



# COVERING APPALACHIA

*A product of 100 Days in Appalachia's Appalachian Advisors Network*

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When a region is misrepresented, there's a lot of damage that lingers — on the community, on its people, on their morale and in their distrust of journalism.

Four years ago, during one of the most divisive election cycles in American history, Appalachia was at the forefront of national media's attention after 399 of its 420 counties across 13 states voted in favor of Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump. Without context, many journalists parachuted into the region, framing nearly every story through the lens of the same one-dimensional, monolithic stereotypes that emerged in the mid-1960s during Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty. What was left behind was a community of people who felt taken advantage of, unheard, whose trust in news — which was already declining — hit an all time low.

This resource guide is meant to help journalists from national and international media outlets, but also those who are new to the region and working at our newspapers, television and radio stations, cover stories in Appalachia with more depth, understanding the complexity around these issues and how they impact our communities.

This guide will continue to evolve, so check back often, but we hope you'll browse its pages and use it to add the nuance to your reporting that Appalachia deserves.

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*Assembled by 100 Days in Appalachia | Illustration by Rosalie Haizlett*



# Context Checks

*In journalism, research is key. Whether you're traveling through Appalachia or interviewing sources remotely, we're here to help you navigate unfamiliar roads and situations before you reach them. Below, we've touched on a few topics that are often associated with Appalachia.*

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## **POLITICS & "TRUMP COUNTRY":**

During the 2016 election, 399 out of 420 Appalachian counties voted in favor of Republican presidential candidate, Donald Trump, which earned the region the infamous "Trump Country" label. Journalists flocked to the region, eager to cover the novelty of rural American voters and their support of the non-career candidate. Certainly a fair share of Appalachians voted for Trump, but that narrative quickly came to represent all Appalachians.

The oversimplification, perpetuated by national media and various elements of popular culture, helped solidify the false, monolithic, one-dimensional portrait of the Appalachian identity — which is a disservice to Appalachians everywhere. For a region composed of 420 counties across 13 states, Appalachia hosts a diverse collection and voices, opinions and cultures. While it's a portion of Appalachia's story, that's not Appalachia's only story. Be aware of any implicit bias and ask questions to ensure you have the context to cover Appalachia with accuracy.

*Note: 100 Days in Appalachia, who created the Appalachian Advisors Network project, was formed in the wake of the 2016 election as a way to contest perpetuated stereotypes and give Appalachians a space to tell their stories from within the region. Read more about that vision [here](#).*

## **COAL/COAL COUNTRY:**

Statistically speaking, coal is no longer king. According to the [United States Energy Information Administration](#), 2019 marked the lowest production of coal since the late 1970s for coal producers in America. In Appalachia, the once-booming industry began to decline during the late 1950s and early 1960s. [According to a report from Brian Lego, Eric Bowen, Ph.D., John Deskins, Ph.D. and Christiadi, Ph.D.](#), commissioned by the Appalachian Regional Commission, Appalachia saw an decline of "nearly 45 percent overall" between 2005 and 2015 in Appalachian coal production, "more than double the rate of national decline."

Before using a coal country reference, ask: Are coal and energy-related jobs top employers in this region? Does this

area have a history of coal mining? Would it make sense to label it coal country? Avoid overgeneralizations.

*Note: Coal can be a sensitive topic. For some, it's a source of great pride; a heritage. For others, it's a bitter reminder of an industry that uprooted and left former mining towns — and families who relied on the income— isolated, unstable and unemployed.*

## **POVERTY:**

From declining industries to outward migration of populations, many factors have contributed to poverty in Appalachia over the last several centuries. Historically speaking, Appalachia has long been a source of extraction, footing the costly bills left by exploitative industries, politicians and corporations.

According to recent [Appalachian Regional Commission reports](#), in 2018, nearly 16 percent of Appalachians struggled with poverty. Appalachian Kentucky fared the worst, with 25.3 percent below the poverty line. For many in Appalachia, poverty can be cyclical. With fewer industries moving in, limited access to healthcare, education and broadband, there's no one-size-fits-all solution to catapult upcoming generations out of the cycle. Add in unreliable (or no) transportation in and out of the more rural areas and job prospects plummet.

*Note: Consider that, if you're working with a source who is facing financial constraints and seems unwilling or "stubborn" when it comes to accepting help, they may be experiencing feelings of defeat, frustration and, potentially, shame. In rural communities, providing for one's family is often a source of pride.*

## **EDUCATION:**

In coal fields and classrooms, Appalachia has been a battleground for many of our nation's most prolific labor movements. [The West Virginia teacher strikes of 2018 and 2019](#) spread like wildfire across the country, inspiring teachers to demand more – higher pay, more resources for education systems and access to social workers for students.



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And, in many states, they won.

Poverty and education coverage tends to overlap in Appalachia. In 2019, Amelia Ferrell Knisely, a Report for America fellow with the *Charleston Gazette-Mail*, wrote ["Data shows more than 10,000 homeless students in WV's public schools."](#) The results revealed that the majority of homeless students were facing "economic hardship." With fewer students enrolled, better salaries for teachers across state borders and dwindling funding for resources, money — and sometimes students — have been directed elsewhere. *American Public Media's* ["Schools in poor, rural districts are the hardest hit by nation's growing teacher shortage,"](#) digs into the educational gaps left in rural school systems that are formed when districts can't attract or retain teachers to replace those who have left positions. In these cases, substitute teachers, who are most often not qualified to teach the subjects, are placed in charge.

## **JOBS/UNEMPLOYMENT:**

With the dissolve of many coal- and industry-related jobs over the last several decades, Appalachia has sought new means of employment out of necessity. In some communities, isolated by geography, opportunity and lack of economic growth, unemployment has persisted. ["Dedicated to the mountains, desperate for jobs,"](#) from PEW Charitable Trusts details the strong devotion to community that runs rampant in the Appalachian mountains and the resistance to change that comes with its traditions. This piece by *The Guardian*, ["America's poorest white town, abandoned by coal, swallowed by drugs,"](#) helps illustrate some of the struggles many encounter when facing limited job opportunities.

*Note: It's easy to look at a situation and wonder why an individual doesn't just adapt or evolve to suit their situation. But sometimes it's complex, and it's best to not assume that you know all the details. Familial ties to land, careers and tightly-knit communities, as well as stubbornness, can challenge what, for some, could be a seemingly simple decision.*

*Tradition is a large part of Appalachian culture, even if it*

*varies by location. When asking about the vitality of tradition and why your source or community doesn't seek out other means of income, frame wording in a way that is open and inviting. Criticism of lifestyle and priorities can be construed as just that — critical — when it may be the only lifestyle they've ever known.*

## **SUBSTANCE USE:**

Associated Press Stylebook recommends [avoiding specific terms](#), such as, "addict, user, abuser or junkie" when referring to someone struggling with Substance Use Disorder (SUD). Longtime *Charleston Gazette-Mail* reporter Eric Eyre won a 2017 Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of prescription painkiller pipelines that funneled from big pharmaceutical companies to rural doctors and pharmacies. Together, these three stories ["Drug firms fueled 'pill mills' in rural WV,"](#) ["'Suspicious' drug order rules never enforced by state"](#) and ["Drug firms poured 780M painkillers into WV amid rise of overdoses"](#) were responsible for inciting change in how prescription painkillers were handled and distributed not just in West Virginia, but across the country.

The 2019 *Washington Post* piece ["Flooded with opioids, Appalachia is still trying to recover"](#) chronicles various accounts of individuals in recovery in the region, sharing first-hand accounts of how addiction can reshape priorities and challenge relationships.

*Note: It's safe to say that most Appalachians know — or love — someone who struggles with substance use. Think people-first language when it comes to word selection, like "a person with substance use disorder."*

## **CLEAN or ALTERNATIVE ENERGY:**

In Appalachia, alternative energies are on the rise. From solar power to wind farms and natural gas, many regions are embracing new ways to move forward from the depleting supply of coal — and prevent further destructive alterations of the region's mountains. Though some Appalachian states continue to favor coal as a source of energy, some initiatives, like [Solar Holler](#), have emerged with the environment — and renewability — as the first priority.