

## Symposium Overview

### Low-Income Rural Mothers' Support for Employment: Policy Implications

The collection of works presented in this symposium utilized data collected under the Rural Families Speak project. This paper provides a brief overview of project methods employed including its operational definition of rural, participant sampling methods, data collection periods, and participating states. Policy implications arising from the symposium are integrated and presented in the Policy Implications paper (Dolan).

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#### *Definition of Rural Context*

The Rural Families Speak project began recruiting families during 1999 and 2000 from rural counties within each participating state. The counties were designated rural through the urban-rural continuum codes developed by Butler and Beale (1994) of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and known more commonly as Beale Codes. The codes place every county in the US on a continuum with ratings ranging from zero to nine. The most populous counties are given a rating of zero (populations of a million or more) while the least populous counties are given a rating of nine (population of less than two thousand five hundred). Rural Families Speak recruited families from counties rated six or higher. A rating of six is defined as a population of 2,500 to 19,999 adjacent to a metropolitan area. Five states recruited families from one county, eight states recruited families from two counties, and one state recruited families from three counties.

#### *Participant Identification and Sampling*

Criteria for participation in the study were that the family had at least one member under the age of 13 at the time of the interview and that the family earned no more than 200% of the poverty guidelines. Families were recruited through persons within each state working in programs that the target families would utilize (Food Stamps, Supplemental Nutritional Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), Head Start, Work Centers, Social Service Offices, Vocational Technical Schools, childcare centers for farm laborers, welfare-to-work classes, 4-H parents, Housing Authority offices, food pantries, Latino Migrant and Settled Workers program, homeless shelters, and Spanish Community Action Programs). The families were recruited using multiple methods including letters, face to face interactions, telephone, and flyers placed at various locations throughout the community (Bauer, 2004).

#### *Data Collection and Instrumentation*

The Rural Families Speak project is a longitudinal research project consisting of three waves of data. A pilot study was conducted in 1999 and data was collected for Wave 1 in 1999 and 2000. Wave 2 data were collected in 2001 and 2002 with Wave 3 collected in 2003 and 2004. Qualified and interested families were contacted to schedule interview appointments by telephone, letter, or e-mail. Face to face, open-ended interviews were conducted with each family. The mother was the primary informant but occasionally other family members were present at the interview and would also provide information. The interviews took place in a variety of settings according to what was most convenient and comfortable for the families such as family homes, day care centers, schools, public libraries, restaurants, parks, churches, or county extension offices. The interviews were conducted by various people; such as, county extension workers, research associates, graduate students, trained professional staff, and university faculty. The interviews usually lasted between 1 ½ and 3 hours but varied from family to family and state to state. All families provided written consent to participate and be tape-recorded and were assured confidentiality. The participants were reimbursed for their time participating in the interview through a variety of honorariums such as gift certificates to local department stores, children's book stores, or grocery stores or a framed picture of their children taken at the time of the interview. Children of families were given small, age appropriate gifts such as

markers and writing pads or children's books. In most cases, the interview team provided childcare during the interview while the mother was being interviewed. Data were collected using a protocol reflecting both qualitative and quantitative research methods. The interview protocol consisted of questions regarding how low-income, rural families managed to make ends meet. The qualitative captured quantifiable measures of family well-being such as income and the existence of insurance or use of formal support programs. The qualitative protocol encouraged guided and open-ended responses concerning the mother's lived experience as they managed resources, family responsibilities and relationships, formal support program requirements, and other experiences of import to their daily lives.

#### *Participating States*

Researchers in eighteen different states were involved in the longitudinal project at various periods of time. Participating states include California, Colorado, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New York, Ohio, Oregon, South Dakota, West Virginia, and Wyoming.

#### **References**

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Butler, M.A., & Beale, C.L. 1994. *Rural-Urban Continuum Codes of Metro and Non-Metro Counties, 1993*. (Staff Report No. 9425), Agriculture and Rural Economy Division, Economic Research Service, Washington, DC:USDA.

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