

University of Wisconsin-Madison
Department of Agricultural Economics
Community Economics

A newsletter from the Department of Agricultural Economics,
University of Wisconsin-Madison and Community, Natural Resource
and Economic Development Programs.

Cooperative Extension Service. University of Wisconsin-Extension

Number 218
December 1994

Quality of Life in Rural Areas

by

Norman Walzer

Copyright (c) 1994 by Norman Walzer. All rights reserved.
Readers may make verbatim copies of this document for non-
commercial purposes by any means, provided that this copyright
notice appears on all such copies.

Quality of Life in Rural Areas
by Norman Walzer¹

Measuring economic development and/or the outcomes of public policies aimed at promoting economic growth has always been difficult. Jobs, income levels, payrolls, and other characteristics which can be observed directly have been used most often. Communities or governmental jurisdictions that are increasing, by these measures, are viewed as prospering whereas regions which are lower by these standards are often viewed as less desirable. A result is that many public policy-makers have focused on economic development, as measured by employment.

While economic development is still paramount in the minds of policy-makers, more and more attention is now paid to other factors that affect the overall quality of life. In fact, more and more, community development is being differentiated from economic development or industrial development. Community development encompasses living conditions or quality of life issues. Policy-makers are measuring the success of their efforts according to this broader yardstick.

The main stumbling block in using quality of life in practical discussions is the difficulty in measuring it. How residents perceive quality life is affected by their age, ethnic background, wealth, and other personal characteristics. In addition, without directly asking residents how they feel about the area in which they live, it is hard to directly observe quality of life conditions.

Illinois Rural Life Panel

In 1989, the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs initiated the Illinois Rural Life Panel, an annual survey of approximately 2,000 residents in the 76 nonmetro counties in Illinois. Panelists agreed to report on their perception and opinions on a wide range of state and local policy issues. The Panel started with 2,700 residents but has remained relatively constant at 2,000 for the past three years.

The Panel offers a unique opportunity to monitor how rural residents perceive conditions in rural areas, by age, sex, occupations, and income levels. Especially important is the ability to determine how attitudes are changing over time. While the Panel is only in its fourth year, we are now able to begin to see trends in attitudes. This paper describes rural residents' attitudes about the quality of life for their family and for their community. It also shows what rural residents think the future holds for rural Illinois.

Quality of Life in Late 1980s. - In 1989, not quite one-half (46 percent) of the Panelists

¹ The author is acting dean, College of Business, Western Illinois University. He also directs the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs.

reported that the quality of life, for their families, had generally remained the same over the previous five years. On the other hand, 37 percent reported that the quality of life had improved and 17 percent said that it had declined. On these grounds it appears that quality of life in rural areas may have increased.

Rural residents felt quite differently about conditions in their community, however. Only 19 percent reported that conditions had improved in their community during the previous five years, compared with 52 percent who thought conditions had remained the same. Almost one third (29 percent), however, thought that conditions in their community had worsened. The attitudes about community are supported by the fact that, in Illinois, 70 of the 76 nonmetro counties lost population and of the six counties which gained, four contained either a prison or a university. Clearly, the 1980s were not good, especially to small towns in Illinois, or nationwide for that matter.

Early 1990s. Respondents also felt strongly that the future for rural Illinois families was not bright but that their family might do better. Statewide, 22 percent of respondents reported that the quality of life for families in their community will become better, compared with 29 percent who reported that it will worsen.

The future for respondents' families, on the other hand, appears much brighter. On average, 36 percent reported that quality of life for their families will become better, compared with only 17 percent who viewed it as worsening. Apparently, respondents were encouraged by the previous five years and thought that they had better control over conditions facing their families than did rural residents at large.

Respondents also were asked about the quality of life for rural Illinois families overall and they had relatively little confidence about the future. A total of 37 percent of respondents reported that the next five years (1989 to 1994) would be about the same for the average rural Illinois family, compared with only 17 percent who reported that it would increase and 46 percent who said that it would worsen.

What these figure show is that as direct involvement lessens, the worse the Panelists think the future will be. They rated the future for their families highest, families in their community next, and rural families overall lowest. These are not necessarily unexpected findings.

Underlying Factors. Family characteristics might determine how a Panelist views the future and a more detailed analysis was undertaken relating gender, place of residence, sex, occupational status, education, and income. In general, residents in wealthier areas and retirees thought that quality of life in their community during the past five year remained the same. Those with less formal education reported that quality of life has not changed for their families while higher income panelists report that quality of life had increased.

Views about the future, however, are somewhat different, Respondents with more formal

education are more likely to see the future as improving for their families, while retirees are much less likely to see the future as improving. Higher income respondents were more likely to report a brighter future for their families and this probably reflects the findings for education.

Summary

Evaluating conditions in a rural region is difficult. Objective measures such as income, employment, and sales reattv don't measure how residents perceive local conditions. The Rural Life Panel indicates that many residents think their family conditions will improve but that rural residents in general will face hardship in the future. While surveying residents is difficult and costly, it may be virtually the only way to obtain a broad picture of how residents think their areas are doing.