Rural Poverty and the Federal Safety Net

IMPLICATIONS FOR RURAL EDUCATORS

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Perhaps the greatest challenge for rural schools serving poor children today is the same as the challenge in urban settings: ensuring that poor children receive a high-quality education that equips them for future success. Although poverty is often viewed as a distinctly urban problem, rural residents experience it too, often struggling with the same underlying conditions, including joblessness, substance abuse, and single parenthood. Without a doubt, such conditions affect a child’s ability to learn and thrive in school, and impoverished communities often cannot support good schools. School remains the best path out of poverty for rural children, but its role is challenged by the problems poverty creates. The surest way to address this challenge is to understand poverty and its principal causes. Doing so will ensure that education remains an escape from poverty toward opportunity.

For economic opportunity to be a reality for poor rural children, they need to overcome many obstacles. One of the most important institutions to combat these challenges is school, which increasingly must serve as a support system to struggling families at the same time it offers education as a path upward. This places rural educators in a bind—if they focus too much attention on social services, their ability to educate is strained; but if they focus too little attention, educating poor children becomes difficult. While schools and educators cannot possibly be expected to address all the underlying causes of poverty, they certainly have a role to play.

For rural schools and educators to meet this challenge, rural areas need a robust, targeted, safety net that supports low-income families so that children can thrive at home and schools can focus on educating. Rural educators can help achieve this by coordinating with local social service agencies, communicating with families about benefits available to them, and ensuring that the struggles of children’s home lives are taken into account when dealing with them at
school. But these efforts can still be challenging when faced with a rural population that dislikes or even mistrusts government intervention, often with good reason. Government programs are typically designed to help those with little to no income, possibly creating disincentives to work or stigma associated with those who do receive benefits. This is why rural schools and safety net programs alone cannot fully solve the problem of rural poverty. Economic development efforts that strengthen the local labor market, combined with government and education efforts are needed.

In the following pages, I explore the challenges faced by rural schools and educators in addressing poverty. First, I describe the problems with measuring rural poverty and the differences in rural compared to urban poverty. Next, I review the underlying conditions associated with poverty and the prevalence of these factors in rural areas. Following that, I describe the federal government’s main safety net programs for the poor, along with the extent to which they serve their rural populations. And finally, I discuss the implications of both poverty and its underlying conditions on rural schools and educators, with a few broad recommendations offered aimed at helping rural schools and educators serve poor rural children and their families.

Rural versus Urban Poverty

Measuring poverty in rural and urban areas in America is complex. First is the issue of how to define rural and urban areas. A conventional way is to consider what the Federal Office of Management and Budget defines as metropolitan and non-metropolitan, which is often used to represent urban and rural. According to this definition, a metropolitan area is “one or more counties that contain a city of 50,000 or more inhabitants, or contain a Census Bureau-defined urbanized area (UA) and have a total population of at least 100,000 (75,000 in New England).” Another way is to use the Census Bureau’s definitions, with urban defined according to density...
and population. In general an incorporated area with a population of 50,000 people or more and dense areas between 2,500 and 50,000 population are considered urban.³

While metropolitan and non-metropolitan are often used to represent urban and rural, these definitions do not necessarily line up. Metropolitan areas are defined at the county level, and some counties include both rural and urban areas as defined by the Census. The result is that a higher percentage of the population (93.9 percent) live in metropolitan counties, compared to the portion of the population that lives in urban areas (89.0 percent).⁴ Efforts to analyze the poverty rate illustrate the implications of these differing definitions. Non-metropolitan areas (often used to depict rural areas) have higher poverty rates than do metropolitan areas, but this trend is reversed when considering urban and rural areas as defined by the US Census Bureau.⁵

Additional challenges regarding how poverty is measured present other problems that may affect our understanding of rural poverty pose other problems. The official poverty rate uses the same threshold—the line that delineates who is poor—for the entire United States, which fails to factor in different costs of living by geography. Income for a family living in New York City is treated the same as income for a family in rural Mississippi, even though the New York family likely needs more income to achieve the same living standards as the Mississippi family.

To address this concern, the Census Bureau began publishing the Supplemental Poverty Measure in 2010, which adjusts the threshold geographically based on the local cost of living. Additionally, the supplemental measure considers pre-tax or non-cash government benefits, such as the Earned Income Tax Credit or food benefits.

Figure 1.1 shows official poverty rates using the metropolitan definition of urban and rural areas. As shown, poverty rates have consistently been higher in nonmetropolitan areas compared to metropolitan areas since the 1960’s. In the time since President Lyndon Johnson’s
“War on Poverty” in the 1960s, nonmetropolitan poverty declined dramatically, but has remained at roughly 15 percent since then and has always been higher in nonmetropolitan areas than metropolitan ones. Many factors contributed to this large rural decline in poverty throughout the 1960s, including increased federal spending on safety net programs, such as Medicaid and Medicare, energy development that caused industries to move south, and poor Southern residents moving north or into cities.\(^6\)

**Figure 1.1**

![Poverty rates by metro/nonmetro residence, 1959-2015](image)

This trend holds across age groups, including among children. In 2015, the official poverty rate among children was 24.3 percent in nonmetropolitan areas compared to a metropolitan rate of 20.1 percent (Figure 1.2).

**Figure 1.2**

![Poverty rates by age group and metro/nonmetro residence, 2015](source)

However, the Census Bureau’s definition of rurality (rather than metropolitan and nonmetropolitan) reveals a slightly different picture, with poverty in rural areas lower than that of urban areas (Figure 1.3). According to the most recent data, urban poverty was almost 3 percentage points higher than in rural areas, including among children (Figure 1.3).

**Figure 1.3: Official Poverty Rates in Rural vs. Urban Areas, US Census Bureau Definition**
Consideration of the supplemental poverty measure provides yet another picture of poverty. Again, the supplemental poverty measure adjusts the threshold based on geography and in general lowers the threshold in rural areas compared to urban areas. It also considers all government benefits income, including tax-based and non-cash income. Primarily because of the lower threshold, nonmetropolitan poverty is lower than metropolitan poverty when utilizing the supplemental measure, although the gap has narrowed in recent years (Figure 1.4).

Figure 1.4
Poverty’s implications for rural educators remain the same no matter the poverty measure or definition of rurality that is used. It is important to understand rural poverty rates, as well as the corresponding measurement issues, in order to fully grasp how to address it. The data above shows that poverty in rural areas is likely lower than urban ones, but only slightly, suggesting that rural areas deserve as much attention as urban when it comes to combating poverty. This requires understanding the underlying conditions of rural poverty, the federal government’s response to it, and how it affects rural schools.

Underlying Conditions of Rural Poverty

Rural schools and educators must understand the underlying issues associated with poverty for them to meet the needs of poor, rural children. To the extent that social and cultural factors unique to rural environments contribute to poverty, policymakers must tailor their approaches accordingly. Increasingly, however, rural areas in America are experiencing the same underlying conditions as urban areas, suggesting that solutions can be shared.
In search of solutions, Jennifer Sherman in her 2009 book, “Those Who Work, Those Who Don’t: Poverty, Morality, and Family in Rural America,” argues that rural communities have declined in recent years primarily because existing economic and political climates (for example, reduced employment, stagnated wages, declining union membership) made them feel powerless and helpless. In response, they revised their own moral foundations, which led to behaviors typically seen in urban areas, such as substance abuse, single parenthood, and the declining role of men in communal and family life. Rural residents might also be more inclined to reject government help when facing poverty given the stigma involved and the close-knit nature of many small towns, adding to their despair. Add to that a less sophisticated human service infrastructure in rural compared to urban areas, and rural residents may feel particularly helpless.

Perhaps this is even truer today. In 2015, economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton of Princeton identified a concerning trend of rising mortality and morbidity among middle-aged non-Hispanic whites. Since then, their research has led to a better understanding of these “deaths of despair,” which they found stem from rising substance use and suicides among non-Hispanic whites. Although they acknowledge that the problem is endemic to both urban and rural areas, the spread to rural areas raises new concerns about how social and economic issues translate to health and well-being.

Demographic comparisons of rural and urban populations further contribute to our understanding of these social and economic issues, suggesting that rural populations might be worse off in some ways than urban populations. According to the US Census Bureau definition of rurality, rural residents are less educated than urban residents, with only 20 percent possessing a bachelor’s degree or more, compared to 29 percent of urban residents. Unsurprisingly, this
translates into a smaller share of working-age adults (age 18–64) in rural areas being employed (67 percent vs. 70 percent). A larger share, however, is married (62 percent vs. 51 percent), and the higher marriage rate among rural residents also translates to a higher percentage of children living in married-couple households in rural areas, yet almost 25 percent still live with one or more unmarried parents.  

As rural educators think about how to address poverty among their students, they must consider the underlying conditions. Four specific factors are worth exploring in more detail: work status, education level, family structure, and immigration.

Work Status

For people of employment age and their families, work is the primary source of income. Naturally, people who work less are more likely to be in poverty. Fortunately, working and still being poor is rather uncommon, but still important. Slack analyzed the working poor by metropolitan status and found that from the early 1980’s to 2003 the percentage of all workers who were poor was around 5 percent with only a small variation, and nonmetropolitan areas consistently had a slightly higher share of working poor than metropolitan areas, although that gap got smaller across time.

More recently, Thiede et al explored the working poor through 2013 and found similar shares of all workers who were in poverty (approximately 5 percent). However, they also found disparities based on various characteristics. Working women in non-metropolitan areas were much more likely to be poor than their male counterparts, likely stemming from a concentration of low-wage, female-dominated jobs in rural areas, while the gap by gender was narrower in metropolitan areas. Interestingly, the gap between white and black poverty rates were larger in metropolitan areas than nonmetropolitan areas, but the gap in the poverty rates between white
and Hispanic workers in nonmetropolitan areas was much larger than in metropolitan areas, possibly a result of the agricultural economy more present in nonmetropolitan areas, which employs many Hispanic immigrants.

Explored another way, the metropolitan-nonmetropolitan divide remains when considering the share of the poor who work, but it has changed over the past 15 years. In the early 2000s, nonmetropolitan people in poverty were more likely to be working at least half-time than those in metropolitan areas. But by 2013, this trend reversed and poor people in nonmetropolitan areas had a work rate (at least half-time) that was 4 percentage points below that of poor people in metropolitan areas (23.6 percent vs. 28 percent, respectively). It is possible that this shift is due to labor market deterioration in rural areas, but it could also be the result of a declining labor supply in terms of people with higher education levels moving out of rural areas leaving those with limited education and limited prospects behind. The result is that not only does this show that poor people in nonmetropolitan areas work less than their metropolitan counterparts, but the vast majority (more than 75 percent) work less than half-time.

Education Level

Education level and work status are strongly linked. Those with limited education are less likely to work, which in turn makes them more likely to be in poverty. According to the US Census Bureau, 80 percent of nonmetropolitan residents 18 years and older lack a 4-year college degree, compared to 70 percent of metropolitan residents. This likely helps explain why a smaller share of nonmetropolitan working-age adults 18 to 64 work (67.6 percent) compared to metropolitan adults, although it’s possible that age still plays a role, with rural populations being older on average than urban populations. And among those who do work, a much higher percentage of those with less than a high school education are poor (approximately 20 percent)
compared to those with a college degree (approximately 2 percent). But among the least educated, nonmetropolitan working adults are slightly less likely to be poor than their metropolitan counterparts,\textsuperscript{18} perhaps because they work more hours.

Labor Market

Also strongly related to the working share of the population is the local labor market. Since 2000, the nonmetropolitan population has grown slightly (approximately 5 percent) but total employment has declined.\textsuperscript{19} This contrasts with metropolitan areas, which have experienced population and employment growth since 2000.\textsuperscript{20} This could be the result of changing demographics and other population-based factors, but it also is a function of the local labor market.

While service-related industries dominate both metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas, goods-producing sectors, such as farming, forestry and manufacturing, are much more common in nonmetropolitan areas.\textsuperscript{21} This means that as these sectors decline as a share of all industries, it disproportionately affects nonmetropolitan areas. And as jobs in these sectors are replaced by lower-paying service jobs, fewer “good” employment opportunities exist in nonmetropolitan areas.

Economist David Autor argues that trade policy has directly affected these areas by causing employment to decline, resulting in an increase in transfer payments such as unemployment insurance and disability claims.\textsuperscript{22} Others noting the rise in disability claims in recent years mapped them and note that claims are concentrated in the rural south, and increased disability claims are correlated with lost job opportunities.\textsuperscript{23}

Changes like these are important not only from an economic perspective, but also because the labor market directly contributes to social cohesiveness and community. The types
of jobs and industries present in a community help form personal and communal identities, and when those change, it may be difficult to adapt. One example is the 2017 book, “Janesville: An American Story”, which profiled a town in Wisconsin that lost a General Motors plant in the mid-2000s. It describes the economic difficulties faced by laid-off workers, as well the difficulties faced by their families and neighborhoods as they adapted to a new identity not connected to the “local plant”. Declines in other areas of social connectedness might contribute to feelings of isolation when major employers leave rural areas. As Robert Putnam wrote in his 2000 book, “Bowling Alone”, Americans in general (not only in rural areas) have become increasingly disconnected from each other as community institutions have disappeared. As fewer identity-forming opportunities exist, it may be difficult for laid-off employees to adapt to life without a job, even aside from the lack of employment itself.

Immigration

Immigration presents both challenges and opportunities to rural areas. On one hand, immigrants provide needed labor, which bolsters the local economy. On the other hand, they introduce a different culture that may be hard to adapt to for native-born residents. Immigrants can also present challenges to local schools when English is not the primary language spoken at home. Urban areas might be more equipped to adapt to these challenges given the existence of a higher concentration of immigrants, but rural areas also experience immigration’s challenges. Lichter argues that many immigrants settle in rural America, but because rural areas provide a more isolated existence they often go unnoticed. According to US Census data, 25 percent of the rural population is non-white. Lichter identifies an increase in Hispanic immigrants in rural American in the early 2000s, which he argues challenged many communities, on both economic and cultural fronts.
Increased poverty is another reality when it comes to immigration. Martin argued that America has imported many poor workers from other countries over the past two decades to address labor shortages in agriculture, which drives up poverty rates in America. More recently, Lee and Sharp noted the diversity in rural areas and suggested that while rural areas remain less diverse than urban areas, this pattern is not consistent across the country, leaving some rural areas highly diverse and others not. Immigrants tend to have higher poverty rates than their native-born counterparts, suggesting that as immigration increases in rural areas, so too will poverty.

But increased immigration in rural areas and its relationship with poverty is complex. While immigrants have higher poverty rates, their impact can also be positive because they display higher work rates and marriage rates than native-born Americans. For this reason, immigration may contribute to higher poverty rates in rural areas, but not necessarily the associated social and familial decay.

Looking to the Future

Many of these trends have been building for years, suggesting that rural areas will continue to experience challenges into the future. The association between employment, limited education, labor market changes, and immigration are strong and there is little indication that current trends will reverse. Efforts are needed at the federal and local level to address these challenges if rural populations are to have ample opportunity to thrive.

Federal Response to Rural Poverty

Rural schools cannot be expected to confront these underlying conditions alone. Fortunately, a number of programs exist at the federal level to address challenges associated with poverty and low income across America. However, federal anti-poverty programs are complex...
and often confusion. To get a sense of how much, simply consider that over 80 programs exist to serve the needs of low-income families and individuals, and each program is designed differently, often with no coordination between programs. For example, some are almost completely federally financed and administered, while others are financed by the federal government but administered by states. Still others receive some federal funding but states are required to share in the costs. Additionally, some are administered through the tax system, while others are administered at the local level through state or county social service offices.

Due to the variance in how these programs are financed and operated, states and local areas have varying levels of control over the design of and access to programs, meaning that services may look very different in rural areas compared to urban areas. Even between different rural areas, programs can look very different. For example, antipoverty programs can have different eligibility criteria and varying means of access depending on where one lives. Rural areas might face particular challenges in designing programs accessible to their constituents because of the dispersed population. While this creates challenges for rural areas, it also creates opportunity because rural schools and other community stakeholders can collaborate with social service agencies to design programs that meet the unique needs of their community.

Recognizing the distinct challenges faced by rural areas in accessing social services, the federal government has engaged several efforts directly targeting rural areas. The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) houses the National Advisory Committee on Rural Health and Human Services, which advises HHS on a host of issues important to rural areas. Additionally, President Barack Obama established the White House Rural Council in 2009 to advise federal efforts in rural areas.
Increasing the ability of poor families to access social services is a critical step in ensuring that children receive necessary services so they can thrive at home and in school. And while many programs serve rural populations, access to a few in particular plays an outsized role, and those programs are worth mentioning in more depth. The extent to which poor rural families and their children receive these benefits likely contributes to how well they are able to perform in school. For this reason, school officials and educators have a stake in understanding these programs, as well as helping their students access them to the extent possible.

The largest, and perhaps most critical of programs, is public health insurance. Medicaid is the country’s primary public health insurance program for low-income populations, along with the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP), which covers children not covered by Medicaid. Medicaid and CHIP provide health insurance coverage to approximately 74 million people per month and Medicaid alone costs the federal government over $545 billion per year.36 Medicaid and CHIP can be particularly helpful to residents of rural areas, as they generally have lower employment levels and lower-wage jobs than people in urban areas, meaning they are less likely to have employer-provided coverage or to afford coverage on their own. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, rural residents are less likely to receive employer-provided coverage, with 61 percent of people in rural areas with health coverage receiving employer-provided coverage compared to 64 percent in urban areas.38 Beyond those who have health insurance coverage, rural populations are slightly more likely to be uninsured. In 2015, 12 percent of rural residents were uninsured compared to 10 percent in urban areas.39

Medicaid has been very effective at providing health insurance to those who otherwise would not have it. The uninsured rate declined in all areas where Medicaid was expanded as part of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), and the decline was attributed more to Medicaid than
expansions to private coverage.\textsuperscript{40} In terms of health outcomes, the evidence is mixed. Most agree that increased health insurance coverage leads to better health, but an experiment in Oregon found that an expansion to the Medicaid program led to few physical health improvements after two years, although mental health improved substantially.\textsuperscript{41}

After Medicaid, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), known before 2008 as the Food Stamp Program, is the second-largest need-tested program for low-income families in the United States. In the average month in 2016, it served 44.2 million people and in recent years has cost the federal government approximately $74 billion per year.\textsuperscript{42} It covers approximately 14 percent of the entire population, and 83 percent of eligible households participated according to the most recent data.\textsuperscript{43}

SNAP is largely effective when it comes to poverty reduction and outcomes for children and families. A large body of research shows that SNAP reduces poverty, improves food security among low-income households, and positively affects infant health and benefits children in the long run.\textsuperscript{44} Rural families in particular benefit a great deal from SNAP. According to the Center for Rural Affairs, 14.6 percent of rural households receive SNAP; a larger share than both metropolitan and micropolitan areas.\textsuperscript{45} Households with children and households with senior citizens receiving SNAP benefits are more common in rural areas compared to urban areas, and participation among eligible households is higher in rural areas.\textsuperscript{46}

Closely related to SNAP is the National School Lunch Program, which serves free and reduced-cost lunches to low-income children in school. According to US Census data, 22.4 percent of rural households have a child who benefits from the National School Lunch Program.\textsuperscript{47} Similar to SNAP, the National School Lunch Program has proved effective, increasing consumption of fruits and vegetables among students, without leading to increased
weight gain or obesity. With 1.4 million rural households with children participating in the National School Lunch Program, it provides a needed safety net that increases healthy eating for poor children.

The earned income tax credit (EITC) is another antipoverty program that assists a large share of low-income rural residents. It is the third-largest government transfer for low-income families in the United States, behind Medicaid and SNAP; in tax year 2013, $68.1 billion was distributed to more than 28 million tax filers. Unlike most income-transfer programs that provide monthly or even more frequent benefits, the EITC is a refundable tax credit, which means it is provided to low-income households once per year. Because most EITC-eligible tax filers owe little to no income tax, most beneficiaries receive the credit as a refund.

Approximately one-quarter of all EITC claims go to tax filers in rural areas, and among all rural tax filers, 22 percent receive the EITC. Since the EITC only goes to working families, it is particularly helpful for workers in rural areas who face declining wages and opportunities to pursue higher-paying jobs.

Although not specific to rural areas, reviews of the literature have found the EITC to be quite effective, with the family EITC linked to increased employment rates of single mothers by approximately 3–7 percentage points in the late 1990s. A study in 2015 found similar increases in employment among single mothers in the 1990s due to the EITC and also found that the EITC reduced the percentage of single-mother families in poverty by 9.3 percent. The same researchers even found that poverty reductions attributed to the EITC are likely underestimated because they do not take into account longer-lasting effects.
The EITC has been particularly effective at improving children’s outcomes. Maxfield documented the positive impacts of the EITC on academic achievement and high school graduation.⁵⁶ Other studies have found positive effects on child behavior and adult health outcomes that ultimately affect children.⁵⁷

Across these four programs alone, the government provides substantial resources to low-income families in rural areas. According to analysis of 2011-2015 US Census data, approximately 40 percent of nonmetropolitan households in the bottom 10 percent of the income distribution received Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, 36 percent received the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), and almost 60 percent received public health insurance coverage.⁵⁸ Program coverage in nonmetropolitan areas among the poorest households shows that many already access government benefits, but ensuring that more eligible households receive benefits could help their children perform in school.

Implications for Rural Schools and Educators

By witnessing it each school day, rural educators are acutely aware of the consequences of poverty for their students. And they are also no doubt aware of the research on the struggles that low-income children have in schools.⁵⁹ As Sean Reardon argued in 2013,

“If we do not find ways to reduce the growing inequality in education outcomes, we are in danger of bequeathing our children a society in which the American Dream—the promise that one can rise, through education and hard work, to any position in society—is no longer a reality. Our schools cannot be expected to solve this problem on their own, but they must be part of the solution.”⁶⁰

Research suggests that low-income student academic achievement is not necessarily due to differences in teacher effectiveness across low- and high-income students⁶¹, reinforcing
Reardon’s view that schools cannot be expected to solve the problem alone. But schools inevitably play a role given that it is likely the only institution that comes into contact with almost all poor children at some point. And evidence from high-performing, high-poverty schools confirm that given the right tools, teachers can help students in high-poverty areas learn and thrive.62

As Reardon contends, if low-income students receive similar levels of quality instruction as their higher-income counterparts, then other factors must explain their lower performance. Understanding these other factors is important for establishing policies both inside and outside the school that might help student achievement. Schools and educators must work with the broader policy community to understand the dynamics that lead to the achievement gap and work together to address those issues.

The negative effects of low income and the stresses of poverty on children are well documented.63 In their seminal review of the literature, Brooks-Gunn and Duncan described the substantial role that family income played in explaining child outcomes, particularly academic achievement. Of particular concern was their finding that experiencing poverty in the early years led to worse outcomes than later in adolescence,64 suggesting that intervening early is crucial. Child poverty has been shown to affect brain development and subsequently lower academic achievement, requiring that any public policies designed to narrow the achievement gap must focus on the early years.65

But what can rural schools do to address poverty and low income in their communities? Three broad focus areas are suggested.

First, rural families and schools should leverage federal safety net programs to the greatest extent possible. As described above, the evidence suggests positive impacts on children
of public health insurance, SNAP, the National School Lunch Program, and the EITC. Rural schools can help ensure that families receive the benefits for which they are eligible by sharing information and coordinating with their local social service agencies. Sharing data between social service areas and schools is one potential area for collaboration. For example, all recipients of the school lunch program should be assessed for SNAP eligibility and vice versa. Yet some schools and social service agencies might not share this information with each other. Doing so might increase receipt of these benefits among eligible families.

Second, broader policy efforts are needed in rural areas to address the underlying causes of poverty. This is beyond the scope of what schools and educators can achieve alone, but they could serve as a community resource for struggling families. This requires additional social service resources directed toward schools so that funding is not diverted away from education. In collaboration with local social service agencies, schools are well positioned to help struggling families given the frequent contact with them that they likely have.

Finally, the psychological stress of poverty is linked to the achievement gap between lower- and higher-income students. This stress can be amplified by joblessness and fragile family life; experiences which children bring to school. As identified earlier, a larger share of rural populations may experience these underlying conditions than do those in other geographic settings. While schools are not equipped to solve all family-life problems, recognizing them and adapting student disciplinary policies may one place to start. As noted in a 2012 issue of Rural Matters, research shows that schools still use disparate discipline policies depending on the student group. More research is needed to compare disciplinary actions with low-income compared to high-income students, as well as rural versus urban. If low-income students are disproportionately disciplined, review of these policies might be in order.
Beyond what is possible for rural educators and schools, rural areas must also focus on economic development efforts that attract jobs and people. Widely reported after the 2010 decennial census, the American population has shifted toward urban areas over the last two decades. As younger, educated people leave rural areas for cities, rural towns struggle to replace the resources that they used to bring. State governments must focus economic development attention on rural areas that factor in the changing demographics of rural residents, as well as the labor markets in which they must now operate.

Conclusion

Although measurement issues make it difficult to compare precisely poverty levels across rural and urban areas, the best available data suggest that rural areas have at least the same level of poverty as urban areas, along with similar underlying conditions. Problems associated with joblessness, single parenthood, low education, and substance abuse are perhaps as common in rural areas as they are in urban areas. Attention to these issues are important for rural schools and educators because they make it more difficult to educate rural students and help them meet their potential.

The federal government offers a number of safety net programs to help alleviate economic hardship among low-income families, many of which have an evidence base of effectiveness. But longer-term economic opportunity can only be achieved in concert with family and community. Rural schools can help by coordinating with local social service agencies to ensure that families receive the supports that they might need. While rural schools should not be expected to solve all the problems associated with poverty, they have a responsibility to recognize the challenges low-income students face and do what they can to help alleviate some of those challenges. Beyond that, rural communities, and the government agencies that serve
them, must recognize that government programs cannot be the entire solution. Economic
development efforts that bring jobs and people back to rural areas must also play a role.

4 Ibid.
9 US Census Bureau, Measuring America.
10 Slack, "Working Poverty across the Metro-Nonmetro Divide."
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
26 (Litcher, 2012)
29 Martin (2009)
32 Ibid.
34 Department of Health and Human Services, National Advisory Committee on Rural Health and Human Services, https://www.hrsa.gov/advisorycommittees/rural/publications/index.html
35 https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/administration/eop/rural-council
36 Kaiser Family Foundation, https://www.kff.org/health-reform/state-indicator/total-monthly-medicaid-and-chip-enrollment/?currentTimeframe=0&sortModel=%7B%22collId%22:%22Location%22,%22sort%22:%22asc%22%7D.


46 Ibid.


55 Ibid.


59 Sean Reardon, The Widening Income Achievement Gap, May 2013, Volume 70 Number 8, Educational Leadership, pages 10-16.
60 Ibid.