

1-1-2014

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Nebraska Metro and Rural Residents' Views of the Problems that Metro and Rural Areas should be Trying to Address

An Analysis of Open-Ended Survey Questions in the 2014 Nebraska Metro and Rural Polls

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Introduction:

Researchers and policymakers across the state of Nebraska have often discussed the need for a statewide poll to understand residents' perceptions of their communities, personal well-being and community issues. Separate initiatives have periodically surveyed metropolitan and rural Nebraskans on these issues. However, to date, no single effort has obtained statewide coverage at the level necessary to report attitudinal differences across metropolitan and rural Nebraska. The Nebraska Metro and Nebraska Rural Polls represent a unique effort in the state of Nebraska to obtain directly comparable data on statewide residents. This report provides a detailed analysis of a subset of responses to the 2014 Nebraska Metro and Rural Polls.

In 2014, the University of Nebraska at Omaha and University of Nebraska-Lincoln partnered to conduct similar but distinct polls of metropolitan and nonmetropolitan residents that provided statewide coverage of all 93 Nebraska counties. The polls used a common methodology and nearly identical shared question set, so results from the Metro and Rural Polls are directly comparable. Included on these questionnaires were a set of open-ended question items. The wording for these questions read as follows in the Metro Poll:

"Q8: In your opinion, what are the three most important problems in the Lincoln and Omaha metro areas that should be addressed?"

"Q9: In your opinion, what are the three most important problems in rural parts of Nebraska that should be addressed?"

The Rural Poll had the same wording but used the opposite order to ask about rural problems first and metro problems second. These questions were designed to gauge the extent to which rural and metro Nebraskans understand and share problems faced in other parts of the state. The questions provided no response options, but instructed respondents to list what they viewed as the top three problems in each area, with numbered blank lines provided for each.

Open-ended survey questions of this type can be useful for encouraging respondents to give substantive answers that are grounded in their own knowledge base or feelings. Because respondents are answering “off the top of their heads,” these types of questions are useful for tapping into issues commonly faced by community residents. Respondents from the same areas may provide similar answers grounded in shared concerns. However, these types of questions can also elicit surprising responses that provide insight into unexpected issues affecting respondents. This document will summarize the findings from the 2014 Nebraska Metro and Rural Polls related to these open-ended questions and respondents’ perceptions of problems for metropolitan and rural areas to address.

Survey Methodology:

The 2014 Nebraska Metro Poll used an initial sample size of 7,500 households in the Omaha and Lincoln metro areas, defined as Cass, Douglas, Lancaster, Sarpy, Saunders, Seward and Washington counties. The contact frame included 5,500 randomly selected metro households, an oversample of 500 randomly selected Hispanic households, an oversample of 500 randomly selected Black households, and an oversample of 1,000 households headed by a person under age 40. The overall response rate to the random sample was 18.3%. Including the oversamples the response rate was 16.6% with 1,149 total households responding to the survey.

The 2014 Nebraska Rural Poll used a similar methodology to the Metro Poll with 7,500 initial households in 86 rural Nebraska counties. The contact frame for the Rural Poll included 7,000 randomly selected households and an oversample of 500 Hispanic households. The Rural Poll achieved a response rate of 28.5% with 1,943 total responses. Letters and questionnaires were translated and sent in both English and Spanish to Hispanic households, improving response.

Both polls used a 14-page questionnaire that included items on well-being, personal safety, community satisfaction, and employment. The open-ended questions described above were included in the “Community” section of the survey. Responses to these questions were coded into categories to group similar responses and identify patterns of commonly-cited issues. Each response could be coded into a maximum of two separate categories. For example, a response such as “Robberies due to poverty” were placed into the crime and poverty categories, but any response listing three distinct items were coded into only the first two items mentioned. Given the possibility for multiple responses, the data were not weighted by age, gender or race.

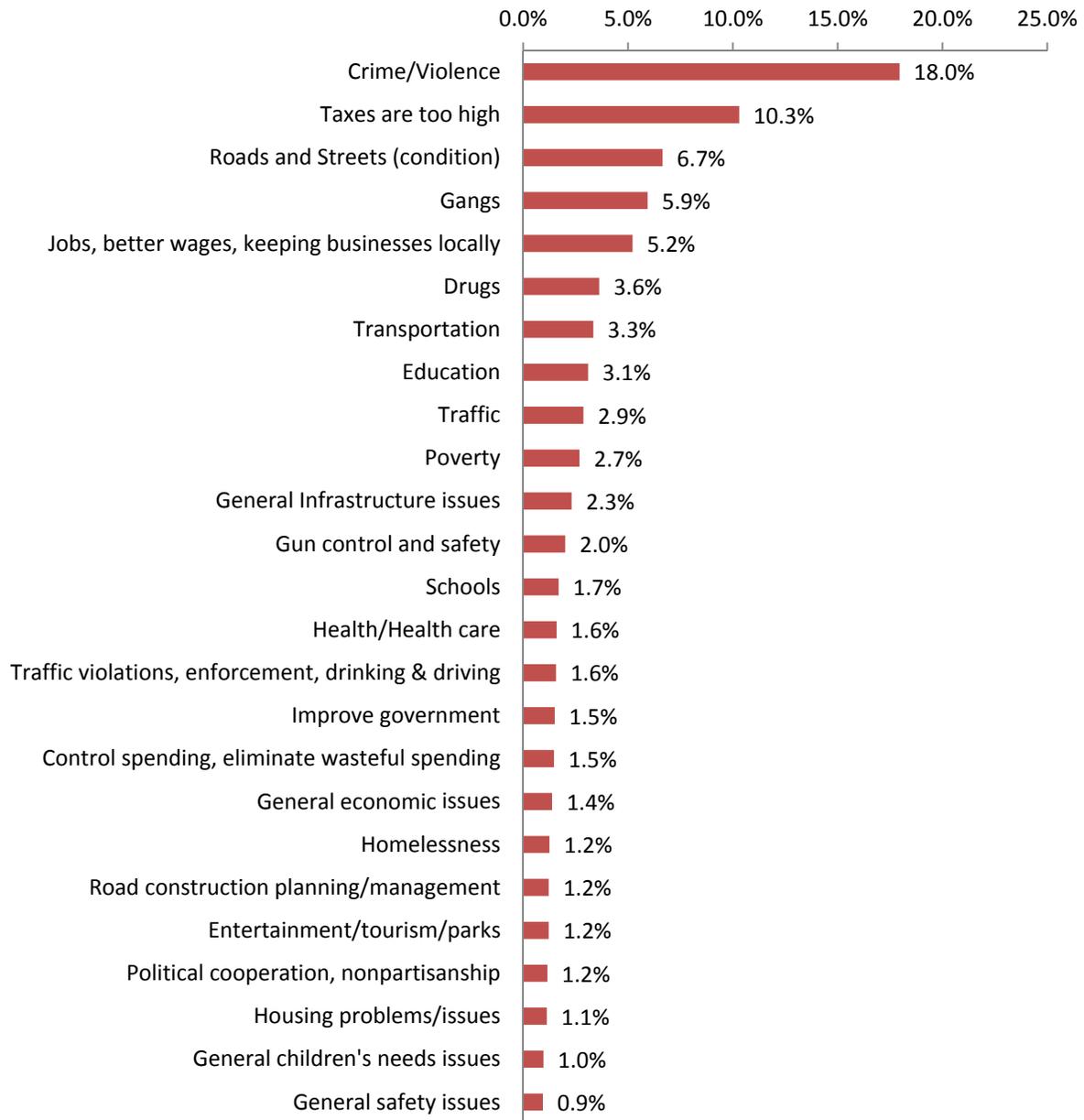
Results of Analysis Based on Total Responses

Perceptions of Metro Respondents

The first section of this report will display results from the Metro Poll. Metropolitan residents were asked what they viewed as the top three most important problems facing the Lincoln and

Omaha metropolitan areas (Figure 1), and about their perceptions of the three most important problems facing rural Nebraska (Figure 2). The top 25 issues facing metropolitan Nebraska, as identified by responses of respondents to the Metro Poll are presented below in Figure 1:

Figure 1: Metro Poll Responses for Problems for Metro Areas to Address
Total Valid Responses = 3,203

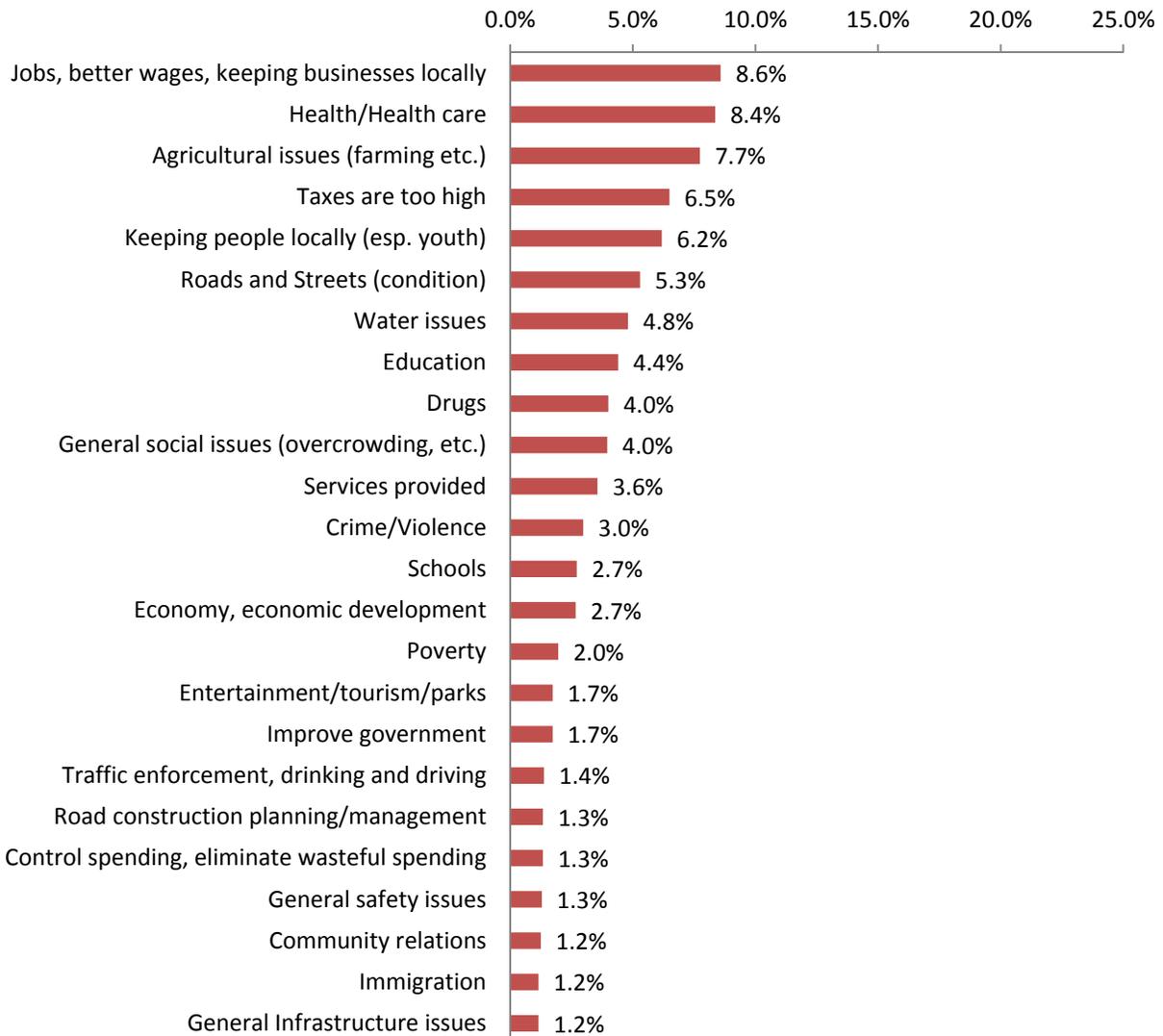


Eighteen percent of responses identified crime and violence as an issue facing metro Nebraska. High taxes and the conditions of roads and streets were identified by metro respondents as the second and third most common problems facing metro Nebraska. While crime in general was

the most commonly cited problem, specific types of crimes were also identified by respondents. Problems with gangs and drugs accounted for 5.9% and 3.6% of responses, respectively. Job opportunities and wages were mentioned in 5.2% of all responses.

Metro residents were also asked their perception of problems in rural Nebraska, so that comparisons could be made. The top 25 issues facing rural Nebraska, as identified by responses of the respondents to the Metro Poll, are presented below in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Metro Poll Responses for Problems for Rural Areas to Address
Total Valid Responses = 2,249



Several of the top issues identified by metro residents as serious problems for metro areas were also identified as being problematic for rural areas. Metro respondents identified local job

opportunities, high taxes, roads and streets, drugs, and education as being among the top common problems faced by both rural and metropolitan respondents.

There were several social issues that metro respondents did not identify as being among the top 25 issues faced by rural respondents. Traffic was identified as a problem in the Omaha/Lincoln areas, but is not perceived as being an issue for rural Nebraskans. Crime/violence was the top issue for metro areas to address (Figure 1, 18%) but did not make the list of the top 10 items to address in rural areas, being mentioned in only 3% of responses. Moreover, metro residents cited gangs/gang activity as the fourth most mentioned problem for metro areas to address, but it was not perceived as an issue for rural Nebraskans, not even making the top 25 list for rural problems to address.

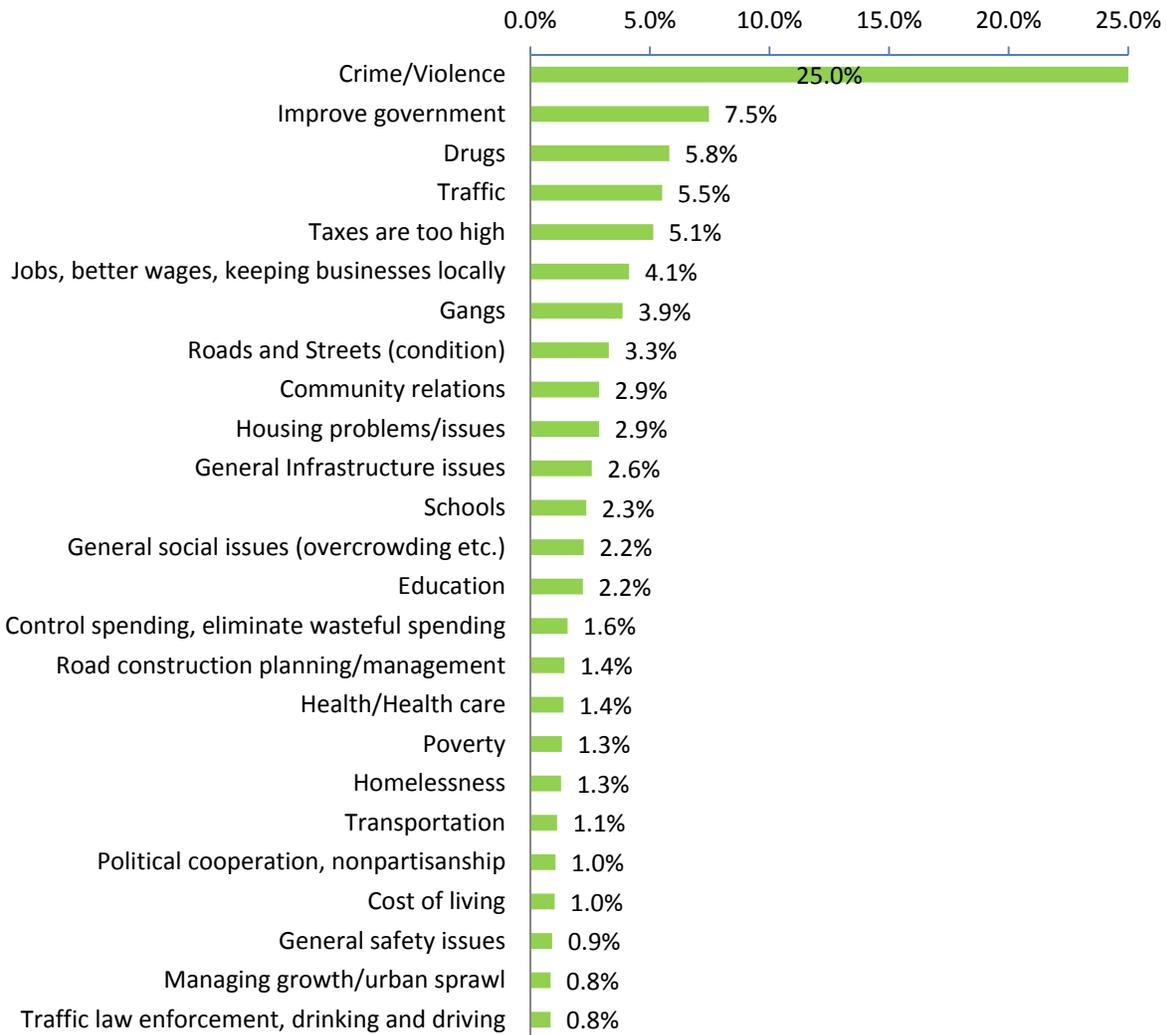
However, drug use was identified as being a shared problem across rural and metro areas. This indicates that the crimes respondents are worried about in metro areas may differ from those they perceive as affecting rural areas. Other social issues that were identified as being more problematic for metro Nebraska included issues of gun safety, homelessness, and housing problems and issues.

Water issues and agricultural issues were identified by metro respondents as being uniquely problematic for rural residents. Metro respondents identified “keeping people locally” as another issue that is more important for rural areas to address, presumably understanding that some rural locations have suffered population loss, especially among younger people of college age or in their early working years. Metro residents mentioned factors related to health and health care as being problems for rural areas to address (Figure 2, 8.4%) more often than as a problem for metro areas to address (Figure 1, 1.6%), presumably due to perceived differences in access to hospitals, doctors, and specialty health services.

Perceptions of Rural Respondents

The same set of questions, although in the opposite order, were asked to rural residents in the Rural Poll. The data are summarized for rural residents’ views of the top three most important problems facing the Lincoln and Omaha metropolitan areas (Figure 3) and their perceptions of the three most important problems facing rural Nebraska, their local area (Figure 4).

Figure 3: Rural Poll Responses for Problems for Metro Areas to Address
Total Valid Responses = 3,092

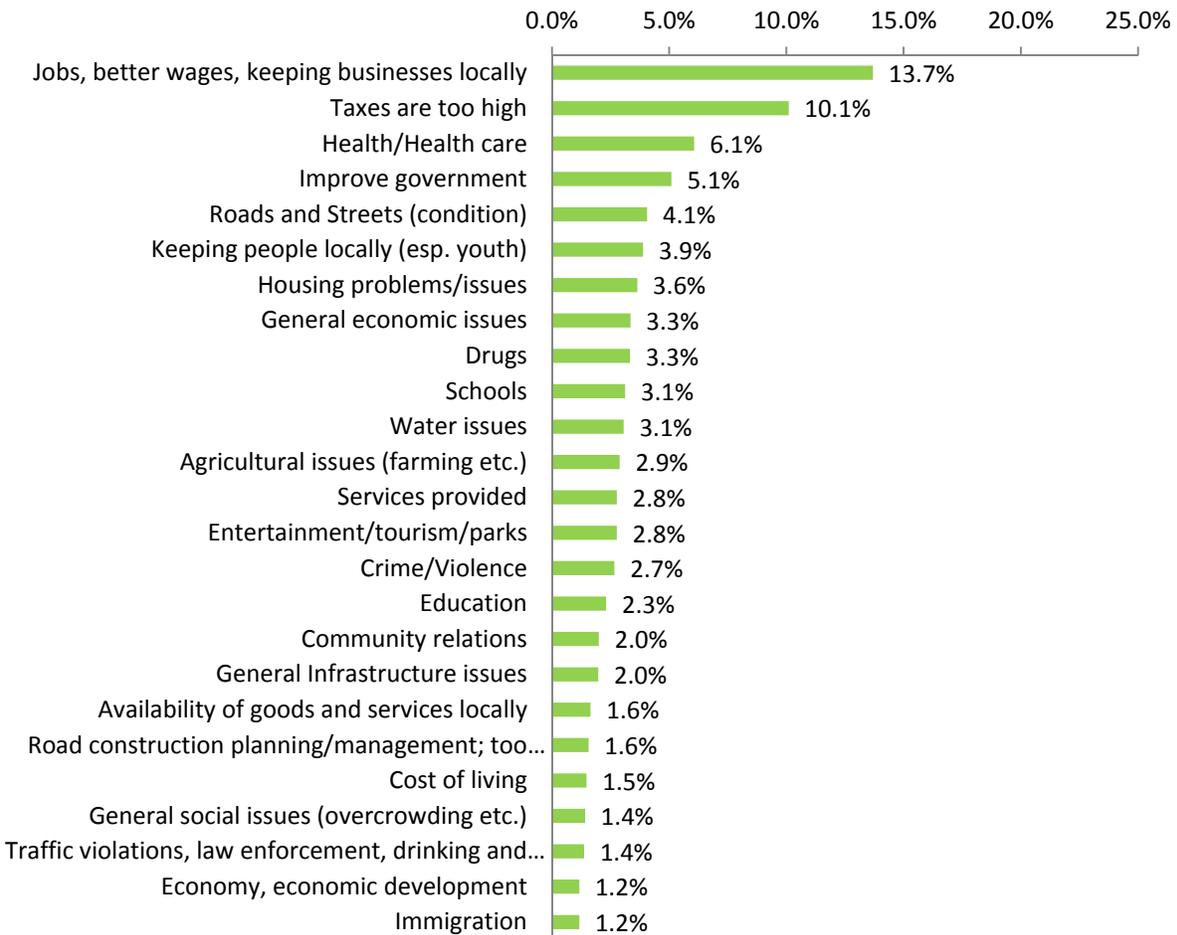


The responses of rural respondents most commonly identified crime and violence as being an issue facing metro Nebraska (25.0% of responses). Rural residents listed improving government as the second most commonly identified issue facing metropolitan Nebraska (7.5%), followed by drugs (5.8%), traffic (5.5%) and high taxes (5.1%).

Figures 1 and 3 allow a comparison of metro and rural residents' perceptions of the problems facing metro Nebraska. Crime and violence was the most frequent response for both groups; rural residents viewed crime as a problem for metro areas to address more often than metro residents did (25% on Figure 3 versus 18% on Figure 1). Beyond the topmost category, rural respondents differed from metro respondents, identifying problems with government, drugs and traffic more commonly than metro respondents. Metro respondents identified high taxes, the conditions of roads and streets and gangs as issues for metro areas to address more often than rural respondents did.

The top 25 issues facing rural Nebraska, as identified by the responses of respondents to the Rural Poll are presented below in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Rural Poll Responses for Problems for Rural Areas to Address
Total Valid Responses = 4,938



Jobs and keeping businesses locally was identified most frequently by rural respondents as a serious problem facing rural Nebraskans (13.7% of responses). High taxes (10.1%) and health and healthcare (6.1%) were the second and third most frequently identified issues facing rural Nebraska, with many of the comments about healthcare being related to access or availability. Like metro Nebraskans, rural residents viewed health care as more of a problem for rural areas to address (Figure 4, 6.1%, 3rd highest) than for metro areas to address (Figure 3, 1.4%, 17th most often mentioned item).

Only 2.7% of rural residents listed crime/violence as a problem for rural areas to address; they mentioned it 10 times more frequently as a problem for metro areas (Figure 3, 25%). Rural

residents listed drugs as a problem for rural areas to address more often than crime; drugs were mentioned in 3.3% of responses, ranking as the 9th highest issue to address. Housing problems/issues (7th highest on Figure 4) and schools (10th highest) tended to be on the minds of rural residents more often – they were listed at higher levels on Figures 3 and 4 by rural residents than in Figures 1 and 2 by metro residents.

Comparing Figures 2 and 4 shows the differences between metro and rural Nebraskan’s perceptions of the problems facing rural Nebraska. The most common issue identified by both groups was jobs, wages and keeping businesses locally. Rural residents mentioned this item at about twice the rate of metro residents (Figure 4, 13.7% versus Figure 2, 8.6%). Beyond this issue, there was divergence between the rural and metro respondents’ perceptions. Rural respondents identified high taxes as an issue for rural areas more commonly than metro respondents did (10.1 versus 6.5%), while metro respondents identified agricultural and water issues as a problem facing rural Nebraskans more commonly than rural residents did.

Results of Analysis Based on Total Respondents

Perceptions of Key Problems for Metro Areas to Address

In the figures above, the basis for the analysis was the total number of valid responses to the open ended questions, where three lines were listed for the three most important problems that should be addressed. In this analysis, responses where the person listed that they “didn’t know” were excluded from the analysis. Additionally, if only one item was listed, that counted as one response for that respondent while other respondents filling out all three lines had three responses and relatively more influence on the number of total responses analyzed. Additionally each response could be coded into a maximum of two categories if two separate themes were mentioned in the response.

There is also value in analyzing the response patterns of all respondents. Here, to get a full sense of how often items were mentioned, the “don’t know” responses were counted. Specific problems were allocated in the specific category if the item was mentioned at least once in the three responses given. This differed from using responses as the base since specific responses were coded and categorized individually. For example, someone listing “crime”, “murders”, and “vandalism” as their three problems to address would have been included in the “crime and violence” category three times, since each of these responses fall into that specific category. However, using the total number of respondents as the basis of analysis would only count this in the crime category once, since at least one of the three possible items mentioned related to crime. Therefore, for each respondent their responses either mentioned something for each specific category or they did not. In the analysis that follows, the base for the total number of overall respondents is 1,943 in the Rural Poll and 1,149 in the Metro Poll.

To understand how perceptions of each area’s problems differed between metro and rural respondents, we summarized the top 10 issues identified by respondents to both the metro and rural polls. Table 1 ranks the key issues and overall percentages of respondents to the

Metro and Rural Polls who identified that issue as being among the most important problems for metro Nebraska to address.

Table 1: Ranking of issues facing Metro Nebraska stated by Metro and Rural Poll respondents

Metro Poll Results			Rural Poll Results		
Social Issue	Issue Rank	Percentage of Metro Respondents	Social Issue	Issue Rank	Percentage of Rural Respondents
Crime/Violence	1	45.9%	Crime/Violence	1	34.0%
Condition of Roads and Streets	2	29.2%	Condition of Roads and Streets	10	2.5%
Taxes are too high	3	26.7%	Taxes are too high	4	7.3%
Gangs	4	16.4%	Gangs	7	5.2%
Jobs, better wages, keeping businesses locally	5	14.3%	Jobs, better wages, keeping businesses locally	6	6.0%
Drugs	6	10.1%	Drugs	3	7.9%
Transportation	7	9.0%	-	-	-
Traffic	8	8.9%	Traffic	9	3.6%
Education	9	8.5%	-	-	-
Poverty	10	7.5%	-	-	-
			Improve government	2	10.0%
			Not classifiable (Don't know, item left blank)	5	6.4%
			Community relations	8	3.8%

Note: The total number of respondents are the basis of this analysis, not the percentage of all responses.

Metro and rural respondents shared many of the same opinions about issues facing metro Nebraska. Crime and violence was ranked as the most important issue facing metro Nebraska by each set of respondents. Crime and violence were mentioned at least once among the three most important problems for metro Nebraska to address by 45.9% of respondents in the Metro Poll and 34.0% of respondents to the Rural Poll. Metro Poll respondents were more likely than rural Nebraskans to identify specific crimes as being problematic for metro Nebraska. For example, gangs were identified as a problem to address three times more often by metro respondents (16.4%) than rural respondents (5.2%).

Metro respondents reported that the condition of roads and streets was an important issue facing metro Nebraska much more frequently than respondents to the Rural Poll. This issue was mentioned by 29.2% of Metro Poll respondents, but only by 2.5% of Rural Poll respondents, likely due to the local nature of the problem.

Improving government was mentioned as an issue for metro Nebraska by 10.0% of Rural Poll respondents, the second most frequently mentioned item by rural residents. In contrast, this

issue did not appear in the ranking of the top 10 most commonly identified issues among Metro Poll respondents. This may be due to the geographic locations of governmental bodies in the state, and general perceptions of government among rural Nebraskans.

Perceptions of Key Problems for Rural Areas to Address

Table 2 ranks the top 10 issues facing rural Nebraska as identified by respondents to the Rural and Metro Polls, and provides the percentage of total respondents to the Rural and Metro Polls who identified that issue as being a problem for rural Nebraska to address.

Rural Poll Results			Metro Poll Results		
Social Issue	Issue Rank	Percentage of Rural Respondents	Social Issue	Issue Rank	Percentage of Metro Respondents
Jobs, better wages, keeping businesses locally	1	31.1%	Jobs, better wages, keeping businesses locally	2	15.8%
Taxes are too high	2	23.5%	Taxes are too high	5	12.1%
Health/Health care	3	14.5%	Health/Health care	1	16.0%
Improve government	4	11.4%	-	-	-
Roads and Streets (condition)	5	9.6%	Roads and Streets (condition)	6	9.4%
Keeping people locally (especially youth)	6	9.1%	Keeping people locally (especially youth)	4	12.6%
Housing problems/issues	7	8.8%	-	-	-
Drugs	8	8.0%	Drugs	9	7.7%
General economic issues	9	7.9%	-	-	-
Schools	10	7.6%	-	-	-
			Agricultural issues (farming etc.)	3	13.4%
			Water issues	7	9.0%
			Education	8	8.4%

Note: The total number of respondents are the basis of this analysis, not the percentage of all responses.

Rural Poll respondents most frequently identified jobs, better wages and keeping businesses locally as the top issue facing rural Nebraska. Metro Nebraskans identified health and healthcare as the top issue facing rural Nebraska, by a thin margin, and ranked jobs, better wages and keeping businesses locally second. Rural respondents mentioned jobs twice as often as metro respondents (31.1% versus 15.8%). The percentage of respondents mentioning health and health care issues was similar (14.5% versus 16.0%). It is worth noting that health/healthcare and keeping people locally were the only issues where a higher percentage

of metro respondents mentioned the item, showing a perception among metro residents that rural areas lack health facilities and that people are often moving away from rural areas.

The top ranked issues for rural areas to address were generally similar between rural and metro respondents. The same set of issues ranked in the top six issues to address, with two exceptions. Improving government was important to rural residents. Recall that rural residents also listed improving government as an important problem for metro Nebraska to address (Table 1). Agricultural issues and water issues were perceived as being important to rural areas by Metro Poll respondents, but these issues were not identified by Rural Poll respondents as being among the top 10 issues facing rural Nebraska.

Housing problems/issues and schools were identified by 8.8% and 7.6% of Rural Poll respondents as being problematic for rural areas, but did not rank among the top 10 issues identified by Metro Poll respondents for rural areas to address. This may be related to metro Nebraskans' perceptions of rural Nebraska life being based on more limited knowledge, in contrast to the actual day to day issues experienced by Nebraskans living in rural areas.

Metro and Rural Poll respondents were about equally likely to identify drugs as an issue facing rural Nebraska. Eight percent and 7.7 percent of Rural and Metro Poll respondents, respectively, identified drugs as being problematic for rural Nebraska.

Summary

Crime and violence was identified by both rural and metro respondents most frequently as the top problem facing metro Nebraska. Crime and violence was not identified as being a serious issue facing rural Nebraska by metro or rural Nebraskans.

Jobs and aspects of work, along with health and healthcare items were identified as serious issues facing rural Nebraska by both metro and rural respondents. Job opportunities including keeping businesses locally was identified by both rural and metro respondents most frequently as the top problem facing rural Nebraska when total responses were analyzed. Health and healthcare was the second most frequently identified problem facing rural Nebraska by metro respondents and the third most frequently identified issue by rural respondents using total responses. About 15% of respondents to both the Metro and Rural Polls mentioned health/health care as an important problem for rural areas to address (Table 2).

High taxes were identified as being a problem for metro and rural Nebraska. Rural Nebraskans identified high taxes as a problem for rural Nebraska more commonly than they identified it as a problem for metro Nebraskans (10% on Figure 4 versus 5% on Figure 3), and metro Nebraskans rated it as a problem for metro Nebraska more than for rural Nebraska (10% on Figure 1 versus 6.5% on Figure 2). This shows a pattern of self-interest, as both areas think high

taxes should be tackled locally before they are addressed in other parts of the state. A similar pattern was seen when evaluating common responses by all respondents (Tables 1 and 2). High taxes were the second most often mentioned item for respondents evaluating the local items to be addressed in both polls, being mentioned in 10% of responses in both polls to the specific associated questions (Figures 1 and 4).

Metro respondents identified agricultural and water issues as being problems for rural Nebraskans more frequently than these issues were identified by actual rural Nebraskans. This may be related to metro Nebraskans' views of rural Nebraskans' reliance on agriculture and the recent focus on water issues in local and national media. Both areas identified depopulation as more of a rural issue, a pattern which is verified by available data from the U.S. Census Bureau. Rural Nebraskans also appear to view metro areas as more closely tied to problems related to government and representation within the state, possibly due to an association with state government and the state capitol being in a metro area.

Overall, rural and metro Nebraskans identified many of the same problems facing rural and metro areas in the state. Taken together, this suggests that Nebraskan's generally have strong enough ties between communities to understand what issues are important to other areas of the state. Major issues being reported in other parts of the state drive the perception of those not living there. Examples of this were shown as rural residents perceived crime as an issue for metro areas to address more so than actual metro-area residents did (25% on Figure 3 versus 18% on Figure 1); likewise, metro residents felt rural areas should address population loss at a higher rate than actual rural residents did (6.2% on Figure 2 compared to 3.9% on Figure 4). Several other instances of this effect can be identified as well (traffic, agricultural issues).

Thus, the perception as created by the stories people hear about other parts of the state may differ somewhat from the actual reality experienced by those living on the ground there. With a Unicameral body that is split about equally between large metros and rural areas, policy makers should take note of how perceptions of key issues drives the public debate. Many issues facing rural and metro Nebraska have existed over time, and they are not likely to be fully resolved in the near future without fully understanding how the public views such issues and the priority they place in addressing local and statewide problems.

Support, insight, and collaboration on this analysis was provided by Randy Cantrell and Rebecca Vogt of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Rural Poll.

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