Top 10 Rural Research Reports

We’re rural nerds knee-deep in research and reporting on it for 40+ years! Countdown inside!

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Rural Reports on Families in Need
Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program; Earned Income Tax Credit
BY JON M. BAILEY, 2014

These reports looked at who used the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) in metropolitan, small city, and rural areas of the nation. Both explored if the prevailing stereotype that programs serving low-income individuals and families in need are mostly used in metropolitan areas is still true.

We had found that rural areas actually had higher rates of poverty than metro areas when we examined Census data. Would that hold for SNAP and EITC?

**KEY FINDINGS**

- SNAP usage from 2008 to 2012 was highest in rural households.
- During the period, about one-in-seven households in small cities, small towns, and rural areas received SNAP benefits.
- Rural areas and small cities have a higher proportion of households with senior and child residents receiving SNAP benefits.
- Rural and small city tax returns in 2012 had a higher rate of claiming the EITC.
- Proposals to expand the EITC have potential to provide greater anti-poverty, income support, and economic stimulus to rural and small city areas and residents.
Connect the Dots was the first in a series of continuing reports examining the potential of renewable energy and transmission for small towns and rural communities. It looked at the aging electric grid, the regulatory climate for energy, and the economic impact of an expanded grid for rural regions rich in renewable resources. It is an excellent case of the Center “doing its homework” when venturing into a new area of work. Opening the door to renewable energy projects is bringing opportunity to rural communities across the nation.

**KEY FINDINGS**

- A majority of transmission lines were constructed 30-50 years ago. Approximately 60 percent of circuit breakers and 70 percent of transformers were over 25 years old in 2011 and continue to age.
- In 2011, over 275,000 MW of new wind projects remained unconnected due to a lack of available transmission.
- Power from conventional coal sources cost $68 per megawatt-hour, while power generated from wind projects built in high-resource areas cost $65 per megawatt-hour back then. The advantage is even greater now.
- With adequate transmission, up to 40 percent of electricity demand could be met by wind without adversely impacting grid reliability.
This series (25 reports and still counting) analyzed health care and the Affordable Care Act (ACA), especially for their connection to rural people and rural places. We have looked at issues from mental health services in rural America, to ways to increase the number of health care professionals in rural communities, to how specific provisions of the ACA work (or don’t work) for rural people. The series illuminated a host of health care topics for rural people.

As the new health care law was debated and implemented, the series found ways for the law to better respond to rural health care concerns. We provided recommendations to make the law more rural-friendly. Readers were able to see how the ACA affected their lives and how it related to the unique health care challenges in rural America.

The ACA was subject to so many falsehoods and misinformation that the primary purpose of this series – and its ultimate importance to rural communities – was to provide a fact-based analysis of the new health care law and its connections to rural people and rural places.

We looked into how the new health care law would affect small business, rural communities, seniors on Medicare, rural young adults, prevention, and public health, among other issue areas. These can be found on cfra.org/publications.

We use #RuralNerd to tag social media posts about rural research.
We were among the first to look at the disparities that exist in rural America in health insurance and health outcomes and connections between the two. This report outlined many of the health care needs for rural people and rural communities and the health care disparities faced by rural residents. It concluded with an observation from The Institute of Medicine: “The many consequences of uninsurance and the growing threat it poses to the very fabric of America’s health care system makes this a problem that can no longer be ignored.”

*Health Care in Rural America* formed the basis for much of our advocacy around health care reform and what became the Affordable Care Act (ACA). Many of the provisions of the ACA directly respond to the health insurance disparities and health care outcome disparities in rural America that were outlined in this report. Rural Americans may have been the people most in need of reforming the nation’s health insurance and health care system, and this report demonstrated why.

**KEY FINDINGS**

- Rural residents – particularly those in remote rural counties – were more likely to be uninsured than non-rural residents.
- Rural residents’ health insurance coverage paid less of their health care expenses, and rural individuals and families devoted more of their income to health care costs. These are commonly accepted definitions of “underinsurance.”
- Rural residents, in general, were sicker than non-rural residents. Rural residents had higher rates of almost all common diseases and conditions than did non-rural residents.
- The ultimate health status of rural people had much to do with health insurance coverage and the type they had.
These reports looked at 2010 Census data to complete a 40 year data history of socio-economic trends in rural areas of the Great Plains. Little has changed in the economic status in the region’s rural communities. This suggests that either the current model of rural development policy has not worked, or public policy has neglected these communities. This series argues for a civic culture based on development of all local human resources. While external influences can assist, ultimately the development of a community, its people, their leadership, and their organizations must come from within.

KEY FINDINGS

- Population in the region as a whole continued to grow, but population in rural counties continued to decline.
- Latino population in all county types of the region grew from 2000 to 2010, with all county types having over 50 percent growth in the decade.
- But for Latino population growth in rural counties of the region, rural population losses would have been significantly greater.
- For the age 0-19 age cohort, county types in the region were essentially the same, despite significant overall population losses in rural counties for the 2000-2010 decade.
- Rural counties began to lag behind other counties in the 20-44 age cohort, young, working age adults. Rural areas had larger shares of their population in the 25 and older age cohorts.
- Poverty rates in rural counties of the region continued to be higher than in more populous counties.
Despite the longest sustained period of national economic growth in history during the 1990s, economic hardships in rural areas of the Great Plains region persisted. *Swept Away* continued documentation of the wide economic gap between agriculturally-based areas of the Great Plains (Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota) and other areas of the region. More importantly, it showed a continuation of this trend we had documented since 1980 despite favorable national economic trends.

**KEY FINDINGS**

- The number of agriculturally-based counties in the region declined to 149 counties (from 261 in 2000).
- Population in rural areas of the region continued to decline while the region as a whole gained population from 1990 to 2000.
- Poverty in the smallest agriculturally-based counties of the region was over 60 percent greater than in metropolitan counties of the region.
- Poverty in the agriculturally-based counties of the region was again widespread. Over one-in-five of households in agriculturally-based counties had annual incomes over $15,000, compared to one-in-eight households in metropolitan counties of the region.
- Income and earnings in agriculturally-based counties of the region were significantly lower than in metropolitan counties.
This report began as a response to statements about the need to eliminate small, rural schools. We provided the series so advocates for small schools could tell state policymakers, local school board members, and school administrators about advantages of educating children in small schools.

Rural school districts across the nation continue to experience school consolidations or closures. Often these decisions are made without considering the social, economic, and political effects on communities or the educational advantages of small schools.

**KEY FINDINGS**

- Federal data showed big schools (1,000 students or more) had higher incidents of all types of crimes (violent and non-violent) than did small schools (less than 300 students).
- Small schools had a significantly greater ability to graduate students than did large schools.
- A review of numerous studies found that extracurricular participation rates were higher and more varied in small schools than in large schools, and that alienation from the school environment was lower in small schools.
- Schools in rural communities had a significant economic effect on their towns. The loss of a school led to declines in retail sales and labor supplies in communities.
Trampled Dreams was the second in what became a series of reports documenting Census data for the rural Great Plains. The report compared the socio-economic conditions of agriculturally-based counties with other urban and metropolitan counties in the region. It reviewed data from 1989 to 1997, and focused on a six-state region (Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota).

The data and findings of *Trampled Dreams* are important because they shined a light on rural poverty and socio-economic conditions in a neglected part of the nation. For one of the first times, data and policy analysis focused on the general economy of small, rural communities of the Great Plains in general, and not solely the agricultural economy.

**KEY FINDINGS**

- The percentage of people living in poverty in the smallest, most rural counties of the region was more than 50 percent greater than in metropolitan counties.
- While the region as a whole gained population, agriculturally-based counties lost population.
- Poverty in rural areas of the region was not found in isolated pockets. Instead, it represented the tail end of a large group of low-income households. Nearly 40 percent of households in the rural counties of the region had annual incomes of less than $15,000, nearly twice the rate in metropolitan counties.
- Earnings in rural counties of the region were persistently low.
- Rural areas of the region were extraordinarily entrepreneurial.
The Center’s groundbreaking work in practical on-farm research began in 1976 with the Small Farm Energy Project. This 3-year research and demonstration effort involved 48 cooperating farms. Half agreed to innovate with alternative energy projects on their farms; half pledged not to. Both groups kept detailed records.

The project showed how small commercial farmers could reduce purchased energy inputs and improve net farm income by using alternative energy technologies. It taught people that despite world events, they could control a portion of their businesses and their lives. The process of learning, doing, and public demonstrations formed leaders who helped build the national sustainable agriculture movement.

**KEY FINDINGS**

- Farmers built energy innovations using locally available materials that were low-cost, easy to maintain, and applicable to a variety of farm energy needs. Projects included solar, wood, wind and alcohol energy, heat exchange, and composting.
- Farmers who used innovative technologies and conservation consumed 13 percent less energy than the matched group that did not, and spent 17 percent less money on energy while maintaining production levels.
- Although solar devices received the most publicity, simple energy conservation devices and practices resulted in most of the energy savings by the cooperating group.
#1  TOP TEN RURAL RESEARCH REPORTS

Who Will Sit Up with the Corporate Sow?
A Report on Vertical Integration and Large Scale Hog Production in Nebraska

BY LYNN SPIVAK WITH ASSISTANCE FROM THE STAFF AND BOARD OF THE CENTER FOR RURAL AFFAIRS, 1974

This ground-level reporting put the Center for Rural Affairs on the map. As our co-founder Marty Strange recalled, “We dispatched Lynn Spivak, a former VISTA volunteer with no background in agriculture, to find out about vertical integration in the pork industry. We were looking for evidence of forward contracting arrangements or other semblances of the heavily industrialized poultry industry.”

This report foretold the future of livestock production. Questions it raised about environmental and social impacts are with us today. Now, 41 years later, the Center is still battling forces in the Nebraska Legislature and elsewhere promoting corporate, industrialized agriculture at the detriment of family farming and rural communities.

KEY FINDINGS

- A dramatic and sudden intrusion of corporate confinement was underway in Nebraska.
- Feeder pig production was sure to move from the farm to the factory.
- The corn belt would extend west, where irrigation, hybrids, and chemical fertilization made feed grain available.
- Public funds were being used to create vertically integrated corporate farming operations.