

How Residents of the U.S. South Pursue Racial and Economic Justice

Elizabeth Korver-Glenn, Ph.D.
The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
egkg@unc.edu

Abstract

The long American legacy of the fight for racial and economic justice has many roots in the U.S. South. From the Underground Railroad to sit-ins to labor union organizing and beyond, U.S. Southerners have repeatedly been at the forefront of this fight. Yet many decades of sociopolitical repression and gerrymandering have curbed or reversed many of the electoral victories earlier generations of Southerners have won, leading to region-wide racialized disenfranchisement, racialized-economic exploitation, and associated material inequalities in education, employment, and wealth. Academic studies and popular portrayals of the contemporary South tend to center these harsh realities—at times even veering into racist or classist voyeurism that flattens the South and its residents into a pre-made, simplistic mold: uneducated, poor, conservative, religious. The present study complicates such an interpretation, building on the long legacy of racial and economic justice movements in the U.S. South to ask how contemporary residents of the region are organizing to fight against inequality and pursue social justice. In particular, the study centers strategies beyond the electoral participation. Building on more than 50 in-depth interviews and ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia, I find that racially, politically, and economically diverse residents of the U.S. South are resisting inequality and pursuing justice across multiple domains, including housing, the criminal legal system, reproduction, climate/environment, and education/literacy, among others. I show how Southerners leverage public and private resources to identify and ameliorate problems they and their communities have faced. And, I demonstrate how these individuals draw on family and community legacies, community connections, and faith to strengthen and motivate their work. I conclude by discussing the implications of my research for studies of the South, political (dis)engagement, and racial and economic justice.