

rural new york minute

ISSUE NUMBER 21/SEPTEMBER 2008

Attitudes Toward Rural Community Life in New York State

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In an increasingly urban nation, why are attitudes about rural life important?

Public attitudes affect public policy. When positive attitudes toward rural people and communities are prevalent, policies fostering rural life are more likely to be on the public agenda and supported. However, given that the U.S. is about 80% urban, why should this majority care about rural places and people? For starters, rural areas contain most of our nation's land, water and natural resources, energy generation facilities, physical infrastructure and recreation destinations. Most of our nation's food, fiber and energy sectors are located in rural areas. And, while rural people only comprise about 20% of the US population, this still constitutes a sizeable "minority" and a significant force in state and national elections.

Attitudes also influence our private choices. How people feel about rural versus urban areas may be associated with their decisions about where to live and work. Collectively, these individual attitudes may influence migration patterns which affect land use, community character, and economic development patterns. Where people live has a significant impact on their opportunities and life chances, as well as on their personal identities.

Research on attitudes about rural life

In a recent study, we examined people's perceptions about particular aspects of rural and urban life in New York State in 2008. This issue has not been examined for at least a decade. Previous research shows that rural Americans and rural areas are viewed as worthy of attention in public policy (Kellogg, 2001, Roper Association, 1992*). In Pennsylvania, Willets et al. (1990) found that regardless of where people lived (urban, suburban, or rural), their attitudes were comprised of both pro-rural and anti-urban responses, a pairing which can be considered a critique of urban life.

Our study revisits the Pennsylvania work. We surveyed 1,100 New Yorkers in 2008 via the annual Empire State Poll telephone survey conducted by Cornell University. Respondents were presented with a set of ten statements that elicited the clearest pro-rural, anti-urban, and anti-rural sentiments in the previous Pennsylvania research and asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statements. Survey respondents were grouped according to residential place type – upstate urban, downstate urban, or rural.

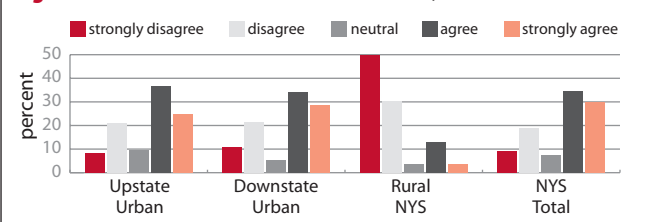
What are the attitudes in NYS? Do they vary depending upon where one lives?

We find that while the general attitudes in NYS are similar to those found in Pennsylvania two decades ago, NYS respondents were often divided depending on the specific sentiment being expressed. Agreeing with one pro-rural sentiment, usually, but not always, meant that a respondent will

agree with other pro-rural sentiments. In fact, respondents often agreed with both pro-rural and anti-rural sentiments (especially those reflecting material conditions), indicating that overall pro-rural attitudes are complex and may even be coupled with realistic ideas about rural deficits.

In addition, responses are consistent across residential place types for some attitudes but not for others. For example, there is strong agreement across New York that "neighborliness and friendliness are more characteristic of rural areas." However, rural New Yorkers tend to disagree (and disagree strongly!) that "because rural life is closer to nature, it is more wholesome", while urban New Yorkers tend to agree with this statement (see Figure 1). In general, rural respondents were more likely to differ from other New Yorkers in their attitudes about rural areas. They often take a slightly more negative (and perhaps realistic) view of the material aspects of rural life, such as limited economic opportunities, than do their urban counterparts. On the other hand, rural respondents were the most likely to disagree with the anti-rural sentiment, "Rural life is monotonous and boring," suggesting that rural residents value the quality of life aspects of rural living regardless of the material conditions.

Figure 1: Because Rural Life is Closer to Nature, It is More Wholesome



Source: 2008 Empire State Poll, Cornell University.

Conclusions

We find that pro-rural and anti-urban attitudes are strong in NYS despite high levels of urbanization, but these attitudes are more complex than might appear from an overall general or "global" preference question. More global attitudes towards rural or urban life can mask differences across specific questions that tap particular dimensions of the broader attitude. This suggests that these global attitude measures should be avoided in policy prescriptions and future research.

While people are rather consistent in their attitudes, with those who hold pro-rural attitudes also tending to hold anti-urban attitudes, many people appear to hold both pro- and anti-rural attitudes at the same time. This finding suggests that people have a realistic idea about limited rural opportunities while still holding positive sentiments about other aspects of rural life. Since attitudes toward rural people and communities can affect the public policy process, thoughtful research and policymaking will examine who thinks what about rural people and places, and avoid over-generalizing. ♦

* All citations posted on the CaRDI website with this issue.