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The purpose of this study is to compare selected aspects of the economic well-being of households in economically growing/sustaining and declining rural counties in Michigan.

METHODS

Missaukee (growing/sustaining) and Presque Isle (declining) were randomly selected from counties meeting the criteria used. Households in the counties were randomly selected by the R. L. Polk Company. Questionnaires were sent to 450 households in each county. Of the 845 which could have been completed 281 (33%) usable questionnaires were returned. The adult responsible for managing the household's finances was asked to respond to the questionnaire.

THE FINANCIAL MANAGERS

The financial managers of the households had the following characteristics: they were almost equally divided between men and women; about half of the sample was in the 21-45 age category; mean household size was 2.6; two-fifths had graduated from high school; their median income category was \$20,000 - \$24,999; 54% reported two or three sources of income; two-thirds were in their first marriage; and 96% were white. None of these characteristics showed significant differences by county.

PROBLEMS WITH FINANCIAL RESOURCES

On average, respondents indicated not often having financial problems meeting specific types of expenses. However, buying special things, saving, and affording doctor or dentist services seemed to be a problem more often than paying the rent or utilities. There were no significant differences by county in problems experienced meeting any of the expense categories.

PERCEIVED COMMUNITY CHANGES

Respondents were asked if they perceived some specific changes in their community in the last five years. For analysis purposes a +1 was assigned to responses which indicated an improving community condition, a -1 to a worsening community condition, and a 0 to those conditions where no changes were perceived or known about. In each county, increasing health care costs, numbers of persons needing support by welfare,

and the cost of borrowing were perceived as the three characteristics which had deteriorated the most. In each county, the improved availability of educational and community services were rated favorably. There were significant differences by county in respondents' perceptions of changes in four community characteristics: employment conditions, whether or not people were moving into or out of the community, the costs of health care, and the number of persons seeking welfare. The sustaining/growing county scored more favorably on these items. To get an overall perception of change in the communities, the computed change scores were summed for each respondent and averaged for each county. While both counties' scores were negative, the mean for the declining county was significantly lower than the mean for the sustaining/growing county.

PERCEIVED EFFECTS OF CHANGES

Respondents were asked if the changes they had perceived in their communities had affected them. They could indicate that they were better off (scored as +1), worse off (-1), or not affected (0). In all areas for both counties, the average scores were negative, ranging from -.19 for changes in numbers of people seeking welfare in the better off county to -.62 for changes in health costs in the same county. The only areas where the two counties differed were in the perceived effects of changes in employment conditions and in availability of community services. Respondents in the declining county had significantly lower mean scores on these.

PERCEIVED CHANGE IN FAMILY FINANCIAL CONDITION

Respondents were asked if they felt that their family's financial condition was better off, much better off, worse off, or much worse off than it was five years ago. Twenty two percent of the total sample felt they were worse off, 39% felt they were better off, and 39% perceived no difference; no significant difference by county.

RESPONDENT SATISFACTION

Respondents were asked about their levels of satisfaction with various aspects of their lives. Because answers were skewed toward the satisfied end of the scale, response categories were collapsed as follows: very satisfied, +1; very dissatisfied, dissatisfied, or mixed feelings, -1; satisfied, 0. In only one area was there a significant difference between the means for the two counties. Respondents in the growing/sustaining county indicated they were less satisfied with their overall way of life than did the respondents in the declining county.

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