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Does Community Size Affect Resident Satisfaction? Data from the Nebraska Rural Poll

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Cornhusker Economics

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Data from the Nebraska Rural Poll

Market Report	Year Ago	4 Wks Ago	12-2-16
Livestock and Products,			
Weekly Average			
Nebraska Slaughter Steers, 35-65% Choice, Live Weight.	127.00	104.05	114.00
Nebraska Feeder Steers, Med. & Large Frame, 550-600 lb.	196.97	136.59	147.13
Nebraska Feeder Steers, Med. & Large Frame 750-800 lb.	180.95	129.65	135.02
Choice Boxed Beef, 600-750 lb. Carcass.	203.77	187.03	189.55
Western Corn Belt Base Hog Price Carcass, Negotiated	51.38	42.55	47.83
Pork Carcass Cutout, 185 lb. Carcass 51-52% Lean.	72.05	72.92	73.11
Slaughter Lambs, woolled and shorn, 135-165 lb. National.	*	144.73	141.90
National Carcass Lamb Cutout FOB.	362.45	352.66	352.34
Crops,			
Daily Spot Prices			
Wheat, No. 1, H.W. Imperial, bu.	3.85	2.71	2.64
Corn, No. 2, Yellow Columbus, bu.	3.44	3.04	3.09
Soybeans, No. 1, Yellow Columbus, bu.	8.14	9.06	9.53
Grain Sorghum, No.2, Yellow Dorchester, cwt.	5.61	4.67	4.79
Oats, No. 2, Heavy Minneapolis, Mn, bu.	2.77	2.91	2.85
Feed			
Alfalfa, Large Square Bales, Good to Premium, RFV 160-185 Northeast Nebraska, ton.	182.50	145.00	NA
Alfalfa, Large Rounds, Good Platte Valley, ton.	75.00	67.50	67.50
Grass Hay, Large Rounds, Good Nebraska, ton.	80.00	67.50	65.00
Dried Distillers Grains, 10% Moisture Nebraska Average.	130.00	105.00	107.50
Wet Distillers Grains, 65-70% Moisture Nebraska Average.	50.00	NA	42.00
* No Market			

The Nebraska Rural Poll is a mailed sample survey of non-Metropolitan Nebraska Households that is now entering its 22nd year. In that regard, it is the largest and longest running thing of its kind in the nation. The survey has now reached over 56,000 respondents.

Within the collected Rural Poll data are a number of variables that have been measured every year since 1996. The bulk of these variables are measured on five-point Likert type scales questioning the extent to which respondents are "Satisfied" with various aspects of their lives and their communities. In this context, we define satisfaction as the fulfillment of a need or want. Thus, the extent to which one is satisfied or dissatisfied indicates the adequacy of that fulfillment.

Now, most economists and sociologists accept the notion that small rural places are stressed by population loss, outmigration of youth, empty storefronts, aging housing, infrastructure needs, institutional consolidations and more. Given those conditions, it would be reasonable to assume that the residents of very rural places would be less satisfied with their communities than would the residents of larger places with more diverse economies and stable or growing populations. Communities that are limited in the ability to fulfill the needs and wants of their residents might, logically, be populated by people who are themselves dissatisfied with their hometowns. But, this turns out to not be the case. Rather, the residents of the 84 counties that make up the Rural Poll's respondent population seem, on average, to like the places where they live, the stresses of rural decline notwithstanding.

In fact, one of the more interesting stories found in these data is how little variation appears with regard to reported satisfaction with one's community (either the community of residence or for open-country residents the community that they define as

being closest to them). This can be most easily demonstrated with a simple graph (Figure 1), which represents average reported satisfaction with the respondent's own community. Responses to the question are disaggregated to represent four types of Nebraska counties: Micropolitan core counties, counties with a trade center larger than 2,500 residents, counties with no trade center that large, and counties with both no such trade center and population densities of fewer than six per square mile.

Respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction with their community on a five-point scale ranging from "Very dissatisfied" to "Very satisfied" with a mid-point of "Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied." From a community perspective, one would hope for responses that tend to the satisfied side of this indicator, which would be a score of 3 or greater. That is indeed the case for communities of all sizes in the Poll.

What is perhaps most surprising about this variable is how similar respondent rankings are for communities of various sizes. While it may be that smaller communities are under more stress from declining populations and loss of amenities, it does not seem to have much effect on how the average residents view their community.

Further evidence that the size of a community does not seem to result in great variation in resident satisfaction is seen in Figure 2. Here we are looking at the percentage of respondents rating their communities on each of the five scale points. In this instance, we have aggregated the last five years of Rural Poll data (2011 – 2015) in order to increase the sample size for reliability purposes. This is the same strategy utilized by the Census' American Community Survey. Given the stability of the average rating seen in Figure 1, this strategy appears to be warranted.

The Rural Poll routinely achieves annual error estimates of 5% or less for the statewide sample. Applying the same 5% confidence interval to the aggregated data, Figure 2 again demonstrates that there is very little variation in satisfaction with one's community to be found across the four categories of community size.

So, does that mean that Rural Poll respondents tend to be satisfied with everything that their communities have to offer, no matter how limited that may be? Perhaps not entirely. Differences in reported satisfaction do appear when respondents are questioned with regard to specific amenities or services. An example of this can be found in Figure 3, representing reported satisfaction with medical care services.

With regard to this essential service, respondents from the smallest counties surveyed (having no town of 2,500 and population densities of less than six per square mile) are somewhat more likely to indicate dissatisfaction with their available medical care services and less likely to indicate a high level of satisfaction. This makes sense given the logistics of rural living where access to health care services may require significant travel. However, even with the differences seen, it is still the case that approximately 60% of respondents from these very rural areas report that they are either satisfied or very satisfied with the medical care services that they know.

The same pattern appears when survey respondents are questioned with regard to K-12 education in their community. Residents of the most rural counties are slightly more likely to express dissatisfaction and less likely to express a high level of satisfaction than are the residents of counties with larger population centers. And again, it is still the case that nearly 70% of those responding indicated that they were satisfied or very satisfied with K-12 education in their community.

Two observations seem to be relevant here. First, Non-Metropolitan Nebraskans tend to be satisfied with where they are, even if the resources available in that location are limited. The Rural Poll has repeatedly demonstrated that, while satisfaction with consumer products (e.g. restaurants, retail, entertainment, etc.) tends to be higher in more urbanized locations that offer more variety, satisfaction with social relationships (e.g. friends and neighbors) tends to be higher in more rural locations.

Sociologically, this can be explained as a consequence of population density. Individuals living in larger population centers most often interact with others on a role basis and are unlikely to have a personal relationship with the people in those roles. By contrast, the resident of a small rural community may be personally familiar with virtually everyone they meet in the course of a typical day. Interactions with known others carry less uncertainty than interactions with strangers, resulting in an increased sense of predictability and safety. Safety, the Rural Poll has shown, is among the things held to be most important in defining a "Successful" community.

The second observation to be drawn from these data is that, for most rural residents, the notion that rural schools and health care are in crisis has either been overstated or fallen on deaf ears. Empirically, the quality of a school can be measured by graduation rates, course offerings, faculty skills and the presence of specific facilities such as laboratories. Similarly, medical facilities can be graded according to the standards of that industry. And of course, access to both institutions is affected by distance. The notion that rural institutions have been left behind is largely shaped by those verifiable, material characteristics.

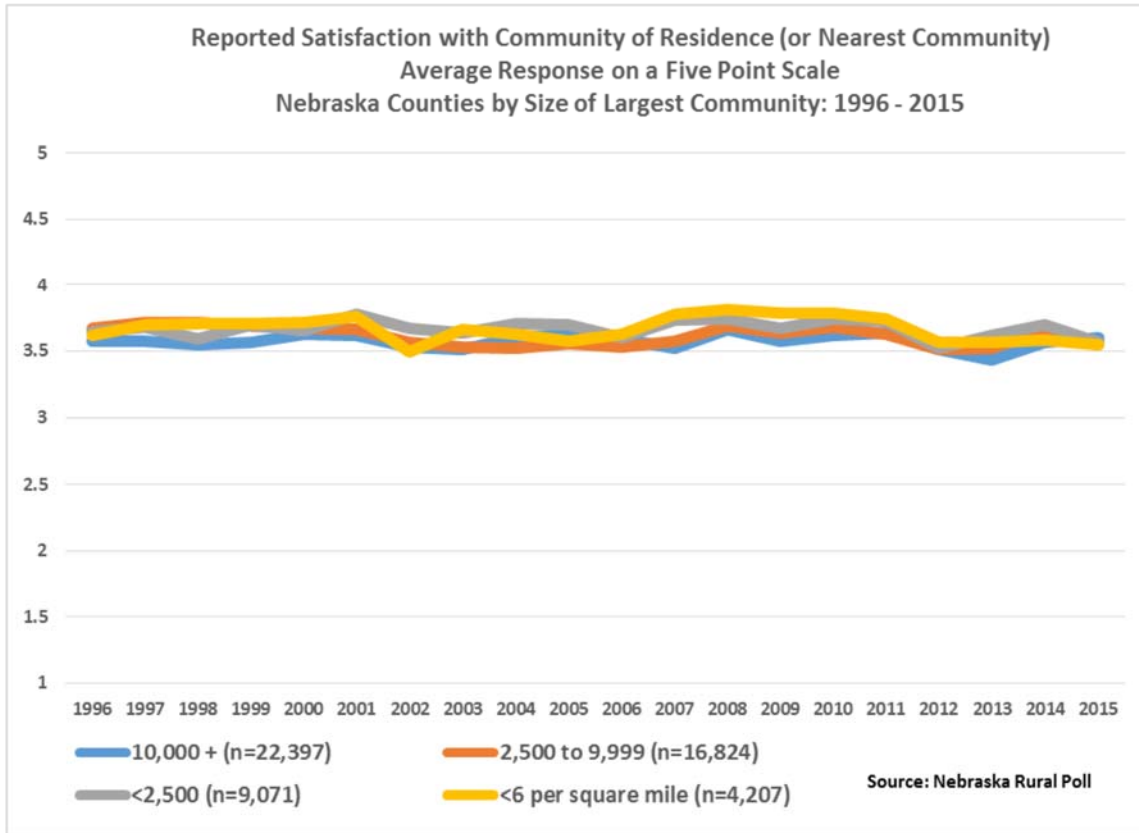


Figure 1

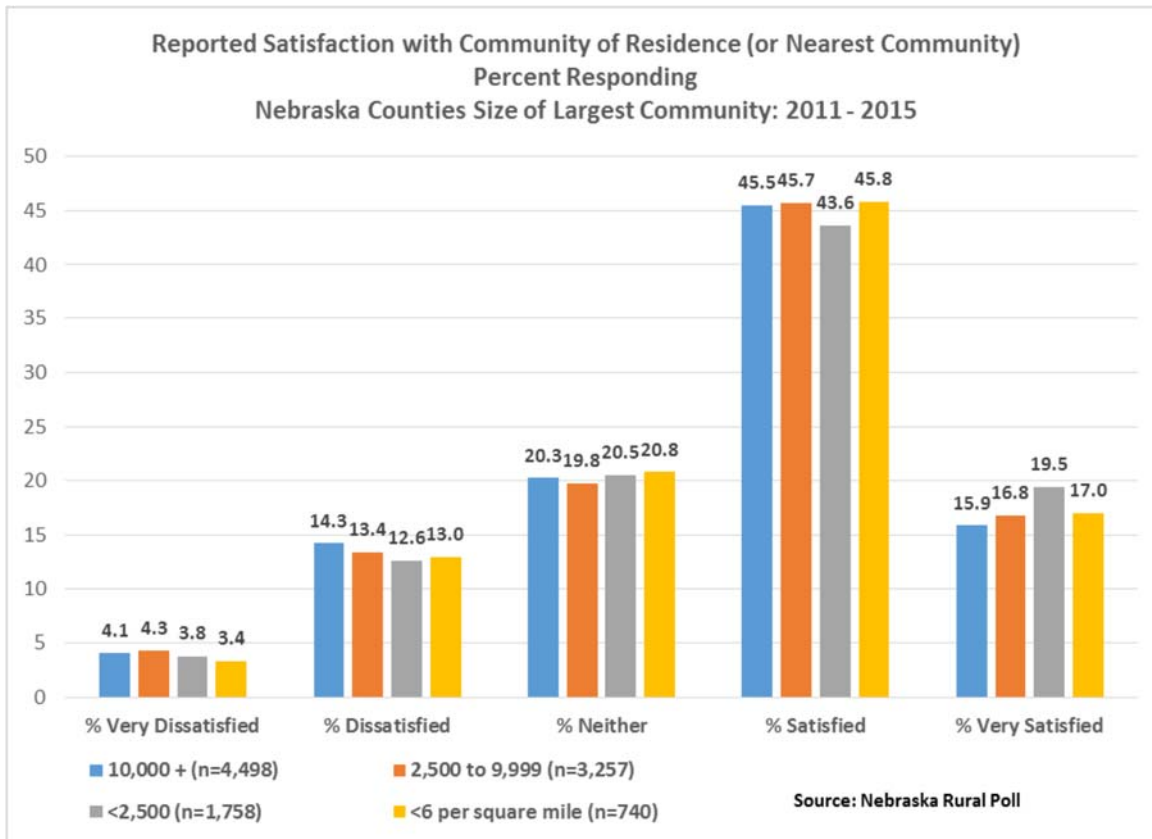


Figure 2

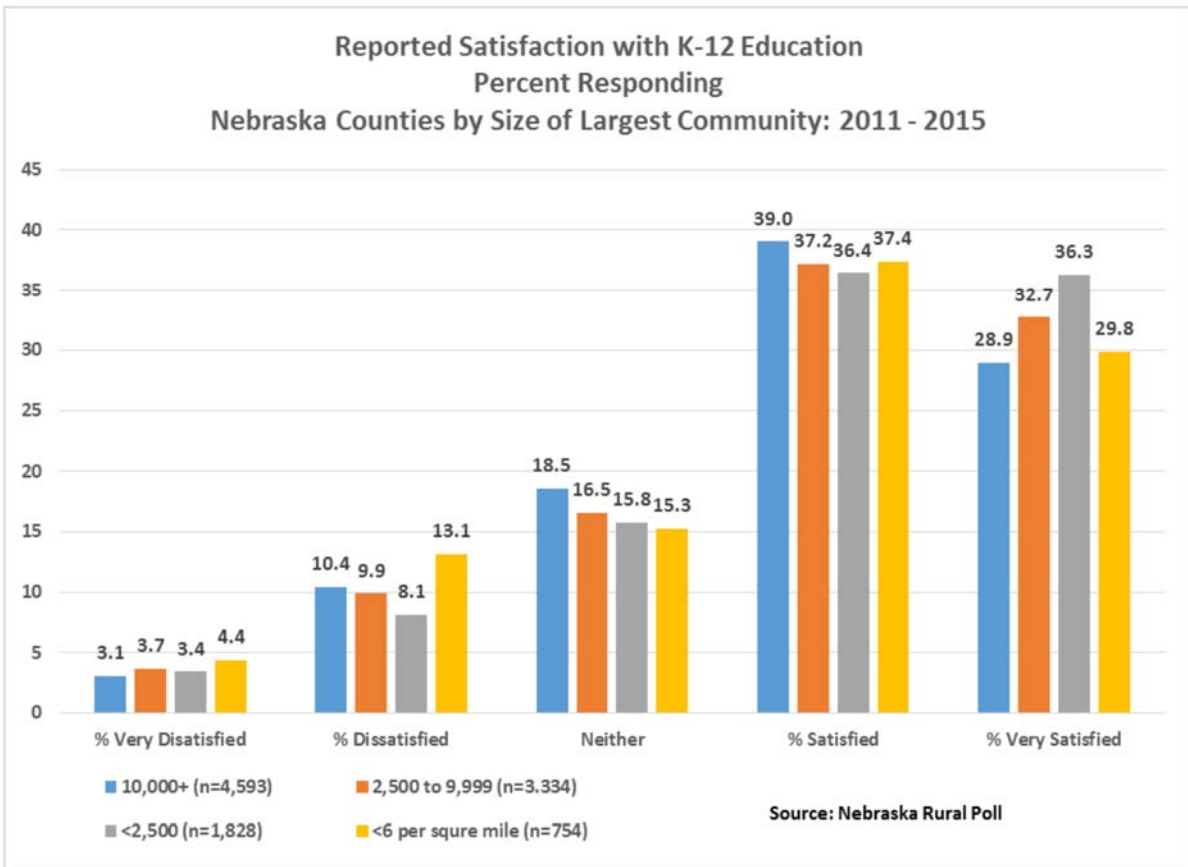


Figure 3

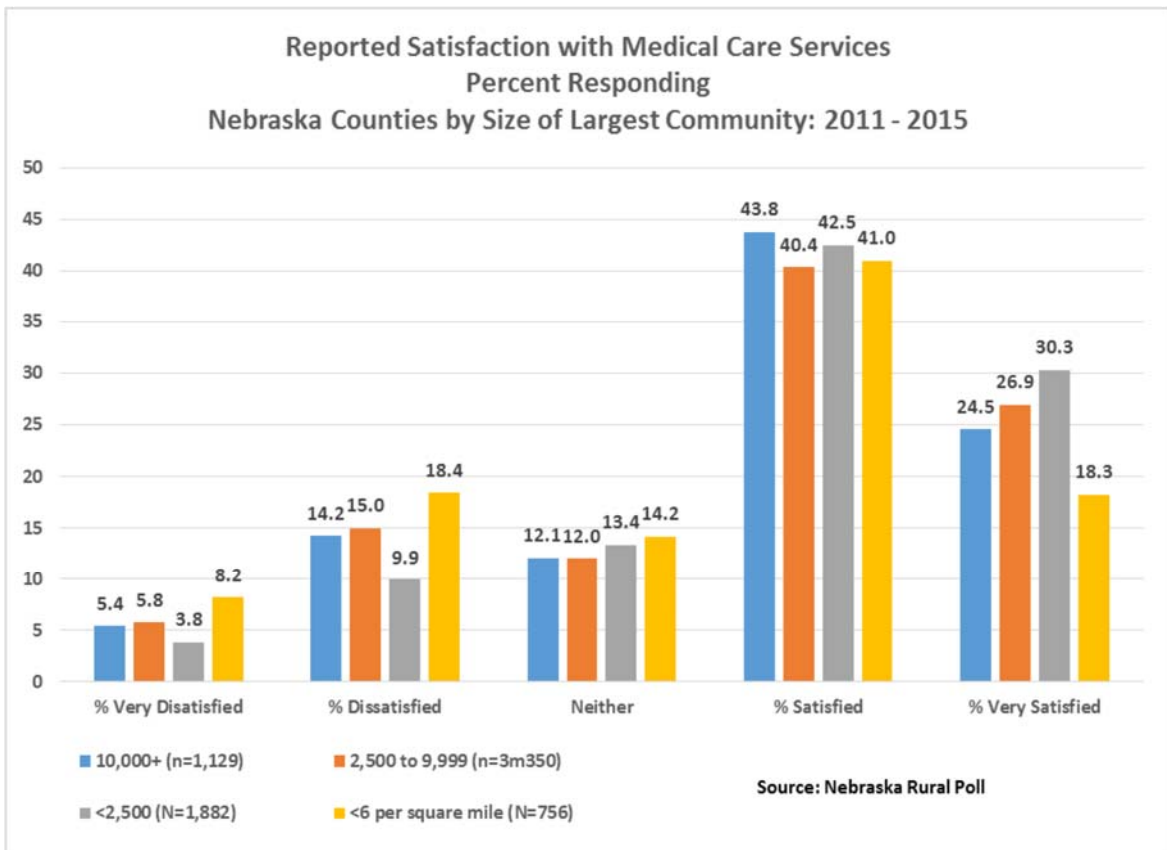


Figure 4