

# **STRENGTHENING RURAL FAMILIES**

AMERICA'S RURAL CHILDREN

2004

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with the highest child  
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located in rural America.**

This publication focuses on the 14 million children who live in rural America. One out of every five children in the United States lives in a rural family. Families in rural America face significant educational, social, and economic challenges, just as their urban counterparts do; yet policymakers have focused primarily on improving conditions for families living in cities. ■ We hope this publication will increase the visibility of rural families by providing information about their social, economic, and demographic characteristics; and by comparing the status of families and children living in rural and urban areas. ■ We also hope that providing objective, data-based facts and figures on families in rural areas will help rural leaders and advocates focus their efforts and inform their strategies for improving the lives of children and families.

## Demographics: Race and Place

Although whites make up a majority of the rural population, there is a growing presence of minorities in rural America, especially in the population under age 18. In 2003, racial and ethnic minorities accounted for one-quarter of all rural children, 17 percent of working-age adults (18 to 64), but only 11 percent of the population ages 65 and over.

In 2003, three-fourths of the rural child population was non-Hispanic white, compared with 57 percent in urban areas, where African Americans, Asian Americans and Hispanics accounted for a larger share of the population (see Table 1). American Indians accounted for a slightly larger share of children in rural areas compared with urban areas.

Historically, there have been high concentrations of African Americans in the rural South, American Indians in the West and Midwest (especially Arizona, California, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Washington), and Latinos in the rural Southwest. However, the 2000 Census showed significant Hispanic population gains in rural areas of the Midwest and Southeast. Hispanics still represent a relatively small proportion of the rural population (5.5 percent), but they accounted for 25 percent of rural population growth during the 1990s. Pockets of rural communities across the United States are growing more racially and ethnically diverse with the arrival of new international migrants in search of employment opportunities or reuniting with family members.

TABLE 1

Racial/Ethnic Distribution of Children Living Inside and Outside Metropolitan Areas, 2003		
Percent Distribution	Metro	Nonmetro
Total	100.0	100.0
White only, non-Hispanic	56.5	75.1
African American only, non-Hispanic	16.1	9.7
American Indian/Alaska Native only, non-Hispanic	0.4	1.9
Asian/Pacific Islander only, non-Hispanic	4.5	1.2
Two or more races, non-Hispanic	2.4	2.4
Hispanic	20.2	9.6

NOTE: Metro/nonmetro status was not available for a small number of survey respondents. SOURCE: March 2003 Current Population Survey.

## The Well-Being of America's Rural Children

Each year the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics issues a report on the well-being of America's children. The report highlights household and family characteristics, along with key health, social, and education measures that are linked to child well-being. We have created a table that compares estimates for children in rural and urban areas for many of the measures in that report. Some of the measures used in the Interagency report were not available separately for rural and urban areas, and not all the measures are based on the same metro/nonmetro definitions. Nonetheless, this table provides a good overview of the relative well-being of children living in rural areas.

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Overall, the results indicate that rural children face many of the same challenges that are typically associated with children living in cities, including absent or underemployed parents, high poverty rates, drug and alcohol abuse, and high dropout rates (see Table 2). Children in rural areas are better off than their urban counterparts on some measures (English-speaking ability, housing problems) but worse off on many others (secure parental employment, poverty, health status, mortality rates, cigarette, alcohol, and drug use, and education outcomes). Many of these problems are exacerbated by the isolation, lack of jobs, and lack of support services for families living in rural communities.

The higher mortality rates for children in rural areas are of particular concern. Mortality rates are about 40 percent higher for children and teens living in rural areas. Higher infant mortality rates may be linked to the higher poverty rates, lower levels of parental education, and lack of prenatal care specialists practicing in rural areas.<sup>1</sup> For older children, the higher mortality rates in rural areas may be due to the higher risk of unintentional injuries, especially from motor vehicle accidents.

<sup>1</sup>Jennifer Peck and Kristie Alexander, "Maternal and Infant Child Health in Rural Areas," in Rural Healthy People, 2010: A Companion Document to Health People 2010, Vol. 1 (College Station, TX: The Texas A&M University System Health Science Center, School of Rural Public Health, Southwest Rural Health Research Center, 2003): 151-54.

**TABLE 2****Estimates of Child Well-Being Inside and Outside Metropolitan Areas**

Indicator	Year	U.S.	Metro	Nonmetro
<b>Family Characteristics</b>				
Percent of children living with two married parents	2003	68	68	68
Percent of children 5-17 with difficulty speaking English	2000	7	7	3
<b>Family Economic Security</b>				
Percent of related children living in poverty	2002	16	16	20
Percent of related children living in extreme poverty	2002	7	6	7
Percent of related children living in low-income families	2002	22	20	27
Percent of children living with at least one parent employed full time	2002	78	79	76
Percent of households with children reporting housing problems	2001	36	37	31
Percent of households reporting child hunger due to food insecurity	2002	0.8	0.8	0.8
Percent of children covered by health insurance	2002	88	88	88
Percent of children with no usual source of health care	2002	6	6	6
<b>Health</b>				
Percent of children in very good or excellent health	2002	83	84	82
Percent of children 5-17 with any limitation in activity	2001	8	8	8
Percent of children 19-35 months with recommended immunizations	2002	78	78	77
Deaths per 100,000 children ages 1 to 4	2000	32	30	42
Deaths per 100,000 children ages 5 to 14	2000	18	17	24
Deaths per 100,000 adolescents ages 15 to 19	2000	67	62	87
<b>Behavior and Social Environment</b>				
Percent of 10th graders who have smoked daily in the last month	2003	9	8	14
Percent of 10th graders who reported binge drinking in the last two weeks	2003	22	21	26
Percent of 10th graders who have used illicit drugs in the last month	2003	20	19	22
<b>Education</b>				
Percent of teens 16-19 who are neither in school nor working	2003	8	8	10
Percent of high school grads 25-29 who have completed a BA or higher	2003	28	32	17

SOURCES: U.S. Census Bureau: 2000 Census SF3, Current Population Survey (Basic Monthly Survey and March, October, and Food Security Supplements); Department of Housing and Urban Development: American Housing Survey; National Center for Health Statistics: National Health Interview Survey, National Immunization Survey, National Vital Statistics System; National Institutes of Health: Monitoring the Future National Survey.

# Child Poverty in Rural America

**Child poverty rates in rural America have consistently been higher than those in metro areas**

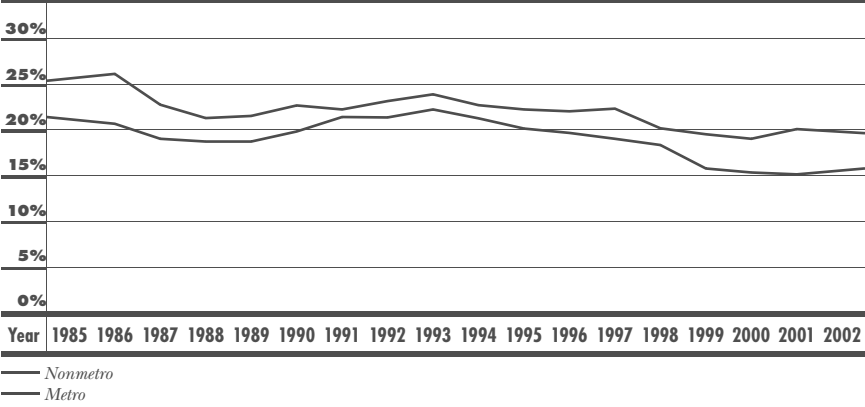
Child poverty deserves special attention because it is the most widely-used measure of well-being and because children growing up in poor families are more likely to have negative outcomes in education, employment, and health.

Child poverty rates in rural America have consistently been higher than those in metro areas (see Figure 1). Moreover, the gap between child poverty in rural and urban places widened during the last half of the 1990s. In 1994, there was only a 1-percentage point difference between child poverty rates inside and outside metro areas, but by 2001 the gap had widened to 5 percentage points. Clearly, the economic boom times of the late 1990s were more helpful to families living in urban areas than those living in rural areas.

Of the 50 U.S. counties with the highest child poverty rates, 48 are located in rural America. Child poverty rates are highest in central Appalachia, which is predominantly white, and in geographic regions with high concentrations of racial and ethnic minorities, including the Mississippi Delta, the Rio Grande Valley, and the Northern Great Plains. Some counties in these geographic areas, which include large numbers of black, Latino, and American Indian families, have child poverty rates exceeding 50 percent. Child poverty rates are higher in rural areas than in urban areas for every racial and ethnic group except for Asian Americans.

However, there has been some good news regarding child poverty in rural America. The child poverty rate among African American children living in rural areas (primarily in the South) fell from 47 percent in 1995 to 39 percent in 2000.

**FIGURE 1**  
**Child Poverty Rates Inside and Outside Metropolitan Areas, 1985–2002**



SOURCE: Current Population Survey (March Supplement).

The Rural Families Data Center ([www.rfdcenter.org](http://www.rfdcenter.org)) is a source of data on children, families, and communities in rural America designed to serve community leaders, policymakers, educators, journalists, grant makers, and the general public. Our goal is to raise awareness of trends in the well-being of families in rural areas and to contribute to informed discussion of policy at the national, state, and local levels. ■ The RFD Center, a project of the Population Reference Bureau, is funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation ([www.aecf.org](http://www.aecf.org)).

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