The “Appalachian Problem”: A Fresh Perspective

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For almost half a century, Appalachia has been viewed as a “region apart” from the rest of the United States. Culturally, socially, and economically, comparisons between the people of the mountains and the rest of the country have seldom been favorable. In 1965, the Appalachian Regional Commission was created to solve the “Appalachian Problem”, and bring the region into parity with the rest of the nation. At the root of this policy is the annual determination of County Economic Status, a metric intended to measure performance in relation to the rest of the nation. This designation, calculated from income, unemployment and poverty data, shows uneven results across the region, but may be deeply flawed. Evaluating economic accessibility recognizes the assets and challenges unique to the region, and helps shed some light on regional interactions between local economies. This new perspective may be valuable in understanding the real impact of public investment and program effectiveness, and solving the “problem” of Appalachia.