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“I have a job... but you can’t make a living”: How County Economic Context Shapes Residents’ Livelihood Strategies

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how rural residents' livelihood strategies are shaped by community economic and population characteristics. We use qualitative data from interviews and focus groups with low-income residents and social service providers (N=85 participants) in two rural New England counties to understand livelihood strategies within rural places. We then employ quantitative data to understand how these strategies are shaped by local historical labor markets and demographic characteristics. Although one county attracts wealthy retirees, with corresponding work opportunities in the service sector, and the other is remote and losing population, low-income workers in both places are struggling to make ends meet. We suggest that work-promoting public policies incorporate a nuanced approach that considers not only how to support rural workforce development, but also how to develop economic opportunities while attending to the complex variation between rural places.

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KEYWORDS
Demographics; employment opportunities; New England; population change; rural communities

INTRODUCTION

Plentiful research documents the ways in which rural economies have changed via the shift from resource extraction and manufacturing to lower-paid service jobs (e.g. in recreation, health care, and education) (Smith and Tickamyer 2011; Weber and Miller 2017). However, less research explicitly (1) traces the ways in which these broad rural economic trends interact with specific places' population characteristics to shape the quality of economic opportunities available to residents; and (2) explores how rural residents' strategies for making ends meet might vary alongside these community characteristics. In this article, we take a comparative case study approach to explore features of community and opportunity for low-income residents in two rural counties in New England. We study Union County—where a remote location and a seasonal, natural resource-based economy has generated a long-running history of poverty—and Clay County, where a vibrant set of natural amenities and a relatively central location attract wealthy retirees and tourists (county names are pseudonyms to protect participant privacy).

Given the complex nexus of challenges facing rural low-income families—unstable employment, expensive housing and child care, unreliable transportation—understanding how residents navigate "on the ground" within specific communities is a key goal. Through the lens of two communities, we explore residents' strategies for creating and leveraging economic opportunities and assess how these approaches are linked to the context of their environments. We ground findings from our interviews and focus groups in data from a variety of quantitative sources, both federal and local (e.g. the American Community Survey, local historical society documents), to understand the circumstances that gave rise to these patterns.

Union and Clay Counties share many characteristics—both with one another and with rural communities nationwide—and we use these cases to explore how rural residents' methods of making ends meet are embedded in the context of their communities. We suggest that a community's history, economic trajectory, and population characteristics shape the opportunities and challenges its residents face and frame these findings in a policy-relevant discussion that recognizes the importance of both people and place.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Changing Rural Economic Opportunities

Since the mid-twentieth century, shifts from manufacturing to service economies have affected American workers broadly (Brown 2014; Duncan 1999; Smith and Tickamyer 2011). Amid technological innovation and globalization, traditionally rural industries (including agriculture and extraction) declined as work became mechanized and cheaper raw materials became internationally available (Bell and York 2010). As the service sector grew, higher-paying service employers, like professional and technical services, remained sparse in rural America (Brown 2014), in part because of the sector's population density requirements for profitability (Flora and Flora 1990).

Related to these trends, rural wages lag behind those in urban places (Albrecht 2012; Smith and Tickamyer 2011), and nonmetropolitan poverty is higher than in metropolitan places (Economic Research Service 2019), attributed both to structural and social characteristics of rural places (Bocinski 2010; Fisher 2007). These characteristics include dominance of low-wage, part-time, or temporary jobs in the service sector, and outmigration of higher-educated residents from rural places (Parisi et al. 2011). These employment-related changes have shaped the population characteristics of rural places: first, as declining economic prospects drive outmigration of young workers, and second, in rural amenity areas, as the increase in tourism, second homes, and the in-migration of older, often wealthier, retirees result in a greater demand for service industries.

Changing Population Characteristics of Rural Communities

Rural places experienced substantial population upheaval during the second half of the twentieth century, with a substantial "population deconcentration" between the 1970s and late-1990s (Brown 2014; Johnson 1999). However, fluctuating trends in rural migration in the 1980s-2000s—in part related to economic shifts and labor market restructuring—have translated to an overall net population loss in rural places since the 1950s (Brown 2014).

But not all rural places experienced population shifts evenly. Areas "rich in natural amenities and other recreational attractions" (Johnson and Beale 2002:1) have drawn substantial influxes of migrants, including retirees, while places that once depended on traditional industries (e.g. timber, mining) have experienced considerable population loss (Hamilton et al. 2008). The exodus of the young is driven by a lack of educational and work opportunities in rural places, with high-achieving youth often encouraged to seek their fortunes elsewhere (Carr and Kefalas 2009). These migration influences coalesce to produce an uneven distribution of aged populations (Nelson 2014), such that rural places are home to larger shares of the elderly than are urban areas (Rogers 2000).

Place-Based Strategies for Making Ends Meet

Amid the lack of economic opportunities in some rural places, and exacerbated by reduced investment in public infrastructure, rural residents who remain must either (1) have the human capital to keep themselves afloat in a weak economy (e.g. Cromartie et al. 2015), or (2) be prepared to consider alternate strategies for making ends meet. Research shows that “jobs have been scarce and unstable in most rural communities for decades, and people have responded by combining different kinds of work or by migrating to cities for better employment opportunities” (Tickamyer and Duncan 1990:68). For rural residents with lower human capital, this strategy of “combining different kinds of work” has been critical, and the prevalence of informal work in rural places has been well-documented (e.g. Jensen, Cornwell, and Findeis 1995; Nelson and Smith 1999; Wornell, Jensen, and Tickamyer 2017). (Of course, informal work has long been key for low-income urban dwellers, too; see Edin and Lein 1997). Such work includes yard sales, yard work, wood cutting, and home production and preservation of food (Tickamyer and Wood 1998), resulting in a “complex layering of activities across the year” (Edgcomb and Thetford 2004:25). This layering of activities has also been well acknowledged in the livelihoods literature, which explores the way that people construct a living (both material and non-material) in dynamic, place-based ways (de Haan and Zoomer 2005; Scoones 2009).

Summary and Remaining Questions

Plentiful literature explores the ways in which rural labor markets have been restructured, and the implications for rural residents. Other literature examines the ways in which rural populations have ebbed and flowed in response to these shifting economies, with major implications for the age structure. Research also documents the strategies that rural residents use to make ends meet, including informal employment. However, little scholarship links all three of these literatures to explore variation in low-income residents’ livelihood strategies across rural spaces with distinct economic contexts and demographic histories. Research indicates that “as an area selectively attracts (or loses) persons with specific demographic characteristics, these population changes in turn affect future economic opportunities and the attractiveness of the area for new business location" (Blank 2005:446). Here, we explore residents' responses to these changes in two kinds of communities and contextualize our findings in the history of each place. By providing such a specific application, we aim to highlight the interplay between community and opportunity, and to identify how people- and place-based policies can intersect to support rural residents.

DATA AND METHODS

Pilot Work

The larger project from which this research derives sought to better understand factors influencing stability among rural vulnerable families and to identify the effective social services available to them. In 2010, we began a pilot study in several rural places and small cities in New England, conducting five focus groups with local service providers (N=25 participants). These providers were identified through professional networks and local knowledge of the region. Providers saw their clients as multiply vulnerable to things that might go wrong in their lives. One provider described someone she served, saying, "It isn't one tipping point. That's a really middle-class phenomenon…When you're spread as thin as she was, anything could be a tipping point. Her check not coming, her boyfriend blowing up at her…the net was so frail." This sentiment was echoed in nine additional interviews with low-income rural residents, recruited through service providers: few residents had experienced a single, dramatic "tipping point." Instead, interviewees described how the pervasive challenges of everyday life accumulated to function as barriers to economic stability. Indeed, this pilot research clarified the extent to which challenges are overlapping, connected across personal, family, and community levels, and often embedded in intergenerational practices and experiences. While the pilot project informed our instrument and shaped our data collection methods, data from those interviews and focus groups are not included in this analysis.

Present Study

With an understanding of these cross-connected challenges as a starting point, we expanded the project, with a particular interest in the context of specific rural communities. To build on our initial findings, we returned to the most rural of our pilot sites (Union County) with a revised instrument and expanded the work into a second rural New England county that could serve as a comparison site (Clay). By selecting a second site that is demographically similar to the first (in terms of racial-ethnic composition, median age, and family structure) but different in remoteness and long-term economic characteristics, we sought to explore the ways in which the contemporary and historical characteristics of a community shaped residents' economic opportunities and, more importantly, their strategies for getting by. Critically, Union County has 15,000 fewer residents than Clay County, dispersed across a land area that is three times the size, and the median income in Clay is 50 percent higher than in Union (for a more detailed comparison of the two counties' characteristics see Carson and Mattingly 2018).

Data

To recruit participants for this study, we first compiled a list of social service agencies in each county, reaching out to representatives from dozens of agencies with invitations to participate in a discussion about the families and communities they serve. We conducted semi-structured focus groups in public spaces within the community, comprised of 2-7 service providers with one moderator from the research team (focus group participants were provided with light refreshments, but not otherwise compensated). We conducted three groups in Union, and two in Clay, lasting, on average, 79 minutes. We recorded and transcribed the sessions. Afterward, we asked providers to help recruit low-income residents for interviews by disseminating informational sheets about the project to their clients. We supplemented this strategy by hanging fliers in public spaces around each county (e.g. gas stations, laundromats), with details about the study and contact information for the research team. Interviews were largely conducted in-person in a variety of settings, according to interviewee preference, lasting an average of 50 minutes, and also recorded and transcribed. Interviewees were compensated with a $25 gift certificate to their choice of a big box retailer, supermarket, or gas station. We conducted 29 interviews in each county, for a total of 85 participants from focus groups and interviews.

We initially envisioned our data collection strategy as dual-pronged: low-income residents could inform us about the challenges of making ends meet, while service providers could detail existing supports for these residents. However, we quickly learned that treating service providers and residents as groups with distinct experiences misrepresented the reality of daily life in these counties. Specifically, many service providers also lived in the communities they served, and working in nonprofit service fields, faced many of the same challenges as their clients in making ends meet.

While providers were typically somewhat more advantaged than those we interviewed as low-income residents—specifically, in terms of educational attainment—they were similar in many other ways—like needing to patch together multiple jobs to get by. There were no other clear demographic distinctions between service providers and other low-income residents we spoke with. Like the low-income residents, many providers worried about job stability in a changing environment, their ability to meet expenses, and the loss of their young family members to more urban areas. After exploration of these themes from both kinds of respondents, it became clear that showcasing providers' perspectives in a way that abstracts them from their reality as residents and often low-income workers themselves would be disingenuous. As such, we make no effort to explicitly contain providers' perspectives to the service provision realm throughout this article.

Analysis

All data were transcribed and checked for quality against the audio by a member of the research team. Data were then imported into NVivo, read for emergent themes, and coded into categories. After this initial pass, data in each category were re-read to refine categories. Qualitative data were supplemented with data from a wide variety of quantitative sources to better understand the county contexts; these sources include the Decennial Census, American Community Survey, Population Estimates, Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD) Origin-Destination Employment Statistics, County Business Patterns, and Economic Census from the U.S. Census Bureau; the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Census; the National Conservation Easement Database; state departments of labor; the Bureau of Economic Analysis; the Bureau of Labor Statistics; the Office of Energy and Planning; and Zillow real estate data, some of which appear here. We also drew upon local historical sources, including newspapers, county statistical reports, and documents from state historical societies, to inform our understanding of the history of each county. Because disclosure of these sources could reveal the true identities of the county of study, we follow Sherman (2009) in omitting these source details in favor of maintaining project participants' privacy. All statistics cited in text are from authors' analyses of these data unless otherwise noted. Finally, all stages of this research were reviewed and approved by the University of New Hampshire Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research (IRB case 5134).

FINDINGS

Clay County: The Creation of a "Destination" County

The rural return

Clay County is regionally known for its natural beauty, which includes more than 150,000 acres of National Forest land, five state parks, dozens of lakes and ponds, and several ski destinations. Because of these amenities, the United States Economic Research Service has classified Clay as a recreation county, with hospitality-related industries like food service and real estate accounting for large shares of employment and income, and high shares of the housing stock used for seasonal or occasional use (Johnson and Beale 2002).

Clay's natural amenities and proximity to more populated areas intersect to create an environment that was especially ripe for population gains from newcomers and rural returners in the 1970s (Johnson 1999). Indeed, decennial Census data demonstrate that Clay County's population increased an average of 20 percent each decade between 1960 and 2010. About this growth, one Clay service provider recalled, "Back in the early [years], you know, the 1960s, this was a tourist destination for a day…There were a few motels, but people weren't buying homes here. That started to happen in the '70s and '80s, and that became a real economic driver for construction, building maintenance, and all the amenity services…It drove our hospitality engine to be as big as it is today." This recollection identifies critical details about the county's growing population and how these shifts bolstered the region's economy, supporting the literature indicating that amenities are linked with rural economic growth (e.g. Deller et al. 2001; English, Marcouiller, and Cordell 2000).

Protecting Clay's assets

As Clay's population skyrocketed, concerns about overcrowding emerged. One provider explains the reactionary movement, saying, "Zoning came into play in all of our communities in the early '80s and it was a reaction to growth that we were experiencing, growth like never before." New zoning laws slowed growth by regulating lot size and restricting allowable use of land. Clay County planning and zoning boards (staffed with lay citizens, rather than land-use professionals) were tasked with protecting Clay's most important assets, without the kinds of resources that urban boards often have at their disposal. Clay residents explained that, without technical expertise in land use, most planning boards chose to preserve land, rather than to make development decisions that could not be undone. This contrasts with existing literature that suggests rural planners often see amenity-based development as having “significant net benefits” (Marcouiller, Clendenning, and Kedzior 2002: 517) without a full understanding of the scope of implications. Local stakeholders also put forth broader conservation efforts in Clay around this time, with new attention to preserving scenic vistas and open spaces. The number of acres protected by conservation easements in Clay County increased by more than 500 percent between 1980 and 1990, and another 300 percent between 1990 and 2010.[1]

An aging population

While the new restrictions on development undoubtedly preserved many of Clay’s scenic qualities, these regulations had other major, lasting implications. First, residents suggested that the restrictive zoning regulations calcified Clay as a recreation and tourism economy by effectively designating the scenery as the area’s most valuable resource and crowding out industrial development. This approach created an economy driven by recreation and retirement, with rippling effects on Clay’s economy and population for decades to come. Clay’s abundance of natural amenities means that it is a retirement destination, with regular influxes of seniors settling in. Data show that migration among those aged 60-69 was especially high between 2000 and 2010 (Winkler et al. 2013; see also Figure 1), and partially as a result, Clay County has a distinctive population structure, dominated by older adults—though this is not uncommon among rural places more broadly.

Union County: Sustaining a Remote Population

A land-based economy

In contrast to Clay County, Union County is significantly more remote, with a history of natural resource extraction and related manufacturing, and less emphasis on tourism. Amid the marine economy of coastal Union—including fishing and fish processing industries—good timber strengthened the lumber industry, the paper mills, and the ship building industries in the county’s interior regions. Produce processing rounded out the maritime seasonal employment, and in the 1800s, the county became accessible to tourists and workers via improved roads, bridges, and automobiles. Population changes in Union reflected these new opportunities, with decennial Census data revealing the number of residents doubling between 1820 and 1840, and steadily increasing until 1900.

Into the twentieth century, Union County's economy responded to the changing times. However, with urban industrialization, more rural parts of the region were under increasing pressure. Post-Depression markets facilitated industry moving south for cheaper transport and labor costs, while traditional regional goods faced increasing competition from international producers. In addition, infrastructure costs complicated doing business in the area. As one resident explained, "It's very expensive to run a mill [here] all year round, because of the heating and all that and so you just saw…this mass exit of all of the mill industry in this area. They found cheap labor somewhere else."

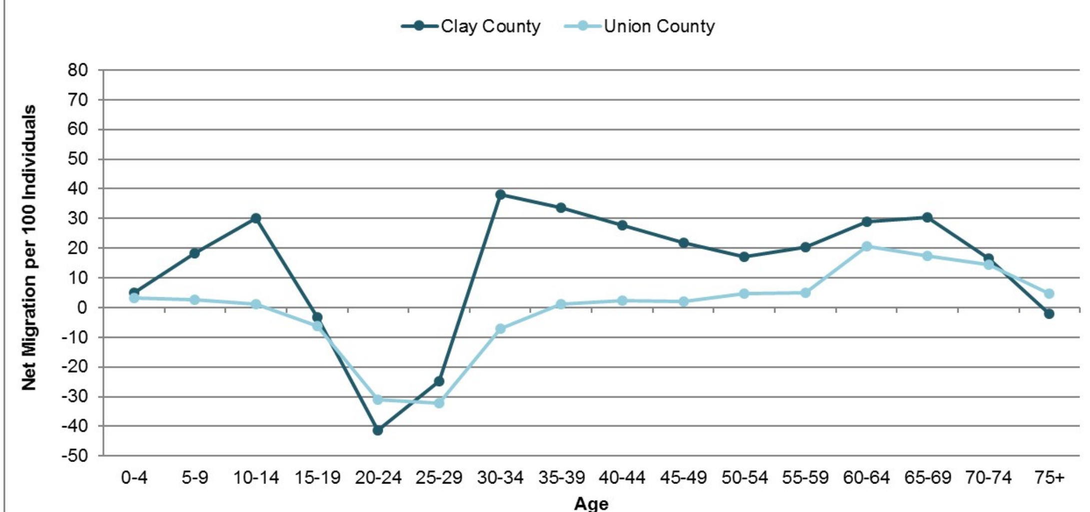
Patterned outmigration

Closely connected to the region's changing employment options, Union County began losing residents in the twentieth century. Local historical sources note that statewide population changes began in this period when "year-round residents began leaving… seeking better schools and doctors and more opportunities for work."

At least in recent history, those who leave Union County are not a random subset of residents. In 1970, Census data reveal a still-young population in Union, with large numbers of children and teenagers. A particularly large cohort is evident born between 1956 and 1960, reflective of the national post-World War II baby boom. In contrast, by 2014, the size of the baby boomer population was relatively stable, though the number of their children who still live in the county has fallen dramatically, resulting in a population structure like Clay County's—dominated by older adults. This loss of young people suggests that population change in Union is heavily shaped by outmigration, and corroborates what providers know intuitively about Union: "The young people, they're gettin' out of school now, [and] there's nothing for them…they're graduating from college and if they want a job, they got to go away. They can't stay, because there isn't that much for work."

Youth outmigration is an important characteristic shared by both Clay and Union Counties, along with many rural places nationwide. Migration data show that the largest single group of outmigrants in both Clay and Union is people in their 20s; both counties have aging populations wherein young people are leaving while older people are aging in place (Figure 1). However, these data also reveal a key difference between Clay and Union Counties in terms of in-migration patterns: in Clay, people in their early 30s (and their school aged-children) are entering the county at high rates, as are retirement-aged people in their late 50s and 60s. Although the influx of 30-somethings was less often mentioned in our interviews than was the arrival of retirees, there was some evidence that people upended by recessionary job losses had moved to Clay, either looking for work in the service industry, or returning to be near family in the region. As a result, Clay County's overall population is growing, while Union's is contracting. However, two key similarities between the counties remain: (1) each county's economic opportunities affect the type and number of people who arrive and leave; and (2) those same migration patterns in turn affect the kinds of economic opportunities that each county offers, through its demands for services and workforce availability.

Figure 1: Net Migration by Age and County, 2000-2010



Source: Replicated from Winkler, Richelle, Kenneth M. Johnson, Cheng Cheng, Jim Beaudoin, Paul R. Voss, and Katherine J. Curtis. Age-Specific Net Migration Estimates for US Counties, 1950-2010. Applied Population Laboratory, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2013. Web. March 30, 2017. http://www.netmigration.wisc.edu.

Clay County: Economic Implications of a Destination County

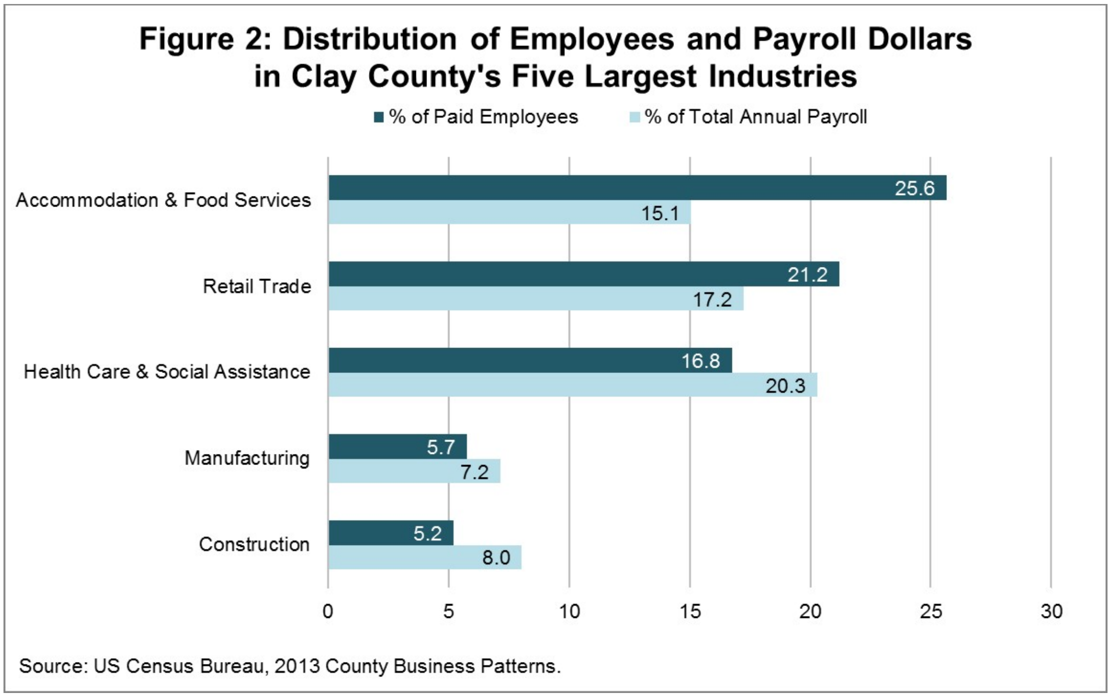
Quality of jobs

In many ways, Clay has been buffered from broader changes in rural labor markets, including losses in agricultural and natural resource-based jobs that have badly affected many rural communities. One provider noted, "The advantage that Clay County has over [our neighboring county], I think, is that it didn't experience the collapse of two or three important industries in the last fifteen years." In Clay, industries like mining and timber were not necessarily large economic engines, even at a time when this was the case for many other rural places. Data as far back as 1967 show that the largest industries have likely always been tourism and recreation centered,[2] and along with its designation as a recreation county, the Economic Research Service also classifies Clay as a services-dependent county.

This context shapes the economics of daily life for Clay County residents. Along with the services that retirees require (gas, groceries, and health care), the need for tourist amenities, like shops and restaurants, also shapes the job market via the prevalence of low wage jobs (see Glasgow and Reeder 1990). However, tight land use regulations—like those preserving Clay's scenery—are regularly associated with increased housing costs (e.g. Glaeser and Gyourko 2002). High housing costs affect working families' ability to remain in Clay, which in turn, reinforces Clay (in reputation and reality) as a place where seniors go to retire, not a place where young families can make a living. In other words, the tourism and recreation industries provide Clay County residents with jobs that might not exist otherwise and infuse the local economy with non-local cash. On the other hand, by relying heavily on these industries, Clay's economic structure is dominated by low-paying service jobs and high-cost housing stock, which in turn reinforces the outmigration of young residents.

Indeed, for Clay service providers and residents alike, one of the most pressing issues facing the county is employment. However, the *availability* of work is not necessarily a central concern; one provider explained, "I feel like you don't hear that very often: 'I can't find work.' You really don't… [The jobs a]re not ideal and there's not a lot of upward mobility and there's not a lot of pay and there's not a lot of benefits, but I think people would tell you that they feel as though they can work if they want to." Instead, residents describe the *quality* of available employment as more problematic, recognizing that the prevalence of seasonal, part-time, and low-paying work is inherent in Clay's natural amenity-based economy.

Data on Clay's business patterns support the perception that low-paying jobs are prevalent. Figure 2 shows the percent of Clay workers in each of the county's five largest industries (based on number of paid employees) in the darker bars, and the percent of all Clay County payroll dollars that go to workers in each industry in the lighter bars.



Discrepancies between the two bars indicate industries in which pay is disproportionately low or high. For example, in 2013, one in four Clay employees worked in accommodation and food services (25.6 percent), but those employees took home just 15 percent of Clay's earnings; a similar pattern emerged for workers in retail trade, Clay's second largest industry. That 46.9 percent of employees were clustered in accommodation and retail industries often means that, as one resident explained, "the people who work up here are not working just one job, they're working three." "Most of the people that I know either sell retail or do housekeeping or wait tables…it's really a lot of hard work and not a lot of money," said a Clay County resident. A retail manager concurred: "My job is one of the better paying jobs, and I'm still having it rough." This multiple, low-wage job landscape has implications for everything from the practical challenges of daily life, like securing health insurance coverage and adequate child care, to the community-wide struggle to entice working-aged people to stay in the region. "There has to be more than just hand-to-mouth existence," one service provider explained. "But if you're gonna have to work, you know, 3 to 4 part-time jobs to have enough money to pay rent and bring home a bag of groceries—that sucks. That's not something that's gonna attract and keep our young people."

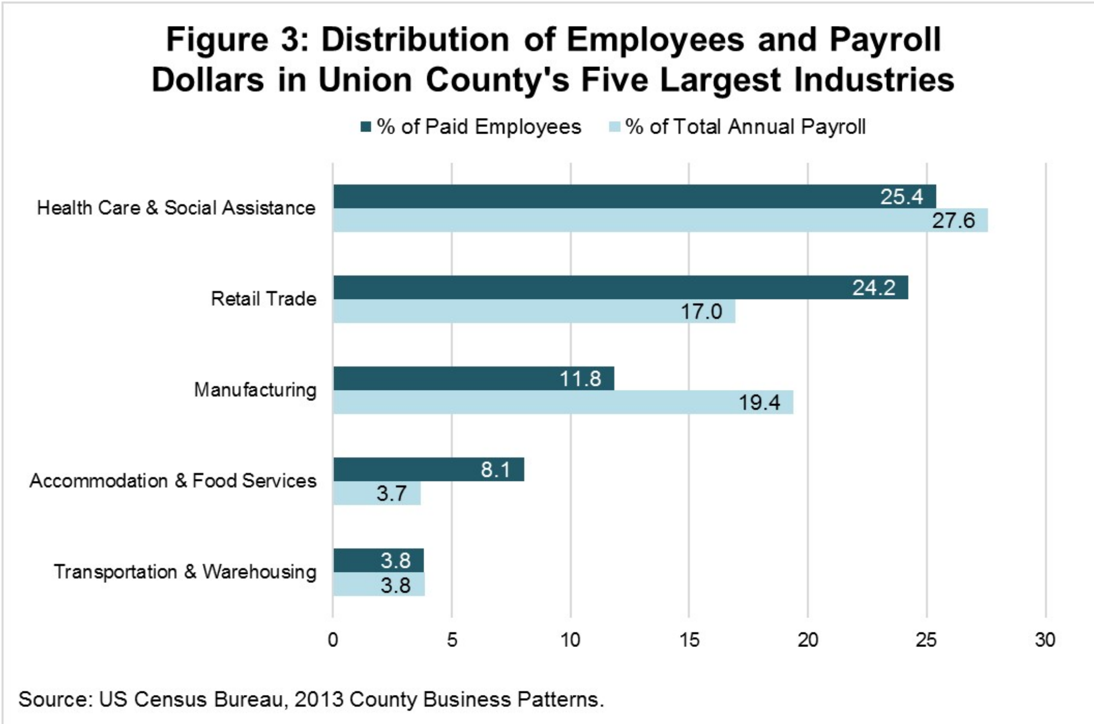
Outflow of workers

Of course, this is not to say that Clay has no working-aged people. In 2013, more than half (52.2 percent) of its population was between the ages of 25 and 64, and 73.6 percent of these residents are employed. However, many Clay residents do not work in the county; data from the U.S. Census Bureau's Center for Economic Studies shows that more than half (51.4 percent) of Clay County's employed residents work elsewhere. This outflow of workers is likely driven by earnings: 40 percent of Clay residents who work outside the county make more than $3,333 per month—about $40,000 per year—compared with just 28 percent of those who work in Clay, whether they live in the county or not. In other words, Clay residents who work locally are not paid poorly because other, more qualified people inhabit the county's "good jobs;" instead, Clay simply has fewer high-paying jobs than other counties in the region.

One provider attributed this lack of local industry back to the tourism economy, saying, "Nobody wants manufacturing here, because we are so much a tourist area. And that's wonderful and it is beautiful here and I chose to bring my children up here, but it makes it very hard. Our young people leave."

Union County: Making Ends Meet in Modern Times

In contrast to Clay County, Union County is more remote and less densely populated, has a legacy of high poverty, and offers a much smaller tourist industry. Figure 3 shows that health care and social assistance employs a larger share of Union residents than any other single industry, followed by retail and manufacturing. Employees in health care and social assistance—like many of the service providers participating in this study—receive a relatively equitable share of payroll dollars in the aggregate, whereas retail workers claim a disproportionately small share of payroll dollars, and those in manufacturing earn considerably more.



For residents outside of health care and manufacturing, survival in Union County can be difficult. When asked how she gets by, a single mother remarked, "I don't. I don't make ends meet. We ran out of money Monday. I get paid Friday…it's just a lifestyle. You adjust to not having and not doing." For residents like this mother, patching together government aid and "combining different kinds of work" (Tickamyer and Duncan 1990:68) are common approaches to making ends meet.

Patchwork and seasonal employment

Indeed, for those outside of Union's more stable industries, two kinds of alternate work arrangements were described in detail. As Nelson (2011) and others have observed, rural residents engage in seasonal and "patchwork" employment—that is, they work different jobs at different points of the year or multiple jobs at once—and when accessing traditional employment is difficult altogether, some find that making ends meet is more feasible through trading, bartering, or informally selling products from the woods, garden, or yard sales. Entrepreneurship provides some opportunities for some Union residents (also noted by Green 2017), although generating clientele can be a challenge. One Union County resident, who had a job in human services, but was also a farmer and owned a small business noted the risks involved with a remotely-located business. "Some of the challenges are just that, you know, population size. There's only so many people who are gonna take the extra effort to buy from [me] instead of from a [big box store]." To combat this challenge, he offered online ordering and shipping, to ensure demand before production. Still, even a "rural" trade like farming in Union is challenging: "It's very difficult to be a farmer without a community, without suppliers, without skilled workers, without custom operators…We're hoping to build a critical mass [of farmers] …that will kind of build a self-sustaining infrastructure with markets and suppliers."

Although Union County's economy has been in a state of flux since the turn of the twentieth century, that instability is one of the economy's most consistent characteristics. Regional historical sources note, "Coastal life settled into an economic pattern still evident today: opportunistic, multi-occupational fisher-farmers working seasonal odd-jobs; a scattering of shops, stores, and fish-processing factories; a vigorous trade in domestic handicrafts; and a collection of 'summer colonies' and hotels that helped sustain this local activity." This diverse economy is still a hallmark of modern Union County, and for many, employment in recent memory has always included components of seasonal work and "patching" together a living. As one provider noted, "I've always seen Union County as a [place] where a lot of people got by, by doing a number of different things during the year."

This irregular economy is reflected in Union's employment statistics, too. For instance, only 45.4 percent of working-age residents work year-round, considerably less than in surrounding counties, and especially low shares work full time throughout the year (37.2 percent). This speaks to the seasonality of Union's economy, a structure that for many providers has deep connections to the region's culture and history. One provider explained "A lot of people…survive on part time jobs. You know, they fish in the summertime. They drive the school bus in the winter time or work [in] an accountant office or whatever. They just cobble together a decent life—not great but that's how they work, and I think that kind of part time 'jobbi-ness' is what the kids expect as well." Another provider said, "There's not an expectation to get a full-time job. And so you get an idea that 'I'll work really hard for three or four months, and then I got to make it on that for the rest of the year.'" In each case, providers' comments reflect not only on the current economy, but the economy's connection to the past and to cultural expectations around work in the present.

Informal economy

One strategy that can circumvent or supplement unstable employment is to rely on a different kind of economy altogether. A conversation with a local service provider summed up an important component of the Union County economy:

(Provider): I think you're trying to address the question, "How do these people earn a living?" Well, they don't. They don't. They're barely scratching to meet their needs, and if any of their wants, and that's it. Some people say, "Well, then how can people live there? There's no work, no opportunity, there's no chance for advancement in any industry, because they just don't exist. How do they survive?" Now I don't know if any of your research has come across this but there is a reason why they stay here and how they survive.

(Interviewer): What is that?

(Provider): The hidden economy. People are resorting back to bartering. People are resorting back to cash only, unreported income…they want to be legit, but they don't know how to do it.

Indeed, this strategy is not uncommon in rural places, with evidence long suggesting that nonmetropolitan families in particular turn to informal efforts like trading, bartering, or selling things that they make, grow, produce, recycle, or repair at home to get by (e.g. Jensen et al. 1995; Nelson and Smith 1999). One Union carpenter exemplified nearly all these efforts, explaining,

> I just can't rely on carpentry around here to keep the ball rolling. I've always grown a big garden…I've sold organic vegetables privately and also to restaurants and whatnot...I've got a number of trees planted—more fruit trees, a variety. I do a lot of jams and jellies. I've sold a lot of my produce at the farmers' market in the past as well, to help keep the ball rolling. I own a bunch of land. I cut a lot of my own firewood. And I've cut and sold firewood in the past when I'm not doing carpentry and not doing gardening and other things to keep the ball rolling in that regard…I [also] was a captain of an aquaculture boat…It gave me a fallback as well.

Finally, an elderly woman in Union described informal barter systems, saying, "Yeah, they barter. You know, you have to. You want a ride to the store…they might even say, 'Come and do up my dishes, and I'll take you to the store.'"

Clay and Union: Interplay of Community Factors and Economic Opportunities

In both Clay and Union Counties, low-income residents struggle to make ends meet. Even when higher-paying jobs are available, residents may lack the resources (e.g. education or transportation) to get them. As a result, unskilled, low-wage work is sometimes the only viable employment option, and patching together multiple jobs is necessary, Further, residents in both places are subject to the same trials of low-wage workers nationwide: variable scheduling, limited options for benefits, and long working hours. In addition, Clay and Union workers face added rural burdens including long commutes to work and limited numbers of jobs, supportive services, and childcare options.

Key differences between the economic opportunities in Clay and Union Counties stem from the degree of remoteness in each geography. For instance, some low-income Clay workers have the option to commute outside of the region to find additional work, education, and social service opportunities, whereas the remoteness of Union County does not afford that option to its residents. In addition, the influx of retirees and day tourists into Clay stimulates new low-wage job opportunities, whereas demand for these industries is much more limited in Union.

Economic implications of outmigration

In both Clay and Union Counties, residents identify the loss of the young workforce as a key factor in each area's inability to attract new businesses. One Union County provider expounded: "We have done a lot of work with the investors behind [a new manufacturing plant in the region] to figure out a training and recruitment strategy where they can fill the eighty jobs they're creating, and they were concerned that they wouldn't able to, given just the number of people in the local workforce." While population size is less often a concern in Clay County, providers in both counties expressed concern about the quality of the workforce left behind when young people leave the region. Referencing the share of local students who graduate high school and do not leave the county for college or work, one Clay provider said, "Forty percent [of the graduating students] stay here and…[they] are not ready for work, never mind skilled…A lot of our existing employers have no problem training a worker who's ready to work, but they're not ready…" Union County providers also identified workforce readiness as a serious issue: "The ones who stay are probably not real high-functioning."

However, people-based policies are insufficient for spurring economic success in these communities. For instance, a history of low-skill employment opportunities has implications for young people's expectations for transitioning into successful adulthood in the region. One young Union resident explained, "I hear a lot of people say, once you get here, you're like trapped here. You can't get out of it." Another described "the fear that they're going to fall into this nutshell of what you can turn to be in Union County…You could get stuck in this rut and be there forever." A provider in Clay commented, "They go to college… [But] why would they come back? What's the opportunity going to be?" In both places, the contraction of the working age population and the related stagnation of economic opportunities reinforce the perception that making ends meet in Clay and Union Counties is simply not feasible. Reflecting findings from other rural scholarship (e.g. Carr and Kafalas 2009), one Clay community member said, "My advice to a lot of people is get out of town. You can't do it here. You need to go someplace where…you're closer to work, you're closer to the market." This sentiment is both an honest reaction to Clay's economic climate, and a contributing factor to that same climate.

Economic implications of in-migration

In-migration also has implications for economic opportunities available to low-income residents of Clay and Union Counties. First, incoming migrants affect the availability and affordability of housing stock, and even Union County's small population of retiring in-migrants influences the market. One resident noted the role of oceanfront property, saying "There are a lot of…local people who now can't afford to pay their taxes—who that piece of shore land has been in their family for fifty, hundred years—can't afford the taxes anymore and somebody from outside comes and buys it up and it's gone." In Clay County, real estate is an even more dire issue, as the county's less-remote location entices more second homeowners. Both providers and residents alike cited a relationship between the availability of affordable housing for locals and consumption of housing stock by new residents. One provider explained the complexity of this relationship: "We appreciate the second home market—nobody's saying it's a bad thing—but at the same time, when forty percent of your housing units are owned by second home owners, that means you have, you know, not very many options for the people who are working here." American Community Survey data from 2013 show that of every five housing units in Clay County, two (41.1 percent) were vacant and designated "for seasonal use." In total, just 1.5 percent of vacant units in

Clay County were available for rent, and more than half of Clay's renters spent 30 percent or more of their household income on rent and utilities.

Of course, another reality of in-migration is that outsiders—whether permanent retirees or people summering in the area—contribute to these economies in ways that locals cannot. A Union County carpenter explained, "And with the economy being what it is, a lot of local folks don't have any extra money, so I do a lot of work for out-of-town clients. Second homes, getting ready for retirement, these kinds of things; those are most of my clients…Without the out-of-towners, there wouldn't be a lot of paychecks around here." Similarly, in Clay County, retirees play an important financial role, particularly in the county's property tax base. One community member explained, "We raise a lot of tax dollars through commercial real estate, through second homes…These people don't use the resources, but we're able—the town is able—to raise the revenues." However, he continued, "They're not as invested in things like spending money for school districts…Their kids are through school, they've come here to retire, [and] they like their taxes to be as low as possible…that's a potential draw back." In short, while incoming residents stimulate the economy in terms of their demand for services and the infusions of non-local cash that they bring, their priorities may not align with the interests of Clay and Union's working classes (see Carson and Mattingly 2018).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

We document some of the ways that workers make ends meet in two specific rural communities and identify ways that these opportunities are shaped by community characteristics. Residents of these communities use multiple strategies to get by, the combination of which is influenced by their community's context, and in turn, serves to reinforce those contexts. While the ways that Clay and Union residents make ends meet overlaps with strategies identified in other rural scholarship, each community's individual features shape the opportunities afforded its residents. In Union County, these livelihood strategies are more often based in regional traditions of land-based economies (e.g. fishing, seasonal produce packing), whereas in Clay County, strategies are more frequently focused on combining multiple formal employment opportunities. While community context shapes residents' opportunities, those residents' responses—including migrating elsewhere, dropping out of the formal labor force, or occupying multiple low-wage jobs—reinforce the regions' population structure and the features of their labor markets. Most importantly from a public policy perspective is that in both amenity-rich places with in-migration, recreation, and tourism (like Clay) and in remote places with shrinking populations and a contraction of many industries (like Union), low-wage workers struggle to make ends meet, often patching together livelihoods with limited prospects for mobility.

In both places, local stakeholders are working to expand opportunities for low-income residents, and there is a sense that community economic development—place-based policies—rather than pure service provision, is an important path forward. Specifically, even with a strong and skilled workforce, Clay and Union cannot offer the kinds of work opportunities that those workers might seek, so place-based policies—those that push community economic development for a specific place—are also needed (Crane and Manville 2008; Green 2017). Stakeholders use both traditional and community-based methods of economic development, strategizing about how to entice new industry to the region, while retaining local control and maximizing local benefits in the process (Green 2017). One Union provider explained: "To be honest, we have to kind of try anything we think may work…you just can't chase smokestacks…You also need a whole group of locally owned and controlled small businesses, so you have decent multiplier effects." In Clay, diversification may occur within the service sector; with the aging population, one provider noted, "There's some pretty good health care opportunities here that don't exist in other places," although ensuring that these jobs are good quality is a distinct challenge.

On the other hand, the challenge of a self-perpetuating low-skill workforce is not an unusual rural issue (e.g. Blank 2005; Sherman and Sage 2011), and highlights a place for people-based policies in Clay and Union, that is, programs and supports that can help connect low-skill workers with training and education, so that they are prepared for the workforce. Providers who are focused on developing the regions' workforce also channel residents into training for jobs that fit both their skills and the region's economy. "If you can start educating people in the community and getting them internships at jobs that they have potential to do, then you're beginning to really feed the system in ways that are gonna make a difference," one Union provider explained. In Clay County, community experts are thinking critically about expanding the supports that low-income workers need: "In order to get young entrepreneurs here…we need to make sure that they can have a rental property that they like, or buy a house—that they can afford to do that."

As we document the ways that livelihood strategies overlap and diverge in these communities, a role for nuanced public policy and economic development becomes clear. Often, economists support "people-based" policies, like facilitating education, workforce training, or improving work supports, while rural development economists converge around support for place-based policies, given that "spatially neutral people-based policies can have spatially heterogeneous effects" (Irwin et al. 2010: 532; see also Siebert and Singelmann 2015). After talking with residents in these two different places that struggle to develop good jobs for local workers, we find Blank's (2005) call for both place- and people-based policies useful. Future research might focus on more explicitly understanding employers' and community developers' perspectives, highlighting their perceived challenges in encouraging economic growth and engaging the workforce, with the goal of better tailoring policy and practice to meet these needs. It is clear that work-promoting policies designed with an urban lens are inappropriate in many rural places, as the density of employment opportunities and supportive services are simply different. Our findings demonstrate that community context indeed shapes the opportunities that residents have for making ends meet, and that attention to the interplay between community and opportunity may be fruitful.

ENDNOTES

[1]Conservation easements are legal arrangements between stakeholders and land owners that restrict land use in order to protect its natural features. These arrangements do not alter the land's ownership structure, but instead are (relatively) permanent restrictions on potential development tied to the land.

[2]We use "likely" since the original data were on paper and uploaded in low quality copy to an archival host site, and some data are missing. However, in the earliest data available (1967), among employees whose industry is reported, 35 percent worked in hospitality-related service, with an additional 26 percent in retail and wholesale trade. Because data are also available for finance, insurance, real estate, manufacturing, and construction industries, we can conclude that workers were *not* clustered in these industries, although other unreported industries may have been important. For more, see the County Business Pattern files at https://research.archives.gov/search.

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