

Is there really a problem with hiring rural social service staff?

An investigation of rural Minnesota social service supervisors



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Introduction

- Problems associated with hiring/retaining social service staff in rural areas are well identified (see Holzer, Goldsmith, & Ciarlo, 2000; Ricketts, 1999; Schmidt & Klein, 2004)
 - Reasons cited for hiring/retaining complications include:
 - Geographic isolation
 - Lack of professional support
 - Burnout & dissatisfaction with workplace
- This study was designed to further investigate concerns about hiring social service staff in rural areas. Surveyed rural-based social service supervisors across Minnesota.



Background: Rural America Populations

| Year | Population in Rural Areas (%) |
|------|-------------------------------|
| 1800 | 94% |
| 1850 | 85% |
| 1900 | 60% |
| 2008 | 20% |

Garkovich, L. (1989). *Population and community in rural America*. New York: Greenwood Press.

Dimitri, C., Efland, A., & Conklin, N. (2005). The 20th Century transformation of U.S. agriculture and farm policy. United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Information Bulletin Number 3. Retrieved October 28, 2008 from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Economic Research Service via USDA ERS Access:

USDA Economic Research Service. (2008). State fact sheets: United States. Population, income, education, and employment (Updated October 22, 2008). Retrieved November 17, 2008 from United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Economic Research Service via USDA ERS Access: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/StateFacts/US.htm>



Background cont.

- The erosion of rural populations has resulted in lack of:
 - Social services,
 - Mental health services,

Based at least in part by...

- Lack of health, mental health, and social service professionals.

There is a continued need to better understand reasons of problems associated with hiring/retaining social service professionals.



Hypotheses Tested

1. Differences will be identified in hiring workers based on levels of worker education (degree held)
2. Differences will be identified in the educational degrees supervisors feel best prepares workers for rural practice.
3. Differences in difficulty in hiring workers will be identified based on geographic distance.



Research Design

- This exploratory investigation included 183 MN social service supervisors (identified through variety of professional lists – convenience sampling).
- Selected out the 7 MSA Twin Cities counties (all other MSAs remained).
- Pencil and paper survey to be mailed to each supervisor.
- Reminder post cards sent one week after survey.



Survey Response

- 104 of 183 surveys returned – 57% response rate.
- 10 of the returned surveys were deemed not usable due to incomplete information or being completed by someone other than a supervisor.

Quantitative Data

- Descriptive, univariate, bivariate, and regression statistics using SPSS software.

Qualitative Data

- Open axial coding to find categories and themes from responses.



Demographic Findings

- Mean age = 50.2 years
- 71.1% female
- 81.9% employed by a county
- 18.1% held BSW degree
- 9.6% held MSW degree
- Mean county population = 34,325
- Mean distance from an
urban center = 63 miles




Hypothesis One Findings: Educational Levels

Applying a χ^2 analysis – findings suggest supervisors are not always able to hire their preferred choice of degree holder.

- Preferred to hire a BSW – but could do so only **47.9%** of the time.
- Preferred to hire a MSW – but could do so only **27.7%** of the time.

$$(\chi^2 (9, N = 88) = 33.59, p < .001)$$



Hypothesis Two Findings: Best Prepared

A one-sample *t*-test analysis determined:

- 86% of respondents felt a social work degree best prepared employees for rural practice - Compared with: Corrections, General Human Services, Psychology, Sociology.

($M = 6.73$, $SD = 1.13$, $t = 53.02$, $p < .001$)



Hypothesis Three Findings: Difficulties and Distance

Application of regression analysis found a statistically significant relationship between hiring difficulties and distance:

- For every 10 miles moved away from an urban center there is a 3% increase in difficulty of hiring workers.

| <u>Variable</u> | <u>B</u> | <u>SE</u> | <u>β</u> | <u>t</u> |
|---|----------|-----------|---------------------------|----------|
| Distance in miles from Workplace to pop. >50,000 | -.003 | .001 | -.222 | 2.07* |

* $p = <.05$

Illustration of Distance Data

From Mankato, MN:

New Ulm

25 miles/7.5%

Redwood Falls

60 miles/18%

Granite Falls

90 miles/27%

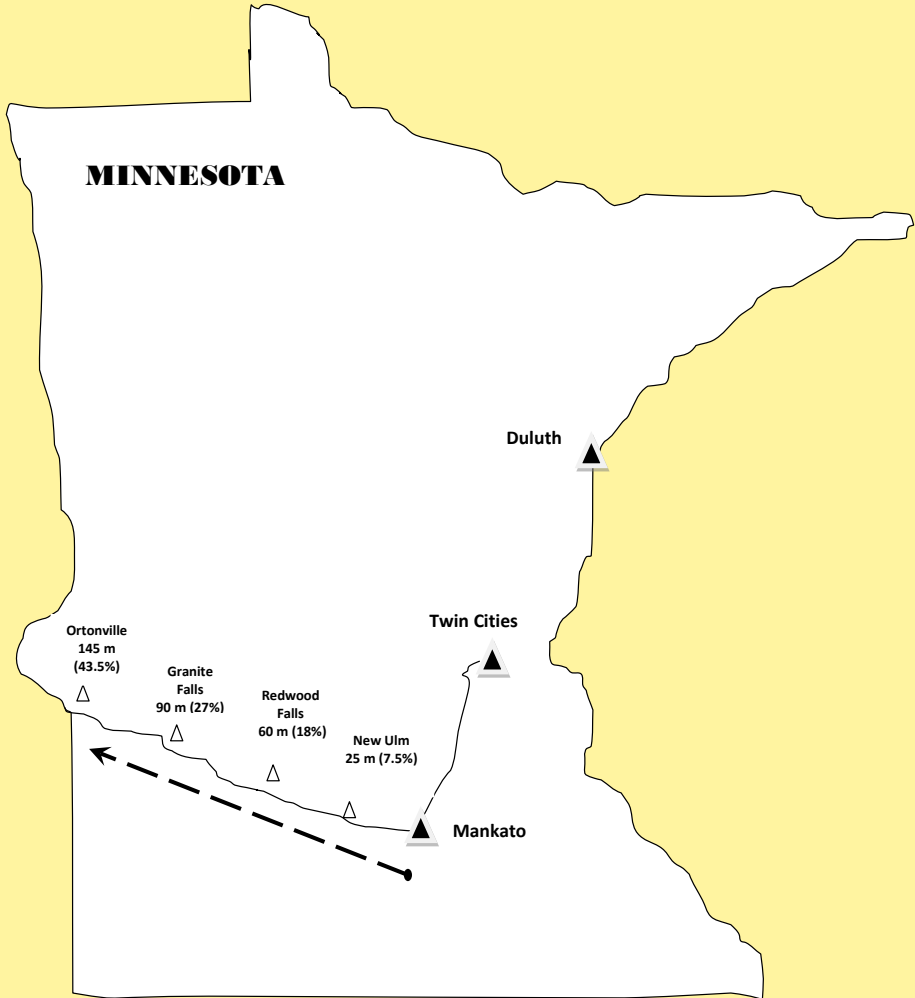
Ortonville

145 miles/43.5%

(note: distance measured in radius miles)

Distance measured using:

<http://www.freemaptools.com/measure-distance.htm>



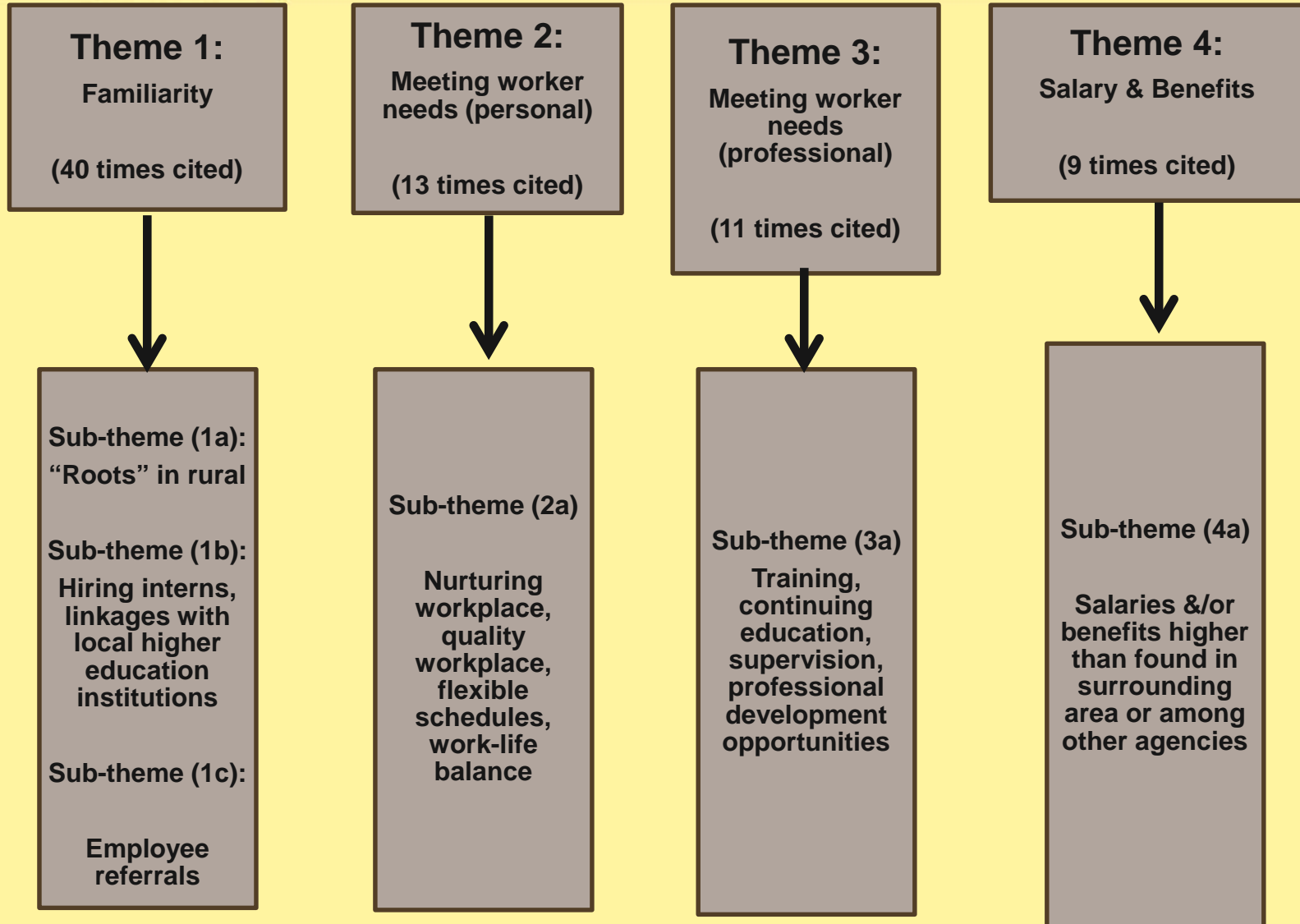


Qualitative Data: **Successes** in Hiring Rural Workers

- Theme One: ***Familiarity***
- Theme Two: ***Meeting worker needs (Personal)***
- Theme Three: ***Meeting worker needs (Professional)***
- Theme Four: ***Salary and benefits***



Successes in Recruiting & Retaining Rural Staff



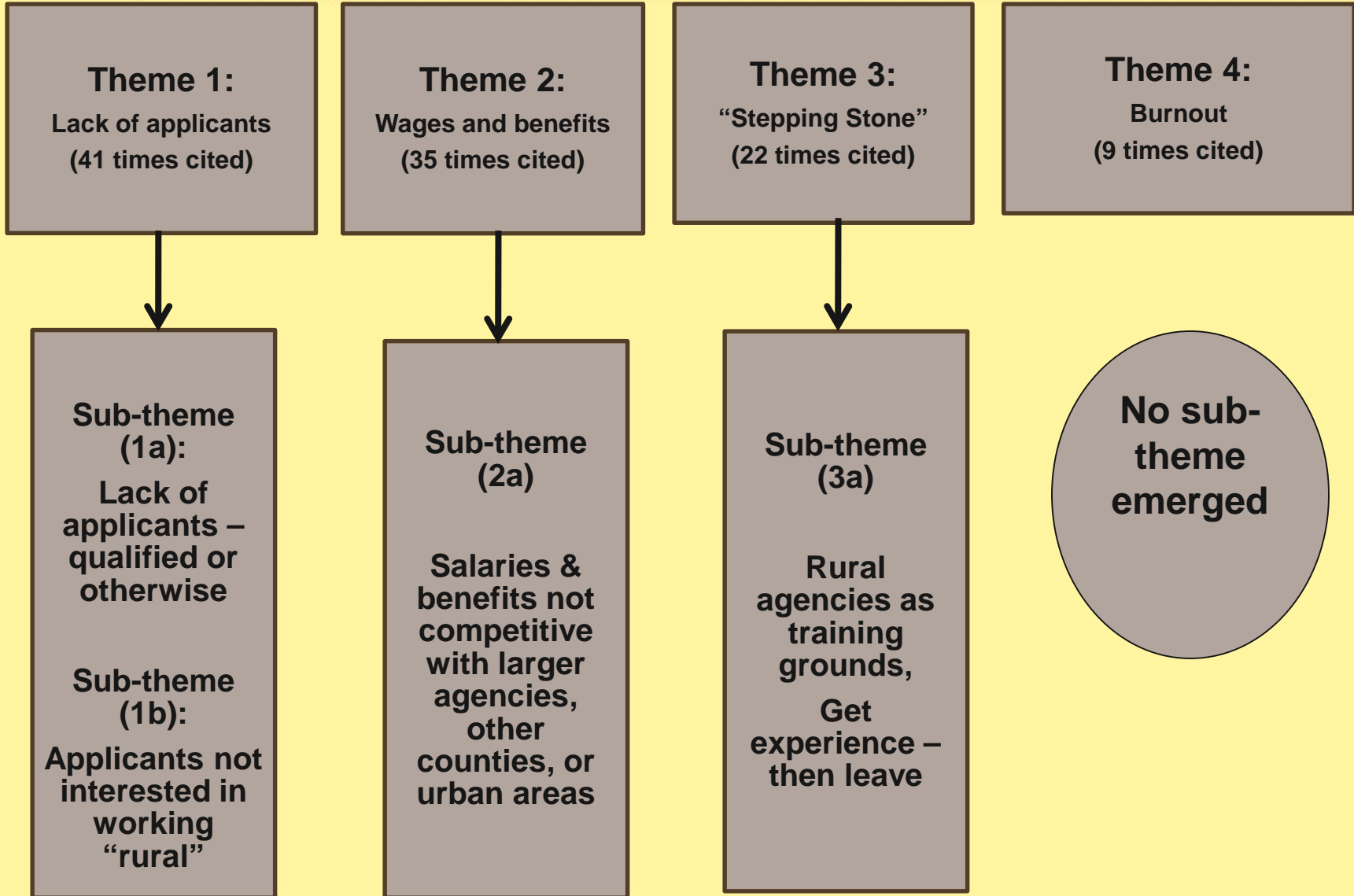


Qualitative Data: **Challenges** in Hiring Rural Workers

- Theme One: ***Lack of applicants***
- Theme Two: ***Wages and benefits***
- Theme Three: ***“Stepping stone”***
- Theme Four: ***Burnout***



Challenges in Recruiting & Retaining Rural Staff





Limitations of Research

- Exploratory and convenience sampling based, should not be generalized,
- Distance self-reported; unable to confirm actual distances from MSAs,
- Based solely on self-reported data which may lead to over or under-reporting,
- Respondents largely county social service supervisors (81.9% of sample),
- Lack of ability to further investigate open ended questions.
- Effects of social work programs in rural areas (between MSAs) not measured*

Geographic limitation

The effects of social work programs in “less urban” locations were not measured.

Examples:

Duluth to Bemidji = 142 miles.

Duluth to St. Cloud = 135 miles.

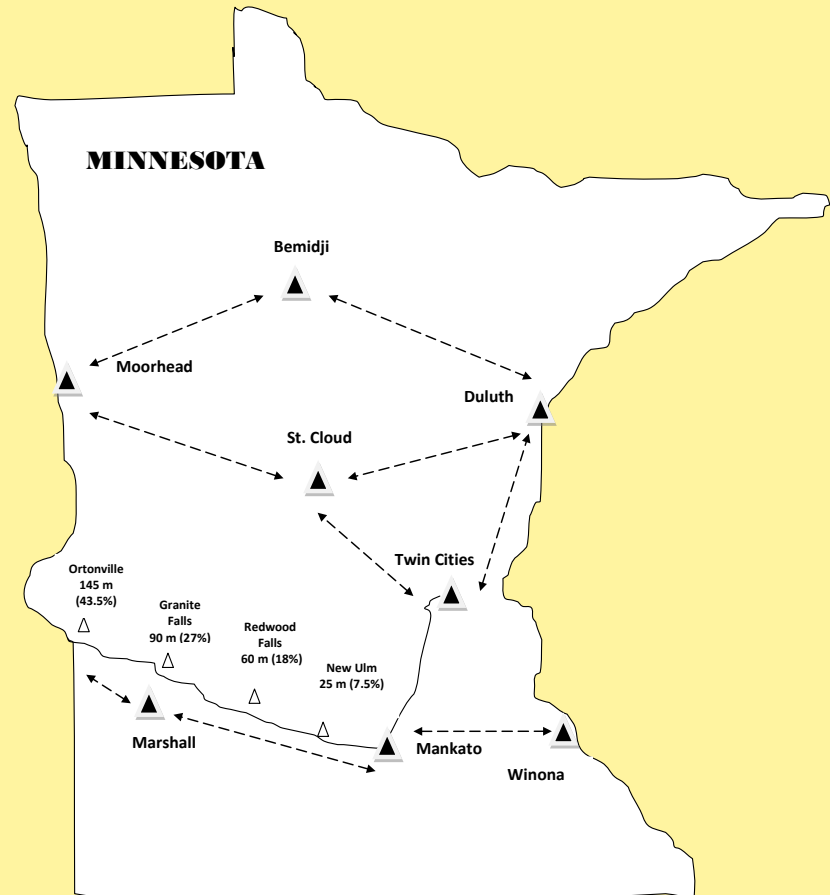
TCs to St. Cloud = 60 miles.

Mankato to Marshall = 91 miles.

Mankato to TCs = 65 miles.

Marshall to Ortonville = 67 miles.

What are the effects of social work programs in rural areas on geographic data?





Future Research

- Duplicate study,
- More targeted research to allow for more confidence around outcomes,
- More specific protocols in measuring distance,
- Broader geographic sampling.



Conclusion

- Nearly 50% of the time the most desirable applicant (BSW) are not hired (supervisors hire non-social work degreed workers instead). When supervisors prefer to hire MSWs, they can only do so 28% of the time.
- Clearly a measureable effect of hiring difficulty based on distance from urban centers,
- Higher education institutions may play role in helping address this concern:
 - Recruiting
 - Internship placement

(Note: Findings presented are currently under journal review)