

# A Snapshot of Racial Inequities in Human Services Programs in Rural Contexts

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2M RESEARCH

Human services programs provide critical safety net services, including economic and employment support, cash assistance, and family and early childhood support. In recent years there have been growing efforts to understand and address racial bias in human services delivery. Racial and ethnic disparities in human services are well documented throughout the literature (Fong et al. 2014; McDaniel et al. 2017; Institute for Research on Poverty 2021; Shapiro 2021), but little is known about how these inequities manifest in federal human services programs in rural areas. In this brief, we identify differences between Black, Hispanic, Native, and white<sup>1</sup> populations that may indicate a potentially unfair and systemic privilege for certain populations. Our analysis draws on several sources, including quantitative data on rural counties with different racial makeups and qualitative data gleaned from interviews with rural human services staff. We synthesize this quantitative and qualitative data to describe racial inequities in human services programs in rural areas.

## Key Findings

- Rural counties with predominantly Black, Hispanic, and Native populations have high remaining need, which is defined as the difference between the eligible population and population served by human services programs in each rural county.
- Rural counties with large Black, Hispanic, and Native populations have the highest levels of unemployment and poverty and limited access to broadband and transportation.
- Predominantly Black and Hispanic rural counties have significantly less funding available per person in poverty than predominantly white and Native rural counties. This inequity may be partially explained by lower welfare cutoffs and similar policies in states where these populations are often located. This inequity may also be attributable to a cultural distrust of the government and a stigma associated with receiving human services.
- Tribal program staff described two key differentiators between tribal and non-tribal communities in rural areas that impact service delivery: (1) Historical trauma due to past interactions between the Federal Government and tribal governments; and (2) A disconnect between Western and tribal cultures, expectations, beliefs, and perceptions of success, meaning that services may be misaligned to community needs and priorities.

<sup>1</sup> Racial categories besides “white” are capitalized in line with several contemporary style guides, including Columbia Journalism Review’s style guide: <https://www.cjr.org/analysis/capital-b-black-styleguide.php>.

## Human Services Programs in Rural Contexts Study

This brief is part of a study focused more broadly on human services programs in rural contexts. Through a mixed-methods research design, including administrative and secondary data and 12 site visits, with engagement from human service practitioners and other subject matter experts, this project (1) provided a rich description of human services programs in rural contexts; (2) determined the remaining need for human services in rural communities; and (3) identified opportunities for strengthening the capacity of human services programs to promote the economic and social wellbeing of individuals, families, and communities in rural contexts. The study examined several human services programs administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families; Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting; Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood; and Health Profession Opportunity Grants, as well as programs on early childhood development, family development, employment, and higher education and technical training.

## Defining Racial Inequities

In the literature documenting racial and ethnic differences in the provision of human services, the terms racial disparity and racial inequity are often used interchangeably. They both refer to differences between racial groups that indicate a potentially unfair and systemic privilege for certain groups (Fong et al. 2014; McDaniel et al. 2017; Institute for Research on Poverty 2021; Shapiro 2021). In this brief we examine differences between Black, Hispanic, Native, and white populations that may suggest racial inequities in both the need for human services and funding for human services programs.

Our comparison of these differences details the following:

- Average level of need for human services programs broken down by racial group, as compared to the average level of need across all rural counties.
- Average amount of funding for human services programs broken down by racial group, as compared to the average amount of funding across all rural counties.

Differences in level of need and amount of funding between racial groups indicate potential inequity because, barring some other explanation, if these counties experienced no racial inequity we would expect the levels of need and amount of funding for different populations to be similar. Please note that is not our intent to imply that a specific level of need or amount of funding is normal for any specific racial group. Instead, our goal is to point out differences between various groups and explain how those differences may suggest racial inequity.

## Identifying Black, Hispanic, Native, and White Populations in Rural Contexts

Most rural counties in the U.S. are made up of populations that identify as non-Hispanic white. Of the 1,976 rural counties we analyzed using the 5-year estimates of the 2018 American Communities Survey,<sup>2</sup> 90

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<sup>2</sup> We identified rural counties as counties within any of the 50 states that are outside of a metropolitan area. We excluded counties in the territories in this project due to time constraints and some misalignment between data sources available between the 50 states and the territories.

percent (1,781 counties) had a predominantly<sup>3</sup> white population. Only 4 percent of counties had a predominantly Black population (82 counties); just under 4 percent of counties had a predominantly Hispanic population (78 counties); and about 2 percent had a predominantly American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander population (35 counties, hereafter referred to as predominantly Native counties).<sup>4</sup> **Exhibit 1** presents a map showing the locations of the rural counties we identified. Predominantly Black rural counties are located in the deep South in Louisiana, Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia. Predominantly Hispanic rural counties are mostly located in Texas and New Mexico. Finally, predominantly Native counties are spread out among New Mexico, Arizona, the Dakotas, Montana, Alaska, and other pockets in Oklahoma and North Carolina.<sup>5</sup> **Exhibit 1** also shows that several counties with predominantly Black, Hispanic, and Native populations have high levels of remaining need<sup>6</sup> for human services. Through a hotspot analysis, we identified counties with a level of remaining need higher than the national average at a statistically significant level ( $p < 0.1$ ). The map below identifies these counties using diagonally hatched shading. The ovals in the map show that the counties with high remaining need are clustered together in 26 locations in the U.S. This includes predominantly Black counties in Alabama and South Carolina; predominantly Native counties in Arizona, Alaska, and New Mexico; and predominantly Hispanic counties in New Mexico and Texas.

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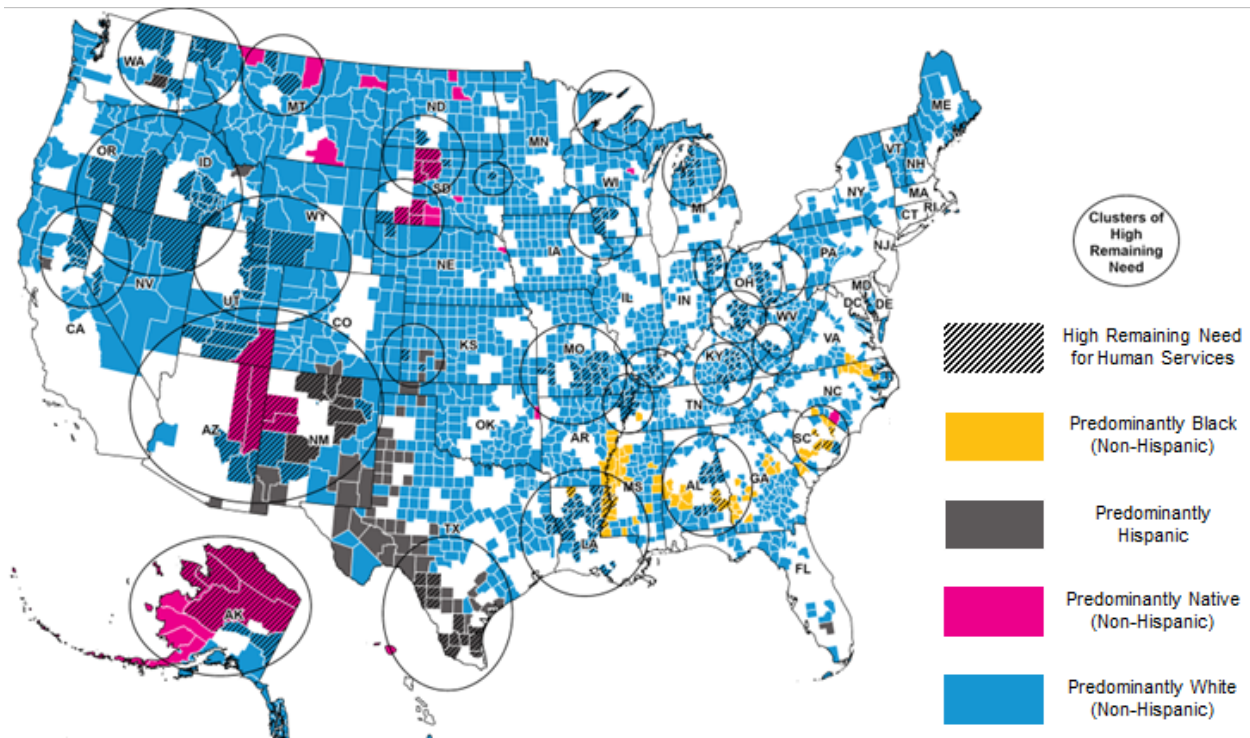
<sup>3</sup> Counties were determined to be “predominantly” a certain population when that population was the largest in the county than any other group.

<sup>4</sup> We used the term “Hispanic” to refer to people of Latin American origin living in the United States to align with the language used by research sources, although we recognize that the term “Latinx” or “Latine” may be perceived as more inclusive. We use the term Black to describe people of African descent in the U.S. in line with contemporary preferences to respect the experiences across the African diaspora in the U.S., although we recognize that not everyone belonging to this group identifies as such.

<sup>5</sup> The Census also collects data on individuals that identify as Asian or as some other race not represented by the categories of the census. There are no rural counties where these groups are the predominant population.

<sup>6</sup> We defined remaining need for federal human services as the difference between the eligible population and the population served for the four human services programs of interest. The greater this difference, the greater the remaining need. For more information see section 7.3 of the Comprehensive Report.

## Exhibit 1. Map of Rural Counties with High Remaining Need for Human Services by Predominant Race in 2018



**Sources:** 2018 county cartographic boundary file and 2018 core-based statistical area delineation file from the U.S. Census Bureau; 2018 American Communities Survey, 5-year estimates; administrative data from the Administration for Children and Families and Health Resources and Services Administration; other secondary survey data listed in section 7.3 of the Comprehensive Report.

**Note:** We define the terms “predominant” and “predominantly” when referring to race/ethnicity in a county as the race/ethnicity with the largest population. White space on this map corresponds to urban counties that are not the focus of this brief.

### Black, Hispanic, and Native Populations in Rural Communities Face Significant Economic and Social Challenges

We examined data from the American Communities Survey and broadband data from the Federal Communications Commission to understand how predominantly Black, Hispanic, Native, and white rural counties compare to the average level of need in rural counties. We found that rural counties that are predominantly composed of Black, Hispanic, and Native populations experience greater levels of unemployment and poverty and have more limited access to highspeed broadband internet and transportation than rural counties with predominantly white populations. This suggests rural counties with large Black, Hispanic, or Native populations may have greater challenges and need for human services.

### **Perspectives Shared by Rural Tribal Communities**

Interviews with program staff in rural tribal<sup>7</sup> communities revealed tribal-specific needs, including economic need that may go beyond what is experienced in non-tribal communities. Program staff also shared that, historically, tribal communities have experienced trauma through their interactions with Western culture. This trauma is the result of events such as the forceful removal of communities from their tribal lands and the forced reeducation of children in boarding schools. These events were efforts to force tribal communities to assimilate to Western culture, which resulted in trauma that still affects the communities' social and economic wellbeing today. Staff felt that tribal knowledge, traditional ways of living, and alternative modes of community building are often not valued as highly as Western culture by people outside of tribal communities. Program staff felt that forcing tribal populations to adapt to Western expectations adds to their historical trauma and creates further distrust of the government. This prevents people from accessing human services, and further exacerbates higher rates of mental health challenges, substance use, and domestic violence.

**See section 3.1.6 of the Comprehensive Report for more details.**

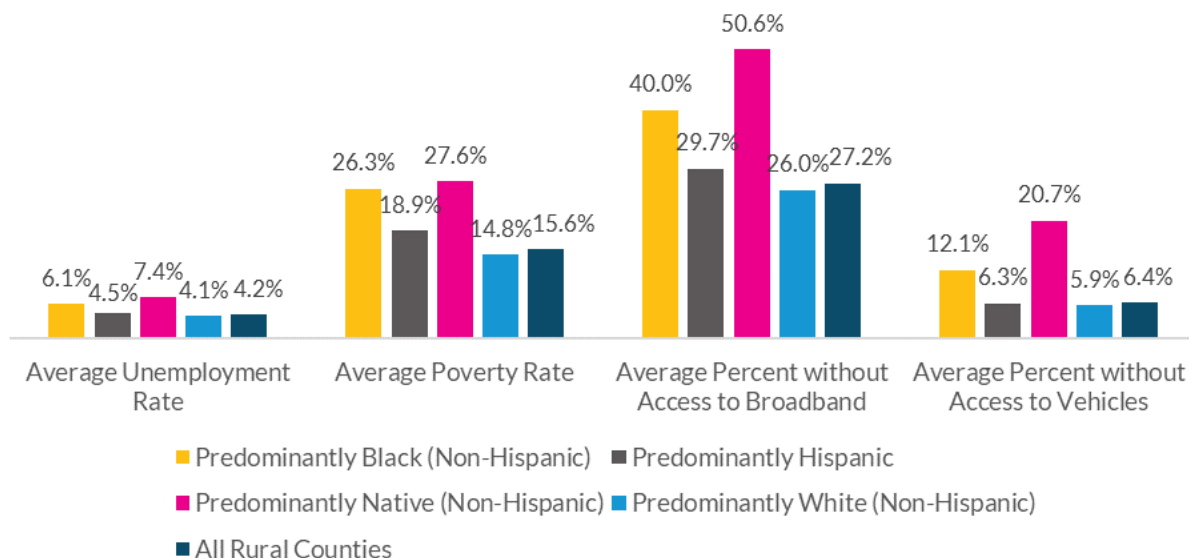
**Exhibit 2** shows that in 2018, the average unemployment rate across all counties was 4.2 percent, predominantly Black rural counties had an average unemployment level of 6.1 percent, predominantly Hispanic rural counties had an average of 4.5 percent, predominantly Native counties had the highest average of 7.4 percent, and predominantly white rural counties had an average unemployment rate of 4.1 percent. Findings are similar for the average poverty rate (15.6 percent [all counties], 26.3 percent [Black], 18.9 percent [Hispanic], 27.6 percent [Native], and 14.8 percent [White]), percent without access to broadband<sup>8</sup> (27.2 percent, 40 percent, 29.7 percent, 50.6 percent, and 26 percent, respectively), and percent without access to vehicles (6.4 percent, 12.1 percent, 6.3 percent, 20.7 percent, and 5.9 percent, respectively). This is an indication that predominantly Black and Native rural counties and, to a lesser extent, predominantly Hispanic rural counties have more economic and related challenges than other counties do.

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<sup>7</sup> The term 'Native' refers to individuals who have self-identified as American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander in the American Community Survey. The term 'tribal' refers to a sovereign nation that has one centralized government that has the power to govern a specific geographic area. Currently, 573 sovereign tribal nations (variously called tribes, nations, bands, pueblos, communities, and Native villages) have a formal nation-to-nation relationship with the US government. These tribal governments are legally defined as "federally recognized tribes."

<sup>8</sup> We defined broadband as fixed terrestrial 25/3 mbps and/or mobile LTE with a minimum advertised speed of 5/1 mbps based on the 2018 Broadband Deployment Report by the Federal Communications Commission.

## Exhibit 2. Average Unemployment, Poverty, Access to Broadband, and Access to Vehicles in Predominantly White, Black, Hispanic, and Native Rural Counties in 2018



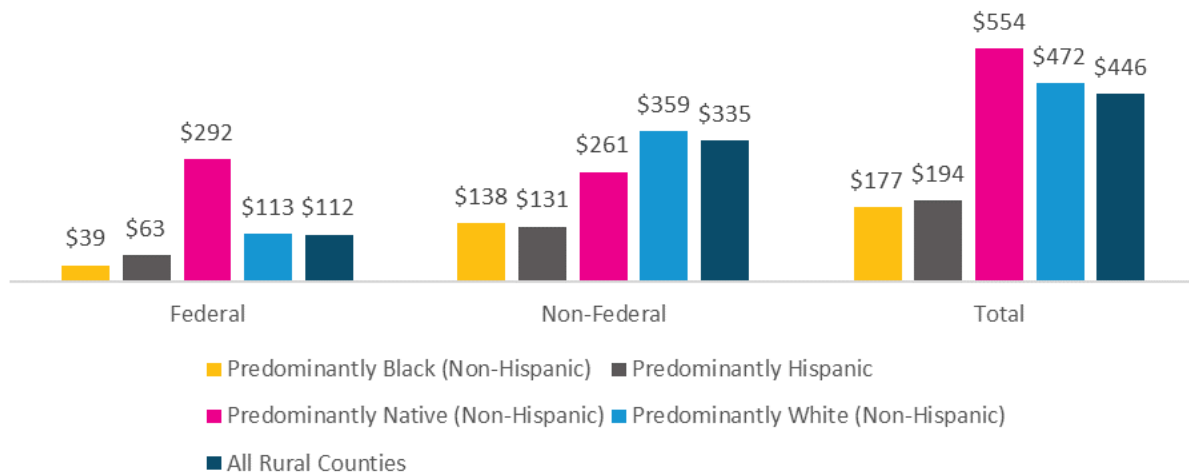
Sources: 2018 American Communities Survey, 5-year estimates; 2018 Broadband Deployment Report by the Federal Communications Commission

### Federal Human Services Funding May Address Some Need for Rural Native Communities, but Black and Hispanic Communities Receive Fewer Funds than White Communities

Given the challenges faced by rural communities with larger Black, Hispanic, and Native populations that we discussed above, human services may wish to target these communities with more funding. We analyzed the amount of funding in rural counties for four federal programs, including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Cash Assistance; the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program; the Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Program, and the Health Profession Opportunity Grants Program. Using administrative data sources provided by the Administration for Children and Families and the Health Resources and Services Association, we estimated the total funding for all four programs in each category of rural county (predominantly Black, Hispanic, Native, and white) and divided the total funding by the total population in poverty in each category. This gives us an estimate of the total amount of federal funding available per person in poverty.<sup>10</sup> Exhibit 3 shows that in 2018 these four federal programs combined provided an average amount of about \$112 per person in poverty across all counties, \$39 per person in predominantly Black counties, \$63 per person in predominantly Hispanic counties, \$292 per person in predominantly Native counties, and \$113 per person in predominantly white counties. In other words, predominantly Black and Hispanic rural counties have less funding available per person in poverty than predominantly white and Native rural counties.

<sup>10</sup> Section 7.2.2 and 7.2.3 in our Comprehensive Report provide more detail on how we estimated federal funding.

### Exhibit 3. Federal, Non-Federal, and Total Human Services Funding Per Person in Poverty in Rural Counties in 2018



Sources: 2018 American Communities Survey, 5-year estimates; Administrative data on fiscal year 2018 funding for federal human services programs including TANF, MIECHV, HMRF, and HPOG; 2012 Survey of State and Local Government Finances; 2018 National Center for Charitable Statistics

We also examined the amount of non-federal funding per person in poverty using data from the National Center for Charitable Statistics and the Survey of State and Local Governments.<sup>11</sup> In the case of non-federal funding, we found that the average amount of funding per person was \$335. Predominantly white counties receive the most funding per person in poverty (\$359) compared to predominantly Black, Hispanic, and Native counties (\$138, \$131, and \$261, respectively). Finally, we also provide the total of both federal and non-federal funding in **Exhibit 3**. The average level of combined federal and nonfederal funding available per person in poverty was \$446. Overall, predominantly Native and predominantly white rural counties are closer in terms of the amount of funding available per person in poverty (\$554 and \$472, respectively), but predominantly Black and predominantly Hispanic communities have much less funding (\$177 and \$194, respectively).

The finding that Native counties receive more federal and non-federal funding per person (\$554) compared to Black (\$177), Hispanic (\$194), and white (\$472) counties is encouraging given the challenges of poverty, access to broadband, and historical trauma that human services program staff shared; more information can be found in the text box on page 5 titled “Perspectives Shared by Rural Tribal Communities.”

Another key finding from our analysis is that predominantly Black and predominantly Hispanic communities have much more limited human services funding, which may highlight inequities in how the funding, at both the federal and non-federal level, is allocated. Hahn et al. (2017) found that TANF policy decisions at the state level are significantly related to the state’s racial makeup. Specifically, the authors found that while holding all else equal, states with larger populations of Black people have more restrictive and less generous TANF policies (Hahn et al. 2017). Accordingly, our analysis revealed that predominantly Black and predominantly Hispanic rural counties are in states, mostly in the South, with more restrictive TANF policies and lower welfare cutoffs, whereas predominantly white rural counties are in states with high welfare

<sup>11</sup> Section 7.3.3 in our Comprehensive Report provides more detail on how we estimated non-federal funding.

cutoffs (see Exhibit 1 showing where the counties are located throughout the U.S.). In addition to inequity in program policy and welfare cutoffs, our interviews also suggest that cultural factors in predominantly Black and Hispanic rural communities may also limit the capacity of human services programs ability to reach, recruit, and engage participants. This in turn limits the number of human services organizations able to compete for funds in these communities. In several interviews, we heard that a cultural distrust of government among some minority groups may discourage those groups from participating in social services programs. Specifically, staff recalled difficulties recruiting participants from Hispanic populations due to a cultural distrust of government. Program staff noted that Hispanic people in their counties tended to not seek out services, especially when one or more family member in their household did not have citizenship status. Staff felt there was a fear that government involvement would lead to negative consequences for families requesting assistance.

### **Opportunities for Future Research**

This analysis focuses on differences in economic and social challenges and human services funding in rural counties with different populations of various racial groups. These racial differences have implications for the provision of human services and underscore the need for human services to intentionally promote racial equity in their service delivery. However, more research is needed to determine whether these differences could be attributed to a multitude of external factors such as differences in preferences, whether people who are eligible view themselves as in need of services, family factors, eligibility, and/or other external factors (McDaniel et al. 2017).

Importantly, we examined differences at the county-level, which is a large unit of geography. Many of the counties (predominantly Black, predominantly Hispanic, predominantly Native, predominantly white) in our analysis likely include smaller concentrations of other populations that we could not analyze. Moreover, at the county level, we did not identify any predominantly Asian counties or counties with large numbers of other races/ethnicities. While the federal funding data we used is not available at geographies smaller than the county, future studies could implement surveys or other primary data collection to conduct more nuanced analyses. Secondly, our analysis only focused on four federal human services programs. Human services represent a very large and diverse set of programs and future studies can determine whether our findings persist when other programs are included in the analysis.

Despite these limitations, our findings do suggest some level of inequity in the availability of human services funding for Black, Hispanic, and Native populations in rural communities, especially Black and Hispanic populations. To address this issue, federal and non-federal human services can work together with rural communities to identify the best path forward to addressing the needs of rural Black, Hispanic, and Native populations.



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