



North American Association of Christians in Social Work (NACSW)
PO Box 121; Botsford, CT 06404 *** Phone/Fax (tollfree): 888.426.4712
Email: info@nacsW.org *** Website: <http://www.nacsW.org>

“A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work”

**FEED MY SHEEP – RURAL POVERTY IN THE CHURCH: BASED ON
CASE STUDIES IN VERMONT**

Alana Atchinson, Ph.D., MSW

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**Feed my Sheep:
Rural Poverty
and the Church**

Based on
Case Studies in Vermont

**Alana B. Atchinson
M.S.W., Ph.D.
Slippery Rock University**

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Session Objectives

By the end of this session participants will be equipped to

- Articulate various differences in needs between urban and rural families experiencing poverty
- Lobby for social welfare policies that consider the unique needs of rural families
- Articulate the role that churches in rural areas are playing in providing a safety net for families in need

**Feed My Sheep: Rural Poverty
and the Church
Case Studies in Vermont**

I. Introduction

II. Research Questions

III. Methodology

- Location
- Access
- Data Collection
- Data Analysis

IV. Findings & Themes

V. The role of the Church

VI. Questions and Discussion

Research Questions

- What is life like for Vermont households who are receiving ANFC?
- How do the families think they will survive when reforms are implemented and benefits are cut?

Where? & When?

- Chittenden County, Vermont
- Orleans County, Vermont

September 1994 – November 2005

Data Collection Methods

(Access Issues)

1. Participant Observation

- Community Locations
 - Laundromats
 - Food distribution centers
 - Agency waiting rooms
 - Health clinics
 - Churches
- Welfare Rights Organizations
 - Women's Union
 - Our Lady of Welfare
 - Agency waiting rooms

2. Interviews with Families

3. Extended Observations

4. Focus Groups

5. Casual Contacts

Data Analysis

Triangulation (reliability and validity checks)

1. Data Triangulation
 - > Time
 - > Space
 - > Person
2. Investigator Triangulation
3. Theory Triangulation
4. Methodological Triangulation
 - > Participant observation
 - > Focus groups
 - > Interviews
 - > Extended observations of families

Analysis
How do things work?

- **Precipitating Factors**
 - > Changes in relationship status
 - > Imprisonment
 - > Illness
 - > Loss of and under-employment
 - > Unplanned pregnancies
- **Poverty Survival Strategies**
 - > Non-profit community resources
 - > Networking
 - > Finding loopholes
 - > Breaking the rules

Primary Findings

- Geographic and climate related isolation exacerbate the poverty experience.
- Rural areas have inadequate formal services for families experiencing poverty.
- People with low incomes living in rural areas lack social capital.

Themes

1) The undertow of poverty :

Precipitating factors

- > changes in relationship status
- > violence in the home
- > imprisonment
- > illness
- > loss of employment/underemployment
- > unplanned pregnancies

2) I AM the typical welfare mother:

Myths about welfare recipients

"They were looking for someone to be on this radio talk show. To talk about what it was like to be on welfare... I volunteered. When the lady called to talk to me about it she said I was too well educated, you know, too articulate and knowledgeable. She said she wanted a typical welfare mother. Well, I blew up... That's just it, I AM the typical welfare mother, intelligent and resourceful!"

3) Just gettin' by: Economic insecurity

- > lack of money
- > poor housing
- > feeding the family
- > child care problems

Themes cont.

4) From the inside out: Survival strategies

- > networking
- > finding loopholes
- > non-profit community resources
- > breaking the rules

5) I AM working and it ain't easy: Defining work

- > motherhood is work
- > poverty is work
- > being on welfare is work
- > community service is work

6) The road less traveled: Rural issues

- > social isolation and lack of resources
- > transportation issues
- > long cold winters

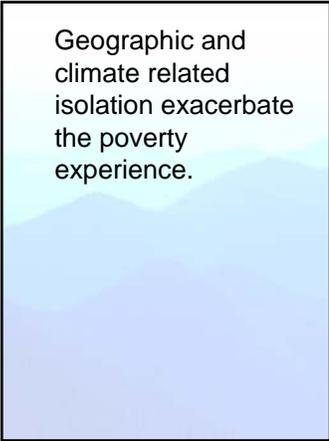
7) You can't get there from here:

Barriers to self sufficiency

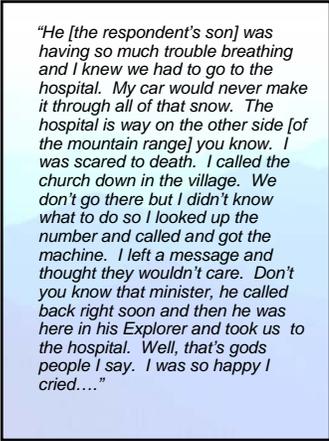
- > a living wage and a running car
- > child support and child care
- > societal attitudes
- > just a little respect

The Role of the Church in addressing Rural Poverty

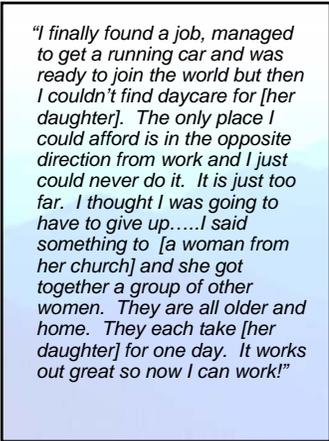
Geographic and climate related isolation exacerbate the poverty experience.



"He [the respondent's son] was having so much trouble breathing and I knew we had to go to the hospital. My car would never make it through all of that snow. The hospital is way on the other side [of the mountain range] you know. I was scared to death. I called the church down in the village. We don't go there but I didn't know what to do so I looked up the number and called and got the machine. I left a message and thought they wouldn't care. Don't you know that minister, he called back right soon and then he was here in his Explorer and took us to the hospital. Well, that's gods people I say. I was so happy I cried..."



"I finally found a job, managed to get a running car and was ready to join the world but then I couldn't find daycare for [her daughter]. The only place I could afford is in the opposite direction from work and I just could never do it. It is just too far. I thought I was going to have to give up....I said something to [a woman from her church] and she got together a group of other women. They are all older and home. They each take [her daughter] for one day. It works out great so now I can work!"



Rural areas have inadequate formal services for families experiencing poverty.

"The churches have helped significantly... They really have been great like helping us buy the woodstove. Without the stove we wouldn't have any heat. They really have helped a lot."

People with low incomes living in rural areas lack social capital.

"I get pretty lonely, especially during the winter. I love the kids and all but it would be nice to have adults to talk to sometimes. Even having the phone doesn't help too much because almost every call is long distance from here so I can't afford it. Thank god for the [name of church] women. They seem to know just when I need them. It seems just when I am going crazy there is a knock at the door and there is someone from the women's group stopping in just to say hi. You must think I'm nuts but it means so much to me."

Danger.....

- Obligation?
- "Strings" attached?

Feed
All the Sheep

Some final words...

What Women Say They Need

"Two things really – a steady job with good pay and health insurance for [my husband] and a car to get him there. I think that's what we need most... The rest we could take care of but this temporary work is just too hard on a family... He needs a job that lasts all year. One with good pay that we can count on."

"...We could use all kinds of things...but the worst thing is the myths about welfare...If people believe we are lazy and treat us like we are lazy then eventually that will come true...I don't want that for [my daughter]."

"If people knew, really knew, how little we are living on...If most Americans understood this then things would change...They could give us more help and things would get better...When people think you are getting rich off the system and really you are working like a dog just to make ends meet, then something is wrong...If people really knew then it would be different."

What Women Say They Need

"God, what do I need? We've been talking about this for years but it doesn't make any difference...We said we needed child care, we got long waiting lists. We said we needed good jobs, we got workfare...dead-end jobs...Things just keep getting worst...more and more cuts...How many times do we need to say things? Does anybody out there listen? ...Like hello, is anybody listening?"
