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Cover: Children wading in a fountain at Jamison Square, in Portland's Pearl District. Photo by Isabelle Groc.

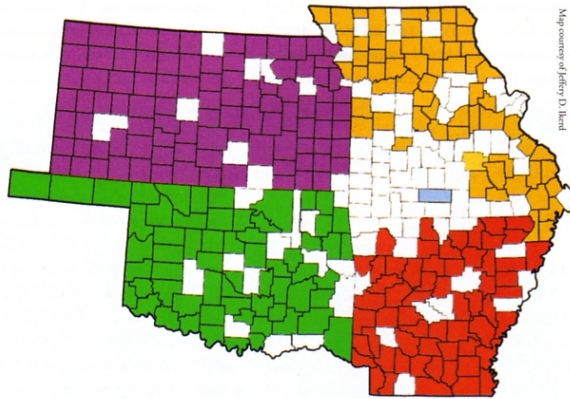
Art credits: Children playing in Portland's Pearl District photo by Isabelle Groc (8). Toddler area at The Kitchen community center, Springfield, Missouri; photo by The Kitchen, Inc. (20). A jogger checks out upcoming residential development at a downtown St. Louis site; photo by Bill Schawacker (24). Building sign in Shepherdstown, West Virginia; photo by James Seg

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A Rural Problem

By Paul Rollinson, AICP



Map courtesy of Jeffrey D. Head



Brenda knew Springfield, Missouri, before she eventually moved there to get help at The Kitchen, Inc., the city's largest homeless shelter. She finished junior high and high school in this mid-sized city (pop. 150,000), which is set within a largely rural region. Before she arrived at the shelter, her life had been a series of ups and downs—mostly downs, to hear her tell the story.

Before returning home to live with her aging parents in a rural community not far from Springfield, Brenda married, had two children, got divorced, and then experienced a number of abusive relationships. For a time she had lived in West Virginia: "I made a bad choice to go out there with my boyfriend, and it was a really bad, bad situation," she says. When asked if she was abused, the answer was: "Emotionally, yes. And

Two-thirds of the homeless who seek help in Springfield, Missouri (blue rectangle), come from that state; the rest travel from Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Kansas. Main feeder counties are in white. Right: The Kitchen, Inc., is a multiservice agency in Springfield that started in 1983, eventually buying several buildings.

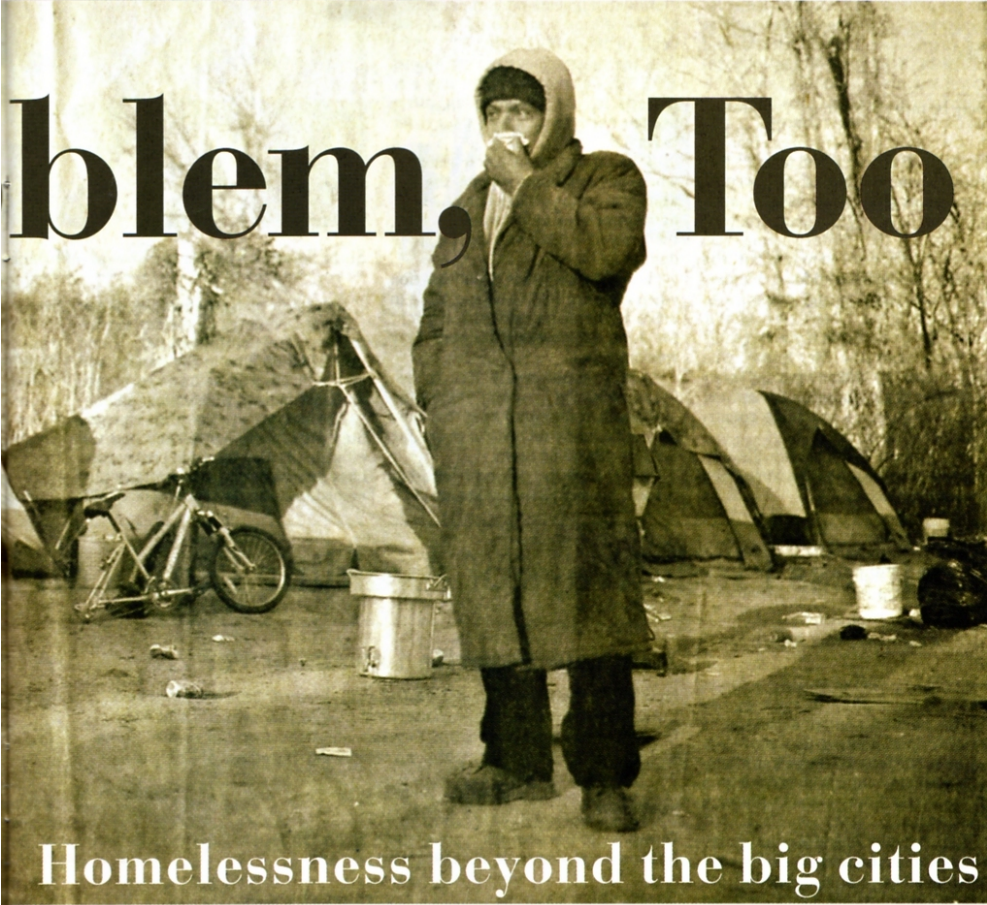


sexually, yes, and verbally, yes." Brenda's details are gut-wrenching to listen to. Upon leaving, she says, "The only place I had to live was with my Mom and Dad."

Once she was living with her parents, she

discovered that her husband did not, in fact, have custody of her two children, now ages 14 and 18: "I saved all my money to get a bus ticket [out of town] to get the girls. I brought them back," she says. "They wanted to be with

blem, Too



Homelessness beyond the big cities

Jose Adrian Tenabua lives with other homeless men and women in a tent city in Ocean County, New Jersey. His encampment is one of several erected in the woods near towns along the Jersey Shore.

me. They didn't want to be with their Dad; he was a crackhead—still is, for all I know. He was giving my oldest daughter drugs; she ended up in the hospital one time.”

So Brenda's two daughters joined her, and all three of them were then living with her parents. “We didn't have enough dressers, enough places to hang clothes. I had to sleep on the couch,” Brenda says. “It was not a good place; there was tension because my Mom was trying to tell me how to run my life and my kids' life. And my Mom and Dad were bickering all the time.”

Brenda (not her real name) and her girls were forced to stay with her parents because they had nowhere else to go, but the situation got intolerable: “After my Dad exploded one night, I just couldn't live at home anymore,” she says.

Pushed to the edge, Brenda decided to consider her options in Springfield. Realizing she

had few choices, she considered the homeless shelter: “I knew that this was a shelter, but I never really thought about it being a home for me. I decided to call and make an appointment and come and look it over.”

Brenda never thought that this was where she'd end up, but, she says, “After I saw it, took a tour, saw the room, I said fine, this is really good. And I am here.” Her parents did not want her to move to the shelter, she says, “but I told them that this is the only door that has been opened and I am going to choose to take that. I'm learning to be more assertive.”

Rural homeless remain hidden

The homeless in rural areas and smaller towns and cities have largely been overlooked. Their problems have often taken a back seat to the more glaring problems evident in big cities.

People who are homeless in rural America rarely fit the national stereotype. While some are literally homeless, the majority are living in extremely precarious housing situations. They are often moving from one overcrowded, or barely affordable, housing situation to another, often doubling up or tripling up with family or friends.

Some sleep in vehicles or in other improvised housing. Some camp in isolated areas and some are families who are facing foreclosure and imminent eviction from their homes.

The rural homeless are often less visible than their urban counterparts, partly because of lower population densities in rural areas and the scarcity of social services and shelter programs to identify and assist them. Although the rural homeless are not as concentrated or as visible as the urban homeless,

Photo: Heidi Alt/The New York Times/Redux

proportionally there may be more of them in many rural areas.

As a whole, the nation's rural population has lower income, lower employment, and higher poverty levels than urban and suburban Americans. Many rural Americans have experienced economic downturns not seen since the Great Depression, with dwindling populations and growing fiscal problems. Remote and farm-dependent counties appear to be facing especially difficult challenges.

Poverty rates have been consistently higher in nonmetropolitan areas. Of the 386 persistently poor counties—those with 20 percent or more of their populations living in poverty as measured in the 1970 through 2000 censuses—340 are nonmetropolitan. The majority are in parts of the U.S. where poverty primarily reflects conditions among racial or ethnic minority groups or the predominantly white population of the Southern Highlands, mostly the Allegheny and Cumberland Plateau counties of Kentucky and West Virginia, plus parts of the Ozark Plateau and Ouachita Mountains west of the Mississippi.

Unfortunately, the social problems of rural Americans have received less attention than their more visible urban counterparts. Many Americans view life in rural communities as bucolic, but this image is partially maintained by the invisibility of our rural citizens in need.

Estimates from different sources show that in the late 1990s at least 2.3 million, and perhaps as many as 3.5 million, people experienced homelessness at some time during an average year. Rural homelessness is estimated to make up anywhere from seven to 14 percent of this population. *Helping America's Homeless*, a widely referenced Urban Institute study by Martha Burt and others, puts the number at nine percent. The rural homeless are less likely to live on the street or in a shelter, and are more likely to live in car, or with relatives or friends in overcrowded or substandard housing.

The problems inherent in these estimates begin with the definition of the homeless and the techniques used in counting them. The most popular counting technique is a census of the individuals staying in shelters and recognized congregation sites. While this method may be acceptable for getting estimates of the homeless population in large metropolitan areas, it does not do justice to rural homeless populations.

One of the main problems in rural areas is that the homeless become invisible, or unrecognizable in rural settings. Homeless shelters and service providers are few and far between, often leaving only family and limited community assistance available to those in need.



Melissa Hummel/DTN, New York Times/Reuters

Ruben Garcia and John Lobato at the Open Door Soup Kitchen in Trinidad, Colorado.

To date, a significant number of national, state, and local organizations have endorsed the call for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to adopt a definition of homelessness that is broader and would more accurately reflect the experience of homeless persons in rural areas. Currently, the HUD definition excludes people who are forced to stay with others temporarily (those who are "doubled-up"). These include Brenda and her daughters and people staying in motels because they have no other options.

In search of help

The rural homeless like Brenda are often forced to move in search of help. In smaller communities across the U.S., the homeless have become more visible in places that are ill-prepared to assist them. Debates are under way in many of these communities concerning the provision of homeless services and the so-called "attraction" of this population. Today, the connection between residency and public assistance has reemerged as states and localities worry about providing services

that may be a magnet for the homeless.

More than half of the homeless in Springfield who were surveyed in 1999 came from the southwest region of Missouri, and two-thirds originated from within the state. Overall, three-quarters came from the four states of Arkansas, Kansas, Missouri, and Oklahoma.

Springfield is the retailing and service center of the Ozarks. The area served by the large multiservice homeless shelter extends throughout a large portion of this mostly rural state. If such a phenomenon as a homeless social-service magnet exists, this organization would be one.

However, the vast majority of homeless individuals were not traveling to the shelter from other states. They originated in the predominantly rural communities of the wider region, where social services—especially for those fleeing domestic violence or other crises—were very limited. A small regional network of agencies does exist, but they all reported insufficient funds to support all service provision requests.

The rural and small town homeless are different from the homeless in larger cities. For one



180 miles south of Denver.

thing, there are many more homeless families in nonmetropolitan areas than in many metropolitan settings. They are also more likely to be white families and single mothers with children, working and homeless for the first time.

Rural homelessness is the result of poverty and the lack of affordable housing. Research published by the Rural Poverty Research Center in 2004 notes that the odds of being poor are between 1.2 and 2.3 times higher for those in nonmetropolitan areas.

Many wind up homeless because of the problems associated with doubling up in overcrowded housing. In Springfield, the number of those who had previously been living in shelters or on the streets was very low. The homeless who were studied in Springfield in 1999 were more likely to be precariously housed with friends or relatives than visible on the streets, and this is one of the reasons rural homelessness has been largely overlooked by researchers and policy makers alike.

Violence prevalent

The problem involves more than the lack of a

roof. Decent, safe, and affordable housing is obviously a necessity for those who find themselves homeless in rural areas, but their needs go beyond housing. The self-reported reasons for homelessness underestimated the extent of disabilities and family violence—factors that became more obvious when the Springfield shelter's intake data were analyzed.

Self-reported reasons given for homelessness:	
Disability	11%
Eviction	21%
Family breakup	17%
Family violence and abuse	2%
Financial problems	31%
Other	18%

Even though 11 percent of the population claimed they were homeless because of a disability, the number found in the in-depth analysis of the narratives describing their pathways to the shelter was much higher. Nearly two-thirds had a history of substance abuse, one-half had a history of mental illness, and almost one-fourth had a medical problem. These data suggest that disability is very common among the rural homeless. (Other studies have shown that disability is also common among the urban homeless.)

The variable that was most commonly associated with the rural homeless was family violence, despite the fact that only two percent reported it as the reason for their homelessness. In Springfield, more than 68 percent of the women interviewed had experienced family violence. Physical abuse was the most common form of family violence, although 20 percent experienced emotional abuse and 13 percent experienced sexual abuse.

Brenda's self-reported reason for homelessness is typical. While she reported her reason for homelessness as family breakup, it was not until we interviewed her several times that we learned the true nature of her breakup.

Histories of abuse and violence are very difficult to cope with, and a typical response is repression and denial. The abuses identified in the narratives of the intake interviews make it quite clear that domestic violence is a significant variable in explaining the pathways many rural families take to homelessness.

Brenda initially saw domestic violence as typical and even acceptable. "It is only now that I see the pattern and the trends," she says. Caught in a storm, many suffering from domestic violence do not know how to reach out or even where to go.

Paul Rollinson teaches urban geography and social planning at Missouri State University. He is the coauthor of *Homelessness in Rural America*, published in 2006.

Things to Be Done

The rural homeless face many special challenges:

- A dispersed and often hidden population
- Limited transportation, making outreach and coordination difficult
- Federal programs that favor the homeless in larger metropolitan areas
- Lack of affordable housing and rental assistance
- Nonexistent or shrinking mental health and drug and alcohol services
- Limited capacity for resource development, including grant writing and management

To meet some of these challenges rural areas need:

- Formal coordination of outreach centers and engagement teams
- Access to information on best practices
- Grant-writing and management assistance

Resources

In print. *Homelessness in Rural America: Policy and Practice.* Paul A. Rollinson and John T. Pardeck. 2006. Haworth Press. The book describes shelter intake data in 1,480 cases of homeless households using the services of The Kitchen, Inc., in Springfield, Missouri, in 1999. One-fifth of the narratives (296 cases) were reviewed to learn about pathways to homelessness, and another 10 percent of the homeless (30 cases) were interviewed multiple times and cross referenced with key informants to create a triangulated qualitative analysis of the nature of rural homelessness.

Helping America's Homeless: Emergency Shelter or Affordable Housing? Martha Burt, Laudan Aron, Edgar Lee, and Jesse Valente. 2001. Urban Institute Press. This book describes homeless people and service systems across the nation using data from the National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients, conducted by the Urban Institute in 1996. It is unique in its breadth and coverage and offers a comprehensive look at homeless assistance programs. It covers urban, suburban, and rural homelessness.

Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Homeless Children and Families in Small Town America. Yvonne M. Vissing. 1996. University Press of America. This book details the causes and consequences of homelessness among school-aged children and their families in five New Hampshire communities. Published after six years of sociological investigation during the 1990s, this book is rich in insights and descriptions of the complexity of the problem.

On the web. Housing Assistance Council: www.ruralhome.org; National Coalition for the Homeless: www.nationalhomeless.org; National Alliance to End Homelessness: www.endhomelessness.org; National Center for Homeless Education: www.serve.org/nche; Rural Poverty Research Center: www.rpronline.org; Pennsylvania's Rural Homeless Reality: www.ruralpa.org/Homeless.pdf.