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New Data on Poor Families & Children in Rural America
What is happening in Appalachia and the Black South?
Symposium on The Family Life Project

Although there are a number of important studies of children of the poor, most of these studies focus on urban areas. Very few studies have focused on the lives of poor rural children where the challenges to development may be different from those in urban areas. Children in rural areas have less access to health care, quality childcare, and education; with limited public transportation and fewer quality jobs for their parents.

The Family Life Project is a study of two regions east of the Mississippi with large pockets of rural poverty: Appalachia and the Black South. The project tried to identify every baby born to mothers who resided in three rural counties in rural Pennsylvania and North Carolina over one year. The study recruited a representative sample of all babies born in the counties, oversampling for poverty and African American. About two thirds of the families in the sample earn below 200% of the federally-established poverty line.

This symposium will be the first time comprehensive data are presented from this project. That data will reflect challenges faced by families and children through 24 months of age. More than 1,200 babies were studied in this project. In addition, a detailed qualitative ethnographic study of 72 poor families was conducted in the same counties in conjunction with the quantitative study.

The results will depict a richer portrait of the lives of these families and their children. The results will also take a close look at how issues of poverty and being African American in rural America can have an impact on the development of children. Researchers will also present new data on how African-American and non African-American families cope with major issues like parental depression, social support and negative parenting in an extremely poor region of rural America.

Researchers: Lynne Vernon-Feagans & Martha Cox, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.