
The Delta Rural Poll is administered by the faculty associates at the Center for Community and Economic Development (CCED) at Delta State University (DSU), with assistance from the DSU Division of Social Sciences. The survey was conducted by the Social Science Research Center at Mississippi State University under the supervision of Dr. Wolfgang Frese. The CCED faculty associates acknowledge and thank the Mid-South Delta Consortium for providing funding for the Delta Rural Poll.

Reports produced by the Center for Community and Economic Development have been peer reviewed by colleagues at Delta State University. Any questions, suggestions, or concerns should be sent directly to the author.

All of the Center’s research reports detailing the Delta Rural Poll results are posted on the Center’s World Wide Web page at http://www.deltastate.edu/cced/ruralpoll.htm.
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The Mississippi Delta
Executive Summary

The Delta region of the state of Mississippi is an area in transition. Known for its agricultural past, the area continues to exhibit characteristics typical of rural America, and agriculture remains an important part of the area’s economy and culture. Yet, employment patterns in the Delta today suggest most residents make a living in administrative and service jobs, much like the rest of America.

Data from the 2003 Delta Rural Poll, a survey of 809 residents of 11 northwest Mississippi counties, show that two-thirds of Deltans work full- or part-time, and among those that are employed, over two-thirds work in professional, administrative, sales and service occupations. About one-fourth work in skilled or manual labor positions. Among those that are not employed, two-fifths are retired, just less than one in ten are full-time homemakers, and about 18% are unemployed, three-fourths of whom are not looking for work.

Employment conditions in the Delta show great disparities by race. While 72% of white Deltans are employed, only 65% of black residents have a job. Moreover, over 25% of whites own a business or farm, while less than 5% of blacks are entrepreneurs. Whites have higher rates of employment than blacks in professional, technical, administrative and sales positions, while blacks have higher rates in skilled and manual labor. Finally, about one-third of whites earn annual incomes higher than $60,000, about one-third earn incomes between $30,000 and $60,000 and about one-third have incomes below $30,000. Among black Deltans, four in five have an annual income below $30,000, while less than 5% have an income above $60,000.

Interestingly, despite disadvantages in employment, a higher proportion of blacks than whites tended to believe the quality of their lives was improving. While most respondents indicated an improvement in the quality of their lives, there were differences if the data are broken down into different time frames. About 80% of all respondents (84% of blacks, 76% of whites) indicated they were better off today than their parents were at the same age. By contrast, only 57% of all respondents (60% of blacks, 51% of whites) believed they were better off today than five years ago. Almost 20% of both races said they were worse off than five years ago. And 37% of all respondents (34% of blacks, 42% of whites) said their community was worse off today than one year ago. Only 21% of respondents believed their community was better off than one year ago. Blacks believed their community was better off at twice the rate of whites (25.5% of blacks, 12.8% of whites). Finally, most Deltans remain optimistic about the future. Over three-fourths expect the quality of their lives to improve in the next ten years, including 84% of black respondents and 65% of white Deltans.
EMPLOYMENT AND QUALITY OF LIFE IN THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA: A Summary Report from the 2003 Delta Rural Poll

Alan W. Barton, Ph.D.

Introduction

Many rural dwellers in the United States are finding life increasingly stressful. The bucolic image of small-town America is, for many who live in small towns, quickly being erased and replaced by a mixture of influences more reminiscent of suburban (large chain retailers, strip malls, housing tracts) and urban (crime and narcotics, failing schools, traffic) America. Agricultural industrialization and land consolidation have taken away individual livelihoods for many rural families, leaving service sector wage employment or low-skill industrial work as the only alternatives for many people. And in some regions, even these jobs are becoming increasingly scarce.

The changing nature of the work force directly affects people’s perceptions about the quality of their lives. As jobs are downgraded, people must find additional work to support their families, leaving them less free time, more stressed, and likely facing a range of social problems. People’s health care options, already constrained in rural areas, are reduced if they lose health insurance coverage along with their job. Many people have chosen to leave rural areas to seek opportunities elsewhere. Out-migration is particularly high in the Midwest and the Lower Mississippi Valley, including the Delta region of Mississippi. This feeds a vicious cycle in which depopulation makes rural areas less attractive to employers, so fewer locate in these regions and more leave to take advantage of more abundant and cheaper labor overseas.

Given this backdrop of changing conditions in rural America, as well as the history of persistent poverty in the Mississippi Delta region, we asked residents of 11 Delta counties to assess their quality of life and employment situation as part of the 2003 Delta Rural Poll. This policy report summarizes and analyzes their responses.
Who Responded to the Delta Rural Poll?

The Delta Rural Poll’s first annual survey was conducted in October and November, 2003. The survey was administered by telephone to a sample of 809 randomly selected residents of eleven counties in the Delta region of Mississippi. Respondents were all over 18 years of age, 71% of respondents were female, 61% were black, and 60% worked full- or part-time during 2002.¹ Half of the respondents had a high school diploma or less, while one quarter had a college degree or higher, and the remainder had some college. Nearly two-thirds earned less than $30,000 total household income in 2002, 15% had a household income above $60,000, and 21.5% had a household income between $30,000 and $60,000.

One-quarter of the respondents lived in the North Delta (Tunica, Coahoma, Quitman and Tallahatchie counties), two-thirds lived in the Mid-Delta region (Bolivar, Sunflower, Leflore and Washington counties), and only 7.5% lived in the South Delta (Humphreys, Sharkey and Issaquena counties). Thirty-eight percent lived in larger towns (more than 10,000 residents), 28% lived in small villages (less than 1,000 residents), and 34% lived in towns with between 1,000 and 10,000 residents. Two-thirds lived within city limits, 11% lived outside a city on a farm, and 21.5% lived outside a city, not on a farm. Sixty percent had lived in the same community for more than twenty years, while 12.6% lived in their current community less than five years. See Barton (2004) for a more thorough analysis of the sample.

Employment in the Delta

Employment is an important factor that contributes to quality of life. Of course, an income is essential, and benefits such as health insurance and retirement bring greater security, but among the other amenities that a job provides are a purpose, a place to go, interaction with colleagues, and opportunities for learning. For many people, their job forms an important part of their identity; this speaks to the meaningful role that work plays in people’s lives. I begin with an analysis of the employment situation in the Delta, as reported by Delta Rural Poll respondents, before assessing their perceptions about the quality of their lives.

¹ It is common for females and whites to be overrepresented in a sample of this nature. To account for this, we applied a weighting procedure, which aligns sample characteristics with data from the 2000 U.S. Census, for analytical purposes. The data reported in this paragraph are unweighted; however, the Employment and Quality of Life sections apply the weighting procedure. See Barton (2004) for a description of the weighting procedure.
Many Delta residents express the perception that jobs are scarce in the region, particularly as businesses shut down and move overseas. Nevertheless, as shown in Figure 1, two-thirds of respondents said that they and/or their spouse were employed full-time, part-time or seasonally during 2002. While this general rate of employment is reasonable, this statistic does not address distributional issues, such as: What are the characteristics of those who have a job versus those who do not? and Who has the better jobs?

**Race and Employment** Race is an important characteristic that exerts a strong influence on conditions in the Delta. Employment status by race is shown in Figure 2. Sixty-five percent of Black respondents reported that they and/or their spouses were employed during 2002, while seventy-two percent of white respondents reported the same thing. These figures are comparable to national employment figures; according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2003), the employment-population ratio in December 2002 for males age 20 and over was 72.3% for whites and 63.6% for blacks. The difference, however, is that African-Americans are the majority race in the Delta, comprising over 60% of the population in all eleven counties in the survey, while blacks make up about 13% of the population nationwide (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). As a result, the lower rate of employment for blacks translates to a higher overall rate of Deltans without jobs.

**Entrepreneurship** Among all respondents that were employed, about 12% owned a business or farm in the Delta. Among business and farm owners, there is a substantial difference by race. About
one-quarter of white respondents owned a business or farm in the Delta, while less than five percent of black respondents were business or farm owners (see Figure 3).

*Occupations*  What do people do in the Delta? Due to the region’s history and rural character, many associate the Delta with agriculture, and a drive through the region today confirms that much of the land is still used for farming. Yet, only 6.5% of respondents reported working in farming. While this is higher than the national average, it is probably lower than most people would expect and an indicator of the changing nature of employment in the Delta region.

Table 1 shows the occupations reported by respondents to the Delta Rural Poll. As with the rest of the U.S., many people in the Delta are employed today in administrative and service-sector occupations. Nearly two-fifths of respondents work in professional and administrative positions, while an additional 30% work in administrative support, sales, and service jobs.

Close to half of the white respondents reported holding a professional, technical or administrative position, compared to one-third of black respondents. Overall, nearly 70% of white respondents held professional, administrative (including administrative support) or sales jobs, while about half of black respondents reported jobs in these categories. By contrast, nearly one-third of employed black respondents worked as skilled or manual laborers, compared to about 15% of white respondents.

Figure 3: Ownership of Businesses/Farms in the Delta, By Race
Table 1: Occupational Category for Delta Residents, by Race
(Percent of Employed Respondents)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>All Respondents (N = 492)</th>
<th>Race (N = 489)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional/Technical/</td>
<td>38.8</td>
<td>47.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative</td>
<td></td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative Support</td>
<td></td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales</td>
<td></td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service</td>
<td></td>
<td>12.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled Labor</td>
<td></td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manual Labor</td>
<td></td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farming</td>
<td></td>
<td>47.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Weighted Data
Source: 2003 Delta Rural Poll

The disparity in employment status, entrepreneurship and occupation in part accounts for the substantial differences between whites and blacks in income; as shown in Figure 4. Slightly more than one-third of white Delta households have incomes over $60,000 and slightly less than one-third fall into the middle- and low-income categories, while four-fifths of black Delta households have incomes below $30,000 per year, and less than five percent have incomes above $60,000 per year.

Unemployment  Among those that were not employed in 2002, two-fifths were retired, nearly one-quarter were disabled, about one in ten were full-time homemakers, and about seven percent

![Figure 4: 2002 Total Household Income, by Race](source)

Weighted Data; N = 673, Missing = 128
Source: 2003 Delta Rural Poll
Table 2: Employment Status during 2002 of Respondents to the 2003 Delta Rural Poll

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment Status</th>
<th>Percent of Employed</th>
<th>Percent of Owns a Farm or Business</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employed (n = 497)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed, Does Not Own a Farm or Business</td>
<td>88.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owns a Farm or Business in the Delta (n = 59)</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owns a Farm</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>30.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owns a Business</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>57.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owns Both a Farm and a Business</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Employed (n = 304)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>41.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disabled</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time Homemaker</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed (n = 53)</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed, Looking for Work</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>22.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed, Not Looking for Work</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>77.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Weighted Data, N = 801
Source: 2003 Delta Rural Poll

were students (Table 2). The rest (17.6%) were unemployed. Over three-fourths of the unemployed were not looking for work in 2002.

While the employment rate in the Delta on the whole is good, the data presented here suggest that black Delta residents lack the same employment opportunities as whites, reflected in the low rates of business ownership, lower employment rates, higher rates of employment as laborers and lower rates in professional positions, and substantially lower total household income among black families.

Figure 5: Effect of Education on Employment Status

Weighted Data; N = 798, Missing = 3
Source: 2003 Delta Rural Poll
Education and Employment  Many Delta residents believe that education is the key to a better job and a better life. Data from the Delta Rural Poll support this notion. As shown in Figure 5, those with some college are more likely to have a job than those with only a high school diploma or less. In addition, Figure 6 indicates that more years of education translate into higher earnings.

Among those with a high school diploma or less, over four-fifths earn less than $30,000 annually, while less than five percent earn more than $60,000. One’s chance of earning more increases with education, and among those with graduate or professional degrees, nearly half earn more than $60,000 per year, while less than one-quarter earn less than $30,000 annually. Among college graduates, over 70% make more than $30,000 per year.

The data shown in Figure 7 suggest that education’s benefits are not evenly distributed, however. A substantially lower percentage of black respondents had completed college or graduate/professional school than white respondents, and a much higher percentage of black respondents than white respondents reported their highest educational level as a high school degree or less. Perhaps education is a ticket to employment and a higher income, but whites in the Delta continue to have more access to this opportunity than African Americans.
Quality of Life Indicators

Given the employment situation in the Delta, how do residents perceive their quality of life? Of course, employment is not the only factor that affects quality of life; some Deltans might consider involvement in community groups and activities, a happy marriage and stable family, good health, or status in the community to be equally or more important. Nevertheless, one’s job is an important factor that affects one’s ability to lead a happy life.

In the big picture, Deltans believe the quality of their lives is improving, and they are optimistic that things will continue to improve in the future (Figure 8). Nearly four out of five respondents believe they are better off than their parents were at the same age, and almost the same proportion expect to be better off in ten years time. In the short run, however, about one in five respondents have experienced a recent decline in the quality of their lives, and only 57% believe they are better off today than five years ago. One quarter believe they lives have stayed about the same in the past five years.

Race and Quality of Life  Given the inequities noted in employment, are African Americans more likely to report lower quality of life? Figure 9 shows that equal proportions of blacks and whites report a decline in their quality of life in the past five years; however, only about half of the white respondents thought they were better off today than five years ago, while 60% of black respondents rated their life better today than five years ago.

![Figure 8: Quality of Life Assessment Compared to Five Years Ago, to Parents at the Same Age, and Expected Status Ten Years from Now](image-url)
Likewise, blacks were more likely than whites to perceive their quality of life today as better than their parents, although the vast majority in both groups believed things have improved. Slightly more than three-fourths of white respondents perceived themselves to be better off than their parents were at the same age, while 84% of blacks held this same opinion. Looking to the future, black Deltans showed substantially more optimism. As shown in Figure 10, about 85% of black respondents indicated they expected their quality of life to improve over the next ten years, while only 65% of whites believed their lives would improve. One quarter of white respondents said they expected their quality of life to remain the same in the next ten years, while only 10% of black respondents expected things to remain the same.
Employment, Income and Quality of Life  The effects of employment and income on quality of life are shown in Figure 11. As would be expected, those with a job are much more likely to indicate an improvement in their quality of life over the past five years, as are those with incomes over $30,000 per year. Sixty-three percent of employed respondents indicated they were better off today than five years ago, and an additional twenty percent said their quality of life was about the same. Among those without a job, only 43.5% said they were better off, and 33.6% said they were about the same. Nearly one quarter of those not employed said they were worse off than five years ago. Among those earning over $30,000 per year, two-thirds indicated the quality of their lives had improved over the past five years. About half of those with incomes under $30,000 felt their lives were better today than five years ago. About one quarter of those with incomes below $30,000 said their life was about the same and about one quarter said they were worse off than five years ago.

Community Characteristics and Quality of Life  Table 3 summarizes opinions on quality of life by place of residence (See also Appendix A). Comparing quality of life today versus five years ago, opinions did not vary at all between residents of the North, Central and South Delta. There was some variation in response to the question comparing quality of life today with the respondents’ parents at the same age; residents in South Delta counties were more likely to indicate an improvement, although more than three-fourths of the residents in all regions said
their lives were better than their parents. Residents of the South Delta were also the most optimistic that their lives would be better off in ten years time, but again over three-fourths expressed this belief in all regions.

In addition to individual quality of life, respondents were asked whether their communities had improved in the past year. Results are summarized in Figure 12. Among all respondents, about one-fifth believed their community had improved over the past year, while nearly two-fifths
thought their community was worse than a year ago, and just over two-fifths indicated their community was about the same as a year ago. African Americans had a more positive opinion of changes in their community than whites. One quarter of black respondents believed their community had improved over the past year, twice the rate of white respondents. By contrast, 42.0 percent of white respondents believed their community was worse off than a year ago, compared to 34.2% of black respondents.

The size of a community also affected how residents perceived changes in their community over the past year. As shown in Figure 13, residents of smaller communities, less than 1,000 residents, were more likely to believe their community had improved over the past year. Nearly 30% of those in small communities indicated an improvement, while less than 15% of those in larger towns, over 10,000 residents, said their community was better off than one year ago. Those living in medium-sized places, between 1,000 and 10,000 residents, fell in the middle – 21% indicated an improvement. Nearly half of the residents of towns over 10,000 believed their community was worse off compared to a year ago, while only 27.4% of those in villages smaller than 1,000 said their community was worse off.

**Conclusion**

The employment and quality of life data presented above present a paradox. Comparing black and white respondents, on the whole whites have a higher rate of employment, they earn substantially more income, they are employed in professional and administrative jobs at a higher...
rate and skilled and manual labor jobs at a lower rate, and they own businesses and farms at a much higher rate. Nevertheless, whites rate their quality of life lower than black respondents, when compared to their parents, when compared to five years ago, and their expectations for the next ten years are lower as well. It should be pointed out that a similar percentage of black and white respondents rated their quality of life as “worse off” – almost one in five when compared to five years ago, and less than one in ten when compared to their parents or when looking ahead ten years. White respondents rated their quality of life “about the same” at a higher rate than black respondents.

One possible explanation ties demographic factors to the issue of quality of life. With the exception of Tunica County, all of the counties in this study have been losing population for many years. It would make sense to assume that some or many of those that leave do so because their quality of life is low; hence, quality of life statistics for those that stayed in the Delta would be inflated. An upcoming report from the Center for Community and Economic Development will explore emigration from the Delta based on results from the 2003 Delta Rural Poll, and may shed light on these dynamics.

A second potential explanation connects current employment and quality of life to historic patterns in the region. It may be that black Deltans continue to be disadvantaged in employment, yet they are better off than in the past. Likewise, while whites hold advantages in the job market, they may believe that things have not improved recently. The fact that only one in eight white respondents believed their community had improved over the past year, while 42% said things had gotten worse, suggests that many whites perceive conditions are changing for the worse, and this affects their individual quality of life. Among black respondents, one in four saw their community improving, while only 34% believed their community was worse off than one year ago, and this is translated into a greater sense that their quality of life is improving, and greater optimism about the future.

The results from the 2003 Delta Rural Poll are intriguing. Delta State University researchers will investigate employment issues in greater detail in the next Delta Rural Poll, scheduled for February, 2005. The 2005 poll will likely include qualitative interviews on employment, which will help us develop explanations for the changing job conditions highlighted in this survey.
### Appendix A: Quality of Life Assessment by County of Residence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status vis a vis:</th>
<th>Parents at Same Age</th>
<th>5 Years Ago</th>
<th>10 Years from Now</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Better Off</td>
<td>About the Same</td>
<td>Worse Off</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolivar</td>
<td>84.9</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coahoma</td>
<td>86.0</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humphreys</td>
<td>93.9</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issaquena</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leflore</td>
<td>85.2</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quitman</td>
<td>73.3</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharkey</td>
<td>80.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunflower</td>
<td>76.1</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tallahatchie</td>
<td>75.0</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunica</td>
<td>68.0</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>79.0</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>12.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>81.3</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Weighted Data;**
- N = 780, Missing = 20
- N = 789, Missing = 12
- N = 688, Missing = 113

Source: 2003 Delta Rural Poll
References


Policy Paper 04-01


Policy Paper 04-02


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