

Media Relations

Carsey Institute: People In Poorest Rural Areas Less Involved In Their Communities, Less Trusting Of Neighbors

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DURHAM, N.H. – Residents in chronically poor rural communities are less likely to trust, get along with and help their neighbors, and are generally less involved with their communities, according to new research from the Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire.

“The pronounced economic disadvantage of chronically poor communities is accompanied by civic disadvantage. Compared to other rural Americans, fewer chronically poor residents offer a positive assessment of neighborly trust and cooperativeness and belong to local community organizations,” said Michele Dillon, professor of sociology at UNH.

In contrast, residents who live in rural communities rich in amenities have a positive outlook about their communities and their neighbors, with 9 out of 10 saying that they would work together to solve a community problem.

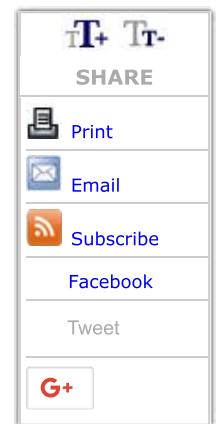
The researchers also found that rural residents who are college-educated are more involved in their communities than noncollege-educated residents.

“This is a significant civic divide in a democratic society that strongly emphasizes community belonging and participation. The divide, however, is not completely insurmountable; at least within relatively well-off local communities, one can imagine that energetic community leaders might be able to narrow the gap through proactive, targeted recruitment measures. The larger specter raised by the education-civic divide is that it exacerbates the civic disadvantage of chronically poor communities—communities whose residents are the rural Americans least likely to have a college education,” the researchers said.

Conducted by Dillon and Justin Young, a doctoral student in the UNH Department of Sociology, the research relies on data from the Community and Environment in Rural America (CERA) Survey conducted by the Carsey Institute to highlight the variation in the patterns of civic involvement across diverse rural communities. Between 2007 and 2010, the Carsey Institute conducted telephone surveys with almost 19,000 rural residents in geographically and socioeconomically diverse rural counties across the nation in an effort to assess the similarities and differences in rural Americans’ attitudes toward community change and development. To date, the CERA survey has been administered in 13 rural regions encompassing 36 counties and 12 states.

The key findings show:

- Large majorities of rural Americans across different types of communities have very positive views of their neighbors and communities.
- Residents in chronically poor communities have lower levels of neighborly cooperativeness, community trust, and community participation than other rural Americans.
- There is little variation in levels of community participation across chronically poor communities.
- Residents in amenity-rich rural communities experiencing population growth demonstrate high levels of community trust and participation.
- Residents in communities in economic decline demonstrate high levels of community trust and exceptionally high levels of community participation.
- There is considerable local variation in residents’ civic participation across communities where amenities are in decline.



- Across all types of rural communities, college-educated residents are more likely than their noncollege-educated neighbors to participate in local community organizations.
- Residents in communities where amenities are in decline are far more likely than other rural Americans to express a negative view of the effectiveness of local government.
- In communities experiencing economic decline and amenity decline, the perception of community problems does not increase the likelihood of residents' participation in local community organizations.

"Neighborhood cooperativeness, community trust, and involvement in local community organizations are productive resources that a community can use to pursue initiatives that can help advance its economic development. Civic resources are not sufficient in and of themselves, however, to turn a community's trajectory of economic decline into one of growth. Clearly, the high levels of civic engagement among residents in economic-decline communities in the CERA survey have not stemmed their communities' decline," the researchers said.

The complete report about this research, "Community Strength and Economic Challenge: Civic Attitudes and Community Involvement in Rural America," is available at <http://carseyinstitute.unh.edu/CarseySearch/search.php?id=162>.

The Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire conducts research and analysis on the challenges facing 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 through a generous gift from UNH alumna and noted television producer Marcy Carsey. For more information about the Carsey Institute, go to www.carseyinstitute.unh.edu.

The University of New Hampshire, founded in 1866, is a world-class public research university with the feel of a New England liberal arts college. A land, sea, and space-grant university, UNH is the state's flagship public institution, enrolling 12,200 undergraduate and 2,300 graduate students.

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