

**Are There Differences between Rural and
Urban Social Workers?
Understanding Educational and
Demographic Predictors**

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Introduction

- "Rural" is more than geographic location or Census Bureau definition – it is also culture & lifestyle
- Rural communities can be both homogenous & diverse in the same space – immigrants, African Americans, Native Americans...
- Rural areas often lack adequate social welfare services, sufficient staffing of social services, mental health, physical health care

Introduction, con't

- Research suggests problems exist in recruiting and retaining social welfare providers in rural areas (Hodgkin, 2002)
- Reasons:
Geographic isolation, lack of professional support and contacts (Mor Barak, Nissly, & Levin, 2001), and fewer resources (Schmidt & Klein, 2004)

Review of the Literature

- Rural areas erroneously viewed as simple, quiet, and insulated from strife associated with urban areas (Vidich & Bensman, 1960; Zapf, 2001)
- Substance abuse (Schoenberger et al, 2006; Shears et al, 2006)
- Unemployment (Durham & Miah, 1993)
- Homelessness (Nooe & Cunningham, 1992)

Literature Review, con't

- Swanson (1972) argued that professional social work has vacillated between “rural social work practice” and “social work in rural areas” since the 1920s.
- 1930s – “Rural social work” well established.
- 1940s – “Rural social work” waning, replaced with “social work in rural areas”
- Definition problems continue today

Literature Review, con't

- Is there a difference between “rural” and “urban” social work practice? (York, Denton, & Moran, 1989)
- Pugh (2003) refutes – argues that rural social work is sufficiently different from urban

Literature Review, con't

- Does social work education factor into to the conservation? Is there an implied influence given most schools of social work are located in urban areas?
- Social welfare policies, treatment modalities, training, and ethics largely developed in urban centers – sometimes conflict with rural, informal systems (Nelson & McPherson, 2004)

Reason for Study

Gap in the Literature

Evidence suggests there are differences between *rural & urban social work*, but little is known about differences between *rural & urban social workers*

This study investigated whether differences exist between *rural & urban social workers* – if so, to what extent?

Hypotheses Tested

Ho 1: Social workers who grew up in a rural environment are more likely to be employed in a rural setting compared to those from urban

Ho 2: Social workers who completed a practicum in rural area are more likely to be employed in rural areas versus those who completed practicum in urban area

Ho 3: Social workers who received undergraduate or graduate training in rural social work content are more likely to be employed in rural area compared those who did not receive rural-focused training

Methods

Data collected

National, random sample,
cross-sectional mailed
pencil-and-paper survey

- demographic,
- length of time as social worker,
- location of practice,
- location where Ss grew up,
- educational information,
- practicum information

Sampling

- Probability sampling from eight primarily rural states in U.S. (AK, ME, MN, MS, MT, SD, WV, & WY)
- States selected due to rural nature AND existence of "frontier" counties (>7 ppsm). All but WV had at least one frontier county

Sampling, con't

- State-level lists of NASW members
- Sample for 8 states was 7,700 members, of which 1,665 names were randomly selected
- Apriori power analysis found sample size minimum to be 381 (medium effect size statistic (f^2) of .15, calculated with alpha = .05 and power = .95)
- Final count of returned surveys = 876 (53% response rate)

Findings

Subjects

European American (white):
88%, $N = 680$

African American:
5%, $N = 35$

Native American or Alaskan
Native: 4%, $N = 31$

Other*: 3%, $N = 22$

*Asian American, Latino/a, Hispanic,
or ethnicity not otherwise identified

Female: 78%, $N = 594$

Male: 22%, $N = 168$

MSW: 81%, $N = 625$

BSW: 14%, $N = 105$

Doctorate: 5%, $N = 38$

Findings, con't

Field of Practice

- Mental Health: 49%, $N = 354$
- Child Services: 25%, $N = 180$
- Gerontology: 9%, $N = 68$
- Other:
17%, $N = 121$

Employment Setting

- Not-for-Profit (non-gov't): 43%, $N = 182$
- For-Profit: 27%, $N = 205$
- Government (Local, State, Federal): 30%, $N = 226$

Findings, con't

Significant differences found between rural & urban social workers

- Rural SWers employed fewer years overall compared to urban SWers (rural $M = 15.4$, urban $M = 17.4$)
- Rural SWers employed fewer years in current job compared to urban SWers (rural $M = 5.9$, urban $M = 7.0$)
- Rural SWers work more hours per week than urban SWers (rural $M = 40.6$, urban $M = 38.6$)

Hypothesis 1

- **Supported.** Sig difference in the backgrounds of people working in rural & urban settings
- 46% of people working in rural setting grew up in rural area compared to only 26% of people working in urban location, $\chi^2 (1, N = 764) = 33.14, p < .001$)

Hypothesis 2: (Undergraduate)

- **Supported.** Sig differences found in the number of people working in rural & urban settings who had completed practica in rural locations
- 19% of **undergraduates** from rural practicum's were found working in rural areas compared to 8% of people employed in urban area, $\chi^2 (1, N = 640) = 17.95, p < .001$)

Hypothesis 2: (Graduate)

- 13% of people working in a rural area received **graduate training** in rural content, compared to 6% of people working in an urban setting, $\chi^2(1, N = 672) = 11.13, p < .001$)

Hypothesis 3: (Undergraduate)

- **Supported.** Sig differences found among **undergraduate students** who received rural-specific education compared to those who did not
- 21% of those working in rural locations received undergraduate education in rural content compared to 16% of people working in urban locations, $\chi^2 (1, N = 659) = 4.01, p < .05$)

Hypothesis 3: (Graduate)

- 81% of people working in a rural area received graduate-level education in rural content compared to 75% of those working in an urban setting, $\chi^2 (1, N = 667) = 3.22, p < .05$)

Discussion

Three significant predictors identified

1. SWers who were raised in rural areas – more likely to work in rural areas than those raised in urban areas
2. SWers (undergraduate & graduate) who completed rural-based practicum – more likely to work in rural areas compared to those who were in urban-based practicum
3. SWers (undergraduate and graduate) who received education in rural content – more likely to work in rural areas compared to those who did not

Limitations

- Only NASW members included in sample – are non-NASW members different enough to change outcomes?
- 53% response rate – who didn't respond?
- Data from primarily rural states. Sample from predominantly urban locations could be different

Implications for Social Work Education

- These findings suggest that to create rural social workers, we should consider recruiting from rural areas
- This information could be useful to increase social work presence in diverse rural populations (American Indian reservations, African American, Hispanic communities)
- Policymakers interested in increasing rural social work presence may consider incentives to encourage more rural social workers (scholarships, outreach/education programs, support rural social work programs, etc)

For More Information...

"Are there differences between rural and urban social workers? Understanding educational and demographic predictors" by P.F.E. Mackie is currently *in press* – Journal of Baccalaureate Social Workers (JBSW). Scheduled for publication spring 2007.