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THE INCIDENCE OF POVERTY-LEVEL FARM INCOME IN WISCONSIN

William Saupe

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William Saupe is Associate Professor of Agricultural Economics.
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THE INCIDENCE OF POVERTY-LEVEL FARM INCOME IN WISCONSIN

An initial problem in action or research programs to improve the incomes of "poor" farmers is to establish criteria for defining "poverty-level" farmer income. This is part of the broader problem of establishing what constitutes rural poverty. Once defined, the location and intensity of the poverty problem within the state can then be determined.

This paper first discusses the distinction between the "farm problem," as it has been studied and legislated against in the past, and the problem of low farmer income. It then explores the relevant criteria for defining poverty. Finally, it provides an approximation of the incidence of poverty-level farm income in Wisconsin, derived from the 1964 Census of Agriculture.

The Farm Problem and Farm Poverty

In order properly to address the problems in rural poverty action and research programs the distinction between farm poverty and "the farm problem" should be made clear. The farm problem has four major components: inefficient resource use, imbalance in aggregate level of production, imbalance in product mix, and low level of farmer income.

Inefficient resource use in farming means that more resources are presently committed to farming than are necessary to maintain the current levels of farm production. This imbalance incurs two costs. Since more resources than necessary are used to produce farm products, the resource cost per unit of product (food) is higher than necessary. Second, the redundant resources in farming could be applied to production of non-agricultural products in other sectors of the economy, i.e., there is a

cost to the economy of not having available these other goods. Inefficiency in resource use is of major significance in the Midwest,[1] and can be conjectured to prevail throughout those parts of the United States where family farming is the predominant pattern. Most action programs in farm management education implicitly direct themselves to this problem. The payoff comes in two ways--higher income for farmers who organize their resources more efficiently, and lower cost of farm (food) products. But the problem of inefficient resource use in farming is neither the sole nor the major cause of the low level of farmer income. Many low-income farmers control very few resources. Improving the efficiency with which they organize them may raise their income, but their small resource base prevents them from reaching a "satisfactory" income level.

The second aspect of the farm problem is an imbalance in aggregate level of production, i.e., capacity for "too much" farm production. During recent decades Federal agricultural programs have been directed toward controlling the level of farm production. Programs have reduced the quantity of land used for farming and removed farm production from usual market channels. The existence of these programs over time suggests an imbalance in the level of farm output at prices the Government is willing to have farmers receive. There is additional evidence that this is the case.[2] The effect of a reduction in aggregate level of production per se would be an increase in farm product prices. However, many farmers with a low level of income produce relatively small quantities. An increase in product price will not necessarily increase their income to a "satisfactory" level, above the poverty line.

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[1] Donald R. Kaldor and William E. Saupe, "Estimates and Projections of an Income-Efficient Commercial Farm Industry in the North Central States," Journal of Farm Economics, Vol. 48, No. 3, Part I, August, 1966.

[2] Ibid.

The third aspect of the farm problem is an imbalance in product mix, i.e., "too much" of some farm products and "not enough" of others. Adjustment is carried out within individual farm firms as the decision-makers shift their pattern of production from season to season in response to expected price differentials.

The fourth aspect of the farm problem--low level of farmer income--emerges as distinct from the resource use, level of production and product mix problems described above. Federal farm programs have been directed in recent decades at "too high" levels of total farm production and have not had a significant positive effect on farmers with a low level of income. Benefit payments in some farm programs have been based on the reduction in acres of land planted to selected crops, and the farmer with very few acres does not receive a large absolute increase in income from this kind of program. Other farm programs that base payments to farmers on the quantity of production also do not help the low-income farmer who produces a small quantity. The low level of income problem in farming needs to be evaluated in a context separate from the "farm problem" as it has been commonly described in the past.

Defining Poverty-Level Farm Income

A precondition of the formulation of policy and the development and evaluation of poverty-reducing action programs is identification of the clientele groups. This necessitates establishment of a working definition of poverty-level farm income and of criteria for selecting the target group of farm families or rural residents.

A major effort to define poverty and to establish measurable criteria has been made within the Division of Research and Statistics of the United

States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.[3] It is focused on current family income and family size. These have the advantage of being readily measured. In addition, it seems reasonable that some minimum level must be achieved if the family is to enjoy the minimum standard of living that society is willing to have its members accept.

Neither current income, nor net worth, nor some combination is an entirely satisfactory criterion of poverty. A family with a sizeable net worth and a relatively low income is different from a family with the same current income but much lower net worth. Some consideration of the value of physical resources owned and controlled by the family seems relevant in the definition of poverty.

Measures of the quality of human resources controlled, besides the physical resources included among the assets, may also be relevant. These measures may include vocational and professional training received, employment experience, skills, health, age, and intelligence level. An individual who is receiving, or has recently completed, vocational or professional training may have both low current income and low net worth. Yet earnings over his lifetime can be expected to be well above the "poverty level," however defined. Some measure of the usual, expected, or permanent income level should be included in the definition of poverty. All are related to the family's ability to improve its income situation, if desired.

Whether or not the family experiences dissatisfaction or discomfort in its present situation may be a relevant criterion. A family with few physical or human resources that is satisfied with its lot is different from a family dissatisfied or thwarted in its aspirations. The family's

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[3]Mollie Orshansky, "Counting the Poor: Another Look at the Poverty Profile," Social Security Administration, U. S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, January, 1965.

appraisal of itself and its environment, including its perception of its own acceptance, may be another dimension of poverty. A low-income family may view itself differently if it is a part of a low-income community than if it is the exception in a higher-income community. Thus, important criteria in defining poverty may include income, level of living, resources controlled, aspirations, and achievement. Society, however, decides what poverty is. While adding more rigor and specificity to the definition of poverty, these additional considerations are neither as universally understood nor as readily measured as is current income. Data about them are not widely available from secondary sources. Preliminary study must therefore proceed with information at hand.

Census Economic Class of Farm as a Criterion

The Census of Agriculture groups farms into economic classes which can be used to separate roughly the farms more likely to have poverty-level income from those less likely. As a first approximation this is useful to indicate the magnitude of farmer poverty, to delineate the geographical areas in which farm poverty appears to exist, and in a gross way to measure its intensity.

The Census "Economic Class of Farm" aggregates farms that are similar in size of business and in certain other characteristics. The major criterion is value of farm products sold. For some classes of farms the number of days the operator worked off the farm, the age of the farm operator, and the relationship of family nonfarm income to value of farm products sold is also considered.

Census data have the advantage of being uniformly collected and available for the entire United States.[4] However, the limitations

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[4] 1964 United States Census of Agriculture, Volume 1, Part 14, Wisconsin.

associated with the use of current income instead of average income as a poverty criterion apply to the use of Census data. Unusual weather, disaster, disease, level of livestock production or fluctuations in product prices could place a farm in an atypical economic class. In addition, value of farm sales is not a perfect predictor of farm family income. Farmers often receive the use of a dwelling and consume some home-raised food, benefits which are not reflected in sales but which do constitute a component of income. Cash production costs, which vary among farms, likewise must be subtracted from sales. Despite these limitations, the Census Economic Class of farms is useful as a preliminary screening criterion in establishing the incidence of problem-level farm income. Judgments made here regarding the likelihood of the existence of poverty-level farmers in the various classes are based also on experiences in farm management and farm business analyses. A brief description of the economic classes and the number of Wisconsin farms by classes in 1959 and 1964 are reported in Table 1.

Cash sales on farms can be adjusted to be made comparable with income from wages or salaries and net income from investments. First, the operating costs of the farm business must be subtracted, including fertilizer, seed, fuel, repairs and so on. A sum must be subtracted to allow for the replacement of capital items used up in the farm business over time, such as farm buildings and improvements, machinery, and equipment.

It was estimated from Wisconsin farm record summaries that net cash income on farms was 27 per cent of total value of sales of farm products.[5]

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[5] Department of Agricultural Economics, University of Wisconsin, 1964 Wisconsin Farm Management Association Farm Record Summary; and Department of Agricultural Economics, University of Wisconsin, 1966 Wisconsin Electronic Farm Records Program, Business Analysis.

TABLE 1

Number of Wisconsin Farms by Census Economic Class, 1959 and 1964

	1959	1964
Class I (Sales of $40,000 or more)	1,010	1,793
Class II (Sales of $20,000 to $39,999)	4,221	7,805
Class III (Sales of $10,000 to $19,999)	23,750	28,417
Class IV (Sales of $5,000 to $9,999)	43,523	32,162
Class V (Sales of $2,500 to $4,999)	28,324	20,033
Class VI (Sales of $50 to $2,499)	5,868	5,701
Part Time (Sales of $50 to $2,499)	16,392	14,757
Part Retirement (Sales of $50 to $2,499)	8,038	8,096

Source: 1964 United States Census of Agriculture.

In making this estimate, data from farms with less than $10,000 value of sales were not available. If these smaller farms purchase fewer inputs and have less depreciation of capital assets relative to their sales, their net cash income would be greater than 27 per cent of sales. This would mean that the number of poverty-level farmers would be overestimated in the following analysis.

Comparisons between economic classes of farms and minimum acceptable levels of family income are presented in Table 2. The minimum acceptable levels of family income were calculated from the Orshansky standards,[6] which consider family size, food costs, and whether farm or nonfarm location.

The family income deficit below the minimum acceptable income level is presented in the last line of the table. This deficit must be filled by nonfarm income if the family is to escape the poverty classification. A frequency distribution of farms by levels of nonfarm income is presented in Table 3.

[6] Orshansky, op. cit.

The number of families that do not make up the family income deficit can be estimated from Table 3. For example, average Class IV farms have a deficit of $818 to make up from nonfarm sources (Table 2). The 7,823 Class IV families that reported no nonfarm income, the 4,416 that reported $1-$499, and most of those reporting $500-$999, would not make up the deficit. Thus these 15,463 Class IV farm families are "poor." In all, 33,513 farm families are estimated by this procedure to have total incomes below the minimum acceptable standards (Table 4).

Interpretation and Use

The distribution of the 33,513 poor farm families among the counties is reported in Figure 1 and in Table 5. It ranges from 1,449 to 29 per county. The size of the potential clientele in a county is relevant because it is recommended that action programs evaluate working with existing agencies, services, and organizations, which are often structured on a county basis.

Were poverty-level farmers uniformly distributed per square mile throughout Wisconsin, the counties with the largest numbers would simply be the largest counties. However, as reported in Figure 2 and in Table 5, the number per square mile ranges from .03 (one poverty farmer in 33 square miles) to 1.52 per square mile. Second, although it is possible for a very large county to have a light concentration and still have many poverty-level farmers, this is not the general case. Counties having the most poverty-level farmers tend also to have a relatively high concentration per square mile. The coefficient of correlation (r) between the number of poverty-level farmers per square mile and the number per county is .599 (n = 71), a positive association interpreted as being significant.

TABLE 2

Estimation of Family Income Deficit by
Economic Class of Farms in Wisconsin, 1964

	Economic Class of Farm							
	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	Part Time	Part Retirement
Average value of farm products sold per farm[a]	$88,698	$25,894	$13,858	$7,327	$3,733	$1,296	$ 988	$1,053
Estimated cash farm income per family[b]	$23,598	$ 6,641	$ 3,392	$1,628	$ 658	nil	nil	nil
Number of persons per farm family[c]	4.80	5.16	4.78	4.09	3.67	2.95	4.36	2.14
Minimum acceptable family income[d]	$ 2,734	$ 2,871	$ 2,726	$2,446	$2,237	$1,858	$2,556	$1,568
Family income deficit below the minimum acceptable level	None	None	None	$-818	$-1579	$-1858	$-2556	$-1568

[a] 1964 United States Census of Agriculture, Volume 1, Part 14, Wisconsin.

[b] The proportion of total value of all farm products sold that is cash farm income was estimated based on relationships established from analysis of the 1964 Wisconsin Farm Management Association farm records and the 1966 Wisconsin Electronic Farm Records Program records.

[c] Estimated from data in Table 17, 1964 United States Census of Agriculture, Wisconsin.

[d] Orshanski, Mollie, "Counting the Poor: Another Look at the Poverty Profile."

TABLE 3

Distribution of Farms by Family Income from All Nonfarm Sources, by Economic Class of Farm in Wisconsin, 1964

Nonfarm Income Reported	Economic Class of Farm							
	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	Part Time	Part Retirement
None	608	2,615	9,383	7,823	3,691	1,540	87	130
$1 - 499	146	1,128	4,215	4,416	2,009	821	156	672
$ 500 - 999	143	688	3,040	3,224	1,928	616	123	1,360
1000 - 1499	69	536	2,245	2,529	1,590	464	198	1,538
1500 - 1999	93	544	1,558	1,919	1,265	391	294	1,160
$2000 - 2999	141	516	2,217	2,805	1,889	595	884	1,499
$3000 - 3999	131	462	1,662	2,403	1,635	382	1,544	639
$4000 - 4999	104	379	1,161	1,996	1,435	275	2,467	326
$5000 and over	358	937	2,936	5,047	4,591	617	9,004	772
Total Farms	1,793	7,805	28,417	32,162	20,033	5,701	14,757	8,096

Source: 1964 United States Census of Agriculture, Volume 1, Part 14.

TABLE 4

Estimated Numbers of Farm Families with Income from All Sources Below Minimum Acceptable Levels, Wisconsin, 1964

Economic Class	Number of Farm Families
I (Sales of $40,000 or more)	None
II (Sales of $20,000 to $39,999)	None
III (Sales of $10,000 to $19,999)	None
IV (Sales of $5,000 to $9,999)	15,463
V (Sales of $2,500 to $4,999)	9,218
VI (Sales of $50 to $2,499)	3,832
Part Time (Sales of $50 to $2,499)	1,300
Part Retirement (Sales of $50 to $2,499)	3,700
Total poverty farms	33,513

Action programs or research conducted on a county basis may find cost advantages where there are large numbers of poverty-level farmers per county and per square mile. However, the dispersion of poverty-level farmers among the total population of farmers is also relevant. Where poverty-level farmers comprise a high percentage of total farmers, a depressed area may exist--a different kind of problem from poverty among affluence.

Poverty-level farmers range from 16 per cent to 38 per cent of total farmers among the counties (see Figure 3 and Table 5). There is no mutual relationship between the number of poverty farms per county and the percentage of farmers who are poor ($r = -.135$, $n = 71$). The "depressed area" with a high percentage of poverty-level farmers does not generally

TABLE 5

Rank of Wisconsin Counties by Number of Poverty-Level Farm Families per County, per Square Mile, and as a Percentage of Total Farms, 1964

Rank	County	Number of Farms	County	Number of Farms per Sq. Mile	County	% of Total Farms in County
1	Marathon	1,449	Kewaunee	1.52	Price	38
2	Clark	1,128	Douglas	1.36	Ashland	37
3	Vernon	1,005	Manitowoc	1.26	Bayfield	36
4	Barron	903	Vernon	1.25	Iron	36
5	Dane	871	Calumet	1.21	Rusk	36
6	Shawano	830	Sheboygan	1.19	Sawyer	36
7	Polk	801	Door	1.15	Taylor	36
8	Dodge	742	Brown	1.10	Washburn	36
9	Manitowoc	740	Barron	1.04	Forrest	35
10	Chippewa	739	Washington	1.02	Lincoln	35
11	Dunn	719	Jefferson	.99	Burnett	34
12	Monroe	710	Outagamie	.99	Juneau	34
13	Waupaca	695	Richland	.99	Marinette	34
14	Grant	694	Pierce	.93	Vernon	34
15	Trempealeau	681	Waupaca	.93	Barron	33
16	Taylor	661	Clark	.92	Crawford	33
17	Oconto	660	Marathon	.92	Door	33
18	Outagamie	627	Trempealeau	.92	Marquette	33
19	Wood	613	Winnebago	.91	Oconto	33
20	Fond du Lac	606	Ozaukee	.89	Portage	33
21	Sheboygan	604	Polk	.86	Richland	33
22	Sauk	589	Racine	.85	Adams	32
23	St. Croix	580	Pepin	.84	Clark	32
24	Brown	577	Fond du Lac	.84	Jackson	32
25	Richland	576	Dunn	.84	Kewaunee	32
26	Door	566	Dodge	.83	Polk	32
27	Jefferson	557	St. Croix	.79	Shawano	32
28	Portage	556	Monroe	.78	Waushara	32
29	Pierce	552	Crawford	.77	Wood	32
30	Rock	518	Waukesha	.77	Eau Claire	31
31	Columbia	504	Wood	.76	Florence	31
32	Kewaunee	502	Dane	.73	Marathon	31
33	Eau Claire	471	Eau Claire	.73	Monroe	31
34	Rusk	469	Chippewa	.72	Pepin	31
35	Crawford	448	Rock	.72	Waupaca	31
36	Marinette	437	Shawano	.71	Chippewa	30
37	Washington	435	Sauk	.70	Dunn	30
38	Waukesha	430	Portage	.69	Trempealeau	30
39	Jackson	426	Taylor	.68	Douglas	29

TABLE 5 (cont.)

Rank	County	Number of Farms	County	Number of Farms per Sq. Mile	County	% of Total Farms in County
40	Price	417	Green Lake	.67	Langlade	29
41	Winnebago	414	Columbia	.65	Pierce	29
42	Iowa	408	La Crosse	.63	Manitowoc	28
43	Juneau	390	Oconto	.60	Milwaukee	28
44	Calumet	382	Waushara	.60	Brown	27
45	Waushara	376	Grant	.59	St. Croix	27
46	Buffalo	359	Kenosha	.59	Vilas	27
47	Lincoln	346	Walworth	.56	Calumet	26
48	Green	319	Marquette	.56	La Crosse	26
49	Walworth	313	Iowa	.54	Sheboygan	26
50	Bayfield	294	Green	.54	Waukesha	26
51	La Crosse	293	Rusk	.52	Winnebago	26
52	Racine	286	Buffalo	.50	Buffalo	25
53	Langlade	278	Juneau	.49	Green Lake	25
54	Lafayette	277	Milwaukee	.47	Jefferson	25
55	Burnett	272	Lafayette	.43	Oneida	25
56	Marquette	256	Jackson	.43	Outagamie	25
57	Washburn	247	Lincoln	.38	Sauk	25
58	Green Lake	237	Price	.33	Washington	25
59	Ozaukee	208	Marinette	.32	Columbia	24
60	Ashland	199	Langlade	.32	Ozaukee	24
61	Pepin	199	Burnett	.32	Racine	24
62	Adams	197	Washburn	.30	Grant	23
63	Douglas	178	Adams	.29	Iowa	23
64	Sawyer	175	Bayfield	.20	Dodge	22
65	Kenosha	161	Ashland	.19	Fond du Lac	22
66	Milwaukee	113	Sawyer	.14	Dane	21
67	Forrest	84	Florence	.10	Rock	21
68	Oneida	54	Forrest	.08	Kenosha	20
69	Florence	48	Iron	.06	Walworth	18
70	Iron	42	Oneida	.05	Green	17
71	Vilas	29	Vilas	.03	Lafayette	16

coincide with the counties that have large numbers of such farmers. Counties with few farmers per square mile, e.g., northern Wisconsin, tend to have a high percentage of low-income farmers but few low-income farmers per square mile or in absolute numbers. The coefficient of correlation between number of poverty-level farms per square mile and percentage who are poor is -.338.

Poverty Areas

No one principal poverty farming area emerges from this cursory view of Census data. The counties with the largest numbers of poverty-level farmers generally form a belt from Polk County eastward across the state to Door and Manitowoc Counties. Counties with the most poverty-level farmers per square mile lie along the eastern lakeshore and scattered among the western river counties. The highest percentages of poverty-level farmers are in the northern counties.

Poverty-level farms in Wisconsin occur in all the counties of the state. The number per county is likely to be the best criterion for selecting areas for research or action programs. Data by counties are presented in Table 6.

Summary

The problem of low farmer income is a separate component of "the farm problem" as it has been legislated against in the past.

The definition of poverty must consider many relevant criteria, among which current-year income is no more than a preliminary screening criterion. Classes of farms based on gross farm sales are uniformly available for every county in the United States from the 1964 Census of Agriculture.

Census Economic Classes of farms are useful as an approximation of current-year income for identifying areas with large numbers or high percentages of low-income farms, when adjustments for nonfarm income are made. In Wisconsin low-income farms are widely dispersed around the state and among the counties. Counties with numerous low-income farmers generally are not the same as those having high percentages of farmers with low incomes. The number of poverty-level farmers per county is positively related with their concentration per square mile.

TABLE 6

Number of Poverty-Level Farms by Economic Classes
in Wisconsin Counties, 1964

Economic Class	Adams	Ashland	Barron	Bayfield	Brown	Buffalo	Burnett	Calumet	Chippewa	Clark
Class IV	57	46	407	75	308	184	76	234	361	594
Class V	49	63	262	100	159	86	73	93	191	283
Class VI	39	52	113	56	46	38	62	23	82	117
Part Time	12	13	26	18	22	11	15	9	29	25
Part Retirement	40	25	95	45	42	40	46	23	76	109
Total Poverty Farms	197	199	903	294	577	359	272	382	739	1128

Economic Class	Columbia	Crawford	Dane	Dodge	Door	Douglas	Dunn	Eau Claire	Florence	Fond du Lac
Class IV	213	241	426	422	237	41	313	198	15	335
Class V	141	115	228	181	169	50	197	115	16	158
Class VI	54	44	72	54	58	34	94	70	9	36
Part Time	27	8	44	23	26	21	23	27	4	21
Part Retirement	69	40	101	62	76	32	92	61	4	56
Total Poverty Farms	504	448	871	742	566	178	719	471	48	606

Economic Class	Forrest	Grant	Green	Green Lake	Iowa	Iron	Jackson	Jefferson	Juneau	Kenosha
Class IV	24	385	198	109	236	8	154	266	151	61
Class V	24	167	60	63	91	14	112	144	118	46
Class VI	16	70	19	25	36	9	83	50	60	15
Part Time	6	16	7	11	8	3	17	29	15	14
Part Retirement	14	56	35	29	37	8	60	68	46	25
Total Poverty Farms	84	694	319	237	408	42	426	557	390	161

Economic Class	Kewaunee	La Crosse	Lafayette	Langlade	Lincoln	Manitowoc	Marathon	Mari-nette	Marquette	Menomi-nee
Class IV	265	153	174	132	130	347	756	176	80	(.48)
Class V	150	71	65	81	109	230	423	128	71	(.46)
Class VI	39	34	21	29	48	56	123	58	46	1
Part Time	13	12	4	11	16	30	45	23	11	(.45)
Part Retirement	35	23	13	25	43	77	102	52	48	(.46)
Total Poverty Farms	502	293	277	278	346	740	1449	437	256	1

Economic Class	Milwaukee	Monroe	Oconto	Oneida	Outagamie	Ozaukee	Pepin	Pierce	Polk	Portage
Class IV	28	337	311	10	318	90	87	249	343	219
Class V	34	194	188	12	179	58	47	150	219	165
Class VI	19	78	76	13	54	19	31	62	102	82
Part Time	9	25	22	8	24	9	6	22	32	24
Part Retirement	23	76	63	11	52	32	28	69	105	66
Total Poverty Farms	113	710	660	54	627	208	199	552	801	556

Economic Class	Price	Racine	Richland	Rock	Rusk	St. Croix	Sauk	Sawyer	Shawano	Sheboygan
Class IV	119	96	300	240	184	261	268	45	446	307
Class V	140	80	153	145	157	155	170	46	204	160
Class VI	84	42	57	34	66	64	59	44	73	42
Part Time	22	22	13	29	16	25	22	9	21	29
Part Retirement	52	46	53	70	46	75	70	31	86	66
Total Poverty Farms	417	286	576	518	469	580	589	175	830	604

Economic Class	Taylor	Trempealeau	Vernon	Vilas	Walworth	Washburn	Washington	Waukesha	Waupaca	Waushara
Class IV	285	313	493	2	133	82	193	158	327	138
Class V	217	179	287	5	89	71	123	105	171	109
Class VI	94	91	107	9	40	48	51	55	74	62
Part Time	17	21	24	4	17	13	23	33	27	17
Part Retirement	48	77	94	9	34	33	45	79	96	50
Total Poverty Farms	661	681	1005	29	313	247	435	430	695	376

Economic Class	Winnebago	Wood
Class IV	192	275
Class V	126	182
Class VI	36	60
Part Time	16	31
Part Retirement	44	65
Total Poverty Farms	414	613

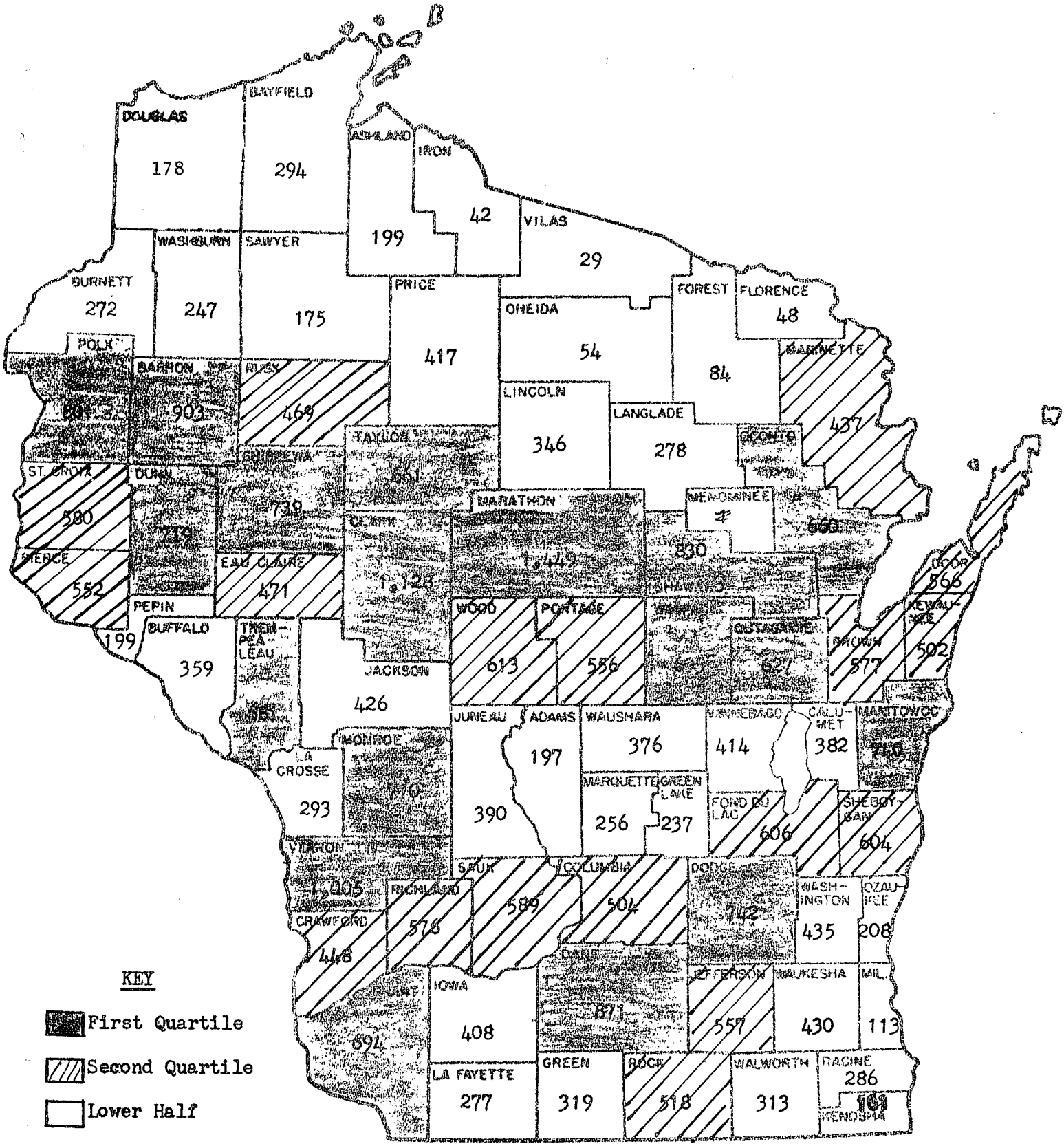

Figure 1. Number of poverty level farms by counties.

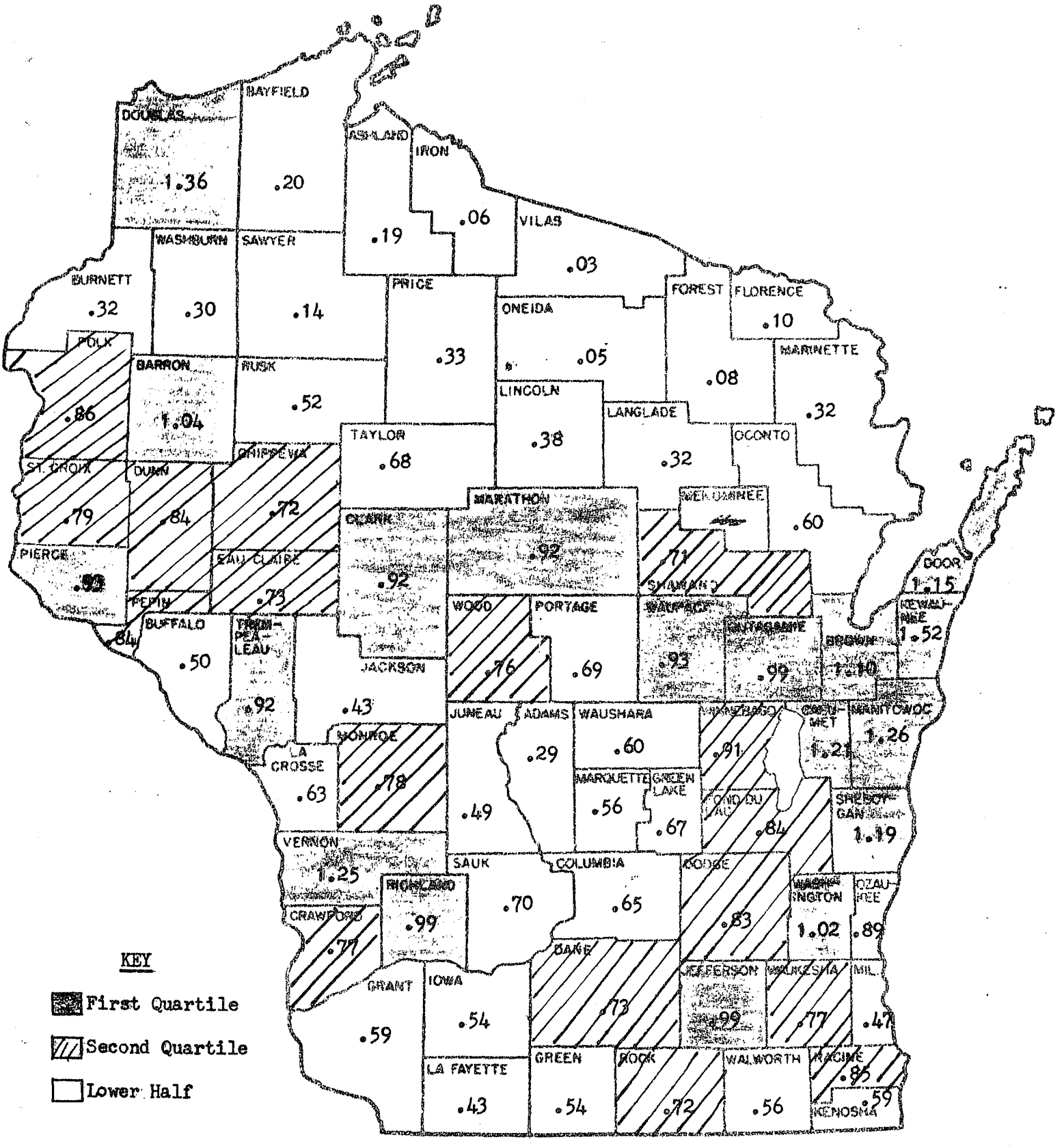

Figure 2. Number of poverty level farms per square mile.

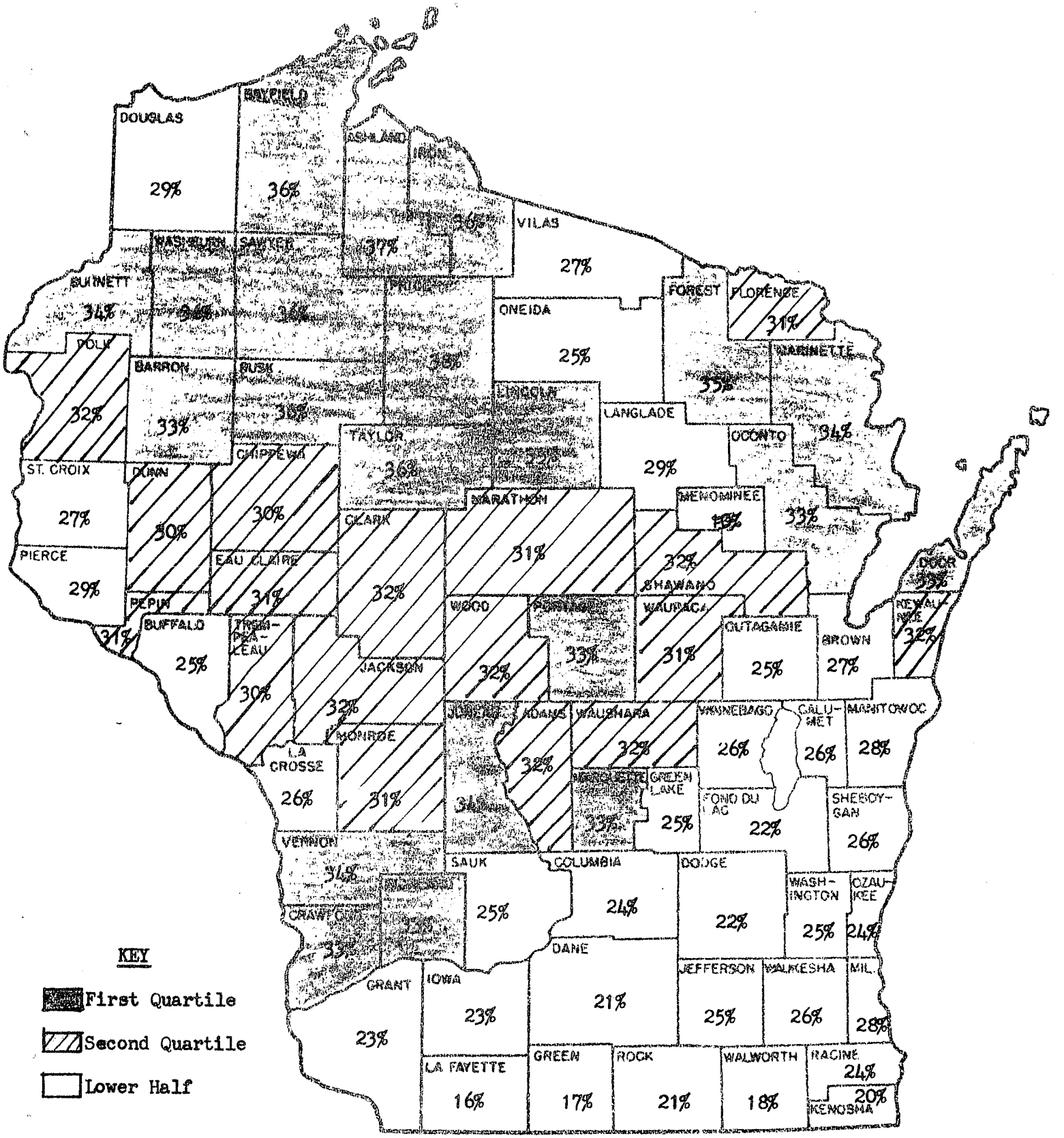

Figure 3. Percentage of poverty level farms (by counties)