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Despite Progress, Rural Poverty Demands Attention

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Despite great progress in reducing poverty in the United States, millions of people still lack sufficient income to meet basic needs.

Poverty was so widespread during the Great Depression that President Roosevelt saw "one-third of a Nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished." By 1960, the poor represented 22 percent of the total population. By 1977, poverty had declined to only 12 percent. Even so, 25 million people still had incomes below the poverty level.

Considering our progress, should poverty continue to be a major focus of national public policy? More to the point, why should it be a major concern for rural development?

Rural Poverty More Prevalent

A disproportionate share of the poor live in rural areas. Nonmetro areas had 33 percent of the population in 1977, but 40 percent of the poor. (Rural and nonmetropolitan are used interchangeably.) The rural poor are frequently overlooked. The two-thirds of the Nation's population living in urban areas have little opportunity to observe rural conditions. Even rural people are frequently unaware of the poverty in their midst. One reason is that the rural poor are more dispersed geographically and thus are less apparent than in more populated areas. In many scenic rural areas, such as northern New England, the Upper Great Lakes, and Appalachia, dilapidated housing may even look quaint or picturesque.

Scenery, however, does not make poverty any less real. And the nature of rural poverty must be understood if effective policies are to be developed by Federal, State and local governments.

Who Are the Rural Poor?

Ethnic Groups—In 1975, although three-fourths of all nonmetro poor were white, poverty was more prevalent among nonmetro blacks. About 41 percent of nonmetro blacks but only 12 percent of nonmetro whites had incomes below poverty in 1975. More than nine-tenths of all low-income rural blacks were in the South, the only region where large numbers of blacks live in rural areas.

Poverty was also high among American Indians, 55 percent of whom live in rural America. In 1970, nearly half of the 423,000 rural American Indians were poor. The majority lived in the West.

About 5 percent of the nonmetro poor were of Spanish origin. Only in the West did people of Spanish origin constitute a large portion of the rural poor.

Farmers—Although farmers and farm workers now account for only 15 percent of all low-income families in rural areas, poverty is far more prevalent among farm than nonfarm people. Of all nonmetro families having farming as their major occupation in 1975, more than 20 percent had poverty incomes. By contrast, only 10 percent of other nonmetro families had such limited income.

Poverty is especially prevalent among some segments of the farm population. In 1975, 44 percent of all blacks living on farms and nearly a third of farm-laborer families had poverty incomes. Migrant workers are a particularly disadvantaged group. In addition to their low incomes, they must contend with high costs of travel, job insecurity, poor living conditions, and limited access to community services. About one-third of migrant workers are of Spanish origin; few belong to other minorities.

The Elderly—Older persons make up a disproportionate share of the rural poor. The elderly accounted for 12 percent of the rural population in 1975 but made up 16 percent of the rural poor. Nationally, the elderly accounted for 13 percent of all poor.

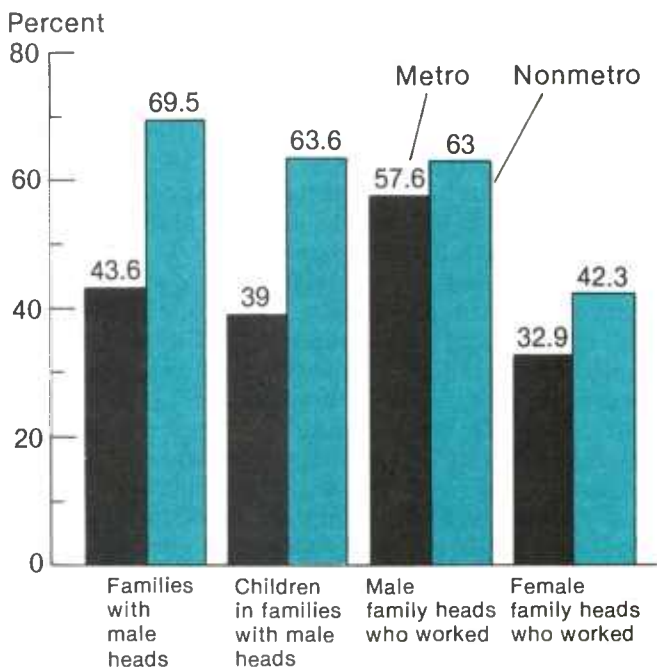
Poverty among the rural elderly is aggravated by the problems associated with aging. The elderly are likely to have greater health care needs and often are less able to cope with drafty houses, undependable heating systems, and inadequate nutrition. Lack of rural public transportation becomes a more acute problem for the elderly, particularly for those with infirmities.

Family Structure and Work—The Nation's poor are often stereotyped as members of families without a male head. However, this type of family is not common among the rural poor. In 1975, 70 percent of nonmetro low-income households were headed by males (figure 1). Virtually all these families had both a husband and wife present. Almost two-thirds of all rural poor children lived in such families. In contrast, the urban poor were much more likely to live in families headed by a female.

Some people also believe that low-income people do not work. Again the stereotype is less true of rural than urban households. Among the rural poor,

Figure 1

Characteristics of Poor Families in 1975



Source: 1976 Survey of Income and Education, Bureau of the Census, U.S. Department of Commerce.

almost two-thirds of the male family heads and two-fifths of the female family heads reported working in 1975. The corresponding figures in metro areas were 58 percent for male family heads and 33 percent for female family heads.

Many rural poor are unemployed because of poor health, advanced age, lack of skills, or limited employment opportunities. In addition, many rural women do not work outside their homes because of housekeeping duties, including caring for their children.

Where Do the Rural Poor Live?

Knowledge of the geographic distribution of the rural poor is essential to the design and effective operation of poverty programs. Which States and regions have large numbers of rural poor? Where is poverty most prevalent?

A populous State, such as Ohio, can have a large number of rural poor but only a small portion of its rural population living in poverty. Conversely, a State such as New Mexico, while having a smaller number of rural poor, can have a larger percent of

low-income rural people. A region or State with either a large number of rural poor or a large portion of its rural population living in poverty faces a problem that merits concerted attention. Providing public assistance and services to a large number of rural poor can be expensive for even a populous State. One with a large portion of its rural population in poverty is almost certain to have even greater problems raising the revenue necessary to support desired poverty programs.

Geographically, nonmetro low-income people are widely dispersed. Even so, there are areas of relatively heavy concentrations of poverty throughout rural America. More than half of the rural poor live in minor civil divisions (MCD's) such as townships or villages in which more than 20 percent of the population is poor. In the South, more than three-fourths of the low-income people live in such poor MCD's, far above the 38 percent in the West, 28 percent in the North Central region, and 11 percent in the Northeast. Rural areas with high poverty rates range from desert and sagebrush Indian reservations to depressed mining towns in Appalachia and the Upper Great Lakes to farming communities in the Mississippi delta.

Rural poverty is particularly prevalent in the South. In 1975, more than half of all nonmetro poor lived in the South. This is the only region having more nonmetro than metro poor (figure 2). Texas, Mississippi, Florida, North Carolina, Georgia, and Kentucky each had more than 400,000 rural poor (figure 3). All other States in the South, except Maryland and Delaware, had more than 200,000 nonmetro poor. Outside the South, the only States with more than 200,000 rural poor were populous States such as California, Missouri, Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. States having relatively few nonmetro poor were sparsely populated States such as Nevada and Wyoming, and small urban States like Connecticut and Rhode Island.

The South also had the greatest concentration of rural poverty, when measured by the percent of the rural population that is poor. About 20 percent of all nonmetro people in the South are poor, compared with 9 percent in the Northeast, 12 percent in the West, and 10 percent in the North Central region. In all Southern States except Delaware and Maryland, between 15 and 28 percent of rural

people had poverty level incomes (figure 4). Outside the South, only Arizona, New Mexico, and Missouri had rates higher than 15 percent. New Mexico's rural poverty rate, 24 percent, was third highest in the Nation, despite the fact that the State ranked relatively low in the number of rural poor.

As evidence of the chronic and persistent nature of Southern rural poverty, a recent study ranked nonmetro counties by per capita income in 1950, 1959, 1969 and 1975. Of the 253 counties with low incomes in each of the 4 years, more than 90 percent were in the South.

The Nature of Rural Poverty

A basic fact of life among the poor is insufficient income for comfortable housing, adequate clothing, a nutritious diet, and essential health care. However, some characteristics of rural areas make life especially difficult for the poor. In particular, the low population density and distance between rural communities geographically isolate low-income people from both job opportunities and social services. Services such as child care centers, hospitals, and meal programs for the elderly, if they exist at all, may be inaccessible to many because of the distances involved.

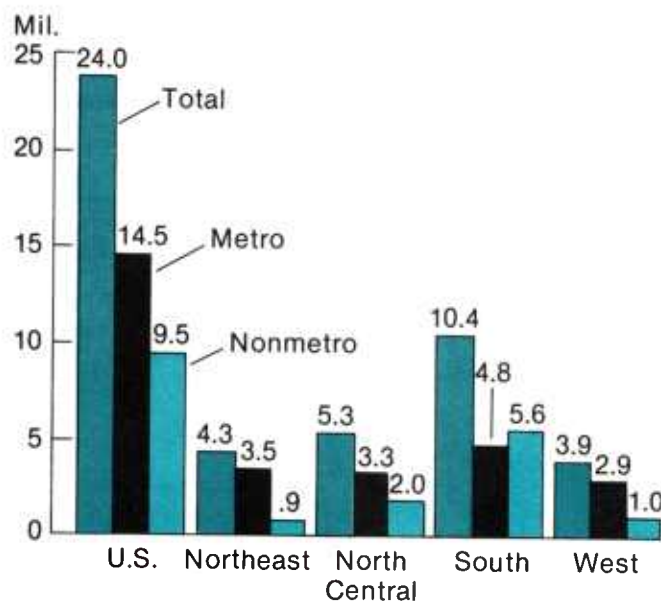
Because of greater distances, transportation becomes a key element affecting people in small towns and the countryside. It is frequently necessary to travel considerable distances to receive medical care, to get to work, or to shop. Public transportation systems often are not feasible in a rural setting. As a result, rural people typically are dependent on the automobile for transportation. Those unable to drive because of age, disability, or low income must depend on others for transportation. Hence, many low-income people have problems getting the basic goods and services needed in everyday living.

Low population density hinders local governments in providing social services to the rural poor. Per capita cost of delivering services is frequently high in rural areas because overhead costs must be divided among fewer people. And many jurisdictions lack the necessary tax base to provide all services desired. In such cases, because of other priorities on their limited resources, local governments may not provide such specialized services as mental health centers, day care centers, or family counseling, particularly if few of their citizens need the service. Even if neighboring communities pool their efforts to provide such services, the distances involved may deter those in need from using them.

A major problem facing the rural poor is their limited access to health care services. Even if trans-

Figure 2

Where Poor Families Lived in 1975



Source: 1976 Survey of Income and Education Bureau of the Census, U.S. Department of Commerce.

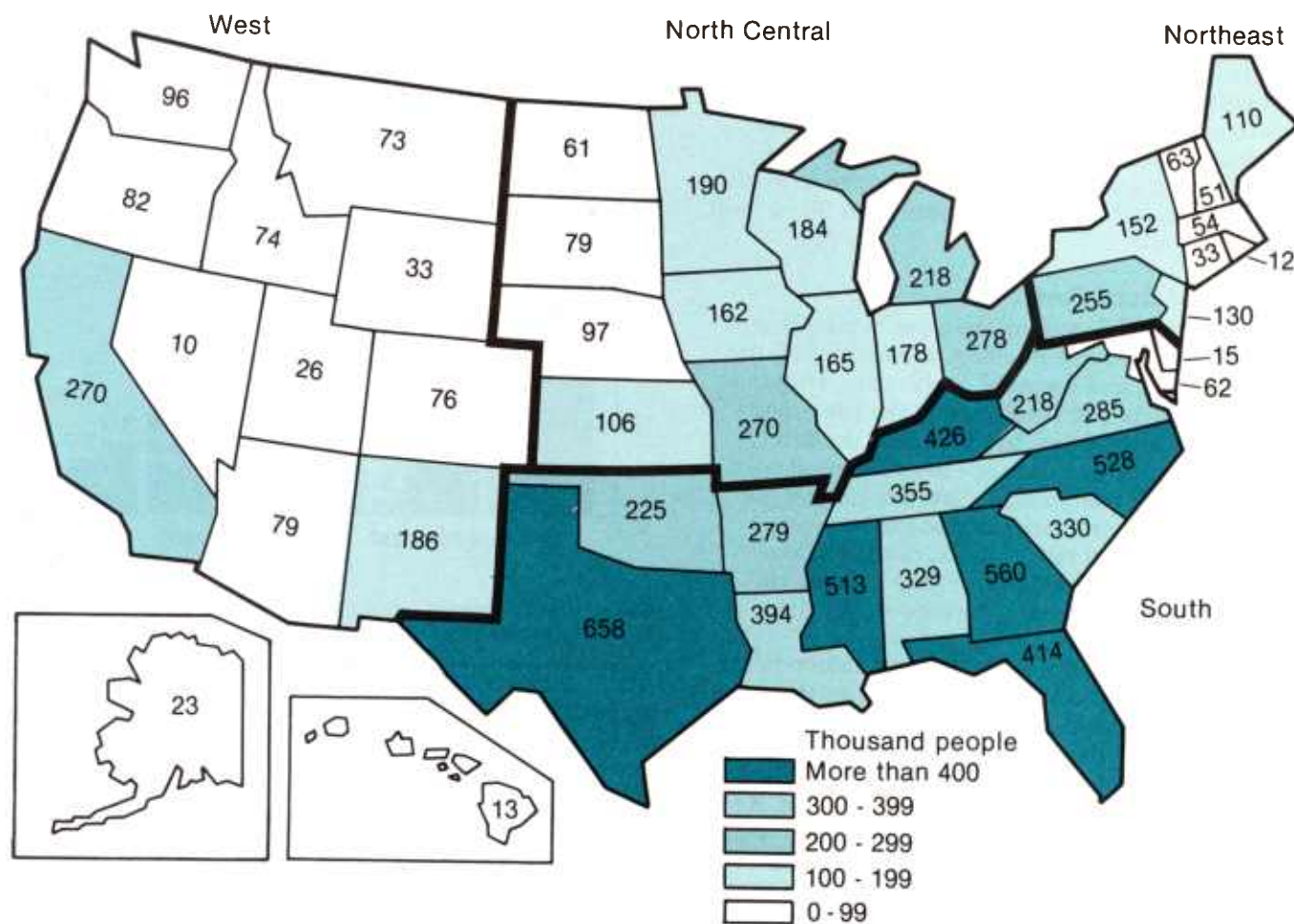
portation problems can be surmounted, finding a doctor nearby can be difficult. There are about twice as many people per doctor in rural as urban areas. In fact, 132 counties containing almost half a million people had no doctors as recently as 1976.

Greater population concentration and higher incomes in urban areas make it possible for doctors to specialize, to charge higher fees, and to form group practices, thus avoiding being on call 24 hours a day. Such opportunities are less common in rural areas. For these and other reasons, medical practice in rural areas is less attractive to many health professionals.

Education is generally considered to be a route out of poverty. But rural people are less likely to have finished high school, and rural schools provide fewer specialized services and a narrower range of courses. For instance, nonmetro schools are less likely to have librarians, guidance counselors and teachers aids, or to offer as wide a range of vocational training as metro schools. Young people academically underprepared today are all too likely to become the poor of tomorrow.

Figure 3

Number of Nonmetro Poor



1975 data. Source: 1976 Survey of Income and Education, Bureau of the Census, U.S. Department of Commerce.

How Can Rural Poverty Be Eased?

The multifaceted nature of rural poverty calls for Federal, State and local governments to focus attention on this complex problem.

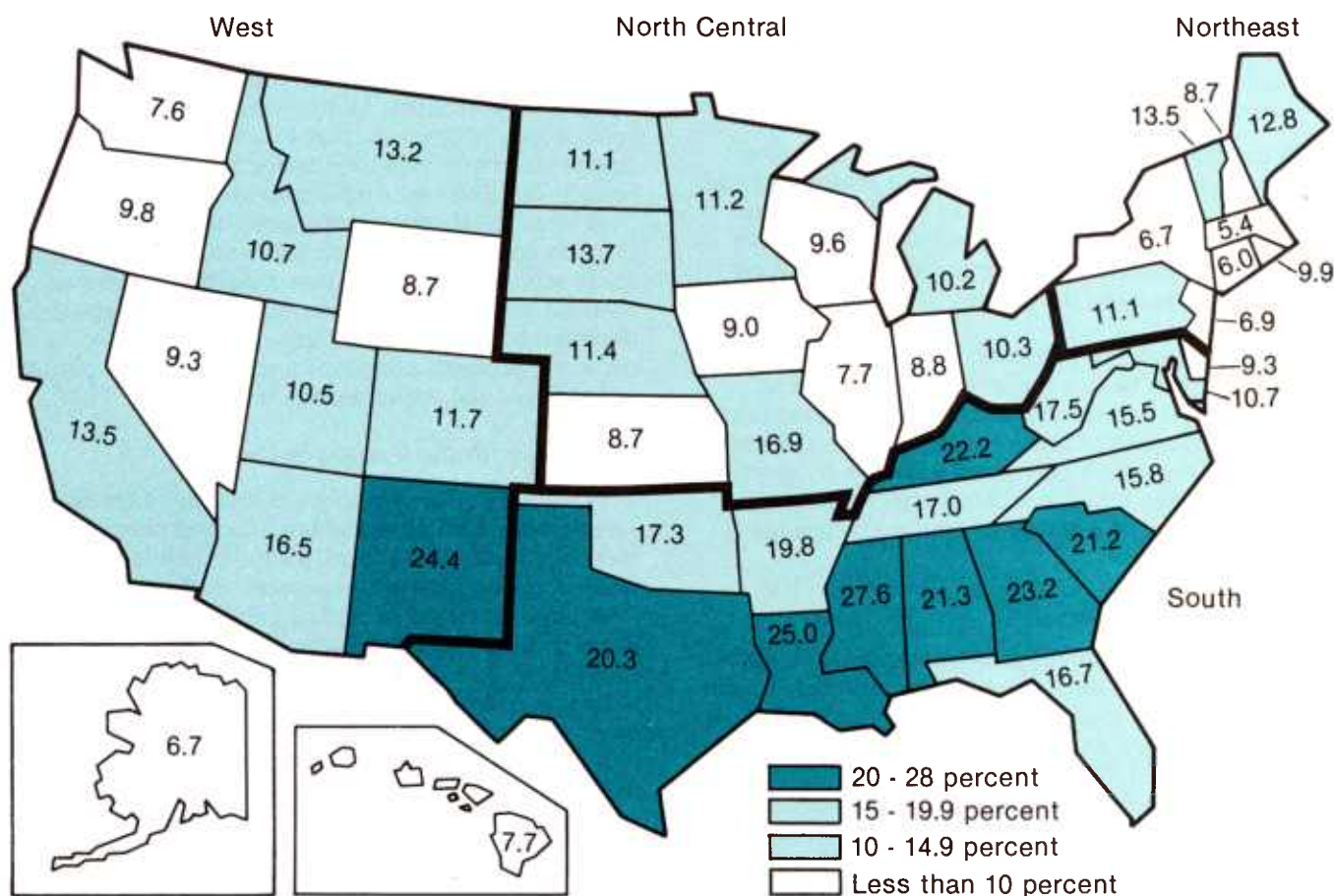
Economic development programs to attract more jobs to rural areas will, over time, contribute to solving the problem. But many families are unlikely to benefit directly and immediately from such developmental efforts. In the meantime, therefore, governmental assistance is necessary to supplement the incomes of many working poor and to provide sub-

sistence for the elderly, blind and disabled, and others unable to participate in the labor force. Also important are programs to increase access to essential services and to improve the income earning potentials of unskilled, low-wage workers.

Where local governments lack the necessary revenue to deal adequately with poverty, expanded efforts most likely will depend on increased Federal funds. For example, benefit levels for Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), currently set by the individual States, generally are substantially lower in the South than in the rest of the country. Increasing the level of benefits in the South would help, but some southern States lack the fiscal capacity to increase benefits. ■

Figure 4

Percent of Nonmetro Poor



1975 data. Source: 1976 Survey of Income and Education, Bureau of the Census, U.S. Department of Commerce.

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