



## Future Directions for Rural Population Research: Findings from RPRN's Listening Sessions

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People living in rural places face slow-moving stressors that have manifested over multiple decades alongside short-term economic, environmental, and public health shocks. Combined, these forces have introduced significant community change in rural America. However, rural experiences are not uniform, and changes vary widely. Many rural communities are thriving; others are struggling. Overall, community change has important implications for current and future rural population well-being.

This project aimed to identify key research areas needing further investigation by rural population researchers in the U.S. Towards this aim, we held a series of listening sessions with rural development practitioners

recruited through Cooperative Extension systems and the Regional Rural Development Centers. Participants lived and worked in diverse rural communities experiencing growth, stability, and/or decline. In this series of briefs, we outline the motivations for this project, the methods used for data collection and analysis, findings across one in-person and four remote topical listening sessions, and practitioner-identified needs and recommendations for rural population researchers. Ultimately, this series points to ways rural population scholars might make useful contributions by producing research most critical to practitioners who are responsible for responding and adapting to community change.

### Rural Population Characteristics and Trends

Research examining recent and longer-term population dynamics has identified important characteristics and trends related to rural areas. At its core, population trends are rooted in fertility, mortality, and migration. Overall, there has been a decline in rural births since 2000, resulting from a combination of fewer women of child-bearing age living in rural places and overall declines in fertility among rural women (Johnson 2020). Mortality is another key source of rural population change. Specifically, rural areas have experienced a growing mortality penalty in the past 20 years. Across all Census regions, rural areas have

### KEY POINTS

- People living in rural places face numerous forces that both shape and are shaped by population change.
- RPRN researchers held 5 listening sessions with rural community practitioners, generating data through focus group dialogue.
- This work helped to identify important trends and questions to inform future rural population research and development efforts.

higher mortality rates, especially among the working-aged (Rhubart and Santos 2023; Monnat 2020). Furthermore, these trends converged at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic with fewer births and more deaths among rural places (Johnson and Jensen 2023).

Still, patterns of population change, their causes, and their implications are heterogeneous (Slack and Monnat 2024). For example, fertility rates among Hispanic populations were the highest in rural areas between 2007 and 2017 (Ely and Hamilton 2023). And the rural mortality penalty varies by region, race, and ethnicity – with some ethnoracial groups only experiencing a rural mortality penalty in some regions of the U.S. (Rhubart and Santos 2023). While many rural places have faced population decline, other rural areas have maintained stable population sizes or gained population. For instance, some rural places have experienced population gains largely driven by in-migration of immigrant populations, which has also contributed to increasing racial and ethnic diversity in these communities (Slack and Jensen 2020). And more recently, some rural areas experienced selective in-migration, including remote workers relocating to high amenity areas during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (Davis et al. 2023).

However, it is important to note that long-term rural population trends must be interpreted with an understanding that many nonmetropolitan counties with significant population increases are reclassified as metropolitan over time (an ongoing periodic process) (Johnson and Lichter 2020). In other words, it is difficult to compare rural and urban statistics over time as some rural counties are reclassified as urban when their populations increase above a given threshold.

Better understanding rural population characteristics and trends can help to inform rural development efforts at the local, regional, and national levels. To contribute to such knowledge, members of the Rural Population Research Network (RPRN) sought to take stock of what population changes have meant for people working on the frontlines of community outreach, education, organizing, technical assistance, and policy. This work contributes to the broader set of efforts to advance understanding and collective action for rural community development that has grown in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, given associated economic challenges and social tensions (e.g., Dumont and Davis 2021; Entsminger et al. 2023).

## **Listening Session Methods**

Members of RPRN facilitated a series of listening sessions to identify the research topics and questions of highest priority that could help advance rural development work among educators, practitioners, and policymakers. Listening sessions were chosen as they allow participants to interact with each other and discuss areas of agreement and disagreement. One in-person listening session was held in a mid-South state; participants were recruited through RPRN members' personal connections to rural practitioners, policymakers, and Cooperative Extension staff in that state. Four remote listening sessions included greater regional diversity. Participants were recruited through outreach to the Regional Rural Development Centers and specific Cooperative Extension systems to achieve diverse regional representation (i.e., Northeast, North Central, South, and West).

Listening sessions consisted of participants being divided into small groups for discussions followed by a summary and reflection with the full group. Substantive discussion themes included agriculture and food systems, community and economic development,

environment and natural resources, and health, health care, and disability services. Common questions explored across small group discussions centered on how the respective theme relates to rural population change and what issues the participants' states and communities face that require more research attention. The following general questions were used to guide the conversations:

### LISTENING SESSION QUESTIONS

How is rural population change impacting [theme]?	How does [theme] impact or affect rural population shifts?	What are the critical issues your community and/or state are facing that require more attention?
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At the one in-person session, participants rotated through all four themes, participating in a small group discussion on each. The four remote sessions focused on one theme each, with participants divided into small discussion groups. Both in-person and virtual discussion groups typically consisted of three to four participants and one to two facilitators. Flipcharts were used in the in-person small group discussions for visual documentation and reflection. The virtual groups similarly made use of interactive whiteboards on Zoom. Before opening the discussion, participants were provided five minutes to respond to prompts by placing virtual post-it notes on the whiteboards. Participants were then invited to discuss their post-it notes with the group, ensuring that each participant's ideas were included in the discussion. At the in-person session, detailed notes were taken by RPRN members during the discussions. At the remote sessions, discussions were audio recorded and transcribed. In both scenarios, the small groups came back at the end of the session to share highlights and discuss next steps. There were approximately 38 participants in the in-person session, and the remote sessions had an average of 25 participants (min. 10, max. 34) per session, with a total of 10 participants attending more than one session. In all, there were 89 unique participants across the four remote sessions, working in communities spanning 23 states.

The methods used for this project were reviewed by the Institutional Review Boards of the Pennsylvania State University (STUDY00023367), Mississippi State University (IRB-23-387), Tennessee State University (HS-2023-4940), University of Tennessee-Knoxville (IRB-23-07756-XM), and the University of Wisconsin-Madison (2024-0024).

Data analysis consisted of multiple rounds of thematic coding. The study team initially read through focus group transcripts to generate an inductive list of themes emerging across sessions. Using this coding scheme, all participant statements were first coded by one researcher, and then double checked by a second researcher. Any discrepancies were discussed with a third researcher to reach consensus. The themes and their associated patterns were then used to frame the presentation of our results.

### Findings Presented by Growth and Decline

In this series of briefs, we organize themes by listening session topic. We present key patterns and concerns in the areas of agriculture and food systems, environment and natural resources, community and economic development, and health, health care, and disability services. However, we recognize there is no single story that can capture the past, present, or future of people living in all of rural America. Rural areas and populations have had many common experiences, but there is also substantial variation between rural places.

Moreover, the sample of the focus group is not nationally representative of all rural areas. Therefore, the findings represent the perceptions or perceived needs of the participants themselves and may not be exhaustive of all possible needs facing rural areas.

Of the many ways we can think about the causes and consequences of population change, and what those insights can tell us about future rural development efforts, we chose to use a key lens: similarities and divergences by population growth and decline. These emerged as key themes in the listening sessions. And while there are many ways to measure wellbeing of rural communities (e.g. Isserman et al. 2009), population change is one of them. Some rural places experienced particular challenges as a result of population growth, such as from in-migration resulting from urban sprawl or an industry moving into an area. Meanwhile, other rural places experienced unique challenges from population decline, such as from declining fertility or outmigration following the loss of an industry. However, some challenges were ubiquitous across all rural places, regardless of whether they were experiencing growth or decline. Thus, in each of our topical findings reports, we note how perceptions of key concerns and needs for rural populations and areas do or do not vary by population growth or decline. We hope that the use of this lens highlights the common and distinct concerns and challenges facing communities across rural America today.

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# Agriculture and Food Systems



A USDA supported multi-state research project on the causes and consequences of demographic change in rural America

In this section, we summarize participants' perspectives on how recent rural population change relates to current trends in agriculture and food systems. We also summarize other critical issues participants raised concerning agriculture and food systems that require deeper attention.

## Limited Access to Fresh Food

In rural areas experiencing population decline, limited access to fresh food was a major concern. Participants expressed that a lack of affordable, nutritious food is particularly impacting marginalized populations (e.g., racial/ethnic minorities). This lack of access has been perpetuated by grocery store closures, food pantry closures, and the subsequent proliferation of convenience stores and dollar stores as primary sources of food in rural communities. Grocery stores that remain often have higher food prices than similar types of stores in more populated places. Participants noted possible remedies to this emerging crisis, including initiatives to preserve and recruit grocery stores, create local farmer cooperatives, and support farmers' markets. Participants also pointed to emerging issues around food access in rural areas experiencing population growth. Particularly as growing rural communities diversify, with an increase in residents from minority ethnic groups, these newcomers may experience difficulties locating culturally significant foods or lack access to land to grow their own food. Increasing access to culturally appropriate food through diverse methods was a common finding across listening session.

## KEY FINDINGS

- Declining rural communities are seeing closures of grocery stores and proliferation of dollar stores, limiting fresh food access.
- Rising land prices in growing rural places are a key barrier to entry and financial viability of small-and medium-scale farmers.
- Farmland consolidation and intensification is creating pollution and conflict over natural resources.
- With an aging farmer population, there is a growing need for farm succession planning.

### Fresh Food Gaps amid Population Decline

"A lot of people, to do their affordable shopping, have to travel a half hour, 40 minutes to a grocery store. And the grocery stores we do have, I mean those prices are 50 to 60 percent higher than, sav. going to Aldi or Walmart."

### Fresh Food Gaps amid Population Growth

"Where I live, we have a large population of Hmong... and it's in a rural area, [so] it's harder to go to grocery stores, and even if there is food, it's not geared towards ethnic populations, so it's harder to access."

## Rising Land Prices

Participants also noted that rising costs of land are presenting a significant barrier for small- and medium-scale farmers to buy land, make a profit, and support their families without an additional off-farm income source. Especially in rural areas experiencing growth, competition between farming and residential or commercial land use is driving up land prices. Some participants referred to this change as “rural gentrification.” The proximity of rural communities to urban areas and the COVID-19 pandemic have further increased land values and taxes, intensifying pressure on farmland for various developments, including second homes, renewable energy projects, and outdoor recreational activities.

## Farmland Loss and Consolidation

In rural areas experiencing growth, participants also expressed concern about industrial development and infrastructure construction that have encroached on farmland and ranchland, causing pollution and conflicts over land use. Participants reported that farmland consolidation has spurred the growth of new industries and services, including in farm equipment sales, farm laborers, and specialty agricultural occupations (e.g., agronomists, veterinarians). Nonetheless, the intensification of farming operations can pose significant threats to the persistence of small- and medium-scale farming.

## Aging Farmer Populations

Finally, participants raised concern about the aging of small- and medium-scale farmer populations. They noted that it is increasingly common that farmers do not have clear mechanisms for land transfer, with a growing need for farm succession planning assistance. Finally, participants also noted that there are growing generational differences in agriculture, with a need to help older farmers accept new agricultural practices.

### Loss of Farmland from Land Use Competition

“There’s a rural county that I work in [that’s] seeing a lot of growth because it’s close to a larger population hub . . . and it’s also probably the best farmland in Ohio . . . [a big] IT company bought up a large farm to put their distribution center in . . . A bunch of farmers tried to outbid them, but you can’t outbid these companies that are multi-billion dollar companies and so that farmland is going to be lost forever.”

### Farmland Consolidation

“What’s happening is that consolidation in the region. As more and more smaller family farms sell up their land or kids are leaving the farm, their property is getting bought up by larger farms and they’re expanding and growing.”

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## Community and Economic Development



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In this section, we summarize participants' perspectives on how recent rural population change relates to current trends in community and economic development. We also summarize other critical issues participants raised concerning community and economic development that require deeper attention.

### Limited Economic Opportunity

A top concern among participants was the limited economic opportunity present in rural communities, particularly those experiencing population decline. Participants noted that rural economic opportunity is hampered by a deficit of employers to meet job needs, the offshoring or relocation of jobs to other countries and regions, and farm consolidation. Participants explained that the loss of economic opportunity (i.e., due to an industry closure) is often the reason for out-migration of residents, who must move to look for better jobs elsewhere. Additionally, they noted that the loss of a major employer in a rural community can spark a feedback cycle of declining opportunities, as supporting businesses, such as restaurants, grocery stores, and health care facilities, subsequently close because they no longer have an adequate clientele base. These business closures leave vacant buildings that can further create a loss of community identity and limit opportunities for social interaction. Participants reported that entrepreneurship and placemaking could act as a remedy to this cycle of decline by empowering residents to create new economic opportunities and reinvigorate a sense of community identity.

### Declining Skilled Workforce

Yet, participants noted that even when employers consider locating businesses within rural communities, there can be a lack of qualified workers to meet their needs. If skilled workers migrate out when economic opportunities leave, then the communities they leave behind may be less able to recruit new employers. Furthermore, limited community leadership and volunteer base can constrain communities' abilities to pursue development opportunities.

## KEY FINDINGS

- Limited economic opportunities and a shrinking workforce are key barriers to rural community and economic development.
- Lack of community services, housing, and broadband impede the recruitment of employers and newcomers and the retention of long-time residents.
- Participants suggested that an emphasis on entrepreneurship and placemaking could remedy cycles of economic and community decline.

### **Economic Decline and Community Placemaking**

“As we lost population, [it led to] a lot of vacant buildings. Some of it [was] obviously with Covid, people working from home, some businesses just never opened back up, and now you have these just vacant buildings, vacant stores on the courthouse square, just all of that.”

### **Local Workforce and Employer Recruitment**

“What we see is, if there's not a good pool of employees there, either [the workers] don't stay or they don't come at all . . . And so that is an issue especially for the communities that lose an employer and we've had that happen with a number of 'em, and it's hard to get something back in to replace.”

## **Limited Community Services**

Participants also emphasized a lack of community services as an impediment to development. This theme intersects with the above two—community services disappear as economic opportunities disappear, and then a lack of community services acts as a barrier to recruiting new employers and workers. Participants specifically explained that a lack of childcare providers and other supporting services (e.g., banks, public transportation) can deter newcomers and motivate existing residents to leave. Another concern was that declining communities experience a negative impact on quality of education, as schools suffer when teachers cannot be recruited and retained. Finally, participants also expressed concern about inadequate services for older adults (e.g., in-home aides and assisted living facilities), given that many rural communities are seeing greater aging populations.

## **Limited Housing**

Insufficient housing stock was often cited as a major barrier to rural development. Participants noted that a deficit of housing units and poor quality of existing housing can serve as barriers to employer and worker recruitment in declining rural communities. But for communities experiencing growth, issues of housing affordability also have emerged—long-time residents may be priced out as newcomers move in. For communities investing in tourism, participants also noted that the use of housing for short-term rentals (e.g., AirBnBs) can drive up housing prices further.

## **Limited Broadband Access**

Participants explained that ensuring availability and quality of broadband is emerging as a key ingredient for facilitating rural community and economic development. Broadband access can encourage employers to locate in rural areas, and it can allow for people who work from home to move to rural communities.

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## Environment and Natural Resources



*A USDA supported multi-state research project on the causes and consequences of demographic change in rural America*

In this section, we summarize participants' perspectives on how recent rural population change relates to current trends in environment and natural resources. We also summarize other critical issues participants raised concerning environment and natural resources that require deeper attention.

### Air and Water Pollution

The most discussed environmental issue was increased pollution. Participants expressed great concern about air and water quality in areas experiencing population growth, especially due to industrial growth and natural amenity-based tourism. They noted that industrial growth threatens clean water sources, as greater traffic creates air pollution, and that increased natural amenity-based tourism leads to greater litter and dumping. There was also concern about pollution in agricultural areas experiencing population decline. Participants explained that agricultural areas seeing a shift from smaller, family farms to larger, corporate farms experienced population decline, and then this growth in corporate farming can lead to contaminated water sources and poor air quality, which can further deter potential newcomers from moving into those rural areas.

### KEY FINDINGS

- In growing rural areas, industry and nature tourism can lead to increased pollution and demands on natural resources and utility infrastructure.
- In declining areas, loss of resources leads to crumbling utility infrastructure, and rise in corporate farming can create pollution.
- Solar and wind energy development requires significant land, uses up rural resources, and can contribute to urban-rural tensions.
- Rural areas are likely to see even greater land competition and demands amid climate change.

#### Pollution amid Population Growth

"We've got a lot of industries coming in and obviously they're bringing jobs, but they're also bringing a lot of changes with respect to construction and housing. Of course they're building a lot of roads... It enhances traffic, which enhances some pollution type issues, air quality and water quality."

#### Pollution amid Population Decline

"Intensification of cropping or dairies... is going to result in some impacts in water quality, whether that's nitrates or pesticides or outright manure pollution... and that's going to affect efforts to attract new populations to move to rural areas... if they drive past manure pits the size of football fields on their way to the community."

### Demands on Natural Resources and Infrastructure

Industrial growth and tourism is also creating greater demands on natural resources and utility infrastructure in rural areas. Participants explained that industries require large quantities of fresh water and produce even greater quantities of wastewater, which can strain local infrastructure. This also relates to pollution concerns, as lack of adequate septic

systems can lead to water contamination. In terms of natural amenity-based tourism, participants noted that many rural areas lack the capacity to maintain natural resources like trails amidst increased use. Conversely, in areas experiencing decline, participants explained that loss of population and related financial resources can delay much-needed infrastructure upgrades, leading to a lack of basic needs like water and electricity.

**Resources/Utilities amid Population Growth**

“Our trails and creeks are seeing more demand than ever, which in some ways it's good. It's nice to see people out and enjoying nature, but on the other hand it causes some issues for us. And as far as industry, it's good to see industrial growth and new factories being built and stuff coming into the area. It just is placing higher

**Resources/Utilities amid Population Decline**

“We are seeing, on an increasing basis, resources being pulled out of our rural areas... So we have some truly crumbling towns and some areas that have poverty levels that are shocking to most Americans. People don't have sewage, and they don't have access to safe water, don't have electricity year round, those kinds of

### Renewable Energy Development

One industry that received particular attention was renewable energy. Participants noted that the development of wind and solar farms can take over farmland, use up local natural resources, and compact soil. Local residents find these farms can make their communities less desirable, and land development can create greater environmental hazards, like risks of flash flooding. Participants explained that the use of rural lands to develop energy desired by a largely urban consumer base is also heightening rural-urban political tensions; some residents see their communities as “rural sacrifice zones” in the energy transition. Certainly, the renewable energy industry could help to spur job creation and economic development in rural communities (Blair et al. 2011). The concerns participants raised should be acknowledged while considering these industries’ potential economic benefits.

### Climate Change

Participants expressed growing concern about the impacts of climate change on rural communities. As people in higher-risk urban areas move to lower-risk rural areas, there will be greater competition for land, heightened demands on natural resources and infrastructure, and greater risk of pollution. Participants explained that determining how to prepare these rural areas for climate migration is crucial. Participants also acknowledged that some rural areas could be impacted by climate change as well. They were concerned with how to help rural residents prepare for these climate impacts, like natural disasters.

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# Health, Health Care, and Disability Services



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In this section, we summarize participants' perspectives on how recent rural population change relates to current trends in health, health care, and disability services. We also summarize other critical issues participants raised concerning health, health care, and disability services that require deeper attention.

## Gaps in Health Care Services

Participants emphasized a growing, urgent need for health care services in rural areas. There was particular concern about access to specialty care, mental health care, care for older adults, disability care, and maternity care. Rural areas experiencing population decline have seen health care facility closures. Particularly in the case of hospitals, these closures can lead to a higher risk of mortality in the face of emergencies. Participants also explained that residents may have to move away from declining rural communities for better health care access, leading to further population decline. For rural areas experiencing population growth, the health care industry has not kept up with increased demand, and local health systems have become overwhelmed.

Both types of rural areas also struggle with talent acquisition and retention. Declining rural areas lack amenities to attract new providers or keep existing providers; even if a company seeks to situate a new facility in a declining rural area, it can be difficult to find providers willing to move there. Conversely, in growing rural areas, providers may be willing to move in, but local property has become too expensive for them to afford to live there. Participants were particularly concerned about a lack of home health aides for the growing aging population in both types of rural places.

## KEY FINDINGS

- There is a dire shortage of health care providers in many rural areas—including those experiencing decline *and* those experiencing growth.
- Lack of trust and concerns of stigma deter residents from seeking local care even when it is available.
- These challenges lead to higher travel times and costs when seeking care—widening access disparities.
- Telehealth is a promising solution to fill gaps, but multiple barriers to utilization remain.

### Health Care Gaps amid Population Decline

“There's not that many hospitals, and there's even fewer mental health providers. So that's forcing some people to sometimes move away from the places that they love and go to those few places where they can access the care that they need... And then it pulls away resources from those rural areas as a result.”

### Health Care Gaps amid Population Growth

“The population increases and the health care is decreasing and there's not a good balance. There's more people. There's more needs... We're seeing a lot of very bad things in terms of both physical health and mental health in our rural areas. We can't keep up.”

## Trust and Stigma in Local Health Care

Even when health care services are available locally, they may not be utilized. Participants explained that rural residents often lack trust in local care options, seeing high rates of provider turnover and worrying that facilities lack up-to-date equipment or sufficient resources. Participants said that stigma also deters residents from seeking local care, particularly for substance use and mental health concerns (which participants noted were growing), as they may know medical staff and fear their information could be spread.

### Trust as a Barrier to Rural Health Care

“We have a local hospital we call the bandaid station because they don't have very many resources [or] up-to-date medical equipment... It's one of those communities where you go right after medical school to get some of your student loans forgiven. So there's high turnover, low quality. People will drive an hour in an emergency to avoid that hospital, even though it's there.”

### Stigma as a Barrier to Rural Health Care

“Stigma is such a big barrier... People will travel out of our counties to get mental health or any kind of physical health treatment because they don't want to be stigmatized because, oh, their cousin works at the hospital or so-and-so will see them and they don't want people to know that they have an opioid use disorder or have been thinking of suicide or have a disability.”

## Travel and Transportation Needs

These challenges mean that rural residents may have to travel significant distances to access health care, especially specialty care and mental health care. In rural areas with little or no public transportation, residents without car access become dependent on others for rides. Participants explained that this was particularly limiting for older adults and socially isolated residents—both of which are growing populations in rural areas.

## Rising Costs Associated with Seeking Care

These challenges also lead to growing costs shouldered by rural residents seeking care. Increased travel distances may impose higher gas costs, may require spending on lodging and meals, and may impact productivity and wages for both those seeking care and their caregivers. Participants explained that these costs widened disparities in health care access, with lower-income residents particularly impacted by growing barriers.

## Telehealth Possibilities and Barriers

Participants believed telehealth can overcome some of the gaps in health care access plaguing rural communities. Nonetheless, barriers remain related to *access* (due to lack of broadband), *affordability* (due to the costs of Internet and digital devices), and *adoption* (due to lack of digital literacy, trust in technology and the medical system, and preference for in-person care). Thus, harnessing the benefits of telehealth will require both structural change in communities and education for individual rural residents.

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# Practitioner Needs and Recommendations



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In this final section, we summarize findings regarding practitioner-identified needs and recommendations. These themes arose across the different thematically-focused listening sessions.

## Sharing Information and Raising Awareness

Many participants expressed an interest in learning about how to better spread information and raise awareness on key issues impacting their communities. For example, participants desired resources on how to raise awareness on issues like chronic diseases and promote positive health behaviors. They also stressed the need to ensure residents know about resources and programs before it is “too late”. Participants explained that this is particularly challenging in rural areas where

many residents are not online, transportation is limited, and newspapers have become less common. Particularly given the spread of dis- and misinformation on social media and from less traditional news agencies (Sommariva et al. 2018; Kbaier et al. 2024), participants’ desire for assistance in spreading research-backed information is potentially becoming increasingly important.

## Local Knowledge and Impactful Research

Several participants mentioned the need for local communities to be more involved in the research process. They stated that inclusion of local voices helps to ensure that research is relevant and impactful. Research projects with a larger geographic focus should also be contextualized, noting how effects may differ in different places. Participants also wanted researchers to work with Extension agents and other community practitioners to ensure their research is applied in meaningful ways.

## Need for Better Data and Research

Several participants noted the need for better data and research to help support their work. In particular, participants wanted to see research on how to support aging populations, plan for uncertainty (with regard to climate risks), and support an increasingly diverse population. They were also interested in finding better measures of mental and physical health, disability, and well-being. One participant noted that data must be localized and

## KEY FINDINGS

- Practitioners face barriers to sharing information and raising awareness in rural areas, including limited internet use and a decline in newspapers.
- Researchers should include local practitioners in the research process and share results with them in a relevant way.
- Practitioners want localized data and research to inform local decision making as well as improved measures of evaluation.

### Local Knowledge

“From my experience, when you include the community in the research that you’re doing, it allows the project to be more impactful because the research that we do may not fit the community. Each community has different needs.”

intersectional. Regional and state-level data often masks variation from community to community. Moreover, existing data often does not allow for the examination of trends and needs at the intersection of disability and race, for example. Such data is essential for making informed decisions regarding what interventions to implement and what sources of funding to target.

#### **Need for Data and Research**

“Give me the data. Give me the tools where I can pull the mayors and county commissioners aside and say, ‘Look, here's what the research is saying is going to happen... here's the reality. This is what happened over in Kentucky. This is what happened in Mississippi.’ That's the kind of stuff that I need... to disseminate your findings. So just send it to me. I'll use it.”

### **Need for Best Practices, Better Evaluation, and Research on What Works**

Participants expressed a desire to learn about programs and interventions that work, but they lacked a common place to share and learn such information. Participants also wanted information about available grants, effective workforce recruitment and retention strategies, and approaches to

addressing declining volunteer rates. Participants wanted to know how to showcase the measureable effects of their projects on a community or region. Developing better evaluation processes and metrics is certainly an area of potential collaboration. Finally, rural demographic research should not only explore the needs and concerns outlined in this report but also related successes.

Seeking a deeper understanding of what interventions and efforts successfully support community well-being in various types of rural communities would provide community practitioners and policymakers with ideas to better address these needs.

#### **Better Evaluation**

“How do you showcase the impact of these projects we're doing? I don't have a good mechanism, and survey fatigue [is] a real thing out there... It's also getting additional funding to support these programs. And it's just like, we grew so many pounds of potatoes, but that's just not a good metric. That's not the metric that people are really wanting to see. They're wanting to see decreased obesity or those kinds of things.”

## **References**

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