



CALIFORNIA RURAL LEGAL ASSISTANCE, INC.



Community
Development

Toward a New Definition of Rurality in 21st Century California

A Report to California Rural Legal Assistance



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Photos Courtesy of David Bacon

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Introduction

The 20th Century saw the transformation of the United States from a largely rural space to the now dominant urban landscape it has become. This transformation moved across the nation at a rapid pace, and continues to this day largely unabated. While some geographic spaces still remain free from any built environment, many more spaces are now located between what were once open swaths of land and what are now becoming rural-connected cities. This rural-urban continuum of space became the dominant focus of attention among rural sociologists, regional planners, policy makers and demographers in the late 20th Century (Dewey, 1960; Wilkinson, 1999). The ongoing debate about the direction and fate of rural areas has pushed many to question the utility of the term “rural” itself, prompting many to engage in discussions of rurality—a more nuanced consideration of the varying dimensions of space and place that influence peoples lives outside of major cities. The complex transformation of space, people and economies in what were once “rural” places of the United States has rendered most traditional definitions of such places inadequate, no longer serving as meaningful conceptual tools for service providers, policy development and, to some extent, intentional efforts to chronicle any process of social change or development.

A reconsideration of rurality seems warranted, if organizations and stakeholders with rural interests are to continue having a positive impact on these communities. California Rural Legal Assistance (CRLA) is one such organization that has been working in rural communities for over four decades. CRLA has been conducting rural advocacy and providing legal services, outreach and education to low-income communities throughout California since 1966. With 21 offices throughout the state, from Marysville in the northern Sacramento Valley to El Centro on the Mexican border, CRLA has a presence in all of California’s major agricultural regions. The organization’s historical focus on service to farmworkers and rural areas has however been diversifying in recent years. The changes are due to factors including the increasing urbanization of many of CRLA’s service areas and some mergers with legal service providers that have not historically served rural or farmworker populations². As part of its current strategic planning process, CRLA is seeking to develop a new definition of rural that is tailored to the realities of its current service areas and target populations.

¹ Presented by CRLA, Rural Justice Forum 9/27/11.

² In 1996, CRLA acquired several service areas that included communities more traditionally associated with an urban experience. These service areas included: Monterey, Oxnard, Santa Barbara and Santa Cruz.

Specifically, this effort seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What defines a rural community or rural area with regard to the CRLA service delivery model?
2. How should CRLA define the concepts of “rural advocacy,” “rural communities” or “rural areas” when asked to inform or comment on policy making at the local, state and federal level?
3. What constitutes rural advocacy and what about it is uniquely “rural”?
4. In which ways is the term “rural” still relevant to CRLA’s work?

Answers to these questions were sought via a review of the literature on current and evolving definitions of rurality; interviews with key informants with expertise on rural issues, representing nonprofits, the public sector and academia; and interviews with CRLA staff. Key findings from this research are presented below, along with some considerations for practice and support of rural communities in the years ahead.

Defining Rurality

In order to situate and frame this work, the research began with a review of traditional definitions of rural. Despite a plethora of governmental definitions of rural, it is important to note *that there is no “official” or universally accepted definition of the term rural*. Different organizations and federal agencies define rurality in ways that best meet their varying needs. Attempts to define rurality have historically been fraught with tension. Cheryl Cook (Cook, 2011), Deputy Undersecretary for Rural Development at USDA recently described this as “one of the most fundamental, and vexing questions we face in USDA Rural Development.”

A key informant at the USDA Economic Research Service noted that California is one of the states with the most complaints about the negative impacts of current definitions of rurality, which typically favor the smaller – and less populous – counties of the East and Midwest. In fact, while 44 California counties have large rural populations, only four meet the federal definition as entirely rural, owing primarily to their distance from major population centers (Bakersfield Californian, 2011).

These concerns were highlighted by Rep. Jim Costa (Costa, 2011) of the Central Valley’s 20th Congressional District, who recently called for a new federal definition of rural. He explained that many of his district’s communities “are not only rural, but also largely poor and disadvantaged,” noting that, “despite the need, my district continues to struggle with eligibility for these [rural development] programs, whether it is rural housing, health, or essential community facilities, largely because of the criteria used to define rural communities.”

Given the lack of an “official” definition of rurality, a guiding principle for this work is that CRLA is free to develop a definition of rurality that best meets its needs. As Weisheit et al. (1995) noted, “Like concepts such as “truth,” “beauty,” or “justice,” everyone knows the term rural, but no one can define the term very precisely.” Or, as a CRLA staff member noted, “Rural is like pornography. I can’t define it, but I know it when I see it.”

Traditional Definitions of Rurality

The two most commonly used definitions of rural are those used by the U.S. Census Bureau and the Office of Management and Budget. The Census defines urban areas as those with a population density of at least 1,000 persons per square mile and a population of 2,500 or more residents. Two types of urban areas are defined: Urbanized Areas, with 50,000 or more residents and Urban Clusters, with between 2,500 and 50,000 residents. It is telling that the Census definition of rural: “all territory, population, and housing units not classified as urban,” *essentially defines rural by what it is not.*

The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) has developed the county-based Core Based Statistical Areas (CBSA) typology, which classifies urban and rural areas based on population and commuting patterns. Metro areas are defined as counties including an urban area with at least 50,000 residents and outlying counties in which 25 percent of workers commute to the central county, or those with a “reverse” commuting pattern in which 25 percent of workers commute from the central counties. Nonmetro counties are located outside the boundaries of metro areas and are subdivided into two types: micropolitan areas, which include an urban area with 10,000 to 50,000 residents and noncore areas, which are neither metropolitan nor micropolitan. Here too, noncore areas, which are arguably the most rural, are defined by what they are not.

Alternative Definitions of Rurality

A growing number of alternative definitions have been developed to address the perceived limitations of the more dominant definitions of rurality, which many observers feel do not accurately reflect reality. Some of the perceived limitations of more formal definitions include the following:

- Census and OMB definitions do not accurately reflect the often significant differences between different places within the same classification.
- Because OMB metro/nometro designations refer to entire counties, this typology does not account for differences between urban and rural areas within the same county. In fact, the majority of “rural” people live in “metropolitan” counties.
- Population growth and the consequent reclassification of entire counties from “nonmetro” to “metro” can result in significant loss of federal funding, negatively affecting those counties’ rural populations.
- The thresholds used for classification purposes are often considered arbitrary, e.g. “500 persons per square mile” or “25% of residents that commute to a central county.”
- The use of thresholds also creates artificial similarities and dissimilarities between places that actually may be very similar. For example, a dichotomous categorization based on population density, e.g. 1,000 residents per square mile, will group together places with 32 and 999 residents per square mile, but will separate places with 999 and 1,001 residents per square mile.

Alternative definitions, which are summarized briefly below, seek to address these perceived limitations in a number of ways, including refining existing approaches to develop more nuanced

typologies, basing definitions on census tracts rather than counties, or developing altogether different approaches such as the urban-rural continuum, which seek to do away with “threshold” type categorizations entirely.

Rural-Urban Continuum Codes

The ERS Rural-Urban Continuum Codes form a nine-point classification scheme identifying metropolitan and nonmetropolitan counties. Metro counties are classified based on population size, while nonmetropolitan classifications are based on a combination of population and adjacency to metro areas. There are three metro and six nonmetro groupings. Codes 1 to 3 represent metropolitan areas, while codes 4 to 9 represent non-metropolitan areas.

Urban Influence Codes

The ERS Urban Influence Code (UIC) classification scheme represents a further refinement of the metro/nonmetro dichotomy. It consists of a 12-point scale, in which higher numbers reflect decreasing urban influence. Metro counties are divided into two groups based on the size of the metro area: “large” areas with at least 1 million residents and “small” areas with fewer than 1 million residents. Nonmetro micropolitan counties are divided into three groups based on their adjacency to metro areas: adjacent to a large metro area, adjacent to a small metro area, and not adjacent to a metro area. Nonmetro noncore counties are divided into seven groups based on their adjacency to metro or micro areas and whether or not they have their “own town” of at least 2,500 residents.

Rural-Urban Commuting Area Codes

As with other approaches, Rural-Urban Commuting Area Codes (RUCA) use measures of population density, urbanization and commuting patterns to identify urban cores and adjacent territory that is economically integrated with those cores. This typology is based on census tracts rather than counties, allowing for a significantly more nuanced and detailed classification. There are 10 primary and 30 secondary codes. The primary codes refer to metropolitan, micropolitan, small town and rural areas with high commuting flows to urban areas or urban clusters. The secondary codes are based on population and secondary, or second largest commuting flows.

Rural-Urban Density Typology

This typology, developed by Andrew Isserman of the University of Illinois, assigns counties to one of four categories: rural, mixed rural, mixed urban or urban. The classification scheme is based on a combination of four criteria, including the percentage of urban residents; the total number of urban residents; population density; and the population size of the county’s largest urban area.

Index of Relative Rurality

This index, developed by Brigitte Waldorf of Purdue University, proposes a continuous measure of rurality to address what Waldorf describes as the “threshold trap.” Rather than answering the question “Is a county rural or urban?” it addresses the question “What is a county’s degree of

rurality?” The index is calculated based on four dimensions: population size, population density, percentage of urban residents, and distance to the closest metropolitan area. By assigning each county a score, it provides a continuous measure of rurality, allowing for easier comparisons of different counties or the same county over time. As Waldorf (2006) notes, “Three properties of the index are particularly beneficial for both research and policy: rurality is treated as a relative attribute, making it possible to investigate trajectories of rurality over time; sensitivity to small changes in one of the defining dimensions; applicability to different spatial scales.”

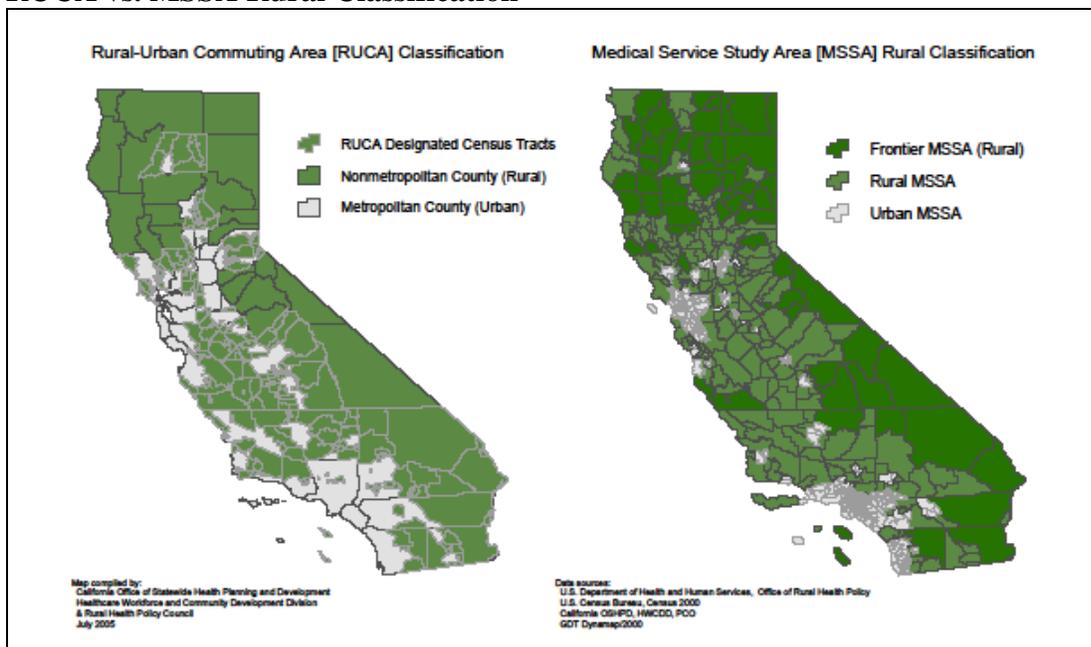
Medical Service Study Areas

Medical Service Study Areas (MSSA) are the geographic unit of analysis used by the California Office of Statewide Health Planning and Development. This sub-county categorization scheme, which is based on aggregations of census tracts representing urban, rural, and frontier areas, was designed to identify areas with adequate health care resources and those that are “medically underserved.”

According to this approach, a rural designation is based on a population density of less than 250 persons per square mile and no census-defined place with population exceeding 50,000 within the area. The “frontier” designation is based on a population density of less than 11 persons per square mile. In contrast to the Census, the MSSA approach defines urban by what it is not – any MSSA that is not designated rural or frontier is considered urban.

The MSSA approach is the one preferred by the California Commission on Access to Justice (2010), which considers “MSSAs a useful approach for determining levels of unmet legal need and differences among urban and rural areas.” As the below graphic illustrates, the MSSA classification scheme identifies a significantly larger area of California as rural and frontier than the RUCA classification.

RUCA vs. MSSA Rural Classification



Key Findings: Toward a New Definition of Rurality in 21st Century California

As seen, virtually all definitions of rurality are based on “tangible” or quantitative measures such as population size, population density, commuting patterns and distance from urban centers. Conversely, none reflect the numerous “intangible” factors that define “rurality” for the people and communities that CRLA serves. This research has attempted to identify some of those factors, and in so doing to develop a definition of rurality that more accurately reflects the realities of CRLA’s advocacy efforts, service areas and target populations.

The following are key considerations regarding a definition of rurality to guide CRLA’s work in 21st century California. These considerations apply to the specific context of California, which is different from other areas in many ways, including historical development, current demographics and socioeconomic conditions and less obvious distinctions between “urban” and “rural” areas than many other regions of the U.S.

The following sections provide a description of the main facets of rurality as identified by this research. These considerations are by no means definitive, and are provided as a jumping off point for further discussion.

Agriculture and Natural Resource Extraction

Agriculture and natural resources have traditionally represented the defining characteristic of rural areas. However, the percentage of rural residents relying on agriculture and natural resources for their livelihoods has diminished significantly over the years, to the extent that many observers feel that agriculture no longer represents a defining characteristic of rural areas.

At the same time, there are approximately one half million agricultural workers in the State of California –the highest concentration in the nation– representing an estimated three percent of the total workforce. With an additional multiplier effect of between 1.5 and 2 additional nonfarm jobs for each farm job (Martin, 2010), agriculture and subsidiary industries may account for as much as 8% of California’s total employment.

Given the significance of agricultural employment in California, many observers still feel that it remains an important hallmark of rurality. As a key informant noted, “If a plurality of private sector employment in a given area is in the natural resources sector, I consider that area rural.”

More importantly perhaps, is the fact that employment in agriculture and natural resources is associated with high levels of poverty and uneven development. It is probably not coincidental that the San Joaquin Valley’s 20th Congressional District, which is highly agricultural, was identified as the lowest ranking county *in the entire United States* in terms of “human development,” based on factors including income, health and educational attainment (Burds-Sharps, et al., 2008).

Uneven development associated with agricultural-based economies is found in large urban areas as well as small towns and traditional rural areas. In fact, the Brookings Institution (Berube,

2008) found that Fresno had the dubious distinction of being the U.S. city with the highest rate of “concentrated poverty” in 2005, with 43.5%, of low-income residents living in areas of concentrated poverty, compared with a national average of 10.3%. Once again, it is probably no coincidence that the highest rates of concentrated poverty in the nation are found in Fresno County, the highest grossing agricultural county in the United States, with over \$5 billion in agricultural revenues in 2010. The study’s author (KFSN, 2006) notes that Fresno’s pattern of uneven development is ultimately unsustainable, as “no country has survived with such a gulf between the rich and the poor...”

Agriculture still exerts an enormous influence on the communities CRLA serves. In addition to its impacts on wages and indicators of community and economic development such as limited home ownership, low educational attainment and limited infrastructure, politicians representing these regions are often more beholden to agricultural interests than those of their low-income constituents. As a CRLA staff member explained, “the disproportionate power of agriculture is a huge part of [what necessitates] our work. Its impacts can be seen everywhere, including political decisions such as opposition to legislation such as the Dream Act and health care reform that would help our clients.”

The historical legacy of racism, exploitation of an immigrant labor force and uneven development associated with agriculture is key in this regard. While agriculture may no longer be the defining feature of many ostensibly “urban” places such as Fresno and Stockton, the agrarian roots of these places has resulted in a history of class division, structural racism, reliance on an immigrant workforce, and a lack of access to services, power and justice that continues until this day.

Ultimately, many of the cities CRLA currently works in, which are no longer rural or agrarian per se, have strong vestiges of those agrarian roots and the inequalities that go along with them. At the same time, in contrast to evolving patterns in larger cities, the power base in many of the cities CRLA serves remains largely white and affluent. As a CRLA staff member noted, “it is less likely for a person of color to rise to a position of power and authority in a small city like ours than in larger cities such as San Francisco or Los Angeles.”

Isolation, Infrastructure and Access to Capitals

In addition to an agricultural base, historically defining characteristics of rural areas are isolation, marginalization and limited access to assets – or capitals – typically associated with more even development in urban areas. Emery et al. (2006) discuss seven types of capitals that are hallmarks of and essential to development. These include natural, cultural, human, social, political, financial and built capitals, many of which are limited or completely nonexistent in the communities that CRLA serves.

Based on the above, many of the clients and urban communities CRLA serves can ultimately be considered “rural,” in that they are marginalized, peripheral, lack political voice, have limited access to social services, live in substandard housing and are geographically and socially isolated by limited transportation, unsafe neighborhoods, immigrant status, linguistic barriers and lack of legal documentation.

Lack of access to services – which is common among clients living in and around formerly agricultural cities such as Fresno or Stockton – was frequently cited by CRLA staff as another important indicator of rurality. As many noted, the lack of access to services such as health care, transportation, education, workers centers, etc. makes the cities CRLA serves more similar to rural areas than “typical” urban centers. It is important to note that the word “access” refers to both the existence of services and the ability to access those services; an inability to access existing services ultimately results in the same degree of isolation as the inexistence of those services.

Unincorporated areas – in both rural and urban areas – represent a specific form of isolation and lack of access to services, infrastructure and political power. Despite the urban nature of many of the unincorporated areas CRLA serves, their lack of assets – and the fact they are under the jurisdiction of the county, not a municipality – makes them even more similar to rural areas than surrounding urban centers.

Limited access to opportunities was cited as an additional defining feature of rurality, even among clients in urban areas. As a CRLA staff member commented, “I can’t think of a better term than ‘rural’ to describe the lack of access to opportunities that we see in our communities.”

Preferred Advocacy Frameworks and Definitions

“Rural Cities” and “Rural-Connected Cities”

As seen, most definitions of “urban” are predicated on the existence of large population centers, commuting patterns and/or proximity to urban areas. The reality, however, is that urban centers located in close proximity to rural and agricultural regions are in many ways more “rural” than “urban” in nature. As seen, they lack many of the assets and capitals that contribute to thriving urban centers and grapple with many of the defining characteristics of rural places (i.e., isolation, lack of infrastructure, and limited access to services and political, financial and social capitals). As a CRLA staff member noted, “Fresno is more defined by the rural areas surrounding it than vice-versa. That is true for most cities in the Central Valley.”

New terminology is needed to describe these places. The CRLA research team proposes the concepts of “Rural-Connected Cities” or “Rural Cities,” which we believe provide a more useful framework for understanding the nature of these places than is offered by existing definitions. According to this framework, many of the cities CRLA serves should be considered more rural than urban – or closer to the rural than urban end of the continuum – and are consequently places CRLA should be serving.

Rep. Jim Costa’s recent call for a new definition of rural provides a clear example of this. Referring to the 20th Congressional District, which includes the city of Fresno, Costa noted that, “Definitions based on population or distances from urbanized areas...do not take into account other socioeconomic factors that could elevate communities to be ideal candidates for Rural Development programs,” since “some cities grow above the population cutoff without the accompanying increased economic development and diversified economies that many people associate with urban areas.” An additional consideration noted by Costa is that,

Some community facilities primarily serve rural residents despite their ‘urban’ classification. These facilities – though serving rural needs – remain ineligible for rural programs that aim to meet these goals. The Central Valley of California has seen this play out time and time again.

An additional aspect of these “rural cities” has to do with population size. Since federal funding for certain programs is based on total population, smaller cities often do not get enough resources to invest in long term solutions. Citing the example of homelessness, a CRLA staff member explained that Los Angeles receives enough federal funding to invest in long term infrastructure improvements such as new homeless shelters, while his region is unable to do so. As he explained, we’re “always going to be giving away lunches to homeless people. We’ll never [have the capacity to] be able to build a homeless shelter.”

This situation is exacerbated for rural areas, which receive less community development funding per capita than urban areas. According to the Council of State Governments (2007),

Federal spending on urban community development is two to five times higher than rural, per capita. Not only do rural areas get 8 percent fewer dollars per capita than urban areas, less of the money is for building the capacity needed to create economic and community development.

A CRLA staff member noted that community-based advocacy efforts at the local level are ultimately stymied by limited resources, because at the end of the day, “no matter how much we advocate, the resources to do everything that needs to be done just aren’t there.” He called for more advocacy at the state, rather than local level, as a means of shifting more resources to local communities.

Rural/Urban Interdependence

From a policy perspective, debates on rurality have shifted from a focus on definitions of urban and rural toward a deeper understanding of the interdependence of urban and rural regions and the need for policies addressing the mutual needs of both areas.

The Rural Compact addresses this interdependence explicitly, noting that “When rural communities succeed, the nation does better, and cities and suburbs have more resources on which to build. Conversely, when rural communities falter, it drains the nation’s prosperity and limits what we can accomplish together.” From a policy perspective, Fluharty (2010) notes that we need to ask: “What policy framework will best integrate rural and urban initiatives and programs, to advantage both constituencies and their communities and regions, while enhancing their sustainability and interdependence?”

The Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI) (Fluharty and Miller, 2010) claims that,

We have come to appreciate that specific rural definitions should no longer be the most critical question. In fact, all of this suggests that the interdependence of rural and urban

people and places, and the spatial continuum from one to the other, should become much more relevant in future policy considerations, to address the economic vitality of both.

RUPRI calls for moving Rural Development discussions beyond “the futile and trivial search for a “rural” definition,” noting that,

A more substantive policy dialogue should concern itself with the challenges and opportunities inherent in the amazing diversity of U.S. ‘rurals,’ and how a more creative federal policy framework could address this uniqueness. It should also consider the impact of the growing rural-urban interdependence, which is defining that continuum across our nation’s geography...

The Office of Management and Budget (2009) has also called for a more regional approach to rural development, noting that:

Given the forces reshaping smaller communities, it is particularly important that rural development programs be coordinated with broader regional initiatives. Programs in neighboring zones and within larger regions—some of which connect rural communities to metropolitan regions—should complement each other.

The Frameworks Institute (2005) also cites the importance of messaging regarding the interconnectedness of urban and rural areas as a means of increasing public support for rural issues.

One of the most critical messages advocates can convey is the idea that rural and metro areas are interconnected and share a common fate. What affects one area can affect others. If Americans ignore rural problems we end up with a less prosperous, less healthy country.

It has long been recognized that rural areas provide urban areas with food and natural resources, while urban areas provide rural areas with manufactured goods and markets for rural products. Nonetheless, recent trends have highlighted more areas of interdependence. Recognizing “the continuing move from rural-urban dissonance to rural-urban interdependence,” Fluharty (2010) cites a number of these trends, including renewable energy systems; community and regional food systems; cultural, ecosystem, and amenity tourism; and climate change mitigation and adaptation.

Rural Origins

Rural origins are yet another defining feature of rurality. Many of CRLA’s clients have their origins in small, rural communities in Mexico and Central America. Despite current residence in urban areas, these individuals retain many aspects of their rural roots in terms of their worldview, sense of empowerment, ability to access services, knowledge of their rights and how to seek redress, and access to social, political and other capitals. This “rural mindset” plays out in many ways, including the extent to which they are likely to seek justice. As a CRLA staff member pointed out, many may not know that farmworkers have rights under U.S. and California law, or

that there are legal remedies for domestic violence. Further, many individuals prefer not to “make waves” even if they are aware of their rights. This is often compounded by a history of discrimination and exploitation that may make them feel they are not worthy of justice or redress for grievances.

Historical patterns of racism and discrimination toward rural and indigenous people in Mexico and Central America may also result in a real or perceived sense of isolation and condescension on the part of service providers. Agricultural workers are often reluctant to seek healthcare because of a sense that clinic staff are rude and disrespectful based on their status as agricultural workers or because they live in or come from rural areas. This sense of discrimination associated with rural origins often persists when rural people move to cities, and is in fact often exacerbated by a heightened sense of feeling out of place and looked down upon because of their rural roots.³

Implications for rural nonprofit capacity building⁴

The broader discussion about rurality illuminates some of the challenges faced by rural nonprofit organizations. The differences between urban and rural organizations go beyond mere geographic location. Defining rurality in California invites a new look at California’s rural organizations. We offer two lenses for viewing capacity building challenges for California’s rural organizations.

1. Rural organizations share many of the traits, discussed throughout this paper, of our rural communities.

- Our agricultural heritage is reflected in our rural nonprofit sector.
 - “Low income, communities of color,” in the rural setting, are often closely connected with our immigrant agricultural labor force. Understanding rural communities helps us understand organizations which serve these communities.
 - Rural organizations, like rural communities, cope with uneven development and this has meant very narrow and shallow philanthropic sources of funding for social change and community improvements. Communities characterized by deep ties to agriculture and natural resource extraction often do not themselves have the financial and other capacities within the community to support the work of nonprofit organizations.
- Like rural communities, our rural organizations are characterized by isolation, lack of infrastructure, and limited access to capitals.
 - The geography of the rural nonprofit sector means that travel is an ever-present impediment. It limits peer-to-peer exchanges among leaders. It adds to organizational costs. It limits community access.

³ An interesting example of this phenomenon in another region of the U.S. can be seen in the anti-discrimination ordinance enacted in Cincinnati in 1993, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of Appalachian identity and culture.

⁴ This section of the paper authored in conjunction with Lee Pliscou, CRLA Director of Community Programs.

- Organizations in low income communities of color must connect with resources outside the community in order to survive and thrive.
- Existing sources of capital are often generated from activities that may be undermining the very well-being of the communities served by rural non-profits, creating challenges for private-public partnerships and local philanthropic relationships.
- Organizational leaders, like their constituencies, have limited access to the critical capitals, including political, human, social and financial.

2. Rural organizations are different than urban organizations. Not better, not worse, but different.

- Rural organizations work differently than urban organizations, because working in a rural environment requires different strategies.
 - Technology might seem like a promising tool for bridging the geographic isolation of rural organizations. However, it doesn't address the fact that face-to-face coordination remains a highly valued means of connecting.
 - Assumptions based on what works in an urban setting may not apply.
- The divide between rural and urban organizations is a cultural divide.
 - Organizations which serve low income, communities of color are challenged to recruit staff from the community with the necessary job skills that could enhance organizational capacity over time.
 - Organizations with an urban culture have difficulty reaching rural communities.

These lenses help us understand some of the challenges we see in practice in working with rural organizations:

--The importance of dialog: when outside resources are brought in to community, success depends on being able to deploy those resources in ways that are relevant to the community. Local leaders are key to understanding what works and what doesn't work so well.

--The importance of broad philanthropic support of rural organizations: organizations in rural communities are often closely tied to and allied with low income communities of color. The uneven development that characterizes these communities results in these communities lacking the financial and related resources to fully support the work of the organizations. Urban resources are critical to the success of rural organizations. To the extent that philanthropy is about increasing social capital, these communities are underserved generally by the philanthropic sector. Social capital is not always working in the favor of rural non-profits serving low-income people.

--The value of rural organizations: When we discuss rural/urban interdependence, we should consider how rural organizations play a key role in our supporting our agricultural communities. Low wage workers in rural communities—farm workers, irrigators, forestry workers, to name a few—help provide essential commodities for urban centers. At that same

time, these workers and their families depend on a broad range of community supports—from community centers that offer free immunizations to legal services for civil rights. Supporting rural communities benefits both the rural community and the urban populations, which depend on those rural communities for their own capital needs.

--Rural communities access services and resources in ways that are consistent with their rural origins. For people with strong rural origins, traditional institutional forms of support, such as established non-profit organizations, may not be the dominant vehicles through which they seek help. Regional entities such as The United Way or similar multi-purpose social service agencies, may not be able to penetrate rural communities in the same way they do in more densely populated areas with vibrant urban systems of charitable support. This seems particularly true if these organizations do not offer a sense of person-to-person relationship and connection with community. Instead, people turn to the more local and the more informal community associations and churches.

The challenge of providing sustained, impactful, broad-spectrum capacity building in rural communities is real. What does it mean to be a leader in a rural community? How different does “success” look in a rural context as opposed to an urban context? How do we reach the organizations that are reaching the most vulnerable? What about scale—can an organization be ‘too big’ to serve a rural community effectively? Too small? How does collaboration work in rural communities?

Understanding the defining characteristics of rurality get us a bit closer to being able to answer these, and other questions about capacity building.

Additional Considerations

The following are additional considerations, including a discussion about and staff perceptions of CRLA’s work in to ensure access to justice in rural cities and rural connected cities of California.

Access to Justice

Yet another defining feature of rural areas that is often found in the cities served by CRLA is inequitable access to justice. As a CRLA staff member noted, “justice is less blind in small cities” than larger urban areas, which makes small cities more akin to rural areas in terms of how justice is served. Inequitable access to justice is a function of several factors, including the following:

- The legal community is typically close-knit and white male dominated. They “speak a different language” and don’t understand or support CRLA’s clients.
- The “small town” nature of many of smaller cities entails a high level of cronyism, which works against CRLA and its clients. Many, if not most of the judges and lawyers in these areas grew up together and have personal as well as professional relationships. They socialize with each other and “their fathers were lawyers and judges together,” which makes the impartial administration of justice difficult at best.

- Rural areas and small towns are typically more politically conservative than urban areas and there is more animosity towards CRLA’s clients. Judges and juries are generally biased against the type of clients CRLA serves, with negative impacts on how cases are decided.
- The conservative nature of courts in small cities also affects the types of cases most local lawyers are willing to accept. Knowing that they are less likely to win certain cases makes most lawyers less likely to accept those cases in the first place.
- The small town nature of many smaller cities also results in what one staff member describes as a “mafia factor.” This is described via the example of an attorney who represents landlords in the vast majority of cases in that county. That attorney is said to virtually control the courtroom and local judges are biased toward him and generally rule in his favor. Clients have no recourse to a less biased judge, given the small size of this city.

Staff Observations Regarding CRLA’s Work in Urban Areas

Some staff appreciate that CRLA is one of the few legal service providers serving both cities and rural areas and feel that focusing on urban-rural distinctions is ultimately not a useful approach. As a staff member noted, “it’s an artificial distinction to think that some issues are only urban or rural. In reality it’s all mixed – schools, gangs – these are urban and rural problems.” She noted that CRLA must straddle both worlds to adequately serve its clients, for example, addressing urban type housing problems such as overcrowding and rent gouging among people that work and live in rural areas. She posed the question, “Is substandard farmworker housing in urban or rural issue?” To which she replied “Yes!” (i.e., both). In fact, CRLA is in many ways uniquely qualified to bridge the urban-rural divide, as seen in its Community Equity Initiative work, where urban (rural) communities must work with county governments that are more used to working in rural (urban) areas. Ultimately, this staff member explained that, “It’s important not to see urban and rural as a dichotomy – if we’re in counties with urban and rural then we should be serving urban and rural areas. It’s OK to call ourselves rural and still represent urban people with urban problems. We’re a hybrid, and that’s OK.”

CRLA’s work in urban and rural areas focuses on issues that no one else is willing or able to address. Examples include:

- Advocating for improved services and infrastructure in unincorporated communities.
- Addressing rural homelessness, which is typically considered an “urban” problem. Homelessness exists in rural areas, with people living in cars, river bottoms, canyons, etc. the problem is ignored because it’s hidden. As a staffer notes, “you don’t see homeless people in rural areas walking around with shopping carts like you do in big cities.”
- Rural housing foreclosures, another largely hidden issue.
- Addressing the unintended consequences of legislation such as SB375 and potential impacts on the availability of affordable housing in small towns and rural areas lacking transit hubs.

Conclusions

As seen, rurality encompasses much more than traditional measures of population, commuting patterns and proximity to urban centers. It is a function of historical and present-day patterns of racism and exploitation that have resulted in the uneven development that characterizes not only California’s rural areas, but its many “rural-connected” cities as well. Still further populations

within these rural-connected cities often have recent rural origins, and may therefore be overlooked as a population with unique but shared needs. Despite relatively large populations, these areas exhibit high rates of isolation, limited access to services and infrastructure and a lack of economic, political and social capitals, making them more similar to rural areas than more thriving urban centers. In that sense, a continuum-based approach to rurality may prove most useful for CRLA in terms of guiding its current and future work in these communities.

APPENDIX A: KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWEES

- John Cromartie, USDA, Economic Research Service
- Dee Davis, Center for Rural Strategies/National Rural Assembly
- Cornelia Flora, Iowa State University
- Chuck Hassebrook, Center for Rural Affairs
- Tim Marama, Center for Rural Strategies
- Philip Martin, UC-Davis
- Kathleen Miller, Rural Policy Research Institute
- Lorette Picciano, Rural Coalition
- Sarah Pursely, USDA Rural Development, California
- Louise Reynnells, Rural Information Center, National Agricultural Library
- Don Villarejo, Consultant, Director Emeritus, California Institute for Rural Studies
- Brigitte Waldorf, Purdue University
- Blanca Bañuelos, CRLA
- Mike Courville, CRLA
- Ilene Jacobs, CRLA
- Mike Meuter, CRLA
- Jose Padilla, CRLA
- Lee Pliscou, CRLA
- Marcela Ruiz, CRLA
- Phoebe Seaton, CRLA
- Andrea Zigman, CRLA Consultant

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