When We Say “Rural”  
What Do We Mean?  
The Census Bureau defines a rural area as “any place outside a town, city or “urban cluster” with more than 2,500 residents.”  
But, there are other definitions used with regard to federal aid in rural areas that The Washington Post has pulled together.

Family fragmentation—which includes low marriage rates, unwed childbearing, and high divorce rates—has long been associated with poverty. However, research on safety-net services, or services that help families move from poverty to self-sufficiency, has focused more on urban families with less attention paid to the unique challenges for families living in rural communities or the ways in which healthy marriage and relationship education (referred to as “relationship education”) can help to stabilize rural families and, ultimately, alleviate stressors that rural families face to promote healthy children and families.

Research indicates that rural families in low-income communities experience chronic stressors such as unemployment, low wage markets, as well as lack of access to health care, and nutritious food. Additionally, infrastructure challenges (e.g. poor road conditions, lack of transportation) create obstacles to accessing employment and safety-net services as well as educational and self-enrichment opportunities. Experiencing chronic stressors without access to services can exacerbate feelings of isolation and despair that compound relationship stress and increase the likelihood of substance abuse and family violence.

The purpose of this research brief is to highlight the unique challenges — and the strengths — of rural communities and provide suggestions for integrating culturally responsive healthy relationship education into existing safety-net services to strengthen rural families in poverty. The brief will also provide practical tips and strategies for stabilizing families as offered by a program situated in the Appalachian region that has demonstrated success in working with low-income rural families.

* Current ICF employee; work completed as University of Georgia employee.
The State of Rural Communities

As of July 2015, 46.2 million people live in rural areas— which equates to 14% of the U.S. population living in 72% of the land area of the country. While the effect of the Great Recession was felt nationally, rural communities have been slower to recover economically than their urban counterparts— experiencing high rates of unemployment and population loss during the Recession. While rural employment increased between 2013 and 2015 by 1.3%, it is still far below the pre-recession rate. In contrast, urban area employment is 4% higher in 2015 than the pre-recession rate in 2007. Relatively, the poverty rate among female-headed households is 10% higher in rural areas (47.3%) than metro areas (37.9%).

The Great Recession also had implications for population loss in rural communities as residents moved to more urban areas to seek employment or higher wages between 2010 and 2014, before leveling off in 2015. Declining or flat populations result in lower purchasing power as fewer consumers are able to support the remaining businesses; and, therefore, potential new businesses have little incentive to bring jobs and income to the area. Without new businesses or expansion of existing businesses, commercial and residential construction is halted, affecting realtors, bankers, builders, suppliers, and their collective employees. The domino effect creates an economically distressed community. Additionally, social services for families are less likely to exist in areas where there is low population density and there are fewer economic resources. Communities with declining populations have a lower tax base, which reduces public dollars typically used to fund local infrastructure, such as road construction and community-based programming (i.e. afterschool care). Distressed communities are also less likely to have access to philanthropic efforts typically associated with business leaders. Rural areas receive less foundation grants than other communities due to the income disparity between rural regions and their more populated counterparts.

All of these factors contribute to an intergenerational cycle of poverty wherein families who remain in economically depressed rural areas are less likely to have access to adequate employment or needed safety-net services due to underfunded programs in their own communities and limited access to programs that exist in more economically robust communities.

Even when services do exist in rural communities, infrastructure challenges prevent some individuals from participating in local resources. For example, inadequate highways, housing, transportation resources such as mass transit, water, and sewer services present obstacles for the families that reside in rural low income regions. Infrastructure challenges and limited job opportunities contribute to the isolation of rural low-income residents keeping them from accessing needed services. Further, power inequality between those in need of services and those most likely to receive services in low population density areas can complicate community engagement and impact residents’ willingness to access safety-net services that are available.
Due to the many environmental and social infrastructure challenges that exist, residents of rural communities are compelled to rely more heavily upon one another. For many, this interdependence helps build a collective identity and sense of belonging resulting from common cultural background and shared struggles. Individuals without generational ties to the community can be viewed as outsiders who do not understand community norms and may not be trustworthy. Service providers may be perceived as outsiders because they represent the families who have moved to the area for their profession (teachers, ministers, etc.), and residents of rural areas may be hesitant to seek services from outsiders—leading some rural residents to forgo needed prevention and intervention services. Individuals from rural areas may also resent an outsider offering assistance, a belief based in the preference for professional services from someone within their trusted group or someone who may share familiar values.

School-based Family Engagement Examples (West Virginia)

- **Muffins with Moms and Donuts with Dads.** Grandparents, Aunts and Uncles are also invited to attend.
- **ReadAloud Program** invites parents to read to a classroom.

In some ways, this enhances the resilience of rural communities. Insular communities are often close-knit with a strong sense of community identity, which leads to greater degrees of self-reliance and independence. Research indicates residents with strong community identity may be much more likely to assist fellow community members in their times of need. In spite of infrastructure concerns, community schools and local places of worship serve as gathering points for rural families, creating a natural support system for children and families. Teachers and faith leaders are more likely to know individual families and their specific needs. Additionally, school and faith leaders often leverage this network and central location to provide additional services to families. For example, schools can partner with Feeding America to coordinate the Backpack Program, providing a backpack of healthy food for children to take home on Fridays to ensure the family has nutritious meals on the weekend. Summer activities are often offered through faith-based organizations, including free lunch programs. Parents and other family members are encouraged to participate.

**Additional challenges facing rural families**

As indicated, a strong sense of community may have protection effects for residents; however, these strengths are often not enough to overcome the unique challenges in rural areas related to poverty and lack of access to resources due to underfunding and population...
decline. For example, the negative outcomes for children living in poverty are well documented\textsuperscript{19}; children who are raised in poverty due to out of wedlock births and divorce are likely to continue the cycle of family fragmentation as youth tend to reiterate these trends in their own relationships.\textsuperscript{20}

In 2015, it was estimated that one-fourth of children residing in rural areas were poor (in contrast to one-fifth of children in urban areas).\textsuperscript{21} These risks are compounded by additional family stressors such as food insecurity, substance abuse, and access to health care.

**Food Insecurity.** Food insecurity is a correlate of unemployment and peripheral labor markets. Rural low income communities are more likely to experience food insecurity as a result of the low wages, unemployment, and infrastructure challenges noted previously. In 2015, food insecurity was 15.4\% in rural areas compared to 14.1\% in metropolitan areas and 10.4\% in suburban areas.\textsuperscript{21} Unfortunately, the underfunded services in rural communities are often unable to meet the overwhelming needs of families struggling with food insecurity. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) offers a number of programs to improve access to nutritious foods for food insecure families. In addition to commonly known programs like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Women, Infants and Children (WIC), there are a number of other programs funded in partnership with local schools and community agencies. Feeding America also supports families through food banks, including mobile food banks as well as specialized initiatives, like the BackPack program.

**Substance Abuse.** Substance abuse is a specific concern in rural communities and differs from that of urban areas. According to a Federal report comparing rural and urban substance abuse treatment admissions, those that seek treatment for addiction in rural areas are younger and less racially and ethnically diverse than urban patients. In addition, those in rural areas are nearly twice as likely to be referred by the criminal justice system, and less likely to self-refer into substance abuse treatment centers (22.8\% vs. 38.7\%).\textsuperscript{22} Rural communities across the U.S. report similar trends to metro areas with regard to emerging substance abuse trends, alcohol consumption, and increasing numbers of youth who engage in substance use behavior.\textsuperscript{23} The capacity to treat substance abuse has not kept pace with the growth in abuse rates. Research indicates state and national substance abuse treatment need does not match the capacity,\textsuperscript{24} with lower capacity more likely to exist in less populated areas.

**USDA Summer Food Service Program** (SFSP) ensures that low-income children continue to receive nutritious meals when school is not in session. [www.fns.usda.gov](http://www.fns.usda.gov)

**Feeding America BackPack Program** Helping children get the nutritious and easy-to-prepare food they need to eat enough on the weekends. [www.Feedingamerica.org](http://www.Feedingamerica.org)

Although researchers are not sure why the rates of substance abuse are so high in rural communities, one theory is the combination of chronic stressors, despair, and isolation. Drugs are often used to try and fill a void in a person’s life, providing a kind of crutch for those who need one. Often this need stems from a lack of social fulfillment or connection, and it is this, rather than chemicals, that drives a person to drugs. What’s driving the increase in substance abuse is not clear, but it is clear that substance abuse has long reaching effects for children, families, and communities. Those that abuse substances are more likely to engage in intimate partner violence, engage in child abuse, and consequently are at even greater risk for divorce.\textsuperscript{25}
Families are further destabilized when those abusing substances are incarcerated either on drug charges or as a result of domestic violence. Overwhelmed criminal justice systems are not equipped to provide the needed mental health and substance abuse services. Additionally, due to the rural nature of these communities, incarcerated loved ones are often housed in facilities that are too far away to encourage regular visitation reducing the likelihood of maintaining family relationship ties which have been proven to facilitate a more successful re-entry experience. These factors combined often result in a revolving door for those with unmet needs, perpetuating the cycle of poverty and negative outcomes.

Johann Hari offers insights on the connection between addiction and isolation in his TED Talk, “Everything You Think You Know about Addiction is Wrong.” In his presentation, he points to a pivotal study conducted by Canadian psychologist Bruce Alexander. Known as the Rat Park Experiment, the study revealed how rats kept in solitary confinement tended to opt for water that was laced with morphine over regular water, to the point where they became physically addicted and died of overdoses. In contrast, rats living in the Rat Park were able to interact with other rats and make use of running wheels, nesting areas and other facilities contributing to a positive life experience. Amazingly, these rats showed a preference for water over morphine.

**Barriers to Health Care.** Community factors such as food insecurity and substance abuse rates suggest higher demand for health care services in rural low-income communities, yet these services remain limited for reasons discussed previously despite their economic benefits—especially preventative services. Affordability of health care and access to health insurance are two barriers residents of economically depressed communities face. According to the Treatment Episodes Data Set Report, 65.9% of rural residents report not being covered by health insurance. Self-reports by residents of rural Appalachian counties in Virginia support the argument that rural residents have difficulty accessing health care; self-reported health status was poorer in Appalachian counties, as were health perceptions as residents were twice as likely to rate their health as poor or fair as non-Appalachian counties. Recent research has found four main themes associated with barriers to preventative health care for rural residents: time, low priority, fear of the unknown, and a lack of social support for preventative health care. Community education efforts can assist with some of these themes, but not all.

In August 2017, a *Wall Street Journal* article reported that “women in sparsely populated places are more likely to die from pregnancy-related complications than those in large cities - a reversal from 2000.”

**Culturally Responsive Approaches to Serving Rural Low-Income Families**

Reaching families through culturally responsive healthy relationship education can alleviate pressures associated with the physical and social infrastructure of rural communities. Moreover, studies have found that the negative effects of adverse experiences (substance abuse, antisocial behaviors, etc.) can be mitigated through relationship education, specifically through integrating relationship programming into existing safety-net services.
Gateway Community Services Organization in the Appalachian region of Kentucky provides culturally responsive services to a community characterized by many of the factors previously noted: high poverty, unemployment, and rates of disabilities; high divorce and separation rates; low levels of educational attainment and per capita income; and large numbers of parental incarceration. Gateway utilizes a holistic approach to stabilize families through enhancing both relationship skills as well as practical skills to improve economic stability and family well-being. For example, Gateway Community Services provides:

- skills-based parenting education
- dissemination of information regarding healthy parenting practices
- facilitation of the financial support of children through job readiness workshops
- additional job training and educational assistance
- job search and placement assistance and employment incentives
- healthy marriage and relationship activities through marriage and relationship education
- conflict resolution skills training
- financial literacy seminars
- individualized coaching

Gateway Community Services Organization uses strategic partnerships with a wide variety of service organizations also serving rural populations in Kentucky – these organizations are shown in the Fatherhood Program Exhibit. As an example, Gateway’s team works collaboratively with the Project Directors at two substance abuse live-in rehab facilities – where information and best practices are shared in order to increase the success of their respective programs. Also, other community partners make space available in their facilities for classes, while Gateway makes appropriate referrals to other programs.

**Gateway Community Services Organization Goals**

1. Strengthen positive father-child engagement.
2. Provide employment enhancement through training, links to work readiness programs, and job placement.
3. Improve skills for healthy relationships and marriage.
4. Decrease barriers to achieving success.

*Gateway’s four specific goals are designed to improve family functioning, enhance adult and child well-being, increase economic stability and mobility, and reduce poverty.*
Lessons from the Field

Individuals and families must be reached in a way that is meaningful to their cultural context. Learning from the success of Gateway, other communities serving rural populations can improve their program’s reach and effectiveness by increasing the cultural responsiveness of their services. Specifically, organizations serving rural low-income populations can address some of the following common challenges experienced by safety-net service providers.

Minimize the “Outsider” Stigma by Partnering with Volunteers from the Community

Partnering with volunteers from the community who are known and have a shared identity with those seeking assistance can facilitate a bridge between service providers and those seeking safety-net services. This is in line with the strong sense of community and “abundant informal community resources” that are often present within these close-knit communities where community members help each other times of need. In other words, those closest to the issue are often closest to the solution. Sometimes it may be necessary to partner with others outside the community although such partnerships are contingent upon their credibility. Effective partnerships with outside organizations rely on the assurances of locals that the service providers are trustworthy.

Develop partnerships that allow for offering services in community spaces like schools and places of worship where families are comfortable and commonly gather. Use of local spaces and volunteers leverages the credibility and experiences of local residents; thereby increasing the likelihood that residents will participate.

Address External Stressors in Tandem with Relational Concerns

The process of strengthening relationships is more effective as programs address external stressors in tandem with relational concerns, such as offering job training and financial skill building. In fact, studies show that those who employ a variety of methods to reach families and attempt to strengthen families through the provision of relationship education have a more widespread impact and attain more holistic change in individuals and families. In the case of Gateway Community Services, their financial management programming focuses on job coaching in addition to budgeting and financial management skill-building. This multifaceted approach is imperative to overcoming generational poverty which is chronic in low-income rural families.

The process of strengthening relationships is more effective as programs address external stressors in tandem with relational concerns, such as offering job training and financial skill building.
Use Technology to Maximize Reach of Limited Resources

Safety-net service providers in rural low-income areas can mitigate transportation or infrastructure challenges mentioned previously by harnessing available resources through technology. Many isolated communities have access to communication technologies that can bring needed information, resources, and programming to areas that may be difficult to access physically or in which there are not direct service providers. Online resources such as trainings and webinars provide continuing education opportunities as well as needed professional contacts for service providers in remote communities. For example, Gateway Community Action’s website includes information about the prevention and detection of domestic violence for service providers as well as information on the availability of area domestic violence and child maltreatment services for residents. In addition, Gateway Community Action uses Job Coaches to help participants complete the Online Work Readiness Assessment (OWRA). The coaches use the web-based assessment tool to develop personalized job training plans based on participant employability and the potential risk characteristics identified.

Seek Input from Individuals and the Community

One of the ways to provide culturally relevant safety-net services is to spend more time listening to residents’ wants and needs instead of acting on assumptions about individual needs. Well-intentioned programs that have not sought resident input may not be attended as often as those that have. Focus groups with rural low-income residents have been influential in identifying some of the barriers noted previously (e.g. lack of transportation, access to affordable health care). Additionally, assessment tools like OWRA, mentioned previously, are helpful in gathering information specific to individuals being served.

Integration of Healthy Relationship Education

Integration of healthy relationship education will vary based on an agency’s structure and service delivery methods. The Resource Center offers tools and resources to support integration on three levels:

1. **Basic Engagement** - Social service providers may promote healthy relationship education by distributing information to colleagues and clients regarding the importance of these skills and how they support the overall strengthening of families. This is a great way to begin a dialogue and a fairly low-cost approach to increasing public awareness. Depending upon the
agency’s service delivery system, this could include placing tip sheets or fact sheets in a waiting area or at in-service training, staff meetings, community meetings, or agency-sponsored town hall events. Organizations could also add articles about healthy relationships to client newsletters or offer access to training on financial education tools.

2. **Partnerships** – Develop partnerships with community agencies that offer interpersonal or critical skills and accept referrals or even offer workshops onsite for stakeholders with adequate space. Partnerships can be beneficial to building agency capacity by securing resources including facilities, volunteers or staff, and funding as well as sharing ideas for successful integration.

3. **Full Integration** - Incorporate a comprehensive healthy marriage and relationship education program into existing services. Full integration involves training service providers and agency staff or volunteers to teach healthy relationship skills as part of existing individualized services or offer group-based programs for individuals and families being served by the safety-net provider agency. For example, if home visits are the main form of contact, staff can be trained to integrate healthy relationship education into their discussions with the families during the home visit. If classes or workshops are already part of a service delivery system, healthy relationship education curricula could be included to encourage participants to adopt and strengthen these skills.

**Conclusion**

Rural low-income families living in economically depressed communities face a number of complex challenges that are not easily addressed, such as high unemployment rates and poor infrastructure. These challenges are often compounded by family life issues related to poverty, poor health, and substance abuse. These challenges present barriers to achieving self-sufficiency and contribute to the cycle of family fragmentation, as evidenced by higher rates of incarcerated parents and substance abuse. Yet, research shows that services targeted to rural low-income communities can be effective through the use of culturally responsive approaches that acknowledge the unique context in which these families exist; a context in which resources may not be available due to underfunding or cannot be accessed due to lack of transportation.

Effective programming requires a multifaceted approach that combines strengthening interpersonal and coping skills that support family functioning (e.g. healthy marriage and relationship activities and responsible parenting) with pragmatic services like job readiness and financial literacy. Empowering families with knowledge and skills to address challenges within their control can strengthen families and reduce some of the feelings of isolation and despair that prevent families from moving toward self-sufficiency.

**Acknowledgment**

The Resource Center would like to thank Leah Kohr and Michele Staton from the Gateway Community Services Organization for their contribution to this brief.
References


Culturally Responsive Relationship Education for Rural Communities


Used our Product?
Please tell us how. Email: info@HealthyMarriageandFamilies.org
Reference Product #088
www.HealthyMarriageandFamilies.org

This product was produced by ICF with funding provided by the United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Grant: 90FH0003. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.