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Review of *Guide to Rural Data* by Priscilla Salant and Anita J. Waller

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Guide to Rural Data. Priscilla Salant and Anita J. Waller. Revised Edition. Washington, DC: Island Press, 1995. xv+140 pp. Tables, figures, glossary, and index. \$29.95 paper (ISBN 1-55963-384-0).

With increased devolution of responsibility to rural places, reliable, timely, and meaningful data take on added importance for local governments

and local nonprofit organizations. Pressures for data on which to base allocations of resources and to assess the impact of those allocations are further intensified by the rapid changes occurring in rural America. This short book provides those who need to know what is happening locally with an overview of what data are available, what they mean, and their limitations.

The authors present a succinct rundown of basic data concepts and private and public data sources. Discussion of different ways to access each data source is especially important for rural data users. Published data sources and their electronic forms, such as CD-ROM and diskette, are described—with price and how to order. Readers are told how to access each state's county classifications quickly by e-mail or fax. Advantages of using the data services available, such as the Rural Information Center (RIC), are highlighted by short case studies describing the interaction between accessing the appropriate data and effective rural development.

Since systematic data on employment and occupation are only available from the decennial census for small areas, readers are urged to contact state sources for specifics in their states. There is huge fluctuation in the availability of state-generated data; nevertheless, state data centers are often where research ought to begin, and each state center is listed with an accompanying phone number.

Though issued very slowly, small area decennial census data are the most detailed available. Data on per capita personal income, income by type, and earnings by type and major industry are available annually from the Bureau of Economic Analysis. The authors compare the use of those data—more current, but less precise than the decennial census—with other current, but partial data series giving insight into special populations, such as the elderly.

The book's excellent presentation on understanding local economies underscores how data can vary from one data source to another—or, as the caption for Table 9 puts it, "Which data source is most appropriate depends on the research question." Data sources are linked to such variables as unit of observation, origin of the data, coverage, industry detail, and geographic detail. This valuable summary makes simple questions (how many jobs have been created?) more complex and helps rural data users consider why they are stressing jobs in the first place. The authors discuss each economic sector and suggest appropriate questions that can be answered from available data sources.

Because of the current perception of fiscal crisis at all levels of government and the increasing devolution of responsibility, including unfunded

mandates from state and federal governments to the local level, the last chapter deals specifically with data on local government structure and how various governmental units generate and spend money. The importance and limits of centrally collected data sources are discussed—as are the implications of the data for local decision making and research questions.

In terms of availability and uses of rural data, the authors have produced an outstanding work; its appendices—including a glossary and a listing of selected data series, including title, description, frequency, formats, and comments which aid in data use—are likely to be thumbed continually. Census Bureau contacts are listed both in the text and appendices. Electronic data access, which expands daily, is integrated into the entire text, as well as summarized in an appendix.

Guide to Rural Data would be an excellent text for classes in rural planning and rural development. It is also invaluable for practitioners. An easy to use format and systematic attention to the meanings and uses of different data and different data sources mean that identification and implementation of alternative rural development models called for by the authors may well indeed take place. **Cornelia Butler Flora**, *North Central Regional Center for Rural Development, Iowa State University*.