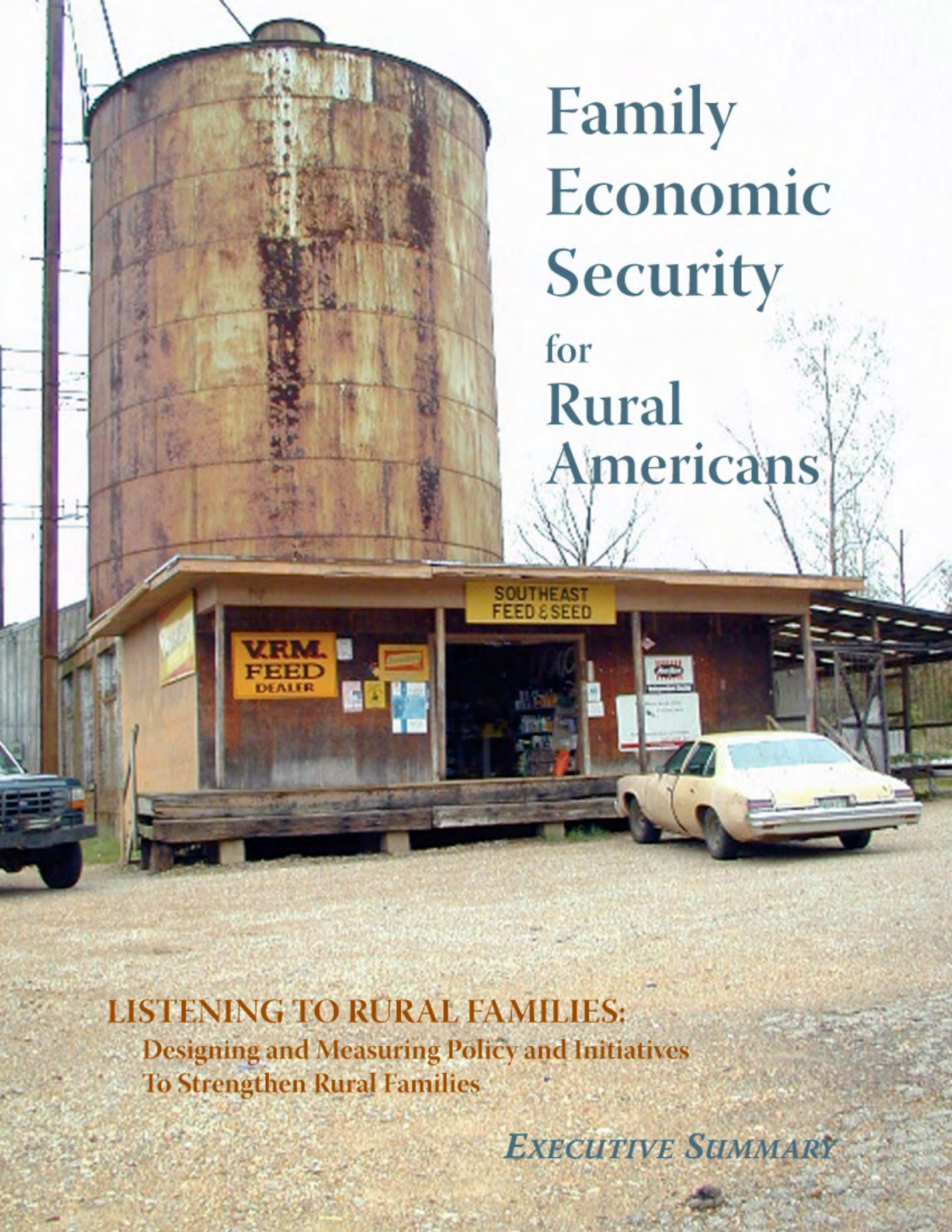


Family Economic Security for Rural Americans

LISTENING TO RURAL FAMILIES:

Designing and Measuring Policy and Initiatives To Strengthen Rural Families

Executive Summary

THE GOAL:

Design a framework to identify indicators that accurately reflect the reality of rural life.

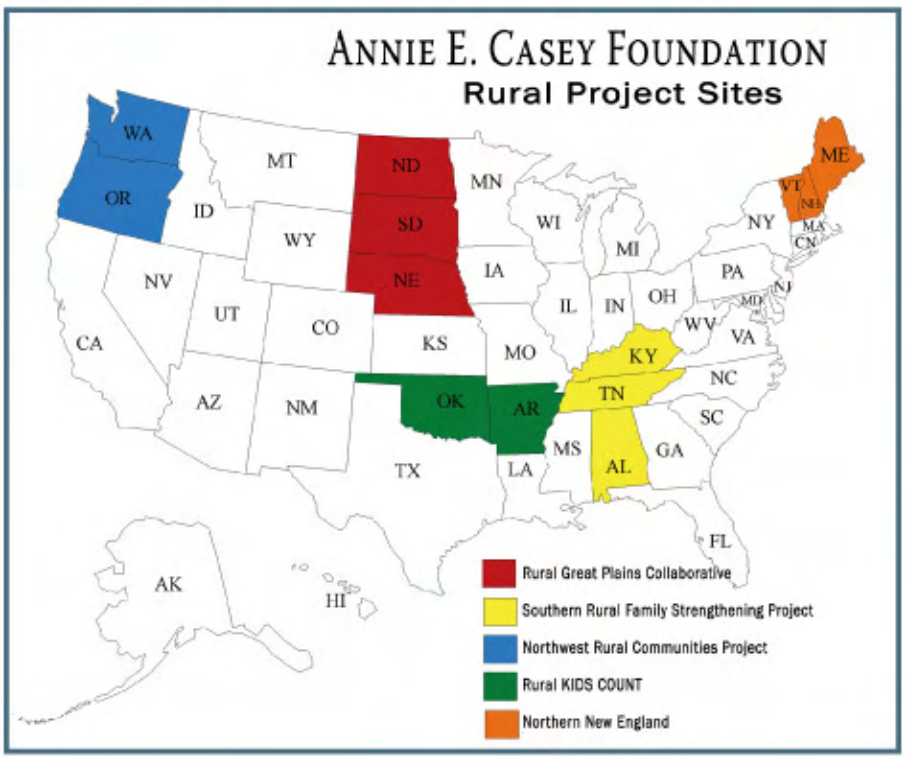
- Why are programs and initiatives successful in urban neighborhoods not showing the same outcomes in rural communities?
- What makes the hardships faced by financially challenged rural families different from their urban counterparts?
- How do policy strategies need to be implemented or adapted in order to be more effective in counties with sparse populations?

KIDS COUNT, a project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, is a national and state-by-state effort to track the status of children in the United States. By providing policy-makers and citizens with benchmarks of child well-being, KIDS COUNT seeks to enrich local, state and national discussions concerning ways to secure brighter futures for all children.

As they compiled reports of statistical data from year to year, project directors from many states recognized or confirmed low-income rural children and their families are often outside the national attention spotlight. As a consequence, their needs have been less frequently studied than those of children living in poor urban areas. The research directors identified the need for a body of research or common language to document the unique circumstances which impact the ability of these families to ensure their children's successful journey through childhood and adolescence.

In order to identify the underlying issues and recommend effective solutions to the problem, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, through its KIDS COUNT Network, funded three phases of a research project designed and proposed by KIDS COUNT organizations from the Great Plains states of Nebraska, North Dakota and South Dakota. The overarching goal of the project was to design a framework to identify indicators that accurately reflect the reality of rural life. The project's focus was on listening to rural families' life experiences to provide insight into the opportunities and barriers that are at the core of rural life and pave the way for developing solutions and better measures of progress.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation funded five collaborative research sites studying rural communities in 13 states.



Great Plains Collaborative
- Nebraska
- North Dakota
- South Dakota

Southern Rural Family Strengthening Project
- Alabama
- Kentucky
- Tennessee

Northwest Rural Communities Project
- Oregon
- Washington

Rural KIDS COUNT
- Arkansas
- Oklahoma

Northern New England
- Maine
- New Hampshire
- Vermont

CAPTURING THE VOICES OF RURAL AMERICANS...

The First Step is Listening

In a three-stage process involving rural communities in 13 states, more than 50 focus groups convened and researchers listened to hundreds of lower-income rural Americans discuss their lives.

Despite the evident differences between living in the Appalachian Mountains, a 3000-acre ranch in Oklahoma, a lumber camp in Maine, a small isolated town in western Nebraska or a fishing community in Oregon - a common litany of hardships and concerns developed into consistent patterns and trends when studies from the various regions were compared.

The five collaborative sites all described a struggling economy that has led to:

- A dominant industry (i.e., agriculture, forestry, mining or tourism) that is currently or has been in decline
- Low wage jobs
- An out-migration pattern of people, especially young families
- A lack of adequate services, such as health care and childcare
- A lack of activities, such as child and youth development programs

It needs to be stated that generalizations cannot be made to all rural America. However, reoccurring themes can point to shared characteristics.

Why Focus on Rural America?

Despite the hardships that have been described in this report, almost 50 million Americans, 20% of the population, live in non-metro areas, keepers of 75% of the nation's land. This number would probably be lower were it not for the strength, loyalty, family connections, tenacity and determination of rural Americans, characteristics reflected during the focus group sessions. Those choosing to live in rural areas are willing to trade the conveniences and opportunities of city life for the safety and wholesome lifestyle prevalent in smaller communities.

"I think it keeps [my kids] innocent a little longer... Everybody knows everybody, and you're going to get caught easier. When they start hanging out with someone, it's not a total stranger. You kind of know if it's a good person for them to be hanging out with or if it's not."

"We've been here almost four years and I'll never leave. ... [My daughter] has done a complete turn around and she loves her teachers. She loves the school and that means the world to us. My husband drives ninety miles a day to work and he has done that for four years, and we'd never left and we've had opportunities several times."

"There are no taxis, no buses - only friends."

"There's some Sundays my husband and I head out on our horses. We go out in the hills. It is like nobody else has ever been there before. It's very relaxing and soothing. It's times like that, that really makes us think 'yep', we're doing the right thing."

Reducing the hardships experienced in rural living will help preserve this unique heritage and culture so important to the diversity America was designed to uphold.

at a glance...

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY CHANGE

A three-pronged approach to changing rural policy is needed to adequately impact the circumstances of families in rural America. The strategy needs to focus on data, research and advocacy.

DATA

Explore in-depth existing data used as indicators of well-being to assess their appropriateness for rural areas.

- Are there well-being indicators unique to rural areas?
- What data are available that can be used?
- What challenges exist in uniformity and comparability of data?

Evaluate how to encourage non-federal data providers to make their data products available to the public.

- Who are the non-federal data providers who focus on family well-being issues?
- What type of incentives would be attractive to these providers to release information for public consumption?
- What are the issues of quality control that need to be considered?

Lobby for comparable data collection procedures across geographic areas.

- How much data regarding family well-being is not comparable?
- What obstacles exist to developing comparable data sets?

ADVOCACY

Build on the strengths of the community or regional area.

- What in the inventory of resources and infrastructure can be used innovatively to accomplish some task?
- How can a community's human capital or organizations best be leveraged to address a particular need?

  EXAMPLE: Underutilized rural schools may provide needed facilities for childcare or after-school activities. Similarly, a region with a strong faith-based community may provide untapped volunteers for local programming.

Shift the paradigm from competition to cooperation.

- Are communities encouraged and given incentives to cooperate rather than compete?
- Has an effort been made in strategic planning to bring surrounding communities together for problem solving?
- Are we building solutions on partnerships that share scarce resources among organizations or communities?

  EXAMPLE: Compile information of best practices, where communities cooperated on projects that benefited each community.

RESEARCH

Explore policy directions relating to research.

- How can we create incentives for rural research and demonstration projects related to rural family economic success?
- How can we establish a clearinghouse of rural family research?

AGENDA FOR SUCCESS

1 Identify and organize collaborative partners to promote strategies that increase family economic success in rural areas.

WORKFORCE STRATEGIES

THEME: Diversify economic opportunities.

- Adapt TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), through collaborative partners, to be rural focused.
- Promote rural economic development partnerships.
- Improve rural educational opportunities.
  - Develop financial partnerships for literacy programs.
  - Promote Small Rural Business Venture Capital Tax Credit.

ECONOMIC SUPPORT STRATEGIES

THEME: Improve childcare.

- Foster public-private collaboration to promote childcare availability and quality.
- Increase and enhance childcare subsidies.

THEME: Income support.

- Improve awareness for Earned Income Tax Credit.
- Increase minimum wage.

2 Initiate and sustain programs that explore ways to more effectively measure barriers to rural family economic success.

- Establish a clearinghouse of rural family research.
- Organize a policy forum to promote dialogue within the data-user community.
- Organize a policy forum to promote linkage between policy-makers, data providers and state and local advocates.

3 Empower community engagement activities that promote self-sufficiency through innovative community partnerships.

COMMUNITY INVESTMENT STRATEGIES

THEME: Improve rural transportation.

- Explore and evaluate innovative programs.
  - Provide subsidies for car ownership.
  - Streamline para-transit opportunities.

THEME: Provide greater access to health care.

- Support State Children's Health Insurance Programs (SCHIP).
- Support Individual Development Account for Services.
- Support blended funding to maximize available programs.

THEME: Increase activities for youth.

- Improve out-of-school programs.
- Provide service learning opportunities.

The most critical element of these recommendations is reflected in the need to engage community leaders in improving conditions for the families while building state and national capacity to test strategies and measure outcomes. Community leaders can benefit as much as national researchers and data providers from the information collected from members of similarly situated communities all across the country. Responsibilities can be assigned at the local and national level and priorities can be established based upon short-term and long-term strategies. It is the intent of this collaborative effort that these recommendations will help rural families to feel less isolated and less challenged in their effort to achieve self-sufficiency, while building upon the strengths and benefits that initially brought them to rural America.

EMERGING THEMES

Many Consistent Themes
were shared by the five sites

All five sites expressed:

- Similar reasons for staying in rural areas: (e.g., safety, friendliness, nature and proximity to family)
- Concern over medical needs, education, and services for their children with special needs
- Concern for low wages and the lack of jobs
- Dissatisfaction with shopping options and prices
- Hardship in accessing reasonably-priced auto repair - a self-reliance necessity
- A need for more medical specialists
- Difficulty in accessing affordable medical and dental services
- A lack of usable public transportation
- Boredom among teens or general lack of activities
- Concern that youth activities are limited primarily to sports

Four of the five sites shared:

- Challenges in transporting children to youth activities
- Praise for Head Start
- Discontent with the local business community and leaders (a sense of lack of control - not empowered)
- General satisfaction with elementary schools
- A need for more after-school programs and youth activities for children and teens
- Parental concerns over drug use among the community's youth
- Problems in transporting children with special medical needs to urban medical centers

Three of the five sites have:

- A shortage of affordable, reliable and flexible childcare providers
- An expressed desire for community centers for children and families
- Housing costs not included in their primary concerns
- Values including connection to church

"There are a few places you can go get more than the minimum wage, but not really -- the nursing home is about the only place."

"My husband, he leaves at 4:00 in the morning to travel to work, works all day, comes back at 8:00 or 9:00 in the evening, goes to sleep at 10:00 and he travels again the next morning."

"We don't even get an ambulance. My son had a seizure last Friday, and it took 30 to 35 minutes to get help."

"I figured out that if I worked 40 hours a week and paid daycare for two children, that I would bring home $40 a month. So we decided for $40 a month, we should raise our own kids."

"If you've got three kids, you're on three different teams. It's impossible. You know, gas is two bucks a gallon. You can't send them out on the bicycle in the middle of the night."

"One man went to the clinic with heart problems and stayed all day -- couldn't get in. They sent him home and he died that night."

"I just want my child to actually have the opportunity to be a lawyer or to have choices, not just to be thrown into the mill or gas station - because when I was a kid, we didn't have choices."

QUALITATIVE DATA:

Focus Groups provided the information needed to develop a clear picture of the poverty and hardship of rural America.

Many of the same challenges to family economic stability and success impact both rural and non-rural families. However specific factors of rural life complicate the development of an over-arching policy initiative.

Although the basic framework for developing strategies in rural areas appears to be similar to those in urban areas, the approach needs to differ. A key underlying principle is the need to look at the situation through the lens of those who we are attempting to serve. In rural areas, that lens typically reflects obstacles such as isolation, small population base, and significant distances to population centers. Thus, a localized perspective needs to be considered when developing effective strategies.

The research teams in the five collaborative sites funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation opened the research process to families living the unique experiences of poverty in Rural America. The teams set out to discover the strengths that support and challenges that confront rural families with limited resources. They also sought to design strategies to sustain these families' efforts in raising healthy children, providing opportunities for them to reach their fullest potential.

Focus groups were conducted to provide a qualitative contextual background to the existing quantitative data, and to supplement topic areas lacking quantitative data. Focus group questions were designed to direct discussion toward rural community benefits and challenges and identify ways that families make connections in the following three aspects of life:

- **Economic Opportunity** such as jobs, wages and cost of living
- **Social Networks** including churches, schools and recreation
- **Services and Supports** such as health care, childcare and shopping.

46 focus groups, consisting of over 300 individuals, were conducted in the five collaborative sites. Poverty guidelines issued by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) were used to select focus group participants. The groups were composed of families with children, having incomes at approximately 185% or below the poverty level.

In most communities, additional contextual information was sought from "key informants" such as local teachers, ministers, judges, social service providers and community leaders. Their input was used to validate, refute or expand upon results of focus group discussions. Over 150 "key informants" were interviewed in the five sites.

The qualitative findings were supplemented with quantitative data gathered from the U.S. Census Bureau and the most current, relevant data from national, regional, state or local data sets.

Reseachers from across the country found the views and experiences of families represented the sample data not often seen in rural family poverty studies. They found that, when presented alone, most large quantitative data sets did not accurately reflect the true experiences shared by those studied.

The important final step of the project will be the presentation of the new data gathered, along with its analysis and implications, to key policy-makers and opinion leaders at the national, state and local levels.

Acknowledgements

The *Family Economic Security for Rural Americans* project consists of 13 states in five clusters. Each cluster represents a rural collaborative. Each collaborative has already produced their own report describing their area's rural research findings. This report is the compilation of all five publications. Individual reports can be accessed by visiting the KIDS COUNT Network website:

http://www.aecf.org/kidscount/kcnetwork/meeting/KIDSCOUNTRuralWork.htm

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- Local coordinators
- Data and research partners
- Qualitative data analysts
- Staff and faculty at each state's site

Family Economic Security for Rural Americans project team members:

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