TEXAS RURAL LEADERS AND ECONOMIES

2016 Survey Summary

TX

Rural

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Survey Background

“Community development precedes economic development” may be the mantra of Extension CED professionals. People have to want to live and engage in a community before they move businesses there. Young adults who choose to remain in rural areas (“stayers”) have skills and talents that are valuable to their communities. If current positional leaders respect and engage these young people, the expansion of human and social capital can invigorate the community. While evidence from public meetings suggests that positional leaders are not currently engaging these stayers, their attitudes toward stayers have not been formally and systematically studied. Similarly, leaders’ ideas about how to integrate stayers into a multigenerational community leadership have not been documented.

The purpose of this study was (1) to gauge rural leaders' attitudes about local economies and potential new leaders and (2) to identify opportunities for communities to deepen citizen engagement and strengthen rural communities and economies. The project surveyed positional leaders (county judges and commissioners, mayors, economic development corporation managers, civic club leaders about attitudes toward stayers. These leaders had a lot to say about stayers, community leadership, and regional economies. Their responses are summarized here.

Results of the study will guide the development of Extension programming and publications to help communities identify and develop new rural leaders and integrate citizen involvement into economic development efforts.

I thank survey respondents for their time in completing the seven-page questionnaire and their honesty in reflecting on their communities and their own leadership experiences. I welcome questions or feedback on this project. My contact info is on the back page.

Regards,

Rebekka Dudensing

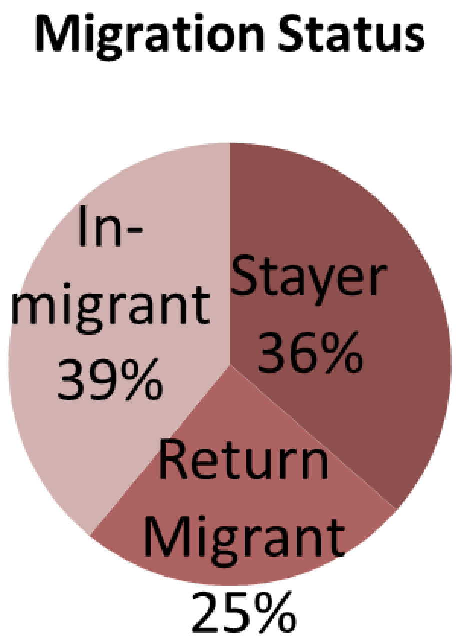
Report sections

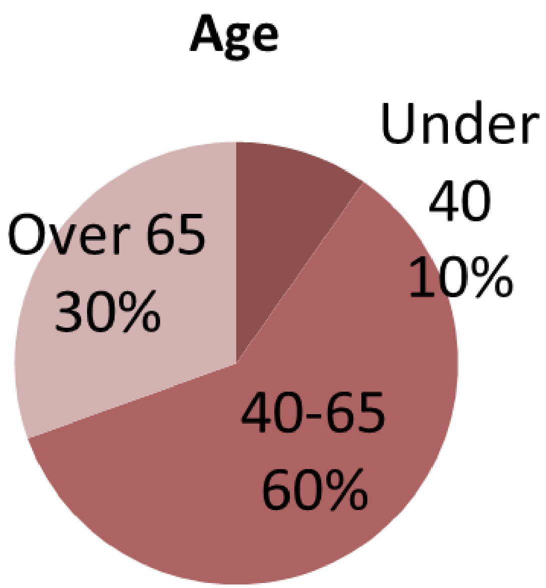
Who Responded

Who Responded

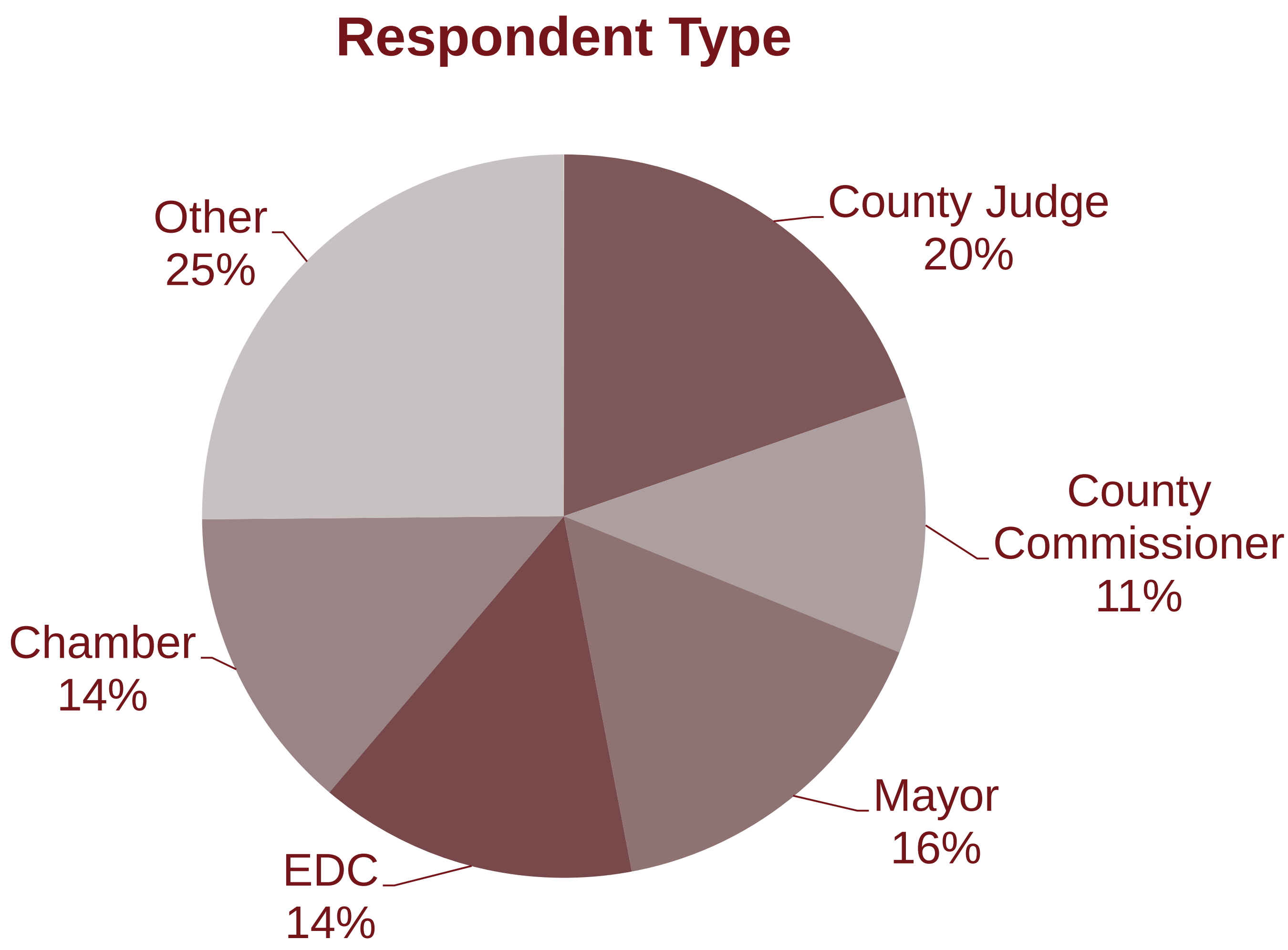
183 responses from 654 potential participants

(28.0% unadjusted response rate)





Who Responded



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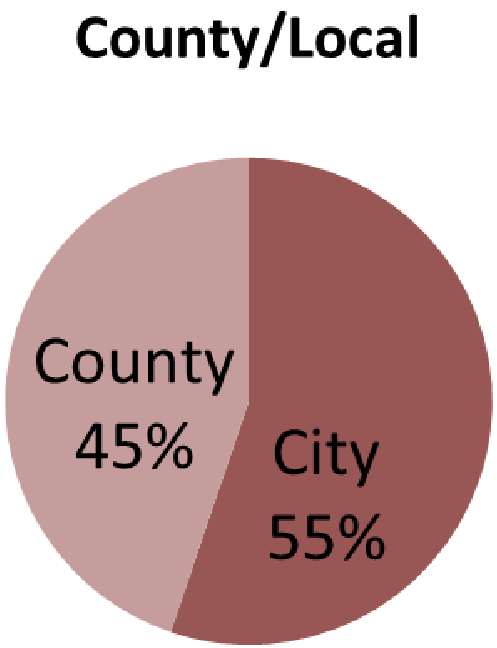
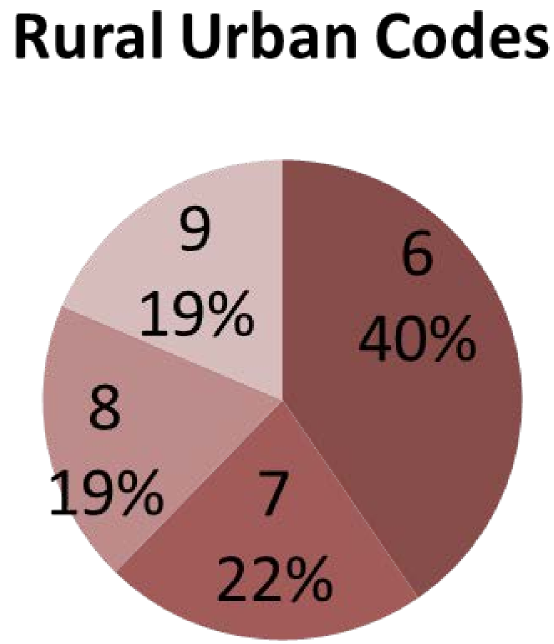




Code	Description
6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
7	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area
8	Nonmetro - Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, adjacent to a metro area
9	Nonmetro - Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area

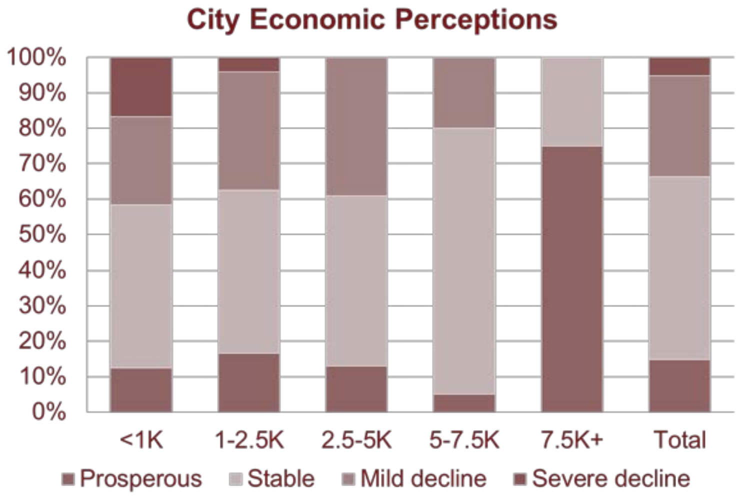
Who Responded

Responses by County or City population:

County Population					
<5K	10-15K	15-20K	20K+	5-10K	Total
38	16	7	8	13	82
City Population					
<1K	1-2.5K	2.5-5K	5-7.5K	7.5K+	Total
27	24	25	21	4	101

Economic Perceptions

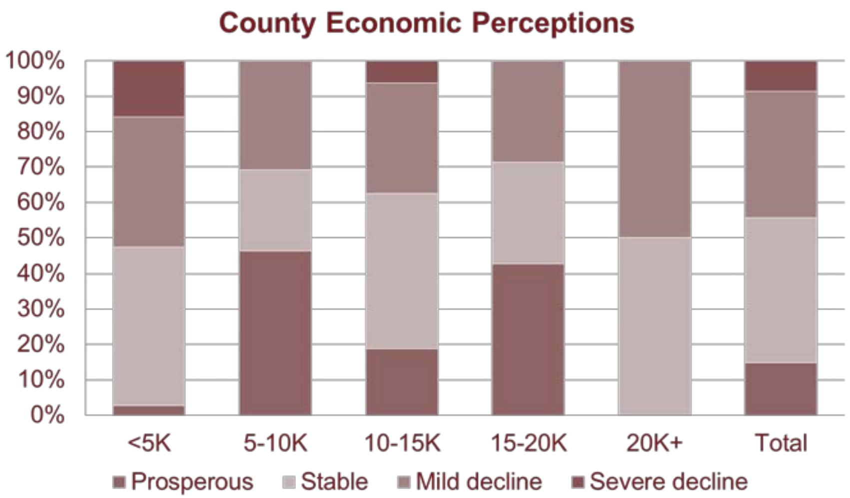
Perceived state of the local economy



Leaders tended to view overall economic conditions and retail conditions similarly. Most respondents rated their economies and retail sectors as stable.

Forty percent of county responses and half of city responses indicated a stable economy. Less than 15 percent of county and city respondents said their local economy was prospering.

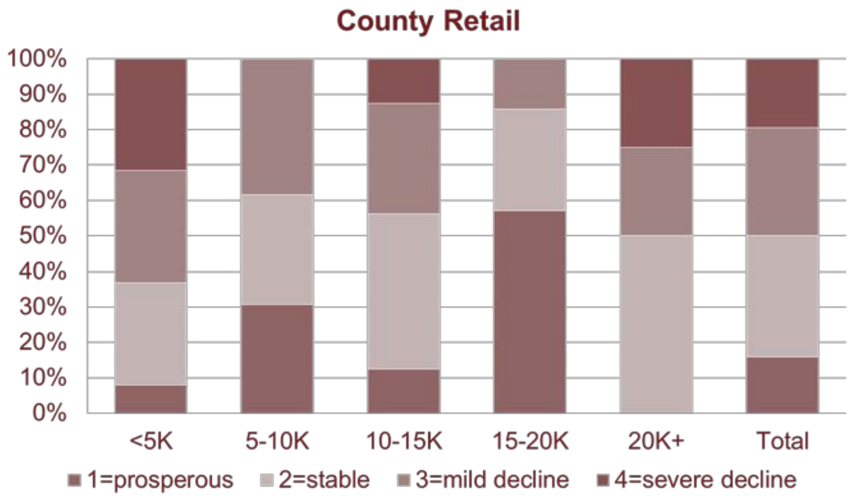
Indications of severe economic decline were clustered in the smallest counties and cities, which is indicative of the economic struggle many of the smallest rural communities face.



Economic Perceptions

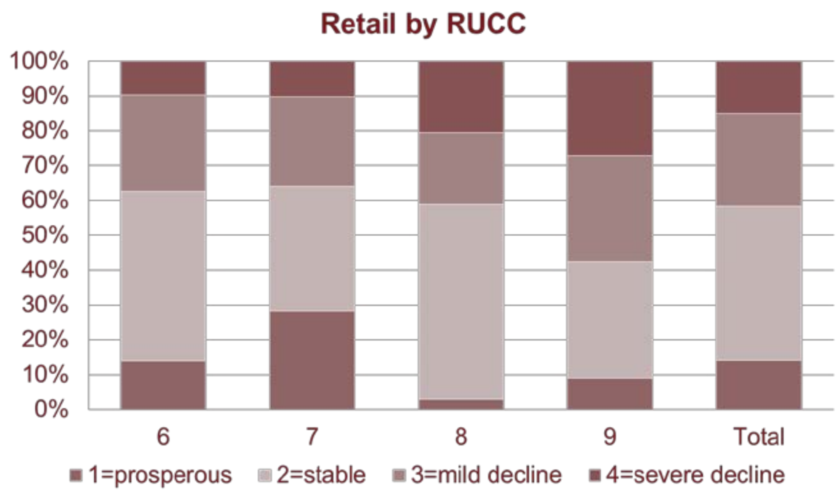
Jurisdiction	Population	Prosperous	Stable	Mild decline	Severe decline
County	<5K	2.6%	44.7%	36.8%	15.8%
	5-10K	46.2%	23.1%	30.8%	0.0%
	10-15K	18.8%	43.8%	31.3%	6.3%
	15-20K	42.9%	28.6%	28.6%	0.0%
	20K+	0.0%	50.0%	50.0%	0.0%
	Total	14.6%	40.2%	35.4%	8.5%
City	<1K	12.5%	45.8%	25.0%	16.7%
	1-2.5K	16.7%	45.8%	33.3%	4.2%
	2.5-5K	13.0%	47.8%	39.1%	0.0%
	5-7.5K	5.0%	75.0%	20.0%	0.0%
	7.5K+	75.0%	25.0%	0.0%	0.0%
	Total	14.7%	51.6%	28.4%	5.3%

Perceived state of local retail



City respondents tended to think their retail sector was stable. County respondents were more likely to indicate retail decline.

Perceptions of decline across both city and county respondents were more evident in rural counties not adjacent to urban areas (e.g., RUCC codes 8 and 9).



Retail Perceptions

Jurisdiction	Population	Prosperous	Stable	Mild decline	Severe decline
County	<5K	7.9%	28.9%	31.6%	31.6%
	5-10K	30.8%	30.8%	38.5%	0.0%
	10-15K	12.5%	43.8%	31.3%	12.5%
	15-20K	57.1%	28.6%	14.3%	0.0%
	20K+	0.0%	50.0%	25.0%	25.0%
	Total	15.9%	34.1%	30.5%	19.5%
City	<1K	12.0%	56.0%	16.0%	16.0%
	1-2.5K	8.3%	54.2%	33.3%	4.2%
	2.5-5K	13.0%	34.8%	34.8%	17.4%
	5-7.5K	10.0%	70.0%	10.0%	10.0%
	7.5K+	50.0%	50.0%	0.0%	0.0%
	Total	12.5%	53.1%	22.9%	11.5%

Economic Drivers: Factors Affecting Change

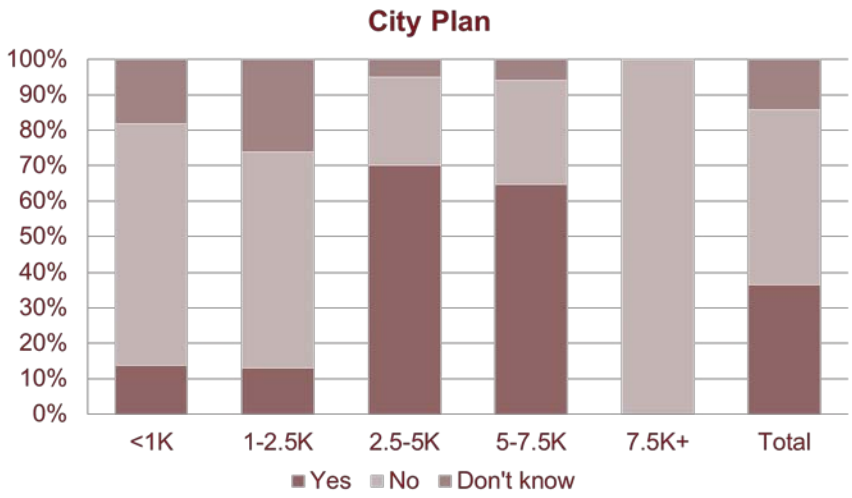
IMPROVEMENT

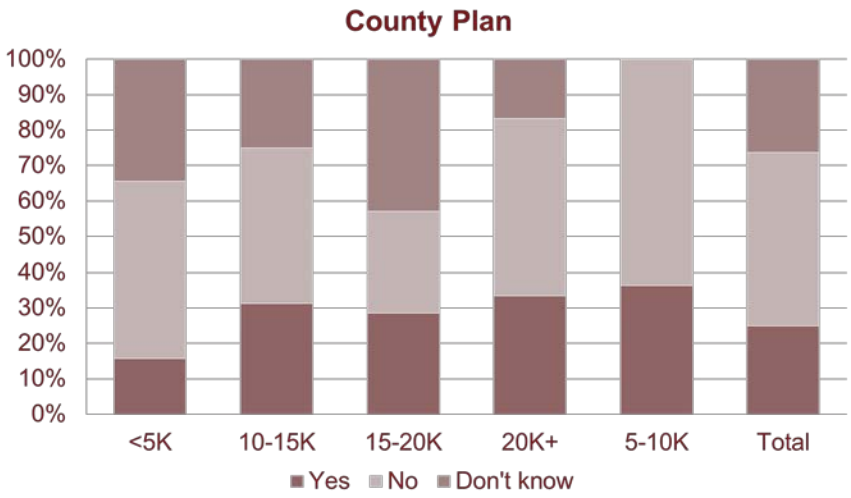
- Attracting shoppers from neighboring smaller communities
- Strong energy/oil incomes in area
- Strong ag incomes in area
- Growth of city population
- Strong manufacturing

DECLINE

- Competition from neighboring larger retail centers
- Weaker energy/oil incomes in area
- Loss of city population
- Weaker ag incomes in area
- Business closings because of retirements

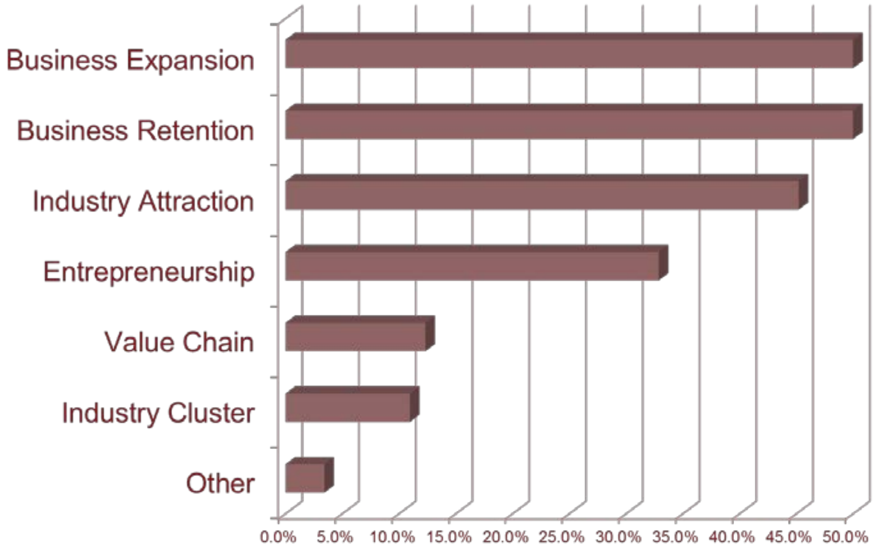
Presence of economic development plan





Almost half of rural leaders (49%) said their jurisdiction did not have a formal economic development plan while 31% said their region did have a plan and 20% didn't know if their jurisdiction had a plan.

Business retention and expansion, followed by industry attraction and entrepreneurship development, were the most commonly reported economic development strategies.

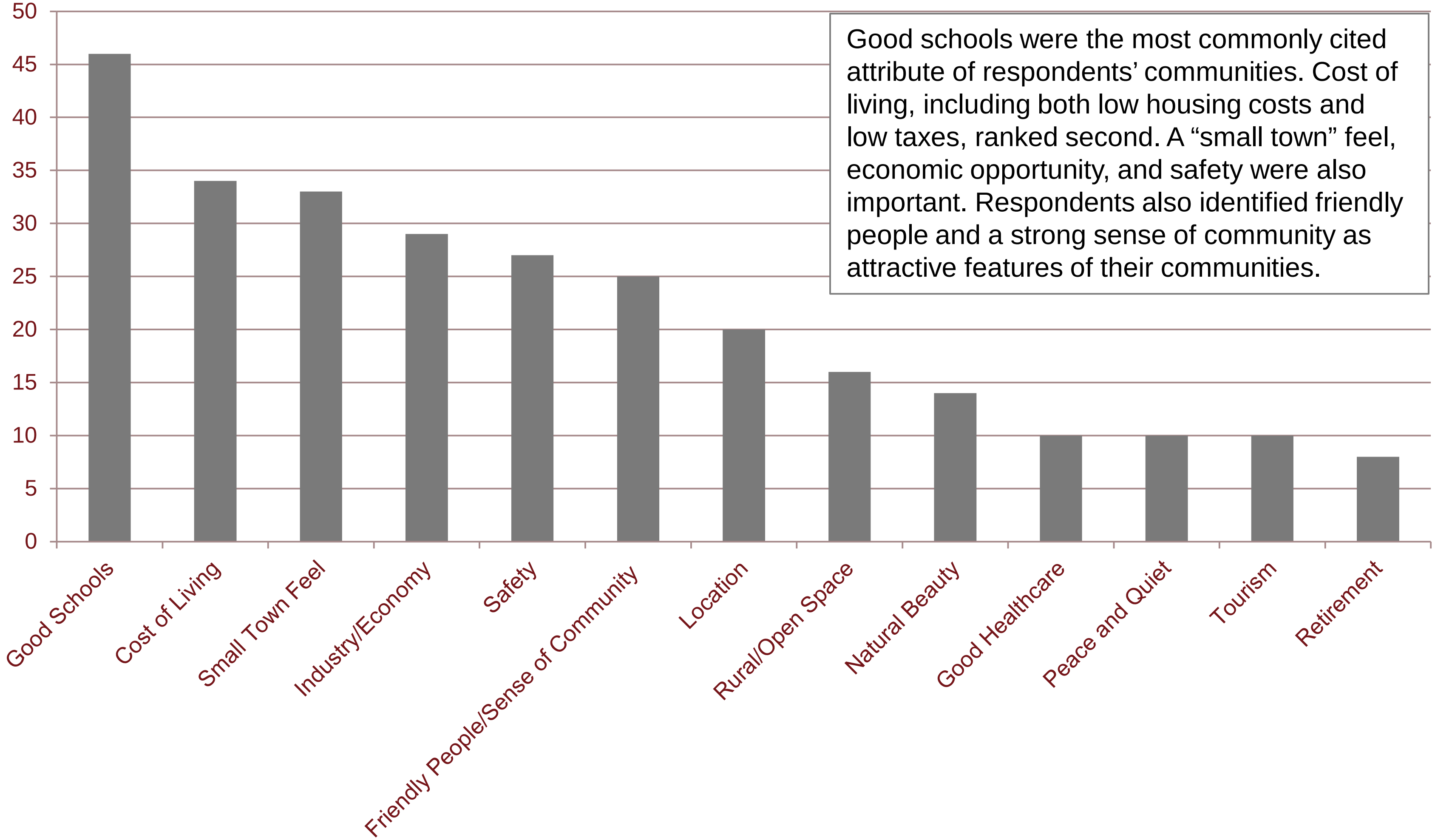


Leading Industries

Recent research has stressed that rural is not synonymous with agriculture. However, in rural Texas the agriculture is closely linked to the rural economy. Many respondents noted that agriculture is one of the top three industries in their economy, followed by energy (most often oil and gas but also wind). Manufacturing is also important in many economies.

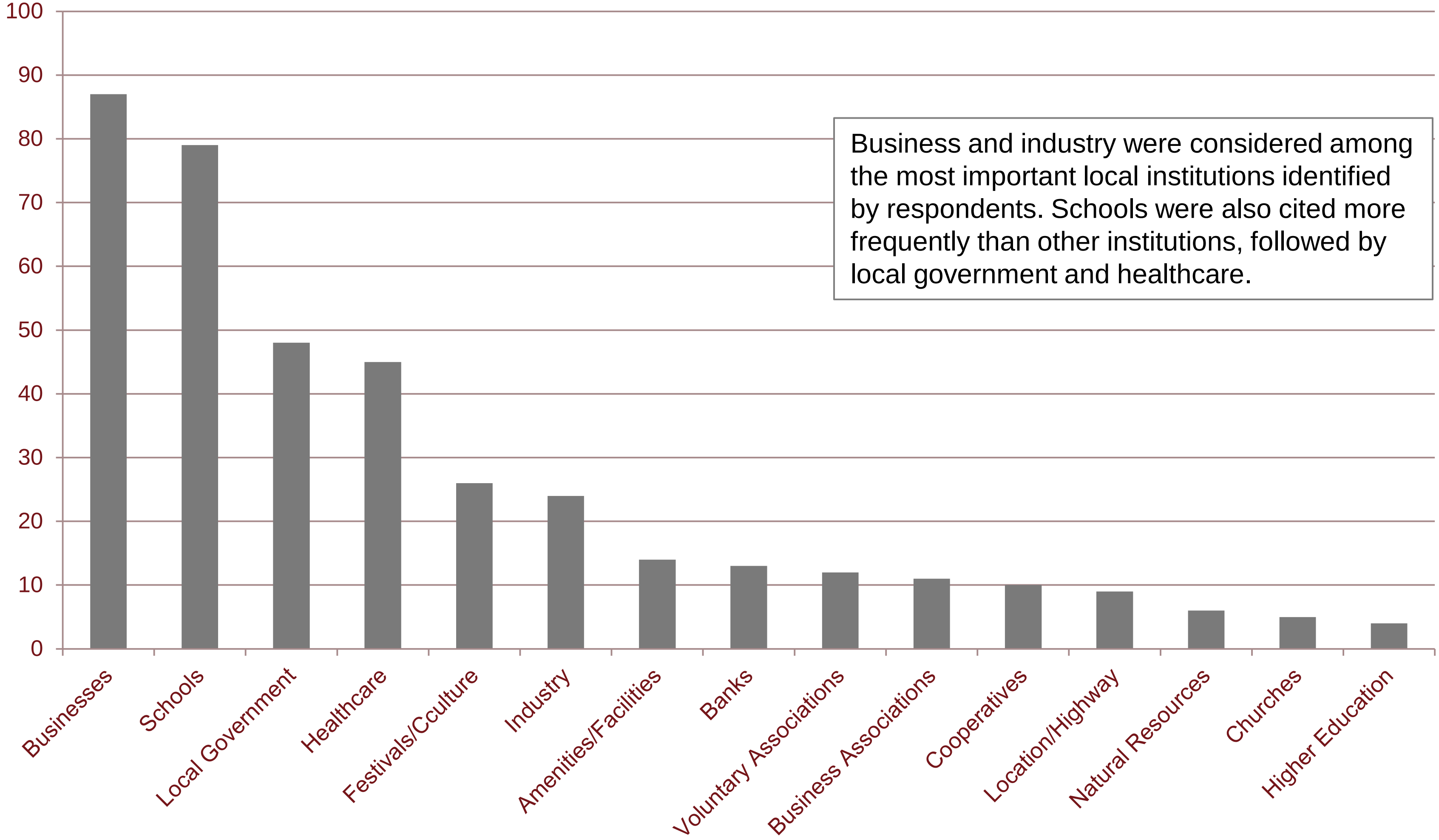
Community Characteristics

Characteristics that attract people to live / and/or work in your community:



Good schools were the most commonly cited attribute of respondents' communities. Cost of living, including both low housing costs and low taxes, ranked second. A "small town" feel, economic opportunity, and safety were also important. Respondents also identified friendly people and a strong sense of community as attractive features of their communities.

Most Important Institutions



Business and industry were considered among the most important local institutions identified by respondents. Schools were also cited more frequently than other institutions, followed by local government and healthcare.

Locations of Schools and Hospitals

	Elementary school		Middle school		High school		Hospital	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
"Community"/city district in my jurisdiction	122	81%	125	82%	124	82%	61	42%
County-level district in my jurisdiction	17	11%	15	10%	16	11%	19	13%
County-level district NOT in my jurisdiction	7	5%	7	5%	7	5%	24	17%
Regional (multi-county or cross-county) district in my jurisdiction	4	3%	4	3%	4	3%	10	7%
Regional (multi-county or cross-county) district NOT in my jurisdiction	1	1%	1	1%	1	1%	31	21%

Respondents were much more likely to have a school in their home jurisdiction than a hospital. More than 80% of respondents said there was a community-level school (elementary, middle and high school) in their town or jurisdiction. Conversely, 21% of rural respondents responded that the nearest hospital was not in their home county. Still, 42% reported a community hospital in their jurisdiction, while 30% indicated the nearest hospital was a county hospital.

Is it more important to keep your local school or your local hospital?

Most respondents (56%) refused to choose between their local school and hospital, indicating that both are equally important. More than 40% of respondents indicated that they preferred to keep their local school as opposed to their hospital.

While no respondents preferred their hospital to their local school, it is important to note that respondents were much more likely to already have a regional hospital, and a lack of a hospital does not necessarily indicate a lack of a clinic.

	#	**%**
School	65	43%
Hospital	0	0%
Both are equally important	84	56%
Neither	1	1%
Total	150	100%

Attitudes toward regional collaboration

How respondents view other towns

Rural leaders have mixed relationships with other communities. More often than not, neighboring communities are seen as competitors for economic development, but 81% of respondents said other communities were primarily sometimes collaborators. More than half (61%) thought a stronger local economy was an outcome of regional cooperation, but only 39% thought cooperation would result in broad-based development in the region and only 30% expected higher local incomes as a result of regional cooperation. Responses suggested many rural leaders didn't know what to expect from regional efforts.

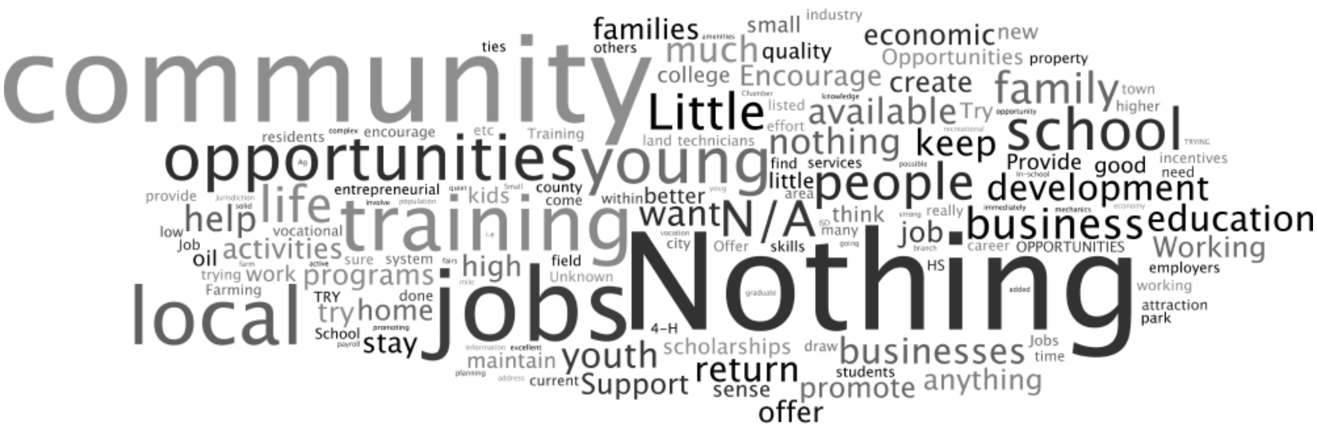
	Primarily	Sometimes	Never
Competitors	37.2%	48.3%	14.5%
Collaborators	17.7%	63.1%	19.1%

Likely effects of region cooperation

Stronger local economy	61.2%
Weaker local economy	3.3%
Higher incomes in the region	43.7%
Higher local incomes	30.1%
Broad-based development across communities in the region	38.8%
Primary benefit to the largest communities in the region	27.9%
Other	5.5%

Stayers

What does your community do to make young people want to stay?



Many leaders reported their communities did little (or nothing) to encourage young people to want to stay in the community.

Several respondents did provide ideas about how communities can encourage young people to stay in the community:

- Involve them in community planning
- Encourage them through youth organizations and activities
- Strive to create economic development to grow jobs and wages
- Support training opportunities through schools and employers
- Maintain active organizations and institutions
- Implement leadership development programs
- Develop activities and amenities (e.g., renovated theatre and neighborhoods, build or improve parks)
- Take advantage of opportunities created by retirements
- Leverage festivals to spur young people’s connection to the community
- Encourage youth and let them know they are part of the community family

What do youth want?

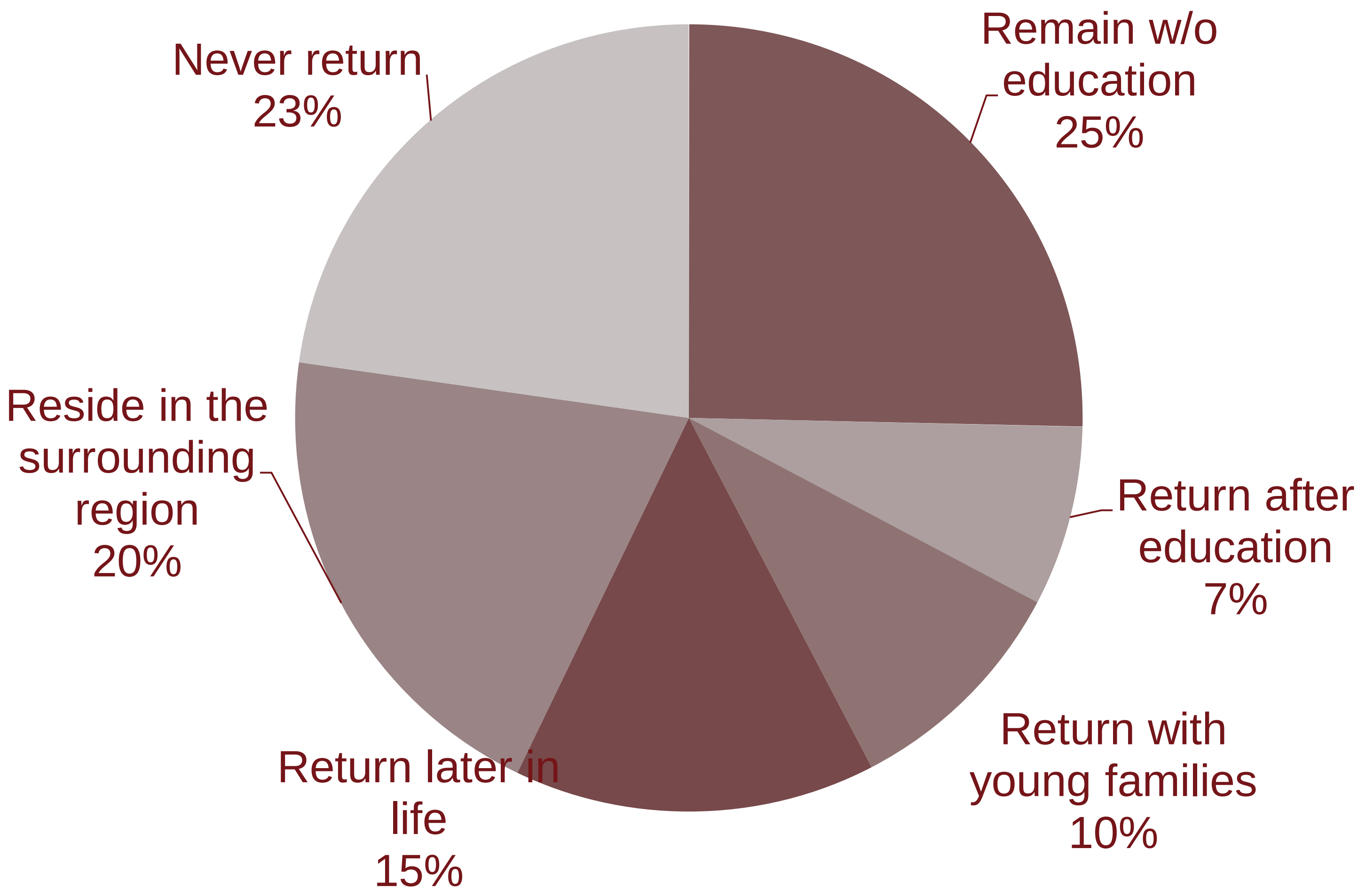
- Skate parks
- Movie theaters
- Swimming pools
- Recreational opportunities

Some of the most-requested items or opportunities youth have asked for include skate parks and movie theaters. This can be scary for leaders, both in terms of financial investment and insurance risk.

But often community leaders can respond to youth concerns by asking “Why?” and helping them in create their own opportunities. For example, why do youth want a movie theater? Often, they want something to do close to home (recreational opportunities). The school has a projector, and someone has a tarp or the side of a building. Youth can be encouraged to showcase their creativity, technical savvy, and ability to work together to create a pop-up theater once a month. A pop-up-park or a water games night with slip-n-slides and water balloon games provide other recreation opportunities.

Alternatively, churches or other service groups might mobilize to provide recreational opportunities on a regular or rotating basis. But giving youth a key role in organizing projects gives them ownership in both the projects and the community. It lets them know they are valued and sets the stage for future engagement.

Percent high school in the past 5 years who:



Involvement of Young Stayers

Respondents estimated that a quarter of recent graduates remain without leaving to get an education. Another 17% return after their education or with young families and 15% return later in life. Each of these groups can contribute to community life and leadership. The 20% who live in a nearby area can also be active members in the local community.

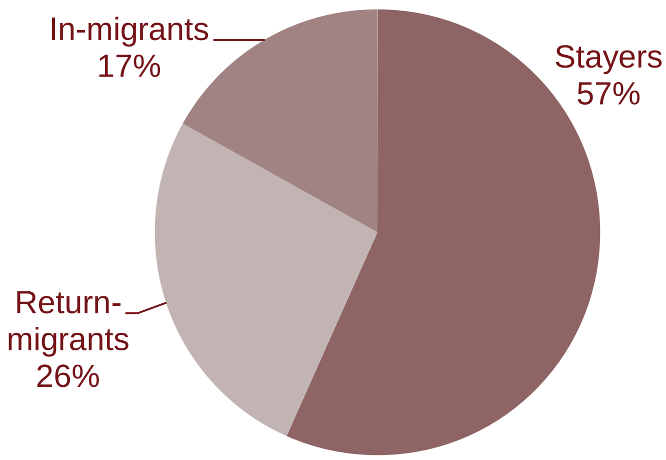
It is important to realize that young families are often occupied by family and job-related concerns that may pre-empt their interest in community leadership. But that doesn't mean the community can't develop these individuals as leaders.

Respondents indicated that Young Stayers are involved in:

- Family
- Family businesses
- Jobs
- Sports and youth activities
- Community-wide leadership

These results suggest that communities can take advantage of potential opportunities to meet and grow young leaders "where they are".

Elected or appointed officials or leaders by migration status



Respondents themselves were more likely to be in-migrants (39%) while 36% were stayers and 25% were return-migrants. Only 10% of respondents were under age 40.

Stayers dominate community leadership, according to respondents. They estimated 57% percent of leadership positions were held by stayers with 26% held by return migrants and 17% by in-migrants. Spouses accompanying returnees and brand new residents are both considered in-migrants.

Each group brings important and unique perspectives.

On average,
people under age 40 hold

18%

of leadership positions.

68% of respondents reported young people hold less than 10% of leadership positions.

Respondents’ Self-reported Leadership Qualities

When asked what qualities that they most value about themselves as a family member, friend, and leaders, respondents indicated a strong sense of community, honesty, and characteristics related to caring and loyalty. These are characteristics they will likely seek in the younger leaders they develop.

Methods and Resources

Methods—Who was contacted

City and county officials' perceptions of their local economies and economic development were surveyed using a 27-question survey patterned on Walzer and Kapper (1989).

Participants were recruited by identifying five county judges and commissioners, city mayors and council members, and directors of economic development corporation (EDCs) and chambers of commerce (CoCs) in each of the 131 rural counties in Texas (based on ERS Rural-Urban Continuum Codes). Most names and contact information (mail and email) was collected from local websites. However, many websites for rural cities and counties do not provide contact information for elected officials. Contact information for these officials was obtained from the Texas State Directory, a subscription web service.

To achieve a well-balanced sample, individuals representing both city and county governments as well as an EDC or Chamber, towns of different sizes, and, when possible, different genders, races, and ethnicities. In counties with no incorporated areas, justices of the peace, sheriffs, newspaper editors, museum directors, or other civic leaders were contacted to round out the county's sample.

Methods-Modes and Timing of Contact

This study adopted a mixed mode surveying approach (Dillman 2000, Israel 2013), relying on both mail and email/web contacts. Participants were contacted via mail and/or email using a modified Dillman (1991, 2000) method reviewed and approved by the Texas A&M Institutional Review Board’s Human Subjects Research Program (IRB2015-0146).

Individuals whose information included only an email or mailing address were assigned to the appropriate mode. Among other individuals, potential respondents from rural counties begin with the letters A through M were mailed surveys via U.S. first class post. The cover letter included a web survey link. The mailing also included a paper survey and stamped return envelope. Leaders in counties begging the letters N through Z initially received email invitations to a direct-link web survey. The direct link could not be forwarded as the link was tied to the original recipients e-mail address.

The initial mailing or email contact was sent October 13, 2015. Two weeks after the first mailing, half of mail survey respondents (sorted alphabetically by last name) were sent a reminder postcard that included their personal access code and a web survey address. The other half received an email reminder with a direct link to the survey. All initial email recipients received a reminder email.

Two weeks after the second contact, all non-respondents who had initially received a mail survey and half of those who had initially received the email survey (sorted alphabetically by last name) received a final mail reminder with a copy of the survey, a stamped return envelope, and their personal code in case they preferred to do the survey online. The other half of initial email recipients received a final email reminder.

Resources

Dillman, Don A. 1991. *Mail and internet surveys: The tailored design method*. Wiley.

Dillman, Don A. 2000. The Design and Administration of Mail Surveys. *Annual Reviews of Sociology* 17:225-249.

Israel, Glenn D. 2013. Using Mixed-Mode Contacts in Client Surveys: Getting More Bang for Your Buck. *Journal of Extension* 51(3), Article #3FEA1.

U.S. Department of Agriculture. 2013. 2013 Rural-Urban Continuum Codes. Economic Research Service, Washington, DC.

Walzer, Norman, and John Gruidl. 1991. Local Economic Development: Perceptions and Actions of Small City Officials in Illinois. In *Rural Community Economic Development*, Norman Walzer, Ed. New York: Praeger Publishers, pp. 97-110.

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