Rural poverty: Trapped in the cycle

Rural poverty: 'A way of life' for numerous Oklahomans

Poverty is common experience for many rural Oklahomans

By MICHAEL OVERALL World Staff Writer | 51 comments

VIDEO: Rural Poverty: Stilwell Oklahoma is one of the poorest towns in the state

STILWELL — With no air conditioning on a brutally hot summer afternoon, 19-year-old Breeze Bunch is sitting on the front porch with a half-empty Pepsi and a bottle of sunscreen.

"Why don’t you go splash in the water?" Bunch tells her 2-year-old daughter, who waddles off toward an inflatable kiddie pool under a shade tree beside the house.

Sharing a clapboard house with her boyfriend’s family, Bunch lives on a dead-end street north of downtown in one of the poorest, most crime-ridden neighborhoods in Oklahoma. This isn’t Tulsa or Oklahoma City, or even Muskogee or Lawton. A five-minute walk could put Bunch in the middle of a cow pasture.

“I don’t really want her to grow up here,” Bunch says, watching her daughter climb into the water. “If it was up to me.”

Like a lot of her friends in high school, she dropped out during her junior year when she

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With no air conditioning, Jenifer Wilhite and her family, including her son, Ray Wichita, and her 9-month-old grandchild, Blazton, come to the front porch for relief from the summer heat in Stilwell. MIKE SIMONS/Tulsa World

Buy this photo
Bunch's boyfriend took them to Arkansas, where he was making $14 to $15 an hour as an electrician and renting an RV for his young family.

The RV had air conditioning. But her boyfriend missed his family, so he quit to come back to Adair County, the poorest rural area in northeast Oklahoma.

Now he’s sitting inside watching TV next to his aging grandfather, who pays the rent — $400 a month for no air conditioning and windows that are painted shut — with his veterans disability checks.

“We were having a blast” in Arkansas, Bunch says. “Me, I couldn’t care less about coming back. And yeah, I’d get out of here again.

“If it was up to me.”

‘Way of life’

It might not be what comes to mind when most people think about “poverty,” but Stilwell — the Strawberry Capital of Oklahoma with a population just over 4,000 — is statistically more representative of poverty in this state than, say, a Section 8 housing complex in north Tulsa.
“We’re the forgotten poor,” says Shelldon Migletto, the recently resigned city clerk who is now working as a consultant while the town looks for a permanent replacement. “Or maybe we’re not forgotten, just ignored.”

Ninety minutes east of Tulsa and accessible only by two-lane highways, Stilwell is poorer than most small towns but not really atypical. Simply being rural is itself a significant risk factor for poverty, according to the nonprofit Oklahoma Policy Institute.

Rural areas always tend to be poorer than urban or suburban communities, with 14.2 percent of the rural U.S. population living in poverty compared to 11.6 percent of the urban population, according to Oklahoma Policy’s research. And the national average jumps to 16.8 percent poverty in rural counties — like Adair County in eastern Oklahoma — that are not contiguous with an urban area.

Three factors — all readily apparent in Adair County — contribute to rural poverty, according to Oklahoma Policy:

- Amenities, or the lack thereof. With “nothing to do” in a small town, young people who can afford to move away often do, depriving their hometown of the very type of resident who could attract investors. In a classic Catch-22, small towns can’t attract the kind of amenities that will make young people want to live in them until more young people are living in them.

- Geographic isolation. The sheer distance from job opportunities makes it difficult for residents to find work, according to the Oklahoma Policy paper “The Surprising Causes of Rural Poverty.” Stilwell, for example, is an hour from the nearest significant cities, Fayetteville and Fort Smith, Arkansas.

- Social norms. Teenage parenthood and an ingrained pessimism — “there aren’t any jobs, so why even try?” — can keep young people from striving for the kind of education that could end a generational cycle of poverty.

“A cornerstone of combating poverty is education,” says Migletto, who grew up in Stilwell and came back to live here after going to college in Texas. “We have three to four generations of families in which welfare is a way of life. They don’t know any better. They don’t know how to break out of the cycle. So when I say education, that’s what I’m talking about.”

‘Less than nothing’

One evening in early summer, Jennifer Wilhite’s teenage sons were walking home from a friend’s apartment, a few blocks from their rental house, when they were approached by four other teenage boys.

One wore a North Carolina-blue shirt and another a blood-red bandana, perhaps a sign that small-town gang-banger wannabes don’t discriminate in their choice of colors.
One took out a handgun and held it against her younger son’s head to demand his phone, Wilhite says.

“It’s dangerous walking around here,” she says. “You think a small town is safe? Not anymore.”

Now in her late 30s, Wilhite grew up in Stilwell but remembers a different kind of neighborhood. Parents kept track of their kids, and neighbors enforced discipline when parents weren’t around.

“Now all these kids here think they’re Crips, think they’re Bloods,” she says. “And the cops around here don’t do anything.”

The police simply don’t have funding to put juveniles in custody unless it’s for a violent crime, Chief Chad Smith says.

“All we can do is send them home to mommy and daddy,” he says. “Then, people blame the police because we’re not doing anything.”

On a windowsill next to his desk, Smith keeps a collection of empty cans — mostly spray paint or WD-40 — that have been modified with hidden compartments or false bottoms to carry meth and other drugs.

All have been seized during recent raids.

“It’s ingenious, really,” he says. “If people would apply this much effort and ingenuity to finding legitimate jobs, Stilwell wouldn’t have any problems.”

Smith moved here from Kansas in the early 1990s to be a paramedic, but he also signed up to be a police reserve officer and soon discovered that was his true passion. He became chief four years ago and also serves as a school board member and volunteer firefighter.

“It’s a great community — has great people in it,” he says. “Everybody knows everybody. Everybody stops to talk.

“You go to Wal-Mart to buy dog food and the wife calls you an hour later to ask where you are because you stopped to talk to somebody. That’s the kind of town Stilwell is.”

But it’s not the way Wilhite describes the town. She shares three bedrooms with her husband, five children and a 9-month-old grandchild.

“If you have a little money, this is a great little town, I’m sure,” she says. “But if you don’t got money, you’re nothing in this town. You’re less than nothing.”

‘Just the way life is’

Lisa Pruitt grew up in the wooded hills of northwest Arkansas, where it was about an hour’s drive across the state line to her grandfather’s house in Stilwell. That was, of course, long before she earned a doctorate from the University of London and became a law professor at the University of California-Davis, where rural poverty has become the main focus of her scholarship. But perhaps her experience with Stilwell, and the similar poverty she saw growing up in rural Arkansas, sparked the interest in her.

People have a misconception about rural poverty, she says, that “it is somehow not as debilitating as urban poverty.”

“We cling to the notions that small towns will still function as a community where people will rally around each other and help,” she says. “‘So maybe you’re poor, but at least you’re living in this beautiful, pristine countryside and at least your neighbors will take care of you.’
“It’s not like that at all.”

If anything, rural poverty might be more debilitating. Sheer distance can deprive people of social services and education opportunities that would be a short bus ride away in a city like Tulsa, Pruitt says.

In other ways, however, poverty is poverty wherever it is found. And the root causes are the same — a lack of education and lack of capital investment, both public and private.

And then there’s a touchier, more complicated factor that both rural and urban poverty have in common, Pruitt says.

“The idea of a ‘culture of poverty’ has been controversial,” she says. “But it’s making a comeback with sociologists.”

People make choices — to become sexually active at a young age, for example, or to drop out of school or to leave one job before finding another — and choices have consequences.

“There’s a relative lack of role models,” Pruitt says. “So the younger generation doesn’t know how to set goals for themselves and how to work toward something better. They don’t necessarily believe there is anything better to work toward. ‘This is just the way life is.’”
Cassandra Wilhite holds her 9-month-old baby Blazton while her mother, Jennifer Wilhite, explains what life is like in Stilwell. “If you have a little money, this is a great little town, I’m sure,” she says. “But if you don’t got money, you’re nothing in this town. You’re less than nothing.” MIKE SIMONS/Tulsa World

Changing that, she says, would take a massive shift in both the political and cultural landscape.

“I’ve been studying these issues for a long time,” she says. “And I can’t say that it has made me very optimistic.”

Back in Stilwell, 2-year-old Brinley Jones is relaxing waist-deep in the kiddie pool while her mother sits in the grass to spoon-feed her some ice cream.

If somebody else could watch Brinley for a while, Bunch might have time to study for the GED. Then she might have time to enroll in nursing school — with a scholarship from the Cherokee Nation, she says, because she is a citizen — and then she could find a good-paying job here in Stilwell.

“That’s what I would like to do,” she says. “Yep — that’s the plan.”

But when can she get started? Bunch shrugs her shoulder and gives Brinley another bite.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Adair County</th>
<th>Tulsa County</th>
<th>Statewide</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poverty rate (34.2 in Stilwell itself):</td>
<td>27.2%</td>
<td>14.8%</td>
<td>16.6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Median household income:</td>
<td>$33,325</td>
<td>$48,926</td>
<td>$46,235</td>
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<td>Median home value:</td>
<td>$74,700</td>
<td>$136,100</td>
<td>$115,000</td>
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<td>High school diploma:</td>
<td>78.5%</td>
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<td>Bachelor’s or higher:</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
<td>23.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Labor force participation (16 years and older):</td>
<td>53.6%</td>
<td>67.0</td>
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<td>Retail sales per capita:</td>
<td>$5,535</td>
<td>$17,032</td>
<td>$13,174</td>
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<tr>
<td>Population change (last 5 years):</td>
<td>-3.0</td>
<td>+5.9</td>
<td>+4.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: U.S. Census

Michael Overall 918-581-8383
michael.overall@tulsaworld.com
Bunch's boyfriend took them to Arkansas, where he was making $14 to $15 an hour as an electrician and renting an RV for his young family. The RV had air conditioning. But her boyfriend missed his family, so he
quit to come back to Adair County, the poorest rural area in northeast Oklahoma. that’s part of the problem...left a good job to come back home and mooch off family. Sometimes you have to leave home to make your life better... cut the apron strings. People are always talking about “those people” mooching off the system but the poor come in all shades. And they blame everyone else but themselves.

Katherine White posted at 7:15 pm on Sun, Aug 7, 2016.

Many of us are too busy working to worry about your poverty. Have you ever heard the saying “the harder you work the luckier you get”. Try it. Tulsa has many resources for those who want to improve themselves.

Katherine White posted at 7:12 pm on Sun, Aug 7, 2016.

You are not the forgotten poor. Some of us are too busy working and taking care of ourselves and our families to think about you. They teach you in school about goals and making good choices. After you have made poor decision after poor decision what do you expect? Many people work jobs they don’t like because they need the income.

Jack Snyder posted at 3:09 pm on Sun, Aug 7, 2016.

People complain about generational poverty and African-Americans, yet most welfare recipients in Oklahoma are white and, yes, they predominantly vote republican.

Get an education, stay in school, make good grades, practice safe sex, and get the heck out of these rural cesspools.

But it’s a heck of a lot easier to blame Obama for everything gone wrong in rural Oklahoma.

Donald Cody posted at 4:23 pm on Sun, Aug 7, 2016.

What a pant load....How do you know how they vote....My guess is that they don’t vote at all.....It all boils down to making bad choices.....getting pregnant and dropping out of high school was a bad choice....Leaving a $15 an hour job as an electrician in AR and moving back to Stillwell was a bad choice....

Louis Young posted at 8:28 pm on Sun, Aug 7, 2016.

Right,tell us about it Einstein. 😊

Brandy Braniff posted at 3:55 pm on Sun, Aug 7, 2016.

Not in proportion to the % of black population
Blacks are way over represented in crime and mooching stats

Louis Young posted at 8:26 pm on Sun, Aug 7, 2016.

Don’t pay any attention to Moochie, Martha. He, she, it, is uncouth.

martha morris posted at 7:18 pm on Sun, Aug 7, 2016.

Prove it in Stilwell.


My parents lived and died in Bell, Oklahoma south of Stilwell, Ok. and yes, we lived poor, but that doesn’t mean that I wanted live poor. I went NSU then I enlisted in the USAF, I have a better life then my parents ever had. No it was not easy, yes I had to work and study hard, it took years, to build a good life for my family and I. I am not the smartest person, I had to make a joice, to live poor or try to make a better way of life for my family and I. I don’t want the finest things in life, just a little finer and not live poor!!

Gordon Mills posted at 4:42 pm on Sun, Aug 7, 2016.

Jeremy, good on you. Your choice to better your life is commendable and an example for those mentioned in this story. They make the decision to continue to live as they do.

Emmalee Taylor posted at 2:56 pm on Sun, Aug 7, 2016.

I have lived in Stilwell my whole life and if you choose to live this way then you can. There are jobs for people who want to work.

Ramona Brown posted at 8:42 pm on Sun, Aug 7, 2016.

Please post any job opportunities please!!!


Further proof the welfare State has ruined millions of lives

Louis Young posted at 8:29 pm on Sun, Aug 7, 2016.
Too many people moving in on your welfare moochie?

Log In to report. | Link  Reply  Reply

David Taylor posted at 2:03 pm on Sun, Aug 7, 2016.

"...where he was making $14 to $15 an hour..."

Log In to report. | Link  Reply  Reply

Peter Henry posted at 12:12 pm on Sun, Aug 7, 2016.

“The idea of a ‘culture of poverty’ has been controversial,” she says. “But it’s making a comeback with sociologists.”

She could just as easily have read Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s papers from 50 years ago rather than re-creating the wheel. Unfortunately, “liberals” (The liberal Moynihan would not recognize what the term has come to imply.) ex-communicated his thoughts since his death. I wonder whether the TW would have printed this expression if the article’s participants had been blacks or latinos rather than whites.

Log In to report. | Link  Reply  Reply

Amber Connelly posted at 11:49 am on Sun, Aug 7, 2016.

This was a great article. I just wanted to leave this comment in case the young lady really wants to go to school and does not know how to approach it. Cherokee Nation and the federal government will give you grants. Also Cherokee Nation will pay for a sitter (I believe they will pay a biological grandparent to do that as well) and there is even a program to pay for your nursing school supplies when you make it that far. I hope you are reading this post. Don’t pay attention to the negative posts and people in your life. You can do this. The first step is apply for the lpn program or college and make an appointment with Adult Education at Cherokee Nation. Don’t give up on your dreams and stop the cycle with you. Your baby deserves to have a chance!

Log In to report. | Link  Reply  Reply


"The best way to help poor people -- is to not become one of them” (Rev. Ike)

The Lord helps those who help themselves (Scripture)

The Lord helps those who help themselves -- implied in the GOP bagger-party platform.

The federal government should provide room, and board, and job's education -- for every USA’n capable of learning a job’s skill.

National-Jobs -training Centers -- should be established -- at as many "former" (currently underutilized) military bases -- as the need be.

According to Calvinism -- poor children made the mistake of selecting impoverished parents, rather than to be born into families that could afford to raise then properly.

Ignorance -- about how many kids an impoverished family can properly
The Lord helps those who help themselves is from Ben Franklin, not the bible.


wow read the article on Stilwell, everyone wants to say, "Well it's generational welfare, their grandparents where on welfare etc. etc. The truth is I work two jobs and still live below the poverty line. My parents didn't finish high school but were able to work 40 hour jobs and were able to build a home and feed their family. This younger generation may be able to get a part time job at walmart or mcdonalds with no benefits and few hours, or they could work at a factory for a temp agency that takes most their pay. Rich people want you to believe its because young people had unplanned pregnancies, the truth is and no one wants to admit this, but you can do everything right in this day in age and still end up living in poverty. As Dr. Phil says, "You can't change what you don't acknowledge."
So solving our social problems, IMHO means we have to admit that the balance of prosperity has shifted to the corporate world and left our young people behind.

Ronny Baker posted at 8:03 pm on Sun, Aug 7, 2016.

Shhh. RWNJs can't handle facts that aren't convenient. Let them think they're superior because of "choices" they made.

Ed Brocksmith posted at 10:19 am on Sun, Aug 7, 2016.

An example of excellent journalism. Yes...education is the key to fixing many of our problems.

Tamra Bacon posted at 9:45 am on Sun, Aug 7, 2016.

There should be time limits on food stamps and section 8 so that those receiving the assistance will be working towards becoming better educated and self sufficient. These should not be way of life programs generation after generation. I've never heard anyone with a college degree say "man, that was such a bad choice"...

martha morris posted at 7:30 pm on Sun, Aug 7, 2016.

Those folks weren't on section 8 housing.

Michael Smith posted at 1:39 pm on Sun, Aug 7, 2016.
I agree Tamara. How do you propose a 19 year old with a kid who lives in the middle of no where and whose family do not have a car gets access to a better job and education?

I want people off assistance as much as one, but we need to figure out solutions instead of telling our poor and vulnerable to figure it out themselves.

Brandy Braniff posted at 2:32 pm on Sun, Aug 7, 2016.

No one anywhere in America is denied a public school education. Stilwell and every town in Oklahoma has schools

Louis Young posted at 8:31 pm on Sun, Aug 7, 2016.

Good comment Michael. 😊😊😊

Michael Smith posted at 5:08 pm on Sun, Aug 7, 2016.

You didn't answer the question.

Having an education does not mean someone pulls up in front of your home and makes everything better.

You have a kid. You live in the middle of no where. You have no money and no transportation. You could move to Tulsa, but you don't know anyone there, have no money to put down for an apartment, no way to get child care while you interview.

This 'everyone has access to an education' is way of not engaging in finding solutions. It’s an excuse not to care while pretending you are a good and fair person.

Ronald Welch posted at 8:23 am on Sun, Aug 7, 2016.

If you read this article and can't see the numerous bad decisions then YOU have a problem.

Michael Smith posted at 5:08 pm on Sun, Aug 7, 2016.

I suppose the bad decision was being born poor?

Brandy Braniff posted at 7:00 pm on Sun, Aug 7, 2016.

The bad decision was making bad decisions to make it worse
Generations of poor white people are primarily democrats...they are uneducated, ignorant, and are on food stamps and welfare, just like Obama likes them. 😊

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Since the state is bright red... I think you are up the wrong creek. Read the daily oklahoman article about http://newsok.com/spavinaw-residents-feel-gop-presidential-nominee-donald-trump-understands-despair-surrounding-their-town/article/5512785

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Actually, many are Republicans because of God and guns.

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So, you're saying you're a democrat?

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Excellent article!

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Deb, actually it is pretty depressing.

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Universal access to free birth control would end a LOT of problems with poverty. Work with people in poverty and it becomes clear most of their problems start by having kids at an early age. This article makes that evident.

Sadly, many oppose doing such a thing because you'd be 'giving something away.' Instead, we have to feed, attempt to educate, house, then ultimately put the kids in jail, or pay for the next round of mothers.

Seriously... birth control is a lot cheaper than food stamps, welfare, Section 8, disability checks, extra police, extra jails, crime and so on.

Michael, given your apparent political bent you should realize that they all have access to abortion and you should have written your comment substituting abortion for ‘free’ contraceptives. Abortion is more effective than contraceptives for reducing the population.

martha morris posted at 7:33 pm on Sun, Aug 7, 2016.

BIRTH Control would cut down the abortion rate...which has been made more difficult. If you don’t have money, getting an abortion is harder than you think. Middle class and the well off ALWAYS have a way to get an abortion.

Charles Clinton posted at 1:50 pm on Sun, Aug 7, 2016.

What is it like to live under a bridge Gordon?

Donald Cody posted at 4:32 pm on Sun, Aug 7, 2016.

Charles, Why don’t you tell us what it's like to live under a bridge....Does the traffic interrupt your sleeping off your hangover....

Michael Smith posted at 1:33 pm on Sun, Aug 7, 2016.

Gordon, they generally do not have access to abortion due to cost and transportation issues. Furthermore, many oppose it because of religious issues and the psychological trauma it can cause.

This has nothing to do with reducing the population, but helping people in poverty stay not pregnant until they are able to start a family. We have many women in this state who have two children before their 18th birthday.

Cindy Keith posted at 11:19 pm on Sat, Aug 6, 2016.

Great piece, Michael Overall...

Dana Asher posted at 9:40 pm on Sat, Aug 6, 2016.
republicans have no time for the "little people"......

Dana, because of their unbalanced diet, most of them are obese rather than being 'little people'.....I'm not quite sure of how 'little people' are being mistreated....

Neither do you Asher, except to post on the Internet

The kettle talks again. 😄

If the Democrats started running the House, Senate and the Governor's office tomorrow, nothing would change for these people. It's not a political issue. It's a "catch-22" fact of life, like the article states.