
Poverty Research and Policy for Rural America

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Resurgent interest in poverty in the U.S. by both researchers and policymakers offers an opportunity to bring increased attention to the plight of the rural poor. Rural poverty is widespread and severe, and fundamental changes in the structure of the national economy portend continued distress in remote areas. High labor force participation by the rural poor has important theoretical and policy implications for understanding the causes, consequences and intervention strategies for combating poverty. Research on the characteristics and circumstances of different groups of the poor in rural areas could make a significant contribution toward dispelling some of the myths about "deserving and undeserving" categories of poor people that continue to impede design and implementation of appropriate policy. We review what is currently known about rural poverty, what needs to be learned, and how such research applies to current policy debates.

Renewed interest in poverty has put welfare reform on the nation's political agenda. This paper argues that researchers and policymakers should take this opportunity to direct increased attention to rural poverty. Poverty in rural areas of the U.S. is widespread and persistent, and fundamental changes in the structure of the national economy over the last decade portend continued economic distress for those in remote areas. Furthermore, since a large proportion of the rural poor are workers, research on their characteristics and circumstances could make a significant contribution toward dispelling some of the myths about "deserving and undeserving" categories of poor people that continue to impede design and implementation of appropriate policy.

In the following sections we review what is currently known about rural poverty, what needs to be learned, and how such research applies to current policy debates. Using a sociology of knowledge approach, we propose a reevaluation of

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poverty theory and research to stimulate policy-relevant research on rural poverty issues.

Characteristics of Rural Poverty

Popular opinion reflects many misconceptions about who is poor and why. The prevalent image is that the poor are members of an underclass made up largely of female heads of households with numerous illegitimate children and no adult males present, concentrated in urban ghettos, unemployed and unemployable. Many believe that poor people do not want to work and welfare supports their disinclination for generation after generation, creating a "permanent culture of poverty" (cf. Reagan 1986; Murray 1984).

In contrast, statistics about the poverty population show a more complex picture. The number of poor married couple families is about the same as the number of poor female-headed households (3.4 million families in both cases), and almost two thirds of America's poor do not live in female-headed households. Nor do all poor families depend on welfare rather than work: only one-third of the 7.3 million poor families received public assistance payments in 1984, and nearly half of the able-bodied poor worked. More than half of the poor families in 1984 had at least one worker, and over 20 percent had two or more. Rural families have even higher labor force participation: two thirds of poor rural families had at least one worker.

Rural areas have only one fifth of the nation's population, but one third of the poor.¹ Of the 32.4 million poor people in the U.S. in 1986, 9.7 million lived in rural areas. At 18.1 percent, the poverty rate of the nonmetropolitan population was about the same as that in the inner cities (18.0) and substantially higher than the 12.3 percent of the entire metro population. In many areas, particularly the rural South, regional underdevelopment has limited economic opportunities for decades, resulting in pockets of chronic poverty.

Speculation and popular perceptions about rural poverty in certain places and among specific groups parallel negative stereotypes of the urban ghetto underclass. Groups such as poor black tenant farmers, mountain people, or Native Americans, and their spatial counterparts—the Mississippi Delta, the Appalachian mountains, or Indian reservations—invoke images of generations of poverty, welfare dependency, and an entrenched culture of poverty. These poor people are seen as outside the mainstream, not sharing society's lifestyles or values—a kind of rural underclass.

In recent years analysts have made considerable progress in understanding urban poverty by disaggregating urban and national poverty statistics and examining longitudinal data. Empirical research has contributed important facts to debates about persistent poverty and its relationship to welfare. Among the more significant findings are the realization that household structure and labor force attachment distinguish different segments of poverty populations and the understanding that these distinctions strongly influence opportunity for upward mobility

(Bane and Ellwood 1986; Ellwood 1987; Reischauer 1987a; Sawhill 1987). In addition, to move beyond prevailing stereotypes and undertake in-depth analysis of the problem, urban analysts are beginning to agree on a definition of the underclass as those who have weak labor force attachment, are persistently poor, have little formal education, and who are isolated from established social and economic institutions (See Ricketts and Sawhill 1986; Reischauer 1987c; McLanahan, Garfinkel, and Watson 1987; and Wilson 1987). Studies indicate that a minority of all the poor, perhaps less than ten percent, can be classified as part of an underclass.²

Recognition of the diversity of poverty populations is crucial for the design of effective policies and programs. Poverty among two parent families with children can usually be attributed to low wages, seasonality of work, or disability, while different problems plague those in single-headed households (Ellwood 1987). Some of the poor need basic income assistance and others need help obtaining work or the skills necessary to get work.

Rural poverty populations are different from the urban poor, and, like them, have considerable subgroup diversity. For example, compared to the urban poor, a greater proportion of the rural poor are elderly (13 percent vs. 9 percent), a greater proportion are white (76 percent vs. 66 percent), and a smaller proportion live in female-headed households (27 percent vs. 39 percent). Children make up 39 percent of the urban poor and 35 percent of the rural poor.

Vulnerable groups, such as the elderly and children, are even more vulnerable in rural areas. Eighteen percent of the rural elderly are poor, compared to 11 percent of the urban elderly. Twenty-four percent of all rural children are poor—3.4 million—compared to 19 percent of all metropolitan children. There are 7 million poor whites in rural areas and 2 million rural blacks, but 43 percent of all rural blacks are poor (compared to 28 percent of all urban blacks).

Although proportionately fewer rural poor are children or black or in female-headed households, those who fit these categories have a far greater propensity to be poor. The poverty rate for rural blacks in female-headed households is 64 percent (compared to 51 percent of persons in black female-headed households in metro areas). Children in rural female-headed households have a poverty rate of 59 percent, and black children in rural female-headed households have a poverty rate of 83 percent.³

One important social and political implication of these poverty profiles is that rural areas tend to lack the middle class base that many urban areas have. Proportionately more rural blacks are poor because there are not as many rural blacks with middle incomes that dilute the statistics. In this respect, rural areas are more like the inner city areas that Wilson (1987) describes. In both instances, middle income and more educated adults have left the area for places that offer greater job opportunities and a better quality of life.

Urban poverty analysts find that those living in areas of concentrated poverty face a distressing web of social problems and have limited individual and community resources to address them. Much current research on urban poverty ex-

plores the consequences of growing up poor in poor places.⁴ This neighborhood, or ecological effect, on the urban poor's everyday lives and opportunities for upward mobility probably applies equally to those living in chronically depressed rural areas. We speculate that the isolation, alienation, and limited expectations experienced by those in an urban ghetto are very similar to the experiences of those growing up poor in rural areas.⁵ Like variations in household structure and labor force attachment, neighborhood conditions will affect what policy is appropriate and how programs should be implemented. But in addition, the unique demographic and economic conditions which characterize rural areas must be considered in planning programs and policies for rural problems.

Rural areas are not densely populated, do not have diverse economic activities, and generally do not have a well-developed public sector. These differences not only mean there may be limited potential for cultivating job opportunities for the poor, but also that the institutional and financial base for public program delivery may be weak. Furthermore, basic education and skills lag far behind in rural areas, and these deficiencies must be at the center of policy addressing rural poverty. Even though rural areas closed the gap with urban areas on many basic social and economic indicators during the 1960s and 1970s, the gap in educational attainment widened during this period (See Duncan 1985; Brown and Deavers 1987).

In addition to consideration of the dispersed population, relatively weaker institutional base, and basic education deficit in rural areas, policy analysts need to take account of the rigid social stratification that often blocks upward mobility. Children from poor families are stigmatized in small rural towns, and this stigma follows them into the school system where little is expected from them or done for them. The entrenched patronage in many rural school systems, especially in the South, is also a fundamental obstacle to individual and community development (Duncan 1986). Where jobs are scarce, public jobs are either doled out as political favors or go to friends and families. In either case, the effectiveness of program management and the dedication to reaching those most in need may be affected.

Poverty Theory

In-depth rural poverty research is important to inform policy, but it could also stimulate conceptual analysis important to advancing poverty theory. At the core of much theoretical debate about poverty is the question of how much poverty is caused by unwillingness to work versus the unavailability of work. Because so many of the rural poor work and live in two-parent families and because labor market opportunities are more limited, analyses that examine different segments of the rural poor could provide insight into issues that have long plagued poverty research. New research on the underclass, labor markets, household structure, and community life have contributed to empirical advances in the study of poverty, and these can be extended to theories about poverty to bring us closer to

understanding why people are poor and what policies can help them escape poverty.

Since the 1960s, debates about poverty have been framed either within parameters set by culture of poverty theories or, in explicit opposition, within the boundaries of a macro-level structural analysis. The cultural explanation posits that poor people have personal or familial backgrounds and values that inhibit their interest in or ability to work. Poverty is symptomatic of individual failure and an individual-centered model is used to explain it. The structural explanation holds that poor people are left out of the economy, that there are too few jobs with adequate pay. Poverty is symptomatic of societal failure and can only be understood through analysis of the economic and social structure. But both positions in this highly politicized dichotomy miss important aspects of the real lives of poor people and the real isolation inherent in poor places.

The strength of the culture of poverty school is its recognition of the day-to-day grind and discouragement of living poor that can affect behavior and subsequent opportunity. However, it indiscriminately labels the non-middle class behavior of poor people as deviant and dysfunctional, and it regards this behavior as the cause of poverty. The strength of the structural school is its recognition of the vital role played by economic opportunity, as it is manifested both in the general health of the economy and in regional and local labor markets. Poverty varies by region, increasing during recessions and declining during economic upturns. But, in their zeal to avoid victim blaming, structuralists fail to acknowledge the underclass-like trap that can envelop very poor households that are repeatedly locked out of the labor force.

This resistance to acknowledging behavioral and social problems associated with poverty makes structuralists' arguments sound too hollow to the general public and the policymakers who represent them. Poor people appear to willfully defy middle class norms—missing or avoiding work, raising their children differently or having children out of wedlock, devaluing education and dropping out of school. Blaming a national or world economic system for their poverty is too abstract to be a satisfying explanation for these observed differences. Furthermore, since popular opinion tends to see workers as constituting an entirely separate category from the poor, the meaning of a structural analysis is lost on the general public. As a rule, people do not link unemployment to poor people, even when the statistical evidence shows a strong relationship. Therefore, the culture of poverty model dominates public discussion, and traits associated with it are exaggerated and confounded with other forms of social deviance which may or may not be related to poverty. The resulting negative stereotypes place restrictions on what programs and expenditures are politically acceptable to ameliorate poverty.

Origins of the Culture of Poverty Model

The continued hegemony of culture of poverty theory among scholars and policymakers requires serious attention because it so clearly sets the parameters

for policy. Interestingly, the popular notion of a culture of poverty bears little resemblance to the original concept formulated by anthropologist Oscar Lewis in his studies of Puerto Rican families in the 1960s (1966a; 1966b). Lewis was looking for a conceptual model that moved beyond individualistic explanations for poverty and explained the behavior of poor people by taking account of the community and economic environment in which they lived. He believed that low-income people adopt a culture of poverty when they are left out of a cash economy, see no avenue for breaking into it, and have no institutional resources outside of their extended family to provide means for economic success. Consequently, they develop a way of coping on a day to day basis that is present oriented and includes fatalistic acceptance of their lot in life. They accept the dominant class's explanation that they are to blame for their failure, and give up trying to succeed. To those outside this social milieu, their behavior looks like laziness in people who deserve to be poor.

But while Lewis developed his conceptual model as an explanation that tied poor people's behavior to the economy, public concern over poverty in the U.S. was aroused using similar terms to make the opposite case. In *The Other America* (1962) Michael Harrington drew attention to the widespread poverty that existed amidst the apparent affluence of the United States. As Patterson (1986:12) points out, Harrington used the notion of a culture of poverty to distinguish the poverty that persisted in spite of a growing economy with plentiful jobs from the poverty that was the result of inadequate opportunities. Harrington attributed the poverty in Appalachia and urban ghettos in the 1960s to a culture of poverty, contrasting it to poverty in previous decades which he believed had been due to unfavorable economic conditions and too few good-paying jobs.

Numerous other books, both popular and scholarly, appeared following Harrington's depiction of poverty in the midst of affluence. Unlike Harrington and Lewis, these authors' accounts of poverty reduced Lewis's culture of poverty model to a shallow, derogatory description of individuals' failure to move out of poverty. For example, in *The Unheavenly City* Edward Banfield (1968) attributed the "vicious," "squalid" nature of urban slums to pathological components of lower class culture. Harry Caudill, a Kentucky lawyer, wrote an account of Appalachian poverty, *Night Comes to the Cumberland*s (1962), which emphasized the ignorance and ingrained discouragement of mountain people. Kentucky journalist John Fetterman published a similarly damning portrait of Appalachian poverty, *Stinking Creek* (1967). Sociologist Herman Lantz (1964), citing Harry Caudill, described coal communities as thoroughly resigned, with apathetic and hopeless people "largely dependent upon miners' pensions, Social Security, and public assistance."

The moralistic tone drew extensive criticism (e.g. Gans 1968; Valentine 1968). Valentine regarded the culture of poverty as an effort to "support the long-established rationalization of blaming poverty on the poor," and pointed out the flaws in the assumptions, theory, methods, and ideology, as well as internal inconsistencies in the evidence used to support a culture of poverty model (Valentine

1968:15). Poor people and communities were characterized as fatalistic, disorganized and deviant. Even when authors like Banfield, Caudill, and Fetterman described difficult circumstances that constantly discouraged low-income people from working steadily, they nonetheless appeared to blame them for such non-middle class behavior.

Several studies provide important exceptions to this tendency to reduce poverty to fatalistic behavior and faulty values. In 1967, Elliot Liebow published his study of street corner men, *Tally's Corner*, which effectively linked these individuals' discouragement in achieving economic success to their way of life, and drew out the theoretical implications of such discouragement and isolation on a broader scale. Similarly, Carol Stack in *All Our Kin* (1974) unravelled the economic rationality behind complex family, household and community arrangements and decisions made by poor urban black families. Liebow and Stack, like Lewis, delved deeper than the facile critiques implicit in Caudill and Fetterman's descriptions. Both studies represent finely balanced accounts which debunk many of the negative stereotypes associated with poverty, but still demonstrate the way the day-to-day discouragement of being outside the economy affects behavior. Their insightful descriptions show readers how the values, attitudes, and behaviors of poor people are logically grounded in the social relations associated with a marginal economic position.

Renewed Debate in the 1980s

Interest in poverty analysis declined in the 1970s. The reasons are complex, but two possibilities stand out. On the one hand, numerous anti-poverty programs were in place, and there may have been an unstated "wait and see" attitude. On the other hand, as Wilson (1985) has pointed out, liberals' reluctance to recognize social disorganization and eagerness to avoid racial stereotypes permitted a kind of rationalization for avoiding close poverty analysis. In the 1980s, however, poverty problems became so severe and statistics about the poor so glaring that they could no longer be ignored.

Debate over poverty theory and policy resurfaced in the 1980s because economic trends had caused increased inequality (Thurow 1987), unemployment, and hardship for substantial portions of the population, while a conservative political climate challenged continuation of traditional welfare state remedies to these problems. Conservatives not only argued that "liberal" welfare solutions were ineffective in solving social problems and promoting individual well-being, but that they contributed to the problem by providing financial support and thus implicit societal approval for those who did not work for a living.

Charles Murray's *Losing Ground* (1984) was particularly influential. Murray argued that welfare payments acted as a disincentive for able-bodied adults to help themselves, encouraging women to have large numbers of out-of-wedlock children and men to ignore parental responsibilities. Both men and women were enticed by the welfare system to become dependent, and have little regard for

legal and moral conventions. Ken Auletta's *New Yorker* articles on the underclass, Bill Moyer's television documentary on the urban poor, and Nicholas Lemann's articles on the underclass published in the *Atlantic Monthly* all stimulated further public discourse.

Murray, appealing to popular preconceptions about welfare-dependency, kept the terms of the debate focussed on the character issues implied in shallow versions of the culture of poverty theoretical framework. Although his study was dismissed by many serious poverty scholars, it offered the opportunity to raise long neglected issues underlying current poverty theory, research, and policy. Most notably, as mentioned above, Wilson (1985) criticized liberal and progressive analysts for becoming so intent upon avoiding victim blaming and justifying entitlement that they ignored the growing social problems experienced by the poor.

Current debate about poverty still reflects the political polarization that surrounds these issues (Auletta 1982; Wilson 1985, 1987; Corcoran, Duncan, Gurin, and Gurin 1985; Mead 1986), and in many respects the discussions about the underclass revive old culture of poverty debates about values and behavior (cf. Ricketts and Sawhill 1986; Mead and Wilson 1987). The terms of the debate among policymakers are still constrained by the relatively narrow range of acceptable positions in American politics, and despite new information on poverty, explanations of causes and consequences often remain locked into the same rigid framework.

Recently, however, new research and policy analysis have begun to move beyond these stale terms of debate, breaking new ground about understanding and fighting poverty (cf. Gurin and Gurin 1985; Corcoran, Gordon, Laren and Solon 1987; Ellwood 1987; Wilson 1985; Kaus 1986; Wilson 1987; Reischauer 1987a; Greenstein 1987a; Danziger and Gottschalk 1985, 1987; Danziger and Weinberg 1986). New urban poverty research has begun to consider the role of cultural and behavioral patterns of different poverty populations, separating out the persistently poor from the temporary poor. Better understanding of rural poverty—which includes so many working poor—would provide a critical contribution to current efforts to advance debates about poverty's causes by clarifying relationships between the economy, opportunity and poverty. Attention to different types of poverty populations and their class position would augment efforts to move beyond the old categories and arguments, separating those who are in the labor force but still poor from those who are out of the labor force and possibly trapped in a ghetto or isolated in a rural backwater area. Further research on rural poverty can help disentangle class, poverty and race issues as well as provide a source of contrast and comparison for the processes which condition urban poverty. In the following sections we set out an agenda for new research on rural poverty, based on our assessment of the current state of poverty theory and research.

Agenda for New Research

Conceptual Analysis

The first task for revitalizing poverty research is to reformulate poverty theory to move beyond the ideological trap inherent in the narrow culture of poverty model. One way to do this is to accept that there are cultural components to poverty that greatly contribute to the perpetuation of poverty. Living in poverty, especially in areas of concentrated poverty, not only can shape and determine individuals' human capital and ability to benefit from any opportunity (Wilson 1985), but also can influence ambitions and expectations. But recognition of cultural and social influences on how poor people live must be accompanied by recognition that the consequential poverty culture and limited human capital are actually cultural and social manifestations of structural position, including class, labor markets, and ecological location.

Virtually all ethnographic accounts of poverty populations directly or indirectly document the cultural components of living in poverty (Stack 1974; Liebow 1967; Gans 1962; Fitchen 1981). This holds whatever the location of the study (urban/rural, north/south) or the socio-demographic characteristics of its subjects (black urban ghetto residents, white rural dirt farmers, ethnic enclaves, female-headed households, male street gangs) or the politics of the researcher (culture of poverty adherents and opponents). But researchers vary in which cultural traits they emphasize and how they label them, whether they call them "a culture of poverty," how sympathetically they are portrayed, and most importantly, whether they are posited as cause or consequence of poverty.

The anthropological work of Lewis and Liebow attributed poverty to economic conditions, recognizing that the perpetuation of those conditions barred low-income individuals and communities not only from the opportunity to make a living, but also from feeling any connection to the economic mainstream. More recently, Wilson emphasizes how the increasing social isolation of urban ghetto residents exacerbates economic failure and further estranges them from the mainstream.

Today culture of poverty theory remains compelling, despite repeated efforts at repudiation, because it accurately reflects aspects of the actual situation of persons in poverty. However distorted by popular accounts or political rhetoric, culture of poverty resonates with people's understanding and experience. Indeed, poor people themselves often accept the blame for their poverty, recalling particular mistakes or personal failures, and thus fulfill Lewis's thesis and accept the more conservative culture of poverty framework.

Drawing on three decades of scholarship beginning with Lewis and Liebow and continuing with the work of Wilson, we argue that the culture of poverty model can be reformulated and understood as the cultural manifestation of a particular economic position within local, regional, and increasingly world economies.

Poverty results from exclusion from successful participation in mainstream economic activities. In some circumstances this may be reinforced by a variety of adaptive mechanisms (attitudes, values, behaviors) which ultimately can undermine any opportunity to escape poverty in the long run. To develop policy that combats poverty, we need to know more about these circumstances. Rather than accepting the fixed state implied by the more individualistic models of culture of poverty theories advanced since Lewis, we should reexamine those aspects of Lewis's model in which community and economic position contribute to cultural behavior. Cultural manifestations of poverty vary over time and place, as circumstances vary, and require deeper investigation and fuller explanation.

In recognizing the cultural and individual experiential components of poverty, it is important to avoid definitional quibbles that often characterized analyses in the late 1960s. In grappling with culture of poverty formulations, a great deal of energy went toward refining distinctions between norms, values, and aspirations held by the poor—in part to try to absolve the poor of a culture of poverty without denying different lifestyles and even deviance (cf. Gans 1968; Rainwater 1968). Ultimately, these semantic gymnastics did little to advance understanding of the behavior or exigencies of those living in poverty. Rather, they diverted attention from poverty and focused on problems associated with the conceptual tools used to analyze poverty.

The most evocative accounts of the meaning and impact of poverty come from works that combine a solid understanding of the structural underpinnings of poverty with insight into the logic behind ensuing social relations and subcultural forms. Examples include the studies cited above as well as classic studies of the working class such as *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (Sennett and Cobb 1972) and *Worlds of Pain* (Rubin 1976) in which the authors portray the complex strategies of survival employed by those facing limited opportunity.

Unfortunately, there are few comparable examples that depict and dissect rural poverty. With the exception of Fitchen's (1981) anthropological case study of poor people in upstate New York, the most insightful accounts of rural poverty are found in fiction (cf. *The Beans of Egypt Maine, Love Medicine, Where the River Flows North, The Stories of Breece DJ Pancake*). Hence, one very important direction for research is comprehensive ethnographic studies of rural poverty populations along the lines of Liebow and Stack, bringing together detailed understanding of material position and "lived experience." In addition to filling in a serious gap in current research, there would be opportunity to further specify the situations under which patterns of behavior and belief associated with culture of poverty occur, to what extent and why, legitimizing research into cultural manifestations of poverty without falling into the ideological traps described previously.

Other ways to improve poverty theory are to bring insight from new areas of scholarship. Some of the most innovative, policy relevant work on poverty in recent years has been prompted by feminist theory and analysis of poverty. Popularized concepts such as the feminization of poverty underscored the linkages

between poverty and gender discrimination, women's disadvantage in the labor market, and the plight of female-headed households. Recognition of women's special vulnerability to poverty and the reasons behind it has been a key to new understanding of sources of poverty and directions for programs and policies (cf. Folbre 1984; Kamerman 1984; Pearce 1985; Sarvasy and Van Allen 1984). Much of the research that disaggregates poverty by household structure emerges from or has been influenced by feminist scholarship. Critiques of current policies and proposals for welfare reform that include work programs and new measures to assure child support have been similarly influenced (Garfinkel and McLanahan 1986).

Another example is Billings and Blee's (1986) "rereading" of classic studies of Appalachian communities using critical theory and hermeneutic methods. They show that what has been condemned as the culture of poverty with all the associated implications of a dysfunctional form of social life made perfect economic sense in a society that was largely precapitalist and hence, outside of market relationships. Much of the victim-blaming poverty work in the 1960s could benefit from similar reconsideration. What were the economic, political, and social forces shaping the lives and futures of the people Caudill, Fetterman and Lantz describe? What do these descriptions tell us about the linkages between poverty and work and community?

Better understanding of poverty requires linking insightful field observations made at lesser levels of abstraction with a structural approach. If poverty is engendered by economic circumstances that leave some people with diminished market capacity, then it is incomplete by itself. The culture of poverty model's value is its recognition and portrayal (again, despite severe distortion) of people's "lived experience." Its failure is its tendency to decontextualize this experience. The structural approach emphasizes how labor markets and larger economic forces structure the opportunity to escape poverty. It falls short in theory (though not always in practice as the above examples suggest) by failing to incorporate the experiential level. New theory and research that advance understanding of poverty will operate on both levels.

Wilson criticizes the "conservative students of inner-city poverty" who have dominated current poverty policy debates because they concentrate "almost exclusively on the interconnection between cultural traditions, family history, and individual characters" (1987:12). This characterization suggests that the conservatives apply a distorted version of C. Wright Mills' description of the sociological imagination (1959)—one that neglects the importance of structure. Mills described the best of sociology as occupying the intersection of history, biography and social structure. Good poverty theory and research will substitute the original Mills formula and its balance of elements for the conservative version.

Empirical Analysis

In-depth case studies of particular groups of rural poor along the lines of the urban based studies described earlier clearly would add significantly to our un-

derstanding of poverty. But we also need, and have new opportunities to undertake, research that disaggregates poverty and poses fundamental questions about who is poor, for how long and what reason, and to what extent are their social relations and behavior rational. Specific items to investigate include labor markets, household and family structure, and persistent poverty for people and places.

First, it is vital to understand the relationship of poverty populations to labor market structures. As discussed earlier, a substantial portion of the rural poor are part of the working poor—persons in households with at least one member in the labor force. As marginal labor, they are often unemployed, underemployed, seasonally employed, or have minimal wages. Labor markets structure the social organization of production into a series of exchanges between employers and workers that occur in a particular locale. They determine the opportunities available to workers (or potential workers), and hence represent the arena where individuals find their specific location in the economic structure.

Understanding the operation of rural labor markets provides an important corrective to past overemphasis on supply side issues—the skills brought to the labor market by workers. While poor people need better skills to work, increased skill levels do little when they are held by people in areas where labor markets provide little opportunity. This is illustrated by the history of training programs that cannot place newly skilled workers in rural areas with few jobs (Auletta 1982; Gueron 1986).

Changes in the economy and labor force in recent years have made it clear that the relationship between human capital and labor market capacity is complex. For example, in mining-dependent economies of Appalachia, the expected relationship between human capital and market capacity was reversed. The only high wage employment available was in coal mining, encouraging many men to discontinue their education to take jobs in the mines. Recent journalistic reports in New Hampshire, where labor is scarce, cite a similar phenomenon: young people leave school in order to take jobs that pay well above the minimum wage.

A related issue is the extent to which the rural poor participate in informal and underground economies, working, but doing so in markets outside the formal economy. There is growing evidence that, contrary to previous understanding and prediction, informal markets represent an important trend in advanced capitalist societies (Bonano 1986; Portes and Sassen-Koob 1987), and there is much speculation about how much the poor depend on informal markets in both urban and rural settings. Interviews with displaced coal miners indicate that many earn income in "odd jobs," such as timber and carpentry, or illegal jobs, such as unofficial taxi cab driving (Duncan 1987). However, relatively little systematic information exists on the informal economy's scope or how it affects the rural poor.

Some of these issues can be addressed by new opportunities and data for studying labor markets. For example, a new version of the 1980 Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS-D) redraws the one in one thousand population sample according

to labor market areas empirically determined by commuting data. Local labor market areas are defined by where workers actually live and work, encompassing rural areas as well as urban-metro centers (Tolbert and Killian 1987). The University of Michigan Survey Research Center will add geographic identifiers to all the cases in their Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), making possible a whole new range of analyses about the interplay between place and poverty, and making the data much richer for research on the rural poor.⁶

Other relevant issues include how family and household composition relate to the income generating strategies and work behavior of the rural poor. There have been great strides in understanding the relationship between poverty and family type and life cycle events. Female-headed households are far more vulnerable to poverty, and the children in such households are at great risk. Divorce and teenage pregnancy are two of the most common life course events creating economic vulnerability. What is less well-known is the extent to which this applies to rural areas. Many rural areas with high poverty rates, such as Appalachia, have comparatively fewer female-headed households (Tickamyer and Tickamyer forthcoming), while others, such as the Black Belt in the South, do have large numbers of black female-headed households. In both areas, teenage pregnancy is high. The most basic questions remain to be answered: What is the household composition of different groups of rural poor? How are family structure and economic opportunity intertwined? Who is bringing in income (or other resources)? How does this influence poverty status? Where do values and behavior fit in perpetuating poverty in these areas?

Finally, a related issue is persistence of poverty for people and places. National longitudinal studies and research on the urban poor have made it clear that there are far fewer persistently poor or intergenerationally poor people than persons who have "spells" of poverty (Bane and Ellwood 1986). However, even though the persistently poor make up a small fraction of all the poor, their problems are especially intractable, and many of them are children. By definition, the focus of concern in rural areas includes spatial factors, identifying persistently poor places and investigating economic factors in these areas. Persons in these places are frequently assumed to be persistently poor, but little is known about actual rates of persistent rural poverty at the individual level. Some preliminary analysis using the PSID suggest that poverty is more persistent in rural areas, but we have little solid evidence of the extent to which outmigration and upward mobility are related. How often do the rural poor who migrate to urban areas escape poverty? To what extent does migration itself represent the antithesis of the culture of poverty thesis, as individuals and families leave areas of little economic opportunity to find work elsewhere? Are those left behind persistently poor?

These are not distinct issues. For example, household structure and income-generating activities among the persistently poor involve all three issues. Ability to find work depends on the characteristics of the local labor market, the availability of household members to take a job, and the willingness of people to pursue different labor market options. By applying an analytic framework that

promotes disaggregation of poverty and its component parts, it should be possible to devise better programs and policies designed to alleviate poverty. Specifically, it should be possible to target programs to specific types of poor people and problems and it should be possible to gain public support for these policies.

Conclusion

Research on the rural poor would contribute insights and practical information to those designing welfare reform programs today. Current reform proposals from both conservatives and liberals emphasize work—responsibility rather than entitlement, as conservatives choose to phrase it. This could mean some important gains for the rural poor who would disproportionately benefit from many current proposals. For example, enlargement of the earned income tax credit with adjustments for family size would help many rural poor, since this only benefits the working poor, many of whom are in rural areas (Greenstein 1987b).

Other current proposals would also have a major effect on portions of the rural poor. Requiring all states to cover poor two-parent families under AFDC would disproportionately affect the rural poor since one-half the states (including most rural states and all Southern states except South Carolina) do not now do this. Similarly, raising AFDC benefits to a national minimum would be most widely felt in rural Southern states, where benefits can be as low as 50 percent of the poverty line (Shapiro and Greenstein 1988). Proposals to extend Medicaid, remove the poor from state income tax rolls, and reform collection of child support would aid the poor wherever they live (Greenstein 1987b).

But the rural poor also have special needs that go unmet when programs are tailored for urban areas rather than isolated rural communities. The main thrust of current welfare reform proposals is work—willingness to work, opportunities to work and skills to work. Many of the rural poor already work, but opportunities are scarce in rural areas. Evaluations of workfare experiments show that this scarcity makes these programs meaningless because there are no jobs for those required to work, and thus rural areas are frequently exempted from work requirements. Inadequate skills for work are also a more pressing issue in rural areas. Rural youth lag behind not only in educational attainment and training, but also in having fewer opportunities to gain skills. Those who do have skills often must choose between migrating or accepting lower job aspirations.

Without new policies specifically aimed at rural areas, those rural poor who work will feel the brunt of the permanent economic restructuring occurring throughout the rural economy. Those isolated in remote hollows, Indian reservations and Delta shacks will be unable to compete with their more skilled and educated peers who live in mainstream America. Furthermore, with an impending labor shortage, the quality of the nation's work force and its future international competitiveness depend on swift and far-reaching efforts to reach the poor children and youth in isolated rural areas as well as isolated urban ghettos.

As we have argued, new research specifically aimed at rural poverty is essential

to address the particular problems of the poor in rural areas. In addition, extending our understanding of poverty to cover rural residents and locales as well as urban and ghetto residents offers a crucial opportunity to enlarge our overall understanding of the causes, consequences and correctives of poverty in this country. It is necessary for sociologists—both those traditionally concerned with rural sociology and those more generally concerned with stratification and inequality—to undertake research in this area. The failure of sociologists to remain engaged in poverty research has left a vacuum. Much of the new work underway on poverty comes from economists whose conclusions call for further research to answer questions that have traditionally been in sociologists' domain. The uniquely sociological imagination has produced the best work on poverty and holds out the best hope for further progress. We urge the application of this perspective to the issue of poverty for all groups and places, rural as well as urban.

Notes

The authors contributed equally to this paper. Helpful comments were offered by anonymous reviewers. An earlier version was presented at the 1987 Rural Sociological Society Meetings, Madison, Wisconsin.

1. "Rural" and "nonmetropolitan" are used interchangeably in this paper, but the reference is technically to nonmetropolitan data as defined in June 1984 by the Office of Management and Budget for use in presenting statistics by agencies of the Federal Government. Nonmetropolitan refers to areas outside metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs), and MSAs are geographic areas with a large population nucleus, including adjacent communities that are economically and socially integrated with that nucleus. Thus it usually consists of an urbanized area or city with a population of 50,000, as well as surrounding counties that have strong commuting ties.
2. If the definition is confined to minorities living in inner city ghettos who have "dysfunctional attitudes," Reischauer (1987b) estimates that the underclass would include 1.4 million people. Using a definition that encompasses able-bodied adults with little education, weak labor force attachment, and persistent poverty, Reischauer suggests that 3.3 million rural Americans would be part of an "underclass."
3. All of these comparative statistics are drawn from the Current Population Reports, Series P60 1987, U.S. Department of Commerce, 1987a, 1987b.
4. Mary Jo Bane and David Ellwood are studying the growing concentration of poverty in several large cities, Christopher Jencks and Susan Mayer are investigating the effect of segregation on students' performance, and Greg Duncan, Martha Hill, Terry Adams and Willard Rodgers are examining how growing up in poor neighborhoods affects chances of escaping poverty.
5. Terry M. Williams and William Kornblum's accounts of poor teenagers in *Growing Up Poor* suggest similar experiences for rural teens and urban teens.
6. Unfortunately, there are many missed opportunities as well. For example, it is virtually impossible to study rural poverty using the extensive Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) files because of limitations in study design and confidentiality procedures.

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