Persistent Poverty in Counties and Census Tracts

American Community Survey Reports

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INTRODUCTION[1]

Research has suggested that people living in higher poverty areas experience more acute systemic problems than people in lower poverty areas (e.g., limited access to medical services, healthy and affordable food, quality education, and civic engagement opportunities).[2] Government agencies and researchers have previously identified counties with high rates of poverty over an extended period as targets for increased level of support. While definitions vary, counties are typically considered to be in persistent poverty if they maintained poverty rates of 20 percent or more for the past 30 years.

Persistent poverty is different from and should not be confused with chronic poverty. Chronic poverty identifies individuals and families that are consistently in poverty over time, whereas persistent poverty in this report focuses on geographic locations that have had high poverty rates for an extended time.

To identify counties in persistent poverty, this report incorporates poverty estimates from the 1990 and 2000 Censuses, the 2005–2009 American Community Survey (ACS), 5-year estimates, and the 2015–2019 ACS, 5-year estimates. Other governmental agencies have alternative definitions of persistent poverty for programmatic purposes. This has created a need

for more consistent methods that can be universally applied, and examples of such are described in this report.

This report expands upon the persistent poverty literature by examining subcounty geographies (specifically, census tracts) and comparing those results to county results. By using this smaller geography, additional populations that may benefit from targeted intervention are identifiable. In addition, census tracts are explored over a longer time than what has been typically done in other persistent poverty analyses, allowing for comparison with identified persistent poverty counties.

HIGHLIGHTS

- From 1989 to 2015–2019, there were 341 counties, 10.9 percent of the total, in persistent poverty.
- Approximately 6.1 percent of the U.S. population in 2019 lived in a persistent poverty county.
- From 1989 to 2015–2019, 8,238 tracts, 11.3 percent of the total, were in persistent poverty.
- Approximately 9.0 percent of the U.S. population in 2019 lived in a persistent poverty tract.
- Approximately 9.1 million more people lived in a persistent poverty tract than lived in a persistent poverty county. Census tracts were more geographically precise in identifying persistent poverty populations than counties.
- Over 74 percent of persistent poverty census tracts were not in a persistent poverty county.

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BACKGROUND

The definition of persistent poverty has been shaped by federal interventions that attempted to target communities rather than individuals. The poverty rate of 20 percent as a threshold has been discussed in the literature as relevant for examining social characteristics of high versus low poverty areas (Dalaker, 2021). A U.S. Government Accountability Office report from May 2021 found that government agencies identified persistent poverty counties in many different ways, and therefore they may not have been targeting counties with the greatest need.[3] The approaches developed for this report, described in detail in the Methods section, provide a comprehensive model for consistently examining persistent poverty geographies over time.

The "10-20-30" provision was first implemented in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009.[4] The act required the Secretary of Agriculture to allocate at least 10 percent of funds from three rural development program accounts to counties that maintained poverty rates of 20 percent or more for the past 30 years, as measured by the 1980, 1990, and 2000 Censuses.[5] Since ARRA, Congress has applied the 10-20-30 provision to other programs. Since the decennial census stopped collecting income information after 2000, the definitions of persistent poverty have varied in subsequent appropriation bills and among various departments and agencies.

As shown in Table 1, there are a number of areas of methodological differences among researchers

[3] Refer to <www.gao.gov/products/gao-21-470>.
[4] Refer to <www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-111publ5/pdf/PLAW-111publ5.pdf>.
[5] Refer to <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R45100>.

working on persistent poverty: number of datapoints used, datasets used, whether margins of error (MOE) were included, and whether census tracts were analyzed.

While most previous studies used three datapoints, this report uses four datapoints to more accurately count persistent poverty areas and to use roughly equal periods between readings. Conversely, this report follows the vast majority of previous studies in rounding to the nearest tenth of a percent, using a cutoff of 20.0 percent, without rounding to the nearest whole number, and without using margins of error to test whether poverty rates were statistically different from 20.0 percent. Finally, while most previous work has focused on counties, three studies in Table 1 also examined tract poverty. Each of these studies uses one ACS 5-year period. This report improves on this method by including four different datapoints to measure tract persistent poverty.

METHODS

How Poverty Is Determined

Poverty status is determined by comparing annual income to a set of dollar values (poverty thresholds) that vary by family size, the number of children in the household, and the age of the householder. If a family's before-tax money income is less than the dollar value of their threshold, then that family and every individual in it are considered to be in poverty. For people not living in families, poverty status is determined by comparing the individual's income to his or her poverty threshold.

The poverty thresholds are updated annually to account for changes in the cost of living using the Consumer Price Index for All

Urban Consumers (CPI-U). They do not vary geographically. As the ACS is continuously administered throughout the year and income is reported for the previous 12 months, the appropriate poverty threshold for each family is determined by multiplying the base year poverty threshold from 1982 by the average of monthly CPI values for the 12 months preceding the survey month.

The poverty universe excludes children under the age of 15 who are not related to the householder, people living in institutional group quarters (e.g., nursing homes or correctional facilities), and people living in college dormitories or military barracks. Population totals for the nation, states, and other geographic units in this report were computed using the poverty universe, the population for whom poverty status can be determined.

Data Sources

This report uses several data sources to generate a list of persistent poverty counties and census tracts. Data from the 1990 and 2000 Censuses provide information about the previous calendar years—1989 and 1999. After the 2000 Census, the long form, which provided the income information to generate poverty rates, was discontinued. Therefore, data to reflect more recent periods come from different sources. The 2005–2009 and 2015–2019 ACS, 5-year estimates are used with the earlier decennial estimates to determine persistent poverty in various periods. An additional analysis uses the 2009 and 2019 Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE) in place of the 2005–2009 and 2015–2019 ACS, 5-year estimates.[6]

[6] Detailed descriptions of each data source used are in the appendix.

Table 1.
A Comparison of Persistent Poverty Methodologies

Persistent poverty project	Number of datapoints— (surveys used)	Number of counties in persistent poverty	Margin of error used?	Tracts
Persistent Poverty in Counties and Census Tracts—Benson, Bishaw, and Glassman, 2023	4—(1990 and 2000 Censuses; 2005–2009 and 2015–2019 ACS, 5-year estimates)	341	No	1990 and 2000 Censuses; 2005–2009 and 2015–2019 ACS, 5-year estimates
Housing Assistance Council, 2022	3—(2000 Census, 2006–2010 and 2016–2020 ACS, 5-year estimates)	377	No	No
U.S. Economic Development Administration, 2022 (EDA)	3—(1990 and 2000 Censuses; most recent SAIPE[1] estimates); used 19.5% as cutoff	489	Yes	No
U.S. Department of Transportation, 2022	3—(1990 and 2000 Censuses; 2020 SAIPE)	354	No	2014–2018 ACS, 5-year estimates
Dalaker, 2021 (CRS 1)	3—(1990 and 2000 Censuses; 2015–2019 ACS, 5-year estimates)	375	No	No
Dalaker, 2021 (CRS 2)	3—(1990 and 2000 Censuses; 2015–2019 ACS, 5-year estimates); used 19.5% as cutoff	418	No	No
Dalaker, 2021 (CRS 3)	3—(1990 and 2000 Censuses; 2019 SAIPE)	361	No	No
Farrigan, 2021 (ERS 1)	4—(1980, 1990, and 2000 Censuses; average of 2007–2011 and 2015–2019 ACS, 5-year estimates)	310	No	No
Farrigan, 2021 (ERS 2)	4—(1980, 1990, and 2000 Censuses; 2007–2011 ACS, 5-year estimates)	353	No	No
Government Accountability Office, 2021	3—(1990 and 2000 Censuses; 2017 SAIPE)	409	Yes	2013–2017 ACS, 5-year estimates
Srinivasan and Kennedy, 2021	4—(1980, 1990, and 2000 Censuses; 2007–2011 ACS, 5-year estimates)	353	No	Yes
U.S. Department of The Treasury Community Development Financial Institutions Fund, 2020 (CDFI)	3—(1990 and 2000 Censuses; 2011–2015 ACS, 5-year estimates)	395	No	2011–2015 ACS, 5-year estimates
Miller and Weber, 2003	5—(1960–2000 Censuses)	382	No	No

[1] SAIPE refers to Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates Program. EDA uses the most recent SAIPE dataset (released December of every year, at which time the Persistent Poverty Counties [PPC] list for that fiscal year is updated). For more information, refer to the Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates Program at <www.census.gov/programs-surveys/saipe/about.html>.

Determining Persistent Poverty

In this report, counties and census tracts with poverty rates of 20.0 percent or greater are considered to have a high poverty rate. Margins of error (MOE) were not used to determine whether poverty rates were significantly different from 20.0 percent.[7] This is consistent with the majority of examples of past persistent poverty calculations. If a county or census tract had a high poverty rate at all 4 datapoints from 1989 to 2015–2019 (i.e., a county or tract had a poverty rate of 20.0 percent or greater for the 1990 and 2000 Census data and the 2005–2009 and 2015–2019 ACS, 5-year estimates), then we include the geographic unit in the persistent poverty category. Unlike some previous studies, this report includes four datapoints to increase the accuracy of the county being in persistent poverty for the entire period and to use roughly equal periods between readings.

This definition of persistent poverty is a definition purely for this report and is one of several viable options. The U.S. Census Bureau takes no official position at this time on how persistent poverty should be defined.

[7] For example, a county with a rate of 18 percent and a margin of error of 2 would be included if MOEs were used and would not be included if MOEs were not used.

Geography

Persistent poverty is analyzed at both the county- and census-tract levels of geography. The persistent poverty at these spatial levels is aggregated to provide state totals. In this report, estimates are provided for the the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Puerto Rico is excluded from this analysis. It should be noted that in addition to being a state equivalent, the District of Columbia is also considered a county equivalent for the purposes of data presentation.

Counties are relatively stable over time, but there are occasional name or boundary changes along with county creations and deletions. The set of counties used in this report includes all counties that existed in each of the four datasets used for analysis.

Census tracts are small, statistical subdivisions of a county or statistical equivalent entity.[8] Since it is possible for census tract boundaries to change with each decennial census, the total number of census tracts varies during each 10-year period. To account for this, we use harmonized census-tract data from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS) National

[8] For more information on census tracts, refer to the Glossary at <https://www.census.gov/glossary/>.

Historical Geographic Information System (NHGIS).[9]

RESULTS[10]

Counties With High Poverty Rates

Before examining persistent poverty in counties, it is helpful to establish the number of counties that had a high poverty rate at each datapoint as a means of comparison.

Table 2 shows the number of counties with poverty rates equal to or greater than 20.0, 25.0, and 30.0 percent at individual years. The number of counties with poverty rates equal to or higher than 20.0 percent was highest in 1989. It decreased in 1999, increased in 2005–2009, and decreased to current 2015–2019 levels.

In 2015–2019, the most current period in this study, there were 590 counties with a poverty rate equal to or greater than 20.0 percent according to the ACS data. These 590 counties accounted for 18.8 percent of the nation's counties. Using SAIPE estimates, more

[9] For more information on the IPUMS NHGIS and census-tract harmonization, refer to the IPUMS NHGIS, National Historical Geographic Information System, at <https://www.nhgis.org/geographic-crosswalks>.

[10] Population totals for this report are computed using the poverty universe, the population for whom poverty status is determined. The estimates presented here do not reflect the COVID-19 pandemic and its potential impact.

Table 2.
Number and Percentage of Counties With High Poverty Rates

Dataset	Poverty rate 20.0 percent or more		Poverty rate 25.0 percent or more		Poverty rate 30.0 percent or more	
	Number of counties	Percent of counties	Number of counties	Percent of counties	Number of counties	Percent of counties
1990 Decennial Census (1989)	858	27.3	429	13.7	199	6.3
2000 Decennial Census (1999)	500	15.9	203	6.5	85	2.7
2005-2009 ACS, 5-year estimates	639	20.3	246	7.8	91	2.9
2015-2019 ACS, 5-year estimates	590	18.8	222	7.1	87	2.8
2009 SAIPE estimates.	748	23.8	290	9.2	112	3.6
2019 SAIPE estimates.	478	15.2	169	5.4	67	2.1

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1990 and 2000 Censuses; 2005–2009 and 2015–2019 American Community Survey, 5-year estimates; and the 2009 and 2019 Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE).

counties had poverty rates equal to or greater than 20.0 percent in 2009, and fewer counties had poverty rates equal to or greater than 20.0 percent in 2019.[11]

Counties in Persistent Poverty

Having a sense of the current number of counties with high poverty rates helps put into context the counties identified as being persistently in poverty. In the most recent period (2015–2019), 341 of the 590 high poverty counties were persistently in poverty, having a poverty rate of 20.0 percent or higher in 1989, 1999, 2005–2009, and 2015–2019. These 341 counties represent 10.9 percent of all the counties in the nation.

Table 3 breaks down the population living in persistent poverty by state and shows an alternate number of counties identified if 2009 and 2019 SAIPE estimates are used for the last two datapoints rather than 2005–2009 and 2015–2019 ACS, 5-year estimates.

In the 1989 to 2015–2019 period, 19.4 million people lived in counties identified as being persistently in poverty, or 6.1 percent of the population. More closely examining individual state totals, the states had a range of 0 to 44 counties in persistent poverty. Fifteen states and the District of Columbia had no counties identified and therefore had no population living in persistent poverty counties. An

additional eight states had less than 1 percent of their population living in persistent poverty counties. Ten states had 10 percent or more of their population living in persistent poverty counties.

Examination of the difference between the 1989 to 2015–2019 ACS and 1989 to 2019 SAIPE counts shows that there were fewer counties in persistent poverty with the ACS, though the ACS counties resulted in a larger population. Note that the 2015–2019 ACS, 5-year estimates reflect 5 individual years (2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2019) pooled together, whereas SAIPE is solely based upon 2019 estimates. The two data sources also employ different methodologies in determining estimates.[12]

The percentage of the population living in persistent poverty may better reflect current economic conditions rather than the percentage of counties in persistent poverty. This is especially true in states with many counties with smaller

populations.[13] A list of all 341 counties in persistent poverty identified in the 1989 to 2015–2019 ACS, 5-year period by state accompanies this report.

Figure 1 spatially represents the percentage of each state's population living in counties that were in persistent poverty during the 1989 to 2015–2019 ACS period. The state population is based on the 2015–2019 ACS 5-year population for whom poverty status can be determined.[14] This figure highlights the uneven distribution of persistent poverty observed at the nation level.

Overall, 278 of the 341 persistent poverty counties were in the South, making up 81.5 percent of the national total. Nearly 1 in 5 (19.5 percent) counties within the South region were in persistent poverty. No other region (West, Northeast, Midwest) had more than 5.8 percent of its counties in persistent poverty.[15]

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[11] The SAIPE estimates are from a single year (2019), whereas the 2019 ACS, 5-year estimates are pooled 1-year estimates from 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2019.

[12] One notable state difference between the ACS and SAIPE counts was in New York. The 2015–2019 ACS poverty estimate (20.0 percent) places Kings County into persistent poverty (in combination with its 1989, 1999, and 2005–2009 estimates), while its 2009 and 2019 SAIPE estimates of 21.7 percent and 17.7 percent do not. This places an additional 2.6 million people (the 2019 population of Kings County) into persistent poverty using the 1989 to 2015–2019 ACS. This county alone accounted for 50.6 percent of the difference between the total in persistent poverty population numbers.

[13] For Mississippi in the 1989 to 2015–2019 ACS, 44 out of its 82 counties, or 53.7 percent, were identified as being in persistent poverty, whereas 34.8 of its total population lived in these counties. New York was an example of the opposite: there, a small number of total counties, but among the largest in population, were in persistent poverty. New York has just 3.2 percent of its 62 counties identified, yet that captured 20.8 percent of state population.

[14] Poverty status is determined for individuals in housing units and noninstitutional group quarters. The poverty universe excludes children under the age of 15 who are not related to the householder, people living in institutional group quarters, and people living in college dormitories or military barracks.

[15] For information on census regions and divisions of the United States, refer to <https://www2.census.gov/geo/pdfs/maps-data/maps/reference/us_regdiv.pdf>.

Table 3.
# Number of Counties and Population in Persistent Poverty Within States

Area	Total counties (number)	1989 to 2015–2019 ACS[1] persistent poverty counties			1989 to 2019 SAIPE[1] persistent poverty counties		
		Number	Population (thousands)	Percent of population	Number	Population (thousands)	Percent of population
United States	**3,142**	**341**	**19,420.0**	**6.1**	**348**	**14,350.0**	**4.5**
Alabama	67	18	330.6	7.0	18	319.3	6.7
Alaska	29	2	13.5	1.9	2	23.0	3.2
Arizona	15	3	222.8	3.2	3	210.7	3.1
Arkansas	75	15	305.7	10.5	16	313.8	10.8
California...................	58	3	1,595.0	4.1	2	1,139.0	3.0
Colorado...................	64	2	18.7	0.3	2	10.3	0.2
Connecticut	8	0	0	0	0	0	0
Delaware...................	3	0	0	0	0	0	0
District of Columbia	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Florida.....................	67	4	364.3	1.8	4	124.3	0.6
Georgia	159	40	758.1	7.5	46	783.9	7.7
Hawaii	5	0	0	0	0	0	0
Idaho	44	1	38.7	2.3	1	38.7	2.3
Illinois.....................	102	3	65.6	0.5	3	65.6	0.5
Indiana.....................	92	0	0	0	0	0	0
Iowa	99	0	0	0	0	0	0
Kansas	105	1	65.2	2.3	1	65.2	2.3
Kentucky...................	120	40	678.3	15.7	42	741.8	17.2
Louisiana...................	64	27	1,545.0	34.1	21	1,110.0	24.5
Maine	16	0	0	0	0	0	0
Maryland...................	24	1	586.8	10.0	1	586.8	10.0
Massachusetts...............	14	0	0	0	0	0	0
Michigan	83	1	64.2	0.7	1	64.2	0.7
Minnesota..................	87	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mississippi..................	82	44	1,004.0	34.8	45	939.1	32.5
Missouri....................	115	12	483.3	8.2	12	468.6	7.9
Montana	56	4	44.1	4.3	4	44.1	4.3
Nebraska...................	93	1	7.1	0.4	1	7.1	0.4
Nevada	17	0	0	0	0	0	0
New Hampshire..............	10	0	0	0	0	0	0
New Jersey..................	21	0	0	0	0	0	0
New Mexico	33	9	434.6	21.2	11	397.7	19.4
New York...................	62	2	3,965.0	20.8	1	1,400.0	7.3
North Carolina..............	100	8	484.9	4.9	9	339.5	3.5
North Dakota................	53	3	25.4	3.5	3	25.4	3.5
Ohio	88	1	56.2	0.5	1	56.2	0.5
Oklahoma	77	11	263.9	6.9	13	295.9	7.8
Oregon	36	0	0	0	0	0	0
Pennsylvania	67	1	1,535.0	12.4	1	1,535.0	12.4
Rhode Island	5	0	0	0	0	0	0
South Carolina..............	46	12	345.0	7.1	12	345.0	7.1
South Dakota...............	66	11	69.3	8.2	10	46.1	5.5
Tennessee..................	95	8	152.9	2.3	8	152.9	2.3
Texas	254	30	3,049.0	11.0	35	2,297.0	8.3
Utah	29	1	14.9	0.5	1	14.9	0.5
Vermont	14	0	0	0	0	0	0
Virginia	133	9	492.2	6.0	6	162.4	2.0
Washington	39	1	42.3	0.6	1	42.3	0.6
West Virginia	55	11	294.8	16.7	10	179.5	10.2
Wisconsin	72	1	4.5	0.1	1	4.5	0.1
Wyoming...................	23	0	0	0	0	0	0

[1] Data used for the 1989 to 2015–2019 ACS period include the 1990 and 2000 Censuses and the 2005–2009 and 2015–2019 American Community Survey, 5-year estimates. Data used for the 1989 to 2019 SAIPE period include the 1990 and 2000 Censuses, the 2009 SAIPE estimates, and the 2019 SAIPE estimates.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1990 and 2000 Censuses; 2005–2009 and 2015–2019 American Community Survey, 5-year estimates; and the 2009 and 2019 Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE).

Figure 1.
Percentage of State Population Living in Persistent Poverty Counties: 1989 to 2015-2019
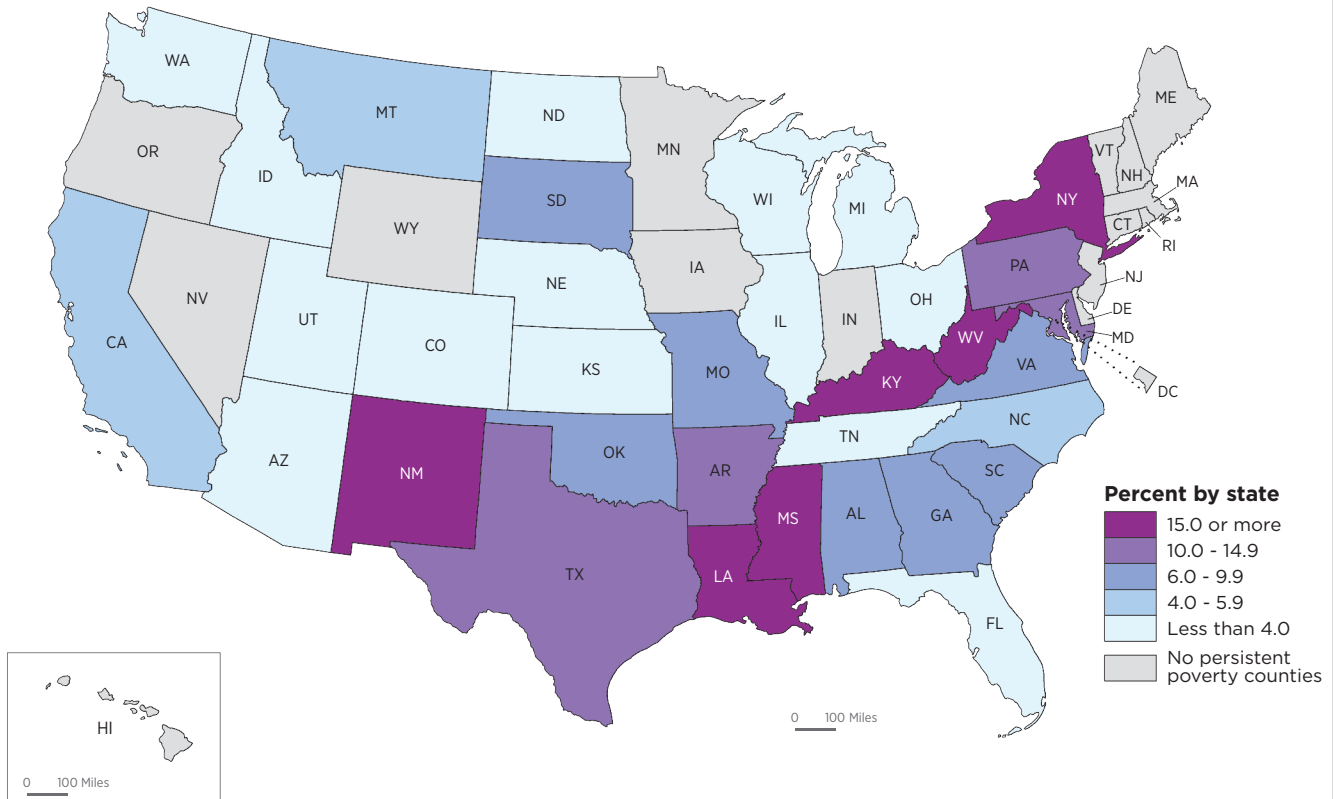
Percent by state
- 15.0 or more
- 10.0 - 14.9
- 6.0 - 9.9
- 4.0 - 5.9
- Less than 4.0
- No persistent poverty counties

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1990 and 2000 Decennial Censuses; and 2005-2009 and 2015-2019 American Community Survey, 5-year estimates.

The majority of the persistent poverty population, 54.9 percent, lived in the South. However, a significant amount, 28.4 percent, lived in the Northeast region.

Figure 2 shows the specific locations of the 341 counties found to be in persistent poverty and shows the aforementioned spatial clustering.

Census Tracts With High Poverty

Unlike counties, census tracts are less stable over time. As tracts either increase or decrease in population, changes are made to boundaries. To accomplish this,

census tracts can be split into multiple tracts, or several tracts can be combined into one, depending on local population trends. This makes comparisons over longer periods more difficult and is likely why most previous research with tracts has spanned only one ACS 5-year period. In this report, harmonized census tracts from IPUMS NHGIS were used, and therefore this report provides longer periods of persistent poverty in census tracts that are more consistent with the persistent poverty counties. For the 2015–2019 ACS, 5-year estimates, there were more than 73,000 census tracts. Table 4

provides a baseline of the tracts identified as being equal or greater to a 20.0 percent poverty rate for data from the 1990 and 2000 Censuses and the 2005–2009 and 2015–2019 ACS, 5-year estimates.

In utilizing just the 2015–2019 ACS, 5-year estimates, over 17,000 census tracts, or 24.4 percent, had rates of 20.0 percent or higher. This number was higher in both number and percentage of census tracts than the three other datasets. However, as discussed in the next section, less than half of this total maintained this rate over a longer (persistent) time.

Figure 2.
Counties in Persistent Poverty: 1989 to 2015–2019
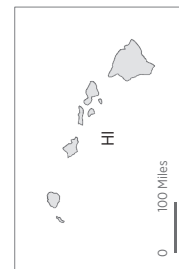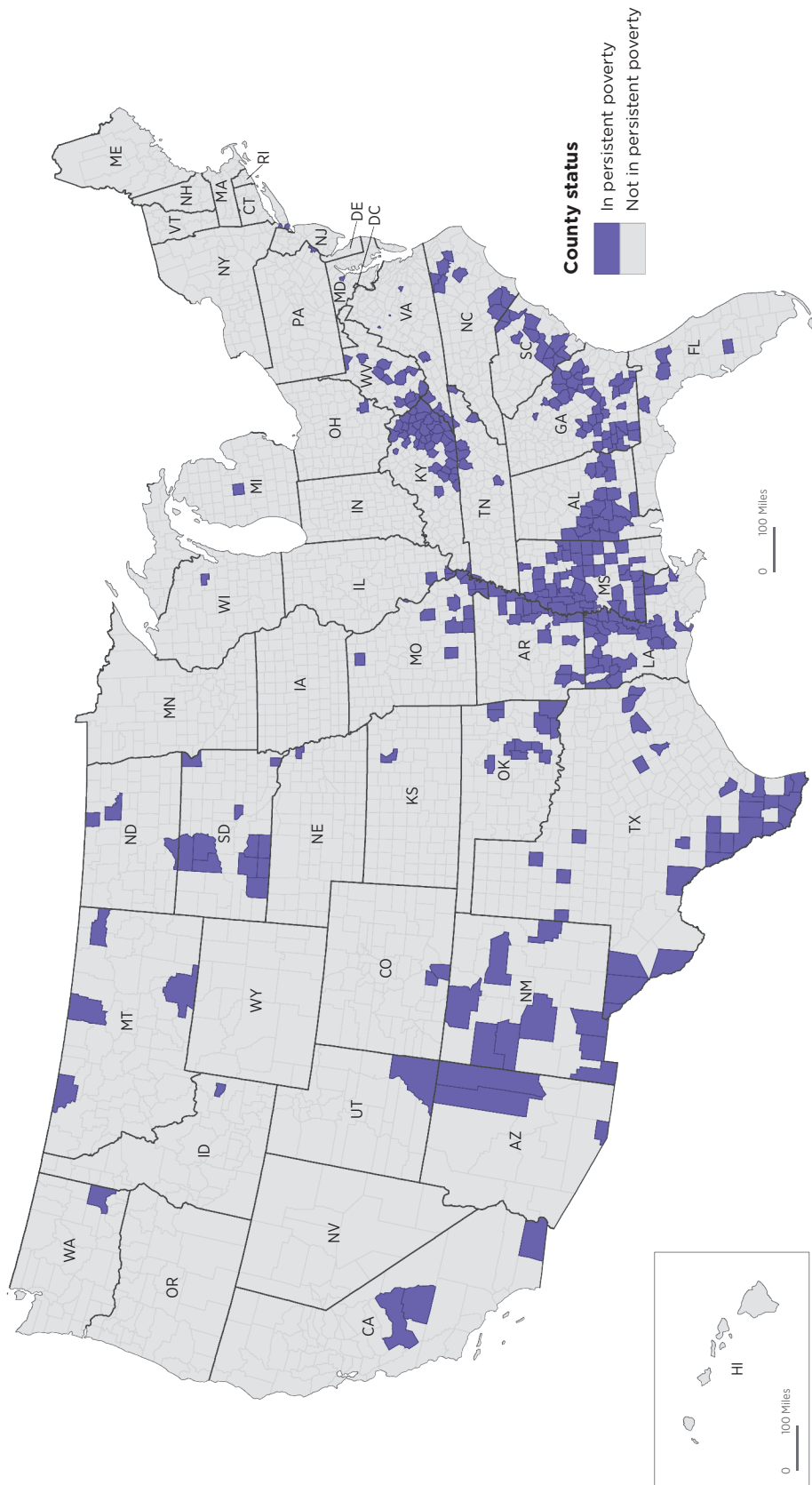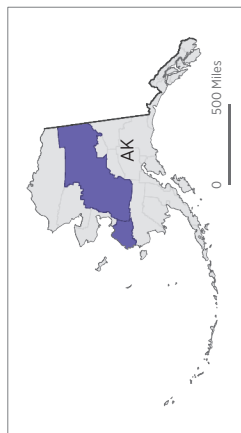
County status

In persistent poverty
Not in persistent poverty

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1990 and 2000 Censuses; and 2005–2009 and 2015–2019 American Community Survey, 5-year estimates.

Table 4.
Number and Percentage of Census Tracts With High Poverty Rates

Year	Census tracts with poverty rates of 20.0 percent or higher	
	Number	Percent
1990 Census	14,851	20.4
2000 Census	14,110	19.4
2005–2009 ACS, 5-year estimates	16,752	23.1
2015–2019 ACS, 5-year estimates	17,809	24.4

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1990 and 2000 Censuses and the 2005–2009 and 2015–2019 American Community Survey, 5-year estimates.

Census Tracts in Persistent Poverty

To determine whether a census tract was in persistent poverty, this report uses the same four datasets that we used in the county-level analysis. As discussed in the background section, this is different from how most governmental agencies have determined persistent poverty census tracts in both the number of datasets and in the years covered. Our approach provides a comprehensive look at census tract poverty over the past 30 years and provides the ability to compare tracts to persistent poverty counties (by using the same datasets and time).

Of the 17,809 census tracts found to have poverty rates of greater than or equal to 20.0 percent in 2015–2019, 8,238 of them were in persistent poverty using the 1990 and 2000 Censuses and the 2005–2009 and 2015–2019 ACS, 5-year estimates. Table 5 breaks down the number of census tracts and the population living in those census tracts by state. A list of all census tracts in persistent poverty accompanies this report.

As with counties, there was variation in the percentage of census tracts and the population living in persistent poverty census tracts within states. Unlike counties, all states and the District of Columbia had at least one census tract in persistent poverty.

We find that 30 states had 10 percent or fewer of their census tracts in persistent poverty. Furthermore, 20 states had 5 percent or less of their population living in persistent poverty tracts. Three states had 20 percent or more of their population in persistent poverty tracts.

Figure 3 shows the percentage of each state's population living in persistent poverty census tracts. There is a cluster of states with less than 5 percent of their population living in persistent poverty census tracts in the Midwest and West. States with 15 percent or more of their population living in these tracts were generally in the South (except for New Mexico in the West).

In the appendix of this report, there is a series of maps that show census tracts in persistent poverty by census division. In addition, there are maps of the locations of persistent poverty census tracts for the vicinity of the 25 most populous metro areas.

The 1989 to 2015–2019 period captured 28.5 million people living in persistent poverty census tracts. This is equal to 9 percent of the nation's population in 2019. It is also more than the people found to be living in persistent poverty counties. Analyzing a smaller geography may be able to capture nuances that a county-level analysis cannot.

Measuring Persistent Poverty by County and Census Tract Differences

The level of geography used to define persistent poverty changes both the number of people living in areas classified as persistently poor as well as the geographic distribution of these areas throughout the country. Persistent poverty census tracts are more evenly spread throughout the country than persistent poverty counties.

Many census tracts that were in persistent poverty were not in a county that was persistently poor. Table 6 shows state and national differences in the population in persistent poverty when using either counties or census tracts for identifying areas.

A total of about 9.1 million more people were found to be living in persistent poverty census tracts than persistent poverty counties. There were more people living in persistent poverty tracts than in persistent poverty counties in 41 states and the District of Columbia. This was particularly evident in the 15 states and the District of Columbia where there were no persistent poverty counties.

Nine states had fewer people living in persistent poverty census tracts than persistent poverty counties.

Overall, 25.7 percent of persistent poverty census tracts were located within persistent poverty counties.

Table 5.
Number and Population of Census Tracts in Persistent Poverty

Area	Total census tracts (number)	1989 to 2015–2019[1]			
		Persistent poverty census tracts			
		Number	Percent of total census tracts	Population[2] (thousands)	Percent of total population
United States	**73,060**	**8,238**	**11.3**	**28,490.0**	**9.0**
Alabama	1,181	226	19.1	574.6	12.1
Alaska	167	4	2.4	20.7	2.9
Arizona	1,526	192	12.6	778.4	11.3
Arkansas.....................	686	103	15.0	315.5	10.8
California.....................	8,057	838	10.4	3,816.0	9.9
Colorado.....................	1,249	71	5.7	247.6	4.5
Connecticut	833	66	7.9	188.1	5.4
Delaware.....................	218	11	5.0	27.3	2.9
District of Columbia...........	179	37	20.7	129.4	19.6
Florida.......................	4,245	330	7.8	1,355.0	6.6
Georgia	1,969	288	14.6	946.6	9.3
Hawaii	351	11	3.1	42.8	3.1
Idaho	298	11	3.7	54.0	3.2
Illinois........................	3,123	349	11.2	912.0	7.3
Indiana.......................	1,511	136	9.0	328.8	5.1
Iowa	825	39	4.7	109.8	3.6
Kansas.......................	770	58	7.5	157.5	5.6
Kentucky.....................	1,115	238	21.3	755.0	17.5
Louisiana.....................	1,148	306	26.7	948.3	20.9
Maine........................	358	15	4.2	39.7	3.1
Maryland.....................	1,406	80	5.7	188.8	3.2
Massachusetts................	1,478	129	8.7	453.8	6.9
Michigan	2,813	364	12.9	860.9	8.8
Minnesota....................	1,338	72	5.4	230.6	4.2
Mississippi....................	664	214	32.2	705.8	24.4
Missouri......................	1,393	168	12.1	465.2	7.9
Montana	271	27	10.0	92.5	9.0
Nebraska.....................	532	35	6.6	93.9	5.0
Nevada	687	20	2.9	60.7	2.1
New Hampshire...............	295	5	1.7	10.9	0.8
New Jersey...................	2,010	130	6.5	445.2	5.1
New Mexico	499	107	21.4	436	21.3
New York.....................	4,919	657	13.4	2,656.0	13.9
North Carolina................	2,195	190	8.7	636.5	6.4
North Dakota.................	205	11	5.4	32.8	4.5
Ohio.........................	2,952	427	14.5	1,001.0	8.8
Oklahoma....................	1,046	174	16.6	502.6	13.2
Oregon	834	44	5.3	174.2	4.3
Pennsylvania	3,218	320	9.9	963.5	7.8
Rhode Island	244	28	11.5	110.0	10.8
South Carolina................	1,103	135	12.2	461.6	9.5
South Dakota.................	222	19	8.6	55.4	6.6
Tennessee....................	1,497	194	13.0	619.8	9.5
Texas	5,265	914	17.4	4,026.0	14.6
Utah	588	36	6.1	134.2	4.4
Vermont	184	4	2.2	15.0	2.5
Virginia	1,907	107	5.6	367.5	4.5
Washington	1,458	80	5.5	359.0	4.9
West Virginia.................	484	93	19.2	255.1	14.4
Wisconsin....................	1,409	121	8.6	319.4	5.7
Wyoming.....................	132	4	3.0	9.3	1.6

[1] Based on the 1990 and 2000 Censuses and the 2005–2009 and 2015–2019 ACS, 5-year estimates.
[2] Population for whom poverty status could be determined.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1990 and 2000 Censuses and the 2005–2009 and 2015–2019 American Community Survey, 5-year estimates.
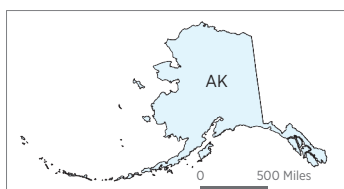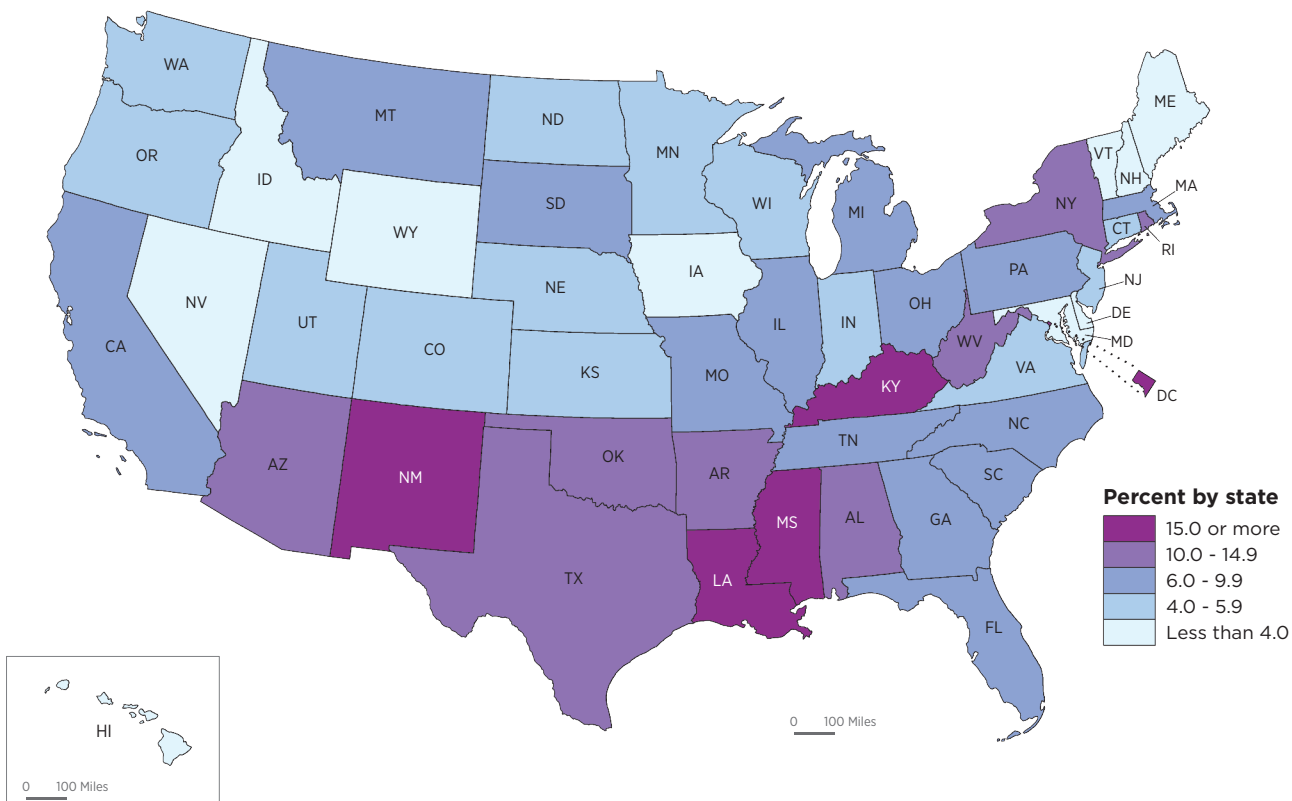
Figure 3.
Percentage of State Population Living in Persistent Poverty Census Tracts: 1989 to 2015-2019

Percent by state
- 15.0 or more
- 10.0 - 14.9
- 6.0 - 9.9
- 4.0 - 5.9
- Less than 4.0

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1990 and 2000 Decennial Censuses; and 2005-2009 and 2015-2019 American Community Survey, 5-year estimates.

Conversely, this means slightly less than three-quarters of all persistent poverty tracts were located outside persistently poor counties.

CONCLUSION

This report uses decennial census and ACS 5-year data to identify counties and census tracts in persistent poverty. For the 1989 to 2015–2019 period, 341 counties (10.9 percent) were persistently in poverty. These counties had a population of 19.4 million and accounted for 6.1 percent of the population for which poverty status could be determined. The South was home to 278 (81.5

percent) of the 341 counties in persistent poverty and 54.9 percent of the people identified nationally as living in persistent poverty counties.

For the 1989 to 2015–2019 period, 8,238 census tracts (11.3 percent) were persistently in poverty. There were 28.5 million people living within these tracts, which is 9.0 percent of the total population for whom poverty status could be determined in 2019. The South had 44.2 percent of all persistent poverty census tracts and 45.1 percent of the total population that lived in persistent poverty census tracts.

As with counties, there was variation among states, but all states and the District of Columbia had at least one persistently poor census tract.

Census tracts allow researchers to identify persistent poverty more precisely. We found many census tracts in persistent poverty that were not in persistently poor counties. In fact, slightly less than three-quarters of all persistent poverty tracts were not within a persistently poor county. Census tracts also identify the specific areas within a county that are in persistent poverty, thereby creating a

Table 6.
Population of People Living in Persistent Poverty Census Tracts and Counties

| Area | 1989 to 2015–2019[1] | | | | | |
| | Census tract population | | County population | | Difference[3] | |
	Number (thousand)	Percent	Number[2] (thousand)	Percent	Number (thousand)	Percentage point
United States	**28,490.0**	**9.0**	**19,420.0**	**6.1**	**9,070.0**	**2.9**
Alabama	574.6	12.1	330.6	7.0	243.9	5.1
Alaska	20.7	2.9	13,520.0	1.9	7.2	1.0
Arizona	778.4	11.3	222.8	3.2	555.5	7.6
Arkansas	315.5	10.8	305.7	10.5	9.8	0.3
California	3,816.0	9.9	1,595.0	4.1	2,221.0	5.7
Colorado	247.6	4.5	18.7	0.3	228.8	4.2
Connecticut	188.1	5.4	0	0	188.1	5.4
Delaware	27.3	2.9	0	0	27.3	2.9
District of Columbia	129.4	19.6	0	0	129.4	19.6
Florida	1,355.0	6.6	364.3	1.8	991	4.8
Georgia	946.6	9.3	758.1	7.5	188.5	1.9
Hawaii	42.8	3.1	0	0	42.8	3.1
Idaho	54.0	3.2	38.7	2.3	15.3	0.9
Illinois	912	7.3	65.6	0.5	846.5	6.8
Indiana	328.8	5.1	0	0	328.8	5.1
Iowa	109.8	3.6	0	0	109.8	3.6
Kansas	157.5	5.6	65.2	2.3	92.4	3.3
Kentucky	755	17.5	678.3	15.7	76.7	1.8
Louisiana	948.3	20.9	1,545.0	34.1	−596.7	−13.2
Maine	39.7	3.1	0	0	39.7	3.1
Maryland	188.8	3.2	586.8	10.0	−398.0	−6.8
Massachusetts	453.8	6.9	0	0	453.8	6.9
Michigan	860.9	8.8	64.2	0.7	796.7	8.1
Minnesota	230.6	4.2	0	0	230.6	4.2
Mississippi	705.8	24.4	1,004.0	34.8	−298.3	−10.4
Missouri	465.2	7.9	483.3	8.2	−18.1	−0.3
Montana	92.5	9.0	44.1	4.3	48.5	4.7
Nebraska	93.9	5.0	7.1	0.4	86.8	4.7
Nevada	60.7	2.1	0	0	60.7	2.1
New Hampshire	10.9	0.8	0	0	10.9	0.8
New Jersey	445.2	5.1	0	0	445.2	5.1
New Mexico	436.0	21.3	434.6	21.2	1.4	0.1
New York	2,656.0	13.9	3,965.0	20.8	−1,308.0	−6.9
North Carolina	636.5	6.4	484.9	4.9	151.6	1.5
North Dakota	32.8	4.5	25.4	3.5	7.4	1.0
Ohio	1,001.0	8.8	56.2	0.5	944.7	8.3
Oklahoma	502.6	13.2	263.9	6.9	238.7	6.3
Oregon	174.2	4.3	0	0	174.2	4.3
Pennsylvania	963.5	7.8	1,535.0	12.4	−571.7	−4.6
Rhode Island	110.0	10.8	0	0	110.0	10.8
South Carolina	461.6	9.5	345.0	7.1	116.5	2.4
South Dakota	55.4	6.6	69.3	8.2	−14.0	−1.7
Tennessee	619.8	9.5	152.9	2.3	467.0	7.1
Texas	4,026.0	14.6	3,049.0	11.0	976.9	3.5
Utah	134.2	4.4	14.9	0.5	119.3	3.9
Vermont	15.0	2.5	0	0	15.0	2.5
Virginia	367.5	4.5	492.2	6.0	−124.7	−1.5
Washington	359.0	4.9	42.3	0.6	316.7	4.4
West Virginia	255.1	14.4	294.7	16.7	−39.6	−2.2
Wisconsin	319.4	5.7	4.5	0.1	314.9	5.6
Wyoming	9.3	1.6	0	0	9.3	1.6

[1] Data used includes the 1990 and 2000 Censuses and the 2009 and 2019 ACS, 5-year estimates.
[2] Population totals are based on the poverty universe, the population for whom poverty status could be determined.
[3] Differences may not sum to totals due to rounding.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1990 and 2000 Censuses and the 2005–2009 and 2015–2019 American Community Survey, 5-year estimates.

more accurate and specific picture of where resources may need to be targeted.

Future work will focus on creating more precision with population totals that are in persistent poverty. This will be of value to agencies in determining where to target limited resources. Additional future work will further examine demographic and economic variables that are consistently shared among counties and census tracts in persistent poverty. Examination of the feasibility of using even smaller geographies, such as census blocks or block groups to even more precisely determine persistent poverty locations and populations would likely be a worthwhile endeavor.

SOURCE AND ACCURACY

The data presented in this report are based on the 1990 and 2000 Census long forms. The long form asked 52 questions of approximately 1 in 6 households. Additional data in this report are from the 2005–2009 and 2015–2019 ACS, 5-year estimates. These data are based on the ACS sample interviewed from January 2005 through December 2009 and from January 2015 through December 2019. The estimates based on these samples describe the average values of person, household, and housing unit characteristics over this period of collection. In addition to sampling error, nonsampling error may be introduced during any of the operations used to collect and process survey data such as editing, reviewing, or keying data from questionnaires. For more information on sampling and estimation methods, confidentiality protection, and sampling and nonsampling errors, please refer to the 2019 ACS Accuracy of the Data document located at <www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/technical-documentation/code-lists.html>. This report also uses 2009 and 2019 SAIPE estimates. For more information on SAIPE methodology, refer to <www.census.gov/programs-surveys/saipe.html>.

HOW TO ACCESS ADDITIONAL ACS POVERTY DATA

All ACS data products are now released on data.census.gov, the U.S. Census Bureau's primary data dissemination and digital content platform located at <https://data.census.gov>. The centralized experience allows data users of all skill levels to search tables, visualize and download data, and create custom statistics. ACS data from 2010 forward are available. Estimates from Table S1701 were used to obtain the county and census tract poverty estimates in this report. An additional method for obtaining ACS data is through the Census Bureau's application programming interface (API) at <www.census.gov/data/developers.html>. This tool provides the public with maximum flexibility to query data directly from Census Bureau servers.

Additional poverty estimates, publications, working papers, visualizations, and data from other surveys can be found at <www.census.gov/topics/income-poverty/poverty.html>.

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APPENDIX

Data Source Information

The American Community Survey (ACS) is a nationwide survey designed to provide communities with reliable and timely demographic, social, economic, and housing data for the nation, states, congressional districts, counties, places, and other localities every year. It has an annual sample size of about 3.5 million addresses across the United States and includes both housing and group quarters (e.g., nursing facilities and prisons).[16] The ACS is conducted in every county throughout the nation. Beginning in 2005, ACS 1-year data have been released annually for geographic areas with populations of 65,000 or greater. The Census Bureau combines 5 consecutive years of ACS data to produce multiyear estimates of geographic areas with fewer than 65,000 residents. These 5-year estimates represent data collected over a period of 60 months. For information on the ACS sample design and other topics, visit <www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs>.

The decennial census is conducted every 10 years to determine the number of people living

in the United States as required by Article I, Sections 2 and 9 of the Constitution of the United States. The data collected by the decennial census are used to apportion the number of seats each state has in the U.S. House of Representatives. In the 20th century, most addresses received a "short" form, while a portion of addresses received a more detailed "long" form. The short-form questionnaire was designed to collect basic demographic and housing information (such as age, race, sex, relationship, and tenure) to be used for apportionment and redistricting. The long-form questionnaire, sent to approximately 1 in 6 households, collected social, housing, and economic information (such as citizenship, educational attainment, disability status, employment status, income, and housing costs). Starting with the 2010 Census, only short-form information was collected, while long-form data was now collected annually by the ACS. Therefore, this project, which spans over 30 years, uses both long-form decennial census data from 1990 and 2000 and more recent ACS data. In this report, data from the 1990 Census are identified as 1989, and data from the 2000 Census are identified as 1999. For more information on the relationship between the decennial census and the ACS, visit <www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/about/acs-and-census.html>.

The U.S. Census Bureau's Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE) program provides annual estimates of income and poverty statistics for all school districts, counties, and states. The SAIPE program produces county and state estimates of the total number of people in poverty. The estimates are not direct counts from enumerations or administrative records, nor direct estimates from sample surveys. Instead, for counties and states, income and poverty estimates are modeled by combining 1-year ACS survey data with population estimates and administrative records. Beginning with the SAIPE program's estimates for 2005, data from the ACS are used in the estimation procedure; all prior years used data from the Annual Social and Economic Supplements of the Current Population Survey. SAIPE estimates are available from 1989. In this project, 2009 SAIPE and 2019 estimates were used in combination with other data years to produce a set of persistent poverty counties. This is compared to the use of 2005–2009 and 2015–2019 ACS, 5-year estimates in producing a set of counties that meet the definition of being persistently in poverty. For more information on SAIPE and its methodology, refer to <www.census.gov/programs-surveys/saipe/about.html>.

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[16] While people living in group quarters are sampled in the ACS, those living in institutional group quarters (e.g., nursing homes or correctional facilities) are not included in the poverty universe. Puerto Rico, as a United States territory, is not included in the analysis in this report.

Figure A-1.
Census Tracts in Persistent Poverty, 1989–2019: New England Division
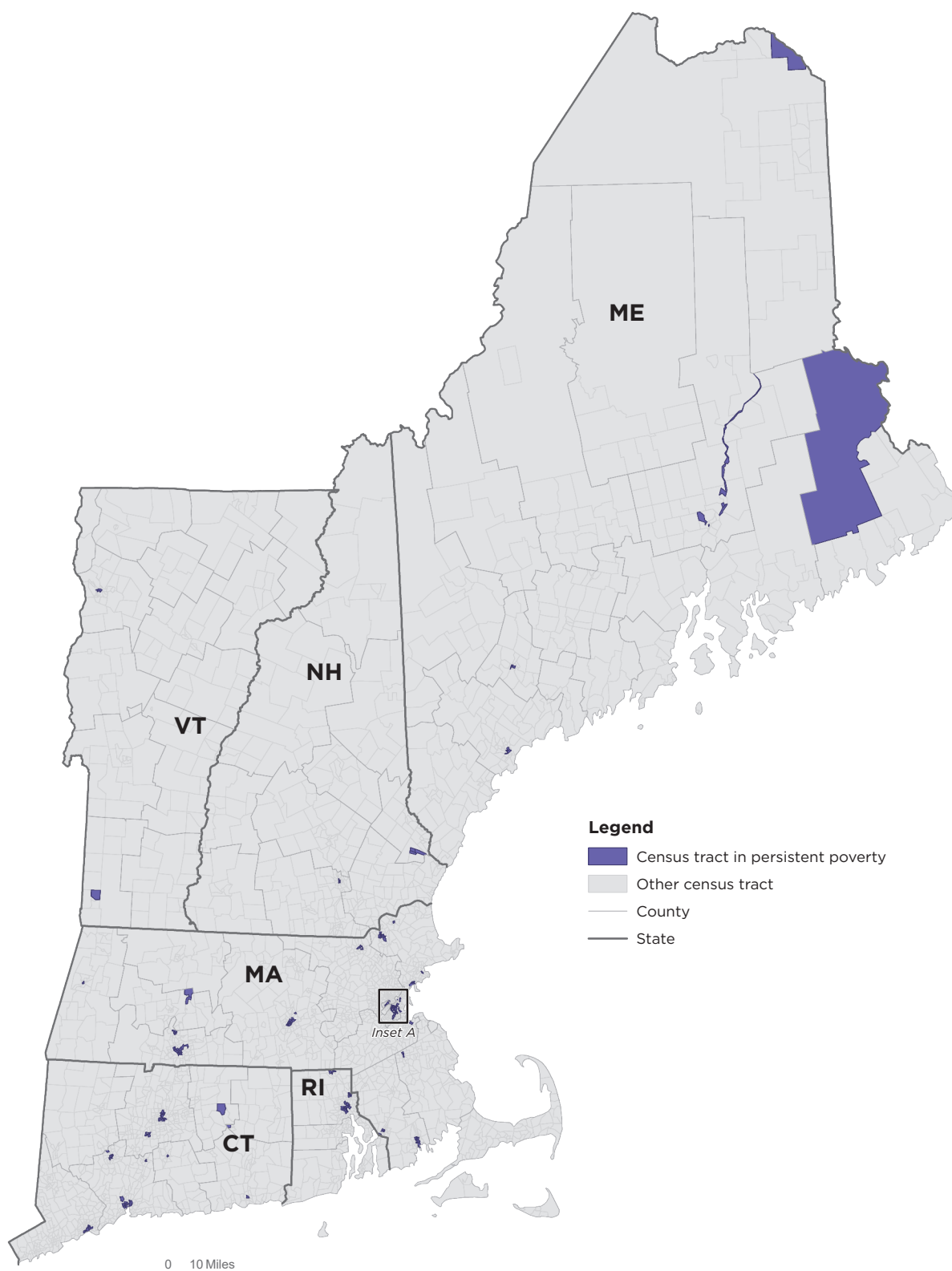
ME

NH

VT

Legend

Census tract in persistent poverty

Other census tract

County

State

MA

Inset A

RI

CT

0 10 Miles

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1990 and 2000 Censuses; and 2005–2009 and 2015–2019 American Community Survey, 5-year estimates.

Figure A-2.
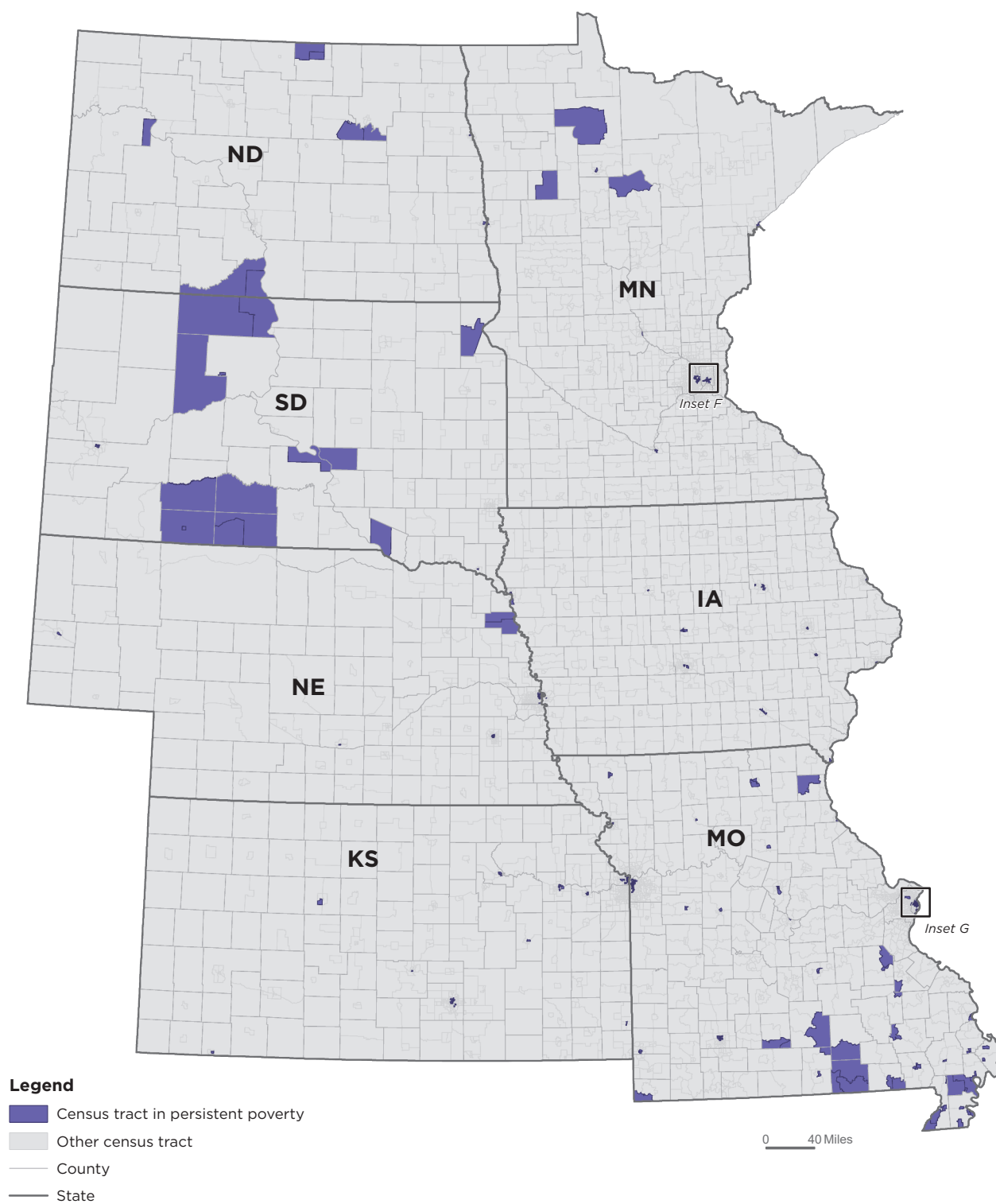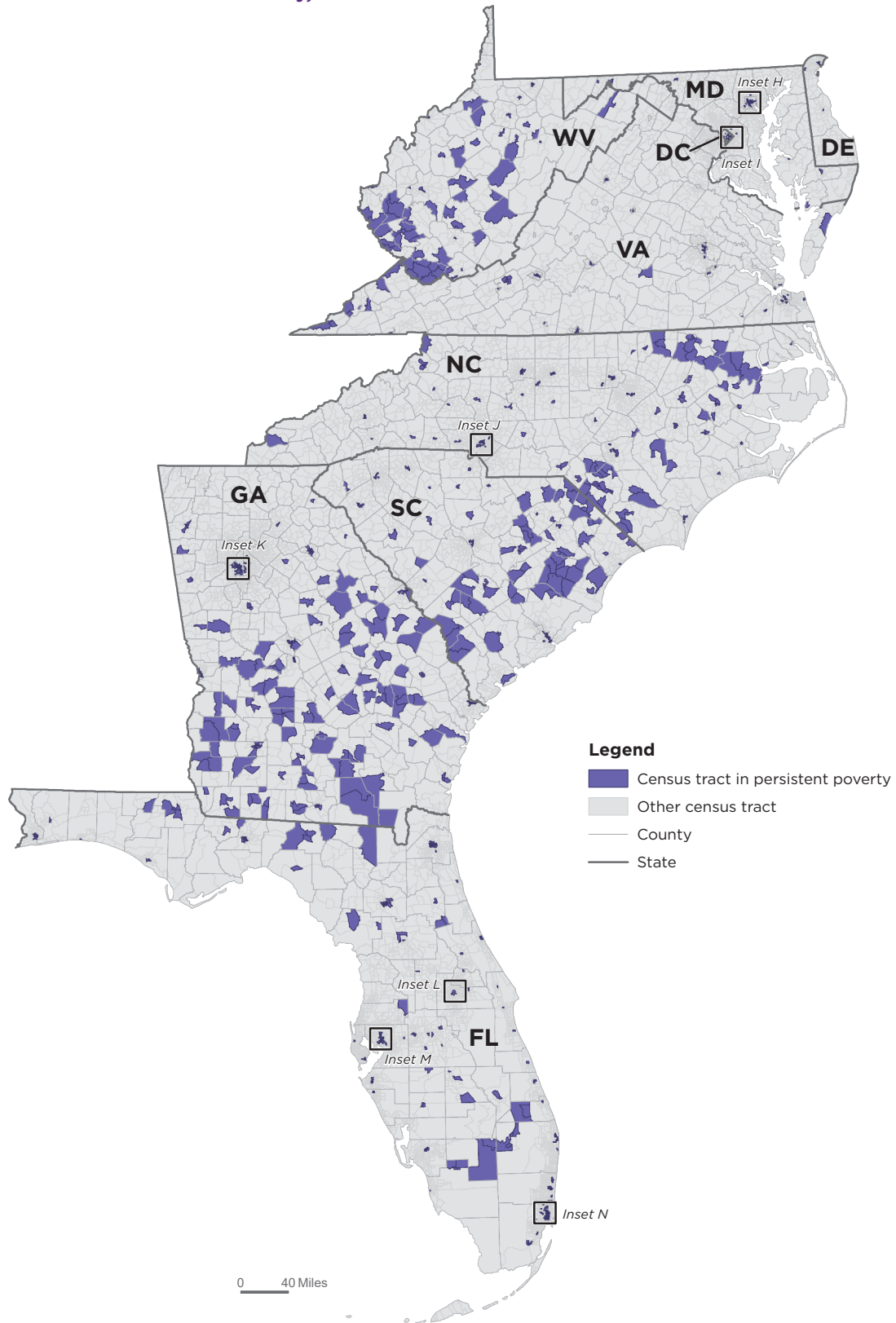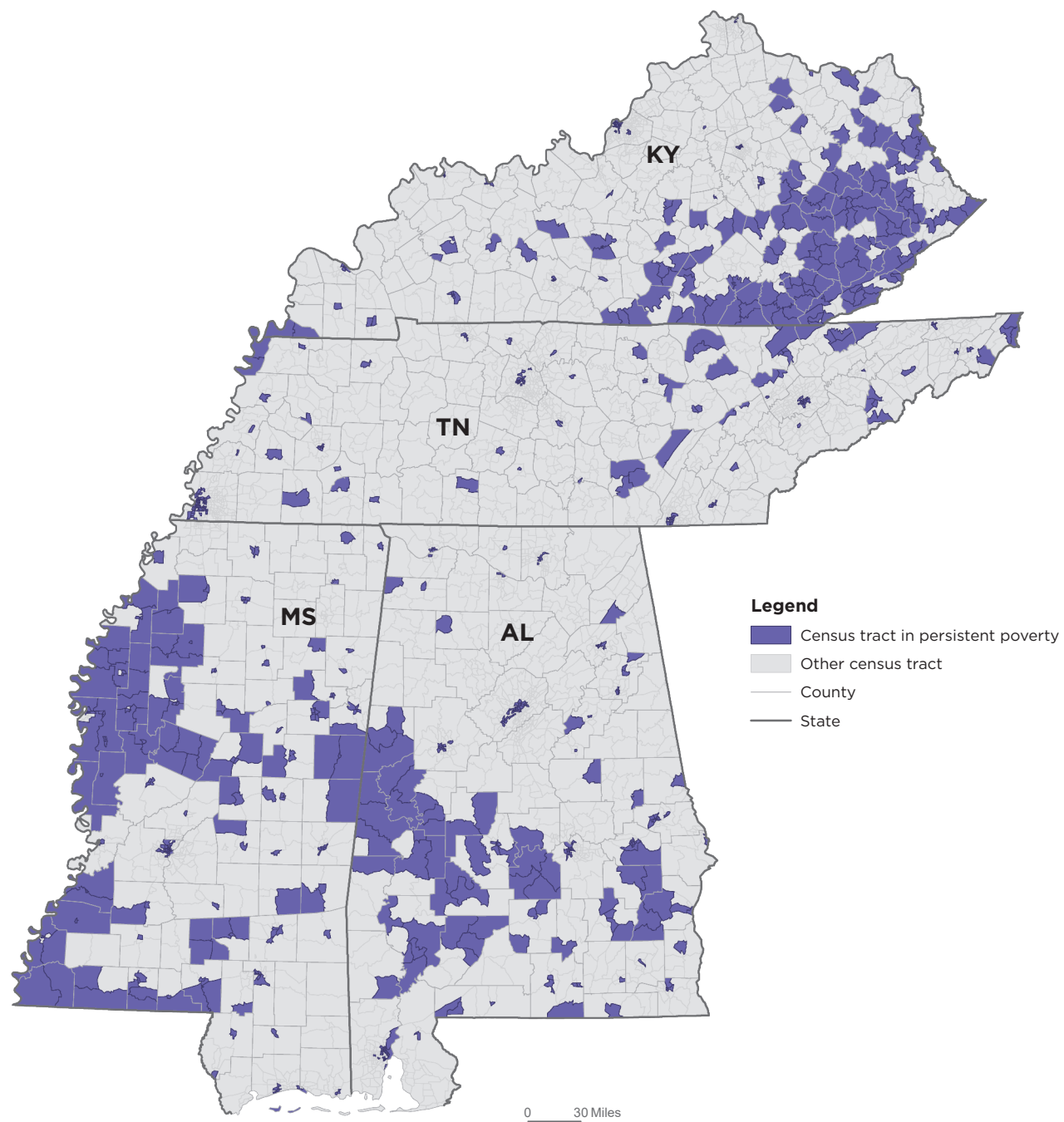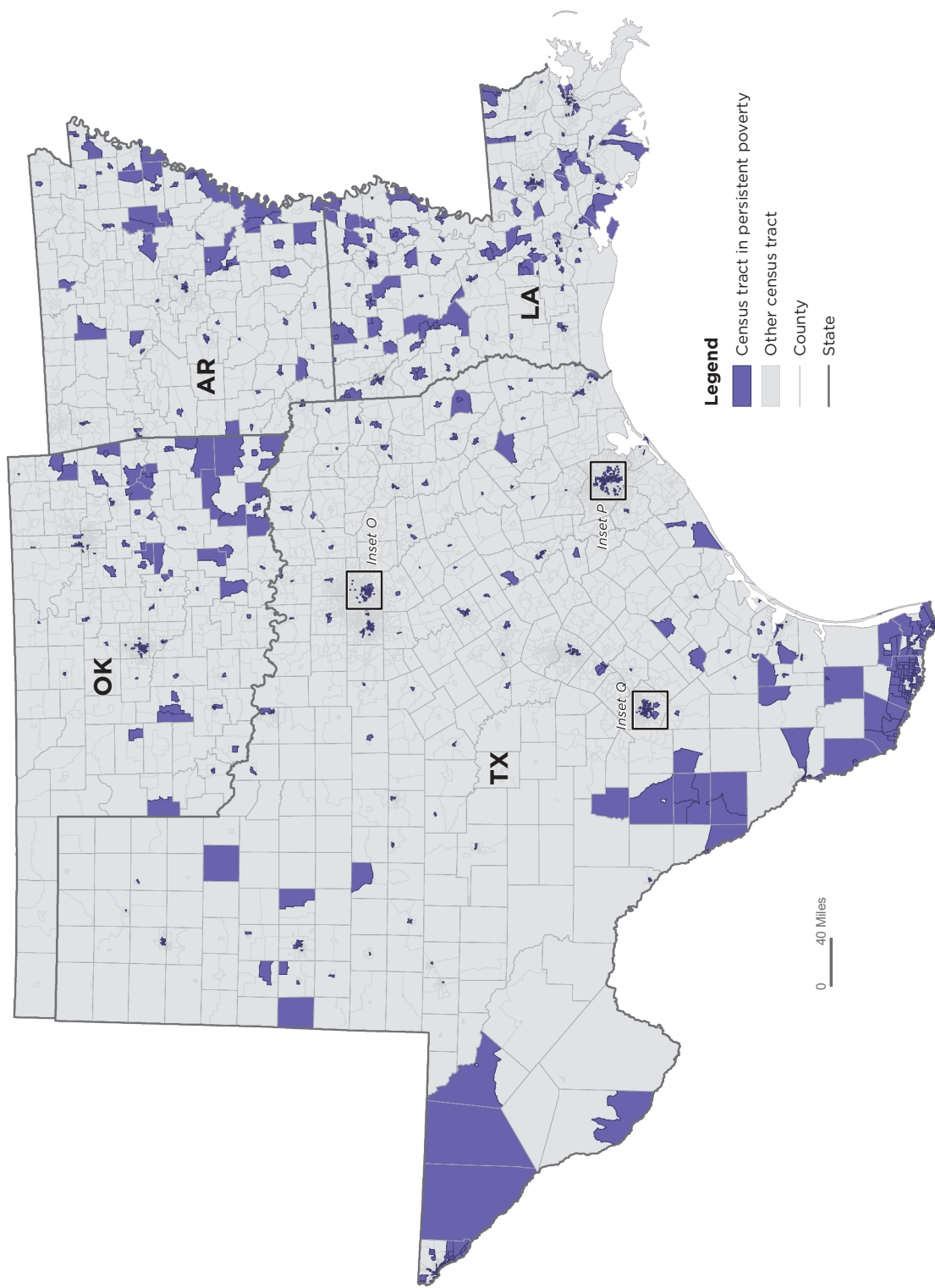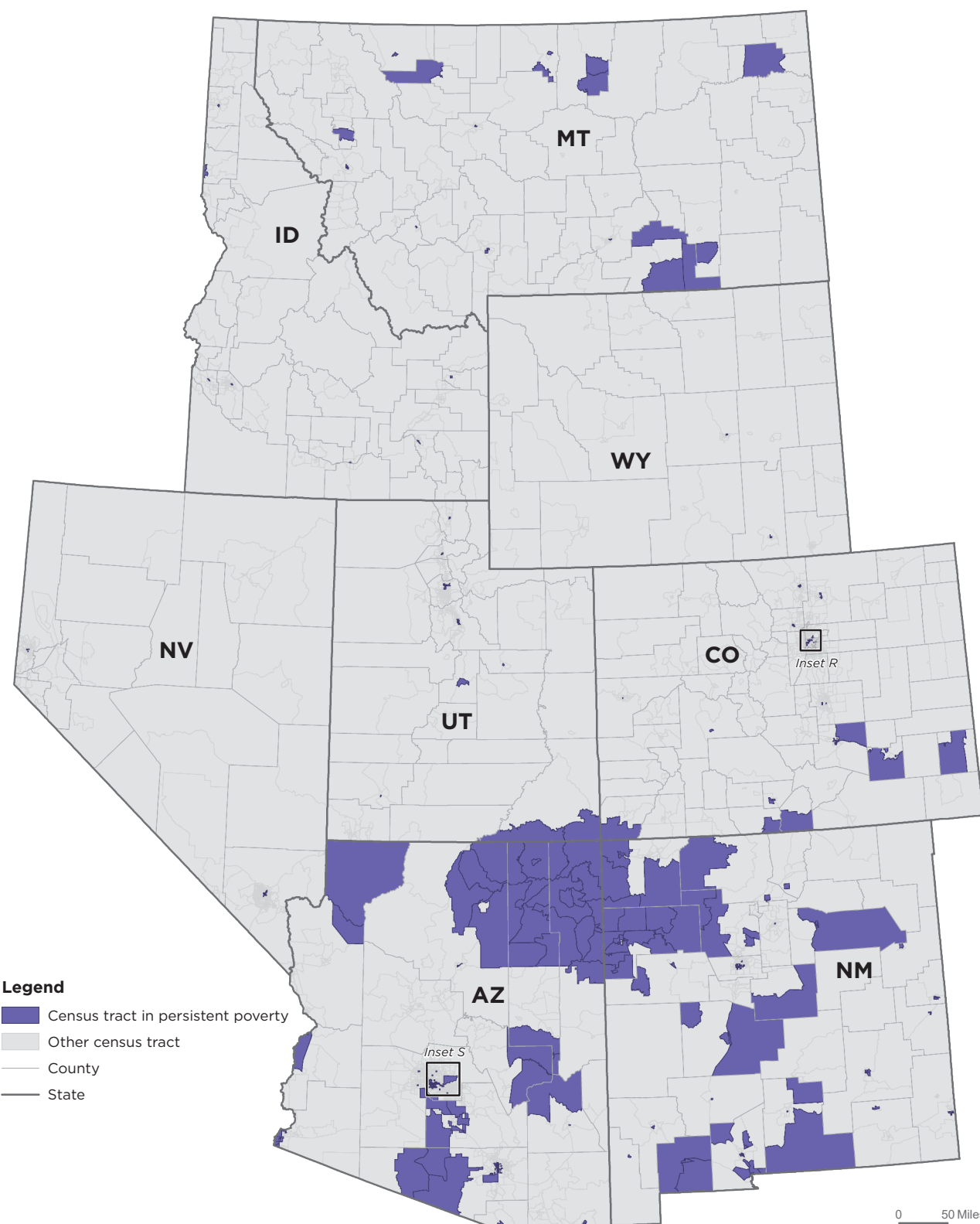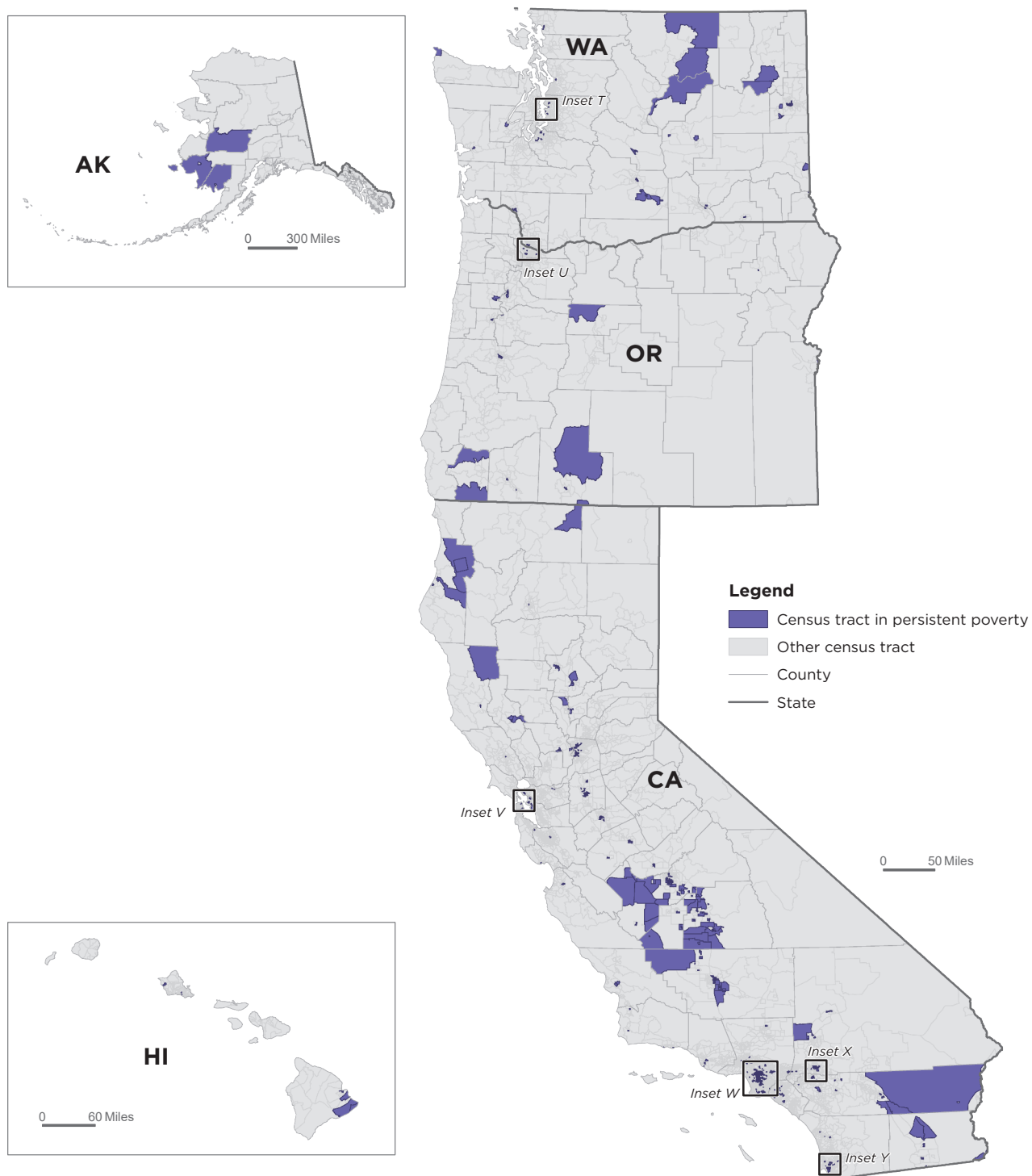**Census Tracts in Persistent Poverty, 1989–2019: Middle Atlantic Division**
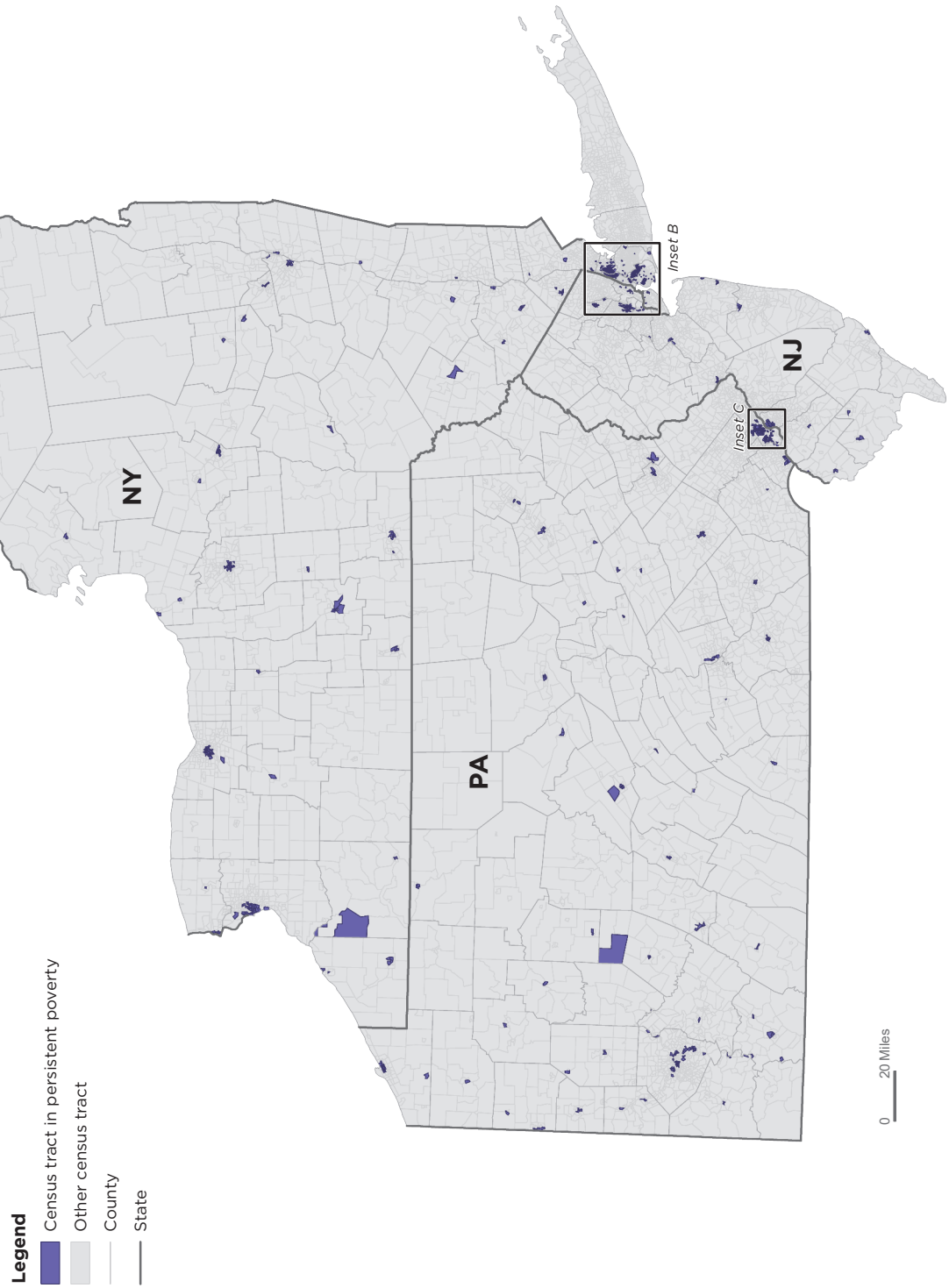
Legend

Census tract in persistent poverty
Other census tract
County
State

NY

PA

NJ

Inset B

Inset C

0   20 Miles

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1990 and 2000 Censuses; and 2005–2009 and 2015–2019 American Community Survey, 5-year estimates.

Figure A-3.
**Census Tracts in Persistent Poverty, 1989–2019: East North Central Division**
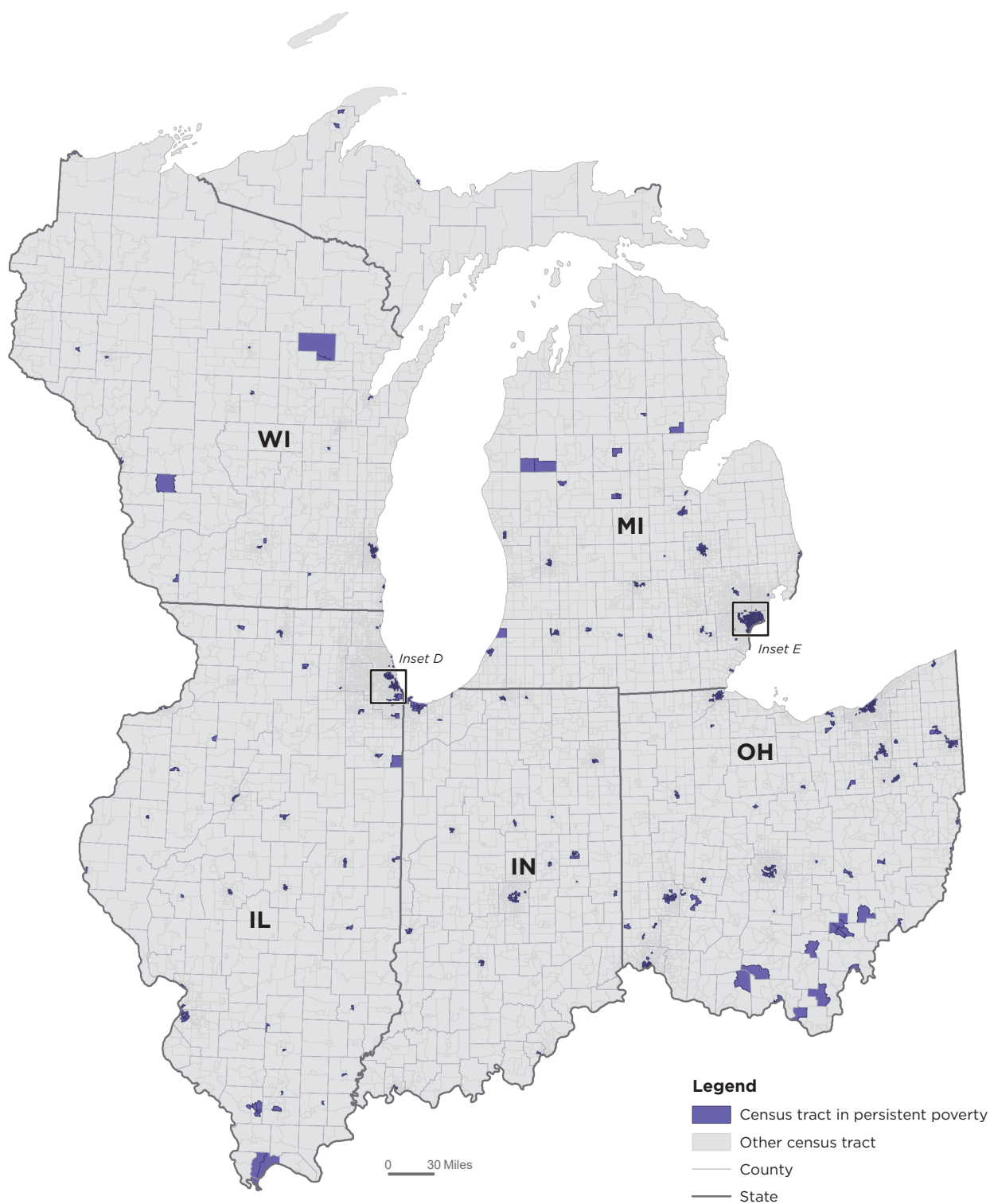
WI

MI

Inset D

Inset E

OH

IN

IL

Legend

◼ Census tract in persistent poverty

◻ Other census tract

— County

— State

0   30 Miles

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1990 and 2000 Censuses; and 2005–2009 and 2015–2019 American Community Survey, 5-year estimates.

Figure A-4.
Census Tracts in Persistent Poverty, 1989–2019: West North Central Division

Legend
- Census tract in persistent poverty
- Other census tract
- County
- State

0   40 Miles

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1990 and 2000 Censuses; and 2005–2009 and 2015–2019 American Community Survey, 5-year estimates.

Census Tracts in Persistent Poverty, 1989–2019: South Atlantic Division

Legend

- ■ Census tract in persistent poverty
- ■ Other census tract
- — County
- — State

MD

WV

DC

DE

VA

NC

GA

SC

FL

Inset H

Inset I

Inset J

Inset K

Inset L

Inset M

Inset N

0   40 Miles
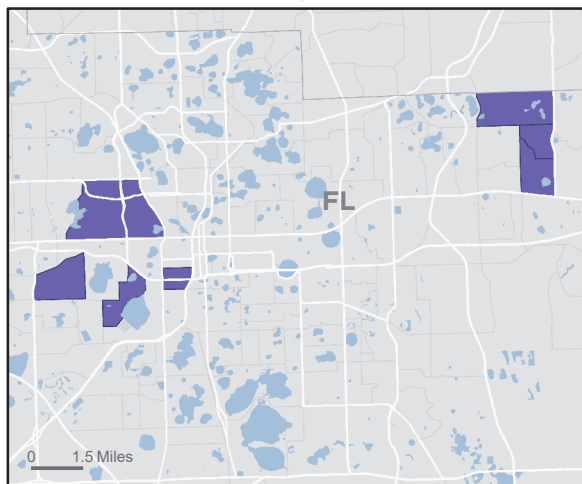
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1990 and 2000 Censuses; and 2005–2009 and 2015–2019 American Community Survey, 5-year estimates.

Census Tracts in Persistent Poverty, 1989–2019: East South Central Division

Legend
- ■ Census tract in persistent poverty
- □ Other census tract
- — County
- — State

KY

TN

MS

AL

0 — 30 Miles

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1990 and 2000 Censuses; and 2005–2009 and 2015–2019 American Community Survey, 5-year estimates.

Figure A-7.
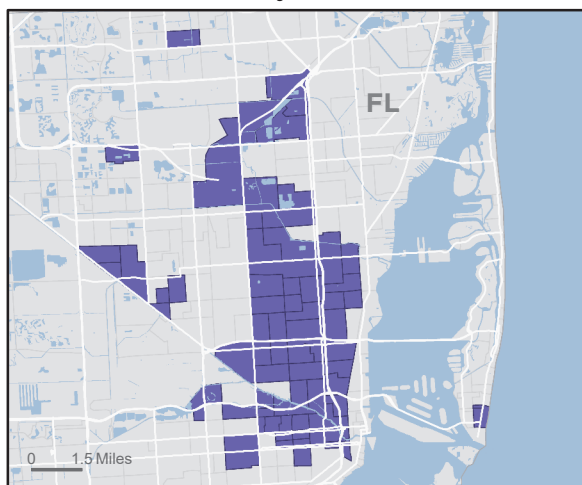**Census Tracts in Persistent Poverty, 1989–2019: West South Central Division**

Legend

■ Census tract in persistent poverty

□ Other census tract

County

State

0 ⎯⎯ 40 Miles

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1990 and 2000 Censuses; and 2005–2009 and 2015–2019 American Community Survey, 5-year estimates.

Figure A-8.
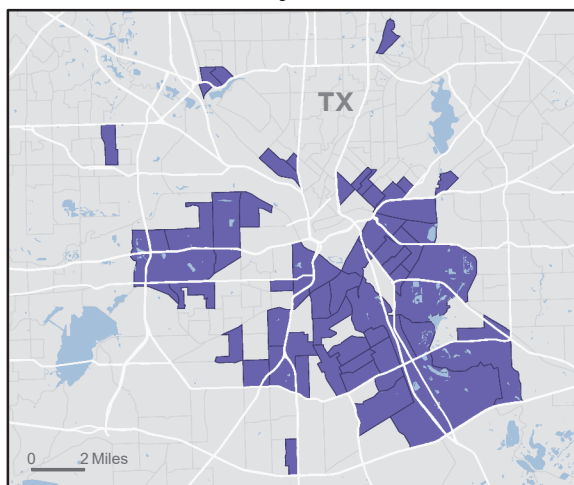**Census Tracts in Persistent Poverty, 1989–2019: Mountain Division**

Legend
- Census tract in persistent poverty
- Other census tract
- County
- State

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1990 and 2000 Censuses; and 2005–2009 and 2015–2019 American Community Survey, 5-year estimates.

Figure A-9.
Census Tracts in Persistent Poverty, 1989–2019: Pacific Division

WA

Inset T

AK

0   300 Miles

OR

Inset U

Legend

■ Census tract in persistent poverty

□ Other census tract

— County

— State

CA

Inset V

0   50 Miles

HI

0   60 Miles

Inset W

Inset X

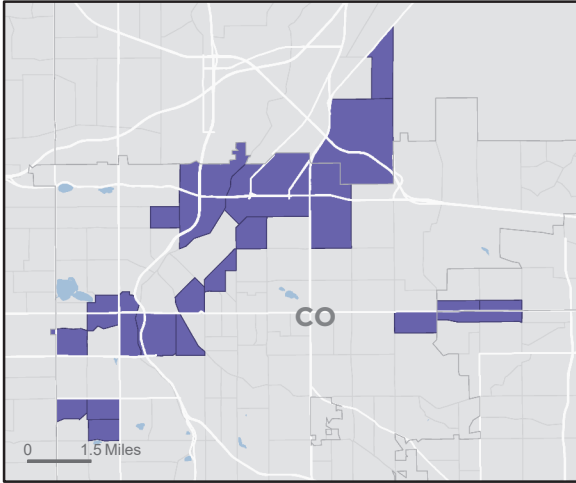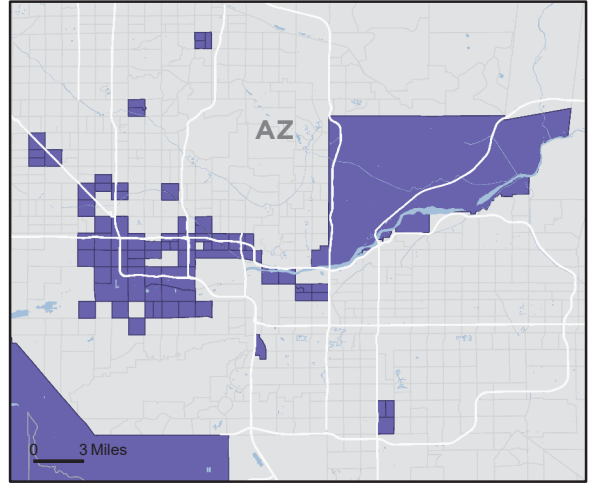*Inset Y*

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1990 and 2000 Censuses; and 2005–2009 and 2015–2019 American Community Survey, 5-year estimates.

Figure A-10.
Census Tracts in Persistent Poverty, 1989–2019: Inset Areas

Inset Map Legend

- Census tract in persistent poverty
- Other census tract
- Primary and secondary roads
- County
- State

Inset A—Boston vicinity
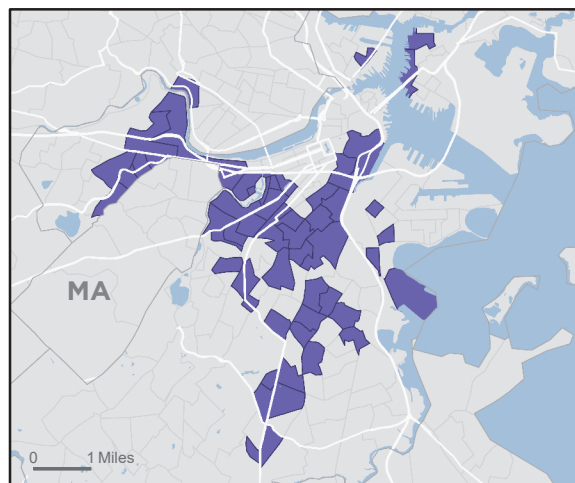
Inset B—New York City vicinity
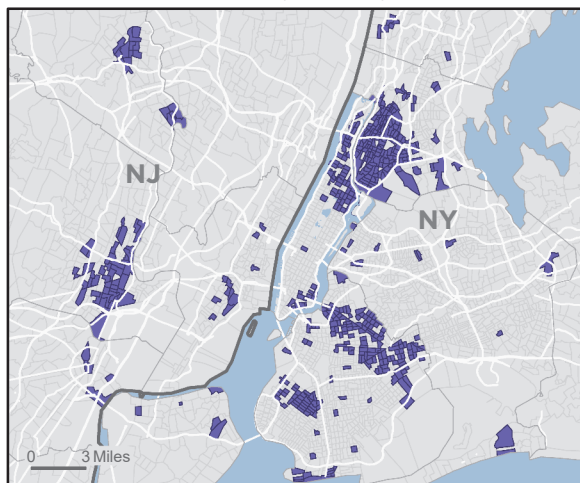
Inset C—Philadelphia and Camden vicinity
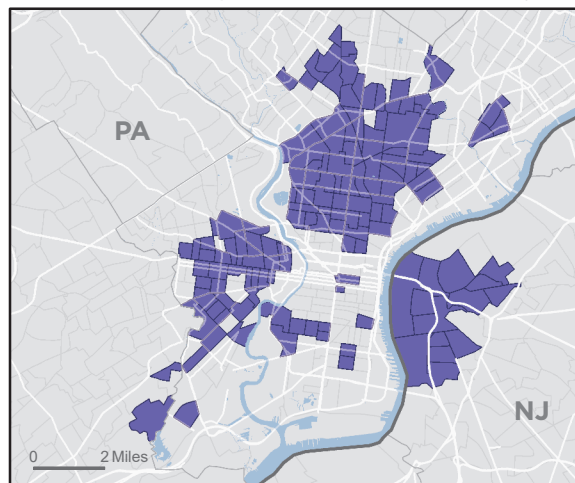
Inset D—Chicago vicinity
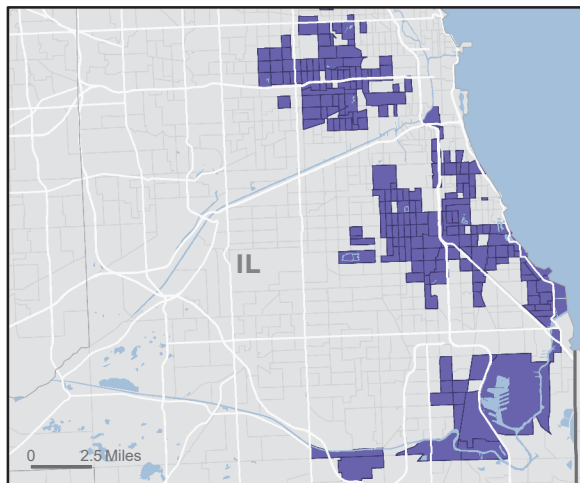
Inset E—Detroit vicinity
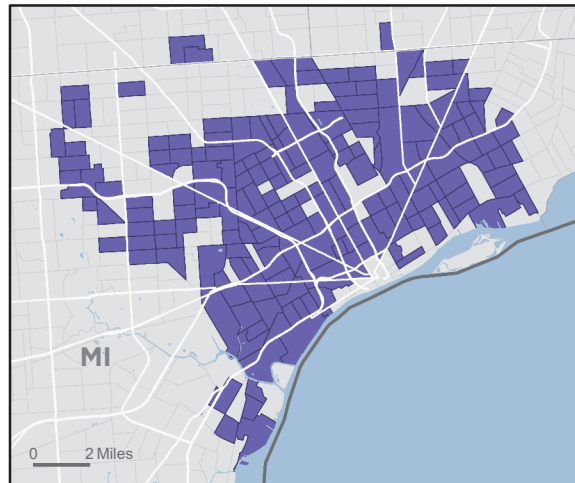
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1990 and 2000 Censuses; and 2005–2009 and 2015–2019 American Community Survey, 5-year estimates.

Figure A-11.
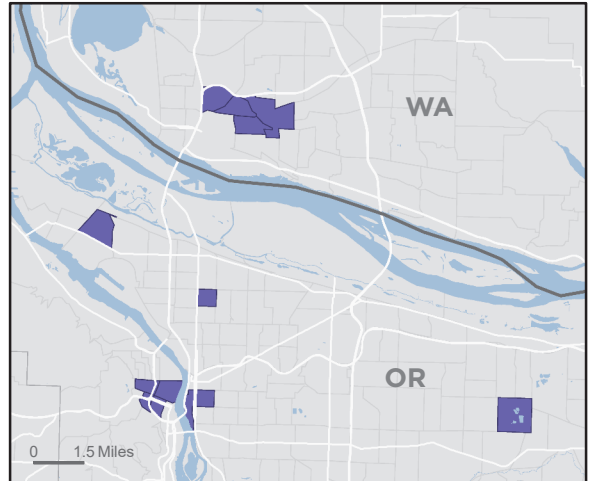**Census Tracts in Persistent Poverty, 1989–2019: Inset Areas**

Inset F—Minneapolis and St. Paul vicinity
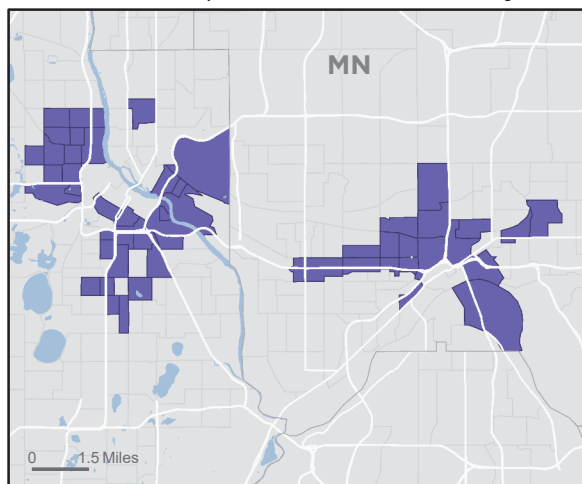
Inset G—St. Louis vicinity
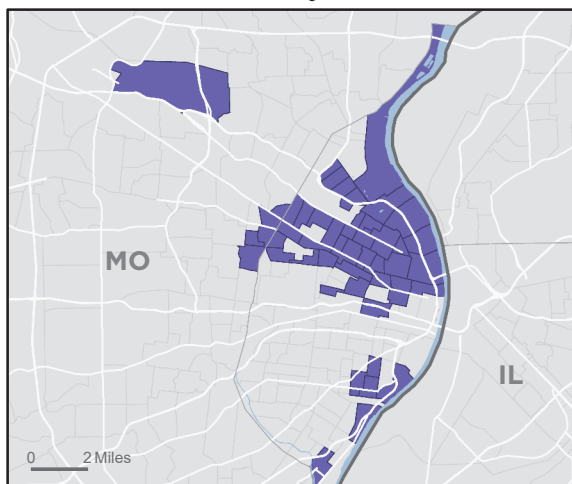
Inset H—Baltimore vicinity
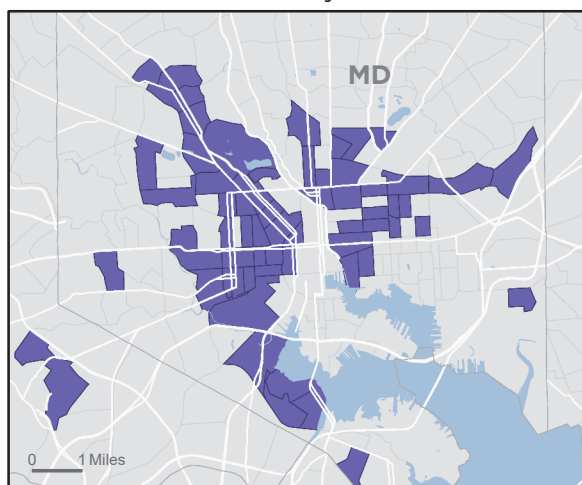
Inset I—District of Columbia vicinity
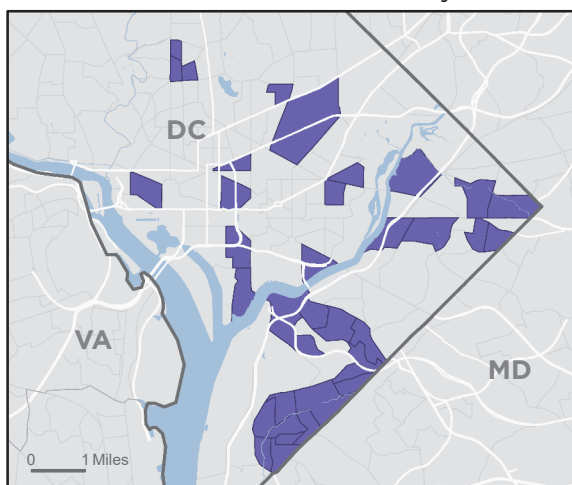
Inset J—Charlotte vicinity
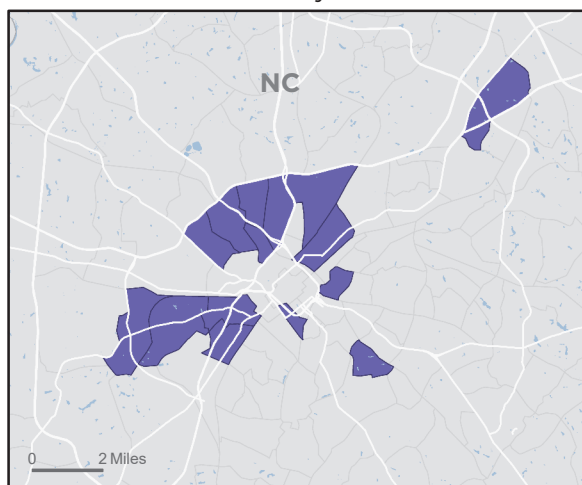
Inset K—Atlanta vicinity
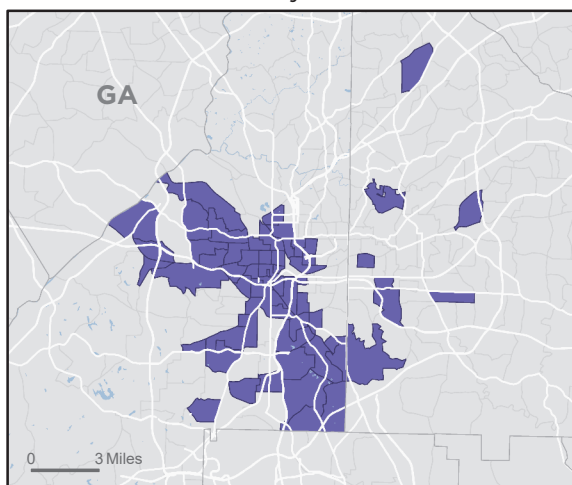
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1990 and 2000 Censuses; and 2005–2009 and 2015–2019 American Community Survey, 5-year estimates.

Figure A-12.
Census Tracts in Persistent Poverty, 1989–2019: Inset Areas

Inset L—Orlando vicinity
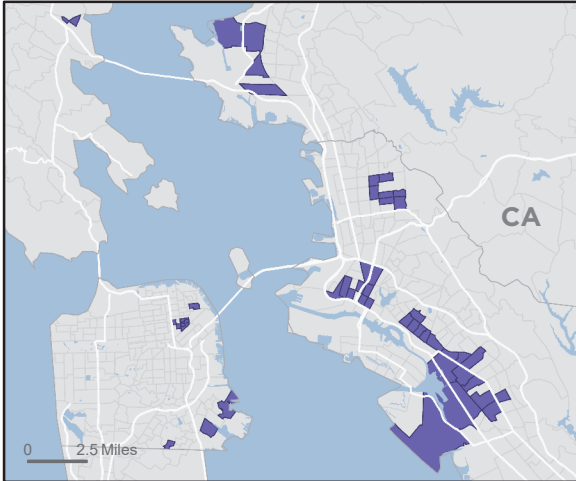

Inset M—Tampa vicinity
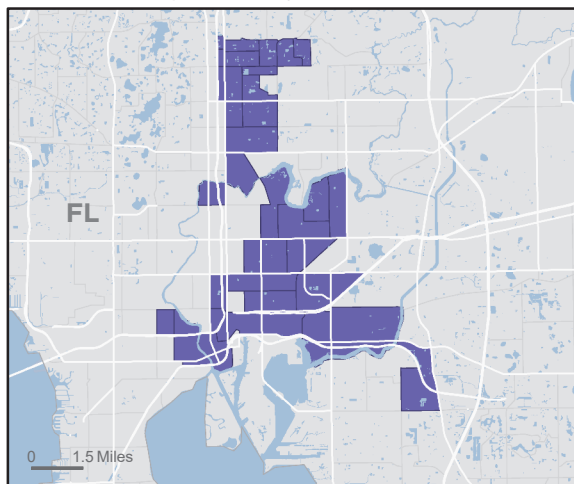
Inset N—Miami vicinity

Inset O—Dallas vicinity

Inset P—Houston vicinity
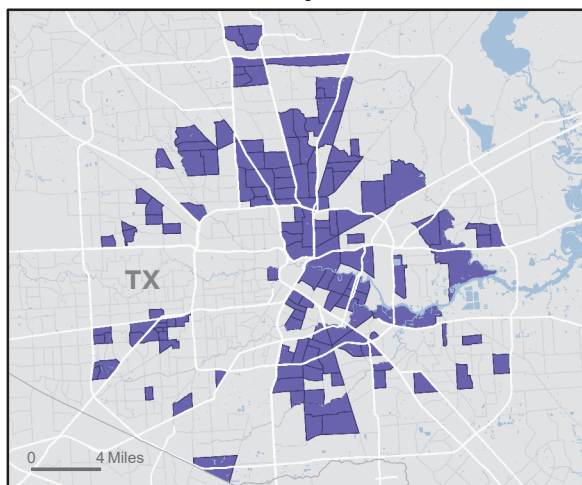
Inset Q—San Antonio vicinity
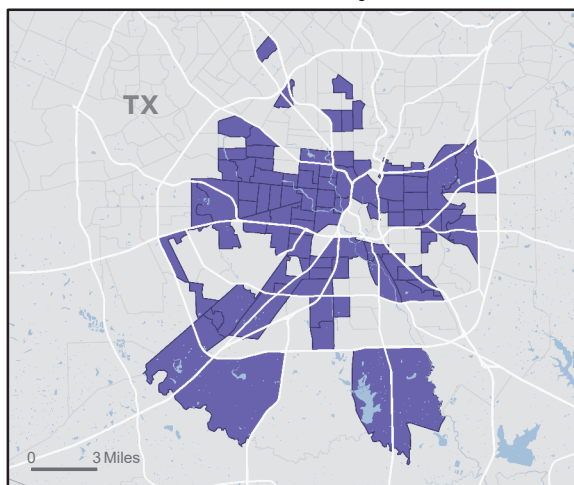
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1990 and 2000 Censuses; and 2005–2009 and 2015–2019 American Community Survey, 5-year estimates.

Figure A-13.
Census Tracts in Persistent Poverty, 1989–2019: Inset Areas

Inset R—Denver vicinity

Inset S—Phoenix vicinity
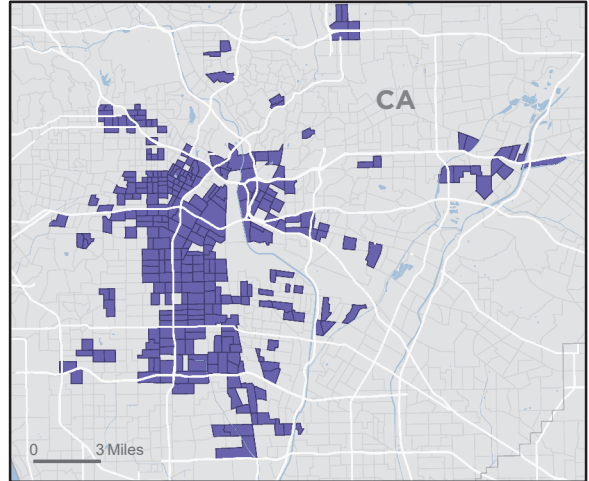

Inset T—Seattle vicinity
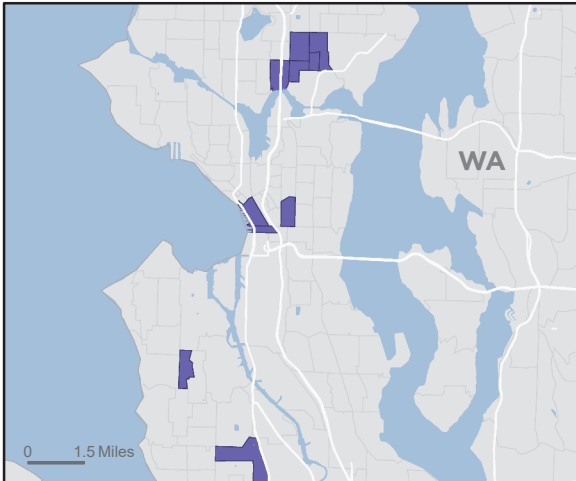
Inset U—Portland and Vancouver vicinity

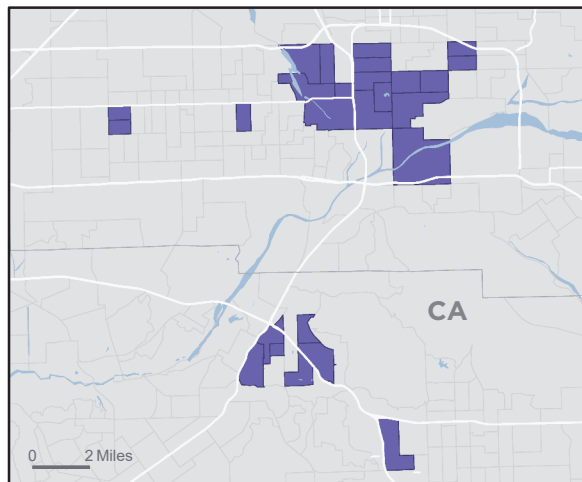Inset V—San Francisco and Oakland vicinity

Inset W—Los Angeles vicinity

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1990 and 2000 Censuses; and 2005–2009 and 2015–2019 American Community Survey, 5-year estimates.
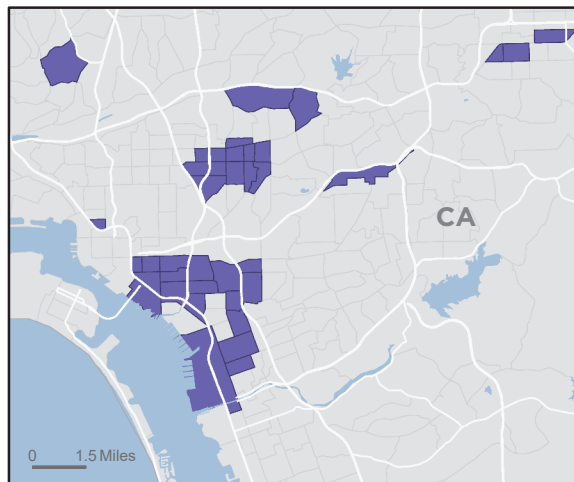
Figure A-14.
Census Tracts in Persistent Poverty, 1989–2019: Inset Areas

Inset X—San Bernardino vicinity

Inset Y—San Diego vicinity

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1990 and 2000 Censuses; and 2005–2009 and 2015–2019 American Community Survey, 5-year estimates.