CHAPTER ONE

Rural Communities and Social Work: An Introduction

RURAL SOCIAL WORK has been with us since the early 1900s and remains a significant and vital part of helping individuals and families, and addressing community problems. Despite the fact that the population of North America has been becoming increasingly urban for more than a century, a significant minority of the population still resides in rural areas. Although we are no longer primarily a rural or agrarian society, rural people, their culture, and their economic contributions remain an important part of our society.

Rural people experience challenges like the rest of society, and sometimes their needs rise to the level of requiring professional help; that is where social workers enter the picture. People from rural communities experience mental health problems; their children need protection from maltreatment; individuals and families are victims of crime or family violence; or people are poor and need assistance in accessing economic resources and health care. But because rural people are a minority and can be less visible because they live outside major urban and media centers, it is often easy to forget their unique needs and wants.

Frankly, even when services may be available, the one-size-fits-all, depersonalized model of service of the twenty-first century, designed to
promote efficiency, is likely to alienate rural clients and turn them away from the very assistance they need. Culturally, they expect more personalized relationships, are cautious of outsiders, cling to traditional ways of doing things, and value self-reliance. These characteristics can easily be seen as standoffish, resistant to change and help, and somewhat backward. None of these perceptions is entirely accurate. It is just that the constant change and impersonality that have become so much a part of twenty-first-century urban life really seem unpleasant, depersonalizing, and rude to them.

Social workers are there to help empower—from the elder person who needs a wheelchair, ramp, and caregivers to remain in the home to the toddler who is burned by an angry parent, or the person with an illness needing treatment. Human relationships are important tools that social workers use to effect change in clients’ lives (NASW, 2012). But strong relationships with rural clients are difficult to establish if we do not already know them and are reluctant to learn their culture. Developing cultural sensitivity and competence and working to address oppression are basic to social work. Learning to adapt professional helping methods in the context of rural culture is a vital part of building and maintaining the helping relationships needed to work with rural clients and communities. Not all rural communities are alike, and each new context may require some discovery and learning on the part of the social worker. Otherwise, it is more difficult to establish relationships, effectively assess needs, or respond appropriately to the needs of rural people. It is important to understand their worldview and who they really are.

But rural social work, as all social work, is a complex endeavor. Ginsberg (2005) effectively captures the essence of rural social work when he states, “Perhaps the first important principle is that social work with rural populations and in rural areas is, ideally, simply good social work that reflects and considers the environment in which practice takes place” (p. 4). This suggests that rural social workers adapt what they do to each rural environment. Some of these adaptations are small and subtle, whereas others are much more substantial. But deciding which aspects of practice require adapting, understanding the fit between clients and practice, and incorporating all of this into a social worker’s skill set are critical and frequently more difficult than they appear.
While there is a rich and growing literature in the field of rural social work, often discovering the kind of information that one may need is challenging, since key knowledge is scattered among journal articles and collections of readings. It has been almost three decades since a book attempted to provide a comprehensive overview of social work with rural populations. The overview of rural practice presented in this book, drawn from several sources, provides the reader with a single source for rural social work. The discussion of topics contained in the chapters is centered on social work competency and content areas.

This chapter begins the journey of discovery about rural social work. It discusses why rural social work is important, how rural is defined, the limits of a geographical definition for rural communities, the uniqueness of rural social work, and the potential rewards of being a rural social worker.

WHY RURAL SOCIAL WORK?

Despite our increasingly urban society, people who live in rural areas are a significant minority of the population. According to figures from the 2010 US census, the rural population represented 19.3 percent of the population, or about 59.5 million people (US Census Bureau, n.d.). Canadian statistics for 2006 also indicate a rural population of 20 percent, or 6.3 million people (Statistics Canada, 2011). Census data and Canadian statistical data also both indicate that over the past one hundred years, the percentage of the rural population in the United States and Canada has declined (Statistics Canada, 2011; US Census Bureau, 1995). This trend has led many people to believe that the rural population is in decline in both countries, as they become increasingly urban.

Yet this viewpoint is mistaken, because the absolute numbers of rural people in both the United States and Canada have actually increased. In the United States there are approximately 430,000 more rural residents, and in Canada 150,000, than the previous data collection period, and the rural population continues to grow. This suggests that the percentage decline in the rural population of both countries is more a function of the faster growth in urban areas than an actual decline in rural residents. Indeed, both countries have significant rural populations as well as strong
rural traditions. In fact, a majority of the US and Canadian populations lived in rural communities as late as the 1920s.

The 19 or 20 percent of the population living in rural areas today is not an insignificant minority, and this is a minority population that is growing in size, if declining in percentage. But the population that potentially needs rural social work services is actually greater than the official rural figures listed in a census. Rural people do live in the cities, and they could require services as well. Rural people do move to urban areas, and they often do not leave their needs and cultural traditions behind when they do. Many times rural people in cities move into areas where they are most comfortable and form new communities, or rural enclaves, with the larger geographic community. In this sense, rural communities may not be entirely geographic but of the type based on shared interests, social interaction, behavior patterns, trade, or commerce (Meenaghan, Gibbons, & McNutt, 2005). Therefore, rural communities may be found outside of those geographic areas that are typically classified as rural.

Because of significant rural-to-urban migration, and the expansion of urban communities, many country people find themselves outside of their native environment. They may find themselves in an unfamiliar suburban or urban community. Just as in any other segment of society, these rural people may confront a variety of social needs for which they require help. Given their new community context, they may find their traditional rural coping mechanisms ineffective, and so require professional help. Often these are types of needs and challenges that social workers are well prepared to tackle.

Though far from the familiar rural environment in which they may have been raised and socialized, people may still maintain their beliefs and behaviors in their new homes (Daley & Avant, 2004b; Ginsberg, 2005). As they develop problems in living and try to solve those problems, it is important for social workers with whom these people come into contact to recognize the importance and uniqueness of their culture in order to respond in a sensitive way.

So, in a very real sense, urban-based social workers may work with clients who have strong rural beliefs and behaviors, and who live within the boundaries of metropolitan or suburban areas. This scenario is essentially the one portrayed in Harriette Arnow’s (1954) book *The Dollmaker,*
in which a family faces a series of struggles after moving from rural Kentucky to Detroit. While she is in the city, the heroine, Gertrude Nevils, struggles to keep her family together and to maintain her strong rural values. For rural people, because of their new urban home, their rural culture may be easy to miss, and it could be far too easy for others to view them as dysfunctional. This may not be something an urban social worker is adequately prepared to recognize or incorporate into assessments and services.

Rural communities can also change over time, sometimes involuntarily. As urban areas expand their boundaries, they can surround and absorb traditional rural communities near them. Rural areas can become suburban or bedroom communities for commuters and change the very character of the community. In this case, as urbanites move to the country in large numbers, rural people may view themselves as being invaded or overrun by outsiders. The result is often the displacement of former residents as property values rise and transformation of the community in ways that cause division among residents. New ways are forced onto the community involuntarily and can generate social disruption and problems.

Ultimately, rural communities are communities of people. These communities may be geographic or associational. So, whether rural people live in a rural town or area or form a subgroup in a city or suburb, they can and do form cohesive communities. The issues and problems the different types of rural communities present may vary, but the communality is rural behavior. Although rural communities differ in terms of their norms and culture, there tend to be some common elements. Learning rural behavior and the specific expectations of each community are important parts of any effective social work assessment and of helping empower rural people to meet the challenges facing them.

Rural communities—be they geographic, associational, or neighborhoods—tend to face an increased risk of experiencing several social problems. According to the National Association of Social Workers (2012), the people in rural communities are more likely to have no health coverage or dental care, to smoke and be obese, to suffer from chronic health problems, and to avoid seeing physicians because of the cost. They are also more likely to have low incomes and to be in poverty, and to rely on government forms of economic assistance. Many of these same issues exist for rural people who relocate to suburban or urban areas.
The conditions identified here speak to the need for social workers in rural areas and to provide services for rural people. The National Association of Social Workers’ (2012) rural social work policy statement succinctly captures the role of rural social workers as follows: “Social workers practicing in rural areas have historically sought to resolve issues of equity, service availability, and isolation that adversely affect residents. They also work to support and advocate for vulnerable and at-risk people living in rural communities” (p. 296). This is important work and is of significant benefit to both individuals involved and society in general.

Social workers who work with rural people who reside in urban and suburban communities face similar issues and have very similar roles. Unfortunately, there are not enough professional social workers to meet the needs of rural communities (Daley & Avant, 1999; Ginsberg, 2005; NASW, 2012). This is part of a general problem faced by rural communities, and it involves a shortage of service and health-care professionals. For social work the specific concern is that the numbers, distribution, and types of backgrounds of social workers often do not adequately meet the needs of rural communities. Specialized services, such as foster care for special needs children, are an area of especially acute need.

Ginsberg (2011) points out that social workers in rural areas tend to be employed as sole practitioners or in small groups. Daley and Avant (1999) expand on this point by identifying issues with the geographic distribution and specialized and advanced preparation of rural social workers. What these authors suggest is that professional social workers are not available in many rural areas, and when they are, they are frequently isolated or work in very small groups. Even when social workers are available to serve the community, they often do not have the advanced or specialized education or training to address the range of community problems, and they face challenges in terms of getting supervision (Daley & Avant, 2004a; Ginsberg, 2005, 2011; NASW, 2012).

All of this speaks to a basic labor-force issue: more social workers are needed in rural areas, more educational programs need to prepare social workers to work with rural people (Daley & Avant, 1999; Ginsberg, 2011; Lohmann & Lohmann, 2005; NASW, 2012), and there is an even greater need to prepare social workers for advanced rural practice (Daley & Avant, 1999; Daley & Pierce, 2011; Lohmann & Lohmann,
The recruitment and retention of social workers in rural communities can be effectively approached by providing social workers with rural content and field placements during their professional education (Daley & Avant, 1999; Lohmann & Lohmann, 2005; Mackie, 2007).

**WHAT IS RURAL?**

Although it may seem simple, answering the question “Am I working with a rural community?” is a bigger challenge for a social worker than it may appear. The challenge exists not so much because a rural community is difficult to define, but because there are many definitions of rural, and this can lead to uncertainty about which definition to use. One can easily get lost or distracted in trying to split hairs over the fine points or technicalities of definitions; it is more important to focus on why it is important for a social worker to determine rurality. Social workers tend to be more focused on how the social environment affects the people than on population figures or density.

There is no one generally accepted definition of rurality (Ginsberg, 2011). There are multiple definitions, each of which is useful for different purposes, so asking, “Is this rural?” may also prove relevant in deciding which definition of the word to use. Some definitions are more useful for research and statistical purposes, whereas others may be more helpful for sociological, economic, or social work purposes. Definitions of rurality can be classified into one of three categories, depending on the core concepts underlying the definition: absolute, relative, or socioeconomic. Each of these is discussed in the following paragraphs.

The absolute method of defining rurality is based on an arbitrarily determined number of residents; this tends to be the most frequently used way to determine whether a community is rural. The advantage of using an absolute method is that communities can be clearly classified as either rural or nonrural. This approach is useful for endeavors that require a clear-cut demarcation between rural and nonrural, as, for example, census data, social policy concerns, and social research. The primary value of the absolute approach is the degree of certainty that it provides in determining what is rural and its ability to convey simply a complex system of
social structure and interactions, economics, and special characteristics. However, much valuable information can be lost with this approach, particularly for the purposes of social work services. Absolute definitions tend to either overgeneralize or lose many of the unique characteristics of specific communities. In fact, even at the county or province level, an overall urban classification may cause one to miss rural pockets on the periphery.

Much of the social work literature uses an absolute approach that identifies the rural community as one of geography, place, or locale. As a result, many social workers tend to view *rural* as a synonym for a specific type of physical location that consists of a small town, agricultural region, or ranch. This perspective is further reinforced by the media’s portrayal of rural America and Canada, where we find images of a fictional rural Mayberry, North Carolina; Cicely, Alaska; or Dog River, Saskatchewan, to use as a place of reference. These are fictional small towns, and their portrayal is based on the quaint ways of rural people, often used as a vehicle for comedy. Of course, these stereotypes do not begin to capture the richness of diversity that exists in the vast areas of rural North America. Nor do they accurately reflect the complex dimensions of rurality that are important to the practice of social work.

Farley, Griffiths, Skidmore, and Thackeray (1982) indicate that an absolute approach to defining rurality by population may not ultimately be as helpful as it appears. They suggest that rurality and urbanity lie along a continuum and that the various population figures are but points along that continuum. This viewpoint suggests that rurality is much more complex than revealed in a simple population figure and that it is a function of population size, density, and distance from an urban core.

Even with the absolute approach there are at least three discrete population classification systems in use in the United States for deciding whether a community is rural (Daley & Pierce, 2011). The US Census Bureau defines a rural area as having a population of less than 2,500 and as nonadjacent to an urban area. The US Office of Management and Budget classifies communities with a population of less than 50,000 as non-metropolitan, and the 2000 US Census classified communities as rural areas, urban areas, and urban clusters (Daley & Pierce, 2011; Olaveson, Conway, & Shaver, 2004). This latter classification is a composite definition based on population size and density. Additionally, parts of the
United States with very low population density are often classified as frontier areas.

Canada also uses multiple ways to define rural communities. These include census rural areas and rural and small towns. Census rural areas have a population living outside of places with one thousand or more people or outside of places with a population density of four hundred or more people per square kilometer. Rural and small towns are populations living outside the main commuting zone of larger urban centers of ten thousand or more. Nonmetropolitan areas are communities of people who live outside of major urban settlements of fifty thousand or more (Statistics Canada, 2001).

A second approach to determining rurality is a relative one, which focuses on population density. This type of method compares relative densities of people to reflect the collection of people in a geographic space. Urban areas obviously have a high number of people per square mile or kilometer, whereas the density decreases considerably for small towns and rural areas. These relative densities have some implications for critical masses of people, the institutions that serve them, and the type of economy and social interactions. Thus, a low population density may be attributable to some economic factor like agriculture, ranching, or timber, which require more land to be economically productive than a small business does. Low density may also speak to sparseness of services, a topic frequently discussed in the rural social work literature. Low population densities for rural areas translate into a high cost per unit of service, which is something service providers often try to minimize.

In some sense, the metropolitan and nonmetropolitan dichotomy also loosely reflects the relative concept of population density in both the United States and Canada. The general classification of a metropolitan area also tends to include the idea that population density exceeds one thousand people per square mile. Canada also uses a relative method, defining rural areas as those having fewer than 400 people per square kilometer and rural communities as populations having fewer than 150 people per square kilometer (Statistics Canada, 2001).

Definitions of rurality that focus on absolute population or population density are often not much help to the average social worker, except in a very general sense. The core of social work is about helping individuals,
families, and communities to address specific problems and challenges. So, the social, institutional, economic, and cultural characteristics of rurality tend to take on greater significance than geographic components do. Even within rural communities there is considerable variation on these factors, as a rural area may include communities ranging in size from fifty people to forty-five thousand. As a result, the general kind of information that comes from population figures tends to be helpful primarily as background, unless one is engaged in very broad-based community work or social research.

The third approach to defining rurality uses sociocultural characteristics of the community. Daley and Avant (2004b) and Daley and Pierce (2011) suggest using this approach, and Ginsberg (2005) discusses viewing rural communities and services from the perspective of a rural lifestyle. The person-in-environment approach in social work tends to support this way of defining rurality.

The sociocultural method of defining rurality follows the lead of rural sociologists and evaluates the economy, identity, and social interaction within a community. The term *rurality,* designating a community with rural characteristics, has been used by rural sociologists for at least fifty years (Bealer, Willitis, & Kuvlesky, 1965). This sociocultural definition identifies rural communities in terms of institutions and structures, like occupations, ecology, and sociocultural elements. A *sociocultural approach* is a functional way of defining rurality for social workers because it frames rurality in terms of important social systems and issues that affect what social workers do on a daily basis.

There are other advantages to using a sociocultural perspective in rural social work. Definitions of rurality based on population size and/or density do not adequately capture those rural people who have moved to the city and formed communities, rural communities that have been absorbed through urban growth, or rural pockets on the outskirts of metropolitan regions. These communities still have substantial numbers of people who have a rural culture, beliefs, and lifestyle, yet they remain invisible and uncounted in population-based representations of rural community. In many ways there is some substance to the old adage “you can take the kid out of the country, but you can’t take the country out of the kid.”
The value of the sociocultural approach in defining rurality in a way that is relevant for social work is illustrated by the examples of rural values, behaviors, and institutions that have been consistently identified in the literature. Some of these characteristics are attachment to the land or place, emphasis on a personal style of social interaction, traditionalism or conservatism, importance of faith, use of natural helping networks, and a close-knit community in which people’s lives are intertwined (sometimes called “living in a fishbowl”) (Daley & Avant, 2004b; Ginsberg, 2005). All of these characteristics have significant influences on individual and collective behavior, as well as on the delivery of social work services—and they tend to be consistent across many rural communities.

So, what does all this mean for the social worker trying to figure out whether a client or community is rural? First and foremost, it is important to consider why one seeks to determine rurality. This has important implications for which approach to the definition is most appropriate. If making decisions that require a dichotomy like rural and not rural is important, then population-based figures may be important. If considering program and service planning, then population density, with its implications for program costs, transportation, and resources, may be important. But in virtually any aspect of social work—from working with an individual client to engaging in community development—rural culture and the self-identification of the people are key elements of practice. This argues for the use of a sociocultural definition of rurality by social workers, perhaps even in conjunction with other methods.

From a practical standpoint, based on what social workers typically do, sociocultural definitions of rurality serve as the best guide for professional practice. This is because the key elements of the human systems with which we work are guided more by culture, beliefs, values, and behavior than they are by the use of the term rural. Social workers focus on individualizing the specific situations, and sociocultural characteristics help in that process. This is important because rural social workers often serve multiple communities that differ substantially in culture and characteristics. If people who reside in a community view themselves as rural, then drawing distinctions based on population size is indeed arbitrary.

Perhaps the best advice for determining whether one is working with rural people is that which Daley and Pierce (2011) propose in discussing
rural social work education: “The basic questions that social work[ers] . . . must ask . . . are: Do residents of the service area think of themselves as rural and possess rural attributes and behaviors? Do the communities have rural characteristics?” (p. 126). If the answer to these questions is yes, then a social worker is indeed working with rural people, and this should shape the approach to providing services.

IS RURALITY CONFINED TO SMALL TOWNS AND COMMUNITIES?

Rurality does not exist solely in small towns, villages, and the countryside. The presence of rural culture is evident in large cities, medium-size towns, and suburbs. Unfortunately, the use of absolute definitions of rurality suggests a dichotomy of rural and nonrural that is based on a fixed geographic boundary. In our society people move and communities change on the basis of that movement. Social workers who approach their practice as a rural-nonrural dichotomy often overlook the subtle differences in people and behavior essential to effective practice.

Rural communities are collections of people, many of whom share common interests, interact socially, conform to common behavioral norms and expectations, and conduct trade or business with one another. The social worker may find large groups of people, families, or individuals who view themselves as rural in virtually any kind of geographic community. Because of this, rural people and communities cannot always be identified easily just because of the geographic community in which they live, especially for the purposes of professional helping.

Social workers assist people face the challenges of life and adaptation to the surrounding environment. It is not unusual to find rural people in the “big city” in need of help. These people may be out of their cultural element, be far from family support, and have a precarious economic future, and the traditional rural ways of coping with these issues are either nonexistent or not effective in the urban environment.

My own practice experience in a large metropolitan area included numerous examples of rural people who had migrated to the city at various times, primarily to achieve a better economic life. Often they would settle in neighborhoods near a family member, friends, or other people
from similar backgrounds. Many of the people needing help faced difficulty because of being separated from their family and community, traditional sources of support. They often faced economic disruption because the jobs they filled either were dangerous or did not offer benefits. Yet these were fundamentally rural people who would, and often did, re-create some elements of their rural home in their new city. For example, they might have looked to live in outlying parts of town where the population density is lower, or have adapted their homes to a more familiar lifestyle. For example, residents in the Southwest may find themselves in neighborhoods that begin to resemble rural Mexican barrios. In effect, the residents from rural areas help these communities become rural islands within a larger urban sphere.

Urbanites and suburbanites may tend to look with contempt upon these neighborhoods and areas. The idea of placing chairs and couches and other furniture on the front porch, or of parking multiple cars or burning trash in the yard, may be viewed as “trashy” within the larger community. Yet in a rural environment having a place to sit on the porch is a way to enjoy the outdoors and an extension of hospitality to friends and neighbors. Many rural homes do not have garages, and trash pickup ranges from less reliable than in the city to nonexistent. So, all of these activities serve useful functions in rural life.

Interestingly, rural communities, whether they are in less populated areas or are islands in the larger urban environment, share some of the same characteristics, which has implications for practice. Most rural areas are not service-rich environments, whether in the country or in the big city. This in turn generates issues of travel to be able to access services, which is not a trivial issue for people without reliable cars and trucks.

**WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT RURAL SOCIAL WORK?**

The unique aspect of social work with rural people is the context, as rural culture tends to shape a lot of individual and collective behavior. In a broad sense people are people, and the basic principles of social work practice do not fundamentally change in rural areas. But ideas, perceptions, belief systems, and behavior are unquestionably shaped by the rural
experience. To effectively engage and work with rural people, it is essential to understand their background and worldview. This, of course, is basic good social work in any context, but it is still significant to keep it in mind for rural work. As an example of this, consider that in social work, as in other professions, the social worker is expected to maintain a distinction between the personal and the professional relationship. This is done to maintain objectivity and fairness, and to ensure that each client receives similar-quality service. If personal and professional relationships are not distinct, this may create confusion for the client about the nature of the relationship. But in the rural community, personal relationships are the norm and are expected. Moreover, the impartiality associated with professional help can be seen as standoffish or rude. If clients develop this perception, they may be distant or mistrustful of the social worker. Successful rural social workers must learn to adapt their practice methods to account for the informality of the rural context by finding more personal ways of connecting with clients while still maintaining appropriate professional boundaries. An ability to discuss people whom they know in common, community activities, and events like football games are more informal ways of establishing a relationship without being unprofessional.

Even delivering a basic service in the rural setting may evoke a need for creativity (Riebschleger, 2007). For example, a person who needs a basic mental health service may need a referral to the local mental health or health center. But the client may balk at going to that center because he or she—or his or her car or truck—might be readily recognized by others in the community. In this context, driving into a mental health or health-care center is perceived as advertising to the community that a person is “crazy” or “sick”; it’s something a person does not want everyone to know. Providing alternative means of service delivery, such as in another nearby community, might be a creative solution that a rural social worker could use.

Rural social workers may also have to spend extra time in community-based work, hence the need for them to be generalists. They may need to develop or bundle the services a client needs if a specific type of service or agency does not exist in the community. In this sense, rural social workers may need to work with more than just individuals and families to get the job done.
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Rural social workers are also more visible in the community, both as professionals and as individuals. Secrets don’t last very long in a small town, so what a social worker does either professionally or personally ends up as part of a general perception about who he or she is. Consequently, rural social workers have to be careful about how they act. For example, drinking or partying will be noticed in a small town, whereas this would be unlikely in the more anonymous environment of a large city. Rural towns may be located in dry counties or in areas where drinking is frowned upon. Even though adults can consume alcohol on their own time, if people in a community notice, it might affect their perception of the social worker.

Rewards and challenges of rural social work

Being a social worker in a rural community can be quite a rewarding experience and a fulfilling career choice. Indeed, there are both rewards and challenges to this field of practice, but for the social worker who is prepared and who adapts well to the rural environment, the rewards tend to outweigh the challenges. But rural practice is not for everyone. Consequently, it is important for social workers to understand the structural environment in which social workers carry out their responsibilities, as well as the potential rewards and challenges of the work.

It seems clear that many social workers in rural communities already have rural backgrounds (Mackie, 2007, 2012), as they are from or have prior work or field placement experiences in rural communities. The advantage they have is that they already have some understanding of the environment, and they have demonstrated some ability to adapt to it—as a result, they are probably more comfortable working in and with a rural community. Given this, these social workers are also more apt to remain in rural areas over the long term.

Yet if rural residents do not already have professional credentials in social work, they must often go to urban centers to get their education, especially advanced education. Some do not return, and others find that there is not much in the way of rural content to support their practice. Advocates for rural social work suggest that rural communities would be better served if social work education were to add more rural content.
and extend programs to rural areas (Daley & Avant, 1999; Mackie, 2007; NASW, 2012). The expansion of online and other forms of distance education in recent years may eventually serve to deliver social work programs to more outlying areas, but the extent to which rural content may be added is still not known.

What are the potential rewards of being a rural social worker? Ginsberg (1998, 2005) identifies five positive aspects of rural social work: (1) autonomy and independence, (2) opportunity and promotion, (3) the ability to see the results of one’s intervention, (4) personal rewards, and (5) recognition. To this list one can also add quality of lifestyle and work environments. Each of these benefits offers a potentially attractive opportunity to social workers.

Rural social welfare services and agencies operate on a smaller scale than is generally the case in urban centers. The smaller and simpler structure of the rural agency allows the social worker a higher degree of independence and autonomy than in many other settings (Ginsberg, 2005; Riebschleger, 2007). Rural communities generally have smaller agencies, employing fewer staff, which reduces the need for a complex, flatter administrative structure. As a result, rural social welfare organizations tend to have less distance and formality between administrators and workers. Having fewer supervisors and administrators, especially on-site, often frees up social workers to take more initiative to do what needs to be done. Simply put, superiors may be harder to reach or ask questions of, there are fewer people to look over one’s shoulder, and the relationships that exist with administrators and supervisors tend to be less formal. To deal with pressing issues, workers must develop autonomy to act, and they commonly seek approval after the fact. So, the rural environment leads to increased opportunity to demonstrate initiative and act autonomously.

The smaller professional staffs in rural communities also create increased opportunities for visibility, responsibility, and promotion. In many rural areas there are proportionately fewer professionals of any kind to serve the needs of the community. Physicians, nurses, and social workers all tend to be in short supply. For social workers this means that there may be only one per county or one for several counties. A social worker may often work with coworkers who are caseworkers, people who are not necessarily professionally educated in providing human services but have
learned to be caseworkers by experience. There also tend to be proportionately fewer social workers with specialized and advanced professional skills in rural communities (Daley & Avant, 1999).

All of this creates a work environment in which the rural social worker is likely to be more visible and given increased responsibility much more quickly, because there may be no one else adequately prepared to do the work. The responsibility may include some supervisory or administrative duties, or the opportunity to provide advanced services. This opportunity is a bit of a double-edged sword, because licensing laws and professional protocols often limit what a social worker can do—depending on education, license, and experience—and social workers must be careful not to violate those limitations. But having additional responsibility can provide one with valuable experience that can lead to expanded opportunities and professional growth. The increased visibility of the social worker in a rural community also creates an opportunity to be noticed, particularly when the social worker does a good job (Ginsberg, 2005; Riebschleger, 2007).

Small agency size and increased involvement in the community often lead to quicker, more visible results for interventions (Ginsberg, 2005; Riebschleger, 2007). In rural communities there may be fewer obstacles or red tape that delay the implementation of interventions. The closeness of a rural community may make it easier to engage individuals and services in the helping process. In any event, because there are fewer secrets and less anonymity in the rural community, results may be easier to see, which can be very rewarding for the social worker, particularly if interventions are successful.

Rural social workers are usually closer to clients and coworkers and maintain closer connections to the broader community than their urban counterparts. This can provide a strong sense of personal reward, as the social worker can see his or her contribution to the community. Work with rural people, many of whom are down to earth and very resilient, have strong family connections, and attempt to be self-reliant even in the face of adversity, can be very uplifting as well. Because of this, the social worker may feel a strong sense of personal reward.

Social work jobs tend to carry a greater chance of recognition and to convey greater status in rural communities than they do in many other
settings. The position one holds is commonly known in the rural community, and because social workers are professionals and help solve problems, community members tend to know and respect both the person and the position. As a result, the social worker is frequently seen as a person of some importance and is accorded respect. In a very real sense, the rural social worker is “somebody.” Having an understanding that people in the community know not only who you are but also what you do can be a great source of gratification.

A final potential reward is that social work jobs can be good jobs in a community’s economic structure. Social work positions are often reasonably stable and have benefits. This may not be true of many jobs in a rural community, where lack of economic diversity may lead to unstable employment or periodic declines in earnings. Many other jobs may be of low pay or not offer benefits. Social work positions, especially those funded by public dollars, can be less subject to local fluctuations. The types of benefits that social workers can receive, including retirement plans, health insurance, and paid leave, may be unavailable to hourly or agricultural workers. So, in the context of the local rural economy, social work positions may be seen as conveying some status.

Despite the rewards, rural social workers do face some challenges in professional practice, including professional isolation, difficulty in getting supervision, fewer professional development opportunities, less availability of services and funding, and transportation barriers. Addressing these challenges requires adaptability and creativity, and successful rural social workers are able to take these challenges in stride and overcome them, but such challenges may also deter others from rural practice.

Rural social workers sometimes feel slighted by their own profession and by society at large. One has to look only at rural content in professional education, as well as the resources and array of services in rural areas, to perceive that more attention, status, and resources are given to urban areas. At times rural social workers experience envy, frustration, disappointment, feelings of inferiority, and a sense of challenge over this perceived disparity between rural and urban social work. Rural social workers may even face bias against the importance of rural work from members of their own profession who do not fully understand the needs of rural communities.
The scarcity of professionals in the rural community can also tend to isolate the social worker (Ginsberg, 2005; Riebschleger, 2007). Much of what social workers do involves collaborative work and consultation with colleagues, yet rural social workers may find that their colleagues are miles away, which can create barriers to frequent or easy means of consultation and collaboration. In some areas, rural social workers might find that they have no social work colleagues for many miles. So when one struggles with a difficult or perplexing case or is considering an ethical issue, peer help is not just a trip down the hall or a quick lunch away. As a result, the consultation and peer support that social workers routinely seek out may need to be more carefully planned, which may postpone a social worker’s actions or decisions, or may be frustrating. The challenges of finding appropriate professional support should not be underestimated, because isolation can create negative effects on the services delivered and can deny one a sense of reward from successful work. These challenges may also lead to feelings of being alone, and/or that no one else understands, knows, or cares about what the social worker is doing. Professional isolation can produce professional burnout. This isolation can be effectively addressed and overcome, but it does require awareness and planning.

As is the case with consultation, rural social workers have to be aware about getting an appropriate level of professional supervision. In rural offices, supervisors may not be on-site, because they are responsible for work groups spread across a wide geographic area. In addition, the worker’s supervisor is less likely to have a professional education in either supervision or social work, and this may affect the quality of professional support the social worker receives (Daley & Avant, 1999). Given this type of administrative arrangement, the worker may not have on-site access to his or her supervisor on a regular basis. When this is the case, then the worker must plan for supervision. Once again, this is not a simple drop down the hall or asking, “Do you have a minute?” The supervisor responsible for workers across several counties may not be readily available when needed. Even communication may be spotty, as many rural areas have large dead zones for cellular phones and Internet, so rapid communication may be a problem.

Failure to get appropriate supervision or consultation can be problematic, as social workers may face situations that are beyond their expertise.
Professional supervision and consultation can also include components of support and education for the social worker. Since the rural social worker may be the only help available in the immediate area, there is some pressure to provide helping services. Yet moving beyond one’s professional expertise runs the risk of running afoul of ethical or licensing issues. As Daley and Doughty (2006) found in their study of licensing violations, practice outside of one’s recognized area of competence was a major source of ethical code violations for rural social workers. They concluded that this may be a particularly difficult problem for rural social workers, who feel the need to help as best they can. The effective use of supervision and peer consultation is a good way to reduce this risk, but in rural work, the development of communication links may require extra work and planning.

Ongoing professional development is essential to any social worker. Continuing to learn and improve one’s skills and incorporating new knowledge are basic professional and ethical responsibilities. Licensing laws institutionalize this idea by requiring minimum numbers of continuing education hours for license renewal. But continuing education for social workers may not be offered locally in a rural community. To get continuing education, the worker may have to take time away from the office and incur extra expense. Recent innovations in the delivery of continuing education through the Internet and video have made continuing education more available to rural social workers, but workers may still need some face-to-face hours to meet agency and licensing requirements.

One does not have to read much social work literature to discover that rural communities do not have the rich array of social welfare services that are typically found in larger communities. Indeed, much has been written about the lack of rural services and the scarcity of funds to create and run them. In many cases, one of the biggest challenges a rural social worker faces is assembling an appropriate group of services that are accessible to their clients. For example, day care might not be generally available in the community, but acceptable arrangements could be developed by the social worker with neighbors, family members, or churches to provide such a service. Rural communities do not entirely lack services, as some would have us believe, but they usually do not have the breadth and depth of services of larger communities. Rural social workers
must be creative in bundling, developing services, and using natural networks in the community to provide what clients need. This kind of creativity for service delivery might not be appealing to every social worker.

People in rural areas are less densely grouped than in other types of communities, so when people need help, some travel is required. Yet mass transit and public transit in rural areas are rare, and the cars and trucks of people with limited incomes can be less than reliable. Because people need to get to services, there are frequently transportation barriers. Even the best-designed services cannot work if people cannot access them. Rural social workers commonly face the task of overcoming transportation barriers for their clients by finding transportation for them. This might not be easy, and it might involve finding a family member, working with a church, or getting community funding to address transportation. It might not be glamorous work, but it is often essential for rural practice to work.

A social worker should weigh the benefits and challenges of working in a rural community to evaluate whether rural social work is the right choice for practice. If independence and autonomy, being known in the community, being able to see results, having more responsibility and better opportunities for promotion, and living and working with rural people are appealing, then rural social work may be a good choice for a social worker. If being required to have professional creativity, having less frequent contact with peers and supervisors, facing more challenges for professional development, living and working in a smaller community, developing resources, and finding transportation do not seem interesting, then rural social work may not be the best choice.

CONCLUSION

Most of the land area of North America can be classified as rural, and while these areas have low population density, rural people still represent a significant minority of society. But beyond mere geography, there is a significant rural population in areas that are not typically classified as rural. Rural people are in urban and suburban areas either because they have moved there or because urban expansion has reached out to transform their home communities.
All too commonly, the need for rural services and the culture of rural people are overlooked. Modern stereotypes sometimes suggest that rural areas are unimportant because they are dying or because rural people are simply backward. Rural people who live in urban areas are easy to overlook, because they may not be recognized or people assume that they have been assimilated into the urban culture.

In any group of people, a certain percentage of them will need social welfare services and the assistance of social workers. This certainly holds true for rural people, as they often live in areas where the economy is not diverse, they tend to have lower incomes and fewer services readily accessible to them, and they may experience difficulty in adapting when they do move to urban centers. Social workers with a rural knowledge base can help empower them to access the help they need.

Yet rural communities have too few social workers to meet their needs. More social workers with a background in understanding and addressing rurality are needed to respond to the needs of such communities. There are multiple definitions of rurality that are based on different ideas about what constitutes a rural community, and many of these are not particularly informative for practice. For social work purposes, if people think of themselves as rural, then they probably are, no matter where they live. The importance of rurality for social work is the way in which it influences the characteristics and behaviors of the people and communities. For the social worker, it is most important to understand how people view themselves and how that influences their situations.

Rurality is not and cannot be narrowly confined to small towns and geographically rural communities, given the significant numbers of people who move into cities, often in search of work and economic opportunity. Whether they were raised in a rural community or have a rural heritage, rurality is an important part of these people’s worldview, decision making, actions, and relationships. When this rural belief system is not entirely compatible with the urban environment, a social worker may need to assist a person. To neglect the culture and beliefs of rural people, even through a lack of awareness, would be a serious error for any social worker.

One of the most important factors in rural social work is the context in which one practices. Whether working in a rural geographic area or an
associational community that identifies as rural, social context affects the nature of social work in many ways. Sometimes friends, family, and local groups, though not professional, are the most important sources of help.

Rural social work is an important field of practice that offers many potential rewards and some challenges to social workers. Rural social workers tend to have more independence and influence, yet they are commonly isolated from peers and supervisors to some degree. They are well known in the community and often able to implement interventions more quickly. But they live their lives in a bit of a fishbowl, and even their private lives can become part of everyday conversation, affecting how community members view them professionally. Rural practitioners must be creative and flexible and work across all social systems to be effective.

The lifestyle in a rural community offers a slower pace of living, but the number and diversity of stores and services available in larger communities may be absent. Social work jobs may tend to be attractive and carry some prestige in a local rural community, as they have stability, pay relatively well, and offer benefits when many jobs do not. Rural social work can be attractive, but it might not be the ideal field of practice for everyone. It is undoubtedly important, though, particularly for the rural people who need professional assistance.

REFERENCES


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