

# DELTA RURAL POLL

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## Annual Report 2007

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Delta State University

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The third Delta Rural Poll survey was conducted in January, 2007.  
Topics of the survey include:

- Demographic Characteristics
  - Quality of Life
  - Intent to Migrate
    - Workforce
  - Social Capital Indicators
- Attitudes About Social Problems in the Mississippi Delta
  - Attitudes About Health Care Services
- Early Childhood Development Programs in the Delta
  - Youth After School Programs in the Delta

**THE DELTA RURAL POLL  
2007 ANNUAL REPORT**

Alan W. Barton, Ph.D.

**Introduction**

The Delta Rural Poll serves the people of the Mississippi Delta by collecting high-quality social science data that researchers and students use to better understand conditions and trends in the Delta region. Over the past year, the Delta Rural Poll has conducted its third survey of Delta residents, and researchers have used results from that survey and previous surveys to prepare several papers and public presentations. Dr. Alan Barton developed the Delta Rural Poll at the Center for Community and Economic Development (CCED), and has directed the project since its inception in 2003. A Coordinating Committee consisting of CCED Faculty Associates and faculty from the Delta State University (DSU) Division of Social Sciences develops the questionnaire used in the surveys and is involved in the administration of the project.

**Objectives**

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.

**History of the Delta Rural Poll**

The first survey conducted by the Delta Rural Poll was completed in November, 2003. The first Coordinating Committee included Dr. Alan Barton, Dr. Brent Hales, Dr. John Green and Dr. Albert Nylander. This Committee decided that the Delta Rural Poll project would include a survey as well as qualitative research and would focus on eleven “core” Delta counties, those that are entirely within the Yazoo-Mississippi floodplain. The counties are: Bolivar, Coahoma,

Humphreys, Issaquena, Leflore, Quitman, Sharkey, Sunflower, Tallahatchie, Tunica, and Washington. Funding was provided by a grant to the CCED from the Mid-South Delta Consortium.

The Coordinating Committee developed a questionnaire in collaboration with the Director of the Nebraska Rural Poll and focusing on the research interests of faculty in DSU's Division of Social Sciences. After considering a variety of options, the Committee opted for a telephone survey, and contracted the Survey Research Unit at Mississippi State University's Social Science Research Center (SSRC) to collect the data. Using random-digit dialing techniques, SSRC interviewers completed 809 questionnaires, and delivered the data to DSU researchers in early 2004.

The questionnaire included a series of basic questions that would be repeated in each survey, and that used the same language as questions on the Nebraska Rural Poll. These pertained to quality of life, demographic characteristics, employment, and intent to migrate. A second series of questions covered topical issues; these would change with each iteration of the survey. Topics in the 2003 survey included perceptions on health care, experience with computer technology, and perceptions of Delta schools.

During the remainder of 2004, researchers and graduates students conducted qualitative interviews focusing on education in the Delta, with teachers and Delta residents. Combined with the survey data, the qualitative data were used to complete an M.S. thesis, several policy reports, and papers presented at various conferences.

The second survey was conducted in January and February, 2005, following the same strategy as the first poll. The time of year was changed to align with similar polls conducted elsewhere. The Coordinating Committee included Dr. Alan Barton, Dr. Brent Hales, Dr. John Green and Dr. Albert Nylander. The Committee agreed to use the same demographic, quality of life, employment and migration questions with only slight modifications. Asking the same questions in the same way provides a longitudinal data set that can be used to track trends among the population of the Delta. Policy topics selected for the 2005 survey included heritage tourism and workforce development, and some of the health care questions from the 2003 survey were repeated. The Coordinating Committee again contracted with the SSRC to conduct this telephone survey, and the interviewers collected results from 1,009 randomly selected respondents. Data analysis began in the Summer of 2005, and during the Spring of 2006,

graduate students conducted qualitative interviews on heritage tourism in the Delta region. These led to various conference presentations and policy briefs.

The third survey was conducted in January, 2007. There were not sufficient funds from the original grant provided by the now-defunct Mid-South Delta Consortium; however, through the work of John Green the Delta Rural Poll was able to secure a commitment from the Social Science Research Center to cover the costs of the 2007 survey. The Coordinating Committee for this survey included Dr. Alan Barton, Dr. John Green, Dr. Albert Nylander and Dr. Paulette Meikle-Yaw. This group began meeting in the summer of 2006 to plan the 2007 survey and to develop the questionnaire. In accordance with the project's objectives, the Committee decided to include members of the Delta community in questionnaire design. A meeting was held in October, 2006 at the CCED, attended by faculty from DSU and representatives of community organizations. A number of topics were recommended and discussed. Following the meeting, the Coordinating Committee met and selected youth development and early childhood development, social problems, and health care as topics for the 2007 survey. The youth and early childhood development questions were developed in coordination with staff from the CCED, which sponsors programs in both areas. The social problems questions were developed at the request of and in coordination with faculty from the Social Work Department at Delta State University. The health questions were regarded as very important by many at the community meeting, and included a repetition of questions from the 2003 and 2005 surveys, as well as some new questions. For example, two questions were asked to gauge attitudes about smoking bans, an emerging statewide issue.

The same quality of life, workforce, demographic and migration questions were included in the 2007 questionnaire. The Coordinating Committee also developed a new set of core questions that assess social capital by asking respondents how much they trust various institutions in their communities. These questions will be included in future iterations of the Delta Rural Poll survey.

The SSRC carried out the telephone survey in January, 2007. Results are discussed in greater detail below.

**Administrative Activities, 2007**

The following are the activities carried out by the Delta Rural Poll project during 2007.

*Graduate Assistants*

The Delta Rural Poll has been supported by the Hearin Foundation Fellowships offered by the Division of Social Sciences to graduate students in the Community Development degree program. Hearin Fellows are assigned to work with Community Development faculty, and several graduate assistants have helped with the Delta Rural Poll project since its inception, including Roshun Williams, Josh Stovall, Jolana Gibbs, and Monica Rosas. In Fall, 2006, Eric Atchison was assigned to work with Dr. Alan Barton. Throughout 2007, Eric has assisted with a number of activities, including the Delta Rural Poll project.

*Collaboration with the Institute for Community-Based Research*

In 2007 the Delta Rural Poll solidified its on-going collaboration with the Institute for Community-Based Research (ICBR), also based at the Center for Community and Economic Development and directed by Dr. John Green. Ms. Katie Kerstetter served as an associate with the ICBR during 2007 and collaborated with Dr. Green to write two reports using Delta Rural Poll data. A report on Youth After-School Programs, which used data from the 2007 Delta Rural Poll, is complete and will be issued early in 2008. A second report on employment and quality of life, using data from the 2005 Delta Rural Poll, is scheduled to come out later in 2008. Although Ms. Kerstetter completed her service to the ICBR in August, 2007, her on-going work continues to benefit both the ICBR and the Delta Rural Poll. We thank Ms. Kerstetter and Dr. Green for the contributions to the Delta Rural Poll project.

*New Publications Series*

In an effort to expand the outlets that report data from the Delta Rural Poll, in 2007 Dr. Alan Barton began producing posters that summarize results from the survey. He created and displayed two posters at the DSU Faculty Research and Scholarship Symposium, April 11–12, 2007 in Ewing Hall. One poster presented information on the Delta Rural Poll. The other summarized results on perceptions among Delta residents regarding municipal ordinances to limit smoking in public places.

Dr. Barton produced another poster on social problems. One of these is on display in the hallway on the second floor of Kethley Hall, where social science students can view it. Dr. Barton also gave a second copy of this poster to the Social Work Department, as the questions on social problems were developed with faculty in Social Work and the data on this poster relate directly to issues of interest in their courses.

In 2007, the Delta Rural Poll expanded its Policy Briefs publication series, initiated in 2006. Policy Briefs are short reports on a specified topic, aimed at policy makers and community leaders. Each Policy Brief presents data from the Delta Rural Poll related to one policy issue, and makes recommendations based on the survey results. The Policy Briefs are produced in-house, using the printer donated to the Delta Rural Poll by the Madison Center in 2006. In 2007, the Delta Rural Poll issued two Policy Briefs, discussed below.

#### *Institutional Review Board*

An application for a Continuing Review was submitted to the Delta State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the beginning of 2007, and was approved. The questionnaire for the 2007 survey (described below) 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.

### **Publications Produced During 2007**

#### *Research Reports*

In December 2007, Dr. Alan Barton issued a paper that summarized the results from the 2007 survey. This report, titled "The 2007 Delta Rural Poll: Methods and Characteristics of the Sample" provides basic information on the procedures used to prepare and conduct the survey as well as summary statistics that characterize the sample that was drawn to conduct the survey. Similar papers have been issued for each of the previous surveys.

#### *Policy Briefs*

The Delta Rural Poll continued the Policy Briefs series with the publication of Policy Brief No. 07-01 in March, 2007. This report is titled "Visitation to Heritage Tourism Sites By Residents of the Mississippi Delta," and it is authored by Dr. Alan Barton using data from the 2005 Delta Rural Poll. Dr. Barton examines the characteristics of Delta residents who have visited a variety

of different types of heritage tourism sites over the past year, including cultural sites such as blues clubs and literary museums, historical sites such as a Civil Rights museum or an historic church, and natural sites, such as parks and refuges or hunting clubs.

Dr. Barton issued a second Policy Brief, No. 07-02, in December, 2007, titled "Attitudes About Smoking Bans in the Mississippi Delta." Over the past year, several Mississippi towns have issued municipal ordinances banning smoking in public places. In this report, Dr. Barton assesses the extent to which Delta residents would support or oppose similar policies in their community.

#### *Journal Article*

Dr. John Green, Ms. Katie Kerstetter and Dr. Albert Nylander collaborated on a study on health in the Delta, using data from the Delta Rural Poll and other sources. In November, 2007, they received notice that their paper, entitled "Socioeconomic Resources and Self-Rated Health: A Study in the Mississippi Delta," had been accepted for publication in the journal *Sociological Spectrum*. This is the first time data from the Delta Rural Poll has appeared in a peer-reviewed journal article. The paper will appear in early 2008. Congratulations to Dr. Green, Ms. Kerstetter and Dr. Nylander, and thanks for extending the data from the Delta Rural Poll to the professional sociological literature.

#### **Public Presentations During 2007**

During 2007, DSU researchers gave several public presentations that featured data from the Delta Rural Poll.

In February, Dr. John Green and Katie Kerstetter traveled to Montgomery, AL, to attend the 38th annual meeting of the Alabama-Mississippi Sociological Association. They presented a paper entitled "Quality of Life and Employment Opportunities: A Summary Report from the 2005 Delta Rural Poll."

In April, Delta State University held its third annual Faculty Research and Scholarship Symposium, which provides faculty with an opportunity to exhibit their research projects. At this meeting, Dr. Alan Barton and Eric Atchison presented a paper entitled "Ecotourism in the Mississippi Delta: Insights from Land and Tourism Managers." The paper included data on heritage tourism from the 2005 survey. Dr. Barton also displayed two posters at this meeting,



one with general information on the Delta Rural Poll project, and another that summarized data on smoking bans from the 2007 Delta Rural Poll.

In August, 2007, Dr. Alan Barton and Eric Atchison traveled to Santa Clara, CA and presented a paper at the 70th Annual Meeting of the Rural Sociological Society. The paper was titled "Ecotourism as a Community Development Strategy in the Mississippi Delta: Insights from Land Managers," and was presented in a session called *Tourism and Amenity Issues in Rural Areas*.

Dr. Alan Barton gave a paper at the 33rd Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Sociological Association, held in Mobile, AL in October, 2007. The paper drew upon data from the 2005 Delta Rural Poll as well as interviews conducted through the Delta Rural Poll and other projects. The title was "Heritage Tourism in the Mississippi Delta: The Potential for Uneven Community Development."

Dr. John Green also attended the Mid-South Sociological Association meeting in Mobile, and collaborated with graduate students Eleanor Green and Mechelle Wallace to present a paper entitled "Framing Health, Sickness and Well-Being: A Comparative Exploratory Study." The paper was presented in a session called *African American Health Outcomes: Examining Disparities and the Impact of Structural Factors and Individual Choices*.

Finally, Community Development graduate student Sharon Nguyen is conducting a practicum, and has used data from the 2007 Delta Rural Poll as part of her project. In November, 2007, she presented a preliminary report on this project called "Exploring Youth Centers in the Mississippi Delta: Approaches for Community Action to Increase Involvement in Youth Centers" as part of the Addressing Community Challenges by Empowering Students and Staff (ACCESS) Recognition Ceremony, held at the CCED. The ACCESS program coordinates student practical experiences through the Division of Social Sciences.

### **Future Activities**

The next survey is scheduled for January, 2009. In January, 2008, a new Faculty Committee will be formed, and preparations for the next survey will begin. Dr. Alan Barton is also scheduled to attend a Grant Writing Workshop sponsored by the DSU Office of Grants and Contracts in early 2008, with the intent of preparing a proposal to build funding for the Delta Rural Poll project. Funding remains one of the weak points of the project, and a more serious effort will be made in 2008 to develop a strategy for seeking a more regular source of financing.

Preparation for the 2009 survey will include at least one community meeting, following the protocol developed for the 2007 Delta Rural Poll. The new Coordinating Committee will determine the time and place for the meeting(s). The Coordinating Committee will discuss solidifying the Advisory Board that was discussed and approved last year, but which has not been created.

### **Conclusion**

The completion of the 2007 Delta Rural Poll survey was a milestone for the project. The Delta Rural Poll began in 2003 with sufficient funding and a plan to complete two surveys, which were done in 2003 and 2005. The 2007 survey shows the project can continue beyond its original vision. Much remains to be done, however, to ensure the long-term sustainability of the project. The Division of Social Sciences continues to attract highly qualified and engaged young faculty, and the Delta Rural Poll can benefit from the contributions they can make to this project. Under the direction of Ms. Deborah Moore, the CCED has taken on a new vitality in Delta communities, and the Delta Rural Poll can play an integral role in project planning and design.

The Delta Rural Poll continues to benefit the people of the Mississippi Delta and beyond. By collecting a wealth of high quality social science data on the Mississippi Delta region, the Delta Rural Poll has enhanced the ability of faculty and students at DSU to carry out research and has increased the knowledge about the Mississippi Delta both in local communities and in national and international circles, through presentations at conferences and publications. The Delta Rural Poll continues to grow and adapt, creating new outlets to distribute findings. The coming year will provide new challenges, and the faculty and students who work on the Delta Rural Poll look forward to building on the groundwork that has been established and continuing to work together to advance community development in the Mississippi Delta region.

The Faculty Committee for the 2007 survey:

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