Save the Children

THE STATE OF CHILDHOOD IN RURAL AMERICA: WELL-BEING, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Authors
Anita I. Drever, Ph.D., Save the Children
Beth A. Eagleton, Save the Children
Denali A. Drake, Save the Children

Jonathan J. Sury , MPH CPH, Columbia University

We gratefully acknowledge the support of the
Dollar General Literacy Foundation

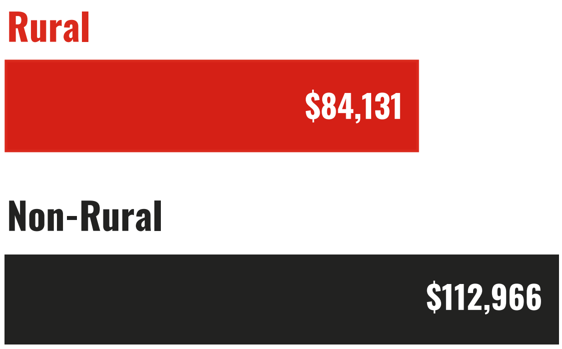
2026

INTRODUCTION

Where a child grows up can change the course of their future. There are advantages to living in a rural community: close social ties, connection to local culture, proximity to nature and more. But decades of economic restructuring and underinvestment have resulted in fewer jobs, businesses and services in rural America than in cities, making it more difficult for children and families to thrive.[1]

Save the Children's Rural Child Well-Being Dashboards shed light on the challenges confronting rural children and their families. Rural elementary and middle school children's reading skills are lagging behind their non-rural peers by half a grade level. Among the root causes for rural children not reaching this milestone are their families' economic circumstances. Rural families earn nearly $30,000 less per year than non-rural families, and 2.6 million children – 19% of rural children under 18 – are living in poverty. This impacts their well-being by increasing the likelihood of food insecurity, housing instability, attending under-resourced schools, exposure to chronic stress and more.[2]

RURAL FAMILIES EARN $29,000 LESS PER YEAR

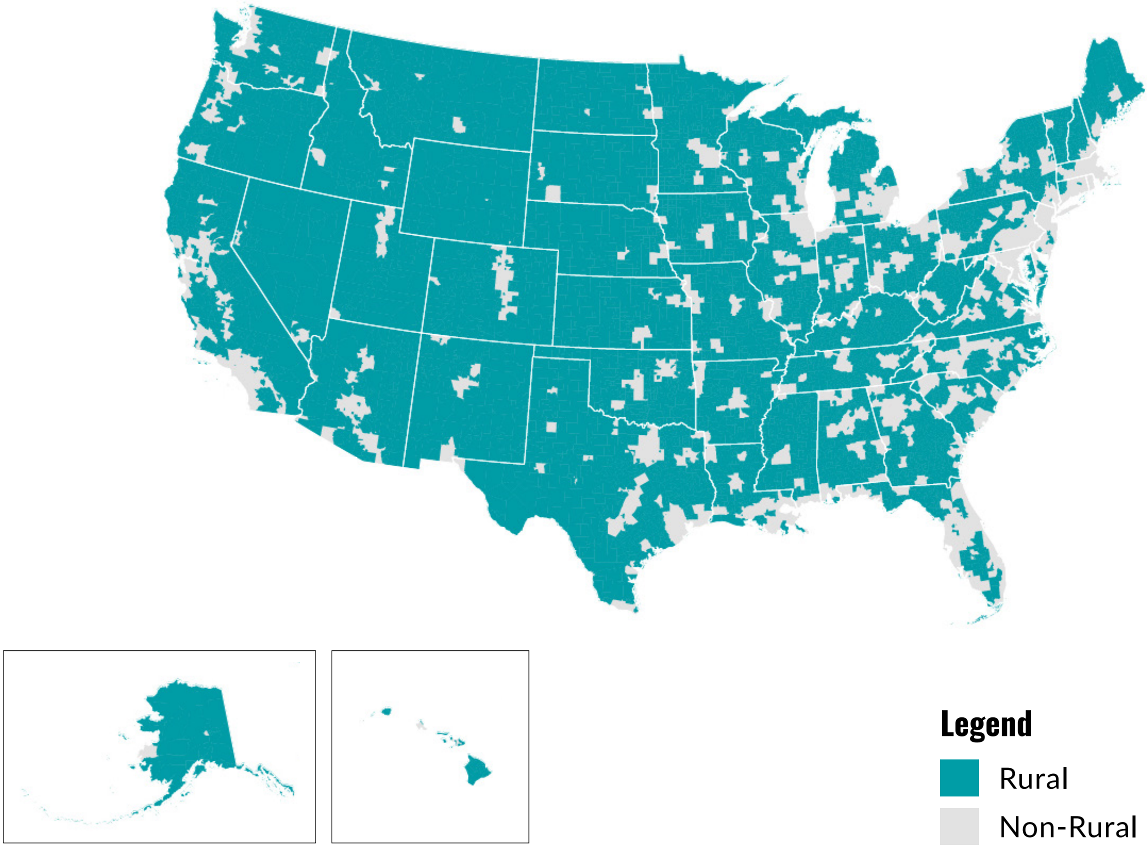


Limited income is one side of the coin, while affordability and a lack of opportunities are the other. Scenic landscapes are abundant in rural America, but childcare is not. Most rural children do not have a single daycare center within a 30-minute drive of their home. Employment is also difficult to find, with 55% of rural communities classified as job deserts, where there are few jobs within driving range. Rural families spend an average of 28% of their income on transportation, even more than they spend on housing – making it harder for kids in rural communities to access the services they need.

Our Rural Child Well-Being Dashboards take stock of these widening disparities between rural and non-rural communities at both the national and state levels – revealing where barriers for rural children are greatest and the gaps between rural and non-rural communities are widest. They also showcase the places where rural children are thriving – and in some cases even leading – the nation. This summary report highlights key data points and patterns from the dashboards and concludes with a discussion of the implications on programs and policy.

RURAL DEFINITION

RURAL AREAS AS DEFINED BY THE HEALTH RESOURCES & SERVICES ADMINISTRATION



There are many competing definitions of “rural” in the United States. The federal government alone uses more than half a dozen rural definitions.[3] Many of the most widely used are applied at the county level, including those used by the Census Bureau and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). County-level rural definitions have the advantage of being easily applicable to a broad array of publicly available datasets, but counties are unequal in size. Large counties, particularly in the western U.S., often end up being classified in their entirety as metropolitan, resulting in rural communities being overlooked by government programs and research.

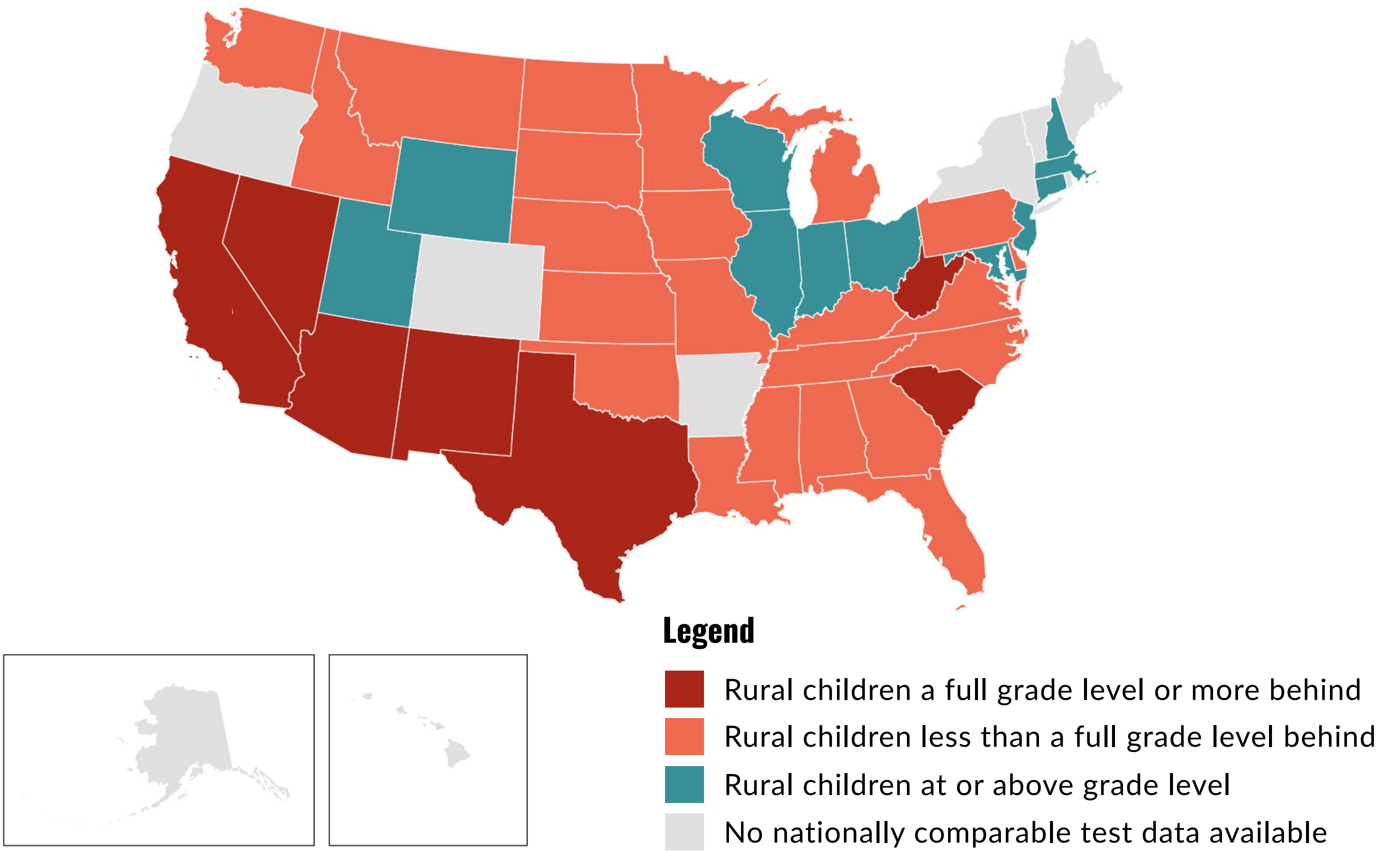
Save the Children addresses this tendency toward oversight by using the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) Federal Office of Rural Health Policy’s census-tract-level rural definition. It should be noted that as a result, the nationwide gaps that our Rural Child Well-Being Dashboards uncover between rural and non-rural populations tend to be wider than the gaps uncovered by commonly used county-level rural definitions. This is because many of the rural communities within metropolitan counties are low income. Another consequence of using a census tract-level definition is that the dashboards leverage five-year, rather than one-year, American Community Survey datasets to provide reliable estimates.

HOW ARE RURAL CHILDREN DOING?

13.8 million children – 19% of all U.S. children under 18 – live in rural America. Many of them are falling behind academically. Among kids in grades 3-8, rural children are half a grade behind their non-rural peers in reading and language arts, on average, across 39 states with nationally comparable test score data.

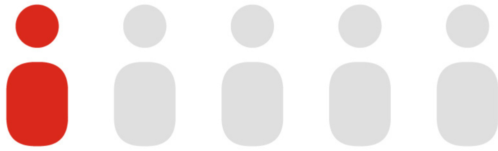
In seven states – New Mexico, West Virginia, Arizona, South Carolina, California, Nevada and Texas – rural children were, on average, a full grade or more behind. The data reveal similar gaps in math: Across 39 states with comparable data, rural children were two-fifths of a grade behind in math, and in 10 states, they were a grade level or more behind.

RURAL READING TEST SCORES VS. NATIONAL AVERAGE



However, rural children do not struggle as a group in every state. They do well in places with robust rural economies that invest heavily in public education. Rural kids in Connecticut and Massachusetts achieved some of the top literacy test score averages in the nation. Rural children in Wyoming – one of the most sparsely populated states in the country – outperformed non-rural children in literacy and math in all but a handful of states.

Where rural children underperform in school, their families face a variety of challenges at the household and community level. Nationwide, rural family households earned nearly $30,000 less per year than non-rural family households in 2020-2024. Nearly 1 in 5 rural children lives in poverty nationwide – and in Louisiana, Mississippi and New Mexico, that proportion rises to 30%.

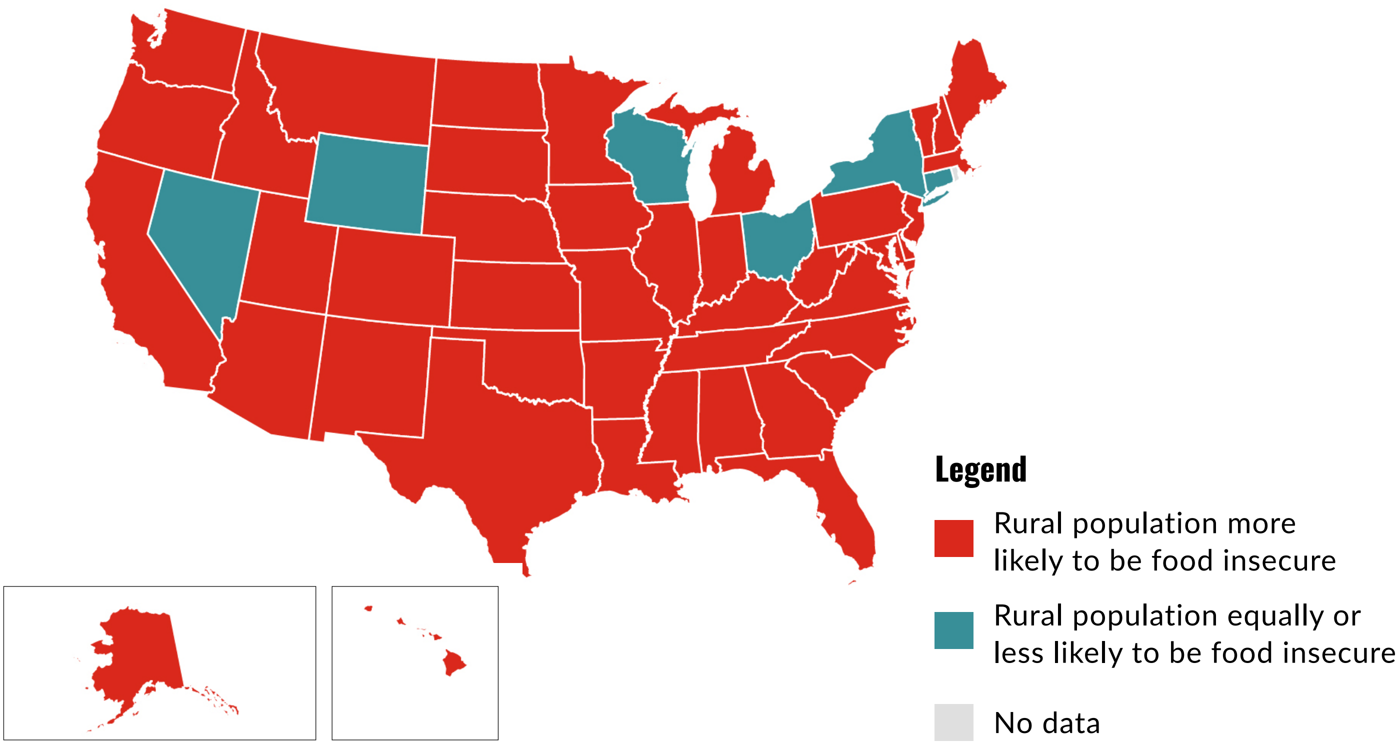


NEARLY 1 IN 5 RURAL CHILDREN LIVE IN POVERTY

Rural and non-rural income differences are driven by disinvestment in rural communities. Manufacturing jobs have moved overseas or become increasingly automated;[4] access to credit and investment capital has become more constrained,[5] and farms have become larger and more mechanized.[6] As a result, 55% of rural communities are job deserts, where employment opportunities are few and often far from where residents live. Furthermore, many rural degree holders have relocated to cities: only 23% of rural adults have a bachelor's degree compared to 38% of adults living outside rural areas.

More limited income means rural residents are more likely to be food insecure than their non-rural peers, particularly along the U.S.-Mexico border and in the Deep South, where rural poverty rates are highest. In fact, rural children are more likely to grow up food insecure in 43 states. In 2020-2024, 17% of rural households with children were enrolled in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and in 2025, 40% of rural children were eligible for free and reduced-price lunches.

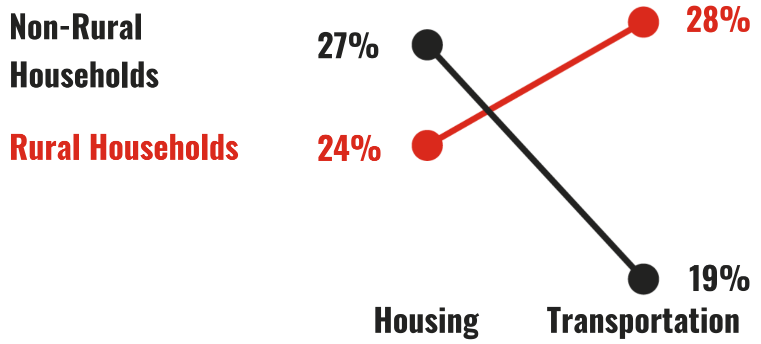
FOOD INSECURITY IN RURAL VS NON-RURAL POPULATIONS



Rural families are navigating not just their own limited resources, but also barriers in their communities. Many rural children don't have a single center-based child-care option within a 30-minute driving distance of their home. Rural families who are able to secure childcare – whether it be center- or home-based – do, however, benefit from the cost being 10%–11% of their income compared to non-rural families, who spend an average of 11%–13% of their income on childcare.

A key factor in rural households' ability to access food, childcare and other resources is transportation affordability. On average, rural households spent 28% of their income on transportation in 2024 – more than they spent on housing – including the cost of a vehicle, its financing, insurance, maintenance, repairs and gas.

HOUSING & TRANSPORTATION SPENDING: RURAL VS. NON-RURAL

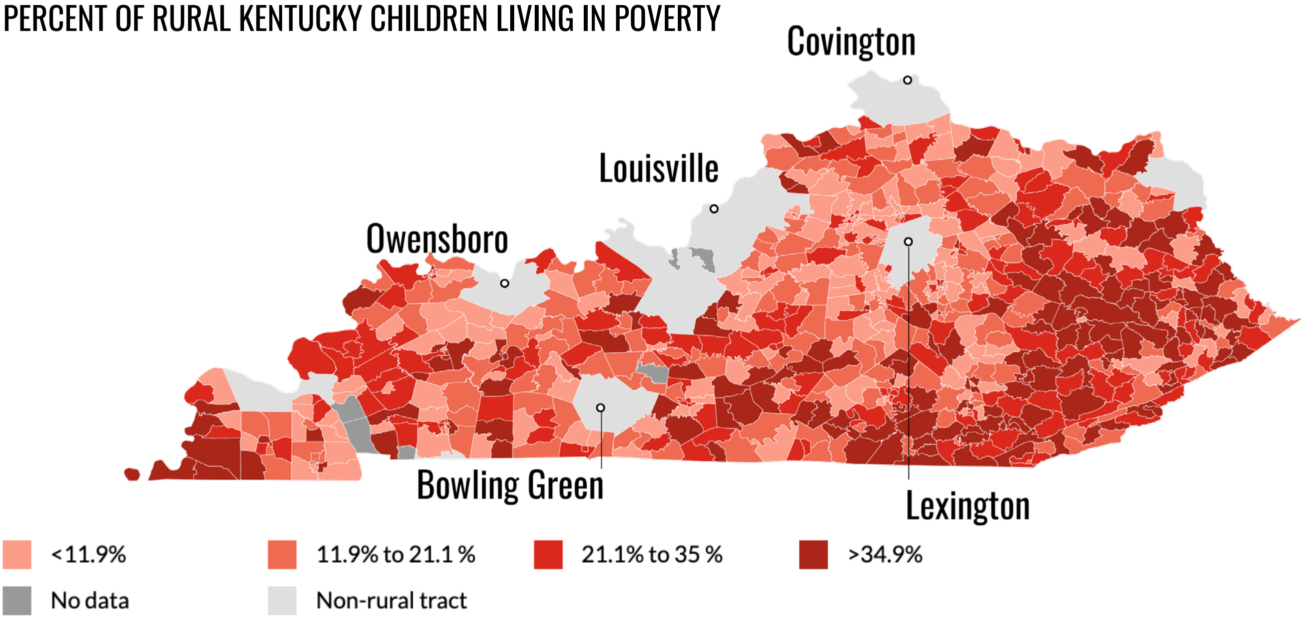


On the other hand, greater housing affordability, higher home ownership rates and housing stability are important advantages of living in many parts of rural America.[7] Being able to afford to stay in a community long term makes it easier to develop trusting relationships that boost families' social capital, helping them access emotional support, childcare, employment information and more from local friends and family. The first round of data from our Rural Child Well-Being Dashboards, which focused on 2015-2019, showed that community connections were stronger in rural communities across several measures. Greater housing stability also helps children do well academically, limiting mid-year school transfers and allowing them to form bonds with caring adults and teachers.[8]

In addition to rural families having fewer resources and facing higher cost burdens in a range of areas, rural communities are more exposed to natural hazards like tornadoes, floods and wildfires. As disasters become more frequent and extreme, homeowners' insurance is becoming increasingly unaffordable or unavailable – putting rural families at greater risk of losing everything to a storm, fire or flood.[9] Unfortunately, our dashboards suggest many of the rural communities most exposed to natural hazards are also the most socially vulnerable and, therefore, least equipped to recover quickly and fully.

The data summarized in Save the Children's Rural Child Well-Being Dashboards illustrate the multifaceted barriers that rural families face. But rural America is profoundly diverse, and state rural averages mask community variation. For example, on average, children and families in rural Kentucky score near the national average on many well-being measures. However, rural families in Appalachian Eastern Kentucky face significant barriers with limited resources. It's not uncommon for children here to be a full grade level behind in reading and math, for half of children to be living in poverty and for transportation costs to average more than 40% of household income.

PERCENT OF RURAL KENTUCKY CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY



It is also important to recognize that rural America is culturally and economically diverse. Although rural communities are often portrayed as culturally homogeneous, they encompass a wide range of racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds that vary significantly by region. Native American children make up a larger share of the population in rural communities than in non-rural areas due to the location of many Tribal Nations and Indigenous communities. In states such as Mississippi and South Carolina, Black children comprise a larger proportion of the rural child population than they do in urban and suburban communities. Likewise, in New Mexico and California, Hispanic children make up more than half of all rural children. Appalachia reflects the enduring influence of Scots Irish settlement, and as a result, White children comprise about 90% of the rural child population in West Virginia and Pennsylvania. Together, these diverse rural communities form a critical part of our nation's cultural bedrock, displaying generations of distinct histories, traditions and identities.

PROGRAM AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Programs and policies can help address some of the challenges rural children and families face.

Investing in early education and childcare builds a strong foundation for rural children's development. State and federal grants that help rural child-care providers cover their operating costs or help low-income families afford childcare can increase the number of child-care slots, which are often far below the number needed to meet demand. Similarly, supplementing child-care workers' wages, offering scholarships for early childhood education and providing paid professional development can improve the availability and quality of childcare and early education in rural communities.[10] Home daycares and family childcare – which are especially critical in remote areas – can benefit from start-up grants and simplified licensing processes. Often, rural child-care providers who are qualified borrowers and want to strengthen their businesses have limited access to capital and technical assistance.[11] Supporting local lenders to provide low-interest loans could address these challenges.

Investing in Head Start also plays an important role in rural America. Head Start centers are often one of the few licensed child-care providers in rural communities, providing wraparound services like medical, dental and mental health care for children.

State and federally funded home visiting programs provide key developmental supports including identification of developmental delays, particularly for isolated rural families who cannot access licensed childcare in their communities. Home visiting improves infant and child health and decreases incidences of child neglect.[12]

Continuing to support rural children's educational journey once they start school is critical. Rural schools often have smaller student populations who live farther away from their schools, which translates into higher per-pupil costs. Rural schools also struggle to find and retain educators, due in part to the brain drain from rural communities. Programs that address these barriers – like the federal Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP), which provides flexible funding to high-need rural schools – help even the playing field. In addition to in-school supports, the 21st Century Community Learning Centers block grant funds out-of-school time and summer programming in many rural communities across the country, ensuring rural students receive tutoring and enrichment that would otherwise not be available.

Helping rural families access healthy food is also critical to support rural children's development. Federal nutrition programs including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) are essential to fight food insecurity in rural America. Currently, rural mothers face long drives to enroll in WIC and recertify their eligibility, so virtual and/or telephonic options would reduce the barrier to their participation. The National School Lunch Program is another vital support during the school year. Summer EBT and summer feeding programs deliver meals to rural families' homes, ensuring they can continue to access this support over the summer despite transportation challenges.

Finally, policies that support families' financial security are particularly helpful in rural America, where household incomes are significantly below the national average. 530A accounts – made into law in 2025 – provide families with the opportunity to save and build wealth for their children. Child Tax Credits return some of families' earnings, improving food and housing security. Childcare and dependent care tax credits help families secure childcare so they can work outside the home.

KEY POLICY TAKEAWAYS

The larger takeaway is that national and state policies are most effective when they recognize and address the unique realities of rural communities. Programs designed for urban and suburban populations often overlook the challenges created by geographic isolation, limited infrastructure, workforce shortages and higher transportation costs. Policies that account for these differences – by helping schools cover transportation expenses, delivering meals directly to families, expanding home visiting services, investing in rural childcare and educator workforce development and providing flexible funding for rural schools – can ensure rural children have equitable access to the opportunities and support they need to thrive.

Rural children possess the same potential as children anywhere in the country. By making sustained, targeted investments that are sensitive to the strengths and challenges of rural communities, policymakers can help ensure that where a child grows up does not determine the opportunities available to them or the trajectory of their future.

References

1. Smith, K. E., & Tickamyer, A. R. (2011). *Economic restructuring and family well-being in rural America*. Penn State Press.
2. Aber, J. L., Bennett, N. G., Conley, D. C., & Li, J. (1997). The effects of poverty on child health and development. Annual Review of Public Health, 18(1), 463–483; Brooks-Gunn, J., & Duncan, G. J. (1997). The effects of poverty on children. The Future of Children, 7(2), 55–71.
3. Krasniqi, Q., Samur Zuniga, A., Hansen, S., Heard, E. Sury, J. & Drever, A. (2023) Rural definitions primer: Rural definitions review and recommendation. Save the Children.
4. Autor, D. H., Dorn, D., & Hanson, G. H. (2013). *The China Syndrome: Local Labor Market Effects of Import Competition in the United States*. American Economic Review, 103(6), 2121–2168.
5. Craig, S. G., & Hardee, P. (2007). The impact of bank consolidation on small business credit availability. Journal of Banking & Finance, 31(4), 1237–1263.
6. Hamilton, S. F., Richards, T. J., Shafran, A. P., & Vasilaky, K. N. (2022). Farm labor productivity and the impact of mechanization. American Journal of Agricultural Economics, 104(4), 1435–1459.
7. Deller, S., Gaede, E., & Conroy, T. (2026). Housing financial stress and community well-being: Is there an urban-rural dimension. Journal of Rural Studies, 124, 104135.
8. Rumberger, R. W. (2003). The causes and consequences of student mobility. The Journal of Negro Education, 72(1), 6–21.
9. Hemmati, M., Gray, I. P., & Bowen, S. G. (2025). The growing void in the US homeowners' insurance market: who should bear the rising cost of climate change?. *Climate Action*, 4(1), 35.
10. Bridges, M., Fuller, B., Huang, D. S., & Hamre, B. K. (2011). Strengthening the early childhood workforce: How wage incentives may boost training and job stability. Early Education and Development, 22(6), 1009–1029; Maier, M., Rau, L., Bumgarner, E., & Hsueh, J. (2025). *Using wage supplements in childcare and early education*. OPRE Report 2025-005. Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
11. Garrity, S., Longstreth, S., Linder, L. K., & Salcedo-Potter, N. (2020). Licensed family childcare providers' participation in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP): Greater benefits and fewer burdens in highly urban areas? Early Education and Development, 31(2), 276–294.
12. Gubbels, J., van der Put, C. E., Stams, G. J. J. M., Prinzie, P., & Assink, M. (2021). Components associated with the effect of home visiting programs on child maltreatment: A meta-analytic review. Child Abuse & Neglect, 114, 104981; Han, K., & Oh, S. (2022). The effectiveness of home visiting programs for the prevention of child maltreatment recurrence at home: A systematic review and meta-analysis. Child Health Nursing Research, 28(1), 41–50.