Down on the Farm: Pathways of Resilience for Rural Youth

Farm life still holds its appeal as an ideal setting to raise children, even though few Americans have experienced it for themselves. A hundred years ago most Americans lived on farms, but only 1 in 50 do so today. Yet we still wax nostalgic about the family farm, where parents and children work together throughout the day raising crops and animals. Extended family members live nearby and will pitch in when needed, and children learn social roles in tight-knit communities where everyone knows and cares about each other.

But the family farm has been under assault in recent decades, as global competition and increasing production costs threaten the viability of the family operation. Small farmers have been forced off the land, selling out to corporate farms. As one Kansas observer noted, “tractors and combines have gotten bigger over the years, as have the farms...and the farmers themselves have become almost as scarce as white-tailed jackrabbits.”

Concerned by the years of economic stress, Rand Conger and Glenn Elder launched a study of Iowa farm families caught in the farm crisis of the 1980’s. Their initial study focused on the responses of family members to chronic economic difficulty. Observations showed that, indeed, the economic distress of these families undermined family functioning, and was linked to lower academic achievement and increased risk taking among the youth. Results of this study are summarized in “Hard Times on the Farm”, available in The Communicator July 1999 on the web at www.uidaho.edu/fcs/extension.

Although many young people did show negative effects of the farm economy, the investigators were equally impressed with the young people in the study who weathered the economic storm successfully. Family stress was great for these young people as well, and many were forced off their farms into neighboring communities. Yet these youth showed resilience in the face of hardship, earning good grades at school and the esteem of their peers as well. In Children of the Land, Elder and Conger ask what factors promoted successful outcomes for these beleaguered young people. That is, what was it about these teenagers and their family, community, and school that supported them in the face of such adversity? To what extent did the ties to the land associated with family farming cushion them through these difficult times?

Ties to the Land

To look at these questions, Elder and Conger returned to their sample of Iowa youth in 1989, comparing adjustment to economic stress as a function of family ties to the land. Full-time farming families were deemed to have the strongest ties to the land. Intermediate in connection to the land were part-time farming families and recently displaced farm families, which were combined into a group labeled “farm-tied.” Nonfarm families in the same rural communities were the least connected to the land. The study followed youth from each of these family situations from the 7th grade through the high school years. Investigators examined the family and community resources available to young people as well as the teenagers’ accomplishments.

Farm kids distinguished themselves in comparison to farm-tied and nonfarm rural youth in several ways. Reflecting the priorities of farm families, farm youth were lower than the other two groups in materialism. They also rated their chores at home as more important, noting with pride that their families...
relied on them to do their part. They showed stronger ties to their parents than the other teens, especially their fathers. Farm youth were similarly closer than the other groups to their grandparents. Finally, they were more extensively involved in school, community and church events, where they tended to take on leadership roles.

Thus, farm teens were well connected to both family and community and took on significant responsibilities in those two important arenas. As we might expect from youth so well engaged in the network of support around them, farm youth excelled in their own attainments. They were the highest of the three groups in academic achievement, and were also the most successful socially.

If farm kids were doing so well, how were the other rural youth faring? Young people from non-farm families were the lowest of the groups on both community and family connection. In family and extended family relationships, as well as in community, church and school events, nonfarm youth were marginalized from the opportunities farm teens thrived on. Research in recent decades suggests that these are just the activities that benefit young people so much in building a sense of confidence and mastery. These activities also integrate young people into a community network of caring adults that can support them when the going gets tough. Teen outcomes in nonfarm families show the effects of their family disengagement, with lower levels of academic achievement and less success and recognition among peers.

Farm-tied youth generally fell between the two other groups in most measures of the study. Part-time and displaced farm families have many of the same roots in the community as full-time farmers, going back several generations in many cases. Some of the young people from displaced farm families were especially impressive in their resolve. They lost a beloved way of life when their family farms were sold and they moved to the nearby small town. However, many showed a determination to make a contribution to community and family through participation in clubs and organizations, frequently taking leadership roles. This group was also especially resourceful in generating income through paid labor so they could afford to participate in such opportunities.

What’s so Good about Farm Life?

These are striking differences in opportunity and outcome for rural youth as a function of family ties to the land. Just what is it about farm life that affords such advantage? And what is it about nonfarm families and youth that leave them as bystanders to the opportunity around them?

It’s tempting to conclude that these are nothing but social class differences. Much research does show that poverty level family income can constrain opportunities for children and youth. But Elder and Conger look beyond family income to identify other attributes that account for such disparity among youth in the same community. Their analyses show five themes of special relevance to successfully navigating the adolescent years:

**Intergenerational Investments:** Farm families have several generations of investment in the land and community in which they live. They have a strong sense of connection with the local community and know the people in it, having grown up with most of them. Their grandparents and great-grandparents most likely knew the same families as well.

**Family Connections:** Farm youth have strong family ties. They spend more time in activities with their parents, especially their fathers, and less time hanging out with peers than nonfarm youth. The chores they complete on a regular basis also connect them to family, and underscore the role they play in meeting family needs. Finally, farm children are more likely to live close to grandparents than nonfarm children, another source of love and encouragement. Elder and Conger find this to be “the most striking developmental feature of an agrarian lifestyle...the generalized press of parents and grandparents toward constructive activities in the household, farm operation, and broader community.”

**Networks of Social Engagement:** Farm parents are actively engaged in community life. As one farmer put it, “Pam and I have raised our three children and participated in the local school, church, and community projects. Ball games and recitals, harvests and hogs have been our way of life.” As a result, farm parents involve their children in groups and opportunities appropriate to their interests. Fur-
thermore, farm children see the extensive community involvement of their parents and naturally want to do likewise. According to Elder and Conger, “No factor was more predictive of students who participate in athletics and other school activities than the community ties of parents.”

Mastery Experiences: Farm life offers many opportunities for children to develop feelings of mastery, starting with their first chores on the farm. Children learn early that people are counting on them to do their best. Participation in community activities further develops new skills and abilities. Achievement at school fits naturally into this context, with farm youth accustomed to handling challenges well.

Caring Adults: Farm communities provide an extensive network of caring adults who support young people in difficult times. Not only do farm families know each other, but also the families have been intertwined for generations. Adults in the community have known the children since they were born, and they want them to succeed.

Marginalized Youth

If farm families were so successful at providing a strong network of support to their children, what were other families doing differently? The most significant feature of nonfarm families was social isolation. Nearly all farm families had strong ties to the community, but almost half of nonfarm parents had only weak community ties. These parents had less education than farm parents and were more recent arrivals to the community. Nonfarm parents also traveled longer distances to work, cutting into time available for both family and community. Studies show that each 10 minutes spent commuting to work reduces community engagement by 10 percent. The families also lived farther from school, making it harder for family participation in school events. (See “Connecting with Others” in The Communicator December 2000 on the web at www.uidaho.edu/fcs/extension for more on the role of community engagement in quality of life.)

When parents are disengaged from the community, their children become marginalized as well. They see little of their parents when they are out in the community, and the other adults they interact with are people they don’t know. These young people are free to spend aimless time in peer-oriented activity with little or no adult supervision. Some teenagers may be able to handle such independence, but others find their way into early sexuality, drug and alcohol use, and delinquency.

In sum, Elder and Conger find that rural youth are not a homogeneous group, but rather that family occupational patterns promote different opportunities for young people. Ties to the land protect farm youth within a strong network of caring. According to the authors, “Farming organizes life differently for children than do nonfarm occupations, and growing up on a farm has consequences for skills, social attachments, and values that can persist through life.”

The advantages to farm youth so evident in the study persisted after they graduated from high school. Checking up on progress of the young people a year later, Conger and Elder found nearly all farm youth in higher education, with 3/5 in 4 year colleges, and 1/3 in 2 year college programs. Almost half of land-tied youth were in 4-year college programs, but only 27 percent of nonfarm teenagers were similarly engaged.

In sum, Elder and Conger’s study shows that:

- Farm youth are generally more successful academically and socially than other rural youth.
- Strong links to family and other caring adults protect farm youth as they move into the independence of the teenage years.
- Parental engagement in community life is a strong predictor of youth involvement in extracurricular activities, which in turn promotes academic and social success for young people.
- Rural nonfarm youth are often marginalized with weaker links to family and community.
- Such strong effects of parental community engagement on opportunities for their children should be a wake up call to program leaders in youth development. Drawing uninvolved parents into activities and events may be critical to efforts to extend opportunity to all youth.


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Web Resources for Rural Communities


www.nal.usda.gov/ric Rural Information Center: Providing information and referral to those working to maintain the vitality of America’s rural areas.

www.rupri.org Rural Policy Research Institute: Research, analyses and information on challenges, needs, and opportunities facing rural America.

www.cfra.org Center for Rural Affairs: Research, education, advocacy and service for a strong future for rural America.

www.nationalruralnetwork.org National Rural Network: Creating awareness and understanding of public policies, which enhance the viability of rural America.

www.rurdev.usda.gov Rural Development Online: USDA website featuring information about grants and opportunities in rural development.

www.usda.gov/nass National Agricultural Statistics Service: The USDA offers statistical information, including links to state agencies with local rural data.

www.4w.com/heartland Heartland Center for Leadership Development: Leadership development in rural communities, and practical resources to address rural concerns.

www.ruralurban.org Strengthening the Rural-Urban Connection: Addresses concerns of rural and urban community builders, with in-depth analyses and research reviews.

www.rurdev.usda.gov/nrdp National Rural Development Partnership: An organization of state rural development councils bringing together resources to address rural issues.

www.nrharural.org National Rural Health Association: A forum for the exchange of ideas, information and research to improve rural health.


http://extension.usu.edu/WRDC Western Rural Development Center: Presents research and analyses of rural issues in the western region.

http://ext.msstate.edu/srdc Southern Rural Development Center: Offers analyses on regional issues and information about grant opportunities in the southern region.

www.ag.iastate.edu/centers/rdev North Central Regional Center for Rural Development: Rural development research and education for the north central states.

www.cas.psu.edu/docs/casconf/nercrd/nercrd.html Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development: Rural policy and economic and family issues for the rural northeast.

For other useful websites, try The Local Government Guide to the Internet: Online Resources for Communities by P. Salant & C. Dearien (2000) TVA Rural Studies, University of Kentucky.

Source: Harriet Shaklee, Linda Fox, & Linda Webb, University of Idaho. Distributed at the AAFCS conference, Providence, RI.

www.uidaho.edu/fcs/extension

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