

Family and Household Structure and Change in Rural America

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Family and Household Structure

Recent studies of family and household demographics find many similarities between rural and urban and well as between metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas. It is safe to conclude that any major trends that have been observed for the nation as a whole can also be observed in nonmetropolitan and rural areas. These trends include increasing age at marriage, declines in fertility, increases in nonmarital fertility, rising cohabitation, declining age at first sexual intercourse, lower marital stability, declining percentages of households containing a married couple and their own children, growing percentages of mothers who are in the labor force, and increasing numbers of nontraditional households. These trends are all manifestations of fundamental changes in the way that individual's are reared within families, and, in turn, how they enact their own family lives.

- ◀ Rural America, like the country as a whole, is experiencing fundamental changes in family and household structure. Family issues that are important on the national scene will also be important in rural areas. These include feminization of poverty, the well-being of children, teenage pregnancy, dual earner couples, and growth of nontraditional families and households.

Although some studies suggest that urban-rural and met-nonmet differences may be converging, significant differences remain. Heaton et al. (1989) find little spatial difference in the timing of first intercourse and

first birth, but rural nonmetropolitan areas are characterized by younger age at marriage. Similarly, O'Hare (1991) reports a higher percentage of rural residents are married, with or without children, than are urban residents. Fuguitt, Brown and Beale (1989) find few met-nonmet differences in household composition, but rural areas have higher proportions in married couple households with minor children, and relatively few persons in single parent families or living alone. Their research also identifies young age at marriage as a distinguishing feature of rural family life. Rural areas have a long tradition of above average fertility, but this difference appears to be declining (Fuguitt, Brown and Beale, 1989). Although evidence is far from complete, it appears from research reviewed above that rural-urban differences are greater than nonmet-met differences.

Of course, simple dichotomies in residence type mask important spatial differences. Community size, proximity to large urban centers, location on transportation corridors and other dimensions of spatial structure provide more refined indicators of residence. Moreover, regional variation in modes of production, subcultural orientation and economic structure change work patterns and levels of living that, in turn, impact on family life.

- ◀ Research should continue to pay attention to nonmetropolitan-metropolitan and, in particular, rural-urban differences in family structure. More detailed categories of residence type and regional variation should also be taken into account.

Even with more refined categories,

measures of residence type leave unanswered questions regarding processes which generate spatial differentiation. Even though type of residence continues to account for some differences in family structure, the magnitude of these differences create an awkward situation. The differences are large enough that they should not be ignored. At the same time, the differences are not so great as to require exclusive study of one type of area. Indeed, the modest size of residential differences coupled with a rapid decline in the proportion of people in rural or nonmetro areas (to about thirty percent nonmetro and an equivalent percent in rural areas in 1980) suggest that rural studies may be threatened with obsolescence unless they contribute to our understanding of society as a whole. In particular, the farm population has many distinctive features, but is a shrinking proportion of the U.S. population (only 2 percent in 1988).

- ◀ **Most research should not focus exclusively on rural, farm or nonmetropolitan family life, but should provide a basis for generalization to broader segments of society.**

Composition of rural and/or nonmetropolitan areas is an important source of variation in family demographics. Heaton et al., (1989) find that population composition, as measured by a fairly limited set of control variables, accounts for roughly half of the spatial variation in timing of first marriage. Fuguitt, Brown and Beale (1989) identify substantial differences in fertility on the basis of race/ethnicity, education, labor force participation, income, and migrant status. Nonmetropolitan minorities are perennially ranked among the more economically disadvantaged groups in the country (Jensen and Tienda, 1989). Indeed, demographic, ethnic and socioeconomic differences are substantially greater than are the spatial differences.

- ◀ **Research on rural and nonmetropolitan families must take population composition into account.**

Attitudes and Values Regarding Family Life

Prior research and common wisdom support the notion that rural people have more traditional outlooks on life. One analysis of values in the mid-1970s lead the author to retreat from his earlier conclusion that "Rural-urban differences in values are decreasing as America moves in the direction of a mass society" (Larson, 1978:110). Larson goes on to note: (1) rural-urban difference in the emphasis given to major values, (2) differences may narrow in some cases but widen in others, and (3) variation within rural America is substantial. Rural residents were more likely to take traditional positions on family related issues such as divorce, premarital sex, birth control, and abortion. These differences suggest some strain between rural areas and the broader society.

The dramatic changes in family life which have occurred in the last two decades indicate a need to update our knowledge of urban-rural differences in family related values and attitudes. A broad gap between rural values and fundamental family change could pose serious problems for the relevance and utility of national policies designed to deal with this family change.

For this report, I calculated urban-rural differences in attitudes toward broad groups of family issues using the 1987 National Survey of Families and Households (See Appendix Table 1). The questions fall roughly into four groups namely: (1) the impact of family behavior on young children, (2) the acceptability of various forms of union formation and dissolution, (3) gender roles, and (4) assistance given to parents or adult children. Generally, these results show little difference between the metropolitan majority

and various sub-categories of nonmetropolitan residents.

The first set of questions asks about attitudes regarding mothers working, day care, and divorce when young children are involved. Responses for residents in metropolitan, adjacent nonmetropolitan, and urban nonadjacent counties all fall within a few percentage points of each other. Residents of nonadjacent, entirely rural counties are a little more likely to disapprove than other groups, but the differences are not large. On questions regarding nontraditional family behaviors including having a child without getting married, staying single, cohabitation, premarital sex, nonbiological parents and childlessness, the most rural residents tend to have more traditional attitudes, with nonadjacent rural counties averaging about 11 percentage points higher disapproval than metropolitan residents. Similar patterns are not observed, however, on issues of divorce, extra-marital sex or the desire to be free of parental responsibilities. Although rurality is associated with a traditional response to a gender based division of labor, rurality has little association with attitudes regarding independence in sons and daughters, individual freedom in marriage, and shared housework in dual earner households. Finally, there is very little correlation between rurality and beliefs how much parents and older children should help each other.

- ◀ With the possible exception of the most rural residents, there appears to be little urban-rural difference in family attitudes and values. Thus, family centered values and attitudes should not be a major focus of family policy or research in rural areas.

Family Behavior and Population Change

For a relatively brief period, the migration

turnaround shifted our focus away for concerns of population decline in rural areas. It appears now that the turnaround was the exception rather than a fundamental restructuring of population redistribution. An increasing proportion of nonmetropolitan counties are now experiencing population decline and natural decrease (Fuguitt, Beale and Reibel, 1991; Johnson, 1991). Approximately 500 nonmet counties were experiencing natural decrease (more deaths than births) in the late 1980s. In part, an increased number of deaths is a consequence of in-migration of the elderly during the turnaround era. More importantly, the rural fertility rate has dropped substantially. Indeed, in the late 1980s the nonmet crude birth rate actually dropped below the metro rate. Age-standardized measures of fertility indicate that nonmet women still have more children than metro women, but the age structure of nonmet areas is unfavorable to fertility (Fuguitt, Beale and Reibel, 1991).

Population trends reveal the interconnectedness of family and population issues. In the past, high rural fertility sustained rural population size, even in the face of out-migration. With rural fertility converging toward the national average, population stability will be more difficult to sustain and the rural population will age more rapidly than in the past. Given that outmigrants are generally just reaching the prime childbearing ages, renewed out-migration from nonmetro areas in the 1980s could lead to a further decline in birth rates. The decline in rural births may even be exacerbated by an apparent trend toward later childbearing (Fuguitt, Beale and Reibel, 1991). Of course, lower fertility now could reduce the pressure for young people to move out in future years when smaller cohorts reach late adolescence. Less out-migration of youth, in turn, could mean more stable residential patterns and kinship ties. If fewer young people leave, it could also reduce the cost to rural areas of bearing and raising children who then leave for greener pastures.

Changing population structure also signals a shift in the relative importance of various family issues. The increased ratio of funerals to baby showers implied by natural decrease is suggestive of how family issues may shift. National issues on child support payments and child care are certainly relevant in rural areas with a historical pattern of high fertility, but the shifts in age structure implied by the combination of declining fertility, young out-migration, and older in-migration may mean that issues of care giving to the frail elderly are also of increasing importance. Indeed, the double burden of youth dependency and elderly dependency may be particularly acute in more rural areas in the present and near future.

- ◀ **Population trends are shaped by family behavior and the resulting population structure, in turn, has a impact on family issues. Research is needed to identify family factors influencing fertility and migration, and to show how resulting age structure and population change alter the importance of various aspects of family life.**

Several changes in family structure including marital dissolution, lower fertility, later age at marriage, and earlier exit from the parental household have resulted in a decline in the size of households. Many services are provided to households rather than to individuals. Thus, faster growth of households than persons places increased demand on some services. This trend is not unique to rural or nonmetropolitan areas, but problems of service delivery many differ across the urban hierarchy.

- ◀ **Research is needed to examine the implications of more rapid growth of households than of population.**

The Family-Society Interface

Rural families are not self-sufficient entities (Coward and Smith, 1982). A cursory review of research published in *Rural Sociology* over the last five years reveals important connections between the family and other social institutions. Farm background contributes to marital stability (Acocck and Deseran, 1986), the structure of agriculture influences fertility patterns (Plutzer, 1986; Landale, 1989), size of community is associated with exchange orientations in marriage (Hansen, 1987), and the sex ratio has important effects on family formation and structure of nonmetro blacks (Fossett and Kiecolt, 1990).

Modes of production have been of particular importance for the organization of family life in rural areas. The family remains a unit of production in many areas. The role of families is often obscured, however, because women's contribution to farm production is often underrated by traditional labor market statistics (Reimer, 1986). Yet adaptations to economic change may be most evident in women's behavior. During the farm crisis, rural and especially farm women accelerated their rate of entrance into the labor force (Ollenburger, Grana, and Moore, 1989). Unfortunately, the limited opportunity structure in nonmetro areas puts female-headed households at greater risk of poverty (McLaughlin and Sachs, 1988).

- ◀ **Research on rural families needs to pay careful attention to the relationships between the family and other social institutions. In particular, research is needed on the connections between economic production, gender roles, and family functioning.**

Appendix Table ATTITUDES TOWARD FAMILY ISSUES BY URBAN STATUS OF COUNTY, 1987 NSFH

Question	Metropolitan	Nonmetropolitan			
		Urban Place		Entirely Rural	
		Adjacent	Nonadjacent	Adjacent	Nonadjacent
		(% who give a traditional response)			
Mothers who work full-time when their youngest child is under age 5 (disapprove)	47.4	48.5	48.1	48.3	51.6
Children under 3 years old being cared for in a day care center (disapprove)	58.7	59.9	58.0	56.2	60.0
Mothers who work part-time when their youngest child is under age 5 (disapprove)	27.8	27.5	32.7	32.7	36.4
A couple with an unhappy marriage getting a divorce when their youngest child is under 5 (disapprove)	34.5	33.6	39.4	35.2	43.1
Preschool children are likely to suffer if their mother is employed (agree)	48.3	47.0	51.4	52.5	52.3
Women who have a child without getting married (disapprove)	57.5	60.9	66.4	64.2	73.3
It's better for a person to get married than to go through life being single (agree)	47.6	47.4	51.3	50.5	53.4
Marriage is a lifetime relationship and should never be ended except under extreme circumstances (agree)	73.9	76.6	78.4	78.5	74.8
It is all right for an unmarried couple to live together even if they have no interest in considering marriage (disagree)	45.4	49.4	54.5	53.5	60.1
It is all right for unmarried 18-year-olds to have sexual relations if they have strong affection for each other (disagree)	49.8	54.1	57.1	58.4	59.8
Married couples ought to overlook isolated occasions of sexual unfaithfulness (agree)	13.7	11.4	14.3	11.7	8.9
Children have fewer problems with natural parents than with one natural parent and one step-parent (agree)	47.1	50.0	54.0	54.2	59.5
It is all right for an unmarried couple to live together as long as they have plans to marry (disagree)	40.8	43.0	50.1	49.8	55.6
It is better for a person to have a child than to go through life childless (agree)	38.4	35.9	43.7	42.6	45.4
I often wish I could be free from the responsibility of being a parent (disagree)	76.9	78.3	82.6	78.0	75.9

Appendix Table ATTITUDES TOWARD FAMILY ISSUES BY URBAN STATUS OF COUNTY, 1987 NSFH
(continued)

Question	Metropolitan	Nonmetropolitan			
		Urban Place		Entirely Rural	
		Adjacent	Nonadjacent	Adjacent	Nonadjacent
It is much better for everyone if the man earns the main living and the woman takes care of the home and family (agree)	47.4	46.2	54.9	54.5	60.7
Parents should encourage just as much independence in their daughters as in their sons (disagree)	5.6	3.8	4.7	3.4	4.7
In a successful marriage, the partners must have freedom to do what they want individually (disagree)	13.5	13.4	16.2	14.5	8.1
If a husband and a wife both work full-time, they should share household tasks equally (disagree)	2.8	2.3	3.6	2.7	1.6
Parents ought to help their children with college expenses (agree)	68.7	68.6	71.4	66.8	74.2
Parents ought to provide financial help to their adult children when the children are having financial difficulty (agree)	49.5	49.5	46.9	45.1	55.5
Children ought to let aging parents live with them when the parents can no longer live by themselves (agree)	54.4	51.0	51.3	50.8	51.4
Children ought to provide financial help to aging parents when their parents are having financial difficulty (agree)	74.9	72.1	70.8	68.1	76.3
Parents ought to let their adult children live with them when the children are having problems (agree)	38.9	33.9	35.0	32.6	34.0

Although recent analysis questions the impact of governmental policy on family structure, it does indicate that policies can provide some assistance to families in economic distress or with inadequate child care options (Bane and Jargowsky, 1988). Different policies, however, may have different impacts in urban and rural areas (Coward and Smith, 1982). Some policies such as paid parental leave and on-site child care may be more feasible in large corporations that are concentrated in urban centers. Support for formal child care facilities may also be less effective in low density settings where there is insufficient demand to support such facilities. Rogers (1991) notes that nonmetro children are less likely to have formal child-care arrangements. Attempts to increase child support payments may be more difficult and may need contingency provisions in areas where periodic unemployment is common, where wages are generally low, and where more people are self-employed. Economic considerations are particularly important in nonmetro areas because children in these areas are more likely to be in poverty or near poverty (Rogers, 1991). Provision for the elderly may also be more difficult in smaller cities and rural nonfarm areas because of the inaccessibility of children (Lee, Dwyer and Coward, 1990). Some policies may be further complicated by aversion to welfare in more rural areas (Rank and Hirschl, 1988).

- ◀ Family policies designed to deal with issues such as poverty, the elderly and child care must be sensitive to conditions in rural areas where poverty rates are higher but where some policies designed for urban centers may be ineffective.

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