

BLACK BELT COUNTY SURVEY

**593 Alabama Adults in Twelve Black Belt Counties
February 10-19, 2003
SME 4.0%**

CAPITAL SURVEY RESEARCH CENTER

ALABAMA EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The adult population of the Black Belt has an informed and seemingly accurate perception and understanding of who and what the Black Belt counties are. While the population of the Black Belt, both white and black, believes the area is, overall, a good place to live, the perception exists that Black Belt counties are worse off than other Alabama counties and there is substantial concern about the future of the counties and the children who live there. The population has very specific ideas about the nature of the problems and the solutions to resolving them.

The major problems identified are lack of jobs, a poor economy, bad roads, and inadequate education. While Black Belt citizens are relatively satisfied with their churches, mail service, basic services, the media, health care, race relations, and a range of other services, the problems of jobs, the economy, and education appear to overwhelm the positive attributes of the area.

The major reasons given as to why the problems cannot be solved include lack of leadership, the inability to work together, politics, and insufficient resources. The population is unsure of the ability to solve the problems locally and do not believe they have much personal influence in the decision-making processes affecting change.

Black Belt county residents believe the local population and local and state governments have the major responsibility for solving Black Belt problems. However, the perceived inability to work together militates against resolution of the problems. In addition, there is uncertainty over whether or not the problems can best be addressed locally or regionally.

To date, the population is mostly unaware of the Black Belt County Commission. While there is some feeling that the Commission may be able to make some difference in Black Belt counties, the view that little will change is strong.

The major advice given to the Commission is to get jobs, emphasize education, and listen to the people.

White and black residents share the overall assessment of the Black Belt area. Both believe it is overall a good place to live and both believe the counties are worse off than other Alabama counties, has major problems that will be difficult to address, and are concerned about the future.

On most of the specific items describing Black Belt counties there is substantial agreement in the assessments of both the black and white

populations. There are some differences. Black African-Americans generally believe that roads, public transportation, recreation services, and fire services are worse than do whites. They also believe that public schools and teachers are better than do whites. And blacks express a greater willingness to pay higher taxes to address the problems than do whites.

There are significant demographic differences among black and white populations in the Black Belt counties. Blacks have more school age children, are younger, have lower levels of education and income, are more likely to rent rather than own property, and have lived longer in the Black Belt area than whites.

In summary, Black Belt county residents appear to have a realistic but not a fatalistic view of the area in which they live. In some ways, probably the rural and non-congested and non-hurried way of life and the good people, they believe it is a good place to live. But, they know about the problems of the Black Belt and believe they are worse off than other Alabama counties, specifically with respect to jobs, the economy, and education. And, while they believe that some change can be made, they are not confident that much will change.

The following report provides original and first-hand data on how the residents of the Black Belt counties see and evaluate the area in which they live. The survey data provide both challenge and opportunity for the Black County Commission.

INTRODUCTION

This report presents the findings of a representative survey of adult residence of twelve Alabama counties generally classified as a Black Belt County. While there is no formal definition or designation of what constitutes an Alabama Black Belt County, historically, the term applies to the set of counties located in the black soil region of the state that had cotton plantations and large black populations prior to the Civil War. The contemporary definition generally includes the same set of counties but defined in terms of a high percentage black population, very low economic status, and rural. The survey included the following listed twelve Alabama counties that are generally designated as being Black Belt counties.

Bullock	Hale	Perry
Choctaw	Lowndes	Pickens
Dallas	Macon	Sumter
Greene	Marengo	Wilcox

The survey was conducted during the period February 10-19, 2003, and included completed surveys of 596 adults over the age of eighteen. The sample was selected using a computerized random digit dialing methodology that selects the sample on a representative county quota basis from a computerized list of all telephone numbers. The survey has a +/- 4.0% Sample Margin of Error.

SURVEY DESIGN

The survey was designed to collect data in the following areas:

- Evaluation and Satisfaction with Residence
- State and Local Politics
- Definition and Evaluation of Black Belt County
- Black Belt County Commission
- Demographic Data

SURVEY RESULTS

EVALUATION OF COUNTY OF RESIDENCE

First, without identifying the survey as a survey of Black Belt counties, respondents were asked how they felt about the county in which they live. A strong majority (71%) believes their county is a very good or pretty good place to live and work and raise a family.

Evaluation of Place of Residence

Very good place	22%
Pretty good place	49%
Not a very good place	12%
Not a good place	11%
Don't Know / No Reply	5%

In an open-end question, residents were asked to identify the major problems in the county in which they live that need to be fixed. Jobs and industry were first, followed by roads, and schools.

Major Problems

Jobs / Industry	30%
Roads	13%
Schools / Education	11%
Drugs / Crime	7%
Local government	4%
Recreation / Parks	3%
Housing	3%
Racial problems	3%
Politics	2%
Money	2%
Law enforcement	2%
Public transportation	2%
Don't Know / Other	14%*

* Includes leaders, hospital care, and discipline in schools.

Respondents were asked if they were Very Satisfied (VS), Somewhat Satisfied (SS), Somewhat Dissatisfied (SD), or Very Dissatisfied (VD) with a list of facilities, services, and programs in the county in which they lived. Churches and mail services are at the top of the list and jobs and the economy at the bottom.

Satisfaction with Place of Residence

Item	VS	SS	SD	VD	DK
Churches	52%	36%	8%	3%	2%
Mail service	46%	43%	5%	4%	1%
Garbage collection	40%	40%	9%	8%	4%
Financial services	37%	43%	9%	7%	4%
Library services	36%	38%	7%	9%	11%
Drinking water	35%	41%	11%	12%	1%
Radio coverage	31%	43%	11%	9%	7%
Quality of life	31%	49%	13%	7%	1%
Television coverage	29%	42%	16%	12%	2%
Fire services	29%	43%	10%	15%	4%
Doctor care	25%	42%	15%	14%	4%
Local newspapers	23%	43%	18%	10%	7%
Environment	22%	51%	17%	7%	3%
Communications	21%	54%	14%	8%	3%
Police services	21%	44%	17%	16%	3%
Sewage treatment	20%	41%	11%	12%	16%
Race relations	19%	45%	18%	15%	3%
Elderly services	18%	43%	16%	12%	11%
Health care	17%	44%	17%	18%	4%
Emergency medical care	17%	38%	18%	23%	4%
Recreation programs	16%	28%	19%	28%	9%
Public schools	16%	41%	16%	11%	16%
School teachers	15%	43%	17%	9%	17%
Hospital care	13%	33%	17%	30%	7%
Children's services	12%	38%	18%	14%	18%
Public transportation	11%	25%	11%	27%	26%
Local leadership	11%	44%	23%	19%	4%
State government	10%	48%	20%	13%	8%
Local school funding	10%	26%	22%	27%	16%
Local governments	8%	46%	22%	17%	7%
Roads	7%	31%	26%	35%	1%
Economy	6%	26%	32%	34%	2%
Jobs	5%	16%	21%	55%	4%

Almost one-half of the population has access to the internet.

Access at Home or at Work to E-mail and the Internet

Yes	49%
No	51%

STATE AND LOCAL POLITICS

The Black Belt population is not confident that the community can fix its problems or that individuals have much influence in the process and decisions made to address the problems.

Ability of Community and County to Address and Solve Local Problems Without Outside Help

Very successful	7%
Somewhat successful	42%
Not very successful	28%
Not successful	18%
Don't Know / Other	6%

Ability to Influence Local Political and Business Processes to Make Changes

A lot	6%
Some	28%
Not very much	36%
None at all	29%
Don't Know / Other	2%

DEFINITION AND EVALUATION OF BLACK BELT COUNTY

Most respondents are able to give an accurate definition of a Black Belt county either in terms of geography and the soil, the population, or the economy.

Definition of Black Belt County

Black soil	21%
Black population	13%
Poor rural county	8%
Rural / Agriculture county	6%
Cotton industry related county	5%
Middle / Lower South	4%
Geographical area	3%
Income related	3%
Bible belt	2%
Don't Know	35%

Respondents were given the following brief definition of the term “Black Belt County” and then asked to evaluate the county relative to other Alabama counties.

“Historically, the term ‘Black Belt County’ meant the dozen or so Alabama counties that had black soil and large cotton plantations before the Civil War. Now, the term includes the same set of counties but refers to the poor economic conditions and large Black African-American populations in the counties.”

A large majority of the Black Belt population believes that Black Belt counties are worse off than other Alabama counties and believe that lack of jobs, resources, and inadequate education are the major causes of the problems.

Five major reasons were cited as the major causes that prevent Black Belt counties from solving their problems. These include lack of local leadership, the inability to work together, politics, lack of local resources, and racism.

Thus, leadership, jobs, working together, and better education were identified as the things needed to fix the problems.

Major responsibility for fixing the problems is distributed among national, state, and local governments and between county and regional approaches.

Working together is the major way in which local people believe they can help fix the problems. The population is divided on the willingness to pay more taxes to fix the problems and on what kind of tax they would support.

Evaluation of Black Belt Counties Relative to Other Counties

Very much worse off	27%
Somewhat worse off	40%
Not worse off	19%
Don't Know	15%

Why Black Belt Counties Are Worse Off

Lack Of Jobs / Economy / Industry	24%
Lack Of Money / Resources	15%
Poor Education	10%
Politics	6%
Older Generation Against Change	6%
Segregation / Race Relations	5%
Lack Of Transportation	5%
Lack Of Black Leaders	4%
No Entertainment	3%
Government	2%
Nothing For Children	2%
Lack Of Highways	1%
Little Help	1%
Media	1%
Not many votes	1%
Don't Know / Other	15%

Main Reasons that Prevent Black Belt Counties from Solving their Problems

Lack of local leadership	18%
Unable to form groups to work together	18%
Politics	16%
Lack of local resources	16%
Racism	12%
Lack of initiative	6%
Outside control	2%
Don't Know / Other	14%

What is Needed to Fix the Problems in the Black Belt Counties

Leadership	21%
Jobs / Industry	12%
People Working Together	8%
Better Education	7%
Better Race Relations	7%
Politicians Working Together	6%
Money	5%
Security / Police Protection	4%
Listen To People	4%
Local Government	3%
Prayer	2%
More Black Leaders	1%
Desegregate Schools	1%
Initiative	1%
Can't Be Fixed	1%
A Lot	1%
Don't Know / Other	16%

Major Responsibility to Address Problems in Black Belt Counties

Local people	28%
State government	21%
Local governments	23%
Private sector	3%
National government	3%
Combination	16%
Don't Know / Other	6%

Problems Local or Regional

County	44%
Region	49%
Don't Know /	8%

What Local People Can Do to Fix Black Belt County Problems

Work Together	16%
Speak Up	8%
Elect Qualified People	6%
Get On Education	6%
Develop Plan To Let Government Know Problems	5%
Get Rid Of Racism	5%
Honesty	4%
Form Committees To Work With Representatives	4%
Counties Work Together	4%
Be More Accountable	4%
Support Schools	3%
Attend Town Meeting	3%
Define Problem	2%
Help Leaders	2%
Get A Job	1%
Work With Young People	1%
Get State To Assist Schools With Training	1%
Be Aware	1%
Don't Be Afraid	1%
Don't Know / Other	22%

Willing to pay higher taxes to help fix the problems

Yes	45%
No	36%
Depends	16%
Don't Know / Other	4%

Tax increase most support

Sales tax	37%
Property tax	26%
Income tax	20%
Don't Know / Other	17%

BLACK BELT COUNTY COMMISSION

Most of the population is unaware of the Governor's Black Belt County Commission. Of those who are aware, the majority believes that the Commission can make some difference.

The major advice given to the Commission includes get more jobs, stress education, and listen to the people.

Residents are split on whether the future of Black Belt counties will be better or worse or stay the same and are unsure about the future success of Black Belt children.

Aware of and Evaluation of Black Belt County Commission

Will be able make a major difference	4%
Will be able to make some difference	20%
Will not be able to make any difference	4%
Not aware of Commission	63%
Don't Know / Other	10%

Advice to Black Belt County Commission

Get Jobs	20%
Stress Education	11%
Listen To People	8%
Attend Community Meetings	7%
Put Aside Differences / Work Together	6%
Fix Roads	6%
Address Every Issue	5%
Help Low Income People	4%
Get Better Leaders	4%
Be Fair	3%
Get Rid Of Crooks	2%
Focus On Young People	2%
Do What Is Right	1%
Things Getting Worse / Not Better	1%
Don't Know / No Reply / Other	20%

Future of Black Belt Counties

Get much better	13%
Get some better	37%
Get some worse	10%
Get much worse	9%
Stay about the same	27%
Don't Know / Other	5%

Confidence that Children in Black Belt Have a Successful Future

Very confident	12%
Somewhat confident	39%
Not very confident	29%
Not confident	15%
Don't Know / Other	4%

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

Gender

Female	40%
Male	60%

Race

Black / A-A	56%
White	40%
Other	4%

School Age Children

None	64%
Public school	28%
Private school	5%
Both	2%

Education

Less than high school	16%
High school graduate	31%
Some college	26%
College graduate	15%
Graduate degree	12%

Age Group

8-24	12%
25-34	14%
35-50	31%
51-64	23%
65 or Older	21%

Political Party

Democrat	57%
Republican	25%
Independent	7%
Other	12%

Property

Own	73%
Rent	22%
Other	5%

Income

Less than \$10,000	18%
\$10,000 to \$25,000	26%
\$25,000 to \$50,000	27%
\$50,000 to \$75,000	12%
\$75,000 to \$100,000	4%
Over \$100,000%	3%
Other	10%

Lived in County

All of your life	49%
Less than five years	9%
Five to ten years	8%
Over ten years	33%