

Water and Equity in the Texas Hill Country

Over four million people live in the 18 counties of the Texas Hill Country. Communities within this rapidly growing, drying, yet flood-prone region are experiencing major shifts in their relationship with water. These changes are not uniform and their impacts to communities vary widely.

To better understand Hill Country water challenges and those communities who are most at-risk, the Texas Hill Country Conservation Network commissioned a report to study Hill Country demographics and water data and to survey communities, landowners, and water leaders throughout the region. Here's what the study tells us about water and equity in the Hill Country.

Download the full report at
is.gd/hillcountryeq



texas hill country
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The Hill Country is diverse

DIVERSE POPULATIONS

The Hill Country is a confluence of voices blending urban and rural communities with distinctly different population demographics. Out of the region's 18 counties and 4 million residents, 47% are Latino, 8% Black or African American, 4% Asian, 1% American Indian or Indigenous, while approximately 40% are Non-Hispanic White (U.S. Census 2021).

URBAN AND RURAL DIVERSITY

Urban areas in the region have more diverse, younger, and higher-density populations while rural areas have less diverse (primarily Non Hispanic White), older, and lower-density populations. While poverty levels vary across the region, 32% of the population of the Hill Country is defined as lower-income, and these populations are more frequent in densely populated areas within both urban and rural communities, and in far western counties.

LOCALIZED DIVERSITY

Within each Hill Country county, individual neighborhoods can have considerably different poverty, unemployment, labor rates, income and education levels.

INCOME: median income is highest in eastern urban counties adjacent to the I35 corridor where many low-income communities are also concentrated — indicating the Hill Country's metro areas have a wide internal wealth gap.

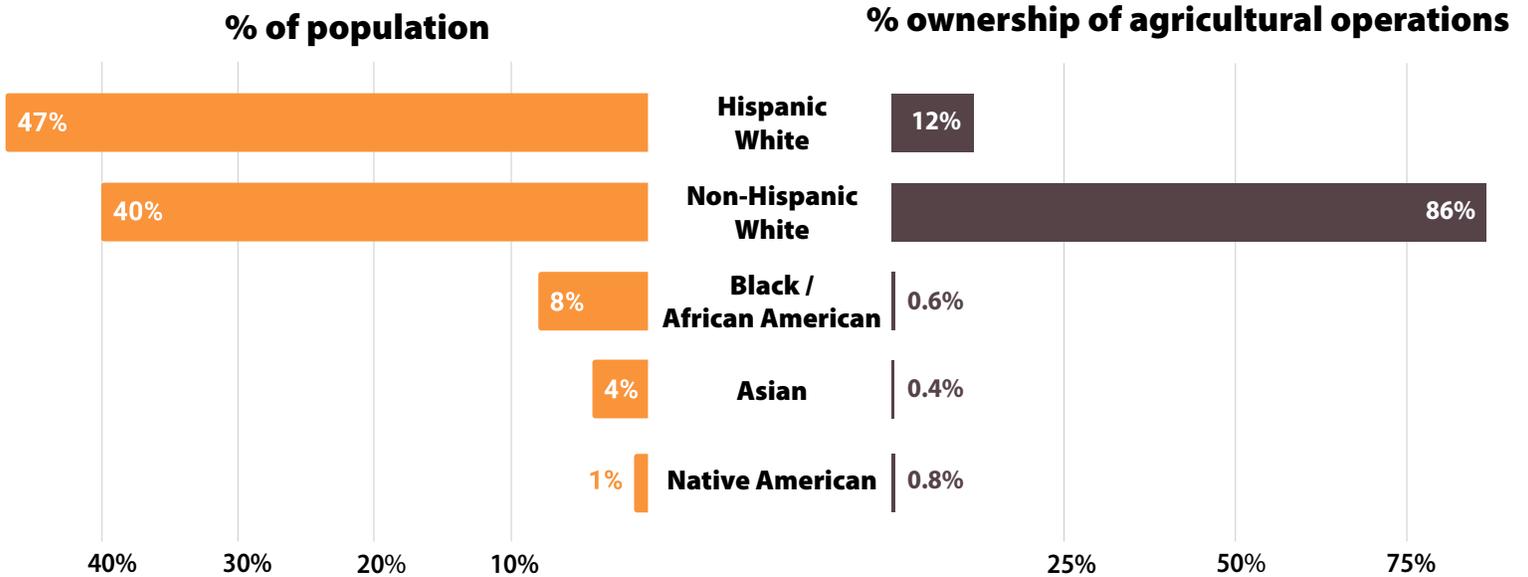
UNEMPLOYMENT: labor force participation is low relative to the national average of 64%. In Real County, for example, only 43% of people over 15 are in the labor force.

EDUCATION: education levels vary considerably within the region. For example, 40% of San Saba County obtained a college degree while 25% did not obtain a high school diploma.

Access and influence are not always equal

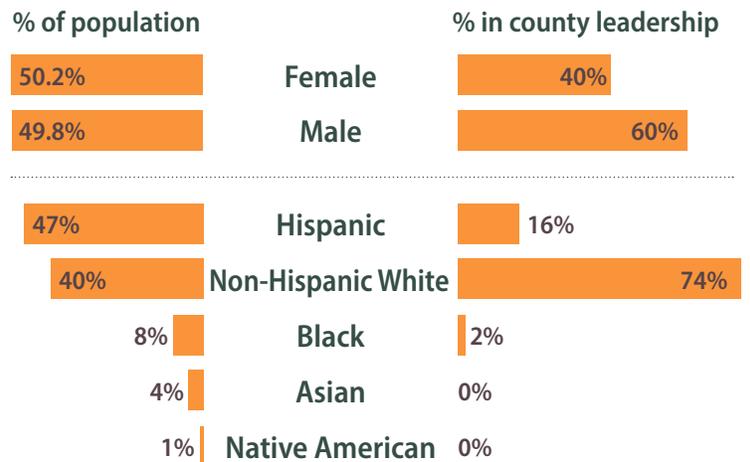
LAND AND WATER OWNERSHIP PATTERNS

Despite making up less than half of the population (40%), Non-Hispanic Whites own 94% of agricultural acreage.

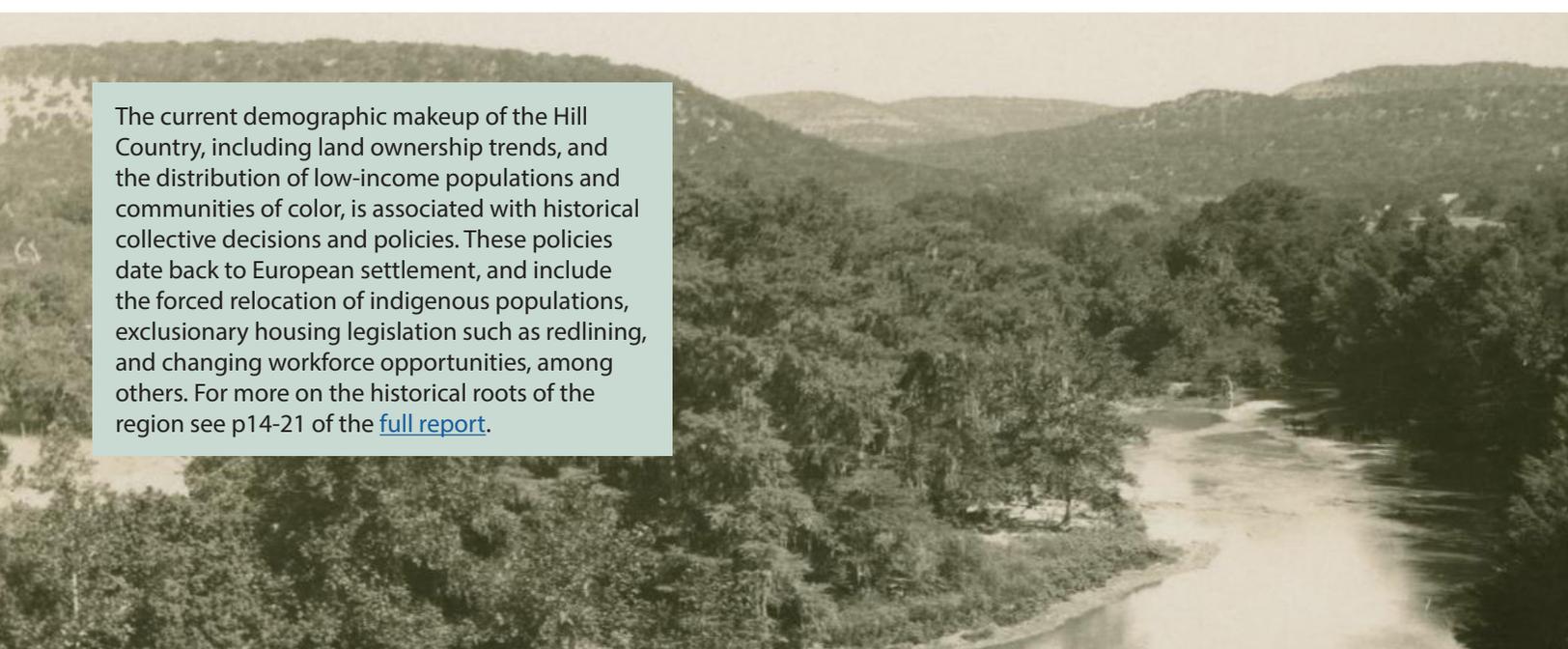


COUNTY LEADERSHIP REPRESENTATION

Counties are the heart of Texas' governance. Across a majority of the Hill Country, elected county and water leadership demographics are not reflective of the demographics of the communities they serve. At the time of this study, Bexar, Edwards, Gillespie, Hays, Travis, and Uvalde counties held the most representative leadership in the Hill Country, in terms of race and ethnicity. The remaining two thirds of Hill Country counties did not have elected leadership that reflects the demographics of their county populations. See p43-51 of the [full report](#) for details on individual county leadership demographics.

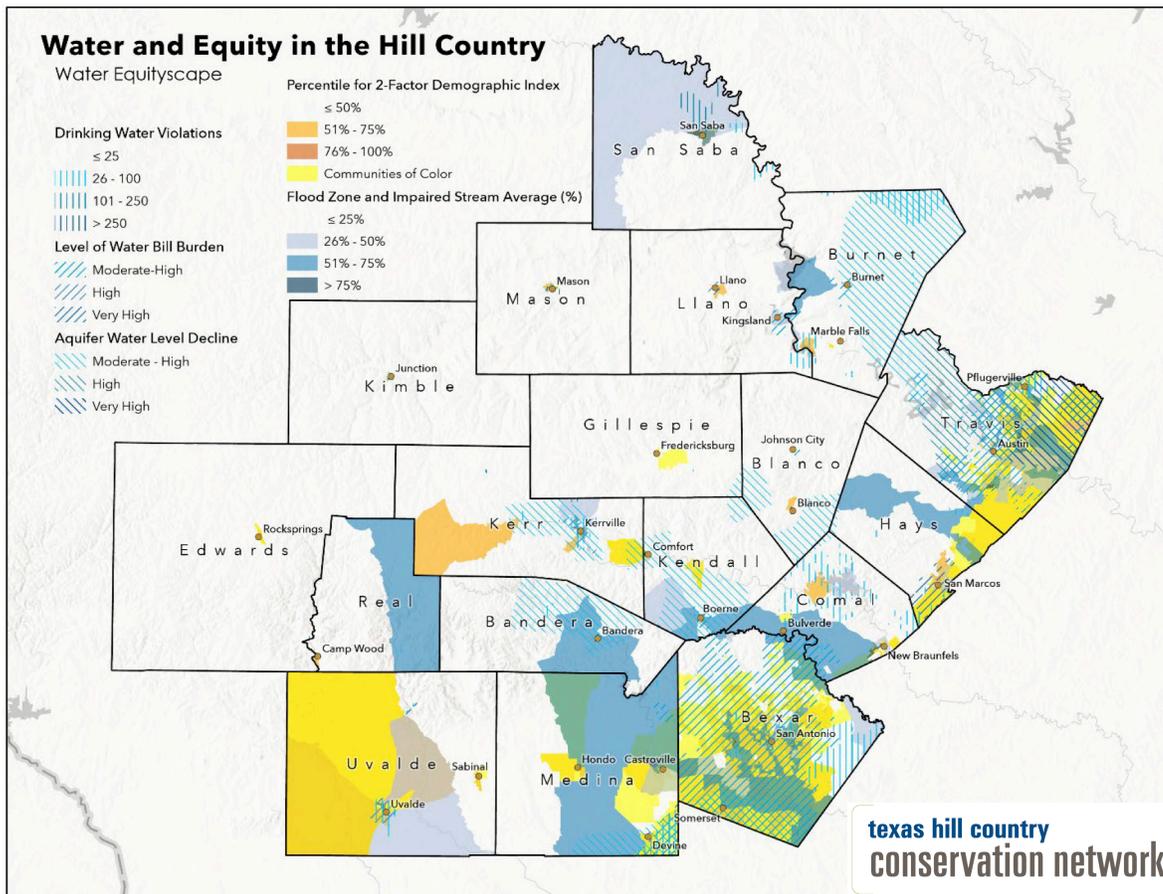


The current demographic makeup of the Hill Country, including land ownership trends, and the distribution of low-income populations and communities of color, is associated with historical collective decisions and policies. These policies date back to European settlement, and include the forced relocation of indigenous populations, exclusionary housing legislation such as redlining, and changing workforce opportunities, among others. For more on the historical roots of the region see p14-21 of the [full report](#).



Water challenges are largely concentrated in communities of color and low-income areas

The study revealed that the majority of water challenges in the Hill Country—ranging from aquifer decline, water quality concerns, and high relative cost of water—are concentrated in and around densely populated areas within both urban and rural communities, and they largely overlap with communities of color and/or low-income communities identified in key areas within the region, defined generally as “communities at risk.” The “water equitiescape” illustration below demonstrates the overlap between communities-at-risk and water challenges.



Water Equitiescape combining Communities-At-Risk and water challenges in the Texas Hill Country. See p77-80 of [full report](#) for more on this water equitiescape. Source: Compiled by NRI from TCEQ, TWDB, NIEPS, EPA, US Census.

WATER BILLS ARE A GROWING BURDEN

Water affordability appears to be a challenge in most small Hill Country towns with public water systems, including Uvalde, Devine, Castroville, Kerrville, Mason, and Llano. In San Marcos and Concan, the water burden is particularly high.



1 water bill
@8000 gallons/mo.

21.8 working hrs
@minimum wage

in San Marcos
where 43% of residents are low-income

16.2 working hrs
@minimum wage

in Kerrville
where 37.6% of residents are low-income

Hill Country residents fear an uncertain water future

Surveys of water users, providers, community leaders, and water professionals — combined with in-person interviews targeting at-risk under-represented communities — reveal a consistent set of concerns around the future of water availability, flooding, and water quality in the Hill Country. Most had personal experiences with either flood and/or drought. The most persistent concerns were:

Drought and water availability

Flood risk

Rising water cost

Water quality fears

Fears over boil water notices and inadequate infrastructure translated to increased reliance on bottled water for drinking and household activities. This comes at a huge increased cost, particularly for those households that can least afford to purchase outside drinking water.

Where do we go from here?

This report shows that water, and our connection to water, can unite communities in the Texas Hill Country. There is near universal agreement across demographic groups, to include varying ages and income levels, that water is critical to our well being and economic vitality in the Hill Country. There is also general agreement that our water future seems uncertain- that increasing drought-flood cycles, aging infrastructure, and a growing demand on limited water supply will threaten the lifeline that sustains communities from the rural hinterlands to the urban core and beyond. Those uncertainties, and the costs that accompany them, are disproportionately impacting at-risk communities.

RESOURCES FOR INFORMED INTERVENTION:

[TxMAP](#)

A mapping tool developed by the Texas A&M Natural Resources Institute helps stakeholders visualize critical natural resource issues in the [Hill Country](#) and across the [state](#) through the detailed curation of multiple statewide datasets.

[Texas Water + IJA Primer](#)

A [new guide](#) from the Texas Living Waters Project highlights how the infusion of federal dollars into state revolving funds can be effectively used to help at-risk communities address key water infrastructure needs.

[Download the full report](#)

A PRODUCT OF:

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THCCN PARTNERS INVOLVED IN THIS PROJECT:



National Wildlife Federation
Texas Coast and Water Program



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