



**SUPPORT SYSTEMS FOR RURAL FAMILIES IN THE UNITED STATES:
RATIONALE, STRATEGIES, AND EXAMPLES**

by

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Abstract

Rural America is characterized by diversity - weather, geography, customs, values, cultures, and crops. Rural families represent diversity, too, and are also different in composition, age, occupation, and economic status than their urban counterparts. The role and function of rural families in the United States are impacted by the diverse rural context in which they live. As changes occur in the social and economic environment in rural areas, the needs and nature of rural families change although their role and function as the socializing and nurturing agent for family members does not change. Changes in rural communities which impact the function of families may create a focus on the resulting family function or disfunction rather than on the strengths and values of these families. Too often the focus on helping programs is on experts and intrusion into family life, which is antithetical to values held dear by most rural communities. A more feasible approach to rural families is to strengthen and support their natural helping systems.

Formal and informal support systems are essential in empowering rural families. Because of the lack of formal resources or support systems in rural U.S., families must rely on informal resources when they attempt to make orderly and successful transitions as change occurs. As mobility and the erosion of stable economic bases increase the stress of families, there may be less social support for families because of the loss of "social capital".

In rural areas, women play multiple and complex roles. These roles are changing with structural changes in rural areas, and although women retain the traditional caretaking and nurturing roles for their families, they may need more formal and informal support for these roles. In addition, their volunteer and traditional family roles make them the major source of support for others in rural areas (via the church, etc.). The need for social support and resources is critical for the empowerment of rural families as they continue their function.

Focusing on the empowerment of rural families means respecting the skills and strengths of families rather than attending to their "problems". Empowerment means that informal social systems meet ongoing and crisis needs of families in a manner which respects the strengths, values and competencies of rural families. The primary characteristics of informal social support systems are discussed and policy recommendations are suggested. An example of an empowerment program which focuses on rural women is described.

Support Systems for Rural Families in the United States: Rationale, strategies, and examples

Family as a unit.

The family is comprised of interdependent members which provide support and nurturance for each other. Most cultures recognize that the family, in both the attitude it has and the support it receives, is the central social institution for children. Families are the agent of socialization and they protect fundamental societal values (Center for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs, 1987). Families are units with their own dynamics and are the primary resource in meeting needs of each members. Finally, families offer stability, consistency, and close relationships that cannot be duplicated by institutional service systems.

Definitions of Rural

When examining rural families several components and definitions must be included. The U.S. Census Bureau defines the rural population as persons living in the open countryside and places with fewer than 2,500 residents that are not in urbanized areas (population concentration of 50,000 or more residents). The farm population consists of all persons living in rural areas on places that sold \$1,000 or more worth of agricultural products in the preceding year. The nonfarm population comprises persons living in urban areas and all rural persons not on farms. The total population of the U.S. in 1989 was 248,255,00. Slightly more than one-quarter of the nation's population, 27.2 percent or 66.2 million persons, resided in rural areas, of which 4,801,000 (or 1.9 percent of the total population) are defined as farm residents (U.S. Bureau of Census, Residents of Farms and Rural Areas, 1990).

In addition to the U.S. Census urban-rural designation, the U. S. Government's Office of Management and Budget has its own definitions for which it defines population areas, metropolitan and nonmetropolitan. To be metropolitan, a county (or "county equivalent") must have an urban population of center of 50,000 or more. The metropolitan areas often includes satellite counties, as determined by commuting patterns and other factors. The counties that lie outside of metropolitan areas are often treated in official and unofficial studies as "rural." In some places, there are farms and rural communities of less than 2,500 in metro (urban) counties and cities approaching 50,000 in non-metro (rural) counties.

Population Estimates and Shifts

Initial estimates from the 1990 Census indicate that the population shift towards the urban areas continues. The proportion of the population living in rural areas fell during the 1980's from 26.3 percent in 1980 to 24.8 in 1990. In contrast, the urban population estimates increased from 73.7 to 75.2 percent during the same period (U.S. Bureau of Census, Census and You, 1992). Despite the proportional decline of rural to urban, the rural population has been growing – mainly at the expense of the farm population. For the period 1981 to 1989, year to year changes in the farm population were cumulated showing an average decline of 2.4 percent per year. The rural population increased 4.9 percent between 1986 and 1989, compared to a 2.4 percent increase in the urban population for the same period. Some of this increase in the rural population can be explained by the spread of suburban residential development into areas that were once defined as rural based on the 1980 census (U.S. Bureau of Census, Census and You, 1991).

In geographic distribution, the U.S. Census Bureau lists largest rural region as the South, with 34.5 percent or 83.6 million people. In contrast, the total rural population of the Midwest is 24.5 percent of the total population. And, the Midwest has over half (51.3%) of the total farm population. The majority, 73.2 percent, of the farm population live in the rural portions of nonmetropolitan counties in 1989. But, one-fourth lived within the rural portion of metropolitan areas. Rural nonfarm residents are equally divided between metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas – 48 percent within metropolitan areas and 52 percent lived outside metropolitan areas (U.S. Bureau of Census, Residents of Farms and Rural Areas, 1990).

Population Characteristics

The median age of rural farm residents was 38.0 years in 1989. This is significantly higher than the median of 33.3 years for the non-farm population. The difference is not just an urban-rural difference because the rural farm population is also older than the total population, which had a median age of 32.6 years in 1989. The median age for rural male and female also differs significantly compared to the male and female median age of the total population. The median age for male and females in the total population are 31.6 and 33.5, respectively. The rural median age for males is 33.0 and females is 34.2. The farm male and female median age are 37.7 and 38.3, the nonfarm is 32.7 and 33.9 respectively.

TABLE 1 – Age and Sex of the Population, by Urban-Rural Residence: 1989
(Current Population Survey annual averages)

Median Age	Both Sexes	Male	Female
Total Population	32.6	31.6	33.5
Urban	32.3	31.2	33.3
Rural	33.6	33.0	34.2
Farm	38.0	37.7	38.3
Nonfarm	32.5	31.5	33.5

Source: Residents of Farms and Rural Areas:1989

In reviewing the sex ratio, males per females, in 1989 the ratio was higher for the farm population (108 males per 100 females) than the nonfarm population (93 males per 100 females) (U.S. Bureau of Census, Residents of Farms and Rural Areas, 1990). According to the Census Bureau, the farm sex ratio has always been higher since the first separate data on farm population was collected in 1920. The 1920 farm sex ratio was 109 per 100, while the nonfarm was 102 per 100.

Rural Households in the U.S.

There are an estimated 93.3 million households in the U.S. in 1990. According to the U.S. Census, there are two major categories of households, family and nonfamily. A family household has a minimum of two persons present – the householder and at least one additional person related to the householder by birth, marriage, or adoption. A nonfamily householder has either a householder who lives alone, or one who is not related is not related to any of the persons with whom they share the household.

About 71 percent of the U.S. households in 1990 were family households (U.S. Bureau of Census, Household Family Characteristics, 1990). As for the number of farm households, about 1 out of 60 households (1.7 percent) are farm households (U.S. Bureau of Census, Residents of Farms and Rural Areas, 1990). Married-couple families with no own-children under 18 present in the home account for 30 percent of all households. Only 26 percent of households were two-parent families. Married-couple families represent 69 percent of the total household population in 1990, remaining by far the most common type of living arrangement. And, families maintained by either men or women with no spouse present accounted for 15 percent of all households in 1990. In about 56 percent of these families, the children of the householder were present in the home.

TABLE 2 – Household Composition, by Presence of Own Children Under 18: 1990
(numbers in thousands)

	All households	93,347	100.0 %		
	Family households	66,090	70.8 %		
Married-couple family	52,317	56.0 %	Nonfamily householder	27,257	29.2 %
No own children under 18	27,780	29.8 %	Living alone	22,999	24.6 %
With own children under 18	24,537	26.3 %	Male householder	11,606	12.4 %
Other families with children	6,021	8.3 %	Living alone	9,049	9.7 %
Other families without children	7,752	6.5 %	Female householder	15,651	16.8 %
			Living alone	13,950	14.9 %

Source: Household and Family Characteristics: March 1990 and 1989

Nonfamily households represent 29 percent of the households in 1990. Of these nonfamily households, 84 percent were composed of persons who lived alone. A majority of nonfamily householders were women (57 percent), and 89 percent of them lived alone. Among male nonfamily householders, 78 percent lived alone.

Farm families as compared to nonfarm families are more likely to have both husband and wife present (92.2 percent versus 78.9 percent) in 1989. The portion of farm families maintained by a woman without a husband present was only 4.1 percent – under one-fourth of the nonfarm proportion of 16.8 percent. The size of rural families, both farm and nonfarm, average about the same – 3.20 members per farm family and 3.16 per nonfarm family, respectively. And, farm families are more likely to have children, under 18, living at home (about 96 percent versus 77.7 percent) (U.S. Bureau of Census, Residents of Farms and Rural Areas, 1990).

According to the 1989 data, 55.7 percent of the rural population is married with their spouse present in the home. But, of the rural population, farm residents are more likely to be married and to live in family households (68.6 percent) than nonfarm residents (55.4 percent). About 72 percent of farm women 15 years and over were married and living with their husbands in 1989, compared with just 53 percent of nonfarm women. The proportion of men living with their wives were 65.6 percent for farm men and 58 percent for nonfarm men. Significantly more nonfarm residents were married and living apart, widowed, or divorced, or single than farm residents. The percent of non-farm residents married - separated and the divorced are more than double of farm residents (3.0 and 7.8 to 1.0 and 2.8) (U.S. Bureau of Census, Residents of Farms and Rural Areas, 1990).

The 1988 fertility rate of farm women, age 18 to 44, averages to 1,533 children per 1,000 women. The number of children ever born to nonfarm women was 1,337 per 1,000 women, slightly lower than the total fertility rate for women of 1,340 per thousand.

Context of rural environment

These rural residents face contextual influences inherent to the environment in which they live. And although they are very complex, they must not be ignored in examining and enhancing support systems for rural families. Rural contextual factors impinge on the role and function of rural families. Both sociological and ecological issues influence the ability of the family to fulfill its socializing and nurturing role for its members.

Homer and O'Neil (1981) suggest a variety of positive and negative rural factors such as ideocracy of communities, personalness, scarcity of formal resources, and extensive role demands. In working with rural families with handicapped children, Tucker and Riles (1991) add distances, transportation, weather, and staff recruitment and retention as factors which influenced their families and the ability of their home-based intervention program to serve its families.

On the darker side, rural America is characterized by huge pockets of fast-emptying countryside. Some analysts of social and economic distress suggest that rural America is a "third world" in the making (Gimlin, 1990). Although many problems in rural areas are the same as elsewhere, they are more a matter of degree. The real contrasts, according to Brown, Beale, and Guguit (1990) are in income levels, poverty rates, age, and racial composition. There are proportionately more poor in rural America and they are the most persistently poor.

Characteristics which distinguish rural poor from urban poor include employment status, family structure, and race. In 1986, 62 percent of rural poor adults aged 18 to 44 worked at least parttime (O'Hare, 1988). A recent national report based on 1987 data (Shapiro, 1989) noted that almost three fourths of non-metro poor family heads who are not disabled or retired worked for all or part of the year; more rural heads worked compared to metro poor family heads; nearly 1/4 nonmetro poor family heads worked full time, year round; and a large number of poor family heads looked for jobs but could not find them. These relationships hold true across all races and types of work. Therefore, rural poor family heads are likely to be working but their wage levels keep their families in poverty.

In addition, the majority of poor families are in two-parent families and it is not unusual for both parents to be working (Shapiro, 1989). And a much larger portion of the rural poor are whites than in urban areas. In rural areas, 71 percent of the poor are whites, whereas in central cities, 54 percent are whites (Porter, 1989). Porter also reports that racial minorities in rural areas suffer from more extreme poverty than their urban counterparts.

There are fewer services in rural areas. Coward, DeWeaver, Schmidt, and Jackson (1983) point out that there are limited recreational opportunities and fewer sufficient day care centers. These rural context variable impact on the strength and stability of rural families and support systems are needed for families to adapt positively to changes in their rural environment.

Diversity, strengths, and values of rural families

The composition of race in rural areas in 1989 consisted of 92 percent White, 6.3 percent Black, and 1.7 percent of other races. Those residents which represent Hispanic origins, which may be of any race, make up 2.7 percent of the rural population. The urban percentages vary considerably, 81.4 percent White, 14.5 percent Black, 4.1 percent other races, and 10.4 percent Hispanic.

The 1989 farm resident population was 97.4 percent White, 1.8 percent Black and other races comprised of 0.7 percent. Persons of Hispanic origin were 2.9 percent of the farm population. The race and Hispanic origins of the nonfarm populations is 84 percent White, 12 percent Black, 3.5 for other races, and 8.4 Hispanic. These percentages are closely associated with total population distribution according to race.

TABLE 3 – Race and Hispanic Origin of the Population, by Urban-Rural Residence:1989 (Current Population Survey annual averages)

<u>PERCENT DISTRIBUTION</u>	Total	Urban	Rural	Rural Nonfarm	Rural Farm
Total Persons	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
White	84.3	81.4	92.0	91.6	97.4
Black	12.3	14.5	6.3	6.6	1.8
Other Races	3.5	4.1	1.7	1.8	0.7
Hispanic	8.3	10.4	2.7	2.7	2.9
(persons of Hispanic origin may be of any race)					

Source: Residents of Farms and Rural Areas:1989

Estimates of the population of migrant farmworkers vary from 317,000 to 1.5 million (Shotland, 1989). Migrant families are difficult to characterize because of the diverse nature of these families and their lifestyles. It is known that work for migrant families is usually seasonal and inconsistent. Most workers are not covered by employee benefit programs and language barriers, lack of contact with community services, and serious health problems are universal problems for migrant families. They also

face problems of poverty. Shotland (1989) estimated that the average annual income for migrant farmworkers is less than \$6500. Living conditions, inconsistent education for children, and hazardous working conditions are also common for all migrant families.

Despite the diversity inherent in rural populations and in rural contexts rural families in general hold some values and demonstrate some strengths that serve them well as they seek to fulfill the role of the family. It has been speculated that this is because of the nature of ruralness itself, with sparsity of population and close interactions with nature. Generalizations can be made about rural values, rural communities, and rural organizations such as schools. Ethnic background or economic status of individuals present an additional overlay upon these common values and characteristics.

Although rural communities tend to be homogeneous and hold common values (Nachtigal, 1982b), rural communities are very different from each other. Helge (1984b) conceptualized diversity in rural America along the dimensions of population density, topography, and other community variables (she listed over 15). The National Rural Research Project identified over 300 combinations of these variables, disputing the "white bread" theory of ruralness. Recognizing this diversity is the key to understanding rural families and communities (Thurston, 1989-1990).

Nachtigal (1982b) reports rural values and compares them to urban values. Rather than static or generalized, he reported that these values are along a continuum from rural to urban. His examples include personal (rural) to impersonal (urban), homogeneous to heterogeneous, nonbureaucratic to bureaucratic, verbal communication to written communication, who said it to what was said, self-sufficiency to leave problem solving to experts, and responding to environment to rational planning to control the environment.

Carlson (1991) researched values and attitudes in rural communities and determined that rural community organizations are more personal, less bureaucratic, and more flexible than urban organizations. The rural people in his study took pride in self-sufficiency and their sense of belonging. There were high levels of community involvement in schools and teachers reported they wouldn't leave their lower-paying rural positions for the big city. Their main reason was liking the rural life style, slower pace and quality of life.

Rural values tend to be centered around the family (Coward, DeWeaver, Schmidt, and Jackson, 1983). Rural America has a relative high trust factor, close family ties and a "sense of community" (Helge, 1984b). Turnbull, Turnbull, and Brunk (1992) report that their extensive international studies suggest that

there are many similarities in families despite cultural and ethnic differences. For example, all families desire to provide a home that can nurture all family members; all families want to foster mental, physical and emotional development of their children, and all families suffer when a member suffers and rejoices in each others' achievement.

Rural Support Systems

J. Whitecrow (1989), at a rural conference about educational transition, declared that all rural people and communities share the same basic needs, they just differ in the way they go about meeting those needs. Basic needs are usually met for family members by the work of the family and include the use of health services, education institutions, and employment opportunities. These three basic elements of family life are a different matter in rural United States.

Health Services

In the matters of health services, rural areas are in critical need of care to survive. There is a chronic shortage of health professional and primary care services in most rural areas. An 1988 American Hospital Association survey of hospitals reported that in rural areas 9.5 percent of the full-time positions for registered nurses were vacant. The comparable figures for urban areas were 6.6 percent in cities of under 1 million population and 8 percent in cities above 1 million. A University of Wisconsin study in 1985 found that the ratio of physicians to people in small communities was 53 per 100,000, less than one third of the national average. In 1988, a U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging staff report identified 1,292 rural areas that lacked primary-care physicians.

Despite the existence of such programs as Medicaid and Medicare, 28.6 percent of the poor in 1990 reported that they had no medical insurance of any kind during the year. About 13.9 percent of persons above the poverty level lacked medical insurance in 1990. Persons with income below the poverty level represented 28.6 percent of the 34.6 million persons who reported no health insurance during 1990. Poor adult males, 18 to 44, were the least likely age-sex group to have insurance, with 54 percent uninsured in 1990. Poor adult women accounted for 33 percent. About 21.8 percent of poor children under 18 years had no insurance and only 2.5 of the elderly poor were uninsured. For the total population, of all income levels, only 13.9 percent were without any kind of health insurance coverage in 1990 – adult men, 21.7; adult women, 15.8; children under 18, 12.9, elderly 0.9.

TABLE 4 – Selected Characteristics of Persons, by Health Insurance Coverage Status and Poverty Status: 1990
PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION – Some form of health insurance all or part of year

	<u>Covered</u>	<u>Not covered</u>		<u>Covered</u>	<u>Not covered</u>
All Income Levels			Income Below Poverty Level		
Total	86.1	13.9	Total	71.4	26.6
Under 18 years	87.1	12.9	Under 18 years	78.2	21.8
Men	78.3	21.7	Men	46.0	54.0
Women	84.2	15.8	Women	67.0	33.0

Source: Poverty in the United States:1990

Education Attainment

The U.S. Census measures and studies the populations' educational attainment in three areas: completion of high school, 1 or more years of college, and 4 or more years of college. Residents in the metropolitan areas have higher levels of educational attainment than those in nonmetropolitan areas and farms for the population ages 25 and over. The higher percentage of educational level is partly reflective of the location of residents in metropolitan areas who are in occupations which require higher levels of skills and education.

Attainment levels are higher for men than women in each of the three measures. In terms of high school completion, the difference between men and women is relatively small (77.2 percent to 76.6 percent). But, the difference is much more pronounced at the level of college education – one or more years of college, 35.3 for women and 41.8 for men, completion of college, 18.1 percent for women and 24.5 for men.

TABLE 5 – Educational Attainment of the Population, Ages 25 and Over: March 1989

Percentage with -	4 years of high school	1 or more years of college	4 or more years of college
All persons	76.9	38.4	21.1
Sex:			
Male	77.2	41.8	24.5
Female	76.6	35.3	18.1
Metropolitan residence:			
Metro area	78.8	41.6	23.4
Nonmetro area	70.2	27.4	13.2
Farm	72.1	25.1	11.3

Source: Educational Attainment in the U.S. March 1989 and 1988

The 1989 attainment levels of the U.S. population, ages 25 and over, indicate that 70.2 percent of the residents in nonmetropolitan areas have 4 years of high school, 27.4 have 1 or more years of college, and 13.2 have 4 or more years of college. Metropolitan residents have 78.8 percent, 41.6 percent, and 23.4 percent, respectively. Farm residents fair slightly better than nonmetropolitan in high school graduates (72.1 percent) and are similar in college education levels (25.1 percent and 11.3 percent).

Employment

Occupational information is vital in defining rural and farm characteristics, especially its relationship to the family structure or support system. In March 1989, 2.8 percent of the employed labor force reported an agricultural occupation as their major job. Only 7 percent of the rural and 1.2 of the urban population indicated agriculture as their main employment.

Employed rural residents are more likely to work in nonagriculture occupations as their primary occupation. The chief occupation among rural residents was manufacturing, 22.6 percent. Among rural men, 27.5 percent were in manufacturing. Retail trade was second at 13.6 percent. Retail trade occupations were first among women at 20.5 percent followed by manufacturing at 16.5. Only 3.4 percent of rural women report agriculture as their main occupation.

Employed farm men, however, most often had farm jobs (60 percent), generally as farm operators and managers. While 26.7 percent of employed farm women worked in farm occupations. The leading non-agricultural industry of employed farm men was manufacturing, for women, it was retail trade (U.S. Bureau of Census, Residents of Farms and Rural Areas, 1990). Overall, farm residents are more likely than nonfarm residents to be in the labor force and less likely to be unemployed. About 70 percent of farm residents, 15 and over, were in the labor force in 1989. This is compared to 64.5 percent of nonfarm residents.

Higher labor force participation is distinctive of the rural population; it is not a product of overall urban-rural differences. In fact, the overall rural labor force participation rate of 64.9 percent was slightly lower than the urban rate of 65.9 percent in 1989. The unemployment rate was modestly lower in rural than urban areas, (5.4 percent versus 5.7 percent), but both the rural and urban rates were higher than the farm resident rate.

**TABLE 6 – Employment Status of Persons 15 Years and Over,
by Sex and Urban-Rural Residence: 1989**

	<u>Total</u>	<u>Urban</u>	<u>Rural</u>	<u>Rural nonfarm</u>	<u>Rural farm</u>
Both sexes					
In Labor Force					
Percent of Total	65.7	65.9	64.9	64.5	69.8
Unemployed					
Percent of Labor Force	5.3	5.5	4.9	5.1	2.1
Male					
In Labor Force					
Percent of Total	75.4	75.7	74.7	74.2	81.3
Unemployed					
Percent of Labor Force	5.3	5.5	4.8	5.0	1.7
Female					
In Labor Force					
Percent of Total	56.8	57.3	55.3	55.1	57.2
Unemployed					
Percent of Labor Force	5.4	5.6	5.1	5.3	2.8

Source: Residents of Farms and Rural Areas:1989

Farm workers show a different distribution by class of worker than their nonfarm counterparts. Among employed farm residents in 1989, 37.9 percent were self-employed, 57.5 percent were wage and salary workers, and 4.5 percent were unpaid family workers. The nonfarm distribution was 10.1 percent, 89.5 percent and 0.4 percent, respectively (U.S. Bureau of Census, Residents of Farms and Rural Areas, 1990).

**TABLE 7 – Class of Worker of Employed Persons 15 Years and Over, by Industry,
Sex, and Urban-Rural Residence: 1989**

	Total	Urban	Rural	Rural Nonfarm	Rural farm
ALL WORKERS					
Both sexes					
Self-employed workers	8.5	7.1	12.4	10.1	37.9
Wage & salary worker	91.1	92.7	86.9	89.5	57.5
Unpaid family worker	0.4	0.2	0.8	0.4	4.5
Male					
Self-employed workers	10.4	8.6	15.4	12.1	49.1
Wage & salary worker	89.4	91.4	84.3	87.8	48.4
Unpaid family worker	0.1	0.1	0.4	0.2	2.5
Female					
Self-employed workers	6.2	5.4	8.4	7.4	20.4
Wage & salary worker	93.2	94.2	90.3	91.7	71.8
Unpaid family worker	0.6	0.4	1.3	0.8	7.7

TABLE 7 - CONTINUED

WORKERS IN AGRICULTURAL INDUSTRIES

Both sexes

Self-employed workers	43.2	25.6	51.7	31.1	68.4
Wage & salary worker	55.2	73.6	42.1	66.3	22.6
Unpaid family worker	4.4	0.8	6.1	2.6	9.0

Male

Self-employed workers	46.0	27.5	54.6	32.4	72.8
Wage & salary worker	51.9	72.1	42.6	66.0	23.2
Unpaid family worker	2.0	0.4	2.8	1.4	4.0

Female

Self-employed workers	33.9	19.1	41.1	25.5	53.0
Wage & salary worker	53.1	79.1	40.0	67.3	20.7
Unpaid family worker	13.1	1.7	18.6	7.7	26.7

WORKERS IN NONAGRICULTURAL INDUSTRIES

Both sexes

Self-employed workers	7.5	6.9	9.4	9.3	10.8
Wage & salary worker	92.2	92.9	90.2	90.3	88.6
Unpaid family worker	0.2	0.2	0.4	0.4	0.6

Male

Self-employed workers	9.0	11.1			
Wage & salary worker	90.9	91.7	88.8	88.9	86.5
Unpaid family worker	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.2

Female

Self-employed workers	5.8	5.3	7.2	7.2	8.5
Wage & salary worker	93.7	94.3	92.0	92.1	90.5
Unpaid family worker	0.5	0.4	0.7	0.7	0.9

Source: Residents of Farms and Rural Areas:1989

Formal and informal support systems for rural families

Support systems are vital in providing provide a direct and indirect influence on family functioning and on the functioning of its member. Purposes of formal and informal systems which support families include: keep families healthy and independent by providing services or whatever it takes; enhance a family's capacity to meet the multiple needs of its members; provide quality supports that minimize future needs; treat people with dignity by respecting their individual choices and preferences and values. Support systems which are able to provide these standards should be flexible, focus on entire family, change as family needs, roles, and ages change, provide a convenient and central access to services and resources, and utilize natural community and resources.

The ways in which families cope with life events and environmental changes and the ways they promote the growth and development of family members is in part dependent on the sources of extra-family support available (Dunst, Trivette, & Deal, 1988). This support includes emotional, physical,

informational, and material aid. This support comes from others people. Lopata (1979) had done extensive research with rural and urban widows. She defines support systems are a constellation of resources which provide actions or objects which are necessary or helpful in maintaining a style of life. Larry Marrs (1984) lists important community network systems in his study for the National Rural Living Network. He lists individual volunteers, CB radio clubs, 4-H clubs, mail carriers, garden clubs, libraries, volunteer fire departments, and churches.

O'Brien and Wagner (1980) suggest that totally independent living is a myth for persons of all ages. Informal and formal support systems provide assistance in meeting needs related to the activities of daily living. Mitchell (1969) found that support networks were a buffer for physical and mental stressors that increase susceptibility to disease. Huston (1989) a leader in the field of child development, suggests that support systems in the extended family and community consistently emerge as important moderators of negative effects of such family changes as divorce, maternal employment, and non-maternal care.

Formal systems

Formal support systems are much more rare in rural environments and with diminished levels and reorganization of social welfare systems, informal systems are becoming vital for successful family functioning.

The role of social support networks for rural families has been well documented. Michler (1981) demonstrated the importance of social support to health and health education and Ehrich (1985) studied the reliance of elderly rural women on support networks. Her subjects rated social networks and their children as their most important source of support.

Rural women as needing and providing support

Bescher-Donnelly and Smith (1989) studied the roles of rural women and emphasized the importance of women's roles outside the family. Roles and responsibilities of rural women are complex and diversified. Not only do their roles include reproduction, raising children, domestic work, caretaking of extended family members and older family members. Their roles often include the volunteer and community work that are essential in family farms, small family businesses, churches, etc. Because this work usually has no economic basis, it is often ignored or invisible.

This complex role for rural women may vary with geographical and cultural variations, but it is essentially diverse and complex for rural women. Rural women are less healthy than their urban sisters

and have greater incidences of suicide and depression. Rural women are less likely to go on to college and to finish high school than their urban counterparts and are less likely to return to school after they drop out. Roughly one of every three rural female workers experience some form of economic distress. Rural women are significantly poorer than rural men and mother-only families are the poorest families.

Strengthening support systems for family empowerment

Gartner (1991) reminds us that a wider range of formal services does not always result in better support for families. The transfer of family functions to formal systems have, in fact, undermined and in some instances replaced the family unit. Rural contextual factors, especially rural values of self-sufficiency and community involvement, suggest that efforts should be made to move away from formal service provision to greater use of informal systems and natural environments. Additional factors to be considered are growing fiscal restraints and the increasing emphasis on community-based development. Alternatives to traditional formal helping systems are therefore required both for practical and pragmatic reasons.

Dunst, et. al (1988) suggest that by strengthening and supporting the family unit, a significant positive impact is made on all members of the family unit. A goal then, for empowering rural families is to enhance existing informal social supports by providing formal support to relieve stress on the supporter and to act as a surrogate social support system for those with a weak or nonexistent informal support system. When families are viewed in a positive light and major emphasis is placed on promoting the acquisition of self-sustaining and adaptive behaviors.

Hobbs, et. al (1984) suggests that help-giving efforts are most likely to be empowering if they strengthen normal socializing agencies such as churches, relatives, and neighbors. Dunst and colleagues (1988) suggest that support can be seen as an intervention for families in crisis.

Characteristics of empowerment and systems which empower

Green (1987) suggests that respect and consideration for differing approaches, beliefs, and concerns are the hallmarks of effective social system. Gartner, Lipsky, and Turnbull (1991) affirm that to provide support appropriately requires cultural understanding of the nature and roles of the family and the ways they can be supported. Turnbull, Turnbull, and Brunk (1992) believe differences in values and cultural traditions impact on child development support systems. In their study of successful systems for

rural special education services, Cunningham, Cunningham, and O'Connell (1987) found that considering differing cultural perceptions had a great impact on program success. To be successful, they assert, rural service systems must be sensitive to traditional cultural values and beliefs. Walker (1991) suggests remembering that the way of the majority is not the standard. Cultural differences in the definitions of work, health, help and family as well as the importance of religion, social status, and change be investigated and respected.

Schiemberg, (1982), examined support systems for widows and suggests that formal community agencies be bypassed in favor of services offered within the context of informal larger-purpose organizations such as the Senior Citizens' Center in a rural community.

Dunst, et. al (1988) suggest that empowerment means that the help-seeker and helper be equal, with a focus on cooperation and reciprocity. Ehrich (1985) gather data with elderly women which showed that a key to their informal helping network was that the helping was reciprocal. Dunst, et. al (1988) also suggest the elements of immediate success for the recipient of the support, and the focus on decision making and skill development. Skinner (1978) agrees with the latter feature. His research suggests that the promotion of acquisition of behaviors that decrease the need for help makes the seeker more capable and competent.

Horner and O'Neill (1981) suggest that family empowerment programs focus on social and ecological factors, link non-professional helping systems to formal ones, and utilize team work.

The ability of families to manage life events effectively as well as to gain mastery over their own affairs requires that we empower families to become competent and capable rather than dependent upon professional helpers or formal helping systems which are scarce in rural areas. This is accomplished, according to Dunst, et. al (1988), by creating opportunities for families to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to become stronger and better able to manage and negotiate the many demands and forces that impinge upon the family.

Example Program for Empowerment of Rural Women

Survival Skills for Women is an example of a family empowerment program that fits the suggestions offered in this paper for providing informal support systems for rural women as a means to provide family social and economic self-sufficiency. The program is a series of workshops which are offered to groups of women for the purpose of providing a support system for the women and also

teaching some basic life skills which lead to self-sufficiency. The program was developed for low-income, single mothers, but has served women in rural areas who are single or married and who are from all economic levels. Basic skill areas which are the focus of the program are applicable to many members of the family: assertiveness, personal health, nutrition and meal planning, money management, child management, self-advocacy, legal rights, coping with crisis, community resources, and employment.

Survival Skills for Women is offered by churches, Extension, community colleges, women's centers, and human service agencies and organizations such as displaced homemaker centers and Head Start. The premise of the program is that participants already have many important skills that repeated failure has stopped them from using, or that they have never learned because of their dependent role as females. The skills taught are based on existing skills, thus supporting the strength model which is often missing in formal support networks (Thurston, 1989). Instead of "helping" women with personal, economic, and family responsibilities, *Survival Skills for Women* promotes self-help by using a non-expert "facilitator" to lead the groups. This Facilitator may be a community volunteer, staff of an agency, or a *Survival Skill for Women* graduate. The women in the groups learn from the materials of the program, but, more importantly, they learn from each other, thus providing mutuality and reciprocity and avoiding the "expert" model which is disdained in rural areas. In addition, the program was carefully designed to avoid conflict with belief systems and values of the women in the groups, while encouraging them to discuss their own points of view and offer suggestions to others from their unique perceptions.

The self-help aspect of *Survival Skills for Women* has proven effective for thousands of women in rural areas of Texas, Kansas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, South Dakota, and Tennessee. Women of Hispanic, white, African, and Native American backgrounds have been part of the program as have women who are handicapped. Participants of the program have reported major changes in their lives from buying their first home to getting a \$31,000 job after being on welfare for years. They have reported success in coping with family problems and report improved relationships with children and other family members, improved health and nutrition habits, and increased motivation to solve their own problems. Data from the program demonstrate increases in knowledge and use of basic life skills and increased supportiveness to others in the group (Thurston, 1989). Other studies demonstrate long-term positive effects of program participation and significantly decreased depression and anxiety.

Such programs as *Survival Skills for Women*, which can be sponsored and continued by local community groups, and which provide skill building for improved self-sufficiency and independence, is an

example of a program which can be used as both a formal and informal support network for rural women. Such empowerment programs are and must be fostered and encouraged by policy makers; or, at least, they must not be prohibited or discouraged in favor of services that are easier to create but which foster dependence rather than independence.

Policy Suggestions for Rural Family Support Systems

Because of common assumptions about rural America and about the urbanization of current social problems, the needs of rural residents are often overlooked or ignored in policy planning. The rural poor also have special needs that go unmet when programs are tailored for urban areas, without regard for conditions in isolated rural areas facing economic difficulties. Current proposals to alleviate social problems must be sensitive to special issues and concerns of rural residents. For example, reforms that provide health services to low-income families that include two-parent families would especially help the rural poor.

Informed policy makers and program planners have the potential to build public awareness and concern about the problems facing the rural poor and, at the same time, shape appropriate policy responses. Policies and the programs they create and maintain must support families rather than cause or exacerbate problems for families in rural areas. Formal support systems are important because of the scarcity of health, education, and employment opportunities and services in rural areas in the U.S. Too often, formal support and "helping" systems are intrusive into families and contribute to the dependence on those formal systems. Informal systems are especially sensitive to the needs of rural residents because those systems are made up of rural residents, focusing on their own strengths to build and support their friends, neighbors, and communities.

Policy makers and program planners offer support systems which meet the needs of rural families and maximize the strengths of rural residents. They should also adhere to these additional suggestions:

- a. focus on women as givers and receivers of support services
- b. base programs on family strengths/assume strengths
- c. focus on self-sufficiency, self-help, and
- d. consideration of and respect for cultural diversity
- e. attention to rural contextual issues
- f. reciprocity and cooperation/peer relationships between "helper" and "helpee"

g. link formal to informal support systems

h. provide opportunity for individuals to learn skills and acquire knowledge to self-manage

Those concerned with supporting the health and well-being of rural families must build a foundation for developing, reviewing, and changing regulations and quality assurance standards for family support systems.

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