

“We’ve found that public lands are no longer the only places to protect species. We have come to realize that we must work in partnership with people who farm, ranch and log on private land. While countless species depend on the land to sustain life, families depend on the land for economic survival.” —Gale Norton, Secretary, United States Department of Interior

FACTORS AFFECTING ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

Environmental issues are not isolated from socio-economic issues. Our lifestyles affect the environment, and the environment affects our quality of life. There are many economic opportunities associated with good environmental stewardship (as described in the next chapter). However, until the basic necessities of life, like food, clothing, and shelter are met, it is difficult for people to recognize these opportunities. The economic benefits of protecting, restoring, and being good environmental stewards are often unclear to people struggling to meet the basic needs of their families. And many communities in the Mid-Atlantic Highlands are struggling with serious economic problems:

- High rates of children in poverty;
- Low educational attainment;
- High unemployment rates;

- Low labor force participation rates;
- Outmigration of the working-age population; and
- Low per capita income.

For the United States as a whole, virtually all socioeconomic indicators show a higher standard of living for metropolitan (urban) areas as opposed to nonmetropolitan (rural) areas, with the more isolated rural areas having the lowest standards of living.

In the Mid-Atlantic Highlands as a whole, 33% of the population lives in rural areas, compared with 19.7% for the nation. Within large parts of the Mid-Atlantic Highlands, especially in West Virginia and southwest Virginia, there is a high proportion of isolated rural counties. In West Virginia, 58% of the population resides in rural areas, as does 53% in the Virginia portion of the Mid-Atlantic Highlands.

The most economically distressed parts of the Mid-Atlantic Highlands are the rural areas. These areas generally

have high poverty rates, low educational attainment, high unemployment, and low labor force participation.

CHILDREN IN POVERTY

There are several counties within the Mid-Atlantic Highlands where over a third of the children are living in poverty (as defined by the US Census Bureau), and county poverty rates range up to 50%. While high poverty rates are not uniform throughout the Mid-Atlantic Highlands, they are significant in many areas (Figure 13).

LOW EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Educational attainment in the Mid-Atlantic Highlands lags behind that for the United States as a whole. Perceived local job opportunities influ-

Eighty-eight percent of counties in the Highlands have lower per capita income than the rest of the country.

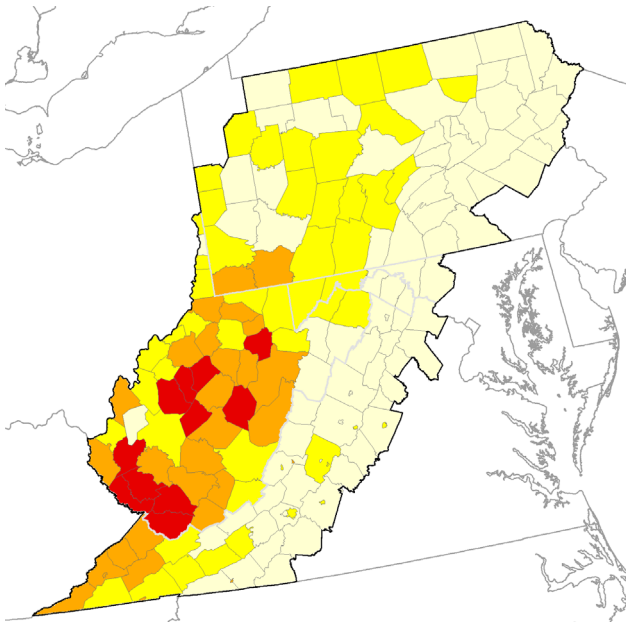


Figure 13. In some Highlands counties between one-third and one-half of the children live below the national poverty level (counties in red). In many counties, over 20% of children live in poverty (counties in orange). Counties in red, orange, and yellow all have child poverty rates above the national average.

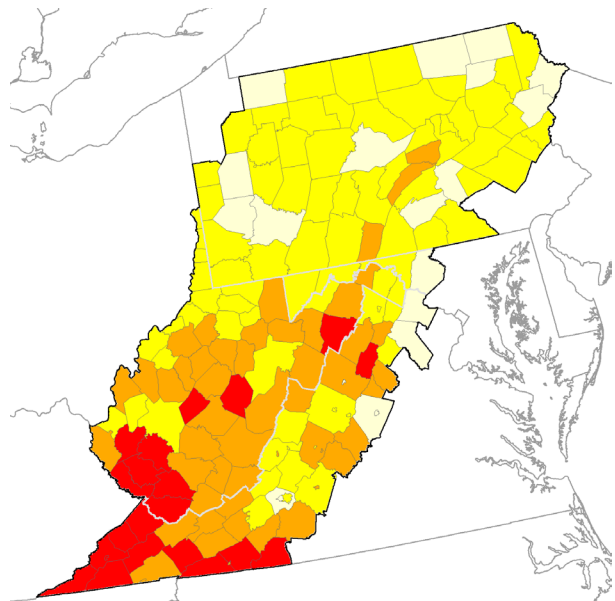
ence the value people place on education. Areas that have a high concentration of employment in blue-collar occupations are less likely to stress the value of higher education. In 1990, 86% of Mid-Atlantic Highlands counties fell below the national average for adult high school graduation rates. Low educational attainment is most serious in rural areas, such as southern West Virginia and southwestern Virginia (Figure 14).

HIGH UNEMPLOYMENT AND LOW LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION

Traditionally, many employment opportunities in the Mid-Atlantic Highlands have been in the blue-collar mining, forestry, and agriculture sectors—industries requiring neither major urban centers nor knowledge in areas such as ad-

vanced computer technology. These industries have now declined, or have phased out workers through increased mechanization and operational efficiency. In 1980, over 100,000 coal miners were employed in the Mid-Atlantic Highlands. By 1999, there were 30,000—a decline of 70%. The persistence of high unemployment

Figure 14. In many Highlands counties (those in red), 40-55% of adults do not have high school diplomas; in many other counties (orange), one-third of adults don't have high school diplomas. Counties in red, orange, and yellow all have high school graduation rates below the national average.



in the more isolated areas suggests that new and growing industries are not being attracted to take advantage of the available labor force.

In the Mid-Atlantic Highlands, 83% of counties have higher unemployment rates than the rest of the United States, and 81% have lower labor force participation rates. Low labor force participation and high unemployment rates are usually the result of these factors:

- Insufficient number of jobs to employ all potential seekers;
- Low wages; and
- Existence of barriers that inhibit the ability of an individual to accept a job (lack of transportation or daycare, lack of skills).

Such socioeconomic conditions are interrelated. For example, without a high school degree, it is difficult for

an individual to obtain a good-paying job, especially given the decline in manufacturing and mining entry-level jobs across the region.

LOW PER CAPITA INCOME

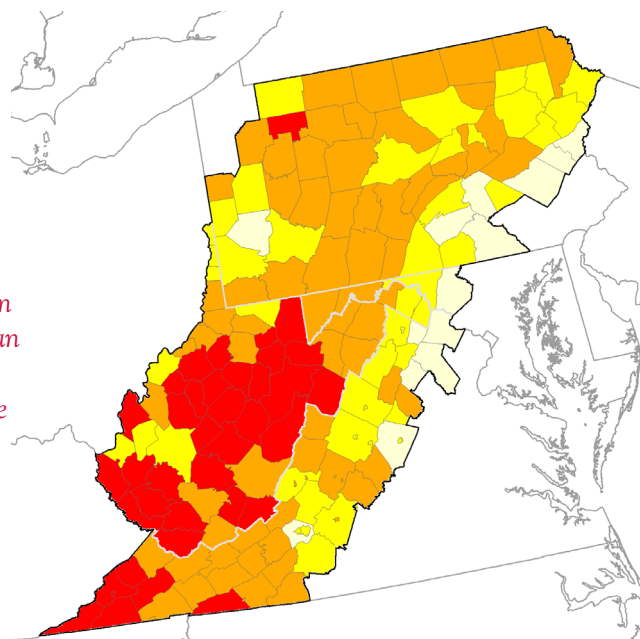
Per capita income is low throughout the Mid-Atlantic Highlands. In 1989, 88% of the region's counties had a per capita income below the national average (Figure 15). Even metropolitan counties in the Mid-Atlantic Highlands lagged behind the nation, with 78% of the counties below the national average for per capita income.

OUTMIGRATION OF WORKING-AGE POPULATION

Although there have been population in-

creases in several counties throughout the Mid-Atlantic Highlands, the area overall has experienced a population decline or slow population growth relative to the rest of the country. Population growth between 1970 and 2000 in the Mid-Atlantic Highlands was only 10.6%, compared to 38.4% for the nation. Much of this slow growth is explained by a history of reliance on the manufacturing and coal mining industries, which are employing fewer and fewer people. Few industries have emerged to fill these voids. This problem is exacerbated by a lack of technology. For example, relatively few high-speed Internet access lines exist within the Mid-Atlantic Highlands (Figure 16). Poor Internet access is indicative of

Figure 15. Per capita income in many Highlands counties falls well below the national average of \$14,420. Per capita income in counties shown in red is less than \$9,500; for counties in orange it is less than \$11,500. Counties in red, orange, and yellow all have per capita income below the national average.



the lack of a strong Mid-Atlantic Highlands technology base.

Because of such voids, outmigration of the working-age population is prevalent, particularly in distressed areas, where younger people move out of the area in search of economic opportunity elsewhere. At the same time, the percentage of children in the area has decreased, a direct consequence of this out-migration of the younger working-age population (Figure 17). In West Virginia, for instance, all of the population growth in the 1990s occurred in the 45 and older age group; the working-age population is being replaced by an influx of older people. Just as the working-age population is leaving due to a lack of opportunities, retirees are returning or migrating to

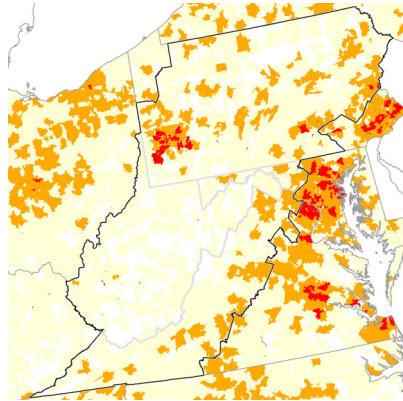


Figure 16. High speed internet access is nonexistent (white areas) or sparse (lightest yellow areas) throughout much of the Highlands. Red and orange areas have many high speed internet access options.

the area due to low property taxes and the lower cost of housing and land. Thus, the median age, currently the highest in the nation, is increasing, causing a greater tax

burden for the remaining working-age class.

Over the past seven years, CVI has become increasingly aware of changes affecting local communities. More importantly, this awareness has driven home the point that community, economy, and environment are all inexorably linked. Any time there are problems, there are also opportunities. As CVI has worked with local communities to solve their problems, some opportunities for sustainable environmental stewardship and sustainable development have emerged.

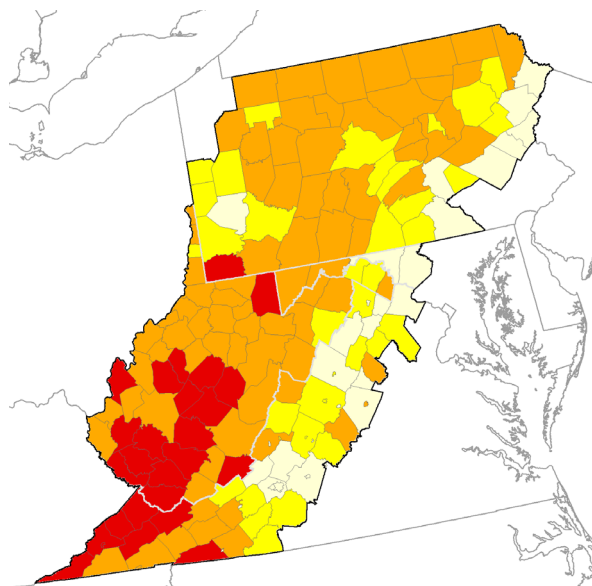


Figure 17. The percentage of the population younger than 18 years old declined in the Highlands between 1990-2000. In counties shown in red, the percent of children decreased between 3-6%. (The percentage of children in the population decreased in counties in red, orange, and yellow between 1990-2000.)