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Issues Facing Rural Residents

by

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ISSUES FACING RURAL RESIDENTS

Norman Walzer*

Many rural areas underwent population declines and economic stagnation during the 1980s creating significant stress and concern. Young families in search of better employment opportunities migrated out of some rural areas. In other cases, relatively well-paid manufacturing jobs are being replaced by lower paid consumer service jobs, causing lower incomes for rural residents.

In the fall of 1989, the Illinois Rural Life Panel** surveyed approximately 2,800 residents about the issues which they viewed as concerns. This Community Economics Newsletter explores the types of issues reported by the Rural Life Panel in Illinois. It seems reasonable to propose that similar issues would be reported if such a survey were undertaken in Wisconsin. The responses are analyzed by respondent characteristics to generalize the results.

Seriousness of Community Issues

Panelists could comment on issues fitting into two categories: public services and economic issues.

Public Services. The overall quality of public services in rural Illinois is not a major concern for respondents to the Rural Life Panel as only 29 percent reported the general quality of services as a moderate or very serious problem. Statewide, 35 percent reported that overall quality of services is not a problem at all.

Among the services about which rural residents expressed most concern was landfill pollution. Statewide, 51 percent of respondents reported this pollution as a moderate or very serious issue. There has been much discussion in the news media and in public forums about disposal of solid waste and some rural landfills are accepting refuse from other states and urban areas. This issue has been of major concern in rural areas effected.

While landfill pollution is troublesome, there is much less concern about either availability or quality of drinking water. Only 23 percent reported availability and 35 percent reported quality as major issues. This is somewhat surprising because a common issue surrounding landfill discussions is the impact on water quality.

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**The Illinois Rural Life Panel was created in 1989 to gather information on views and attitudes of residents in 76 nonmetro counties in Illinois. The Panel consists of approximately 2,000 residents who are surveyed annually about policies and issues facing rural areas.

Another important concern for rural residents is quality of local roads and bridges. Specifically, 42 percent of respondents reported that condition of rural roads was either a moderate or very serious problem. Also, 39 percent reported that conditions of local bridges are in this grouping.

Residents also are concerned about drugs in schools, especially in secondary schools. Nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of respondents rated drugs as a moderate or very serious problem in secondary schools and 46 percent reported this issue in elementary schools. A general view is that drugs and gang activities are moving from urban areas into surrounding rural areas and local governments are increasingly asked to deal with this issue. Crime in rural areas, for instance, was reported by 45 percent of Panelists.

Access to health care is not reported as a major concern. Access to dentists was reported by only 15 percent of respondents, compared with 23 percent for either access to hospitals or access to doctors. What is not shown, however, is that the access may be a greater issue for relatively immobile populations, such as poor, aged, or otherwise disadvantaged groups. These residents may not have many alternative sources of care, other than in their communities.

While educational programs in rural areas often are cited as lagging behind those in urban areas, literacy was cited as a major issue by only 33 percent of respondents. One explanation may be that illiteracy is often concealed because people who cannot read or write find ways to hide this fact. Likewise, a lack of programs to deal with adult illiteracy was cited by only 27 percent of respondents as a significant issue. Senior citizen services also were not cited by many respondents (24 percent) as a major concern. Availability of low-cost housing, on the other hand, is cause for serious concern for 43 percent of respondents.

Economic Issues. Unemployment in rural areas is obviously a cause of significant concern for Panelists as 71 percent reported it as a moderate or very serious problem. Particular concern was expressed regarding job opportunities for rural youth. Parents and community residents are concerned about retaining youth or attracting them back to the community after they have completed their education. However, without job opportunities at relatively competitive salaries, there is little prospect that youth will find areas attractive. As an example, 77 percent of Panelists reported entertainment opportunities for youth as a moderate or serious concern.

The concern about unemployment is supported by the fact that 64 percent of respondents reported loss of manufacturing and 66 percent reported loss of retailers as a moderate or serious issue. These are two separate issues. Loss of manufacturing usually means loss of relatively high paying jobs whereas the loss of retail means that residents must travel further to obtain goods and services. Retail, however, typically pays relative low wages but sales taxes finance many public services in communities.

Conclusions

Economic problems facing rural residents are affecting their ability to finance services, especially roads and bridges. Also, however, pollution, crime, and drugs in schools are becoming important issues in many rural areas. The Illinois Rural Life Panel provides an opportunity to monitor conditions in rural Illinois and trace the effects of public policies on conditions which rural residents face. Clearly, many issues must be resolved, if rural areas are to retain the high quality of life it has enjoyed in the past.

Ron Shaffer
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