

IMPLICATIONS OF DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE FOR RURAL COMMUNITIES

Frederick E. Schmidt
University of Vermont

Demographic concepts, historically relegated to the academy, are enjoying a newfound popularity. Buoyed by the best-selling *Megatrends*, pushed by the private sector (as evidenced in Dow Jones' purchase of the trendy *American Demographics*), and sustained by the appeal of catchy phrases — the rural renaissance, baby boomers, children of the echo, Yuppies, Guppies, et. al. — the implications of these demographic foci are eagerly sought by nearly everyone.

Demographics and Rural Community Policy

Much useful information for those concerned with rural policy is drawn from the most simple, basic areas of demographic analysis: population totals, density, household composition, birth and death measures. Other useful indicators include sex, age, ethnicity, and the indicators of socioeconomic status [10, p. 2; 3]. *Megatrends* readers will certainly recognize these fundamental demographic indicators as they underpin many of institutional trends Naisbitt describes at national and regional levels.

While this list seems reasonably straightforward, policy impact analysis requires careful attention to the form one uses to express a given demographic indicator. In work with rural policy activists, the following operations are essential: 1. specification of aggregation level, 2. introduction of multiple data points to yield measures amenable to the calculation of change, and 3. elaboration of absolute figures to create ratios or percents in order to compare one place with another.

No single indicator has the power of that most basic of demographic indicators, total population. A total population count — a key component in the very definition of a rural community (a matter of no small policy import in itself) — provides a fundamental indication of local need, or, from a private sector perspective, the ceiling on volume of sales — mouths to feed, bodies to cloth, residents to house. Indicators of changes in basic population, be they increases or decreases, provide policy planners with the information necessary to align utilities, anticipate traffic demands, zone, apply for state and federal aid, etc.

The relationship of base population to the areal properties of that particular global niche in which a community finds itself is yet one more fundamental element in the definition of rural. Simply, the sparsity or density of the population per square mile lends the policy formulator insight into the configuration of the program recipient's location. By definition, we anticipate great differences between urban and rural communities in population per square mile. In fact, it is this "friction of space" issue that has led a generation of rural activists to point directly to federal inequity in the per capita allocation of program dollars in rural, as contrasted with urban, areas. Many argue that equitable distribution of program dollars will require greater rural per capita outlays in order to compensate for delivery and access charges. Such positions belie the fact that within the rural sector, great variations in the spatial distribution of population require community specific strategies. Consider variations in Vermont towns alone, where, in some cases, 75 percent of a rural population live within walking distance of a town commons, and yet adjacent communities may have up to 75 percent of their population in an open country residence pattern. Distinctions within the more densely populated rural areas of New England pale when contrasts are drawn to the big sky country of the northern Rockies or the concentrated residential clusters within isolated open country typical of Indian reservations.

Changes in family or household composition will provide critical information for rural community policymakers as well. Cal Beal has pointed out that household size, in both rural and urban areas, has declined for many years [1]. The creation of new, nontraditional households and of one-parent-family households — which are typically rather small in size — suggest some dramatic changes in consumption patterns as well as forcing many traditional family service providers to rethink their service package.

Critical indicators, which serve to qualify simple indications of community population change, are provided by birth, death, and migration measures. High birth rates will suggest the increasing needs of a so-called "dependent" population; those residents too young to be part of the labor force. Such crude indicators suggest to the policymakers changing institutional demands such as day care, school expansion, or renewed concerns for public recreation facilities. Of late, employment for teens in the summer has been a major urban political issue and there is no reason to assume that such programmatic struggles are limited to urban policymakers.

These observations regarding community impacts for the basic demographic trends certainly suggest that we may profitably pursue the likely impacts of the other key concepts suggested above (age, sex, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status). Several good sources toward this end are presented in the bibliography. However, there is much more here than meets the eye. It would be misleading to suggest that simply

a concern for the form in which demographic data is expressed solves all the problems in seeking the meaningful application of national trends to rural communities.

Obstacles to Use of Demographics in Rural Community Policy

At the very outset of this consideration of obstacles to analysis, recall the point made several times in the examples above: *While national trends will not necessarily be evident in any given rural community, critical impacting trends discovered in one community will rarely serve to characterize events in other rural communities.* Consider, for example, the much ballyhooed rural renaissance, discovered and documented by Cal Beale. Despite the major significance of this finding (it made its way into Naisbitt's *Megatrends*), it hardly characterized *all* rural communities. But it did characterize the United States and was used by Naisbitt as one major trend to document his emphasis upon the growing importance of decentralized organization. Three other obstacles stand in the way of the would-be rural community impact analyst.

One is the danger inherent in using data collected at a community level to describe properties of individuals within the community. This was identified some 35 years ago as the ecological fallacy [8]. Simply, most demographic indicators are percentages or ratios, descriptive properties of groups, not of individuals. Most of the data utilized for community demographic analysis comes from the United States census which often uses the small rural community as the smallest common denominator in its work. Descriptive community characteristics, e.g. a high percentage of inadequate housing, cannot be directly assigned to a given neighborhood or identifiable subgroup (such as some resident ethnic group) without field level confirmation.

Similarly, many trends of a regional or national level have absolutely no meaning at a local level. National data depicting dramatic reduction in illiteracy, for example, need local confirmation before they can be accepted by specific community policy activists. This problem in data reduction to a local level often belies ongoing issues in the rural pockets of this society. While national and regional media are so persuasive, rapid, and reasonably accurate in informing us of national events, they are rarely, if ever, useful in informing us of what is happening locally. A wide variety of social ills, for which specific policy stimulated programs have emerged, bear local monitoring to adequately assess impact.

And finally, demographic concepts occasionally simply mask critical differences in human experience. One illustration occurred recently in a housing market study we conducted. We began field work seeking to identify low- and moderate-income elderly persons willing to move to a public project. We began the effort with a "pool" of more than 400, an estimate we had drawn for this rural town from census materials.

It rapidly became clear that the life style of those low-income rural elderly was quite different from that of those who currently lived in the village. The latter were typically proper, small-town, socially-oriented widows and the former tended to be more earthy, independent, and iconoclastic country folks. A melding of representatives of these two groups, emerging from the same town level demographic profile, in the context of a small, 16-to-24-unit senior home, seemed likely to present an unworkable tenant arrangement despite the best intentions of the local policy and program advocates.

Conclusions: The Larger Issues

Despite the obstacles that face those involved in bringing demographic and other socioeconomic and political indicators into the policy and program arena, I don't want to leave the impression that the effort should be abandoned. Quite the opposite. The fact is that the prevailing intellectual condition of this society is one of profound ignorance. In an address several years ago to the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Dr. Lewis Thomas called attention to this situation by characterizing Americans as, "...profoundly ignorant about how we work, about where we fit in, and, most of all, about the enormous, imponderable system of life in which we are embedded as working parts" [3, p. 45]. Most of us here today are convened because we have chosen a course of action that attempts to fill the void of public information about critical economic, social, and political conditions in which we are "embedded as working parts."

Sadly, at the community level of policy formation and implementation, potential information consumers demonstrate a marked anti-data orientation. In Vermont towns, I have been informed that I could never capture the essence of the local community through a set of social and economic indices. "Don't dazzle us with numbers," is a prevailing anti-research orientation. Currently, little information is utilized to: 1. establish local need, 2. assign policy and program priorities, and, most critically, 3. evaluate the impact of given programs upon the needs they are designed to address by utilizing measurement of local need before and after policy implementation.

In our work we must seek to address this local ignorance. And one key way to do it is to lay the challenge of such research more clearly on the doorstep of local community leaders. We must share more of our data collecting techniques and less of our data in an effort to more closely involve local activists in the process. Just as we would advocate community autonomy and participation in appropriate local decision making, so too, this involvement must stress greater accountability for what is happening locally.

In concluding, I am reminded of a tale from T. H. White's treatment of Camelot wherein Merlyn advises a despondent young Prince Arthur, "The best thing for being sad is to learn something. Learn why

the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting" [12, p. 185]. Those engaged in promoting rural community analysis of demographic trends and their policy impact may draw cheer from Merlyn's advice.

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