

Mounting challenges undermine parenting

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Roughly 20 percent of children in the United States live in rural communities, but surprisingly few studies have looked at poor children from these areas. Credit: Public domain image, Library of Congress.

New findings from a long-running study of nearly 1300 rural children by UNC's Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute (FPG) reveal that parenting deteriorates when families face a number of risk factors at once. As a result, children's intellectual, emotional, and social

development suffers.

The findings from FPG's Family Life Project explain why a combination of [risk factors](#) like low maternal education, low income, and unsafe neighborhoods is a strong predictor of [adverse outcomes](#) for young rural [children](#). "When social challenges mount for families, it's likely this cumulative risk negatively affects parenting, which in turn hinders child development," said Lynne Vernon-Feagans, the study's principal investigator.

According to Vernon-Feagans, a fellow at FPG and the William C. Friday Distinguished Professor in UNC's School of Education, roughly 20% of children in the United States live in rural communities, but surprisingly few studies have looked at poor children from these areas. Since 2003, the Family Life Project has helped to fill this gap by producing integral peer-reviewed articles, while following 1,292 children from birth.

"We're examining a very understudied group of children in rural areas, and the study is sizeable," said Vernon-Feagans, who published the latest findings with FPG fellow Martha Cox and key investigators from the Family Life Project in a special monograph from the Society for Research in Child Development.

In order to understand the effects of poverty on parenting and child outcomes, Vernon-Feagans, Cox, and colleagues wanted to account for the most important risk factors that poor rural families face. They used "cumulative risk" to incorporate measures of maternal education, income, work hours per week, job prestige, household density, neighborhood safety, and the extent to which the parents are consistently partnered.

The study also observed parenting in the home by looking at whether

parents were sensitive and supportive or harsh and controlling. Likewise, researchers observed the amount each mother talked to her child during a wordless picture book task, as well as recording the material investments that parents made in their child's development.

In addition, the study examined important outcomes for children at age 3 by focusing on skills that enable children to undertake flexible, coordinated decision-making—a crucial ability for school readiness and academic achievement. Measures of language skills and social and emotional behavior also contributed to a model that revealed how numerous childhood skills are related to cumulative risk, telling a significant story about rural children in poverty.

Vernon-Feagans and her research team determined that cumulative risk, largely due to its effect on parenting, was an important predictor of these children's outcomes. "Overall, our findings indicated that the environment of poverty begins to shape child development very early in ways that have important implications for the child's ability to regulate emotion, attention, and behavior, as well as to use language in ways that school demands," she said.

Vernon-Feagans added that these findings reinforced the potential effectiveness of interventions that support parenting and other aspects of the rural child's social context, such as schools, neighborhood supports, and community resources—all of which can bolster development.

As the Family Life Project enters its eleventh year of data collection, Vernon-Feagans said many more findings and conclusions are forthcoming as the project's children make the transition into and out of elementary school.

According to Vernon-Feagans, an agreement with the University of Michigan ensures that the information the FPG project has gathered will

be available to all researchers through open access: "The Family Life Project's broad and deep measurement of rural families in poverty means this data will remain valuable for years to come for scientists looking to answer critical questions about [child development](#)."

Provided by Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute

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