The Perpetuation of the Rural Ghetto: A Case Study of St. Lawrence County

Danielle Rhubart
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Department of Sociology
Dr. Karen O’Neil

Abstract: With growing rates of unemployment and poverty, St. Lawrence County has epitomized the rural ghetto and faces no significant signs of hope. This case study identifies the factors that play the pivotal roles in perpetuating rural poverty with the thesis that generational poverty needs to be addressed at where it continues to reincarnate itself; among youth. Through reviewing relevant literature and conducting interviews with local community members as well as college students who have been able to break the cycle of poverty, this study provides a better understanding of what factors among at-risk youth need to be addressed in order to mitigate the cycle of poverty in the rural ghetto.
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INTRODUCTION

An Introduction to Poverty

The poverty that plagues the ghettos of rural America is perpetuated with each generation by numerous social and structural forces. Poverty in small self-efficient communities in traditional rural America was not an anticipated outcome of the rise of urbanization and industrialization (Duncan, 1992). Yet both contributed to the displacement of farmers and led to the eventual decline in the investment in human capital in non-metro areas (Duncan, 1992). As a result of this occurring throughout the past century, a specific type of impoverishment has settled into the framework of non-farming communities of rural America (Fitchen, 1981) as they now lack self reliance and the ability to invest in their own communities. These rural areas are plagued by increasing poverty, low educational attainment and a narrow range of employment opportunities. The outcomes of these indicators of poverty are both psychological and social and are perpetuated with each new generation.

Two of the most explicit indicators of poverty in rural areas are a lack of employment and educational opportunity structures. Rural schools have a lower educational attainment rate than their urban counterparts as they experience minimal funding from property taxes (Lichter, 2003). And unfortunately, rural communities provide minimal payoffs for investment in education as the local economy cannot provide reasonable returns for a high school diploma or college degree (Lichter, 2003). This is seen through the simultaneous growth in the proportion of rural poor and the brain drain of the more educated young leaving the county for better paying jobs in urban areas (Jensen, 2003). This brain drain weakens local industry, commerce and employment (Fitchen, 1981) as schools, churches and other structures of community investment are consolidated or closed (Castle, 1993). The benefits of high educational attainment do not benefit
the rural community. And the lack of community reinvestment from those who do break the cycle of poverty only perpetuates a system of low salaries and few resources. Therefore, both local educational and employment opportunity structures are pivotal in determining the level of poverty in an area and how jobs and education are allocated (Jensen, 2003).

Misconceptions of Rural Poverty

A common misconception is that it is cheaper to live in rural areas than metro areas (Jensen, 2003). But in fact the cost of living is not reduced in rural areas. Transportation, processed food, utilities and health care tend to be more expensive. And transportation in particular plays the role of limiting families in where they can choose to be employed, seek child care or access area resources and services (Castle, 1993). The low population density makes community support agencies such as food pantries, soup kitchens, free clinics and family planning clinics difficult to access. In addition, the cost of heating in northern states refutes the argument that living in rural areas is less expensive (Jensen, 2003).

An additional misconception is that homelessness does not exist in rural areas. However even though it is less visible, it is not necessarily less prominent. The manifestation of homelessness takes a different form in rural areas. Some homeless families utilize mobile homes, trailers or camper trailers and create temporary settlements on land that they do not own. However, in many cases the homeless take refuge in the homes of their extended family (Castle, 1993), which often builds tension (Castle, 1993) rather than reestablishing kin support and assistance.

Societal Changes

Rural communities – and how people perceive them - have experienced dramatic changes in not only their structure, but also their ideologies. Structurally, rural communities are enduring
an increasingly adverse economy as opportunities for education, training and employment continue to become fewer (Duncan, 1992). The wealth in rural populations has also been stratified as suburbanization of small towns has increased the cost of housing (MacTavish, 2003). As a result of this stratification, economic standing has become a more acceptable form of establishing a reputation in a community as opposed to the reputation of a family which had traditionally served as the social hierarchy of a community (MacTavish, 2003). These changes in social roles came with the creation of the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’ in rural America. And unfortunately this bifurcation that segregates communities is only reinforced by employers’ ability to gain control over the labor of the poor as economic diversity limited people’s options for employment and better wages (Duncan, 1992).

The Social Reproduction of Poverty

The way in which rural poverty perpetuates itself in each generation lies in various social factors and in four structural disadvantages; economic, development, educational and employment. An economic disadvantage is rooted in an employment disadvantage as a lack of jobs results in an under-stimulated local economy. An employment disadvantage is then rooted in an educational disadvantage as low educational attainment rates decrease opportunities for investment in human capital in the area. Back tracking further into the cycle, the educational disadvantage is a result of a developmental disadvantage as low property taxes and lack of local development are unable to fund schools adequately. This development disadvantage is a result of an economic disadvantage (Williams). Using this cycle, one can see how each of these four disadvantages - economic, employment, educational and development – perpetuate one another (Figure 1).

Figure 1:
Human Capital

An underinvestment in human capital also underlies each one of the disadvantages in the poverty cycle. Rural areas were forced to take on labor of an industrialized sector and later a service sector which required little skill and therefore received minimum pay (McGranaham, 1987). As stated earlier, there is little economic pay off for high educational attainment in poor rural communities. With more specificity, Janet Fichen points to this underinvestment as inadequate employment along with poor housing, changes in family structure and geographical mobility as causes that both perpetuate and “exacerbate” one another in Upstate New York “so that together they produce an effect far greater than their sum (Fitchen, 1981, p. 188). The social reproduction of poverty in rural areas tends to follow the basic cycle shown in Figure 1, however the specific components and contributors of this cycle are more specific when case studies are used.

Social Capital

Although the four disadvantages just mentioned are pivotal in perpetuating the cyclical nature of poverty, other social factors exist that assist in making rural poverty generational. For instance, rural communities have witnessed a decrease in social capital as they have become
more interconnected with urban life and more entrenched into the social reproduction of poverty (Flora, 2003). The term social capital in this paper and case study is used most similarly to Robert Putnam’s definition which explained social capital as the “features of social organization, such as networks, norms, and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. Social Capital enhances the benefits of investment in physical and human capital” (Flora, 2003). Robert Putnam stated that “a well connected individual in a poorly connected society is not as productive as a well-connected individual in a well-connected society” (Putnam, 2000, p. 20). In this context, social capital is what allows a community to sustain itself.

Structural factors, not individual motivation, hinder the ability for social capital to thrive. Reciprocity, shared vision and access to internal resources allows for social capital to form (Flora, 2003). However these qualities have been removed from the rural community and thus decreased its social capital. As a result, rural communities can no longer rely on social capital and thus a bottom up approach to fighting the cyclical nature of poverty.

**The Role of Children: Poverty’s Inevitable Reinstatement**

Poverty has many social impacts as well as psychological impacts on its victims, which allow it to persist through each generation. However, understanding how it is able to affect and influence each generation can best be understood by looking at its impacts on children. Children are molded and influenced by multiple stake holders including their parents, family, school, community and interactions with other people (MacTavish, 2003). These factors can influence a child’s self-esteem, behavior, capabilities and life outcomes.

Children’s familial experiences and the way in which they are reared plays a pivotal role in how they relate to institutions of authority and therefore their life outcomes (Lareau, 2003). In terms of child-rearing, as rural families become more dependent on the urban economy, they
have less time to care for and socialize with their children (MacTavish, 2003). In addition, the current generation of poor children is more aware of their family’s poverty than past generations (Gray, 2004). These children are now feeling more stigmatized in school than in past generations (Castle, 1993) and are therefore experiencing lower levels of self-esteem (Gray, 2004). Such children are also more likely to suffer as their socio-emotional needs are neglected by their working and overstressed parents. These consequences can subsequently result in a decrease in the child’s aspirations (McLoyd, 1990). And with the rise of divorce rates also contributing, children from single parent headed households are more likely to be disadvantaged than their counterparts who have more than one parent in the household (Castle, 1993).

The St. Lawrence County Case Study

Causes of Poverty

A case study of St. Lawrence County in Upstate New York will be used to analyze the direct causes and impacts of rural poverty and how they are perpetuated with each new generation of children. Although New York State has one of the highest median earnings in the country (Burd-Sharps, et al., 2008), St. Lawrence County falls short of the state’s overall advantages. A historical review of the economic changes in this area since the early 1900’s provides an understanding of the creation of such a disparity. A decrease in farms during the 1900’s led to the initial underinvestment in human capital because as the rural population began shifting to non-farming activities they were less qualified for skilled employment. This resulted in the introduction of routine types of employment that did not require a high degree of skill and thus earned lower salaries than skilled employment (McGranaham, 1987). In St. Lawrence County, logging, mining and later manufacturing (Community Member) and paper production became the industries to take farming’s place (Fitchen, 1981). Urbanization and industrialization
are what led to the loss of farms in Upstate New York and a change in rural composition – farming to non farming activities (Deavers, 1992). Dairy farms continue to be consolidated and farmers displaced (Fitchen, 1981).

**Poverty in the Present**

As in many areas of rural America, inadequate employment in St. Lawrence County has been the result of factories and mills closing as companies downsize and outsource their production. This has forced blue collar workers further into poverty as they had no other skills or structural opportunities to gain skills (Fitchen, 1981). With the lack of investment in human capital which followed, impoverishment has settled in on the non-farming communities and non-farming people of Upstate New York (Fitchen, 1981) leaving St. Lawrence County with an estimated 17.2% poverty rate in 2008 compared to the New York State estimated poverty rate of 13.7% (Quick Facts).

In St. Lawrence County changes in family structure and dynamics, such as the rise in divorce rates and loss of social capital, have also contributed to rural family’s chances of falling into poverty and increasing their children’s likelihood of growing up to live in poverty and have few capabilities and poor life outcomes. The first dramatic rise in female-headed households began in the late 1980’s (Fitchen, 1981). As poor young parents began living in trailer parks or village apartments as opposed to the traditional intergenerational pockets of family in the open country, familial support networks that once sustained communities began to diminish (Fitchen, 1981). Living with extended family was no longer a norm but rather a result of homelessness. As multiple nuclear families began living together in small deteriorating houses, trailers and mobile homes, a high level of familial stress was created, thus severing kin support further (Castle, 1993) and increase the rate of divorce.
The more educated young leaving the County for better paying jobs in urban areas (Fitchen, 1981; Jensen, 2003) is known as the brain drain. Many factors including the brain drain and lack of investment in communities has resulted in lower levels of educational attainment. Only 16.4% of St. Lawrence County residents have a bachelors degree or higher compared to the 27.4% of residents in New York State (Quick Facts). Those with a high school degree and further training or college, experience more positive life outcomes through better access to higher economic and social opportunities (Kids Count). This brain drain weakens local industries, commerce and employment (Fichen, 1981). Additionally, the brain drain is causing an overall decrease in St. Lawrence County’s population which decreased from 111,974 to 111,284 between 1990 and 2006 (County, 2007) and was estimated to have dropped to 109,701 in 2008 (Quick Facts).

It is also important to note the role of population density. Situated on the Canadian border, St. Lawrence County had an average of 41.7 persons per square mile in 2000 as opposed to the average 401.9 persons per square mile in New York State as a whole (Quick Facts). This distance between people in St. Lawrence County reflects the earlier discussion on the role that transportation plays in limiting employment opportunities and access to community resources (Castle, 1993). In addition, four institutions of higher education are located within the parameters of the County. Although they do provide employment opportunities and incentives for the two towns they are located in, a distinct contrast and bifurcation is seen when one drives just a few miles out of those towns and into the true rural ghetto.

In this case study, the terms ‘poverty’ and ‘life-outcomes’ will be used frequently. With every community and student interview that was conducted, the interviewer asked the individuals for their definition of poverty. From these inquiries and from the interviewer’s
research and personal background, an overarching definition of poverty was created for this study. For this essay, poverty can be defined as the relative financial, social and educational deprivation of an individual based on environmental influences. Those who live in poverty “lack [the] basic human capabilities and opportunities for living a tolerable life” (Burd-Sharps, et al., 2008). The term ‘positive life outcomes’, is almost synonymic with Burd-Sharps, et al. definition of capabilities which they described as “the personal and societal assets that enable people to fulfill their potential” (p. 21) and to make life decisions based on preference rather than lack of choices (Burd-Sharps, et al., 2008). Having positive life outcomes does not indicate that an individual has moved into the middle class or into a white-collar career. Rather, in the short term, residents of St. Lawrence County can experience positive life outcomes by simply overcoming financial, social and educational challenges to become a contributing member of the community who is able to provide for both him or herself and their family.

As the story of poverty in Upstate New York begins to unfold on the coming pages, it is hoped that the reader will see a reality that should neither be romanticized nor distanced from oneself. Behind every statistic and anecdote are countless lives that struggle to put food on the table and oil in the furnaces. These lives are connected to our own, yet only differ in how far they are from where we stand on a spectrum of have and have nots.

**Cyclical Rural Poverty**

The social and structural disadvantages and indicators of life outcomes work in a cyclical nature to perpetuate one another (Williams). Being economically disadvantaged is the most prominent way in which poverty is described and understood, but when looking with slightly more depth, employment disadvantages, economic disadvantages, educational disadvantages and developmental disadvantages are rooted within each other (Williams) and are influenced by
numerous social and structural indicators. By not improving these disadvantages, poor rural children are not able to acquire the capabilities to improve their life outcomes. By not having capabilities a child’s decision making capabilities are narrowed by a lack of choices as opposed to a child with capabilities being able to make a choice based on preference (Burd-Sharps, et al., 2008).
LITERATURE REVIEW

The Initiation of Poverty

The initial underinvestment of human capital in rural America that led to the poverty that exists today stemmed from the decline of farms in the 1900’s (Deavers & Hoppe 1992). In 1985, only 10% of rural families lived on farms as opposed to the 60% in 1908. With the decline of farms, some unskilled farmers moved to urban areas to take factory positions while others stayed in rural areas looking for employment with other industries and careers (Duncan, 1992). Those who stayed were believed to be less productive workers because of low educational attainment according to the human capital theory (Castle, 1993; Jensen 2003). This further discouraged introducing skilled employment into the area for fear the workers would not be as productive. However, 1973 and 1987 data that showed that the percentage of non-metro poor who worked was 10% higher than metro poor (Deavers & Hoppe 1992) refuted the human capital theory.

This underinvestment in human capital in rural areas led to twice the amount of relatively unskilled occupations being located in non-metro areas than in metro areas (Deavers & Hoppe 1992). And with an exodus of farming families, there was a decline in demand of local stores and schools, which forced additional families to migrate to other areas to seek employment (MacTavish, 2003) and thus emphasized the rural underinvestment in human capital and rural poverty. The lack of opportunity structures and positive influences to improve life outcomes and subsequently stop the self-perpetuated cycle of poverty will be discussed by examining ten well studied influences and indicators of life outcomes.

Influences & Indicators of Life Outcomes

Employment
The lack of employment in poor rural areas provides a connection between the poor life outcomes of children and the growth of the rural ghetto. The quality and quantity of jobs and the structures for job training and education are minimal in these areas (Jensen, 2003). Tickamyer and Duncan (1990) trace the negative effects of persistent poverty in rural regions and the resultant decrease in economic opportunities. The employment opportunities available in rural areas limit students in their education. There is a self-perpetuating cycle between the jobs available in a rural area and the poverty that already exists in a community. Many of the jobs available to residents and students in rural communities are limited to industries with low pay and little possibility for advancement, especially in service sector and agricultural employment (Duncan & Tickamyer, 1990). Willis pointed to four factors that played important roles in determining what type of job one would acquire; their class background, geographic location, local opportunity structure for employment, and educational attainment (MacLeod, 1987).

**Education**

In terms of educational opportunities, families living in rural areas tend to have only one public school available for their children and rarely any private schools (Garrett, 1993). These rural public schools tend to have higher dropout rates and lower levels achievement than their urban counterparts (Lichter, 2003). In general, students in rural areas are more likely to be the products of low human capital investment in that they have fewer educational opportunities for advanced courses and vocational training programs in high schools (Castle, 1993). The quality of schools at the primary level also plays a role in breaking the “pattern by which parents with limited education raise children with limited education – short-circuiting their ability to command decent opportunities and wages…” (Burd-Sharps, et al., 2008, p.7). In addition, Lubrano spoke to how schools in general can perpetuate the social class system as “teachers treat
the working class and the well-to-do differently… with the blue-collar kids getting less attention and respect” (Lubrano, 2004, p. 55). Yet, rural public schools are unable to improve their resources or attract more qualified teachers because of the low property taxes that they receive (Lichter, 2003).

These poor educational resources can have negative effects on the life outcomes of students. The necessity of a high school degree and further training, or a college diploma is demonstrated by the higher economic and social opportunities available to students who possess them (Kids Count, 2004). Students who drop out before receiving a diploma or a GED are far more likely to experience unemployment, underemployment, or very low wages in comparison to those with a college degree (Kids Count, 2004). School achievement statistics show that youth from families in poverty (the lowest quartile of income distribution) have a 36% rate of attrition, while youth from families in the top quartile have a mere 8% rate of attrition (Kids Count, 2004).

The connection between indicators of life outcomes and education is also emphasized by 1987 data that showed that those with less than 12 years of schooling were 22.2% more likely to live in poverty as opposed to those who had at least some college (Castle, 1993; Jensen 2003). And although earning an education is pivotal in deciding one’s employment and poverty outcomes, variation exists between rural and urban areas as rural college graduates were 57% more likely to experience low earnings in 1987 than urban college graduates, which had increased by 31% from 1979 (Castle or Duncan?). A connection does exist between poor life outcomes and education as those with less education have a higher chance of being unemployed or earning incomes that are below the poverty line (Deavers & Hoppe, 1992).

*Low Investment in Human Capital*
It is argued that rural training and educational opportunities to improve life outcomes are not always worth the effort in the long run if employment opportunities are not available for those who do attain a higher level of skill. And if they are available, such jobs do not provide the economic return to those who invest themselves into such programs (Garrett, 2003; Lichter, 2003). As a result, such investment often leads to the alumni of these programs leaving the area for higher paying jobs in urban areas (Jensen, 2003). The rural exportation of well educated individuals, or brain drain, detours rural towns and communities from being able to reinvest in the education and training of youth (Garrett, 1993).

Social & Familial Changes

The manifestation of rural poverty is one of uniqueness in terms of changes in family structure (MacTavish, 2003; Castle, 1993) and social relations (MacTavish, 2003; Castle, 1993; Lichter, 2003). The suburbanization of rural areas has put new stresses on rural families. Traditionally rural parents are now trying to keep up with urban immigrant parents as they chauffer their children to different practices, lessons and games (MacTavish, 2003). The demands to keep up with a suburban life style by putting their children in organized activities makes rural parents feel stressed and unable to spend as much time with their families (MacTavish, 2003).

Additionally, higher levels of poverty have changed family dynamics and gender roles and have now pushed women into the work force (Garrett, 1993). These financial, social, familial and other stresses have resulted in a rise of single parent households from 11% to 27% between 1970 and 2000, (Lichter, 2003) which often puts more financial stress on a family. Additionally, as rural families have become more dependent on the urban economy, they have lost the ties and support of their kinship and have less time with their children to help them
develop socially (MacTavish, 2003). In terms of non-traditional families, children who are raised in homes with a stepparent or a parent’s live-in companion experience fewer positive life outcomes than children who grow up in homes with two biological parents (Bund-Sharps, et al., 2008). However, these negative effects of changes in family structure can be minimized by “high-quality, center-based care [which] leads to better school outcomes and vastly improved life chances” (Bund-Sharps, et al., 2008, p. 100).

The rural social hierarchy has also been affected by the increases in poverty. The social hierarchy was traditionally determined by a family’s reputation within a community, which served a very important role. As small towns and rural areas became suburban-like with increasing immigration of urban families, the social structure changed and financial standing determined the hierarchy (MacTavish, 2003). The outmigration of families for higher paying wages and more opportunity structures only contributed to fewer “institutional supports for the families” (Garrett, 1993, p 234). And as the traditional familial clout of the community disappeared, organic families struggled to pay rising property taxes or were forced to move to other towns and areas that the wealthy incoming families would be less likely to suburbanize. As a result, residential areas were transformed into rural slums (MacTavish, 2003).

Self Awareness & Duration:

This intensification of rural poverty in specific areas can result in family, and children in particular, who are living in poverty not knowing that their lives are abnormal (Community Interview). One community member stated that if a child and their parents never had the opportunity to see a life that was not plagued with poverty, they would be less likely to want anything different from what they were raised in or encourage their children of anything different (Community Interview). This concept is reemphasized in MacLeod’s study of the Brothers and
Hallway Hangers. Both sets of boys and parents had similar backgrounds and struggles. Except for one, all of the Brothers were the eldest male sibling in their families or they had older brothers and sisters attending college. The Brothers also received encouragement from their poor and struggling parents to use their education to improve their lives. The Hallway Hangers tended to not have older siblings, and if they did, the older siblings were not positive role models or encouraging. And as a result it was the Brothers who worked harder in school and had higher aspirations for their life outcomes (MacLeod, 1987). The knowledge of a different lifestyle from one’s own is pivotal in allowing youth to break the cycle of poverty.

The number of times and length of time in which a child lives in poverty adversely affects their mental and emotional development (Lichter 2003). The Brothers of MacLeod’s study were from families that had lived in public housing for approximately half the amount of time that most of the Hallway Hanger’s families had (MacLeod, 1987). The families of the Brothers had also been in the area for shorter amounts of time, having established themselves in the new area with a sense of hope. The Hallway Hangers did not have a similar sense of hope. As a result, the Brothers were more dedicated to their school work and aspirations while the Hallway Hangers were more disruptive and had lower levels of aspirations (MacLeod, 1987).

The psychological and social impacts of rural poverty on children are pivotal in understanding how they are able to perpetuate the system of poverty. The current generation of poor children is more aware of their family’s poverty than past generations (Gray, 2004) and these children are more apt to feel stigmatized in school because of their family’s level of poverty (Castle, 1993). Children’s social status is a byproduct of the social acceptance that they do or don’t receive from their peers. Conforming is therefore a desire for children as well as their need for belonging. They tend to perceive themselves in a more positive light if they are socially
accepted. Therefore one’s self image will have an effect on the amount of self-esteem a child has (Gray, 2004). Children who have a high level of self-esteem and a sense of entitlement feel more at ease with institutions of authority and have more success in their life outcomes when they go to apply for jobs or have to interact with such authority (Lareau, 2003). But for poor children, the constant discouragement and hopelessness they feel at home can “lead to weakened self-esteem” both in school and later in life and “marital tensions, and depression, all of which further undermine the quality of life, aspirations, and achievements of children (Burd-Sharps, et al., 2008).

Cultural Capital

Cultural capital also plays a role in prohibiting youth from moving from the working class to the white collar world (Lubrano, 2004). Bourdieu defined cultural capital as “the general cultural background, knowledge, disposition, and skills that are passed from one generation to the next” (MacLeod, 1987, p, 12). The type of cultural capital one inherits is most dependent on which social class one is born into. School systems indirectly favor the cultural capital of the ‘dominant class’ and therefore working class children are at a disadvantage and have less educability. This was demonstrated by MacLeod’s study of the Hallway Hangers and the Brothers. Even though the Hallway Hangers tended to have lower aspirations and expectations than the Brothers and the Brothers were more academically committed and had high level aspirations, they still had poor grades. MacLeod concluded that this is a result of the Brother’s lack of cultural capital. Despite their effort, their educability is lower because their cultural capital is not that of the dominant class (MacLeod, 1987).

Lubrano uses the term ‘Straddlers’ to define the population of children who were born into blue-collar families and became first-generation college students and then made the
transition to the white-collar middle class (Lubrano, 2004). As he compares the Straddlers to the children of middle class families he makes note of the cultural capital that was passed down through generations of middle class families. He states that “growing up in an educated, advantaged environment, they learn about Picasso and Mozart, stock portfolios and crème brulee” (p. 9). In a home with cultural capital, “there are networks: Someone always has an aunt or golfing buddy with the inside track for an internship or some entry-level job” (p. 9). As Lubrano goes on to discuss, the difficulties in entering the white collar world when not having the ‘right’ type of cultural capital can make it more difficult for blue-collar children to succeed in a white-collar world (Lubrano, 2004).

It is also helpful to note Bourdieu’s concept of habitus as it relates to the difficulties found by blue-collar children. A habitus “is composed of the attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of those inhabiting one’s social world” (MacLeod, 1987, p.13). Habitus includes one’s attitudes and perceptions of social institutions for example. The habitus works to reproduce existing social structures by allowing the dominant class to use their habitus to maintain or improve their own life outcomes (MacLeod, 1987) but leaving children of blue-collar families without the correct habitus to improve their lives.

*Social Capital*

Two new types of residential patterns that have recently developed in rural areas in additional to the traditional “open-country clusters of intergenerationally poor families”. They are “trailer parks and informal clusters of older mobile homes, and vacant store buildings … converted to low-rent apartments” (Fitchen 1992, p 180). Although not everyone living in these types of settlements is poor, the number of families who are moving into these types of settlements continues to grow and provides a representation of the deterioration of social
networks within kinship and community and the loss of social capital in rural areas such as Upstate New York (Fitchen, 1992). In addition to this, the rural homeless often take refuge in the homes of their extended family. This often builds tension in families rather than reestablishing kin support and assistance (Castle, 1993) and thus strong social capital. As rural families have become more dependent on the urban economy, they have lost the ties and support of their kinship (MacTavish, 2003).

Communities that lack social capital are less likely to be able to create change at the grassroots level (Flora, 2003). Such communities lack “entrepreneurial social infrastructure” (ESI) which measures a community’s ability to create collective action and cooperate to resolve issues for a mutual benefit (Flora 2003, p 214). The ability for communities to have control over their own opportunity structures is only weakened by a lack of opportunity structures (Jensen, 2003) and therefore prohibits the community from having control of the disadvantages that perpetuate their poverty.

Familial & Social Acceptance of the White Collar World

And when understanding how community and familial influences affect one’s life outcomes, it is helpful to refer to Paul Willis’ (1981) research of the masculinity of white, non-conforming, working-class males in secondary school. Known as ‘lads’, they took more physically laborious positions in shops and factories just as their brothers and fathers had done because they felt that this was a way of achieving a sense of power in their social groups (Bernstein, 1970). The Hallway Hangers of MacLeod’s study were also influenced by their families when developing aspirations (MacLeod, 1987). And in school, working-class children are less likely to participate in school because of their working-class peer’s pressure to not do so.
Therefore pressure towards a blue-collar career comes from both one’s family and one’s peers.

There are certain rules among blue collar families and social circles that make it difficult for children to pursue anything but blue-collar careers. Lubrano (2004) notes that blue-collar rule number one is that you work to make money so that you can live a good life. And with this rule there is a ridicule that often follows if a child wishes to find employment based on interests and passions. In addition, some blue-collar parents also have the fear that their child’s education will “facilitate an economic and intellectual ascendance over the old man” (p. 32). When a child does gain an education higher than their parents an additional fear can arise; will that child separate his or her self so that it becomes an ‘us versus them’ dichotomy? This is synonymous with betrayal and eventually resentment (Lubrano, 2004). Such pressures can result in children not fully breaking through the cycle of poverty.

Linguistic Codes

Bernstein’s research on restricted and elaborated language codes demonstrates the linguistic boundary that exists between the working class and the middle class and how such a boundary prohibits the working class from having successful life outcomes (Bernstein, 1970) and breaking the cyclical nature of poverty. The restricted language code, which is shared most often between people of the working class social group, makes it difficult for those with elaborated language codes to understand and relate to the context of what one is speaking. Those with the elaborated language code use explicit language where those with a restricted language code are not always able to make clear their intent to people outside of their social context (Bernstein, 1970). Those with elaborated language codes, again seen more often in white collar families, are estimated to speak three times greater the number of words than blue-collar families in an
average day (Lubrano, 2004). In the case of children, working class and middle class children realize in a different way “what is apparently the same context” (p. 27). Working class children’s use of language is often restricted to a specific context and therefore not easily understood by all. The middle class child is more likely to use language that will allow all to understand despite the context of the listener. This difference in linguistic codes is not specific to children but is seen in adults as well (Lubrano, 2004) and ultimately shapes one’s social relations to others. This barrier can hinder a child’s ability to move out of the working class as they become adults.

The diversity of linguistic codes can also affect a child’s educational outcomes. A child who is raised in a family with restricted linguistic codes will not feel the ease of a transition into school where elaborated language codes are emphasized (Bernstein, 1970). Children who were raised with elaborated linguistic codes will use their time in school to socially develop, while those with restricted language codes will face a conflict between norms and experience a change in their own social identity (Bernstein, 1970). Children of working class homes are at a huge disadvantage at school as they have difficulty when listening to and reading language that is expressed explicitly. These children have a much smaller range of vocabulary (Lubrano, 2004). They have difficulty finding relevancy in the material and are more prone to negative life outcomes because of the cultural linguistic barrier that separates two different systems of communication; their working class social groups and the institution of school (Berstein, 1970).

Child Rearing:

A child’s ability to have positive life outcomes and subsequently break the cyclical nature of poverty is also a result of the way that parents raise their children. Lareau defined two distinct styles of raising children, concerted cultivation and natural growth. Concerted cultivation is seen most prominent among middle class families and occurs when parents engage their children with
questions and dialogue at a young age and place them in organized activities with other children.

On the other hand, natural growth is found most prominent among working class and poor families and occurs when parents do not promote healthy dialogue between children and themselves and do not allow the child to socialize with other children in organized activities. Children who are products of concerted cultivation tend to feel ‘special’ and ‘entitled’ and usually feel less of a boundary between themselves and institutions or other forms of authority (Lareau, 2003). This results in such children growing up to take advantage of opportunities and being more easily accepted by institutions. These children also have stronger negotiating skills to bring to society because of the type of dialogue they engaged in as children. With that said, natural growth tends to create a barrier between children and authority. Children of natural growth are more apt to feel inferior to such institutions and, when becoming adults, such hesitations reduce their chances of employment and trusting systems of authority, such as higher education. This was demonstrated in Willis’s research as the ‘Lads’ did not trust the institution of education to give them the ‘qualifications’ for a good job (Willis, 1977). Because of these reasons, the way in which children are reared in working class and poor families makes them more susceptible to poor life outcomes than those children from middle class families who are raised through concerted cultivation (Lareau, 2003).

Lareau (2003) also discusses how children who experience concerted cultivation gain more life skills than a child who was raised with natural growth. The children tend to perform better and work better with others because they have more experience performing and behaving in organized activities. She also asserts that these children will have stronger negotiating skills because of the type of dialogue they engaged in with their parents (Lareau, 2003). Such skills
and qualifications are necessary to improve the life outcomes of a child and mitigate the causes that perpetuate rural poverty.
METHODOLOGY

The data for this project was collected through qualitative methods that were supported by the concepts of both action-oriented research (AOR) and applied developmental science (ADS) methods. By integrating these two methods which both emphasize an integrated relationship between academic partners and community partners, a more holistic understanding of both the causes of poverty and the life outcomes of children who are raised in a community of poverty could be established.

Action-oriented research and applied developmental science methods are a result of a growing body of research that emerged in the 1990’s to begin holding institutions of higher education more accountable for the role they were playing in the communities in which they were located (Small, 2005) and the extent to which they were engaging with those communities to perpetuate civil society and gain knowledge (Lerner, 2000). Campus-community partnerships allow for an increase in capacity of skills and knowledge among community members and college faculty and students (Strand, 2003).

Action oriented research (AOR) is a method that attempts to “generate knowledge that can be used to address practical concerns of local communities, organizations, and groups and incorporate local understandings of specific practices and issues” (Small, 2005, p. 3). AOR provides a direct linkage between the social sciences and the needs of the community (Small, 2005). It does not separate itself from the community, but rather acts in a relationship of integrated mutual benefit. Not only do the academic partners benefit, but the community partner is also able to benefit from new knowledge and the application of that new knowledge to its programs and policies. AOR is grounded in the idea that “understanding cannot be achieved independent of its context, time and place” (Small, 2005, p. 938). Therefore, in most instances,
AOR presents itself as specific case studies (Small, 2005). In this project, the case study is of St. Lawrence County in Upstate New York.

Applied developmental science (ADS) can assist in maintaining and sustaining civil society by promoting positive development in children and families (Lerner, 2000). ADS is a method used to “merge scholarly and community interests in the context of higher education institutions striving to become vehicles of community engagement, that is, institutions making value-added contributions to community life” (Lerner, 2000, p. 11). Its role is in “crafting a social system that uses ecologically valid knowledge to inform societal actions aimed at promoting positive development in children and families” (Lerner, 2000, p. 13). Institutions of higher education and community partners that work together are found to have results that increase the community member’s capacity to create and maintain programs that will benefit and sustain their communities (Lerner, 2000).

The interviewing process was one of fluidity and evolution. As noted by Small et al, action-oriented research questions tend to be adjusted or modified midway through the research to accommodate new findings or community partner reactions (Small, 2005). AOR is dissimilar to traditional research in this way as interviews do not stay static and structured but rather provide intensive personalization for each individual who is interviewed. It also does not generalize using the data collected from interviews, but instead allows the information gathered to better inform the understanding of a specific situation of a case study (Small, 2005).

Understanding the reflexivity of the research is pivotal in understanding how the data collected from community partners is perceived by the researcher (Small, 2005). In this case study, community partners can be defined as “representatives from a community agency, program, or center who are advocating for or providing programs or services to (or both) a
particular group or clientele, as well as members of a community who might be directly affected by the collaborative project” (Small, 2005, p. 936). In this study, the researcher was a permanent resident near the area of study and also had three years of experience in the St. Lawrence County community as an engaged volunteer. The researcher volunteered on a regular basis with some of the community partners with whom she interviewed experts from. In the cases that the researcher did not personally know the representative, she had colleagues whom were points of reference for the relationship. As suggested by Small et al, the researcher contacted those community partners that she felt had the most direct contact with the issues facing the poorest population of the County. However, the researcher attempted to only use her own background of the area as objective knowledge of how to approach the community and allowed the responses and information she gained from the community partners to dominate the research.

A small sample of students who attend one of the Universities in the county was also interviewed for this case study. To gain student participants, the researcher contacted the campus offices that provide assistance to students from low-income backgrounds. Solicitation was made confidentially without the researcher’s knowledge of who was solicited. Interested participants were then able to contact the researcher to set up a time to conduct the interview. In line with AOR methods, questions were modified throughout the process of interviewing students to accommodate for new findings (Small, 2005).

Small et al points to the fact that research often contains parameters which academic partners must follow (Small, 2005). In this study the most restrictive parameter was time. The project was started and completed within a four month window and therefore the researcher had to be selective in how many community members and students were selected. To accommodate this, community members from a breadth of fields were asked to participate.
ANALYSIS

Manifestation:

Although ten indicators were identified earlier as having meaningful contributions to a child’s life outcomes in poor rural areas and thus perpetuating a system of poverty, the results of this case study narrowed and specified the barriers that prohibit St. Lawrence County children from having positive life outcomes and stopping the perpetuation of poverty in their communities.

Most literature tends to generalize rural poverty, but it is important to note that specific areas have specific qualities that allow for poverty to be prevalent. In St. Lawrence County, poverty takes a distinct form as the economic hierarchy has been bifurcated by the growth of four area Universities and Colleges and yet at the same time has witnessed a decline in industry and business. Although the institutions of higher education do provide some economic and social incentives to the communities in which they are located, such as employment opportunities and student volunteers, the county is still plastered with high rates of unemployment and poverty and low rates of educational attainment and economic development. It is within these factors that children are unable to break the system of poverty.

One of the most vivid explanations of poverty that was acquired from this case study was a woman’s account of her daily interactions with people living in poverty. The following is an excerpt taken from an interview with this woman after she was asked how poverty manifests itself in St. Lawrence County;

“When I think of poverty I think of people who are in housing that is not substantial or appropriate for the kind of weather we have up here. Um they have limited clothing to wear … They don’t always have the appropriate clothes for the winter. Um I guess when I think of poverty there are certain things that trigger in my mind. And maybe it’s partially from the work I’ve done. There are… smells of poverty."
[You] walk into certain houses and [there are] odors because if they don’t have the ability to keep their clothes clean and whatever and stuff the whole house gets that kind of odor.”

In this county, poverty is not located in clusters as it tends to be in urban settings. Rather, it is spread throughout the whole county and “many times we don’t even realize it’s out there on rural roads. There are a lot of rural roads in this county” (Community Member). Poverty has plagued St. Lawrence County and instilled a sense of pessimism and even a lack of hope that ‘the system’ will allow families to pull themselves out of poverty. One community member stated solemnly that

“There’s a kind of poverty (pause, sitting back looking at the wall behind the interviewer) … a sustaining kind of poverty that isn’t questioned by the individual. It is more or less accepted. The fight has gone out. And they’re incapable at that point of looking for a solution. They are really overwhelmed by needs. Their needs are so many because it’s not just one thing.”

The sense of hopelessness and inability to believe in opportunity structures mimics MacLeod’s depiction of the Brothers who had no faith in such institutions as school or college as a way to improve their lives or as they phrased it “deliver the goods” (MacLeod, 1987).

Isolation & Access to Resources

The size of St. Lawrence County poses numerous problems in terms of creating poverty and perpetuating it. Resources are spread finely over the sparsely populated county. With less than one eighth of the density of the average for New York State (Quick Facts), residents of St. Lawrence County face several transportation challenges. For many, the lack of a running vehicle or public transportation and the cost of gas directly affect adults’ ability to find and maintain employment (Castle, 1993).
The small tax base for this large yet economically poor area struggles to support the size of the county. Not only does local infrastructure suffer, but schools face severe economic restraints in transporting students over long distances to and from school each day. One of the local school districts is one of the “biggest land mass size school districts in the state. Some of [their] kids [spend] an hour, hour and a half on the bus” (Community Member). This not only affects the schools’ budgets but also their ability to have after school programs that require bussing.

County residents who do rely on local, state and federal programs to provide for their families must have access to transportation and be able to afford that transportation in order to drive to the various decentralized locations that provide assistance and free resources. One local woman stated that because of “the isolation [and] spread of resources… the system doesn’t allow you to break free from poverty”. Isolation plays a bigger role in St. Lawrence County as more and more families continue to fall into poverty. This is seen through the number of families served by the St. Lawrence County Department of Social Services which has increased by approximately 1000 cases or 2200 people in the past year.

*Rural Endurance*

Despite this unfortunate manifestation of poverty in St. Lawrence County, there is a specific core group of local organizations and programs that play pivotal roles in helping local residents keep their heads above water. One community member who is involved with such programs described herself and her role by saying;

“I am the knot at the end of the rope... If you are bleeding we want to know why and if we put a band aid on and take it off tomorrow, is it still going to be bleeding? Well then, the band aid isn’t the proper thing to do.”
Although poverty continues to be perpetuated with each generation of children, the residents of St. Lawrence County “have learned to survive” with a significant amount of help from local programs and organizations. A list of those that work to sustain the poor of St. Lawrence County can be found in Appendix 1.

**Less Relevant Factors & Indicators of Life Outcomes**

Earlier, ten general indicators or causes of rural poverty were discussed. Now, the case study of St. Lawrence County will be examined through a lens which identifies which indicators and causes are most prevalent in the area and play the most important roles in perpetuating poverty with each generation of youth. Although each of the ten general indicators is relevant to the poverty that exists in St. Lawrence County, there are three indicators that are not primary reasons for why poverty persists in this area.

In the most rural parts of St. Lawrence County a lack of industry and business plague the deserted and barren towns, villages and countryside. In these places, families struggle simply to hold their place in the lower class. As discussed in the introduction, ‘positive life outcomes’ are not equivalent with establishing a middle class lifestyle. Families aren’t necessarily worried about making it to the middle class but are simply trying to sustain their families by putting food on the table and a roof over their heads. Therefore, the three indicators that were found to be the most relevant in St. Lawrence County in promoting positive life outcomes are cultural capital, linguistic barriers, and familial and social acceptance of the white collar world. Such barriers may play a role in the child making a significant move along the social hierarchy (Lubrano, 2004), but they do not play vital roles in ensuring a person will be able to meet the basic needs of him or herself and their family and be a contributing member of society.

*Linguistic Codes*
In terms of linguistic barriers, Bernstein’s research provided important insight into the role of language in creating boundaries within the social hierarchy (Bernstein, 1970). One community member vouched for the linguistic barriers in St. Lawrence County by saying

“Children of poverty, they don’t get good language. You know. There are so many words that you have heard; you have heard at a certain time. And they haven’t heard most of the words. And even though they have Head Start and they have Early Intervention... it’s very hard”.

However, although these linguistic barriers do pose problems to children who may attempt to pursue a life with in a white collar world, they will not contribute as much in preventing a child from acquiring a decent paying blue-collar job and having positive life outcomes. In addition, if a child of poverty does have the aspirations to move into the white collar middle class, there will be other more significant influences that will play a pivotal role in him or her overcoming obstacles.

Cultural Capital

Although, cultural capital also plays a role in prohibiting youth from moving from the working class to the white collar world (Lubrano, 2004), cultural capital is also not a primary concern in determining positive life outcomes. However, it is also important to note that the two towns in St. Lawrence County that are home to a total of four Universities and Colleges may see linguistic barriers and cultural capital playing an inhibiting role. These institutions of higher education have attracted educated families to the area to the point that the middle class is almost non-existent. The towns are composed of the poor locals and the semi-wealthy faculty and staff families. One community member noted this bifurcation and its consequences:

“There are two sets of kids at school [here]. The faculty brats and the non-faculty brats. And they really didn’t mix much. They didn’t. They had very little in common. I mean one of them went to scout camp when the other one went to the Balkans or something for the
Therefore, with more research one may see that linguistic barriers and cultural capital may play a role in only two of the numerous towns in St. Lawrence County. However, outside of the village limits of Canton and Potsdam, there is no differentiation in wealth and for the majority of local children, linguistic barriers and cultural capital are not what necessarily hold them back.

**Familial and Social Acceptance of the White Collar World**

One of the indicators identified earlier discussed how a lack of acceptance of a white collar lifestyle could prohibit a child from not pursuing such endeavors. For St. Lawrence County, this indicator is much less significant compared to others. The college students spoken to in this study did admit that there were certain levels of resentment from their families because they had exceeded their parents’ and siblings’ levels of education. However, all of them also stated that despite this underlying resentment, their parents were proud of their achievement. The only partial evidence of family’s impact on their children based on their reluctance to a white collar world came from the local guidance counselor who stated that some families don’t value education because they need their children to stay at home to help take care of their farms. However, this only exemplifies the local resident’s need to meet their basic needs before they can begin thinking about a broader purpose or future outcomes. If the parents are unable to provide for the basic needs of their children, they will not be able to think about long term goals and the benefits of investment in education. Therefore, although some families may exhibit some levels of pressure or resentment, a lack of acceptance is not a primary reason for a child not being able to break a cycle of poverty.

**Most Relevant Factors & Indicators of Life Outcomes**

*Education*
One of the most explicit indicators for life outcomes of a child is education, which is also extremely relevant to the case study of St. Lawrence University. The educational system in St. Lawrence County suffers for several reasons. As in most states, public schools are funded primarily through the local tax base. St. Lawrence County has very little industry. “Everything they do here is really put on the tax payers. There are not many businesses to pull from” said one local community member. Although some schools apply for grants to create programs to assist their students and families, “sustainability is the hardest part” (Community Interview) as funding is only given for a narrow period of time. This lack of funding, additional programs and skilled teachers contributes to the higher drop-out rates and lower educational achievement rates in rural areas than urban areas (Lichter, 2003, p 101). The percentage of students who dropped out of high school in St. Lawrence County can be found in Figure II).

**Figure II**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School District</th>
<th>2003 Total Cohort (%)</th>
<th>2004 Total Cohort (%)</th>
<th>2005 Total Cohort (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brasher Falls</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canton</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clifton-Fine</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colton-Pierrepont</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edwards-Knox</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gouverneur</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hammond</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hermon-Dekalb</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heuvelton</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisbon</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madrid-Waddington</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massena</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morristown</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norwood-Norfolk</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ogdensburg</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parishville</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potsdam</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*(Public, 2010)*
In some of the most rural parts of St. Lawrence County, struggling farms are still the main source of income for some families. And in these poor economic times in a ‘get big or get out’ industry, families are forced to rely heavily on the free labor of their children to simply keep their heads above water. The short term needs of the family are often put above a child’s education. A local school staff member stated that there are parents who openly admit to having their children stay home from school to help on the farm.

The relationship between the needs of a family and a child’s education raises an important question about the role of the school. For many St. Lawrence County schools, the line that defines the responsibilities of the school is vague. One local school staff member said that he has had many parents try to inform him that the school was a separate entity from ‘St. Lawrence County Social Services’. However, in such poverty stricken areas the school cannot provide a child with an education if the child’s basic needs are not being met. One community member emphasized this point by saying, if a child does not eat breakfast, he or she won’t be able to focus on class.

These barriers prohibit students from having high levels of educational attainment. A college degree or at least completion of high school is essential in determining a child’s life outcomes in St. Lawrence County (Kids Count, 2004). Despite the fact that four colleges and universities are located within the parameters of the County, too few students are able to have access to such opportunities because of their lack of achievement in high school. In addition, a small tax base and few resources make it even more difficult for schools to better meet the needs of their at-risk youth (Lichter, 2003). Therefore, these students will experiences fewer economic and social opportunities and be more likely to experience unemployment, underemployment or low wages (Kids Count, 2004).
**Employment**

At the root of all issues of poverty is a lack of stable employment, that of which St. Lawrence County epitomizes. The lack of economic opportunities in the area perpetuates the negative effects of persistent poverty (Tickamyer and Duncan, 1990). When one is lucky enough to find stable employment, it is usually with low pay or little possibility for advancement (1990). In St. Lawrence County this is seen through the decline in manufacturing and entrepreneurial businesses and the rise of service sector chains (Fitchen, 1992). When a child does manage to have successful life outcomes and step out of the cycle of poverty, they are unable to find employment that provides an economic pay off in St. Lawrence County. If they move elsewhere, they are able to find positions that can offer them more money; which results in a brain drain. Evidence for the population decline in St. Lawrence County, which is partially a result of the brain drain can be found in Figure III. The County saw its biggest loss between 1980 and 1990. Luckily it has begun to even out but is still decreasing.

**Figure III**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population Changes, by County Percent Changes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>St. Lawrence County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980-1990</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-2.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990-2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-0.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* (Socio-Economic, 2006).

For those who are able to find employment, many of the types of jobs that are available in the County do not provide stability for families. For example, in 2005, the unemployment rate rose by nearly 3% between December and June (Socio-Economic, 2006) indicating that much of the employment is seasonal, such as construction, tree removal and odd jobs (See Figure IV). One community member noted that this instability of employment makes it very easy for middle class families to fall into poverty. In addition, “businesses… in many cases… are paying just barely minimum wage. Or it’s part time so the individual isn’t able to support their family on just
a part time job … [and no] health coverage” (Community Member). This situation is a pure representation of the working poor concept.

**Figure IV**

**North Country Unemployment Rate, January through August 2005**
(Includes Clinton, Essex, Franklin, Jefferson, Lewis and St. Lawrence Counties)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Jan</th>
<th>Feb</th>
<th>Mar</th>
<th>Apr</th>
<th>May</th>
<th>Jun</th>
<th>Jul</th>
<th>Aug</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* (Socio-Economic, 2006).

Although children’s life outcomes suffer by a lack of employment when they graduate from high school, youth are also directly impacted while still in school. With so few jobs in the area, adults are forced to take minimum wage positions in local businesses and restaurants. As a result, local youth are less able to find after-school or summer employment in order to save money for a higher education (Community Interview) or gain the essential social skills one gains in their first years of work experience.

**Low Investment in Human Capital**

After discussing education and employment opportunities in St. Lawrence County, it is explicitly apparent that there is little investment in human capital in the area. While the human capital theory makes the likelihood of investment from an outside corporation with good wages seem unlikely (Summers, 1993), 1973 and 1987 data that showed that the percentage of non-metro poor who worked was 10% higher than metro poor (Deavers & Hoppe 1992). Despite these findings, with such high rates of unemployment and low rates of educational attainment, there are very few opportunity structures for which one can take advantage. As a result, children have minimal resources to help them ensure positive life outcomes. And although programs such as Upward Bound and HEOP (Appendix I) have attempted to provide opportunities for disadvantaged children in St. Lawrence County, one community member made an important point in saying
“I think it just takes generations. It seems to me the kids who are going through the programs right now ... are going to be parents”.

However, even for children who are able to have a positive educational experience, career opportunities that provide an adequate financial return need to be made available for them in the County to prohibit the brain drain from occurring and thus perpetuating a cycle of poverty.

Child Rearing

A child’s ability to have positive life outcomes and subsequently break the cyclical nature of poverty is also a result of the way in which they are raised. Children of parents who allow them to be involved in organized activities also benefit as they gain skills to allow them to work better with others, have stronger negotiating skills and perform better (Lareau, 2003). One community member spoke to their experience in witnessing this by noting that “it is very important to bring kids into sports… because they see themselves as good.” He emphasized that children who see themselves in a positive light tend to have better self-esteem. Additionally, self-esteem can be transferred from one generation to the next which was emphasized by one community member who said;

“They have an inferiority complex. I mean whether they would agree with that or not. They just hold back because they didn’t feel like uh they were good enough. I just don’t think their horizons are really you know (speaking solemnly and trailing off). So children live in those kinds of environments and a poor environment doesn’t give the kids the richness.”

One student who had managed to make it out of poverty and to college said “I just always believed that I should have things and I wanted them and I did the best that I could.” She later indicated that her sense of entitlement was what she felt pushed her to pursue college. The impact of entitlement is supported by research that indicates that those children who are raised with concerted cultivation gain a feeling of being ‘special’ and ‘entitled’ which allows them to
feel less of a boundary between themselves or other forms of authority (Lareau, 2003). Such children also find it easier to take advantage of opportunities. However, children who are not raised to feel entitled or special can be more at-risk to experiencing negative life outcomes by not feeling comfortable with institutions of authority and reducing their chances of sustaining employment (Lareau, 2003).

**Self-Awareness and Duration**

Gray’s findings that the current generation of poor children is more aware of their family’s poverty than past generations (Gray 2004) holds true for St. Lawrence County. The social and psychological impacts of this awareness are self-evident from the voice of school staff member who testified to having had students come to his office crying because they did not have clothes to wear or that they were not able to take a shower. Unfortunately, school does act as a forum for students to feel stigmatized by their peers because of their family’s level of poverty (Castle, 1993). One student even spoke about her fears of how her friend’s parents would perceive her because of her family’s poverty and if they would allow their children to go to her house. These were vividly explained with more detail by a local woman who stated;

“Kids can be really cruel. You have children making fun of other kids because maybe their hair isn’t cut quite right, or they’ve got the old style glasses. [But] if you are dealing with Medicaid for their glasses they’ve got the old frames... they don’t have the new ones. If the glasses get broken, they are wearing them taped cuz they can’t always get em fixed right away. Um. And mom and dad may pick them up in a junker. You know the car ... or mom and dad show up and mom and dad aren’t dressed like middle class because mom and dad don’t have the money to dress like middle class. Umm maybe an odor with the clothing. An odor with the child because they don’t bathe as frequently. They don’t have the facilities at the house. There’s too many people living there and not everyone can take a shower or a bath in the same day.”

Those students who feel a lack of acceptance from their peers tend to also lack a sense of belonging and have lower levels of self-esteem (Gray, 2004, p 156). Without self esteem and
feelings of entitlement they are more apt to feel uncomfortable with institutions of authority and have less success in their life outcomes when they go to apply for jobs or have to interact with such authority (Lareau, 2003).

*Self Awareness & Duration: Normal vs. Abnormal*

The environmental isolation felt in many areas of the County can result in a child not having the self awareness in relation to other lifestyles. For example, if a child has never had the opportunity to see a life that was not plagued with poverty, they would be less likely to want anything different from what they were raised in or encourage their children of anything different. One community member posed the point that

“If waiting for the monthly welfare check or food stamp check is the only thing you’ve known, then there’s nothing abnormal about that … if this is what you are accustomed to then this is the norm … Why would you be killing yourself to try something you don’t know anything about?”

This is the case for many St. Lawrence County students who have never been outside of the county. For children who grow up with parents who did not graduate from high school and not knowing anyone who had gone to college, excluding their teachers, many students simply do not know that a different life path is an option or even possible. “Exposing kids to different things is key” several community members communicated. One college student who had managed to break out of the cycle of poverty demonstrated the ability to want something different from what she was accustomed by stating:

“You go to work not because it’s fun. You go to work just to get a pay check to feed and clothe your kids or whatever. And you come home and you make enough money so that you can put food on the table, clothes, bills, you have cable or something special like that. And that’s kind of it. And I felt like that wasn’t the life I wanted to live. I still kind of feel like I don’t wanna go home. I can’t (sighs) I don’t know. I feel that and I didn’t want to do that. I wanted to have a career, not a job.”
Being able to identify an alternative to what is considered a normal life path is key in allowing children to take charge of their lives and stop the cycle of poverty with their generation.

Social and Familial Changes

St. Lawrence County has undergone many social and familial changes in the past few decades. As stated earlier, financial, social and familial stresses have resulted in a rise in single parent households (Lichter, 2003; Fitchen, 1992). St. Lawrence County witnessed a 22% increase in single-parent households between 1990 and 2000 (Socio-Economic, 2006). When divorce occurs, parents are more likely to face further financial stresses while children are more at risk of not having their socio-emotional needs met. What makes these changes that much more severe in rural St. Lawrence County is the loss of the traditional social hierarchy. A family’s clout is no longer determined by their reputation but by its financial standing (MacTavish, 2003). And with this loss of familial and social support is the need for reflection on social capital in St. Lawrence County.

Social Capital

Throughout the process of conducting interviews and engaging in the community, the indicator that kept being pushed to the forefront of the rural poverty issue was social capital. Fitchen stated in the early 1990’s that rural Upstate New York faced a more serious problem than geographical isolation and that was social isolation. This finding from almost twenty years is still accurate as St. Lawrence County continues to witness the deterioration of social capital within its kinship circles and communities (Fitchen, 1992). Reciprocity, shared vision and accessing internal resources are what are needed in order to allow social capital to form (Flora, 2003). This would instill in local residents a sense of empowerment which one resident expressed the need for when he said;
However, a shared vision is difficult to create in St. Lawrence County as a hierarchy has been created between the locals and the wealthy faculty. As one community member said, “currency for the white middle class is working hard; having a future; putting money away… stuff like that. The currency in poverty is relationships, the time they put into each other”. Without a shared vision, social capital cannot be cultivated. The lack of such social capital is seen through the need for socialization among many community members who rely on free local dinners or events in order to have contact with other people. Socialization is key for the working class as one community member stated:

“People in say poverty, middle class and upper class view social context differently. People at the poverty level depend entirely on social context. So in their small group, they all know one another in their groups.”

Fortunately, because people in St. Lawrence County rely on these social groups for commonality, they have a basis from which social capital could develop. Signs that social capital could be reestablished are seen through the community’s ability to come together in times of emergency or in the corners of the county where wealth has no presence; there is a sense of commonality and understanding. In these areas, everyone is poor and there is an understanding that one community member described as “hey we’re all a little messed up here, let’s stick together”. Therefore, in the face of emergencies or issues that could be resolved with mutual benefit and collective action (Jensen, 2003, p. 125), communities in St. Lawrence County are sometimes able to come together and exhibit signs of social capital. However, by not fully having this, communities in St. Lawrence County lose out on the potential benefits of investment in physical and human capital (Flora, 2003).

Social Capital: Social Influences
As already discussed, many children are unable to break the cycle of poverty in St. Lawrence County because of their lack of interaction with anything different from their norm. Specific influences can be identified as playing key roles in opening a child’s eyes to different life outcomes. Parents are one of the most explicit influences in a child’s life. If the parent encourages their child’s work ethic in school and to achieve a better life, that child will be more likely to be driven than a child who had parent’s that did the opposite. Teachers also play an important role in a child’s development. Not only are teachers sometimes the first person a child meets who has gone to college but teachers can also assist students in identifying post-graduate options, and exposing them to different norms. Other common influences include church members, school mentors or coaches. Career and college resource centers also act as influences in a child’s development and pursuit of positive life-outcomes. However, one community member noted that whatever the person’s title, a positive role-model plays an important role in building self-esteem in a child. It is children’s relationships with others that influence their perception of themselves and their families (Gray, 2004).

Another factor that contributes to the aspirations that a child sets for him or herself to create positive life-outcomes is the outcomes of their older siblings. From MacLeod’s study, the Brothers, who had higher aspirations and a stronger work ethic, mostly had older siblings who were attending college (MacLeod, 1987). On the other hand, the Hallway Hangers who had low aspirations and low levels of work ethic had no older siblings or had poor role-models for older siblings (MacLeod, 1987). In contradiction to this, some of the students in this study indicated that they had older siblings who had done “everything wrong” and said that their older sibling’s failures actually motivated them to be better. A St. Lawrence County guidance counselor emphasized this by saying that several students who have older siblings that had ‘problems’ and
dropped out, now use their older siblings failures as something to motivate themselves to be better (Community Member). In providing socialization, positive influences and community support, social capital is one of the most important indicators of rural poverty in St. Lawrence County as it underlies all structural disadvantages and prohibits communities from improving the capabilities and life outcomes of each generation of youth.

CONCLUSION

The factors that have contributed to the rise and perpetuation of the rural ghetto in St. Lawrence County show no sign of diminishing. Although educational and employment opportunities lend themselves to be the obvious causes of poverty, underlying social and structural forces prohibit residents from improving their communities and themselves. As a result, the youth are bred to reincarnate the system of generational poverty. Low self-esteem, long periods of impoverishment, changes in familial and social structures and poor practices in raising children provide too many obstacles for youth to be able to overcome and break the cycle of poverty. And for the few who do create positive life outcomes for themselves, they choose to ‘break out’ of the cycle and their communities rather than using their capabilities to reestablish social capital and structural opportunities in St. Lawrence County.

Progress will only occur if the state increases its dedication to improving educational resources and after school programming and if the community takes a stronger stance in demanding more for themselves through social capital building at the grassroots level. These two components must occur simultaneously over several generations for empowerment and opportunity structures to work together to stop the cyclical nature of the rural ghetto and improve positive life outcomes for future generations of St. Lawrence County residents.
APPENDIX I – Community Resources

As with most communities, St. Lawrence County children benefit from universal programs such as Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES), the Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP), Neighborhood Centers and Free or Reduced Lunch and Breakfast Programs. Other programs that provide assistance to low income community members in St. Lawrence County but are less commonly known of are listed below.

**Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP)** – Funded through the New York State Department of Social Services provides low-income families with heating assistance towards their total energy costs. HEAP also provides assistance to those homes that have heating equipment that is broken and emergency assistance for homes in a heating emergency (Home). HEAP assistance is taken from a set amount of money given to the county. Therefore, when the money runs out, Department of Social Services cannot provide further assistance in terms of heating (HEAP). HEAP is not taken for granted in St. Lawrence County as many families would go without heat in the below zero weather that the County experiences in the winter. According to one community member, many families use up their HEAP assistance before the end of the winter and subsequently go without heat.

**Church and Community Worker Programs** – Established in 1974, the Church and Community Worker Program provides a “safety net” for area residents by assisting with the needs that are not met by other agencies and by providing volunteer opportunities for community members. The C&CP provides school supplies for children, emergency food baskets for families and helps with “budgeting, fuel, eyeglasses, diapers, clothing, transportation, and counseling” (Church).
**Upward Bound** – The Upward Bound program is funded through the U.S. Department of Education and provides year round and summer programs for high school youth to gain the skills and motivation to not only complete high school but also successfully pursue a college education. SUNY Canton administers Upward Bound for St. Lawrence, Lewis and Franklin County students. Participants gain academic and social skills and support. Through eligibility guidelines, Upward Bound target students who meet federal economic guidelines or are youth who could potentially be first generation college students. The program also emphasizes introducing students to other communities and cultures through field trips to cities like New York, Boston and Washington, DC and cultural events held in the evenings during the Summer component. These students are also encouraged to engage with organized volunteer opportunities (Upward).
APPENDIX II – Recommendations for Future Research

Initially this paper examined ten indicators that influence a child’s ability to achieve the capabilities and positive life outcomes to stop the cyclical nature of poverty. Through the development of the St. Lawrence County case study, positive life outcomes were defined as the ability to overcome financial, social and educational challenges to become a contributing member of the community who is able to provide for both him or herself and their family. Therefore, this research provides insight into the perpetuation and alleviation of rural poverty, not the degree of social mobility for children from the rural ghetto of St. Lawrence County. In future research, taking into consideration such indicators as linguistic barriers, cultural capital and the social and familial acceptance of a white collar life, would provide more insight into the level of social mobility in St. Lawrence County.

Another aspect of this study that could be examined in more depth is the role and influence of the four institutions of higher education in St. Lawrence County. Not only do these colleges and universities provide employment opportunities and contribute to the local tax base, but they also contribute hundreds of student volunteers into the community each year. And for all of the benefits the colleges and universities provide to the area, they also have negative impacts as seen through conversations with community members who saw a division between the wealthy faculty and the poor locals both in schools and in the community.

Lastly, this research focused primarily on the environmental influences that shape a child’s capabilities and life outcomes. Very little was discussed about the biological implications for many local residents. St. Lawrence County does face dark realities in terms of incest, rape, teen-age pregnancy, drug use, substance use during pregnancy and other prenatal care issues; none of which were discussed in this case study. Future research should focus on the
other side of the nature versus nurture dichotomy. The nature or biological implications must be examined in order to have a holistic understanding of the broader issue of poverty and predicting life outcomes.
APPENDIX III – Author’s Reflection

The decision to conduct a case study on the cyclical nature of poverty and its perpetuation through each generation in St. Lawrence County was the result of several years of study and engagement in Northern New York. This work has a foundation made of the author’s personal ties to the area, a structure gained from her academic studies and the furnishings of countless hours engaging with community members through volunteering and service learning partnerships.

As a child of rural Northern New York, the author had experienced in her first decade of life the structural and social disadvantages of poverty. She was aware of her family’s poverty at a young age and at times felt the social disparities between herself and her peers. By her teenage years, the author’s single mother had somehow managed to pull the family out of poverty despite numerous barriers. Although her family was the poster child for the federal, state and local programs that assist working class families, the author wasn’t content to believe that hard work and such resources were the solutions for poverty. A question always lingered in the back of her mind, “Why and how do some people make it out of poverty and not others?”

Defying the odds that had run rampant in her early stages of life, the author was able to attend St. Lawrence University in St. Lawrence County. After engaging with local disabled citizens in Canton and at-risk youth on the nearby Akwesasne Reservation through the service-learning components of her First Year Program and First Year Seminar, the author was not only intrigued with such techniques of learning, but was also inspired to know that she could give back to the community.

To continue this journey, she began studying sociology and became a Community Mentor for the Center for Civic Engagement (CCE) at St. Lawrence University. As a Community
Mentor she acted as a liaison between faculty, the CCE, community volunteer placements and student volunteers. She worked with and volunteered at the Canton United Methodist Church Free Will Dinner Program, Birdsfoot Organic Farm and NYSARC. And by the beginning of her third year at St. Lawrence University, she had recognized the needs of local at-risk secondary education students and created a mentoring program to assist such youth in their preparation for after graduation.

Through this personal journey of understanding rural poverty and its perpetuation with each generation, the author had the opportunity to speak with countless community members who were willing to share pieces of their stories. From the mouths of hard working men, women and children were the accounts of enduring human beings who had faced too many challenges and obstacles in their lives. Yet, these people and the people of St. Lawrence County have learned to survive. They have learned to persevere on the brink of relative deprivation. And although such dedication almost always fails to push their heads far enough above water, they never give up trying. For as much as the author gained from her experiences in the community and conducting this case study, it is her hope that it may shed light onto the issues of this area for future students and young scholars. She hopes it inspires continued research and sustainable engagement with the people of St. Lawrence County.
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