

Rural Poverty Research Center



Place Matters: Addressing Rural Poverty

A summary of the
RUPRI Rural Poverty Research Center
Conference:
*The Importance of Place in Poverty Research
and Policy*

April 2004



RURAL POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Facilitating a policy relevant dialogue on issues affecting RURAL AMERICA

The RUPRI Rural Poverty Research Center is a community of policymakers, practitioners and researchers seeking to understand how policy and practice can reduce poverty across the rural-urban continuum. The RPRC is one of four centers funded by the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE), Department of Health and Human Services.

RUPRI - Rural Policy Research Institute
214 Middlebush Hall | Columbia, MO 65211 | (573) 882-0316

The Importance of Place in Poverty Research and Policy: *An Invited Conference*
Creating a National Rural Poverty Research Agenda
March 3-4, 2004, Washington DC

Wednesday, March 3

Three Conference Framings: The relationship between poverty and place, and the research and policy implications deriving from this understanding.

Karl Stauber, President, Northwest Area Foundation

Rachel Tompkins, President, The Rural School and Community Trust

Charles W. Fluharty, Director, RUPRI

A National Research Perspective

The Impact of Place on Poverty and Poverty Policy: The Rural Consideration

Rebecca Blank, Co-Director of the National Poverty Center and Dean, Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, Univ. of Michigan

Rural Poverty Research and Practice - A Retrospective

Poverty, Policy and Place: A Critical Review of Rural Poverty Research

Leif Jensen, Professor of Rural Sociology and Director, Population Research Institute, Penn State Univ.; **Bruce Weber**, Professor of Agricultural and Resource Economics, Oregon State Univ. and RPRC Co-Director

Community Capacity, Cultural and Social Capital and Rural Poverty

Cornelia Flora, Director, North Central Regional Center for Rural Development

Place-Based Poverty Studies

The Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality: How Place and Race Matter in Housing and Labor Markets

Harry Holzer, Professor of Public Policy, Georgetown Univ.

Welfare, Children and Families: Lessons from the Three City Study for Rural Poverty Research

Linda Burton, Professor of Human Development and Family Studies, Sociology, and Demography, Penn State Univ.; **Stephen Matthews**, Population Research Institute, Penn State Univ.; **Debra Skinner**, Department of Anthropology, Univ. of North Carolina-Chapel Hill

Moving to Opportunity: Lessons about Neighborhoods, Mobility and Poverty

Jeffrey Kling, Assistant Professor of Economics and Public Affairs, Princeton Univ.

Panel Discussion: What Did We Learn About Place Dynamics That Offers Opportunities For The Rural Poverty Research Agenda?

Amy Glasmeier, Professor of Geography and Regional Planning, Penn State Univ.

Greg Duncan, Edwina S. Tarry Professor, School of Education and Social Policy, Northwestern Univ.

Ann Tickamyer, Professor & Director of International Development Studies, Ohio Univ.

William Darity, Jr., Boshamer Distinguished Professor of Economics, Univ. of North Carolina

Thursday, March 4

Policy Perspectives

Don E. Winstead, Deputy Assistant Secretary, Office of Human Services Policy, ASPE, HHS

Clarence Carter, Director of the Federal Office of Community Services, ACF, HHS

Gary Stangler, Executive Director, Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, Annie E. Casey Foundation

April Bender, Partnerships for Quality, Potsdam, New York

Data Challenges in Rural Poverty Research

Leslie Whitener, Chief, Rural Economy Branch, Food & Rural Economics Div., Economic Research Service, USDA

Andrew Isserman, Professor of Urban and Regional Planning & Ag. & Consumer Econs. U Illinois, Urbana

Chuck Nelson, Asst Div Chief, Income, Poverty, & Health Stats. Census Bureau

Debra Strong, Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.

Panel Discussion: Crafting A Sustainable, Collaborative National Rural Poverty Research Agenda: Where Do We Go From Here?

Dan Lichter, Robert Lazarus Professor in Population Studies and Prof. of Sociology. Ohio State Univ.

Miriam Shark, Annie E. Casey Foundation

Bruce Katz, Director, Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy, The Brookings Institution

Barry Van Lare, Senior Vice President, Workforce Services Division, MAXIMUS

Executive Summary

Place Matters: Addressing Rural Poverty

A summary of the RUPRI Rural Poverty Research Center conference,
The Importance of Place in Poverty Research and Policy

“When you’ve seen one rural area, you’ve seen one rural area.”

The Importance of Place in Poverty Research and Policy conference, organized by the Rural Poverty Research Center of the Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI), met in Washington, DC, March 3–4, 2004, to set an agenda for the future of rural poverty research and policy. As with the rural communities themselves, rural poverty is often cast in the shadow of urban and suburban issues. Yet, one in five Americans is rural, and a higher share of rural residents lives in poverty than urban (14% versus 11% for urban residents). Rural children are more likely to be poor, and poverty is more likely to be enduring and persistent in rural areas. Policies to improve the economic conditions of rural families, however, find themselves between a proverbial rock and a hard place. The diversity of needs and capacity in different places makes tailored policies more effective, which argues for community-based policy, yet the limited capacity to fund community-based policy initiatives in many poor communities argues for federal funding, guidelines, and oversight.

This quandary was a recurring theme at the conference. Although there is no silver bullet to eliminate rural poverty, policymakers and researchers at the conference gained important

Policies to improve the economic conditions of rural families, however, find themselves between a proverbial rock and a hard place.

insights for addressing this complex issue. Drawing on what is known from past rural research and offering lessons from the wealth of new, rigorous studies of urban poverty, the conference was a first step in reshaping a research and policy agenda to fit the rural landscape.

The goal of the conference was specific: to identify priority research questions and policy imperatives to be addressed by a national agenda. Toward that end, participants reviewed the existing research on rural poverty, with a special emphasis on that since the 1990s; they explored the experiences of researchers who have conducted large-scale urban poverty projects to discern implications for rural research; they suggested approaches to rural issues that might provide more relevant insights for policy and program decision-making; they examined the data challenges in studying rural poverty, and they laid out steps for future research.

WHAT DID WE LEARN...

...About Poverty?

- Place matters. Rural places have different characteristics than urban areas—different access to resources, different economic structures, different institutions, different social norms, and different demographics—which in turn distinguish the causes and consequences of rural poverty from urban poverty.

- Interrelationships among the factors causing poverty make analyzing the causes of poverty very difficult.
- There is great diversity within and across rural places that precludes simple generalizations about rural poverty.
- Strong links between rural and urban areas make it necessary to study urban and rural poverty as part of an urban-rural system.
- Race matters. Racial differences in poverty rates in both rural and urban areas are larger than can be explained by differences in education, gender, age, and other demographics associated with earning capacity or need.

...About Policy?

- There is no silver bullet to address rural poverty because there is no one cause of rural poverty. Policymakers must approach rural poverty with multiple strategies that more completely reflect the myriad reasons for poverty in rural America. Economic strategies that encourage a greater mix of employers, for example, should be coupled with education investment.
- Urban approaches for reducing poverty and its negative effects are unlikely to be equally effective in rural areas.
- The differences in characteristics, need, and capacity in different locales suggest that community-based solutions will be more effective. The effectiveness of community-based solutions depends on the capacity of a community: its collective efficacy and its resources.
- Policy effectiveness requires a balance between local and federal or state funding. The dilemma, however, is that rural areas' unique conditions call for locally designed policies, yet, because of the higher poverty rates in some of these communities, there are often fewer local resources to fight poverty.
- Policies that focus on basic developmental issues such as asset-building and community development are more likely to succeed in building the coalitions necessary for effective adoption and implementation.

...About Poverty Research?

- Policymakers want clear, timely, and actionable research. The recent successes of rural health care research in affecting policy decisions suggests a model for research in which policymakers, practitioners, and researchers collaborate to define problems and evaluate outcomes.
- The complexity of rural poverty requires a research strategy that is multi-disciplinary, multi-method, and long-term.
- Experimental design research can effectively discern policy and program impacts, but is less helpful in sorting out causes, and often cannot be generalized.
- The fact that people can choose where they live complicates efforts to arrive at clear explanations of the factors that cause poverty in rural areas.
- Research that is designed collaboratively by researchers, policymakers, and practitioners is more likely to be effective in the policy process.

PLACE MATTERS: ADDRESSING RURAL POVERTY

A summary of the RUPRI Rural Poverty Research Center conference,
The Importance of Place in Poverty Research and Policy

Where you live affects your likelihood of being in poverty. How far you are from a job, how isolated you are from commerce and connections, the social norms that shape you—all of these are colored by where you live, and all of these factors affect your life chances. In her keynote paper at the March 3–4 conference on *The Importance of Place in Poverty Research and Policy*, organized by the [Rural Poverty Research Center](#) of the [Rural Policy Research Institute](#) (RUPRI), **Rebecca Blank**, director of the [National Poverty Center](#) and dean of the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy at the University of Michigan, provided a framework for thinking about how poverty and policy are affected by where one lives. Blank laid out five characteristics of rural locales that lead to this difficult struggle with poverty: the natural environment, economic structure, public and community institutions, social norms, and demographic characteristics. These five characteristics were picked up in various forms by all of the conference presenters, and we use them here to frame this summary.

THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

An area's natural environment—its climate, natural resources, and isolation—is often its distinguishing feature, and those endowments often determine its economic vitality, and in turn, its depth and persistence of poverty. As **Blank** outlines in her paper, by definition, cities have fewer problems related to the natural environment. They are located where they are, historically at least, because the locale was accessible to the resources people wanted. Rural areas, in turn, are rural because they lack some geographic advantage. Many of these factors also determine the economic vitality of the region. Geographic isolation, for example, creates distance from product and labor markets. The climate and natural resources in an area often contribute to the types of industries and markets that emerge. Communities with resources that can support multiple enterprises (such as a natural port) are much more likely to develop mixed economies than are communities with a single-source resource (such as rich soil). In short, the geographic attributes of an area set the environmental context that helps or hinders economic development.

ECONOMIC STRUCTURE

The economic structure of an area turns on its mix of industry and job opportunities. Areas with limited industry attract fewer skilled workers, and wages are lower. Areas that rely on one industry are also more susceptible to recessions and other business fluctuations. Lower wages

Fast Facts

- One in five Americans is rural
- A higher share of rural residents lives in poverty than urban (14% versus 11% for urban residents).
- Rural children are more likely to be poor
- Poverty is more likely to be enduring and persistent in rural areas.

How Poverty and Policies to Alleviate Poverty are Shaped by Local Characteristics, by Rebecca M. Blank

[www.minnesotaruralpartners.org/rupri/Local_Characteristics_files/frame.htm]

PowerPoint presentations of are available at www.minnesotaruralpartners.org/rupri/

and limited opportunities, in turn, affect the wealth and tax base available to public institutions, such as schools and health care, diminishing the capacity of rural communities to address social and other problems. Fewer job options can lead to low educational aspirations and narrow views of opportunity, which can perpetuate poverty into the next generation. Fewer jobs also leads to migration from the area, and with it another hit to the wealth and tax base of the community. In other words, in rural areas, poverty and disadvantage can arise because people are unable to cash in on their human capital (education, job experience, etc.), because of the structural conditions, such as fewer services, fewer jobs, fewer opportunities.

This structural view of poverty—that poverty is created by economic and environmental factors—is often countered with a theory of poverty that looks not to the structural conditions but to individuals' characteristics and how people react to their surroundings. As Northwest Area Foundation President **Karl Stauber** reported, economists have traditionally been averse to place-based social policies in favor of programs targeting the behavior or needs of individuals, be that through cash assistance or tax relief or the myriad other government supports. Such individual-based policies are motivated by the belief that people are poor because of a human capital deficit.

Providing support on the basis of place, in contrast, is thought to create incentives for people to remain in stagnate and less prosperous locales, such as the inner city or dying rural towns. Economists attuned to individual choices might argue, as did **Greg Duncan**, Edwina S. Tarry Professor, School of Education and Social Policy, Northwestern University, that when communities can no longer offer their residents opportunity, moving often becomes the better option. The [Moving to Opportunity](#) (MTO) program, an experimental study funded by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and involving 4600 public housing families across four cities, reveals the benefits of mobility. Moving to lower poverty areas, noted **Jeffrey Kling**, Assistant Professor of Economics and Public Affairs at Princeton University and one of its evaluators, led to better health and mental health and improved education outcomes for teen girls (effects for boys were negligible). The incomes of families in the experimental groups improved only marginally over control families, perhaps owing to surrounding policy changes that mandated work in exchange for public assistance as well as robust economic conditions at the time.

Of course, the MTO program focused on inner-city families, and the situations they were leaving were quite dire, with high crime, drug cultures, and other unhealthy conditions. Rural areas rarely share the same degree of social pathology. Yet rural areas do sometimes suffer the consequences of place, and as Duncan noted, “we have heard about the costs to the places left behind, and certainly those have to be taken into account. But surely it can't be the right policy to pour resources into every single town to keep them viable. At what point should policy encourage mobility outside of distressed areas?”

A structural view of poverty—that poverty is created by economic and environmental factors—is often countered with a theory of poverty that looks to individuals' characteristics and how people react to their surroundings, that people are poor because of a human capital deficit.

When communities can no longer offer its residents opportunity, is moving the better option? The [Moving to Opportunity](#) program might suggest so.

MTO website:
www.MTOresearch.org

Ideally, as Blank argues, one would expand the economic development of the region, but the reality is, as Timothy Bartik argued in an Upjohn Institute for Employment Research paper, the benefits of economic development rarely surpass the costs.

COMMUNITY INSTITUTIONS

Cornelia Flora, director of the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development, suggested shifting the frame from economic development to one of building community capacity to address individual problems of low wealth and income. To Flora and others, poverty springs from a lack of assets, voice, and economic self-sufficiency. Increased community capacity—as defined by strong human, social, cultural, political, natural, and built capital—leads to improved well-being. With sufficient capital, communities thrive, and individuals thrive. Strengthen schools and you strengthen cultural capacity by expanding how residents view the world and what they see as changeable. Strengthen the social capital of a group and you bolster economic development. Strengthen political capital among all residents and you bring attention to the issues at hand.

Rachel Tompkins, president of the Rural School and Community Trust, discussed a community institution that is critical to the viability of rural communities: the school system. Not only do schools educate the populace, but in small communities, they are often a major employer and purchaser of goods and services. Yet many rural communities face losing their school to consolidation. Economies of scale that lead to the consolidation and closing of schools is not the answer, she argues. Instead, change should focus on improved financing for rural schools as a way to avoid their consolidation or worse, their asphyxiation. Two approaches to sustaining schools, Tomkins argues, are to pay teachers more based on the costs of encouraging them to relocate to rural areas. Tomkins also proposes abandoning financing systems that are tied to property wealth.

Health care is another critical community institution in rural areas, and **Charles Fluharty**, director of RUPRI and the Rural Poverty Research Center codirector, pointed to the health policy field as a source of many innovative models for improving practice in very small places on a very small scale.

As Flora suggests, community institutions play a vital role in developing community capital. A vibrant set of community institutions and a thriving public sector is what draws people into the community and encourages businesses to locate and industries to spring up. The presence of public-sector and community institutions is a sign of organization and order in a community, and indicates a willingness among residents to work together for a common cause. Community institutions are also critical to the implementation of effective antipoverty programs. As Blank notes, legislation that mandates

Others suggest that poverty springs from a lack of assets, voice, and economic self-sufficiency. Increased **community capacity**—as defined by strong human, social, cultural, political, natural, and built capital—leads to improved well-being.

Schools are critical to the viability of rural communities. They are both a major employer and purchaser of goods, in addition to educating the populace.

Community institutions are critical to the implementation of effective antipoverty programs. Legislation that mandates programs or resources is only as effective as the local government's ability and willingness to implement it.

programs or resources is only as effective as the local government's ability and willingness to implement it.

Strong community capital can also cement economic and social relationships among residents, which in turn can perpetuate and foster stronger links and stronger institutions and development. Those networks can help families remain in the area. Research has shown that those who move tend to lack networks. There is, however, also a dark side to these social relationships. The power of community elite (defined by wealth, ethnicity, or background), as Blank argues, can "capture" special interests that have the power or the funding to subvert public activities to their own personal interests. **William (Sandy) Darity, Jr.**, Boshamer Distinguished Professor of Economics and Director of Institute of African American Research, University of North Carolina, pointed, as an example, to the legacy of desegregation in some southern towns, where black students remain in the public schools while white students have "fled" to the private school system. The community white elite, he argues, have often worked to maintain de facto segregation by controlling funding and curricula that are inferior to the private school system. What happens in schools, he argues, is not always an inability to educate poor children, but a lack of commitment by the power structure.

Power is tangible in small communities. Ensuring an **incorruptible public sector** is therefore critical.

Power is tangible in small communities. Ensuring an incorruptible public sector is therefore critical, as is nurturing strong community organizations such as churches or youth programs that can instill a sense of opportunity or ambition in youth and families who might be marginalized. Harnessing the potential and forging a new capacity should be the goal.

SOCIAL NORMS

Tight-knit rural communities also foster a strong set of social norms, or a framework of rules about appropriate behavior. Strong norms can benefit communities and families, keeping them intact and firmly stitched together. The norms of reciprocity, for example, can be a safety net of sorts for families, knowing they can turn to other family members or close friends for support when needed.

Strong norms can benefit communities and families, keeping them intact and firmly stitched together.

As with social networks, however, norms can also limit opportunities. Girls who grow up in communities where early marriage is the norm, for example, may not pursue their abilities or invest in education. Certain children are taught that life choices are limited for them, making them less likely to protest their more limited opportunities. Networks of reciprocity can also unduly strain families and can prevent people from accumulating wealth. In fact, according to **Cornelia Flora**, the likelihood of remaining poor grows with the number of poor relatives. This often causes rural families to face a tough choice: stay close to family or accumulate assets.

Norms, however, can also limit opportunities.

One method of learning about the norms of a local area or family is

through ethnographic and qualitative research. Large quantitative studies can rarely offer the personal insights that sitting down and talking with people in-depth can. **Linda Burton** and her fellow researchers in the Welfare, Children, and Families: A Three-City Study use ethnographic research to uncover and relate a community's norms to larger policy issues. The Three-City Study is an intensive study in Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio to better understand the effects of welfare reform on the well-being of children and families. The study combines longitudinal surveys, comparative ethnographies, and an embedded developmental study. One interesting finding on social networks and norms is the concept of "jumping scale." In some poor urban communities, families jump scale quite often, relying for certain services and supports on their family and friends who live in better neighborhoods.

Another strong social norm they uncovered is the concept of a "homeplace." Home is the place where people find refuge from the racism, the oppression, the sexism, or the poverty in life. The Three-City researchers found that the sense of homeplace is very strong in rural areas, and is more critical to rural families than in urban areas.

Discovering the social norms of a place is important if the policies and programs are to be effective. Economic incentives and other antipoverty policies are likely to be far more effective when they reinforce existing social norms rather than try to change them. The work mandates under welfare reform, Blank noted, were often embraced by poor women, which likely contributed to their apparent success.

However, some theorists, such as **Flora**, are beginning to invert the lens and ask "whose norms" frame the issue? Perhaps, she argues, we should turn our attention from the norms of poor people to the norms of those who are making the policies, in terms of both value and measurement (what poverty is). Whose norms we look through to shape the picture of poverty ultimately defines its solutions, and its success. An example is the issue of land distribution. As **Darity** argued, rural black poverty in the South may stem in large part from land redistribution policies of the powers that be. Blacks, he notes, managed to accumulate 15 million acres of land in the first half of the nineteenth century, while today, they own only 2 million acres.

Social norms also influence the intersection of race with poverty via the workforce. As **Harry Holzer**, Professor of Public Policy at Georgetown University, demonstrates in his MultiCity Study on Urban Inequality, race was a critical factor in the hiring decisions of a large group of employers, above and beyond issues of spatial mismatch and skill mismatch. The MultiCity Study included information from 8,000 individuals and 3,200 employers in Atlanta, Boston, Detroit, and Los Angeles on minorities' labor market experiences and employers' hiring and promotion practices and racial attitudes.

Ethnographic research can relate a community's norms to larger policy issues.

Three-City study website:
www.jhu.edu/~welfare

Economic incentives and other antipoverty policies are likely to be far more effective when they **reinforce existing social norms** than when they try to change them.

Whose norms we look through to shape the picture of poverty ultimately defines its solutions, and its success.

MultiCity Study website:
www.russellsage.org/programs/proj_reviews/multicity.shtml

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

The final characteristic that Blank suggests shapes the nature of poverty and policy in a locale is demographics, and it is in this characteristic that we perhaps see most clearly the difficulties inherent in studying and addressing rural poverty. As Blank notes, demographic traits—age, race, income, etc—are almost entirely determined by the past history of the place. If a local industry attracts a certain migrant group, the local population will reflect that group. Lower-skilled jobs draw lower-skilled workers with less education. Migration may leave behind a disproportionately elderly population.

Demographics, Blank argues, are helpful in discerning patterns: how many elderly live in a region, how many families earn more than the poverty level, or how many people have a college education. However, demographic trends cannot answer *why* the community is less educated or why the elderly are overrepresented. It is a demographic fact, for example, that rural areas have lower educated population. But do people get less education because they live in rural areas, *or*, do they choose rural living because they have less education (perhaps because rural areas have a preponderance of low-skilled jobs)? In other words, it is difficult to untangle cause and effect when the characteristics of place are so critical a part of the equation.

Demographics are helpful in discerning patterns—how many elderly live in a region, but they cannot answer *why* the elderly are overrepresented.

STUDYING RURAL POVERTY

The consensus emerging from the conference is that it is no longer viable to simply describe the extent of an area's misery. Poverty is more than lack of income. To move beyond describing the extent of poverty in an area requires a new multidimensional, and multidisciplinary, approach. As **Amy Glasmeier**, Professor of Geography and Regional Planning at Penn State, noted, research must explore the role of contextual factors, and develop models that isolate and compare individual and structural factors associated with poverty.

To move beyond merely describing the extent of poverty in an area requires a **new multidimensional, and multidisciplinary, approach**.

There is much research available on rural poverty, but it suffers many limitations. **Leif Jensen**, Professor of Rural Sociology and director of the Population Research Institute at Penn State, and **Bruce Weber**, Professor of Agricultural and Resource Economics at Oregon State University and codirector of the RUPRI Rural Poverty Research Center, summarized the state of the research since 1990, focusing on the quantitative. There is a long history of qualitative and ethnographic work rural poverty that provides a rich and invaluable history, which should continue. As Jensen noted, there is no substitute for the in-depth study that can be attained with qualitative work. It is, however, expensive to conduct, and limited in its generalizability.

There is a long history of **qualitative and ethnographic work** rural poverty that provides a rich and invaluable history, which should continue.

An **annotated bibliography** of rural poverty research is available at <http://www.rupri.org/rprc/biblio051404.pdf>

Quantitative studies of the determinants of rural poverty are generally of

two types. “Community studies” use area (usually county) data and look for correlations between rates of poverty and county demographic and economic characteristics. These studies are subject to an ecological fallacy in which correlations are used to make inferences about relationships of individual characteristics to poverty. “Contextual studies” use individual data and look for relationships between poverty and individual characteristics and the characteristics of one’s area of residence. These studies have more demanding data requirements but may draw incorrect inferences if the personal characteristics that affect choice of residence (rural or urban places, for example) are related to the characteristics that affect poverty.

There have also been experimental and quasi-experimental studies of the impacts of programs and policy on poverty in rural and urban areas. These studies are thought to provide more reliable information about program impacts but are less helpful in understanding causes of poverty.

A key methodological challenge is to account for the interaction of choices about where one lives and about decisions affecting poverty status. Important data challenges involve creating data with better access to geographic identifiers, and better information about community processes and local intermediary institutions. **Jensen and Weber** called for more long-term, multi-method studies *in rural places* of low-income family, safety-net, and work dynamics.

The lack of useful data—its scarcity, the mismatch between geographical boundaries across data sets, and little or no data on processes and institutions—is a particular impediment. In short, the data are inadequate for capturing the variations and nuances of rural America. **Leslie Whitener**, Chief of the Rural Economy Branch, Food and Rural Economics Division, Economic Research Service, of the USDA, reviewed some of the specific challenges, including the challenges and strengths of primary data collection, secondary data sources, and administrative data.

As she noted, primary survey data is excellent if done well, but very costly. Secondary data sources, such as the Current Population Survey, are a less costly option, given that they already exist. However, making them conform to the needs of the study is sometimes difficult. As **Ann Tickamyer** noted, the measures of rurality often differ across various surveys. They also suffer in timeliness. One potentially promising source of secondary data is the American Community Survey, undertaken by the U.S. Census Bureau. As **Chuck Nelson**, Assistant Division Chief of the Income, Poverty, and Health Statistics, Housing and Household Economics Statistics division of the U.S. Census Bureau, explained, unlike the decennial census, the ACS, a large, continuous survey that produces annual and multiyear estimates of the population and housing, uses five-year rolling averages for examining data for small places, including tracts and block groups and small population subgroups. The ACS, in effect, keeps the larger census more efficient by more timely collection.

Quantitative studies are generally of two types: community studies and contextual studies.

A key methodological challenge is to account for the **interaction of choices** about where one lives and about decisions affecting poverty status.

The **lack of useful data**—its scarcity, the mismatch between geographical boundaries across data sets, and little or no data on processes and institutions—is a particular impediment.

One potentially promising source of secondary data is the **American Community Survey**

www.census.gov/acs/www

Research, Whitener suggested, should also go beyond these public use files and obtain access to restricted Current Population Survey, or SIPP files, which can be classified at the county level, and which would allow researchers to create a better definition of rural beyond metro-nonmetro, urban-rural classifications. Another good source of county-level data, she notes, is administrative data. That too, however, has limitations, namely, the data are often not standardized. However, as she reports, the federal government is interested in documenting program impacts and as such is almost certain to improve the state of administrative data.

In a case of the dog chasing its tail, the lack of data can stymie funding interest. The limited data, **Tickamy** argues, has limited past poverty research to mainly local studies, which, as noted earlier, limits the generalizability of the findings, making it difficult for funders and policymakers to act on the findings on a broad scale. As **Miriam Shark**, Annie E. Casey Foundation program officer, pointed out, from a funder's view, research must have a relevant, evidence-driven policy agenda. It must be applicable at the right level, and credible, building on a history of demonstrable results.

Tickamy also noted the lack of systematic comparative studies, which, she says, would allow research to draw broader conclusions. **Greg Duncan** argued that without comparative studies, research risks overlooking the similarities between urban and rural poverty and will be less successful in differentiating the macroeconomic forces, such as deindustrialization, welfare reform, or drug use trends, from the micro forces. It is macro solutions, he notes, that turn into national solutions. Interestingly, in his own work with Bruce Weber comparing welfare reform outcomes in rural and urban areas, they find that the similarities in outcomes were much more striking than the differences.

The call to think expansively and creatively about data and research design was heard frequently over the course of the conference. As **Duncan** said, "think big and roll the dice," create original sources of data, conduct original surveys or longitudinal studies. "Don't lament the fact that there are no large-scale experiments in rural areas like the New Hope project in Milwaukee, or the Moving to Opportunity project. If you think that there is something important to be learned about how rural people might respond to particular program incentives, propose such a project. Bring actionable plans to policymakers and they will notice." One novel idea proposed by Duncan in response to the keen interest on the part of policymakers for random assignment is to devise so-called "natural experiments." By taking advantage of changing conditions that are completely outside the control of the target families, for example, a school consolidation or the arrival of a riverboat casino that suddenly creates many jobs, researchers can measure the before-and-after effect on a particular outcome and attribute with a fairly good degree of confidence any differences in the outcome of interest to the event.

Limited data has restricted past poverty research to mainly local studies, which limits the generalizability of the findings, making it difficult for funders and policymakers to act on the findings on a broad scale

"Think big and roll the dice," create original sources of data, conduct original surveys or longitudinal studies.

Thinking creatively should also involve combining methods and disciplines. Hybrid forms of ethnographic research with quantitative evaluations have many examples in the urban poverty research, and several participants presented results from their own urban studies. **Harry Holzer**, for example, outlined how approaches such as that in the Multicity Study of Urban Inequality can inform rural poverty research. The MultiCity Study was a classic example of understanding the connection between where the jobs are located, where the people are, and the relation between the two. The same methods could be applied to studying how a job search is carried out by rural families, or to revealing recruitment issues, and whether those mechanisms reinforce the issues of space and geography.

Many lessons can be learned from large-scale urban studies.

Linda Burton, a principal investigator in the [Three-City Study](#), reported on combining ethnography with other sources of data and technology. The Three-City Study made explicit efforts to combine several research methods to produce a rich set of findings on the effects of welfare reform on families. Discoveries that can be applied to rural research include the importance of tracing pathways that individuals follow over the course of their day. Once the researchers documented the many stopping points—for child care, for traveling to and from work, for buying groceries or picking up a prescription, for obtaining health care or other services—they were able to use administrative data to document the services and programs used, and create a more accurate picture of the lives of families at the low end of the income spectrum. The study even combined Global Information Systems (GIS) technology with the traditions of ethnography to develop an innovative perspective on families in specific locales. Researchers were able to visualize their data, so to speak, and better conceptualize the history of place-based experiences. All these tools allow researchers to develop a more accurate understanding of the lives of residents in small areas, whether that be urban neighborhoods or rural towns.

Combining ethnography with other sources of data and technology can be especially fruitful.

Karl Stauber offered a guide for thinking about how to tailor programs to local issues, and for marking progress. The typology incorporates social and political links as well as economic resources, and labels communities on a range from deprived to advantaged, although all are nevertheless “poor” communities (see table). Compared with deprived communities, disadvantaged areas have high social and political links but low economic resources. Deprived communities, in contrast, have few social and political links *and* few economic resources.

	Social & Political Links	
	High	Low
Economic Resources		
High	Advantaged	Alienated
Low	Disadvantaged	Deprived

This typology allows one to “drill down” and distinguish by levels of poverty and disadvantage based on the concepts of voice or assets as

introduced by Flora and others. This focus also allows programs to be better tailored to the community needs. Finally, this typology can be used to measure success. To be successful, interventions must move communities progressively up the levels of advantage. Incremental change will allow them to become progressively more successful and progressively easier to assist.

CREATING POLICY-RELEVANT RESEARCH

Beyond the recurring call for multidisciplinary approaches using multidimensional research tools to study rural poverty was the call for that research to be usable and relevant to policymakers and their daily demands. As **April Bender** argued, policymakers need research that is “moveable,” applicable in different areas at different scales; research that is “actionable,” that offers something that policymakers can act on and that can be applied to other populations; and research that is timely, that fit into politicians’ 2–4 year timetable. **Barry Van Lare**, Senior Vice President of the Workforce Services Division of Maximus, added that, “No matter how aggressive you are, policy won’t wait for research. Decisions will go ahead with or without you. You must figure out how to use what you have available to affect decisions.”

One way to influence decisions, he believes, is to make rural poverty a mainstream issue by wrapping it in a larger policy issue. Focusing solely on poverty, he suggests, is not a model that guarantees success. Almost any strategy, for example, that addresses the broader issue of economic development allows policymakers to address issues of rural poverty. Showing policymakers, for example, that ignoring the rural component will prevent them from meeting TANF work mandates, or other policy goals, will likely garner more attention.

Finally, he suggests, researchers should look to examples of interventions and policies that work. The ability to look at the wide variety of policies implemented across the nation and provide real data showing that a program mattered is invaluable. **Bender** would supplement that view by keeping in close contact with practitioners, who can serve as a touchstone to reality, making the research more credible to all involved.

All this should be packaged in terms of clear policy choices. As **Gary Stangler**, said, “Don’t restate the problem. No one wants to understand the problem better.” Research should offer policymakers options that move the field forward, even in a small fashion. The research, he added, should be marketed in a way that is easily digested and “skimmable,” from fact sheets, to policy briefs. **Bender** agreed, noting that brevity is a virtue in the policy field. Policymakers and other stakeholders, she said, simply do not have the time to read long research papers. Instead, she said, reports should be summarized in short briefs that lead with key recommendations. The message, **Stangler** noted, should be targeted toward media consumption. Without this access, the odds of the

Research should be **moveable**, applicable in different areas at different scales.

“No matter how aggressive you are, **policy won’t wait** for research. Decisions will go ahead with our without you. You must figure out how you use what you have available to affect decisions.”

Maintain close contact with **practitioners**, who can serve as a touchstone to reality, making the research more credible to all involved.

The research should be marketed in a way that is easily digested and “**skimmable**,” from fact sheets, to policy briefs.

message reaching Washington are slim. As he said, “If you’re going to have access to politicians you need visibility, credibility, and legitimacy.”

An organization that is very effective conducting and packaging research that catches the policy eye is the Brookings Institution. **Bruce Katz**, Director of the [Center on Urban and Metro Policy](#) at Brookings outlined their model of influencing policy, which includes setting the context for policy by documenting large demographic trends; describing how places are growing, from both the person and physical perspectives; demonstrating that these trends are not inevitable, that they are very much the effect of policies; and bringing policies currently at the margins into view.

Katz suggests, for example, that rural poverty researchers could describe trends about spatial allocation of large federal policies to show the spatial distribution of the effect of policies. He suggests that these data could show where coalitions of rural and urban places might form and could lead to an integrative research and political agenda. Finally, he suggests that research drill down and focus on small, targeted agendas, such as smart growth or asset-building, for example.

Like Van Lare, **Katz** cautioned against focusing exclusively on rural poverty. Brookings, for example, categorizes cities and metro areas in different disparate typologies and then focuses on certain cities that share certain characteristics. Similar approaches could be followed in rural poverty studies. Rural-urban poverty coalitions, he suggests, are much stronger avenues for influencing policy. Similarly, defining the issue as one of poverty alone may be limiting. He suggests expanding beyond traditional definitions of poverty and the traditional ways rural poverty is described. An example might be to redefine poverty as a broader class of those who are working but not making ends meet. In the end, he suggests, if rural researchers define their charge too narrowly, they will be left with a narrow focus. If defined more broadly, the possibilities expand as well.

Actions such as these, it was agreed, will require breaking down a silo mentality among government, service deliverers, funders, and researchers. As noted above, the health care arena is an apt example of coalition-building across disciplines and interests. As **Charles Fluharty** reported, since the early 1990s, RUPRI, through its health panel, has met with enormous success working with scholars and practitioners to bring sustained policy attention to rural health issues. The success of the RUPRI Rural Health Panel, he argues, can be attributed to an eminent cadre of scholars collaborating to ensure that national health policy is informed by an understanding of the place-based, rural context. In addition, this rural differential analyses became more relevant in the broader health policy development process as a result of highly motivated and effective rural health caucuses in both the U.S. House and Senate, a highly respected national rural health advocacy organization, a stand-alone federal agency within HHS with statutory

1. Set the context by documenting large demographic trends;
2. Demonstrate that these trends are not inevitable;
3. Bring policies currently at the margins into view

Do not focus exclusively on rural poverty; **create urban-rural coalitions**

[RUPRI health panel website:](#)

[www.rupri.org/centers/
healthPolicy](http://www.rupri.org/centers/healthPolicy)

responsibility for rural health policy, planning, programs, and evaluation, and state offices with statutory responsibility for these functions at a state level.

Daniel Lichter, Robert Lazarus Professor in Population Studies and Professor of Sociology, Ohio State University, raised one possibility for why it is currently difficult for rural researchers to sustain a dialogue. Many, he suggests, do not believe rural poverty is an issue. There is, for example, a persistent belief that the poverty rate overestimates the extent of rural poverty, and further, rural poverty has decreased substantially in recent years. Also, as Duncan and others alluded to, poverty trends between metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas track each other, which suggests that a broader, macro effect may be at work. Finally, eliminating rural poverty through economic development ultimately redefines rural areas as nonrural.

How, then, to create a community that focuses on both urban and rural areas? As with others, Lichter urges rural scholars to build bridges to the broader poverty community. As he says, the lives of rural and urban poor are linked, and research on the rural poor should recognize this and integrate it. He also argues for rural researchers to engage more directly in policy-relevant work. Although random assignment experiments are quickly becoming the preferred approach to gaining policy attention, Lichter cautions that the results do not tell the whole story. They do not offer insights on why people are poor or why programs work. Answers to these questions will never be realized without a multi-method approach across many different areas.

Finally, Lichter takes issue with the notion that policymakers do not need a restatement of the problem. It is impossible, he says, to find doable solutions until we know the dimensions and causes of rural poverty. As he says, “If we as researchers want to stay relevant, we have to quit nibbling around the edges. We have (borrowing Greg Duncan’s phrase) to think big and roll the dice about bigger solutions to a problem that doesn’t seem to change very much.”

Moving Research into Policy

Moving research into policy is an important aim for the rural research and practice community. Moveable and timely solutions that unite different research areas and methods are necessary if findings are to be transferred into meaningful policy. Recognizing the importance of this goal, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, as reported by **Don Winstead**, Deputy Assistant Secretary, [Office of Human Services Policy](#), Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, has assembled a Rural Task Force, which unites several organizations within DHHS for coordinated action. The goals of this rural initiative are to improve access to services, strengthen rural families, support rural economic development, improve coordination among state, local, and

Rural poverty research should recognize and incorporate the fact that the lives of rural and urban poor are integrally linked.

“If we as researchers want to stay relevant, we have to **quit nibbling around the edges**. We have to think big and roll the dice about bigger solutions to a problem that doesn’t seem to change very much.”

The DHHS-sponsored **Rural Taskforce** is leading the charge for collaboration across departments on issues of rural poverty and is poised to play a key role in implementing rural policy.

www.hhs.gov/ruralinitiative/intro.html

tribal governments, and help translate research findings into policy. The latter effort is being realized through a research coordination council, which looks for areas of potential coordination within DHHS as well as to spur new forms of collaboration and cross-pollination of ideas. The Rural Task Force is poised to play a key role in implementing rural policy, and RPRC and RUPRI are poised to become integral partners in that process. As Winstead said, “You give us an agenda that is policy relevant and actionable, and we’ll be the department in DHHS that will turn that into policies that will aid families in rural America.”

Another government agency working hard to coordinate the many efforts to alleviate poverty in rural areas is the [Office of Community Services](#) within DHHS. Led by **Clarence Carter**, the goal is to coordinate department efforts and bring the many ongoing conversations together to form a nucleus of broader conversations. Carter also noted the importance of refocusing policy toward individuals and their communities, and away from the current focus on programs. “It’s our challenge,” he said, “to build the capacity of communities and individuals, to bring the investments together to make the whole greater than the sum of its parts.”

In the end, as **Bryan Dabson**, President of the Corporation for Enterprise Development, said, the necessary visibility will only occur when rural poverty research produces “actionable options”; the necessary credibility will come only from rigorous research; and legitimacy will be achieved only when the rural poverty research community can define one or more compelling issues, the answers to which will make a difference in the lives of rural people.

The **Office of Community Services** seeks to build capacity in communities and coordinate DHHS efforts to address rural poverty.

www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ocs