

This topic is “practice ready”: No

Keeping the Bottom Line: Accessibility and Essential Services in Rural Iowa

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Abstract

Over a million Iowans and over 59 million Americans presently reside in rural places. The typical rural resident is older, poorer, and faces lower levels of accessibility to hospitals, grocery stores, social service providers, and government offices (what we term “essential services”) relative to their urban counterparts. Many essential services have been centralized due to the ongoing urbanization of the US population, while disappearing from rural areas facing economic stagnation and population decline.

Much of the existing research on the accessibility of essential services has focused on urban areas. Relatively little attention has been paid to rural areas, especially issues around accessibility to essential services. While we know that rural residents usually find ways to obtain the services they need, we do not know how they do so. In other words, what kinds of strategies do rural residents use to access the essential services they need? There is a critical need to evaluate accessibility to essential services among rural residents in order to develop feasible improvements.

To begin to understand how rural residents cope with accessibility issues, we surveyed (via mail) a random sample of approximately 1000 households in each of four predominantly rural Iowa counties (Cass, Cerro Gordo, O’Brien, and Wapello). The counties were selected based on a set of pre-determined demographic and geographic criteria. The survey included questions about the distances households must travel to access a wide range of essential services as well as perceived impediments to accessing

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those services. We also collected basic demographic information about household structure. We then followed up with loosely structured, one-on-one, in person interviews of approximately 10 households in each county. Households were selected to represent a broad range of demographic characteristics.

The analysis of survey results reveal that a statistically significant percentage of households in the four counties reported difficulty accessing essential services on a regular basis. Among the reasons cited were distance to services, financial resources, age, and marital status. The analysis of the interviews confirmed the survey findings but also offered additional insights into how households perceive transportation difficulties and what strategies they employ to overcome them. Among the findings were reports of extreme hardship in accessing critical health care services, isolation and lack of social connections, and lacking knowledge of available resources. Respondents reported coping strategies that included informal ride sharing networks and risky travel behaviors (e.g. driving without a valid license).

Our analysis suggests several major issues facing rural households. First, the single greatest challenge for rural households in terms of access to services is health care, especially specialized services beyond basic primary care. Second, access to fresh food, a problem that has been widely reported, remains a challenge for many rural households, especially for the elderly. Three, informal transportation networks are critical to the survival of many households in rural areas and are likely to be increasingly important as the Baby Boomer generation ages in place. Drawing from the results of our study, we offer several policy suggestions that could help alleviate accessibility issues for rural households.

Key words: Rural Transportation – Accessibility – Mobility - Essential Services - Transportation Policy