



## Child Poverty Higher and More Persistent in Rural America

Andrew Schaefer, Marybeth J. Mattingly, and Kenneth M. Johnson

The negative consequences of growing up in a poor family are well known. Poor children are less likely to have timely immunizations, have lower academic achievement, are generally less engaged in school activities, and face higher delinquency rates in adolescent years.<sup>1</sup> Each of these has adverse impacts on their health, earnings, and family status in adulthood. Less understood is how the experience of poverty can differ depending on the community context. Being poor in a relatively well-off community with good infrastructure and schools is different from being poor in a place where poverty rates have been high for generations, where economic investment in schools and infrastructure is negligible, and where pathways to success are few.<sup>2</sup> The hurdles are even higher in rural areas, where low population density, physical isolation, and the broad spatial distribution of the poor make service delivery and exposure to innovative programs more challenging.

Over the past thirty years, the share of counties with high child poverty increased, rising from 36 to 47 percent between 1980 and 1990, falling back to 36 percent in 2000, and then surging to include more than half of all counties (58 percent) in 2010.

This brief looks at both the incidence of high child poverty (20 percent or greater) over the past three decades and at the places where such high child poverty has *persisted* for all of those decades (see Box 1 for definitions of high and persistent child poverty). Our analysis documents both that the incidence of high child poverty is growing nationwide and that rural America includes a disproportionate share of children living in counties characterized as having persistent high child poverty.

### KEY FINDINGS

64%

Sixty-four percent of rural counties and 47 percent of urban counties had high child poverty in 2010.



Counties with persistent high child poverty are clustered in Appalachia, the Mississippi Delta, much of the Southeast, parts of the Southwest, and in the Great Plains.



Persistent high child poverty is much more common in rural than in urban counties.



Child poverty rates are dramatically lower for non-Hispanic white than for minority children regardless of the racial-ethnic composition of the county in which they live.

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More than three-quarters of counties with persistent high child poverty have a substantial minority child population.

### More Poor Children, Especially in Rural Areas

Figure 1 displays the percent of all U.S. counties with high child poverty from 1980 to 2010<sup>3</sup> by metropolitan status. Over the past thirty years, the share of counties with high child poverty increased, rising from 36 to 47 percent between 1980 and 1990, falling back to 36 percent in 2000, and then surging to include more than half of all counties (58 percent) in 2010. This pattern was similar in rural and urban areas (see Box 2 for description of how we define rural and urban), although a larger percentage of rural counties had high child poverty at each time point. By 2010, nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of rural counties had high child poverty, compared to just 47 percent of urban counties.

**Box 1: Defining High and Persistent Child Poverty**

In this report, we calculate poverty by comparing a family's total income to a poverty threshold that varies by the number of adults and children in the family (this is often considered the official poverty measure, or OPM). In 2010, the poverty threshold for a family of two adults and two children was \$22,113.<sup>4</sup> If a family's total income falls below its assigned threshold, then everyone in the family is considered poor, or in poverty. We consider places where 20 percent or more of resident children are poor in any given year as having high child poverty for that year. Counties with high child poverty at each of the four time points, spanning three decades, 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2010, are counties with persistent high child poverty. Note that we use decennial Census data for 1980, 1990, and 2000, while relying on estimates from five years of the American Community Survey (2008–2012), centered on 2010, for 2010 estimates. There are 755 (24 percent) counties classified as having persistent high child poverty.

It is important to note that poverty calculated this way is limited in that it does not take into account other economic resources besides income that are helpful for families such as in-kind benefits and tax credits like the Earned Income and Child Tax Credit. They also don't take into account differences in necessary expenses including out-of-pocket medical expenses and child care costs. Official poverty measurement also does not adjust the thresholds for differences in the cost of living across the nation as a whole. The Census Bureau has recently started releasing a Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM) to account for these limitations.<sup>5</sup> It is currently not possible to use the SPM to estimate child poverty rates for counties going back to 1980. We use the OPM in this report because it allows for nuanced historical analyses.

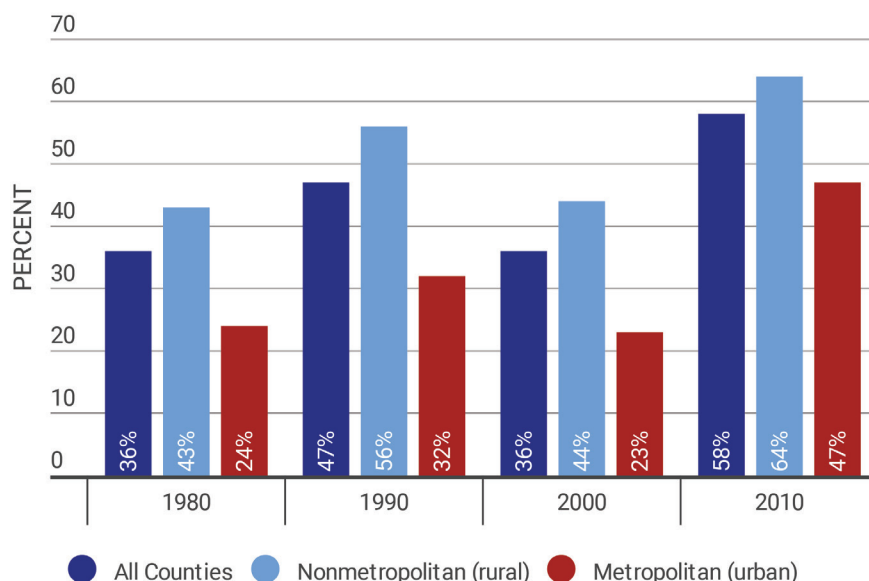
**Places Where High Child Poverty Persists**

The recent economic recession fueled increases in the incidence of child poverty, though in many instances the recession just made a bad situation worse: 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.

**Box 2: Defining Rural and Urban**

Researchers define rural and urban in many ways. The Office of Management and Budget classifies counties as either metropolitan or nonmetropolitan. Metropolitan ("urban") counties are those located within an urbanized core or any adjacent counties that have a "high degree of social and economic integration with the core."<sup>6</sup> All other counties are considered nonmetropolitan ("rural"). We use a consistent 2013 definition of metropolitan areas, which avoids problems that would arise from the redefinition of metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas over time. Our use of the 2013 definition reduces the number of nonmetropolitan counties and increases the number of metropolitan counties compared with earlier definitions. There are 1,167 metropolitan (urban) counties and 1,976 nonmetropolitan (rural) counties.

**FIGURE 1. SHARE OF COUNTIES WITH HIGH CHILD POVERTY, 1980, 1990, 2000, AND 2010**



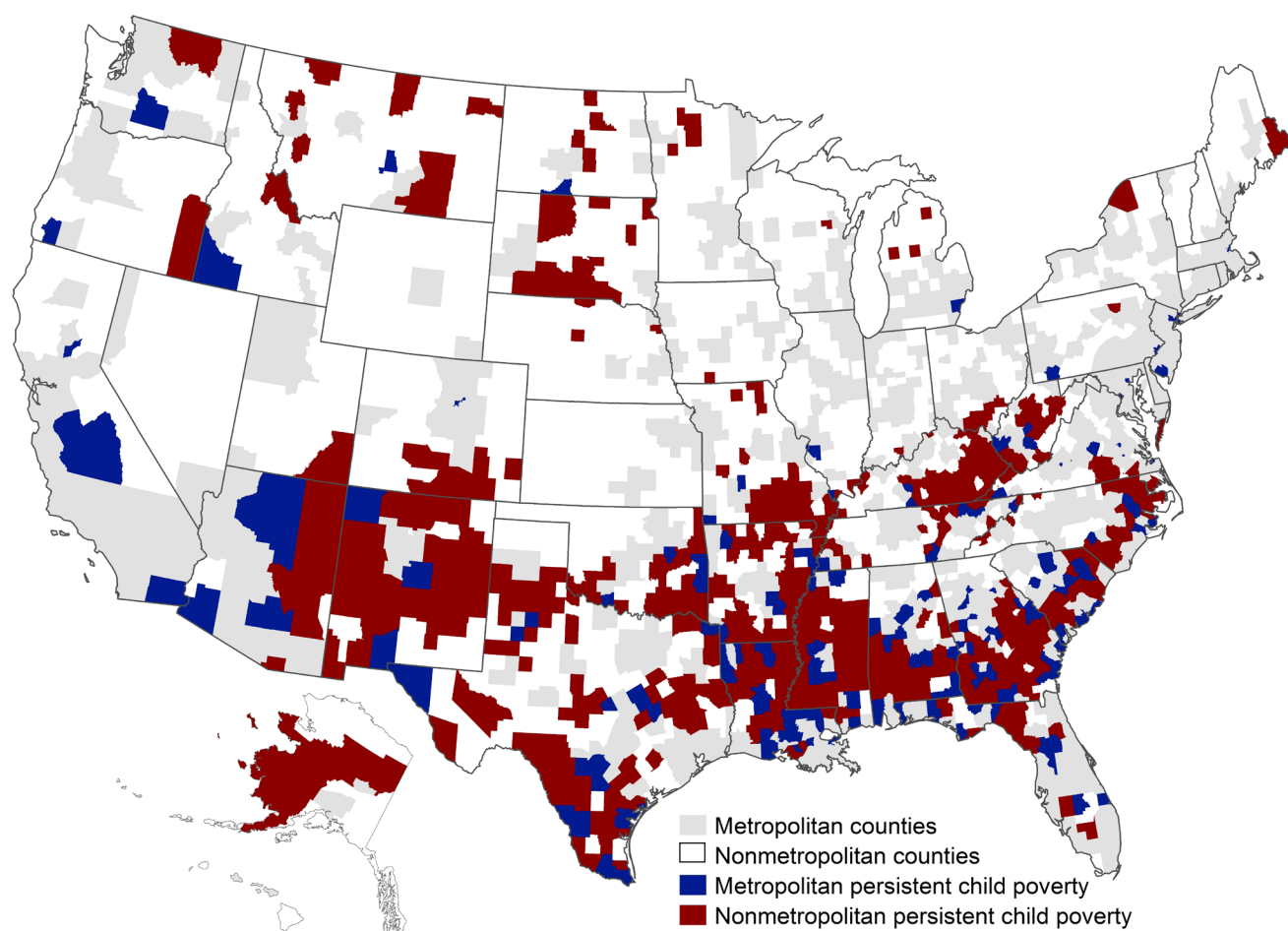
Source: 1980–2000 U.S. Decennial Census; 2008–2012 American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates

Figure 2 shows the distribution of persistent child poverty across the United States by metropolitan status. Some 755 counties—24 percent of the total—had persistent high child poverty between 1980 and 2010. Rural areas are much more likely to experience persistent child poverty than urban areas: 77 percent of counties with persistent high child poverty are nonmetropolitan, and 29 percent (581) of nonmetropolitan

counties had persistent high child poverty compared to just 15 percent (174) of metropolitan counties. Furthermore, a disproportionate share of poor children live in rural places. Only 14.3 percent of the total child population resides in a rural county, but these counties contain 17.2 percent of the nation's poor children. In contrast, urban counties contain 85.6 percent of all children but only 82.7 percent of poor children.

The incidence of high child poverty varies considerably by region. It is clustered in Appalachian counties in West Virginia and Kentucky, throughout the Mississippi Delta, across much of the Southeast, and in parts of the Southwest, and there are scattered pockets in the Great Plains, particularly proximate to Native American reservations. In contrast, high child poverty is largely absent from the Northeast, the Great Lakes, and the rest of the Great Plains.

**FIGURE 2. PERSISTENT CHILD POVERTY BY METROPOLITAN STATUS, 1980–2010**



Source: 1980–2000 U.S. Decennial Census; 2008–2012 American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates

## Populations for Whom High Child Poverty Persists

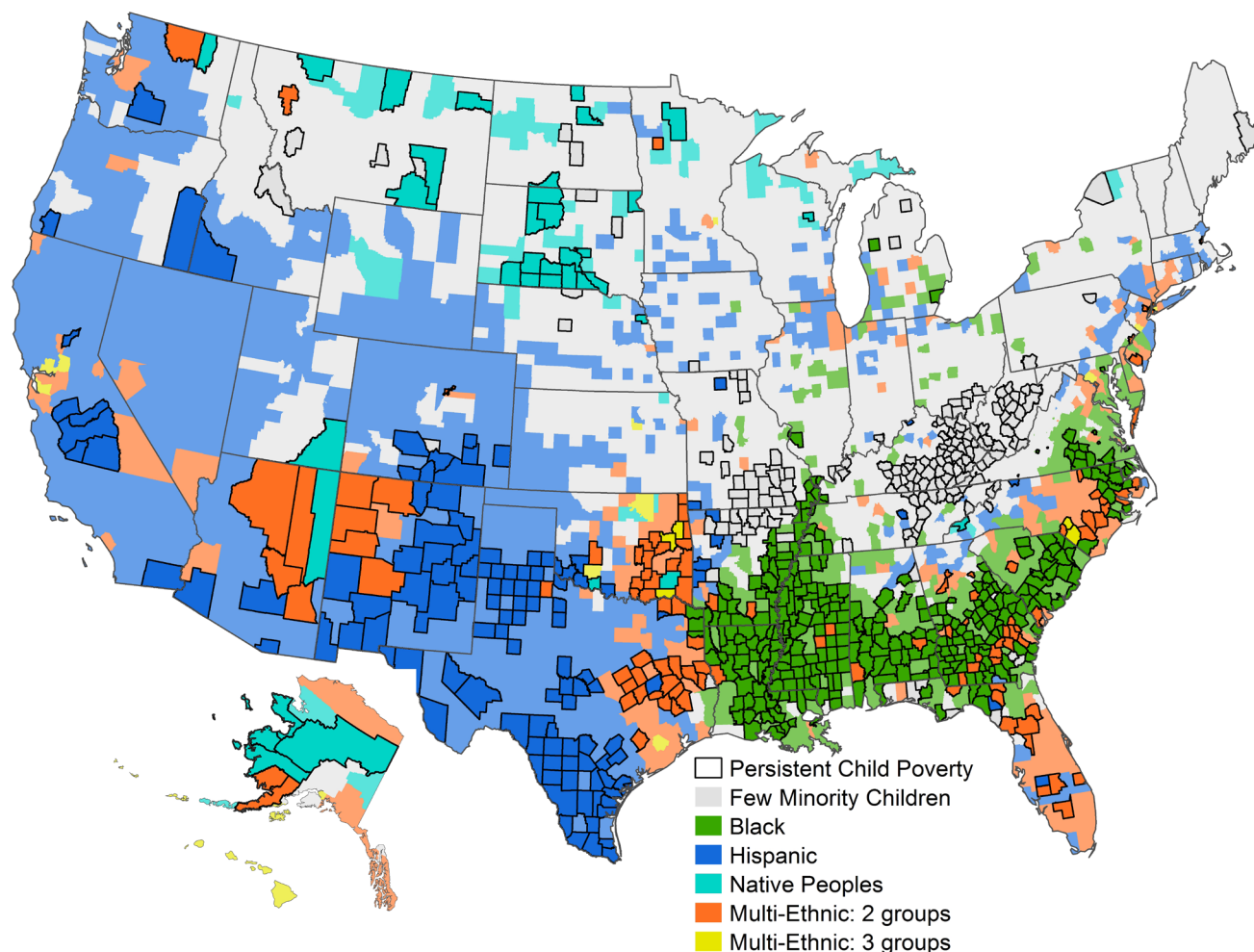
Persistent child poverty touches both minority and non-Hispanic white children. Figure 3 overlays persistent high child poverty data on the distribution of minority children in 2010. A county is identified as having a concentration of minority children if more than 10 percent of its children are from any one minority group (African American, Asian, Native American, or Hispanic). Counties in which children from two or more minority

groups each exceed 10 percent are identified as multi-ethnic.<sup>7</sup>

Persistent high child poverty is concentrated in counties in the old plantation south and in the emerging *colonias* along the Texas–Mexico border, where Hispanic children make up a large proportion of all children. Additional clusters exist on Native American reservations in southeastern Oklahoma, Arizona, New Mexico, Montana, and the Dakotas. Large clusters in the Ozarks and Appalachia contain child populations that are almost exclusively non-Hispanic white.

Some child poverty clusters contain diverse child populations. In east Texas, a large cluster of counties with persistent high child poverty has a diverse population of Hispanic, black, and white children. Further west, in Arizona and New Mexico, persistent high child poverty is evident in places with a large presence of both Hispanic and Native American children. A smaller cluster is emerging in coastal North Carolina, where traditionally black areas are beginning to see significant growth in the Hispanic child population with high poverty rates.

**FIGURE 3. PERSISTENT CHILD POVERTY, 1980–2010 AND MINORITY CHILD POPULATION DISTRIBUTION, 2010**



Source: 1980–2010 U.S. Decennial Census; 2008–2012 American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates



Persistent-high-child poverty counties are disproportionately minority. About 77 percent of persistent-high-child-poverty counties have a substantial minority child population, compared to just 54 percent of all counties.

How do minority child poverty and white, non-Hispanic child poverty rates vary in each of these types of counties? Figure 4 provides the 2010 mean child poverty rate for minority children and non-Hispanic white children in all counties, in all persistent-high-child-poverty counties, and in persistent-high-child-poverty counties with and without substantial minority populations. The figure illustrates that poverty among non-Hispanic white children is consistently lower than among minority children in each category. The gap is smallest in persistent-high-child-poverty counties with few minority children. Here, 42 percent of minority children are

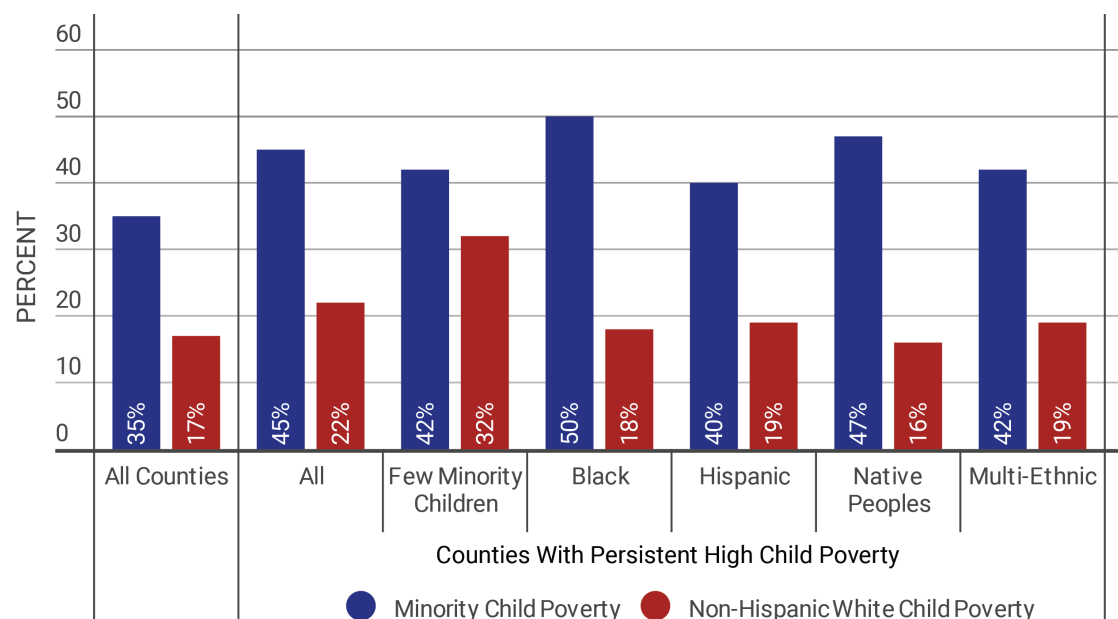
poor compared to 32 percent of non-Hispanic white children. The gap is largest in counties where non-Hispanic black children are the only minority group comprising more than 10 percent of the child population. In such counties, 50 percent of minority children are poor, on average, compared to just 18 percent of non-Hispanic white children.

*The situation of children is of particular concern in the 755 U.S. counties that have experienced high child poverty persistently for three decades. 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.*

## Summary and Conclusion

The incidence of high child poverty has increased over the past three decades. In 1980, 36 percent of counties had at least 20 percent of children in poverty, but by 2010 the share of such counties had grown to 58 percent. Rural counties consistently have a much higher incidence of child poverty than urban counties; in 2010, roughly two-thirds of rural counties had high child poverty compared to about half of urban counties. The situation of children is of particular concern in the 755 U.S. counties (24 percent of the total) that have experienced high child poverty persistently for three decades. 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. Prior research suggests that, in many of these counties,

**FIGURE 4. MEAN PERCENT POOR IN COUNTIES WITH PERSISTENT HIGH CHILD POVERTY, BY RACIAL-ETHNIC COMPOSITION IN 2010**



Source: 1980–2010 U.S. Decennial Census; 2008–2012 American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates

child poverty has been high for longer than the past three decades.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to having higher rates of child poverty generally, rural America contains a disproportionate share of the counties with persistent high child poverty. Approximately 28 percent of all rural children live in persistently poor counties, compared to just 13 percent of urban children. Persistent child poverty is not limited to a few isolated pockets of the country, nor is it limited to minority children. Our maps demonstrate that it is widespread in the largely white areas of Appalachia and the Ozarks as well as in historically black counties deep in the Mississippi Delta, in Hispanic enclaves in the Rio Grande Valley, and in parts of the Dakotas with large Native American populations. Nonetheless, poverty rates for non-Hispanic white children are substantially lower than for their minority counterparts, on average, regardless of the racial-ethnic or persistent child poverty status of the county. This disparity is greatest in counties that have a large minority concentration.

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 persistent high child poverty underscores that any national discussion of child poverty must address the challenges faced by children living in isolated rural areas. The problems with which all poor people struggle are exacerbated in rural areas by remoteness and lack of support services. For instance, limited access

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to comprehensive food stores with fresh fruits and vegetables creates food deserts in rural areas, especially for the rural poor with limited access to reliable transportation. That these persistently poor rural areas exist far from the media and governmental centers of a metro-centric nation may make it difficult for policy makers, the media, and the public to appreciate the extent and depths of rural poverty.

## Data and Methods

This brief updates past work<sup>9</sup> on the uneven spatial distribution of persistent child poverty across U.S. counties. We examine child poverty using decennial census data from 1980, 1990, and 2000, as well as American Community Survey (ACS) five-year estimates from 2008 to 2012. Counties have high child poverty if 20 percent or more of all children under 18 live in families below the official poverty line.<sup>10</sup> Counties have persistent high child poverty if they have high child poverty at each of the four time points: 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2010.<sup>11</sup>

We use counties<sup>12</sup> as the unit of analysis because they constitute a historically consistent set of entities for which child poverty and demographic data have been collected over time. Thus, we are able to identify persistent child poverty in counties and examine variation over both time and location. Although the county is the best unit of analysis for our purposes, it has some limitations. Because large metropolitan counties include substantial populations, some contain large numbers of poor children. Yet, though the absolute numbers may be large, the percentage of poor children may be relatively modest. Another limitation of using counties is that it may preclude a focus on large spatial pockets of concentrated poverty within large urban counties.

## Endnotes

1. Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, Greg J. Duncan, and Nancy Maritato, "Poor Families, Poor Outcomes: The Well-Being of Children and Youth," in Greg J. Duncan and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, eds., *Consequences of Growing Up Poor* (New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 1997).
2. Cynthia M. Duncan, *Worlds Apart: Why Poverty Persists in Rural America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999).
3. Data for 2010 come from the 2008–2012 American Community Survey (ACS) five-year estimates that center around the year 2010.
4. See here for more on Census poverty thresholds: <https://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/data/threshld/>.
5. See the U.S. Census Bureau, Experimental Poverty Measures: <http://www.census.gov/hhes/povmeas/methodology/supplemental/overview.html>.
6. See the Office of Management and Budget report, "Revised Delineations of Metropolitan Statistical Areas, Micropolitan Statistical Areas, and Combined Statistical Areas, and Guidance on Uses of the Delineations of These Areas," <https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/bulletins/2013/b-13-01.pdf>.
7. Note, however, that these definitions exclude counties where the total minority population is over 10 percent but no single minority group comprises more than 10 percent. Thus, hypothetically, if a county is 80 percent white, 9 percent black, 6 percent Hispanic, 3 percent Asian, and 2 percent Native American, it is still coded as having relatively few minority children as no one group reaches the 10 percent threshold.
8. William P. O'Hare and Kenneth M. Johnson, "Child Poverty in Rural America," Population Reference Bureau Reports on America 4, no. 1 (2004).

9. Marybeth J. Mattingly, Kenneth M. Johnson, and Andrew Schaefer, "More Poor Kids in More Poor Places: Children Increasingly Live Where Poverty Persists," Issue Brief No. 38 (Durham, NH: Carsey Institute, 2011).
10. Our use of "all" children is a slight departure from the definition used in previous work. In our past work using the 1980, 1990, and 2000 censuses, we looked only at "related" children under 18, i.e., those children who are related in some way to the household or family reference person. When using the 2005–2009 ACS estimates, we looked at "all" children under 18, a category that includes related children as defined above as well as unrelated children over age 15. For consistency, in this brief we analyze data on all children under 18 at each time point.
11. Our definition of persistent child poverty differs from research recently published by the Economic Research Service (ERS) in three ways. First, the ERS looks only at data on "related" children under age 18, whereas we analyze data on "all" children under age 18. Second, its measure of persistent high child poverty uses slightly older data for the final time point (the 2007–2011 ACS five-year estimates, versus the 2008–2012 ACS estimates). Third, the ERS combines many of the Virginia independent cities with surrounding counties to create an aggregate poverty rate for the total area before calculating persistent high child poverty status. We make no such calculation and treat Virginia independent cities as county equivalents. The ERS analysis yields 708 persistent related child poverty counties compared to our 755 persistent child poverty counties. We replicated our analyses using the ERS measure with no substantial change in the findings.
12. In this analysis, Virginia independent cities are treated as counties. In addition, we have estimated poverty levels for Cibola County in New Mexico, La Paz County in Arizona, and Lake and Peninsula Borough in Alaska because these delineations did not exist at the time of the 1980 census.

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