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*Growing Up Rural:
How Place Shapes Life Outcomes*

VOLUME 8, ISSUE 4, MAY 2022





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Growing Up Rural: How Place Shapes Life Outcomes

ISSUE EDITORS

Shelley Clark, Sam Harper, and Bruce Weber

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Growing Up in Rural America



SHELLEY CLARK, SAM HARPER, AND BRUCE WEBER

This article examines the context of growing up in rural America and how rural roots shape life chances. The distinctive physical, social, and cultural attributes of rural areas can exacerbate many of the challenges of childhood poverty. Yet rural children have better access to public childcare services and perform as well as urban children on standardized tests. Life trajectories diverge most sharply when rural youths decide whether to leave their home communities. Those who stay typically face limited opportunities for higher education and well-paid, stable employment, whereas those who leave fare remarkably well with respect to their educational, economic, and health outcomes. In sum, growing up in rural America offers distinctive advantages and disadvantages, yet the benefits may accrue primarily to those who leave.

Keywords: rural, life course, geographic inequalities, place-based effects

Nearly one in six Americans, some forty-six million people, lives in a rural area (Cromartie et al. 2020). Over the last three decades their lives have attracted relatively little attention, but recent years have seen a burst of media attention and academic research. Much of this newfound interest paints a bleak, even troubling, portrait of life in rural areas in the United States. Several important scholarly works have argued that rural communities feel “left behind,” engendering widespread feelings of rage, despair, mourn-

ing, and resentment (Cramer 2016; Hochschild 2016; Lichter and Schafft 2016; Wuthnow 2018).

Scholars often attribute these sentiments to widespread economic distress found in many rural communities (Monnat and Brown 2017). Some rural areas have experienced deep poverty persisting across generations (Lichter and Johnson 2007; Thiede, Kim, and Valasik 2018), whereas others have witnessed steady economic decline over the last fifty years as a consequence of economic restructuring (Lobao

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2014; Ryser and Halseth 2010) and globalization (Slack 2014; Thiede and Slack 2017). These economic hardships, in turn, have affected all aspects of rural life. Even after the recovery from the Great Recession, unemployment and underemployment (discouraged workers, involuntary part-time workers, low-income full-time workers) remain widespread in rural areas (Thiede and Slack 2017). For at least the last half century, employment hardship has consistently been greater for rural workers than for urban workers (Slack and Jensen 2020). Prime-age labor-force participation rates remain markedly lower in rural areas than in urban areas (Economic Research Service 2019b). Educational attainment is also lower in rural areas. In 2015, only 19 percent of rural residents, relative to 33 percent of urban residents, have a bachelor's degree (Marré 2017). Of particular importance for children's well-being and long-term health and educational outcomes, about 25 percent of rural children versus approximately 20 percent of urban children live in poverty (Hertz and Farrigan 2016; Pacas and Rothwell 2020; Rothwell and Thiede 2018).

Rural families have also changed (Carson and Mattingly 2014; Lichter and Graefe 2011; MacTavish and Salamon 2004). Once characterized as the traditional ideal of strong, stable "intact" nuclear families with robust extended kinship ties, rural families are now indistinguishable from urban families in terms of rates of family volatility, single motherhood, and cohabitation (Livingston 2018; O'Hare et al. 2009; Snyder and McLaughlin 2004). Similarly, in response to an aging and shrinking population, rural schools, which were historically important hubs in rural communities, are now consolidating or closing (Biddle, Mette, and Schafft 2017; Schafft and Biddle 2014; Sherman and Sage 2011). Rural health has also suffered, and mortality rates are now substantially higher in rural than in urban areas (Cosby et al. 2018; Garcia et al. 2017, 2019; Leider et al. 2020; Moy 2017). Rural areas have been severely affected by the opioid crisis and other so-called deaths of despair (Kiang et al. 2019; Monnat 2018; Peters et al. 2020; Case and Deaton 2015), a growing rural-urban gap in cardiovascular disease and injuries (Abrams, Myrskylä, and Mehta

2021; Harper, Riddell, and King 2021; Monnat 2020), and most recently elevated rates of infection and deaths associated with the COVID epidemic (Cromartie et al. 2020; Karim and Chen 2021; Karmakar, Lantz, and Tipirneni 2021; Mueller et al. 2021).

Taken together, these studies suggest that growing up in rural areas is hard. Children who happen to be born in rural areas are likely to face a series of daunting obstacles that ultimately result in cumulative disadvantage in regard to their education, incomes, and health. Yet studies examining what it is like to grow up in rural areas, and particularly its longer-term implications, are surprisingly scarce. Many of the extant studies on rural children and families focus exclusively on those living in poverty (Albrecht and Albrecht 2000; Beale 2004; Brown and Lichter 2004; Duncan 2015; Lichter and Johnson 2007; Snyder, McLaughlin, and Findeis 2006; Snyder and McLaughlin 2004; Thiede, Kim, and Valasik 2018; Weber and Miller 2017). Although such a focus is certainly justifiable from a child welfare perspective, it can create a false impression that all or at least most rural children live in poverty or in poor rural areas. As noted, about three-quarters of rural children are not living in poverty (Rothwell and Thiede 2018). Further, at the national level, although the official poverty rate is about 3.5 percentage points higher in rural than urban areas (Economic Research Service 2020b), the supplemental poverty rate, which takes into account the cost of living, is actually lower in rural areas (Nolan, Waldfogel, and Wimer 2017; Pacas and Rothwell 2020). Nationally representative studies also find few sizable differences in key indicators of children's well-being. For example, rural school children perform as well or slightly better than their urban counterparts on standardized math and reading tests, although suburban children outperform both groups (Burdick-Will and Logan 2017; Provasnik et al. 2007; Fishman 2015). Similarly, differences in the overall health of rural and urban children are minimal (National Center for Health Statistics 2019; Robinson et al. 2017; Probst et al. 2018), with the notable exception of obesity, which is higher in rural areas (Liu et al. 2012; Ogden et al. 2018; Johnson and Johnson 2015).

In addition, most studies, including those

cited, that show striking rural disadvantage with respect to health, education, and earnings are based on cross-sectional samples of adults currently living in places designated as rural or urban. Such studies provide important insights into the well-being of adults who remained in or moved to rural areas. However, they do not address one of the central questions of this issue, namely, whether individuals who grew up in rural areas fare better or worse than those from more urban areas. This is because cross-sectional studies reflect selective migration both out of and into rural areas. Adults who grew up in rural areas and left differ from those who stayed. Selective out-migration of better-educated rural youths is well documented (Carr and Kefalas 2009), but rural out-migrants may also be healthier and have higher earning potential (Weber et al. 2007). Addressing the issue of selective migration, and hence answering questions about the longer-term implications of growing up in a rural area, requires longitudinal data that traces individuals over their life course. Unfortunately, only a handful of such studies currently exist.

The goal of this double issue of *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* is to provide a nuanced, balanced, and accurate depiction of what it is like to grow up in rural communities and its implications for both those who leave and those who stay in rural areas. This introductory article has four main objectives. First, we address a deceptively simple question: what is rural? This section briefly describes the challenges of defining rural places and rural people, the considerable changes that have occurred in rural areas over the last fifty years, and the heterogeneity across rural areas. Second, it examines what is distinctive about rural areas and challenges to measuring the effect of growing up in rural areas. Third, it draws on the existing literature and new research in this volume to provide insights into the challenges and opportunities afforded by growing up in rural areas and the longer-term implications of having grown up in rural places for adults. In the fourth section, we identify important gaps that remain in the existing literature on growing up rural.

The studies presented offer several key findings; some reinforce the well-known challenges

associated with rural life, whereas others yield surprising, and often more optimistic, insights about rural institutions and the longer-term implications of growing up in rural areas. In particular, the articles in this volume show that

consistent with prior studies, evidence indicates that rural families are under considerable strain. This strain is particularly acute in low-income families and families dealing with drug addiction. Yet strong ties among extended family members continue to play an important role in supporting and caring for children in families facing food insecurity and drug addiction.

Early public education programs and schools are surprisingly strong in rural areas relative to those in urban areas.

Publicly funded early childcare and education programs, such as Head Start, are more common in rural than in urban areas.

Rural third graders perform as well as their urban counterparts on standardized tests and socioeconomic status (SES) is less predictive of academic performance for rural than for urban students, suggesting less educational inequality.

However, the educational benefits of rural gentrification for children of longer-term residents may be limited.

Many rural youths harbor ambitious aspirations for higher education, but they lack practical knowledge about how to achieve their goals and are reluctant to leave their communities.

Young people who choose to stay in rural areas often do so to maintain family ties, even at the cost of limiting their careers and earnings. Rural youths who remain often make expedited transitions into parenthood and marriage, although these early unions are often unstable.

Relative to studies focusing on adults who currently live in rural areas, studies that take a life-course perspective paint a more complex, and somewhat rosier, picture of the consequences of growing up rural on adult health, education, income, and wealth.

Being born on an Iowa farm in the early twentieth century is associated with living a longer and healthier life. However, women who grew up and stayed in nonfarm rural areas had worse mortality outcomes.

Young adults who grew up in rural areas were less likely than their urban-raised counterparts to have negative net worth, although they also had fewer financial assets.

Children who grew up in rural areas achieved similar levels of education and earnings as urban children. More favorable economic place-based conditions facilitated greater upward educational and income mobility, although these benefits primarily accrued to those who moved to urban areas.

UNDERSTANDING RURAL AMERICA

Willa Cather's novel *My Antonia* (1918) opens with two friends on a train to New York, passing through the Iowa countryside where they had both grown up many years ago. The narrator reflects on their shared experience: "We were talking about what it is like to spend one's childhood in little towns like these, buried in wheat and corn, under stimulating extremes of climate: burning summers when the world lies green and billowy beneath a brilliant sky, when one is fairly stifled in vegetation, in the color and smell of strong weeds and heavy harvests; blustery winters with little snow, when the whole country is stripped bare and grey as sheet-iron. We agreed that no one who had not grown up in a little prairie town could know anything about it."

Some will agree with the narrator that unless you have grown up in rural America, you will never understand rural people or places. For those who study rural America, however, it is necessary to identify the boundaries and to define *rural* in a way that maintains a coherent object of study. It is challenging—even for those who grew up rural—to clearly articulate what makes a place or person rural and to mark the boundaries between rural and urban. As we discuss in the following section, it is dif-

ficult to draw these boundaries clearly for several reasons.

What Is Rural? Defining Rural Places and Rural People

At its most fundamental level, the term *rural* is about territory. Two of the most commonly used definitions of the word by the U.S. Census Bureau and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) clearly identify the boundaries that separate rural and urban territory. Complications in characterizing rural places arise chiefly because, in either definition, rural is a residual category. Rural is defined as what is not urban. Rural is whatever territory or area is outside of the urban boundaries. Rural areas are not selected and bounded based on their own characteristics, but is what is left over after bounding *urban* territory.

Furthermore, these standard definitions of rural identify geographic places, not rural people. A person is rural only by association with rural territory, and the premise underlying the notion of rural people is that people are shaped by the places they live. People are rural to the extent that they live in or have lived in rural places. Yet because of migration, rural places and rural people may not always coincide. Further, no set duration of exposure to rural places renders an individual rural because the development of a rural identity or consciousness is subjective and idiosyncratic. Hence the study of rural people is inherently even more fuzzy and messy than the study of rural places. Defining rural is further complicated by the diversity of rural people and places and the reality that rural areas are changing and interdependent with urban places, as we discuss.

Notwithstanding the definitional issues, rural places are commonly understood to share two characteristics. They are relatively sparsely settled with small populations and relatively isolated from large cities.¹ The two standard definitions that are used to describe rural America emphasize one or the other of these characteristics in their definitions.

The Census Bureau defines rural and urban

1. Some would also add the relative dependence of rural economies on natural resources, but this is more difficult to defend as a defining characteristic given the prevalence of farming and food and wood processing in metro areas.

areas by aggregating densely settled census blocks into urban areas and defining rural as any territory that is not urban (Ratcliffe et al. 2016). Using this definition yields a rural America that consists of small towns and open country. The OMB starts with counties as the unit of measurement, and classifies them into metropolitan (metro) and nonmetropolitan (non-metro) by identifying “metropolitan statistical areas” that group counties into regional labor markets around big cities. Nonmetro counties are those that are not part of a “metropolitan statistical area.” By convention, many scholars refer to OMB metro counties as urban and non-metro counties as rural (Economic Research Service 2019d). Rural under this nonmetro definition consists of territory that is distant from the regional labor markets of cities with populations of fifty thousand or more (for more detail about these definitions, see appendix table A.1).

Both classifications provide useful perspectives on rural America. Both seek to describe sparsely populated and remote places, but they are not equivalent concepts and they capture different realities. More than half of the rural population (as defined by the Census) live in metro counties, and most of the nonmetro population (as defined by OMB) live in counties that have urban clusters, that is, cities or towns with populations of more than ten thousand. The Economic Research Service (2019d) suggests that

the choice of a rural definition should be based on the purpose of the application. For instance, tracking urbanization and its influence on farmland prices is best approached using the Census urban-rural definition because it is a land-use definition that distinguishes built-up territory from immediately surrounding, less developed land. Studies designed to track and explain economic and social changes often choose to use the metro-nonmetro classification, because it reflects a regional, labor-market concept and allows the use of widely available county-level data. The key is to use a rural-urban definition that best fits the needs of a specific activity, recognizing

that any simple dichotomy hides a complex rural-urban continuum, often with very gentle gradations from one level to the next.

In this special issue, definitions of the rural places studied are varied. The seven quantitative studies used six systems. Only two used the metro-nonmetro binary. Two articles use classifications developed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service: one uses the Rural-Urban Continuum Codes and the other Rural-Urban Commuting Area codes. Only one used the census definitions. One article examining schooling outcomes identifies rural school districts using a National Center for Educational Statistics urbanicity code and the other devised its own criteria. All seven qualitative studies, with one exception, selected respondents from non-metro counties. The exception studied a “largely rural” region that included a few respondents from outlying areas of metro counties.²

Rural America Is Diverse, Changing, and Interdependent

Rural scholars have described rural America as “diverse, dynamic, and relational to (rather than separate from) urban places” (Slack and Jensen 2020, 775). All three characteristics complicate a common definition or understanding of rural America.

Although rural areas share the characteristics of having relatively small and sparsely settled populations and remoteness from cities, they exhibit enormous *diversity*. Each rural location offers its own combination of landscapes and features. Different rural populations have their own distinctive personalities and histories. The substantial diversity across rural areas makes generalizations about “rural life” difficult (Chan, Hart, and Goodman 2006; Cossman, James, and Wolf 2017). Some non-metro areas are truly isolated and sparsely populated and others contain medium-sized cities or are found just beyond the suburbs of large cities. Some nonmetro counties are growing, but many are declining in population.

Average poverty rates are higher in non-

2. For more detail about these studies and the ways they defined rural, see the appendix table A.2

metro than in metro counties, but this difference masks considerable economic heterogeneity. Deep pockets of persistent poverty in nonmetro America are numerous. Geographic concentrations of nonmetro poverty are found in Appalachia, in the Mississippi Delta (Thiede, Kim, and Valasik 2018), in *colonias* along the Mexican border, and on Native American reservations (Weber and Miller 2017). However, other amenity-rich rural areas and many parts of the upper Midwest are thriving and offer their residents attractive environmental features (such as lakes, mountains, rivers), better air quality, low traffic congestion, and a strong local economy (Hamilton et al. 2008).

Rural areas are also economically diverse. Many nonmetro counties depend on agricultural and extractive industries for a significant share of their jobs and earnings. Although agricultural and extractive industries such as mining account for less than 5 percent of nonmetro employment on average (Cromartie 2017), 20 percent of nonmetro counties have been classified by the Economic Research Service as dependent on farming (more than 16 percent of their jobs) and 9 percent as dependent on mining. An additional 12 percent were defined as dependent on recreation services (Economic Research Service 2019a). Those based on farming face different economic challenges than those dependent on mining or recreation jobs.

Rural America is less ethnically and racially diverse than urban America, 78 percent of the rural U.S. population is White relative to 58 percent of the urban population (Economic Research Service 2020a). Some nonmetro areas, however, have large concentrations of minorities: of African Americans in the southeastern states, of Hispanics in the southwestern states, and of Native Americans in the Southwest and northern Great Plains (Economic Research Service 2011). Furthermore, more than 90 percent of nonmetro places experienced an increase in racial-ethnic diversity between 1990 and 2010 and racial and ethnic minorities accounted for more than 80 percent of rural population growth (Johnson 2012, 2014; Lee and Sharp 2017).

In short, what it is like to grow up in rural America depends heavily on the specific rural

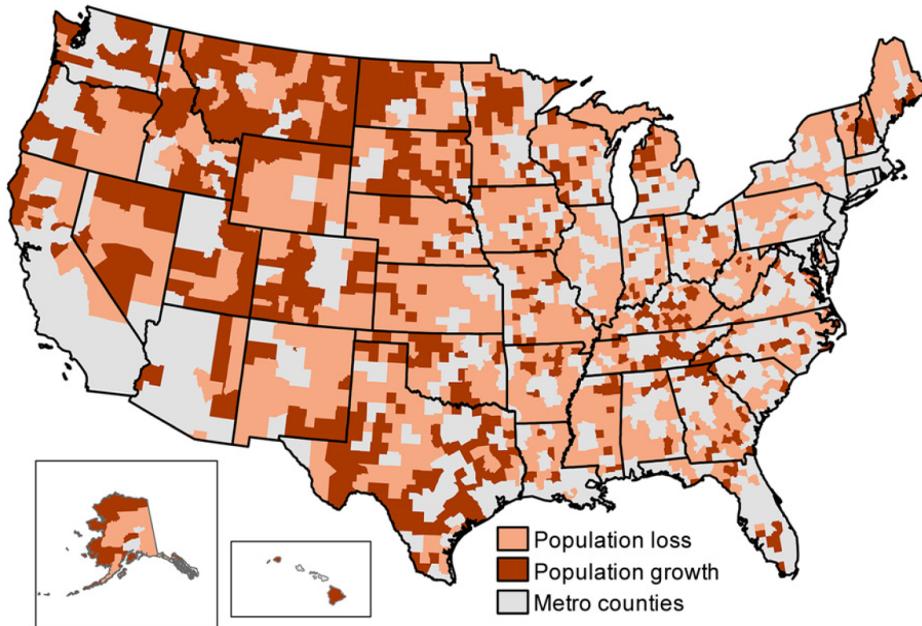
locale. This diversity presents challenges for making broad generalizations regarding the impacts of growing up rural, but also offers opportunities to explore the heterogeneity of rural environments and how their specific features may shape their residents' life chances.

The last half century witnessed considerable changes in both the composition and the general well-being of rural populations. Three important demographic trends observed in the nonmetro United States over the past several decades are: depopulation due to population aging and out-migration of youth; in-migration associated with exurban growth, retirement decisions, and amenities; and increases in ethnic and racial diversity (Brown 2014).

Although the total nonmetro population is roughly the same in 2017 as it was in 2010, more than two-thirds of the nonmetro counties lost population, as shown in figure 1. These counties that lost population are disproportionately found in the Great Plains, the Corn Belt, high poverty areas of the southern Coastal Plains and the Appalachian region from Kentucky up through New England. During the same period, however, other nonmetro areas experienced population growth. Since the Great Recession, evidence indicates that suburbanization and exurban expansion, recreation-related development and energy development in rural areas have slowed (Economic Research Service 2019c). In the wake of the COVID pandemic, some rural areas may be experiencing an influx of new residents, but the extent of this migration and whether it will endure is yet unknown.

Growth in the Hispanic population contributed to both the increase in ethnic diversity in rural America and to overall population growth. The rural Hispanic population grew by almost 45 percent between 2000 and 2010 (Lichter 2012; Lee and Sharp 2017). Hispanics have also become the largest minority population in nonmetro areas, 8.6 percent in 2018 (Economic Research Service 2020a). The increase also boosted the overall nonmetro population, contributing more than 60 percent of nonmetropolitan population growth from 1990 to 2017 (Lichter and Johnson 2020).

Trends across several important markers indicate deterioration in rural well-being and a widening rural-urban gap over the past thirty

Figure 1. Nonmetropolitan Population Change in the United States, 2010–2017

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

to fifty years. For example, the proportion of rural children living with married two-parent families has declined steadily such that rural children are now less likely than urban children to live in married two-parent families and more likely to live with cohabiting couples (O'Hare et al. 2009; O'Hare and Churilla 2008). Nonmetro Americans, particularly men, have also fallen further behind their metro counterparts in postsecondary education. The college completion gap between metro and nonmetro men has grown from about 5 to about 20 percent over the past fifty years (Ziliak 2018). The rural-urban gap in employment rates for men with less than a high school education has increased dramatically. In the 1960s, nearly all men without a high school degree in both metro and nonmetro areas were employed, "but by 2016 only 1 in 2 less skilled men in rural America worked, which was 15 percentage points lower than in metro areas" (Ziliak 2018, 10).

Since the early 1980s, urban and rural areas have seen diverging mortality trajectories (Cosby et al. 2018; James 2014; Singh and Siahpush 2014; Elo et al. 2019). Mortality rates have fallen in small, medium, and large metropoli-

tan areas but have increased among rural adults age twenty-five to sixty-four over the last thirty years (James 2014). The rural mortality penalty, which began to emerge in the 1990s, is now substantial (Cosby et al. 2018). Although much research highlights the poor health of rural men, recent analyses reveal a growing rural mortality penalty for White women as well (Monnat 2020). The opioid crisis and other so-called deaths of despair, such as suicides, drug overdoses, and alcohol-related deaths (Kiang et al. 2019; Monnat 2018; Peters et al. 2020; Case and Deaton 2015), only partially account for the rural-urban mortality gap, given that most of the growing difference in life expectancy is attributable to diverging mortality trajectories for cardiovascular diseases (Abrams, Myrskylä, and Mehta 2021; Harper, Riddell, and King 2021; Monnat 2020). Poorer cardiovascular health in rural areas relative to urban areas is found even among young adults (Lawrence, Hummer, and Harris 2017). Nonfatal health outcomes among adults are also worse in rural areas (National Center for Health Statistics 2019), particularly with respect to physical activity, obesity, and rates of smoking and tobacco consumption (Roth et al. 2017). Rural

areas have also not been spared from the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, which began in early 2020. Although initial caseloads were higher in dense urban places, rural counties saw rising caseloads during the summer and rural counties were observed to have some of the highest incidence and death rates (Cromartie et al. 2020; Karim and Chen 2021; Karmakar, Lantz, and Tipirneni 2021; Mueller et al. 2021). As the pandemic continues in subsequent waves, rural areas maintain their relatively higher risks of infection and death, as well as lower rates of full vaccination (Ullrich and Mueller 2021).

At least some of the measured decline in well-being in rural America is because many growing nonmetro counties have been reclassified from nonmetro to metro status since the OMB created the metropolitan classification in 1950. For many years, researchers have been aware that the conclusions drawn from comparisons of economic and social conditions in metro and nonmetro areas over long periods are influenced by the fact that each decade many counties are reclassified from nonmetro to metro or (less frequently) from metro to nonmetro (Artz and Orazem 2006; Goetz, Partridge, and Stephens 2018; Johnson and Lichter 2020).³ As a result, counties designated as nonmetro in 1974, for example, are now home to more than eighty million people, but counties classified as nonmetro in 2013 claim fewer than fifty million (Cromartie 2017). To the extent that population growth is correlated with strong local economies, better population health, and a better-educated labor force, this reclassification may contribute to a persistent rural-urban gaps in these economic, health, and education measures. For example, one recent study found

that reclassification accounted for about 25 percent of the increase in the rural-urban mortality gap since the 1970s (Brooks, Mueller, and Thiede 2020).

Two other factors that make it difficult to characterize the distinctive impact of rural places are the strength of social and economic ties across rural and urban communities and the ongoing blurring of the boundaries between rural and urban areas. Recent scholarship argues that interdependence of rural and urban places is growing and the uniqueness of rural and urban settings is diminishing as they become more similar across multiple dimensions (Lichter and Brown 2011; Lichter and Ziliai 2017; Wu, Weber, and Partridge 2017; Lichter, Brown, and Parisi 2021).

Rural and urban places are interdependent economically, environmentally, socially, and politically (Lichter, Brown, and Parisi 2021). Rural economies produce the food and energy and have the natural amenities that urban people need to thrive, and urban businesses produce goods and higher order services that rural people need but cannot generate efficiently. Rural land uses also generate environmental externalities from farming and mining that cross over into urban areas, and urban air and water pollution migrates into the rural periphery (Wu, Weber, and Partridge 2017). At the same time, the historical distinctiveness of urban and rural places is diminishing. Daniel Lichter and David Brown (2011) identify past changes in transportation technology and infrastructure that speeded the movement of goods and services and people. New advances in information technology and globalization, they argue, have facilitated the rapid movement of information and capital across rural

3. This reclassification can happen either because their largest cities cross the metro population threshold or because their commuting patterns change to cross the commuting thresholds. This was recognized as early as the 1970s when Fred Hines, David Brown, and John Zimmer developed the Beale Codes for use in an Economic Research Service publication examining changes in social and economic characteristics of metro and nonmetro populations. They recognized that using the 1970 classification for both their 1960 and 1970 data would likely depress nonmetro growth rates “by inclusion of some rapidly changing counties in the metro category that were nonmetro at the beginning of the period (1960)” (1975, 4) In the intervening years, others have noted how the failure to address the changing classification of counties affects the estimate of growth rates. Johnson (1989), for example, pointed out that the estimated nonmetro population growth rate between 1980 and 1987 was reduced by 32 percent if one used the nonmetro classification for 1987 rather than for 1980.

and urban spaces. Furthermore, the geographic expansion of boundaries at the rural-urban fringe and into exurbia can erase and blur the separation of rural and urban areas. They assert that “drawing sharp rural-urban distinctions seems increasingly obsolete” (2011, 566).

WHY GROWING UP RURAL MATTERS

A central concept of this double issue is that growing up in rural areas matters not only for children’s development and well-being, but also for their future life chances. In this section, we briefly review evidence that where one grows up has both immediate and longer-term influence on important outcomes such as health, education, and economic security. We then articulate what is distinctive about rural settings, how they differ from more urban environments, and why these place-based rural characteristics may impact the lives of those who grow up there.

Place-Based Effects: Short and Long-Term Implications

Over the past three decades since William Julius Wilson’s *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987) stimulated research on “neighborhood effects,” a substantial literature has emerged in a wide range of disciplines demonstrating that one’s childhood place of residence matters (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, and Aber 1997; Sampson 2008; Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley 2002; Diez Roux and Mair 2010; Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls 1997; Chetty et al. 2014; Chetty and Hendren 2018a; Hayward and Gorman 2004). In their landmark publication, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, Greg J. Duncan, and Lawrence Aber (1997) compile extensive evidence that neighborhood characteristics, particularly poverty, had a detrimental effect on children’s well-being. Importantly, several studies demonstrate that these neighborhood-level characteristics influenced child development above and beyond their individual household or family characteristics. Subsequent work showed that many neighborhood characteristics impact children by operating through key institutions such as families and schools (Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2000). For example, poorer neighborhoods tend to have a

higher proportion of single-parent families and lower quality, underresourced schools, which in turn are associated with poorer child development outcomes.

An important and growing literature further demonstrates that the impact of childhood residential characteristics are not limited to childhood. Recently scholars have drawn on ideas from both neighborhood or place-based effects and life-course theories to examine how community characteristics and residential environments during childhood may influence health and economic outcomes well into adulthood. Being raised in a poor or disadvantaged neighborhood is often associated with poorer health, lower educational attainment, and lower earnings in adulthood (Gould, Lavy, and Paserman 2011; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2000; Wodtke, Harding, and Elwert 2011). For example, such children are more likely to be obese as adults (Alvarado 2019; Kravitz-Wirtz 2016). In his groundbreaking study, the Equality of Opportunity project, Raj Chetty and colleagues show that where children are raised is strongly related with their upward income mobility as well as educational, fertility, and marital outcomes (Chetty et al. 2014; Chetty, Hendren, and Katz 2016; Chetty et al. 2018; Chetty and Hendren 2018b, 2018a). The Equality of Opportunity project used data from deidentified geographically coded federal income tax records to identify where individuals born in the early 1980s lived when they were in their mid-teens and then linked information about their teen location and family income rank to a host of socioeconomic outcomes when the individuals were roughly age thirty. Importantly, these analyses assessed outcomes of young adults regardless of whether these individuals have remained in their home county or commuting zone or have moved. These studies provide compelling evidence that not only does where you grew up matter, but so do the place-based characteristics of your childhood residence. Specifically, they find that areas with less segregation and more income equality achieved higher rates of upward income mobility (Chetty and Hendren 2018b).

The lion’s share of the research cited, however, focuses on urban areas or nationally representative studies consisting of predominately

urban populations. Even the term *neighborhood effects* reflects an urban orientation given that *neighborhoods* more aptly characterize urban than rural communities. Hence we prefer terms like *community* or *place-based* effects. This urban bias may matter for several reasons and may not provide a full understanding of how rural places can shape the development and life chances of children. First, many of the measures used to capture urban neighborhood quality may not be applicable to rural communities. For examples, community-level indicators of food deserts typically measure the number and proximity of supermarkets but do not usually take into account whether families have access to gardens (Walker, Keane, and Burke 2010). Even studies that explicitly seek to examine neighborhood effects across the rural-urban continuum encounter urban-biased definitional problems. For example, one study defined neighborhood problems in urban, suburban, exurban, and rural areas using the presence of abandoned or vandalized buildings or buildings with bars on windows within three hundred feet of the housing unit (Cornwell and Hall 2017). Given that rural housing units are less likely to have any buildings within three hundred feet, it is not clear that these standard measures of neighborhood quality are conceptually or empirically comparable across the rural-urban continuum.

A second issue is that many place-based characteristics that have been identified as important in urban settings may be less salient in rural communities, and vice versa. An obvious example is the presence of sidewalks, which may have very important implications for access to goods and services in urban areas but are less relevant in rural areas. Less obviously, levels of neighborhood socioeconomic inequality may be less germane in rural than urban areas given that urban residents are able to more easily self-segregate themselves and their children into different schools and medical care, whereas rural residents are more likely to share these services. Our lack of understanding how growing up rural may influence childhood well-being and life outcomes represents an important blind spot in both academic research and in the urban public more broadly.

What Is Distinctive About Rural Areas?

The dearth of research on the place-effects of growing up rural leaves open the question of what, if anything, is distinctive about rural places and why growing up in such places should matter. Given the rapid changes and considerable heterogeneity in rural areas just discussed, no one feature, such as poverty or agricultural production, is universally present in all rural areas. Nonetheless, we contend that two defining characteristics of rurality, smaller population size and remoteness from urban centers, fundamentally shape the characteristics of rural areas, which in turn influence the well-being and life chances of those raised in these places. Rebecca Blank (2005) identifies five attributes of communities that affect opportunity and outcomes: its natural and physical built environment, its economic structure, its public and community institutions, its social norms and cultural environment, and the demographic characteristics of its population. Places, in this view, are not just spaces where physical infrastructure and natural resources are located. Places are human creations with unique institutions, cultural and social norms, and sets of relationships within which people live and interact and change.

Despite the great diversity across rural America just described, rural areas are distinctly different from urban areas, at least on average, with respect to each of the five attributes. Perhaps the most visually striking differences between rural and urban places is in their physical environments. Put simply, rural places have a higher ratio of the natural to the built environment. Indeed, the natural environment is often central to the identity of rural areas. Densely timbered forests, vast fertile fields, coal-laden mountains, and abundant lakes and streams not only are the backbone of many rural economies, but also provide entertainment and physical exercise such as hunting and fishing, hiking, skiing, biking, and canoeing. Consequently, rural life is generally more closely tied to the natural environment. The physical built environment of rural areas is also distinctive. Rural infrastructures generally consist of longer roads and fewer sidewalks. As a result, traffic congestion may be less, but dis-

tances to services is typically greater and public forms of transportation, including bus routes and subway systems, are much more limited. Consequently, rural residents depend more on cars to perform essential daily tasks, such as getting to work or buying groceries. This reliance not only is relatively expensive, but also affords fewer opportunities for active transportation by walking or biking, thus affecting rural residence economic and physical well-being. Prior studies, for example, have labeled rural environments as “obesogenic” due to their limited access to recreational facilities, dependence on nonactive modes of transportation, and overall food environments (Boehmer et al. 2006; Wen et al. 2018).

Rural economic structures also differ strikingly from urban ones both because of their greater dependence on natural features and resources, and because smaller population sizes generate less demand and fewer economies of scale. As a result, access to economic opportunities and services is generally more limited. Job markets tend to be less diverse and many rural communities depend on only a few major industries (Cromartie 2017). Limited job opportunities correlate with higher unemployment and underemployment (Slack, Thiede, and Jensen 2020) and lower labor-force participation rates (Pender et al. 2019), which in turn affect rural families through higher levels of poverty and its impact on gender norms (as discussed). Commercial establishments including grocery stores, restaurants, and other retail businesses often are not profitable in sparsely populated areas or offer less variety where they do exist (Mushinski, Weiler, and Widner 2014). Many services and public infrastructures with high fixed costs that are provided in cities are not available in rural communities or are provided by volunteers rather than paid professionals.

Importantly, rural areas in the United States suffer from fewer health-care resources and potentially greater difficulties accessing both primary and secondary care (National Center for Health Statistics 2019). Access to physicians is generally lower in rural areas given that only about 10 percent of physicians practice there (Rosenblatt et al. 2010). The problem of rural out-migration is likely to exacerbate this issue

because growing up in a rural area is a key determinant of developing a rural medical practice (MacQueen et al. 2018).

In contrast, fewer private and public services may encourage more community institutions, including civic and faith-based organizations (Weber 2008). Schools and churches in rural areas often function as hubs of community life, engendering strong feelings of community attachment. At the same time, educational services are restricted in rural areas because fewer students lead to less diversity in choice of schools and fewer specialized subjects being taught. In sparsely populated rural communities and areas facing pronounced depopulation, some schools have been closed or consolidated. The public and community institutions that emerge (schools, churches, local governments, civic institutions, financial intermediaries) affect the quality and types of services available and thus the emotional, social, cognitive, and physical development of children and youth.

These community institutions also contribute to rural social norms and cultural values. Rural areas tend to hold more religious (Dillon and Henly 2008; Chalfant and Heller 1991) and conservative political (Gimpel et al. 2020) values. These social norms, undergirded by informal social sanctions, shape the behavior and expectations of children, youth, and adults. They are part of the “sense of place” that gives residents an identity but may also limit perceived opportunities. At the same time, the importance of local social relationships and working collectively on common issues and the limited number of neighbors makes developing these relationships easier.

The demographic characteristics of the community reflect its past history and are, in many cases, closely tied to social norms. Rural populations tend to be older, nearly 18 percent of their population age sixty-five or older relative to 14 percent of urban populations (Smith and Trevelyan 2019). In addition, despite large minority populations in geographically concentrated areas and sizable increases in ethnic minority populations, rural areas are also less ethnically and racially diverse than urban areas (Johnson 2012, 2014; Lee and Sharp 2017). These

demographic profiles shape the priorities and opportunities of youth living there. In the long run, of course, many of these attributes pertaining to the physical environment, local economy, civic institutions, cultural values, and demographics, are changeable, and many are endogenous. Social norms, for example, not only shape but also reflect the economic structure and institutions of the community that may have adapted to support these norms.

Challenges in Identifying a Rural Effect

The aim of this double issue is to better understand how growing up in a rural place influences the life outcomes of a person—what has been called the “rural effect” (Weber et al. 2005). Measuring this rural effect, however, presents several daunting methodological challenges. As discussed in detail in the appendix, *rural places* and hence *rural people* can be defined many ways. Beyond these definitional issues, scholars studying the rural effect need to address at least three other challenges: definitions change, places change, and people move. These challenges are particularly important in retrospective and longitudinal studies that follow people over their life course.

The first challenge is that the standard definitions of urban and rural—and metropolitan and nonmetropolitan—have changed over time. Since the earliest days, *rural* has always been *not urban* and *nonmetro* has always been *not metropolitan*. Some changes were made in the definitions in 1950 and 2000, however, and these changed the classification of particular places.⁴ But the basic concepts were maintained: *rural* continues to refer to small settle-

ments with open country and populations of less than 2,500; and *nonmetropolitan* continues to refer to counties distant from regional labor markets centered on cities of fifty thousand or more, and so continuity is significant across the decades in definitions that allows some consistency in the analysis of rural places.

A more serious challenge is that, even when the definitions of urban and rural stay consistent over time, places change. As noted, many nonmetropolitan counties have grown over the past half century and been reclassified as metro counties. Between 1960 and 2017, nearly 25 percent (753) of all nonmetro counties were redefined by the OMB as metro (Johnson and Lichter 2020). “All the growth since 1970 in the metropolitan share of the U.S. population came from reclassification rather than endogenous growth in existing metropolitan areas” (Johnson and Lichter 2020, 1929). For the study of “rural effects,” it is important that the county of origin is correctly identified as metro or nonmetro. If one happens to have grown up in one of the 753 counties that was reclassified, using the most recent OMB classification to identify county of origin will lead to a misestimation of the rural effect. Specifically, because the formerly nonmetro counties now classified as metro generally have more positive demographic and economic characteristics, failure to properly identify nonmetro status at the time of childhood will likely bias the rural effect downward by excluding healthier, better-educated, and higher-earning adults. Both Lisa Keister, James Moody, and Tom Wolff (2022, this volume, issue 4) and Evan Roberts, Wendy Rahn, and DeAnn Lazovich (2022, this volume,

4. Before 1950, the Census Bureau considered only the populations with incorporated areas in their definition of urban. For the 1950 Census, it changed the definition to allow densely populated unincorporated areas to be identified as urban (Census Bureau 2020b). In 2000, it created two classes of urban areas, aggregating census blocks into urbanized areas of fifty thousand or more and urban clusters of between 2,500 and 49,999. In 1949, the Bureau of the Budget (the predecessor of OMB) standardized the definitions of metro areas by defining as them as single counties or groups of counties with a core city of at least fifty thousand people plus adjoining counties that were socially and economically integrated with the central county (Census Bureau 2020a). Changes of terminology were regular over the next fifty years but the standards used to identify metro areas did not change significantly (U.S. Census Bureau 1994). In 2000, however, OMB instituted a significant change in the metro classification system by adopting *core-based-statistical-areas* to define metro areas. This change retained the metro-nonmetro distinction with Census Bureau–defined urbanized areas of fifty thousand or more forming the cores of metro statistical areas. Nonmetro counties—those that were not in metro statistical areas—were classified as either micropolitan (counties or groups of counties with urban clusters of 10,000 to 49,999 as their cores) or noncore areas (those not metro or micropolitan).

issue 4) take care to link both childhood place of origin and adult place of residence to the geographic identifiers in effect at the time of childhood and adulthood.

Even if definitions can be held constant and particular places do not change categories, the characteristics of a given place may be quite different in different eras. This can change the size and character of the rural effect. This suggests that conclusions about a rural effect from the 1930s, for example, should be carefully interpreted in understanding the effect of growing up in a rural area today. Roberts, Rahn, and Lazovich (2022) provide a good example of how to address this issue in their paper on the effect of growing up in a rural area in the early years of the twentieth century on mortality rates five decades later.

The third, and possibly most intractable, challenge is that people move. This has two implications for the study of rural effects. The first is that, depending on when they move during or after childhood, people growing up in a rural area will have had varying exposure to rural life. In other words, they will have varying “doses” of the rural effect. The effects of this exposure can vary depending both on the life stage and the era in which they are experienced. Emily Parker, Laura Tach, and Cassandra Robertson (2022, this volume, issue 4) consider this in their analysis by creating variables that captured time spent in nonmetro counties, but do not report the results because they find them to be substantially the same as using the metro-nonmetro county of origin variables. They do, however, separate exposure to place-based federal funding in childhood from exposure to place-based federal funding during adulthood and found different effects on adult educational and earnings outcomes.

The second issue involved in migration is that the migration is selective. Because of more limited local institutions of higher education (colleges and universities) and less diverse and robust local labor markets, many rural youths leave their home communities to pursue their educational and occupational goals. Consequently, migration from rural areas to urban ones is known to be highly selective with respect to higher education and earning potential (Carr and Kefalas 2009; Faggian, Corcoran,

and Rowe 2017; Sherman and Sage 2011; Weber et al. 2007). Out-migration from rural areas may also be linked to better health, though this form of selective migration is less frequently studied (Jokela et al. 2009; Lee 2019). In-migration to rural areas is also selective. Between 2000 and 2010, Hispanic populations accounted for about two-thirds of rural population growth (Lichter and Johnson 2020). Other rural areas have seen an increase in migrants with high levels of education and income through a process of rural gentrification. Cross-sectional studies typically ignore these selection effects in migration; yet excluding these rural migrants can generate biased estimates of the longer-term effects of growing up in rural areas. Roberts, Rahn, and Lazovich (2022) and Parker, Tach, and Robertson (2022), for example, both find important differences in adult mortality and economic outcomes between rural stayers and movers in their studies.

Studying the longer-term effects of having rural roots typically requires longitudinal data at the individual level that spans a substantial portion of the life course and follows individuals who move. Studies of the rural effect over the life course also need to use the most appropriate definition of rural status and measure it at the time the individual was a child. Ideally, such studies would capture not only whether an individual grew up in a rural area, but also how specific attributes of these rural communities (its physical environment, economic structure, community institutions, social norms, and demographic characteristics) shape individuals’ life chances. These rural attributes would also need to be measured during childhood as they too change over time. Studies that meet all of these data and analytic challenges are rare, but also essential to provide a deeper understanding of both the advantages and disadvantages of being raised in rural America.

AN OVERVIEW OF GROWING UP IN RURAL AMERICA

In this section we provide an overview of the literature pertaining to growing up in rural America and highlight the contributions of articles in this volume to this literature. We begin with a discussion of two key institutions that are shaped by rural place attributes and play a

pivotal role in fostering children's development: rural families and rural schools. We then turn to one of the most distinctive and difficult aspects of growing up in a rural area: having to decide whether to leave or stay in one's home community. In particular, we examine the conflict and uncertainty rural youths experience as higher educational aspirations typically require them to leave. We then explore why many rural youth prefer to stay in rural areas and the implications of this choice for building families and securing work. Last, we draw on a limited number of studies, including three new studies in this volume, that take a life-course perspective to examine the implications of growing up in rural areas on adult education, income, wealth, and health for both those who leave and those who stay in rural areas.

Rural Families: Coping Under Strain

Like their urban counterparts, rural families play a central role in protecting and promoting rural children's well-being. The strength, stability, and dynamics of family forms and functions critically influence children's emotional well-being and physical health (Amato 2005, 2010; Brown 2004; Panico et al. 2019; Thomson and McLanahan 2012; Bzostek and Berger 2017). Historically, rural children were more likely than urban children to be raised in traditional family structures consisting of heterosexual married couples and their children (Albrecht and Albrecht 2000). These nuclear family units were typically integrated into extended kin networks, including grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, and nephews, who lived nearby. In traditional rural communities, these large and tightly knit kinship networks were actively engaged in the lives of rural children offering both supplemental support and full-time care in times of economic or personal crisis (Beggs, Haines, and Hurlbert 1996).

Today, rural and urban families more closely resemble one another (Carson and Mattingly 2014). By 2018, slightly fewer rural (60 percent) than urban (63 percent) children lived in two-parent married households. Instead, rural children are more likely to live with cohabiting parents (O'Hare et al. 2009) and to be born to unmarried mothers (Livingston 2018). Data on children's residence with same-sex couples are

limited, but American Community Survey (ACS) data from 2018 show that a similar proportion of rural and urban children (about 0.5 percent) live in same-sex married or cohabiting couples. Rural children are as likely as urban children to live in multigenerational households, and grandmothers often play an active role in helping raise their grandchildren (Barnett 2008; Brown and Lichter 2004; Burton et al. 2013; Lichter and Graefe 2011). These multigenerational households are especially common among African Americans and Native Americans living in rural areas (Snyder, McLaughlin, and Findeis 2006). Yet the assumption that rural kin are more available to assist with childcare is increasingly questionable, given that high out-migration means fewer family members around to care for the young or the old (Choi et al. 2020).

Furthermore, despite substantial changes in the structures of rural families, social norms, being often rooted in Christian religious ideals, continue to valorize "traditional families" in many rural communities (Miller and Edin 2022, this volume, issue 4). These traditional social norms may help explain why some family structures may be particularly disadvantageous for children living in rural areas (Burton et al. 2013). Relative to urban single mothers, rural single mothers may face greater social stigma as well as greater barriers in accessing welfare benefits and, if employed, are more likely to be working part time (Brown and Lichter 2004). This may help explain the higher poverty levels among single mothers in rural areas than urban areas (Brown and Lichter 2004; Snyder and McLaughlin 2004). In addition, although research shows little if any differential impact of parental gender composition on children's well-being (Reczek et al. 2016; Cheng and Powell 2015; Schumm 2016; Cenegy, Denney, and Kimbro 2018), the scarce literature on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer-questioning (LGBTQ) rural families raises concerns that children with LGBTQ parents may face a higher risk of bullying and social isolation (Bell 2000; Poston and Chang 2016; Preston and D'Augelli 2014).

Some scholars have argued that it is not family structure per se, but instead family instability, including divorce, remarriage, or

household moves, that disrupt children's home lives and have a negative impact on their well-being (for an overview, see Cavanagh and Fomby 2019). Numerous factors have been found to be associated with family instability in rural areas. Studies on the impact of economic restructuring suggest that changing gender roles in rural areas increased family tensions, potentially resulting in greater family instability (Sherman 2009a). Yet other work shows that rural families accustomed to economic hardships, specifically those dependent on coal extraction, exhibited greater resilience (less disruption) than metro areas before and after the recession (Betz and Snyder 2017). Cohabiting unions, which are more common in rural areas, are less stable than marriages, and rural cohabiting unions are less enduring than urban cohabiting partnerships (Brown and Snyder 2006). Similarly, remarriage is more common in rural areas, suggesting higher levels of blended families and a greater number of family transitions. High levels of family instability also fosters greater multipartner fertility, which leads to complex family structures and complicated intergenerational family ties (Burton et al. 2013).

Family instability is also higher among families facing deep poverty and drug addiction. The official poverty rate is higher for rural than for urban children, and poverty increased during the early 2000s reaching a high of 27 percent in 2012 (Hertz and Farrigan 2016). Many low-income rural families, like their urban counterparts, struggle to care for young children through a combination of low-paying jobs, government programs (such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program [SNAP] and Women, Infants and Children [WIC]), and help from other family members, often grandmothers. Yet in some ways living in a rural area poses additional challenges. Notably, employment opportunities are more scarce and stigma around receiving support from government programs reduces families' use of such programs, even when they are eligible (Brown and Lichter 2004). Moreover, work locations, hospitals, gas stations, and grocery stores are farther away, requiring rural families to incur the costs of car ownership or greater dependence on family and friends to perform

essential tasks. Recently, studies have also noted limited access to healthy food in rural areas. In fact, despite being the primary producers of food in America, rural families are more likely to experience food insecurity than urban households, particularly after adjusting for region (Gundersen et al. 2017; Rabbitt, Coleman-Jensen, and Gregory 2017). Furthermore, although food insecurity has generally declined in urban areas after the recovery from the Great Recession, it has continued to rise in rural areas (Coleman-Jensen, Steffen, and Whitley 2017).

Rural families struggle to mitigate the impact of poverty and family instability for children (Sano, Manoogian, and Ontai 2012). Two articles in this volume demonstrate how low-income rural families adapt when coping with food insecurity and drug addiction, respectively. Sarah Bowen, Sinikka Elliott, and Annie Hardison-Moody (2022, issue 3) take a close look at the lived experiences of three unmarried low-income female caregivers of young children in two rural counties in North Carolina. They follow these families for five years. At the beginning of their study, these children reside in a variety of nontraditional living arrangements, including a multigenerational family consisting of a single mother and grandmother, a blended family with cohabiting migrant parents, and a single grandmother caring for three grandchildren. Despite these different initial living arrangements, these families had common experiences. First, all three noted the importance of being able to rely on other family members and, to a lesser extent, neighbors and friends to cope with food insecurity. Second, their reliance on public safety net programs, such as SNAP and WIC, and charitable food pantries was both essential to "getting by" and engendered significant levels of anxiety, frustration, and embarrassment. Third, by the end of the five years of the study, all families experienced significant instability. When an older adolescent grandchild in the multigenerational family became pregnant and had a child, the grandmother (now great-grandmother) left the household as the boyfriend of the adolescent mother moved in. Over this same period, a car accident compelled the migrant family to move to an urban center to

be closer to hospital care. Mounting bills and dilapidated housing forced the grandmother to move several times and ultimately to lose custody of her grandchildren. Her struggles illustrate the close interconnection between food and housing insecurity in rural areas (Coleman-Jensen, Steffen, and Whitley 2017).

In addition to chronic poverty, rising rates of drug addiction have wreaked havoc on rural families, frequently separating children from their parents' care, and fueling family instability. The rapidly spreading opioid and methamphetamine epidemics have rendered fewer adults, including parents, capable of providing childcare. In her analysis of children's living arrangements in rural Appalachia, Kristina Brant (2022, this volume, issue 3) shows how parental opioid and other drug abuse and its ties to the criminal justice systems and child welfare programs generates family instability as children bounce among care by parents, grandparents, and other relatives. Brant's study highlights how in rural communities personal connections (both positive and negative) to local legal systems plays a critical role in determining whether rural families are successful in navigating kinship family formations. Rural family members with negative experiences and connections are less likely to seek legally recognized custody of children, thereby limiting their access to federal and state subsidies for childcare. In contrast, rural families with positive connections are able to effectively intervene, buffering both children and their parents from the negative effects of drug addiction. The articles in this volume by both Bowen, Elliott, and Hardison-Moody and by Brant focus on rural families facing considerable economic and personal strain, but also demonstrate how in the midst of these crises, rural families often work together to prioritize children's well-being.

Childcare and Schools in Rural Areas: Surprising Equality and New Challenges

In addition to families, educational institutions, including early childcare and education programs and schools, play a key role in fostering children's well-being. These institutions are primarily responsible for promoting children's cognitive development and preparing children

with the necessary knowledge and skills for subsequent academic success.

The Changing Context of Childcare

Historically, most rural children under the age of five were cared for by family members. Lower female employment rates combined with greater distances to center-based childcare and closer proximity to kin resulted in limited demand for center-based childcare, either private or public (Atkinson 1994). Rapid economic and social change over the last thirty years, however, have transformed rural families, undermined traditional gender roles, and altered childcare arrangements (Betz and Snyder 2017; Lichter and Graefe 2011). Specifically, economic restructuring caused by a shift from largely agricultural and extractive industries to service positions has resulted in lower paid jobs with fewer benefits (Autor 2019; Slack 2014; Thiede and Slack 2017). It has also led to a decline in employment, much more pronounced among rural men than rural women. In fact, many rural women entered the formal labor market in response to their male partners' job loss (Mattingly and Smith 2010). These trends were compounded during the 2008 recession: not only did rural female employment outpace male employment, but rural fathers also modestly increased their time spent on childcare if the child's mother was employed (Smith and Pruitt 2017), transforming traditional gender roles of the male breadwinner and female caregiver (Mattingly and Smith 2010; Smith and Pruitt 2017; Tickamyer and Henderson 2004).

Even after the recession, many of the new jobs available for both men and women in rural areas had rigid hours or irregular shift work, neither of which is compatible with childcare (Thiede and Slack 2017). Rural jobs have been described as being less family friendly because they offer fewer paid sick days, paid vacation days, parental leave, or flextime than urban jobs (Glauber and Young 2015). Historically, many rural families may have depended on kin for assistance with childcare (Atkinson 1994), but this appears to be waning as more rural families look for affordable center-based childcare. Contrary to some expectations, Taryn Morrissey, Scott Allard, and Elizabeth Pelletier (2022, this volume, issue 3) find that publicly

funded early childhood care and education programs, primarily Head Start, are more available and more likely to be used in rural than in urban areas, highlighting the heavy dependence on such public funds in rural communities. In contrast, urban children were more likely than rural children to attend private nonprofit preschools. In addition, on entry into kindergarten, rural children's reading and math scores were slightly lower than their more urban counterparts'. Adjusting for county-level center-based childcare capacity and socioeconomic characteristics, however, largely explained rural-urban differences in young children's readiness to enter kindergarten.

Rural Schools: Challenges and Advantages

School quality, resources, and investments largely drive students' educational outcomes in both rural and urban areas; yet on several key dimensions, differences between rural and urban school environments are distinct. Because of their lower population density, rural schools face numerous challenges. Smaller student bodies support fewer specialized classes (Bouck 2004). Of particular concern in rural areas are the limited number of college preparatory classes as well as of classes suited to the needs of students with learning disabilities. Funding allocation regulations, particularly with respect to federal funding for low-income students, further limits services for disadvantaged rural students (Biddle, Mette, and Schafft 2017). For example, Title 1 of the Elementary and Secondary Education uses an allocation formula based on the percentage of students living in poverty or the total numbers of students living in poverty. As a result, smaller rural schools receive fewer resources per child living in poverty than large urban schools do (Schafft and Biddle 2014; Biddle, Mette, and Schafft 2017; Strange 2011). Less funding also limits teacher salaries, which in turn, undermines the recruitment and retention of rural school teachers (Fishman 2015;

Monk 2007; Lamkin 2018). These financial challenges are compounded by stringent certification requirements, which restrict the pool of potential teachers and the number of subjects teachers are eligible to cover. Because rural teachers are more likely to double-up on subjects taught, the burden of these restrictions is heightened in rural school systems.

Given that rural schools receive less per-student funding and offer a less diverse curriculum, one may expect that rural children would exhibit lower academic performance. Yet, rural and urban students often perform similarly on standardized tests such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). From 2000 to 2010, rural students performed slightly better than urban students on the reading and math NAEP, but worse than suburban students (Burdick-Will and Logan 2017; Provasnik et al. 2007). Within rural areas, students in fringe rural areas typically outperform the national average, whereas those in remote rural areas score lower on the NAEP (Fishman 2015).⁵ National averages also mask potentially important regional variation. In the Deep South, which includes rural areas with high levels of persistent poverty and lower levels of school funding, rural children's performance on standardized tests falls gradually behind those of urban students as they progress from kindergarten to grade twelve (Lindahl 2011). By using an innovative new common scale of state achievement tests on 430 million standardized test scores, Jessica Drescher, Anne Podolsky, Sean F. Reardon, and Gabrielle Torrance (2022, this volume, issue 3) provide a nationwide comparison of rural and urban third grade achievement and learning rates between the third and eighth grade. Overall, they find only modest differences between rural and urban students' academic performance, although some differences within race-ethnicity groups were larger.

To help explain the similar levels of aca-

5. "NAEP reports results for four mutually exclusive categories of school location: city, suburb, town, and rural. Each of these categories has three subcategories. Rural areas are further distinguished by their distance from an urbanized area: Fringe rural is 5 miles or less from an urbanized area or 2.5 miles or less from an urban cluster; distant rural is more than 5 miles up to 25 miles from an urbanized area or more than 2.5 miles up to 10 miles from an urban cluster; remote rural is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area or more than 10 miles from an urban cluster" (Fishman 2015).

ademic performance in rural and urban areas, some studies highlight specific advantageous characteristics of rural schools that may enhance students' learning and performance. For instance, rural schools tend to be closely integrated into their communities, often serving as hubs of local activity and engagement (Elder and Conger 2014; Schafft and Jackson 2010; Schafft and Biddle 2014; Schafft 2016; Bauch 2001). Glen Elder and Rand Conger (2014) provide extensive evidence on how farm children's ties to the land, their families, and their communities enhance both their academic success and social competence. Other studies show that rural schools promote social capital by facilitating children's and adolescents' civic engagement. Rural youth are highly engaged in both community and school civic activities such as student council, Future Farmers of America, and 4-H (Ludden 2011). These close community ties offer important advantages because teachers are more likely to know their students' parents and parents are more engaged in school activities (Schafft and Biddle 2014; Semke and Sheridan 2012). Rural classrooms are also, on average, smaller than urban ones and lower student-to-teacher ratios tend to correspond with greater per-student attention (Schafft and Biddle 2014).

Last, rural schools tend to be less socioeconomically segregated than urban schools. Largely because of limited school choice in rural areas, rural students across the socioeconomic spectrum are more likely to attend the same classes, participate on the same sports teams, and engage in the same extracurricular activities. Emerging research suggests that this greater integration may offer important opportunities for academic achievement and help facilitate social mobility (Chetty and Hendren 2018b; Chetty et al. 2014). These findings are consistent with those of Drescher and her colleagues (2022), which show that socioeconomic status is less predictive of academic achievement in rural areas than in urban areas. Another study also found that racial-ethnic gaps, specifically White-Black and White-Hispanic differences, in test scores were lower in rural than in urban settings (Gagnon and Mattingly 2018). These findings suggest that rural schools offer more equitable oppor-

tunities for upward mobility via education than urban schools.

However, new work by Jennifer Sherman and Kai Schafft (2022, this volume, issue 3) raises concerns that this greater rural educational equality may be threatened in rapidly gentrifying, high-amenity rural areas. Although rural gentrification is sometimes viewed as a critical development strategy to reverse economic decline, this provocative study highlights some potentially harmful consequences to the influx of wealthy migrants to a former logging community in the Pacific Northwest. These newcomers have, on average, improved schools resources and performance, but they have also exacerbated inequalities. The most socioeconomically disadvantaged children benefited little from these changes because they lack the resources to pay for any of the schools' new sports and extracurricular activities and are poorly prepared to take advantage of curricular changes. Hence the process of rural gentrification may undermine an important advantage of rural schools, namely, promoting more equitable upward mobility through education.

Aspiring to Leave: The Pursuit of Higher Education

Arguably, the pursuit of postsecondary education marks when the life trajectories of rural and urban Americans most sharply diverge. Because of the limited range of postsecondary institutions in rural areas, rural youth, unlike their urban counterparts, typically face a difficult, and sometimes painful, decision of whether to remain in their home communities or leave to achieve their educational goals. Choosing to leave entails not only separation from their family, friends, and community, but also adjusting to a new, often unfamiliar, urban culture and environment. In addition, because rural areas have fewer local colleges and universities and fewer adults who have college degrees, many rural youths make this potentially life-altering decision with little understanding of how postsecondary institutions work or the role of postsecondary education in defining their subsequent career options.

The rural-urban divergence begins with differential aspirations to attend college. In their study of students in Minnesota, Alejandra Mi-

randa and Michael Rodriguez (2022, this volume, issue 3) find that only 61 percent of rural students, versus 74 percent of urban students, aspired to attend a four-year college. Rural girls had greater odds of college aspiration than rural boys did, and American Indian and Latinx students had lower educational aspirations than non-Latinx White students, but these ethnic differences were smaller among rural than urban students. Other studies, however, have found that among African American men, rural men were slightly less likely than urban men and significantly less likely than suburban men to aspire to attend college even after controlling for SES and student grades (Strayhorn 2009). Nationally, rural and urban adolescents express the greatest divergence in their educational aspirations beyond college, rural children being significantly less likely than urban to aspire to pursue postgraduate training (Howley 2006).

Previous studies highlight three factors that may curtail the educational aspirations and attainment of rural youth: family SES, particularly parental education; greater attachment to their families, communities, and land; and fewer and lower-ranked local universities and colleges nearby (Turley 2009). Perhaps the strongest barrier to pursuing postsecondary education for rural students is limited family resources (Irvin et al. 2012; Koricich, Chen, and Hughes 2017). One study contends that parents' low SES is the primary deterrent for rural youths to seek additional education (Byun, Meece, and Irvin 2012). Matthew Irvin and his colleagues (2012) also find that rural children whose parents have postsecondary education are more likely to attend college. Ethnographic research shows how members of the broader community, including teachers, perceive and sometimes reinforce the link between family SES and youths' educational prospects. In rural Kentucky, children of community leaders, who generally have higher SES, were encouraged to leave their community to attend college, whereas children in poor and working-class families were expected to remain (Miller and Edin 2022, this volume, issue 4). Although a handful of individuals from low-income families do leave and earn college degrees, these children were the excep-

tion and referred to as "beating long odds." Jennifer Sherman and Kai Schafft (2022, this volume, issue 3) similarly show notable differences in educational aspirations by length of residency, which is closely correlated with SES. Both old-timers, most of whom lived in the community more than twenty years, and newcomers in rural gentrifying areas strongly encouraged their children to attend college, but old-timers were more likely to view college as essential to securing well-paid and reliable employment, whereas newcomers tended to value education as an important life goal in and of itself.

The strong attachment of rural youths to their families and communities may be a double-edged sword, simultaneously encouraging and discouraging educational ambitions (Byun, Meece, and Agger 2017; Byun, Meece, and Irvin 2012; Howley 2006; Johnson, Elder, and Stern 2005). On the one hand, these ties are an important form of social capital and benefit rural adolescents in their college application process (Nelson 2016). These social resources may be especially important for rural children of lower SES to achieve their educational goals (McGrath et al. 2001). On the other hand, strong local attachments may conflict with educational aspirations (Petrin, Schafft, and Meece 2014; Theodori and Theodori 2015). Unlike urban youths, rural youths with strong parental bonds are less likely to enroll in postsecondary education, suggesting that close family ties, which typically promote higher education, may conflict with educational aspirations in rural contexts (Demi, Coleman-Jensen, and Snyder 2010). One study finds that rural youth with strong academic records tend to apply to lower-ranked community colleges rather than to more distant high-ranking universities (Robbins 2012). Similarly, youths who are more satisfied with their communities are more likely to stay (Mellander, Florida, and Stolarick 2011). These findings are consistent with the study by Nicole Bernsen and her colleagues (2022, this volume, issue 3) that youths in rural Oregon and Maine that have a more favorable perception of their communities were less likely to want to go to college. Interestingly, the perceptions of the high school students about the future local economic trajectory of the commu-

nity did not have any relationship with their educational aspirations.

These aspirational rural-urban gaps are reflected in both college and postgraduate enrollment and completion rates. Data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study show that urban youths are more likely than those from rural areas to earn a bachelor's degree (Byun, Meece, and Irvin 2012). The gap in college completion rates may partially reflect higher college drop-out rates for rural youths, who may not feel that they “fit” in university environments, which tend to be more culturally urban and politically liberal. Challenges of acceptance on university campuses may not be limited to rural Whites. One interesting study found that in-state rural African Americans were often being perceived as “more White” and provincial, whereas urban African Americans represented “authentic Blackness” and sophistication (Woldoff, Wiggins, and Washington 2011). Ryan Parsons (2022, this volume, issue 3) provides one of the first in-depth looks at the multiple barriers to college completion facing rural African Americans in the South. He argues that although college is perceived as crucial to upward social mobility, social and cultural capital are mismatched, expectations of cultural and emotional labor are high, and feelings of marginalization are pronounced. In particular, his work highlights how enrolling in college and pursuing careers that require college degrees entails a permanent transition from one opportunity structure to another one, that is unfamiliar to them, their families, and their communities. Thus for rural students of color this transition is especially difficult because it usually entails the substantial emotional and social costs of leaving family behind and facing uncertain futures largely on their own.

Choosing to Stay: Building Families and Finding Work

Out-migration of rural youth is a well-established pattern (Carr and Kefalas 2009; Faggian, Corcoran, and Rowe 2017; Sherman and Sage 2011). Rural youth are typically drawn to urban areas in search of further education, better pay or diversity in employment, and more cosmopolitan lifestyles (Artz 2003; Gibson and McKenzie 2012). Rural out-migration can be

substantial. Between 1990 and 2005, the rural Midwest experienced a 50 percent decline in its population aged twenty-five to thirty-four (Hamilton et al. 2008).

Yet many rural youth choose to remain, noting close ties to their families and communities and a dislike for the congestion and anomie of urban life, and many out-migrants later return to rural areas (von Reichert, Cromartie, and Arthun 2011). These youth make a conscious decision to remain in or return to their home communities, despite limited employment opportunities and almost certain economic hardships. Older studies find that rural youth experience markedly different transitions to adulthood, including completing one's education, finding work, leaving home, getting married, and having children (Heaton, Lichter, and Amoateng 1989). Emily E. N. Miller and Kathryn Edin (2022, this volume, issue 4) refer to these transitions as the “big five” and provide an in-depth analysis of the challenges of obtaining these key markers of adulthood in an area of rural Kentucky that has become an icon of rural White poverty. Two of the most notable differences in these transitions to adulthood pertain to building families and securing work.

Early Family Formation

Although rural and urban family structures increasingly resemble one another, differences in the timing of family formation continue to be notable. On average, women in rural counties give birth three years earlier than women in large metro counties in 2017 (Ely and Hamilton 2018). Teen childbirth is strikingly higher in rural than in urban areas, partly a result of more limited access to contraception and abortion services (Hamilton, Rossen, and Branum 2016; Ng and Kaye 2015). Consequently, a higher percentage of rural than urban teen births are unintended (Sutton, Lichter, and Sassler 2019). This early entry into parenthood generally occurs outside marriage, placing many adolescent and young parents at odds with local religious norms and teachings and undermining their access to critical community support and practical assistance. Miller and Edin (2022, this volume, issue 4) provide astute insights into how young unmarried parents navigate their complex and sometimes conflictual relation-

ships with religion and religious institutions in rural Kentucky.

Rural men and women also marry at younger ages (Snyder, Brown, and Condo 2004). Rural marriages that are formed early are often of lower quality with high levels of intimate partner violence and divorce (Miller and Edin 2022, this volume, issue 4). Hence, despite personal aspirations and community expectations of raising children within nuclear families, many young adults in rural areas find themselves struggling to support their children on their own.

Finding Well-Paid, Stable Employment

Job opportunities for those who stay or return to rural areas are limited. In the wake of decades of restructuring, recessions, and globalization, well-paid, stable employment with predictable hours and benefits is difficult to find in many rural communities. The few “good jobs” available, often in the education or health-care sectors, are highly competitive and usually require advanced degrees, and the “bad jobs” offer inadequate wages leading to a higher proportion of the working poor in rural than in urban areas (Thiede, Lichter, and Slack 2018). Even these bad jobs required owning or having regular access to a car, which was beyond the economic reach of many rural workers. Yet having a job, even a poorly paid one with irregular hours, was important to both men and women and carried not only practical, but also important moral, implications (Miller and Edin 2022, this volume, issue 4; Sherman 2009b). Lack of economic opportunities in rural areas is one of the primary drivers of out-migration (McLaughlin, Shoff, and Demi 2014; Petrin, Schafft, and Meece 2014). Depopulation, in turn, exacerbates income inequality (Butler et al. 2020).

For young men and women who have grown up and stayed in rural areas with declining economic bases, available employment is strongly shaped by gender and class. Although better-educated women often dominate in the education and health sector, poorer and less well-educated women can typically only find work at low-paying jobs with limited benefits at fast food restaurants or big box stores (Miller and Edin 2022, this volume, issue 4). In contrast,

men with limited education can secure better-paying jobs as construction workers, electricians, and plumbers.

These disparities with respect to the expected returns to education for rural men and women may help explain some of the findings in the study by Ashley Niccolai, Sarah Damaske, and Jason Park (2022, this volume, issue 4) of unemployed men and women age fifty to seventy who grew up in and still lived in rural Pennsylvania. They find working-class girls there were given more encouragement to seek higher education than working-class boys were, and that rural middle-class parents encouraged both boys and girls to pursue a college education. These early aspirations changed in the transition to adulthood by processes they term upshifting, downshifting, and nonshifting. About half of the respondents reported no change in aspirations during this period. Upshifting (raising aspirations) was observed largely among middle-class men. Downshifting was observed largely among working-class men and women, men emphasizing financial constraints as a reason and women emphasizing family ties. When faced with unemployment in midlife, the processes were also classed and gendered and influenced by the desire to remain in the community. In response to unemployment, middle-class men upshifted and anticipated having to leave the rural community. Middle-class women and both working-class men and women, on the other hand, were likely to downshift and remain in place despite recognizing poor local job prospects.

Robert Francis (2022, this volume, issue 4) explores how being rooted in rural places shapes the labor-market trajectories of working-class men in rural Pennsylvania and particularly rural men’s decisions about whether to upskill, move, or change jobs to improve their economic prospects. He finds more geographic mobility for work than generally reported, particularly when one considers geographic mobility required for military service. Furthermore, many rural men have left their home communities in search of better-paid jobs but returned when they failed to find them. He also finds that most of these men have pursued some postsecondary education or training, but that rather than seeking further

education to escape rural areas or the working class, they use it “to strengthen—not escape from—their identities as rural, working-class men.”

Rural Roots: The Consequences of Growing Up Rural for Adults

As discussed, a sizable literature demonstrates that adults currently living in rural areas have poorer health and higher mortality, have lower educational attainment, and are more likely to be underemployed or unemployed than urban residents. These studies, however, do not necessarily mean that individuals raised in rural areas are similarly disadvantaged in terms of health, education, or economic outcomes because they do not take into account selective migration. We now review the admittedly few studies that have examined rural-urban differences from a life-course perspective and, hence, yield insights into the longer-term implications of having rural roots.

Consequences on Health

The handful of longitudinal health studies that have been published suggest that the effects of growing up rural may be more beneficial than is typically found in cross-sectional comparisons. Samuel Preston, Mark Hill, and Greg Drevenstedt (1998), using data from the 1900 and 1910 Censuses, find that childhood exposure to rural environments among turn-of-the-century cohorts was associated with greater likelihood of living to age eighty-five. In particular, they find that childhood residence on farms, in rural places, and in less dense counties was associated with greater survival chances and speculated that at least some of this pattern may have resulted from the intergenerational transmission of farming as an occupation, which is less likely to be relevant today, when fewer than 5 percent of Americans work on farms. Nonetheless, a similar analysis of the more recent National Longitudinal Survey of Older Men (Hayward and Gorman 2004) also finds that rural farm residence in childhood was associated with reduced mortality in adulthood. Although these studies take into account childhood residence, they do not assess whether the individual moved to a more urban setting.

Evan Roberts, Wendy Rahn, and DeAnn Lazovich (2022, this volume, issue 4) link a recent health survey of older women (aged fifty-five and older) in Iowa to early-life census records, and demonstrate the value of such linkage studies for addressing some of the core questions around the impact of “growing up rural.” They find that women who grew up on farms or in nonfarm rural areas and migrated to urban areas had an increased probability of attending college relative to those who stayed, but also relative to women who moved to other rural areas. However, these rural-to-urban migrants were also much more likely to be smokers in adulthood, reflecting that out-migration does not necessarily always lead to better health, depending on the social and cultural context of the destination. They also present intriguing results for mortality. Among women originating in rural areas, those who stayed on farms had the highest survival rates and that those who moved to towns, cities, or even rural nonfarm areas had lower survival rates. Interestingly, women who grew up in urban areas but moved to farms also had better survival rates than those who grew up urban but stayed or moved to towns.

The rural effect on health is likely to operate through different pathways for different health outcomes, some salutary and some detrimental. Studies cite evidence that urban adult migrants to rural areas were more likely to become obese in later life, consistent with theories that rural physical environments are obesogenic (Jokela et al. 2009; Lee 2019). A few studies have directly investigated differential exposure to rural environments across the life course, that is, whether rural residence at a particular stage of the life course affects health later in life. Kira Patterson and her colleagues (2017) compare life-course models for assessing the contribution of different place trajectories (stable rural, rural-to-urban, urban-to-rural, stable urban) to rates of obesity in Australia. They find evidence for an impact on obesity in middle-age of both cumulative exposure to rurality, as well as exposure to rural areas during the “sensitive period” of young adulthood. In contrast, a recent study by Shelley Clark (2021) uses longitudinal data from the United States and finds that living in a rural area during the critical period of birth

to age two was associated with higher body mass index (BMI) during young adulthood, but that neither cumulative exposure nor exposure during adolescence to rural environments led to elevated BMI later in life.

Consequences on Economic Outcomes

Although findings from the Equality of Opportunity project brought considerable attention to the importance of childhood residence for a variety of measures of adult economic attainment, the study was primarily interested comparisons across urban cities or regions. The initial reports pay scant attention to differences in economic mobility across the rural-urban continuum, though they note that low-income children growing up in rural commuting zones are, on average, more likely to be upwardly mobile than their urban counterparts (Chetty et al. 2014). This finding surprised and puzzled many rural scholars who thought that the rural economic disadvantages found in many cross-sectional studies would be evident in longitudinal studies as well. Indeed, this finding has yet to be fully explained, though several hypotheses have been put forward. First, much of this average effect is driven by the exceptional upward mobility of youth raised in the upper and lower Midwest. In fact, subsequent analyses show a strong negative correlation between population density and upward mobility of White children (suggesting greater upward mobility of rural children) in the Midwest, and a positive correlation in the Southeast suggesting greater upward mobility for White urban children (Chetty et al. 2018). Similar academic and social advantages have also been noted among rural adolescents in Iowa (Elder and Conger 2014). Second, some of this upward mobility may reflect the high levels of geographic mobility from rural to urban areas, and the corresponding higher urban incomes. Again, out-migration is especially high in the Midwest. Finally, rural community characteristics, including the percentage of single mothers, the racial and ethnic composition, social capital, school quality, and income equality may also facilitate greater upward mobility (Chetty et al. 2014). In the most in-depth analysis of this question to date, Bruce Weber and his colleagues (2017, 2018) find that the most remote

rural areas, those farthest from large metro centers, experienced the greatest upward mobility of low-income youth. They also show that many characteristics of rural areas, including higher levels of social capital, less economic inequality, and less single motherhood, help explain the greater upward mobility found in rural areas. Importantly, however, they find that some of these characteristics have a larger effect on upward mobility in rural than in urban areas. These findings demonstrate not only the importance of place-based characteristics, but also that which characteristics matter most may differ in rural and urban areas.

Parker, Tach, and Robertson (2022) further extend our understanding of how access to place-based resources during childhood affect young adults' educational attainment and earnings. Using longitudinal data from the National Longitudinal Study of Youth, they show that, as expected, young adults currently living in metro counties have both higher educational attainment and higher earnings. Yet, importantly, no differences in the educational or earnings outcomes of young adults based on whether they lived in a metro or nonmetro county during childhood are economically meaningful. They also provide an in-depth assessment of trends in federal place-based investments in metro and nonmetro counties, showing a substantial rise in federal funding since 1990. They then show a strong positive association between living in counties with more place-based funding during childhood and higher educational attainment in both metro and nonmetro counties. However, they find that children who grew up in rural counties with more federal place-based funding experienced upward educational and income mobility, only if they subsequently moved out of their home county. Federal place-based funding had no effect on the upward mobility of rural children who remained in their home county. These quantitative findings reinforce qualitative studies suggesting that place-based initiatives may facilitate upward educational and economic mobility, but mainly by helping rural residents leave.

Although most longitudinal studies focus on income, less is known about rural-urban differences in wealth accumulation. Cross-

sectional comparisons across the rural-urban continuum show that rural families are more likely to own the house they live in but have fewer liquid assets than urban families (Fisher and Weber 2004). Lisa Keister, James Moody, and Tom Wolff (2022, this volume, issue 4) use longitudinal data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health to examine whether this pattern holds from a life-course perspective or mainly reflects selective migration or current local economic structures. Their analyses find that young adults who were raised in rural areas were more likely to own a home and had lower mortgage debt than adults who were raised in the urban core, consequently they were less likely to have negative net worth. However, those raised in rural areas also had fewer financial assets. They suggest, therefore, that these types of wealth across the rural-urban continuum reflect both differences in local economies (costs of housing) as well as opportunities for acquiring debt (higher education) that can have a lasting impact on individuals' lifetime economic security.

SUMMARY AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The primary objective of this double issue is to provide a more complete and accurate picture of what it is like to grow up in rural areas and how doing so influences one's life chances. Taken together, these studies generate three main messages that offer a somewhat different perspective on growing up rural than previous studies do.

First, that growing up in poor rural areas is hard and presents a distinctive set of challenges is not in question. Rural children (25 percent) are more likely than urban children (20 percent) to live in poverty in 2016 (Rothwell and Thiede 2018). Furthermore, rural areas, such as the Mississippi Delta and Appalachia, are some of the highest concentrations of persistent poverty in the United States. Growing up in these places has detrimental consequences for children's health and development. Although poor rural children face many of the disadvantages that poor urban children do, some of the harmful effects of poverty may be unique to or exacerbated by living in a rural setting. For example, both rural and urban poverty are associated with greater family vol-

atility, housing instability, food insecurity, job loss, and often drug addiction. In rural areas, however, the natural and built environment typically requires access to an automobile in order to work. Several respondents reported that the lack of a car or mechanical breakdowns were responsible for them losing their jobs (Miller and Edin 2022, this volume, issue 4; Bowen, Elliott, and Hardison-Moody 2022, this volume, issue 3). Greater distances to public services also triggered housing instability, such as that of the family forced to move to an urban area to access necessary medical care (Bowen, Elliott, and Hardison-Moody 2022). Rural social norms and civic and religious institutions can also amplify some of the harmful effects associated with family instability. For example, strong religious beliefs valorizing nuclear families can induce feelings of shame among unmarried parents and greater stigmatization of their children (Miller and Edin 2022). Social connections may also matter more in rural areas creating sizable inequalities in how drug charges are handled in the legal system and poor children are perceived in their schools (Brant 2022; Miller and Edin 2022; Sherman and Schafft 2022). Lastly, rural norms valorizing work and independence may make poor rural families, including those experiencing food insecurity, less likely to access government or private assistance (Bowen, Elliott, and Hardison-Moody 2022). These differences compel scholars of child poverty to think about whether policies and programs designed primarily to meet the needs of urban children living in poverty are applicable in rural areas or whether new policies are required.

Second, because of their more acute vulnerability, the lion's share of research has focused on rural children living in poverty. Although such a focus is justifiable, it does not generate a full picture of what it is like to grow up in rural areas. Specifically, it can distort public images of the lives of rural children by failing to take into account the lives of the three in four rural children who are not living in poverty and the considerable geographic, economic, and social heterogeneity within rural areas. Nationally representative studies tend to show few if any significant differences in rural and urban children's health or academic performance

(Probst et al. 2018). With the notable exception of obesity levels (Liu et al. 2012; Ogden et al. 2018; Johnson and Johnson 2015) and perhaps mental and behavioral disorders, rural children on average are as healthy as urban children (National Center for Health Statistics 2019; Robinson et al. 2017; Probst et al. 2018). Educational programs are also not particularly lacking in rural areas. For example, publicly funded early childcare and education programs, such as Head Start, are more common in rural than in urban areas (Morrissey, Allard, and Pelletier 2022). In addition, using a large national survey, Drescher, Podolsky, Reardon, and Torrance (2022) find that rural third graders perform as well as their urban counterparts on standardized tests, and community SES is less predictive of academic performance for rural than for urban students, suggesting less educational inequality. Ironically, because rural areas typically offer fewer choices in schools and health-care services, socioeconomic inequalities between rural families may matter less because both the rich and the poor use public services, one of the distinctive advantages of growing up rural. Hence, despite substantial heterogeneity in children's well-being, especially by region, at a national level, rural children do not appear to be disadvantaged relative to their urban counterparts.

Third, studies that focus on adults who currently live in rural areas consistently reveal substantial adversity, particularly in regard to health, family formation, job security, education, and earnings (see Miller and Edin 2022; Francis 2022; Niccolai, Damaske, and Park 2022). In contrast, articles that focus on adults who were raised in rural areas but do not necessarily currently live there (that is, not reflecting selective migration bias), show less rural disadvantage and, in some instances, an overall long-term advantage of growing up in a rural area. For example, being born on a farm in the early twentieth century is associated with living a longer and healthier life. However, women who grew up and stayed in a nonfarm rural area had the worst mortality outcomes (Roberts, Rahn, and Lazovich 2022). In addition, young adults who grew up in rural areas are not "less wealthy," although they have different types of wealth (Keister, Moody, and Wolff 2022). Last,

despite large metro-nonmetro differences in education and earnings based on where respondents currently live as young adults, Parker, Tach, and Robertson (2022) find no significant differences in either education or earnings between respondents who grew up in metro versus nonmetro places. However, they also find that although place-based federal funding enhances both the educational attainment and earnings of rural (and urban) children, the benefits of these federal funds primarily accrue to children who grew up in a rural area and subsequently left.

This last caveat is critical. If these place-based effects are causal, for rural children to realize the same life opportunities as urban children, a sizable fraction must move. This highlights one of the most distinctive and arguably disadvantageous aspects of growing up in a rural area. Rural children face a much sharper trade-off between maintaining close ties to their families and communities and their educational and occupational aspirations than urban children do. Some may dismiss this stipulation as trivial, noting that many urban children also decide to leave their home communities in pursuit of higher education, work, or simply new experiences. Yet this choice is much less constricted for urban than rural children. Many urban children may leave to attend a particular university or take a specific job, but they could find similar or comparable ones nearby. Further, as Parsons highlights (2022), when rural children move to urban areas they often feel marginalized, lack social and cultural urban capital, and must expend considerable emotional labor adjusting to their new environments while maintaining meaningful connections to their old ones. On a practical level, travel times for these rural migrants may take longer than for urban migrants. For example, flying from New York City to Chicago takes less time than driving from New York City to many rural parts of upstate New York. Greater distances also limit the instrumental support family members can provide to one another. For example, grandparents who live farther away are less available to assist with childcare, and adult children are less able to offer practical assistance to their aging parents (Clark, Lawrence, and Monnat forthcoming). At the same

time, costs to rural places that are “left behind” are considerable because high selective out-migration often deprives these communities of the energy and skills that maintain vibrant social lives and dynamic economies (Wuthnow 2018).

Gaps in Current Knowledge

The comparative dearth in rural studies likely reflects the research challenges discussed and the lack of sufficient data on rural populations, particularly in nationally representative, longitudinal data, available to meet these challenges. Even in large national studies, rural residents make up a minority of the population, which, unless oversampled, makes studying heterogeneity across types of rural areas difficult. Second, longitudinal studies often face attrition and attrition rates may be especially high among respondents who move. Third, as discussed, measuring exposure to rural places is daunting. Even detailed measures that treat rurality as a continuum rather than a dichotomous indicator face the problem that places themselves may transition from more rural to less rural (or vice versa) and that government classification systems change over time. These issues pose particular difficulty for life-course researchers who need to take these shifting definitions into account. Life-course researchers who wish to access contextual factors within rural areas also require historical data on county or census tract characteristics. In sum, as Jamie Pearce (2018) argues, serious challenges are involved in developing a practical research program on life-course effects of geographic areas, requiring the linking of longitudinal data on people and places over a substantial period of observation, as well as information on geographic mobility over the life course. Notably, the lack of longitudinal data with information on both rural childhood exposure and adult health outcomes has prevented the generation of evidence on whether rural environments in early life may have similar or different effects on later life outcomes (Burton et al. 2013).

Although the new evidence in this issue adds to our understanding of growing up in rural America, as a result of these challenges, two important gaps remain. First, more studies

are needed to identify specific place-based attributes of rural areas that either promote or inhibit rural children’s development, these include its natural and physical built environment, economic structure, public and community institutions, social norms and cultural environment, and demographic characteristics. Research has developed constructs and measures for many of these place-based characteristics, but the characteristics that may be more important—the community institutions and social and cultural norms—are more difficult to measure. More qualitative research is needed to capture these dimensions. Studies that assess whether the impact of these place-based attributes differs in rural and urban areas would be especially useful in identifying policies and rural development strategies that were most effective in rural areas.

Second, longitudinal studies following rural children over their life course remain scarce. Such studies are essential to determining not only whether children raised in rural areas fare worse (or better) than urban-born children, but also the role of migration in shaping their adult outcomes. Such studies could directly address the question of whether children born in rural areas have equal opportunities as those born in urban centers by taking into account the outcomes of both those who stay in and those who move away from rural areas. In particular, we have surprisingly little knowledge of the fate of those who choose to leave. Last, more studies are needed to understand which specific rural attributes account for rural and urban differences in adult outcomes. For example, one of the few studies to examine this type of question finds that family structure, lower inequality, greater social capital, and better spatial job matching in rural counties facilitate upward income mobility among low-income youths who grow up in nonmetro counties (Weber et al. 2018).

Even well-designed cross-sectional and longitudinal quantitative studies examining the relationship between place characteristics and outcomes, however, would not reveal how places affect outcomes. And knowledge of the mechanisms through which outcomes are generated is critical in designing effective policies. The sparse populations and isolation from

large cities that define rural places lead to distinctive institutions (civic organizations and faith communities) and social and cultural norms. Studies in this volume (Brant 2022, issue 3; Miller and Edin 2022, issue 4; Parsons 2022, issue 3) as well as prior ethnographic research (Cramer 2016; Duncan 2015; Hochschild 2016; Sherman 2009b) provide valuable insights into the social and institutional processes in rural places, but more studies are needed on how they generate the social and cultural norms that affect the human behavior that leads to adult outcomes.

Policy Implications and Conclusions

Those concerned about rural people and places will often encourage policymakers to support place-based or, at least, place-sensitive policies. Most policies focusing on rural rejuvenation aim to strengthen local economies by promoting local businesses and industries, expanding and improving health and educational services, and enhancing civic institutions (see, for example, Austin, Glaeser, and Summers 2018). These place-based policies and programs offer the prospect of not only benefiting residents who remain in rural areas, but also increasing the human and social capital of those who leave. Many, of course, are concerned that policies that invest in rural places might deliberately or inadvertently encourage out-migration, particularly of high achieving youths. This concern appears substantiated in studies like that by Parker, Tach, and Robertson (2022), which shows that levels of federal place-based funding is strongly correlated with out-migration in nonmetro counties. High rates of out-migration, some contend, threaten the economic viability and civic vibrancy, and ultimately the very existence of their communities. Some scholars argue that, by promoting their “best and brightest,” rural schools are undermining future social and economic well-being of the communities they serve. To counter these concerns, some place-based policies aim specifically at stemming the tide of rural youth out-migration by promoting training in local trades and vocational programs, offering scholarships at community colleges, or subsidizing

professional training (such as medicine, dentistry, law) with the requirement of future service in rural areas.

Others concerned about investments in rural places worry about the opposite outcome—that investments in rural places may trap poor people in poor areas and impede movement of people and businesses to places that would enhance the overall efficiency of the economy and hence the general welfare. The debate over investments in people versus places has a long history, going back at least to Louis Winnick’s 1966 paper “Place Prosperity v. People Prosperity” that addressed the role of the federal government in assisting people and places that are economically distressed. Much ink has been spilled in this debate.⁶ In the end, many will conclude that investments must be made in both people and places, that these policies are complementary, and that the important decisions are about how much to invest in people relative to places (Weber 2008).

Importantly, these policy debates focus on the welfare of rural places and of the people currently living there, largely, though not exclusively, in economic terms (Nunn and Shambaugh 2018). Such policies are often focused on interventions to address underlying sources of underemployment or poor infrastructure that contribute to reduced economic prospects among working age adults. Notwithstanding the value of such priorities, these policies address a fundamentally different set of underlying issues than those focused on addressing geographic inequalities based on childhood residence, as is the focus of studies such as the Equality of Opportunity Project. Understanding the ways in which children raised in rural versus urban areas are advantaged or disadvantaged and identifying the distinctive challenges rural children face enables a clearer understanding of the types of policies needed to promote the welfare of rural children regardless of whether they stay or leave. Not only would a focus on place-based policies targeting early-life or childhood environments have the potential for “knock-on” effects that materialize in later life, they could also provide crucial new possibilities for measuring and monitoring im-

6. For discussion of the economic arguments for and against place-based policy, see Weber 2008, 117–20.

pacts over the life course—an area that remains underresearched.

Overall, the current literature on the impacts of growing up rural on adult well-being, including the new material presented in this double issue, yield complex and heterogeneous findings, reflecting the marked diversity of rural places in the United States. We find continuing examples of how chronic pockets of deep rural poverty create strains on rural families and limit the opportunities of young adults, but this volume also showcases evidence that this narrative needs tempering. Novel and nationally representative data show limited differences between rural and urban places in key child development indicators such as health and educational performance. Moreover, the longitudinal studies in this double issue suggest that exposure to rural places in early life can offer some health and economic benefits, though further studies are needed to ascertain whether these patterns are replicable. Overall, by focusing on the implications of growing up in rural America, rather than currently living in rural America, the new research presented in this issue offers a new perspective on rural life and its social and economic impact on rural people.

APPENDIX: WHAT IS RURAL?

The U.S. Census Bureau defines *urban* using a complex algorithm to aggregate census block groups based on population size and density into contiguous areas, creating two categories of urban territory: urbanized areas of fifty thousand or more people, and urban clusters of 2,500 to 49,999 people. *Rural* is the residual category, including all territory outside of urbanized areas and urban clusters. “Rural areas consist of open countryside with population densities less than 500 people per square mile and places with fewer than 2,500 people” (Economic Research Service 2019d).

The Office of Management and Budget considers both the size of core cities and the commuting patterns of outlying counties to urban centers in its classification of counties into metropolitan (metro) and nonmetropolitan (nonmetro) areas. Starting in 2000, OMB created the Core-Based Statistical Area classification that identified two classes of core areas: metropoli-

tan statistical areas that have at least one county with an urbanized area of fifty thousand or more inhabitants plus any adjoining counties strongly linked through commuting and micropolitan statistical areas that have at least one county with an urban cluster of ten thousand to 49,999 plus adjoining counties linked to the core county by commuting. Nonmetropolitan counties include all those not in metropolitan statistical areas and thus include both the micropolitan counties and the noncore counties that are in neither a metropolitan nor a micropolitan core-based statistical area (for the defining features of each classification, see table A.1). The introduction of core-based statistical areas brought with it some inconsistency in using the OMB classification in describing rural places. Most analysts, including the Economic Research Service, define rural areas to include both micropolitan and noncore areas. Some researchers, however, define rural areas as consisting only of noncore areas. For example, Keith J. Mueller and colleagues (2020) apply the label *rural* to noncore statistical areas.

Recognizing that neither the Census Bureau urban-rural nor the Office of Management and Budget metro-nonmetro definitions captured the multidimensionality of the rural and urban concepts, there have been several attempts to create new classification schemes that better capture the rich diversity of both population size/density and remoteness across rural and urban communities. Perhaps the most widely used of these is the Rural Urban Continuum Code (RUCC) classification (sometimes called Beale Codes) developed in 1975 and updated regularly by the Economic Research Service. The RUCC divides the OMB metro counties into three categories based on population size of the metro area and it divides the OMB nonmetro counties into six categories based on the size of the urban population and adjacency to metropolitan areas. Other classification systems have been developed by the federal government that capture distinct features of rural areas that are important for policy development. An extended discussion of two classification systems discussed plus five other classification systems can be found in the RUPRI Health Panel publication on which table A.1 was based.

Table A.1. Commonly Used Rural-Urban Classifications

Name	Geographic Building Block	Measure	Rural-Nonmetro Percentage of Land Area and Population of Total United States, 2010
Census Bureau	Census block	<p><i>Urban = Urbanized Areas and Urban Clusters</i></p> <p><i>Urbanized Areas:</i> contiguously built-up area with population of greater than 50,000 and at least 1,000 people per square mile and adjoining blocks with at least 500 people per square mile</p> <p><i>Urban Clusters:</i> contiguously built-up area with population of between 2,500 and 50,000 and at least 1,000 people per square mile and adjoining blocks with at least 500 people per square mile</p> <p><i>Rural = all other census blocks</i></p>	Land Area: 97 Population: 19
OMB	County	<p><i>Metropolitan = counties with at least one urbanized area (population > 50,000) and adjacent, economically integrated counties.</i></p> <p><i>Nonmetropolitan = Micropolitan and Noncore Counties</i></p> <p><i>Micropolitan:</i> counties with at least one urban cluster having a population of between 10,000 and 49,999 and adjacent, economically integrated counties</p> <p><i>Noncore:</i> all other counties</p>	Land Area: 72 Population: 14

Source: Authors' tabulation (Mueller et al. 2020, 10; Ratcliffe et al. 2016; Cromartie 2017).

Note: The *noncore* category was identified as *rural* in the original RUPRI table, but the label has been changed to be consistent with the official OMB guidelines. The description of the category has also been revised.

APPENDIX

Rural Definitions and Methodological Approaches to Studying the "Rural Effect"

This special issue focuses on the experience of growing up in a rural area and how this experience shapes people. This appendix reviews the various definitions of "rural" used by the researchers in this special issue and discusses the strengths and weaknesses of the various methodological approaches used in this special issue to identify a "rural effect."

As noted in the introduction, rural places are the relatively sparsely settled territory that remains after defining urban places, and the

more remote territory surrounding the regional labor markets of large cities. The standard classifications divide territory into two categories: urban or rural and metro or non-metro. Most rural research (and most of the papers in this special issue) use these classification systems to define "rural." Of the fourteen articles, eight identify "rurality" at the county level using the OMB metro and nonmetro dichotomous categories. Three use classifications developed by the USDA Economic Research Service: one uses the Rural-Urban Continuum Codes and one article uses Rural-Urban Commuting Area codes. Only one of the studies uses the Census definitions of rural and urban places. One of the papers, which exam-

ines schooling outcomes, identifies rural school districts using a National Center for Educational Statistics urbanicity code. The remaining two articles rely on their own unique method of defining rural as described below.

Authors in this issue chose the definitions of rural that best suited their substantive topic (that is, education, health, earnings), methods (cross-sectional, longitudinal, or qualitative), and data (which may have limited geographic identifiers). The diversity and complexity of definitions used, however, highlights the challenges to generalizing about “rural areas” or comparisons across studies. In table A.2, we have summarized important features of each of the fourteen studies in this special issue. The last column in the table reports how each of the studies identifies “rural.”

The seven quantitative studies used six different classification schemes to capture rurality.

- The OMB *metro* or *nonmetro* classification was used in two studies. Using a national database, Parker et al. identified respondents as rural if they lived in a county classified as nonmetro in 1990 and explore how federal funding in their counties of origin affected their education and earnings in later life. Bernsen et al. selected two nonmetro counties in Oregon and Maine to examine educational aspirations of youth in a survey of students.
- Roberts et al. used the Census definition of *rural* to capture the effect that growing up on a farm or towns of different sizes had on the mortality of an early twentieth century cohort of women in Iowa.
- Economic Research Service *Rural-Urban Continuum Code (RUCC)*. Morrissey et al. collapsed the nine-category RUCC into four categories in their effort to understand how early childhood education program provision and participation in the U.S. vary across rural and urban places.
- Economic Research Service *Rural-Urban Commuting Area (RUCA)*. Keister et al. collapsed the ten-category RUCA codes into seven categories to explore how rural residence during adolescence affects wealth in adulthood across the United States.
- National Center for Education Statistics *Urbanicity Locale Codes for school districts*. Drescher et al. explore differences in third grade achievement and subsequent five-year learning rates between rural and nonrural (town, suburban, city) school districts and between three subcategories of rural districts (rural fringe, rural distant, and rural remote).
- *Unique classification*: Miranda and Rodriguez created a unique classification system for Minnesota school districts to explore educational aspirations of public-school students. In their classification system, a district was considered an urban district if it was in Twin Cities metropolitan area or if it was in one of five cities with a population greater than 50,000. All other districts were considered to be Rural. This classification system thus has features of both the Census “urbanized area” of 50,000 or more population and the OMB metropolitan area classifications.
- Of the seven qualitative studies, six selected counties, parts of counties or groups of counties that were nonmetropolitan.
- Two of the studies selected a *single nonmetropolitan county* in which to do their ethnographic research. Parsons studied educational aspirations in “Central Delta County,” Mississippi. Miller and Edin studied poverty, health and economic mobility in nonmetropolitan Clay County, Kentucky.
- Bowen et al. selected *two nonmetropolitan counties* in North Carolina in which to do her semi-structured interviews, surveys and dietary recalls to study food insecurity.
- Two studies examined *regions comprised of nonmetropolitan counties*. Brant did interviews and observations related to opioid use and recovery in “an entirely rural region in nonmetropolitan Appalachian Kentucky”; and Niccolai and Damaske did

their interviews of unemployed prime-working-age adults in a five-nonmetropolitan-county region in Pennsylvania

- One study examined *part of a nonmetro county*. Sherman did her ethnographic study in “Paradise Valley,” a sixty-mile-long valley in a remote nonmetropolitan county in Washington state.
- One study created its own *uniquely defined region*. Francis did his qualitative study in a “largely rural” five-county region in northwestern Pennsylvania that included four nonmetro counties and one metro county in 1980 when his respondents were growing up.

Table A.2 also incorporates information about the methodological approaches used by the researchers in studying the relationship between rural residence and various outcomes over the life course (school readiness and test scores in childhood; educational aspirations in teen years; work choices, migration, earnings, employment, upward economic mobility and wealth in adulthood). The studies in this special issue employed three different types of analysis. Following Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, and Aber (1997), we distinguish two types of quantitative analyses: community studies and contextual studies. Community studies of a “rural effect” explain different community outcomes (education rates or employment rates, for example) as a function of community demographic and economic structure variables, including whether a community is urban or rural. Contextual studies of a rural effect explain differences in individual outcomes (individual educational attainment or individual earnings) as a function of individual demographic characteristics and community social and economic characteristics, including whether the community is urban or rural. In this issue there

are six contextual studies and one community study. The last approach is the qualitative and ethnographic studies, of which there are seven in this special issue. Through intensive interviews and observation, these qualitative studies provide rich detail about the lives and experiences of people growing up and living in rural places.

These approaches are complementary. Information from community studies about the effects of community characteristic on rates or levels of community outcomes can assist interpretation of contextual study results about how community characteristics affect individual outcomes. Qualitative studies can provide information about the community and individual processes that produce the outcomes observed in the quantitative studies. Qualitative studies provide rich detail that allows understanding of the underlying processes of individual and community change, but they are often less generalizable beyond the region under study. Community studies reveal how community characteristics and perhaps community policies can affect the community outcomes, but they suffer from several problems. Communities are not randomly distributed but tend to cluster geographically in ways that complicate statistical inferences, and the interpretation of results is subject to ecological fallacy problems if used to draw conclusions about individual outcomes. Contextual studies provide better inferences about how context affects individual outcomes and avoids the ecological fallacy problem but can be hampered by endogeneity and omitted variable bias. Estimates of a “rural effect” can be biased because people can choose where they live, and so rural residence is not exogenous and because other important factors that are correlated with rural residence are not included in the analysis.

Table A.2. How Rural Is Defined in This Issue

Author	Type or Geographic Scope	Source of Data	Definition of Rural
Rural Families			
Bowen, Elliott, Hardison-Moody <i>Rural Food Insecurity: A Longitudinal Analysis</i>	Qualitative study in 2 rural counties in North Carolina	Semi-structured interviews, a survey, and 24-hour dietary recalls with 124 poor and working-class households with female caregivers of young children [90 completed all three waves]	Nonmetro (OMB) 2 nonmetro counties
Brant <i>When Mamaw Becomes Mom: Social Capital and Kinship Family Formation amid the Rural Opioid Crisis</i>	Qualitative study in "entirely rural region within Central Appalachia"	In-depth interviews with 50 relative caregivers, 50 support/surveil institutions, and observations of 30 support group meetings for relative caregivers	Nonmetro (OMB)
Childcare and Schools in Rural Areas			
Morrissey-Allard-Pelletier <i>Access to Early Care and Education in Rural Communities: Implications for Children's School Readiness</i>	Contextual study using a national database	Unique county-level ECE program data from the 2007–2011 American Community Survey (ACS) linked with child-level data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K:2011)	Rural Urban Continuum Codes (2013) collapsed into four categories: Large metro counties (with population 250,000 or greater), (2) Small metro counties (with population less than 250,000), (3) Large nonmetro counties (with urban population of 20,000 or more), (4) Small nonmetro counties (with urban population of less than 20,000)
Drescher-Podolsky-Reardon-Torrance <i>Geography of Rural Educational Opportunity</i>	Community study using a national database	Stanford Education Data Archive 3.0, 12,000 school districts (incl. 6,000 rural districts) average test scores in 3rd grade and average learning rates between 3rd and 8th grade	National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data (CCD) urbanicity locale codes, categorizing districts and schools by one of four locale types (rural, town, suburban, city), and additional rural subcategories (rural fringe, rural distant, and rural remote, in order of increasing rurality)
Sherman-Schafft <i>"Turning Their Back on Kids"... Gentrifying Rural Communities</i>	Qualitative study in a mountainous region in Washington state	Intensive qualitative field research that included 84 open-ended in-depth interviews and ten months of ethnographic observation and participation	Nonmetro (OMB) Paradise Valley, a remote rural area covering 60 miles with a population of roughly 5,000 year-round residents and four distinct communities

Table A.2. (continued)

Author	Type or Geographic Scope	Source of Data	Definition of Rural
Aspiring to Leave			
Miranda-Rodriguez <i>Educational Aspirations and School Grades of Rural Students</i>	Contextual study using a Minnesota database	Minnesota Student Survey from students in regular public schools in grades 5, 8, 9, 11. ACS data	Unique definition-School Districts 48 districts identified as "urban" included all districts in Twin Cities metropolitan area plus another five districts with community populations > 50,000. The remaining 253 districts identified as "rural."
Bernsen-Crandall-Leahy-Biddle <i>Community Influences on Youth Educational Aspirations in Rural, Resource-Dependent Places</i>	Contextual study using a survey of students in northern Maine and coastal Oregon	Survey administered electronically to 2,027 middle (31%) and high school (69%) students at most public secondary schools in counties in two counties	Nonmetro (OMB) 2 counties: Piscataquis County, Maine, [N = 17,535] and Coos County, Oregon [N = 60,043]
Parsons <i>Moving Out to Move Up: Higher Education as a Mobility Pathway in the Rural South</i>	Qualitative study in central Mississippi	2 years of ethnographic fieldwork	Nonmetro (OMB) "Central Delta County," Mississippi with a population of 25,000 with 10,000 in county seat
Choosing to Stay			
Miller-Edin <i>Coming of Age in Appalachia, Emerging or Expedited Adulthood?</i>	Qualitative study in Appalachian Kentucky	Intensive interviews with low-income parents as well as a broad range of community leaders to study "poverty to other dimensions of disadvantage, namely health and economic mobility"	Nonmetro (OMB) Clay County, KY [America's poorest White-majority county, nested in its Appalachian region]. It is classified as "noncore" nonmetro.
Francis <i>Movin' On Up? The Role of Growing Up Rural in Shaping Why Working-Class Men Do—and Don't—Seek to Improve Their Labor-Market Prospects</i>	Retrospective qualitative study in "mostly rural" northwestern Pennsylvania	Semi-structured, in-depth qualitative interviews (narrative interviewing) with 61 mostly White, mostly working (¾ working) middle-aged (generally under 40) working-class men (defined as having less than a four-year college degree, working in a blue-collar occupation, or both). 85 percent born and raised in NW PA. Only 4 of them moved there as adults.	Unique definition A five-county "largely rural" area. Four of the counties were nonmetro in the 1980s. Three of the five counties were nonmetro in 2010. There were only a few interviews in these metro counties and these interviewees lived in the outlying areas of the metro counties.

(continued)

Table A.2. (continued)

Author	Type or Geographic Scope	Source of Data	Definition of Rural
<i>Choosing to Stay (cont.)</i>			
Niccolai-Damaske-Park <i>We Won't Be Able to Find Jobs Here: How Growing Up in Rural America Shapes Decisions About Work</i>	Retrospective qualitative study in rural Pennsylvania	Analysis draws on 72 interviews of unemployed working- and middle-class men and women (between the ages of 30–50, prime working and child-rearing years) who grew up in nonmetro counties and who worked full-time prior to their job loss, and those who experienced an involuntary job loss during the past year. Follow-up interviews conducted one year later.	Nonmetro (OMB) (2013)
<i>Rural Roots</i>			
Roberts-Rahn-Lazovich <i>Life-Course Transitions in Rural Residence and Old-Age Mortality in Iowa, 1930–2014</i>	Longitudinal contextual study in Iowa	Longitudinal Iowa Women's Health Study (IWHS) linked cohort of 10,375 women born 1916–1930 to early-life census records from 1920 and 1930. IWHS started in the 1980s and followed women through 2014. This cohort (age 55–69 in 1986) represents the mothers of children born during the baby boom.	Rural (U.S. Census) <i>Early life residence:</i> farm, rural nonfarm (township < 2,500), urban. (1920 and 1930 Census) <i>Later life residence:</i> farm, rural, and four categories of town or city size (Towns under 1,000, Towns 1,000–2,499, Towns 2,500–9,999, Towns or cities of 10,000 or more people) (1980 census)
Parker-Tach-Robertson <i>Do Federal Place-Based Policies Improve Economic Opportunity in Rural Communities?</i>	Longitudinal contextual study using linked national databases	Federal agency data on place-based federal expenditures between 1990 and 2015 linked with National Longitudinal Survey of Youth-97 data for 2015 adult outcomes of 8,984 youth born between 1980–1984	Nonmetro (OMB) (1990) Metro status for respondents refers to the county where the NLSY respondent lived in the first survey year (1997). In supplemental analyses they examine counties that were nonmetro throughout separately from transition counties (counties that changed from nonmetro to metro).

Table A.2. (continued)

Author	Type or Geographic Scope	Source of Data	Definition of Rural
Rural Roots (cont.)			
Keister-Moody-Wolff <i>Rural Kids and Wealth</i>	Longitudinal contextual study with national database	@ National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health [AddHealth] is a study of U.S. adolescents who were in grades 7–12 (ages 12–18) during the study's first wave (1994–1995) and were young adults in Wave 3 (2001–2002 (ages 19–25) and Wave 4 (2008–2009 (ages 26–32).	Rural-urban Commuting Area (RUCA) 10-category RUCA collapsed to 7 categories: metropolitan area core, metropolitan area commuting, micropolitan area core, micropolitan area commuting, small town core, small town commuting, and rural. Adolescent RUCA, Wave 1; Young Adult RUCA, Wave 4

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PART IV

Choosing to Stay: Building Families and Finding Work

Coming of Age in Appalachia, Emerging or Expedited Adulthood?



EMILY E. N. MILLER AND KATHRYN EDIN

We examine the transition to adulthood in a poor, white, rural community in Appalachia. Young adults come of age in a context of persistent poverty, economic decline, an ongoing opioid and addiction crisis, and strong community norms about family and work bolstered by religious institutions. For low-income young adults in this community, this stage in the life course is both expedited and emerging. Marriage and childbearing are expedited, frequently occurring in late teens or early twenties. However, other adult markers—such as stable employment, pursuing education, and leaving the parental home—are often slow to emerge and are usually only tentatively achieved. This pattern is in contrast to middle-class young adults in this community.

Keywords: young adulthood, rural, poverty, addiction, life course

Young adulthood is a pivotal stage in an individual's life course where vital decisions are made that shape future opportunities. What used to be a straightforward, predictable, somewhat linear progression from adolescence to adulthood has morphed into a stage marked by variation and uncertainty (Shanahan 2000). Put another way, the young adulthood years are

a period of “demographic density,” a stage during which individuals experience transitions and embrace new roles in rapid succession (Rindfuss 1991; Manning 2020).

Scholars have delineated the Big 5 markers of adulthood that historically signaled adult status: leaving home, finishing school, finding work, getting married, and having children

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(Furstenberg, Rumbaut, and Settersten 2005; Settersten 2012; Settersten, Ottusch, and Schneider 2015). Classic demographic research has illustrated how the order, sequencing, and duration of these life course events as well as social norms about these events shape status attainment (Hogan 1978). Nevertheless, shifts in the sequence of the life course over the last century have been significant. The human development scholar Richard Settersten (2012) notes that in the first half of the twentieth century, young adults typically achieved these milestones in rapid succession. Yet more recently, both the ordering and the timing have shifted. For example, finishing school now typically includes postsecondary education, career entry is more protracted, and, consequently, both marriage and childbearing typically occur much later in the life course. Settersten notes, however, that “young adults often have starkly different sets of options and experiences depending on family backgrounds and resources” (9).

Identifying broad population trends, diverging patterns among demographic groups, and their implications for the well-being of American young adults are strengths of quantitative methods. However, these methods often fail to capture the subjective experiences of young adults as they manage the transition to adulthood within specific contexts. Qualitative methods provide researchers the opportunity to explore how young adults conceive of what constitutes adulthood, the strategies they use to navigate it, the barriers they face, and the meaning they attach to various markers of adult status. Yet qualitative research on young adulthood is contested terrain.

Analysis of in-depth interviews by the psychologists Jeffrey Arnett and Jennifer Tanner (2006) portrays contemporary young adulthood as an elongated period—“emerging adulthood”—during which individuals focus on personal goals and desires rather than settling into traditional adult roles. Yet other qualitative researchers have sharply critiqued this portrayal, encouraging the field to acknowledge the sharp disparities by race-ethnicity and social class in the path toward adulthood, disparities that often exacerbate inequality in life chances (Booth et al. 2012; Settersten 2012; Sha-

nahan 2000). Because of these disparities, becoming an adult is more than just a “private trouble” that can be managed by individual effort. Instead, it is a “public issue” that requires collective thought and investment (Settersten 2012).

For example, the sociologist Stefanie DeLuca and her colleagues (2016) followed a sample of disadvantaged youth from Baltimore from middle childhood to young adulthood, interviewing and observing them at regular intervals. Their findings challenge whether the term “emerging adulthood” is appropriate for this group. Indeed, the 150 youth in their study described experiences more aptly described as “expedited adulthood” (DeLuca, Clampet-Lundquist, and Edin 2016). For example, although the aspirations of the Baltimore youth aligned with the ideal of a four-year college degree, structural challenges—specifically, the need to be self-supporting after high school because of limited family resources—often prevented the realization of this goal. In the face of these pressures, ambitions to pursue a career in nursing, for example, morphed into short-term training to become a nurse aide.

Coming of age in rural America might be distinct from doing so in urban America in several ways. Many rural counties experience population aging and population decline (Carr and Kefalas 2009; Johnson and Lichter 2019; Johnson 2011; Shiode et al. 2014; Thiede et al. 2017). Shrinking tax revenues, limited services, and school consolidation often follow (Johnson and Lichter 2019; Thiede et al. 2017; Tieken 2014). The rural labor market is less diverse and has been decimated in many rural places (Crockett, Shanahan, and Jackson-Newsom 2000; Glasmeier and Salant 2006; Niccolai, Damaske, and Park 2022, this issue). Available jobs may be low wage or far away. Furthermore, the lack of public transportation in most rural areas limits career opportunities for young adults. Other supports, such as social service-oriented nonprofits, may lack capacity to serve rural young adults (Heflinger and Christens 2006; Lewis, Scott, and Calfee 2013; Waters et al. 2011). The rural context might shape aspirations as well as opportunities. An early review suggested that rural young adults anticipated accelerated transitions to adult-

hood relative to their counterparts in urban areas in part due to structural constraints (Crockett, Shanahan, and Jackson-Newsom 2000).

At a community level, rural places might be distinctive in their sense of shared values, strong ties, and social capital, which, according to the sociologist Robert Wuthnow (2019), turns small towns into moral communities. Thus, in rural places, strong shared notions of morality may uniquely shape youths' aspirations and their sense of what constitutes adult status. In rural areas, strong community and family ties, as well as religious institutions, might function protectively during the transition to adulthood (Crockett, Shanahan, and Jackson-Newsom 2000; Elder and Conger 2000). However, the protectiveness of rural communities is hardly a guarantee. Based on extensive qualitative interviews in several disadvantaged rural regions, including Appalachia, the sociologist Cynthia Duncan (2014) observes sharp class cleavages, so much so that family reputation can be difficult, if not impossible, to shake and may limit life chances for those on the other side of the community divide. Jennifer Sherman (2009), also a sociologist, echoes the notion that family reputation may play a role in shaping life chances. In her rural research site, what she calls moral capital, derived from family reputation and work ethic, is used to foster success and gain community support. However, those who lack moral capital are typically unable to access community resources.

In this article, we draw on in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations of one high-poverty, white, rural community—Clay County in eastern Kentucky. Prior research on rural youth and the transition to adulthood frequently focuses on one or two markers of adulthood such as the economic opportunities (Duncan 2014; Niccolai, Damaske, and Park 2022, this issue), the role of family processes (Burton et al. 2013; Garrett-Peters and Burton 2016), or leaving home and school (Carr and Kefalas 2009; Parsons 2022). Here we examine the dynamics of all of the Big 5 markers of adulthood as they are experienced (or not) by low-income young adults. We explore whether these young people conform to Arnett and Tanner's "emerging adulthood," DeLuca and colleagues' "expedited adulthood," or some

other distinct pattern. Following Wuthnow, Duncan, and Sherman, we also examine whether any features of the rural context—especially class cleavages or strong moral norms—shape young people's experiences as they come of age.

In keeping with Duncan and Sherman, we find that in Clay County, young adult outcomes are sharply delineated along class lines. The "moral community" promotes the importance of work and marriage. These norms shape the aspirations of the relatively affluent and poor alike, but paths to adulthood are nonetheless starkly different by social class. For many in the latter group, pathways are disrupted by addiction.

Interviews with community leaders, who are among the more affluent in the county, indicate that young people from the middle class are following the Big 5 sequence as it plays out for most Americans, where marriage and children come last. However, interviews with low-income respondents reveal that those from less advantaged backgrounds pursue a sequence that differs dramatically from their middle-class counterparts. For low-income respondents, some markers of adulthood—marriage and childbearing—are expedited; they frequently put marriage and childbearing (usually in close succession) first. Yet, other adult markers—completing schooling, leaving home, and finding employment—are at best slow to emerge, especially in the face of a faltering economy and a raging opioid and addiction epidemic. There are many starts and stops as young adults seek financial and residential stability. Low-SES young adults age out of this period of the life course with these markers only tentatively achieved. Families fall apart under these pressures, leaving many low-income residents living outside of the dictates of what Wuthnow calls the moral community, and thus largely excluded from the key social institutions, including religious congregations where generations of Appalachians have gleaned meaning, dignity, and social support.

METHODS

Clay County is one of the poorest predominantly white counties in the United States, 36.2 percent of the working-age population and 47.2

percent of its children living below the official poverty line as of 2019 (Census Bureau 2020). Other forms of disadvantage in Clay County include a high rate of low-birth weight babies (strongly associated with other child health challenges), obesity, and premature death (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation 2019). Correspondingly, the percentage of those receiving disability benefits is exceptionally high (Flippen 2014). These challenges, along with high incidence of addiction, were salient to local leaders. “If you want to study poverty, you have come to right place,” a volunteer at the local historical society told us early on in our fieldwork.

What is it like navigating the transition to adulthood in such a place? To provide a preliminary answer to this question, we conducted in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations during the summer of 2019. One of us (Miller) and another field researcher lived in the area during this period, conducting forty-seven in-depth interviews (with twenty-two low-income families and twenty-five middle-class community leaders) and more than fifty hours of participant observation over an eleven-week period. We attended local worship services and other church-sponsored activities, volunteered with service providers, observed local meetings, and engaged in festivals and other local pastimes within the community.¹ Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed, and observations were documented in extensive fieldnotes.

Low-income families were recruited through local social service providers, including a faith-based food pantry and clothing closet where we volunteered nearly every week. Most respondents resided in the county seat of Manchester, a city of about 1,800 people, but several lived in the more remote areas of the county; the county population numbered roughly twenty thousand (Census Bureau 2020). Interviews with household heads included life histories,

questions about health and well-being, views of and experiences of community institutions, and a detailed accounting of how families were making ends meet economically. All but three of these interviews were with women. In addition, we spoke with community leaders, professionals and volunteers in service agencies, heads of nonprofits, local government officials, educators, health professionals, and religious leaders about their perceptions of the strengths and challenges of the community as well as their day-to-day experiences in their professional roles. Our sample consists of individuals who stayed or returned to the county. For this analysis, although we draw on interviews with community leaders, we focus primarily on how low-income participants described their young adulthood years, starting at age sixteen and extending through their early thirties. About half of our low-income respondents were still in this stage, but older respondents were asked to recount their experiences as young adults as well.

FINDINGS

We start at respondents’ family conditions at age sixteen. We then focus on how young adults navigate childbearing and marriage, employment, and school and leaving home.

At Age Sixteen

Near the beginning of each interview, we asked low-income participants to describe their circumstances at age sixteen (Schwarz 1994), when low-income Appalachian youth are still in adolescence but often on the cusp of making crucial decisions that will profoundly affect their young adult years, especially family formation.² We use these descriptions as a starting point in our discussion of how Clay County youth experience the transition to adulthood. From these, we can derive a sense of the family context for each respondent at an age where adolescents begin thinking about and preparing for their

1. The county is overwhelmingly evangelical Christian and includes numerous Southern Baptist, Holiness, and Pentecostal churches as well as some Protestant institutions, notably the Methodist Red Bird Mission, and a small Catholic presence. The county is even more exclusively Christian than other parts of eastern Kentucky. The American Communities Project classifies the county as an “Evangelical Hub” (2021).

2. No youth in our sample had transitioned to marriage or childbearing before age sixteen, but several did so while still in their teenage years.

adult lives. Family context plays an important role in shaping aspirations and opportunities by providing material and emotional support and normative benchmarks as young people begin on the path to adulthood (DeLuca, Clampet-Lundquist, and Edin 2016; Fergusson, Horwood, and Boden 2008; Furstenberg, Rumbaut, and Settersten 2005; Settersten 2012).

Nearly two-thirds of respondents described their family's income as "below the community average" as they were growing up; only two reported it as above average. Six said they lived with both parents; two others reported living with their mother and stepfather. Nearly half said they lived with a single parent at sixteen: eight with their mother and two with their father. One participant reported living on her own. Three lived with grandparents. In the Appalachian region, where three-quarters of our respondents grew up, living with grandparents has become a more common living arrangement in the wake of the opioid and addiction crisis (Brant 2022; Hansen et al. 2020).

Respondents were asked to describe their parents' educational attainment and employment at age sixteen. One had a mother with a college degree, but most mothers had less than a high school degree (eleven respondents). Six of these reported their mothers had less than a middle school (eighth grade) education. Seven had mothers who worked at age sixteen, most often as home health aides or in manufacturing. A handful reported that their mother was a homemaker. Several reported that their mother received Supplemental Security Income or Social Security Disability Income, both being forms of government disability insurance.

Fewer respondents were able to report on their father's education, but among those who could, none said that he had more than a high school education. Most had fathers who had failed to earn a high school diploma. Those whose fathers were employed usually worked in extractive industries such as coal mining (the most common response, five respondents reporting this occupation) or logging. One respondent reported that her father received disability after an injury. Other occupations

included cable installer, or welder, mechanic, state trooper, and truck driver.

In short, the family contexts of respondents at age sixteen were challenging. Very low levels of parental education translated to very limited employment opportunities for the mothers of our respondents at age sixteen, but somewhat less so for the fathers, some of whom were employed in extractive industries (coal and timber), jobs that have since become rare in the county. Despite strong moral norms about the importance of marriage and a traditional family (one mother, one father), which we discuss next, the majority were living outside the sanctioned family structure at age sixteen.

CHILDBEARING AND MARRIAGE

Our in-depth conversations with community residents made clear that, for young women in our sample, becoming a parent is a marker of adulthood. First births nearly always occurred within, or shortly before, marriage, another adult marker. However, among low-income respondents, a flagging economy offering little job stability or pay, a high incidence of addiction, and an elevated rate of intimate partner violence (usually associated with addiction) often frayed marital relationships, distorting one of the key entry points to adult status and making it challenging to achieve others. At the same time, moral norms strongly supported childbearing and rearing within heterosexual marriage as a proper course. These norms were repeatedly voiced both by low-income families and community leaders, particularly clergy. When relationships soured, low-income parents frequently put their role of a parent over being a partner, leaving them outside the community's moral code.

Marie, age twenty, a high school dropout, had been married nearly a year and was pregnant with her third child when we spoke with her. Angel had three children by the time she reached eighteen. She tried to return to school after giving birth to her third child, but dropped out again, noting that it was difficult because having children made her feel so much older than the other students.³ Like them, most of the low-income respondents we interviewed

3. Angel eventually got her GED and completed some college.

had their first birth in their teens and several subsequently dropped out of high school. In many cases, the pattern of early family formation and interrupted schooling was intergenerational; when asked to recount their life stories, many participants told us their parents had shared these struggles. Reports of early childbearing mirrors administrative data. For the United States, the median age at first birth is younger in rural than urban areas and the gap has been widening (Ely 2018).⁴ But in Clay County, the teen childbearing rate is three times higher than the national average (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation 2019).

As noted earlier, young adults moved from marriage and to childbearing, or vice versa, in rapid succession. Almost all low-income parents we spoke with had been married, some more than once. However, none of the marriages of respondents older than twenty-five had lasted.⁵ In Clay County, 11.5 percent of the population is divorced, only slightly higher than the U.S. average of 10.9 percent, whereas the 4.9 percent separated is more than double the national average of 1.9 percent (Census Bureau 2020). Yet these data likely mask substantial variation in the rate of divorce by socioeconomic status (Kennedy and Ruggles 2014; McLanahan 2004; McLanahan and Percheski 2008).

Family formation and dissolution yielded complex family relationships. At time of interview, the vast majority of those in our low-income sample were raising their children apart from their child's other parent. The difficulty of negotiating parent and partner roles across multiple households characterized the young adult years for many participants. Stevie, age twenty-seven, is a mother of three, who, while still in her early twenties, divorced after three years of marriage. She recently became involved with a man who also has three children from a prior relationship. She described how difficult it was to negotiate organizing the

family's daily routine or plan trips to visit kin. Family complexity also created difficulties in families' economic lives. Among the low-income mothers we spoke with, child support from past partners was rarely regular. New partners similarly struggled to meet their current obligations to the household plus obligations to children from past partners (child support), often because of a lack of stable employment.

Marital quality was typically low. When marriages failed, both parties were usually hesitant to commit to marriage again. Regrets about early marriage shaped the young adult years of many among our low-income participants. Angel, who had three children prior in high school and married at about age twenty, told us, "I did get married at a point. I did. It was horrible. That's the worst nine years of my life. Don't do it. It's a trap!" Formerly married mother Loretta, who had been with her current partner for six years after divorcing in her mid-twenties, shared her view on the subject: "I just don't want to jump into a marriage and it be another divorce."

Many low-income participants, nine of twenty-two, described marital breakups due to domestic abuse. Abuse ranged from verbal to physical, including one case where a man shot and killed his pregnant girlfriend after holding other family members, including a toddler, hostage at gunpoint for several hours. Although rates are not available by county, in Kentucky, the lifetime prevalence of physical violence by an intimate partner is 42.1 percent, the highest in the nation (national average, 32.4). For men, the rate, 32.1 percent, is among the highest in the nation (national average, 28.3 percent) (Smith et al. 2017). A family court judge confirmed that our respondents' accounts were not unusual. When describing his work, he told us, "I do wife beaters, husband beaters, about 50/50. I do grandma beaters, grandchild beaters. . . . It's a terrible job. I only see people at their worst."

4. When talking about national level rural-urban differences, *rural* is used interchangeably with the nonmetropolitan definitions used by government agencies like the census. Separately, fewer women were childless and more had had an unintended pregnancy resulting in childbirth in rural areas than their urban counterparts (Hamilton 2016; Sutton, Lichter, and Sassler 2019)

5. Relative to urban areas, rural areas have higher percentages of divorced women (Hamilton 2016; Sutton, Lichter, and Sassler 2019).

Experiences of domestic abuse in their family of origin sometimes solidified young respondents' resolve to end their marriages when confronted with the same circumstances. Loretta, for example, left her husband of eight years when their son was six and she was in her mid-twenties because "[My son] sort of caught us in this fight a couple times and I didn't want him growing up like I did [witnessing fights]. And so I decided to leave, and finally got out of there." Loretta told us it was difficult to leave because she "really loved this man, but I knew I couldn't be with him. That wasn't right for the kids."

Addiction intensified violence and added to the instability in the family lives of our low-income participants. Clay County was at the epicenter of the opioid crisis in the early 2000s and strong remnants remain. From 2006 to 2014, 133.5 pills were prescribed per person per year in Clay County, one of the highest rates in the nation (*Washington Post* 2020). During our fieldwork, thirteen pharmacies were operating in the tiny town of Manchester, nearly one for every 140 residents. Both low-income and community leaders reported high rates of concurrent substance use (such as opioids and methamphetamines), and that methadone and Suboxone are increasingly used recreationally as well as for treatment. Several community leaders estimated half of the county had been or currently were abusing substances. Although middle-class families were not shielded from addiction, addiction was especially consequential for those with fewer resources, especially with regard to marital stability and child well-being.

Crystal, who, after several years of dating, married the father of her youngest child at age twenty-five, divorced a year later because "He got on drugs and got . . . It's just drugs took over, and I'm not like that. I don't do that." Lulu described how her husband, whom she had been with for fifteen years (since age fourteen), had become addicted to drugs and started stealing from her. Around age twenty-eight, she left behind a house she purchased with a down payment from a student loan to flee to Clay County, where she had kin. In her words, "Money started disappearing. He was staying out, staying out all night, getting high and stuff

like that. His priorities just weren't with me and the girls, so I caught him one day gone [out of the house]. I left. Got my car. I left everything there. Didn't [take anything with me]. Took off."

Mirroring other qualitative work among low-income urban mothers (Edin and Kefalas 2005), children were a key source of meaning and identity for the low-income rural mothers we interviewed. Especially poignant were those parents who cited their own addiction as a reason they had lost custody of their children. At the same time, the need to be present for their children provided a reason to fight addiction. Four respondents had gotten sober, each citing their children as their major motivation to stop using drugs, stay in rehab, and stay clean. Loretta, a mother of two, told us, "I just knew that if I got out there on drugs [again] that I wouldn't get to keep my kids, or I wouldn't have a life for them. And it was either my kids or the drugs. I picked my kids, of course. Went to rehab for six months." When Helena learned that her teenage daughter had tried methamphetamines, it was a wakeup call to get clean: "I mean . . . , I know [my daughter] has smoked pot and she has drank, but I never thought she would do [meth] . . . I guess that was another kind of eye opener for me." Helena, who told us she had been sober for six months, reobtained custody of her daughter during our fieldwork. Paige, age thirty-five, whose mother held temporary custody of her youngest son because of her own drug use, managed to quit without attending a rehabilitation program. She told us, "So, I'm staying clean and trying to do the right thing for my kids."

Despite the frequency of nontraditional family structures within the low-income community, divorce and cohabitation were harshly judged, especially by religious leaders. Several clergy were among the community leaders who cited cohabitation as one of the community's biggest challenges and claimed that cohabitation as well as divorce and single parenthood were the cause of the high poverty rates in the county. One told us, "We're trying to encourage kids to get married because the outcomes of families and children are so much better when there's a mom and dad involved."

Several others identified "fatherlessness" as

the chief social problem county wide. Although not all could articulate the rationale behind their views, some linked the high poverty rates in the county to the lack of a “male breadwinner” in the home; others cited the deleterious effects (for both the families and society at large) of increased dependency of single mothers on government programs such as the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP). A founder of a faith-based nonprofit described the ideal family as “a married father and mother that train their children and don’t think that they just have to have a handout.”

As noted, our low-income respondents were similarly very critical of divorce and cohabitation, but ultimately decided that living outside these norms was the best course for them because of their concern for their children’s well-being. Scarlet explained: “So I ended up getting pregnant. You know, it was one of those things that was like oop, oops, oops. But God played a big play in that because I was scared to death to be a single momma. Which [my husband] tried to, he wanted to [keep me from leaving him]. He’s like, ‘Oh, we can work this out.’ . . . [But] he was just a big ho because he had another girl pregnant, [I] didn’t know it.”

The salience of traditional family values permeated the lives of the low-income participants we interviewed. Several described a large church in the county seat, Manchester, advertising a “wedding ministry.” Interested couples could receive the services of the officiating minister for free, and church members provided a reception in the church basement. Both the bride’s wedding dress and the wedding cake were also provided free of charge, reinforcing the message that young adults were supposed to marry. One respondent recounted that she had been convinced to marry for a second time through the wedding ministry, only discover that her groom had a “pill problem.” He started stealing from her soon after they had wed.

The shadow of the church and its traditional norms was virtually impossible to avoid given that nongovernmental sources of material and service provision (from food to addiction recovery) were nearly all faith based. One community leader claimed that “Without faith-based services in our rural communities there would be a lot of lacking. I mean, I think that they are

the bulk, they fill in [for what the government doesn’t do].”

As indicated earlier, research suggests that class origins and a family’s reputation and moral capital within the community can be consequential across a variety of domains (Duncan 2014; Sherman 2009). In Jennifer Sherman’s (2009) study of a predominately white, low-income northern California timber town, an individual’s perceived moral standing, based on the perception of whether an individual was a “hard worker” or came from a “traditional” household with “family values,” was a vital component of who received help in hard times. In Clay County, respondents reported similar judgments being rendered, along with the importance of religiously and church attendance. Yet we did not observe any faith-based entity refusing service to a needy family. Indeed, the Baptist minister who administered the soup kitchen, food bank, clothing closet, and homeless shelter, and gave rides to those requiring medical treatment in Lexington (two hours away) was among the most beloved figures in the community, especially among the low-income families who had sought aid.

However, few among our less advantaged respondents became incorporated into the local congregations who provided such assistance, or any local congregation at all, though most were nonetheless eager to profess their Christian faith. Many, especially those still in young adulthood, said they were not interested in participating in church. In the context of Clay County, isolation from religious institutions, especially in the young adult years, can be highly consequential because these institutions are very nearly the only venue where one can generate social capital and cultivate a feeling of belonging in the community. As one indication of the hegemony of religious institutions within the community, we counted more than sixty churches in the tiny city of Manchester and the surrounding area alone. Social capital helps young adults navigate personal relationships and gain opportunities, including schooling and employment (Byun et al. 2012; Coleman 1988; Kane et al. 2018; Settersten 2012). A lack of social capital further isolates young people from resources.

Marie, age twenty, told us that although God

played a big role in her life, church did not. When asked why she did not attend church she said, “I just don’t go to church because, a lot of churches are hypocrites. . . . Most of the churches I’ve went to they’ve always talked about me, or my makeup, or pants, so I just don’t go.” Twenty-seven-year-old Stevie offered a similar claim. Emphasizing that “If it wasn’t for God, I wouldn’t be anywhere near where I’m at now,” she asserted that nonetheless she could not find a church that made her feel comfortable. Throughout our interview, Miranda, age thirty-one, emphasized that she strove to put God in the center of her life and hoped her children would as well. But when it came to church, she said, “Problem is with church, there are people that look down on people. If there weren’t people like them, there’d be more people in the church. I’m not judging those people because that’s their business. That’s between them and God. But if weren’t for people like that I think a lot of people would go to church. I know I would.”

A deeper analysis of these views indicate that the rejection many felt was rooted in the fact that they didn’t have the resources to “dress the part.” More fundamentally, however, many felt judged because they were not living in accordance with community norms regarding marriage. Churchgoing among the less educated has long been lower than among those with a college degree, though the gap is closing due to a sharp falloff in attendance among recent cohorts of the college educated (Edin et al. 2019).

In sum, marriage and childbearing were core components of adulthood for Clay County residents and a point of entry into the pathway to adulthood for those from low-income backgrounds, who typically transitioned to these adult roles while still in their teens or early twenties.⁶ However, many marital relationships were marred by poverty, addiction, and violence. When trouble struck, many parents, especially mothers, chose being a parent over be-

ing a partner. Several mothers too struggled with addiction, and their children were sometimes removed from their care. Low marital quality led to separation and hesitancy to remarry. Deviating from the norm of a two-parent, biological family form often alienated young parents from a key institution of material and social support—the church.

EMPLOYMENT

Desire for better employment opportunities in Clay County was widespread, most keenly felt as young adults graduated from high school, started a family, or separated from a marriage—events that often took place over the course of just a few, demographically dense, years. Moral norms about the value of work were repeatedly espoused in interviews with low-income respondents and community leaders alike, and efforts were made to conform to these ideals. While some low-income participants’ fathers may have been able to claim work in blue-collar jobs, this generation of young people were not. Throughout their young adult years, constrained employment opportunities prevent participants finding stable economic footing. Their aspirations were dashed by a low-end service sector, fast food, and Walmart, all of which offered low pay, uncertain hours, and frequent layoffs.

Because of the decline of extractive industries in the region, no industry is present to anchor the economy in Clay County today. The county’s official labor-force participation rate in 2019 was only 36.8 percent, substantially lower than the national average of 63.4 percent (Census Bureau 2020). As noted earlier, the population relies heavily on federal disability benefits. Among the working-age population (age eighteen to sixty-four), 9.8 percent receive disability payments, relative to 7.8 percent for the state and 4.5 percent for the nation (Social Security Administration 2019b, 2019a). This is not necessarily an indication of fraud; it is primarily rural locations such as Clay County that

6. The majority of our interviews were with women, but the three men in the sample also reported early marriages, childbearing, and divorce. James got married when he was seventeen on his wife’s sixteenth birthday, but separated later in life. Jake married the mother of two of his children at about twenty-five and was going through a divorce at the time of the interview at age thirty-three. Travis, who did not have children, recalled getting married through the wedding ministry in his early twenties but was divorced by twenty-six.

have living costs low enough to live on the meager benefits of these government programs, making them “sticky” for beneficiaries. Real differences in morbidity are also a likely cause. The economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton (2020) and others find that reports of pain are elevated in rural areas, including the Appalachian region, possibly as a result of the physically demanding work many have been subject to (Case and Deaton 2020, 2017; Copeland et al. 2020; Dwyer-Lindgren et al. 2018; Erwin 2017).

The entry-level job openings that do promise stability, benefits, and better pay—usually in education, the health sector, or at the federal prison at the edge of town, were few and subject to strong competition. In keeping with other studies (Duncan 2014; Maril 1989), several low-income respondents emphasized that you needed to have connections—especially family ties—to get one of the better jobs in town. Paige put it this way: “It’s just a small-knit community. . . . It’s all about who you know.” Other low-income participants described Manchester, the county seat, as a “family-run town.”

Despite these challenges, low-income respondents exerted considerable effort to find and keep a job. Many mothers of young children were not employed at time of the interview but could recount their time in the labor force and the barriers to employment they had encountered. Some, like Miranda, now thirty-one, had worked for years. She took pride in her prior management position but had been unable to continue due to lack of childcare options. Forty-year-old Scarlet had also wanted to work when she was a young mother but couldn’t find childcare, “A lot of my life has been hard because of childcare. . . . we have [only] two childcares [in the county]. A lot of people, their family babysits. But now if your family works [like mine does], you’re screwed.” She went on to describe a time she had to pay sixty dollars in late fees because she got a flat tire while traveling from work to pick up her children at daycare. Stevie, who had enrolled in a training program in hopes of scoring a higher paying job, ended up taking a part-

time minimum-wage job instead because she had to care for her children after school hours.

A lack of transportation was another barrier to employment among low-income young adults. Helena, now thirty-two, described in her twenties walking more than a mile to her fast-food restaurant job while eight months pregnant. She could not afford a car and the county has no adequate public transportation system. Stevie described walking to work when she was sixteen years old and pregnant “in the rain, in the snow. The police picked me up a couple of times and asked me what I was doing out because it was storming.” Other respondents reported looking for work in London, a city in a neighboring county, or even cities farther away like Bowling Green or Glasgow (both more than a two-hour drive, one way), but this strategy was tenuous. Marie, age twenty, described her family’s situation: “[My husband] currently can’t work because we don’t have a car. [M]y mom’s car. . . . we kind of use hers. But she don’t really like people driving her car far out and . . . the jobs are mostly in London because you can’t find nothing down here. So it’s hard for us to go back and forth. So, the only thing we’re pretty much [relying on] is just my child support from [my daughter’s] dad, which is not guaranteed.”

Even though paid work was hard to come by, we witnessed considerable unpaid labor in the form of volunteer work among young adults. Kentucky’s version of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, the cash welfare program known locally as the Kentucky Transitional Assistance Program (KTAP), along with SNAP, have work requirements for many beneficiaries (Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services n.d.). In lieu of available paid employment, several low-income families relied on KTAP and volunteered to meet work requirements. At maximum, KTAP offered at \$262 a month for a family of three in 2019 plus money for transportation to and from workfare assignments (Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services 2017).⁷ Key volunteer venues were at the soup kitchen and clothing pantry, but oth-

7. Unemployed parents were also eligible for a \$200 per month for transportation support payments if they participated in more KTAP activities each month (Potter 2020). Most of our respondents also claimed this credit bringing the monthly total to \$462 for a family of three.

ers volunteered at the Manchester visitor center or other faith-based organizations.

The lack of formal employment opportunities affected other institutions, including child support and drug court, that influenced the lives and trajectories of young adults. Two respondents still in their young adult years described how they had been arrested for missing child support payments. Lacking stable employment, both were unsure how they were going to be able to pay. Some noncustodial mothers shared this dilemma. Helena, age thirty-two, explained: "If I had a job I would [pay child support]. But I've made one payment [because] I've not had no job, [so] I've not been able to make no payments. And that's when last time I went to jail, I was able to get out because I signed a plea agreement. But I've not been able to keep my end of the deal on the plea agreement because I've not been able to find a job yet."

Drug court, an alternative to prison, also required participants to be employed. Paige, a thirty-four-year-old respondent enrolled in the program, told us that although she appreciated her job at a fast-food restaurant, getting rides to and from work was a challenge. She asked us to give her a ride to work several times during our fieldwork. Without a car, she worried about whether she could stay in the program and avoid additional incarceration. The lack of jobs compounded challenges that young adults faced, especially when trying to avoid the penal system and provide for a partner or a child.

As in other rural communities (Sherman 2009), labor-market opportunities for some respondents were limited by a gendered labor market. When describing the labor opportunities in the county, Stevie, age twenty-seven, told us, "It's easier for men to do stuff than it is for women around here." Paige, age thirty-four, echoed this sentiment: "I feel like if we had more jobs, especially for mothers, females, not just that, but I feel like if they had more jobs besides just restaurant work, or something like that, it would help a lot of households." Male jobs, according to Paige, were in manual labor or the trades.

Somewhat in keeping with these characterizations, several low-income male respondents reported working short-term construction gigs for money. Others turned to crime. Travis, age

thirty-nine, who took to selling drugs in his young adult years, told us, "I tried working and they don't really pay enough to actually survive down here. So I do a lot of little side hustles, I guess." Later in the interview, he discussed his calculus in more detail: "Most of the places around Manchester you're lucky to get maybe thirty hours a week. They pay you \$7.25 an hour, by the time you're done, you're lucky to pay your rent and electric, you know? That ain't even counting car insurance and getting a car."

Travis highlights a key tension in the experiences of low-income respondents who worked: even when they were able to find a job, their pay was seldom enough to get by, especially when factoring in transportation costs. Formal employment might not be worth it, some concluded.

Community leaders also reflected on this dilemma. Acknowledging that government programs were clearly needed to ensure family well-being, many community leaders favored work requirements. At the same time, the community elite understood that most local wages were not enough to lift families out of poverty. One respondent, a stably employed professional explained: "It's a broken system. It is. These minimum-wage jobs were meant for high school kids [or] college kids to make a little money while they're going to school, and in this area, it's become families having to depend on that to live. So [it has become I can go] and bring home \$50 a week, or I can stay home and receive my health and insurance, food stamps, money and all this kind of stuff. . . . Why should I go to work for that?"

In short, jobs designed as a starting point for young adults entering the workforce had become a permanent and unsatisfactory feature of their adult lives.

Despite these realities, some community leaders decried what they called "dependency mentality" created by so-called dependence on government assistance and saw jobs as a way to provide "independence" and change people's lives, creating a pathway to prosperity. One pastor opined that "Job [opportunities] out in rural communities can change families and can cause them to become prosperous and change their vision, the way of thinking. They're not dependent. They become independen-

dent. That's one of the things that I'd like to see is helping people become independent, changing their lives."

At the same time, he acknowledged the barriers to employment in the region, such as transportation. Given his concern about the corrosive influence of government dependence, he had founded a small pallet factory and had employed a dozen or so people for several years. However, he could keep the business afloat only through donations. When the facility caught fire and burned down, he was unable to replace it.

In sum, stable employment was lauded as a key marker of adulthood and a source of dignity and pride. However, low-income respondents faced numerous challenges given structural constraints and expedited entry into marriage and childbearing to achieve this milestone. Participants took steps, such as enrolling in training programs, searching for child-care, and commuting long distances, but finding stable economic footing rarely materialized, extending a tentative transition to adulthood. When asked about what could be done to improve the county, well-paying jobs were at the top of the list. As one community leader said, "Feed us. Help us. But don't give it to us. We're a proud country. We're a very proud country. When you take someone's pride from them, you've stripped them of their dignity. Feed us, but feed us with jobs. Feed us with hope. Feed us with a life to look forward to, to get up and go to work. To make something. To be productive in your community."

SCHOOL AND LEAVING HOME

Like marriage and childbearing, completing school and leaving home were starkly divided along class lines in Clay County. As indicated earlier, middle income youth in the county frequently follow the Big 5 sequence as it plays out for the average American. Community leaders and their children pursued education and had the means to leave the county, though some returned because of family obligations. Those who did return found stable employment in health care, education, or social services. For these young people, marriage and children came last. But, for less advantaged youth, pursuing higher education as a path to adulthood

was often untenable because of expedited transitions into marriage and childbearing. Furthermore, establishing an independent household, or maintaining one, was challenging in the face of poverty as well as the need to contribute financially to one's family of origin and other kin.

Class divides in educational experiences and trajectories appeared in conversations about the local high school. Schools are one of the only institutions in Clay County where low-income and middle-class young people interact. We interviewed a handful of community members from stable middle-class and working-class backgrounds who had recently graduated. Graduates of the system, as well as some staff members from the school, claimed that it was understood from an early age that there were those who were going to "make it" and those who were not. The two recent graduates described one group of students whose parents provided the material resources and encouragement that allowed them to do well and the students' whose parents were in the "jail section" of the newspaper. Sometimes, they told us, you could tell who was who because of "the way they look." This class divide was less evident in elementary school, they noted, when it was not uncommon to have friends that came from "dysfunctional homes." But friendships were increasingly sorted by social class in high school.

Perhaps, then, it is unsurprising that respondents from low-income backgrounds described their time in high school as a difficult period. Carrie, age twenty-three, told us, "I hated high school, really." Stevie echoed the sentiment, "I hated school. I was learning. I made straight As. I hated going. Hated it, so I quit." After probing these respondents' views, participants shared that it was mainly their middle-class peers that made school so difficult. Carrie said it was "because you always had different sorts of groups. I hated it." For twenty-year-old Marie, it was a move to the local high school when she turned sixteen that left her alienated. It derailed higher education plans: "I was wanting to complete college, but when we moved down here, I didn't want to go to school [because of the cliques]."

Nonetheless, low-income respondents we

spoke with did recognize the importance of higher education and wanted to achieve this marker of adulthood, some struggling to do so even later in their twenties and thirties, though none had yet earned a bachelor's degree. Barriers of degree completion included the cost and the challenges of balancing schooling and family responsibilities. Forty-year-old Scarlett, a mother of four, had been working toward her bachelor's degree throughout her young adulthood years. Her plans had been repeatedly derailed by juggling being a single mother, work, and school. Angel, age forty-five, after receiving her GED after having children, turned her sights toward a college degree. She reported similar challenges, "No, I didn't keep going [to complete the degree] 'cause it was so hard to juggle school and work, and to raise kids, you have to have money, you know." Fewer than 10 percent of county residents held a bachelor's degree in 2019 relative to 24.2 percent nationally (Census Bureau 2020). Other respondents, such as Carrie, age twenty-three, and Miranda, age thirty-one, aspired to get certifications, most often as nurses' aides, but were unable to do so because of childcare needs.

According to community leaders, it was exceedingly rare for a student with a family history of poverty, family complexity, and drug use to make it to college, much less leave the county permanently. It was not unheard of, but such students were described as beating long odds and spoken of with reverence. As noted elsewhere in the companion volume to this issue (Parsons 2022), low-income youth with educational aspirations frequently failed to consider academic options farther away in response to family expectations of staying locally.

In contrast to the lives of the low-income respondents, community leaders and their children were able to pursue higher education somewhat farther afield. Clay County, like many rural places, has experienced a brain drain (Carr and Kefalas 2009; Sherman and Schafft 2022; Bernsen et al. 2022). Many community leaders expressed concern about this. Those they referred to as the best and brightest were often their own children. Young adults who wanted to return seldom did so because there were "no jobs" for young people with col-

lege credentials. A retired high school teacher described the school district's dilemma in this way: "It's a big problem [that] there's not any work here to amount to anything. . . . Most of the people who are willing to leave have already left. The others are seeking ways to be able to live here and still survive [financially]. We don't want to stress too much the welfare segment, because you also have that segment of people who want their children to be educated. . . . But in a way, we are raising [those] children to leave, to be able to leave this county."

Some community leaders were raised locally by middle-class parents and had left, but had subsequently returned. All, however, reported that moving back took an emotional toll. Much of the sparse in-migration to the county was due to grown children (and their spouses and children) returning to be close to family. Returning home had meant compromising on lifestyle and career opportunities. One social service provider we spoke with described the trade-off as follows: "My husband wanted to come back here. He wanted to live here. I think he maybe regrets that now. . . . We just kind of settled." Some community leaders had family members who chose not to move back because of lack of amenities or health services. One young professional who returned to care for an ill family member told us that her sister had not moved back because support for her disabled daughter would be difficult at best. When reflecting on her choices, she said, "I always question, should I have left here? I don't know. I ran into an old friend and he's actually been a missionary and I went, 'I'm a missionary too. I stayed in Manchester.' And one of my older sisters told my mom, 'You can move to Lexington now. You've put your time in here.' Should I have stayed here? Sometimes I want to go to a restaurant that doesn't look terrible."

For many low-income young people, leaving the parental household is not uncommon, but few stray far beyond the family compound, the collection of trailer homes and small wood-framed houses where they were raised. Extended family and kin are of utmost importance, and relying on family was a key survival strategy to combat both poverty and addiction. Within these extended family networks, financial challenges were typically shared so reci-

procuity was expected. Indeed, low-income households frequently described receiving, and extending, aid to their parents and other extended family members, as has been documented in other rural communities (Pickering 2000; Sherman 2009).

Engaging in these exchanges was another element that lingered in the lives of the low-income respondents in young adulthood. Several described caring for neighbors' children and offering meals to those who struggled with addiction. Lulu, for example, took it upon herself to care for the neighbors' children, often providing meals, when their drug-addicted parents simply failed to come home, sometimes for days at a time. She told us that an evening meal at her home could include as many as eight such children. This generosity sometimes meant forgoing the meal herself, as her financial resources were meager. Lulu did not charge for her services.

Yet these acts of generosity were extended despite pervasive mistrust, often exacerbated by drug addiction. Aurora, who also routinely fed the hungry in her home, recounted that some of her impromptu guests, who were struggling with addiction, had stolen groceries from her. Her account was not the exception but the norm. Among low-income households in our sample, moral judgments about addiction and the other behaviors it spawned (stealing) were typically suspended in a context in which so many friends, family members, and respondents themselves had experienced similar struggles.

Throughout our interviews, many low-income participants voiced the goal of establishing permanent independent households. However, most currently lived with, had recently lived with, or anticipating once again living with, kin. They doubled up with mothers, mothers-in-law, parents, cousins, aunts and uncles, and friends or friends of friends. Angel, age forty-five, was doubled up with her friend Crystal, age thirty-one, and Crystal's children. They also housed Angel's young adult children and their romantic partners. Like Angel's adult children, the majority of those in their young adult years were doubled up. One respondent temporarily established an independent household but an abusive partner, high on meth,

threatened to kill her, and she was evicted after her landlord learned that the police had been called. At the time of the interview, she was doubled up with a cousin.

Family caregiving responsibilities also prevented the establishment of independent households for some during the young adult years. Shania, for example, told us she spent most of her time caring for a son with severe yet untreated mental health issues. At the same time, she was living with and caring for her elderly mother to keep her out of a nursing home, though at the time of our interview the mother had recently died. A twenty-three-year-old respondent who asked us to refer to her as Pooh Bear coped with her own frequent epileptic seizures while serving as a full-time caregiver for her mother, who also suffered from seizures. In sum, although marriages may be fragile, thick extended family ties both support and bind young adults to the community.

CONCLUSION

Scholars of young adulthood have highlighted the importance of moving beyond the white middle-class portrayals of adulthood and encourage researchers to capture diverse and heterogeneous experiences. This article adds to this body of work by providing a case study of young adulthood as it is experienced in a predominantly poor, predominantly white Appalachian community. Decades of economic and labor-market decline and a sharp rise of illicit drug use and addiction shape this community and region. However, although these challenges are present for everyone in the county, we observed a stark class divide in who has the resources—both social and material—to weather them.

Clay County's middle-class youth were able to achieve markers to adulthood in a sequence that mirrors the typical American young adult. Education was prioritized, and most pursued four-year postsecondary degrees. For those who returned to the county after college, a job in a relatively well-paying sector was frequently a necessary prerequisite, often courtesy of connections with influential family members or friends.

In contrast, low-income respondents had to grow up fast, some after losing a parent to ad-

diction, others finding refuge from a dysfunctional family through early marriage and family formation. However, once these initial steps to adulthood were taken, the next were shaky at best. Three of the Big 5 markers of adulthood—completing schooling, finding stable work, and establishing a permanent independent household, remained out of reach for nearly every low-income respondent in young adulthood despite repeated efforts to achieve them. Coming of age in Clay County thus involves both expedited and emerging (extended) transitions across the Big 5 markers of adulthood.

Family formation was expedited, yet unstable. Marriages were tested by a failing economy, addition, and violence. When these challenges occurred, mothers in particular were caught between enacting their partner and parental roles. When marriages failed, many low-income young adults swore off marriage, which carried reputational costs that could impede their mobility by cutting them off from the vital social capital that participation in a key community institution, the church, could have provided. In a small community, where “everyone knows everyone,” family reputations earned through the intergenerational transmission of poverty were hard to overcome. Social exclusion from places frequented by the middle class—both church and school—may have stymied upward mobility for low-income youth.

Meanwhile, young adults were left overwhelmed and isolated and had few opportunities to achieve or stably maintain other markers of adulthood. Respondents worked toward these markers throughout their young adult years, but the markers were emerging slowly and sporadically. Young adults pursued financial stability through participation in the labor market, following another important community norm. Similarly, throughout the young adult years, most made plans to complete high school or a postsecondary degree. Yet these plans were frequently derailed. What little money was gleaned from low-paying, unstable employment or meager government assistance was quickly absorbed by pressing household needs of one’s own household, not to mention those of kin and neighbors, needs that were exacerbated by addiction. For those who managed to start an independent household, this

achievement was almost always temporary. As low-income young adults aged out of young adulthood, for most, completing the Big 5 seemed no more feasible than at the start.

In Clay County and in other poor rural places, policymakers and researchers need to recognize that launching young adults is a “public issue.” Individual efforts alone cannot overcome chronic community challenges such as intergenerational poverty, a lack of well-paying jobs, and addiction, much less the interplay of these challenges in family and individual lives. Although community members may prefer to advance faith-based solutions to such challenges, they are far beyond the capacity of even the most well-resourced congregation. An additional challenge is that low-income youth are often profoundly distrustful of religious institutions. Such young adults wrest partial adult status from parenthood and marriage, but these are only partially won, and full adult status may never materialize. When a whole cohort of disadvantaged young people seem locked out of a stable path for adulthood, a societal response is required.

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Movin' On Up? The Role of Growing Up Rural in Shaping Why Working-Class Men Do—and Don't—Seek to Improve Their Labor-Market Prospects

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Based on interviews with sixty-one working-class men in rural Pennsylvania, this article explores the ways in which rural, working-class men do—and do not—seek to improve their labor-market positions by getting additional education or training, moving, or taking gender-atypical jobs. The evidence presented shows that men are making many efforts to improve their labor-market position, but there are misunderstandings about why they adopt the strategies they do. In particular, deep identification with rural place provides meaning and attachment but also constrains how they seek to improve their labor-market prospects.

Keywords: rural, masculinity, working-class men, employment, education, mobility

The growth of “bad jobs” for men without a college degree has been well documented (Autor 2010; Autor and Dorn 2009; Chen 2015; Howell and Kalleberg 2019; Kalleberg 2009, 2011; Newman 2009; Silva 2013). The challenge facing working-class men is particularly acute in rural places, where employment opportunities have generally been worse than in urban America (Slack 2007) and where wage growth continues to be slower (Cromartie 2017). Given these headwinds, researchers and policymakers have stressed three primary ways for less-educated men to improve their labor-market positions: *upskilling*, getting additional education or training; *geographic mobility*, a tactic especially applicable for men living in rural areas with limited opportunities; and *occupational flexibility*, primarily by taking jobs not traditionally done

by men, such as in female-dominated occupations like care work. However, available evidence suggests that men have largely been resistant to these avenues of social mobility (Austin, Glaeser, and Summers 2018; Bound and Holzer 2000; Doar, Holzer, and Orrell 2017; Ganong and Shoag 2017), although the reasons are less understood.

Based on life history interviews with sixty-one working-class men in rural Pennsylvania, this article explores the ways in which rural, working-class men do—and do not—seek to improve their labor-market positions by upskilling, geographic mobility, and occupational flexibility. The evidence presented in this article shows that men are often doing more to improve their labor-market positions than outcome-based accounts allow. Regarding up-

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skilling, most men in this study have pursued some sort of postsecondary education or training. However, rather than using education to escape rural place or working-class life, these men use it to reinforce their identities as rural, working-class men. Further, evidence from these interviews suggests that higher education is less valuable in rural places where personal reputation and ability to do the job are more important than paper credentials. Regarding geographic mobility, despite evidence that Americans are moving less, about one-third of the men in this study have moved out of state for work. These forays across state lines often took the form of *prospecting trips*, where men would move without a job in search of better opportunities but often fail to find anything and then return. Further, a focus on out-of-state moves alone misses other *mobility measures* taken by these men, such as taking a job that requires extensive travel or enlisting in the military. Finally, regarding occupational flexibility, although few men have worked nontraditional jobs, many more have considered such jobs and even taken preliminary steps toward such work. However, the few men in this study who are in female-dominated occupations testify to resistance from family and peers, indicating that certain cultural barriers—perhaps more pronounced in rural place—remain formidable.

A thread that unifies men's actions in these three domains—education, mobility, and occupation—is rural masculinities. Renewed attention is being paid to rural masculinities given the toxic and hypermasculinity associated with white nationalists and hate groups in many rural areas (Gahman 2020; Harrington 2021; Kelly 2017). Feminist critiques have long pointed to patriarchal gender relations in rural communities and ways in which conceptions of rurality have limited opportunities for women (see Little and Panelli 2002). Evidence suggests that, as labor-market changes have disrupted sources of working-class masculinity, some rural men have been less resilient than their urban counterparts (Kenway, Kraack, and Hickey-Moody 2006). However, uniform depictions of rural men as rootless, angry, and even dangerous belies the fact that no single “rural masculinity” in fact exists (Campbell and Bell 2000). Al-

though some men have not adjusted well to recent economic and cultural changes (*The Economist* 2015), others have. For example, in their study of the logging industry, Berit Brandth and Marit Haugen (2005) find that some rural men recast their “masculine rural knowledge” of logging to outdoor tourism in ways that introduce elements of femininity and urbanity. Jennifer Sherman, whose work appears in the companion issue to this one, has found in her previous work that some rural men showed flexibility regarding gender norms in ways previously underemphasized (Sherman 2009).

A central focus of this article is the way identification with rural place, which is intertwined with the “rural masculine” (Campbell and Bell 2000), affects men's decisions in the domains of upskilling, mobility, and occupational flexibility. Most men in this study see themselves as “country boys” (Campbell, Bell, and Finney 2006), which is a quintessential form of masculinity (Lobao 2006). As respondent Randy, an electrician, describes it, “I mean, I don't see myself going anywhere, it's where I've been all my life. And I like it, I like being in the country.” Casey, who works at a steel mill, echoes Randy: “nowhere can I find more peace than driving down a backroad.” Although deep identification with rural place provides meaning and attachment, it also constrains how men seek to improve their labor-market prospects. For example, an aversion to working for a boss in supervised, indoor setting limits occupational opportunities. A love for rural place, combined with seeing urban spaces as unsafe, make cities largely nonstarters for relocation. Further, working-class masculinity—as expressed in practical, hands-on skill—can evoke a distrust of classroom-based, formal education.

The arena where rural masculinity is most pronounced in affecting mobility strategies regards the movement into female-typed jobs. Research shows that low- and middle-skill men are reluctant to enter female-dominated industries because of lower pay and prestige (England 2005; Gatta and Roos 2005; Simpson 2005); also, leading gender theorists argue that men's resistance to entering occupations staffed largely by women reflects the persistent devaluation of roles and activities that are seen as feminine (Peters and Dush 2010; Ridgeway

and England 2007). A cultural script within masculinity focuses on the types of work “real men” do (Williams 2010), which makes adaptation to a changed labor market not just a case of sheer economics (Cherlin 2014). Additionally, one tendency is for displaced workers to look for jobs like those they used to have, not ones currently available (Kroft et al. 2015). This is in keeping with the idea that many men—especially white, working-class men—compare their labor-market prospects with those of their fathers and grandfathers rather than that of the current employment landscape (Cherlin 2018). Among men who work in traditionally female-dominated jobs, research has found not only evidence of role strain (Simpson 2005) but also strategies for reestablishing masculinity in those gender-atypical employment situations (Simpson 2004). As will be explored, some men are redefining masculinity to incorporate these types of jobs traditionally done by women but face barriers to doing so. Across all three domains—upskilling, geographic mobility, and occupational flexibility—this article studies the role that being from a rural place plays in shaping the labor-market choices and trajectories of working-class men. Rural place is not an inert backdrop against which gender scripts are enacted, but an active and integral character to this gendered story of work and family (Little and Panelli 2002).

DATA AND METHODS

The setting of this study is a largely rural, five-county region of northwestern Pennsylvania. The counties of this area exemplify many of the challenges facing rural America, yet important for this study’s focus on labor-force trajectories, this area is not economically destitute. Relative

to Pennsylvania as a whole, this five-county area has lower median household income (\$48,872 to \$60,891); a slightly higher poverty rate (14 percent to 12.2 percent); and a higher rate of disability among the working-age population (14.7 percent to 11.3 percent).¹ From 2010 to 2019, the area lost almost 6 percent of its population whereas the state experienced a population gain of about 1 percent. However, in 2018 the five-county unemployment rate was under 5 percent and only slightly higher than the state average (4.6 percent versus 4.2 percent). Based on the Economic Research Service 2015 county typology codes, two of these counties are manufacturing dependent and three are nonspecialized.² The most prevalent North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) descriptions in these counties are manufacturing, health care and social assistance, and retail trade, all of which represent at least a 10 percent employment share in each of the five counties.³ Per the ERS 2015 county typology codes, none of these five counties qualify as low education, low employment, persistent poverty, or persistent child poverty counties.

Data for this article come from in-depth, semistructured interviews conducted between July 2016 and May 2018 with sixty-one working-class men. This five-county area contains the town where I was born and raised, which allowed a degree of access and familiarity during fieldwork that aided in gaining trust among key informants, recruitment sites, and research participants. Research participants were identified through a mixture of personal networks, snowball sampling, and venue-based recruitment.⁴ The three screening criteria for inclusion in the sample were as follows: men; generally under forty years old; and working class,

1. All data are for 2018 and drawn from the author’s calculations of data compiled by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania (see <https://www.rural.palegislature.us>, accessed November 5, 2021).

2. See Economic Research Service, “Description and Maps,” last updated October 23, 2019, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/county-typology-codes/descriptions-and-maps> (accessed November 5, 2021).

3. NAICS is the standard used by federal statistical agencies in classifying business establishments (<https://www.census.gov/naics>, accessed November 5, 2021). Percentage is based on county profiles compiled by the Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry (<https://www.workstats.dli.pa.gov/Products/CountyProfiles/Pages/default.aspx>, accessed November 5, 2021).

4. Publicly posted recruitment materials generated virtually no interest, even when noting the \$25 payment for participation, evidence that the field site was relatively closed to outsiders.

Table 1. Demographics of Cases

	Total (N = 61)	Percentage of Cases
Mean respondent age	35	n/a
Gender		
Male	61	100
Female	0	0
Race		
White	58	95
American Indian	2	3
Asian American	1	2
Highest educational attainment		
Less than high school	1	2
High school diploma or equivalent (GED)	20	33
Completed postsecondary credential (CDL)	11	18
Some college, no degree	15	25
Associate degree	7	11
Bachelor's degree	7	11
Work status (at time of interview)		
Full time	35	57
Part time	11	18
Unemployed	5	8
Not in labor force	10	16
Effective hourly rate of working men (N=44)		
Less than \$10	9	20
\$10.00 to \$14.99	19	43
\$15.00 to \$19.99	4	9
\$20.00 to \$24.99	2	5
\$25.00 and above	12	27

Source: Author's tabulation.

Note: May not total to one hundred due to rounding.

defined as having less than a four-year college degree, working in a blue-collar occupation, or both.⁵ The demographics of the cases are displayed in table 1. The average age of the participants is thirty-five. All participants are men, and virtually all are white, which mirrors the fact that the five-county field site is about 94 percent white. The modal highest educational attainment is a high school diploma or GED, although a plurality of the men had attempted or completed some type of postsecondary education or training. About three-quarters of the

men had a job at the time of the interview, while 10 percent were unemployed but looking for work. Ten men were not in the labor force. Within the screening frame, I sought to maximize the heterogeneity of occupations.

Once research participants were identified and successfully recruited for the study, I conducted semistructured, in-depth qualitative interviews with each respondent using narrative interviewing (DeLuca, Clampet-Lundquist, and Edin 2016). Narrative interviews are conducted according to a preset interview guide guided by

5. Although I did not use parental education as a marker of working class, virtually all men in this study had parents with less than a college degree.

the research's aims and memorized by the researcher. Emphasis is placed on natural conversation that elicits respondent narratives. Each interview begins with the invitation for the respondent to tell the story of his life. From there, participants were asked about their life histories, including origins, education, employment, relationships, and current situation. Special attention was given to participants' employment histories, including job duties, duration, hours, wages and benefits, reasons for leaving, views toward work and the labor market, and current work status and means of support. Interviews took place in a variety of places: homes, apartments, front yards, back yards, offices, coffee shops, restaurants, and even a police station. Men came from a total of seventeen towns across the five-county area. Interviews were digitally recorded, and I took field notes about the setting and substance of each interview as soon as possible after the interview was completed. Respondents were offered \$25 for their participation, though in some cases, men refused payment. Although this is not an ethnography in the strict sense, I attended churches; ate or drank at numerous restaurants, bars, and coffee shops; and attended community events, including a candlelight vigil, a talent show, an Eagle Scout ceremony, a community theater production, and even a funeral. I also lived the first eighteen years of my life in this area, still have family there, and visit regularly.

In this study, 85 percent of the men interviewed were born and raised in northwestern Pennsylvania and another 8 percent moved to the area as children or youth, meaning only four of the sixty-one men moved to the area as adults. Although migration patterns in rural America are not uniform (Smith, Winkler, and Johnson 2016), rural areas have generally experienced depopulation over the last century (Johnson and Lichter 2019). Nativity to the study area was not a requirement for inclusion in the study, but it is not surprising that virtually all men who were recruited to participate are from the area originally. This creates a selection problem given that the sample is almost exclusively composed of those from this area, which misses those who grew up in the area but left and have not returned. We know from pre-

vious work about the differences and distinctions among these groups (Carr and Kefalas 2009; von Reichert, Cromartie, and Arthun 2011). However, despite the inability of this study to speak about those who have left, examining the behaviors and attitudes of working-class men who grew up and stayed in rural America still has value. Understanding these stayers and returners (Carr and Kefalas 2009) is vital because they are those who—by definition—live in rural America now.

The recorded interviews were transcribed, assigned a case number and pseudonym, and uploaded into NVivo 12 Plus, a software program for qualitative data analysis. Following a “flexible coding” protocol (Deterding and Waters 2018), I began analysis by creating a set of index codes, which are broad categories based on the topics covered in the interview protocol. Concurrent with index coding, I populated a spreadsheet with what Nicole Deterding and Mary Waters (2018) call attributive codes, which are categorical or numeric data connected to each case, such as number of biological children, highest educational attainment, and current hourly wage. Also concurrent with the index coding, I took notes on each case, which formed the basis for a respondent memo associated with each case. These four documents—interview transcript, respondent memo, interview field notes, and spreadsheet of attributive codes—make up the core data for each case. Additionally, during coding I also created a cross-case memo, which identified common themes across cases for exploration and verification using the case files. Once possible themes and patterns were identified, they were compared against all cases for validity.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

I examine the degree to which—and why—the men in this study have adopted the strategies of upskilling, geographic mobility, and occupational flexibility to improve their labor-market positions, each of which I examine in turn. For clarity, discussion of previous literature is embedded in each subsection. In all three sections, I pay particular attention to the ways in which rurality—particularly rural masculinities—matters for the decisions men make about their labor-force pathways.

Upskilling

The well-documented “college for all” push in recent decades (Reynolds and Baird 2010; Rosenbaum 2001) has been so pervasive that the aspiration to attend college persists well into adulthood, even among low-income students who have failed to make progress toward a degree (Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson 2014; Deterding 2015). This pressure is also present among working-class families. In recent work, Jennifer Silva and Kaisa Snellman (2018) argue that working-class young adults and their parents cast the decision to go to college in terms of their “salvation,” a way out of the grim realities of working-class life and a tool that allows them to generate efficacy and optimism about the future. This is despite the fact that most do not have the knowledge or practical guidance to successfully navigate the landscape of higher education. Rural youth aspire to college at the same rate as nonrural youth (Howley 2006), though they lag in enrollment and completion (Byun, Meece, and Irvin 2012; Clark, Harper, and Weber 2022, this issue). The lack of economic opportunities in rural places is thought to be a primary driver of outmigration (McLaughlin, Shoff, and Demi 2014; Petrin, Schafft, and Meece 2014), leading to rural population loss (Hamilton et al. 2008; Johnson and Lichter 2019) and the well-publicized rural brain drain (Carr and Kefalas 2009; Sherman and Sage 2011). In this issue, Ashley Niccolai, Sarah Damaske, and Jason Park (2022) find that rural women from working-class families report more pressure to go to college than rural men, though these rural, working-class men still sometimes report feeling pressure from family to secure a middle-class life, which often involves education beyond high school. Ryan Parsons’s ethnography of the Central Delta in the companion issue to this one illustrates—perhaps unwittingly—the intimate connection between the aspirations for upward mobility and higher education in the imaginations of rural youth, even when that pathway is fraught with obstacles (2022).

In keeping with the ubiquitous societal emphasis on postsecondary education, the most

common labor-market advancement strategy among the men in this study is upskilling, or any training or credentialing beyond a high school diploma or equivalent.⁶ As shown in table 1, a plurality of the men in the study have attempted or completed postsecondary education or training: about one-fifth earned a credential; another one-fifth attended some college but failed to earn a degree; and another one-fifth earned an associate or bachelor’s degree. Among those who earned credentials, the most common was a commercial driver’s license (CDL), earned by five men. Three of the five acquired their CDL to do long-haul trucking; the other two drive locally, which is defined as routes that do not require an overnight stay, even if sometimes they require travel to other states. Several men earned a credential in auto mechanics; two men became emergency medical technicians (EMTs); and two completed training at the police academy. For those who earned an associate degree, most were for vocational or technical training, and most were earned from for-profit entities. Most of the bachelor’s degrees were from nonprofit schools, all within the state of Pennsylvania.

The emphasis in this analysis is not on the fact that many men pursued higher education, but instead on why they did. On its face, it seems in keeping with the college-for-all literature, as well as Silva and Snellman’s (2018) recent findings that working-class young adults see education as a way to “save themselves” from working-class futures. However, I argue that the prevalence of higher education among the men in this study is evidence—not of college for all or working-class escape—but as a way of reinforcing rural, working-class masculinity. This interpretation suggests a unique instrumentality of education for men who grew up and stayed in rural America.

The first evidence for this interpretation is in the substance of the men’s postsecondary choices. These men pursued credentials to be truck drivers, medical technicians, auto and bicycle mechanics, and police officers. They sought associate degrees in electrical technology, welding and fabrication, X-ray technol-

6. Not included as upskilling for the purposes of this study is any on-the-job training, which imparts job skills but is not independently sought by the employee.

ogy, and wildlife management. Two men in the study pursued higher education in art, yet both use that training primarily as tattoo artists. For many of the men, these interests can be traced to high school, when many were part of vocational-technical programs, pursuing everything from computer-aided drafting to culinary arts to automotive technology. Although the local plant or mill no longer exists as the inevitable place to live into a working-class destiny, these men still see themselves as working class, enacting that identity in a much broader and more fragmented milieu than their fathers. These men continue to want working-class jobs, and they value the “masculine” nature of such work: working with their hands, often outside, sometimes autonomously. For these men, postsecondary education is a way to strengthen—not create distance from—a traditional vision of rural, working-class masculinity.

Additionally, men were quick to abandon education if they felt it was not serving the practical end of helping them secure working-class work. Derek and Mark are examples of men who left their postsecondary pursuits before finishing because they received job offers in the fields they were training to enter. Derek did a semester at a technical college, and besides not feeling suited for more classroom schooling, he was convinced to leave school when he got a job offer: “when I got that phone call that really made my mind up that I was definitely done because I can go learn as an apprentice. In that industry, they’d rather see an apprenticeship than a degree. You know, this is hands-on, this guy knows what he’s doing, so that’s another reason I took the job.”

Mark was involved in firefighting as far back as high school and enrolled in a community college across the state to study firefighting. However, just two months into the program, he was recruited to be a paid firefighter, so he left school for work. Christian was also impatient with higher education. After high school, he enrolled to get an associate degree in electrical technology, but he said he was tired of being broke, “got impatient,” and returned home to work in a factory before earning his degree. As he said, “I wanted money; I’d work, instead of be broke and be in school.”

A second unique feature in the approach to higher education among these men is that paper credentials matter less than a demonstrated ability to do the job, a mark of rural place where reputation and relationships are valued above formal education. Randy came from a long line of electricians and was poised to join them in the family business, but his family wanted him to earn his associate degree before taking over. He enrolled at a local technical school but struggled because he was not learning anything new: “When you have teachers instructing you and you feel that you know more than they do, it’s just a little awkward to be there, but I had an unfair advantage.” Randy said he often found himself wandering the halls because he was “so bored.” However, he stuck with the program because his family wanted him to have the credential. He made the best of it, bonding with another student: “And I got lucky,” Randy said, “there was another kid in the class that had been around construction and wired his grandparents’ whole house, and I mean, he had some good knowledge and we kind of palled around together.” When Randy earned his degree, he went back home to work in the family business, which thrived off reputation, not educational credentials:

I do very little advertising because most the time the bang for the buck is just not there. So, I don’t do a lot of that and the people coming in, it’s just nice to see where they heard from you. And a lot of it’s just word of mouth reputation in town; I can’t take credit for all that cause between granddad and my dad and uncle it’s a strong name through town, so I’m living off of that. I think I’ve improved it. . . . I’ve only had one person ever ask for the certificate. . . . they just needed somebody’s creds to have on file.

Jeremiah, whose father was a contractor, also struggled with the limitations of school. After completing the architecture and design concentration in his high school Vo-Tech program, he enrolled in a local technical college. He thought he would be permitted to place out of some entry-level courses, so he was frustrated to learn after arriving on campus that

was not an option. He tried to make the best of it, but he lost interest after crossing the instructor:

So, I just kind of went with it and I went to the class and I thought, “Well, maybe they’ll, maybe there will be something different that I’ll learn, and I’ll learn a better way of doing something.” But they were teaching on an older, outdated version of CAD and they were teaching an older, outdated way of doing things. And, so, like, we got a drawing packet at the beginning of the semester with, like, fifty drawings in it, and we had to have them all done by the end of the semester. And by the end of the second week, I had all of my drawings done and I was showing the other kids in the class the shortcuts and the keystrokes to get through the program. The teacher was not happy with me telling everybody how to get around the involved process of doing things. I kind of, I just stopped going to class. So, since participation and being there was so much of the grade, like, I kind of . . . I did all right, I think I got Cs and maybe a couple Bs, but I was not in it to go to class. So, I stopped going to class and started partying and hanging out with my friends and, you know, doing other things, so yeah.

Jeremiah stayed one more semester but dropped his major “because I knew all of that stuff and I didn’t want to do it again.” He took mostly general education requirements, and then left the school after a year with no degree.

As we saw with Randy, small businesses in the area rely on the strength of the business’ reputation. This dynamic also applies to employers when they seek prospective employees, at least when it comes to jobs that have some technical requirement. Brett, who runs a towing company, talked at some length about the challenges of staffing. For drivers, simply having a CDL is not enough. He said they have gone to having a trial period with prospective drivers: “what we started doing with drivers, we bring them in for three days if possible. And we do a trial with them for three days. And I can tell you whether or not they’re going to be able

to run a truck after those three days.” Thomas and Cameron, both self-employed contractors who are responsible for assembling their work crews, also spoke of the importance of reputation and reliability in their workers.

GEOGRAPHIC MOBILITY

Evidence shows that both intra-county and inter-county migration rates have dropped significantly in recent decades (Austin, Glaeser, and Summers 2018) to the point that Americans are moving less than at any point on record (Tavernise 2019). Reasons for this slowdown are myriad, but include the high cost of housing in some areas (Glaeser and Saiz 2003), land-use restrictions (Herkenhoff, Ohanian, and Prescott 2018), and a reduction in the wage premium for less-educated workers in dense urban centers (Autor 2020).⁷ Yet despite these barriers to mobility, a sense among policymakers prevails that less-educated men living in areas with limited employment opportunities should move (Yglesias 2013). Evidence indicates that college-educated workers (Cadena and Kovak 2016; Wozniak 2010) and immigrants (Cadena and Kovak 2016) are much more willing to move for economic opportunities than nongraduates and non-immigrants. Niccolai, Damaske, and Park (2022, this issue) find that rural men (and women) were often unwilling to leave the area or commute long distances for work opportunities. However, a sense in much of the literature on rural aspirations is that those with skills and aspirations need to leave rural places if they are to succeed (Carr and Kefalas 2009; Schafft and Jackson 2010).

Contrary to national trends and existing academic literature, almost one-third of the men in this study have moved out of state for work. However, these moves are far from the strategic ventures hoped for by policymakers. The most common approach was to move away for brief periods on *prospecting trips*, where men move without a job in search of better opportunities. In most cases, the men were single at the time of the move, and the move was accompanied by little plan. Men often moved to a place where they had family or friends but no concrete job prospects. Sometimes they managed

7. For a full discussion, see Austin, Glaeser, and Summers 2018; Tavernise 2019.

to find a job, but other times, they did not and returned home. In virtually all cases, the episode was relatively short-lived, and the men eventually ended up back in northwestern Pennsylvania. Of course, given the nature of these cases, I cannot know whether some men took similar measures but found work elsewhere and stayed. It is the case that among those in this sample who moved away but returned, the men both had trouble making it work elsewhere and expressed a longing for home.

William is a good example of these prospecting trips. He served in the navy after high school, and after he was discharged, he moved into an already crowded house in Ohio with his Dad, his uncle and his wife, and grandmother. William worked a few jobs, none of which led to advancement, and then he also found himself the primary caregiver for his aging grandmother, which was too much: "I, as a twenty-one or so year old kid, like I couldn't handle like watching my grandmother deteriorate, let alone be in charge of her care." He returned home to northwestern Pennsylvania, but after having no luck finding meaningful work, he decided to try his luck in North Carolina, where he had been stationed in the service: "And then I went down to North Carolina, um tried to get work down there. Ended up working, uh, painting houses. Did that for a little while. Worked in the food service industry on base for a while. And then wrecked my car, got a DUI. And then from there, uh, spent the ten days in jail and then hitchhiked back home [to Pennsylvania]."

For Zach and Scott, their moves out of state were attempts to make clean breaks, at least for a season. For Zach, who had a bout with cancer not long after high school, his move was a chance to get away. He moved in with his sister in Kentucky and stocked shelves at a grocery store at night: "I just wanted to get away for a while, everything had been so crazy with chemo and everything, and I was just kind of over being in the area and was just ready to try something else." He thought it would be a long-term move, but he was not making enough to pay his bills, plus a nascent relationship with a woman back home started to get more serious over the miles. For Scott, his move was a chance to break bad habits: "I moved to Florida. Um, I

tried to set myself straight once. Um, I kind of got stuck in the alcohol world, um, and I had a, a relative that um, lived in Florida at the time, so I um, I moved down there, kind of got my life a little more sober, I guess. Um, I moved back, and I don't know what could've been, because I wasn't there long enough, so."

He moved in with a cousin and his cousin's grandparents, but failed to find work, so moved back after just a couple months. He missed his friends and, like Zach, he "was talking to somebody" before he left, which also made it hard to stay away.

Although some men were escaping things when they moved, others moved to pursue concrete opportunities elsewhere. Thomas learned masonry from his father and grandfather and carpentry from a man he worked for in high school. He worked a few carpentry and contracting jobs during and after high school, but he was lured to the western United States to work for a cousin. He lived with a couple friends, worked hard, and played harder: "We flipped houses. The economy there was great. . . . [W]e made bank, but I drank a lot, and a lot of that bank was going straight to the bar." After a while, he moved back to northwestern Pennsylvania and took a job with another friend. Thomas described life out west as "fast-paced" and the people of northwestern Pennsylvania as "more genuine." In the end, he said that he "couldn't imagine living anywhere else [than northwestern Pennsylvania]."

The move out of state also worked out—for a time—for men like Sean and Doug. Sean, the EMT later turned law enforcement officer, also had a stint working in North Carolina: "Then I, and eventually I went to North Carolina 'cause I was just frustrated with not being able to find something around here." He had an aunt and uncle near Charlotte, and although they did not have a close relationship, he reached out and they invited him to stay there until he got on his feet. Sean initially lived with his family and took a job at the "steel manufacturing place" where his uncle worked while he put in other applications. He eventually got a job at a utility company and made relatively good money. He enjoyed the weather, but he also said he always looked forward to his annual hunting trip with his father back in Pennsylvania.

nia. After living in North Carolina for a time and without much explanation, he said he just moved back to northwestern Pennsylvania and has been back ever since: “it’s nice to live here.”

When examining geographic mobility, a narrow focus on out-of-state residential moves misses other *mobility measures*, such as taking jobs that require travel or enlisting in the military. These decisions show a willingness to spend time away from home and family for economic opportunity. About 10 percent of the men in this study at one point took jobs that required extensive travel, such as joining itinerant work crews or long-haul truck driving. For most who did itinerant work, the job was usually taken when they were young and unmarried; it was a chance to make money and see a bit more of the state or country. Brad worked locally after high school, but “then came an opportunity and that’s when I started traveling through the United States doing like rubber roofing. And that’s what really started me going elsewhere throughout like the United States. Just going places that normally people don’t get to go to, let alone me going twenty plus places every year.”

Similarly, Jeff worked for a time as part of a traveling crew that repaired kilns. He stayed relatively close to home—Ohio, West Virginia, and other parts of Pennsylvania—but he found it a nice diversion from home:

We didn’t know what was going to be next, when the job was going to be. You know, I was just dating. . . . at the time. It was kind of a nice getaway. It kind of got boring [at home] ’cause, you know, I had a girlfriend that couldn’t go and do anything, you know. But, but it was, it was different. You got to see some different places. Um, uh, you know, just the thrill of working on the road and the hotel. At least you get that experience. It’s not; it’s not all it’s psyched up to be, you know. It’s pretty boring, but also made good money.

Several of the men tried long-haul trucking, which tended to pay better than jobs available locally but also took a toll on relationships. In fact, all but one of the men doing this type of long-distance travel for work eventually moved on. Dan took a voluntary layoff from a ware-

house to get his CDL and start long-haul driving, but he lasted only about six months, finding he missed home too much. With a newborn at home, Nick knew he needed more employment certainty than his work at the local factory provided, which had started rolling layoffs: “I came across an ad in the paper to, uh, go driving and learn to become a CDL driver.” The company paid all the training costs if the driver stayed with them for six months, so Nick gave them seven months, then moved to what he saw as a better company. However, he still did not like being away, so he eventually began alternating between long-haul and local driving: “There wasn’t enough money in this area to make . . . to provide for the things that was going on here, but I always wanted to be back here because I wanted to see my child, you know? I missed out on a lot of things while I was out driving. So, I kind of bounced back and forth like trying to save up some money and do the on the road thing and come back here and get a job until I just couldn’t take it anymore ’cause we weren’t making ends meet.”

When his marriage ended, in part because of his infidelity, Nick went back to long-haul driving, although he was frustrated with the larger trucking companies because they had no regard for his scheduling requests, such as when he wanted to be home for weekends when he had his daughter. He eventually moved exclusively to local driving, which he has been doing for almost ten years.

Jared also paid a high price for his time over the road. He had already earned his CDL for a previous job—although it had lapsed—and he found himself in a period of job transition. Like Nick, an advertisement caught his attention. Jared took a three-and-a-half-day bus trip to Phoenix to take his road test, which he passed. But Jared minced no words about the long-term outcome of driving: “And I said, yeah, and I climbed in a truck, started driving, got married like seven months later, drive for seven more years over the road, got a divorce—job killed my marriage.” He learned his wife had been cheating while he was away on runs, and the marriage ended soon after.

An overlooked mobility measure, especially among minority, working-class, and rural men, is joining the military (Butler and Moskos 1996;

Kleykamp 2006; Silva 2013; Sykes and Bailey 2020; Woodward 2000). The role of military service as a geographic mobility strategy deserves particular attention in rural context, given that rural youth enroll in military service at higher rates than their urban counterparts (Kane 2005; O'Hare and Bishop 2006), and past work has highlighted how rural and military masculinities overlap and reinforce one another (Woodward 2000). Rural men pay a price for their service: rural soldiers are at a greater risk for suicide (McCarthy et al. 2012) and were a disproportionate share of the casualties during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (O'Hare and Bishop 2006). In this study, nearly one-fifth of the men enlisted in the military and were trained, stationed, or deployed out of state or overseas. In many cases, the men enlisted with plans of a military career, but none fulfilled those plans once exposed to the rigors of military life and the trauma of combat. The main line of argument here is not whether the military yielded a stable career, but simply that the decision to enlist meant leaving the confines of home.

Many of these geographic mobility decisions have a gendered component. In some cases, the lack of a romantic partner lowered the stakes for taking a prospecting trip or joining the military. In others, it was the connection to a girlfriend that drew the men back to the area when out-of-state moves did not pay immediate dividends. For others, their mobility in search of opportunity put such a strain on their relationships that several ended in divorce. This status as "tied movers" also applies to the connection of men with their children. In a few cases, custody arrangements and a desire to be near noncustodial children kept men local when they might have otherwise moved. For some men, the fact that family is often a motivator for men to get serious about work echoes the process found among urban families (Edin and Kefalas 2007). Those in marriages and partnerships most often had a household-level livelihood strategy, marking a return to a previous mode of family life that predates the male breadwinner model (Cherlin 2014). Although this does not represent a total breakdown of traditional gender roles around tasks like caregiving, a sense in some of these

partnerships is that the rigidity of certain roles has eroded.

OCCUPATIONAL FLEXIBILITY

Although many studies indicate that men who enter female-dominant occupations are rewarded with job security and wage growth (Budig 2002; Cognard-Black 2004; Dill, Price-Glynn, and Rakovski 2016; Williams 1992, 2013), men have still been slow to enter female-dominated fields (England 2010; Wootton 1997). Consistent with existing evidence, only a few of the men in this study have worked in gender-atypical occupations. Justin used his GI Bill to get a degree in elementary education and is currently the only male teacher or staff in his entire elementary school, which is private: "I'm the only guy in the building really most days." Paul, who worked in manual labor for more than a decade, found himself in need of work and used a connection to get a job working the front desk at a drug and alcohol treatment facility. Two men in the study left the formal labor force completely for a time, in consultation with their wives or partners, to stay at home and be the primary caregiver for their children. Alex and Gary work in direct care, and Phil works as a registered nurse (RN). Yet these examples were relatively rare. How does rural masculinity show up in the narratives of these men regarding their occupational choices, especially for men who have worked in or considered gender-atypical employment?

Health care is one field in particular where observers have expected working-class men to enter in greater numbers (Miller 2017) given projections of robust demand and higher wages (Cottingham 2013; Dill, Price-Glynn, and Rakovski 2016). The message that employment in health care is potentially lucrative has gotten through to the men in this study. Jerry, among the youngest in the study at age twenty-one, enrolled in the local branch campus initially as a pre-nursing major: "I went to pre-nursing . . . because I've heard a lot of good stuff about nursing industry or the health-care industry just they're being in demand. It's a wide variety of possible jobs for nurses. And so like, 'What the hell? Let's get money.'" A few other men considered health care and even started school in nursing. William, who had

field medical service support school training while in the navy, tried to use that training to get a job as a medical assistant after discharge, but “none of that counts, you still have to go back and get re-trained on whatever.” He opted for a job at a car dealership that was immediately available and never pursued health care. Jeff, who went on to become a master carpenter, initially enrolled in school to start a nursing degree. Scott, a military veteran who has worked mostly in fast food, took steps to work at a nursing home, thinking it would open the door to other opportunities: “I thought maybe if I started there, then I could become the next step in the nursing, the nursing neighborhood, and actually get into like, a hospital.” Brad—who is a recovering opioid addict and currently receives Social Security Disability benefits—said he would like to go back to school for nursing because “I like helping people.” Gary got the closest to a health-care career, enrolling in an eighteen-month course to become a licensed practical nurse (LPN). Having been laid off, he began LPN training but was only partway through the program when his unemployment insurance (UI) ran out. Without the support of UI, Gary had to leave the training to return to work. But he explained his hopes of a career change because “I’m getting too broken to do a lot of construction anymore.” The fact that so many men in this study explored health care as a possible career suggests that some of the gendered barriers to this type of work might be weakening.

This is also true in the rhetoric men used about so-called pink-collar jobs. When the issue of being willing to work in a pink-collar job was raised in the interview, the only objections concerned the duties required of the position, not the nature of the job. For example, Zach—who dropped out of art school and works as a graphic designer and tattoo artist—said he “wouldn’t have anything against that [working in a female-typed job]” but he doesn’t see himself as “really good with hands-on health-care stuff.” Jordan replied, “a couple of my best friends are guys that are nurses and it gets, gets to a point where, uh, acclimated in that, um, so yeah.” At the suggestion of working in a female-dominated occupation, Corey grounded his response in his own masculinity, which he said

was secure enough to handle such work: “I wouldn’t think twice [about working in a female-dominated job]; I don’t care. I know I’m a man, you know.” Overall, there are indications—both in men’s actions and rhetoric—that the gendered barriers to certain types of historically female-dominated work are weakening.

Yet despite evidence among the men in this study of an openness to traditionally female-dominated jobs, these experiences of men in this study reveal at least two remaining barriers: remnants of a traditional rural masculinity and the formal education required to obtain middle-skill, gender-atypical occupations. The former barrier is seen in the experiences of two men from the study who work in female-dominated roles: Paul, who worked for years in manual labor and now works the front desk for a drug and alcohol rehab facility, and Phil, an RN. Although Paul spoke forcefully against those who diminish his work, it is also clear that he faces gendered resistance in his work that might create role strain for him over time:

In a way, really what I do now, I answer phones all day. I . . . I get, I answer the phones so much, and like I said, I don’t think this way, but for somebody else you know, you know, some of the older men that I work with, the drivers, they’re kind of rough around the edges. And one guy in particular, you know, “Where’s your skirt at?,” you know? “Listen, buddy, I’ll show you where my skirt’s at,” you know? You know, but let me tell you, what if I ever, you know, you’re . . . that thinking, they . . . I don’t pull any punches with anybody. That thinking, I’ll put it in place every time. And there’s no place for it anymore. There was never a place for it period. Um . . . and as I said, I’m not gonna let you get away with it and me, I don’t care, but it’s that type of thinking that takes women that could probably do your job better than you, feeling uncomfortable, demoralizes them and I ain’t gonna let you do it. You have daughters, you have mothers, you have aunt, grandmother, how’d you like it if you watched somebody do that to them? And I have four daughters, and my youngest one will put you in your place, too. So, I’m not gonna let it happen.

Phil has also experienced gendered resistance in his work as a nurse. He describes the culture as offering only two options for men: "It's kind of funny because northwestern Pennsylvania is such a strange area in terms of human sexuality and gender views and everything like that. It's like, you either wear camo or you're gay. That's essentially the mindset of the people around here." Phil describes himself as not being attracted to the hunting culture, instead seeing himself as "an artsy, music, and poetry and literature type of person." He did not listen to country music, preferring rock-n-roll and following pop culture. Influenced musically and in fashion by some of the guitarists he liked, he would wear pink shirts or skinny jeans and be questioned by peers and his family: "That's gay" or "You look like a girl." Although not gay himself, he says he sometimes got covert requests to meet up from closeted men in the area.

Because of his experience navigating gender, Phil said nursing school did not bother him, but he still called it "an extreme experience." Of the thirty-six people who started in his class, three were men: two straight, one gay. Fourteen of the thirty-six original students graduated: twelve women, two men. This gender disparity has carried forward into his work as a nurse: "So, like my peers throughout college were so strange because here I am, a seventeen-, eighteen-year-old kid, sitting with these thirty-year-old women. It's just bizarre. It's a very strange mix. Then the same thing in the workplace for me today. I work with late-twenties to sixty-year-old women. There's two other male nurses at the hospital."

Phil says his coworkers "have never made a deal about me being a male nurse," but that gendered expectations crop up at work. Some concern patient expectations, such as how he is often mistaken for a doctor even after he explains he's a nurse. Conversely, he sees patients, especially older ones, often surprised when the doctor is a woman. When he is carrying out his duties, sometimes female patients who require toileting prefer a female nurse. But he also describes unwritten rules about who treats which case: "It's kind of funny, like in the ER, like if there's a male gender urinary problem that comes in, like it's just kind of under-

stood like that's my patient. Female genital or urinary problem that comes in, that's, you know, one of the other nurses' patients." In reflecting on how gender might play out at work, he also realized—in the act of speaking—that he is not sure the legality of one of the hospital's rules: "I was told when I got hired there—I don't even know if this is legal, but I was told when I got hired there that I wasn't allowed to work in OB because I was a male. They didn't let males work in OB there. I don't know. I was like nineteen at the time, I had no interest in working in OB anyway, so I was like, "Okay. That's fine." But come to think of it now, I don't know if that's really even . . . if that's legal."

The second barrier to men entering female-dominated among the men in this study is the need for formal education to get the more lucrative, middle-skill health-care jobs—schooling that many of these men do not desire or are not suited to complete. Phil took the most direct path to a nursing credential (an associate degree), but it still required five semesters of college that left him \$20,000 in debt, despite grants and scholarships, working part time, and living at home. Although Phil makes almost \$30 an hour—wages that place him among the top-fifth of men in this study—he does not make more than other men in the study who work in male-typed occupations that require virtually no postsecondary education. Table 2 shows the men in the study who make at least \$15 an hour with their current occupation or industry. Most jobs in this list are traditionally male-typed and do not require as much formal education as Phil completed.

Short of earning at least an associate degree, the options for entry-level health-care jobs are less appealing. For example, Alex, who works as a direct care assistant at a nursing home, makes just \$8.25 an hour after five years on the job. Although Alex's pay and rate of promotion are perhaps unusually low, Gary—whose effort to earn his LPN credential was cut short—makes just \$12.50 an hour working third shift as a personal care aide for a man with disabilities. Gary's wage, the equivalent of about \$26,000 per year, does not distinguish itself from most male-typed manual work available in the area. Paul, the front desk attendant who defended his work against the harassment of male col-

Table 2. Men with Effective Hourly Rates of at Least \$15 an Hour (N = 18)

Name	Age at Interview	Current Occupation or Industry	Effective Hourly Wage
Jeremiah	38	manufacturing	\$15.00
Derek	40	commercial driver	\$16.75
Cameron	33	self-employed contractor	\$17.31
Wes	34	operations	\$19.95
Seth*	40	manufacturing	\$21.65
Phil*	26	nurse	\$24.00
Thomas	32	self-employed contractor	\$25.00
Sean	39	law enforcement	\$26.00
Jacob*	38	law enforcement	\$27.11
Don	43	oil and gas	\$29.00
Jeff*	25	master carpenter	\$29.61
Sam	37	manufacturing management	\$30.29
Dustin*	46	hospital administration	\$31.00
Vince	39	higher education	\$36.06
Dennis*	33	utilities	\$37.50
Austin*	46	federal government	\$44.62
Todd	46	self-employed	\$72.11
Larry	35	oil and gas	\$96.00

Source: Author's tabulation.

*Indicates union member

leagues, makes just \$13 an hour after six years on the job, which is still more than three dollars an hour less than he made doing maintenance for a local municipality, his first job after high school. Overall, despite the apparent openness of these men to traditionally female-dominated occupations and the steps that some of them took toward these jobs, barriers remain: the cultural cost for some men to switch into female-typed occupations; the availability of at least some traditionally male-typed work that pays comparably or better; and the educational requirements to access the better-paying, female-typed jobs. Therefore, even if cultural barriers to nontraditional work continue to diminish, it may take the further erosion of traditionally male-dominated occupations to push more men into female-typed jobs.

CONCLUSION

Over the past few decades, economic and technological changes have extracted a large cost for many workers, including less-educated men. Real male earnings today are lower than

in the 1970s (Greenstone and Looney 2011; Mishel et al. 2012). Among full-time, full-year male workers, all but college-educated men have experienced double-digit decreases in inflation-adjusted mean earnings since 1969 (Greenstone and Looney 2011). Job quality for has also declined: the adequacy of employer-sponsored health insurance benefits has decreased (Collins, Gunja, and Doty 2017; Martin et al. 2011); job stability for men is lower (Hollister 2011); and involuntary part-time jobs and irregular work hours have increased (Finnigan 2018; Glauber 2017); and the share of men working full-time has decreased substantially, (Greenstone and Looney 2011) as has that of those looking for work at all (Abraham and Kearney 2018). These seismic changes have led policymakers and other observers to wonder why less-educated men have not been doing more to improve their labor-market positions (Semuels 2017; Strain 2014; Williams 2017; Yglesias 2013).

Based on life history interviews with sixty-one working-class men living in rural Pennsyl-

vania, this article explored the ways in which rural, working-class men do—and do not—seek to improve their labor-market positions. The evidence presented in this article shows that men are making many efforts to improve their labor-market position, but there are misunderstandings about why working-class men adopt the strategies they do. First, a majority of men in this study have pursued some sort of postsecondary education or training. However, these men view postsecondary education as a way to strengthen—not escape from—their identities as rural, working-class men. Additionally, men are quick to abandon education if they are offered a job. Moreover, formal educational credentials are less valued in a rural setting where personal reputation and a demonstrated ability to do the job mean more than certificates or degrees.

Second, despite evidence that Americans in general are moving less for work, one-third of the men in this study have moved out of state for work. But rather than move with a job offer in hand or choose a location strategically based on the availability of good, working-class jobs, most often the men go on *prospecting trips* where they move without a job or a plan, usually to a place where they have a personal connection, in hopes of a fresh start. These moves sometimes result in employment and a change of residence, but in other cases, men are unsuccessful in developing attachments and return home. Further, looking at interstate moves alone misses other *mobility measures* men use to improve their labor-market prospects, such as taking jobs that require extensive travel or enlisting in the military.

Finally, although only a few men have worked in gender-atypical occupations, several more have considered it and almost none of them express hostility to the idea. Yet the few in this study who are in female-dominated jobs testify to resistance from family and peers, indicating that certain cultural barriers remain entrenched, perhaps particularly in rural America. Moreover, the most lucrative jobs in female-dominated fields require at least some formal education, a barrier for most of these men, especially when comparably paying, male-typed jobs remain. Given the cultural cost for some men to switch careers, the low pay of much

female-typed work, and the availability of at least some traditional work that pays well, it will likely take the further decimation of less-skilled, male-dominated occupations to push more men into female-dominated jobs.

This study contributes to our knowledge of the intersection between identity and work. We have long known of the interaction between gender and work, particularly how masculinity plays a role in the labor-market choices and experiences of men. This article builds on this foundation by extending and updating the inquiry to include rural, working-class men. For the men in this study, attachment to rural place and their identities as rural, working-class men exert great influence over their educational, economic, and labor-force decisions in ways that make them look different from other working-class men.

This article has several limitations. One is the narrow focus on white, working-class men. Future explorations of work among working-class men in rural America should explore the ways in which other racial or ethnic identities affect labor-market strategies. Another limitation is the use of a single field site, which leaves open the possibility that dynamics may be different in other rural places, not to mention urban and suburban places. Further, this study captures only men who lived in the field site at the time of recruitment, which misses those who were born in the study site but have moved away and not returned. It is possible that out-migrants are qualitatively different from those who returned or remained, although it is also possible that some of those who left went to other rural areas. Future work could attend to both those who stay and those who leave—and why. Finally, these interviews were conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic, which has roiled the labor market for many groups (Cajner et al. 2020; Kesler and Bash 2021; Schieman et al. 2021). Early evidence has shown a white male labor-market advantage during COVID (Dias 2021), although not all analyses are sensitive to the effects of education or rurality. It is too early to say how the pandemic affected these men's employment and how their labor-market strategies did—or did not—change. Even when the pre-COVID American economy was in an extended period of low unemploy-

ment, many workers—especially those with less education—struggled to find adequate employment and livable wages. It should be a continued priority for social scientists and policymakers to better understand the reasons why workers do—and do not—seek to improve their prospects, in rural places and beyond.

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We Won't Be Able to Find Jobs Here: How Growing Up in Rural America Shapes Decisions About Work



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Using data from sixty-eight interviews conducted with men and women raised in rural counties in Pennsylvania, we ask how growing up in rural settings shapes people's aspirations regarding work over three periods. We find that participants' early aspirations during their late teens were shaped by rurality, gender, and class. During the transition to adulthood and again during an unemployment period, searching for work in rural areas with a shrinking economic base, participants adjusted their early aspirations. These adjustments were shaped by their attachment to rural locations, their gender, and class and exacerbated existing structural inequalities in their local labor markets.

Keywords: unemployment, aspirations, expectations, rural youth, inequality

The dominant popular narrative surrounding rural life in the United States is a tale of economic downturn: rural youth, according to popular lore, must either abandon their rural roots or remain tied to the economic peril that has come to define these lands (Gibbs and Cromartie 1994; Schell and Silva 2020; Vazzana and Rudi-Polloska 2019). Indeed, many industries once key for rural communities' vitality—

agriculture, manufacturing, fossil fuel mining, and drilling—experienced industry collapse over the past thirty years (Marcus and Krupnick 2017; Nelson 2016; Schafft and Jackson 2010). Concerned with the human impact of these economic changes, researchers and policymakers alike have decried a rural “brain drain”—an out-migration pattern by which bright, motivated, and educated young people flee their

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small hometowns in the pursuit of education and work (Carr and Kefalas 2010; Petrin, Schafft, and Meece 2014). During this same period, women and men across the economic spectrum increased their levels of educational attainment to weather these changing conditions, and families have come to rely on both women's and men's contributions in the paid labor market and at home (Sherman 2009; DiPrete and Buchmann 2013). Thus, on the one hand, availability of good paying work in communities where rural youth live has declined, but, on the other hand, convergence of the centrality of paid work in these youth's lives has grown. This article asks how the tension between the importance of paid work, family obligations, and community shape rural youth's aspirations during three key periods in their lives—as they finish high school, during their initial transition to adulthood, and during a period of unemployment later in life.

A well-established body of sociological literature examines how gender, race, and social class shape aspirations and preferences for schooling, work, and family (see, for example, Davis and Pearce 2007; Vespa 2009). Normative gender ideologies shape men and women's decisions about workforce participation at various stages in the life course, even though they do not produce singular patterns (Correll 2004). Class also appears to shape “planfulness” or whether young people create roadmaps toward future achievable goals (Schulz and Robinson 2017); this may be partly because of their disappointment with the labor market or because they do not have the necessary financial, cultural, or social capital with which to achieve their plans (Bettie 2003; Willis 1977; Silva 2013; Hardie forthcoming). Although these studies have primarily relied on urban and suburban samples, rurality also shapes expectations about work and family (Sherman 2009; Nelson 2016). Moreover, qualitative work suggests that youth make decisions early in their lives about whether to remain in their rural areas (Carr and Kefalas 2010).

Understanding whether these early aspirations may keep people tied to particular locations even after jobs have left and how these beliefs are intertwined with rurality, gender, and class may help us identify an important

mechanism of inequality. To answer these questions, we draw on analyses of sixty-eight in-depth interviews of men and women who grew up in rural counties of Pennsylvania and who have remained in Pennsylvania (either in their rural communities or in larger metropolitan areas). Our findings suggest early aspirations are connected to the importance of rural place in participants' lives (particularly family ties), are further shaped by gender and class, and change across the life course during transitions into and out of work, particularly when these transitions occur in local labor markets with few opportunities.

RURAL YOUTH, ASPIRATIONS, AND COMMITMENTS TO COMMUNITY

Historically, rural areas have generally experienced greater net losses of young people than of older adults (Cushing 1999). Furthermore, the people who leave rural areas tend to be more educated and highly trained, and those who remain have less education, training, lower incomes, and fewer skills (Cushing 1999; Gibbs and Cromartie 1994; Mills and Hazarika 2001).

Recent statistics show that more rural youth are attending college than ever before—though still at disproportionately lower rates than their suburban and urban peers (Snyder, de Brey, and Dillow 2016; Wells et al. 2019). Yet rurality likely shapes aspirations about educational attainment. Rural parents have lower educational expectations for their children and are less likely to have graduated college themselves (Byun, Meece, and Irvin 2012; Byun et al. 2012; Israel, Beaulieu, and Hartless 2001; Khattri, Riley, and Kane 1997; Provasnik et al. 2007). Additionally, because rural schools are geographically isolated from urban centers and generally supported by a smaller tax base, it is not uncommon for them to operate under significant budgetary constraints. As a result, they generally offer fewer classes and extracurricular activities in support of students' post-secondary aspirations (Byun, Meece, and Irvin 2012; Khattri, Riley, and Kane 1997). Rural students may also have concerns about the cost of college and may believe that their academic records are less competitive for college admissions than those of their suburban and urban

peers (Bernsen et al. 2022). Finally, attachment to one's hometown may limit rural students' college options (Turley 2009).

Yet rurality can come with distinct advantages that may increase rural youths' aspirations for educational attainment and professional careers. Rural youth tend to have high levels of family and community capital, and these strong attachments are positively related to academic achievement and college completion (Byun et al. 2012; Petrin, Schafft, and Meece 2014). Smaller schools—typical of rural communities—tend to generate high levels of social capital as they cultivate “feelings of belonging and commitment to education beyond high school” (Nelson 2019, 98). Thus rural youth may be poised to aspire to higher educational attainment and work.

But the distribution of these community resources is unequal; communities often devote significant resources to middle-class youth who will likely leave the area, whereas those most likely to remain may receive fewer of the educational and community resources (Drescher et al. 2022; Carr and Kefalas 2010; Parsons 2022). Aspirations may be shaped by access to these resources. In a qualitative study of rural Iowa, Patrick Carr and Maria Kefalas (2010) identify four primary patterns among rural youth; they find that schools devoted significant time, attention, and resources to the group they labeled *achievers*—college-bound youth from middle-class families thought of as the town's best and brightest. Conversely, rural towns devoted less energy and resources to students from working-class families who were thought to have less academic promise and thus also might stay in the community as *stayers*. But not everyone who lacked resources wanted to stay; like *achievers*, *seekers* were determined to leave their hometown (and did), but they did not have the same academic and economic resources as *achievers* (Carr and Kefalas 2010). Finally, Carr and Kefalas (2010) identify returners who were either *seekers* or *achievers* who eventually circled back to their hometown. This study provides a model of how rurality and class may shape youth's early aspirations and some later moves, as well.

Gendered and Classed Aspirations over the Life Course

A life-course approach considers how people's lives unfold and are shaped by social and historical contexts (Elder 1998; Moen and Han 2001). Moreover, the life-course perspective examines what happens at transition points, such as the end of high school, and how these transitions are shaped by gender (Moen and Han 2001; Williams and Han 2003). The perspective also sheds light on how early life opportunities and constraints shapes the sequencing of their future life trajectories (Dannefer 2003; Willson, Shuey, and Elder 2007; Damaske and Frech 2016).

Nested within the life course approach, the cumulative advantages and disadvantages perspective theorizes that inequalities—such as race, social class, and family structure—build over time, given that one transition into a “good” or “bad” job may lead to a transition into another and yet another with consequences both for future employment, as well as for other aspects across the life course (Elder 1998; Dannefer 2003; Willson, Shuey, and Elder 2007; Frech and Damaske 2019). These aspirations are often classed and gendered (Damaske 2011; Vespa 2009; Cech 2015; Ovink 2014). Importantly, differences in parental advice tend to privilege middle-class children who usually grow up with more cultural capital than working-class children (Lareau 2003; Rohall, Milkie, and Lucas 2011). Sarah Damaske (2011) argues that middle-class girls typically view college as the only next step after high school, thus delaying decisions about work and family until after college—an opportunity that working-class girls seldom have. Working-class men may look toward work instead of college (Holland 2014; Ovink 2014).

Thus the transition from high school to the next phase of life may be a crucial moment for aspirations. Moreover, given the multiple paths toward adulthood that present no clear next step after high school, youth may find themselves struggling to make decisions about what the next right step should be; a decision shaped by gender and class (Lippert and Damaske 2019; Swauger 2010). At multiple transition points in young adulthood, gender shapes aspirations: high school-aged girls and boys an-

ticipate different majors and jobs (Lips 2004; Machung 1989), college-aged students go into different majors depending on their gender (Mullen 2014), young adult men and women engage in different work strategies in anticipation of future goals (Bass 2015), and young adult couples negotiate gendered plans for the future (Wong 2017). Finally, it may also be true that aspirations will continue to change across the life course, as roadblocks or new opportunities provide new lenses through which to see one's potential (Damaske 2011; Vespa 2009).

METHODS

This article focuses on a subset of sixty-eight interviews (see table 1) of people who grew up in rural areas; it is drawn from a larger study conducted from 2013 to 2015 that includes one hundred interviews with unemployed working- and middle-class men and women. For the broader study, participants were recruited from Pennsylvania unemployment centers where the unemployed were invited to fill out a form to indicate participation interest and eligibility. Participation was limited to those born between 1964 and 1985, those who had worked full time, and those who experienced an involuntary job loss. The sample was further restricted to include only those participants who grew up in rural (nonmetropolitan) counties, as determined by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget's 2013 definition of *nonmetropolitan* and described in the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health's report, "Rural Pennsylvania: Where Is It Anyway?" (Center for Rural Pennsylvania 2014). All participants lived in rural Pennsylvania counties in high school; in adulthood some still lived in their counties of birth; others had moved to metropolitan counties, but all remained in Pennsylvania.

The interviews were conducted in person primarily by the second author and a team of graduate students and were an average of 2.5 hours. All interviews were transcribed. Interview transcripts, field notes, and other pieces of data were coded according to categories determined from the literature. We used an iterative process to develop analytic categories, relying on the existing literature and examining the

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Sample (n = 68)

Age (years)	
mean	39.6
Gender (n)	
men	32
women	36
Race-ethnicity (n)	
White	64
Black	3
Latino/a	1
Asian	—
Marital status (n)	
married	40
cohabitating	17
single	11
Children in household (n)	
under twenty-three	56

Source: Authors' tabulations.

findings for unexpected patterns (Gerson and Damaske 2020).¹

The aspirations section of the interview (a focus of this article) centered on participants' aspirations at the end of their high school experience, whenever that took place. Participants were asked a series of questions about their expectations about work and family in the future, as well as about their parents' expectations. The questions included the following: First, think back, growing up, did your mother or father express any expectations or hopes regarding your future? Now, did you have any expectations or hopes for what you wanted to do when you grew up? How did your outlook compare with your parents? Did you want to get a job? Did you expect to get a job? Did you think it would be ok not to work? When you were growing up, did you have any expectations or hopes about having children? Did you ever think how you would combine having children and working outside the home?

The analyses identified two social class constructs, origin and destination (see Conley 2004). Both were determined using the highest

1. For more detailed information about the interview methodology, see Damaske 2020.

status occupation in the household (see Damaske 2021). Social class of origin was determined around high school age because this was when participants often last lived with parents and had the clearest ideas of parent occupation and household finances. For these analyses, we use social class of origin.

FINDINGS

The vast majority of participants had a common goal for their future selves: to remain steadily employed throughout their adult lives. In fact, nearly all stated that not working was not acceptable in adulthood. Both men and women discussed paid work as a nonnegotiable part of the transition to adulthood. Yet participants also spoke of communities undergoing drastic economic changes—labor-market shifts that left their hometowns to languish. Despite the value placed on paid work, they grew up in areas where finding paid work could be difficult.

In the analysis that follows, we examine the ways in which growing up in rural America in the face of these economic changes shaped our participants' preferences for paid work, first in their teenage years, then in their transition to adulthood, and then, again, in midlife. We show that, from a young age, participants recognized the economic changes as a dilemma they would have to navigate and respond to in their search for work. Next we examine participants' early aspirations and expectations in their high school years. We then consider the processes by which these early aspirations and expectations changed, if at all, once participants began to transition into their adult lives. Finally, we look at the relationship between these early aspirations and their job search activities while they were unemployed in midlife.

THE CHANGING ECONOMIC LANDSCAPE DILEMMA

Men and women of both working- and middle-class origins described clear recollections of the economic changes and labor-market shifts that occurred within their respective rural hometowns.² In some cases, like for Julie, who is

white and working-class origins, the decline of industry in her community—a rural town known for coal mining—resulted in parental layoffs: “My father worked in a factory . . . He had solid work. We didn’t want for anything. We had what we needed but we didn’t live by any means an extravagant lifestyle. . . . There were times when he was laid off periodically and I remember there being some stress in the household during those times and him trying to find something to bridge that gap but that was never for long.”

Although Julie generally perceived her family to be financially secure, she remembers her father’s layoffs from factory work as a time of economic uncertainty for her family. Some participants described a realization that economic change could drive them and their peers from their communities. Natalie, who is white and with middle-class origins, recalled seeing people flee her rural community after the local steel manufacturing plant closed: “[My town’s] economy was strongly based on the steel making industry . . . Basically at some point in there, we started importing all our steel . . . And they don’t make steel anymore . . . A lot of people at that point left. And by that time, I was fourteen. By the time I graduated, most of my friends were thinking, ‘We won’t be able to find jobs in [my hometown], we’re gonna have to go someplace else.’ So, my generation was the first one that really left.”

The closing of the local steel mill signaled to Natalie’s peers that remaining in their hometown would make continued work difficult.

Yet, both Julie and Natalie found themselves, at the time of our interviews, living in another small rural town, in the same state, less than two hours away from where they grew up. This was true for many other participants in this study.

RURAL WORKING-CLASS ASPIRATIONS

Working-class women and men described parental aspirations that differed for sons and daughters, unlike middle-class participants). A majority of girls with working-class origins recalled that their parents emphasized the importance of college for girls but not for boys.

2. Names have been changed to protect the identity of participants.

Brandi, who is white with working-class origins, recalled how she (and her sisters) felt more pressure to attend college, whereas she felt that her brother experienced less: “I mean, [my parents] both, they were both very adamant that all of us, well, at least my sisters and I would go to college. It was a little different with our brother, but . . . they did push that all us girls go to college.” When asked to explain what was different with her brother, Brandi responded, “I think partially that he had a lot of skills that . . . didn’t really require necessary schooling, like he owns his own excavating company, and you know . . . [our parents] figured he’d do something like that where he didn’t have to go to college.”

Jodi, who is white with working-class origins, shared a similar story, recalling how her parents urged her to “Yes, work hard, go to college please [laughter]. My brother went to military instead [of college] but . . . they just wanted me to have a good job doing something, so they encouraged college.” Although working-class daughters heard an emphasis of college for them, they did not see a similar emphasis for their brothers. Heather, also white with working-class origins, explained that she was “the valedictorian of my high school, so [college] was like expected. But, I was the first person, I think, on both sides of my family to go to college.” When asked whether she considered other options for her future or whether her parents suggested other plans, Heather replied that college was “I think it was just . . . [pause] expected.”

A smaller group of women from rural working-class families described how parents encouraged them to attach their identity to paid work. Unlike prior generations of women, women growing up in rural communities were told to expect that they would need to provide for themselves. Pamela, who is white with working-class origins, recalled, “my mom was like you should always provide; she always told me to take care of myself.” Suzanne, also white with working-class origins, explained: “My senior year ended up being my best year, but I think [my parents] kind of knew that I wasn’t going to . . . go any further than that, that I was probably going to go right into the workforce. I think I knew that too.” Suzanne did not

remember a time when paid work was not expected to be part of her future.

In contrast to the working-class women’s parents who encouraged college, the majority of working-class men in our sample reported their parents stressed the importance of a hard-work ethic. Gregory, who is white with working-class origins, said of his parents, “They didn’t really tell me what they wanted me to do or be anything, but yeah, they expected me to not be a bum because they didn’t raise me that way. I was a hard worker. They always tried to instill working things into me, made us work all the time around the house. I’d earn money that way by doing chores and stuff like that.”

Martin, also white with working-class origins, said simply that his parents had one goal for him, that he would “work.” Other men discussed how their parents’ emphasis on hard work was in support of becoming upwardly mobile and securing a middle-class life. Jeff, also white and from a working-class background, said, “I’m sure that [my parents] wished for a better situation than what they were in.” Ken, who has white working-class origins, noted a similar emphasis on hard work that would lead to a better life. He explained, “[My parents] just wanted us kids to have it better than they had.”

Some men’s parents did not necessarily emphasize either hard work or college. Of the men in our sample who grew up in working-class families, some reported their parents did not emphasize any specific pathway (college or otherwise), but rather the decision would be up to them—it would be “their choice.” For example, Wesley, who is white with working-class origins, when asked whether his parents expressed specific expectations of him said, “Not really. They were pretty like go with the flow I guess sort of thing.”

Finally, some working-class origin men and women described developing aspirations that were focused on obtaining a middle-class occupation—a job that would require at a least a college degree or other specialized, advanced training. For instance, Rita, who is white with working-class origins, recalled, “Well, I wanted to be a librarian, I wanted to be an accountant.” Ken’s original plan entailed going to school to become “a radiologist,” and Vincent, also white with working-class origins, “always thought

[he'd] make decent teacher." For Rita, Ken, and Vincent—among others— aspiring to careers that would propel them into the middle class was central in shaping early plans.

In the 1990s, Anita Garey (1999) interviewed white working-class mothers and found that many "weaved" paid work with motherhood. Looking back, among those working-class women who wanted to have children, a majority reported expecting that they would integrate work and family in their lives. Regina, white with working-class origins, said "I always knew I would have [kids]. And I just knew that I would work." Ruth, also white with working-class origins, was an exception in that she anticipated work and family might conflict, but thought that the timing of children would be critical to combining work and family as seamlessly as possible: "I wanted [kids] later though . . . Because my sister had a baby when she was sixteen—both of my sisters did and I didn't want to do that . . . So, I didn't want to work sixty-five hours a week and have babies at home."

A smaller subset of working-class women who expected work and children to conflict reported they originally planned not to have children. Vanessa, who is white with working-class origins, said, "I didn't want kids [laughter]." When asked why, she explained, "No, I just wanted to go to school." Paula, also white with working-class origins, held high educational aspirations and planned not to have children, because she explained, "Because I knew how hard it is and how much work it is." A small subset of working-class women reported that they planned to leave work after starting a family (none of the middle-class women reported such expectations, nor did any of the men). Rita, who is white with working-class origins, said, "When I was growing up my mom and dad both worked, but I thought I'd want to stay home and take care of my kids."

Most working-class men were united in the lack of thought they gave to combining work and family. Ken, who is white and has working-class origins, explained that he expected to have children, but that he had never given much thought to combining work and children. Once he started working, he explained, "I've always had daylight jobs so it was easy.

Normally you work while they're at school and then home together at night and on the weekends." Yet this discussion failed to consider the time that children were too young to be at school or that school did not cover, suggesting that it was not Ken's responsibility to manage such details. Jay, who is white with working-class origins, repeatedly said "None" when asked whether he had had thoughts about combining work and family one day. Once he married, he explained, he realized that "growing up, my dad worked, my mom took care of us" and that he had, perhaps, anticipated that he and his wife would want a similar traditional relationship. But he did not believe that he had given the matter any thought prior to his marriage.

Rural Middle-Class Aspirations

Few gender differences were evident in the messages that middle-class parents relayed to their children; instead, they emphasized college—sometimes even advanced degrees—for both sons and daughters. For instance, Misty, who is white with middle-class origins, explained how she and her brother were both expected to attend college: "They kind of wanted me to follow in my brother's footsteps because he went to college." Frank, also white with middle-class origins, reported, "I mean that was always the goal, go to college, get a degree and then figure out what I was going to do with it." Middle-class parents viewed college as a matter of fact and wanted to ensure that their sons and daughters would secure a foothold in the middle class.

Like their parents, middle-class origin participants almost universally described a focus on college—a focus that those from working-class backgrounds emphasized less, even when their occupational aspirations would require a college degree (for a similar process in working-poor urban youth, see Ray 2017). For those who grew up middle class, the focus on college was so deeply ingrained that many took college for granted. Christina, who is Latina with middle-class origins, explained: "I always knew I was going to go to college, it wasn't even a second thought for me." Jason, who is white with middle-class origins, remarked, "I think it was just family expectations. Like eight or ten of my

family members went to the University. So yeah. I think it's the normal thing to do." These comments underscore how college was embedded into their future.

Looking back, many of the middle-class women recalled expecting that they would prioritize their work at first and that marriage and children would follow (with their lives somehow seamlessly expanding to encompass it all). Renee, who is white with middle-class origins, described seeing her mother balance full-time work and three kids with very little help from her spouse and expected that she would do the same, "I saw my mother do it, but then again, my mother had three kids that were older. Uh, you know, we helped, when we got home, we would help make dinner, or we'd set the table. My father would come home at five and he would expect dinner to be on the table, and it was." As with most men and a few women with a working-class background, a few middle-class women also said that they had given the matter no thought as a young adult. Nicole, who is white and has middle-class origins, explained that while she planned to have children, she did not consider how that would affect her work plans: "I never really thought about it. . . . I really thought I would be working."

Like the working-class men, most middle-class men anticipated being fathers but did not give any thought to balancing work and family. In fact, Frank, who is white and has middle-class origins, was originally confused by the question: "Having kids and working, what's that mean?" After the second author phrased the question differently: "for example, did you ever think about who would take care of the kids if you worked full time?" Frank replied, "Oh, okay, I see what you're saying. I just assumed there would be a daycare of some kind. . . . Um, that was just my assumption." Although presuming that work and family would balance out was a common expectation during young adulthood, none of the women expected it to happen outside of their purview. Derek, who is white and with middle-class origins, also did not consider the prospect of combining work and family when he was young, even though he expected to have children. He explained, "I knew I wanted to have kids but I'd never really thought about [it]. Just kind of

what happened, happened." Edward, also white with middle-class origins, did think about the prospect of combining work and family, though he expected to do so primarily as his father (the primary breadwinner in his household) had done. Edward expected that he would go to work, then "would come home and work at night, late." In this description, what Edward imagined doing at the home was vague, but the need to work long hours to achieve his goals at a professional career were not.

CLASSED AND GENDERED TRANSITIONS TO ADULTHOOD

As the men and women in the sample described their transitions to adulthood—the time from when they were teenagers through their early twenties—they provided accounts of how their baseline aspirations changed during this time period. Although participants did not identify distinctly rural factors in their accounts of how they formed early aspirations, we find that the ways that participants adjusted their aspirations were, indeed, shaped in part by place. We identified three change processes, *downshifting*, *upshifting*, and *nonshifting*, to describe how participants adjusted their original aspirations.

Downshifting, a term Brooke Bass (2015) uses to describe the process by which women decide to scale back on work to accommodate anticipated family demands, occurred when participants—especially those from working-class backgrounds—scaled back their original aspirations or expectations. Upshifting was primarily undertaken by men from middle-class backgrounds and involved a heightening or leveling-up of their original aspirations. Nonshifting, by contrast, was undertaken primarily by working-class men and women, as well as most middle-class women, and occurred when participants did not report a significant adjustment to their baseline aspirations. Further, we identify how these processes were complicated by their attachment to the rural communities in which they were born and raised.

Downshifting Aspirations and Expectations in the Transition to Adulthood

Downshifting during the transition to adulthood primarily occurred among men and

Table 2. Aspiration Changes During Transition to Adulthood

	Downshift	Upshift	Nonshift	Total
Men				
Working class	10	1	9	20
Middle class	1	4	7	12
Women				
Working class	19	0	11	30
Middle class	2	0	4	6

Source: Authors' tabulations.

women who grew up working class and not among the middle class, as we see in table 2. The process through which this played out was also gendered, even though about as many working-class women as working-class men downshifted. Rural working-class women were more likely to emphasize ties to rural places and their family as a primary reason for why they changed their original plans, whereas working-class men emphasized financial insecurity in their rural economies. Leslie, who is white with working-class origins, originally aspired to be an accountant. She described how being away from her family was something she struggled with after moving away for college: “[Chuckled] You know what . . . I was supposed to go to [University], I got down [there] and I just didn’t like it . . . we grew up in [rural town] and it was—I think part of it was just even, I had never been away—and like we were so very family based, even extensive like, I only have one cousin of my mom’s brothers and sisters . . . that lives out of [my home] county.”

Although Leslie had wanted to attend college, her main source of support was her family, and she found it difficult to be away from them and her rural community. Stacy, who is white with working-class origins, similarly tied downshifting to rural family ties. She explained, “I had dreams, but they were quickly dashed because I knew that I knew I wasn’t going to college.” When asked what those dreams were, she continued, “I wanted to be a forest ranger [chuckles]. Which there are no real big forests around here [chuckles]. So that would have meant traveling and my family wasn’t real big on travel, and we were homebodies, and we felt there was no need to travel outside of my comfort zone.” Both Leslie and Stacy articu-

lated a common dilemma experienced by those who grew up in rural areas: the desire to remain close to family and the home community. Although many young adults express a desire to live near their families, this desire places greater constraints on the aspirations of rural youth, like Leslie and Stacy, whose local communities lack nearby colleges and universities. In fact, the only higher education institution in Leslie’s rural county was a for-profit institution that lacked accounting degrees (for a critique of for-profits, see Cottom 2017). Once women started the transition to adulthood, the reality of leaving their communities and families often led them to temper their original career aspirations.

Men from rural working-class backgrounds also downshifted their aspirations; decisions most often tied to financial insecurity. Jesse, who is white with working-class origins, said, “Well, considering that I did well in high school, my plan was to attend college.” However, Jesse decided to leave college after two semesters, citing financial strain as the rationale for his downshift:

I worked, you know I saved up some of my own money to help pay for college . . . I was fortunate enough to find [a place to live] that was relatively cheap, but what it boiled down to was that I went there and I had to work so that I could eat and pay for gas to go to school and pay my rent, so . . . I ended up working more than I went to class, so I ended up withdrawing before the end of year because it just wasn’t working, like it was just not a well-laid plan, and I just haven’t had the chance to go back yet. I mean I guess I have; I just haven’t made the effort to go back yet.

Ken, a white man from a working-class family, described downshifting for financial reasons (an inability to afford college), though he found an unexpected opportunity in his hometown. Initially, he had enrolled in school to become a radiologist, but this plan changed. He explained, “I went to college for three weeks, and then I got a call for a job at a local factory, so I thought, this was right out of high school, so I figured I’d go for a year and make some money. Put it away so I wouldn’t take out so many loans, ’cause I knew my parents couldn’t afford to send me to college.”

For Jesse and Ken, they downshifted their original aspirations—to attend college—because they did not have the financial resources necessary to do so successfully. National data suggest that men drop out of college sooner than women do when they face debt burdens that are lower than women’s (Dwyer, Hodson, and McCloud 2013), a process often tied to men’s higher earning potential. Our findings suggest that rural working-class men may also do so because they expect fewer returns to their debt in their local communities.

Upshifting Aspirations

Although working-class origin men and women downshifted their aspirations to make a way for themselves in the rural labor market, some participants with middle-class origins (particularly men) upshifted. Upshifting mostly occurred when middle-class aspirations transformed into professional goals, or when educational aspirations were heightened. This process was almost exclusively undertaken by men with middle-class backgrounds. Nathan, white and with middle-class origins, discussed how, from a young age, he “knew [he] wanted to be in construction.” During the transition to adulthood, however, Nathan explained, “I went to an open house at [a university]. . . . architectural engineering was what came up and I really liked that.” Nathan upshifted his aspiration from an occupation that was outside his class upbringing and made his aspirations fit a different social class background.

Phillip, white with middle-class origins, described how he aspired to work in electronics, and initially had planned to join the military for this training, just as his father had. How-

ever, Phillip’s rural labor-market opportunities shaped his decision making, focusing his sights on college instead: “Actually, my first inclination was not to go to college, it was to go into the military and sort of follow in my father’s footsteps and I did pursue that but at that time—I suspect now that it was a similar situation as we’re in now with budgetary cuts and whatnot. There were not a lot opportunities available in the electronics field at that time and so I chose to go to college instead to get that training.”

Phillip assessed his local job market for his desired occupation—electronics—but saw few opportunities like the one that had put his father and his family of origin solidly into the middle class. Rather than following his father’s footsteps or deciding to leave his rural community, he upshifted his educational aspirations (from specialized training via the military to college) to maximize his job prospects at home.

Nonshifting Aspirations

Many men and women experienced no change to their baseline aspirations during the transition to adulthood, a process we refer to as nonshifting. Nonshifting occurred when people had not formed baseline aspirations during their formative high school years, but also when they experienced no changes in their lives. This was common among men and women from working-class backgrounds, as well as nearly all middle-class-origin women in the sample.

It was often the case that nonshifter could not recall having concrete or fully formed aspirations. Tonya, white and with working-class origins, described this of herself when she was in high school:

INT: Okay, did you have any expectations for yourself?

TONYA: No, I was working, and I was in school.

INT: Is there anything you ever wanted to be when you grew up type of thing?

TONYA: No, [chuckles] no.

When asked whether she thought she would continue working after high school, Tonya said, “I think I wanted, I think I’m not sure, I think I wanted a job but not sure. I think, so yeah.” Tonya, after graduating high school, went on to

Table 3. Aspiration Changes After Job Loss in Midlife

	Downshift	Upshift	Nonshift	Total
Men				
Working class	15	2	3	20
Middle class	1	6	5	12
Women				
Working class	17	1	12	30
Middle class	5	0	1	6

Source: Authors' tabulations.

work in food service. Similarly, Randall, white with working-class origins, could not recall having any clear aspirations for himself and described defaulting to his parents' wishes for his future, which was to attend college: "No, I went along with [what my parents wanted for me]." After high school, however, he decided not to attend college and began working instead.

Jacob, one of the few middle-class origin men who nonshifted, also spoke about how he had had no concrete aspiration: "You know, I didn't really think about it as much as I probably could have. But I suppose I did. I just went about life the way, you know that it came at me, so. . . ." Jacob reflected on how his lack of aspirations in his youth did not impede his ability to find a job after high school, and that he could rely on the support of his family in finding paid work. "I was, I was washing cars for a car dealership in high school and went right to work under my mom at the car dealership as a salesperson." Jacob was able to rely on his connections to a local business—a car dealership—to secure employment in his community.

Participants like Tonya, Randall, and Jacob nonshifted because they had no clear baseline aspiration to adjust in the first place. Although they identified a loosely held expectation or even strong professional interests, they generally discussed their early aspirations and expectations in uncertain or even ambiguous terms.

DOWNSHIFTING, UPSHIFTING, AND NONSHIFTING IN MIDLIFE

At the time of their interviews, the participants were unemployed and had to make choices—yet again—about their future working lives. As we see in table 3, planning to downshift was the modal category for most of the unemployed: for

women of both middle-class and working-class origins as well as for men with working-class origins. It was far less common for working-class origin men or women or middle-class origin women to aspire to either upshift or even nonshift during this period of unemployment. In stark contrast, very few middle-class origin men planned to downshift even after experiencing a job loss and period of unemployment. As in their youth, many participants engaged in downshifting, upshifting, and nonshifting in response to living—and trying to remain—in rural places where employment opportunities were slim, although many middle-class origin men expanded their horizons and looked to leave their rural communities.

The majority of women with working-class origins downshifted their expectations yet again after their job loss, reporting that they expected to see a decrease in wages, in job status, in benefits, or an increase in commute time or worsening job conditions, or a combination of these. Vanessa, who is white with working-class origins, explained that she started out looking primarily for certified nursing assistant positions, but that these had been hard to find, so she had expanded her search to include anything she might be qualified for: "I went to a couple restaurants, and the last time I was a waitress, I was sixteen, seventeen, and eighteen, and they want people with fresh experience. And, when I put down that I was in the nursing field, they're like, 'That's great and everything but you don't have the requirements that we need. We need somebody with at least a year's experience, and [your experience] was over fourteen years ago.' So, they don't want somebody off the street. They, they want somebody who's gonna know what they're doing."

Rita, who is white with working-class origins, had also downshifted, but she worried about taking a position that would not pay her enough to cover the cost of childcare for her three-year-old son or that would have erratic hours, making childcare coverage difficult. She said, “If I wanted, I could probably go to Burger King and get a job but I think if I go to Burger King, I’m not even going to be getting close to what I’m doing or what I need. And then that’s time taken away from my little boy.”

Working-class men also reported downshifting as a common response after a job loss and unemployment period. Gregory, who is white with working-class origins, explained that as a truck driver, he could find temporary or “swing” work, but he was unable to find a permanent or a full-time position:

GREGORY: It has its benefits being a swing driver and it doesn’t, you know because there’s never full time and then you’re stuck in a part-time route.

INT: You’d rather be full time?

GREGORY: Oh yeah. I’d rather work nine to five and have a set schedule and do the same thing every day, instead of every week being different.

Marcus reported that he was going to take work that he would not report, because it was all he expected he could find. He explained, “People say ‘We’re just looking for a job, we’re looking for a job.’ There are so many people over there that are getting under-the-table jobs while getting unemployment just so they could scrape by.” Because so many people were competing for the same jobs, Marcus did not expect that he would find comparable work. Ken, who is white with working-class origins, said he could not be picky about what he was looking for.

Although downshifting was the most common response, some working-class origin women and men did not change their expectations, that is, they nonshifted. Unlike in their youth, when nonshifting was predominantly a result of not having a fully formed aspiration, nonshifting in midlife tended to be a strategy to resist leaving their rural area or because of family obligations. For working-class origin non-

shiffters, the rural areas where they lived continued to pose labor-market problems in midlife, such as when they decided that they could not accept jobs that meant long commutes. Heidi, who is white with working-class origins, had moved with her husband for his work, but he would not follow her (nor would she ask him) should she be unable to find a job locally. As she said, “So the one [job] is in [one town]. It’s a little bit of a drive but not really. The big thing was the mountain. There’s a mountain that you have to go over. It’s always bad. I really wanted that job, too.” Ultimately, Heidi felt that she could not take a job that would require her to pass over the mountain daily, because she worried about driving in the winter. Leslie, also white with working-class origins, was also tied by family commitments and commuting distance. She explained, “I already drove a half hour drive to work which I don’t mind, I love where I live, but forty-five minutes is kinda that breaker point.” Driving that long made jobs seem untenable to Leslie, who was primarily responsible for her daughter’s extracurricular activities; thus she did not downshift her expectations. Victoria, who is white with working-class origins, actively resisted a downshift during her job search, saying, “I shouldn’t be forced to take a temporary position; then I’m just going to be back on unemployment again in a few months. I shouldn’t be forced to take a part-time position when I’m available to work more hours. So, a lot of it is part-time bartenders, part-time this, or it’s seasonal.” Victoria did not want to settle for a temporary position; one she might easily lose again. In this case, nonshifting enabled Victoria to bide time in her job search and to resist compromises that could present challenges to herself and her family.

Working-class origin men, too, articulated similar sentiments about being unwilling to move or adjust their commutes. Martin, who is white with working-class origins, had previously worked in the gas industry and similarly expressed how he was not willing to adjust his work expectations. He described how he even turned down job offers because they were not in his home area or at his expected pay level, stating, “I’ve had a couple of offers, but they weren’t in line with what I was looking for fi-

nancially. I'm not going to move to a [neighboring state] or something like that." Martin wanted to find a job similar to his prior employment and was unwilling to compromise either of these things in his search for new employment.

Some middle-class women downshifted as well. They tied decisions about jobs and downshifting to their unwillingness to move away from their families and rural areas. Natalie, who is white with middle-class origins, discussed her reluctance in moving to several large cities when her company was reducing jobs.

INT: If you had moved, do you think you would have been able to just, jump right back into career track or . . . ?

NATALIE: Probably. If I'd been down in the [metro] area, yeah.

Here Natalie acknowledges that if she had been willing to move away from her hometown, it might have made it easier for her to find work. But in addition to leaving her hometown, she would also have needed to move her husband and children. Attachment to rural place and family was a significant barrier to finding employment more quickly.

Unlike the modal groups of women and working-class men, the majority of middle-class origin men expected either that they would not have to change their expectations that they could move into an even better job, upshifting after their job loss. Relative to women and working-class origin men, they were also the least concerned about having to leave their rural communities and families in search of work. The middle-class men who hoped to maintain or upshift expected that it was likely that they would increase their commute times. Derek, who is white with middle-class origins, explained: "And obviously in this area that's the major employer and especially with information technology and IT. There's some other decent companies around but I'm looking. I'm willing to drive. I'm looking all the way down to [a different county]. If that's what I have to do to get a job, I will and then if it's a long-term position and we have to address things in future we will. But I'll drive, I don't

care. I need to work." Unlike many of the working-class men, Derek did not consider the possibility of a longer commute or a future move to be a barrier to new employment. Nathan, also white with middle-class origins, spoke similarly of a willingness to move to a more populous area with more jobs. He described his rural hometown as one of the biggest barriers to finding new employment. Discussing finding a job in the years following the Great Recession and companies' newly returned willingness to relocate new employees, he explained, "I think also a lot of the barriers would be location because prior to this no one was offering relocation but now I think they will be offering relocation. It's still kind of touch and go because a lot of people are still worried about a second wave or something like that. So, relocation is a big one."

Further, middle-class origin men who expected to upshift framed their unemployment less as an obstacle and more an opportunity to find a better job, which they defined in terms of better pay, benefits, or an opportunity for them to better use or expand their expertise or skill set. Jason, who is white with middle-class origins, viewed his unemployment as a "blessing in disguise, the whole situation." Similar to how middle-class origin men upshifted in their youth, middle-class men who expected to upshift after job loss saw this period of time as an opportunity to level up or otherwise heighten their job expectations.

CONCLUSION

Our study examines how men and women who grew up during the rural brain drain developed aspirations about work over three periods in their life: their baseline period during their high school years, when they formed aspirations about their future; their transition to adulthood, when many experienced a shift in these plans; and at midlife while unemployed. We find that growing up in a rural location shaped participants' aspirations in each period because many hoped to stay close to home despite their wariness of the economic changes they saw unfolding around them. We also find that rurality intersected with class and gender to shape aspirations at every stage. Both the women and the men (across class) described

themselves as primarily focused on work at a young age. Working-class women often anticipated that work and family would weave together (Garey 1999) whereas some middle-class women anticipated focusing on work and then seamlessly adding in family. Across class, women who anticipated work-family conflict reported that they originally planned to forgo childbearing. Men, on the other hand, did not anticipate (for the most part) how work and family would be managed.

We provide insights for how aspirations change on workforce entrance into a changing rural labor market and during a period of unemployment in rural labor markets that often saw high unemployment rates. During the transition to adulthood, working-class women and men both experienced downshifting more frequently than their middle-class origin peers as they reassessed their entrance into tight labor markets. Working-class origin women described themselves as pulled by ties of home and family, whereas working-class origin men described financial uncertainty as derailing their plans. On the other hand, middle-class origin women were most likely to nonshift during the transition to adulthood, and middle-class origin men reported upshifting their expectations for the future because they expected higher education would be the ticket to maintaining their elite status in their rural communities. Finally, after a job loss and during a period of unemployment, we see rural labor-market prospects, rural roots, family ties, class, and gender shape how men and women assess their future prospects. Working-class origin men and women engaged in downshifting. Notably, middle-class origin women joined them in this process. Commitment to their rural communities were more pointed at this stage than at earlier points, as were discussions of poor labor-market prospects. But middle-class origin men were unique in their willingness to look beyond their rural communities (and, perhaps, to leave them) in order to find positions similar to what they had once held or to position themselves better in the labor market.

Our study shows how (rural) place further complicates aspirations—and how aspirations change—at each life stage. We further find that place attachment was salient in shaping par-

ticipants' shifts in aspirations. Despite acknowledging massive economic changes surrounding them, many working-class origin youth still expressed optimism that either college degrees (for women) or hard work (for men) would be enough to counter the changing labor market. The importance parents placed on college degrees for working-class girls (but not boys) may help explain some of the growing gender divide in education (see DiPrete and Buchmann 2013) and should be explored in future research. Once they begin to transition to adulthood, however, many working-class origin women and men begin to acknowledge a conflict between their aspirations and their rural ties and begin to downshift; this process is repeated at a heightened state during unemployment.

Our analysis adds important complexity to the existing narrative of what it is like to grow up—and remain—in a rural area of the United States. Although Carr and Kefalas (2010) discuss how “stayers” knew early on that they were going to remain in their hometown and were generally resentful of this destiny, for our study participants, this was rarely the case. Instead, we find the men and women took great pains to stay, valuing the ability to remain in their hometowns over seeking better pay and opportunity elsewhere. Similarly, Ryan Parsons (2022) finds that rural youth struggled to imagine themselves leaving their communities and Robert Francis (2022, this issue) finds that under- and unemployed rural working-class men were generally satisfied to stay in their rural communities close to family. There is a tension here, given that working-class origin men and women struggle to remain in communities that place high value on paid labor even as employment leaves these communities.

Our findings add a gender and class lens to other research that finds attachment to rural place shapes explanations of people's intentions for leaving or staying (Fiore, Niehm, and Hurst 2015; Vazanna and Rudi-Poloshka 2019). Other studies that examine who stays in rural communities tend to discuss this group as being primarily working-class people who were left behind because of their lower educational attainment and lack of marketable skills than their middle-class counterparts (Brown and

Schafft 2011; Carr and Kefalas 2010; Cushing 1999). Although our findings lend support to these rural working-class origin realities, they also show that stayers also come from the middle class. Some from the middle-class origins—those in the most advantaged position to find work elsewhere—also preferred to remain close to their hometown. But these preferences did not prevent middle-class origin rural youth from moving away for a time to attend college, nor did it prevent middle-class origin men from making decisions to leave the area once it became clear that staying was incompatible with maintaining their professional career goals.

The aspiration change processes identified contributes to a more general understanding about how people respond to labor-market constraints, and how these responses are tied to one's rurality, gender, and class position. Similar to other qualitative studies of labor-market change in more urban locations (Brown 1996; Johnson 2002; Newman 2006; Swauger 2010), the rural Pennsylvanians included in our study changed their aspirations in response to industry decline in their communities. Our research finds that people change their aspirations when they hit roadblocks that are difficult to surmount, as others have noted (see Vespa 2009; Damaske 2011). Our research also suggests roadblocks may be particularly salient for aspirational change at key transition points, such as the transition to adulthood or after a job loss. Moreover, commitments to rurality meant that long commuting times were considered seriously in order to maintain both standards of living and location. Additionally, during the transition to adulthood, the lack of local universities made it difficult for rural youth to attend college while staying close to home (few local commuter college options were available). Many working-class origin rural youth in our study started and then stopped attending college. That those from middle-class origins were most likely to upshift or make no change to their baseline aspirations is not surprising, given that they grew up in middle-class families that emphasized the importance of attending college and were better advantaged to help their children to weather the structural shifts of the labor market (Lareau 2003).

Although our study provides nuance for what like is life for those who are born, raised, and then stay in rural America, this analysis has several limitations. The data are drawn from a broader study of the unemployed across Pennsylvania and therefore are limited to rural residents who ultimately chose to remain in (or nearby) their rural hometowns (or to relocate to other regions within the state). Therefore, our data cannot address how rurality shaped aspirations for those who moved away from their home communities or for those who might have stayed but did not experience job loss. Moreover, Pennsylvania's rural communities during the period these participants were growing up were whiter than rural communities are nationally today (Cheng, Sun, and Monnat 2020). Thus we are limited in our ability to discuss variation in experiences across race. Additionally, our study was designed to examine unemployment and, as such, does not tell us about the experiences of the stably employed. Future studies on how rurality shapes employment aspirations should consider these factors.

These findings show how rural contexts indeed shapes labor-market choices—and the life trajectories—of the people who are born and raised in these areas. Our data further reveal how class and gender further shaped participants' abilities to move freely in and out of rural spaces, middle-class origin men being most advantaged in this process.

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PART V

Rural Roots: The Consequences of Growing Up Rural for Adults

Life-Course Transitions in Rural Residence and Old-Age Mortality in Iowa, 1930–2014



EVAN ROBERTS^{ORCID}, WENDY RAHN^{ORCID}, AND DEANN LAZOVICH

Early-life conditions are associated with mortality in men, but not studied to the same extent in women. We add new evidence by studying a cohort of women born between 1916 and 1931 and followed for mortality between 1986 and 2013. Our sample from Iowa includes a significant number of rural women, from both farms and small towns. The long-term effects of growing up in a rural area were mixed: farmers' daughters lived longer than women growing up off-farm in rural areas. Daughters of farm laborers and skilled or semi-skilled trades workers fared worst, when considering early-life socioeconomic status. We also find evidence that migrating to small-town Iowa was associated with lower life expectancy after age fifty-five. Considering social class and farm-nonfarm status is important for understanding the health of rural America.

Keywords: early-life conditions, rural populations, migration, mortality, longitudinal studies

A substantial body of research in the social and medical sciences has now established that stress and economic deprivation in early life can have long-lasting effects on individual health and well-being. Thus the roots of con- temporary health conditions in adults, and differences between groups in health status and life expectancy, can be partly traced to adverse experiences in early life. A wide range of inter-related childhood influences can bear on later-

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life health and mortality, including early-life health itself, and children's social and economic environment (Elo and Preston 1992; Haas 2007; Hayward and Gorman 2004; Kauhanen et al. 2006). Poor health in childhood has been shown to be associated with poorer health in adulthood in different cohorts in both the United States and Britain (Blackwell, Hayward, and Crimmins 2001; Haas 2008; Kuh and Wadsworth 1993; Wadsworth and Kuh 1997). In turn, health status in both childhood and adulthood is influenced by current and past socioeconomic status (Cohen et al. 2010).

Much of the literature on the effects of early-life circumstances on later-life health and mortality has focused on the experiences of cohorts born since World War II and either followed prospectively or asked retrospectively about their early-life circumstances (Brandt, Deindl, and Hank 2012; Montez and Hayward 2011). Although these cohorts include both men and women, by definition they are relatively young, having only reached their seventies at the time of writing. Representative population samples begun since World War II are likely to have relatively small numbers of rural residents. By the census definition of urban, 57 percent of the country was living in an urban area in 1950 (Boustan, Bunten, and Hearey 2018). Research on earlier cohorts, born between the 1890s and 1940 and more likely to include people growing up in rural America, has relied on prospective long-term follow-up of pioneering early twentieth-century studies (such as the Harvard, Oakland, and Fels growth studies) and linkage between early-life census records and later-life health and mortality outcomes (Aizer et al. 2016; Ferrie and Rolf 2011).

Thus studies of life-course health processes over the long term have somewhat neglected people with rural origins. Moreover, studies of early twentieth century cohorts have underrepresented women. Again, practical considerations of sample or variable availability are a significant reason for this oversight. Women are difficult, but not impossible, to trace over time due to the nearly universal practice of changing surname on marriage (Ruggles, Fitch, and Roberts 2018). Although this is common in Western societies, the practical implications for record linkage are exacerbated in the United

States by the diffusion of marriage recording across county government. In countries with centralized marriage registration at the national (such as Britain and New Zealand) or first subnational level (such as Australian states and Canadian provinces) tracing women across the life course is easier. It is clear from the literature that the influence of early-life conditions on adult health and mortality differs across time and social context (Currie and Vogl 2013; Galobardes, Lynch, and Davey Smith 2008, 2004). It is less clear whether the effects differ across the sexes (Power, Hyppönen, and Davey Smith 2005) and what the impact of different residential origins are.

We address a key gap in the literature by examining early-life circumstances and late adult mortality in a group of American women born between 1916 and 1930 and followed in the Iowa Women's Health Study since 1986. This is an earlier cohort than previously considered in studies of women's early-life conditions. Women in this cohort had a significantly different fertility and labor-market profile in their adult lives than surrounding cohorts. This cohort represents the mothers of children born during the baby boom. Yet they are also a cohort that reentered the labor force in significant numbers *after* childbearing, in contrast to earlier generations of American women. Considering for the moment only national migration trends, this cohort also saw significant movement from rural childhoods to urban (or suburban) adult lives. We find that growing up or moving to a farm was associated with better health outcomes, and that for women of any residential origins in childhood moving to a city or large town was associated with better health in later life. Across several dimensions of social status and health, we observe that living in nonfarm rural areas in earlier or later life is associated with worse outcomes and lower social status. To be specific, these women are living off-farm in towns with a population of under 2,500. Given this and the generally positive findings for farm residents at any point in the life course, we conclude that understanding what it means to grow up and live in rural America is heavily conditioned by social class and occupational opportunities. The finding in our cohort of a mortality difference for women

living in nonfarm rural areas in later life is suggestive of important changes in the opportunities and challenges of rural areas that have emerged in recent decades.

BACKGROUND

A full life-course perspective is important for understanding and addressing rural health disparities. The “rural mortality penalty” in the United States dates only to the 1980s (Cosby et al. 2019) and is not uniform across regions (James, Cossman, and Wolf 2018)—higher disparities exist in the South—or across age groups, given that excess rural mortality is concentrated in working-age populations (Elo et al. 2019). Because the rural mortality penalty is relatively recent, many Americans adults in both urban and rural areas grew up in an era when infectious disease and environmental hazards from industrial activity meant an *urban* mortality penalty. Through the mid-twentieth century, improvements in public health reversed these differences (Haines 2001). In the same period, substantial rural-to-urban migration in the United States continued, more than three-quarters of the country living in urban areas since the 1970s. Yet in cohorts born before World War II, rural origins were common. The long-term impact of growing up in rural or urban settings has, however, often been addressed by classifying residence at a single point in time, such as birth or a single point in childhood. Rural mortality patterns today reflect a long-term process of migration and compositional change. Understanding why older (sixty-five-plus) rural residents have not experienced the same health disparities as those of working age over the past thirty years can inform policies to improve health for the next generation of older rural Americans.

Estimating the impact of birth to early-adult experiences on later health is challenging. At a minimum, it requires data on thousands of individuals at two time points. Because large cohort studies were not initiated until after World War II, understanding the early lives of people born before 1940 requires a different approach. One approach is to ask retrospective questions about early life. Such an approach has been used fruitfully by the Health and Retirement Survey, the Panel Study of Income Dynamics,

and the National Longitudinal Survey of Older Men (Havari and Mazzonna 2015; Hayward and Gorman 2004; Smith 2009). Retrospective questions have two significant limitations: they can only be asked of surviving cohort members, and they are dependent on memory, which often falters with age (Brown 2014). An alternative is linking multiple sources across time. In early life, these sources could be a census, health survey, or institutional roster with health information. In later life, they could include health surveys, medical records, or death records.

STUDY CONTEXT

We take advantage of an epidemiological study conducted since the 1980s. The Iowa Women’s Health Study (IWHS) is a prospective study of 41,836 women age fifty-five through sixty-nine at baseline in 1986 and followed until 2014. The sampling frame was the 1985 Iowa driver’s license list; because driving was near universal in the United States in the second half of the twentieth century, a driver’s license registry provided an efficient and representative listing of adults for population samples.

Iowa in the Early Twentieth Century

The members of the Iowa Women’s Health Study were born between 1916 and 1931. Neither the drivers’ license registry nor the baseline questionnaire asked women where they were born. However, from census samples for 1980 and 1990 for the state of Iowa, we can describe the target population: women born between 1916 and 1931 and living in Iowa. More than 90 percent of the cohort eligible to be included in the IWHS were born in Iowa (85 percent) or the six surrounding states. Using the 1920 Census as a gauge, the population of Iowa was less urban (defined as incorporated areas with more than 2,500 persons) than the United States as a whole and fewer people lived in large cities (see table 1). However, its rural residents were much more likely to live in incorporated places than their counterparts in rural areas outside Iowa. Indeed, nearly the same fraction of Iowans lived in incorporated places as in the country as a whole. The Iowa landscape at the time was dotted with hundreds of small towns, and its population density actually exceeded that of the nation’s. Nearly 10 percent of Iowa’s popu-

Table 1. Key Demographic Characteristics of Iowa and the United States in 1920

	Iowa	Nation
% urban population 1920 ^a	36.4	51.2
% rural population 1920 ^a	63.6	48.8
Rural-farm percentage of total population ^a	40.7	29.7
Rural-nonfarm percentage of total population ^a	22.9	19
% population in cities twenty-five thousand and greater 1920 ^a	17.1	35.7
% rural population in incorporated places 1920 ^a	31.3	17.4
% total population in incorporated places 1920 ^a	56.3	57.1
Persons per square mile 1920 ^a	43.2	35.5
% foreign-born white population 1920 ^a	9.4	13.0
% Black 1920 ^a	0.8	10.0
% employed males ten and older in agriculture 1920 ^a	44.6	29.8
% employed males ten and older in manufacturing 1920 ^a	22.0	32.9
% population age twenty-five and older graduated high school 1940 Census ^a	28.6	24.1
Voter turnout 1920 presidential election ^b	62.6	45.6
% population Red Cross members 1918 ^c	33.1	17.6
% population purchased Liberty Bonds May, 1918 ^d	29.1	17.7

Source: Authors' tabulations from 2019 American Community Survey available via IPUMS (Ruggles, Flood, et al. 2021).

^aHaines 2010.

^bAuthors' calculation computed as total number of votes cast for president in the 1920 election divided by population twenty-one and older from the 1920 Census

^cAmerican Red Cross 1919.

^dU.S. Department of the Treasury 1919, 8.

lation was foreign born. Emigrants from Germany made up the largest single share, not much lower than the nation as a whole. However, like most of the Upper Midwest before the Great Migration, Iowa had significantly fewer African American residents at the time. In 1920, the dominant industry in the state was agriculture, whereas male employment was more evenly split between manufacturing and agriculture in the rest of the country.

Despite being more rural, Iowa (along with several other prairie states) was at the forefront of the "high school movement," the rapid spread of taxpayer-funded secondary schools in the early twentieth century. The expansion of the American high school in the nation's heartland was in part explained by the fact that the wealth in these states was tied to land, a source more easily taxed than more mobile forms of capital, and in part by the more even

distribution of wealth in the region. The relative racial and ethnic homogeneity of the Upper Midwest, the dominance of the Protestant faith, and the preponderance of small towns were also factors that facilitated the spread of high school attendance (Goldin and Katz 1999). Using unique data collected by the state of Iowa in a 1915 state census, the economists Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz (2000, 790) estimate that the average years of schooling completed by an Iowa child was at a level that would not be "equaled in the entire United States until about 1940." In other words, Iowa was a generation ahead of the nation. As a result of the earlier expansion of high school education, Iowa had more high school graduates than the nation as a whole did in 1940, and still leads the nation in the percentage of students graduating, more than 91 percent relative to the national average of 85 percent.¹

1. However, Iowa now lags behind the nation in its share of college graduates, 27.7 to 30.9 percent. This proportion is lower than many surrounding states in the West North Central Census Division, including Minnesota

Goldin and Katz (1999) speculate that the same economic and social features that facilitated the spread of secondary education may also have contributed to greater stocks of local social capital in Iowa and the states like it. Iowa's higher-than-average turnout rate in the 1920 presidential election, its participation in the Liberty Bond drives of World War I, as well as reported Red Cross membership rates in 1918 are consistent with that interpretation (table 1).² Iowa still is a leading state on contemporary measures of social capital (Hawes, Rocha, and Meier 2013; Rupasingha, Goetz, and Freshwater 2006), though it has not been immune to the changes that have led to a decline in social capital across the nation (Besser 2009).

Iowa in the 1980s

Members of the IWHS completed their baseline interviews in 1986, a time of severe economic stress in the nation's heartland rivaling the severity of the Great Depression. In the 1970s, federal policymakers encouraged farmers to plant "fencerow to fencerow" to take advantage of steep rises in the price of agricultural commodities occasioned by surging international demand for U.S. farm exports in China, Russia, and other parts of the world. American farmers invested heavily in both land and equipment to expand production, investments made possible by the cheap credit offered by the nation's lenders. As a result, the debt that farmers carried on their balance sheets ballooned, rising nearly 80 percent from 1970 to 1980. Land values rose even more than agricultural prices, drawing in speculators that bet on continued good times, further pushing up the price of farmland (Barnett 2000; Peoples et al. 1992).

The 1970s boom ended abruptly for several reasons. Export markets dried up, causing commodity prices to fall more than 50 percent between 1981 and 1986, and farmers' income suffered accordingly. Falling prices ended the speculative frenzy in farmland, and land values

plunged. At the same time, the Federal Reserve raised interest rates aggressively to combat high inflation. Many farmers were underwater, that is, unable to refinance their loans because of cash-flow problems, tighter credit, and assets worth considerably less than their purchase price. Farm bankruptcies and foreclosures soared, and many rural banks failed (Harl 1990). Between 1978 and 1987, more than twenty thousand farms in Iowa ceased operating; in some counties, the number of farms declined by more than 20 percent (U.S. Census Bureau 1987).

The effects of the 1980s Farm Crisis extended well beyond Iowa farmers and their families. In addition to rural bank failures, 41 percent of rural gas stations went out of business, hundreds of automobile dealers closed up shop, and almost five hundred grocery stores were shuttered—five per county, a decline of more than 20 percent across the state. Construction sales plunged by more than 40 percent during the decade and unemployment rose. Hard-hit Iowa counties lost population as families migrated to areas of greater opportunity, school enrollments declined, and rural populations become older and poorer as a result (Conger and Elder 1994). This "shake out" (Friedberger 1989) was not unlike the restructuring that would happen in other parts of the country three decades later as a result of the 2008 financial crisis, import competition from China (Acemoglu et al. 2016), and increasing automation (Acemoglu and Restrepo 2020), factors that may have contributed to the opioid crisis and "deaths of despair" among middle-aged white Americans (Case and Deaton 2017; Pierce and Schott 2018).

Study Population and Potential for Record Linkage

The IWHS began around the same time as the 1980s farm crisis. Like any longitudinal study, the cohort and the study are a product of their

(34.8 percent), Nebraska (30.6 percent), and Kansas (32.3 percent). See the authors' tabulation from 2019 American Community Survey available via IPUMS (Ruggles, Flood, et al. 2021).

2. To finance World War I, the Department of the Treasury sold Liberty Bonds to the general public in a series of loan drives. The success of these drives depended greatly on volunteers from civil society organizations (Hilt and Rahn 2020).

time. Important research foci for the initial investigators were diet, nutrition, and risk factors for cancer and cardiovascular disease. Because the IWHS had been designed as an epidemiological study, significant effort went into collecting food frequency diaries and relatively less into measuring social and economic factors across the life course. Looking back through the lens of more recent developments in life-course sociology of health, we can recognize the single-risk factor epidemiologic approach critiqued by scholars in the 1990s during the development of fundamental cause theory (Link and Phelan 1995). Cancer incidence was ascertained via annual linkage to the State Health Registry of Iowa, a member of the Surveillance, Epidemiology, and End Results program. Through 2014, 26,472 deaths were recorded (see table A.1 online).

Respondents differed in a range of ways from nonrespondents, and potential biases went in different directions (Folsom et al. 1989): respondents were from less affluent areas but also tended to be lighter. The baseline questionnaire asked about a variety of cancer and other health risk factors, including age, smoking behavior, physical activity, education, and alcohol consumption. Weight, fertility, and family medical histories were also collected at baseline. Driver's license information indicated that respondents' self-reported body mass index (BMI) was 0.4 kg/m² lower. Respondents were more likely to live in rural and less affluent counties (Folsom et al. 2000). Despite these differences in baseline health and socioeconomic status, the association of body weight with mortality and cancer incidence was similar in respondents and nonrespondents (Bisgard et al. 1994). Women rated their health on a 4-point scale (excellent, good, fair, poor). Follow-up questionnaires were mailed in 1987, 1989, 1992, 1997, and 2004, providing several measures of the trajectory of health in later life (Ahmed et al. 2008).

Despite collecting a limited amount of social and economic data at baseline, and in follow-up surveys, the IWHS provides an unusual and important opportunity to add objective measures of early-life circumstances to a longitudinal study of aging women. Tracing men forward or backward in time is relatively straight-

forward because men do not change their name at marriage. An extensive literature now links men between different census enumerations or from the census to mortality records (Aizer et al. 2016; Beach et al. 2016; Ferrie and Rolf 2011). Objective measures of early-life circumstances are important because their impact is attenuated when studies use recalled information (Galobardes, Lynch, and Davey Smith 2004). The IWHS was originally designed to study mid- and late-life influences on health and mortality, not the extended reach of early childhood conditions on mortality after age fifty-five. However, a baseline question on maiden name has allowed the study to be repurposed in its own later life.

The question on maiden name was designed to facilitate mortality follow-up, as some states include maiden names on death certificates as an additional attribute to identify individuals and verify the age of death through linkage to birth certificates. At the 1986 baseline interview, 97 percent of the women provided either a maiden name or were never married, implying that their current last name was likely to have been their name in early life. Because IWHS subjects were born between 1916 and 1931, their early-life census records are now publicly available (Ruggles 2014). Complete electronic databases of the 1850 to 1940 Censuses can be obtained for scholarly research through the Minnesota Population Center (Ruggles, Fitch, et al. 2021). Restricted-use versions of the data contain names and low-level geographic information that allow individuals to be identified.

The potential is significant for IWHS subjects to be linked to multiple early-life records to develop a dataset of life-course social and economic circumstances for the cohort. Because a large share of the cohort were born in Iowa or surrounding states, our search space for matching women on the basis of name, race, and age is limited, increasing the likelihood of finding unambiguous matches, or matches that can be identified with an acceptable degree of (un)certainly. Born fairly uniformly between 1916 and 1931, the IWHS cohort can be identified in multiple early-life censuses. Federal censuses from 1920 to 1950 included a core of information that allows recon-

struction of residential and socioeconomic trajectories (see table A.2 online).

We estimate we can match more than thirty-five thousand IWHS subjects to at least one early-life census record, and around twenty-eight thousand to all of their 1920 to 1950 census records (see table A.3 online). Even after adjusting for more under-enumeration than occurred in the region (Hacker 2013), we expect we could link nearly thirty-three thousand IWHS subjects to multiple records, including more than twenty-six thousand to three censuses, and fourteen thousand to four or more early-life records. Because our links to early-life records are retrospective, linkage failure is not as consequential as in prospective studies. It is highly unlikely that under-enumeration or spelling errors in early life are correlated with mortality.

DATA

In this article, our scope is more modest because we work with a subset of the best matches between the IWHS cohort born before April 1, 1930, and the 1930 Federal Census of Iowa. Thus we miss women not yet born and those who were outside of Iowa at that point, around one-sixth of the sample. We identified IWHS subjects who were alive in April 1930 (39,621 of the total study population) and matched them to 1930 federal census records from Iowa. Potential matches were identified in a comparison of names in the IWHS and census records, adapting procedures used for the construction of the IPUMS Linked Representative Samples (Goeken et al. 2011). We searched among census records plus or minus one year of the age the IWHS subjects would have been in 1930. Two trained research assistants independently reviewed potential matches. The subjects selected for this analysis were cases for which only one potential match was found in the census records, the census record matched only one IWHS subject, and both research assistants recorded the match as legitimate.

We matched 10,375 women to early-life census records, restricting matches to women resident in Iowa in 1930 in order to bring in additional, consistent county-level data collected

from state government publications. Although state of birth information was not collected in the IWHS, we can assess the effects of this sample restriction in several ways. In the first instance, we can assess whether the linked sample was representative of the populations from which it was drawn. Significantly, the sample matched to early-life records was representative of both populations: the cohort of females up to age thirteen resident in Iowa (see table 2), and the full IWHS sample (see table A.4 online).³ Significant numbers of women were found in every county in Iowa (see figure A.1 online). The major substantive difference is that early-life matches are more likely to come from farming households than their counterparts in Iowa in 1930. We expect this to have occurred because of stronger intergenerational persistence in place and occupation for people who owned farms (Baker, Duffy, and Lamberti 2001; Feigenbaum 2018; Fink 1986). Despite a structural move out of farming, Iowa continues to be a heavily agricultural state and inheritance of farmland and a farm business remain a key mechanism by which people enter farming as adults. On the other side of the process, we match a smaller than expected number of never-married women out of the IWHS sample to early-life records. 95 percent of the sample linked to the 1930 Census had been born in Iowa, with another 3.5 percent born in the six surrounding states.

More broadly, we can assess external validity of the Iowa sample through comparison of the cohort of Iowa-resident women who would later be eligible to participate in the IWHS to other women of the same cohort in the 1980 federal census. Iowa today is not representative of the United States. But in the early twentieth century, it was quite representative of the white population (Goldin and Katz 2000). Three-quarters of the eligible cohort had been born in Iowa and were likely to have lived there for their entire life given migration patterns in this cohort. The cohort resident in Iowa were 98.6 percent white relative to the national average of 88.5 percent. Yet the racial composition of this cohort in Iowa was similar to that seen in other states in the Upper Midwest, New En-

3. See online appendix.

Table 2. Characteristics of 1930 Iowa Cohort and IWHS Early-Life Matches

	Girls Born 1916 to 1930	IWHS Matches
Rural	0.65	0.75
Father's occupation		
Farmer	0.38	0.51
Laborer	0.12	0.11
White collar	0.14	0.11
Trade or craft	0.15	0.13
Owned home	0.41	0.42
Owned radio	0.47	0.48
Both parents present	0.91	0.95
Number of siblings (mean)	2.60	2.66
Father a World War I veteran	0.14	0.14
Parents' nativity		
Both native born	0.87	0.87
One or both foreign born	0.13	0.13
Mean home rent (if renting)	\$8.85	\$5.83
Mean home value (if owned)	\$2092	\$1598
N	344,057	10,375

Source: Authors' tabulations from 1930 United States Census available via IPUMS (Ruggles, Fitch, et al. 2021).

gland, the Great Plains and Mountain West. On other important dimensions, women eligible to participate in the IWHS were representative of white American women their age across the country, having nearly identical rates of marriage, fertility, and labor-force participation.

The most significant difference in adulthood between the IWHS study population and white American women of the same cohort is that the IWHS cohort was significantly more likely to be rural. At the 1986 baseline interview, 19 percent of the IWHS sample were living on a farm, and an additional 19 percent were living in a rural area or a town with fewer than one thousand people. Although the IWHS cohort is distinctive for being rural in later life, growing up in a rural area was common for women born between 1916 and 1931, and our sample represents reasonably well the distribution of childhood environments for white Americans in the early twentieth century, lacking only a major metropolitan area. At the 1930 Census, 48 percent of American women born between 1916 and 1930 lived in a rural area.

MEASURES

For *early-life residence*, the 1930 census identified residential location with more or less precision in urban and rural areas. In cities and towns, this was a street address. Approximately half of Iowa had a street address in 1930. In rural areas (townships with a population of less than 2,500) information is less precise, but no worse than location within a five- by five-mile area. We categorize women in 1930 as living in one of three statuses: on farms, in rural areas off-farms, or in urban areas.

The 1930 census collected information on adult occupations, which have been coded by IPUMS into the U.S. Census Bureau's 1950 occupational categories, for *early-life socioeconomic status*. We aggregated these occupational categories further into variables denoting whether fathers worked in white-collar jobs (professionals, managers, clerical and sales workers), as farmers, skilled or semi-skilled workers in manufacturing, utilities, and transport, or as laborers in farming or industry. We measure the economic status of mothers

through a binary variable for labor-force participation. Distinguishing different occupations for women workers is less important, because labor-force participation by married women at this time was very low; nationally fewer than 10 percent of white married women worked and in Iowa 7 percent of married women.

Later-life residential status was classified by the IWHS into six categories: farm, rural, and four categories of town or city size from the 1980 census: fewer than one thousand people; between one thousand and 2,499 people; between 2,500 and 9,999 people; and ten thousand or more. For ease of interpretation and consistency with the early-life measures, we collapse some categories. The identification of town or city size is made on an urban area basis. Small administrative municipalities that were functionally part of a larger urban area are classified into urban areas. For example, a small municipality contiguous with Des Moines (a suburb), would be classified as being in the metropolitan area.

In regard to *adult health and sociodemographic status*, we measure baseline health at age fifty-five through sixty-nine through BMI, and smoking status (never smoked, currently smoked, past smoker). Family structure at the baseline interview was measured by a question on current marital status. Because the IWHS cohort was composed of women older and younger than typical retirement age, a question on current employment would not accurately capture the socioeconomic position of women. The baseline questionnaire therefore asked about usual work done for “most of your life,” classifying response into homemakers, professionals and managers, clerical and sales work, craft and service work (associated with greater physical intensity), and agricultural work.

Mortality follow-up was carried out nationwide via linkage to the Iowa death registry and National Death Index.

ANALYSIS

Our analysis focuses on describing the differences in social characteristics in baseline health status and survival after 1986 in relation to migration between urban and rural areas within Iowa between 1930 and 1986. Starting from detailed information on residential loca-

tions at each point we categorize women’s migration patterns into one of twelve categories summarized by the cross-categorization, and summarize the distribution of key social and health characteristics within these categories (see table 3). Although we are summarizing life-course trajectories somewhat crudely with information at just two points in time (1930 and 1986), the combination of different social and migration statuses necessitates a multivariate approach to further understand health trajectories. Because not all of our sample is deceased, and right censoring is an issue, we use Cox proportional hazard models to estimate hazard ratios of childhood, family structure, socioeconomic status, place of residence, and migration trajectories. The chance of surviving from the start of 1986 through the end of 2013 is, of course, strongly influenced by age at study entry, which varies between fifty-five and sixty-nine. Thus we control for age at entry in all models.

RESULTS

Although record linkage across long periods is inherently selective, our sample is reasonably, maybe even remarkably, representative of both the cohort of girls (born between 1916 and 1930) living in Iowa in 1930, and of the cohort of women in the IWHS in 1986. We matched a sample of 10,375 women from the IWHS to 1930 federal census records. We expected that women who survived and remained in Iowa at the time the IWHS began in 1986 to be distinct from the cohort of girls resident in Iowa in childhood because migration and mortality are not random. However, our sample matched the total cohort of girls in Iowa in 1930 closely (see table 2). The most significant difference between our matched sample that survived to be in the IWHS and the 1930 Iowa girls was that our sample was more likely to be living in a rural area or on a farm in 1930, and slightly more likely to be living in a family with both parents present. Similarly, we find the group matched to early-life records has a very similar distribution of social and health characteristics in 1986 to the entire IWHS cohort (see table A.4).

More than half a century after the 1930 Census, we observed 24 percent of our cohort still living in the same county. Even in the light of

Table 3. Residence in 1930 and 1986

Residence in 1986	Residence in 1930			Total
	Farm	Nonfarm rural (township < 2,500)	Urban	
Farm	1,666	247	245	2,158
Nonfarm rural	2,023	665	505	3,193
Town of 2,500 to 9,999	1,064	310	413	1,787
Town of 10,000 or more	1,218	547	1,407	3,172
Total	5,971	1,769	2,570	10,310

Source: Authors' tabulations from IWHS linked to 1930 federal census (Ruggles, Fitch, et al. 2021).

declining intercounty (domestic) migration over the twentieth century (Fischer 2002), we are inclined to regard this proportion as a high rate of persistence in the same place. Yet, given the combination of setting (Iowa) and sample selection (women age fifty-five to sixty-nine at baseline) this level of persistence is consistent with expectations. Among women born in Iowa in the same birth cohort, slightly more than half had migrated to other states by 1980. We observed no substantial differences in the social characteristics or baseline health status by intercounty migration status. That is, anthropometric measures and self-rated health at the 1986 baseline survey were similar among women who remained in the same county and those who moved.

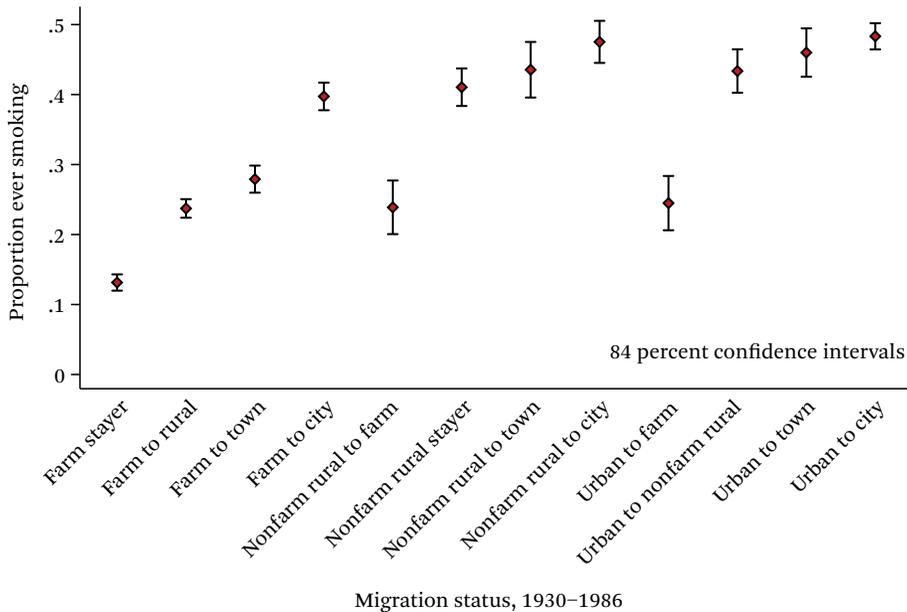
Given the declining rural population share of Iowa from more than 50 percent in 1930 to less than 20 percent in 1986, we observe a substantial movement of women out of farm and other rural residential locations and into towns and cities (see table 3). However, the rural-to-urban shift is one seen more in the aggregate than in individual trajectories. Nearly a quarter of women growing up in Iowa's larger cities in 1930 were in 1986 living on a farm or in townships that would have been classified as rural by the historic census bureau definition (a population of less than 2,500 defining the border between urban and rural). Women observed in 1930 in smaller towns and cities or nonfarm rural areas had the most diverse 1986 destina-

tions, being relatively less likely to be in the same type of place than either the farm or city girls of 1930. The residential patterns we observe here reflect the population geography of Iowa—a state whose largest metropolitan area is around half a million and where the organization of farming and agricultural processing industries has produced a state with many small towns and cities.

We observe important social and health differences between women in different migration states (see table A.5 online). Women migrating to urban areas, whether from farms or nonfarm rural areas, had higher rates of college attendance than women remaining on, or moving to, farms. Women who ended up in cities in 1986 had higher rates of attending college (see figure A.2 online), reflecting that college attendance often migrating out of the county.⁴ Although college attendance and graduation is positively associated with health status in the contemporary United States, the effects of migration to urban areas were less clear in the mid-twentieth century. Smoking rates were significantly higher in urban areas. For the majority of women in our linked cohort, who grew up on farms, the difference in rates of ever smoking (see figure 1) between those who remained on farms (0.13), and those who ended up in towns of larger than ten thousand in 1986 (0.39) was threefold.

Both origins and destination were important in women's adoption of smoking. Mi-

4. Note that in all figures displaying group means we have used 84 percent confidence intervals around the mean, so that non-overlapping confidence intervals can be directly interpreted as having a statistically significant difference at the 5 percent level.

Figure 1. Ever-Smoking Rates by Migration Status

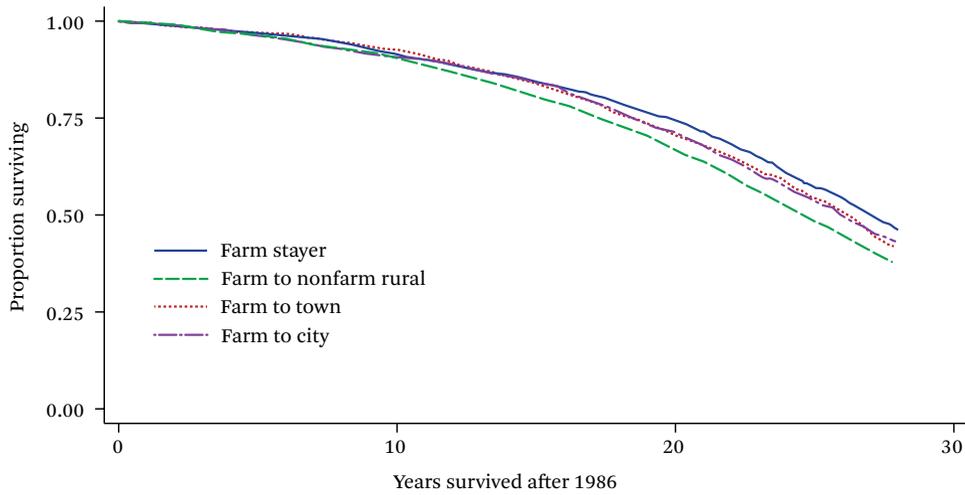
Source: Authors' tabulations from IWHS linked to 1930 federal census (Ruggles, Fitch, et al. 2021).

grants to farms had smoking rates nearly half that of their peers seen in 1930 off the farm (either nonfarm rural, or any urban area). Similar patterns are evident for current smoking rates (figure A.3 online). Smaller differences in health indicators are evident when comparing BMI (figure A.4 online) and the likelihood of reporting excellent health (figure A.5 online) at the baseline interview.

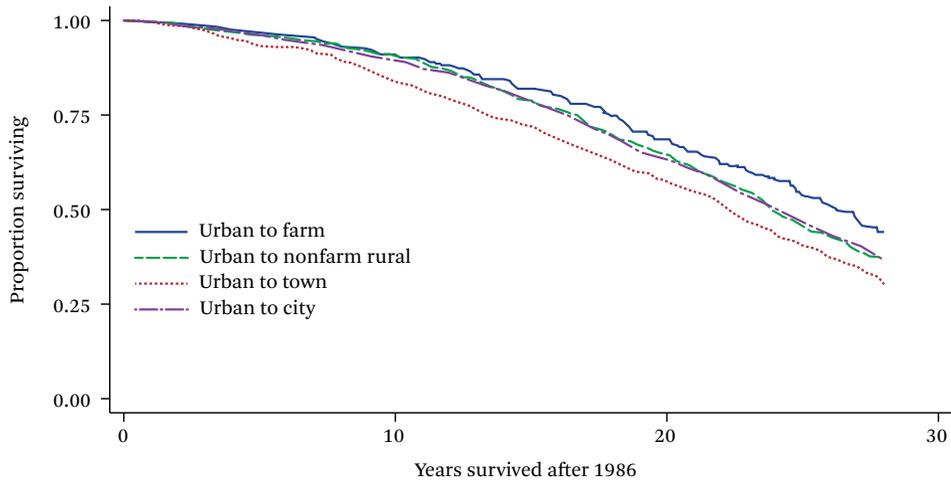
These general patterns of health advantages for farm stayers and migrants to farms, and social disadvantage for women in nonfarm rural areas later in life continue when we examine survival profiles for women in the twenty-eight years of follow-up following the baseline interview. Originating on, or moving to a farm, is associated with higher survival (see figure 2). Women who were living in an urban area in 1986 (see figure 3), but moved to a small town had poorer survival than those moving to farms or staying in the city. Similarly, women originating in nonfarm rural areas had higher observed survival when migrating to a farm by 1986 (see figure 4).

With important differences in social characteristics and health behaviors at baseline by migration status we turn to a multivariate model

to describe and explain these patterns (see table A.6 online). We observe important differences in mortality along multiple dimensions of early life experience. The mortality risk for girls growing up on farms and remaining there is significantly lower. Given the twelve categories of migration origins and destinations between 1930 and 1986, interpreting the association of all-cause mortality with migration is complex. The association of migration patterns and mortality is only slightly affected by controlling for socioeconomic status in childhood—the estimates are very stable when comparing a basic age and migration model, with a model including 1930 characteristics (see figure 5). The patterning of migration and mortality is clearer visually, and we draw attention to two features of these results. First, it was advantageous to originate or move to a farm. Girls who grew up off-farm in 1930 in a small town (fewer than 2,500 people) but moved to a farm had nearly the same mortality risks as those growing up on a farm and remaining there. Similarly, girls who grew up in urban areas (a population of 2,500 or more in 1930) and moved to a farm had the lowest mortality risk of any subgroup originating in urban areas. Second, origi-

Figure 2. Survival Curve for Women Originating on Farms

Source: Authors' tabulations from IWHS linked to 1930 federal census (Ruggles, Fitch, et al. 2021).

Figure 3. Survival Curve for Women Originating in Urban Areas of any Size (> 2,500 Population)

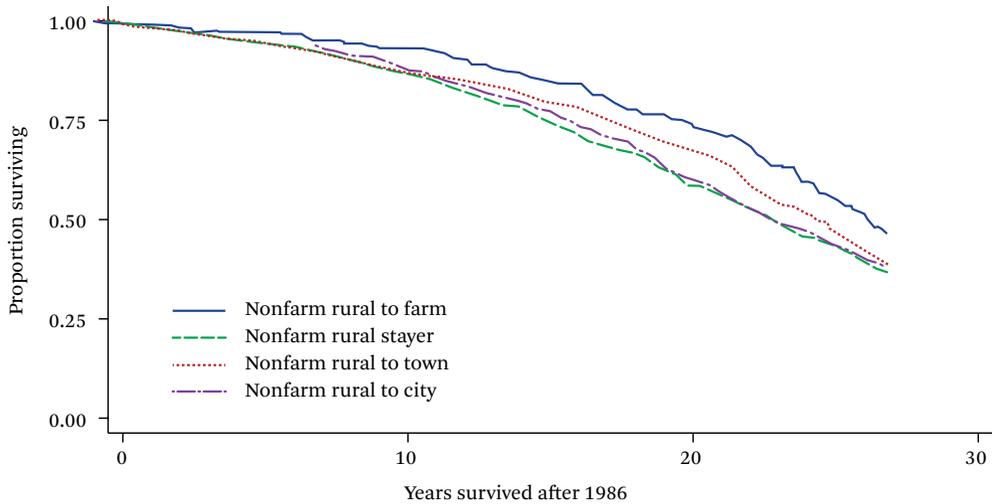
Source: Authors' tabulations from IWHS linked to 1930 federal census (Ruggles, Fitch, et al. 2021).

inating in or moving to a nonfarm rural area was associated with generally higher mortality.

Cause-specific mortality estimates provide additional insight into the potential mechanisms behind these associations. In general, we observe that cardiovascular and respiratory mortality is more strongly associated with migration patterns than cancer mortality (see figure A.6 online). Cancer mortality risk only shows a significant association with farm to rural and urban to small-town migration. These

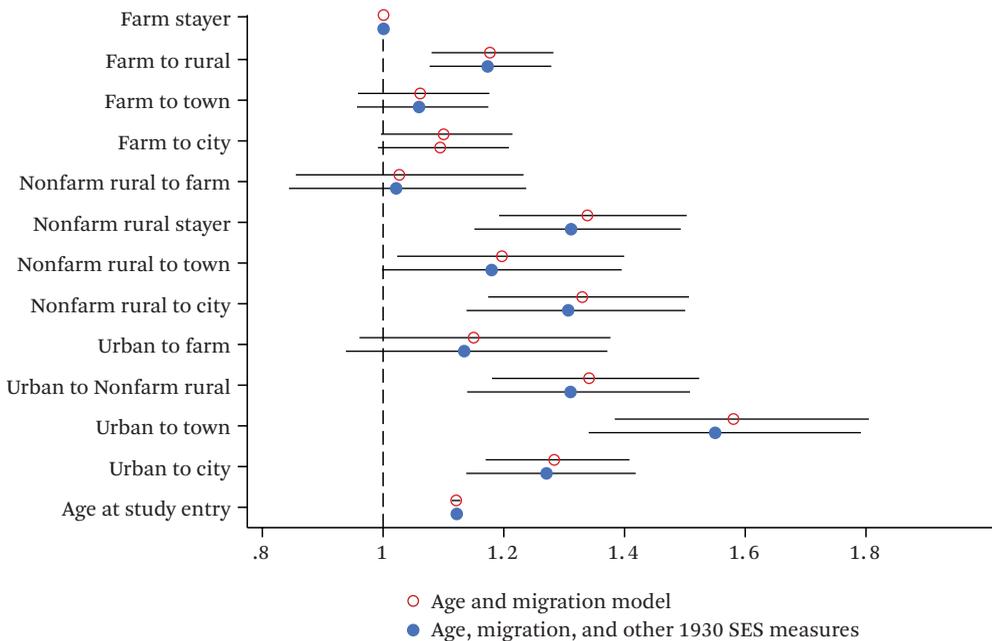
migration statuses had the highest current smoking rates in the 1985 baseline survey (see figure A.3). Cardiovascular and respiratory deaths are associated with more migration trajectories and with more common migration trajectories. Cardiovascular and respiratory mortality was higher for women staying in nonfarm rural residence, moving from nonfarm rural origins to a city in later life and originating in an urban area and ending up anywhere except a farm. Similarly, cardiovascular and re-

Figure 4. Survival Curve for Women Originating in Rural Areas



Source: Authors' tabulations from IWHS linked to 1930 federal census (Ruggles, Fitch, et al. 2021).

Figure 5. Association of Migration Patterns with Mortality Risk After Age Fifty-Five



Source: Authors' tabulations from IWHS linked to 1930 federal census (Ruggles, Fitch, et al. 2021).

spiratory mortality, but not cancer mortality, is associated with indicators of early-life socio-economic deprivation and stress: living in a home that was rented or in a single-parent household (figure A.7 online). Children living

with neither their mother nor father in 1930 had lower all-cause and cardiorespiratory mortality after 1986, reflecting the fact that the majority of children seen with neither parent in 1930 were living with aunts or uncles, or both

grandparents. Although the census does not identify that these children were orphans, it is highly likely that they were.

We see only small mortality gradients in father's occupation compared to girls whose father was a farmer. The daughters of farm laborers and tradesmen may have fared slightly worse than daughters of farmers and white-collar workers, with the difference significant at the 10 percent level. We suspect this reflects that social class differentials within Iowa are muted relative to those in the entire United States.

DISCUSSION

The demography of rural and urban residence has changed significantly in the United States in the past century, having potentially important long-term consequences for health and mortality in later life. In the early twentieth century—when the current generation of older Americans were children—living in rural areas or on farms was common. Migration out of rural areas and away from farms has been significant. Working out how selection of people into and out of rural areas affects life chances is important for understanding the opportunities and challenges of growing up in rural America. Examining the experience of a sample living in favorable circumstances—Iowa was a state that invested significantly in girls' education (Goldin 1998; Goldin and Katz 2000), and social capital was high—and surviving to at least age fifty-five, we find that migration to small towns and nonfarm rural areas is associated with higher mortality and poorer health. The childhood origins of these women were not distinctly different, but their health, social circumstances, and mortality are somewhat worse than women in larger towns and cities or on farms. Growing up on a farm in the early twentieth century appears to be associated with favorable longer-term outcomes. Although somewhat uncommon—just 5 percent of our sample—moving to a farm was associated with lower mortality in later life relative to remaining off-farm in rural areas, or moving to a town or city. We observe the worst mortality outcomes for women with nonfarm rural origins who remain in that context in later life, and women who originated in urban areas and moved to smaller towns or nonfarm rural areas.

These results highlight that the rural health disadvantage examined in recent literature (Cosby et al. 2019; James 2014) is not homogeneous. Farm residents—who are certainly rural—have longer lives in general, despite heightened mortality risk from some specific causes including accidents and site-specific cancers from agricultural chemicals. Rural residents who are not resident on farms, whether in earlier or later life, have significantly elevated mortality risk in our cohort of women in Iowa. The educational and health behaviors of the Iowa cohort suggest two, not mutually exclusive, mechanisms for these findings. First, lifetime smoking rates, and continuing to smoke in 1985, were significantly higher for women not living on farms, including those in nonfarm rural settings. It is well known that women in the United States took up smoking in large numbers nearly a generation after men, particularly after World War II (Preston and Wang 2006). Relatively little attention has been paid, however, to the life-course patterns of smoking initiation in American women who reached adulthood between the 1930s and 1960s and who took up smoking at higher rates than cohorts before or since. By contrast, prior studies of the IWHS cohort show relatively small demographic differences in diet and exercise (Shivappa et al. 2016). The similar patterning of smoking behavior and mortality risk with rural-urban migration categories suggests an important area for further research with both the IWHS and other studies of similar cohorts to explain which groups within the age cohort smoked for longer.

Second, the socioeconomic trajectory of women in nonfarm rural areas is more likely to have been declining than for those who stayed at or migrated to a farm or who were living in a city in 1985. Although women with farm origins were less likely to have attended high school, 95 percent of women living off-farm or in an urban area in 1930 attended high school. But conditional on graduating high school, women who stayed off-farm in rural areas or moved to small towns were less likely to attend or complete college. Women with urban origins (in 1930) or destinations (1985 residence) were more likely to complete college than their off-farm rural peers. These educational patterns

are consistent with evidence from other studies of a steeper education gradient in women's health (Ross and Mirowsky 2010).

An important feature of our study is that it focuses on women enrolled in late adulthood and living in a particular place. We can draw parallels to other cohort studies to highlight what we can learn from this structure. Like the Health and Retirement Study (Brandt, Deindl, and Hank 2012) and SHARELIFE (Pakpahan, Hoffmann, and Kröger 2017), the IWHS recruited subjects who had survived to at least fifty-five. What these studies and ours can say about childhood circumstances are conditional on surviving to late adulthood. Unlike the Health Retirement Study or SHARELIFE, however, the IWHS is situated in a particular place. This is not without parallel either, the Utah Population Database is structured in a similar way with a focus on people living in Utah (Smith et al. 2009). Regional datasets are limited in important ways given that interstate migration over a lifetime is common and the population that chooses to remain are self-selected. Although we highlight the similarity of our group in childhood and adulthood to other women in Iowa on observable characteristics, the differences between our cohort (who stayed) and their peers who moved and are missing by construction, are likely to be on unobservable characteristics. People who chose to leave Iowa (or to stay) likely did so with an evaluation of their economic and social prospects. The advantages we find for women who remained on or moved to a farm in Iowa were not broadly shared. Although Iowa remains a heavily agricultural state and our sample has a high proportion of women living on farms relative to the rest of the United States, it is also true that the share of women living on a farm declined from three-fifths to less than one-fifth of the sample. Whatever the ways that farming worked to benefit women in our cohort, it is not a plausible treatment that can be applied to resolve the disadvantages of other groups in rural areas. In short, the selective nature of the IWHS cohort tells us something about the structure of rural advantage and disadvantage.

Coincident with a pattern of health advantage for women with farming connections, we saw a pattern of earlier old-age mortality for

women in nonfarm rural areas or small towns. We emphasize that these are empirical and selective associations rather than causal mechanisms. Nevertheless, the selective nature of disadvantage is informative. The women we see in the IWHS in later life are women who remained in Iowa. Less than half of the 1916 to 1930 birth cohort who were born in Iowa were still in Iowa at the 1980 census. Thus, although many of the nonfarm rural or small-town group moved between counties, relative to their cohort peers they did not move far. The disadvantaged group share with women remaining on or moving to farms a pattern of relatively short intercounty moves or persistence in the same county. Yet the two groups differ significantly in social and economic outcomes.

The pattern of disadvantage identified for women in nonfarm rural settings is consistent with the changing geography of economic activity in rural areas in the United States. Mechanization of agricultural work has reduced the numbers of people needed to work a given area of land. In 1930, small towns housed and provisioned farm laborers and small businesses catering to farms. But farm laborers are fewer in 1986 and thus fewer people live in small towns and rural areas that need retail or services. Paving of rural roads, for example, has enabled farmers to access commercial services and retail trade in larger urban centers. Conversely, towns and cities have provided increasing opportunity for socioeconomic advancement with labor markets diverse enough for both members of dual-earner couples to work. Persistence in nonfarm rural areas is associated with fewer economic opportunities. In Iowa after 1985, the decline in the number of nonfarm businesses in rural areas was significant. The structural decline in economic activity during the farm crisis in Iowa in the 1980s has been echoed in other rural settings in the United States in subsequent decades. Despite these structural changes, we do not see strong evidence in our sample of "deaths of despair." Deaths from suicide, accidents, and alcohol or drug abuse were rare in this cohort. As other scholars note, the rural mortality disadvantage has been concentrated in working-age Americans (James, Cossman, and Wolf 2018), similar to the pattern identified for deaths of despair.

The contrast we identify between favorable outcomes for farm women, and less favorable outcomes for nonfarm rural women point to the challenges in understanding what it means to live in rural America. Both farms and their surrounding areas are rural, and yet the life chances of residents are quite different. Women with connections to capital in farming derive significant health benefits from their status. Despite the hazards of growing up in urban areas before World War II, women with urban origins and later-life residence have been able to take advantage of their human capital. Off the farm, families without capital in farming or a larger market for their human capital face significant social and health disadvantages. These contrasts point to the importance of social status and resources in overcoming some of the challenges of living in contemporary rural America.

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Do Federal Place-Based Policies Improve Economic Opportunity in Rural Communities?



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The U.S. federal government has invested considerable resources in place-based programs to improve local economies, amenities, and infrastructure. Although urban place-based policies have received the most attention, place-based approaches have long been central to efforts addressing rural poverty as well. Using a novel dataset, we document a substantial increase in place-based funding to rural counties from 1990 to 2015. We then assess the association between exposure to place-based funding and socioeconomic outcomes in adulthood using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997. We find that living in counties that received more place-based funding is associated with higher educational attainment and greater earnings, but only for those who migrated in adulthood. We conclude that place-based investment may improve economic opportunity via geographic mobility for rural American youth.

Keywords: public policy, geography, rural youth, economic opportunity

Areas of concentrated economic disadvantage are persistent features of the U.S. landscape, and this persistence is especially notable in rural areas (Duncan 1996). Of the counties defined by the federal government as “persistently poor” in 2010—meaning they had poverty rates above 20 percent for the past thirty years—fully 85 percent were in rural areas (Economic Re-

search Service 2021). Persistent poverty is also spatially concentrated (Lichter and Johnson 2007). The vast majority of poor counties are located in the Mississippi Delta and Appalachia; additional smaller pockets are in the Southwest and Great Plains. Durable patterns of spatial inequality among rural communities have worsened in recent years, fueled by the

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dual forces of economic restructuring and depopulation (Johnson and Lichter 2019; Thiede, Lichter, and Slack 2018).

The spatial clustering and temporal durability of poverty has led scholars and policymakers to consider place-based policies as a means for improving economic opportunity and alleviating multi-generational poverty (Cisneros and Engdahl 2010; Glaeser and Gottlieb 2008; Neumark and Simpson 2015). Over the past quarter century, the federal government has invested considerable resources in place-based programs to stimulate local economies, improve amenities and infrastructure, and build human capital. Whereas people-based interventions target individual sources of disadvantage—such as a lack of income for basic necessities including food, shelter, or childcare—place-based policies are motivated by a recognition that community conditions shape access to opportunity and quality of life above and beyond personal resources. Advocates of place-based investment frequently justify targeting disadvantaged communities on equity grounds, pointing to the blatant neglect (and sometimes active harm) caused by public and private initiatives over generations. As a result, place-based policies focus disproportionately on areas with concentrated and persistent economic or social disadvantage.

Although most scholarly attention has focused on place-based policies in urban areas, place-based approaches have long been central policy tools used to address rural poverty as well. We draw on a novel dataset of federal place-based policies that links longitudinal federal funding to specific counties across the United States from 1990 to 2015 in order to describe the evolution and distribution of federal place-based funding specifically for rural areas, defined here as nonmetropolitan counties.¹ We then integrate the data on place-based funding with data from the nationally representative National Longitudinal Survey of Youth-1997 Cohort (NLSY97) to assess whether exposure to place-based funding was associated with improved educational and economic outcomes for residents of rural areas.

We find that federal place-based funding to rural counties has increased substantially during this time period, mirroring broader national trends. Since the Great Recession, federal place-based policies have provided more than \$4 billion annually to nonmetro counties and the majority of this funding went toward economic development initiatives. Although the total funding received by rural counties is considerably less than what metropolitan counties received, on a per capita basis funding levels are roughly comparable across the rural-urban divide. The vast majority of rural counties received some place-based funding from federal sources over this period, but substantial amounts of funding were geographically concentrated in poor areas of the Mississippi Delta, Appalachia, and near the Canadian border. Despite evidence of federal place-based investment in rural counties, we find that the intensity of place-based funding in one's county of residence is associated with upward mobility only for rural young adults who leave their hometowns. We conclude by discussing how federal place-based investment may contribute to the so-called rural brain drain (Kefalas and Carr 2009).

BACKGROUND

Academic characterizations of rural communities typically depict areas with densely connected social ties or places with rigid systems of racial, economic, and social stratification (DuBois 1912; Duncan 1996; Hall and Stack 1982; Tickamyer and Duncan 1990). Both characterizations reflect a limited opportunity structure that is rooted in historical political economy, with powerful local elites who exerted substantial control over rural labor and social institutions—power that was tied to land ownership and control over a single dominant industry, such as natural resource extraction or seasonal agriculture (Baldwin 2018; Billings 1979; Hall and Stack 1982). More recently, some rural communities have experienced increased precarity as the result of economic decline, restructuring, and population loss (Johnson and Lichter 2019; Thiede, Lichter, and Slack 2018).

1. Throughout this article, we categorize counties as metropolitan or nonmetropolitan using 1990 Office of Management and Budget (OMB) definitions and refer to these categories as urban or rural respectively.

These forces are exacerbated by residential mobility patterns, given that highly skilled and highly educated individuals are the most likely to migrate out of rural areas (Foulkes and Schafft 2010). In recent decades, scholars have found high rates of out-migration from rural areas among the young and highly educated (Domina 2006; Weber et al. 2007), leading to rising educational differentials between urban and rural America (Fischer and Mattson 2009). Returns to human capital tend to be greater in urban than rural areas, motivating selective migration to cities for the more educated and skilled, while keeping less educated and skilled residents anchored in rural communities with limited wage or occupational opportunities that restrict upward economic mobility (Lichter and Brown 2011). Dubbed “rural brain drain” (Kefalas and Carr 2009), this migration dynamic has generated sharp socioeconomic disparities between the so-called rural movers and stayers. Rural stayers undertake various labor market strategies to cope with economic decline in their communities, which differs by gender and social class (see Francis 2022, this issue; Niccolai, Damaske, and Park 2022, this issue), whereas rural movers tend to confront a host of social, economic, and emotional hurdles on their pursuit of upward mobility (see Parsons 2022).

Rationales for and Against Place-Based Investment

Against this backdrop of rigid opportunity structures, persistent poverty, and depopulation, both scholars and policymakers have considered place-based policies as a tool for investing in rural communities. Those who advocate for place-based policies typically justify them using either equity or efficiency rationales. Equity arguments frequently point to policies that have either ignored or actively harmed certain communities over time, leading to the concentration of disadvantage, particularly within

communities of color (Massey and Denton 1993; Rothstein 2017; Squires 2011). Efficiency arguments for place-based investment suggest that geographically targeted interventions may rectify local market failures, fund public goods and amenities, and generate positive productivity spillovers that are unlikely to accrue to geographically dispersed investments (Kline and Moretti 2014; Neumark and Simpson 2015).

Despite these arguments, the equity and efficiency of place-based policies remains an area of active scholarly and public debate. In economic spatial equilibrium models, the benefit of a location-based subsidy is capitalized into land rents—raising prices and undermining the potential benefits to residents as a result (Glaeser and Gottlieb 2008). Residents can also move in and out of areas targeted for investment as prices rise or as opportunities increase (Freeman 2005; Marcuse 1985). Finally, the incentives to invest within particular areas may distort the market and create inefficiencies by depressing economic activity in other areas where it may have occurred in the absence of any incentives (Neumark and Simpson 2015).

Thus, the potential benefits of place-based policies must be weighed alongside the potential adverse effects on prices, migration flows, and market efficiency. This leads scholars from disparate disciplinary and epistemological traditions to question place-based initiatives as a mechanism to improve equity and spur economic growth (Brenner, Marcuse, and Mayer 2012; Crump 2002; Glaeser 2012). Together, these critiques point to potential adverse consequences of place-based targeting that might undermine intended equity and efficiency goals.²

Federal Place-Based Policy in Rural Areas

Although most scholarly attention has focused on place-based policies in urban areas, the federal government has also long used place-based approaches to address rural poverty as well.³

2. A full review of the impact of place-based policies is beyond the scope of this article (see Glaeser and Gottlieb 2008; Kline and Moretti 2014; Neumark and Simpson 2015). Most research, however, finds modest short-run effects on a limited set of outcomes that are closely related to the domain of the intervention, such as housing, economic development, or crime (Braga et al. 2001; Busso, Gregory, and Kline 2013; Tach and Emory 2017).

3. States and local jurisdictions have also used place-based targeting initiatives. Future research should consider whether state and local initiatives complement or supplement federal funding.

Some early place-based economic development initiatives were focused on rural communities, such as the New Deal-era Tennessee Valley Authority. This program aimed to stimulate economic development via large-scale public infrastructure spending, albeit using racially exclusionary practices (Alderman and Brown 2011; Bullard 2008). Place-based approaches were also part of the 1960s War on Poverty agenda, for example, when the National Advisory Committee on Rural Poverty produced its influential *People Left Behind* report (Breathitt 1967). Additionally, the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) Program, which has been administered since 1974, disburses the majority of non-entitlement funds to rural areas; however, it is unclear how effective this program is at promoting development in rural areas (Wiley 2014).

More recently, scholars of rural areas have debated the efficacy of place-based policies aimed to revitalize struggling rural business districts and industries, in an effort to both stem the tide of depopulation in small town America and aid in recovery from the Great Recession (Austin, Summers, and Glaeser 2018; Partridge and Rickman 2008; Shambaugh and Nunn 2018; Weber 2007). Rural communities were included in a patchwork of federal place-based economic development programs, such as the Empowerment Zone program in the 1990s and more recently the New Markets Tax Credit program. Some evidence indicates that being designated an Empowerment Zone reduced out-migration in rural areas and increased housing stability, but researchers have been unable to identify a broader impact on economic indicators in rural areas (Cho 2019; Estrada and Allen 2004).

In addition to resources available from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, specific funding streams for housing and economic development were also offered to rural communities through the Department of Agriculture (USDA) and other federal agencies. Under President Obama's administration, several new initiatives such as federal Promise Zones, StrikeForce, and Cool & Connected specifically targeted rural areas with funding for economic development, housing, and infra-

structure (Scally and Posey 2017). Implementation in each community varied widely because of need, though evidence indicates localized successes. Case studies demonstrate that some communities were able to use these newly available funds to increase graduation rates, improve public infrastructure, and increase children's school readiness (Scally and Posey 2017). However, research suggests that high-poverty rural counties lack the resources to pursue much of this federal funding (Deweese, Lobao, and Swanson 2003), and that the strength of local community leadership is a key determinant to receiving federal funding and improving overall community vitality (Cook et al. 2009). Despite the historical emergence and recent growth of place-based policies in rural areas (Swanson 2001), we currently lack a comprehensive picture of how federal place-based policies have been distributed across rural and urban areas, and whether residents experience different returns to these investments depending on where they live.

Geographic Variation in Upward Mobility

Recent scholarly investigations have revealed that prospects for upward mobility in the United States are strongly influenced by geography. Children from the bottom quintile of family income face dramatically different chances of moving up in the income distribution based on the county, and even the neighborhood, where they grow up (Alvarado 2016; Chetty et al. 2014). Areas characterized by high levels of upward mobility tend to be less racially segregated and more economically equal, have better K–12 schools, higher levels of social capital, and greater family stability (Chetty et al. 2014). Although empirical evidence is limited, in theory policies that generate improvements to such local community contexts—including economic opportunity and security, the built and social environment, and health care and educational institutions—could have a positive impact on resident outcomes (Chetty, Hendren, and Katz 2016; Sharkey and Faber 2014).

Although most of this work has focused on either the nation as a whole or metropolitan areas only, rural counties tend to have slightly higher average levels of upward mobility than

urban counties (Krause and Reeves 2017; Weber et al. 2018). Better job matching, lower inequality, and higher social capital can provide low-income rural youth a greater chance at upward mobility (Weber et al. 2018). Eleanor Krause and Richard Reeves (2017) also find that rates of upward mobility are more variable among rural areas than urban: counties in the upper Midwest and Northern Plains have some of the nation's highest rates of upward mobility from poverty, whereas rural parts of the Southeast have among the nation's lowest. In general, these place-based predictors of upward mobility are as strong, if not stronger, in rural counties than urban. In particular, economic prosperity and population growth are strong predictors of upward mobility for residents of urban areas, but even stronger predictors of upward mobility for rural residents (Krause and Reeves 2017).

Despite renewed scholarly attention to the geographic contours of economic opportunity in America, and the increased attention to place that this work has inspired, we still know little about the role of place-based policies in either reinforcing or disrupting spatial differences in economic opportunity. This dearth of information is particularly acute for rural areas. In the analyses that follow, we aim to fill this gap in existing research by using a novel data source to document the evolution and distribution of federal place-based funding for nonmetropolitan areas from 1990 to 2015. We then integrate data on place-based policies with data from the nationally representative NLSY-1997 Cohort to compare the associations between place-based funding and economic outcomes for nonmetro and metro residents who had varying exposure to these policies as children and young adults. We also consider the role of migration, given its ongoing importance in shaping the economic fortunes of rural communities.

DATA AND METHOD

We obtained data on the sources of federal place-based funding from public records of federal agencies. We developed an initial list of candidate programs by consulting Notifications of Funding Availability, annual budgets

of federal agencies and congressional appropriations, existing federal data sources, and inquiries with key executive and agency personnel and other policy experts. From the initial list of programs, we developed a set of criteria to identify the final set of programs to include in this analysis. First, we defined an initiative as *place-based* if eligibility was determined, and implementation occurred, for a specific bounded geographic area (Kline and Moretti 2014; Neumark and Simpson 2015; Orszag et al. 2009). Further, that area must be geographically concentrated at the county level or smaller. Most initiatives targeted counties or neighborhoods based on specific community characteristics, such as the poverty, crime, or unemployment rate. We excluded policies that targeted people based on individual or family characteristics (such as family poverty status) and retained those that targeted geographic units based on community-level characteristics (such as neighborhood poverty rate). We also excluded funding that went only to urban areas, as well as those that went to very broad geographic areas (such as the U.S.-Mexico border) without any further geographic targeting below that level.

Second, we defined an initiative as *federal* if awards were determined by a federal agency and funding came primarily from federal sources in the form of grants, loans, tax expenditures, or technical assistance. These were awarded on both formula and competitive bases. Some initiatives did not include new funding, consisting instead of coordination among agencies or helping organizations to apply for existing funding; these were not included in our sample because no funding was allocated. Third, we focus on the period from 1990 to 2015. As we show, federal place-based investment prior to 1990 was minimal. At the other end of the time series, 2015 was the most recent year for which data were available for most initiatives. We exclude programs that started after 2015 for this reason. Table 1 lists the names and key details for all initiatives that met the above criteria. We identified nineteen distinct programs, totaling more than \$368 billion in funding over the twenty-five-year period. We adjusted all funding for inflation using the

Table 1. Data Sources and Funding Information for Rural Counties, 1990–2015

Place-Based Program	Funding Agency	Total Funding	Years Covered	Eligibility	Domain	Type
Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC)	Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)	\$154,439,086,122	1990–2015	No geographic restrictions for where units are developed. Qualified census tracts (QCTs) and difficult development areas (DDA) receive “bonus” tax credits. QCTs have high poverty rates or low median household incomes, and DDAs have high land, construction, and utility costs relative to area median incomes.	housing	tax
HOME Investment Partnership Program (HOME)	HUD	\$21,728,701,108	1990–2015	States and local jurisdictions with inadequate housing supply, high resident poverty rates, and fiscal distress. Participating jurisdictions determine specific neighborhoods and affordable housing activities to receive funding.	housing	formula
Neighborhood Stabilization Program (NSP)	HUD	\$6,855,343,910	2008–2010	Neighborhoods with the greatest need for stabilization based on a high concentration of foreclosed or vacant properties, delinquent loans, and subprime loans.	housing	grant
HOPE VI	HUD	\$8,228,579,988	1993–2010	Distressed public housing based on population density, rates of vandalism and criminal activity, availability of supportive services, and occupied by residents dependent on public assistance who are low income or unemployed.	housing	grant

Rural Innovation Fund (RIF)	HUD	\$4,505,616	2010	Rural areas, Indian tribal entities, Colonias, Appalachian distressed counties, and communities in the Lower Mississippi Delta region	housing	grant
Federally Qualified Health Centers	Department of Health and Human Services	\$37,623,151,610	1990-2015	Medically underserved areas (MUAs) at various geographic scales are calculated using four criteria: provider to population ratio, infant mortality rate, percent of the population 65+, and percent of the population below the federal poverty level	health	grant
Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI)	Departments of Agriculture, Treasury, and Health and Human Services	\$46,020,078	2011-2015	Neighborhoods in urban and rural communities with food deserts, defined as low-income areas in which residents do not live in close proximity to affordable and healthy food retailers.	health	grant
Promise Neighborhoods	Department of Education	\$196,813,238	2010-2015	Distressed neighborhoods with an education need (defined as a neighborhood within the attendance zone of a low-performing school) and a family and community support need (based on neighborhood health indicators, crime rates, and housing and poverty thresholds).	education	grant <i>(continued)</i>

Table 1. (continued)

Place-Based Program	Funding Agency	Total Funding	Years Covered	Eligibility	Domain	Type
New Markets Tax Credits (NMTC)	Department of the Treasury	\$45,409,133,761	2001–2015	Rural or urban census tracts meeting individual poverty or median family income thresholds. Rural census tracts that are either located in an Empowerment Zone contiguous to one other low-income community or that experience net out-migration.	economic development	tax
Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI) Fund	Department of the Treasury	\$37,768,446,124	1994–2015	Economically distressed communities with financial institutions (CDFIs and CDEs) recognized for their support of underserved populations in low-income areas.	economic development	grant
Federal Empowerment Zones, Enterprise Communities, Renewal Communities (EZ/EC/RC)	HUD	\$12,126,055,040	1995–2015	Economically distressed census tracts with high levels of poverty and unemployment.	economic development	tax
Economic Development Administration (EDA) Programs	Department of Commerce, Economic Development Administration	\$4,926,021,104	2001–2015	Economically distressed communities, including those negatively impacted by changes to the coal economy, determined by average per capita income, the unemployment rate of the region, or deemed a “special need” by the EDA.	economic development	grant
StrikeForce for Rural Growth and Opportunity	Department of Agriculture	\$48,514,777	2010–2015	Rural counties meeting persistent poverty thresholds.	economic development	grant

Appalachia Economic Development Initiative (AEDI)	HUD	\$550,000	2015	Counties in the Appalachia Region that are chronically underserved, undercapitalized, and lack capacity to support business development.	economic development	competitive
Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN)	Department of Justice	\$233,324,680	2003–2015	Places with gun-related violence and gang violence, especially elevated youth gang-related incidences.	crime	grant
Innovations in Community-Based Crime Reduction (CBCR)	Department of Justice	\$31,168,936	2012–2015	High-poverty neighborhoods with crime hot spots, defined as micro-places in communities that have persistent crime problems.	crime	grant
Community Development Block Grants (CDBG)	HUD	\$37,235,757,320	1990–2015	Counties and cities awarded funding on a formula basis according to poverty rates, population, age of housing stock, and housing overcrowding. Local jurisdictions determine specific neighborhoods to receive funding.	multidimensional	formula
Rural Housing and Economic Development (RHED)	HUD	\$186,814,066	2002–2005; 2007–2009	Rural areas.	multidimensional	grant
Youth Opportunity Grants	Departments of Labor and Education	\$1,181,699,966	1999–2005	Economically distressed census tracts with high levels of poverty and unemployment.	multidimensional	formula

Source: Authors' tabulation from public records of federal agencies.

personal consumption expenditures (PCE) index and present amounts in 2016 dollars.⁴ More details on analytic decisions for each program are available from the authors upon request.

Unit of Geography

The primary geographic target for federal place-based programs differed in metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas. Although census tracts or neighborhoods were the most common geographic target in metropolitan areas, most place-based initiatives in nonmetropolitan areas used the county as the geographic target—it was uncommon for nonmetropolitan programs to target smaller geographic units like neighborhoods. As a result, we use the county as the geographic unit of analysis.

Metrics for categorizing counties along the rural-urban divide are numerous. We use the broad Office of Management and Budget (OMB) definitions rather than the more granular USDA or Census Bureau ones, a decision driven primarily by statistical power and temporal comparability considerations. We categorize counties as metropolitan and nonmetropolitan using 1990 OMB definitions throughout the analyses. Because OMB definitions have changed considerably since the beginning of our study's period (Johnson and Lichter 2020) and could, in part, be related to policy interventions such as those considered here, we use the 1990 time invariant measure as a stable baseline. However, in supplemental analyses (table A.2), we also present time-varying definitions of metropolitan status to account for changes in OMB definitions between the 1990 and 2010 Censuses; the results remain substantively similar.

Individual-Level Mobility Analysis

After providing a descriptive portrait of the evolution and geographic dispersion of federal place-based funding to rural areas, we analyze the association between exposure to place-based programs and individual economic out-

comes using data from the NLSY-1997 Cohort. The NLSY-1997 is a nationally representative longitudinal panel of 8,984 youth born between 1980 and 1984. The youth were ages twelve to seventeen when first interviewed in 1997. They were reinterviewed every one to two years thereafter. We measure respondent socioeconomic outcomes—individual earnings and educational attainment—in 2015, the last year for which we have place-based funding data. Respondents were excluded from the analysis if they were not interviewed in 2015, or if they were missing on these key outcome variables, resulting in a sample size of 4,871.

To measure exposure to place-based funding, we use restricted county identifiers to locate where respondents lived in each survey wave from 1997 to 2015. The NLSY did not obtain information on the respondent's county of residence prior to the 1997 survey. For measuring exposure to place-based funding prior to 1997, we assume that respondents lived in the same county from 1990 through 1997. We sum the annual total place-based funding for each county in which the respondent lived from 1990 to 2015 and calculate a total exposure amount for each respondent, and log transform this measure because of its skewed distribution. We also create measures to compare the domain of investment (such as housing, economic development), as well as the exposure to funding in childhood (younger than eighteen) and adulthood. Finally, to examine the relationship between place-based funding and out-migration, we identify respondents who moved from or stayed in their childhood home county between 1997 and 2015.

We regress 2015 socioeconomic outcomes, as well as out-migration, on the logged measure of exposure to place-based funding, plus vectors of individual- and county-level controls. As we show, federal place-based funding is not distributed evenly across counties. Research suggests that places receiving more federal place-based funding are both positively and negatively se-

4. Although no price index is perfect, the PCE is less likely to overstate inflation relative to other indices such as the Consumer Price Index (see Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland, "PCE and CPI Inflation: What's the Difference?" April 17, 2014, <https://www.clevelandfed.org/newsroom-and-events/publications/economic-trends/2014-economic-trends/et-20140417-pce-and-cpi-inflation-whats-the-difference.aspx>, accessed November 12, 2021).

lected: they are more economically disadvantaged, but also have characteristics such as strong housing markets (Tach et al. 2019). We therefore include several controls for both individual- and county-level characteristics that may be associated with both exposure to place-based funding and the likelihood of experiencing economic mobility. The individual-level controls include 1997 household income, maternal and paternal educational attainment, gender, race-ethnicity, age, nativity, and childhood family structure. The county-level contextual controls include indicator variables for region and metro status as well as 1997 poverty rate, unemployment rate, and population obtained from linear interpolations of census data (Logan, Xu, and Stultz 2014). Our results stratify by the respondents' metropolitan status during childhood, measured in 1997, but are also robust to measures using the cumulative number of years respondents lived in nonmetro versus metro counties. We also stratify models according to whether the respondent moved out of their childhood home county by 2015 (for descriptive statistics from the NLSY sample, see table A.1). No differences in educational attainment or earnings between youth growing up in metro and nonmetro areas are significant. All results are weighted using customized NLSY national sampling weights and are not sensitive to excluding counties receiving the highest share (top 1 or 2 percent) of funding.

RESULTS

From 1990 to 2015, we identified more than \$368 billion in federal place-based investment nationwide. The annual funding amounts for metro and nonmetro areas are shown in figures 1 and 2. Federal place-based funding amounted to less than \$8 billion per year in metro counties and less than \$2 billion annually in nonmetro counties in the 1990s. Annual funding grew more rapidly for metropolitan areas in both total and per capita terms. The primary sources of place-based funding came from the CDBG program, categorized as multidimensional, and the Low-Income

Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC program), categorized as housing, in the early 1990s. Funding increases were more substantial in metro areas in the later 1990s, resulting from several high-profile programs targeting primarily urban areas with concentrated poverty: the HOPE VI program to redevelop distressed public housing and the Empowerment Zone/Enterprise Communities/Renewal Communities (EZ/EC/RC) program to stimulate economic activity in high-unemployment areas.

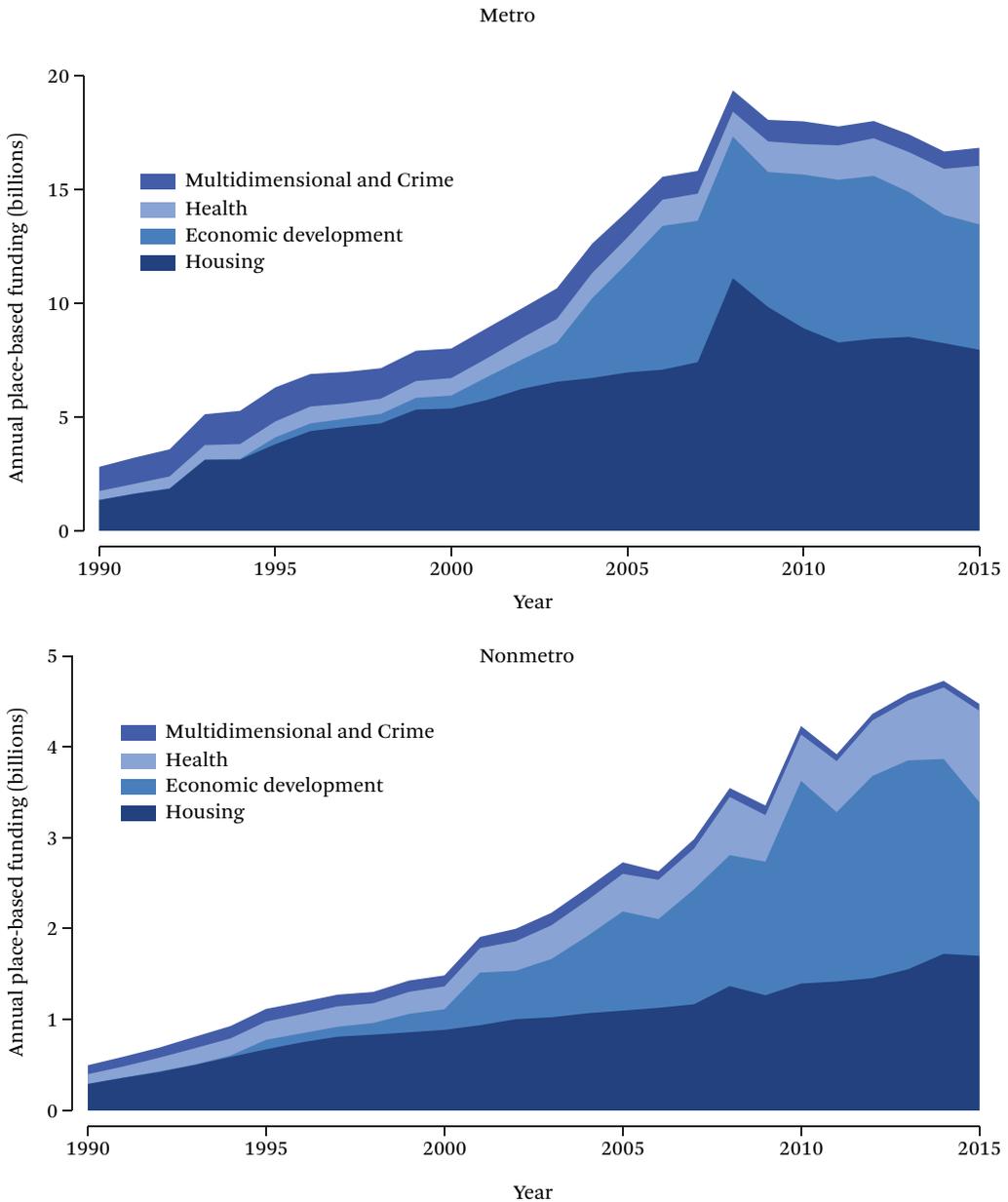
Annual funding increased more rapidly in the early 2000s, peaking at about \$18 billion in metro areas during the Great Recession. This growth was due in large part to the creation of the New Markets Tax Credit program, which provides tax incentives for businesses to locate within, hire residents from, make loans to, and provide human capital training for residents of high poverty communities. Since 2010, funding has continued to increase for nonmetro areas—albeit unevenly year to year—and has tapered off slightly for metropolitan areas. Annual funding peaked later for nonmetro areas, at just under \$5 billion dollars in 2014, the result of newer and smaller place-based programs targeted to rural areas, such as Strike-Force for Rural Growth and Opportunity, as well as shifts in program focus, with more funding of established programs earmarked for nonmetro areas. By the end of 2015, per capita funding across metro and nonmetro areas were close to parity.

Variation of Federal Place-Based Initiatives

Federal place-based investment was distributed unevenly across the urban-rural divide, reflecting differences in population concentration (table 2). A large majority of the funding (\$306 billion) went to metropolitan areas, whereas about \$62 billion went to nonmetro areas. On a per capita basis, however, these geographic disparities narrow considerably: \$1,549 per capita in metropolitan and \$1,230 per capita in nonmetro areas.⁵ On a per capita basis, nonmetro counties tended to receive relatively more funding from economic development and health

5. Comparing per capita funding across metro and nonmetro areas is complicated by lower population densities and lack of scale economies in rural areas, which makes it difficult for programs to serve comparable number of people.

Figure 1. Annual Place-Based Funding (in billions)

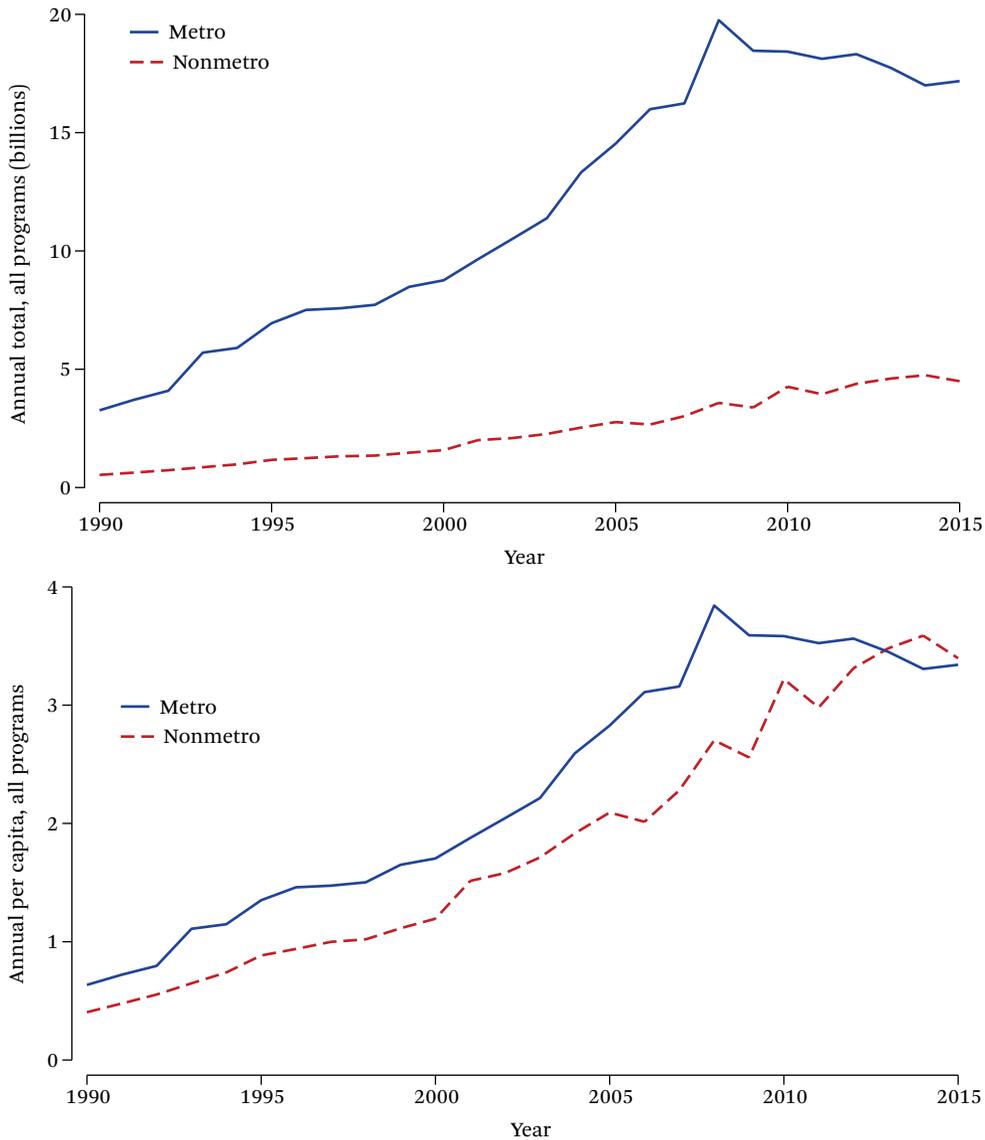


Source: Authors' tabulation based on public records of federal agencies.

Note: Annual funding amounts adjusted for inflation to 2016 dollars. Geography based on 1990 OMB definitions.

programs than metropolitan counties did, and relatively less from housing, crime, and other multidimensional programs. Although virtually all counties received some place-based investment over the twenty-five years covered here, the levels of investment varied considerably.

The median levels of funding on a per capita basis were modest—\$1,047 per capita for metropolitan and \$799 for nonmetro counties—but the counties in the top tail of the distribution received substantially more. The 99th percentile of funding was \$4,573 per person in metro

Figure 2. Total and Per Capita Annual Place-Based Funding (in billions)

Source: Data compiled by authors from public records of federal agencies.

Notes: Annual funding amounts adjusted for inflation to 2016 dollars. Geography based on 1990 OMB definitions.

counties and \$9,210 per person in nonmetro counties. Although average funding levels were relatively modest on a per capita basis, a small share of counties received substantial funding amounts from place-based programs.⁶

What happened in the counties that received the most funding? Table 3 presents sociodemographic change in counties in the top and bottom 10 percent of the per capita funding distribution, demonstrating the mixed se-

6. Metro classifications changed over this time period. Table A.2 compares counties that were consistently nonmetro to those that transitioned from nonmetro in 1990 to metro in 2010. The transition counties, which were more advantaged, received proportionately less place-based funding than consistently nonmetro counties.

Table 2. Total and Per Capita Place-Based Funding by Intervention Domain and Metropolitan Status, 1990–2015

	Metro (N = 837)	Nonmetro (N = 2,306)
National total	\$306,277,389,384	\$62,621,409,827
Housing	\$164,567,357,314	\$27,206,604,005
Economic development	\$78,230,029,854	\$22,174,476,977
Health	\$27,646,105,349	\$10,023,066,339
Crime	\$250,927,799	\$16,803,203
Multidimensional	\$35,582,968,885	\$3,200,459,295
Mean county total funding	\$365,922,807	\$27,138,282
National per capita	\$1,549.20	\$1,229.77
Housing	\$832.41	\$534.24
Economic development	\$395.70	\$435.56
Health	\$139.84	\$196.82
Crime	\$1.27	\$0.33
Multidimensional	\$179.98	\$62.81
Mean per capita funding	\$1,244	\$1,302
Mean per person-in-poverty funding	\$11,828	\$7,750
Percentiles of county per capita funding		
10th	\$391	\$154
25th	\$664	\$397
50th	\$1,047	\$799
75th	\$1,567	\$1,427
90th	\$2,234	\$2,507
99th	\$4,573	\$9,210

Sources: Authors' tabulations from public records of federal agencies and 1990 census data (Logan et al. 2014).

Notes: Metropolitan status determined with 1990 OMB definitions, per capita calculations use 1990 county populations.

lection into which places receive more (or less) investment. Between 1990 and 2015, nonmetro counties receiving the most place-based funding (greater than \$2,507 per capita) experienced population growth, increases in the share of residents with college educations and in median home values, and declines in poverty, unemployment, as well as the non-Hispanic White population. For metro counties receiving the most per capita funding (greater than \$2,234 per capita) relative to nonmetro counties, growth in average population was even larger and the decline greater in the non-Hispanic White population, a similar growth in the share college-educated as well as median home value, whereas poverty and unemployment remained roughly the same. Counties that received the least amount of funding expe-

rienced similar trends in sociodemographic change to the top tenth percentile, except for stable population size in nonmetro counties and lower overall levels of economic disadvantage. Overall, we find that economically disadvantaged counties were selected into receiving substantial amounts of place-based funding and that they experienced improved economic conditions, on average, though these gains have not eliminated persistent poverty.

The distribution of particular programs was similar across urban and rural counties (table 4), although greater shares of metro counties received funding compared to nonmetro counties. The programs with the largest presence in both rural and urban areas were long-running formula programs like HOME and CDBG: 63 percent of all nonmetro counties

Table 3. Sociodemographic Change in Counties Receiving the Top and Bottom Percentiles of Per Capita Place-Based Funding, 1990–2015

	1990	2015	% Change	1990	2015	% Change
	Top 10% Nonmetro (N = 231)			Top 10% Metro (N = 84)		
Population	17,371	21,150	21.75	402,883	529,811	31.50
Share poverty	24.66	20.35	-17.47	16.01	17.00	6.20
Share unemployed	9.47	8.15	-13.92	6.89	6.86	-0.51
Share non-Hispanic White	70.28	63.62	-9.49	68.80	55.00	-20.06
Share college educated	12.05	18.14	50.54	20.55	31.82	54.84
Median home value	\$73,818	\$125,203	69.61	\$141,118	\$228,974	62.26
	Bottom 10% Nonmetro (N = 231)			Bottom 10% Metro (N = 84)		
Population	8,167	8,161	-0.07	145,348	174,156	19.82
Share poverty	15.80	12.85	-18.64	8.96	10.17	13.50
Share unemployed	4.70	4.03	-14.40	5.08	5.49	7.92
Share non-Hispanic White	91.57	85.76	-6.35	89.30	82.79	-7.28
Share college educated	11.93	19.32	61.97	17.43	28.85	65.59
Median home value	\$58,836	\$111,383	89.31	\$144,137	\$209,943	45.65

Source: Authors' tabulations from public records of federal agencies, 1990 census data, and 2015 ACS data (Logan et al. 2014).

Note: Top 10 percent equates to investments greater than \$2,507 per capita in nonmetro counties and \$2,234 per capita in metro counties. Bottom 10 percent (conditional on receiving any funding) equates to investments less than \$154 per capita in nonmetro counties and \$391 per capita in metro counties. Median home values are adjusted for inflation to 2016 dollars.

and 96 percent of all metropolitan counties received HOME funding, and 47 percent of nonmetro counties and 87 percent of metropolitan counties received CDBG funding. Tax expenditure programs also had a large presence in counties across the rural-urban divide, with 56 percent and 88 percent of nonmetro and metropolitan counties, respectively, receiving LIHTC funding, and 20 percent and 45 percent receiving funding from the Community Development Financial Institutions Fund. In total, 90 percent of all rural counties and 99.2 percent of all urban counties received some place-based funding from a federal program between 1990 and 2015, making federal place-based funding ubiquitous over this period. These levels are similar if one considers all counties, or only high poverty counties (above 20 percent in 1990).

The map in figure 3 displays the geographic variability in place-based funding for nonmetro counties. Place-based funding was concentrated in poor areas of Appalachia, the Mississippi Delta, and the Southwest. A number of

rural counties located close to the Canadian border—from the Pacific Northwest to the Great Lakes to northern Maine—also received significant investment; less funding flowed to the Midwest than to other areas.

Taken together, the results from the first part of this analysis reveal a substantial increase in federal place-based funding going to rural counties between 1990 and 2015. What began as annual funding of roughly \$500 million to nonmetro counties has grown to more than \$4 billion annually. Economic development funding increased substantially during the 2000s, particularly after the recession, and has remained at that level since. Although the total amount of funding going to nonmetro places is substantially less than that going to urban places, on a per capita basis the funding amounts are roughly comparable. The vast majority of nonmetro counties—90 percent—received some place-based funding over this period, but substantial levels of investment were geographically concentrated—in high-poverty areas of the Mississippi Delta and Appalachia,

Table 4. Share of Counties Receiving Place-Based Funding by Program, 1990–2015

Program Name	All Counties		High-Poverty Counties	
	Nonmetro	Metro	Nonmetro	Metro
Housing				
LIHTC	56.15	88.42	54.86	86.61
HOME	62.80	96.06	60.47	98.73
NSP	0.40	2.95	0.35	2.68
HOPE VI	0.04	1.40	0.06	2.04
RIF	0.01	0.00	0.02	0.00
Health				
FQHC	41.66	55.16	57.12	72.10
HFFI	0.01	0.28	0.03	0.49
Education				
PROMISE	0.01	0.20	0.03	0.00
Economic development				
NMTC	1.46	7.63	2.03	10.56
CDFI	19.57	44.47	20.40	54.67
EZ	1.81	5.30	4.74	16.75
EDA	2.76	7.44	2.90	12.17
StrikeForce	0.04	0.05	0.09	0.19
AEDI	0.04	0.01	0.10	0.05
Crime				
PSN	0.29	4.94	0.41	7.06
CBCR	0.01	0.17	0.02	0.19
Multidimensional				
CDBG	46.93	86.62	44.33	91.14
RHED	0.56	0.84	0.93	2.00
YOG	0.12	0.67	0.25	0.97
Any Program	89.60	99.20	91.20	100.00

Source: Authors' tabulations from public records of federal agencies and 1990 census data (Logan et al. 2014).

Note: High poverty defined as > 20 percent of residents below the poverty line in 1990. Metropolitan status determined using 1990 OMB definitions. See table 1 for unabbreviated program names.

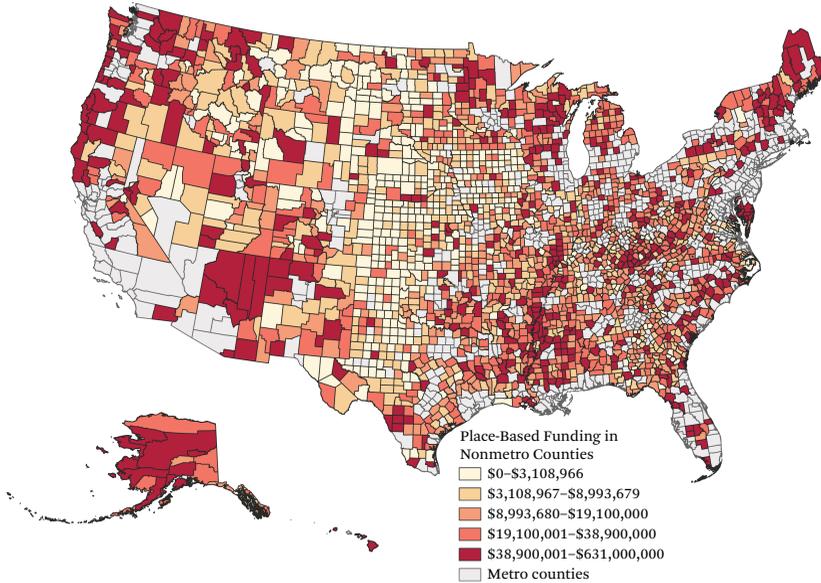
and also in rural northern counties close to the Canadian border.

Exposure to Place-Based Investment and Upward Mobility

Is federal place-based investment associated with improved socioeconomic outcomes for the residents of rural communities? We report the results for regressions of NLSY-97 adult so-

cioeconomic outcomes in 2015 on exposure to county place-based funding between 1990 and 2015, first for educational attainment (table 5) then for individual earnings (table 6). We find a strong association between living in a county that received more place-based funding and higher educational attainment in adulthood, controlling for individual and contextual covariates (see table 5, panel A).⁷ Nationally, every

7. This finding holds when we restrict the analysis to respondents at age twenty-five, when the average adult completes their education. We include older than age twenty-five for the main results to capture adults who finished degrees later in life.

Figure 3. Total Place-Based Funding in Nonmetro Counties, 1990–2015

Source: Data compiled by authors from public records of federal agencies.

Note: Annual funding amounts adjusted for inflation to 2016 dollars. Geography based on 1990 OMB definitions.

1 percent increase in exposure to place-based funding is associated with 11 percent greater odds ($e^{0.108}$) of obtaining a higher level of education (where educational categories are measured as: no high school degree, high school degree, some college, four-year college degree, or advanced degree). Converted into marginal effects for interpretation, the change in probability of completing a high school degree only decreases by 1.1 percentage points with a 1 percent increase in funding, whereas the probability of completing a college or advanced degree increases by 0.8 and 0.7 percentage points, respectively. This association is strongest for the top two quintiles of the place-based funding distribution, suggesting that substantial levels of investment are required to see noticeable consequences for adult educational outcomes. The association between county place-based funding and greater educational attainment is substantively large and statistically significant for respondents who grew up in *both* metro and nonmetro areas.

We then examine the patterns of educational attainment separately for those who stayed in their childhood home county and

those who moved. We find null results for both metro and nonmetro youth who stayed in their same county of residence; place-based investment is associated with higher educational attainment only for those who moved counties, particularly for those who moved from nonmetro home counties. The interactions presented in panel B of table 5 confirm a statistically significant difference in the association between place-based funding and educational attainment for movers and stayers among rural youth only; this difference is not statistically significant for urban youth. These results support qualitative evidence that high levels of investment in educational “achievers” may prompt migration out of nonmetro areas and contribute to the “brain drain” in rural America, where there are fewer employment opportunities that allow residents to translate human capital into higher earnings (Kefalas and Carr 2009).

The results for earnings are presented in table 6. We find that, net of individual and contextual controls, exposure to a one percent increase in county place-based funding is associated with 9.5 percent greater earnings in

Table 5. Ordinal Logistic Regressions Predicting 2015 Educational Attainment, Weighted Coefficients

	National			Childhood County			Stayed			Moved			
	Logged	Funding	Quintiles	Metro	Nonmetro	Logged	Metro	Nonmetro	Logged	Metro	Nonmetro	Logged	Nonmetro
	Funding			Logged	Logged	Logged	Logged	Logged	Logged	Logged	Logged	Logged	Logged
Panel A. Overall													
Exposure to place-based funding													
Total place-based funding	0.108*** (0.028)			0.101** (0.033)	0.160** (0.056)		-0.018 (0.050)	0.063 (0.124)		0.175*** (0.047)		0.217** (0.074)	
By quintiles (Ref=1st quintile)													
2nd quintile		0.190+ (0.103)											
3rd quintile		0.236* (0.108)											
4th quintile		0.367** (0.112)											
5th quintile		0.435*** (0.132)											
Metro county of residence	-0.062 (0.088)												
Panel B. Interaction													
Moved counties*place-based funding	0.053 (0.041)			-0.003 -0.054	0.242* -0.113								
Panel C. Life course timing													
Childhood place-based funding	-0.074** (0.024)			-0.067* (0.028)	-0.130+ (0.072)		-0.067 (0.042)	-0.158 (0.176)		-0.037 (0.038)		-0.156+ (0.080)	
Adulthood place-based funding	0.156*** (0.025)			0.137*** (0.031)	0.245*** (0.049)		-0.001 (0.048)	0.105 (0.109)		0.192*** (0.041)		0.228*** (0.063)	
Observations	4,871	4,871	4,871	3,844	1,027		1,989	449		1,855		578	

Source: Authors' tabulations from public records of federal agencies, NLSY-1997, 1990 census data, and 2015 ACS data (Logan et al. 2014).

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses. Models include individual-level controls for 1997 household income, maternal and paternal educational attainment, gender, race-ethnicity, age, nativity, childhood family structure, and whether the respondent moved counties by 2015. County-level controls include indicator variables for region and metropolitan status as well as 1997 poverty rate, unemployment rate, and population. All models weighted using NLSY custom national sampling weights. Stayed and moved are in reference to childhood home counties.

***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05, + p < .1

2015; although substantively large this result is only marginally statistically significant.⁸ When we examine quintiles of place-based funding, we find that the associations are strongest for the fourth quintile. We do not find significant differences in this association for children growing up in metro or nonmetro counties. The latter columns of table 6 separate those who stayed in their childhood county and those who moved. For respondents who moved counties between childhood and adulthood, increased county place-based investment was strongly associated with greater earnings. On the other hand, those who stayed in their childhood county experienced no economic returns from greater place-based investment. Panel B of table 6 shows a marginally significant difference in the association of place-based funding for youth who moved and stayed in their childhood home counties. The results suggest that place-based investment may influence young adults' economic prospects primarily through the channel of geographic mobility, creating opportunities that then enable youth to move to metro areas with robust economies and earnings potential.

Both the educational attainment and earnings results indicate that migration plays an important role in enabling greater economic opportunity for youth. To assess the relationship between exposure to place-based investment in childhood and out-migration in greater detail, we present logistic regressions on the log odds that respondents move from their original home county in adulthood (table 7). We find that, at the national level, living in counties that received more place-based funding in childhood is associated with significantly lower odds of migration. This pattern appears to be strongest for counties in the top two quintiles of funding. However, this overall negative relationship is driven by youth living in metro counties, whereas nonmetro youth exposed to more place-based funding have increased odds of out-migration. Specifically, ex-

posure to one percent more place-based funding for nonmetro youth is associated with 29 percent greater odds ($e^{0.255}$) of out-migration (or a change in probability of 2.7 percentage points), and this association is even stronger for moves to metro counties. Taken together, rural place-based investment appears to benefit economic and educational outcomes for young adults who migrate to metro areas, while we do not find evidence of these benefits for those who stay in their nonmetro home county or for those who move to a nonmetro county.

Do these associations vary by the life course timing or domain of place-based investment? Our results suggest that exposure to place-based funding in adulthood is associated with more favorable economic outcomes, rather than funding during childhood (see panel C of tables 5 and 6). A one percent increase in place-based investment in adulthood is associated with a 10.5 percent increase in individual earnings and 13 percent greater odds ($e^{0.16}$) of obtaining higher education (or in marginal effects, the change in probability of completing a college degree increases by 1 percentage point), whereas exposure to funding in childhood is insignificant or negative for both of these outcomes.⁹ Importantly, when considering residential mobility, we find these positive associations in adulthood only among rural and urban youth who moved and not those who stayed in their childhood home counties.

The positive associations in adulthood may be because place-based investment was comparatively scant in the 1980s and early 1990s, during the early childhood years of the NLSY respondents' lives, relative to the later years when funding became more widespread and substantial. It also may be that federal place-based funding streams have done more to alter economic opportunity for adults—through access to job training or credit, for example—than they have for youth, especially due to the selective out-migration of rural youth among

8. The results are largely similar when we use household income in 2015 as the dependent variable, though smaller in magnitude, as the broader household income measure less closely corresponds with the individual survey respondent, for whom we measure exposure to place-based investment.

9. Results using quintiles also show that intensity of funding in childhood did not vary, suggesting further that exposure during young adulthood matters more for the economic outcomes considered here.

Table 6. OLS Regressions Predicting 2015 Individual Earnings (Logged), Weighted Coefficients

	National		Childhood Residence				Stayed		Moved	
	Logged Funding	Funding Quintiles	Metro		Nonmetro		Metro		Nonmetro	
			Logged Funding	Logged Funding	Logged Funding	Logged Funding	Logged Funding	Logged Funding		
Panel A. Overall										
Exposure to place-based funding, 1990–2015										
Total place-based funding	0.096 ⁺ (0.058)		0.090 (0.068)	0.116 (0.118)	-0.074 (0.093)	-0.181 (0.248)	0.235* (0.100)	0.248 ⁺ (0.135)		
By quintile (ref=1st quintile)										
2nd quintile		0.108 (0.199)								
3rd quintile		0.181 (0.219)								
4th quintile		0.526* (0.222)								
5th quintile		0.121 (0.274)								
Metro county of residence	-0.279 ⁺ (0.167)									
Panel B. Interaction										
Moved counties*place-based funding	0.167* (0.08)		0.141 (0.11)	0.412 ⁺ (0.246)						
Panel C. Life course timing										
Childhood place-based funding	-0.060 (0.046)		-0.045 (0.051)	-0.201 (0.150)	-0.088 (0.076)	-0.330 (0.257)	0.014 (0.071)	-0.145 (0.180)		
Adulthood place-based funding	0.105 ⁺ (0.054)		0.103 (0.064)	0.123 (0.106)	-0.056 (0.091)	-0.133 (0.214)	0.213* (0.091)	0.245* (0.123)		
Observations	4,871	4,871	3,844	1,027	1,989	449	1,855	578		

Source: Authors' tabulations from public records of federal agencies, NLSY–1997, 1990 census data, and 2015 ACS data (Logan et al. 2014).

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. Models include individual-level controls for 1997 household income, maternal and paternal educational attainment, gender, race-ethnicity, age, nativity, childhood family structure, and whether the respondent moved counties by 2015. County-level controls include indicator variables for region and metropolitan status as well as 1997 poverty rate, unemployment rate, and population. All models weighted using NLSY custom national sampling weights. Stayed and moved are in reference to childhood home counties.

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, + $p < .1$.

Table 7. Logistic Regressions Predicting Outmigration from Original Childhood County, Weighted Coefficients

	Logged Funding	Funding Quintiles	Childhood Residence				Moved	
			Metro		Nonmetro		Metro to Nonmetro	Nonmetro to Metro
			Metro	Nonmetro	Metro	Nonmetro		
Childhood exposure to place-based funding								
Total funding, logged (ref=1st quintile)	-0.098*** (0.026)		-0.101*** (0.030)	0.255** (0.079)	-0.133 (0.089)	-0.123** (0.047)	0.345*** (0.083)	-0.055+ (0.030)
By quintiles in childhood (ref=1st quintile)								
2nd quintile		-0.056 (0.104)						
3rd quintile		-0.123 (0.123)						
4th quintile		-0.364** (0.128)						
5th quintile		-0.365* (0.154)						
Metro county of residence	0.026 (0.102)							
Constant	1.125 (0.971)	-0.582 (0.833)	0.446 (1.130)	-1.869 (2.496)	1.238 (2.531)	-1.466 (2.001)	-4.078+ (2.418)	-0.507 (1.145)
Observations	4,871	4,871	3,844	1,027	1,020	3,844	1,027	3,844

Source: Authors' tabulations from public records of federal agencies, NLSY-1997, and 1990 census data (Logan et al. 2014).

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. Models include individual-level controls for 1997 household income, maternal and paternal educational attainment, gender, race-ethnicity, age, nativity, and childhood family structure. County-level controls include indicator variables for region and metropolitan status as well as 1997 poverty rate, unemployment rate, and population. All models weighted using NLSY custom national sampling weights.

***p < .001, **p < .01, * p < .05, +p < .1

those more likely to complete secondary education.

In supplemental analyses (table A.3), we find that the general results hold across different domains of investment. These programs often have different aims; for instance, economic development programs tend to focus on developing human capital or creating job opportunities while housing programs attempt to create new housing opportunities in their communities. Indeed, economic development funding was associated with greater earnings and greater odds of obtaining a higher educational degree, while housing funding was strongly associated with higher educational attainment as well as lower odds of out-migration. Health and multidimensional programs were also positively associated with educational attainment, and multidimensional programs were negatively associated with out-migration.

DISCUSSION

Our analysis of federal place-based policy has revealed substantial and sustained growth in funding to rural counties between 1990 and 2015, particularly for economic development initiatives and to a lesser extent housing and health initiatives. Although federal place-based investment in nonmetro counties totaled about \$500 million per year in the 1990s, it grew to more than \$4 billion annually by 2015. This funding was disbursed widely across the country, with the vast majority of counties receiving funding from a place-based program over this period, including 90 percent of nonmetro counties. At the same time, investment was concentrated among a smaller number of nonmetro counties, located disproportionately in the Mississippi Delta, Appalachia, Southwest, and by the Canadian border from the Pacific Northwest to the Great Lakes to northern Maine.

Despite this sizable growth in federal place-based investment in rural communities, we find mixed evidence that this investment has produced better socioeconomic outcomes for rural residents. For youth growing up in nonmetro counties, exposure to a greater intensity of place-based funding was associated with significantly higher educational attainment and earnings, but only when they left their home

counties. Along with our descriptive results (table A.1), this suggests that youth growing up in rural areas do not have significantly different educational or economic outcomes from urban youth so long as they migrate in adulthood. Indeed, qualitative evidence indicates that rural housing and economic development efforts disproportionately advantage wealthier in-migrants to rural areas, rather than long-time residents, and that schools are a key mechanism in this divergence (see Sherman and Schafft 2022).

These findings further align with research showing that returns to education have been diverging across metro and nonmetro areas since the mid-1990s (Domina 2006), such that economic incentives have greatly favored metropolitan residence for college graduates. This has resulted in rising educational segregation between metro and nonmetro areas (Fischer and Mattson 2009). Taken together with the strong relationship we uncovered between place-based funding and out-migration, the results suggest that place-based funding is associated with improved economic opportunity primarily via channels of geographic mobility. Rather than place-based investment inciting residential displacement or gentrification as in urban contexts (Freeman 2005; Marcuse 1985), we find that in rural contexts, place-based investment may improve individual life chances through out-migration to places with greater economic opportunity, contributing to what has been dubbed the rural brain drain (Kefalas and Carr 2009). Such funding could, for example, create conditions that improve human and financial capital that enables college attendance away from one's hometown and skills that are competitive in metropolitan labor markets. But this geographic mobility is not without drawbacks, as moving to places with better opportunity structures can incur economic, social, and emotional costs for disadvantaged rural youth (see Parsons 2022).

Although our key independent variable is funding amount, the modest associations between place-based funding and economic outcomes in adulthood may have less to do with how much was spent and more to do with the products of that expenditure, such as how many jobs were created; how many residents

received access to training, capital, or health care; or how many housing units were built. All individuals in a given county may not personally benefit from investment even though the community experiences improvements in local economic conditions such as employment or home values. This tension between person-versus place-based approaches leads to perennial questions of who benefits from this type of policy intervention. The literature provides only limited evidence about the concrete benefits of place-based investments, and it suggests that those gains tend to be relatively modest in scope and impact in both urban and rural areas (Busso, Gregory, and Kline 2013; Cho 2019; Estrada and Allen 2004; Kline and Moretti 2014). Some evidence also indicates compositional change following place-based investment, an increasing presence of more advantaged residents and a potential displacement of incumbent disadvantaged residents (Freedman 2012; Reynolds and Rohlin 2015; Tach and Emory 2017). None of this literature has explicitly compared place-based investments across multiple programs in urban and rural areas, however. We also know little about how place-based investment intersects with other aspects of community opportunity structure, and it may be that other conditions—such as a sufficient density of population, a robust nonprofit sector, proximity to colleges and universities, or low levels of racial inequality—may be required for place-based investment to reach its full potential.

A different class of methodological and data-driven explanations also highlights some limitations of this study's data and analytic strategy. First, this article focuses on federal place-based policies, but many state, local, and philanthropic initiatives have also taken a place-based approach to investing in communities. To the extent that federal investments are distinct from these other sources, we may not be identifying all relevant place-based investments in communities, which may obscure the effects of federal programs. We also define place-based policies narrowly based on geographic eligibility criteria. Other types of federal investment (such as agricultural subsidies) may have disproportionate concentration and impact on rural areas even though they do not

meet the strict definition of place-based program used here.

Second, our place-based data series begins in 1990 because, prior to that period, little federal place-based investment occurred and data records were very uneven in coverage and quality. This means that the cohort of respondents covered in the NLSY—born in the early 1980s—experienced a substantial portion of their childhood with little exposure to place-based policies. If either early childhood or cumulative childhood exposure are important for youth to reap the benefits of place-based investment, the NLSY cohort may be too old relative to the expansion of place-based policymaking for us to observe significant gains. Third, this article takes a broad approach to assessing the consequences of place-based investment defined as exposure to all forms of funding at the county level. Although this approach captures funding in a comprehensive way, we cannot know for sure whether residents actually came into contact with the tangible products of the place-based investment.

Finally, the observational and descriptive approach taken here limits our ability to assess the impact of any single program in a way that is causally identified. The results may be influenced by selection: some places are selected for funding due to great need, whereas others are selected because they are more likely to be successful (Cook et al. 2009; Dewees, Lobao, and Swanson 2003; Tach et al. 2019). Our descriptive findings on this selection pattern (table 3) suggest that the most economically distressed counties did receive more funding, particularly nonmetro counties, than those receiving the least amount of funding; however, the trends in level of demographic change were similar. Although we find that funding is distributed widely across the country over the period, reaching 98.5 percent of all counties, the intensity of place-based investments is not random. Thus our findings are subject to the same limitations as other descriptive work based on covariate adjustment, and more needs to be done to identify the causal impacts of these programs in rural areas.

Although this article has focused on socioeconomic outcomes, place-based policies may affect many other important aspects of per-

sonal and community well-being. Policies that provide access to banking services, better infrastructure, stable housing, or more commerce may be well worth the investment even if they do not yield appreciable improvement in economic outcomes for residents. The NLSY data used in this article also necessitated a broad categorization of counties by metropolitan status, but this likely obscures significant

variation in the efficacy of place-based policies across areas experiencing different economic and population trends. We hope that the place-based data used in this article can spur more research on these, and other, important topics in the future with the goal of providing a better understanding of what forms of place-based investment work for rural places and their residents.

Table A.1. Descriptive Statistics of NLSY-1997 Respondents, Place-Based Funding, and Geographic Characteristics

Respondent's Sociodemographic Characteristics	Overall	Metro	Nonmetro	T-test by Metro
Gender (1=Male)	0.51	0.52	0.50	
Household income (1997)	\$52,249	\$54,402	\$45,308	***
Race-Ethnicity and Nativity				
Non-Hispanic Black	0.15	0.16	0.12	**
Non-Hispanic White	0.68	0.64	0.80	***
Non-Hispanic Other Race	0.04	0.05	0.03	
Hispanic	0.13	0.15	0.05	***
U.S.-born	0.97	0.96	0.99	***
Father's education				
Less than high school	0.19	0.19	0.20	
High school or GED	0.37	0.36	0.41	***
Some college	0.17	0.17	0.16	
College or more	0.22	0.23	0.18	
Missing	0.05	0.05	0.04	
Mother's education				
Less than high school	0.18	0.18	0.18	
High school or GED	0.37	0.36	0.38	
Some college	0.25	0.25	0.25	
College or more	0.20	0.21	0.18	
Missing	0.01	0.01	0.01	
Household composition (1997)				
Lived with both biological parents	0.53	0.52	0.57	
Lived with mix of biological or nonbiological parents	0.15	0.14	0.16	
Lived with single biological parent	0.27	0.28	0.23	**
Other living arrangement	0.05	0.05	0.04	
County characteristics (1997)				
Persistent poverty county	0.07	0.04	0.18	***
Percent poverty	0.12	0.12	0.14	***
Percent unemployed	0.60	0.59	0.65	***

Table A.1. (continued)

Respondent's Sociodemographic Characteristics	Overall	Metro	Nonmetro	T-test by Metro
Region (1997)				
Northeast	0.17	0.16	0.17	
Midwest	0.28	0.27	0.34	***
West	0.20	0.21	0.19	**
South	0.35	0.36	0.30	
Respondent characteristics (2015)				
Age	32.8	32.8	32.8	
Individual earnings	\$38,496	\$39,226	\$36,138	
Mean years in metro county (1990–2015)	17.98	22.11	4.68	***
Percent lived majority of years in nonmetro county	0.23	0.02	0.91	***
Moved counties	0.53	0.52	0.57	***
Moved to nonmetro county	0.10	0.07	0.20	***
Moved to metro county	0.43	0.45	0.37	**
Respondent has a child	0.34	0.35	0.33	
Highest degree completed (2015)				
Less than high school	0.07	0.07	0.06	
High school or GED	0.51	0.50	0.54	
Some college	0.09	0.09	0.10	
College or more	0.33	0.34	0.30	
Mean place-based funding, 1990–2015 (millions)				
Total	\$101.92	\$125.08	\$27.22	***
By domain				
Economic development	\$28.50	\$34.57	\$8.94	***
Housing	\$51.08	\$62.78	\$13.37	***
Multidimensional	\$14.12	\$17.77	\$2.34	***
Health	\$8.13	\$9.86	\$2.56	***
	N=4,871	N=3,844	N=1,027	

Source: Authors' tabulations from public records of federal agencies, NLSY-1997, 1990 census data, and 2015 ACS data (Logan et al. 2014).

Note: Customized NLSY survey weights applied. Metro status refers to the county where the NLSY respondent lived in the first survey year (1997). Sample excluded NLSY respondents who were not interviewed in 2015 (n = 1,933) or who had missing values on household income in 1997 (n = 1,446) and 2015 (n = 763) or education (n = 18). All monetary measures were converted to 2016 dollars.

Table A.2. Total and Per Capita Place-Based Funding by Intervention Domain, 1990–2015

	Stable Nonmetro (N = 2,003)	Nonmetro to Metro ^a (N = 306)
National total	\$52,074,268,597	\$10,547,141,229
Housing	\$21,432,202,681	\$5,774,401,324
Economic development	\$19,651,974,427	\$2,522,502,549
Health	\$8,393,463,983	\$1,629,602,356
Crime	\$13,561,185	\$3,242,017
Multidimensional	\$2,583,066,320	\$617,392,975
Mean county total funding	\$26,018,548	\$34,467,782
National per capita	\$478.02	\$451.03
Housing	\$196.74	\$246.93
Economic development	\$180.40	\$107.87
Health	\$77.05	\$69.69
Crime	\$0.12	\$0.14
Multidimensional	\$23.71	\$26.40
Mean per capita funding	\$1,337	\$1,079
Mean per person-in-poverty funding	\$7,832	\$7,209
Percentiles of county per capita funding		
10th	\$145.48	\$171.20
25th	\$398.99	\$369.14
50th	\$804.74	\$774.42
75th	\$1,475.11	\$1,273.59
90th	\$2,594.96	\$1,984.00
99th	\$9,654.49	\$6,067.13

Sources. Authors' tabulations from public records of federal agencies.

Notes. Metropolitan status determined with 1990 OMB definitions, per capita calculations use 1990 county populations.

^aCounties that transitioned from nonmetro in 1990 to metropolitan by 2010.

Table A.3. Supplemental Regression Results, Weighted Coefficients

	Education			Earnings			Out-Migration		
	Overall	Nonmetro	Metro	Overall	Nonmetro	Metro	Overall	Nonmetro	Metro
Domain of place-based funding									
Economic development	0.050*** (0.014)	0.041 (0.028)	0.062*** (0.017)	0.063* (0.030)	0.069 (0.050)	0.048 (0.038)	-0.006 (0.006)	0.013 (0.013)	-0.009 (0.007)
Housing	0.094*** (0.027)	0.138* (0.056)	0.087** (0.033)	0.084 (0.057)	0.091 (0.116)	0.086 (0.067)	-0.055** (0.021)	0.034 (0.030)	-0.079* (0.031)
Health	0.020** (0.007)	0.048*** (0.014)	0.006 (0.009)	0.020 (0.015)	0.063* (0.026)	-0.001 (0.018)	0.000 (0.005)	0.030** (0.011)	-0.002 (0.006)
Multidimensional	0.035* (0.016)	0.055** (0.021)	0.033 (0.024)	-0.000 (0.028)	-0.040 (0.044)	0.017 (0.037)	-0.024* (0.012)	0.008 (0.022)	-0.030* (0.015)

Source: Authors' tabulations from public records of federal agencies, NLSY-1997, 1990 census data, and 2015 ACS data (Logan et al. 2014).

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. All funding measures are log transformed. Models include individual-level controls for 1997 household income, maternal and paternal educational attainment, gender, race-ethnicity, age, nativity, childhood family structure, and whether the respondent moved counties by 2015. County-level controls include indicator variables for region and metropolitan status as well as 1997 poverty rate, unemployment rate, and population. All models weighted using customized national sampling weights.

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, + $p < .1$

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Rural Kids and Wealth



LISA A. KEISTER , JAMES W. MOODY, AND TOM WOLFF

Wealth ownership is a critical component of economic well-being, and wealth in early adulthood provides important clues about the trajectories along which individuals move throughout their lives. Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), we find an association between growing up rural and adult wealth that varies across the components of wealth. We also find that growing up rural has unique implications for young adult wealth ownership that differ from growing up in other geographic regions, particularly in urban areas. Our results highlight an important outcome that is conditioned by growing up rural and underscores the importance of context for understanding how families save and accumulate wealth.

Keywords: Wealth inequality, rural, homeownership, debt

Wealth ownership is a crucial component of economic security (Keister and Lee 2014; Killwald, Pfeffer, and Schachner 2017; Skopek, Buchholz, and Blossfeld 2014), and wealth in early adulthood provides important evidence regarding the trajectories along which people move

throughout their lives (Keister 2003, 2005). Wealth is the things people own and is usually measured as net worth (total household assets minus debts). Because wealth is cumulative, understanding the assets and debts of young adults can provide a glimpse into the lifelong

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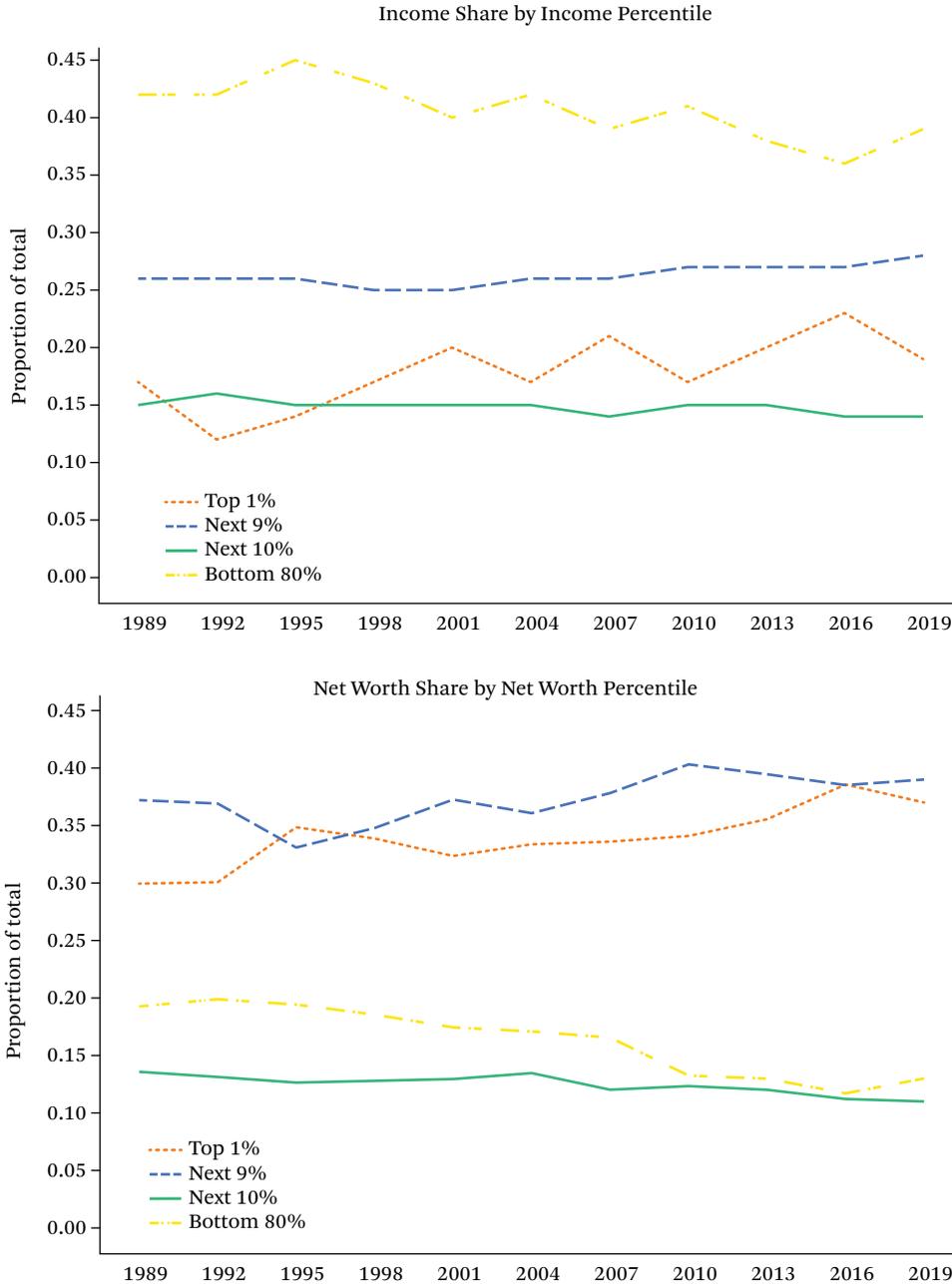
wealth accumulation pathways that people follow. Wealth is sometimes relegated to conversations about high net worth households, but even a small amount of savings or home equity can provide significant advantages. Wealth can create a financial buffer in case of medical or other emergencies, the loss of an income, or unforeseen expenses. Assets can be invested to generate more wealth, and real assets (such as the home or other real estate) have both use value and investment value. Wealth is positively associated with children's development (Gibson-Davis, Keister, and Gennetian 2019), improves health and emotional well-being across the life course (Boen 2016; Boen and Yang 2016), and can be used to fund a comfortable retirement. Perhaps more important, wealth can be passed to future generations to extend these benefits indefinitely. Income is often used to measure well-being, but wealth is more enduring and much more unequally distributed than income. Figure 1 shows that the top 1 percent of U.S. households received about 20 percent of total income in recent decades, but the top 1 percent owned at least 30 percent of net worth. By contrast, the bottom 80 percent of households received 35–45 percent of income but owned less than 20 percent of net worth. Given the importance of wealth to well-being, it is important to understand the factors that are associated with saving, asset ownership, and debt.

Growing up in a rural area is likely to be associated with early adult—and thus lifelong—wealth ownership; however, no research documents the association between being raised rural and later wealth. Three gaps in the literature require attention. First, there are the likely differences in young adult wealth among rural youth relative to their peers raised in other geographic areas. Differences are across geographic regions in poverty, educational and occupational opportunities, and the pace at which areas recover from economic setbacks. Given that income, education, and occupational attainment are all highly predictive of wealth, differences between rural and urban youth in their saving, asset accumulation, and debt follow. Second, the relationship between growing up rural and young adult wealth is likely to be associated differently with total net

worth and its components (such as financial assets, homeownership, debt). Parsing these patterns and processes has the potential to clarify the reasons a rural background matters more broadly. Third, differences are likely in wealth outcomes by detailed geographic residence in adolescence. Rural, urban, and other geographic regions offer unique benefits and challenges that may shape young adult wealth. Rural-urban differences are potentially most pronounced, but research to date has not explored this possibility.

We address these gaps by studying the differences in young adult wealth ownership in the United States across the rural-urban continuum. We have three primary objectives. The first is to document the association between growing up rural and young adult wealth. We study wealth in young adulthood because this is a critical life stage for understanding the trajectory along which a person will accumulate assets as both saving and debt can be cumulative, and early patterns are likely predictive of lifelong saving and debt pathways. Importantly, the large and growing literature on the correlates of wealth neglects this critical life stage and says nothing about the role of geography as a correlate of wealth at any life stage. Second, we study how the association between growing up rural and young adult wealth varies across key measures of wealth including having negative net worth, the value of financial assets, homeownership, and home debt. Third, we explore how the association between geographic region of residence in adolescence and young adult wealth varies across the rural-urban continuum using a detailed conception of rural, urban, and other geographic areas. We use the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health) to study these processes. Add Health is ideal for our work because it includes longitudinal information on both adolescent traits (including place of residence) and young adult outcomes (including place of residence and wealth). Our attention to young adult outcomes is particularly important given the foundational nature of this life stage and the reality that today's young adults face a different set of social and economic contexts than previous generations. Moreover, we study detailed geographic conditions by using

Figure 1. Net Worth and Income Inequality



Source: Authors' estimates from the Survey of Consumer Finances.

rural-urban commuting area (RUCA) codes, which allow us to explore differences across the rural-urban continuum in significant detail. Our findings contribute to understanding the long-term consequences of growing up rural, and they highlight the importance of geo-

graphic context in conditioning economic well-being across the life course.

YOUNG ADULT WEALTH

Four aspects of wealth are particularly important to understanding financial stability in

young adulthood and the trajectory along which people are likely to accumulate assets and debts over their adult lives: total wealth (net worth), financial assets, homeownership, and mortgage debt. We focus on each of these measures, knowing, of course, that young adulthood is just the start of adult wealth ownership and acknowledging that wealth patterns will change as people age. However, total wealth and these components provide an important glimpse into the starting point for accumulation that will provide the foundation on which future wealth is built. First, it is important to consider *net worth*, a broad indicator of wealth status. In particular, having negative, zero, or positive net worth is a particularly salient indicator of wealth status in young adulthood when people have just begun to accumulate wealth and the distribution of assets across households has not yet become as skewed as it tends to be later in life. Positive net worth suggests that a household has begun to save and accumulate assets that can provide a foundation for lifelong financial security. By contrast, negative net worth results from having more debts than assets and might indicate a precarious start to adult financial status, particularly if a household has considerable consumer debt (rather than educational or home debt). Although net worth is an important measure of financial well-being, it follows that looking more closely at its components is necessary to better understand a household's status. For this reason, we also study a second wealth measure: financial assets. *Financial assets* (such as savings accounts, checking accounts, stocks, and bonds) can be used to pay for necessary expenses in an emergency and can be invested to provide financial security over the life course. Liquid financial assets—those that are readily turned to cash—are particularly important. The ownership of financial assets is highly unequal in the United States (Keister 2014), and those who manage to save some financial assets at an early age are uniquely positioned to create financial stability over the course of their adult lives.

Third, *homeownership* is a form of wealth critical to the financial well-being of Americans. The home is one of the most significant assets that many Americans will own, particularly for those in the middle class; and home

values have historically appreciated across most of U.S. history (Spilerman and Wolff 2012). Owning a home as a young adult can allow a household to accumulate significant positive net worth over time that can ultimately be used to fund other investments (for example, when home equity is used to buy a more valuable home or other real estate) or spending (such as through home equity lines of credit or by selling the house to pay for retirement expenses). Although home equity is less liquid than most financial assets, home equity lines of credit and other forms of borrowing against the home can make homeownership an important safety net as well. Importantly, there is a financial value to homeownership via consumption (that is, the owner can take loans against the equity if needed). However, owning some form of real estate has important advantages regardless of the value; that is, the very act of owning a home provides a foundation for saving, can reduce stress, can allow parents to obtain quality education for their children, and can be an indicator of success (Coley et al. 2013). Finally, debt is an important indicator of financial stability. It is important to remember that not all debt is problematic. *Mortgage debt*, for example, is a financial liability but it is associated with the benefits that come from investing in real estate. The 2007–2009 economic crisis and ensuing economic downturn highlighted that mortgage debt and homeownership are not always beneficial, that not all households are ideal homeowners, and that home values will not always increase (Fligstein and Goldstein 2011; Pfeffer, Danziger, and Schoeni 2013). However, most households cannot afford to purchase a home without a mortgage, and given that the benefits of homeownership can be substantial, mortgage debt is typically considered an advantageous form of debt for most households.

GEOGRAPHY AND WEALTH

The unique demographic, economic, and social conditions that characterize rural communities are likely to interact in nuanced ways to shape young adult wealth. In recent decades, jobs have moved from rural areas to metropolitan centers where financial, technical, and other employers are located (Probst et al. 2011). Rural

areas were also considerably slower to recover from the Great Recession than metropolitan and other regions, leading to widening economic gaps (Fry 2013). These recent changes have exacerbated well-documented challenges of growing up rural and are likely to lead to distinctive patterns of saving, investing, and debt acquisition for young adults who were raised in rural areas.

Three correlates of wealth suggest that growing up in a rural community is likely to be associated with young adult wealth in important ways. The factors that relate growing up rural with young adult assets and debts are well-established correlates of wealth ownership, and the underlying processes that lead to young adult wealth are the same regardless of place of residence in adolescence. However, because the conditions under which rural youth are raised might involve impediments to attaining important adult outcomes such as education, it follows that rural youth might also accumulate different levels and types of wealth than their urban counterparts. In the following sections, we address the three most salient correlates of wealth accumulation (educational attainment, social connections, and income) and explore how these might result in differences in young adult wealth across the rural-urban continuum. Of course, many other factors contribute to wealth ownership both in young adulthood and beyond; identifying the salient adolescent factors that are associated with young adult wealth is not an implication that these are the only factors at play.

Education

The first factor that potentially leads to differences in young adult wealth across the urban-rural continuum is educational attainment. In particular, it is well documented that educational opportunities are limited in rural communities even relative to other small communities (Biddle and Mette 2017; Economic Research Service 2019b; Hamilton et al. 2008). High rates of poverty and low population density mean that funding for rural schools lags behind school funding in other regions (Biddle and Mette 2017; Carlson and Goss 2016). The result is dilapidated buildings, less experienced and qualified teachers, and limits to other resources

such as after-school programs, athletics, music education, and other extracurricular activities (Biddle and Mette 2017; Carlson and Goss 2016; Lichter, Roscigno, and Condron 2003). Because of resource constraints in school and at home, rural students' access to the internet tends to be low, and as a result, rural youth have lower rates of adoption of new technologies that might contribute to educational achievement (Biddle and Mette 2017; Carlson and Goss 2016). Moreover, as rural populations declined in recent decades, rural schools consolidated, requiring students to spend more time on buses, reducing time available for educational and extracurricular activities, socializing with friends and family, and doing homework (MacTavis and Salamon 2003).

Resource and other constraints in rural areas have clear implications for both short- and long-term educational outcomes for youth. In particular, growing up in a rural area is associated with lower educational and occupational aspirations (Biddle and Mette 2017; Cobb, McIntire, and Pratt 1989; McLaughlin, Shoff, and Demi 2014), increased dropout rates, reduced preparation for postsecondary education, and ultimately lower lifelong educational achievement (Lichter, Roscigno, and Condron 2003). Youth who stay in rural areas are less likely to complete college degrees or professional training (Economic Research Service 2019b; Hamilton et al. 2008). Those who migrate to other areas in search of educational and occupational opportunities (often the most talented youth) contribute to the acute outmigration problem that faces many rural communities and that further lowers education levels in rural areas (Carr and Kefalas 2009; Gibbs and Cromartie 1994; Johnson 2012; Sherman and Sage 2011). Rates of return to rural communities are notably low despite the draw of ties to family and friends (Hamilton et al. 2008) because employment opportunities are limited (von Reichert, Cromartie and Arthun 2011).

Because education is one of the strongest correlates of adult wealth, differences in educational opportunities between rural and other areas may lead to differences in young adult wealth. Education provides the skills needed to invest, buy real estate, and sensibly assume and pay off debt (Keister 2000, 2005; Killewald, Pfef-

fer, and Schachner 2017). Educational attainment also affects wealth accumulation indirectly because it reduces family size, increases female labor force participation, and increases both personal and total household income (Keister 2000, 2005), and these outcomes also affect wealth. In young adulthood, educational attainment is likely to reduce the likelihood that a household has negative net worth, and it is likely to increase overall savings and the accumulation of financial assets. Educational attainment is also likely to increase the propensity to own a home and, correspondingly, the amount of mortgage debt that a household has acquired. In the case of those with higher levels of education, mortgage debt is likely to be a long-term benefit to overall wealth accumulation because education improves job and income stability, which increase the potential for the household to pay off the debt and increase home equity.

Social Connections

Second, social connections across geographic areas may lead to differences in young adult wealth. Research has highlighted the presence of strong social support in rural communities, and rural youths may share stronger ties and denser networks than do youths in other areas (Crockett, Shanahan, and Jackson-Newsom 2000; Howarth 1995; Stegner 1992). Social connections during adolescence are particularly important: in modern industrial societies adolescents are largely sequestered from adults, allowing students to form their own unique social systems (Coleman 1961; Milner 2004). As James Coleman (1961, 174) notes, “There are few periods in life in which associations are so strong, intimate, and all-encompassing as those that develop during adolescence.” Whereas adult society is functionally differentiated into worlds such as work, family, or neighborhoods, adolescent social life is comparatively one dimensional. Most adolescents spend the majority of their time involved in school or school-related activities that bring students together with the same sets of people. Informal relations with other adolescents—primarily friendship and romance—make up the core of the adolescent society.

The intense peer relations, influential

cliques, and broader social hierarchies that characterize adolescence affect behaviors and outcomes during youth and continue to shape well-being into adulthood (Bearman and Moody 2004; Haynie 2002; Milner 2004; Umberston, Crosnoe, and Reczek 2010). Evidence indicates, for example, that adolescent social relations affect important development outcomes including grades, high school graduation, and other measures of academic achievement (Singh and Dika 2003); delinquency, violence, contact with the criminal justice system; self-esteem, depression and suicidality (Bearman and Moody 2004; Haynie 2002; Kreager 2007; Mueller and Abrutyn 2015); and self-reported health, smoking, substance abuse, body mass index, and other measures of health (Crosnoe 2002; Ennett and Bauman 1994; Mercken et al. 2010; Osgood et al. 2013). Evidence also indicates that adolescent social ties are associated with success in adulthood as measured by employment status and income (Shi and Moody 2016).

We anticipate that differences in adolescent social networks between rural and nonrural areas are likely to contribute to young adult wealth outcomes for three reasons. First, the experience of being connected to others—that is, the experience of having constituencies that confer status and information—might contribute to creating a still-unmeasured skill that translates into later success. This might include the ability to ease tensions between conflicted peers, switch language or behavior quickly between microsocial crowds or easily pick up on social cues that allow one to navigate later employment settings, to earn income, and ultimately to generate wealth with greater ease (Davis 1966; Festinger 1954; Shi and Moody 2016). Second, having social connections that can provide opportunities for educational advancement, occupational training and success, capital to buy a house or start a business, and related tangible outcomes might translate into adult wealth (Davis 1966; Festinger 1954; Shi and Moody 2016). For these reasons, we anticipate that more socially connected adolescents will have higher net worth and more financial assets in early adulthood. We also anticipate that adolescent social relations will increase the likelihood of homeown-

ership in young adulthood. Third, social relations can confer and reinforce savings habits that manifest in different propensities to buy certain types of assets in a somewhat predictable order. For example, people with traditional values tend to buy homes earlier in life and to invest more of their savings in the family home than those with less traditional values (Keister 2008). Similarly, traditional values are associated with postponing investments in financial assets until later in life, even controlling for other predictors of these forms of saving (such as education and income). Because people imitate the savings behaviors of family and other social relations (Chiteji and Stafford 1999; Chiteji and Stafford 2000), it is likely that those raised in rural communities—particularly if they are highly connected to others—will imitate more traditional savings trajectories, including early home purchases and later investments in financial assets.

Job Opportunities and Income

Third, job opportunities and income are an important link between geographic residence in adolescence and young adult wealth. Agriculture, low-skilled manufacturing, and natural resource industries have been replaced with lower-paying jobs in the service industry in many rural areas (Hamilton et al. 2008). As a result, many rural communities that already lagged behind other geographic regions struggled to recover from the Great Recession, leading to even larger gaps among geographic regions (Fry 2013). Declines in federal investment in infrastructure for rural communities exacerbated these problems and, although not all rural communities are the same (Hamilton et al. 2008), the broad trend has been toward high and rising levels of unemployment (Duncan 2015; Economic Research Service 2019a) and few opportunities for self-employment (Tsvetkova, Partridge, and Betz 2017). Consistent with increasing unemployment, incomes are comparatively low, and poverty—including child poverty—is high in rural areas (Duncan 2015; Economic Research Service 2019a). Recent evidence also suggests that poverty risk is high and increasing even for those who are employed in rural areas, that the rate of working poverty is higher in rural areas than in other

geographic areas (Thiede, Lichter, and Slack 2018), and that poverty is persistent across generations (Lichter and Graefe 2011; Lichter and Schafft 2016; Thiede, Kim, and Slack 2017). Evidence that low-income children who grow up in rural commuting zones tend to be more upwardly mobile than their rural counterparts may, in reality, reflect lower starting points for rural children rather than a particularly propitious pattern (Chetty et al. 2014).

We expect that limited job opportunities and low income levels will be important factors driving differences in young adult wealth across the rural-urban continuum. Importantly, income (the flow of funds into a household from wages, salaries, government transfer payments, and other sources) and wealth (net worth or net saved assets at a single point in time) measure different aspects of financial well-being. Income is a measure of short-term security that reflects current employment status as well as educational attainment and other aspects of human capital. Wealth is broader: it can come from intergenerational transfers, from active saving, or from the appreciation of investments. Of course, income and wealth are positively correlated, but the correlation is not particularly high. The correlation between total household income and total net worth among U.S. households is only about 0.50 and is relatively stable over the life course (Keister 2018). Part of the explanation for the relatively low correlation is intergenerational transfers: people who inherit may have high wealth and low income. Another part of the explanation is behavioral. Some households have high income from current work but low saving rates and, as a result, low wealth. At the other extreme, some households have a high net worth but low income. A person who inherited wealth or a retiree who saved consistently during the working years may have high levels of assets but low income. The association between income and wealth is likely to be fairly low for young adults who grew up in rural communities because they are unlikely to have inherited and have had little time to save on their own. Nonetheless, income remains a critical determinant of saving, investing, and wealth accumulation. Income also affects whether a household will qualify for loans such as mortgages. For these

reasons, we expect that income is likely to increase net worth, financial assets, and homeownership.

EXPECTATIONS

Our expectation is an association between geographic residence in adolescence and young adult wealth. We also anticipate that this association varies in meaningful ways across the components of wealth including net worth, financial assets, homeownership, and mortgage debt. In particular, we expect that those who grow up rural will be less likely than their peers to have negative net worth but will also have fewer financial assets. We expect that homeownership will be high for those raised in rural areas but that they will have comparably less mortgage debt. Homeownership is a particularly important wealth measure in young adulthood. The history of high rates of homeownership in rural areas is a long one (Goodman et al. 2016); research has also shown that people learn how to save from family and friends (Chang 2005). It follows that those raised in rural areas may gravitate toward homeownership more readily as young adults regardless of where they live. Debt is also important: those who stay in rural areas and buy homes are likely to assume comparatively low levels of mortgage debt because home values are relatively low in rural areas. Those raised in rural areas also assume less education debt, consistent with having less education, and this will contribute to their overall wealth as well. Together, these patterns suggest that young adults raised in rural communities are less likely than their peers to have negative net worth. Because rural areas have a unique set of characteristics and challenges, we expect that the association between growing up in a rural area is unique in its association with young adult wealth relative to growing up in all other geographic regions but that the differences are most pronounced when rural and urban youth are compared. Notably, we are not proposing that place of residence in adolescence is more (or less) strongly associated with place of residence in young adulthood; instead, we propose that place of residence in adolescence is associated with young adult wealth even when place of residence—and other factors that contribute to wealth—

are held constant. We are also not making formal causal arguments. That is, we expect

Young adults raised in a rural area are less likely to have negative net worth, but they also have fewer financial assets compared to those raised in other regions.

Young adults raised in rural areas are more likely to be homeowners, but they have less mortgage debt than those raised in other regions.

Young adults who grew up in rural areas have assets and debts that differ from their peers who grew up in all other geographic regions, but the difference is most pronounced between those raised in rural versus urban areas.

DATA

To study these issues, we use data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health). Add Health is a longitudinal study of U.S. adolescents who were in grades seven through twelve (ages twelve through eighteen) during the study's first wave (1994–95). We use Add Health because it is a high-quality source of information about young adults that also includes important data about their upbringing. Importantly for our purposes, young adults—including Add Health respondents—do tend to have some savings by the time they are in their mid-twenties and even more commonly by their early thirties. It is also common for people this age to be homeowners. Many of the data sets that include wealth information (such as the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, and now Add Health) start to include questions about wealth when respondents are in their mid-twenties for this very reason. Many young people (again, including Add Health respondents) still have zero or negative net worth at this life stage, but many people have begun to accumulate something by their twenties. Consistent with this, in Add Health, we see that 83 percent of respondents have some assets and 44 percent are homeowners. These estimates are in line with data from the Survey of Consumer Finances (SCF), the gold standard for

wealth information in the United States and with research published from the SCF (see, for example, Bricker et al. 2014; Keister 2014, 2018).

Add Health collected four additional waves of data on these adolescents, including a third between 2001 and 2002 (ages nineteen through twenty-five) and a fourth between 2008 and 2009 (ages twenty-six through thirty-two). We use waves 1, 3, and 4. Wave 1 includes detailed information about respondents' adolescent region of residence, family structure, friendship ties, and demographic information. Waves 3 and 4 include follow-up information about young adult wealth (including net worth, homeownership, financial assets, and debts), educational attainment, income and job status, family structure, region of residence in young adulthood, and demographics. Together, these data provide a rich source of information on both adolescent social and demographic conditions and young adult achievements uniquely suited to our purposes. We include only respondents who were represented in waves 3 and 4 and who provided valid data for variables of interest in our sample and those who were still living with their parents (16 percent of Add Health respondents). A small number of respondents (fewer than 2 percent) reported being homeowners but also reported living with their parents. We coded these respondents as not owning a home. Our ultimate sample includes 7,758 respondents for models of negative net worth, financial assets, and homeownership. For models of mortgage debt, our sample is 3,232 because we omit nonhomeowners.

MEASURES AND METHODS

We use four outcome variables to measure young adult wealth; all outcomes are taken from wave 4 of Add Health. First, we measure overall net worth as self-reported negative net worth, relative to zero or positive net worth. We focus on negative net worth because having more debts than assets can indicate that a household is in a financially precarious position. However, the substance of our findings does not change if we model overall net worth as positive net worth relative to zero or negative net worth. This simple categorical measure is ideal for our study because our respondents are

young and variation in net worth across households is still relatively minimal. Second, we measure financial assets as the dollar amount of assets other than real estate owned by the household. Add Health reports financial assets in nine dollar-range categories. We assign the midpoint of the category selected by the respondent to indicate the value of their financial assets. Ideally, we would have the actual amount of financial assets owned, but Add Health does not make these values public to ensure respondent confidentiality. Our measures are consistent with well-documented financial asset values owned at this life stage (see Bricker et al. 2014; see also discussion of table 1). We do not know the details of the types of financial assets owned by Add Health respondents because the survey does not include this level of data.

Third, we use a dichotomous measure of homeownership to indicate that the respondent's household currently owns a home. Becoming a homeowner is a significant step in a financial trajectory, separate from the value of the home owned. Therefore, we model ownership of this asset as a dichotomous state to capture the importance of this step in a financial life course. Ideally we would have home value as well, but Add Health does not include home value. Fourth, we measure mortgage debt as a continuous dollar amount. We focus on mortgage debt because it is a liability that has investment value as well as being an obligation to repay a sum of money. Simultaneously, the value of mortgage debt indicates the value of the home owned, providing a uniquely rich source of information about the household's finances. Although it does not do so with financial assets, Add Health reports the value of mortgage debt as a continuous measure, allowing us to evaluate this outcome with greater precision. Descriptive statistics for mortgage debt values in our sample are consistent with other well-documented values for mortgage debt owned.

Our primary independent variable is the RUCA coding for respondents' place of residence during adolescence. Geographic differences between rural and urban areas cannot be captured by a simple binary and are experienced differently across the United States (Li-

chter and Brown 2011; Lichter and Ziliak 2017). RUCA codes, taken from census files, provide a better classification of these differences and assign locations to one of seven categories: metro core, metro area, micro core, micro area, small town core, small town area, and rural. Our use of the RUCA measure resembles previous research using Add Health data (Lawrence, Hummer, and Harris 2017).

We also include several control variables. We measure highest level of education attained using data from wave 4; we code education as a series of dichotomous measures including less than high school, high school, some college, college degree, and advanced degree. Some respondents may not have completed their educations, although only 6 percent of respondents were still taking college courses by wave 4. Future research might explore whether those who continued their educations are unique in ways that affect the results included in this article.

We include two measures of social connections. First, we include a continuous measure of indegree or popularity using data from wave 1. In wave 1, respondents in eligible schools identified up to five male and five female peers as friends from a roster of students in their school. For single-gender schools, respondents were allowed to select five students from a corresponding sister school. Thus, each individual could nominate up to ten friends. Second, we include a binary measure indicating whether a respondent was an isolate in adolescence, meaning that they neither selected peers as friends nor were selected as a friend by their peers in wave 1. Add Health does not include adult social connections, so we are unable to control for these ties. We measure total household income with a continuous measure from wave 4 indicating all sources of wages, salaries, transfer payments, and other income. We use household income because our unit of analysis is the household. However, preliminary analyses using personal income produced substantively similar results.

We also include controls for marriage and fertility to capture family structure. We measure marital status using a dichotomous indicator of whether a respondent lives with either a spouse or a romantic partner as opposed to

living with neither; those who are not married are our reference category. We use married as the omitted category. We capture fertility with a continuous indicator of the number of children ever born in the household. We control for race-ethnicity using a series of dichotomous indicators showing that the respondent reports identifying as white, black, Asian, Native American, Latino, or other. Gender is a dichotomous indicator that the respondent is female.

We use a combination of descriptive statistics, logistic regression, and generalized least squares regression to explore our ideas. We first provide descriptive statistics comparing the wealth and other traits of respondents by adolescent RUCA. We model negative net worth and homeownership with logistic regression models; we model financial assets and debt with generalized least squares regression models. We present model results with and without control variables for comparison and to suggest directions for future research. We include basic control variables in model 1. In model 2, we add additional controls for marital status and fertility. In models 3 and 4, we add measures that we discuss in the background section and young adult place of residence. Notably, these models suggest that formal mediation analysis might usefully identify whether the control variables we include mediate the relationship between geographic place of residence in adolescence and young adult wealth. However, we make no formal claims about causal relationships and hope that future research will explore the potential for causation between rural upbringing and young adult wealth.

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for our variables. Consistent with previous research on wealth ownership, approximately 20 percent of respondents have negative net worth, and median financial assets owned at this stage is a little more than \$20,000 (Bricker et al. 2014; Bricker et al. 2016; Keister 2014). Also consistent with previous research, the distribution of financial assets is highly skewed, a pattern that is evident in the difference between mean (more than \$82,000) and median (\$20,679) in financial assets (Bricker et al. 2016; Killewald, Pfeffer, and Schachner 2017). Approximately 46 percent of respondents are currently home-

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	95% Confidence Limits	
Has negative net worth	.20	.19	.21
Financial assets (\$)	82,013 (20,679)	78,752	85,273
Homeownership	.44	.41	.47
Mortgage debt (\$)	119,300 (99,499)	115,525	123,076
Adolescent RUCA			
Metropolitan core	.55	.54	.56
Metropolitan high/low commuting	.19	.18	.20
Micropolitan core	.06	.05	.06
Micropolitan high/low commuting	.04	.04	.04
Small town core	.06	.05	.06
Small town high/low commuting	.04	.03	.04
Rural	.07	.07	.08
Female	.51	.50	.52
Age (wave 1)	15.81 (15.74)	15.77	15.85
Race-ethnicity			
White	.71	.70	.72
Latino	.04	.03	.04
Black	.15	.15	.16
Asian	.09	.08	.10
Native American	.01	.01	.01
Other	.00	.00	.01
Married	.63	.62	.64
Number of children	.87	.85	.90
Education			
Less than high school	.06	.06	.07
High school	.16	.15	.17
Some college	.44	.43	.45
College degree	.21	.20	.22
Advanced degree	.12	.12	.13
Young adult RUCA			
Metropolitan core	.70	.69	.71
Metropolitan high or low commuting	.08	.08	.09
Micropolitan core	.07	.06	.08
Micropolitan high or low commuting	.03	.03	.03
Small town core	.02	.02	.03
Small town high or low commuting	.03	.02	.05
Rural	.05	.04	.05
Indegree	4.73 (3.42)	4.66	4.82
No ties	.03	.02	.03
Young adult household income (\$)	61,555 (48,486)	60,730	62,381

Source: Authors' estimates from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health, Waves I (1995), III (2001-2002), and IV (2008-2009).

Note: Numbers in parentheses indicate median values. Analysis adjusts for complex sampling design. n = 7,758.

owners, and the median mortgage owned is \$99,499. Sample demographics are consistent with other research published using Add Health data (Bearman and Moody 2004; Shi and Moody 2016) including gender, age, and family structure. Our descriptives also match other published sources using RUCA codes for these samples (Lawrence, Hummer, and Harris 2017). Because we restrict our sample to respondents with valid data in waves 1 and 4, slight differences between our descriptive statistics and other published research reflect differences in the sample used for analyses (Lawrence, Hummer, and Harris 2017; Shi and Moody 2016). Missing data on wealth variables are minimal, and robustness checks indicated that results are not sensitive to missing data.

Additional descriptive data in table 2 provide preliminary evidence that young adult wealth varies by adolescent geographic residence in ways that are consistent with our expectations. The first four rows of the table include mean values for our dependent variables (measured in wave 4, when respondents were young adults) broken down by adolescent RUCA. Young adults who grew up in rural communities were less likely to have negative net worth than their peers, especially those who grew up in metro core, metro commuting, small town core, and small town commuting areas. Those who grew up rural owned fewer financial assets than other young adults, especially those who grew up in metropolitan areas. Respondents who grew up rural were also more likely to be homeowners but had considerably less mortgage debt than their peers from metro areas.

Table 2 documents systematic individual differences in our control variables by adolescent RUCA as well. We include family structure in this table—measured with marital status and number of children—because family structure has historically varied across the rural-urban continuum (Heaton, Lichter, and Amoateng 1989; McLaughlin, Lichter, and Johnston 1993). In recent decades, however, family structure has changed quite noticeably in rural areas. Delayed marriage, nonmarital fertility, cohabitation, and divorce are all increasingly common in rural communities (Carson and Mattingly 2014; Glasgow 2003; MacTavis and

Salamon 2003). Likewise, fertility rates have declined in both rural and urban areas, and as a result, total fertility in rural areas are increasingly comparable to fertility in other geographic areas (Hamilton, Rossen, and Branum 2016; Jones and Tertilt 2006; Ng and Kaye 2015). As a result of these changes, gender roles and the division of labor both in and out of the household have changed dramatically, rural men spending more time on childcare and rural women spending more time working out of the home (Smith 2017). Consistent with these social and economic changes, the descriptive statistics in table 2 show that marriage rates and family size vary only modestly across the rural-urban continuum. The descriptive statistics in table 2 also compare educational attainment, social ties, and income by RUCA code and show some small but systematic differences. Rates of college completion and attaining advanced degrees are noticeably lower for those who grew up in rural communities, particularly when compared with those who grew up in all other regions with the exception of those from small town commuting areas. The most notable difference in social ties is for those who grew up in metro core areas who were more likely to have no ties and to have somewhat lower indegree than their peers. Finally, young adult incomes are somewhat lower for respondents from rural, small town, and micro commuting RUCAs.

ADOLESCENT RUCA AND YOUNG ADULT WEALTH

Our multivariate results suggest that growing up in a rural community is indeed associated with young adult wealth. Table 3 presents results from logistic regression models predicting negative net worth. In all models, we omitted those raised in rural areas so that all other coefficients are compared to respondents from a rural RUCA. Model 1 is a base model and shows that those who were raised in metropolitan core and metropolitan commuting RUCAs were more likely than those raised in rural RUCAs to have negative net worth. There is no difference between those raised in other RUCAs and those raised in rural RUCAs; this is notable because it suggests that rural, small town, and micropolitan RUCAs have similar long-term as-

Table 2. Wealth by Adolescent RUCA

	Adolescent RUCA (Wave 1)							
	All	Metro Core	Metro Commuting	Micro Core	Micro Commute	Small Town Core	Small Town Commute	Rural
Has negative net worth	.20	.20	.22	.18	.17	.21	.21	.17
Financial assets (\$)	82,013 (20,679)	89,178 (21,845)	82,649 (20,267)	66,812.63 (18,359)	75,784.60 (20,064)	59,534.47 (16,676)	64,022.18 (16,071)	67,747.57 (23,070)
Homeownership	.44	.40	.52	.38	.55	.44	.48	.54
Mortgage debt (\$)	119,300 (99,499)	142,160.06 (114,879)	113,007.29 (103,537)	114,173.61 (101,444)	87,767.43 (76,757)	77,294.33 (59,731)	68,485.83 (58,061)	78,818.61 (55,759)
Married	.63	.60	.68	.58	.77	.58	.69	.66
Number of children	.87	.85	.83	.82	.90	.91	.98	1.03
Education								
Less than high school	.06	.06	.07	.05	.01	.05	.05	.08
High school	.16	.15	.16	.13	.17	.16	.22	.21
Some college	.44	.44	.43	.44	.43	.39	.50	.49
College degree	.21	.21	.22	.28	.24	.21	.16	.13
Advanced degree	.12	.13	.12	.11	.07	.18	.08	.10
Indegree	4.73 (3.42)	4.27 (3.00)	5.45 (3.95)	4.35 (3.16)	5.59 (4.31)	5.53 (4.20)	4.98 (3.43)	5.39 (4.11)
No ties	.03	.04	.02	.02	.01	.01	.01	.01
Adult household income (\$)	61,555 (48,486)	63,725 (49,685)	63,998 (50,294)	53,334 (45,735)	62,571 (50,314)	51,479 (40,869)	57,649 (45,097)	52,052 (43,878)

Source: Authors' estimates from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health, Waves I (1995), III (2001–2002), and IV (2008–2009).
 Note: Numbers in parentheses indicate median values. Analysis adjusts for complex sampling design. n = 7,758.

sociations with wealth. Other control variables are in the direction we would expect. The likelihood of having negative net worth decreases with age; and black respondents are more likely than white respondents to have negative net worth, and Asian respondents are less likely than white respondents to have negative net worth (Boen 2016; Taylor et al. 2011).

Notably, the coefficient for Latino respondents in table 3 is negative and statistically significant, indicating that Latino respondents are less likely than white respondents to have negative net worth. This finding is consistent with a growing body of research on status attainment—including wealth accumulation—among Latino Americans. This literature builds on a large literature about immigrant attainment that is characterized by intense debate regarding the degree to which immigrants incorporate into the host country over time. Some scholars propose that immigrants tend to follow a straight line trajectory leading to integration into the host country and progressively higher attainment on key measures such as education, income, and wealth (Alba and Nee 2003; Alba, Kasinitz, and Waters 2011). Others argue that racial distance from the American mainstream and other challenges associated with membership in the immigrant second generation created what is referred to as segmented or downward assimilation (Haller, Portes, and Lynch 2011a, 2011b; Portes and Zhou 1993; Zhou et al. 2008). A growing body of work explicitly looks at the wealth ownership, including financial asset ownership, of Latino respondents; this literature finds high levels of early-life disadvantage among Mexican Americans and other Latino Americans, but these disadvantages are less pronounced in the second and third generations than in the first. This work also confirms other research that finds high levels of young adult impediments to mobility for Mexican Americans and other Latino Americans; but evidence suggests that these early roadblocks do not translate into lower adult wealth. Indeed, researchers find that Latino Americans have less total wealth than whites but more than African Americans and that many Latino Americans are beginning to accumulate significant financial assets from sources such as business startup (Aguilera

2009; Keister, Agius Vallejo, and Borelli 2014; Vallejo and Keister 2019). We conducted significant sensitivity tests to ensure that our results are not influenced by outliers, whether particular high-SES subsamples (such as some Cuban respondents) are being weighted appropriately, and to otherwise ensure the robustness of our findings. A full examination of the wealth accumulation patterns of Latino respondents in the Add Health is beyond the scope of this article, but future research might usefully engage more fully with this issue.

Model 2 adds controls for family structure and shows that adding this control does not change the relationship between RUCA and negative net worth; that is, growing up in a metropolitan core or metropolitan commuting area is still positively associated with negative net worth. Model 3 also controls for educational attainment and social ties, and model 4 controls for income. Once these control variables are included, our adolescent RUCA measures are no longer significant.

Table 4 contains results from generalized least squares regression models of financial assets. Again, we include only basic controls in model 1 and subsequently include controls for family structure, educational attainment, social ties, and household income. Model 1 shows that respondents raised in rural communities have fewer financial assets than those raised in metropolitan core RUCAs; other RUCA codes are not significant. When we add education and social ties in subsequent models, the association between adolescent RUCA and young adult financial assets is no longer significant. Models 3 and 4 also show that our control variables are associated with net worth as we would expect. Educational attainment and income, for example, are both associated with higher levels of financial assets (Keister 2000, 2014). The association between social ties and financial asset ownership is not significant. There is no literature on social relations and wealth ownership to which we can compare this result, but previous work on adolescent social connections and income suggests that the association might be positive (Shi and Moody 2016). Consistent with our finding that Latino respondents were less likely to have negative net worth than white respondents, the coefficient for La-

Table 3. Logistic Regression of Whether Respondent Has Negative Net Worth

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Adolescent RUCA (rural)				
Metropolitan core	.33* (0.16)	.33* (0.16)	.26 (0.23)	.31 (0.24)
Metropolitan high/low commuting	.41* (0.20)	.43* (0.20)	.44 (0.26)	.48 (0.26)
Micropolitan core	.07 (0.20)	.07 (0.22)	-.05 (0.29)	-.06 (0.29)
Micropolitan high/low commuting	.03 (0.26)	.09 (0.24)	.25 (0.27)	.33 (0.29)
Small town core	.21 (0.17)	.21 (0.17)	.15 (0.24)	.09 (0.25)
Small town high/low commuting	.24 (0.24)	.26 (0.25)	.26 (0.29)	.32 (0.30)
Sex (1 = female)	.21* (0.10)	.20 (0.10)	.19 (0.11)	.10 (0.10)
Age (Wave 1)	-.07*** (0.02)	-.07*** (0.02)	-.07** (0.02)	-.05* (0.02)
Race/ethnicity (white)				
Black	.44*** (0.11)	.30** (0.09)	.25* (0.12)	.11 (0.10)
Latino	-.46** (0.18)	-.52** (0.19)	-.58** (0.20)	-.41* (0.21)
Asian	-.41** (0.13)	-.44** (0.13)	-.46** (0.14)	-.40** (0.13)
Native American	.63 (0.39)	.51 (0.41)	.65 (0.41)	.60 (0.43)
Other	.60 (0.49)	.55 (0.52)	.45 (0.54)	1.01 (0.61)
Marital status (married)		.45*** (0.09)	.44*** (0.09)	.09 (0.10)
Number of children		.10** (0.03)	.13*** (0.04)	.06 (0.04)
Education (high school)				
Advanced degree			.66*** (0.17)	1.05*** (0.17)
College degree			.32* (0.14)	.74*** (0.15)
Some college			.16 (0.11)	.29* (0.12)
Less than high school			.45* (0.21)	.29 (0.20)
Young adult RUCA (rural)				
Metropolitan core			-.03 (0.24)	.15 (0.25)
Metropolitan high/low commuting			-.19 (0.24)	-.08 (0.25)

(continued)

Table 3. (continued)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Micropolitan core			.19 (0.30)	.29 (0.32)
Micropolitan high/low commuting			-.71 (0.42)	-.65 (0.41)
Small town core			-.17 (0.30)	-.15 (0.34)
Small town high/low commuting			.03 (0.30)	.19 (0.32)
Indegree			-.04*** (0.01)	-.02** (0.01)
No ties			.23 (0.24)	.17 (0.23)
Adult household income				-.02*** (0.00)

Source: Authors' estimates from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health, Waves I (1995), III (2001–2002), and IV (2008–2009).

Note: $n = 7,758$. Cells are coefficient estimates. Analysis adjusts for complex sampling design.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 4. Generalized Least Squares Regression Models of Financial Assets (In Thousands of Dollars)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Adolescent RUCA (rural)				
Metropolitan core	19.43** (7.04)	17.87* (6.89)	12.79 (9.34)	6.51 (9.46)
Metropolitan high/low commuting	8.66 (7.72)	7.27 (7.80)	1.98 (9.58)	-1.90 (9.81)
Micropolitan core	2.23 (7.36)	.01 (7.37)	-2.88 (9.01)	-3.11 (9.66)
Micropolitan high/low commuting	4.01 (15.54)	3.04 (15.21)	.69 (19.56)	-6.47 (18.91)
Small town core	-3.68 (8.37)	-4.59 (8.48)	-12.08 (9.51)	-6.93 (9.52)
Small town high/low commuting	-3.79 (9.24)	-4.18 (9.10)	-11.83 (8.68)	-15.87 (10.85)
Sex (1 = female)	-18.96*** (4.75)	-14.63** (4.89)	-18.47*** (4.84)	-8.83* (4.65)
Age (Wave 1)	1.06 (1.30)	1.95 (1.28)	1.52 (1.25)	-1.24 (1.20)
Race/ethnicity (white)				
Black	-34.46*** (5.17)	-30.73*** (5.42)	-27.90*** (5.55)	-13.47* (5.45)
Latino	24.26 (14.36)	22.95 (14.36)	20.86 (14.62)	-1.54 (12.30)
Asian	-11.23 (8.89)	-8.55 (8.66)	-5.44 (8.62)	-12.50 (8.03)

Table 4. (continued)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Native American	-3.41 (20.41)	-.54 (19.07)	1.12 (18.88)	11.00 (20.63)
Other	86.03 (75.22)	87.63 (74.74)	84.77 (73.91)	36.51 (80.47)
Marital status (married)		-5.04 (5.96)	-2.89 (5.90)	28.15*** (5.76)
Number of children		-10.74*** (2.01)	-7.24*** (1.89)	-.26 (1.78)
Education (high school)				
Advanced degree			21.49* (9.75)	-13.64 (8.69)
College degree			22.73** (7.84)	-17.51* (6.90)
Some college			6.52 (6.64)	-6.97 (6.22)
Less than high school			-25.86** (9.13)	-9.50 (8.41)
Young adult RUCA (rural)				
Metropolitan core			8.21 (12.12)	-8.79 (10.15)
Metropolitan high/low commuting			10.97 (12.21)	-2.15 (9.93)
Micropolitan core			-.51 (10.08)	-9.43 (8.93)
Micropolitan high/low commuting			8.48 (18.78)	-1.84 (21.61)
Small town core			10.47 (13.88)	8.29 (12.11)
Small town high/low commuting			2.25* (10.70)	7.85 (9.96)
Indegree			.34 (0.58)	-1.46 (.58)
No ties			-19.81* (9.49)	-12.05 (8.18)
Adult household income				1.74*** (.10)

Source: Authors' estimates from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health, Waves I (1995), III (2001–2002), and IV (2008–2009).

Note: $n = 7,758$. Cells are coefficient estimates. Analysis adjusts for complex sampling design. Referent is in the parentheses.

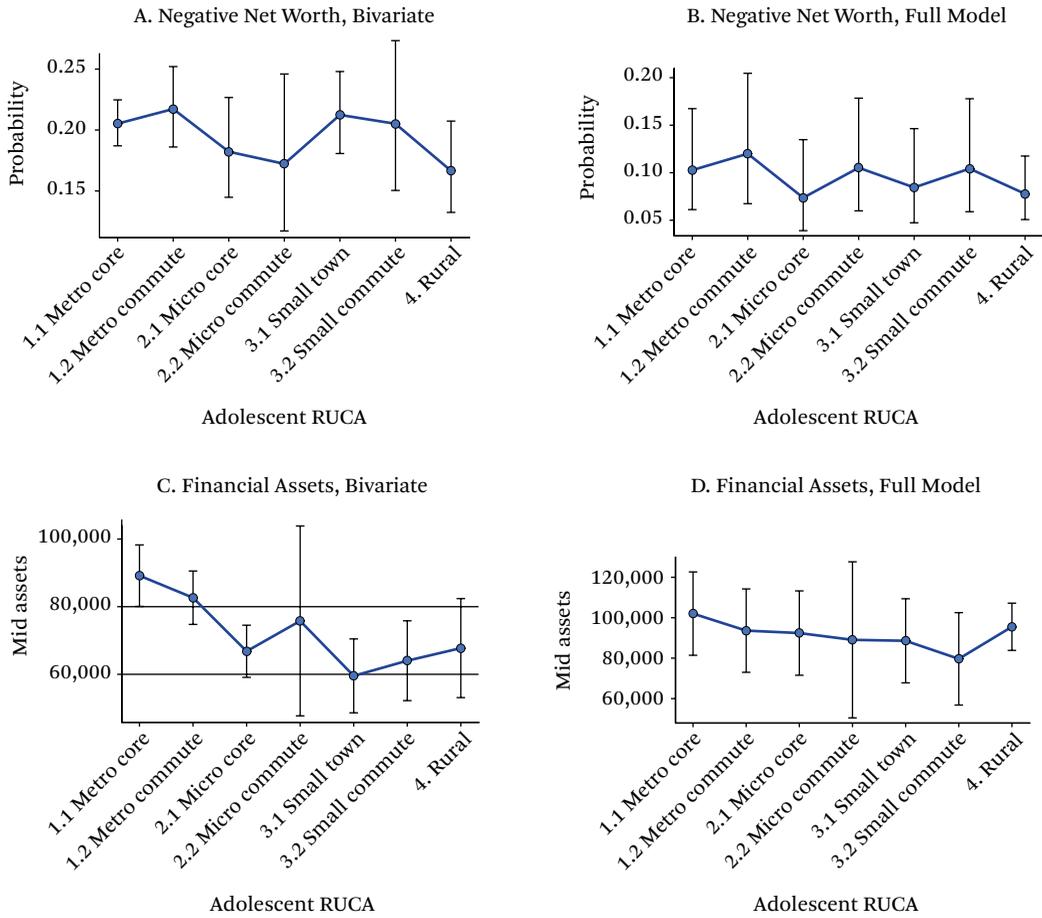
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

tino respondents in table 4 is large and positive; however, this association is not statistically significant.

Figure 2 illustrates the findings shown in tables 3 and 4 using predicated probabilities.

The figure includes four visualizations of predicted negative net worth and financial assets. Panel A is the predicted bivariate association between adolescent RUCA and having negative net worth in young adulthood; the figure com-

Figure 2. Predicted Probabilities for Negative Net Worth and Financial Assets



Source: Authors' estimates from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health.

pares respondents by adolescent RUCAs with no other variables included in the model. These results are based on models similar to those shown in table 3, model 1 but with no control variables. Panel B also displays predicted probabilities for models of negative net worth, but results in this figure include all covariates included and held at their means (computed using model shown in table 3, model 4). Similarly, panel C shows bivariate predicted financial asset values, and panel D shows predicted financial asset values with all covariates included in the models and held at their means (computed using model shown in table 4, model 4). All figures include 95 percent confidence limits.

Panels A and B highlight the similarities in

wealth outcomes for those raised in rural, metropolitan core, metropolitan commuting, and small town core RUCAs: the predicted probability of having negative net worth given that a respondent was raised in one of these RUCAs is lower than for those raised in other (metropolitan and small town commuting) RUCAs. The difference between panel C and panel D is more striking. The bivariate model (panel C) shows a clear decline in the probability of having negative net worth over the RUCAs, ordered from metropolitan core to rural. When the full array of covariates is included (panel D), the association is much more tenuous. This provides additional evidence and a visual demonstration of the association between geo-

graphic region in adolescence and young adult wealth.

The association between adolescent RUCA and young adult homeownership is particularly strong. Table 5 includes results from logistic regression models of homeownership in young adulthood as a function of adolescent RUCA and other covariates. Again, model 1 includes only basic controls, and we add covariates in stages in subsequent models. Consistent with our expectations, model 1 results show that respondents who grew up in metropolitan core and micropolitan core communities are significantly less likely than those who grew up in rural communities to own homes. In model 1, the difference in homeownership between those who grew up in rural communities and those who grew up in metropolitan commuting, micropolitan commuting, small town core, and small town commuting RUCAs is not significant. These patterns persist in model 2,

which includes family structure controls. In models 3 and 4, the difference between those who grew up in rural RUCAs and those who grew up in metropolitan commuting areas, small town core, and small town commuting areas is also significant. Given that some of the rural association operates through home prices in rural areas, it is notable that the adolescent RUCA codes remain significant even when young adult RUCA is controlled. Notably, our key control variables—educational attainment, indegree, and income—are positively associated with homeownership (having no ties is not significant). However, the significance of the adolescent RUCA does not decline across our models. This suggests that other unmeasured variables might mediate the associations between geographic area in adolescence and adult wealth. For example, if we were able to measure traditional approaches to saving more directly, we might find it to be the key mediator.

Table 5: Logistic Regression of Whether Respondent Owns Home

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Adolescent RUCA (rural)				
Metropolitan core	-.56*** (0.12)	-.55*** (0.14)	-.63*** (0.15)	-.70*** (0.15)
Metropolitan high/low commuting	-.24 (0.13)	-.26 (0.15)	-.40* (0.15)	-.44** (0.15)
Micropolitan core	-.53*** (0.16)	-.55*** (0.16)	-.68*** (0.18)	-.70*** (0.18)
Micropolitan high/low commuting	.07 (0.21)	-.13 (0.19)	-.33 (0.21)	-.39 (0.23)
Small town core	-.19 (0.18)	-.15 (0.19)	-.43* (0.21)	-.41 (0.21)
Small town high/low commuting	-.24 (0.16)	-.32 (0.21)	-.50* (0.21)	-.54* (0.22)
Sex (1 = female)	.23*** (0.07)	.12 (0.07)	.02 (0.07)	.09 (0.07)
Age (Wave 1)	.18*** (0.02)	.16*** (0.02)	.15*** (0.02)	.13*** (0.02)
Race/ethnicity (white)				
Black	-1.19*** (0.10)	-.91*** (0.11)	-.85*** (0.11)	-.78*** (0.10)
Latino	-.71*** (0.17)	-.56* (0.23)	-.57* (0.22)	-.75** (0.24)
Asian	-.30* (0.15)	-.33* (0.15)	-.24 (0.16)	-.29 (0.16)

(continued)

Table 5: (continued)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Native American	-.85*	-.57	-.63	-.57
	(0.40)	(0.43)	(0.43)	(0.40)
Other	-.85	-.80	-.80	-1.08
	(0.07)	(0.49)	(0.52)	(0.48)
Marital status (married)		-1.74***	-1.71***	-1.56***
		(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.09)
Number of children		.00	.09*	.14***
		(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Education (high school)				
Advanced degree			.63***	.40*
			(0.18)	(0.18)
College degree			.56***	.29*
			(0.13)	(0.14)
Some college			.06	-.05
			(0.13)	(0.12)
Less than high school			-.33	-.25
			(0.19)	(0.18)
Young adult RUCA (rural)				
Metropolitan core			.20	.10
			(0.17)	(0.18)
Metropolitan high/low commuting			.29	.22
			(0.17)	(0.18)
Micropolitan core			.12	.06
			(0.23)	(0.23)
Micropolitan high/low commuting			.52*	.47
			(0.23)	(0.24)
Small town core			.53	.53
			(0.32)	(0.33)
Small town high/low commuting			.44*	.36
			(0.19)	(0.19)
Indegree			.05*	.04***
			(0.01)	(0.01)
No ties			-.35	-.30
			(0.24)	(0.22)
Adult household income				.01***
				(0.00)

Source: Authors' estimates from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health, Waves I (1995), III (2001–2002), and IV (2008–2009).

Note: $n = 7,758$. Cells are coefficient estimates. Analysis adjusts for complex sampling design. Referent is in the parentheses.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Although a formal mediation analysis is beyond the scope of this article, future research could explore this possibility.

The association between adolescent RUCA and young adult wealth is also clear in table 6,

which includes results of generalized linear models of mortgage debt for those who are homeowners. Model 1 shows that respondents who grew up in rural communities and who currently own a home have less mortgage debt

than those who grew up in metropolitan communities. The RUCA association is unchanged in model 2, but RUCA is not significant when education and social ties are controlled. These results provide additional suggestive evidence that education might be a mediating variable. That is, the association between educational attainment and mortgage debt is strong and

significant. Research has documented a strong, positive relationship between education and mortgage debt, a pattern that reflects both supply (lenders are willing to lend to those with more education) and demand (educated consumers are more likely to apply for home loans) (Killewald, Pfeffer, and Schachner 2017). Our findings confirm this pattern and suggest that

Table 6. Generalized Least Squares Regression of Mortgage Debt (in Thousands of Dollars)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Adolescent RUCA (rural)				
Metropolitan core	52.60*** (14.79)	51.30*** (14.23)	25.43 (13.69)	17.40 (11.86)
Metropolitan high/low commuting	32.06* (14.71)	30.43* (14.04)	13.24 (12.92)	10.16 (11.44)
Micropolitan core	30.32 (16.76)	26.05 (16.26)	5.11 (16.44)	2.81 (16.36)
Micropolitan high/low commuting	11.81 (16.22)	8.32 (16.26)	3.00 (13.76)	-3.45 (10.89)
Small town core	5.78 (16.22)	7.02 (13.86)	-2.77 (3.98)	-5.92 (12.23)
Small town high/low commuting	5.78 (14.60)	-8.70 (14.42)	-4.32 (11.89)	-7.41 (11.29)
Sex (1 = female)	2.49 (4.58)	4.54 (4.22)	-2.67 (3.98)	3.29 (3.62)
Age (Wave 1)	5.05* (2.07)	6.11** (2.05)	4.20* (1.86)	2.23 (1.66)
Race/ethnicity (white)				
Black	-17.16 (2.08)	-7.83 (10.10)	-8.39 (7.89)	-2.31 (7.62)
Latino	110.71*** (30.69)	113.09*** (30.27)	105.63** (31.77)	95.36** (30.39)
Asian	32.63 (18.27)	35.93* (17.35)	44.52** (16.44)	37.94* (14.81)
Native American	-17.78 (37.19)	-7.46 (25.03)	-8.45 (18.96)	-14.05 (25.88)
Other	206.20*** (48.71)	207.03*** (48.05)	209.21*** (53.57)	172.31*** (36.35)
Marital status (married)		-39.02*** (6.60)	-36.72*** (5.81)	-8.67 (5.90)
Number of children		-14.93*** (2.37)	-5.49** (2.04)	-1.21 (1.97)
Education (high school)				
Advanced degree			70.10*** (9.40)	44.51*** (8.89)
College degree			68.06*** (7.79)	40.09*** (7.81)

(continued)

Table 6. (continued)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Some college			27.19*** (5.19)	17.26** (5.09)
Less than high school			-16.32 (9.31)	-4.15 (8.82)
Young adult RUCA (rural)				
Metropolitan core			33.89** (11.99)	24.48* (9.56)
Metropolitan high/low commuting			7.70 (12.57)	-2.38 (10.64)
Micropolitan core			10.42 (11.73)	9.41 (10.32)
Micropolitan high/low commuting			9.61 (11.90)	8.78 (11.92)
Small town core			-4.97 (12.65)	-.57 (10.27)
Small town high/low commuting			2.07 (10.22)	-4.11 (10.08)
Indegree			.59 (.48)	-.34 (.47)
No ties			-.20 (15.47)	-4.62 (15.99)
Adult household income				1.13*** (.08)

Source: Authors' estimates from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health, Waves I (1995), III (2001–2002), and IV (2008–2009).

Note: Models are for homeowners only; non-homeowners are omitted. $n = 3,232$. Cells are coefficient estimates. Analysis adjusts for complex sampling design. Referent is in the parentheses.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

future research might usefully explore the role of education as a mediator between place of residence in adolescence and young adult wealth status. Figure 3 includes predicted probabilities to illustrate these models.

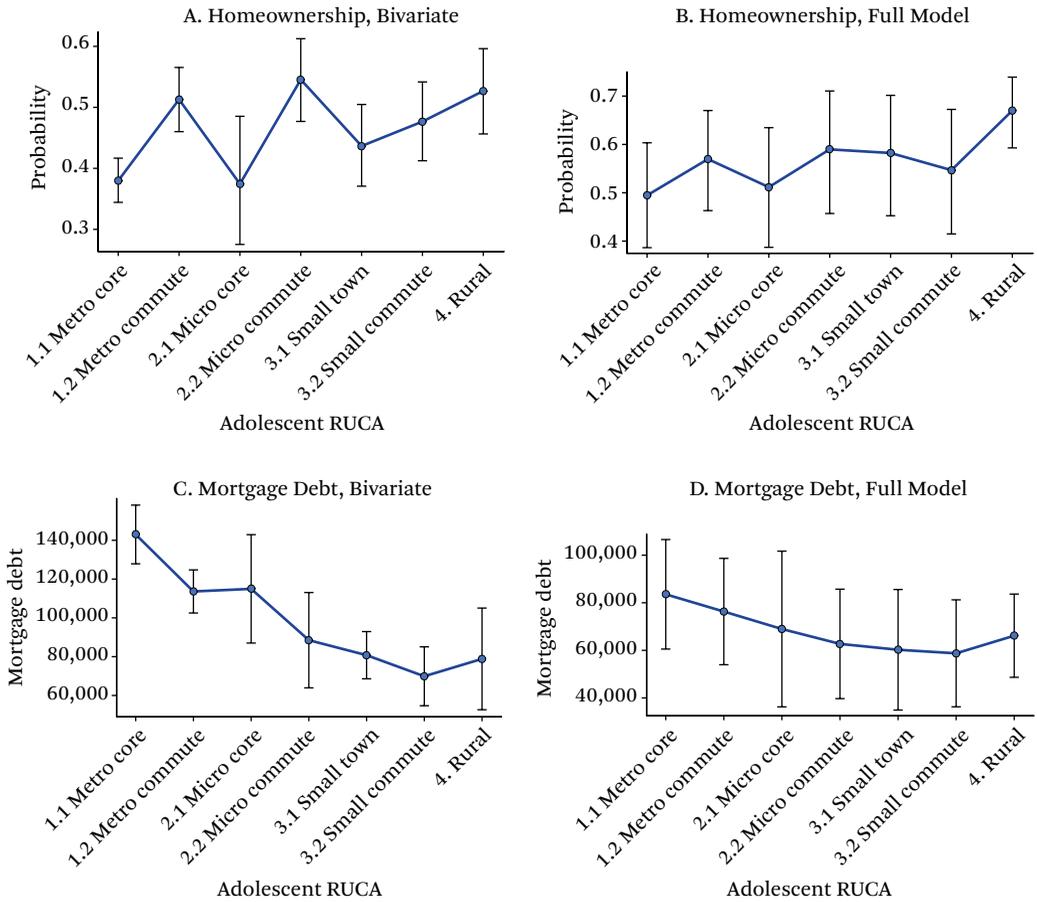
Our findings are largely consistent with our expectation of unique association between growing up in a rural area—relative to all other geographic areas—and young adult wealth. This unique relationship holds for net worth as well as for financial assets, homeownership, and debt. Despite some variation in the importance of growing up rural relative to other geographic regions across the models we present, the importance and unique relationship between a rural upbringing and early adult wealth is clear. It may not surprise readers to learn of a difference between the long-term trajectories

of rural youth and of their metropolitan peers, given that urban-rural differences seem quite stark. However, an important takeaway from this work is that the effects of growing up rural are neither unilaterally good nor bad.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this article, we have studied the extent to which wealth ownership in early adulthood differs across the rural-urban continuum and the factors that are associated with those differences. We asked whether young adult wealth differs for those who grow up in rural communities and their peers who grew up in other geographic areas, and studied how these differences vary across four key wealth measures: net worth, financial assets, homeownership, and mortgage debt. Young adults raised in rural

Figure 3. Predicted Probabilities and Outcomes for Homeownership and Mortgage Debt



Source: Authors' estimates from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health.

communities are less likely than other young adults to have negative net worth, but those raised in rural areas had lower financial assets than their peers in young adulthood. Differences in homeownership were an important component of our findings. Evidence indicates that young adults raised in rural communities are more likely to be homeowners than their peers, but that those who own homes have less mortgage debt than those raised in other regions. Although some of these patterns can be explained by rural youth who remain in their hometowns, our findings suggest that the patterns hold even for those who move to other regions. Evidence also indicates that growing up rural has a particularly important association with young adult wealth relative to other geographic areas. We speculate that this unique

relationship reflects distinct characteristics of rural areas that are highlighted in other papers in this double volume; future research might usefully expand on these findings and explore in greater detail the reasons for these patterns.

Research on residential differences in well-being has often used a simple rural-urban distinction, but this strategy obscures nuanced and complex regional differences that are increasingly salient (Thiede, Lichter, and Slack 2018). We used detailed RUCA codes to measure region of residence in both adolescence and young adulthood, consistent with research that encourages researchers to move beyond the simple rural-urban dichotomy (Lichter and Brown 2011). Using the more detailed RUCA codes allowed us to document, indeed, more detailed differences by region than we might

have found otherwise. In particular, those raised in rural areas were less likely to have negative net worth than those raised in metropolitan core and metropolitan commuting areas, but no differences between those raised in rural areas and those raised in other areas were apparent. Differences in financial asset ownership were significant only for those raised in rural and metropolitan core RUCAs. For homeownership, the differences were slightly different still: those raised rural were more likely to be homeowners and to have less mortgage debt than those raised in metropolitan core, metropolitan commuting, and micropolitan core areas. These patterns underscore clear differences in adult wealth between those raised rural and those raised in somewhat larger, more metropolitan areas. The difference between being raised in a rural area and in a micropolitan area or small town, however, are minimal at best.

Our research contributes to understanding an important long-term outcome associated with growing up rural, and also highlights the relevance of region to patterns of saving, investing, and debt that lead to adult wealth ownership. Despite this contribution, our work has limitations. For example, it would be ideal to have more detailed measures of assets and debts, including dollar values for all wealth components (such as value of the home, other real estate, all financial assets, pensions, other forms of debt), which would enable us to parse in even greater detail how a rural upbringing is related to young adult wealth. Important reasons related to confidentiality are the reason surveys do not collect more detailed wealth information; the severe skew of the wealth distribution means that when detail is available about a respondent's assets, the risk is real that a respondent's identity could be revealed. However, exploring the association between region and wealth would benefit from having more detailed data on key outcome variables.

In addition, results for our models suggest the importance of some of our key control variables in explaining the relationship between rural upbringing and young adult wealth ownership. These results indicate the potential benefit of using formal mediation analysis to identify which variables mediate the relation-

ship between geographic place of residence in adolescence and young adult wealth. Future research may usefully explore this possibility. Exploring the interaction between place of residence in adolescence and place of residence in young adulthood would also be an important contribution to the literatures on wealth, rural residence, and residential mobility. That is, understanding whether those who stay in rural areas and those who move differ (thinking in terms of flows) could provide additional information about how place of residence is associated with assets and debts. Unfortunately, such analysis was beyond the scope of this article, but future research might extend the current work in this more dynamic direction.

Moreover, it would be ideal to have additional information on the reasons that respondents save and assume debt. For instance, understanding respondents' risk preferences, knowledge about personal finance, approaches to borrowing and obtaining credit, long-term goals for saving and spending, plans for future education, and other savings goals would all clarify the mechanisms that lead to wealth ownership. Finally, it would be ideal to have additional longitudinal information about respondents' life and family situations, education, work, and wealth in order to explore the longer-term effects of a rural upbringing on saving and wealth accumulation. Fortunately, Add Health continues to collect new information on respondents, suggesting that it will ultimately be possible to address this in the future. We acknowledge that Add Health respondents are at the early stages of adulthood and that their wealth ownership will certainly change over time. To be clear, our objective was to document their wealth ownership patterns in early adulthood, to explore the association between growing up rural and these wealth patterns, and thus to contribute to both the literatures on rural youth and wealth. Our contribution to the wealth literature includes looking at this critical life stage, one that is typically neglected in the wealth and wealth inequalities literature. Nonetheless, future work will usefully follow Add Health respondents to study how their ownership and assets and accumulation of debt changes as they pass through other life stages.

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