

Rural Public School Dropouts: Findings from High School and Beyond

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Although there has lately been a considerable increase in attention to the dropout problem, a substantial gap in the research literature still remains relative to *rural* dropouts and the unique circumstances of rural schools environment. The present study attempts to address this gap in the research by using the High School and Beyond (HS&B) data base, Sophomore class of 1980, to examine the rural dropout population. Differences between dropouts and stayers from rural schools are examined and discussed. Differences between urban, suburban, and rural dropouts relative to reasons for dropping out, post-school activities, ratings of school conditions, and educational aspirations were also investigated. The results suggest that issues of educational aspirations, student-teacher relationships, and teen pregnancy need to be addressed by those concerned about the rural dropout problem.

DROPOUTS

In recent years, America has invested increased financial and human resources in public schools, and educators have placed a renewed emphasis on achievement and performance standards. These investments are considered by most as necessary and critical for the strengthening of our educational system. However, some educators (Hamilton, 1986; Levin, 1985; and McDill et al., 1986) have expressed their concern over how such developments will affect the "casualties" of our public schools—the students who are already discouraged, already are displaying academic and emotional problems in school. While some components of the new agenda for effective schools may actually *help* these students, the emphasis on more rigorous curricular offerings and higher performance standards may also lead to greater frustration, discouragement and alienation. Too often, this negative cycle leads to a predictable result; the student chooses to drop out of school.

Indeed, the dropout problem has lately received considerable attention, and President Reagan set a national goal of a 90% graduation rate by 1990 (*Tenth Annual Report to Congress*, 1988). In an attempt to determine which students are most at risk of dropping out, recent research has examined the characteristics of dropouts (Rumberger, 1983; Ekstrom et al., 1986). Other studies have focused on the reasons students choose to drop out (Fine, 1986; Peng, 1983) and on the school-related factors, such as discipline practices, that affect student aspirations and dropping out behavior (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). For example, Bachman, Wirtinen, and Green (1972) argued that dropping out results from a "mismatch"

between the school and the child. Wehlage and Rutter (1986) viewed the dropout problem as "growing out of the conflict and estrangement" between the student and the school's rules and environment.

In fact, Morrow (1986) estimated that hundreds of articles have addressed these issues. Nevertheless, a substantial gap in dropout literature exists relative to *rural* dropouts and unique circumstances of rural schools which may contribute to such behavior. Many questions still remain unaddressed: How do graduates and dropouts from rural schools differ in their aspirations and attitudes? Do rural students who drop out differ in their aspirations and attitudes from dropouts in urban areas? Do they drop out for the same reasons? Are they more likely to leave in order to find the type of employment (*e.g.*, wood-cutting, farm work) typically only available in rural areas? The answers to these questions are not merely academic if we seriously intend to offer programs that will keep the at-risk rural student in school.

The present study was designed to address the rural dropout problem by examining the characteristics, attitudes, and school experience of rural dropouts. More specifically, the research reported here was designed to identify:

1. Differences between rural dropouts and their rural counterparts who stayed in school relative to gender, race, grades, socioeconomic status, test scores, self-concept, locus of control, educational aspirations, and ratings of school conditions.
2. Differences between rural dropouts and their urban and suburban counterparts who dropped out of school relative to post-school activities, reasons for

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dropping out, educational aspirations, and ratings of school conditions.

METHOD

The High School and Beyond (HS&B) data from the base-year survey in 1980 and the follow-up survey in 1982 were used for the analyses. The HS&B survey involved a two-stage sampling design in which over 30,000 sophomores from more than 1,000 high schools were surveyed in the spring of 1980. Students still enrolled in base-year schools were surveyed in 1982 along with 2,601 students who had dropped out (Alexander, Natriello, & Pallas, 1985). Respondents to both surveys took a battery of cognitive ability tests and filled out questionnaires covering a wide variety of information on background factors, school experiences, life activities, opinions on school-related factors, and ratings of the importance of various life values (*e.g.*, finding a secure and steady job, finding the right person to marry, or living close to one's parents). Composite measures of self-esteem and locus of control were computed from responses to both the base-year and the follow-up survey. Dropouts were administered a separate questionnaire which contained many of the same items as on the still-in school questionnaire, but also contained questions on reasons for dropping out and on post-school activities.

The HS&B data base contains sample weights which correct for oversampling of policy-relevant minorities and for nonresponse rates. The use of these weights allows one to generalize results to the population of high school sophomores in 1980, approximately 3,800,000 (Alexander et al., 1985). For the present study, a modified version of the sampling weight was employed. The weight for the HS&B cohort participating in both the base-year and follow-up surveys (PANELWT) was divided by the mean weight for these subjects. In this manner, oversampling and nonresponse were corrected while the sample size was preserved (Coladarci & McIntire, 1988). Crosstabular analyses were employed to compare groups on all measures except for self-esteem and locus of control measures. For these psychological scales, t-tests were used for group comparisons.

RESULTS

Differences Between Dropouts and Stayers

In general, results of this study confirmed results obtained previously that indicated there are differences in background characteristics between dropouts and stayers. For example, rural dropouts had lower grades than rural stayers and also lower scores on the HS&B achievement test composite. Also, twice as many dropouts scored in the lower test quartile. Rural dropouts were also more likely to be Hispanic but only slightly more likely to be black or American Indian than graduates. Only slight differences in gender were found, but differences

in socioeconomic status between dropouts and stayers were pronounced. Almost 50% of rural dropouts were from the bottom SES quartile as opposed to 26% of the graduates.

TABLE 1
Dropouts and Graduates from Rural Schools by
Race, Sex, Grades, Test Quartiles

Category	Graduates	Dropouts
	Total N=2048	Total N=587
	Percent	Percent
<u>Race</u>		
Hispanic	12.2	15.8
Am. Indian	1.5	2.4
Asian	.3	.6
Black	7.8	8.6
White	78.2	72.3
Other	.1	.1
<u>Sex</u>		
Male	50.0	51.9
Female	50.0	48.1
<u>Grades</u>		
A's	11.9	.9
A's and B's	20.7	5.8
B's	18.7	12.5
B's and C's	25.3	25.7
C's	12.8	18.3
C's and D's	8.4	22.3
D's	1.7	8.3
Below D's	.5	6.2
<u>Test Score Quartiles</u>		
Lowest	22.6	49.2
Second	24.8	31.1
Third	26.4	15.6
Highest	26.2	4.1
<u>SES Quartiles</u>		
Lowest	26.9	47.5
Second	29.4	27.6
Third	25.3	15.4
Highest	18.4	9.6

Note: Figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Many authors (Bachman et al., 1972; Cevantes, 1965; Rumberger, 1983) have cited low self-esteem as characteristic of dropouts. The results of this study indicated that dropouts did have lower self-esteem in 1980 but the difference in self-esteem in 1982 was not significant. (See Table 2). Although not evident from Table 2, the self-esteem of dropouts did rise significantly between 1980 and 1982. This is consistent with some findings (Wehlage and Rutter, 1986) which indicated that self-esteem of dropouts may rise after they leave school, thus indicating that dropouts' "lower self-esteem" may be partially a result of negative school experiences rather than a stable personality trait.

TABLE 2
A Comparison of Self-Concept and Locus of Control for Dropouts and Stayers

Measure	Stayers N=5862		Dropouts N=982	
	M	SD	M	SD
Self-Concept				
1980	.020	.71	.195*	.75
1982	.035	.73	.038	.75
Locus of Control				
1980	-.019	.65	-.299*	.67
1982	-.004	.67	-.272*	.74

* = significant difference between groups at the .01 level.

Note: Lower scores on self-concept variable indicate more *positive* self-esteem. Higher scores on locus of control scale indicate a greater sense of *internal* control. Sample sizes varied slightly depending upon analysis.

Rural dropouts and stayers were also compared on the HS&B locus of control scale. For both 1980 and 1982, stayers scored significantly higher on *internal* control. This finding is consistent with research depicting dropouts as seeing their lives as out their control (Ekstrom et al., 1986; Rumberger, 1983). Interestingly, neither stayers or dropouts showed a significant gain in internal control from 1980 to 1982. Further research is needed to determine whether dropouts gain more of a sense of control over their lives the longer they are separated from the school experience.

Differences between dropouts and stayers on their ratings of school conditions are shown in Table 3. Dropouts were harsher critics of their schools. A greater percent of dropouts than stayers rated conditions of buildings and libraries as poor. They were strong critics of their schools' instruction and reputation in the community.

In addition, they gave lower ratings to effectiveness of discipline and were almost twice as likely to give low marks to teachers' interest in students and to the fairness of discipline. Only in the area of school spirit were dropouts' ratings comparable to those of stayers.

These results are consistent with the common view of the dropout as alienated from the school environment. Nevertheless, educators need to be concerned about the low marks that both dropouts and stayers gave to fairness and effectiveness of discipline. More than half of both groups (approximately 55% of stayers and 60% of dropouts) rated fairness and effectiveness of discipline as "poor" or "fair". Regardless of our "objective" appraisal of the accuracy of this assessment, their perceptions of schools' discipline procedures need to be a matter of concern.

Rural dropouts and stayers also differed on their educational aspirations. Results of respondents' ratings of "lowest level of schooling with which you would be satisfied" are shown in Table 4.

TABLE 3
A Comparison of Dropouts and Stayers on their Ratings of School Conditions (Number and percent rating school condition as *poor*)

Measure	Stayers N=5864 ^a		Dropouts N=968 ^a	
	Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent
School Condition				
Condition of building	8.6	13.0*		
Library facilities	6.8	9.4*		
Academic instruction	7.4	14.4*		
School's reputation				
in community	8.5	14.2*		
Teacher's interest				
in students	11.2	24.3*		
Effectiveness of				
discipline	11.7	17.3*		
Fairness of discipline	20.8	32.0*		
School spirit	9.6	11.4		

* = significant difference between groups, p. 05.

a = actual N varied slightly depending upon analysis.

TABLE 4
A Comparison of Dropouts and Stayers from Rural Schools on Educational Aspirations (Percent rating the lowest level of schooling with which they would be satisfied.)

Measure	Stayers Total N=5723		Dropouts N=928	
	Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent
Level of Schooling				
Less than H.S.	3.9	12.4		
H.S. only	46.7	62.4		
Vocational School				
(less than 2 years)	5.5	5.3		
Vocational School				
(more than 2 years)	7.2	4.7		
College (less than				
2 years)	6.9	5.7		
College (more than				
2 years)	12.8	5.0		
College Degree	12.5	2.4		
Master's Degree	2.9	1.0		
Doctoral Degree	1.6	1.1		

Approximately three times as many dropouts as stayers responded that they would be satisfied with less than a high school education. Fifteen percent more dropouts indicated that they would be satisfied with completing high school only. In addition, while many dropouts had aspirations toward attending vocational school, only 2.4% of dropouts (as opposed to 12.5% of stayers) would be dissatisfied if they did not obtain a college degree. Clearly, if the labor market is going to demand increasingly higher levels of education (Rumberger, 1987), rural

educators must address the depressed educational aspirations of rural high school dropouts.

Differences Between Rural, Urban, and Suburban Dropouts

Dropouts from urban, suburban, and rural schools reported different reasons for leaving school. (See Table 5).

TABLE 5 -13

A Comparison of Dropouts from Urban, Suburban, and Rural Schools Relative to Reasons for Dropping Out. (Percent responding "yes" to suggested reason)

Measure	Urban N=538	Suburban N=829	Rural N=664
Reasons	Percent	Percent	Percent
Expelled	11.5	12.4	8.1
Married	14.4	18.7	25.9
Pregnant	10.8	9.5	12.0
Poor grades	32.3	31.5	30.4
Support family	12.6	8.9	9.9
Offered job	17.3	19.8	20.8
Armed services	6.2	5.5	4.2
Moved from area	5.1	4.5	3.6
School wasn't for me	30.4	30.1	29.2
School too dangerous	3.6	2.8	1.4
Wanted to travel	5.5	7.0	5.4
Friends were dropping out	3.1	2.6	1.7
Didn't get into program	6.0	8.6	4.6
Disability or illness	4.4	3.9	5.2
Couldn't get along with teachers	13.8	15.9	16.0
Couldn't get along with students	5.2	7.1	6.4

a general equivalency certificate!), taking vocational or technical courses, being in the armed services, and "with job, but not working." Dropouts from rural schools more frequently engaged in the postschool activities of homemaking, looking for work, and taking a break from school.

In their ratings of school conditions, dropouts from urban, suburban, and rural schools were more consistent. (See Table 7).

Urban dropouts gave slightly higher ratings to conditions of buildings, effectiveness of discipline and to school spirit. Suburban dropouts tended to be less severe in their criticism of school conditions but did give slightly lower marks to their school's reputation in the community.

TABLE 6

A Comparison of Dropouts from Urban, Suburban, and Rural Schools Relative to Postschool activities. (Percent responding "yes" to activity)

Measure	Urban N=569	Suburban N=868	Rural N=678
Activity	Percent	Percent	Percent
Working	46.4	49.6	42.8
Taking college courses	4.0	4.6	1.2
Taking voc. or tech courses	7.2	8.1	6.7
Apprenticeship	3.1	1.2	1.9
Armed services	3.3	5.3	2.5
Homemaker	14.5	14.5	19.7
With job, but not working	4.4	4.9	4.5
Looking for work	27.1	24.4	29.9
Taking a break from school	9.8	7.1	11.2

TABLE 7

A Comparison of Dropouts from Urban, Suburban, and Rural Schools on Their Ratings of School Conditions. (Number and percent rating school condition as *poor*.)

Measure	Urban N=512	Suburban N=795	Rural N=643
School Condition	Percent	Percent	Percent
Condition of building	13.4	10.5	13.0
Library facilities	9.5	7.7	9.4
Academic instruction	11.3	12.7	14.4
School's reputation in community	13.9	16.9	14.2
Teacher's interest in students	21.0	21.1	24.3
Effectiveness of discipline	18.5	14.9	17.3
Fairness of discipline	29.4	28.8	32.0
School spirit	13.1	12.5	11.4

Students from urban schools were more likely than their counterparts to report poor grades, having to support a family, joining the armed services, moved from area, school wasn't for me, school was too dangerous, or friends were dropping out, as a reason for dropping out. Those from suburban schools were most likely to cite being expelled, wanted to travel, didn't get into program, or couldn't get along with students as reasons. Rural students were most likely to cite getting married, pregnancy, being offered a job, disability or illness, and couldn't get along with teachers as reasons for dropping out. As is evident from Table 5, the dropouts collectively most often identified poor grades and "school wasn't for me" as reasons for leaving.

Dropouts also varied in their postschool activities. A higher percentage of those from urban than suburban or rural schools reported being involved in apprenticeships. Suburban school dropouts were most likely to report working, taking college courses (presumably after receiving

Rural dropouts were more likely than their urban and suburban counterparts to rate as poor their school's academic instruction, teacher's interest in students, and fairness of discipline.

Dropouts from urban, suburban, and rural schools also differed in their educational aspirations. (See Table 8).

TABLE 8

A Comparison of Dropouts from Urban, Suburban, and Rural Schools on Educational Aspirations. (Percent rating the lowest level of schooling with which they would be satisfied)

Measure	Urban	Suburban	Rural
	N=517	N=800	N=646
Level of Schooling	Percent	Percent	Percent
Less than H.S.	9.1	8.3	12.7
H.S. only	38.0	43.9	51.5
Vocational School (less than 2 years)	6.3	7.0	5.4
Vocational School (more than 2 years)	15.6	10.1	11.7
College (less than 2 years)	2.4	4.3	3.1
College (more than 2 years)	7.6	9.7	6.5
College degree	10.2	8.6	6.9
Master's degree	4.6	2.3	1.3
Doctoral degree	6.2	5.8	.9

Dropouts from rural schools had the lowest aspirations. Approximately 13% indicated that they would be satisfied with less than a high school education, and over 50% reported that they would be satisfied with high school only. On the other end of the aspirations continuum, only 7% (as opposed to 10% of urban dropouts and 9% of suburban dropouts) indicated that they would be satisfied only if they received a college degree.

SUMMARY

Results of this study are best viewed as exploratory. The High School and Beyond data set, as carefully constructed and as rich in information as it is, does have limitations for the study of dropouts. For example, it is difficult to use HS&B to investigate the particular characteristics of school environment that influence dropping out. Perhaps its most basic limitation, however, is that it deals with the population of dropouts in general, while some research has indicated that dropout prevention efforts must be tailored to the unique characteristics of both the student and the school environment (Ekstrom et al., 1986; Mann, 1986; Hahn et al., 1987). Also,

when using HS&B to investigate a particular subgroup (e.g., the female, black, rural dropout), the small sample size leads to unacceptably large standard errors (Barro & Kolstad, 1987). Nevertheless, HS&B is extremely useful in identifying general patterns and issues related to dropping out of school.

The results of this study suggest have implications for assessing the rural dropout problem and for future research. First, some of the findings reinforce the stereotype of dropouts as having lower grades, lower test scores, as being from homes of low socioeconomic status, as being more external in locus of control, and as having lower self-esteem than high school graduates. In regard to self-esteem, however, differences found in 1980 were not present in 1982, thus raising suggesting that dropouts' lower self-esteem may be partly in response to school environments.

Second, dropouts from all subgroups reported "having poor grades" and "school wasn't for me" as the primary reasons for dropping out. However, students from rural schools cited marriage and pregnancy as reasons more frequently than their urban and suburban counterparts. Since support and social services for pregnant teenagers and young married couples may be less available and less accessible in rural communities, these issues need to be considered and addressed in rural states and rural regions of states.

Rural dropouts were also more likely to cite "being offered a job" and "couldn't get along with teachers" as reasons for dropping out. Indeed, part-time jobs, such as farm work, are often available to many rural youth. When combined with other factors—such as low grades and frustration with school—the lure of work is undoubtedly tempting. But, the economic consequences of dropping out have been documented (Levin, 1985), and educators need to counterbalance the temptation of work and money if they wish to keep rural youth in school. Perhaps a more realistic balance of work and study—with more options available for obtaining necessary skills while working (e.g., a six-year program instead of the traditional four) would keep more rural youth in school and give them better prospects for the future. It also appears that attempts at "mentoring," or fostering more positive relationships with teachers or other adults might result in more rural youth completing their education (Wehlage, 1983).

All of these considerations need to be addressed through further research and with samples other than that of High School and Beyond. Particular attention should be given to studying those school experiences that tend to diminish rural youth's self-esteem and educational aspirations and which influence them to seek more self-reinforcing experiences through work, marriage, or starting a family. Also, since marriage and pregnancy appeared more often as issues of rural dropouts, special and considerable attention needs to be directed at research relative to the unique problems of the rural *female* dropout. Results of this study indicate that factors in rural schools and communities may be exacerbating the female dropout problem.

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