

# DELTA RURAL POLL



## Annual Report 2005

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## **THE DELTA RURAL POLL 2005 ANNUAL REPORT**

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### **Introduction**

The Delta Rural Poll is a project of the Center for Community and Economic Development (CCED) at Delta State University (DSU). This project started in 2003, with the aim of collecting social and demographic data on residents of the Mississippi Delta, to be used in research, policy, and in strategic planning by the CCED.

Dr. Alan Barton has directed the Delta Rural Poll since its inception, in collaboration with a coordinating committee that includes Dr. Albert Nylander, Dr. John Green, and Dr. Brent Hales. This committee has produced the policies that have guided this project, and has done much of the work that has led to the success of this project over the past two years.

### **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.

### **Background**

The first survey conducted by the Delta Rural Poll was completed in November, 2003. The actual data collection was carried out by the Survey Research Unit at Mississippi State University's Social Science Research Center (SSRC), using a questionnaire developed by the Delta Rural Poll Faculty Committee. The SSRC surveyed 809 randomly selected respondents living in eleven Delta counties (Bolivar, Coahoma, Humphreys, Issaquena, Leflore, Quitman,

Sharkey, Sunflower, Tallahatchie, Tunica, and Washington), asking their perceptions on health care, their experience with advanced technology, their attitudes about Delta schools, as well as demographic, employment and quality of life. Policy reports on health care, technology, and employment/quality of life were produced using these data.

In accordance with the research strategy for the Delta Rural Poll, qualitative interviews were conducted by various researchers and graduate students during 2004. The topic of these interviews was education in the Delta, and interviews targeted teachers and residents in several communities.

### **Summary of Activities, 2005**

The Delta Rural Poll had an active year in 2005. The second survey was conducted in January and February, using a questionnaire developed by the Executive Committee at the end of 2004. The topics on the 2005 questionnaire included the standard questions on demographic characteristics, employment, and quality of life, as well as specialized questions on heritage tourism and workforce development. In addition, a few of the questions on health care from the 2003 survey were repeated in 2005. Administration of the questionnaire was contracted to the Survey Research Unit at Mississippi State University's Social Science Research Center. The Survey Research Unit did an admirable job of data collection, and returned the results in March, 2005. They surveyed a total of 1,009 respondents in the eleven counties.

The results were analyzed and presented in a variety of formats, including research and policy papers issued by the Delta Rural Poll and the CCED, public presentations at national and international conferences, as well as in classes and events on the DSU campus. Results from the 2003 survey were also used in public presentations and papers during 2005.

### **Institutional Review Board**

An application for a continuing review was submitted to the DSU Institutional Review Board in July, 2005. The continuing review was granted for the 2005-06 year in December, 2005.

### **Graduate Student Support**

The Delta Rural Poll did not have a graduate assistant for the first eight months of 2005. In August, a graduate assistant was finally assigned to work on the Delta Rural Poll project, supported by the Hearin Fellowship in the Division of Social Sciences. Jolana Gibbs jumped

right into the role, and began analyzing data pertaining to heritage tourism from the 2005 survey. She will continue in as graduate assistant during Spring, 2006.

The Delta Rural Poll sponsored two community development graduate students who attended the Annual Meeting of the Southern Demographic Association in Oxford, MS, from November 3–5, 2005. Catherine Cannatella and Justina Garcia joined Dr. Alan Barton at these meetings, and in addition to attending sessions and meetings, these students were able to meet and talk with demographers from around the U.S. Ms. Cannatella also presented a paper at this conference, described below.

### **Qualitative Interviews**

In the summer of 2004, the first cycle of qualitative data collection began, focusing on education, one of the themes of the 2003 survey. These interviews continued through the fall of 2004 and into the spring of 2005. Many of these were carried out by community development graduate students, as part of their thesis projects and in conjunction with on-going research sponsored by the Institute for Community-Based Research. Qualitative interviews based on the 2005 survey will begin in the Spring of 2006.

### **Publications Produced During 2005**

One graduate student in the Community Development program finished a thesis during 2005 using data from the Delta Rural Poll. Catherine Rice was awarded a M.S. degree in Spring, 2005, after her thesis entitled *Perceptions of Education in the Mississippi Delta* was approved by the graduate faculty. Ms. Rice used data from the 2003 Delta Rural Poll, and from interviews organized through the Delta Rural Poll and the Institute for Community-Based Research in her thesis.

The Delta Rural Poll produces topical papers in two series; one which features policy papers, and the other for research papers. Papers are available through the Center for Community and Economic Development, and on the Delta Rural Poll website (<http://www.deltastate.edu/pages/536.asp>).

One research paper was issued in August 2005, entitled *The 2005 Delta Rural Poll: Methods and Characteristics of the Sample*. This paper summarizes results from the annual survey conducted in January and February.

Two policy papers were issued in during 2005. In July, Alan Barton and Roshun Williams, a recent graduate of the M.S. program in Community Development at Delta State University, issued a paper entitled *Technology Use in the Mississippi Delta: A Summary Report from the 2003 Delta Rural Poll*. This paper used data from the 2003 annual survey to analyze the “digital divide” in the Mississippi Delta region. Alan Barton issued a policy paper in December entitled *Attitudes About Heritage Tourism in the Mississippi Delta: A Policy Report from the 2005 Delta Rural Poll*. Using data from the 2005 annual survey, Dr. Barton assesses perceptions of heritage tourism, and support for tourism to various types of heritage sites in the Delta.

### **Public Presentations During 2005**

Several public presentations featured data from both the 2003 and the 2005 Delta Rural Polls. On February 20, 2005, Alan Barton gave a presentation at the CCED to a group of students visiting from the International Development program at Brandeis University. The students were taking part in a field course called “Third World on the Mississippi: An Exploration of Sustainable Development Strategies in the Lower Mississippi Delta Region,” instructed by Pam Moore. Dr. Barton’s presentation was entitled “An Overview of Changing Conditions in the Mississippi Delta,” and used data from the Delta Rural Poll to introduce students to the social and demographic conditions in the region.

On February 25, 2005, Alan Barton participated in a panel at the Alabama-Mississippi Sociological Association meeting on Applied Research in the Mississippi Delta, and gave a presentation entitled “The Delta Rural Poll: Collecting Data in the Delta.” Other DSU professors participated in this panel as well, including Dr. John Green and Dr. Brent Hales, who are members of the Delta Rural Poll coordinating committee.

Alan Barton gave a presentation to the DSU campus as part of the Madison Center Brown Bag series on May 4, 2005. Dr. Barton spoke on “Access to and Use of Technology in the Mississippi Delta,” using data from the 2003 Delta Rural Poll. The data from this presentation were used in the policy paper that Dr. Barton developed with Roshun Williams, and Dr. Barton presented a revised version of this paper at the Annual Meeting of the Rural Sociological Society, in Tampa, FL on August 11, 2005. Dr. Barton’s presentation was entitled “Class, Race and Technology Use in the Mississippi Delta: Characteristics and Policy Implications,” and was presented as part of the New Economies and Old Problems: Economic Opportunity and Community Integration in a Changing World Economy session.

On May 27 and 28, 2005, the Institute for Community-Based Research sponsored a workshop on the DSU campus called The Delta in Global Context. Catherine Cannatella, a graduate student in the Community Development program presented a paper at this workshop called “Brain Drain Distressing the Delta Dollar.” Ms. Cannatella used data from the 2003 Delta Rural Poll in this presentation. Ms. Cannatella presented this paper again on November 4, 2005 at the Annual Meeting of the Southern Demographic Association in Oxford, MS, in a session entitled “Poverty and Inequality.”

A contingent of faculty and students from Delta State University traveled to the Mid-South Sociological Association meeting in Atlanta, GA, in October, 2005. At this conference, Dr. John Green presented a paper that he co-authored with Dr. Albert Nylander at the Medical Sociology session. The paper was entitled “Access to Care and Perceived Health Status: A Multi-Method Study from the Mississippi Delta,” and used data from the 2003 Delta Rural Poll. Alan Barton presented the results of work he has done with Jolana Gibbs on heritage tourism, in the Religion and Ethnicity in the American South session. Their presentation was entitled “Local Attitudes and Perceptions of Heritage Tourism in the Mississippi Delta.”

Finally, Alan Barton traveled to Oxford, MS in November, 2005 to present a paper at the Annual Meeting of the Southern Demographic Association, using migration data collected in both the 2003 and 2005 Delta Rural Polls. Dr. Barton’s paper was entitled “Community Stability, Intent to Migrate, and Sustainable Development in the Mississippi Delta,” and was part of the traditional Demography in the American South session at these meetings.

### **Facilities and Equipment**

The Delta Rural Poll moved to a new office within the CCED during 2005, and now shares an office with the Institute for Community-Based Research. In addition, the Delta Rural Poll purchased one piece of equipment during 2005, a paper cutter than is necessary to produce a clean and even edge on our reports. This is kept in the office at the CCED.

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

The principal investigators for the Delta Rural Poll have taken a lead role in developing a national network to coordinate rural polling efforts in a variety of states. We have collaborated with researchers in Nebraska, Utah, Iowa, Ohio, and Indiana, and have also had contact with

researchers in Texas, South Dakota and Oregon, with the goal of developing a national data base drawn from state-level rural polls. We met with the former director of the Nebraska Rural Poll at the Rural Sociological Society meetings in August and advanced our national project. We also have coordinated with directors of rural polls from Purdue University in Indiana, the Nebraska Rural Poll, and with the Western Regional Development Center at Utah State University to have a panel discussion on rural polls at a national meeting of extension professionals in early 2006. In addition, we have coordinated with the same poll directors, plus directors from Iowa State and Ohio State Universities to collaborate on funding proposals and to develop funding sources for national-level polls.

### **Future Activities**

A change in administration at the CCED has led to greater emphasis on coordinating the Delta Rural Poll with other community development programs that are based at the CCED. The goal is to provide a research basis for applied projects to target their activities.

A priority this coming year will be fundraising, so that we can run another annual survey in February, 2007. The principal investigators have initiated one avenue through a USDA grant; however, that is a long-term possibility that requires coordinating with other rural polls. We will work on that over the course of this year, however. A local or regional foundation is more likely to fund the on-going data collection efforts undertaken by the Delta Rural Poll, and we will work over the course of 2006 to find a funding source that is a good fit for our activities.

Drs. Barton and Hales will participate on a panel at a national meeting of extension practitioners in San Antonio, TX in February, 2006, along with directors from rural polls in Nebraska, Indiana and Utah. We have several other presentations of Delta Rural Poll results planned over the next year, including a paper on technology use in the Delta, to be presented by Drs. Hales and Barton to the Alabama-Mississippi Sociological Association's annual meeting in Oxford in February; a panel on Delta heritage at a symposium sponsored by the Community Development graduate program in the Division of Social Sciences in April; a presentation on heritage tourism by Dr. Barton and Jolana Gibbs in June at the International Symposium on Society and Resource Management in Vancouver, Canada; and several papers to be given by professors and graduate students at the Rural Sociological Society meeting in Kentucky, in August, 2006.

## **Conclusion**

With the completion of a second survey early in 2005, the Delta Rural Poll established itself as an important and meaningful entity in the Mississippi Delta. The survey was covered in the local press, and participation was high. Almost all of the potential respondents contacted completed the Delta Rural Poll questionnaire. In addition, data from the Delta Rural Poll is being used in courses at Delta State, and by graduate students for class projects and theses. The data are also being used for presentations at national conferences and in policy reports. As a result, the Delta Rural Poll is becoming recognized beyond the Mississippi Delta as a source of reliable information on public policy issues. These are positive developments. The biggest challenge that needs to be addressed to sustain the Delta Rural Poll into the future is funding. Finding a reliable source of financing will allow the Delta Rural Poll to continue to bring the voice of Deltans to the attention of state and national policymakers, to researchers interested in rural issues, and to the people of the Delta. Members of the Delta Rural Poll faculty coordinating committee and the staff at the Center for Community and Economic Development hope that the Delta Rural Poll can continue to support community development in the region and provide a valuable service to the Mississippi Delta through 2006 and well into the future.