

The Black Belt's Population Decline Explains Why Alabama May Lose a Congressional Seat in the 2020 Census

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"The 2020 Census is more important than ever to Alabama... it helps us secure \$13 billion in funding for education, healthcare, communities, and economic development opportunities; and it will help us maintain our current Congressional representation."

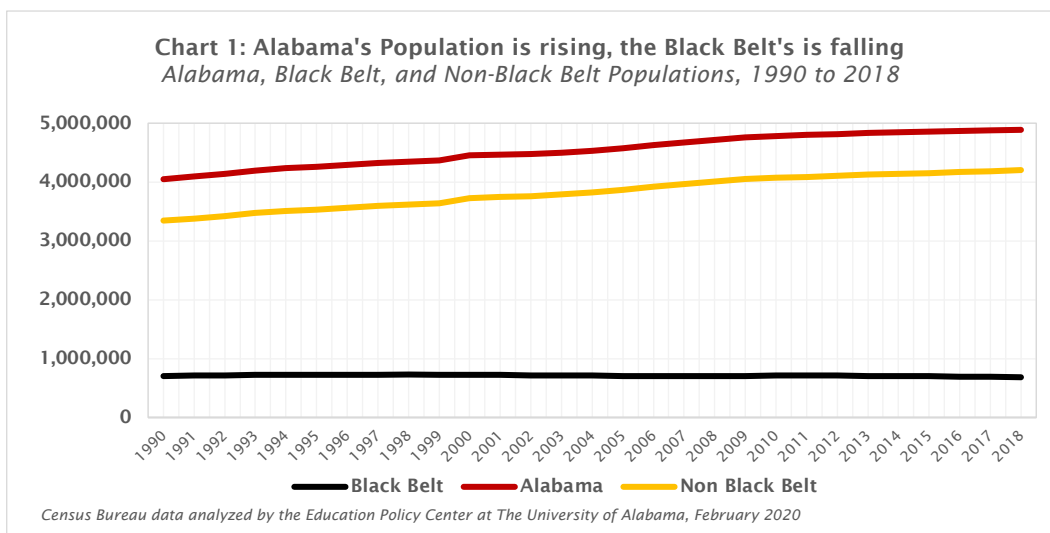
—Governor Kay Ivey¹

Will Alabama lose its seventh congressional seat after the 2020 Census? In this issue brief, the first in a series of eight The University of Alabama's Education Policy Center will publish on demographic, economic, and education issues, challenges, concerns, and options facing the Black Belt, we argue that if our state loses a seat, it will be the direct result of stagnant or declining population in Alabama's 24 Black Belt counties. The challenges of rural life in Alabama, and indeed rural America, are driving away its most valuable resource: its people. Economics, lower access to information-age broadband and healthcare, as well as the inability of 19th century systems of governance and taxation frozen in Alabama's antiquated, race-based 1901 Jim Crow state constitution are key forces underlying this decades-long trend. This is the policy context for the critically important 2020 Census, which cannot be divorced from any discussion of the Black Belt's population decline. Losing a congressional seat will jeopardize billions in federal investment dollars over the next decade. This is why Alabama policymakers on a bipartisan basis are working tirelessly to insure a full and complete count for the Census.

The Black Belt is not keeping up with the rest of Alabama

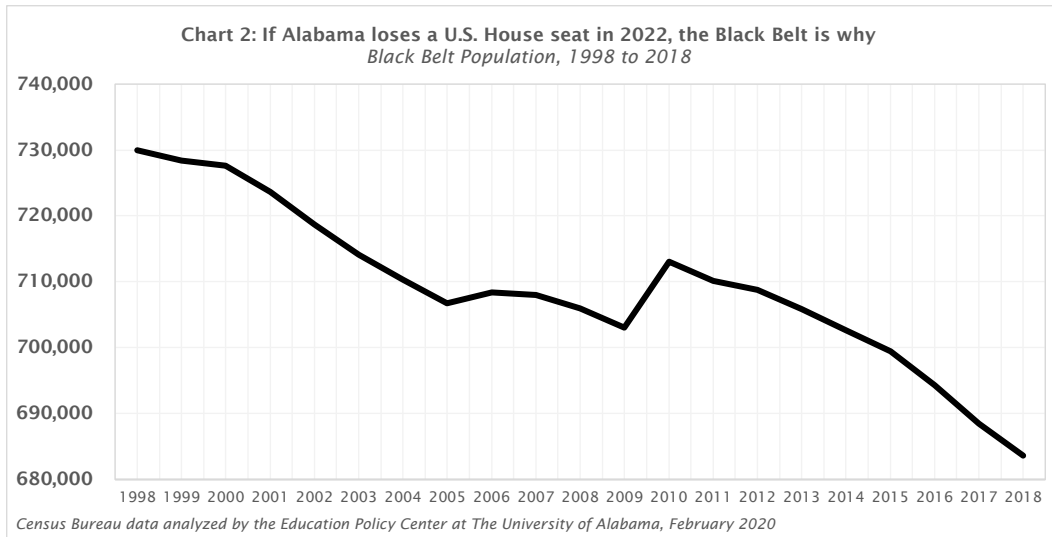
By whatever definition is used to define it—and we acknowledge that no generally accepted, consistent definition exists—the rural counties that constitute Alabama's Black Belt are losing people. Chart 1 shows the populations of Alabama,

Black Belt counties, and non-Black Belt counties from 1990 to 2018. Alabama's statewide population steadily rose between 1990 and 2018, and the population changes for Alabama's 43 non-Black Belt counties exactly paralleled changes in the state's population over these three decades. By contrast, Alabama's 24 Black Belt counties have seen persistent stagnation or decline.



Of the 24 Black Belt counties, 16 lost population both in the twenty years from 1990 to 2010 and after the Great Recession from 2010 to 2018. One county, Pickens, lost population from 1990 to 2010, and gained afterwards. Three counties—Escambia, Hale, and Washington—saw rising populations from 1990 to 2010, and loss to 2018. Four counties—Crenshaw, Montgomery, Pike, and Russell—saw population rise in both periods.² The county and city with the largest population loss was Selma, the world-famous county seat of Dallas County, where Martin Luther King, Jr., John Lewis, and other civil rights protesters led the epic Voting Rights march over the Edmund Pettus Bridge in 1965. Selma's population fell from just over 21,000 in 2010 to 17,200 in 2019, a staggering 17 percent decline.³

Chart 2 isolates just the 24 Black Belt counties. It reveals the region lost over 40,000 residents from 1998 to 2018. Sadly, this trend may continue in for the foreseeable future, as persistent issues such as hospital closures and lack of broadband access drive people away. The sudden requirement for remote learning due to the pandemic exposed crevasses in available broadband services that echo the gulf in electricity access in the 1930s between the rural have-nots and an urban America that had been wired for nearly two generations.



Why are people leaving?

Alabamians, and Americans across the country, have been leaving rural areas in search of better quality of life and greater economic opportunity for some time. “[From] rural hospital closures to the rise of hookworm in Lowndes County,” healthcare in the Black Belt and other areas like it remains a policy challenge.⁴ Meanwhile, internet access—the electricity of the twenty-first century—is clearly not available to all. “According to a study by Microsoft in 2018, about 3.3 million Alabamians do not use the internet at broadband speeds,” which equates to 67% of the state’s population just two years ago.⁵ It simply is not making sense for rural Alabamians, especially its younger residents, to live so far from healthcare or internet—let alone a combination of the two. A future issue brief in this series will zero in on the challenge of rural broadband.

Implications

The population loss in non-metro Alabama—which includes every Black Belt county regardless of the definition—has long-term political consequences for the state. National media outlets such as Politico predict Alabama will lose a congressional seat in the reapportionment

following the 2020 Census.⁶ State policymakers recognize the importance of retaining the seventh seat and are developing strategies to make sure a full and complete Census count occurs in 2020. Governor Kay Ivey cited the need for a

full 2020 Census count in both her January 2019 Inaugural Address⁷ and her March 2019 State of the State Address.⁸

Challenges remain, however. *The Moulton Advertiser* reports that Alabama is behind 30 other states in filling out the 2020 Census.⁹ As of June 15, the national self-response rate was 61.4% while Alabama's was 59.3%, according to the US Census Bureau. Complications from the COVID-19 pandemic have delayed Bureau deadlines for responses, so there does remain time for Alabama to increase its response rates.

We conclude with a hopeful note: There's still a chance Alabama may *not* lose a House seat after the 2020 Census. CNN, CBS, and Politico all predict Alabama will lose a seat, but the nonpartisan Election Data Services notes that if the state can count between 11,000 and 19,000 more people, it may retain its seventh congressional seat. But even if Alabama does not lose a seat in 2020, unless the trend of Black Belt population loss is reversed, one or perhaps two congressional seats could be lost in 2030.¹⁰ This underscores the need for a major effort to lift Alabama's Black Belt, over and above the full-court press Alabama leaders are presently engaged in to ensure a full and complete 2020 Census count.

THE EDUCATION POLICY CENTER AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA

Established in 1924, the Education Policy Center is The University of Alabama's oldest center or institute. Through its ongoing nonpartisan research and programs, it seeks to assist the College of Education and the University to fulfill their mission to improve the quality of life for all Alabamians. The EPC promotes expanding access and success, strengthening equity, and advancing economic and community development with special emphasis on telling the story of the Deep South to policymakers in Alabama, the region and nation.

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