



# **An In-Depth Look at Wilcox County, Alabama**

## **A Comparison of Rural Poverty Across County Lines:**

How Two Southern Alabama Counties Share a Geographical Location but Not Much More

A Continuation of Research Regarding Rural Poverty in the United States  
Poverty Studies Interdisciplinary Minor – Independent Capstone Research

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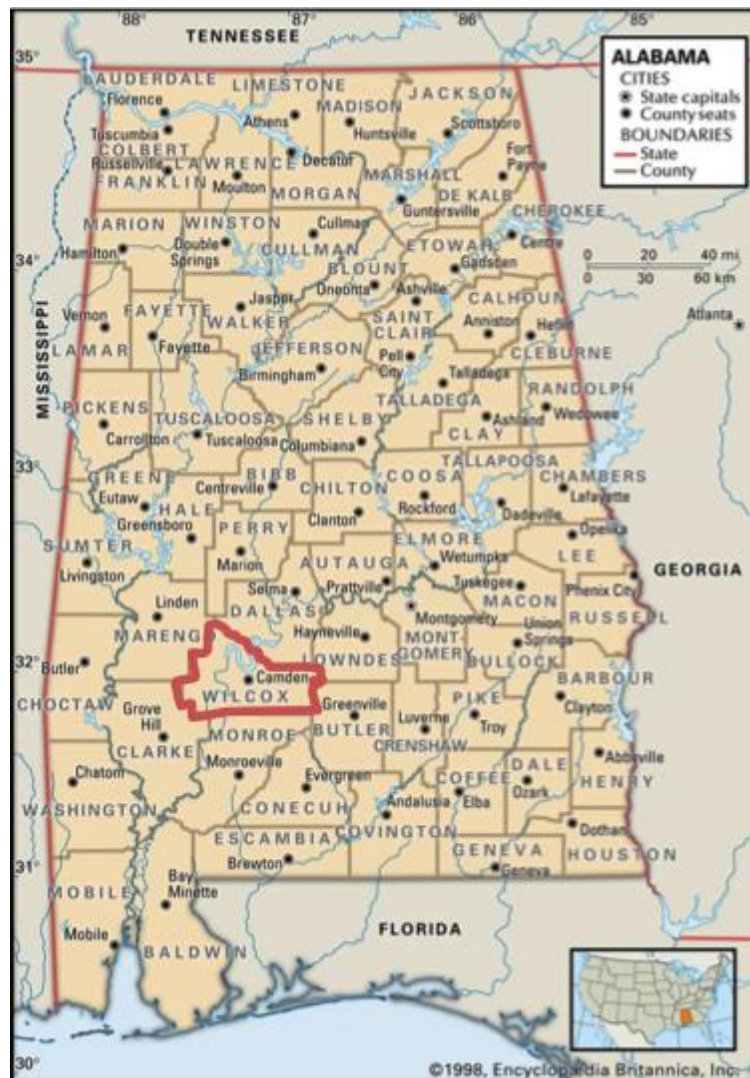
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**Background Information**

Wilcox County, Alabama was founded on December 13, 1819, and it is located in the southwestern corner of the state of Alabama. The county covers 888.5 square miles of land, and, although it is part of the Coastal Plain physiographic section, it is completely landlocked. Until the twentieth century, Wilcox County’s economy revolved around farming. As part of the Black Belt, the county’s main agricultural product was cotton. The Alabama River runs through the county, which acted as an important method for transporting cotton and produce elsewhere. At one point, there were more than 50 boat landings along the river, making Wilcox County an important transportation site.



In the 1930s, the T. Lee Long Bridge over the Alabama River was constructed to allow for more efficient transportation within the county. The construction of the Millers Ferry Lock and Dam in the 1960s resulted in hydroelectric power that could be utilized in factories, including a paper mill. Today, the main products and industries within the county revolve around timber. However, there are still no major highways passing through the county, limiting economic growth and manufacturing. Wilcox County remains rural and agricultural despite attempts at industrialization (Siebenthaler).

### ***Population and Statistics***

As of 2013, the county had a population of 11,307 residents. The majority of the residents are between the ages of 18 to 65, as a quarter of the residents are under age 18 and 17 percent of the residents are 65 or older. The number of men and women in the county is similar, as slightly over half of the population is female. However, the population size decreased by 3.1 percent between April 2010 and July 2013. The county has had a steady stream of outmigration, as later discussed in this analysis.

#### **Wilcox County, Alabama – Population Statistics, 2013**

	<b>Wilcox County</b>	<b>Alabama</b>
Population, 2013 estimate	11,307	4,833,722
Population, 2010 (April 1) estimates base	11,665	4,779,758
Population, percent change, April 1, 2010 to July 1, 2013	-3.1%	1.1%
Population, 2010	11,670	4,779,736
Persons under 5 years, percent, 2013	5.8%	6.1%
Persons under 18 years, percent, 2013	25.3%	23.0%
Persons 65 years and over, percent, 2013	17.0%	14.9%
Female persons, percent, 2013	52.3%	51.5%
Source: <a href="http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/01/01131.html">http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/01/01131.html</a>		

Of the 11,307 residents in Wilcox County, 71.2 percent of them identified themselves as African American or black, and 27.9 percent of them identified as white. Only 0.9 percent of the population identified as Hispanic or Latino, and only 1.2 percent of the population speak a language other than English at home.

**Wilcox County, Alabama – Demographic Statistics, 2013**

	<b>Wilcox County</b>	<b>Alabama</b>
White alone, percent, 2013 (a)	27.9%	69.8%
Black or African American alone, percent, 2013 (a)	71.2%	26.6%
American Indian and Alaska Native alone, percent, 2013 (a)	0.2%	0.7%
Asian alone, percent, 2013 (a)	0.1%	1.3%
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone, percent, 2013 (a)	-	0.1%
Two or More Races, percent, 2013	0.6%	1.5%
Hispanic or Latino, percent, 2013 (b)	0.9%	4.1%
White alone, not Hispanic or Latino, percent, 2013	27.5%	66.4%
Foreign born persons, percent, 2008-2012	0.1%	3.5%
Language other than English spoken at home, pct age 5+, 2008-2012	1.2%	5.2%

Source: <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/01/01131.html>

Wilcox County does have a higher percentage of homeownership than the state of Alabama. However, it is unknown how old these housing structures are, as many of these homes may be passed from generation to generation. The length of time spent living in the same house is also consistent with the idea that people remain in family homes, even into adulthood. The number of persons per household in Wilcox County is higher than the state average. The higher number may be due to overcrowding, as well as a sign of multi-generation families living under the same roof. Another measure taken in relation to the household is the median household income. The Wilcox County median household income for 2008 to 2012 was only \$24,212, which is slightly more than half the median household income for the state of Alabama and is the lowest in the entire nation. The per capita money income was only \$13,163, more than \$10,000 less than the state per capita money income.

**Wilcox County, Alabama – Basic Housing & Income Statistics, 2013**

	<b>Wilcox County</b>	<b>Alabama</b>
Mean travel time to work (minutes), workers age 16+, 2008-2012	23.4	24.1
Housing units, 2013	5,571	2,189,938
Homeownership rate, 2008-2012	78.1%	70.2%
Living in same house 1 year & over, percent, 2008-2012	93.4%	84.9%
Housing units in multi-unit structures, percent, 2008-2012	6.0%	15.8%
Median value of owner-occupied housing units, 2008-2012	\$58,300	\$122,300
Households, 2008-2012	3,624	1,837,576
Persons per household, 2008-2012	3.15	2.54
Per capita money income, past 12 months (2012 dollars), 2008-2012	\$13,163	\$23,587
Median household income, 2008-2012	\$24,212	\$43,160
Persons below poverty level, percent, 2008-2012	39.4%	18.1%
Source: <a href="http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/01/01131.html">http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/01/01131.html</a>		

As described in *Rural America at a Glance*, 2013 Edition, released by the United States Department of Agriculture, the Gini index is a measure of income equality. The index ranges from 0 to 1. The measure of 0 represents maximum equality, or when each household has the same income. The measure of 1, or 100 percent represents the maximum inequality, or when a single household has all the income. (USDA ERS, *Rural America at a Glance*, 2013) In regards to Wilcox County, the Gini Index is .5220, using ACS 2008-2012 5-Year Estimates data. (Batt)

***Economy***

Wilcox County fell into poverty during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the boll weevil destroyed the rural Black Belt’s cotton crops, thus devastating the county’s economy. Since then, the county has had little economic development. Today, the county’s workforce is employed in manufacturing (20.8%); educational services, and health care and social assistance (20.1%); retail trade (11.4%); finance and insurance, and real estate, rental, and leasing (6.7%); other services (6.4%); transportation and warehousing, and utilities (5.5%); construction (5.3%); agriculture, forestry, fishing, hunting, and extraction (5.0%); professional, scientific,

management, administrative, and waste management services (4.7%); arts, entertainment, recreation, and accommodation and food services (4.4%); public administration (4.1%); wholesale trade (3.7%); and information (1.8%). The majority of the industries and products produced in Wilcox today are timber related (Siebenthaler).

**Economic Business QuickFacts – Wilcox County**

	<b>Wilcox County</b>	<b>Alabama</b>
Private nonfarm establishments, 2012	193	97,938
Private nonfarm employment, 2012	1,758	1,585,761
Private nonfarm employment, percent change, 2011-2012	-4.2%	0.8%
Nonemployer establishments, 2012	640	315,382
Total number of firms, 2007	928	382,350
Black-owned firms, percent, 2007	66.2%	14.8%
American Indian- and Alaska Native-owned firms, percent, 2007	-	0.8%
Asian-owned firms, percent, 2007	-	1.8%
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander-owned firms, percent, 2007	-	0.1%
Hispanic-owned firms, percent, 2007	-	1.2%
Women-owned firms, percent, 2007	37.6%	28.1%
Manufacturers shipments, 2007 (\$1000)	-	112,858,843
Merchant wholesaler sales, 2007 (\$1000)	21,337	52,252,752
Retail sales, 2007 (\$1000)	75,708	57,344,851
Retail sales per capita, 2007	\$6,018	\$12,364
Accommodation and food services sales, 2007 (\$1000)	12,949	6,426,342
Building permits, 2012	0	13,506
Source: <a href="http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/01/01131.html">http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/01/01131.html</a>		

***History of Poverty in Wilcox County***

In the 2014 State of the State address to Alabama, Gov. Robert Bentley highlighted Wilcox County as the poorest county in the United States of America. This statement was not received well by local officials, as there are many ways to measure poverty. However, Wilcox County is indeed the poorest county by one measure. “[A]ccording to the Census Bureau’s 2012 estimate, Wilcox is dead-last in the United States with a median household income of

[\$24,212],” as half of the county’s residents make more than, and half of them make less than, that median income (Kirby, “4 Things to Know about Poverty in Wilcox County”). According to the 2008-2012 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, 32.4 percent of Wilcox families have had income levels below the poverty level in the past 12 months, and 39.4 percent of all Wilcox residents have had their income levels below the poverty level in the past 12 months. It is also important to notice the high rate of poverty suffered by families with a single mother or female householder. More than half, or 55.8 percent, of single mother run families with no husband present have had income below the poverty level in the past 12 months.

**Wilcox County, Alabama – Percentage of Families and People Whose Income in Past 12 Months is Below Poverty Level – 2008-2012 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates**

	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Percent Margin of Error</b>
<b>All families</b>	<b>32.4%</b>	<b>+/-5.2</b>
With related children under 18 years	45.4%	+/-7.3
With related children under 5 years only	60.8%	+/-24.2
<b>Married couple families</b>	<b>12.9%</b>	<b>+/-5.5</b>
With related children under 18 years	13.4%	+/-8.7
With related children under 5 years only	64.3%	+/-40.4
<b>Families with female householder, no husband present</b>	<b>55.8%</b>	<b>+/-8.1</b>
With related children under 18 years	60.8%	+/-10.4
With related children under 5 years only	59.1%	+/-29.0
<b>All people</b>	<b>39.4%</b>	<b>+/-4.9</b>
Under 18 years	49.1%	+/-7.5
Related children under 18 years	49.1%	+/-7.6
Related children under 5 years	68.2%	+/-13.9
Related children 5 to 17 years	43.9%	+/-8.5
18 years and over	35.7%	+/-4.9
18 to 64 years	39.8%	+/-5.6
65 years and over	20.1%	+/-7.7
People in families	38.1%	+/-5.6
Unrelated individuals 15 years and over	49.4%	+/-8.8
Source: <a href="http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=bkmk">http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=bkmk</a> (Numbers Unavailable)		



However, it is necessary to delve deeper into these statistics to gain a better understanding of the poor in Wilcox County, Alabama, as poverty disproportionately affects specific races in the South, and specifically in Wilcox. As shown below, although 39.3 percent of the population is in poverty, 51.6 percent of the African American population lives in poverty in Wilcox County. Although there are few people of Hispanic or Latino origin in Wilcox, over 69 percent of that population lives in poverty. In comparison, only 5.1 percent of the white population in Wilcox County lives in poverty.

**Wilcox County, Alabama - Poverty Status for Past 12 Months  
2008-2012 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates**

	Total	Below poverty level	Percent below poverty level	
	Estimate	Estimate	Estimate	Margin of Error
<b>Population</b>	11,403	4,493	39.4%	+/-4.9
<b>Gender</b>				
Male	5,381	2,085	38.7%	+/-6.0
Female	6,022	2,408	40.0%	+/-5.4
<b>Race</b>				
One race	11,388	4,478	39.3%	+/-4.9
White	3,010	153	5.1%	+/-2.8
Black or African American	8,374	4,325	51.6%	+/-6.5
American Indian and Alaska Native	0	0	-	**
Asian	0	0	-	**
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0	0	-	**
Other race	4	0	0.0%	+/-100.0
Two or more races	15	15	100.0%	+/-76.6
Hispanic or Latino origin (of any race)	13	9	69.2%	+/-56.6

Source: [http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/isf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS\\_12\\_5YR\\_S1701&prodType=table](http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/isf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_12_5YR_S1701&prodType=table)

The residents of Wilcox are heavily dependent on government payments, as nearly 44 percent of personal income comes from government benefits, including Social Security,

Medicare, and food stamps (Kirby, "4 Things to Know about Poverty in Wilcox County"). The chart below highlights statistics relating to government income assistance in Alabama. The data also allows for comparison of statewide statistics to Wilcox County's countywide statistics. As noted below, 15.9 percent of Wilcox County residents received SSI during the recorded five-year period. Nearly a third of the county's residents received food stamps and SNAP benefits within twelve months of the Census documentation.

**In Depth View of Income in Wilcox County, Alabama**  
**Census Bureau 2008-2012 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates**

Income & Benefits (2012 inflation-adjusted dollars)	Alabama		Wilcox County	
	Estimate	Percent	Estimate	Percent
Total households	1,837,576		3,624	
Less than \$10,000	181,464	9.9%	861	23.8%
\$10,000 to \$14,999	130,184	7.1%	408	11.3%
\$15,000 to \$24,999	240,224	13.1%	578	15.9%
\$25,000 to \$34,999	212,357	11.6%	538	14.8%
\$35,000 to \$49,999	265,092	14.4%	291	8.0%
\$50,000 to \$74,999	321,774	17.5%	449	12.4%
\$75,000 to \$99,999	198,770	10.8%	205	5.7%
\$100,000 to \$149,999	184,425	10.0%	220	6.1%
\$150,000 to \$199,999	56,794	3.1%	49	1.4%
\$200,000 or more	46,492	2.5%	25	0.7%
Median household income (dollars)	\$43,160	(X)	\$24,212	(X)
Mean household income (dollars)	\$59,273	(X)	\$36,554	(X)
<b>With earnings</b>				
With earnings	1,362,739	74.2%	1,895	52.3%
Mean earnings (dollars)	\$61,500	(X)	\$44,649	(X)
<b>With Social Security</b>				
With Social Security	602,481	32.8%	1,639	45.2%
Mean Social Security income (dollars)	\$16,054	(X)	\$15,810	(X)
<b>With retirement income</b>				
With retirement income	369,405	20.1%	556	15.3%
Mean retirement income (dollars)	\$20,921	(X)	\$18,313	(X)
<b>With Supplemental Security Income</b>				
With Supplemental Security Income	112,114	6.1%	575	15.9%
Mean Supplemental Security Income	\$8,261	(X)	\$9,832	(X)
<b>With cash public assistance income</b>				
With cash public assistance income	30,713	1.7%	124	3.4%
Mean cash public assistance income	\$2,603	(X)	\$1,965	(X)
<b>With Food Stamp/SNAP benefits in the past 12 months</b>				
With Food Stamp/SNAP benefits in the past 12 months	260,599	14.2%	1,047	28.9%

Source: <http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=bkmm>

### ***Heavy Government Dependence for Income Support***

Wilcox County's percentage of income coming from the federal government is the highest in the state and is nearly double the state average. This percentage of income support places Wilcox 22<sup>nd</sup>, out of more than 3,100 counties, in regards to the amount of government income provided to its residents. More importantly, this level of dependence means that not only do thousands of households depend directly on the government for their survival, but also most of the other residents depend on the government indirectly. When asked how the elimination of government support would affect the local economy, local Piggly Wiggly general manager and co-owner Kevin Skantz said, "All business here are dependent on assistance. ... It would affect everyone, no doubt about it [...] It'd be hard. It would be tough. I would have to lay off half my workforce" (Kirby, "Alabama's Poorest: Almost Half of All Income in Wilcox County Comes from Uncle Sam"). Other local business owners voice concern regarding the impact that government benefit cuts would have on their businesses and the local economy. Although customers may come from all levels of income, public assistance plays a large role in business profits.

These economic problems, however, did not develop overnight. Wilcox County and many other communities across the country have grown more and more dependent on federal assistance over the years. As previously mentioned, 44 percent of personal income in Wilcox is made up of transfer payments from the government. However, in 1972, only 18.2 percent of personal income in Wilcox came from government programs. Scott Beaulier, an economics professor at Troy University, believes such a heavy reliance on government support is evidence of an unhealthy economy. However, there is debate about whether an unhealthy economy led

to the government assistance dependence, or if the dependence has led to a bad economy.

Although Wilcox County has the lowest median household income in the nation, certain areas of Wilcox County face deeper levels of poverty than other regions. These desperate areas could also be much more difficult to assist and revamp through economic development initiatives due to the severe level of poverty. As noted in the Census, the residents of the county seat, Camden, and the southern half of Wilcox County have household incomes within 15 percent of the state average. However, the median household income in the northern-most tract is only \$14,516, which is 67 percent below the state average. Many of the residents lack phones and Internet access, which makes it incredibly difficult, or even impossible, to apply for employment opportunities (Kirby, "4 Things to Know about Poverty in Wilcox County").

### ***Obstacles to Overcoming Poverty***

The majority of the citizens who are in the community tend to rely on government assistance in some form or another. Regardless of the millions of dollars of government assistance, including a total of \$132.8 million in 2012 alone, the federal government has not ended poverty in Wilcox County. Camden Mayor Max Baggett noted the issue of the local economy's reliance on government assistance. "Any retail business has to do business with a majority of the population," he said. "The more important question is what would these people who receive that support do without it?" Although business and political leaders acknowledge the abundance and importance of government assistance within Wilcox County, they believe that are working towards a more diverse local economy. However, there are certain obstacles preventing economic growth and development within the region, including a

lack of an interstate highway and few educated and skilled workers. Even with the addition of the copper tubing plant, the director of the Wilcox Area Chamber of Commerce, Sheryl Threadgill-Matthews, believes it will take more than the single plant to pull Wilcox out of poverty (Kirby, "Alabama's Poorest: Almost Half of All Income in Wilcox County Comes from Uncle Sam"). The unemployment rate for Wilcox County in August 2014 was 13.9 percent, and in September 2014 it was 16.2 percent ("SEP 2014 Unemployment Rates").

Although Alabama's government is offering \$200 million in tax abatements and including up to \$20 million in cash payments to Golden Dragon Copper, the creation of the copper tubing plant may do little for the county. The community has complex issues, as it is impossible to apply for a job without access to the internet when applications are only accepted online, like positions at the Golden Dragon plant. It is just as difficult to accept a job offer without a phone. Therefore, inviting a company to Wilcox will not solve the economic issues within the county. A wider approach must be used to address the needs of workers and the different levels of economic inequality.

While the majority of Wilcox County is in need of economic assistance, certain areas are worse off than others. However, the countywide measures fail to reveal these differences. The Census data actually breaks Wilcox County into four different tracts, allowing for a more in depth view of the economic issues within certain regions of the county. The map below magnifies and outlines the four tracts within Wilcox County. The majority of the population in the northern tract lives in the Gee's Bend community, while many others live in the southern tract in Camden. Although the county's poorest residents live in the northern tract, the Golden Dragon Copper plant is located in Wilcox County's southeastern region. Tract 352, the southern

region of Wilcox that includes Camden, has a median household income of more than \$36,500, which is 15 percent less than the Alabama average median household income. In regards to median family income, the figures are even closer to the state average, at a level of almost \$51,000 compare to the state average of \$54,000. However, Tract 347's measures do not even compare to the Alabama state average. The region, which encompasses Gee's Bend, has a per capita income of \$6,520. This level of income is 73 percent below the state average. The median household income is only \$14,516, which is 67 percent below the state amount. One of the most profound statistics is the employment data for the tract. As noted by Walsh, "[o]f the 1,072 adults that live in that tract, just 183 have jobs." Surprisingly, the unemployment rate for the tract is only 6.8 percent due to the fact that only 73 people are actively seeking employment. The unemployment measure, however, does not include the 816 residents who have given up the search for work. Among Tract 347 residents, 27 percent of adults do not have health insurance. More than 44 percent of the households in the tract receive food stamps. (Walsh)



Image source: [http://blog.al.com/wire/2014/02/millions\\_of\\_dollars\\_funneled\\_t.html](http://blog.al.com/wire/2014/02/millions_of_dollars_funneled_t.html)

**Population Changes**

Wilcox County has also seen a great deal of out-migration since the early 1900s. In 1900, the community reached a peak of 35,631 residences. Today, the population is 11,307. The publication, *Selected Health Status Indicators Wilcox County*, released by the Office of Primary Care and Rural Health, Alabama Department of Public Health and The Alabama Rural Health Association, predicts that the population of Wilcox County will continue to decrease for many years to come. From 2010 to 2040, the publication predicts that population will decrease from 11,670 to 9,083, a decrease of 22.2 percent. Although the overall population is expected to decrease, the publication predicts the Wilcox County population of those ages 65 and over to increase by 41.4 percent between 2010 and 2040. Wilcox County, as well as the state of Alabama, has seen an increase in the Hispanic population. Between 1990 and 2011, the Hispanic population increased by 110 percent in Wilcox County, while the state of Alabama saw an increase of 687.2 percent of Hispanic residents. (“Selected Health Status Indicators Wilcox County”)

**Wilcox County, Alabama – Population Change from 1910 to 2010**

Years	State of Alabama		Wilcox County	
	Number	Percent Change	Number	Percent Change
1910	2,138,093	123.6%	33,180	-65.5%
2010	4,779,736		11,670	
Source: <a href="http://www.adph.org/ruralhealth/assets/Wilcox13.pdf">http://www.adph.org/ruralhealth/assets/Wilcox13.pdf</a>				

Although the most recent data indicates that 54 percent of Wilcox Central High School graduates enroll in a state institution of high learning, the majority the students go on to get jobs outside of Wilcox. As expected, it is difficult to attract businesses to an area with so few college graduates (Kirby, "Alabama's Poorest: Almost Half of All Income in Wilcox County

Comes from Uncle Sam"). However, this problem compounds itself, as many college graduates may want to return but are unable to because of the lack of jobs. Few college graduates in the area deter businesses, but few job opportunities prevent college graduates from returning to the area. The brain drain and outmigration is highlighted in the population change rates, as the population has decreased by 3.1 percent from 2010 to 2013. The population change from 1990-2013 was a decrease of 16.67 percent.

**Migration Rates for Wilcox County, 1990 - 2013**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Population</b>
1990	13,568
2000	12,995
2010	11,665
2013	11,307
Source: <a href="http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/county-level-data-sets/population.aspx#P6a2c15cd34d74d6cb99efb3064985d92_3_54iT2">http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/county-level-data-sets/population.aspx#P6a2c15cd34d74d6cb99efb3064985d92_3_54iT2</a>	

However, there are also residents who choose to stay in Wilcox County. Regardless of the lack of economic opportunities, the declining population, and the poor educational attainment levels, many people simply do not want to leave. According to interviews and feedback from residents, the area has a strong pull on many residents who have stayed “for reasons of family, tradition and heritage” (Kirby, “4 Things to Know about Poverty in Wilcox County”). For many people, both in Wilcox County and throughout the world, familiarity and comfort keep them from relocating, even when they are struggling to make ends meet. However, there is also the possibility that it is too expensive to relocate, as areas outside of Wilcox County that offer better job opportunities will also have higher living costs. Moving a family is also quite difficult and stressful for families, especially if a single parent runs the family.



### ***Economic Development***

There are new economic opportunities coming to Wilcox, such as the new copper tubing plant that recently opened in the county. State and local governments agreed to \$200 million in tax incentives in hopes that the 500 jobs created would ignite an economic turnaround in Wilcox (Kirby 4 Things). As of May 2014, the plant, Golden Dragon Copper Tube Group, employed 150 Alabamians and had plans to hire 300 more people within the next 18 months ("Alabama Officials Welcome Golden Dragon's First U.S. Factory"). According to the Wilcox Area Chamber of Commerce, about 25 of those jobs already have gone to county residents (Kirby, "Alabama's Poorest: Almost Half of All Income in Wilcox County Comes from Uncle Sam"). However, it is unknown how many of the other employees are actually from Wilcox or if they are from areas that do not necessarily need the jobs.

The issue of the copper tubing plant also brings to light Wilcox's need for a better educated and higher skilled workforce. Some business leaders in the region have noted that local high school graduates read on a seventh-grade level, and some workers are unable to use simple tools, including rulers. The skills gap hurts the companies and local workers, as the companies are unable to hire local laborers because they are not able to perform in the work place (Kirby, "4 Things to Know about Poverty in Wilcox County"). A new movement, known as "Wilcox Works!," has been created by local political leaders and volunteers to reduce the skills gap (Kirby, "4 Things to Know about Poverty in Wilcox County").

According to Walsh, Wilcox County's current focus for economic development is to utilize the county's existing assets and to form relationships between existing agencies. Sheryl Threadgill-Matthews, the director of the Wilcox Area Chamber of Commerce, believes that the

region should showcase and promote the culture of Gee's Bend and the talented artists in the community for tourism purposes. However, these artistic talents can serve a larger purpose than simply attracting people to Gee's Bend. Although the copper plant may provide some benefits for residents, Wilcox County also has the ability to invest in various service industries, including the arts, childcare, and health care (Walsh). However, both coordination efforts and enthusiasm are required for economic growth and development within Wilcox. This growth and development will not happen on its own, and "[e]verybody needs to be at the same level of involvement," Threadgill-Matthews says (Walsh).

### ***Health***

There are five primary care physicians, one dentist, and no psychiatrists available to serve the entire county. Wilcox County has quite a few health issues, including a higher than average teenage and unmarried women birthrate, a high adult obesity rate, and a lower than average life expectancy. The rate of births to teenagers, ages 10-19, in 2011, was 13.7 percent, compared to the Alabama state average of 11.3 percent and the national average of 9.3 percent. The rate of births to unmarried women in 2011 was 76.7 percent, compared to the Alabama state average of 42.1 percent and the national average of 40.8 percent. The adult obesity rate of Wilcox County in 2011 was 43 percent of the total population aged 20 years or older. The Alabama rate of adult obesity in 2011 was 33 percent, while the national rate was 25 percent. The life expectancy at birth for residents of Wilcox County in 2011 was 69.8 years. The Alabama life expectancy rate was 75.7 years, while the national life expectancy was 78.7 years ("Selected Health Status Indicators Wilcox County").

Sheryl Threadgill-Matthews, director of the Wilcox Area Chamber of Commerce, particularly noted that health is a challenge in the area. “Some people aren't well. If you're not well, you can't get a job” (Walsh). Statistics regarding health insurance coverage are shown below. Almost 83 percent of the county’s residents do have health insurance. However, 54.1 percent of those with health coverage have public coverage. Of those employed, 19.1 percent do not have health insurance coverage. However, of those unemployed but actively searching for employment, 63.5 percent do not have health insurance coverage. Of those not in the labor force, 25.1 percent do not have health insurance coverage.

#### Wilcox County, Alabama – Health Insurance Coverage

Health Insurance Coverage	Estimate	Margin of Error	Percent	Percent Margin of Error
<b>Civilian noninstitutionalized population</b>	11,387	+/-161	11,387	(X)
With health insurance coverage	9,412	+/-446	82.7%	+/-3.6
With private health insurance	4,490	+/-463	39.4%	+/-4.1
With public coverage	6,161	+/-545	54.1%	+/-4.6
No health insurance coverage	1,975	+/-403	17.3%	+/-3.6
<b>Civilian noninstitutionalized population under 18 years</b>	3,139	+/-19	3,139	(X)
No health insurance coverage	153	+/-119	4.9%	+/-3.8
<b>Civilian noninstitutionalized population 18 to 64 years</b>	6,556	+/-128	6,556	(X)
In labor force:	3,232	+/-323	3,232	(X)
<b>Employed:</b>	2,397	+/-274	2,397	(X)
With health insurance coverage	1,939	+/-228	80.9%	+/-6.5
With private health insurance	1,693	+/-231	70.6%	+/-7.9
With public coverage	295	+/-123	12.3%	+/-5.0
No health insurance coverage	458	+/-180	19.1%	+/-6.5
<b>Unemployed:</b>	835	+/-212	835	(X)
With health insurance coverage	305	+/-147	36.5%	+/-15.6
With private health insurance	77	+/-46	9.2%	+/-6.1
With public coverage	246	+/-154	29.5%	+/-16.5
No health insurance coverage	530	+/-192	63.5%	+/-15.6

<b>Not in labor force:</b>	3,324	+/-300	3,324	(X)
With health insurance coverage	2,490	+/-348	74.9%	+/-8.0
With private health insurance	802	+/-204	24.1%	+/-6.0
With public coverage	1,868	+/-362	56.2%	+/-9.3
No health insurance coverage	834	+/-272	25.1%	+/-8.0
Source: <a href="http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=bkmk">http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=bkmk</a>				

### **Education**

Wilcox County has a total of seven schools, offering prekindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. During the 2011-2012 school year, the schools had 121 teachers who educated 1,905 students. The student to teacher ratio was 15.74 students per teacher. The school district is classified as rural remote.

#### **Wilcox County, Alabama – Educational Funding for Students, 2010-2011**

<b>Revenue by Source (2010-2011)</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Per Student</b>	<b>Percentage of Total</b>
Federal	\$6,532,000	\$3,281	29%
Local	\$3,911,000	\$1,964	17%
State	\$12,117,000	\$6,086	54%
	<b>\$22,560,000</b>	<b>\$11,331 per student</b>	
Source: <a href="http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/districtsearch/district_detail.asp?Search=2&amp;ID2=0103510">http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/districtsearch/district_detail.asp?Search=2&amp;ID2=0103510</a>			

Within Wilcox County, 71.3 percent of the population over the age of 25 is a high school graduate or higher. However, only 11.1 percent of the population over the age of 25 holds a Bachelor's degree or higher. In comparison, 82.6 percent of Alabama residents over the age of 25 are high school graduates or higher, and 22.3 percent of the state's residents have a Bachelor's degree or higher. Students from Wilcox County who do go on to a public university are 75 percent more likely to require remedial math or English than a typical college student (Kirby, "Alabama's Poorest: Almost Half of All Income in Wilcox County Comes from Uncle Sam").

**Wilcox County, Alabama – Educational Attainment Levels, 2008-2012**

<b>Overall Educational Attainment</b>	<b>Wilcox County</b>	<b>State of Alabama</b>
High school graduate or higher, persons age 25+, 2008-2012	71.3%	82.6%
Bachelor's degree or higher, persons age 25+, 2008-2012	11.1%	22.3%

Source: <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/01/01131.html>

**Wilcox County, Alabama – Educational Attainment Breakdown, 2008-2012**

<b>Educational Attainment</b>	<b>Wilcox County</b>		<b>State of Alabama</b>	
	<b>Estimate</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Estimate</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>Breakdown by Level</b>				
Population 25 years and over	7,593	7,593	3,166,424	3,166,424
Less than 9th grade	1,091	14.4%	187,882	5.9%
9th to 12th grade, no diploma	1,090	14.4%	363,148	11.5%
High school graduate (or equivalency)	2,919	38.4%	991,406	31.3%
Some college, no degree	1,158	15.3%	691,686	21.8%
Associate's degree	495	6.5%	227,301	7.2%
Bachelor's degree	663	8.7%	448,117	14.2%
Graduate or professional degree	177	2.3%	256,884	8.1%

Source: <http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=CF>

**Religion**

The population of Wilcox County, Alabama was 11,665 in 2010, and at that time, 7,124 residents regarded themselves as religiously active within these religious bodies, which is 61 percent of the population.

<b>Religious Congregations</b>	<b>Tradition</b>	<b>Congregations</b>	<b>Adherents</b>
African Methodist Episcopal Church	Black Protestant	19	2,443
African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church	Black Protestant	1	125
Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church	Evangelical Protestant	2	90
Catholic Church	Catholic	3	12
Christian Methodist Episcopal Church	Black Protestant	2	251
Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee)	Evangelical Protestant	2	133
Church of God in Christ	Black Protestant	1	188
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, The	Other	1	95
Churches of Christ	Evangelical Protestant	5	206
Cumberland Presbyterian Church in America	Black Protestant	2	---
Jehovah's Witnesses	Other	1	---
Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod	Evangelical Protestant	3	262

Non-denominational	Evangelical Protestant	4	477
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)	Mainline Protestant	2	105
Presbyterian Church in America	Evangelical Protestant	2	97
Southern Baptist Convention	Evangelical Protestant	16	2,177
United Methodist Church, The	Mainline Protestant	6	463
		<b>72</b>	<b>7,124</b>
Source: <a href="http://www.thearda.com/rcms2010/r/c/01/rcms2010_01131_county_name_2010.asp">http://www.thearda.com/rcms2010/r/c/01/rcms2010_01131_county_name_2010.asp</a>			

Wilcox County has over 130 locations of worship (“Wilcox County AL Churches”). The majority of the religious residents in Wilcox County are Baptist or Methodist. However, many of these churches are non-denominational or do not receive much funding from a larger body, like Catholic churches typically receive. Therefore, although these churches may be rich in spirit, they are unable to provide many programs or much financial support for their members.

### ***Camden***

The city of Camden serves as the county seat of Wilcox County. As the largest city in the county, Camden had a population 2,020 in 2010. Camden was incorporated in 1841 and originally served as a commercial and political center for the region. Today, the city is home to many historic buildings and monuments, including the Confederate Memorial Statue, which all serve as attractions for tourists. The Camden Cemetery and the Wilcox County Courthouse also reside within the city. One distinctive organization within Camden is Black Belt Treasures, which “is a non-profit economic development program, marketing high quality products from the Black Belt region. Visitors can view and purchase such diverse items as artwork, pottery, woodwork, baskets, and jewelry” (Siebenthaler). The program provides residents with an outlet to sell small goods and products to other residents and visitors to the area. The program’s model could easily be replicated in other towns that lack opportunities for builders, artists, and

crafters.

Another unique aspect of Camden is the Gee's Bend Ferry, which serves as a mode of transportation between Camden and the other major city in Wilcox County, Gee's Bend.

### ***Gee's Bend***

Officially known as the city of Boykin, Gee's Bend is a community located within Wilcox County. The 750 residents of Gee's Bend, mostly descendants of enslaved African Americans, reside along the banks of the Alabama River. The U.S. Census Bureau has designated Gee's Bend as the poorest Census-designated place in Alabama, with a per capita income of \$6,015 (Kirby, "4 Things to Know about Poverty in Wilcox County"). Although Gee's Bend faces extreme poverty and a lack of economic opportunities, the community has become well-known for its rich culture and nationally renowned quilt makers (Stevens).

In 1816 Joseph Gee, a landowner from North Carolina, settled along a bend in the Alabama River. He brought 18 African American slaves with him to establish a cotton plantation in the new region along the north side of the river bend. At the time of his death, he left 47 slaves and his estate to his two nephews. The nephews later sold the plantation in 1845 to the Pettway family, which remains a prominent family in Wilcox today. After emancipation, some of the freed slaves remained on the plantation to work as sharecroppers and tenant farmers. Gee's Bend saw drastic economic change during the 1930s due to the death of a local merchant who had extended credit to residents. Immediately following his death, his family demanded the payment of all debts and demanded food, animals, tools, and seed from the local families for repayment. The Red Cross actually had to step in to support local residents

during this period, and a local family, the Van de Graaff family, agreed to waive rents. The Van de Graaff family sold their land to the federal government in 1937, leading to the Farm Security Administration's establishment of Gee's Bend Farms, Inc., "a pilot project of a cooperative-based program designed to sustain the inhabitants" (Stevens). The government project included the construction of houses and the subdivision and sale of land throughout the Van de Graff property. Gee's Bend Farms, Inc., provided the African American population with the first opportunity to control the land they worked. During the later years of the Depression, small farmers felt the pressure of agricultural mechanization, forcing many farmers to leave Gee's Bend for other economic opportunities. However, many other farmers stayed in Gee's Bend because they owned the land they lived on. The local farmers dealt with additional hardships over the years, such as a dam that was constructed on the Alabama River in 1962. The dam construction caused thousands of acres of the most fertile land in the Gee's Bend to flood, eliminating economic opportunities for residents.

Gee's Bend residents faced great adversity during the civil rights era, including the Wilcox County officials' decision to temporarily end ferry service across the Alabama River. The elimination of the ferry service was one of the many attempts to prevent the residents from registering to vote, as Wilcox County did not have a single black resident registered to vote. At the time, Sheriff Lummie Jenkins reportedly said, "we didn't close the ferry because they were black [. . .] we closed it because they *forgot* they were black" (Wallach). Without the ability to use the ferry, the county seat of Camden was a two-hour drive (Stevens).

Even today, many of the descendants of slaves live in Gee's Bend. However, the community members live in a similar economic situation as the rest of Wilcox and the majority



of the Black Belt, as there are few jobs, little infrastructure, and no schools in the city of Boykin. The current workforce is made up of manufacturing (35.9 percent); educational services, health care, and social assistance (38.0 percent); and finance, insurance, and real estate, rental, and leasing (26.1 percent). Gee's Bend also faces limited transportation options. Although County Road 29 runs through Boykin, commuters must rely on the ferry to reach Camden on the other side of the Alabama River. (Stevens)

Since the creation of the community, the women of Gee's Bend have created quilts as a means of supporting their families and keeping their families warm. These quilts are made using whatever materials are available, including work clothes and fabric scraps.



Quilt Mural in Gee's Bend in Wilcox County. Photo courtesy of John Archibald.

Over time, the Gee's Bend quilters have developed a distinctive style based on traditional American and African American quilt designs. However, the quilts also resemble

Amish quilts and modern art due to the geometric shapes that make up the quilts. The quilting tradition has been passed down through at least six generations and still continues today. The technical skills and artistic abilities of the quilters have caught the eye of quite a few collectors and museums. Gee's Bend Quilts have been exhibited at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, and the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston. The quilts have also been featured on television programs, including CBS *News Sunday Morning* and the *Martha Stewart Living* show, and in many magazines, including *House and Garden* and Oprah's *O Magazine*. The quilters were honored in 2006 in a series of postage stamps, which included ten stamps, each featuring the image of a Gee's Bend quilt. In 2007 and 2008, large murals of the quilts honored on the stamps were created and placed throughout Gee's Bend ("The Gee's Bend Quilt Mural Trail").

### ***Future Implications***

In regards to Wilcox County's future, the county's population is expected to continue to decrease due to brain drain and the aging and passing of older residents. Because many of the young adults are leaving, the county is not being repopulated at a steady enough rate to match the death rate in the county.

Luckily, failure is not the only option for this county. There are many gifted and talented artists within Wilcox County who have the ability to support both themselves and their families through their talents. These artists, however, need outlets to market and sell their goods if they are to make a profit. One example is the Black Belt Treasures program in Camden, which provides an organized space for local residents to sell their products to other residents and

visitors to the area.

Wilcox County has the ability to capitalize on the art projects and creations within the area. These products are attractions for tourists, like the Gee's Bend Quilt Mural Trail. The Wilcox County Chamber of Commerce is also working with other counties to create a quilt trail across Alabama. By constructing museums and repurposing abandoned or unused buildings within the county, the local government could create multiple attractions for tourists. These galleries could also serve as retail locations for art pieces and quilts.

Although the production and sale of art and goods provide one method of income for residents, many people may not have the means or ability to create museum-worthy pieces. Therefore, the county should consider providing basic skills training for its residents to ensure that any resident who wants to work in a manufacturing environment has the basic skills to join a company at an entry level. This is particularly relevant in Wilcox County, as local manufacturing companies have commented on the unskillfulness of locals who have worked for their companies. These training programs could be organized as joint efforts between the local government and the companies to ensure that residents are receiving the training needed to succeed within the companies.

Another option for Wilcox County to invest in its residents is to open employment centers with free access to phones and computers with Internet. These resources would be specifically designated for residents to apply for employment opportunities. These employment centers could also provide free guidance and counseling for residents seeking employment, as well as resume review services and interview preparation. To lower costs, these employment centers could be open only on specific days, utilizing local libraries or

schools where computers are already available. Volunteers from local or outside businesses could offer counseling and interview preparation services. Wilcox County would also greatly benefit its residents by hosting career fairs in conjunction with these employment centers.

### ***Conclusion***

Although the people of Wilcox County have faced many hardships over the years, there is still a possibility for growth and prosperity within the area. However, everyone within the county must be willing to participate and support the efforts of their fellow residents. Outsiders, including the state government, should also support the county in constructive ways. One specific area in need of development is infrastructure, as a major highway or road through or near the county would increase traffic and tourism in the area.

Wilcox County embodies the history and culture of the South. The economic costs and efforts needed to revive this county are great. However, the loss of a culturally rich area would be a dishonor to those who worked the land and created the local quilt-making tradition. Ultimately, the future of Wilcox County and its residents is ambiguous, due to the uncertainty of leadership and funding to promote revitalization and growth in the county.

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