

## Book Review

### *Economic Restructuring and Family Wellbeing in Rural America*

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With the approaching presidential election, the nation's economy is not only a topic for intense debate among politicians but also a major source of angst for individuals who are counting on our nation's leaders to advance policies that will provide employment opportunities offering wages that can adequately sustain a living wage and promote their family's wellbeing. The success for any economic plan will require that our politicians understand and address the complexity and relationship between employment and community conditions as well as the health, education and family support systems that need to co-evolve in order to establish and maintain employment opportunities with access to a ready and able workforce. This is a difficult task for politicians as there is often tension between developing national economic policy and family support policies. Yet, the two are essential to each other.

Stimulating job creation makes sense for all residential types in the United States. Unemployment rates in the U.S. hovered around 9% during 2011, and the trends in unemployment rates were similar in both metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas (USDA Economic Research Service, 2011). There are caveats to unemployment rates, however, that make them potentially misleading including that some workers have given up finding employment and have dropped out of the work force, others are working part-time when full-time work is their preference, and others are retired, sometimes earlier than they might have had if they had been able to remain in their jobs. Types of jobs worked also contribute to the economic stress especially in nonmetropolitan areas due to a shift from manufacturing and extraction industries to a greater number of low skill service related jobs that often do not provide a living wage. In addition, nonmetropolitan income has lagged behind metropolitan income (Miller, 2008). As a result of the economic conditions in rural America, nonmetropolitan areas overall are experiencing greater rates of poverty

(USDA Economic Research Service, 2004) which lead to family stress. Understanding the ways rural economic restructuring impacts rural people has not yet become a policy focus that receives the attention it is due.

However, there is a well-timed, comprehensive and credible source of information detailing the trends and the impact of recent rural economic restructuring and how rural families fare that, by reading, politicians would gain important insight. This source is the recently published book *Restructuring and Family Well Being in Rural America* edited by Smith and Tickamyer (2011). An edited volume, this compilation of chapters showcases the work of several exceptional rural demographers and sociologists and is not only a recommended read for politicians, but provides an interesting and empirically sound perspective for those interested in rural people and places (academics or otherwise). Using this book in a classroom either as supplementary reading for undergraduates or as a text for graduate students studying the dynamics of rural and urban place is recommended. Although the focus of the chapters in the volume is on rural economic structuring and family wellbeing, the reader also gains an understanding of urban and suburban places and people because of the comparisons made among the residential types. Because of these comparisons, the book should not be considered a book for people with rural interests only, but a comprehensive reader for all.

Using a multidisciplinary approach the chapters detail the overall trends in rural economic restructuring and how these trends relate to rural family wellbeing. The authors address factors related to family wellbeing including gender roles in relationship to employment, the hardships and survival strategies related to economic stress, and family structural change and family stability in times of economic restructuring. Often, empirical studies will define the problem and the contributing factors but will only provide limited discussion and insights toward resolution of the problem. However, this edited volume provides important

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and thoughtful commentary that provides policy makers and lobbyists with concrete suggestion and ideas to promote or improve rural economies and family wellbeing.

A strength of this book is the variety of data sources and methods used. The data sources in this volume allow the researchers to provide both macro level (e.g., Current Population Survey, Census, American Community Survey, Survey of Income and Program Participation) and micro level (e.g., National Survey of Family Growth, Iowa Families across Time) approaches to understanding trends at national, county and individual levels. In addition, the volume includes ethnographic studies that provide rich and personal accounts of how the current trends in economic restructuring are affecting personal lives and family wellbeing. Although a variety of quantitative methodologies are used, the reader does not get lost in trying to interpret complex analytical models; rather, they are drawn to the story told by the results that, in concert with the qualitative data, deliver a well-crafted and easily read synopsis of how rural economies have fared, how families living in these areas support their families and survive times of economic stress, and the investments that policy makers need to make in order to improve rural family wellbeing.

Smith and Tickamyer do an admirable job in selecting and organizing this volume. In addition to the introduction which orients the reader to the impact of rural economic restructuring and family wellbeing, the volume is divided into four sections: Changing Economic Opportunities and Changing Roles; Family Change, Economic Hardship and Family Adaptive Strategies; Low-Wage Employment; and Work and Family Policy. The work included in each section builds a concise compilation of research that clearly defines economic restructuring trends and how rural areas and families have fared during times of economic restructuring. The message in the first three sections identifies how rural economies and family wellbeing differ from that of their urban and suburban counterparts. This content poses a clear challenge to one size fits all policies that may inadvertently leave rural populations at risk. Not only have the type of jobs available to rural men and women changed, but unemployment, underemployment and job displacement are major factors for workers trying to provide for their families. These employment challenges, as meaningfully pointed out by the contributing authors, are related to rural poverty, a change in traditional gender roles, changes in family structure and stability, risks to child and adolescent development, and overall family stress. Not only does each chapter in the first three sections offer policy related discussions, but the final section outlines specific areas of policy concern that would undeniably provide relief to rural families. These suggestions include policy that supports investments in education, child care, health insurance, transportation, social and economic supports to the working

poor, and the need for policies that are flexible enough to support remote and chronically depressed areas.

In conclusion, this edited volume is a key contribution to theoretically grounded and empirically sound literature to rural studies. It is a timely addition given the economic crisis that continues in the United States and the need for politicians and rural advocates to gain an in-depth knowledge of how rural areas and families compare to – and differ from – their urban and suburban counterparts. Hopefully, this edition will make it into the hands of our politicians, but at a minimum will become a must read for those who are in a place to advocate for rural places and people and for those that have the power to influence rural policy makers.

## References

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