# *J*ournal of *R*ural and *C*ommunity *D*evelopment

## Supportive Communities and a Sense of Belonging in Rural and Non-rural Communities in Canada

**Author: E. Dianne Looker**

**Editor:**
Dr. Doug Ramsey

**Special Note:**
This paper is one of five in this issue of the JRCD that was prepared for a Festschrift for Bill Reimer, Professor of Sociology at Concordia University and Director of the SSHRC-funded New Rural Economy Project (NRE) from 1998 to 2007. Indeed, the concept of the JRCD was conceived at a research workshop of the NRE in May, 2002. All five papers were peer-reviewed through the co-editing efforts of Dr. William Ashton and Dr. Ray Bollman.

# Supportive communities and a sense of belonging in rural and non-rural communities in Canada

**E. Dianne Looker**
Acadia and Mount Saint Vincent Universities
Nova Scotia, Canada
dianne.looker@msvu.ca

## Abstract

This analysis examines where people turn in times of change, and factors that affect one's sense of belonging to a community. Cycle 22 of the Canadian General Social Survey provides data on rural and non-rural areas; the New Rural Economy Project has detailed information on twenty rural communities. Many of the changes participants experienced in the last year had neutral or positive effects. Family and friends are the principal source of support in both rural and non-rural communities. (Bureaucratic and informal associative networks are important for fewer.) Like rural participants, non-rural participants also report they belong to their community, a feeling that is stronger in rural communities which are open to diversity, have many, effective leaders, and encourage community participation.

Keywords: youth, community attachment, rural, social networks, social support

---

## 1.0 Introduction

This paper looks at the links between individuals and communities in which they live. To whom do people turn when faced with challenges and change? Family and friends? Or, have we reached a point where institutions and bureaucracies have replaced social networks as the source of support? How do those in rural feel about their communities, compared to those in non-rural areas? Are networks of support stronger in rural areas? Do rural residents have more of a sense of belonging in their communities?

This paper will attempt to answer these questions by analysing data on the relationship between communities and individuals in two Canadian studies. Specifically it will look at the role of networks and communal relations in supporting individuals when faced with change, as well as the sense of belonging that individuals, in rural and non-rural locales report toward their communities. In doing this, the paper will also highlight and celebrate the key role that the New Rural Economy (NRE) project, spearheaded by Bill Reimer of Concordia University, has played in the ways we look at rural issues in Canada.

Social networks and community ties are important for a number of reasons—social networks provide support and create emotional attachments and a sense of mutual obligation. Having a strong sense of attachment to a community can affect both an individual's level of participation in community events, and can also influence decisions about staying or leaving the area. Having supportive networks within a community can strengthen ties to that community; having few supports within a locale may weaken these ties. This paper explores both social networks and community ties, and their interrelations in rural and non-rural settings.

There has been a lot of research on community attachment and sense of belonging to community. As Brehm, Weisenhauer and Kranich (2004) note "community attachment, a concept encompassing residents' emotional and sentimental attachments to a particular community has long been of interest to scholars, particularly in relation to rural areas" (p. 405) (see also Beggs, Hurlbert, & Hames, 1996; Looker, 2001, 2002; Meert, 2000; Reimer, 1997). Community ties are often seen to be stronger in rural areas (Theordori & Luloff, 2000). Indeed, "rural communities have traditionally been strong with respect to social networks based on kin, religious and cultural similarities." (Reimer & Bollman, 2010, p. 34). However, there is some recognition that community attachment is important in urban as well as rural areas (Lewicka, 2005; Looker, 2012, 2013; Obst, Smith, & Zinkiewicz, 2002; Theodori, 2001). Nonetheless, ties to community and community support networks are key links to understanding geographic stability and mobility (Looker, 2013), and the resources available in times of change and stress (Reimer, 1997, 2011).

This paper will examine some of the dynamics of community ties in rural and non-rural areas of Canada. It will examine the extent to which rural (and non-rural) individuals still turn to family and friends, rather than market or bureaucratic structures, when they need support in times of change. It will also explore residents' sense of belonging to a community, and the community characteristics that are associated with residents having strong feelings of belonging to their community.

## 2.0 Description of Data

In order to explore these issues, two sources of data will be used: data from cycle 22 of Statistics Canada's General Social Survey (GSS) and from the household survey that was part of the New Rural Economy (NRE) project. The link between these two data sets derives from the fact that several of the questions in this cycle of the GSS were taken directly from the NRE. This link is one of the key contributions of the NRE project—its influence on how we understand and conceptualize issues facing rural communities in Canada. Because of the systematic way in which the NRE was designed and implemented, and because of the recognition of the insights it developed with respect to rural issues, several strategic items from the NRE were incorporated into the GSS, Cycle 22, a larger, national study of individuals in communities across Canada. In this way, the impact of the NRE is much wider than would be the case if the ideas it explored could only be examined in the necessarily limited sample of communities that were its primary focus.

The NRE project has a number of different components (see Reimer, 2006 for details). A key component of the NRE was the attention that was paid to sample selection. Thirty two rural communities were chosen based on data from the Canadian Census on five variables: status as leading or lagging rural areas; extent of exposure to global market forces; economic stability; proximity to urban areas; and local social and institutional capacity. For this paper, the focus is on the NRE household survey that was undertaken in the year 2000, in twenty of the thirty two communities (see Reimer, 2006, 2011 for details of the twenty communities). The survey sample included information from one individual, randomly chosen, in each of 1,995 rural households. The response rate was not recorded in all NRE communities; for the twelve where it was, the response rate ranged from 34% to 62%. One of the strengths of this data set is the combination of individual, household and community data. The NRE data include several questions about community

involvement and sense of belonging as well as perceptions of their community. However, having data from only 20 rural communities means there is little variation in the community-level characteristics.

The General Social Survey, Cycle 22 is a nationally representative sample of individuals in the ten Canadian provinces, undertaken in 2008. Excluded are those living in the Territories, those on aboriginal reserves and those living in institutions. Random digit dialing was used to locate individuals, fifteen years of age and older, in households across the provinces. The final sample size was 20,401 individuals, chosen randomly within the household, representing a 57% response rate. Eighteen percent of the participants in the GSS were living in rural areas at the time they were surveyed. (See Reimer et al., 2010 for a discussion of definitions of "rural".) The strengths of the GSS are that it is representative at the provincial and national levels, and that it includes individuals living in both urban and rural communities. However, there are fewer questions on the individual's involvement with their community than is true in the NRE data because the GSS collected information on a wider range of topics.

## 3.0  Specific Measures

There are two general issues that form the focus of the following analysis. One has to do with how individuals deal with change, in particular what role communal networks play in their responses to change. The other is the individual's sense of belonging to their community. In other words, we will initially examine the extent to which individuals turn to their communities for support in times of change and then, on the other side, how they feel about their community, and the links between the two.

### 3.1  Response to Change

First, we look at the role of the local community in supporting individuals in times of change. Both the NRE and the GSS include the question: "Which of the following changes, either positive or negative, have you experienced during the last 12 months?" For the GSS, the question was targeted to changes experienced by the chosen individual. For the NRE, it included changes experienced by the respondent *or* a member of their household.

The list of possible areas in which there might have been changes included: finances or income; education; employment; legal matters; health; living arrangements; parenting or child care; home care of a sick or disabled person; personal achievements; any other change. Individuals who reported at least one change in the last twelve months were then asked which of these changes had the *largest* impact on them.[1] In the GSS, but not the NRE, participants were also asked if the overall effect of the change was positive or negative[2].

In both surveys, respondents were asked where they turned for support, given the effects of the change *that had the greatest impact*. Following the conceptualization developed by Reimer (Reimer, 1997; 2011; Reimer, Lyons, Ferguson, & Polanco,

---

[1] In the GSS the list of possible changes also included: "death of a loved one" and "family relationships".

[2] Note the respondents were asked if the *change itself* were positive or negative. Other questions ask about the impact of the change. So, a wage increase is likely seen as a positive change; a pay cut would likely be described as a negative change.

2008), the possible responses about types of support were classified as follows:

1. "Communal" (includes family, close friends/other friends, co-workers, neighbours);
2. "Bureaucratic" (includes professional people (doctor, lawyer, counselor); local government (mayor, municipal service); other government (federal or provincial department or representative); a public institution (high school, college, university or library); some social service/law or justice organizations);
3. "Communication/Media" (includes using the Internet or some other information or media source (newspaper, books, TV or radio));
4. "Market" (includes business people (one's employer, financial advisor or business friend));
5. "Associative" (includes any religious organization or other community organization).[3]

Once the nature of the change with the greatest impact was established and the sources of support during this the change identified, GSS respondents were asked about the effect of this change on various aspects of their life: their financial situation; their employment; their physical health; their mental well-being; and their sense of personal safety. NRE respondents were asked about the impact of the *household* response to this change on: their wealth; family; friends; personal safety and security; good physical health; work success; and mental well-being.

## 3.2 Sense of Belonging to Community

In both the NRE and the GSS, individuals were asked about their own personal sense of belonging in their current community. In the NRE the question asked their individual level of agreement with the statement "I feel that I belong in this community".[4] Possible responses were: strongly agree; agree somewhat; neither agree nor disagree; disagree somewhat; and strongly disagree. In the GSS the question was worded: "How strong is your sense of belonging in your community?" and the responses were: very strong; somewhat strong; somewhat weak; very weak; and no opinion. These responses were reordered in the analysis to more closely parallel the NRE questions, i.e. "no opinion", as a neutral response, was placed in the middle.

## 3.3 Other Measures

There are a number of other measures that are used in the analysis below. Rural/non-

---

[3] Note that there are areas of overlap in the question wording. "Market" supports include "business friends" while "Communal" includes "other friends" and "coworkers"; there could be overlap between "community organizations" which is classified as "Associative" and "social service" or "public institution", which are classified as "Bureaucratic". Using "books" is classified as "Communication/Media" but using the library "Bureaucratic". The assumption made by Reimer and his associates is that all five systems may be relevant to a particular situation, but that one tends to dominate. The categories in the classification are meant to reflect the *predominant* type of system used when seeking support. Some overlap in the classification of support types is, therefore, expected.
[4] In the NRE, feelings of belonging in the community correlates highly with plans to stay and not wanting to leave (data not shown).

rural is a key one in the GSS; all the respondents in the NRE survey live in rural communities. Other individual characteristics that will be used in some of the analyses include: gender; level of education; age; marital status; income; length of time in their current community; and whether they own their own home.

Both the NRE and the GSS data sets include information on the respondent's participation in their community (e.g. membership in local groups or organizations). The NRE also has a number of other measures about the individual's perceptions of various aspects of their community: the effectiveness of community leaders; whether the leadership in the community is dominated by a few or many, diverse individuals; and the community's openness to various groups (youth, women, those of different ethnic origin).

## 4.0 Analysis

### 4.1 Support in Times of Change

The first part of the analysis will look at the types of change individuals report and where they turn to for support when change happens. Interestingly, in the GSS, 29% of the individuals surveyed said they had *no changes* in the last 12 months to report (31% of those in rural areas and 28% in non-rural reported no changes). A virtually identical number, 29%, of the rural individuals in the NRE reported no changes in the last twelve months experienced by them or a member of their household.

Table 1 shows the types of changes that were reported by the respondents in the two surveys. Since more than one type of change can be reported these percents do not add to 100%.

One thing worth noting in Table 1 is that there is no particular type of change reported by even half of the respondents; the changes facing these individuals vary considerably. Most frequently mentioned in both data sets are financial and employment changes. Legal matters or home care changes are reported by relatively few.

Comparing rural versus non-rural responses in the GSS data, we see very few differences, which is an interesting finding in and of itself. Rural individuals are slightly more likely to report a death; non-rural to report a change in education.[5] Finally, the two right hand columns show the patterns for the GSS rural respondents and the (rural) NRE ones. More respondents to the NRE survey report "other changes", no doubt reflecting the fact that there are changes itemized in the GSS survey that are not included in the NRE data (specifically death of a loved one, and changes in family relationships). Other than that, the percent reporting any particular type of change is surprisingly similar. The one exception to this statement is the fact that more in the NRE report changes to health, but the question is worded to include changes to the health of someone in their household. Since both surveys report similar types of changes we have confidence that neither the survey design nor question wording (e.g. the fact that the NRE respondents were reporting changes faced by a member of their household while GSS respondents were talking about changes they personally faced) seems to have affected the prevalence of certain types of change. Further, the rural and non-rural respondents share many of the same

---

[5] The sample size of the GSS, cycle 22 is so large that almost any differences will be statistically significant. The discussion will focus on those for which there is a larger than a five percentage point difference.

changes in their lives.

Table 1. *Type of change reported by GSS (rural/non-rural location) and NRE (rural only)*

| Type of change | Non-rural GSS % | Rural GSS % | NRE (rural) % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Financial | 41 | 38 | 32 |
| Employment | 31 | 27 | 24 |
| Personal achievements | 28 | 25 | 17 |
| Health | 25 | 24 | 30 |
| Death of a loved one | 20 | 24 | - |
| Family relationships | 18 | 16 | - |
| Living arrangements | 18 | 14 | 15 |
| Parenting | 15 | 14 | 12 |
| Education | 15 | 12 | 10 |
| Legal matters | 10 | 10 | 5 |
| Home care for another | 9 | 9 | 7 |
| Other change | 2 | 2 | 12 |
| N* | 16579-16614 | 3744-3756 | 1990 |

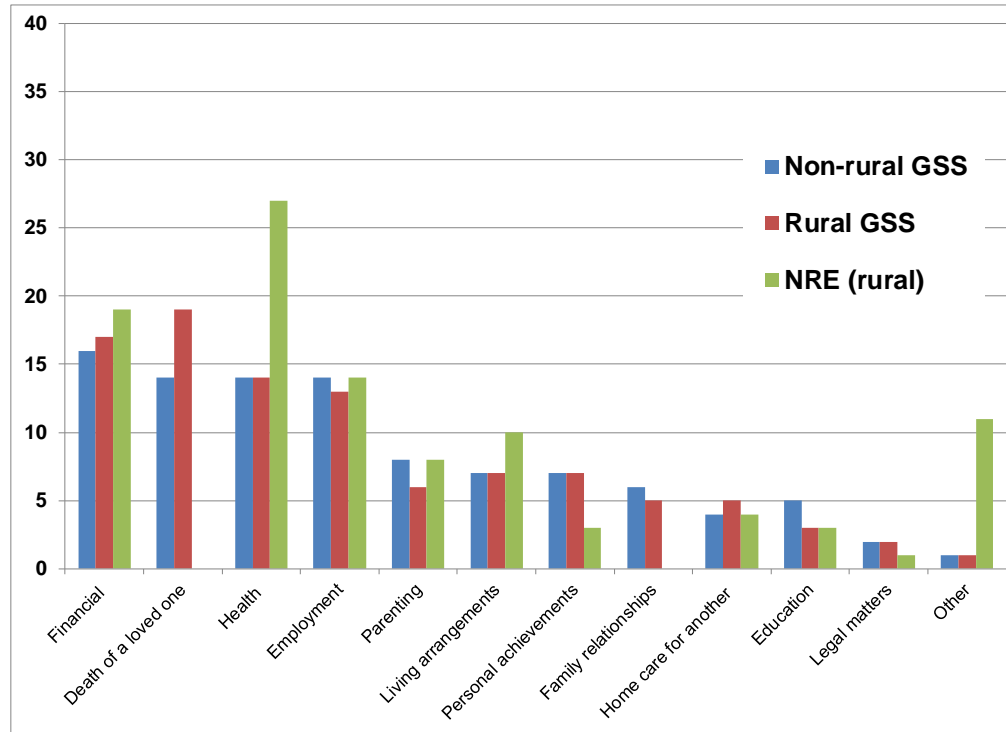Source: GSS22 and NRE household survey data files. Note "-" indicates no data available.
* N varies by individual item.

Before we can examine how these individuals deal with change, we need to look at which change they say had the *largest* effect on them. Figure 1 shows the results. Note that the question on which change had the largest impact was only asked of those who reported at least one change in the last 12 months. [6] Again, the striking result is the similarity between rural and non-rural respondents in the GSS, as well as the similarity between the rural respondents in the two surveys, despite the sampling differences in the two studies.

The biggest differences are in the comparison of the two rural samples, with more individuals in the NRE reporting that health changes (for themselves or others in their household) had the most impact on them. However, since there is no separate item on death of a family member, those "death" changes would likely be included in those reporting the impact of this change. Further, more NRE than rural GSS respondents reported some "other" change had the most impact on them.

---

[6] The number of sample observations (Ns) are reduced from those shown in Table 1 because almost 30% of the respondents reported no changes when asked about changes over the last 12 months and therefore would not be asked about the change that had the most impact.

Figure 1.  *Change with the largest impact reported by rural/non-rural location GSS and NRE (rural only)*



Source: GSS22 (non-rural, N= 11831; Rural N= 2562) and NRE household survey (N=1405)

One important question that was asked in the GSS, but not the NRE had to do with the *nature* of the most significant change, specifically whether the change itself was primarily positive or primarily negative. Almost two thirds (66% of non-rural and 64% of rural GSS respondents said the most important change was *positive* (data not shown)—the change itself (e.g. they got a pay raise, or went to a better job or improved their health), not the impact of the change. Only about a quarter (27% of non-rural and 29% of rural) of the GSS participants said the change was mostly negative; the remaining individuals said either it was both positive and negative, or neither.[7] This finding is particularly important when we look at how people say they adapted to this change, and who provided them with support. If the vast majority of changes are positive or neutral, it may be unclear that much "support" is needed.

This result is evident in a related finding: that even the change that had the most impact on the respondent often had little impact on various outcomes or it improved the situation (see Figure 2 and Figure 3).

---

[7] The largest percent reporting positive effects were from employment changes and from personal achievements. The largest percent reporting negative effects involved those from health changes, home care for a sick or disabled person, or changes in legal matters.

Figure 2. *Effect of most significant change on various outcomes, by non-rural/rural, GSS*
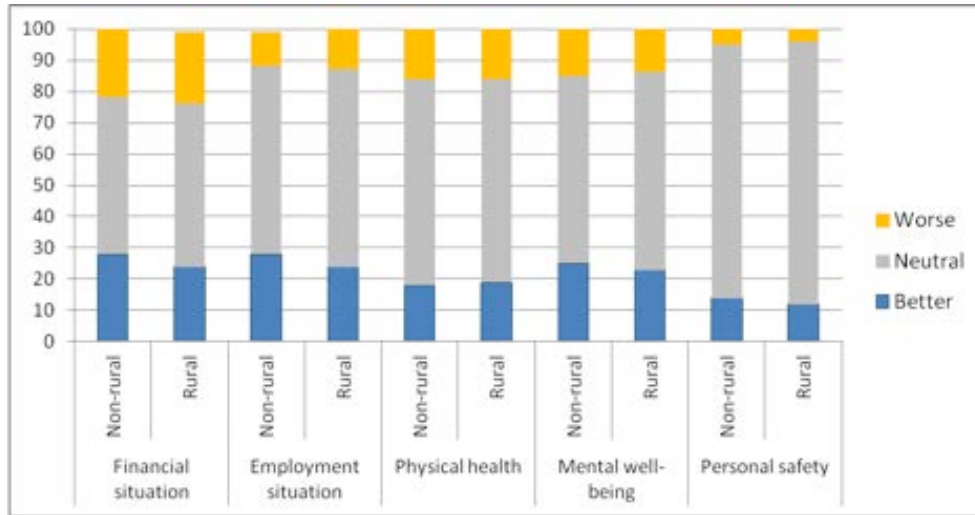


Source: GSS22, (non-rural, N=9117; rural N=2397).

The pattern from both data sets is the same, regardless of the outcome that is the focus: the change that had the most impact had a *positive* impact on an important minority of respondents (as high as 38% in terms of the effect on family in the NRE, and the lowest at 12% of rural respondents in the GSS saying the change had a positive effect on their personal safety). But by far the most frequent outcome was "no impact", the neutral middle category. The good news is that few report that the change had a negative impact (the highest percent was 26% of NRE respondents who said that the most significant change had a negative impact on their wealth; 23% of rural GSS respondents said the same). The low percent who report negative outcomes of the change no doubt reflects the fact that most say the change was a positive one in the first place (see above).

Figure 3. *Effect on various aspects of how the household dealt with change that had the most impact, NRE*
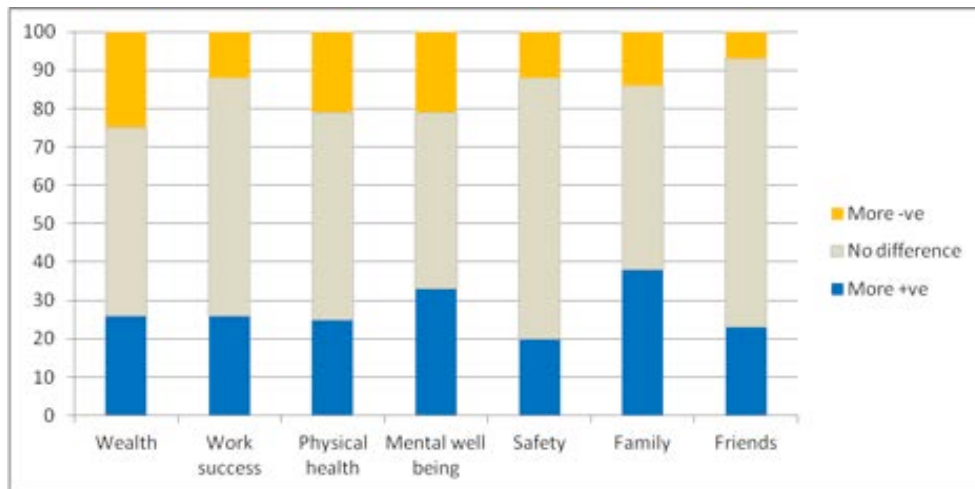


Source: NRE household survey, N varies 1152-1327.

Finally we come to a critical point of this part of the paper—the analysis of the type of supports reported by members of rural and non-rural households. When considering this analysis, it is important to keep in mind that (a) about a third of the individuals said they had no changes in the last twelve months to report and (b) the effects of any change were by and large positive or neutral. Few needed support because of a change that had a negative impact. Again, those who reported no changes in the last 12 months were not asked about the change with the most impact, so were also not asked about the source of support for dealing with this change.

As indicated above, Reimer and his NRE colleagues (Reimer, 2011) identified five sources of supports identified by NRE respondents when asked about a fairly comprehensive list of different types of possible supports (see section, above, on "Response to change" measures). These are: Communal, Bureaucratic, Communication/Media, Market and Associative supports. Individuals and households can use more than one type of support so the percents in the columns in Table 2 do not add to 100%.

Table 2. *Source of support used in the type of change with the most impact, by GSS (rural/non-rural location) and NRE (rural only)*

| Source of support | Non-rural GSS | Rural GSS | NRE (rural) |
|---|---|---|---|
|  | % | % | % |
| Communal | 79 | 77 | 60 |
| Bureaucratic | 52 | 49 | 50 |
| Communication | 45 | 37 | 24 |
| Market | 28 | 28 | 22 |
| Associative | 13 | 16 | 14 |

Source: GSS22 (non-rural N varies 11758 to 11811; rural N varies 2537-2555) and NRE household survey (N=1405).

For those who reported some change *and* identified a change that had the most impact, Table 2 shows that by far the largest percent of respondents, rural or non-rural, rely on family, friends and other "Communal" supports. Even though the percent reporting this type of support is somewhat lower in the NRE data, as Reimer (2011) reported, still, more than half the respondents say they used some form of Communal support. It is important to remember that NRE respondents are answering not only about changes that occurred to them or a member of their household, but also the *household* response to the change with the most impact. Individuals may have less information about how much the relevant member(s) of their household used informal Communal or Communication supports than they have about their household members' use of more formal Bureaucratic or Associative systems.

What is interesting are the high levels of reported use of Communal supports in non-rural areas. The fact that as many or more non-rural as rural respondents say they turn to family and friends for support indicates that informal social networks may be just as supportive in non-rural as in rural communities.

About half of all respondents from both data sets say they used a "Bureaucratic" support. That is, they say they turned to a professional (doctor, lawyer, counselor), or a member of the local, provincial or federal government, a public institution, or a

social service/law or justice organization. These are clearly important sources of information and services for individuals regardless of where they live.

Use of the other types of support is low relative to Communal and to Bureaucratic supports. Less than half, and in many cases, less than a quarter of respondents report using the other three types of support. Nonetheless, as Reimer (2011) notes, some groups, such as those with low education or income may be more reliant on Associative supports. Associative supports tend to be community-based groups. The fact that more people say they rely on the more formal structures of Bureaucratic groups for support compared to Associative supports, suggests that there is an important role for formal systems to be in place for those who may not have Communal supports when they are needed.

So, what can we learn from this analysis? Besides emphasizing the fact that most changes (including the change that individuals say had the greatest impact on them) were positive, there are a few points that warrant repeating before we move to the next section of this paper. One is that Communal supports dominate; they dominate in non-rural as well as rural areas, and in the results from both surveys. Secondly, the fact that there are so few differences between the responses given by rural and non-rural individuals is important. This is true regardless of whether the question is about the type of change, the effect of change or how they dealt with change. This blurring of rural/non-rural differences is important to ongoing research on rural and non-rural communities, and to research about the role of community ties and supports.

## *4.2 Sense of Belonging*

The next part of the analysis looks at the other side of the issue – not who in the community individuals turn to, but how they *feel* about their community. While the NRE has several measures that ask about feelings about and relation to community, the GSS Cycle 22 data set has only one comparable indicator: sense of feeling that one belongs. It is this common measure that will be examined in the next section. The critical issue is: what community characteristics are related to a sense of belonging in one's community? These findings could suggest some initiatives that communities can develop to help foster attachment among community members.

Table 3 shows the responses to the question about feelings of attachment to one's community in the two data sets. First of all, it is important to note that over seventy percent of all individuals surveyed agreed that they feel they belong to their community; more than a fifth strongly agree with this statement. That is, both non-rural and rural respondents feel this sense of belonging. Rural places do not have a monopoly on community ties. That said, somewhat more rural than non-rural do agree that they have these feelings, and more rural individuals say they "strongly agree". Further, the non-rural GSS respondents are more likely than their rural counterparts to disagree that they feel they belong to their community.

Table 3.  *Feelings of belonging to community by GSS (rural/non-rural location)
and NRE (rural only)*

| Feelings of belonging | GSS non-rural % | GSS rural % | NRE (rural) % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Strongly agree | 20 | 31 | 29 |
| Agree | 52 | 51 | 54 |
| Neutral | 1 | 1 | 8 |
| Disagree | 19 | 12 | 8 |
| Strongly disagree | 8 | 5 | 1 |
| N | 16025 | 3669 | 1984 |

Source: GSS Cycle 22 and NRE household survey.

There are also striking similarities between the percentages for the two sets of rural respondents. The percent who agree and who strongly agree that they feel they belong in their community in the GSS rural and the NRE rural data are within a few percentage points of each other. The main difference is more of the NRE respondents give a neutral response while slightly more of the GSS rural individuals disagree that they feel they belong to their community.[8]

So, feelings of belonging to one's community are fairly pervasive, but there is some variation. Since the NRE, but not the GSS, is a community based sample there are a number of detailed questions in the NRE about the community and the individual's feelings about and involvement in the community. In the GSS, these questions are more limited.  Therefore the next section of the paper will focus on data from the NRE.

Table 3 shows the relationship of feelings of belonging to whether or not they participate in any community group as a member, among the NRE respondents. More of those who participate say they agree that they feel they belong in the community (86% versus 77% of those who say they do not participate in any community group).[9] Of course, there is an issue here with causal order. Those who feel they belong are likely to participate in community groups. The results show relationship, not causation.

---

[8] Since the question wording and the placement of the neutral category differed in the two surveys, the percent giving a neutral response may reflect no more than the impact of the question format. For this question, NRE respondents are answering for themselves, not their household.

[9] In data not shown, a similar pattern holds in the GSS data, which does include questions on participation in local community groups. In both rural and non-rural areas, community participation is related to feelings of belonging. Interestingly, the number of times one participates does not have a clear effect. If one participates once a month, several times a month, or once a week, the feelings of belonging are the same. It is only when one compares infrequent participation (less than once a month) to frequent (once a month or more) that there is a difference in the percent who report that they feel they belong in their community, based on the GSS Cycle 22 data.

Figure 4. *Sense of belonging by participation in community groups (NRE)*
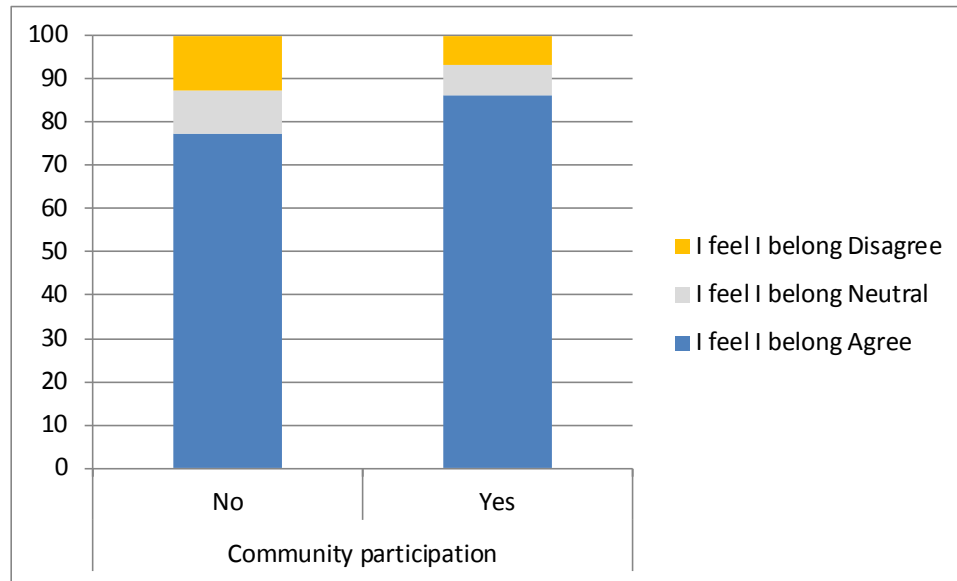


Source: NRE household survey (N=1984).

A stronger relationship is seen if we look at perceptions of how effective community leaders are (see Figure 5). Those who feel the leaders in their community are very effective are much more likely than others to say they feel they belong in the community (93% of those who agree versus 65% of those who disagree their leaders are effective, say they feel like they belong in their community).

Figure 5. *Sense of belonging by perceived effectiveness of community leaders (NRE)*
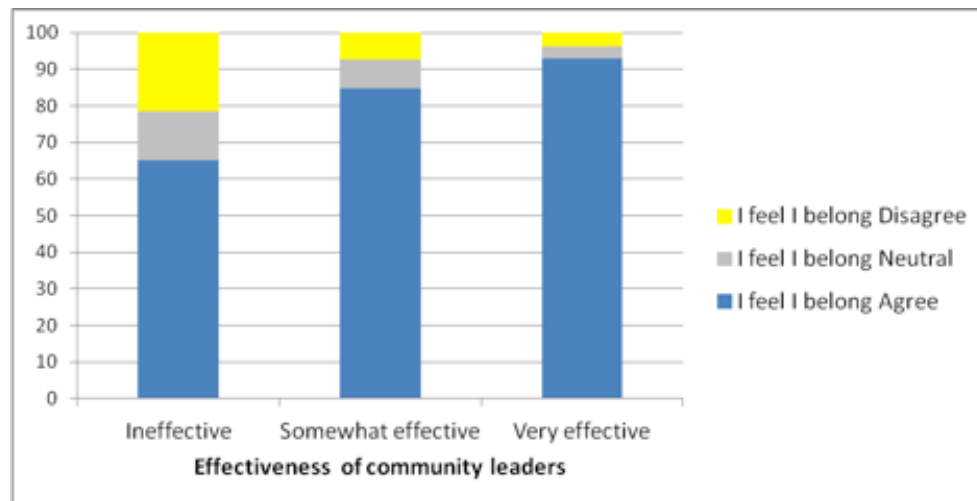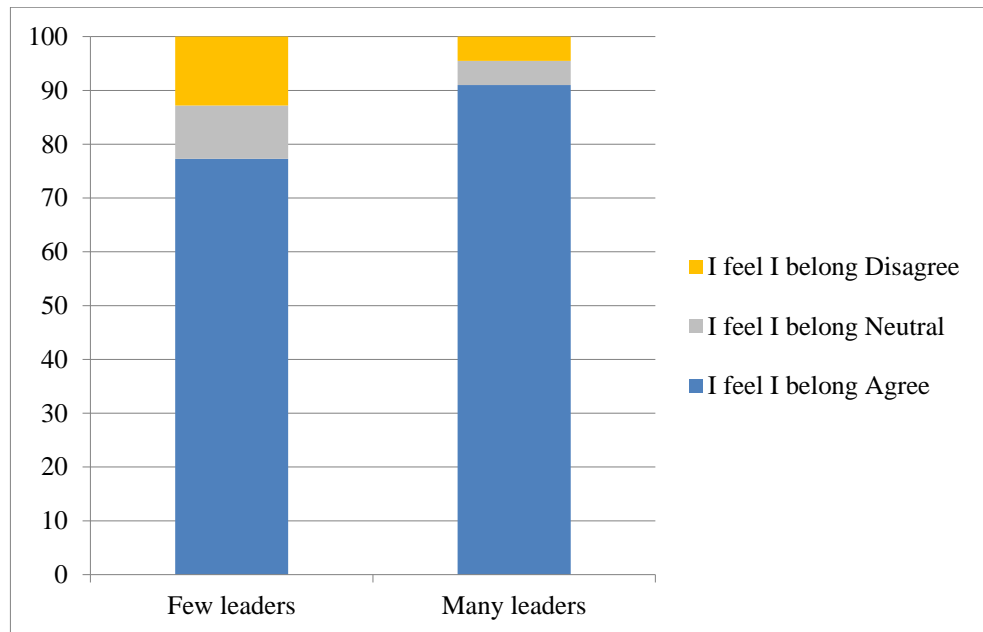


Source: NRE Household survey (N=1924).

The NRE also asked about how decisions were made in the community. Options included: one or two people are in control; a small group of people control things; there are several (3 or 4) groups or factions competing for control; or many people participate. About forty percent say that "many people participate"; slightly more (43%) say things are controlled by a small group; and 11% say there are factions

competing for control. If one compares those who report "many leaders" to the other respondents, in terms of feeling of belonging to the community, one gets the results in Figure 6.

It is clear that those individuals, who say their community is *not* run by a few individuals or small groups, but rather the community has many leaders, are more likely to say they feel a sense of belonging to their community. Over ninety percent of those who report "many leaders" compared to 77% of others, report these feelings of belonging.

Figure 6.  *Sense of belonging to community by whether or not there are many community leaders (NRE)*
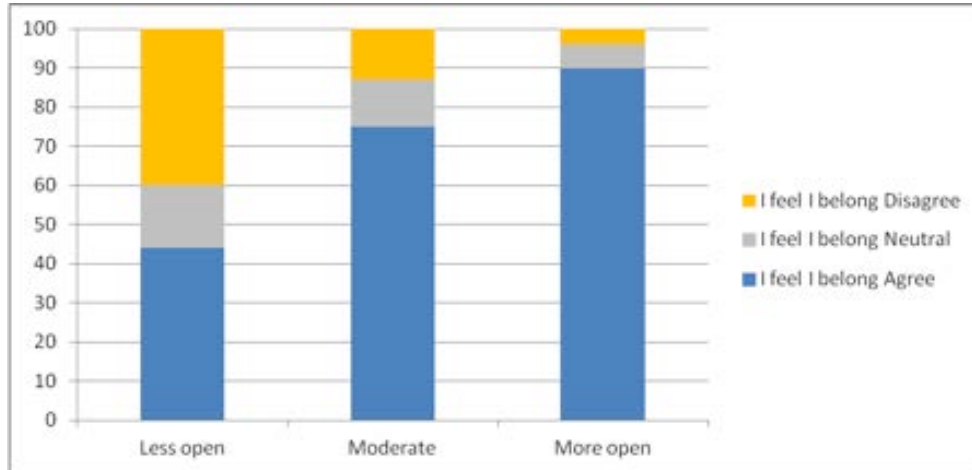


Source: NRE household survey (N=1785).

Finally, we look at how open the community is perceived to be. "Openness" is a composite measure, created from levels of agreement with the following statements:

- People in my community are open to opinions that are very different from their own.

- Women have opportunities for leadership positions.

- People in my community are willing to accept people from different racial and ethnic groups.

- Young adults (under the age of 35) have opportunities for leadership positions.

- People in my community are friendly with outsiders.

Figure 7 shows that the more open to diversity an individual says their community is, the more likely they are to say they feel like they, themselves, belong there. Ninety percent of those with a high score in their valuation of their community's openness, compared to 75% of those with a moderate rating and only 44% who say their community is not very open, say they feel they belong in their community.

Figure 7. *Sense of belonging to community by perceived openness of community (NRE)*



Source: NRE household community survey (N=1972).

We have seen that these four variables (participation in the community, perceived effectiveness of community leaders, having many leaders, and having an open community) are all related to someone reporting they feel they belong in the community. Table 4 shows that all four measures are, in fact related to this sense of belonging in an ordinary least squares regression.[10] In other words, communities that are perceived to have these characteristics: having leaders who are seen to be effective; having many leaders; being open and welcoming to diverse groups; and encouraging moderate participation in community groups, are likely to have a higher percent of community members who feel like they belong.[11] The largest effects are for community openness (beta = .28) and for having effective community leaders (beta = .22). These are characteristics that community policy makers can, to some degree, affect.

---

[10] If one extends the regression equation to include a number of measures of individual characteristics, we find that being older, being married, owning one's own house, and having lived all one's life in the community are all related to this sense of belonging, even when these community characteristics are controlled. That is, they have a statistically significant effect when included in the regression equation. Interestingly, gender, education and household income do *not* have statistically significant effects in this regression. But it is important to note that including all these individual factors only marginally increases the $R^2$ from .21 to .23.

[11] If one includes the individual's perception of the quality of a range of services in the community (elementary school, secondary school, police services, fire protection service, municipal water supply, municipal sewage services, garbage collection, recreation facilities, recreation programs) only the quality of the secondary school is related to sense of belonging in the community when other measures are controlled. Indeed, quality of secondary schools is related to plans to stay and plans to leave when a range of individual and community characteristics are included in the analysis (data not shown).

Table 4. *Regression analysis of factors related to sense of belonging to community, (NRE)*

| Variable | Standardized coefficient (beta) | Significance |
|---|---|---|
| Openness of community | .28 | .001 |
| Effectiveness of community leaders | .22 | .001 |
| Individual's participation in community | .14 | .001 |
| Having many leaders | .07 | .001 |

Source: NRE household survey. N= 1750; $R^2$= .21; Dependent variable= sense of belonging to community.

The final task is to pull the two parts of this analysis together. What relationship does a sense of belonging to the community have with the different types of supports individuals use in times of change? Figure 8 shows that there is a relationship, more evident when the more detailed version of the questions is used, between relying on communal types of support and one's sense of belonging in the community.[12]

Figure 8. *Sense of belonging to the community by amount of communal support (NRE)*
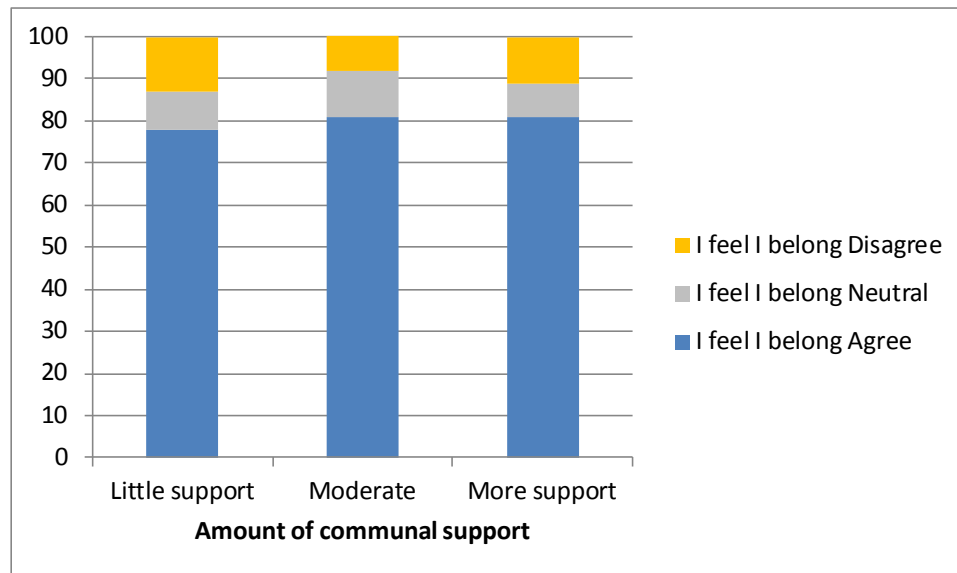


Source: NRE household survey. N=1397.

When we include the different types of supports used in times of change in the regression equation of factors related to a sense of belonging to community (i.e. adding these measures to those reported in Table 4, above), only the measure of use of Communal supports has a statistically significant effect on the sense of belonging to the community. That is, use of Bureaucratic, Associative, Communication or Market supports is not related to the sense of belonging to the community, after controls.

## 5.0  Summary and Conclusions

So, we have seen that there are a range of supports available to individuals in both rural and non-rural communities. While there are differences in who in these communities uses the different types of support (see Reimer, 2011), most individuals still turn to family and friends, and family and friends within their local community, in times of change. There are few rural/non-rural differences of much significance. In answer to the question, posed at the beginning of the paper, contrary to Putnam's (2000) claim that we are now "bowling alone", informal social networks still play a key role in individual's lives. And most feel at least some attachment to the community in which they are living.

Secondly we see that, by and large, the changes reported by individuals have a range of effects, many of them positive. Change (which can itself be positive or negative), in and of itself, does not create a crisis. For many individuals, the supports at hand are adequate to deal with any challenges from change. However, this does not mitigate the need to ensure that those dealing with change and with the sometimes negative effects of change may need active interventions. The results presented indicate that, next to Communal supports, it is Bureaucratic supports that are most often used, not Associative. That is, people tend to turn to formal organizations, professionals, and various government agencies, rather than informal community groups. This result points to a key role that formal organizations can play in both rural and non-rural settings.

The analysis of sense of belonging to a community is likely to be encouraging to a range of municipal leaders. Most individuals seem to feel a sense of belonging to their community, regardless of its size and degree of urbanization. Again, the minority who do not feel so connected warrant mention. While there is some support for the claim that community ties and a sense of belonging are stronger in rural areas, the data we examined document that rural communities do not have a monopoly on these ties. The vast majority of non-rural residents also report feeling like they belong to their local community.

Even more important are the characteristics of communities that are related to a sense of belonging. Many of these are open to augmentation by communities. While one can assume most, if not all communities strive to have "effective" leaders, being open to diverse groups, and ensuring a range of perspectives in decision making, can be affected by policy initiatives. In other words, policy makers in communities may be able to use these results to focus on initiatives that can improve the sense of belonging among their citizens. Policies can be put in place to ensure diversity in community leadership and to make a community more open and welcoming to diverse groups. Further, encouraging even moderate participation in community events and groups can have a positive effect.

Beyond the specific research findings, one goal of this paper was to recognize and celebrate the extensive contribution of the NRE project to research on rural issues. The detailed community oriented analyses, such as the one in this paper, would not have been possible without this resource. It is hoped that other researchers will make

---

[12] It is worth noting that the vast majority of those who said they received help from family and friends (Communal support) got support *within* the community. This was not true of those who relied on Associative, Market or Communication supports. It was less true of those who relied on Bureaucratic support to deal with change. That is, more of those who turned to Communal supports (85%) found support within the community, compared to 63% of those who reported Bureaucratic supports.

use of both the findings and the data from the NRE, and the GSS Cycle 22 questions it inspired.

## References

Beggs, J. J., Hurlbert, J. S., & Hames, V. A. (1996). Community attachment in a rural setting: A refinement and empirical test of the systemic model. *Rural Sociology*, *61*(3), 407-426.

Brehm, J. M., Weisenhauer, B., & Kranich, R. S. (2004). Dimensions of community attachment and their relationships to well-being in the amenity rich rural west. *Rural Sociology*, *69*(3), 405-429.

Lewicki, M. (2005). Ways to make people active: the role of place attachment, cultural capital and neighborhood ties. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, *25*(4), 381-395.

Looker, E. D. (2013). Staying or leaving "home":  feelings about community among mobile and immobile, rural and urban youth. Emotional Geographies Conference. July 1 - 3, Groningen, Netherlands.

Looker, E. D. (2012). Problematizing social networks as social capital. The impact of social ties on the mobility decisions of rural and urban youth. Annual International Conference on Sociology, May 7 - 10, Athens, Greece.

Looker, E. D. (2010). The risk of being rural. (with Ted D. Naylor). *Journal of Rural and Community Development*. *4*(2), 39-64.

Looker, E. D. (2002). *An Overview of Human Capital In Rural and Urban Areas. Human Resources and Social Development Canada*. Human Resources Development Canada. Available at: http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/cs/sp/hrsd/prc/publications/research/2001-000179/SP-510-07-02E.pdf

Looker, E. D. (2001). Rurality and capital: educational expectations and attainment of rural and urban youth. (with L. Andres), *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, *31*(2), 1-47.

Meert, H. (2000). Rural community life and the importance of reciprocal survival strategies. *Sociologica Ruralis*, *40*(3), 31.9-338

Obst, P., Smith, S. G., & Zinkiewicz, L. (2002). An exploration of community: Dimensions and predictors of psychological sense of community in geographical communities. *Journal of Community Psychology*, *32*(1), 119-135.

Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Reimer, B. (1997). Informal Social networks and voluntary associations in non-metro Canada. In Richard C. Rounds (Ed.), *Changing rural institutions: A Canadian Perspective*. Canadian Rural Restructuring Foundation and Rural Development Institute (pp. 89-104). Brandon University, Brandon, MB.

Reimer, B. (Ed.) (2006). Special Issue: The New Rural Economy. *Journal of Rural and Community Development*, *1*(2). Accessed January 24, 2014 at http://www.jrcd.ca/viewissue.php?id=2

Reimer, B. (2011). Social exclusion through lack of access to social support in rural areas. In Guy Fréchet, Danielle Gauvreau and Jean Poirier (Eds.), *Social Statistics, Poverty and Social Exclusion: Perspectives from Quebec, Canada and Beyond* (pp.152-160). Montréal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal.

Reimer, B. & Bollman, D. R. (2010). Understanding rural Canada: Implications for rural development policy and rural planning policy. In David J. A. Douglas (Ed.), *Rural Planning and Development in Canada* (pp. 10-52). Toronto, ON: Nelson.

Reimer, B., Lyons, T., Ferguson, N., & Polanco, G. (2008). Social capital as social relation: The contribution of normative structures. *Sociological Review*, *56*(2), 256-274.

Theodori, G. L. (2001). Examining the effects of community satisfaction and attachment on individual well-being. *Rural Sociology*, *66*(4), 618-628.

Theodori, G. & Luloff, A. E. (2000). Urbanization and community attachment in rural areas. *Society and Natural Resources*, *13*(5), 399-420.