

THE FUTURE OF WORK IN THE BLACK RURAL SOUTH



To better understand the rural Black Belt, we looked at rural counties with populations that are 35% Black or higher. We call these 157 counties the "Black Rural South" (Figure 1). Enslaved Black persons in this region produced cotton that facilitated the growth of U.S. exports and textile, banking, and shipping industries, and allowed the U.S. to quickly become a global economic superpower. Today, deep racial and economic inequalities persist in the area (Figure 2).

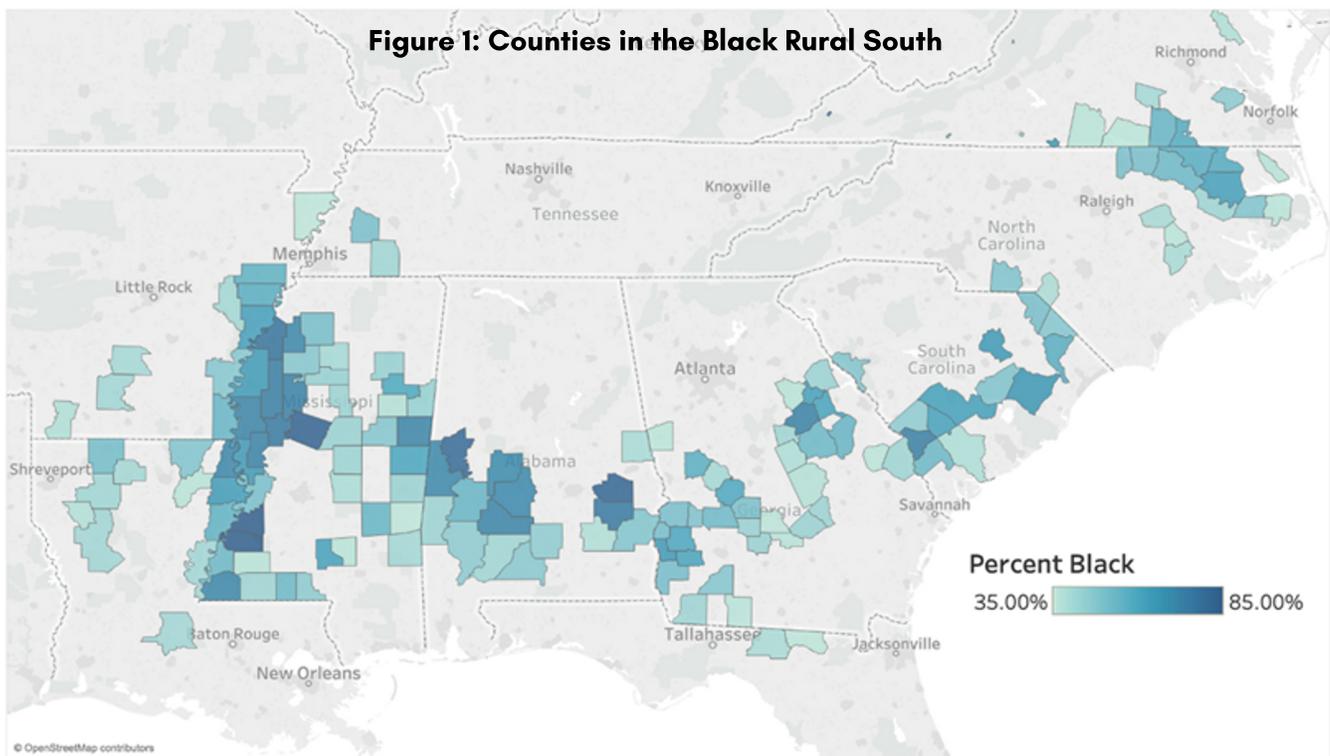
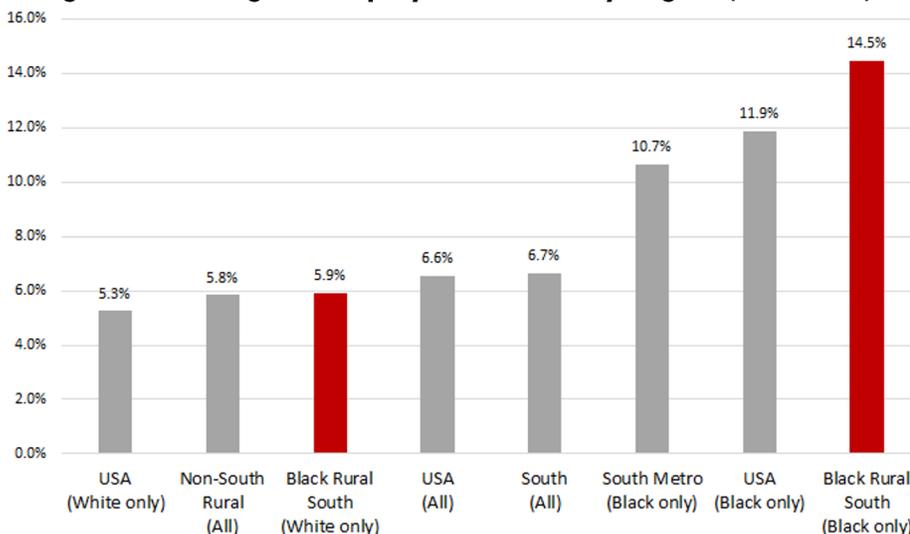
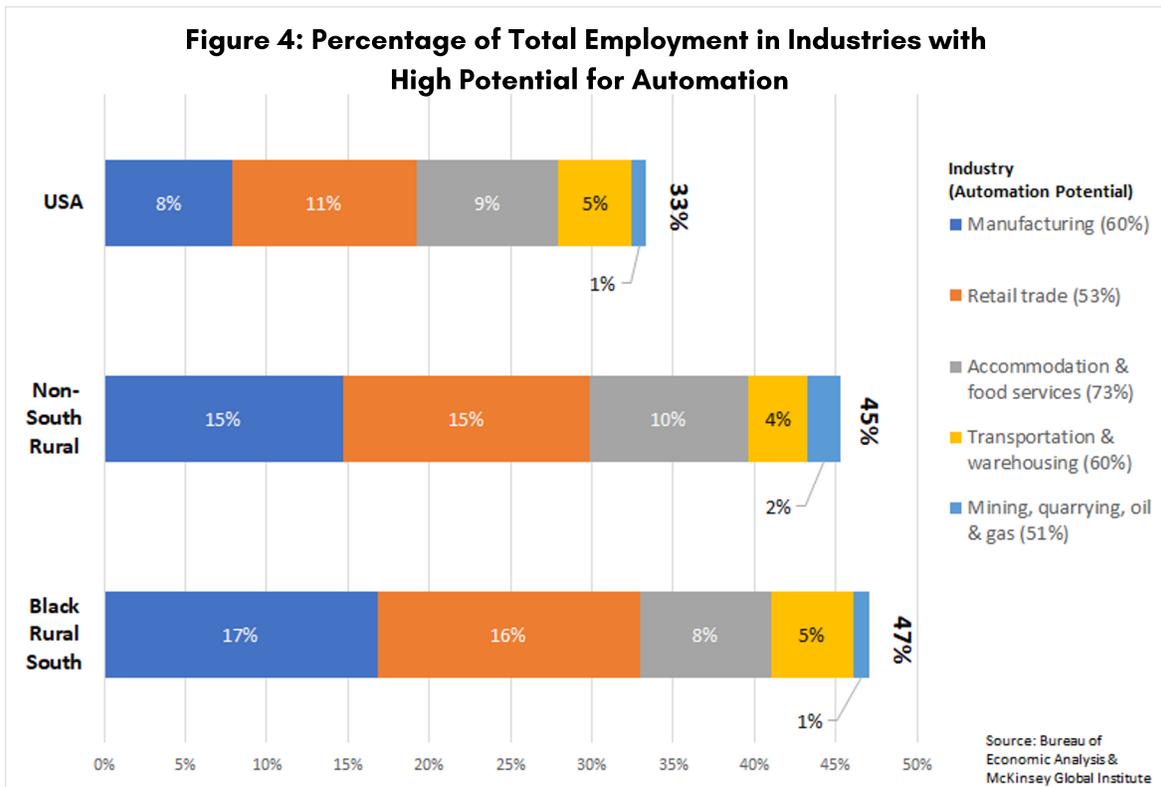
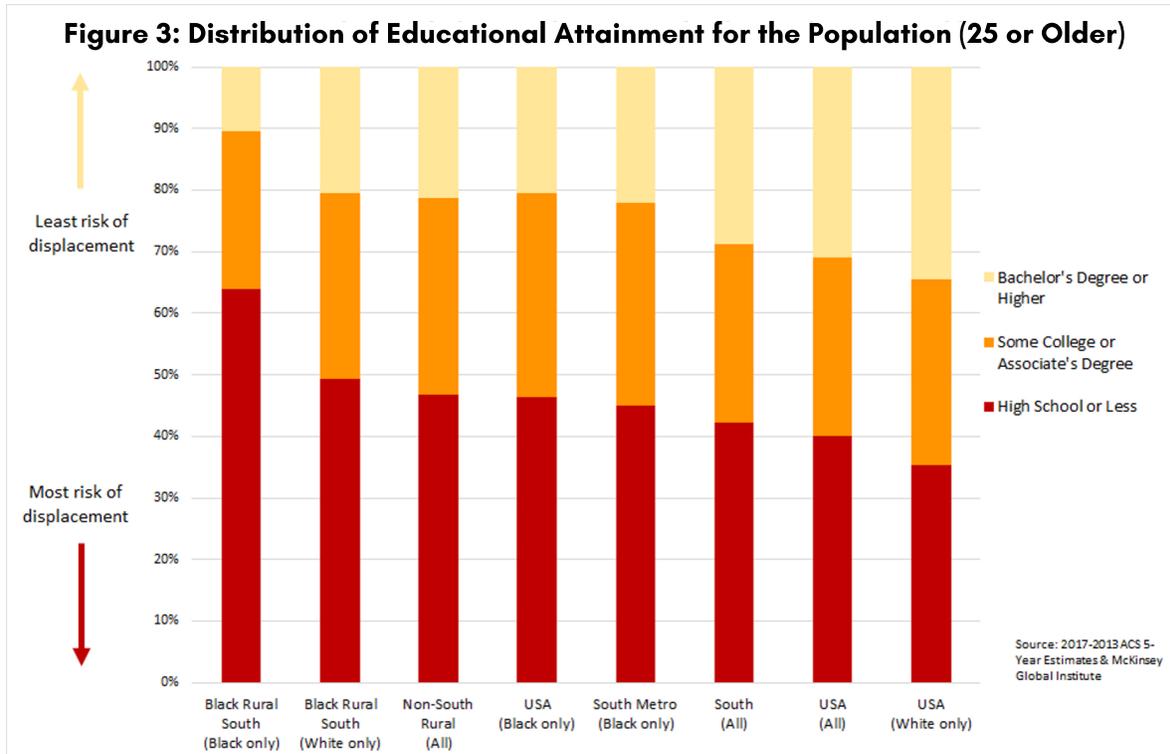


Figure 2: Average Unemployment Rates by Region (2013-2017)



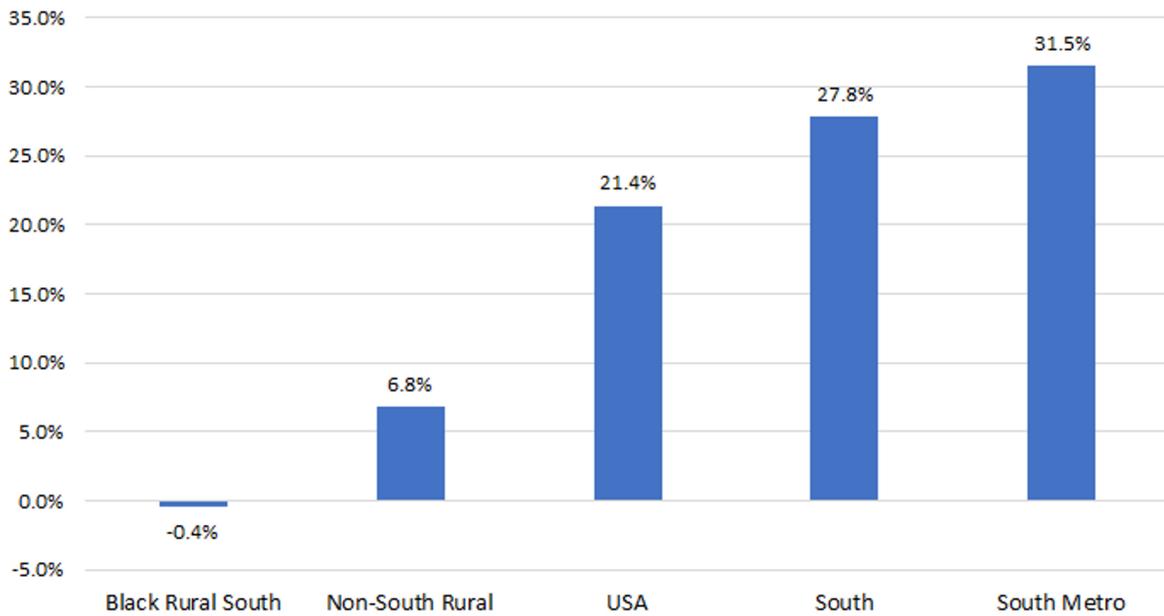
In the Black Rural South, 46% of Black households & 28% of White households lack broadband access.

Technology can create new jobs, but also eliminate other jobs. Across the U.S., workers with a high school diploma or less disproportionately hold the jobs that can be eliminated with technology (e.g., cashiers replaced by kiosks and e-commerce, factory workers replaced by robots). The Black Rural South has a large share of these workers (*Figure 3*). Almost half of all private sector workers in the Black Rural South work in the five industries with the highest potential for automation, compared to only a third of U.S. private sector workers (*Figure 4*).



While most areas of the U.S. enjoyed job growth from 2001-2017, the Black Rural South lost jobs. Absent policy solutions, we expect these trends to continue. From 2017-2030, the consulting firm McKinsey & Company predicts total job growth of 6 to 17% in most metro areas, 1% in healthier rural areas, and -9% in the Black Rural South.

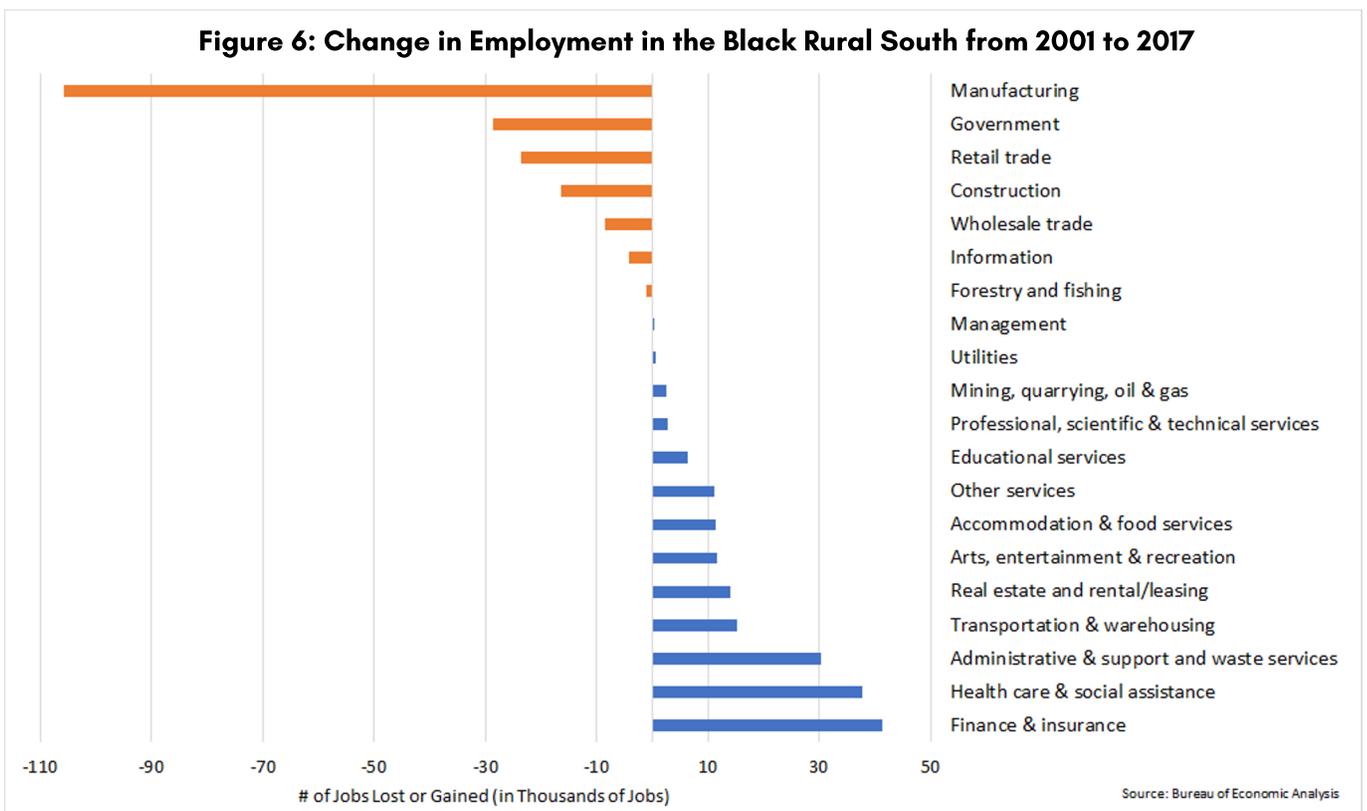
Figure 5: Employment Change in All Industries from 2001 to 2017



Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis

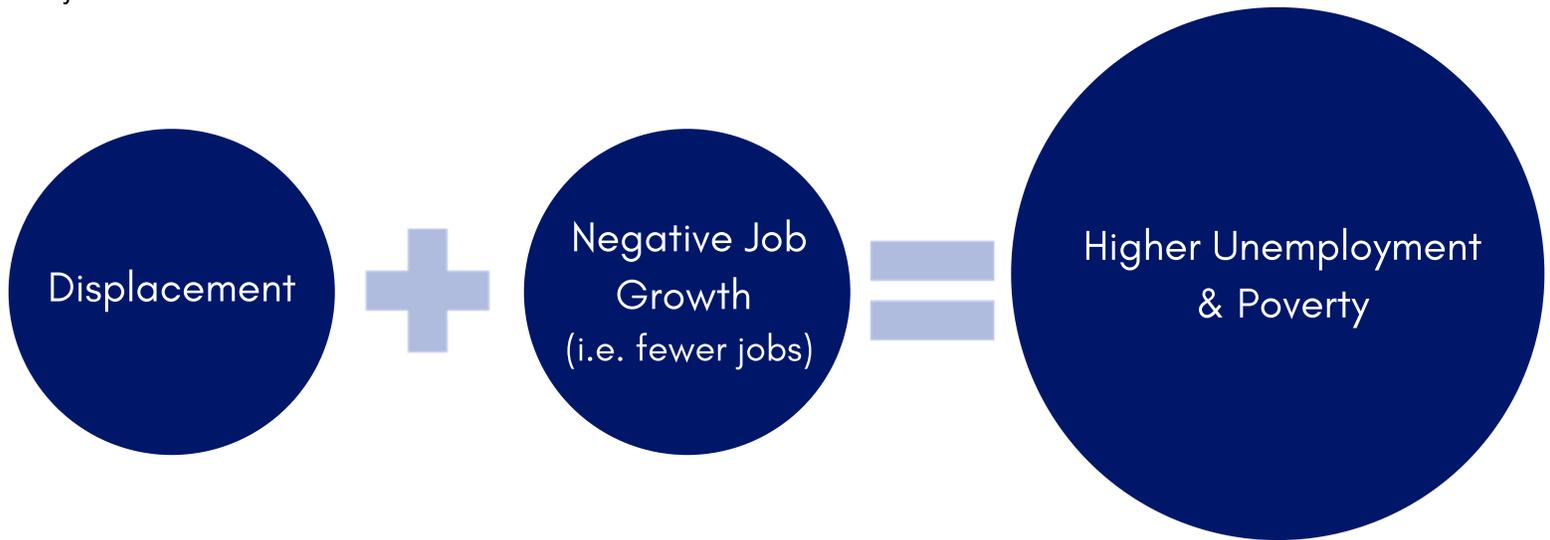
The Black Rural South lost over 100,000 manufacturing jobs from 2001-2017—or almost 40% of the region’s manufacturing jobs. This is twice as high as the loss in non-South rural counties.

Figure 6: Change in Employment in the Black Rural South from 2001 to 2017



Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis

While the risk of displacement is only slightly higher in the Black Rural South, the cost of displacement is much higher to workers. Many displaced workers in metro areas with high job growth could have a relatively easy time securing replacement employment. By comparison, displaced workers in the Black Rural South could have a much more difficult time securing replacement employment if fewer open jobs exist.



Federal and local leaders and the private sector should support the following in the Black Rural South:

- High quality K-12 education
- High-quality degrees, credentials, certifications, apprenticeships & digital skills
- HBCUs
- Broadband expansion
- Online entrepreneurship & remote work
- Remote & in-person learning (blended)
- Public transportation & ridesharing
- Establishment of Black Belt Commission
- 10/20/30: 10% of federal program money to counties with persistent poverty
- Regional economic cooperation agreements between neighboring counties

This research was made possible thanks to the generous support of Google.org. We also appreciate the Lumina Foundation's support of the dissemination of our research on the future of work and Black communities. For an in-depth discussion of the ideas in this brief, please read the Joint Center's forthcoming report, **An Introduction to the Future of Work in the Black Rural South**, which will be available at JointCenter.org.