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Early Childhood in Rural Virginia: Challenges, Affordances, and Implications for Increased Access to Services

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Rural localities are characterized by open countryside or rocky, steep mountains, undeveloped land, and often have an agrarian or industrial economy with small populations and towns of 2,500 people or less.^{1 2 3} There are vast amounts of rural lands across the United States, however not all of it is populated, and, historically, most rural populations cluster on the outskirts of urban areas. Today, continued dependence on farming, topography, and climate are all reasons for sparse settlements in rural localities.⁴ Rural Virginia, in particular, has unique challenges specific to the Southeast/Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Virginia's 2019 estimated population is 8,535,519, and 1,034,447 of those people live in rural areas.⁵ The purpose of this report is to direct attention to the issues related to childhood in rural Virginia, as rural localities present a unique set of challenges for young children and families. In the sections that follow, we present an overview of relevant research as it applies to families residing in rural localities to situate implications for policy aimed at supporting needs throughout rural Virginia.



Figure 1. Rural home along a residential road in southwestern Virginia. Photo: Rebecca Tilhou, VECPC

Challenges Associated with Life in Rural Localities for Families with Young Children

People residing in rural localities face location specific challenges such as difficulty accessing employment opportunities, healthcare, and childcare services in communities with stressed economies.^{6 7 8 9 10} Research on rural localities routinely indicate that rural residents are

often in greater need of economic, health, and educational assistance,^{11 12 13} and, as a result of the locality, resources and services found in rural are widely dispersed resulting in inadequate access for families with young children.¹⁴ Rural localities also routinely report higher percentages of infant mortality and food insecurity rates.¹⁵ Moreover, rural educational systems do not always receive the same attention and funding as suburban schools or urban counterparts^{16 17 18} and people from rural localities have demonstrated higher high school dropout and unemployment rates.^{19 20} Resulting long-term impacts suggest that rural children may have less income mobility in their future.²¹ Such challenges can be attributed additional factors present in some rural localities such as issues with generational poverty and pervasive racial inequalities.^{22 23}

Rural Poverty

Statistics and research about rural localities, people, and poverty show that there is a persistent and ongoing difference between rural and urban child poverty levels, with rural rates consistently higher.²⁴ Poverty status is determined by comparing a family’s total before-tax income to a poverty threshold. The threshold measure varies based on the number of adults and children within the family, however, thresholds are not adjusted for cost of living differences across localities.²⁵ The current threshold for a family of four (two parents and two children), for example, is \$25, 465.²⁶ If a family of four’s income is less than this threshold, then every individual in the family including children are considered to be in poverty.²⁷

Nationwide, 11.8 million urban children live in poverty and 2.3 million children live in rural poverty, however, the percentage of children in poverty in rural areas exceeds those in urban—23.5 percent of children residing in rural areas are impoverished compared to 18.8 percent in urban localities. Nearly half (6.1 million) of America’s children living in rural poverty are in the Southeast, which includes Virginia, and the Southeast has by far the highest rate of poverty in the United States.²⁸ The 2019 Kids Count profile for Virginia showed that 258,000 children are living in poverty.²⁹ The 2018 Save the Children *Growing Up in Rural America* report detailed that approximately 13.1% of people in urban areas are living in poverty as compared to 23.7% in rural areas in Virginia. These comparisons are shown in Figure 2. Furthermore, Virginia was ranked as the 30th state for rural child poverty rate percentage, with the lower the ranking on the list of all U.S. states, the higher the rural poverty rate.³⁰

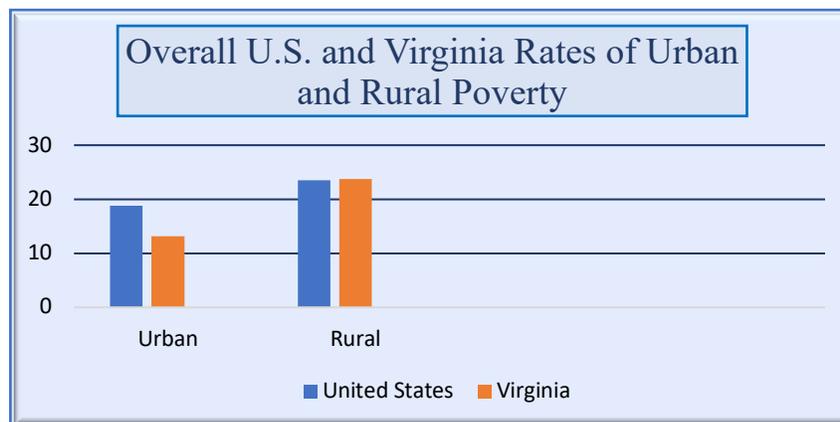


Figure 2. Overall Comparison of U.S. and Virginia Rates of Urban and Rural Poverty.

To further illustrate the relationship between rural places and higher rates of poverty, Figure 3 presents a mapping of Virginia based on average income rates and Figure 4 illustrates regions of Virginia urban to rural designation. Viewing these together shows how rural areas of Virginia in many cases correspond to areas with the lowest income brackets. As seen in the mappings below, the regions of Virginia that persistently endure the highest poverty rates, such as the lower Eastern Shore and in central and southern parts of Virginia, are located in regions that are identified as rural.

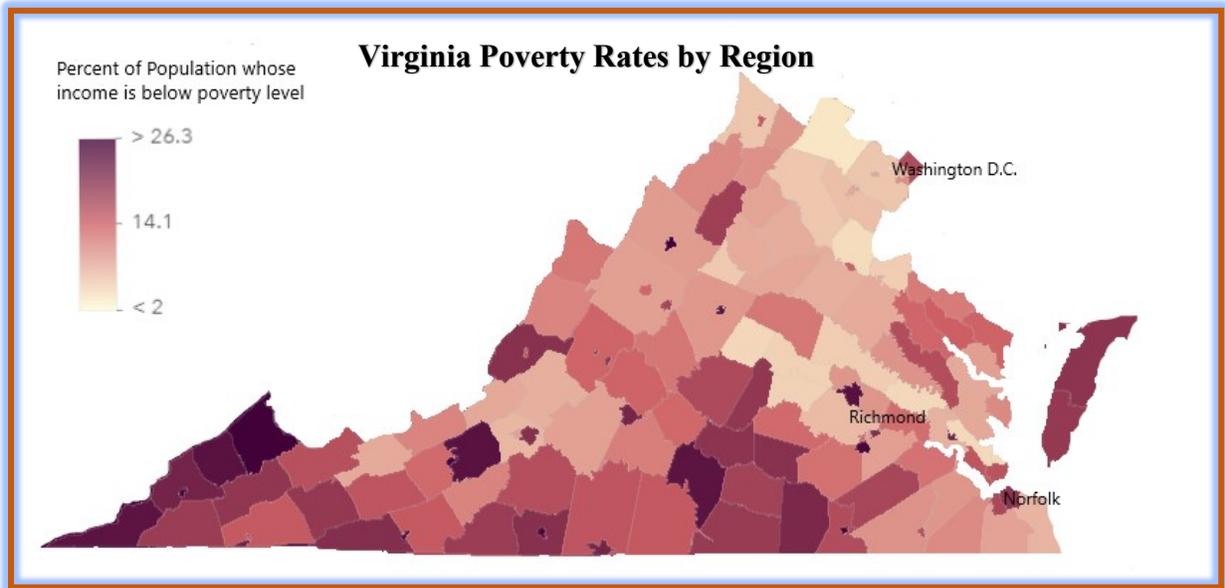


Figure 3. Virginia Poverty Rates map shows poverty rates by region.^{31 32}

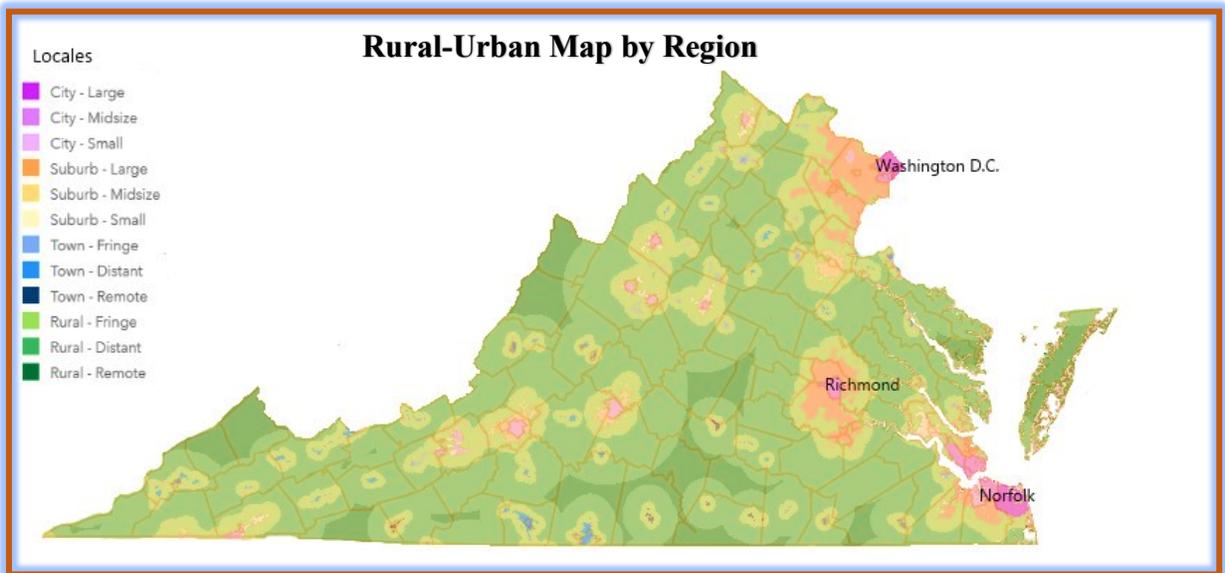


Figure 4. Rural-Urban map shows designation by region.^{33 34}

Across the mappings of Figure 3 and Figure 4, the locations showing the darkest red, or the highest poverty rate, also shows darker green denoting that the areas that considered rural. The co-occurrence of poverty and rurality within a location poses many challenges. Another one of those challenges is access to quality services that support the healthy growth of children—in particular, quality early childcare and education. In rural areas, such as those shown in the Figure 4, Rural-Urban map of Virginia, it is common for services to be widely dispersed. Thus, resulting in issues of accessibility for families and children which can create external barriers for their overall health and education.

Access to Services and Quality Early Care and Education

Regular health checkups, early childhood care and education, home visitation services, and access to healthy food, libraries, recreation, clean outdoor spaces, and community social events are all services that families in communities need access to in order to support the growth of children. A robust body of research on the economic and policy outcomes of early childhood services indicate that high-quality programs help to combat effects of poverty and other factors that place children at risk, better preparing young children for later school experiences.^{35 36} High quality early childhood education and care has the potential to reduce achievement gaps in school and promote better outcomes across the one's lifespan.³⁷ As such, nationally and throughout Virginia there is great need for high-quality early childhood care and education that promotes children's cognitive, linguistic, emotional, social, and physical development for children ages birth to five years old.

Quality in early childhood settings is an important factor in providing early learning experiences. Quality rating and improvement systems (QRISs) are used in Virginia to assess, communicate, and improve the quality of service early childhood settings provide. Virginia's QRIS is known as the Virginia Star Quality Initiative, and it is used across Virginia's classrooms, centers, and family childcare settings. Furthermore, accreditation can come from National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the National Accreditation Commission for Early Care and Education Programs (NACCP/NAC). With NAC accreditation, early care and education programs have the opportunity to demonstrate and document the quality of their service using research-based criteria.

Accredited education and early childhood care facilities are often widely dispersed, with rural localities having significantly less access to quality-rated care than urban and suburban counterparts.³⁸ Figure 5 shows the prevalence of quality early education and care services across regions of Virginia, with rural localities demonstrating fewer opportunities for quality, accredited care and education facilities. To illustrate, highly metropolitan areas such as Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads have combined QRIS, NAEYC, and NAC totals of 572 and 263 accredited early childhood care facilities, respectively. The Southwest region of Virginia only has 63 QRIS facilities, and none that are NAYCE or NAC accredited.

Prevalence of Quality-Rated (QRIS) or Accredited Care – by Region

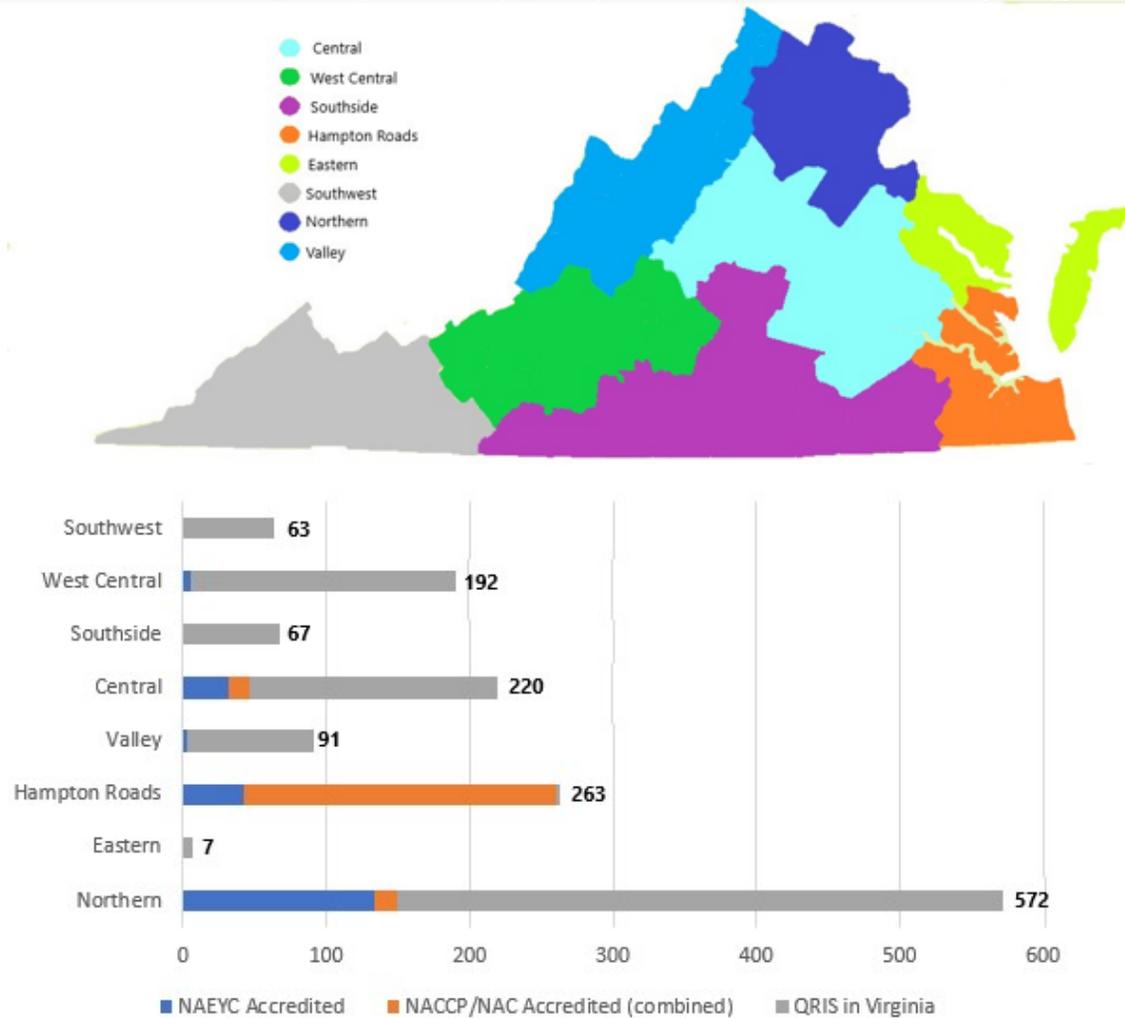


Figure 5. Regional map of quality early care and education.^{39 40 41}

A large selection of accredited early childhood care and education schools are available in highly populated areas such as Northern Virginia, Central Virginia, and Hampton Roads. In contrast, places with inadequate child care facilities are called child care deserts, and rural areas are found to have the highest concentration of these “deserts.”⁴² In a 2018 study done by The Center for American Progress, Virginia was found to have 50-60% of the population living in a child care desert, with the national range being from -30% to 60+%.⁴³ In rural areas, geographic proximity is a significant issue, as families may experience greater difficulty transporting children to available child care centers, public schools, and other sites of early learning because of distance and access to public transportation services.

Mobility

Strong community affiliations and relationships are a backbone of rural areas. Being raised within a supportive, friendly community can lead to future success and mobility for

children.⁴⁴ Mobility, in this section, refers to an increase in a youth's yearly income once grown into an adult compared to parental income; thus, *upward* mobility can mean advanced *economic* mobility but not necessarily physical mobility in terms of moving away from the rural place where one was raised. There are differences in mobility across America, and living in rural poverty does not necessarily mean a child has less of a chance for mobility than his or her urban counterparts. In fact, in many cases a child can have a better chance if poor in a rural place rather than poor in an urban place.⁴⁵

A 2014 study by Chetty and colleagues found that poor children from rural counties across America have gained higher incomes than the national average by the age of 26. Data for this study were collected from de-identified federal income tax records, which provided information about the incomes of more than 40 million children and their parents between 1996 and 2012. The study found that poor children from rural counties gained higher incomes as a result of **neighborhood effects**. Rural localities and communities, compared to poor urban communities, more often have a combination of factors, or neighborhood effects, that help poor children succeed in a labor market. Specific neighborhood effects that lead to mobility in rural localities include less racially segregated communities, little disparities in income, good primary schools, strong social networks, and family stability. These factors can produce adults that have shown to earn more than people who grow up in localities that lack those qualities.⁴⁶ Chetty found that rural localities in the Southeast United States, including Virginia, do not represent these overall statistics, and income mobility is significantly lower in areas with larger minority populations.⁴⁷

Neighborhood Effects:

Characteristics of a community that help children attain upward mobility

Specific positive neighborhood effects in rural localities are:

-less racially segregated communities

-little disparities in income

-school quality

-strong social networks

When considering neighborhood effects that promote healthy growth and mobility, such as strong community networks, less racial segregation and disparity in income, and good schools, policy makers need to explore which neighborhood effects Virginia's rural localities do have, and which ones are lacking. By focusing on the impact of neighborhood effects and exploring what some rural localities that do exhibit upward mobility have, Virginia policy and services can work to specifically address the components that hold back or promote rural children in poverty and lead the next generation to a healthy, bright future.

Recommendations

As rural areas can have higher concentrations of poverty that may persist over generations it is important to consider possible avenues that would best support families and young children in Virginia's rural localities. Specific to young children growing up in rural Virginia, rural families experience unequal access to quality, nationally accredited and quality rated early childhood education facilities due to scarcity and geographic proximity. What is known from the research on mobility is that neighborhood effects, or community characteristics,

which encompass connected, supportive educational and community networks, can have a positive impact on children's futures and later-in-life success. Considerations of the following recommendations may help to better support young children and families across the rural localities of Virginia.

Bill § 56-585.1:8 establishing pilot program to focus on outcomes of families' increased access to knowledge. A critical component of future mobility is access to knowledge- this could be knowledge about services, greater community and educational networks, and connections to further away localities. The internet has become today's hub of information and many rural localities in Virginia do not have the same technologies that cities do. It is typical for Virginia cities to have internet speeds at 20 megabits or more per second, which is higher than the national average. However, many parts of rural Virginia can have speeds as slow as in the single digits of megabits, which is, in fact, slower than many countries in the developing world. This is leaving many Virginians without access to vital information that is common for individuals living in cities contributing to issues of epistemic injustice.

To address this issue, a bill was proposed by Del. Israel O'Quinn of the 5th House District in early 2019 that pushed for increased access to high speed broadband in rural localities, and it was passed in March 2019 by the Virginia General Assembly. Thus, the Code of Virginia was amended by adding the section numbered 56-585.1:8 and calls for: *Pilot program for broadband capacity to unserved areas of the Commonwealth*. This pilot program is planned to run for three years, with Dominion Power and Appalachian Power being the leaders in each of the phases in providing increased services to rural areas by aiming to install cables that will carry broadband into hard to reach localities.^{48 49} Along with surveying the cost and the increased number of households and buildings with access to broadband throughout the pilot program, research could be conducted specifically to understand how this impacts knowledge dissemination to families with children who are in those remote localities. In particular, during the time of school closures due to COVID-19 pandemic, many children without broadband access cannot receive virtual, online instruction as their counterparts who have access to this service can.

Increase collaboration, communication and integration of services amongst stakeholders through collective impact organizations. Collective impact organizations are built on shared visions and common agenda as they gather stakeholders across the local and wider community- faith based, public and higher education, businesses, human services and non-profits, and local policy leaders- to develop a long-term commitment to a specific social problem.⁵⁰ By tackling issues from multiple angles, collective impact organizations have the potential to increase impact and decrease the duplication of efforts,⁵¹ the latter being a significant issue in rural Virginia, as the VECPC reported on in the 2013 *The State of Early Childhood in Virginia* report. Duplication of services in some cases and unintentional omission in others can be combatted and resolved when stakeholders have a space for open collaboration and communication. Specifically, a collective impact framework across Virginia has the power to enhance collaborative practices by hosting frequent meetings with specific agendas that promote the sharing of knowledge and resources.⁵² Additionally, collective impact approaches can facilitate larger-impact systems

change from this coordination among stakeholders and sectors by using a data-driven approach.⁵³ Data collection, sharing, and wide dissemination leads to cohesiveness across underserved regions. Furthermore, elected officials must create space for rural voices to inform policy decisions as part of collective impact.

Increased opportunities for transportation. Public transportation provides physical mobility for Virginia families who do not have their own vehicle. In urban paces, public transportation is often readily accessible, however transportation can be a real barrier for families living in rural areas. Many families with young children of rural localities may have limited access to a car. Public transit provides parents caring for children a way to commute to work and gain income, go shopping, get to medical appointments and childcare facilities, and travel to social and recreational activities. Safe, reliable, accessible, and affordable transportation is an essential link towards good health, education, and upward mobility. Public transport serving rural areas of Virginia does exist, for example:

- Jaunt, a 55 vehicle-fleet providing more than 228,000 trips annually serves the counties of Albemarle, Louisa, Nelson and Fluvanna and the city of Charlottesville.
- Mountain Empire Older Citizens, Inc (MET) has more than 25 bus routes that serve the counties of Lee, Scott, Wise and areas of the town of Norton.
- STAR Transit (Shore Transit and Rideshare) weekly service began serving Accomack and Northampton Counties on Virginia's Eastern Shore in 1996 when community leaders realized that a transportation service was critical to addressing increased poverty, a higher unemployment rate, and an older/disabled population with limited mobility and fewer registered vehicles.⁵⁴

These are three valuable transportation services that cover a large square mileage of Virginia's rural localities, however many areas are still left without comprehensive service. Funds for transportation in rural areas of Virginia was last addressed by the General Assembly of Virginia in 2006, with bill § 33.1-23.1:02 establishing the Virginia Rural Transportation Fund and determining:

- *A minimum percentage, as designated by the Board, of the moneys allocated from the Fund in a given fiscal year shall be used for non-highway related projects to improve transportation in rural areas; and*
- *The remaining moneys in the Fund may be disbursed for projects in rural areas based on application by Metropolitan Planning Organizations, Planning District Commissions, other transportation authorities established by the General Assembly, the Virginia Department of Transportation, and the Department of Rail and Public Transportation, or to make debt service payments on obligations incurred by the Board that address rural transportation needs.*⁵⁵

These two points indicate that only a minimum amount of funds will be allotted for non-highway projects, which would include public transportation, and that any leftover monies will be controlled by overarching authorities not specific to rural areas. Revisiting the 2006 bill to consider allotting a specific portion of Virginia Rural Transportation Funds for public transportation in rural areas that are underserved could serve to support rural communities. While there are a variety of programs and organizations that create a patchwork of transportation options in rural communities, a comprehensive approach would ensure equitable and consistent access to needed services.

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