



# RESEARCH BRIEF

May 2006

## Laboring Towards Economic Self-Sufficiency: A Research 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 families and few focused on rural families over time. To balance those investigations, researchers from 17 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*<sup>1</sup>. Findings are emerging with implications for public policy and programs.

This research brief provides a discussion of the findings from eleven studies-to-date. Those studies are listed at the end of the brief<sup>1</sup>. For a discussion of the policy implications of the research to-date, see the policy brief that accompanies this research brief, *Laboring Towards Economic Self-Sufficiency: A Public Policy Perspective*. That brief focuses the findings on implications for current or future policy. Analyses highlight evidence of gaps that could be addressed through public policy, identifying the gaps as points for policy intervention.

### Applying Family Ecology Theory

Family Ecology Theory organizes the contexts within which families function into a discrete series of nested systems collectively referred to as the ecosystem. These systems are interdependent--interaction within one system influences, and is influenced by, all others. The *macrosystem* is made up of the broad ideological values, norms and beliefs of a particular culture. The *exosystem* refers to the institutional structures that are external to family members but that directly or indirectly affect them. The *mesosystem*, represents interactions among systems and can be conceptualized as the bridge between the exosystem and the microsystem. The *microsystem* is the principal family context of individuals.

In the studies in this analysis, a theme of resources emerged: Cultural Resources (macro), Availability of Resources (exo), Access to Resources (meso), Allocation of Resources (micro), and Personal Resources (individual).

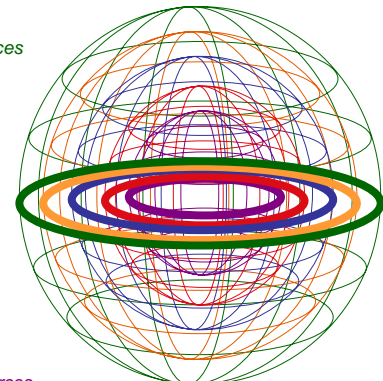
**Macrosystem**  
Cultural Resources

**Exosystem**  
Availability of  
Resources

**Mesosystem**  
Accessibility of  
Resources

**Microsystem**  
Allocation of  
Resources

**Individual**  
Personal Resources



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### **Ecology of Labor Force Participation among Rural, Low-Income Families**

Findings from the eleven studies-to-date examining labor force participation are presented in Figure 1. The model shows the ecosystem location of each factor found to be associated with labor force participation. By representing the studies' findings on the ecosystem map, the systemic relationships among the challenges to becoming and remaining employed over time are made evident.

Each factor found to be associated with labor force participation is mapped onto the ecosystem in Figure 1 permitting the reader to trace the interactions occurring across systems for example, labor force engagement in the mesosystem is dependent on availability of resources within the exosystem such as local job opportunities, available transportation, and affordable childcare. Families must be able to access these resources in the mesosystem to benefit from them. If they can, then their labor force engagement will affect the microsystem through wage income impacting other microsystem factors such as income adequacy and food security. Allocation of these resources impacts both mental and physical health of the individual-- in these eleven studies, the mother.

System influence reverberates outward as well. If wage income is too low, then income adequacy is not achieved. This circumstance places many mothers in a dilemma between providing care for their children or paying someone else to do so allowing them the time needed for labor force engagement. When the job does not pay adequate wages, these mothers choose child caregiving over breadwinning.

### **Pathways to Gainful Employment**

Figure 2 represents pathways to labor force participation<sup>i</sup>. The model illustrates key factors associated with gainful employment and derived benefits. According to these studies, this combination of factors is the best scenario for rural

families seeking to achieve economic self-sufficiency through employment. Taken together, the key findings of *Rural Families Speak* research on labor force participation concludes that:

- It's not good enough to simply be employed. Families need access to full-time jobs paying adequate wages. Employment stability is enhanced by having a flexible employer, working sufficient work hours, and having health insurance.
- If jobs are available but families lack reliable transportation, they will not be able to maintain employment.
- Access to affordable childcare is critical to gainful employment for rural, low-income families. Families who do not have affordable childcare options will: 1) Look to the social support of family and friends to fill the gap. This gap decreases their employment stability and increases their financial vulnerability or 2) Make caregiving for young children a priority over earning an income.
- Families earning income are eligible to receive the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). Families who are aware of the EITC and have assistance with tax forms receive and use the money to pay bills, invest in reliable transportation, and increase assets through home improvements or savings. EITC receipt increases income adequacy and improves financial stability.
- Mothers who are gainfully employed and earning an adequate income are more food secure, more financially stable and are healthier--they are less depressed and report fewer health problems.

<sup>i</sup> For a model illustrating the Barriers to Labor Force Participation, see Figure 3. This model maps out the factors that research shows are a hindrance to labor force participation and the detriments that result.

Figure 1. Ecology of Labor Force Participation Among Rural, Low-Income Families

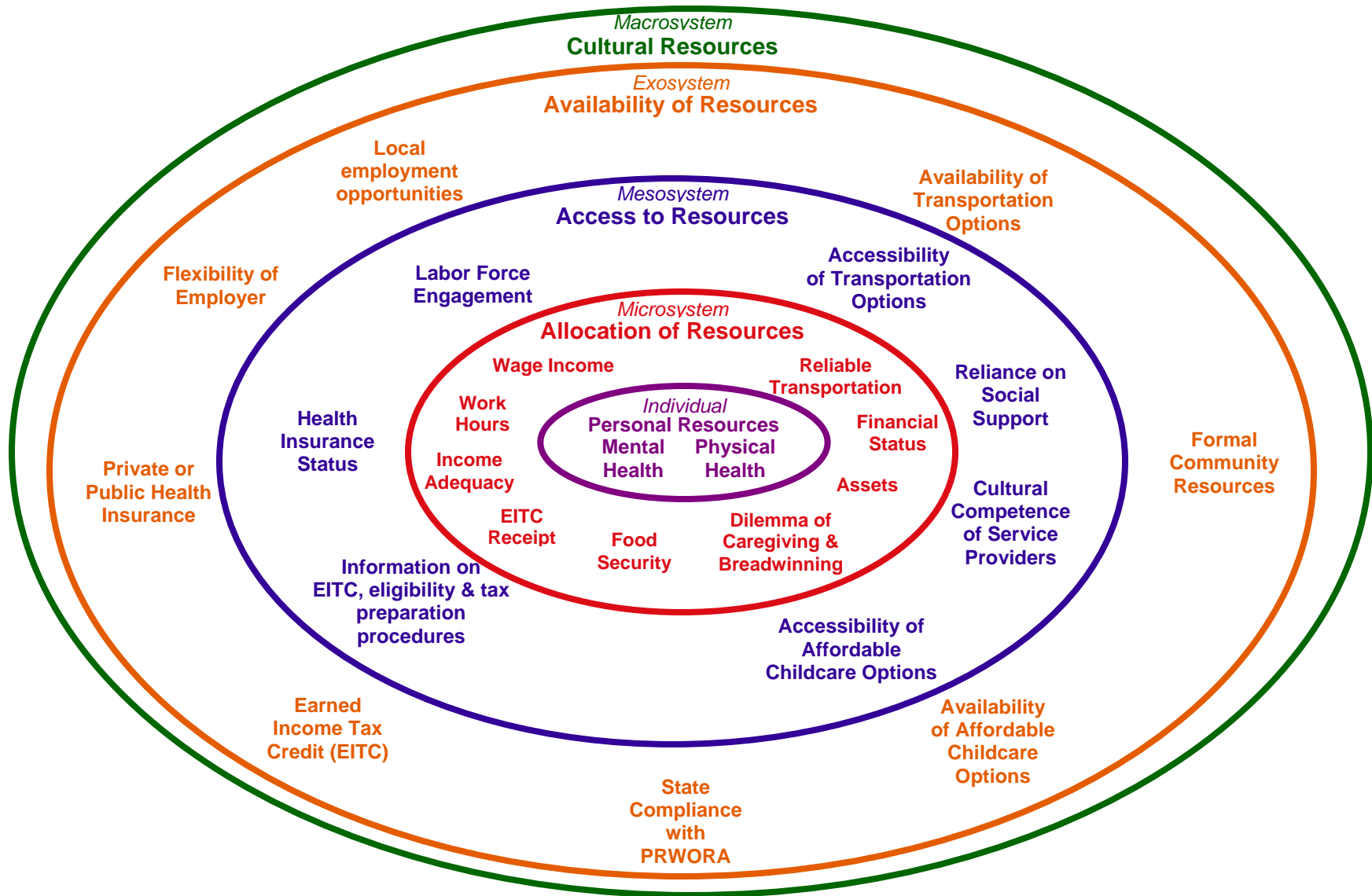


Figure 2. Pathways to Labor Force Participation Among Rural, Low-Income Families

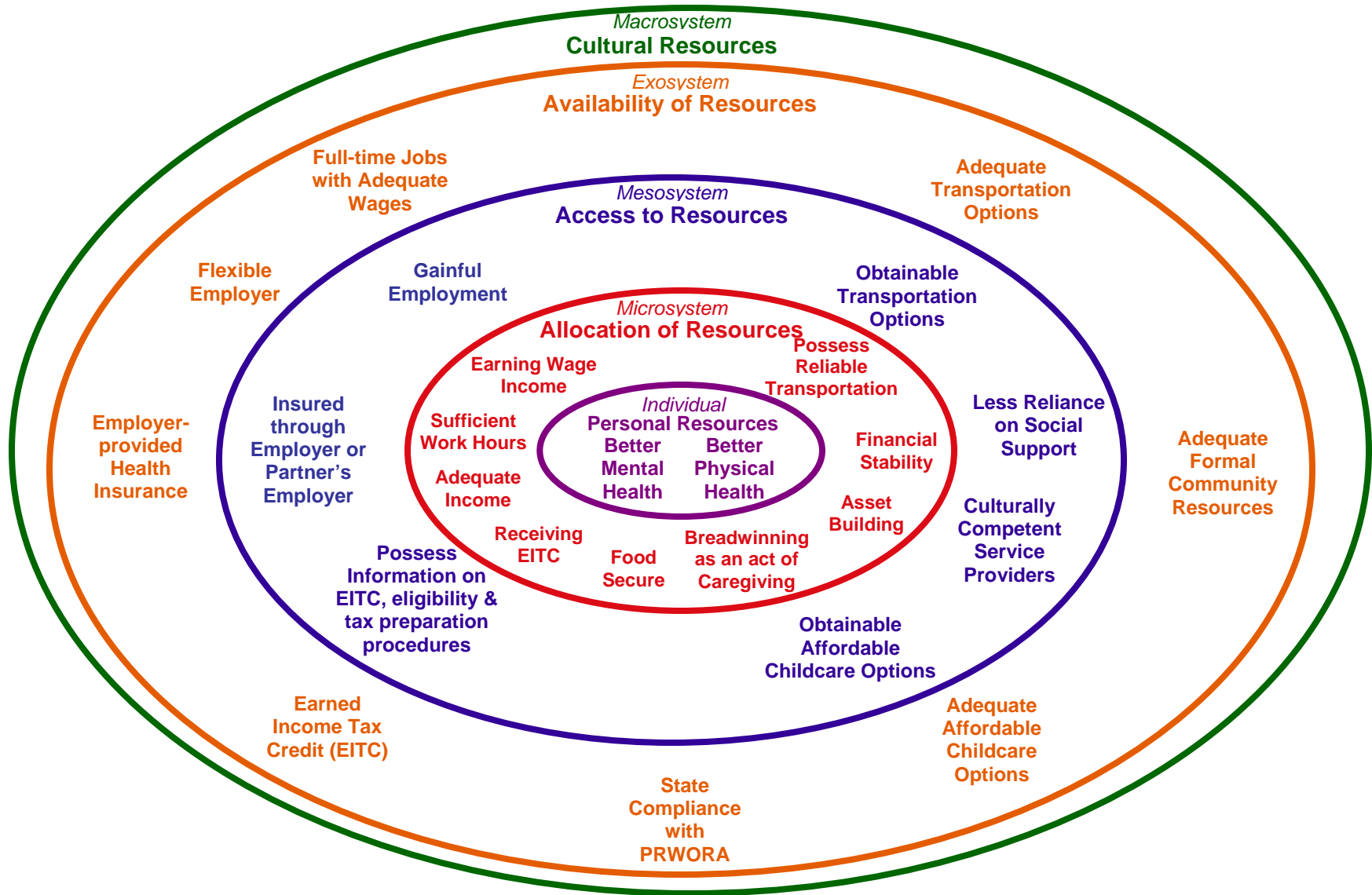
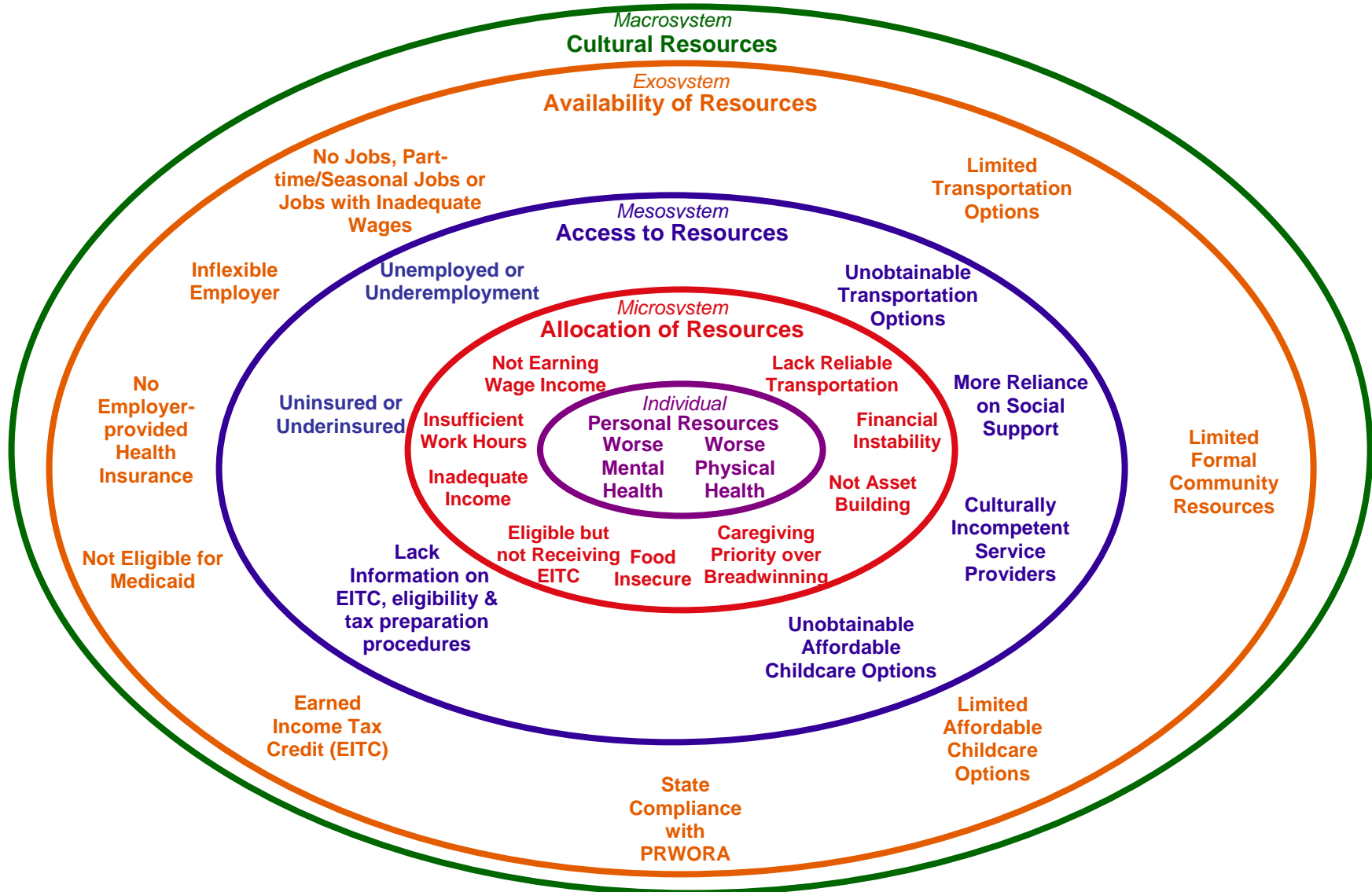


Figure 3. Barriers to Labor Force Participation Among Rural, Low-Income Families



**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*.



**Acknowledgements:**

This research was supported in part by USDA/CSREES/NRICGP Grants 2001-35401-10215, 2002-35401-11591, and 2004-35401-14938. Data were collected in conjunction with the cooperative multi state research project NC-223/NC-1011 Rural Low-income families: Tracking Their Well-being and Functioning in the Context of Welfare Reform. Cooperating states are California, Colorado, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New York, Ohio, Oregon, South Dakota, West Virginia, and Wyoming.

**For more information:**

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