October 1997

Where One Size Does Not Fit All: Small Community Diversity

Kathleen Prochaska-Cue  
*University of Nebraska - Lincoln*, kprochaska-cue1@unl.edu

Ann Ziebarth  
*University of Minnesota-Twin Cities St. Paul, Minnesota*

Bonnie Shrewsbury  
*University of Nebraska - Lincoln*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch](http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch)

Part of the Other International and Area Studies Commons

[http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch/333](http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch/333)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.
WHERE ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL: SMALL COMMUNITY DIVERSITY

Kathleen Prochaska-Cue

Department of Family and Consumer Sciences
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Lincoln, Nebraska 68563-0801

Ann Ziebarth

Department of Design, Housing, and Apparel
University of Minnesota-Twin Cities
St. Paul, Minnesota 55108-6136

and

Bonnie Shrewsbury

Department of Family and Consumer Sciences
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Lincoln, Nebraska 68563-0801

Abstract. Using a community classification based on key demographic and geographic factors and data from the U.S. Census, analyses from 212 small communities indicate significant inter- and intra-state differences. The communities studied were located in two states within the North Central Region. The sample was limited to incorporated places with populations between 1,000 and 2,500. Several commonly-held ideas about small communities are either challenged or confirmed by this research. Similarities and differences among the communities as well as between the states support the conclusion that small communities have diverse characteristics. Not all small communities of this size are geographically isolated places with declining population. While many small communities have a large proportion of their residents age 65 or older, not all do. Finally, while most small communities are populated by large proportions of white residents, some small communities have growing minority populations. The diversity of small communities has substantial implications for public policy decisions such as the allocation of Community Development Block Grant funding or the distribution of services for community residents. Recommendations for future research directions are also presented.
Human nature tends to evaluate public policy decisions using a criteria based on "common sense." Using this criteria however can create problems. A common-sense idea without a factual basis is myth. Decision-making based on myth can lead to serious unintended consequences. For example, state and federal policy based on "common sense beliefs" about rural communities can yield significant resource allocation inequalities for rural America.

Prevailing images of rural places and small communities are often polarized as either declining population and stagnant economies (Daniels and Lapping 1987) or alternatively, that rural places are bucolic and picturesque (Hondale 1993; Fitchen 1991). Such dichotomous perceptions about small towns have a great potential for harm when policy-makers base decisions about national and state resource distribution, not on fact, but on the flimsy base of common-sense ideas and assumptions. The forecast that "the small towns in the surrounding countryside will empty, wither, and die" (Popper and Popper 1987:576) is often cited (e.g., White 1992). Places with small populations are considered to be unworthy of public policy attention under an assumption that they are in a state of irreversible decline and aid would therefore result in a "waste of public resources." An alternative, but equally extreme viewpoint presents a prevailing image of small communities as idyllic places which certainly have no need of community development support or assistance.

For the Great Plains, the population distribution results in a core area that consists largely of open countryside and small-towns while the periphery consists of metropolitan areas. This dual population profile has led to a pessimistic view regarding the fate of the rural communities (Lonsdale and Archer 1995). The questions remain: Are the general perceptions of small rural communities accurate? What is the situation of small rural communities today? Are small towns dying places? Or are they idyllic examples of supportive communities? Are small communities alike? Or do their geographic and demographic characteristics lead to unique differences influencing both their strengths and their needs? The objective of this study is to explore these questions by examining locational and demographic characteristics of small communities. Following Ballard and Fuguitt's (1985) recommendation that further research consider contrasting regions to provide increased understanding of nonmetropolitan places, we concentrate our study of rural communities in the midwest by comparing small communities in two states; one located in the West North Central Region, and the other in the East North Central Region.
Central Place Theory and Small Communities

Central place theory, both directly and indirectly, has often been used as a basis for regional planning. It has been seen as particularly useful for studying nonmetropolitan places (Ballard and Fuguitt 1985). The hierarchical ordering of population centers is seen as both an efficient and an equitable approach to planning (King and Golledge 1978). With its framework for evaluating communities, central place theory suggests that communities develop at the center of an area based on supply and demand for goods and services with the size of each central place determined by the size of the area it serves. The distances between communities, following the central place theory, differ between hierarchical levels, which results in high-order centers widely spaced, and the distances separating centers on each level decreasing as they move down the hierarchy (Lloyd & Dicken 1990). Brush’s classic (1953) study of central places in southwestern Wisconsin indicated that communities correspond closely to theoretical expectations (Brush 1953). Because communities of similar size perform similar functions, economic and otherwise, such communities have both a similar resource base and similar needs.

Other researchers have critiqued the basic central place model. Dacey (1962) found that the central place system in southwestern Wisconsin more closely approximated a random pattern than a uniform one. Lloyd and Dicken (1990:81) conclude that “empirical evidence reveals that there is considerable degree of order and regularity in the spatial organization of economic systems, although such regularity is a good deal less than the theoretical models suggest.” Other critiques suggest that the measure of distance between communities is inappropriate. A measure of population density is offered as more realistic (Lloyd and Dicken 1990).

The concepts of size and place are essential for community economic and demographic change. The growth or decline of communities relates directly to central place theoretical concepts regarding size of place and proximity to larger centers. Ballard and Fuguitt (1985) recommend that a comparative study of nonmetropolitan places in the United States could provide a more complete understanding of settlement dynamics. They further suggest that a central place theoretical framework and the use of regional comparisons could be used to support “some sort of evolutionary theory of stages of settlement structure and change” (Ballard and Fuguitt 1985:111). Such a perspective would provide a social and historical context for understanding and predicting trends in population redistribution as well as the impacts of such changes for local policy priorities.
Policy Implication and Application of Central Place Theories

For those who live there, it is obvious that rural America is an exceedingly diverse place. While among the local residents uniqueness is an unquestioned assumption (Fitchen 1991), objective analyses using mapping techniques provide evidence of diversity as well. Maps of rural demographic and/or economic trends (e.g., Hamrick 1996) look like patchwork quilts. For example, some rural areas are experiencing rapid population growth while other areas show population declines. Population change, as an example of one dimension of diversity in rural places, provides insight into the range of factors that shape the applicability of public policies to the rural countryside (Castle 1993). The diversity of rural places results in the support of policies which are locally specific. As Stephen White (1992: 195) concludes, “broad-based, regional policies directed toward population growth will have less impact than those that are sensitive to local differences in the cultural landscape.”

While diversity is key in identifying the applicable public policies, most federal policies focus on uniform guidelines based on urban models. Few legislators have rural experiences or represent rural constituencies. Thus, they can ignore rural issues with impunity. Furthermore, state legislators from rural areas cannot agree on one approach to rural policy and therefore default to a set of policy positions favoring agriculture rather than deal with the diversity of other issues related to rural places (Hondale 1993). Confusing agrarian with rural and romanticizing farm life further limits progress toward public policies directed at rural places (Bonnen 1992). While the focus on agricultural policy rather than rural policy remains, it does little to address the policy needs of small rural communities. With declining funds to support public policies, there is a frequent call for targeting policy based on a ‘rifle’ rather than a ‘shotgun’ approach in order to increase efficiency, coordination, and equitable access. In reality, federal government strategies typically spread program resources as widely as possible. Once in place, a constituency for that program forms and seeks to garner on-going continuation of the resources and the support of legislators (Hondale 1993).

Daniels and Lapping (1987) recommend a public resource allocation policy for small towns based on a model of triage similar to that used by French medical personnel in World War I to treat wounded soldiers. “Triage is a selection process in which the mortally wounded and slightly wounded do not receive medical attention: the former because there is little hope of
survival, and the latter because there is little threat of death” (Daniels and Lapping 1987:275). Using a triage approach, the rural settlement policy for the midwest recommends that communities of 2,500-5,000 receive first priority, second priority would go to communities of 5,000-15,000 while those communities under 2,500 are ignored. This recommendation is linked to research that indicates that the larger the nonmetropolitan community, the greater the effort local government exerts in promoting growth and economic development (Green and Fleischmann 1991).

Our literature review indicates that much of the rural policy formation is grounded in central place theoretical perspectives regarding the assumption that similar size places function in similar ways. We examine the implicit critique of central place theory in Castle’s assertion that rural places are exceedingly diverse. We hypothesized that when holding community size constant, differences would be found among communities both within a state and between regions. We further explore possible characteristics that could influence small community diversity.

**Selected Characteristics of Small Characteristics**

Ballard and Fuguitt (1985) suggest that proximity to larger centers is an important explanatory variable basic to central place theory that provides an understanding of population redistribution. Research has shown that proximity to metropolitan areas influences how rural places fare in terms of economic development (Galston and Baehler 1995). Those communities that are within a reasonable commute of more populous employment and service centers often have informal, social, and economic service linkages to the larger urban area, while isolated places are more likely to be disadvantaged (Bonnen 1992; Hill 1991).

Size of place was also identified by Ballard and Fuguitt (1987) as a critical variable in the application of central place theory to rural settlement and population distribution. Using Iowa as an example, Daniels and Lapping (1987) point out the advantages of population concentration and growth for policies relevant to rural development. The competitive grant process through which state economic development programs for small towns are allocated favors those communities with expertise and organizations able to prepare competitive proposals. The community capacity to be successful in a highly competitive grant environment rarely results in funding allocated to communities under 2,500 in population. In another example, Daniels and Lapping (1987:279) point to the National Main Street Center’s revitalization program
which has predominately assisted Iowa communities with populations between 5,000 and 50,000 and has been concentrated in "eastern Iowa where two-thirds of the state’s population is located . . . (rather than) rural areas in western Iowa (which) are sorely in need of viable regional centers." This triage approach to public resource allocation tends to disadvantage small places. Yet, "people often feel a strong sentiment to where they have lived and worked for many years. It may not be realistic to expect rural and small town inhabitants to move to regional centers just because this move would create greater efficiency in the provision of public services" (Daniels and Lapping 1987:280).

In addition to size and location, demographic characteristics of the local population impact community development in terms of the demands on resources as well as the priorities for local needs. Rural areas traditionally have a disproportionate population of elderly residents (King and Golledge 1978). A high stationary concentration or substantial in-migration of older residents impacts the places where they reside (Everitt and Gfellner 1994). Older persons who are attracted to rural places and relocate there tend to use public health and medical services, public parks and recreational services, as well as cultural programs more frequently than their counterparts who are long term local residents (Glasgow 1995). Thus, communities seeking to attract retirees as an economic development strategy should be prepared to respond to increasing service demands. On the other hand, a concentration of elderly residents can also provide a number of benefits to rural communities. A community’s economic base can be enhanced through government transfer payments to older residents (Bentley 1988). The higher demand for health care services by elderly residents also can result in the creation or expansion of medical related employment (Hunt 1995).

The horizontal and vertical integration along with the industrial restructuring of the food-processing industry is dramatically changing the employment opportunity structure of many small rural communities (Stull, Broadway, and Griffith 1995). An emerging issue for selected small communities located in the central Great Plains states is the changing ethnic and racial composition of population that often accompanies food-processing industry growth. For example, the opening of a meatpacking plant in Lexington, Nebraska, in 1989 resulted in significant demographic changes for that community. The 1990 Census showed that 4.9% of the population was Hispanic; three years later a special census indicated that the Hispanic population of the community had risen to 24% (Burke 1996).
One impact of rapid demographic change resulting from successful economic development activities in small communities has been the emergence of housing problems. Employees in rural growth industries often do not earn wages sufficient to create effective economic demand to enhance a community’s housing stock. Affordable housing to meet the needs of new residents attracted to the employment opportunities often is lacking. Overcrowding becomes commonplace. And, in areas where employment has attracted people of color, housing discrimination can occur (Burke 1996; Stull, Broadway, and Griffith 1995). At the same time, the “effects of (emerging) cultural diversity on the ability to mobilize collective action are often overlooked by community development practitioners” (Ewert, et al. 1994:21). Little research regarding the extent of demographic changes within small rural communities is available. Without research-based knowledge, the potential for public policy decisions based on myths and biases remains a high probability.

**Data and methods**

*Sample Description.* The question of the definition of a rural community is the subject of extensive on-going debate (Fitchen 1991; Devers 1992). In this study, diversity among small communities was analyzed by evaluating the 212 communities with populations between 1,000 and 2,500 in two North Central states, Nebraska and Wisconsin (U.S. Census 1990). Nebraska was selected from the West North Central Region and Wisconsin from the East North Central Region. These states illustrate contrasts within the combined North Central Region. First, the two states differ in their overall climate and physical geography. Wisconsin receives more rainfall, and has a northern forested area and a southern cropland area. Nebraska is more representative of the Great Plains, with wide expanses of rangeland and much lower rainfall. Secondly, and in reflection of differences of climate and physical geography, the agricultural economies are also in contrast, with Wisconsin having more dairy production and timber processing while Nebraska has more beef cattle and corn production. Third, the numbers and locational distributions of communities in the 1,000-2,500 population range differ between the two states. Wisconsin has a fairly even distribution of the communities across the state while Nebraska has fewer more scattered communities.

The upper population limit of 2,500 was selected in accordance with federal policies. Eligibility for rural assistance programs includes
communities with populations of 2,500 or less, regardless of their location (Cranston-Gonzalez National Affordable Housing Act 1990; Fuguitt, Brown, and Beale 1989). The lower limit of 1,000 was selected as a minimal population level necessary to support essential economic and social services as well as possessing sufficient human capital to independently address local concerns within the local governmental jurisdiction. As Paulsen and Reed (1987:59) point out, communities with populations under 1,000 are less likely to participate in economic development activities because “they are not active governments, they may hold quarterly meetings only, and the city clerk, the only employee, may work just 3-5 hours a month.”

Community Classification. The research protocol called for the use of a framework of four characteristics which may affect a community’s public policy needs and priorities. According to this framework, each community was classified with respect to quantitative measures based on three demographic variables and one geographic variable. Each variable was paired (high and low) and communities were placed into one of 16 distinct groups. These groupings were then used as comparisons for the subsequent analysis (Ziebarth, Prochaska-Cue, and Shrewsbury 1995).

Data from the 1980 and 1990 Censuses were used to specify three demographic characteristics impacting small communities. First, it was posited that growing communities have different needs from those communities which are not growing. While population change does not directly equate to community vitality or well-being, it is an indicator of viability. If a community’s population had grown during the decade of the 1980s it was typed “growing,” whereas if the population was stable to or had declined in size, the community type was specified as “non-growing” (Table 1).

Second, small communities with the same or higher than their respective state’s proportion of elderly residents were thought to face different challenges than those with a smaller proportion of older residents. Communities were typed “high elderly” if the proportion of community residents age 65 or older was greater than the corresponding state proportion. If the proportion of older residents was lower than or equal to the state’s proportion, the community was classified as “low elderly” (Table 1).

The third demographic characteristic considered was the proportion of minority residents in the community. Again, the respective state population proportion was used as a benchmark. If the proportion of minority residents, defined as all but non-Hispanic whites was greater than the corresponding state proportion, the community was termed “high minority.” Conversely, if
TABLE 1
STATE AND SMALL COMMUNITY*
POPULATION CHARACTERISTICS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Nebraska</th>
<th>Wisconsin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population Change, 1980-90</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Mean</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small communities range</td>
<td>-19.3% to 82.4%</td>
<td>-40.4% to 45.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residents 65 &amp; older, 1990</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Mean</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
<td>13.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small communities range</td>
<td>6.2% to 40.7%</td>
<td>3.3% to 36.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority Residents,** 1990</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Mean</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small communities range</td>
<td>0.1% to 18.3%</td>
<td>0.0% to 10.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Small Communities include those with 1990 populations between 1,000-2,500.
** Minorities include all but white non-Hispanic persons.
Source: Computed from the U.S. Census of Population and Housing, 1980 and 1990.

the proportion was less or equal to the state's proportion, the classification was defined as "low minority" (Table 1).

A fourth community characteristic considered was geographic location in relation to major trade centers, since evidence form central place theory implies that nearness to a major trade center also influences the character of a small community. For the purposes of this study, communities outside a 50-mile radius of a regional metropolitan center with a population of at least 50,000 were considered "isolated." Those equal to or within a 50-mile radius of a metropolitan center were classified as "non-isolated."

Statistical comparisons of the paired community groups were conducted. A chi square significance test was determined at the .01 level of significance for relative frequencies of each community characteristic across the two selected states.
Findings

Findings from the analyses are reported according to community characteristics. Differences in the most common community type for each state further illustrate the diversity which exists among small communities.

Growing/Non-growing. We began by considering the question of population decline among small rural communities. Were the majority of the communities in the two states declining or growing between 1980 and 1990? Most Nebraska communities studied had non-growing populations. (Table 2). Wisconsin had a significantly greater number of growing communities than Nebraska.

High elderly/Low elderly. Next, we considered the dominance of senior citizens among small rural community residents. Do small communities have a greater proportion of elderly populations than would be expected given the proportion of elderly persons in their respective state? More than three-fourths of the small communities in Wisconsin had greater than the...
state proportion of elderly residents. An every greater proportion of the small communities in Nebraska were classified as high elderly communities (Table 2). No significant differences were found between the relative frequencies of high elderly communities between the two states.

High minority/Low minority. The third comparison dealt with the impact of increasing minority populations in rural North Central areas. How prevalent are minority populations in Nebraska and Wisconsin small communities? While the majority of small communities in this sample have less than their corresponding state’s proportion of minority persons, there are some communities with larger proportions of minority residents. For example, 14.9% of small Nebraska communities had minority populations greater than the state’s proportion (Table 2). A much smaller proportion of Wisconsin’s small rural communities (1.4%) fell into the high minority category. Expected frequencies in Wisconsin were too low for valid significance testing.

Isolated/Non-isolated. The fourth comparison considered the geographic proximity of small rural communities in relation to metropolitan areas. Are small communities geographically isolated—or not? While a majority of small communities in Nebraska were found to be geographically isolated, less than a third of small communities in Wisconsin fell into this category (Table 2). Nebraska had significantly more isolated small communities than Wisconsin.

Most Common Community Classification. The most common small community type in both Nebraska and in Wisconsin have high elderly and low minority population characteristics. But, the two state’s most common community type varied in terms of isolation and growth. In Nebraska, the most common community type was isolated, while in Wisconsin it was non-isolated. In Wisconsin, the most common community type was growing, within Nebraska it was non-growing.

These most common community types per state, however, accounted for only 35.4% of all communities in the 1,000 to 2,500 size range studied. In Nebraska, the most common community classification was high elderly, low minority, isolated and non-growing (37.3%, n=25). The most common type of Wisconsin small community was also one with high elderly and low minority populations but non-isolated and growing (34%, n=50). This contrast between the two states is another testimony to the diversity of small communities.
Policy Implications of the Research Findings

While this study of two states questions common ideas about small communities, an expanded study in all states would need to be undertaken before findings could be generalized nationwide. Recognizing this limitation, it can be concluded that not only were small communities found to be different between the two states, but that within each state considerable diversity also existed among its small communities. Such community diversity appears to support Lewis (1979:141) when he warned observers against the "uncritical acceptance of concepts such as the rural-urban dichotomy and continuum, which have the effect of making the rural society appear as an spatial and homogenous whole." Instead Fitchen (1991:253) points out, "rural communities are presumed by their members to have individual identities each different from the next."

If an assumption that small communities are dying is accepted, it could be argued that allocating state or federal dollars to these places would be an inefficient use of public resources. Public policy which ignores the needs of small places which have static or declining population sizes may continue, making it even more impractical or impossible for such communities to address their local concerns. As public policy is implemented, those deciding who will benefit through policy-directed resource distribution may design guidelines regarding resource assistance based upon erroneous assumptions about small communities and their resource needs and capacities. Consequently, assistance will be awarded to larger communities while ignoring the needs of many smaller places. Such is the dilemma facing policy makers: Should limited public resources be channeled to small non-growing communities in hopes of reversing downward trends or instead towards communities where growth is creating pressure on present resources? This question is one well-deserving of future investigation.

Collaboration among communities has been suggested as an avenue through which small communities might aggregate their concerns and obtain much-needed public and private resources. But community differences, including those highlighted in this study, point to the challenges small communities may face in seeking and arranging collaboration opportunities. Such challenges indicate the need for training in conflict management before communities can effectively collaborate in efforts to influence public policy decision making (Fredericksen 1996).

While it may be impossible to design and implement custom-made policies to meet the diverse needs of all small communities, failure to
consider the range of communities can be expected to result in on-going problems. Undoubtedly, a one-size-fits-all policy will fail to meet the diverse needs of small communities. Increased flexibility in both the policy developed and in the methods and minds of those charged with policy implementation is necessary in order to avoid the continued neglect of small communities. As William Galston said in 1992, “what is true in the aggregate may not be valid for individual communities” (Galston 1992:209). A better understanding of the unique differences among small communities is needed before state and national policies effectively recognizing community diversity can be formulated and implemented.

Acknowledgments

We wish to thank those who reviewed this paper. Partial funding for this research was received from the United States Department of Agriculture, Cooperative State Research and Extension Service Grant #93-34306-8407.

Notes

1. A rapid population growth is indicated as higher than the national average. Between 1980 and 1990 the national average population change was 9.8%.
2. Community vitality has been defined as a community’s capacity to maintain and/or improve its relative economic position (McDowell 1995).

References


Small Community Diversity


