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Carsey: Rural Children More Likely Living In Cohabiting Households

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DURHAM, N.H. - As cohabiting - opposite-sex unmarried partners living together in households - increases nationwide, new data show that the growing rate of children in cohabiting households is most pronounced in rural areas. A new brief from the Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire analyzes recent U.S. Census Bureau data to explore trends and patterns among children in cohabiting households in rural America.

The brief finds that the share of rural children living in cohabiting households has nearly doubled since 2000, from four to seven percent. During the same period, the share of urban children living in cohabiting households rose only slightly, from three to four percent.½ This pattern runs counter to the normal flow of social trends, which start in urban areas then spread to rural areas.

"We think that growing economic stress in rural America is in part driving this rapid increase of cohabiting in rural households," says report author William O'Hare, a Carsey Institute policy fellow and senior fellow at the Annie E. Casey Foundation. "The jump in the share of rural children living in cohabiting households has occurred since 2000, when economic conditions in rural America began to deteriorate."

O'Hare and his co-authors - Wendy Manning, Meredith Porter and Heidi Lyons -- state that for single rural women with children, joining a household with a man may be an economic survival strategy. While cohabiting families have poverty rates double those of married-couple households, they are less than half those for single-mother households.

Among the additional findings of the policy brief:

- The number of children living with cohabiting parents has increased more rapidly than any other family form during the past decade.
- The poverty rate for rural children in cohabiting households is 21 percent, compared to only 15 percent in cohabiting urban households.
- Relative to their urban counterparts, rural adults in cohabiting households with children have lower levels of education, employment and income.
- Rural cohabiting-parent families are more vulnerable economically than their urban counterparts, with 60 percent of rural children in cohabiting households in low-income

households (below 200 percent of the poverty line) versus 47 percent of urban children.

The brief notes several policy implications of these findings. Cohabiting parents may be good targets for marriage education - an initiative of the federal government - as they are "closer" to marriage than unmarried parents who live apart. Further, cohabiting women in rural areas are more likely to marry their cohabiting partners than their urban counterparts.

Needs-based public assistance programs treat cohabiting couples unevenly between states, which could have a greater impact on rural families, since nearly half of cohabiting rural households with children receive some type of means-tested public assistance, in contrast to about one-third of urban cohabiting households. This lack of consistency in eligibility could result in some families losing out on necessary services.

And finally, because the official measure of poverty does not include the income of a cohabiting partner as part of the family income, poverty numbers are likely overestimated. As the number of cohabiters has grown significantly since the mid-1960s, when the government implemented its poverty measure, so has the potential impact of mismeasurement. Again, because cohabiting-parent families are a larger share of families in rural America, such mismeasurement would have a larger impact on poverty figures for rural children.

To download a copy of the report, go to <http://carseyinstitute.unh.edu/publications/PB14-cohab.pdf>

The Carsey Institute conducts policy and applied research on vulnerable families and on sustainable community development, giving policy makers and practitioners the timely, independent resources they need to effect change in their communities.

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