

**Do “Delta Dreams” Come True?
Community and Individual Development in Phillips County,
Arkansas**

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April 13, 2011

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Introduction:

In failing cities, should the limited resources at hand be dedicated to developing individuals and preparing them to get out of the troubled area, or should anti-poverty efforts focus on developing the community by encouraging new business, and providing residents with jobs and social services? Of course the answer to this question is not one or the other, since each depends on the other to be truly successful, but what do you do when a region consistently suffers from economic decline and outmigration? How do you help people who are living in an economically depressed community with very limited job opportunities and where the introduction of a new business or industry to boost the economy is highly unlikely? Phillips County, Arkansas, located in the Mississippi Delta, is an example of a small rural city that has been unable to reverse the population decline that began in the 1960s, and the residents of the County have suffered as a result of the unstable economy. Using Phillips County as a real life example, this paper looks at efforts to reverse the high concentration of poverty, both by means of CED programs that seek to build the community and antipoverty policy through government programs or other organizations that target individuals and households.

In general, most residents of low-income neighborhoods are unhappy with the impoverished state of their community and can take one of two modes of action to demonstrate their dissatisfaction: exit or voice (Simon 2001:144). Exit refers to the case when members of the community leave and move to different cities; voice is when residents publicly announce their discontent by complaining to authority figures or participating in efforts towards change (Hirschman 1970:4). Different community characteristics can either facilitate exit or promote voice depending on residents' long-

term interest in the area and whether or not reforms are made in response to voiced concerns. When there are many barriers to exit people are more likely to use their voice and vice versa. Exit and voice are at the center of the discussion of this paper that essentially aims to determine how people are made better off. Should exit be discouraged by developing the local community and creating geographic ties through personal connections and enhanced resources or should exit be facilitated with programs designed to educate and empower individuals to explore opportunities outside the community?

Exit becomes the norm in geographic areas where the living conditions are particularly dismal and the opportunity for future improvements looks grim. Outmigration in cities around the country has occurred as a result of deindustrialization and the changes in workforce demand for skilled and unskilled labor (Wilson 1996). The story of a once thriving city that is now ravaged with poverty, unemployment, failing schools, and weak social and political structure is certainly not unique to Phillips County, Arkansas, but it is a nearly perfect example of how quickly economic demise can occur. The discussion of how to go about fixing broken communities requires some background knowledge of the economic history of the area.

Phillips County: the Poster Child for Economic Decline and Outmigration

Robert Kinchen, an Attorney for the Legal Aid of Arkansas who grew up in Helena and came back after 20 years, observes:

The thing I do remember though was that during my school years Helena was considered a fairly prosperous place. Most of the people here worked. In our community, most of the people were either schoolteachers or they worked at the Mohawk Rubber and Tire plant, and those occupations probably made up what would have been considered the black middle class. People had fairly good lives,

the town had a lot of places that you could go shopping, a lot of things were provided for kids as far as recreation is concerned. There were movie theaters there were a lot of community activities that the kids participated in, baseball teams and stuff in the summer. So, during that time I guess you would think of Helena as being a fairly booming town...especially compared to what you saw. [I worked with Mr. Kinchen at the Legal Aid of Arkansas in Summer 2009.] Helena when you were here that summer, and what I grew up in, that's two different places.

Mr. Kinchen's description of his childhood paints a very different picture of Helena than exists today. Looking at Helena-West Helena (the towns consolidated in 2006) today, it would not be described as booming, middle-class, or prosperous. The presence of poverty is overwhelming; neighborhoods are littered with abandoned buildings, trash, and unkempt property; teenagers roam the streets causing trouble because there is nothing for them to do; fast food and retail chains dominate the main access road to the town, forcing long-standing small businesses to close, and leaving the once thriving Cherry and Main streets deserted. Abandoned buildings and houses are spread out throughout the town, signifying both the current depressed state of the local economy and also reminding people of what once was with the beautiful antebellum architecture and southern charm. My experience working at the Legal Aid of Arkansas in 2009 made me wonder what Helena-West Helena used to be like. What caused such a swift and drastic decline in the economic and social atmosphere, and what makes poverty and economic decline so persistent in Phillips County?

Like many counties in the Mississippi Delta, Phillips County, Arkansas suffers from a number of problems related to poverty, unemployment, race, and poor education. According to the United States Census, as of 2009, 34.9% of the population in Phillips County lives in poverty, and 50% of children are poor (US Census; Southern Rural

Development Center). These figures are significantly higher than state and national averages; the 2009 US Census reported a 17.7% poverty rate in Arkansas and a 13.2% national average, with 20.7% of American children living in poverty (<http://fastfacts.census.gov>). Phillips County's population has steadily declined in the last fifty years, and in the last ten years they experienced a 20.9% decrease in the population; it is less than half what it was in 1950. The demographic characteristics of Phillips County are also very different from state averages. In Arkansas, African-Americans make up only 15.8% of the population, whereas in Phillips County they represent the majority of the population at 61.5% (<http://quickfacts.census.gov>). As far as education, only 62.2% of Phillips County residents over 25 have a high school degree, and 12.4% have a college degree, compared to 75.3% and 16.7% of Arkansas residents (<http://quickfacts.census.gov>). The 2005-2009 American Community Survey reports a 14.9% unemployment rate for the civilian labor force in Phillips County, double the State and National averages, which are both around 7% (<http://factfinder.census.gov>). Looking into the history of Phillips County gives some insight into how the issues of joblessness, rapid population decline, poverty, and uneven representation of minorities, came to be.

History of Phillips County

In a different era, Phillips County was a prosperous rural region in Eastern Arkansas. In a documentary about these twin towns of Helena and West-Helena, *Delta Dreams*, several residents recall the “glory days” of Helena, when people had jobs and the streets were busy with people and all types of businesses. Over the years, a vibrant middle class comprised of workers in the river transportation, agriculture, lumber, and manufacturing industries populated the town. Helena—a river town and the county seat

of Phillips County—benefited greatly from the traffic and tourism that resulted from the town's position as a transportation hub along the Mississippi, and transportation was one of the first successful industries in the area (Cliff 2011). Helena also gained notoriety as a Union city and for the Battle of Helena in 1863 during the civil war (Teske 2010).

Throughout the 19th century sprawling plantations occupied the land, and the rich soil was used to produce cash crops like cotton, which was in high demand at the time. The booming agriculture industry that provided employment and economic wellbeing was heavily dependent on black workers' manual labor, while whites exclusively enjoyed its rewards. The success of the agriculture industry in Phillips County was built on slavery and segregation and the resulting racial tension and inequality continues to this day. The racial turmoil between blacks and whites exploded with the Elaine Massacre in 1919. White farmers felt threatened when black farmers finally took action to correct the inequality in farming and agriculture by starting a union, and they attacked blacks they thought were involved. Nobody knows for sure, but it is estimated that the riots resulted in the arrests of hundreds of black men, and the deaths of five white and up to one hundred black men (Moneyhon 1997:108). This event marked the last time that blacks would speak up against their unjust treatment until the Civil Rights Movement.

In addition to transportation and agriculture, lumber became an important industry for Phillips County in 1890, and at one point it trailed Memphis as the second highest producer for hardwood goods in the country (Cliff 2011). The technological advances such as the railroad system and the installation of levees to prevent flooding allowed the lumber industry in Helena to grow, and West Helena was developed in 1917. However, the thriving industry that provided thousands of jobs for Phillips County residents began

to decline in the 1920s as societal changes reduced the demand for wood products as they were substituted with metal and other materials. Finally, the great flood of 1927 destroyed infrastructure and farmland throughout Phillips County, forcing them out of the lumber industry and significantly reducing the profits from agriculture. The increasingly mechanized agriculture industry combined with a reduced demand for cotton simultaneously reduced the demand for the good itself and the labor required to produce it, putting many people (especially blacks) out of a job. By the end of the Great Depression, Helena had lost an entire industry and suffered serious depreciation in the agriculture and transportation industries, causing a steady increase in unemployment.

Despite the economic downturn in Phillips County in the 1930s, the population continued to increase until the 1960s. The thriving blues music community supported the economy in Helena and West Helena throughout the 1940s and 50s. Black musicians such as Conway Twitty and followers of blues music flocked to Helena, which some people still consider a “Blues Holy land” (*Delta Dreams*). Business from the blues community included blues clubs and performance venues, the annual blues festival, and the entertainment program, *King Biscuit Time* (Cliff 2011). The blues music culture was at the center of Walnut and Cherry streets in downtown Helena, which continued to be busy with people and businesses. Even though small farms continued to be consolidated and fewer people worked in agriculture, manufacturing jobs were still available and the Mohawk Rubber and Tire plant employed hundreds of people throughout the 60s and 70s.

The closing of the Mohawk Rubber and Tire plant in 1979 put hundreds of people out of work and marks a turning point in the history of Phillips County. One resident remembers what happened, “I think probably if you had to put your finger on when

things started going down, I don't think anybody would disagree that it started going down when Mohawk went out" (Charles Roscoff, *Delta Dreams*). Suddenly, the town that once had busy streets lined with shops, restaurants, and movie theaters began to fade. Buildings and family homes were abandoned as hundreds of unemployed people quickly realized they would not be able to find a decent job in Phillips County and were forced to move out of town. As more and more residents emigrated away from Helena and West Helena the streets were not as busy, and small businesses were forced to close. Outmigration was quick and widespread and the loss of the tax base led to rapid deterioration of municipal property, and worse—the public school system. The public schools system—which was already a victim of de facto segregation—suffered from budget cuts and lay-offs. Before long, the once booming middle-class that supported the economy and social life of Helena had vanished, and what remained was a sad picture of poverty, unemployment, and inequality.

Phillips County Today: What is left?

Looking at the economic and social history of Phillips County gives an outsider an idea of the events that led up to the widespread poverty that exists today, but a true understanding of the current situation in Phillips County goes beyond poverty. What follows is an in-depth look at the current economic opportunities, education system, and racial tension that exist in Phillips County and an exploration into how each of these has contributed to outmigration and poverty and prohibited economic growth and progress in the community.

Joblessness

Joblessness, as opposed to unemployment, is a serious problem in Phillips County. Estimates of unemployment vary from 9% to 15%, but it is assumed that at any given time an additional 10% of people who are able to work and in need of employment are excluded from this estimation because they are not actively seeking employment. The employment ratio gives a more accurate picture of workforce participation by comparing the total number of employed working age adults in the labor force to the total population of working age people (ages 16 to 64) in the region. As of 2009 the Employment Ratio in Phillips County is around 57.1, which is low compared to the State of Arkansas (60.8) and the National average (64.6) (American Community Survey 2005-2009). There are several reasons for the low employment rate in Phillips County. First of all, the shift from an agricultural, to an industrial, to a service based economy over the past century has resulted in a significantly reduced demand for low-skilled labor. The majority of job opportunities now exist in the service industry, such as at fast-food restaurants or Wal-Mart. However, these positions are unattractive to job seekers because they have almost no potential for job growth and barely provide a livable wage. For many residents in Phillips County, working the fast food window at McDonalds is not the type of job they are interested in, and if this is the only option, many people will simply give up their job search.

Others lack the human capital, or hard and soft skills that are needed to work in the service industry. When there was a high demand for labor in the manufacturing industry, low-skilled residents were able to hold well-paying jobs without a high school degree (McGranahan and Beal 2002:3). Now, any desirable job that offers a reasonable wage requires at least a high school degree. Since almost 40% of Phillips County

residents are high school dropouts, and even some with a high school degree lack the basic written and verbal skills that are required even for low-skilled jobs, there is a gap between the skill set that is supplied and demand by the labor force. Unable to find jobs that fit their skill set, another group of people relies on welfare and government assistance to make ends meet. In 2005 over 10.5% of Phillips County residents received Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and more than 20% were enrolled in Medicare (Country and City Data Book 2007).

Katheenya Willis, a young woman who works as the secretary for the Legal Aid of Arkansas, and a lifetime West-Helena resident who grew up in poverty, has a unique perspective on the employment challenges young people face in Phillips County. Willis shared feelings of sympathy and criticism when she spoke about her peers. One friend of hers endlessly searched for a job to support her children with no luck, confirming the deficiency in job opportunities in the area. With a tone of disapproval, Willis suggests others are unemployed because they are lazy, unskilled in certain areas of work, or only want to make enough cash to get by. She also mentioned how young people frequently turn to illegal activities to make money quickly without any formal education or skills, such as dealing drugs. Those who do have jobs most likely work in one of the many fast food chains or in the nearby casino in Tunica, Mississippi; some also have seasonal jobs in factories (personal interview with Katheenya Willis, March 25, 2011). Although Willis partially blames individuals for their jobless state, saying they do not want to put in the effort required to find a job, her observations actually suggest that the system has failed the members of the Phillips County community. In theory, individuals should have a certain amount of control over their employment status, but if the local government fails

to provide an education system that adequately prepares individuals for higher education or a career, they are being set up to fail.

In addition to an individual's inability to find a suitable job, the large pool of low and unskilled workers in Phillips County is a challenge for current and potential employers. From the employers' perspective, it is nearly impossible to find reliable labor from the large pool of unskilled workers (Personal Interview with John Collins¹, March 25, 2011). The owner of the Mexican restaurant in Helena-West Helena complained that even people who came in looking for a job would not show up for work consistently, could not pass the drug test, or simply did not want to work hard. Especially in the service industry, the difficulty of finding reliable and qualified workers is directly related to the skill gap that was previously mentioned; people who have the appropriate skill set to work in the service industry have little interest in working in a fast food restaurant, and those people who would accept this type of job are unqualified or undependable. These challenges also exist outside the service industry. A few years ago, a new manufacturing company in a nearby Mississippi county was forced to close after only two years of operation because it was unable to find enough people in the Delta area to fill three shifts of 200 employees. Any large company would probably encounter a similar problem in Phillips County, eliminating the possibility of job creating and economic growth through the introduction of new big business. The lack of human capital is one reason high-poverty rural areas are unattractive to companies who are seeking to expand or relocate; the chance of being unable to find reliable, skilled labor is too risky. (McGranahan,

¹ Name has been changed

Cromartie, and Wojan 2011). One of the main reasons for workers' low skill level in Phillips County is the poor quality of local schools.

Education

The quality of an individual's education has a direct affect on their skill development and employability. For the community, quality schools create a productive workforce and make the geographic location more desirable to potential migrants and new businesses; after availability of human capital, school quality is the second most common concern for businesses and professionals who are considering relocating to the area (McGranahan, Cromartie, and Wojan 2011). In Helena-West Helena, the consequences of the ineffective school system are severe and can be seen in the high dropout rates, and widespread poverty and unemployment. The education system in Phillips County has suffered considerably as a result of the steady out-migration over the last fifty years. To quantify this loss, between 2007-2010, enrollment declined by 564 students, a loss that amounts to \$3.4 million in funding (Lyon 2010). The Helena-West Helena School District is currently in a state of economic distress and has begun a Reduction in Force (RIF), resulting in the lay-offs of a number of teachers and school personnel. Many parents in the Helena-West Helena School District are upset with the RIF and have continued to seek alternate education programs for their children, which will only make the situation worse. Academic achievement is far below that of state and national averages, and only about 60% of children who start first grade will graduate from high school.

Personal interviews with residents of Helena-West Helena and comments from the *Delta Dreams* documentary suggest a concern that people have stopped caring about

educating their children. Although there is little empirical evidence to prove it, anecdotal evidence suggests a consensus about the negative academic trend. Ollie White suggests the key difference in poverty then and now lies in how we view education:

I mean, when I was growing up, we would be walking to school, there were people all along the way my little route to school would say, oh you're going to school. Okay you go to school and you listen to what the teacher says, and you learn something. Everybody in the community was interested in kids getting a good education. I just don't see that now (*Delta Dreams*).

Katheenya Willis points to the teachers' lack of interest as a major issue and a weak point in the education system. When she was growing up she felt teachers cared about her and wanted her to succeed in school, whereas today it appears that many teachers are just "doing it for a paycheck" and are not dedicated to their students' academic futures (personal interview with Katheenya Willis, March 25, 2011). The result is a

dysfunctional school system that allows underperforming students to move from one grade to the next without ever learning how to read or do math on grade-level. At best, they graduate without having learned enough to go to college, at worst they dropout.

The poor education system in Phillips County is the reason for the high population of low-skilled labor, and without major changes and improvements in the system, no progress will ever be made towards community or economic development. Quality schools matter not only when it comes to finding labor for existing companies and businesses, but also for future business. Without a proper school system to send their children to, business management and professionals will be disinclined to relocate to Phillips County. Therefore, the education system must be significantly improved if the region will ever be attractive to potential business investors.

Failing school systems around the country produce unqualified and low-skilled people who eventually make up the labor force, but what is unique in Phillips County is how the negative impact disproportionately affects blacks over whites. When the public school system was integrated in the 1960s, white families started the Desoto School which remains 100% white today. The public schools are nearly 99% black, which makes black children the victims of the low quality education system and the current state of financial distress that threatens the very existence of the school. Although the Desoto School is not the highest quality private school, it is still ahead of Helena-West Helena, and white students at Desoto are more likely to graduate from high school and even go on to college than their black counterparts. De facto segregation of schools in Phillips County has created an achievement gap between black and white youth, which will inevitably grow larger as whites continue to have better education and occupational opportunities, and blacks are stuck in the failing public school system.

De Facto Segregation

De facto segregation in schools is only one example of how racial tension continues to affect the Phillips County community. Long after the days of “separate but equal” community organizations, churches, neighborhoods, and schools continue to be segregated by race. Samara Francisco (Washington and Lee ’10) wrote a wonderful paper, arguing that racial tension between black and white residents is the greatest barrier to community development in Helena-West Helena, because it has prevented the accumulation of social capital. Whereas physical and human capital refer to “tools and training that enhance individual productivity,” social capital refers to “features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and

cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam 1995:67). As Francisco explores in depth, the history of racial segregation and stratification in Phillips County has severely limited the development of social capital: “In Phillips County, due to the extent of racial tension and segregation, the presence of bonding social capital—that focuses on the in-group—is the norm, whereas bridging social capital—that seeks to build intergroup relations—is the exception” (Francisco 2010:11). Bridging social capital (such as the level of trust and cooperation between racial groups in a community) is very low in Phillips County because de-facto segregation in schools, churches, and other organizations has prevented social interaction and trust from forming between whites and blacks in the community.

Racial tension is also an issue in the government. Mayor James Valley was re-elected in November but he has so far been unable to win the support of both the black and white communities. Despite being a black mayor, many people see him as a “white candidate” because of his Republican political views (Personal Interview with Robert Kinchen, March 24, 2011). The white community is also split in their support of the Mayor; some residents feel this is an important step toward progress and away from the “old school” politics while others question Valley’s competence as a leader. Kinchen expressed that Valley has had trouble passing changes through the city council because many black councilmen consistently vote against him. Kinchen also shared his opinion on how race is a barrier to progress in Phillips County: “I’ve talked to some of my white classmates, some of my black classmates, [I’ve said] that this town isn’t gonna get any better until we decide to sit down at the table and talk to each other and start working out things in a sense of all of us, as opposed to we and them” (Personal Interview with Robert Kinchen, March 24, 2011). Without cooperation and leadership from both the black and

white communities it is unlikely that significant progress will be made towards community development.

Community and Individual Development:

Phillips County serves as a real-life example of how the economic prosperity or poverty is inextricably related to community intergroup relations (social capital) and the availability of a skilled workforce (human capital) that results from a quality education system. These three community characteristics are associated with high levels of productivity and economic growth. Unfortunately the opposite is true in Phillips County; racial tension and low social capital combined with a poor quality school system and unskilled workforce have contributed in some way to the economic demise that has occurred over the last half-century and continues to this today. However, despite the consistent economic and population decline, Phillips County residents have maintained hope and there are a number of programs in progress that aim to create community economic development. An investigation into the current initiatives that are being made to alleviate and eliminate poverty will help answer the question: Is there hope that community economic development programs could stimulate the economy and create new jobs for Phillips County residents? Or, should policies focus on fostering individual capability and encouraging young people to pursue academic and career opportunities outside the area?

Community Economic Development

The Community Economic Development Movement is a bottom-up approach to reducing poverty that focuses on the big-picture and long term development projects such

as creating jobs and affordable housing. CED programs intervene in impoverished urban cities and aim to make improvements to the social, economic, and political systems that foster human interaction and boost resident's long-term investment in the geographic location (Simon 2001: 3). A successful organization must provide benefits to residents, form useful partnerships with existing institutions or local activities, have a minimal negative impact on the environment, and reinforce and strengthen the existing community structure (Simon 2001:69-72).

The Delta Bridge Project in Phillips County is an initiative that fits Simon's description. Delta Bridge works with the Phillips County Strategic Planning Steering Committee in a public-private partnership. It seeks to "create and harness community spirit, reduce racial disparity, and unify community organizations and citizens so that together we create, promote, and support development that result in the greatest possible benefit for all citizens" (2010-2020 Strategic Community Plan: 9). The creation of the strategic plan in 2005 and its update in 2010 is the collaborative effort of hundreds of Phillips County residents who worked together to address the persistent poverty in the community by acknowledging the strengths/opportunities and weaknesses/threats to economic and community development. Its comprehensive plan addresses the key challenges in Phillips County and lays out specific steps that will be taken in the areas of economic development, housing, education, leadership and health care, the five pillars of community development (2010-2020 Strategic Community Plan 6). The goal of the Delta Bridge Project is to turn Phillips County into a model county for the rest of the Delta. The vision states that "Phillips County will be a safe community with quality job opportunities for all citizens, excellent housing for all income levels, proactive healthcare

and social services, excellent education for its children and workforce, and premier recreational and tourism attractions that promote cultural enrichment for all” (2010-2020 Strategic Community Plan: 10).

In many ways, the Delta Bridge Project is a great example of a Community Economic Development program that could set Phillips County on a path towards future growth. An important characteristic of a successful community development program is that it encourages social connections and face-to-face interaction between community members. The fact that 600 people were involved in formulating this strategic plan suggests that at least a few hundred people have a desire for change and improvement in the community. The strategic plan is an example of how community members can use their voice to express concern over the existing problems in Phillips County; but simply being aware of the problems is not enough, voice is only an effective tool if it brings about real positive changes that ultimately benefit the community. The original version of the Community Strategic Plan set goals with the hopes that they would be accomplished by 2010. The review and revision of the plan is a good way to measure how successful the Delta Bridge Project was at achieving its goals, specifically those for economic development, education, and leadership.

The Strategic Plan recognizes tourism and the creation of new jobs and business as the two main forms of future economic development in Phillips County. Both the geographic location and the rich cultural heritage of Phillips County make it an attractive tourist destination and the potential to capitalize on the expansion of the tourism industry in the area is one of the most promising ideas set fourth in the action plan for a few reasons. First, its Civil War history and its significance in the birth of blues music

demonstrate the wealth of tourist opportunities such as museums, Civil War reenactments, music festivals, and blues clubs; second, the development of tourism could begin immediately and would bring in the revenue that is needed to address the more complex challenges in Phillips County, such as the failing public school system and unemployment. One resident of Helena-West Helena articulates this point:

Economic development starts with community development, and to start really effective community development, you have to do something that bridges that gap, and I see that as being tourism. Tourists come into town and they spend money. But, they don't worry about your education system, and they don't need to buy houses, you know. They come and go. They can be that bridge in between where we are now and where we hope to be (Phil Baldwin, Delta Dreams). As opposed to tourism, bringing in a new business would first require vast improvements in the housing market, available healthcare, and a complete overhaul of the school system. Creating new jobs has similar challenges because of the low-skilled workforce that would require extensive training and remedial education. The key to successful development is to build upon existing industries and institutions in the area. In 2007 a \$2 million sweet potato storage facility was put into place; now it employs around twenty people and allows local farmers to store their crops so they can sell them locally when the price is right (Personal Interview with John Collins, March 25, 2011). Another potential source of local economic development is the biodiesel plant that is being constructed. If this plan follows through it would be a great addition to agribusiness and could employ between 40 and 60 people.

Job-training programs are popular CED programs because they seem like a laissez-faire solution to poverty that is not paternalistic or a handout from the government. Successful job training programs should must be connected with existing job opportunities so that both employers and employees will receive the greatest benefit from

the program (Simon 2001:34). Phillips Community College, located in Helena-West Helena, is one resource that provides training for some of the main employers in the area. For example, they have a nursing program that is connected with the Helena Regional Medical Center, and recently received a grant to develop training related to alternative energy to support the pending biodiesel facility (Personal interview with John Collins, March 25, 2011). However, in places like Phillips County job-training programs are better in theory; in reality, they have many barriers to success. The people who benefit from job training programs most likely already had some basic skills to build upon; training programs help low skilled people function at a medium skill level, but they are not as effective at helping people with no skills. Helena-West Helena has a high school graduation rate that is just over 60%, meaning that 40% of the working-age population are dropouts who may have the reading skills equivalent to a 5th grade level. Even those who did make it through high school may not have learned much of anything, and they were simply pushed through the system. Before you can train a person for a specific job, they must at least be able to read and write with some proficiency, so this is where job-training programs would have to start before they could teach any marketable or vocational skills.

While there are significant *plans* in place to boost community development in Phillips County, there has been less action taken to actual realize the goals set forth by the Delta Bridge Project's strategic planning committee. There appears to be some potential for tourism based on Phillips County's historical significance in the Civil War and blues music, and boosting the local economy to attract visitors might provide some incentive to clean up Phillips County and inspire a renewed sense of pride in the local

culture and heritage, but a long-term solution is needed to make a real difference in Phillips County's future.

Preparing Individuals for Exit:

Although the Delta Bridge Project has proposed a number of ways to revitalize Phillips County and create community economic development, so far the area has yet to see any significant growth, and economic opportunities are still few and far between. The desire for change is widespread in the community, and people of all races, classes, and socioeconomic status want the same things for the community: safe streets, more jobs, and a quality education system, with one exception—the high school seniors just want to get out.

The only group that you could clearly see that was different was the high school students and that was probably the most depressing focus group we had, because what they said to a tee is as soon as we graduate we're out of here. Every one of them 40 or 50 kids black and white. They all wanted to leave and we've got to change that. We've got to make it so that our high school students want to stay and that if they stay there is a real job...not just a menial job but a job with a career (Phil Baldwin, Delta Dreams).

Nicholas Lemann, who argues that community economic development is a myth, explains the transitional nature of urban ghettos, and the same principle can be applied to poor rural areas: “the standard model of progress for poor people living in urban slums, repeated millions and millions of times over the decades, is to get a good job outside the neighborhood and then decamp for a nicer part of town,” (Lemann 1994) or a nicer part of Arkansas if you are from Phillips County. This is often referred to as “brain drain” because the smartest and most motivated members of the community move out of town, leaving behind the high school dropouts, teen moms, and others who are either stuck or

have no desire to leave. Community development programs are directed at these remaining people, but perhaps the limited resources that are available should be redirected towards individuals who want to exit the community.

Targeting individuals, rather than entire communities, is a more cost-efficient and effective way to eliminate poverty in the long run. The benefits of programs that foster individual capability such as early childhood education are long-lasting and lead to higher rates of high school graduation, increase the likelihood and number of young people who attend college, and creates more opportunities long-term employment. However, politics and the need to have more immediate and measurable results can be a barrier to support and funding for these more costly programs. John Collins says, “the downside of that [early investment in individuals] is from a policy side, from a funding side, everyone likes to see outcomes in terms of job creation...on a three to five-year time line...often people don’t care about things that take twenty years to come to fruition” (Personal

Interview with John Collins March 25, 2011). The KIPP School is an example of how investment in individuals facilitates exit out of the troubled community and opens up a variety of opportunities for young people. At KIPP, college is the goal, and every child learns that hard work and determination will eventually pay off. Beginning in 9th grade students set long-term goals for their GPA, where they will attend college, what they will study in college, and they establish a financial plan for future success (KIPP Delta Public Schools 2010 Annual Report). The class of 2010 was the first class to graduate from KIPP Delta and 100% of students were accepted to a four-year university.

Exit through college is clearly the KIPP School’s goal, and programs like the Boys and Girls Club of Phillips County also facilitate individual capability with

significant emphasis on setting educational and career goals for the future. Considering the limited opportunities that currently exist in the area, the BGPC encourages its members to look beyond Phillips County in order to accomplish their mission to “enable all young people to realize their full potential as productive, responsible, and caring citizens” (Boys and Girls Club of Phillips County 2011). Samara Francisco, who also worked in Phillips County during her Shepherd Internship, interviewed a Helena resident involved in the BBGPC who said:

I think most people who have the means to do so leave. By means, I mean education and opportunities. I have found very few who stay out of want. Most who are here are staying because of family business or family members. The education system is terrible and crime is high. If you don't have a family business or are not here to try to change things then more than likely you will leave. I think there are very few opportunities for people to reach their full potential here. There are only so many great jobs and outlets for people to work and you can only do so much in a small community. (Interview April 1, 2010, as cited in Francisco 2010:19).

This man clearly believes that exit is the answer for young people. At least in the short-term, facilitating exit is really the only way to ensure young people will reach their full potential. This strategy could change in the future if Phillips County is able to make progress towards its goals of economic growth and job creation. For now, it should be a moral obligation to empower youths to set goals beyond Phillips County and provide them with the tools they need to get an education and pursue their career aspirations.

It is important to recognize how community economic development and individual capability are connected. Mike Beebe, the Governor of Arkansas said, “It’s worth repeating that KIPP Delta’s senior class is 100 percent college-bound. Imagine the changed face of our State if every single student pursued higher education. Imagine the companies we’d recruit, the good jobs we’d bring in, the positive growth we’d see in our

communities” (KIPP Delta Public Schools 2010 Annual Report: 7). Twenty years down the road this could prove to have the greatest impact on the community as these young people go on to graduate from college with a high skill level and maybe a few of them will come back to Phillips County and create their own jobs (Personal Interview with John Collins). People do come back, so even programs that facilitate exit in the short term could have long-term benefits for the whole community. After practicing law in Atlanta, Bernie Crowley returned to Helena to start a biodiesel plant that would create at least twenty new jobs. Despite his mother’s advice that he leave Helena for good, Robert Kinchen returned to work for the Legal Aid of Arkansas after receiving his undergraduate and law degree from Harvard University and practicing law in Detroit. The current superintendent of the Helena-West Helena School District is a 1985 graduate of the local Central High School. Marcus Nelson knew he wanted to return to Helena since 8th grade and now works at the KIPP School (*Delta Dreams*). In some ways, enabling exit presents the risk of removing the positive role models and people who will use their voice to the benefit of the entire community. However, it is possible that the most dedicated and passionate individuals will return to Phillips County with a desire to make a difference, and they can use the tools and skills they accumulated outside of the region to benefit the well-being of the entire community.

What is the solution?

Both community economic development programs that encourage residents to use their voice and programs that target individuals and prepare them for exit are being implemented in Phillips County. The Delta Bridge Project’s strategic plan and the

success of the KIPP School and the Boys and Girls Club in Phillips County are examples of antipoverty programs that aim not only benefit individuals but also the community at large. The short-term gains from economic development will help fund the programs that will foster long-term growth such as quality education, and these efforts should continue to grow in the future. However, both of these approaches are missing a key element that must be addressed if Phillips County is ever going to be revitalized, and that is the deeply rooted racial tension that prevents community members from truly working together.

Addressing Racial Tension

The first step towards community change in Phillips County must acknowledge racial tensions that exist and make an attempt to increase the social capital between blacks and whites. Obviously this will not be easy, but to continue to ignore the “race issue” in Phillips County would be a detriment to progress towards community economic development. This is important first, because economic development is the most efficient in places with high social capital, but also because economic growth in areas with low social capital will only add to the inequality and stratification between racial groups. Francisco illustrates this point with an example from the neighboring Tunica County in Mississippi. The creation of a large casino in area created jobs and financial capital for both black and white residents in the area, but it had no effect on the relations between groups, and the black and white communities continue to be divided (Francisco 2010:19; Wright Austin 2006:175). Since economic growth cannot solve the problems related to social capital, antipoverty programs must be dedicated specifically to reducing the animosity between the black and white communities and facilitate trust, social interaction, and cooperation between the groups either before or along with any efforts put towards

economic growth. One Helena resident said, “We are only kidding ourselves if we think without racial equality, we can have economic development here for real” (Dr. Mary Olson, *Delta Dreams*).

One reason so few attempts have been made to repair the relations between racial groups in Phillips County is because addressing the inequality and racial tension that has occurred for centuries is an extremely daunting task. A full discussion of the specific steps that should be taken to address the deficient social capital in Phillips County is beyond the scope of this paper (See Samara Francisco’s Paper), but one example is the Boys and Girls Club of Phillips County. The BGCPC emphasizes the importance of promoting interactions with others from different cultural, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds and stresses that trust is an essential element to relationships between members of the organization and the community at large (Francisco 2010:21). Another avenue to promote civic engagement and interaction between racial is through religious organizations. Although churches remain segregated in Phillips County, the partnership between a black and a white church through a community service or other local project could be a great way community members to work together with people from different backgrounds with the mutually beneficial goal of creating local change. Finally, eliminating de facto segregation in the education system would be the most groundbreaking but controversial reform that would promote social capital in Phillips County.

Educational Reforms

Addressing the racial inequality in Phillips County must be the first priority in any antipoverty policy because it is so pervasive in other aspects of the society, especially

education. Native Helena resident, Senator Blanche Lincoln said, “what we need to do is work on those opportunities to help in a natural succession to eliminate the poverty that exists. But, a lot of it is going to depend on education” (Blanche Lincoln, *Delta Dreams*).

The connection between education and hard and soft skills that are needed to participate in paid labor has been explored at length. Without significant improvement to the current Public School System in Phillips County the residents of Phillips County will continue to suffer from a lack of skills that prevent them from holding jobs and pursuing higher education. It is in the best interest of individuals and the entire community to have high quality schools in the area, both for kids’ academic achievement and economic opportunities. Rural development economists note that “schooling is not typically a rural development issue, but it is difficult to see how sustained growth in high-poverty

outmigration counties could be achieved without attention to local education systems” (McGranahan, Cromartie, and Wojan 2011). Robert Kinchen, who has an active role in

educational reform in the area, makes this point:

I don’t think economically it’s going to get better here until we change the systems that are here. We gotta provide a better education for the kids that are here, because businesses won’t come here if the executives don’t have anywhere to send their kids to school. So unless we get better educational system, unless we get better services to our city...we gotta develop the stuff here so that we can be attractive to folks who may want to invest in us (Personal Interview with Robert Kinchen, March 24, 2011).

Kinchen also mentioned that the key to improving the education system in Helena-West Helena is to change the way things are done. The schools cannot continue to operate in the same way because something is not working, and to continue to do something over and over and expect a different result is foolish.

One of the biggest challenges is to change students' and parents' attitudes about education and learning. Anecdotal evidence suggests that students in Phillips County are discouraged from learning because they know how bad the system is, and they are aware that they are not receiving a quality education. True educational reform requires a comprehensive strategy, says Sanetta Davis: "the churches, the community, the business people, the schools, we've all got to come together. We've all got to show the students that okay, we're all going to work this together and this is what we want from you all. Then, maybe we can get a hand on our students because right now we just do not" (*Delta Dreams*). The KIPP School is obviously a huge asset to the Delta community. The student body is 95% black and 81% are eligible for free lunch (KIPP Delta Public Schools, 2010 Annual Report), so KIPP is definitely targeting those who have the highest demonstrated need, but its impact is limited to a very small number of children. The Phillips County community would also benefit from more integration beginning as soon as possible, so a more even balance between black and white students would be a good complement to the primary community goal of increasing social capital and trust between community members.

Conclusion

In the past fifty years, Phillips County has lost half its population, the majority of its economic opportunities, and is currently on the brink of losing its school system—but if there is one thing it has not lost, it is hope. This was evident two summers ago when I spent eight weeks in Helena, and it was repeated over and over again in personal interviews I conducted and in the *Delta Dreams* documentary. The desire to revitalize the once thriving economy in Phillips County is widespread, but certain changes must

happen before any real growth can occur. Alleviating and eliminating poverty will take generations of hard work and a community-wide dedication to breaking down racial boundaries and facilitating trust and cooperation between community members of all types of backgrounds. Educational reforms must go into effect immediately so the maximum number of children can reap the benefits of a quality education. Many organizations and programs have taken a strictly business approach to community development in Phillips County, and have failed as result. Going forward, if the Phillips County community is dedicated to first improving social and human capital, economic growth will occur naturally, and CED programs will be more effective at making long-lasting and significant changes in the community. With this comprehensive approach to community development it is possible that Phillips County will one day be a “Delta

Dream” come true.

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