

# **The Delta Rural Poll**

**Research Report, 2003**

Prepared by:

Alan Barton, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor  
Division of Social Sciences  
Delta State University

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in collaboration with the

Center for Community and Economic Development  
Brent Hales, Ph.D., Director

## **RESEARCH REPORT, 2003: THE DELTA RURAL POLL**

### **Introduction**

The Delta Rural Poll was initiated in 2003 to collect data on social and demographic characteristics of residents of the Mississippi Delta. These data are primarily for use by researchers, policymakers, community leaders, and local organizations. The poll is sponsored and carried out by the Center for Community and Economic Development (CCED) at Delta State University (DSU). The first poll was completed in November, 2003. The principal investigators for this project are Dr. Alan Barton, assistant professor of sociology and community development in the Division of Social Sciences at DSU, and Dr. Brent Hales, director of the CCED.

### **Objectives**

As per the research proposal for this project, the Delta Rural Poll has the following objectives:

- (1) Collect annual data on social and demographic characteristics of Mississippi Delta residents, for use by researchers, policymakers, local communities, and others.
- (2) Strengthen ties between Delta State University and communities in the Mississippi Delta.
- (3) Provide Delta State University students and Delta residents with opportunities to learn about research techniques through experience.
- (4) Collaborate with other universities and researchers carrying out similar projects to develop a broad, comparable data-base on social and demographic characteristics of rural dwellers.

### **Summary of Activities, 2003**

We began preparing the Delta Rural Poll 2003 in the Spring of 2003. As this was the first poll, we were beginning from scratch. We began by surveying similar efforts elsewhere, and established a relationship with researchers at the University of Nebraska's Center for Applied Rural Innovation (CARI). CARI researchers conduct an annual poll, which has served as a model for the Delta Rural Poll. Dr. John Allen, the director of CARI, visited DSU during the spring and assisted with many aspects of preparing the poll.

Roshun Williams, a graduate student in the Community Development program, was selected as graduate assistant on this project and has assisted the principal investigators with various aspects of the poll.

Several meetings were held among DSU researchers during the spring to determine research methods, as well as themes and questions for the poll. We considered three methodological options: a mail survey (as is used in Nebraska), a telephone survey, and face-to-face interviews. After debating the benefits and drawbacks of each approach, three faculty members (including the principal investigator) visited the Social Science Research Center at Mississippi State University during the spring to gain insights on conducting a telephone survey. During this visit we inspected the Survey Research Unit and spoke with its director Dr. Wolfgang Frese about conducting telephone interviews. Following extensive discussions among the DSU faculty, it was decided that telephone interviews would be the best option for this survey. Furthermore, we decided that contracting data collection to MSU's Survey Research Unit would be the best option for this year. The Survey Research Unit is equipped to carry out such studies and has substantial experience in collecting data in the Mississippi Delta.

The DSU faculty determined that the topics for the 2003 poll would be technology use, health care, and education. These correspond to interests and on-going research conducted by faculty in the Division of Social Sciences.

A proposal was prepared and submitted to the DSU Institutional Review Board. The proposal was classified as exempt, which means that it is approved and data collection could begin.

During the summer of 2003, faculty members submitted potential questions for the various topic areas. These were consolidated, narrowed and refined to include in the final questionnaire. We also developed a series of questions to be included on each annual questionnaire. These collect data on general demographic characteristics (respondent's age, race, educational level, etc.), general sense of well-being, and employment trends.

Once the draft questionnaire was ready, it was pilot tested by the research assistant. She called randomly selected delta households and administered the questionnaire, noting any problems that respondents had in understanding the questions. Based on the results of the pilot test, several minor changes were made in the questionnaire.

The final questionnaire was submitted to the Survey Research Unit at MSU in September, 2003. The questionnaire was approved by MSU's IRB, and the poll was conducted during October and November, 2003. Telephone interviews were carried out in the following Mississippi counties: Bolivar, Coahoma, Humphreys, Issaquena, Leflore, Quitman, Sharkey, Sunflower, Tallahatchie, Tunica, and Washington. Respondents were selected using random digit dialing techniques, and the interviews took approximately 10 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

A press release was developed to announce the 2003 poll. This was distributed as the poll was ready to begin. This resulted in television and newspaper coverage of the poll, so Delta residents would have a better understanding of the purposes of the poll, and would be more willing to respond if they were chosen in the sample.

Results from the poll were returned in late November, 2003. A total of 809 interviews were completed, and returned as an SPSS data set. Researchers at DSU checked the data and made appropriate adjustments, weighting for underrepresented groups in the survey. The first report of results was released to the press on December 15, 2003.

### **Coordination with Other Rural Polls**

In addition to preparing and carrying out the Delta Rural Poll, the principal investigators have been coordinating with researchers conducting or planning similar polls in Nebraska, Utah, Iowa, Ohio, Texas, South Dakota and Oregon, to develop regional and/or national data analysis capacity across state polls. A series of conference calls were conducted to coordinate data collection times and techniques, to explore common themes, and to discuss analyzing data collected across states.

### **Future Activities**

Press and policy releases on the topical information, prepared by DSU faculty, will be released according to the following schedule: January 2004 (Health care), March 2004 (Technology use), May 2004 (Delta schools), and June 2004 (Employment). Focus group interviews will be conducted during the spring and summer of 2004 to collect qualitative information to supplement poll results, and to prepare the next Delta Rural Poll, scheduled for February, 2005.

A panel of researchers from various states has been proposed for the 2004 Rural Sociological Society Annual Meeting in August on methodology used in rural polls (Dr. Hales will participate), and another is in development on results from rural polls (Dr. Barton will participate).

## **Conclusion**

The first iteration of the Delta Rural Poll has been remarkably successful. We were able to collect a wealth of high-quality data on Delta residents, and these data will certainly prove very valuable to researchers and policymakers over the coming months. In addition, we have developed a protocol for conducting the poll which can be applied in future iterations, and we have established relationships with MSU and with researchers around the country that will assist us in moving forward with this project.