

Training **MATTERS**



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- NC Division of Social Services
- NC Association of County Directors of Social Services
- Appalachian Family Innovations at Appalachian State University
- Independent Living Resources, Inc.
- NC Child Welfare Education Collaborative
- NC State University Department of Social Work
- NC A & T State University Social Work Program
- Resources for Change, Inc.
- UNC-Chapel Hill School of Social Work (Jordan Institute for Families)
- UNC-Chapel Hill School of Medicine
- UNC-Greensboro Department of Social Work

We Want To Hear from You!

If you have questions or would like to comment about something that appears in *Training Matters*, please contact Teresa Turner, Program Administrator, Family Support and Child Welfare Services Staff Development, NC Division of Social Services, 2412 Mail Service Center, 325 N. Salisbury Street, Suite 735, Raleigh, NC 27699-2412, State Courier: 56-20-25, E-mail: Teresa.Turner@ncmail.net, Tel: 919/733-7672.

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This issue of *Training Matters* was produced by John McMahon and Ellen Ozier Hayes of the UNC-Chapel Hill School of Social Work.

References for this issue can be found at <www.trainingmatters-nc.org>

Child Welfare Practice and Child Poverty in Rural NC

No consideration of child welfare practice in rural North Carolina would be complete without some discussion of the poverty that affects so many rural children and their families.

Defining Poverty

Anyone with an income insufficient to meet basic needs (food, shelter, clothing, other essential goods and services) is considered poor. The 2007 poverty line for a single adult under age 65 is \$10,210. For a family with two adults and three children it is \$24,130 (USDHHS, 2007).

Family structure has a significant impact on poverty. The highest poverty rates are found among rural, female-headed families (ERS, 2003a).

Rural Poverty

Nationally, poverty affects a larger percentage of households in rural areas than in urban ones (Strong et al., 2005). Of the 50 U.S. counties with the highest child poverty rates, 48 are located in rural America (Rural Families Data Center, 2004). Rural counties also account for 95% of

counties in “persistent poverty.” A county is considered **persistently poor** if its poverty rate has been 20% or higher in each decennial census since 1960 (Miller & Weber, 2004).

In North Carolina 23 counties, all of them rural, have poverty rates over 18% (NCREDC, 2004). Most are located in Eastern NC.

In rural North Carolina, poverty rates are much higher for minorities. In 2000, the poverty rate for rural African Americans was 27%, more than 1.5 times greater than for rural whites. That same year the poverty rate for NC’s rural American Indians was 22%; for Latinos the poverty rate was 28% (NCREDC, 2004).

Rural Child Poverty

In most states the poverty rate for children is higher than for the general population. This is certainly true in North Carolina, where in 2000 the overall poverty rate was 12.3% and the child poverty rate is 15.7%. Our state’s rural children are more likely to be poor than their urban *cont. p. 2*

Relevant Learning Resource

North Carolina has developed several child welfare training courses to support professionals serving families in poverty. Among these is *Understanding and Intervening in Child Neglect*. This two-day course helps practitioners understand how poverty and neglect are linked (but not the same) and helps them develop skills for working with families who neglect. This training, which encourages participants to recognize the need for various approaches when providing services, will be offered next on October 23-24, 2007 at the Division’s Greensboro Regional Training Center. For more information on or to register go to <www.ncswlearn.org>.



Child Welfare Practice and Child Poverty in Rural North Carolina

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peers. In 2000 NC's rural child poverty rate was 18.5% compared to a rate of 12.5% for urban children (NCREDC, 2006). In six rural NC counties, the child poverty rate is above 30% (NCREDC, 2004).

Effects

When children live in poverty—especially long-term poverty—the effects are far-reaching and can include:

- **Poor health**, including low birth weight and chronic health problems such as asthma and anemia (Rural Families Data Center, 2004; Moore & Redd, 2002).
- **Inadequate health care**: 19% of poor children lack health insurance, nearly double the percent of all children who lack coverage (Nat'l Center for Children in Poverty, 2006).
- **Economic hardships** such as food insecurity and lack of affordable housing (Nat'l Center for Children in Poverty, 2006).
- **Negative educational outcomes**. Poor children are more likely to demonstrate low academic achievement and to drop out of school (Moore & Redd, 2002). Studies indicate that the length of time a child spends in poverty is a strong predictor of school attainment (Duncan et al, 1994).
- **Personal challenges** in the areas of social adjustment, esteem, depression and social competence (Moore & Redd, 2002; Huston et al., 1994).
- **Negative mental states and behaviors**. In children long-term poverty is associated with feelings of anxiety, unhappiness, stress, and dependence. Current poverty is associated with external behaviors, such as aggression and disobedience (McLeod & Shanahan, 1993; DeCivits et al., 2007).
- **Risky behaviors** such as smoking or engaging in early sexual activity. Teens from lower income families are more likely to become pregnant or bear children (Moore & Redd, 2002; Haveman & Wolfe, 1997).

An Untapped Resource for Enhancing Rural Child Safety

Many rural North Carolina county DSS agencies may be missing an opportunity to fight poverty and enhance child safety. According to Sybil Wheeler, a Work First Representative with the NC Division of Social Services, even though law and policy **require** DSS agencies to offer special financial assistance to qualified families with an income of up to 200% of the federal poverty level, some small county DSS agencies do not.

200%

Wheeler says that in the field of Work First today these "200% Services Programs," as they are called, can be one of the best sources for child welfare services to tap into to help families whose children have not entered foster care. "200% money," she says, "can be used to pay for almost anything that is work related. Combined with work, this resource can help stabilize a family and keep them afloat."

To learn more about 200% services programs, talk to your agency's Work First staff or one of the Division's Work First Representatives.

- **Employment difficulties**. As adults, kids who grow up persistently poor are more likely to earn less and to be unemployed more frequently than children brought up in families above the poverty line (ERS, 2003b).
- **Long-term poverty**. Those who experience persistent poverty as children are much more likely to be poor as adults (Corcoran & Chaudry, 1997).

Poverty and Neglect

The correlation between child neglect with poverty is a strong one. "The poorest of the poor" have the highest rates of children who are neglected (Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996).

Yet poverty itself does not cause neglect. Just because you are poor doesn't mean you will neglect your children. However, poverty can be a significant factor when neglect occurs, since poverty is generally tied to decreased resources, increased needs, and an increase in risk factors. Many studies have correlated poverty with risks such as high infant mortality, substance abuse, criminal behavior and higher levels of child maltreatment (Dubowitz, 1999).

Practice Implications

Clearly, rural poverty in North Carolina compromises the well-being and safety of children. It would be won-

derful if child welfare workers had magic wands that could instantly alleviate family poverty. On their own they wouldn't eliminate neglect—again, poverty doesn't cause maltreatment—but they'd be a great help.

For the time being, however, we must settle for the next best thing: wholehearted collaboration with Work First and economic services programs. With their help and insights, child welfare professionals can address the lack of financial resources that often play such a big role when we're setting up case plans and protection plans. To learn more about this crucial Multiple Response System strategy, see *Children's Services Practice Notes* vol. 9, no. 3 (www.practicenotes.org).

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