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Defining Distress: Lessons from the Federally Chartered Regional Commissions

Widening geographic inequality in the United States has shifted federal policymakers' attention to investing in "places" as well as "people." On his first day in office, President Biden signed an executive order prioritizing support for underserved communities, including those in rural areas.

For each of the three active federally chartered regional commissions that serve more than one state—the Appalachian Regional Commission, Delta Regional Authority, and Northern Border Regional Commission—the authorizing legislation explicitly requires the commission to assess annually which places within their service area can be classified as "distressed," and to spend at least half, but often more, of their grant resources in those places.[1] [2] [3] Given the large proportion of rural places in their coverage areas, the use of "distress" by the commissions offers insights and lessons for reaching vulnerable rural communities.

Each commission defines distress differently, starting from the respective statutory requirements, balanced by internal analysis and capacity. Comparing their definitions illuminates the implications of different approaches and provides insights into the idiosyncrasies of designing methods for targeting specific types of communities.

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