

Programs and Resources to Assist Appalachian Ohio

Thomas W. Blaine, Associate Professor
Ohio State University Extension
April 2024

In part 1, we described the concepts of justice in general and environmental justice in particular. We adopted Rawls's (1971, 2020) criterion that any step toward justice may only be considered in that way if it assists those who have been damaged the most by *injustice*. For a community, an example of injustice would be a high poverty rate and an example of environmental injustice would be a place where environmental degradation and pollution are common, along with diseases suffered by the population that are outside all proportion to other regions (Smith and Fisher 2016; Strobo, 2012).

In the United States, two large contiguous areas that fit this description are the Mississippi Delta and Appalachia. Since this project is associated with The Ohio State University, a state with over a dozen Appalachian counties, we will be focusing on programs that could potentially assist there. We encourage others to develop measures along this line for intervening on behalf of deprived communities elsewhere. Many of the basic principles would apply anywhere.

What is Appalachia?

The idea of Appalachia is really a concept, where the rugged Appalachian mountains and their foothills in the eastern United States have produced communities that tend to be isolated and remote. This has in turn created a culture with various regional dialects, or at a minimum, accents, vocabulary, music and other characteristics or traditions. One of the primary characteristics though is poverty, along with its twin, environmental degradation/pollution. This is because Appalachia has traditionally exported unrefined, raw, low value products (coal, timber and tobacco or other raw crops).

The facilities to process these items tend to lie outside the region, so the economic gains that go to them (called value-added) have accrued to people outside Appalachia. This leaves Appalachian residents with scarred landscapes, polluted streams, air and rivers, and continued poverty due to low wages along with poor health outcomes because of the nature of the work and lack of decent health care facilities (Fernandez-Navarro et al, 2012; Fisher et al, 2008).

It is often a legitimate question to ask: *where* is Appalachia? But Appalachia is not a jurisdiction or separate section of the United States. You cannot draw a series of lines on a map and declare that anything within these lines is Appalachia and anything outside them is not. In fact one of the characteristics of Appalachia itself, strong local ties and customs, means that the heterogeneity of the region further prevents us from doing that.

Appalachia, therefore is like other loosely defined areas of the United States like the Great Plains or the Mississippi Delta. You cannot draw lines around regions like those either, but we study and routinely refer to them nevertheless.

Figure 1 shows us a map where sociologists and economists have attempted to do this anyway, at least to provide a general guideline for “where” Appalachia is.

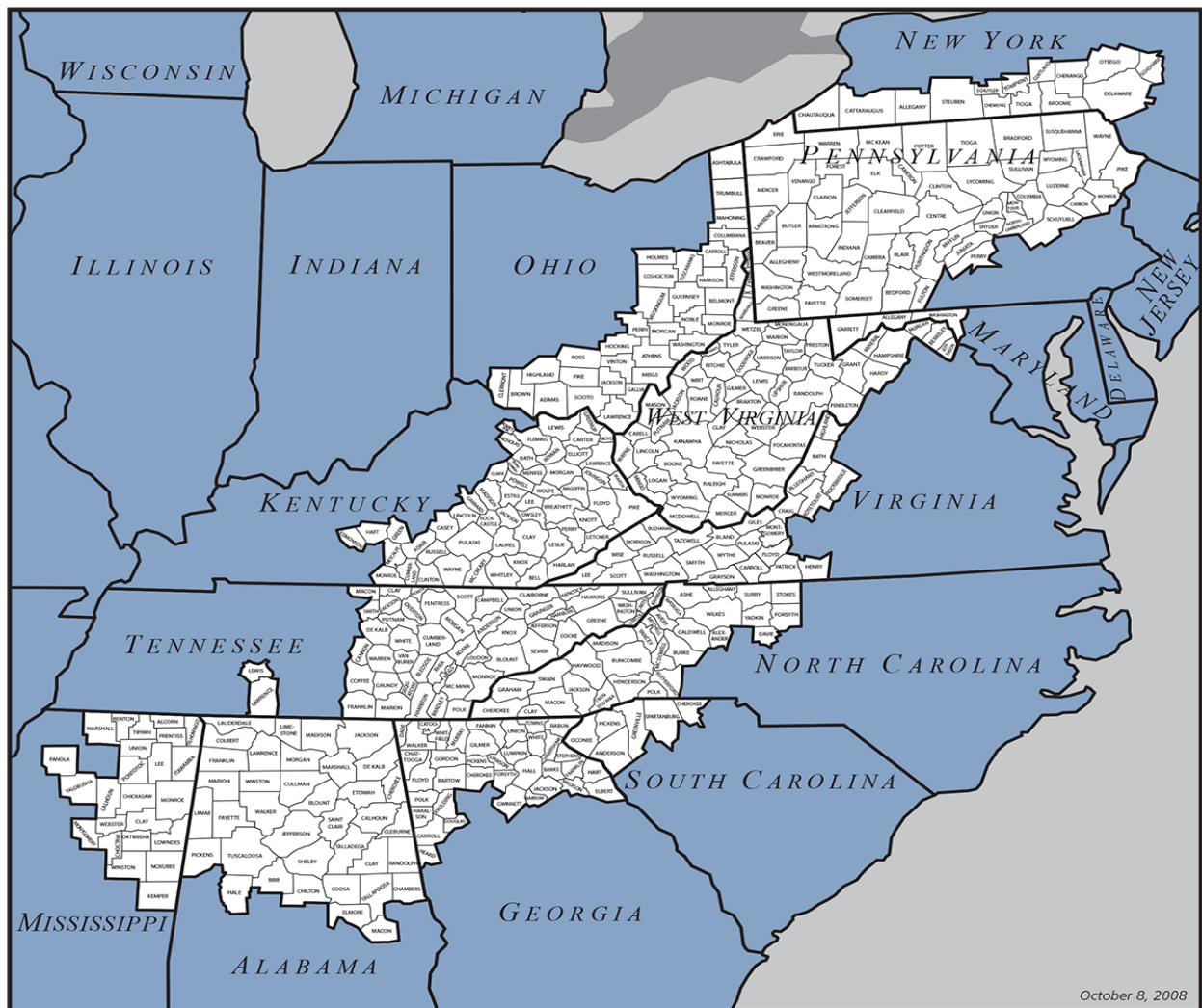


Figure 1: Appalachia as defined by the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC)

As you can see, the region as officially recognized includes portions of 13 states, extending from New York to Mississippi. It includes the entire state of West Virginia, and thirty two counties in Ohio. Note that there are zero non-contiguous counties in the region.

Fisher and Smith (2016) use a model of an “internal colony” to describe Appalachia, meaning that the USA as a whole has tended to use and abuse the region for its own advantage without regard for the well being of citizens of the region. They argue that this treatment included impoverishment, stereotyping and exploitation. They also cite dispossession of the land as an important characteristic of the internal colony model, since much of the land within the region is owned by “outsiders” who do not live there. Absentee ownership encourages use of the land and resources simply for personal gain, without regard for the well-being of the community or its residents. It is only natural for absentee owners to be less concerned about external diseconomies generated on their land if they do not live in the area than landowners who live there and would be able to see their own family members and friends harmed by these externalities.

Hedges and Sacco (2012) describe the coal fields of West Virginia, along with other Appalachian communities that have been decimated by mountaintop removal, a radical form of strip mining that has become increasingly common over the past 25 years, as “sacrifice zones.” They use this term because, like we see in the internal colony framework, the nation as a whole is willing to allow unspeakable environmental degradation and the ill health and continued poverty of residents to persist in order to promote economic well-being for the rest of the country (Bodenhamer, 2016). In other words, these communities are being “sacrificed” for the rest of us (Hendryx and Luo, 2015; Holzman, 2011).

Whether one wishes to use the term “internal colony” or “sacrifice zone” to describe large areas of Appalachia, the ideas behind these terms are the same.

How Internal Colonies Participate in the National Economy

Deficit Areas, Surplus Areas and Recycling Mechanisms

So a region like Appalachia that tends to produce low valued items also tends to wish to import into the region finished goods that come at a much greater expense than they would ordinarily afford. A region like this is called a deficit region. But the country has surplus regions as well. These are places where the value of goods

and services produced exceeds consumption. In order for a national economy to work, it must have a recycling mechanism to get the excess out of the surplus regions and then make these funds available to the deficit regions. How do we do this?

As we might expect, the recycling mechanisms countries use are usually not all that appealing to the deficit areas, but these communities must have the income to survive. As the nation began to industrialize in the early 20th century, the federal government began to negotiate with chemical companies to place their production facilities that have the highest form of external diseconomies (toxicity, etc) in Appalachian areas. This would inject money into these regions and provide employment opportunities for locals. In other words, it would allow surpluses to be recycled in deficit areas.

One area where they concentrated factories that produced some of the most toxic gases for military and other uses was in the Kanawha River Valley around Charleston West Virginia. One entire community was named “Nitro” because of the chemicals it produced. Nitro is located just down river from Charleston and has a population of around 6,000 according to the 2020 census (US Department of Commerce, 2023). Between it and Belle, a community just up-river from Charleston, this stretch of the Kanawha made some of the most harmful chemicals in the world, such as agent orange.

One well known plant there, owned by Union Carbide, produced a chemical so toxic that there was only one other place in the world that produced it. That other plant, located in Bhopal India and also owned by Union Carbide, let forth a leak of this gas, methyl isocyanate on December 3, 1984 that is considered one of the worst human made environmental disasters of all time (Broughton, 2005; Varma and Varma, 2005), with a death toll of 16,000 and hundreds of thousands sickened/injured.

Other river valleys in this portion of Appalachia also served as sites for highly polluting industries that provided employment with decent pay for locals. They include the Big Sandy River Valley and the Ohio River Valley itself, home to chemical plants, cast iron foundries, and coke plants that produce a synthesized form of coal that has fewer impurities in order to make higher quality steel.

Another method the USA has chosen to recycle surpluses into Appalachia has been as a place to site federal prisons. Employment in these facilities offers federal employee status, with good pay and benefits for people who lack an education or

having traveled to places outside the region. These facilities seem to be ideal for low income communities, where they would be shunned elsewhere.

Funds can also be recycled via other projects like highway construction or other infrastructure. Over the decades however, it has just become simpler to recycle via direct income payments. Because of American demographics, a larger age cohort is now at the stage where they can receive social security benefits. This is an effective recycling mechanism. However, as job opportunities have continued to decline, and not just in Appalachia, but throughout much of the U.S., Social Security Disability and SSI have become among the most common ways to provide a living income to Americans who cannot or are not interested in finding employment (Fang and Huber, 2020).

Even though it is obvious that the rigor of unskilled labor has declined in the past half century, and medical gains have helped to rehabilitate those who become injured, a higher percentage of Americans are on disability than ever before. SSDI and its cousin SSI have now become viable career options for millions of Americans (Autor, 2011), and many of these recipients are in Appalachia. The officials who make these dubious awards understand what they are doing, but continue the practice because they are aware of the bleakness of the future that many of these (primarily) young men would face. It is precisely this bleakness that has driven the high death rate from the opioid crisis, and even those who obtain the government's funds are at an elevated risk of suicide, particularly in Appalachia (Fontanella et al 2018; Meit et al 2019).

Moving towards Environmental Justice in Appalachia

As we move through the project on economic transitions, we will explicitly consider options for economic growth and energy production to Rawlsian standards of environmental justice. Identifying and measuring ways of economic recycling from economic surplus areas to deficit areas requires a national scope. So the elements of this study reach far beyond Appalachia, where we will focus at levels with which most of us specialize: community. None of this is easy. Sociologists and economists have studied chronic misery in impoverished Appalachian communities for a very long time.

Some of the problems seem not only chronic, but even intractable. But this is the challenge we face as we go forward. Hopefully these two papers provide a solid base on which to begin, along with a standard by which we can measure success, or lack of it.

This paper is part 2 in a series on environmental justice published by The Ohio State University. Peer Reviewers for both parts are Dan Remley, Gwynn Stewart and Brian Raison, all with Ohio State University Extension.

References

Appalachian Regional Commission (2023). <https://www.arc.gov/>

Autor, D. H. (2011). The unsustainable rise of the disability rolls in the United States: Causes, consequences, and policy options. *NBER Working Paper Series-National Bureau of Economic Research*, (17697).

Bodenhamer, A. (2016). King coal: a study of mountaintop removal, public discourse, and power in Appalachia. *Society & Natural Resources*, 29(10), 1139-1153.

Broughton, E. (2005). The Bhopal disaster and its aftermath: a review. *Environmental Health*, 4(1), 1-6.

Fang, A. H., & Huber, G. A. (2020). Perceptions of deservingness and the politicization of social insurance: Evidence from disability insurance in the United States. *American Politics Research*, 48(5), 543-559.

Fernández-Navarro, P., García-Pérez, J., Ramis, R., Boldo, E., & López-Abente, G. (2012). Proximity to mining industry and cancer mortality. *Science of the total environment*, 435, 66-73.

Fisher, J. L., Engelhardt, H. L., Stephens, J. A., Smith, B. R., Haydu, G. G., Indian, R. W., & Paskett, E. D. (2008). Cancer-related disparities among residents of Appalachia Ohio. *Journal of Health Disparities Research and Practice*, 2(2), 4.

Fisher, S., & Smith, B. E. (2016). Internal colony—Are you sure? Defining, theorizing, organizing Appalachia. *Journal of Appalachian Studies*, 22(1), 45-50.

Fontanella, C. A., Saman, D. M., Campo, J. V., Hiance-Steelesmith, D. L., Bridge, J. A., Sweeney, H. A., & Root, E. D. (2018). Mapping suicide mortality in Ohio: A spatial epidemiological analysis of suicide clusters and area level correlates. *Preventive medicine*, 106, 177-184.

Hedges, Chris and Joe Sacco. (2012). *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt*. New York: Nation Books.

Hendryx, M., & Luo, J. (2015). An examination of the effects of mountaintop removal coal mining on respiratory symptoms and COPD using propensity scores. *International journal of environmental health research*, 25(3), 265-276.

Holzman, D. C. (2011). Mountaintop removal mining: digging into community health concerns.

Meit, M., Heffernan, M., & Tanenbaum, E. (2019). Investigating the impact of the diseases of despair in Appalachia. *Journal of Appalachian Health, 1*(2), 7.

Smith, B. E., & Fisher, S. (2016). Reinventing the region: Defining, theorizing, organizing Appalachia. *Journal of Appalachian Studies, 22*(1), 76-79.

Rawls, John. *A theory of justice: Revised edition*. Harvard university press, (1971; 2020).

Strobo, R. A. (2012). The shape of Appalachia to come: Coal in a transitional economy. *Duke FL & Soc. Change, 4*, 91.

US Department of Commerce, 2023. US Census, 2020: Washington, DC.

Varma, R., & Varma, D. R. (2005). The Bhopal disaster of 1984. *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society, 25*(1), 37-45.