

## Introduction to the Rural Development Special Issue

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It was in the late 1960s when USDA demographer Calvin Beale put together various pieces of the rural puzzle during his trips and realized that rural areas and communities were no longer one-dimensional in social and economic structures. Until that time, rural areas in the US were seen as the realm of agriculture, or sometimes of resource extraction. These labels not only referred to the dominant economic activity but provided the context for the organization of rural societies. After the 1970 census which validated Beale's conclusion and marked the start of the nonmetropolitan turnaround (Beale, 1975)<sup>1</sup>, scholars and policy makers began to understand rurality in the United States as a more complex concept. This change gave a strong impetus to the fields of rural sociology and rural studies in general.

Since the 1970s, rural studies has developed into a complex academic field, dealing with a large number of issues, problems and challenges of rural places, both in the US and abroad. While there is still a strong focus on agriculture, it has also stimulated a large literature on other issues, such as boomtowns and resource extraction, amenity and retirement migration, rural tourism, spatial inequalities and rural poverty. Rural sociology has occasionally been challenged as an academic discipline, but such challenges have helped to refine the identity and mission of the field (Lobao, 1996)<sup>2</sup>.

As an academic discipline, rural studies has two important characteristics. The first is that it has strong policy focus. Rural researchers have always been interested in not only describing conditions, but also offering recommendations to policy makers to improve the life of rural populations and to understand the complexity of rural communities. Second, the fact that complex realities are seldom understood through a narrow disciplinary lens made rural studies an inherently interdisciplinary field, providing many opportunities for collaboration with other fields in both social and natural sciences.

The Online Journal of Rural Research and Policy took the initiative to publish a Rural Development Special Issue. This initiative corresponds with the interdisciplinary perspective of rural studies and is reflected in the collection of papers as well. Each paper addresses one or more central themes of rural studies, many of which are interrelated.

One is the development disparity between urban and rural areas, which has been an issue for rural policy for a long time. Mannion and Zougris discuss the neoclassical economic claim of ultimate development convergence using the Plains states as an example. Rural population trends

are concerns for many policy makers. The paper by Nene and Johnson addresses recruitment and retention strategies in Nebraska, a state which has struggled with depopulation for a long time.

Other issues which concern rural researchers represented in this special issue are place attachment and the cultural meanings of rurality. Loveridge, Yi and Bokemeier explore how place attachment in the Great Plains is affected by various local characteristics, including natural amenities. Ellingson and Seidl discuss the same general themes from a different perspective, examining the values that residents and visitors place on the landscape in a Colorado tourist destination. In her paper, Hajdik examines how 'rural' cultural icons have been commoditized and used to promote tourism in Iowa, and how the commoditization process often relies on an imagined and unchanging pastoral rurality. In "Feedstock Fashions," Kendra Brandes relies on oral history to reconstruct the uses and the meanings of rural fashions made from feedstock bags during first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in rural communities in the Midwest. She argues that as an element of material culture, the clothing and clothing practices of rural populations provide a glimpse of everyday life in rural America during this time period.

Overall, the six papers in the special issue illustrate how diverse the field of rural studies continues to be. These contributions to this issue come from many academic disciplines, and are very diverse in methods and in subject matter. We believe that despite the rapid urbanization of the United States investigations in rural studies have not lost their significance. Rurality has important cultural meanings for Americans, and rural areas provide livelihood for many people as well as resources for the society as a whole. With that in mind, we recommend the reader to explore this realm in this special edition.

1. Beale, Calvin (1975) *The revival of population growth in non-metropolitan America*. USDA ERS-605, Washington DC. [\[back\]](#)
2. Lobao, Linda (1996) A Sociology of the Periphery versus a Peripheral Sociology: Rural Sociology and the Dimension of Space. *Rural Sociology* 61, pp. 77-102. [\[back\]](#)