

community leaders assess quality of life

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In our work as Extension professionals, all of us are vitally concerned with improving the quality of life for our clientele, no matter the program area. We have some definite ideas about quality of life and make educated guesses about our programming. But, in fact, we don't know enough about how local citizens view quality of life and what they want, both quantitatively and qualitatively, to improve it. This article discusses what local community citizens think about their quality of life and how this may be reflected in Extension programming efforts.

Quality of Life Definition

In recent years, social scientists have tried to define quality of life (QOL), but as one would expect, there are differing opinions on just what it is. QOL, notes Coleman, is a term that refers to the degree of people's happiness, comfort, satisfaction, and general level of living.¹ Liu defines it "as a subjective name for the well being" of people and the environment in which they live.² Inevitably, however, QOL is related to specifics like pure air and water, nutritious food, agricultural advances, recreational opportunities, medical facilities and services, and participation in decision-making processes.

However you define the term, QOL must inevitably reflect what people think about it. In short, it's the "definition of the situation" that's important and must guide programs to improve QOL. What we have done is simply ask community leaders about QOL. Here are the results of our inquiry.

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In the Search for Facts

A total of 200 community leaders were interviewed in 5 Louisiana parishes (counties).³ The 40 community leaders from each county consisted of 25 whites and 15 blacks. The community leaders were carefully selected by stringent criteria and drew men and women from a broad spectrum of community institutions and organizations. The listing included representatives in agriculture, education, business and labor, government, communications, as well as private professionals, members of civic and social organizations, and others.

Each of the 200 community leaders was personally interviewed and responses were recorded by use of a survey instrument. Specific questions were subsumed under the general topic areas of general QOL, government, economy, human development, and physical facilities. Statistical analyses were used to examine the findings.

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Results

An overwhelmingly majority, 94%, indicated QOL had improved for most people in the county since 1960. In addition, 79% indicated their families' QOL had improved also. Nearly 75% of the community leaders felt the style of life and problems encountered in the counties were more urban-like than in 1960.

Important Changes

Community leaders were asked about the important changes that have had or will have the most effect on QOL and prospects for the future of the county.

Major Subject Area Changes

Table 1 gives a breakdown of the respondents' answers in terms of major subject areas.

Most often mentioned were changes relating to human development, including such areas as health, education and

Table 1. Major changes since 1960.

Subject area	Times mentioned
General QOL	5
Government	24
Economy	55
Human development	91
Physical facilities	41
Total	216

welfare, churches and religion, recreation, and civic and social participation. This obvious concern for "people" problems isn't unusual, as behavioral research has indicated.⁴

Ranking Changes

Table 2 shows what the community leaders ranked as the top 10 major changes in QOL. As you can see, over one-third of all the community leaders volunteered income and housing as major changes in QOL since 1960. Jobs and education ranked third and fourth for all respondents. Somewhat unexpectedly, 15% indicated food stamps and improved nutrition as a major change in QOL. Other major changes included improved standard of living, roads and transportation, health, utilities, and consumer concerns.

Table 2. Highest ranked changes in QOL.

Rank	Blacks (N=75)	%	Whites (N=125)	%	Total (N=200)	%
1	Jobs	36%	Income	42%	Income	36%
2	Housing	33	Housing	36	Housing	34
3	Income	28	Jobs	27	Jobs	28
4	Education	21	Education	19	Education	20
5	Food stamps & nutrition	20	Standard of living	15	Food stamps & nutrition	15
6	Blacks' life	13	Roads & transportation	15	Standard of living	14
7	Standard of living	11	Food stamps & nutrition	13	Roads & transportation	11
8	Race relations	11	Health	12	Health	8
9	Politics	8	Utilities	10	Utilities	8
10	Misc. consumer concerns	8	Recreation	8	Misc. concerns	6

Differences by Race

Income and jobs were reversed in the one and three positions for the two racial groups. White community leaders placed the most emphasis on income and black community leaders stressed jobs the most. Getting jobs was viewed as an important advance for blacks. For whites, who have traditionally had more and better jobs, increased income was a more significant change in QOL.

Fifth ranked, for blacks, was food stamps and nutrition; this change in QOL ranked seventh for whites. It's of special significance that 20% of the black community leaders listed nutrition as an important change in QOL. This finding reminds us that basic needs are still a major concern to a substantial portion of the population.

**Special
Categories
of People**

Asked whether there were any groups or types of people in the county who didn't share in the improvements in QOL, community leaders named several groups as not sharing in the general progressive trend.

The elderly were most often mentioned as not sharing in the ameliorative changes to the same extent as the general population. Also mentioned more often were blacks and low-income groups. Youth, the rural segment, and the other categories were also mentioned as disadvantaged groups.

Table 3. Disadvantaged categories of people.

Categories	Times mentioned
Elderly (both white and black)	18
Blacks	16
Low-income groups	13
Youth	8
Rural	9
Others	12
Total	76

**Causes
of Change**

*Difficulty
Separating
Causes of Changes*

Community leaders were asked to note major causes of change in QOL, but the respondents had some difficulty differentiating between *changes* in QOL and *causes of changes* in QOL. For example, jobs, income, and housing were listed as responses to both changes and causes of change. However, there were some significant differences noted also. Table 4 shows the community leaders' perception of causes of change since 1960.

Both whites and nonwhites listed integration, more than any other factor, as a cause of change in QOL. Forty percent of the blacks and 28% of the whites volunteered this response. More and better jobs were mentioned by 29% of the total. Other causes of change included improved income, improved education, better homes, agricultural change, various social changes, and federal programs.

*Differences
by Race*

Twenty-three percent of the blacks listed better homes as a cause of change. Race relations and black involvement in politics were mentioned more often among black respondents. White community leaders were more sensitive than blacks to changes in agriculture, population, and recreational opportunities.

Table 4. Causes of change in QOL.

Rank	Blacks (N=75)		Whites (N=125)		Total (N=200)	
		%		%		%
1	Integration	40%	Integration	28%	Integration	33%
2	More jobs	33	More jobs	26	More jobs	29
3	Better homes	23	More income	18	More income	14
4	Better race relations	16	Changes in agriculture	14	Improved education	12
5	Improved education	16	Improved education	10	Better homes	12
6	Blacks in politics	11	Population change	10	Changes in agriculture	11
7	Welfare	9	Lake development	10	Better race relations	8
8	Social problems	9	Federal programs	9	Social problems	8
9	More income	8	Changes in politics	8	Population changes	8
10	Blacks' education improved	7	Social problems	7	Federal programs	7

Expectedly, causes of change in QOL, as recognized by blacks, centered around federal programs and actions designed to improve the economic and social conditions of blacks and low-income people. Whites were seemingly more conscious of other happenings, such as changes in agriculture, population shifts, and economic indicators of change.

Implications for Extension Programming

A genuine sense of optimism pervaded the thinking of Louisiana community leaders in assessing recent changes in quality of life. The findings suggest that community leaders in the study counties accept changes and generally view them positively.

Community leaders interviewed were sensitive to the needs of the elderly, black, low-income, and similarly disadvantaged groups, as well as young people and rural citizens. A majority of the respondents were favorably impressed with changes in most areas of life, but weren't pleased with recreational opportunities and quality of the physical environment.

The emergence and growing significance of black community leaders is evident in the Louisiana research. More needs to be known about these leaders and the importance of these leaders in the subcommunity and the greater community of which they're part.

The overall findings suggest that community leaders are very much interested in quality of life, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Louisiana community leaders were cognizant of the importance of providing basic necessities to some and expanding opportunities to all. The findings suggest the importance of programs like EFNEP and efforts to help small farmers, as well as other programs to improve QOL for disadvantaged citizens.

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Results also suggest a need for Extension community development efforts designed to alleviate communitywide problems. In addition, the findings indicate that programs designed to improve QOL for disadvantaged blacks shouldn't hesitate to involve white community leaders in the legitimation and implementation of such programs.

Because of the limitations associated with using only Louisiana data, it may be useful to duplicate at least a portion of this research in your state. The authors will be glad to share the questionnaire and methodology with interested parties.

Footnotes

1. Lee A. Coleman, "Quality of Life: How Community Leaders and Ordinary Residents Assess Various Aspects of Life in Four Kentucky Mountain Counties" (Lexington: University of Kentucky, Department of Sociology, 1975).
2. Ben-Chieh Liu, "Quality of Life: Concept, Measure, and Results," *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, XXXIV (1975), 1.
3. The information reported in this article was collected as part of the S-79 regional research project, "Quality of Life in the Rural South," sponsored by the USDA and the participating Experiment Stations of Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee. Only Louisiana data are used in this analysis. Similar data were collected in these states, but it wasn't analyzed in this way.
4. Jacob Bronowski, "The Impact of New Science," in *The Environment of Change*, Aaron Warner and others (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969).