

THE ROLE OF HOUSING IN NON-METROPOLITAN COUNTY VITALITY: THE OVERVIEW

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Strategies to enhance the economic health of rural communities were a Nineties U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) priority challenge (*Research Agenda*, 1992). Revitalization initiatives are unlikely to succeed, however, without attention to housing supply and demand (Shreve & Belsky, 1991). Previous researchers largely ignored or underestimated the role of housing in community well-being and economic development. Although many rural communities are now showing improvement, housing that is neither affordable nor adequate can remain a formidable barrier to business growth and development efforts in these areas.

The research reported in this special issue was designed to start to fill that “housing gap.” Project NC-217 (“The Role of Housing in Rural Community Vitality”) was funded by the USDA through several Agricultural Experiment Stations (AES) and other sources in and out of the North Central Region. The AES support came from Cornell University, the University of Idaho, Iowa State University, the Universities of Minnesota and Nebraska-Lincoln, and Utah State University. Additional support was provided by the Universities of Alabama and Missouri, the Illinois, Louisiana, and Kansas State Universities, and the Idaho Housing Agency.

According to Census definitions, rural areas are comprised of places (incorporated or unincorporated) with fewer than 2,500 residents and open territory. “Nonmetropolitan” counties are those outside the boundaries of metropolitan areas and have no cities with 50,000 or more residents. (Metropolitan is defined as a geographic area containing a city of at least 50,000 inhabitants, or an urbanized area of at least 50,000 with a total population of at least 100,000). The 1990 Census showed that 24.8% of the U.S. population lived in rural areas, while 20.5% lived in nonmetropolitan counties (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1996).

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Research Objectives

This research project linked measures of non-metropolitan county economic vitality to a more inclusive set of factors that represent changes in rural housing and household characteristics over time. First, the researchers examined the relationships between selected housing and household characteristics and levels of non-metropolitan county vitality. Second, they developed the proposed Rural Community Vitality Index that incorporates measures of economic and social condition in addition to housing and household characteristics, as indicators of rural community vitality.

Project NC-217 (conducted from 1995-99) used raw, non-metropolitan, county-level data for 1980 and 1990 from the Census Bureau's *USA Counties 1996* CD-ROM (U.S. Census Bureau, 1996). The county was chosen as the unit of measurement because contemporary rural development strategies are likely to be developed and implemented at single- or multiple-county levels (Korshing, Borich, & Stewart, 1992). Non-metropolitan data were used as a proxy for rural; therefore, the two terms are used interchangeably throughout the papers. The researchers acknowledge the differences between non-metropolitan and rural, but note that nationwide data sources with a finer distinction are unavailable. Another pair of similar, yet different, terms used interchangeably in this issue are "rural community" and "non-metropolitan county."

The nature of the research questions and the use of secondary data in their resolution presented the opportunity for housing researchers from the North Central region to invite several other states to collaborate and to help develop results that can be replicated for any state. Although the NC-217 timeline has expired, the same research questions are guiding a National Research Initiative grant awarded in 1999 to Iowa State University, with several North Central housing researchers as collaborators. We hope this proves to be a continuing, productive, and seminal train of research that can aid future rural community decision making for revitalization.

Literature/Conceptual Framework

Community viability refers to long-term economic, environmental, and community health, while vitality implies dynamic, healthy progress that can be sustained (O'Brien, Hassinger, Brown, & Pinkerton, 1991). Realistic assessments and comparisons of vitality between rural communities are necessary to ascertain their relative competitiveness (Summers, Bloomquist, Hirschl, & Shaffer, 1988).

Previous economic and community development initiatives and strategies focused on stimulating employment opportunities and population growth (Galston, 1992). Reeder (1991) suggested that some individual economic indicators are urban-biased. Notably missing from earlier research literature is attention to community housing supplies (Summers et al., 1988). Most rural development policies and indicators use other units of measurement and exclude housing (Jenkins & Konecny, 1994).

Wilkinson (1991) concluded that without housing, economic development is difficult. Populations may increase even as (retail) trade activities decline. The future of some rural communities may be as places of residence rather than as centers of business and service (O'Brien et al., 1991). People's interests and commitments may lie in

the nearby city rather than in the local community (Sears, Redman, Kusmin, & Killian, 1992).

The conceptual framework for the NC-217 project is provided by social systems theory (Deacon & Firebaugh, 1988; Jenkins & Konecny, 1994). This framework views the *system* under study (the community) as being in constant interaction with its surrounding environment. At the community level, *inputs* are demands for goods and services, and resources are economic and business conditions, physical infrastructure, and human capital. The inputs include both horizontal patterns within and vertical linkages outside the community (Warren, 1978). Community vitality is the *output*. Finally, the *informational feedback process* provided by systems theory not only accommodates deviations from anticipated effects but can also promote change. Yust and Memken (in this issue) also discuss the application of social systems theory in their article on the NC-217 methodology.

Previous North Central regional housing research found that non-metropolitan households suffered more housing problems than did their metropolitan cohorts (Memken & Canabal, 1994; Williams, 1994; Winter, 1994). Not surprisingly, the households at-risk (minority, female-headed, lower-income, and selected older adults) factor heavily in the subsequent NC-217 longitudinal analyses of 1980 and 1990 Census and other data.

As a sample outcome of the Rural Community Vitality Index, Figure 1 illustrates the relative vitality levels for the non-metropolitan counties in the North Central Region in 1990. The reader, however, is cautioned against generalizing from this map because these findings may mask the diversity and inconsistencies that characterize rural America. Further investigation of communities within each county will reveal differences, about which local officials and housing decision-makers need to know. The NRI project noted above will focus on those differences and decisions.

Summary of Articles

The North Central housing research team offers unique expertise and experience to address the complexities of rural housing. Their shared interest in community-based housing is strengthened by additional perspectives from community development, Cooperative Extension, family resource management, and statistics. Use of the *USA Counties 1996* CD-ROM and additional representation from the Southern, Northeastern, and Western regions facilitated broad geographic testing of different combinations of variables and statistical procedures prior to “final” construction of the proposed model.

During the developmental process, criteria for variable selection were based on the project’s goal of nationwide use of the resultant index and individual researchers’ state-based housing questions. As a result, each article in this issue uses a slightly different set of variables based on the same conceptual model. The index used by Crull and Cook (in this issue) is the “work in progress” that the research team continues to study and refine.

The following articles, which appear in order of their evolution during the four-year project period, show that housing and household variables are important in any snapshot of rural community vitality. First, the article by Yust and Memken outlines how the researchers accessed the CD-ROM data and describes the procedures used to construct the index. Three core measures, involving 12 specific variables, comprise their model: 1) human capital, 2) public and private economic activity, and 3) housing resources. Yust and Memken also discuss the importance of using longitudinal measures, note the measurement and interpretive constraints of aggregate data, and highlight the limitations of indices.

In the first "test" of the project methodology, Hawks, Williams, Delgadillo, Cann, and Steggell examined the relationships between selected housing, employment, and demographic characteristics using alternate vitality indices. For the non-metropolitan counties of Utah and Idaho, they compared the results of a three- and a five-variable community vitality index using 1980 and 1990 data. Depending on the index used, their findings showed that total labor force, proportion of vacant housing units, and median value of owner-occupied housing are important, albeit inconsistent, predictors of community vitality. The Hawks group concluded that while the two housing independent variables were useful, the median value of owner-occupied housing was a more consistent and positive indicator of vitality than was the housing vacancy rate.

Combs and Xia focus on the population shifts (outflows of young families, immigration of retirees, and aging-in-place) that have resulted in increased proportions of older residents in many non-metropolitan counties of the twelve North Central states. Investigating the relationships between the proportion of older residents in a county and the level of rural community vitality, they found that counties with larger proportions of residents age 65 and older rated well on selected vitality measures (i.e., higher per capita incomes, higher percentages of persons above the poverty level). Conversely, their results also showed that counties with high proportions of older adults had fewer capital resources and lower median values of owner-occupied housing and contract rents.

Finally, Crull and Cook assess high versus low vitality levels among non-metropolitan counties in the twelve largely farming-dependent North Central states, using an index comprised of three variables: per capita earnings in all industries, per capita personal income, and proportion of persons above poverty. Their multiple regressions of 1980 and 1990 data found four housing variables to be significantly related to community vitality. The proportion of renter-occupied housing and the percentage of occupied housing related positively to vitality. The proportions of manufactured/mobile homes¹ and dwellings in structures with five or more units, however, related nega-

¹Both "manufactured" and "mobile" home are used here because although the CD-ROM uses the term mobile home, the federal construction and safety standards and much state legislation currently classify it as "manufactured housing." In simple terms, it is a one- or more-section factory-built unit with permanent undercarriage and (removable wheels) that structurally does not require a foundation. Many states, however, now require the units to be set on a "foundation" to meet compatibility criteria for fitting in any single-family neighborhood.

tively to community vitality. Economic vitality in 1980 was the most powerful variable in predicting 1990 vitality. Metropolitan adjacency seemed to have conflicting effects.

Applications and Implications

The papers in this Special Issue indicate that, over time, changes in housing and household characteristics do relate to rural community vitality, and their inclusion does increase the explanatory power of the proposed model. Initial tests indicate that the Rural Community Vitality Index developed here is applicable and adaptable to non-metropolitan counties and rural communities across the nation.

Continuing research related to the Rural Community Vitality Index will produce a self-help tool that utilizes readily accessible and easily interpreted data to assist rural leaders in designing appropriate community development strategies. Local decision-makers will be able to use the Census CD-ROM data to develop longitudinal community profiles that identify local dynamics that can be hidden in rural averages. Further, the standardized protocol will allow for inter- and intra-state comparisons and regional analyses.

In the continuing work, selected counties of various vitality levels and population sizes will be the subjects of additional qualitative research. Telephone interviews in the participating states will isolate general and specific local factors that may explain the findings and separate cause from effect among the various indicators.

In conclusion, these results show that housing contributes to rural community vitality in complex and sometimes conflicting ways. This conclusion is no surprise to rural scholars, given the diversity that rural averages may hide. The Rural Community Vitality Index, using various housing and household variables as well as the typical economic measures, can be a useful first step, after which local decision makers must study their case further. With the addition of the 2000 Census data, productive housing and community development strategies to revitalize or stabilize small towns and rural counties across the nation are waiting to be discovered.

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