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Homelessness In Rural Places: Perspectives From Upstate New York[1]

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ABSTRACT: Homelessness in rural America is generally overlooked and ignored because it does not fit urban-based perceptions and definitions. Rural homelessness is tied to worsening rural poverty, and particularly to deterioration of employment, increase in single-parent families, and loss of inexpensive housing. In the past, most rural poor people had the security of owning their homes, although for many the housing was substandard. In some rural areas there are now more poor people, and more of them are renters, but the stock of low-cost rental housing has been diminished by development, rural gentrification, and inadequate public investment. One result of the low-cost housing shortfall is elevated residential mobility: Some families move frequently within and between communities, often doubling up with relatives between residences. The destabilizing mobility and the frequent doubling up are hidden forms of homelessness. Ill-defined and uncounted, however, homeless people in small towns and open countryside remain ineffectively assisted by government programs.

This article is based on field research in scattered rural communities in New York state. Data were collected in interviews with low-income families and with local service providers, and from records of community agencies and schools. The article suggests research-based strategies for preventing and responding to homelessness that would be appropriate for rural people and rural communities.

Homelessness is not exclusively an urban phenomenon. In rural America, too, an increasing number of individuals and families lack housing for several weeks at a time or several periods in a year. However, the existence of homelessness in rural places is hardly known or recognized, largely because the generally accepted concept

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of homelessness is based on urban images, images that are not entirely accurate even for the cities, but certainly do not fit the rural situation: cardboard boxes on sidewalks, subway station benches, and large congregate shelters. In rural places, few people sleep on heating grates -- because there are few heating grates. In fact, not many rural people are literally homeless in the sense of having no roof over their heads. But the roof they have may be only a car roof or a shed roof; it may be the leaking roof of a very old, dilapidated farmhouse or an isolated shack with no running water, or it may be the temporary roof of an old mobile home already fully occupied by relatives or friends, or a borrowed camper-trailer parked off-season in a public campground.

The dimensions of rural homelessness are hardly known, even to social scientists, government planners, and community agencies, for the "hinterland homeless" (Davenport, Davenport, and Newell 1990) are even less accurately counted than their urban counterparts. With no agreed-upon definition of what constitutes homelessness in rural areas, counting the number of rural people who are homeless is indeed problematic. Furthermore, because rural homelessness is often an episode or a series of episodes, each lasting only a few days to a few weeks, it would be necessary to catch people during one of these periods in order to count them as homeless. Even during a spell of homelessness, though, rural people are widely dispersed rather than congregated in shelters, and are therefore difficult and costly to locate. Thus, when the Census Bureau was taking extra care to count the urban homeless in April 1990, no special counts were conducted in rural areas.

In this article I call attention to the existence and growth of homelessness in rural places and provide some research-based understanding of its nature and causes. I start with a national overview of characteristics of the rural homeless population, as revealed in the social science literature. To provide context, I also discuss rural poverty, and review the structural causes underlying its recent growth. In the central parts of the paper, I focus on a smaller geographic area, upstate New York, and draw on field research in sixteen rural counties to illustrate patterns and manifestations of rural homelessness, and to indicate reasons why rural poverty is more likely to lead to homelessness now than in the past. I conclude with suggestions for policy changes and program initiatives appropriate to rural versions of homelessness, urging strategies that take account of the particularly rural aspects of the problem and that draw on the potential strengths and resources available in rural places.

Overview of Homelessness and Poverty in Rural Places

Homelessness in Rural America

In the limited literature on rural homelessness, most definitions refer not to total absence of a home, but to housing instability. One nationwide overview defines rural people as homeless if "their housing situation is both unstable and temporary . . . and they lack the resources to secure adequate housing" (Patton 1988:188). The Housing Assistance Council has estimated that up to 20 percent of the nation's homeless population lives in rural areas. Since about 20 percent of the total U. S. population is rural, this would mean that the rate of homelessness is about the same in rural America as in urban America. But reliable national figures are not available, and rural homelessness is very unevenly distributed among and within states. Maine, Arizona, and Minnesota, among other states, have recently reported that an increasing number of people from small rural communities are showing up at emergency shelters in larger towns, and that an increasing number of them come as families, including two-parent families (Housing Assistance Council 1989:1-2). However, a recent book assessing the extent of homelessness on a state-by-state basis makes almost no mention of rural homelessness, even in chapters on states with large rural areas, such as Alabama, Florida, and Colorado (Momeni 1989). For Missouri, the book mentions reports that people are "living in cars along county roads or staying in public campgrounds beyond the normal season" (p. 95); and for Illinois it cites "impressionistic evidence that rural and small-town homelessness has risen," but the authors reaffirm that reliable data do not exist (p. 59). In New York, the authors assert, "Homelessness does not appear to be a major problem in rural areas" (p. 135), citing as evidence one rural county in which only a small number of homeless families had turned to the department of social services for emergency shelter assistance. Such surveys and conclusions notwithstanding, I would argue that rural homelessness is indeed a major problem in some places, but that it has not yet been adequately defined, sufficiently researched, or accurately measured.

The most comprehensive and systematic study of rural homelessness was conducted in Ohio during 1990, adding a great deal of hard data, and also allowing comparison over time, since it parallels a similar study done there in 1984. Preliminary findings from the recent

study indicate that in some rural Ohio counties the rate of homelessness has increased substantially in recent years, that the demographic characteristics of the rural homeless are changing, and that the rural and urban homeless populations differ in that "homeless persons in rural areas are younger, more likely to be women or mothers with children, more educated and less disabled than their urban counterparts" (First, et. al. 1990:21). Of the 921 homeless persons interviewed in the random sample of 21 rural counties of Ohio, slightly over half (51.6 percent) were women, and nearly half of the women had children with them; of the families in the sample, nearly 68 percent were headed by single parents (p. 16). Over half (56.5 percent) had graduated from high school. In only a small percentage of cases (1.6 percent) was deinstitutionalization a major reason given for homelessness; and only 13.3 percent of the homeless respondents reported prior psychiatric hospitalization. Furthermore, the 1990 figures on deinstitutionalization and psychiatric hospitalization are only half as high as the corresponding figures from the 1984 sample (p. 21), and are considerably lower than was the case in an urban setting, Chicago, in the mid '80s (Rossi, et. al. 1987). At least in Ohio, rural homelessness does not now have a major mental illness component. For the rural homeless people interviewed in the Ohio study, family conflict/dissolution was the leading reason given for homelessness (30.4 percent), followed by eviction or problems paying rent (26.2 percent), and by unemployment (18.9 percent) (First, et. al. 1990:20).

Homeless rural people can be found in a variety of living situations. The Ohio study reports that at the time the 921 homeless respondents were interviewed, only 14.6 percent were literally without shelter or living in cars or abandoned buildings; just over 46 percent were living with family members or friends, while nearly 40 percent were living in shelters or cheap hotels/motels (First, et. al. 1990:11). In Virginia, a study in Fairfax county found many working people living seasonally in campgrounds, sleeping in cars, trucks, and campers because housing costs near their construction jobs were too high, and because, as they reported, they had no home elsewhere either (Lowe 1989). In Michigan, an innovative community services project surveyed rural people entering its network of private, scattered-site shelters, and found that 64 percent of them had previously been living at the home of another, and 41 percent had been pushed out of their previous home by family or friends; while one-third had become homeless by eviction (Gateway Community Services 1988). In a rural county in the western part of New York in 1986, with a population of

about 150,000, about 100 families and 122 single individuals, mostly local residents, sought housing assistance each day from local governmental and charitable institutions (Lantz 1986:11).

Growing Rural Poverty as the Underlying Cause of Rural Homelessness

In rural America, as in the cities, homelessness is closely linked to poverty. Poverty rates in rural (or non-metropolitan) areas have always been higher than metropolitan poverty rates. Although the difference diminished in the 1960s and 1970s, after 1980 rural poverty rose more rapidly than urban poverty. By 1986, the nation's non-metropolitan poverty rate had reached 18 percent (O'Hare 1988:6; Porter 1989:26), which was 50 percent higher than the metropolitan poverty rate of 12 percent, and virtually the same as the rate in the nation's inner cities. Subsequently, the rural poverty rate dropped a bit, which the central cities rate did not. However, as a result of the "poor performance" of the rural economy in the 1980s (Deavers 1989:33), the rural disadvantage appears to be growing again as the 1990s begin.

Reflecting the uneven and diverse economic and social conditions within rural America, some rural places and populations have a much more serious poverty problem than others. Rural poverty is still most prevalent in the South: "In 1987, 54 percent of the rural poor lived in the South, where the nonmetro poverty rate was 21.2 percent" (Deavers 1989:37). To a large extent, the rural poverty of the South is concentrated in the black population. In fact, around the country, the "persistently poor" rural counties are mostly places with large racial or ethnic minority populations. In the Northeast, however, minority populations compose only a very small percentage of the total rural population and of the rural poor. In this region, poverty is tied primarily to the nature and health of the local rural economy.

The trends of downsized manufacturing, increase in overseas assembly, and shift from manufacturing to service-sector jobs have had a particularly devastating impact in rural places, since nearly 40 percent of the nation's rural population lives in counties where manufacturing comprises the major share of local employment. Both in the recession of the early 1980s and in the economic recovery afterwards, rural areas fared worse than urban, not only in job growth but also in unemployment levels (Deavers 1989: 33-38; Shapiro 1989). Significantly, much of the rural job growth in the 1980s was in part-time and temporary employment at close to the minimum wage, and

in jobs that lack health benefits. The substitution of less adequate employment in rural areas has led many rural people to migrate to cities, as early returns from the 1990 census indicate; but of the workers who remain in rural areas, a greater proportion now are underemployed and poor. The percentage of rural workers who are earning low wages has grown recently, from 32 percent in 1979 to 42 percent in 1987, while in urban areas the figures are lower and have risen more slowly, from 23 percent in 1979 to 29 percent in 1987, (Gorham and Harrison 1990:16). The inadequacy of rural employment is also revealed by the fact that in 1986, "about one-quarter of poor young adults in the rural labor force held two or more jobs" (O'Hare 1988:11) -- and still they were poor.

The deterioration of rural employment, itself a major contributor to increased poverty in rural America, has been compounded by the increase in single-parent families, a nationwide trend that has been somewhat delayed in rural areas. Traditionally, the overwhelming majority of poor rural households have been those with married couples; but in recent years single parenthood has become increasingly common in the entire rural population and particularly among the rural poor. By 1987, 11.6 percent of all rural people were living in female-headed households (Hoppe 1989, and personal communication), and 39 percent of rural poor households were headed by women (Porter 1989:30). While these figures are still low in comparison to the 13.5 percent of the urban (metropolitan) population living in female-headed households (Hoppe personal communication) and 58 percent of the center-city poor population living in households headed by women (Porter 1989:30), the rural trend is noteworthy. The proportion of single-parent households has risen steadily in rural areas in the last few years, even after it had peaked and declined slightly in urban areas. The connection of this trend to increased homelessness is that single-parent rural families have a high risk of poverty, a risk level just as high as that of female-headed households in the central cities (Porter 1989:28). An even more critical relationship, however, is that in rural economies where wage levels are lower, single women with dependent children are apt to stay poor for longer: Their children are ."... substantially more prone to persistent poverty" (being poor for at least three years out of five) than is the case for children in female-headed households in metropolitan areas (Ross and Morrissey 1989:65).

Population migration out of and into rural areas also contributes to rural impoverishment. The long-term trend, except for the decade of the 1970s, has been a net outmigration from rural places. This

outmigration has tended to diminish economic vitality of rural communities not only because of sheer population loss, but because it has been selective: In general, rural young adults with lower incomes or lower earning potential tend to remain in rural areas, while better prepared young people with higher earning potential tend more often to move away to urban or suburban areas. Recently, however, another dynamic in the migration pattern has become apparent: A significant urban-to-rural migration, hidden under the larger rural-to-urban flow, is composed of low-wage workers and families on public assistance squeezed out from cities by high rents and resettling in small towns beyond the suburban fringe. A recent study has reported that the urban-to-rural stream has become "increasingly overrepresentative of the jobless, the marginally employed, blue-collar and service/farm workers, and the poor," as "metropolitan areas in the late 1980s were more likely to export their least skilled and their poor to nonmetropolitan areas" (Lichter, et. al. 1990:11). Thus, even where the net change in rural population was quite small in the 1980s, both the outflow and the inmigration caused further impoverishment of rural areas.

Increasing Poverty in Rural New York

Although New York is neither the most rural nor the poorest of states, it provides a suitable geographical focus for exploring rural poverty and rural homelessness. New York contains a dispersed population of three million rural residents and, in some places, a serious problem of tenacious intergenerational rural poverty (Fitchen 1981). As a result of major nationwide economic, demographic, and social changes that have recently affected rural New York (Fitchen 1991), rural poverty is now undergoing significant changes, and in some places is increasing quite rapidly. Although poverty rates varied around the state during the 1980s, poverty was generally highest in the more remote rural counties, and generally it rose in the early years of the decade and then declined slightly.

At the start of 1990, however, certain rural areas reported unanticipated new increases in poverty. In a few rural counties, welfare rolls rose as much as 18 percent or more from April 1989 to April 1990, while statewide in the same period they increased only 1 percent (Pear 1990), and in New York City they rose only 7 percent (Terry 1990). One rural county recorded a seven percent increase in welfare caseload just in the first three months of 1990. Food stamp applica-

tions, another indicator of poverty or near-poverty, have recently increased even faster than welfare caseloads, and faster in some rural areas than in the cities. The number of individuals receiving food stamps in New York City in April 1990 was 5.6 percent above the 1989 monthly average; but meanwhile, some rural counties witnessed a growth in food stamp clients of 18 to 20 percent or more. As in the past, some of the counties with growing poverty are in more remote areas; but the counties experiencing major increases now are located closer to metropolitan areas.

Underlying this growth in poverty in rural New York are the same economic and social forces that are creating more poverty elsewhere in rural America: deterioration of rural employment resulting from the loss of manufacturing and the transition to a service economy; increase of single-parent families; and further increase in the urban cost of living that drives poor people outward to less expensive small towns.[2] All three of these forces seem particularly strong in the Northeast and Midwest, where rural manufacturing has been deeply hurt, and where many metropolitan areas recovered so well after the recession of the early 1980s that urban housing prices escalated rapidly. Hence one might expect that the situations and conditions underlying homelessness in New York state are widespread in these regions.

In terms of individuals and families, the combined effect of these three trends has been to increase the number of rural residents living below the poverty line. The increase comes from three different population sources: (1) rural people who were raised in poverty or have been poor for many years and are now raising the next generation in poverty; (2) rural people who had previously not been poor but have recently fallen into poverty; and (3) urban poor people driven out of cities by the high cost and deteriorated quality of life there.

Patterns of Homelessness In Rural New York

For providing a qualitative sense of the rural homelessness problem, if not a quantitative measure of its magnitude, I draw upon material from recent and on-going research in sixteen rural New York counties. To probe various aspects of poverty, housing situations, and homelessness, I conducted about twenty focused but unstructured interviews with low-income individuals and families. To explore more systematically the patterns of residential insecurity and residential mobility, I conducted questionnaire-interviews on residential history

with thirty low-income women who reside in several of the counties where I had already conducted broader research on poverty. The three main criteria for selection of these thirty respondents was that their household income was below or only slightly above the official poverty line, that they were participating in some programs such as AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children), WIC (Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children), food stamps, or Head Start; and that they were willing to be interviewed for this research. Respondents were contacted through or at these programs or at other service or educational institutions, and were interviewed at a variety of sites including Head Start centers, WIC clinics, and adult education centers, as well as in their homes. None of the thirty low-income women was actually without a place to live at the time of the interview; but almost all indicated that they presently were or recently had been in a very precarious situation with regard to housing. These questionnaire interviews were accompanied and augmented by several focus-group sessions with low-income women. Coming at the problem of poverty and homelessness from a different angle, I also conducted focus-group sessions and individual interviews on the topic of residential instability with staff of public and private social agencies and local school districts, and have supplemented their comments with material gathered from some of their records and reports. Data from these disparate sources, all set within the known context of poverty in rural New York, elucidate the patterns and manifestations of rural homelessness.

One of the key patterns that came through in both the unstructured interviews and the residential history questionnaires is the extent to which people depend on family and relatives to keep themselves from becoming literally homeless. When rural low-income people find themselves without a home, whether because of marital violence, family breakup, eviction by a landlord, or a house fire, the usual first recourse is to move in temporarily with parents or other relatives. In depressed rural neighborhoods I studied in the 1970s (Fitchen 1981), parents routinely promised their growing children, "You can always come home if you need to." Doubling up was a very common strategy for dealing with both emergency and longer-term housing needs, and was logistically quite simple, since temporary housing space could easily be added. Families just squeezed up a bit, giving over living room space or even a bedroom to the extra people, and pooling work, child care, food, and food stamps. One couple needing to provide space for a returning grown daughter and her child borrowed a converted school bus from the neighbor up the

road to park beside their own house; later, the same bus was hauled to another neighbor's yard to house an elderly parent. Several families added a makeshift extra room to a trailer or house to accommodate extra family members.

Still today, as the thirty residential history interviews have indicated, families double up, squeeze in, and stay until the situation grows unbearable or the welfare department threatens to close their case for non-compliance with regulations, and then move on to someone else's place. If the host relative or friend cannot take in the whole family, a child or two may be sent to live with another relative for a while, or a teenager may sleep in a car in the yard. This pattern of doubling up has been reported in other rural areas as well (First, et. al. 1990; Gateway Community Services 1988), but is not uniquely rural. Agencies and researchers in large cities around the country report that doubling up is the primary defense most urban people use against literal homelessness and the housing situation most families have experienced immediately prior to showing up at a congregate shelter (see Dehavenon 1990:26-31).

In recent years, however, as the rural housing situation has tightened for everyone, doubling up with relatives and friends has become more difficult. In many rural areas, new housing and zoning ordinances prevent such temporary, flexible housing expansions as the converted school bus, or the placement of an additional trailer or camper trailer as temporary housing. Doubling up is becoming more difficult also as more of the rural poor no longer own the place where they are living, and thus may not be so free to provide temporary shelter for other family members in need. If the host family is only a tenant, the landlord may increase the rent on a per-person basis or threaten eviction if the "guests" don't leave. Doubling two families in a trailer or apartment that is already inadequate for one often leads to intense friction, and so the extra family soon moves to another temporary situation, becoming part of a growing rural population living at the edge of homelessness.

For people who move in and out of the homes of relatives and friends because they lack security of shelter, the period of being "potentially homeless," "sometimes homeless," or "near homeless" may last for several months. Yet they are never classified or counted as homeless because they are not sleeping in the village park or in an agency shelter. Some of them eventually come to the attention of community agencies or programs, and in some of these cases, more permanent housing is found and a multi-pronged approach undertaken to unravel their problems and attack the causes that left them

homeless. In spring 1990, the staff and clients of several community agencies provided a research window into some of the typical situations and characteristics of rural homelessness. Three cases, from three different kinds of programs, are indicative of the situations coming to the attention of local service providers.

> A community action agency had been working closely with a young family. The couple and their small child had recently moved in and out of several rented apartments in the county, staying a few weeks at a time between each move with his or her mother, with his grandparents and her siblings. The agency had located a downstairs apartment of an old main-street house that had recently been divided up, and arranged federal rental assistance to supplement the husband's income from his job in a gas station. It was the largest and nicest place this family had ever had. When I asked the young woman, "Where did you live before you got this place?" she thought but a split second and replied, "in limbo."
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> A church-affiliated program working in an underserved rural area was desperately trying to find long-term housing for a teen-aged mother and her baby. A victim of domestic violence, she had left her boyfriend a year earlier. She had tried living on her own, first in a condemned building, then in an apartment she could not afford. Next, she went back home to her parents, a situation frought with tension and disputes over responsibility for the baby's care and over her boyfriend. Suddenly her parents had demanded that she leave. Since this young mother doesn't drive and has no car, the cheap trailer she was considering out in the countryside seemed an unsuitable situation. But rents in the nearby village were running about $100 over the shelter allowance of her AFDC grant. In such a situation, and with no formal shelter facility in the rural parts of the county, the people who run this program sometimes put people up in their own home while they use all their community contacts to try to locate suitable housing.
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> A shelter program in the central city of a rural county reports that the biggest surprise in terms of local homeless people was the number of homeless teens turning to the program. Whether "runaways" or "throwaways," these teenagers have no parental home available to them. They sleep in cars, they bed

> down here and there with friends, they stay a few days with an older sibling. Girls may move into the home of a boyfriend's parents, boys into the home of a girlfriend. But these arrangements are subject to tension with the host parents and sudden disruption: Breakup of the teen couple puts one partner out of a home again, sometimes with a baby in tow. Teens who have already left home on several stormy occasions may no longer have the option of moving back in again, and eventually some of them show up at the shelter in the county seat.

Interviews with individuals and families in the midst of housing problems revealed the precariousness of their housing and the high level of mobility that, in rural settings, is the next thing to literal homelessness.

> Terry and her children were still on the edge of homelessness after two years of "bouncing around" among several locations in her county. When her marriage suddenly broke up, she and her four children stayed with her sister in the village, and then moved to a temporary residence in a rented trailer a few miles out of town. Because the trailer was too small and she had no reliable car, she decided to move back to the village, and soon located an apartment above a vacant store. When Terry found this to be an unhealthy environment for her children, she moved out again, to a two-bedroom trailer way out in the country. With a better car, the distance was less of a problem, and at $250. the rent was cheap; but because of the crowding in the trailer, she had to send her oldest child back to live with his father. After yet another move, Terry and three of her children are now back in the trailer cluster where she was living a year earlier.

> Winnie and Danny had moved eleven times in the six years of their marriage, living in nine different communities within the county in which they both were born. They have circulated through a series of substandard apartments, trailers with leaking roofs and fire hazards, places where inadequate air circulation exacerbated a medical problem, and places that were decent but too costly for Danny's marginal income -- he was still earning only $4.45 an hour after three years in the same factory. Tomorrow, they and their two pre-school children would be moving again, but this would be "a good move" and an

> easy one, to an adjacent apartment in the same building in a small hamlet. The new location will have the two bedrooms the department of social services requires if the family is to continue receiving support for a child with special needs. Their present location, where they have been only two months, is spotlessly clean, their possessions stacked and packed. (However, four months after my first interview, the family was again looking for a place to live.)

The thirty questionnaire-interviews on residential mobility elicited additional detail and longitudinal depth for understanding the patterns and manifestations of rural homelessness. One family's residential history, summarized below, exemplifies many of the interrelated problems and situations that keep some families on the edge of homelessness and sometimes throw them into literal homelessness.

> In spring 1991, Elvira and her husband and three children are living in half of a house in a small, poverty-stricken hamlet in central New York state. With two bedrooms, the place is small and cramped, and at $375 a month it is more expensive than they can afford. But at the moment, Elvira says that they are hoping to stay put a while. At the end of a questionnaire-interview conducted at a small rural once-a-week Head Start center, Elvira summed up the difficulties of her family's recent situation by saying, "We have not actually had to sleep in our station wagon, but sometimes we thought that we might."
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> Elvira had grown up in a small rural community in central New York, in what she describes as a "troubled" childhood in an abusive family. "My mother started having babies at age 15, and she was barefoot and pregnant for years." Elvira dropped out of school in 9th grade; at 19 she got pregnant, and endured some serious health problems. At 22, she married Fred and had her second child, and they moved into an old rented farmhouse along a back road.
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> About five years ago, with a new baby, this family of five lost the place they were living. They were able to find another old house not far away, and still within twenty miles of the place where she had grown up, and not far from the communities where members of her family and Fred's still live. But before they'd been in this house two years, the elderly landlord "sold the house out from under us." With no place to go, the family spent the next three months, in Elvira's words, "camping here

and there." First they returned to her hometown and stayed with her brother and his wife in the village. But there were some difficulties in her brother's new marriage, and "although they were real good to us, we didn't want to overstay our welcome." They moved to a campground for two weeks, where the creek served as their bathing facilities. At this time, Elvira was working as a bartender and waitress, and her husband, who could find no farm labor jobs, stayed with the children. When everything they owned was stolen one day, they decided it was time to move out. Some friends who lived in the country, people whom Elvira had helped in the past, took them in. "They did the best they could to keep us all there, sleeping us wherever we could fit." Finally, Elvira found a house, or, as she called it, "a dump, a junkyard with rats" in a little hamlet, owned by the father of someone she knew. At $250 a month, the rent was low for a four-bedroom house, although the additional cost for heating and other utilities was high. They managed to cover their rent on her part-time work at a nursing facility nearby, combined with a meager income Fred was now making on a farm labor job, approximately $184 for a 64-hour week. They spent weeks clearing the junk from the house and yard, and hauling it to the dump. Then Elvira became ill, and was finally diagnosed as having dysentery, which was traced to the well water that was polluted from the old septic tank. When the landlord moved into a health care facility, his grown children took over the place and immediately raised the rent. So two years after they had moved in and cleaned up the place, Elvira and Fred packed up again.

This time they found another place quite quickly, half of a house just at the edge of a neighboring hamlet, and they have now been in it two years. With only two bedrooms, the boys, ages 12 and 4, sleep in bunk beds, the daughter sleeps in the other bedroom; and Elvira and Fred sleep in the living room. The older boy, from before her marriage, generally stays with his maternal grandparents thirty miles away, as there is no room for him here. The place is small and inconvenient, but only $375 a month, and Elvira reports that an affordable place is not easy to find. Elvira, tense and exhausted, is planning to ask for reduced hours at the nursing care facility, where she serves alone on an arduous and responsible night shift. As a part-time employee with no benefits, she earns $4.75 an hour, bringing home about $161 a week. Fred has been out of work

for the two years they've been here, and the family now receives food stamps and medicaid, and also partial rent assistance from social services. At the moment they feel fairly secure in their housing, partly because Elvira has a good relationship with the landlord, due to the fact that she sometimes helps take care of his elderly mother.

Now at age 34, Elvira reflects: "I'm a tough person, a survivor. And as long as we stay together, somehow things will get better." Elvira dreams of a time when she might have her own house. "I'd like to have a big house in the country where I could take in people who need help. There are a lot of people out there who need a place to stay. And I know what it's like to be in bad shape and have no place to go. I know because we've been there ourselves."

Factors Pushing the State's Rural Poor Into Homelessness

While poverty has existed in rural New York for many decades, homelessness is a newer phenomenon: The rural poor are more likely to become homeless now than was the case in earlier decades. The risk of homelessness has increased because the housing situation has deteriorated, traditional rural strategies for minimizing housing costs have been curtailed, and marital and kinship ties have weakened for many people. These factors all interact to produce a high rate of residential mobility, which in itself is a contributor to and a form of rural homelessness. All in all, rural poor people are now more prone to losing their residence and less protected when that happens.

Deterioration of the Rural Housing Situation

In rural areas, as in urban, in upstate New York as throughout the nation, the main link between poverty and homelessness is the local housing situation. Four rural housing trends can be identified as especially critical in placing New York's rural poor people at risk of homelessness.

The rural low-cost housing stock, relative to demand, has diminished. Rural New York is a microcosm of the Northeast region and the nation in the mismatch of supply and demand in rural low-cost housing.[3] Demand for inexpensive housing increases each year as more

rural residents have fallen into poverty and the number of single-parent households has increased; but the number of low-cost housing units has failed to expand commensurately. Except for apartments for the elderly and some rehabilitation funded by federal and state grants, very little low-cost rural housing has recently been created in the public sector. In some areas of the state, the poor have been displaced by rural gentrification, which withdraws old farmhouses and neglected village homes from the market as they are purchased and renovated, or razed to make way for higher-priced housing. Thus, more and more rural people are playing a game of musical chairs for fewer and fewer inexpensive houses and apartments. Where poor people from high-rent urban areas are moving into small towns, they compete with each other and with local poor households for the shrinking supply of available inexpensive housing, which bids up local rents still farther.

In some rural communities, however, low-cost rental housing is being created in the private sector. After many years of long-term population loss and commercial decline, some villages have been left with older single-family houses that no one wants and store buildings long-since vacant. After sitting idle for years, such properties deteriorate and their market value drops considerably, creating an investment opportunity for family heirs or outside buyers, who convert the buildings into cheap apartments, usually with minimal renovation or up-dating, and rent them to families with meager earnings. Some landlords arrange directly with local welfare departments to rent the apartments to families on public assistance. By this conversion process, small communities with a surplus stock of older buildings have gained a number of cheap apartments -- and a growing number of low-income residents to fill them.

The only other significant growth in low-cost rural housing in New York, as in many other states, is in the cheaper mobile-home parks, both within small villages and out in the countryside. Where not prohibited or tightly regulated by local ordinances, more trailer parks are being created, and individual trailers as well as small clusters of trailers are sprouting on the open-country landscape. In the lower-rent trailer parks, still more trailers are now being squeezed in. Increased demand for mobile homes includes both rental trailers and space (with hookups) for owner-occupied trailers.

Despite apartment conversions and mobile home expansions, though, the total stock of low-cost rural housing has hardly increased. What is happening, it seems, is a redistribution of poor people, squeezed out of some communities where the stock of low-cost

housing has been reduced, and shunted into other communities where low-cost units have been added in trailer parks and in vacant village buildings. Often, however, the places with excess space to house low-income people are places where few jobs are available or only inadequate jobs, so that the occupants of such housing are likely to remain poor -- and at risk of losing their housing because of their poverty.

More rural poor people are becoming renters rather than owners of their housing. In the past, many rural poor people were protected against homelessness by the fact that they owned their residence, giving them a decided advantage over the urban poor.[4] But it appears that home ownership is now declining among rural New York's poor, especially in areas contiguous to metropolitan centers where land development and population growth have been significant, and in remote areas, such as the Adirondack Park, where environmental and park regulations have restricted housing and driven up land and housing prices beyond the reach of most locals. For many, the security of ownership is increasingly being replaced by the precariousness of tenancy. Low-income young adults, whether they grew up in poverty or have just fallen into poverty, report in interviews that they are priced out of owning even a very meager dwelling or a plot of land on which to put a trailer they already own. Of the thirty low-income women interviewed for residential histories, 23 are currently living in a place they rent. Of the 7 who are not renting, one married couple owns its home and one woman's boyfriend owns the home. In the five remaining cases, other family members own the dwelling and/or the land: two couples are in the process of buying the dwelling and some marginal farmland from a grandparent; one couple lives in a trailer they own on land being purchased on contract from a parent; and two single women are living rent free with their parents in an owner-occupied home.

For low-income families, the problem with being a tenant is not only that rent payments take up so much income, but that renting requires a cash outlay on a regular basis. This leaves people vulnerable to losing their rented home by eviction for falling behind in the rent. Families purchasing a trailer or land from within the family, on the other hand, benefit from flexible payment schedules and no fear of eviction.

Like their urban counterparts, poor rural people who only rent their homes are also extremely vulnerable to sudden changes in the local housing market, and particularly to gentrification. Such problems often strike owners of mobile homes. In the case of people who rent

a lot in a mobile home park on which they place their own trailer, if the landlord decides to convert his land to condominiums or to commercial use in order to make a higher return on his investment, the park's tenants are thrown into a unique, and uniquely rural version of homelessness: they own a roof to cover their heads, but they have no place to put it. They are closed out of other trailer parks because these parks are already at capacity or because few park owners will rent spaces for the older, smaller trailers that poor people own, or simply because the rents are too high. At the same time, high land prices or mobile home restrictions in the open countryside may prevent such displaced trailer owners from purchasing land on which to set their trailer.

Rural rents are rising. Moderate- and low-income rental housing in rural New York has become considerably more expensive in the last few years, largely as a result of greater competition for a shrinking supply of low-cost housing.[5] Although rents vary greatly between and within communities, in villages experiencing an influx of low-income people, or where a new "industry" such as a state prison has come in, growing demand for rental housing has pushed rents up considerably, from under $300 to over $400 in 1989 alone for apartments rented by single women with children. In one trailer park, rental of a lot for an owned trailer, not including charges for water (which was inadequate), garbage collection, and utilities, went up in 1988 from $85 to $120. Rents paid by the 23 renters among the 30 families who completed questionnaire-interviews range from $200 for a bad trailer in an undesirable trailer park and $250 in public housing, to $350 to $450 in one- or two-bedroom private apartments. Erosion of worker incomes and the sub-inflationary increase of welfare grants both leave families paying well over half their income for rent. In 1989, workers from the department of social services in several rural counties reported that their clients, typically, were paying monthly rents around $100 above their welfare shelter allowance, squeezing the difference out from money intended for other household expenses. Families in these situations hold a precarious tenancy: They are often in arrears on the rent and at risk of being evicted; and they are constantly seeking a more affordable place to stay. A family that is just barely getting by on its income may be unable to stay in its rented housing when the landlord raises the rent by even a rather small amount.

Substandard housing, an old problem, now contributes to homelessness. Poor rural people have always had to put up with poor quality housing because they could afford no better. Traditionally,

poor rural owners have sacrificed quality of housing as a way to minimize cash expenses and remain independent of welfare (Fitchen 1981:96-98). Despite some improvements in the last two decades, still today much of the owner-occupied housing in the open-country pockets of poverty in upstate New York is structurally unsound and lacks adequate wiring, running water, or plumbing. Now, with a growing proportion of the rural poor living in rented housing, substandard conditions in the low-cost rental housing stock may become a problem of even greater concern. With an inadequate supply of cheap apartments to meet demand, low-income tenants have to accept whatever the market offers in housing, paying higher prices for lower quality. In some of the burgeoning trailer parks and the new informal trailer clusters along back roads, water and sewer systems are unable to meet increased demands or state codes, and some of the rental trailers are very old and in deteriorated condition. Many rental apartments created out of former houses and store buildings in small villages are not only deteriorated, but known to have code violations; however, inspection and enforcement in these communities may be minimal, in part because there is no alternative low-cost housing to which tenants could move.

Although sub-standard conditions in themselves do not constitute homelessness by most definitions (Patton 1988:188), deficiencies in the dwelling and its infrastructure definitely contribute to insecurity of tenancy and to residential mobility of tenants. In the residential histories gathered on thirty rural families, many of their residential moves had been triggered by a structural or physical problem in their previous rented dwelling that jeopardized health or safety -- inoperable plumbing, bad leaks, very unsafe electrical wiring, flooding, and serious deterioration. But so often, when a family moved to a better dwelling they soon found the rent too much to manage, and so again they experienced a spell of homelessness as they tried to find a place with the elusive balance between cost and quality.

Curtailment of Informal Housing Strategies

Traditionally, open-country poor people have had the security and limited cash expense of owning a place to live, or having parents or other relatives who owned a place, even if it was just a crumbling farmhouse, a tarpaper-sided shack, or an old trailer encased in wooden additions. It did not matter so much what one owned, but that one owned it. However, in a densely settled region such as the

Northeast, housing pressures have been mounting in rural areas, and are now in conflict with both long-term and emergency strategies poor people have traditionally used for providing housing at minimal cost. Today, ownership of only a very modest or even a substandard dwelling moves out of reach as suburban housing development advances, vacation homes fill the more remote areas, land prices soar, and property taxes escalate.

In addition to marketplace forces, tighter land-use regulations and mobile home restrictions enacted at the local level are especially likely to squeeze out poor people. In many localities, mobile homes are becoming less possible as a strategy for cutting housing costs and providing flexible (moveable) housing. Many townships totally prohibit mobile homes; others require a five-acre lot for a trailer; while others exclude the older and smaller trailers that are all that poor families can afford. Additionally, building codes instituted at the state level prevent low-income home-owning families from using their traditional strategies to provide cheap make-shift owner-occupied housing for themselves and their extended families. For example, the use of second-hand lumber in housing construction is now tightly regulated in New York state. To obtain the necessary certificate of occupancy, the home must be essentially completed, plumbing, electricity, and all. If strictly enforced, these state codes can greatly curtail the ability of poor families to provide their own low-cost, do-it-yourself housing. As people are no longer so free to put their own trailers or shacks on their relatives' property, to share a water supply or septic system with relatives next door, or to add onto and modify their modest homes, they are losing access to housing strategies that previously provided both short-term emergency housing and more permanent housing that kept people from being homeless , even in the worst of times.

Instability of Marriage and Weakening of Family Ties

The deterioration of marriage, the instability of households (whether composed of a married couple, a cohabiting couple, or a single parent), and the weakening of extended family ties all contribute to putting poor rural people at greater risk of homelessness. Many of the teens whose interviews reveal that they have moved from place to place, slept in cars, and sometimes gone to shelters or other institutional settings, are runaways or throwaways from very difficult family situations. For some, interpersonal problems and abuse at home, frequently involving a parent's new partner, make the

youngster's home a very negative setting to which he or she cannot and should not return. Some of these young people become homeless individuals; when they have children, they are at risk of becoming homeless families, usually single-parent families.

Women who are somewhat older, perhaps in their mid-twenties to early thirties, are particularly at risk of experiencing spells of homelessness just after they separate or divorce. For mothers with young children, their residential histories indicated that insecure and sometimes volatile relationships with men compound the problem of finding and keeping adequate housing on a meager income, in part because their personal relationship with a man may also involve rent-sharing. When a woman splits up with her boyfriend, she may be unable to cover the rent alone, or she may find herself without a place to live. Some women cope with this loss of housing by moving in with a new boyfriend and then with a subsequent boyfriend, attaining neither permanence in relationships nor security of residence.

The weakening of extended family ties has also increased people's risk of homelessness. Although interviews and residential histories reveal that many women who lose the place they had been living turn first to a parent or sister for temporary housing, this strategy is not possible in all cases. As rural incomes have deteriorated recently, parents may be less able to take in a grown child because they themselves are in a desperate situation, or because they are already providing temporary housing for another needy family member. And for a growing number of the poor who have come from cities to live in rural villages, there are no parents or other relatives close by with whom they can obtain temporary housing. According to reports from small-town family shelter programs and domestic violence shelters, an increasing number of women caught without a home have no family members in their area, or none willing and able to take in an extra woman and children, or none who can keep them more than a few days at a time.

High Levels of Residential Mobility

Deteriorated housing quality, rising rents, and scarcity of rental units for an increased number of families with low incomes all contribute to undermining residential stability of the rural poor. Mobility is also driven by the instability of marital and family relationships. Some rural families with low or insecure incomes move rapidly and suddenly within and between rural communities. They may move three or more

times in a year, from one rented apartment to another one nearby, from one village to another, from trailer park to trailer park, from village to trailer park and back to village, from open country to village and back to the country. Their moves tend to be circumscribed within a fairly localized region, usually within a county or perhaps two adjacent counties.

This high and rising level of residential movement is confirmed in records of schools and social agencies, and in interview comments of elementary school teachers, school administrators, social workers, and community service providers. In many rural school districts, more families than in the past are reported to move in or out during the course of a school year, and some of them are reported to have moved several times in a single year. For example, in one rural school district with a large population of poor families living in the village, transfers in and out of the elementary school in two recent years (1988-'89 and 1989-'90) reached 28 percent and 34 percent of the total elementary enrollment of around 520. Although the total number of pupils hardly changed over the period, a record number of pupils entered and withdrew, and several children moved in and out several times within the two years. Approximately 60 percent of the moves in and out were within three adjoining counties.

One particular mobility pattern that demonstrates the pressure of housing costs on poor families and the insecurity of their housing tenure is a seasonal mobility found near some resort areas. Families occupy lakeside cottages or cabins at low off-season rent during the autumn, then move to relatives or friends in town to keep warm for the winter, and then move back to the cottage in early spring. During the summer, they may stay with other relatives or in a public campsite until autumn comes and they can return to the cottage. In some resort areas, the off-season home is a lakeside motel room paid for by the department of social services, at a cost at least double the going rent for apartments in the community.

The families most prone to frequent moves have other problems as well, and may be among the people known to local human service providers as "dysfunctional families." The high level of residential mobility may have more serious and long-lasting consequences in rural areas than in cities, however, because the moves often cross the boundaries of education and service jurisdictions. For example, as children rotate through three or more separate school districts in a single year, they encounter different curricula and methodologies, including totally different approaches to learning to read; consequently, they don't learn to read. The frequent moves may also undermine

whatever stabilizing ties people may have to relatives, friends, places, and institutions. And, in turn, their weakened connections make it even less likely that a family will stay put in the next location.

Except for those rural people who literally have no home for weeks or months at a time, these highly mobile families are the most extreme casualties of the increasing tendency for rural poverty to lead to rural homelessness. Though such families nearly always have a roof over their heads, their frequent residential movement should really be considered a form of homelessness.

Appropriate Responses to Rural Homelessness

In light of the weak rural economy, rural poverty is likely to continue growing, and with it the potential for rural homelessness. Even in recession, the cost of moderate housing in most rural places is not apt to fall as fast as the level of income of poorer rural residents, whether they are employed or turning to welfare. If rural homelessness goes unchecked, it can have negative consequences not only on the families and individuals most directly affected, but also on the small community and its institutions. To dismiss rural homelessness as a less pressing problem than urban homelessness simply because it is less visible and involves fewer people would be a grave mistake. But to address the rural problem with the same programs and strategies used in urban areas would be a serious misuse of resources. Because rural homelessness is different from urban homelessness, and because the rural social, economic, and cultural context in which it occurs is also different, some different approaches are needed.

Currently, funds and programs for addressing rural homelessness are scattered in a patchwork of federal, state, and local efforts (Housing Assistance Council 1990). Federal funds come mostly from the McKinney Act, are administered through the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and are distributed by state governments to local government agencies and non-profit groups providing emergency shelter programs. Most states also have made funding available, largely through their departments of social services, to establish programs and shelters for homeless people. On the whole, however, only a very small amount of the federal and state funding filters down to small communities, largely because their scattered homeless populations are difficult to document and to serve, and partly because most of the money comes through competitive

grants, a process that generally puts small communities at a disadvantage compared to large cities. In any case, overall funding is now jeopardized by budgetary constraints and other spending priorities at the federal and state level, and, in many rural areas, by local political attitudes that manifest little awareness of or concern about rural homelessness. Despite all this, however, the ingenuity of some small-town groups in rural New York, including community action agencies (CAAs), church-sponsored programs, and legal aid services, has resulted in a variety of effective efforts. A number of local programs have set up networks of less-institutionalized shelter homes, have used funds creatively to help highly mobile or homeless people settle into longer-term housing, and have intervened to assist people before they become homeless. But increasing public concern and governmental commitment -- from all levels -- will require that the existence of homelessness in rural areas becomes more widely known and that the particular features of homelessness in rural areas are more carefully documented.

Needed Research

The design of remedies and preventions for rural homelessness requires a much greater and more precise knowledge of what rural homelessness is and how much of it there is. Research-based definitions of rural homelessness are needed. An adequate definition would expand beyond literal or sheltered homelessness, perhaps to include people living doubled-up more than a certain number of periods or nights per year, perhaps to include people living in a place that is seriously below substandard or not meant for human habitation, and perhaps to include people who have had to move several times in a year. Such research-based definitions could be used both as a basis for more fully and accurately counting the rural homeless population and for designing remedies and preventive strategies. Using more rural-appropriate definitions of homelessness would also help redress the funding bias against small communities and enable them to compete for homelessness funding even if they have few or no people on the sidewalks or in agency shelters.

Research on rural homelessness should come from a number of different disciplines and methodologies, and cover a variety of regions and situations. Studies among homeless rural people in other states could elucidate specific regional and local causes, patterns, and variations related to different economic or demographic factors, and

could provide direction for programs of intervention and amelioration. Research is also needed that would explore more fully the informal strategies and social resources poor people employ to cope with their housing situations, so that these strategies could be fostered rather than outlawed or ignored. Conducting research on rural people who are poor but not homeless might help identify strategies that keep some people housed and factors that throw others into homelessness.

More research is especially needed on the connection between city and country, between poverty and homelessness in rural and urban places. The connection is most clearly demonstrated where urban poor people are forced to move outward from cities because the urban "low-cost" housing stock has both deteriorated and become even more expensive. Research is needed to determine whether creating more low-cost housing in the cities would reduce the urban push-out phenomenon, and to document what happens to small-town housing costs and availability when the local low-income population is swelled by an in-migrating low-income population from the cities.

Based on my research in this one state, it is clear that tackling the problem of rural homelessness will require a mixture of three types of response: (1) emergency responses are needed for homeless families and individuals; (2) longer-term responses are needed to prevent and reduce homelessness; and (3) it is necessary to attack the underlying problem of worsening rural poverty that gives rise to rural homelessness. Each one of these, in turn, will involve three governmental levels, federal, state, and local. A few suggestions of needed responses involving various governmental levels are presented here as examples of approaches to homelessness that would be appropriate in rural areas.

Emergency Responses for Homeless Families and Individuals

1. *Fund and support the establishment of more shelters and safe-homes*. These are particularly needed in small towns for women and children fleeing domestic violence and for lone teenagers who can no longer live at home, and in communities where in-migrating poor people have no networks of local relatives to provide informal interim housing support. The most effective existing small-town shelter programs provide not just a safe roof, but multi-faceted assistance and counseling as well.

Utilizing some of the positive social characteristics of small communities, some small-scale and scattered-site shelter programs build supportive ties between sheltered individuals and local community residents and institutions. Using this approach, small-town shelters can avoid the "revolving door" syndrome by strengthening informal community networks, which benefit both the sheltered individual and the community.

2. *Allocate special funds to assist low-income people in meeting the start-up costs of a residential move.* Local agencies can disperse McKinney, HUD, and FEMA funding to help settle potentially homeless and "sometimes-homeless" rural people into more adequate or appropriate housing. Assistance in meeting the security deposit and/or the first month's rent is especially needed for families that have been living doubled up with relatives, are threatened with eviction, or show a pattern of frequent moves. Local agencies need more latitude for creatively adapting the somewhat restrictive urban-based definitions of homelessness to rural situations, and need to be encouraged to use financial assistance to prevent literal homelessness.
3. *Provide case management to assist people on the brink of homelessness.* Homelessness assistance should be more proactive, helping people who are "near-homeless" or who have moved several times in a year, rather than waiting until an individual or family has an eviction notice in hand, as is the case with some federally-funded homelessness assistance (Housing Assistance Council 1990). New York and some other states do have homelessness prevention programs offered by the state Department of Social Services through competitive grants; but, although some programs and staff have already proven the effectiveness of providing case management, counseling, and legal services to prevent high-risk people from being evicted, future funding to assist people not actually homeless is doubtful, and some such programs are already being discontinued.
4. *Help the informal helpers.* Agencies and programs could provide assistance, referrals, and even direct reimbursement to low-income rural people who are temporarily housing relatives who would otherwise fall into literal homelessness or be institutionalized. The network of relatives is a valuable resource that helps limit rural homelessness; but since the sheltering relatives may themselves be poor and in a precarious and

marginal housing situation, their generosity can easily become overstrained. Some outside help might enable them to continue helping.

A Mix of Long-term Responses to Prevent and Reduce Homelessness

1. *Housing initiatives should be undertaken to improve the supply, affordability, quality, and distribution of rural low-cost housing.*
   a. Stem the conversion of the rural poor from homeowners to renters through improved loan and grant programs tailored to the particular income and cash-flow limitations faced by poor people. Slowing the conversion from home-owning to tenancy among the rural poor would stabilize people, greatly minimizing residential mobility. It would also reduce the tendency toward concentrating poor people into clusters of village apartments or trailer parks. As many of my interviewees indicated, having close relatives who own a house and or land is their greatest asset, for it gives them opportunities for both emergency and long-term housing. If poorer people are to have access to home ownership, rights to transfer a parcel of land within the family for housing purposes need to be protected. Additionally, there should be more provision, both technological and legal/institutional, for shared water systems and shared septic systems for small clusters of houses or trailers in open-country areas.
   b. Provide more rental subsidies for those among the rural poor who otherwise can afford neither home ownership nor rental of a decent place. Expansion of federal rent subsidies, such as the HUD Section 8 program, is critically needed to reduce the waiting lists of one, two, or more years. Also, there should be greater flexibility in rent ceilings in these programs to protect tenants from losing a rent-subsidized home due to a landlord's small rent increase.
   c. Create small-scale public housing projects suitable for families and appropriate to the social patterns and needs of rural communities. Rents should be tied to income, but tenants should not be forced to move out unless or until their earned income stabilizes at a safe margin above the

poverty line. Public housing in small towns and villages can reduce homelessness by providing affordable housing for local young families (both single-parent and two-parent families) in the community where they already have supportive networks of family and friends. For example, in two communities where low-income families living in public housing were interviewed, residential mobility appeared limited: Families that had frequently moved in the past had settled into the housing project and remained there for several years, developing social connections and more effective interactions with community agencies. In public housing, also, public space can and should be set aside for use by tenants, including community rooms that can be used for tenant meetings, for outreach activities of local agencies, and for pre-school or daycare facilities, and safe outdoor space for childrens' play -- neither of which is available in the village apartments and trailer park settings currently housing most low-income rural renters.

d. Increase and expand housing rehabilitation grants and loans funded through federal and state channels. Where rural gentrification is occurring, a community should not be excluded from such housing assistance simply because wealthy people moving into the area have raised the median income or reduced the poverty rate sufficiently to make it appear that poverty has diminished.

2. *Localities should monitor the rural housing stock to ensure its sufficiency and adequacy.*

a. Monitor at the local level the impact of rural economic development in reducing the stock of inexpensive rental housing. A new large industry, expansion of a military base, or the building of a new state prison may overwhelm the housing capacity of surrounding small communities, pushing up rents and pushing out poorer people.

b. Tame and restrict the free-market effects that push up homeowner costs and rent costs in rural areas beyond the reach of working families. Residential development in rural places near metropolitan centers can have major impacts on local people needing inexpensive housing. More states will need to consider adopting and strengthening legislation, as New York and a few others have, that gives mobile-home park tenants protection from sudden

displacement if the park owner converts his land to more profitable uses.

c. Increase local inspection of housing units rented by low-income people. At the very least, people whose rents are covered or subsidized by any governmental support ought to have apartments that are safe and sanitary -- which is certainly not now the case. Local government bodies with inspection powers (county health departments, where they exist, county social service departments, and also fire departments) must have adequate funds to make these inspections, and sufficient authority and political independence to force improvements or to close down landlords whose properties are in violation. However, as inspection and enforcement are tightened, there must be increased assistance to the low-income tenants to protect them against eviction or rent increases they cannot meet. The condemnation and closing of a low-rent trailer park with health code violations, for example, quickly exhausted one county's stock of vacant low-cost housing and overloaded the capabilities and homelessness funds of local agencies. At present, there is no slack in the system to absorb such losses from the stock of inexpensive housing.

d. Monitor and cushion the effect of second homes in bidding up land and housing costs in rural resort and vacation areas to levels beyond what local sons and daughters, in low wage jobs, can afford. Although the booming demand for second homes slacks off during a recession, in better times vacation-home displacement creates serious housing hardships for young adults in some rural areas. Federal income tax breaks on second homes add extra incentive for this phenomenon, and should be removed.

e. Reduce the pressure on rural housing markets that results from ignoring urban housing needs. Building more low-cost housing in cities might slow the urban push-out phenomenon that sends poor people from the cities to compete for cheaper housing in small towns.

3. *Modify certain rules, regulations, and taxing policies that needlessly restrict housing options and informal housing strategies of rural poor people.*

   a. Examine state building codes that restrict cost-reduction strategies of rural poor homeowners. New York's rather

stringent state-wide building and fire code, for example, may unnecessarily shift rural low-income people from ownership into tenancy, may discourage ownership by young families, and may cause a hardship for homeowners with low and unsteady incomes.

b. Monitor and minimize the negative effects that local land-use regulations may have on housing for low-income people. In particular, exclusionary municipal restrictions outlawing trailers or requiring large lots and expensive amenities for them may eliminate an important, if flawed, housing option needed by the rural poor. Large-lot zoning significantly increases the "rent burden" for low-income people by boosting land purchase prices, raising property taxes, and prohibiting a family from loaning or transferring part of their land to other family members so that they could bring in a trailer or build a house next to their parents.
c. Require that government rent subsidy programs (such as those from HUD) accommodate to the mobility of poor people, rather than penalizing them for moving. If a rent-subsidized tenant has to move or has good reason to move, the subsidy should travel with the recipient and be applicable to the next housing rental, even if it is located in another county.
d. Modify certain Department of Social Services requirements that, if enforced, exacerbate the housing problems of the poor. One example is the bedroom regulation that require a family on welfare to have separate bedrooms for girls and boys above early childhood, even though the family may not be able to afford a place with the required number of bedrooms. Additionally, the standard practice of placing a lien on a home owned by a family that turns to welfare may be counterproductive in that it discourages home improvement and may even contribute to the family sliding from ownership to tenancy, and from there, perhaps, to residential mobility and homelessness.

Attacking the Underlying Problem of Worsening Rural Poverty

Ultimately, to reduce and prevent rural homelessness requires reduction and prevention of the kind of poverty that renders some rural

people homeless. While specific recommendations for curing rural poverty are beyond the scope of this paper, research in rural New York confirms the general wisdom of the rural development literature, that the key to eliminating rural poverty lies in improvement of employment: creation of jobs, up-grading of entry-level jobs for better wages, hours, and benefits, and provision of employment training programs that include job readiness and life-management skills as well as job skills. Addressing the income side of the housing problem, because it attacks the underlying poverty, could do as much to eliminate homelessness in the rural area as the construction of more low-cost housing.

While the trend towards increasing single-parent families in rural areas may continue to grow, at least for a while, rural anti-poverty efforts should move in two directions: to remove the financial pressures on young, precarious married couples who are at risk of falling into poverty; and to bring down the risk that single mothers (whether never married or separated/divorced) will fall into and remain in poverty. For both approaches, improvement of the rural employment situations is imperative; but in neither case would that be sufficient. Controlling the spiraling cost of rural housing, encouraging rural home ownership, and providing a mix of coordinated family assistance, as well as fostering and strengthening social connectedness would help people avoid or climb more quickly out of poverty.

To the extent that the urban push-out phenomenon continues, whether by conscious policy at the state level, by routine practice of urban agencies, or by individual decisions separately made by numerous urban poor people, its consequences for the people and institutions of the receiving rural communities must be considered. For example, what financial burden is added to rural school districts, and how much are county budgets strained when service-needy people migrate to rural areas? Would alteration of the formulas for state and local cost-sharing for welfare and other entitlement programs reduce the burden to the receiving community and, at the same time, provide better services for needy residents in rural places?

Combining these three approaches, to improve the rural employment situation, to cushion single-parent families against long-term poverty, and to assist communities that are receiving an in-migration of low-income people, will all be necessary if we are to stop the growth of rural poverty and address the homelessness that increasingly comes with it.

NOTES

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[2] Agricultural changes in rural New York have added to rural poverty, though not significantly. Dairy farmhands displaced by farm consolidation may be unable to find substitute non-farm employment; and because they lose their "rent free" housing they may become homeless. Farm laborers are a small population, however, a sub-set of the 5 percent of the state's workforce that is employed in agriculture. Migrant non-dairy farm workers are also poor, and may become homeless while awaiting harvest or if they settle out of the migrant stream. They, too, are a small part of the rural poor in the state, however, numbering under 31,000, including dependents (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 1990: 13).

[3] In the rural U. S. after 1979, the number of low-rent housing units diminished relative to the growing number of low-income renters, transforming a surplus of low-rent housing to a shortfall of 500,000 units by 1985 (Lazere, Leonard, and Kravitz 1989: 11).

[4] As recently as 1985, 55 percent of poor rural households in the U. S. owned their homes, as compared to only 32 percent of poor metropolitan households.

[5] While rural rents are still lower than urban rents in most places across the country, rural incomes compared to urban incomes are even lower (Lazere, Leonard, and Kravitz 1989: 20), leaving a rent burden at least as high in rural areas as in urban.

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