

RAISING RURAL VOICES

Listening to the Hopes and Hardships of Rural Communities



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Foreword

As a former governor of a rural state, the themes about challenges and opportunities in “Raising Rural Voices” echo the views of rural Kansans that I hear every day.

People choose to stay in rural areas because they love the sense of community spirit that permeates everyday life. But many are also fearful that their children and grandchildren will be forced to move away because of the lack of jobs, the cost and the lack of access to health care, and the rising cost of basic services. And they are not sure that their voices are being heard or their views are being considered by policymakers.

Automation came to farm communities decades ago with the improvement of farm equipment and technology which designs planting patterns and crop rotations. Far fewer people are now needed to plant or harvest, and equipment has become far more expensive — a double whammy for the small “family farm.” And while technology disrupted farm employment, investment in “off-farm” jobs didn’t increase. Too often, rural communities became more isolated by the internet divide; they fell behind because of their lack of access to the speed available in metropolitan areas.

The NETWORK rural roundtable discussions brought to light key challenges and identified policy solutions, which are critical to the future of our rural communities. For example, I have worked on health care at the state and federal level, and know that the challenges all Americans face with rising costs and dwindling access are amplified in less populated areas. It’s hard to attract doctors, it’s hard to keep rural hospitals open, and it’s hard to deal with complicated disease management in communities where transportation is difficult. I learned from experience that if a hospital closes in a rural area the town itself “closes,” because many people can’t or won’t live in a community without access to health care.

This report reflects the “active listening” that doesn’t occur frequently enough within states or with policymakers in Washington. Too many decisions are made without understanding the perspective of rural residents or acknowledging the values of shared obligations.

“This report reflects the active listening that doesn’t occur frequently enough within states or with policymakers in Washington.”



We can’t achieve goals as “One America” until we understand that our strength is enhanced by our diversity and that policymakers must attend to the unique challenges faced by the almost 20% of Americans living in rural communities.

Many young adults in rural areas want to continue to live and work and raise their children near family, where neighbors know each other, help each other, collaborate, and cooperate. Those hopes and dreams deserve attention and assistance from state and federal leaders who make strategic decisions about allocation of resources.

The insights in this report are valuable and timely. We need to identify more ways to find common purpose and develop policies that look out for everyone living in the United States. And not only is it wise for policymakers to listen to the challenges of families in rural communities, but to learn some lessons from them — lessons about coming together with a shared purpose and a focus on the future. We will all be better off if we identify and work together on diversifying resources and recognizing the unique hardships and hopes of rural America.

Kathleen Sebelius
Former Kansas Governor and Secretary of Health and Human Services

Introduction

NETWORK strives to mend the economic gaps in our nation through federal policy. The troubling reality for too many families in the United States is that they struggle to access resources they need, and this burden disproportionately falls on marginalized communities. With our members across the country, we work to create a nation where all have what they need to thrive and live together in community. The principles of Catholic Social Justice, as well as lived realities, guide our work and inspire us to advocate for an economy of inclusion.

We base our policy positions on lived realities, not ideology. To know and understand those lived realities, we listen to struggling families and communities. Beginning in 2012, our Nuns on the Bus trips allowed us to visit towns and cities across the country, seeing and hearing their challenges and experiences. This informs our advocacy in support of policies. More recently, we began hearing about the environmental, economic, and social challenges felt in rural areas, but we did not understand the reality. So, in 2019 and 2020, NETWORK hosted 17 rural roundtable conversations in 16 states, meeting and listening to a diverse group of more than 250 people living in rural parts of the United States.

These conversations vividly expressed the lived reality in those towns and regions. As we often heard, people living in rural areas believe their communities have a lot to offer, but they also face unique challenges that our country's elected officials have not done enough to address. To make sure their voices are heard, we provide the following collection of experiences, observations, anxieties, and aspirations from our discussions.

The serious economic challenges facing rural communities have clear connections to policy choices made by our nation's leaders, and those leaders need to hear rural residents' struggles when making decisions to chart the course for our nation.

We hope our findings will guide our collective efforts to create a more just, equitable country for all people in the United States — the 100% — including those in rural areas.



Brownsville, Texas Rural Roundtable

NETWORK Rural Roundtables Methodology

While some of the roundtables were held in metropolitan areas, rural roundtable participants were residents of surrounding non-metro areas up to two hours away.

Descriptions of comments from rural roundtable participants are derived from NETWORK's contemporaneous notes and records of events. They are intended to provide an overview of observed discussion that represents topics covered and sentiments expressed, and are not comments reproduced verbatim unless denoted by quotation marks.

Dear Washington,

For nearly 50 years, NETWORK has advocated for policies that advance the common good and promote justice and dignity for everyone. Since our founding, we have been a moral voice on Capitol Hill, listening to and lifting up the people who you need to hear from across the country.

So, in these polarized times, when division is exploited for political gain, we at NETWORK returned to our roots. We heard Pope Francis' call to a culture of encounter: "Not just seeing, but looking; not just hearing, but listening; not just passing people by, but stopping with them; not just saying 'what a shame,' but allowing yourself to be moved with compassion." [1]

I have driven thousands of miles and met people at service sites, community events, town halls, rallies, interviews, and roadside lunch stops during our Nuns on the Bus trips. Encounter drives the Nuns on the Bus trips, informs NETWORK's advocacy, and should shape our federal policies.

When our advocacy to mend the gaps led us to realize that health care, housing, education, and more were failing in rural areas, I saw a new opportunity for encounter. In the spirit of Pope Francis, NETWORK organized rural roundtables in every region of the United States and listened to the lived realities of more than 250 people.

To begin each roundtable, I asked "What do city folk get wrong about rural communities?" This usually elicited a laugh, but quickly turned into serious conversation. Almost every place, participants said that city people think country people are dumb and uneducated – but this is not true. As I observed how similar issues challenge both rural and metropolitan areas, this gap in perception was the most poignant divide.

Time and time again, I heard how rural areas are trying to cope with national challenges that affect their communities in unique ways. But problems rural residents face accessing health care or other issues are not easily solved with telehealth or other "city answers."

In eastern Kentucky, a retired high school teacher said with tears in his eyes: "I just want my representatives to represent me. I want them to meet with me just once, not only their donors." Today, as wealth, opportunity, and influence are increasingly concentrated, it is clear that you have not paid enough attention to the lived realities of people across the U.S. It is time to change that.

At a roundtable at Jubilee Farm outside Springfield, Illinois, an observer from metropolitan Springfield spoke with wonder in his voice. He said, "You folks are talking about the same things that we talk about in the central city." These roundtables taught us just that. The whole country, metropolitan and rural, shares common struggles. This report attempts to lift up what we heard: the hopes and hardships of the rural areas we encountered, which mirror the hopes and hardships of our country as a whole.

“I invite you to embrace a culture of encounter as you read this report.”

To open your minds and your hearts to places you may have seen but not looked at; stories you may have heard but not listened to, and to people you've passed but haven't stopped to meet. In this encounter, we can find a common way forward and heal our democracy.

Sister Simone Campbell, SSS
Executive Director
NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice

[1] Encyclical Letter. *The Holy Father Francis*. http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/cotidie/2016/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie_20160913_for-a-culture-of-encounter.html

Rural Communities Have a Lot to Offer



Albuquerque, New Mexico Rural Roundtable

The people who came to NETWORK's roundtables love living in rural communities, appreciate their surroundings, and deeply value how friends and neighbors treat one another. Outside of their communities though, they feel misunderstood and undervalued. Many participants stated they often feel judgement from those outside their community, more often than not feeling dismissed when voicing concerns and forgotten by policymakers.

Who Lives in Rural America?

During NETWORK's rural roundtable discussions, we met people living in rural areas across the United States. They were young adults, parents, and grandparents. They worked as service employees, teachers, farmers, and more. There was no single story or single personality that fit the many diverse roundtable participants we met. In 2010, almost 60 million people, about 19% of the population, lived in rural areas of the United States.[2] Over the course of a year, we were able to meet and talk to over 250 of these rural residents.

When asked to picture a rural area, it's likely that the people you imagine are white. This wouldn't necessarily be inaccurate, but it is incomplete. White residents make up nearly 80% of the rural population, but the rural population is nowhere close to being racially monolithic, according the U.S. Department of Agriculture.[3]

A full 9% of the rural population is Hispanic, making up the fastest growing segment. Black rural residents comprise 8%, while American Indians make up 2%, and a smaller Asian American population, about 1% lives in rural areas.[4] The rural population is slowly becoming more racially and ethnically diverse as the percentage of white residents declines, though people of color have always lived in rural areas.

This racial diversity was evident at NETWORK's roundtables, with attendees of all racial and ethnic backgrounds sharing their experiences. Participants were candid and courageous in offering their observations, pointing to ongoing challenges in rural race relations as well as universal struggles shared across racial lines.

When considering the role of race in their communities, many roundtable participants again noted the strengths and weaknesses of living in a tight knit community. While overall, close connections are a rural strength, the heavily relationship-based living that characterizes rural areas can magnify tensions and inequality when there are racial differences between groups. In Albuquerque, New Mexico, participants noted significant tensions among Native peoples, the Latinx population (both descendants of Spanish settlers and recent immigrants), and white residents.

[2] Rural America. United States Census Bureau. <https://gis-portal.data.census.gov/arcgis/apps/MapSeries/index.html?appid=7a41374f6b03456e9d138cb014711e01>

[3] USDA Rural America at a Glance, 2018 Edition. John Cromartie, United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service. November 2018. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details/?pubid=90555>

[4] USDA Rural America at a Glance, 2018 Edition. John Cromartie, United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service. November 2018. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details/?pubid=90555>

Physical segregation continues to be a barrier to progress. Roundtable participants in Poetry, Texas described how the nearby town of Terrell is separated from other areas by railroad tracks, perpetuating de facto segregation long after the end of legal segregation. In Tutwiler, Mississippi participants noted that there are clearly defined Black neighborhoods and white neighborhoods, and people know where they can and can't go. They also lamented that conditions of basic services including roads, schools, and sanitation were clearly better in white neighborhoods.

Social obstacles, however, seemed to loom even larger than physical. Many respondents across roundtables named unfamiliarity as one of the biggest drivers of racial tension. Cultural and economic norms were also identified as playing a role in perpetuating racism since neighbors need each other in different circumstances and are thus more likely to give people a "pass" on racially insensitive behavior. As participants in Tutwiler observed, these social barriers close off opportunity for Black residents and victims of discrimination by denying them social networks that could lead to better economic opportunities.

“Relationships are key, and it is difficult to break through the various barriers because trust is hard to develop among diverse people. Latinx are pushing to be seen in Mendocino. They have been there for a couple of generations but are not readily considered part of the community.”

—Davis, California Rural Roundtable

On multiple occasions, participants expressed concern about the state of Native populations in rural areas. Specifically, concerns that Native community members face challenges speaking out or gaining recognition, and that younger Native people are losing ties to their cultural identity.

Today, economic factors drive racial diversity in many rural communities. As participants in Columbia, Missouri and Clinton, Iowa noted, the demand for labor in agriculture and meat processing leads to demographic change. And, even as discrimination against non-white workers or workers who don't speak English persists, people acknowledge that the workers are needed, and their community's culture must adapt.

The Rural Way of Life

When NETWORK asked roundtable participants what they like most about living in a rural area there was a clear, universal response: community. In the Northeast, Southwest, Appalachia, Midwest, and the South, a sense of familiarity, mutual support, and shared obligation defines their communities and illustrates how residents see themselves and the places they live.

This sense of community starts with individual relationships. As a roundtable attendee in Poetry put it, one-to-one relationships are crucial in rural areas. Time and time again, we heard how people are what make rural communities a welcoming home. Attendees in Columbia described their neighbors as accessible, helpful, friendly, and genuine. This also shapes how they see their communities compared to cities. In Richmond, Indiana we heard that residents value the deep communal connection that can't be developed in places where people are more transient, and how people in rural areas are less afraid to make connections. Or, as one attendee in Union Hill, Virginia put it, "Even if you don't know people, you know them."

Rural residents also described how individual relationships create a valuable reserve of social capital and shared responsibility. A participant in our Davis, California roundtable could have been speaking at any of our events, summing up the benefit of living in a rural area as the sense of community that comes from knowing people take care of each other. For example, participants at many roundtables noted how the whole community pitches in to help raise and guide children, or rallies to help parents in need and neighbors facing tragedy.

“People who live here do know each other and come together. They show up if needed to deal with tornados or other things...There is treasure in responding to needs, for the common good...Together we have hope that the problems can change.”

—Springfield, Illinois Rural Roundtable

Rural residents value self-reliance and prize the independence living in a small town requires. But, our participants made it clear that an emphasis on personal responsibility does not mean expecting everyone to go it alone. For example, in Poetry there was a vigorous back-and-forth about where personal responsibility ends and our obligations to each other begin. In this discussion, it became clear that “personal responsibility” is often used as shorthand for “not government.” The communal duty felt by people in rural areas leads them to help one another overcome challenges bigger than one person, or one family, can face alone. We heard about how it is common practice to bring casseroles to sick or elderly community members, and how some participants’ city-dwelling relatives were and asked how much it costs for this service.

A reluctance toward excessive government intervention and concern about over-regulation appeared in different contexts. In Richmond, this sense of “not government” was explicitly related to the federal government, which seems far away from their issues and not as effective as state government. Instead, they see state government as better due to the proximity to the community. Building off of this, local government is seen as the most trustworthy of all levels of government due to the ability for community members to pop in and talk with their representatives as needed. One participant expressed disdain seeing so much of his tax bill go to federal taxes and thought people might be less resistant to taxes if more of them went to their local community and had tangible, local benefits.

In Oil City, Pennsylvania, attendees talked about forging partnerships to make a difference through inter-church organizations, city governments, and small resident groups. As one participant in Tiffin, Ohio said, “We may not always agree, but we can get things done.”

In addition to community, the pace and space afforded by rural living was also part of the attraction for residents. A Union Hill participant summed up the sentiments of many when she expressed her appreciation for the peaceful way of living, quietness of the surroundings, ability to see the stars, and connection to wildlife. Proximity to the natural environment is a key aspect of rural life, and environmental threats that compromise that relationship are a major concern.

Rural Communities Feel Unseen

Rural roundtable participants clearly value connection in their communities and yearn to feel it with the rest of their country. However, they do not believe the feeling is always mutual. In fact, a common theme at many roundtables was the sense that people living on the coasts and in cities don’t understand how rural residents live or why they choose to live the way, and the frustration at how that lack of understanding is felt as condescension or dismissal.

One possible reason for this disconnect is the unique way rural communities function. As participants in Columbia noted, metropolitan residents may not understand the fabric of rural communities and how everyone is connected. They described how there is no anonymity. Whether taking a position on an issue, doing business together, participating in the PTA, or anything else, they are always encountering the same people. NETWORK roundtable participants clearly cherish the bonds fostered by their communities, but that closeness is also a challenge that isn’t present in metropolitan life.

We heard repeatedly that this lack of understanding makes it easy for rural residents to feel written off. Participants in areas as different as Poetry, Texas and Amsterdam, New York discussed the perception that rural areas are simply “flyover states” or “dots on the landscape” that are forgotten and left behind. Even more frustrating, in so many cases, rural and metropolitan residents have the same aspirations, fears, and needs. More challenges unite these different communities than divide them.



Laguna Pueblo, New Mexico

American Challenges and the Rural Experience

Rural individuals and families are concerned about many of the same issues as their metropolitan counterparts, though they experience them in different ways. Policymakers need to address common challenges with solutions tailored to the rural reality. To do that, it is important to understand how challenges faced everywhere, like keeping up with the cost of living and ensuring access to health care, are felt in rural communities.

The Rural Kitchen Table

Across our roundtables, participants were concerned about the deteriorating condition of the economic foundation that used to support their towns and neighborhoods. No matter the state or region, the sources of jobs and growth rural residents had counted on for generations are no longer reliable. There was a pervasive feeling that good jobs are harder to come by, and access to opportunity is shrinking. Part of that feeling was driven by the widespread departure of traditional industries and businesses.

The specific types of work that replaced some of the old jobs varied by region, ranging from tourism (in Albuquerque), to retail distribution centers (in Amsterdam), to other types of service jobs that emphasize interpersonal skills (in Oil City). But, according to participants, they all present two common challenges: They are poor matches for the skills people have in the community and they don't pay particularly well.

In Adrian, Amsterdam, Oil City, and Whitesburg, Kentucky, rural roundtable participants explained that the service sector jobs that replaced farming or industry jobs keep hours down to avoid offering benefits, provide little in the way of time off or scheduling flexibility for parents, and often fail to reemploy local residents because they don't have the skills for the new jobs or access to effective training. In general, there was a sense that large corporations view workers as disposable. Participants felt expensive tax packages or other incentives used to recruit new employers were actually counterproductive and that they diverted resources away from those in need.

“There used to be manufacturing but that left and now there is a dearth of opportunity. Industries didn't survive advancements in technology. Now there are just fast food places. Most people work in the service sector. There used to be more of a middle class.”

—Adrian, Michigan Rural Roundtable

We also heard that challenging economic circumstances are damaging the fabric of rural communities by straining core community services. In numerous communities, shrinking tax bases had led to cuts in important services like police (in Springfield), firefighting (in Amsterdam), and schools (in Springfield and Columbia). In Union Hill, participants talked about how a shrinking local tax base forced the community to tighten eligibility guidelines for children's mental health services and curtail access. Economic circumstances are also depressing volunteerism. In Tiffin, surrounding towns that rely on volunteer fire departments can't staff them because so many people need to work two jobs and don't have time to help.

The fact is, so many rural communities are struggling economically, leading to families being unable to keep up with the cost of living, and some even falling into poverty. Participants in Poetry named wages as a huge problem because people don't make enough to live, have leisure time with their families, or take vacation. Many families feel they are just hanging on, while others are what Oil City participants referred to as ALICE (Asset-Limited Income-Constrained Employed), meaning they make too little money to truly get by but too much to be eligible for public assistance. In Richmond, participants estimated that almost a quarter of the local population would be considered "working poor." Participants in Clinton and Tiffin both pointed to high child poverty and rates of students who qualify for free or reduced school lunch.

The cost of child care also received special mention. This is not surprising: according to the Center for American Progress, the cost of child care in rural areas has grown steadily and earnings have failed to match this growth.[5] Rural families spend an average of 12.2% of their income on child care compared to 10.8% for metropolitan families, though metropolitan families spend more per week overall. The same study finds that 60% of rural families live in a "child care desert" with very limited access to child care.

The Need for Better Transportation Options

All rural roundtable participants readily acknowledged that distance is simply a fact of rural life. Roads are the only way people in rural areas can get to jobs, groceries, and health care, and rural residents need a car they can take on these long drives. Those who don't have reliable access to a car face serious challenges.

“There is dial-a-ride where you can call the day before to get a ride but it seems to have a fixed schedule that isn't really convenient for medical appointments in other towns...If you have a job you need a car unless you just live and work in town.”

—Wabasha, Minnesota Rural Roundtable



Downtown Tiffin, Ohio

“The ability of working families to stay afloat as the cost of living, child care, elder care, and other demands rise is a problem. Day care is lacking and is unaffordable. \$200 a week. In a month it is often more than a mortgage payment.”

—Columbia, Missouri Rural Roundtable

[5] 5 Facts To Know About Child Care in Rural America. Leila Schochet, Center for American Progress. June 4, 2019. <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/early-childhood/news/2019/06/04/470581/5-facts-know-child-care-rural-america/>

In addition to getting to work, which is essential to rural families' livelihoods, access to transportation can also impede efforts to improve skills and education. People shared how they could not go to trainings or classes because they simply couldn't get to them. One participant in Richmond couldn't get to evening skilled trade classes without either a friend to drive them or a long walk.

Further, for those who are walking, there are often issues of sidewalk safety, or lack of safe public sidewalks. We heard in Tutwiler this was a particular concern in predominately Black neighborhoods.

While those in metropolitan areas are able to reap the benefits of ridesharing or car services, in rural areas, we heard that ridesharing or car services are not widely available or have to be called in advance. Similarly, public transit, if available, has a constrained schedule. The little public transit that does exist in rural areas does not work for many workers' schedules.

Public transportation has the potential to greatly improve the rural reality. An American Public Transportation Association study highlights how public transportation options could help serve a growing rural population that is increasingly elderly, benefit rural residents with disabilities, and reduce costs in areas with lower wages and higher poverty.[6] The participants at our roundtables made it clear they would be eager to take advantage of public transportation if it was more available.

“There is no public transit program, and to have people make an appointment to come in is really difficult because a taxi costs so much. Getting just to the grocery store or any appointment is difficult. They have an extensive “backpack program” to send food home on the weekend so that people can eat. County workers have to travel a LOT to get to people or provide transportation to appointments. The majority of a care coordinator’s day is spent driving.”

—Amsterdam, New York Rural Roundtable

Transportation issues severely effect health outcomes. In Wantage, New Jersey we heard participants voice concerns on transportation restrictions that are negatively affecting some of the most marginalized members of the community — disabled adults. Restrictions on transportation for the only adult daytime care center in the area, for severely disabled adults, prevents them from accessing much needed medical care and sheltered workshops. For many people living in rural areas, access to health care starts with access to transportation. Without reliable and affordable transportation, illnesses and health issues are left untreated and simply getting groceries is a heavy burden on many families.



Downtown Tiffin, Ohio

Rural Housing Availability, Cost, and Quality

While many often think of housing and renting challenges as unique to metropolitan areas, rural communities also struggle with housing cost, availability, and quality. A 2018 Urban Institute study on rural housing found that 1 in 4 rural renters spent more than 50% of their income on housing.[7] Additionally, 38% of rural communities faced moderately severe rental housing needs while 58% experienced less severe needs.

When it comes to affordable rent, many rural communities feel their concerns are brushed aside by policymakers. We heard across the country that while rent may not be as high as in some metropolitan areas, it is still a problem.

[6] Public Transit's Impact on Rural and Small Towns: A Vital Mobility Link. Tom Litman, Victoria Transport Policy Institute. 2017. <https://www.apta.com/wp-content/uploads/Resources/resources/reportsandpublications/Documents/APTA-Rural-Transit-2017.pdf>

[7] Rental Housing for a 21st Century Rural America: A Platform for Production. Corianne Payton Scally, Brandi Gilbert, Carl Hedman, Amanda Gold, Lily Posey, Urban Institute. October 2, 2018. <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/rental-housing-21st-century-rural-america>

“In Clinton you need \$21,000 a year for a one-bedroom apartment. But if you are making minimum wage this means working 57 hours a week to be able to afford it.”

—Clinton, Iowa Rural Roundtable

Access to quality, affordable housing also affects the ability to draw in new residents and keep existing community members. Without new people moving to rural areas, local economies suffer and municipal systems are increasingly strained as the local population gets older. As those in Clinton noted, their community lacks quality housing, so that if new people do come to Clinton, they are not able to live in Clinton, instead choosing housing options in neighboring towns. This becomes problematic because they then cannot experience the strong ties to community that are so valuable.

Frustration at federal housing, and lack of federal action in particular, was raised. At rural roundtables across the country, we heard unanimously that available local housing was often abandoned, unsafe, or outdated. Participants described federally funded housing that was in disrepair and in critical need of upgrades. Participants noted that legislators needed to understand that a 30-unit affordable housing complex in Hagerstown, Indiana has maintenance needs just as a complex with thousands of units in New York City does.

Insufficient housing supply and a lack of quality, affordable federal housing options causes some rural community members to experience homelessness. It is hard for communities themselves to meet this need. One participant noted that in their community, the homeless shelter is only open from October through April. Others raised concerns about people living in vans or trailers, often lacking access to utilities and spread far apart — this also means the exact homeless population numbers are hard to capture.

Rural Poverty and Food Insecurity

While rural communities are a critical source of water and food for the rest of the nation, the Census Bureau finds rural residents frequently suffer from food insecurity.[8] According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), poverty rates are 4% higher in rural areas than in cities.[9]

“Some grow their vegetables and share with neighbors, but others don’t because they have the farm and outside jobs and there is no time to do their own kitchen gardens.”

—Columbia, Missouri Rural Roundtable

We heard concerns about poverty and food insecurity in nearly every community. Clinton participants expressed “big poverty” in their area noting an estimate that around 60% of elementary school students are on the state free lunch program and their families participate in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). In Wantage, New Jersey we also heard how food insecurity affects the senior population — and that they account for most of the clients at food pantries.

We also heard serious concerns that purchasing fresh food is often impossible for families in rural areas. Our nation has too many communities where there is limited or no access to affordable and nutritious food, usually due to lack of access to supermarkets or community farmers markets where fresh fruits and vegetables are readily available.[10]

“There are vast food “deserts,” but this is giving deserts a bad name. Food insecurity and child hunger are a big issue in the rural areas. There are no grocery stores in rural communities and [they] might have a little “bodega” but not fresh food.”

—Albuquerque, New Mexico Rural Roundtable

[8] Rural America is Hungry. Jessica Leigh Hester, Citylab. <https://www.citylab.com/equity/2017/05/hunger-in-rural-america-map-meal-gap-report/525549/>

[9] Rural Poverty & Well-Being. United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service. August 20, 2019. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/rural-economy-population/rural-poverty-well-being/>

[10] Documentation. United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service. October 31, 2019. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/documentation/>

This has created a prime market for retailers like Family Dollar and Dollar General to enter communities that do not have a grocery store. According to CNN, around 75% of Dollar General stores are in towns with 20,000 or fewer people, the majority of which are in Southern states.[11] One participant from Columbia discussed how Dollar General is both a problem and a lifeline.

Immigration in Rural America

In rural communities, immigration remains a complex and evolving issue. The U.S. Department of Labor's National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) found more than 70% of hired crop workers are foreign-born, [12] while a separate study from Texas A&M found half of all dairy workers are immigrants.[13]

As we were told repeatedly: in rural areas, there is discrimination against people who do not speak English, but also a reliance on their labor. In Clinton, Columbia, and Amsterdam, participants noted that agricultural facilities like slaughterhouses, meat processing plants, and dairy farms are heavily dependent on undocumented immigrants for labor, and in Adrian, workers who are exploited dare not speak out for fear of being deported. Many expressed their experiences of poor working conditions, meager wages, and long hours.

For immigrants, the fear of deportation touches many aspects of their daily life, including mundane tasks like getting a driver's license. In Adrian, we were told that Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients were not getting driver's licenses for fear of deportation. Those fears spill into distrust of law enforcement and the political establishment.

“People come to see immigration as the problem, but the reality is that their \$80K a year jobs are gone and there is nothing even close to replace them.”

—Springfield, Illinois Rural Roundtable



Springfield, Illinois Rural Roundtable

Rural Relationship to the Environment

As we noted previously, we heard that maintaining a close connection to nature is a fundamental part of the appeal of being a rural resident. Participants of our roundtables value and cherish their natural resources, but see them under threat.

“Connection to the land is physically and emotionally healing.”

—Springfield, Illinois Rural Roundtable

Water is necessary to sustain life and it is critically important to communities dependent on agriculture. It is not surprising then that risks to water quality, and the need to use water more responsibly, were named as major concerns at several roundtables. Davis roundtable participants talked about the need to better balance the interests of fisheries, farms, and residents to endure droughts and to prevent environmentalists and farmers from turning on each other. In Albuquerque, people told us about their concerns that mining and fracking were diverting water from farms and reintroducing contaminated water into the water table. In Whitesburg, mountaintop removal coal mining is decimating local ecosystems and causing heavy water pollution.

[11] Dollar stores are everywhere. That's a problem for poor Americans. *Nathaniel Meyersohn, CNN Business*. July 19, 2019. <https://www.cnn.com/2019/07/19/business/dollar-general-opposition/index.html>

[12] Findings for the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) 2015-2016: A demographic and Employment Profile of United States Farmworkers. *Trish Hernandez, Susan Gabbard, JBS International*. January 2018. https://www.doleta.gov/naaws/research/docs/NAWS_Research_Report_13.pdf

[13] The Economic Impacts of Immigrant Labor on U.S. Dairy Farms. *Flynn Adcock, David Anderson, and Parr Rosson, Research Support Provided by Dan Hanselka, Prepared Under Contract for National Milk Producers Federation, Texas A&M AgriLife Research, Center for North American Studies*. August 2015. <https://www.nmpf.org/wp-content/uploads/immigration-survey-090915.pdf>



Union Hill, Virginia Rural Roundtable

In many cases, participants told us that threats to the environment were the product of outside corporations exercising too much control and putting profits over people. Residents of Oil City lamented that the rolling hills and waterways they love were once again under threat from petrochemical and wastewater pollution after being slowly reclaimed from the damage done by timber, oil, and coal extraction.

In Union Hill, we heard from concerned residents upset that a new pipeline was being proposed without adequate health impact studies, local consultation, or contingency planning for potential accidents. At this roundtable, people were particularly incensed that according to a volunteer census, the pipeline route went through areas inhabited by Black residents, leading some to feel that they were living in a “sacrifice zone.” Albuquerque participants raised similar concerns about the disproportionate environmental impact of uranium mining and nuclear production on people of color and the economically vulnerable.

Rural Challenges Need Rural Solutions

While many common national challenges have a rural face, there are some concerns that are unique to rural communities and require focused attention from federal policymakers. Our nation isn't working unless it's working for every rural area, suburb, and city across our country. Our roundtables overwhelmingly told us about challenges that cannot be overcome overnight or solved without dedicating additional time and resources to them. Rural problems need rural solutions.

Jumpstarting Rural Economies

We heard over and over again that policymakers need to encourage investors to move into rural communities as well as support rural residents who start and maintain their own businesses. Perhaps more importantly, policymakers need to ensure rural jobs lead to real opportunities for rural residents. As we noted, the jobs and industries that previously existed no longer do, making it harder to keep and bring young people into rural communities. In Wantage, participants were concerned that small businesses are closing, only to be replaced by big box stores or online retailers that do even less to benefit the community.

“In Clinton, there were five Fortune 500 companies in the 1990s. Now there is only one – ADM – which processes corn syrup. This has resulted in a big brain drain.”

–Clinton, Iowa Rural Roundtable



Albuquerque, New Mexico Rural Roundtable

The numbers back up this concern. Since the mid-1990s, rural population growth has been much slower than growth in metropolitan areas, and since 2010, 1,350 non-metro communities have lost population.[14] Roundtable participants in Oil City noted that more young people are leaving than are staying, and many of those who stay live in poverty. As communities look inward, one thing is very clear: people want their children and the young people in the community to stay.

“It is without question that our community is one of extended family and deep roots. Yet, we worry that kids can't live here anymore.”

–Tiffin, Ohio Rural Roundtable

[14] Rural America is Losing Young People-Consequences and Solutions. Dipak Kumar. March 23, 2018. <https://publicpolicy.wharton.upenn.edu/live/news/2393-rural-america-is-losing-young-people->

Making Digital Connections in Rural Areas

Internet access and use were a continual topic of conversation among the rural communities. The Brownsville roundtable, and several others, brought up internet infrastructure as a primary issue. They described how a lack of internet infrastructure cuts off communities and businesses from assistance and support. Put more bluntly: no internet, no government services. Access to the internet is a critical aspect of any community, woven into everyday life, and many rural residents today still do not have access to affordable, reliable broadband.

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in 2019 reported that rural and tribal areas continue to lag behind urban areas in broadband deployment.[15] There has been some improvement — according to a 2019 Pew study, 63% of rural Americans have access to broadband in their homes, up from 35% in 2007 — but that access does not always mean connectivity and advancements are still needed.[16]

“Broadband is now essential to attracting people into the community. Many come with a job and then their spouse needs to work remotely. If there isn't broadband, it really isn't possible.”

—Wabasha, Minnesota Rural Roundtable

To address these issues, some rural communities have turned inward. A Tiffin roundtable attendee explained how his rural broadband cooperative has been able to get services into places that the “big boys” aren’t interested in serving. He noted that since they live in the community and know the people using their services, there is a greater level of accountability. We heard a similar story in Wantage, where local providers are trying to work together to improve substandard service.



Adrian, Michigan Rural Roundtable

Encouraging Rural Education

Albuquerque roundtable participants were most likely to classify broadband as non-existent, and educators feel this the most. One participant of the rural roundtable recounted what it is like to access internet as a teacher, explaining how teachers have to use a phone hotspot to access the internet. This puts an unprecedented burden on teachers, while hindering children’s education. As K-12 education continues to move online, children in rural communities are being left behind.

“People aren't challenged to pursue a higher education, because no one is there to do so.”

—Albuquerque, New Mexico Rural Roundtable

Rural education has enough of its own individual challenges without the issue of broadband exacerbating them. In Tutwiler, attendees were concerned about low high school graduation rates. Another problem is the lack of teachers — a problem which extends to many rural communities. In Albuquerque, we heard that almost half of the teachers are substitutes and don’t have long-term status in the classroom, causing many residents to express the lack of integration occurring between teachers and the community. And in Tutwiler, they are so desperate for teachers that they removed the requirement for certification entirely.

[15] 2019 Broadband Deployment Report. *Federal Communications Commission*. May 29, 2019. <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/FCC-19-44A1.pdf>

[16] Digital gap between rural and nonrural America persists. *Andrew Perrin, Pew Research Center FactTank*. May 31, 2019. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/05/31/digital-gap-between-rural-and-nonrural-america-persists/>

Creating a Future for Farming

Today, because of advancements in technology and growth in farm sizes, the average U.S. farm provides food to about 155 people, compared to just 25.8 people in 1960.[17] This has been possible because of the shift to automation which continues challenging non-commercial, family-owned farms and younger farmers who lack the capital to make investments in new technology.

The average cost to start a small farm comes in at \$2,000-\$10,000, but the real cost can be even higher. Attendees in Richmond told us that the cost to start a small farm comes in at one million dollars. It is almost impossible for a small farm to be financially sustainable. Participants noted that people do not farm to “get rich” — getting rich is not something any farmer expects when going into agriculture, they just want to be able to support their families. In Springfield, we heard how cost prohibitive it is to start farming as a young person, and how much more expensive it is now to begin farming than it had been for previous generations.

Farming is not only costly to get into, but many long-established family farms have been lost. The family-owned farm is becoming an idea of the past, and the “curse of the third generation” has fallen upon them: Grandpa started it, Dad built it, and Son lost it.

“We’re losing family farms because of increased costs of production and low return on crops. Some are moving to small towns, but a lot of young folks are just moving to the cities.”

—Columbia, Missouri Rural Roundtable

The farming industry is going corporate, and with this switch comes the loss of family-built businesses and backbones of communities that provided many with jobs. Farms that do remain family-owned face a different issue of having to put the financial survival of the farm ahead of providing support and compensation to employees.

At multiple roundtables, we heard that dairy farmers across the country face the same financial challenges. Dairy farmers in Wabasha and Oil City are facing an extremely difficult economic situation. We heard frustration about how milk prices today are little more than they were in the 1970s, but costs have risen. Amsterdam residents say this puts farmers in a position where they can’t afford to help their struggling community. Farmers and farm workers are on the edge of survival. This situation is most hopeless in western Montgomery County, where many farmers are in hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt with no hope of getting out.

“There really aren’t career opportunities in farming unless it is in the administrative and sales side of things. You can farm with just the machine and not the people. GPS allows for “self-planting.””

—Clinton, Iowa Rural Roundtable



Wabasha, Minnesota Rural Roundtable

Compounding problems with the costliness of farming is the need for benefits. These are traditionally received with city jobs, the number one benefit being health insurance. We heard from many communities that the need for health insurance drives many families to have an adult family member seek a job in town, leading families to lose additional help on the farm in order to gain necessary health insurance. The underlying issue of needing someone to work in town goes back to a larger structural issue that farmers and farming families cannot make a monthly premium work with the way farmers are paid.

Currently, farmers receive payment when the crop is sold. There is no monthly income, but rather seasonal payment. This presents a load of challenges for farming communities and constrains farming families’ ability to succeed. An inability to make monthly payments goes beyond making day-to-day life difficult, it limits future prospects. The most notable limitation expressed throughout by roundtable participants was student access to federal aid, since students from farming families do not have consistent cash to make monthly loan payments. College, therefore, is often seen as a waste due to the financial burden of student loans.

“Student loans are a big burden without much payback.”

—Springfield, Illinois Rural Roundtable

[17] Farm Facts: The United States Farmer. Rachel Bertone, *Farm Flavor*. February 22, 2012. <https://www.farmflavor.com/at-home/cooking/farm-facts-the-united-states-farmer/>

Rural Health Challenges

Health care is a critical issue for everyone in the United States, regardless of whether they live in cities, suburbs, or rural areas. While concerns of quality and affordability are universal, rural communities face unique challenges when it comes to access and availability of general and specialty services. For example, the University of North Carolina found that at least 160 rural hospitals have closed since 2005 (121 of those since 2010) and that the rate of closure has been accelerating, from just three closures in 2010 to at least 17 in 2019.[18] A study by the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists found that less than half of rural women live within a 30-minute drive of a hospital offering perinatal care.[19]

The stories we heard from rural roundtable participants reflected these challenges. One of the most commonly discussed problems was the shortage of local health care providers. Multiple communities talked about how hard it is to recruit and keep doctors in their localities.

People told us how often medical staff will rotate through for a time to help pay off student loans but then move on, which in Albuquerque disrupts the continuity of care. In Clinton, physician shortages mean that the few doctors are constantly “on call” and overstretched. Whitesburg participants have struggled after some doctors with little investment in the community overprescribed prescription opioids to patients. In Columbia, participants felt that economic conditions made it difficult for medical schools to recruit students to return to their communities. In Tiffin they felt student debt made it difficult for doctors to live and work in their localities.

The lack of providers for specialty services or specific types of care is felt acutely in rural areas. In Tutwiler, a participant needed to drive two to three hours to the nearest city to see a specialist, while in Albuquerque and Wantage, the treatment available for developmental disabilities and speech defects is only a drop in the bucket compared to what’s needed. In Oil City, access to dental care is highly restricted and requires people to go to a medical school in the closest major city.

The lack of local services, combined with the fundamental nature of rural communities, makes distance and travel time major barriers to care. We heard repeatedly that even if some local health care providers are available, anything serious requires long-distance travel to a hospital. Participants in Poetry noted how the closure of numerous hospitals in Texas made access to health care a bigger challenge. These participants, though, were also glad for the closures in some ways because the quality of care had been so low. In Tutwiler, people told us about how the closure of a local health clinic has lengthened travel times and how extremely limited ambulance service forces people to wait for care, sometimes with tragic consequences. For Wantage residents, wait times for 911 assistance can far exceed 20 minutes.

We also heard that rural communities’ health outcomes are impacted by the unique challenges of running a farm – factors far beyond the lack of physicians or hospital access. The spiritual and psychological toll of these stressors present their own challenges in the form of loneliness, depression, and substance abuse.

The financial challenges facing family farms drew special mention, with participants describing how struggling operations, worries about the ability to bequeath or inherit farms, and general concern about the future led to depression or anxiety. Participants also noted that too often there is a stigma associated with seeking help. In Davis and Wantage, the lack of mental health services is a real problem. For those who do seek help, they are forced to navigate health service networks that are either overwhelmed or non-existent.

“Farmer suicide is not spoken of, but [it] is a serious issue. With prices down and all challenged to survive and without mental health services, it is a big issue.”

—Columbia, Missouri Rural Roundtable

There was also a great deal of discussion about how those suffering in silence have increasingly turned to substance abuse, particularly opioids and methamphetamine, as a way to self-medicate. The Centers for Disease Control found the percentage of patients prescribed opioids was higher in rural areas than in urban areas between 2014 and 2017, and participants described seeing the epidemic firsthand.[20] As the epidemic has grown, communities have tried to keep up with walk-in centers with staff trained in the use of Narcan, but, in general, people told us there wasn’t enough capacity to keep up with the need for treatment.

“Some counties have no hospitals at all, and seeing a specialist means going to Phoenix, Albuquerque, or another big city. If you need to see a specialist and the specialist is located out of state, the care is not covered by Medicaid.”

—Albuquerque, New Mexico Rural Roundtable

[18] 163 Rural Hospital Closures: January 2005 – Present (121 since 2010). Cecil G. Sheps Center for Health Services Research, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 2020. <https://www.shepscenter.unc.edu/programs-projects/rural-health/rural-hospital-closures/>

[19] Health Disparities in Rural Women. American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. February 2014 (reaffirmed 2018). <https://www.acog.org/Clinical-Guidance-and-Publications/Committee-Opinions/Committee-on-Health-Care-for-Underserved-Women/Health-Disparities-in-Rural-Women>

[20] Opioid Prescribing Rates in Nonmetropolitan and Metropolitan Counties Among Primary Care Providers Using an Electronic Health Record System — United States, 2014–2017. García MC, Heilig CM, Lee SH, et al., MMWR Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report 2019, Center for Disease Control. January 18, 2019. https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/68/wr/mm6802a1.htm?s_cid=mm6802a1_w

Turning Hope and Hardship into Action

“We cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation.”



St. Joseph Mission School in Laguna, New Mexico

Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home, Pope Francis's 2015 encyclical, calls us to see the connection between how we treat the earth and how we treat each other. In it, he writes, “We cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation.” [21] It is critical for us to reject both human and environmental degradation, especially in rural areas.

When we began hosting conversations in rural communities across the country, we did so with one purpose: listening to the voices that are not heard by those in power. By coming to rural communities and towns, we listened to their realities and, in the process, let them know that we care about what they have to say. But, it's not enough for us at NETWORK to hear them. Policymakers need to listen and let these voices guide their actions.

Whether the conversation turned to housing, health care, jobs, or the environment, the people we met in rural communities were facing struggles too big and too complex for them to fix on their own. Too many people today are working harder and harder just to keep from falling behind. This has to end. We must build a better home and a better country together. In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis writes, “Hope would have us recognize that there is always a way out, that we can always redirect our steps, that we can always do something to solve our problems.” [22] It's time to turn this hope into action.

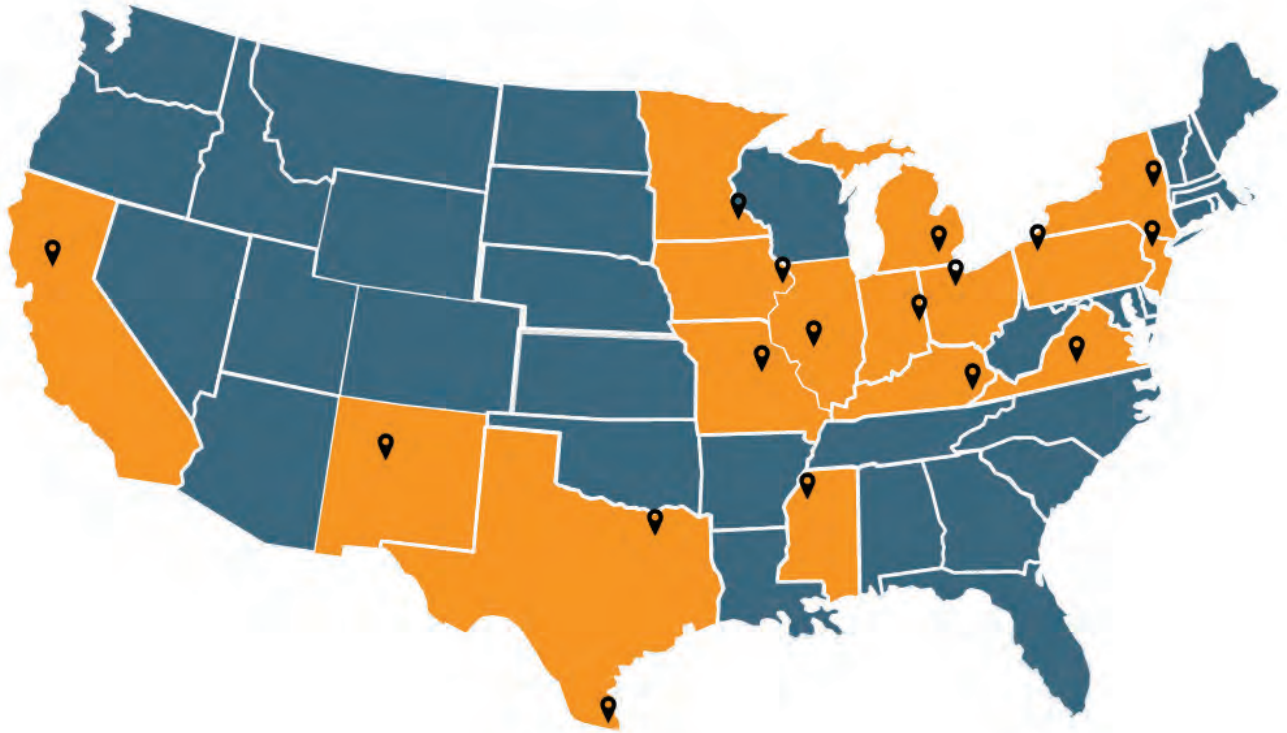
The message is clear: rural residents share the same desire for a just, equitable, and prosperous future as those living in metropolitan areas. To realize that future, rural communities need their elected officials to find and support solutions that recognize the unique characteristics of rural life. We hope that the voices we've raised in this report will be heard, their needs will guide policy decisions, and their lived experiences in rural communities will be considered to achieve these goals.

[21] *Laudato Si'* paragraph 48 http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

[22] *Laudato Si'* paragraph 61 http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

*Not just seeing, but looking; not just hearing, but listening;
not just passing people by, but stopping with them;
not just saying 'what a shame,'
but allowing yourself to be moved with compassion.*



— POPE FRANCIS



16 States • 17 Rural Roundtables • More than 250 Participants

To download the Raising Rural Voices report visit: www.networklobby.org/raisingruralvoices.
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