power plant. The plant, to be constructed on a remediated mine site, would provide low-cost power to industrial tenants. Surplus power would be sold, with revenues going back to the county.

Mining, while no longer at peak levels, remains an important local industry. Local stakeholders expressed universal support for the mining industry, which they believe is often misunderstood and unfairly demonized. Coal is clearly an important element in the local culture and an issue of considerable sensitivity in the region. When asked about a post-coal future, residents and county leaders express few answers. They do, however, seem to recognize the pressing need for local economic diversity.

"Breaking the poverty cycle is critical to Bell County's future."

Because of the employment situation in Bell County, welfare dependence is high and is a major concern among local leaders. Of the ten counties in

Figure 4-60: Word cloud responses to the question, "What is your county's top attraction for tourism?"



this study, Bell County has the highest percentage of residents dependent on SSI disability income at 11.1%.⁶⁵ Residents blame this dependence on several factors, including a lack of motivation, a sense of entitlement, and federal policies that discourage work.

4.6.5 Tourism

Bell County has several important tourism resources and is taking innovative steps to attract visitors. The county is home to Cumberland Gap National Historical Park, a site that drew 918,746 visitors in 2010.⁶⁶ The county also includes Pine Mountain State Resort Park, which boasts a lodge, rental cabins, dining facilities, a golf course, and an extensive trail system.⁶⁷

Local leaders view adventure tourism as a major growth area and are heavily promoting related activities, including rafting, climbing, and an extensive local ATV trail system. The Kentucky legislature has encouraged the development of the ATV trails by exempting local governments from most liability claims. As a result, the county has partnered with a local ATV club, "the Holler Crawlers," and local entrepreneurs to build, maintain, and promote Wilderness Off-Road Park.

The park, which encompasses 9,000 acres and boasts over 120 miles of trails, is regarded as one of the nation's best ATV trail sites. The facility receives rave reviews in ATV publications and recently received a \$30,000 grant from Yamaha, the largest ever made by that corporation.⁶⁸

The recent surge in ATV tourism has created a number of small business opportunities in the county including car washes, repair shops and rental cabins. Yet, despite this growth, tourism

⁶⁵ Social Security Administration, "SSI Recipients by State and County, 2009," (2010, SSA Publication No. 13-11976)

⁶⁶ Visitation figures obtained from the National Parks Service Public Use Statistics Office, www.nature.nps.gov/stats

⁶⁷ Kentucky State Parks, "Pine Mountain State Resort Park," <http://parks.ky.gov/findparks/resortparks/pm>

⁶⁸ Information related to Wilderness Off-Road Park can be found at www.wildernesstrailoffroadpark.net

revenues are insufficient to “carry” the local economy. However, local officials expressed a desire for developing one or two more attractions that would help attract overnight visitors and promote longer stays.

Tourism infrastructure is improving. Marketing materials are first-rate and the county has staff dedicated to tourism development. The county has an excellent web presence and local attractions are well represented on the Internet and social media websites. Lodging and dining facilities, however, remain limited. Residents attribute this deficiency, in part, to the county's “dry” status. The lack of alcohol sales discourages some new restaurants from opening in the county. These restrictions also drive many visitors to Tennessee, where they can dine or purchase alcohol with other supplies.

4.6.6 Local Leadership and Planning

Local officials attribute recent progress to a spirit of cooperation among public and private entities. Survey results tend to confirm this, at least at the

county level. Bell County government received the second highest scores in the survey, with 85 percent of residents rating it as adequate or better. Municipal government, tainted by past corruption scandals, fared somewhat worse. Almost 40% of respondents rated it as inadequate or poor. Most leaders, however, expressed confidence that local governments in the county were improving.

As mentioned, state tax policies are a major constraint for local officials. The county continues to lose both residents and revenues to Tennessee. Income and property tax policies create powerful incentives for more affluent residents to move across the state line to Harrogate and other nearby Tennessee communities. However, increased tax revenues from retail and gas sales have proven beneficial. Fuel tax revenues, for example, have helped finance much-needed improvements on secondary roads.

The problems are compounded by restrictions on alcohol sales. Bell County's “dry” status costs the community much-needed revenues and limits

Figure 4-61: The Bell Theatre in downtown Pineville.



growth in tourism. The issue has become very divisive and is the subject of considerable local debate. Many residents favor liquor and beer sales and note the fact that existing laws don't prevent consumption but simply drive revenues to Tennessee and Virginia. Others cite strong religious or moral objections in defense of current policies. Others cite the irony of local government permitting alcohol sales while combating drug abuse. Few expect the issue to be resolved soon.

Planning is a mixed bag. Strategic planning for transportation, economic development, and tourism projects is good. Local officials are quick to praise ARC for assistance with these planning efforts. Local land use planning, however, is virtually nonexistent. Among survey participants, 58% rated local planning efforts as inadequate and another 15% found them poor. The lack of planning is perhaps most evident near the entrance to the Cumberland Gap National Park. The gateway area in Middlesboro is marred by unsightly commercial and residential development. Local leaders are aware of these issues, but complain that local culture – historically steeped in personal property rights – limits strong zoning and other controls.

The county enjoys a good working relationship with the local development district, the Cumberland Valley Area Development District. Local leaders feel, however, that the district staff is "overwhelmed" and is not always capable of rendering assistance.

4.6.7 Health

Access to health care is excellent. The county boasts two hospitals, Pineville Community Hospital and Middlesboro Appalachian Regional Hospital. The community also benefits from the Debusk College of Osteopathic Medicine, located at Lincoln Memorial University in nearby Harrogate, TN. These

facilities not only provide important care, they also provide a significant number of good paying jobs. Not surprisingly, the county enjoys one of the highest physician-to-resident ratios in this study, at 89.5 per 100,000 residents. Dental care, however, is less available with 37.9 dentists per 100,000 residents.

The county also benefits from an annual health clinic conducted by Knoxville-based Remote Area Medical. Originally established to deliver medical care to remote developing nations, the charity now provides services to many Appalachian communities. Services include medical screenings, dental procedures, vision services, and even veterinary clinics. The continued necessity of these clinics, in places like Bell County that have available resources, indicate that many residents continue to lack access to important services. Also telling is the fact that local leaders seem to view these clinics as a normal part of their health care system rather than the "last resort" opportunity for indigent care that RAM was established to serve.

Figure 4-62: University extension services are highly visible and engaged in Bell County, as are other land grant institutions in this study.



This lack of access may be evident in the county's health care rankings – of the 120 Kentucky counties, Bell County ranks 106th in health outcomes. The county ranks 116th in health factors, an index that includes a number of elements, including access to clinical care, poverty levels, environmental characteristics, and health behaviors (smoking, obesity, etc.).⁶⁹

Drug abuse is a concern among local leaders. Bell County is in the midst of prescription drug abuse crisis and suffers from one of the highest overdose fatality rates in the nation. Evidence of the abuse readily apparent - downtown Pineville, a city of 2,047, has seven pharmacies. The effects of drug abuse are wide spread. Officials blame the abuse for driving away potential visitors and investment.

"It is very hard to find workers who are drug free."

Efforts to prosecute and incarcerate drug offenders overwhelm the local justice system and drain public resources. Funds used to combat the drug trade draw resources away from other important areas and limit vital services. In response, local officials encourage treatment over incarceration and have established special "drug courts" to handle cases related to addiction. Local resources to supply treatment are limited, however, and officials need additional funding to implement treatment programs.

⁶⁹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "Community Health Status Report, 2009" www.communityhealth.hhs.gov; Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. "County Health Care Rankings, 2010," www.countyhealthrankings.org/kentucky/bell

4.6.8 Education

Among the ten study counties, Bell County remains at or near the bottom in a number of key areas. The county ranked last, for example, in the percentage of residents with a high school diploma. Just 63.1% of adult residents have graduated from high school, a figure more than twenty points below the national average. Nearly 18% of adults lack even a ninth grade education and, as late as 2000, 6.2% of adult residents had never advanced beyond 5th grade. An estimated 18% of the local population lacks basic prose literacy skills.

Residents and local officials recognize that the lack of education is a major barrier to economic growth. Despite significant improvements over the past twenty years, dropouts remain a problem. While the percentage of residents with a high school diploma has increased by 16.4 points since 1990,⁷⁰ all too often "16 and the kid is out" of school forever. Unlike some states, Kentucky does not require a high school diploma to obtain a full driver's license. Many residents feel that such a law would discourage youth from leaving school.

Local leaders blame poor educational performance on a number of factors. Traditional mining culture neither required nor emphasized education. As a result, some families place a low priority on educational attainment. Attacking the adult literacy issue, some felt, is an important first step.

"Adult literacy must be addressed one family at a time."

Test scores are mixed, particularly at the high school level. Recent high school math proficiency

⁷⁰ 2010 US Census

discuss local issues and opportunities. Local leaders hope this effort will help create new leaders for the community and inspire some youth to return after college as entrepreneurs.

4.6.9 Summary and Lessons Learned

Bell County is a community with a great deal of potential. Good location, ease of access, and recreational assets make it well-suited for growth. However, formidable obstacles must be overcome before the county can achieve a better future. Educational improvements, changes in state and local policies, and the rising drug problem must be addressed. It is encouraging, though, that local leaders and residents are well aware of these issues and are already taking important and innovative steps to help facilitate change.

Bell County provides a number of important lessons for other communities, including the following:

- Alcohol restrictions deter tourism and prevent investment in restaurants and lodging. Though supported by some local residents, these policies are divisive, quixotic, and deny the county much-needed tax revenues.
- The Cumberland Gap Tunnel is an important reminder that, while infrastructure improvements often bring great benefits, they can also create unexpected issues. New roads run both ways and communities should be fully prepared about potential consequences.
- Bell County's efforts to promote adventure tourism are an excellent example of asset-based development and should serve as a model for the region.
- Internet access is impressive and validates the success of Connect Kentucky, yet more could be done to get citizens using broadband.
- Disparate policies related to taxation, alcohol, or other factors can have a significant impact on state-line communities.
- Bell County demonstrates the impact that drug abuse has, not only on local residents, but also on the local economy and the local government's ability to provide important services. The county's efforts to combat abuse and encourage treatment, however, are laudable and are a model for the region.

Figure 4-64: Mosaic tile floor in the Bell County Courthouse.



4.7 Avery County, North Carolina

Figure 4-65: Word cloud responses to the question, "What are three words that describe your county?"



Figure 4-66: Word cloud responses to the question, "What is your county best known for?"



4.7.1 Avery County Introduction

“Avery County is the richest and the poorest county in North Carolina.” This statement, made by a long-time resident, aptly describes this scenic and dichotomous community. For much of its 100 year existence, this county has been a place of marked contrasts as people of extreme wealth live alongside the working poor, and part-time residents swell the ranks of long-time natives. These dualities lead to misleading statistics and can confound a casual observer.

Avery thus demonstrates the limits of distant observation. Once a community reliant on agriculture, mining, and timber operations, the county has, over the past century, transformed itself into a successful tourism destination and a retreat for wealthy expatriates. Avery County’s experience in this transformation provides a compelling case study in tourism development that is as cautionary as it is encouraging.

4.7.2 Population Profile

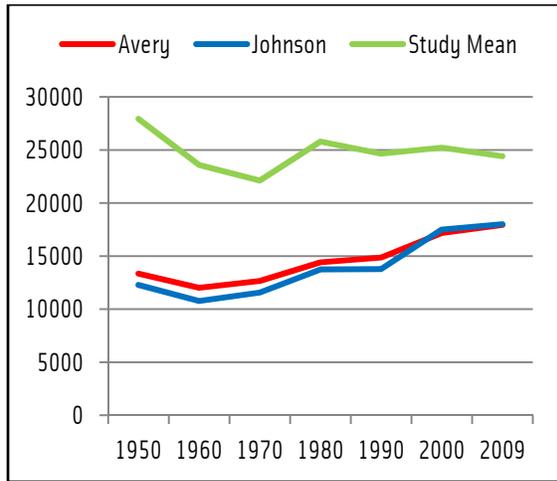
Officially, Avery County has just under 18,000 residents. This number, compiled by the federal census, is accurate to the extent that it counts full-time, year-round residents. It is misleading, however, because Avery County has a much larger population of part-time residents and visitors. During the summer, the county’s population swells to over 60,000 when many local homeowners occupy their homes only on weekends or during summer months.

Likewise, local income statistics paint an inaccurate picture of local conditions. Income disparity is likely more pronounced than official demographic data indicate, as many part-time residents are very wealthy and lead a cloistered existence that contrasts dramatically with that of the native-born community.

Quick Facts	
Avery County, North Carolina	
	
Founded	1911
County Seat	Newland
Land Area	247 sq. mi.
Water Surface Area	0.19 sq. mi.
Population	17,797
Density	72.1 per sq. mi.
Per Capita Income	\$24,915
Unemployment Rate	12%
ADHS Highway	No
Miles to State Capital	220
Miles from county seat to nearest Interstate	38 (I-40)
Miles from county seat to nearest commercial airport	38 (Tri-Cities, TN)

Diversity is low, but somewhat greater than in surrounding communities. The county has a small African-American population that comprises about 5% of the population. A small but growing Hispanic population, who work in agricultural and service jobs, is also present. Officially, about 4% of the local population is classified as Latino or Hispanic. Local social service providers, however, believe the actual number is probably higher and that the population is undercounted due to the questionable legal status of many of these residents.

Figure 4-67: 60-year population trend with cohort (Johnson County, TN) and 10-county average.



Age distribution is skewed, with lower than average percentages of young people and higher averages of senior citizens. This is likely caused by the high number of retirees in the community.

4.7.3 Access and Infrastructure

At an elevation of 3,606 feet, Newland is the highest county seat in the eastern US. Newland is about 20 miles from the rapidly growing city of Boone, about a half-hour drive, and 13 miles or 20 minutes from the resort town of Banner Elk. Avery County is also home Beech Mountain, which at 5,506 feet is the highest incorporated community east of the Mississippi.

As a result of its relatively high elevation, Avery County enjoys considerably cooler summers than most of the rest of the Southeast. Likewise, winters are longer and often much colder with frequent snowfall, which attracts wintertime visitors to nearby ski resorts.

Avery County only has about two miles of four lane road, but access appears to be adequate. Roads through the county are narrow and winding, however, and many residents would like to see improvements. About 60% of survey respondents

found road maintenance to be poor or inadequate. Road congestion during busy summer months may also be an issue.

Road improvements have played a major role in promoting local development efforts. Particularly important for both access and tourism was the expansion of the Blue Ridge Parkway through Avery County. The county was one of the last sections of the popular roadway to be completed, but is also among the most spectacular.

Particularly stunning is the Linn Cove Viaduct, a roadway that skirts the side of Grandfather Mountain. This section of road, the last section of the parkway to be completed, is said to include the most complicated concrete bridge ever built and has become an attraction in its own right. The 1,243 foot section of roadway has its own visitor center and trails that allow visitors to walk beneath it.

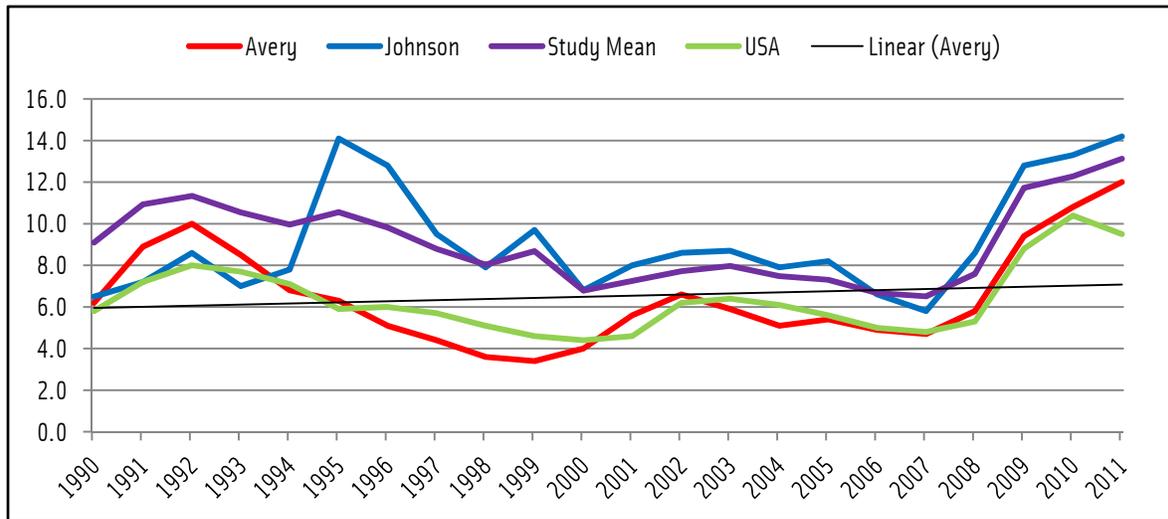
The nearest commercial air access is Tri-Cities Regional Airport, about an hour away in Johnson City, Tennessee. The county has a small general aviation airport, along with private airstrips and helipads located in local gated communities.

While broadband Internet is available inside the county's gated communities, access in other areas of the county is spotty. Residents in less populated areas sometimes have little or no access. Thirty

Figure 4-68: The Linn Cove Viaduct snakes around Grandfather Mountain in Avery County.



Figure 4-69: Avery County unemployment rate comparison, percentage by year.



percent of survey respondents rated Internet access as inadequate and 50% rated it as poor – the lowest ratings of all study counties. Lack of broadband was identified as a major issue by local leaders and residents. Similarly, cell phone access is inconsistent throughout the county depending on the service provider and the part of the county the user is located.⁷³

Water and sewer service received high marks from survey participants, with about 80% rating them adequate or better. The county also received high marks for solid waste services and scored highest among study communities for recycling services.

4.7.4 Economic and Housing Conditions

Avery County has served as a seasonal refuge for Carolina elite for well over a century. Early planters often spent summers in the area to escape the heat of their tidewater plantations. Today that tradition continues, as the county serves as a summer destination for wealthy refugees from Charlotte, Florida, and other environs.

Local roads are lined with exclusive gated communities and private golf courses. Mountainsides are dotted with large vacation homes and Mercedes are as common as Fords.

“We have two Lowes grocery stores in Avery County. At one, you likely to find yourself parked next to a Rolls Royce or a Maserati - I’m not kidding. At the other one, you are in a store full of WIC food where everyone is on food stamps. That’s Avery County.”

One gated community features its own roadside landing strip for private aircraft, and residents spoke of another gated community that featured within its confines, another even more exclusive gated community. Banner Elk, a town with a census population of 811, currently has 26 homes listed for sale for over \$ 1 million.⁷⁴

⁷³ <http://e-ncbroadband.org/>

⁷⁴ Home listings obtained from www.realtor.com

Among study counties, Avery has the highest percentage of high-income residents with 3.2% of households earning over \$200,000 annually.⁷⁵ These well-heeled residents contribute significantly to the local economy and tax base. The county has a wide range of small businesses that cater to these part-time residents, including restaurants, galleries, and service providers.

Yet, while these part-time residents are an important part of the local economy, they seem to live largely divorced from the greater community. Most appear to be cloistered within their gated enclaves and seem to have little interaction with full-time residents.

"We really have no middle class, at least not much of one."

During the recent economic recession, however, even some of Avery County's wealthiest residents have had to cut back. Foreclosures are taking place in even the most exclusive developments and auction signs can be found near neighborhood

gates. Construction, once an active and important sector of the county economy, has slowed the past couple of years. Even with these recent problems, most residents feel the concentration of wealth has helped the county ride out the economic downturn better than many surrounding communities.

The county's agricultural sector is also experiencing a decline related, in part, to the current recession. Thanks to Avery County's high altitude, the main agricultural product is Fraser Fir Christmas trees, a product adopted several years ago as part of a new development strategy.

In the past few years, however, the market for North Carolina Christmas trees has collapsed, while tree businesses started several years ago are now bearing mature trees. As a result, growers accustomed to getting \$20 or more per tree, earned as little as \$5 per tree during the 2010 season.

Local officials point to a number of factors for the decline, including overproduction and a decrease in demand due to the recession. Residents also bemoaned their inability to sell trees and related greenery directly to consumers and felt that, with

Figure 4-70: Fraser Fir Christmas tree farms dot the mountainside landscape in Avery County.



improved internet access, they could conduct more profitable online sales.

The Christmas tree industry appears to be heavily dependent on immigrant labor. Some residents voiced concerns about the ability of the growers to sustain their businesses given increased immigration restrictions. Others voiced concerns about the long-term welfare of immigrant workers should the tree industry fail. Local leaders expressed particular concern for Hispanic women, who are most isolated and, as a consequence, most vulnerable.

Motivated by the recent downturn, some tree growers are searching for additional products to grow and market. Chief among these is wine production. A handful of vineyards and wineries have opened or are in development and many growers are optimistic. Climate conditions, however, could limit production to less lucrative grape varieties. Climate change could, over time, threaten both the wine and tree industries.

In spite of this recent downturn, local entrepreneurship remains high. Small business development is strong and both Newland and Banner Elk have active and viable business districts. Local officials attribute this in part to a local spirit of entrepreneurship and a willingness to accept risk. Historical evidence of this can be seen in their acceptance of tourism, the rapid development of resort communities, and more recently in their willingness to invest in Christmas tree and wine production.

Local entrepreneurs also benefit from extensive business development resources. Western North Carolina is a model for small business development and the region's programs should serve as an example for other rural Appalachian communities.

Potential entrepreneurs have access to multiple training and assistance programs, including the following:

- The North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center develops, promotes and implements sound economic strategies to improve the quality of life of the state's rural communities. The nonprofit organization includes among its programs an Institute for Rural Entrepreneurship that develops policies and programs to encourage the start-up and growth of locally owned companies.
- NC LEAP, North Carolina Lawyers for Entrepreneurs Assistance Program, an initiative sponsored by the state's Bar Association to provide pro bono legal services to low-wealth entrepreneurs who are starting or expanding their businesses.
- The Small Business Center Network, a program of the state's community college system, maintains a network of 58 community-based Small Business Centers to support business development through training, counseling, and resource information.
- Higher education resources are vast. Appalachian State University, for example, maintains eight distinct assistance programs, including an Appalachian Enterprise Center, a Small Business and Technology Development Center, a Center for Entrepreneurship and the Appalachian Center for Mountain Winegrowing.
- Western Carolina University maintains a Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation and is one of a handful of institutions to offer a Master's Degree in Entrepreneurship.
- The MAY Coalition, a nonprofit corporation established by the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, promotes business development by providing affordable loans to entrepreneurs in Mitchell, Avery and Yancey counties in North

Carolina. Loans range from a few thousand dollars up to \$250,000. The coalition operates in partnership with Community Foundation of Western North Carolina, the North Carolina Department of Commerce, the United States Department of the Treasury CDFI Fund and the USDA Rural Development program.

Local leaders view the arts as an important economic development priority. Successful artists not only attract visitors, they also create viable small businesses.

"If we have twenty artists making a living, then we've created twenty jobs."

Housing is a major issue in the county. While luxury homes are abundant, affordable housing is in short supply and 60% of survey respondents felt housing quality has declined in the past decade. Many low-income residents live in substandard homes, often old trailers, and struggle with respiratory ailments and other illnesses as a result.

The local Habitat for Humanity is overwhelmed with requests for assistance and inflated land values prevent affordable housing developments. Rising utility costs, which in some cases have tripled in the past few years, add to housing and poverty issues.

"People have to decide if they want to heat the house or eat."

Homeless services are nonexistent. Social service advocates claim this is a deliberate policy designed to foist the poor upon neighboring counties. These same advocates insist that real and persistent poverty can be found beneath the county's veneer of affluence.

4.7.5 Tourism

Tourism resources are abundant and of high quality. The county offers a number of lodging options, ranging from campgrounds to high-end rental properties. Dining and shopping

Figure 4-71: Word cloud responses to the question, "What is your county's top attraction for tourism?"



opportunities are plentiful and varied. Tourism infrastructure is excellent and the county has a well-trained and capable tourism development staff. Promotional materials are first-rate and the local Chamber maintains an excellent website.

Additional web-based resources are also available and include a presence on Facebook, Twitter, and even YouTube. The county hosts festivals and events throughout the year, including the Annual Woolly Worm Festival, an annual October event that attracts over 20,000 visitors.⁷⁶

4.7.6 Local Leadership and Planning

Residents are quick to lavish praise on county officials and 85% of survey respondents rated county government as “adequate” or better. Local government fared somewhat worse, with 70% of participants finding it “adequate” or “excellent.” Government capacity appears to be high, thanks in part to property tax revenues levied on lavish mountain homes. Matching funds are not an issue and the county offers a full range of services and programs and even operates a small museum.

Regional cooperation is high. The county works with neighboring counties on a number of issues, including shared telemedicine and library systems. The library system, which serves Avery, Mitchell, and Yancey Counties, also support local nonprofit organizations by providing grant writing training and support services. The county enjoys a good working relationship with their local development district, the High Country Council of Governments, which provide important and necessary support to local communities.

Planning is better than in most study counties, with 60% of survey participants finding it to be

⁷⁶ <http://www.woollyworm.com>

Figure 4-72: The public outcry after this resort was built on a prominent mountain led to strict ridge top development restrictions.



adequate or better. The scope of development, however, is a concern to some residents as are potential environmental impacts. Many residents are also frustrated over past developments, particularly a large resort on Sugar Mountain that looms over Banner Elk. The development, described by one resident as “that damn cheese box” built for “Miami re-locaters,” has led to strict development restrictions on ridge tops, which will also likely prohibit future wind power projects.

4.7.7 Health

Avery County is ranked 45th out of 100 North Carolina in Health outcomes, and is 20th in the state in health behaviors. County residents have lower rates of obesity, teen pregnancy, and STDs than the state as a whole. The county is ranked last in the state, however, in clinical care, largely due to the high number of uninsured residents (30%) and a low number of health care professionals. The county claims 50.3 physicians and 22.4 dentists per 100,000 residents. Primary care physicians appear to be lacking, however, with just 1 for every 1,629 residents. Since these statistics are based on the

number of full-time residents, access for some parts of the year may be far worse.⁷⁷

The county has a small 70-bed hospital that provides emergency care and basic services. More extensive diagnostic and clinical services are available in nearby Boone. Among survey participants, 45% lived within 15 minutes of an emergency facility and another 40% lived within 30 minutes of emergency care. Some residents, however, expressed concerns over the level of care at the local facility.

"Don't go there unless you know what is wrong with you and you know what needs to be done."

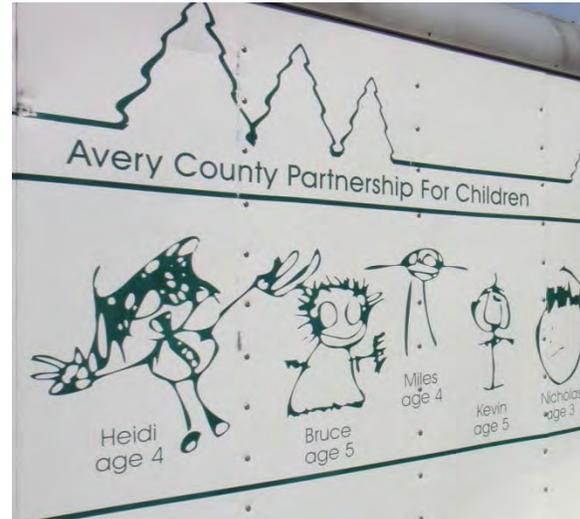
As in other areas, drug abuse is a constant concern. Methamphetamine is a significant issue and is abetted by the rural landscape and large number of campgrounds, which are becoming popular for hosting transient meth labs. Prescription drug abuse is also a rising problem. The county's border with Tennessee contributes to the problem, as it permits addicts to avoid North Carolina's prescription drug database. Perceptions also play a role, as many residents continue to view prescribed drugs as inherently beneficial or benign.

4.7.8 Education

Educational attainment is among the highest of the study counties. Almost 82% of adult residents are high school graduates and almost 22% hold a

⁷⁷ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "Community Health Status Report, 2009," www.communityhealth.hhs.gov; Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. "County Health Care Rankings, 2010," www.countyhealthrankings.org/northcarolina/avery

Figure 4-73: Avery County organizations work together well to provide better education.



bachelor's degree or higher, the highest among the ten study counties. The county also boasts the highest percentage of residents with a graduate degree, at 6.5%. Community colleges are a strength of the North Carolina educational system and Avery County has the highest level of Associate Degree holders, at 9.1%.⁷⁸

These figures are the result of steady gains made over the past twenty years. Local officials attribute these results to a number of factors, including increased monitoring of low-performing students and driver's license diploma requirements. Among the more innovative programs is a new policy that places suspended students in local businesses where they are required to work for the duration of their suspension.

Proficiency scores attest to the quality of the local schools. Scores are among the highest in this study and are consistent across all grade levels. Local leaders report that students who attend college tend to succeed. The same holds true for

⁷⁸ 2010 US Census

Figure 4-74: Word cloud to the question, "What are three problems in your county that need solved?"



community college graduates, who transition well to four year degree programs. Distance learning is being utilized throughout the community college system, and the local community college has a dedicated distance learning classroom.⁷⁹

Avery County benefits from a close working relationship with two local colleges. Lees-McRae College, a small liberal arts college in Banner Elk and Appalachian State University in nearby Boone are both important community partners. Both institutions are active in local schools and work to promote local businesses and increase entrepreneurship. They also provide invaluable assistance to local agencies and nonprofit organizations. Local organizations benefit considerably from student interns or volunteers from one or both institutions. Extension staff from North Carolina State University is also an important

partner and are almost overwhelmed by the level of assistance they provide.

4.7.9 Summary and Lessons Learned

Avery County is an important case study in many respects. The county demonstrates the limits of distant quantitative analyses, as many of its most important characteristics are not clearly evident in statistics. The county also serves as a model for entrepreneurial development and sets important examples for other communities. Lastly, the community shows the benefits and consequences of county-wide gentrification. Among the specific lessons garnered from the county are these:

- North Carolina is a clear leader in promoting entrepreneurship and developing small businesses. The pathway to business development is clear and assistance is available every step of the way - from developing a business plan to acquiring capital and managing a new start-up.
- Among business development programs, the MAY Coalition is especially appealing. With a

⁷⁹ Federal Education Budget Project, "Avery County Schools," <http://febp.newamerica.net/k12/nc/3700300>

mission to provide affordable capital, its origins as a foundation-funded initiative, and its current status as a public-private partnership all contribute to its success. The organization's approach is replicable and should serve as a model for other Appalachian communities.

- Avery County validates the importance of partnerships with colleges and universities. Communities that enjoy such partnerships clearly benefit from these relationships.
- As in other communities, the lack of widely available Internet access is seen as a major economic constraint.
- The county's Christmas tree industry demonstrates the potential for success and collapse in large scale agricultural transitions and the need for a diverse agricultural economy. The industry also raises important questions about potential economic impacts

related to climate change and more restrictive immigration policies.

- The county's policy of placing suspended students in the workplace has proven successful in keeping young people in school and in demonstrating the value of education in the workplace. This simple but effective approach could be easily adopted by other communities.
- Part-time residents are clearly an important local economic asset and help sustain a number of vital programs. At the same time, however, they contribute to visible class distinctions and limit the availability of affordable housing. Gated communities, while filling a lucrative market niche, create a sense of duality in the county that, in the long term, may not be healthy. More should be done to engage these property owners in the greater community to encourage mutual understanding and create a shared sense of place.

Figure 4-75: Downtown Newland celebrated Avery County's 100th anniversary in 2011.



4.8.1 Johnson County Introduction

Johnson County, Tennessee, is a community in transition. Once home to well-known clothing manufacturers like Levi-Strauss and Timberland, the county has cobbled together a diverse economy that includes a major prison, small business development, and tourism. These efforts have led to improvements in the county and have helped prompt revitalization efforts in the county seat of Mountain City. Significant issues remain, however, and while the county has made important progress it is still struggling to find economic stability.

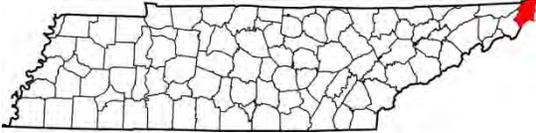
Johnson County's successes to date have much to teach other counties in terms of allocation of resources, creation of jobs, and building tourism infrastructure. The county seat is also an important case study of a community working to create a niche market in a growing but highly competitive regional tourism sector.

4.8.2 Population Profile

Unlike many counties in this study, Johnson County has seen steady population growth over the past fifty years. Since 1990, the local population has increased over 30% to about 18,000 residents. Much of this increase has come through immigration, as the surrounding region has become a popular retirement destination. While these new residents have brought much-needed growth, they have also created a community that sometimes divides between "newcomers" and "natives."

"We do not like outside people."

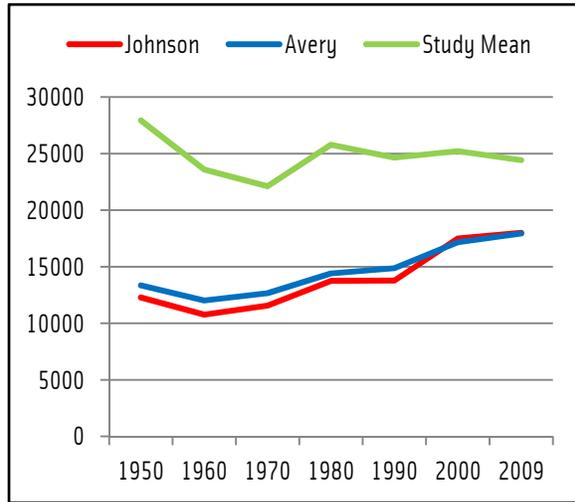
The population increase also reflects an important local industry, the Northeast Correctional Complex. The prison, built to house state inmates, opened in

Quick Facts	
Johnson County, Tennessee	
	
Founded	1836
County Seat	Mountain City
Land Area	298 sq. mi.
Water Surface Area	4 sq. mi.
Population	18,244
Density	59 per sq. mi.
Per Capita Income	\$16,605
Unemployment Rate	12.6%
ADHS Highway	No
Miles to State Capital	327 (Nashville)
Miles from county seat to nearest Interstate	30 (I-81)
Miles from county seat to nearest commercial airport	34 (Tri-Cities, TN)

1991 and currently houses about 1,800 inmates in both the main maximum security facility and a smaller minimum security annex. The presence of the inmates inflates the local population figures and also creates a male majority of about 54%.

As with most Appalachian communities, diversity is low. The county, even with the prison population, is almost 96% white. As in other communities, this lack of diversity may contribute to a lack of tolerance. One survey respondent declared "We only want white people in the area." The county is

Figure 4-78: 60-year population trend with cohort (Avery County, NC) and 10-county study average.



also older than the state average, with fewer youth and a higher percentage of senior citizens.⁸⁰

4.8.3 Access and Infrastructure

Johnson County is in the midst of a high growth region, situated between the cities of Abingdon, Virginia, and Boone, North Carolina. Abingdon, about 30 miles distant, is about a 45 minute drive from Mountain City. Boone, 25 miles distant, is about a 35 minute drive. The nearest major city, Johnson City, Tennessee is about an hour away.

Access, while not necessarily difficult, is also not easy. The best route, from I-81 near Abingdon, VA, requires about a forty minute drive along a narrow winding road. Other routes through Tennessee are considerably more challenging. Not surprisingly, residents often feel isolated and “forgotten.” They feel particularly detached from the State of

⁸⁰ 2010 US Census, Tennessee Department of Corrections, “Northeast Correctional Complex, <http://www.tn.gov/correction/institutions/necx.html>.

Tennessee and seem to align themselves more with their neighbors in North Carolina and Virginia.

Roads within the county are generally good and show recent improvements, particularly near Mountain City. Just over half of survey participants (54%) found road maintenance to be adequate or better. A significant portion, however, reported road conditions as “inadequate,” perhaps a reflection of poorer conditions on side roads or the challenges of access in general.

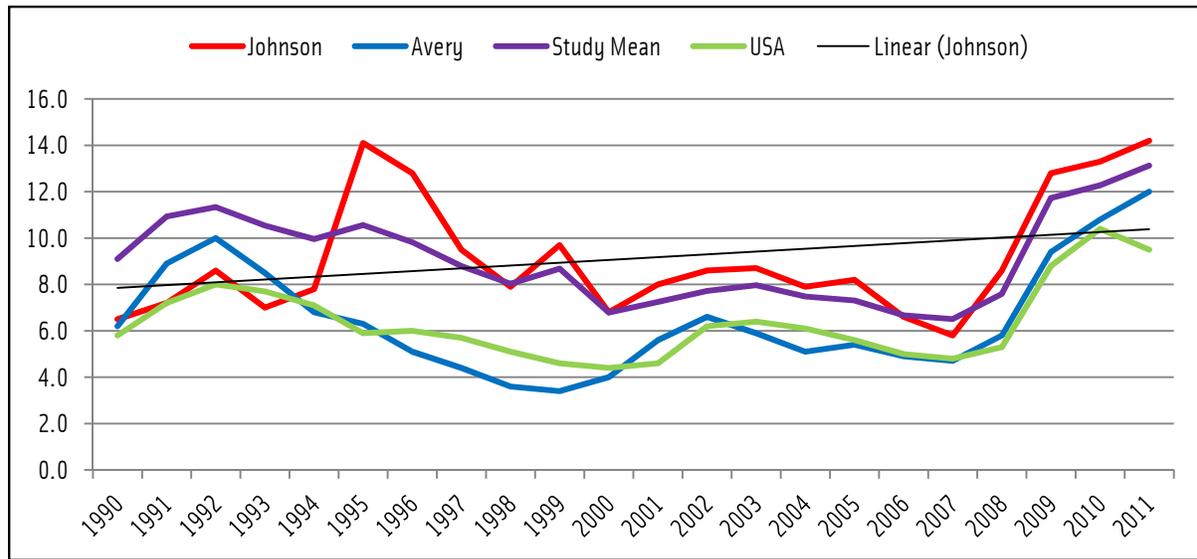
Commercial air service is available at Tri-Cities Regional Airport in Johnson City. The county also maintains a small general aviation airport facility. The nearest interstate access is in Abingdon, which is located on the I-81 corridor.

Water and sewer services received mixed reviews from survey participants and reflect the disparity between more populated and more rural areas. About 64% found sewer services to be adequate or better, while another 35% found them to be inadequate or poor. Water services received better results, with three-quarters of respondents finding services to be adequate or excellent.

Figure 4-79: Downtown Mountain City.



Figure 4-80: Johnson County unemployment rate comparison, percentage by year.



Reliable and affordable high speed internet access is available in Mountain City; however, outside of the county seat access is very limited. Many residents outside of Mountain City rely on satellite or dial-up services. Cell phone reception is mixed, depending on the carrier.⁸¹

4.8.4 Economic and Housing Conditions

For most of the post-WW II era, Johnson County was a manufacturing center. Allied with textile and knitting firms in North Carolina, the county produced clothing. Employers included well-known brands, including Levi-Strauss and Timberland. In the early to mid-1990s, many of these firms moved production overseas, leaving an employment crisis in their wake. Other unanticipated changes have also led to job loss. A local silver recovery plant, for example, also curtailed operations recently, a victim of the transition from film to digital imaging. By 1996, monthly unemployment had peaked at

over 22% and annual unemployment averages exceeded 17%.

Local officials and community leaders responded with efforts to create a more diversified local economy with reduced emphasis on manufacturing. Construction of the prison was an important early component of this strategy. The facility was controversial, however, and many residents initially opposed the effort. Once completed, however, local concerns were abated and today the facility employs about 500 residents.

The facility is not only valued for the jobs it creates, but also for the low-cost labor it provides to local groups and organizations. Prison labor, which is valued at up to \$100,000 per month, is an important contribution to many local projects and also serves as a matching resource for local governments and nonprofit groups.

Leaders also worked to leverage regional assets to promote development. Neighboring counties in North Carolina and Virginia had long attracted tourists. Increasingly, they were also attracting full-time residents as well, especially retirees. Johnson County officials began to promote their

⁸¹ http://www.connectedtn.org/broadband_landscape/_interactive_map_interface/?q=map

community as a retirement destination and have enjoyed some success in attracting new residents.

New residents and retirees have emerged as important new group of entrepreneurs. Local leaders complain that longtime residents are overly risk averse, but report that newcomers are filling the void and beginning new businesses. Residents struggle to explain the lack of local initiative, but believe that many problems are internal.

"People in Johnson County have lost pride in themselves."

Fear of change is also an issue. One resident stated that residents "must learn to embrace change," adding, "maintaining the status quo will not work. If we don't do that, nothing will change."

During the early 2000s, the Tennessee Valley Authority proposed building a modest wind farm along the ridgelines above Mountain City. This project was rejected by local residents who believed the turbines would spoil local viewsheds and hurt tourism. Some residents would now feel the idea "should be addressed again," but the issue remains divisive and prospects for green energy production are unclear.

Welfare dependence is fairly high, with 4.7% of local residents dependent on SSI disability support, a figure that is probably understated due to the local prison population. Those with jobs often work outside of the county, with a significant number commuting to Boone and other North Carolina

communities. Unemployment in April 2011 stands at 12.6%.⁸²

The local capacity for business development is adequate, at best. The local Chamber is underfunded and there appear to be conflicts over resource allocations. The county has an attractive website, with some economic development resources. The county also has a small but emerging Facebook presence. Resources and assistance for business development are much-needed, with one owner conceding "it is so hard to keep a business open here." On a more positive note, however, the outlook for local agriculture is improving, thanks to efforts to create a county farmer's market and improve local food access.

4.8.5 Tourism

In the mid-1990s, as local leaders began to transition the local economy, tourism emerged a major element of the new local development strategy. The move was both sound and compelling, as the surrounding region is a growing haven for tourism development. Neighboring counties in North Carolina had been attracting visitors for decades, and Abingdon Virginia, with its historic Barter Theater and Martha Washington Inn, is well-established tourism destination.

Regional tourism got an additional boost in the 1990s with the completion of the Virginia Creeper Trail. This rails-to-trails project converted a former logging railroad into a recreational hiking and bike trail that connects Abingdon to Damascus, Virginia

⁸² *Social Security Administration, "SSI Recipients by State and County, 2009," (2010, SSA Publication No. 13-11976), 89; Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development, "Labor Force Estimates, April 2011," www.tn.gov/labor-wfd/labor_figures/april2011county.pdf.*

Figure 4-81: Word cloud responses to the question, "What is your county's top attraction for tourism?"



- less than 20 minutes from Mountain City. The trail transformed Damascus into an outdoor recreation hot spot and transformed the dying community into a trendy and popular destination.⁸³

In response to these changes, Johnson County officials embarked on an ambitious tourism development strategy. The centerpiece of this effort was development of a county welcome center in Mountain City. The center, which houses an information desk and a small county museum, has helped boost tourism and improve the local visitor experience. The facility has also proven sustainable, thanks to a dedicated revenue stream derived from occupancy taxes.

Yet, while this revenue source has enabled the county to staff and maintain the center, it has also raised questions about the allocation of resources. Some county leaders worry that the facility, while important, draws resources away from other

important tourism development needs, including Chamber activities, promotional media, and other development efforts.

Most recently, local residents created another tourism resource with the conversion of a former school auditorium into a local community theater. The 1926 school facility was closed in 1966 and its auditorium was used mainly for storage. In the early 2000s, a local grassroots effort, led by a former drama teacher, organized and renovated the structure into a community playhouse - Heritage Hall Theatre. Using grant funds and local donations,

Figure 4-82: The inside of the recently remodeled Heritage Hall Theatre in Mountain City.



⁸³ For more information of the Virginia Creeper Trail, see the official trail website at <http://www.vacreepertrail.org>.

Figure 4-83: A sign on the sidewalk outside of a Mountain City business.



supporters created a modern performance venue that now hosts a regular schedule of plays and musical performances. The facility also enjoys a partnership with Abingdon's prestigious Barter Theater, which lends technical and artistic assistance to theatre supporters.⁸⁴

Tourism infrastructure has improved considerably in the past few years and is generally good. The county has three motels and several small inns and bed and breakfasts. A number of dining options are available and are of good quality. The county also has a golf course which, despite some recent financial issues, remains open and is a popular attraction. The county website, while lacking in economic development information, offers good information for potential visitors.

⁸⁴ <http://www.heritagehalltheatre.org>

Downtown Mountain City has considerable tourism potential. The theatre, improved sidewalks, and some new businesses all show recent progress. Residents would like to see a more coordinated revitalization effort, however, and felt the city or county should do more to retain local businesses.

"The city or county should provide incentives to business owners so we can keep our staff employed."

Officials are hoping to expand their tourism resources even more with the addition of adventure tourism activities to the local entertainment options. Doe Mountain is a local site once slated for development by a private party. These plans, however, fell through after the death of the developer and the recent recession has prevented further efforts. Local officials, however, continue to eye the property and would like to utilize it for ATV trail and other activities. They currently lack funds to purchase the property, but are exploring a number of options to finance future development of the site.

4.8.6 Local Leadership and Planning

Local and county government generally received high marks in the survey, with about 70% of participants finding them to be adequate or better. Focus group participants, however, questioned these statistics and blamed an entrenched "old guard" and "internal policies" for many local problems. Some residents also felt long-term residents were threatened by so-called "newcomers" and were afraid to relinquish power to new residents. Yet, despite these feelings, most residents believe cooperation between local officials is strong. Residents did express a desire, however, for better communication across the

county and an increased awareness of government resources and services.

Since the 1990s, the county has been the subject of numerous plans and studies, most of which produced few results - if any. Local leaders, both inside and outside of government, complained about external "experts" who produced lavish plans and studies, only to disappear - leaving their work to gather dust on a shelf. Because of this, residents view planning with cynicism and many regard it as "a waste of money." They expressed considerable frustration with government, both at the state and local levels, for funding such projects without providing follow-up or implementation support.

The county enjoys a good relationship with its LDD, the First Tennessee Development District, and considers them a valuable regional resource. Relations with the state, however, appear to be paradoxical. Johnson County leaders point out that their county is "closer to seven other state capitals than to Nashville," and often feels forgotten by the state legislature. At the same time, however, they point to the local welcome center and the prison, which were both funded largely by the state.

4.8.7 Health

Johnson County ranks 86th out of 95 Tennessee counties in health outcomes and exceeds state averages in poor health days, premature deaths, and most poor health factors. Access to health care is limited. The county maintains a small hospital capable of providing emergency care and basic services. Residents must travel outside of the county, however, for many medical needs. Among survey respondents, 72% reported they lived within 30 minutes of an emergency care facility.

Although the county has been able to maintain its small hospital, it remains a designated Health Professional Shortage Area. The county claims 44.2

physicians and 27.6 dentists per 100,000 residents.⁸⁵

As in other Appalachian communities, drug abuse is a major issue. Johnson County leads Tennessee in the production of methamphetamine and also reports problems with prescription drug abuse. Residents blame the phenomenon on a number of factors, including a lack of opportunities for local youth and so-called "Florida pain clinics" that appear to be a leading source of illegal drugs.

A significant effort is underway in the county to promote community gardening and agricultural education as a way to improve eating habits and promote healthy lifestyles. The county recently completed and released a thorough and well documented food assessment. The new farmer's market accepts food stamps, giving local recipients access to affordable, local fresh produce.⁸⁶

4.8.8 Education

Over the past twenty years Johnson County has achieved remarkable success in promoting education. In 1990 less than half of county residents held a high school diploma. Today, the number stands at 69%. The percentage of college graduates has more than doubled the same period, from 5% to 10.4%.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "Community Health Status Report, 2009," <http://www.communityhealth.hhs.gov>; Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. "County Health Care Rankings, 2010," <http://www.countyhealthrankings.org/tennessee/johnson>.

⁸⁶ Tamara McNaughton, et. al., "Community Food Security in Johnson County, Tennessee: A Local Food Strategy for Self-Sufficiency, Economic Development, and Community Engagement," Report to the US Department of Agriculture National Institute for Food and Agriculture, August 2010.

⁸⁷ 2010 US Census

areas facing difficult economic change. Likewise, the county's progress in education should also serve as an inspiration for other Appalachian communities and demonstrate how educational progress plays a role in securing economic progress. Among the lessons offered by the county are these:

- Heritage Hall Theatre is an excellent example of a grassroots effort to create a new community resource. It is also a very good case study in asset based development, as it leverages local talent, a historic and underutilized local structure, and the county's proximity to the Barter Theatre.
- The county's experiences vividly illustrate the phenomenon of planning fatigue. Given their past experiences with planning efforts, it is difficult to fault local residents and officials for their cynicism. Planning without follow-up or implementation may do little to benefit the community and may only serve to increase local levels of frustration and diminish confidence in public agencies and resources.
- The aquaculture project at Johnson County High School is an innovative and increasingly renowned program. Yet, despite its prominence, the program appears to have done little to actually promote commercial aquaculture in the county. It is unclear if any county students have gone on to pursue degrees or careers in the field of aquaculture. Additional research should be conducted to measure the effectiveness of this program and attempt to more closely link entrepreneurial or career development programs.
- The improvements in educational attainment testify to the impact of changes in state policy and the importance of educational funding.
- Johnson County should be commended for its efforts to improve local nutrition, increase food security, and promote community agriculture. These efforts, which could be replicated elsewhere, demonstrate a win-win for the community: increased revenue for local growers and better food for local residents.

Figure 4-85: The Johnson County Welcome Center in Mountain City.

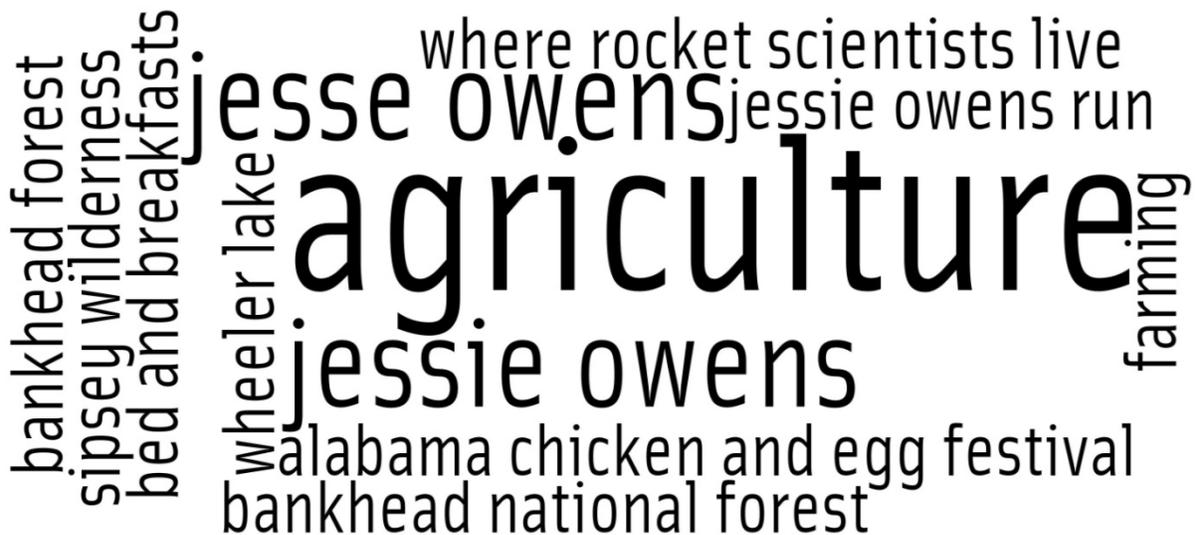


4.9 Lawrence County, Alabama

Figure 4-86: Word cloud responses to the question, "What are three words that describe your county?"



Figure 4-87: Word cloud responses to the question, "What is your county best known for?"



4.9.1 Lawrence County Introduction

Lawrence County is among the most dramatic success stories of Appalachia. Once a poor county in one of the poorest parts of the nation, Lawrence County is now a growing and thriving county located among the most competitive counties in the entire ARC region. The transformation of north Alabama, including Lawrence County, is a story of investment, innovation, and reconciliation.

In spite of this remarkable progress, Lawrence County continues to face important challenges. Educational reforms, downtown revitalization, and industrial recruitment are among the issues confronting local leaders. The community's approaches to these issues may, however, provide important examples of best practices for many other Appalachian counties.

4.9.2 Population Profile

Lawrence County is considerably more diverse than many of the counties in this study. While the county is 79% white, almost 12% of residents are African-American. Another 5.2% of residents identify themselves as Native American and 3.7% are multiracial.⁸⁹ The county also has a small, but growing Hispanic community that currently makes up about 2% of the population.

Age distribution is generally good and near state averages. The county has more than twice as many youth as seniors. The local population, which has climbed steadily since the 1960s, changed little

⁸⁹ 2010 Census; The tribal affiliation of Native American residents is unclear. Currently the Alabama Indian Affairs Commission recognizes nine tribes within the state. Just one of these tribes - the Porch Band of Creek Indians from lower Alabama - is recognized by the federal government. <http://aiac.alabama.gov/tribes.aspx>.

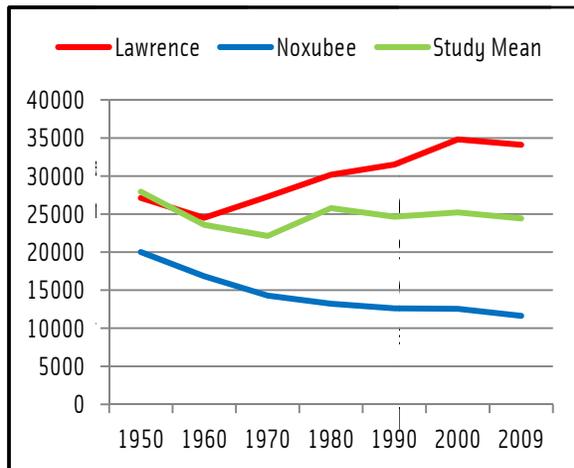
Quick Facts	
Lawrence County, Alabama	
	
Founded	1818
County Seat	Moulton
Land Area	693.38 sq. mi.
Water Surface Area	24.68 sq. mi.
Population	34,339
Density	49.5 per sq. mi.
Per Capita Income	\$19,795
Unemployment Rate	10.3%
ADHS Highway	Yes (Corridor V)
Miles to State Capital	173
Miles from county seat to nearest Interstate	33 (I-65)
Miles from county seat to nearest commercial airport	32 (Huntsville, AL)

during the past decade. Lawrence County is the third most populous county in this study.

4.9.3 Access and Infrastructure

Local leaders are quick to admit that location has been a major factor in Lawrence County's success. The county seat, Moulton, is located within a 30 to 40 minute drive of three major employment centers: Decatur (20 miles), Huntsville (40 miles)

Figure 4-88: 60-year population trend with cohort (Johnson County, TN) and 10-county study average.



The terrain is largely flat and open. Road access is excellent. The county is served by two modern 4-lane highways, including ADHS Corridor V. Main roads appear to be well maintained, but secondary road conditions are mixed. Two-thirds of survey respondents from the county rated road maintenance as “inadequate” or “poor.”

Air access is very good. Commercial air service is less than an hour away in Huntsville. Residents can also use the Birmingham airport which, while more distant, offers more extensive air services. The county also maintains a general aviation airport with two runways. The county also enjoys barge access to the Tennessee River which, in turn, connects to the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway, the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers and their tributaries. Rail service is available through the Norfolk Southern system.

Cell phone service is available throughout the county. Local leaders indicate that broadband access is a serious constraint and 60 percent of

survey participants classified service as poor or inadequate. Access is limited outside of Moulton, and officials argued that expanded service was an important factor in attracting new industries and residents. Broadband access maps confirm this lack of service, which is particularly evident in the western portion of the county.⁹¹

4.9.4 Economic and Housing Conditions

Lawrence County largely serves as a “bedroom community” for regional employment centers in Decatur, Huntsville, and the Quad-cities. Most residents drive outside of the county to work, but the county has a handful of manufacturing plants. The largest of these is International Paper, in Courtland. Other major employers include the local hospital and the county school system.

Unemployment, at 10.3% in March 2011, is above the state average but a full point lower than the previous year.⁹² Officials attribute the relatively high rate to a regional economic downturn, but anticipate a recovery. Interestingly, Lawrence County is remarkable in that the current decline in the manufacturing sector may be offset, to a degree, by growth in retail sales.

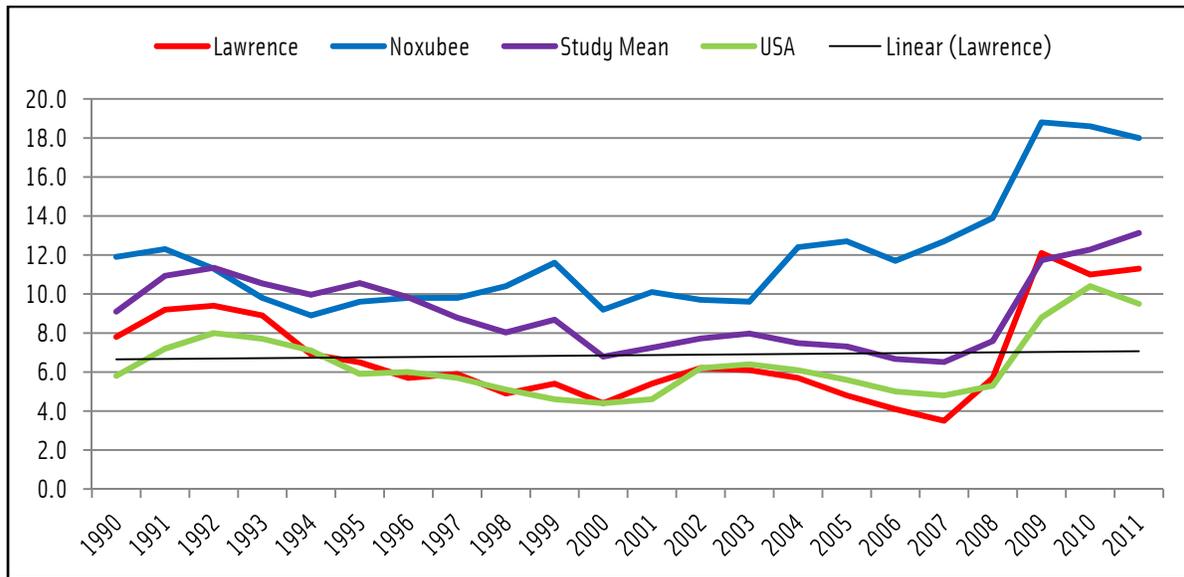
Improved highways have helped transform Moulton into a regional trade center and the town recently saw construction of a Wal-Mart Supercenter. This development, initially feared for its impact on local businesses, had actually improved local sales across the board. New businesses were opening near the development to capitalize on the increased traffic. As a result, the city of Moulton was currently operation with an annual surplus of

⁹⁰ Distances and travel times calculated using Mapquest.com and Google Earth.

⁹¹ <http://al.linkamericadata.org/>

⁹² Alabama Department of Industrial Relations, “County Unemployment Rates,” <http://www2.dir.state.al.us/LAUS>

Figure 4-89: Lawrence County unemployment rate comparison, percentage by year.



\$250,000 and was building a sizable contingency fund. Recent voter approval of local alcohol sales promises to increase that figure even more.

Officials and residents credit ADHS Corridor V with spurring retail and residential development in East Lawrence County, and point towards new businesses as a sign of continued growth and progress. They noted, however, that all of this growth was still largely dependent on proximity to larger urban areas.

"Had Lawrence County been located elsewhere, the results would have probably been much different."

It should also be noted that local retail growth may have occurred at the expense of regional counties. Officials report the new supercenter resulted in declines in sales and revenues in some neighboring communities and that these areas were struggling to recover from Lawrence County's new gains.

Corridor V growth may have also contributed to a downtown decline. Historic Moulton, a charming community, has a number of empty storefronts and

would likely benefit from a Main Street initiative or similar project to stimulate downtown retail development activities.

The capacity of local and county development officials is quite high. The county benefits from an active Chamber, industrial development board, and several dynamic professional organizations.

The county maintains a number of industrial sites and markets them effectively. Among these sites is a major riverfront tract of land that is being reserved for large scale development purposes. The

Figure 4-90: Downtown businesses struggle with changing traffic patterns and increased competition from the local supercenter.



Figure 4-91: The Moulton Business and Professional Association encourages residents to buy local.



site has been a contender for several recent developments and officials are confident that "something is going to hit."

Agriculture remains an important part of the local economy. The county produces cotton and poultry production is significant. Entrepreneurship is mixed but may be improving. One example would be Lewis Innovative Technologies, a small engineering firm that works with defense contractors. The company, founded in the late 1990s, now employs 15 and holds several patents.

For some time, Alabama counties have performed, in general, better than adjacent counties in Mississippi. When asked about this disparity, Alabama residents were quick to offer possible explanations. They noted, for example, that Alabama had invested heavily in educational reforms and had created one of the most extensive systems of community colleges in the nation. They also cited the state's success in attracting industries and the cooperative partnerships that facilitated industrial recruitment efforts.

They also noted, however, the differences in attitudes between the two states. They noted, with some pride, that Lawrence County had peacefully desegregated in the 1960s and they spoke of efforts to increase diversity in their schools and

raise educational attainment among African-American students.

Local residents also stressed that impact of NASA investment in Huntsville could not be underestimated. This impact, they argued, was not just about new jobs that were created. Local involvement in the Space Program instilled a sense of pride in local residents, created confidence, validated the power of learning, and forced communities to look forward.

They also noted that the program brought in a host of new residents who settled in counties across north Alabama. These new residents tended to be educated professionals, unburdened by the past, who brought new and profound expectations about schools, government, and race relations. These residents were perhaps unwilling to accept the status quo and may have forced much needed change in the region.

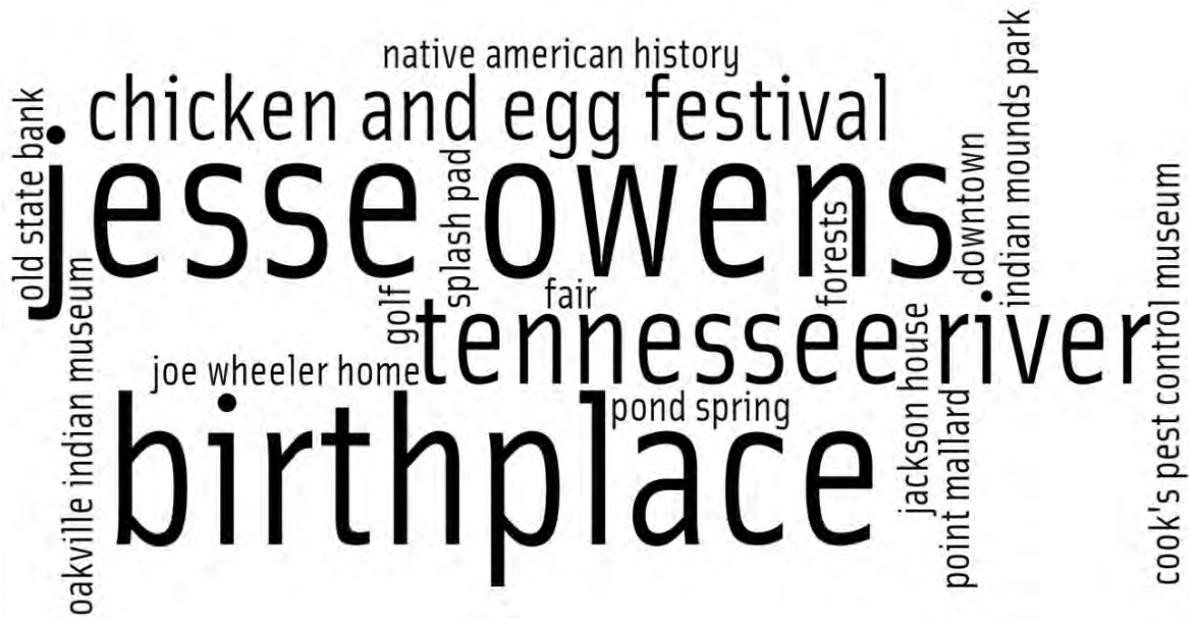
4.9.5 Tourism

Tourism is increasing, in part due to ARC investments and the efforts of local sites. The Jesse Owens Memorial Park, a tribute to a local favorite son, was partly funded by the ARC and reports a steady increase in visitors. The facility is located near the Oakville Mounds, an important Native American site located in a popular park.

Another attraction, the General Joe Wheeler House, state historic site, is undergoing much needed renovations and should also attract increasing visitors. The county's historic attractions have excellent websites and benefit from good signage.

Proposed budget cuts at the Alabama Historical Commission, however, may threaten this progress. The State of Alabama has proposed dramatic 45%

Figure 4-92: Word cloud responses to the question, "What is your county's top attraction for tourism?"



budget cut that, if implemented, could impede continued progress in the county's heritage tourism efforts.⁹³

The county also benefits from a number of natural and recreational amenities. Among these are TVA's Wheeler reservoir and Bankhead National Forest. Local officials are currently working to increase awareness of these amenities.

Tourism infrastructure is adequate. The county claims two hotels and a lakefront cabin resort. Dining options, while limited, are of good quality. Extensive lodging and dining options are available in adjacent counties.

The county hosts an annual event, the Alabama Chicken and Egg Festival. The festival, established in 2005, draws over 15,000 visitors annually and is promoted as "one of the best, family-friendly events in the mid-South."

⁹³ Bob Lowry, "Tourist attractions around Alabama grappling with budget cuts proposed by Gov. Robert Bentley," *Huntsville Times*, March 6, 2011.

The festival sponsor, the local arts council, just opened a downtown headquarters - a symbol of the festival's success and an important effort to help revitalize downtown Moulton. A major renovation of the county's New Deal era courthouse should also boost the downtown district.

4.9.6 Local Leadership and Planning

Among survey respondents, views on local and county government were mixed. Just 40% of respondents rated county government as "adequate" and none found it to be excellent. Local

Figure 4-93: The Lawrence County Courthouse anchors downtown Moulton.



Figure 4-94: The historic Star Theatre in downtown Moulton is being considered for redevelopment.



government, however, garnered more favorable opinions, with 87% of participants ranking it as "adequate."

A number of factors may contribute to the poor perception of county officials. Recent job losses certainly play a role in this perception. Local residents, however, also pointed to a lack of training, reluctance to change, and a small, but vocal group that opposes recent progress. They also point to a number of issues, include school consolidations and alcohol sales, which have alienated some voters.

Cooperation among local officials is high. Major community partners, such as the local Chamber, school system, and tourism development staff, serve as advocates for one another and all pursue a common agenda. Nonprofits are active community partners and help with a number of causes, including downtown redevelopment.

Strategic planning for economic development is good, but other planning appears to be wanting.

Residents expressed a strong desire for more comprehensive planning. About 40% of survey respondents classified planning efforts as "poor" or "inadequate."

Local officials noted an "improving" relationship with their local development district and attributed the change to new local district office leadership. They noted that the organization was still encountering some issues associated with the transition. They also noted that, under the prior director, the LDD would not assist local government in preparing grant proposals and only helped with senior services and similar activities. The local officials stated that this LDD director, now gone, did not prepare grants because he did not like the idea of counties in his district competing for the same money.

Officials also complained about Alabama's outdated and burdensome state constitution. At over 340,000 words, Alabama's constitution is the longest still-operative constitution in the world. The document, which boasts 827 amendments, has become notorious for micro-managing local officials and is widely viewed as an obstacle to further reform.⁹⁴

4.9.7 Health

Lawrence County ranks 39th out of 67 Alabama counties in health outcomes. They rank above state averages in smoking, obesity, and motor vehicle fatalities - a consequence, perhaps, of the high number of commuters. The county ranks third, however, in environmental quality, and the number

⁹⁴ For information about issues related to Alabama's constitution, see <http://www.constitutionalreform.org>

of residents with access to healthy foods is double the state average.⁹⁵

Local residents have ready access to health care, despite statistics which suggest otherwise. The number of local practitioners is quite low - 29.3 physicians and just 5.9 dentists per 100,000 residents. Most residents, however, rely heavily on services offered in Decatur, Huntsville or the Quad Cities. As a result, two-thirds of survey participants were within a 15 minute drive of a hospital and none were more than 30 minutes from care.⁹⁶

Drugs, particularly methamphetamine, are a major concern in the county. Three-fourths of survey respondents viewed drug abuse as a major concern. Teen pregnancy is also an issue, with 60% of survey participants classifying it as a frequent problem. Local residents expressed a need to educational programs to help change negative behaviors.

4.9.8 Education

The county demonstrates leadership in education, especially at the high-school level. Many locals credit the improvements to the county's school superintendent, a young, energetic, and inspiring community leader. Test scores and graduation rates are approaching national averages and a recent consolidation effort promises to increase the number and variety of learning activities.

School budgets remain tight, however, and school officials continue to face a cadre of residents who do not appear to value or support educational

improvements. Officials also expressed a desire to increase diversity at some local schools and discussed challenges with having a so-called "black school" in their main industrial growth area. Local officials believed that perceptions attached to the school sometimes hampered their efforts to recruit new industries.

Both residents and local leaders credit increased education spending by the state for recent progress. Once among the lowest in per-student expenditures, Alabama now ranks 38th in school spending in the nation. Educational attainment has also benefitted from new regulations that require a diploma to obtain a full driver's license.⁹⁷

Youth retention remains a concern and residents bemoaned the loss of their best and brightest to surrounding urban centers. Boredom appears to be a prime motivator and officials would like to find more activities and amenities for young people and young families. With twice as many youth as senior residents living in the county, Lawrence County has the opportunity to grow with next generation, as young individuals make decisions in the coming years about their lives and livelihood.

In an effort to help retain young people and promote agriculture, local officials have embarked on an innovative program with Auburn University. The program, designed to encourage youth to pursue careers in agriculture, engages high school students in discussions about agricultural careers and takes them on project-based field trips. Eventually, these students will have the opportunity to earn an "advanced ag" degree from Auburn University.

⁹⁵ Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. "County Health Care Rankings, 2010," www.countyhealthrankings.org/alabama/lawrence

⁹⁶ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "Community Health Status Report, 2009," <http://www.communityhealth.hhs.gov>.

⁹⁷ Federal Education Budget Project, "Lawrence County School District," <http://febp.newamerica.net/k12/al/102040>

Figure 4-95: Word cloud to the question, "What are three problems in your county that need solved?"



4.9.9 Summary and Lessons Learned

Lawrence County's success can be attributed to a number of factors, including improved roads, a strategic location, and vast levels of government investment. Educational improvements and good decisions also contribute to local progress. Because of this, the county offers a number of important lessons for other communities. These include the following:

- The transformation of North Alabama, including Lawrence County, is due in large part to federal investments in TVA and NASA. The impacts of these programs meant not only jobs, but were broad and varied. While residents are quick to acknowledge the jobs created by TVA and NASA, they also note the role new residents, new ideas, and newfound pride played in changing the region.
- Lawrence County shows how improved roads can help improve the local economy and the local quality of life. These improvements, including ADHS Corridor V, are an unqualified success. To a degree, however, these roads

succeed because of where they are, what they connect, and who they serve. Road improvements may have a greater impact when they are undertaken in conjunction with other regional improvements.

- Residents recognize that racial reconciliation has played an important role in the achievement of economic progress. It is perhaps symbolic that the county's three main historic sites commemorate Native Americans, an African-American athlete, and a Confederate general. The fact that these sites not only coexist, but cooperate, gives proof that a community can break with its past and still honor its diverse heritage.
- The agricultural education partnership being developed with Auburn University appears to be promising and could be a model for other communities. This program also reinforces the importance of higher education partnerships - a trend that is also important elsewhere.

- As in some other study counties, there is evidence that Local Development Districts may be inconsistent in their range of services.
- The educational progress being made demonstrates the impact that can be achieved through prioritization of schools, increased funding, and effective leadership.
- Conventional development approaches - regional strategies, highway construction, and industrial parks, for example - appear to have work very well in Lawrence County. This suggests these strategies may be better suited to counties located near major employment centers or communities with more favorable terrain.
- Lawrence County, though fairly well developed, struggles with Internet access. Some residents of the county, though they live about 30 or 40 miles from a federal research facility, still lack reliable and affordable high-speed service.

Figure 4-96: The Star Theatre entrance and marquee in downtown Moulton



4.10 Noxubee County, Mississippi

Figure 4-97: Word cloud responses to the question, "What are three words that describe your county?"



Figure 4-98: Word cloud responses to the question, "What is your county best known for?"



4.10.1 Noxubee County Introduction

Noxubee County is one of just a handful of counties in the ARC region with an Africa-American population majority. Located in eastern Mississippi, it is also in one of the most historically economically distressed areas of the nation. As such, the county provides an interesting case study of an atypical Appalachian community. The county's proximity to Alabama also invites comparisons to Lawrence County and demonstrates the impact of state policies and local cultural constraints.

Noxubee County is a community heavily burdened by history. Past events, both recent and distant, cast a long shadow over the community and deter progress and change. Outmoded racial traditions, an archaic power structure, and deep seated political and social divisions all serve to diminish the impact of significant investments and interventions. Yet, despite these issues, the county continues to move ahead and is beginning to show progress in some important areas.

4.10.2 Population Profile

Noxubee County has a level of diversity unseen in most Appalachian communities. Over 70% of Noxubee County residents are African-American. Whites make up fewer than 30% of the population. The county's population, which currently stands at 11,631, has dropped steadily over the past century. In 1900 the county boasted almost 31,000 residents and has since seen a decline of 63%.⁹⁸

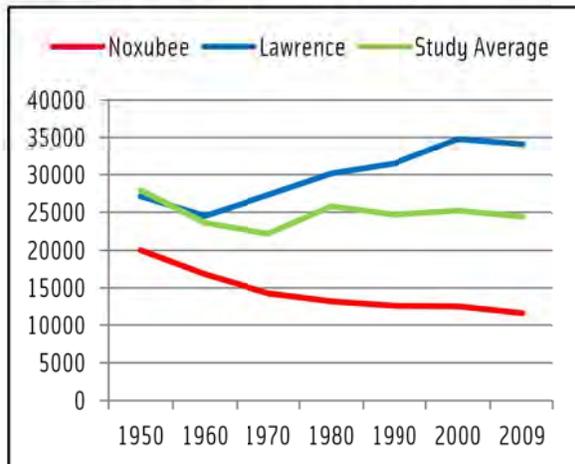
A number of factors have contributed to this decline. Mechanization and changes in agriculture have certainly played a role. Steep declines during World War One and World War Two also suggest

⁹⁸ 2010 US Census

Quick Facts	
Noxubee County, Mississippi	
	
Founded	1833
County Seat	Macon
Land Area	694.79 sq. mi.
Water Surface Area	5.26 sq. mi.
Population	11,631
Density	16.6 per sq. mi.
Per Capita Income	\$13,123
Unemployment Rate	16.6%
ADHS Highway	No
Miles to State Capital	126
Miles from county seat to nearest Interstate	56 (I-20/59)
Miles from county seat to nearest commercial airport	24 (Columbus, MS)

that the county was deeply affected by the so-called "Black Exodus," as African-Americans left the South seeking industrial jobs and better opportunities in northern cities. Interestingly, this trend continues unabated. The local population declined 7.3% during the last decade. One survey respondent complained of being "unable to leave."

Figure 4-99: 60-year population trend with cohort (Lawrence County, AL) and 10-county average.



More than one-third of white residents are Mennonite Christians. These Mennonites settled in the community in the 1960s, attracted by the abundance of affordable farm land. They pursue a traditional agricultural existence and, because of their religious beliefs, deliberately isolate themselves from the larger community. Most do not vote or participate in local elections. They maintain their own church-run schools and most Mennonite families, which tend to be large, do not educate their children beyond eighth grade.⁹⁹

Population density, at 18.1 per square mile, is one-third the state average. Population distribution is uneven, with slightly higher than average percentages of both youth and senior residents.¹⁰⁰

4.10.3 Access and Infrastructure

Noxubee County is ideally located between three important Mississippi cities. Columbus and Starkville are less than thirty miles to the North of

⁹⁹ Association of Religion Data Archives, "Religious Congregations and Membership Study, 2000," www.thearda.com/Archive/ChCounty.asp.

¹⁰⁰ 2010 US Census

the county seat of Macon. Meridian is 50 miles south of Macon. The county is connected to all three cities via a modern 4-lane road, state Highway 45.

Mississippi State University, the state's land-grant institution, is located about a half hour from Macon in Starkville. Two interstate highways, I-20 and I-59 are about an hour away in Meridian. The Gulf of Mexico is accessible via the Port of Biloxi or the Port of New Orleans, both no more than four hours from Macon. Commercial air service is available in both Columbus/Starkville and Meridian. River access is available via the Tennessee/Tombigbee Waterway. The Kansas City Southern Railroad runs parallel to Highway 45.

The main highway, which bisects the county along a North-South axis, is fairly new and in excellent condition. This highway, coupled with the relatively flat terrain, make for easy access to the county. The road is well traveled with trucks moving between Meridian and the northern cities. Macon, the main city and two other towns, Brooksville and Shuqualak are all located along Highway 45 and are easily accessed.

While the main roads are in excellent condition, secondary and side roads in the county fare considerably worse. Gravel roads are not uncommon and may be found just a few blocks from the main corridor. Not surprisingly, 70% of survey respondents found road maintenance to be either "poor" or "inadequate." Water and sewer services scored considerably higher, with a majority of residents rating them as "adequate" or better.

Broadband access is very limited, especially outside of Macon. Most county resident are forced to rely on satellite service, which is expensive, unreliable, and relatively slow. Local officials

contend that digital literacy is an issue for some residents.¹⁰¹

4.10.4 Economic and Housing Conditions

Noxubee ranks at or near the bottom among the ten study counties for many key economic indicators. The county ranks last in per capita income, at \$13,123, and in family income, at \$30,762. The county ranks second to last in household income at \$22,974, surpassing Bell County by \$415. Unemployment in April 2011 stood at 16.6%, the fifth highest of the state's 82 counties.¹⁰²

The county has a handful of small manufacturers, including a heavy equipment trailer builder. Most

Figure 4-100: *A home near downtown Macon.*



local industries focus on agricultural products and include a poultry processor, a catfish producer, and lumber mills. Macon has few businesses and vacant storefronts are common. To its credit, though, the city has undertaken a Main Street program to help revitalize its downtown. However, conditions appear to be grim in the county's smaller communities. Shuqualak, for example consists of a

¹⁰¹ <http://msbb.broadmap.com/StateMap/>

¹⁰² 2010 US Census; Mississippi Department of Employment Security, "Unemployment Rates by County, April 2011" www.mdes.ms.gov/Home/docs/LMI/Publications/Labor%20Market%20Data/labormarketdata.pdf

lone sawmill and a small row of old and largely abandoned storefronts. Local officials blame a lack of available capital for low levels of entrepreneurship.

Signs of economic distress are glaringly evident. Most housing appeared substandard and in poor repair. Litter, abandoned vehicles, and eroding creek beds cut through low-income neighborhoods. The level of economic disparity is striking. Ornate and imposing homes can be found just a few blocks from low-income neighborhoods. Throughout the county, comfortable housing appears to be the exception, rather than the norm. Local leaders characterize the housing market as "dead."

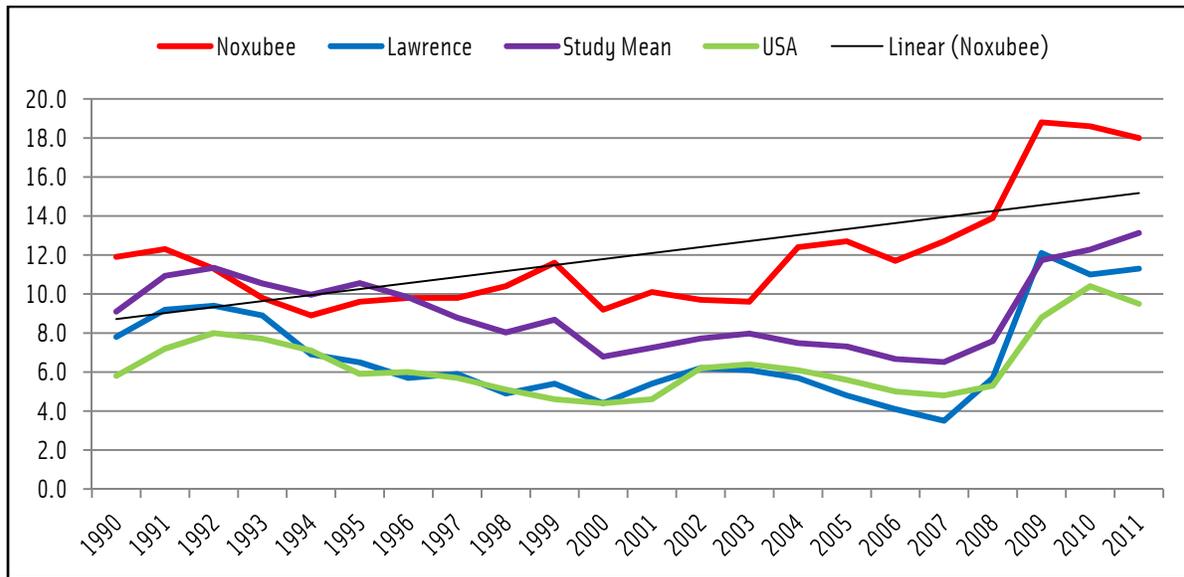
The lack of jobs dominates local discussions. Unemployment remains very high in the county and continues to rise, even after passage of the economic stimulus. Officials blame local and state politics for much of the problem. They complain that Noxubee, a largely Democratic county, is often passed over in the distribution of federal funds. With just 26 Republican votes in the last election, they contend the county is not a priority for state officials, including the state's ARC representative.

Regional development strategies appear to have had little impact on the community. Officials state that regional industry clusters have been good for

Figure 4-101: *Another home near downtown Macon.*



Figure 4-102: Noxubee County unemployment rate comparison, percentage by year.



some counties, but not theirs. Local leaders report that expansion of the highway in the 1990s increased economic activity, but - given the location of the community and the level of traffic - more highway development might be expected.

One explanation for the continued stagnation can be found in the controversy surrounding a proposed hazardous waste facility in the early 1990s. The controversy surrounding the proposed development pitted neighbors against one another and was largely divided along racial and class lines.

The vitriol and bitterness surrounding this debate is still evident almost twenty years later. In fact, the subject raised considerable tension during discussions and nearly resulted in a shouting match among local officials. Yet, while both sides disagreed on the facility, all agreed that the episode has since deterred investment and seriously hindered economic development efforts.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ The waste-site controversy is fully documented by Colin Crawford in, *Uproar at Dancing Rabbit Creek: The Battle over*

Resistance to change and local attitudes were also blamed for the lack of growth. Fear of change, a lack of pride, and a pervasive sense of hopelessness were all seen as common characteristics among many local residents.

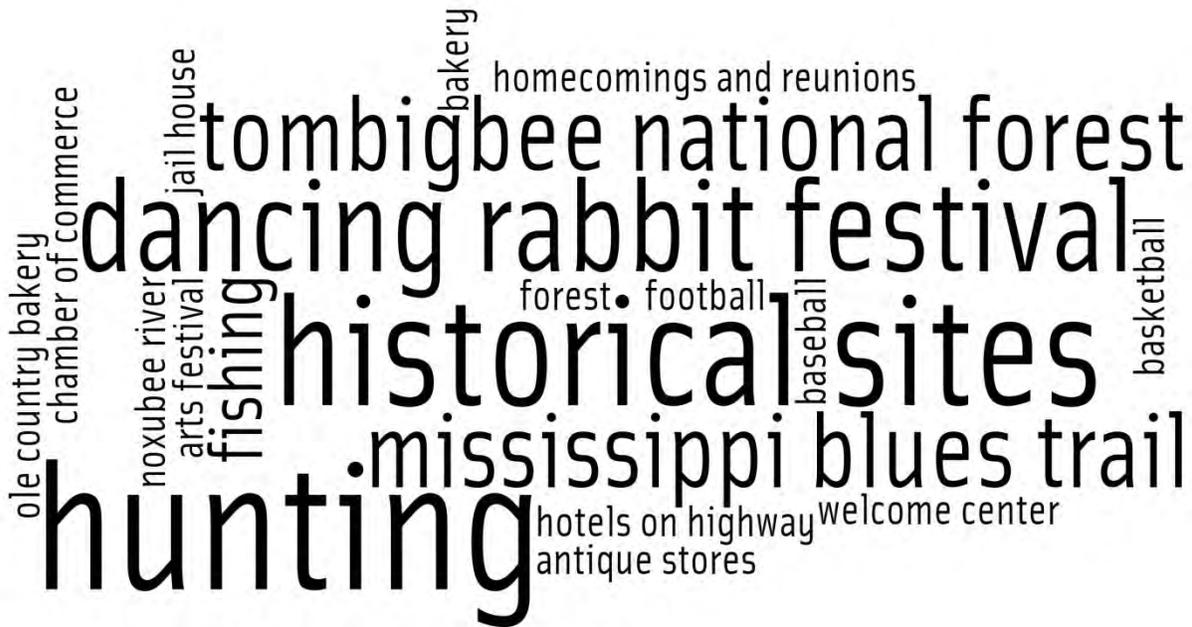
Welfare dependence was reported to be high and multi-generational. One survey participant commented, "People don't work." According to the Social Security Administration, 9.2% of residents rely on SSI disability income.

"Noxubee County should be renamed 'Can't County'...most people here believe the world ends at the county line."

As in Lawrence County, residents were asked to explain the performance disparity between the Mississippi and Alabama counties. Mississippi residents struggled with the question, but noted

Race, Class and the Environment in the New South (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1996).

Figure 4-104: Word cloud responses to the question, "What is your county's top attraction for tourism?"



that Alabama had done a better job at attracting major industries. They also stated that Alabama had done a good job at leveraging their universities to attract industries and noted the relationships between the University of Alabama and Mercedes and the cooperation between Auburn University and Hyundai/Kia.

They also admitted, though, that attitudes played an important role. Mississippians seemed incapable of change, at times. Participants blamed this on fear and the persistent hegemony of "old guard" power elite. These elite, they believe, fight

progress in order to maintain power and control.

4.10.5 Tourism

Tourism resources in Noxubee County are modest. Macon boasts a visitor's center located in a recently converted gas station. The center included a small exhibit on local history, but little else. The facility's lone staff member, while cordial, had few resources to guide visitors to local sites or businesses. Improved marketing materials and docent training would probably increase the center's effectiveness.

Tourism infrastructure throughout the county is generally poor. The most popular local attraction in the county appears to be an excellent Mennonite bakery in Brooksville. Aside from the bakery, the county can claim just a handful of small, local restaurants. A new McDonalds was eagerly anticipated and became a source of community pride. The county has just one hotel, a dated and well-worn facility in Macon. Trip Advisor reviews of the facility are discouraging. The most recent reviewer "would not recommend this hell hole to

Figure 4-103: The Macon Welcome Center.



any decent people" and advised visitors to "sleep in [their] cars."¹⁰⁴

On a more positive note, the county appears to have some potential in nature based tourism. Hunting appears to be a potential growth area, and the county has a high quality quail and turkey hunting plantation with on-site lodging facilities. Local leaders recognize the potential of this business sector and noted unrecognized and underutilized natural assets, including the Noxubee Wildlife Refuge.

The county is well represented in regional tourism media with ads that promote the visitor's center. Better utilized, this center could become an important element in a better crafted tourism strategy. Additional tourism training and planning, however, are needed to help fulfill this vision.

Figure 4-105: Downtown Macon features a site on the Mississippi Blues Trail.



4.10.6 Local Leadership and Planning

Both county and local governments received mixed reviews. About half of survey respondents found both local and county government to be adequate,

¹⁰⁴ http://www.tripadvisor.com/Hotel_Review-g43867-d545623-Reviews-River_Chase_Inn_Macon-Macon_Mississippi.html

but another half found them inadequate or poor. Opinions on local officials were strong and indicate deep divisions, often along racial lines. One survey participant complained of "reverse discrimination" while another stated:

"This county is a hold-over from the 1960s where blacks still believe they are being mistreated and consumed with payback."

These racial divisions have, in recent years, even garnered national attention. In 2006 the U.S. Justice Department filed the first federal lawsuit under the Voting Rights Act accusing black local officials of suppressing the rights of white voters. The suit, which claimed "relentless voting-related racial discrimination," was eventually settled in favor of white voters.¹⁰⁵ The experience and outcome, however, further polarized a community already divided over past issues.

"There are some leaders reaching out to other factions, but to a large degree the effort is not successful. Thus, little or no community sense."

County leaders claim only a fourth of local residents pay property taxes, further limiting government services. Youth programs, senior services, and public transportation are among the services deemed inadequate by survey respondents. An exception to this trend is the local library system, which received universal praise. The county recently opened a new sports complex, an important sign of local progress.

¹⁰⁵ Adam Nossiter, "U.S. Says Blacks in Mississippi Suppress White Vote," *New York Times*, October 11, 2006.

Over 80% of survey participants found local planning efforts to be poor or inadequate. The county government has no central website, but the local library and the cities of Macon and Shuqualak have a web presence.

Local officials contend that political considerations play a role at the local development district, and that their LDD favored projects in larger or more influential communities. While it is unclear if these accusations are founded, it is clear that relations between the community and the development district could be improved.

Yet, despite these grim realities, there are small signs for hope. The Noxubee Economic and Community Development Alliance appears to be making significant progress in marketing the community and recently developed an excellent website. The Alliance also maintains an active Facebook page, which serves as an important web portal for the entire community.

4.10.7 Health

Noxubee ranks 47th out of Mississippi's 81 counties in health outcomes. The county has a 25-bed critical access hospital in Macon, and medical clinics in Macon and Brooksville. Despite these facilities, the county is classified as a health professional shortage area with 16.9 physicians and dentists per 100,000 residents. Major health care facilities, however, are available in Columbus and Starkville. All survey participants reported they lived within 30 minutes of an emergency care facility.

As in other communities in this study, residents of Noxubee County experience high rates of diabetes, obesity and heart disease. Sexual health statistics are alarming. The teen pregnancy rate, at 76 per 1,000 female residents age 16-19, is highest among study counties and well above the national

Figure 4-106: Eroding creek banks cut through residential areas along the main entry point between the highway and downtown Macon.



average of 41.5. The local chlamydia rate of 1,079 per 100,000 residents is also the highest in the study and more than double the national rate of 409.2 per 100,000 people.

The reason for these troubling statistics is unclear, but education could be an important factor. For comparison, Morgan County, Ohio, is also economically distressed and a health professional shortage area, but with excellent schools. Morgan County's teen pregnancy rate is 45 per 100,000, and has a chlamydia rate of only 7 per 100,000 residents, more than 150 times lower than that of Noxubee County.¹⁰⁶

Local officials report that drug abuse is a major problem. Prescription drug abuse is most prevalent, but problems with street drugs, including cocaine, are increasing.

¹⁰⁶ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "Community Health Status Report, 2009" www.communityhealth.hhs.gov; Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. "County Health Care Rankings, 2010" www.countyhealthrankings.org/mississippi/noxubee; "STD Statistics for the USA," www.avert.org/std-statistics-america; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Teen Births," www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/teenbrth.htm

4.10.8 Education

Educational attainment and educational systems are major issues in Noxubee County and a fundamental source of the area's long-term economic distress. Although it has been 57 years since *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka*, Noxubee County schools still maintain a *de facto* system of racial segregation. Virtually no white children attend local public schools. Instead, they attend private schools in Noxubee and neighboring counties.

With no personal stake in the public school system, white families have little incentive to support the public school system. The dual system appears to be so entrenched that it is unlikely to disappear anytime soon. This anachronistic policy places the county outside of the national mainstream and might deter investment by national or global employers.

Surprisingly, African-American schools officials appear to be resigned to accept this system. While some argue that it hurts the county, others stated that the system is "just the way it is" and seem to see no reason to change or even challenge this long-held practice. African-American residents even appear proud that a few token black children now attended the private school.

Low levels of educational attainment are compounded further by the presence of a significant Mennonite community. Citing religious objections, local Mennonites refuse to enroll in public schools and rarely educate their children beyond the eighth grade. This practice further erodes educational attainment statistics. Although the Mennonites promote self-sufficiency and hard work, their low levels of schooling may discourage knowledge-based industries and employers seeking a skilled and adaptable workforce.

Not surprisingly, the county ranks near the bottom among study counties in educational attainment, though still slightly better than Bell County, Kentucky. Just 64.4% of adult residents have a high school diploma. About 10% of residents hold a bachelor's degree or higher. An estimated 28% of residents lack basic prose literacy skills, the highest level among the ten study counties. In the 2000 census, six percent of adult residents lacked a fifth grade education. Over 99% of public school students qualify for free or reduced price lunches.

Proficiency test scores are the lowest among the ten study counties. The scores, which measure performance at the public school, were deficient at all grade levels. In 2008-2009, just 30% of eighth graders scored proficient or above in math and only 25% scored proficient or better in reading. Among high school students, 45% were proficient or better in math and 32% demonstrated proficiency in reading. Proficiency scores for private schools are unavailable, but these public school assessments reflect educational performance among the majority of local youth.¹⁰⁷

Local leaders attribute poor performance to a number of factors. Peer pressure, embarrassment, and a lack of family support systems all contribute to high drop-out rates and low levels of attainment. Middle school performance is an important factor and students who fall behind in seventh or eighth grade often have trouble catching up and sometimes quit school altogether. Local officials also agreed that the lack of integration was also a factor and, in addition to hurting educational performance, also helped keep the community divided.

¹⁰⁷ 2010 US Census; Federal Education Budget Project; Noxubee School District; feb.newamerica.net/k12/ms/2803300.

Among the lessons learned from Noxubee County are the following:

- Race relations in Noxubee County remain a major barrier to economic progress. Any economic development strategy applied to the county that does not address the divisive race issue seems doomed to failure. Particularly distressing are the continued de facto segregation of schools and the alarming levels of economic disparity along race lines. Equally troubling was the tacit acceptance of this dual educational system by residents of both races.
- The lingering racial divisions that exist in the county should not be interpreted as a sign that the residents of Noxubee County are overwhelmingly racist. On the contrary, the county has a degree of racial interaction, understanding, and cooperation unheard of in many parts of Appalachia. These persistent racial divisions, however, encourage anachronistic practices that may discourage investment and prevent much needed change.
- Complaints about the politicization of the local development district and development funds, while not confined to Noxubee County, reflect issues seen in other counties related to county-LDD relations.
- Recent efforts to market the county are commendable; particularly those initiated by the local Economic and Community Development Alliance. Their website and Facebook page serve as a model for other communities, particularly those in economic distress.
- Among the subregional cohorts in this study, the contrast between Lawrence and Noxubee Counties is most striking. Though separated by only about 100 miles, the two communities appear to be decades apart. While Federal investments in NASA and TVA have certainly played a major role in the Alabama county's success, educational reforms and racial reconciliation may have also played a role.

Figure 4-109: A community church near downtown Macon.



