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The War on Poverty Failed Them—and They're No Longer Waiting For Help

Federal money and projects have come and gone so many times that McDowell County locals have little faith in the government to restore their fortunes; 'We're on our own'

By [Dan Frosch](#) [Follow](#) | *Photographs by Roger May for WSJ*

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WAR, W.Va.—Carolyn Owens was 9 years old when her family became one of the first in America to get food stamps.

Her father could no longer work in the coal mines that pock the mountains here after an injury. He'd wait at the local government office to collect food coupons, part of a program launched by John F. Kennedy in 1961 to help alleviate the shocking poverty he witnessed campaigning across Appalachia.

Owens would walk home from school to find peanut-butter sandwiches with a sliver of banana waiting for her and her 10 brothers and sisters. "Those sandwiches were like ice cream for us," said Owens, now 73.

In the decades since, the federal government has poured more than \$3.6 billion into trying to ease the hardship in McDowell County, according to estimates from the Economic Innovation Group, using current dollars. That doesn't include the roughly \$13 billion more in Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid payments.

It hasn't worked.

Here in the heart of America's War on Poverty, some two-thirds of households with children still get food stamps, among the nation's highest rates, and the estimated median household income hovers around \$35,000. Nonfarm employment has plummeted 78% since 1975, according to data compiled by West Virginia University economist John Deskins, as the coal that once powered this rugged place is now mostly mined with machines, [if at all](#), and no other industry has replaced it.

The county has lost 67% of its residents over those years, the largest drop in West Virginia, its population dwindling from just over 51,000 to roughly 17,000.

With little faith left in government to break the cycle of poverty, those who remain say it's up to them to forge a brighter economic path.

"We're on our own," said Jason Tartt. "Nobody's coming down here to save us."



The county was once among the nation's top coal-producing regions, but its fortunes fell as the industry declined.



Carolyn Owens has emerged from poverty, working jobs as a custodian, cashier and bank teller.

Tartt, the grandson of coal miners, is teaching locals, including retired miners and those recovering from opioid addiction, how to farm the forested hillsides. Down the winding, two-lane roads that connect communities, a pastor organizes bottled-water drives for neighbors whose tap water is undrinkable, while the local utility patches together funding for long-term solutions. A tiny, former coal town is trying to transform a shuttered [Walmart](#) into a new factory it hopes will jolt the local economy.

Their efforts are small in comparison to the government programs that have sought to revive McDowell County, and can't make up for the prosperity that slipped away when the coal companies left. But they are spurring hope for renewal in some places, driven by one of the few constants here: resilience.

With limited tax revenue to support local initiatives or infrastructure, a network of nonprofits has sprung up. Many are funded with federal grants and private donations and run by locals. Most have had to figure out how to keep going when government money runs out.

“There is one thing our people know: If a government program starts, it will surely be cut or end,” said Randal Johnson, whose nonprofit, the Council of the Southern Mountains, pushed for the food-stamp program here back in the '60s.

“They strive for self-reliance because they know that mines open and close and government programs end,” he added. “But they’ll always find a way to take care of their children.”

After Brittany Gibson’s father was injured rescuing fellow miners in the deadly [Upper Big Branch mine explosion](#) of 2010, her family struggled to get by. Her father was too proud to apply for food stamps when he couldn’t work, she said. Her mother sold Gibson’s stuffed animals and her own jewelry to afford her high-school graduation cap and gown.

“We’re forgotten, because we’ve already lost so much. Nobody wants to give us a chance,” Gibson said.



Owens and other residents often rely on springs and drainage pipes for cooking water, as access to clean water has been a long-running issue in the county.

Gibson, 33, quit her job as a teacher's aide in September and started a one-woman restaurant out of a converted Airstream, where she whips up soups, milkshakes and baked potatoes loaded with bacon. It's one of the only food establishments in a place where people have little extra money to spend.

"I tell myself 'Just hang in there,'" Gibson said. "It's what I've told myself my whole life. There's got to be a rainbow somewhere."

Once among the nation's top coal-producing regions, McDowell County saw its fortunes turn beginning in the 1950s as automated machines meant fewer miners and competing energy sources meant less coal. Things nosedived in the mid-1980s when U.S. Steel shut down its numerous mining operations here virtually overnight.

Some coal operations remain, but mining in McDowell County is a ghost of what it once was. Government, the county education system and the hospital are among the other main employers.

According to the Economic Innovation Group, 54% of the county's total personal income in 2022 came from transfers from government programs, among the top 10 highest rates in the U.S. That's up from below 20% in the 1970s, the group's research shows, and 36 percentage points above the national average.

The failures have spanned political parties and administrations. Some say assistance has been

more like emergency response, as opposed to the long-term investment needed. Others say dilapidated infrastructure has limited economic growth.

The same steep mountainsides whose coal once helped McDowell County prosper have made it challenging to create the transportation corridors needed for sustainable new business, said Gayle Manchin, who co-chairs the Appalachian Regional Commission, a joint federal-state entity that funds economic-development programs. As a result, projects often come, only to pack up when funding runs out.

Like others who grew up here, Jason Tartt felt he had to leave to find success. Tartt's grandparents were miners from the remote community of Valls creek, once home to a historically Black coal camp tucked along McDowell County's border with Virginia. His father had joined the Army, and Tartt followed him into the service.

After eight years as a military policeman, including a deployment to the Balkans, and a second career as a defense contractor in Colorado, Tartt moved back home in 2012 to help his ailing mother. He was shocked by what he saw.

"It looked like Bosnia. There were dilapidated buildings, deserted towns, infrastructure gone," he said.

But Tartt, 52, saw something else, too. There were wild blackberries and raspberries blanketing the hillsides, and vestiges of old fruit orchards. A fellow Black veteran who lived nearby and knew agriculture told him the area was ripe for mountain farming.

Tartt partnered with Amelia Bandy, a health department official in neighboring Virginia who wanted to help the region where she grew up.

The pair co-founded the nonprofit Economic Development Greater East, or EDGE. They began transforming a 350-acre plot into a teaching farm. Tartt bought 5 acres himself and leased the rest from Berwind, a former local coal-mining giant that still owns county land.

Over the past five years, Tartt, Bandy and a shoestring staff have trained some 60 people on farming the mountain valleys. Participants spend months learning how to plant orchards, raise free-range livestock and tap syrup from the thickets of maple and sycamore trees. They sell the goods to farmers markets and fellow residents or use it to feed their families.

"There's no reason in hell that places like McDowell County should be food deserts," said Tartt,

who's poured more than \$100,000 of his own money into the project. "These places have the potential to produce huge amounts of food."



Amelia Bandy and Jason Tartt's nonprofit aims to teach locals how to farm. 'The fact that this place is a food desert should be criminal,' says Tartt.

Scaling up the operation so those in the program can run their own agricultural businesses hasn't been easy. According to a 2013 report from the West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy, about 60% of land in the county is owned by absentee corporations, including railroad, mining and timber companies. Tartt says most have shown little interest in leasing to him.

A USDA grant slated to give the farm \$900,000 over the next five years was discontinued this year as part of the Trump administration's budget review, Bandy said. The Agriculture Department said such grants were a pandemic-era program without long-term funding, and it is looking to support agriculture in other ways.

In Kimball, residents are trying to breathe fresh life into their community after the Walmart there closed nearly 10 years ago.

The town, whose population has dipped from more than 1,500 to about 250 since the coal companies left decades ago, acquired the deed to the 97,000-square-foot property and local leaders began working with a West Virginia nonprofit that's trying to help revitalize former coal communities.

"Kimball, and much of rural Appalachia, is at a pivotal point where they have this amazing

opportunity to redefine themselves,” said Jenny Totten, a former resident who helped connect town leaders to the nonprofit.

A plan was hatched to work with a developer to turn the building into a mobile-home factory. The factory will aim to train locals to build the homes and ship them across the county and state.

Stacy Henderson, who works for the nonprofit, is helping the developer apply for a federal grant to design the factory and then will try to find the \$2 million needed to build it. She isn’t from McDowell County, but its people feel like hers. Henderson grew up in a family of coal miners about 130 miles away. Two of her brothers were addicted to opioids and are now in prison.

“Too often, whether it’s federal agencies or other nonprofits, there’s been this helicopter approach where people come in and tell the community ‘This is what we’re going to do,’” she said. “This project is being worked on from within.”

For many in McDowell County, it feels like nearly everyone—and everything—has tried to take something from them. The [opioid scourge](#) that preyed on miners with broken bodies and stole a generation. The outside journalists and television crews whose depictions of a hillbilly hellscape exploited their pain.



When the Walmart in Kimball closed in 2016, around 150 local jobs were lost. Plans to turn the building into a mobile-home factory have stoked hopes for revitalization, though the plant wouldn’t employ as many people.



A man stops by a distribution hub in Gary to pick up bottled water provided by the United Methodist Church.

Even the clean water is gone in some areas because municipalities couldn't afford to maintain the pipes. Boil-water advisories are common. One community, Keystone, was under an advisory for a decade until 2022, when it was put on a new county system.

Water in many homes is tinged a rusty orange from iron and manganese in the soil, or pipe corrosion, and smells sour from sulfur. People often collect water for cooking from roadside springs and drainage pipes jutting from the hillsides.

Mavis Brewster runs the McDowell County Public Service District, the county's largest utility, which serves about 3,500 homes and businesses. A former pharmacy tech and literacy program coordinator from War, Brewster has spent the past two decades working to get clean water to as many people as she can with few resources.

She spends her days jigsawing state and federal funding sources for new water systems, and answering residents' frequent calls about when they'll be connected. Some die before she can find a solution. Most projects take years to complete, hindered by the pendulum swings of available money, so Brewster tempers her frustration at having to waylay them mid-planning until she can find enough cash.

"When the lines finally go in the ground, and the water turns on, it's life changing," she said.

The utility recently installed water hookups for one secluded mountaintop community that had been relying on cisterns and a truck hauling creek water—a project Brewster said took six years

to accumulate enough government money for. After the water was turned on, she recounted, one woman called her crying tears of relief.

Brewster herself has to buy bottled water because War's water system needs upgrades.

Brad Davis, a former journalist who now leads five United Methodist churches in the county, kept hearing from parishioners about their water troubles. It became clear long-term fixes weren't happening swiftly enough, he said.

For the past 18 months, Davis has organized biweekly water drives for people mostly not on Brewster's county water system. United Methodist churches from a neighboring county donate 50 cases of bottled water each month, which he and parishioners deliver to residents.

At an October meeting in Anawalt, an old coal town of about 150, a group packed up water to take to neighbors and family. Most in attendance were elderly women, whom Davis affectionately calls "holler grannies," using the term for the narrow, sheltered valleys where extended families often live here.

"There's a lot of fight left in these people. Otherwise we wouldn't be here," he said. "By all rights, we shouldn't still be here with everything we've endured."



'People here will tell you that every institution has forgotten this place,' says Davis. 'The government—regardless of party affiliation or ideology—has come here and promised the world and not delivered.'

That tally got longer this year, when one of the worst floods in county history struck in February. It was yet another reminder of the ways in which they must lean on each other to survive.

Carolyn Owens, who still fixes herself peanut-butter-and-banana sandwiches, was safe when the Tug Fork River overflowed. But her sister's house sat near a swollen creek that had done serious damage in prior floods. Locals tried for several years to get government officials to clear the creek bed to prevent more flooding.

Owens and her family saved the house, wedging plywood underneath the doorways during the storm and mopping up water faster than it seeped inside.

The office that housed the Council of the Southern Mountains was less fortunate.

Randal Johnson, 73, the nonprofit's head, later dragged out debris in frigid temperatures with the help of two brothers in their early 20s.

The council has since crammed its operation into an old cupcake shop, and continues to run on a mix of state and federal funding and private donations. With the cold setting in, Johnson's staff brings donated space heaters to elderly people trying to stay warm because they can't afford to fix their broken heating systems.

The council was approved for \$60,000 in Federal Emergency Management Agency aid to cover the damage from the flood. They've yet to receive a dollar, Johnson said.



Many residents say they have had to build back their community on their own after devastating flooding from the Tug Fork River in February.

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