

## Low-Income Program Design

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The Cooperative Extension Service has been given the charge to develop programs for delivery to the rural poor. This study surveyed the poor in three western Oregon counties. It indicates that rural poverty is heterogenous and people in poverty have a variety of needs. The authors then identified some implications of this survey to Extension programming. You may want to compare their implications to your current Extension programs for low-income people.

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“Develop programs for the rural poor”—that was the charge given to Extension.<sup>1</sup> And, several states are now in the midst of pilot efforts to develop these programs. This article reports the results of an Oregon study, with the assumption that the approach taken has implications for developing low-income programs in other states as well.

### Program Development Process

In developing Extension programs for the rural poor, as for any other audience, the first function is to identify educa-

tional needs and priorities.<sup>2</sup> Four bases are used to determine needs and priorities: (1) expressed needs of audience, (2) professional analysis of changing problems, (3) availability of new knowledge—research results, and (4) support group recommendations and funding.<sup>3</sup>

Each of these four bases presents problems in developing and directing programs for low-income rural families. Because of weak communication channels with this audience (as evidenced by results presented later), the expressed needs of the audience aren't communicated as effec-

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tively as those of Extension's commercial agriculture audiences. These communication channels for the rural poor will be built as programs are delivered, but at the outset this basis for need identification is limited.

Analysis to determine needs is also limited because Extension professionals don't completely understand the rural poverty situation. New knowledge contributing to the solution of the problems of poverty is accumulating, but the stock isn't enough yet to provide a strong base for program development.

The poor, especially rural poor, lack support groups to express their interests and concerns. Therefore, other approaches are required if program development is to be done successfully.

Initially, we found very little data available in Oregon on the characteristics of the low-income rural audience. We also didn't know how these characteristics differed from other audiences.<sup>4</sup> These data were a prerequisite to analysis of needs.

The Oregon study had as its objectives: (1) surveying a sample of families living in three rural areas, (2) sorting the sample families according to whether their incomes were above or below "adequate," (3) contrasting the socioeconomic characteristics of the two groups, and (4) drawing implications for the design of Extension programs for low-income rural audiences.

## Rural Poverty Problem

The rural poverty problem in Oregon is similar to other states. According to the 1970 census, 33 percent of Oregon's population lived in rural areas. However, 37 percent of the population with incomes below the poverty level were rural residents. Not only do rural areas have a higher portion of people with incomes below poverty, but these people are less visible and more easily neglected by public assistance and action programs.

Of the 86,830 rural residents in Oregon with income below poverty, the census found about 18 percent living on farms. These low-income farm families depend, at least partially, on small farm agriculture for their income. While nearly 80 percent of all Oregon farms are small, part-time, or retirement, many of these farm families have nonfarm sources of income raising their standard of living above poverty.

## Survey Procedure

Three western Oregon census county divisions (CCD)—Badger Mountain, Cave Junction, and Sheridan—were surveyed. The 3 study areas are predominantly rural, with populations of 6,938, 2,866, and 3,280, respectively. The CCD's vary in terms of the predominance of agriculture, recreation potential, proximity to metropolitan areas, and industry.

A questionnaire was designed to use in interviewing. Questions covered the characteristics of the families, employment, education, income, and use of public service agencies.

The interviews were done by assistants hired in each area. They were trained in interviewing techniques and assigned to cover all roads and streets systematically, stopping at every fourth or eighth house, depending on the appropriate sampling rate for that study area.

### Survey Results

While we recognize that poverty is a relative concept incorporating several dimensions, we are narrowly defining it as income here.

The criterion used to determine the adequacy of household income was based on the census definition of poverty adjusted to 1972.<sup>5</sup> This was increased by 25 percent to provide a figure higher than the bare subsistence indicated by the census definition. For a single-person household, the minimum "adequate" income thus derived was \$2,070; for a family of four, \$5,330.<sup>6</sup>

The households surveyed were sorted into "below-adequate income" and "above-adequate income" groups by comparing the "total household income" reported with the "adequate" income level defined above.<sup>7</sup> When we didn't have enough information to clas-

sify the household, that household was excluded from the analysis.

In specifying elements of low-income programs, it's necessary to consider the characteristics of the target audience, particularly as contrasted with other audiences.

The following analysis applies to the three study areas combined. For this reason these characteristics should be considered guidelines for overall program development. Specific programs should be designed for each area depending on the unique characteristics and needs of families in that area.

#### Comparisons of Two Audiences

For all study areas combined, 108 of 374 households (29%) had below-adequate income. The mean income for the below-adequate income households was \$3,047 compared to \$11,381 for the above-adequate group.

As might be expected, households headed by older persons or females are more likely to be receiving inadequate incomes (Table 1). A larger portion of lower-income people were over 65 years of age, but the percentage of children wasn't greatly different compared to higher income groups.

#### Employment and Education

Being poor isn't just a matter of not being employed. The results of the survey indicated that 59 percent of the households in

**Table 1. Selected age and sex characteristics by income level, all study areas.**

Item	Below-adequate income	Above-adequate income
<b>Age of household head</b>		
Less than 24 years	7.5%	3.8%
25 to 34 years	15.9	19.8
35 to 44 years	13.1	27.8
45 to 44 years	11.2	22.8
55 to 64 years	16.8	17.9
65 years and over	35.5	8.0
Total	100.0%	100.0%
<b>Sex of household head</b>		
Male	80.6%	92.4%
Female	19.4	7.6
Total	100.0%	100.0%
<b>Total persons in households</b>		
65 years and over	16.3%	4.7%
Under 18 years	33.7	36.7
Under 6 years	6.7	7.4
Total	100.0%	100.0%

poverty circumstances had no one employed. However, 58 percent of those who were employed were working 10 to 12 months, essentially full-time. Despite this full-time employment, these households were still receiving below-adequate incomes.

Many unemployed poor household heads, moreover, weren't "typical" labor force members. Of all poverty household heads, 59 percent were unemployed. Of those unemployed, 59 percent were 65 years old or over, 13 percent were females under 65, and the remaining 28 percent of the unemployed were

males under 65. In other words, only 28 percent of the unemployed poverty households were headed by working-age males.

Furthermore, some of these 28 percent may be characterized by physical disability, educational deficiency, or other unavoidable conditions. Therefore, the provision of economic opportunity is only one part of a successful poverty program.

Formal education has long been singled out as one of the more important variables contributing to higher incomes. The results of this survey aren't conclusive in that respect. Cases of

low education levels were found among the higher-income group, and higher education levels were found among the lower-income group (Table 2).

#### Small Farm Component

In this study, small farms represented a minor portion of the rural poverty situation. Fifteen percent of all households had farm sales. Of households with below-adequate income, only 12 percent had farm sales.

The farm households with below-adequate income were compared to those with above-adequate income. The low-income farms tended to be smaller and a lower percentage had income from off-farm employment (Table 3).

The age distributions of the heads of the households didn't differ significantly.

The most important difference in attitudes between the low-income farmers and other farmers is that a higher portion of the low-income farmers wanted

to do less farming and/or more off-farm work, as opposed to making no change or expanding the farm.

#### Use of Selected Agencies

It's believed that low-income people aren't inclined to seek help from Extension or avail themselves of services from other public agencies. In the survey, below-adequate income households reported a greater exposure (compared to adequate income households) only to the county Public Welfare Division (Table 4). Households with above-adequate incomes were more likely to be users of other public agencies than were the low-income households.

Reasons for the lack of use of public agencies by poor households might include an absence of knowledge about the availability of services, attitudes against participating in these services, and the inaccessibility or inappropriate nature of the services offered.

**Table 2. Formal education by income level, all study areas.**

Level of education	Below-adequate income	Above-adequate income
Less than 8 years	2.5%	3.2%
8 to 11 years	30.0	21.2
High school diploma	42.5	46.2
Some college	20.0	16.5
College degree or more	5.0	12.9
Total	100.0%	100.0%

**Table 3. Characteristics of households with farm sales by income level, all study areas.**

Item	Below-adequate income	Above-adequate income
Gross farm income per household	\$1,190	\$4,972
Households with off-farm employment	46.2%	92.3%
Land owned per household	91.1 acres	212.2 acres
Land farmed per household	96.3 acres	282.2 acres

When low-income people did make a contact with the county Extension Service, they were inclined to make more than one contact, similar to those with adequate incomes. However, only 27 percent of the households reporting below-adequate incomes indicated a contact with the Extension Service.

The nature of the contact with Extension Service was revealing. For families with below-adequate incomes, Extension con-

tact was most frequently through 4-H Clubs. The Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program was the second most reported contact. For the agriculture and family living programs, only one low-income household indicated contact with each.

Families with higher incomes also reported their greatest exposure was to 4-H activities. Significant exposure was indicated to family living programs, with agriculture third in importance.

**Table 4. Contacts with selected agencies by income level, all study areas.**

Agency	Below-adequate income	Above-adequate income
Farmers Home Administration	0.9 %	12.5 %
Soil Conservation Service	14.8	27.8
Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service	5.7	20.6
State Employment Service	31.5	43.2
County Health Department	35.2	41.5
County Public Welfare Division	22.2	9.5
Community College (not as a regular student)	14.8	26.3
County Extension Service	27.1	40.3

### Implications for Low-Income Programs

The results of this survey indicate that rural poverty is heterogeneous. It is a many-faceted phenomenon requiring a *total* Extension outreach.

Programs should not be primarily small-farm oriented, nor should programs be designed principally for unemployed male household heads. The programs should be flexible enough to serve the needs of the 60-year-old farmer and the 24-year-old female family head with several small children.

Extension programming, to address the causes and consequences of rural poverty, will require a variety of elements. Examples include:

- programs on home and money management and consumer economics.
- programs to increase awareness of the services offered by state and local agencies to the rural disadvantaged.
- programs in cooperation with other agencies to increase opportunities to the underemployed, such as employment counseling and job retraining.
- programs designed to help rural communities, organizations, and businesses enhance education and human capital development.
- programs for all members of low-income rural households to improve the qual-

ity of the non-monetary aspects of life.

- programs for small farmers designed to help those who wish to continue to farm and have an opportunity for success.

Further analysis will be necessary to determine the specific needs of low-income rural audiences and what priorities should be established.<sup>9</sup>

People in poverty aren't as responsive to traditional delivery methods (Table 4). Programs are needed that recognize the personal and individual nature of poverty within each family. Fulfilling its educational responsibility will require that Extension be prepared to address poverty through new methods and increased cooperation with other agencies.

Thus, Extension will serve as an innovator, facilitator, referral agency, training unit, and counseling service, in addition to other capacities, as it relates to low-income audiences in rural areas.

### Footnotes

1. Charles Beer, "What's Happening to Political and Social Attitudes" (paper presented at the Southern Extension Farm Management Small Farm Seminar, Lexington, Kentucky, April 3-4, 1973) and Thomas Brown, "Extension Farm Management Programming for Small Farms" (paper presented at the North Central Farm Management Extension Workshop,

- Michigan State University, East Lansing, May 21-24, 1973).
2. E. J. Boone, R. J. Dolan, and R. W. Shearon, *Programming in the Cooperative Extension Service: A Conceptual Schema*, Publication 72 (Raieigh, North Carolina: Agricultural Extension Service, 1971); Ken D. Duft, "Systems Planning for Extension," *Journal of Cooperative Extension*, VII (Fall, 1969), 168-78; and Gale L. VandeBerg, "Guidelines to Planning," *Journal of Cooperative Extension*, III (Summer, 1965), 77-86.
  3. Hal Routhe, "Farm Management Programming 1973 and Beyond" (paper presented at the North Central Farm Management Extension Workshop, Michigan State University, East Lansing, May 21-24, 1973).
  4. Some census data were available, but were found inadequate for these purposes. U. S. Bureau of the Census, "Characteristics of the Low Income Population, 1970," *Current Population Reports*, Series P-60, No. 81 (Washington, D.C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1971) and U. S. Bureau of the Census, *1970 Census of Population: General Social and Economic Characteristics: Oregon*, Final Report PC(1)-C39 (Washington, D.C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1972).
  5. The 1972 poverty threshold was found by adjusting the 1970 poverty figure for the change in the consumer price index between 1970 and 1972. See U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Characteristics of the Low Income Population, 1970," p. 19, for the census definition of poverty.
  6. The formula used was \$1,780 plus the product of \$890 times the number of persons in the household.
  7. Total household income is the sum of income from all sources with net income from farming assumed to be one-third of the gross income reported.
  8. See Duft, "Systems Planning in Extension" and Charles A. Ibsen and Manuel Alers-Montalvo, "Expressed Family Needs," *Journal of Cooperative Extension*, V (Summer, 1967), 85-92.