

Attachment to Place: College Students' Hometown Community Sentiment

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ABSTRACT

This study examined hometown sentiment in rural, suburban, and urban students at a Midwestern land grant university. Students from an introductory sociology course were surveyed about their feelings of attachment and satisfaction regarding the communities where they grew up. Findings indicated relatively high feelings of sentiment. Analysis of variance indicated some significant differences based on type of community, particularly between rural and small town students and those from suburbs. Community leaders and Extension educators should create opportunities and conditions that encourage community involvement, youth voice, and positive regard for one's place of residence.



INTRODUCTION

College students reflect on their hometown communities when making long-term decisions about career, family, and residence. If they perceive their hometowns to be less than satisfactory and do not feel particularly attached to these places, they may graduate and relocate to a new, 'ideal' community. Students who anticipate returning home (a) have a high sense of community identity, (b) had strong relationships with family, and (c) were civically engaged (Cicognani, et al., 2011; Evans, 2007). Few studies have examined community attachment and satisfaction based on location of residence where one grew up. Studies of rural youth have indicated both positive and negative feelings of sentiment. (Fabiansson, 2006; Glendinning, et al., 2003).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are college students' feelings of community sentiment?
2. Is there a difference between college students from rural, suburban, and urban communities?

METHODOLOGY

- A survey was distributed to students in Introduction to Rural Sociology (RS 1500) at The Ohio State University in Spring and Autumn 2012 (N = 795). Students from the United States ages 18-24 were included in the analysis (N=410).
- Six questions examined community sentiment on a scale ranging from 1-5, with 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree.

- "I like where I'm from"
- "I find my hometown to be a satisfactory place to live"
- "I feel comfortable identifying myself as a member of my hometown"
- "My hometown is an important part of my history"
- "My hometown is an ideal place for families to live"
- "I feel more attached to my school than my community."

- Median age was 19 years. Approximately 43% were male and 56% were female. Of the sample, 38% were from rural areas/small towns, 35% were from suburbs, 19% were from cities, and 8% lived in multiple locations.
- Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS 22.



RESULTS

Overall, students indicated relatively high levels of community sentiment. They liked their hometowns, identified with them, and saw them as part of their personal history. They felt their communities were satisfactory places to live and ideal places for families. Attachment to school instead of community was rated lower.

Table 1 – Cross-analysis of variables based on hometown

Variable	\bar{x}	Rural \bar{x}	Suburban \bar{x}	Urban \bar{x}
Like hometown	4.23	4.31	4.21	4.13
Satisfactory place to live	4.11	4.18	4.14	3.74
Identifying with community	4.25	4.34	4.19	4.24
Part of history	4.19	4.39	3.96	4.21
Ideal place for families	4.02	4.06	4.20	3.75
Attachment to school vs. community	3.51	3.32	3.72	3.49

- Analysis of variance indicated significant differences ($p < 0.05$) based on community type for three of the six sentiment items.
- Tukey post-hoc HSD tests indicated that rural students identified with their communities more than suburban students; that suburban students rated their communities more highly than urban students as ideal places for families; and that suburban students felt more attached to their schools than their communities than did rural students.
- Urban students, while not statistically significant, were least likely to perceive their hometowns as a positive place.

Table 2 – Analysis of Variance

Variable	df	F
Like hometown	3, 404	.98
Satisfactory place to live	3, 285	2.43
Identifying with community	3, 402	1.97
Part of history	3, 403	6.45***
Ideal place for families	3, 403	4.60**
Attachment to school vs. community	3, 403	3.61*

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

DISCUSSION / IMPLICATIONS

This researcher found that college students' feelings of hometown community sentiment are based on where they grew up. College students with lower variable means, then, may be less likely to associate or feel belonging to their hometowns. Limitations to the research includes ill-representation of the entire population as just college students were surveyed. In order to construct a fuller picture, future research should include the methodology necessary for a cross analysis of how college students perceive other communities. Community leaders and Extension educators should continue to use civic engagement programs to improve community sentiment and increase individual self-esteem about hometown.



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