

Changes in Poverty Rates and Poverty Areas Over Time: 2005 to 2019

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INTRODUCTION

This study uses 2005-2009, 2010-2014, and 2015-2019 American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year estimates, the first instance of three nonoverlapping periods for comparison, to study changes in county poverty rates and the prevalence of poverty areas (defined as census tracts with poverty rates of 20 percent or higher).

The ACS is an annual, nationwide survey designed to provide communities with reliable and timely social, economic, and demographic data. It has an annual sample size of about 3.5 million addresses across the United States.

Researchers have found that low-income families living in communities with high poverty concentrations face a number of challenges. Problems such as poor housing conditions, limited job opportunities, and high crime rates are exacerbated when poor families live clustered in high-poverty neighborhoods.

METHODS/DATA

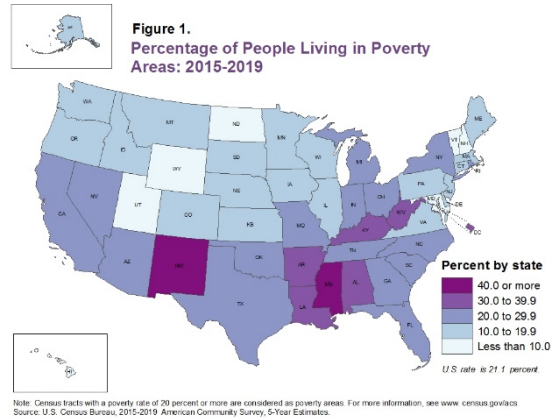
Poverty status is determined by comparing annual income to a set of poverty thresholds that vary by family size, number of children, and the age of the householder. If a family's before-tax money income is less than the dollar value of its threshold, then that family and every individual in it are considered to be in poverty. For people not living in families, poverty status is determined by comparing the individual's income to his or her poverty threshold. Those living in institutional group quarters (e.g., nursing homes or correctional facilities) are not included in the poverty universe.

Poverty areas are defined by the Census Bureau as census tracts with poverty rates greater than or equal to 20 percent. State poverty areas reflect the percentage of people living in poverty areas. The poverty universe in 2005 did not include those living in noninstitutional group quarters (GQs). The estimates presented here did not reflect the COVID-19 pandemic and its potential impact.

RESULTS

State Poverty Areas

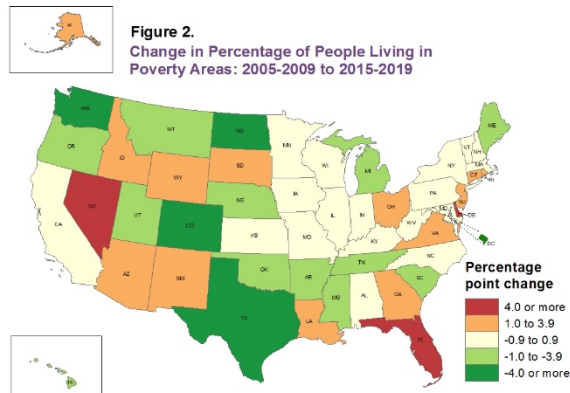
Figure 1 shows the percentage of people living in poverty areas in the United States for the most current 5-year period, 2015-2019. In this period, 21.1 percent of the U.S. population lived in poverty areas. Six of the seven states and the District of Columbia with 30 percent or higher of their population living in poverty areas were in the Census Bureau's South region. In seven states, the percentage of the population living in poverty areas was 10 percent or less.



In the 2010-2014 period, 27.7 percent of the U.S. population lived in poverty areas. The percentage of people living in poverty areas was at least 30 percent in 17 states and the District of Columbia; it was over 40 percent in four states. The percentage of the population living in poverty areas was under 10 percent in one state.

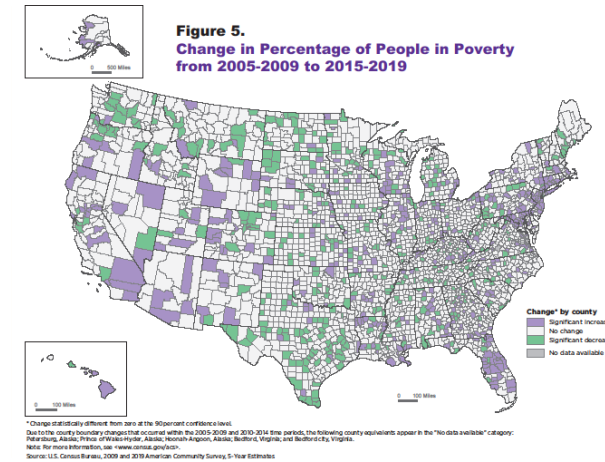
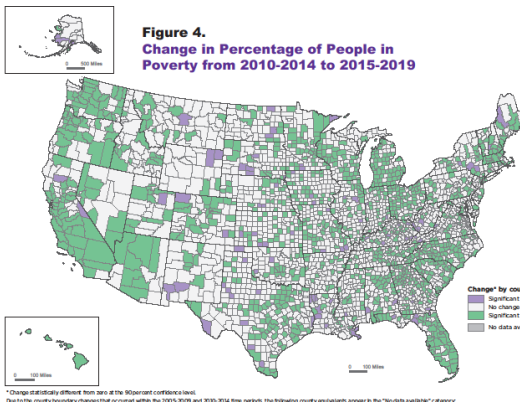
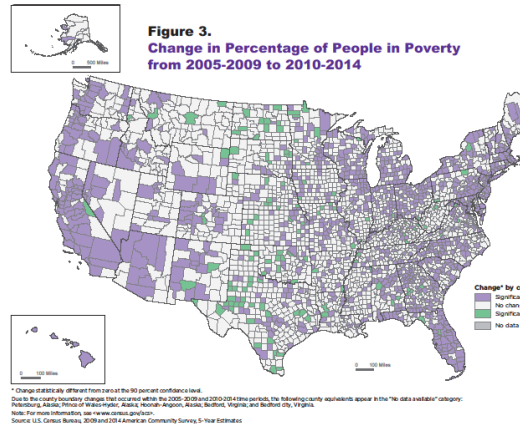
In the 2005-2009 period, 21.3 percent of the population lived in poverty areas. In eight states and the District of Columbia, the percentage of people living in poverty areas was at least 30 percent. In seven states, less than 10 percent of the population lived in poverty areas.

From 2005-2009 to 2015-2019, the percentage of people in the United States living in poverty areas decreased by 0.2 percentage points. The percentage of people living in poverty areas increased in 25 states and decreased in 23 states and the District of Columbia. Figure 2 shows state change during this period.



County Poverty

Figures 3 through 5 show county changes in the 5-year ACS poverty rates. Figure 3 shows counties that experienced an increase, decrease, or no statistically significant change in their poverty rates from 2005-2009 to 2010-2014. During this period, the poverty rate increased in 1,051 counties and decreased in 136. The overall poverty rate in the United States increased from 13.5 percent to 15.6 percent. Figure 4 shows change from 2010-2014 to 2015-2019. The poverty rate increased in 99 counties and decreased in 1,072 counties and the overall poverty rate in the United States decreased from 15.6 percent to 13.4 percent. Figure 5 displays change in poverty rates from 2005-2009 to 2015-2019. The change in the overall poverty rate was not statistically significant. During this time, the poverty rate increased in 429 counties and decreased in 409 counties.



CONCLUSION

This study uses 2005-2009, 2010-2014, and 2015-2019 ACS 5-year estimates to examine county poverty rates and the prevalence of poverty areas. Similar trends can be found in both the examination of poverty areas and the overall U.S. poverty rate. In 2005-2009, 21.3 percent of the population lived in poverty areas. In the 2010-2014 time period the percentage of people living in poverty areas increased to 27.7 percent. In 2015-2019, the percentage of people living in poverty areas decreased to 21.1 percent. The U.S. poverty rate was 13.5 percent in the 2005-2009 time period, 15.6 percent in the 2010-2014 period, and 13.4 percent from 2015-2019. The change from 2005-2009 to 2015-2019 was not statistically different.

Figure 3 and 4 visualize two periods, one from 2005-2009 to 2010-2014 where 1,051 counties had an increase in poverty rates and a second, from 2010-2014 to 2015-2019 where 1,072 counties experienced a decrease in poverty rates. Overall, from 2005-2009 to 2015-2019, a period that spanned the Great Recession (December 2007-June 2009) and the subsequent economic expansion, the poverty rate increased in 429 counties and decreased in 409 counties.

The estimates presented highlight the usefulness of ACS data. They demonstrate how data from three nonoverlapping periods can be compared to further the understanding of poverty (and other economic indicators) during a period of economic change. For further examination of this project please see [Changes in Poverty Rates and Poverty Areas Over Time: 2005 to 2019 \(census.gov\)](#) and [Fewer People Living in Poverty Areas in 2015-2019 \(census.gov\)](#). The graphic [Percentage of People in Poverty by County: 2015-2019 \(census.gov\)](#) shows racial poverty breakdowns by state and county.

