

# A Profile of the Rural Sociological Society at the Turn of the Century

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## REASON FOR A MEMBERSHIP SURVEY

As part of its strategic planning process and in response to several requests voiced at business meetings during the late 1990s, the Rural Sociological Society (RSS) authorized a membership survey in 1998. The RSS Council asked Lori Garkovich, Lou Swanson, and Al Luloff (with input from RSS Council members) to prepare a survey instrument. The final survey included questions on attitudes toward and opinions regarding Society directions, levels of participation in Society activities, other professional affiliations, and general sociodemographics.

The survey resembled a similar questionnaire developed by Luloff and Miller (1983) for the RSS during the presidency of Robert C. Bealer. The final instrument for the present study was printed and mailed to 500 randomly selected members of the Society. We used a modified Dillman technique which included multiple mailings (surveys, reminder postcards, and e-mail communications). Sampled individuals were contacted initially in early May 1999. After five contact efforts, with the final attempt occurring in mid-August 1999, we received responses from 354 members for a response rate of 71%.

## MEMBER CHARACTERISTICS

The typical member was a 48-year-old white male of moderately liberal Democratic political affiliation. On average, members reported a 1998 household income of between \$50,000 and \$59,999, indicated that they were more or less satisfied with their current financial position, and felt that their monetary situation had improved over the last few years. The average member had been with the RSS for nearly 14 years. The top two reasons reported for first joining the RSS and renewing RSS membership were (1) "to keep up on current research," and (2) "for contact with colleagues." Approximately 67% indicated that they first joined the RSS to keep up on current research; roughly 57% noted that they first joined for contact with colleagues. The percentage of respondents who continued to renew their membership in RSS to keep up on current research and for contact with colleagues was about 62% and 55%, respectively. Approximately 76% (257 of 339) maintained continuous membership in the RSS; about one in four ( $n = 83$ ) had let their membership lapse at times. The most frequently cited reason for letting one's membership lapse was "forgot to pay dues" (reported by 29 of 83 respondents), followed by "RSS membership did not seem to fit my needs or interests" (reported by 25 of 83 respondents).

Of those individuals who reported their current

membership status in RSS ( $n = 339$ ), 55% were active members, 6% were active without publications, 3% were associates (non-voting), 7% were international associates, 9% were emeritus, and 20% were students. Comparable data compiled from the 1986-1987 RSS Membership Directory showed that nearly 75% of the total membership were classified as active members, roughly 3% were associates, 7% were emeritus, and 15% were students (Willits and Ghelfi 1988). In 1969, sixty-two percent of RSS members were active, 13% were associates, and 25% were students (Field et al. 1973).

Roughly 45% of the members (152 of 336) indicated that RSS was their primary professional affiliation, while approximately 47% ( $n = 159$ ) reported RSS as being a secondary affiliation. About one in twelve ( $n = 25$ ) felt that the RSS was not a very important professional affiliation. Approximately 45% (132 of 292) of those reporting an affiliation with at least one other professional association indicated that they held a membership in the American Sociological Association. Roughly 11% ( $n = 31$ ) indicated membership in the Population Association of America, while about one in ten ( $n = 26$ ) reported membership in the Community Development Society. Fifteen individuals (approximately 5%) reported membership in the Southern Rural Sociological Association.

About three of every four members (239 of 321) were currently employed by a college or university (5%, college; 70%, university). Another 23 (7%) were employed by government. Roughly 18% ( $n = 59$ ) were either retired or presently employed outside academia or government. Comparable employment data from 1969 (Field et al. 1973) and 1987 (Willits and Ghelfi 1988) showed similar patterns. In 1969, approximately 80% of RSS members were employed in a college or university, roughly 10% were employed by federal and state governments, and the remaining 10% were distributed among private organizations and the clergy (Field et al. 1973). In 1987, approximately 84% claimed employment in a college or university, about 8% worked for federal, state, or local governments, and 8% were either self-employed or worked for other organizations (Willits and Ghelfi 1988).

## RURAL SOCIOLOGISTS IN ACADEMIC SETTINGS

Of those members who reported employment in an academic setting, approximately 22% (49 of 226) indicated that their department was oriented towards undergraduate education, while about 16% ( $n = 36$ ) felt that their department was oriented towards graduate education. Slightly more than half ( $n = 126$ ) believed that their academic department was characterized by

a mixture of undergraduate and graduate education. Seven percent (n = 15) reported some other orientation (i.e., extension, research, or administration).

About seven in ten members (164 of 234) reported some percentage of teaching responsibilities, while about 73% (n = 170) held some research responsibilities. Roughly 24% (55 of 233) had an extension appointment, while the same percentage maintained some type of administrative appointment. Similar data from 1987 (Willits and Ghelfi 1988) revealed smaller percentages of members with teaching and extension appointments - 65% and 20%, respectively - and larger percentages with research and administrative responsibilities - 80% and 35%, respectively.

On average, those members employed in academic settings had held their positions for 10.5 years (range = from less than 1 to 53 years). Approximately 45% (101 of 223) had held academic positions at institutions other than their current one since receiving their highest degree. Roughly 19% (38 of 199) were assistant professors, 25% (n = 49) were associate professors, and 42% (n = 83) were full professors. Only one in ten (n = 20) reported that they were an instructor, and another 4% (n = 9) reported holding emeritus status. Sixty percent (129 of 215) reported being tenured, and roughly 58% (127 of 221) had held nonacademic positions throughout their careers.

Members who reported employment in academic settings were asked about the climate of support for rural sociological research and teaching at their university during the past five years. These individuals noted whether their unit had experienced an increase,

no change, or a decrease with respect to the following activities and support resources: Numbers of undergraduate classes with high rural sociology content, such as Introduction to Rural Sociology; numbers of graduate classes with high rural sociology content; numbers of rural sociology undergraduate majors; numbers of rural sociology graduate students; institutional financial support for rural sociological research; numbers of research assistantships in rural sociology; numbers of faculty positions in rural sociology; institutional climate of encouragement for research on rural sociological topics; and institutional climate of encouragement for teaching rural sociological topics. As shown in Table 1, when applicable, the modal response for each item was "no change".

#### CURRENT AND FUTURE VIEWS OF THE RSS

Members were asked a series of general statements concerning the current and future state of the RSS. A majority of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements: RSS should devote more attention to informing the development of federal and/or state policies which affect rural communities (79%); RSS should sponsor workshops for agency representatives and congressional aides to inform them about issues of interest/concern to rural sociologists (76%); I value my membership in RSS (76%); RSS should work more on increasing the pool of funds available to support research on rural sociological issues (75%); RSS should work to increase the number of job opportunities available to rural sociologists in nonacademic settings (74%); the membership

Table 1

Statement	Increase	No Change	Decrease	Not Applicable
Number of undergraduate classes with high rural sociology content, such as Introduction to Rural Sociology (n = 210)	16	40	14	30
Number of graduate classes with high rural sociology content (n = 207)	14	37	12	37
Number of rural sociology undergraduate majors (n = 203)	9	19	12	60
Number of rural sociology graduate students (n = 206)	13	24	15	48
Institutional financial support for rural sociological research (n = 208)	18	33	23	26
Number of research assistantships in rural sociology (n = 206)	10	29	17	44
Number of faculty positions in rural sociology (n = 212)	19	31	17	33
Institutional climate of encouragement for research on rural sociological topics (n = 211)	32	35	14	19
Institutional climate of encouragement for teaching rural sociological topics (n = 206)	18	45	15	22

fee structure is fair (73%); racial and ethnic diversity in membership is an important goal for the Society (70%); and RSS should give more attention to helping rural sociology graduate education (57%). Conversely, about four of every ten members either disagreed or strongly disagreed that membership fees should be increased (39%) and that they personally would like to have more opportunities for leadership roles (36%). Moreover, approximately one in five (22%) contended that the RSS was not a professionally diverse society.

"Neither agree nor disagree" was the modal category for the following statements: I think RSS has been changing for the better (61%); RSS has lost its sense of community (52%); I fear that RSS is aging and not enough new or younger members are becoming leaders in the Society (51%); RSS seems to have lost some of the close personal relationships that I value (48%); there seems to be little opportunity for newcomers to become active as leaders in RSS (44%); RSS should give more attention to undergraduate curriculum development (44%); it seems like the same group of persons continue to play leadership roles in RSS (39%); RSS should place greater emphasis on rural studies rather than focusing on rural sociology (36%); and the role of RSS should focus more on advocacy for rural society (32%).

#### RSS AS AN ADVOCATE FOR RURAL AMERICA

Respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with the following statement:

At present, there is no strong voice of advocacy for rural Americans in federal policy-making. Of the 312 individuals who responded, slightly more than one-half (58%) either agreed or strongly agreed, approximately 30% were neutral, and about 12% either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement.

Members were then presented with a list of eight actions that the RSS might take to promote advocacy for rural Americans in federal policy-making. The majority either agreed or strongly agreed with each of the possibilities. The statements and the respective percentage of respondents agreeing with each were as follows: Have a mechanism for alerting members to specific issues involving the social sciences and /or rural affairs (89%); join forces with related professional societies on issues of mutual concern (88%); provide informed opinion to legislators and regulators on matters of public interest (86%); become an advocate for research funding (79%); promote rural sociology stories in the general press and news (79%); publish popularized summaries of disciplinary research (75%); have a presence in Washington, DC (65%); and investigate the costs and benefits of hiring an advocate in Washington, DC, for issues of interest to the Society (59%).

#### WORK-RELATED ISSUES

Members were asked to indicate their opinion on several issues that may be affecting or will affect them or their work now or in the future. As indicated in

Table 2

Significant Issues	Is Affecting		Will Affect	
	No	Yes	No	Yes
Access to information via the Internet ( <i>n</i> = 276)	14	86	11	89
Accomplishing more with less ( <i>n</i> = 251)	21	79	17	83
Greater interest in global changes in rural society ( <i>n</i> = 271)	26	74	18	82
Greater awareness of social context of research and technologies ( <i>n</i> = 263)	35	65	29	71
Finding new options for funding rural sociological research ( <i>n</i> = 255)	40	60	22	78
Greater emphasis on applications of rural sociological research ( <i>n</i> = 255)	41	59	27	73
Less federal funds for rural social science research ( <i>n</i> = 265)	44	56	26	74
Greater interest in or concern for rural people and places ( <i>n</i> = 271)	46	54	33	67
Declining interest in or concern for rural people and places ( <i>n</i> = 271)	55	45	45	55
More research funded by state government ( <i>n</i> = 254)	70	30	51	49
Consolidation of university departments ( <i>n</i> = 275)	72	28	53	47
Declining student enrollment in rural sociology programs ( <i>n</i> = 252)	73	27	62	38

Table 2, the top three most frequently cited issues were as follows: (1) Access to information via the Internet (86%); (2) accomplishing more with less (79%); and (3) greater interest in global changes in rural society (74%). These same issues were ranked similarly in terms of possibly affecting them or their work in the future (nearly 9 in 10 mentioned access to information via the Internet; 83% mentioned accomplishing more with less; and 82% mentioned greater interest in global changes in rural society). The three least cited issues currently affecting them or their work were as follows: (1) Declining student enrollment in rural sociology programs (27%); (2) consolidation of university departments (28%); and (3) more research funded by state government (30%). Again, these same issues were ranked similarly in terms of possibly affecting them or their work in the future (38% mentioned declining student enrollment in rural sociology programs; 47% mentioned consolidation of university departments; and 49% mentioned more research funded by state government).

#### SUMMARY

This report provides a brief summary of member characteristics and selected findings from the 1999 RSS Membership Survey. Total membership in the Society has fluctuated from year to year, but over the last several decades it has remained fairly stable. Since the late 1960s, year end figures have ranged between approximately 800 and 1,100 (RSS 1997). Moreover, the membership profile of the RSS in the late 1990s was largely reflective of the configurations that were reported by previous researchers (cf., Field et al. 1973; Luloff and Miller 1983; Willits and Ghelfi 1988). The data presented here show that the majority of members continue to maintain an active classification and work in academic settings. Furthermore, a large proportion of members continue to belong to the ASA.

The age structure of the Society has remained relatively constant since the late 1960s, while the racial composition has changed slightly over the past decade. First, with respect to age, 38% of the members were less than age 40, 25% were age 40 to 49, and 32% were age 50 or older in 1969 (Field et al. 1973). Approximately 20 years later, one third of the total membership was less than 40, one third was age 40 to 49, and the remaining one third was age 50 or older (Willits and Ghelfi 1988). Our data reveal that nearly 27% of the members are less than age 40, roughly 32% are age 40 to 49, and about 41% are age 50 or older. The decline in younger age members is an issue that might deserve increased societal attention over the next several years. On the other hand, in 1987, the Society was predominantly white (94%; Willits and Ghelfi 1988). The current survey data indicate that this percentage had declined to 83%, perhaps reflecting positively on diversity efforts by the RSS.

The data also reveal that societal members are interested in policy, feel that there is no strong voice of advocacy for rural America, and believe that the RSS could take a more proactive role in this regard. These findings are not surprising; the roots of the organization are traceable to such concerns. What is remarkable, though, is the fact that so many of our members continue to believe that the organization should serve rural America in this capacity.

Finally, while there has been broad recognition of several changes in the RSS, it is important to realize that these changes have had associated costs. Concerns exist over the decline of a sense of community, the loss of some of the close personal relationships enjoyed by the membership, and the fact that the same people continue to play leadership roles in the organization. When asked, slightly more than a third of the members did not want more opportunities to become involved in leadership roles. Concomitantly, the data suggest that there are many people willing to get involved in the myriad activities of the society. Perhaps all that is needed is a request to serve.

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