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ISU Sociologist Examines Communities' Quality of Life Near Large Farms

AMES, Iowa — Do Iowa small towns benefit from the presence of large farms?

Recent studies by Iowa State University rural sociologists suggest they do. "Our findings suggest there is a modest favorable effect of large-scale agriculture on quality of life in the 99 Iowa communities we studied," said Steve Sapp, professor of sociology. "It's not especially surprising, given the close relationship between Iowa's rural communities and agriculture."

Sapp conducted the studies with Daniel Sundblad, a graduate student who completed his doctorate at Iowa State and now is an assistant professor of sociology at Berry College in Georgia.

The studies were funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Research Initiative, with a goal of seeking a better understanding of key factors affecting the viability of small towns in Iowa and citizen satisfaction.

For several decades, rural sociologists around the country have been studying relationships between agricultural scale and community quality of life.

"The generally favorable association of larger agricultural scale and community quality of life has tended to occur mainly in the Midwest, and that was true with our studies," he said. "Similar studies in other regions of the country have tended to associate larger agricultural scale with decreased measures of quality of life."

Sapp said quality of life was defined from residents' impressions of government services (such as police and fire protection, street and park maintenance and garbage collection) and community services (such as medical care, schools, shopping, recreation and entertainment options, child care, senior citizen programs and youth programs). It also included participation in local clubs and organizations and ratings of neighborliness. Quality of life also included socioeconomic data within each county, such as income, percentage of population living in poverty, crime rates, infant mortality rates, unemployment rates and gaps between rich and poor.

One town in each of Iowa's 99 counties was selected if it was below 10,000 population, was not adjacent to a large city and relied mainly on agriculture for jobs and income. Surveys were conducted of 150 randomly selected households located in or near each community.

The researchers looked at changes in the 99 small towns across the decade from 1994 to 2004, using county-level data and local surveys. "In that 10-year period, for the most part incomes rose, poverty rates declined, crime rates declined, infant mortality declined, unemployment declined and gaps between rich and poor closed in association

with increases in the scale of agriculture in their county,” Sapp said.

People tended to rate their government services and community services higher with increases in the scale of agriculture in their county. “Participation in clubs and organizations and citizens’ ratings of neighborliness also tended to increase with increases in the scale of agriculture and commercial hog production in the county,” Sapp said.

Most of the changes also were evident when looking specifically at commercial hog operations. The greater the scale of hog production in the county, the higher quality of life ratings from the community, the researchers concluded.

Scale of agriculture was defined as a composite of the average number of hogs per hog farm, the average number of cattle per cattle farm, total agricultural sales per farm, percent of sales in the county from large farms, total value of farmland in the county and the percent of land in crops in the county.

“This approach sought to capture aspects of larger-scale agriculture devoted to meat and raw commodity production in a county,” Sapp said.

The researchers used advanced statistical procedures to evaluate the effects of scale on a community’s quality of life while controlling for other key factors, such as a respondent’s age, sex, formal education and household income, along with measures of community racial diversity, retail activity and proximity to an urban area.

Although not all changes were consistent within a time period or across time, Sapp said the county-level data and local surveys overall supported the view that large-scale agriculture and hog production in particular have a modest but favorable effect on quality of life in Iowa rural towns.

So what about smaller scale agriculture?

“Our study focused entirely on effects of a larger scale of agriculture,” Sapp said. “We might anticipate that communities with the presence of both large- and small-scale agriculture would likely benefit the most from overall farming practices, but we don’t have the data to look at those relationships. Those are excellent questions for additional research.”

Sapp hopes to obtain funding to repeat the study in 2014 and continue to learn more about trends in the relationship between agriculture and rural communities’ quality of life.

Sapp and Sunblad are submitting results of the studies to peer-reviewed journals.

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