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Defining “Rural” for rural library research.

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by Thomas Ivie

"There is an assumption that the public library is predominantly an urban institution, and ... that depends on how the word 'urban' is defined..." (Sager, p. 5). Furthermore, it can depend on how the word "rural" is defined. Approximately eighty-two percent of public libraries in the U.S. serve populations of under 25,000 (Vavrek, May 1983, p. 966). Idaho public libraries fall in line with the national statistic by being approximately eighty percent rural (*E.D. TAB: Public Libraries in the United States: Fiscal Year 1999*).

Because the concept of "rural" is a key element in the overall framework of any rural research, the various meanings and applications of the term need to be explored. Rural is an inexact term that can mean different things to different people. Attempts at defining rural range from demographic to psychological. In fact, defining rural becomes more of a subjective term than what is defined by any dictionary.

Given the many dimensions of rural and the confusion this can produce, what is the definition of the term? Our government defines rural by exclusion: that which is not urban is rural. The United States Census Bureau necessarily provides definitions of urban and rural in connection with its decennial censuses. The Census Bureau employs a dichotomous urban-rural distinction, in which the defining factor is population size. Moreover, the Census Bureau's definitions focus primarily on urban, with the result that anything not urban is rural (Fitchen, 1991).

The government's definition of urban and rural change with convenience to suit its needs. For the 2000 census, the Census Bureau revised the criteria in anticipation that the revision might "classify as much as three percent (five million) more people as urban than the previous criteria did" (*Federal Register*, March 28, 2001). The revised definition defined urban as having "urbanized areas and urban clusters to encompass densely settled territory, which consists of: (1) core census block groups or blocks that have a population density of at least 1,000 people per square mile, and (2) surrounding census blocks that have an overall density of at least 500 people per square mile." It revised rural to consist of "all territory, population, and housing units located outside of urbanized areas and urban clusters with a population of 2,500 or less" (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002).

Although some government programs and agencies use the Census Bureau's definition of rural, others use widely different population thresholds to define rural communities. For example, community development block grant programs define rural as 50,000 or fewer people (*U.S. Code*, T.42); the Farmers Home Administration uses a standard of 10,000 or fewer people (*U.S. Code*, T.7); and the Rural Electrification Act considers communities of 1,500 or fewer people to be rural (Rural Electrification Act of 1936).

The terms urban and rural have imprecise and potentially overlapping definitions depending upon one's perspective and orientation. Researchers such as Deavers (1992) favor restricting the meaning of rural to a single dimension. Almost always this is the demographic dimension because it is more objective and measurable; it also seems most conceptually basic and straightforward.

Within the library and information science field, there are two population based definitions of rural in common usage. The first, set forth by the Library Services and Construction Act,

defines rural as communities with populations of 10,000 or less (Osborn, 1973). The second, used by the Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship, defines a town of 25,000 individuals or less as rural (Vavrek, Dec. 1983). An approach suggested by the Library Research Center of the University of Illinois Graduate School of Library and Information Science defines the rural public library as "a library which serves fewer than 10,000 people and is located in a county which either has fewer than 150 persons per square mile or has over eighty percent of its land in farms" (Goldhor, 1986, p.15). Studies in the library field use a wide variety of definitions for rural and the small library, thus complicating the process of comparing and analyzing existing data and findings regarding rural library service.

Unfortunately, there is no one correct definition of rural. The operational definition of rural should take into consideration the points discussed above. The definition should attempt to take into consideration Marans' and Dillmans' suggestions for development of a typology of ruralism which takes into account "...the requirements of different governmental agencies and programs, the kinds of data that are currently available through the U.S. Census and other federal sources, and the potential data that could be collected as part of social surveys – either through observation, by interviewers or by the responses of residents" (Marans, Dillman, & Keller, 1980, p. 52).

End Notes

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