

BOOK REVIEW

Understanding Rural Poverty in the United States

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Tickamyer, Ann R., Sherman, Jennifer, and Warlick, Jennifer (eds.) (2017), *Rural Poverty in the United States*, Columbia University Press, New York, pp. 476, USD 40.

This book, written by a group of American sociologists, is based on careful quantitative analysis and cartography. It is in five parts. The first part is on the geography and demography of the rural population of the United States (US). The rural population of the US today exceeds 50 million and is spread geographically over 75 per cent of the area of the country. The definition of rural in the United States is essentially that which is not urban. Specifically, counties, the basic unit of government, are classified as either metropolitan or non-metropolitan (or rural). A metropolitan county is one “with an urban core (city) population of 50,000 or more residents, along with adjacent counties (the suburbs) that link to the urban core by commuting patterns.” There are 1,090 metropolitan counties and 2,051 non-metropolitan counties in the country.

The first chapter by Kenneth Johnson brings out two distinctive features of change in respect of the rural population: ageing and diversifying in terms of minorities. While the rural population is still predominantly white with clear pockets of African Americans and Hispanics, the Census data point to a rise in ethnic and racial diversity over the last two decades.

The next chapter by Bruce Weber and Kathleen Miller maps changes in rural poverty over the last century. The official poverty measure (OPM) in the US, developed by the Census Bureau, is based on a 1960s estimate of the cost of a minimum adequate diet (adjusted for family size and composition). Essentially, the poverty line in the US is three times the cost of the minimum diet or food basket, on the assumption that other necessary expenditures such as on housing, fuel, clothing amount to two-thirds of the family budget. This poverty line is adjusted annually for the rate

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of inflation. In 2014, the poverty line for a single person below the age of 65 was 12,316 dollars a year or 33.7 dollars a day (roughly Rs 2100 a day).

Trends in the incidence of poverty from 1959 to 2014 show a steep decline in the 1960s, followed by a period of stability from the mid 1970s to mid 2000s and a rise again from 2009 to 2013. In 2014, the rural poverty rate or proportion of population below the poverty line in the United States was 16 per cent. The rural poverty rate has always been higher than the urban poverty rate but the gap has narrowed over time.

There has also been a concentration of rural poverty across space with the high poverty rate counties, that is, those with a head count ratio of more than 30 per cent, going up from 16 per cent of all rural counties in 1999 to 26 per cent in 2009–13 or a rise of 70 per cent. The 828 high poverty counties are mainly in Appalachia, the southern Black belt and Mississippi Delta, along the Mexican border and on Native American tribal reservations (p. 50).

In the second part on concepts, Leif Jensen and Danielle Ely explore alternative measures of poverty, including relative poverty and subjective poverty. Ann Tickamyer and Emily Wornell critically assess existing theories of poverty from choice-based explanations of the neoclassical school to structural theories, and argue strongly for a focus on intersectionalities. As they point out, a person in the category of “African American, female, in the rural South faces more oppression and discrimination than that of a person in any one of those categories alone (p. 104).”

The third part of the book deals with specific vulnerabilities. There are chapters on gender (Kristin Smith), the native American population (Lisa Pruitt), race (Mark Harvey), and immigration (Shannon Monnat and Raeven Chandler). Each of these chapters is substantial. The chapter on gender explores changing gender roles in the rural US. The loss of stable male jobs after the 2008 financial crisis, for example, led to a rise in female work participation, particularly in the services sector. Time-use data suggest that while males spent less time in economic activity, there was some rise in time spent on child care but no perceptible change in time spent on housework.

The chapter on race is essential reading for a solution in the field. Mark Harvey attacks the popular view that racism is a vestige of the past and will fade away with time (and economic growth). He criticises scholars for failing to study “how rural minority poverty is generated today by contemporary structures of racial domination.” He makes a strong case for racism as a type of social structure, not human biology. He traces the role of racism in the development of the modern capitalist global economy, and underlines the importance of documenting the relationship between racial domination and poverty.

The data on race and poverty put together in this chapter are eye-opening. First, poverty rates are much higher among African Americans than any other

community. In 2014, the incidence of poverty was 37 per cent among rural African Americans, 33 per cent among Native Americans, 28 per cent among Hispanics, and 15 per cent among non-Hispanic whites. A second feature to note is the spatial concentration of poverty. There are three rural regions in which the poorest rural counties are located. These are the Black Belt of the Deep South, the Borderlands of the Southwest, and the Native American reservations. Further, African Americans are the “most regionally concentrated minority group, with 83 per cent of all rural African Americans residing in the Black Belt region.” Understanding the poverty of minorities, including African Americans, requires us to understand the “characteristics of the regions and communities that generate it, including the structure of their economic, political, and civic spheres (pp. 148–9).” Drawing on earlier work, Harvey identifies four common features of regions with a high concentration of poor minorities. These are (i) extremely weak private sector labour markets; (ii) heavy reliance on federal government transfer programmes; (iii) ineffective political institutions; and, (iv) a fractured civil society.

In conclusion, Harvey points out that “nearly every scholar who has addressed this (poverty) question has noted the need for new federal government interventions,” but “these recommendations have gone unheeded (p 162).” He criticises the ideology that underlies the failure to take specific action, namely that of colour-blind universalism, which denies and obscures the continuing role of racism in the persistence of poverty. There are clear parallels here with Indian debates on “merit” or “caste-blind” policy.

The fourth section of the book is on various institutions or sectors, including food security and housing (Alisha Coleman-Jensen and Barry Steffen), education (Catherine Biddle and Ian Mette), crime (John Eason, Ash Smith, Jason Greenberg, Richard Abel, and Corey Sparks), health and environment (Danielle Rhubarb and Elyzabeth Engle), social capital (Jennifer Sherman), and economic restructuring (Brian Thiede and Tim Slack). Each of the chapters discusses deprivation in rural areas with respect to the specific sector.

Food insecurity increased sharply during the 2007 to 2009 recession. In 2007, 11.1 per cent of the population was food insecure; the figure rose to 14.6 in 2008 and remained stubbornly at 14 per cent in 2014. In rural areas, food insecurity worsened even after the official end of the recession in 2013. Among rural African Americans, food insecurity affected 29.1 per cent of the population. The corresponding figure was 27.2 for Hispanics. As Coleman-Jensen and Steffen demonstrate, food insecurity would have been much worse without the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Programme.

In the United States, funding for schools is highly decentralised and, as a result, “the local economy has a profound effect on the funding a school receives, and, in turn, the capacity of that school to provide educational amenities and services to its

students (p. 329).” Although some initiatives were taken in 2015 to expand funding to rural schools, the effects are not yet clear. Many rural schools are initiating partnerships locally with the private sector to enhance their amenities.

There is much writing by urban sociologists on crime and punishment but less attention has been paid to rural areas. John Eason *et al.* show that homicide rates are on the decline in cities but on the rise in rural areas. Prison re-entry and incarceration are also on the rise in rural areas. They raise a call for increasing public resources and attention to crime in rural regions.

Although the underlying economic structure of rural areas is critical to understanding poverty, only one chapter in this volume, by Thiede and Slack, addresses economic issues with respect to employment. Over time, the data show a consolidation of the agricultural sector, with a decline in the number of farms and the farm population. Initially, the work force moved out of farming to manufacturing, especially industries related to natural resources and extractive industries. From the 1970s, however, employment shifted to the services sector. Many rural counties are now dependent on a small set of industries or even a single industry.

At the same time, in line with national trends, the new jobs tended to be characterised by non-standard employment arrangements, such as subcontracting. This trend implied the “declining likelihood that families can attain a stable, above-poverty standard of living through the work of a single member (p. 236).” Today, a large majority (86 per cent) of the high unemployment counties (that is, where one-third or more of adult workers are unemployed) are rural counties. Underemployment is higher in rural areas than in urban areas. For example, the incidence of low-income workers, that is, those in employment but with weekly earnings less than 125 per cent of the poverty threshold in non-metropolitan or rural areas was higher (7.9 per cent) than in metropolitan areas (5.9 per cent). In short, “the new rural economy continues to produce conditions that disadvantage rural workers relative to their urban counterparts (p. 249).”

The fifth and final section of the book is on policies and politics, and returns to much-debated questions of paths out of poverty. Should we rely on economic growth, job creation, and trickle-down to end poverty or lay emphasis on direct interventions, including through housing and social security? Jennifer Warlick’s comprehensive chapter on social security shows that the safety net has made a significant difference to poverty in the US. The author provides a detailed estimate of the contribution of a range of social insurance (employment-related, that is to retired or injured workers or their survivors) and means-tested programmes to reduction of the poverty rate in 2013 (see Table 14.2 on p. 394). The Census Bureau in the United States uses two measures of poverty, the official poverty measure (OPM) discussed above, and the supplementary poverty measure (SPM). The SPM

is an alternative measure with a more generous definition of family and with adjustments for transfers. Warlick uses the SPM for her analysis.

The biggest reduction in poverty was on account of social security, followed by refundable tax credits and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Programme or SNAP (earlier called food stamps). The reason for social security payments to be the most significant in reduction of poverty is because these payments are on average much higher than the benefits given through means-tested (or targeted) programmes such as SNAP.

The last chapter by Gary Paul Green sums up the discussion on alternative paths out of poverty and argues that economic growth alone has a limited impact on poverty on account of the structural problems of many rural areas (such as being dependent on a few extractive industries or being located in remote places). He also makes the point that economic growth-led reduction in poverty is essentially dependent on job creation, which would require the poor to move in search of jobs, rather than address all the problems of a poor region in a systematic way.

To conclude, this book by a group of committed scholars is a fascinating read and provides many insights into rural poverty in the world's most powerful country, the United States. There are several lessons for researchers elsewhere in terms of methods (including definitions of poverty and ways of mapping), theories, and policy. One criticism of the book is that several authors discuss the effects of neoliberal economic policy but shy away from taking a strong stand on this debate. Further, while several scholars make it clear that geography or location plays a big role in rural poverty, a discussion of local economies is limited to the chapter on labour markets. I look forward to further joint study by sociologists and economists to better understand the economic characteristics of rural counties.