Accepted but to be revised for Soc. & Poverty — ASA mtgs August '88

POVERTY, WORK AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE APPALACHIAN COAL FIELDS

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January, 1988

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Introduction: Myths about the Appalachian Poor

Growing alarm about the black underclass in the nation's cities has sparked renewed discussion of poverty in the media and in scholarly literature (Lemann, 1986; Kaus, 1986; Wilson, 1987; Mead, 1986; Danziger and Weinberg, 1986; Wall Street Journal, 1987; New York Times, 1987; New York Review of Books, 1987). Simultaneously, the national retrenchment from social programs to aid the disadvantaged and debates about growing inequality have prompted new discussions of welfare reform (Murray, 1984; Moynihan, 1986; Harrington, 1986; Thurow, 1984, 1986).

In both cases, much of current discussion, both about causes and possible remedies for poverty, focuses on work and responsibility. While those on different sides of the ideological spectrum continue to disagree about the poor's willingness to work and take responsibility, there is a general feeling among both conservative and liberal policy makers that increased individual responsibility for well-being through work and child support would help ameliorate desperate conditions in chronic poverty areas. Consequently, work fare proposals and child support assurance programs are at the heart of current welfare reform proposals before Congress.

In a related recent development in poverty research and policy, analysts have begun to recognize the significance of the

growing number of working poor: households and individuals who continue to live in poverty despite working (Levitan and Shapiro, 1987; Reischauer, 1987; Sawhill, 1987; Greenstein, 1987; Duncan and Tickamyer, 1987). The Bureau of the Census reported that about " half of the Nation's family householders with income below the poverty level in 1985 worked at some time during the year, and 16 percent worked year-round, full-time" (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1987). Levitan and Shapiro point out that accompanying growing inequality nationwide, the number of working poor has been increasing since 1978: the full-time year-round working poor has increased by 50 percent and the part-time working poor has risen 35 percent (1987:16).

These developments in public discussion about poverty are of critical importance to those in rural areas, where the majority of the working poor are concentrated (Levitan and Shapiro, 1987:18). Opportunities for work have been limited for decades in rural areas, especially in the South and the Appalachian mountains. The economies of these regions have been dependent on the most volatile industries--either natural resource-based or low-wage manufacturing that is vulnerable to overseas competition--and are most often undiversified. Full-time year-round jobs are rare, and people have been accustomed to booms and busts for their whole working life.

The persistence of chronic poverty in the rural South and the Appalachian mountains has contributed to the acceptance of disparaging stereotypes about poor mountain people and poor

tenant farmers. Bolstered by misleading, highly subjective accounts of poverty in these areas (Caudill, 1966; Fetterman, 1968; Weller, 196x; Looff, 19xx....; Auletta, 1982), popular opinion continues to regard the rural poor as non-workers: lazy, fatalistic, overly dependent on kinship, and consequently deserving of their poverty.

The relative dearth of insightful analytic research on rural poverty has permitted an over emphasis on the few studies that exist. Caudill in particular, and Fetterman to a lesser extent, have become the reference point even for serious scholars or policy analysts whom one would expect to bring a more circumspect viewpoint to the subject. For example, both political journalist Neil Pierce (19xx) and political scientist Vine Deloria (1984) treat Caudill's damning portrait of Appalachians in Night Comes to the Cumberlands as the primary reference for the Appalachian predicament. Similarly, sociologist Herman Lantz cited Caudill to justify his contention that coal community residents were thoroughly resigned and apathetic, outside the mainstream of American values which emphasize "mobility, individual effort, and initiative" (Lantz, 1964). When he discussed the white underclass in West Virginia, Auletta reiterated the conclusions drawn by Fetterman: "As was true of the rural Appalachian mountain community brought to life in John Fetterman's powerful book about rural poverty, Stinking Creek, much of 'the rural populace in the countless hollows have adopted the welfare rolls as a way of life'" (1982:159).

These conclusions that "much of the rural populace...have adopted the welfare rolls as a way of life" parallel urban studies which interpret the poor's patterns of living designed to adapt to limited economic opportunities as anti-social, non-work oriented behavior that is embedded in the character of these people, and then generalize these conclusions to cover all the poor (Duncan and Tickamyer, 1987; Steinberg, 19xx). Researchers or journalists observe non-middle class behavior with middle-class glasses on, and fail to delve deeper into behavior over time, among different members of families, and under different economic conditions (cf. Gans, 1968;). These biases imply that the poor deserve their poverty and that it is too deeply entrenched as a way of life to be ameliorated. Such attitudes discourage public efforts to address poverty.

New Research on the Appalachian Poor

To obtain greater insight on the Appalachian poor, researchers at the Mountain Association for Community Economic Development (MACED) conducted open-ended, unstructured interviews with over fifty coal-field residents in three eastern Kentucky counties during 1985-86.[1] MACED is a regional development organization that combines business investment with research and policy analysis, and previous work on the changing structure of the coal industry had stimulated further questions about how

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[1] This research effort was supported by the Rural Poverty and Resources program of the Ford Foundation.

people affected by declining coal employment were coping in the 1980s, and what policy measures might improve their future economic opportunities.

The fundamental questions underlying the interviews were three-fold. First, how do people living in a volatile coal economy regard work, and how do their households survive when coal employment is down? Secondly, what is it about living in the mountains that draws people back and holds them there, even when the economy is depressed and there is little work available? Third, how do coal field residents perceive the future, for themselves, their children, and for mountain communities?[2] Better understanding of the answers to these questions would inform policy makers concerned with Appalachian poverty and development, and enhance their development of appropriate policies.

Interviewees were selected through personal contacts and word-of-mouth inquiries about several categories of individuals affected by declining coal employment: independent, small coal operators and coal haulers, employed and unemployed coal miners, workers in service industries dependent upon coal business, and individuals dependent upon public assistance. Interviews ranged from one to three hours, and always covered basic personal characteristics as well as the following issues: work history for the individual and his or her family members; past outmigration

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[2] Previous structured surveys of attitudes in Appalachia include Ford (1958); Bowman and Haynes (1964) and Billings (19xx).

in the family; attitudes toward living in the mountains; hopes and aspirations for children; attitudes toward education; and the effect of local politics on improving the quality of life and work in the mountains.

While the interviewers were middle class and from outside the mountains, they were accompanied by an inside informant and had worked on development issues in the region for 12 years.[3] Every effort was made to explore the full context in which those interviewed made decisions and developed attitudes about their community and their future.

The Context for the Study: Patterns of Coal Production and Employment

Although coal production has undergone some peaks and valleys during this century, since the 1960s production has climbed steadily. Close to 900 million tons of coal supply one-fifth of the nation's energy needs, and the Appalachian coal fields produce about fifty percent of that coal in the mid-1980s. Because the deep mines which dominate Appalachian coal production are less productive, the region employs almost 75 percent of the nation's coal miners. However, unlike coal production, coal

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[3] Interviewers included Cynthia Duncan, sociologist and research director at MACED at the time, and at various times: Carol Lamm, community development specialist and subsequently author of a report on policies for dislocated coal miners, S.M. Miller, sociologist and poverty expert at Boston University, and the local informant (who shall remain anonymous to protect the anonymity of those interviewed).

employment has been steadily declining since the 1950s, except for a brief surge in the late 1970s when new safety and environmental laws coincided with the oil embargo.

Graphs 1 and 2 indicate that the coal industry has been raising production and lowering employment almost steadily since the post World War II era beginning around 1950. From 1950 to 1970 coal employment declined dramatically because workers were replaced by new mining machinery during a period of stagnating demand. There was a brief surge in employment during the 1970s, when demand for coal grew in the face of the Arab oil boycott, prices for coal increased, and new regulations for mine safety and environmental protection required more labor. However, when the short-lived price surge ended in the late 1970s, the industry resumed efforts to increase productivity through investments in better mining technology, improved production management, more stable labor relations and more efficient responses to regulations. Since 1978, the industry increased productivity nationwide 42 percent, and these trends are expected to continue at a more moderate rate. Between 1982 and 1985, 15,000 miners lost their jobs in Kentucky alone, and experts forecast continued declines in coal employment.

While these graphs suggest to an outside observer that the coal industry has followed fairly consistent pattern of increased production and declining employment for nearly 30 years, they indicate repeated gyrations to those living and working in the mountains today. Most miners today had fathers and uncles who

mined. In some cases miners described themselves as "three generation miners", including their grandfathers and great uncles. In many cases, two generations would virturally span the century described in this graph. Families would have known peaks around 1919, then both decline and gain in the twenties, followed by the Depression of the thirties. World War II brought more demand for coal, only to be followed by mechanization, massive layoffs, and the outmigration of over a million people. In every household we interviewed, several family members had left to work in northern auto plants and some had returned to work in coal during the 1970s boom. In short, over two or three generations, the lived experience of a coal economy is one of boom and bust. Nonetheless, we found few who believed that their children could find work in the mines. This is the economic context in which we conducted interviews over a two year period.

Work in the Coal Fields

Those interviewed for this study had worked, mostly intermittently, as long as they had been of working age. They generally valued work, and would prefer work over public assistance. many, as will be described, took low-paying and difficult jobs to earn a living after they lost coal mining jobs. There are four kinds of work in the coal fields: work in the coal industry; "odd jobs" in the informal sector; low-wage, often part-time work in the service sector; and the much-coveted stable, middle-range jobs in the public sector, including

teaching.

Not surprisingly, given the trends in the coal industry described earlier, most workers in the coal industry have experienced intermittent work. Fathers and grandfathers of those interviewed were in and out of work because chronic overcapacity and fierce competition meant that any one producer's access to markets was short term. When the United Mine Workers Union was being formed, people were in and out of work as part of the labor turmoil that swept the area. Overcapacity and extreme competitiveness lasted until after World War II. Then John Lewis, colorful and powerful leader of the United Mine Workers, negotiated with the leading companies of the industry in the 1950s and came up with a plan to raise wages, forcing many marginal producers out of business. The arrangement depended upon sudden mechanization, and the result was massive unemployment in the coal fields. In the 1950s and 1960s over a million and a half people left the mountains to find work elsewhere.

During the Arab oil embargo, demand for coal surged again. Coal production and employment increased almost 50 percent during the 1960-1980 years, and the price of coal doubled in constant dollars. This coal boom brought euphoria in the coal fields. Sons and daughters of miners who had moved to auto plants in Ohio and Michigan returned to the mountains to mine coal and raise their children in familiar communities with their extended families.

For several years demand for coal seemed steady and prices went very high. One operator described how he had been bringing coal down off the mountain and selling it at a local tipple for $4.00 a ton, when one day someone waited for him and offered $16.00 a ton, and the next buyer offered $17.50. Others had stories of good quality metallurgical coal selling for as much as $70.00 per ton. People were selling coal they removed with wheel barrows, and others were competing with one another to buy large machinery to move large amounts of coal quickly. There appeared to be no limit to the demand or the price, and coal operators and miners were euphoric.

But the boom ended as suddenly as it had begun, and with virtually no notice, contractors were told their buyers needed no more coal and miners were told they were no longer needed at work. Miner after miner, operator after operator described going into work or calling up the buyer to hear that there was no more work or no more coal needed. For the last several years--since 1982--many miners and operators have either been working partial weeks or partial years. Most of the operators we interviewed were accustomed to saving substantial parts of their income, usually between one fourth and one half. Miners, on the other hand, mostly failed to save, and were in desperate shape when their unemployment benefits ran out.

Those coal workers whom we interviewed took pride in their work and in the skills they brought to it. Many of them had begun working around the mines as teenagers, as rock pickers or errand

boys. Coal was their life, what they knew and were good at. Even those with relatively routine jobs described with pride certain tasks they did that took great skill, care or experience to get just right. Those who were small operators described the attraction of being independent, one's own boss. When jobs are scarce and operations have to be both highly productive and meticulously law abiding, a good reputation determines whether one can get of keep a job or get or keep new contracts.

About half the small operators with whom we talked are planning to stay in the coal business. They are looking for new contracts, looking for coal to lease or sublease . (Most coal is leased by a handful of large land companies who have little to lose by waiting to lease it out until prices rise again). Most are resourceful about finding temporary work--altering a coal hauling truck so it can be used to transport heavy machinery, haul dirt, doing odd jobs fixing plumbing, cars, light carpentry.

Others, especially unemployed miners, described what they do as "odd jobs." They look for carpentry, grass cutting, plumbing jobs. Some act as drivers, or essentially illegal taxi drivers. Others took on janitorial work in banks or schools, if they knew the right people to get hired. Wives usually worked as nurses, bank tellers, selling Avon, processing social security forms, waitresses. Low wage jobs, often minimum wage jobs, performed by these women would be supporting families of four or more on less than $7000 in wages, perhaps supplemented by food stamps.

Even those whom we interviewed who had depended on public

assistance, either AFDC or disability, had worked in the past or were planning to work in the near future. One young unwed mother of a five year old was using the WIN program to go to school to be trained as a legal secretary so she could end her dependency. Today she is working as a legal secretary.

Another woman had received AFDC payments to support herself when her children were young and she left her husband, who drank, was unable to hold on to a job, and "was the kind of person that anything free, I'll take." Her worst fears had been the arrival of bill collectors and eviction notices when she was married to him, and the AFDC payments gave her relief from those fears. When her children were in school, she earned a General Equivalency Degree (GED) and got a job as a waitress. Her two adult children work hard and resist any kind of charity, even help with gas money from their church when their father lay ill in a distant hospital.

A third household demonstrated the same complex mix of workers and non workers. We went to see an unemployed miner who lived in a dilapidated mobile home with his girl friend, their child, his girl friend's sister and her boy friend and their two small children. After years of waiting approval, the boy friend had received disability status and he returned to the mountains from a northern city. Both women received AFDC payments, and the couples were unmarried so they could receive those payments. The miner had been making $13.00 an hour as a miner up until about a month before we talked with them. The miner had worked in coal

mining all his life, intermittently, beginning when he was 12. At 45 years of age, he looked over 60. He wanted to be working again, and was planning to move to a northern city, where he had a distant relative, hoping to find work as a mechanic.

Work in the mountains is scarce in the 1980s, and, with few exceptions such as the brief coal boom in the seventies, it always has been. This scarcity has shaped the social and political system in the mountains, and has important implications for understanding the past and devising policies for the future. Jobs represent real wealth, like property, and control over jobs carries significant political and social power.

Both public and private sector jobs are the prized reward for family, friends or political supporters. One coal miner who had been unemployed for three years and was trying to run a used car business in the day time and clean school rooms in the evening said,

> "It's getting back to worse as it's ever been...if you don't work in the coal mines here, there's nothing else to do...during the coal boom there was a lot of work available...Now, you know, people around just can't buy a job. If you work for somebody, you're going to have to pay them."

Others told us that all jobs go to friends and families of those doing the hiring:

> If you're not tight with the people that own it, you're not going to get a job. The people that have the authority to hire will make sure that their friends or their families get the jobs because they know there are none anywhere else. I know if I had the authority, I'd hire my brother before I'd let him work in a 'scab mine'.

Independent coal operators, looking for coal reserves,

figure their only chance to mine coal without being a subcontractor is if they "can marry into it." Those who described new mining opportunities had obtained them through family connections: "my wife's uncle", "my uncle", "my father worked with this person".

A young woman described how politics permeates job giving and getting:

> Politics are too involved in all the hiring up here. They need to get the politics out and get people in who would concentrate on the good of this place, not on 'who owes who what'.
>
> For such a small place, there is a lot of politics going on. A lot of "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours." There's a lot of people with a lot of pull, but you have to know which ones are on the same side.

Others distinguished between state and local jobs and federal jobs. Federal jobs are not subject to the political machinations that determine who works in poor rural counties:

> I knew a lady that was trying to get a job at the food stamp office, and they told her she had to go to the Democratic party chairman and to another political figure to get letters. She had to switch her politics, to have a chance at the job. In a federal job--like social security--I don't think it has anything to do with politics. The social security office has a new supervisor who is black and from out of state, and that never would have happened in state politics.

A disabled coal miner told us that "anymore, even the odd jobs are hard to find." But "odd jobs" are all that a lot of people have. Unemployed miners who were accustomed to making $12 to $14 an hour just a year ago are now working as custodians, messengers, "shade tree" mechanics, drivers, carpenters. Wives are selling Avon, taking care of other people's kids, hoping to

get work in a store through connections. Any one who has work feels fortunate to have that opportunity.

Living in Coal Field Communities

Despite this depressed economy and the corrupt local politics it has engendered over the years, people living in the mountains feel a deep attachment to the region. Those who leave say they get "homesick". They like the fact that everyone knows them and "accepts" them in the mountains. In the same breath they will criticize their fellow mountaineers for not being more sophisticated, for throwing trash out on the road, for condoning bad schools, and then they will describe how much they like that familiarity, the closeness and acceptance.

But everyone, even the very poorest people whom we interviewed, deplored the bad politics and most felt helpless about changing it. Parents described the biggest obstacle facing their communities was corruption in the schools:

> ...the biggest problem you get into with the school board is the fact that they control more jobs and more people and more people's lives than any other thing in this county. They have the employees, and anytime you have that type of situation in a low economic area, you have a beautiful setup for bribery, corruption, and political power plays. And that is what happens in eastern Kentucky.

Several described the high stakes in school politics becasue of the number of jobs involved in places where the school system is the largest employer, saying that a school board seat in eastern Kentucky costs $100,000. A knowledgeable community leader said it was worth that much because the winner would "have power over jobs"--not just in the schools, but throughout the county.

Thisa individual, like several others we interviewed, had been involved in the process for years. He had been offered

$20,000 recently to deliver a certain community. He said he refused this time, but he told us how he would have done it, based on how he handled a governor's race in 1959:

> The way I work is I pick the families, and I'll get 30 people working for me over there. So I've got 30 people working for, say $40 a piece. They're all working for the same thing. They all have families. You get them out of big families, you know. I had families I relied on, whom I had taught how to do this.

He went on to describe in great detail how he picked the families, covered both sides of the families, and built a little movement of votes for his candidate.

Buying elections not only fills local institutions with corruption that puts loyalties over school quality. It also absorbs the energy of those in the system who would prefer to work on the content of their job. Teachers told us that even the well-meaning school administrators had to devote all their energy to surviving, and had none left for educational leadership. People say they cannot come in "and relax, and pay attention" to their jobs. They have to be alert to how the political winds blow, how they are changing, who's in and who's out.

Besides low educational quality in the present, this corruption also prevents those who want change from getting involved. One businesswomen told us, "nice people don't get involved in education." Education is regarded as dirty and corrupt, and best left to politicians. Time and time again, people described the local politics as "an iron grip", "a big wheel that turns and turns", "a pall lying over the community that you can't escape."

Education is seen by most as the most important issue in their depressed communities, and, as parents, they want the best for their children.

> People want change, they want improvement...I think they are just hindered in getting to those points by this political mess. It seems to be clouding the atmosphere in which we live and work.
>
> Business and professional people are not just concerned about their own kids--there's an urgency because they hire these people. They don't want a bunch of yo-yos working for them...

People of all income levels value education for their children and see it as their only hope. They are proud when their children do well in school, and they go to a lot of trouble to be sure their own kids get the dedicated teacher, the special class for the gifted or the dyslexic, or other special opportunities.

A laid off coal miner and his wife, neither of whom had finished high school, told us proudly how their son would read with a flashlight in bed at night. The father hopes both their boys will become school teachers, and the mother told us how they have been chosen to compete on quiz teams and in reading contests.

A young woman on welfare described her father's pride in her when she returned to school to get extra training for a good job:

> My father <u>hates</u> the idea that I draw a welfare check, period. And when I decided to go to school, he would come and pick me up early in the morning, and he would have a smile on his face the whole time we was going. He's the quiet type; he doesn't talk a lot at all. He just smiles. And when he'd see me getting discouraged or something--'cause you do--he would say, "Oh, hang in there, honey. You can do it. He's real proud, he is.
>
> People seek out special opportunities for their children,

sometimes aggressively. Both middle class, educated parents and low-income parents told us at great length of their struggles to get their handicapped children into the special programs they need. One mother told us she had stayed at home, not even driving a car, getting out only to go to the store a couple of times a month, until her son started school and had trouble learning. Then:

> I went through pure hell trying to get my child into a program where he could learn something. Well, that's been four years, and I'm still not there yet. I've got him in a program where he's learning something, but it's private, it's not public. I searched and I searched and I called and I wrote and I went everywhere in the world.

People with high achievers are equally aggressive about getting their children special assistance. A laid off coal miner told us of the interest he takes in his daughters' education:

> I stretch them. I push them to do a lot more than what the classroom wants them to do. I've got two kids that's probably going to go to college if there's any way I can possibly get them there. My youngest daughter is real, real intelligent. And she's a bit lazy but, you know, I push her. And I've had her in every special, you know, advanced class I can get her into to stimulate her mind and make her keep working. But as far as anything else goes, that's about all I can do, you know, besides in the summertime, make her read some books through the summer. Because reading is probably the key to all education; if you can't read you can't do anything.

The Future

These mountaineers have the same dreams for themselves and for their children as American elsewhere. They want their children to have good educations, to get stable, white collar jobs. They all would choose to have them live nearby, but most,

even when they have political connections or jobs to wield personally, are doubtful that their children will find satisfying work in the mountains.

Despite the grim economic forecast and the presistent corrupt politics, there may be new standards of social and political behavior in the future, A number of those with whom we talked counted themselves members of a new generation, a "baby boom" generation that had been inspired by the 1960s and hope for social change to have higher expectations of their mountain homes. They want a better social and political infrastructure, a participatory system that is progressive and opens opportunities for the region. This handful of people, several young leaders in each of the three counties, were working for change. They were winning people's confidence in their work lives, obtaining the crucial good reputation as a fair manager or reliable miner, and then using this reputation to challenge the old, rigid status quo. They were running for school board, occasionally winning. They were joining service clubs, working to bring public television or head start programs to the region.

Policy Implications

There are policies that could be implemented tomorrow and make a big difference to people in the mountains--the "old poor", or people who have been left out of the stream all long, as well as the "new poor", the people who have just been tossed out of the stream and are flipping around on the banks.

First, programs to help the unemployed and underemployed gain the skills they need for new work, whether in the mountains or in other areas where jobs are available could make a big difference. The many mountain people who want so much to work could benefit from programs that provide financial and other assistance those who want to go back to school or get new training and those who want leave isolated places for growing areas of the state. These programs have been successful in other places or times.

Second, state development programs could help local civic leaders in the "natural" growth centers on the edge of the mountains to develop their facilities, and to provide good linkages to surrounding areas. Similarly, state development program staff can work with those more isolated areas that want to develop better tourism facilities.

But policies and programs such as these would work best if local politics were cleaned up. In areas like eastern Kentucky, where each county and the jobs it controls represents a small fiefdom, the first step toward achieving would be consolidation of counties. People throughout the state who have tried to work to improve Kentucky by working with local governments tell you that a primary obstacle to getting things done efficiently and effectively is the plethora of small counties, each with its own judge and magistrates and political battles. Those that are hurt the most by the corruption and provincialism in small rural places are the poor, the people born on the wrong side of the

tracks, literally, and into the wrong families. They not only have to overcome the disadvantages of poverty, but also lack the crucial connections necessary for getting even the least desirable jobs.

Perhaps the new leadership MACED interviewers encountered throughout the mountains make such ideas possible, for the first time in the history of the poverty-stricken region. As one young leader who has worked to make schools better serve the poor put it:

> "Sure, there is a status quo--people that wouldn't change things around here for anything...But now young people are getting into key management positions. We will be making the decisions, and we are going to determine whether the quo remains status, or whether something is done."

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