Media Relations

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UNH Research Finds Higher and More Persistent Child Poverty in Rural America

DURHAM, N.H. – The incidence of high child poverty in the U.S. has increased over the last three decades and rural counties more often had high child poverty than did urban counties, according to new research from the Carsey School of Public Policy at the University of New Hampshire. The researchers define a place as having high child poverty if 20 percent or more of the children are living in families with income below the official poverty threshold.

Over the past 30 years the share of counties with high child poverty increased from 36 to 47 percent between 1980 and 1990 before falling to 36 percent in 2000 and then surging to include more than half of all counties (58 percent) in 2010. In 2010, nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of rural counties had high child poverty compared to 47 percent of urban counties.

"The recent economic recession fueled increases in the incidence of child poverty though in many instances the recession just made a bad situation worse," the researchers said. "High child poverty has persisted in many areas for decades, underscoring that it is not just a short-term result of the recession. Such persistent poverty merits special attention because it has significant long-term implications for the families, communities and institutions within its purview."

The researchers noted the situation of children in the 755 counties that have experienced high child poverty persistently for three decades as being of particular concern. "In these areas, at least two generations of children and the families, organizations and institutions that support them have been challenged to grow and develop under difficult financial circumstances." Counties with persistent high child poverty are clustered in Appalachia, the Mississippi Delta, much of the Southeast, and in parts of the Southwest and Great Plains.

The researchers also found that child poverty rates are dramatically lower for non-Hispanic white than for minority children regardless of the racial-ethnic composition of the county where they live. In addition, more than three-quarters of counties with persistent high child poverty have a substantial minority child population.

"The overwhelming focus of welfare programs in the United States is urban, but the fact that a rural child is more than twice as likely as an urban child to live in the vicinity of high child poverty underscores that any national discussion of child poverty must address the challenges faced by children living in isolated rural areas," the researchers said.

The research was conducted by Andrew Schaefer, a doctoral student in sociology and a vulnerable families research associate at the Carsey School; Beth Mattingly, director of research on vulnerable

families at the Carsey School and research assistant professor of sociology; and Ken Johnson, senior demographer at the Carsey School and professor of sociology.

To download a copy of the report, go to https://carsey.unh.edu/publication/rural-child-poverty-higher. The Carsey School of Public Policy is nationally acclaimed for its research, policy education and engagement aimed at addressing important societal challenges. The school takes on the pressing issues of the 21st century, striving for innovative, responsive and equitable solutions at all levels of government and in the for-profit and nonprofit sectors.

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 13,000 undergraduate and 2,500 graduate students.

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