

The Rural Poverty Commission: Ten Years Later

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More than a decade has elapsed since the Rural Poverty Commission submitted its final report—*The People Left Behind*—to President Lyndon Johnson. In its report, the Commission charted an ambitious course to deal with the problem of rural poverty, detailing some 158 separate recommendations. Although there is room for argument over the extent of the problem and where combating it fits among current national priorities, poverty persists in sufficient magnitude to give it a high rank. This is particularly true in rural areas, where the problem is often less visible and the conventional solutions have been less effective.

After 10 years, it is appropriate to look at the work of the Commission and assess its impact on Federal policy. Did the Commission ask the right questions? Were its recommendations heeded? Did the Commission make a difference? Is the course charted by the Commission still relevant?

What the Commission Did

On September 27, 1966, in the midst of the War on Poverty, President Johnson signed Executive Order 11306 creating the National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty. This Commission was charged with responsibilities to:

1. Make a comprehensive study and appraisal of the current economic situations and trends affecting rural people;
2. Evaluate existing policies and programs in terms of their effects on community welfare and the well-being of rural people; and
3. Develop recommendations for action by local,

State, and Federal governments or private enterprise for providing opportunities for rural people.

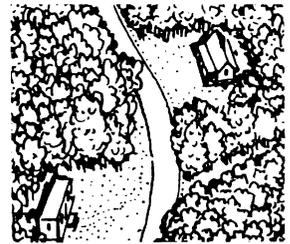
Of course, this was not the first commission charged with studying rural America and offering suggestions to improve conditions there. Notable among earlier efforts was the American Country Life Commission created in 1908. The American Country Life Commission made a comprehensive study and offered recommendations that eventually led to substantial improvements in rural America. It is especially remembered for its role in strengthening the discipline of rural sociology, creating the extension service, and improving financial institutions serving rural America. These institutions went on to play major roles in shaping rural society.

As the Rural Poverty Commission began its work, it was clear that the great surge of efficiency that took place on farms from 1946 to 1966 had been accompanied by unprecedented migration from rural areas, heavy concentration of rural migrants in central cities of America, and continued poverty for millions of Americans living on farms and in rural communities.

Adverse effects of this adjustment took many forms—low income, limited assets, unemployment, underemployment, malnutrition, disease, inferior social institutions, and depressed and poverty-stricken communities. These conditions persisted despite the fact that American agriculture was making unprecedented strides in increasing production. Indeed, it was apparent to the Commission that technological changes that made possible the increased production also contributed to the perpetuation of poverty in rural America. In this regard, much of the poverty in rural America was found to be structural in nature.

Commissions are formed for a variety of reasons. The Rural Poverty Commission was created principally out of a desire to provide more rural emphasis to the War on Poverty. Many persons, including Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey, felt this effort was too urban oriented. There probably were other reasons—to delay the push for costly actions, to build consensus on the necessity for taking actions, and to fill in gaps in the Government's understanding of the structure and problems of rural America.

Wide-ranging interests were represented on the Commission—labor, industry, agriculture, education,



media, racial minorities, community organizers, liberals, conservatives, and in-betweens.

The character of the work of Commissions is heavily dependent on the experience and capability of members and the executive director who has day-to-day responsibility for quarterbacking the entire operation. In my experience, I have found no two Commissions alike. Each develops its own particular chemistry.

The Rural Poverty Commission was blessed with members and an executive director of exceptionally high caliber. In its collective dedication, vision, and rigor, this Commission was truly exemplary.

Recommendations

Although the Commission staff took a heavy hand in framing the issues, amassing documentation, and writing the report, the tone, direction, and many of the specific recommendations came from members. The 158 recommendations the Commission put forth concerned such issues as income support and maintenance, food programs and nutrition, social legislation and programs for human resource development, and modernization of rural governmental structures. The broad range of these recommendations reflects: (a) the great complexity and pervasiveness of the rural poverty problem, (b) the diversity of viewpoints represented by the Commission members, and (c) the tenaciousness with which these points of view were represented during the Commission deliberations.

Evaluation—Ten Years Later

Twenty-twenty hindsight is a useful, if not entirely rare, attribute of policy observers. I exercise it with due humility, recognizing that its abundance belies its value.

Did the Commission Ask the Right Questions?

The answer depends in part on the audience the Commission was trying to reach and what it was

trying to accomplish. Three principal objectives were to:

1. Sensitize the general public, mostly middle-class urban people, about rural problems and to create the will to support policy solutions;
2. Broaden the scope of interest and involvement of rural interests beyond traditional bounds; and
3. Provide a comprehensive action agenda for those engaged in program administration and policy formulation.

Given these purposes, it appears that most of the right questions were asked. The Commission's inquiry gave sharp focus to current conditions in rural America and the urgent need for action. It established the relationship between rural poverty and the problems of poverty in our central cities, and it identified the need for both new programs and changes in current programs in such areas as unemployment, education, health, housing, and deteriorating communities. Some of the Commission's recommendations were too narrowly framed to remain relevant, but most are still relevant today, although actions and events since publication of the report have altered the surrounding circumstances.

Were the Commission's Recommendations Followed?

Not surprisingly, one can find cause for both hope and for despair in a search of the record since the Commission reported. However, on balance, I find cause for a great deal of hope. The extent to which this is a result of the Commission and its work is unanswerable. For the most part, the Commission was probably not an instrumental factor. Nevertheless, a high proportion of the Commission's recommendations have been acted on in some respect. Overall, this is reflected in the level of commitment to deal with the economic and social problems of the poor. Reductions in the number of poor people provide further evidence that these expenditures are having effect. More specifically, there have been significant improvements in:

- reform and expansion of the food stamp program;
- strengthened programs of pre-school and vocational education;

- extended coverage of various labor legislation;
- development of a comprehensive approach to manpower development;
 - increased emphasis on health clinics staffed by paraprofessionals;
 - adoption of a medicaid program;
 - increased use of family planning services;
 - growth of Health Maintenance Organizations (HMO's);
 - greater emphasis on Indian self-determination;
 - increased formation of substate multicounty planning and development districts;
 - greatly expanded rural housing programs, including use of rent supplements and self-help housing;
 - the institutionalization of Community Action Agencies (CAA's);
 - greater use of block grants; and
 - strengthened capacity of State governments to deal with human resource problems of rural areas.

The despair focuses on the most difficult, most intractable problems:

- reforming the welfare system;
- adapting policies for agriculture and land and water development to a broader range of social needs;
- solving problems of Indian and migrant populations; and
- institutionalizing a concern for and understanding of rural poverty in the Federal bureaucracy.

To repeat, the hope outweighs the despair by a significant margin.

An Unfinished Agenda

As a comprehensive blueprint for guiding policy actions, *The People Left Behind* has been a durable report. As a result, it has provided a useful benchmark against which progress can be measured. However, the report's direct influence on programs and

policy for rural America is difficult to judge. Few of the recommendations were original with the Commission, and there is no way of knowing whether subsequent progress in reducing poverty was related to the Commission's work. The Commission's value was in providing a framework around which prevailing ideas and information could be assembled and related to the problems of rural poverty. Thus, if there were any one particular benefit, it was the comprehensiveness of the approach. The other principal benefit was in the preparation of the Commission members and staff to apply the results of the Commission experience in their individual pursuits . . . not an insignificant benefit.

The most glaring shortcoming of this Commission, and others, is the lack of continuity and organized follow-through. Once the report is complete and its participants have begun to understand the intricacies of the topic they are treating, the Commission is disbanded and the report is turned over to others, some of whom are critiqued within it. Although *The People Left Behind* got better treatment than many such reports, unless there is continuing attention, it is too easy for such reports to be filed and forgotten. Perhaps there is merit in providing for such Commissions to periodically reassemble for purposes of stocktaking and updating of recommendations.

Ten years after the publication of the report of the Rural Poverty Commission, millions of Americans are still left behind. In the intervening years, significant improvements in programs and policies have been made. People's lives have been made more productive and more meaningful as a result. Still, the thrust has not been sufficient to overcome all the problems of rural poverty. Despite the many significant gains we have witnessed over the past decade, rural poverty therefore remains a problem of major dimensions. Unfortunately, it is not a current-day glamour issue and therefore tends to receive less attention than it merits.

I remain convinced that poverty will not be overcome without extensive reform of welfare programs, a coordinated program of human resource development, and substantial additions to the capacity of local governments and other public institutions to deliver essential services and to better adapt to structural change. These are the major components of the unfinished agenda. ■