Center for Public Health Systems Science

GEORGE WARREN BROWN SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

Does rurality matter in partnership development? Evaluating differences in rural and urban partnerships among obesity prevention projects

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BACKGROUND

In 2009, the Missouri Foundation for Health (MFH) launched the Promising Strategies (PS) funding strategy as part of the Healthy & Active Communities (H&AC) initiative that begun in 2005 to address rising obesity levels in Missouri. PS projects (n=23) are currently in the second or third year of three-year projects. **Analyses focus on partnerships developed to implement their projects.**

Research Question

Do urban and rural obesity prevention projects differ in number, type, and contributions of partnerships?

Research demonstrates that partnerships are an important resource:

- Obesity prevention projects with greater partnership involvement in activities have adopted more policies, implemented activities in more settings, and leveraged more funds

Rural organizations may have a particularly strong need for partnership support, noting:

- Fewer potential partners or partners with specific expertise
- High operating costs associated with partnership development
- A perceived greater need for collaboration than urban organizations

METHODS

Data were collected from multiple sources, as part of an ongoing evaluation of the H&AC Initiative:

- The Healthy and Active Programs and Policies Evaluation (HAPPE) system, an online monitoring system to document project activities (e.g., partnerships developed, contributions made by partner)
- Key informant interviews with project staff (n=44)
  - During interviews, informants were asked to describe the partners *most critical* to their project and what those partners contributed to their projects

Projects were classified as urban or rural based on the zip code(s) where primary activities occurred, utilizing the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural-Urban Commuting Areas (RUCA).[i] The RUCA system defines rural and urban as:

- **Rural**: Micropolitan areas, small towns and rural areas with a small proportion of workers commuting to urbanized areas
- **Urban**: Metropolitan areas and all other areas with a high proportion of workers commuting to urbanized areas

Rural	**35%**
Urban	**65%**

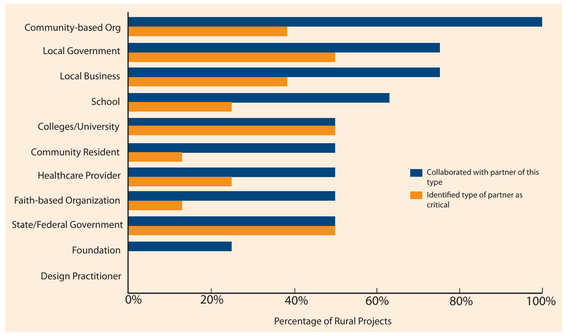
i Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture. (2012, July 5). Rural-Urban Commuting Area Codes. Retrieved from http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/rural-urban-commuting-area-codes.aspx

RESULTS

Rural Projects

- A *higher proportion* of rural projects formed larger partnership networks
  - **6 of 8** (75%) rural projects had more than the overall average number of partners
- Identified *different critical partners* from their typical partners
  - The largest proportion of rural projects partnered with community-based organizations, local businesses, and local governments, but identified **healthcare organizations, colleges, and local governments** as *most critical* to project success

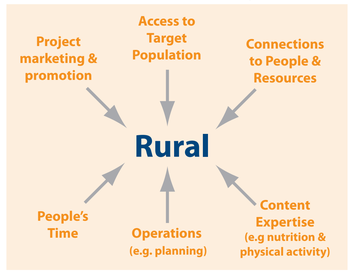
Figure 1: Comparison of rural projects' overall partnerships and critical partners



Note: Bars indicate percentage of projects that identified at least one partner of this type.

- Rural projects received *fewer* types of contributions from critical partners
  - The majority of rural projects identified **6** types of contributions received from critical partners

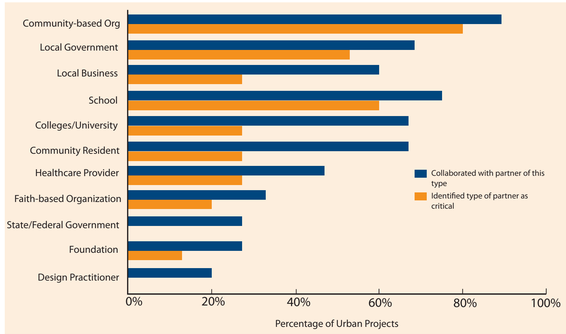
Figure 2: Rural projects' typical contributions from critical partners



Urban Projects

- A *lower proportion* of urban projects formed larger partnership networks
  - **6 of 15** (40%) urban projects had more than the overall average number of partners
- Identified *similar critical partners* to their typical partners
  - The largest proportion of urban projects partnered with community-based organizations and schools, and identified **community-based organizations, local governments, and schools** as *most critical* to project success

Figure 3: Comparison of urban projects' overall partnerships and critical partners



Note: Bars indicate percentage of projects that identified at least one partner of this type.

- Urban projects received *more* types of contributions from critical partners
  - The majority of urban projects identified **10** types of contributions received from critical partners

Figure 4: Urban projects' typical contributions from critical partners

CONCLUSIONS

While projects in rural settings often produced a larger number of partnerships, urban projects partnered more often with organizations they considered *critical* to project success, and received a *wider variety* of contributions from these vital partners.

- Forming partnerships primarily with partners identified as critical may allow or require urban projects to rely *more heavily* on these partners for diverse contributions, rather than building more partnerships overall to obtain specific contributions.
- Urban projects may have received more diverse contributions from critical partners because of the *types* of organizations they identified as most critical (e.g., community organizations, schools, local governments). Some types of partners may have greater capacity to deliver multiple contributions.
- Barriers to forming partners of specific types may differ across rural and urban settings (e.g., fewer partners of certain types in geographic area, varying capacity levels of locally available partners).

NEXT STEPS

Geographical settings should be considered when measuring and assessing partnership development. Differences between rural and urban settings may have implications for designing and evaluating obesity prevention initiatives.

- **Examine the evolution of partnerships over time.** The overall breadth, type, and contributions of partnerships change over time. It is important to document partnership activities at various time points to assess these changes.
- **Examine other characteristics of partnerships.** Diversity and type of contributions to projects may be one reason certain partnerships are considered critical, but other factors, such as early or ongoing contributions and support, may also influence why certain partnerships are seen as vital to project success.
- **Examine the likelihood of partnerships being sustained beyond project funding.** Contributions from partners can help sustain project activities and impact after funding ends. Projects operating in different settings may experience varying success in maintaining existing partnerships and contributions after funding.