



# Rural Population Research Network

A USDA supported multi-state research project on the causes and consequences of demographic change in rural America

March 18, 2022

Brief # 2022-9

## Growing Up in Rural America: New Disadvantages and Surprising Advantages

Shelley Clark, Sam Harper, and Bruce Weber

Depictions of rural life in the scholarly literature and popular media suggest that growing up in rural America is hard. This is certainly true for rural children raised in low-income families in economically depressed regions and for young adults who remain in rural areas - the so-called "left-behind." These individuals face daunting and well-documented challenges of declining economies, few opportunities for higher education, poorer health, and in some places, ongoing overdose and COVID-19 epidemics. Other disadvantages to growing up rural, such as high levels of family instability and the rising number of children raised by single parents or grandparents, receive less attention.

Despite disadvantages, rural children also have strong public schools that promote socioeconomic equality. As a result, some studies find that growing up in rural areas leads to better health, higher education, and higher income and wealth. Unfortunately, these benefits tend to be realized mainly by those who leave. Therefore, one of the greatest disadvantages of growing up in rural America is that obtaining greater success later in life sometimes means leaving one's rural roots behind.

This brief highlights key findings from a forthcoming issue of the *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* (June 2022).<sup>1-2</sup> It offers a nuanced, balanced, and comprehensive perspective on both the immediate and longer-term effects of growing up in rural America. Findings are aimed at providing policy makers with evidence to develop more effective programs that benefit vulnerable rural children and families, protect key institutions such as public schools, and create more opportunities for young adults who wish to stay in their rural hometowns.

### KEY FINDINGS

- Low income rural families are under considerable strain from household instability, food insecurity, and parental drug addiction.
- Rural families often lack adequate legal protection and civic support.
- Rural early education and school systems are strong and promote socioeconomic equality. But they are at risk of closure and consolidation.
- The destinies of rural youth who stay and those who leave diverge sharply. On average, adults who grow up in rural areas tend to fare as well, if not better, than urban children with respect to their health, wealth, and education. But the benefits of growing up rural are mainly experienced by those who leave.

## **Rural Families Are Under Considerable Strain**

Rural families are often idealized as strong, stable, and self-reliant, consisting typically of married parents and their children. However, this image does not match the reality for many rural children. Nationally, there is evidence that rural and urban children are equally likely to be raised by single parents, unmarried parents, or grandparents. Children raised in low-income rural families face challenges of family instability, food insecurity, and parental drug addiction that rival those of poor urban children. Despite how common such nontraditional families have become, children living in these homes often encounter social stigma and discrimination in their schools, from faith-based institutions, and within their broader communities. Further, rural families coping with drug addition and food insecurity struggle to protect and care for vulnerable children by relying on opaque legal systems, restrictive government programs, and scarce private charity services, such as foodbanks.<sup>2</sup>

## **Public Education Creates a Strong Foundation for Rural Children**

Contrary to expectations, publicly-funded early child care and education programs, such as Head Start, are more available and more often used in rural than in urban areas.<sup>2</sup> Rural school systems typically play a central role in rural communities, often serving as social, civic and educational hubs. National studies indicate that the education they offer is excellent. Despite fewer dollars per pupil, rural school children typically perform as well, if not better on standardized tests in both math and reading. Furthermore, rural schools promote greater equality, with parent's socioeconomic status being less important to children's school achievements in rural than in urban areas.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, declining populations in many rural areas has led to school consolidation and closures, posing a major threat to one of the most important assets in rural communities.

## **Destinies Diverge When Youth Decide to Leave or Stay**

Many rural youth have ambitious aspirations for higher education, but they lack knowledge about how to achieve their goals and are reluctant to leave their communities.<sup>2</sup> Young people who stay face limited higher education and career options. They also tend to enter into parenthood and marriage early, and these early unions are often unstable.<sup>2</sup> Less is known about the futures of those who leave rural areas, but studies that follow children raised in rural areas show that growing up rural may offer important advantages for adults. Recent studies have demonstrated that early life exposure to rural environments is associated with living a longer and healthier life, having higher net financial worth in young adulthood, and achieving greater upward income mobility.<sup>2,3</sup> Unfortunately, emerging evidence indicates that these benefits accrue mainly to those who leave.<sup>2</sup>

## **Policies that Merit More Attention**

- 1) The myth of the strong, resilient, self-reliant, traditional nuclear rural family needs to be reevaluated. Rural family policies and programs need to recognize the increased diversity and fluidity reflected in rural families and children's living arrangements. Such policies should also address the strong social stigma that continues to be associated with nontraditional families and the distrust of legal systems and social services that further heightens the vulnerability of many rural children.
- 2) Rural early education programs and schools need to be strengthened and expanded, not undermined through child care closures and school consolidations. These public programs not only offer excellent education, but they also play a vital role in reducing socioeconomic inequalities in rural areas. More investments should be made that accommodate the need for rural areas to operate smaller child care

programs and schools, even if such programs are more costly per child because costs are spread over fewer children..

- 3) More programs should be initiated that provide alternatives to outmigration for ambitious and talented rural youth. Beyond concerns about the sizeable number of youth leaving, rural areas are also losing some of their brightest, healthiest, and wealthiest young adults. Many of these youth do not wish to leave. Good-paying jobs and enticements for well-trained professionals including teachers, lawyers, doctors, and other health care providers to return to rural areas are required to stem the tide of outmigration and to help fill critical educational and health needs.

---

## References

1. Clark, Shelley, Sam Harper, and Bruce Weber. 2022. "Growing Up in Rural America." *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, 8(3): 1-47.
2. Clark, Shelley, Sam Harper, and Bruce Weber (editors). 2022. "Growing Up Rural: How Place Shapes Outcomes" *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, volume 8, issues 3 & 4. (double issue)
3. Chetty, Raj, and Nathaniel Hendren. 2018a. "The Impacts of Neighborhoods on Intergenerational Mobility I: Childhood Exposure Effects\*." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 133 (3): 1107–62.

## Acknowledgments

The authors gratefully acknowledge funding from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) (435-2019-1117).

## About the Authors

**Shelley Clark** ([shelley.clark@mcgill.ca](mailto:shelley.clark@mcgill.ca)) is the Chair of the Department of Sociology and James McGill Professor at McGill University. **Sam Harper** ([sam.harper@mcgill.ca](mailto:sam.harper@mcgill.ca)) is Associate Professor in the Department of Epidemiology, Biostatistics & Occupational Health at McGill University. **Bruce Weber** ([bruce.weber@oregonstate.edu](mailto:bruce.weber@oregonstate.edu)) is Professor Emeritus of Applied Economics at Oregon State University and Senior Economist at the Rural Policy Research Institute.

*Suggested Citation:* Clark, Shelley, Sam Harper, and Bruce Weber. 2022. "Growing Up in Rural America: New Disadvantages and Surprising Advantages." Brief 2022-9. Rural Population Research Network.

---

The Rural Population Research Network is a USDA NIFA supported network of scholars who conduct research on the most pressing demographic, economic, social, and environmental challenges faced by rural communities in the United States. Our current project (2017-2022) is titled 'W4001: Social, Economic and Environmental Causes and Consequences of Demographic Change in Rural America'. <https://www.nimss.org/projects/view/mrp/outline/18389>