



**WESTERN  
MICHIGAN**  
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

---

Volume 4  
Issue 7 *September*

Article 6

---

September 1977

## Public Perceptions of Rural County Social Service Agencies

Robert W. Bilby

*University of Wisconsin, La Crosse*

Robert Benson

*University of Wisconsin, La Crosse*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Rural Sociology Commons, and the Social Work Commons

---

### Recommended Citation

Bilby, Robert W. and Benson, Robert (1977) "Public Perceptions of Rural County Social Service Agencies," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 7 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol4/iss7/6>

This Article is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact [wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).



PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF RURAL COUNTY SOCIAL SERVICE AGENCIES\*

Robert W. Bilby  
Department of Sociology-Anthropology

Robert Benson  
Department of Social Work

University of Wisconsin-La Crosse

ABSTRACT

Data gathered via interviews and mailed questionnaires in two rural counties in Western Wisconsin indicate that large segments of the general citizenry and "public opinion leaders" are generally more supportive of social services than common stereotypes suggest, while also voicing criticism of what are seen as inequities in the administration of services. Large majorities view social services as an institutionalized practice in American society, large segments hold negative views of recipients, and the samples studied are in general ill-informed about social service practices. Implications are drawn regarding public information programs aimed at better informing the public about social services.

In most characterizations of rural America, conservatism in one form or another is assumed to be a central theme of rural or small town existence. While historians and social analysts could supply numerous examples of exceptions to this stereotypic image, the layman and scholar alike most often conceive of the rural populace as fundamentalistic in religion, Republican or right-wing in politics, supportive of a strong nuclear family, economically frugal, and convinced that employment is essential to self-esteem (at least for the non-wealthy).

\* The authors wish to thank Mr. Robert Kuechmann and Mr. Charles Zepp for assistance in gathering data for our research, Mr. Paul Johnson, Dr. James Anderson, and Dr. John Jenks for their criticisms and contributions, and Ms. Mary Johnson and Ms. Sharon Goss for typing the manuscript.

While more characteristics could be added to this list of assumptions about rural Americans, the central notion of relevance to this paper is that few people are surprised when public social service agencies are frowned upon in rural areas. Supported by traditions of individualism within a capitalistic economic system, residents of small town or farm communities very often are highly critical of social service programs, social workers and "welfare" in general.

This picture of rural attitudes toward social services is generally supported by the observations of social workers themselves. However, plausible speculation can be developed that points out how a widespread consensus critical of social services might not exist even though practicing social workers sense a hostile public opinion. The personnel of social service agencies, from the agency administrators to the social workers, aides, and support staff, must deal primarily with two categories of people. One audience is their clientele who are often experiencing the stigma of poverty, disability or some other difficulty, and who are frequently blamed for their circumstances by an individualistic, affluent society. The second major category with whom agency personnel also interact are those who step forward to actively voice criticism of the "lazy" or "immoral" poor and their "misguided" benefactor, the social worker. Both of these categories of persons constitute a "role set" that provides the social worker with information suggesting that the public is critical or even hostile toward the social worker and social services in general. In short, the social processes and social structures within which the social worker operates might function to reinforce the notion that rural public opinion is strongly critical of social services, whether or not the actual climate of opinion as a whole reflects these values.

Rural or small town communities are usually characterized by less anonymity than urban areas, making it more likely that the educated and professional segments of the population would have a more complete awareness of local values and beliefs. But given the complexity of the various interrelationships among different social groups, even in less populated areas accurate appraisals of public opinion are difficult. Different religious, political, ethnic, and socio-economic groups often have long-standing disagreements about a variety of local and regional questions; social service policies and practices could be among these issues where dissensus exists.

A review of research literature reveals a paucity of systematic research on public attitudes toward the welfare system, much less a body of knowledge specifically relevant to rural attitudes. While

there seems to be a growing body of unpublished material as indicated by recent symposia and conferences, it has yet to supplement the small body of current published studies of rural attitudes toward social services.

A study by Kallen and Miller (1971) of 300 white and 300 black women in Baltimore, Maryland, does shed some light on attitudes toward social services among a general albeit urban population. It reveals that the largest number of people are ambivalent regarding welfare programs, approving of some types of welfare and disapproving of other types. The strongest negative attitudes were found to be held about people not working if they are able, and about aid for illegitimate children. In general, however, they conclude "that attitudes toward welfare are frequently one aspect of a cluster of attitudes the general public holds toward both government actions and racial differences." (Kallen and Miller, 1971:90).

Osgood (forthcoming) completed an analysis of rural-urban differences in attitudes toward welfare using data from a survey of 1,426 Pennsylvania residents conducted by Ritti (1974). Osgood's analysis finds that rural residents display less willingness to grant that welfare recipients are honest and more often doubted the recipients' willingness to work. Osgood finds some expression of support for the "needy" but at the same time criticism of those recipients considered unneedy, "Cheaters", or "Chislers", and that rural residents are more likely to view welfare programs as temporary rather than institutionalized:

. . . taken as a group, these responses indicate a more residual view of welfare in rural areas of Pennsylvania. The poor individual is distrusted and "blamed" for being poor. Rather than seeing poverty as caused by structural insufficiencies in society - for example, widespread unemployment - almost half of the rural and less urban residents felt welfare recipients were not willing to work . . . These data suggest that those in cities have a more institutional perspective of welfare than either the less densely populated . . . counties or the very rural counties . . . (Osgood, forthcoming).

Ogren (1973) conducted an interview study of almost 200 individuals in California to assess public attitudes toward welfare. In general, support for social services was greater than opposition, and welfare programs were viewed as potentially ameliorative; yet recipients were criticized for not trying hard enough and often being "unworthy" (Ogren: 1973: 107). This study was not, however, specifically

directed to issues of rural life.

The Ogren study was expanded into a national study, with the results published by Carter, et. al. (1973). Using opinion polling procedures with 9,345 persons over 18 years of age in seven sample states, the results were once again contrary to generally held ideas about how the public feels about welfare and the poor. These findings indicate that such variables as amount of personal contact with welfare, the presence of a college degree, and being younger than forty are associated with more positive attitudes. Almost sixty percent of those interviewed had at least some personal knowledge of someone on welfare. Further,

. . . survey respondents registered solid support for aid to the employed poor as well as the unemployed poor who for various reasons cannot work; rejected negative stereotypes of the welfare recipient (and) endorsed American society's obligation to the poor (Carter, et. al., 1973:8).

Carter and her associates conclude that attitudes are not rigidly set regarding welfare, and are subject to change when better information is provided. An exception to this pattern was the firm belief regarding aid to families with illegitimate children.

In light of the small amount of systematic research on public views toward social services, and the dearth of material concerning specifically rural attitudes, the present research effort was pursued as an initial attempt to clarify rural views. The objective of this report, then, is to present data which allow a preliminary empirical assessment of the accuracy of prevalent assumptions regarding rural attitudes toward social services.

#### PROCEDURES

Two separate research efforts, one completed in the fall of 1973 and the second in the spring and summer of 1974, were undertaken to study public perceptions of county social service agencies in two predominantly rural counties in western Wisconsin. The studies were essentially the same in design and implementation, with only minor changes in instrumentation incorporated into the second study.

In each county, henceforth referred to as County A and County B, data were collected in two phases. First, a small sample of citizens were interviewed by college students who had received training in interviewing techniques. Residents of towns and villages within each

county were interviewed in numbers proportionate to the population of the respective town or village, and rural townships were randomly selected to provide a geographically representative sample. Within each geographic area, availability sampling was employed. In this fashion, 137 citizen interviews were obtained from County A and 140 interviews were obtained from County B.

In the second phase of data collection in each county, the various professional and quasi-professional members of each community were sent questionnaires. Governmental and commercial occupations and avocations pertinent to human service efforts were chosen for study. The goal was to contact those persons in positions that involved the dissemination of public or private services, non-profit or commercial, other than the personnel of the county social service agencies. More specifically, this second phase of the sampling was carried out by sending questionnaires to: (1) all school superintendents, principals, and guidance counsellors, and a random sample of teachers (teachers were not included in County A); (2) all medical and mental health personnel; (3) the county clerk, the town and city alderman (half in County A, all in County B); (4) all full-time police personnel and all known local law enforcement officers; (5) one lawyer from each law firm; and (6) all clergymen. The return rates for this mailed questionnaire phase of the data collection were approximately 70% in County A and 55% in County B.<sup>1</sup>

This study design, which was felt to be a practical means of achieving the goal of a preliminary descriptive study of rural attitudes toward social services, unfortunately introduces problems of terminology. The variety of governmental and commercial occupations and avocations making up a part of the samples studied cannot accurately be labelled "people workers", even though that term seems to be growing in popularity as a general category of human service work. The explicit exclusion of social workers, and the inclusion of such groups as lawyers and elected political officials, makes it difficult to use such terms as "people workers" or "human service workers" in describing the types of workers included in this study. Turning to a term commonly employed in the field of communications, it could be argued that the professionals and quasi-professionals included in the second phase of sampling in each county might comprise an important portion of the "opinion leaders" of each community. Admittedly, ascertaining who the opinion leaders are in any given community is always an empirical question, and as such is not addressed in this study. Further, some opinion leaders in the counties studied here may not be in the occupations which were sampled, and of course probably not all incumbents of the occupational roles sampled here are in fact opinion

leaders. Yet, since the occupations and avocations chosen for sampling do fit the definitional criteria most frequently associated with opinion leaders (Berelson and Steiner, 1964: 550), this group will be designated "opinion leaders" in the text and tables which follows. This terminology obviously suffers from the limitations noted above, but for lack of a better term, will be employed here.<sup>2</sup>

In each county studied, the interview schedule and the mailed questionnaire, while not identical, contained many of the same items. Each instrument contained items assessing the respondent's (1) evaluations of the county social services agency, (2) knowledgeability about social services, and (3) attitudes toward social services in general. One or two open-ended questions were included in all instruments allowing the respondent to express any general comments he or she felt relevant.

#### FINDINGS

The presentation of the findings follow in three segments. First, a general picture of the viewpoint of the "person-on-the-street" studied in each county is presented. Second, a brief summary of the views of the professional and quasi-professional individuals sampled in each county, referred to as opinion leaders, is presented. Third, responses to items assessing knowledgeability and attitudes which were directed to all individuals studied are reported.

##### A) THE CITIZENS' VIEW

Given the local political, economic and intra-agency personality differences between the two counties studied in this research, the results of interviewing citizens show remarkably similar patterns of response. In both counties roughly three out of five of the citizens interviewed said that they personally know individuals or families who are receiving some sort of assistance from the county agency (County A, 60.6%; County B, 61.4%). As shown in Table 1a, in response to a question asking the degree of help which they think recipients receive, less than three percent in each county felt the county agency was not helping at all. Further, while the sample from County A contained more persons who were reluctant to make any evaluation, substantial minorities (32% in County A, 40.7% in County B) felt that the county agencies were providing "a lot of help" for recipients.

TABLE 1

CITIZEN PERCEPTIONS OF DEGREE OF POSITIVE ASSISTANCE TO CLIENTS  
AND INEQUITIES IN DISSEMINATION OF SERVICES BY COUNTY

<u>A. AMOUNT OF HELP</u>	<u>COUNTY A</u>	<u>COUNTY B</u>
	(N = 137)	(N = 140)
Of the people you personally know who are receiving assistance from the ___ County Social Service Department, how much do you think they are being helped?	Alot . . . . .32.1% (44)	40.7% (57)
	Little . . . . .25.5% (35)	31.4% (44)
	None . . . . .2.9% (4)	2.9% (4)
	Don't Know . .39.4% (54)	25.0% (35)
 <u>B. UNDESERVING RECIPIENTS</u>		
In your opinion, are there people in ___ County who are receiving help from the County Social Services Department who should not be getting it?	Yes. . . . .54.0% (74)	62.1% (87)
	No or Don't Know . . . .46.0% (63)	37.1% (52)
	No Answer. . . 0.0% (0)	.7% (1)
 <u>C. DESERVING NON-RECIPIENTS</u>		
On the other hand, do you think there are people in ___ County who are not getting help who should be receiving it?	Yes. . . . .45.3% (62)	62.1% (87)
	No or Don't Know . . . .54.7% (75)	32.7% (46)
	No Answer. . . 0.0% (0)	5.0% (7)

A high percentage of citizens in the two county samples see considerable inequity in the administration of social service policies, however. These inequities include both the granting of assistance to those who should not have it, and not granting it to those who should. Table 1b shows that in County A a majority (54%) believe undeserving recipients abound, and Table 1c shows a large minority (45.3%) perceive deserving non-recipients. In County B, precisely the same proportion of the citizen sample (62.1%) perceive both forms of inequity.

An open-ended question which concluded the citizen interview elicited widely diverse responses. In general, considerably more negative than positive comments were voiced (eleven negative to two positive in County A, thirty-four negative to seventeen positive in County B).



The major criticisms voiced generally fell into the categories of (1) the need for more careful screening of applicants for assistance, (2) the desirability of having recipients work in some manner, and (3) criticisms of specific programs, e.g., food stamps, aid to families with dependent children, or assistance to the elderly. Positive remarks were most often either general comments ("department is pretty good" or "it's all good for something") or were directed at specific people in the department.

In summary, the rural citizens sampled in the two counties in this study view the county social service agencies in a somewhat paradoxical fashion. On the one hand they are critical of certain persons getting financial assistance (i.e., something for nothing), and of what they see as inequities in the administration of social services. On the other hand, they see the agencies as fulfilling specific needs within the existing exigencies of local life in their communities.

#### B) THE VIEW OF OPINION LEADERS

Taken collectively, the educators, health personnel, local politicians, law officers, lawyers, and clergymen share the citizens' position of a moderate, but clearly qualified, support for the county social service agency. In their judgement of the policy and personnel of the county agencies, the opinion leaders sampled in both rural counties most often expressed "adequate" evaluations. In County A, personnel were given a somewhat higher proportion of favorable evaluations than policy; however, the high proportion of "unsure" responses (from 19.6% to 31.4%) reflects a self-professed unawareness of the adequacy of the county social service agencies on the part of individuals in social and occupational positions that actively deal with substantial portions of the agency's target population (see Table 2a & b).

Table 2c presents the responses of these opinion leaders to a question concerning whose criteria, their own or the county agency's, they prefer in deciding whether an individual should be referred to the county department of social services. The results show the largest minority supporting the agency's standards concerning who should receive assistance, but with another large minority (slightly over one-third in each county) opting to employ their own criteria. And once again, a fairly sizable group in each county (16.1% and 24.4%) report their indecision on the issue. Only moderate support for the social service agencies are indicated among opinion leaders, with considerable misgiving expressed over the county agency's judgement about who should be receiving assistance

TABLE 2

OPINION LEADERS EVALUATIONS OF AGENCY POLICIES AND PERSONNEL,  
PERCEPTION OF ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA, AND PERCEIVED EASE OF ACCESS  
TO RECEIPT OF SOCIAL SERVICES BY COUNTY

<u>A. POLICY EVALUATION</u>	COUNTY A (N = 112)	COUNTY B (N = 86)
I would refer more people to the County Social Services Department but my experience has been that the policies of the Department are inadequate.	Inadequate -28.6% (32)	31.4% (27)
	Adequate - -45.5% (51)	41.8% (36)
	Unsure - -22.3% (25)	25.6% (22)
	Did Not Answer - - 3.6% (4)	1.2% (1)
 <u>B. PERSONNEL EVALUATION</u>		
I would refer more people to the County Social Services Department but my experience has been that the people who work there are less capable than they should be.	Inadequate -17.9% (20)	25.6% (22)
	Adequate - -58.9% (66)	43.0% (37)
	Unsure - -19.6% (22)	31.4% (27)
	Did Not Answer - - 3.6% (4)	0.0% (0)
 <u>C. CRITERIA FOR ELIGIBILITY</u>		
I prefer to use my own standards rather than the guidelines of the agency in judging whether a person should be referred to the County Social Services Department.	Strongly Disagree or Disagree -44.6% (50)	40.7% (35)
	Strongly Agree or Agree- -33.9% (38)	33.7% (29)
	Unsure - -16.1% (18)	24.4% (21)
	Did Not Answer - - 5.4% (6)	1.2% (1)
 <u>D. EASE OF ACCESS TO SERVICES</u>		
In general, in your professional opinion, how difficult is it for people who qualify for the services offered by the County Social Services Department to actually get those services?	Very Difficult or Difficult-19.6% (22)	16.3% (14)
	Easy or Very Easy - -58.9% (66)	62.9% (54)
	In my Opinion, Too Easy -12.5% (14)	17.0% (15)
	Did Not Answer - - 8.9% (10)	3.8% (3)

In evaluating the degree of difficulty persons experience in acquiring assistance, a majority of opinion leaders believe it is easy or very easy to obtain help from the county agency (see Table 2d). Indeed, an additional number of people (12.5% in County A, 17% in County B) reported that it was "too easy" for persons to receive assistance. Less than one in five in both counties felt that it was difficult or very difficult.

Table 2 shows that two patterns emerge in the data: (1) moderate support for the personnel and policies of the county social services agency, including some support for the criteria used in defining who is eligible and the perception that eligible persons have little difficulty obtaining help; and (2) a smaller but substantial proportion of opinion leaders who view personnel and policies as inadequate, over one-third who prefer their own standards for deciding who deserves assistance to those of the county agency, and from ten to twenty percent who think it too easy for persons to acquire assistance. While the specific concerns of members of these occupational groups who work directly with people are different from those of the "person-on-the-street", a similar bi-modal pattern of attitudes and evaluations is present which includes moderate support of the county social services agency coupled with substantial criticism.

#### C) COMPARISONS BETWEEN CITIZENS AND OPINION LEADERS

To further assess the views of rural citizens and opinion leaders, a number of comparisons were drawn concerning (1) specific evaluations of the county agencies, (2) general attitudes toward social services, and (3) knowledge of social services. More specifically, respondents were asked to what extent the county agency provided "essential services", and if the agency was "too liberal" in providing assistance. Attitudes were elicited regarding the relative permanence of social services as a societal institution, the extent to which recipients are personally responsible for their circumstances, and if assistance should be denied to families with more than two illegitimate children. Knowledgeability was appraised regarding the topics of the agency's source of income and the existing extent of welfare fraud; individuals were also asked if they personally desired more information about social services. This portion of the findings draws comparisons between citizens and opinion leaders regarding these issues as well as providing further comparisons among those occupational groups.<sup>3</sup>

As shown in Table 3, larger percentages of sampled opinion leaders than citizens indicated that the county agencies provide essential services to the community; in County B, however, the difference is negligible. In all instances, sizable majorities (from 69.3% to 80.0%)

report that their county agencies are providing needed services. This finding is consistent with earlier results of this study suggesting the existence of moderate support for certain aspects of social service programs. The differences between the general citizenry and those in service occupations are minimal, which suggests that either citizens are more supportive of social services or "opinion leaders" less supportive than popular stereotypes would suggest.<sup>4</sup>

TABLE 3  
PERCENTAGE INDICATING THAT COUNTY  
SOCIAL SERVICE AGENCIES PROVIDE ESSENTIAL SERVICES

	<u>COUNTY A</u>			
	<u>YES</u>	<u>NO</u>	<u>DON'T KNOW OR UNSURE</u>	
A.				
Citizens	69.3% (95)	8.8% (12)	21.9% (30)	(N = 137)
All Opinion Leaders	80.0% (88)	3.6% (4)	16.4% (18)	(N = 110)
$\chi^2 = 4.343$ , not significant at .01 level, df = 2				
B.				
Educators	71.9% (23)	3.1% (1)	25.0% (8)	(N = 32)
Medical or Mental Health	78.6% (11)	14.3% (2)	7.1% (1)	(N = 14)
Political Officials	76.2% (16)	0.0% (0)	23.8% (5)	(N = 21)
Law Enforcement	80.0% (8)	0.0% (0)	10.0% (1)	(N = 9*)
Lawyers	100.0% (6)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	(N = 6)
Clergy	88.2% (15)	0.0% (0)	11.8% (2)	(N = 17)
<u>COUNTY B</u>				
A.				
Citizens	73.6% (103)	8.6% (12)	17.8% (25)	(N = 140)
All Opinion Leaders	74.4% (63)	0.0% (0)	24.4% (21)	(N = 85)
$\chi^2 = 8.419$ , not significant at .01 level, df = 2				
B.				
Educators	66.2% (28)	0.0% (0)	33.8% (14)	(N = 42)
Medical or Mental Health	80.0% (4)	0.0% (0)	20.0% (1)	(N = 5)
Political Officials	----	----	----	(N = 2)
Law Enforcement	94.1% (17)	0.0% (0)	5.9% (1)	(N = 18)
Lawyers	----	----	----	(N = 1)
Clergy	56.3% (9)	0.0% (0)	43.7% (7)	(N = 16)

\*One (10%) law enforcement official did not respond to this item.

When asked to respond to the statement "The County Department of Social Services is too liberal in its interpretation of rules and regulations about giving out public welfare", a slightly larger proportion of citizens than opinion leaders agreed with this statement in County B; but in County A, more opinion leaders agreed with this view than citizens and did so by a statistically significant margin of almost three to one (see Table 4).<sup>5</sup>

TABLE 4

PERCENTAGE REPORTING THAT COUNTY SOCIAL SERVICE AGENCIES  
ARE "TOO LIBERAL" IN DISSEMINATION OF SERVICES

A.	<u>COUNTY A</u>	<u>COUNTY B</u>
Citizens	19.0% (26)	(52.9% (74)
All Opinion Leaders	45.5% (51)	43.0% (37)
	$\chi^2 = 20.435$ , significant at .01 level, df = 1	$\chi^2 = 2.031$ , not significant at .01 level, df = 1
B.	<u>COUNTY A</u>	<u>COUNTY B</u>
Educators	40.6% (13)	40.5% (17)
Medical and Mental Health	42.9% (6)	40.0% (2)
Political Officials	38.1% (8)	-----
Law Enforcement	30.0% (3)	78.9% (15)
Lawyers	83.3% (5)	-----
Clergy	58.8% (10)	18.8% (3)

Turning to more general attitudes toward social services, respondents were asked about their perceptions of the relative permanence of social services as an institutionalized practice in American society. When asked "Do you think social service agencies are a temporary part of society or are they here to stay?", large majorities (from 86.9% to 95.5%) indicated that they accept social services as a permanent institutional pattern (see Table 5a). In County A, almost three times the proportion of citizens to opinion leaders viewed welfare as a temporary (13.1% of citizens, 4.5% of opinion leaders); in County B, about the same proportion of citizens and opinion leaders saw welfare as a temporary part of society. Contrary to Osgood's (forthcoming) inferences regarding the perceived permanence of social services programs in rural communities, these findings indicate that

rural residents view social services as an institutionalized component of their community, rather than as a residual or temporary development.<sup>6</sup>

TABLE 5  
 PERCENTAGE VIEWING SOCIAL SERVICES AS  
 A TEMPORARY ASPECT OF SOCIETY

A.	<u>COUNTY A</u>	<u>COUNTY B</u>
Citizens	13.1% (18)	11.4% (16)
All Opinion Leaders	4.5% (5)	11.6% (10)
	$\chi^2 = 5.444$ , not significant at .01 level, df = 1	$\chi^2 = .002$ , not significant at .01 level, df = 1
B.	<u>COUNTY A</u>	<u>COUNTY B</u>
Educators	3.1% (1)	16.7% (7)
Medical and Mental Health	0.0% (0)	20.0% (1)
Political Officials	14.3% (3)	-----
Law Enforcement	0.0% (0)	15.8% (3)
Lawyers	0.0% (0)	-----
Clergy	5.9% (1)	0.0% (0)

When addressing the issue of the characteristics of "typical" or "average" welfare recipients, individual deficiencies were imputed to recipients by a larger proportion of citizens in County A, and a larger proportion of opinion leaders in County B (see Table 6b). Only in the case of the opinion leaders in County A did the proportion holding a negative view of recipients dip below a majority. Almost two-thirds of the opinion leaders in County B held a negative picture of recipients.<sup>7</sup>

TABLE 6  
 PERCENTAGE IMPUTING INDIVIDUAL DEFICIENCIES TO  
 RECIPIENTS OF SOCIAL SERVICES

A.	<u>COUNTY A</u>	<u>COUNTY B</u>
Citizens	51.1% (70)	56.4% (79)
All Opinion Leaders	42.0% (47)	66.3% (57)
	$\chi^2 = 2.043$ , not sig- nificant at .01 level, df = 1	$\chi^2 = 2.118$ , not sig- nificant at .01 level, df = 1
B.	<u>COUNTY A</u>	<u>COUNTY B</u>
Educators	40.6% (13)	81.0% (34)
Medical and Mental Health	35.7% (5)	60.0% (3)
Political Officials	47.6% (10)	-----
Law Enforcement	60.0% (6)	47.4% (9)
Lawyers	33.3% (2)	-----
Clergy	41.2% (7)	50.0% (8)

Previous findings published by Carter, et. al. (1973) and Kallen and Miller (1971) indicates that aid to families with illegitimate children is an issue about which particularly strong opinions are held. When asked to respond to the statement "Financial assistance should be denied to families in which more than two illegitimate children have been born," slightly more than one-half of the opinion leaders in both counties agreed; less than half of the citizens sampled in County A and almost 60.0% of the citizens sampled in County B agreed with this statement (see Table 7). Differences between the two groups were not statistically significant in either county studied.<sup>8</sup>

To assess the knowledgeability of respondents in the area of welfare practices, a series of true/false items were included in the data collection instruments. The two items with greatest face validity concerned the source of the county agency's income<sup>9</sup> and the extent of existing "welfare fraud."<sup>10</sup> About 20% of the citizens in both counties answered each of these questions correctly; opinion leaders had significantly higher percentages of correct answers, but a majority answered correctly only in the case of the source of finances

TABLE 7

PERCENTAGE SUPPORTING THE STATEMENT THAT

"FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE SHOULD BE DENIED TO FAMILIES  
IN WHICH MORE THAN TWO ILLEGITIMATE CHILDREN HAVE  
BEEN BORN."

A.	<u>COUNTY A</u>	<u>COUNTY B</u>
Citizens	47.4% (65)	58.8% (82)
All Opinion Leaders	52.7% (59)	52.3% (45)
	$X^2 = .665$ , not signi- ficant at .01 level, df = 1	$X^2 = .831$ , not signi- ficant at .01 level, df = 1
B.	<u>COUNTY A</u>	<u>COUNTY B</u>
Educators	53.1% (17)	50.0% (21)
Medical or Mental Health	35.7% (5)	60.0% (3)
Political Officials	71.4% (15)	-----
Law Enforcement	80.0% (8)	57.9% (11)
Lawyers	0.0% (0)	-----
Clergy	58.8% (10)	56.2% (9)

question in County A. Other knowledgeability items, not reported here because of their possible ambiguity, resulted in even lower percentages of correct answers. Accurate information about social service practices does not seem to be part of the belief system of either citizens or opinion leaders in the rural counties studied here. While opinion leaders are somewhat better informed than the citizenry, lack of information is the rule rather than the exception.<sup>11</sup>

When asked if they personally desired more information about social services, large minorities of citizens indicated in the affirmative in both counties studied here, and large majorities (75.0% and 91.9%) of the opinion leaders desired more knowledge. The largest percentages of expressed desires for more information came from educators and the clergy (see Table 9).



TABLE 8  
 PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS GIVING CORRECT ANSWERS  
 TO QUESTIONS REGARDING COUNTY AGENCY'S SOURCE  
 OF FINANCES AND EXTENT OF CLIENT FRAUD

	<u>SOURCE OF FINANCES</u>		<u>EXTENT OF CLIENT FRAUD</u>	
	<u>COUNTY A</u>	<u>COUNTY B</u>	<u>COUNTY A</u>	<u>COUNTY B</u>
A.				
Citizens	21.2% (29)	20.7% (29)	22.6% (31)	20.7% (29)
All Opinion Leaders	62.5% (70)	44.2% (38)	40.2% (45)	25.6% (22)
	$X^2 = 34.302$ , significant at .01 level, df = 1	$X^2 = 14.062$ , significant at .01 level, df = 1	$X^2 = 8.925$ , not significant at .01 level, df = 1	$X^2 = .726$ , not significant at .01 level, df = 1
B.				
Educators	50.0% (16)	35.7% (15)	25.0% (8)	21.9% (9)
Medical and Mental Health	64.3% (9)	40.0% (2)	57.2% (8)	0.0% (0)
Political Officials	76.2% (16)	-----	42.9% (9)	-----
Law Enforcement	60.0% (6)	42.1% (8)	30.0% (3)	21.1% (4)
Lawyers	66.7% (4)	-----	50.0% (3)	-----
Clergy	47.1% (8)	62.5% (10)	35.3% (6)	43.8% (7)

TABLE 9

PERCENTAGE PERSONALLY DESIRING MORE  
KNOWLEDGE OF SOCIAL SERVICES

A.	<u>COUNTY A</u>	<u>COUNTY B</u>
Citizens	36.5% (50)	45.0% (63)
All Opinion Leaders	75.0% (84)	91.9% (79)
	$X^2 = 36.673$ , significant at .01 level, df = 1	$X^2 = 50.227$ , significant at .01 level, df = 1
B.	<u>COUNTY A</u>	<u>COUNTY B</u>
Educators	81.3% (26)	95.2% (40)
Medical and Mental Health	57.2% (8)	80.0% (4)
Political Officials	85.7% (18)	-----
Law Enforcement	60.0% (6)	84.2% (16)
Lawyers	50.0% (3)	-----
Clergy	82.4% (14)	93.8% (15)

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

The research reported here adds to the as yet small body of research that shows public attitudes toward social service agencies as being considerably less critical and more equivocal than suggested by the common assumptions held by social workers and others. The picture that seems to be emerging is one of an ambivalent and sometimes paradoxical blend of support for the existence of social service agencies and their more obviously humanitarian efforts, and considerable concern about unfair distribution of services and benefits. The present study shows that this pattern also exists in rural areas which are often seen as hotbeds of anti-welfare sentiment. In terms of both attitudes and knowledgeability, this study suggests that the lack of informed opinion and accurate knowledge pervades, rather than a coherent conservative philosophy dictating non-supportive views toward welfare practices.

There is little evidence, too, indicating that public views toward social services are permanent.

The evidence that views are elastic, that they change according to local circumstances or with improved communication, indicates a healthy open-mindedness that cannot be ignored... Attitudes toward the poor and the welfare system are not firmly fixed but are subject to change when more or better data is provided (Carter, et. al., 1973: 33-35).

If the public image of social services is indeed somewhat elastic at this time, the complex questions surrounding the issue of how to influence these views are obviously open to discussion. The present research suggests that the current values and perceptions of members of other "helping professions" and quasi-professions, at least in rural areas, are certainly not overwhelmingly on the social worker's side in his or her efforts to develop supportive public opinion. Indeed, in one of the rural counties studied in this research, the opinion leaders as a group were more critical than the general citizenry regarding how the county social service agency administered its programs (see Table 9a). In a more general comparison between the general public and opinion leaders, differences in attitudes and knowledgeability were typically in the anticipated direction (i.e., opinion leaders more supportive and better informed than the general public), but of a relatively small magnitude. Firm conclusions about particular occupational and avocational groups are not warranted in light of the absence of any concrete pattern of criticisms being voiced by any specific group(s) in either rural county studied here; nor did any group of opinion leaders emerge as being particularly supportive of the county social service agencies. At the same time, however, among opinion leaders in both counties, a majority indicated a desire for more information about social service programs. Whether this request for more information is sincere or is merely the most socially desirable response for opinion leaders to provide, it is nonetheless an opportunity to inaugurate information programs with designated staff to implement such programs to help improve relations among the helping professions and between the agency and general public.

Turning to the citizens interviewed in this research, fully three-fifths of those interviewed in both counties reported that they personally were acquainted with recipients of social services; this finding is highly consistent with earlier findings by Ogren (1973: 102) and Carter, et. al. (1973: 6). This indicates the presence of existing

interpersonal relationships among the general public upon which public information and public relations programs could be built.<sup>12</sup> Further, these public relations efforts might be more successful to the extent that they involve an emphasis on social workers rather than agency policies. Ogren (1973: 102) concluded that individuals in her study were more willing to evaluate welfare in general than to pass judgement on recipients of assistance. Similarly, in the present study policies were criticized more frequently than were social service personnel. This tendency to criticize "rules and regulations" or the more remote federal and state decision makers rather than local personalities might account, at least in part, for the consistent mixture of support and reprobation voiced by both citizens and opinion leaders.

Effective public relations programs could no doubt modify the public's perception of social service agencies and social workers. But more than mere propaganda must be involved in such public information efforts. Adopting "Madison Avenue" techniques to sell the social services product is not, in the present authors' view, an implication stemming from this and related research. Rather, efforts to evaluate and improve current programs should be coupled with meaningful public information efforts. Social services personnel must assume the lion's share of any attempt to raise their own image in the public eye and to provide more accurate information to the public; yet hand in hand with this goes the responsibility to improve policies and practices when necessary in such a manner that accurate information brings with it favorable evaluations.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. This difference in return rate reflects different strategies used in administering the mailed questionnaires in the two counties. In County A letters were sent to those in the sample, prior to sending the questionnaire, to encourage their cooperation. This was not done in County B. More importantly, follow-up phone calls were made in County A, when possible, to further solicit cooperation. In County B, lack of time and finances made this technique impossible. It was the judgement of the authors and local resource persons that this research design would maximize the return rate among respondents who were sent questionnaires, and minimize the interviewing time spent in the field. To the best of the authors' knowledge, in no instance in either county were citizens who were interviewed later sent questionnaires, nor were the respondents to

the questionnaire aware that interviews were being conducted in the community.

2. Adopting "opinion leader" as a conceptual category, in spite of the difficulties which it introduces for descriptive purposes, does re-open some interesting theoretical issues addressed by students of community organization and personal influence. If in fact more highly educated professionals and members of allied occupations and avocations are viewed as credible sources of information and beliefs by the wider population in rural areas, one would expect some similarity between the views of such "opinion leaders" and the general citizenry. Further, this should be the case whether or not such opinion leaders demonstrate support for social service agencies. Thus, the interrelationships among social service agency personnel and other professional, quasi-professional and political figures in a community could have considerable impact upon both the actual effectiveness of the agency and the manner in which the public perceives the agency. While this may all be quite obvious, there has been little systematic research which explores the complex relationships among social workers, opinion leaders and the public, especially in rural areas. While data from the research reported here are insufficient to adequately test hypotheses related to this type of speculation, they are suggestive of over-all patterns in the counties studied.
3. In this section of the findings, in addition to comparing the knowledgeability and expressed attitude responses of the "general citizens" with the "public opinion leaders," comparisons among the various occupations and avocations are also presented. However, due to the small sample size and consequent small cell frequencies, no significance tests are presented. Further, textual commentary will be relegated to footnotes and is intended as highly tentative and probably not generalizable to other rural communities.
4. When comparing specific occupational categories, in County A lawyers and clergymen were most in agreement that the county agency provided essential services, while in County B the law enforcement officials and health personnel recorded the highest percentage of affirmative responses. None of the occupational groups in County B were willing to report that the county agency was not offering needed help to the community, while a small percentage in County A, primarily health personnel, reported negative responses to this question.

5. When comparing occupational groups, highest percentages of agreement with this statement came from lawyers and clergymen in County A, and law enforcement officers in County B (see Table 4b).
6. When comparing the occupational groups regarding this issue, Table 5b shows very little variability among the various occupational categories in either county.
7. Table 6b shows that educators and school personnel hold a particularly high proportion of negative stereotypes of recipients while in County A, law enforcement officials, and to a lesser extent political officeholders ascribe individual weaknesses to welfare recipients.
8. Table 7 shows that particularly high proportions of law enforcement personnel and political officials agreed that assistance should be denied families with more than two illegitimate children. No single occupational group in County B stood out as holding a much greater consensus than others regarding negative attitudes toward financial assistance to families with illegitimate children.
9. The item was worded "Most of the money spent by the \_\_\_\_\_ County Department of Social Services comes from local taxes."; this is a false statement.
10. This item read "Statewide statistics estimate that approximately 25% of all welfare recipients defraud the department," this considerably exaggerated figure is false.
11. In County A, educators and clergymen were more often misinformed about the specific factual issues assessed in this study, while in County B, educators were slightly less well-informed than other occupational groups (see Table 8b)
12. With regard to the potential for public relations programs, Hollister, et. al., suggest that there is considerable potential for educating social services personnel and media personnel concerning issues and skills relevant to the inter-play between journalistic efforts of all kinds and human services concerns (Hollister, et. al. 1976).

## REFERENCES

- Berelson, Bernard and Gary Steiner  
1964 Human Behavior: An Inventory of Scientific Findings.  
New York: Harcourt, Brace and World.
- Carter, Genevieve, Lillene Fifield and Hannah Shields  
1973 Public Attitudes Toward Welfare: An Opinion Poll.  
University of Southern California: Regional Research Institute  
in Social Welfare.
- Hollister, David C., David Bast and Richard Dolezal  
1976 "Public welfare and the news media: a regional study."  
Pp. 109-119 in Leon H. Ginsberg (ed.), Social Work in  
Rural Communities: A Book of Readings. New York: Council  
on Social Work Education.
- Kallen, David J. and Dorothy Miller  
1971 "Public attitudes toward welfare." Social Work 16:83-90.
- Ogren, Evelyn H.  
1973 "Public opinions about public welfare." Social Work 18:  
101-108.
- Osgood, Mary H.  
1977 "Attitudes toward Welfare, Rural and Urban." Forthcoming in  
Social Work.