



# America's poorest white town: abandoned by coal, swallowed by drugs

In the first of a series of dispatches from the US's poorest communities, we visit Beattyville, Kentucky, blighted by a lack of jobs and addiction to painkillers

**Chris McGreal in Beattyville, Kentucky**

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Karen Jennings patted her heavily made up face, put on a sardonic smile and said she thought she looked good after all she'd been through.

"I was an alcoholic first. I got drunk and fell in the creek and broke my back. Then I got hooked on the painkillers," the 59-year-old grandmother said.

Over the years, Jennings' back healed but her addiction to powerful opioids remained. After the prescriptions dried up, she was drawn to the underground drug trade that defines eastern Kentucky today as coal, oil and timber once did.

Jennings spoke with startling frankness about her part in a plague gripping the isolated, fading towns dotting this part of Appalachia. Frontier communities steeped in the myth of self-reliance

are now blighted by addiction to opioids - “hillbilly heroin” to those who use them. It’s a dependency bound up with economic despair and financed in part by the same welfare system that is staving off economic collapse across much of eastern Kentucky. It’s a crisis that crosses generations.

One of those communities is Beattyville, recorded by a US census survey as the poorest white town - 98% of its 1,700 residents are white - in the country. It was also by one measure - the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey 2008-2012 of communities of more than 1,000 people, the latest statistics available at the time of reporting - among the four lowest income towns in the country. It is the first stop for a series of dispatches by the Guardian about the lives of those trying to do more than survive in places that seem the most remote from the aspirations and possibilities of the American Dream.

Beattyville sits at the northern tip of a belt of the most enduring rural poverty in America. The belt runs from eastern Kentucky through the Mississippi delta to the Texas border with Mexico, taking in two of the other towns - one overwhelmingly African American and the other exclusively Latino - at the bottom of the low income scale. The town at the very bottom of that census list is an outlier far to the west on an Indian reservation in Arizona.

The communities share common struggles in grappling with blighted histories and uncertain futures. People in Beattyville are not alone in wondering if their kind of rural town even has a future. To the young, such places can sometimes feel like traps in an age when social mobility in the US is diminishing and they face greater obstacles to a good education than other Americans.

At the same time, each of the towns is distinguished by problems not common to the rest. In Beattyville it is the drug epidemic, which has not only destroyed lives but has come to redefine a town whose fleeting embrace of prosperity a generation ago is still visible in some of its grander official buildings and homes near the heart of the town. Now they seem to accentuate the decline of a main street littered with ghost shops that haven’t seen business in years.

Jennings shook off her addiction after 15 years. She struggled to find work but eventually got a job serving in a restaurant that pays the \$300 a month rent on her trailer home. She collects a small disability allowance from the government and volunteers at a food bank as a kind of atonement. Helping other people is, she said, her way of “getting through”: “I just want to serve God and do what I can for people here.”

It was at the local food bank that Jennings spilled out her story.

“There are lots of ways of getting drugs. The elderly sell their prescriptions to make up money to buy food. There are doctors and pharmacies that just want to make money out of it,” she said. “I was the manager of a fast food place. I used to buy from the customers. People could come in for a hamburger and do a drug transaction with me and no one would ever notice.”

Even as Jennings related the toll of drug abuse - the part it played in destroying at least some of her five marriages, the overdose that nearly cost her life and the letter she wrote to her doctor begging for the help that finally wrenched her off the pills - she spoke as if one step removed from the experience.

“You get hooked and you’re not yourself. You go on functioning. You do your job. But I really don’t see how I’m alive today,” she said.

It was only when Jennings got to the part about her son, Todd, a bank vice-president, that she faltered. “I lost my son three years ago from suicide. My lifestyle contributed to his depression. I take responsibility for my part of it,” she said.



Alex Dezanett lives in a tent pitched in a horse trailer in Beattyville.  
Photograph: Sean Smith for the Guardian

The cluster of people waiting their turn to collect a cardboard box containing tins of beef stew, macaroni and cheese instant dinners, bread, eggs and cereal passed no direct comment as Jennings recounted her history.

Some of them carried their own sense of defeat at having come to rely on government assistance and private largesse. But afterwards there was a whiff of suspicion from others who seemed to see the decades-long decline of their communities as a moral failing.

“I’m not one for helping people who don’t help themselves but sometimes you do the best you can and you still need help,” said 63-year-old Wilma Barrett who, after a lifetime of hard work farming and digging coal, was unsettled to find herself reliant on welfare payments and the food bank. “A lot of it’s our own fault. The Lord says work and if you don’t work and provide for yourself then there’s no reason why anyone else should. I know it’s easy to give up but the Lord tells us not to give up. Too many people here have given up.”



Food bank volunteer Karen Jennings, who described her life as a former addict. Photograph: Sean Smith for the Guardian

## Hidden world

Eastern Kentucky falls within that part of Appalachia that has come to epitomise the white underclass in America ever since president Lyndon Johnson sat down on the porch of a wood cabin in the small town of Inez in 1964 and made it the face of his War on Poverty.

The president arrived virtually unannounced at the home of Tom Fletcher, a 38-year-old former coalminer who had not held a full-time job in two years and was struggling to feed eight children. The visit offered the rest of the US a disturbing glimpse into a largely hidden world where houses routinely lacked electricity and indoor plumbing, and children habitually failed to get enough to eat. The 1960 census records that one in five adults in the region could neither read nor write.

Half a century later, while poverty levels have fallen dramatically in some other parts of the country in good part thanks to Johnson, the economic gap between the region and much of the rest of America is as wide. And its deprivation is once again largely invisible to most of the country.

Beattyville's median household income is just \$12,361 (about £8,000) a year, placing it as the third lowest income town in the US, according to that Census Bureau 2008-12 survey.

Nationally, the median household income was \$53,915 in 2012. In real terms, the income of people in Beattyville is lower than it was in 1980.

The town's poverty rate is 44% above the national average. Half of its families live below the poverty line. That includes three-quarters of those with children, with the attendant consequences. More than one-third of teenagers drop out of high school or leave without graduating. Just 5% of residents have college degrees.

Surrounding communities are little better. Beattyville is the capital of Lee County, named after the commander of the Confederate army of Northern Virginia in the civil war, General Robert E Lee.

Five of the 10 poorest counties in the US run in a line through eastern Kentucky and they include Lee County. Life expectancy in the county is among the worst in the US, which is not unconnected to the fact that more than half the population is obese. Men lived an average of just 68.3 years in 2013, a little more than eight years short of the national average. Women lived 76.4 years on average, about five years short of national life expectancy.



An abandoned truck in Beattyville. Photograph: David Coyle/Team Coyle for the Guardian

A few months before he visited eastern Kentucky, Johnson said in his State of the Union address: “Our aim is not only to relieve the symptoms of poverty, but to cure it and, above all, to prevent it.”

Over time, the focus of that effort shifted to inner-city poverty and many of the programmes Johnson launched came to be seen as aimed at minorities, even though to this day white people make up the largest number of beneficiaries.

But when the president sat on Fletcher’s porch in Inez, he had in mind rural poverty of an almost exclusively white region where the coal industry - which for a while provided jobs but not the much-promised prosperity - was already receding and people struggled for more than a basic income from the land.

Television pictures of Johnson’s visit presented Americans with a hardness of living in the midst of some of the greatest beauty the US has to offer. Life in a log cabin buried in the forest from which it was hewed is romantic until you have to collect water by bucket in the dead cold of winter.

The War on Poverty did relieve many of the symptoms. Food stamps and housing grants, healthcare for the poor and older people and improved access to a decent education have kept millions from struggling with the deprivations Johnson encountered in Inez. There are few homes in eastern Kentucky without electricity and indoor toilets these days. But the promised cure for poverty never materialised.

Three decades after Johnson’s visit, Fletcher was still unemployed but receiving disability benefits. His first wife had died of cancer. His second had been convicted of murdering their three-year-old daughter and attempting to kill their four-year-old son with a drug overdose to claim the life insurance.

A film of Johnson’s visit describes joblessness in the region as primarily attributable to “lack of industrialisation and losses in the coalmining industry”.

People in eastern Kentucky still call it “coal country”, even though the decline continued largely unabated and the number of jobs in the industry fell with the passing of each presidency. There were 31,000 under Bill Clinton but fewer than 14,000 by the time George W Bush left power.

The number of people employed in mining in eastern Kentucky has fallen by half since Barack Obama came to power, although the long history of decline has been conveniently set aside in the clamour to blame the current president. The more cautious critics say Obama is anti-coal because of his environment policies. But a no less popular view in the region is that it is part of president Obama’s war on white people.

Beattyville and Lee County did well out of oil, too, until the 1980s. A decade later, the largest employers in the town were a factory making uniforms, a data company and a private jail holding prisoners from Vermont. Now, the garment and computer businesses are gone and Vermont has just moved its prisoners to Michigan, where it is cheaper to house them.



The office of the Sturgeon Mining Company, Main Street, Beattyville.  
Photograph: David Coyle/Team Coyle for the Guardian

The largest employer in the county is now the school system. There are five times as many healthcare workers in eastern Kentucky as miners. “Coal country” is today little more than a cultural identity.

The office of Ed Courier’s Sturgeon Mining Company is on the high street. Its few remaining mines involve people digging coal out of hillsides. “I’ve been in the coal business since ’78 and the last five years I’ve been trying to get out of the coal business. There’s no future for it here,” he said.

Courier’s office is an old store front on Beattyville’s Main street. He nodded towards the window and commented caustically on how many former shops in the once bustling town centre were given over to payday loan companies and charities. One gave away what is popularly known as the “Obama Phone”, a free mobile available to anyone on food stamps or other assistance that provides 250 minutes of calls per month.

“Things were really good when I came here in ’72 and I ended up staying. When I came here there were three new car dealerships. There hasn’t been a new car dealership here since ’89,” he said. “There’s no future here. I have a sense of sadness. I wish people had a better life.”

The War on Poverty lives on through federal grants. Food stamps, employment programmes and disability allowance have cushioned many people from the harshest effects of the retreat of jobs from the region. Some families still struggle to put enough food on the table but their children are fed - if not well in the sense of healthily - at school.

Federal money also built Vivian Lunsford a new house - a spacious wooden bungalow with a balcony on two sides and forest to the back, constructed in a ravine just outside Beattyville. The narrow road from the town winds past simple log cabins buried in the trees.

“They’ve probably been there since the early 1900s,” she said. “I don’t know how people live in them. They’re real basic. Their only running water is the stream. But people just keep staying there. They don’t want to leave. It’s the pride. The heritage of that land.”



Trailers in Beattyville. Photograph: Sean Smith for the Guardian

Before getting the house Lunsford, 38, was unemployed and homeless. Her mother applied for a grant and a cut-rate mortgage on her daughter's behalf without telling her, in order to build a more modern and spacious version of the old wood cabins. Lunsford repays the mortgage at \$389 a month, less than it would cost to rent.

"There's so much grant money went toward it that so long as I live there for 10 years I don't have to pay that grant money back," she said.

Lunsford was also able to land a job with the Beattyville housing association that built her home, which she shares these days with her partner and his school-age daughter.

"This place is notably poorer. You can't just go out and get a job in McDonald's. A Walmart is an hour away. I can go to my daddy's in Florida and the world is like a different place. Here is more stuck in time," she said.

"Our homeless situation is really different to a big city. It's couch surfing. You've got lower income people, grandparents with their children and spouses living there with the grandchildren. They're all crammed into this one house. There's a lot of them."

Other people on the waiting list for new homes - wooden bungalows or trailers - are what she calls "burn downs", whose homes were destroyed by fire from candles, kerosene heaters or pot belly stoves. Many of those are in homes disconnected from electricity and other utilities to save money.

"Utility bills are outrageous in a trailer because they lack insulation. I have a little lady I've been helping with, Miss Nelly. She's in her late 70s. Her electric bill in the wintertime here runs about \$400 a month. She can't afford that. Trailers don't heat good," she said. "Some people choose not to connect to utilities to save money. A lot of people here, their income is like between \$500 and \$700 a month. That's all they get. That's not a lot, especially if you've got kids and the price of gas and car insurance and you've got all these things that have to be paid."



Sheriff Wendell 'Bug' Childerts. Photograph: Sean Smith for the Guardian

Still, the rehousing programme is not without its issues. Bob Ball built Lunsford's home. He also built one for a man in his early 20s called Duke and his wife, both of whom were unemployed and had been living in a caravan.

Ball has since hired Duke as a worker. Federal money keeps the builder's business alive but he still commented with a hint of disapproval at the government funding homes. "He got a new house so young. We all paid for that," said Ball.

Through much of the 19th century, this part of the Bluegrass State was romanticised in stories of rugged frontiersmen and courageous hunters as the epitome of American self-reliance. None more so than Daniel Boone, a hunter and surveyor at the forefront of settling Kentucky. A good part of Lee County carves into a national forest named after him.

"Cultural heritage here is important," said Dee Davis, whose family was from Lee County, though he grew up in a neighbouring county where he heads the Center for Rural Strategies. "The first bestselling novels were about this region. It was at one time the iconic America. This kind of frontier: white, noble. This was the iconography."

By the time Johnson arrived a different image had taken hold - that of the anti-modern, moonshine swilling, gun toting, backwards "hillbilly". The stereotype was perpetuated on television by a popular 1960s comedy show, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, in which unsophisticated mountain folk find oil on their land, get rich and move with their guns, bibles and Confederate sympathies to live among California's millionaires.

In 2003, Davis led a campaign against a CBS plan to remake the comedy as reality television by setting up a poor Appalachian family in a Beverly Hills mansion. One mocking CBS executive remarked on the potential: "Imagine the episode where they have to interview maids."

Davis beat back CBS but said the planned programme reflected a sense that white people living in poorer communities were blamed for their condition.

"There's this feeling here like people are looking down on you. Feeling like it's OK to laugh at you, to pity you. You're not on the same common ground for comparison as someone who's better off or living in a better place. That doesn't mean it's always true, it just means we feel that burden quickly. We're primed to react to people we think are looking down on us. That they judge us for our clothes, judge us for our car, judge us for our income, the way we talk," he said.

"This is the poorest congressional district in the United States. I grew up delivering furniture with my dad. No one ever said they were in poverty. That's a word that's used to judge people. You hear them say, I may be a poor man but we live a pretty good life for poor people. People refer to themselves as poor but they won't refer to themselves as in poverty."

Karen Jennings encountered the prejudice when she first left Beattyville.

"When I went to Louisville as a teenager to work in Waffle House I had this country accent. They laughed at me and asked if we even had bathrooms where I come from. People here are judged in the bigger cities and they resent that," she said. "The difference is the cities hide their problems. Here it's too small to hide them. There's the drugs, and the poverty. There's a lot of the old people come in here for food. The welfare isn't enough. Three girls in my granddaughter's class are pregnant. This is a hard place to grow up. People don't hide it but they resent being judged for it."

## **Drug epidemic**

The stereotype has evolved. Deepest Appalachia may still be thought of as backward and dirt poor but it's now also widely known as in the grip of a prescription drug epidemic. Without prompting, it's the first thing Steve Mays, Lee County's de facto mayor, talks about.

Mays is the county's judge-executive, an antiquated title that carries political but no judicial authority. His office is in Beattyville, where he was born and was a policeman for 16 years, half of them as chief of police.

"When I worked as a police officer and chief there was drugs here and we made a lot of busts, but things are getting worse," he said. "We don't have a lot of jobs here. Some people look for a way out. They haven't accomplished what they wanted to and they're just looking for that escape, I guess. They get that high and once it gets a hold of you they have a hard time getting away from it. They don't think the future looks good for them or they don't feel there's any hope so they continue to stay on that drug."

“It’s people of all ages. You feel sorry for them. Good people. It takes their lives over. They do things you wouldn’t normally think they’d do. Stealing, writing bad cheques, younger girls prostitute themselves out for drugs.”

Mays feels the sting all the more acutely because his daughter was convicted of illegally obtaining drugs from a local pharmacy where she worked.

In 2013, drug overdoses accounted for 56% of all accidental deaths in Kentucky and an even higher proportion in the east of the state.



Deputy Sheriff David Stamper on patrol in Beattyville. Photograph: Sean Smith for the Guardian

Leading the blight is a powerful and highly addictive opioid painkiller, OxyContin, known locally as “hillbilly heroin”. Typically it is ground down and injected or snorted to give an instant and powerful high.

Its misuse is so routine that the bulk of court cases reported in the local papers are drug related. Just about everyone in Beattyville has a story of the human cost. Some mention the decline of the town’s homecoming queen, Michele Moore, into addiction in the 1990s. Moore struggled by as a single mother living in a trailer home before she was stabbed to death by a man while the two were taking drugs.

At about that time, Beattyville’s police chief, Omer Noe, and the Lee County sheriff, Johnny Mann, were jailed for taking bribes to protect drug smugglers. Five years later, the next Lee County sheriff, Douglas Brandenburg, went to prison for a similar crime.

Amid the relentless destruction of life, there is little that shocks. But four years ago residents of Harlan County - a couple of hours’ drive to the south-east - were shaken by a series of deaths over six weeks of parents of members of the local boys and girls club. Eleven of the children watched a parent die.

Getting the drugs isn’t difficult. Elderly people sell their prescription drugs to supplement some of the lowest incomes in the US. The national average retirement income is about \$21,500. In Beattyville it is \$6,500.

Last year, a pharmacy owner in nearby Clay County, Terry Tenhet, was jailed for 10 years for illegally distributing hundreds of thousands of pills after police tied the prescriptions to several

overdose deaths. In 2011 alone, he supplied more than 360,000 OxyContin pills in a county with only 21,000 residents. Those prescriptions were mostly written by doctors in other states.

Prosecutors alleged that for years a single pain clinic nearly 1,000 miles away in south Florida had provided the prescriptions for a quarter of the OxyContin sold in eastern Kentucky. The bus service to Florida is known to police and addicts alike as the “Oxy Express”.

In 2012, Dr Paul Volkman was sentenced to four life terms for writing illegal prescriptions for more than 3m pills from a clinic he ran in Portsmouth, Ohio, on the border with eastern Kentucky. Prosecutors said the prescriptions had contributed to dozens of overdose deaths.

Another doctor, David Procter, is serving 16 years in prison for running a “pill mill” at which at least four other doctors were involved in the illegal supply of drugs to eastern Kentucky.

There is little sympathy for doctors or pharmacists acting as dealers, but there is a view in Beattyville and surrounding towns that people have been exploited by something bigger than a few medics, largely because they are regarded as “backward”.

Davis said the drug companies aggressively pushed OxyContin and similar drugs in a region where, because of a mixture of the mining, the rigours of the outdoors and the weather, there was a higher demand for painkillers.

“You couldn’t go to a doctor without seeing a merchant there. Here’s this synthetic opium product that’s supposed to be good for palliative care - cancer patients - and they start selling it as regular pain medicine. They knew how highly addictive it was and they sold it anyway,” he said. “I live in a town of 1,500 people with seven pharmacies as well as pain clinics and methadone clinics and the full backup industry. Everybody gets paid, doctors and pharmacists and lawyers.”

Recently released research shows that abuse of powerful opioid painkillers is in part responsible for a sharp rise in the death rate among white middle-aged Americans over the past two decades, particularly less-educated 45- to 54-year-olds. The report by academics at Princeton university also blamed misuse of alcohol and a rise in cheaper high quality heroin along with suicides. The researchers said they suspected that financial stress played a part in people taking their lives.

OxyContin’s manufacturer, Purdue Pharma, was penalised \$634m by a federal court in 2007 for misrepresenting the drug’s addictive effects to doctors and patients. Purdue is now being sued by the Kentucky government. The state’s attorney general, Jack Conway, accuses the company of concealing information about the dangers of the drug in order to increase profits, and its salespeople of claiming OxyContin is less addictive and safer than it is.

“I want to hold them accountable in eastern Kentucky for what they did,” Conway told the Lexington Herald-Leader. “We have lost an entire generation.”

Purdue has denied the claim.

Late last year the Beattyville Enterprise reported that pharmacists in the town were appealing to drug companies for greater control over another prescription medicine, Neurontin, which is increasingly in demand and has been found at the scene of overdose deaths. Heroin use is also on the rise.

Ask where people get the money for drugs and just about everyone blames it on welfare in general and the trade in what is known locally as “pop” - soft drinks - in particular.



The west end of Main Street, Beattyville. Photograph: David Coyle/Team Coyle for the Guardian

Close to 57% of Beattyville residents claim food stamps. They are paid by electronic transfer on the first of the month. That same day, cases of Pepsi and Coca-Cola are marked down sharply in supermarkets and disappear off the shelves, often paid for with food stamps.

They are then sold on to smaller stores at a lower price than they would pay a distributor, in effect turning several hundred dollars of food stamps into cash at about 50 cents on the dollar.

The “pop” scam has become shorthand in Beattyville among those who regard welfare as almost as big a blight as the drugs themselves.

“We have a lot of dope and the like around here,” said Wilma Barrett at the food bank. “Food stamps go to pay for it. You can see it happening and it’s sickening. It’s become a kind of trap for us out here.”

Courier, the mining company owner, took a similar line, saying welfare had dragged Beattyville down. “It’s made things worse. It’s disincentivised people from even trying. You can’t create a handout and expect people to pull themselves up. You have to give them the incentive to improve. I feel sadness that they’re being trapped,” he said.

### **Living on welfare**

April Newman scoffed at the idea that she was trapped by welfare. She said it had kept her and her children, aged one to four years old, from near destitution after she escaped a bad six-year relationship.

“You definitely do feel resented because I resented myself. People look down on you for it,” she said.

In order to get free housing and financial assistance, Newman was obliged to sign on to a Kentucky programme providing financial assistance to low-income families with children in combination with training or volunteering. She receives a living allowance - not formally a pay cheque - of about \$800 a month after signing up with AmeriCorps, a federally run national service

organisation. She also receives \$600 in food stamps. The state covers healthcare costs for the children.

“It’s hard to get by on that but I have learned. Being on my own and being a single mother, you have to learn to budget. So if I know that school clothes are coming up, or if Christmas is coming up, three to four months in advance, I start to slowly save. That way if things come up, I have the money for it. I’ve just learned to save really well,” she said.

Newman’s federal housing is in a stark block on the edge of town where she doesn’t feel particularly safe. “I won’t be living here long though. I’m actually going to try to do better and move out. You can’t raise children in places like that,” she said.

But to move out, she’ll need to pay the rent and the prospects for a full-time job are bleak.

Wilma Barrett does not have much sympathy for people in Newman’s position, even though she too has come to rely on government assistance.

“We owned a farm and we dig our own coal out of the hill. I had a heart attack and had to quit work four years ago. That’s when I started coming over [to the food bank],” she said. “I have a milk cow, chickens for eggs. We didn’t need a hog this year as we had some meat left in the freezer from last year.”

Barrett and her husband pull in about \$1,100 a month in welfare payments and food stamps. But she has little time for younger people she regards as unwilling to work. “If you’re not picky about what you do, there’s always something. A job that pays \$6 an hour is better than zero. I was raised on a farm with a couple of mules. I have three children and all of them know how to work.”

In the late 19th century, Beattyville was trumpeted by the investment company developing the town as “the gateway to the development of all the great mineral, lumber and agricultural resources” of eastern Kentucky.



Closed store front, Main Street, Beattyville. Photograph: David Coyle/Team Coyle for the Guardian

“If a block of wood be thrown into the waters west of the mountains dividing Kentucky from Virginia it will wind its way between towering mountains and rich valleys until it floats over the dam at Beattyville. Eastern Kentucky cannot be developed without Beattyville becoming a large and important city,” it said.

It was not to be. Within a few years, railways had replaced rivers as the principal means of moving goods and the trains came nowhere near Beattyville. Neither did the highway system that spread across America over the 20th century.

In the end, what eastern Kentucky got was not development but plunder.

In his distinguished 1963 account of life in the region, *Night Comes to the Cumberland: A Biography of a Depressed Area*, Harry Caudill described the “greed and cunning of the coal magnates” who left behind few facilities but plenty of misery.

“From the beginning, the coal and timber companies insisted on keeping all, or nearly all, the wealth they produced,” wrote Caudill. “They were unwilling to plough more than a tiny part of the money they earned back into schools, libraries, health facilities and other institutions essential to a balanced, pleasant, productive and civilised society. The knowledge and guile of their managers enabled them to corrupt and cozen all too many of the region’s elected public officials and to thwart the legitimate aspirations of the people.”

Even during the War on Poverty, as billions of dollars were poured into the region, programmes were hijacked to serve politicians and money was diverted by members of Congress to prop up support in constituencies far from those for which it was intended.

Yet ask who is responsible for Beattyville’s woes today and fingers in the town frequently point at one man.

“Since Obama it’s got bad,” said Courier. “There’s the economy but also a lot of EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] regulations. There’s been a lot of changes in the law over the past two or three years with hollow mining. As for large-scale mining here, it’s finished. I employed 50 people at the peak. Now it’s six.”

The numbers don’t back up Courier’s claims. The industry has been in decline for decades. Coal production in eastern Kentucky has fallen by 63% since 2000. Mechanisation ate into the number of jobs long before that.



Abandoned coal, Beattyville. Photograph: David Coyle/Team Coyle for the Guardian

Davis said there had been a political campaign by the mining industry to blame the government for the decline led by an industry-funded group, The Friends of Coal.

“In the coinciding of the decline of coal jobs and the corresponding decline in the economy, the Friends of Coal campaign went from car shows and football games to music events - it was very cultural - and began to deflect pressure on the industry to blaming government policy. They put up posters: Stop the war on coal,” he said.

“We’re in a place right now where a tonne of coal costs about \$68 to mine in eastern Kentucky and about \$12 to mine in Wyoming. They’re importing more Wyoming coal here than they’re using east Kentucky coal. But if you ask people why this is, it’s Obama. They won’t blame the market, they blame the policy. It’s been very convenient to shift it to the black guy.”

Hostility to the US’s first black president runs deep. In an editorial, Beattyville’s largest circulation newspaper, Three Forks Tradition, described Obama as “trying to destroy the United States as we know it”. It accused him of waging war on “Anglo-Saxon males, who work for a living, believe in God and the right to keep and bear arms” and called the president and his then attorney general, Eric Holder, “race baiters with blood on their hands”.

“He has driven racial wedges between the people that will take generations to heal,” the editorial said without irony.

Vivian Lunsford pushed a page torn from a small notepad across her desk at the housing association. The writing on it was in pencil in capital letters. It was a tribute to Mitch McConnell, the Kentucky senator who is the Republican leader in the US Senate. “Mitch will keep us good,” it said, adding he would protect Kentucky from people who were “against coal”.

“My stepdaughter wrote that,” said Lunsford. “She’s too young to think it for herself. God knows who put that into her head. It wasn’t me. But that’s how they think around here. She’s hears it at school. She hears it from her friends and their parents. You hear it a lot.”

Another Beattyville resident offered a forthright assessment of Republican support in the town.

“It’s crazy, it really is. It’s not just this county, it’s the surrounding counties. There’s so many people on welfare and yet they vote Republican and it’s crazy. I’m embarrassed, I really am. I understand a lot of it’s because they’re afraid what colour is our president, and that’s what they go on,” the person said.

A few hours later the resident asked not to be named “because although every word I said is true it would upset people around here”.



Deputy Sheriff David Stamper stops off at the Saturday local college basketball game. Photograph: Sean Smith for the Guardian

Steve Mays, Lee County's de facto mayor, is a Republican. He has a picture of McConnell on the shelf behind his desk. "I like Mitch. He's very supportive of me when I need grants or something. He always tries to come through for me," said Mays.

But just a few months earlier, McConnell had claimed "massive numbers" of people were receiving food stamps "who probably shouldn't" and described the programme as "making it excessively easy to be non-productive".

This put Mays in a bind. His party routinely demonises people who receive welfare - but many of his voters rely on it. Mays said he regarded welfare as "a trap", but acknowledged that without it the town would die.

"It's catch 22. I don't know what you do. I see people who really need the help. I see them in this office every day. They struggle and couldn't make it without it. But I see some people taking advantage of it too," he said. "I'm not completely against welfare. I don't think just anybody should get it, I don't agree with that. There's people that need it but it's taken advantage of by people that could work. But I'm not one of those who says there shouldn't be welfare."

Still, he acknowledged the seeming contradiction of people voting for a party that was so scornful of the government assistance their town survived on.

"You're right, Republicans are against that. But that's not why people around here are registered Republican. It's because of local candidates or family history. My dad was Republican. I'm raised a Republican and voting Republican. That's just the way it is," he said.

This is routinely, and sometimes sneeringly, characterised by Democrats in other parts of America as poor white people voting against their own interests. It's a view that exasperates Davis.

"They say, why aren't these people voting their self-interest? People always vote their self-interest if they can see it. If they believe the government doesn't work, if they believe that the Democrats don't really give a shit about people like them, don't want to be in the same room with them, they want their vote but don't want to hang out with them, then as they see it they're voting their self-interest," he said.

So what's the future?

“It’s bad. I don’t think rural America has a future,” said Courier. “The advantage rural areas had in the past of cheap labour is gone. We used to have a lot of little factories in this area but they’ve gone to Mexico or China. In rural areas housing is cheap but everything else costs more. Utility rates are higher. Food and transport are higher. Management doesn’t want to live in rural areas. Education is horrible here. This is a third-world county. My kids grew up here until they were eight or nine, then they went to school in Louisville [a 145-mile drive away]. I wouldn’t send them to school here.”



An abandoned railroad coal-loading station, Beattyville. Photograph: David Coyle/Team Coyle for the Guardian

Mays worried that Beattyville and Lee County were losing their best educated while the most dependent remained. “These kids come out of high school and graduate with honours, and go on to graduate college. We’ve got a lot of them. There’s a lot of smart people here but there’s not a lot of opportunity for them here once they graduate college. Normally they won’t stay here. We need to find a way to encourage them to stay,” he said.

Just as the railways and highways bypassed Beattyville in the last century, so high-speed internet has failed to penetrate through to the town in more recent times. Most people rely on slow and expensive connections through satellite providers. It’s a further discouragement to businesses.

Mays said the county was rooting its hopes for the future in more rustic pastimes. “We’ve got rock climbing and four counties here just got together and invested in a recreation park for off-road vehicles. We’re trying to get canoes on the river. We’ve got a lot of cabins here and a lot of people coming here from all over this country. We’re trying to work on that aspect of it because that’s what we’ve got going for us. We just need a break,” said Mays.

“I feel positive about the future. I wouldn’t want to live anywhere else but Lee County. We’ve got our problems but we’ve got good people ... I’ve seen people with a lot of money that wouldn’t give \$10 to help somebody out but in this area even people who don’t have a lot, when somebody gets down and sick, or if they’ve got cancer, they band together and they raise as much money as they can for that person to help them.

“I feel like the drug problem is our biggest issue. Not only does it destroy lives but the economic situation. If a company’s not going to come in because they don’t have a lot of workforce to choose from, or don’t feel like they do, there’s your jobs gone. And then people that move out of here. A lot of people move out of here to bigger places to find jobs. So your population starts going down even more. I don’t know how to change that. I’m not smart enough to say how to do it. But if somehow it could be reined in, I think we could grow.”

So, is the American Dream dead in Beattyville?

“If you don’t experience the American Dream, if you’ve never been taken out of the box, I don’t think you believe in it,” said Vivian Lunsford: “People have to be able to see or feel it or touch it to believe.”

Ed Courier said it lived on, but only for those who escaped Beattyville. “There’s opportunities if you go to college. But not for those who stay here. This place is being left behind,” he said.



April Newman with Olivia aged two and one-year-old Jonathan. ‘I don’t want to stay here. I don’t want my children to stay here,’ she said. Photograph: Sean Smith for the Guardian

April Newman agreed with that sentiment. She saw her dream being fulfilled far from Beattyville. “I really want to be a teacher and I have to get out of this town to do that,” she said. “There’s no options here. I don’t want to stay here. I don’t want my children to stay here. There’s so much that goes on. It’s just really sad.”

Dee Davis said the American Dream lived on even for those who could not escape Beattyville, but in a different way. “It’s not the dream of the immigrants so much as the dream of being OK, of surviving,” he said.

This article was amended on 13 November 2015 to remove an image that was inconsistent with the Guardian’s editorial guidelines.

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