

The 2012 Texas Rural Survey: Perceptions of Rural and Urban Living



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The Rural Reality

Rural areas are home to many of the industrial, agricultural, cultural, and natural resources that make Texas a great state. Rural areas are also home to one of our greatest resources – *people*.

Data from the United States Census Bureau suggest that nearly 3.8 million people live in rural areas throughout the Lone Star State.¹ In other words, the population of rural Texas is greater than or roughly equal to the resident populations of 24 other individual states.

In Texas, rural people and communities face certain challenges that differ from their urban and suburban counterparts. It is important to keep in mind, however, that Texas is not alone in this respect. Research indicates that the social and economic fabric of rural areas throughout the United States has been progressively weakened by a number of regional, national, and global changes over the past few decades. Transformations in economic, demographic, social, and spatial organization have had profound effects on rural areas all across this country.²

As in most other states, rural areas in Texas have been, and continue to be, impacted by these structural-level occurrences. An examination of county-level data shows that between 2000 and 2010, 39% of the nonmetropolitan counties in Texas experienced a reduction in their resident populations. Further, nonmetropolitan counties within Texas maintain, on average, lower per capita incomes, higher poverty rates, greater levels of aged-

dependency ratios with fewer workers to support those over age 65, and lower labor force participation rates than do urban areas.

U.S. Census Bureau data affirm that Texas residents living in nonmetropolitan counties are *older, less educated, and poorer* than their metropolitan counterparts. In addition, the quantity and quality of many amenities and public services are frequently inadequate to meet the needs of rural Texans. In rural Texas, pressing needs exist for job creation, increased incomes, economic growth, modernization, improved service delivery, and business recruitment, retention and expansion activities.

The Texas Rural Survey

Between July 2012 and October 2012, a random sample of 4,111 individuals living in 22 rural places in Texas were contacted and asked to participate in the Texas Rural Survey. This report explains the methodology and summarizes the findings of that study.

Methodology

Study Site Selection

The first step of this research required the selection of case study sites. According to the Texas State Data Center, there were a total of 1,752 places in the state of Texas in 2010. This total includes both incorporated places (concentrations of populations having legally defined boundaries) and census designated places (concentrations of population that are locally identifiable by name but not legally incorporated).

Of those 1,752 places, 1,511 (86%) had a population of 10,000 or fewer in 2010. Upon examination of the 1,511 places with populations under 10,000, we noticed what

¹ U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census.

² Brown, David L. and Kai A. Schafft. 2011. *Rural People and Communities in the 21st Century: Resilience and Transformation*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

appeared to be “natural breaks” in the sizes of population. About one-third of the 1,511 places had populations of 499 or fewer. Another one-third had populations between 500 and 1,999 residents. The remaining one-third had populations between 2,000 and 10,000. As of the 2010 Census, these 1,511 places represented roughly 11% of the total population of Texas, or approximately 2.7 million people. To use the previous analogy, the number of Texans living in these 1,511 places was greater than or roughly equal to the resident populations of about 16 other states.

In accordance with the research design of the project, one place within each of the three population categories (499 or fewer, 500-1,999, and 2,000-10,000) was selected as a study site within each of the seven Texas Department of Agriculture’s Rural Economic Development Regions (see Appendix A). Due to the large percentage of places with populations of 499 or fewer in the West Region, an additional place in the population category was selected as a study site. Hence, the total number of places included as study sites was 22. The 22 randomly selected places chosen to serve as study sites are shown in Appendix A.

Data Collection

A standard self-administered mail survey following the methodological procedures espoused by the tailored design method (TDM), which incorporates repeated mailings to sampled individuals, was used to gather the data.³ The TDM uses a multiple-contact approach to increase response rates from the sample population.

In July of 2012, an informational letter was first mailed to a stratified random sample of 4,124 households across the 22 study sites. The

informational letter, which was printed in English on one side and Spanish on the other side, informed residents that their household was randomly selected for participation in an upcoming study on rural Texas. Included with the letter was a pre-paid addressed postcard. Residents were instructed to return the postcard if they preferred to receive a copy of the questionnaire printed in Spanish. Instructions on the postcard were printed in both English and Spanish. Thirteen households requested that the survey questionnaire not be sent. Those 13 addresses were not replaced. Hence, the final sample size was 4,111.

In August of 2012, the survey questionnaire was mailed to the sampled households. To obtain a representative sample of individuals within households, a response from the adult who most recently celebrated his/her birthday was requested in the cover letter. The survey questionnaire, organized as a self-completion booklet, contained 46 questions and required approximately 50 minutes to complete. After the initial survey mailing and two follow-up mailings during September and October of 2012, a total of 712 completed questionnaires were returned.

Images of Rurality and Perceptions of Urban Living

To determine the nature of the images that rural Texas residents hold about rurality and urban living, percentage distributions of the responses given to 23 statements were compiled. To simplify presentation of the results, the five answer categories ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree” were combined to form three groupings – “agree,” “undecided,” and “disagree.”

Positive Images of Rurality

Of the nine statements focusing on positive images of rurality:

- 88.4% agreed that “rural areas have more peace and quiet than do other areas”;

³ Dillman, Don A., Jolene D. Smyth, and Leah Melani Christian. 2009. *Internet, Mail, and Mixed-Mode Surveys: The Tailored Design Method*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

- 78.6% agreed that “rural life brings out the best in people”;
- 73.5% agreed that “rural families are more close-knit and enduring than are other families”;
- 71.7% agreed that “neighborliness and friendliness are more characteristic of rural communities than other areas”;
- 71.3% agreed that “rural communities are the most satisfying of all places to live, work, and play”;
- 70.2% agreed that “because rural life is closer to nature, it is more wholesome”;
- 69.6% agreed that “life in rural communities is less stressful than life elsewhere”;
- 60.9% agreed that “there is less crime and violence in rural areas than in other areas”; and,
- 50.2% agreed that “rural people are more likely than other people to accept you as you are”.

Negative Images of Rurality

Over one half of all respondents disagreed with five of the seven statements focusing on negative images of rurality.

- 86.9% disagreed that “rural people are crude and uncultured in their talk, actions, and dress”;
- 80.1% disagreed that “rural life is monotonous and boring”;
- 72.1% disagreed that “living in rural areas means doing without the good things in modern society”;
- 59.7% disagreed that “rural people are suspicious and prejudiced toward anyone not like themselves”;
- 50.8% disagreed that “rural communities provide few opportunities for the individual to get ahead in life”.

Less than one half of the sample disagreed with the following two statements:

- “rural people are closed-minded in their thinking” (47.9% disagreed); and,
- “rural communities provide few opportunities for new experiences” (44.2% disagreed).

Perceptions of Urban Living

Roughly 3 of every 4 (73.5%) respondents agreed that “urban life is complex, fast-paced, and stressful.” The majority of respondents, however, either disagreed or were undecided with the following statements focused on urban living:

- “political corruption is a fact of life in urban Texas” (67.8% undecided or disagree);
- “crime and violence characterize life in urban Texas” (67.7% undecided or disagree);
- “the relationships among people in urban areas are impersonal and uncaring” (67.6% undecided or disagree);
- “urban areas are artificial settings that separate people from nature” (63.8% undecided or disagree);
- “urban areas are crowded, dirty, and noisy environments in which to live” (53.8% undecided or disagree); and,
- “urban life is too centered on the quest for money” (50.3% undecided or disagree).

Conclusions

Overall, the positive images of rurality were much more likely to be accepted than rejected by the rural survey respondents. Rural places and communities were regarded as being less stressful, more peaceful and quiet, more neighborly and friendly, more satisfying and wholesome, and having less crime and violence than other places and/or communities. Rural families were viewed as being more close-knit and enduring than families living in other areas, and rural people were seen as being more likely to accept individuals as they are.

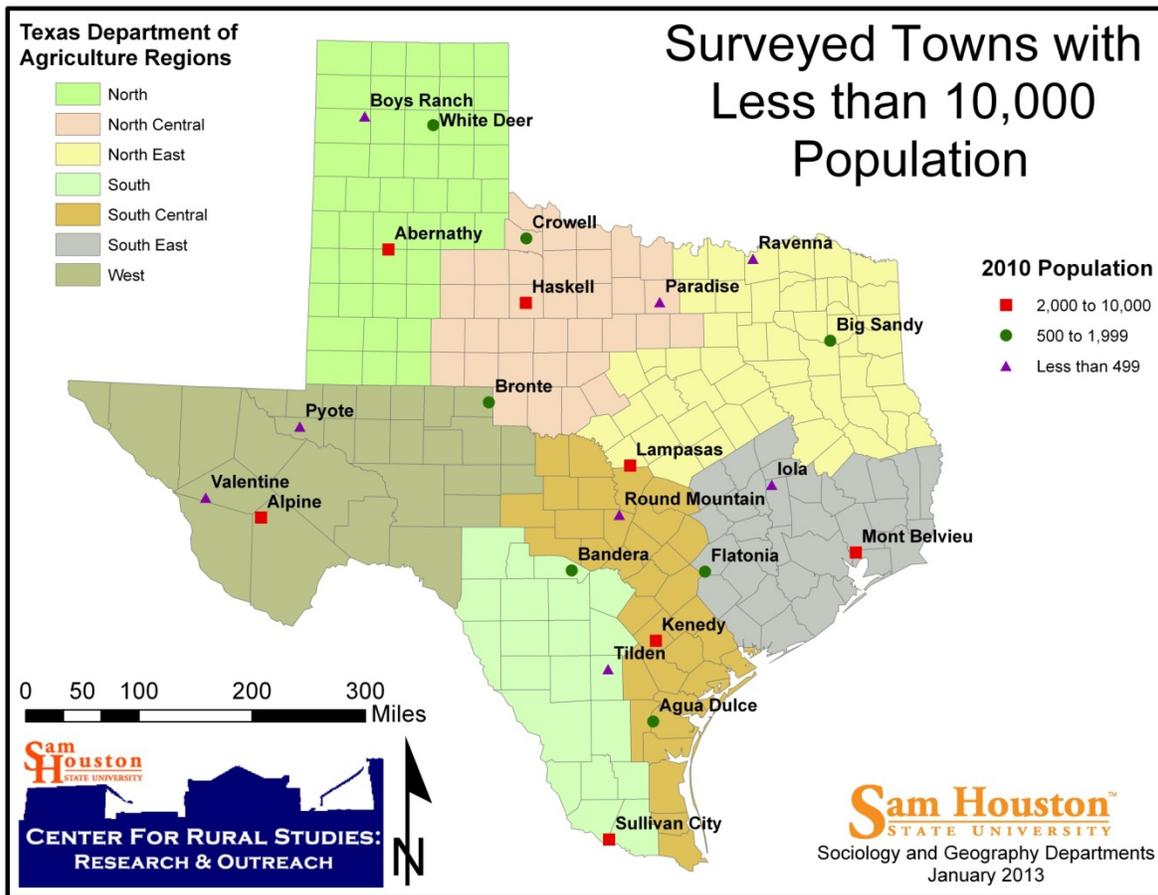
Over half of the survey respondents rejected five of the seven statements that focused on negative images of rurality. An overwhelming majority of respondents (more than eight in ten) were much more likely to disagree than agree that rural people are crude and uncultured and that rural life is monotonous and boring. Most respondents also disagreed that living in rural areas means doing without the good things in society, that rural people are suspicious and prejudiced towards others, and that there are few opportunities in rural communities. The two statements that failed to receive a majority of disagree responses included: "rural people are closed-minded in their thinking" and "rural communities provide few opportunities for new experiences."

With respect to the perceptions of urban living, a majority of respondents agreed with one statement – that urban living is complex, fast-paced, and stressful. The remaining six statements failed to receive a majority of agree responses.

Taken together, these findings suggest that rural Texans hold positive images about rural people and places and tend to more or less reject negative images. Further, these results reveal the lack of pronounced negative perceptions of urban living. We propose that rural community and economic development professionals might, in certain situations, harness and sell this overly positive imagery of rurality – what other writers have termed the "rural mystique"⁴ – and use it to build, revitalize, and/or enhance their local economies.

⁴ See, for example: Willits, Fern K., Robert C. Bealer, and Vincent L. Timbers. 1990. "Popular Images of 'Rurality': Data from a Pennsylvania Survey." *Rural Sociology* 55(4):559-575. Willits, Fern K. 1993. "The Rural Mystique and Tourism Development: Data from Pennsylvania." *Journal of the Community Development Society* 24(2):159-174.

Appendix A



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