

THE CHANGES IN RURAL AMERICA

Daryl Heasley, PhD.
Associate Professor, Rural Sociology Extension
Dept. of Agriculture, Economics, and Rural Sociology
The Pennsylvania State University

Deborah Bray Preston, R.N., M.S.
Doctoral Candidate
Dept. of Agriculture, Economics, and Rural Sociology
The Pennsylvania State University

Libraries are special places and when they are in rural areas they are even more special. Both of us, although raised in very different rural areas--one about 35 miles directly west of Clarion, Pennsylvania, and the other in Northern Ontario, Canada--have a warm appreciation for rural library services. Despite the remoteness of both of these geographic areas, there was always a library and a librarian to enrich our lives. We like what you are doing at conferences like this to make these services better. Furthermore, we know that your interest, creativity, and dedication in providing library services to rural residents go far beyond such conferences. Dr. Vavrek enumerated three challenges at the first conference sponsored by Clarion University of Pennsylvania. He stated:

First, we can build on the momentum of interest in rural librarianship through workshops, conferences, and institutes...Second, we can perform the research necessary to illustrate the similarities and the differences of rural librarianship with other aspects of library service. Third, we can signal... those...given a responsibility to represent American librarianship that the needs of those served by the small and medium sized libraries have been neglected and must be made a part of a new creative consciousness to benefit all Americans (Vavrek, 91).

We commend your efforts in all of these areas as we believe that access to adequate library services is crucial if rural residents are to achieve and maintain a high quality of life.

In an attempt to insure that you realize your objectives, we intend to discuss selected changes in the rural countryside which help to explain the current rural phenomenon. First, we must define "rural" which is not an easy task. We use it in a general sense to mean the countryside, the village, and the small American town. These geographic areas are inhabited by people who have different values and a stronger commitment to the institutions and lifeways of the American past than do their urban counterparts. The adjective "rural" also implies deficiencies in the availability and quality of public services, increased costs and time involved in accessing these services, and difficulties in attempting to adapt urban programs to rural needs (Copp; USDA Yearbook 1970, 147).

Schmidt (1982) made the following observations on rural life:

There are few (if any) generalizations concerning life in rural America which can be made with absolute certainty. This is not because we know so little about rural conditions...but rather, because rural areas...differ so greatly one from another...Diversity exists in geography, demography, culture, and ethnicity. It exists in the variety of political forms and it exists in the diversity of the rural economy...It represents (at the same time) a great resource in our work with those who inhabit our countryside (11).

In summation, rural areas are the backbone of America in that they are the sources of all raw materials that are essential to our high quality of life (Dillman and Hobbs, 1982). It is the

rural people, the growers and extractors of these raw materials, who represent the focus of the remainder of our discussion.

Having considered several definitional and value items as a prelude to the thesis of this address, we can now move to a discussion of selected trends in rural America and their implications for rural librarians. These trends include: the population turnaround, economic changes, improvement in housing, decreased poverty levels, increased formal educational attainment, changes in the structure of rural families, increases in rural crime, changes in local government finance and expenditures, and improvement in health care and transportation.

Population Turnaround

A significant development occurred in the pattern of population growth, beginning in the late 1960s and becoming measurable in about 1972. For the first time in more than 160 years, the population growth rate was higher in rural areas than in urban areas, despite a decline in the national birth rate (Beale, 1981). In the 1960s, rural and small town growth was 4.4 percent. Between 1970 and 1980, this growth rate had climbed to 15.4 percent (USDA, Office of Rural Development, 1983:1).

In the decade of the 1960s, the number of persons living in nonmetropolitan counties declined by 2.8 million. By contrast, in the decade of the 1970s, the number of people in nonmetropolitan counties increased by 8.4 million. This growth in the 1970s, however, was not uniform across the U.S.A. Four factors seem to have influenced this unevenness. These factors include the

growth of the extractive industries, the expansion of resort industries, the relocation of persons of retirement age, and the growth of four year plus colleges (USDA, Office of Rural Development, 1983:2).

In the Northeast Region of the U.S.A., the nonmetropolitan population increased by 12.4 percent. Similarly, a 7.8 percent increase was registered in the North Central Region. A 17.1 percent increase was noted in the Southern Region, and a 31.8 percent increase in nonmetropolitan growth was recorded in the Western Region (USDA, Office of Rural Development, 1983:2).

Unevenness of growth is just one factor which should be recognized by persons who provide services to rural areas. Another significant factor is the nature and structure of this population. Today, one in every four Americans (or 57 million people) lives in nonmetropolitan areas (USDA, Office of Rural Development, 1983:5). Twenty-eight percent of the American population 18 years of age and under lives in rural areas (Stern, 1980), as does one-third (11 million) of the nation's total elderly (Harbert and Wilkinson, 1979). Approximately 27 million women aged 16 years and over live in nonmetropolitan areas (Bescher-Donnelly and Smith, 1981). Projections suggest these population trends will continue.

These population trends suggest some obvious conclusions. There will be an increasing, but uneven demand for rural library services. Also, services will need to be geared especially to those 18 years of age and under and to those 65 years of age and over. In addition, data need to be gathered on the types of demands such age cohorts

have placed on these services in the past in order to determine what services will be needed in the future.

Economic Growth

Population growth in nonmetropolitan counties resulted in part from expanding job opportunities.

Rural employment growth in the 1970s outpaced urban job progress by one-third. While total employment in the United States rose at an annual rate of 2.1 percent in the 1970s, the growth rate in rural America was 2.3 percent ...and 1.9 percent in metropolitan areas (USDA, Office of Rural Development, 1983:5).

This difference was even more pronounced in those rural counties with no town of more than 2,500 persons as they averaged 3.3 percent employment growth (USDA, Office of Rural Development, 1983).

The American farmer now produces enough harvest for 75 persons--twice the output produced in the 1940s with one-third the workers. It is generally acknowledged that this drastic increase is due to the adoption of high technology. The term "agri-business" is often used to describe the status of most American farms (USDA, Office of Rural Development, 1983).

The farm work force seems to have stabilized at nearly six million. In addition, the rural economy has diversified and is no longer dominated by agriculture. Still, self-employment is nearly twice as common in rural as in urban America. Several reasons for this diversity become apparent. They include the following: a tax system that encourages industrial growth, abundant land at moderate prices, access to national transportation systems, and a trainable labor force. Thus, the rural economy more closely

resembles and is affected by national economic cycles (USDA, Office of Rural Development, 1983:5). This trend is expected to continue.

Traditionally, the industries based in rural areas have been those that offer lower pay. This situation may change now that more high tech industry is becoming nonmetropolitan based.

Women in America have been perceived as occupying positions that are peripheral or supportive in relation to those occupied by men, and they have not figured into the GNP (Brown, 1982). These perceptions are no longer accurate. Between 1970 and 1980, the number of nonmetropolitan women 16 years of age and over who participated in the labor force increased by 4.5 million persons or 53 percent. By 1980, 48 percent of all nonmetropolitan women were in the labor force. This increase came about as a result of the following factors: (1) more jobs were made available to women in nonmetropolitan industries and associated ancillary services, (2) a more liberal sex role ideology developed, (3) variations in family size and structure occurred, (4) families experienced increased need for another income, and (5) other changes in family roles and responsibilities occurred. Certainly, by any measure, women are contributing significantly to the economic growth in nonmetropolitan areas (Beschner-Donnelly and Smith, 1981).

These changes in the economy have implications for rural library service. Librarians will experience increased demand for information on high tech occupations, career change, computers, time management, dual wage earners, and ways to cope with family change.

Social Progress Indicators

Although educational attainment has increased, rural students (especially minority group members) are likely to enroll in school later, progress through school more slowly, complete fewer school years, and score lower on national tests than students who attend urban schools. The percentage of high school graduates among the rural population grew from 45.9 in 1970 to 62.8 in 1980, but rural education statistics are not encouraging. In fact, several aspects of rural education present problems. These disturbing aspects include the following: (1) about half the rural population age 25 and older had completed high school in 1975 (compared to about two-thirds of their urban counterparts), (2) about a quarter of rural blacks and Hispanics in the same age group had completed high school, (3) functional illiteracy remained high among rural minorities as 30 percent of rural black males and 19 percent of rural black females had completed less than five years of formal education in 1975, and (4) regardless of race, the college enrollment rates of rural students were lower than those of their urban counterparts (USDA, 1978:6). The need for supplements to rural education is great. Rural libraries can help fill this need. Ironically, perhaps tragically, federal funding for rural libraries was cut from the budget in fiscal years '83 and '84. Lobbying for restoration of these funds is crucial. These data should support your argument for the restoration of these funds.

Housing conditions in rural areas have improved markedly. However, by almost any measure of adequacy, housing continues

to be poorer in rural than in urban areas. A higher percentage of rural than urban residents are likely to live in homes that lack complete plumbing and/or are crowded, lack a complete kitchen, and have a lower market value. These problems affect blacks, Indians, migrant workers, the elderly, and single persons living in rural areas more than they do the general rural population. Several reasons for these problems can be given. These include: (1) limited access to credit, (2) limited income, (3) job instability, and (4) prejudice (USDA, 1978:6-7).

Rural poverty levels (as set by the U.S. Department of Welfare) have fallen 19 percent over the past 20 years. From 1969 to 1979, poverty levels dropped from 17.9 to 13.7 percent. This trend is positively reflected in increased median rural family incomes. Still, income is lower in rural areas for every major racial/ethnic group. Moreover, rural poverty is not evenly distributed across the regions of the U.S. Areas of chronic and persistent poverty are concentrated in the South where nearly two-thirds of the nation's poor reside (USDA, Office of Rural Development, 1983).

Significant differences exist between rural and urban poor. Urban poor families most often are headed by females, unemployed workers, or by persons not in the labor force. Conversely, more rural poor families are heavily involved in the labor force. Forty percent of these families are headed by full-time workers and almost half have two or more wage earners. Thus, poverty levels in rural areas are not associated with labor force participation, but rather with the types of jobs that have traditionally

been available in rural labor markets. Recent diversification is beginning to reverse this trend somewhat (USDA, 1978:5-6).

What can rural libraries do to assist the rural poor? Rural libraries can provide information to those who work with low-income persons or families in the following areas: careers, money management, wise use of credit, and budgeting.

Family structure in rural society has undergone significant changes. Shifts from family owned to corporate owned farms have resulted in loss of family identity and cohesion, as well as unemployment, economic problems, and increasing industrialization. The outward migration of the young has fragmented family ties and inward migration of nonrural people has caused conflicts in values and changes in social institutions (Coward and Smith, 1981, Dillman and Hobbs, 1982).

The lifestyles of rural women are changing, as are the lifestyles of women in other sectors of American society. Rural women are still more likely to be married, have more children, live in large families and marry earlier than urban women. But they are beginning to enter the workforce in higher numbers (Haney, 1982, Bescher-Donnelly and Smith, 1981). Although they still value their traditional maternal role, fertility control and an awareness of the feminist movement has helped rural women become more independent and willing to exert influence in family and community affairs (Flora and Johnson, 1978).

Rural families are more likely to be headed by married couples than are urban families. Family stability is greater in that

fewer divorces occur (although the rate is rising) (Smith and Coward, 1981). Rural society is not tolerant of divorce (Larson, 1978); therefore, when divorces do occur, divorcees and children of divorced parents encounter more social disapproval.

The American family is experiencing a decline in kinship ties. Family members are moving to other geographical areas (Lee, 1980) and family life is evolving nontraditional forms with friendships and stepfamilies replacing kin networks (Macklin, 1980). Lee and Cassity (1981) have found that these factors (migration and spatial separation from kin) are also issues in rural areas. Thus, we can conclude that familial support systems are diminishing in rural as well as in urban areas. No data are available, however, on how rural people are handling this issue--especially the elderly and widowed. We do know that there are fewer human services available in rural areas to cope with this phenomenon.

Finally, a significant change has occurred in attitudes toward premarital sex. Clayton and Bokemeier (1980) state that premarital sex has increased the incidents of childbearing among teenage girls. This is the age group least likely to use contraception and most likely to have childbirth complications and bear unhealthy babies. Rural parents are more intolerant of premarital sex and are less likely than urban parents to make birth control or abortion information available (Larson, 1978). This presents significant problems for rural youth who may hold more liberal values than their parents do.

The above issues demonstrate the need in rural areas for increased

institutional support systems and inexpensive human services programs such as family education, sex education, and contraceptive education. There is also a need for mental health services, programs to re-educate women and the unemployed for better jobs, and day care centers for children whose mothers are employed. Hopefully, the 1980s will be a decade of change which will see an increase in these services. Rural libraries could help supply information in these areas.

Rural crime is on the increase in categories such as larceny, theft, misdemeanor and selected violent crimes (Rotfeld, 1983). Several factors have contributed to this rise: (1) a changing community structure that is less inhibiting; (2) the fact that children and property are less closely supervised in families where both parents work, (3) small widely spread housing developments; (4) a growing number of part-time farmers who are absent much of the day; (5) improved highways that permit a criminal to escape before his crime is discovered; (6) the tendency of many rural residents to leave doors, windows, and field equipment unlocked; (7) understaffed local police forces; and (8) a continued, but unrealistic sense of safety in rural areas (Rotfeld, 1983).

One nationwide trend that needs more research is the significant percentage increase in crimes such as shoplifting among those rural residents 65 years of age and older (Rotfeld, 1983). Materials such as those available from the National Center for Rural Crime, Columbus, Ohio, could be highlighted in rural library displays to help "take a bite out of rural crime."

Public Services

Local government expenditures (per capita) are usually a rough indicator of the level of community services available in urban/rural areas. In 1972, urban counties averaged one and one-half times higher per capita local government expenditures than did rural counties. This gap continues to widen (USDA, 1980:7).

The cautions set forth earlier about unevenness of growth in rural areas translate into overburdened facilities, understaffed services, and ill-defined growth plans in areas of rapid population growth. The opposite is true for declining rural areas (Butler and Howell, 1980). Furthermore, many local governmental units are restricted by law, by political tradition, and by economic reality (in both rapid growth areas and declining areas) from taxing adequately to furnish needed services. In 1977, 43 percent of the rural governmental expenditures came from State and Federal Aid (\$299 per capita) (USDA, 1978:6). Block grants may help loosen the local government revenue/expenditure crunch if local governments avail themselves of these resources. Rural libraries could help provide information to local governments to help them secure such resources. Rural local governmental units that lack a professional grant writer often lose potential resources to those governmental units who have such a staff person.

Health care issues in rural America differ from those of urban America. There is some indication that rural people are less healthy than their urban counterparts (McCoy and Brown, 1978). Few studies, however, have been done on the health status of rural

people. It is known that rural areas have a higher infant mortality rate (16.9 versus 15.0 per 1,000 live births) than urban areas do. Some researchers have suggested that high infant mortality rates are tied to poverty related conditions such as poor housing, inadequate nutrition, insufficient prenatal care, and increased teenage childbearing due to earlier marriages. High rates of both of these phenomena are more prevalent in rural areas (Chilman, 1980).

The fact that quality health care is often inaccessible in rural America presents a problem. Current research shows that rural health care is inferior to urban health care because it is frequently inaccessible and because fewer physicians practice in rural areas (Cordes, 1976).

Transportation in rural areas falls far short in nearly all respects to urban transportation. Inadequate rural transportation--especially for the poor, elderly, handicapped, young, and one-car families--makes gaining access to jobs, health care, social services, shopping, recreation, and cultural opportunities difficult. Coupled with this lack of public transportation is the high cost of long-distance private transportation.

Among all rural households, 52 percent own only a single vehicle and 15 percent do not own any vehicle. Less than 1 percent of the rural population working outside the home uses or has access to public transportation. Transportation is an even more serious problem for the rural poor and the elderly. Fifty-seven percent of rural poor residents and 45 percent of rural elderly have no

car (USDA, 1980:10-11).

During the period between 1972 and 1980, 1,800 small towns lost intercity bus lines. Regulated air service carriers dropped 200 service points (30 percent of the total) during the period from 1960 to 1980 (USDA, 1980:10-11).

Two-thirds of the nation's major roads, particularly those in rural America, need resurfacing and rebuilding. Many rural bridges have been closed or their use has been severely restricted. Rural roads can not support firetruck and bookmobile traffic (USDA, Office of Rural Development, 1983:10-11).

Conclusion

Most objective measures of socioeconomic conditions show that the quality of life in rural America has improved in recent years. Data on population, income, employment and housing are more positive than previously. However, data on health care and transportation indicate even more rural versus urban lag than previously. Data showing progress in income, employment and housing categories point out the persistence of rural-urban disparity. Pockets of poverty inhabited by minority groups, the elderly, and migrant workers persist, especially in the South. In the past, programs that were tailored for urban problems were applied to rural problems. This situation still exists, and the issue needs attention (USDA, 1980:11).

In addition to the specific implications already stated for those of us who work in rural areas, librarians should note several more that result from the trends mentioned above. Whether one

works in a rural area that is experiencing decline or growth in population, a need for increased interorganizational linkages exists. We would like to suggest that a linkage should be established between the rural library network and the Cooperative Extension Service network. The latter organization has offices in each of the approximately 3,100 counties of the United States. Furthermore, the goals of the two organizations are similar. Both seek to provide educational opportunities for their rural clientele.

There is a need for appropriate and accessible educational services in rural areas. Disadvantaged rural dwellers need these services. Even the least disadvantaged rural dwellers, young married couples with children, experience mobility problems during the workday because the employed spouse drives the car to work. Obviously, the need for flexibility in providing appropriate times, techniques, and places for these educational opportunities demands major consideration.

Materials must be geared to the educational level of our clientele. The disparity in the levels of formal educational attainment between rural and urban residents suggests that educational materials should be adapted. The diverse political, cultural, social, and economic conditions that exist in rural areas indicate a need for conducting case studies, studies that could be monitored to see which programs work, which ones need to be changed, and what generalities can be drawn from individual conditions. Case studies could be set up in various "service communities" that would take into account the diversities and geographical differences mentioned

above. Rural librarians and Cooperative Extension Service personnel could work together in these endeavors and both apply the findings to program development.

* Services should be geared to families in transition, families changing their place of residence or place of employment. in stage of life cycle, place of residence, state and place of employment. Educational displays and materials could spotlight crime reduction programs and health care programs aimed specifically at the needs of rural residents.

In summation, we believe that models for programs and services must be based on rural needs, needs which can be discovered by pursuing rural research. We can no longer apply urban models to rural communities.

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