

Poverty and Development in Rural America's Frontier

Background

The National Center for Frontier Communities is the only organization in the United States dedicated to the issues and concerns of the most sparsely populated and isolated communities, the enduring American frontier.

For the past several years, the Center has paid special attention to the unacceptably high rates of poverty in frontier communities across the United States. This focus on addressing frontier poverty has led the Center to invite Cynthia “Mil” Duncan, one of the nation’s leading researchers and policy experts on rural poverty, to address its advisory committee, the Frontier and Rural Expert Panel.

In two presentations before the Frontier and Rural Expert Panel of the National Center for Frontier Communities, Cynthia "Mil" Duncan described the extent of poverty in rural America. She illustrated with extensive mapping the history and characteristics associated with such poverty and the changing landscape of rural America with the potential for impacting that poverty.

Duncan is the founding director of the Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire. The Institute supports interdisciplinary policy research on children, youth and families in rural communities. Duncan published the acclaimed *Worlds Apart: Why Poverty Persists in Rural America* in 1999, and from 2000-2004 directed the Ford Foundation's Community and Resource Development Unit.

Duncan addressed the Panel in June 2007 and May 2010. Maps in her presentations help to visualize the historical dimension of the problems—including the correlations between lack of education and persistent poverty.

The 50 million people who are living in rural America comprise 17 percent of the population and live on 80 percent of the land. The National Center for Frontier Communities in partnership with State Offices of Rural Health have designated close to 4 percent of the nation's population as frontier. Ten million frontier residents are scattered across 56% percent of the land.

- Four types of rural and frontier areas.

Amenity rich areas; three out of five baby boomers say they want to live in a small town. ‘Footloose professionals’ are choosing places that are amenity rich, and those are the places that are showing a population gain.

Declining resource dependent areas. Many of these communities have relatively healthy strong community institutions such as schools. They have strong social capital and civic infrastructure but they have seen changes in their economy leading to significant out migration and increasing poverty.

Transitioning areas with amenities. These are good places to work to build institutions, not gated communities. Reduce any separation of people who have been there and new people moving in.

Chronically poor communities where the challenges are enormous. These are places with a majority people of color with the exception of Appalachia and the Ozarks. Long-term underinvestment, a legacy of poverty, low education levels, and broken civic institutions prevent positive change. Duncan’s study finds that “half of the rural poor live in areas of concentrated poverty. Therefore they do not see or experience inclusion, civic culture, or other ways of doing things.”

- Factors that contribute to continuing poverty in rural America.

Outmigration. Young adults have always left rural America. A chart beginning with 1950, and showing each decade since, illustrates that “20 somethings” have always left. The most remote rural communities have the biggest challenges – loss of population, persistent poverty, an unskilled labor force and a high number of high school dropouts. In the global economy, this is an extreme disadvantage. Schools that are broken unfairly condemn children to a lifetime of limited opportunities.

Chronic underinvestment. Places with high poverty, low education and broken government and weak or non-existent community institutions have an inherent lack of capacity. And it turns out that these communities suffer from high levels of corruption and patronage that are especially hard on low income residents.

Lack of adequate resources to participate in society. “Participate” is key. Poor people are not apathetic; they do not have the resources to participate. In communities where nobody participates, patronage is rampant. Few people have the resources to hold institutions accountable and the institutions become a source of patronage for some, rather than a source of opportunity for all.

For example, a minister in Appalachia explained to Duncan that in his congregation family concerns trumps community engagement, “I see people very, very concerned about their own families, and their concern stops there..... This concern ought to go beyond family.”

Lack of civic culture. The lack of civic institutions and a lack of middle class are related factors. Duncan refers to the concept of "civic culture" which has three elements:

1. To what extent do people trust each other?
2. To what extent do people from all walks of life participate in community affairs and decisions?
3. To what extent do people invest in the community – spend time and even money building things that benefit others outside their own family?

Poor communities tend to have only two classes, the haves and the have-nots. In those communities middle income people tend to ally themselves with the elite and the people doing well, leaving those who are doing poorly dismissed and set aside.

A strong middle class, she asserts, is essential to creating strong community institutions such as schools. Amenity rich communities have the opportunities to combine environmental stewardship with investment in collective institutions that benefit the whole community. Gated communities threaten to create two rural Americas living side by side in one community. Newcomers need to be engaged with their community.

THE CHALLENGES FOR RURAL AND FRONTIER COMMUNITIES:

Isolation and remoteness make it hard to implement programs.

Small social worlds mean family stigma can have real consequences.

Broken social fabric and community institutions.

Corrupt local government, patronage system

Old patterns and systems based on traditional economies no longer work. Changing local politics is difficult.

The families who run things go unchallenged.

POLICIES TO CREATE POSITIVE CHANGE;

Support working families.

Invest in young children and connect youth to the mainstream.

Encourage work and make it pay a living wage with benefits and a career path.

Support seniors to age in place with dignity.

Duncan supports the work of development economist Albert Hirschman. Hirschman finds that when people are stuck in a place that is stagnant, undeveloped or full of problems they have three choices: loyalty, exit or voice.

Loyalty is 'kind of an odd word but it means loyalty to what one has.' Loyalty means going on with the status quo, the safe thing to do. For many it is hard to make change and it is oftentimes dangerous to speak out and point out things that are not fair.

Exit means those who can get up and go got up and went.

Voice is about participation and about being politically active. It is about standing up not alone but together and saying, "We can make a difference here." That kind of voice participation and investment at the community level needs also to be facilitated at the Federal level.

Duncan's slide presentations from 2010 and 2007 follow. While some of the slides are similar in the two presentations, the later version has a great deal of new, updated information.