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Pastoral Poverty: The Seeds of Decline

By TIMOTHY EGAN

LOUPI COUNTY, Neb., the poorest county in the nation, is down to 712 people — a third of the population it had nearly a century ago. A four-bedroom house goes for \$30,000. But building a life is much harder. In Loup County, what rides on the unrelenting winds are symptoms of despair that have taken hold there and across a large swath of rural America.

It could be Chemung County in upstate New York, which lost people and jobs even in the boom of the 90's. Or Bighorn County, Wyo., where some high school seniors say their only choices are to move out of town or take up with people cooking methamphetamine in a rusty sink. Or Dalhart, Tex., a Panhandle town of 7,000 people where the murder rate last year was more than twice the national average.

Around the country, rural ghettos are unravelling in the same way that inner cities did in the 1960's and 70's, according to the officials and experts who have tried to make sense of a generations-old downward spiral in the countryside. In this view, decades of economic decline have produced a culture of dependency, with empty counties hooked on farm subsidies just as welfare mothers were said to be tied to their monthly checks. And just as in the cities, the hollowed-out economy has led to a frightening rise in crime and drug abuse.

But unlike the cities' troubles, which generated a national debate about causes and solutions, the rural collapse has been largely silent, perhaps because it happened so slowly.

Crime, fueled by a methamphetamine epidemic that has turned fertilizer into a drug lab component and given some sparsely populated counties higher murder rates than New York City, has so strained small-town police budgets that many are begging the federal government for help. The rate of serious crime in Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma and Utah is as much as 50 percent higher than the state of New York, the F.B.I. reported in October.

Towns of 10,000 and 25,000 people are now the most likely places to experience a bank robbery. Drug-related homicides fell by 50 percent in urban areas, but they tripled over the last decade in the countryside.

"We have serious drug crime in places that never used to have it," said Allen Curtis, executive director of the Nebraska Crime Commission.

Poverty was held in place somewhat by the boom of the 1990's. Still, the 2000 census found that the percentage of people living below the poverty level is nearly 30 percent higher in rural areas than it is in cities. Of the 25 poorest counties in the nation, 5 are in Nebraska, 5 are in Texas and 4 are in South Dakota, the Commerce Department found. In Loup County, the dead center of Nebraska, per capita personal income is \$6,606 per year, just 22 percent of the national average, according to a listing compiled by the Commerce Department.

Equally telling is a growing wage gap that finds people who work in rural areas making just 70 percent of the average salaries of workers in urban areas. The cost of

living, of course, is much lower outside the big cities. But workers in rural areas are 60 percent more likely to earn minimum wage than urban wage-earners.

No wonder then that the exodus from large parts of rural America is continuing, extending far beyond the long-suffering Great Plains. While the nation as a whole grew by 13 percent in the 2000 census, many counties in upstate New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois, Michigan and three Southern states, for example, lost 9 percent or more of their population during the 1990's.

THE pastoral farms of cider presses and pumpkin patches still exist, of course, but the ones that prosper are at suburban edges, or they are places with sublime scenery or an energetic college. Bonner County, Idaho, for example, grew by 38 percent in the last decade, hooking its fate to outdoor amenities and second homes for early-retiring baby boomers.

Though the politicians who inveighed against moral and economic decline in the big cities have yet to weigh in on rural breakdown, plenty of voices are sounding alarms from this Other America.

Some say that entrepreneurship has been stifled by central government subsidies to agribusiness, while the real problems of rural America — which have little to do with farm policy — have been ignored.

"The slide is not inevitable," said Chuck Hassebrook, director of the Center for Rural Affairs in Walthill, Neb., a nonprofit group that studies trends in rural areas. "We give a lot of tax breaks and direct payments to big agriculture companies that don't do much for the local economy, but rarely do we give anything to the little guy trying to start a business and stay in town."

In Nebraska, nearly 70 percent of all farmers rely on government largess to stay in business. Yet the biggest economic collapse is happening in counties most tied to agriculture — in spite of the subsidies.

Unaffected by the downward trends are cheap labs used to make methamphetamine, a synthetic form of speed that the White House calls the fastest-growing drug threat in America.

Nationwide, meth use has nearly tripled since 1994, and there are now far more regular users of meth than crack, according to the annual survey of drug use done for the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

In Wyoming, the least populated state, officials estimate that 1 out of every 100 people needs treatment for meth addiction. Users of meth tend to be white and rural. There were 300 times more seizures of meth labs in Iowa in 1999, for example, than in New York and New Jersey combined, the Drug Enforcement Agency found.

Like crack, meth drives up all the other problems in these communities. Meth users tend to be erratic, violent and in some cases, borderline psychotic — especially when on a sleepless binge or "tweaking" episode. Small-fry dealers steal and war among one another. Users abandon families, lose jobs and batter spouses and loved ones.

"Meth seems to be everywhere in Nebraska right now," Mr. Curtis of the Nebraska Crime Commission said. "It's mostly Beavis and Butthead labs, with poor white kids making meth out of their cars."

WHETHER people would be less prone to using meth if there were more good-paying jobs in rural areas is an echo of an old question — the one posed about crack and heroin use in gutted inner cities. But at least during the decline-of-cities phase, the topic was vigorously debated.

By contrast, the problems of rural America were not discussed much in the recent national election, even in South Dakota and Missouri, which had close Senate races.

Instead, the issue was farm price supports. In South Dakota, which received \$3.2 billion in farm subsidies over the last five years and stands to gain an even larger amount in the coming decade, candidates of both parties swore to uphold the status quo. Supporters of subsidies say they keep entire counties from going under and ensure a cheap and abundant food supply.

But opponents say that the biggest checks go to large corporate farms and do little to stem rural decline. The farm bill signed in May by President Bush — and backed by both parties — will, over the next 10 years, distribute two-thirds of \$125 billion in payments to the top 10 percent of farms, according to an analysis done by the Environmental Working Group, a conservation group.

These payments go to farm businesses that cannot make money in the global market without government help, or they are funneled to people who agree to take certain crops out of production.

But farmers who are just getting by tend to be out of the subsidy loop. About 1.2 million of the nation's 2 million farms do less than \$10,000 a year in annual sales, the Agriculture Department reports.

In any case, with barely 1 percent of Americans living on farms, most rural jobs are nonagricultural. About 25 percent of those jobs pay wages below the poverty level for a family of four, said Representative Eva Clayton, a Democrat of South Carolina who is retiring this year, and who served as chairwoman of the Congressional Rural Caucus.

Or, she said, more often the rural wage-earner makes a long commute to a minimum-wage job in the nearest regional hub city.

There are some bright spots on the open map. In some regional hubs, like Fargo, N.D., wages and jobs have increased. Across the Midwest, a number of communities have attracted enough immigrants to show population growth. But these immigrants come to work at meatpacking plants or corporate hog farms. And recent studies have shown those jobs tend to drive out other people who might normally stay in an area for its quality of life.

Representative Tom Osborne, Republican of Nebraska, has been trying to get small "action" grants — somewhat similar to the ones the big cities used to go after — as a way to jump-start businesses in western Nebraska.

In desperation, other rural politicians are looking to an earlier model.

TWO major homestead acts were largely responsible for people moving to some of least populated areas to begin with. Now comes the New Homestead Economic Opportunity Act, introduced by Senators Byron L. Dorgan, Democrat of North Dakota, and Chuck Hagel, Republican of Nebraska. The bill would forgive student loans and provide tax credit for home purchasers in depressed rural areas and small towns.

History has provided us a model to help the communities that are hurting in the heartland, Senator Dorgan said.

But history, at least since the end of the last homestead act around 1920, has also shown that people who live in depressed rural America have been going only one way — out.

INTRODUCTION**LESS MONEY****MORE CRIME****A METH PROBLEM**

The economic boom of the 1990's slowed the growth of poverty in America's rural areas, but crime, drug use and joblessness continue to plague the countryside. Certainly, the cost of rural living is somewhat lower than city life, but per capita incomes in non-urban areas are often as much as 25 percent lower than they are in metropolitan areas. Manufacture and use of methamphetamine is rampant.

Click on the tabs above to learn more about some of the problems facing rural America.



Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

According to Sheriff Phil Hart of Taylor, Nebraska, abandoned farmhouses make ideal places for people to set up illegal operations such as meth labs.

Sources: Rural Policy Research Institute; Federal Bureau of Investigation; Drug Enforcement Agency

The New York Times

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The number of states with a significant gap between rural and urban incomes ...

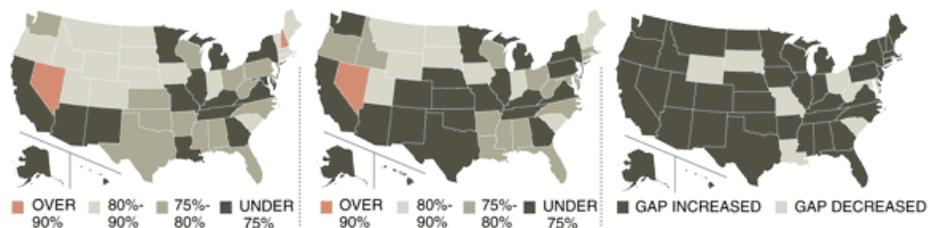
Rural per capita income as a percentage of urban per capita income, **1990**

... proliferated over the last decade ...

Rural per capita income as a percentage of urban per capita income, **2000**

... and the gap grew wider almost everywhere

Change in rural/urban income gap, **1990-2000**



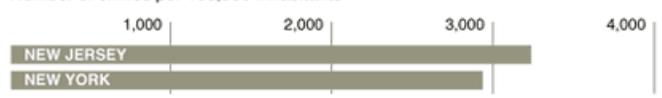
Note: New Jersey and Washington D.C. do not have statistically significant non-urban areas, according to the Rural Policy Research Institute.

Sources: Rural Policy Research Institute; Federal Bureau of Investigation; Drug Enforcement Agency

The New York Times

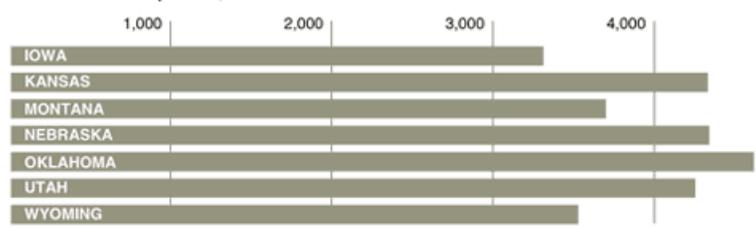
The crime rates in highly urbanized states like New York and New Jersey ...

Number of crimes per 100,000 inhabitants



... are lower than in many the nation's rural states

Number of crimes per 100,000 inhabitants



Sources: Rural Policy Research Institute; Federal Bureau of Investigation; Drug Enforcement Agency

The New York Times

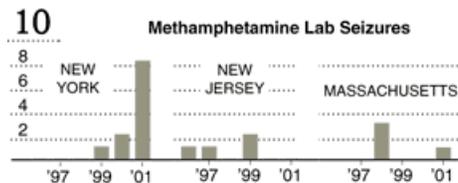
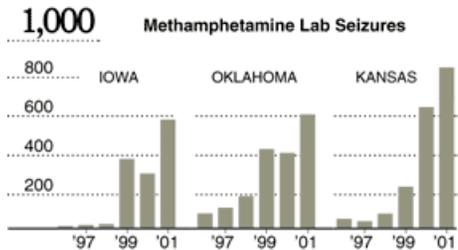
INTRODUCTION **LESS MONEY** **MORE CRIME** **A METH PROBLEM**



Associated Press

Just like crack in America's inner cities, methamphetamine has become the scourge of rural areas. And the number of meth lab seizures in rural states dwarfs the number in more urban states.

Sources: Rural Policy Research Institute; Federal Bureau of Investigation; Drug Enforcement Agency



The New York Times