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Social engagement and civic participation: Are rural and small town populations really at an advantage?

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Highlights

- ◆ Rural residents are more likely to know all or most of their neighbours and rural residents are more likely to trust their neighbours. However, there is little difference between rural and urban residents in the degree to which they provide help to a neighbour or receive help from a neighbour.
- ◆ Rural residents are more likely to provide unpaid volunteer work for an organization but rural residents are no more likely than urban residents to give unpaid help to people that they know (like relatives, neighbours or friends).
- ◆ Rural residents are more likely to have a strong sense of belonging to their local community.
- ◆ However, there is no difference between rural and urban residents in terms of the degree of social isolation from friends or relatives, the level of political involvement and the levels of trust toward other people.

Introduction

Rural and small town areas are often portrayed as the most fertile grounds for community involvement, volunteering activities, neighbouring and, more generally, social engagement. Moreover, small town and rural area residents are commonly perceived as friendlier, warmer and more family oriented than their urban counterparts. With the population of Canada becoming increasingly urban and more and more

concentrated within the large Census Metropolitan Areas, such a reality, if accurate, would have detrimental consequences on the level of social engagement in the country. But are these views, that some sociologists have called myths about rural warmth and hospitality (e.g. Gans, 1962), realistic?



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This bulletin uses General Social Survey (GSS), cycle 17 data (Appendix 1) to examine various aspects of social engagement, social cohesion and social participation. It assesses whether residents of rural and small town areas are more likely than residents of larger urban centres to be involved in organizations; to establish and maintain social relationships with friends, relatives and neighbours; to volunteer; to be involved in various social and political activities; and to express trust toward other people.

The topic of this article, social engagement and “social capital”, has received a tremendous amount of attention in the past 10 years. While there are many discussions around the concept of social capital, one way of describing it in a concise manner is to say that “social capital consists of networks of social relations which are characterised by norms of trust and reciprocity” (Stone, 2001). There have been two main reasons for this heightened interest in social capital and social engagement in recent years. First, individuals who are more socially engaged, and communities where social engagement is greater, are perceived to do better on several dimensions (health, economic success, general well-being, etc.). Secondly, social engagement and social capital have been portrayed as declining significantly in the past decades (e.g. Putnam, 2000), which motivated reflections on the causes of this decline and on possible solutions to reverse the trend. One of the factors identified to explain the decline of social engagement has been the rising urbanization of the population. Within this context, this article asks: are rural areas and small towns characterised by a higher level of social engagement and participation than larger urban centres?

Three aspects of social capital are covered in this bulletin:

1. Social participation and social networks;
2. Civic participation; and
3. Sense of belonging and trust.

The first section includes social relationships and mutual aid between family, friends and neighbours. Section two focuses on participation in various voluntary organizations and involvement in political activities. Finally, the third section concentrates on individuals’ attitudes toward their community (sense of belonging) and toward their fellow citizens (sense of trust).

Social participation and social networks

Common views about the greater sociability of rural and small town residents have interested researchers for a long time (see Appendix 2 for the definitions of rural and urban categories). According to Putnam (2000) and to classical urban sociology writings (e.g. Wirth, 1938), residents of large urban metropolitan areas are more likely to be socially isolated or to see friends less often than those living in rural communities. However, many authors have contested this view and have shown with various data sources that residents of urban places are no more isolated from friends or relatives than others (Beggs *et al.*, 1996; Palisi, 1983; Fischer, 1982; Franck, 1980; Korte, 1980). In sum, most studies indicate that social isolation does not vary across the rural-to-urban gradient, at least in the United States.

However, there is some indication that the types of social networks that individuals form do vary across the rural-to-urban gradient. Generally speaking, research shows that the social networks of individuals living in urban places include a lower proportion of kin and neighbours and a greater proportion of friends and acquaintances (Fischer, 1982; Wilson, 1993; Beggs *et al.* 1996). The opposite applies for residents of more rural areas: the proportion of neighbours and family members in their close social networks is relatively greater but the proportion of friends is relatively lower.

The quasi-totality of past studies was based on United States data. What about Canada? Do

residents of rural areas differ from residents of urban areas in their social interactions?

Social relationships with relatives

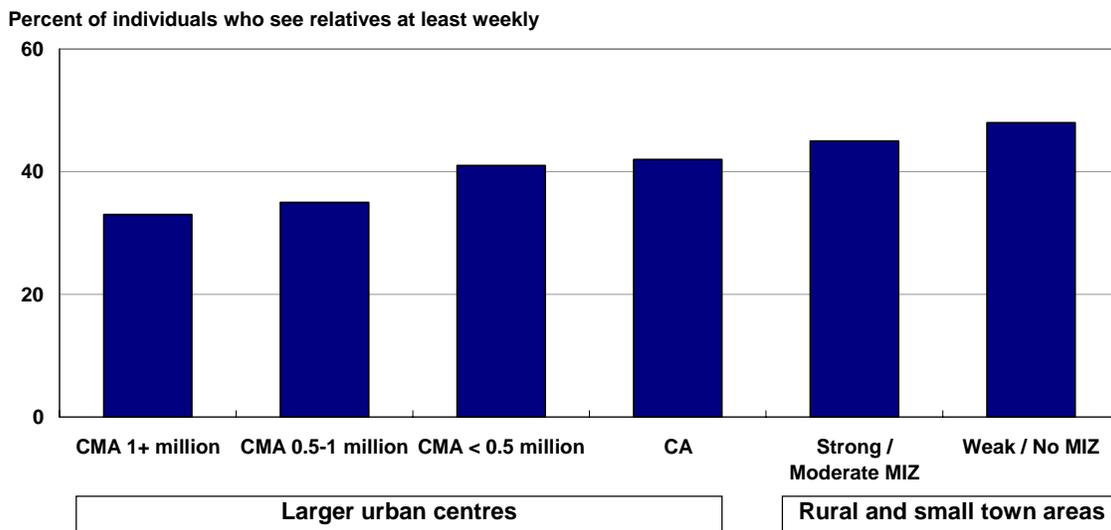
There is not necessarily a perfect correlation between the number of close relatives a person can count on and the quality of the social support that this person will give and/or receive from relatives. However, it is reasonable to think that those who reported that they did not have any relative with whom they felt close could be more vulnerable than others, especially if other social resources are scarce.

Overall, 7 percent of Canadians aged 15 and over said they did not have any relatives they felt close to, that is, who they felt at ease with, who they could talk to about what is on their mind or who they could call for help. The proportion of residents of large metropolitan areas who said that they did not have any relative they felt close to

was not significantly different than the proportion observed for residents of rural areas. This result is consistent with past findings, which indicate that residents of larger places are not more likely to be estranged or isolated from their relatives than others.

However, the frequency with which rural and urban residents saw their relatives face-to-face varied significantly across the rural-to-urban gradient. While 33 percent of the residents of the largest census metropolitan areas (CMAs) (Appendix 2) saw their relatives (living outside their household) a few times a week or every day, this was the case for 42 percent of Census Agglomeration (CA) residents, 45 percent of strong/moderate metropolitan influenced zones (MIZ) residents and 48 percent of the weak/no MIZ residents (Figure 1). This result might be expected as residents of rural areas are likely to live in closer proximity to their relatives.

Figure 1 Seeing relatives at least weekly is more frequent in rural and small town areas, Canada, 2003



Note: A CMA (Census Metropolitan Area) has 100,000 or more residents in the urban core and a CA (Census Agglomeration) has 10,000 to 99,999 residents in the urban core. Both include neighbouring towns and municipalities where more than 50 percent of the workers commute to the urban core. MIZ (Metropolitan Influenced Zones) are assigned on the basis of the share of commuting to any CMA or CA -- Strong/Moderate MIZ includes towns and municipalities with 5 to 49 percent commuting to a CMA or CA and Weak/No MIZ has less than 5 percent commuting to a CMA or CA.
Source: Statistics Canada. General Social Survey, 2003.

Moreover, almost a quarter of residents of large metropolitan areas (23 percent) said they did not see their relatives at all in the past month, a proportion which was almost twice the proportion observed in strong/moderate MIZ (12 percent). In weak/no MIZ, only about one sixth (16 percent) of individuals did not see their relatives in the past month.

The fact that a great proportion of the residents of Canada's largest CMAs are immigrants might explain, at least in part, why a significantly greater proportion of them did not meet face-to-face with their relatives in the previous month. These relatives might live in other countries. There is some empirical support for this hypothesis; if the analysis is restricted only to Canadian-born persons, the proportion of the largest CMA residents who did not see their relatives in the last month falls from 23 percent to 15 percent, a percentage that is not statistically different from that of Canadian-born persons who live in more rural communities.

To summarize, rural residents were not more or less likely to be isolated from their family than urban residents; the same proportion of rural and urban residents said they did not have any

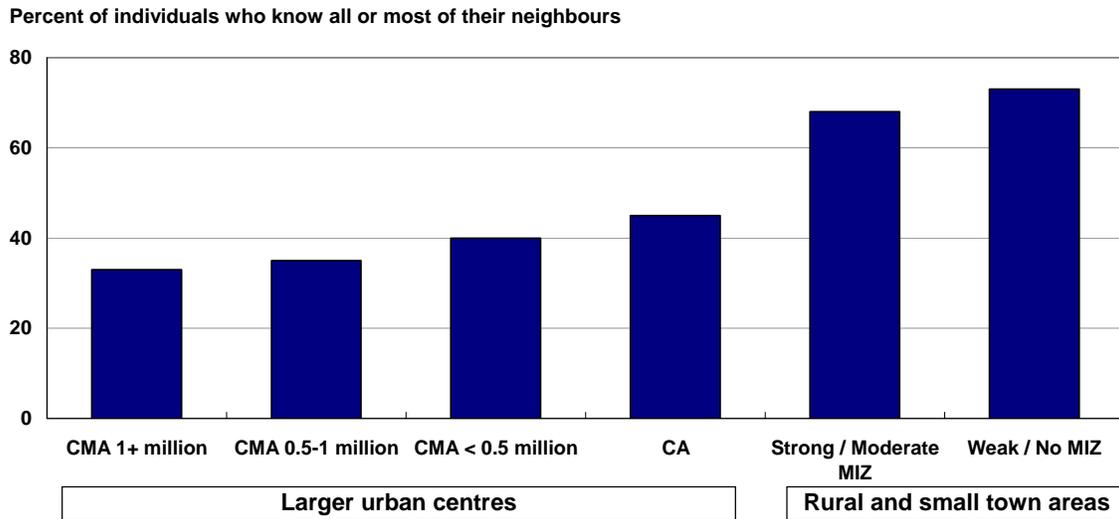
relatives they felt close to. Also, amongst the Canadian-born population the proportion who had not seen their relatives in the past month was the same across the rural-urban spectrum. However, rural residents were more likely to see their relatives very frequently (a few times a week or every day) than individuals who lived in larger urban centres. This might be due to the fact that rural residents tend to live in closer proximity to their relatives. Thus, after accounting for rural residents living in closer proximity to their relatives and the intensity of immigrants in the metro population, rural populations do not appear to have a distinct advantage in terms of contact with family members.

Social relationships with neighbours

The relationship between rural residence and the strength and incidence of neighbourhood relationships is well established in the United States: the more rural a place, the more individuals are likely to know their neighbours and to include them as members of their personal social network (Fischer, 1984; Fischer, 1982; Degenne and Forsé, 1994). This also seems to be the case in Canada.

Figure 2

Residents of rural and small town areas are more likely to know all or most of their neighbours, Canada, 2003



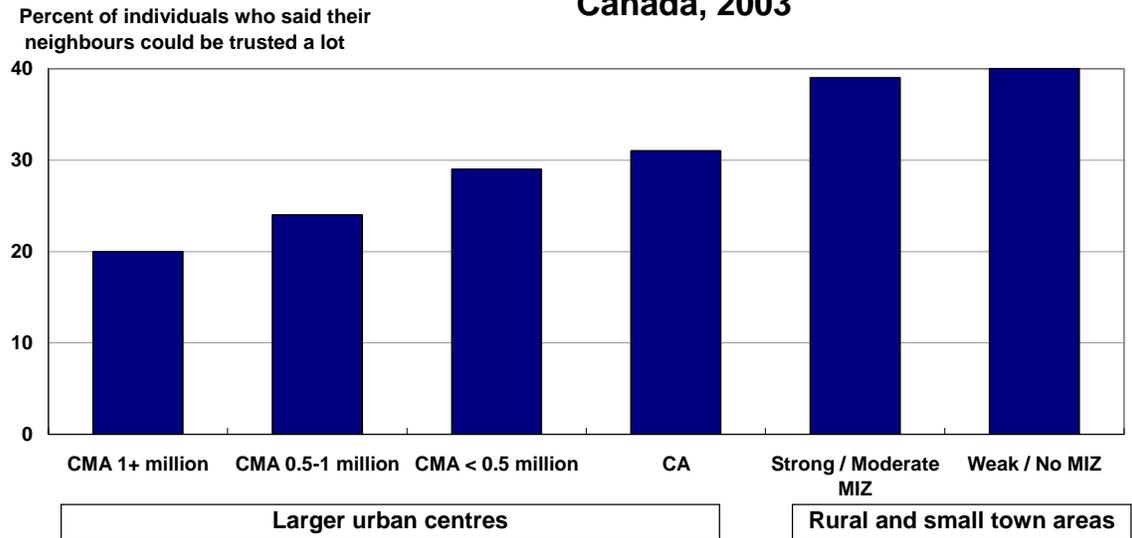
Note: A CMA (Census Metropolitan Area) has 100,000 or more residents in the urban core and a CA (Census Agglomeration) has 10,000 to 99,999 residents in the urban core. Both include neighbouring towns and municipalities where more than 50 percent of the workers commute to the urban core. MIZ (Metropolitan Influenced Zones) are assigned on the basis of the share of commuting to any CMA or CA -- Strong/Moderate MIZ includes towns and municipalities with 5 to 49 percent commuting to a CMA or CA and Weak/No MIZ has less than 5 percent commuting to a CMA or CA.
Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2003.

The more rural a place, the greater the proportion of individuals who said they knew all or most of their neighbours (Figure 2). The difference between the residents of the largest CMAs and those of the strong/moderate MIZ and weak/no MIZ is even more striking if we look at the proportion of individuals who know all their neighbours. In the largest CMAs, 16 percent of individuals said they knew all their neighbours; the corresponding proportion was 52 percent in strong/moderate MIZ and 61 percent in weak/no MIZ. Put differently, the proportion of individuals

living in weak/no MIZ who knew all their neighbours was 45 percentage points greater than those in the largest CMAs.

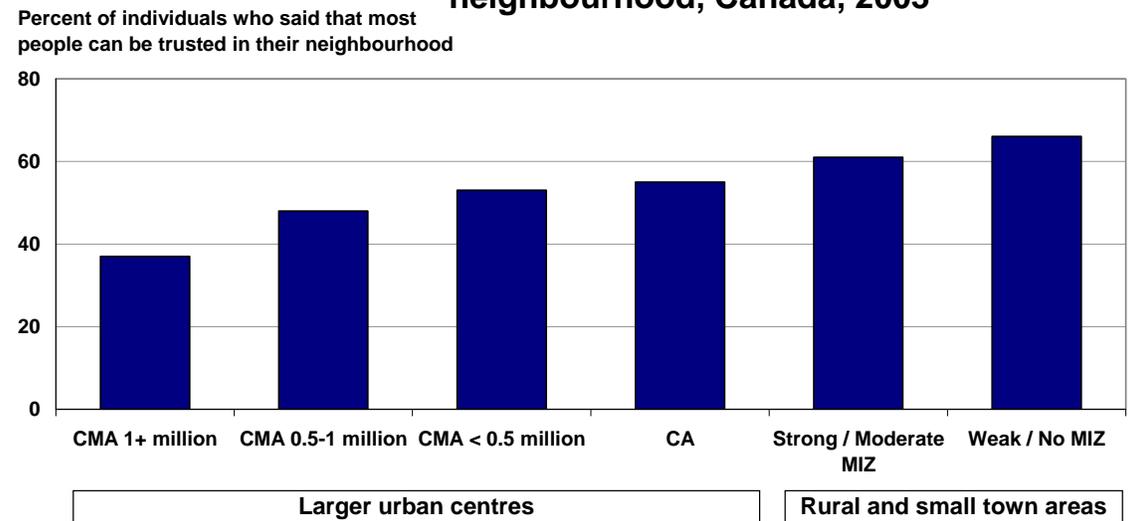
These important differences are reflected in the extent to which rural and urban residents trust their neighbours. Residents of strong/moderate MIZ and residents of weak/no MIZ were much more likely to say that their neighbours could be trusted a lot (Figure 3). They were also more likely to say that they trusted most people in their neighbourhood (Figure 4).

Figure 3 Residents of rural and small town areas are more likely to say that their neighbours can be trusted a lot, Canada, 2003



Note: A CMA (Census Metropolitan Area) has 100,000 or more residents in the urban core and a CA (Census Agglomeration) has 10,000 to 99,999 residents in the urban core. Both include neighbouring towns and municipalities where more than 50 percent of the workers commute to the urban core. MIZ (Metropolitan Influenced Zones) are assigned on the basis of the share of commuting to any CMA or CA -- Strong/Moderate MIZ includes towns and municipalities with 5 to 49 percent commuting to a CMA or CA and Weak/No MIZ has less than 5 percent commuting to a CMA or CA.
Source: Statistics Canada. General Social Survey, 2003.

Figure 4 Rural and small town residents are more likely to say that most people can be trusted in their neighbourhood, Canada, 2003



Note: A CMA (Census Metropolitan Area) has 100,000 or more residents in the urban core and a CA (Census Agglomeration) has 10,000 to 99,999 residents in the urban core. Both include neighbouring towns and municipalities where more than 50 percent of the workers commute to the urban core. MIZ (Metropolitan Influenced Zones) are assigned on the basis of the share of commuting to any CMA or CA -- Strong/Moderate MIZ includes towns and municipalities with 5 to 49 percent commuting to a CMA or CA and Weak/No MIZ has less than 5 percent commuting to a CMA or CA.
Source: Statistics Canada. General Social Survey, 2003.

However, the differences between metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas in the proportions of individuals who know all or most of their neighbours were not so well reflected in the sources of help received and given by rural and urban residents. GSS respondents were asked if someone helped them in the past month,¹ or if they helped someone in any way.² If so, they were asked who helped them or who they helped. Respondents could report several sources or receivers of help (neighbours, relatives, friends, or another person).

Seventeen percent of all Canadians who were helped in the month preceding the survey said they were helped by a neighbour, compared to 69 percent who were helped by a friend and 51 percent by a relative. As previously mentioned, residents of rural areas were much more likely to know a lot of their neighbours and we might expect that they would also be much more likely than residents of more urban places to receive help from their neighbours. Contrary to expectations, among those who received help from anybody in the last month, the proportion of individuals who were helped by a neighbour was only slightly higher in more rural areas (20 percent in weak/no MIZ) than in more urban areas (16 percent in the largest CMAs).

The magnitude of the difference between urban and rural places in terms of help given was similar to that of help received: among those who said that they helped someone in the last month, 17 percent of residents in the largest metropolitan

areas said that they helped a neighbour, compared to 23 percent in both strong/moderate MIZ and weak/no MIZ.

Taken together, these differences in helping and receiving help from neighbours are less pronounced than the differences in the actual number of neighbours known by rural and urban dwellers. The fact that the population density is much greater in urban areas, and as a consequence that there are many more neighbours to know in urban neighbourhoods, might explain, in part, the differences mentioned in this section. In sum, while rural residents are much more likely to know a lot of their neighbours, they are not as different from urban residents in terms of giving help to their neighbours, or receiving help from them, as would be expected. Thus, rural populations are at an advantage with respect to neighbourliness, but not by as much as might be expected.

Social relationships with friends

Overall, about 6 percent of all Canadians said they did not have any close friends they felt at ease with, who they could talk about what is on their mind, or who they could call for help. However, that percentage did not vary across the rural-to-urban gradient. Contrary to the “urban loneliness” thesis, residents of rural areas were as likely to say that they did not have any close friend as residents of the largest CMAs.

Again, the total number of close friends that individuals said they had may not be a perfect indicator of the level of social support available. For example, having five very available close friends might provide someone with more social support than having 10 close friends who are not so available. Does the number of close friends vary across the rural-to-urban gradient? Overall, 70 percent of Canadians said they had three to five close friends or more. That proportion was not significantly different between more and less rural areas. However, the proportion of

1. Specifically, they were asked: “In the past month, did anyone help you... “by doing domestic work, home maintenance or outdoor work?”, “by providing transportation or running errands?”, “by helping with child care?”, “by teaching, coaching or giving you practical advice?”, “by giving you emotional support?”, “by helping you in some other way?”. Respondents who said yes to one of these statements were considered to have been helped by someone in the past month.

2. Respondents were asked: “In the past month did you help anyone”... The same categories of help were read to the respondents. They were asked to consider unpaid help that was not provided as a volunteer for an organization.

individuals who said that they had six or more close friends was slightly greater among those who resided in weak/no MIZ (34 percent) than among those who were living in one of the four largest CMAs of the country (28 percent).

Respondents were also asked how many “other friends who are not relatives or close friends” they had. The percentage of individuals who said they had 11 or more “other friends” was slightly lower in the largest CMAs, but similar across the rest of the rural-urban spectrum.³ Specifically, in Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver and Ottawa-Gatineau (i.e. CMAs with a population of one million or more), 53 percent of individuals aged 15 and over said they had 11 or more “other friends”. This contrasts with 57 percent of residents of strong/moderate MIZ, and 61 percent of residents of weak/no MIZ.

Even if the average number of “other friends” reported was higher in rural areas, the proportion who were helped by a friend – among those who received help in the past month – was slightly higher in more urban places (71 percent) than it was in strong/moderate MIZ areas (66 percent) or in weak/no MIZ areas (67 percent). Among those who provided some form of help in the past month, the proportion of individuals who helped a *friend* was also greater in large metropolitan areas (67 percent) than in strong/moderate MIZ (62 percent) (but the difference with weak/no MIZ residents was not significant).

To summarize, residents in rural areas are not more or less likely to be socially isolated from close friends or other friends than residents of larger urban areas. Individuals living outside the four largest metropolitan areas of the country are slightly more likely to say that they had many “other friends,” but social support provided by

friends is available to the majority of Canadians, wherever they live. Thus, social support from friends is strong in each type of urban and rural area in Canada.

Helping friends, relatives and neighbours

The majority of rural and urban dwellers provide various types of help to their friends, neighbours and relatives; overall, 78 percent of individuals said that they had helped at least one person in the month preceding the survey. There were no significant differences across the rural-to-urban gradient in the extent to which individuals did so. Residents of CMAs and CAs were as likely as residents of strong/moderate MIZ and weak/no MIZ to have helped a friend, a family member, a neighbour or another person. But does the **type** of help provided vary across the rural-to-urban gradient?

Six different types of help were read to respondents, who were asked if they had helped anyone, in the past month, with that kind of help. The six different types of help were: doing domestic work, home maintenance or outdoor work; providing transportation or running errands; helping with child care; teaching, coaching or giving practical advice; giving someone emotional support; or helping a person in some other way.

There were significant differences between the largest CMAs and all other areas for three types of help: domestic work/outdoor work, providing transportation and helping with childcare (Figures 5, 6 and 7). First, residents of the largest CMAs were less likely to provide “domestic work/outdoor work” help than the residents of all other types of areas. However, the residents of all other areas did not differ among themselves in the extent to which they provided this kind of help. The same conclusion applies to “transportation and running errands” and to child care. Residents of the largest CMAs differed from the residents of

3. Put differently, there were no statistical differences between all other types of areas in the extent to which their residents said they had 11 or more friends. Similar results were observed if the number of “other friends” looked at was six and more instead of 11 and more.

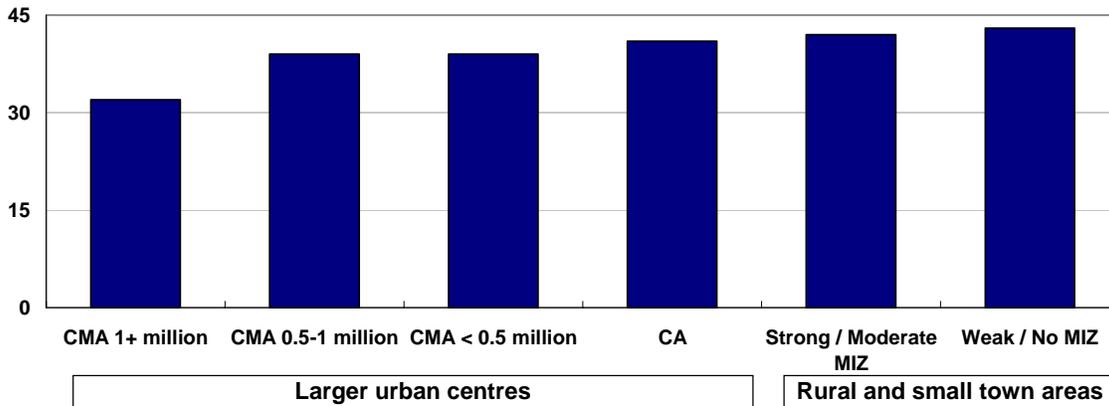
all the other areas, but residents of these less urban areas did not differ among themselves. Residents of strong/moderate MIZ and residents

of weak/no MIZ were more likely to help with child care than residents of largest CMAs.

Figure 5

Residents of the largest urban areas are less likely to help someone by doing domestic work, home maintenance or outdoor work, Canada, 2003

Percent of individuals who helped someone by doing domestic work, home maintenance or outdoor work

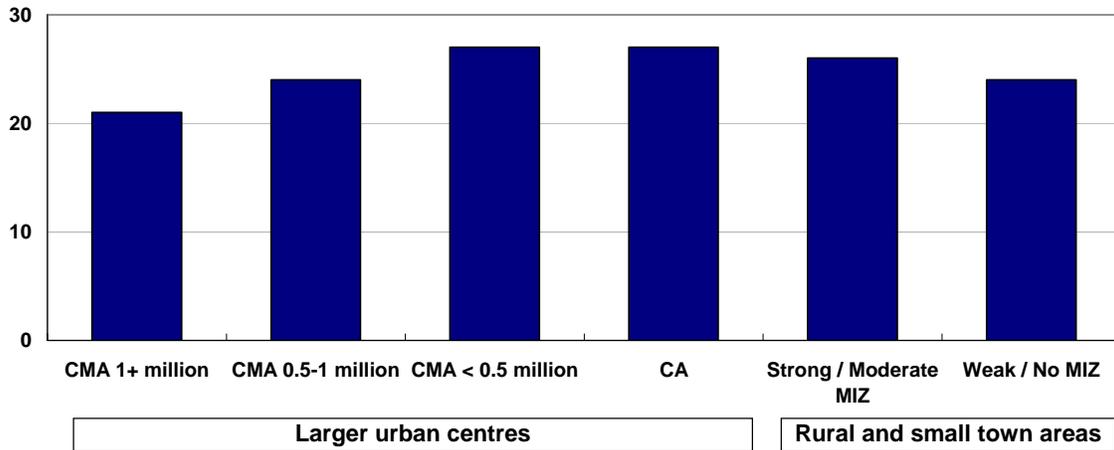


Note: A CMA (Census Metropolitan Area) has 100,000 or more residents in the urban core and a CA (Census Agglomeration) has 10,000 to 99,999 residents in the urban core. Both include neighbouring towns and municipalities where more than 50 percent of the workers commute to the urban core. MIZ (Metropolitan Influenced Zones) are assigned on the basis of the share of commuting to any CMA or CA -- Strong/Moderate MIZ includes towns and municipalities with 5 to 49 percent commuting to a CMA or CA and Weak/No MIZ has less than 5 percent commuting to a CMA or CA.

Source: Statistics Canada. General Social Survey, 2003.

Figure 6 Residents of the largest urban centres are less likely to help someone by providing child care, Canada, 2003

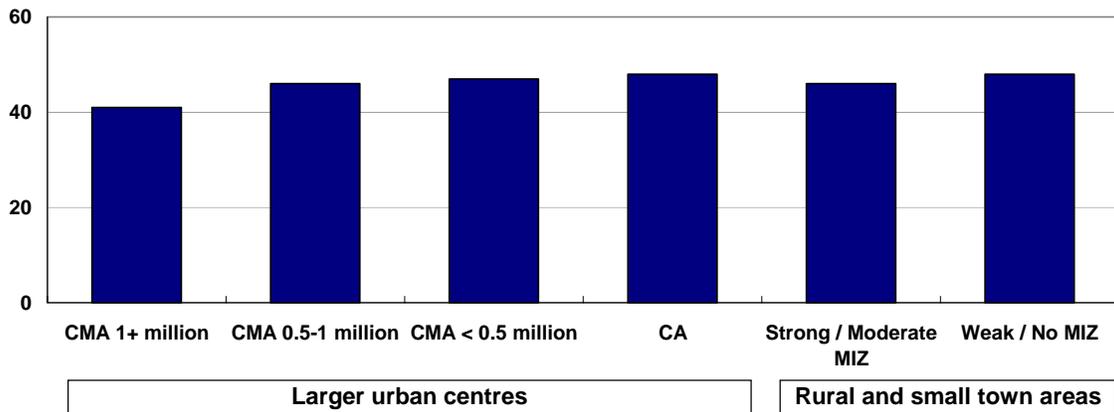
Percent of individuals who helped someone by providing child care



Note: A CMA (Census Metropolitan Area) has 100,000 or more residents in the urban core and a CA (Census Agglomeration) has 10,000 to 99,999 residents in the urban core. Both include neighbouring towns and municipalities where more than 50 percent of the workers commute to the urban core. MIZ (Metropolitan Influenced Zones) are assigned on the basis of the share of commuting to any CMA or CA -- Strong/Moderate MIZ includes towns and municipalities with 5 to 49 percent commuting to a CMA or CA and Weak/No MIZ has less than 5 percent commuting to a CMA or CA.
Source: Statistics Canada. General Social Survey, 2003.

Figure 7 Residents of the largest urban centres are less likely to help someone by providing transportation or running errands, Canada, 2003

Percent of individuals who helped someone by providing transportation or running errands



Note: A CMA (Census Metropolitan Area) has 100,000 or more residents in the urban core and a CA (Census Agglomeration) has 10,000 to 99,999 residents in the urban core. Both include neighbouring towns and municipalities where more than 50 percent of the workers commute to the urban core. MIZ (Metropolitan Influenced Zones) are assigned on the basis of the share of commuting to any CMA or CA -- Strong/Moderate MIZ includes towns and municipalities with 5 to 49 percent commuting to a CMA or CA and Weak/No MIZ has less than 5 percent commuting to a CMA or CA.
Source: Statistics Canada. General Social Survey, 2003.

Living in large urban areas might decrease the need for at least two of the three types of help for which there are significant differences by rural/urban geography. Public transport is easily available in the four largest metropolitan areas, so providing this type of help might be less of a necessity. Also, the proportion of individuals living in apartments is much higher in large cities. Therefore, providing help for home maintenance or outdoor work might also be of less importance. It is noticeable that residents of all regions other than those of the largest CMAs did not differ very significantly in the type of help provided.

To summarize, rural dwellers are not very different in the kind of help they give to their friends, neighbours and relatives than residents of more urban places. Residents of large CMAs might be less likely to help with transportation or domestic/home work because this kind of help is less important for the members of their social networks. They are also slightly less likely to provide child care. However, they are as likely as residents of any other area to provide emotional help, teach, coach or give practical advice or help a person in some other way.

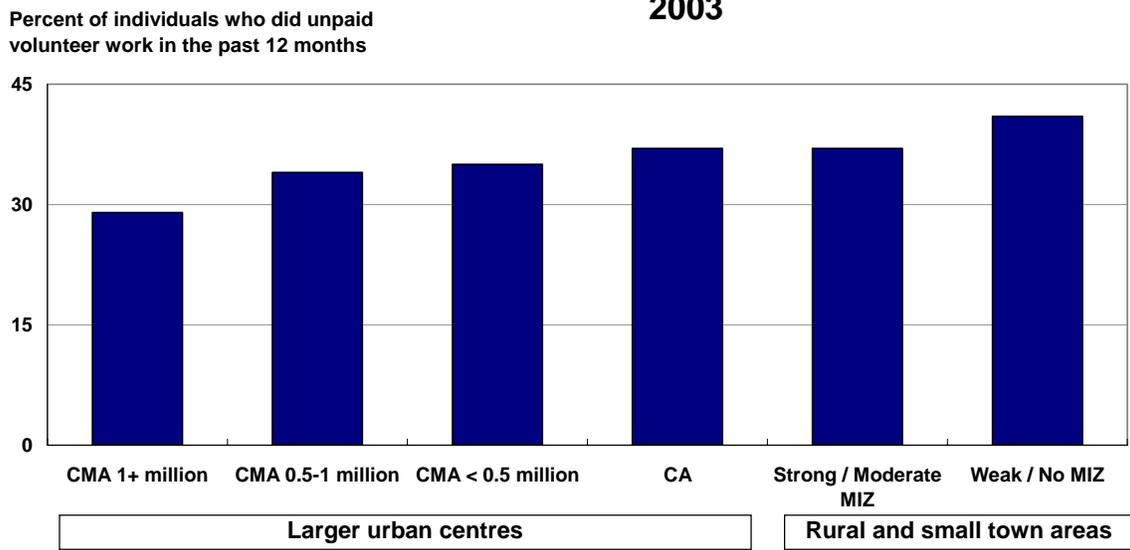
Civic participation

Volunteering activities

Volunteering has significant positive consequences for all communities. According to Putnam, “formal volunteering, working on community projects, informal helping behaviour (like coming to the aid of a stranger), charitable giving, and perhaps blood donation are all more common in small towns than in big cities” (2000: 119). Can we confirm these conclusions?

In 2003, approximately 34 percent of all Canadians said that they did unpaid volunteer work for any organization. There was a clear and strong association between place of residence and volunteering (Figure 8). The more rural the place of residence, the greater was the likelihood of having volunteered in the past 12 months. These differences remained significant when other factors, such as age, gender, household income, level of education, length of residence in the neighbourhood, place of birth, province of residence and marital status, were taken into account. In other words, it is not because residents of more rural areas are different in their socio-economic characteristics that they were more likely to be involved in volunteering activities.

Figure 8 Residents of rural and small town areas are more likely to have volunteered in the past 12 months, Canada, 2003



Note: A CMA (Census Metropolitan Area) has 100,000 or more residents in the urban core and a CA (Census Agglomeration) has 10,000 to 99,999 residents in the urban core. Both include neighbouring towns and municipalities where more than 50 percent of the workers commute to the urban core. MIZ (Metropolitan Influenced Zones) are assigned on the basis of the share of commuting to any CMA or CA -- Strong/Moderate MIZ includes towns and municipalities with 5 to 49 percent commuting to a CMA or CA and Weak/No MIZ has less than 5 percent commuting to a CMA or CA.
Source: Statistics Canada. General Social Survey, 2003.

Participation in voluntary organizations

Involvement in various types of organizations has also been said to be higher in more rural places (Putnam, 2000). Respondents were asked if they were members of, or if they participated in, any of the following organizations: union or professional association;⁴ political party or group; sports or recreation organization (such as hockey league, health club, golf club); cultural or hobby organization (such as theatre group, book club, bridge club); religious-affiliated group (such as church youth group, choir); school group, neighbourhood civic or community association (such as parent-teachers association, alumni, block parents, neighbourhood watch); service club or fraternal organization (such as Kiwanis, Knights of Columbus, the Legion); any other type of organization. Respondents were told that these organizations could be formally organized groups

4. Union membership is not included in our analysis because membership in a union does not necessarily imply participation in any networks.

or just groups of people who get together regularly to do an activity or talk about things.

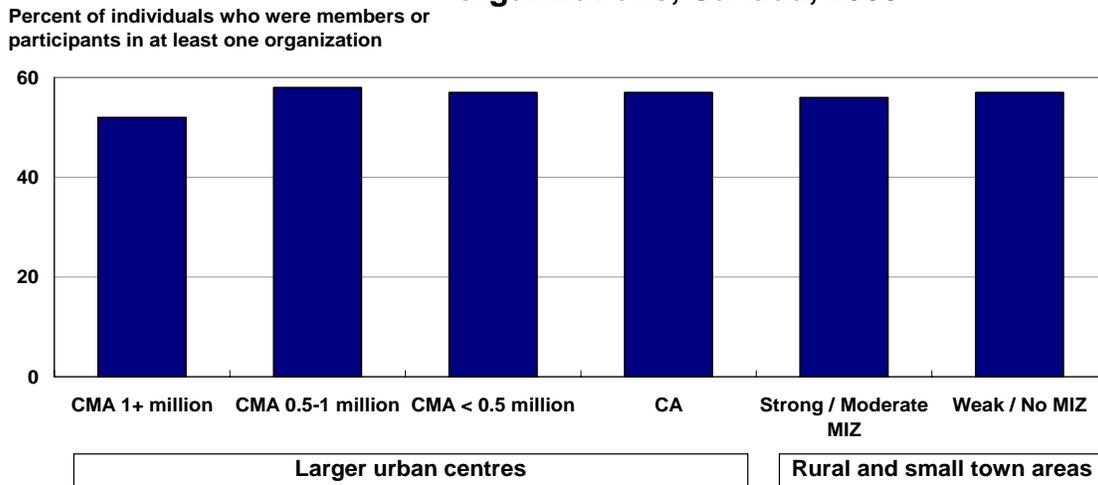
Membership in these different types of organizations was estimated in each different geographic area. Taking one organization at a time, there were only modest differences in membership across the rural-to-urban gradient. The largest differences between urban and rural residents in membership were observed in service clubs or fraternal organizations (five percent in the largest CMAs versus twelve percent in both strong/moderate MIZ and weak/no MIZ).

In order to verify if rural residents were proportionally more likely to be members of any organizations, the proportion of individuals who were members of at least one of the seven organizations mentioned in the GSS questionnaire was estimated. Residents of Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver and Ottawa-Gatineau were less likely to be members or participants in at least one organization than residents of other areas (52

percent versus 57 percent of residents of weak/no MIZ) (Figure 9). However, the proportion of individuals living in CMAs of 500,000 to 1 million who were involved in a least one organization was not different from the proportion

observed in more rural areas. The differences between the largest urban areas and rural places were less than the differences previously reported in the United States.

Figure 9 Residents of the largest urban centres are only slightly less likely to be members or participants in organizations, Canada, 2003



Note: A CMA (Census Metropolitan Area) has 100,000 or more residents in the urban core and a CA (Census Agglomeration) has 10,000 to 99,999 residents in the urban core. Both include neighbouring towns and municipalities where more than 50 percent of the workers commute to the urban core. MIZ (Metropolitan Influenced Zones) are assigned on the basis of the share of commuting to any CMA or CA -- Strong/Moderate MIZ includes towns and municipalities with 5 to 49 percent commuting to a CMA or CA and Weak/No MIZ has less than 5 percent commuting to a CMA or CA.
Source: Statistics Canada. General Social Survey, 2003.

Political participation

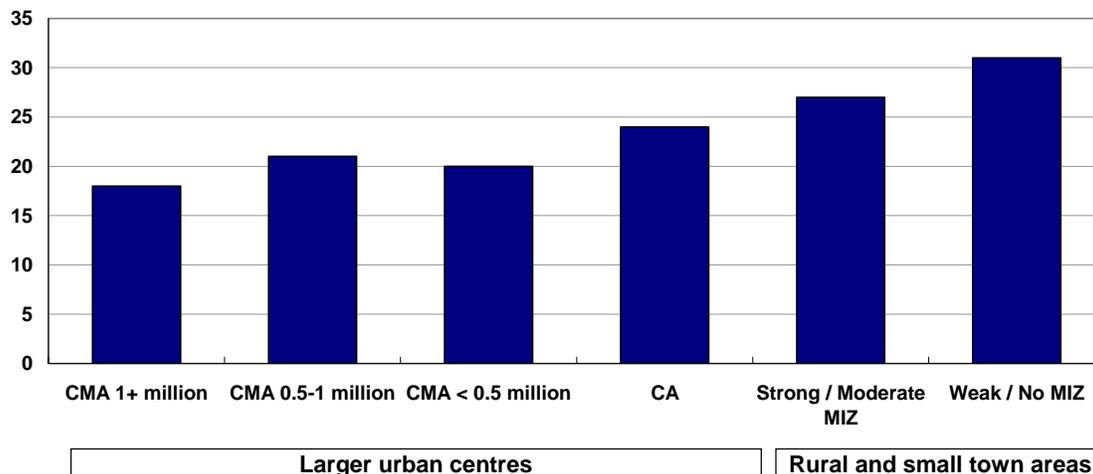
The involvement of citizens in the political process is considered by many political scientists to be a central element of a healthy democracy (Verba, Scholzman and Brady, 1995). Attendance at public meetings on local affairs has been shown, at least in research in the United States, to be more frequent in rural areas and small towns than in large cities (Putnam, 2000; Oliver, 2000).

There is also evidence to support this observation in Canada (Figure 10). According to the 2003

GSS data, the larger the place, the lower was the proportion of individuals who said that they attended a public meeting in the past 12 months. One explanation for this greater attendance of public meetings in smaller places might be that there are greater possibilities of directly influencing the political process in smaller towns; another explanation might be that there is a greater interest in local affairs in smaller communities (Oliver, 2000).

Figure 10 Rural and small town residents are more likely to attend public meetings, Canada, 2003

Percent of individuals who attended a public meeting in the past 12 months



Note: A CMA (Census Metropolitan Area) has 100,000 or more residents in the urban core and a CA (Census Agglomeration) has 10,000 to 99,999 residents in the urban core. Both include neighbouring towns and municipalities where more than 50 percent of the workers commute to the urban core. MIZ (Metropolitan Influenced Zones) are assigned on the basis of the share of commuting to any CMA or CA -- Strong/Moderate MIZ includes towns and municipalities with 5 to 49 percent commuting to a CMA or CA and Weak/No MIZ has less than 5 percent commuting to a CMA or CA.
Source: Statistics Canada. General Social Survey, 2003.

On the other hand, there were no important differences between the residents of different areas in the extent to which they participated in

various political activities (Table 1). In most cases, differences were modest or non-existent.

Table 1. Political involvement across the rural-to-urban gradient, Canada, 2001

	Voted in federal election	Searched for information on political issues	Volunteered for a political party	Expressed views (in newspaper or to a politician)	Signed a petition	Boycotted a product for ethical reasons	Participated in demonstration or march
	Percent						
CMAs over 1 million	68	29	3	11	25	22	8
CMAs 500,000 to 1 million	70	30	3	14	29	23	7
CMAs below 500,000	69	27	3	14	29	22	6
CAs	74	23	3	14	30	18	5
Strong/moderate MIZ	76	21	3	13	29	16	5
Weak/zero MIZ	73	19	3	13	31	15	5

Note: A CMA (Census Metropolitan Area) has 100,000 or more residents in the urban core and a CA (Census Agglomeration) has 10,000 to 99,999 residents in the urban core. Both include neighbouring towns and municipalities where more than 50 percent of the workers commute to the urban core. MIZ (Metropolitan Influenced Zones) are assigned on the basis of the share of commuting to any CMA or CA -- Strong/Moderate MIZ includes towns and municipalities with 5 to 49 percent commuting to a CMA or CA and Weak/No MIZ has less than 5 percent commuting to a CMA or CA.
Source: Statistics Canada. General Social Survey, 2003.

Sense of belonging and trust

Trust

The level of trust within groups or communities is often considered as an important element of “social capital.” Many authors argue that there are important positive outcomes for groups and communities in which people trust each other. For example, some research indicates that communities where citizens trust each other have a significant economic advantage (Knack and Keefer, 1997) and even show higher life expectancy rates (Kawachi, Kennedy and Lochner, 1997) along with lower homicide rates (Rosenfeld, Messner and Baumer, 2001). To explain these advantages, it is argued that most activities which need some form of co-operation, i.e. most day-to-day human activities, are much easier to achieve when individuals have confidence in the people they deal with (co-workers, neighbours, strangers, etc.). The goal of this article is not to review this literature and its criticisms (for that purpose see for example Woolcock, 1998; Feddereke, de Kadt and Luiz, 1999; Kelleher *et al.*, 2004), but to assess the commonplace assumption that rural and small town residents are generally more trusting of other people than are urban dwellers.

Respondents were asked:

Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you

cannot be too careful in dealing with people?

According to the GSS data, there was only weak evidence to support the idea that residents of smaller places express higher levels of generalized trust toward other people. Residents of large CMAs were slightly less likely than residents of smaller places to say that most people could be trusted (52 percent in large CMAs compared to 59 percent in weak/no MIZ). But the residents of CMAs with a population between 500,000 and 1 million were as likely as residents of smaller places to say that “most people can be trusted.” In sum, the level of trust expressed toward other peoples did not vary greatly along the rural-to-urban gradient. However, as it was shown in the section on social participation, residents of smaller places were significantly more likely to trust their neighbours than were residents of more urban places.

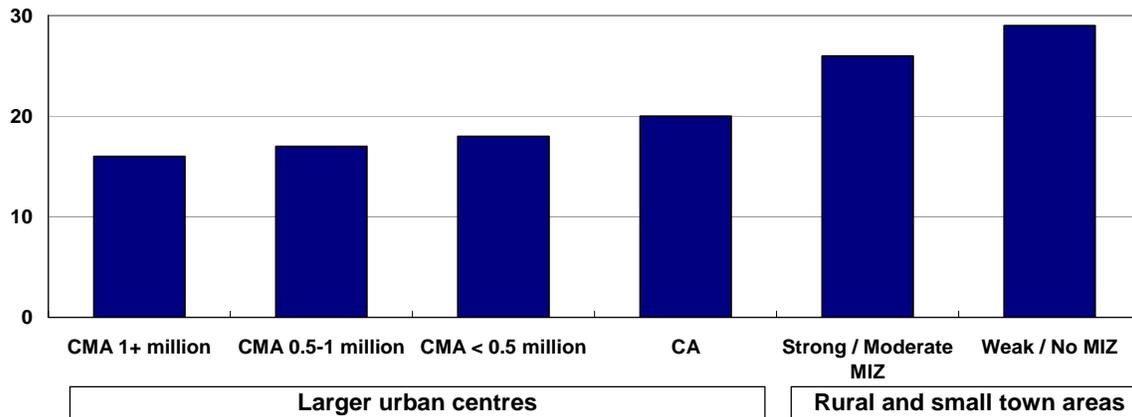
Belonging

Residents of smaller places are sometimes said to have stronger sense of belonging toward their local communities than residents of larger places. GSS data provides strong support for that perception. The more urban the place of residence the less likely individuals were to say that they had a very strong sense of belonging to their local community (Figure 11).

Figure 11

Rural and small town residents are more likely to have a very strong sense of belonging to their community, Canada, 2003

Percent of individuals who have a very strong sense of belonging to the local community



Note: A CMA (Census Metropolitan Area) has 100,000 or more residents in the urban core and a CA (Census Agglomeration) has 10,000 to 99,999 residents in the urban core. Both include neighbouring towns and municipalities where more than 50 percent of the workers commute to the urban core. MIZ (Metropolitan Influenced Zones) are assigned on the basis of the share of commuting to any CMA or CA -- Strong/Moderate MIZ includes towns and municipalities with 5 to 49 percent commuting to a CMA or CA and Weak/No MIZ has less than 5 percent commuting to a CMA or CA.

Source: Statistics Canada. General Social Survey, 2003.

Generally speaking, residents of rural and small town areas have stayed for a longer period of time where they live. For example, the proportion of individuals who had lived for 5 years or more in the neighbourhood they currently lived in was 74 percent in weak/no MIZ and 73 percent in strong/moderate MIZ, compared to 59 percent in the four largest CMAs. However, this reality does not help to explain why residents of more rural areas expressed a stronger sense of belonging to their local community. If the analysis is restricted to individuals who lived for 5 or more years in the same neighbourhood, the rural and small towns dwellers were still more likely (32 percent) to express a strong sense of belonging to their local community than residents of CMAs of population size 500,000 to 1 million (20 percent) or than residents of the four largest CMAs in Canada (19 percent). In summary, the relationship between place of residence and sense of belonging to the local community was strong, and remained significant when length of residence and even

other important factors like education, place of birth and age were taken into account.

Conclusion

This analysis of the 2003 GSS data illuminated significant differences in patterns of social participation, social engagement and sense of trust/belonging across the rural-to-urban gradient. However, the differences between individuals living in rural areas and those living in large cities were smaller than they are often perceived to be. For example, there was no evidence that the prevalence of social isolation from friends or relatives was lower in more rural places or greater in large cities. Also, levels of political involvement were very similar in all community sizes. Finally, levels of trust toward other people were similar in both urban and rural places.

The greatest differences observed across the rural-to-urban gradient related to 1) the proportion of

individuals who knew all or most of their neighbours, 2) the extent to which individuals trusted their neighbours 3) the incidence of volunteering, 4) participation in a service club or fraternal organization and 5) the sense of belonging to the local community. For these 5 items, the differences between the residents of larger CMAs and residents of smaller places were quite important, and could not be explained by the fact that individuals living in more rural areas had different socio-economic and demographic characteristics than individuals living in more urban areas.⁵ In other words, to paraphrase Putnam, residents of rural areas were more engaged “because of where they are, not who they are” (2000:206).

But does that mean that levels of social engagement or “social capital” are higher in small towns and rural areas? Results from the 2003 GSS do not allow us to provide a straightforward answer to that question. On some aspects, the level of social engagement was greater in smaller places. On other aspects, large cities and small towns were very similar. Overall, the perceived advantages of rural society appear to exist for only a limited number of dimensions of social life in rural Canada.

5. Multivariate logistic regressions and ordered logit models were constructed for all single items presented in this article (results not shown). Six dummy variables were created to operationalize place of residence: weak/no MIZ, strong/moderate MIZ, CAs, CMAs of populations size lower than 500,000, CMAs of population 500,000 to 1,000,000, CMAs of size greater than 1,000,000. The category “CMAs of size greater than 1,000,000” was used as the reference category. The other variables included in the multivariate regression models were age, gender, region, highest level of schooling, marital status, health, presence of children, household income, place of birth and length of residence in the neighbourhood.

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Appendix 1

The General Social Survey

The General Social Survey (GSS) is a Statistics Canada survey program that gathers data on social subjects in order to monitor changes in the living conditions and well being of Canadians over time and to provide immediate information on specific social policy issues of current and emerging interest. Each year the GSS investigates and presents a different social topic. For more information on the GSS see Statistics Canada (2004).

General Social Survey, Cycle 17 – Survey on Social Engagement in Canada

The data used in this bulletin was taken from Cycle 17 of the GSS. Conducted from February through December 2003, Cycle 17 was the first cycle dedicated to the topic of social engagement.

Appendix 2

Defining rural and urban geography

A **census metropolitan area (CMA)** has an urban core population of 100,000 and over. In this paper, CMAs have been divided into three groups based on population (greater than 1 million, 500,000 to 1 million and 100,000 to 500,000).

A **census agglomeration (CA)** has an urban core population of 10,000 to 99,999.

Both CMAs and CAs include all neighbouring municipalities where 50 percent or more of the workforce commutes to the urban core.

Rural and small town areas are towns or municipalities outside the commuting zone of CMAs and CAs.

Rural and small town areas are disaggregated into four **metropolitan influenced zones (MIZ)** sub-groups based on the size of commuting flows of the workforce to any CMA or CA. The **Strong MIZ** category comprises areas with a commuting flow of 30 percent or more. The **Moderate MIZ** category comprises areas with a commuting flow between five percent and thirty percent. The **Weak MIZ** category comprises areas with a commuting flow of more than zero percent and less than five percent. The **No MIZ** category comprises those areas where no individuals commute to a CMA/CA. For further information on MIZ see McNiven *et al.* (2000).

In this bulletin, the strong and moderate MIZ categories were combined, as were the weak and no MIZ categories.

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