

# Fact Sheet

## Rural Life Today: An Overview

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To study rural communities is to study change. Despite the common stereotype of rural communities as places of serene stability, life in rural communities and small towns is subject to the same life changing social forces affecting the rest of America. Major trends, including the changing structure of families, an increased mobility within society, the changing economic picture, and an increasingly diverse population, have as profound an effect on the well-being of rural communities and small towns as in urban areas.

Naturally, given the diversity found among rural communities and small towns, change will be experienced differently. Regardless of the specific dynamics of change (e.g., economic and population growth, decline, increased mobility, etc.) in a rural area, the impact is likely to be experienced more intensely than in urban areas. In rural communities struggling with poverty, the closing or consolidation of schools, a declining tax base, or the regionalization of services, alternative services that might soften the social impact often are not available.

Similarly, the disruption of community life and social relationships that occurs in “booming” communities may lead to social problems, especially if services are underdeveloped or inadequate to meet the needs of growing numbers of residents. Studies have shown that both long-term and new residents perceived and exhibited problems in communities when social life was disrupted as a result of development.<sup>(1)</sup> Thus, the factors contributing to the transformation of rural America are likely to produce meaningful differences in the nature of everyday life for rural communities and small towns.

Needless to say, aggregated data can help to provide an overall appreciation of the change that has occurred in rural areas generically. However, to examine the extent and impact of change within a given rural community, it is necessary to compare the conditions of the local community against the broader picture presented as trends here.

One of the most disquieting trends observed in communities across America today is the decline in social capital – that is, the disappearance and weakening of the connections between and among people and community institutions that produce a vibrant civic life. Although the nature of social capital in rural areas has not been studied extensively, researchers have generally assumed that the close personal ties among family and neighbors so often associated with rural residency and the sense of connection to one’s community were indicative of social capital.

When social capital exists in a community, residents interact with each other in the form of visiting, discussing and solving problems, helping each other with small tasks, and generally watching out for each other. They are more likely to work, socialize, attend church, and shop in the community. Perhaps most importantly, the presence of social capital is a predictor of community stability and well-being, and the capacity of community residents to establish and enforce norms, shared values, and attitudes.

In rural communities, many people traditionally have assumed that the ties between family, kin, and neighborhood groups and among residents and their schools, churches, and other social institutions have helped to main-

tain stability within rural communities. Thus, the trends highlighted in the *Rural Life Today* fact sheet may have particularly harsh consequences for small towns and rural areas. To the extent that these trends operate to weaken social ties and relationships, rural communities may find it more difficult to deter crime and violence, and to maintain safety and other measures of a high quality of life.

**Source**

(1) Jobs, P.C. (1999). Residential stability and crime in small agricultural and recreational towns. *Sociological Perspectives*, 42(3), 499-524. See also, Krannich, R. S., Greider, T., & Little, R. L. (1985). Rapid growth and fear of crime: A four-community comparison. *Rural Sociology*, 50(2), 193-209.

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