Socioeconomic Status and Child Health Outcomes in Appalachia

Janet Currie

Highlights

- Appalachians are both less healthy and poorer than other Americans.
- There are strong indications that poor health may have its roots in childhood poverty, starting before birth, rather than simply the effects of currently living in poverty.
- This indicates that it could take decades to eradicate adult health disparities between Appalachia and the rest of the country.
- There is not enough research to assess how parental income and its effects on child health translate into intergenerational poverty.
- However, since both smoking and obesity contribute to poor fetal and infant health, policy targeted at preventing these conditions could alleviate future health and income disparities.

Research increasingly indicates poor health in childhood may be important in transmitting health disparities across the income distribution later in life, and that these links are especially pronounced among individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. This may be particularly problematic for families in Appalachia, who tend to be poorer and in worse health than other Americans. For example, the incidence of low birth weight is 90 per 1,000 in rural Appalachia compared to 83 per 1,000 outside the region. At the same time the age-adjusted all cause mortality rate for Appalachians in 2006 was over 900 per 100,000 compared to a rate of 760 per 100,000 for those outside of Appalachia.

Poor health at birth may be linked to issues of access to health care. Indeed, nearly half of women in rural Appalachia must travel to another county to give birth and the fraction of babies born in hospital is declining in Appalachia, compared to a rising trend in the U.S. However, even in Appalachia, less than 2% of babies are born outside a hospital, and evidence suggests the delivery of prenatal and obstetric care may not be greatly affected by this. Nor are trends in these variables likely to explain increases in the incidence of low birth weight over time.

This summary, which is drawn from a wider survey on child health available as a UKCPR discussion paper, focuses instead on links between maternal behaviors, along with socioeconomic status and environmental factors during childhood, as leading causes of higher death rates among adults in Appalachia. If current disparities in childhood are likely to have important future health effects, then the case for ameliorating them becomes even stronger.

Links between Parent’s SES and Child Health

Socioeconomic status isn’t just about what a family can afford but how it uses available resources. Parental education, for example, is often highlighted as something that determines how well parents invest in child health, including quality of health inputs such as better medical care and food, safer toys, housing, and neighborhoods. Currie and Moretti (2003) show that higher rates of maternal college attendance improve infant health. College attendance increases the probability that a new mother is married, reduces parity, increases use of prenatal care, and substantially reduces maternal smoking. Children of lower SES families, on the other hand, are more likely to have worse health at birth, which tends to increase as children age and is related to a higher adult risk of disease, especially cardiovascular disease and diabetes (Barker 1998; Case, et al. 2002). This is now generally known as the “fetal origins hypothesis.”

As depicted in Figure 1, rural, white Appalachian mothers are considerably less likely to have a high school education. Figure 2 shows that smoking is also a significant problem – in rural Appalachia 25% of mothers smoked during pregnancy in 2005, compared to about 12% in the U.S. Similar to the education gap, the differences in smoking rates is predominately a problem among mothers who are white. Smoking is a leading cause of low birth weight. Maternal obesity may also be a factor. Obese women are at higher risk for many complications of pregnancy and delivery, and their infants are more likely to be high birth weight, which has been linked to higher body weight in later life and metabolic disorders such as diabetes. Birth data does not give maternal pre-pregnancy weight but it does record a higher incidence of chronic hypertension – a condition often caused by obesity – among pregnant women in Appalachia.

This all suggests that persistent poverty is likely to have worse effects on health than transitory poverty, since health is affected by past investments.

(Continued on page 3)
In this issue of Insights we highlight the papers presented at our fall 2009 conference Appalachia and the Legacy of the War on Poverty. In April of 1964 President Johnson traveled to Martin County, Kentucky in the heart of Appalachia to launch the nation’s War on Poverty. At the time more than half of Appalachians lived in poverty, many suffered from malnutrition, and basic necessities such as indoor plumbing were the exception in the mountainous rural areas. As the summaries in this issue indicate, progress has been made in the ensuing 45 years to reduce the absolute poverty found in much of Appalachia in the 1960s; however, the region continues to lag behind the rest of the nation in terms of economic development and health, and parts of the central Appalachian region appear to be mired in a poverty trap.

We lead with an article by Janet Currie of Columbia University, who discusses the links between socioeconomic status, child health, and adult outcomes. She finds that Appalachians are in poor health relative to other Americans, and that health disparities start before birth. Moreover, although African Americans are generally in poorer health relative to white Americans, disparities between Appalachia and the rest of the U.S. are much greater for whites. In rural Appalachia 25% of mothers smoked during pregnancy in 2005, compared to about 12% in the U.S., and smoking is a leading cause of low birth weight. Because many poor health outcomes trace their roots to childhood deprivation, it will be difficult to eradicate adult health disparities without significant efforts to improve child health. Currie suggests smoking cessation programs would be a beneficial start.

Earnings inequality increased significantly in the United States over the past three decades, and the summary by Dan Black of the University of Chicago and Seth Sanders of Duke University reveals that Appalachia was not immune to these trends. However they find that there have been large differences in the evolution of the earnings distribution in rural versus urban areas and this is the principal reason that Appalachia’s earnings distribution differs from the remainder of the U.S. The bottom half of the earnings distribution increased in rural counties between 1960 and 1980, both in absolute terms and relative to the bottom half in urban areas. But between 1980 and 2000, urban areas exhibited far more bifurcation of earnings than rural areas. A key factor underlying these trends is slower growth in educational attainment, suggesting that long-term gains in the economic status of Appalachia is to invest more in developing human capital skills.

Matthew Kahn of UCLA surveys economic research on the association between economic development and urban areas, and the attendant implications for the types of place-based policies that might be effective to promote economic growth in the Appalachian region. The fundamental challenges that Appalachia faces is that its cities are comparatively small and located far from the high amenity coasts. Moreover, relative to the rest of the nation its educational attainment is low and its local economies have not specialized in the high tech sector. He concludes that valuable lessons for encouraging the growth of Appalachia’s medium sized cities that emphasize improving household quality of life can be learned from cities such as Pittsburgh that have reinvented themselves as high skill, consumer cities.

Recent changes in family structure have placed upward demographic pressure on poverty rates nationally, and as Daniel Lichter and Lisa Cimbaluk of Cornell University highlight in their article, Appalachian families and children have not been immune to the economic consequences of declining marriage, high rates of nonmarital fertility, and rising numbers of female-headed families, especially in rural areas. The implications of family change for family poverty are larger in Appalachia than in non-Appalachia areas, independent of regional differences in employment opportunities, industrial structure, demographic variables, and unobserved state and county variables. Moreover, family effects, notably those associated with changing female headship, are estimated to be larger than those for conventional economic and human capital variables. Simulations suggest that 1990 to 2005-2007 changes in family poverty would have been roughly 40 percent lower than the observed poverty rate if Appalachian families had not changed since 1990. This suggests that in addition to policies that encourage economic growth, efforts to encourage and maintain “healthy marriages” may provide additional assistance in reducing poverty.

Whether the persistent poverty witnessed in Appalachia is emblematic of a so-called poverty trap is the focus of the article by Steven Durlauf of the University of Wisconsin. He begins by providing a framework to characterize exactly what is and what is not a poverty trap, and noting that although regions per se are the not the usual scale at which poverty traps are studied, there are several aspects of the socioeconomic environment in Central Appalachia that are consistent with a poverty trap. Understanding the causal channels generating a trap are the first step for designing a possible policy response. For example, if a shortage of skilled labor is the problem then a policy response might be to enhance opportunities for formal schooling and training, or to foster in-migration of skilled labor. But, if the trap largely emanates from institutional barriers then political reforms affecting the distribution of resources and political participation may be warranted. Durlauf notes that empirical work is scarce on this fundamental issue and calls for new research on the roots of persistent poverty in Appalachia.
Links between Child Health and Adult Outcomes

The fetal origins hypothesis strongly suggests that conditions in utero affect not only birth weight but features such as basic metabolism, which in turn affect future health. This suggests a long-term impact since adult health is strongly linked to adult economic well-being.

Research by Almond (2006) and Almond and Mazumder (2005) examined people affected in utero by the influenza epidemic of 1918 when approximately a third of women of child-bearing age were infected. They show that those affected were more likely to suffer from diabetes, stroke, activity limitations, cancer, hypertension, and heart problems and reported poorer general health status as adults. In addition, they were found to be 15 percent less likely to graduate from high school, and that wages were lowered by 5 to 9 percent.

Studies of the long-term effects of low birth weight using sibling comparisons yield similar evidence. Comparing mothers who are sisters, Currie and Moretti (2007) found the sister who was low birth weight is three percent more likely to live in a poor area at the time she delivers her own child, and three percent less likely to be married when she gives birth.

Toxic exposures are a particular concern in Appalachia where coal mining may lead to exposures to toxins such as arsenic, cadmium, lead, and mercury. But there has been little study of the extent to which pollution due to coal mines or other heavy industries is associated with poor health. Lead has been shown to decrease IQ by two to five points for each 10 to 20 microg/DL above the current standard (Pочек et al., 1994). Government tracking of lead poisoning is not especially precise but lead poisoning hot spots persist and some of them are in Appalachia.

Conclusion

Several studies suggest that early, even fetal, health insults may have large effects on future earnings and/or employment probabilities. This suggests that the best way to safeguard children’s health may be to safeguard the health of their pregnant (or pre-pregnant) mothers. It also suggests that standard measures of child health after birth (such as birth weight) don’t fully capture the effects of these fetal health deficits.

Studies also show intergenerational correlations in health status and interactions between parental health and economic status in achieving child health. The fetal origins literature provides a natural explanation of why this might be. But few researchers have tried to show how parental impact on child health affects transmitting wealth between generations, and the impact of poor childhood health on adult education and income.

What are the implications for Appalachia? It is common to blame the bad health of Appalachian adults on disparities in current access to medical care. However, the research suggests that they may have their roots in childhood deprivation. This suggests it will be difficult to eradicate adult health disparities and work must be done to improve child health if adult health in Appalachia is ever to be brought up to national levels. The large numbers of pregnant Appalachian women who smoke or have obesity-related conditions are of particular concern. Since both are best treated with prevention, a larger role for public health campaigns targeting these behaviors seems to be warranted.

Janet Currie is Sami Mnaymneh Professor of Economics at Columbia University and Director of the National Bureau of Economic Research’s Program on Children.

Selected References


Trends in Earnings Inequality in Appalachia, 1960-2000

Dan A. Black and Seth G. Sanders

Highlights

• Between 1960 and 1980 average income for working-aged men in Appalachia moved closer to the national norm. However, that trend reversed in the next two decades. By 2000 it was at approximately the same level relative to the U.S. as in 1960.
• The pattern is also different in sub-regions of Appalachia. The central region flourished between 1960 and 1980, but lost ground in the next two decades; Northern Appalachia held steady through 1980, then declined; while in Southern Appalachia relative income rose in both periods.
• Appalachia is largely rural, with few cities, and income trends track very closely to those in other rural areas in the U.S.
• The decline in relative earnings among rural Appalachian men can be attributed to a decline at the top of the earnings distribution. This can be explained by a slower growth (compared to urban areas) in the rate of college attainment among men at the high end of the earnings distribution.

When President Lyndon Johnson opened fire on poverty in Appalachia by signing the Appalachian Regional Development Act of 1965, he was addressing an area that lagged far behind the rest of the country. In 1960 per capita income in Appalachia was 77 percent of the national average and 31 percent of the region’s residents subsisted below the federal poverty line, compared to 22 percent nationally.

On the face of it, things have changed dramatically. In 1999 per capita income was 84 percent of the national average and the poverty rate was 13.6 percent in Appalachia. And the typical Appalachian county had a median household income that was 89 percent of the median for the typical U.S. county.

Despite these developments, they do not tell the whole story. To better understand the complexity of trends in earning capacity both across space and time, we focus our attention on the earnings of men aged 25 to 64 between 1960 and 2000.

Earnings Trends among Men in Appalachia

In 1960 prime-age working men in Appalachia earned 80 percent as much as their peers in the rest of the country. Some 40 years later that had barely moved.

But breaking down the era into two 20-year time periods tells a different story. In 1980 men in Appalachia earned 85 percent of those outside the region, an increase attributable to the boom in the coal industry in the ’60s and ’70s. In the subsequent two decades inflation-adjusted income among men in Appalachia continued to grow but without the engine of a booming coal sector it lagged growth in the rest of the country and so sank to the 81 percent level in 2000.

Within the region divergent stories also emerge. This can be seen in Figure 1, which displays trends in men’s earnings within the three major Appalachian regions. In Central Appalachia – the most coal-reliant region – the average male income rose from 57 percent to 72 percent of that of non-Appalachian men between 1960 and 1980. But, between 1980 and 2000 inflation-adjusted income of Central Appalachian men fell 9 percent so that by the end of the century they were earning 58 percent of the income of non-Appalachian men, almost where they had started in 1960.

The patterns are quite different in Northern and Southern Appalachia. In the north, men’s income averaged about 90 percent of those outside Appalachia in 1960, stayed at about that level through 1980 and then fell to about 80 percent by 2000. Almost the reverse is seen in Southern Appalachia, where male incomes rose...
Inequality in Appalachia

from about 70 percent of non-Appalachian levels in 1960 to 81 percent in 1980 and 86 percent in 2000.

The Role of Urban Areas for Male Earnings

The big story in the data for this 40 year period is the relative earnings in rural versus urban areas within the United States. In 1960, low earning urban residents (at the 25th percentile of earnings) earned 80 percent more than low earning rural residents. Relative earnings tended to converge moving up the scale, and by the 90th percentile, urban residents earned 20 percent more than rural residents. By 1980, urban residents across the entire earnings distribution earned about 20 percent more than rural residents, reflecting a two-decade convergence in earnings at the lower end of the distribution.

Between 1980 and 2000, a clear pattern developed: the relative earnings of rural residents at the bottom of the earnings distribution continued to rise while the relative earnings of rural residents at the top of the distribution fell. Both trends were more evident in urban than rural areas, but the pace of increase in the 90th percentile was striking. While county level rises in the upper end of the earnings distribution were evident in large urban areas throughout the country, in many rural areas earnings at the 90th percentile actually fell between 1980 and 2000. The one area of Appalachia that did experience a rise in the 90th percentile was in Southern Appalachia, in the counties surrounding Charlotte, NC and Atlanta, GA. The northern and southern regions within Appalachia, however, generally reflected the trends in rural areas outside Appalachia.

Human Capital and Earnings

How can we account for these differential trends in rural and urban areas? We investigate two logical possibilities - differences in long-term trends in educational attainment, as well as the return to a college degree. In 1980, residents of rural Appalachia had lower levels of education than non-Appalachian men at every point in the earnings distribution. For example, at the 25th percentile, 86 percent of men in rural Appalachia had a high school degree or less, compared to 77 percent in other rural areas and 61 percent in urban areas. Between 1980 and 2000, it is clear that educational attainment at the bottom of the earnings distribution rose in rural Appalachia relative to urban areas in the U.S. On net, the fraction of men who were high school dropouts at the 25th percentile fell 11.9 percentage points faster in rural Appalachia than in urban areas and the fraction who were high school graduates rose 12.4 percentage points faster. Since high school graduates earn considerably more than high school dropouts (20% more in 1980 and 29%-38% more in 2000) this shift in relative education is no doubt a primary reason that the low end of the earnings distribution declined less in Appalachian and other rural areas relative to urban areas. The story at the upper end of the earnings distribution is more complicated. Over time, men in rural areas (including those within rural Appalachia) at the top of the earnings distribution were more likely to be college graduates. For example, between 1980 and 2000 the fraction that were college graduates at the 90th percentile increased by 8.1 percentage points in rural non-Appalachian counties, and by 9.9 percent in rural Appalachian counties. But at the same time, the fraction of men who were college graduates at the 90th percentile of the urban earnings distribution increased even faster (16.2 percentage points). This partly explains the 1980-2000 decrease in relative earnings among rural (as well as Appalachian) men at the top of the earnings distribution.

A second possible reason for the decline in relative earnings among high-earning, rural men may be rooted in differential trends in the economic returns to a college degree. Across the country, the return to college education doubled between 1980 and 2000. However, there is evidence that non-Appalachian rural areas did not experience the rapid rise in the returns to college education that urban areas did. Interestingly, Appalachian rural counties did see returns similar to those found in urban areas. Thus, it seems that the relative decline in earnings at the upper end of the distribution in rural areas is due to urban-rural differences in trends both in educational attainment and the returns to a college degree outside of Appalachia, and solely to differences in trends in educational attainment within Appalachia.

Conclusion

This research shows that working-age men in Appalachia still lag behind the rest of the United States in terms of income and employment. Although relative income differences are on average only slightly better in 2000 than in 1960, there were significant changes within Appalachia and at various points in the earnings distribution. An important factor underlying these trends is slower growth in educational attainment, especially at the baccalaureate and professional levels, suggesting that a key to long-term improvement in the economic status of Appalachian men is to invest more in developing human capital skills.

Dan A. Black is Professor of Public Policy at the University of Chicago and a Senior Fellow at the National Opinion Research Center. Seth G. Sanders is a Professor of Economics and Public Policy at Duke University.

Selected References


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Welfare Reform and Its Long-Term Consequences for America’s Poor

Edited by James P. Ziliak
University of Kentucky

Two decades of federal and state-level demonstration projects and experiments concerning cash welfare in the United States culminated with the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, better known as welfare reform. Ten years after reform there remain a host of unanswered questions on the well-being of low-income families. In Welfare Reform and Its Long Term Consequences for America’s Poor, many of the nation’s leading poverty experts address these and related outcomes to assess the longer-term effects of welfare reform. A diverse array of survey and administrative data are brought to bear to examine the effects of welfare reform and the concomitant expansions of the Earned Income Tax Credit on the level and distribution of income, the composition of consumption, employment, public versus private health insurance coverage, health and education outcomes of children, marriage, and social service delivery.

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1. What we know, what we don’t know, and what we need to know about welfare reform Rebecca Blank;
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3. How have expansions in the earned income tax credit affected family expenditures? Qin Gao, Neeraj Kaushal, and Jane Waldfogel;
4. How families are doing nine years after welfare reform: 2005 evidence from the three-city study Bianca Frogner, Robert Moffitt, and David Ribar;
5. The impact of welfare reform on juvenile characteristics, employment and recidivism Peter R. Mueser, David W. Stevens, and Kenneth R. Troske;
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8. The effects of welfare and child support policies on the incidence of marriage following a nonmarital birth Jean Knab, Irv Garfinkel, Sara McLanahan, Emily Moldwith and Cynthia Osborne;
10. Mismatches and unmet need: access to social services in urban and rural America Scott W. Allard.

Reviews

'This volume brings together some of the best research from across the social sciences and provides a nuanced assessment of the key consequences of welfare reform. The authors lay out important lessons of the previous decade and the implications of the successes - and failures - of welfare reform. The volume is particularly timely as we confront the pressing challenge of designing policies that effectively support poor families in the current economic environment.' Maria Cancian, University of Wisconsin, Madison

'The poor did remarkably well in the immediate aftermath of welfare reform, but the booming economy may have been responsible. Since September 11, the economy has endured wage stagnation and recession. This book, edited by James Ziliak, provides a comprehensive and penetrating look at how the poor have fared in this new, less favorable, environment. The experts assembled in this volume examine everything from earnings, income, and consumption to health insurance and child well-being. This book may provide the definitive coda to the analysis of the great welfare reform experiment of 1996.' Janet Currie, Columbia University

‘James Ziliak and his colleagues present a balanced 10-year retrospective on “end of welfare as we knew it.” Using sophisticated research methods, they document that the 1996 federal welfare reform had both positive and negative effects on single mothers and their children. Welfare caseloads fell dramatically and mothers’ work efforts increased substantially. However, child poverty remains high and because many former welfare recipients have limited labor market prospects, some never found steady work. Congress must re-authorize welfare reform in 2010. Researchers and policy makers looking for ways to offset the negative effects of the 1996 reform should read this book.’ Sheldon Danziger, University of Michigan

‘More than 10 years have passed since the landmark federal welfare reform in 1996. This exceptional volume provides important new research on the long-run impacts of welfare reform on the well-being of America’s poor families. Top poverty experts are brought together and analyze a wide range of outcomes such as the health and school performance of children and the income, marital structure, and spending patterns of the family. The result in a cohesive, insightful, and somewhat surprising story of the current status of our safety net and disadvantaged families. Welfare Reform and Its Long Term Consequences for America’s Poor is a must-read for anyone interested in this critical issue of the day.’ Hilary Hoynes, University of California, Davis

‘Welfare Reform and Its Long Term Consequences for America’s Poor, the first major treatment of welfare reform’s effects to a widely read book on both pre- and post-reform data, provides important information not available elsewhere. The volume opens with an excellent introductory essay by the editor and Rebecca Blank’s thoughtful review of the state of research on welfare reform. The empirical chapters that follow set their issues in the context of welfare reform and previous research and present a wealth of descriptive information and statistical findings. The contributing authors include well-established experts and younger ones who are among the best of a new generation of scholars on poverty and welfare. For anyone concerned about American poverty and social policy in the academy, research and advocacy organizations, and public agencies, this volume will be essential reading.’ Robert Plotnick, University of Washington

Cambridge Press for ordering:
Cities and Economic Development in Appalachia

Matthew E. Kahn

Highlights

- Appalachia has very few cities
- Cities are a key engine of economic growth
- Cities must offer both economic opportunity and quality of life to thrive
- Strategies to develop larger cities in Appalachia could include investing in local universities and developing retirement communities.

Appalachia does not have very many cities and those it does have tend to be small. Only three of the 428 counties in the region have a population of more than 500,000. Moreover, as shown in Table 1, Appalachia’s small cities consistently fall in the lower half on quality of life and productivity rankings.

The state of Appalachian cities presents a problem because cities are critical engines of economic growth. In cities for Appalachia’s persistent earnings weakness. Wages in the region’s rural areas are on par with the rest of rural America, it is the urban areas where wages are lower.

Cities and Economic Development

Today’s mega cities offer both quality of life and economic opportunity. They reflect a “virtuous cycle” in which higher quality of life attracts highly skilled workers which in turns encourages growth. With a highly skilled workforce, these cities have more flexibility to adapt to external changes. Typically, they are located on or near a coast, in a temperate weather zone and are considered “green cities.”

The fundamental challenge that Appalachia faces is that it does not embody the “time tested” formula for achieving ongoing urban growth. Appalachian cities are far from the coasts and most have cold winters. In addition, much of the economy of much of the region has focused on extracting natural resources from the ground. The water and air pollution and scars on the mountains that are a legacy of mining offset the industrial engines of economic growth. In cities it contains that are a legacy of mining offset the rural resources from the ground. The water and air pollution and scars on the mountains that are a legacy of mining offset the quality of life and economic opportunity. Social networks, family and friends are born.

Table One: Quality of Life and Human Capital in Appalachian Cities: Evidence from 2000

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Place-Based Economic Policies

While there is debate within the economic community about whether local efforts to stimulate an economy benefit those who live there or simply encourage in-migration, evidence suggests that in Appalachia the benefits might accrue to residents. Research on the phenomenon of coal price swings finds that Appalachians leave the area during depressed times but people who live outside don’t come in during boom times. However, there is evidence that during coal boom out-migration falls and some prime-working-aged men who had left the region returned. Poverty levels also declined during the booms.

If this finding can be applied generally, then Appalachia must focus on a “grow your own” strategy of educating young people and encouraging a significant number to stay in the region through economic opportunity, social networks, family and the desire to live in the place where you were born.

Would that strategy, if effective, increase housing costs? It doesn’t seem likely since in Appalachia, unlike mega cities such as New York and San Francisco, land is abundant and restrictions on housing are few. With those factors in place, growing demand would increase construction (coincidently also increasing employment) rather than result in bidding up the cost of existing housing.

Taken as a given that we want to increase the productivity and quality of life in Appalachia, what investment is appropriate? Recent research has shown that investing in “million dollar plants” improves public finances and has spillover gains for other manufacturing industries in a region. However, there is evidence that such plants choose to locate in anti-union states. In Appalachia, seven of the 13 states, and most of the northern states are pro-union so that strategy probably wouldn’t be broadly effective.

A more promising strategy is investing in research universities. When the Swedish government decided to decentralize post-secondary education it offered a natural experiment on the impact of locating universities where there had previously been none. Researchers found that creating a university raised local productivity and local patent counts. There are several possible collateral benefits to creating a new university or investing in an existing one. It will attract and retain high skilled faculty and students and encourage private consulting firms that make use of those skilled individuals. That could, in turn, encourage more students to remain in the area, attracting or creating other startup firms. Small cities like Ann Arbor, Michigan have successfully pursued this course to create a
Family Structure and Poverty in Appalachia

Daniel T. Lichter and Lisa A. Cimbaluk

Highlights

- Family structure, especially the rise of single parent households, is often touted as a cause of poverty.
- In regions of persistent poverty such as Appalachia the family is viewed as a source of strength. Family decline is seen as a consequence not a cause of poverty.
- Since the 1960s poverty in Appalachia fell faster than in the nation as a whole, and a lower fraction of families in the region are headed by a single mother.
- Even so, the rise of female headship in Appalachia mitigated poverty declines in the region from economic growth and industrial restructuring more than in the nation overall.
- In conjunction with policies that encourage economic growth, efforts to encourage and maintain "healthy marriages" may provide additional assistance in reducing poverty.

Trends over the past several decades show that fewer people are getting married, divorce rates remain at historic highs and more women are having children outside marriage than ever before. Against that backdrop, statistics nationwide draw a strong link between family structure and economic well-being. The poverty rate among female-headed families, 28.7 percent in 2008, far outstrips that of married-couple families, 5.5 percent. The poverty rate for children living with single mothers was 43.4 percent.

Rightly or not, marriage is increasingly viewed as a panacea. However, in historically disadvantaged rural areas with entrenched poverty, such as Appalachia, family decline is often viewed as a consequence of poverty rather than a cause. Most ethnographic studies have found that for Appalachians family is often seen as a source of strength during hard times. Appalachians, especially those living in the most remote regions, are more likely to see family as a casualty of hard times rather than a cause of them.

The goal of this study is to focus on the poverty implications of changing family structure in Appalachia as a counterbalance to the current preoccupation with employment and income growth. This topic has particular relevance now as marriage promotion has taken on a larger role in discussions about how best to improve the economic circumstances of low-income, welfare-dependent mothers and their children.

The Trend of Family Change in Appalachia

Appalachia has been touched by the national trends in family structure but poverty in the region has declined much more substantially there than in the rest of the country since the 1960s. The nature of poverty in Appalachia is also distinct. In the rest of the country the poorest people are urban, inner-city minorities while in Appalachia the most severe and persistent poverty is among rural white people.

Although national trends in family structure changes are apparent in Appalachia there are also significant differences in the fate of families. Unlike the nation as a whole, the majority of Appalachian families living in poverty are headed by married couples. It is important to be cautious about drawing conclusions about the impact of increasing divorce rates on poverty in a region where many two-parent families live in poverty. The breakup of a poor married-couple family that transitions into a poor-single-parent family will not change family poverty rates.

While female-headed families have increased in the Appalachian, it has been at a slower rate than in the rest of the nation. In the past 40 years Appalachia has had a slightly smaller share of never-married women but higher percentages of divorced. The percentage households headed by "at risk" single mothers is also slightly smaller in Appalachia, 6.2 percent, than in the rest of the U.S., 7.3 percent. Collectively these data indicate that family structure may be less strongly associated with poverty in Appalachia than in the rest of the nation.

Poverty and Female-Headed Families in Appalachia

In our study we use county-level data from the 1990 and 2000 Decennial Census, coupled with 2005-2007 data from the American Community Survey, to estimate models of the determinants of poverty as a function of family structure, demographics, local economic conditions, and industrial structure. We also include controls for those local factors that likely affect poverty but are not readily measured, using so-called county fixed effects.

Both for the nation as a whole, and for Appalachia, we find strong evidence that changing family structure mitigated the anti-poverty effectiveness of economic growth as measured by declining unemployment rates or rising employment rates. In the decade of the 1990s...
female headship in Appalachian counties increased by 1.2 percentage points and by 2.3 percentage points in the current decade. If these changes in female headship had not occurred then poverty in Appalachia would have been 10 to 15 percent lower, the range of estimates reflecting different experience in metro and non-metro locations as well as in the Central versus Non-Central Appalachian region.

**Conclusion**

Our statistical analysis found that the effects of changes in family structure were larger than those for changes in conventional economic and human capital variables, such as education. Our modeling found that family poverty would have been roughly 10 to 15 percent lower if there had been no change in family patterns. These findings could support the case for intervention based on strengthening or sustaining marriages as a legitimate approach to fighting poverty in addition to traditional methods aimed at promoting economic growth and job creation.

Daniel T. Lichter is Professor of Policy Analysis and Management and Sociology, and Director of the Bronfenbrenner Life Course Center at Cornell University. Lisa A. Cimbaluk is a doctoral candidate at Cornell University.

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**Some Reflections on Poverty Traps and Implications for Appalachia**

**Steven N. Durlauf**

**Highlights**

- Poverty traps can emerge when poverty is persistent, it is not self-correcting, and it is perpetuated by the institutions and culture of the region.
- Regions are agglomerations of individuals, and high local poverty rates do not provide prima facie evidence of a poverty trap.
- However, with its low levels of human capital and complex migration patterns, Central Appalachia has many characteristics emblematic of a poverty trap.
- Although there is important qualitative work on the origins of persistent poverty in Appalachia, recent empirical evidence is scant.

The paucity of empirical work on poverty traps in Appalachia should not by itself deter policymakers from considering interventions to alleviate poverty. There is a large body of work on poverty traps. A significant portion of it includes discussions of country-level forces to understand continuing deprivation in much of the developing world. But another field of research addresses the phenomenon of poverty traps in otherwise affluent countries, such as the United States. Most of this work has examined neighborhood-level poverty traps, with ghettos as a prime example.

Although regions are typically not the scale under which poverty traps are analyzed, there is no a priori reason that they cannot be as regions such as Appalachia are influenced both by aggregate and local level economic factors underlying persistent poverty. Beyond knowledge of whether a poverty trap is in evidence, one would like to know the underlying sources in order to design an appropriate policy response. This summary provides some general ideas on how to conceptualize poverty traps and discusses the applicability to understanding Appalachian poverty.

**Characteristics of Poverty Traps**

The term ‘poverty trap’ is ubiquitous in economic development circles, and yet despite extensive research there is not an accepted definition. However, the term does consistently encompass three distinct and compatible characteristics: (i) poverty is highly persistent; (ii) poverty is not self-correcting, meaning that in some cases poverty can be perpetuated indefinitely; and (iii) poverty is perpetuated by features of the environment, such as the institutions and culture.

There is an important distinction between the first two characteristics and the third. The first two refer specifically to the income process, how much people make and the duration of income levels. These often reflect the supply of and demand for human capital, and the interaction of the two sides of the labor market. The third characteristic, though, refers to the super-numerary reasons why – the environmental mechanisms – that account for an income deficit. Examples of the latter include the diversity of work opportunities (or lack thereof in the case of ‘coal towns’), the concentration of control over physical and financial capital, the level of participation in the political process, and amenities such as the arts or outdoor recreation opportunities.

A fundamental issue in modern poverty theories, whether addressing nations, local areas, or individuals, is that they involve the interplay of many factors in creating a poverty trap, as is suggested by both the second and third characteristics. This makes it difficult to assess the role of any one factor.

And yet understanding the causal channels are critical for the design of a well-targeted policy response. For example, if a poverty trap emerges because of a shortage of skilled labor then a policy response might be to enhance opportunities for formal schooling and training. If a quality labor force is available but there is a shortage of skilled jobs then the policy response might be to subsidize firms to locate in an area. And if the trap largely emanates from institutional barriers then political reforms affecting the distribution of resources and political participation may be warranted. The prospect that all three channels are present at once is logical to expect, and thus the policy response to address the poverty trap needs to be multi-pronged.

Is (Central) Appalachia Emblematic of a Poverty Trap?

Although Appalachia has a history of persistently high rates of poverty, examined through the characteristics listed above that alone does not constitute a prima facie case that the region is in fact a poverty trap. Regions are made up of individuals and the traits of a region – such as high rates of poverty – do not really tell anything about the dynamics that contribute to individual poverty. Factors such as

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**Selected References**


Implications for Appalachia

In-migration of poor people could affect the poverty level without regard to underlying local conditions. Moreover, the poverty rate in isolation does not tell anything about the environment, such as a weak tax for investment in education, the dominance of a single industry that discourages other economic activity or social norms about education that can contribute to creating and maintaining a poverty trap.

There have been qualitative and historical studies of Appalachia as a poverty trap (Duncan 1999; Billings and Blee 2000), but formal empirical tests are lacking. Even lacking extensive statistical evidence it is still possible to make a case for regarding Appalachia as a poverty trap. Beyond the fact of consistent high levels of poverty in Appalachia, it is common to find terms such as “culture of poverty” applied to the region. This is most applicable in the central region of Appalachia encompassing eastern Kentucky and the bordering counties of Virginia and West Virginia.

Observable, measurable factors in Central Appalachia, such as education attainment, can also suggest a poverty trap. Low investment in human capital, a characteristic of Appalachia, can certainly be proposed as an underlying mechanism in a poverty trap.

Appalachia’s complex migration patterns can also suggest a poverty trap. It would be reasonable to expect that the socioeconomic conditions in Appalachia would result in significant out-migration. But Central Appalachia had considerable inflows as well as outflows in the late 1990s. Obermiller and Howe found that the region’s outflow of more skilled adult workers was balanced by an inflow of less skilled individuals. In another study, Baum and Reagan argue that just over one eighth of the gap in college graduates between Appalachia and the rest of the nation can be attributed to migration.

The puzzling migration patterns raise questions about the role of social interactions. Why is out-migration of skilled workers not higher, considering that the return on human capital is demonstrably lower in the region? The fact that low skilled workers choose to relocate to Appalachia argues against the region as a poverty trap.

Inflation factors ranging from the quality of legal and political institutions to geography can plausibly be offered to explain poverty but are very difficult to measure. In fact, there are many of these social interactions that can arguably affect individual behavior and outcomes but are difficult to identify and to measure. This problem has led to considerable disagreement about the importance of social interactions in economic success or failure.

As a result of the challenges to identifying poverty traps and the factors that contribute to creating and perpetuating them, the literature provides very little guidance on policy to address them. This should not, however, be taken as a reason to avoid policy interventions. Rather, as discussed in the article by Matthew Kahn, the focus should be on developing policies that can be effective in different environments rather than under just one set of circumstances. This includes investing in the education of the residents of Appalachia, marketing the attractive environmental amenities of the region, and reorganizing the political and economic organization of the region to attract a diverse set of employment opportunities.

Steven N. Durlauf is Kenneth J. Arrow Professor of Economics at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

Center for Poverty Research Discussion Paper Series

The following discussion papers have been recently added to the UKCPR Discussion Paper Series Web page, located at http://www.ukcpr.org/DiscussionPapers.aspx.

“The Importance of Region and Welfare Policy for Disconnected Single Mothers.” Author: Andrea Hetling, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

The proportion of single mothers in poverty not receiving public assistance or participating in the formal employment sector has approximately doubled over the past decade. Many of the currently debated policy options to support these families focus on state level programs. However, little is known about the relationships between state welfare program characteristics and disconnectedness. Using the Survey of Income and Program Participation and the Urban Institute’s Welfare Rules Database, the current research compares the circumstances of these at-risk mothers in southern versus nonsouthern states and examines the influence of state welfare policies on the probability of becoming disconnected.

“The Impact of U.S. Family Planning Programs on Fertility and Mortality: Evidence from the War on Poverty and Title X.” Author: Martha J. Bailey, University of Michigan

Over forty years ago, the U.S. government adopted a policy of funding domestic family planning services, and the effects of these programs have been debated ever since. Within an event-study framework, I exploit community-level variation in the timing of federal grants for family planning services under the Economic Opportunity Act (1965 to 1974) and Title X (1970 to 1980) to evaluate their impact. The results provide robust evidence that federal family planning grants reduced birth rates in funded communities by four percent within six years. I find no evidence that family planning grants reduced maternal or infant mortality rates.

“Assessing the Impact of a Modernized Application Process on Florida’s Food Stamp Caseload.” Authors: Colleen Hefflin and Peter Mueser, University of Missouri

In 2005, Florida implemented an internet-based service delivery system for eligibility determination in public assistance programs, including the Food Stamp, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and the Medicaid programs. At the same time, Florida switched from a caseworker model to a technology-driven model and decreased staffing levels of employees involved in social service delivery. We conduct an evaluative case study of the effects of these policy changes on the Food Stamp caseload. Results suggest that modernization may have resulted in decreases in application and inflows to the Food Stamp program but with important differences for specific demographic groups.
Center for Poverty Research Discussion

Paper Series

“The Organization of Discipline: From Performance Management to Perversity and Punishment.” Authors: Joe Soss, University of Minnesota, Richard Fording, University of Kentucky, and Sanford Schram, Bryn Mawr College

This study examines how familial contexts affect poverty disparities between the children of immigrant and US-born Blacks, and among Black and non-Black children of immigrants. Despite lower gross child poverty rates in immigrant than US-born Black families, accounting for differences in family structure reveals that child poverty risks among Blacks are highest in single-parent Black immigrant families. In addition, although the heads of Black immigrant households have more schooling than those of native-Black households, increased schooling has a weaker negative association with child poverty among the former than the latter. Several additional findings are reported.

“In this paper we offer new evidence on earnings and income volatility in the United States over the past four decades by using matched data from the March Current Population Survey. We find that between 1973 and 2008 family income volatility rose by 38 percent, primarily as a result of higher volatility of husbands earnings and non means-tested nonlabor income. Rising family income volatility is in evidence across race, education, and family structure, and after declining sharply while young, it is increasing in the latter part of the life cycle among the skilled.”

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“Bilingual Education and English Proficiency.” Author: Christopher Jepsen, University of Kentucky

English Learners, students who are not proficient in English and speak a non-English language at home, make up more than 10 percent of the nation’s K-12 student body. Achieving proficiency in English for these students is a major goal of both state and federal education policy, motivating the provision of bilingual education policies. In contrast, there is little difference between bilingual education and other programs for students in grades three through five. These results hold across fixed effects, propensity score, and instrumental variables models.

In addition, although the heads of Black immigrant households have more schooling than those of native-Black households, increased schooling has a weaker negative association with child poverty among the former than the latter. Several additional findings are reported.

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“Intergenerational effects of welfare reform.” Authors: Amalia Miller, University of Virginia, and Lei Zhang, Clemson University

This paper estimates the impact of the fundamental welfare reforms of the 1990s on the educational attainment of children in low-income families. Using data from national surveys of individuals and administrative records of school districts spanning the period from the early 1990s to the mid-2000s, we estimate the net effects of welfare reform in a difference-in-differences framework. We find that low- and high-income children experience statistically indistinguishable time trends in outcomes prior to reform, whereas in sharp contrast, in the period following welfare reform, low-income children experience significant and growing relative gains in educational attainment.

“Objective and subjective residential context and urban children’s weight status and physical and sedentary activities.” Authors: Rachel Tolbert Kimbro, Rice University, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, Columbia University, and Sara McLanahan, Princeton University

Child overweight remains a significant public health issue, with approximately one-third of children overweight or obese and 16% obese. Very little work has examined the associations between children’s activities, neighborhood characteristics, and weight status, using nationally representative data. This paper fills this gap. We find that outdoor play is negatively associated with weight status, while television watching is positively associated with weight status. We also find, unexpectedly, that the poorest children are playing outdoors the most and watching the most television. Finally, we find that three measures of residential context are positively associated with children’s physical activity, but that neighborhood socioeconomic disadvantage is not.

2010-2011 Funding Opportunities from UKCPR

Regional Small Grants Program

We seek proposals for research on the causes, consequences, and correlates of poverty in the American South. Applicants to the Regional Small Grants Program must hold a Ph.D. or equivalent academic degree by September 1, 2009 and must have a full-time academic appointment. The UKCPR anticipates funding 3 proposals, up to a maximum of $20,000 per award. Full application details are available at [http://www.ukcpr.org/Small-Grants.aspx](http://www.ukcpr.org/Small-Grants.aspx).

Young Investigators Development Grant Program

The UKCPR seeks proposals from untenured, junior faculty within seven years of receipt of the Ph.D. for social science research on issues salient to low-income populations residing in the U.S. Applicants must hold a Ph.D. or equivalent degree by September 1, 2010. The UKCPR anticipates funding 3 proposals, up to a maximum of $7,500 per award. Full application details are available at [http://www.ukcpr.org/YIDGP.aspx](http://www.ukcpr.org/YIDGP.aspx).

Emerging Scholars Program

This program offers young scholars in social and behavioral sciences the opportunity to visit the UKCPR. Eligibility is open to scholars holding a Ph.D., with preference given to those who graduated in the last six years. The UKCPR will consider nominations and applications for the 2010 academic year on an ongoing basis. Full application details are available at [http://www.ukcpr.org/EmergingScholars.aspx](http://www.ukcpr.org/EmergingScholars.aspx).