

Voices of Rural America

National Survey Results

In an effort to understand local citizens' current perceptions and priorities about community life, the Pew Partnership for Civic Change commissioned a national survey of 1,830 adults. Conducted in October 2000, interview questions were grouped around three areas:

- community life and participation
- key problems facing communities
- community problem solvers

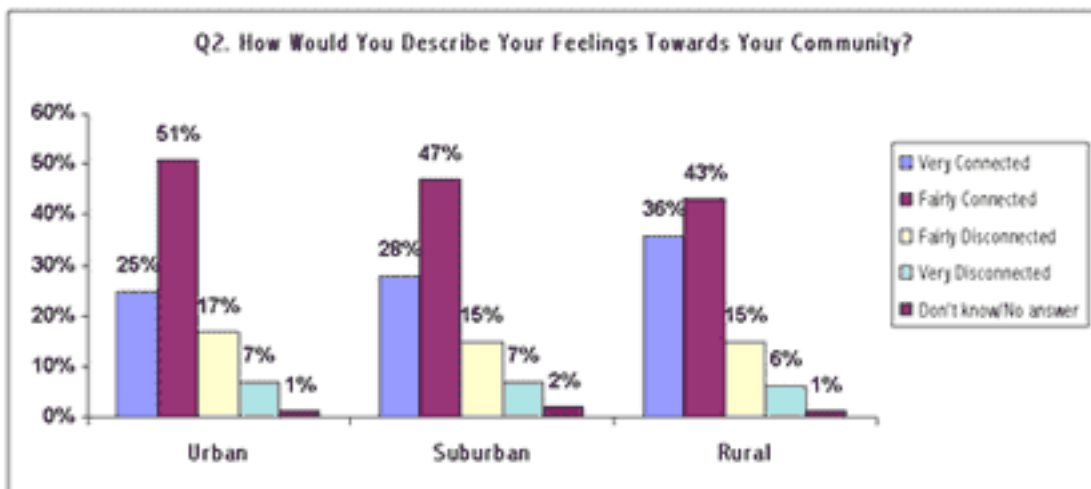
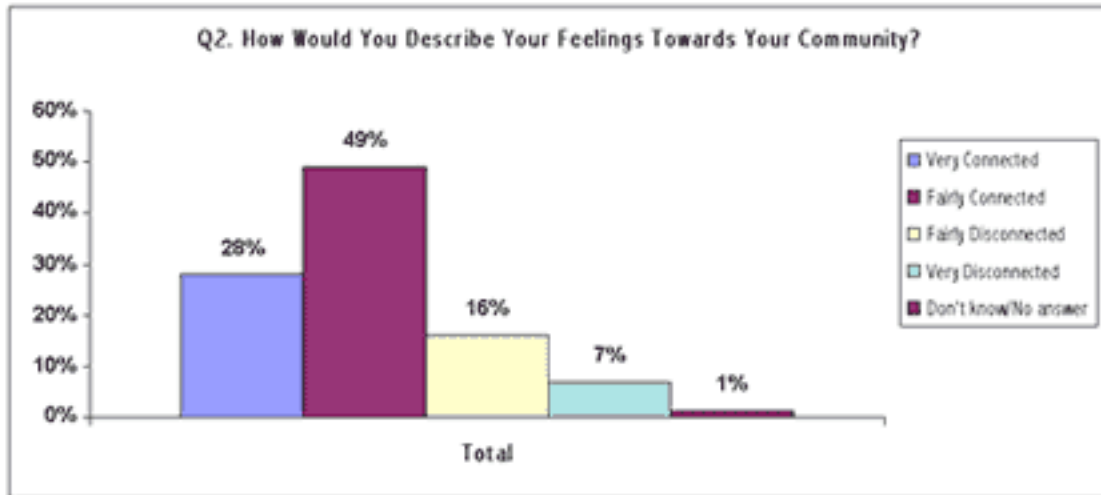
A picture emerges from the survey that both describes current attitudes of rural residents and identifies salient differences and commonalities between urban and rural communities.¹

What follows is a summary of the key findings from this survey.

¹ Rural is defined using the U.S. Census definition of places of 2,500 or fewer persons.

Optimism and Civic Bonds Are Alive and Well in Rural America

Rural residents feel good about their community and hopeful about the future. Over three-quarters of rural residents surveyed rate the quality of life in their community as either excellent or good. Running counter to common perceptions of isolation and real physical detachment, rural residents were more likely to feel connected to their communities than urban residents and equally optimistic about their community's prospects for the future. Eighty percent of rural residents indicated that they feel that their community's best years might be ahead, not behind.

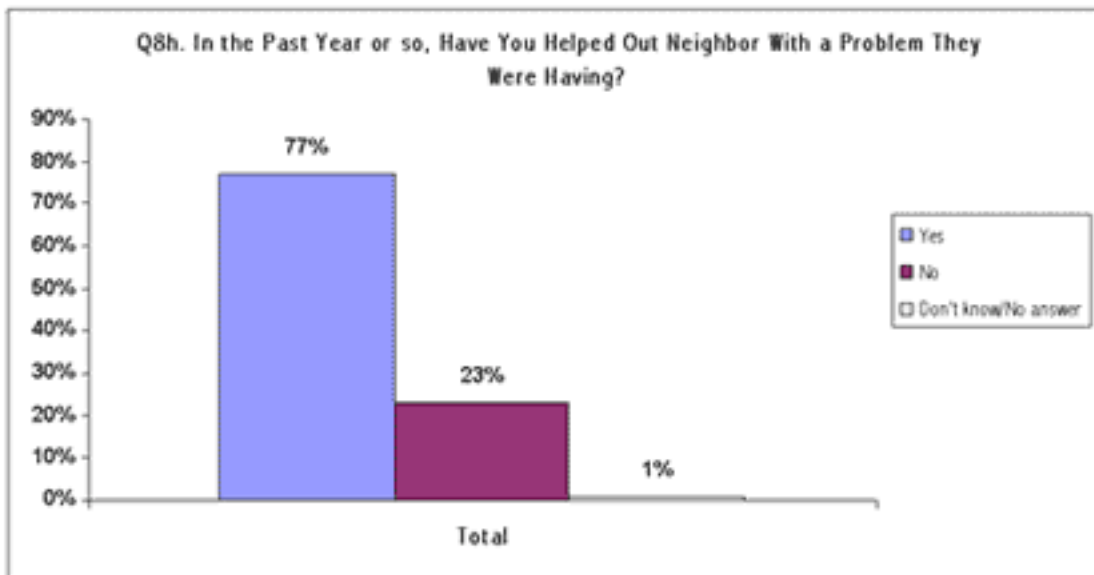
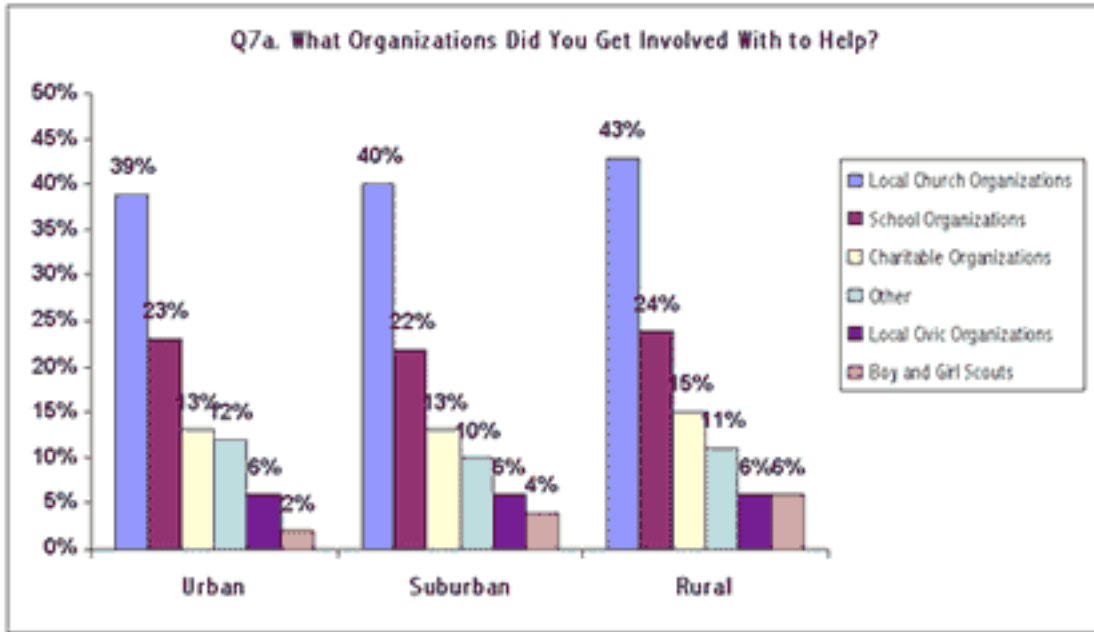


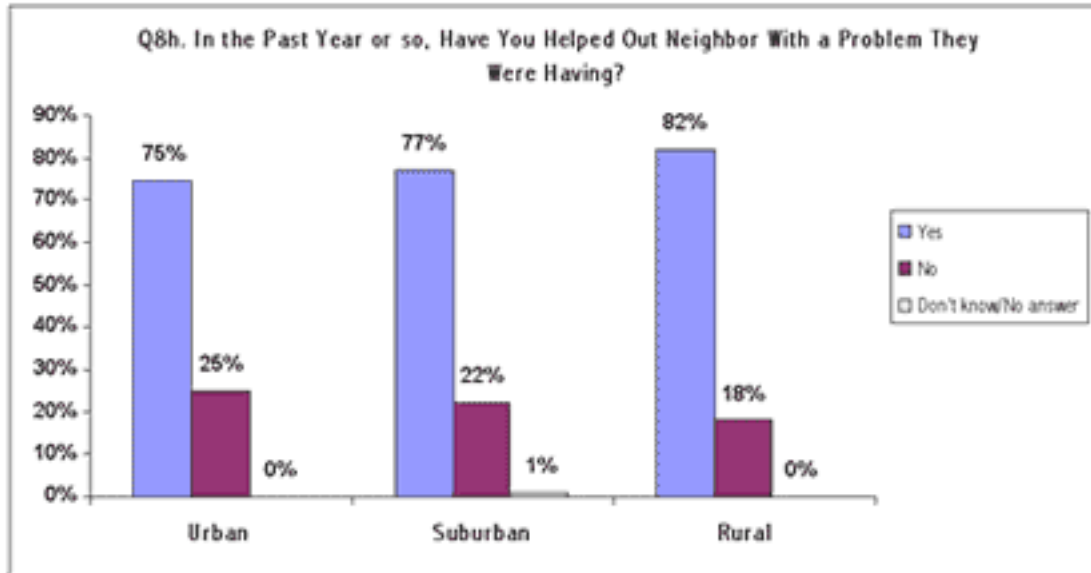
When it comes to civic life, rural residents keep pace with their urban and suburban counterparts. Percentages of volunteering, voting, and charitable contributions for rural residents were approximately equal to those in other types of communities. One might expect geographic distances to reduce the amount of volunteering in rural communities. However, this is not the case, with over 50% of rural residents reporting volunteering in the past year. Rural volunteers are also more likely than urban or suburban residents to commit to volunteering on a regular basis. Even along the lines of simple “neighborly acts,” rural residents report reaching out a helping hand. Over 80% indicated that they had helped out a neighbor with a problem, the highest among urban and suburban categories.



Rural Connectors Abound

The entry points for rural volunteers mirror those reported by urban residents. Local religious organizations and schools were the main outlets for volunteer activity, attracting over two-thirds of volunteers. Thirty-seven percent of rural residents indicated that they have been active in a community group or club during the previous year. One-third had attended a neighborhood or community meeting. Close to half of rural residents report that they regularly attend a house of worship.





Despite high levels of participation in community activities, rural residents experience two main impediments to getting more involved: time and knowledge. Close to two-thirds of rural respondents agree that they do not have enough free time to volunteer. Forty percent say that that they would like to get involved but lack the knowledge about first steps— who to call or how to get involved.

Rural Problems are Real

Survey respondents were asked to rank a list of 18 possible community challenges. Rural residents' concerns dispel any myths of a Lake Wobegone: the easy, small-town life immune from big-city issues. Five specific problems were particularly resonant for those living in rural areas:

- Lack of living wage jobs
- Illegal drugs
- Access to affordable health care
- Teenage pregnancies
- Too many unsupervised children and teens

By far, the most serious issue for rural residents was living-wage jobs. Given the broad economic challenges to rural economies over the past two decades, this is not surprising. Illegal drugs rate equally serious in both urban and rural areas, suggesting that rural residents are as

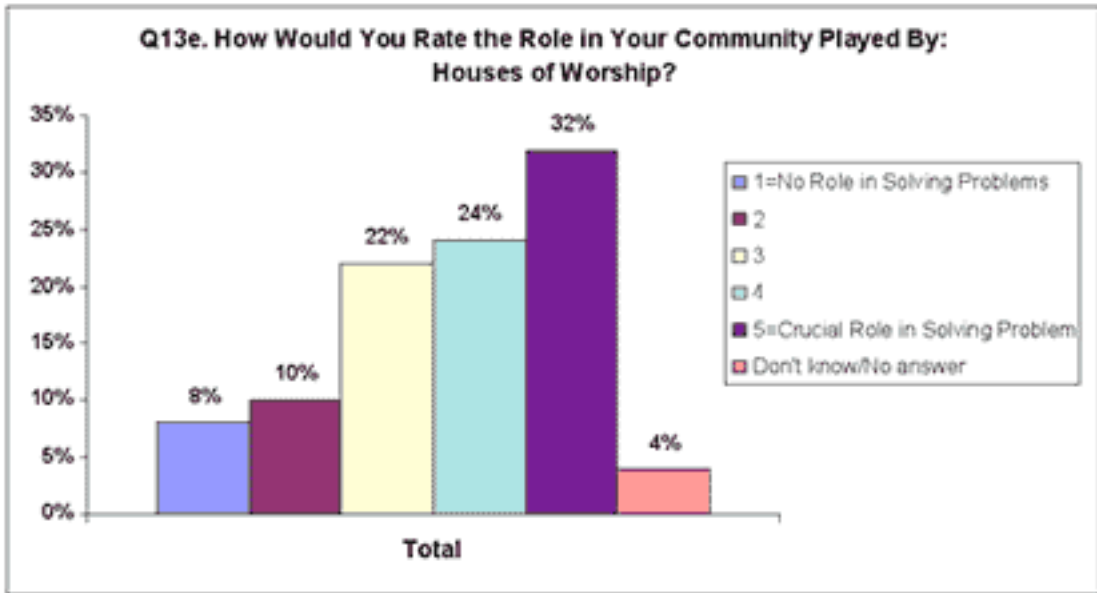
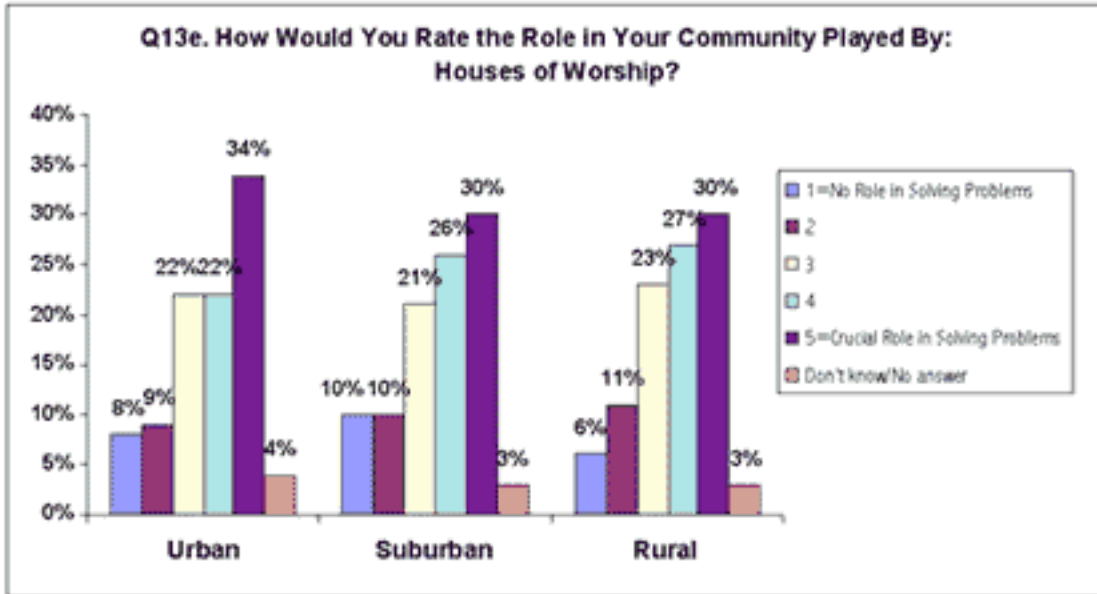
aware and concerned about the issue as their urban peers. Access to affordable health care was the most challenging for rural residents when compared to urban and suburban communities. A variety of factors may explain why rural residents are the most likely to rank health care high including a scarcity of providers, cost, and availability of transportation to use medical services. It is also notable that compared to urban and suburban communities, teen pregnancies are singled out as a particularly serious problem. Combined with the high level of concern about unsupervised children and youth and illegal drugs, clearly rural communities are cognizant of the challenges to providing positive environments for youth development.

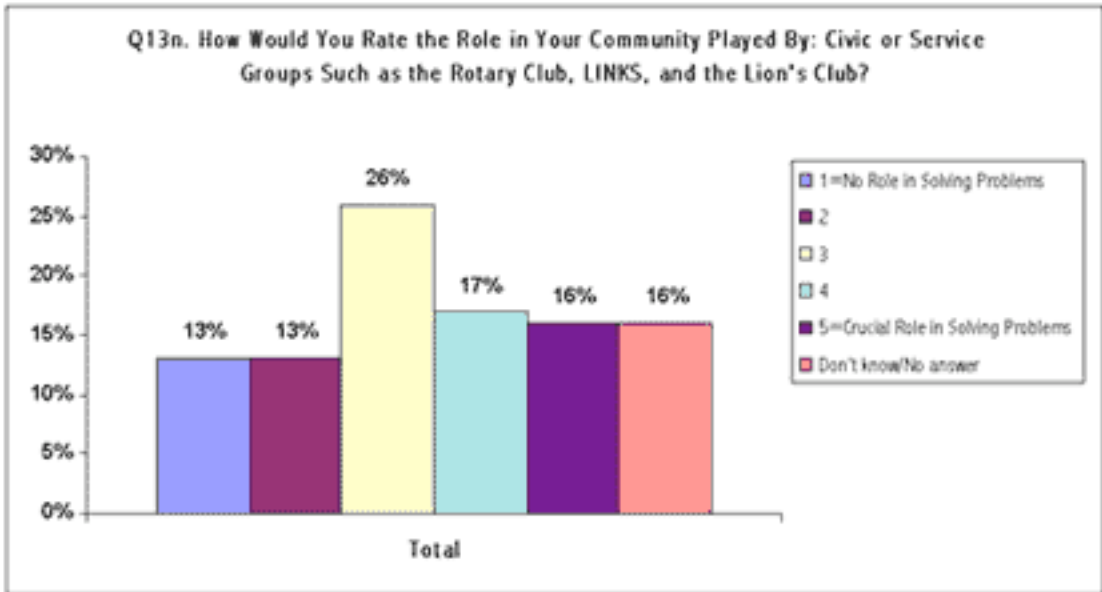
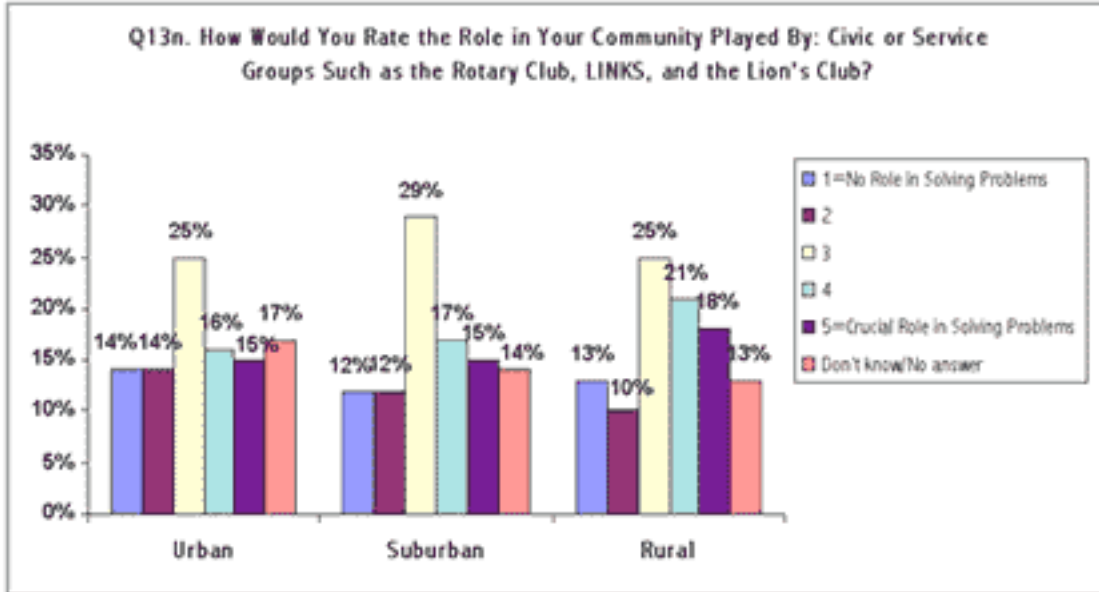
Other important issues for rural residents include affordable housing, insufficient public transportation, and lack of affordable childcare and care for the elderly. Less pressing issues are school violence, low quality public education, and air/water pollution.

Problem Solvers are Close to the Community

Given the challenges posed by local issues, whom do rural residents turn to or view as having a significant impact on these problems? When asked to rank potential problem solvers in their community, rural respondents answer that local religious organizations, the local police department, and friends and neighbors are the top three problem solvers. Friends and neighbors received the highest ranking. Close behind these three were parent-teacher associations, civic/service groups, and local nonprofit organizations. Farthest down the problem-solvers scale were the federal government, labor unions, and the media.

Given the similarities in problems between urban and rural communities, it is reasonable that they may identify the same problem solvers. With the exception of friends and neighbors, rural and urban communities identified the same top problem solvers. In urban communities, nonprofits along with local ministries and the local police department were viewed as the most effective problem solvers. Rural residents were significantly more likely to view their civic and service clubs as more effective problem solvers than those in urban communities. While one might expect the high levels of connectedness to include a role for local business leaders in smaller communities, they were no more likely to be seen as problem solvers than those in urban environments.





Conclusion

The survey suggests that rural and urban communities are more alike than different in terms of how they see their community, choose to get involved, perceive problems, and identify problem solvers. Viewing the survey results with a wide lens, a clear picture emerges of both assets and opportunities in rural communities:

- While physical isolation and economic circumstances certainly play a role in community challenges, they do not pose insurmountable challenges to connecting with others in their community.
- Given the similarities in pressing issues, it seems likely that rural communities are hungry for the same kinds of information about how to solve these problems as urban dwellers.
- Friends and neighbors are one of the biggest building blocks for rural communities. Rural residents are quick to lend a hand and most likely to take a hand when it comes to addressing tough issues.

While the key challenge to volunteering and community involvement in rural and urban communities is time, the other half of the story is lack of information. Finding new ways of connecting potential volunteers to opportunities and community needs presents a valuable opportunity for strengthening rural America.

However, perhaps the most inspiring finding is echoed by the overwhelming number of rural respondents who rank their quality of life as excellent—suggesting that there are enough positives in their community to make them want to stay.