Rural Mothers More Likely To Work, But At Lower Wages

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DURHAM, N.H. – A new study by the Carsey Institute shows that rural mothers with children under age 6 have higher employment rates than their urban counterparts, but have higher poverty rates, lower wages, and lower family income.

“As men’s jobs in traditional rural industries such as agriculture, mining, timber and manufacturing disappear due to restructuring of rural labor markets, families increasingly depend on women’s wage labor,” said Kristin Smith, family demographer with the Carsey Institute and author of the study “Employment Rates Higher Among Rural Mothers Than Urban Mothers.”

In 2004, 69 percent of rural mothers with young children under age 6 were employed, compared with 63 percent of urban mothers. According to Smith, higher employment rates among rural mothers are not surprising, given that rural mothers with children under 6 have higher poverty rates. In 2004, 24 percent of rural and 20 percent of urban mothers with young children lived in poverty.

The high labor force participation of rural mothers raises concern about the availability of high quality child care and preschool programs in rural communities, especially considering recent research finding that rural children lag behind urban children in early literacy skills when entering kindergarten.

“Ensuring that rural preschoolers’ early learning experiences prepare them for school should be a strong focus of state and federal policy,” Smith said.

Rural mothers with more education have higher employment rates. In 2004, 46 percent of rural mothers with less than a high school education were employed, compared to 84 percent of rural mothers with a college degree. The same pattern is evident in urban areas, where 41 percent of urban mothers with less than a high school education were employed, compared to 72 percent of urban mothers with a college degree.

“Rural mothers of young children, whatever their education level, have higher employment rates than urban mothers likely because rural areas experienced a real loss in men’s earnings, income, and employment,” Smith said.
The Carsey Institute conducts research and analysis on the challenges facing rural families and communities in New Hampshire, New England, and the nation. The Carsey Institute sponsors independent, interdisciplinary research that documents trends and conditions affecting families and communities, providing valuable information and analysis to policymakers, practitioners, the media, and the general public. Through this work, the Carsey Institute contributes to public dialogue on policies that encourage social mobility and sustain healthy, equitable communities.

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