

**Reaching for Success  
from a Place Seen as Second Best: Perspectives  
of US Families in the New Rural Economy**



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**KATE MACTAVISH  
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR,  
OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY**

# Reaching for Success



- *“I did things backwards. I had kids, then got married and then chose a career. I hope my kids do things the other way around.”*

Working-poor rural Mother of two, trailer park resident

- *“I hope they can all find a job that will give them the income to support a family. I hope they finish school up to and including college. That they don’t start a family until they’re done [with school].”*

Working-poor rural Father of four, trailer park resident

- *“I want them to be able to have a choice in their life about where they work. That means going to college so they can get a good paying job.”*

non-working poor Mother of five, trailer park resident

# “Second” Best



- *“Paradise Estates, where the shade trees prosper and the trailers rot, where the dogs don’t just bark, they bite, where trolling vans from evangelical churches battle a Mister Softee ice-cream truck for the souls of the children”*

-Dean 1999:134



# Research focus



- This analysis utilizes a decade of ethnographic data across three cases study communities to examine:
  - The social location of poor and working-class rural families in the context of contemporary U.S.
  - How current social location shapes future possibilities for broader life chances among low income rural youth.

# Theoretical Perspective



- **Life course perspective**
  - Attention to socio-historical context and agency
- **Community effects framework**
  - Urban-based models focus on access to resource and exposure to risks
  - Rural perspective on inclusion/integration into place

# Study Approach



## Three community case studies:

### Household Survey

Randomly selected sample 15% of park households (N=201)

Illinois (n=85) New Mexico (n=79) Oregon (n=37)

### Background Community Study

Key informant interviews, archival and census data, participant observation

### Intensive Family Study

Small sample of families with children and youth

Illinois (n=16) New Mexico (n=13) Oregon (n=12)

Series of semi-structured interviews

Observation

Follow-up study

# Social location of poor within place



- **Prairieview, Illinois- Amenity driven growth**

“...in just two decades the village transformed into an affluent community, suburban rather than rural small-town in character, all white, and solidly Republican.”  
(Salamon, 2003)

*“Most of Prairieview thinks the trailer court is low-income. Most free and reduced lunches in schools are served to the children from the trailer court. Most police and ambulance activity comes from the trailer court. Residents there are just never going to pay their way [in taxes] and, because of that, the trailer court is the focus of the entire community’s wrath.”*  
*-Prairieview city official*

# Social location of poor within place



- Mesa Vista, New Mexico- Chronically poor

*“If you know the area at all you know that there are pockets of mobile homes that really just buckshot the town. No one here is going to say anything against it. Chances are everyone knows someone that lives in a trailer.”*

*-Mesa Vista city official*

# Social location of poor within place



- Mountainview, Oregon- Declining resource dependent

*“We have a variety of parks, some that are alright and some that should be burned to the ground!”*

*Mountainview city leader*

*“Poverty is a challenge here. There aren’t a lot of opportunities in this town. It’s really hard to get on at the mill unless just about your whole family works there. When I have someone come in who needs work, there aren’t many places I can send them ... there aren’t many places to find work.”*

*Mountainview social service provider*

# Social location of poor within place



	Town	Trailer Park	Difference
Median Household Income			
IL	\$57,574	\$31,055	-\$26,519
NM	\$22,530	\$18,235	-\$4,295
OR	\$31,030	\$26,074	-\$4,966
% High school or higher			
IL	96.5	86.9	-9.6
NM	75.4	74.3	-1.1
OR	71.4	70	-1.4
% BA degree of higher			
IL	37.3	3.8	-33.5
NM	25.3	14.7	-10.6
OR	5.6	1.4	-4.2

# Social location of poor within place



	Kin in community	Vote	Temporary	Church	Household w/ children
%					
IL	50.0	41.7	49.4	30.1	60
NM	73.4	68.4	46.8	53.2	61
OR	81.1	21.6	56.8	40.5	41

*“We don’t feel like we belong to any community here. It’s a roof over our heads and a place to live and that’s all.”* *–Prairieview park resident*

*“My whole family lives here. We’ve always lived here as far back as anyone knows. This has always been our home.”* *-Mesa Vista park resident*

*“If you live in a trailer park, you’re on welfare, use drugs, and are a bad parent—automatically.”* *- Mountainview park resident*

# Trajectories of Park Youth Over Time



	Flourishing	Static	Floundering
<u>Prairieview (n=10)</u>			
Time 1 (1999)	2	5	3
Time 2 (2010)	4	4	2
<u>Mesa Vista (n=6)</u>			
Time 1 (2000)	1	4	1
Time 2 (2010)	1	4	1
<u>Mountainview (n=7)</u>			
Time 1 (2005)	2	3	2
Time 2 (2010)	1	3	3

# What it takes to Flourish



- Developmental experiences of youth
- Clear pattern characterizes the pathways of Flourishing youth
  - Exile from the park
  - Embeddedness in middle class community
  - Process that occurred over time
  - Supported by parents
  - Driven by youth

# What it takes to Flounder



- Clear pattern characterizes the pathways of Floundering youth
  - Exile from the town
  - Embeddedness in the park neighborhood

# Discussion/ Implications



- Need to take a dynamic perspective
- Importance of creating access to “ladders”
  - Potential value of newcomers in Amenity
  - Role for churches and schools in all
  - Need for buffers in distressed places
- Value of long range view

# Thank you!



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