

Perspectives

ON POVERTY, POLICY, & PLACE

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What is Rural?

Rural America is usually defined as the 2,305 nonmetropolitan U.S. counties that contain 83% of the nation's land, and are home to 20% (56 million) of the U.S. population. The U.S. government designates the nation's counties as either "nonmetropolitan" or "metropolitan." Nonmetropolitan counties are those outside the boundaries of metro areas and that have no cities with 50,000 or more residents. The U.S. Census Bureau, by contrast, defines as rural those places (incorporated or unincorporated) with fewer than 2,500 residents and open territory. Under this definition, rural America is home to 21% of the population. The terms "rural" and "nonmetropolitan" are often used interchangeably.

Source: Economic Research Service, USDA.
See www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/Rurality/

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The Newsletter of the
RUPRI Rural Poverty
Research Center

OVERVIEW

This inaugural issue of *Perspectives: On Poverty, Policy, and Place* outlines trends in poverty in rural America and looks at the dynamics of persistent poverty in rural places—and as such offers a context for the work of the RUPRI Rural Poverty Research Center, the newsletter's publisher. The Rural Poverty Research Center, a national center of the Rural Policy Research Institute, is one of three Area Poverty Research Centers funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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**Perspectives:
On Poverty, Policy, and Place**

A newsletter of the RUPRI Rural Poverty Research Center

Publisher

Rural Poverty Research Center, a national center of the Rural Policy Research Institute

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Bylines—Each article in the newsletter features the byline “based on research by...”, which signifies that the article, while written by our editorial staff, has been reviewed and approved by the original researcher. With this approach, we hope to disseminate research to a broad audience in a format that is accessible, reliable, and accurate.

The RUPRI Rural Poverty Research Center is one of three Area Poverty Research Centers funded by ASPE/HHS.

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From the Co-Directors

Charles W. Fluharty and Bruce A. Weber

Welcome to the inaugural issue of *Perspectives: On Poverty, Policy, and Place*. The research-based newsletter, a publication of the RUPRI Rural Poverty Research Center (RPRC), is designed to provide a forum for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers seeking to understand how policy and practice can reduce poverty in rural America.

As its title implies, *Perspectives* offers a perspective on rural poverty by summarizing and distilling recent policy-relevant research from both peer-reviewed published sources and promising working papers. It also provides information about opportunities and activities of interest to poverty researchers, policymakers, and practitioners.

Poverty, policy, and place are integrally connected. Poverty rates are consistently higher in rural counties than in metropolitan areas, and both the newsletter and the RPRC seek to understand deep and persistent poverty in rural America and the complexities introduced by social and spatial isolation and remoteness.

Place also affects policy outcomes. The community and spatial context of policy implementation can influence the extent to which policies achieve their desired ends. Where these place-related complexities affect the impacts of policy on poverty and well-being, we will explore alternative policy design and implementation strategies that take the distinctiveness of rural places into account.

The RUPRI Rural Poverty Research Center is one of three Area Poverty Research Centers funded by ASPE/HHS. It is our hope that *Perspectives* and RPRC will serve as a catalyst for more effective collaboration between policymakers, practitioners, and researchers through national and regional conferences and policy briefings, a policy brief series, and this newsletter. The Center also aims to help develop the next generation of rural poverty scholars through an undergraduate leadership program in rural poverty research and policy; doctoral dissertation fellowships; post-doctoral rural poverty research fellowships; and a rural poverty lectureship program. Finally, RPRC will undertake original research on a variety of topics, with its initial efforts aimed at understanding how community organizations can improve low-income family well-being; and on how local labor markets, social ties, and the existence of work barriers affect persistent poverty. As with all national RUPRI policy centers, RPRC is supported by multiple collaborations, including the Regional Rural Development Centers.

FOR MORE INFORMATION SEE: WWW.RPRCONLINE.ORG

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Still Left Behind, But Gaining Ground: Rural Poverty in America

Based on research by Bruce Weber, Greg Duncan, Leslie Whitener, and Kathleen Miller

In 1967, when the President's National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty issued its report, *The People Left Behind*, the rural poverty rate was 25%, almost 70% higher than the urban rate. Fourteen million poor people lived in rural areas, mainly concentrated in the South, the Appalachians, and the Southwest.

Considerable progress has been made during the past 35 years. As of 2000, the percentage of the rural population living in poverty has fallen to 13.4%, or about 7 million people. Urban poverty has fallen as well, to 10.8%. The rural rate is currently about 25% higher than the urban poverty rate.

Nevertheless, poverty, and especially persistent poverty—poverty rates that have exceeded 20% in each decennial census for the past half century—have disproportionately plagued rural regions.

Poverty is deeper and more persistent in rural areas than in urban areas for several reasons, including greater barriers to economic self-sufficiency; the lack of community capacity to provide work and family supports; and the declining effectiveness of policies to improve the well-being of low-income families in rural areas. This article examines these reasons in more detail and offers an overview of the state of rural poverty in America (see accompanying article on persistent poverty as well).

Barriers to Employment

A prominent reason why poverty has disproportionately plagued rural areas are the unique barriers to employment that many rural residents face. Compared with urban areas, for example, local rural labor markets generally offer fewer job options, and average earnings are lower, although lower costs of living in rural areas may offset lower wages (Gibbs, 2001; Kurre, 2003; Nord, 2000; National Research Council, 1995).¹ Unemployment rates during the strong economy of the late 1990s were consistently higher in rural areas than in metropolitan areas, including among single-mother households. Underemployed workers (those who are unemployed, discouraged, low-income and involuntarily working

part-time) are also more prevalent in nonmetro areas (Findeis & Jensen, 1998).

One reason for the bleaker job prospects is the inability of some rural areas to create net job growth that matches residents' education and experience credentials. Howell (2002), documenting a considerable "job-skills mismatch" in the local Mississippi workforce, found that the more rural labor markets were less likely to create enough jobs to absorb the number of workers with low education levels and fewer job credentials. The bleakest outlook was in the Delta region, a historically poor and underserved area.

When jobs are available in rural areas, they are less likely to provide steady employment and advancement, and work is typically concentrated in minimum wage and part-time jobs (McKernan et al., 2000). Rural workers themselves are also less prepared for work. Rural adults as a whole have less formal education, making job search in an already competitive market difficult. According to the U.S. 2000 Census, the percentage of all adults who attained no more than a high school degree was 48% (central city in metropolitan area); 44% ("suburb," i.e., outside central city in metropolitan area), and 59% (nonmetropolitan).

These barriers have implications for the design of welfare policy. Although employment for low-income families in both metro and nonmetro locales has increased since the advent of welfare reform in 1996 and the expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), people in rural areas may have a harder time meeting more stringent work requirements.

Limited Capacity for Work and Family Supports

When low-income individuals do find work, they often need critical supports, such as child care and transportation, to help them to keep their job. Lower population densities in rural areas make it more difficult to establish work supports and services for families, such as public transportation and specialized education and job training. Formal, paid child care is also less available in rural areas. Family

supports, such as health and mental health services, emergency services, and services for those with disabilities, are also often only available in larger locales.

A fall 2000 survey of about 2,700 county governments in 46 states found that programs to assist welfare participants in finding work were primarily in metro areas (89% of metro counties had such programs), followed by nonmetro areas adjacent to a metro area (84% of metro counties had such programs), and nonadjacent nonmetro areas (73%) (Kraybill & Lobao, 2001). A study of work supports available in urban and rural communities in Iowa found that people in small towns were less likely to have access to job training programs and community colleges in their localities than people in the larger towns and cities (Fletcher et al., 2002).

Although working parents everywhere face child care cost and availability issues, parents in rural areas likely face additional challenges. Formal, paid child care is less available, child caregivers generally have less education and training, and rural parents generally have longer commutes to work, adding inconvenience and expense to child care arrangements (Colker & Dewees, 2000; Rural Policy Research Institute, 1999). The problem is exacerbated for low-income workers, who often work hours not well accommodated by child care centers. On the other hand, rural residents often have more extensive and stronger informal personal support networks, which can compensate for weaker formal support services.

Difficulties securing reliable and affordable transportation confront most low-income families, but the challenges are often greater for those in remote rural areas and central cities. In persistently poor rural counties in Kentucky, Mississippi, South Dakota, and Texas, welfare participants often live 20–40 miles from the welfare office or nearest place of employment (Harvey et al., 2002). A study in rural Iowa found that only 24% of welfare recipients owned a vehicle (Fletcher et al., 2002), the same percentage who reported owning a car in a study of central-city Boston welfare participants (Edin & Lein, 1997).

Given limited vehicle ownership, many welfare participants rely on public transportation to commute to work and service providers. Again, location is key. Some form of public transportation is available in 64% of all nonmetro counties adjacent to a metro area, but only 44% of nonadjacent counties (Rural Policy Research Institute, 1999).

Less Effective Policies to Alleviate Poverty

Public assistance has had a modest effect in moving single mothers with children out of poverty, moving them out of deep poverty, and closing the “poverty gap” (the gap between their incomes and the poverty line for their family). For the most part, welfare reform’s effect on poverty did not differ greatly in rural and urban areas. Yet, Lichter and Jensen (2002) find that this ameliorative effect of public assistance for single mothers with children has diminished since 1996 (because of declines in both the percentage who receive this assistance and the amount of public assistance received), and it has diminished more in nonmetro areas.

Gennetian and colleagues (2002) found that, although a welfare-to-work program in Minnesota (the Family Investment Program) raised employment among long-term, single-parent recipients in both urban and rural counties between 1994 and 1996, average employment increases were far smaller in rural counties, and employment effects faded considerably by the end of the second year. The researchers also found no effect on average earnings of rural welfare recipients. The program did, however, increase income (measured by welfare and earnings) for both urban and rural recipients because it allowed recipients to maintain their welfare income as their earnings increased.

Community Attributes and Social Capital

These labor market and human capital factors, and work-family supports and policies clearly play a large role in explaining why rural areas are disproportionately poor, but they do not tell the entire story. Such community attributes as the local social structure, community action, civic participation, ethnic diversity, the power of local governments, and commitment of leadership to economic development can also influence the economic success of an area and its population.²

Social capital, or the relationships of commitment and trust in a community and between individuals, can have an impact on community outcomes. Duncan (1999), for example, finds that poverty persists when communities lack civic participation and are rigidly divided by class and race. Lloyd and Wilkinson (1985) find that solidarity among community members has influenced manufacturing development in rural Pennsylvania.

Political leadership can also influence poverty. Congressional representation and seniority can benefit states and communities with federal funding and “pork” projects. On the other hand, these same decisions may sacrifice long-term goals (such as poverty alleviation) for short-term goals and projects to ensure their reelection. It may also behoove a community to have regular competitive elections and competition between parties. Research has shown that states with competitive political parties have faster income growth than states with less competition (Levitt & Poterba, 1999).

Conclusion

Although the nation has made considerable progress in the last three decades, about 7 million people in rural America still live in poverty. The causes of rural poverty are many and often interrelated. Barriers of distance, remoteness, lack of political clout, lower educational levels, ethnic concentration, weaker economies, and job-skills mismatches are some of the reasons for poverty in rural America. Given these distinctions, policies to reduce poverty in rural America will be more effective if they recognize the diversity of context, resources, and opportunity in different places.

1. This and the following two sections are based largely on research presented in *Rural Dimensions of Welfare Reform*, edited by Bruce Weber, Greg Duncan, and Leslie Whitener (Kalamazoo, MI: W. E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, 2002).

2. This section is based on Anil Rupasingha and Stephan Goetz, “Structural Determinants of Poverty in U.S. Counties: An Expanded Spatial Analysis,” a paper presented at the North American Regional Science Association meetings, San Juan, Puerto Rico, 2002.

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Persistent Poverty in Rural America

Based on research by Kathleen Miller, Mindy Crandall, and Bruce Weber

Almost one in eight counties (12%) in the United States has had poverty rates of 20% or more in every decade between 1960 and 2000. The authors label these persistent poverty counties.¹ Persistent poverty counties are overwhelmingly rural (95% of persistent poverty counties are nonmetropolitan) as well as disproportionately rural (while only 2% of metropolitan counties are persistent poverty, almost 16% of nonmetropolitan counties fit this category, or nearly one in six).

Furthermore, persistent poverty increases as county population centers become smaller and as places become more remote from urban centers. As one moves down the “rural-urban continuum,” the share of counties in persistent poverty increases. Reviewed below are some demographic and economic trends and the characteristics of counties that moved out of

the persistent poverty category during the 1990s.² (SEE BOXED INSET, PAGE 9, FOR MORE INFORMATION ON CONTINUUM CODES).

Where Poverty Persists

The areas of the country where pockets of poverty persist include the South and Southwest, the Appalachian Highlands, the Ozark-Ouachita Plateau, and Native American reservations in the Northern Plains states (SEE MAP).

Table 1 shows how these persistent poverty counties are distributed across the rural-urban continuum codes used by the Economic Research Service. Whereas only 1% of the large metropolitan areas (more than 1 million in population) are in persistent poverty, almost one-fifth (19%) of the most rural counties (completely rural and not adjacent to a metropolitan area) are.

Persistent Poverty Counties: Poverty Rates 20% or Higher in 1959, 1969, 1979, 1989 & 1999

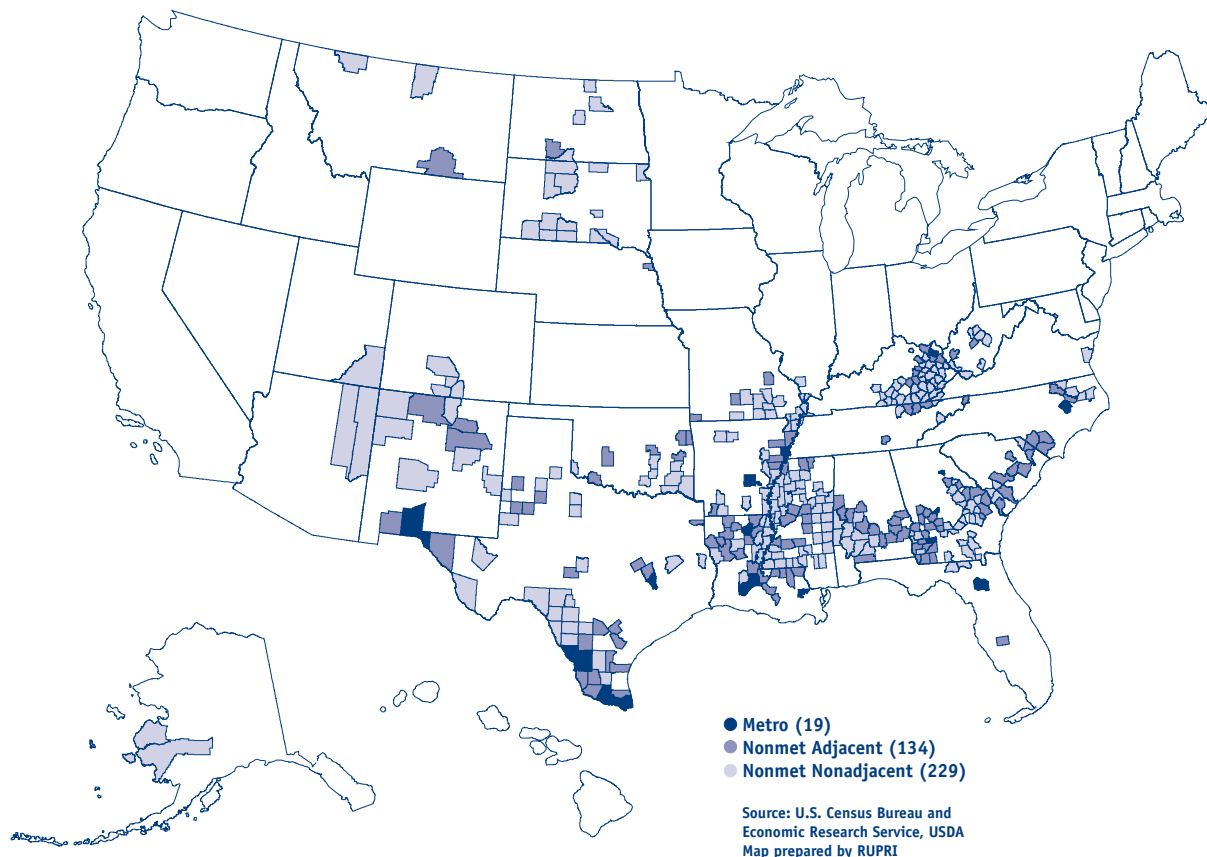


Table 1. Persistent Poverty Counties 1999, by Rural-Urban Continuum Code

Rural-Urban Continuum Code	No. of Counties	PERSISTENT POVERTY AS OF 1999	
		No. of Counties	% of Counties
Central Metro Counties > 1 million	167	2	1.2
Fringe Metro Counties > 1 million	132	1	0.8
Metro Counties 250K-1M	315	7	2.2
Metro Counties < 250K	199	9	4.5
Nonmetro Adjacent 20,000 or more urban	133	10	7.5
Nonmetro Nonadjacent 20,000 or more urban	113	12	10.6
Nonmetro Adjacent 2,500-19,999 urban	607	88	14.5
Nonmetro Nonadjacent 2,500-19,999 urban	649	117	18.0
Nonmetro Adjacent < 2,500 urban	248	36	14.5
Nonmetro Nonadjacent < 2,500 urban	523	100	19.1
All Counties	3086	382	12.4

Table 2. Persistent Poverty Counties 1989 and 1999, by Metro-Nonmetro Status

Metropolitan Status	No. of Counties	Persistent Poverty as of 1989		Persistent Poverty as of 1999		Change	
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
	Counties						
Metro Total	813	36	4.4	19	2.3	-17	-47.2
Nonmetro Adjacent	988	207	21.0	134	13.6	-73	-35.3
Nonmetro Nonadjacent	1285	328	25.5	229	17.8	-99	-30.2
Nonmetro Total	2273	535	23.5	363	16.0	-172	-32.1

Demographics of Persistent Poverty

Persistent poverty counties have distinctive demographic characteristics. They are slightly younger, for example—the percentage of population under age 18 is slightly higher and the percentage over 65 is slightly lower than the national average. The percentage of minority residents is higher in these counties. Education levels are generally lower, and, not surprisingly, median household incomes are lower in persistent poverty counties. Figures 1-4 show how demographic characteristics vary across the Urban Influence codes (SEE BOXED INSET, P.9, FOR A DESCRIPTION OF UI CODES).

The local economic environment in persistent poverty counties is much less favorable than in the nation as a whole. Unemployment rates are higher in persistent poverty counties, and employment is more concentrated in service, farm/forestry/fishing, construction and maintenance, and production and transportation.

Persistent Poverty Dynamics

In 2000, there were 382 persistent poverty counties, down from 571 in 1990. Several characteristics helped these 189 counties to move out of the persistent poverty category.

First, the “leavers” as they are labeled, were more likely to be metropolitan counties, and the nonmetro leavers were more likely to be adjacent to metro areas. Almost half (47%) of the metropolitan persistent poverty counties in 1990 were no longer categorized as such in 2000. In contrast, only 30% of the nonmetro, nonadjacent, persistent poverty counties were leavers in 2000 (see Table 2). Remote (nonadjacent) rural counties were more likely to remain in persistent poverty than those adjacent to metro areas. Clearly, persistent poverty is increasingly a problem of remote rural areas.

Figure 1 Age of Population, 2000, by County Type (all counties and persistent poverty counties)

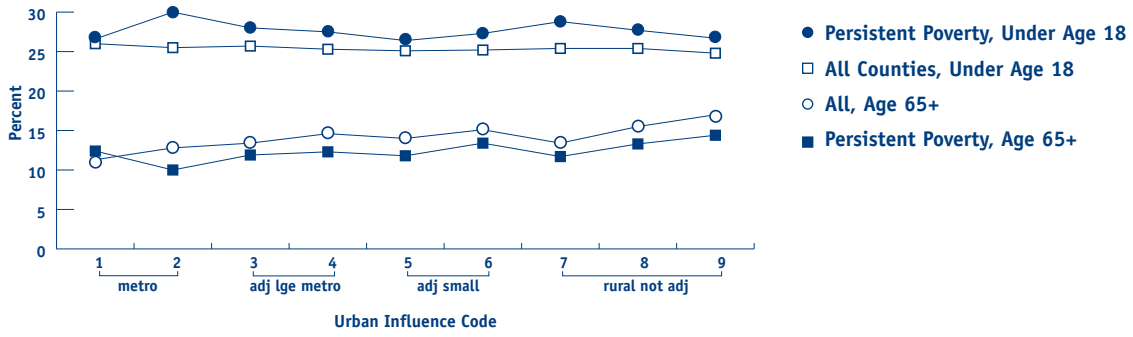


Figure 2 Minority Population, 2000

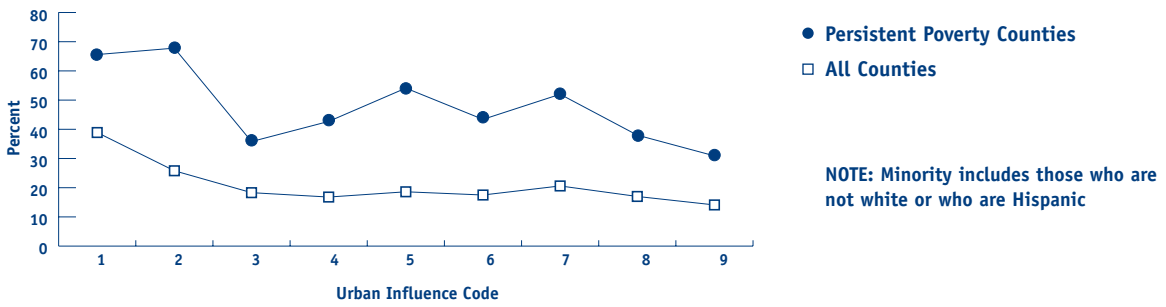


Figure 3 Education of Population, 2000, High School or Bachelor's Degree

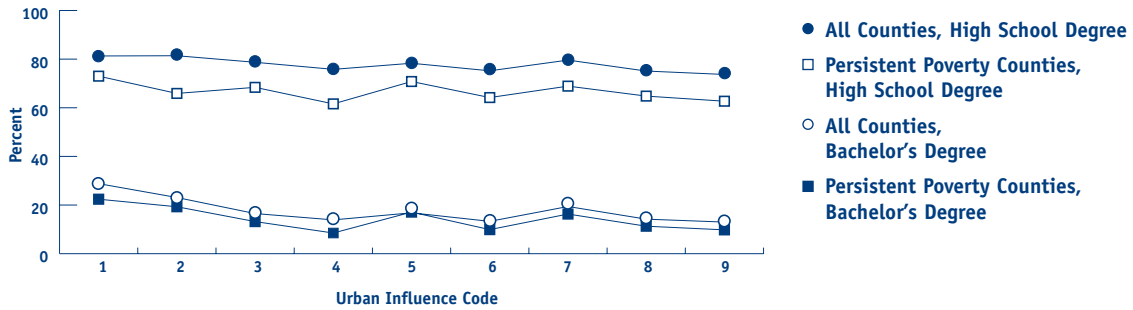
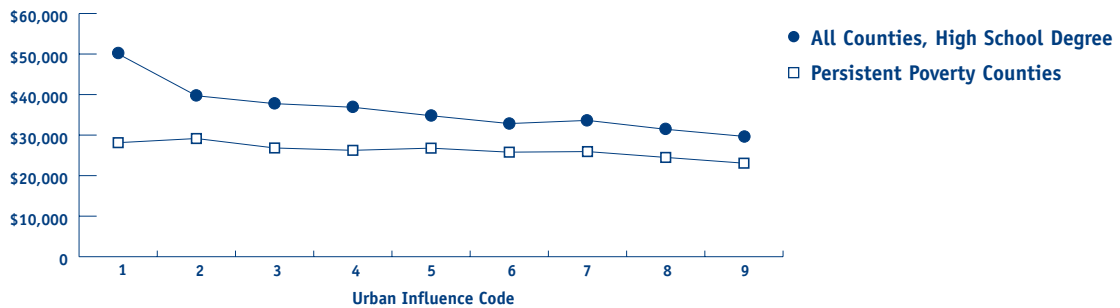


Figure 4 Median Household Income, 1999



However, there were leavers in every region of the country, and if there is a pattern, it seems to be that the leavers are on the fringes of the persistent poverty region. Very few of the leavers are in the center of a concentration of persistent poverty counties.

The leavers also had a smaller share of populations under 18 years old and a higher share over 65 than the counties that remained in persistent poverty, and they had smaller shares of minority residents (30% minority vs. 52%). Unemployment rates are lower and per capita incomes higher in leaver counties, although the types of jobs available are not very different between the leavers and those remaining in persistent poverty.

In short, persistent poverty is most prevalent in the most remote rural places (the percent of counties that are persistent poverty counties increases as one moves across the continuum from central metro counties to completely rural counties). Persistent poverty is increasingly a rural problem, as the counties leaving persistent poverty status during the 1990s were disproportionately metropolitan.

1. The Economic Research Service defines persistent poverty counties as those with poverty rates 20% or higher in the 1960, 1970, 1980, and 1990 censuses. The authors' definition includes those that met this criterion in 2000 as well.

2. This article is based on, "Persistent Poverty and Place: How Do Persistent Poverty and Poverty Demographics Vary across the Rural-Urban Continuum," by Kathleen K. Miller, Mindy S. Crandall, and Bruce A. Weber, a paper prepared for the November 21-22, 2002, conference in Washington, DC, on Measuring Rural Diversity sponsored by the Economic Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Southern Rural Development Center, and the Farm Foundation.

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Measuring Rurality

The 1993 rural-urban continuum codes form one of several classification schemes that distinguish metropolitan from nonmetropolitan counties. The continuum offers a richer metropolitan classification, allowing one to distinguish central counties from fringe counties (suburbs) in large metro areas, and to distinguish medium-sized from small metro places.

The continuum orders metro counties by degree of urbanization and proximity to metro areas. The standard "metro" and "nonmetro" categories have been subdivided into four metro and six nonmetro categories, resulting in a 10-part county codification. All U.S. counties and county equivalents are grouped according to the official metro status. (SEE TABLE 1, PAGE 7, FOR THE DELINEATED CATEGORIES)

A second measure is the **urban influence (UI) codes**. The UI codes collapse metropolitan counties into large and small, and then provide a richer set of categories to describe nonmetropolitan counties. Nonmetropolitan counties in the UI system are classified according to their adjacency to a large or small metropolitan area, and by the size of the largest city within the particular adjacency/nonadjacency category.

1. Large Metro—counties in metro areas of 1 million population or more
2. Small Metro—counties in metro areas of fewer than 1 million population
3. Adjacent to a large metro area and contains a city of at least 10,000 residents
4. Adjacent to a large metro area and does not contain a city of at least 10,000 resident
5. Adjacent to a small metro area and contains a city of at least 10,000 residents
6. Adjacent to a small metro area and does not contain a city of at least 10,000 residents
7. Not adjacent to a metro area and contains a city of at least 10,000 residents
8. Not adjacent to a metro area and contains a town of 2,500 to 9,999 residents
9. Not adjacent to a metro area and does not contain a town of at least 2,500 residents

FOR MORE INFORMATION SEE: ECONOMIC RESEARCH SERVICE, USDA WWW.ERS.USDA.GOV/BRIEFING/RURALITY/RURALURBCON/

Employment Obstacles in Rural Areas

Based on research by Alicia Meckstroth, Michael Ponza, and Michelle Derr

As the first article in this issue notes, rural areas face distinct challenges in raising their poor populations out of poverty. One route to economic self-sufficiency, codified in the 1996 welfare reform legislation, is through work. The legislation intended to enable families to sever their reliance on welfare by mandating employment while providing work supports (such as child care and transitional health benefits).

Given the distinct features of rural America—lower education levels, less child care, fewer services, lower-wage jobs—work mandates might be more of a burden for rural families to meet. Alicia Meckstroth, Michael Ponza, and Michelle Derr, in their Mathematica Policy Research *Issue Brief* and accompanying working paper,¹ examine whether rural Nebraska welfare recipients have had a harder time finding and keeping jobs.

The findings are based on an evaluation of Nebraska's "Employment First" welfare program by Mathematica. The one-time survey in January 2001 asked a statewide representative sample of 400 rural and urban single-mother welfare clients about their experiences with welfare and work during the prior year. (For more information, see www.mathematica-mpr.com.)

Nebraska's Welfare Program and Clients

Employment First was implemented initially in five counties across the state in 1995, with statewide implementation beginning in July 1997. Although many states emphasize on-the-job experience over education and training, Nebraska's program uses a flexible human capital approach. Program staff assess clients' interests and needs and connect them with an individualized mix of employment-related opportunities and supportive services. Consistent with federal policy, Nebraska imposes a five-year lifetime limit on Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) receipt; however, it limits receipt to 24 months in a continuous 48-month period. Nebraska's unemployment rate was below national averages, at 5%, at the time of the survey.

Nebraskan welfare clients are younger (average age is 28) and more likely to be white than TANF clients nationwide. Families have, on average, two children under age 18. Nearly two-thirds of its single-mother TANF caseload resides in Omaha and Lincoln, the state's two urban areas.

The primary data source for this evaluation is the statewide client survey. The study also conducted intensive case studies of the two urban areas, Omaha and Lincoln, and two rural areas, Scottsbluff/Gering and Columbus. Scottsbluff is the largest community in western Nebraska, near the borders of Colorado and Wyoming. It, along with the nearby town of Gering, is generally less prosperous than the other communities surveyed, with higher unemployment and poverty compared with the state average. Starting wages are lower than the state average. Jobs are concentrated in farming and agribusiness, manufacturing, health care, retail, wholesale, education, and tourism.

Columbus, in eastern Nebraska, relies on industrial and manufacturing jobs in the meatpacking, auto, and medical supplies industries. Many of the area's jobs are temporary or part-time and offer few, if any, benefits. The region nevertheless enjoys low unemployment and poverty compared with many parts of the state.

Obstacles Faced

As the study reports, overall, Nebraska welfare clients, both rural and urban, face several obstacles to work, including low skills, mental health issues, domestic abuse, and family health issues, among others. The researchers found that rural and urban residents are generally quite similar in the number and kind of obstacles. Of all the employment obstacles considered, only a few differences between rural and urban families were even marginally statistically significant (at the 0.10 level or higher). Rural clients were somewhat more likely to have an alcohol or drug abuse problem (22% rural versus 14% urban), they were more likely to report three or more personal or family obstacles (20% versus 14%), and more

than half (55%) of rural residents had been victims of domestic violence at some point in their lives, compared with 40% of urban residents (16% of rural residents had experienced domestic violence in the past year).

Transportation issues stymied both urban and rural residents, although rural residents were more likely to report having access to a car and having a driver's license. Only about one-fourth (26%) of urban residents had such access compared with 42% of rural residents. However, urban residents had access to a public transportation unavailable in rural areas. When the researchers defined transportation problems more broadly to include lack of a reliable car, driver's license, or some form of public transportation, 18% of rural and 13% of urban clients reported such an obstacle.

About one-third of both rural and urban residents faced child care shortages, the evaluation finds, and similar numbers had low skills. Mental health issues were also similar across the populations. About one-third suffered a major depressive disorder in the prior year, and 15% in each group had a learning disability. Around 10% had a past criminal record (12% urban and 9% rural), and similar proportions (12% urban and 11% rural) reported physical health problems that could prevent them from working.

Rural residents were, however, more likely to connect with services and their caseworker. About 40% of rural, compared with 30% of urban, residents talked with their caseworker at least every two weeks. Similarly, 64% participated in a work activity compared with 52% of urban residents. More than half (52%) of rural residents with mental health problems had received related services in the last year, compared with 30% of urban residents.

Employment and Wages

Perhaps reflecting a stronger work ethic in close-knit communities and their stronger connection to caseworkers and services, rural residents were more likely than urban residents to be working and to leave welfare, despite facing somewhat higher personal obstacles. Nearly half (45%) of rural clients were employed and no longer receiving TANF within a year, compared with fewer than one-third (31%) of urban clients.

The jobs secured, however, offered lower pay and fewer benefits, reflecting the weaker economic base in rural communities. Fewer than 20% held a job that paid more than \$8 per hour, compared with 40% of urban residents. The average wage for rural clients was \$6.75 and \$7.85 for urban clients. Only about 40% of rural residents had a job with health insurance, compared with about 60% of urban residents.

Policy Implications

Rural and urban Nebraska welfare recipients face generally similar obstacles and hardships. Rural residents, however, are distinguished by more frequent alcohol and drug problems, more family and personal problems, and more domestic abuse. They are also distinguished from urban residents in that despite these hurdles, they were more likely to have left welfare for work between 2000 and 2001. The jobs, however, tend to be low-paying and lack benefits, and job turnover is common.

Given these trends and traits, the authors suggest to welfare program planners that rural clients may especially benefit from enhanced job retention and advancement support after they land a job. Individualized support and job advancement strategies, for example, may help workers move up the job, and economic, ladder more quickly. Career counseling, continued support for education and training, expanded transportation options, and more child care during nonstandard hours may also benefit Nebraska's rural working poor.

1. For the full working paper, see Alicia Meckstroth, Michelle Derr, Michael Ponza, Vinita Jethwani, and Jennifer Faerber, "Preparing Nebraska's Welfare Clients for Work and Addressing Obstacles." Princeton, NJ: Mathematica, August 2002. See also Michael Ponza, Alicia Meckstroth, and Jennifer Faerber, "Employment Experiences and Challenges among Urban and Rural Welfare Clients in Nebraska." Princeton, NJ: Mathematica, August 2002, for the full report on findings from the client survey. For the Issue Brief, see Welfare Clients' Employment Obstacles in Rural and Urban Areas: Lessons from Nebraska, Brief no. 4, November 2002 (www.mathematica-mpr.com).

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