

# THE **OTHER** AMERICANS

RURAL MINORITIES STUCK  
ON THE ECONOMY'S BOTTOM RUNG

BY TOM ZELLER JR.



# ABOUT 22 MILES NORTHEAST OF LAREDO, TEXAS

in an otherwise desolate and unincorporated stretch of Webb County, a roughed-out grid of unnamed dirt roads cuts through a maze of half-built cinderblock homes and dilapidated trailers. ■ Israel Reyna, a local attorney and advocate for the poor, has been driving me through this and similar communities, and we've stopped amid

A "restricted" sign with instructions hangs from the entrance to a colonia resident's property in Texas.

THIS PAGE AND PREVIOUS PAGE: MATT RAINWATERS



a haphazard cluster of residences a few hundred yards off the main highway. As I linger at the side of the road, a yellow school bus inches past, taking care not to savage its struts on a path rutted by poor drainage and cycles of fierce, mud-churning rain and baking prairie sun.

Reyna calls from the side of a tidy trailer where he is chatting with its owners, Elia De La O and her husband, Rogelio. The couple invites us inside.

Like most of the homes in this ostensibly planned subdivision, the De La Os' trailer, with its exposed beams and jerry-rigged wiring, is a work in progress. The family is blessed with electricity—still a luxury for some impoverished communities along the Texas-Mexico border—but they lack running water. For this residents queue up, sometimes for hours, at a county-run spigot a couple miles away, where they fill huge plastic drums of varying shapes and vintage with foul-smelling water that officials describe as potable. Elia and Rogelio, like most residents, won't drink it, preferring to visit a private, for-profit water vendor in Laredo, or nearby Rio Bravo, for jugs to slake their thirst.

The De La Os were not born here and have not yet sought full citizenship, they say, in part because they've struggled with the language. But they've learned enough to find steady work as seasonal agricultural hands in states across the Midwest, and they have been permanent, legal and taxpaying residents of the U.S. for more than a dozen years. They take great care to say that they are proud of their home, and that they are grateful to have gained a foothold on the American dream. But Elia, 64, also shares that, growing up in Mexico, she once imagined that dream rather differently.

"I never thought there were people living like this, like we're living here, in the United States," she says. "We always thought, 'This is the United States—it's the United States, it's the best.' We didn't think when we came here that we would live like kings, but we didn't imagine there would be places like this."

From the borderlands of Texas and the cotton fields of the Mississippi Delta to the reservations of the Great Plains, there are many places like this, and they have remained as such, generation after generation—all of them easy to find. While much has improved since this sort of grinding poverty was first identified as a national disgrace more than 40 years ago,







advocates for the rural poor say the pace of change has been glacial. They also say that persistent, multi-generational poverty continues to plague millions of people living in rural areas, particularly blacks, Hispanics and Native Americans who languish in small towns and isolated outposts where dollars are scarce, development is difficult and discrimination is historically rampant.

In a nation where a breathtaking 46 million people are now living below the poverty line; where the gap between rich and poor is wider than ever; and where upward economic mobility is increasingly rare, these destitute, rural, largely

minority communities represent the poorest of America's poor—the very bottom of an economic ladder that fewer and fewer have the capacity to climb.

Viewed against the nation's larger urban and suburban populations, their numbers are small. Only about 51 million Americans—less than 20 percent of the population—are considered nominally rural anymore, and minorities make up a fraction of that: about 10 million, all told. But their share of the poverty burden is, by any calculus, wildly disproportionate, making them emblematic of some of the country's more unsettling and persistent truths.

Several anti-poverty advocates summed up the situation in a word: “embarrassing.”

An entire household is powered by a single 20 amp circuit—the minimum required of a garage and half of what is necessary for a modern kitchen.



# “I NEVER THOUGHT THERE WERE PEOPLE LIVING LIKE THIS, LIKE WE’RE LIVING HERE, IN THE UNITED STATES.”

In May, the Census Bureau reported that the number of minority births in the U.S., for the very first time, had exceeded the number of white births.

For whatever else that statistic might mean, it suggests that, as a new generation of black and brown Americans comes of age in these forgotten communities, they will increasingly find themselves at the center of the philosophical tug-of-war now paralyzing the nation and animating a presidential election. It is a debate that turns on fundamental questions of wealth, advantage and the role of government in mitigating, even minimally, the influence of discrimination and dumb luck—of where and to whom we are born—on the odds of acquiring equitable access to the American dream.

Just last month, the ideological poles were brought into stark relief when news broke of a grainy video showing Republican presidential contender Mitt Romney telling a group of wealthy donors, “If the Hispanic voting bloc becomes as

committed to the Democrats as the African-American voting bloc has in the past, why, we’re in trouble as a party and, I think, as a nation.”

The video also recorded Romney disparaging “47 percent” of the nation—all presumably supporters of President Barack Obama, the candidate quipped—as under-taxed, dependent on government programs and unwilling to “take responsibility for their lives.”

Critics, of course, quickly pointed out that many of the households Romney categorically dismissed are, in fact, among the nation’s poorest, and whose subsistence income is mercifully exempt from federal income tax. Others noted that Romney’s own father benefited from welfare and other government programs early in life.

In broader terms, however, concern and finger-pointing over the persistence of grinding poverty in the U.S. is not a purely partisan affair. Many activists in the most distressed communities I visited for this article also criticized the current leadership in Washington for cutting housing and loan programs that are vital to the rural poor; for favoring cities over small towns; or



for lavishing subsidies on corporate agriculture while ignoring millions of struggling rural residents who have no connection to farming.

Other stakeholders gave the Obama administration high marks for taking what they viewed as an unprecedented interest in rural development generally, and for targeting persistently poor, minority communities specifically, even as budgets have shrunk.

The reality is surely some blend of all these observations, but what remains clear is that allowing these pockets of deep poverty to persist, generation after generation, is in no one's interest.

"Rural Americans are often overlooked and under-appreciated," said Tom Vilsack, who heads up the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the primary federal agency charged with overseeing rural development.

In a phone call, Vilsack underscored hundreds of millions of dollars of Obama-era programs, grants and loans aimed at revitalizing rural communities and reaching disenfranchised populations that have struggled for decades. "I strongly believe that through the sustained commitment of this administration,"

he said, "the best days for rural America are yet to come."

In the meantime, Elia De La O says that despite the faint scent of rotten eggs left on her washed clothes, and a vaguely slimy feeling left on the skin after bathing, the water she and Rogelio cull from the county spigot serves most of their household needs. "We are content," she says.

Reyna, who works with Texas RioGrande Legal Aid, which represents low-income and seasonal workers in nearly 70 counties of Southwest Texas, isn't convinced.

"Entire generations have passed through, from birth to adulthood, living without water or without electricity, without plumbing," he says. "It doesn't have to be this way, and that's part of the tragedy of all this. We keep thinking that maybe if we tell this story one more time, it will provoke enough shame in people and finally spur real action.

"Unfortunately, it hasn't happened that way so far," he adds. "Progress moves at a snail's pace."

## DISPROPORTIONATE POVERTY

The story of miserably poor Latinos, African and Native Americans eking out hardscrabble lives beyond the bustle of the city is hardly new. Such places were the impetus, more





A man fills  
a container  
at the  
community  
spigot.



than 40 years ago, for President Lyndon B. Johnson's formation of a National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty and that body's subsequent report, titled "The People Left Behind." In 1967, places like this drew Robert F. Kennedy, then a junior senator from New York, to the Mississippi Delta, where he encountered, to his and subsequently the country's dismay, a harsh landscape of plank-wood outhouses, dirt floors and affectless children with bellies distended from hunger.

In the 1980s, Richard Woodbury, writing for *Time* magazine, exposed the struggle "to bring drinking water to thousands of impoverished families" in ramshackle communities along the Mexican border. In 1990, reporters from the Associated Press noted that the infant mortality rate in the Delta ranked below that in some Third World nations. Last October, ABC's Diane Sawyer described the "unthinkable conditions" on the Pine Ridge Indian reservation of South Dakota.

In many of these places, basic amenities like plumbing and electricity have improved standards of living, even if jobs remain scarce and dependence on government assistance remains widespread. In some outposts, however, house-

holds lacking even these most basic of basics can still be found.

The Economic Research Service, the data-gathering arm of USDA, notes that while the gap in poverty rates between the nation's urban areas and its rural outposts has been shrinking over time, families living away from the bustle of city and suburban life have had a higher rate of poverty every year since data on the subject was first officially recorded in the 1960s.

The ERS lists the current overall poverty rate in rural America at 16.6 percent, the highest rate since 1993. The poverty rate among children in rural areas is now roughly 27 percent—an increase of 6 percentage points over 2000—according to an analysis prepared by the Southern Rural Development Center at Mississippi State University.

These statistics often conjure visions of Appalachia, and not without reason. More than 90 counties in the Southern Highlands of the Virginias, eastern Kentucky and parts of Missouri and Oklahoma—all predominantly white—are considered "high poverty," according to federal data.

No matter where poverty is measured, however—whether in urban, suburban or rural areas—minorities always fare worse. According to a 2011 analysis by the





National Poverty Center, a non-partisan research center at the University of Michigan, roughly 26 million of the nation's poor are racial or ethnic minorities.

Put another way: Of the 46 million U.S. residents who now live below the poverty line, nearly 60 percent are minorities. This is despite the fact that all racial and ethnic minorities combined comprise just 37 percent of the U.S. population.

In rural areas, the disparities are particularly pronounced. Of the more than 400 rural counties with poverty rates exceeding 20 percent, which are considered "high poverty" counties, roughly three-fourths were "linked directly to the economic circumstances of racial and ethnic minorities," according to the NPC report.

About 47 percent of those counties are largely African-American; 17 percent are mostly Hispanic; and about 9 percent are Native American. These include places like predominantly black Issaquena County in Mississippi's Delta region, where 60 percent of children were living in poverty in 2010, or Todd County, S.D., with its large Native American population, where the child-poverty figure is 59 percent.

"Despite advances made through

the civil rights movement, labor struggles and increased self-determination, the experiences and conditions of rural minorities are often overlooked given their relatively small populations," noted the Housing Assistance Council, a Washington-based nonprofit that tracks rural poverty issues, in a recent report. "Moreover, it is often assumed that the conditions that led to these upheavals have been addressed."

These numbers suggest, of course, that they have not.

Disparities in standards of living, wherever they occur, are often dismissed as the result of poor personal choices or cultural decay. A 2012 survey commissioned by the Salvation Army, for example, suggested that 27 percent of Americans believe people are poor because they are lazy. Nearly 30 percent of respondents said poor people have lower moral values, while 43 percent believed poor people could find a job if they really wanted one. Fully half of those surveyed said a good work ethic was all that was needed to escape poverty.

Epidemics of drug and alcohol abuse, low educational attainment, teen pregnancies and long-term, multigenerational dependence on government subsidies in these rural outposts, as in areas of urban decay, can lend a superficial legiti-





Freshly clean clothes hang from the chicken coop outside a colonia.





macy to such assessments.

But they rankle experts like Meizhu Lui, the former director of the Closing the Racial Wealth Gap Initiative at the Insight Center for Community Economic Development, a California-based non-profit, and the lead author of the 2006 book, *The Color of Wealth: The Story Behind the U.S. Racial Wealth Divide*.

For starters, Lui points out that numerous studies have shown that economic collapse or struggle in any American enclave—urban, rural, white, black, Latino—is often attended by higher rates of depression, drink, drug abuse and other social ills. She also notes that a more humane social safety net has been documented to prevent similar outcomes in European communities where factories have closed up or job opportunities have otherwise shriveled.

High unemployment in rural areas, Lui says, also makes competition for whatever jobs might be available—meatpacking, poultry processing, light factory work—incredibly fierce, ensuring that wages remain at or near the minimum. Even when combined with government assistance, such wages are typically unable to lift

families out of poverty.

“People can be working full-time and still be living under the poverty line,” Lui said.

“You have all these people in these rural areas that don’t have great schools, they don’t have great amounts of skill, and they don’t have jobs. Everybody is saying, ‘You need to have a college degree,’ but there aren’t even enough jobs that require a college degree to go around. As it is, today white middle-class kids are graduating from college and not finding jobs,” Lui said. “So what’s a poor person from a rural area, especially given the cost of college these days, supposed to do?”

“The opportunities just are not there, and I think that even conservatives have recognized that we have systemic unemployment problems,” Lui added. “They think the solution is to give tax breaks to the wealthy, but if a few wealthy people are not paying as much taxes, are they then going to create employment programs in rural Mississippi for African Americans?”

“I don’t think so,” Lui said, “unless you make them do it.”

## THE POVERTY TRAP

In 1992, the late Willie Morris, a chronicler of the American South and then a writer-in-residence





at the University of Mississippi, described the experience of escorting visitors to Yazoo City and other parts of his native flatlands that extend eastward from the Mississippi River:

“Over the years I have taken countless outlanders through the Delta: peregrinating Yankee scholars, writers, journalists, civil rights activists, and more than a few of the merely idle and professionally despondent curious. Their reaction has often been a singular blend of bafflement, titillation, anger, and, not the least of it, fear; yet to the person they are struck nearly dumb by its brooding quintessential sadness.”

Morris’ words were written when Lakeisha Davis, another Delta native, was just 2 years old. Today, the 22-year-old Davis sits on a concrete slab skirting the Anguilla Family Houses, a low-rise, low-income housing project in Mississippi’s Sharkey County, one of the poorest counties in one of the poorest regions of one of the poorest states in the nation. Her daughter, 2-year-old Josmin, plays in a nearby patch of dying grass, unaware that she is likely the latest installment in what seems a forever unfolding tale of brooding, quintessential sadness.

Davis and I take a seat on a pair of orange cafeteria chairs, which have been reclaimed as porch furniture, and I ask her to tell me what life is like in this rural outpost.

“There just ain’t nothing here,” she says. “That’s it.”

Davis’ response is an abridged version of a story told to me by just about every resident, academic or politician I met in a week of touring the area. These plain-spoken observations are typically delivered without affect or complaint: The Delta, one resident told me, never changes.

I arrived in Jackson, the state capital, just as the wet, leaden weight of summer was settling on the South. I headed westward across the eternal flatness of the Yazoo, aka the Delta basin, a wide shelf of cotton, soybeans, rice and catfish farming that stretches like a black cherry leaf—wide in the middle and pinched at both ends—from Vicksburg in the south to Southaven in the north, along the border with Tennessee.

This roughly 15-county floodplain, bounded by the Bluff Hills to the east, was essentially a swamp in the antebellum years, prompting many locals to remind visitors that there never really was slavery in the Delta. Rather, levees and other post-war infrastructure created an expanse of fertile cotton land



Marion Tyler is a social worker in Cary, Miss. "Any step up is a step back, so why step up?" she said. "That's the whole trap with everybody out here, and I understand it."



for white farmers, and free blacks flocked to the area as sharecroppers. Its population is now predominantly African-American.

But just as the untameable Mississippi still rises here, often leaving many of the poorest residents vulnerable to devastating floods, so too does the residue of racism and discrimination linger in the Delta. In the tiny town of Cary, I visited the town hall, a two-room, one-story building adjacent to an empty field where a lumber mill once stood. Inside, the walls of the building are lined with carefully framed memorabilia reaching back decades: black-and-white yearbook photos and sepia snapshots of local sports teams, high school dances, returning war heroes.

Virtually every smiling face in every photograph is white.

Cary's population, on the other hand, is two-thirds black.

I asked Leslie Brock, the deputy clerk and the only occupant of the building, why that's the case. "Well, you've got to think about, at that time, things were segregated," said Brock, who grew up in the area around Cary and is black. I suggested to her that there must be at least a few contemporaneous photographs of African-American

families from the area—black schools, black proms?

"You would think so," she replied.

Brock, who left the Delta for Los Angeles at 18 before returning in her early 40s two years ago, grew up in the sort of sparse "shotgun house" that predominated among black families here in the 1960s and '70s: narrow shacks, typically without water or plumbing, that skirted the cotton fields where many blacks found work. These were the places where Robert Kennedy often encountered hungry, barefoot children during his 1968 anti-poverty tour of the Delta.

Government programs have lifted most families out of shotgun shacks and into an assortment of small single-family homes, trailers or government-subsidized housing of varying quality. Most have the basics: electricity, running water, plumbing.

But the ability to flip on a light switch, flush an indoor toilet, or draw a glass of water from a kitchen tap has not created new opportunities for poor black Delta residents to thrive, and many continue to languish in a limbo of dependence and the sort of social strife that comes with long-term disinvestment: drug and alcohol abuse, teen pregnancy, truancy, poor health and crime.

Asked why these trends continue





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generation after generation, Brock said part of it is the mentality of the people who live here. “They’ve heard for so long that they can’t have anything, that they cannot be anything, that they cannot do anything, that they start to believe it,” she said. “People are a product of their environment.”

Paulette Meikle, the director of the Center for Community and Economic Development at Delta State University in Cleveland, Miss., 40 miles north of Greenville, expounds on this notion. “When you drive through parts of the Delta, you can see, it’s like, ‘Wow, this is a wealthy place,’” she said. “There is wealth, because we have the power elite, the ones who own the means of production, who control the land. That economy, which grew out of the plantation economy, still survives. You have wealth here that emerged out of that structure.”

But that wealth was not shared by—and, as researchers have frequently shown, was actively with-

held from—black workers and sharecroppers. As the 20th century wore on and mechanization eliminated work opportunities for low-skilled blacks, nothing emerged to take its place.

“The intersection between race and social class, it’s so locked-in,” Meikle explains. “So when you look at the data: if you’re born in poverty and you’re a minority group member, a large percentage of those who are born into that kind of situation will remain that way. An intergenerational exchange of poverty occurs.”

Such has been the fate of Lakeisha Davis and her daughter. There once was a peanut factory in Anguilla, she tells me offhandedly, but that’s long gone. Today, the town has a mini-mart and little else.

Davis managed to complete high school, though now she mostly gets by on food stamps and other government assistance, much as her mother did before her, and her grandmother before that. She enlisted in job training in Greenville, about 40 miles northwest of Anguilla, but she has no car, and the





difficulty in finding a ride to and from the city, along with the dearth of even low-paying opportunities within a wide radius of her home, made the effort Sisyphean.

By her calculus—and that of many in her station—it’s safer to maintain her benefits than to suffer the subsidy cuts that come with a minimum-wage income and long-distance travel to and from home. “If you move a little forward, they push you right back,” Davis said. “It doesn’t make sense.”

That sentiment is echoed by Marion Tyler, a licensed social worker with the Cary Christian Center, a nonprofit organization

that has helped Davis navigate the vagaries of her young pregnancy. Tyler, once a teen mother herself, said she benefited from the benevolence of an employer who was willing to support her as she earned a bachelor’s and then master’s degree. Without that support—exceedingly rare, she said—she would likely still be spinning her wheels on subsidies.

Far more often, the young and poor wash up at low-paying service or fast-food jobs. Tyler recalls flipping burgers at McDonald’s, which caused her government benefits—\$96 in cash assistance at the time, along with \$118 in food stamps for her and her son each month—to plummet.

“So I quit my job,” she says.

The walls of a town hall in Cary, Miss., are lined with memorabilia including black-and-white yearbook photos. While Cary’s population is two-thirds black, virtually every face pictured is white.



“Any step up is a step back, so why step up? That’s the whole trap with everybody out here, and I understand it.”

## ‘TELL THEM TO COME HELP US’

All of this, of course, raises the question: Why not just leave? Charles Fluharty, the founding director of the Rural Policy Research Institute and a professor at the Harry S. Truman School of Public Affairs at the University of Missouri, suggests that’s a facile question.

“That is like saying to someone in a five-block area of the Bronx, ‘You should leave here now.’ And they look at you and say, ‘What are you talking about? This is my neighborhood. I’m the fourth generation on this block, you’ve got to be kidding me.’”

In economic terms, Fluharty said, it’s a given that some people will always take less money to stay where they’re comfortable. In many of the most impoverished, minority-dominated rural communities, the proclivity to stay put despite poor prospects can be particularly strong.

Combine those who won’t leave

with those who, for a variety of reasons, can’t—lack of means or connections elsewhere, or family obligations—and the result is substantial pockets of gnawing economic need.

That raises another key quandary, Fluharty said. “There’s an ongoing argument in the social welfare literature about whether you invest in people or in places. There’s a pretty strong argument for both sides.”

On one hand, he explained, if you invest in people, they will move away to improve their social mobility. But if you only invest in people, it will ignore the problems of place that attend those who stay behind. “If you don’t invest in the places where those people stay,” Fluharty said, “you are giving them an uphill battle that’s almost impossible.”

A recent analysis by Richard Morrill, a professor of geography and environmental studies at the University of Washington, showed the Mississippi Delta to have experienced some of the highest population losses in the country between 2000 and 2010. Several counties in the Delta have shed 15 percent to 20 percent of their populations over that period, according to census data.

Sharkey County, where Davis and her daughter idly watch the hot sun rise and fall each day, lost





more than a quarter of its population. These are areas “where significant development investment simply did not occur,” Morrill writes. “Race matters.”

Karl Stauber, president and CEO of the Danville Regional Foundation, a Virginia-based nonprofit, and a former undersecretary for research, education and economics with the USDA, explained the dynamic. “The two challenges I have to the ‘just move’ argument are that the people most likely to move are the people that are the most skilled,” he said. “So then we’re back to the rural ghetto.

“We spent a lot of the 1960s to the 1980s trying to overcome the concentration of poverty in places like Appalachia, the Delta,” Stauber added. “If we had been a little more sophisticated, we would have included Indian reservations, we would have included the colonias, which were already existing along the U.S.-Mexico border. We would have produced a more nuanced picture.

“What we know will happen, because it’s already happening, is that people that are the most skilled and the people who are often the best educated are the folks that are most likely to move and

successfully relocate. And then we end up with this poverty concentration, and we go back to the ‘Two Americas’ problem.”

A measure of this sort of economic divide can be found in any number of statistics. Mississippi, for example, now ranks first in children born underweight; it is among the five states spending the least amount of money per pupil; it ranks first for obesity, second for diabetes, and has the highest teen pregnancy rate in the country. In infant mortality—often correlated with the worst sorts of endemic poverty—Mississippi ranks second, just behind the nation’s capital.

The infant mortality rate for blacks in Mississippi, roughly 14 deaths per 1,000 live births, is more than double the rate for whites, more than double the national average, and considerably higher than the rates in Botswana and Sri Lanka.

Cuts in government benefits after the wholesale reformation of the welfare system in 1996 have been blamed for a worsening in many of these metrics, although small social service agencies, like the Cary Christian Center 13 miles south of Anguilla, have made inroads in turning them around. The Center’s prenatal program, funded through donations, involves intensive outreach and home visits by





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DERO SANFORD





social workers like Tyler, and has been credited with keeping infant mortality rates markedly lower in Sharkey and Issaquenna Counties, compared to rates in other parts of the Delta.

Yet endeavors like these, along with the slow drip of food stamps and cash assistance, stakeholders suggest, are mere bandages on a much more systemic problem. “We need the powers that be, the policymakers and the landowners—they need to create opportunities for people to benefit from living in a rural community,” says Dorsey Johnson, a co-director of the Cary Christian Center. “We have to create something, you know, that will have some longevity and will help to sustain our community.”

Not doing so can be expensive. In a recent essay published in *The Clarion Ledger*, Charlie Mitchell, a syndicated columnist and assistant dean of the Meek School of Journalism and New Media at the University of Mississippi, lambasted state and federal officials for watching the Delta languish and letting taxpayers foot the bill:

“Take Humphreys County. There, the cost of direct government aid, in all forms, per person, was \$11,385.31 in 2010. The same

cost in DeSoto County, which was Mississippi’s fastest growing in the last census, was \$4,717.20. So, clearly, given that the expense to the taxpaying public can be 2.5 times greater per person where poverty rules than where there’s an economic pulse, there’s an economic imperative (on top of the social imperative) to seek a turnaround for the region as aggressively as possible.”

Mitchell decried the fact that major assembly plants for brands like Toyota and Nissan have found their way to other parts of the state in recent years, and he had special opprobrium for Democratic Rep. Bennie Thompson, the powerful member of Congress who has represented the Delta counties for more than 20 years. “He practices politics the old-school way,” Mitchell wrote. “Reward your friends, punish your enemies, tell your constituents repeatedly they are hapless victims of an unfair world and then dance off to enjoy junket after junket.”

Thompson declined to be interviewed for this article, but in a phone call, a spokesman for his office, Cory Horton, ticked off a number of programs and federal funds that the congressman had secured for his district over the years, including substantial funding for Army Corps of Engineer





improvements to the levees that keep the entirety of the Delta from going underwater. He also points to funds that have augmented agriculture, catfish farming and casinos in the Delta.

“You know, it’s going to take everybody working together to fix these things,” Horton said. “There’s just this one congressman from this district, but there are also two senators. There’s a governor. Everything can’t be put off on one person.”

Heather McTeer, a former mayor of Greenville who ran unsuccessfully against Thompson for the Democratic nomination in a primary earlier this year, suggested that everyone has copped out. “There are a number of reasons I think we’re still in this situation, and one is leadership,” she said. “When you have leadership on a state and a federal and a local level that’s not really addressing the true issues of poverty and how you change a community, when they’re not identifying what factors are critical to helping to change poverty, then you’re always going to stay in that situation.”

Back in Anguilla, I asked Davis what she aspired to as a child. “I wanted to go all over the

world,” she declared. “I wanted to go to Canada.”

Today, she talks of making it to Jackson, the state capital 100 miles to the south, or to Memphis, 200 miles north, where she reckons she’d have higher odds of finding a job—any job. At the moment, though, she’s got little in the way of means to make this happen, and those faraway cities, which are facing their own tough times, might as well be in another country.

“Tell them to come help us. We need some real help down here,” Davis said when asked if she had a message for people outside the Delta. “We sure need some help.”

## DIFFERENT STARTING LINES

In the book *The Color of Wealth*, Lui and her co-authors take on those who would suggest that enough help has already been given, or that people in Davis’ shoes just haven’t tried hard enough.

“Individual effort does make a difference in financial success, compared to how the same individual would have fared without putting forth an effort,” they wrote. “But Americans begin the race from different starting lines. Not only do well-off people, primarily whites, have significant head starts, but even many working-class whites





have had modest advantages when compared with working-class people of color, most of whom begin far behind whites' starting line."

At the point of birth, that starting line might be thought of as wealth, a nugget of potentiality and as-yet-unrealized opportunity that individuals, families and communities carry with them, nurture, contribute to and pass on, sometimes

in imperceptible ways, to subsequent generations.

Beyond revealing that net worth for all families plummeted between 2007 and 2010, data from the Federal Reserve Board's most recent survey of consumer finances, released in June, show a marked and continued disparity in the size of that carrying resource among racial groups.

The median value of net worth for white, non-Hispanic families in 2010 was about \$131,000, ac-

Lakeisha Davis, 22, and her daughter Josmin, 2, of Cary, Miss. Davis has struggled to find gainful employment in her corner of the Delta, where critics say a lack of investment has created "rural ghettos."



cording to the survey. For non-whites and Hispanics, the amount was just over \$20,000. The data also showed that the median value of immediately available financial assets for white families was \$37,000. For non-whites, it was just \$6,000.

Studies have also shown that anywhere from a quarter to a third of white families will, at some point in their lifetimes, augment their net worth with an inheritance of some kind—but even the majority who don’t receive such endowments often fail to recognize the variety of other windfalls that come their way. Citing research from Thomas Shapiro, a professor of sociology and public policy at Brandeis University, Lui explains in her book:

“These numbers show that most white people do not receive any inheritances from deceased relatives’ estates. But in interviewing black and white working-class families, Shapiro found that modest amounts of money passed down by living relatives were also far more common in white families than in black families. Whites who get such help often don’t think of themselves as inheritors, but consider such transfers to be just a normal part of family life. Contributions

to a down payment on a house and college tuition are the most common forms of family financial aid. Shapiro calls these ‘transformative assets,’ because they boost lifelong prosperity and security.”

“Transformative assets” or “transformative wealth” are key words in the study of persistent poverty. These are the sorts of windfalls, even small ones, that can lead upward to new rungs on the economic ladder. It’s cash to buy a reliable car, for example, which can lead to new job opportunities and upward progress. For some, it may simply be enough money to buy a decent suit for a job interview.

For those already halfway up the ladder, transformative nuggets like these, if they initially came from family, come later in the form of commercial loans or credit, ideally at interest rates that aren’t ruinous. For the rural poor, neither avenue is available, and the dribble of government benefits or minimum-wage work tends to keep the unlucky on a treadmill of subsistence.

It is worth noting, for example, that in 2011, the average monthly food stamp outlay in the U.S. was just \$133, according to data compiled by the Kaiser Family Foundation. Families that qualify for temporary cash assistance have also seen the purchasing power of that benefit plummet. In all but two





# OF THE 46 MILLION U.S. RESIDENTS WHO NOW LIVE BELOW THE POVERTY LINE, NEARLY **60 PERCENT ARE MINORITIES.**

states, cash assistance benefit levels in 2011 are actually lower, in real dollars and despite inflation, than they were in 1996, according to the Center On Budget and Policy Priorities in Washington.

Jim Richardson, the executive director of the National Rural Funders Collaborative, a philanthropy aimed at addressing persistent poverty, particularly in minority communities, argues that it's this inability to get any sort of foothold that has kept so many poor families poor. It also explains why they remain disenfranchised socially, politically and culturally.

"Our initial understanding was simply that from years of disinvestment and disenfranchisement of people at low wealth, you basically got these deep pockets of poverty. We knew that these have to be addressed, and can only be addressed, through building family wealth, increasing family sufficiency and then increasing civic participation within the communities," Richardson said.

"But what we found over the

first four or five years was that persistent poverty, especially in rural communities, was inextricably linked with race. And if you look at the disparities not only in income but in wealth, in rural areas by race, the statistics are really pretty staggering."

By the reckoning of numerous researchers, the comparative absence of such transformative assets among communities of color—particularly those in areas where land and labor were the only assets available—is no mere accident. Some have attempted to calculate, for example, the real loss of wealth that attended slavery and subsequent discriminatory policies. Among these are Joe Feagin, a professor of sociology at Texas A&M University and a leading expert on the racial wealth gap.

Writing in the 2010 edition of his book *Racist America*, Feagin cited a variety of estimates for the value of the free labor provided by enslaved African Americans, with the cumulative losses for subsequent generations of American black families ranging between \$2.1 trillion and \$4.7 trillion.

The "40 acres and a mule" that





Cary, Miss., is a case study in persistent rural poverty. Government programs have lifted most, though not all, families out of shotgun shacks and into an assortment of small single-family homes, trailers or other low-income housing. But jobs remain scarce and government dependency is rampant.

were historically promised as a way to allow freed slaves and their families to begin building real wealth never materialized for the most part, Feagin noted. Through much of the 20th century, and particularly in the South, deliberate and codified exclusion from land acquisition, access to credit, equal education and even political power continued to prevent the wider community of African Americans from developing the sort of wealth that has passed

through and improved the lot of generations of whites.

“A simple total of the current economic worth of all black labor stolen by whites through the means of slavery, segregation, and contemporary discrimination is huge—perhaps six to ten trillion dollars,” Feagin wrote. “This latter figure is staggeringly high, indeed about 70 percent of the Gross Domestic Product generated by the United States in a recent year. In addition, these monetary figures do not include other major costs—the great pain and suffering inflicted,





**“THE INFANT MORTALITY RATE  
FOR BLACKS IN MISSISSIPPI, ROUGHLY  
14 DEATHS PER 1,000 LIVE BIRTHS, IS  
CONSIDERABLY HIGHER THAN THE  
RATES IN BOTSWANA AND SRI LANKA.”**

the physical abuse, or the many untimely deaths.”

## **THIS IS NOT ANCIENT HISTORY.**

What land had been acquired by African Americans in the early part of the 20th century—more than 15 million acres at its peak—was systematically whittled away through a variety of post-slavery structural barriers to only 2 million acres by the 1990s. Part of this was almost certainly due to a lack of wills, estate planning and basic legal representation among African American landowners—tools that that would have helped to protect and foster wealth. As intestate land accrued to disparate and far-flung heirs over generations, state acquisition and redistribution to white or corporate interests was made easier, and common.

But the federal government was

also instrumental in preventing black landowners from profiting from their properties. According to a 2011 report by the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service, which reviewed the findings of a 1994 study commissioned by the USDA, agency loans granted to black farmers were \$4,000 less, on average, than those given to white farmers. The study also found that less than 1 percent of disaster payments went to black farmers.

The largest agency loans went to corporations and white male farmers.

In 1997, African-American farmers filed a class action suit against the USDA, *Pigford v. Glickman*, claiming the agency had discriminated against black farmers in the issuance of money for crop payments, disaster payments and loans between the late 1980s and late 1990s. An initial settlement was reached in 1999, resulting in some \$1 billion in payouts to more than 13,000 black farmers to date. Another \$1.2 billion was agreed





upon in 2008 to cover the large number of farmers and their families who missed the original cut-off for filing claims.

The deadline for filing new claims passed on May 11 of this year.

Conservative critics have slammed some of these efforts. In particular, the USDA suit—among the largest civil-rights settlements in history—was labeled a “shakedown” and a “fraud” by right-wing pundit Andrew Breitbart, among others, in large part because the number of claimants exceeded federal data on black-owned farms for the period in question.

Extensive under-counting of black farmers, as well as shared land development among minorities, have been offered as explanations for the disparity.

But even if every one of the nearly 100,000 claimants in the Pigford case were fraudulent, and they somehow managed to game the system to secure what amounts, in most cases, to a one-time \$50,000 payout, the total \$2.2 billion price tag for the case would still only amount to a tiny fraction—far less than 1 percent—of the estimated wealth that has been extracted from the African-American community

over time, if Feagin’s upper-end estimate is accurate.

## IF ONE PERSON IS POOR, WE ARE ALL POOR

Eileen Briggs, a member of the Cheyenne River Sioux reservation in central South Dakota, joins me for a 50-mile drive along Route 212 from Eagle Butte to the reservation’s eastern edge. A herd of buffalo, property of the tribe, grazes on the crest of a low hill off to the right, beyond which an empty, yellow-green prairie spills southward to the horizon.

Briggs, an articulate and passionate host, has been educating me about her tribe’s role in an otherwise familiar narrative arc for all Native Americans, one of displacement, disenfranchisement and unabashed double-dealing. This has been particularly true for tribes of the desert and prairie West, where, over the last century or so, tribal culture has been deliberately undermined, land has been given and taken away, and geographic isolation has made gaining a meaningful foothold in the American economy particularly difficult.

By at least one recent census measure, Ziebach County, one of two South Dakota counties that comprise most of the Cheyenne River reservation, is cur-



rently the nation's poorest.

At the point where 212 meets Lake Oahe, a massive reservoir formed by the damming of the Missouri River north of Pierre two generations ago, Briggs points toward a manicured, road-side pull-out punctuated by a large granite monument.

The boulder, cleaved to expose a broad, polished face, is inscribed with a tribute to Cheyenne River leadership. At the bottom, behind a clutch of wildflowers placed by an unknown visitor, the monument notes that the tribe's burial sites

have been relocated from their original site nearby, along the banks of the pre-dammed Missouri.

The Cheyenne River Sioux lost more than 100,000 acres, including huge swaths of valuable timber and range land, to intentional flooding when the federal Oahe Dam project got underway in the 1950s.

The dam now provides electricity for millions of residents and businesses across the north-central United States, but the federal government originally offered little to the Cheyenne River tribe in return. Dogged legal battles,

The Delta basin is a wide shelf of cotton, soybeans, rice and catfish farming that stretches from Vicksburg in the south to Southaven in the north, along the border with Tennessee.

DERO SANFORD

"THERE JUST AIN'T **NOTHING** HERE."



spearheaded by tribal leaders over the last 40 years, finally prompted the U.S. Treasury in October of last year to set aside roughly \$145 million in interest, along with \$293 million in principal, for the tribe as compensation for the land lost in the dam project.

That's good news, Briggs says, but all of this—the damming, the exhumation of tribal graves by the Army Corps of Engineers, the wholesale relocation of the tribal agency to Eagle Butte and the high-handed behavior of the federal government—are simply part of a long list of insults that this and other tribes have borne. Briggs says it all weighs heavily on minds here, and that healing from all that, both economically and culturally, takes time.

“Our thinking, our culture tells us, that if one person is poor, we’re all poor,” she said. “And we are someone struggling in this country. We are part of this great American story that we all believe in, that we all want to see happen—a future for any dream that we want. There should be some understanding and some newly raised awareness and compassion for these Americans who have been suffering for a very long time.”

Unemployment figures on the reservations of South Dakota are staggering: averaging about 70 percent year over year, and peaking as high as 90 percent when seasonal work dries up. Not surprisingly, drunkenness, drug abuse and crime are problems, as are high-school dropouts and teen pregnancies.

Among the unemployed is Ronnie Bowker, a 50-year-old tribal member who last found work two years ago installing fencing around the cemeteries, scattered about the reservation, where the Army Corps of Engineers relocated the tribe's graves. He has not worked since.

Bowker grew up on the reservation in abject poverty, with no running water and no electricity. He now has a subsidized trailer in a community called La Plant, not far from the stone monument at the reservation's end, that he struggles to maintain against the harsh prairie winters and wicked spring and summer storms. A span of shingles is missing, torn off by high winds a year ago, and a broken gutter hangs across one of the front windows.

Like many of the residents with whom I spoke, Bowker has his own particular understanding of his station. He complained of racism within the tribe, where “half-breeds” with lighter skin wield more power and have more opportunity than “full-bloods” like him.





He blamed himself for the indiscretions of his youth: dropping out of school, drinking heavily, fighting and spending time in prison.

But he also said that despite his efforts at reform—he no longer drinks, he earned his GED, and he has become a something of a spokesman for the poorest and most remote residents on the reservation—he has a hard time identifying opportunities that might better his lot in life, and that of his wife and children.

“I often say it in a joking way, that La Plant is like a retirement home: You come here to die,” he tells me. “There’s just nothing to do.”

It’s easy to dismiss Bowker’s lot as self-inflicted, and there’s little question that, had he followed a different path early in life, he might have found better fortunes. But as with African Americans, it’s also fair to say that a great deal more wealth—transformational wealth—would have been coursing through La Plant, and Cheyenne River, and among many other tribes of the Great Plains, had it not been for decades of discriminatory policy.

This, too, would likely have made a difference in Bowker’s trajectory.

Consider the trust system set up

by the U.S. government under the Dawes Act of 1877, which essentially broke up tribal lands and assigned parcels, ranging in size from 40 to 160 acres, to individual tribal members as a way of assimilating Native Americans into the economy through land ownership. But rather than grant the parcels outright, the government held the land in trust—at first temporarily, but in the end, in perpetuity—and in many cases, it was leased for exploitation to the timber industry, miners and oil and gas companies.

Presumably, the tribal owners of each parcel would profit from such leasing, but the royalties collected from industries active on trust land was wildly mismanaged by the Department of the Interior. A lawsuit filed by a tribal member in 1996 seeking to find out the extent of the mismanagement discovered that the department had also failed to keep track of the heirs to the original allotments. And as had happened with black landowners, nominal ownership of intestate tribal allotments had multiplied exponentially over the generations.

In his 2004 testimony before Congress, Ross Swimmer, the former special trustee for American Indians at the Interior Department, noted that there are now tribal properties “with ownership interests that are less than





0.0000001 percent.” That fraction would afford an interest holder, Swimmer said, about four one-thousandths of a penny.

In the end, the lack of records made it virtually impossible for government officials to sort out what it owed and to whom. Even if it were possible to forensically create records for every potential beneficiary, Swimmer said, doing so would have cost vastly more than what most account holders were actually owed.

More than a dozen years of litigation yielded a \$3.4 billion settlement that was ultimately upheld in May of this year. It will provide

payments of between \$800 and \$1,000 to individual claimants. A large chunk of the settlement will also be used to allow the government to buy up some of the hopelessly fractionated land and turn the consolidated allotments back over to the tribes.

The federal judge who presided over the case for 10 years before being removed by an appeal panel in 2006, called the Interior Department and its handling of tribal interests “the morally and culturally oblivious hand-me-down of a disgracefully racist and imperialist government.”

Despite all of this, the Cheyenne River Sioux have been remarkably entrepreneurial, establishing a number of tribally owned ventures

Ronnie Bowker, a 50-year-old tribal member who last found work two years ago installing fencing around cemeteries, scattered about the South Dakota reservation, where the Army Corps of Engineers relocated the tribe’s graves. He has not worked since.



# “OUR THINKING, OUR CULTURE TELLS US, THAT IF ONE PERSON IS POOR, WE’RE ALL POOR.”

that have created jobs and small measures of growth and opportunity over the last few decades. These include a telephone authority, which now has some \$10 million in annual revenues, and Lakota Technologies, an information technology firm that provides call centers and other services to government and commercial customers.

Still, many stumbling blocks remain. There is not nearly enough housing for the reservation’s population, and overcrowding inside crumbling housing stock is common. Attempts to attract outside businesses to the area—an assembly plant, say, or a livestock processing facility—are stymied by the tribe’s antiquated and over-taxed water system, which has been unable to support new connections for years.

Kevin Keckler, chairman of the Cheyenne River Sioux tribe, reckoned a proper upgrade to the water system would cost about \$65 million. He said the tribe has lobbied the federal government for funding assistance with limited success,

estimating that about half the necessary amount is still needed. He guessed it would be another four or five years, even in the best of circumstances, before a new water system might be in place. He also said hundreds of millions more dollars would be needed to distribute the water to the remote communities like La Plant and others scattered across the reservation.

Keckler held up his index finger to indicate the size of the tubing that currently snakes out under the prairie to reach far-flung homes. When more than a few of these households turn on a spigot at the same time, the pressure can drop to a trickle.

“If we could get that water system built,” Keckler said, “I think we could see a better quality of life.”

Meanwhile, even tribal members who sit on substantial and intact parcels of trust land with clear title have had difficulty using the holding as collateral to secure loans and otherwise spur economic activity that would improve their lot. Commercial banks often avoid lending against trust land, they say, for fear of unfamiliar paperwork and complicated jurisdictional issues should





the debt go bad. This in turn makes it more difficult for tribal members to develop the sort of credit histories that are so key to upward mobility in modern society.

Zach Ducheneaux, a tribal member who sits on the board of directors of the Intertribal Agriculture Council, an organization founded in 1987 to promote the development of agricultural resources in tribal territories, traveled to Capitol Hill in June. He was armed with a request that the Government Accountability Office undertake a study of “credit deserts,” areas of the U.S. that are statistically underserved by bank financing and other credit opportunities.

“We think if you did a map of credit deserts, places where there is a lack of available credit and affordable credit to acquire assets to produce income and build wealth, it would lay right over the poorest places in the country, including this reservation,” Ducheneaux said. “It’s a real problem here.”

Officials at the USDA said they are working on programs to help ease the commercial credit gap on tribal land. The agency also noted in June that it was taking advantage of a new rule, authorized in the 2008 Farm Bill, that “will

make it much easier for Tribes to gain access to USDA funding for water and sewer improvement projects, electrical system upgrades and telecommunications services including broadband.”

In the minds of tribal members attempting to turn things around, such incremental programs and investments are a pittance compared to what’s been taken away, and to what was promised in treaties signed with their people.

“The reality is that the federal government has a trust responsibility with the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe and every other tribe in this country,” Briggs said. She is currently the executive director of Tribal Ventures, a 10-year, \$11 million poverty-reduction plan funded largely by the Northwest Area Foundation, a Minnesota-based philanthropy.

The Tribal Ventures program seeks to spur community and economic development opportunities on the reservation, and by its conclusion in 2016, Briggs hopes to be able to provide insight for other tribes on what works and what doesn’t in the struggle to lift reservations out of poverty.

“My relatives, my ancestors, gave up much for this country to be prosperous, to be what it is today,” Briggs says, “and if people cannot remember that, if they have forgot-





Above: Doretta Bowker, wife of Ronnie Bowker, proudly holds up a jigsaw puzzle she had put together years before. Below: A lightly graffitied playground overlooks La Plant, South Dakota.





ten that, we will continue to remind them. This is not about handouts. The government has not provided assistance for tribal lands because they felt it was the charitable thing to do. It's because they have a treaty obligation to the Sioux Nation and to our tribe. This was an exchange. This was a business deal.

"This whole economic downturn and the country's struggle, we have compassion and recognize that many people in this country have suffered a great deal because they lost their homes and their jobs and their savings. We have a lot of compassion for that," Briggs added. "But that's been our reality for 100 years."

## TURNING THINGS AROUND

On a blazing June afternoon, Ale Obregon, one of the leaders of the community where Elia and Rogelio De La O live, stands at the local county watering hole armed with a video camera. He's arranged to meet with the Webb County utility supervisor, Johnny Amaya, to discuss the lack of official supervision at the site, the need for better maintenance of the pump, which occasionally breaks down, and the

inadequacy of the facility to meet growing needs of residents.

As he waits for Amaya to arrive, a queue of cars pulling flatbed trailers and assorted pickup trucks—all bearing empty plastic tubs and drums—begins to form. As their turn arrives, drivers maneuver their vehicles under a fat hose dangling alongside a rusty steel box the size of a small van. They stuff the hose into the mouth of a container and then drop a couple of quarters into a slot on the side of the box: 50 cents for 150 gallons. The pump motor inside the box revs to life, and a stream of water begins to flow. The stink of sulfur fills the air.

When Amaya arrives, Obregon complains that many customers are taking more than their prescribed limit, 500 gallons, which is laid out on a small sign nearby. He asks why the county doesn't keep someone posted at the water point to oversee the operation, and why another water point couldn't be set up nearby to help alleviate what can be grindingly long waits in line—sometimes hours. Amaya, a small man with dusty boots and the weary carriage of an empathetic bureaucrat—someone who would like to do more but can't—listens patiently and says he will look into the problem.

Later, Amaya tells me that his staff has tried to regulate matters better at the water point, but that





tensions and tempers run high in the queue. Heated words and threats have been exchanged, he says, and guns have been drawn. He also notes that the water, a third of which comes from an aquifer underfoot, with the rest being trucked in from Laredo, is provided by the county at a substantial loss. The coin box generates about \$30,000 a year, he says. The cost to pump and truck water there, and otherwise maintain the facility, is more than 10 times that.

Underserviced communities like this are found all along the U.S.-Mexico border, from New Mexico and Arizona to California, but the largest share of them is in Texas. Some 400,000 Texans call these colonias home. The vast majority—including 85 percent of colonias residents under 18—are American citizens born in the United States.

Taking advantage of lax authority on unincorporated county land, developers in the 1950s began creating ad hoc subdivisions outside of city boundaries, often in agriculturally fallow or dangerously flood-prone areas. “They divided the land into small lots,” the Secretary of State’s website explains, “put in little or no infrastructure, then sold them to low-income individuals

seeking affordable housing.”

What the site doesn’t say, poverty advocates argue, is that demand is and has long been high among low-income buyers in part due to a lack of affordable housing inside border cities. And while the Texas legislature has passed numerous zoning laws, beginning in the 1990s, to curb the proliferation of the colonias, the lack of housing alternatives remains a problem. Often enough, colonias residents informally subdivide their own small plots to make room for family and other new neighbors, who plop down low-budget trailers or begin stacking cinder blocks in pursuit of a home.

Tangled networks of orange extension cords sometimes crisscross these complexes, linking those who don’t have power to those who do.

Just how all of these pockets of need—or those in the Delta, or those on tribal lands—can ultimately be turned around is a matter of great debate. Karl Stauber believes that part of the problem is that per capita government spending has traditionally favored metropolitan areas over rural areas.

Given the billions of dollars in agricultural subsidies that arise every five or so years from the Farm Bill, that might seem a flawed assumption, but there’s some evidence to support it, including a





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recent analysis by Bill Bishop, a long-time Texas-based journalist covering rural affairs and a co-editor of the web-based newspaper The Daily Yonder.

Using data from the Economic Research Service, Bishop found that federal spending on cities outstripped rural spending every year between 2004 and 2009. Per capita spending on non-agricultural development—that is, on community facilities, the environment, housing, regional development, transportation and Native American programs—has been substantially lower in rural areas in recent years.

“I think the Obama administration is the most metropolitan-focused administration in my lifetime,” Stauber told me, “and I’m over 60 years old.”

Secretary Vilsack took great umbrage at that suggestion, noting that President Obama signed an executive order last year that created the very first White House Rural Council specifically to address the challenges facing rural communities.

“For the first time we actually have a damn plan to build a rural economy that will support middle-class families, and we don’t get credit for it and don’t get recognition for it by anybody,” said Vil-

sack, who heads up the year-old council. “Pardon me for being frustrated about this, but we’re working our tails off here and you know, this rural council doesn’t get the recognition it deserves. For someone to say [the President] is urban-centric, it’s crazy.”

Stauber and other critics also argue that government strategies aimed at rural development have traditionally focused too heavily on subsidizing farming, and that this inevitably drives dollars into the pockets of big agriculture—a highly mechanized affair that has slowly shed jobs even as output has increased—at the expense of real solutions for America’s poorest citizens.

“I think the reality is, as long as the dominant federal frame that gets applied to rural development is agriculture, then I think we’re actually forcing people to leave,” Stauber said. “If you want to look at one of the great economic success stories of the 20th century, it’s agriculture. You look at the yield per unit of labor and the yield per unit of capital, and it’s just remarkable.

“There’s nothing wrong with helping farmers create new competitive advantage,” he added, “but the answer to that is not the same thing as the answer to the question: ‘How do you help rural communities create new competitive advantage?’”





**“WE SEND ALL THIS FOREIGN AID  
TO OTHER COUNTRIES TO HELP THEM  
DEVELOP WATER RESOURCES, AND YET  
THERE ARE PEOPLE LIVING RIGHT HERE  
[IN TEXAS] WITHOUT POTABLE WATER.”**

According to a 2010 report from the Congressional Research Service, even farm families don't make money from farms. “Nearly 90 percent of total farm household income comes from off-farm sources,” the report found. Manufacturing accounts for roughly 25 percent of rural private sector earnings and about 12 percent of all rural jobs, according to the report. As in many other places, the service sector is the predominant source for employment opportunities in rural areas.

“Farming, and agriculture more generally, however, remain the major legislative focus for much of congressional debate on rural policy,” the report noted.

Other advocates, including John Henneberger, a co-director of the Texas Low-Income Housing Information Service, which works to develop low-income housing opportunities in Texas, have con-

demned both Congress and the USDA for cutting back on a number of crucial programs. Henneberger is particularly incensed at steady declines in housing loan programs that have helped thousands of very low- and low-income families to build their homes or otherwise become homeowners.

“Vilsack may be investing historic amounts of money in some people in rural America, but it is not getting invested in the homes or lives of poor rural Americans,” Henneberger said. “Rural Americans have Congress to thank for acting to reject a portion of Secretary Vilsack's unprecedented transfer of funds to corporate agriculture from programs that help the rural poor afford a home.”

On this, and on charges that the administration is too agriculture-focused to really address the problem of rural poverty, Vilsack again becomes incensed. “One of the biggest frustrations I have in life—in life, not just in this job,” he said, “is how few people under-



stand what this department does.”

The administration has overseen substantial increases in agricultural production and exports, Vilsack said, which lead to increases in processing and shipping and packaging jobs in rural areas. He points to a recent analysis of the rural manufacturing sector by the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City, which notes that “rural manufacturing has rebounded with a vengeance” in the last two years.

Vilsack also said the administration has enrolled a record number of acres in conservation, linking that to outdoor recreational opportunities and, in turn,

increased jobs in contracting and tourism. The administration has also put a good deal of support behind domestic energy production, including biofuels, which inevitably creates jobs in rural areas.

In an effort to drive USDA resources further into historically disenfranchised minority communities, the agency has also developed a StrikeForce Initiative, which seeks to connect with community-based organizations already on the ground and distribute USDA resources through them. And all of this has been done, Vilsack said, in an era of stiff budget and staffing cutbacks.

Tribal members who sit on substantial and intact parcels of trust land with clear title have had difficulty using the holding as collateral to secure loans that would improve their lot.



AARON PACKARD



“When we’re dealing with substantial reductions in our budget, and we’re dealing with having to meet a growing demand,” Vil-sack said, “the challenge for us is to determine where we can do the most good with the least amount of money.”

Reyna, the Texas attorney who introduced me to the De La Os, says that’s a philosophy that’s deeply familiar to residents of the border colonias.

“We send all this foreign aid to other countries to help them develop water resources, and yet there are people living right here without potable water,” he told me. “They live on American soil. They live in Texas. They live right here, smack in the middle of the United States. It’s really very, very sad to see. I wish we had a magic wand to fix all this, but we don’t.”

Since the late 1990s, the De La Os have been improving their trailer home, inch by inch, dollar by dollar, with their own hands. A lack of affordable alternatives drove them to this place, and the bare wood framing, floppy panel floors, exposed insulation and unfinished wiring suggest years of sweat equity for a family that has lived—without government help, they say—on

\$10,000 to \$15,000 a year.

Until Rogelio, 69, took ill last year, they earned that money, with help from their American-born daughter, working in the canneries of Wisconsin or harvesting beets and potatoes in North Dakota and Minnesota. When harvest season was over, they returned to Texas and took jobs in sewing factories or construction sites around Laredo. For most of this work, the family earned about \$8 an hour, Elia said.

At the family’s kitchen table, Elia serves her guests tall glasses of distilled water, which she draws from a jug. It is a welcome treat on a day when the outside temperature is now upwards of 105 degrees. I ask the couple if they’ve ever felt taken advantage of, or abused by a social order that, from the outside, seems very much stacked against them.

Elia quickly answers no, and so I follow with another question: Does she consider herself poor?

“Poverty doesn’t make a difference to us. We’ve always been poor,” she replies. “We don’t have luxuries. But the things that God has allowed us to do here, we appreciate them. Many people are worse off.

“The only thing that is a great need for us,” she adds, “is the water.”

