



Laboring Towards Economic Self-Sufficiency: A Public Policy Perspective

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Introduction

Following passage of the federal Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, researchers launched a number of policy evaluation studies to monitor the effectiveness of the legislation on targeted families, primarily urban families. Few of these studies focused on the multiple systems that surround and affect the families and few focused on rural families over time. To balance those investigations, researchers from seventeen land-grant universities, with funding from the USDA, launched a three-year, multi-state study of rural, low-income families known as *Rural Families Speak*¹. Findings are emerging with implications for public policy and programs.

For a discussion of the findings from eleven studies-to-date, see the research brief that accompanies this policy brief, *Laboring Towards Economic Self-Sufficiency: A Research Perspective*. Those studies are listed at the end of this brief¹. Findings are presented in the research brief in a model titled, *Ecology of Labor Force Participation Among Rural, Low-Income Families*. The ecosystem model was created as a tool to effectively communicate the findings and facilitate determination of interventions via policy and program. The model shows the relationship of systems and the challenges to becoming and remaining employed over time with wages that could enable families to be economically self-sufficient.

Policy Implications of Research To-Date

Analyses of research findings from a policy perspective focus the findings on implications for current or future policy. Analyses highlight evidence of gaps that could be addressed through public policy. These gaps become points for policy intervention.

Among the eleven studies examined, evidence exists that for rural families to participate in the labor force, there are inhibiting or facilitating factors. Some factors are barriers; others are pathways to participation. Evidence included findings that:

- Families are eligible for, but not receiving the Earned Income Tax Credit;
- Families are challenged to get to places of employment, retail business and health or other services due to distances and the lack of reliable transportation; and
- Employed mothers struggle with the demands of both employment and parenthood including finding available, affordable, safe care for their children.

Each of these three examples carry policy implications for intervention.

Points of Policy Intervention

The *Ecology of Labor Force Participation Among Rural, Low-Income Families* serves as the framework to both show findings from the study in relation to each of the systems and to identify points of policy intervention. (See Figure 1).

In some cases, according to the findings, points where an intervention increases the likelihood of improvement in the condition are contained within one system. In other cases, the points are in multiple systems. If findings from research are viewed without an ecological systems perspective, policy changes, including programs, may not be well matched to the system where the solution is best achieved.

Example One (Figure 2)

Among the rural families in this study, all employed families were eligible for the Earned Income Tax Credit but not all were receiving the EITC. The gap, or breakdown, occurred between the mesosystem, where resources are accessed & the microsystem, where resources are allocated. The problem occurred because families didn't know they could access the resources of the EITC. The problem is not in the federal and/or state policies. The problem requires a community level policy which focuses on education as an intervention. An educational concerted effort by the community, including employers, should increase the likelihood that these families will increase their available resources. When they do, according to the findings of these studies, they will allocate those resources to paying bills and enhancing food security, investing in reliable transportation, and increasing assets through home improvements, or savings for future expenses. These choices increase their income adequacy and improve their financial status. All of these resource expenditures in turn, support their participation in the labor force--which is congruent with the cultural norm that work is rewarded.

Example Two (Figure 3)

Another example from the study suggests the need for intervention in at least two systems because of the relationships between the exosystem where resources are available and the mesosystem where resources are accessed. In this case, the exosystem where local employment is, or is not, available and the mesosystem where the families actually became employed and earned wage income. This example also illustrates the necessity of considering multiple factors within those systems to determine points of intervention.

For the families in this study, when they had locally available jobs, affordable, accessible child care, available transportation, and flexible employers, many were able to be employed. Where the jobs were local but seasonal, or the other factors such as transportation or childcare were not in place, employment was problematic. Thus, effective policy interventions need to take into consideration multiple strategies even within one system. This example also requires intervention in another system, the mesosystem. For these families, it was not enough that jobs, transportation and child care were available, they had to be accessible and affordable. And when they were, again, the families used their earned income to improve their economic well-being and their mental and physical health. Thus, the cultural norms of personal responsibility, economic self-sufficiency and work ethic matched the family behavior.

Achieving Effective Impact

The *Rural Families Speak* study was launched to provide research evidence of the resources both available and unavailable, obtainable and unobtainable, used and unused by rural, low-income families to achieve and maintain economic well-being. The study sought to provide context in which appropriate policy solutions could be applied and to communicate the evidence to citizens and policy makers for action in the public policy and programming arenas.

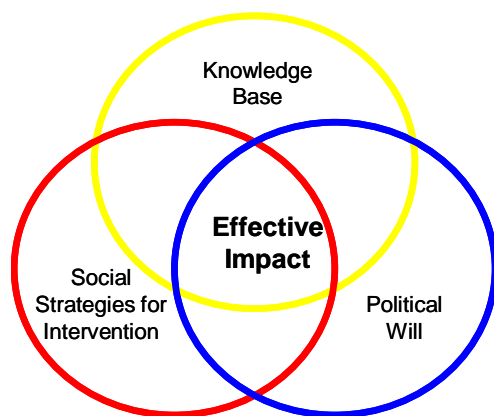
Use of research evidence is a necessary but not sufficient condition for effective public policy. Research evidence is one of three key and interrelated factors in policy development. The other two factors include intervention strategies and political will.

Political will emerges when sufficient people understand the need, or existing conditions, affected parties, and perhaps most importantly, what's to be gained through a policy intervention. In this case, since data exists showing that most EITC money is spent within the local community on both assets (like home and car purchases) or paying bills and since the amount of money foregone to the average

family is also known, some multiplication soon demonstrates that not only do the families improve financially but that there is an economic benefit accrued to the community. Economic benefit to multiple parties can be translated into political will to intervene.

Political will was behind the 1996 federal legislation known as welfare reform. Cultural norms emphasized personal responsibility, economic self-sufficiency, marriage, etc. With the need to contain federal spending and the desire to get people off the federal cash assistance, or welfare rolls, political will was sufficient to pass legislation limiting eligibility and shifting control, through the concept of devolution, to states and localities.

Decisions were made without taking into consideration factors affecting rural families. It is the hope of the multi-state *Rural Families Speak* research team that findings presented here, and those which are forthcoming, will be considered by local, state and federal policy makers and those who implement policies, so that effective intervention strategies are designed, implemented and evaluated; barriers are prevented, removed or neutralized; and pathways to economic well-being are strengthened for America's rural, low-income families.



Studies analyzed for this brief:

Berry, A. A., Shaffett, B. D., & Tucker, J. A., (2004, November). *Strategies to empower people: Step toward self-reliance for low-income families receiving public assistance*. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Association of Financial Counseling and Planning Education, Denver, CO.

Dolan, E. M., Mammen, S., Bauer, J., & Seiling, S., (2005). Stability of employment of rural low-income mothers and their access to employer benefits. *Consumer Interests Annual, USA: Proceedings of the American Council on Consumer Interests, 51*.

Dolan, E. M., Richards, L., Sano, Y., Bauer, J., & Braun, B., (2005). Linkages between employment patterns and depression over time: The case of low-income rural mothers. *Consumer Interests Annual, USA: Proceedings of the American Council on Consumer Interests, 51*.

Ko, J., & Manoogian, M., (2005, April). *Commitment to parenting and personal outcomes for rural, low-income Appalachian mothers*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Ohio Association of Family and Consumer Sciences, Perrysburg, OH.

Lawrence, F., Mammen, S., Kiss, E., Seiling, S., & Varcoe, K., (2004). Use of the earned income credit by rural families. *Proceedings of the Association for Financial Counseling and Planning Education* (pp. 51-52).

Mammen, S., & Dolan, E. M., (2005, May). *Employment and obstacles to employment of rural low-income mothers in the Northeast*. Paper presented at the Conference on Rural Poverty in the Northeast: Strengthening the Regional Research Effort, College Station, PA.

Mammen, S., Seiling, S., & Dolan, E. M., (2004, November). *Employment and quality of life of rural single mothers*. Poster presented at the annual meeting of ISQOLS, Philadelphia, PA.

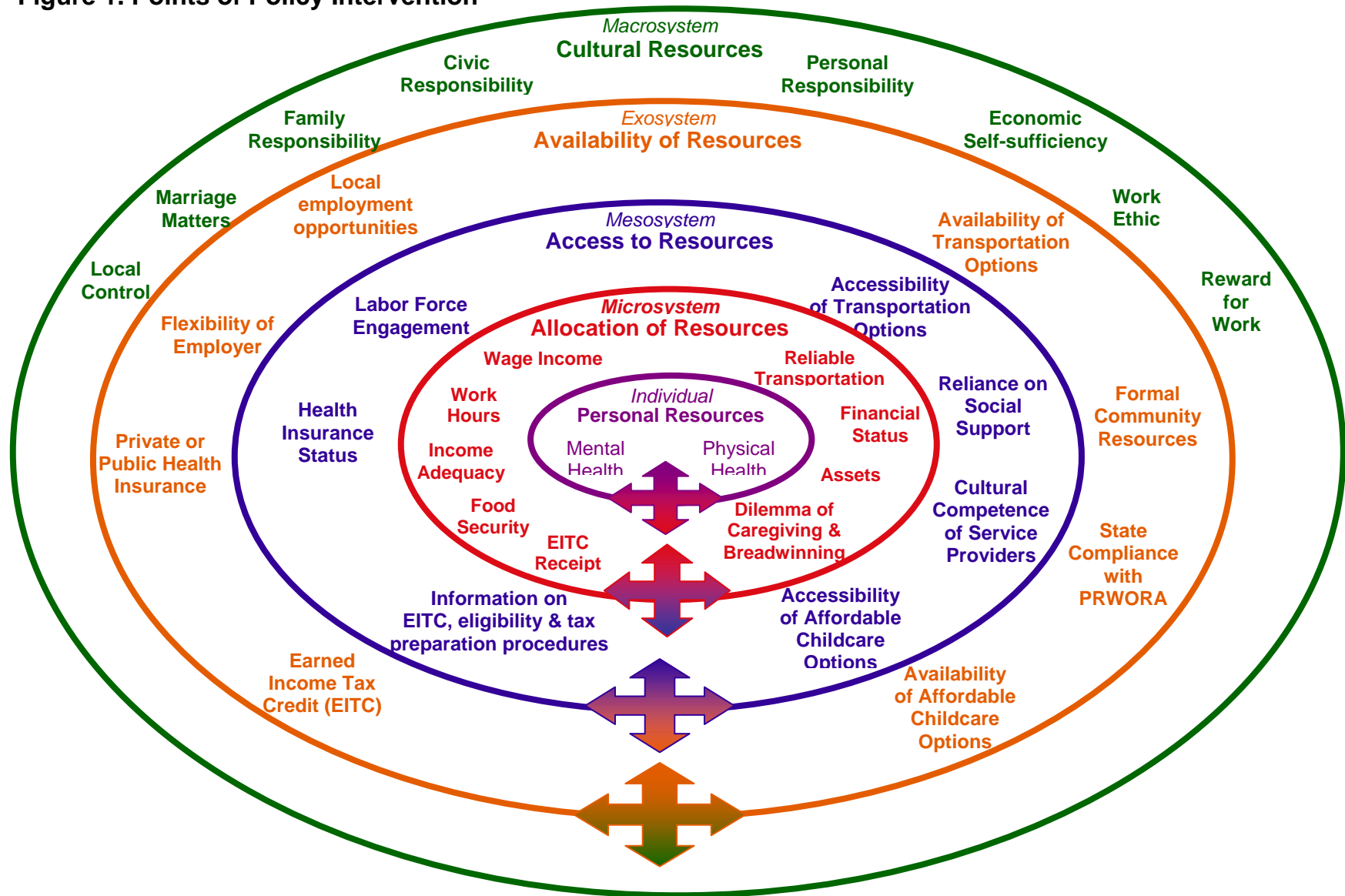
Parra Cardona, J. R., Bullock, L., Imig, D. R., & Villarruel, F. A., (under review). *Trabajando duro todos los dias (Working hard every day): Learning for the life experiences of Latino immigrant families*. *Family Relations*.

Reschke, K. & Walker, S., (in press). Child caregiving and employment commitments and choices in the context of rural poverty. *Affilia: The Journal of Woman and Social Work*.

Seiling, S., Dolan, E. M., & Glesner, T., (2005, June). *Rural low-income women who work in service jobs tell about their lives*. Paper presented at the Gender, Work & Organization Conference, Staffordshire, UK.

Simmons, L. A., Dolan, E. M., & Braun, B. (under review). Rhetoric and reality of economic self-sufficiency among rural, low-income families: A longitudinal study. *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*.

Figure 1. Points of Policy Intervention





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For more information:

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