The Local Stratification of Poverty in Appalachia

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Introduction: Spatial Inequality Within Rural Regions

Much of the work on the spatial distribution of poverty in rural regions focuses on county-level data and dynamics. For example, many scholars use the USDA’s Rural-Urban Continuum to operationalize residential context and examine poverty outcomes across different rural/urban contexts (Weber et al. 2005). But that work often ignores sub-county social dynamics that might lead to stratification within counties.

Urban-based research has paid more attention to neighborhood-level stratification—illustrating how histories of unequal development have led to highly segregated spaces based on race and class (Sampson 2013). For example, racist housing programs and other policies created and maintained disadvantaged and socially isolated neighborhoods in many of the U.S.’s large cities (Wilson 1987).

But few scholars have analyzed the potential of neighborhood stratification in rural regions. This paper uses the case of Appalachia to examine how poverty could be stratified at a sub-county level. Based on past research, I hypothesize that distance to a county seat may be a relevant variable in predicting neighborhood-level poverty in Appalachia.

How Could Poverty Be Locally Stratified Based on County Seats in Appalachia?

1) Uneven Development and Growth Center Policy:
There is a long history of uneven local development in Appalachia. Historians note that “growth center” development policies in the 1960s and 1970s emphasized the population centers of Appalachia, to the detriment of areas on the outskirts of the counties (Eller 2008).

2) Local Elite Exploitation:
Some scholars also note that poverty alleviation programs were administered out of local county seats—and often did not benefit all residents of a county equally. For example, local elites may use government funds for a new baseball field in the county seat—which provides little use to county residents who live farther away (Billings and Blee 2004).

3) Perceived Class Differences:
Several qualitative scholars have noted that there are perceived class differences between “county seat folk” and those from the outskirts of counties (Duncan 1999). Duncan notes that county seats consist of doctors, lawyers, etc.

Primary Research Question and Hypotheses

Does distance to a county seat correlate with neighborhood-level poverty in Appalachia?

Study Area

Fitted Line Plot of Poverty Rate at Levels of Distance to a County Seat

Results

- Overall, poverty has a curvilinear relationship with distance to a county seat overall: Poverty was highest closest and farthest from county seats—the turning point was around 8 miles (or 13 kilometers). Relationship holds when controlling for other socioeconomic, race, and rural variables (Greenberg 2016).
- 32,000 residents lived in neighborhoods more than 18 miles from the nearest county seat, as of 2000—those neighborhoods had an average poverty rate of 21 percent.
- The subregion results above include varied rural/urban contexts in Appalachia: Southern and Northern Appalachia have urban areas (Knoxville, Pittsburgh, Chattanooga, etc.), while Central is more rural. This may explain the higher poverty in county seats, a decreasing effect until “suburbs,” then an increase in rural neighborhoods further away.

Policy Implications and Future Research

- Residents further from county seats may also face cumulative disadvantages related to healthcare, few job opportunities, environmental conditions, and other social and economic problems.
- These results should also lead to important questions about spatial inequality and uneven development at the sub-county level in rural regions.
  1) Do county-level development efforts reach all parts of the county they intend to help?
  2) Does distance to county seat matter in the same way in other U.S. regions?
  3) How can we collect fine-grained geographic and socioeconomic data in rural areas?
  4) How do these isolated rural communities differ from segregated urban ones?

References