

7. Discussion and Recommendations

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Introduction

The purpose of this third iteration of the State of Rural Canada is to identify and evaluate rural data gaps, with a specific focus on topics prioritized by practitioners and CRRF members. Throughout the book, authors work to:

1. Identify data gaps, both broad and specific, discussing why these gaps are problematic and what the implications might be;
2. Summarize case studies in which a place or agency worked to address a data gap, what they did, the results, and lessons they learned; and
3. Identify recommendations for policy makers regarding the importance of addressing these and other data gaps, and how policy can support local efforts to address data gaps.

This final chapter of the book is intended to summarize

highlights and key themes of the chapters and case studies, as well as draw some conclusions and next steps for different audiences.

There are a range of challenges related to data utility, including its availability (e.g., it does not exist at all or at the appropriate scale), accessibility (e.g., its cost or location), the complexity of its analysis (e.g., requiring specialized expertise to interpret), and mobilization for a variety of audiences and issues (e.g., it is challenging to communicate). The location and capacity of users can influence what is most challenging locally, and what potential solutions can practically be realized.

All of these issues have real-world implications. For example, when writing grant applications, it can be a challenge to demonstrate that a problem exists in a community if the relevant data only exists at a larger scale (e.g., regional) or only in larger communities. Housing can

be a key example of this type of problem. Although the housing vacancy rate is an important statistic across the country, its utility for rural communities is limited because the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation publishes regular statistics on vacancy rates only for communities over 10,000 (CMHC, 2019).

Monitoring change or evaluating the impact of a program can also be challenging if data is not consistently collected over time and at the appropriate scale. Without it, practitioners are unable to establish a baseline and identify metrics to track use, impacts, and change. Often, the point at which a question becomes urgent leaves us with little or no time to collect data.

Evidence-based policy development and decision-making rely on more than just having high quality data. Decision-makers and practitioners at all levels require a fundamental understanding of the importance of data, the capacity to analyze and interpret it, and how to use it for program evaluation and planning.

Key Themes

The following are common themes found across the chapters and case studies:

- **Data means more than numbers.** Data includes both qualitative and quantitative information. Quantitative data in the form of concrete measurements and numbers is critically important. However, so too is qualitative data, including written or oral stories, dances, artifacts, and other information. The two types of data are not in competition, but complement each other.
- **A single type of data is rarely sufficient.** The challenges facing rural places are complicated. As a result, the data, policies, programs, and actions needed to address these challenges must be equally complex. Challenges and solutions also differ from place to place, meaning there can be no one-size-fits-all approach. To fully understand a unique issue requires synthesizing different types of data to support a thoughtful and integrated solution. Taking the time to identify and analyze all available types of data will result in more informed decisions and actions.
- **Data must be appropriate for the question asked or issue explored.** It is no surprise that each chapter and case study demonstrated different reasons why data and information are important and how they are, or could be, used. As stated in Chapter 4, *"Data is vital to set policy and to allocate resources; it serves as a planning tool, and acts as a road map for future direction."* Each author also demonstrates that it is critical to have the right data at the right scale.
- **How data is collected matters.** The approaches and processes used to collect and analyze data matter for it to be accurate and appropriate, as well as respectful of differing cultures and worldviews.
- **Equity issues are reflected in data.** One's geographical, political, and social circumstances matter when it comes to the existence, availability, ownership, access, and application of data. Differences are found within provinces and territories, between rural and urban regions, and across different types of rural places. Whether we are talking about the community, provincial/territorial, or federal level, the quality of life of rural residents is directly impacted by challenges with data. Broadband is an important example not only of the difference in services between rural and urban areas, but also of differences in data access. Canada's National Broadband Internet Service Availability Map lacks geographic detail in rural places, presenting a challenge for local planners and practitioners who must instead rely on anecdotal data.
- **Data makes a difference to policy and program outcomes.** When dependable data is collected, analyzed, and put to use, it can have an impact at any scale. For example, the publication of the Vital Signs report card in 2013 and 2018 for Prince Edward County, Ontario boosted local support for the community foundation to address local issues such as the lack of affordable housing, inadequate local transportation, and local food insecurity (Lorinc, 2019). Another example shows how new navigational data is reducing the cost of transportation in the north, using radar images of ice conditions for route planning (McGinnis, 2019).
- **Understanding change over time, or comparing jurisdictions or places, requires the ability to benchmark and track.** It is exceptionally challenging to accomplish this task in rural places without comprehensive repositories of data that are accessible and reliable. However, establishing baseline data and monitoring change over time is essential for understanding changes in a community or evaluating a program or policy.

Recommendations

Based on the key themes, and in addition to the advice offered throughout the individual chapters, we put forward the following recommendations aimed at everyone involved with rural data and decision-making:

1. **Build a better understanding of the importance and practical application of data in rural places.** Too often data is seen as academic and lacking practical application. By mobilizing success stories of innovative ways that rural places collect and apply data, we can

help others understand the importance of quality data and inspire creativity regarding how it can be used to address important issues. This includes engaging communities with data collection, drawing links to community needs and aspirations, and demonstrating how a better understanding, built on evidence, can help foster novel solutions. This also includes learning how to anticipate needs and asking the right questions, as well as developing metrics and collecting data to respond to these questions. In a world clouded by questions that can be manipulated to promote any answer, there must be a continuous commitment to critical analysis.

2. **Ensure consistent and longitudinal data in both qualitative and quantitative forms is collected and used.** No amount of quantitative assessment is sufficient to understand a whole problem or to develop an effective solution. This book highlights how non-statistical information is important for decision-making, as well as for planning and policy development. While qualitative data is often recognized as important, it is most often collected in single, one-off projects, making it challenging to track or compare over time. There are opportunities for the systematic collection of qualitative data to happen in different ways and at multiple levels. This includes everything from local practitioners collecting anecdotes about businesses during annual business walks (informal, face to face surveys of business owners) to provincial, territorial, or federal-scale efforts to consistently collect qualitative

data related to quality of life or community resilience over time. Both private and public funds are necessary to make these initiatives possible.

3. **Support local efforts and capacity-building. Not all data needs to be collected or analyzed at a national, provincial, or territorial level – some data will be collected or analyzed locally, for unique purposes.** Support from upper levels of government is needed to help rural communities develop capacity, including human capacity to identify, access, and analyze existing sources of data, as well as the capacity for communities to collect their own data. Resources, in the form of tools, technical assistance, and supports are critical, as are financial resources.
4. **Show rural data in regional, provincial, territorial, and federal data. Standardized metrics that are collected consistently in a replicable manner are important.** However, if we cannot see the rural story in these datasets, if it is obscured or dominated by urban areas, we cannot understand the needs, challenges, and opportunities that exist in rural places across Canada. This challenge requires the disaggregation of national, provincial, and territorial data to allow practitioners and scholars to see how important trends are reflected in rural and remote places. Where possible, these rural data sets should be publicly accessible and supported.



Conclusion

Gaps in all types of data are a pervasive issue across rural geography and topics. The impacts are felt by a wide variety of people, including local practitioners, municipal governments, policy-makers at the provincial, territorial, and federal levels, Indigenous peoples and governments, business and industry, and researchers. Regardless of how rural communities are defined, they are all impacted by data-related challenges.

This book not only identifies the challenges regarding rural data, it also provides examples of the potential strategies and solutions available to communities to help bridge these data gaps. These potential ways forward include both

short and long term strategies, and are occurring at both the community and regional scale. Pragmatically, with limited time and funds we all must make decisions and take action based on incomplete information. However, the examples throughout this book provide innovative, replicable examples in which rural places are doing more with less. The case studies throughout this book highlight how small communities are being creative and solving problems collaboratively to stay alive, sustainable, and relevant. While there are many different data needs, the collaborative efforts demonstrated within these case studies show the potential for shared benefits across different stakeholder groups. In a changing world that must adapt to environmental, social, and economic changes, this kind of innovative problem solving is imperative.

Chapter References

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