

# Who Owns the Land?

## Agricultural Land Ownership by Race/Ethnicity

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Ownership and control of land strongly affects many aspects of rural life, especially in the poorest regions of the country. Land ownership in minority communities is particularly important since it is often one of the few (and largest) forms of wealth. Beyond economics, land ownership contributes substantially to civic activities and political participation. Land is also culturally significant to minority groups like American Indians, Hispanics, and Blacks. Yet some argue that they are losing ownership and control of land at much faster rates than Whites. In recent years, USDA has been sued for racial discrimination in Federal farm programs. For these reasons among others, good

*Of all private U.S. agricultural land, Whites account for 96 percent of the owners, 97 percent of the value, and 98 percent of the acres. Nonetheless, four minority groups (Blacks, American Indians, Asians, and Hispanics) own over 25 million acres of agricultural land, valued at over \$44 billion, which has wide-ranging consequences for the social, economic, cultural, and political life of minority communities in rural America. This article presents the most recent national data available on the racial and ethnic dimensions of agricultural land ownership in the United States, based largely on USDA's Agricultural Economics and Land Ownership Survey of 1999.*

landownership data are essential for better rural development practice as well as improved agricultural policymaking.

In this article, we present the most recent and thorough national data on the racial/ethnic dimensions of agricultural land ownership in the United States, based largely on USDA's Agricultural Economics and Land Ownership Survey of 1999 (AELOS). Of all private U.S. agricultural land, Whites account for 96 percent of the owners, 97 percent of the value, and 98 percent of the acres. Nonetheless, four minority groups (Blacks, American Indians, Asians, and Hispanics) own over 25 million acres of agricultural land, with a value of over \$44 billion: Blacks possess 7.8 million acres (\$14.4 billion), American Indians 3.4 million private acres (\$5.3 billion), and Hispanics nearly 13 million acres (\$18 billion). The large acreage and high value have significant social, economic, cultural, and political consequences for minority communities in rural America.

### Blacks

For a century after the end of slavery, Black farmers tended to be tenants rather than owners. Since the early 1970s, activists and scholars have warned that the rural Black community was in danger of losing its entire land base. Land ownership by Black farmers peaked in 1910 at 16-19 million acres, according to the Census of Agriculture. However, the 1997 census reports that Black farmers owned only 1.5 million acres. This drastic decline contrasts sharply with an increase in acres owned by White farmers. Thus, the most surprising finding in the 1999 AELOS is that—despite many decades of land loss—Blacks own 7.8 million acres (table 1).

This estimate has not been available to other researchers because these data appeared only last year, and previous national studies have not counted minority land owners as thoroughly as AELOS. Analysts instead have used the much smaller Census of Agriculture figure (1.5 million

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Table 1

**All private agricultural land owners, acres owned, and value of land and buildings, by race and ethnicity, 1999***Minorities own only a small part of the U.S. agricultural land base*

Group	Land owners		Acres		Average acres <sup>1</sup>	Value (\$1,000)	Percent <sup>1</sup>
	Number	Percent <sup>1</sup>	(1,000)	Percent <sup>1</sup>			
United States	3,412,080	--	932,495	--	273	1,283,853,124	--
White	3,218,751	96.2	856,051	98.1	266	1,156,977,076	96.8
Black	68,056	2.0	7,754	0.9	114	14,366,319	1.2
American Indian	23,266	0.7	3,398	0.4	146	5,271,769	0.4
Asian	8,158	0.2	964	0.1	118	6,860,824	0.6
Other	27,290	0.8	4,640	0.5	170	11,753,114	1.0
Hispanic <sup>2</sup>	47,223	1.4	12,888	1.4	273	18,209,871	1.4

<sup>1</sup>Racial percentages are calculated based on the racial totals for all owners and all owner acres (3,345,521 and 872,807,000). The U.S. total is greater than the sum of the races because it includes corporate and other non-individual owners that do not have racial characteristics, plus some individuals who did not answer or did not receive a racial identifier. This also applies to average acres per owner.

<sup>2</sup>Hispanic percentages are calculated based on the U.S. totals for all owners and all owner acres (3,412,080 and 932,495,000).

Source: Table 68, 1999 Agricultural Economics and Land Ownership Survey.

acres). In another major discrepancy, the Census shows fewer than 19,000 Black farmers while AELOS counts 68,000 Black agricultural land owners. These seeming contradictions, however, are due largely to intentional differences between

the two sources: The Census of Agriculture studies farmers whereas the AELOS studies agricultural land owners (see box, "Many Agricultural Land Owners Are Not Farmers," pp. 58-59).

According to the AELOS, only one-third of Black-owned acres are operated by the owner (table 2), with most Blacks renting their land to others (mainly Whites). In fact, 61 percent of Black owners in 1999

Table 2

**Owner-operators, non-operator owners, and acres owned, by race and ethnicity, 1999***Most agricultural land owners, other than Blacks, are owner-operators*

Group	Owner-operators <sup>1</sup>					Non-operator owners <sup>1</sup>				
	Number	Percent <sup>2</sup>	Acres (1,000)	Percent <sup>2</sup>	Average acres <sup>2</sup>	Number	Percent <sup>2</sup>	Acres (1,000)	Percent <sup>2</sup>	Average acres <sup>2</sup>
United States	1,966,715	58	542,890	58	276	1,445,365	42	389,605	42	270
White	1,892,676	59	533,642	62	282	1,326,075	41	322,410	38	243
Black	29,241	43	2,502	32	86	38,815	57	5,252	68	135
American Indian	17,479	75	2,615	77	150	5,787	25	783	23	135
Asian	6,116	75	655	68	107	2,042	25	309	32	151
Other	21,203	78	3,475	75	164	6,087	22	1,165	25	191
Hispanic <sup>3</sup>	33,834	72	10,160	79	300	13,389	28	2,728	21	204

<sup>1</sup>Percentages for owner-operators and non-operator owners are calculated row-wise based on the total number of owners and acres in each racial/ethnic category.

<sup>2</sup>Racial percentages are calculated based on the racial totals for all owners and all owner acres (3,345,521 and 872,807,000). The U.S. total is greater than the sum of the races because it includes corporate and other non-individual owners that do not have racial characteristics, plus some individuals who did not answer or did not receive a racial identifier. This also applies to average acres per owner.

<sup>3</sup>Hispanic percentages are calculated based on the U.S. totals for all owners and all owner acres (3,412,080 and 932,495,000).

Source: Table 68, 1999 Agricultural Economics and Land Ownership Survey.

were landlords, leasing 4.7 million acres for over \$216 million in rent (table 3). Of all the racial groups, Blacks own the smallest average acreage (114 acres per owner).

Black agricultural land owners are highly concentrated in the South, from east Texas through the Black Belt up into Virginia. Their land use patterns are similar to those for the region as a whole: crops and woodland, with relatively little land in pasture (table 4). Blacks' representation in the Conservation Reserve Program is higher than that of other minorities but lower than Whites' (table 5).



Photo courtesy USDA/ERS.

### American Indians

Historically, of course, American Indians had access to practically all the land in the present-day United States. White settlers and the Federal Government subsequently dispossessed them of most of the land. Between the Allotment Act of 1887 and the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, American Indians lost an additional 90 million acres. Before discussing

current American Indian ownership, it is important to note that AELOS contains data only on *private* Indian land, excluding reservation land that is held by the tribe or otherwise administered communally. Thus, AELOS captures only a small amount of the total agricultural land of American Indians. For instance, the 1997

Census of Agriculture reports that only 2 million acres are held privately by American Indians, while 46 million additional acres are on reservations.

AELOS reports over 3 million acres of private agricultural land held by 23,266 Indian owners, with an average of 146 acres per owner (table 1). Unlike Blacks, these

Table 3  
**Private agricultural landlords and acres leased to others, by race and ethnicity, 1999**  
*Nearly half of all land owners are landlords (less for most minorities)*

Group	Landlords		Acres leased		Average acres per landlord <sup>3</sup>	Total rent received (\$1,000)
	Number	Percent <sup>1</sup>	(1,000)	Percent <sup>2</sup>		
United States	1,638,033	48	394,336	42	241	17,379,889
White	1,505,648	47	321,711	38	214	14,492,197
Black	41,377	61	4,668	60	113	216,262
American Indian	6,487	28	726	21	112	27,384
Asian	2,634	32	378	39	144	42,648
Other	6,584	24	1,476	32	224	91,267
Hispanic	14,616	31	2,997	23	205	156,100

<sup>1</sup>Landlords as percent of all owners.

<sup>2</sup>Leased acres as percent of all owned acres.

<sup>3</sup>U.S. average is higher than race-specific averages because U.S. figures include corporate and other non-individual owners that do not have racial characteristics, plus some individuals who did not answer or did not receive a racial identifier.

Source: Table 98, 1999 *Agricultural Economics and Land Ownership Survey*.

## Many Agricultural Land Owners Are Not Farmers

### Comparing the AELOS and the Census of Agriculture

The 1999 Agricultural Economics and Land Ownership Survey (AELOS) was a follow-on survey to the 1997 Census of Agriculture. The sample size included 37,182 farmers and 67,178 private landlords. The response rate was 71 percent for farmers and 51 percent for landlords. Data for nonresponding landlords was taken from the reports of farmers who rent from them. It is important to note that the AELOS focuses on agricultural (farm and ranch) land only. For more information on research methods, see Appendix A of AELOS (USDA, 2001).

There are no ideal data sources on land ownership in the United States—other than in the 3,000-plus county courthouses throughout the Nation. Every 5 years, the census of agriculture reports on “land in farms,” which accounts for roughly half of all private land in the U.S. The Census offers the most comprehensive data on farms and farmers, including the land they operate. Yet it is a poor source of information on agricultural land ownership; it covers land owners only when they are also “farm operators” (farmers). Other landlords and nonoperator owners are intentionally excluded from the census of agriculture.

The crucial distinction is between farmers and agricultural land owners. A farmer may rent rather than own land, and an agricultural land owner may not operate a farm. The census of agriculture studies farmers, not land owners. Land owners, though, are exactly the focus of the 1999 AELOS. It reveals much more than the Census about the ownership of agricultural land. For example, the 1997 Census of Agriculture says that 16,560 Black farmers own 1.5 million acres, whereas the 1999 AELOS shows 68,000 Black agricultural land owners with over 7.7 million acres. This discrepancy has broad implications.

Researchers who work on these issues know that census of agriculture data are problematic. For one thing, small farmers are more likely to be missed by the census, and minority farmers tend to be small-scale. The 1997 Census of Agriculture (the first conducted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture instead of the Department of Commerce) made special efforts to include more minority farmers, and seems to have produced results.

Another problem is the census handling of American Indians. The 1997 Census of Agriculture (tables 17, 19, and appendix B) reports that 18,495 Indian farmers operate 52 million acres, for an average Indian farm size of 2,812 acres—almost seven times the average size for all U.S. farms. (See footnote to box table.) This measure is highly unlikely; it results from the Census’s counting each reservation as a single farm. The 46 million acres on Indian reservations is included (and constitutes the vast majority) in the total for Indian agricultural land. Thus, it is difficult to

Indian land owners tend to be farm operators and rent their land to others less often (table 2). Private Indian agricultural land is worth over \$5 billion, and leased land earned over \$27 million in rent in 1999 (table 3). American Indian land owners are generally concentrated in the West and Southwest. They tend to specialize in pasture (49 percent of all acres), with some land in crops (39 percent) and less in woodland (8 percent) (table 4). Pastureland’s prevalence is probably due to the concentration of

Indian farmers and ranchers in arid and semi-arid regions, which are generally more suitable for livestock grazing than for growing crops. Very few Indian owners, and even fewer of their acres, are enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program, which again may reflect their concentration in regions dominated by rangeland (table 5).

To supplement the AELOS data on private Indian ownership, we used an Intertribal Agricultural Council report based on Bureau

of Indian Affairs data from 1990 (McKean et al.). The BIA counted over 18 million acres of agricultural land on reservations, owned by 29,500 individual Indian farmers or ranchers. Most of these farmers (63 percent) raised livestock, mainly cattle. A more recent report from USDA says that the BIA “manages 55 million acres in trust for Indian tribes and individuals”: 2 million acres of cropland, 36 million in pasture and range, 11 million in forest land, and 6 million other acres (Vesterby and Krupa, p. 24). As with

compare census of agriculture data on Indians with data on other groups, for whom individually held land is the dominant type of ownership.

Finally, the AELOS shows many more owner-operators for all racial/ethnic groups (except Asians) than does the 1997 Census of Agriculture. AELOS estimates of acres owned by owner-operators are closer to the census figures, but still considerably higher for Blacks (see table).

### Comparison of 1997 Census of Agriculture and 1999 AELOS on owner-operators, by race and ethnicity

Major data sources disagree

Group	Census of Agriculture				AELOS			
	Owner-operators		Acres owned		Owner-operators		Acres owned	
	Number	Percent	(1,000)	Percent	Number	Percent	(1,000)	Percent
United States	1,720,730		553,705		1,966,715		542,890	
White	1,679,861	97.6	501,683	90.6	1,892,676	96.2	533,642	98.3
Black	16,560	1.0	1,499	0.3	29,241	1.5	2,502	0.5
American Indian	9,406 <sup>1</sup>	0.5	48,043	8.7	17,479	0.9	2,615	0.5
Asian	6,502	0.4	786	0.1	6,116	0.3	655	0.1
Other	8,401	0.5	1,694	0.3	21,203	1.1	3,475	0.6
Hispanic	24,365	1.4	10,462	1.9	33,834	1.7	10,160	1.9

<sup>1</sup>The number of American Indian owner-operators is not reported in the 1997 Census of Agriculture. It is between the 9,406 owner-operators reported in Table 17 and the 18,495 Indian farmers reported in Appendix B, Table A. The total number of Indian owner-operators is certainly closer to 18,495. Furthermore, the Census of Agriculture count of the acres operated by Indian owner-operators includes reservation land, which is excluded from the AELOS.

Sources: Tables 16, 17, 46, and Appendix B, 1997 Census of Agriculture—United States Data, and Table 68, 1999 Agricultural Economics and Land Ownership Survey.

Blacks, different data sources report different amounts of land ownership for American Indians (see box, “Many Agricultural Land Owners Are Not Farmers”).

### Asians

Asians (and Pacific Islanders) make up the smallest of the racial groups in the AELOS. Some 8,158 Asians own slightly less than a million acres, with an average of 118 acres per owner (table 1). Owner-operators control over two-thirds of this land, with the remainder held

by landlords who do not farm (table 2). However, 39 percent of all Asian-owned acres are rented out, indicating that some owner-operators are also landlords (table 3). The total value of agricultural rent collected by Asian landlords is almost \$43 million. Asian-owned land is highly concentrated in crops (76 percent of all acres), and 90 percent of Asian owners have some cropland (table 4). Only a small percentage of Asian acreage is in pasture, woodland, or the Conservation Reserve Program

(table 5). Asian owners are concentrated in California and Hawaii, areas that specialize in high-value crop production such as orchards and specialty crops.

### Hispanics

The AELOS also gathers data on Hispanic-owned agricultural land. Individuals in this ethnic category are included in the AELOS racial categories, but are also reported separately as being “of Spanish origin.” Thus, because Hispanics are already counted in the racial cate-

gories, data on these owners are not strictly comparable to the data by race.

The AELOS reports 47,000 Hispanic owners of agricultural land, with almost 13 million acres (table 1). Over 70 percent of these owners operate the land themselves (table 2). They have larger average holdings (273 acres per owner) than any racial group, including Whites. Hispanics leased out almost 3 million acres, for \$156 million in rent (table 3). Over 60 percent of Hispanic-owned agricultural land is in pasture, and 28 percent in crops

(table 4). As with American Indians, this is likely due to their concentration in the Southwest, where livestock operations predominate. Only about 5 percent of Hispanic owners participate in the Conservation Reserve Program (about half the rate for Whites), and less than 3 percent of Hispanic-owned land is in the CRP (table 5).

### Racial/Ethnic Comparisons

Among agricultural land owners, the most striking finding is that minorities are truly in the minority. Less than 4 percent of all owners

are non-White. They hold only 2 percent of all private agricultural land and control just 3 percent of its value. Still, the absolute numbers for minority land owners (25 million acres worth \$44 billion) indicate agricultural land as a tremendous resource for these groups, who tend to reside in particularly poor regions of rural America.

Individual minority groups vary significantly—in tenure status (operator or landlord), value of land, rents received, and land uses. Compared with other races

Table 4

### Land use by agricultural land owners and acres, by race and ethnicity, 1999<sup>1</sup>

*Agricultural land use varies across groups*

Group	Cropland					Pastureland				
	Owners		Acres			Owners		Acres		
	Number	Percent	1,000	Percent	Average acres	Number	Percent	1,000	Percent	Average acres
United States	2,710,174	79	434,162	47	160	1,870,355	55	379,579	41	203
White	2,567,497	80	394,792	46	154	1,785,108	55	351,783	41	197
Black	48,916	72	3,772	49	77	28,421	42	2,169	28	76
American Indian	14,437	62	1,309	39	91	16,980	73	1,671	49	98
Asian	7,367	90	733	76	99	1,221	15	76	8	62
Other	14,921	55	1,689	36	113	17,390	64	2,400	52	138
Hispanic	29,619	63	3,632	28	123	27,992	59	8,055	63	288
Group	Woodland					Other				
	Owners		Acres			Owners		Acres		
	Number	Percent	1,000	Percent	Average acres	Number	Percent	1,000	Percent	Average acres
United States	1,210,005	35	73,016	8	60	2,215,992	65	45,738	5	21
White	1,149,038	36	68,396	8	60	2,101,328	65	41,080	5	20
Black	28,938	43	1,244	16	43	41,923	62	569	7	14
American Indian	7,525	32	267	8	35	17,366	75	151	4	9
Asian	1,739	21	105	11	60	3,726	46	50	5	13
Other	4,740	17	250	5	53	19,650	72	300	6	15
Hispanic	8,978	19	678	5	76	29,967	63	524	4	17

<sup>1</sup>Owners usually own land in multiple land-use categories, but any given acre is devoted to only one land use. Therefore, if one sums all owners in the land-use categories, they will be higher than the total number of owners, whereas the summed land-use acres equal the total number of acres.

Source: Table 74, 1999 Agricultural Economics and Land Ownership Survey.

Table 5

**Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) participation of agricultural land owners and acres by race and ethnicity, 1999**  
*Minority land owners use CRP less than Whites*

Group	All owners	Acres (1,000)	CRP land				
			Owners		Acres		Average acres <sup>1</sup>
			Number	Percent	(1,000)	Percent	
United States	3,412,080	932,495	320,323	9.4	39,759	4.3	124
White	3,218,751	856,051	308,052	9.6	37,936	4.4	123
Black	68,056	7,754	4,789	7.0	363	4.7	76
American Indian	23,266	3,398	537	2.3	52	1.5	97
Asian	8,158	964	252	3.1	39	4.0	155
Other	27,290	4,640	578	2.1	38	0.8	66
Hispanic	47,223	12,888	2,295	4.9	349	2.7	152

<sup>1</sup>Average acres in CRP for those participating in the program. U.S. average is higher than race-specific averages because U.S. figures include corporate and other non-individual owners that do not have racial characteristics, plus some individuals who did not answer or did not receive a racial identifier.

Source: Table 74, 1999 Agricultural Economics and Land Ownership Survey.

(including Whites), a large proportion of Blacks are nonoperator owners, who own two-thirds of all Black-held agricultural land. The other racial minorities are above the national averages (58 percent) for both owner-operators and the acres they own.

Moreover, agricultural land use patterns differ among racial/ethnic groups. Blacks have above-average percentages of woodland and below-average pastureland, with the largest proportion of their land in crops. American Indian and Hispanic owners use most of their agricultural land as pasture, whereas Asians have hardly any pastureland and a large majority of their land in crops, especially high-value ones. These land use patterns reflect the regionalization of U.S. agriculture and the concentration of racial/ethnic populations.

## Conclusion

This article only begins to document minority land ownership. Largely due to data sources, it has several serious limitations. First, it

covers privately held land, thus excluding the major resource base of American Indians: reservations. Second, it presents only national data; State-level information (much less county-level) is not available from the AELOS by racial groups. Third, it is cross-sectional, dealing with ownership at only one point in time (1999).

Trend data—ownership changes over time—are essential for both agricultural policymakers and practitioners of land-based community development. Activists and analysts need more accurate information on land ownership. In minority communities, this can be an especially pressing concern since some are not reaping the full value of their property, and others are in danger of losing their land base altogether. Several improvements would strengthen our knowledge of land ownership:

- The AELOS could be conducted every 5 (rather than 10) years as a regular follow-on survey to the Census of Agriculture.

- Racial characteristics could be reported at the State level, not just the national level.
- The Census of Agriculture could break down the tenure category of “part owner” by owned and rented land by race (cf. tables 17 and 46 in the 1997 Census).
- USDA could support a voluntary registry of minority land owners (following recommendation 28 of USDA’s 1997 Civil Rights Action Team Report).
- American Indian farmers and land could be better counted. Reservations, for instance, are not single farms, as the Census of Agriculture now classifies them.

Many believe, and research has shown, that land ownership is of tremendous economic, cultural, and political value to rural communities (e.g., Salamon, Couto, LaDuke, Mitchell). Major private

foundations, as well as the Federal Government, are also convinced. They have invested millions of dollars in research and community development activities that bolster land ownership. The 25 million acres that the 1999 AELOS reports for minority owners, worth over \$44 billion, are only a small fraction of the amount and value of all U.S. private agricultural land. However, it is a major form of wealth in minority rural America, much as homeownership—a top policy priority—is throughout the Nation.

This currently existing asset base, in some of the poorest areas of the country, could be further utilized in community development efforts. Access to land means that rural communities have more options in addressing rural housing needs. Minority land ownership is being used to develop youth training programs in many rural areas. Small producers and land owners have created opportunities for value-added agriculture (e.g., truck crop operations and farmers' markets). Additionally, of course, land owners have greater financial possibilities. Land often serves as collateral for college educations and entrepreneurial ventures. These are just some of the ways that land ownership is crucially important to rural minority communities. This social asset base is too often overlooked by race/ethnic scholars, agricultural policymakers, and sometimes even rural development practitioners in the communities themselves. <sup>RA</sup>

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