

This research makes significant advances in the study of racial inequality by empirically examining multiple operationalizations of the legacy of slavery in the context of poverty within the American South. The legacy of slavery is conceptualized as structures that are formed after slavery that resemble the framework of the oppressive institution and result in continued racial differences in social outcomes. The resultant inequalities are a consequence of the legacy of slavery rather than termed a legacy themselves; the legacy of slavery is the present-day existence of a local “racial state” (James, 1988). In the current study, I examine whether variation in racialized poverty rates across counties in the census-defined South is explained by a legacy of slavery. Moreover, I critically examine the meaning of legacy and employ three separate measures of the concept drawn from extant literatures that explore the impacts of legacy.

Southern Uniqueness

The South is a unique place relative to other regions in the United States. Often, analysts introduce a binary term to control for the affect of the presumed uniqueness. The approach is defensible in many contexts, yet, I argue, it is not adequate in analyses that are concerned with understanding the social forces that set the South apart from other regions. The analysis of poverty is a context in which it is necessary to articulate the mechanisms that produce regional uniqueness. Before applying a model to the entire United States, it is advisable to test how best to capture the concept under study. The most obvious difference between the South and the rest of the United States is its link to chattel slavery.

During and after slavery, whites established social and institutional mechanisms to keep African Americans in a lower stratum in the social hierarchy than whites. Mechanisms include segregation, laws protecting employers rather than employees, and political disenfranchisement (James, 1988). These features left blacks particularly vulnerable to poverty by leaving them open to discrimination and exploitation in the job sector with no chance for recourse in the political realm. Although racist sentiments existed throughout the United States, I argue it was necessarily strongest where the need for control over the enslaved population was greatest. The system of laws would need to be stricter and more systematic in places where slaves were present and where they were present in larger numbers compared to in areas with no or fewer slaves. In the present analysis, I examine the extent to which the legacy of slavery explains patterns in racial inequality in contemporary poverty rates. If the legacy of slavery is related to poverty through remnants of social control, then the difference between black and white poverty rates would be significantly larger in places with a stronger connection to slavery.

The measurement of legacy effects is a central focus, and the connection to slavery can be measured in several ways. Indeed, legacy effects have been measured in different ways and in different contexts. For example, it has been measured in terms of counties containing a plantation in the pre-Civil War era, possessing Confederate or slave state identification, falling within a state with substantial slave holdings, and containing high racial minority concentrations. These measures of the legacy of slavery have been linked to various racialized social outcomes including voting disenfranchisement (James, 1988), legal executions (Vandiver, Giacomassi and Lofquist, 2006), social mobility (Ruff and Fletcher, 2003) and poverty (Saenz, 1997; Swanson, Harris, Skees and Williamson, 1994). Each of these measures of legacy captures an aspect of the historical institution and the lingering effects that institution has on contemporary social outcomes. However, this collection of research demonstrates that a measure that more directly captures the magnitude of dependence on slavery better explains the variance in certain social outcomes. For example, Vandiver et al. (2006) found that the categorization of states and

territories based solely on Confederacy status was inadequate for explaining the variation in contemporary use of the death penalty. In their study, further specification of a state/territory's practice of slavery provided a clearer picture.

I expect that, like the differences in voting rates, a legacy of slavery will be positively related to differences in contemporary poverty rates among blacks and whites (James, 1989). With regard to the specific operationalizations of legacy, I anticipate that the proportion of slaves in a county will have the strongest explanatory power in describing the distribution of racial inequality in contemporary poverty rates in the South out of the two historically based operationalizations. Even though James (1988) employs a plantation indicator to capture the legacy of slavery, his description of the racial state, the political and social milieu he suggests continues black political disenfranchisement, suggests that the racial state would be stronger in a place where slavery had been a more prominent part of the county's economy. The centrality of slavery in an economy is better measured by the proportion of slaves in a county than by a plantation indicator. Even though, as discussed below, the 1860 slave concentration and the current African American concentration represent different aspects of the legacy of slavery, there is still reason to believe the historic variable will significantly decrease the explanatory power of the concentration of blacks in this analysis. In Saenz's (1997) analysis of ethnic concentration and its relationship to poverty rates for the corresponding ethnic group, region is expressed as a series of dummy variables. The inclusion of ethnic concentration does not eliminate the significantly different relationship to poverty between counties in the South and Northeast counties, the reference group. This suggests there is still a crucial component of legacy not captured by Swanson et al.'s (1994) legacy proxy. It is, however, reasonable to expect that there will be no relationship between any of the operationalizations and current differences in poverty rates. Legacy effects of slavery may work to disadvantage the entire area rather than a specific group. That is, the area could be generally disadvantaged, and the total population equally vulnerable to falling into poverty, by a lack of economic opportunity. The relationship with racial inequality in poverty rates would only be seen if blacks are systematically disadvantaged in areas with a deeper connection to slavery.

Data & Analysis

The development of social and institutional mores related to poverty rates is reasonably captured at the county level (Labao and Hooks, 2007). Although states certainly have influence over legal development, social patterns tend to vary considerably within this unit. Moreover, counties have the added potential to adjust laws and practices according to the local context (James, 1988). I employ spatial regression techniques to analyze the relationship between differences in black and white poverty rates within the census defined South and the legacy of slavery. Spatial analysis techniques are appropriate since the data are georeferenced, and poverty research has demonstrated the presence of spatial autocorrelation even after including structural variables (Voss, Long, Hammer and Friedman, 2006).

I use the most recent census data available, the 2000 summary files, as well as the plantation classifications already made by James (1988) and the 1860 census data on the number of slaves, to create county level variables. The dependent variable is racial inequality in poverty rates measured as the natural log of the difference between white and black poverty rates in a given county, following James's (1988) analysis of voting rates. The independent variable is the legacy of slavery and is measured in three ways derived from prior literature: the current concentration of blacks, a historical indicator of the existence of a plantation in the county

(James, 1988), and the proportion of slaves in 1860. The 2000 proportion of blacks in a county focuses on the intergenerational transfer of assets among Southern blacks while recognizing how this legacy has been shaped by slavery; however, the two historical operationalizations of legacy, the plantation indicator and the proportion of slaves in the 1860 population, capture the cultural aspect of slavery's legacy. In addition, the proportion of slaves in the county measures the county's previous economic reliance on slavery.

In addition, I will control for the following standard correlates of county-level poverty to capture the potential confounding effects of demographic, economic and human capital structures: metropolitan status; the proportion of the labor force classified as unemployed; the proportion of the employed population in agriculture, FIRE (finance, insurance and real estate), other professional, and service industries; the proportion of the population 25 and older with at least a high school education; the proportion of families with children under 18 and the proportion of single mother families; and the percent of the households with a household size adjusted income falling within the middle 50 percent of the national income distribution.

The study makes an important contribution to understanding southern poverty by explicitly analyzing the explanatory value of different operationalizations of the legacy of slavery and by studying this relationship with the appropriate spatial analysis techniques rather than relying strictly on traditional regression models. The results of these analyses are interpreted by assessing the strength of the beta coefficients in a model that includes all three independent variables of interest. Given the debatable relative importance of the current concentration of blacks and the 1860 slave population, the current concentration will be included in the model first, followed by the plantation indicator and then the slave population percentage. This permits me to comment on the potential attenuation effects of the historic slave concentration variable on the current black concentration variable's relationship with differences in black and white poverty rates. The challenge of multicollinearity is accepted in order to disentangle the interrelationships among the variables.