

Perspectives

On Poverty, Policy, & Place

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

OVERVIEW

The working poor often face an uphill struggle in making ends meet, and for many rural families, those challenges are compounded by fewer job opportunities, greater distances to work, fewer social services, and even the stigma of government assistance. This issue of *Perspectives* outlines some of the coping strategies that rural working poor families rely on to pull them through as the job market shifts from higher-paying, male-dominated jobs to low-wage service sector jobs, whether that be relying more heavily on disability and unemployment payments, moving from one low-paid job to another as job inflexibility clashes with family demands, or calling on relatives for day care.

Rural Families Choose Home-Based Child Care

p. 2

Kristin Smith

Smith documents that, even though rural children spend more time in day care, their more limited day care options may be putting them at a disadvantage when it comes to school-readiness.

Leaving and Losing Jobs: The Plight of Rural Low-Income Mothers

p. 4

E. Brooke Kelly

Kelly documents the lives of 12 low-income working mothers in the rural Midwest, finding a largely inflexible and low-paid workplace that forces many women to quit (or be fired from) jobs when family conflicts interfere.

Coping with Rural Poverty: Economic Survival and Moral Capital in Rural America

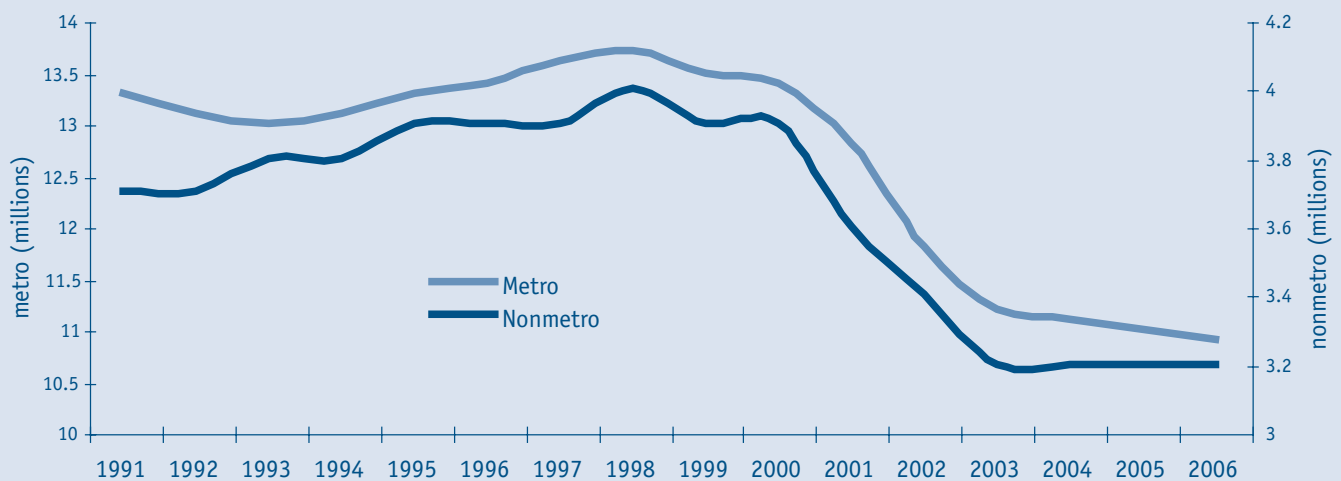
p. 7

Jennifer Sherman

Sherman identifies a range of coping strategies among poor rural families in a northern California economy that has seen male logging jobs decline.

FAST FACT

Metro and Nonmetro Manufacturing Employment, 1991–June 2006



Source: Calculated by USDA Economic Research Service using Current Employment Statistics from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

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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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Rural Families Choose Home-Based Child Care

Based on research by Kristin Smith

From Palo Alto to Manhattan, wait-lists for the best preschools in affluent neighborhoods are overflowing with children whose middle-class, well-educated parents believe it's never too early to prepare for college. That may not be as crazy as it sounds. Research has shown that good quality child care, even for babies and toddlers, enhances brain development, cognitive and language development, and school-readiness, setting the stage for successful early school achievement.

Kristin Smith, in a recent study sponsored by the Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire, shows that rural parents have much less choice in their child care options, relying more often than urban parents on informal—and often unlicensed—day care from neighbors and friends.¹ Because rural preschoolers spend even more time than urban preschoolers in child care, 37 hours versus 35 hours, the use of lower quality child care can be particularly significant. In addition, research has shown that rural children lag urban children in letter recognition and beginning sound recognition when entering kindergarten.² Therefore, to keep rural communities strong and vital, Smith argues, children's educational needs must be addressed, and this must start with quality preschool options.

If the higher use of informal day care reflects a preference for this situation, then it is important to teach relatives, neighbors, and other caregivers about educational components for young children—perhaps through licensing programs—and train parents on the importance of quality care. If, on the other hand, informal situations are being used because they are lower cost and more readily available, then subsidized day care facilities may be the answer. ▶

Kristin Smith is an assistant research professor and family demographer at the Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire. Her research interests include child care, maternity leave, child well-being, and fertility. She has also worked on international population policy in Francophone Africa.

1. Kristin Smith, *Rural Families Choose Home-Based Child Care for Their Preschool-Aged Children*. Policy Brief No. 3. Durham, NH: Carsey Institute, Spring 2006.

2. Cathy Grace et al., “New Clues to Reaching Very Young Children and Families in Rural America,” *Zero to Three*, vol. 26 (2006), pp. 7–13.

More Informal Day Care in Rural Areas

To determine the extent of the difference in rural and urban child care use, Smith examined 2001 data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), a nationally representative sample of U.S. families.

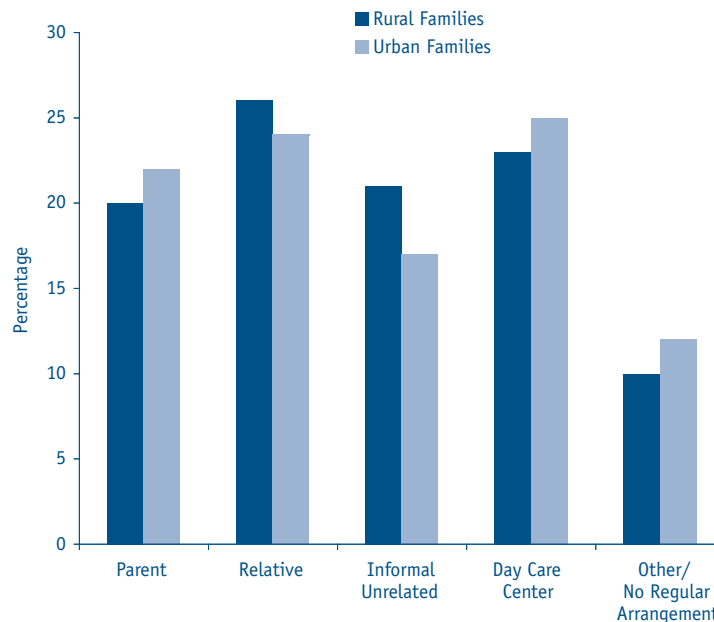
The child care situations used by both urban and rural parents can be categorized into four groups: care by one parent while the other works, care by relatives (siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles), informal care by someone other than a relative (neighbor or friend), and organized care in a day care center. Day care centers can be private preschools, public kindergartens, or federal Head Start Programs. Child care from relatives and other informal providers can be either in the child's home or in the provider's home.

Most parents use a combination of these options to meet their complete child care needs. For example, if one parent leaves early for work, the other may care for the child until the day care center opens. Smith finds that roughly 36% of rural and urban families make use of a relative for part of their child care needs. In addition, roughly 32% of both groups used day care for at least a portion of their child care mix. Approximately 28% of rural and urban families use child care from one parent for at least part of the time while the other is at work. The significant difference between the two groups is in their use of informal day care arrangements from providers that are not relatives. Whereas 20% of urban families make use of this option at some point, 25% of rural families do.

When examining the preferences by primary child care option (the option used for the most hours per week),

the order is similar (see Figure 1). About one-fourth of rural and urban families use relatives or organized day care as the primary child care option, and 21% of families rely on the other parent. Informal day care is again the differentiator, with its use as a primary provider by 17% of urban families and 21% of rural families.

Figure 1.
Primary Child Care Choices among
Rural and Urban Families
(Percentage using each type)



Use of Informal Care Varies by Income, Education, and Child's Age

Rural mothers are more likely to use nonrelative care than their urban counterparts who have similar levels of income and education. For example, rural mothers with moderate to high income levels are more likely to use nonrelative day care than urban mothers of the same income (27% vs. 18%). In addition, 24% of rural mothers with higher

education levels use nonrelative care as the primary care options compared with 18% of their urban peers. In general, all forms of paid day care—relative, nonrelative, and center-based—cost less in rural areas.

The situation is different for low-income parents. Smith finds that 32% of low-income rural preschoolers are cared for primarily by relatives, while only 22% of rural higher-income preschoolers are. Notably, the same trend exists in urban areas, where 29% of low-income preschoolers are in relative care while only 23% of higher-income preschoolers are. This is likely because relative care is often unpaid, or when paid is less expensive than other child care options in both rural and urban settings.

Smith suggests several reasons for the higher use of informal care: it may reflect a preference for informal care, it may be due to a lack of organized care options, or it may reflect the fact that informal situations cost less than organized care.

Policy Implications

If low-income rural families are choosing home-based child care because of cost and accessibility, then rural communities may need more access to affordable, education-based child care centers. Increased funding for the Child Care and Development Block Grant could be used to promote more center-based care in rural America. Expanding the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit and targeting child care subsidies to rural families could also reduce the cost of center-based care.

However, if rural families prefer home-based settings for their preschoolers because of the informal setting, shared values, or the multi-age mix of children, then it is impor-

tant to provide relatives and informal nonrelative caregivers with tools to promote child development and increase stimulation for early learners. These might include workbooks and games that introduce letter recognition and alphabet sounds. Training might also include a discussion of the need to provide opportunities for both large and small motor activities, active and quiet time, and home safety and sanitation. Raising the awareness of parents to the importance of these aspects of their child's well-being would also be helpful. To prepare all American children equally for success in school, the provision of good quality child care in rural areas should be a strong focus of state and federal policy. **RPRC**

Leaving and Losing Jobs: The Plight of Rural Low-Income Mothers

Based on research by E. Brooke Kelly

In many rural communities, the manufacturing, mining, and agricultural industries that paid a middle-class wage have in large part been replaced by a low-wage service sector dominated by women. Where women once stayed at home in traditional rural communities, today they are increasingly called on to supplement, or fulfill, the role of breadwinner.¹ At the same time, reforms in the welfare system that tie welfare to work have caused more single mothers to enter the low-wage workforce. Yet, the service sector and low-wage job market, as E. Brooke Kelly chronicles in her journal article, "Leaving and Losing Jobs," are seldom either attuned to or accommodating of this growing contingent of rural workers.²

Kelly finds that when mothers are faced with an inflexible, low-wage service industry, the only way to meet family needs may be to quit. In doing so, Kelly argues, low-income mothers are exercising the only form of resistance that is available to them. Policies, she argues, aimed at helping rural low-

income mothers find and keep jobs must focus not only on job availability, but also on job flexibility.

Low-Wage, Low-Skill Jobs

Kelly conducted in-depth interviews with 12 rural low-income mothers to examine how working conditions influence job turnover. The women all lived in a county in a midwestern state that was formerly heavily industrialized. All the women were white with, at most, post-high school technical training or some college.

The jobs available to these women were limited to factory and service industries, including clerks, child care workers, bus drivers, bartenders, restaurant servers, housekeepers, dishwashers, and secretarial and data entry workers. All but one of the women interviewed believed that job opportunities were slim.

Wages were generally low, with the best work available paying \$10 an hour. However, the women's lack

1. Ann Tickmayer and Debra Henderson, "Rural Women: New Roles for the New Century." In *Challenges for Rural America in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by David Brown and Louis Swanson. University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 2003.

2. E. Brooke Kelly, "Leaving and Losing Jobs: Resistance of Rural Low-Income Mothers," *Journal of Poverty*, vol. 9, issue 1, April 2005.

E. Brooke Kelly is assistant professor of sociology in the Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice, University of North Carolina–Pembroke. Kelly was a 2003–2004 RPRC dissertation fellow.

of education put these better-paid jobs out of reach of many. Even if they could get a higher-paying factory job, the local temp agency that placed them in the job would often take a cut of the pay, and employment would often be terminated just before full-time employment would have been legally required (typically at the 89th day).

Feast or Famine

In some cases, mothers looking for full-time jobs could not find them. Instead they were offered part-time or temporary work. In other cases, such as with Brandy, “I was hired in, supposed to be full time but only got 32 hours if I got lucky.”

For others, work was exceedingly long. Several reported periods in which they worked 60- to 80-hour weeks, either at a single job or at multiple jobs to make ends meet. According to Erin, she “worked 72 hours in one week and never got paid overtime, never got anything. I was supposed to be a part-timer.”

Holiday workloads could also be overwhelming, as Ellie, a mother of two, indicates:

“When I started, I was working about 40 [hours per week]. Around Christmas time, we had lost a couple people, so most of us were pulling like 60 to 65 hours a week. ...So I was leaving here at 5:30 in the morning, taking the kids to day care, being to work at 6:00, and not getting home until between 4:00 and 6:00 at night. ...Then Ethan [her husband] was over the road too [truck driving] so I was doing everything on my own.”

Inflexible Employers

Many women talked about problems they experienced with inflexible work situations. Laurel, for example, encountered difficulties when she tried to take her mother to chemotherapy during her unpaid lunch break.

“Right in the middle of my mom’s illness, new [management] had come in and decided that, you know, I couldn’t take an extra half hour on my

lunch to take my mom to chemo, even though I was...punched out. I didn’t get paid for my lunches, but the new people who had come in decided that that wasn’t goin’ to happen no more.”

Many of the women tried to negotiate situations that would suit the many demands on their time. Laurel wanted fewer hours so that she could spend more time looking after her teenage daughter, who was having some problems.

“I was bugging them, you know. ‘You’ve got to cut my hours.’ Forty hours a week is just too much with trying to be here and there. And they just insisted on scheduling me 40 hours...and they only paid part-time benefits too. They only considered me part time.”

Brandy, a single mother with two children, also had an inflexible employer when working as a gas station attendant.

“[T]here were a couple of days where I had to call in because the kids were sick or transportation didn’t work out and they didn’t like that at all. They didn’t want to work with me...even though hiring in they knew that I was a single mother.”

Sometimes flexibility came at a price. Laurel recalled working for her neighbor in a meat cutting business:

“George was a really good guy to work for, I mean, if my kids were sick or they needed to go to the dentist, he always understood. ...The only downfall was George likes to hunt and fish, so in the summertime. ...I was there with no job.”

When Quitting Is the Only Option

When they found themselves in inflexible and unstable work situations, it was not uncommon for women to quit the job. Whether they quit or were “let go,” it was usually linked to a conflict over pregnancy, child care, transportation, health problems, or a hostile work environment. ▶

As Clara explained, pregnancy was often a reason for job loss. “I was a housekeeper. And I had a big old black out, and that’s when I found out I was pregnant. ...I had nothing to eat that day because I was in such a hurry to get to work. ...I got real dizzy all of a sudden and down on the floor I went, and they were rushing me to the hospital. ...I called back [to work] to see if I could come back and they told me, ‘No. We have to let you go.’ So, basically, they fired me.”

Liz spoke of compounded child care and transportation problems: “Working at the bank, I had a lot of child care problems. I had a lot of car problems because I was commuting to [a nearby town] and my car wouldn’t hold up. I didn’t make enough money to keep my car running. I couldn’t afford a car payment because I was paying child care.”

Erin lost a job because she could not get time off for her husband’s surgery. “They fired me. And I put on my application I couldn’t work this one weekend when my husband had his neck surgery because I didn’t have a sitter. I even told them three weeks prior.”

In the face of outright hostility, quitting is often the only option. On the assembly line, Clara was often harassed by the men. “They just say things like what they want to do to you [sexually],...things that made me come home and cry and, you know...” Clara never said anything to either the men or her supervisor “because it would just make me look like the bad person. That’s all. You’re just flaunting it off to ‘em or something, you know?” After hiding in the corner and crying, “I just, I said, I’ve had enough. I quit.”

Jenna, a single mother, held her job the longest of any of the participants and attributes it to the flexibility she has in her schedule. As a secretary in a unionized position, she knew she was lucky to have the job she did. “I’m able to take time off when I need it. ...I was here one day, I was here maybe half an hour,...and day care called [and said], ‘Uh, [your

daughter] just threw up.’ [And I said], ‘Okay, I’m on my way. Sorry guys, see ya. Be back in tomorrow, I hope.’ Like I said, they’re really good here about that.”

Laziness or an Act of Resistance?

A cursory view of the employment history of the women in Kelly’s interviews might suggest that at times they were “choosing” not to work. Her detailed interviews show, however, that they wanted to work, but lacked the flexibility to handle the normal personal issues that all workers face. Given the option, they all would have returned to their jobs after the personal issues were resolved. For many of these women, quitting an inflexible or abusive situation was their only possible response in the face of family obligations. Kelly argues that, in deciding to quit, “these women are demonstrating an exertion of power within, and in protest of, a job context that affords them little or no autonomy as workers and people.” She characterizes the women’s quitting as a form of resistance rather than as an act of laziness.

A recent Work and Family Institute project shows that job flexibility enhances employees’ effectiveness, engagement, and commitment on the job, and improves employees’ well-being.

Policy Implications

Kelly’s research underscores the important role of job flexibility in low-income rural women’s ability to lift their families out of poverty through work. Flexibility is needed not only for the tasks that working mothers everywhere face (child care, elder care), but also for the uniquely rural problems of long commutes and limited job opportunities.

A recent Work and Family Institute project shows that job flexibility enhances employees’ effectiveness, engagement, and commitment on the job, and improves employees’ well-being.³ Flex options include daily or weekly flex time (which allows workers to stagger their hours or start and quitting times), compressed work weeks, or flex leaves (which allow workers to take

3. James T. Bond, Ellen Galinsky, and E. Jeffrey Hill, *When Work Works*. Summary of Families and Work Institute research findings. Available online at <http://familiesandwork.org/3w/research/3wes.html>

time off for family or personal issues, both expected and unexpected). Inflexible working conditions, and the turnover that they cause, also prevent many mothers from qualifying for legislative benefits such as the Family Medical Leave Act.

Flexibility in work-based policies themselves is critical, as a recent pilot program in Milwaukee uncovered. The New Hope demonstration program offered low-income working families a set of work supports and income supplements that they could tailor to their own situations. Some chose to use the child care subsidies, others chose to use the subsidized health insurance, still others used a community service job to gain experience. All found the wage supplement to be critical. The result was more choice within families—of which jobs to take, when to hold out for a higher paying job, which child

care options to choose, and more. An evaluation of the program showed not only higher earnings, less poverty, and more sustained work among low-income families, but most important, better outcomes for their children.⁴ As the authors conclude, “the policies tested in New Hope offer a positive and feasible model for the United States to achieve the goals of the American social contract that work should pay, while allowing low-income adults to sustain a reasonable work-family balance.”

Finally, work supports, such as the Earned Income Tax Credit and unemployment insurance, that can stretch low wages or offer security between jobs can help in the balancing act. A higher minimum wage would also help make ends meet. **RPRC**

4. Greg Duncan, Aletha Huston, and Thomas Weisner, *Higher Ground: New Hope for Working Poor Families and Their Children*. Forthcoming by Russell Sage Foundation.

Coping with Rural Poverty: Economic Survival and Moral Capital in Rural America

Based on research by Jennifer Sherman

The history of social policies for the poor in the United States—from the days of almshouses to the most recent welfare reforms—has often been framed, directly or indirectly, in notions of deserving and undeserving poor. Deserted or widowed women, those who were disabled or injured on the job, those who avoided drugs and alcohol were all deemed deserving of support, while those who did not play by those “rules” were often denied or only reluctantly offered support.

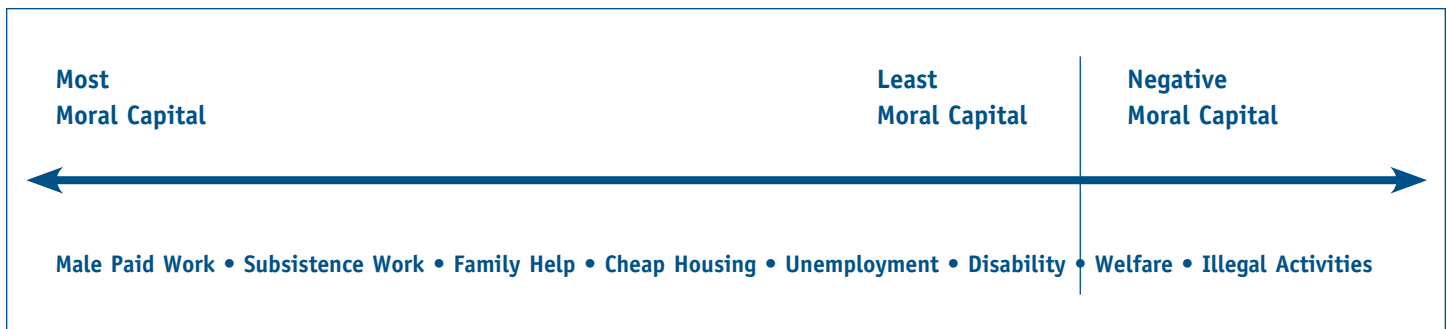
Jennifer Sherman is currently finishing her Ph.D. in sociology at the University of California, Berkeley. She begins work as a postdoctoral fellow at the Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire in January 2007. Her research focuses on the effects of poverty and unemployment on rural families, and explores the ways in which moral, cultural, and gender discourses both constrain behaviors and facilitate adaptations to structural changes in rural settings. Sherman was a 2004–2005 RPRC dissertation fellow.

While overt moral imperatives have been scrubbed from most current poverty policy, their deep history is still evident in the opinions and views of many Americans, perhaps no more than in a small rural California community hit hard by poverty and economic decline. Here, argues Jennifer Sherman in her forthcoming article, “Coping with Rural Poverty: Economic Survival and Moral Capital in Rural America,” moral capital is a critical factor shaping the outlooks for poor residents.¹

Sherman conducted a year-long, intensive ethnographic study in “Golden Valley,” California, living with and interviewing 55 residents in the town of 2,000.² Her work shows clearly how small size, cultural homogeneity, and lack of anonymity in a small rural community can create greater social pressure on the poor to conform to culturally acceptable norms, and the consequences for those who do not. ▶

1. Jennifer Sherman, “Coping with Rural Poverty: Economic Survival and Moral Capital in Rural America.” Forthcoming in *Social Forces*.

2. The majority (92%) were white, with the remaining of Native American heritage. The subjects ranged from 23 to 60 years old, with an average age of 39.



Golden Valley: Rural, Remote, and Poor

Golden Valley (not its real name), located in a remote, forested region of northern California, was chosen as a field site because of its isolation and historical dependence on a single industry, logging, which is now in decline. Today, Golden Valley's residents struggle and compete to secure the limited jobs that remain.

In 2000, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, Golden Valley had significantly higher poverty rates than California as a whole (24% vs. 14%), and its median household income was less than half the state average (\$22,824 vs. \$47,493). It also had triple the unemployment rate (21%) and a significantly lower labor force participation rate (45% vs. 62%). Poverty rates have remained relatively stable over the decade of the 1990s, decreasing from 27% to 24%—tracking nationwide trends. Meanwhile, 16% of Golden Valley households lacked telephones, compared with just 2% in the state as a whole.

Although unemployment increased 10 percentage points from 1990 to 2000, welfare use dropped by half (from 19% to 9.5%). Although some of the decline is attributable to federal reforms to the nation's main safety net programs, Sherman argues that it is also in part due to stigma associated with government "handouts." Residents, she suggests, would prefer to stay in poverty than put their moral capital at risk in the community.

U.S. census data also show that as male participation in the workforce declined (by 8 percentage points), female participation increased by 5 percentage points (from 36% to 41%.) Despite their poverty, when the woods and mills were open, women, and particularly married women, were less likely to work outside the home.

The Moral Capital Scale

From her interviews, Sherman developed a scale of socially acceptable coping strategies and their moral worth in the community. Those who remain to the left of the scale benefit from employment opportunities, community support, and the resulting social capital. Those who veer to the right do so at the risk of being shut out of the community, with significant economic consequences.

Coping Strategies and Moral Capital

The Male Breadwinner

Historically, the key to respectability in Golden Valley has not been wealth, but rather the presence of a male wage earner. There was little shame in living on meager wages earned in a respectable manner.

Tommy, for example, is a well respected young man in the community. A former employee of a logging mill, he recently switched to construction work, which is seasonal and insecure. He supplements this income with occasional side jobs and demonstrates the strong work ethic admired in the community. According to Tommy, the trick to survival in Golden Valley is taking whatever jobs are available.

"Somebody always needs their driveway shoveled, or some firewood, somethin' like that. You just gotta do it," he says.

Nevertheless, he still cannot pay the family's bills on occasion. Liza, his cohabitating "wife," says, "But we always catch back up eventually on our own." Despite the difficulties, Tommy told Sherman, "We got it good." ▶

Subsistence Activities

Subsistence activities (hunting, fishing, gardening, and raising livestock) are also highly valued as work, and as a tie to the masculine culture. George Woodhouse worked in the mill until injury forced him out. Joyce, his wife, worked as a waitress. The mill job was barely enough to keep them afloat, and completely inadequate when they started taking in neighborhood children.

The Woodhouse home became known as a safe haven for youth to escape from troubled families. As George said, “We didn’t drink and do drugs and stuff like that. So everybody that was havin’ drug problems and alcohol problems [at home], and domestic violence, stuff like that, would come to our house because they could sleep here and eat.”

However, providing food for so many strained them financially, and they supplemented work with subsistence activities. “Joyce would go up to the reservoir, the lake, and fish. If she caught fish, then we’d have fish and potatoes... If she didn’t fish, then we’d have potatoes.”

At the time of the interview, the children had moved on and George was no longer employed. Even so, Joyce reported that they smoked and put away for the winter 600 pounds of salmon. They also rely on deer that they “shoot in our yard.”

Family Help

If paid work and subsistence efforts by the man in the family are inadequate, then family help is acceptable, Sherman finds. Family help may consist of cash loans or unpaid child care, and working wives. Even when they work, however, women make less than the poverty-level wages men were paid for the “forest jobs.” Women’s jobs are typically in the service sector, and are often part-time. As a result, the financial benefits of a working wife may not be enough to lift a family out of poverty.

Cheap Housing

Another uniquely rural adaptation is what Sherman calls “cheap housing,” which is generally available

only to those with longer histories in the area or extensive social ties. Again, morally acceptable behavior will determine who benefits and who does not. Beneficiaries inherit family homes or become “care-takers,” providing basic maintenance and upkeep on a property in return for greatly reduced or no rent.

Unemployment Insurance and Disability

For those who still cannot make ends meet, government assistance is acceptable, in specific forms. Unemployment insurance is generally seen as a paid benefit of work in Golden Valley’s seasonal and unstable job environment and is socially acceptable. Supplemental Security Income (known locally as “disability”) is also acceptable, given that it is seen as a mark of injury in an inherently dangerous male work environment. As one

30-year-old former logger put it, “Everything out there is tryin’ to kill you, everything.”

According to census data, nearly 40% of Golden Valley’s working-age men are disabled, and 76% of the disabled are not employed. This compares with a 21% disability rate in the state as a whole, and a reported 40% unemployment rate among the disabled.

For an increasing number of unemployed men, disability has become their main tactic for contributing monetarily to the household.

For an increasing number of unemployed men, disability has become their main tactic for contributing monetarily to the household.

Welfare

Means-tested welfare options are considered by most to be the very last resort. More than one-third of Sherman’s respondents admitted to having received cash assistance or food stamps at some point, yet most considered the experience humiliating. Several respondents confessed to having traveled an hour or more to spend their food stamps where they would not be known. “More than once,” says Sherman, “I witnessed food stamp users being ridiculed by check-out clerks within moments of exiting the grocery store.”

Illegal Drug Activity

Finally, drug dealing is the most socially reprehensible of coping strategies in Golden Valley, particularly if the drug being pedaled is crystal meth (metham-

phetamines), the most commonly abused substance in the area. Those who sell drugs on a large scale are largely isolated from the community, both as a form of self-protection and due to social censure.

The stigma of drug use and welfare, and the lack of anonymity in a rural setting, is evident in an exchange Sherman observed between Amy, an employee of a local business, and a young man in the community who had applied for a job in her office. After he left, having filled out an application, Amy laughed, explaining that they would never hire someone like him. Jeremy, she explained, had done time for marijuana possession and was a “bad egg” and not trustworthy as a worker.

In contrast, Liza and Tommy, who have a 3-year-old son but remain unmarried, are considered pillars of the community. Although both drank and used drugs during high school, they cleaned up as soon as Liza became pregnant, positioning themselves for responsible adulthood. By the time Liza was looking for work, she was known as a responsible and stable mother. She was able to obtain a job working part-time as a receptionist in the local doctor’s office, and part-time as a checker at a grocery store.

Policy Implications

Sherman’s ethnographic research confirms that rural settings such as Golden Valley often place the moral focus on hard work and avoiding “handouts.” Golden Valley’s small size and high cohesion compel the poor to act in mainstream ways. Failure to do so can result

in shame, marginalization, and fewer employment opportunities. In perhaps the most poignant example of marginalization, Angelica, a former drug abuser whose low-paid work forced her to turn to welfare programs told Sherman that she felt so marginalized by the community that she removed all mirrors from her house because she could not stand to look at herself.

Policies designed to help the poor in rural areas should acknowledge that, for many, social disgrace is a fate worse than poverty. While federal social programs remain an important safety net for families, focusing on raising wages and economic development may be more effective in lifting rural families out of poverty. In addition, higher unemployment and disability benefits could help these populations while avoiding the stigma of “welfare.” Expanding the federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) could also help lift working poor families out of poverty, as could instituting a refundable state EITC in California. A 2001 report estimated that a state credit equal to 15% of the federal EITC credit in California would provide an additional \$353 annually for a family with one child and \$583 for families with two or more children.³ Likewise, raising the federal and state minimum wage would also help working families.

Although these findings cannot be generalized to all rural settings given the study’s small size, they offer insights into the struggles of rural poor families to make ends meet and be “deserving” of the help they receive. **RPRC**

3. California Budget Project, Sacramento, March 2001. Available online at <http://www.cbpp.org/>

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