

Good News, Bad News on Education Attainment Levels for Rural Canada

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Recently released analysis from Statistics Canada reports that while overall levels of education attainment are on the rise in rural Canada, there still persists a significant gap in attainment between urban and rural communities.

Rural and Urban Education Attainment: An Investigation of Patterns and Trends, 1981-1996, looks at the highest level of education achieved by each adult aged 25 to 54, as reported by citizens during each of the four census periods: 1981, 1986, 1991, and 1996. The findings were released on June 12, 2003, and are remarkable in that they show persistent gaps between urban and rural Canada despite significant improvements by rural residents in their collective education attainment.

For example, there are now fewer rural adults than ever who have less than a Grade 9 education level. But, a greater share of Canadians with low levels of education are still found in rural Canada. There is obviously still more that we can do in rural communities to encourage GED equivalency upgrading, and encouraging some younger adults to go back and finish high school.

At the other end of the education scale, there was an overall jump in the number of adults with some post-secondary education in Canada, from 44 per cent to 58 per cent between 1981 and 1996. The share of the population with some post-secondary education increased in all regions. Again, the gap between urban and rural persisted but, importantly, the relative concentration in urban areas did not increase. Thus, rural areas were able to increase at the same pace as urban areas over the 15-year period. While the overall numbers are up for rural communities, there are some additional problems. For example, there is still a wide variation from community to community within rural regions of Canada in terms of the per cent of their populations which have some post-secondary education. This suggests that some rural communities are still lagging far behind others, and need to do more to encourage young adults to obtain additional education.

Using other measures, the same patterns emerge. The average years of schooling has increased within each type of region - large cities, smaller cities, rural areas near cities, rural areas further away from cities, and northern regions - and the gap from community to community within each of these five regions has shrunk. But there is still a large gap in the average number of years that an urban adult has been in school (13.5 years) and a rural adult (12 years).

Even when major fields of study are examined, there are spatial patterns worth examining. Rural areas have relatively fewer people with key science and technology-related diplomas and degrees. These are people who are in the business of research and innovation - life sciences, engineering, health professions, mathematics, and physics. They are highly sought after by expanding

companies looking to develop new products and services. In rural areas, you are more likely to find people with education, recreation, or counseling diplomas and degrees.

What are the implications of these trends? There are several. First, it is well known that a more educated adult population and workforce are more likely to find employment and be less dependent on social programs. Second, people with lower levels of education are less likely to have the skills and knowledge to start a business, and small business startups are the key to economic activity in rural communities. Third, there is a strong correlation between innovation and education attainment. Innovation is a driving factor in today's economy. Developing new ideas and finding new ways of doing things, brings about new economic opportunities, and it is people with higher levels of education who do this. With more of the innovators located in urban centres, it will be a challenge for rural communities and businesses to remain competitive or stay ahead of the competition.

What can be done to address this situation? There are a number of possibilities. First, we have to do as much as possible to ensure that young people in rural communities stay in school, complete high school, and do something to further their education beyond high school. Second, we need to create an environment in rural communities and small towns where young adults who go on to complete some additional levels of education can come back and start businesses or be meaningfully employed. Third, we need to support pervasive access to broadband technology in rural areas, and ensure that there are many more accessible and meaningful secondary and post-secondary courses and programs available to rural citizens so that they may continue their studies and pursue lifelong learning. Finally, local and regional agencies involved in community and economic development activities need to work with existing businesses to determine the barriers they face in attracting highly qualified and well-educated workers, and work to remove those barriers.

The report, **Rural and Urban Education Attainment: An Investigation of Patterns and Trends, 1981-1996**, is available free of charge from Statistics Canada's website, www.statcan.ca.

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