

# Poor Rural Children Attract Close Study

By [Debra Viadero](#)

Growing up poor in isolated rural areas and small towns is qualitatively different from growing up poor in the city. Yet most of what experts know about the effects of poverty on children's development comes from studies conducted in big cities.

Now, an ambitious project run by universities in Pennsylvania and North Carolina is putting what some scholars feel is a long-overdue research focus on disadvantaged children in less-populated stretches of the country.

Known as the [Family Life Project](#), the study began in 2002 and set out a year later to track the lives of 1,292 children born between September 2003 and the following September.

The project, which won a \$12.8 million grant last month from the National Institutes of Health to continue the next five-year phase of its work, is the largest, most comprehensive and representative study to date of children's development in rural America, according to Lynne Vernon-Feagans, the lead investigator.

## Family Life Project

**What It Is:** A comprehensive, interdisciplinary study that is tracking children growing up in small cities, towns, and rural areas in three counties in central Pennsylvania and three counties in eastern North Carolina with high concentrations of poverty

**Children Involved:** 1,292 children born between September 2003 and September 2004

**Funding:** \$29.3 million from the National Institutes of Health for the first 10 years of the project, from 2002 to 2012

**Principal Investigators:** Mark Greenberg, Pennsylvania State University, University Park; Lynne Vernon-Feagans, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

"We know a lot about socioeconomic status and whether children are in two-parent families, but we don't have the developmental studies that really look in depth into families in rural areas and what factors are related to children's later development," said Ms. Vernon-Feagans, a professor of human development and psychological studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

If the project continues to get financial support, researchers hope to track the children in the study, most of whom are now preschoolers, into adulthood. Meanwhile, they will gather information on how the children interact with their families, what their homes, schools, and preschools are like, and the kinds of educational resources available to the children as they grow up.

The scholars will also gauge children's cognitive development, literacy skills, temperament, and academic performance—and even take physiological measures of their stress levels.

"This is a research project that really tries to take seriously the whole idea of going from the neuron level all the way up to big levels of context," said Mark Greenberg, the co-principal investigator and a professor of human development and psychology at Pennsylvania State University in University Park.

## Distinct Dynamics

According to 2006 figures from the U.S. Census Bureau, 22 percent of rural children across the nation live below the federal poverty level, which was around \$20,000 for a family of four that year. That's up from 19 percent in 2000.

While that figure is lower than it is for the nation's central cities, it's higher than is the case in suburban America and than the national average of 17 percent.

Experts agree that closer studies are needed precisely because of the different sorts of challenges that rural life can impose on families, particularly those who are not well off. The new work comes at a time when many such communities are also in flux as manufacturing jobs disappear and young adults migrate to bigger population centers in search of work.

In many rural areas, parents face long commutes to their jobs, to their children's schools, or to the agencies that provide needed services for their children.


"Oftentimes, resources are so stretched, programs aren't well funded, and families are really isolated," said Mil Duncan, a sociology professor at the University of New Hampshire in Durham and the director of the university's Carsey Institute, which studies rural issues.

Ms. Duncan, who is not connected with the Family Life Project, said its findings could be important, particularly since the 23 researchers involved represent a range of disciplines and lenses with which to study the issue.

She and other experts also noted that poor families in rural areas may also be at a disadvantage because they move frequently to find low-cost housing. Some national data suggest that while rural children may have smaller class sizes and more-experienced teachers on average than inner-city children do, their teachers typically also have less education, less access to professional development, and lower salaries. Illegal drug use is also a growing scourge in many rural areas.

"There's been this myth that urban children show higher rates of drug and alcohol use," said Mr. Greenberg. "Now, a number of national studies show that's not the case, and it hasn't been the case for a decade."

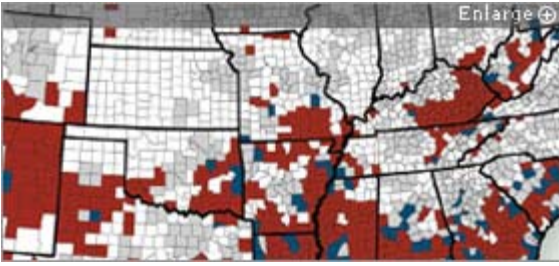
## Generational Poverty

One possible outgrowth of all those factors, [a report released last week by the Carsey Institute](#)  shows, is that rural youths from 18 to 24 are slightly more likely than their urban counterparts to be idle—not working, studying, or serving in the military.

Nationwide, the study shows, 12.4 percent of rural young people in that age group were idle, compared with 10 percent of urban youths. Among high school dropouts and members of minority groups, though, the rural-urban contrast is even sharper. In the racial category known as "other"—which includes Native Americans—twice as many rural youths fell under the "idle" heading as their urban counterparts.

### Counties With Persistent Child Poverty

In more than 600 U.S. rural counties, the proportion of children in poverty has topped 20 percent each decade since 1970, according to University of New Hampshire researchers Kenneth M. Johnson and William P. O'Hare.



Source: Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire

For its study, the Family Life Project has zeroed in on three eastern North Carolina counties—Sampson, Wayne, and Wilson—and three in central Pennsylvania—Blair, Cambria, and Huntingdon. Across the six counties, researchers estimate that about half the families in the study earn \$40,000 or less a year, which was roughly 200 percent of the federal poverty threshold in 2002, and the poverty has passed from generation to generation.

The study locations vary by state, though, in cultural and geographic ways. In the Pennsylvania counties, lying in the Appalachian Mountains, most of the families are white and live in the valleys or hollows between mountains. In North Carolina, many of the families are descendants of African-American tenant farmers who worked the area's flat farmlands.

The research teams recruited local residents to gather data for the study, training them, for example, to conduct interviews, make periodic home visits, videotape mothers or other caregivers reading and playing with the children, measure children's heart rates, and take saliva samples. Researchers will use those samples to measure levels of cortisol, a hormone that is triggered by stress.

“We're interested in stress responses and how they predict children's abilities later on,” said Mr. Greenberg, who is also the director of Penn State's Prevention Research Center. “Animal research shows that if too many corticoids are circulating in the brain, they can kill brain cells.”

Mr. Greenberg and his colleagues will also study how children's temperament—whether they're inhibited or outgoing, for instance—affects their success in school later on.

He said the researchers are also paying particular attention to the development of executive control—the brain processes that guide thought and behaviors, such as self-control—in the preschool years to see how those functions predict children's academic abilities later on.

“We know brain growth is very rapid in this period, and that executive function is the least developed at that stage and most vulnerable to the effect of early environments,” Mr. Greenberg said.

## Effects Add Up

Some of the first findings from the project are due to be published later this year in the journal *Parenting Research and Practice*. They show, in keeping with other research on child poverty, that bad outcomes for children tend to compound over time.

In other words, poverty, unemployment, single parenthood, low levels of maternal education, and other major life stresses tend to be linked to poorer parenting practices in families, which, in turn, tend to be linked to weaker cognitive growth in children by the time they are 15 months old.

The good news, though, is that, when mothers are engaged with their children, when they talk to them often, and provide books and other learning activities for them, they can lessen the negative cognitive impact.

One surprising finding for researchers: At the 15-month check-in, the researchers found that children, for the most part, were better off in more isolated rural areas than they were in the towns and small cities in the study. Their mothers behaved more warmly toward them, and they had stronger cognitive skills than their counterparts in more-populated areas, said Margaret R. Burchinal, the lead statistician for the project.

“What we thought was that the public housing that tended to be where the most destitute families lived were all in the most urban places in our study,” she said. “Families in those places were exposed to more really bad stuff, like active drug-selling or violence. It’s possible,” Ms. Burchinal said, “that being more isolated means that you are exposed to a lot fewer of these negative things.”

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