



**Population Reference Bureau**

**Declining Wages of Young Workers in Rural America**

by  
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simple resolution to the problem of metropolitan reclassification." It is virtually impossible to know how the reclassification of counties affects our analysis.

The changes the in the CPS between 1979 and 1987 make comparisons of absolute numbers over this period inappropriate. Consequently we focus on changes and comparisons of percentage distributions and means.

Our analyses are confined to persons 16 to 34 years old who were in the work force in 1979 and 1987, and the corresponding sample sizes were 37,428 persons in 1979 and 36,039 in 1987. The 1979 CPS contained 11,981 cases for rural workers ages 16 to 34 and these were weighted to represent 14.6 million persons. In 1987, there were 8,031 cases representing 11.2 million young rural workers in the CPS.

In addition to analysis of workers by metro status, this research examines changes in the distribution of young rural workers by numerous classifications, including sex, race full-time/part-time status, industrial sector, and location in one of the nation's nine Census geographic divisions. Definitions used in the study conform to standard Census Bureau usage.

There seems to be a growing interest in determining the proper comparison group for the rural population. While many studies compare the characteristics of the nonmetro population to those from metro areas, it should be noted that figures for the metropolitan population sometimes mask important differences between central cities and suburbs. Many of the major trends found in rural areas are also found in central cities, while suburbs appear quite different from either location. When central cities and suburbs are combined, affluent suburbs often hide the poverty of inner-city neighborhoods. Consequently, some analysts contend that comparisons of nonmetro and central city populations are more illuminating than comparisons between nonmetro and metro populations.

In present study we use the entire metro population as the comparison group for the nonmetro population in order to limit the number of comparisons and keep the focus on the rural population. In a future study we plan to compare the changes in the wages of young rural workers to those of similar workers in central cities.

## RESULTS

### *Employment and Unemployment*

While the focus of this study is on the wages of job-holders, it is clear that looking

only at those who have work does not provide a full picture of economic well-being. As we will show in the next section, young rural workers have fallen behind their urban counterparts during the 1980s in terms of wages, but they have also slipped in terms of their ability to obtain employment regardless of the wage rate.

For at least 20 years prior to 1980, the unemployment rate in rural areas was lower than that in urban areas. During the 1980s, however, unemployment rates in rural areas have exceeded those in urban areas. From 1980 to 1988, the nonmetro unemployment rate averaged 8.2 percent, while the metro rate averaged 7.3 percent.

In 1979, the unemployment rate in metro areas was 5.8 percent and the nonmetro rate was 5.7 percent (*U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1987*). In 1987, the unemployment rate was 7.2 percent in nonmetro areas and 6.0 in metro areas. Things have improved somewhat in rural America since 1987, but rural areas still lag behind metro areas. By 1989, the unemployment rates were 5.7 percent in nonmetro areas and 5.2 percent in metro areas.

However, official unemployment data exclude discouraged workers - those who are unemployed but not actively seeking employment because they do not believe job opportunities are available. Also, official unemployment figures do not take into account "involuntary part-time" workers - workers employed in part-time jobs who would prefer full-time positions but cannot find them. Studies (*Lichter and Costanzo, 1987; or Shapiro, 1989*) have documented the fact that the relative numbers of discouraged and involuntary part-time workers are higher in nonmetropolitan areas than in metropolitan areas which contributes to an underestimation of the real extent of unemployment and underemployment in nonmetro areas compared with metro areas.

A study providing unemployment rates adjusted to include discouraged workers and half of the involuntary part-time workers estimated an unemployment rate of 8.0 percent in metro areas and 8.5 percent in nonmetro areas in 1979 (*U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1987*). Similar figures for 1988 are 7.9 percent in metro areas and 10.1 percent in nonmetro areas (*Shapiro, 1989*). While metro underemployment rates declined slightly between 1979 and 1988, nonmetro rates rose by 1.6 percentage points.

Since there is no official definition of unemployment based on the annual number of hours worked by an individual, it was impossible to calculate an annual unemployment rate in 1979 and 1987, using the March CPS files. However, percentages of individuals ages 16 to 34, who were unemployed<sup>3</sup> the week preceding the survey were computed to

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<sup>3</sup>"Unemployed persons are civilians who did not work during the survey week, made specific efforts to find a job in the prior 4 weeks and were available for work during the survey week (except for temporary illness). Persons waiting to be recalled to a job from which they have been laid-off or waiting to report to a new job within 30 days, need to be looking for work to be classified as unemployed" (*Current Population Survey, 1988*).

measure the extent, as well of the change over the period, in unemployment of young workers.

In March 1980, 6.7 percent individuals ages 16 to 34 in metro areas were unemployed in the week preceding the survey compared 7.1 percent in nonmetro areas. In March 1988, 5.8 percent of persons ages 16 to 34 living in metro areas were unemployed compared to 7.8 percent of those living in nonmetro areas. In other words, the unemployment rate for young adults in metro areas decreased between 1979 and 1987 while it increased for young adults in rural areas.

The magnitude of unemployment and underemployment in rural America is important for two reasons. First, it is clear that wage differentials between young urban and rural workers do not tell the whole story about the economic deterioration in rural America. Second, rates of unemployment and underemployment are important because they may well be a factor in the deterioration of wages. The larger share of rural workers who are unemployed or underemployed may have played a role in the deterioration of wages. The large number of unemployed and underemployed people in rural labor markets provided employers with an abundance of potential employees. With a higher labor surplus than their urban counterparts, rural employers had less incentive to raise wages.

## THE DECLINING WAGES OF RURAL WORKERS

Our analysis shows that the 4.7 percent increase in the share of young workers in low-wage jobs noted by the Senate Budget Committee study (*Committee on the Budget, 1988, p. 7*), was largely due to deterioration of wages among young rural workers. Between 1979 and 1987 there was a 4 percentage point increase in the proportion of young workers in urban areas having low-wage jobs, but there was an increase of 11 percentage points for young workers in rural areas of the country (*see Table 1*). Both changes were statistically significant. In 1987, 57 percent of young workers in rural America (6.3 million people) were working in low-wage jobs.

If young rural families<sup>4</sup> had to depend on one worker for their sole economic support, Table 1 indicates that nearly six out of ten (57 percent) would be poor. Even if that worker was a full-time year-round worker, Table 4 shows that about four out of ten (41 percent) would be in poverty.

Having a low-wage job does not necessarily mean that the standard of living of a particular individual is low, because he or she may live with a family where others are

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<sup>4</sup>Assuming an average family size of four.

working. However, the overall increase in the proportion of young low-wage earners in rural areas is striking and has paralleled the increase in rural poverty rates during the 1980s. As the share of young rural workers in low-wage jobs went from 46 percent in 1979 to 57 percent in 1987, the poverty rate in rural areas went from 13.8 percent to 16.9 percent.

The increase in the share of workers in low-wage jobs combined with a decrease in middle-wage jobs and nearly unchanged share in high-wage jobs experienced by young rural workers in the 1980s is a process labeled “downward wage polarization” by the Senate Budget Committee, because the middle segment is decreasing, resulting in polarization, and most of those formerly in the middle segment moved to the low-wage segment. While the same phenomenon was evident among young urban workers, it was much more pronounced in the rural work force.

In 1979, there was a larger share of young rural workers in middle-wage jobs (53 percent) than in low-wage jobs (46 percent), but by 1987 the reverse was true (*see Table 1*). Nearly all of the loss in the proportion of individuals in the middle-wage category was offset by an expansion of the lower category. While there was an erosion of wages for young workers in urban areas there were still more workers in middle-wage jobs than in low-wage jobs in 1987.

**TABLE 1.** Share of Urban and Rural Workers Ages 16 to 34 in Low-, Middle-, and High-Wage Jobs and Mean Earnings of Young Workers, 1979 and 1987.

	<u>URBAN</u>			<u>RURAL</u>		
	Percent distribution 1979	Percent distribution 1987	Change 1979-87	Percent distribution 1979	Percent distribution 1987	Change 1979-87
Low-wage	37	41	+4	46	57	+11
Middle-wage	62	57	- 5	53	42	- 11
High-wage	2	2	0	1	1	0
<u>MEAN EARNINGS (in 1987 dollars)</u>						
	\$14,103	14,254	+1	\$11,992	10,490	-13

**SOURCE:** The data for 1979 are from the Census Bureau's *Current Population Survey* conducted in March 1980 (with 1980-based weights); the data for 1987 are from the Census Bureau's *Current Population Survey* conducted in March 1988.

*Details may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.*

The wage deterioration of young workers in rural areas is also reflected in their mean earnings. Not only were the wages of young rural workers considerably lower than those in urban areas in 1979 (mean earnings were \$11,992 in 1987 dollars for rural

points while among young rural whites the share of workers in low-wage jobs grew by 10 percentage points over the period. Likewise, the mean earnings for young rural black workers fell by 15 percent compared to 12 percent for young white rural workers.

Examination of wage data of young rural workers by race shows that there is an extremely high concentrations of young black workers in low-wage jobs. Nearly three-quarters (72 percent) of all young black workers in rural America worked at low-wage jobs in 1987; up from 59 percent in 1979. Analysis not shown here indicates that 86 percent of young black workers in rural areas who were employed part time worked for below poverty wages in 1987.

Since most rural blacks are located in the South, the data shown in Table 3 indicate that despite the general prosperity of the South during the 1980s, young rural blacks have been moving backwards. However, Table 6 indicates that generally the rural

**TABLE 3.** Share of Urban and Rural Workers Ages 16 to 34 in Low-Wage Jobs and Mean Earnings of Young Workers in 1979 and 1987 by Race.

	<u>URBAN</u>			<u>RURAL</u>		
	1979	1987	Share of Workers in Low-Wage Jobs Change 1979-87	1979	1987	Change 1979-87
Whites	36	40	+4	45	55	+10
Blacks	44	49	+5	59	72	+13
<b>MEAN EARNINGS (in 1987 dollars)</b>						
Whites	\$14,428	14,665	+2	\$12,224	10,789	-12
Blacks	\$11,723	11,433	- 3	\$ 9,302	7,888	-15

**SOURCE:** The data for 1979 are from the Census Bureau's *Current Population Survey* conducted in March 1980 (with 1980-based weights); the data for 1987 are from the Census Bureau's *Current Population Survey* conducted in March 1988.

areas of the South have not prospered during the 1979 to 1987 period and that most young workers in the South suffered wages deterioration that parallels that of young blacks.



Data in Table 3 also indicates that both young whites and young blacks suffered much less wage deterioration in urban areas. The mean earnings for young blacks fell by 3 percent but the mean earnings for young whites actually grew by 2 percent. The share of workers in low-wage jobs, however, increased from both groups.

***Changes Among Full-Time and Part-Time Employees***

One might be inclined to think that the decline in wages among young rural workers is the result of an increase in the share of workers working just part time. That is not the case. The share of workers in full-time jobs actually increased slightly between 1979 and 1987, but more to the point there was a deterioration of wages for both part-time and full-time workers.

Data in Table 4 indicates that among young rural adults, part-time workers are nearly twice as likely as full-time workers to be in low-wage jobs in 1987. While more than three-quarters (76 percent) of part-time workers were in low-wage jobs, only 41 percent

**TABLE 4. Share of Urban and Rural Workers Ages 16 to 34 in Low-Wage Jobs and Mean Earnings of Young Workers in 1979 and 1987 by Full-time/Part-time Status.**

	<u>URBAN</u>			<u>RURAL</u>		
	1979	1987	Share of Workers in Low-Wage Jobs Change 1979-87	1979	1987	Change 1979-87
Part-Time	59	66	+7	68	76	+8
Full-Time*	19	24	+5	29	41	+12
<b>MEAN EARNINGS (in 1987 dollars)</b>						
Full-Time*	\$22,011	21,352	-3	\$19,088	16,795	-12
Part-Time	\$ 6,829	6,186	-9	\$ 6,098	4,751	-22

**SOURCE:** The data for 1979 are from the Census Bureau's *Current Population Survey* conducted in March 1980 (with 1980-based weights); the data for 1987 are from the Census Bureau's *Current Population Survey* conducted in March 1988.

\*Year Round workers

of full-time workers worked in low-wage jobs. Consequently, if there were a shift from full-time to part-time employment during the period it might account for the decline in wages for young rural workers between 1979 and 1987. Analysis not shown here indi-

cates, however, that 46 percent of young rural workers were full-time workers in 1979 and that figure increased to 48 percent in 1987. Clearly the decline in rural wages is not due to increased proportions of workers in part-time status.

Furthermore, Table 4 indicates that there was wage deterioration for both full-time and part-time workers. The share of young rural workers in low-wage jobs increased by 8 percentage points for part-time workers and 12 percentage points for full-time workers (*see Table 4*). Both changes were statistically significant.

Data in Table 4 also indicates that the real wages of young rural part-time workers decreased by 22 percent between 1979 and 1987, while the decrease for those working full time was 12 percent. Among young full-time workers, the probability of working in a low-wage job was 71 higher for those in rural areas than for those in urban areas.

### *The Impact of Shifting Industry Mix*

Some observers might think that the decline in incomes for young workers in rural areas is the result of shifts in the employment base of rural areas, specifically the shift from manufacturing to service jobs. While the shift from manufacturing to service jobs has exacerbated the trends for young workers in rural areas, the impact of this factor was a relatively minor. The shift from manufacturing to services has not been large and there has been significant wage deterioration in all sectors of the rural economy.

The deterioration of wages for young workers in rural America was felt in every major sector of the economy. In each of the six major sectors shown in Table 5, the share of young workers in low-wage jobs grew between 1979 and 1987.

The share of young rural workers employed in manufacturing has declined over the period, while the service industry attracted an increasing share of workers in rural areas, but the shifts in these two sectors between 1979 and 1987 were relatively small. The share of young rural workers in service jobs went from 28 percent in 1979 to 29 percent in 1987, while the share in manufacturing declined from 25 percent to 22 percent (*see Table 5*).

More than half of the young workers (58 percent) who lived in rural areas in 1987 and who worked in the service industry had low-wage jobs compared with 42 percent of those working in the manufacturing industry (*see Table 5*). These data clearly indicate that the service sector provides lower wages than the manufacturing sector, which means that the shift from manufacturing to services during the early 1980s had a depressing effect on mean earnings.

Not only has the share of young rural workers in the lower-paying service sector grown while the share in the higher-paying manufacturing sector increased, there have been detrimental shifts within each sector. The proportion of young rural workers in service industries who held low-wage jobs increased from 49 percent in 1979 to 58 percent in 1987, while the share of young workers in low-wage jobs in the manufacturing sector went from 31 to 42 percent during the same period (*see Table 5*). Other sectors experienced similar increases in the share of workers in low-wage jobs.

**TABLE 5.** Distribution of Young Rural Workers Across Industries and Change in Share of Workers in Each Industry in Low-Wage Jobs, 1979-1987.

	1979		1987	
	Share of Workers in Industry	Percent in Low-Wage Jobs	Share of Workers in Industry	Percent in Low-Wage Jobs
Extraction	7	61	7	74
Manufacturing	25	31	22	42
Trade	24	61	28	72
Service	28	49	29	58
Government	4	33	4	37
Other	13	33	10	39

**SOURCE:** The data for 1979 are from the Census Bureau's *Current Population Survey* conducted in March 1980 (with 1980-based weights); the data for 1987 are from the Census Bureau's *Current Population Survey* conducted in March 1988.

There was a 4 percentage point increase between 1979 and 1987 in the share of

young rural workers employed in retail and wholesale trade. The large increase in this sector of the economy is significant because 72 percent of young rural workers in that industry were in low-wage jobs in 1987.

Data not presented here indicates that similar deterioration was seen among young urban workers in both the services and manufacturing sectors, but the decline was much less severe.

### ***Changes in Census Geographic Division***

With the exception of New England, young rural workers in all major sections of the country suffered significant wage deterioration between 1979 and 1987 (*see Table 6*). In fact, the decline of wages across rural America is remarkably consistent. There was at least a 10 percentage point increase in the share of young rural workers in low-wage jobs in every area of the country except New England where there was no change at all. The changes in all Census geographic divisions outside of New England were statistically

**TABLE 6.** Change in Share of Urban and Rural Workers Ages 16-34 in Low-Wage Jobs, 1979 and 1987 by Census Division.

	URBAN Share of Workers in Low-Wage Jobs			Change 1979-87	RURAL Share of Workers in Low-Wage Jobs			Change 1979-87
	1979	1987			1979	1987		
New England	40	32	-8		43	43	0	
Middle-Atlantic	35	35	0		42	54	+12	
East North Central	34	43	+9		42	55	+13	
West North Central	36	40	+4		46	57	+11	
South Atlantic	41	43	+2		48	59	+11	
East South Central	42	53	+11		49	59	+10	
West South Central	41	47	+6		50	63	+13	
Mountain	38	43	+5		45	61	+16	
Pacific	41	34	+7		52	41	+11	

SOURCE: The data for 1979 are from the Census Bureau's *Current Population Survey* conducted in March 1980 (with 1980-based weights); the data for 1987 are from the Census Bureau's *Current Population Survey* conducted in March 1988.

significant and they range from a low of 10 percent points in the East South Central states to a high of 16 percentage point in the Mountain states.

The geographic pervasiveness of the wage degeneration for young rural workers is testimony to the faltering economy in most of rural America. Many industries that were the backbone of the rural economy (agriculture, gas, oil, mining and routine manufacturing) deteriorated during the 1980s (*O'Hare, 1988; U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1988*). Consequently, what normally might be a local or regional problem became a national one. Moreover, rural communities are more likely than urban areas to depend upon a single industry for their economic base and therefore are more likely to be affected by an industry specific recession or depression.

## DISCUSSION

Data examined here clearly indicate that the wages of young rural workers declined much more than those of young urban workers between 1979 and 1987. The data also indicate that the decline of wages for young rural workers was pervasive.

It is a mistake to equate the problems of the rural working poor with the farm problems. Indeed, the majority of the rural working poor are not farmers, and the farm crisis has played only a minor role in the deterioration of the rural economy during the 1980s. Analysis presented here which does not include farmers shows that the decline of wages for young rural workers occurred in every major economic sector and in every region of the country outside of New England. Recent problems in the rural areas stem from economic changes that encompass much more than the farm economy.

During the 1960s and 1970s many nonmetro counties competed successfully with metro areas in attracting and creating new jobs, particularly in manufacturing industries. Many people are surprised to learn that more rural workers are employed in manufacturing than in farming. But this new growth was concentrated in routine manufacturing industries such as textiles, apparel or furniture production while more complex manufacturing industries such as those producing chemicals or electrical goods remained concentrated in urban areas. Routine manufacturing industries require less skilled labor for tasks such as garment inspection, repetitive assembly work, or simple machine operation (*McGranahan, 1987*).

The share of metro and nonmetro labor force in manufacturing is nearly the same (17 percent in metro areas compared to 18 percent in nonmetro areas), but the distribution by type of manufacturing is very different. In metro areas about half of the workers in the manufacturing sector work in complex manufacturing industries where the number of jobs is expected to increase, but less than a third of nonmetro workers who are employed in manufacturing work in complex industries. The great majority of manufacturing workers in nonmetro America work in routine manufacturing industries that are expected to decline in the near future.

The deterioration of wages for young adults in America's rural areas appears to be the result of changes within the national and international economic system which have changed the role formerly played by rural workers.

Nonmetro economies are more reliant on unskilled labor, and rural workers must now compete with labor in many Third World countries. Many U.S. firms have moved production facilities to countries such as Mexico, Taiwan, Korea and the

Philippines, where the cost of labor is only a fraction of that in the U.S. This has cost jobs and depressed wages more among nonmetro workers than among those in metro areas. Furthermore, low-skilled workers are more likely to be replaced by mechanization and automation in both manufacturing and jobs in extractive industries.

The changes in rural areas are closely linked to the increase in the extent to which nonmetro economies are controlled by national and international forces. More than ever before, the pressures and constraints shaping work opportunities are out of the control of those living in our rural areas. Even the nonmetro counties that are growing economically and demographically are typically dependent on either tourist dollars or retirement income, which come from outside the local area.

Resource-based industries have historically been the economic foundation of rural areas and agriculture, forestry, fisheries and mining continue to employ a disproportionate share of rural workers. Resource-based industries are increasingly dependent on international relationships that are controlled by the Federal government and multinational corporations. The health of agriculture, mining and timber industries, for example, are heavily reliant on trade agreements, tariffs, and the value of the dollar vis-a-vis other currencies, and decisions regarding these issues are made in Washington and overseas capitals, not in nonmetro counties.

The broad economic changes outlined above are reflected in differential earnings by sex and metro status examined in this study. The emergence of "pink collar" industries, as well as expanding opportunities for professional women, have occurred disproportionately in urban areas, increasing the demand for young female workers. The 12 percent increase in their average pay between 1979 and 1987 reflects this heightened demand.

On the other hand, many of the industries that were the mainstay of rural male employment (for example, farming, mining, timber, and other extractive industries) have been in decline during most of the 1980s. The need for "muscle power," which is the hallmark of many of the traditional employment niches occupied by young rural male workers, has decreased because of increased mechanization and "exporting" jobs to countries with cheap labor. The fall-off in demand for young rural male workers is reflected in a 16 percent decline in the wages for young rural male workers between 1979 and 1987. By 1987, the average wage of young female full-time workers in urban areas was 95 percent that of young full-time male workers in rural areas. In 1979, this figure was 79 percent.

The decrease of wages for young workers documented in this study is clearly related to the rise of poverty among young rural families. O'Hare (1988, p. 8) found that the poverty rate for young rural families (those headed by persons ages 18 to 29) increased from 19 percent in 1979 to 32 percent in 1986. The rise of poverty for young rural families along with the shifting economic fortunes of male and female workers in rural America are likely to have ramifications for marriage and childbearing.

A large body of research has shown that poverty is closely linked to higher rates of divorce and separation, and research has shown that family structure is closely linked to economic roles of men and women. The dramatic decline of male earnings in rural areas is likely to affect fundamental decisions about getting married and having children as well as the structure of family interactions. Some of these topics will be pursued in our next *Working Paper* in this series.





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