

DELTA RURAL POLL



Annual Report 2004

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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 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 faculty associate in the CCED, and Dr. Brent Hales, director of the CCED. Dr. Albert Nylander and Dr. John Green, both faculty associates in the CCED, also participated in the design and implementation of the 2003 Delta Rural Poll. Together, these four researchers formed the Faculty Committee for the 2003 poll.

Objectives

The research proposal for the Delta Rural Poll establishes the following objectives for the project:

- (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, 2004

The 2003 Delta Rural Poll annual survey was completed in November, 2003. The survey was conducted by the Survey Research Unit at Mississippi State University's Social Science Research Center (SSRC). The data were delivered to DSU researchers in December, 2003.

Enumerators completed interviews with 809 randomly selected respondents living in eleven Delta counties (Bolivar, Coahoma, Humphreys, Issaquena, Leflore, Quitman, Sharkey, Sunflower, Tallahatchie, Tunica, and Washington). Topics included technology use, attitudes about Delta schools, and health care. Further details on this poll can be found in the 2003 Annual Report.¹

During 2004, the Faculty Committee began analyzing the data from the 2003 Delta Rural Poll, and prepared reports and presentations, detailed below. Because some of the demographic variables were skewed, a weighting procedure was developed that weighted the gender and race variables by county, in line with the results from the 2000 U.S. Census.² The committee decided to collect qualitative data on education, to supplement the information on education in the annual survey. Several qualitative interviews were conducted during the summer and fall of 2004 with educators in the Mississippi Delta.

Graduate Assistants

Five graduate students in the Community Development program served as graduate assistants on the Delta Rural Poll project during 2004. Hearin Fellow Roshun Williams assisted the principal investigators with various aspects of the poll during the Spring of 2004. During the summer of 2004, Rebecca Kimport and Josh Stovall were employed as graduate assistants and worked on qualitative interviews. During the Fall of 2004, two Hearin Fellows worked on the Delta Rural Poll. Kim Proffit was the research assistant on this project, and Betty Moss assisted on interviews.

Institutional Review Board

An application for a continuing review was submitted to the DSU Institutional Review Board in July, 2004. The continuing review was granted for the 2004-05 year in December, 2004.

Press Releases

Following the general press release that was issued in December, 2003, another press release was sent out in February, 2004, to announce the results of analysis on the health care variables.

¹ This report is available on the World Wide Web at <[http://ntweb.deltastate.edu/vp_academic/abarton/Research/DRP/Delta Rural Poll, 2003 Report.pdf](http://ntweb.deltastate.edu/vp_academic/abarton/Research/DRP/Delta_Rural_Poll,_2003_Report.pdf)>.

² Details of the weighting procedure are described in the report *The 2003 Delta Rural Poll: History, Methods and Characteristics of the Sample*, by Alan Barton, available on the World Wide Web at <[http://ntweb.deltastate.edu/vp_academic/abarton/Research/DRP/Delta Rural Poll, Summary Report, Final.pdf](http://ntweb.deltastate.edu/vp_academic/abarton/Research/DRP/Delta_Rural_Poll,_Summary_Report,_Final.pdf)>.

A press release was prepared to announce the second annual survey, due to be conducted in late January, 2005. The press release will be issued prior to the initiation of data collection.

Press Coverage

The general press release issued in December, 2003, led to substantial press coverage in the first trimester of 2004. An article appeared in the *Bolivar Commercial* on January 23, and this was picked up by Associated Press and versions were reprinted in the Biloxi/Gulfport *Sun Herald* (January 26), and the Jackson *Clarion-Ledger* (January 27), among other newspapers in the state. *USA Today* featured the Delta Rural Poll in its “Across the USA” section on January 27, 2004. After the health care press release was issued in February, articles also appeared in the *Delta Business Journal* (February 2004) and the Clarksdale *Press-Register* (March 2, 2004).

Qualitative Interviews

The Delta Rural Poll is unique in that it combines quantitative and qualitative data collection. Beginning in the summer of 2004, the first cycle of qualitative data collection began. The Faculty Committee decided to focus qualitative interviews on education, to supplement information collected in the 2003 annual survey on this topic. An interview schedule was created, and locations were selected. The interviews concentrated on teachers and administrators at four Delta schools, two public and two private. Two community development graduate students assisted with the interviews.

Interviews continued into the fall, as another community development graduate student was hired to complete the interviews at the selected schools. Questions on education were also added to two focus groups with community members, conducted under the auspices of the Institute for Community-Based Research.

Publications Produced During 2004

Much of the Spring was spent organizing a publications series, under the auspices of the Center for Community and Economic Development, to issue topical papers using data from the Delta Rural Poll. Two series were established; one which features policy papers, and the other for research papers.

Two papers were issued in August, 2004. John Green authored a policy paper entitled *Access to Health Care in the Mississippi Delta: A Summary Report from the 2003 Delta Rural Poll*,

which was posted on the DRP website. A copy of this paper was also sent to many policy-makers in the Mississippi state government. Alan Barton issued a research paper entitled *The 2003 Delta Rural Poll: History, Methods and Characteristics of the Sample*, which documents the establishment of the DRP, describes the data collection methods, and summarizes results that characterize the randomly chosen sample of the population used in the 2003 survey.

Roshun Williams used data from the Delta Rural Poll to prepare her M.S. thesis, completed in July 2004. The title is "Access to Communication Technology Among Residents of the Mississippi Delta." Roshun is working on final revisions of her thesis and will assist on producing a policy paper on the topic as well.

Alan Barton issued a policy paper entitled *Employment and Quality of Life in the Mississippi Delta: A Summary Report from the 2003 Delta Rural Poll* in September, 2004. This paper summarizes baseline data on two topics that will be included in future annual surveys.

Public Presentations During 2004

Several public presentations featured data from the 2003 Delta Rural Poll. On March 11, 2004, Alan Barton gave a presentation to the DSU campus entitled "The Delta Rural Poll." The purpose of the presentation was to introduce the campus community to the DRP, and present some summary results from the first survey. About 30 faculty members and students attended this presentation.

Roshun Williams presented the results from her M.S. thesis in two venues. First, she spoke at the symposium organized by the DSU Community Development Students Organization entitled *Diversity in Community Development*, held April 16-17, 2004. Ms. Williams gave this presentation again in Waltham, MA, on a visit to Brandeis University to participate in a week-long program with Brandeis students studying sustainable international development.

John Green used data from the Delta Rural Poll to prepare a paper he gave at the *In the Shadows of Poverty: Strengthening the Rural Poverty Research Capacity of the South* conference, held in Memphis, TN from July 21–23, 2004. The title of Dr. Green's paper is "Underemployment, Poverty and Access to Health Care in the Mississippi Delta: A Community-Based Approach to Understanding Problems and Exploring Alternatives."

Alan Barton and Brent Hales organized two panel sessions at the *67th Annual Meeting of the Rural Sociological Society*, held in Sacramento, CA from August 12–15, 2004. Both presented papers during these panels as well. Dr. Hales organized the panel on *Methodologies of Polling in Rural Areas*, and presented a paper entitled “Delta Rural Poll: Methods for Successful Polling in Rural Areas.” Dr. Barton organized the panel on *Rural People and Rural Policy: Comparing Results from Rural Polls*, and presented his paper, entitled “Work and Well-Being in the Mississippi Delta.”

Alan Barton traveled to Biloxi, MS, from October 20-23, 2004, to present a paper entitled “Race and Expectations for Public Schools in the Mississippi Delta: Evidence from the Delta Rural Poll,” at the *30th Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Sociological Association*. This paper included preliminary results from a paper Dr. Barton is preparing using data from both the 2003 annual survey and from the qualitative interviews conducted in 2004. Dr. Barton also gave a presentation on the Delta Rural Poll at the *Workshop on Community-Based Research in the Mississippi Delta* on October 15, 2004. This workshop was organized by the CCED's Institute for Community-Based Research.

Facilities and Equipment

The Delta Rural Poll committee has worked to upgrade our facilities and equipment during 2004. We now have office space in the Center for Community and Economic Development. We also have a webpage dedicated to the Delta Rural Poll, located at: <http://www.deltastate.edu/cced/ruralpoll.htm>. In addition, we have purchased equipment that will facilitate the production of reports. We received shipment on printed covers to use with our research and policy reports, and these were first used on the health care policy report issued in August, 2004.

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.

One purpose of the two sessions organized by DRP investigators for the Rural Sociological Society meeting in August, 2004, was to develop stronger ties between the various rural polls in existence. The principal investigators from the rural polls in Nebraska, Iowa and Utah participated in these sessions, and several interesting differences were noted in the results. DRP researchers continued conversations with these researchers following the meetings, with the goal of producing reports that compare conditions across rural America.

Preparations for the 2005 Delta Rural Poll

The second annual survey is scheduled for late January, 2005. The month was changed for the second survey from October to January for two reasons: first, other rural polls generally occur between January and March, and our results will be more comparable if we undertake our poll during the same time period; second, DSU researchers generally have more time to work on research projects during the summer, and conducting the poll early in Spring semester will produce results that will be ready for analysis by the summer.

The Faculty Committee met in the fall of 2004 to discuss plans for the 2005 Delta Rural Poll. Drs. Barton, Nylander, Hales and Green will serve as the Faculty Committee for the 2005 poll. The number of topical areas was reduced to two to allow for more in-depth questions. The topics selected for the 2005 DRP were heritage tourism and workforce development. Various questions from the 2003 poll will be repeated as well.

A survey questionnaire was developed and approved by the Faculty Committee and DSU's Institutional Review Board. This questionnaire was sent to the Social Science Research Center and was approved by the Mississippi State University Institutional Review Board. Data collection will begin in early 2005.

Future Activities

Publicity for the 2005 Delta Rural Poll will begin around the middle of January, 2005, and the survey will begin shortly thereafter. Qualitative interviews will be conducted this summer. The current intent is to conduct interviews on both workforce development and heritage tourism, in conjunction with other projects that are underway. The qualitative interviews provide an opportunity to incorporate local residents into the DRP, and we hope to include locals in the planning and design of this portion of the poll project to a greater extent in 2005.

Drs. Barton, Green, Nylander and Hales will participate in a panel on applied research in the Mississippi Delta at the annual meeting of the Alabama-Mississippi Sociological Association. This meeting will be held on February 24-25, 2005, in Tuscaloosa, AL. Dr. Barton will focus on the Delta Rural Poll during this presentation. In addition, Drs. Green and Barton are organizing a workshop entitled "The Delta in Global Context" for May, 2005. The workshop will focus on the ramifications of globalization on the Mississippi Delta, and will highlight a community-based research emphasis. Results from the 2005 annual survey should be ready to present at this workshop.

Several graduate students in the community development program have expressed an interest in using Delta Rural Poll data for their thesis projects. We hope to see some of these projects completed in 2005. Graduate student participation is an important element in the DRP design, and is one way to incorporate the perspectives of local residents into the project.

Funding for the Delta Rural Poll ends with this cycle. Dr. Barton is currently working on a proposal to renew funding for the Delta Rural Poll.

Conclusion

This was a year of learning for those involved with the Delta Rural Poll. Our successes included incorporating several graduate students in the DRP project, and the production of one M.S. thesis using DRP data. The completion of three research and policy reports, along with eight public presentations, also highlight the value of the DRP to the region and the state. We have learned from the experience of conducting the first poll cycle as well, and have adjusted our approach, timing, and questionnaire for the 2005 poll in line with some of these lessons. The members of the DRP Faculty Committee look forward to the 2005 annual survey and qualitative interviews, and the research and community development possibilities that they offer.