

RURAL POVERTY IN AMERICA

Edited By  
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Submitted to Greenwood Press

February 28, 1991

To

Sue and Don Leavenworth

### Acknowledgments

Many people have helped put this book together. I want to thank the authors who wrote chapters; Norman Collins and Janet Maughan of the Ford Foundation, and Susan Sechler of the Aspen Institute, who provided warm support for the project; Margaret Moore, who read early drafts and cheered me on; Stephen Sweet, who cheerfully and energetically worked with me to bring everything to completion; and Jennifer Bakke, who helped pull the manuscript together. As part of their commitment to encouraging policy-relevant research on the rural disadvantaged, the Ford Foundation's Rural Poverty and Resources Program and the Aspen Institute's Rural Economic Policy Program funded much of the research described here. I am grateful to John Harney of Auburn Press for his encouragement and flexibility. Finally, but most importantly, I thank Graham Duncan and Ian Duncan for cheerfully putting up with the "lack of balance in Mom's life," and Bill Duncan for more than I could ever say. I dedicate the book to my parents, Sue and Don Leavenworth, with love and appreciation.

## CONTENTS

Acknowledgments

List of Tables

List of Illustrations

### INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1. Introduction: Poverty in Rural America  
Cynthia M. Duncan and Stephen Sweet

### PART I. THE DYNAMICS OF POVERTY AND MOBILITY IN RURAL AMERICA

Chapter 2. Overview of the Rural Poor in the 1980s  
Kenneth L. Deavers and Robert A. Hoppe

Chapter 3. The Growing Problem of Low Earnings in Rural Areas  
Lucy Gorham

Chapter 4. The Working Poor in Rural Labor Markets  
Ann R. Tickamyer

Chapter 5. Long-Term Poverty in Rural Areas  
Terry K. Adams and Greg J. Duncan

### PART II. POOR PEOPLE AND POOR PLACES

Chapter 6. Race, Gender, and Poverty in the Rural South  
Bonnie Thornton Dill and Bruce B. Williams

Chapter 7. Persistent Poverty in Appalachia: Corrupt Politics  
Controlling Scarce Jobs  
Cynthia M. Duncan

Chapter 8. Migrant Farm Workers  
Doris P. Slesinger and Max J. Pfeffer

- Chapter 9. American Indians and Economic Poverty  
C. Matthew Snipp and Gene F. Summers
- Chapter 10. Rural Poverty in the Northeast: The Case of  
Upstate New York  
Janet M. Fitchen
- Chapter 11. The New Poor in Midwest Farming Communities  
Cornelia B. Flora

**PART III. POLICIES FOR THE RURAL POOR**

- Chapter 12. Modernization and the Rural Poor: Some Lessons  
from History  
Alice O'Connor
- Chapter 13. Empowerment and Rural Poverty  
Steve Suits
- Chapter 14. Policies to Alleviate Rural Poverty  
Robert Greenstein and Isaac Shapiro

**ENDNOTES**

**REFERENCES**

**Index**

## LIST OF TABLES

- Table 2.1 Selected characteristics of the poor, by residence, 1973 and 1987
- Table 2.2 The working poor, by residence, 1973 and 1987
- Table 3.1 Percentage of low earners, rural and urban workers by race and sex, 1979-1987
- Table 3.2 Percentage of low earners, rural and urban workers by age, 1979-1987
- Table 3.3 Percentage of low earners, rural and urban workers by education, 1979-1987
- Table 3.4 Percentage of low earners, rural and urban workers by region, 1979-1987
- Table 3.5 Rural low-wage employment by industry, 1979-1987
- Table 3.6 Rural high wage employment by industry, 1979-1987
- Table 3.7 Distribution of rural employment by sex, 1979-1987
- Table 3.8 Percentage of rural and urban low earners by industry by sex, 1979-1987
- Table 3.9 Distribution of rural employment by race, 1979-1987
- Table 3.10 Percentage of rural low earners by race, 1979-1987
- Table 4.1 Characteristics of rural and urban LLMAs in Southeastern United States
- Table 4.2 Characteristics of rural LLMAs with different economic bases
- Table 4.3 Incidence of poverty status and income levels among householders in rural and urban LLMAs

- Table 4.4 Poverty status of householders in rural LLMA's with different economic bases
- Table 4.5 Industrial and occupational categories of poor and near poor householders in rural and urban LLMA's
- Table 4.6 Mean poverty and near poverty householder income for rural and urban LLMA's
- Table 4.7 Mean income of poverty and near poverty householders in rural LLMA's with different economic bases
- Table 4.8 Sources of income for households below the poverty line with a working age householder in LLMA's with different economic bases
- Table 5.1 Incidence of long-term poverty by metropolitan and nonmetropolitan residence, by time period and ethnicity
- Table 5.2 Demographic characteristics of long-term poor persons living in households with able-bodied heads
- Table 5.3 Labor market characteristics of long-term poor persons living in households with able-bodied heads
- Table 5.4 Emergency private help available and transfer income receipt for long-term poor persons living in households with able-bodied heads
- Table 5.5 "Underclass" and "deserving" characteristics of long term poor persons

- Table 5.1A Overall population distributions for demographic characteristics of persons living in households with able-bodied heads
- Table 5.2A Overall population distributions for demographic characteristics of persons living in households with able-bodied heads
- Table 8.1 Type of workmens' compensation coverage for agricultural workers, by state, 1986
- Table 8.2 Farms by amount of wages paid, United States, 1987
- Table 8.3 Distribution of children in Wisconsin's migrant education program by total number of schools in which child enrolled between 1982-1983
- Table 9.1 Median incomes and families with incomes below poverty levels for Blacks, Whites, and American Indians, 1969-1979
- Table 9.2 Median family incomes and families with incomes below poverty levels for American Indians residing on the sixteen largest reservations in 1980
- Table 14.1 Voting record on poverty issues ratings of support for new or expanded antipoverty programs, 1965-1989
- Table 14.2 Municipalities of less than 2500 population without Black mayors by population, racial composition, in the South, 1985



## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

### Figures

- Figure 2.1 Poverty rates by residence, 1967-1988
- Figure 2.2 Income by residence, 1950-1980
- Figure 2.3 Farm poverty, 1959-1987
- Figure 2.4 Per capita income: Ratio of nonmetropolitan and farming counties in the United States
- Figure 2.5 Per capita income: Ratio of county types to the United States, 1969-1987
- Figure 2.6 Effects of in-kind benefits on poverty rates, by residence, 1979-1987
- Figure 4.1 Measures used in analysis of poverty in local labor market areas
- Figure 5.1 Temporal aspects of poverty, 1976-1985
- Figure 5.2 Incidence of long-term poverty among individuals living in able bodied households, by location, 1967-1976, 1976-1985
- Figure 5.3 Distribution of ten year total income/needs for blacks living in able-bodied households, by location, 1967-1976, 1976-1985
- Figure 5.4 Demographic characteristics of individuals living in nonmetro able-bodied households, by race, 1967-1976, 1976-1985
- Figure 5.5 Fraction of long-term poor living in families with female heads all and some of the time, by race and location, 1967-1976, 1976-1985

Figure 5.6      Fraction of heads of able-bodied long-term poor households, with substantial employment and unemployment, by location and race, 1967-1976, 1976-1985

Figure 9.1      American Indian places of residence

Figure 9.2      High school graduates, 1970 and 1980

Figure 9.3      College graduates, 1970 and 1980

Maps

Map 2.1          Persistently low income counties in nonmetropolitan United States

Map 8.1          Migrant farm worker streams in the United States

Map 9.1          American Indian lands and communities

Map 10.1        Rural counties in New York

**INTRODUCTION**

## Chapter 1

### POVERTY IN RURAL AMERICA<sup>1</sup>

Cynthia M. Duncan and Stephen Sweet

There are over nine million people living in poverty in rural areas of the United States. This book is about those people -- who they are, why they are living in poverty, and what approach to social policy might improve their lives. It is reasonable to ask why we need a book that focusses especially on the rural poor. Are the rural poor that different from other poor people? Does paying special attention to the rural dimension of poverty add to our understanding of poverty? We know that the circumstances of the poor in general are affected by the availability of work, family structure, human capital, and what William J. Wilson has called the "social context" and culture of the poor. Are these factors somehow different for the rural poor?

To people living in crowded urban and suburban areas, "rural" conveys an image of small towns and open countryside. As Bellah and his colleagues (1985) discovered in their study of American values, middle class Americans associate small town living with an idyllic community life. It is commonly assumed that small rural communities offer simple face-to-face relationships, opportunities for civic involvement, and a local

economy thriving on small proprietorships and hard work. We imagine a world without social class distinctions, a world in which people know one another, take care of one another, and live out the best of the American Dream. We see the whole community as working right.

In contrast, we think of the rural poor as people outside these well-integrated, supportive communities. Our images have been shaped by literature and journalistic accounts--we see the hardened, hollow faces in Agee and Walker's Let Us Now Praise Famous Men (1941), the Oakies in Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath (1939), or Caudill's broken, dispirited coal miners in Night Comes to the Cumberlands (1963). We imagine "people left behind," as President Lyndon Johnson's Commission on Rural Poverty called them, unable to find work in the modern high technology economy.

Neither of these images is accurate as we enter the 1990s. The small, relatively self-sufficient communities that we carry in our imaginations disappeared in the late 1800s and early 1900s, as industrialization and urbanization swept the nation. Now, as the authors in the first section of this volume show, even communities in which the economy was healthy in the 1960s and early 1970s are losing jobs. Across America, young rural workers are struggling to make a living, struggling to earn enough to lift their families out of poverty. However, as the chapters in the second section of this book indicate, not all the rural poor are recent victims of changes in the economy. Poverty

and inequality have been a constant feature in many rural people's lives. Rigid distinctions on the basis of class and ethnic background have oppressed poor rural people for generations. The social context in chronically depressed rural communities bears little resemblance to the world we associate with small communities. Rather, these poor rural communities tend to have two social classes -- those who have control and those who are vulnerable to that control, the haves and the have-nots.

This book focusses attention on poor rural people and poor rural places. Rural places face increasing economic adversity in the 1990s and, as a result, rural people face declining opportunities. As the chapters in this volume show, most poor people in rural areas work, and working people in rural areas are very often poor. The contributors to this book seek to better understand the circumstances and characteristics of the rural poor -- who is poor and why -- in order to help build better opportunities in the future.

A second and related reason to analyze poverty in rural communities is that the small size and face-to-face relationships lay bare social relationships that are often submerged in larger social structures. We can see some of the social and political dynamics that prevent the poor from escaping their poverty in any poor community. The researcher can see, for example, how the scarcity of work and lack of economic diversity give employers control over every aspect of the poor's lives, and how this

control not only limits opportunities for mobility locally, but also can undermine opportunities to escape poverty by moving to find work elsewhere. The evolving understanding of rural poverty presented in these chapters has, therefore, important implications for poverty policy in general, and sheds light on the continuing debate about the structural versus behavioral causes of persistent poverty.

Renewed national attention to poverty and concern about growing inequality and dependency make the 1990s a particularly good time to look closely at the conditions of the rural poor. Scholars have documented the growing severity of concentrated poverty in the inner cities (Wilson 1989; Sawhill 1988) and the alarming growth in the number of homeless people (Rossi 1989). Increasing inequality, reflected in the growing numbers of working poor, has also received greater attention from scholars and policy makers (Bluestone and Harrison 1988; Bradbury 1986; Levitan and Shapiro 1987; Children's Defense Fund 1988; O'Hare 1988; Committee on the Budget 1988). Most connect growing poverty with the changing structure of the national and world economy (see Levy 1987; Thurow 1987; Wilson 1987).

The plight of the urban poor is readily apparent to journalists and politicians. Both the media and research community have written extensively about inner city poverty in recent years. Journalists have raised public concern through stories and documentaries in the national media. Researchers have come to better understand the dynamics of poverty and

dependency in areas of concentrated urban poverty.

The rural poor are less visible in the national press, and their behavior is less threatening to the public on a day to day basis. The diverse pockets of chronically poor people -- rural Blacks in the South, Appalachians in the coal fields, Native Americans on scattered reservations, migrant workers, low-wage farm and manufacturing workers -- appear too disparate to write about as a single social problem. The characteristically rural problems of low wage and part-time or part-year employment are regarded as the inevitable costs of a changing economy.

The contributors to this volume demonstrate that poverty in rural areas is a serious, troubling national problem and has been for decades. An increased exodus to city jobs after World War II brought a dramatic decline in rural poverty, from 22 million (or 33 percent of the rural population) in 1950 to 12 million (or 17 percent) in 1970. Hundreds of thousands of migrants moved from Appalachia and the South seeking better employment opportunities in metropolitan areas (Brown 1972; Levy 1987). These rural migrants went to jobs in the expanding automobile and steel factories, or to construction jobs in growing cities, jobs where a strong back could ensure steady employment for a hard worker. The post-War period, between the late 1940s and the early 1970s, was a period of national expansion and growing productivity, and urban economies could absorb the unemployed and underemployed from rural areas.

When the first impact of economic restructuring hit these



urban industrial areas in the late 1970s, and unemployment dramatically increased in the "rust" belt, rural economies experienced surprising growth for a few years, and there were new employment opportunities. The brief period of revitalization was stimulated by the convergence of several factors: prices for farm products rose, the OPEC oil embargo spurred growth in domestic energy industries, and more and more manufacturing concerns moved routine assembly plants to rural areas where labor costs would be lower. In addition, some retired people began to move back to their childhood communities or to other quiet, less expensive rural areas.

This rural turnaround meant that people who had reluctantly left rural areas in search of work, could return and take advantage of new opportunities in their home communities. Some rural analysts speculated that there might be a kind of "renaissance," as many return migrants brought with them higher expectations of public education and a commitment to civic involvement. Sons and daughters of Appalachian miners and Southern sharecroppers returned to their parents' and grandparents' home places, and the future looked brighter for small communities in rural America.

However, the rural turnaround was short-lived. Growing international competition in goods-producing industries hit rural areas hard in the early 1980s. Manufacturing industries -- the chief source of rural jobs in the 1960s and 1970s -- laid off workers, closed up shop, or moved overseas. Mining and timber

companies introduced changes in management and technology that resulted in dramatic productivity gains, and these in turn prompted substantial reductions in their labor forces. Farm-dependent communities suffered as farmers' debt increased and income dropped.

The rural downturn that began in the early 1980s is now widely accepted as a structural, rather than cyclical, change in the national economy. The goods-producing industries that offered opportunities for stable jobs and upward mobility to high school educated young workers are no longer a source of employment growth. The good jobs in service industries that offer steady employment require workers with more education and tend to be located in growing suburban areas, not in remote rural or dense urban communities. Thus remote rural areas, like inner cities, appear to have intractable high unemployment and high poverty. In both areas young people have been hit the hardest.

Today about half of the nine million rural poor live in the South. The poverty rate among the rural population in 1987 was 17 percent, close to the 19 percent poverty rate in inner cities, and higher than the poverty rate for the urban population overall. Many of the communities described in this book have poverty rates as high as 30 to 50 percent. Economic opportunities have been limited in these areas for decades, and chronic underdevelopment has prevented them from building the basic human resource and institutional infrastructure needed both for individual mobility and community development.

For some rural places and groups, persistent stereotypes are obstacles to deeper understanding. Poor Black farm laborers, mountain people, or Native Americans are seen as chronically poor and dependent because they do not share mainstream values about work. Research presented here shows how inaccurate these stereotypes are. Rural poverty has always reflected the limited opportunity structure rather than limited ambitions. Since the mechanization of agriculture, mining, and other natural resource-based industries, rural areas have had far too little employment available for those who need work. The work that is available tends to be low paying and volatile -- part-time, seasonal, and subject to booms and busts in national and international markets.

In some areas, families and workers have always lived on the margin of the nation's economy, scratching a living from the land, subject to the employment fluctuations of primary industries. This is particularly true in the deep South, Appalachia, poor farming areas, and Indian reservations. In other rural areas, high poverty rates reflect the lower wages and declining employment in manufacturing resulting from more recent structural changes in the national economy. The aim of the first section of this book is to provide an understanding of the underlying dynamics of rural poverty in the United States. The next section is an in-depth look at the circumstances of particular groups of the rural poor, including African Americans, Appalachians, Native Americans, migrant workers, and those outside the mainstream economy in more prosperous places. We

look at how conditions differ among various groups of rural poor -- between those who are working and those who are not, for example, or for Indians on the reservation compared to families of agricultural workers following crops. Finally, we consider an overall framework within which to consider public policy alternatives.

The first section of the book is a national overview. The authors describe who is poor, why they are poor, and how long their poverty lasts. Kenneth Deavers and Robert Hoppe provide a comprehensive picture of the rural poor in the 1980s. Although many people still think of rural poverty as synonymous with farm poverty, Deavers and Hoppe show that dramatic improvement in farm incomes has brought a decline in the numbers of poor farmers. Increases in transfer payment programs have also helped reduce rural poverty over time. However, the economic changes beginning in the early 1980s have contributed to growing unemployment and poverty. Young workers and the traditionally disadvantaged -- minorities, children, and female-headed households -- are the hardest hit by these changes. Low educational attainment coincides with low-wage, low-skill manufacturing jobs in rural areas, contributing to high numbers of working poor. The rural elderly are the only group for whom poverty declined between 1973 and 1987, largely because of the effectiveness of Social Security and Medicare. Nonetheless, the elderly in rural areas have higher poverty rates than the elderly in urban areas.

In "The Growing Problem of Low Earnings in Rural Areas,"

Lucy Gorham analyzes changes in the economic structure over the last twenty years and the effect of those changes on rural workers. Her work shows that declining employment in manufacturing and other relatively high paying, goods-producing sectors during the rural recession in the early 1980s has led to a twenty percent increase in the number of working poor in rural areas. In urban areas, the effect of these structural changes has been softened somewhat by the growth of high wage service sector jobs, but rural areas have not captured these jobs. In 1987, rural workers were over 45 percent more likely to earn low wages than urban workers. Gorham shows that young workers have fared the worst. Currently nearly three quarters of all young rural workers earn yearly incomes well below the poverty level for a family of four.

In "The Working Poor in Rural Labor Markets," Ann Tickamyer further elaborates how limited opportunity structure contributes to these growing numbers of working poor in rural America. Analyzing new data by labor markets (rather than by counties or states), Tickamyer shows that poverty rates vary according to the type of labor market in which workers participate. While the extent of poverty differs between rural and urban labor market areas, there is even greater variation between different types of rural labor markets. When rural labor markets are relatively diversified, they perform more like urban labor markets, offering wider opportunities for workers. Workers take advantage of those opportunities to earn good wages and, as a result,

poverty rates are lower. Tickamyer also shows that labor market areas characterized by concentrated resource extraction tend to have fewer jobs overall (but higher wages), while labor markets offering manufacturing jobs offer predominately low wage jobs. As a result, these narrowly based labor markets tend to have the highest levels of poverty. Overall, she finds that rural labor markets have more working poor than urban labor markets.

Terry Adams and Greg Duncan examine the problems of persistent poverty in their chapter, "Long-Term Poverty in Rural Areas." Analyzing the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, they find that long-term poverty is greater in rural than urban areas. Although there have been improvements since the 1960s, four million people in rural areas -- and one third of all rural Blacks -- are still persistently poor. Adams and Duncan point out that the rural long-term poor tend to "live by the rules," participating in the labor force, and using welfare for only short periods, but they are still poor because there are few good jobs available. Those who have not completed high school and those far from metropolitan areas are especially vulnerable, and there are growing numbers of female-headed households experiencing long-term poverty in rural areas.

The second section, **Poor People and Poor Places**, give a more detailed picture of who poor people are and of the communities in which they live. First, Bonnie Dill and Bruce Williams, in "Race, Gender, and Poverty in the Rural South," detail the multifaceted disadvantages facing Black single mothers in the rural

South. Over the last two decades, the proportion of poor rural families in the South headed by women has doubled. Dill and Williams argue that discrimination based on race, gender, and class leaves limited options for African American women in rural areas. To make ends meet, they combine work and welfare. But most importantly, they rely on family members to provide additional help. While this dependence on kin is a valuable survival mechanism, it also prevents them from leaving to find better work elsewhere.

Cynthia Duncan's chapter shows how scarce jobs and a historically oppressive coal industry have created rigidly stratified, patronage-driven communities that prevent the Appalachian poor from escaping poverty. Jobs and welfare are a kind of currency used by the elite to maintain their own status and power, doled out to family members and political supporters. Those from poor families are outside the job network, and, in small, closed communities, have difficulty escaping the stigma associated with their family background. Schools also have low expectations of the poor, and do not provide basic skills. Like the Black women described in Dill and William's chapter, the Appalachian poor remain in these poor communities, working low-wage, part-time jobs, often partially dependent on welfare, trapped, and vulnerable.

In "Migrant Farm Workers," Doris Slesinger and Max Pfeffer describe the poverty and vulnerability of the nation's often invisible 250,000 migrant farm workers. Migrant workers receive

low wages for hard labor. They follow the crop seasons, unprotected by basic labor legislation that other American workers take for granted. They live in poor housing and move their children from school to school. Slesinger and Pfeffer review the history of policies affecting farm workers, detailing the ways in which they have been excluded from benefits and left vulnerable to employers.

Matthew Snipp and Gene Summers' piece on "American Indians and Economic Poverty," combines a contemporary portrait of the nation's 1.37 million American Indians with a socio-historical analysis of Federal policies that have failed to eradicate their chronic poverty. Over half of all American Indians and Alaska natives live in rural areas, many on the 278 reservations located within the United States. Federal policies have been destructive. Snipp and Summers show how the unique culture of American Indians has been at the center of these policies, as an element to either overcome or ignore. This cultural identity has also given poor rural American Indians a strength and a greater community cohesiveness than other rural groups. But poverty remains a persistent problem among the Indian nations. Snipp and Summers urge a renewed commitment to traditional economic development and capacity building programs.

Janet Fitchen's chapter "Rural Poverty in the Northeast: The Case of Upstate New York" provides a detailed account of the rural poor who live in an area that is more prosperous overall. While pockets of poverty have persisted in these remote rural



communities for decades, Fitchen finds evidence that conditions are growing worse as we enter the 1990s. Welfare rolls and Food Stamp applications are up as much as twenty percent in some areas, and the poor are more and more visible in small, run-down clusters of trailers or other forms of low-cost housing. Fitchen describes people who live on the margin, moving from place to place as housing arrangements and personal relationships deteriorate under the pressure of inadequate incomes. She argues that this mobility itself traps families in poverty, since they are unable to build social ties.

Cornelia Flora, in "The New Poor in Midwest Farming Communities," describes growing poverty in the nation's heartland, especially among wage workers. Flora argues that the poor in midwest farm communities not only face the problems of piecing together a livelihood in a declining economy, but also must deal with a lack of concern from the non-poor. The farmers and other middle class leaders in farm communities believe the poor have failed to work hard enough to escape poverty. She finds, like Dill and Williams, that elites try to keep wages low, preventing these workers from escaping poverty. Like Fitchen, she finds growing poverty among young families that exist on the edges of the community, neither supported by community structures nor making commitments of their own to the community. These young rural households move from town to town, from job to job, in search of a job with reasonable income.

Clearly the rural poor face formidable obstacles to escaping

poverty. They have difficulty finding steady work that pays a living wage, the welfare benefits they receive are too low to lift them out of poverty, and receiving benefits further distances them from the non-poor in their communities. Rural communities are generally either inhospitable or openly oppressive to the poor in their midst. The familiarity that makes small communities less frightening than a big, strange city also means that those from poor families are labeled poor, and given few chances to escape poverty. What approach to public policy would hold some promises for widening opportunities for the rural poor? In the final section of the book, we explore this question.

Rural poverty has been a problem for decades. Over that period, all levels of government have tried a variety of programs. In "Modernization and the Rural Poor: Some Lessons from History," Alice O'Connor reviews past policies from the New Deal through the Great Society, relating their underlying themes to modernization theory. O'Connor shows how policies to address rural poverty have shifted from an early emphasis among Southern regionalists on bringing remote rural places into the modern era, to a subsequent "fix the backward people" approach. The third phase was straightforward economic development built on international development experience. O'Connor's historical analysis demonstrates the policy side of the inequities that have helped perpetuate rural poverty. Her account is full of proposed programs that would have re-distributed power over resources. In

each case, however, powerful local elites whose interests would not be served by such broad-based redistribution successfully blocked social change.

In "Empowerment and Rural Poverty," Steve Suits explores the potential for developing strategies that empower the rural poor by increasing their direct control over economic and political institutions. He reviews past efforts among the rural poor to seize control of their economic institutions, showing how these efforts, like those described by O'Connor, succumbed to the power of local elites. Nonetheless, Suits presents some victories that show the potential of strategies that give the poor more control over their economic and political institutions. His analysis of recent anti-poverty legislation passed as a result of growing African American representation in the U.S. Congress indicates the power that the rural poor can have when their elected representatives support national policies to help the poor.

Recognizing that many of the rural poor are working, living in two-parent families, and elderly, Robert Greenstein and Isaac Shapiro take a pragmatic look at national anti-poverty policies that would help. In "Policies to Alleviate Rural Poverty," Greenstein and Shapiro briefly review those characteristics most important for federal policy considerations. Drawing on their experience at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, they recommend policies which could raise income in working poor families without diminishing work incentive. Their analysis

includes the Earned Income Tax Credit, minimum wage laws, programs to assist the unemployed, benefits for the elderly, and policies to help the rural poor with health, housing, and child care needs.

Clearly many of the policies needed to assist the rural poor, both workers and nonworkers, are also relevant for the urban poor. Workers need better pay and benefits; those unable to work need programs that provide a decent standard of living. The problems of isolation, limited expectations, and limited resources that trap those in poor rural communities are similar to those that trap the poor in inner city poverty areas. Commitment to improved education and training -- from Head Start to schools to youth service and Job Corps -- would widen their opportunities. From a policy standpoint, the differences in circumstances between the urban and rural poor are more likely to imply different implementation strategies than different approaches altogether. But the rural poor are often forgotten by policymakers and those who develop programs. They are truly invisible. The contributions to this volume try to make them visible, and broaden our understanding of who the rural poor are, why they are poor, and what kinds of policies and political strategies might improve their opportunities.

PART I. THE DYNAMICS OF POVERTY AND MOBILITY IN RURAL AMERICA

## Chapter 7

### PERSISTENT POVERTY IN APPALACHIA: CORRUPT POLITICS CONTROLLING SCARCE JOBS<sup>18</sup>

Cynthia M. Duncan

Times have always been hard in Appalachia. During the early 1800s mountaineers scratched a living from the hillsides, supplementing subsistence farming with hunting and occasional trading. The region was sparsely settled, economically isolated, and the family was the center of every aspect of life (Blee and Billings 1986). After the Civil War, Appalachia was drawn into the national economy. Speculators and businessmen from the northeast came into the region to purchase the rich timber and mineral resources, and, within a short time, the region had shifted from its pre-industrial dependence on relatively isolated family-based subsistence farms to an industrial wage economy (Blee and Billings 1986). For families in the mountains, it meant trading the uncertainty and hardships of making a livelihood with small farms for the uncertainty and vulnerability of seeking work in a volatile and oppressive industry (Eller 1982).

Over time, the structure of work in the region -- its scarcity, volatility, and control by a domineering industry -- has created a community context that is both unstable and

oppressive. Limited opportunity for steady work and income means that control over jobs and welfare benefits is a source of wealth and power. Jobs and welfare benefits are a kind of currency. Private employers give jobs to family members, friends, and, frequently, to political supporters. The valuable, steady public sector jobs and the benefits and opportunities available through welfare programs are part of an entrenched patronage-driven political system. In many Appalachian communities a few powerful families have control over most opportunities in the private and public sectors.

Finding work or securing welfare benefits thus depends either on your family's reputation and network, "who you know," or on playing the patronage system right. Employers, workers, and those seeking work in Appalachian communities recognize that one does not get a given job, or even certain forms of public assistance, based primarily on one's qualifications. Those from poor families are least likely to have the reputation or political connections necessary to find steady work in this social structure. The corruption and favoritism that drive who gets opportunities to work or receive public assistance undermine the quality of public institutions. Schools and other public programs that we expect to be open to everyone instead become part of a spoils system, and fail to fulfill their role as support systems for poor people. Opportunities to escape poverty through work are blocked and the public institutions that we expect to give people the education and skills they need to find

work elsewhere are coopted by a system of political patronage. The "social buffers" (see Wilson 1987) on which poor people depend when resources are limited in their own families do not work in these depressed, corrupt communities.

Poor Appalachians live precarious lives in unstable, unpredictable communities, vulnerable to individual setbacks such as a job loss, family member illness, or even a broken down car, as well as to the pervasive arbitrary control of powerful local elites. They become trapped in poverty because there are few opportunities for steady work and income in their own communities, and few opportunities to develop the skills and educational background necessary to find work elsewhere. They piece together a livelihood with intermittent work, help from family members, and various public assistance programs that can supplement too few hours work and too low wages. They have little control over their lives.

### "Broken in Spirit and Body"?

Persistent poverty, high welfare dependence, and corrupt local officials in Appalachia are featured in lawyer Harry Caudill's Night Comes to the Cumberlands (1963), clergyman Jack Weller's Yesterday's People (1966), and journalist John Fetterman's Stinking Creek (1967). These authors conclude that the Appalachian poor have given up trying to escape poverty and are resigned to living on welfare. They attribute continued



poverty and welfare dependence to the "broken spirit" of the people. In a review in the New York Times, Harriet Arnow described Caudill's book as

the story of how this rich and beautiful land was changed into an ugly, poverty-ridden place of desolation, peopled mainly by the broken in spirit and body, the illiterate, the destitute, and morally corroded (Caudill 1963).

By emphasizing defeated individuals who have come to accept welfare dependency, Caudill, Weller, and Fetterman contribute to a widely-held stereotype of lazy, dependent hillbillies who do not share American values about work. Sociologist Herman Lantz (1964) described coal communities as thoroughly resigned, with apathetic, hopeless people "largely dependent upon miners' pensions, Social Security, and public assistance." In 1968, sociologist Richard Ball summed up "the resignation to the welfare syndrome" in the "Appalachian folk subculture" as analgesic -- feeling no pain. More recently, journalist Ken Auletta concluded that poor Appalachians in West Virginia, the "white underclass," were no different in the 1980s than the people Fetterman had described in the 1960s:

As was true of the rural Appalachian mountain community brought to life in John Fetterman's powerful book about rural poverty, Stinking Creek, much of 'the rural populace in the countless hollows have adopted the welfare rolls as a way of life' (1982, p. 159).

These writers emphasize how the poor use welfare, without

fully examining their economic opportunities and the social context in poor Appalachian communities. Robert Coles and Kai Erikson present a more complex picture. In Everything in Its Path: Destruction of Community in the Buffalo Creek Flood (1976), Kai Erikson basically accepts Caudill and Weller's accounts of the Appalachian poor as accurate descriptions for the 1960s. However, he argues that those he studies had just begun to overcome "the poverty and insecurity of their parents," had just begun to move beyond "that numbed and dispirited creature shuffling off to welfare offices of one kind or another" when the flood hit and destroyed their community (1976:132).

But even in the 1960s, Robert Coles found people who argued that poor Appalachians were trapped by the community's social and political structure, not resigned to accepting the welfare rolls. In Migrants, Sharecroppers, Mountaineers (1967), a small coal company operator described the intertwining of lack of jobs, people taking welfare, and a corrupt welfare system:

The poor here...who live up the hollows won't take handouts. I mean, they will, of course, because they're desperate; but they don't like the idea...what we need here is factories, lots of them, to give jobs to our people...but there's nothing left for people but scratching what they can from the land -- or turning to the county welfare system, which is full of rotten, dishonest politics. Welfare is a business here, not the right of a citizen who needs help and is entitled to it. No wonder a lot of people have contempt

for welfare, even if they'll accept the money. They know that the county officials use welfare to stay in power, to buy votes and to punish enemies (p. 283).

The people whom Coles interviewed describe how too few jobs and a corrupt local political structure strip poor people of their opportunities to escape poverty, including the children who are the focus of his study. He sees and relates the vulnerability of the poor:

In some counties of Kentucky and West Virginia one or two families run everything; they control the judge's office and the sheriff's office and they have their man as the superintendent of schools. It is impossible for those who live scattered up the hollows and creeks to defy such "authorities" without paying one or several harsh penalties (1967, p. 297).

It is neither Coles' intent nor style to analyze the social dynamics he has discovered. His purpose, as a child psychologist, is to shed light on "how those children live, how their parents live, and what they are likely to have on their minds" (1967, p. xi). But he recognized the importance of the social context in poor Appalachian communities, and knew how deeply it affected Appalachian children.

This corrupt and rigid social context trapped the poor in Appalachia in the 1960s, and it traps them today. It is not the "broken spirits" of poor individuals that explains persistent poverty in the mountains. It is the corrupt political structure

and rigidly stratified social structure which creates a community context that blocks every path out of poverty.

This chapter presents preliminary observations from a comparative study of social mobility in remote rural communities, some depressed and some relatively prosperous. In in-depth interviews with poor young adults, local welfare administrators and workers, civic leaders, organizers, and business and political elites, we examine how opportunities to escape poverty vary in different social contexts.<sup>19</sup> The Appalachian case is presented here, with emphasis on how people in the mountains see their opportunities and assess the workings of their communities' social and political structures. The early history of social relationships in the coal industry established the setting for today's rigidly stratified and tightly controlled Appalachian communities. Today the continued scarcity and volatility of work perpetuates a corrupt local socio-political system in which the arbitrary power of the elite over the few opportunities that exist creates a social context that blocks poor people's mobility out of poverty.

#### **Early Coal Development: "Acute Poverty Among Miners"**

When coal mining began in the mountains in the late 1800s, politicians and industrialists claimed that coal development would bring wealth and prosperity to the region. In 1913 the *Manufacturers Record*, a leading business journal of the period,

argued that

They [outside investors] have been turning these mountains, largely inhabited by an undeveloped and uneducated people, who because of the lack of employment, have been stagnant for generations, into centers of activity and life and civilization's progress (1913, p. 52).

But these claims were not borne out. The coal industry did not bring improved conditions to the mountains, and, even when production was expanding, times were hard in coal communities. There was fierce competition in the bituminous coal industry until the 1950s (Baratz 1955; Graebner 1973; Johnson 1979; Simon 1981; Seltzer 1985). Since coal reserves were geographically dispersed, widely available, and required relatively little capital to mine, it was easy to enter the business. The result was constant overcapacity and overproduction (Seltzer 1985). Throughout the early 1900s, coal operators vied for markets provided by railroads, steel companies and other industrial customers, and these powerful monopolistic industries played operators against each other (Balliett 1978; Simon 1981). Even during years when markets and production were expanding for the industry as a whole, coal companies faced tight competition. Operators were oriented toward short-term gain, and profitable mining was only possible if costs were held at an absolute minimum. Thus wages were kept low and companies made only minimal investments in coal camp infrastructure. In 1937,

Justice William Douglas observed that,

Labor and capital alike were the victims. Financial distress among the operators and acute poverty among miners prevailed during periods of prosperity (Quoted in Balliett 1978, p. 28).

Most miners lived in coal company towns legendary for their poor conditions and the absolute control wielded by coal operators (Seltzer 1985). Since there was virtually no other economic activity, coal operators provided not only employment, but also housing, utilities, and whatever health and education and recreation were available. Operators molded their company towns, as they did their mining operations, to achieve maximum control and profits (Parker 1940; Corbin 1981; Seltzer 1985). When a company's markets shrank, it would lay people off or cut wages to keep the business going. Business conditions were sometimes so bad that coal companies made their only profits in their company stores (Simon 1981).

Miners and their families were always vulnerable to arbitrary layoffs, and with job loss came the loss of housing and everything else they had. Most miners had difficulty supplementing wages with gardens or keeping small livestock -- as they might have before moving to a coal town -- because the surrounding wooded lands were owned by coal companies (USDA 1935). Local economies were wholly dependent on the volatile coal industry for income and employment, and this dependency thwarted investment in non-coal private sector ventures as well

as public infrastructure. Indeed, in these hard-pressed one-industry towns, the only potential source of revenue for community investment was the coal companies, and they had the power to block any taxation efforts community leaders might propose. A pattern of absolute control by the coal operators was established, and those who resisted were run out of town.

While the result of this fierce competition in the bituminous coal industry was cheap energy to fuel industrialization in the northeast and midwest, the costs were severe for miners and their families:

The blessings of cheap coal were less obvious to the men who mined it. Constant downward pressure on wages -- and the ever present threat of unemployment in a highly unstable industry -- meant lives of grinding poverty for many coal miners and their families. It also resulted in minimal expenditures on health and safety measures by the operators in the most hazardous occupation of the industrial age (Miernyk 1979).

In 1935 the U. S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) examined the Appalachian coal industry's potential contribution to regional development. USDA concluded that although the prospect of coal employment drew thousands of families into the region and discouraged the emigration of thousands more by offering an alternative to subsistence farming,

On the whole, the development of coal mining has not made for a satisfactory economic organization. The

coal mining camps, usually erected and owned by the owners of the mines, have often been unwholesome. The work in the mines has usually been irregular, and even before the present economic depression, most mines were closed from one to several months each year (USDA 1935)

Seltzer's comprehensive study of miners and managers in the coal industry (1985) shows how labor and management relationships in the industry were characterized by distrust and exploitation from the beginning. Over the years bloody and violent labor struggles further contributed to a community context of suspicion and oppression (e.g. Corbin 1981; Jones 1985; Seltzer 1985). Both the violent labor struggles and ruinous competition were finally formally addressed by the industry in the 1950s. John L. Lewis of the United Mine Workers and George Love, representing the Bituminous Coal Operators Association -- the largest producers, reached an agreement to raise wages and force many marginal producers out of business (Seltzer 1985). But the agreement also depended on sudden mechanization, and this meant massive layoffs and permanent unemployment (Miernyk 1980; Seltzer 1985). In the five year period between 1949 and 1954 alone, eastern Kentucky coal employment declined from 60,000 to 27,000. Similar job losses occurred in West Virginia and southwest Virginia. Between 1950 and 1960 over a million and a half people emigrated from Central Appalachia (Brown 1972). Those who remained without coal jobs lived in deep poverty.



## Hard Times in the 1980s and 1990s: "You Can't Buy A Job"

The scarcity and volatility of work and the absolute, arbitrary control of coal industry employers during the first half of this century set the stage for conditions in coal communities today. In the early coal company towns there were two social classes -- miners and managers -- and the large gap between them was rigidly maintained. Over time, the lack of economic diversity, the lack of numerous different employers and different options for employment, has perpetuated the basic system of haves and have-nots. When miners gained better pay in the 1960s, they became part of the "haves."

The region's high poverty rates indicate that income and jobs are distributed unequally in the mountains. Coal miners who work fairly steadily earn \$30,000 or more a year, but a much larger group lives on the margin, scrambling for the few low-paying, part-time jobs in the fast food industry or odd-job opportunities. My 1980 study of the distribution of work and income in rural Kentucky found significantly greater inequalities in coal-dependent counties than in counties dependent on farm, manufacturing, or government and service economies (Duncan 1985). There were fewer workers, but those who worked in wage and salary jobs earned high wages. Average earnings in coal counties were almost 40 percent higher than in other types of counties, while there were 8 percent more families that had no worker at all. An astonishing 36 percent of coal-field teenagers were "hanging

out," not in school, not working, and not looking for work -- compared to an average of 22 percent in other counties. Despite these dramatic differences in average earnings and proportion of adults working, coal-field counties did not differ greatly in their relative dependence on earned income versus transfer payment income. Sixty-six percent of total personal income was earned at work in coal counties, compared to an average of 65 percent in other counties. Twenty-four percent of total personal income in coal counties came from transfer payments (including black lung benefits), compared to an average of 21 percent in the other types of counties.<sup>20</sup> These 1980 statistics indicate high inequality in coal areas compared to areas dependent on other economic activity (Duncan 1985). Declines in coal employment during the 1980s would suggest that these inequalities have probably been exacerbated rather than minimized over the last decade. The lack of economic and social diversity means that those few families who have control over jobs and other opportunities wield great power over those who need them and have no other options.

Coal is still the lifeblood in mining areas. In coal-producing counties of eastern Kentucky over 40 percent of income comes from coal employment, and in many areas it is even higher (Duncan 1985). Like many other core industries in the U.S., the coal industry has introduced changes that make coal production more efficient. Through a combination of better management and new technology, coal companies produce more and more coal with

fewer and fewer miners (MACED 1986). Although new health and safety and environmental regulations in the 1970s meant companies added workers to deal with new rules, today companies meet these requirements efficiently, without adding great numbers of workers to their payroll (MACED 1986). Less efficient small mines are going out of business, while larger mines are introducing new machinery such as long-wall miners that dramatically improve efficiency (MACED 1986). These improvements in productivity mean that the industry increased coal production 70 percent between 1950 and 1984, while, at the same time, reducing employment from 416,000 to 178,000 (MACED 1986). Production continues to go up, and employment continues to go down. In Kentucky alone, coal employment declined from 39,700 in 1984 to 31,500 in 1988. In 1984 Appalachian coal fields produced 1.86 tons per miner per hour. By 1987 that figure had increased to 2.3 tons per miner per hour (Kentucky Coal Association 1989). Most Appalachian coal miners today are skilled, highly paid workers in larger companies that tend to have at least some stable, long-term contracts with utility customers.

Even in an era of relative stability and good wages in the coal industry, however, there are not enough of these jobs for would-be workers in the region. Employment is steadier and safer in the larger mines today, but these opportunities are contracting, not expanding. When there are openings, the jobs require sophisticated skills, and companies advertize in a national labor market. Poor Appalachian youth with poor

educations are unlikely to find work in the coal mines in the 1990s. One industry manager put it this way in 1985:

We are at the point of saturation in the mining industry [here]...The youngsters who were getting out of high school in the early 1970s have now been working for my company for ten years. They were the fortunate ones...The jobs aren't there now (MACED 1986).

Although in the past Appalachian residents who had experienced coal's boom and bust cycle might have expected a new boom, today nearly everyone recognizes that coal employment will not expand. Over and over, young people say there is no work in coal:

Everywhere he's asked, they don't need nobody. He's asked down at the coal yard I don't know how many times, and they don't need nobody. As a matter of fact, the mines is laying off instead of hiring, so there ain't no jobs here.

It is generally understood that there are no longer openings for unskilled rock pickers or rock truck drivers:

You need experience to get a job with a big operator...so instead [people] end up at, you know, McDonalds, for 20 hours. It's hard to put together a living that way.

Even though it's hard to make a living in the low wage, part-time jobs in fast food restaurants or grocery stores, young workers trying to support a family struggle to get these jobs, and struggle to keep them. To avoid paying benefits, fast food restaurants structure the jobs so that people do not get full-

time work, and as a result, workers are always hoping to get more hours. While teenagers, and in some cases retired people, use this kind of job for extra spending money in many parts of the country, young adults in depressed communities must depend on jobs like these to support their families.

One young man's story was representative of many in his predicament. With a baby and teenage wife to support, he had fixed up an old trailer on his uncle's property, bought a \$75 car that he coaxed into running, and was now trying to buy food, gas, and pay utilities on what he could make working part-time in a fast food restaurant. He had dropped out of school, tried finding work in Florida, but there were few options in the mid-1980s for a mountain boy with no education, and he returned home. Now he needed this fast food job to hold his young family together.

Workers like this young man do anything they can to get "hours." A young woman working in a fast food restaurant described how much she liked to close up, even though it meant staying late and more drudgery work cleaning pots and pans.

Closing assured her of more hours:

If you're in a restaurant, 'bout the only time you make your money is if you work "closin'". That's where all the hours are. You don't get sent home early or anything like that when it's slow. You can automatically get six and a half hours, whether it's slow or not slow...You clean the pots, shine everything down for the next day.

She was worried that the following week would bring too few hours to pay for the gas it took to get to work:

Right now it's up and down. Ten hours I've worked [all week]. I don't know if I can stay around, 'cause for the next five days I only get two days and I can't take it. You don't get no hours like that. That's it. I'd only be with 20 hours...I may as well just stay home, saving my gas 'cause I'm just making it for gas to come out here and back...

When business is slow, workers are sent home or told not to come in, and thus every week income is uncertain. One manager cut his workers' hours, keeping costs low relative to profits, in order to achieve the margin he needed to make his bonus:

He has to get all the costs down and sales so much above the costs, so he would work our jobs. That's dirty. People that need the money -- there's a lot who need the money badly -- women who had kids, no husbands, no help whatsoever...But there isn't anything anyone can do about it.

But business demand is not the only force determining a low wage worker's income in a restaurant in these communities. The arbitrary control of managers also affects how many hours workers get, and even whether they keep their jobs. Managers have the authority to change rules to benefit themselves or members of their families. Another worker in another community described how a rule was developed preventing two siblings from being in

management at the same place in order to remove a worker who stood in the way of the manager's own wife's advancement. The storyteller was amused by the obvious ethical contradictions this represented, but not surprised. On the one hand, this kind of power for managers and lack of power for workers is the accepted way of operating in these poor communities. On the other hand, most managers are said to be tightly connected to those few families who make up the elite power structure. Their connections implicitly permit them to exercise the same kind of arbitrary power over workers that elites exercise over the communities.

People from the poorest families have trouble getting these low wage jobs in the service sector. Managers prefer high school students and college students from the "good families", in part because they only want the part-time work available, and in part because they have the appearance and habits that suggest they will be good workers. Workers who are supporting families complain that students, who need the money less, get more of the hours. One fast food manager explains:

The main reason we have a lot of high school students and college students -- most of the time it's your best applicant. When they come in for an interview, they're ready for it. They know the answers, and a lot of people just come here and want a job, they don't want to work. The college students just want part-time 'cause their parents are putting them through anyways.

There are so few jobs available in these communities, and so many who need work, that people seek fast food and other part-time retail work in order to support their families. But the jobs are set up for those who do not need them to offer a living wage. When household heads do get these jobs, their hours are always uncertain and unpredictable, always subject to change.

Those who cannot get the fast food jobs and other retail or service jobs, do "odd jobs" such as babysitting, carpentry, grass cutting, plumbing jobs, often for older people who may have a small pension coming in and can pay a few dollars to get a small job done. An economy characterized by great inequality generates more "odd jobs" -- those who have good work and incomes can pay very little to have jobs done for them that they otherwise might do themselves.

In this way, the informal sector of a depressed rural economy in the U.S. is comparable to that in a developing country that still has remnants of a colonial system. The small elite have substantial resources compared to the large number of poor needing any kind of work, and so the poor can pick up a little painting or plumbing job here and there, some hauling or clearing. The work and the income are uncertain, but people go out to get what they can day after day. Of course, when unemployment grows, and more miners are laid off, even this work becomes hard to find. One unemployed coal miner said that "anymore, even the odd jobs are hard to find."

One coal miner who had been unemployed for three years ran a



used car business in the day time and cleaned school rooms in the evening. He said,

It's getting back to worse as it's ever been...if you don't work in the coal mines here, there's nothing else to do. During the coal boom there was a lot of work available...Now, you know, people around just can't buy a job. If you work for somebody, you're going to have to pay them.

**Who's Your Daddy?"**

#### Opportunities to Work

When jobs are scarce in a small, closed community, whom you know makes all the difference in whether you find any work at all. Even during the coal boom, when thousands of new miners were hired in large, multinational energy companies, the hiring process was largely filtered through connections. Companies with headquarters in the northeast and the midwest bought Appalachian companies or opened new mines to take advantage of the coal boom, but many relied on local elites to hire the workforce. Thus, even in a period of relative job growth, those with the best connections get the "best" jobs. A miner explained:

If you're not tight with the people that own it, you're not going to get a job. The people that have the authority to hire will make sure that their friends or their families get the jobs because they know there are

none anywhere else. I know if I had the authority, I'd hire my brother before I'd let him work in a 'scab mine'.

Steady jobs of any kind are always at a premium, but there is not much turnover. Those who have the jobs keep them, and when they retire, they try to get their family members in to replace them. One young man said:

'Bout all the long term jobs around here are took. The only thing would be to go into the coal mines -- but they is layin' so many off right now...You have to know somebody, have somebody put in a good word fer your father, something like 'at, you know."

In a small community with few jobs and a well established elite, there is little opportunity for jobs that offer mobility. The fundamental reality is that there just are not enough jobs. In addition, however, one's potential to get work and have opportunities depends to a large extent on one's family background. People are assigned the reputation of their families. One young woman described how there were two classes in school -- the "upper class that was going somewhere," and the "lower class, who, you could see, would never go anywhere." People distinguish between the ones who are "dirty and nasty -- unshaven, hair unkept, you can tell they aren't workin'," and those who are neat, clean-cut, and work. One member of the elite put it this way:

There's the people who work and do well and have a lot of

money, and there's the poor. And you don't have an in-between...the people who are just regular coal miners can bring home thirty to forty thousand -- they're all in that bracket. And then you go from that, and the transition's like a cliff's edge, and it drops off and you got people who are very very poor.

The inequality is apparent to people on both sides of the spectrum; they agree that your family's name -- and which side of that divide your family has historically been on -- is of the utmost importance in determining your opportunities. One upper class person said:

You know, we was talkin' about the classes and the distinctions and how you can tell. This sounds silly, but with generations of people bein' this way, and the last name -- a lot of times you can hear somebody's last name and before you even meet 'em, you already got the idea.

They're either a good person or they're sorry as can be... And if someone from a poor family cleans up and wants to get work, what are his or her prospects?

No [you can't overcome the disadvantages of a bad family name]. I knew this fella, I was fixin' to go out with him, but his last name happened to fall into one those lists, and even though he wasn't from the crowd I knew, I couldn't go out with him, you know, It would look bad. You have to be extremely careful here.

For the poorest of the poor, whose "Daddy's never amounted to

anything," this reliance on family reputation often means they are not given a chance to work:

Everybody around here knows everybody, and they know what family you come from. Now my family, they've been always a bad family...they're places they can't even rent a house, because of their last name. And it's just the way it is...you can't change it. You just have to live with it.

A young woman summed <sup>up</sup> her household's predicament:

Way I see it, poor people 'round here can't git a job. My boyfriend tried and tried 'fore he ever got his social security. He couldn't git a job.

In small communities where the labor market is tight, getting a job generally depends on family members' reputations for being good workers or on performing direct political work, ensuring votes, for those who control the jobs. In any case, you need to have someone who is well established with the employer "speak for you." If you are not in the network of those who have work it is difficult to break into the limited steady job market. If in addition you come from a poor family and your father or mother are generally regarded as never having "done any good," you have a much more difficult time breaking into the job market:

You have to come from the right family around here. You gotta know people. It depends on what your name is, if you got a last name that is a rich name, they'll take you, [otherwise] you can't find no work.

### Opportunities at School

The bias the poor face when they seek jobs, either because of their family reputation or their "nasty" appearance, extends to the classroom. Children from poor families are not expected to do well in school. One young mother complained:

These kids walk in the door and they are categorized by 90 percent of the teachers. 'This is so-and-so over there; his mommy and daddy never did amount to a hill of beans. They don't know how to read and write.

There's no point in my wasting time on Johnny here...

Another bitter parent from a poor family said:

Whatever a child has got on his back and no matter how ticky his hair is, no matter how nasty it is, no matter what hole it comes out of, it deserves the same chance as Sally sitting over here in a ruffled dress.

The children themselves are acutely aware of school personnel's discrimination against those from poor families. Comparing teachers' treatment of "upper class" students with that of "lower class" students, one young person said:

They make their picks on the people that's got the most money up here, and they try to say it's cause they achieve more, but it's not. It's 'cause they got more money...The teachers treats them with respect, treats them right, like they're supposed to be, like a human being. And the principal treats them right, they don't direct them in the office for blinking their eyes the wrong way. Now for me,

when I was going to school, I went to the office every day, even if I didn't do nothing, and I got paddled. And they did my brother the same way, whether he did anything or not, he got paddled every day. And that's why kids quit school.

The patterns that lead to dropping out are repeated over and over, as personal problems intersect with school problems. Many who dropped out said that things were "real rough" at home; or they fought a lot in school (both men and women), pushing and instigating scuffles every day until school authorities kicked them out; some with problems with learning failed again and again, until they said they just got too old and big for the grades they were in (17 or 18 in the 8th and 9th grades); many got in with a "rough crowd," and drifted out of school. One young woman, born to a teenage mother and brought up in a broken family, described how she became involved with a wild group:

I just kinda got up with the wrong crowd, you know -- it was like this gang of bad kids. And I started skippin' school and runnin' around. It took me a long time to realize how bad I'd gotten my life messed up. When I was goin' to school there was two crowds. There were the good rich kids and there were the bad poor people. And they were segregated, you know. I felt like I needed to be with somebody like me, and I wound up in the wrong crowd. I experimented with drugs. I run away and stay out. I was out with people you couldn't trust. I was out all night gettin' drunk. I didn't think nobody cared what happened to

me, and I didn't care what happened to me. Now this young woman is herself the unwed mother of a four year old. She is working on her General Equivalency Degree, and she has a part-time waitressing job. She lives with her aunt, who also has a part-time job in the service sector, in a small house with bad plumbing. Although she is doing all she can to "make something" of herself -- getting her high school degree, working as many hours as she can get, and providing whatever opportunities she can for her child, her new life is not secure. She and her aunt work directly for one of the several powerful families in their community, and any mis-step would mean they were out of work, housing, and future opportunities.

Both upper and lower class people describe how the poor children receive less attention and have less expected of them. They have trouble with "learnin'", but they do not get help:

I liked goin' to school but I wasn't that good on learnin'. I couldn't git through the third grade. And, you know, it didn't seem like the teacher had concern, you know, ta learn. Take time with ya. So I was the one that didn't have no teachin'. Somebody to teach for me to learn... 'cause the teacher didn't give me no time, and, I wanted to learn, but seemed like I couldn't learn.

So those from poor families start to "skip" school, and the school and public authorities condone it. One young woman who had lived elsewhere saw a real difference in her Appalachian school:

They just let you go and let you do whatever, they let you skip. They don't care, that's why I was failing. In Illinois, if you got caught skippin', you were in big trouble. I got straight A's in Illinois. But here it's easy [to skip]..

One adult explained how little control teachers have when authorities in the community tolerate "skippin'":

My sister-in-laws are teachers, and they say there's not much they can do in the school system. They talk about punishing kids, and -- well, around here kids don't have to go to school...sometimes they take families to court, but they don't make them do anything about it...

Those teachers who try to teach seriously and who try to treat students equally are undermined by the prevailing atmosphere that favors those from "upper class" families and ignores or discriminates against those from poor families. They are pressured by the parents of the non-poor to give their children privileges and condone transgressions. One woman described the pressure on earnest teachers:

If teachers try to enforce discipline, they get calls at night, parents calling and hollering and stuff if little Susie doesn't get on the honor roll, if they try to take any privileges away from their children -- oh no, their parents won't have it: 'My little child wouldn't do that'...there's not much the teachers can do. It's the wealthier families. The poor people, they don't hardly go into the schools, you



know. They don't say too much about it. But the wealthier ones, well, they think they should be able to buy everything that child needs, including its education.

The problems of the schools, and the schools' failure to teach poor children, have become part of a cycle of low standards and low expectations. No one takes school seriously as a place of learning -- not the parents, not the students, not the teachers, and not the administrators. Students describe chaotic classrooms, with fights in the hall ways, students climbing in and out of windows during class periods, and a general lack of order. Many teachers are untrained or ill-suited for their jobs, but have them because of their participation in the patronage system.

Schools are at the heart of the corrupt patronage system that drives these poor communities. In many Appalachian counties schools provide the majority of jobs, and these jobs -- from school teachers, to aides, kitchen workers, and bus drivers -- are doled out by elected school board members to political supporters. Some parents described the biggest obstacle facing their communities as corruption in the schools:

...the biggest problem you get into with the school board is the fact that they control more jobs and more people and more people's lives than any other thing in this county. They have the employees, and any time you have that type of situation in a low economic area, you have a beautiful setup for bribery, corruption, and

political power plays. And that is what happens... People whose fathers had worked in elections, delivering hollows, expected to get on as teachers, even though they freely admitted they would rather "be a secretary, really", or "hangin' drywall is what I like." As one young person put it:

There's a lot of teachers who went into teaching because it's a job, and there's a lot of problems in the school system. I'd say we have a lot of teachers who don't need to be teaching, who hate kids, who do not care what the kids do.

Even those who do graduate have not learned to read or write.

One businessman observed:

We have got so many...that cannot read their name, can't recognize it if they see it on paper. They can't write their names. Now that's what kind of graduates we got -- that's went through high school and graduated, and they can't read their name.

Coal industry employers say they cannot risk hiring an illiterate worker in a dangerous job. One described how he dealt with applications from people who could not read and write:

People would come in here to apply for a job, and the secretary would read their application, and they would give the answers, and she would write them in because they couldn't read and write. I let them do this, because I didn't want them to feel rejected, but I would never hire anybody like that. I just put an X on the application and

filed it away. I figure if they can't read a warning sign, then they just would not be safe in our jobs.

Thus the poor in Appalachia arrive at the age to work without even the most elementary education and training. Students cannot read, write, or "do figures," and are suited for very few jobs in the mountains or elsewhere:

'Bout the only thing you can find around here without an education is cuttin' grass, or odd jobs here and there.

**Public Jobs and Public Programs in Appalachia: "Honey, everything here is politics."**

This patronage system extends well beyond the school system. The corruption that characterizes school board races and school personnel hiring extends into every aspect of community life. Whether it is access to free government food, access to slots in youth training programs, or referrals to openings at a new fast food restaurant or a good security job with a private firm, having an opportunity depends on whom you know and whom you supported in the last election. Those who have lived and worked elsewhere are struck by the lack of meritocracy in these depressed communities:

There's just types of things that you see that go on. You can see it in the paper and you can see it in who's talking. The political games that go on. It's there. And it's not necessarily you get things on merit -- it's on who you know.

And I've lived away from here and I know what's on merit. Other places it can be merit -- qualifications, your education.

Scarcity of jobs means that control over jobs is a source of wealth and power, and volatility of jobs means that steady work in the public sector -- in the schools, in the welfare or employment office, on the road crew -- is the biggest prize. Often young people who were hoping to get a public job soon, or who had just gotten one, would describe the political activity of their disabled fathers. "Oh, he stays real active -- politickin' mainly." Their fathers are men in their forties and fifties who receive disability payments and then use their time to work as middlemen, delivering votes for the politician who hired them. They get paid with money and with jobs for their relatives. One political middleman told us how he worked:

The way I work is I pick the families, and I'll get 30 people working for me over there. So I've got 30 people working for, say \$40 a piece. They're all working for the same thing. They all have families. You get them out of big families, you know. I had families I relied on, whom I had taught how to do this.

The system and who runs it are clear to everyone in the community. When asked, "who runs things around here?" most people name the same small group of powerful families in their community. "They have a lot of pull," one young woman said, "and everybody's kind of afraid of them 'cause they know what they can

do." Another commented,

We have a system right here that just cannot be fought...There's too much money and too much power where they are at. And you just can't win.

Running unsuccessfully against a corrupt school board in Appalachia in an effort to bring about reforms means your daughter and nephew are likely to lose their jobs in the kitchen or classroom.

If you're not careful you'll make enemies. And you don't want to make enemies. Especially if you don't have importance.

There appears to be widespread consensus that the few families that run things have control over jobs in the private sector as well, and can ensure their control by having those who challenge them under any circumstances fired, no matter where they work. To illustrate the long reach of the elite, one well-placed group of young people whose families had supported the ruling elites and who therefore had good public sector jobs told me that if the political stories they were telling me ever "got out" none of them could ever "flip a hamburger" in their town again. This concentrated power that comes with control over jobs in both the private and the public sector means that one cannot challenge the local elite without losing one's own job or having one's relative lose theirs. It is a complete system in which jobs are awarded on the basis of whom you know and whom you support. People throughout the area take the system for granted

and even those who want community change in the region feel the system is too entrenched to fight.

Elite control over opportunities in the region extends to the welfare system. Social welfare programs play an important role in poor communities. They provide crucial support for the poor, both those who are unemployed and those who have jobs that do neither pay enough to support a family nor offer health benefits. They also contribute substantial dollars to the local economy, dollars that go to local grocers, landlords, health care providers, and even employers who hire people eligible for training and wage supplements. Finally, by providing a safety net of sorts for the low-wage workers in the area, welfare programs maintain a local workforce for local industries.

There may be some family members who "lay around" and won't get work, but most welfare recipients whom we interviewed use welfare programs to make up for what they can not get through work. For low-income individuals, welfare supplements low wages, too few hours, and provides a source of medical coverage, protecting poor people living on the margin in these communities. For poor people in a depressed community, the two biggest worries are "payin' the bills" and "makin' sure we can git a doctor if we need one for the baby." Often it is public assistance programs that can alleviate those worries.

Elites tend to group all welfare recipients into the "generations of welfare dependence," those families "that just don't care to work." But federal welfare programs also directly

benefit the elites in these communities in several ways. First, in a general sense, the programs subsidize rural industries and employers that depend either on low wages or seasonal labor. Wages can be too low to live on, hours too few to count on, and jobs can expand and contract with the volatile movement of markets far from these communities. But workers can stay and survive and be available when employers need them because food stamps, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), medicaid, and unemployment benefits carry them, making up for lack of benefits, low wages, or providing a base during seasonal layoffs.

Secondly, as Robert Coles' informants pointed out in the 1960s, welfare benefits represent another source of political, economic, and social power and control for local elites. In fact, public programs that offer special opportunities are often doled out to supporters, just like jobs. Families who are known to "deliver" certain hollers or families for the politicians, are rewarded when their children get federally funded summer job opportunities, the special training a new program offers, a special scholarship, or a position managing a new federal program. Just as families who voted right will get their roads graveled, those who play the right side will get that valuable public housing slot or free "meals on wheels" -- whether or not they technically qualify for the programs -- while officials look the other way. When resources are so scarce, the small benefits that come from public programs represent real wealth, to be manipulated and dispensed to political supporters.

These ways of allocating jobs and public program benefits give the community and the lives of the people living in it a disorganized, unpredictable character. The powerful, and those who do their bidding, have extraordinary and arbitrary control over the lives of those who need work and need public assistance. Poor people live precarious, violent, and unstable lives, vulnerable not only to economic vicissitudes, but also to the power of elites who keep them in their place.

### **Precarious Lives**

The poor in Appalachia live on the edge, unsettled, tossed from one day to the next, from one disaster to another. The lack of work and anxiety about money and bill-paying, combined with the general disrespect accorded those who are poor, means that people feel powerless in their everyday lives. Their lack of control over their lives produces tension and instability in relationships. Personal lives are stormy, mirroring the soap operas that men and women watch on TV day after day -- jealousies, shootings, men and women "going out on each other."

Women are most vulnerable. One young woman described a situation we heard from many women:

Whenever he's laid off from work and it's sorta hard , you don't know if you gonna meet your bills from one month to the next. And my little girl wantin' things I can't afford at the time, you know. It just makes me feel real bad, you



know...If we had, you know, if he had a good job, you know, and I had a good job, I guess he would, you know, be a lot better to me then, than he would be now. "Cause now it's so hard, you know, trying to get by. It's real hard...it's so hard now, it makes you really disappointed.

Violent relationships, and the possessiveness men feel over women, came up over and over again:

He was real jealous. He shot at me...Men down here, they just use a woman. He can be good to me, but then again, he can be so mean. It's just, I don't know...He don't want me to go out...he don't want me to dress nice... Men back here, they like to live on a woman. I just wished I could be a man for a day.

Women avoid new relationships long after they split up with a husband or old boyfriend, fearful of renewed abuse. One young mother explained:

You get divorced, but they still won't let you live in peace...they still want to bother you or something. That's the reason I don't see nobody else -- when I tried it he hollered and threatened me, and I'm scared of him...skiddish.

But the violence is not just between men and women. Often we encountered young men who had been beaten by their fathers when they were little, whose refrain was "I depend on myself really. I'm independent. I don't need nobody." A number of young men described how they were kicked out of the house for

protecting their mothers from their fathers or their step-fathers' physical assaults.

This violence and uncertainty in individual lives spills over into neighborhoods and community life. Personal disagreements and battles over lovers or children or property spill into others' lives. Family members watch out for one another in both places, and bars and clubs frequently erupt in fights. Time and time again we encountered people who had lost close friends or relatives to a fight or a showdown between two or more young men.

In this atmosphere of violence and "settling of scores", young people cannot count on the public sector for fair and impartial protection. Both the members of the "upper class" and the poor describe corrupt and unpredictable police forces and systems of law. Police tend to be those rewarded for political support, and they are perceived as either incompetent or themselves involved in illegal behavior. One small business owner said:

I reckon we got a police chief can't read or write or hold a gun, not even allowed to shoot a gun. That oughta change... Poor people do not trust the law to protect them, and uncertainty about how they might be treated in an encounter with the law is one more tension in their lives. A young man described how his father had gotten on the wrong side of a local official, and as a result that policeman pulled this teenager into jail on a trumped up charge. These stories come up over and over, indicating law

enforcement is widely perceived to be unfair. The authorities in poor Appalachian communities are part of the overall system in which control is concentrated and rewards and punishments are dispensed arbitrarily. As one young man put it:

There's just no law here, it's not like any place in the world. It's just, a few people run things the way they see fit. I mean, if somebody commits a crime and they know him, or is a cousin's brother or somebody's sister or such crap like that, then he's free. But you can't say nothing, you can't do nothing.

The everyday lives of the poor in depressed Appalachian communities of Appalachia are filled with uncertainty and vulnerability. They have little control over their economic situation in a world of favoritism and patronage. Economic uncertainty creates tension in personal relationships, and lives are violent. Living poor in a poor community is to be trapped, denied access to work, denied access to good educational opportunities, denied the chance to fulfill the American dream and "make something of yourself."

### **Concentrated Poverty in Urban and Rural Communities**

#### Social Isolation in the Inner Cities

Urban poverty scholars have been focussing increasing attention on the way poor people are trapped in inner city poverty areas, and many of the dynamics are similar to those in

poor Appalachian communities. Deepening poverty in the inner cities during the 1970s and 1980s re-ignited concern about concentrated poverty and stimulated debates about whether there an urban underclass has developed (e.g. Kornblum 1984; Wilson 1987; Sawhill 1988; Harris and Wilkins 1988; Wilson 1989). Wilson (1987) and Kasarda (1989) argued that the changing job opportunity structure of the 1980s effectively denied inner city residents access to employment.

But, in addition, there has been growing attention to the cultural and social consequences of living in poor communities (Wilson 1990). Several studies in Wilson's special Annals (1989) volume on the ghetto underclass pursue this theme. For example, Wacquant and Wilson (1989) discuss "the high cost of living in the ghetto," showing how traditional avenues for social mobility are undermined in areas of concentrated poverty. Extreme poverty areas, by definition, have proportionately more very poor households -- people who are either jobless and welfare-dependent or in very low wage or part-time jobs -- and proportionately fewer working and middle class households. The result is social isolation for the very poor, and the absence of what Wilson calls "social buffers," or those social mechanisms that both soften the effect of individuals' poverty and facilitate escape from it. In a discussion of mobility among mother-only families, McClanahan and Garfinkel (1989) consider the impact of social isolation:

...social isolation may occur because the community no longer functions as a resource base for its members, as when

a neighborhood has no jobs, no networks for helping to locate jobs, poor schools, and a youth culture that is subject to minimal control (99).

The studies in The Ghetto Underclass: Social Science Perspectives (1989) emphasize how joblessness and concentrated poverty create a social context in which the expected avenues to escape poverty, the expected social supports for the poor that can facilitate mobility, do not exist. Clearly, a similar dynamic occurs in poor Appalachian communities, but here potential community resources, possible "social buffers" to help the poor escape their poverty, are coopted by a corrupt community power structure that effectively maintains a rigid stratification system to benefit elites.

#### Vulnerability in Remote Rural Communities

Despite the widely-accepted stereotype of coal-field residents as lazy and contentedly welfare-dependent, we found that young Appalachians value work and independence and do all they can to achieve it. Their hope for the next five or ten years is to have a good job, be married, be independent:

Well, hopefully, I'll have a pretty good job and I'd say, the time I'm thirty, I'll be married and hopefully living somewhere on my own. I can't picture myself on -- what did you call it? public assistance? I would prefer to make my own money and not draw food stamps and stuff like 'at. I want to live off myself.

When everything necessary for a good life is scarce -- jobs, housing, clothing, transportation -- individual anxiety eats away at civic generosity and a tension infuses the community. Even the kind of activities that represent civic commitment in other places, like food pantries and second hand clothing outlets are corrupt -- people who are with the right crowd reportedly "get the best things" and "you have to pay to get that food." Families look out for their own relatives and friends. Elites vie with one another for position and prestige, and keep their own lives separate and private. There is little civic activity, few community improvements or charitable functions. The community is sharply divided and the poor are left on their own, isolated in a world of tension, failure, and dependency.

It is harder to be poor and harder to escape poverty in depressed communities. As Wilson (1987) and Williams and Kornblum (1985) have pointed out, poor youth in poor places have few role models, few public institutions that can buffer the lack of jobs and opportunities. They are isolated from the mainstream, and their families do not have the resources to help them do well in school or find a job. These are the young people for whom public programs are the only mechanism of escape. Where youth from middle and upper income families depend on their own families for support, young people from poor families rely on special education programs, youth recreation programs, and federal job training and job placement programs.

The rural poor in the Appalachian mountains live in

concentrated poverty, much like those in the nation's troubled inner cities. But they do not have access to public programs and institutions like schools, parks, youth recreation programs, local transportation and child care programs that help the poor in more diverse communities. In the poor coal communities of Appalachia, these programs are part of a corrupt patronage system, and the poor have been assigned permanent places at the bottom of the social structure. The rigid stratification system, a small world of haves and have-nots, means there is no public sector investment that buffers the inequalities and offers opportunities for those who want to work hard and escape poverty.

This outcome appears to confirm findings of urban researchers that suggest those poor who can escape poor places are more likely to escape poverty themselves. Studies show that poor young people who move from the depressed inner city neighborhoods to communities with more workers and better schools do better in school and work (Rosenbaum and Popkin 1989; Wilson 1990; Osterman 1990). Expectations, like class boundaries, are less rigid, and those from poor families can improve themselves. In poor rural communities this is not the case, and the poor only move up by moving out.

In past decades you could move out and hope for a job in a steel or auto plant, and become a member of the blue collar middle class. Briefly, during the 1970s, when high energy and farm prices stimulated employment growth in rural areas, you could stay home and make a life. But now there are no "good

jobs" for the unskilled and barely literate from poor schools and poor communities. They stay home, piecing together incomes from "odd jobs", part-time work, illicit activities, and whatever welfare benefits they can qualify for. As economic conditions deteriorate, communities and schools become more violent and the social context itself deteriorates.

These are not hardened criminals or desperate crack addicts. The best times in their lives were "when I had that job, and didn't owe anybody. I was makin' my own." The people they admire are their aunts, uncles, mothers and fathers who "made it, you know, worked hard, even when it was so rough." They buy the American dream: they sit on the falling down porch of house with no plumbing for which they pay \$80 a month rent -- and they say their dreams are to own their own place, have a wife or husband, and two kids, and, most importantly, a good steady job. They work as many hours as they can get at the fast food restaurant, rebuild a car they bought for \$75, and hope no one gets sick.

Most blame themselves for not escaping, even when their biographies are full of obstacles and little injustices. "Oh I messed up, they'll say -- I should have...finished school, not gotten pregnant (although their children are also the best parts of their lives now)..." They are living on the margin, struggling, "messing up," moving from place to place to find work, a steady family life, a new start, then returning home for the protection and familiarity of family members in a place they know. These poor young men and women are trapped by mistakes



they made as teenagers that prevented them from finishing school or learning skills, by being born to poor families in depressed communities where there is too little work and one does not escape one's poor background. They are only in their twenties, and they want a better life for themselves and their children. They want steady work, not welfare.

Poor people in Appalachia work hard under trying conditions to get jobs, finish their education, acquire training, and improve their lives. But in chronically poor Appalachian communities they not only struggle to overcome the disadvantages of their family's poverty, but also must overcome a debilitating corrupt social system that makes jobs, education, and training part of a patronage system that perpetuates the status quo. A rigid two-class system, in which elites have control over work and public programs perpetuates poverty in depressed, remote communities.

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QUES: How old are you?

ANSW: 34.

QUES: Have you grown up in O your whole life?

ANSW: Yes. I left when I was 16 and I was gone for about a year. I lives in Chicago and I came back.

QUES: Who did you live with in Chicago?

ANSW: My husband.

QUES: How old were you when you got married then?

ANSW: 16.

QUES: And did you have a baby then too?

ANSW: Yes.

QUES: So how old were you when you had your first baby?

ANSW: 17.

QUES: How far did you go in school?

ANSW: 8th grade.

QUES: And what did you do when you got out of school?

ANSW: Nothing really cause after I got out I got married. Let see it was in '70 I got out of school. I got out of school because I missed so many days from school. My mama was sick, sickly then and I was the oldest girl at home so she kept me at home when she was sick and I was going to school too. So they had so many days you could be out of school or they kick you out and they put me out of school. They told me I had to quit coming. But I didn't want to stop coming. I wanted to go to school. I really wanted to go to school but they told me I couldn't come.

QUES: Who told you?

ANSW: The \_\_\_\_\_ of the school.

QUES: What school was that?

ANSW: Junior High School.

QUES: Here?

ANSW: Yeah.

QUES: Was it R.?

ANSW: Yeah, you know then R. didn't go no further than the 7th and the next year you had to go to the other school for junior high and you came back to R. for high school.

QUES: You were in the 8th grade when you dropped out to take care of your mother. What was the matter with your mother?

ANSW: She was just sickly. Back then they did their own farming you know they did their own farming and chopped their own cotton and we had to help do this.

QUES: And your father also was at home and he worked on the farm?

ANSW: Yes.

QUES: Did they own the farm or did they rent the land from someone?

ANSW: Rented the land. My mama was sick a lot. Then she was having children, 13 kids, me being the oldest I had to be home with the kids while she took work. She took chop ties, [118] what else.

QUES: So it was both that she was sick and that they needed you to take care of the other kids.

ANSW: Yeah, take care of the other kids so they could work.

QUES: That must have been hard to do when you were a young woman?

ANSW: It was. I believe I did it because they were my parents and I had to do it. But I wanted to go to school.

QUES: I haven't heard of this situation here before -- where a black man farmed for himself. Did he have to give some of the cotton to the landowner? Was it a share cropper kind of thing?

ANSW: Yeah, he was. I think like he farmed the land for him. He kept his mules and everything in the pasture at our house. He plowed the ground and all that, but he was doing it -- he got paid to do this. He was being paid to till that land.

QUES: So it was like a job rather than like he had his own?

ANSW: Yeah. It was not like his own. It wasn't under his own.

He did this for this guy and he also, when it was cotton time, when it was time to gin the cotton, he had to go work at the gin. So he had to gin cotton too.

QUES: How many years did he do that? His whole working life?

ANSW: Oh yes. When he died, he died at 80. When he died, he was working then at the chimney. But you know they come to just change things, the guy who was doing it for his \_\_\_\_\_, his name was H. Well he died and this other guy took it up and went on and on and like that. So he was still working in that family when he died.

QUES: And what about his father where did he work?

ANSW: My daddy's father. My daddy's father was dead. He died when I was about 14-15.

QUES: Had he worked on a farm too though?

ANSW: Yes he did.

QUES: Had he worked on the same farm place you guys were on?

ANSW: No, he didn't. He owned his own land. He worked his own land.

QUES: Your grandfather did?

ANSW: Yeah.

QUES: What happened to that land, do you know?

ANSW: Most of the land is in St. Louis and we pay taxes on it. We keep the taxes up on the land and everything and most of his children stayed around O or Chicago and didn't none want to go to St. Louis. He got one daughter staying there with her family. So we own the land just \_\_\_\_\_ to the children cause it was out grandfather's, our father's father. Nobody wants to stay on that there thing so my aunt out there, she rents it out.

QUES: But it's farmland?

ANSW: It's farmland.

QUES: When you say "we" -- who's we who helps with the taxes?

ANSW: My mother, my aunties, my cousins, all my daddy's children when he died he left it to us. We get a deed and a trustee every other year or so letting us know what acre, what part and all his sisters, my aunties and uncles it falls to them and when they die it falls to the kids. They don't never get rid of it. They won't sell the land. They don't want nobody to move up there. I know I

got one aunt up there and she don't even want to stay up there.

QUES: So it's there but it's not much of a help. What was the house like that you grew up in?

ANSW: The house I grew up in. There were two bedrooms a kitchen, a big porch and the rooms were drafty. It was cold, and in the summertime it was hot. It weren't but two rooms. All of us stayed in one room.

QUES: Thirteen of you?

ANSW: Yup. All 13. We had but one room but we had two beds, big beds. All the boys slept in one bed and the girls slept in the other bed. And the other room was my mama's room and the living room. They slept in that room.

QUES: Your mom and dad slept in the front room then?

ANSW: And they had a bed in there and she had a couch.

QUES: How was it heated, by wood?

ANSW: Wood heat.

QUES: And outside water?

ANSW: We had a pump and that hot water that was something. But it was fun. [301] We went outside pumped the water bring it in the house.

QUES: What are all those brothers and sisters doing today?

ANSW: Two brothers, they in with OP, one of them my oldest brother work there, he's a mechanic and he DJ on weekends at the taverns and my other brother, he working in a grocery store and he going to school for some kind of diploma. He wants to go in the air force when he finish up cause he didn't finish school before he left here. He had to go back to school.

QUES: How old is he?

ANSW: He 21. He finish up and then he wanted to go to the army and make a career. He ain't got that down yet. And one of my brothers, the oldest one, we don't know where he at. We haven't known where he is at since '75. We don't know if he's dead or alive. We don't know where he's at. He don't call home. He never came home. He never wrote. We don't know what he is. I got one in MT. He fix what do you call it when you fix cars and paint them and all that. And the rest of them mostly around here are farmers.

QUES: Farmers?

ANSW: Yup. Farming, work on farms. I got two that work on parks and flowers, one works for BM farms.

QUES: Do they live out on those farms?

ANSW: No. One of them stay out there. He got an FHA home and he stay out here. Both of them stay out here; have FHA homes. And the other one is about reaching 12. He's just rowdy. And I have one at home, my baby brother is still at home with my mama.

QUES: Does your mom work right now?

ANSW: No. Her health prevent her from working.

QUES: What is her health problem?

ANSW: She has sugar, sugar diabetes. It put her in a coma or something like that so she stopped working.

QUES: What did she used to work at?

ANSW: She used to do maid work, you know, clean up houses.

QUES: For lots of different people?

ANSW: Oh yeah, for lots and lots and lots of people, like you know they have a camp over here called K.; she worked over there. She clean out on the camp, the camps over there she clean out all of them.

QUES: Did she have a car to get over there or did she go with someone?

ANSW: She had a car and she drove over there. Sometime we would take her.

QUES: How old is she?

ANSW: 62.

QUES: You're the oldest?

ANSW: Yeah. I'm the oldest girl, the boy older than me. My brother he 48 now I think.

QUES: Then she had one and then she stopped for a long time?

ANSW: Yeah. Then she got us all like \_\_\_ steps, one every year.

QUES: Tell me what happened after you left school?

ANSW: I got married.

QUES: Right away?

ANSW: No, not right away, but not too long after that. But I got married and I left here.

QUES: Tell me about the guy that you married. How did you meet him and what was he like?

ANSW: He was 22.

QUES: And you were 16.

ANSW: He just, I think it was through a friend or something, another person and he started coming to visit and we started going up, we started dating and he told me that if I didn't marry I would never leave home when I married. So I picked this date, married and left home. I didn't love him, didn't know anything about what love was to tell the truth. Love and all that stuff. I just married to get away from home cause he said I would never leave if I didn't get married. I got married and left and we went to Chicago. We stayed together a month after we were married. I was pregnant and we were separated before the baby was born.

QUES: Why?

ANSW: I left him cause he was like terrible, awful. He started beating me and stuff like that. Wanted to kill me. It was awful.

QUES: Had you seen that side of him before you left?

ANSW: No, sure didn't. He put a knife on my neck. Said he was going to cut my throat. Scar here buried down in my neck,. He told me he was going to cut my throat and I said I didn't care cause I wanted to go home by then.

QUES: When he used the knife with you I imagine you wanted to go home, is that what you were fighting about or was it something else? Was he a jealous man or a drinker or all of those things?

ANSW: He was on drugs. He smoked dope and heaven knows what else he was doing but I didn't know these things. He kept that part hid from me until we was married. And then when I got up there he sure enough started, strung out on it and he strung out it now but I left, I just left and then be there in the city. I had just imagined what it's like. You never been anywhere. Stayed in the country. Hardly ever come to town, come to town every other Saturday when I used to take turns. I go one Saturday and my sister go the next Saturday. My brother go the next Saturday like that that's the way we went to town and hadn't never come out the country; stayed in the country and all of a sudden I end up in a big city with tall buildings. I'd never seen a tall building in my life. I was like looking up and, what is this? It was strange; it

was exciting and I like it. But me being up there my talk was still funny. I was talking like. Like when I go to the store I would ask for light bread and they would go light bread, what is that? And I would say light bread, light bread, cause that's what we called it in the country. But of course up there they called it white bread. And I would say light bread and they said we don't know what you are talking about miss. I would say I want some light bread and I would walk over and showed it to them and he said, oh that's white bread. I said, what white bread. I ain't heard of it and he said I ain't never heard of light bread. You ain't from here and I said no. So talking like [523]. Where are you all from; you're from the country. You country and I said there they go here. there they go here. It was an experience for me and then he mistreated me up there and I ran off; I was lost in big old Chicago. Didn't know where I was. I ran off and said I'm getting away from him.

QUES: This is right after he cut you or later?

ANSW: Right after he cut me. He cut me and then he put a gun to my head. And when he put the gun to my head I was saying oh Lord don't let him kill me; I'm getting away from here. And he cocked the gun and put it on my forehead. And he told me I kill you, I blow your brains out. I said I don't care. Blow my brains out. I mean I was tired of it. I didn't care if I died. I said shoot me, blow my brains out I don't care, anything as long as I'm away from you. And he said you don't believe I'd kill you. He'd get back on the trucker and his cousin came and in and took the gun and shot it out the window. And he was telling him, she don't believe I'd kill her. I said I don't care. He was crazy and I was crazy too. He went in the bathroom and that's how I got away from him, he went in the bathroom. He had some dope and he was like sniffing it, licking it and I went down past the door and the door was kinda cracked and he was sitting down. He had some dope and he was like sniffing it, licking it and I had never been taught about dope, marijuana or crack or all that stuff and I didn't know much about stuff like that and I was looking and I was saying what is he doing and I came by and I asked his cousin cause we were living with his cousin up there and I asked him, what is he doing? And he said he's smoking some dope. I said smoking some dope. I didn't understand all that stuff; then I started seeing he was acting so crazy, and I said I'm getting out of here and I grabbed my coat and I just ran. I went down on the corner. We stayed on the 14th floor and I went down on the corner and I called the police and I told them that he was jumping on me that I wanted to get away from there and that I wasn't going to stay there. And if they didn't take me some place I would just walk the streets until I found somewhere to stay cause I wasn't going back. But they picked me up and they asked my if I knew anybody else in there. Of course I had a few aunts there and a couple of uncles but i didn't know nothing about it. I didn't know they was up there. And I didn't know nobody then but his aunt so I told them where his aunt



stayed and they took me over to his aunt's house. And of course he come over there talked me into coming back. I went back and he did the same thing again and I ran again. I wouldn't go to his aunt's house. I just walked. I walked all night. I was afraid. I walked. I just walked. I didn't have no where to go. I rode the bus. I bought a ticket, you know transfers. I didn't know much about that but I just got a transfer and rode, rode, rode, till the transfer was out. And then I even tried to ride off of it when it was out. I got up on the bus and then the guy he said you going to have to buy the ticket. Well I said I ain't have no money I have 20 cents which wasn't enough to buy one so I walked back off the bus. I never will forget. I had two thin dimes. I walked back off that bus and I walked, kept those two things and I walked. I sat in a bus depot all night. I just sat there until about 4 o'clock in the morning and this guy came up and said miss are you waiting on a bus? I said, yes. Of course I knowed I wasn't waiting on no bus I didn't have nowhere to go. And he said, the buses ain't running tonight and I said, well I'll just sit here then. And he said you can come round to my house. And I said I'll stay right there and you could catch a bus in the morning. Me and my wife's there. And I said ok. I wasn't scared of nothing. It didn't bother me. It didn't dawn on me I should have been scared you know walking at night in Chicago, walking all night it didn't dawn on me I should have been scared that somebody could have did something to me. I never even thought about it. Really I had gotten to the point where I really didn't care. So I went around to this guy's house and his wife gave me a run in their house and I slept there that night. They fed me and everything and they talked to me the next morning when we was having breakfast and he was saying why you out here. You ain't got nowhere to stay and you walking what are you going to if you wanted to take me to the police station and probably they could do something for me or find a way to get me home but I was going like no, no, no they are going to arrest me. I'm scared. I'm in the big city don't know nobody and I'm scared. I told them I had some people in Chicago and that I was going over to their house. Didn't know nobody. Just dog ignorant. Just didn't know. And I said well I'm going to catch the bus and he said you got some money? I said yeah, I got 20 cents and he said I'm going to give you the money to get your ticket and when you get on the bus tell the bus driver where you are going and he'll let you off at the stop that you want to. I got on that bus. I ain't that man nothing. I rode that bus until that bus got to its last stop, got off that bus and got on another one and did that all day until I got tired. I was tired. I was hungry. And I went over to this shop place, this service station and I called the operator and I told operator I was lost and said will you call the police. And she said where are you at and I said I don't know. She said you don't know where you at? Look around you should see some street signs. I looked around and I didn't see for nothing. And this guy at the service station he ran over there and he said, are you lost and I said yes I am and he told them. Then he told me to come over here and set in the service station

till they get here. And I went over there; he was eating some peanuts or something and he said you want some and I said no, and he said are you hungry and I said nope. He could throw [689]. I was so hungry. He said you don't have to eat these. I have [690] do you want some? I said no thank you. I don't know why I didn't want to be indebted to him or what it was but I didn't eat nothing but I was hungry. The police came and got me and asked me do you know where you at? I said no sir. He said where you come from where you living at up here. I said over on the West Side, West 14th Street. He said how did you get way out here? I said walking and riding the bus. Do you know where you at? I said nope. He said I was over in Illinois. He said you at 66th and South \_\_\_\_\_. He said you almost out of Chicago. I said huh. He said you almost out of Chicago. Well I sure knew I was. Then I had to give him all the information why how I get out there, what happened and all like that and they told me I'd end up going right back to his aunt's cause I didn't know nobody else and I didn't want to go back over there. And \_\_\_ to the place and he told me to come down to the police department the next day and fill out a complaint against him and they'll pick him up. Of course I didn't do that either. I just wanted to get away from there. Didn't matter what he did. But I didn't do it.

QUES: Wasn't this aunty a help. Didn't she try and help you get away?

ANSW: She did. She would talk to him and tell him to leave me alone\_\_\_\_\_ he didn't listen to her. During the time I called back over I called it a good time. My mother had wrote me and his cousin told me I had a letter over there and I had to pick it up and that of course I went over there when he wasn't there in the day time. He was working and I went and got my letter and she was telling me about I had an aunty and gave me number on the letter and everything so I could call on her so I called her and they came and got me. \_\_\_\_\_came and got me. I was going to try to back to O. I got back home and I did they brought me back home. But they waited until after the baby was born, and then I came back. When I came back he had beaten me here. Telling my parents that my stupid wife don't understand and all that. We had one fight and she left. I said I ain't coming back either. No no way.

QUES: So then what happened?

ANSW: I stayed with my mother and them and I got a job.

QUES: What was your job?

ANSW: I worked at this place called AE. I was a sewer making pillowcases, sewing zippers and making mattress covers.

QUES: Was it hard to get that job?

ANSW: No cause it was something like a government job, you know it was easy, real easy. All you had to do was a test. You didn't have to fill out applications. We just had to go in answer a couple of arithmetic like how much is 2 and 2, 4 and 4 like that -- easy ones. Then you had to put the square blocks in the one that looked like and then I got the job. And they train us to sew.

QUES: You mean it was run by the government or the government provided the workers?

ANSW: The government provided the workers.

QUES: That place still isn't around here I guess?

ANSW: No. It's been out of business a long time. After they train you they'll send you to the factory like where I'm working now. But they didn't send me down there because I quit before the end. They were planning \_\_\_ twice a week and I would be making \$22 a week; I mean every two weeks they pay you once every two weeks and I made \$22.00 sometimes \$44.00, \$50.00 and one time I cheated and I made \$70.00 some. When I cheated I ate the labels. You got to sew labels to things and they counted them by the labels. That's how we made the money. And some of the girls put me onto how to make a little more money. Yeah I get off every two weeks and I don't make but \$22.00. Yeah I chewed them labels up and swallowed them. I made like \$70.00 but I stopped.

QUES: What year was it that you were working there, would you say?

ANSW: I don't remember what year it was. It was about the '74, '75 around then.

QUES: So you were staying with your mom and dad and they were helping with the baby? Who took care of the baby?

ANSW: My mom. I got on welfare so that helped take care of the baby but my mama was getting it and I just get got a job and they were paying \$60.00 for one child and I just went to work.

QUES: \$60.00 a month. Did you get food stamps then too or not?

ANSW: They put me on but they put me on with my mother.

QUES: Was she already getting welfare before?

ANSW: She was getting welfare and food stamps.

QUES: How did she do that even though she was married. Was she married?

ANSW: She was married and he was working but I guess it, I don't know. I don't know how they did it. You had to make so much and

he wasn't making nothing so they just helped out.

QUES: You don't have any sense that the Boss Man told the Welfare Department to give your mother welfare because your father worked for him or anything?

ANSW: No. Nope. I never thought about that. I never heard of it.

QUES: So you worked there for how long at the sewing factory?

ANSW: Like about 3 months.

QUES: Then what did you do?

ANSW: Then I quit. Then I started going with my kids' daddy and we got together and we got a house and everything and then I had \_\_\_ and \_\_\_ by him.

QUES: Did you guys get married?

ANSW: No. I never divorced my first husband. I'm still not divorced from him. I had once when we was going to get married and I had went to get my divorce through HN, and by the time they got the divorce ready and everything and it went to court I found out how, he was really just, he wasn't treating me right either so I said no need of me getting divorce from one low down person, so I never went to court to get it.

QUES: When you met the father of the rest of your children, he's that father of your second two children, what was he doing for work?

ANSW: He was a plumber, working for E.

QUES: Here in O?

ANSW: Yes.

QUES: And you guys got a house where?

ANSW: In the old subdivision.

QUES: And did you work then?

ANSW: No.

QUES: You stayed home with the kids and you still got welfare I guess?

ANSW: No. My mother was getting, my kids, my two oldest kids stayed with my mother when me and him got together. They wouldn't

let me take my kids, my two oldest kids.

QUES: Your mother wouldn't or the welfare department?

ANSW: My mother wouldn't. I could have took then but she didn't want me to, so I didn't. And I wasn't staying far from her. I could still see them and everything, do for them so they stayed.

QUES: She lived in old sub too or just down the road?

ANSW: No. She stayed like back out in the country. She stayed about four miles from me.

QUES: So how long were you guys together before he started being rough on you?

ANSW: About a year.

QUES: And during that time he was good to you?

ANSW: Yup. He was smart, he was smart. But after I start catching on as time went one cause he would , a lot of time he would tell he probably was jealous he wasn't jealous. I don't believe you could be jealous and not do the things he was doing. I just don't believe it. I just think he wanted to hide me back where I couldn't see anything cause then he moved us to the country. Even closer to my mother then I was like two blocks from her and I had a car and he had a truck and he would, when he leave home he would take the silver wires off the car. He'd go outside and do something to the telephone where I couldn't call nobody and nobody could call me. I couldn't go anywhere and he would leave and stay gone, leave in the evening at 5:00 and come back at about 3:00 or 4:00 a.m. in the morning. But the next day or whatever, the day after, he'd say come in.

QUES: What was he doing all that time, being with another woman, or going to bars or both?

ANSW: Being with another woman.

QUES: But keeping you tied up?

ANSW: Tied at home. Only time I come out was to do grocery shopping and taking care of bills.

QUES: What did you do all day at home?

ANSW: Cook, clean up, take care of the kids, come outside. I use to like a lot cleaning the yard, making the yard look pretty, planting flowers all that kind of stuff. I had a lot of time to do in cause I couldn't go anywhere. We used to walk a lot in the woods and I used to fish a lot in front of the house from the lake.

and stuff like that.

QUES: Did you see your mother every day?

ANSW: Yeah. Cause she would help me and go fishing.

QUES: What happened that you got out of that relationship?

ANSW: I left. I done got tired. I stayed there until I got tired of it. I knew what was going on what was happening but I never said anything I just always said when I get tired of it then I'm going to leave. When I get tired of it. He got a house over in D, MS down there and it was a nice house a gray house a beautiful house something like this one, but when we moved in it had wall-to-wall carpeting; it had hanging chandeliers from the ceiling, it was a gorgeous house it had a kitchen, it had a master bedroom, kitchen and a den the fire \_\_\_\_\_ vault. It was beautiful. The guy that owned the farm down there he lived there but he moved. And he let him rent the house out to him cause he was working for him. It was real nice and I walked off and left it and he bought brand new furniture nice though, brand new washing machine a whole lot of stuff and put in there but see he knew I was going to leave him. He knew I was tired of it. But he went and bought this stuff and he fixed the house, air conditioned and everything. He really fixed it up. Lovely, gorgeous. But I was tired of it. I was tired of the way he was treating me and he couldn't have bought nothing to keep me there.

QUES: Was he beating you then or was he just keeping you trapped.

ANSW: He used to jump on me \_\_\_\_\_ but the last time he jumped on me before we moved and he told me he'd never hit me again made a promise that he'd never hit me again and we'd never fight no more. But I didn't like the way he did the kids either. He used to pick them up throw them down on the couch and set there. Don't you move you set there. You don't have to holler at them like that. You don't have to grab them and throw them on the couch. Is said you ask them to sit down. The kids were already scared of him, you know most kids you know they'll \_\_\_\_\_ their dad before their mom so he was hot at them, tell them sit down pick them up and throw them against the couch. And we were fighting about that. Don't throw my kids on the couch. Don't holler at them. Just tell them what to do and they'll do it cause they were half scared of him. You don't have to holler at them. We fought about that. The last time we didn't fight we argued and I throwed pots and pans. By that time my dad had Cancer and he was in the hospital and the doctor said he wasn't going to live long. He had Cancer on his brain, he had lung cancer and a coma he was going in and out and so I went to see him that day and I went that morning at seven and I got back that night at eight and he came in he was working, he'd worked all day. And he came in a asked me, where's the food at? I just got to the house. I'm fixing to fix something, and oh boy, what did I

say that for. You mean to tell me you been gone all day and you ain't cooked nothing. I said I went to see Daddy. And he said I don't care who you went to see. What did he say that for. I threw pots and pans and said I don't tell you if your mama's sick or something you can't go and see her. I be willing to go and see her and do what I can to help her. My daddy's dying and he don't want me to go. And I threw pots and pans and I went and bought me a brand new ice pick and I said if he ever say anything to me again I'm going to stab him. And I told him I bought an ice pick and here's my ice pick. I told him if you lay a hand on me again I'm going to kill you. And he went and bought nice stuffy and everything trying to get me to stay but I wasn't going to stay. Me and my kids. I had a car. He had gotten him a \_\_\_\_\_. And every time we go into it he always let me know that. Hey, this is my car. This is not yours. You just drive it. It's mine. So I just bolted the keys and me and my kids left walking coming back to O from D. Long ways and I didn't take anything. I told him he could have it all. I don't care. I told him he could have the clothes and I turned around before we got to the road and asked him do you want these children? You have kids too. I didn't care if he took them. I didn't take anything. I'm gone I'm out of here. We were on our way and he said I don't want the kids you can take them with them too and I told my kids come on but if you want them I'm not going to argue with you about them. And I meant it.

QUES: That was three kids you were taking with you?

ANSW: Yes, two girls and a boy.

QUES: And you had two other kids who were home with mom?

ANSW: Yeh, a girl and a boy.

QUES: And were both of them fathered by the man you went to Chicago with?

ANSW: No. \_\_\_\_\_ on my oldest daughter.

QUES: And second one, who was he fathered by?

ANSW: He was by SR, and he's with him now.

QUES: And you guys just went out a few times. Did you ever live together?

ANSW: Me and my oldest son's dad? No we never did live together.

QUES: You got pregnant by him when you were living with your mom?

ANSW: Living with my mom. It was during the time I came back me and my husband separated and I came back to O.

QUES: You never saw it as a long-term relationship; you just happened to get pregnant?

ANSW: Yeah, but he take good care of him. He do a lot for him. He come get him he keep him he have him stay in MT now. He used to live out here. He take real good care of him. He do a lot for him. He come get him and he'll keep him to stay in MT. He used to live out here. You take real care when you buy school clothes and stuff like that.

QUES: And he's still living with him?

ANSW: Yes.

QUES: So you guys get along ok?

ANSW: Oh yes, we do. We help each other, make arrangements for him to take him places to buy stuff for him or get him a job. He got him a job in MT during the summer when school is out. He can buy his own school clothes and stuff.

QUES: So when do you see him?

ANSW: My son, every other weekend.

QUES: Does he bring him down here?

ANSW: Yeah.

QUES: SO you left everything in this fancy gorgeous house and went back to mom?

ANSW: Yeah



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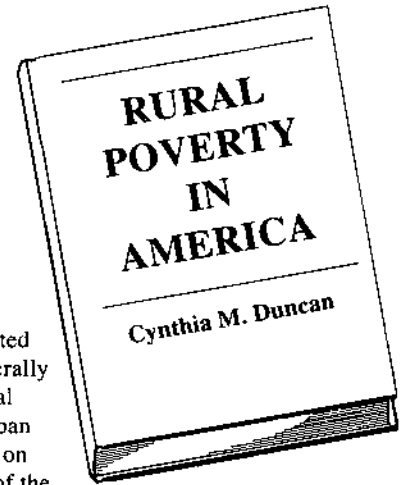
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Foreword by Susan E. Sechler

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**CYNTHIA M. DUNCAN** is assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of New Hampshire. She researches and writes extensively on poverty in rural America, with special interest in Appalachia, the Delta and northern New England.



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