

Health Issues, Relationship Changes Trigger Economic Spirals for Low-Income Rural Families

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When it comes to the factors that can send low-income rural families into a downward spiral, health issues and relationship changes appear to be major trigger events. Fortunately, support networks – in particular, extended families – can help ease these poverty spells, according to new research from the [NH Agricultural Experiment Station](#) at the University of New Hampshire [College of Life Sciences and Agriculture](#).

The research was conducted by Elizabeth Dolan, emeritus associate professor of family studies at UNH, and her colleagues Sheila Mammen at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, and Sharon Seiling at Ohio State University. The research is presented in the article [“Explaining the poverty dynamics of rural families using an economic well-being continuum”](#) in the Journal of Family and Economic Issues.

To assess the unstable nature of poverty for rural low-income families, researchers used the Economic Well-Being Continuum (EWC), which looks at eight factors that can impact the economic circumstances of low-income families. The researchers were trying to understand how life circumstances and events can propel rural families into the cycle of poverty.

The authors found that certain triggering events can cause families to move in and out of poverty. These trigger events may be expected, such as graduating from college, or unexpected, such as a car accident. They can have positive outcomes, such as employment, or negative outcomes, such as a chronic health condition.

Among the trigger events, health issues and relationship changes appeared to have a major effect on the economic well-being of rural low-income families. However, social support networks, usually extended family, can help mitigate hardship by providing emotional and financial support, food, transportation, child care, and housing.

“If the persistently poor cannot improve their position, they may well remain poor, affecting future generations since they are less able to give their children a good start into adulthood in terms of health, education, and employability. These families not only need more resources for longer periods of time than others, they also need more assistance to learn how to put these resources into good use,” Dolan says.

In addition to the EWC analysis, researchers also looked at the poverty patterns of five rural families over three years.

“We found health issues, either for a mother, child or partner/spouse, to be a recurring problem. Whether or not the health issue caused the mothers to regress from their state of functioning depended on how they were able to manage it,” Dolan says. “Several of the families also faced a second trigger event, such as breaking up with a partner/spouse, or getting a better-paying job, which either contributed to, or eased, their situation.

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Founded in 1887, the [NH Agricultural Experiment Station](#) at the [UNH College of Life Sciences and Agriculture](#) is an elemental component of New Hampshire's land-grant university heritage and mission. We steward federal and state funding to provide unbiased and objective research concerning diverse aspects of sustainable agriculture and food systems, aquaculture, forest management, and related wildlife and natural resources. We operate and maintain the [Woodman](#) and [Kingman](#) agronomy and horticultural farms, the [Macfarlane Greenhouses](#), the [Fairchild Dairy Teaching and Research Center](#), and the [Organic Dairy Research Farm](#). Additional properties also provide forage, forests and woodlands in direct support to research, teaching, and outreach.

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