Social Work in a Very Rural Place:
A Study of Practitioners in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan

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Abstract. This study focuses on characteristics, challenges, and benefits of practicing social work in the Upper Peninsula (UP) of Michigan. Using a mixed-methods design, data were analyzed to determine demographic descriptors, seek differences between groups, and learn why social workers pursue and remain in social service employment in the UP. In addition, challenges and benefits of rural practice and perceptions of living and working in this region are addressed. Quantitatively, differences were found between younger and older social workers regarding where they currently live and where they grew up, and whether or not they were raised in a rural location. Qualitative findings suggest that professional challenges to practice include responding to the effects of persistent poverty and unemployment, lack of specialty care for children and families, and inadequate transportation. Benefits of practice include quality community experiences, proximity to familial systems, and professional connectedness.

Keywords: labor force, pragmatic analysis, rural social work

Michigan's Upper Peninsula (UP) is a geographically remote and isolated region of the United States comprised of 15 counties. Bordered on the north by Lake Superior and south by Lakes Michigan and Huron, it is a landmass approximately equal to the states of Rhode Island, Delaware, Connecticut, and New Jersey combined. However, the UP contains a population of only about 299,000 people spread across 16,420 square miles (US Census, 2011a). The population density of the UP ranges from a low of 4.3 people per square mile in Keeweenaw County, to a high of 35.8 in Dickinson County, and three of the 15 counties are designated "frontier," meaning, they contain fewer than seven people per square mile (see Ciarlo & Zelarney, 2000). The UP represents one-third of Michigan's land mass, but contains only 3% of the state's population (Ulrich, 2010). This is a big, sparsely populated place and it is difficult to identify a more rural place in the Eastern United States. If the UP were a state, it would be the only one in the union 100% rural.

Along with geographic uniqueness, the UP is historically distinctive as well. In the late 1800s through the early 1900s, large numbers of European immigrants came to work in the lumbering and mining industries (DeMark, 1997; Loukinen, 1997), and these influences remain embedded within the sub-culture today. Natural resource extraction continues to shape the economy and the people, and has evolved to become part of the fabric of the region which may be defined by boom and bust economies, a sense of communion with the land, and a set of shared experiences. Today, this composite of people (commonly called "Yoopers") continue to live in a region geographically and politically isolated, harsh in climate, and often impoverished.

Many Yoopers depend on social services to meet basic needs (Hilton & DeJong, 2010; Hoyum, 2009; Prusi, 2011a, 2011b). But who are the social workers of the Upper Peninsula providing these services? What are the challenges and benefits of practicing here? What might we learn from them to better understand social service labor force issues in other extremely rural areas? The purpose of this paper is to investigate challenges and benefits of social work practice in a highly isolated region with the expectation that these findings can advance the knowledge of rural practice across a broader landscape. Using a mixed-methods research design, questions were asked regarding why social workers work in this area, how they came to be there, why they work in the UP, the challenges they face, and benefits they experience.

Literature Review

Social Issues in the UP

A review of the literature indicates that the existence of social problems in the UP is comparable to social problems found in other locations (Connell & Kole, 1999; Hilton & DeJong, 2010; Ulrich, 2010). For example, the overall 2009 UP poverty rates are comparable to the State of Michigan's levels (15.8% and 16.1%, respectfully), and higher than the national average of 14.3% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011a). Furthermore, family poverty rates in the UP with children under the age of 18 in the household are problematic, with 17% of these families living below the poverty line between 2005 and 2009, which is higher than Michigan (16.4%) as well as national (15.3%) averages. Perhaps more troubling are the poverty rates among single-headed (predominately female) households with children under 18. Here, the rate of poverty rises to 46%, compared to state (40.6%) and national (37.1%) rates (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011b). Clearly, poverty is a problem across this region, especially among single-headed households with children.

Transportation is challenging in the UP. Based on where one resides, the distance to a Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) can be as close as approximately 60 miles (Menominee, Michigan to Green Bay, Wisconsin) to as far as 110 miles (Ironwood, Michigan to Duluth, Minnesota). But this does not tell the broader story—these are distances to MSA's in other states and from the borders of the UP, not major population centers in Michigan or from the interior of the UP. A resident of the region can be as close as 235 miles or as far as 540 miles from the state capital and up to 600 miles to Michigan's largest city, Detroit. For social workers needing to travel for employment purposes (e.g., trainings, continuing education, etc.) to more urban locations, these distances can be challenging.

Homelessness in the UP is problematic. A study of homelessness was conducted by Hilton and DeJong (2010) who identified several different types of homelessness ranging from brief and episodic to long term and chronic. These authors learned that many of the participants were families with children struggling to find a way out of this precarious state. They conclude that homelessness in the UP is widespread but at the same time, many homeless families are reluctant to leave.

But who are these Yoopers generally, and why do people live and stay here? Ulrich (2010) conducted a review of Upper Peninsula residents and identified many findings. For example, Ulrich found that whereas 88% of the 1,008 Yoopers surveyed stated that they plan to stay in the UP for the next five years, the overall population of the region continues to decline

annually. Among those stating they might leave in the future, the most common reasons were lack of employment and high energy costs—each an indicator of economics (as opposed to life-style, political processes, attitudes, or belief systems). Ulrich (2010) also found that about 80% of adults stated they would advise teenagers to leave the UP to seek better job and educational opportunities. This creates a conundrum—if the majority of adults believe that to have a better life youth must leave the UP, and if those youth do so, the region risks experiencing a "brain drain" with each graduating high school class. This represents a loss of human capital that is at least difficult, and perhaps impossible, to recapture over time.

Rural Social Worker Supply and Availability

Mackie and Simpson (2007) conducted a study comparing undergraduate social work students originally from rural and urban areas in Minnesota and Michigan, seeking differences between groups regarding where students grew up and their interest in working in a rural area upon graduation. Findings suggest that students who grew up in rural areas were significantly more likely to seek employment in a rural area compared to those from urban areas. This study included a qualitative component to learn why respondents may feel the way that they do. Rural-raised participants stated that they prefer the quality of life rural areas provide, regional familiarity, and an attachment to a lifestyle they understand. Additionally, many rural students felt that they would have greater employment opportunities in rural areas as they perceive employment in urban areas as more competitive (see also Phillips, Quinn, & Heitkamp, 2010).

In related research, Mackie (2007) compared rural and urban social workers from a national sample, and found that those practicing in rural areas were more likely to have grown up in a rural area, completed a field practicum in a rural-based agency, and been exposed to rural-specific curriculum. Again, the concept of "familiarity" reemerges—those who grow up in rural areas appear more comfortable with a rural lifestyle. Both groups (rural and urban students) from the Mackie (2007) and the Mackie and Simpson (2007) study perceive "rural" and "rural lifestyle" differently. Whereas those who grew up in urban areas often feel that there are fewer social and cultural activities in rural areas (and view this as negative), those who grew up in rural locations are less likely to see rural areas as lacking social and cultural opportunities. This may be explained by rural-raised individuals being more sophisticated in their knowledge of the happenings of rural life, but also raises a deeper possibility—perhaps rural-raised individuals calibrate their social expectations differently than those who grew up in an urban place. Regardless of what explanation is most accurate, there are considerably fewer people in rural areas. Among those people, only a few who complete college degrees will do so in social work, leaving rural areas with too few social workers to respond to community needs (Daley & Avant, 1999; Holzer, Goldsmith, & Ciarlo, 2000; President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health, 2003).

Some higher education opportunities exist in the UP, with three universities and two community colleges. However, there is currently only one Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) accredited BSW program, which graduates approximately 40-50 students per year, along with one CSWE accredited part-time, distance education-based MSW program, with 30-40 students graduating every third year. The demand for social workers in this region may not be met by local educational facilities. While some online MSW programs exist, it is difficult

to assess the impact due to a lack of knowledge of how many Yoopers may be receiving an education through this educational medium.

Given what we currently know about the UP, it seems logical to study those who are currently practicing social work there and learn about the uniqueness of this population. Having a deeper understanding about Yooper social workers may assist in identifying challenges and benefits of being a social worker in such an isolated area. Did they choose to work here, or was employment "accidental?" Why do those who stay, remain? What do the challenges and benefits of practice look like in such a remote place? What other factors may contribute to a social worker wanting to initially seek and eventually remain here?

Method

Research Questions

The following research questions were investigated in this study:

1. What are demographic, gender, or age differences among UP social workers?

2. What do UP social workers define as challenges associated with living and working in this region?

3. What do UP social workers define as benefits associated with living and working in this region?

Data Collection

Data for this study were collected using mailed pencil-and-paper surveys (see Appendix A) and through face-to-face interviews (see Appendix B). Survey participants were identified using a convenience sample from a list of 83 names, emails, and physical addresses of BSW field supervisors, as provided by the department of Social Work at Northern Michigan University. An additional 142 names, emails, and physical addresses of social workers across all of the 15 counties in the UP were obtained from the Michigan chapter of the National Association of Social Workers. A total of 225 social workers were mailed surveys and responses were anonymous. Using a modified method for survey distribution (Dillman, 2000), one week before the surveys were mailed all subjects were emailed a detailed description of the study and an invitation to participate. One week after the surveys were mailed, subjects received a reminder email thanking those who had already completed the survey and encouraging those who had not, to please consider doing so. In total, 87 surveys were returned (response rate = 39%). Due to incomplete data or being undeliverable, six surveys were deemed unusable and were removed from the sample for a final total of 81 respondents.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 12 social workers across five UP counties (male = 5 (42%); female = 7 (58%); μ age = 40.75; age range = 23-63). Interviewees were identified using a snowball method of identifying key informants and then seeking referrals to others (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). Interviews were semi-structured and informed by data collected from the survey. Survey responses were used to identify elements deemed important for further investigation in the interviews. Each participant was provided a copy of the consent

form, with information outlining the purpose of the study as well as contact information for the Institutional Review Board (IRB), which approved this project. Interviews lasted between one and a half and two hours.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS software to generate both descriptive and univariate results. Qualitative, open-ended survey questions were analyzed using Pragmatic Analysis (Patton, 1988). According to Patton, Pragmatic Analysis allows researchers to efficiently analyze respondents' answers to open-ended questions. Responses were typed into a grid, allowing the researcher to code connected concepts and establish categories, themes, and sub-themes that emerged from the data.

Face-to-face interview data were analyzed using Inductive Analysis (Patton, 1990). Inductive Analysis allows the researcher to ask questions loosely guided by findings from survey responses, and is designed to "discover important categories, dimensions, and interrelationships," (Patton, 1990, p. 40) without starting from a deductive or *a priori* perspective. This allowed for a triangulation of survey, open-ended, and interview data to achieve richer overall findings. Interviewees were encouraged to expand on the general questions through the interviewer's use of probing questions. All interviews were recorded using pen and paper, and responses were later typed into a grid and analyzed using the same category/theme/sub-theme coding technique that was applied to open-ended survey questions.

Results

Quantitative Survey Findings

Quantitative data consisted of demographic and compared-group findings. Tables 1 and 2 show that as a group, approximately two-thirds of sampled social workers grew up in rural areas, and the age of males (μ = 50.66, *SD* = 11.76) was similar to that of females (μ = 51.58, *SD* = 10.01). This sample asked for the highest degree held by respondents, with the understanding that some likely held both BSW and MSW degrees. Nine of those with a MSW degree also held a BSW degree, accounting for the difference of the number of responses and associated percentages reported. Respondents reporting non-social work degrees were reviewed and determined to have been "grand-parented" in as social workers when Michigan enacted degree and licensing requirements. MSW degreed social workers were overrepresented in the sample (MSW highest degree, *n* = 55, 68.8%; BSW highest degree, *n* = 12, 27%; Other (non-social work degree), *n* = 3, 4.2%).

Findings suggest that about one-third of BSW (*n* = 18, 33.3%) and under half of MSW (*n* = 18, 38.3%) degreed social workers were exposed to rural curriculum content during their education, and about half completed a field practicum in a rural area (BSW, *n* = 28, 52.8%; MSW, *n* = 25, 54.3%), further supporting related research (see Mackie, 2007). Additionally, respondents are currently located an average of about 300 miles from where they completed their undergraduate and graduate degrees, indicating that at a minimum, social workers in the UP appear to travel to obtain their degrees, perhaps due to the limited access to MSW education in the UP.

Table 1

Demographic and Comparative Findings Between UP Social Workers

Categories	$\bar{x}$	SD	n	%	Range
Gender					
Male	50.66	11.76	34		
Female	51.58	10.01	36		
Highest degree earned					
BSW			12	27.0	
MSW			55	68.8	
*Other			3	4.2	
Grew up in rural area?					
Yes			45	66.2	
No			23	33.8	
Distance to nearest urban area (>50,000) (in miles)	162.67	85.20			400
Population of county where currently employed	34,453	22,855			72,000
Current distance (in miles) from where degree earned					
Undergraduate degree	239.02	219.41	51		750
Graduate degree	321.86	244.78	43		1200

Note. N = 81. *Other = BA/BS, MA/MS, Doctorate.

Table 2

Educational Background of UP Social Workers

	Yes (n)	%	No (n)	%	Don't recall (n)	%
Undergraduate						
Coursework included rural specific content?	18	33.3	29	53.7	7	13.0
Completed practicum in rural area?	28	52.8	25	47.2		
Graduate						
Coursework included rural specific content?	18	38.3	28	59.6	1	2.1
Completed practicum in rural area?	25	54.3	21	45.7		

Note. N = 81.

No significant differences were found between gender or degree levels when measured against the following variables: (a) size of community where worker grew up, (b) distance now from where worker grew up, (c) did the worker grow up in a rural area, (d) undergraduate-level coursework in rural concepts, (d) undergraduate-level rural or urban practicum location, (e) graduate-level coursework in rural concepts, and (f) graduate-level rural or urban practicum location.

While no gender differences were identified, differences were found between younger and older workers among some variables (see Tables 3 and 4). Note that "younger" and "older" workers were categorized by those above and below the median age (41.5 years). Younger workers' ages ranged between 23-41 and older workers' ages ranged from 42–71 years. Based on these findings, younger workers live closer to where they grew up ($\mu = 1.15$, *SD* $= .376$) compared to older workers ($\mu = 1.49$, *SD* $= .505$, $t = -2.252$, $p < .05$), and were more likely to have grown up in a rural area ($\mu = 1.00$, *SD* $= .000$) compared to their older counterparts ($\mu = 1.42$, *SD* $= .497$, $t = 2.991$, $p = .01$).

Table 3

Gender Differences Between UP Social Workers

	Male (*n* = 33)		Female (*n* = 35)		
	$\overline{x}$	*SD*	$\overline{x}$	*SD*	*t*
Size of community where raised	3.85	2.54	4.69	2.82	1.285 (NS)
Now live reasonable distance from where raised	1.52	.508	1.32	.482	-1.436 (NS)
Consider where grew up as rural	1.39	.496	1.29	.458	-.935 (NS)
Undergraduate coursework included rural content	1.70	.542	1.89	.751	1.039 (NS)
Undergraduate practicum completed in rural area	1.58	.504	1.52	.643	-.367 (NS)
Graduate coursework included rural content	1.61	.499	1.67	.565	.372 (NS)
Graduate practicum completed in rural area	1.50	.512	1.42	.504	-.556 (NS)

Note. $N = 68$. NS = Not Significant.

Table 4

Age Differences Between UP Social Workers

	Younger (n = 13)		Older (n = 53)		
	$\overline{x}$	SD	$\overline{x}$	SD	t
Size of community where raised	4.77	1.48	4.23	2.93	.645 (NS)
Now live reasonable distance from where raised	1.15	.376	1.49	.505	-2.252*
Consider where you grew up as rural	1.00	.000	1.42	.497	-2.991**
Undergraduate coursework included rural specific content	2.00	.667	1.76	.656	1.029 (NS)
Undergraduate practicum completed in rural area	1.30	.483	1.61	.586	-1.544 (NS)
Graduate coursework included rural content	1.86	.690	1.59	.498	1.232 (NS)
Graduate practicum completed in rural area	1.29	.488	1.49	.506	-.974 (NS)

Note. N = 66. NS = Not Significant
*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$

These findings suggest that younger workers are more likely regionally affiliated, meaning they grew up in or near the UP and thus, more likely to have grown up in a rural area. Conversely, older workers appear to have grown up further away and are less likely to have grown up in a rural area. One plausible interpretation (when combined with data from open-ended survey questions and interviews) is that older workers may represent a group who gravitated to the UP for lifestyle reasons, professional reasons, or both. Perhaps those who have been practicing social work in the UP over time (older workers) have self-selected and actively chosen to work and remain here, whereas younger workers are here because this is where they are from and they are still early in their careers. Over time, current younger workers may leave the area or exit the social work profession. This may suggest that if employers seek longevity among social workers in the UP, it may be beneficial to specifically recruit people attracted to living in the region.

Open-Ended Survey and Interview Findings

Findings from the open-ended survey questions and interviews expose several unique characteristics and attitudes among UP social workers. Note that interview findings largely mirrored information gathered in the open-ended questions. Therefore, the two data sets were conflated and interview findings and quotes were added to highlight survey findings.

Benefits to living and working in the UP. Benefits to living and working in the UP were viewed as important components to better understanding why social workers seek out and remain in this isolated region. Findings suggest that often, the most powerful predictors to why social workers live and work here center on quality of life, familiarity with the region and components of the region, and satisfaction in the workplace. Specifically, these workers focused on the rural lifestyle as being a critical component. Closely following is the desire to either be close to family or to raise children in a place perceived as safe and nurturing. Only after discussing these quality of life elements did social workers turn to employment opportunities in the UP, though this did emerge as an important element as well. Figure 1 represents three categories, themes, and sub-themes which emerged from this study.
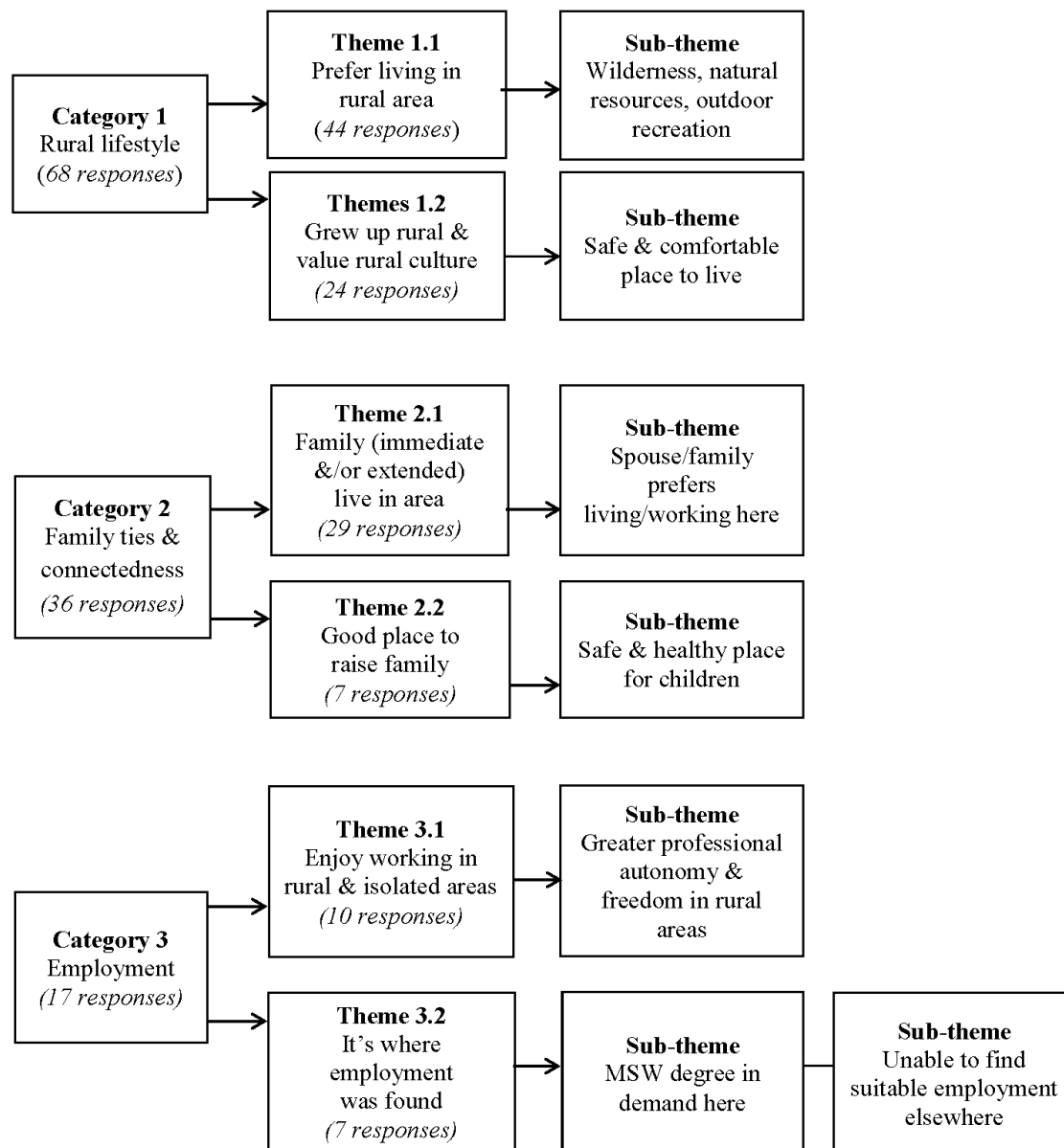
Category 1 Rural lifestyle (68 responses)	Theme 1.1 Prefer living in rural area (44 responses)	Sub-theme Wilderness, natural resources, outdoor recreation
	Themes 1.2 Grew up rural & value rural culture (24 responses)	Sub-theme Safe & comfortable place to live
Category 2 Family ties & connectedness (36 responses)	Theme 2.1 Family (immediate &/or extended) live in area (29 responses)	Sub-theme Spouse/family prefers living/working here
	Theme 2.2 Good place to raise family (7 responses)	Sub-theme Safe & healthy place for children
Category 3 Employment (17 responses)	Theme 3.1 Enjoy working in rural & isolated areas (10 responses)	Sub-theme Greater professional autonomy & freedom in rural areas
	Theme 3.2 It's where employment was found (7 responses)	Sub-theme MSW degree in demand here	Sub-theme Unable to find suitable employment elsewhere

Figure 1. Benefits to living and working in the UP. *N* = 72.

Category 1, *Rural Lifestyle*, was the most commonly noted reason for seeking and remaining in this geographic area, with this category being selected a total of 68 times in the survey responses. Two themes (1.1 and 1.2) identified within Rural Lifestyle emerged: *prefer living in a rural place* and *grew up rural and value the culture*. Respondents shared that they simply prefer to live in a rural rather than an urban environment. They also stated that having grown up in a rural environment allowed them an understanding of rural culture—a culture they prefer to live in. Respondents focused on personal safety and the wilderness (the UP is predominately forested with large tracts of state and federal public lands) as important components. Several respondents shared how they enjoy hunting, fishing, hiking, and related activities living in the UP affords them. Regarding safety, many shared that they feel safer living in the UP and believe this is a place of low crime and less violence compared to urban areas. Interviewees also often cited this as an important component for why they live and work in the UP. For example, the following reasons were shared:

- I feel connected here—grew up here. I know the people and there is a comfort and safety in that. It's important to me to be in a place where I'm able to help people I know and care about.

- There is a focus on a sense of community here, it's fun here, outdoorsy, the people are friendly. It's a proud place with proud people. I like that.

- I like the sanity, privacy, and time I get to recharge here. I'm basically an introvert and need time in the woods to regain perspective. The environment is peaceful, and there is an opportunity to see things here you can't elsewhere. I enjoy being a part of nature.

- Outdoor recreation is available within minutes such as hiking, canoeing, camping, and skiing.

Category 2 identified *family ties and connectedness* as important. Two themes emerged: *family lives in the area* and *good place to raise a family*. Respondents stated that it is important to be close to family (implying that they not only grew up in *a* rural area but are from *this* rural area). However, many others reported that they are in the UP because their spouse (almost exclusively a husband) is from the area or prefers living here. The second theme identified how workers view the UP as a good place to raise children and consider it as safer for children compared to urban areas. Interview data show that raising children in a safe environment and being close to family is sought after and a strong reason for living in the UP. In support of these findings, social workers reported the following statements:

- I grew up here and understand the area, even though I moved to and lived in big cities in my life, I came back. When I was 18 I wanted to leave this Podunk little town but over time that changed—especially after having children. It's a safe community and that was important in my decision to return.

- It's a great place to raise my children because of the support of the community. They [respondent's children] learn the value of community and helping here. They learn to appreciate helping others.

- I grew up in the UP in a small town and was the first in my family to go to college. The UP is my culture—rural. Being born and raised here it never occurred to me to consider really going anywhere else. For me, living in the UP is safe and family oriented.

Category 3 focused on *employment*. Respondents shared that they enjoy working in a rural environment as it allows for more professional freedom, autonomy, and the ability to practice more independently. Respondents shared that rural agencies are typically smaller in size, professional responsibilities are broader in scope, and organizations are less bureaucratic. Some also shared that freedom and autonomy is an extension of the Yooper culture—it is a place where individualism is valued. Conversely, urban agencies are perceived as more bureaucratic, rigid, impersonal, and professionally restrictive (Theme 3.1). Regarding general employment opportunities (Theme 3.2), reasons given for this response focused on lack of job opportunities in more populated areas and how the MSW degree is in higher demand across the UP. In support of these findings, respondents shared the following:

- Compared to urban areas, there is more respect for my education here.

- The people are so thankful and with it being a smaller community, it's a friendly atmosphere. You get to help your neighbors and see the differences you make with clients. Maybe they [clients] are more appreciative of quality services and your efforts.

- The work environment is open and friendly; colleagues are dedicated and support each other. The challenges of creative problem solving to meet client needs—I do see this as a reward to working here.

- Autonomy—I'm distant from the main office and have nobody looking over my shoulder. Clients really appreciate my services . . . I see clients of all ages with all types of mental health problems. I get to be creative and use a wide variety of interventions.

Challenges to living and working in the UP. Living and working in the UP has certain challenges associated with this remote and isolated land. As one respondent succinctly stated, the UP "often has too little and is too far away." Respondents shared their experiences with the challenges associated with transportation, the seemingly never ending need for services and lack of resources to provide for those needs, professional challenges, and problems associated with a stressed rural economy. Often, these challenges fuse together. Examples of this are found in professional challenges where continuing education and transportation and distance fuse together, or how the lack of transportation among clients compromises (and even jeopardizes) their ability to receive services, which in turn creates additional stress within their lives. Figure 2 displays the four categories, themes, and sub-themes derived from this study.
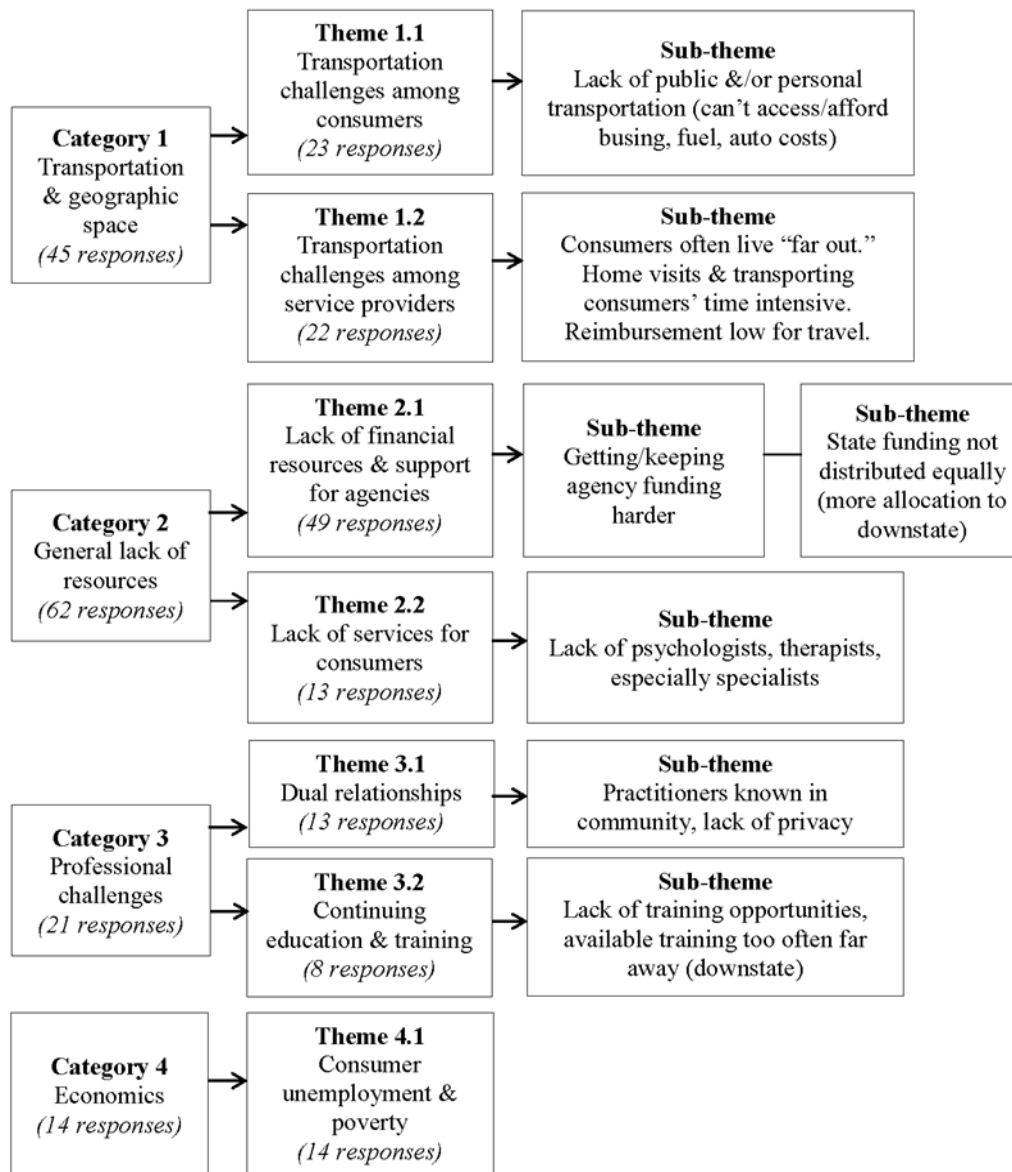
Figure 2. Challenges of living and working in the UP. *N = 73.*

Category 1 identified *transportation* and *geographic space* as common problems. Social workers reported how transportation and the challenges associated with large catchment areas are problematic for both workers and consumers. For the worker, reimbursements for time, fuel, and even the vehicle they use are all often inadequate. Respondents also referred to the phenomenon of "windshield time." Simply getting to and from a single consumer can be a several-hour event due to the amount of time it takes "behind the windshield." This in turn creates staffing problems in that much time is lost due to travel. Consumers face these distance challenges as well. Consumers often lack transportation or when they have it, cannot afford to properly maintain a vehicle. Workers ported that this is especially problematic for

families in poverty needing to shuttle children to and from appointments and activities. Respondents' reported several challenges surrounding transportation and the geography of the UP. For example:

- I supervised seven programs in a family services agency across the UP. It was 350-400 miles between program locations. I had to drive three to four hours to supervise and train social workers. Travel and distance are huge challenges.

- From the hospital, patient discharge planning was a challenge. They [patients] would struggle to get to intake meetings due to transportation problems, so we would write in 'transportation problems' into their treatment plan. When they didn't get to the intake meeting due to their transportation problem, they would be seen as non-compliant and lose services.

- There is a shortage of public transportation, help to pay for gas, and long distances to travel for clients to get to appointments. It was hard on me too. Before I became an 'office-based social worker' I would drive 3,000 or more miles per month as a "home-based" therapist!

Category 2 focuses on a *general lack of resources*. Workers state that most social service programs have experienced noticeable budget cuts over the past several years, which further limits workers' ability to provide services. One worker shared, "The UP is treated like an outpost colony by the State of Michigan" regarding budget allocations, and another stated, "Programs that are administered downstate will receive allocations and funding . . . and then not share much to UP agencies included in their budgets." Another problem is the lack of access to primary and mental health care providers to consumers. Workers often cited the need for more psychologists, psychiatrists, and therapists—especially for specialty services such as those focusing on children, youth, families, and the elderly. These findings were supported during the interviews as well, with respondents stating:

- There is a lack of peers for social workers, and it is very hard to have professional supports here because of the distance of social workers between each other and too few peers to begin with. This a real challenge for us.

- The generational poverty here is astounding. The ability for people to get out of poverty is low—they get stuck in poverty here that that is where they stay, which turns into generational poverty. And it's getting worse. This recession we are in has reduced opportunities for the poor. There are just less resources to help them—lack of transportation assistance, lack of money, lack of access to education. It's all here and it's pretty bad.

- Funding for services is a major issue. Some counties don't even have to resources anymore to support family reunification services. Sometimes we can't even do our jobs.

- State funds are not equally distributed across counties and most social service dollars stay downstate. We go without simply because we are up here and not down there.

- There is only one psychiatrist in town and his waiting period is usually three or more months. Services for mental health care are especially limited for folks with no insurance.

Category 3 focused on *professional* challenges, specifically regarding the themes of *dual relationships* (Theme 3.1) and the lack of *continuing education and training* (Theme 3.2). The challenge of dual relationships in rural areas is not new, and has been identified as an ongoing problem (Mayer, 2005; Reamer, 2003). Not surprisingly, social workers report how challenging it can be to "separate from the job "as well. One recommended response to this problem is through continuing education and training focused on this concern (Croxton, Jayaratne, & Mattison, 2002), but according to social workers in the UP, this is more difficult. We learn in sub-theme of Theme 3.2 that the lack of accessible training and continuing education is identified this as a serious concern. Respondents' shared the following:

- Professional training opportunities are almost always held downstate. For child protection workers, this means we have to complete nine weeks of state-mandated training; six of these nine weeks in-class . . . about a seven hour drive from here. This means we leave our work and families for over three weeks at a time at least twice. We have to be gone a lot for these trainings.

- It's unique that we are closer to the state capital of Minnesota than to Lansing, but we have to go to downstate places such as Lansing, Detroit, or Battle Creek for most of our training and CEUs. Continuing education is a real issue here. DHS continuing education is different because they do their own trainings and this is usually downstate. Other social workers need continuing ed as well and typically need to go downstate to get it. Here you have to be more creative in how you get your continuing ed hours. You have to settle for what you can get, and often can't get what you need to actually become a better practitioner.

Addressing dual relationships, UP social workers acknowledged how living and working in small population communities can present challenges. For example:

- [There is a] lack of privacy. It's easy for clients to find your residence, recognize your vehicle—call you at home during non-working hours. HIPPA doesn't exist here for you, your family, or your clients.

- It is much more difficult to avoid being in social situations—churches, neighborhoods, schools, with clients or potential clients. You see them more frequently at stores and at community events. Confidentiality is much more difficult to maintain.

- Everyone is related some way to another among those who did not leave the area. Very difficult to have a personal life with social relations as most people are involved in church or are otherwise affiliated with companies or services that then result in conflicts of interest such as having a plumber or electrician as a client.

- Here, you feel like you get to know everyone and all of their little secrets.

Category 4 identifies the challenges associated with *economics*. Respondents stated that high rates of poverty and unemployment plague the region and contribute to a vast array of social problems. For example, lower tax bases common among smaller UP communities limit school districts and counties in providing services to children and youth. The poverty of the region is seen as a constant contributing factor to many of the other challenges already identified. Respondent shared the following observations:

- It's difficult to witness the hardships of the working poor or those with chronic illnesses who are unable to afford needed medical equipment—things that make clients' lives more comfortable.

- Health insurance only reimburses PhDs or psychiatrists, not me. This creates funding challenges for my agency.

- There is a lack of community providers who can see clients without insurance. Once they [clients] have exhausted the brief treatment option, they are done.

- . . . our community mental health was discontinued due to budget cuts. This leaves agencies with clients showing more mental health issues, but most of these clients do not meet the assessment criteria the agency uses, so they get left out.

- Communities are tapped out for resources to help. Patients often get referred to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester [Minnesota] but we don't have the money to send them and neither do they. Also, we often have to send kids to Grand Rapids [Michigan] for psychiatric assessments, and that's expensive!

Based on these findings, it is clear that social workers in the UP face a multitude of professional challenges that are at times, impossible for them to adequately address. The effects of poverty, lack of transportation, few specialty mental health services, difficulty accessing services that are available, and limited training opportunities contribute to workers' frustrations.

The Interviews

Findings from face-to-face interviews were largely similar to those collected in the open-ended questions in the survey and thus were conflated into the findings above to further

support and highlight the information presented. However, these interviews did provide greater depth of understanding around three specific areas not otherwise identified by survey respondents: a need for improvements in child and family service system delivery, a lack of services to alleviate homelessness, and challenges associated with helping returning Veterans. Interviewees' expressed serious concerns about the lack of services for each of these groups across multiple system levels. Specifically addressing problems associated with child and family services, interviewees reported on a lack of foster care options, access to children's mental health providers, parent training, services addressing childhood poverty, and a lack of stable housing options were expressed. For example, one interviewee stated:

> There is no juvenile detention center here, so my family services program has to take youth who are charged with a crime even though we are not funded for or equipped to do that. We place these youth in foster care until they are sentenced, sent to the youth detention center in St. Ignace [Michigan] about four hours away from here, or given a non-incarceration sentence. The worst part is that youth who commit crimes here are also often in need of psychiatric services. The closest services of this type are over 100 miles from us and often, they do not have space even if we can get the youth to them.

Housing instability and homelessness among families with children was often identified as serious, ongoing, and increasing. Social workers often expressed frustrations regarding working with families and children, especially among those either homeless or at-risk of becoming so. Working with families to address poverty-related challenges, and working to create healthy and safe living environments for children also emerged as serious concerns. For example, interviewees stated:

- . . . homelessness, especially among families, is a challenge given that there are little to no services for them. It's hard here—there is a lot of poverty.

- The most challenging problem right now I think is the lack of homeless services. There are two homeless shelter options in our area, and one is a domestic violence center and the other is overstressed and unable to respond to current demands. Homelessness is getting worse here.

Military Veterans, especially those deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, were seen as an "invisible population" in the UP. Social workers reported how they sometimes come into contact with Veterans but are unprepared to respond to their needs. Interviewees reported that most Veteran contact is through secondary processes, meaning, they are responding to a concern and then find that a Veteran is involved in the dynamic. Unfortunately, many do not know how to provide adequate services or even where to refer the Veteran. For example:

- The needs of returning Veterans are not being met here. Vets have to go far away for services—the closest VA therapist is about 100 miles away and this is the closest access we have, and the waiting period is long.

- We have Vets hiding out in the woods here, an invisible population. They came home, couldn't adjust, and are now living in deer camps, makeshift

structures, or are just drifting around homeless. I hear about it but can't do anything—I work with children and families. Sometimes I learn about someone struggling because I am working with a family with a Vet but that isn't my area so there isn't much I can do.

Synthesis of Findings

Synthesizing these data shows that UP social workers identified several reasons why they do what they do here. Regarding challenges, it is clear that poverty is a constant "hum in the wire," and one that creates complications across a variety of system levels. For example, providers expressed considerable frustration regarding their work with children and families. It is apparent that they lack access to much needed specialty services for families and children, and children often go untreated or under-treated for serious conditions. When coupled with transportation challenges, it becomes clear that social workers and clients alike do their best to survive with too few resources and too little support, but are more dependent upon the community and natural support systems than what might be found in more populated areas. However, many benefits were identified and appear centered on the lifestyle the UP affords. Social workers who like the challenges of rural practice, prefer outdoor activities, are from the UP or other rural areas, and/or want to work in a place where professional autonomy is supported and even expected may see working in the UP as more positive.

Discussion and Implications

This study sought to identify unique qualities, attitudes, and perceptions regarding social workers in an extremely rural region of the United States. Social workers are challenged by the effects of chronic poverty and unemployment, the lack of access to social service resources, adequate transportation, geographic distance, and access to specialty care services. Through these stories, we learn that too often those who are most negatively impacted are also those most vulnerable—families with children. However, we also learn that while most workers recognize how the needs of specific populations (such as children) go unmet, there are also cultural aspects embedded within the community that are overlooked, such as the sharing nature of community members; an informal systems approach to meeting peoples' needs. At the same time, concerns regarding dual relationships and professional isolation intersect in an interesting way. Some social workers express their frustration around being recognized in the community—in the grocery store, at school events, and at social gatherings, but at the same time, also struggle to develop professional relationships with others due to geographic distance and the nature of living in an isolated place.

Social workers here are unique and may essentially "self-select" as members of this community. Many are from the UP and among those not specifically from the region; a majority of these social workers are from a rural area. As such, there was considerable expression toward wanting to provide for people here; some because Yoopers want to help Yoopers, and others because they enjoy living and working here. This is an important finding in that it further supports past findings suggesting that social workers in rural regions are more likely to have originated from rural areas (Mackie, 2007; Mackie & Simpson, 2007).

Limitations and Suggestions

Findings from a study such as this must be approached with a certain caution as this was a regional investigation and a broad generalization of this information is at best, limited. Survey data were collected from a convenience sample and interviews were conducted with a small group. However, it is important to note that the survey sample included 81 respondents and in-depth interviews were held with 12 social workers. At a minimum, insights into the lives of UP social workers and descriptions of their shared experiences were obtained. Further studies should be more inclusive to increase generalizability of findings.

Several questions emerged from this study. It is clear that families and children struggle here, but this study only skims the surface of these problems. As a study of social workers (and not families), this investigation was able to identify what social workers see as challenges, but the voices of the children and families of the UP were not heard here. Closely related, this study investigated UP social workers from a general perspective. Future studies could focus more specifically on unique challenges such as child welfare and family stabilization.

Another concern that emerged is the problem of homelessness. Social workers were quick to identify this as a real and chronic problem, but aside from the Hilton and DeJong (2010) study, what is known about living conditions, the social and psychological impacts, or even an accurate rate of homelessness among Yoopers remains limited. Given the severity and complexity of homelessness, future studies could better identify needs so as to develop more effective responses.

Policy suggestions abound. Yooper social workers stated that they feel that the State of Michigan often minimizes their needs and does not allocate resources at the same rate as what is provided in more populated areas. There is a need to reevaluate how allocations are made, resources distributed, and services provided across the UP, regardless of the geographic remoteness associated with it. Most of the social workers surveyed and interviewed appear to be here because they want to be here. However, the development of social workers begins with education, and currently there is a lack of social work education opportunities in the UP where the region can "grow their own." The State of Michigan could better support the future supply of rural social workers through the expansion of social work education at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. This may in turn increase the ability to strengthen the workforce with professionals more likely to remain in practice over time.

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Appendix A

**Challenges, Rewards, and Complexities associated with
Delivering Social Services in Rural Areas Survey**

Thank you agreeing to participate in this research. This study focuses on developing a better understanding about challenges and rewards associated with working as a social service provider in rural areas. Due to your rural location, you were selected to participate in this research. Please note that this survey is a confidential document and as such, your identity will be protected.

1. Are you currently employed as a social service provider in a rural area? (as you define "rural area"):

    a. Yes_____   No_____ (If No, please <u>do not continue</u>. Thank you for participating. <u>PLEASE</u> return this survey to proctor).

2. Your age in years: _____ (If under the age of 18, <u>do not continue</u>. Thank you participating. <u>PLEASE</u> return this survey proctor in the envelope provided).

3. Approximate population of the county/catchment area your agency primarily serves? _____

4. Approximate distance (in miles) from your workplace to the nearest city with a population of 50,000 or more residents: _____

5. Your gender: _____

6. Your education (please check highest degree earned only):

    b. Less than a bachelor degree   _____
    c. BS/BA   _____
    d. MS/MA   _____
    e. BSW/BSSW   _____
    f. MSW/MSSW   _____
    g. Doctorate   _____
    h. Other   _____ (please describe_____)

7. Please check the choice below that best describes the approximate size of the community where you are **currently employed**:

    a. 50,000 or more   _____   f. 2,499 – 1,000   _____
    b. 49,999 – 25,000   _____   g. 999 – 500   _____
    c. 24,999 – 10,000   _____   h. 249 or fewer   _____
    d. 9,999 – 5,000   _____
    e. 4,999 – 2,500   _____

8. Please check the choice below that best describes the approximate size of the community where you **grew up**:

a.	50,000 or more	_____	f.	2,499 – 1,000	_____
b.	49,999 – 25,000	_____	g.	999 – 500	_____
c.	24,999 – 10,000	_____	h.	249 or fewer	_____
d.	9,999 – 5,000	_____	i.	Rural, but not a farm	_____
e.	4,999 – 2,500	_____	j.	Rural, farm	_____

9. Do you consider where you grew up as a "rural area"? Yes _____   No _____

10. From where you live now, approximately how many miles are you away from where you grew up? _____

11. Number of years you have worked as a social service provider in a rural setting: _____

12. Total number of years you have worked as a social service provider in any setting (rural + urban): _____

13. Number of years you have been working at your current place of employment: _____

14. Please check the choice that best describes your agency:

   a. Federal social service provider (non-Native American based agency) _____

   b. Federal social service provider (Native American based agency) _____

   c. County based social service provider _____

   d. Public (not otherwise defined) social services provider _____

   e. Private, non-profit social service provider _____

   f. Other _____ (Please describe _____)

15. Do you live within what you would consider a reasonable driving distance from where you grew up? Yes _____   No_____

16. How far do you live from where you grew up (in approximate miles): _____

17. Please describe reasons why you <u>initially</u> chose to work in a rural area:

_____

_____

_____

_____

18. Please describe reasons why you have chosen to <u>continue</u> to work in a rural area:

_____
_____
_____
_____

19. Have you ever considered leaving social services practice in a rural practice for a more urban location?   Yes _____ No _____

(IF YES, PLEASE ANSWER QUESTION #18. **IF NO**, PLEASE SKIP TO QUESTION #19)

20. Please describe the reasons why you have considered leaving social service practice:

_____
_____
_____
_____

21. Looking back on your <u>undergraduate level education</u>, did you:

    a.   Take courses that incorporated rural concepts into the coursework?

       Yes _____ No _____ Do not recall _____ NA _____

    b.   Complete a field practicum located in a rural area?

       Yes _____ No _____ Do not recall _____ NA _____

22. Looking back on your <u>graduate level education</u>, did you:

    a.   Take courses that incorporated rural concepts into the coursework?

       Yes _____ No _____ Do not recall _____ NA _____

    b.   Complete a field practicum located in a rural area?

       Yes _____ No _____ Do not recall _____ NA _____

23. <u>IF</u> you completed a practicum in a <u>rural area</u>, were you <u>offered</u> employment upon completion of your practicum? Yes _____ No _____ NA_____

24. <u>IF</u> you answered **YES** to question 22 (you were <u>offered</u> employment by the <u>rural-located</u> practicum agency upon completion of your field experience), did you accept the position?

Yes _____ No _____ NA _____

25. **IF** you answered **YES** to question 23 (you accepted an employment offer from the <u>rural-located</u> agency where you completed your practicum), please describe why you did so:

_____

_____

_____

_____

26. **IF** you answered **NO** to question 23 (you were <u>offered</u> employment by the rural-located agency where you completed your field experience), please describe why you DID NOT accept this position:

_____

_____

_____

_____

27. What would describe as the greatest challenges to working in a rural area?

_____

_____

_____

_____

28. What would you describe as the greatest rewards to working in a rural area?

_____

_____

_____

_____

Thank you for completing this survey. Please return it in the self-addressed stamped envelope as soon as possible.

Appendix B

**Challenges, Rewards, and Complexities associated with
Delivering Social Services in Rural Areas Questionnaire
(Face-to-Face Interview Instrument)**

This questionnaire addresses questions associated with Dr. Paul Mackie's research concerning challenges, rewards, and complexities associated with delivering social services in rural areas. Interviews will be conducted by Dr. Mackie, and will be limited to the scope of this investigation. Each participant will have completed the consent form before being interviewed, which is kept on file by Dr. Mackie.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is your age? _____ (asked to seek generational differences)
2. Gender? _____
3. What degrees do you currently hold?_____
4. Did you experience the following during your college education:
   a. Completed a field practicum in a rural area? YES _____ NO _____
   b. Been exposed to rural educational content in the classroom? YES _____ NO _____
5. Are you currently working on a degree? YES _____ NO _____
   If yes, please describe:

   _____

6. What type of agency do you work in and what do you do there?

   _____
   _____

7. How long (in years) have you been a social service worker? How long (in years) have you been working as a social service provider in rural areas?

   a. Been social worker total (years)_____
   b. Been social worker in rural area total (years)_____

8. Please describe your personal background regarding where you grew up. Did you grow up in a rural, suburban, or urban area? What was the population of your community growing up?

   a. If you grew up in a **rural** area, please describe how that experience may have influenced (if it did at all) your decision to work in a rural area:

b. If you grew up in an **urban** area, please describe how that experience may have influenced (if it did at all) your decision to work in a rural area:

c. If you grew up in a suburban area, please describe how that experience may have influenced (if it did at all) your decision to work in a rural area:

9. Do you currently **live** in a rural area? If YES, what adjectives (descriptive words) would you use to describe **living** in a rural area? Feel free to share as many as you wish.

   a. Please discuss the 2- 3 most important adjectives you described above. (*To researcher, seek probing questions as follow-up to this question*).

10. What adjectives would you use to describe **working** in a rural area? Feel free to share as many as you wish.

    a. Please discuss the 2- 3 most important adjectives you described above. (*To researcher, seek probing questions as follow-up to this question*).

11. Please describe challenges you experience **living** in a rural area:

12. Please describe joys you experience **living** in a rural area:

13. Please describe challenges you experience **working** as a social service provider in a rural area:

14. Please describe joys you experience **working** as a social service provider in a rural area:

15. Please describe challenges you experience in your specific workplace:

16. Please describe joys/benefits you experience in your specific workplace:

17. Do you feel "connected" to your community? Explain.

18. What do you feel is unique about working as a social service provider in a rural area?

19. Do you plan to leave where you are now for a more urban location anytime in the future? Explain:

20. If you plan to leave where you are now for a more urban location anytime in the future, is it for professional reasons, personal reasons, or both? Explain:

21. Is there any other information you would like to share about your experiences as a social service provider working in a rural area?

22. Are there any questions you wish to as of me before we conclude this interview?

23. May I re-contact you if I have further questions about the information you have provided?

Yes _____
No _____

Thank you very much for participating in this research. Please feel free to contact me with any further questions *(provide a business card or other form of contact information to participant).*