

RURAL DEVELOPMENTS

Research news and notes from the Center for Rural Studies, University of Vermont • Vol. 2, No. 2 Fall 2008



Anniversary symposium set for Saturday, Oct. 4

The Center for Rural Studies is celebrating its 30th anniversary with a symposium to highlight the center's work and the partnerships it has forged throughout the state. The Saturday, Oct. 4, event will be held in the UVM Davis Center Mt. Mansfield room and features talks and panel discussions, displays, a lunch featuring Vermont products and more!

The three main topic areas for the symposium are *Vermont's Civic Culture*, *Value-Added Components of Vermont's Food Systems* and *Communicating with Rural Communities*.

The event is free and open to the public (lunch \$18). Go to <http://crs.uvm.edu/30years/> for a full agenda and registration information.

Health care and jobs consistently top Vermonters' list of important issues

Annual Vermonter Poll shows trends over the years

FRED SCHMIDT
CO-DIRECTOR

The Center for Rural Studies has conducted an annual state-wide telephone poll for almost two decades. In the past five years, health care and jobs clearly dominate the issues Vermonters identify as most pressing. These two topics hold nine of 10 possible first and second places (see table Page 2). In this year's poll, jobs and health care slipped a notch as the economy emerged as the number-one concern.

Our Vermonter Poll, the only annual, systematic and scientific state-wide survey, begins with the question, "What do you feel is the most serious issue facing Vermonters in the coming decade?" The open ended approach

enables respondents to answer as they please. CRS analysts collapse and group responses into categories based on frequency of response. This inquiry informs us that respondents (adult residents) are influenced by current events, yet the persistence of critical, often inter-related themes, such as the economy and health care, is apparent. The introduction of affordability in the 2008 poll suggests an intersection of health care, jobs and taxes, the other top issues of the year.

Open ended query engenders a mixed response where thematic concerns are often mixed with specific issue topics. For example, in three of the last five years both economic develop-

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Vermonter Poll

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About CRS



Project Updates

Future of Vermont survey results released



CRS Co-Director Fred Schmidt speaks at an Aug. 18 press conference with Vermont Council on Rural Development Director Paul Costello and Council on the Future of Vermont Program Manager Sarah Waring about the results of the Council on the Future of Vermont survey. See Page 6 for the key findings.



About CRS

The Center for Rural Studies (CRS) is a non-profit, fee-for-service research organization that addresses social, economic and resource-based problems of rural people and communities. Based in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at the University of Vermont, CRS provides consulting and research services in Vermont, the United States and abroad. The research is divided into five main areas:

- Agriculture
- Human Services and Education
- Program Evaluation
- Rural Community and Economic Development
- Vermont Community Data

CRS has a wide variety of clients – small businesses, academics, UVM Extension and other UVM offices, community organizers, health and social service organizations, planners, town governments and state and federal agencies.

CRS works routinely with the U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau through the State Data Center Program. Its data resources include more than 40 social and economic indicators for every town in Vermont and the Vermont Community Data Bank.

The Center for Rural Studies is fully supported by fees for our services, grants and generous contributions. Visit us online at <http://crs.uvm.edu> for more information about our consulting and research services.

RURAL DEVELOPMENTS Vol. 2, No. 2, Fall 2008

Rural Developments is published three times a year by the Center for Rural Studies. The newsletter is available online at <http://crs.uvm.edu>.

If you would like to receive CRS updates electronically, subscribe to our listserve at <http://crs.uvm.edu/listserv>

Newsletter Editor: Jessica Hyman



2008 Vermonter Poll

Methodology

Vermonter Poll calling was conducted in three phases between Feb. 20 and March 28 using computer-aided telephone interviewing (CATI). The sample for the poll was drawn using a simple random sample of Vermont telephone numbers as the sampling frame. Only Vermont residents over the age of 18 were interviewed.

Vermonter Poll I (N=645), Vermonter Poll II (N=617), and Vermonter Poll III (N=600) have a margin of error of plus or minus 4 percent at a confidence interval of 95

percent. This means that if the polls were to be repeated in Vermont, 95 percent of the time the results would be within plus or minus 4 percent.

Results

This issue of *Rural Developments* includes a snapshot of the 2008 results. To see full reports from the 2008 and earlier Vermonter Polls, go to <http://crs.uvm.edu/surveys.htm>

More information

For more information about including questions on next year's Vermonter Poll, e-mail crs@uvm.edu.

Top issues, Continued from Page 1

ment and development/sprawl appear in the top five issues, suggesting the “ying” and “yang” of public poll issue identification. Issues unique to a specific year could be attributed to state-wide dialogue or the concurrence of national and state concerns. A concern for taxes takes a specific focus in some years as well, where property taxes are noted as well as general taxes.

Although the generic “affordability” (which we attribute to the convergence of health care expenses, unemployment, quality employment, adequate pay, the housing market, all clearly local as well as national dynamics) emerges as a top issue theme in 2008, other single themes in a given year include “environment” in 2004, “government/politics,” in 2006, and “education” in 2007.

Top five most serious issues facing Vermont in the coming decade, 2004-2008

Rank	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
1	Jobs	Health care	Health care	Health care	Economy
2	Health care	Jobs	Jobs	Jobs	Health care
3	Environment	Development/sprawl	Government/politics	General taxes	Jobs
4	Economy/economic development	Taxes	Economy/economic development	Property taxes	Taxes
5	Development/sprawl	Economy/economic development	Development/sprawl	Education	Affordability

Source: Vermonter Poll, 2004-2008

Vermonters choose healthy eating habits

- 94% of Vermonter Poll respondents were concerned with eating healthy foods.
- 75% reported that the “type of ingredients used” is the most important factor when preparing a healthy meal at home.
- Respondents with children were more likely to feel that time affects their ability to prepare healthy meals at home and are more likely to eat out at a restaurant.
- 49% of Vermonters eat at a restaurant for dinner at least once a week.

Household Internet ubiquitous, broadband rising, digital divides remain

WILL "CHIP" SAWYER
SENIOR OUTREACH PROFESSIONAL

The Vermonter Poll has collected data on computer ownership and Internet connectivity among Vermont households for more than a decade. This data can also be used to explore facets of the digital divide in Vermont.

The digital divide is a term that refers to inequalities in the abilities of people to access information technology and Internet resources. Vermonter Poll data have shown that there is an income-based divide in household computer ownership. Households with higher incomes are more likely to have computers. The 2008 poll data continue to follow this trend.

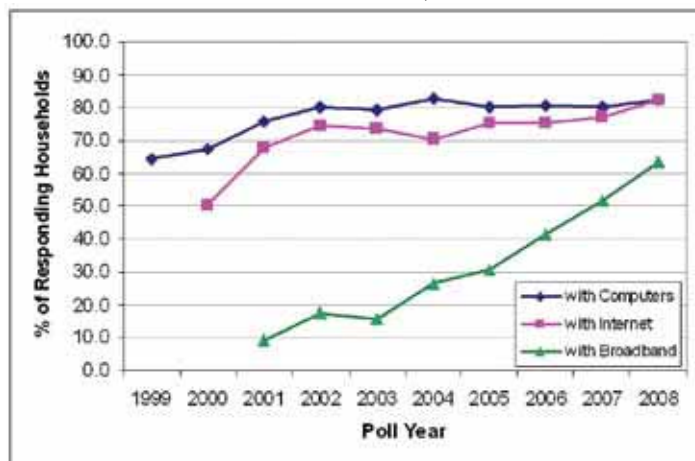
This year, for the first time, Internet connectivity is virtually ubiquitous with computer ownership. No household with a computer responded that they do not have some sort Internet connectivity.

CRS has been focusing its digital divide exploration, not on general connectivity, but on the *type* of connectivity. With today's Internet, users limited to dial-up connections are not getting the same experience and access as those with "broadband" or "high-speed" connections.

Vermont Poll data, and other information sources, have revealed a rural-urban digital divide in broadband connectivity in Vermont and around the nation. The 2008 data continue to verify this trend. Internet households that identify themselves as living in rural areas are less likely (71%) to have broadband than suburban (87%) and urban (77%) households. Although the majority of all groups have broadband, there is still a divide.

Household income seems to have little to no effect upon broadband connectivity. The linkages between broadband and income are driven more by the rural-urban location of different income groups. Urban households have higher tendency to be in lower income groups and yet also have better access to broadband. The data seem to show that broadband connectivity is more closely linked to geographic location and market density than to household income.

Vermont households by computer ownership, Internet connections and broadband connections, 1999-2008



Source: Vermonter Poll, 1999-2008

Key results:

- 100% of respondents with computers had Internet connections.
- An income divide remains in household computer ownership.
- There is a rural-urban divide in high-speed Internet.
- There is majority support for municipal efforts and partnerships to increase broadband availability.

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2008 Vermonter Poll

Tax preparation and savings strategies may help reduce cost of filing taxes and maximize use of refunds

MICHELE C. SCHMIDT
EVALUATION COORDINATOR

Several questions on the Vermonter Poll asked respondents about their tax preparation practices and their spending and saving patterns for refunds and credits.

Many community service providers such as the Vermont Community Action Agencies' Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program and AARP provide free tax preparation and filing services. VITA has operated statewide since the 1990s, however Vermonter Poll results show that only 8 percent of respondents used a free tax preparation service to file their 2007 taxes, down from 10 percent in 2006.

Respondents paid an average of \$222 to complete their taxes. Those who were self-employed or worked as subcontractors were significantly more likely to use a high cost service for

their tax preparation and to pay more money for their tax preparation services than respondents who were not self-employed.

Of all Vermonters surveyed, 66 percent expected to or had already received a tax refund. Expected or actual refund amounts averaged \$1,180. People who self-prepared their taxes received a greater refund amount (ave. \$1,420) compared to those who used a paid accountant (ave. \$1,225) and those who used a national chain service (ave. \$957).

The average amount that respondents reported spending from their tax refund was \$429. The top three ways Vermonters spent their refund were paying household bills, paying off debt and purchasing necessary items, such as food, clothing and medical bills.

The amount Vermonters saved from tax refunds ranged from \$0 to \$4,000 with an average of \$764. Overall,

more respondents saved part or all of their refund than those who spent part or all of their refund. Respondents who received their refund in the form of a direct deposit were significantly more likely to save their money in a bank compared to those who received their refund in the form of a check.

These findings suggest that Vermonters have an opportunity to save money on their tax return and maximize their refunds by encouraging them to use a free tax service to assist in self-preparation of their taxes. These findings, coupled with the high prices being paid for tax filing, suggest that education about the location of free tax preparation services and eligibility requirements, if any, as well as the credentials of those who prepare the taxes at these services is warranted to help Vermonters save money and maximize their refunds.

Rural respondents least likely to correctly identify their watersheds

JESSICA HYMAN
RESEARCH SPECIALIST

The Vermonter Poll included watershed awareness questions for ECHO Lake Aquarium and Science Center in Burlington. Respondents were asked if they had ever visited ECHO, the frequency of their visits in the past year and to identify the watershed in which their homes are located.

Only 42.2 percent of respondents gave a water-related response when asked to identify which watershed they lived in and seventy percent of them correctly identified their watersheds.

Five variables were significantly related to respondents' responses to the watershed identification question. Respondents who had visited ECHO were more likely to have *attempted to answer* the watershed identification question (as opposed to saying "don't know") than



those who had never been to ECHO. Also, males, those with higher levels of education and income and those living in Chittenden County were more likely to have *attempted to answer* the watershed identification question.

It is important to note that these variables did not necessarily affect the accuracy of the responses. Only two variables were significantly related to respondents' *correctly identifying* their watersheds:

- Respondents who lived in suburban areas were most likely to correctly identify their watershed (81.5% correct answers) and rural respondents were least likely to correctly identify their watershed (65.1% correct answers).

- About 77 percent of respondents who had visited ECHO once in the past year correctly identified their watersheds.

Testing agricultural and civic IQ

Vermonters show knowledge gaps in key areas

JESSICA HYMAN
RESEARCH SPECIALIST

The 2008 Vermonter Poll included two series of questions to test basic understanding about civic structure and agriculture in Vermont.

Agricultural IQ

Respondents appeared to be more aware of general issues than the specific realities of agriculture in the state.

For example, 94.5 percent correctly answered that there is less active farmland today than in the 1970s and more than half correctly identified Vermont's national ranking in per capita direct sales as being in the top 10 (Vermont ranks number one!).

However, less than a third of respondents knew that 20 percent of the state's land is currently in agricultural production, a scant 15 percent knew that less than a fifth of the state's farms are dairy operations and merely 4.7 percent correctly identified greenhouse and nursery products as the state's third top agricultural commodity after dairy and cattle.

Civic IQ

Just two of the questions in this section garnered correct answers from more than 50 percent of respondents. The most successful topic, with 53.3 percent correct responses, was the identification of 1780 as the average date of incorporation for Vermont's 246 towns and cities. Meanwhile, 51.2 percent of

respondents were able to name a local example of the legislative branch of government (i.e. selectboard, city council, trustees, residents, town meeting), 45.6 percent identified a local example of the executive branch of government (i.e. mayor, town or city manager, town clerk), and just 30 percent could name a local example of the judicial branch (i.e. board of civil authority, selectboard, city council, planning board zoning board, school board).

Slightly less than a third of respondents correctly identified the total number of all volunteer and paid local officials in Vermont (about 10,000) and the percent of Vermont's towns and cities with less than 2,500 people in the 2000 Census (about 70%).

Finally, only 1.6 percent of respondents were able to correctly identify the towns located at the four corners of the state (Alburgh, Canaan, Pownal and Vernon). About 65 percent of those who attempted to answer this question got all four towns wrong.

Vermonters consistently extol the virtues of the state's agricultural heritage and working landscape as well as their commitment to civic engagement and community ties. The mixed results from both of these quizzes illustrate the need for more education so these basic beliefs can be backed up with a true understanding of the state's agricultural sector and civic structure.

Vermonters want GMO labeling

JANE KOLODINSKY
CO-DIRECTOR

The Vermonter Poll has been keeping track of Vermonters' knowledge, attitudes and behaviors with regard to genetically modified organisms (GMO) for more than a decade.

Starting with the 1995 Vermonter Poll and the issue of rBST (recombinant bovine somatotropin – an artificial growth hormone used to increase milk production) through the 2007 poll, we know that Vermonters overwhelmingly (more than 90 percent over the years) want labeling on foods that contain genetically modified ingredients or are GMO free, want some government oversight on the sale and planting of genetically modified seeds and express continuing concerns over the widespread introduction of genetically modified ingredients into commonly purchased foods, both processed and unprocessed.

Vermonters have also stayed relatively knowledgeable about GMOs. In 2004, 60 percent knew that a GMO can be defined as “the selective, deliberate alteration of genes between organisms that would not naturally occur in nature or through traditional breeding,” while 17 percent were unsure. These percentages were unchanged in 2008.



Partners of the Americas Update

This summer, CRS Research Project Specialist Michael Moser, who is also vice-president of the Vermont Chapter of Partners of the Americas, travelled to Honduras to meet with coffee farmers as part of the non-profit *Compañeros Café* business project. He learned about some of the challenges faced by Honduran farmers as they attempt to tap into international markets and has submitted a research proposal that aims to address these challenges through a

self-sustaining entrepreneurial business model.

Michael also met with Honduran counterparts and other Vermont chapter members including chapter President and CDAE professor Dan Baker, Secretary Kendra Rickerby and member Dave Chappelle. These meetings helped strengthen the chapter's partnerships for current and future Vermont-Honduras community development projects. For more information, go to <http://crs.uvm.edu/partners/poa.html>



Project assesses Vermonters' values and challenges

CRS surveys part of Council on the Future of Vermont's statewide public dialog

A CRS study released this summer shows that Vermonters place high value on the working landscape, independence and community. The same poll ranked affordability and the economy as the two most important challenges the state faces.

The statewide telephone survey was commissioned by the nonpartisan Vermont Council on Rural Development as a facet of a two-year project evaluating Vermonters' values, goals, priorities and points of common vision around the future of the state.

"The study shows that overall, when asked to think beyond day to day politics, Vermonters share a high level of agreement in terms of values and concerns," said Council on the Future of Vermont Program Manager Sarah Waring. "Whether they are asked to comment in a public setting or private phone polls, there are common themes that resonate throughout our population and help define who we are."

A picture of the state

In addition the telephone poll and an online poll, also administered by CRS, the Council on the Future of Vermont is conducting listening sessions throughout the state and commissioning research based on the topics and ideas that arise in local dialogues. All these inputs will help shape a comprehensive picture of the aspirations of Vermonters in our time and what they envision for future generations. The council expects to release its final findings in the spring.

The CRS poll questions were based on issues that surfaced during public "Conversations on the Future of Vermont" held over the winter in Randolph,



VERMONT COUNCIL ON RURAL DEVELOPMENT
"Helping rural Vermonters create a sustainable future through effective use of public and private resources."

The Council on the Future of Vermont is a project of the Vermont Council on Rural Development through a special partnership with the Vermont Community Foundation.

For more information, go to www.futureofvermont.org or contact Sarah Waring at (802) 223-6098 or cfv@sover.net. See <http://crs.uvm.edu/survey/futureofvermont> for survey results.

Rutland, Bennington, and St. Albans.

CRS surveyed 699 Vermont residents over the age of 18 in mid-March. The results have a confidence interval of 99 percent with +/- 5 percent margin of error. This means that if the poll were to be repeated in Vermont, there is a 99 percent certainty that the results would be within plus or minus 5 percent of the results achieved in this survey.

Working landscape and affordability top lists of values and challenges

Survey respondents were asked for their input on a series of 12 values and 24 challenges. They placed the greatest value overall on the state's working landscape and heritage. Together with the second and third-ranked values – "I am proud of being from or living in Vermont" and "I value Vermont's spirit of independence" – these statements provide a picture of the most compelling attributes of the state that bring Vermonters together.

The average number of years living in Vermont for all respondents was 35 and the majority had lived in the state for more than 11 years; overall this survey group could be said to have long experience with the state and its issues.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Vermonters expressed high level of concern about the increasing cost of living, jobs, the economy and health care. Annual statewide polls conducted by the Center for Rural Studies have consistently revealed these as top issues for Vermonters. The open-response questions near the end of the survey provided a way for Vermonters to express their concerns in a very specific way. When asked: "What do you see as the most important goal for Vermont in the next generation?" Vermonters responded with a range of answers overwhelmingly focused on subjects directly related to affordability. Their answers included commentary on tax rates, affordable health care, education and other services and the need for more jobs and higher wages.

CRS staff members Michael Moser and Jessica Hyman and Co-Director Fred Schmidt developed the project and performed the analysis.

"This survey shows strong agreement on some of the current challenges that will affect our future," Schmidt said. "But it also points to our common trust in community and connectivity to civic involvement as building blocks to develop solutions."



Project Updates

Farm to School

The Center for Rural Studies has received a grant to assist the Farm to School Movement in Vermont. This movement has progressed and built momentum in the past five years, and many disparate organizations support its goals, but the movement has lacked a coordinated approach to address challenges of continued program implementation.

This grant addresses these challenges through evaluation of current educational institution interest, determination of successes and barriers to Farm to School programs, documentation of best practices among existing Farm to School programs, and coordination with community stakeholders already building successful programs.

The results will support Vermont agriculture by developing educational institutions as markets and creating new product opportunities to serve these markets, and better prepare Vermont's children through better nutrition and increased awareness of issues of local agriculture.

— *Erin Roche, Research Specialist*

Demand for Local Food

CRS, in collaboration with the Intervale Center, is conducting a study on consumption patterns and demand for local food in Chittenden County. Preliminary results from this study suggest that there is significant demand for high quality, reasonably priced local food products and that there is unmet demand for local food products during the winter months; thus, businesses offering local options during the winter may be able to capture that market niche.

The study also indicates that although more than half of the population is aware of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) and a third expressed interest in joining a CSA, only 4.2 percent of households in Chittenden County currently have a membership share at a CSA farm. Further research is necessary to explore the barriers to increased participation in CSA farms by households in the study area.

— *Thomas Desisto, Research Project Specialist*

Transportation Research Project

A CRS project funded by the UVM Transportation Research Center will be ramping up this fall. The project, titled *Mobility and Livability: Seasonal and Built Environment Impacts*, will take a unique look at transportation, quality of life and the climate in northern New England.

The research will be used to describe the impact of season on mobility and transportation behavior of residents of rural northern communities. The project will then explore links between people's mobility and their perceptions of

livability. This fall, CRS staff will be conducting focus groups around the state in preparation for a four-iteration seasonal telephone panel survey that will begin in January 2009.

— *Chip Sawyer, Senior Outreach Professional*

CRS Web Site Evaluation

The Center for Rural Studies has posted user evaluation surveys for three of the web sites that we are involved with. The web sites are *Vermont Housing Data* at www.housingdata.org, *Vermont Indicators Online* at <http://crs.uvm.edu/indicators> and the *Vermont Planning Information Center* at www.vpic.info. Each web site has a link to the evaluation survey.

The surveys are the central piece of a larger project to assess the impact of these important online community development tools and to explore possibilities for stronger and more thorough evaluation of our web site projects going forward. User focus groups will be conducted this fall. Survey and focus group participants will be entered to win an Apple iPod Nano. All new and veteran users of these web sites are urged to participate!

— *Chip Sawyer, Senior Outreach Professional*

Growing Vermont Store

The Growing Vermont student-operated store has begun its second academic year in the Davis Student Center. The project, supported by the Center for Rural Studies and the department of Community Development and Applied Economics (CDAE), provides a unique retail setting from which Vermont's rural entrepreneurs are able to access the university market while working with CDAE students.

Growing Vermont has partnered with more than 55 businesses from around Vermont and more than 80 students have participated in the project through coursework, independent study, or as volunteers. This year we are looking forward to engaging more students in projects designed to facilitate entrepreneurs' online marketing presence. This effort, combined with vendor fairs, will help the store accomplish its mission of contributing to Vermont's sustainable, community-based economic development by supporting the state's current and next generation entrepreneurs.

Growing Vermont is located on the bottom floor of the Davis Student Center. For more information, visit www.uvm.edu/~growvt/ (under construction).

— *Michael Moser, Research Project Specialist*

Want to learn more about CRS projects?

Sign up for the Rural Listserve at
<http://crs.uvm.edu/listserv>

FREE AND OPEN TO PUBLIC

Information/ Registration:
<http://crs.uvm.edu/30years>
802.656.3021

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**CENTER FOR
RURAL STUDIES**

2008

CELEBRATING 30 YEARS

30th Anniversary Symposium

Saturday, October 4, 2008

Mt. Mansfield Room

UVM's Davis Center

Come for a Talk or Stay All Day!

9:00- 11:30 am Vermont's Civic Culture: Reflecting CRS work w/ issues of local government moderated by Vermont Secretary of State Deb Markowitz

Keynote: *Rural, why bother?*

Changing community structure and demographics in Vermont

Panel Discussion: *Implications of change for local communities in Vermont*

11:30- 12:30 Lunch Featuring Vermont Products (\$18; please register in advance online)

1:00- 4:00 pm Value-Added Components of Vermont's Food Systems

moderated by Vermont Secretary of Agriculture Roger Allbee

Keynote: *New themes in Vermont agriculture- branding, labeling, marketing, and consumer concerns - the education response*

Panel Discussion: *The diversified agricultural scene in Vermont today*

4:00- 5:00 pm Reception with CRS Founder Fred Schmidt (Vermont Products Snacks)

5:00- 6:30 pm Panel Discussion: Communicating with Rural Communities -

responding to rural needs and outreach strategies

moderated by Dan Gillmor, Director of the Center for Citizen Media

Opportunities for Your Organization/Business!

Collaborator Table (limited number*)

What you get:

- 4' table and tablecloth
- Opportunity to promote your organization or business throughout the day at the Davis Center during UVM's Homecoming
- Complimentary "Congratulations CRS" ad

Cost: \$100

*priority given to CRS partner organizations

"Congratulations CRS" Ad

What you get:

- Ad placed on the symposium website (<http://crs.uvm.edu/30years>) and in the printed symposium program
- Complimentary design/layout

Cost: \$50

Register at <http://crs.uvm.edu/30years>