

Rural Poverty in the United States

Katie Christie

In the summer of 2007, I spent a month in Zambia, one of the poorest countries in the entire world. I received a grant from the College of Charleston to do research on the accessibility and availability of health care in rural Zambia. I spent 10 days living with the Hianza family in a village called Chanyanya, trying to soak up as much of the culture as I possibly could in such a short span of time. My time in the village had a tremendous impact on my understanding of poverty. What struck me most was not the cramped living quarters, nor the uncertain and unpredictable income derived from farming in an area with unreliable weather conditions, nor even the lack of running water and electricity. What struck me the most was the cycle in which the Zambian people found themselves trapped: when born into poverty in a remote village, the opportunities for quality education and upward mobility are virtually nonexistent. In other words, the structure of certain societies perpetuates poverty. As a result of my experience in Zambia, I came home with a newly acquired but deep-seated curiosity about the cycle of poverty that exists in other countries, especially within my own.

In the preliminary stages of my research, I found many recent articles and studies pertaining to urban poverty in the United States, but relatively few on rural poverty, and I questioned the reason for this shortage of information. I quickly realized that there has been a recent shift in federal policies targeting poverty towards urban areas. As Americans have migrated away from farms and rural areas into densely clustered cities, there has been a general shift of attention away from rural areas. Although rural imagery and the iconography

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of symbols such as the cowboy are still used to fill Americans with sentimentality, we have developed into an urbanized, fully developed capitalist society. It is in the cities where the majority of jobs, people, and perceived problems are, and therefore the majority of attention is paid to cities, because that's where all eyes are focused. This paper will first provide an overview of poverty in the United States, including basic information on both rural and urban poverty, before considering three distinct areas of the United States plagued by persistent rural poverty. These areas are American Indian Reservations, the Mississippi Delta region of the Black Belt, and Appalachia. An analysis will be performed of the specific cultural and historical conditions of each area, with particular emphasis on the shared characteristics of stalled economic development, a history of oppression and poor public policy planning, and out-migration. This paper will also examine the problems that are unique to each area, with the objective of zeroing in on the America that is unseen, generally forgotten, and often neglected: the landscape of the rural poor.

Poverty in the United States: An Overview

The words “poverty” and “poor” carry many connotations and conjure up many different images. In the United States, the words produce images of ghettos, high crime rates, and dense living conditions. This is the largely urban image of poverty, the poverty in America that is “seen.” In cities, the rich and poor often live in close proximity to one another, and the visibility of the urban poor has been responsible for cities being the origin of social theories, investigations, and innovations to study and assist the poor (Mink and O'Connor 738). Rural poverty often slips under the radar of the public eye. Rural areas consist of 80% of the land area in the United States but only 20% of its population. According to Anita Brown-Graham, the perceived divide between urban and rural spaces hides similar forms of poverty (Brown-Graham 231).

In the United States, poverty level is measured by “money income thresholds.” In its definition of money income thresholds, The U.S. Census Bureau includes earnings, unemployment compensation, social security, and child support, but does not include capital gains or noncash benefits, such as Medicaid and food stamps (“How the Census”).

These thresholds vary based on the size and composition of the family unit. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, poverty thresholds are set figures used to determine poverty status, of which there are 48 different categories (“How the Census”). Families are classified as impoverished if their average income is less than the poverty threshold for their particular family type. The U.S. Census Bureau also reports that in 2006, 12.3% of the population, representing 36.5 million people, fell beneath the poverty line. 20% of children currently live in poverty.

Childhood poverty is particularly problematic in rural areas of the United States. Rural children are more likely to be poor if they are living in a single-parent home, to stay poor longer, and to be in a deeper state of poverty than urban children (Moore 44). Rural families are also less likely to get public assistance, have lower education levels, and have higher rates of malnutrition, hunger, and health problems (Moore 44). As part of the cycle of poverty, children born into persistent rural poverty are also more likely to remain in poverty than urban children (Moore 2001). The highest rates of child poverty are in the South, particularly the rural south around the Mississippi Delta Region (Glasmeier 2006).

Closely linked to childhood poverty is the poor quality of rural education. David Monk (2007) documents extensive problems retaining and finding qualified teachers. He also found that the conditions in rural schools show a lower quality of life, problematic working conditions, low student enrollment, and a high level of need from students (Monk 2007). Substandard schools and teachers are a problem for rural areas, where literacy levels are consequently among the country’s lowest (Glasmeier 2006). The South, particularly the Black Belt, has the lowest rates of high school completion. Although the number of adults without a high school education has decreased in the last 30 years, depending on the county, the percentage is still as high as 40% (Glasmeier 57).

The poor state of rural education represents a serious concern because obtaining a quality education in the United States is paramount to having opportunity. As Dennis Orthner argues, “Our public education system is the foundation upon which our nation’s opportunity structure is built” (219). According to Orthner, if America allows schools in certain areas to lag behind, it will risk developing a two-

tiered society in which one tier has high-quality schools and substantial economic opportunities, and the other, composed of the rural and urban poor, will have access to neither (228).

The Rural Poor

This study examines the rural poor in three distinct areas: Indian Reservations, Appalachia, and the Black Belt. These areas were chosen because each represents a distinct example of persistent rural poverty. In fact, each conforms to the designation of “high poverty,” which the USDA Economic Research Center applies to non-metro counties with a poverty rate of over 20 percent (“Rural Income”). It should be noted that the data for this survey was obtained from 2000, so the figures may not be entirely accurate. By examining the 2006 American Community Survey, I was able to confirm that many of the poverty rates from the 2000 Survey have not changed in the poor rural areas; however, as this survey lacked specific information on small counties, a great deal of information was excluded. Using the USDA’s survey, a total of 444 non-metro counties were found to have high poverty.

The United States Department of Agriculture produced a report in 2008 entitled, “Defining the ‘Rural’ in Rural America.” According to the USDA’s estimates, some two dozen definitions are used by federal agencies to delineate the term “rural” (“Defining ‘Rural’”). The USDA’s report asserts that rural definitions may be based on a number of different parameters, including land-use, geographic isolation, population size, and the social well-being of the population being examined (“Defining ‘Rural’”). Rural areas are typically defined as non-urban, and in order to distinguish between the two areas without creating a dichotomy that ignores a rural-urban continuum, urban definitions are organized into one of three components: land-use, administrative, and economic. Despite the ambiguous nature of the term “rural,” The USDA’s most widely used definition is based on the economic concept, which recognizes rural areas as nonmetropolitan counties on the outskirts of metropolitan boundaries (“Defining ‘Rural’”). The USDA defines metropolitan areas as “core counties with one or more urban areas of 50,000 or more, and outlying counties economically tied to the core counties, as measured by the share of the employed population that commutes to and from core counties”

(“Defining ‘Rural’”). In other words, for the purpose of this paper, “non-metro” refers to rural areas, and “metro” refers to urban and suburban areas. The Rural Poverty Research Center defines persistent poverty as counties with a poverty rate 20% or higher for every census taken between 1970 and 2000. Of the 386 counties classified as being persistently poor, 88% were non-metro (“Persistent Poverty”). Likewise, according the Rural Poverty Research Center, non-metro areas had a significantly higher percentage of counties with persistent poverty, 18% in comparison to metro counties, which had 4% (“Persistent Poverty”). Of the non-metro counties with persistent poverty, the vast majority, over 80%, are in the South.

In order to understand each of the three areas of poverty highlighted in this paper, a general definition of a rural poor community is needed. A rural poor community is one in which disadvantages stem from being born into families with few resources (Mink and O’Connor 641). Monk describes rural communities as being small, sparsely settled, possessing few commercial opportunities, experiencing relative geographic isolation, as well as having an over-reliance on agriculture (156). Each of the three areas of poverty I chose to highlight represents a group of people with distinctive cultural and social practices. The circumstances that gave rise to the high levels of poverty differ among Indian Reservations, Appalachia, and the Mississippi Delta or “Black Belt,” but there are two things that all of these areas have in common: all three areas have a chronic state of high poverty, and the poverty rates can be largely attributed to conditions relating to social and economic factors. These three areas reveal varying geographic, social, cultural, and historic characteristics; the variance provides the opportunity to examine poverty within the context of each area’s unique set of circumstances.

American Indian Reservations

The face of America, and indeed the world, has changed dramatically in recent years in terms of geographic settlement. Approximately 500 years ago, the American landscape looked much different. The European Renaissance was well under way; the discipline of medicine was largely guess-work, and electricity wouldn’t be dreamed up for another two centuries. There were no people

inhabiting America who were of European descent: the area now comprising the United States was at that time inhabited by 5 to 7 million indigenous Americans who had been living on the continent for thousands of years (Mink and O'Connor 2004). Today, the federal government recognizes 562 Native American tribes and reservation land encompasses over 54 million acres in the lower 48 states (Lui et al. 31). The total Native American population in the United States is estimated to be around 4 million, although estimates vary, and roughly 25% of Native Americans live on reservations (Glasmeier 2006). Although Native American land is and has been rich in natural resources, Native Americans have not been able to benefit from the richness of the land, due to a number of federal laws that restrict and control individual and tribal rights.

Among all ethnic groups in the United States, Native Americans have the highest rate of poverty, estimated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to be approximately 28% ("Rural Income"). The USDA's report on rural income identified 40 counties in the United States as having a high Native American population with greater than a 20% prevalence of poverty. These 40 counties identified by the USDA - found in the Southwest, the Northern and Central Plains regions, and Alaska - have a poverty rate of approximately 40% ("Rural Income").

Not only do Native Americans have the highest incidences of poverty, but they also have the greatest percentage of people living in deep poverty. According to the USDA, 20% of people in these counties having incomes that fall below 75% of the poverty line ("Rural Income"). Finally, these counties also show the lowest employment rates and the highest dependency rates compared to other high-poverty counties. It is estimated that the total unemployment rate for Native Americans is close to 42%, while 33% of the employed earn wages that place them below the poverty line (Mink and O'Connor 492). The most current employment information put out by the U.S. Census Bureau found that, for those who are employed, roughly 25% are in professional/management positions; 21% are in service occupations; 24% are in sales and office occupations; 13% are in construction and maintenance occupations, and the remaining 17% are in production, transportation, and material moving occupations ("American Indian").

The current poverty rates among Native Americans can be

attributed almost entirely to their relationship with the federal government. The policies passed by the federal government in the past 200 years governing Native American rights reveal a strong history of oppression. In addition to conducting brutal warfare against Native Americans up through the 19th century, the U.S. government has historically stripped Native Americans of their rights to property, and therefore prevented them from accumulating wealth. The federal government controls and manages Native American land through a series of policies that first began as treaty-making in the 18th century. Lui, et al. divides the history of federal policies geared towards the control of Native American assets into four distinctive time periods, all of which, save the latter, were examined in this paper: the Period of Relocation (1828-1887), the period of Allotment and Assimilation (1887-1934), the Period of Reorganization (1934-1953), and the Period of Termination (1953-1960).

The Period of Relocation was marked by the removal and displacement of Native Americans from their land (Lui et al. 41). Laws such as the Indian Removal Act of 1830 required entire tribes to be relocated to make room for white colonization (Lui et al. 41). The Period of Allotment was meant to integrate Native Americans into white society and encourage them to take on an agricultural lifestyle (Lui et al. 46). Native Americans were allotted tracts of what in most cases was substandard land, but no compensation was offered for the inferiority of the land. In one year alone, the Dawes Act of 1887 resulted in the transfer of approximately 1/7 of Native American land, some 17.5 million acres, to whites (Lui et al. 46). The Dawes Act was also responsible for forcing private property ownership upon tribes, as opposed to collective ownership of land (Lui et al. 46). This had lasting results on Native American poverty. According to Lui et al., “Without a unified land base, tribes have had difficulty creating economies of scale or implementing effective economic strategies” (50).

The Period of Reorganization is marked by the “doctrine of trust responsibility,” whereby the United States government became responsible for managing tribal affairs for Native Americans, under the pretense of it being for their own best interest (Lui et al. 30). The doctrine of trust responsibility was first defined in the 1942 Supreme

Court case *The Seminole Nation v. United States*, but the practice of systematically controlling and managing Native Americans' assets had already been in practice for over 200 years (Lui et al 2006). The doctrine of trust responsibility had and continues to have a tremendous impact on Native Americans by creating policies that promote the external control of assets, which has ultimately led to mismanaged funds and the loss of resources and land. The doctrine of trust responsibility has also negatively impacted Native Americans by promoting legislation which has sought to integrate Native Americans into contemporary American society.

Appalachia

Appalachia represents a unique population of the rural poor, a population almost entirely white. Appalachia includes a mountainous region of the United States, spanning twelve states, from Mississippi to New York, and encompassing 410 counties (Mink and O'Connor 2004). The USDA identified 91 counties in Appalachia as having high poverty, and the majority of these counties are located in the Southern Appalachians, especially in Eastern Kentucky and West Virginia. Individuals living in Appalachia do not share the same history of oppression and racism associated with blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans, but similarities can be observed in the mistreatment and unfair management of workers by coal companies in the 19th and early 20th centuries (Duncan 2001). The high-poverty counties in Appalachia represent a unique set of historical circumstances for poverty in the United States.

The 91 counties in the Southern Appalachians exemplify what is called chronic poverty. The topography of this region is such that farming has historically been very difficult, and the areas have not become centers for urban development. The quality of education is poor, and in the past, the economy has been closely linked to the mining and logging industries. According to the USDA, there is a high prevalence of disability in Appalachia: 31 percent of people between the ages of 21-64 report having a disability ("Rural Income"). This statistic increases the poverty figures by creating a consortium of individuals who are unable to find and retain employment or access education.

Prior to twentieth-century industrialization, Appalachians lived without the outside influence of commerce, using subsistence farming, livestock grazing, and family labor to make ends meet (Mink and O'Connor 95). As industrialization spread to the region, however, mining and timber interests purchased large parcels of land (Mink and O'Connor 2004). According to Mink and O'Connor, the period of coal-mining was marked by violence, resistance, and worker injuries that resulted in a death toll that nearly exceeded all deaths in World War I and World War II combined! Miners experienced extreme discrimination from their employers, the coal companies, who established clear distinctions between management and labor by denying workers control over community institutions such as churches, lodges, and schools (Duncan 62). Employers tried to keep the miners enclosed in a separate social environment and sought to prevent them from organizing unions, establishing churches, and even owning property (Duncan 62).

The coal industry has risen and fallen since the 1920s, due in large part to a shift in technology and a growing trend toward mechanization, leading to the loss of jobs for many Appalachians (Mink and O'Connor 2004). The changes in the coal industry created an unpredictable economy and led to the outward migration of approximately 7 million Appalachians from the 1950s through the 1980s (Mink and O'Connor 96). The combined effects of a shift in industry away from mining, out-migration, and a stalled economy, left many counties in Appalachia in destitution. The 1960s were marked by Lyndon Johnson's "War on Poverty," meant to alleviate Appalachian poverty (Mink and O'Connor 2004). Although poverty rates have decreased since the 60s, unemployment continues to be an issue. Since 1996, there has been a drastic decrease in manufacturing jobs in Appalachia (Glasmeier 2006). It is estimated that some 400,000 manufacturing jobs have been lost in the Appalachian region (Glasmeier 62). A special report by the USDA found that there was a high population loss in many non-metro counties for 2005, including those in Appalachia, and reasons for this were attributed to the outmigration of a large number of youth who were seeking better employment and/or education opportunities in metro areas ("Rural America").

Today, communities in Appalachia are stratified between those

who have much and those who have very little. The stratification can be traced back directly to the legacy of the coal industry, in which employers perceived their workers as inferior, and made it impossible for them to own land or acquire wealth. In her discussion of the class system in modern Appalachia, Cynthia Duncan describes the “haves” as the wealthy who have professional and business-level jobs, send their children to schools in the city, and attend different churches than the “have-nots” (66). The “have-nots” are dependent on public welfare, have low-wage jobs, and are generally mistrustful of anyone outside their immediate kinship network (Duncan 66). The social environment found in coal communities in Appalachia, where people are sharply divided and segregated between the poor and the rich, is not unlike the segregation that can be observed today in the Black Belt, although the Black Belt has a completely different history associated with it.

The Black Belt

The story of African Americans in this country begins with slavery. For several hundred years, African Americans were no more than property. Although this changed after The Civil War, the reversal of opinion about African Americans did not occur over-night; indeed, progress has been painfully slow. As blacks were given plots of land during the Reconstruction era, and many began their new lives as rural farmers, the same set of prejudices that formerly existed remained intact. The Ku Klux Klan and lynchings were common throughout the South well into the 20th century. It is against this historical backdrop that African Americans have for generations fought for a place in American society.

The area in the United States with the highest percentage of counties living in poverty is the South, particularly the Mississippi Delta region. The Mississippi Delta region is contained in the “black belt,” which occupies an area stretching from the Carolinas to Louisiana (Sernau 2006). The “delta” area in particular refers to a number of counties in Louisiana and Mississippi that straddle the Mississippi River (Sernau 258). The majority of the poverty in this area is rural, and the area is steeped in a history of slavery. The majority of residents in this area are descendents of slaves who have stayed in the area, either

working as agricultural laborers or in other blue collar jobs (Sernau 2006). It is estimated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture that the poverty rate for the 210 counties in the Black Belt is thirty-nine percent, over ten percent more than for blacks in metro areas (“Rural Income”). The rural south has a history of slavery, racism, and debilitating public policy programs that can be seen as a cause for persistent poverty.

Before the Civil War, the economy of the Mississippi Delta was based on slavery. During Reconstruction, the area came to be settled by blacks. Many African Americans purchased land during this period, but since then black ownership of farmland has steadily decreased. African American farmers have not received their fair share of federal assistance, a fact illustrated by the New Deal Farm Policy of the 1930’s (Glasmeier 2004). Prior to the Great Depression, millions of blacks worked as sharecroppers and tenant farmers. During this time period, ninety percent of African Americans lived in the South, with roughly three-quarters of them living and working in rural areas on farms (Lui et al. 88). Certain New Deal programs made available loans for tenants and poor farmers so they could purchase land, providing just the sort of assistance that might have helped black farmers (Mink and O’Connor 2004).

The problem with the New Deal programs is that large loans were only offered to those farmers who were perceived as likely to establish a profitable farm. The programs were often discriminatory, failing to offer loan assistance to poor African Americans (Lui et al. 2006). This therefore meant that the black rural farmers were excluded from acquiring land. The discriminatory practices of denying loans to black farmers continued well into the 1960s. Black farmers in the South had an ownership rate of 14% of all farms in the 1920s, but this number has been reduced to less than 1% as of 1999, with a sharp decline beginning in the 1970s (Lui et al. 105). An explanation for the rapid loss in farmland may be due to the large debts owed by many farmers, debts which have accrued over decades of being denied loans or other government financial assistance.

Coinciding with the New Deal, “The Great Migration” was a movement in which millions of African Americans left the rural south in search of better jobs and brighter futures. Valerie Grim conducted an interview of 37 African-American women who migrated from the

Mississippi Delta to northern and Midwestern cities in the first half of the 20th Century. The participants in her study cited many reasons for leaving rural areas, but one of the biggest reasons was racism and discrimination. The women explained that in their communities, they were at the bottom of the socioeconomic as well as cultural ladders, despite the hard work they contributed on farms (Grim 130). The discrimination and racism shown by white women, whose husbands were often employers, made it impossible for the African American women to achieve a similar status of socially accepted womanhood (Grim 127). The negative views of black womanhood affected many participants' feelings of self-worth, and the desire to bring up children in a different environment led many women to embrace the opportunity of moving North. The Great Migration represented an effort to "escape" rural areas and rural poverty by moving to an area which offers greater opportunity and fewer disappointments.

When we examine the current population of the Black Belt, we see that it remains highly segregated, and is stuck in a virtual time warp: very few changes in poverty rates have occurred since the 1970s (Glasmeier 56). This area is defined by "slow economic growth, chronically high poverty, high illiteracy rates, poor housing and health standards, and political and social isolation" (Glasmeier 56). Poverty rates are especially high among children, which may or may not be related to the high prevalence of single mothers. According to the USDA, female-headed homes often have difficulty obtaining income, unless child support payments are made, due to low-wages and little outside assistance ("Rural Income"). Another major issue in the Delta is low-quality education and illiteracy. Schools suffer from racism among students and teachers, and lower than average high school completion rates (Glasmeier 58). Additionally, 27% of adults lack a high school education (Glasmeier 58).

Segregation and racism continue to be issues in the Black Belt. Duncan found that there is a significant level of distrust between whites and blacks in school systems in the Delta (70). The main goal of the school administrations and the school boards, which are predominantly white, are to keep the costs at a minimum and to not ask or look for outside interference or assistance (Duncan 70). Schools are not the only area that are segregated: white communities and black

communities occupy completely separate social spheres. Everything from schools to churches to parades to newspapers are geared towards one race or the other (Duncan 70). Whites and blacks are stratified according to race and social class, with many wealthy white farmers employing blacks as cooks, field hands, and even tractor drivers (Duncan 70). The Mississippi Delta is a prime example of a culture of poverty marked by social problems such as unwed mothers, drug and alcohol abuse, and high crime rates.

Conclusions

This paper examined three areas of the country marked by persistent rural poverty. The aim of the paper was to uncover any similarities and differences that might be observed and to further understand the cycle of poverty in the United States. Indian Reservations, Appalachia, and the Black Belt represent three greatly diversified parts of the country, three areas which contrast greatly in terms of culture and history. While each geographic location consists of a unique population, with a unique set of social issues, three important similarities may be observed. First, each population has faced a long history of oppression and social inequality. Native Americans were forced onto reservations, denied ownership rights, and subsequently saw the wealth from their land removed from their hands. African Americans living in the Black Belt have been subject to a depressing history of slavery and racism, and the government has been unable to correct the damage that it has caused, particularly in the Mississippi Delta, the area of our country with the highest percentage of blacks living in counties with persistent poverty. The wounds given to Native Americans and African Americans haven't yet closed up: both groups are still being discriminated against in terms of housing and the accumulation of assets.

The second major similarity between these three areas is that they all have stalled economic development. This can largely be attributed to the geographic isolation of the areas. In the case of Indian Reservations, a lack of progress can also be attributed to removal of assets and lack of home ownership. For Appalachia, a decline in the manufacturing industry has contributed to the loss of jobs and high unemployment rates. What does this say about the future of these

counties?

For those who have a chance to break the cycle of poverty, it means leaving their home in pursuit of education, jobs, and perhaps even decreased social tensions and prejudice. Those who are able to wriggle away from their impoverished upbringings, do so by leaving the communities in which poverty persists, not by staying and finding a way to improve life. The final similarity among the three areas is out-migration. Out-migration represents at least one way in which the rural poor in the United States attempt to escape the “poverty trap.” Not everyone has the financial means or connections necessary to leave a site of rural poverty, but some clearly do. All three areas are experiencing a decrease in population as people move from rural to urban areas. The image of the city as the future, as a symbol for economic progress and possibility reflects the hope that it will offer greater chances of employment and education for people from rural areas.

The most striking similarity among the three different groups of people may just be that even though each of them has a unique history, and is battling particular issues that correspond to that history, they have all, in a sense, become “stuck.” If cities and urban areas are thought of as the future, and if they continue to benefit from public policies, then what is the poor rural farmer or a disabled elderly person living in Appalachia to conclude other than that they are being left behind in their own country? Native Americans, rural blacks from the Mississippi Delta, and Appalachians may yet see conditions improve, but in the meantime they often go unnoticed, because they belong to the part of America that isn’t racing forwards to compete in our capitalistic economy. They truly represent the “other” America.

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