

From Rural to Urban Poverty – An Autoethnography

Ruth Ogden

The University of Washington Tacoma
Politics, Philosophy, and Economics

ABSTRACT

This project analyzes the inks between urban and rural poverty through the lens of personal experience. Discussions of poverty in the United States are often abstracted from the people who experience it, leaving an emotional vacuum behind the data. This project applies numbers and statistics to my own life. To create a holistic view of this issue, I gathered both peer-reviewed data from academic sources and anecdotal data from individuals who have experienced rural poverty. Through this process, I also attempted to untangle my own identity and what these experiences mean to me now.

Immigrating from a poor rural area to a poor urban area does not positively impact a person's socioeconomic status. In many ways, life becomes more difficult due to a change in cultural and a lack of social support network. Young adults who migrate to urban areas in search of education and vocational training find it challenging to navigate bureaucratic expectations and upper educational culture. Biases present in urban areas towards the rural poor contribute to silenced narratives and a sense of shame.



Above: Photo Credit - Ogden, Ruth. (2021). *Water damage in my apartment ceiling.* Personal Collection.

INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

This paper is an intensely personal project – I explored the ramifications and connections between the urban poverty experience and the rural poverty experience and related them to my own personal lived experience. This piece is part creative writing and part research.

I am a white, queer, low-income, blue-collar woman. I moved from a rural area to an urban area in search of education. Through my experiences at Tacoma Community College and the University of Washington Tacoma, I came to feel that my background was embarrassing and something to be glossed over. My socioeconomic status did not change with migration. The key difference was that this was that I now lacked a support network. I am but one of many stories and these stories are not being told.

Moving to the city was hard. I worked 40+ hours at a gas station and encountered the same problems I fled from: poverty, addiction, tragedy, trauma. At work, I found myself ill-equipped to deal with situations that licensed social workers would address – I gained firsthand experience in administering Narcan and CPR, became proficient with a fire extinguisher, and learned to compartmentalize emotions.

I am never more aware of my lack of cultural capital than when I am in the classroom. Although it was humiliating, this new atmosphere whipped me into shape: My first quarter at TCC, I quit smoking after realizing I reeked of cigarettes in lectures, and I swapped my muddy boots for clean vans that I only wore to campus. I stopped swearing in casual conversation and learned a new language for concepts I already knew: Critical analysis, racial equity, gerrymandering, alienated labor, social justice. I had, and still have, so many gaps in my knowledge and humiliation was my clicker-training. I studied those around me as much as the material itself, and learned to fit in. By the time I transferred to UWT, my camouflage was complete. Peers viewed me as academically reliable, and professors offered me opportunities that were not given to others. Each quarter, I receive my Dean's List letter. Doors once closed are beginning to open.

When I visit my parents, I have flashes of how an outsider sees it – dirty, backwards, ignorant. These are the same adjectives stuck in my mind when I worry about my presentation UWT. I know I don't quite belong here, but I want to. I set out to explore this emotion.



Above: Photo Credit – The New York Times.

PROPOSED SOLUTION/RECOMMENDATIONS

Create greater opportunities for rural social mobility

Rural poverty is decreasing in the United States primarily due to internal migration to urban centers in search of social services, education, and other tools to elevate economic status. Children and young adults from rural communities are heavily encouraged to seek educational opportunities in cities, and then bring back skills and knowledge to improve their communities. Unfortunately, this migration also comes with a loss of community ties and sustenance skills – it is unlikely that any children I produce will need to know how to skin a deer or participate in a barn raising. This loss of generational knowledge is also a tragic loss of culture.

As with international immigration issues, the key to reducing internal migration is to facilitate livable conditions in the home community. By creating educational and vocational training opportunities in their home communities, young people will have the option to stay put and keep their community alive.

Eliminate Poverty Stereotypes in Upper Education

Many students from rural poverty backgrounds are hesitant to discuss their family origins in university settings. Students from this background know that their lack of 'cultural capital' in upper education settings puts them at a disadvantage when networking. Individuals and organizations that foster academic discussions on poverty frequently take a patronizing tone, as if help can only come from the outside. The effect is that individual experiences are silenced, and valuable input is excluded from the conversation. Classism still runs rampant in the university setting – by centering people in poverty during discussions of poverty, the human experience is connected to the issue. This is useful for both humanizing impoverished students and producing academics with lessened biases towards the rural poor.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Urban poverty and rural poverty are inextricably linked. The good news in that rural poverty has actively decreased since its peak in the mid 20th century. Currently, the national poverty rate in rural areas is 13.3%, compared to the urban poverty rate of 16% (Bishaw & Posey, 2017). However, the main cause of rural poverty decreasing is people migrating to urban communities in search of work and access to social services, rather than overall lifestyle improvement (PBS News Hour, 2017). In essence, it is not that there are less country-poor, it is that rural areas are depopulating, driving the numbers down. It feels very strange to know that I am part of this statistic. Poverty in rural areas tends to be more extreme than their urban counterparts, as at least 1/3 of the rural working poor survive on \$12,000 or less for a family of four (PBS News Hour, 2017). It is also worth noting that households in rural areas are far more likely to be low income (but above poverty line) than urban households – a study found that rural areas are far less likely to attract academic attention of study, as well (Weber, et al, 2005). Rural impoverished areas are also the most heavily and immediately affected by "structural economic changes" such as recessions and depressions (Tickamyer & Duncan, 1990). In sum, impoverished rural areas are understudied, underserved, and extremely vulnerable. Impoverished urban areas experience the same issues as rural impoverished areas, but have better access to social services, educational opportunities, and political advocacy.

Although anecdotal experience is not reliable for large scale studies, it is incredibly important when considering approaching the topic with sensitivity. People living in rural poverty are stereotyped as 'backward,' 'ignorant,' and 'trashy.' Politically, people from poor rural areas are seen as perpetrators of violence due to voting patterns when they should be considered mass propaganda casualty victims. When attempting to self advocate, they are met with skepticism due to lack of formal education credentials. There is the feeling of a "catch-22": to become advocates for their community, they must leave their community behind.

METHOD(S)

This paper was part of my TGH303 course. This course focused on immigration and refugee narratives from around the world and the intimate experience of trauma and tragedy that comes with forced migration. In this paper, I was asked to examine my own life for an experience with migration – I chose to write about moving to Tacoma in search of education.

Using both peer-reviewed academic publications and my own life as a case study, I attempted to construct a full picture of what the poverty experience looks and feels like on a personal level. I set out to gather data and statistics of poverty across the board. To collect anecdotal information, I conducted informal interviews with family and past community members who had experience with rural poverty. The self analysis was most painful – this project forced me to confront my own internal bias towards my background.

CONCLUSIONS

Rural poverty and urban poverty are twin sisters with the same symptoms: addiction, trauma, intergenerational poverty. One cannot exist without the other.

Depictions and discussions of poverty are often focused on the macro level and are academic and policy oriented. There is also an illusion amongst the rural poor that moving to an urban center will immediately alleviate poverty. Those that migrate to urban areas find themselves the target of bias, in a new culture that is difficult to navigate without a support system. The experience can be likened to moving to a new country – urban areas have different values, manner of dress, and behavioral expectations in comparison to rural areas.

REFERENCES

- Bishaw, A., Posey, K. (30 November 2017). *Incomes and Poverty Higher in Urban Areas.* <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2017/11/income-poverty-rural-america.html>
- PBS News Hour (17 March 2017). 6 charts that illustrate the divide between rural and urban America. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/six-charts-illustrate-divide-rural-urban-america>.
- Richardson & London. (2007). *Strategies and Lessons for Reducing Persistent Rural Poverty: A Social Justice Approach to Funding Rural Community Transformation.* *Community Development*, 38(1), 92-107.
- Tickamyer & Duncan (1990). *Poverty and Opportunity Structure in Rural America.* *Annual Review of Sociology*, (16), 67-86.
- Weber, et al. (2005). *A critical review of rural poverty literature: Is there truly a rural effect?* *International Regional Science Review*, 28(4), 381-414.