

Younger Families in the Rural Fringe

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One of two key groups in desperate need of service from Extension's "quality of living" program is the young married, according to the Report of the Joint USDA/NASULGC Extension Study Committee.¹ However, the report does not elaborate in any specific respects what programming should be undertaken, how such efforts should be staffed, or what resources should be allocated or reallocated to serve this group as the Committee envisioned it should be. The Committee does acknowledge the complaints of critics directed at present home economics programming in respect to undue emphasis being placed on middle-income, senior and middle-aged women to the exclusion of young homemakers. If Extension's quality of living efforts are to increasingly focus on young marrieds it will be necessary to understand more clearly, among other things, where they live, what they are like, and what their problems and concerns are in order to establish some bases for designing and executing relevant educational programming. This article provides some beginning clues for such an understanding. Even though the population studied was restricted geographically, implications from the findings may not be as restricted.—The editor.

YOUNG FAMILIES are believed to constitute a large segment of people found in the newer areas of urban expansion.² Focus by re-

¹ *A People and a Spirit*, A Report of the Joint USDA/NASULGC Extension Study Committee (Fort Collins, Colorado: Printing and Publications Service, Colorado State University, November, 1968). See Lowell H. Watts, "Extension's Future—A National Report," *Journal of Cooperative Extension*, VI (Winter, 1968), 199-206, for an outline of the major thrusts of the recommendations of this report.

² "Children of No Place U.S.A.," *What's New* (North Chicago, Illinois: Abbott Laboratories, 1960).

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searchers on the family with young children in the rural-urban fringe has not generally occurred.

→ A study of one community in the rural fringe of Columbus, Ohio, sought to contact all younger families with children to explore variations among these families and their expressed needs. The information from this study is presented to suggest to extension workers some characteristics which might be kept in mind when developing programs for similar young families.³

Even elaborate systems of reporting local needs sometimes prove inadequate when local leaders find they are not sure what their own community is like as changes sweep over it. The rural-urban fringe is a rapidly changing area which reflects the dramatic shifts in migration patterns in American society. These patterns have meant the movement of people away from central cities and the movement of the farm population toward the fringe areas that surround these metropolitan centers.

The meaning of the growth of this area to families who live there is open to question. It can be seen as both the best and worst of environments. One view is that the rural-urban fringe is a "crescive, uncoordinated accumulation of residential, commercial, manufacturing, and special services . . . tending toward lower levels of attractiveness."⁴ In contrast, Bugel suggests that the same facilities which enable urbanites to commute to their daily work can also be used freely by farmers, even if they do use them less regularly. "Conversely," he says, "many city workers raise chickens and vegetables in their backyard and become interested in some phase of farm life. Under these conditions the social distinctions become more vague and are increasingly reduced to mere occupational differences."⁵

There is also controversy or inconsistency over the way these residents view their own relationship to the urban scene. As Vidich and Bensman pointed out in describing rural and small town residents' evaluation of urban situations, there is a strong ambivalence toward urban life.⁶ They respect and praise the power of the city but criticize the life style of the residents and the ethics of the urban scene.

³This project is a contribution study to Ohio Agricultural Experiment Station Project No. 364 (Christine H. Hillman, "The Impact of Urbanization in Franklin County, Ohio: An Analysis of Factors Influencing the Home and Family Life of Selected Groups of Young Families").

⁴Alvin Boskoff, *The Sociology of Urban Regions* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1962), p. 140.

⁵T. Karl Sullenger (ed.), *Sociology of Urbanization: A Study in Rurban Society* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Braun-Brumfield, Inc., 1956), pp. 5-6.

⁶Albert J. Vidich and Joseph Bensman, *Small Town in a Mass Society* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1958), p. 105.

These conflicting images of rural-urban living provide the background for this research.

Design of the Study

The community selected for this research is a township within the standard metropolitan statistical area of Columbus, Ohio. The township is a single census tract (PNOO72) and is located in the northeastern sector of Franklin County, Ohio, approximately 15 miles from the center of the city. It has a village of 307 population in the approximate center of the tract. The sense of community is emphasized because the tract has nearly the same boundaries as the school district, which has the high school located in the village. This census tract fits a definition of rural-urban fringe, as it retains an essentially rural appearance while experiencing rapid population growth and expanding ties with the city of Columbus. From a population of 1615 in 1950 to 2409 in 1960,⁷ to a Chamber of Commerce estimate of 3818 in 1964,⁸ the growth has been accomplished with no large commercial housing developments. New houses are scattered throughout the township on small plots of land.

The definition of "younger family" used in this study is that the homemaker be no more than 35 years old and that there be at least one child residing in the home. A thorough search of township records and a directory revealed that this township contained approximately 747 households and 109 (14.5 per cent of these) met the definition used. Interviews were completed with 86.2 per cent of the homemakers during April and May of 1964. (Two homemakers refused to participate, four made themselves unavailable, and, after persistent callbacks, it was impossible to contact nine others during the interview period.)

The interviews were partially structured and partially open. The results reported here are drawn from both sections of the interviews.

Findings

This case study suggests these families were characteristically well-established. The number of years married ranged from 3 to 18 with a mean of 9.4. The average number of children per family was 2.7 with a total of 256 children in the sample. Most of these children were young: 57.4 per cent were 6 years of age or under; 35.2 per

⁷ U.S. Bureau of Census, *General Characteristics of the Population by Census Tracts*, PC-1 (1960), 37-134.

⁸ John J. Macklin, "County Population Up 15.6 Percent Since 1960," *Columbus Evening Dispatch* (February 5, 1964), p. 1B.

cent were between 6 and 13 years of age; and 7.4 per cent were 13 or older. The average age of wives interviewed was 29.2 and their husbands 32.4 years.

Organizational Participation

These younger families in the rural fringe were not involved in formal organizations to any great extent. Both husband and wife participated in an average of 1.3 organizations outside the local community and 1.9 within the community. When looking at *level* of participation, the scores were similarly low and irregularly distributed over the group. To obtain a score, husband's and wife's participation was considered together by assigning points for each organization: only membership = 1; occasional attendance = 2; regular attendance = 3; officer, major committee member, or advisor = 4. Using this procedure a total mean participation score of 7.25 was obtained. However there was considerable variation from couple to couple; most scores ranged from 1.25 to 13.25.

Those organizations to which they *did* belong emphasized the locality and were hostile to larger bureaucracies. The organizations mentioned by these young homemakers were parent-teachers organization, volunteer fire department and auxiliary, school board, town council, little league advisory board, Boy and Girl Scout Councils, 4-H Club leadership, Youth Building Committee, unions, management clubs, Masons, Eastern Star, Lions Club, card clubs, bowling leagues, and church groups.

Community resistance to associate with complex organizations which have relationships outside the community may be a local phenomenon. The strength of this resistance was evident: the parent-teacher organization was not affiliated with the national or state parent-teacher associations; the scouting movement had prospered only after one family consented to be the go-between to the district for all communication; and, at least one church had made a point of stressing its lack of affiliation with the parent denominational organization and remained an independent congregation.

Only one woman said she had participated in the adult extension programs in home economics and no husbands were reported to use the educational services available in agriculture, although several were part-time farmers. Of the 256 children in the families included in the sample, 100 were of 4-H age. However, only four families reported having children in 4-H. Two were involved in some leadership capacity. While the majority of children were too young to be a part of 4-H activities, there was an underrepresentation of those

with eligible children, as compared to membership in 4-H from the general population of the area. Eligible children of parents older than those included in this study were participating in greater proportions.

Community satisfaction items in the questionnaire yielded a mildly satisfied response. Using Nagi's 40 point measure of community satisfaction (with zero as neutral, minus 20 being extreme dissatisfaction, and plus 20 as full satisfaction) the mean score was toward the satisfied side, + 5.38.⁹ (The majority of scores ranged from + .68 to + 10.08.) The public schools represented the primary area of dissatisfaction while churches brought a generally favorable response. Public school officials had been urging consolidation with another district; this was the focus of criticism.

Unlike their resistance or apathy toward the more structured and formal social activity, these families were involved in activities which are characteristically of a less structured nature. On a check list of 13 activities where three levels of participation were possible (often = 2, seldom = 1, never = 0), a consistently high level of nuclear family involvement was revealed. The range of scores was from 5 to 26 with a mean of 16.1. These activities included watching athletic events, playing cards, attending dances, movies, music, plays, fairs, picnics, suppers, parties, family visits, visiting friends, and participating in active sports.

Rural-Urban Orientation

These families were tied to the urban center by occupation and purchasing patterns, but many had small town and rural backgrounds and exhibited stable, rather than mobile, occupations. In contrast to the still rural appearance of the area, the husband of only one of the interviewees could be considered a full-time farmer; three others were involved part-time in farming. Most employment was outside township boundaries. Only a teacher, a custodian, and two ministers were working within the tract. One man was unemployed and another was a full-time student in a technical course. Construction trades accounted for a substantial source of employment (one-fourth of the group had such employment); however, most of these were not of the type where the man follows the employment possibilities in the summer.

The average prestige of occupations (as measured by the North-

⁹ This scale is from Wade Andres and Ross Eshleman, *The New Community II*, Bulletin No. 955 (Wooster: The Ohio Agricultural Experiment Station, 1963), pp. 5-7.

Hatt Scale¹⁰) was that of semi-skilled and skilled workers whose occupations are typified by those of the carpenter, auto repairman, plumber, garage mechanic, checker on assembly line, postal clerk, or telephone lineman. A little more than one-fifth of the wives interviewed were employed outside the home. They worked as clerks, unskilled workers, and nurses.

In discussing purchasing patterns, homemakers indicated they traveled considerable distances for basic goods and services.¹¹ An average of 9.5 miles of travel per service was reported. While not necessarily seeking these goods and services in the urban center, the tendency was toward the suburbs of Columbus. Even if the particular family did not go toward Columbus, the same approximate distance was involved in finding goods and services elsewhere.

Although these families went to urban centers for employment and goods and services, they had small town or rural backgrounds. Only 11.8 per cent of the couples had no rural or small town experience in their childhood or young adult lives. Rural background was reported for either or both husband and wife in 76.4 per cent of the families. However, many families had an urban experience previous to their present location. In 48.3 per cent of the families both husband and wife had lived in a large city just prior to moving to their present home.

Residence

The time lived in the community by these families ranged from two weeks to a lifetime. In 21.5 per cent of the families either the husband or wife or both had lived in the community all their lives. The mean years in the community for the whole sample was 7.2, but the range was considerable (the majority had lived in the community between 1.8 and 12.6 years). This fairly wide range of residence tenure indicates the large number of families who had moved to the community recently.

A rough measure of stability can be given by using the number of years married divided by the number of moves since marriage. The average of 3.9 years between moves indicated a mobility pattern below estimates for the national population. While a standard deviation of 2.8 indicated considerable variety within the study popula-

¹⁰ Christian Jonassen *et al.*, "The North-Hatt Scale—Interpolations," The Ohio State University (mimeographed, no date).

¹¹ A check list of goods and services was prepared by the interviewer. It was modeled after one by Harold Swedner, "Prediction in Habits Toward Service Establishments in Rural and Urban Settings," *Rural Sociology*, XXVII (December, 1962), 395-96.

tion, efforts to determine separate values and life styles of the more mobile and less mobile proved fruitless in analysis of the data. The newcomers and lifetime residents' overlapping characteristics washed out apparent differences. Over half the families said they considered their present location permanent.

Housing and Transportation Situation

Twenty-two families were renting houses, with a mean rent of \$75 per month. Seventy-two were either buying or owned their houses. The worth of these houses and land varied from \$4200 to \$45,000 by local bankers' estimates; 46 were estimated by their owners as being worth from \$20,000 to \$100,000. Loans reported included 43 conventional bank loans, 20 land contracts, 2 FHA insured loans, and 1 VA insured. Twelve families were living in unfinished houses and one family lived in a trailer next to a shell house, which the family was completing. In addition, 13 other families had done some construction work on their homes. These families were using the rural fringe area's less stringent building codes to complete their homes themselves. The interiors of the houses were generally quite modest, with few magazines, books, and newspapers in view.

All but one family possessed at least one car. Nearly one-half had the use of an additional car or truck. With no public transportation available, more than one-quarter of the wives considered themselves limited in their transportation.

Friendship Patterns

In an effort to see whether these families found their friends in the local or the greater urban community, an inquiry was made about the three family friends visited most often. A mean of 37 miles (one way) to visit the three friends— $12\frac{1}{3}$ miles per visit—was obtained.

Some of the wives said their families did not visit friends and listed relatives instead. For the entire group almost one (0.7) in three of the friends listed was a relative. It was more common for the respondent listing one relative to list more than one and for those listing friends to list only friends. The distance traveled tended to increase as the number of friends who were relatives increased (a correlation of .233 was statistically significant at the .05 level). This indicates that distance traveled may not be an indicator of cosmopolitan or heterogeneous social relationships but more a factor of family relationships. These families seemed neither to be tied di-

rectly to their local neighbors or to the greater urban scene but to occupy a marginal position to both.

Conclusions and Implications

This case study of young families with children who reside in the rural-urban fringe may suggest to extension workers the following generalizations: (1) these young families are not involved with formal organizations to any great extent; (2) those organizations to which they *do* belong emphasize the locality and are hostile to larger bureaucracies; (3) they are tied to the urban center by occupation, but many have rural and small town backgrounds and stable rather than highly mobile residence patterns; (4) they are involved with kinship networks and consider some of these relatives to be their friends; (5) large standard deviations on most variables indicate much diversity of background and interests.

If Extension seeks to provide educational programs for sectors of the population similar to this one, appropriate actions would likely:

- emphasize the local community or be located in the shopping areas to which these families drive
- deemphasize the formality or membership aspect of the program, especially the nonlocal bureaucratic apparatus
- not depend on older women in the community to report these younger families' needs, as they are not actively in contact with them except as relatives
- remember that some women of 30 have teenage children and some are in the beginning stages of their families; averages do not indicate uniformity; diversity is found in occupation and income as well
- assume high school background generally, but recognize there is little college influence in this population group
- use the improvement of community services as a vital focus for organization, as these lag behind the growth rate of the area and are of interest to these families
- not assume any clear cleavages between long-time residents and new residents, at least in this age group, for their opinions and backgrounds were remarkably homogeneous
- not assume that large amounts of printed materials are found in these homes.

Within these generalities may be some guides for understanding and reaching out to families with young children who live in the rural fringe of large cities.