50 Years Into the War on Poverty, Hardship Hits Back

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Poorest Counties Still Losing in War on Want

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Credit Travis Dove for The New York Times

TWIN BRANCH, W.Va. — When people visit with friends and neighbors in southern West Virginia, where paved roads give way to dirt before winding steeply up wooded hollows, the talk is often of lives that never got off the ground.

“How’s John boy?” Sabrina Shrader, 30, a former neighbor, asked Marie Bolden one cold winter day at what Ms. Bolden calls her “little shanty by the tracks.”

“He had another seizure the other night,” Ms. Bolden, 50, said of her son, John McCall, a former classmate of Ms. Shrader’s. John got caught up in the dark undertow of drugs that defines life for so many here in McDowell County, almost died of an overdose in 2007, and now lives on disability payments. His brother, Donald, recently released from prison, is unemployed and essentially homeless.

“It’s like he’s in a hole with no way out,” Ms. Bolden said of Donald as she drizzled honey on a homemade biscuit in her tidy kitchen. “The other day he came in and said, ‘Ain’t that a shame: I’m 30 years old and carrying my life around in a backpack.’ It broke my heart.”
The L.B.J. Poverty Tour

Footage from the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library of the President’s “Poverty Tour” through the Appalachian states in 1964. McDowell County, the poorest in West Virginia, has been emblematic of entrenched American poverty for more than a half-century. John F. Kennedy campaigned here in 1960 and was so appalled that he promised to send help if elected president. His first executive order created the modern food stamp program, whose first recipients were McDowell County residents. When President Lyndon B. Johnson declared “unconditional war on poverty” in 1964, it was the squalor of Appalachia he had in mind. The federal programs that followed — Medicare, Medicaid, free school lunches and others — lifted tens of thousands above a subsistence standard of living.

But a half-century later, with the poverty rate again on the rise, hardship seems merely to have taken on a new face in McDowell County. The economy is declining along with the coal industry, towns are hollowed out as people flee, and communities are scarred by family dissolution, prescription drug abuse and a high rate of imprisonment.

Fifty years after the war on poverty began, its anniversary is being observed with academic conferences and ideological sparring — often focused, explicitly or implicitly, on the “culture” of poor urban residents. Almost forgotten is how many ways poverty plays out in America, and how much long-term poverty is a rural problem.

Of the 353 most persistently poor counties in the United States — defined by Washington as having had a poverty rate above 20 percent in each of the past three decades — 85 percent are rural. They are clustered in distinct regions: Indian reservations in the West; Hispanic communities in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas; a band across the Deep South and along the Mississippi Delta with a majority black population; and Appalachia, largely white, which has supplied some of America’s iconic imagery of rural poverty since the Depression-era photos of Walker Evans.

McDowell County is in some ways a place truly left behind, from which the educated few have fled, leaving almost no shreds of prosperity. But in a nation with more than 46 million people living below the poverty line — 15 percent of the population — it is also a sobering reminder of how much remains broken, in drearily familiar ways and utterly unexpected ones, 50 years on.

A Scarred Landscape

Much of McDowell County looks like a rural Detroit, with broken windows on shuttered businesses and homes crumbling from neglect. In many places, little seems to have been built or maintained in decades.

Numbers tell the tale as vividly as the scarred landscape. Forty-six percent of children in the county do not live with a biological parent, according to the school district. Their mothers and fathers are in jail, are dead or have left them to be raised by relatives, said Gordon Lambert, president of the McDowell County Commission.

Beginning in the 19th century, the rugged region produced more coal than any other county in West Virginia, but it got almost none of the wealth back as local investment. Of West Virginia’s 55 counties, McDowell has the lowest median household income, $22,000; the worst childhood obesity rate; and the highest teenage birthrate.
Caught in Poverty

Articles in this series will examine American hardship 50 years after the war on poverty. It is also reeling from prescription drug abuse. The death rate from overdoses is more than eight times the national average. Of the 115 babies born in 2011 at Welch Community Hospital, over 40 had been exposed to drugs.

Largely as a consequence of the drug scourge, a problem widespread in rural America, the incarceration rate in West Virginia is one of the highest in the country.

"Whole families have been wiped out in this county: mother, father, children," said Sheriff Martin B. West.

"These are good people, good families," Sheriff West, an evangelical pastor, said of his lifelong neighbors. "But they get involved with drugs, and the next thing you know they're getting arrested."

The sheriff's wife, Georgia Muncy West, has a historical link to the war on poverty. Her parents, Alderson and Chloe Muncy, were the first beneficiaries of the modern food stamp program, traveling to Welch to collect $95 in coupons. Ms. West, one of 15 children, said that unlike many current families, hers remained intact even through the leanest times. She went to work the Monday after she graduated from high school, sent her two children to college and served on the county school board.

As coal mining jobs have declined over half a century, there has been a steady migration away from the mountains. McDowell County's population is just 21,300, down from 100,000 in the 1950s. Those who stayed did not have the education or skills to leave, or remained fiercely attached to the hollows and homes their families had known for generations.

Alma and Randy McNeely, both 50, tried life in Tennessee. But they returned to McDowell County to be close to their large extended family.

The couple married when they were 16. In a family photo album, Ms. McNeely appears in her white wedding dress as if headed to the junior prom. Turning the album's pages for a visitor, she apologized for its lack of captions. "Mama couldn't write, so, you know, there ain't no names in it," she said.

Ms. McNeely, whose long, dark hair is gathered behind, is known as Maw for being a surrogate mother to many in Hensley, a dot of a community. Her home is a few small rooms under a metal roof, clinging to a hillside.

Photo

John F. Kennedy, then a senator running for president, with miners near Mullens, W.Va., in 1960. Credit Hank Walker/Time Life Pictures, via Getty Images
Her husband worked in sawmills before a back injury in 1990. His disability payments, some $1,700 a month, are the family’s only income.

After marrying, the couple had two children. Their daughter, Angela, gave birth at 14 and was expelled from a Christian school, her mother said. Now, Ms. McNeely is raising Angela’s daughter, Emalee Short, who is 15.

A high school sophomore, Emalee dreams of being a veterinarian or maybe a marine biologist. The house and yard ring with the yelps of a dozen Chihuahuas and other small dogs, some of them strays dropped off by neighbors.

A confident teenager in a “Twilight” T-shirt, Emalee is enrolled in Upward Bound, the federal program that offers Saturday classes and summer school for bright students aspiring to college. “I want to be one of the ones who gets out of here,” she said. “I don’t want people to talk about me” — meaning the recitation of damaged young lives that is a regular part of catching up.

Another photo in the album shows Randy Jr., the McNeelys’ son, known as Little Man. Little Man dropped out of high school six months shy of graduation, “with me sitting here crying,” Ms. McNeely said. He has been in and out of jail but is one of the lucky ones who have found work, at a junkyard run by a family friend.

Although Ms. McNeely encourages her granddaughter to aim for college, which would mean leaving McDowell County, she said that “her other mommy and daddy” — meaning Emalee’s biological parents — “and all her aunts and uncles, they don’t want her to go.”

“They’re scared she’s going to get hurt,” Ms. McNeely said.

Food Stamps and Coal

Many in McDowell County acknowledge that depending on government benefits has become a way of life, passed from generation to generation. Nearly 47 percent of personal income in the county is from Social Security, disability insurance, food stamps and other federal programs.

But residents also identify a more insidious cause of the current social unraveling: the disappearance of the only good jobs they ever knew, in coal mining. The county was always poor. Yet family breakup did not become a calamity until the 1990s, after southern West Virginia lost its major mines in the downturn of the American steel industry. The poverty rate, 50 percent in 1960, declined — partly as a result of federal benefits — to 36 percent in 1970 and to 23.5 percent in 1980. But it soared to nearly 38 percent in 1990. For families with children, it now nears 41 percent.

Today, fewer than one in three McDowell County residents are in the labor force. The chief effort to diversify the economy has been building prisons. The most impressive structure on Route 52, the twisting highway into Welch, is a state prison that occupies a former hospital. There is also a new federal prison on a mountaintop. But many residents have been skipped over for the well-paying jobs in corrections: They can’t pass a drug test.

Sheriff West, a former coal miner who presided over a magistrature court before he was elected sheriff in 2012, said the region’s ills traced back to many failures by elected officials, including local politicians who governed by patronage and state leaders in Charleston, the capital, who took the county’s solidly Democratic voters for granted and never courted them with aid.

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The sheriff and other members of McDowell County’s small elite are not inclined to debate national poverty policy. They draw conclusions from what is in front of them.

"Our politicians never really did look ahead in this county for when coal wouldn’t be king," Sheriff West said. "Therefore, we’ve fallen flat on our face."

**Returning for Neighbors**

Not everyone with an education and prospects has moved away. McDowell County has a small professional class of people fighting long odds to better a place they love. Florisha McGuire, who grew up in War, which calls itself West Virginia’s southernmost city, returned to become principal of Southside K-8 School.

For Ms. McGuire, 34, the turning point in the town’s recent history was the year she left for college, 1997, when many of the 17-year-olds who stayed behind graduated from beer and marijuana to prescription pill abuse.

Many of the parents of the children in her school today are her former classmates. In some, emaciated bodies and sunken eyes show the ravages of addiction. "I had a boy in here the other day I went to high school with," she said. "He had lost weight. Teeth missing. You can look at them and go, 'He’s going to be the next to die.' "

**Photo**

Emalee Short played with her dog outside her grandparents' home in Hensley, W.Va., in long-struggling McDowell County. Credit Travis Dove for The New York Times

Ms. McGuire, who grew up in poverty — her father did not work and died of lung cancer at 49; her mother had married at 16 — was the first in her family to attend college. On her first morning at Concord University in Athens, W.Va., about 50 miles from War, her roommate called her to breakfast. Ms. McGuire replied that she didn’t have the money. She hadn’t realized her scholarship included meals in a dining hall.

"I was as backward as these kids are," she said in the office of her school, one of few modern buildings in town. "We’re isolated. Part of our culture here is we tend to stick with our own." In her leaving for college, she said, "you’d think I’d committed a crime."

As the mother of a 3-year-old girl, she frets that the closest ballet lesson or soccer team is nearly two hours away, over the state line in Bluefield, Va. But she is committed to living and working here. "As God calls preachers to preach, he calls teachers to certain jobs," she said. "I really believe it is my mission to do this and give these kids a chance."

Ms. McGuire described War as almost biblically divided between forces of dark and light: between the working blue- and white-collar residents who anchor churches, schools and the city government, and the "pill head" community. As she drove down the main street, past municipal offices with the Ten Commandments painted in front, she pointed out the signs of a once-thriving town sunk into hopelessness. The abandoned American Legion hall. A pharmacy with gates to prevent break-ins. The decrepit War Hotel, its filthy awning calling it "Miner’s City," where the sheriff’s department has made drug arrests.

http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/21/us/50-years-into-the-war-on-poverty-hardship-hits-back.html?_r=0#
When coal was king, there were two movie theaters and a high school, now closed. “Everybody worked,” Ms. McGuire said.

She turned up Shaft Hollow, where many people live in poorly built houses once owned by a coal company, their roofs sagging and the porches without railings. At the foot of Shop Hollow, a homemade sign advertised Hillbilly Fried Chicken. Another pointed the way to the True Light Church of God in Jesus Name. “This is one of the country places, but I love these people,” Ms. McGuire said. She said it was a bastion of Pentecostal faith, where families are strict and their children well behaved.

She and others who seek to lift McDowell County have attracted some outside allies. Reconnecting McDowell[3], led by the American Federation of Teachers union, is working to turn schools into community centers offering health care, adult literacy classes and other services. Its leaders hope to convert an abandoned furniture store in Welch to apartments in order to attract teachers.

“Someone from Indiana or Pennsylvania, they’re not going to come to McDowell County and live in a house trailer on top of a mountain,” said Bob Brown, a union official.

Another group, the West Virginia Healthy Kids and Families Coalition[4], is working to create a home visitation service to teach new parents the skills of child-rearing.

Sabrina Shrader, the former neighbor of Marie Bolden in Twin Branch, has spoken on behalf of the group to the State Legislature and appeared[5] before a United States Senate committee last year. Ms. Shrader, who spent part of her youth in a battered women’s shelter with her mother, earned a college degree in social work.

“It’s important we care about places like this,” she said. “There are kids and families who want to succeed. They want life to be better, but they don’t know how.”

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