BLACK STORYTELLING AND POLICYMAKING IN APPALACHIA

JANUARY 2022





BACKGROUND

In the fall of 2021, the Black Appalachian Coalition (BLAC) and the Ohio River Valley Institute (ORVI) hosted five virtual listening sessions to hear from Black Appalachians. The sessions were part of the ongoing national conversation around infrastructure policy but weren't limited to infrastructure. Black Appalachians shared stories about their past and present and thoughts about how Appalachia should move forward.

This document highlights some common themes across the sessions related to policymaking in Appalachia. The 8 hours of rich dialogue throughout the sessions can be viewed <u>here</u>.

SUMMARY

Black Appalachians have played a critical role in Appalachian history, but Appalachian narratives have been whitewashed. Neither the contributions of Black people to Appalachian history nor the harms experienced by Black communities are popularly known or appreciated, especially in media and policymaking.

Speakers identified many policy needs for Black communities in Appalachia—including access to healthcare and healthy foods, child and elder care, public transportation, clean air and water, more and higher quality education opportunities, criminal justice reform, jobs, and equal and higher pay.

Across all of these policy issues there is a common need for Black storytelling and participation as a precondition for policymaking. Narratives shape how policymakers prioritize public problems. Narratives that leave out the Black parts of our region's history and present guarantee that problems experienced by Black people won't be prioritized. Policymakers should place more value on creating spaces for groups of Appalachians that have been historically oppressed or ignored to share their stories, and on helping shift narratives to accurately reflect the region's past and present.

Ohio River
Valley Institute

Black people are missing from the policymaking table. Participatory policymaking does not include us."

-Bishop Marcia Dinkins, Ohio

In addition to policy implications, decolonizing Appalachian stories is key to helping many Black Appalachians see themselves in this place and to heal individually and collectively from past racist trauma. Without this healing, prosperity for many members of Appalachian communities remains beyond reach.

I. BLACK PEOPLE HAVE HAD A 'POWERFUL PRESENCE' IN THE HISTORY OF APPALACHIA.

Black Appalachians helped shape Appalachia's society and economy, from Black workers in the coal and steel industries that Appalachia is known for to midwives in the care economy. Black leaders from Appalachia have also made significant contributions to regional and national social movements, from the NAACP to the black lung movement.

"The more I discovered history, the more I understood that Black people in West Virginia have had a powerful presence, but that history is not always front and center in our textbooks, it's not always front and center in how the media frames West Virginia [and greater Appalachia]."

—Crystal Good, West Virginia

"When you see Appalachian musicians, you would never guess that the downstroke of banjo picking actually was influenced by Black Appalachians."

—Akisha Townsend Eaton, Kentucky

"When the NAACP started, it was initiated by the Niagara Movement, which took place in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia... [and] when the garbage workers' strike took place in Charleston...I kind of got drawn into it, not by the NAACP, because they were not really active in that struggle, but by the union...and I just remember how much fun we had just participating in that movement that was intended to deal with equal wages, wages for those garbage workers..."

-Rev. Ronald English, West Virginia



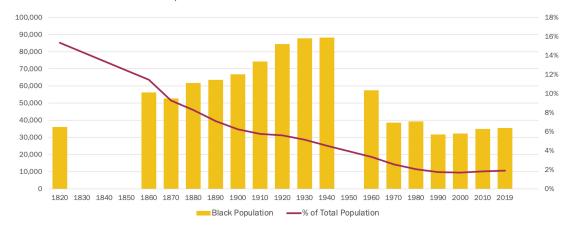
"...my great great grandmother, who went by the name of Maime Callie...was a midwife who traveled by horseback...she was one of the most well-regarded midwives in the region, and white families needed her services out of necessity. But she was especially important to Black families, who could really only be able to have access to the services of a Black midwife. Yeah, if you were to do a Google search of midwives on horseback, you would not see one single image of a Black midwife during that time."

Akisha Townsend Eaton, Kentucky

BLACK WORKERS HAVE COMPRISED A SIGNIFICANT—IF DECLINING— SHARE OF THE REGION'S POPULATION FOR CENTURIES

Despite historical narratives that paint Appalachia as white, Black people comprised a significant share of the Appalachian population historically. In the Central Appalachian counties of Kentucky, Virginia, West Virginia, and Tennessee—the predominantly rural subregion of Appalachia often considered to have little or no racial diversity—nearly 1 in 6 people were Black in 1820. For context, that is a higher share than the Black population currently comprises nationally. The relative share of Black Appalachians has steadily and significantly decreased since then, but this underlines that even the areas of Appalachia with the smallest Black populations at present were shaped by centuries of significant Black communities. Critically, even in Central Appalachia and the rural counties in Northern Appalachia, tens of thousands of Black people remain now.

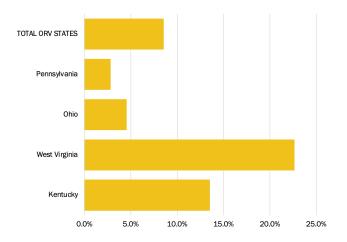
FIGURE 1: BLACK POPULATION, CENTRAL APPALACHIA2



BLACK WORKERS WERE KEY TO THE APPALACHIAN COAL & STEEL INDUSTRIES

When many Americans conjure up a mental image of an Appalachian coal miner or a worker at a steel mill in the Rust Belt, they don't see a Black worker. But Black Appalachians were critical to the booming of these Appalachian industries and their historic contribution to the national economy. In 1930, 1 in 11 coal miners in the states of Ohio, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, and West Virginia were Black. Nearly a quarter of West Virginia coal miners were Black in 1930. Since this era, Black employment in the coal sector has declined steadily and was 3.1% nationally in 2020.3 Similarly, Black workers made up a significant share of the workforce in the steel mills of the region. For example, in Western Pennsylvania, Black workers made up 13% of the region's steelworkers in 1918.4

FIGURE 2: PERCENT OF COAL WORKERS WHO WERE BLACK, 1930^5





II. BLACK APPALACHIAN HISTORY AND EXPERIENCE HAS BEEN MADE INVISIBLE.

Speakers discussed the many episodes in which Black Appalachians have been erased from popular narratives about both who is Appalachian and narratives about who is deserving of the attention of policymakers.

"When we look at Appalachian communities, we do not see ourselves represented in that. There are many, many countless stories of contributions not only from Black Kentuckians, but Black Appalachians in Kentucky. And the notion is that the victor always gets to tell the story, right? And we know many times in many communities where Black individuals have not been the victor. And they have not had control of the narrative or the telling of their story."

—Shana Goggins, Kentucky

"When I think of West Virginia, and I think of how people think of white poverty, recognize that, inside that, not everybody is white, and that that 'poverty' impacts those people greater. So what we have to do is be visible, because we're invisible in this narrative. I mean, how many years have we had of people telling the opioid story and not once have you heard the stories that I live with: of grandmothers and mothers who got addicted to pain pills, and that are gone now. Because, you know, nobody's asking the question."

THE SHARE OF BLACK APPALACHIANS WHO CAN'T AFFORD BASIC NECESSITIES IS TWICE AS HIGH AS THE SHARE OF THE REGION OVERALL

The share of Appalachians who can't afford basic necessities is higher than the national average. In 2019, the Appalachian regions of Ohio, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia had a combined rate of 15.5% people whose incomes fell below the federal poverty line. Nearly twice that rate, or 30.5%, of the Black population in the region was unable to afford basic necessities. The figure below represents 130,577 Black people in the region whose income fell below the poverty line in 2019.

In Pennsylvania and Ohio the racial gaps were the largest: the Black poverty rate was about 19 percentage points higher than the white poverty rate. The share of people with incomes below the poverty line—and perhaps also the racial gaps—have likely increased since the pandemic. It is also important to note that many analysts consider the federal poverty line an outdated measure that does not capture everyone experiencing economic distress.

FIGURE 3: POVERTY RATE IN APPALACHIA BY RACE/ETHNICITY, 2019 Appalachia = ARC counties of Kentucky, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia

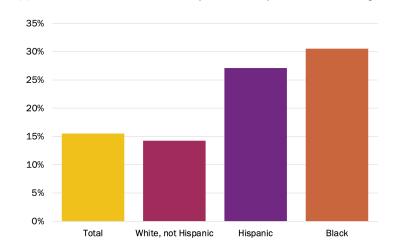


TABLE 1: SHARE OF PEOPLE IN THE APPALACHIAN COUNTIES OF EACH STATE WHOSE INCOMES FELL BELOW THE POVERTY LINE, 2019⁷

	Kentucky	Ohio	Pennsylvania	West Virginia	People with income below poverty line
Total	24.5%	16.4%	12.7%	17.6%	1,598,426
white, not Hispanic	24.1%	15.0%	10.9%	16.9%	1,324,379
Hispanic	35.8%	27.8%	26.9%	21.5%	70,015
Black	30.7%	34.6%	29.7%	29.2%	130,577
white - Black Poverty Gap	6.64	19.54	18.85	12.33	



CASE STUDY: DISPLACEMENT IN THE TRIANGLE NEIGHBORHOOD OF CHARLESTON, WEST VIRGINIA

A consistent theme was the displacement of Black people in Appalachia and the lack of popular understanding of this displacement. A significant recent wave of Black migration occurred alongside "urban renewal" projects that displaced Black Appalachian communities in the 1960s and 1970s. One such project was the interstate project that came through the Black community in the Triangle neighborhood of Charleston, West Virginia in the 1970s. Local and state officials demolished the businesses and homes of a vibrant and longstanding Black community in Triangle in order to construct a new intersecting interstate system in downtown Charleston. As a pretense for its demolition, officials perpetuated narratives that the Triangle community was a dangerous and illicit area that needed to be "redone." Black residents fought the project, but hundreds of families were eventually displaced?

"The road is not wanted. The Governor could, by executive order, have the road rerouted, which has been done earlier when the road was tentatively going through Kanawha City but it was rerouted. It was rerouted to save hills around the Capitol. It's going to be rerouted around Logan County. And if he can look out for the poor, white farmers, he can look out for the poor angry Black folk in the Triangle District." — Emmerson Reed, speaking to a reporter in the 1970s about the West Virginia Governor and the proposed interstate project that would demolish Triangle.

Speakers in the listening sessions mentioned that their communities have also experienced Black displacement, as well as "white flight" that was often accompanied by disinvestment of downtown areas. The case of the Triangle neighborhood is relevant for current conversations around how and where to invest new infrastructure funds both because a) it underlines how Black Appalachians have had dramatically different and often harmful experiences with past infrastructure buildout, and b) it highlights that the current low relative Black population in many Appalachian areas is in part a result of policies that displaced Black residents and workers who historically shaped these places.

"In my community, what the city intends to do [regarding new federal funds] is to distribute a survey to the citizens to receive input. Now, as a behavior scientist, that absolutely intrigues me. But, also, I find it sort of problematic, in that in the distribution of the survey to solicit comments, are you making sure that this survey is widely being distributed to communities and neighborhoods or groups of people that are not typically a part of this conversation?"

—Shana Goggins, Kentucky



III. DECOLONIZING APPALACHIAN IDENTITY AND HEALING BLACK COMMUNITIES IS FOUNDATIONAL.

Speakers discussed the need to acknowledge and address historical and present-day racial trauma experienced by Black Appalachians and to decolonize what it means to be "Appalachian." Revising untruthful narratives prevalent in our education, media, and policymaking that leave out the the rich history of Black people in Appalachia and the racist harms experienced by Black people here is foundational to creating a place where Black Appalachians can heal—and can see themselves in the stories about their home.

From better access to Black mental health experts to teaching true histories about the region, decolonizing Appalachian identity and prioritizing the healing of Black Appalachian communities must be a regional priority.

"I'm so thankful for the Black Appalachian Coalition, I'm so thankful for this opportunity to actually know that I have a story worth telling."

-Melanie Meade, Pennsylvania

"...we cannot allow ourselves to be erased, in that so many other entities and groups will try their level best to make it seem as though we are not here and we have not had an impact. And we are tasked with the challenge of making sure that that does not happen."

—Shana Goggins, Kentucky

"There are so many ways we could hear inside of our stories if we could just get comfortable with voice and visibility. If we can get comfortable with hearing the stories, and seeing the invisible become visible then we can heal individually and collectively."

—Bishop Marcia Dinkins, Ohio

"...[you may] have been told you have to minimize these aspects of yourself, in order to be able to fit in. I didn't realize how much of a rural Kentuckian I was until I went to a space in my first two years of college, and I was around other Black people that I was not related to. And many times I heard, 'Oh, you're just talking white,' or 'You're acting white' in that I liked country music, some of those local, you know, sayings that we do about 'down yonder,' and things of that nature, people have always associated that with whiteness, and therefore if I am doing those things, or I am saying those things, that I am trying to embrace aspects that are not mine. Now, at 17, I completely shied away from all of that, and was like, 'No, I'm not trying to act white, I'm not trying to sound white. I'm just from the country. This is what we do. This is how we do things.' And I didn't understand that those things can exist in the same space, in that I could be who I was, and I could talk how I did. And I wasn't shunning any aspect of myself. And that Black people really helped build and shape the society and culture of Appalachia. And those are not the stories that we tell because there's a lot of stigma associated with that... you can be a person of color—you can be anything outside of the norm or the mainstream—and also be Appalachian..."

"So the long and the short of it is we have never necessarily been viewed as characters in the Appalachian story...this is my home, this is my history. This is my region...yes, on the outside, we are very different. However, if you had to make a list of things that all Appalachians appreciate and value, you would see that being Black does not exclude you from having some of those same values and or ethical or moral standings. Not to minimize that we need to pay attention to the differences. But we also need to understand and embrace the things that we have in common."

—Shana Goggins, Kentucky

IV. BLACK STORYTELLING AS A PRECONDITION FOR POLICYMAKING

Given the erasure of Black Appalachians from narratives in the region, a common theme was the need for civil society and government to create more spaces for Black Appalachians to tell their own stories, and to update false or incomplete regional narratives that are the context for policymaking and governance. Speakers argued this should be understood as a necessary participatory component of policymaking in Appalachia. Speakers also discussed the need to build social, economic, and political power in Black communities, and to address a history of active disinvestment and disempowerment waged against Black communities.

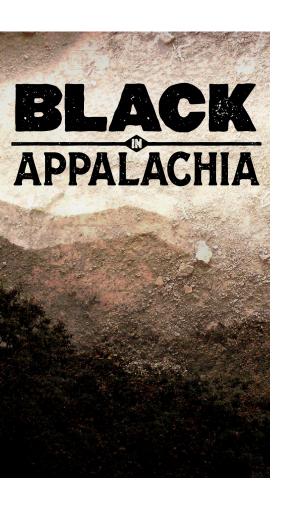
"We're the only ones in all of Warren that does Juneteenth. We do it every year. And it's getting bigger and bigger because we want people to know the history. These young people don't know anything about our history. And we really want them to at least come and see and have some of the old things, how things might have been."

-Corinne Williams, Ohio

as a poet and storyteller, and in creating <u>Black By God</u>, I... just want to elevate the stories for visibility. And then let the people speak for themselves."

-Crystal Good, West Virginia

"Now is the time to tell the story. Now is the time to build. Now is the time for Black people to be seen. Now is the time for us to be at the table. Now is the time for policies to recognize us. Now is the time for media to speak to the lived experience of Black people. Now is the time for our truth to be told. Now is the time for people to recognize that Black people have always been a part of the fabric of this nation and if you want to heal the soul of this nation you've got to hear the story of Black people."



CASE STUDY: BLACK IN APPALACHIA: RESEARCH, EDUCATION & SUPPORT

<u>Black in Appalachia</u>: Research, Education & Support is a non-profit that works with East Tennessee PBS and other partners "to highlight the history and contributions of African-Americans in the development of the Mountain South and its culture...through research, local narratives, public engagement and exhibition." The organization leads a number of projects, including a digital community history archive, community forums, documentary films, and the popular podcast, "Black in Appalachia." Though based out of East Tennessee, some of Black in Appalachia's projects work alongside communities in Appalachian Kentucky and <u>Ohio</u>. In 2019, the team shot a <u>documentary film</u> on the Eastern Kentucky Social Club. They are currently producing a film on Southeastern Ohio.

Another common theme was that Black Appalachian communities have been routinely disinvested and disempowered by the political system and the economy. Speakers noted that many Black people in their communities do not look to the federal government for solutions because, among other reasons, government programs have often been a source of harm in Black communities, even beneficial programs can be cumbersome and difficult to navigate, and the political system has been engineered, through policies like gerrymandering and other voting laws, to diminish Black voices. Many speakers felt that the people in their community can be leaders in solving local problems but that they lack resources and power in formal decision-making processes.

"I don't believe that we need anything in Aliquippa that doesn't already exist here, it just needs to be developed, it just needs to be worked on. And that's why to us the most important thing is education because when you empower people through giving them real tools and real resources, there is no telling what can be done."

-Zabriawn Smith, Pennsylvania

"That kind of economic empowerment is strengthened and resourced by the community's empowerment..."

-Rev. Ronald English, West Virginia

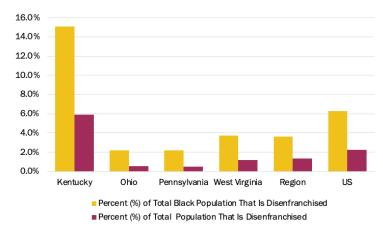
"We are in a place of lack...We shouldn't be written off. We're a powerful, strong people with a lot of love in us. And given the right resources, each and every one could succeed."

-Melanie Meade, Pennsylvania

BLACK APPALACHIANS ARE DISPROPORTIONATELY DISENFRANCHISED AND BLACK COMMUNITIES ARE OFTEN SUBJECT TO VOTER SUPPRESSION

Though the participation of Black Appalachians in policymaking must extend beyond the formal political process, the right to vote is fundamental. While laws vary by state, some voting laws and practices in Appalachian states disparately impact Black Appalachians and suppress Black political power. Restrictive voting laws in some Appalachian states include the lack of automatic or same-day voter registration, the lack of no-excuse absentee/mail voting, early deadlines to return absentee ballots, ID requirements for in-person voting, election day hours, voter roll purges, and gerrymandering. 12

FIGURE 4: RATES OF DISENFRANCHISEMENT, 2020 13



Source: The Sentencing Project

In all Appalachian states those convicted of a felony lose the right to vote while in prison, and in some states felony disenfranchisement extends through probation, parole, and—in Kentucky—even after prison or parole, unless pardoned by the Governor. Black people are disproportionately disenfranchised under these laws in Appalachian states, as shown in the figure above. ¹⁴ There are currently no Black people in the thirty-six statewide and federal elected offices representing the Appalachian areas of Ohio, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, and West Virginia.

TABLE 2: BLACK DISENFRANCHISEMENT BY STATE. 2020 15

	Black Disenfranchisement		Latinx Disenfranchisement		Overall Disenfranchisement	
	Black Disenfranchised Population	Percent (%) of Total Black Population	Latinx Disenfranchised Population	Percent (%) of Total Latinx Population	Total Disenfranchised Population	Percent (%) of Total Population
Kentucky	38,665	15.1%	3,429	6.2%	197,672	5.9%
Ohio	22,532	2.2%	1,452	0.7%	50,402	0.6%
Pennsylvania	22,357	2.2%	4,860	1.0%	48,823	0.5%
West Virginia	1,912	3.7%	95	0.6%	17,274	1.2%
Region Total (OH, KY, PA, WV)	85,466	3.6%	9,836	1.3%	314,171	1.3%
US Total	1,807,329	6.3%	561,486	2.0%	5,177,780	2.3%

V. POLICY PRIORITIES: CLEAN AIR TO EDUCATION

Speakers shared ideas on specific policy problems and solutions in their communities, some of which are excerpted below.



"We don't have to work people to the grave."

-Pastor Orneil Heller, Ohio

"We have to have an economy that works for everyone, not just some of us. We have to have a working economy for all. We have to have human infrastructure for all. That looks like access to healthcare, good paying jobs, scaling up entrepreneurial opportunities, access to clean water, we have to have clean air, the list goes on."

—Bishop Marcia Dinkins, Ohio

"I am working to inform and educate the community about our need to stop the air pollution that is causing so much harm to the community, the animals, and nature."

"It can take you two hours to go to the grocery. And there aren't any restrooms, so if the grocery store doesn't allow you to use their restrooms you are on public transportation carrying bags, possibly children, and no restroom access and it doesn't usually go over well for many people."



CASE STUDY: CLAIRTON, PENNSYLVANIA AND ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICE IN APPALACHIA

"Today, as I hold back tears, I cannot breathe. Our little children still walk to school, are still playing football practice right at the base of the mill on poor air quality days."

-Melanie Meade, Pennsylvania

Black Americans disproportionately face risk of environmental hazards, including proximity to polluters and exposure to pollution that has been linked to health impacts. In Clairton, Pennsylvania where U.S. Steel operates the Clairton Coke Works plant, residents breathe air that has a higher particulate matter value than 93% of the country. To cancer risk from air toxins is higher in Clairton than 95-100% of the country, and children at Clairton Elementary have asthma at twice the rate of the state average. Clairton is located about 30 minutes south of Pittsburgh and is home to a population of 6,637, about 36% of whom are Black and 52% are low-income. After years of resistance from local residents and others, U.S. Steel announced in 2021 it will close three of the worst polluting coke batteries at the Clairton plant. In addition to air pollution from the Coke Works plant, Clairton residents' risk to lead paint exposure is higher than 95% of the country, and the EPA's indicator for wastewater discharge in Clairton is higher than 90% of the country.

"At some point it has to get to agriculture because we have to learn to localize food production. We remove a lot of their ability to harm our communities by being able to produce for ourselves."

"...the people that we're helping, are they capable of helping themselves? And I believe the answer to be yes, as long as we are providing them with the correct educational resources and educational opportunities in order to design their own path and design their own pursuit of happiness."

-Zabriawn Smith, Pennsylvania

"...they started renovating [Quimby Park], then they started seeing how many people were excited to see Quimby return... So now they're doing a lot to Quimby, they're supposed to keep on improving it, but they refuse to put restrooms on the outside."

-Corinne Williams, Ohio

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"...the one who holds the narrative holds the power."

—Zabriawn Smith, Pennsylvania



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