Closing Remarks at the RUPRI Conference:
*Rural Poverty: Fifty Years After The People Left Behind*
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Summary

I was asked to sum up what we’ve heard and learned over the course of the conference and use this as a springboard for moving forward.

First, the good news: the evidence from this conference is that research relevant to rural poverty is alive and well and making impressive strides in the continued effort to document demography, geography, and economics of rural poverty both in itself and as it relates to other poverty issues and arenas. Furthermore, the demonstration that there has been real reduction in poverty and economic distress in many rural areas over time since the Commission’s report is encouraging.

Second, the bad news: The more things have changed, the more they stayed the same. This is true of the Commission’s findings and of the whole research enterprise since. Most of the Commission’s findings could be restated today, only the numbers change. To be fair, as Bruce Weber points out, there has been improvement. There have been real reductions in poverty rates for many places, but too much has stayed the same. The Commission’s recommendations still make sense today, and it resonates with the results reported in this conference. To take just one example, witness a quote from the conference paper by Slack, Thiede, and Jensen: “the Commission’s goal to ‘achieve the elimination of underemployment and low income of rural people’ (1967: vi) remains an unmet aspiration and a continuing obstacle to rural economic well-being.”

Similarly, I am teaching a graduate seminar on poverty this semester for the first time after a long hiatus in teaching. And I have struggled not to be demoralized or worse, to discourage a room full of bright rising scholars. Nevertheless, it has been a struggle to avoid having the knowledge of how little has changed in the last several decades along with a general sense of doom and gloom overwhelm the class and me, its instructor. We are still slogging through many of the same research and policy issues, and it’s especially sobering to be confronted with how little our wealth of research findings seems to translate into good and effective policy. Rather we see popular and policy discussions driven by the same old tired and offensive but nevertheless politically animating issues. These include the same old

- underlying assumptions about who is deserving and who is not, with the undeserving predictably falling into categories of the “other” – race, ethnic, nationality, and nonconforming sex, gender, and family minorities.
- efforts to impose sanctions and proposals for the kinds of “sticks” we must use to make “them” share “our values” – the beliefs that poor people are lazy so we must tie
benefits to work effort, or poor people don’t value family so we must tie benefits to
those who somehow demonstrate “family values,” i.e. what the fickle public deems
“truly deserving.” Work requirements where they make little sense are “wildly popular”
in the words of Lisa Pruitt and appear to be ever expanding.
- failures to recognize the diversity among rural poor peoples and places.
- efforts to create a competitive notion of whose poverty is really worse and needs the
most attention – rural, urban, and most recently, suburban.
All of these represent either the continuous efforts to demonize the poor and make welfare
receipt difficult, stigmatizing, and even impossible or the well-intentioned but misguided efforts
to prioritize particular groups, places, problems, and populations.

And while the wealth of outstanding research efforts that continue to document the realities of
being poor, who is poor, when, where, and how long, both demographically and experientially
is impressive, the policy discussions have not followed the research nor have they kept pace.
There is a huge disconnect between research and policy that hinders effective evidence based
policy making. This was expressed numerous times during the conference as a “failure of will”
which indeed it is, but it is more than that. It is a failure to communicate, to have our work
heard and respected.

Future Agenda
Therefore, where do we go in the future? What hope is there for truly addressing rural
poverty? What should our future agenda be?

When I started drafting this I had four or five points. But the more I thought about it and the
more I listened in this conference, the number of items kept growing. I now have a laundry list
of must pursue questions and topics in rural poverty. These are included here. However, in the
interest of brevity and emphasis as the conference ends, I focus on half a dozen high priority
items.

1. Links across space and place: The Commission’s report on who was left behind smartly
recognized the connections between rural and urban poverty. It’s important not to siloize rural
and continue to work and demonstrate the linkages across space and place. As interest in the
rise of suburban poverty has grown, it becomes increasingly important to incorporate it into
our comparative research on poverty and understand its linkages to rural poverty. Similarly, in
a global economy, linkages across national boundaries must be recognized.

2. Policy and public opinion: In amidst reading all the great research conducted in the last
couple of decades by dedicated rural poverty researchers, including most of the presenters at
this conference and their colleagues, one of the pieces my grad students found most
compelling was a slightly obscure article in a policy studies journal. “Framing the Poor: Media
Coverage and U.S. Policy 1960-2008” by Rose and Baumgartner (2013) traces how policy
responds to media coverage (and presumably vice versa). Rural poverty analysts don’t pay
enough attention to what frames and drives policy and public opinion. Why are all those tired
old tropes still the dominant frames for poverty, whether rural or otherwise? Research on
communication, the drivers of public opinion, and how we translate and deliver our findings is critical.

3. **Links between macro and micro levels or structure, culture, and action**: the need to pay more attention to neglected topics that link the larger social structure with practice and behavior. Most of the papers at this conference focused on the structural level, vitally important work, but incomplete on its own. One of the comments we heard numerous times in answer to questions during this conference is the need for “political economy” in addition to the structural analysis to understand and explain findings. One example repeated during the conference: the need for a more nuanced understanding of the legacy of slavery for current poverty requires a more holistic analysis. This speaks to the larger need to connect structure with intermediate institutions and organizations. For example, we hear all the time that politics and policy are driven by religious beliefs and practices. Where is this in our research? What other cultural factors (and this doesn’t mean the culture of poverty) are important in shaping poverty outcomes, opinions, attitudes, and practices? Where are the intermediate institutions? We hear about child poverty but little about family processes. We hear about the disappearance of men’s jobs but not about the gender identities, roles, and relations that turn that result into failure to cope and exit from the labor force. We did hear an excellent account by Catherine Biddle of the role of schools as a mediating institution for students, families and communities in poverty that demonstrates the need for and benefit of much more of this type of work.

4. **Diversity**: the importance of continuing to probe the diversity of rural peoples and places—whether race and ethnicity, age, gender and sexuality, geographic location, or forms of economic development. How do these intersect and interact with each other and how do they vary across place? What are the consequences for rural peoples? The conference highlighted issues for various poor populations, including African Americans, Latinx, residents of persistent poverty locations such as Appalachia and the Delta and “Black Belt”, immigrants, and children. These groups are extremely vulnerable to poverty, and it goes without saying that their circumstances require focused and ongoing attention. However, the need for analytic clarity should not preclude investigation of intersectional complexity across different groups and identities, nor should attention be limited only to the most visible populations.

5. **Methods and data**: More qualitative and mixed methods research and new sources of information. Some of the most revealing work comes from deep ethnography and case studies such as conducted by Jennifer Sherman and Cynthia Duncan. Especially important are mixed methods approaches which link quantitative and qualitative methods to address issues that can’t be understood with only one tool. We’ve heard very little of the qualitative research at this conference and that’s a gap that should be addressed. This too is a matter of coming down from the loftiest view to connect how structure shapes behavior on the ground. Similarly, we need more efforts to grapple with new sources of data and new ways to collect it. This includes big data but goes beyond. Our tried and true survey methods are faltering. What will replace them? How will we train our students to use them? Can we agree on the appropriate ways to measure poverty in the next 50 years and then pursue efforts to realize that goal? And as Sam
Cordes and others said, it’s not enough to look at poverty but also we need linked data on wealth and inequality to understand the economic fortunes of the poor.

6. **Future visioning:** I promised a laundry list of critical issues for poverty analysis that are suggested by or supplement the research from this conference. This is a sample, by no means complete. Numerous topics can be added to the list, particularly the exploration of what current trends mean for the future and thus what we study. Examples include:

- What do current employment trends mean for rural poverty, especially the growth of unemployment, underemployment, and out of the labor force? What about the increasing casualization of labor, its feminization, the relentless move to service sector positions, and the disassociation of benefits from jobs.
- Where will family supports come from? We’ve heard lots about child poverty but little about important services such as child care and yet this is a huge issue for most families, let alone poor rural women where child care services are scarce to nonexistent.
- More generally, what are the social service needs across space and place? How do rural places fare in access to services and benefits?
- On a larger scale: What does increasing globalization mean for rural poverty in the U.S.?
- What about the reverse trend – the current effort toward protectionism?
- What do the vast economic changes brought by increasing automation and ultimately artificial intelligence mean for causes and consequences of being poor?
- Rural places are already behind in the digital world with limited access to broadband and related services. Will this accelerate with the ever increasing pace of change?
- What are the consequences of devolution for poor peoples and places? What are the limits of this trend?
- What are the connections and implications between rising inequality in the U.S. and globally for rural poverty?
- How has a global and local neoliberal agenda influenced poverty policy and outcomes?

These and similar issues will need to become part of our research agendas.

**In Summary**
The bottom line is that there are many bright spots on the horizon connecting current and future research agendas. There is also no dearth of both continuing research and new initiatives needed. What has urgency however, is finding a way to do a better job of connecting our research findings with policy to actually make a dent in the problem.