

# Urban Pennsylvanians' Misperceptions of Rural Conditions

*The ideas that urban residents and decisionmakers have about rural people and places can influence rural-urban interactions and the nature of rural development policies. In Pennsylvania, residents, business people, and State officials/employees in urban areas often hold nostalgic, positive images of rural places and misunderstand the economic and social characteristics of the State's rural population. This disjuncture is problematic for rural development and creates a need for educating policy-makers and urban residents about the realities of rural conditions.*

**C**ONTRARY to many people's perceptions, the rural economy of the Northeastern United States is not driven by agricultural production. In Pennsylvania, less than 5 percent of rural income comes from traditionally defined rural activities—farming, mining, and forestry. Although production agriculture is practiced statewide and 59 percent of the State is forested, manufacturing, retail trade, and service industries are the major employers of rural people.

Rural communities exist throughout Pennsylvania, both on the fringes of the urban centers, where suburbs meet the hinterland, and also as relatively isolated settlements in the central and western regions of the State. Nearly 3.7 million Pennsylvanians lived in rural areas (open countryside and towns with fewer than 2,500 residents) in 1990—the largest rural population of any State. Nevertheless, the rural population in Pennsylvania accounts for only 31 percent of the State's 11.9 million population.

The dominant urban majority affects rural life through interarea economic and social links, State and Federal programs, business contacts, and personal interchanges. Thus, the ideas that urban people have about the nature and diversity of rurality and the characteristics of rural residents are likely to influence their opinions and positions on public and private policies that affect rural well-being.

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We examine the perceptions of rural areas held by three types of urban people—residents, business people, and State government officials/employees in Pennsylvania. We use recent data from mail surveys of those groups to measure their perceptions and attitudes toward various rural development strategies (see "Procedures," p. 26).

## Urban Pennsylvanians View Rural Areas as Desirable Places to Live

Previous research has suggested that in Pennsylvania (and perhaps elsewhere) rural areas are seen by substantial proportions of the population in highly positive terms. Nostalgic images of simple lifestyles, historical notions linking rurality to the Nation's heritage and the American character, and ideas glorifying the primeval wilderness combine to form what has been called "the mystique of rurality."

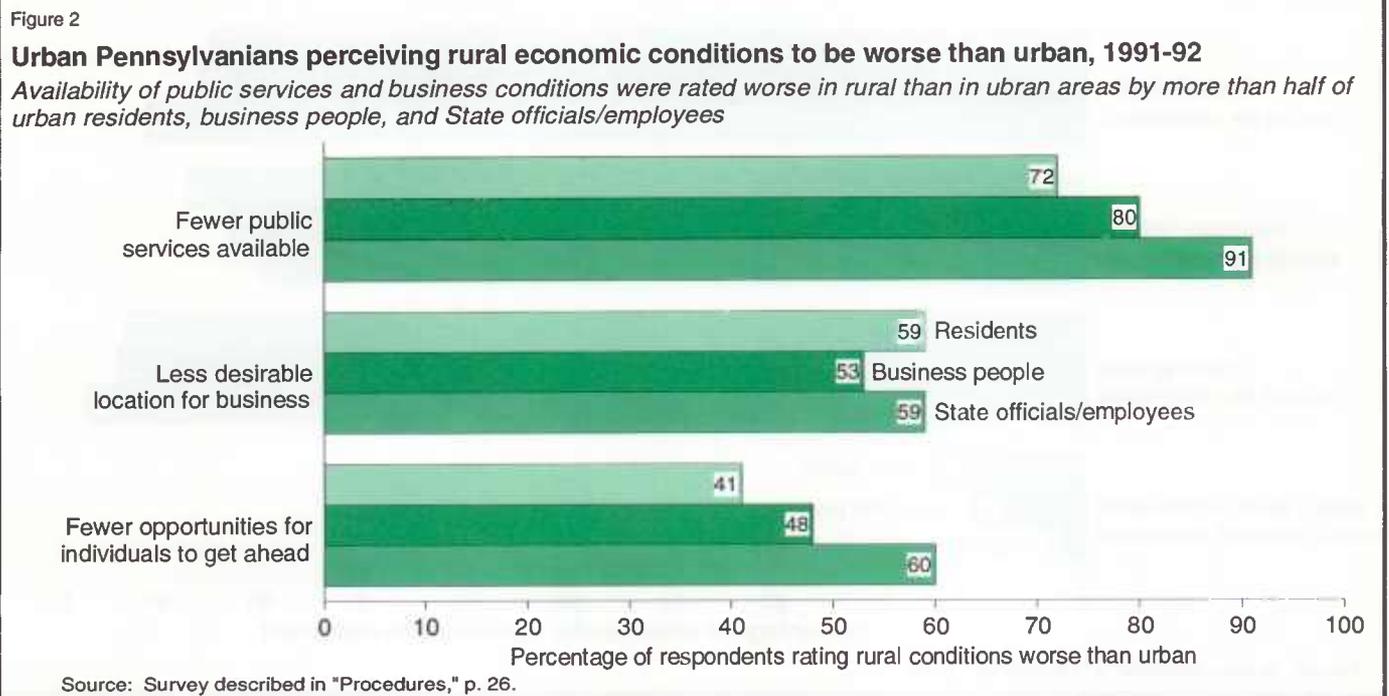
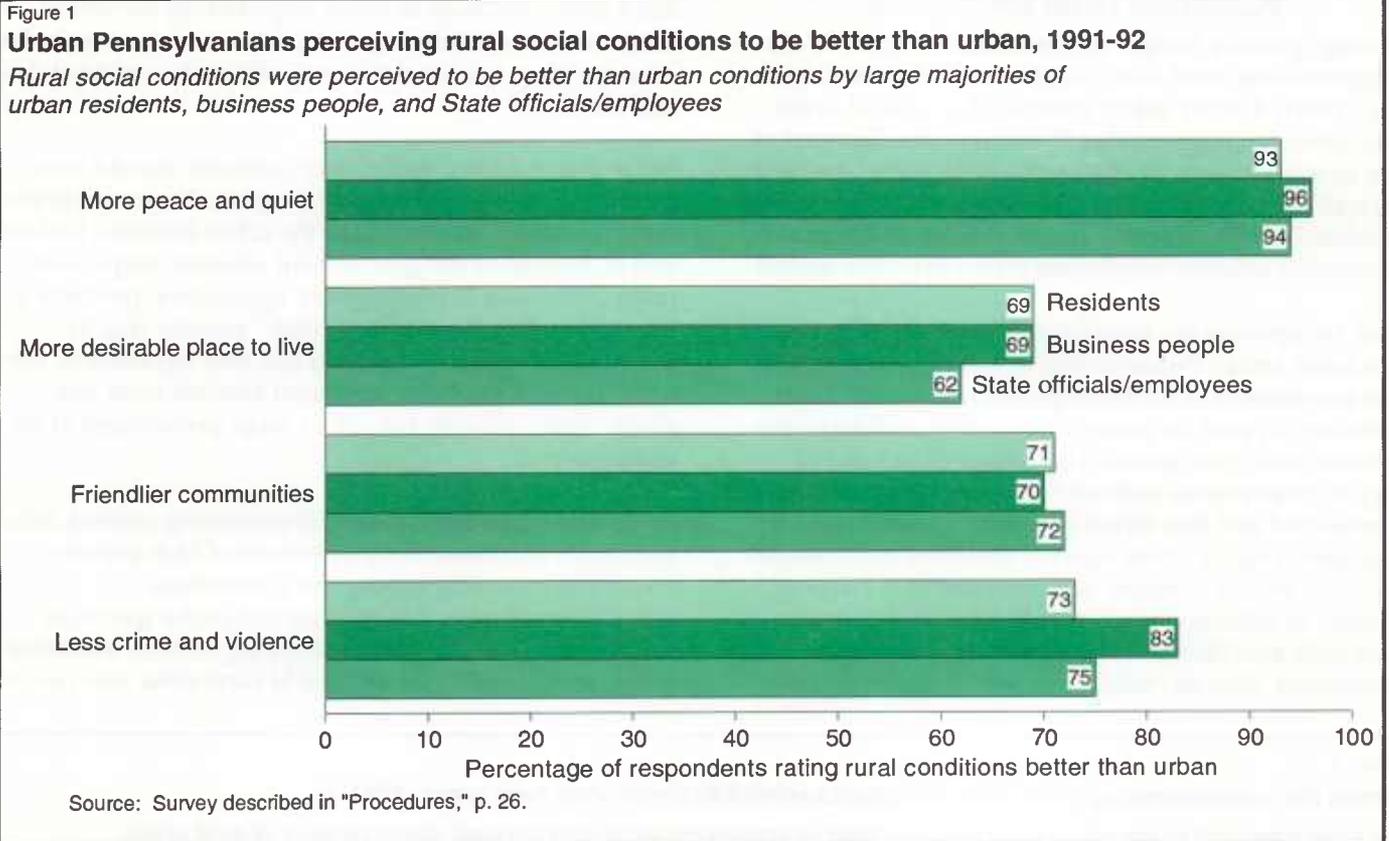
We found that urban residents, business leaders, and State government officials/employees in Pennsylvania were likely to subscribe to this positive image. When asked what words or phrases came to mind when they thought of Pennsylvania's rural areas, the most common responses focused on farming and natural and aesthetic features (such as forests, mountains, fresh air, open spaces) and on positive lifestyle attributes (such as wholesome, peaceful, tolerant).

Direct questions regarding how rural areas ranked compared with urban areas on social characteristics elicited similar acceptance of positive images (fig. 1). Compared with urban areas, rural places were viewed by 9 out of 10 of the urban residents, urban business people, and government officials/employees surveyed as providing more peace and quiet. Large majorities also described rural areas as more desirable places to live with friendlier communities and less crime and violence.

### Rural Areas Not Viewed as Positively in Economic Terms

When rating rural areas on more economically based characteristics, respondents in all three groups were less positive. All three groups overwhelmingly replied that rural areas had fewer public services (fig. 2). In light of their rating rural areas as more desirable places to live, they may not view the lack of public services as highly

detrimental. Perhaps the "rural mystique" partially accounts for the disjuncture between the respondents' recognition of the economic fact of fewer services and their high social ratings of rural areas. Government officials/employees were somewhat more likely than the other two groups surveyed to indicate that fewer public services were available in rural areas, indicating greater recognition of this problem.



Over half of each group also felt that rural areas were less desirable places to locate a business. Opinion was more divided on whether rural areas provide fewer opportunities for individuals to get ahead in life. Sixty percent of government officials/employees felt that opportunities to get ahead were more limited in rural areas, while 48 percent of business people and only 41 percent of urban residents thought rural areas provided fewer opportunities.

### Preservation versus Development

Although positive images predominated, there was also recognition that rural communities are not without problems. When directly asked whether they agreed, were undecided, or disagreed that "economic development of rural communities in Pennsylvania is necessary for their survival," 47 percent of the urban residents, 43 percent of the urban business leaders, and 59 percent of the State government officials/employees stated that they agreed.

While recognizing the need for economic development of rural areas, urban Pennsylvanians, business leaders and State government officials/employees expressed overwhelming support for preserving rurality and maintaining farms and open spaces. Thus, more than 8 out of every 10 respondents indicated that rural lifestyles should be preserved and that farms and open spaces should be maintained (fig. 3). They rejected the ideas that undeveloped land wastes valuable resources and that farming activities in suburban areas should be restricted, even when such activities are offensive to local residents. Government officials/employees were less certain than

the other groups sampled that farms, particularly unrestricted ones, should be maintained in suburban areas but more in favor of leaving land undeveloped.

Acceptance of the need for the development of rural areas appears to contradict the desire to preserve or maintain traditional rural lifestyles, natural resources, and amenities. Clearly, this is the case if rural development means heavy industrial development. Although other development strategies, such as those emphasizing recreation, tourism, retirement living, or vacation homes, may be less invasive, they too can threaten traditional rural lifestyles and resources.

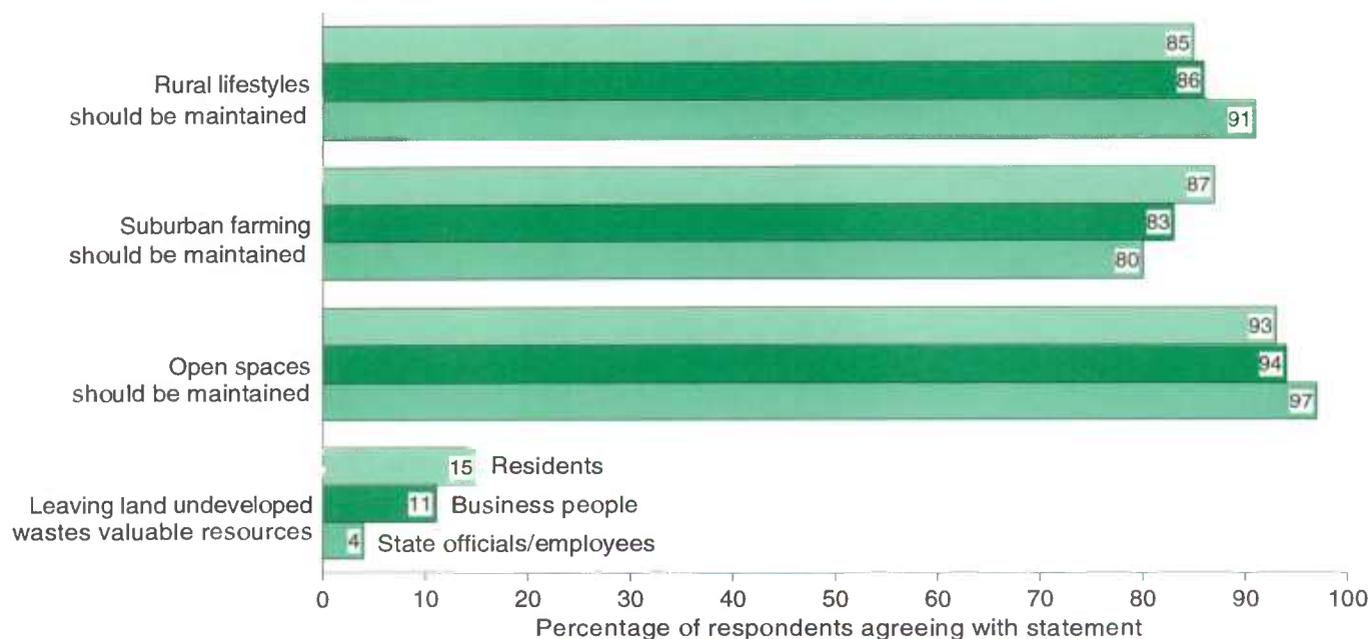
When asked what types of State activities should have priority for enhancing rural economies, 70 percent of the urban residents, 62 percent of the urban business leaders, and 80 percent of the government officials/employees rated promoting Pennsylvania's agricultural products as one option that should have "high" priority (fig. 4). Promoting Pennsylvania's coal and coal byproducts, timber and wood products, and rural tourism were also given "high" priority ratings by large percentages of all three samples.

Promoting small businesses and promoting existing industries received substantial proportions of high priority responses, especially among the government officials/employees. At the other end of the spectrum, support for promoting retail shopping centers, industrial parks, and manufacturing firms in rural areas was modest.

Figure 3

### Urban Pennsylvanians agreeing with statements related to preserving rural areas, 1991-92

All three groups of respondents were highly in favor of preserving social and physical characteristics of rural areas



Source: Survey described in "Procedures," p. 26.

Government officials/employees were significantly more likely to endorse many of the development options than were urban residents or business leaders. All three groups, however, focused on promoting the traditional extractive industries and on promoting tourism or businesses that might be expected to harm the countryside less profoundly than establishing shopping malls and factories.

### Comparing Urban Residents, Business Leaders, and Government Officials/Employees

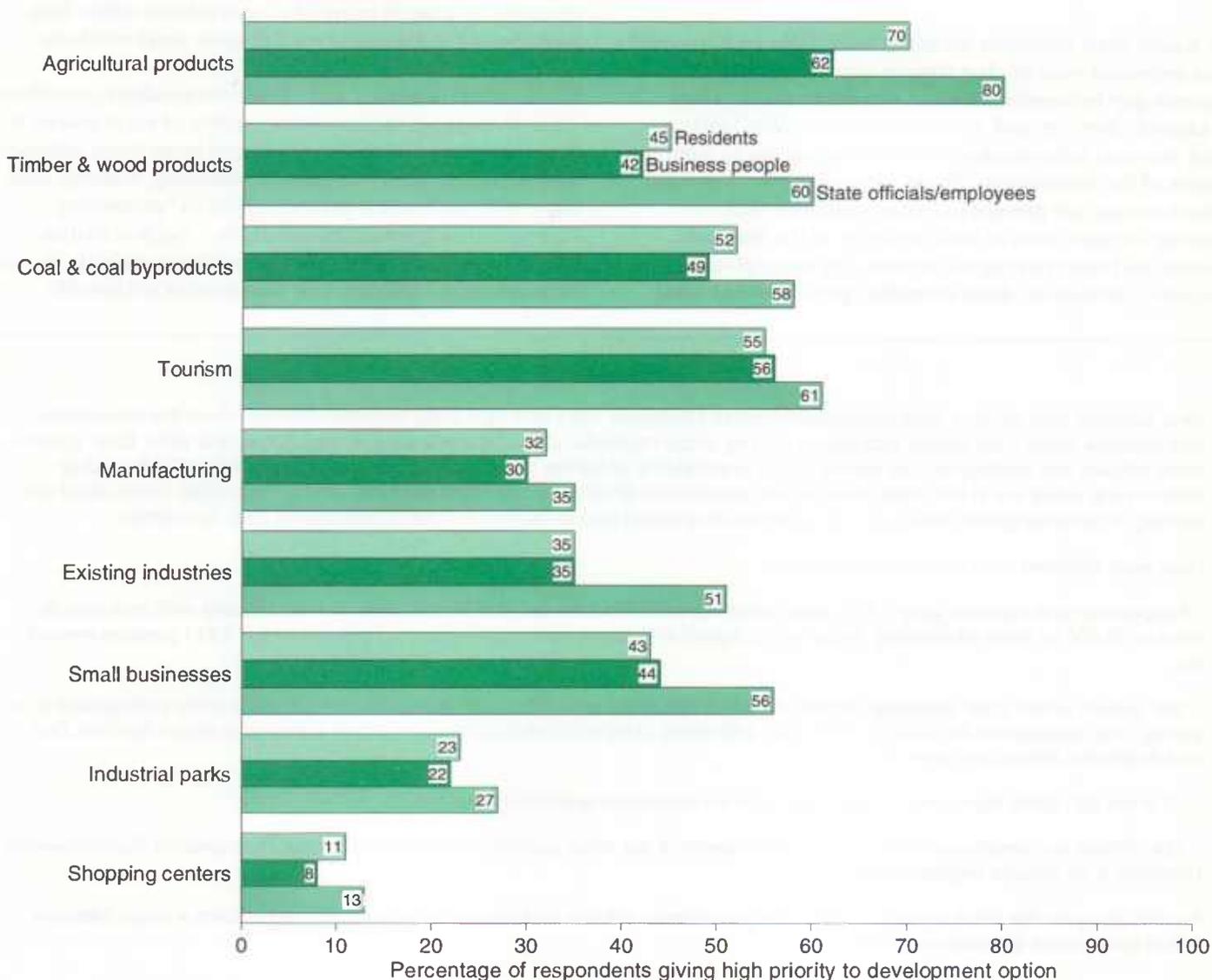
There were many similarities and a few differences between the perceptions and attitudes reported by the urban residents and those expressed by the samples of urban business people and State government

officials/employees. All three groups were likely to describe rural places in positive terms. Farming images were the most often named element, followed by comments on the natural beauty of the rural environment and the desirable characteristics of rural community life. State officials/employees were more likely to indicate that rural areas are relatively disadvantaged in terms of job opportunities and available community services. Such responses suggest a somewhat greater recognition among government officials/employees that rural areas suffer various disadvantages. They also were more likely to feel that the State should give priority to helping rural communities enhance their traditional extractive industries, to bring in additional businesses and industries, and to promote

Figure 4

### Urban Pennsylvanians who believe the State should give high priority to various rural development options, 1991-92

*Economic development strategies for traditional extractive industries and tourism were given high priority by more respondents than strategies involving less traditionally perceived rural industries*



Source: Survey described in "Procedures," p. 26.

rural tourism. Although a number of differences among the three samples were statistically significant, the distinctions were quantitative, not qualitative. In general, the urban public, urban business people, and Pennsylvania government officials/employees shared positive views of rurality and wished to preserve rural places.

### Discussion

Policies and actions developed on the basis of misconceptions about rural people and places are unlikely to achieve desired ends. Thus, government programs aimed at providing human services, facilitating economic growth, or gaining cooperation among political units may founder. Business leaders may ignore lucrative markets or bypass profitable production locations. Individuals may not avail themselves of opportunities for rewarding contacts and experiences. Equally important, the widely held images of a mystique of rurality and the related belief that "all is right" in the hinterland may mean that rural problems often are ignored, while social programs are designed to fit the more visible needs of inner cities.

In reality rural problems do exist. Nationally, rural poverty has increased over the last decade and the per capita income gap between metro and nonmetro persons has widened. Services and amenities are also often lacking, and the rural infrastructure is often inadequate to meet the needs of the inhabitants. These national patterns of rural disadvantage are present in Pennsylvania as well. Unemployment rates of rural counties in the State are higher, and their per capita incomes lag those of urban counties. Moreover, these economic gaps between rural

and urban areas increased during the 1980's and early 1990's. Pennsylvania's rural communities were particularly hard hit by declines in manufacturing and mining during the decade. These factors combine to hinder the ability of rural areas to support social services, health care, transportation facilities, water and sewage systems, schools, and other community services. Programs and policies which are targeted to rural locales may fail to reach their intended goals if they are based on misperceptions.

One of the persistent misconceptions about rural America is the idea that "rural" and "farm" are synonymous. In Pennsylvania, not only farming, but other extractive industries (mining and forestry) were historically important, and, together with many small manufacturing plants, provided employment and income to village residents. Declines in each of these industries have contributed to the economic hardships of rural areas in the State. To the extent that policymakers equate "rural" with "farming" and seek solutions to rural problems through programs targeted to enhance farm operations, they divert valuable resources to a small number of individuals rather than contributing to the well-being of most rural residents.

When urban residents and State policymakers considered ways to increase the economic vitality of rural places, the development options they preferred were those enhancing traditional extractive industries—farming, forestry, mining—with the highest priority given to "promoting Pennsylvania agricultural products." Such activities would have little benefit for the nonfarm majority in rural Pennsylvania. Tourism was also seen as a desirable

### Procedures

Four separate mail surveys were conducted between November 1991 and April 1992 to obtain information on the perceptions and attitudes about rural people and places held by urban residents, urban business people, legislators, and other State government officials and employees. The survey asked respondents about the meaning they assign to the word "rural"; where they believe rural areas are in the State; their general perceptions of rural communities, lifestyles, and settings; their views about preserving or developing rural areas; and the priorities they would give to various options for enhancing rural economies.

Data were obtained from the following samples:

\* Responses were received from 1,524 urban residents selected from the nine largest cities in Pennsylvania with core populations of 50,000 or more inhabitants. Returned, completed questionnaires represented 42 percent of the 3,611 persons contacted.

\* 354 owners and/or chief executive officers of businesses in the nine cities with populations of 50,000 or more participated in the survey. This represented 38 percent of the valid addresses obtained from a random sample of businesses drawn from the Dun and Bradstreet listings for these cities.

\* 67 of the 251 State legislators (27 percent) returned completed questionnaires.

\* 134 officials and employees from the executive branch of the State government selected from the Pennsylvania Commonwealth Directory, a 52 percent response rate.

For this analysis, the State legislators and other government officials and employees were combined to form a single category called government officials/employees.

option for increasing the vitality of rural places in the State. Rural tourism is an important industry in Pennsylvania, supporting more than 63,000 rural jobs and contributing over \$17 million in local tax revenues. Although tourism development may be an appropriate strategy for some situations, it is not a panacea for the problems of all communities in the State and region.

Rural areas are also diverse. No single, universal image is appropriate. Rather, rural areas differ from one another, not only in economic activities, but also in ethnicity, religious persuasion, historical background, sociodemographic structure, and other attributes. Thus, policy decisions designed with a "one size fits all" orientation are unlikely to succeed in encouraging rural economic development.

Many academicians are concerned with contributing to the policy process, and a number of avenues of dialogue have been established at the national level for sharing the knowledge of the social sciences with policymakers. These include, but are not limited to, the National Rural Studies Committee, the Experiment Station Committee on Organization Policy, the Social Science Agricultural Agenda Project, and the Regional Rural Development Centers. Such interaction and collaboration can contribute to correcting misperceptions about rural people and places. Communication channels could also be opened at the State level by convening working groups of academicians, business leaders, State legislators, and local officials to focus on current rural conditions; to inventory and identify natural areas, communities, and persons at risk; and to devise procedures for activating and assisting local individuals in improving rural well-being.

Although rural areas in the real world do not always match the idealized, nostalgic views that people hold of them, the images themselves tell us something about American values and the treasured elements of our heritage. These ought not to be dismissed as the simple musings of an uninformed populace. Rather, they represent many of the goals and dreams of citizens across the Nation—close-knit communities, safety, peace, stability, and a clean environment.

What appears to be needed is a vision that incorporates the best of both rural and urban life and, as such, may be appropriate for country, small town, and metro settings. But that does not mean that all areas would be alike. Effective progress toward a better life for rural people in Pennsylvania and elsewhere requires a clear and accurate appraisal of current conditions and concerted and systematic efforts by business leaders, government policymakers, and rural residents themselves to improve their life chances and well-being.

### For Further Reading

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