

Fact Sheet

Rural Life Today

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FAMILY TRENDS

Family life in rural America is often associated with the traditional, two-parent family. Although rural households are still more likely than urban households to include both parents, rural families have experienced change, as described below, not unlike that experienced by urban families.

- The rise of female-headed households.

The composition of many rural households has changed with the absence of more fathers from the home. In the early 1960s, upwards of 90% of rural children lived with both parents. By 1987, 30% of rural residents lived in female headed households. (4) Although this percentage is still lower than the 45% of urban residents living in female-headed households, the trend is clearly downward as greater numbers of children in rural areas are born to mothers outside marriage. One implication of this trend is that increasing numbers of rural children are growing up in poverty (see economic trends).

- The increase of women in the workforce.

Family life has also been affected dramatically by changing economic conditions in many rural communities and small towns. Even in two-parent families, rural women have increasingly had to join the work force to help support the family.

- The rise of births to unmarried and teen mothers.

√ The proportion of births to unmarried mothers is higher in urban areas but is increasing faster in rural areas. By 1994, 31% of births in rural areas were to unmarried mothers as compared to 33% of births in urban areas. (5)

√ By 1994, rural Blacks surpassed urban Blacks in the proportion of births to unmarried mothers, 73% to 70% respectively.

√ Rural unmarried mothers also were more likely to be teenagers than their urban counterparts. (5) By 1994, 1 of every 9 births in rural areas was to an unmarried teenage mother, as compared to 1 of every 10 births in urban areas.

√ Higher levels of cohabitation.

√ Higher levels of divorce.

Implications

Because the family is the primary unit of socialization into the norms, values, and attitudes of society, changes in the composition and structure of rural families is likely to have a profound effect on rural life. When these trends are combined with change in economic conditions and social institutions (e.g., schools, religious organizations), the stability of the rural family becomes increasingly threatened. As the strength and stability of some families decline,

they become less of a resource for individuals to draw upon in times of need. The scarcity of formal services (e.g., social services, mental health, child care, etc.) in rural areas combined with the absence of supporting family members creates a void that is difficult to fill.

SCHOOL TRENDS

In the not too distant past, rural schools were often the cultural center of the community. Next to the family and faith-based organizations, rural schools helped to transmit the values and norms of the community. Like the family, in many communities, the rural school has changed dramatically.

- Some communities lost their rural schools as school districts consolidated.

The number of schools districts has decreased from 128,000 in 1930 to approximately 15,600 by the late 1990s. Rural districts account for about three-quarters of the total but serve only about one-quarter of the elementary and secondary students. (6) In other communities, schools have survived but struggle with declining revenues from a diminishing tax base and repeated school bond failures. (6) In yet other rural areas, particularly those adjacent to urban areas, schools are struggling to keep up with the influx of new students.

- Most schools are rural schools.
 - √ In 1997-98, more public schools were classified as rural (21,636) than any other community type (e.g., large city, midsize city, large town, small town, etc.). (7)
 - √ During the 1998-99 school year, 27.8% of children attended public schools in rural communities and small towns, as compared to 28.9% of children who attended public schools in a large or midsize city. (7)
 - √ Of the 23,539 public schools in rural communities, 6,722 are in rural areas bordering urban communities. (7)

- Rural residents are less educated than urban residents.
 - √ 23.5% of rural residents 18 and older do not have a high school diploma as compared to 17.4% of urban residents. (8)
 - √ Rural youth are more likely to drop out of high school (20% rural vs. 15% urban); and rural youth are less likely to return to school or get a GED. (9)
 - √ Rural youth are less likely to go to college (23% rural vs. 29% urban) and are less likely to graduate from college (13% rural vs. 23% urban). (9)

Implications

There is no question that rural schools are fragile in many communities. Regardless, rural schools and rural school leadership often are pivotal in developing the capacity of rural communities to address the challenges presented by such factors as poverty, social isolation, and growth. Schools have an obvious role in developing human capital. Because rural employment has been more concentrated than urban employment in industries and occupations that are projected to decline through the year 2005, many rural communities are exploring strategies for diversifying and improving their economies. (10). Schools will be an important partner in providing training opportunities to support these efforts.

Rural schools can also be instrumental in developing the leadership potential of youth and adults alike. They can provide opportunities for youth to engage in micro enterprise activities where youth can apply their skills and interests in the development of small business enterprises. Schools can give youth opportunities to “contribute” to their community and to others. Further, schools can help connect students who are struggling with school, including truants, to adult mentors for support and guidance. Finally, in partnership with other community leaders, schools can open their doors to a variety of community

activities (e.g., health fairs, violence prevention programs, “fun” days, cultural events, etc.) designed to bring together parents, youth, and community residents.

FAITH-BASED TRENDS

The role of churches and faith-based organizations in rural community life cannot be overstated. In the poorest rural areas, churches and faith-based organizations often represent the only viable social institution capable of connecting people within the community and/or providing community services. Despite their resiliency, as noted below, several factors have begun to limit the potential effectiveness of churches and faith-based organizations to strengthen families and rural communities. Most notable among these factors are the fewer numbers of churchgoers in communities with declining populations and the growing religious diversity in communities with increasing populations. In addition, there are unique structural challenges which must be overcome.

- Church attendance has declined over the last 30 years. (11)
 - √ Churches are less engaged in communities. (11)
 - √ Rural churches face many structural challenges.
 - Rural churches have limited membership.
 - Limited membership restricts the number of programs and services that faith-based organizations are able to offer.
 - People will drive to more responsive community churches.
 - Rural churches are fiscally challenged.
 - Pastors are seldom full-time and may live outside the communities they serve.

SERVICE TRENDS

Often, rural communities have fewer services provided by

private and voluntary associations and publicly funded programs. In the past, rural residents have relied more heavily on friends and family to provide “help,” however as rates of out-migration have increased in rural areas, family, kin, and neighbor networks are not as strong. Thus, many families, often the most vulnerable, need, but lack, access to the most basic services, including housing, transportation, and child care.

For most families, these services are critical in helping them obtain and keep gainful employment. Welfare recipients in particular are likely to be disadvantaged if they do not have access to child care and transportation. Children may also be disadvantaged. Research has shown, for example, that children in poor early education and child care settings may be disadvantaged in learning later on in their school years.(12) Moreover, the lack of access to basic supports may affect a family’s capacity to cope with the day-to-day challenges of life. Parents who lack adequate housing – or any housing – for example, may have more difficulty in keeping their children safe, because the hazards of everyday life become more frequent and more serious.(13). The following highlight some of the more prevalent trends facing rural families today related to service availability.

- Center-based child care programs (e.g., day care centers, nursery schools, prekindergarten, preschools, and Head Start programs) are less likely to be available in rural areas.
 - √ Mothers in rural areas traditionally have been more likely to rely on informal sources (e.g., relatives, friends) to provide child care. (14)
 - √ At least one study has shown that rural families travel greater distances to obtain child care than do urban families. (15)
- Low-income households are the most likely to have difficulty finding acceptable and affordable housing.
 - √ In contrast to other low-income rural households, low-income families that depend on their employment income to support housing costs are more likely to live in residences that are too small for their family size and that have physical problems. (16)

√ Although nonmetro householders are more likely than metro householders to own their homes, housing in general in rural areas is smaller and more likely to have moderate or severe physical problems. (16)

√ Rural households are three times more likely than urban households to live in a mobile home, a less expensive housing alternative. (16)

• Some rural residents do not have access to housing at all.

√ As compared to urban areas, homeless people in rural areas are more likely to be white, female, married, currently working, homeless for the first time, and homeless for a shorter period of time. (17)

√ Homeless families in rural areas are more likely than their urban counterparts (41% in rural areas versus 11% in urban areas) to move in temporarily with family or friends rather than to rely on social agencies. (18)

√ Homelessness in rural areas as compared to urban areas is more likely to involve domestic violence but less likely to involve substance abuse. (17)

√ A recent survey of 202 homeless families in four Southern states revealed that 42% of the adults were employed and 28% of the adults had never received public assistance. The primary reasons for homelessness appeared to be a shortage of housing subsidies and landlords willing to accept subsidized rents. A shortage of subsidized child care also kept many poor families homeless. (19)

• Most rural residents do not have access to public transportation.

√ Nearly 1 out of every 14 rural households does not own a vehicle. About 57% of the rural poor do not own a car. (20)

√ Nationally, close to 40% of all rural residents live in areas with no form of public transportation. (20) 28% of rural residents live in areas with very low levels of service provision. (20)

√ Often, the rural poor must travel greater distances to employment opportunities, to obtain essential services, and to make needed purchases, such as groceries. (20)

Implications

As a result of changes in family structure and, in some cases, the loss of extended family networks, rural families are more likely today to require a wide array of formal services, such as child care, to meet their daily needs. Often, however, the array of services and social supports available to families in rural communities is limited. Accessing services frequently requires traveling to neighboring communities or regional centers, which is particularly difficult for poor families. Regardless of a family's income level, when families have to travel great distances to obtain child care, to work, to obtain services, and to purchase goods, it removes residents from their communities. This makes it more difficult for them to establish and nurture the informal networks that are important to strengthening community life and maintaining control within the community.

ECONOMIC TRENDS

For most of the last century, rural life typically was seen as an agricultural life and the combination of "family" and "farm" became an inseparable reminder of people's tie to the land. In the mid-1980s, family farms began to disappear as economic conditions favored their conversion into large-scale agribusiness operations. Simultaneously, metropolitan communities began to expand into rural areas with the effect of improving economic conditions, though drastically changing the lifestyle of community residents.

As a result of these and other changes, rural life can no longer be considered agricultural life. Today, rural communities are characterized by a level of economic

diversity that defies a single description. Rather, rural communities are more likely to be shaped by a convergence of diverse factors (e.g., changing family structure, economic conditions, strength of key social institutions) that influence the capacity of residents to affect the well-being of their community.

The following economic trends provide an overall picture of rural America in the last decade. However, this description of general trends should be read with the reminder that each rural community is unique.

- Rural America grew slightly in population during the 1990s.

From April 1990 to July 1999, the population of nonmetro counties grew 7.6%, or 3.9 million, compared to an increase of 2.7%, or 1.3 million, during the entire 1980-90 decade. (21) Early indications from the 2000 Census are that rural America has continued to experience population growth.

- Growth is uneven in rural areas.

Not all rural communities have benefitted from the nation's expansion. During the 1990s, a third of all rural counties captured three-fourths of all rural economic gains. Rural areas that have thrived economically are more likely to have amenities that attract business and migration, such as recreational areas. (22) Rural areas located next to metro areas have the fastest growing economies.

- Many rural areas are continuing to lose their young people.

√ During the early 1990s and into the mid-1990s, more college-educated people migrated into than out of rural areas, reversing a long-standing trend of out-migration. (23) However, from 1997-1999, college graduates migrated out of rural areas in numbers almost equal to those moving in for the first time since the early 1990s. (21)

√ During the early to mid 1990s, rural areas attracted a disproportionate share of young

families in their early careers (ages 26-30).

√ The rural South experienced the bulk of the migration followed by the West.

√ Hispanics were over-represented among the urban-to-rural migrants during the 1990s and now constitute the fastest growing racial-ethnic group in rural America.

- Median family income in rural areas grew slightly between 1996 and 1998 after a relatively stagnant period in the early 1990s.

√ Between 1997 and 1998, median family income (adjusted for inflation) grew at a faster rate (4.9% in rural areas than in urban (2.3%, however median family income for rural families (\$38,006) is still far below that of families in urban areas (\$49,016). (24)

√ Not all rural residents benefitted from the increase in family income. Families below the poverty line experienced a 4.6% decrease in income. In contrast, families with incomes between 100 and 299% of poverty and between 300 and 499% of poverty experienced growth. (24)

- Rural poverty is higher than urban poverty

√ After a steady increase in rural poverty from 1990 to 1993, rising from 16.3% in 1990 to 17.2% in 1993, by 1998 the rural poverty rate had dropped to 14.3%. Regardless, the rural poverty rate still exceeded the urban poverty rate by 2 percentage points. (25)

√ From 1996 to 1998, the share of poor people living in families with at least one full-time, full-year worker increased from 20% to 29%. (26) The share also increased in urban areas, from 21% in 1996 to 25% in 1998.

√ 43% of single adult households with children in rural areas have incomes below the poverty level, compared with 37 percent in urban areas. (27) 53% of the total income of these rural households comes from government assistance

programs, compared with 11% for nonpoor households.

√ Over half of the rural poor live in the South. In contrast, urban poor are more evenly distributed throughout the country.

√ In 1997, racial and ethnic minorities comprised 17% of all rural residents. Regardless, the rate of rural minorities living in poverty in 1996 was nearly three times as high as those of rural Whites. (26) In 1997, rural Blacks were twice as likely to be unemployed as rural Whites.

√ Rural children living in single-parent families are more likely to be poor than children living in two-parent families. 61.9% of rural poor children lived in families headed by a single parent. (27) A total of 3.2 million children (under age 18) in rural areas lived in poverty in 1996. The poverty rate for all rural children was 24%, compared to 22% for urban children. Rural White children constituted 17% of the poverty rate; rural Black children had the highest poverty rates at 50%; and the poverty rate for rural Hispanic and Native American children exceeded 40%. (28)

√ Children in the rural South are more likely to be poor than in other areas of the country. In 1998, the poverty rate for children in the rural South was nearly 27%, as compared to 17% in rural areas in the rest of the nation. (29)

Implications

The impact of economic factors on crime and violence rates has been the source of considerable study in urban areas, with much less of a focus on rural areas. For example, although high rates of poverty have long been associated with increased crime rates in urban areas, the link between chronic poverty and crime in rural areas is less clear. On the other hand, a meta-analysis of studies examining the impact of rapid population growth on crime indicated that crime grew even faster than the population. (30) Although the reason for such an increase is not clear, it is theorized that informal social controls, which

operate to keep crime in check, are weakened as new residents move in.

At the very least, the economic conditions of a community influence the extent to which resources are available to address crime and violence. Many rural areas lack sufficient population to support the services essential to meeting the needs of people on a daily basis. Even in rural areas that are benefitting from the national growth experienced during the last decade, community leaders are likely to face challenges in strengthening and expanding services and public programs, such as the schools and police, to meet the needs of growing populations.

Moreover, it may be as critical in rural communities, regardless of whether they are persistently poor or experiencing rapid growth, to find ways of strengthening the connections among people. Stronger connections enable people to act collectively in establishing and enforcing the norms, values, and attitudes of the community.

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