

Why don't We Know More? Research and Welfare Reform in Rural America.

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Despite the unprecedented amount of research on welfare reform that has emerged over the last six years, by contrast, rural research and results have been much more limited.

Investigations that examine differences across the diversity of rural areas are even more rare.

While research is suggestive of some rural/urban differences, many questions are as of yet unanswered.

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In 1996, Congress passed legislation creating the latest welfare reform. Since the legislation, a large amount of research has emerged. However, rural research and results have been much more limited. Even less common are investigations that examine differences across the diversity of rural areas.

Several reasons underlay the relative scarcity of rural research: multiple and complex changes brought about by welfare reform; challenges in capturing the unique qualities of rural areas; differing definitions of rural; and the challenges of accessing suitable data.

This is the second of two Rural Issues Briefs examining welfare reform in rural America. The first Brief examined some of what we know about the impacts and implications of the 1996 welfare reform for rural America. This *Rural Issues Brief* examines why we don't know more. Both of these *Rural Issues Briefs* are drawn from the Chapter "Welfare Reform in Rural Areas: A Voyage Through Uncharted Waters" written for the book Challenges for Rural America in the 21st Century.

The Complexities of Welfare Reform

The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) ended cash assistance as we have known it. With it came a **wide range of policy and program changes, each raising an extensive list of questions regarding their impacts and outcomes.**

Following a period of state experimentation through federally-granted waivers to Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), the 1996 legislation changed the cash assistance system from being an entitlement to one that is limited and contingent. The legislation introduced changes to programs such as food stamps, funding streams for the Social Services Block Grant (SSBG), and introduced the Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG).

The most sweeping changes were associated with cash assistance. AFDC, JOBS, and Emergency Assistance (EA) were eliminated, and the program Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) was created.

Among the changes for recipients, TANF introduced time limits, required participation in 'work or work related activities' and imposed financial sanctions for noncompliance. Attention was also brought to unwed childbearing and family formation.

The legislation also affected the organization of the cash assistance provision system, moving from a categorical program to a block grant program.

Within federal parameters, this change brought increased decision-making and latitude for state policy decisions, fixed federal funding based on the state's funding under AFDC, and froze funding differences across states.

With the new federal TANF block grants, each state made a series of decisions regarding the exact nature of their programs.

These decisions included choosing time limits less than the federal 60 months, the form, timing and severity of sanctions, the option to have a family cap or exempt a vehicle from the asset limitations, among many others (Zedlewski, 1998; Gallagher, et al., 1998; DHHS, 2000).

As a result, the welfare reform legislation not only produced multiple changes, but also combinations of changes that vary from state to state.

Indeed, since states in the South contain a large share of the nation's rural population, with the devolution of cash assistance, the structure of federal funding has hidden implications for rural areas (Weber and Duncan, 2001).

Challenges Facing Welfare Reform in Rural Areas.

Welfare recipients face many similar issues across rural and urban areas such as meeting work requirements, gaining economic independence, and maintaining family and child well-being.

However, rural areas comprise economic, political, and service landscapes different from their urban counterparts. These differences include fewer

economic opportunities and lower earnings, differences in occupational skill levels, as well as issues associated with less access to formal child care, lack of transportation options, and limitations in housing and the availability of health care (RUPRI, 1999).

As a RUPRI report stated; "Rural areas and communities are not just smaller, poor substitutes for urban areas. Rather, they are qualitatively different, and those differences are consequential" (2001:3).

Particularly in rural areas, issues facing recipients interplay with broader issues facing rural communities.

Fewer economic and job advancement opportunities are issues faced by all community members, not just current and former TANF recipients.

It is also unclear whether all communities are equally situated to be able to respond to newly devolved responsibilities. For many rural communities, local elected officials are part-time employees, attending to their other job duties while also serving their communities. Rural leadership networks tend to be smaller in size, sometimes overlapping or centered on a few families.

Greater expectations are also being placed on nongovernmental organizations. However, in rural areas there are fewer nonprofit organizations to fill service gaps and smaller faith-based institutions with limited capacity to provide services (Bartkowski and Regis, Forthcoming; Duffy et al., 2002; Ferguson et al., 2002).

Fewer social service resources and sparse population densities can also stretch already limited

resources, even when services are available.

Even still, rural communities also hold examples of sectors and organizations working together (Pindus, 2001). Small leadership structures that can hinder one community can also help another work together. For example, McConnell and Ohls found that while rural participants felt that they would be likely to meet someone they know while shopping at the grocery store, they also found that service delivery in rural areas was perceived as being more courteous (2000:8).

Even though poverty in rural areas differs from that in urban centers, the welfare reform legislation and regulations did not contain specific rural provisions.

Instead, the legislation gave greater flexibility to the states with the intention that they would be in the best position to design programs better tailored to "respond more effectively to the needs of families within their own unique environments" (DHHS, 1997: Preamble).

However, state administrators face political landscapes within their own states that can still pose barriers to responding to rural needs (Reeder, 1996:2).

Why One Size Doesn't Fit All

While it is customary to contrast rural and urban areas, **rural areas differ considerably from one another.**

Rural areas include not just agricultural economies, but also manufacturing, coal, and timber communities, retirement destinations, as well as tourism and recreation-based economies, among others.

While many rural communities have diverse local economies others are dependent on a single economic sector.

“Each of these hold different implications not only for local employment and earnings, but also implications for the local community tax base, the demand for services, and the ability to develop middle class wage and occupational opportunities” (RUPRI, 2001:4).

Not only are economic realities different across rural areas, but proximity to an urban area can also affect employment and service availability.

While this diversity of rural areas holds implications for the success of welfare reform, research that examines these implications is even more limited.

For example, rural poverty is already disproportionately found among those who are working. It is unclear whether an employment-focused cash assistance program with time limits will be an effective policy for many rural areas.

Moreover, what happens when families who are poor live in places that are poor?

Rural areas also encompass some of the highest persistent poverty regions of the nation (e.g., Mississippi Delta, Appalachia, Southern Black Belt, Native American reservations, Rio Grande) (Nord and Beaulieu, 1997).

How can families in these areas transition from welfare to work when there are few employment opportunities to begin with?

And, how effective is a block grant environment when these regions cross state lines (Wimberley and Morris, 1996)?

Which Rural?

By far the most common conceptualization used in research is some version of a rural/urban dichotomy. This approach defines everything that is not urban as being rural.

A common approach for assessing the impacts of welfare reform has been to conduct a statewide assessment such as a survey of those leaving TANF (Isaacs and Lyon, 2000; Zedlewski and Alderson, 2001).

However, while rural families may be included in order to ensure statewide representative sample, less commonly are the rural voices separated from the sample. Even more rarely are these data examined across the diversity of rural areas.

However, even when rural areas are examined, the lack of uniform definitions of place confounds the ability to provide a clear interpretation of findings.

In some cases urban areas are defined by the major urban counties with all remaining counties combined into a single rural category (Westra and Routley, 2000; Kickham et al., 2000).

Others forego a rural/urban distinction and use a regional approach within the state (Acker et al., 2001; Bosley and Mills, 1999) or use congressional districts (Moreland-Young, 2002).

In another case, researchers compared major metro and other metro counties with rural persistent poverty and other rural counties (Klemmack et al., 2002).

Parisi et al. (2002) took a different approach, examining the role of place and space in accounting for caseload declines.

Less common are standardized county classifications such as that provided by the Office of Management and Budget, or the USDA Economic Research Service (Dyk and Zimmerman, 2000; Goetz et al., 1999; Jensen et al., 2000; McKernan et al., 2001; RUPRI, 1999).

Data Needs

While analyses using national surveys such as the Current Population Survey are often used to assess federal policy changes, **these data sources are restricted in their ability to portray the diversity of rural areas.**

Indeed, this approach may be least relevant as devolution to state and local decision-making has increased.

Because of this, the National Research Council (Moffitt and Ver Ploeg, 2001) has argued that since decisions for TANF vary by state and local areas, sampling frames and sample sizes from national surveys are not appropriate.

While the new American Community Survey will allow for better analyses of small areas, its implementation has only recently begun (Moffitt and Ver Ploeg, 2001).

Many researchers have relied on data available from state agencies. However, the form and format can vary greatly from state to state making comparisons and multi-state analyses difficult or very limited (eg. RUPRI, 1999).

Issues and Implications

Just as poverty is often framed as an urban issue, so too has welfare reform. As a result, while research on welfare reform has grown exponentially, the knowledge base for rural areas is scattered and limited.

While some research is suggestive of rural/urban differences, many questions are as of yet unanswered.

Devolution and block grants opened the possibility for policies to be more responsive to rural needs, and while employment of all TANF recipients has increased, less clear is whether these changes have increased the well-being of those in rural areas or increased their vulnerability, especially long term.

Service, network, employment, and resource differentials exist not only between rural and urban areas but across rural places as well.

With policies varying state to state, each state facing its own political and economic changes, and the diversity of rural America, the prospects for welfare reform in rural areas is likely as varied as the diversity of rural America itself.

Without a national county level database or other means for systematically examining outcomes across the diversity of rural areas in the nation, knowledge about the impacts and outcomes of welfare reform for rural America could remain limited.

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