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Who Wants To Do Rural Social Work?

Student Perceptions of Rural Social Work Practice

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Abstract: *In response to growing concerns about the national shortage of rural social workers, the researchers surveyed and interviewed 115 social work students (97 BSW, 18 MSW) to ascertain their career plans and perceptions of rural social work practice. Although more than half reported living in rural communities at the time of their high school graduation, over 70% indicated a preference for practicing social work in or near an urban area. Students articulated multiple incentives that would attract them to rural social work and expressed a clear understanding of how various systems (social service, legislative, community, and educational) could provide these incentives and generally encourage and support rural social work practice.*

Keywords: *rural social work; rural social workers, social work students*

Introduction

In 2009, the North Dakota State Data Center reported that between July 1, 2007 and July 1, 2008 the state experienced both a natural population increase and net in-migration. This was the first such combined increase in almost 20 years (North Dakota State Data Center, 2009). It was also extremely good news for a state in which 47 of 53 counties lost population between 2000 and 2005 (Dorgan, 2007). With a total population under 650,000 and with 68% of its counties containing less than 6 persons per square mile (Center for Rural Health, n.d.), years of rural depopulation and out-migration of young people have resulted in serious consequences for North Dakota communities, particularly rural communities. These consequences include school consolidations, hospital and clinic closures, decreased availability and increased costs of goods and services, and loss of workers (N.D. State Data Center, n.d.). Loss of workers includes social workers, many of whom, as with other professionals, prefer to work in the state's urban areas or may be leaving the state entirely.

Rural depopulation does not mean, however, the disappearance of social problems. As detailed by a variety of authors (Locke & Winship, 2005; Openshaw & Halvorson, 2005; Randall, 2005; Slovak, 2005; Winship, 2004), homelessness, poverty, mental illness, violence, substance abuse, and other problems continue to plague rural communities around the country. Social workers are often on the front line in response to these issues, and in some rural communities social workers may be called on to exercise their skills for the larger purpose of community survival (Blakely & Locke, 2008). Unfortunately, the pool of rural social worker professionals appears to be dwindling, and as the National Association of Social Workers (2006) has noted, "recruitment and retention of social workers for rural practice is a major problem for the profession, leading to declassification, resistance to legal regulation, and the siphoning of social work jobs to those with little professional training" (§ 2). In addition, the geographic distribution of social workers with expertise in more specialized practice areas is uneven. Only 3% of licensed geriatric social workers, 2% of health social workers, and 2% of behavioral health MSWs are working in rural areas (NASW, Center, 2006).

The rural social work workforce in North Dakota appears to be reflecting national trends. A 2007 report by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) Mental Health Program noted that "the entire state (46/53 counties, 23 geographic areas and 16 facilities) is

designated as a federal Mental Health Professional Shortage Area” and that North Dakota is 43rd among states in social workers per capita (WICHE, 2007, p. 3). Although the report focused exclusively on behavioral health workers and was not inclusive of practitioners in all fields of social work, data indicated that North Dakota ranked toward the bottom (7th among 12 regional states) in employment of child, family, and school social workers, and 4th among 12 in employment of mental health and substance abuse social workers (WICHE, 2007). The report noted that recruiting and retaining public behavioral health professionals, particularly in rural areas, is difficult due to competition with private sector salaries and to “problems of cultural and rural competence” (p. 16).

An issue in recruiting social workers to rural areas is the unique dynamics of rural practice that raise concerns for potential applicants. These dynamics include extensive travel over great distances to provide service, dealing with the ethical complications of managing multiple and dual relationships, the lack of formal resources in rural areas, the requirement of generalist practice for MSWs who want to work in primarily clinical practice, and the lack of anonymity as a professional (Gumpert & Black, 2005). In addition, rural areas have fewer jobs that pay a living wage and fewer residents with higher education degrees (Belanger, 2005). All of these factors may be off-putting to young professionals who wish to have a reasonable income, access to professional colleagues, and the social opportunities of urban areas. Further complicating the issue are continued questions about the type of educational content that Schools of Social Work should provide in order to best prepare students for the unique practice of social work in rural areas (Lohmann, 2005). Such preparation requires that educators understand the dynamics of rural practice and can translate this competence to their students (Fulcher, 2002).

To understand how a new cohort of social workers viewed the practice of rural social and the likelihood of their engagement in such practice, the authors surveyed and interviewed undergraduate and graduate social work students from across North Dakota and western Minnesota. Students were asked about their career plans, their perceptions of the impediments and incentives to rural practice, and how social work educational programs could better encourage and train rural social workers.

Method

Permission and Access

In addition to their own university, the researchers received permission from Social Work Program Directors to survey and hold focus groups at one other university in North Dakota and at two Minnesota higher education institutions bordering North Dakota. All four institutions offered BSW programs, with the researchers’ institution also offering an MSW program. Over the course of summer and fall 2008, researchers met with BSW and MSW students at these institutions during regularly scheduled class times, including field seminars.

Participants and Data Collection

Ninety-seven BSW students with a mean age of 27.12 participated in the study. Eighteen MSW students with a mean age of 30.39 also participated. In each social work class, researchers distributed consent forms and discussed the purpose of the study with students. All students agreed to participate. Each student received a survey with 12 questions pertaining to demographics, post-graduation employment plans, and their perceptions of rural social work practice (see Appendix A). After students completed the survey, the researchers conducted a focus group interview with the class using a semi-structured interview format with 19 questions that were similar to those asked on the survey (see Appendix B). With permission from the students, a researcher recorded responses to interview questions on a laptop computer. After the interview, students had the opportunity to add additional information to their surveys, prior to returning them to the researchers.

Results

Quantitative Survey Data

Table 1 provides results for survey questions pertaining to post-graduation employment and licensure plans. As Table 1 shows, most BSW and MSW participants intended to find social work employment upon graduation or practice social work in agencies in which they were already employed. Most participants also intended to seek social work licensure, with North Dakota and/or Minnesota chosen most frequently as states of preferred licensure.

Both BSW and MSW participant groups indicated their preferred fields of practice (in the order of most frequent responses) as family and children services, mental health, and juvenile or adult corrections. Violence and abuse services and medical social work were also frequent responses.

Table 1

Post-Graduation Employment and Licensure Plans

	BSW	MSW
	n (%)	n (%)
Find or maintain social work employment	89 (91.7)	16 (88.8%)
Expect to obtain social work licensure	91 ^a (95.7)	17 (94.4)
ND and/or MN as planned states of licensure	88 ^b (95.6)	15 ^c (93.8)

^an=95 useable BSW surveys; ^bn=92 useable BSW surveys; ^cn=16 useable MSW surveys

In addition to articulating post-graduation employment and licensure plans, participants answered questions about the size of their home community and the size of the community in which they planned to practice social work. Response categories were based on Rural Urban Continuum Codes used by the United States Department of Agriculture and the frontier designation used by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education. The responses to these questions, found in Tables 2 and 3, provide an interesting juxtaposition between students' communities of origin and their preferred practice location. As seen in Table 2, 55% of BSWs and 47% of MSWs indicated that they had lived in rural areas at the time of their high school graduation (see responses e., f., and g. on Table 2).

Table 2

Place of Residence at Time of High School Graduation

Community size	BSW ^a	MSW ^b
	n (%)	n (%)
a. A metropolitan area of 250,000 or more	5 (5.2)	0 (0)
b. A metropolitan area of 50,000-249,999	13 (13.6)	4 (23.5)
c. An urban/suburban area of 20,000-49,999	13 (13.6)	2 (11.7)
d. A town or area of 2,500-19,999 adjacent to a metropolitan or urban area	12 (12.6)	3 (17.6)
e. A town or area of 2,500-19,999 not adjacent to a metropolitan or urban area	23 (24.2)	4 (23.5)
f. A rural area of less than 2,500	26 (27.3)	3 (17.6)
g. A frontier area of less than 7 people per square mile	3 (3.1)	1 (5.8)

^an=95 useable BSW surveys; ^bn=17 useable MSW surveys

When making selections about their preferred practice location, participants could choose more than one response. Overwhelmingly (73% BSW, 72% MSW), students indicated that, despite their rural roots, their preference was to work in or near a metropolitan or urban area (responses a-d in Table 3).

Table 3

Choice of Practice Location

Community size	BSW ^a	MSW ^b
	n (%)	n (%)
a. A metropolitan area of 250,000 or more	24 (10.1)	1 (2.5)
b. A metropolitan area of 50,000-249,999	55 (23.2)	6 (15)
c. An urban/suburban area of 20,000-49,999	50 (21)	13 (32.5)
d. A town or area of 2,500-19,999 adjacent to a metropolitan or urban area	46 (19.4)	9 (22.5)
e. A town or area of 2,500-19,999 not adjacent to a metropolitan or urban area	31 (13)	7 (17.5)
f. A rural area of less than 2,500	21 (8.9)	3 (7.5)
g. A frontier area of less than 7 people per square mile	10 (4.2)	1 (2.5)

^an= 237 BSW responses; ^bn= 40 MSW responses

Qualitative Focus Group Interview Data

Raw focus group interview data were analyzed using qualitative coding procedures leading to categories and themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Padgett, 1998). After assigning codes (words or phrases) to lines or paragraphs of interview notes, categories and subcategories emerged to describe groups of codes with similar characteristics. By asking descriptive questions about categories (e.g., who, what, where), and examining the data for answers to these questions, “properties” of categories begin to emerge (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) as well as relational statements and themes.

Table 4 contains a sampling of codes as well as the six categories, and corresponding subcategories, produced by the coding process. Examination of codes and comparison of the relationship between categories resulted in the emergence of a number of themes discussed below.

Theme 1: Student definitions of “rural” reflect the images and features of rural areas and towns. When asked what “rural” meant to them, participants rarely mentioned the size of a community. Instead, they described many of the physical features associated with rural areas such as dirt roads, absence of stoplights, agricultural and ranching activity, and consolidated schools, laughing when these consolidations were referred to as “schools with 5 letters in the name” (referring to the abbreviated title of schools referencing five small communities). But participants also identified rural as associated with the unique human features of rural communities, noting that “everyone is related,” “you have a street named after your family,” the sense of community, “families bring their kids to eat in bars—and it’s OK,” and that people in rural areas “hold grudges.”

Theme 2: Student perceptions of “rural” contain contradictions. Participants discussed various features of rural life, which reflected inherent contradictions. Rural schools were viewed as being either better or worse than urban schools. Participants reported feeling either safer or less safe in rural areas. Rural communities were described as providing a wonderful sense of community, but residents were also seen as “gossipy” and “nosy.” Living in a rural area generally meant having the good fortune to know everyone, but also meant lacking a sense of privacy. Being a rural social worker meant being able to use generalist practice skills, but a social worker was also seen as “having to do everything.”

Theme 3: The rural social work workforce shortage reflects interplay between rural dynamics and struggles related to rural social work practice. When asked their opinions about why there may be a shortage of rural social workers, participant responses suggested that the

Table 4

Focus Group Data Analysis

Codes	Sub-Category	Category
Expensive groceries Relaxed dress “town closed down” No Walmart Dirt roads		Rural Life
Tradition Pride Resistance to Change Close-knit Gossipy/nosy		Rural Culture
Jobs Diverse people Privacy Resources Services for clients	Lack of...	Rural Experience
Isolation A distance from everything Boredom “can hear the wind”	Distance & Isolation	
Safe Neighbors help out Safety issues Violence	Safe vs. Safety	
Dual relationships Confidentiality issues Can't make mistakes “Seen as a social worker, not a social person”	Disadvantages	Rural Social Work Experience
Generalist practice Know your resources Smaller case loads Can be creative	Advantages	
Like rural life “It's what I know Need a job You make a difference	Reasons for choosing rural social work	
Low salaries Cultural differences Burnout/stress No jobs for spouses		Reasons for SW Shortage
Good schools Entertainment Access to amenities Safety	Community resources	Rural Social Work Incentives
Quality supervision Mentors Agency car Good salary	Agency supports	
Loan forgiveness Resources for clients Agency car Benefits Rotation to city	Legislative support	
Job shadow Rotational experience Rural speakers Rural course Rural content		Training/Education Needs

answer lay in an interesting synergy between the dynamics of contemporary rural life in the upper Midwest/Great Plains and the demands of rural social work practice. Participants discussed “rural

flight” and changing family values, which meant that young people were feeling less pressure to stay in or return to their rural home communities. They talked about low salaries, the lack of opportunities, too much travel, and few or no jobs for spouses or significant others. These factors were paired with their perceptions that being a rural social worker meant being an “outsider,” struggling with dual relationships, having little privacy, and being “seen as a social worker and not a social person.” Being a visible professional in a community also raised fears about making mistakes and being stigmatized because of the “regulatory role” that social workers play. There was also significant concern about a conflict in values. One participant asserted that small towns and rural communities tended to be conservative, while social workers tended to be liberal. This conflict was highlighted by the comment that in rural communities, “you can’t put up your gay pride flag.”

Theme 4: Many of the components of rural communities that would attract students to rural practice are the very things that are disappearing from rural communities. Participants were asked what would attract them to rural social work and many who were from rural areas mentioned the characteristics that make them feel connected to their homes: the close-knit sense of community, knowing everyone, “cheaper cost of living,” and enjoying activities such as fishing and hunting. But there was also acknowledgment that attractive components would include good schools, activities for their children, local health care facilities, good jobs for self and one’s significant other, a continuum of services for their clients, and a viable pool of people to date or with whom to socialize. Unfortunately, many of these components are rapidly disappearing from rural areas.

Theme 5: Incentives for rural social work practice fall into three categories: “what I need;” “what my family needs;” and “what the community needs to have in it.” Although realistic about what rural areas offered both personally and professionally, students also discussed the components of rural communities that would ideally attract them to rural practice. For themselves, participants listed both personal and professional needs such as potential relationships, social networks, a quality and flexible work environment, and good salary and benefits. For their families, they wanted good schools, activities for their children, and jobs for their significant others. They also noted that they would be attracted to communities which offered good schools, low crime, access to shopping (Target stores were frequently mentioned), diverse people, and child care.

Theme 6: Incentives are concrete, extensive, and reflect an understanding of how systems (policy-making, social service agency, community) could meet the needs of rural social workers. In addition to speaking generally about incentive categories (Theme 5), participants were also concrete about the specific incentives that various systems could offer to attract them to rural practice. “Good salary” (\$40,000+) and good benefits as well as loan forgiveness were the number one incentives, followed by quality supervision, access to mentors, ability to relocate to a city after five years of rural service, and use of a company car. Other incentives included subsidized continuing education opportunities, subsidized licensure renewal, flexible work schedules with some ability to work from home, relocation benefits, jobs for significant others, and housing options. One respondent’s comments were indicative of a general consensus: “I would want a competitive wage and benefits, also opportunities to further my education and allowing access to CEU hours. Another important factor for me is good supervision and co-workers due to the support and teamwork that is needed to develop a good functioning agency.”

Students also understood the relationship between these incentives and the larger issue of rural community development. They talked about the importance of economic development initiatives and the need to attract diverse people to rural communities. They were clear that community development would be connected to their own personal and professional success.

Theme 7: The success of rural social work practice depends on an accessible continuum of services for client systems. In tandem with community development, and to their credit as developing social workers, students noted the need for a rural continuum of social services in order to feel attracted to rural social work practice. Without services to support clients, participants recognized that their jobs would be considerably more difficult, and the possibility of professional frustration and burnout would be much higher.

Theme 8: The attraction of rural social work comes from an appreciation for the positives of rural life and from an understanding of hallmarks of effective social work practice. When asked about the benefits of practicing social work in rural areas, responses were reflective of participants' positive experiences with rural life. They noted the quiet and peaceful aspects of rural area, "knowing everyone," and being able to make a difference because of the smaller, more manageable size of rural communities. Students from rural areas commented on their "passion for rural folk" and that rural life is "what I know."

Benefits to rural social work practice also reflected the perception that effective social work practices could be more easily implemented in rural areas. Such practices included in-depth knowledge of one's clients including their informal networks, building positive professional networks to draw on, being grounded in generalist practice, having knowledge of all resources available to clients, being able to get help fast, having the flexibility to be creative, and having smaller case loads. As one participant noted, "I think that it would be easy to master the social service delivery system in your area and also you would be able to build solid relationships with community members and clients."

Theme 9: Social work training programs play an important role in encouraging and preparing students for rural practice. Researchers asked participants how social work education could be enhanced in order to encourage or better prepare students for rural practice. Although students acknowledged receiving rural content in their education, they had concrete and extensive recommendations for how training programs could be improved in order to dispel stereotypes and excite interest in rural practice. They suggested that rural social workers speak in classes on a regular basis so as to better understand what their daily routine looks like. A required or elective course on rural social work was a frequent response, as was infusing more rural content across the curriculum. Several respondents underscored the importance of a course on working with American Indian communities and the need for course content related to working with groups such as refugees or other New Americans. A course in eligibility programs was also suggested as was more training in leadership and supervision since "you have to become part of the community if you're in a rural community and... being a good social worker doesn't necessarily equate to being a good supervisor."

In addition to course recommendations, getting more exposure to and experience in rural areas and rural social work was a frequent response theme. Going out to rural areas was seen as necessary to "help break down the fear of working in rural areas." One student noted that it would be helpful if students could "go on a field trip to see that the office isn't a trailer." Students also recommended mini rural field experiences, rural volunteer or service-learning activities, and more rural internships. They also suggested that if rural agencies had a stronger outreach presence in social work training programs, more students might be recruited to rural internships or employment.

Discussion

The perceptions offered by participants in this study support much of what is discussed in the literature about rural life and rural social work practice. The study adds to the literature, however, in that it offers feedback from a current cohort of new social workers and provides guidance to policy makers, agencies, and educators who want to address the current drain of professionals from

rural areas. Participant comments indicated that it would be a challenge to attract many of these students to rural areas and rural social work practice, but there are incentives that might provide encouragement.

Study participants, many of whom were from rural areas, recognized the benefits of rural life such as a slower pace, a “wholesome feel,” a close-knit sense of community, and “knowing everyone.” They could translate this to advantages related to social work practice such as better use of informal networks, smaller case loads, in-depth knowledge of resources, and more frequent use of generalist knowledge and skills at multiple system levels. But students also acknowledged the disadvantages of rural life for one’s personal as well as professional life: lack of jobs (for self and significant other), lack of diversity, lack of resources, the distance to services and amenities, dual relationships, no privacy, being stereotyped as “the social worker,” and fear of making mistakes. In general, student discussion of rural life and rural social work contained contradictions and dilemmas (better schools/poor schools, safe/not safe, generalist practice/have to do everything), and the rural workforce shortage was viewed as resulting from the interplay of negative aspects of rural life and the challenges to rural social work resulting from those aspects. In addition, and unfortunately, the aspects of rural communities that would seem to most attractive to students such as good schools, activities for kids, good jobs, social networks, and services for clients, are the very things that are disappearing from rural communities.

Students were clear that incentives to rural practice were multi-faceted. For themselves, students voiced the need for a flexible work environment, good salary and benefits, high-quality supervision, and access to personal and professional networks. For their families, they wanted good schools, jobs for significant others, and activities for their kids. In addition, the communities in which they lived would need to have good childcare, diverse people, access to amenities, and low crime. These expectations seem to belie the very nature of rural life and underscore the challenges to workforce recruitment. Nevertheless, student participants recognized that incentives were possible via actions on the part of policy making, agency, and community systems. Such actions could take the form of attractive salaries and benefits, loan forgiveness, paid relocation expenses, financial support for licensure and continuing education, job security, agency cars, guaranteed health insurance, opportunities for job mobility and rotation, and development of services for clients.

Finally, students had a number of recommendations for social work training programs. In order to encourage rural practice, students suggested enhanced curricular content, expanded rural experiences, and increased contact with rural agencies.

This study provides guidance for policy-makers who want to work with rural communities to ensure a pool of social service providers in rural areas and for employers who wish to recruit social workers to rural agencies. It also offers advice for social work educators preparing students for practice in rural communities. The results are noteworthy and require a commitment from all groups to address this workforce concern.

Recommendations for Policy-Makers.

Policy-makers should be aware that educational stipends have proven successful in recruiting graduates to rural communities. With appropriate legislative leadership, the Title IV-E Child Welfare Stipend Program could be replicated beyond child welfare practice to rural mental health services, for example. In addition, loan forgiveness and competitive salaries are primary and necessary incentives for recruiting service providers to rural areas. Policy makers can also support development of additional technological tools that allow more services to be delivered at a distance and that ensure rural workers quick and routine access to consultants, colleagues, and professional networks. Finally, as policy makers are aware, continued collaboration with rural communities

around economic development initiatives will encourage the growth of various dimensions of community life that attract and retain workers at various stages of their careers.

Recommendations for Agency Administrators

For employers, wages must provide an incentive to live in rural areas, particularly more remote areas, and this may mean offering wages higher than those provided in urban areas. Employers are challenged to educate their boards and commissions about the need for higher wages to assure that they can recruit quality professionals. In addition, it must be recognized that the current practice of declassifying social work positions in certain service arenas in order to hire para-professionals, such as “social work designees,” will not assure the same level of quality in service. This approach must be adamantly challenged by agency directors, supervisors, and the social work field in general. Employers must also assure that quality social work supervision is available to assure professional services and to provide professional development activities that advance professional credentials and attract potential employees.

Employers should also be reasonable in their expectations about employees joining in the cultural and recreational life of a rural community. Professional employees in rural areas must be assured of at least a modicum of personal privacy. Alumni residing in rural communities often stated to the authors that they do not wish to live under a microscope where they have little privacy and which makes managing boundaries even more difficult. Allowing employees to reside outside their work community is a necessary option. Also allowing some professional work to occur via synchronous internet interaction with clients is reasonable and has occurred with success (Krueger, Gibbons, & Northwood, 2004).

Recommendations for Social Work Educators

For social work training programs, the challenge is to expand how programs present practice in a rural community. Social work faculty need to ensure that, in addition to delineating the struggles, they highlight the changing complexities, the strengths, and the potential futures, of rural communities. Competence in rural social work practice can be supported by following the suggestions of student respondents to this study which includes developing courses about rural social work, diverse communities, and entitlements, providing increased hands-on experience in rural service provision, and ensuring routine outreach by rural agencies to social work students. As educators move beyond clichés about rural communities and become more intentional about discussing and celebrating rural practice, students will be excited and better prepared to practice in rural communities.

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Appendix A

Survey of Social Work Students' Perceptions of Rural Social Work Practice

Today's Date _____

1. The University/College I am currently attending: _____
2. My age: _____
3. At the time of my high school graduation, I lived in:
 - 3a. ____ A metropolitan area with a population of 250,000 or more
 - 3b. ____ A metropolitan area with a population of 50,000-249,999
 - 3c. ____ An urban/suburban area with a population of 20,000-49,999
 - 3d. ____ A town or area with a population of 2,500-19,999 adjacent to a metro or urban area
 - 3e. ____ A town or area with a population of 2,500-19,999 **not** adjacent to a metro or urban area
 - 3f. ____ A rural area with a population of less than 2,500
 - 3g. ____ A frontier area with a population of less than 7 people per square mile
4. Please answer all that apply below:
 - 4a. I am currently employed in a social work position (not including internship):
____ Yes (Go to 4b or 4d) ____ No (Go to 4c or 4d)
 - 4b. I anticipate continued employment in this position upon graduation (from either a BSW or MSW program):
____ Yes ____ No
 - 4c. I am currently looking for, or planning to find, a social work job after graduation:
____ Yes ____ No
 - 4d. ____ I do not plan to practice social work after graduation. (Please explain your answer in the space below.)
5. If you are currently in a social work position, or plan to find a social work position, please indicate the field of social work practice in which you currently work or plan to work (check all that apply):

5a. ____ Family & Children's Services	5h. ____ Information & Referral
5b. ____ Addictions	5i. ____ Income Maintenance
5c. ____ Mental Health	5j. ____ Community Development
5d. ____ Gerontological Services	5k. ____ Occupational Social Work
5e. ____ Developmental & Other Disabilities	5l. ____ Medical Social Work
5f. ____ Juvenile and/or Adult Corrections	5m. ____ Other
5g. ____ Violence & Abuse Services	
6. I am planning to secure a social work license upon graduation: ____ Yes ____ No
If yes, in what state(s) do you intend to be licensed? _____
If no, why not? _____
7. I plan to practice social work in one of the following areas (check all that apply):
 - 7a. ____ A metropolitan area with a population of 250,000 or more
 - 7b. ____ A metropolitan area with a population of 50,000-249,999
 - 7c. ____ An urban/suburban area with a population of 20,000-49,999
 - 7d. ____ A town or area with a population of 2,500-19,999 adjacent to a metro or urban area
 - 7e. ____ A town or area with a population of 2,500-19,999 **not** adjacent to a metro or urban area
 - 7f. ____ A rural area with a population of less than 2,500
 - 7g. ____ A frontier area with a population of less than 7 people per square mile

8. Regarding your answer to Question 7, please explain why you are making this choice:
9. What do you consider to be the draw-backs, or problems, with practicing social work in a rural area?
10. What do you consider to be the benefits of practicing social work in a rural area?
11. If a rural agency were trying to recruit you, what factors would have to be in place for you to accept the job? (Some factors might include salary/benefits; continuing education opportunities; quality supervision; flexible work schedule; access to social factors such as entertainment, peers, shopping; family in the area; other)? Please answer this question as honestly and with as much detail as possible.
12. What aspects of your social work education could be enhanced to better prepare you for or to excite you about rural social work?

Thank you for completing this survey!

Appendix B

Focus Group Questions for “Social Work Students’ Perceptions of Rural Social Work Practice”

- 1) What is your home state? Are you from a rural/urban/suburban area?
- 2) What does “rural” mean to you?
- 3) What do you see as the advantages and disadvantages to living/working in rural areas? (Even if you have not lived in a rural area.)
- 4) Do you have a social work job lined up after graduation? OR do you plan to find a social work job after graduation? (If not, why not?)
- 5) What field of practice do you hope/plan to work in?
- 6) In what setting do you plan/hope to work? Rural/urban/suburban?
- 7) Why are you making this choice? (i.e., why choosing to work in rural area or choosing NOT to work in a rural area)
- 8) There is increasing concern about the shortage of social workers in rural areas. How do you explain this shortage?
- 9) Why do you think rural areas have a hard time attracting social workers?
- 10) What would attract you to working in a rural area? What incentives would convince you to live/work in a rural area?
- 11) If you were talking to a group of legislators about what resources, services, or other incentives the state could provide to convince you to work in a rural area, what would you tell them?
- 12) If you were talking to rural agency directors about what benefits, salary, work schedule, etc. agencies would need to provide to attract you to them, what would you say?
- 13) Do you feel it would be helpful to have training and mentoring opportunities available to you to attract you to/keep you doing rural social work?
- 14) What do rural communities need to have in them to attract you to work there?
- 15) What makes you nervous about living in a rural area?
- 16) What excites you about living in a rural area?
- 17) Do you feel prepared to work in a rural area?
- 18) What additional courses/training do you think would help prepare you for rural social work?
- 19) What else could a social work department do to prepare students for and encourage students to engage in rural social work?

Authors' Note

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