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Crime top problem for metro areas to address, jobs most important for rural areas, high taxes a top issue statewide the Nebraska Metro and Rural Polls find

OMAHA – While rural and metro Nebraskans have strong enough ties between communities to understand the issues that are important to other areas of the state, there are varying factors that drive the perceptions of outsiders that are important to consider. On many issues, metro and rural Nebraskans have different views of the problems facing other parts of the state, which are shaped by factors other than the day-to-day experiences of locals, according to a new report released by the University of Nebraska at Omaha’s (UNO) Center for Public Affairs Research (CPAR).

The analysis is based on responses to the 2014 Nebraska Metro and Rural Polls. The Metro Poll was conducted by CPAR, and received nearly 1,150 survey responses across the seven Nebraska counties that comprise the Omaha and Lincoln metro areas. The rural counterpart was conducted by the University of Nebraska – Lincoln and received 1,943 responses from the remaining 86 Nebraska counties. The two surveys shared a common question set, allowing the measures to be directly compared. The latest analysis and report was based on rural and metro respondents’ answers to “open ended” questions asking them to list the three most important problems facing both rural parts of Nebraska and the Lincoln and Omaha metro areas.

Two separate analyses contributed to the report – an analysis of total responses given to the questions and an analysis making response percentages per the total number of participants in the surveys. This approaches were taken to account for respondents who listed the same issue multiple times in their top three problems to address. Key findings from the research report (in no particular order) are summarized below. The findings based on total responses are summarized first (a) and those based on the total number of respondents to the surveys are summarized second (b):

1. Overall, rural and metro Nebraskans identified many of the same problems as being important for both rural and metro areas to address. Rural and metro residents viewed crime as being an issue in metro areas but not as problematic in rural areas, and both groups of residents identified health care and population loss as being an important problem for rural areas to address. This suggests that rural and metro respondents generally share common views about problems in other parts of the state. However, there is evidence from the report to suggest that non-local respondents’ views may differ from the day-to-day experiences of locals in the communities as well.
2. a. Both metro and rural respondents to the surveys identified crime and violence most commonly as the top issue facing metro Nebraska (18% of metro responses and 25% of rural responses). Thus, responses from rural Nebraskans were about 1.4 times more likely than metro residents to state that crime was a serious problem facing metro Nebraska. This suggests that rural Nebraskans have a more focused knowledge of crime being a serious problem in metro Nebraska, while metro Nebraskans have a broader set of issues based on their day-to-day experiences.
- b. Crime was mentioned more frequently in the Metro Poll when using the number of respondents as the basis for analysis – nearly half (45.9%) of metro respondents

listed crime at least once in their top three items for metro areas to address, versus 34.0% of respondents in the Rural Poll.

3. a. Job opportunities and keeping businesses locally was identified as the top issue facing rural Nebraska by both rural and metro participants in the surveys. However, rural responses (13.7%) listed jobs as a serious issue for rural areas 1.6 times more often than responses from metro respondents (8.6%), suggesting that local rural residents view this as a more serious problem than non-locals do.
 - b. The finding that local residents view this as more problematic is confirmed when analyzing respondents as the basis of analysis – 31.1% of rural respondents listed jobs in their top problems for rural areas to address, double the percentage of metro respondents (15.8%) stating jobs should be addressed by rural areas.
4. a. Metro responses more frequently identified agricultural and water issues as being problematic for rural Nebraskans than actual rural residents did. This may be related to metro Nebraskans' views of rural reliance on agriculture and a recent focus on water issues in local and national media. This, along with views of crime in metro areas, are examples of how views and the perceptions of problems may be shaped by media and news reports.
5. a. High taxes were viewed as being problematic for both metro and rural Nebraskans. Slightly more than 10% of responses in both polls stated their local area should be addressing high taxes. However, both metro and rural Nebraskans were about twice as likely to identify high taxes as a problem for their local community as they were for the nonlocal area (5-6% of responses). This shows a pattern of self-interest, as both metro and rural areas think high taxes should be tackled locally before they are addressed in other parts of the state.
 - b. Among respondents, a similar percentage in each poll said high taxes should be addressed in the local area (26.7% of respondents in the metro poll for metro areas and 23.5% in the rural poll for rural areas to address). These percentages were 2 to 3 times higher than the percentage of respondents saying high taxes should be addressed in the non-local part of Nebraska outside of which they lived.
6. b. Among respondents, gangs were mentioned as a problem for metro areas to address three times more often in the metro poll than in the rural poll (16.4% vs 5.2%). In contrast, drugs were listed as a problem for metro areas to address by a similar percentage in both polls (10% of metro respondents and 8% of rural respondents). Likewise, drugs were listed as a problem for rural areas to address by 8% of respondents in both the rural poll and the metro poll. Thus, gangs are viewed as more of a problem in metro areas, but drugs are considered a problem in both metro and rural parts of the state.

“These findings suggest that the perceptions of nonlocals about other parts of the state differ from the day-to-day experiences of local residents,” said Abby Heithoff, a researcher on the project. “This is a significant issue, especially in the Unicameral, which is about evenly split between rural and metro districts. Policy makers should take note of how perceptions drive the public debate and the public’s views and priorities,” she concluded.

This is the first year that the Nebraska Rural Poll and the Nebraska Metro Poll coordinated to ask the same questions so that comparisons could be made. “We wanted to provide another tool for community leaders and citizens to understand how they can address local needs,” said David Drozd, Research Coordinator at CPAR. “It also provides researchers and decision makers with a more consistent way to compare the views of urban and rural communities, in this case finding some similarities and certain differences in the most important problems they feel should be addressed.”

The full report can be found online at CPAR’s website at www.unomaha.edu/cpar.

For questions about the report’s findings, please contact Drozd at 402.554.2132 or ddrozd@unomaha.edu. For information about the Nebraska Rural Poll view <http://ruralpoll.unl.edu/> or contact Randy Cantrell at rcantrell1@unl.edu.

For media inquiries, please contact Charley Reed, UNO media relations coordinator, at 402.554.2129 or unonews@unomaha.edu.

Note that the seven Nebraska counties that comprise the Omaha and Lincoln metro areas are Cass, Douglas, Lancaster, Sarpy, Saunders, Seward, and Washington.

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