

**Highlighting New
Poverty Research****by Victoria Lawson,
Lucy Jarosz and Anne
Bonds**

“Building Economies
from the Bottom Up:
(Mis)representations
of Poverty in the Rural
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**Building Economies from the Bottom Up:
(Mis)representations of Poverty in the Rural American Northwest**

Background. Like many other areas, rural counties in the Northwest are experiencing the effects of economic restructuring, policy devolution, declining federal funding for social services, and gentrification. Because poverty emerges from the intersection of cultural as well as political and economic processes, exploring how rural Northwesterners in positions of economic and political power think and speak about economic development, the poor, and their place in the western landscape can be important for understanding the persistence of rural poverty in the region and some of the barriers to addressing it.

Methods. Using in-depth case studies of three persistently poor rural counties in Idaho and Montana, WCPC Faculty Affiliate Victoria Lawson and colleagues Lucy Jarosz and Anne Bonds investigate how white community leaders understand the causes of poverty, the best ways to pursue economic development, and the implications of their understandings and actions for inequality and social welfare. The researchers interviewed county commissioners, mayors, religious leaders, business owners, farmers and ranchers, realtors, and social service providers between 2002 and 2007 and used thematic content analysis to examine how their 32 informants discussed poverty, poor people, quality of life, and economic development in their counties.

Findings. The three counties in the study faced high rates of poverty, although the relationship between poverty, race, and economic structure varied across the counties. One of the counties experienced high white poverty and a strong agricultural economy and two experienced high Latino poverty and diversifying economies.

Faced with the decline of historically important industries (e.g., mining and agriculture) in the region, each of the three counties is pursuing various economic development strategies. The interviewees were broadly supportive of market-based development strategies. For example, some leaders pursued development strategies that try to attract more non-farm employment, such as big box retailers, to their counties, in spite of the low wages and minimal employee benefits that come with these jobs. The pursuit of growth sometimes created conflict; for example, some county leaders worked to draw migrant workers to the area for seasonal agricultural work, but at the same time perceived these workers as a drain on social services, unwilling to assimilate into the community, and likely responsible for perceived increases in crime.

While leaders expressed frustration with federal policies such as free trade agreements that they saw as one source of their counties' economic difficulties, they tended to focus on personal responsibility over structural explanations for individuals' poverty. In each of the three counties, local leaders drew on ideas about personal choice and race/ethnicity to marginalize the poor. Many saw poverty as a lifestyle choice, believing that poor whites are choosing not to do difficult or poorly-paid agricultural work. Mexican workers, on the other hand, were seen as eager to do any work because the wages they can earn in the U.S. are higher than those they might earn in Mexico. At the same time, respondents viewed migrant workers as undeserving, threatening and even criminal.

The authors note that white community leaders' narratives draw on commonly shared, though often unstated, concepts of economic growth and personal responsibility. Nonetheless their views, in framing the poor as transient and deviant outsiders, may create support for economic development opportunities that tend to reinforce poor workers' low income status and can limit community cohesion and political support for assisting the poor.

Poverty Research Flash

The West Coast Poverty Center serves as a hub for research, education, and policy analysis leading to greater understanding of the causes and consequences of poverty and effective approaches to reducing it in the west coast states. The Center, located at the University of Washington, is one of three regional poverty centers funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE). More information about the West Coast Poverty Center is available from our website: www.wpcp.washington.edu

Poverty Research Flash 2009-09

Building Economies from the Bottom Up: (Mis)representations of Poverty in the Rural American Northwest

**New research from Victoria Lawson, Lucy Jarosz and
Anne Bonds**

West Coast Poverty Center Faculty Affiliate Victoria Lawson and colleagues Lucy Jarosz and Anne Bonds interviewed 32 community leaders in three persistently poor rural counties in Idaho and Montana to investigate how these leaders understand the causes of poverty in their areas and how to best pursue economic development. The interviewees were broadly supportive of market-based development strategies and tended to focus on personal responsibility over structural explanations for individuals' financial situations. The authors suggest that, by using narratives that rely on personal responsibility and frame the poor as transient and deviant outsiders, these leaders' attitudes may create support for economic development opportunities that tend to reinforce poor workers' low income status and limit community cohesion and political support for assisting the poor.