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DURHAM, N.H. – New research from the Carsey Institute at the University shows that people living in chronically poor rural areas have among the lowest education attainment levels from generation to generation, underscoring that a lack of educational opportunities has persisted for decades.

“There was a time, even a generation ago, when a strong back and good work ethic could mean a decent job and good life in rural America. Unfortunately, this is no longer the case. In today’s increasingly competitive and unstable economy, rural Americans need increasingly higher levels of education or specialized technical skills to obtain even low-paying jobs. Thus, although education has for generations been a key predictor of economic success, it is even more important today simply for basic survival,” said Jessica Ulrich, a doctoral student in sociology at UNH and research assistant at the institute.

The research is part of the Carsey Institute’s Community and Environment in Rural America (CERA) initiative. Since 2007, Carsey Institute researchers have conducted nearly 19,000 telephone surveys with randomly selected adult Americans (age 18 and above) from 12 diverse rural locations.

According to Ulrich, people living in chronically poor communities had significantly lower education levels, compared with those living in amenity-rich (high levels of population growth) amenity-transition (modest to low population growth and relatively high employment and education levels), and declining communities (stagnant economic conditions and population).

Communities in the heart of Appalachia, such as Harlan and Letcher counties in Kentucky, the Mississippi Delta including Coahoma, Tunica, and Quitman counties, and the “Black Belt” of Alabama including Choctaw, Clarke, Marengo, and Wilcox counties, typify chronically poor rural areas -- persistent poverty, high unemployment, and long-term underinvestment in their educational systems, infrastructure, and civic institutions.

Although 14 percent of those in chronically poor communities report not completing high school, only 6 percent in amenity-transition, 4 percent in declining, and 2 percent in amenity-rich communities report the same. A higher percentage of respondents from chronically poor regions said high school was their highest level of education, and fewer report completing or attending college than other rural residents.

When looking at generational trends in education, nearly one-half (43 percent) of fathers from chronically poor rural areas had less than a high school education compared with only 19 percent of fathers from amenity-rich areas. Almost one-third (30 percent) of the fathers from chronically poor places completed only the eighth grade or less. Similarly, 21 percent of the mothers from chronically poor places completed only eighth grade or less.

“Growing up in households with parents with low education levels and in communities with inadequate educational opportunities makes it difficult for those growing up in chronically poor rural areas to achieve a high level of education themselves,” Ulrich says.

Other key findings include:

- Educational achievement varies significantly by type of place in rural America. In chronically poor rural areas, 45 percent of residents have completed only high school or less, compared with 22 to 33 percent in amenity-rich, amenity-transition, and declining resource-dependent rural areas.
- Parents of respondents in amenity-rich and amenity-transition rural communities have higher levels of
education than parents of respondents in declining and chronically poor communities.

- Although people from all types of rural communities generally have more education than their parents, those in chronically poor rural areas still have relatively low education levels — a disadvantage that persists across generations. Fourteen percent of CERA respondents still report not completing high school.

- Concern about school quality is highest in chronically poor rural places where education levels are lowest; however, respondents from declining resource-dependent places were less concerned about school quality than respondents from amenity-rich and amenity-transition rural communities.

“These findings highlight the importance in investing in the educational systems of chronically poor rural areas where generations of underinvestment have contributed to persistent poverty,” Ulrich said.

The complete report about this research is available at http://carseyinstitute.unh.edu/CarseySearch/search.php?id=157.

The Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire conducts research and analysis on the challenges facing 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.

The Carsey Institute was established in May 2002 through a generous gift from UNH alumna and noted television producer Marcy Carsey. For more information about the Carsey Institute, go to www.carseyinstitute.unh.edu.

The University of New Hampshire, founded in 1866, is a world-class public research university with the feel of a New England liberal arts college. A land, sea, and space-grant university, UNH is the state's flagship public institution, enrolling 12,200 undergraduate and 2,300 graduate students.

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