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
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)
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
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 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 (>7ppsm). 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

Female: 78%, N = 594

Male: 22%, N = 168

MSW: 81%, N = 625

BSW: 14%, N = 105

Doctorate: 5%, N = 38

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