Libraries and Rural Poverty

Graham Tedesco-Blair
Adult Services Librarian
Newark Public Library
Newark, NY
Today’s Topics

- What happened out there?
- What causes poverty?
- What counts as rural anyways?
- What makes rural poverty different from urban?
- What can we librarians do to help?
Caveat

- Rural libraries encompass a vast amount of geography, social situations, political situations, employment situations, elemental situations, etc. such that no single presentation could possibly hope to cover them all.
- That said, this program will not attempt the impossible.
- I am speaking in broad strokes out of necessity, as the specifics I have only relate to Western New York state.
- You are invited and encouraged to share your own experiences and opinions; more perspectives give us a better view of the situation.
- And this will be the last slide to have really long sentences like this on it.
What happened?
This is complicated and contentious

- Civilization tends towards large groups, not isolated packs
- Farming leads to agricultural surplus leads to leisure time
- Leisure time leads to experiments
- Experiments leads to technology
- Technology leads to easier work, and more people with leisure time
- Theoretically, the time will come when no one need work, and the machines will care for us all
But instead, on the dark side of this view...

- Technology becomes an excuse to remove people from work
- They become “surplus” “unnecessary” “outdated”
- What good is their leisure time to The Company that owns The Machine?
Rural communities are, in a sense, outdated technology

- They were very sensible for the vast majority of human existence
- Consolidation has occurred
- In 1900, farming employed 41% of the US population
- Now, it is less than 2%
- There are 63% fewer farms, but the average farm is 67% larger
- Farms now concentrate on one or two crops, rather than four or five.
- The amount of land being farmed has not changed.

Source: https://www.ers.usda.gov/media/259572/eib3_1_.pdf
Factories employ machines, not people
Hence, long term, neigh irreversible poverty

- The work has left
- The work will not be coming back
- The work, in many cases, no longer exists
- The work, if it does exist, will not come back to this area
- The work, if it does exist, and does come back to this area, will not employ these people
What’s Rural?

It’s not just “Farms”
The FAR Rating System

- “Frontier And Remote” rating
- Part of the Rural-Urban Continuum Codes (RUCC)
- Created and used by the USDA to determine if a place is rural or not
- Determined by “Travel times by car to edges of nearest urban areas by size, based on posted speed limits”
  - FAR1 – at least 60 minutes from an area of 50,000
  - FAR2 – at least 45 minutes from 25,000
  - FAR3 – at least 30 minutes from 10,000
  - FAR4 – at least 15 minutes from 2,500
- 3% of the US population is FAR3 and and less than 2% is FAR4
Frontier and Remote (FAR) Level 1
ZIP Code Areas, 2010

Level 1 - FAR areas consist of rural areas and urban areas up to 50,000 people that are 60 minutes or more from an urban area of 50,000 or more people.

*Note: Alaska and Hawaii not to scale.

Source(s): Economic Research Service, United States Department of Agriculture, April 2015 Based on Census 2010 data.
Frontier and Remote (FAR) Level 3 ZIP Code Areas, 2010

Level 3 - FAR areas consist of rural areas and urban areas up to 10,000 people that are 30 minutes or more from an urban area of 10,000-24,999 people; 45 minutes or more from an urban area of 25,000-49,999 people; and 60 minutes or more from an urban area of 50,000 or more people.

*Note: Alaska and Hawaii not to scale

Source(s): Economic Research Service, United States Department of Agriculture, April 2013 based on Census 2010 data.
Frontier and Remote (FAR) Level 4 ZIP Code Areas, 2010

Level 4 - FAR areas that are 15 minutes or more from an urban area of 2,500 to 9,999 people; 30 minutes or more from an urban area of 10,000 to 24,999 people; 45 minutes or more from an urban area of 25,000 to 49,999 people; and 60 minutes or more from an urban area of 50,000 or more people.

*Note: Alaska and Hawaii not to scale

Source: Economic Research Service, United States Department of Agriculture, April 2013
Based on Census 2010 data
Non-Metro Area

- Office of Management and Budget definition
- It’s a negative definition
  - Not a densely-settled urban entities with 50,000 or more people (a Metropolitan area)
  - Also not economically tied to the above, with 25% or more of the pop. commuting there.
  - Also not a labor-market area centered on urban clusters of 10,000-49,999 persons and defined with the same criteria used to define metro areas (a Micropolitan area)
- Yes, that is a lot of words to say “small town or smaller”
Rural vs. Urban

- US Census definition
- “Rural areas consist of open countryside with population densities less than 500 people per square mile and places with fewer than 2,500 people”
Why not just “Poverty”?

Why, specifically, “Rural Poverty”? 
The Problems and Fallout Are Mostly The Same

- Joblessness
  - No work
  - The wrong sort of work
  - Work that doesn’t pay enough
  - Work that goes nowhere

- Homelessness
  - Yes, there are homeless and semi-homeless people in rural areas
  - Visit any given trailer park, and see how many folks are living crammed together

- Drug and Alcohol Addiction
  - Heroin in the East, Meth in the West

- Domestic Issues
Cities have things we don’t: hospitals, police, ambulances, stores, restaurants, the internet, 4G cellphone signal…

What we do have is often of a lower quality, or of limited access:
- How many restaurants are available? What variety of food?
- What is there to do for fun?
- Is there a local police department, or do you rely on the county sheriffs?
- If you are hurt, how long does it take for the ambulance to arrive, and then take you to a hospital?

The medical analogy is a good one: If you are injured in the city, there are many resources to take care of you. If you are injured out in the country, there are far fewer. So what happens when the countryside itself is injured?
Sidebar:
Purdue Pharmaceuticals

- Pretty much singlehandedly responsible for the present opioid crisis
- Made the oxycodone based OxyContin available to the public in 1996
- Lied about its addictiveness. Claimed it was “less than 1%”, which was a major factor in its marketing campaign; in true, it is obscenely addictive
- Perfect storm – plenty of people seeking pain medication for injuries sustained in manufacturing throughout the 70s, 80s, and early 90s.
- Kept records of doctors with a long history of overprescribing pain medication
- Made $1.1 Billion from sales in 2000
- Plead guilty to lying about the addictiveness in 2007, paid $600 million fine.
  - That’s .55% of their 2000 profits, for those keeping track
- And they created an entire new growth market for drug dealers now that the supply from doctors has dried up.

What can be done?
What can the library do?

- Serve as an information clearing house for anything job related
  - Do you know the major employers in your area?
  - Do you know how to write a resume for someone with little to no experience?

- Consider people’s circumstances
  - Are you there when people need your skills?
  - Are your policies necessary, or are they designed to keep “those sorts” of people out?
    - Do you have a limit on how long people can stay in the library?
    - How many things they can carry with them?

- Familiarize yourself with the USDA
  - Many programs for rural development - [https://www.rd.usda.gov/](https://www.rd.usda.gov/)

- Keep Naloxone on hand
  - Sold under the brand names Narcan and Evzio
  - Blocks the effects of opioids on the brain – targets opioid receptors
  - Available as a nasal spray through most pharmacies in most states
What can you do?

- How involved in your community are you?
  - Do you know your local leaders, business owners, elected officials, and other important decision makers?
  - Are you a member of the same organizations they are (Rotary, Masons, Elk, Moose, Lions, Kiwanis...)?
    - If not, join whichever is the most prominent in your area. The largest will have the most lax membership requirements, and the largest pool of people you want to speak with.
    - This gives you access to these important people in a venue that isn’t official office hours, or during scheduled meetings. You chat over a meal and in between other topics. It’s easy to test the waters about things.

- How informed are you?
  - Do you go to town hall meetings?
  - Do you know your local representatives and their stances?
Tailoring your message to your audience

- This is cynical, but effective.
- Figure out their politics, their priorities, their loves and hates
- Look at your goal, and see how your message can be turned to fit those priorities.
  - Do not alter the goal, simply alter the way in which the goal is spoken about
  - Do not lie, but shift emphasis on different aspects towards different people
- An Example:
  - Goal: “The library budget needs to be raised”
    - Cliché Liberal: Speak about children and education, about caring for homeless people, about a community meeting space
    - Cliché Conservative: Speak about helping families, about caring for veterans who are getting back into the workforce, about a cultural institution that was started by Ben Franklin and Thomas Jefferson
Finally, Don’t Be Hard On Yourself

- You cannot solve a problem that has been festering for well over 150+ years overnight
- The library is not the Red Cross, Habitat for Humanity, or any other large scale charity organization
  - It is local, and it works locally – cherish your victories, no matter how small, and forgive your losses, because if you are alive, you can try again
- Remember to take a bit of time each day, each week, for yourself – don’t lose track of family, friends, hobbies, because you’ve thrown yourself into the problems
  - You are still allowed to be a person