



Professor Sheila Mammen



Places

Revealing the Face of Rural Poverty in Massachusetts

This is Franklin County: Rolling hills. Soft, broad valleys. Quiet hamlets. Hard workers, hardy farmers, self-reliant folks, and good neighbors. It is also a county where hunger, malnutrition, and other hallmarks of poverty persist, sometimes quietly hidden.

For Franklin County families interviewed by UMass Amherst researchers over the past three years, the threat of hunger is a fact of life - far more so than among other families in 30 counties spotlighted in a national study informally dubbed “Rural Families Speak Out.”

This is just one of the disturbing facts shaping a portrait of poverty in Franklin County being drawn by a team that includes Gretchen May and Shirley Mietlicki of UMass Extension’s Communities, Families and Youth Program, and Professor Sheila Mammen of the UMass Amherst Department of Resource Economics. It is part of a 16-state USDA study to gauge the impact of welfare reform on rural families nationwide.

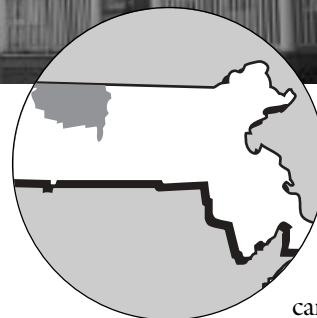
The team, led by Mammen, is sorting through a second round of interview data to be forwarded to Oregon State University for analysis. Startling trends have already emerged that set Franklin County apart from other counties being studied, says Mammen.

“Nutrition, employment and income improved somewhat for our families between the first and second year,” notes Mammen. “But since September 11, 2001, many have taken two steps back.”

While incomes in Massachusetts are among the highest in the U.S., 75-percent of the families studied report either going hungry or not having a secure food supply during any given month. In low-income Louisiana, food insecurity was below 15-percent among families interviewed. California, a high-income state, reported food insecurity in about 30-percent of families studied.

The team attributes part of this disparity to cultural factors. Massachusetts participants are relatively unconnected to an extended family. “And people in public housing often don’t have access to gardens,” says Gretchen May.

Food insecurity takes many forms. Parents skip meals, serve smaller portions, or subsist on a child’s leftovers. Junk food is used to ease hunger. “The manifestations are either emaciation or obesity,” says Mammen, noting that two-thirds of the mothers reported multiple chronic health problems and family learning disabilities. The social service safety net has big holes in it, she adds.



“Local food pantries restrict how often families can visit in a given month, so some must

travel to several pantries. Lack of transportation is a big issue,” says Mammen.

“Rural Low-Income Families: Tracking their Well-Being and Functioning in the Context of Welfare Reform,” is unprecedented in the range of information it encompasses and in eliciting stories of the difficult ways participants navigate the web of social services.

“These are just regular people. They don’t stand out, but struggle just to keep day-to-day life together,” says May.

Mammen adds, “In a city, poverty is in your face. Rural poverty is not as easy to see.”

Now beginning its second five-year round of funding, the study is drawing national attention for its stark portrayal of rural poverty. May, Mammen and Mietlicki are excited about the implications of their work for additional research. They are also looking forward to tracking the fortunes of participants whom they have come to know well and admire.

Despite the challenges, says May, many “are active in their communities, with a purpose and plan in life.” ■