

“Children of the Downturn: Poverty and Capability in Post-Coal Appalachia”

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Summary: Our research centers on at-risk youth in the coal mining regions of Appalachia. A full analysis of the “human condition” must include the socioeconomic factors that influence a person’s economic livelihood, ethical capability, and sociopolitical autonomy—so we believe that our work may contribute to discussions that concern these topics, and especially to those who emphasize the social (in)justice of economic inequality.

Abstract: The coal downturn of the last few decades has created millions of new American poor in Appalachia. As coal mining and its ancillary service industries lost momentum, thousands of families and their children lost their livelihood. What is the best way to help these children fight the systemic poverty that has turned them into *de facto* second-class citizens? We offer both a new analysis of coal-related poverty in the southwestern Appalachian region and a transdisciplinary methodology for its betterment and eventual resolution. We reconceptualize the idea of ‘poverty’ through the capability approach to ethical justice, which understands the human condition in terms not only of material wealth, but also of substantive freedoms. In what sense are the young poor of post-coal Appalachia ‘unfree,’ and thus systemically ‘poor’? We then coopt community-building strategies typically employed by preachers (“come to church, get free pizza”) to establish networks of *capability*-building empowerment, with an emphasis on at-risk youth in Alternative Education systems in Wise County, VA. Our goals are twofold: (1) to develop a better definition of ‘poverty’ in post-coal Appalachia; and (2) to develop recipient-centered solutions for the aid that is supposed to provide poverty relief, but which is often grossly inadequate.