

# Perspectives

On Poverty, Policy, & Place

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The Newsletter of the  
**RUPRI Rural Poverty  
Research Center**

## OVERVIEW

This issue of *Perspectives* highlights select presentations offered at the Western Rural Poverty Conference, the fourth in a series of five meetings on rural poverty convened by RPRC and various cosponsors. This particular conference, co-hosted by the RPRC and the Western Rural Development Center, focused on poverty in the western region of the country with the aim of connecting people and ideas across the worlds of research, practice, and policy.

### Bridging Research, Policy, and Practice:

#### The Western Rural Poverty Conference

By Priscilla Salant

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The conference brought together researchers, policymakers, and community practitioners, and Salant, who offers an overview of the proceedings, details how each of these groups approaches the implications of poverty, and offers suggestions for how researchers can better bridge these often distinct worlds.

### Poverty in the Rural West

Based on research by Annabel Kirschner

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Kirschner examines the unique characteristics of poverty in the rural West, with its large Hispanic immigrant and Native American populations, and the implications of these distinctions for antipoverty policies.

### Responding to the Complex Causes of Poverty in the Northwest

Based on research by David Harrison and Bob Watrus

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Harrison and Watrus report on their recent study of poverty in the Northwest, outlining the area's unique characteristics and offering economic, labor market, human and social capital, and effective land use initiatives designed to address poverty in this region.

### Welfare-to-Work Strategies in Rural Areas

Based on research by Andrew Burwick, Vinita Jethwani, and Alicia Meckstroth

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This article outlines the recent findings by Mathematica Policy Research, inc., on the successes and challenges of implementing three welfare-to-work demonstration programs in rural Illinois, Nebraska, and Tennessee.

## FAST FACT

### Percentage of Persons Living below 200% of Poverty Level, by Region, 2004

■ All   ■ Metro   ■ Nonmetro

The poverty threshold for a family of four (two adults, two children) in 2004 was \$19,157. 200% of the poverty threshold for such families is \$38,314.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau Annual Demographic Survey, March supplement. Available at [http://pubdb3.census.gov/macro/032004/pov/new41\\_200.htm](http://pubdb3.census.gov/macro/032004/pov/new41_200.htm)

### *Perspectives:*

#### *On Poverty, Policy, & Place*

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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.

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## **Bridging Research, Policy, and Practice: The Western Rural Poverty Conference**

By Priscilla Salant

The fourth in a series of five meetings on rural poverty brought together an eclectic group of about 35 practitioners, policy advisors, and researchers in Logan, Utah, April 7–8 for the Western Rural Poverty Conference. Cohosted by the RUPRI Rural Poverty Research Center and Western Rural Development Center, the conference was designed to connect people and ideas across the worlds of research, practice, and policy and initiate a network of people committed to working on a research agenda useful to both practitioners and policy-makers. The agenda focused on the intersection of poverty and tribes, Latinos, social networks, and resource-dependent communities. The two studies that follow, by Harrison and Watrus and by Kirschner, both presented at the conference, offer an overview of poverty in the rural West and frame some of the key issues in such a research agenda.

The conversation at the conference was enriched by participants from several Northwest Area Foundation (NWAFF) partnerships. With a mission of helping communities reduce poverty, NWAFF works in eight states (see the article by Harrison and Watrus in this issue for a recent NWAFF report on poverty in the focus states). Participating practitioners also included the director of a Native American development organization, members of the faith community, and land grant extension faculty.

Conversations such as the one in Logan are a challenge for people who bring such different experiences to the table. It is, after all, much easier and more comfortable to speak a common language with people of a similar background. This particular meeting required patience on the part of people working in low-income communities, where the day-to-day priorities rarely if ever include figuring out a research agenda. Yet by the end of the conference, participants had moved closer to understanding the value of connections between practice, research, and policy. It is at their intersection where we have the greatest effect on poverty.

Clear patterns emerged from the many discussions:

- Researchers tended to ask, What causes poverty and what are the trends in poverty in different places and among different populations?

Priscilla Salant, University of Idaho, splits her time between community development extension work and a variety of externally funded projects. Her research focuses on social and economic trends in rural areas; community engagement at land grant universities; European rural policy; and community information systems.

- Practitioners were more likely to ask about their communities: Who are we and how are we changing? and What are our opportunities?
- Practitioners, policy advisers, and researchers alike asked, What works and under what circumstances?

### Researchers Ask, What Causes Poverty?

For example, a university researcher asked:

- What are the individual and community processes that generate and maintain rural poverty?
- How do public policies and private markets influence these processes?
- How do work and migration decisions of rural people affect their engagement in community affairs, community prosperity, and the capacity to prosper?

Others wanted to know:

- What is happening to income distribution in communities with growing, quality-of-life-based economies? Are income disparities greater in communities with recreation and retirement populations than in others?
- How do the dynamics of poverty differ between rapidly growing Hispanic communities and isolated tribal areas?
- How does residential segregation—for example, in low-income mobile home parks—trap people in poverty?

### Practitioners Ask, Who Are We? What Are Our Opportunities?

A chamber of commerce CEO wanted to learn who is moving into the rapidly growing community in which she

works. “Many newcomers are Hispanics moving here for jobs in the meat packing and manufacturing industries. ... How do we build relationships between new and existing residents? We don’t know how to reach out because we don’t know who they are.”

A tribal member wanted to know how people piece together different sources of income to support their families, and another asked, “How does our tribe contribute to the state’s overall economy?”

As one practitioner from Indian country said, “The lessons we’ve learned come out of our struggle.” The researchers could well have added, “and the lessons we’ve learned come out of our analysis.” The challenge is to build relationships that produce useful knowledge by bridging analysis and struggle.

To design an effective welfare-to-work program, a program director wanted to know the characteristics of people for whom the program was designed. How old are they? What kinds of skills and education do they have? How proficient are they in English?

Both tribal members and those working with Hispanics asked, How accurate are federal sources of data such as the censuses of population and agriculture when it comes to nonwhite communities?

### Policymakers Want to Know What Works and Under What Circumstances?

Policymakers, in contrast, asked, What is “not poverty”? What does success look like? How do strategies change when we focus on creating communities *without poverty*? Several asked where the tipping point is in reversing poverty. When and how does the system change and allow people to begin an upward instead of downward spiral?

Others asked how to improve access to credit, especially for those who have never owned or controlled any financial assets. What kinds of support systems do they need? Others asked what role social capital—trust, norms, and networks—plays in overcoming poverty, or what role the lack of social capital plays in creating poverty in the

first place? They asked when it might be a positive, and alternatively, a negative force for change. They also asked what social capital looks like in tribal communities.

Other policymakers wanted to know which institutional structures, such as the four regional development centers, were needed to bridge the worlds of practice, research, and policy.<sup>1</sup> Finally, a common theme was the importance of honest, patient evaluation, especially, but not only in the case of integrated and comprehensive initiatives. Poverty is complex and multidimensional, but it is also responsive to targeted strategies. We must build our capacity to measure success at the same time we require researchers, practitioners, or policymakers to collaborate with one another.

### Recommendations for Poverty Researchers

For those who study poverty, the implication is that in addition to publishing for our own academic disciplines, we should become engaged and communicate with practitioners and policymakers. When we isolate ourselves and talk only to each other, it becomes much harder to ask the right questions. Too often, then, we are rewarded for

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1. The regional rural development centers link the research and educational outreach capacity of the nation's public universities with rural people and places.

complexity and specialization that are of little interest to practitioners and policymakers. Sometimes, we make our research more complicated than the practice and policy worlds need or want. Practitioners and policy advisers at the conference offered three recommendations for researchers:

- Engage with communities as part of the research process rather than studying from a distance. Learn the history and culture of local people to understand poverty.
- Be clear about why and for whom you are conducting the research. Articulating whether you are attempting to advance science to inform practice or policy tells you what kinds of relationships you need to build beforehand.
- Communicate findings to people who can use them. Reach beyond academic networks if you expect to have an impact.

As one practitioner from Indian country said, “The lessons we’ve learned come out of our struggle.” The researchers could well have added, “and the lessons we’ve learned come out of our analysis.” The challenge is to build relationships that produce useful knowledge by bridging analysis and struggle. In that intersection we will have our greatest impact. **RPRC**

## Poverty in the Rural West

Based on research by Annabel Kirschner

In the past, policies to alleviate rural poverty have focused primarily on agricultural issues and farms. These traditional approaches may be less effective in the economically diverse rural West. Poverty in the rural West is also distinct from that in other areas of the country that have been the traditional focus of poverty policy, such as the South or Appalachia. Therefore, to be effective, antipoverty strategies should be tailored to the distinct characteristics of this region. This article, based on research by Annabel Kirschner presented at the April 7–8, 2005, conference hosted by the RUPRI Rural Poverty Research Center and the Western Rural Development Center, details the distinct characteristics of poverty in the western United States.

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1. In this article the West is defined as Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming.

The West, unlike other areas of the country, is home to large counties and sparse populations separated by great distances.<sup>1</sup> Culturally, the West is also distinct. It is home to the largest concentration of Native Americans and a fast-growing Hispanic immigrant population. In 2000, 13.5% of the nonmetro population in the West was Hispanic. This compares with 5.9% in the South, 2.4% in the Midwest, and 1.8% in the Northeast. Similarly, Kirschner finds, nearly 6% of the nonmetro West is

Annabel Kirschner was the recent chair of Department of Community and Rural Sociology at Washington State University and is currently the interim chair of Apparel, Merchandising, Design, and Textiles. Her main research interests are in community change and development and how these processes intersect with local population trends.

Native American, while only about 1% of both the rural Midwest and South, and less than 1% of the nonmetro Northeast is Native American. Black rural Americans, in contrast, are least likely to live in the West. Slightly less than 1% of the region's population is African American, the smallest representation across all four regions of the United States (see Figure 1).

The Hispanic population is also younger than in other regions. The median age for Hispanics in the West is 24.3, slightly younger than in the Northeast, where the median age is 24.8, and in the South, where the nonmetro Hispanic population is, on average, age 26.1.

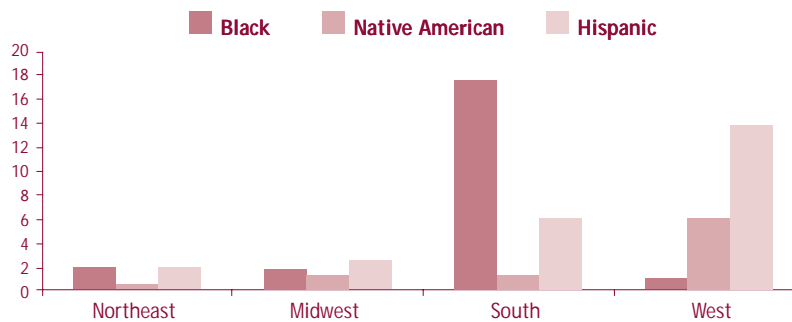
A substantial portion of the young population in the West lives in poverty. Kirschner reports that about one in five youth under age 18 in the West lives in poverty. This compares to approximately 13% in the Midwest and Northeast. Only in the South is the percentage of children in poverty higher, at 28% (see Figure 2).

Likewise, a significant portion of those in poverty are American Indian or Hispanic. A 400-year legacy of discrimination against Native Americans has had a significant impact on the rural West, evident in the high poverty rates of rural Native Americans (31.6%) in 2000 (Figure 3). This regional poverty rate mirrors the national rate for this group, at 31%. Similarly, significant numbers of rural Hispanics live in poverty (22.4%), although their rate is slightly lower than the national poverty rate for Hispanics (27.2%).

Education levels for Hispanics and Native Americans are lower than the average for the region as well. Whereas about 82% of all residents over age 25 in the western United States have a high school diploma, only 66% of Native Americans and 53% of Hispanics do. Likewise, although about 19% of all residents over age 25 have a college degree in the West, only 6.6% and 6.7% of Native Americans and Hispanics, respectively, have college degrees.

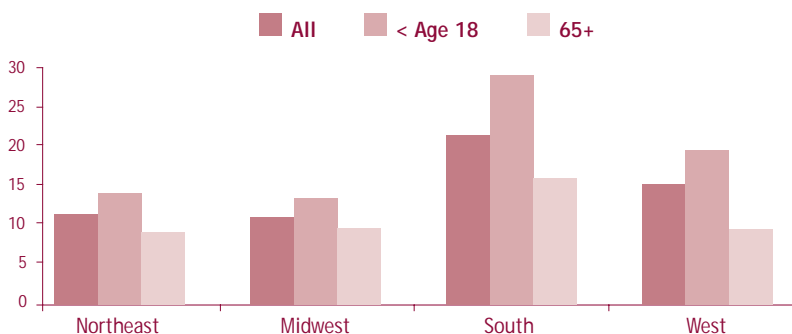
Following from the high rates of immigration in the West, fewer residents speak English as their first

Figure 1.  
Percent of Nonmetro Population by Race-Ethnicity, 2000



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1990 Census of Population and Housing (STF 1 and 3), and 2000 Census of Population and Housing (SF 1 and 3). Washington, DC.

Figure 2.  
Percent of Persons in Poverty by Age and Region, 2000



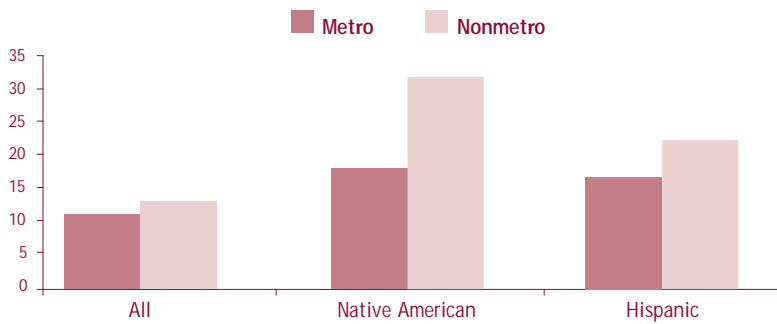
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1990 Census of Population and Housing (STF 1 and 3), and 2000 Census of Population and Housing (SF 1 and 3). Washington, DC.

language. Slightly more than 6% of the West's population is foreign-born (as of 2000), and about the same percentage speak English with limited proficiency.

Economically, western rural areas are extremely diverse. The economy relies on the full gamut of extractive (e.g., mining and forestry) and agricultural industries, from ranching to fruit and vegetable farms, to timber, fishing, and mining. Some western states incorporate all of these industries in their economies, while others depend on one or two. Traditional economies are also being supplemented with growth in the retirement and amenity sectors, and the rapid spread of cities and exurbanization are additional factors affecting the local economies in the West.<sup>2</sup> Although these new economies may offset job losses in traditional industries, they may introduce other prob-

2. Exurbanization is development that occurs between the periphery suburbs and rural areas. Patterns of development are neither wholly rural nor suburban, and the exurbs are often areas that are in transition from their traditional rural setting to something more urban.

Figure 3.  
Percent of Persons in Poverty in West by Race-Ethnicity, 2000



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1990 Census of Population and Housing (STF 1 and 3), and 2000 Census of Population and Housing (SF 1 and 3). Washington, DC.

lems as well. As Kirschner reports, many of the new jobs pay less than the jobs that have been lost. In addition, the rapid population growth often causes a sharp rise in housing prices and property taxes. These changes place a burden on low and even moderate income homeowners and renters, she argues. The additional property and other taxes induced by population growth may not cover the associated costs of this growth. Thus, county budgets may be stretched to cover the construction and improved maintenance of road, new schools, and utility systems, leaving less for food banks, community assistance, and other programs for the low-income population.

Immigration is also causing rapid change in select non-metro counties. Immigrants are drawn to, or recruited by, agricultural and other industries as low-skilled labor for harvesting crops; working in fruit, vegetable, poultry, or meat packing plants; working in forestry; and in tourism. Wages in these industries, Kirschner argues, are traditionally quite low, often seasonal, and have few health benefits. In addition, the work itself may be more injurious to personal health than other occupations. Thus, workers and their families are often very poor, and they may rely on the emergency wards of local hospitals for health care. The immigrant population in the West is

largely Hispanic and composed primarily of young adults and their children. Pregnant and nursing mothers require good prenatal and postnatal care and adequate nutrition. Their children need routine medical care, especially vaccinations, and good preschool and school programs. All are factors, Kirschner suggests, that place a heavy burden on local budgets.

### Implications for Poverty Alleviation Strategies

As Calvin Beale and John Cromartie argued in the fall 2004 issue of *Perspectives*, strategies to alleviate poverty must attend to defining regional characteristics. In their article, Beale and Cromartie illustrated how the reasons for poverty vary by region of the country, from low employment in the Great Plains and among Native Americans, to low English proficiency and low earnings capacity among Hispanics in the Southwest. The need to address both of these issues is certainly pertinent to the large Hispanic and Native American populations in the West. In addition, Kirschner argues, these groups have very different requirements than the older, non-Hispanic white population found in the West and other parts of rural America. It is important that they participate with others at the local community level to design and provide programs to ensure good medical care, adequate nutrition, and quality day care and schooling that their young populations require.

Finally, Kirschner argues, many of the problems that have led to poverty in the rural West, regardless of racial or ethnic group, stem from national and international forces far beyond the control of local communities. Thus, it is important that these rural communities form coalitions and work with congressional representatives and senators to design appropriate national policies that help address the broader, structural causes of poverty. **RPRC**

# Responding to the Complex Causes of Poverty in the Northwest

Based on research by David Harrison and Bob Watrus

As suggested in the prior article on poverty in the western states, the face of rural poverty is largely shaped by its surroundings—geographic and economic—and its demographics. In his presentation at the Western Rural Poverty Conference in April 2005, David Harrison expanded on this discussion, offering several antipoverty strategies that recognize both the complex nature of poverty and the unique aspects that place confers.<sup>1</sup> Labor markets, human capital, discrimination, social capital, and geography all come into play in creating poverty, and governments and nonprofit organizations, the authors argue, must recognize its multidimensional nature to better address the poverty of people and place in concert.

In the Northwest, the focus of their study, poverty has a different face than in other regions of the country.<sup>2</sup> Poverty in the Northwest is whiter (largely because of the region's racial makeup), older, and more likely to be found in two-parent families than in the nation as a whole (see tables and figure for detailed information on other aspects of Northwest poverty as well). Nearly two-thirds of the poor in the Northwest were white, while nationally only 40% of the poor are white (Figure 1). This distinction held true for one other racial group: 5% of the poor in the Northwest were Native American compared with 1.6% in the United States. This is due, in part, to the higher than average proportion of the poor in three states who were American Indian: South Dakota (28.9%), Montana (15.6%), and North Dakota (15.6%).

The degree and type of rurality also influence poverty. The poverty rate in the Northwest is highest in the mostly rural states of Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota; it is lowest in Iowa, Minnesota, and Washington (see Table 1, center column). Over time, poverty rates have grown the most in Idaho and Minnesota (see Table 2). However, statewide poverty rates hide important smaller-area distinctions. For example, South Dakota has a poverty rate of 13.2% (Table 1, center column), but four of its counties have poverty rates of 50% or higher.

1. For the full report, see David Harrison and Bob Watrus, "On Getting Out—and Staying Out—of Poverty: The Complex Causes of and Responses to Poverty in the Northwest" (St Paul, MN: Northwest Area Foundation, 2004), available online at <http://www.nwaf.org/Content/Files/FinalReport.pdf>

2. The Northwest in the authors' study includes Idaho, Iowa, Minnesota, Montana, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, and Washington.

The rates of *severe* poverty (living below 50% of the federal poverty line) at the state level range from a low of 3.2% in Minnesota to a high of 5.8% in both Montana and South Dakota (see Table 1, first column). Yet nine counties in Montana have double-digit severe poverty rates and 15 South Dakota counties face double-digit levels of severe poverty. Understanding these distinctions helps antipoverty strategies better target resources and efforts.

Although the race, age, and household composition data show some differences, the greatest distinction between the Northwest and the U.S. population may be the distribution of poverty among communities. Historically, poverty rates in the nation are highest in central cities, somewhat lower in rural areas, and far lower in the suburbs.

In each of the Northwest states, in contrast, poverty rates in the central cities were lower than the U.S. average (Table 3). Several large northwestern cities had higher rates of homeownership and smaller stocks of deteriorating housing, which, the authors suggest, may have buffered any possible increase. Poverty rates in northwestern rural areas were generally lower than average, in part because of a relatively stable farm-based economy in some areas. Poverty rates were higher, however, in suburban areas in the Northwest than in the rest of the nation. This may be because of rising housing prices in urban neighborhoods, causing the poor to move to suburban areas.

## Strategies to Alleviate Poverty in the Northwest

This short profile of poverty in the Northwest hints at its complexity and diversity. Rarely, however, do organizations combating poverty pay sufficient attention to this multidimensional picture of poverty, and how or whether all of the service pieces fit together. Drawing on the

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Bob Watrus is a Seattle-based consultant to organizations such as The Annie E. Casey Foundation's Making Connections Initiative, Seattle Jobs Initiative, Jobs for the Future and Port Jobs.

Table 1.  
Poverty Rates for Persons in the Northwest and the U.S., 2000

	Severely Poor (living below 50% of the federal poverty level)	Living below the Federal Poverty Level	Living below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level
United States	5.6 %	12.4 %	29.6 %
Northwest region	4.3	10.3	27.1
Idaho	4.6	11.8	33.9
Iowa	3.8	9.1	26.3
Minnesota	3.2	7.9	22.2
Montana	5.8	14.6	37.1
North Dakota	4.9	11.9	31.5
Oregon	5.0	11.6	29.6
South Dakota	5.8	13.2	33.1
Washington	4.6	10.6	25.9

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000

Table 2.  
Poverty Rates for Persons in Northwest, 2000–2003

	2000	2001	2002	2003
United States	12.2 *	12.1 *	12.4 *	12.7
Idaho	11.4 *	12.0 *	13.8	13.8
Iowa	10.0	9.7	11.2	10.1
Minnesota	6.9 *	7.8	8.5	7.8
Montana	13.4	14.6	14.6	14.2
North Dakota	11.6	12.1	12.5	11.7
Oregon	13.2	13.4	13.2	13.9
South Dakota	11.5	11.6	11.4	11.1
Washington	11.6	10.8	11.4	11.0

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2001–2004.

Poverty rates for 2000 differ between Table 1 (center column) and Table 2 because of the different data sources used.

\* Indicates a significant difference at the 90% level between that data and the data from the most current year

Table 3.  
Poverty Rates for Persons by Residence, 2000

	Central City	Suburban	Nonmetro
United States	17.6	4.0	14.6
Idaho	10.4	8.8	13.1
Iowa	12.1	5.0	6.1
Minnesota	15.3	4.4	9.6
Montana	14.8	9.1	15.5
North Dakota	11.5	6.7	13.3
Oregon	14.7	8.7	13.2
South Dakota	9.8	5.9	15.6
Washington	13.6	7.8	14.9

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000

work of a forum of 10 University of Washington faculty members, the authors outline five promising approaches to alleviate poverty in the Northwest.

Intensive community-focused, community-driven initiatives, the authors argue, should recognize the fundamental need to address both people and place, rather than divorcing one from the other. Sponsors of these initiatives should assemble resources that respond to poverty of people in the community in the complex, messy, multi-dimensional way that it exists, rather than trying to force it into a box that gives insufficient attention to some elements and thus dooms interventions to failure. Strengthening the capacity to respond to poverty within a region depends in part on understanding each of poverty's dimensions in the context of both the people and places affected.

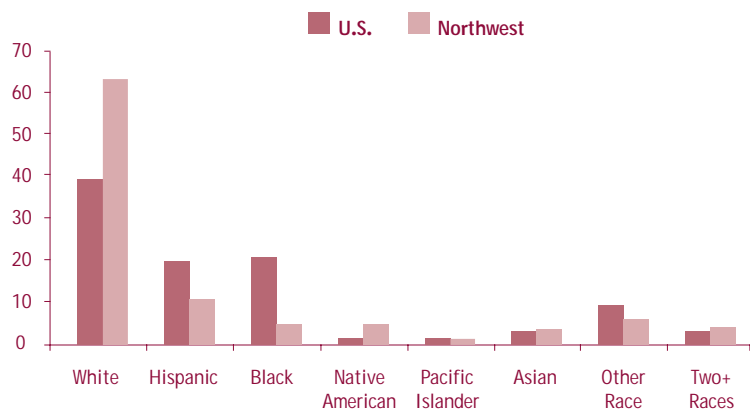
### ***Economic Strategies***

Northwestern states have struggled to respond to the forces of economic change and the income disparities those changes have caused. Although local areas and states are limited in their ability to respond to macro changes such as globalization and trade policy, they can respond with more localized strategies.

Economic sectoral or cluster strategies focus investments in promising companies with clear growth potential. In contrast to a more generic approach that focuses on companies' general needs for capital, access to expanding markets, or an able workforce, sectoral strategies bring together governments and corporate and labor leaders to identify the tailored needs of companies and workers. Further, sectoral approaches target resources to specific communities and sectors. This approach focuses on connecting the poor with opportunities for better paying jobs while recognizing that human capital (such as workforce training) and social capital investments (such as access to job networks) are required, thus reinforcing the notion that solutions to poverty must be multidimensional.

A second economic strategy is a community-based approach that partners with neighboring areas to build the economic base of the region rather than one limited area. Several community-based efforts in the Northwest (such as food processing initiatives in Washington's Yakima Valley), for example, have moved local enterprises toward secondary processing that adds greater value to raw materials,

Figure 1.  
Proportion in Northwest Living in Poverty by Race, 2000



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000. The Northwest includes Idaho, Iowa, Minnesota, Montana, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, and Washington.

involves higher profit margins, more reliable markets and, where advanced skills are required, higher wages.

A third strategy is to create access to capital, through banks or foundations, and tie these efforts to sectoral and community-based initiatives. ShoreBank recently chartered a Northwest bank to spur enterprises in rural communities and Program Related Investments (PRIs) of foundations. In addition, some entities have formed community loan funds and revolving loan funds, and lending institutions seeking to comply with the Community Reinvestment Act have played an important role.

### ***Labor Market Interventions***

Often, the structure of the labor market creates barriers for the poor. Low wages or a preponderance of temporary or part-time jobs, for example, both contribute to poverty and can impede access to unemployment insurance or make child care unaffordable. One way of addressing these labor market conditions is for governments and foundations to create labor market intermediaries—persons who actively work with networks of community-based organizations, industry brokers, employers, unions and training providers to connect people with living wage jobs.

### ***Human Capital Initiatives***

Investing in human capital is imperative in the current economy. Early childhood interventions such as Head Start and improving K–12 education are critical to human capital development, as is job training that partners governments with nonprofit organizations, ▶

business, and labor. Effective features of training, the authors suggest, include:

- Targeting training to living wage jobs in demand in the regional economy;
- Developing training that provides the skills required by employers;
- Replicating the work environment in training facilities;
- Integrating basic- and soft-skills training with job-skills training;
- Structuring training in a way that is flexible, competency based, and open entry, open exit, so that it is easy to access;
- Combining classroom instruction with work-based learning;
- Focusing on living wage employment as the outcome.

### *Effective Land Use*

To address the poverty of place, governments can use land-use planning tools to promote areas of job growth near low-income neighborhoods or implement housing and transportation strategies that guarantee that the poor have access to new jobs. Land use strategies are particularly effective in decreasing race disparities in income.

### *Social Capital Initiatives*

Social capital initiatives build on the economic, labor market, and human capital solutions suggested above. These initiatives can create permanent change in how people use and benefit from information and networks. Community Development Corporations (CDCs) are best known for producing housing for the poor, but they have also engaged in job-creation projects and a variety of other services. Empowerment Zones and Enterprise Communities can be improved with more thoughtful collaboration with other federal efforts and local initiatives. Comprehensive Community Initiatives (CCIs) more broadly affect neighborhood life, including school quality, physical revitalization, and safety. For regional impact, however, CDCs and CCIs must increase their scale. To support this, local and state governments could organize and integrate their services, providing a core service from which CDCs and CCIs can serve the community.

As the authors suggest, society's ability to respond to poverty depends on governments and nonprofit organizations collaborating in ways that have not been common to this point. Through such partnerships—through a results-oriented, community-focused approach that addresses each of poverty's dimensions—communities can find the means to improve the lives of people living in poverty. **RPRC**

## Welfare-to-Work Strategies in Rural Areas

Based on research by Andrew Burwick, Vinita Jethwani, and Alicia Meckstroth

For welfare recipients looking for work, life in rural America presents its own set of unique conditions. Finding a job in a small community, for example, is often a case of who you know—getting an inside scoop on a job opening, or having someone put in a good word with an employer. If local employers are not hiring, residents must cast a wider net, and then buy and maintain a reliable car to get to the job. Residents who face various other barriers to working, such as needed child care, or problems with substance abuse or mental health issues, may find services in rural areas sparse or nonexistent.

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Mathematica Policy Research, inc., recently assessed the successes and challenges of implementing three welfare-to-work demonstration programs in rural Illinois, Nebraska, and Tennessee (impact and cost-benefit analyses are forthcoming).<sup>1</sup> The assessment is based on in-depth site visits between February 2002 and August 2003. The three programs were situated in rural counties with poverty levels generally higher than state averages, and where entry-level jobs were typically low wage and in the service and retail sectors. Social services and supports were also quite limited.

1. Andrew Burwick, Vinita Jethwani, and Alecia Meckstroth, "Implementing Welfare-to-Work Programs in Rural Places: Lessons from the Rural Welfare-to-Work Strategies Demonstration Evaluation." Final report. (Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research, April 2004), available online at: [www.mathematica.org/publications/PDFs/WtWcross-site.pdf](http://www.mathematica.org/publications/PDFs/WtWcross-site.pdf). The evaluation is being conducted with funding from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. Partners in the evaluation are Decision Information Resources and the Rural Policy Research Institute.

Program participants received services over an extended period. Two of the three programs involved participants for over a year, on average. During their most intensive period of involvement, participants in these programs generally met with program staff three or more times per month. Most participants believed the services they received were valuable, and that the programs had helped them improve their outlook and motivation. Although employment gains cannot necessarily be attributed to their participation in the programs, program records showed that about two-thirds of participants in the Illinois and Nebraska programs found at least one job after entering the program.

### The Demonstration Programs

The first program, *Illinois Future Steps*, offered Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) participants and low-income volunteer participants in five rural Illinois counties intensive, employment-focused case management to help them find and keep good jobs. Services included pre- and post-placement supports and services.

The Nebraska program, *Building Nebraska Families*, took a longer-term, educational approach, targeting hard-to-employ recipients of TANF with in-home visits by social work professionals, who helped educate participants on household management, parenting, decision-making, and improving their self-esteem. The goal was to help participants manage these aspects of their lives so they could focus more whole-heartedly on job search and employment. The relatively small caseloads in this and the Illinois program made more intensive intervention possible.

Recognizing the importance of transportation to jobs, *First Wheels*, in Tennessee, offered no-interest car loans to working former or current TANF recipients, food stamp recipients, or those receiving child care subsidies. Caseworkers worked closely with families to plan for and pay their loan, as well as connect them with a set of quality used cars and mechanics when needed.

### Lessons Learned

#### ***Partner Organizations Offered Advantages of Reputation and Expertise***

State welfare agencies partnered with other organizations—a community college in Illinois, a university extension system in Nebraska, and a nonprofit economic development organization in Tennessee—to implement the rural welfare-to-work programs. The positive reputations of these partner organizations helped reduce the

perceived stigma for clients of participating in a welfare-to-work program. According to Future Steps program staff, the partnership was also important for working with employers, who were more likely to respond to inquiries when they were told of the program's affiliation with the community college. The partnering organizations in Illinois and Nebraska had previously collaborated with the welfare agencies in the state, which helped smooth program start-up and operation.

#### ***Rural Families Used a Variety of Services***

Although the programs had a set slate of services they offered, case managers often helped families access other, related services. In fact, in these rural places where few services may be available, clients appeared more likely to turn to welfare-to-work program staff for many kinds of help. Nearly 85% of participants in Future Steps, for example, discussed transportation difficulties with their case manager. About one-half discussed family issues, and about one-third discussed problems of child care, housing, or workplace behavior. First Wheels staff also provided a range of assistance, not only helping participants purchase an affordable car but also linking them with insurers and other services essential to car ownership. In addition, Future Steps and Building Nebraska Families staff helped clients overcome poor reputations and navigate the social services system. For example, Future Steps staff called employers to tell them to expect an employment application from a client and occasionally mediated with employers on clients' behalf, helping to resolve any problems that arose on the job. Staff also could vouch for individuals with a checkered employment history or troubled family life, which could be substantial obstacles in tight-knit rural communities.

#### ***Staff Had to Work Independently and Be Familiar with Local Communities***


As the above descriptions suggest, staff in the rural welfare-to-work programs had to be creative and industrious in their positions, and they needed to work independently, take initiative, and tap into local resources. The programs, in fact, sometimes found it challenging to identify and hire people who had the combination of desired staff qualifications and who were familiar with the rural communities the programs served. Program staff members were likely to be posted far from their supervisors, and they often had large service areas to cover. Therefore, self-motivation was essential. Likewise, supervisors had to develop methods to support staff and monitor their activities from a distance, often by phone and e-mail. ►

Building morale and creating a sense of professional community proved important, as did frequent communication between staff and supervisors.

***Aggressive and Persistent Recruitment Was Necessary***

In rural areas, where potential clients are dispersed, active, coordinated outreach efforts are critical. Identifying eligible clients, informing them about services, and encouraging them to participate can be a lengthy and involved process. Linking compensation for services to enrollment levels was an effective incentive for partner agencies to pursue referrals. Recruitment was most successful when both welfare agencies and partners participated, and it proved critical to clearly define the roles and responsibilities of each partner in the collaboration and keep lines of communication open. If roles are ambiguous or communication is insufficient, important outreach efforts may be deferred or abandoned. First Wheels, for example, had difficulty reaching its recruitment goals, largely because of competing priorities in

local welfare offices and insufficient coordination on outreach between the state welfare agency and its partner organization.

The way rural welfare-to-work programs operate is linked to their context—that is, areas characterized by limited job opportunities and service capacity, population dispersion, and tight-knit communities. The experiences of these demonstration programs suggest that welfare-to-work services may be most valuable for rural clients when they help address both employment needs and a variety of other personal and logistical issues. Program staff members can use personal connections and community familiarity to help vouch for participants and connect them to other needed services. Staff members also often must be able to work independently. Local institutions that partner with welfare agencies to operate programs can bring the advantages of experience delivering services in rural places and a positive reputation in their communities. 

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