

## More Poor Kids in More Poor Places Children Increasingly Live Where Poverty Persists

MARYBETH J. MATTINGLY, KENNETH M. JOHNSON, AND ANDREW SCHAEFER

Despite President Johnson's declaration of a War on Poverty nearly fifty years ago, poverty remains pervasive. Child poverty is particularly widespread. Nearly 22 percent of America's children live in poverty,<sup>1</sup> compared with 14 percent of the total population.<sup>2</sup> Poverty is geographically concentrated, and it ebbs and flows with economic cycles. However, in some parts of the country, especially in rural counties, poverty has persisted for generations.

Persistent high poverty is more prevalent among children than the population as a whole. We find persistent child poverty (defined on page 2) in nearly twice as many U.S. counties as those that report high persistent poverty across all age groups. In all, 342 counties have experienced persistently high levels of poverty across all age groups during the past twenty-nine years. In contrast, more than 700 counties experienced persistent child poverty over the same period (see Figure 1). Our purpose in this brief is to identify those counties where child poverty has persisted, describe their geographic distribution, and identify their characteristics. We find that persistent child poverty is spatially concentrated in parts of the country, and that it occurs across racial-ethnic groups.

### High Child Poverty in Recent Years

In 2010, 22 percent of American children lived in poverty, with rates significantly higher for those in rural areas and in urban cores (over 25 percent for each).<sup>3</sup> The American Community Survey from 2009 shows that child poverty was particularly high among children residing in homes headed by a single mother (40 percent)<sup>4</sup> and among racial minorities (36 percent of black and 31 percent of Hispanic children were poor).<sup>5</sup> Many of these children are growing up in places where high child poverty has persisted for decades.

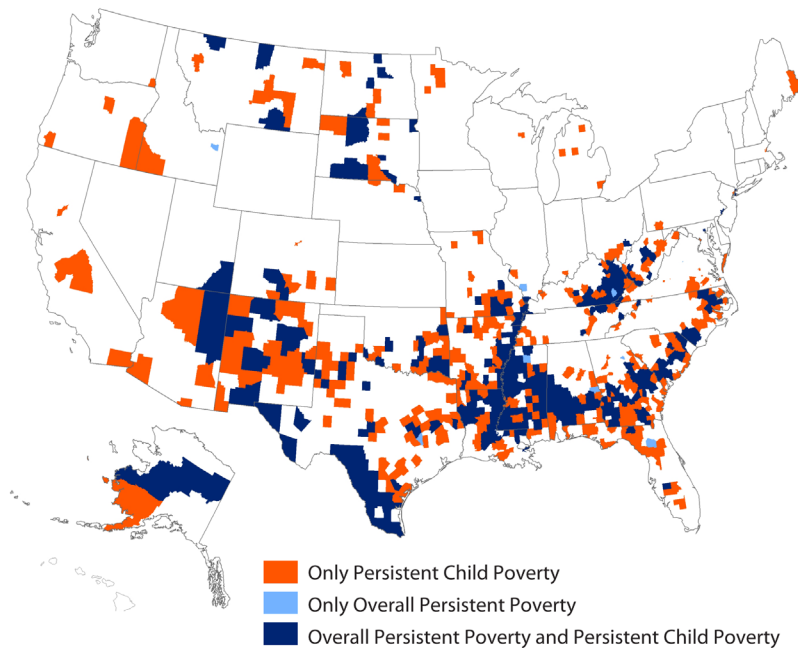
### Key Findings

- More than twice as many counties experienced persistent child poverty than experienced persistent poverty across all ages between 1980 and 2009.
- Between 1980 and 2009, 706 U.S. counties (23 percent) experienced persistent high child poverty.
- Rural areas are disproportionately likely to have persistent high child poverty; 81 percent of counties with persistent high child poverty are nonmetropolitan while only 65 percent of all U.S. counties are nonmetropolitan.
- Overall, 26 percent of rural children reside in counties whose poverty rates have been persistently high. This compares with 12 percent of urban children.
- Counties with persistent child poverty cluster in Appalachia, the Mississippi Delta, other areas of the Southeast, parts of the Southwest, and in the Great Plains.
- During the recent recession, there was a dramatic increase in the number of persistent high child poverty counties with child poverty greater than 30 percent. Between 2005 and 2007, 484 persistently poor counties averaged greater than 30 percent of children in poverty. Between 2008 and 2009, the number rose to 556.

### High Child Poverty Over Time

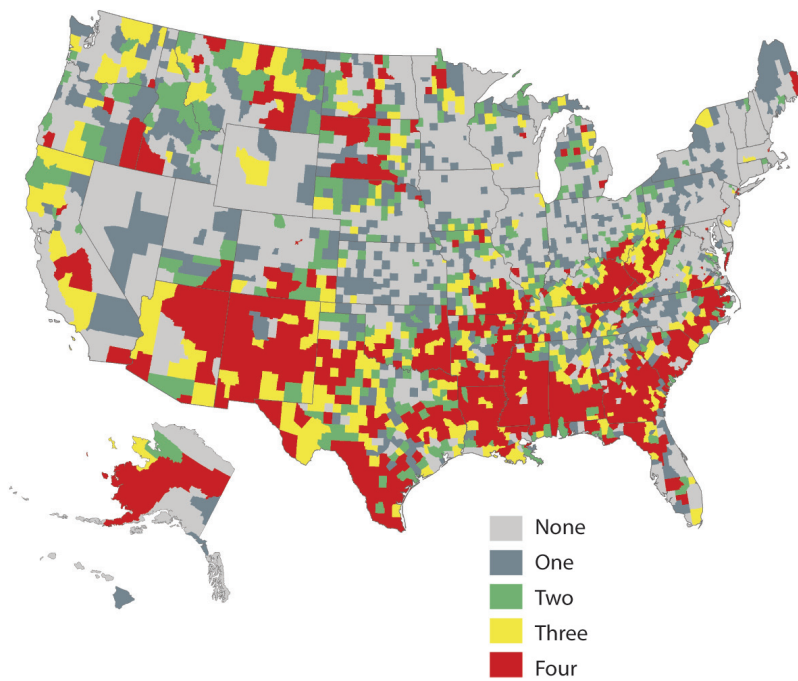
Before addressing the distribution of persistent child poverty, we first consider the number of decades of high child poverty in each county. We find clear evidence of spatial clustering of child poverty in several "hot spots" (see Figure 2). High child poverty is evident in the Southeast, particularly in the

FIGURE 1. OVERALL AND PERSISTENT CHILD POVERTY, 1980-2009



Source: U.S. Census Bureau: 1980-2000, ACS 2005-2009

FIGURE 2. NUMBER OF DECADES OF HIGH CHILD POVERTY (1980, 1990, 2000, AND 2009 SNAPSHOTS)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau: 1980-2000, ACS 2005-2009

## Definitions

A major reason for the widespread concern with child poverty is that it tends to recur in the same places. To examine this phenomenon, we delineate five types of counties based on historical child poverty rates. We consider places with child poverty rates greater than 20 percent in any given year as “high” child poverty for that year. The five types of counties are:

- *Persistent high child poverty:* 706 counties had high child poverty at all four points studied (1980, 1990, 2000, and 2005–2009 aggregate data).
- *Frequent high child poverty:* 362 counties had high child poverty in three of four years studied.
- *Intermittent high child poverty:* 362 counties had high child poverty in two of four years studied.
- *Infrequent high child poverty:* 516 counties had high child poverty in one of four years studied.
- *No high child poverty:* 1,184 counties had no instances of high child poverty in any of the years studied.

We use decennial census data from 1980, 1990, 2000, and the 2009 American Community Survey (ACS) five-year estimates. The 2009 estimates were the most recent county-level poverty estimates because the 2010 Census does not include poverty data. We included the 3,130 counties with data at all four time points in our sample. This represents 99.6 percent of the 3,141 U.S. counties in 2010.

Mississippi Delta and in the Atlantic coastal plain. Poverty levels are also high in the central Appalachian coalfields and in the Ozarks. Additional child poverty hot spots exist in the Southwest along the Rio Grande and in Texas–New Mexico. Although child poverty is generally limited on the Great Plains, a high child poverty hot spot is apparent in the Native American regions of the Dakotas. In contrast, there are far fewer occurrences of high child poverty in the Northeast and Midwest.

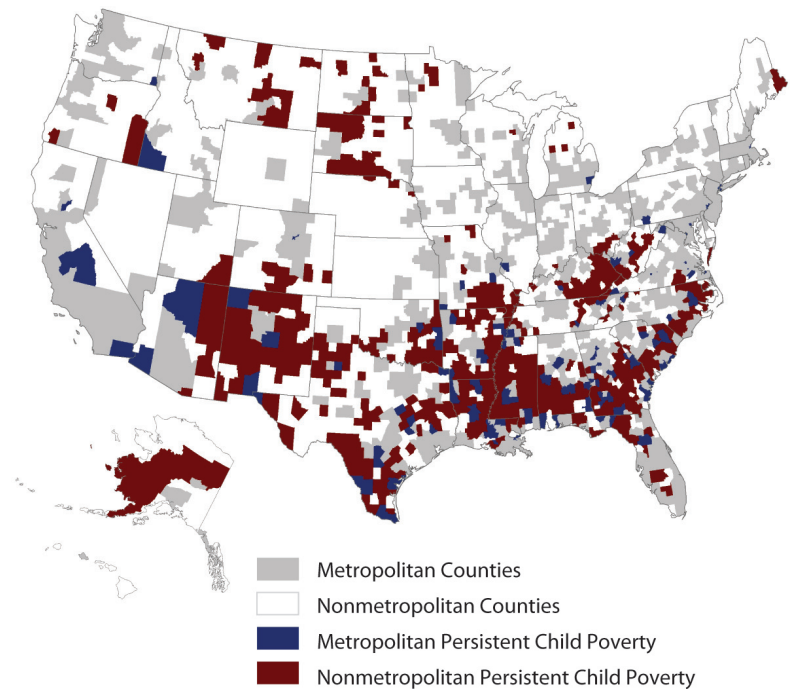
### Spatial Distribution of Persistent Child Poverty

We identify areas of high poverty earlier in the brief. Here we focus on the distribution of persistent high child poverty—rates above 20 percent in 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2009. Persistent child poverty is far more common in nonmetropolitan, or rural, counties: 571 of the 706 persistent child poverty counties are rural (see Figure 3). In all, 81 percent of counties with persistent child poverty are classified as nonmetropolitan, although rural counties represent only 65 percent of all U.S. counties. A similar pattern is evident among counties whose high child poverty rates approach being categorized as persistent (what we term “frequent high child poverty”). In all, 267 (74 percent) of the 362 counties classified as having frequent child poverty are located in nonmetropolitan areas. The distribution of both these types of counties (frequent and persistent child poverty) is familiar to anyone who has studied U.S. poverty trends. There are large and enduring concentrations of child poverty in Appalachia and the Ozarks, the Mississippi Delta, and along the Texas–Mexico border as well as in the Native American regions of Oklahoma and the northern Great Plains. Persistent child poverty is extremely rare in the Northeast and North Central regions of the United States.

### Persistent Child Poverty Affects Many Racial Groups, Including Whites

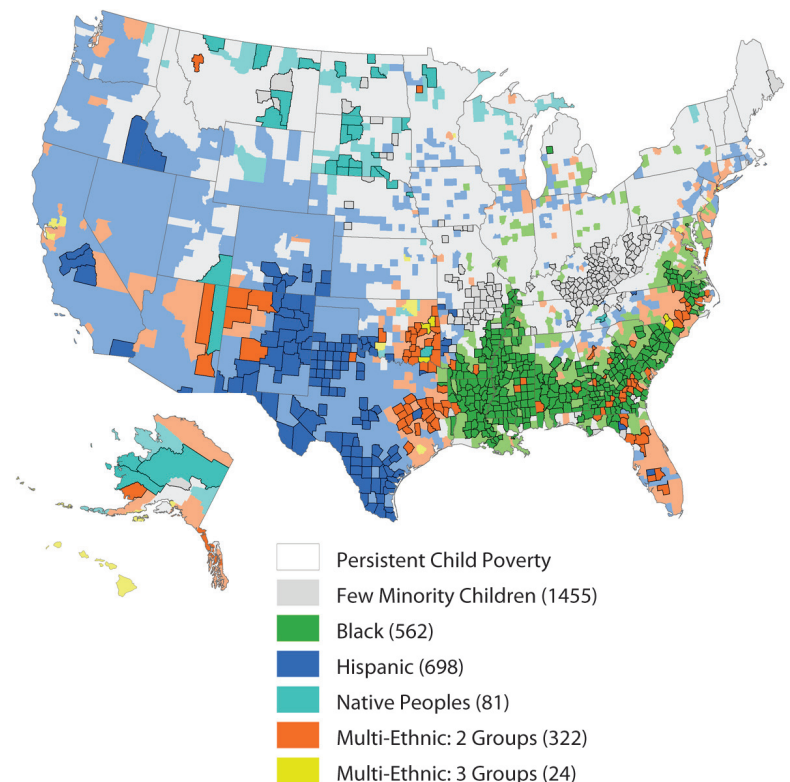
Persistent child poverty touches both minority and non-Hispanic white children. Figure 4 overlays child poverty data on the distribution of minority children in 2010. A county is identified

FIGURE 3. PERSISTENT CHILD POVERTY BY METROPOLITAN STATUS, 1980–2009



Source: U.S. Census Bureau: 1980–2000, ACS 2005–2009

FIGURE 4. PERSISTENT CHILD POVERTY AND MINORITY CHILD POPULATION DISTRIBUTION, 2010



Source: U.S. Census Bureau: 1980–2010, ACS 2005–2009

## Family Experiences in a Persistently Poor County

In the summer of 2010, the Carsey Institute conducted exploratory focus groups and in-depth interviews with families and service providers in a chronically poor rural county. Our research revealed several themes among those struggling to provide a stable family life for their children. Workers in vulnerable families often have fewer job skills and low educational attainment, and rural communities often lack basic work supports, such as quality child care, health care, and transportation. The current recession is also having a deep impact on families and communities. In some ways, the intersection of economic decline and the struggles that families face may be more visible in rural areas than in urban areas. In this county, people spoke of very limited opportunities for full-time jobs for low-skilled workers. The work they do find is often seasonal and irregular. Just getting by requires piecing together a livelihood from part-time jobs, seasonal work, and public assistance such as food stamps, Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) benefits. The instability inherent in piecemeal and seasonal work makes everyday life, along with eligibility for support programs, volatile and uncertain. Much of the instability fragile families in rural communities face arises from economic vulnerability. As one service provider in the county said regarding a client, “It isn’t one tipping point. That’s really middle-class phenomenon....When you’re spread as thin as she was, anything could be a tipping point. Her check not coming, her boyfriend blowing up at her. The net was so frail.”

In other instances, issues of access and transportation that are rooted in rural residence complicate families’ attempts to do well by their children. The same service provider said, “A lot of the stuff isn’t about insight; it’s not about not loving your kid. It’s logistics. And logistics in rural areas are really hard.” She went on to say, “If you don’t have money, and you have three other kids at home, and you don’t have a car, no matter how much you love that kid, you can’t get [to your scheduled appointments].”

For many vulnerable families, finding steady, good work must be a longer-term goal, as they must first overcome unsafe or unreliable housing, mental or physical health problems, unstable family relationships, domestic violence, and, significantly, a deep sense of hopelessness. It can be difficult for individuals in poor families to not just find a job, but to be physically able to do the work, mentally able to engage in the tasks, or have the personal stability to commit to the job. In other cases, hopelessness has set in, making it hard to believe that any life other than “barely making it” exists. For families who are facing such deep and long-standing challenges, the immediate need is to re-establish confidence that they can actually achieve a different life for themselves and their children. Hope and confidence often need to come before attempting to establish economic security. As the same service provider said, “People need people to help them get through this stuff, and help them get beyond it.” When raising a family in a chronically poor area, it is difficult to grasp and hold onto such hope, especially when the experiences of multiple generations all point to a bleak future.

as having a concentration of racial-ethnic minority children if more than 10 percent of its children are from any one minority group (black, Asian, Native American, or of Hispanic origin). Counties where children from two or more minority groups each exceed 10 percent are identified as multi-ethnic.

There are several distinctions worth noting. For example, persistent child poverty is concentrated in counties in the old plantation South and in the *colonias* along the Texas–Mexico border. Additional clusters exist on Native American reservations, including in southeastern Oklahoma, Arizona, and New Mexico, Montana, and the Dakotas. There are also large persistent child poverty hot spots in the Ozarks and Appalachia, where the child populations are almost exclusively non-Hispanic white.

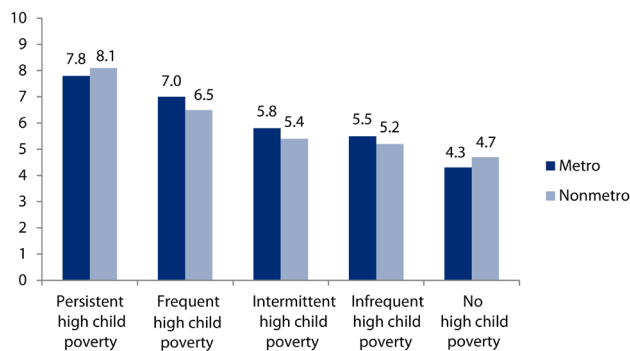
Some of the child poverty hot spots contain more diverse child populations. In east Texas, a large cluster of counties with persistent child poverty has a diverse population of Hispanic, black, and white children. Further west, we see high child poverty in places with a large presence of both Hispanic and Native American children. A smaller area is emerging in coastal North Carolina, where traditionally black areas are beginning to see significant growth in the Hispanic child population.

A concentration of minority children in a persistently poor county does not imply that only children of that group are poor. In fact, it is far more likely that a broad cross-section of the local children are poor.

## Characteristics of Counties with Persistent Child Poverty

In general, both metropolitan and nonmetropolitan counties with persistent child poverty are characterized by high rates of unemployment (see Figure 5). In rural counties with persistent child poverty, an average of 8.1 percent of the labor force was unemployed in 2000. In contrast, only 4.7 percent of the labor force was unemployed in counties with no history of high child poverty. Our analysis of historical data for 1980 and 1990 suggests that this same general pattern was evident in the earlier periods (data not shown).

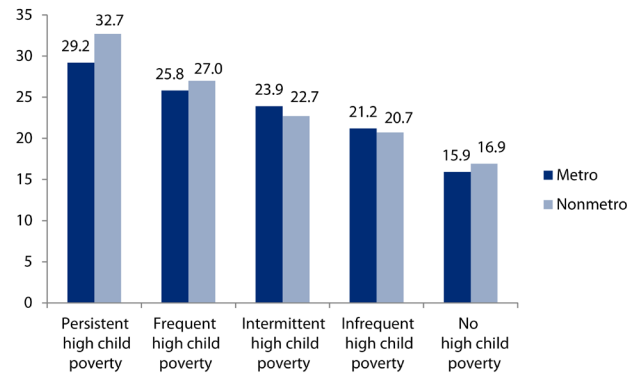
FIGURE 5. MEAN PERCENT UNEMPLOYED (2000)



One explanation for the higher unemployment rates in counties with persistent child poverty may be their very low education levels. Counties with persistent child poverty consistently report high percentages of individuals without a high school degree. In 2000, rural counties with persistent child poverty reported that 33 percent of their population, on average, lacked a high school degree compared with 17 percent of rural counties that never experienced high child poverty (see Figure 6). For those who have not finished high school, the decline in many rural places of extractive and manufacturing industries, which historically provided “good” jobs for low and unskilled workers, has meant rising unemployment.<sup>6</sup>

A similar pattern of high unemployment and low education levels is evident in urban counties with persistent child poverty, although urban education levels are consistently higher (by 3 to 4 percentage points). This education gap is not new and dates back to at least 1980. Since 1980, the percentage of adults graduating from high school has increased; however, counties with persistent child poverty have the lowest levels of education (data not shown). Many of these persistently poor communities face barriers that have resulted in little investment or infrastructure for a

FIGURE 6. MEAN PERCENT LESS THAN HIGH SCHOOL (2000)



solid public education.<sup>7</sup> For example, in some communities the separation of “haves” and “have-nots” results in a two-tiered school system. The wealthier families tend to reside in districts where investments in public schools have been high and prioritized, while poorer families often only have access to underfunded schools. In many places, this bifurcation occurs by race, with whites having more access to better schools than blacks.<sup>8</sup>

As shown above in Figure 4, the proportion of minority children tends to be higher in counties with histories of persistent child poverty. In 2000, black children represented 14.9 percent of the under age 18 population. However, they composed, on average, 28 percent of the children in persistent high child poverty counties. The proportion of poor black children is much lower in counties with little or no history of high child poverty. A similar pattern exists in rural counties for blacks, although because the black population tends to be more concentrated in urban areas, the actual percentages are considerably lower in rural than in urban areas. Our historical analysis suggests that the concentrations of blacks in persistent poverty counties hasn’t changed over time (data not shown).

Hispanics are now the largest minority group in the United States.<sup>9</sup> The Hispanic population has grown rapidly in the past several decades fueled both by immigration and by high levels of natural increase, resulting in a rapid increase in the number of Hispanic children.<sup>10</sup> By 2010, Hispanic children represented 23 percent of all U.S. children. Thus, poverty patterns among Hispanic children are of considerable interest.

In 2000, Hispanics represented an average of 10 percent of the total population in persistent child poverty counties and a slightly lower percentage of those in frequent high child poverty counties. They represent an even smaller percentage of the children in counties with less child poverty. The contrast between their concentrations in persistently high and lower-poverty counties is not as striking as it is for

blacks, but there is still a clear gradient. In addition, there is also a consistent urban-rural difference in the mean percentage of Hispanic children across the poverty categories. Hispanic children represent a larger proportion of the urban than the rural child population, a finding consistent with the overall higher concentration of Hispanics in urban areas. Because the Hispanic population has grown rapidly in recent decades, longitudinal analysis reflects greater increases in Hispanic children in the poverty counties than for blacks. However, the pattern for the two groups is consistent. Hispanics, like blacks, are disproportionately represented in persistent and frequent high child poverty counties.<sup>11</sup>

In 2000, the distribution of non-Hispanic whites was decidedly different from that of Hispanics and blacks. Non-Hispanic whites are underrepresented in counties with persistent child poverty. In 2000, rural counties with persistent child poverty rates were, on average, 65 percent white compared to an average of 82 percent for all rural counties. Urban counties with persistent child poverty were 57 percent non-Hispanic whites, on average, compared to 79 percent of all urban counties.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, counties with no instances of high child poverty were, on average, 93 and 85 percent non-Hispanic white in rural and metro areas, respectively. Despite these lower levels of persistent child poverty among white children, there are areas in the United States, particularly in Appalachia, that have a relatively small minority population suffering the effects of persistent child poverty. Such patterns underscore the fact that racial differences reflect larger structural issues associated with higher poverty, including a legacy of slavery and discrimination that restrict the opportunities afforded minority children.

## Structural Factors Associated with Persistent Child Poverty

As noted above, female-headed households with children have a far greater risk of poverty than two-parent households.<sup>13</sup> Not surprisingly, the pattern is also apparent in persistent child poverty counties. In urban counties with persistent child poverty in 2000, 25 percent of the households were female-headed with children; in rural counties, the number was 22 percent. In contrast, single mother households constituted an average of only 16 percent of urban and 14 percent of rural households in counties with no history of child poverty. This distinction has held over time and in fact the gap in female headed households with children between rural and urban counties has been increasing in all poverty and place categories. In 1980, 14 percent of households in persistently poor counties were headed by single mothers. By 2000, the share was 22 percent.<sup>14</sup>

Demographic characteristics such as family structure and educational attainment are correlated with poverty *and* with

race. These differences contribute, in large part, to observed racial concentrations of persistent child poverty. Data from the American Community Survey's 2005–2009 five-year estimates reveal that 14.4 percent of white family households are headed by single mothers compared with 45.9 percent of black family households and 23.7 percent of Hispanic households (which may also identify as white or black).<sup>15</sup> There are also racial disparities in educational attainment. For example, whites and blacks have similar percentages that graduate high school and have some college. However, 29 percent of whites compared to only 17.2 percent of blacks have a college degree or more. Hispanic education levels are lower than both blacks and whites, with about one-third of Hispanics reporting no high school degree.<sup>16</sup>

## Summary and Conclusion

By highlighting the concentration of persistent child poverty counties in rural America, our research demonstrates that child poverty is not just an urban problem. Our analysis identifies 706 U.S. counties (23 percent of the U.S. total) that have experienced persistent child poverty. In each of these counties for three decades, more than 20 percent of the children have been poor. A disproportionate share of these counties with persistent child poverty is in rural America. Nearly 26 percent of all rural children live in these counties. Persistent child poverty is not limited to a few isolated pockets of the country. Although child poverty is certainly more common in some regions than others, our research clearly demonstrates that persistent child poverty is widespread in both rural and urban America. We find evidence of it in impoverished rural hollows in Appalachia, shacks deep in the Mississippi Delta, isolated Native American reservations on the Great Plains, emerging *colonias* along the Rio Grande, and in urban neighborhoods populated by the latest of a long succession of immigrant streams trying to gain their first foothold in America. Nor is persistent child poverty limited to minority children. Our maps demonstrate that persistent child poverty is widespread in largely white areas of Appalachia and the Ozarks, just as it is in historically black counties deep in the Mississippi Delta, in concentrated Hispanic enclaves in the Rio Grande Valley, and in parts of the Dakotas with large Native American populations. By illustrating that persistent child poverty is widespread in rural America, we contribute to the policy discussion about how to address the challenges poor children face there. The problems that all poor people struggle with are often exacerbated by the remoteness and lack of support services in rural areas. The isolation of persistently poor rural areas far from the media and governmental centers of metropolitan America also makes it difficult for policymakers, the media, and the public to develop a clear vision of rural poverty.

The overwhelming urban focus of welfare programs means policymakers often overlook needy families in rural areas. In addition to the high unemployment and low education levels that we document here, the physical and social isolation associated with rural poverty create problems different from those in densely settled urban areas. For instance, limited access to comprehensive food stores with fresh fruit and vegetables creates food deserts in rural areas, especially among the rural poor with limited access to reliable transportation. Even if government policies make health care more affordable, access to that health care is limited in rural areas with few doctors, nurses, dentists, and hospitals. The Great Recession exacerbated these problems by further reducing employment opportunities and forcing local and state governments to cut back on support services.

According to our analysis of recent Census Bureau small area poverty and income estimates (SAIPE) for 2005 to 2009, the Great Recession is also increasing the rate of poverty in America's poorest counties. Prior to the recession, in 2005-2007 child poverty topped 30 percent in 61 percent of the persistent child poverty counties. By 2008-2009, the percentage of these counties with child poverty above 30 percent increased to 68 percent. So, as the effects of the Great Recession drag on, the situation for children in America's poorest counties continues to deteriorate. Many of the biggest social policy changes over the past decade and those looming on the horizon have special implications for rural children. Because of the unique aspects of social and economic life in rural America, welfare reform, expansion of government health insurance, and education reform affect children differently in rural areas than in cities and suburbs. And the reductions in government spending likely to result from the Great Recession, coupled with two decades of the devolution of policymaking responsibility from the federal to the state level (and occasionally to municipal governments), may have significant implications for children and fragile families in these persistently poor rural counties.

## Data and Methods

We examine child poverty rates using decennial census data from 1980, 1990, and 2000, as well as American Community Survey five-year estimates (ACS) between 2005 and 2009. "High" child poverty is 20 percent or more of the children living in poverty in a county. "Persistent" poverty is high poverty rates in three consecutive decades: 1980, 1990, 2000, as well as 2009 (2005-2009 aggregate data). Demographic data for each county are from the U.S. Census Bureau's "U.S.A. Counties Data Files." The demographic variables are created by dividing the total number of people in the category of interest (such as the unemployed) by the total population (or subpopulation for female-headed households, unemployed, and those with an education less than high

school) of a county. For instance, percentage unemployed is calculated by dividing the total workforce population for each county by the total unemployed in each county. As a result, numbers in the charts are mean percentages for each county. For instance, 7.8 percent (Figure 5) is not the unemployment rate in 2000 for metropolitan counties with persistent child poverty but, rather, the mean percentage unemployed in counties with persistent child poverty in metropolitan areas. Because we examine all U.S. counties, differences represent actual differences in the population. As a result, statistical testing for significance was not necessary.

We use counties<sup>17</sup> as the unit of analysis because they provide a historically consistent set of entities for which child poverty and demographic data have been collected over time. Thus, we are able to identify persistent child poverty in counties and examine variation over both time and location. Counties are also used to delineate metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas. We used a consistent 2004 definition of metropolitan areas, which avoids problems that would arise from the redefinition of metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas. Our use of the 2004 definition reduces the number of nonmetropolitan counties and increases the number of metropolitan counties compared with earlier definitions.

Although the county is the best unit of analysis for our purposes, it does have some limitations. Because large metropolitan counties include substantial populations, some contain large numbers of poor children. Thus, because most metropolitan counties include both poor and non-poor areas, the percentage of poor children in them might be relatively modest, though the absolute number of poor children may be large. Also, because we use counties, we are unable to identify large spatial pockets of concentrated poverty within large urban counties.

## ENDNOTES

1. Marybeth J. Mattingly, Jessica A. Bean, and Andrew Schaefer, "One Million Additional Children in Poverty Since 2009: 2010 Data Reveal Nearly One in Four Southern Children Now Live in Poverty," Issue Brief no. 37 (Durham, NH: Carsey Institute, 2010).
2. See American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates Table S1701: <http://www.census.gov/acs/www/>.
3. Mattingly, Bean, and Schaefer, "One Million Additional Children in Poverty Since 2009: 2010 Data Reveal Nearly One in Four Southern Children Now Live in Poverty." Note that we use 2010 data for the overall rate as it is the most recent. However, to look at the county level, we need five-year aggregate data. The 2005-2009 data are the most recent available.
4. Marybeth J. Mattingly and Jessica A. Bean, "The Unequal Distribution of Child Poverty: Highest Rates among Young Blacks and Children of Single Mothers in Rural America," Issue Brief no. 18 (Durham, NH: Carsey Institute, 2010).

5. Ibid.
6. Jennifer Sherman, *Those Who Work, Those Who Don't: Poverty, Morality, and Family in Rural America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).
7. Cynthia M. Duncan, *Worlds Apart: Why Poverty Persists in Rural America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999).
8. Ibid.
9. Kenneth M. Johnson and Daniel T. Lichter, "Growing Diversity among America's Children and Youth: Spatial and Temporal Dimensions," *Population and Development Review*, vol. 36 (2010): 151-176.
10. Ibid.
11. Carsey Institute analysis of Census/SAIPE data, not shown.
12. Ibid.
13. Mattingly and Bean, "The Unequal Distribution of Child Poverty."
14. Carsey Institute analysis of Census/SAIPE data, not shown.
15. See American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Detail Tables nos. B11001A, B11001B, and B11001I. Available at [www.census.gov/acs/www/](http://www.census.gov/acs/www/).
16. See American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Detail Tables nos. C15002A, C15002B, and C15002I. Available at [www.census.gov/acs/www/](http://www.census.gov/acs/www/).
17. In this analysis, Virginia Independent cities are treated as counties. In addition, we have estimated poverty levels for Cibola County in New Mexico and for Lake and Peninsula Borough in Alaska because they did not exist at the time of the 1980 Census.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Marybeth J. Mattingly is director of research on vulnerable families at the Carsey Institute and a research assistant professor of sociology at the University of New Hampshire ([beth.mattingly@unh.edu](mailto:beth.mattingly@unh.edu)).

Kenneth M. Johnson is a senior demographer at the Carsey Institute and a professor of sociology at the University of New Hampshire ([ken.johnson@unh.edu](mailto:ken.johnson@unh.edu)).

Andrew Schaefer is a graduate student in sociology at the University of New Hampshire and a research assistant at the Carsey Institute ([andrew.schaefer@unh.edu](mailto:andrew.schaefer@unh.edu)).

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful for feedback from Mil Duncan, Curt Grimm, Bruce Mallory, Jessica Bean, Amy Sterndale, and Laurel Lloyd Earnshaw at the Carsey Institute and Barbara Ray at Hired Pen for editorial assistance.



Building knowledge for families and communities

The Carsey Institute conducts policy research on vulnerable children, youth, and families and on sustainable community development. We give policy makers and practitioners timely, independent resources to effect change in their communities.

This work was supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, and an anonymous donor.

Huddleston Hall  
73 Main Street  
Durham, NH 03824

(603) 862-2821

[www.carseyinstitute.unh.edu](http://www.carseyinstitute.unh.edu)