QUARTZ

Young Kenyans are murdering elderly relatives they claim are witches, but it really has nothing to do with magical beliefs

Beenish Ahmed | March 30, 2017

Victims of climate change. (Reuters/Goran Tomasevic)

Bayacharo Kafuna was asleep in his house when two men attacked him with machetes. He was cut across the mouth, back, and the left side of his body. Had he not raised his own machete to defend himself, Kafuna says he would have been hacked to death. More painful than the injuries, though, was the emotional torment of learning identity of the culprits. His attackers were family: a grandson and nephew.

"The problem started after [one of my] sons developed liver complications," Kafuna says. "When he died, my relatives accused me of using witchcraft against him."

Kafuna, now 72 and living in a safe house in Malindi, Kenya, denies the allegation. In fact, he says, he even sold part of his land to pay for his son's medical treatment months before he was attacked in 2010. After Kafuna was attacked for a second time weeks later, he left the Kenyan village in which he lived and worked as a farmer for his entire life. He returned a few times to try to sort things out, but eventually gave up; it's now been three years since he's gone back.

As shockingly personal as the attack may seem, it can best be explained by global forces. Around the time Kafuna was assaulted, Kenya faced a prolonged drought that left 19 million people in need of food assistance. Before conditions improved, 260,000 people across the Horn of Africa starved to death. In coastal Kenya, the harsh conditions coincided with an onslaught of attacks on elderly people—many of them under allegations of practicing witchcraft. Experts believe the violence is a way to preserve food resources for younger, more productive community members.

At least 50 elderly people in the area have taken refuge in safe houses after being accused of harming their communities with hexes over the past several years. Instead of being respected as tribal elders as is custom among the Mijikenda tribe that inhabits the dense forests along the Kenyan coast, they've been incriminated as witches.

"The practice is rampant," says Alexander Makau, the police chief for Kilifi County, along the Indian Ocean. At least 22 people in Kilifi County reported being attacked after facing accusations of witchcraft in 2015, and 104 were reportedly murdered in 2014. But the real numbers are likely much higher than the official count—Makau believes only a small minority of cases are reported to authorities. That's because many of the attacks occur within families.

"A family will conspire and they will hire a killer to come and bump the old man or the old lady off," says Joseph Karisa Mwarandu, who started the Malindi District Cultural Organization to preserve local culture but has found himself protecting the region's older residents. Those two missions dovetail, says Mwarandu, since those who opt for the traditional red, white, and blue sarongs; the coiled hair; and an indigenous faith that reveres ancestors are often those accused of practicing witchcraft.

Killing the elderly, Mwarandu says, "is like setting fire on a library, for example, or a museum, or an archive of some kind. So we have tried to find a way of rescuing them."

There's a long history of demonizing local tradition, from the British colonial administration's policing of local traditions starting in the 1920s to contemporary efforts by Christian missionaries to associate indigenous beliefs with evil. Many locals now associate traditional rituals with causing harm.

Manuel Chingo, who works with Mwarandu at the Malindi Cultural Association, says the contemporary attacks are partially fueled by generational divides. The burgeoning tourism industry along the coast has enticed many younger members of the Mijikenda tribe to abandon traditional society. "Everyone wants to go…work in the hotels or maybe do business on the beaches. They flock there," Chingo says. When they return to their villages, they tend to feel disconnected and disdainful of local customs: "If they have no job, they claim [it's because] that the elders are bewitching them."

What Chingo calls the "mass killing" of elders in the area began about 10 years ago. The Malindi Cultural Association took up the issue soon after. Elders who were attacked moved into thatched huts previously used by the Association a sort of museum display of the traditional Mijikenda lifestyle. The refugees now make beaded jewelry and local cuisine as a way to safeguard both their culture and their lives.

Bayacharo Kafuna in a (Beenish Ahmed)

It's not surprising people feel comfortable enacting vigilante justice against presumed witches, since even the official courts in Kenya take witchcraft seriously. Witchcraft was made a punishable offense under a Colonial-era ordinance that was revised—but not by much—in 1981. According to Kenyan law, causing "fear, annoyance, or injury to another in mind, person, or property" through witchcraft is an offense punishable by up to five years in prison.

At the same time, says Mwarandu, all these witchcraft accusations cannot be taken at face value—he thinks disputes over land and inheritance are what's really driving people to attack community elders. "It's an excuse for killing somebody just to get property maybe or to resolve a dispute," he says. "When they say that you're a witch, the idea in the community is that nobody will have sympathy with you."

The problem isn't isolated to East Africa. According to a 2009 United Nations report, marginalized elderly people—especially widows—all over the world, from Nepal to South Africa, have been attacked under the pretense of witchcraft.

In many cases, the supposed "witch killing" is really just a socially-acceptable form of "death hastening"—instances where an elderly member of the community is killed (or commits suicide) in order to lessen the burden on working relatives during times of scarcity which have been reported across the world. In the past, for example, Inuit tribes abandoned their decrepit elderly on ice floes, Miguel says. And in Japan, seniors in some communities were carried up mountains and left there to die.

In Kenya, authorities say witchcraft-related crimes have been on the rise in recent years, as increasing cycles of drought have caused regular water shortages and crop failures. Since Mijikenda society is traditionally a gerontocracy in which older men control resources and younger members of the tribe have little say, witchcraft accusations offer a pretext to disrupt the hierarchy. Many of the cases Mwarandu has dealt with involve young men willing to resort to desperate measures to get their inheritance without waiting around for it.

The elders of certain Kenyan and Tanzanian tribes are thought to have the power to control the rain through ritual ceremonies and to ward off bad omens that threaten the land. When there are serious droughts or flooding, and crop resulting failures, the elderly find themselves in danger. In a study of 67 Tanzanian villages across 11 years, Edward Miguel, a professor of economics at the University of

California-Berkeley who studies witchcraft-related crimes, found that twice as many "witch murders" occur during years of droughts or floods.

Unlike the torch-bearing mobs who set out to burn witches on the stake in medieval Europe, Miguel says, the attacks in Tanzania were largely clandestine. "They're committed by relatives," he says, and enacted most often within poor families for whom a drought can be a death sentence.

Mwarandu, a tribal elder and a high court advocate himself, thinks the Kenyan authorities haven't done enough to ensure the safety of those elders who want to return home by investigating and prosecuting those who attack them. The government does, however, now provide small pensions to the elderly to offset any financial burden that might make their families turn on them. It's the one thing the Kenyan government has done to alleviate the national economic stress of the mounting environmental pressures of climate change and a rising elderly population.

Bayacharo Kafuna feels his family has already taken everything from him. In the years since he's been living the cultural organization safe house, he his family divided up his land and collected their "inheritance" as if he had died.

Still, he says, "I am happy to be here because I'm safe. I go to bed and wake up alive."

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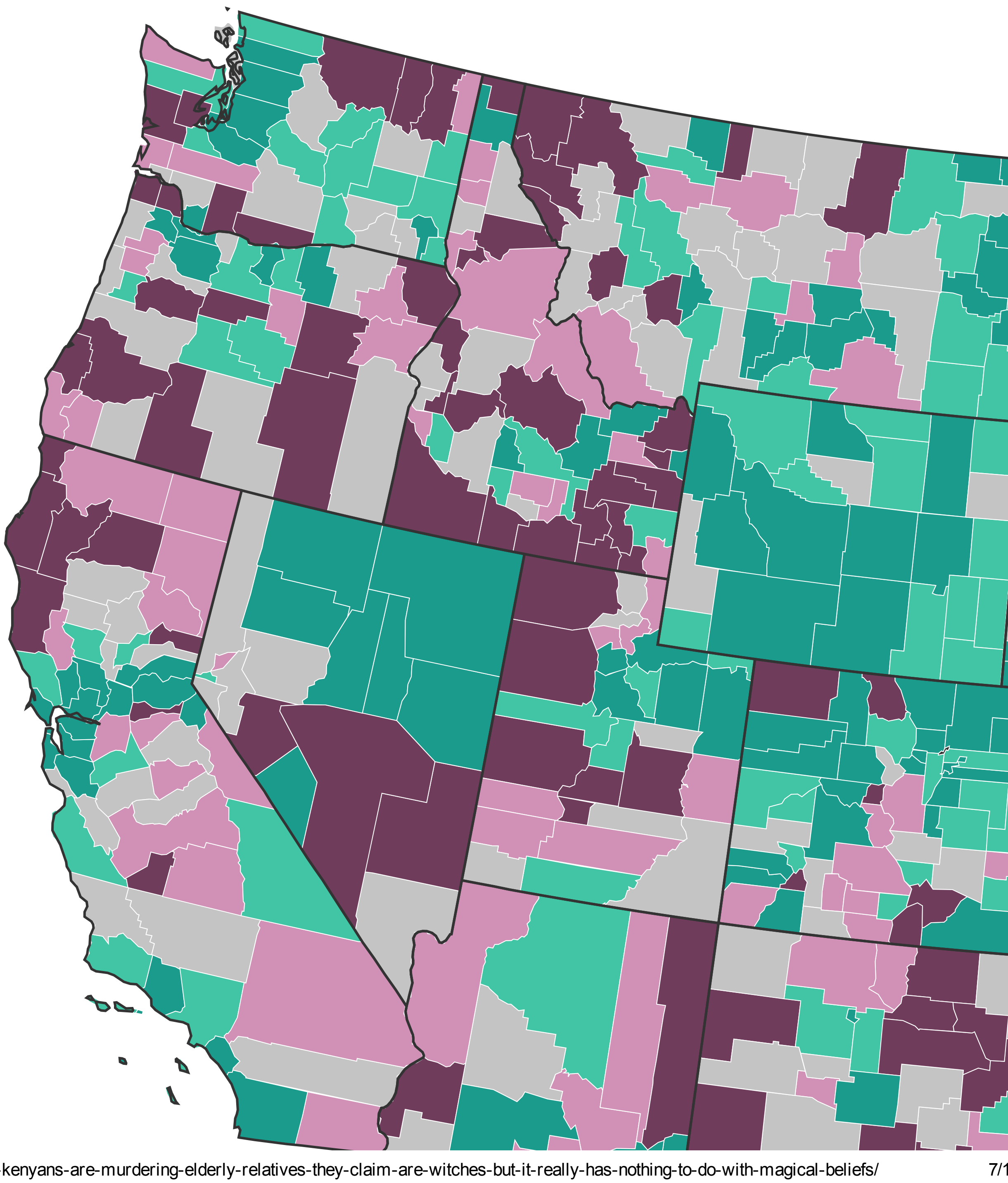
the past 25 years

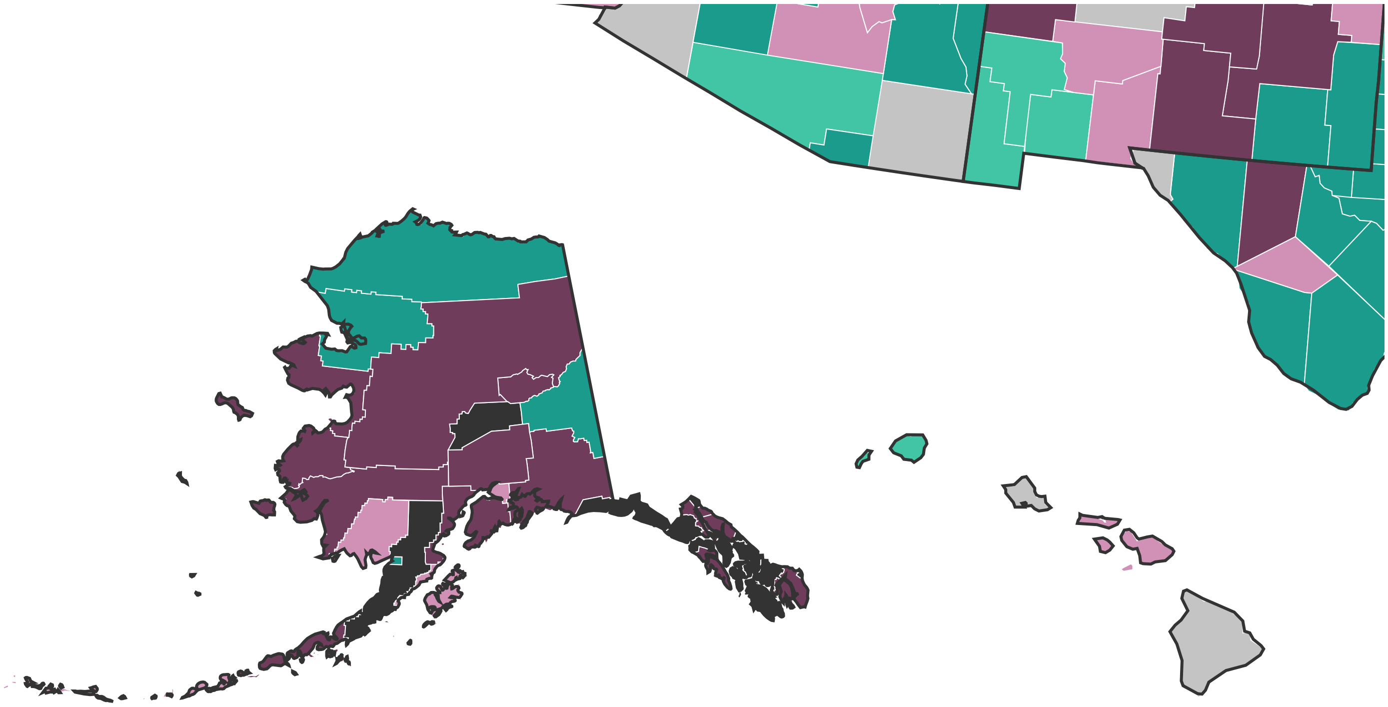
By Christopher Groskopf & Dan Kopf | March 30, 2017

Growth in average income by county, 1990 to 2015

Slowest growing 20% Middle 20% Fastest growing 20%

Only income from employment is included. Growth is reported in inflation-adjusted 2015 dollars.





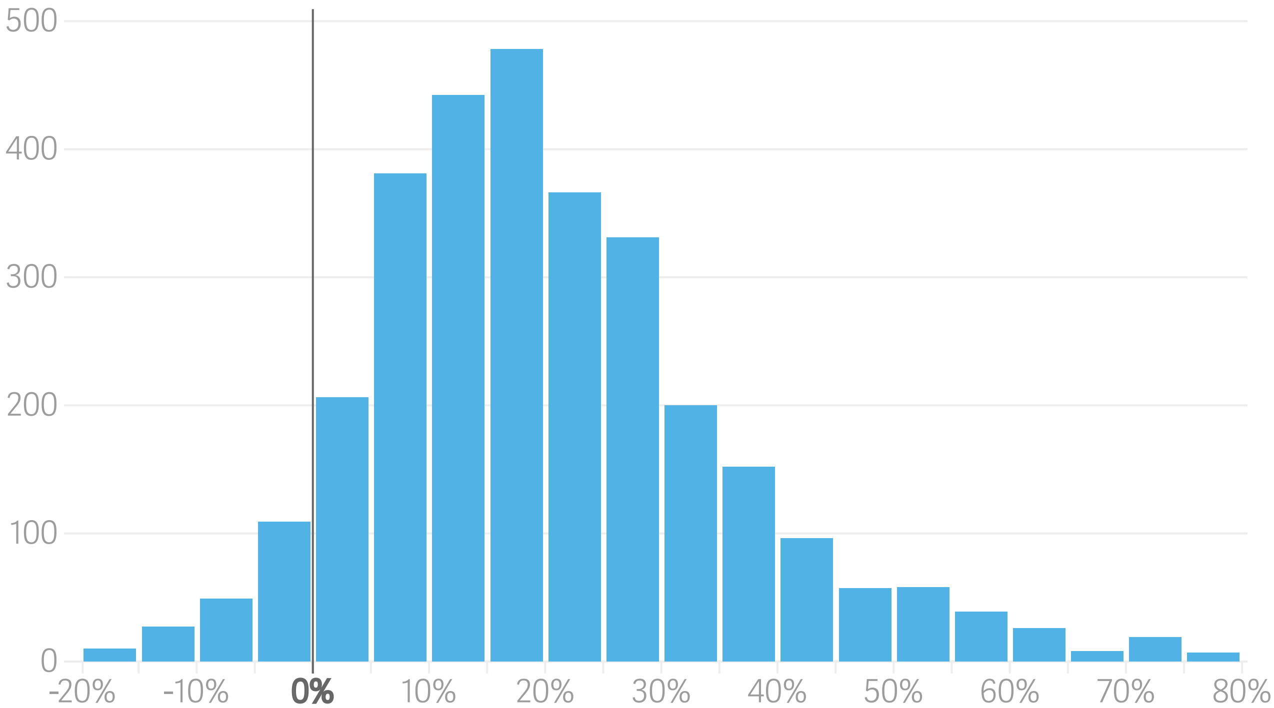
Quartz | qz.com Data: [US Bureau of Labor Statistics]

As the Rust Belt stagnated, coastal metropolises thrived. As Appalachia sputtered, shale country boomed. As Southern manufacturing centers shut their doors, neighboring research hubs opened theirs.

These are just a few of the trends that have played out in regional economies across the US over the past 25 years. This period includes the booms of the late 1990s and mid 2000s, a couple of mild recessions, one huge one, and the slow but steady growth of today. Nationally, workers' average annual earnings rose by about 24% from 1990 to 2015, or from $42,800 to $52,300 in inflation-adjusted dollars. That works out to a 1.3% real annual raise every year—don't spend it all at once!

But, as you see in the map above, the national story belies the diverse experiences of most Americans. Only about a quarter of counties saw average wages grow within 5% of the national average. Some surged, while others sputtered—or even slipped into decline. (Employment income includes salary, as well as bonuses and non-cash compensation like meals. Insurance is excluded.)

Distribution of US counties by real growth of income from employment, 1990 to 2015



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Data: US Bureau of Labor Statistics. Extreme outliers have been excluded. (Less than 2.5% of counties.)

The data used in this interactive come from the Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW) collected by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics. The dataset is unique because it is based on administrative data reported quarterly to state agencies as part of unemployment insurance programs. It allows us to look with precision at trends in geographic areas as small as counties.

The $72,000 inflation-adjusted increase in the average earnings of people in Goochland County, Virginia since 1990—the highest of any county—is not an estimate, like you might see in the US Census, but an average based on nearly all jobs in that county. The same goes for the $18,500 decrease in Monroe County, Ohio—the largest decline. (The data are based on what people earn working in a county; they do not necessarily live there, too.)

To a large degree, the story of American income growth over the past 25 years can be told by two states: Texas and New York. The decline of manufacturing, the march of globalization, the shale boom, the rise of finance and technology—the Empire and Lone Star states have seen it all.

Texas: Shale and trade and tech, oh my!

The economic boom in Texas, the second most populous state in the US, is remarkable and often under-appreciated. From 1990 to 2015, average incomes in Texas grew by 32%—or nearly 2% per year—the fifth-highest rate in the country. And this growth was, unusually, geographically widespread. Nearly 100 of Texas's 255 countries were in the top quintile of growth nationally, and only 18 were in the bottom. From the borderlands to the metropolitan suburbs, Texas has shined.

The story of Texas's growth over the past 25 years is built on the oil and gas boom. The local labor market has been one of the main beneficiaries of the "shale revolution"—the increased production of natural gas made possible by advances in horizontal drilling and hydraulic fracturing (also known as "fracking"). Some of the counties with the fastest wage growth in Texas are those around the Barnett and Eagle Ford shale formations. Counties in North Dakota, Oklahoma, and Louisiana similarly benefitted from the shale boom.

But the Texas story is about more than just fracking. Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas economist Pia Orrenius gets annoyed by this. "People's expectations outside of Texas is that we're still a poor state, we just live off of oil, we're uneducated," she says. "But over the last several decades there has been a diversification of the economy into really high-tech industry, with high-paying service sector and transportation jobs."

Orrenius's research shows that, even after plunging oil prices put a damper on drilling starting in 2014, the Texan economy has continued to outpace the rest of the country. Cities like Austin (Travis County) and Dallas (Dallas County) have become dynamic technology hubs. The state's education and health industries have also grown rapidly.

What's more, Texas is one of the biggest winners from globalization. While other southern states' labor markets took a hit from NAFTA, Texas thrived. The counties along the Texas-Mexico border, though still relatively poor, were among the fastest-growing regions in the country in terms of wages over the past 25 years. Low value-added manufacturing jobs were replaced by transportation logistics, warehousing, and well-paying federal jobs in border security.

Free trade has come under fire lately, but you won't find many complaints in Texas.

New York: One foot in the rust belt and the other in metropolis

If Texas is the land of boomtowns, New York state is the home of the bust, with some of the poorest-performing counties in the nation.

However, because of one very important, eponymous city, New York state's average wage growth was roughly the same as Texas since 1990, at 29% overall, or 1.7% per year. The vast majority of New York's wage growth over this time was, unsurprisingly, centered in Manhattan, where wages grew by 59% overall, or 3.1% per year. In fact, earnings growth among workers in Manhattan accounted for nearly a quarter of all wage growth in the state. And within Manhattan, most of that growth was within finance, law, accounting, and other professional services.

It is a very different story outside of the New York City area.

"Upstate New York was in the path of this momentous loss of manufacturing jobs," says Federal Reserve Bank of New York Economist Richard Deitz. "We had a lot of older, less productive manufacturing plants that were typical of the rustbelt, so the area was hit harder than most other parts of the country." From cities like Rochester and Buffalo, to less-populated rural counties in the north of the state, the loss of factory jobs has hit the state hard.

For example, workers in Monroe County, where Rochester is located, earned $3,000 less in 2015 than they did in 1990, after adjusting for inflation. Big companies like Kodak and Xerox cut huge numbers of well-paying factory jobs in the city over this period. From 1997 to 2010, the number of manufacturing jobs in the city halved.

Most of the factory job losses upstate have been due to automation and, to a lesser extent, globalization. The jobs wiped out over the past 25 years were those that require few skills, with more technical jobs more likely to stick around. In most cases, machines replaced low-skilled machine operators. A smaller number of jobs were cut because local labor was too expensive relative to foreign alternatives.

Not all counties in upstate New York have stagnated. Like elsewhere in the US, the key to prosperity has been strength in technology, education, or government. Incomes in Tompkins County, home of Cornell University and Ithaca College, grew by almost 28% over the past 25 years. Albany County, home to government workers in the state capital, grew in line with the national average. In Rensselaer County, a hotbed for microchip manufacturing, incomes grew by over 35%, about the same as Westchester County, home to the poshest suburbs of New York City.

Keeping things in perspective

Maps can be deceiving. When we look at the country as a whole, perhaps the most eye-catching feature of the wage-growth map is the deep green of shale-rich North Dakota. But fewer than half as many people work in the whole of North Dakota as in Manhattan. That means the small green square of Manhattan is a far larger contributor to national wage growth than all of North Dakota. In general, smaller, more densely populated counties have performed better than large, sparsely populated ones.

There are other wrinkles. The QCEW data only includes average employment income, so it does not account for changes in the distribution of earnings. Since 1980 income gains have been strongest among top earners, so headline gains may mask the struggles of poorer workers.

Another limitation is that these data do not account for the changing composition of employment. At a national level, unemployment was at a similar level in 2015 as in 1990. But in a particular county, wages may have held up even though jobs were lost. Meanwhile, a different county may have gained jobs, but seen a fall in average incomes because workers shifted to lower-paying positions.

Finally, remember that our map shows relative income growth. Michigan is home to many counties in the bottom quintile of growth, yet the state ranks 19th in average income in the US, higher in absolute terms than states with faster wage growth like North Carolina and Oregon. (At least, before you account for the cost of living.)

The story of American incomes over the last 25 years is one of creative destruction. How creative and how destructive depends on where a worker lives. Some are fortunate enough to reside near technology hubs like Silicon Valley or North Carolina's Research Triangle, education centers like Boston, or one of America's large shale formations. Others suffer in cities devastated by the decline of low-skill manufacturing thanks to automation and globalization. But these broad narratives can't account for the patchwork of failed factories, surprise discoveries, and smart investments that together form the landscape of the American economy.