



Global Forces and Individual Coping Strategies for Rural Poverty

Workshop Summary

by Diane K. McLaughlin

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Workshop Purpose

This conference explored what is known from current research about the causes and effects of rural poverty in the Northeast and what needs to be known in order to design more effective policies. Other goals are to facilitate future research collaborations and to contribute to the evolution of a national rural poverty research agenda about causes and effects of rural poverty and the design of effective policies.

These are the summary proceedings of a workshop held on May 3-4, 2005 in State College, Pennsylvania. Prepared by Dr. Diane K. McLaughlin, Associate Professor of Rural Sociology and Demography, The Pennsylvania State University.

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Introduction

Poverty in rural areas of the Northeastern United States shares causes and consequences with rural poverty in other regions, yet it also is unique. The purpose of the conference “Rural Poverty in the Northeast: Global Forces and Individual Coping Strategies” cosponsored by The Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development, RUPRI’s Rural Poverty Research Center and Penn State’s Population Research Institute was to “...explore what is known from current research about the causes and effects of rural poverty in the Northeast and what needs to be known in order to design more effective policies. Other goals are to facilitate future research collaborations, and to contribute to the evolution of a national rural poverty research agenda about causes and effects of rural poverty and the design of effective policies” (http://www.cas.nercrd.psu.edu/Regional_Poverty_Wksp/reg_poverty2005wksp.htm).

The conference theme spans the broad range of forces linked to poverty – from global to individual, and sets the stage for the breadth of research presented at the conference. The statement of purpose for the conference calls for two main outcomes. The first is an evaluation of the status of research on rural poverty and where we should go. Second is that the conference and rural poverty research, in general, should contribute to development of a national rural poverty

research agenda that influences policy. This second goal challenges the research community to reach out beyond its traditional audience (each other) and communicate what is known to policy makers, practitioners and the general public.

This conference summary paper examines the two questions posed by the conference statement of purpose. It begins by providing an overview of the research presented, the contributions this research makes to understanding rural poverty, and the opportunities presented by this research and the conference. I then offer some suggestions on directions rural poverty research in the Northeast might take and how what we already know and will learn in the future can be used to strengthen practice, policy and general knowledge about rural poverty.

The future of rural poverty research lies in broadening our understanding of the forces causing poverty and the consequences of poverty. In addition, we need to balance our research so that we give adequate attention to (a) understanding different levels of forces influencing poverty, e.g., individual, family, community, regional, national, global; (b) considering local diversity and variation while identifying common trends across places; c) recognizing and building on contributions of various disciplines while maintaining disciplinary excellence; d) and including basic research and policy and evaluation research.



Bruce Weber, Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI)

In disseminating research, we further must balance our efforts to inform policy makers, practitioners and the general public as well as other researchers. Stereotypes need to be replaced with research-based information.

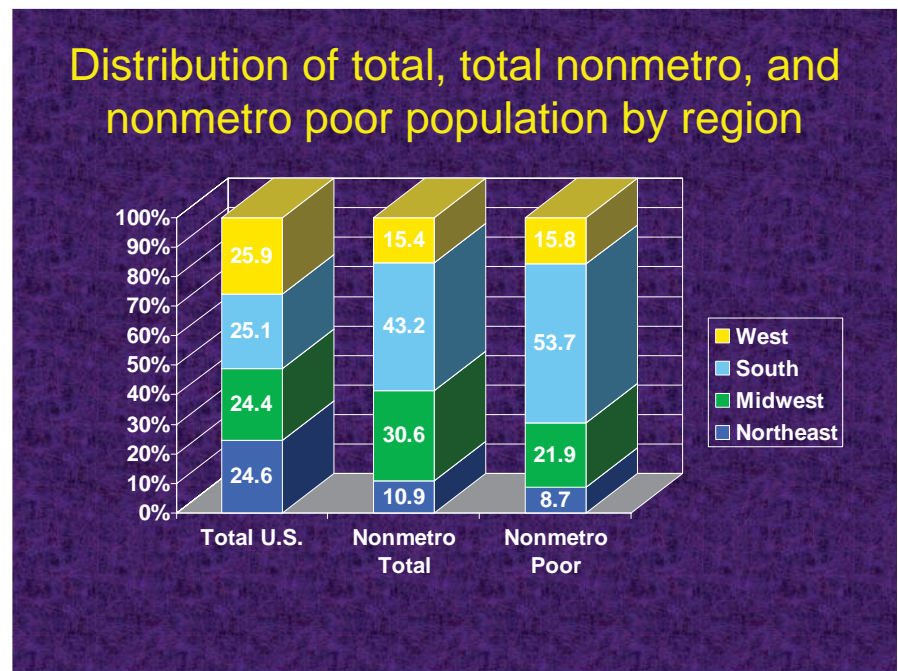
Research on Rural Poverty in the Northeast: Overview of Presented Research

Ten research papers and two summaries or reactions were presented at the one and a half day conference. Presenters represented rural sociology, sociology, agricultural economics, demography, nutrition, nutritional science, human development and sociology, family studies, geography, resource economics, natural sciences, cooperative extension, graduate studies and education policy. The brief summaries of each paper highlight the research questions

and what was learned from each study. These are organized to tell a story about rural poverty in the Northeast as one means of showing the linkages among these studies. These studies, when pieced together into a ‘story’ reveal the importance of a multidisciplinary approach to studying rural poverty and of balancing the contributions made by various disciplines to understanding different aspects of poverty.

Poor Places and People in the Northeast

Our story of poverty in the rural Northeast begins with a description of the spatial distribution of poverty and the characteristics of those more likely to be poor. Higher poverty in the rural Northeast is found in minor civil divisions and counties along a backbone from southwest to northeast ‘orbiting the Boston-Washington corridor.’ Leif Jensen, Penn State, began the

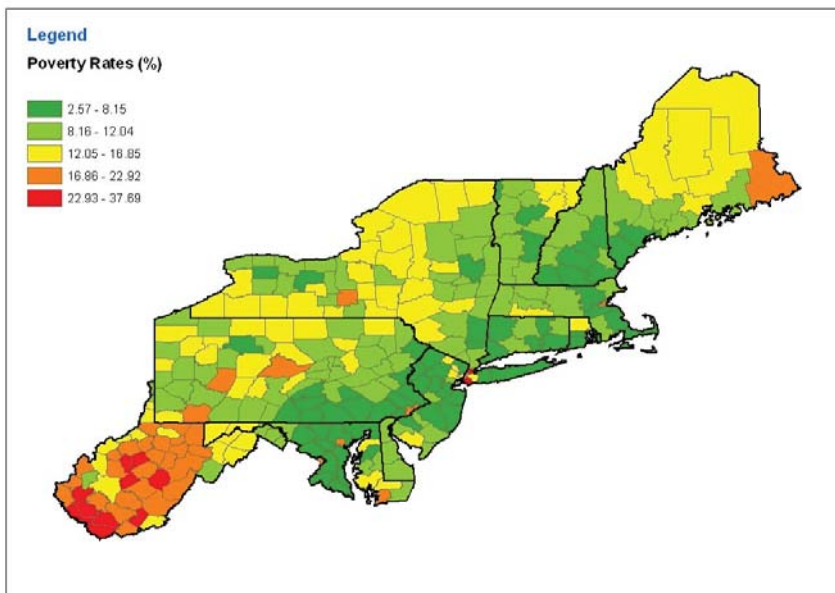


conference presentations using maps and figures developed from U.S. Census of Population and Housing data to provide a portrait of poverty in the Northeast Region in 2000. The unique situation of rural poverty in the Northeast compared to other regions is highlighted by the relatively small share of the

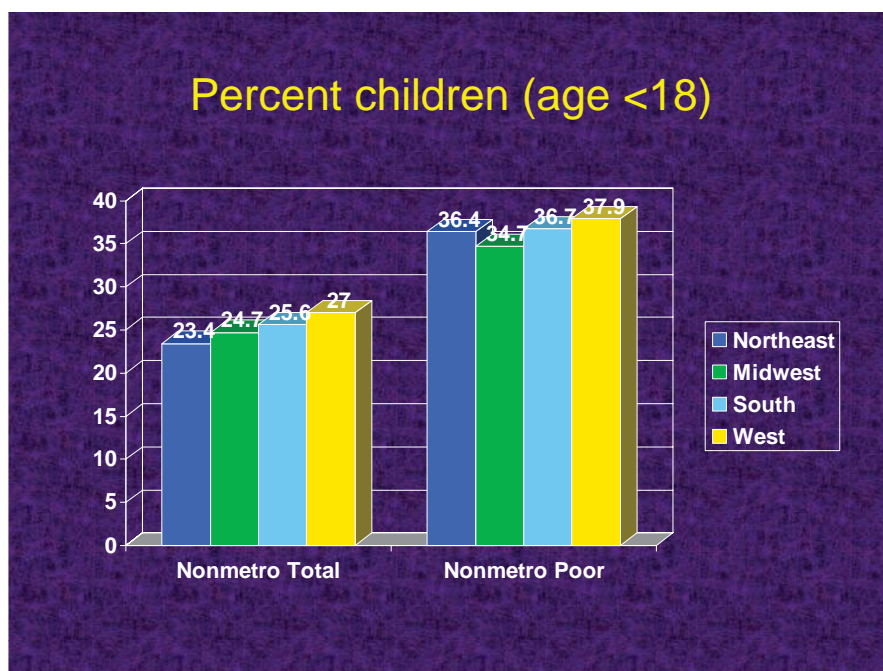
nonmetropolitan (nonmetro) population found in the Northeast (10.9 percent), and the even smaller percentage of the nonmetro poor found there (8.7 percent). The Northeast had the second lowest poverty rates across regions, with nonmetro poverty only slightly higher than metro poverty. The nonmetro Northeast is overwhelmingly non-Hispanic white, and the nonmetro poor in the Northeast are less likely to be elderly or widowed, to work in extractive industries and are more likely to be never married and to have graduated from high school, compared to the poor in other regions. A larger share of nonmetro poor in the Northeast have graduated from high school, suggesting that a high school education is not as effective in the nonmetro Northeast as elsewhere in the U.S. in helping individuals avoid poverty.

This presentation highlighted three key factors. First, in the Northeast, as in other areas of

Poverty Rates for Counties (2000)



the U.S., poverty is higher in natural resource-rich areas but also in areas with difficult terrain (in this case, mountainous and forested). These physical barriers combined with the fairly small share of the nonmetro population in the Northeast suggest that alleviation of rural poverty is unlikely to be a high priority of state governments. Second, the overall presentation underscores the contribution of variations in local conditions across the Northeast to differences in poverty, and the importance of considering local conditions when developing policies to alleviate rural poverty. Third, it is essential to consider both the people who are poor, but also poverty of place. Each alone suggests very different policy strategies (focus on individuals or a focus on places), yet people are located in places, and the resources available locally in a community can greatly affect the opportunities of individuals and families. Proximity to the urban corridor and major urban centers



within the region suggests close attention be paid to rural-urban linkages as both solutions to and causes of poverty. Long-distance commuting to work ‘creates’ job opportunities for rural people, while land use change may generate some jobs but also may force the poor out of suburbanizing areas.

Further insight into the importance of local resources and conditions for poverty across the U.S. was provided in the county-level analysis of change in poverty from 1989 to 1999 presented by Stephan Goetz, NERC RD and Penn State. Goetz used aggregated characteristics of individuals and structural characteristics related to employment, industry structure, social capital, and political competition, to examine change in poverty. While the results are complex, ‘take-away’ messages include the importance of getting people into the workforce, but the quality of local jobs and

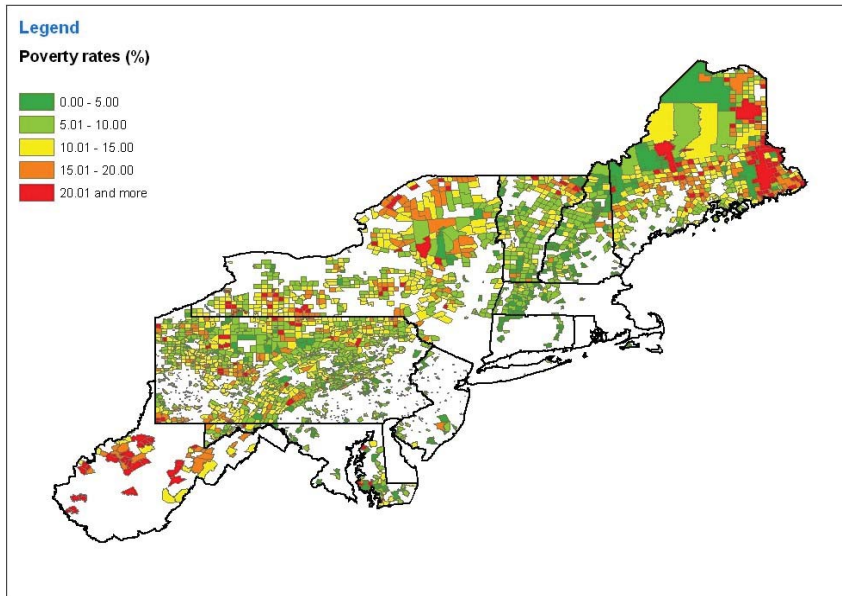
the education of individuals affect the success of this strategy. Higher levels of political competition, social capital and self-employment were associated with declines in poverty, whereas presence of big-box retailers was not. Very useful proxy measures for these local community processes believed to affect development efforts were used. The significant effects suggest that further investigation into these local conditions and how they operate to reduce poverty is warranted.

This was an ambitious presentation, actually based on three separate papers, that provides extremely useful information for identifying factors associated with community economic development strategies and place-based policies to alleviate poverty. Studies based on ecological data tell us little about the mechanisms by which individuals become poor or leave poverty. What we know from this



Leif Jensen, The Pennsylvania State University

Poverty Rates for Rural MCD's



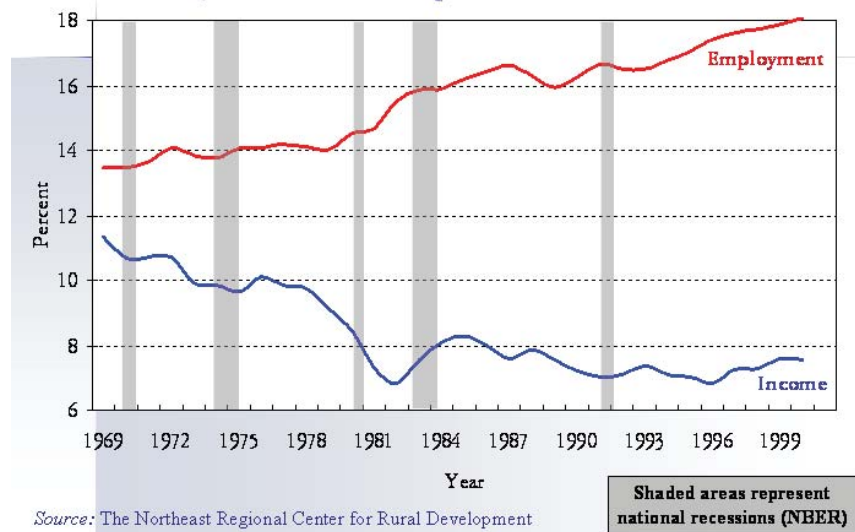
study about education, for example, is that areas with a larger percentage of high school graduates in 1990 had larger reductions in poverty over the ensuing decade. The mechanisms behind this relationship are not clear. The theoretical question to be considered is how do places with a larger share of high school graduates differ in terms of their ability to reduce poverty when compared to places with a larger share of high school drop-outs? Additionally, while very useful for studying poverty of places, ecological studies tell us less about how the conditions of the places in which people live affect individual's decisions and ability to attend school, find a job, or escape poverty.

More insight into the internal workings of places is offered by the study of Ossipee, New Hampshire, conducted by Chris R. Colocousis, University of New Hampshire and Rural Poverty Research Center

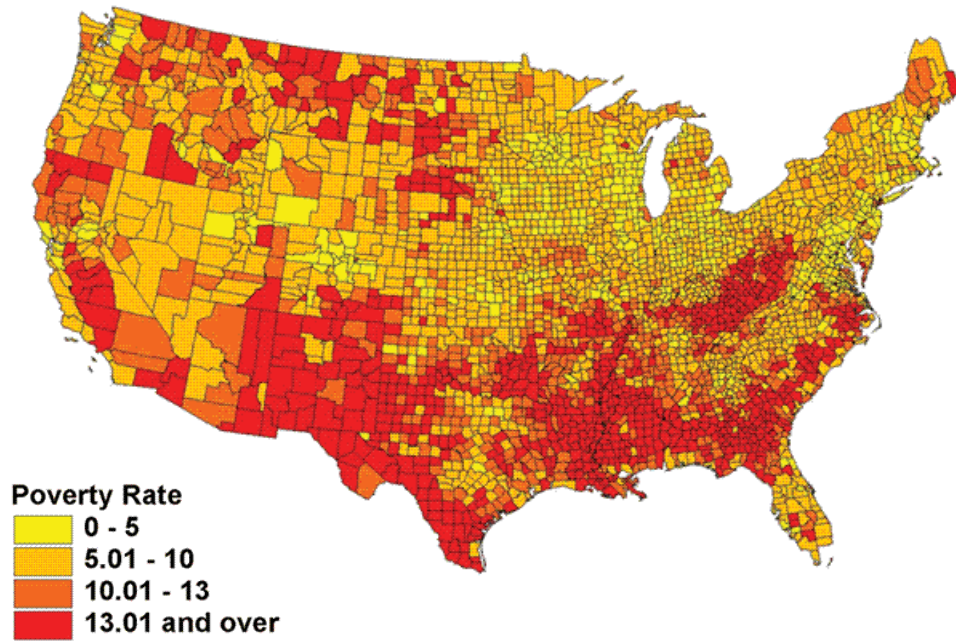
Fellow. The goal of the project is to explore the role of the size of local businesses in the context of economic restructuring and how these changes are associated with levels of community socio-economic well-being. This case study utilizes data from the U.S. Census of Population and Housing for 1970 to 2000 to document the changes that

have been occurring in Ossipee. As the author points out, it is difficult to make assertions of causality from a case study. Preliminary findings suggest that Ossipee followed other U.S. rural communities in shifting away from manufacturing to service sector employment. Unlike other places it continued to have a larger share of small companies. Consistent with other studies and national data, men's wages declined over the period studied while women's stagnated or grew slightly, even though poverty rates were down. Issues of civic engagement and an influx of retirees complicated the interpretation of the Census data. These issues were noted as important for continued study. These findings tend to be consistent with those of Goetz in identifying the importance of economic structure, social capital and locally-owned, smaller businesses for better economic outcomes. These two

Non-farm Proprietor Income & Employment as a Percent of Total Income and Employment, 1969-2000, non-metro only

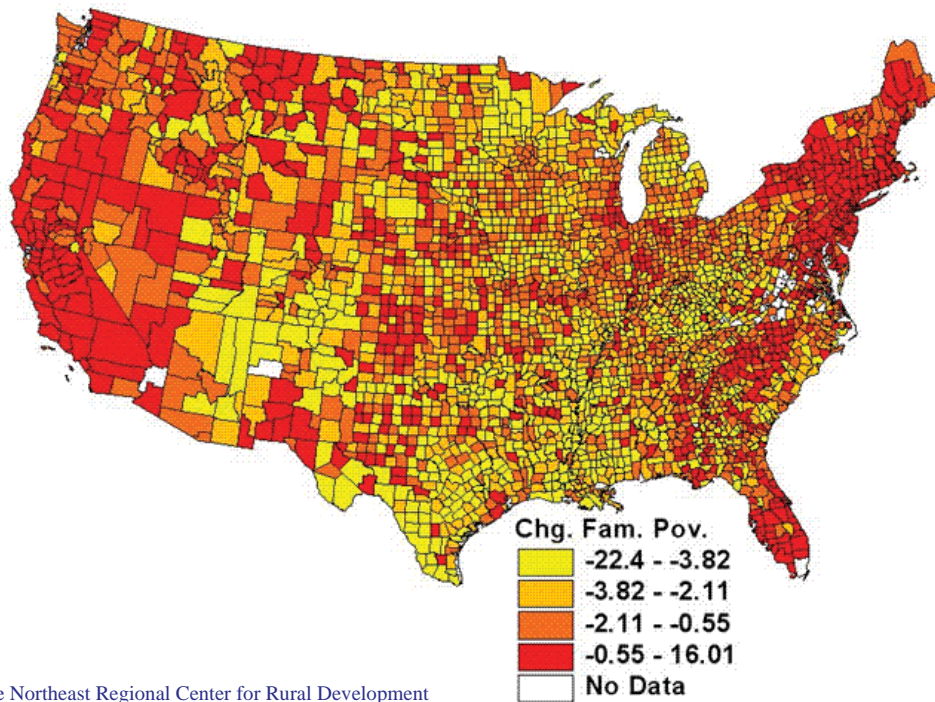


Family Poverty Rate, the US, 2000



The Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development

Change in Family Poverty Rate, 1990-2000



The Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development

Growth

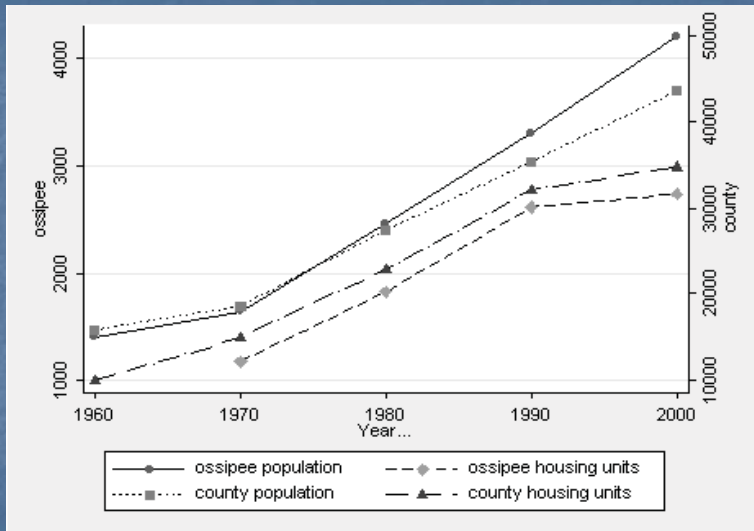


Figure 3: Population and Housing Units, Ossipee Town and Carroll County, 1960-2000.

studies provide insight into how larger forces for restructuring affect economic well-being in local areas, and may be influenced by local strategies and responses to these shifts.

Formal employment is one of the most important routes out of poverty for individuals and generating employment is core to economic development efforts. It is central to current welfare programs which seem to assume that jobs are available if the poor would just decide to work. Place-based policy that promotes the creation of jobs, particularly good jobs, is very important. But, even when successful, job creation does not always resolve other individual- and community-related barriers to poor people becoming employed. Understanding these barriers is essential to using employment as a strategy to eliminate poverty. Doing so requires examination of individuals and families and the issues they face in finding

and keeping good employment. Two studies presented at the conference focused on barriers to work and strategies single mothers use to find jobs and stay employed.

Leaving Poverty: Barriers and Supports

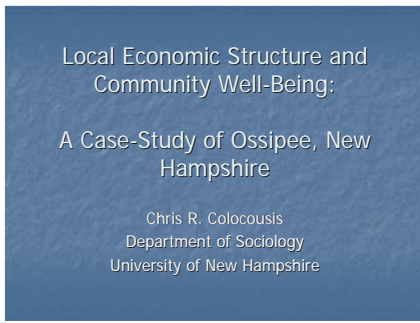
Sheila Mammen, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and Elizabeth Dolan, University of New Hampshire, examined supports that enable low-income rural mothers to maintain employment, as well as to identify obstacles to employment among mothers in low-income families. This study uses data from 114 families from Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and New York that are part of the Rural Families Speak, longitudinal, multi-state study. The descriptive analysis revealed that over the three waves of the study, almost half of the mothers were continuously employed

and just over half had intermittent employment. The study also looked at the perceptions of the shift in the family's economic situation, medical insurance coverage and source, food security, health, transportation access and satisfaction with life. Major barriers to employment for the never-employed were the mother's own health (about 1/3) and importance of the nurturer role (about 1/3). Other barriers among the never employed included lack of child care, child's health, lack of jobs, or the mother was in school. For those intermittently employed, mother's health, child care issues, transportation problems and a non-supportive work environment were identified as work barriers. Access to transportation, child care, family and friends to help in juggling work and family obligations, and a supportive work environment were identified as supports for continuously employed mothers.

This study substantiates what might be considered 'typical' barriers to rural women's employment – lack of appropriate child care, problems with transportation, and a lack of jobs. It



Chris Colocousis, University of New Hampshire



goes further, though, to identify other factors important for employment – an individual’s health, their kin and friend support networks, and the flexibility of the employer if a woman faces family-work conflicts. These last two factors are related to the complexity of roles and conflicting demands that women, in particular, face, when they enter the paid labor force. Identification of poor health as a barrier to employment is important, especially in a low-income single parent population. This study also identifies factors that vary across places – and can have place-based policy solutions that could benefit all families. These include availability of affordable, quality and flexible child care; transportation; and programs to help employers provide more flexible and family-friendly workplaces.

Focusing on one aspect of the Mammen and Dolan paper, Sally Ward and Heather Turner, both from The University of New Hampshire, examine the role of social networks and social support for single mothers’ work and welfare strategies in rural New England. Data from their random-digit dial survey of rural unmarried women with dependent children are used to test the

importance of social capital and different forms of social support on working, use of services and TANF receipt among 508 women. The study finds that informal networks are more important than formal networks for welfare and work. Support from friends decreases TANF reliance and reliance on formal services, while support from family increases reliance on work. Thus, it provides a more nuanced understanding of some of the findings in the Mammen and Dolan study, and highlights the importance of social relationships for women’s adaptation to work and welfare use. These two studies suggest that women with children who are socially isolated have few resources on which to draw to find alternatives to formal programs.

Employment and Well-being

Studies from the conference have identified factors that

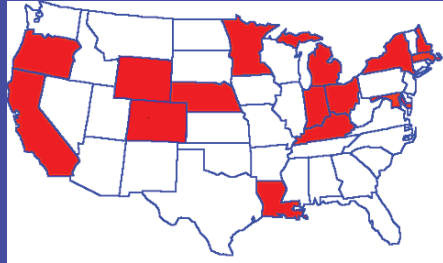
improve women’s success in getting and staying employed. Less is known about whether employment improves the well-being of women and their children. The paper by Heather Turner, University of New Hampshire, extends the Mammen and Dolan and Ward and Turner papers, by examining the relationship between employment and chronic stress and psychological distress among rural single mothers. This study uses the same data as the Ward and Turner study. Turner develops indicators of domains of stressors, including financial, parenting, child care, and rural residence stress. These are particularly helpful in separating out the elements of stress specific to rural residence and single parenting. Findings from the multivariate analysis, where sociodemographic characteristics of the mothers were controlled, reveal that parenting stress was associated with psychological distress



Sheila Mammen, University of Massachusetts



Rural Low-Income Families: Tracking Their Well-Being and Functioning in the Context of Welfare Reform



15 State, 24 County Longitudinal Study
1998-2003

for employed and unemployed women, but child care stress and rural residence stress were not. Financial stress was associated with higher psychological distress only among employed women. Thus, while employment is seen as a main route out of poverty (and off welfare), it is beneficial for women in terms of psychological well-being only when formal employment alleviates financial stress. This study also shows that a history of major depressive disorders corresponded with higher psychological distress. The emphasis on psychological well-being highlights the complexity of implementing programs that focus on employment as the strategy to leave welfare. Equally important is the identification of parenting stress as the single largest contributor to psychological distress among rural single mothers.

Including mental health and stressors in the study of rural poverty balances and broadens

the research and our understanding of the non-economic consequences of low-income and single-parenthood. Child care stress and rural residence stress were not significant. This research on single mothers raises the question whether similar stressors affect the psychological well-being of low income married-couple families with children.

Informal Economic Activity, Food Security, and Hypermobility of the Poor

Informal economic activity has been suggested as an alternative or supplemental livelihood



Sheila Mammen, University of Massachusetts

strategy in rural areas. Using data from semi-structured interviews and a telephone survey of nonmetro Pennsylvania families, Tim Slack of Louisiana State University studied the role of informal economic activities paying special attention to differences between lower and higher income families. The findings in this study are consistent with the few other studies on informal economic activity. There are no differences in the use of informal economic activities for lower and higher income households, and the largest percentage of both types of households combine formal and informal work. A story about social isolation and reduced access to informal activities and networks occurs in this research. Those adults who have some skills, are embedded in social networks, and hold formal employment seem to be more likely to take part in informal economic activity. This study did include married couple families in the survey.

Most studies of poverty focus on economic poverty and income levels. Other risks related to poor health and well-being are associated with low incomes. Food insecurity is an important, but often overlooked correlate of poverty and low or unstable income. Christine M. Olson, Emily O. Miller, Josephine Swanson and Myla S. Strawderman, from The Division of Nutritional Sciences and Cornell Cooperative Extension, examine whether there are regional variations in the dynamics of food insecurity in rural America. The

Work and Welfare Strategies Among Single Mothers in Rural New England: The Role of Social Networks and Social Support

Sally Ward and Heather Turner
University of New Hampshire

study looks at the prevalence of food insecurity in a sample of poor rural families with children and identifies factors associated with changes in food insecurity, especially overcoming food insecurity. Data for the study come from “Rural Low-Income Families: Tracking Their Well-being in the Context of Welfare Reform.” The 193 families that completed three waves of this multi-state regional study are included in the analysis of changes in food insecurity. Women from families of higher socioeconomic status and with fewer health conditions were more likely to leave food insecurity than those without these characteristics. At the initial interview, those with low food life-skills, controlling for education and income, were more likely to be food insecure.

Kai Schafft, Penn State, used data on residential mobility of poor students and their families across rural school district lines in New York to explore the consequences of student transiency for the students and the school districts. This study identifies the consequences of very high residential mobility (hypermobility) of some poor families for the families and children and

the local institutions and places. It suggests that the ability of local institutions to respond to high residential mobility of the poor could mitigate the negative effects of turnover in the classroom for all students, but especially the residentially-mobile students. Mechanisms by which conditions in places influence individual well-being are described. This study brings together levels of theoretical development and analysis that often are treated separately.

Looking to the Future

These studies from one conference help us to tell a rural poverty story that includes the influence of larger global and national forces on the prevalence of poverty in places and how poor families (focusing on women with children) respond to poverty through work or reliance on welfare. The studies provide



Heather Turner, University of New Hampshire

evidence of the ways that other aspects of health and well-being influence the likelihood of working and the consequences of low incomes for well-being.

In each of the individual-level studies, new data were collected by the investigators specifically to answer the study questions, and rural residence was seen as an important context within which individual and family behaviors occurred. These studies provide important information about individual and family factors that influence work and



Kai Schafft, The Pennsylvania State University

The Significance of Employment for Chronic Stress and Psychological Distress among Rural Single Mothers

Heather A. Turner
University of New Hampshire

This research was supported by a grant from The Ford Foundation (#1015-0768).

Financial Stress

- You are too much in debt.
- Your rent or mortgage is too high.
- You don't have enough money to buy the clothing you need.
- You don't have enough money to go out on weekends.
- You don't have enough money to pay your regular bills.
- You want to move to a better house or apartment but don't have enough money.
- You don't have enough money to get your child(ren) what they need.
- You don't have enough money to buy a reliable car
- You don't have enough money to cover medical or dental care

welfare use, informal economic activity, food insecurity, and psychological distress. These studies did not, and perhaps given the data, were not able to examine whether the responses of individuals and families were influenced by conditions in the local area. Schafft highlighted institution's abilities to meet needs of poor children and families. The presentations by Jensen, Goetz and Colocousis documented the importance of variations in local conditions for poverty. Consideration of local conditions enables us to better understand the interplay of individual/family and community/labor markets for individual decisions and behaviors.

Important to note about almost all of these studies is that the researchers designed the study and collected their own data to address the research questions. In several cases, mixed methods (focus groups and surveys) were used. Researchers could

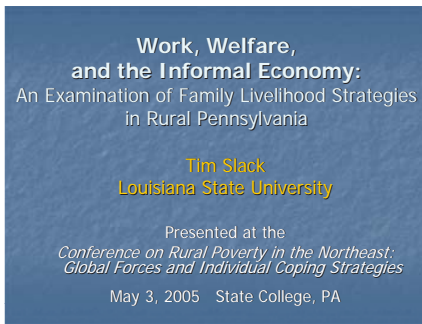
draw upon the larger sample sizes and more representative results possible with surveys and the detailed understanding that comes from focus groups or in-person interviews. In hearing the studies presented at the same conference, it became obvious that adding a few questions to each of the data collection efforts would have enabled each researcher to examine the research questions asked by the others. In some cases, this information may be in the studies, but was simply not used for this particular conference presentation. If this is the case, different data could be brought to bear on similar research questions allowing replication of these studies. Conference participants could look to their fellow participants as collaborators on these projects.

On the cautionary side, the fact that new data were collected for

several of the projects suggests that substantial investments are being made in data collection efforts. Relatively small sample sizes and the fairly low response rate on multi-wave studies indicate the difficulty of tracking individuals over time and the costs involved in collecting data for each study. The similarity of the target populations and the questions asked across several studies does suggest that a large, collaborative data collection effort related to understanding rural poverty could be beneficial and cost-effective. A multidisciplinary approach to study design and analytical strategies could yield a rich data set, with a large sample of families, and data collected at multiple levels (individual, family, community, labor market). Such data could form the basis for a strong research agenda related to rural poverty, help to re-establish research



Tim Slack, Louisiana State University



on rural poverty as important theoretically and empirically, and provide data adequate to test relatively complex relationships.

An additional strategy to build on the different approaches taken by presenters at the conference is to make the aggregate level Census-based data available to link with data from the individual level studies. This requires that the address, zip code, school district, or county of residence of the individual respondents are known. While some sample sizes would be limited, combining these data would allow for preliminary investigation of the contribution of local conditions to understanding variations in individual's opportunities and outcomes.

Individually, these studies focus on specific and focused research questions and some draw from theory within a particular discipline. Yet, these studies and the story about rural poverty they tell, make clear that in order to more fully understand rural poverty we must combine the theories and knowledge from multiple disciplines. A comprehensive understanding will aid in developing meaningful policies to deal with poverty of

place and poverty of individuals. The studies further force us to ask whether the best way to tell the rural poverty story is by many separate, focused studies, or through a larger, multidisciplinary study with broader research objectives. Or, are both approaches necessary? Individual, more focused studies may be better able to respond more quickly to new research questions and to assess effects of policy changes. But larger, more comprehensive studies enable us to test sets of hypotheses, address multiple research questions, and establish empirical ties among different theoretical perspectives across disciplines.

There is no single answer to the poverty of rural places, or the poverty of some rural people. Different places and different people will require different forms of assistance and resources. No single study or discipline

will provide the answer. Researchers on rural poverty have a responsibility to become familiar with the theoretical perspectives and research results from disciplines different from their own. Past research on poverty, rural and urban, combined with the studies from this conference tell us that there isn't just one solution. Yet, these studies, and this conference, allow us to further the interdisciplinary conversation to identify the overlaps and interrelationships of rural poverty research conducted from different disciplinary perspectives.

A Research Agenda for Rural Poverty in the Northeast

In considering what a research agenda for rural poverty in the Northeast should be, I asked myself 'What is missing?' Answering this question looks beyond the research presented at

The Dynamics of Food Insecurity in Rural America: Are There Regional Differences?

Christine M. Olson
Emily O. Miller
Josephine Swanson
Myla S. Strawderman
Cornell University

the conference. One conference can only include a certain number of presenters and so does not reflect the full set of rural poverty research. I am sharing my perceptions of what is needed in future rural poverty research. This would be in addition to the types of research presented at this conference.

Where have the children and married couples gone? Federal welfare policy, which is the core of federal poverty policy, is focused on getting women off welfare. It has nothing to say about the intended or unintended consequences of this for children of poor women. In addition, many rural poor children are in married couple families or in families that are low-income but not welfare recipients. These 'at risk' families, in particular married couple families and their children, are missing from rural poverty research. Most studies of poverty among rural families focus on single mothers with dependent children. The very high poverty rates and difficult situation these families face justify this attention. But, research on



Sally Ward, University of New Hampshire

Research on Poverty in the Northeast U.S.: Where do we go from here?

Diane K. McLaughlin

Associate Professor of Rural Sociology and Demography, Penn State

Prepared for the Northeast Regional Poverty Workshop, Global Force and Individual Coping Strategies
State College, PA, May 3 & 4, 2005

poor and low-income families needs to be extended to include married-couple and single-father families with children.

Researchers, especially urban researchers, examine the consequences of poverty and welfare reform for children's well-being, but there is limited rural research on this topic. It seems likely that urban-focused research on policy and program evaluation will be less useful in assisting children in poor families in rural areas, and especially those in poor rural places. Rural researchers should be especially attentive to opportunities to evaluate 'natural experiments,' for example, those that occur as locales implement the same policy in different ways.

How does poverty of place differentially affect the well-being of poor and non-poor residents? We do not know how poverty of place differentially affects the

life chances of poor and middle-class children or adults from poor places. Nor do we know how poor children and adults in better-off communities fare compared to each other and to those in poor places. It is essential to bring together empirical research and theory on poverty and wealth of places with empirical research and theory on individual well-being to truly understand poverty and barriers to exiting poverty.

What happened to studies of education and race/ethnicity as major factors in poverty and well-being? This question relates back to the core correlates of poverty – the factors that are significant in every study presented at the conference. One commonality across these studies, whether they were ecological or individual-level analyses, was that each multivariate model controlled for race and ethnicity and for educational attainment.

Each presenter with such controls in their models noted the importance of race/ethnicity and education as highly correlated with poverty, but focused on other factors. Have we given up on trying to explain how race/ethnicity and education place individuals, families and places at greater risk of poverty? Or do we think we understand the causal mechanisms, but there is no political will or interest in remedying them? If race/ethnicity and education were eliminated as risk factors for poverty – rural or urban, what would take their place?

Education and job skills require additional comment. The human capital of communities is considered a major factor in successful economic development, and education of individuals remains one of the most important achieved stratifiers in American society. Yet, despite what we know about the relationship between education and job skills and income or poverty, some individuals and communities don't act upon that knowledge. Why do adolescents choose to drop out of school? Have we identified the barriers to high educational (and occupational) aspirations and attainment? What are the encouragements or routes to gain trade skills? If we do know what these are, or even what some of them are, how can we, as a society, move to eliminate barriers and provide opportunities for all youth? How does the poverty of places influence the educational and occupational aspirations



and attainment of the residents, young and old alike?

Finally, we need stronger linkages between research on community and economic development and socioeconomic well-being of residents. The processes communities use to develop in ways that improve socioeconomic well-being of (all) residents must be identified and understood. Such studies need to consider policies and formal or semi-organized programs adopted by local governments, civic organizations, faith-based organizations and others. The roles of individual actors also must be examined. Relationships among community residents must be considered and linked to the literatures on social disorganization, power, social networks and civic engagement. It also seems essential to identify the short- and medium-term consequences of different economic development strategies to

determine which will lead to the best and most sustainable opportunities for current and new residents.

This list could go on. And it will and should change as new issues arise. For example, the recent court decision relieving United Airlines of its pension responsibilities, as well as other bankruptcies and plant closures across the U.S., have important implications for poverty among elders reliant on pensions. Changes in Social Security will further affect elders, especially those in rural areas who tend to be more dependent on Social Security income. The differential benefits of the 'private' Social Security accounts for rural and urban residents – due to earnings differentials – will raise further research and policy questions about the role of policy in the economic plight of rural elders.

How Can Rural Poverty Researchers Contribute to Enacting a Rural Poverty Policy Agenda?

We do know a great deal about the correlates and consequences of rural poverty. Given that, researchers need to ask themselves some serious questions and rethink, and perhaps, expand the role of researchers. Why isn't this knowledge acted upon? Why is it that poverty, let alone rural poverty, does not even seem to be on the 'radar screen' of national, state or local politics? Why is it in a nation with a federal program that challenges us to 'leave no child behind' almost 20 percent of children live in poverty?

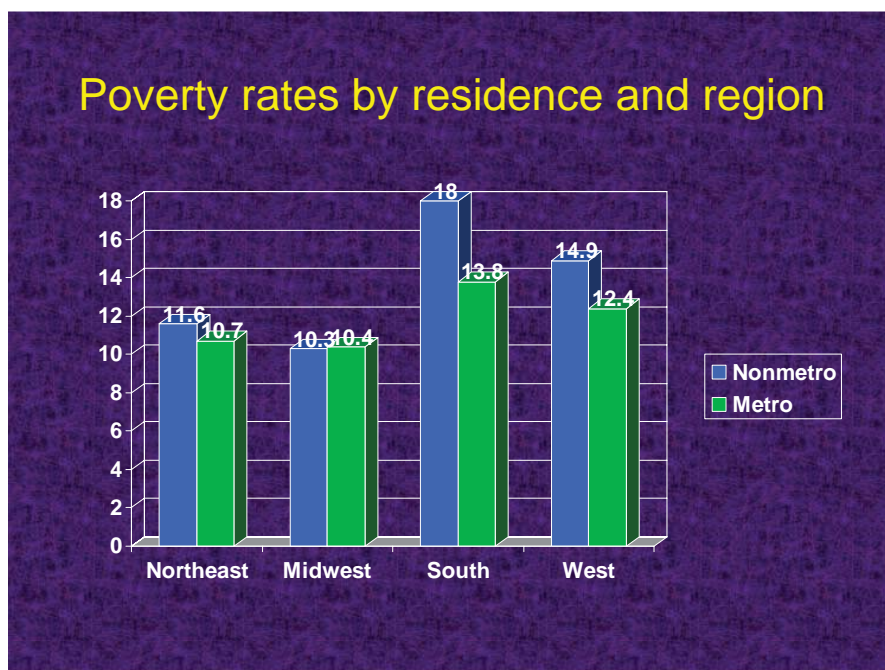
Rural poverty conferences, such as this one focusing on the Northeast, provide unique opportunities for researchers from different disciplines and universities and who focus on different

areas of research to come together to exchange ideas. But, if we look back over the history of rural poverty research, we might also ask ourselves, why haven't we solved this problem? How many additional rural poverty research conferences will there be before this societal problem is resolved? The research tradition is strong, and the contributions of multiple disciplines to looking at and understanding different aspects of rural poverty provide much greater insight into the multiple and quite diverse causes of poverty and the equally multiple and diverse barriers to exiting poverty. Researchers know a great deal about rural poverty. What will they do with that knowledge? They can continue to conduct their research. That will make important contributions to the research community, theoretical development within and across disciplines, and research methodology. It will further extend what we know.

It is unlikely that additional research by itself, no matter how well done, will have much effect on reducing rural poverty.

Perhaps we need to expand our research portfolios to include more program evaluations. Practitioners and policy makers could be included in devising more applied research questions, and practitioners can provide invaluable knowledge about how programs and policies actually operate, and how individuals, families and communities respond to poverty and poverty programs. Establishing what programs and policies are effective and how implementation can be adjusted to meet the needs of local populations would be an important contribution to building a research and practice-based policy agenda.

Rural poverty researchers need to work together across disciplines to develop a coherent message about the causes of rural poverty, its consequences and possible solutions. Taken as a whole, it will be a relatively complex message. As we have seen just from the papers presented in this conference, there are multiple causes of poverty and barriers to exit that occur at community, family and individual levels. Could we identify the three strategies most likely to reduce rural poverty, especially among children? Can we develop a message to challenge stereotypes that resonates with the public and with policy makers? Once such a message is developed, we must disseminate it to the general public and to





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for many families and children. Such programs would require shifts of government resources at multiple levels, including resource shifts to rural areas. These broad-based programs offer special opportunities to build coalitions of voices to educate the public and policy makers. In some cases, an effective rural poverty policy may be a policy targeted to helping all families and children.

policy makers. Policy makers respond to pressure from constituents, but they also need to be convinced that the issues they champion will generate votes and political party support. Care should be taken that the message outlines how these programs and policies will benefit families, children, communities and businesses in the U.S. Packaging of the message is critical.

It would be equally important, in my view, to identify programs and policies that would benefit all families at the same time they benefit the poor. Some of these are identified in the studies presented at the conference and in prior research. These include ensuring availability of high quality, affordable and flexible child care; improving access to affordable and reliable transportation; encouraging employers to make workplaces family-friendly; offering educational programs and support networks for parenting, job skills, nutrition, and building successful interpersonal relationships. Minimum wage increases and universal health care coverage would improve well-being



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