



Research Brief

Social Support Among Rural Low-Income Mothers: Who Helps and How Much?

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Families with limited resources often find it challenging to provide for all of their family's needs. Formal support systems may be inadequate or unavailable, or families may avoid using them for various reasons (1). Families who have chosen to live in rural areas because of ties to family and place often turn to their kin networks for help.

Low-income family networks often respond to economic hardship and, as a result, supply resources for immediate needs (2). Because extended family members usually come from similar socio-economic circumstances, providing support may put a strain on their own resources (3).

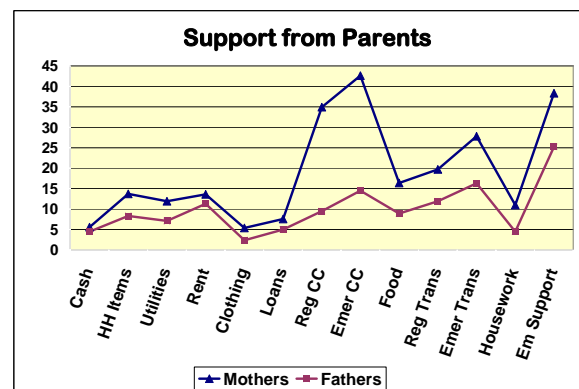
Family network support comes in many forms, ranging from monetary and material resources to practical services such as providing child care and transportation to advice and information. Emotional support is also an important part of close support networks and family networks are typically strong sources of emotional support. The relationships within the network play a big role in determining what, how much, and to whom support is given. Parents provide the most support and the widest range of resources to their adult children and their families (4). There may be various motives parents have for aiding their grown children: altruism, investment in succeeding generations, and/or expectations for help in their old age.

Proximity of kin and other support network members influences the types and amount of support given (2). It is obvious that most practical services require giver and recipient to be in the same location, examples: giving rides to work or taking care of children when their

parents have work or school. Distance also impedes information exchange and financial assistance. Emotional support may be exchanged regardless of location, but distance adds to costs of communicating with others.

Findings from *Rural Families Speak* study*

- Most participants reported tightly-knit networks that were composed primarily of family members. (11)
- Most participants lived within 50 miles of at least one parent. (11)
- Participants have more contact with their mothers than their fathers, 50% saw their mothers every day. (11)
- About twice as many participants received support from their mothers (65%) than from their fathers (34%). (11)
- Mothers and fathers provided similar types of support, with mothers providing more of all types, especially services and emotional support. (11)



- Networks helped maintain household viability & increased financial stability. (10, 13)

- Networks protected against food insecurity & depression. (2-5,12, 13, 14, 15)
- Networks facilitated employment through transportation and child care and provided information and advice about jobs. (1, 12, 13, 16)
- Social support was positively linked to education of teen mothers. (8)
- Networks provided information and advice about parenting. (6, 13, 16)
- Networks provided emotional support and companionship. (11, 13)
- Expectations and demands for network participation and reciprocity cost time and money. (7, 9)

Many low-income rural mothers survive with the help of their extended family networks. Their choice to live in close proximity to kin may give them vital access to resources and emotional support. However, there are time, energy, and financial demands on members of the support networks, especially the parents, to provide support. The lucky ones have family and friends willing to make such sacrifices without demanding too much in return.

What Does It Mean?

Income losses or increased costs of necessities may extend well beyond one household or family. Reductions in wages or hours worked, higher fuel prices, and/or loss of eligibility for government benefits may affect a much larger circle of people than just the immediate family of the worker, commuter, and/or benefit recipient.

Staying near parents or other family members, often in low-wage markets, may reduce income earning potential and keep low-income mothers and their families dependent on their social networks. However, when mothers examine the trade-offs, their choice to stay in the network may be the best one for their family overall.

Families with few resources often have to share them with extended family members and their friends and neighbors; however, much of the support families give and receive is never seen by formal support agencies.

What may be viewed as “poor money management practices” by food stamp or WIC recipients, for example, actually may be resource sharing with persons beyond the immediate family.

- Educators should consider helping low-income participants who rely on informal support to develop communication and interpersonal skills that can facilitate and maintain good relationships with social support network members.
- Knowledge and use of formal support resources may lessen the reliance on informal support networks for basic needs and help in crises.
- Skill in resource management may lessen the use of informal support and reduce demands on social networks.

**See attached bibliography for list of papers from which these findings were drawn.*

References

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This research was supported in part by USDA/CSREES/NRICGP Grants 2001-35401-10215, 2002-35401-11591, and 2004-35401-14938. Data were collected in conjunction with the cooperative multi state research project NC-223/NC-1011 Rural Low-income families: Tracking Their Well-being and Functioning in the Context of Welfare Reform. Cooperating states are California, Colorado, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New York, Ohio, Oregon, South Dakota, West Virginia, and Wyoming.