



New Carsey Institute Report Finds Four Distinct Rural Americas

Study Surveyed 8,000 Americans In 19 Rural Counties

Media Contact: [Amy Sterndale](#)

603-862-4650

Carsey Institute

[Beth Potier](#)

603-862-1566

UNH Media Relations

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DURHAM, N.H. - From waving wheat fields to shuttered manufacturing plants... from the majestic Rocky Mountains to the impoverished Mississippi River Delta ... rural America is as varied and nuanced as the landscape it inhabits. A new report from the Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire, based on a comprehensive survey of 8,000 Americans from 19 rural counties, identifies four distinct, often disparate, rural Americas. The data-rich report presents a complex picture of the economics, demographics, politics, and values of people in rural America.

The report, called "Place Matters: Challenges and Opportunities in Four Rural Americas," identifies four broad types of rural places:

- Amenity-rich areas that draw vacationers, retirees, and second home-owners with their mountains, lakes, coastlines, or forests.
- Declining resource-dependent areas that once thrived on the agriculture, timber, mining and manufacturing industries which, now threatened by globalization and resource depletion, no longer support a vibrant middle class population.
- Chronically poor regions where residents and the land have suffered decades of resource depletion and underinvestment.
- A transitional type characterized by amenity-driven growth and resource-based decline. While traditional resource-based economies in these areas have weakened, these transitional regions show potential for amenity-driven growth.

"Our findings indicate that at the beginning of the twenty-first century, 'rural America' is changing, often dramatically, as economic, demographic and environmental forces sweep across the country," said Carsey Institute Director Mil Duncan, who authored the report with Carsey senior fellow and UNH professor of sociology Larry Hamilton, writer Leslie Hamilton, and Chris Colocousis, a Ph.D. candidate in sociology at UNH.

The report surveyed residents from rural counties around the U.S.: Park and Chafee counties in the amenity-rich Rocky Mountains of Colorado; Jewell, Osborne, Republic and Smith counties in the declining heartland of Kansas; Harlan and Lechter counties in Appalachian

Kentucky; Coahoma, Tunica and Quitman counties in the Mississippi Delta; Choctaw, Clarke, Marengo and Wilcox counties in the “Black Belt” of Alabama; Clatsop County in Oregon and Pacific County in Washington, both along the Pacific coast; and Coos County, New Hampshire, and Oxford County, Maine, in the Northern Forest.

While some issues – the need for more jobs chief among them – transcended these four regions, others created unique problems or opportunities to individual regions. Among the key issues:

- Only 40 percent of respondents to the survey, called the Community and Environment in Rural America (CERA) survey, say they work full time, well below the national average of 53 percent.
- Populations in all but the amenity-rich regions are aging, as young adults leave, older residents remain, and reproduction rates fall. Amenity-rich areas, on the other hand, are attracting both retiring boomers and young professional families.
- The natural environment is a significant, although varied, force on rural America, attracting residents to amenity-rich areas and leading to their departure from declining areas where natural resources have been depleted and economic shifts have diminished employment opportunities.
- Strong traditions of self-reliance and individualism remain in all rural Americas; civic engagement is also strong, especially in the declining Heartland. Political leanings and the role of religion in daily life vary among the four areas.
- Concerns about community problems vary greatly among the four rural Americas, with drugs and crime chief concerns in persistently poor places, population decline worrisome in the declining-resource Heartland, and growth and sprawl concerning residents of high-amenity areas.

“A one-size-fits-all approach to policymaking will not work, as each of these regions struggles with its own place-specific issues and problems,” notes Duncan. “Addressing the challenges in rural America requires an understanding of the complex changes happening right now in these very different regions in order to target their unique needs and opportunities.”

To download the complete report, go to

http://carseyinstitute.unh.edu/publications/Report_PlaceMatters.pdf. To watch a video of Mil

Duncan describing the “four rural Americas” concept, go to

<http://bbvideo.unh.edu/content/milduncan/lecture.wmv>.

The Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire conducts research and analysis on the challenges facing rural families and communities in New Hampshire, New England, and the nation. The Carsey Institute sponsors independent, interdisciplinary research that documents trends and conditions affecting families and communities, providing valuable information and analysis to policymakers, practitioners, the media, and the general public. Through this work, the Carsey Institute contributes to public dialogue on policies that encourage social mobility and sustain healthy, equitable communities. The Carsey Institute was established in May 2002 with a generous gift from UNH alumna and noted television producer Marcy Carsey. Visit us online at <http://carseyinstitute.unh.edu/>.



