

Perspectives

ON POVERTY, POLICY, & PLACE

Spring 2004 • Volume 2/Number 1

rupri

rural policy research institute

The Newsletter of the
RUPRI Rural Poverty
Research Center

OVERVIEW

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 by identifying priority research questions and policy imperatives to be addressed by a national agenda. In this issue, we offer a selection of the presentations. The full summary of the conference is available online at www.rprconline.com.

How Poverty and Policy Are Shaped by Place

p. 3

Rebecca Blank

This article serves as a framework for thinking about how poverty and policy are affected by place, or where one lives. Blank reviews five characteristics of rural locales that can shape both the likelihood of poverty and the effectiveness of various policies to deal with it: the natural environment, economic structure, public and community institutions, social norms, and demographic characteristics.

What We Know about the Causes of Rural Poverty

p. 5

Bruce Weber and Leif Jensen

Weber and Jensen review the quantitative research on rural poverty since 1990 and the importance of place in shaping both the landscape of poverty and the responses to it.

Drawing Lessons from Urban Poverty Research

p. 8

Harry Holzer, Linda Burton, and Jeffrey Kling

This articles examines the lessons for rural poverty research that can be derived from from three large-scale urban poverty studies, the Multicity Study on Urban Inequality; Welfare, Children, and Families: A Three-City Study; and the Moving to Opportunity program.

Influencing Policy

p. 10

Policymakers and other stakeholders discuss how researchers can ensure that their work is read and acted on by policymakers.

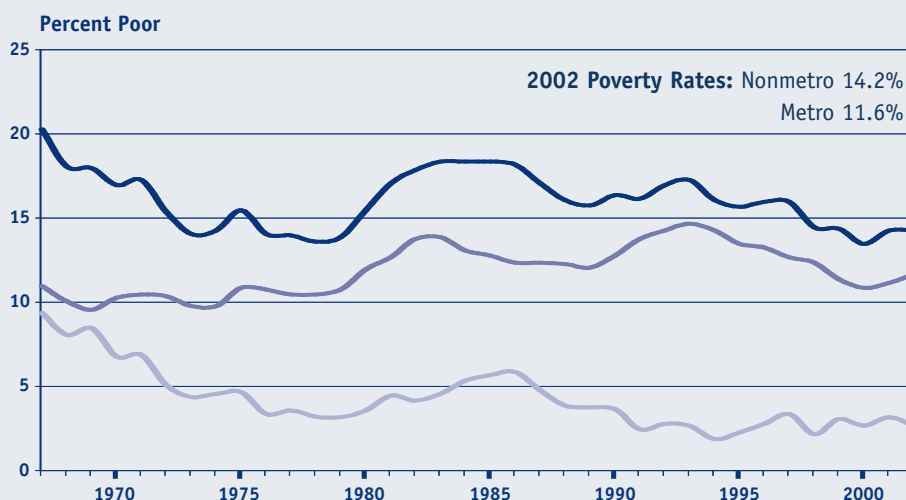
FAST FACTS

Poverty Rates by Residence, 1967–2002

■ Nonmetro
■ Metro
■ Gap

Note: Metro status of some counties changed in 1984 and 1994. Metro and nonmetro rates are imputed for 1960–1968, 1970 and 1984.

Source: Prepared by the Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey, March Supplement.



Perspectives: On Poverty, Policy, and Place

The newsletter of the RUPRI Rural Poverty Research Center

Publisher

Rural Poverty Research Center, a national center of the Rural Policy Research Institute

Co-Directors

Charles W. Fluharty, University of Missouri
Bruce A. Weber, Oregon State University

Editor

Barbara Ray

Perspectives is published quarterly by the Rural Poverty Research Center. Articles may be reprinted on request. Core funding for RPRC is provided by the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The RPRC is an academic research center whose aim is to provide timely and useful research on the causes and effects of rural poverty and on policy options to reduce rural poverty and its effects. It will serve as a catalyst for more effective collaboration between policymakers, practitioners, and researchers and support the development of a next generation of rural poverty scholars.

Bylines—Each article in the newsletter features the byline “based on research by...”, which signifies that the article, while written by our editorial staff, has been reviewed and approved by the original researcher. With this approach, we hope to disseminate research to a broad audience in a format that is accessible, reliable, and accurate. The views expressed are those of the authors and not of the RUPRI Rural Poverty Research Center.

The RUPRI Rural Poverty Research Center is one of three Area Poverty Research Centers funded by ASPE/HHS.

Editorial Offices

Rural Poverty Research Center
Oregon State University, 213 Ballard Hall
Corvallis, OR 97331-3601
Phone: 541.737.1442
FAX: 541.737.2563
deanna.watkins@oregonstate.edu

For information on articles, contact:

Bruce Weber, Oregon State University
bruce.weber@oregonstate.edu

Design

The Glasoe Group, www.glasoegroup.com

Website

www.rprconline.org

The Importance of Place in Poverty Research and Policy: Creating a National Rural Poverty Research Agenda

March 3–4, 2004, Washington DC

Presentations available at www.minnesotaruralpartners.org/rupri/
Conference summary available at www.rprconline.org

Wednesday, March 3

THREE CONFERENCE FRAMINGS

Karl Stauber, President, Northwest Area Foundation
Rachel Tompkins, President, the Rural School and Community Trust
Charles W. Fluharty, Dir., RUPRI

A NATIONAL RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE

The Impact of Place on Poverty and Poverty Policy: The Rural Consideration
Rebecca Blank, Co-Dir., Nat'l Poverty Center, and Dean, Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, U. Michigan

RURAL POVERTY RESEARCH AND PRACTICE - A RETROSPECTIVE

Poverty, Policy and Place: A Critical Review of Rural Poverty Research
Leif Jensen, Prof. of Rural Sociology and Dir., Population Research Inst., Penn State;
Bruce Weber, Prof. of Agricultural and Resource Economics, Oregon State, & RPRC Co-Dir.
Community Capacity, Cultural and Social Capital and Rural Poverty
Cornelia Flora, Dir., 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, Prof. of Public Policy, Georgetown U.

Welfare, Children and Families: Lessons from the Three City Study for Rural Poverty Research
Linda Burton, Prof. of Human Development and Family Studies, Sociology, and Demography, Penn State; Stephen Matthews, Population Research Institute, Penn State.; Debra Skinner, Dept. of Anthropology, U. North Carolina-Chapel Hill

Moving to Opportunity: Lessons about Neighborhoods, Mobility and Poverty
Jeffrey Kling, Asst. Prof. of Economics & Public Affairs, Princeton.

PANEL DISCUSSION: WHAT DID WE LEARN ABOUT PLACE DYNAMICS THAT OFFERS OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE RURAL POVERTY RESEARCH AGENDA?

Amy Glasmeier, Prof. of Geography & Regional Planning, Penn State
Greg Duncan, Edwina S. Tarry Prof., School of Education & Social Policy, Northwestern
Ann Tickamyer, Prof. & Dir. of International Development Studies, Ohio U.
William Darity, Jr., Boshamer Distinguished Prof. of Economics, U. of North Carolina

Thursday, March 4

POLICY PERSPECTIVES

Don E. Winstead, Deputy Assistant Secretary, Office of Human Services Policy, ASPE, HHS
Clarence Carter, Dir. of the Federal Office of Community Services, ACF, HHS
Gary Stangler, Exec Dir., 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 Econ. Div., Economic Research Service, USDA
Andrew Isserman, Prof. of Urban & 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 Prof. in Pop. Studies and Prof. of Sociology. Ohio State
Miriam Shark, Annie E. Casey Foundation
Bruce Katz, Dir., Center on Urban & Metropolitan Policy, Brookings
Barry Van Lare, Sr VP, Workforce Services Division, MAXIMUS

How Poverty and Policy Are Shaped by Place

Based on research by Rebecca Blank

Where a person lives affects the likelihood of being poor. How far one is from a job, how isolated the community from commerce and connections, the social norms that shape a person—all of these are colored by where one lives, and all of these affect one's life chances. In her keynote paper at the March 3–4 conference on *The Importance of Place in Poverty Research and Policy*,¹ 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 place, or where one lives. Blank laid out five characteristics of rural locales that can shape both the likelihood of poverty and the effectiveness of various policies to deal with it: the natural environment, economic structure, public and community institutions, social norms, and demographic characteristics.

The Natural Environment

An area's natural environment—its climate, natural resources, and isolation—is frequently 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 conference paper, "Poverty, Policy, and Place: How Poverty and Policies to Alleviate Poverty Are Shaped by Local Characteristics" (available online www.minnesotaruralpartners.org/rupri/presentations.htm), location and the natural environment affect poverty through 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

A summary of the March conference proceedings, chronicling more of Professor's Blank's research and that of the other presenters, will be available at www.rprconline.org.

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.

Attending to environmental disadvantages and encouraging economic growth in rural areas may be more effective in reducing poverty in the long run than policies designed to address immediate income shortfalls.

Antipoverty policies, Blank suggests, might be most effective when they focus on building the infrastructure to ease isolation. Roads, communication, and other forms of access are necessary precursors to many policy and program solutions to poverty. In fact, Blank argues, attending to these environmental disadvantages and encouraging economic growth may be more effective in reducing poverty in the long run than policies designed to address immediate income shortfalls.

Economic Structure

As indicated above, the economic structure of an area turns on its mix of industry and job opportunities, and the mix of job opportunities, in turn, defines its wage and income opportunities. Areas with limited industry typically attract fewer skilled workers, and wages are lower. Areas that rely on limited industry may also be more susceptible to recessions and business fluctuations. Limited jobs and economic opportunity can also influence expectations among residents about their future prospects, dissuading them from higher education or training opportunities. Ultimately, few job options can cause those with more education or training to leave the area.

Compounding this economic Catch-22, lower wages and limited opportunities affect the wealth and tax base available to public institutions, such as schools and health ▶

1. For a synthesis and summary of the conference proceedings, see www.rprconline.org.

care, diminishing the capacity of rural communities to address social and other problems. In other words, in rural areas, some argue, poverty and disadvantage arise because people are unable to cash in on their human capital (education, job experience, etc.) owing to the structural conditions, such as fewer services, fewer jobs, and fewer opportunities.

As a result of these limitations, policies that focus on job placement are likely to be less successful than in areas where jobs are plentiful, Blank argues. Similarly, policies that focus on education may meet with resistance from youth who see very little connection between school and economic success. Because of the lack of nearby jobs, rural residents may need more extended financial assistance, such as extended unemployment insurance, when they lose their jobs in a recession or because of economic restructuring. Another, more controversial, possibility is policy that encourages residents to move away from the area.

Ideally, as Blank argues, one would expand the economic development of the region, but as Timothy Bartik argued in a 1991 book, economic development policy has been less successful than many claim.² Perhaps, she suggests, improving the skill base of local workers over time would be as effective as attracting a broader mix of jobs.

Community Institutions

The presence of public-sector and community institutions is a sign of organization and order in a community and a willingness among residents to work together toward common goals. This sign of strength and unity can help attract business and stimulate economic development. In addition, strong community institutions can call attention to poverty and hardship among families. In fact, the design and implementation of effective antipoverty policies, Blank argues, require a strong public sector; policies are only as strong as the local community's ability to implement them.

Of course, there is also a darker side to strong communi-

ty institutions, especially if they are controlled by a community elite that works to reinforce class lines or social norms. Too much control in the hands of a few can subvert the efforts of organizations and community institutions to their own personal interests. Certain groups, for example, might be excluded from assistance. Local welfare offices in the South, for example, Blank notes, typically made it very difficult for black families to receive welfare in the 1950s and 1960s.

Ties to national organizations and institutions outside the community can limit this risk; however, once again, the very nature of rural areas can impede this outreach. The more isolated from other communities or the more dominated by one industry, the less likely the community will be heard by those who can help to effect change.

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 for families, knowing they can turn to other family members or close friends for support when needed.

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. Greater poverty by race, ethnicity, or gender in an area stems at least partially, Blank argues, from self-fulfilling social norms that lower expectations or mollify anger at one's status. This suggests that poverty may be more deeply entrenched, passed from generation to generation, in part because of the social norms in an area.

When trying to change a negative social norm, such as teen pregnancy or low educational aspirations, some argue that policy should move beyond creating incentives and instead try to enforce new norms to replace the more negative ones. Policies, however, must take into account

Effective antipoverty policies require a strong public sector; policies are only as strong as the local community's ability to implement them.

2. Timothy Bartik, *Who Benefits from State and Local Economic Development Policies?* Kalamazoo, MI: W. E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, 1991.

the population's views and norms. Tailoring a program message to the local community is critical to its success, Blanks suggests, otherwise unvoiced, but prevalent, assumptions among certain groups about their role in life and their own expectations may thwart efforts at job training or placement, or educational improvement.

Demographic Characteristics

The final characteristic that Blank suggests shapes the nature of poverty and policy in a locale is demographics. As Blank notes, demographic traits—age, race, income, and so forth—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 or poorly educated population.

Demographic information, Blank argues, provides important descriptive knowledge: how many elderly live in a region, how many families earn more than the poverty level, or how many people have a college education. This is not, however, very helpful in answering *why* the community is less educated or why the elderly are over-represented. It is a demographic fact, for example, that rural areas have less educated populations. But do people acquire less education because they live in rural areas, or

do they choose rural living because they have less education? In other words, it is difficult to untangle cause and effect when the characteristics of place are so critical a part of the equation.

On the other hand, Blank argues, it may not be necessary to always know why something is as it is. Poor places with high birth rates will likely benefit from good schools and good health care aimed at children and pregnant mothers, regardless of why the population has high birth rates. Demographic trends can provide very useful insights about what types of policies are most likely to be useful and how they should be targeted.

In short, rural areas are unique because they are more isolated, their economies are often dictated by their location, public and community organizations operate differently, social norms are different, and rural populations are different. Because people choose where they live, it is extremely difficult to identify a prime cause of rural poverty. As a result, there is no silver bullet to lower poverty. The reasons people are poor in rural areas are many and intertwined, and as such, Blank suggests, policies and programs to address rural poverty should focus on multiple, and complementary, strategies, and these approaches should ensure an appropriate balance between local and central authority if they are to be effective. **RUPRI**

What We Know about the Causes of Rural Poverty

Based on a review of literature by Bruce Weber and Leif Jensen

Before setting a new agenda for rural poverty research, as was the goal of the March conference, it is important to establish what we know and what remains to be answered in the field of rural poverty research. Bruce Weber and Leif Jensen provide a review of the quantitative research on rural poverty since 1990 in their conference paper, "Poverty and Place: A Critical Review of the Rural Poverty Literature."¹

The recent studies suggest that there is clearly something about living in a rural area that increases one's odds of

An annotated bibliography of rural poverty research is available at www.rupri.org/rprc/biblio051404.pdf

being poor, even when taking into account individual and household characteristics. In other words, a person of the same race, age, gender, and education, living in households with the same number of working adults and the same number of children is more likely to be poor if he or she lives in a rural area than an urban area. However, the authors also review the inherent limitations that studying rural poverty poses, and caution against accepting these conclusions about the "rural differential" in ►

1. The full paper is available online at: [URL to come]. The authors focus their efforts on quantitative studies since 1990, recognizing, however, that ethnographic studies are integral contributions to the field, especially for capturing the richness of context and the constraints of place.

the absence of more compelling evidence. What follows is a brief synopsis of their survey.

Studies of Rural Poverty and Migration

In almost any discussion of rural poverty, someone is likely to ask, why don't rural residents just move to cities to get jobs? Likewise, the effect mobility has on rural areas, and on formerly rural residents, has been widely studied. Wenk and Hardesty (1993), for example, find that leaving rural for urban areas lessens the time women spend in poverty and unemployment over their lifetimes. Moving also increases the time spent employed for both white and black men.

However, others have found that the poor do not always follow this pattern of self-improvement through mobility. Nord (1998), for example, found that the poor are as mobile as the nonpoor, but that they appear to circulate between poor counties, thus maintaining spatial inequality in poverty (see also Fitchen, 1994; Nord et al. 1995). Fitchen (1995) finds that the poor tend to move more in response to lower costs of living than to better job prospects. Poor people, Fitchen concludes, may be attracted to poor places. Such mobility can also have a downside in the aggregate. Fitchen found that migration of poor families into rural areas seeking lower housing costs and greater safety often led to the area's economic decline, middle-class flight, a drop in housing costs, and more low-income housing.

Studies of County-Level Poverty Rates

Seeking answers to why poverty rates are high in rural areas, researchers have often looked to the industrial structure, human capital characteristics (e.g., the number of college graduates in a population) or demographic variables (e.g., the number of elderly). Typically, researchers explore these issues by studying populations in rural counties, often driven by the availability of county-level data from the census and other data collection tools.

Albrecht and colleagues (2000), for example, find that when a county shifts from an agricultural economy to a service economy, the employment opportunities for men decline, while the number of single-mother households increases even as women's employment increases.

Albrecht and coauthors speculate that men might be leaving for better jobs, while women remain to fill the service-sector jobs, all of which contributes to high poverty rates. Similarly, Lichter and McLaughlin (1995), in one of the strongest and most thorough studies of its kind, found that during the 1980s in nonmetro counties, rising rural poverty was associated with female labor supply and single headship.

In a related vein, researchers have examined whether dependence on agriculture or extraction industries can be linked to poverty in an area. Lobao and Schulman (1991)

while finding that overall industrial structure matters, find very little effect of farming patterns (whether farming is industrial agriculture or large or small family farms) on poverty.

Albrecht (1998), analyzing data from Great Plains counties, finds that those counties that remained agricultural, despite having declining population between 1940 and 1990, had lower poverty rates than those that became service oriented, and their poverty rates differed insignificantly from those that had developed mixed economies by 1990. Finally, Levernier, Partridge, and Rickman (2000), looking nationally, find that industrial structure is important,

but it did not entirely explain why nonmetro counties had higher average poverty rates.

When a county shifts from an agricultural economy to a service economy, the employment opportunities for men decline, while the number of single-mother households increases even as women's employment increases.

Contextual Studies of Household Poverty in Rural Areas

Many researchers have also explored how living in a rural area—the context—affects life chances of individual households. These studies, for example, typically include a household's and individual's characteristics and one or more characteristics of the community and examine how the interrelationship affects a household's odds of living in poverty. Brown and Hirschl (1995), for example, use the percent unemployed in a county, the percent

employed in core industries, and the percent employed in mid-level occupations as factors contributing to the likelihood of a household being poor. Cotter (2002) and Haynie and Gorman (1999) considered age, gender, and education of the labor force; the tightness of the labor market; and its industrial composition as likely influences on a household's poverty odds. What these three studies typically find is that regardless of one's individual or community characteristics, people living in a rural area are more likely to be poor. Local labor market conditions account for about half of the difference between rural and urban places, and having an education and a job and working more hours does less to reduce a household's odds of poverty in rural areas than in urban areas.

Conceptual, Methodological, and Data Issues

Studies of rural poverty face several conceptual and methodological issues. Fundamental conceptual issues include defining the relevant geographic "neighborhoods" in rural areas, identifying the most important social and economic processes that affect poverty, and thinking through how policy affects these processes.

Perhaps the most important methodological challenge is the potentially confounding problem of "endogenous membership." Given that people can move and choose where to live, how do we know that rural-urban differences in poverty are not simply a byproduct of this choice, or "self-selection"? In other words, do poor people sort themselves into rural areas, or is there something about living in rural areas that is detrimental to economic well-being? The authors find several creative approaches to dealing with this important problem, although none fully solves the issue. Other challenges in model specification are to adequately account for the interactions between rural residence and community or individual characteristics; and to accurately account for the interplay between direct and indirect effects of individual and place.

Until these significant research issues are ironed out, Weber and Jensen advocate caution in interpreting the results and in assuming that there are indeed rural and urban differences in the factors affecting poverty.

Finally, rural poverty research is constrained by the scarcity of good data. The credibility and usefulness of

rural poverty research would improve if data were available by subcounty geographic units that captured rural-urban differences or that allowed community-level analysis. The metropolitan-nonmetropolitan dichotomy, Weber and Jensen argue, is inadequate to represent rural-urban geography. Perhaps the most critical data improvement for quantitative research would be data on community processes and institutional intermediaries that might affect the barriers to and opportunities for households. Also, building cost-of-living differences across the rural-urban continuum into poverty thresholds would put to rest lingering concerns about the possibility that rural-urban differences in poverty rates reflect only measurement error.

With better data and better specified models, rural poverty research can provide policy makers with a clearer understanding of causes of poverty in rural and urban areas and ultimately better guidance for policy. **RUPRI**

Reference List

- Albrecht, Don E., Carol Mulford Albrecht, & Stan L. Albrecht. 2000. Poverty in non-metropolitan America: Impacts of industrial, employment, and family structure variables. *Rural Sociology* 65 (1), 87–103.
- _____. 1998. The industrial transformation of farm communities: Implications for family structure and socioeconomic conditions. *Rural Sociology* 63 (1), 51–64.
- Brown, David L., & Thomas A. Hirschl. 1995. Household poverty in rural and metropolitan-core areas of the United States. *Rural Sociology* 60 (1), 44–66.
- Cotter, David A. 2002. Poor people in poor places: Local opportunity structures and household poverty. *Rural Sociology* 67 (4), 534–55.
- Fitchen, Janet M. 1995. Spatial redistribution of poverty through migration of poor people to depressed rural communities. *Rural Sociology*, 60 (2), 181–201.
- Fitchen, Janet M. 1994. Residential mobility among the rural poor. *Rural Sociology*, 59 (3), 416–36.
- Haynie, Dana L., & Bridget K. Gorman. 1999. A gendered context of opportunity: Determinants of poverty across urban and rural labor markets. *The Sociological Quarterly* 40 (2), 177–97.
- Levernier, William, Mark D. Partridge, & Dan S. Rickman. 2000. The causes of regional variations in U.S. poverty: A cross-county analysis. *Journal of Regional Science* 40 (3), 473–49.
- Lichter, Daniel T., & Diane K. McLaughlin. 1995. Changing economic opportunities, family structure, and poverty in rural areas. *Rural Sociology* 60 (4), 688–706.
- Lobao, Linda M., & Michael D. Schulman. 1991. Farming patterns, rural restructuring, and poverty: A comparative regional analysis. *Rural Sociology* 56 (4), 565–602.
- Nord, Mark. 1998. Poor people on the move: County to county migration and the spatial concentration of poverty. *Journal of Regional Science* 38 (2), 329–351.
- Nord, Mark, A.E. Luloff, & Leif Jensen. 1995. Migration and the spatial concentration of poverty. *Rural Sociology* 60 (3), 399–415.
- Wenk, DeeAnn, & Constance Hardesty. 1993. The effects of rural-to-urban migration on the poverty status of youth in the 1980s. *Rural Sociology* 58 (1), 76–92.

Drawing Lessons from Urban Poverty Research

Harry Holzer, Linda Burton, and Jeffrey Kling

Perhaps the most resounding sentiment that emerged from the March conference was that addressing the underlying causes and consequences of rural poverty is an extraordinarily complex task. That complexity, in turn, demands innovation and fresh perspectives from the research community. Just as there is no single answer to solving rural poverty, there is no single approach to studying the issues. Researchers today must cull the best of different research methods, reach across disciplines for insight, and apply what is learned to rural research.

In this spirit, several presenters reported findings from large-scale urban poverty studies. Much can be learned from these studies, both about the importance of place in poverty and methods and approaches methods that can inform rural poverty research. We review three of those studies here, with a focus on their applicability to rural research.

Multicity Study on Urban Inequality

The Multicity Study on Urban Inequality offers many lessons for rural research. According to Harry Holzer, Professor of Public Policy at Georgetown University, and one of the lead co-investigators in this study, researchers combined extensive employer surveys with information from 8,000 individuals in Atlanta, Boston, Detroit, and Los Angeles to gain insight into minorities' labor market experiences and employers' hiring and promotion practices and racial attitudes.

The study offered unique insight on an enduring problem in rural studies: what boundaries to use when studying effects in rural locales. By using geocoding techniques, MultiCity researchers were able to delineate some rough cuts of neighborhood boundaries in urban areas, and from that calculate a ratio of low-skilled people to low-skilled jobs. For every individual, they were able to determine the average distance from a certain type of job in the area. They could also determine the average dis-

MTO study: www.mtoresearch.org
Three-City study: www.jhu.edu/~welfare
MultiCity Study:
www.russellsage.org/programs/proj_reviews/multicity.shtml

tances of each firm to certain populations, such as African-American and Latino populations. In addition, the study gauged distance to public transit stops for each firm. All of these techniques allowed them to better understand the mechanism by which space affects outcomes or by which it can be overcome.

The analysis was a good starting point in analyzing spatial mismatch; however, it was nevertheless a static view

of where the people were in relation to the jobs. The larger question was which factors influenced employers to locate where they did, which factors influenced their hiring decisions, and which factors led employees to a firm. To answer these questions, the researchers turned to in-depth interviews. Those interviews confirmed that there was much more than simply spatial issues influencing hiring decisions; employers, for example, had clear racial and gender preferences, as well as skill

needs based on the job. They also discovered that people chose to live where they did based on how comfortable they felt in the neighborhood. Employers, on the other hand, chose to locate because of taxes, crime, and other neighborhood-related characteristics. They also were influenced by racial attitudes.

This type of analysis can shed valuable light on a variety of questions of interest to rural research. As Holzer noted, the methods can be applied to rural studies seeking answers to where jobs locate and why, where the potential employees are, and the relation between the two. The multi-method approach can cast light on how job search is carried out by rural residents. It can also uncover the

The research methods used in the Multi-City Study can be applied to rural studies seeking answers to where jobs locate and why, where the potential employees are, and the relation between the two.

interplay between race and job skill levels. Finally, such research can shed light on which employers are likely to settle in an area or leave, and raises the issue whether policy can affect those decisions.

Welfare, Children, and Families: A Three-City Study

Another study that made explicit efforts to combine several methods is the Welfare, Children, and Families: A Three-City Study. This study used surveys, ethnographic research, and a developmental study to produce a rich set of findings on the effects of welfare reform on children and families. Linda Burton, director of the Center for Human Development and Family Research in Diverse Contexts at Penn State and director of the ethnographic component of the project, discussed some insights that could readily be applied to rural research, including the importance of tracing pathways that individuals follow over the course of their day.

As part of the ethnographic arm of the study, Linda Burton, Stephen Matthews, and Debra Skinner used Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technology to map the routes that participants charted each day in arranging child care, traveling to and from work, buying groceries, and the many other stops required in caring for family and personal needs. Linking this information to field notes and other study material offered an innovative perspective on families in specific locales. Adding further accuracy to the picture, the researchers confirmed any service and program use with administrative data. One surprising aspect of families' lives that the research uncovered was what they labeled "jumping scale." Often, residents in the study jumped scale, using friends and relatives in other, more resource-rich, neighborhoods as a launching pad for better services, from health care to simply better laundry facilities.

With this multi-faceted approach, 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.

Moving to Opportunity

Jeffrey Kling, Assistant Professor of Economics and Public Affairs at Princeton University, reported on the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) program, an experimental study to determine whether moving public housing

residents to better neighborhoods improved their well-being and job prospects. The study is funded by the Department of Housing and Urban Development and involves 4600 public housing families across five cities. The residents were assigned to either a group that received housing vouchers and mobility counseling, with the stipulation that they move to lower poverty neighborhoods; a group that was offered Section 8 housing vouchers to move, with no stipulation on neighborhood poverty level; and a third, control group, which was offered no new assistance. In 2002, seven years after the experiment began, 70% of the experimental group and 41% percent of Section 8 group were living in areas with a poverty rate below 24%. In contrast just over 20% of those in the control group were living in low-poverty neighborhoods.

Moving to lower poverty areas, reported Kling, led to much better mental health for teen girls, with some evidence of improved education outcomes and lower substance abuse, but moving had no or adverse effects on boys. Employment among all the families rose, even in the control group, which suggests that families were per-

Ethnographic research is a well-established naturalistic method for examining complex relationships among community, policy, and familial contexts, material and social resources and conditions, and child, adolescent, and adult development. Ethnography elicits rich descriptions of cultural environments and the experiences of people embedded within them through close observation and in-depth interviewing. It results in holistic analysis that seeks to depict systemic influences in people's lives, the constraints and opportunities they manage, and how they think and act in the various worlds they encounter. Generally, ethnographers study a wide range of subject, including individual behavior, material conditions, and shared, assumed patterns of thought. In ethnography, researchers engage systematically with those they are studying, participating in their lives, and methodically asking questions about the information they are learning.

—Linda Burton, Debra Skinner, and Stephen Matthews, *Description of the Three-City Study Ethnography*

haps all reacting to the welfare policy changes that mandated work as well as the robust economy at the time.

The important point from this study that can be applied to rural research is that the large differences in outcomes evident between the control and experimental groups indicate that place does matter. Kling also noted that context can drive the research questions to be asked and the data to be gathered. MTO researchers, for example, chose to follow mental health outcomes because public housing imposes significant stress and poses other mental health risks to residents, and it was assumed that a move would alleviate some of that stress and perhaps improve mental health.

Each of these studies approached a question in a novel way. Perhaps the one thing that each have in common is that the process of combining methods and disciplines was often labor-intensive and required a fundamental commitment on everyone's part to make it work. Often,

as Burton reported, research methods from different disciplines such as sociology and economics were unfamiliar and perspectives on the issue at hand were often very different. However, the end result, all agreed, was a stronger study.

The research methods used in the Multi-City Study can be applied to rural studies seeking answers to where jobs locate and why, where the potential employees are, and the relation between the two.

Ethnographic research allows researchers to develop a more accurate understanding of the lives of residents in small areas, whether that be urban neighborhoods or rural towns.

The important point from the MTO study that can be applied to rural research is that the large differences in outcomes evident between the control and experimental groups indicate that place does matter. **RUPRI**

Influencing Policy

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 panelist Barry Van Lare, Vice President, Workforce Services Division, MAXIMUS, noted, "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." Several presenters from the private and public sectors offered insights into what policymakers want, and what approaches will likely be heard in the policy arena. We outline a few of those here. For more detail, see the conference summary, at www.rprconline.org.

The Policy Landscape

Given the myriad, and interconnected, reasons for rural poverty, policymakers must approach its study with multiple strategies, and tailor those strategies to the unique traits of rural living. Although much can be learned from urban poverty studies, it is not enough to simply apply urban solutions to the rural landscape. 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.

Ensuring that a rural agenda has a forum in Washington, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has assembled a rural taskforce, which unites several organizations within DHHS for coordinated action. As reported by Don Winstead, Deputy Assistant Secretary, Office of Human Services Policy, Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, 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 tribal governments, and help translate research findings into policy.

> For more information, see www.hhs.gov/ruralinitiative/intro.html

The latter effort is being realized through a research coordination council, which looks for areas of potential coordination within DHHS with hopes of spurring new forms of collaboration and cross-pollination of ideas. The rural taskforce is poised to play a key role in implement-

ing rural policy. 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.”

Staying true to the community is imperative in designing solutions to poverty. Community-based solutions are likely to be more effective, not only because they are organic to the area, but because they also acknowledge the different characteristics, needs, and capacity of different locales. Yet community-based solutions in rural areas often are stymied by limited local resources to fight poverty. Therefore, the task for policymakers and other stakeholders is to balance federal and state funding and mandates with local control.

Clarence Carter, the head of the Office of Community Services within DHHS, offers one route to balancing federal and local efforts. The Office of Community Services is working to refocus 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.”

> Office of Community Services:
www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ocs/

What Policymakers Want

Research that is actionable and moveable—A short answer to what policymakers want is clear, timely, actionable research. The latter is especially critical. Actionable research offers something that policymakers can act on and that can be applied to other populations. The research should also be “moveable,” noted April Bender, who owns the business Partnerships for Quality, applicable in different areas at different scales. The recent successes of rural health care research in affecting policy decisions suggest a model for research in which policymakers, practitioners, and researchers collaborate to define and address problems and evaluate outcomes.¹


Another model of effective policy outreach is that used by

1. For more information on the rural health care initiatives, see www.rupri.org/centers/healthPolicy.asp

the Brookings Institution. Bruce Katz, Director of the Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy at Brookings, described their approach, which includes setting the context for policy by documenting large demographic trends; describing how places are growing; 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.

> Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy:
www.brookings.edu/es/taxpolicycenter.htm

Katz suggests, for example, that rural poverty researchers could describe trends about spatial allocation of large federal policies to show the different effect of policies in different places. These data could show where coalitions

 “It is our goal to build the capacity of communities and individuals, to bring the investments together to make the whole greater than the sum of its parts.”

—Clarence Carter, Director, DHHS Office of Community Services

of rural and urban places might form and could lead to an integrative research and political agenda.

Finally, Van Lare 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.

Do not ghettoize rural poverty—Several panelists warned against a singular focus on poverty. To expand its visibility and to make it easier for policymakers to act, rural poverty should instead be wrapped in a larger policy issue. Almost any strategy, for example, that addresses the broader issue of economic development allows policymakers to address issues of rural poverty. Showing policymakers that, for example, ignoring the rural component will prevent them from meeting TANF work mandates, or other policy goals, will likely garner more attention, said Van Lare. Another approach, used by the Brookings Institution, categorizes cities and metro areas in different typologies and then focuses on certain cities that share certain characteristics. Similar approaches could be followed in rural poverty studies. In the end, ▶

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.

Collaborate—Research that is designed collaboratively by researchers, policymakers, and practitioners is more likely to be effective in the policy process. Toward that end, researchers should stay in close contact with practitioners, who can serve as a touchstone to reality, making the research more credible to all involved. Bruce Katz also urged rural and urban poverty researchers to form coalitions, which would be much stronger avenues for influencing policy.

Package it—Studies should be packaged in terms of clear policy choices. As Gary Stangler, Executive Director, Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, Annie E. Casey Foundation 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.

Brevity is a virtue in the policy field. The research should be marketed in a way that is easily digested and “skim-mable,” from fact sheets, to policy briefs. Policymakers and other stakeholders need short synopses of key points and findings in a form that they can mark up and hand off to colleagues and staff.

Finally, the message should be targeted toward media consumption. Without this access, the odds of the message reaching Washington are slim. As Stangler said, “If you’re going to have access to politicians you need visibility, credibility, and legitimacy.”

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, director of RUPRI and codirector of the Rural Poverty Research Center, reported, since the early 1990s, RUPRI, through its health panel, has had enormous success working with scholars and practitioners to bring sustained policy attention to rural health issues. The success, he argues, can be attributed to a community of scholars working on unique issues that are policy based but in a community context. By answering questions in a policy context and linking evaluation research to policy, the group has helped generate federal policy, state rural health policy, and a national rural health administration, with constituency groups from each of the major health sectors. The health services community is living proof, he says, of what can transpire if rural poverty research groups work together. **RUPRI**

RUPRI Rural Poverty Research Center
214 Middlebush Hall
University of Missouri
Columbia, MO 65211-6200

Non-Profit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Lansing, MI
Permit #407

rupri

rural policy research institute