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Book Review

By Peter A. Kindle

Rural Poverty in the United States

Ann R. Tickamyer, Jennifer Sherman, & Jennifer Warlick, (Eds.)

2017

New York, NY: Columbia University Press

476 pages

Paperback \$41.99

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Over 30 authors contributed to this sociological inquiry into the current state of poverty in rural America. The editors did a remarkable job of smoothing what could have been a cacophony of voices into one for the reader. Their goal was to provide a comprehensive understanding of rural poverty because it is a persistent social problem that has been increasing in the early 21st century, especially in comparison to urban poverty that is on the decline.

The 16 chapters are grouped into five parts dealing in turn with rural geography and demography, key concepts in understanding poverty, vulnerable populations in rural America, rural community and social institutions, and a final section on the politics of rural poverty. One would be hard pressed to mine more meaningful insights from the national data sets that are central to almost every chapter. Chapter end notes are plentiful, and several chapters contain case studies useful for classroom discussions.

The two chapters in the first section reanalyze U.S. Census data grouped by metropolitan, non-metropolitan adjacent, and non-metropolitan non-adjacent counties. The rural population has not consistently declined with net in-migration resulting in population growth in the 1970s, 1990s and 2000s. What is somewhat consistent is the out-migration of white youth and the in-migration of Hispanics, resulting in an increase in rural diversity. The second chapter, relying almost completely on the official poverty measure (OPM), argues that rural poverty exceeds metropolitan poverty even though the differential has narrowed since the 1950s. Rural poor counties are highly racialized, and concentrated poverty has grown since 1999.

The second section reads much like an introductory textbook, recounting the variety of ways that poverty might be measured in the third chapter. Readers are provided good definitions of absolute poverty (OPM), relative poverty (below 50th percentile), consumption-based poverty (expenditures vs. an absolute measure), deprivations (itemization of specific unmet needs), consensual/democratic approach (census of necessities vs. census of unmet needs), and more subjective measures (respondent estimates). The fourth chapter provides the major theoretical explanations for poverty with a good introduction to the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu. Included are the individual (human capital, status attainment, and culture of poverty), structural and spatial (unequal social and economic systems), and merger of people and place (intersectionality, social exclusion/inclusion, and forms of capital) as potential explanations of poverty.

The third section contains three chapters dealing with gender roles, race inequalities, and immigration – all denoting *vulnerable* populations. Single mothers are most likely to live in poverty, and the decline in rural employment opportunities for men has not resulted, in the author's view, to greater gender life and work balance in the home. Chapter six is quite different from most of the other chapters as it interpreted the racial dynamics in the Black Belt, the Borderland, and American Indian Reservations as various forms of a racial caste system after the model of Alexander (2012). The essential argument is that colorblind policies will never grant adequate resources to address the racialized poverty of place as described in these three areas. Chapter seven returns to U.S. Census data and showed that Hispanic dispersion to new rural regions has not been motivated by economics because new rural regions are higher poverty counties.

The fourth section contains six chapters that addressed a variety of topics. Chapter eight was an introduction to the second editor's interpretation of Bourdieu's social, cultural, human, and moral capital with an emphasis on how each form of symbolic capital creates opportunities as well as barriers to rural life. Chapter nine is a somewhat standard interpretation of the late 20th century economic changes, that is, the decline of unions, the off-shoring of manufacturing jobs, and the increase in the service sector. Twice this chapter asserted that work is no longer an antidote to poverty in the U.S. Wages are comparable between low income work in most advanced economies, but what makes the U.S. different is the absence of robust work supports. National data sets are again mined in chapter ten to compare the underutilization of food programs in rural areas despite higher food insecurity and the less arduous nature of housing insecurity in rural areas. Chapter eleven provided a quick overview of four negative environmental factors that disproportionately influence rural areas: energy resource development, agriculture, climate change, and waste facility siting. Chapter twelve laments the urban focus of federal funding for public education and the presumed disadvantage to rural education. Chapter thirteen proposed social disorganization, lack of resources, and the masculinity crisis as potential explanations for higher murder rates in rural areas and tries to make much of the spatial inequity of new prison construction in high black, high poverty, rural settings.

The final section contains a data-rich comparison of rural and urban utilization of ten safety net programs (chapter fourteen), a discussion of the failure of top-down, placed-based efforts to address poverty through community development or tax incentives (chapter fifteen), and a concluding chapter that throws a deficiency shroud over the entire discussion of rural poverty.

As the first attempt at a comprehensive overview of rural poverty in 20 years, the authors and editors are to be commended. The legacy of rural neglect going back to Harrington (1963) is a blemish on poverty studies. What is most interesting to this reviewer is the casual dismissal of the evidence provided by the supplemental poverty measure (SPM) and the evidence of increasing rural dispersion of Hispanics. Both could easily be interpreted to suggest that the deficiency model of rural poverty that dominates this book is not the complete story. The facts are that Hispanics are moving to many rural areas in America, and rural poverty is lower than urban poverty when measured by the SPM. Academic analyses of national and state level data sets are unlikely to disaggregate explanations for this disconfirming information. Yes, there are

disturbingly persistent pockets of rural poverty - the southern Black Belt, the southern Borderlands, American Indian Reservations, and Appalachia – but all rural areas should not be viewed through the lens these examples form. As Sherman's (2009) own research suggests, rural poverty is sometimes an intentional choice. Rural America is changing. Small communities and their sense of belonging are merging into slightly larger regional centers with some urban amenities that include educational opportunities and health care providers (Wood, 2008). Disparities of income in rural communities are more muted than in urban settings as the wealthiest person in town is likely to drive a pickup truck and wear overalls just like the poorest. As a former urbanite who has spent the last decade living in a rural college town, I can assert with confidence that I will never willingly trade my five-minute commute for city living. Sadly, this book only presents one side of the story about rural poverty.

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