

Rural residents require services, but are flexible on distance

Government services provide economic, institutional, social, cultural and personal support to people in ways that contribute to their well-being.

People in rural communities do not demand the same ease of access to services as city dwellers. They know that living in the country has its trade-offs. While residents require the same services, they are willing to travel greater distances to reach them. Yet, they have not been well served by governments that have cut social spending without knowing the rural impact.

These findings are part of a preliminary report on access to government services in rural Canada. Data from 25 communities is used to examine how far rural people are from schools, hospitals, doctors, lawyers, transportation, government offices, second-hand stores, banks, and more.

Clearly, a vehicle is necessary to rural residents. Youth and the elderly are most likely to be without vehicles. The average distance is 10 kilometres to a bus stop, 31 kilometres to a train station - the same average distance as it is to a hospital. Distances were longer for communities with a poor economic outlook. In one community, residents must travel 100 kilometres to a hospital. In another, the nearest nursing home is 445 kilometres away. Residents said access to grocery stores and emergency response facilities were the two services most in need of improvement.

Not surprisingly, the closest services are those provided by the municipalities. Playing fields, rinks and libraries are often within walking distance, or just a few kilometres away. However, residents in communities with a fluctuating economy must travel further for services.

People felt their concerns did not match those of elected officials. While residents are happy to have access to services without a building on site, many elected officials prefer a store-front presence as a source of tax revenue, jobs and proof of their community's strength.

This information is taken from the study entitled "Access to Government Services in Rural Canada". Copies of the report can be found via the NRE2 web site. This research was supported by the Rural Secretariat of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada and the Canadian Rural Restructuring Foundation.

Between 1986 and 1996 the average distance to birthing facilities increased from 30 km to 50km in the 20 sites sampled.



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