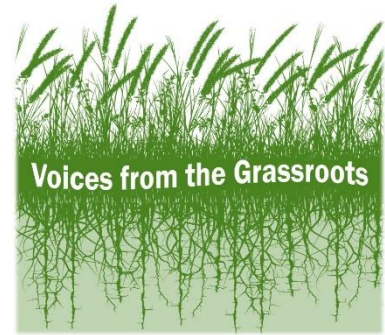


VOICES FROM THE GRASSROOTS COMMENTARY
**Examining the history of trust within
 Appalachian coal camps**



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In the last few decades of the 19th century, towns and settlements were sparse in the Appalachian Mountains. Due to this isolation, a culture of solitude and self-reliance developed, affecting the economic status of the area (Gabriel, 2014). Coal companies established numerous towns known as coal camps, exerting tight control over them. Consequently, community members of these coal camps relied entirely on the mining

companies for survival. This dependency contributed to the region’s decline; as coal lost its dominance and work diminished, economic opportunities also vanished.

While trust is crucial in anyone’s life, it seems to have a higher significance in the Appalachian Mountains and particularly to those who live in coal camps, due to the region’s history. Outsiders

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to those living in the camps are not typically received well, and there are many areas in which the concept of trust should be examined for these people. Environmental, social, and economic trust are areas to be explored as there is a rich and unique history pertaining to each of these. Working with someone who is trusted within the coal camp is imperative for fostering a more trusting relationship with outsiders, including social, environmental, and economic establishments and changes that they might want to bring. Many coal camp communities are considered food deserts. There is limited access to fresh fruits and vegetables, making it very important for these communities to be equipped to grow more of their own fresh fruits and vegetables. Connecting a faith community nurse within coal camps in Appalachia could prove a successful way to enhance trust in community members and facilitate support for accessing fresh fruits and vegetables. We developed a team approach where a nurse who is considered a community insider works with a layperson leader from within the rural coal camp community. To address concerns for limited access to fresh fruits and vegetables, we identified strategies to address the overarching issue of a lack of trust that many rural community members feel. Some community members have concerns about food that comes from outside sources. The faith community nurse and other community insiders have been able to educate community members and support them in overcoming these concerns.

The Connection Between Culture and Trust in Appalachia

Understanding trust in Appalachia is complex, as it differs from the rest of the nation. Many residents live in conditions characterized by poverty, depression (both psychological and/or economic), and suspicion related to a long-term history of exploitation. Appalachians are often reluctant to accept help from people coming in from outside their region. Most have long drives to reach a grocery store, which has resulted in the consumption of canned foods over fresh fruits and vegetables. Regarding health information, they rely heavily on nurses, doctors, and websites (Myrick & Hendryx, 2021). Traditional media is not deemed trustworthy, which presents risks when disseminating infor-

mation during global health crises. In addition, the remoteness from primary-care providers poses challenges in accessing trustworthy health information (Hu et al., 2022).

Cultural values and norms deeply influence trust among Appalachians. Most community members value their faith in God and emphasize independence and self-reliance. Even community members who do not consider themselves religious will speak of their trust in God. The family is also paramount. Many individuals stay within their community even after establishing their own families, leading to isolation from broader national dynamics. This rurality often results in a preference to depend on family rather than outsiders. Often, those people who remain in a coal camp are closely or distantly related. Despite these challenges, coal mining remains a prevalent occupation in Appalachia (Poudyal et al., 2019).

Trust Within Coal Camp Communities

Distinct from most places in the United States, coal camp communities are generational homes. A generational home in Appalachia is when multiple generations of a family live in the same home, or within a mile of each other. Often in rural Appalachia we see older adults sharing their homes with their children, grandchildren, and even great-grandchildren. Residents are more inclined to trust someone within the community than those from other locations, even if those people are well educated. They have seen each others' children grow and have shared life events. Trust is paramount due to the isolation of these coal camps (Russ, 2010). For outsiders, trust and respect are hard-earned. The most successful advocates for these communities are often those born there.

Proposals for change are taken seriously when they originate from someone with community roots. This trust extends to professionals like nurses who are insiders in the community (Canterbury, 2019). Due to limited transportation, it is common for rural community members to stock up on nonperishable food for the long, cold winters. During these times, most community members consume very small amounts of fresh food. We were able to work as a team to develop nutrition-based interventions including education and

community garden development. Two of the authors of this article are considered community insiders in one Appalachian community, and we also were able to identify other community leaders to support our work. This helped to overcome some of the trust barriers that are commonly seen in Appalachia.

Trust and Economic Relationships

West Virginia is the only state that is fully located within the Appalachian region. Starting in the 1880s, large external companies acquired land throughout West Virginia for coal mining (Corbin, 2015). The companies constructed towns for mine workers, controlling housing, stores, post offices, churches, and schools. Unlike stores outside the camps, these company-owned outlets accepted scrip, a form of currency paid to miners, enabling the company to dominate the local economy. The control extended to monitoring mail, stifling political activity, and preventing unionization, sometimes resulting in violence and armed conflicts (Corbin, 2015; Stevens & Fogel, 1999).

Despite its tumultuous history, coal mining has shaped a distinct culture, with many perceiving mining as superior to other occupations. For many Appalachians, coal represents the only path to economic independence, and they view environmental regulations as external threats to their livelihood (Lewin, 2019). However, the industry's decline is primarily due to the rising demand for natural gas and other forms of energy and to decreased productivity in central Appalachian mines, not to solely environmental policies (Appalachian Regional Commission [ARC], 2011; Bowen et al., 2018).

Trust and Environmental Concerns

Mining and industrial pollutants have been linked to higher rates of diseases in nearby residents (Hendryx, 2018). Although entities like the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency regulate the industry to curb pollutant release (Harvey, 1986), many residents blame these regulations for mining's decline, overlooking other market contributors (Bowen et al., 2018; Lewin, 2019). The downturn has profoundly affected Appalachians in the industry, with many mines closing since 2008 (Berry, 2021).

There is a profound mistrust of the government among Appalachians that affects their willingness to engage in environmental programs (Scott & McSpirit, 2014). Building trust around environmental issues is critical for change. Community-based educational initiatives and involving local stakeholders can alter perspectives and cultivate trust, as seen in the University of Tennessee's clean water project (Arcipowski et al., 2017).

Trust and Social Services

Trust in social services and government assistance in Appalachia has been influenced by historical exploitation and negative external views. Challenges in employment and social issues, often highlighted by media stereotypes, have undermined trust. Although many residents have benefited from these programs, there is a need for a more collaborative approach involving local communities in program design and implementation to ensure that their needs and voices are heard (Kauffman-Craig et al., 2014). Education and awareness campaigns are crucial in countering myths and showcasing the positive impacts of these services. We used a team approach where community insiders served as leaders in addressing limited access to fresh fruits and vegetables through identifying concerns with trust among residents of the rural Appalachian communities we worked in.

Trust, Change, and Transition

Despite the coal industry's decline, distrust persists among West Virginians toward governmental agencies and outsiders, who they feel prioritize environmental concerns over residents' well-being (Lewin, 2019). Building trust is a nuanced, time-consuming process, essential for successful community revitalization. Addressing power imbalances and ensuring open, respectful dialogue can foster a collaborative atmosphere (Nixon et al., 2023; Savage et al., 2018). Demonstrating genuine efforts to prevent exploitation and support the region is key to building trust (Lewin, 2019). Strategies for gaining trust are outlined in Table 1. We identified and used these strategies to help address fear and lack of trust among the residents of the communities we worked in. These strategies are things that we use with any new

Table 1. Strategies for Gaining Trust in Appalachian Coal Camps

| Strategies | Description |
|--|---|
| Engage in Active Listening | Actively listen to community members' concerns, perspectives, and needs. Show empathy and validate their experiences. |
| Build Relationships and Establish Rapport | Take time to build relationships with individuals and community leaders. Participate in community events, volunteer, and show genuine interest in their well-being. |
| Promote Transparency and Open Communication | Foster transparency by providing accurate information, sharing updates, and addressing questions and concerns openly. |
| Involve Local Community Members | Engage local community members in decision-making processes, planning, and implementation of programs and initiatives. Ensure their voices are heard and valued. |
| Collaborate with Local Organizations | Establish partnerships and collaborations with local organizations, community leaders, and service providers to leverage resources and collective expertise. |
| Demonstrate Cultural Sensitivity | Understand and respect the unique cultural heritage and traditions of rural Appalachia. Tailor programs and services to be culturally sensitive and inclusive. |
| Deliver on Promises and Commitments | Follow through on commitments and promises made to the community. Consistently deliver high-quality services and support. |
| Be Consistent and Reliable | Establish a consistent presence and follow regular schedules. Build trust by being reliable and dependable in providing assistance and support. |
| Address Historical Context and Stereotypes | Acknowledge and address historical context, stereotypes, and negative perceptions associated with Appalachia. Work to dispel misconceptions and build a positive image. |
| Emphasize Long-Term Sustainability | Demonstrate a commitment to long-term sustainability by investing in ongoing support, programs, and initiatives that benefit the community in the long run. |

project we plan and/or implement in rural communities.

Conclusion

Past exploitations and stereotypes make Appalachians wary of external assistance. Including trusted community members in planning and valuing their insights is critical. Community concerns must be central to decision-making. Identifying ways to improve access year-round to fresh fruits and vegetables may be key to addressing many residents' lower-than-average health-related outcomes that center around a diet that lacks good nutritional value and limited physical activity. We have been able to use the strategies we identified to support

community members where they are and make progress toward building trust. Working within these communities through building insider leadership and support is a good method for improving access to nutritional education and fresh fruits and vegetables. Nevertheless, more research is required to understand trust's role in developing former Appalachian coal camps. Evidence suggests that trust is crucial for sustainable community development by enhancing communication and collaboration. Fostering trust is central to improving Appalachian lives and should be a cornerstone of development efforts; the insider role of nurses in rural Appalachia is invaluable and should not be underestimated.

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