

DELTA RURAL POLL

**Annual Report
2006**

Prepared by:

Alan W. Barton, Ph.D.
Faculty Associate
Center for Community and Economic Development
and
Director, Delta Rural Poll

February 15, 2007



Delta State University

Center for Community and Economic Development
Deborah Moore, Director

THE DELTA RURAL POLL 2006 ANNUAL REPORT

Alan W. Barton, Ph.D.

Introduction

The Delta Rural Poll is a program of the Center for Community and Economic Development (CCED) at Delta State University (DSU). For the past four years, the Delta Rural Poll has served the people of the Mississippi Delta by collecting data for researchers to use in policy-oriented research. Over the past year, the Delta Rural Poll has extended its scope by building partnerships between DSU and other universities in Mississippi and around the country, and by establishing closer ties with Delta communities. Dr. Alan Barton has directed the Delta Rural Poll since its inception, in collaboration with a Coordinating Committee that consists of Faculty Associates from the CCED, as well as a new Advisory Committee formed this past year.

Objectives

The Delta Rural Poll was initiated in 2003 with 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.

History of the Delta Rural Poll

The first survey conducted by the Delta Rural Poll was completed in November, 2003. 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 Coordinating Committee. The SSRC conducted a telephone survey of 809 randomly selected respondents living in eleven Delta counties, which are Bolivar, Coahoma, Humphreys, Issaquena, Leflore, Quitman, Sharkey, Sunflower, Tallahatchie, Tunica, and Washington. The

questions were divided into two categories. First, a series of basic questions, to be repeated in each survey, pertained to quality of life, demographic characteristics, employment, and intent to migrate. A second series of questions covered topical issues, and would change with each iteration of the survey. Topics in the 2003 survey included perceptions on health care, experience with advanced technology, and attitudes about Delta schools.

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.

Data collected in 2003 and 2004 were used to complete one M.S. thesis and several policy reports, as well as papers presented at various conferences.

The second survey was conducted in January and February, 2005, following the same strategy as the first poll. The same demographic, quality of life, employment and migration questions were asked to begin to track trends among the population of the Delta. Policy topics selected for this survey included heritage tourism, workforce development, and health care. The SSRC collected results from 1,009 respondents, and data analysis began in the Summer of 2005. Building on a policy report issued in December, 2005, graduate students conducted qualitative interviews in the Spring of 2006, focusing on the potential for heritage tourism in the Delta region. A report on quality of life and workforce is currently being prepared, using the 2005 data.

Administrative Activities, 2006

The Delta Rural Poll is administered by the Program Director and Principal Investigator, in collaboration with a Faculty Coordinating Committee (FCC). The Principal Investigator is responsible for the day-to-day operations and administration of the Delta Rural Poll project, and serves as a Program Director with the CCED. Members of the FCC serve for two years. The primary mission of the FCC is to prepare each survey. Members identify themes and develop

The Delta Rural Poll covers the following counties:

Bolivar
Coahoma
Humphreys
Issaquena
Leflore
Quitman
Sharkey
Sunflower
Tallahatchie
Tunica
Washington

questionnaires. The FCC is also responsible for all major policy decisions pertaining to the Delta Rural Poll.

Changes in Personnel

Since its inception, Dr. Alan Barton has served as Program Director and Principal Investigator. Dr. Brent Hales was Co-Principal Investigator for the 2003 and 2005 surveys, as well as a member of the FCC. Dr. John Green and Dr. Albert Nylander served as members of the Faculty Coordinating Committee for the 2003, 2005 and 2007 surveys.

During the summer of 2006, Dr. Brent Hales left Delta State University. Dr. Paulette Meikle-Yaw, Assistant Professor of Sociology and Community Development in the Division of Social Sciences, joined the Faculty Coordinating Committee at the beginning of Fall Semester, 2006. Dr. Meikle-Yaw has been on the DSU faculty since 2005, and is a graduate of Mississippi State University in Sociology.

New Committee

During Fall Semester 2006, the Delta Rural Poll Faculty Coordinating Committee met and agreed to form a new Advisory Committee. This committee consists of faculty and other parties from Delta State and other institutions who have a stake and interest in the Delta Rural Poll, but who are not on the FCC. Creating this institutional position provides the opportunity to include people across campus and beyond DSU, incorporating greater community participation into the project and establishing links around the country. Since the beginning, the objectives of the Delta Rural Poll have focused on serving the Delta, and this committee is one step towards building links between the campus and other entities around the Delta. The Delta Rural Poll also has worked closely with similar projects in other states, and the Advisory Committee could be used as a way of institutionalizing relationships between the Delta Rural Poll and directors and staff of other rural polls.

Shortly after this meeting, Dr. Brent Hales, now on the faculty at the University of Southern Mississippi, agreed to serve as a member of this Advisory Committee. Toward the end of 2006, Larry Webster, a Project Administrator at the CCED, expressed an interest in serving on this committee; however, the FCC has not met to further discuss these matters, so additional members of this committee will not be determined until 2007.

Graduate Student Support

Jolana Gibbs, a graduate student in the Community Development program, worked with the Delta Rural Poll project during Spring semester, 2006. Ms. Gibbs was supported by a Hearin Fellowship through the Division of Social Sciences. She assisted in data analysis pertaining to heritage tourism from the 2005 survey. In June, 2006, Ms. Gibbs traveled to Vancouver, Canada along with the Principal Investigator to give a presentation on this research at the International Symposium for Society and Resource Management.

During the Fall semester, 2006, Eric Atchison, a new graduate student in the Community Development program, was assigned to work with the principal investigator. Mr. Atchison is also supported by a Hearin Fellowship. Mr. Atchison has been working on analyzing qualitative interviews on heritage tourism. Mr. Atchison will continue in this position during Spring Semester 2007.

New Publication Series

In 2006, the Delta Rural Poll initiated a new policy-oriented publication series, the Policy Briefs. These supplement the Policy Papers series, but focus on concise presentation of results and policy recommendations, focusing on one specific policy issue surveyed by the Delta Rural Poll. Typically, Policy Briefs are 4 pages, and include a brief description of one issue, accompanied with tables and graphs which show the data from the Delta Rural Poll survey. The first Policy Brief was issued in February 2006, focusing on heritage tourism.

Policy Briefs are prepared and published in-house, and sent to policymakers, researchers and community leaders. Policy Briefs are also posted on the Delta Rural Poll website. The printer donated to the Delta Rural Poll by Dr. Garry Jennings of the Madison Center has facilitated in-house publication of Policy Briefs.

Institutional Review Board

An application for a Continuing Review was submitted to the Delta State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the beginning of 2006, and was approved. Once the questionnaire for the 2007 survey was completed (described below), it was submitted to the DSU IRB as well, and was approved in conjunction with the approval granted by the Mississippi State University Institutional Review Board.

Facilities and Equipment

The Delta Rural Poll has upgraded our facilities and equipment during 2006. Early in the year, Dr. Garry Jennings and the Madison Center generously donated an HP Photosmart printer to the Delta Rural Poll. This printer allows us to prepare professional quality documents in-house. The Delta Rural Poll thanks Dr. Jennings and the Madison Center for this thoughtful contribution.

During Spring semester, the Delta Rural Poll purchased two full-sized tape recorders and microphones to use in focus group and larger interview formats. These recorders complement the handheld digital recorder that we use for individual interviews. These recorders were used immediately by students in SOC/COD 574 Applied Rural Sociology, who carried out focus groups on heritage tourism in four Delta communities during Spring, 2006. They were used again during Fall semester, 2006, for interviews conducted as part of a class project in SOC/COD 521 Sustainable Development. They are available to researchers and graduate students who are conducting research in collaboration with the Delta Rural Poll.

Quantitative Data Collection

There was no survey conducted in 2006; the next is scheduled for early 2007. A variety of activities were conducted in 2006 to prepare for the 2007 survey. First, funding for the survey was arranged during the summer of 2006. We submitted a proposal to the Social Science Research Center at Mississippi State University, the entity that carries out the survey, and in August they notified us that they would finance the 2007 survey. The second half of 2006 was spent preparing the questionnaire and the administration of this survey.

The long-term vision for the Delta Rural Poll has always included substantial community involvement in the survey project, yet during the first two survey cycles, as we were building the infrastructure for the project, there was very little direct community involvement nor buy-in in the development of topics and actual questions. Communities were still directly involved in the Delta Rural Poll through the qualitative interviewing, but the survey was largely the domain of the Delta Rural Poll Faculty Coordinating Committee, only one of whom was a native of the Delta region. By 2006, we had built a sufficient administrative structure for the project, and we were ready to begin building greater bridges to Delta communities.

Thus, in the construction of the questionnaire for the 2007 survey, an effort was made to incorporate a variety of groups in the selection of topics and the production of questions. First, we aimed to reach out across the DSU campus and invited participation from departments other than just the Division of Social Sciences. Next, we actively solicited direct involvement from the staff at the Center for Community and Economic Development and other Centers on campus. Finally, we asked for greater involvement from community organizations in the selection of topics and construction of the questionnaire.

These efforts to incorporate a larger voice from the broader Delta community in the Delta Rural Poll culminated in a community meeting held at the CCED in October, 2006. In addition to the Division of Social Sciences, representatives from the CCED staff, the Delta Center for Culture and Learning, the DSU Social Work Department, and from community organizations including the San Gabriel Mercy Mission in Mound Bayou and Delta Health Partners attended this meeting. Dr. Alan Barton facilitated the meeting and Eric Atchison kept notes. The meeting began with a brief presentation on the history of the Delta Rural Poll, and then we had a moderated dialogue on potential topics and questions for the poll. The process was very valuable and produced a number of good ideas for survey topics and questions.

The Delta Rural Poll Coordinating Committee then met and discussed potential topics. Committee members submitted potential questions, which we reviewed. We decided to include the standard questions on demographics, employment and quality of life, and we added a new section of social capital questions that may become permanent fixtures in our questionnaire. Among the topics that emerged from the meeting, we selected early childhood education programs and youth after-school programs, social problems, health care, and a smoking ban as the thematic topics to incorporate into the 2007 survey. Perceptions of early childhood education and youth development were proposed by CCED staff, and will directly contribute to on-going CCED projects. The social problems questions were proposed by the Social Work faculty, and will support research in their department. And the health care questions emerged from community organizations and drew strong support from all present at the community meeting, so we decided to continue with these questions, in order to track trends monitored in both the 2003 and 2005 surveys. The issue of smoking bans has generated substantial attention in Mississippi over the past year as several communities have instituted such bans, and this is a specific health care policy issue that we wanted to assess in the Delta region.

The Principal Investigator then worked closely with CCED staff and Social Work faculty to hone questions on these topics. The final questionnaire was completed in early November, 2006, and sent to the SSRC and to the DSU IRB for approval. In late December, Dr. Wolf Freese of the Survey Research Unit notified us that the questionnaire had been approved and that data collection would begin early in 2007.

Qualitative Interviews

During the Spring Semester 2006, graduate students in SOC/COD 574 Applied Rural Sociology carried out a series of focus group interviews on heritage tourism in conjunction with the Delta Rural Poll. The Delta Rural Poll project provided funding for these activities and the focus groups built upon data from the 2005 Delta Rural Poll survey. Four groups of students explored issues in Delta heritage and the potential for tourism tied to a regional heritage area. One group studied agritourism, focusing on catfish production in Belzoni; a second group investigated blues tourism in Leland; a third group conducted interviews on juke joints with residents of Boyle and Shaw; and the fourth group studied various heritage projects in Cleveland and Rosedale. These projects led to class papers, and some of the students presented their results at national and international conferences, described below.

Publications Produced During 2006

The Delta Rural Poll initiated the Policy Briefs series this year with the publication of Policy Brief No. 06-01 in March, 2006. The title of this brief is "Attitudes and Perceptions of Heritage Tourism in the Mississippi Delta." The policy briefs provide policymakers and other professionals with timely, scientifically generated information on the attitudes, perceptions and behavior of Delta residents on topical issues in a concise, easy-to-read format. The policy briefs include specific policy recommendations, derived from the research questions and data analysis. While the policy papers produced by the Delta Rural Poll provide an in-depth analysis of policy issues, the policy briefs offer summary results, combined with explanations and recommendations. A second policy brief on heritage tourism is currently being produced.

Public Presentations During 2006

During 2006, DSU researchers gave several public presentations that featured data from both the 2003 and the 2005 Delta Rural Polls.

From February 13 through 16, 2006, Dr. Alan Barton and Dr. Brent Hales traveled to San Antonio, TX, for a conference sponsored by the National Association of Community Development Extension Professionals (NACDEP). The Delta Rural Poll and the Center for Community and Economic Development provided the necessary funds for this trip. At the conference, Dr. Barton gave a presentation entitled "Documenting Attitudes and Perceptions of Residents of the Mississippi Delta: The Delta Rural Poll," as part of a panel called *How Rural Polls Can Guide Extension Programming, Community Dialogue and Policymaking: Examples from Three States*. Directors of rural polls in Nebraska and Indiana also participated on this panel.

Later in February, Dr. Brent Hales presented a paper co-authored with Dr. Alan Barton entitled "Assessing the Digital Divide in the Mississippi Delta," at the Annual Meeting of the Alabama-Mississippi Sociological Association in Oxford, MS. The paper used data on technology use from the 2003 Delta Rural Poll, and built on the policy report issued in 2004 and subsequent analysis conducted by Dr. Hales and Dr. Barton.

In March, the Center for Community and Economic Development held an Open House for mayors from Delta Communities. Dr. Alan Barton gave a presentation at this meeting entitled "The Delta Rural Poll: A Service to Delta Communities." This talk introduced the Delta Rural Poll and informed the mayors how the Delta Rural Poll can serve their communities. Dr. Barton also prepared a handout for this meeting, which was distributed to everyone in attendance and posted on the Delta Rural Poll website.

From June 4 through 8, Dr. Alan Barton and graduate assistant Jolana Gibbs traveled to Vancouver, Canada to give a presentation at the International Symposium on Society and Resource Management (ISSRM), based on data from the 2005 Delta Rural Poll survey and on qualitative data collected by Ms. Gibbs and other graduate students during Spring semester, 2006. Their presentation was titled "Authenticity is in the Eye of the Stakeholder: Using Local Perceptions to Plan for Natural Heritage Tourism in the Mississippi Delta." Based on comments at this conference, Dr. Barton and Ms. Gibbs collected additional data during Spring, 2006, and Dr. Barton is currently revising the paper to incorporate these additional insights.

Later in June, several DSU faculty and graduate students traveled to St. Louis, MO, to participate in the Annual Meeting of the Community Development Society. Dr. Brent Hales and Dr. Alan Barton participated in a panel called *Use of Community Surveys and Focus Groups to*

Inform Development Programs and Engage Students in Hands-On Learning. Dr. Hales' presentation, entitled "The Delta Rural Poll," summarized how the Delta Rural Poll has contributed to CCED programs. Dr. Barton's presentation, "Conducting Focus Groups on Cultural Heritage Tourism: A Pathway to Student Engagement," considered how data collection for the Delta Rural Poll contributed to SOC/COD 574 Applied Rural Sociology and advanced DSU's goal of increasing student engagement.

In August, Dr. Alan Barton, Dr. Brent Hales and several graduate students traveled to Louisville, KY, to present papers at the Annual Meeting of the Rural Sociological Society (RSS). Prior to the meeting, Dr. Barton and Dr. Hales participated in a day-long workshop on rural polling, described in more detail below, called *Evaluating Rural Polls: Strategies for Sustainability*. Dr. Barton gave a presentation at this workshop on the Delta Rural Poll, describing the history and administration of the project. During regular sessions, Dr. Hales and Dr. Barton presented a paper entitled "Technologies of Repression: Assessing Internet Usage in the Mississippi Delta," on unequal access to and use of technology among Delta residents. This paper used data from the 2003 Delta Rural Poll.

At a session called *Culture and Community*, Dr. Barton and graduate student Mary Kathryn Wooten presented a paper on juke joints, using data from the 2005 Delta Rural Poll and qualitative interviews conducted during the Spring of 2006. Monica Rosas and Juanita Sims were co-authors on this paper, although they were unable to participate in the presentation. At the same session, graduate student Catherine Cannatella presented a paper on blues tourism in Leland, MS, called "Cultivating Blues Heritage in the Mississippi Delta," based on data from the 2005 survey and 2006 qualitative interviews. Finally, Dr. Alan Barton participated in a panel on Community-Based Research as Teaching Pedagogy, organized by Dr. John Green. Dr. Barton gave a presentation titled "Engaging Students Through Community-Based Research," analyzing the class project in SOC/COD 574 Applied Rural Sociology that had produced some of the other papers presented at this conference.

Dr. John Green, Katie Kerstetter of the Institute for Community-Based Research, and Dr. Albert Nylander collaborated on a paper titled "Socioeconomic Status, Access to Care and Perceived Health: A Multi-Year Study from the Mississippi Delta." In October 2006, they presented this paper at a session titled *Medical Sociology* at the 32nd Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Sociological Association. The meeting was held in Lafayette, LA.

By providing opportunities for graduate students to participate in data collection and analysis, and to present their results at professional conference, the Delta Rural Poll enhances the skills and professionalization of Delta residents. In addition, the graduate student presence at these conferences is very beneficial to Delta State University and the CCED, and has been acknowledged on various occasions by participants at these conferences. The initiative and professional demeanor shown by graduate students who travel to conferences and present their research results is a good example of community development in action.

Coordination with Other Rural Polls

One of the objectives of the Delta Rural Poll is to collaborate with similar polls in other states, and 2006 was a banner year for building these partnerships. Dr. Alan Barton and Dr. Brent Hales, co-Principal Investigators for the Delta Rural Poll, took a leadership role in organizing national meetings with directors of other rural surveys. In February, 2006, Dr. Barton and Dr. Hales traveled to San Antonio, TX, to participate in the Annual Meeting of the National Association of Community Development Extension Professionals (NACDEP). At this meeting, Dr. Barton participated in a panel with directors from the Nebraska Rural Poll, based at the University of Nebraska, and the Indiana Rural Poll, based at Purdue University. In addition, both Dr. Barton and Dr. Hales joined other rural poll directors for strategy meetings to plan coordination of polls at the national level.

These exercises came to fruition in August, 2006, at the Annual Meeting of the Rural Sociological Society in Louisville, KY. Dr. Hales organized and chaired a day-long workshop on rural polling, and Dr. Barton gave a presentation on the Delta Rural Poll at this meeting. Representatives from the Nebraska Rural Poll, based at the University of Nebraska, the Indiana Rural Poll, based at Purdue University, the Iowa Farm and Rural Life Poll, based at Iowa State University, and the Ohio Survey of Food, Agriculture and the Environment, based at Ohio State University also gave presentations on their projects. Many people who are interested in initiating similar projects attended this meeting, representing institutions such as Michigan State University, Clemson University, University of Kentucky, and the University of Nevada-Reno.

Coordination with the Institute for Community-Based Research

The Delta Rural Poll has worked closely with the Institute for Community-Based Research (ICBR), another CCED program, headed by Dr. John Green. This fruitful collaboration continued in 2006. The two projects share office space and facilities at the CCED, and both

program directors sit on the guiding committees of both projects, allowing for close collaboration. During 2006, Dr. Green and Ms. Katie Kerstetter have used data from the Delta Rural Poll in research projects and in activities supported by the ICBR. We also drew upon connections established by the ICBR in our efforts to incorporate a greater community presence in planning the 2007 survey. The Delta Rural Poll's community meeting was scheduled to coincide with the annual meeting of the ICBR board, and the synergy proved valuable for both projects. Throughout this effort, Dr. Green's expertise in community-based research has been invaluable.

Future Activities

The next survey is scheduled for early 2007. Questions on the 2007 Delta Rural Poll will ask about demographic characteristics, employment, quality of life, perceptions of early childhood education programs and youth programs, health care including opinions on a smoking ban in the Delta region, and various social problems. The Survey Research Unit at Mississippi State University's Social Science Research Center will again conduct this survey. The SSRC has also generously provided the funding to carry out this survey. Results should be available sometime in February or March, 2007 and will be available for analysis during Summer, 2007. Faculty members and graduate students will continue to use data from the Delta Rural Poll surveys and the qualitative interviewing for theses, policy reports and conference presentations.

Conclusion

The past year has seen the Delta Rural Poll grow and make strides towards accomplishing the objectives originally set out in 2003. Most notably, the Delta Rural Poll strengthened ties with similar projects in other states, with the SSRC at Mississippi State University, and built stronger partnerships in the Delta to incorporate greater community involvement in the Delta Rural Poll project. Community participation has been strengthened as well by incorporating data collection into DSU courses. A number of DSU graduate students made substantial contributions to the Delta Rural Poll project this past year, in the collection and interpretation of qualitative data. Many of the graduate students are natives of the Mississippi Delta, and thereby contribute to community participation in the project. Finally, the Delta Rural Poll strengthened ties with other CCED projects during 2006, particularly in the process of preparing the 2007 survey. Questions developed for the survey support CCED projects, and the topics and questions were contributed by program managers for these projects.

The Delta Rural Poll has provided many benefits to the people of the Mississippi Delta. This project has given DSU national exposure and has added a crucial research component to a university known primarily as a teaching college. Perhaps most importantly, the Delta Rural Poll has provided an organized means for researchers, community development agents, and students to work together for a better understanding of the people of the Mississippi Delta.

For more information on the Delta Rural Poll, visit our website:

<http://www.deltastate.edu/pages/536.asp>