



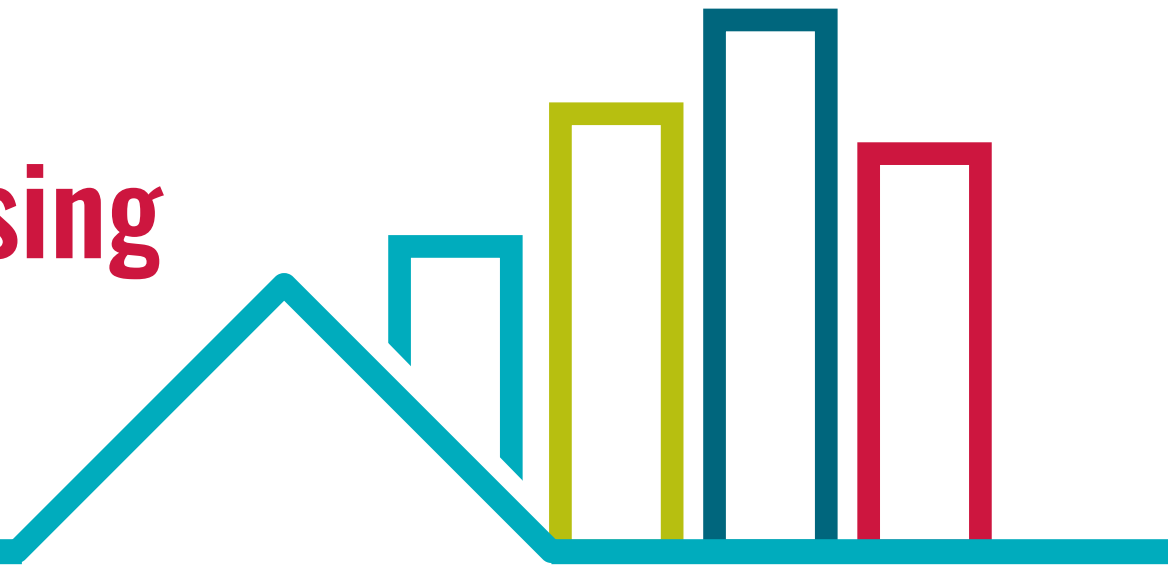
College of Family and Consumer Sciences

Financial Planning, Housing & Consumer Economics

Housing and Demographics Research Center

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

Survey of Rural Small Town Housing in Georgia



UGA Housing and Demographic Research Center

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INTRODUCTION

Housing is a central component to economic development in non-metropolitan communities (Basmajian & Rongerude, 2012). In order for communities to thrive, there must be an ample supply of housing that is available, matches the income and demographic characteristics of the community and is in adequate condition. Balancing housing needs and community factors presents a challenge for many communities, regardless of location. However, the varying patterns of growth and shifting demographic characteristics in non-metropolitan communities present particular challenges. Amenity-rich communities, with attractive physical features and accessible locations, often face problems of housing affordability and availability as an influx of these newcomers brings business and rising property values, making it difficult for long-term, less-affluent residents to find and keep a place to live (Ziebarth et al., 1997). Rural communities that facing both economic and population decline – low home values, a prevalence of dilapidated homes, high level of vacancies become intractable problems (Housing Assistance Council, 2012a). Despite the poor housing conditions in these communities, housing cost burdens affect many households. Households in these communities are also more likely to live in overcrowded conditions (Housing Assistance Council, 2012a).

Measures of key housing indicators, such as homeownership rates, cost-burden and vacancy rates, often show rural and small towns faring the same or better than their metropolitan counterparts. These indicators, while helpful, provide an incomplete picture of the housing problems within rural communities. Rural communities experience problems with housing quality, availability and affordability (Morton, Allen & Li, 2004; Ziebarth, Prochaska-Cue & Shrewsbury, 1997). Rural homes are more likely to have physical inadequacies than their urban counterparts, regardless of whether homes are rented or owned (Morton et al., 2004).

The purpose of this study was to better understand the housing and neighborhood revitalization issues facing small town communities in Georgia. The study focuses on incorporated places located within rural counties in Georgia. About 1.8 million of the 9.7 million people in Georgia live in nonmetropolitan counties in Georgia. About 40% of the rural population live in rural small towns (incorporated municipalities). The remaining 60% live in unincorporated areas. This report only addresses the characteristics and needs of incorporated rural small towns in Georgia and is a limitation of this study.

Defining Rural Small Towns

Defining rural small towns: Location, degree of rurality and population

For this report, we defined communities as rural small towns if they are: 1) incorporated municipalities and 2) located within a county with a designated Rural-Urban Continuum Code of 4-9. The USDA Economic Research Services' Rural-Urban Continuum Code classification system differentiates nonmetropolitan counties by degree of urbanization and adjacency to a metro area (Economic Research Service, 2016).

RU CODES AND DEFINITIONS

Metro Counties:

- 1 Counties in metro areas of 1 million population or more
- 2 Counties in metro areas of 250,000 to 1 million population
- 3 Counties in metro areas of fewer than 250,000 population

Nonmetro Counties

- 4 Urban population of 20,000 or more, adjacent to a metro area
- 5 Urban population of 20,000 or more, not adjacent to a metro area
- 6 Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
- 7 Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area
- 8 Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, adjacent to a metro area
- 9 Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area

Characteristics of the Study Communities

The survey included responses from elected officials and city staff from 164 rural and small towns in Georgia. The communities in the study were primarily small in population. The median population was 1,133, nearly one-half of the communities represented had populations of less than 1000. About one-third had populations above 2,500. Among all the communities in the study, the median household income was \$28,507. The median homeownership rate among the communities in the study was 60.5%, with a range from 21.8% to 96.3%. The housing stock in the study communities is comprised primarily of single-family homes (about 66%) and mobile homes (23%).

164

survey
respondents

1,133

median
population

\$28,507

median household
income

60.5%

median
homeownership
rate

66%

single-family
homes

23%

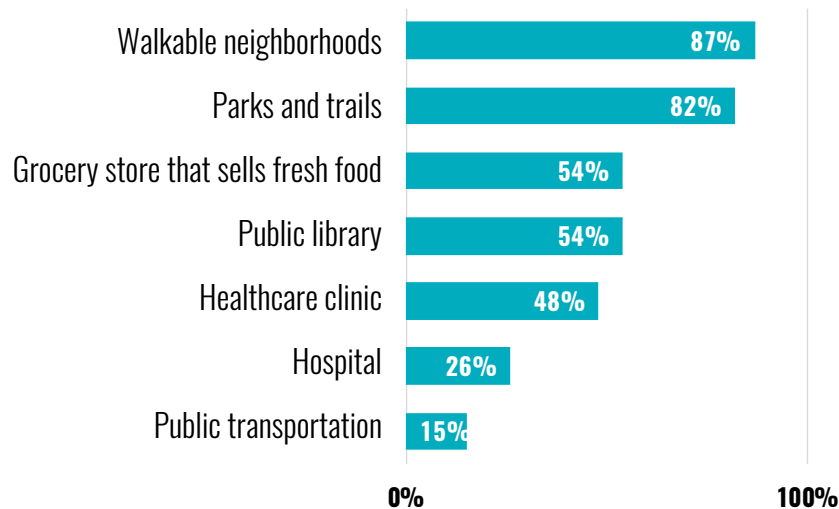
mobile homes

SURVEY RESULTS

Community Amenities and Economic Activity

The survey included questions to identify quality-of-life amenities. Respondents were asked whether the city that they represented included a list of 7 amenities or facilities. Over 80% of the communities represented in the study have walkable neighborhoods (86.6%) and parks and trails. Just over half of the communities have a public libraries and grocery stores that sell fresh, nutritious food. Local access to healthcare was not as prevalent, with 47.6% of the communities have a healthcare clinic and just over a quarter having a hospital.

Percent responding **YES** to “the city you represent include the following amenities.”



After responding to the questions regarding community-based amenities and facilities, respondents were asked to indicate whether, in the last three years, the overall quality of life for people living in the community they were representing had improved, remained the same, or worsened. Most respondents indicated that their community had either remained the same (51.6%) or improved (39.1%). Only a small portion (9.3%) indicated that the quality-of-life had declined for local residents in recent years.

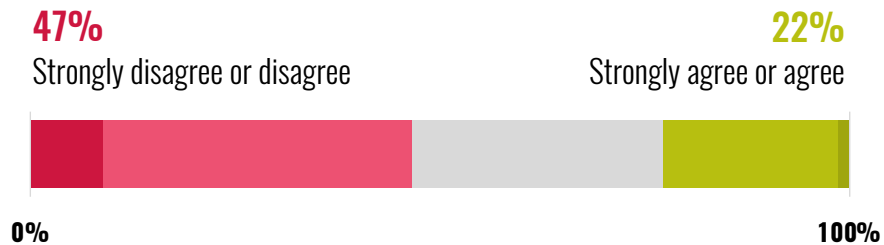
In the last three years, has the overall quality of life for people living in the community you represent **IMPROVED**, **REMAINED THE SAME** or **WORSEN**?



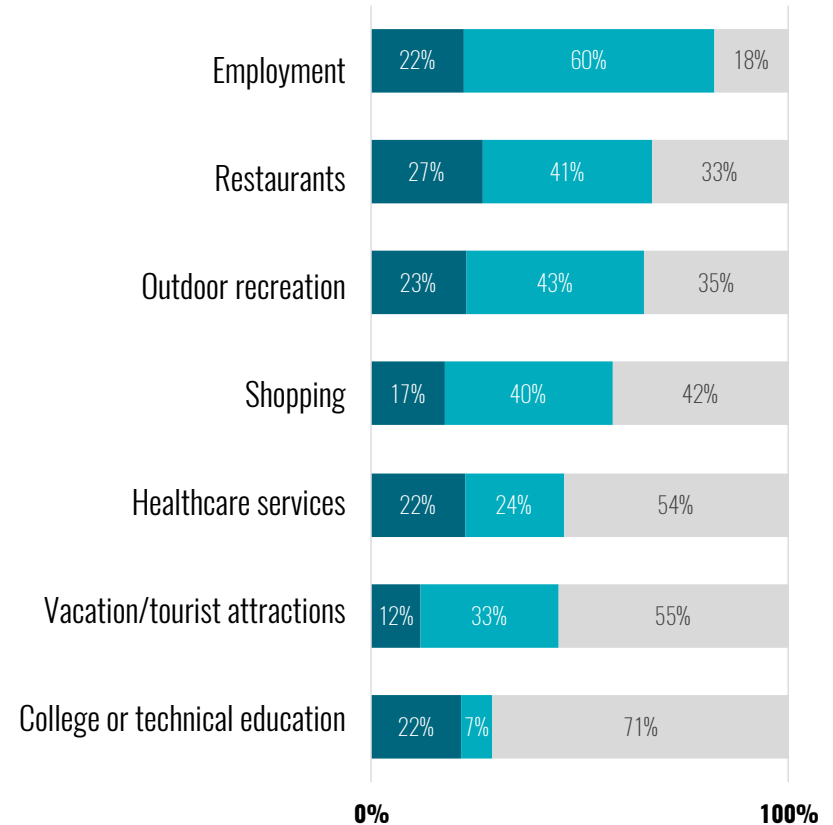
We were interested in identifying the types of activities served to bring people into the communities in the study. The most common economic activities that frequently brought people into the communities were restaurants, outdoor recreation, healthcare services, and employment, though less than one-quarter of respondent communities indicated that people frequently come to their community for any of these activities. A majority of community respondents indicated that people did not come to their community for college/technical education, vacation/tourist attractions, and healthcare services.

Slightly less than half (46.5%) of the community respondents indicated that they disagreed when asked if the current housing stock for their community was adequate for economic development, another 30.8% provided a neutral response.

The current housing stock in the city I represent/work for is adequate for our economic development goals.



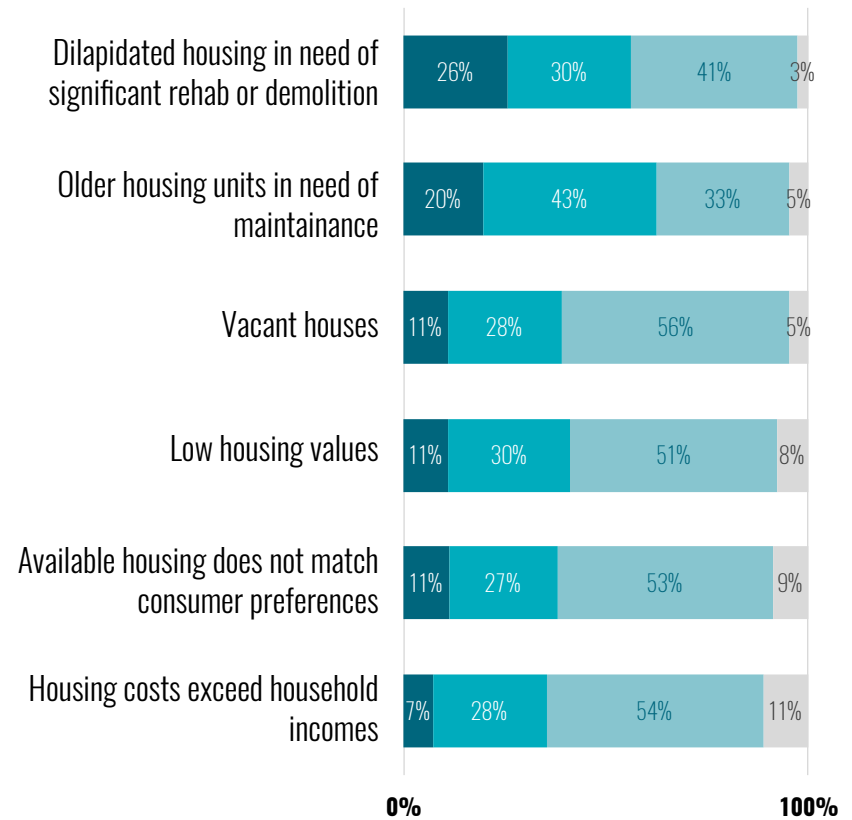
How often do people from other places come to your city for the following activities: FREQUENTLY, OCCASIONALLY, or NOT AT ALL?



HOUSING ISSUES AND CONDITIONS

The housing issues most commonly identified as being present “quite a bit” or “an extreme amount” included older housing units in need of maintenance, dilapidated housing in need of significant rehab or demolition, and low housing values. Vacant housing, housing costs that exceed household incomes, and a mismatch between available housing and consumer preferences were cited by over one-third of the respondents as being present “quite a bit” or “an extreme amount”. The majority of the communities had the housing problems to at least some extent.

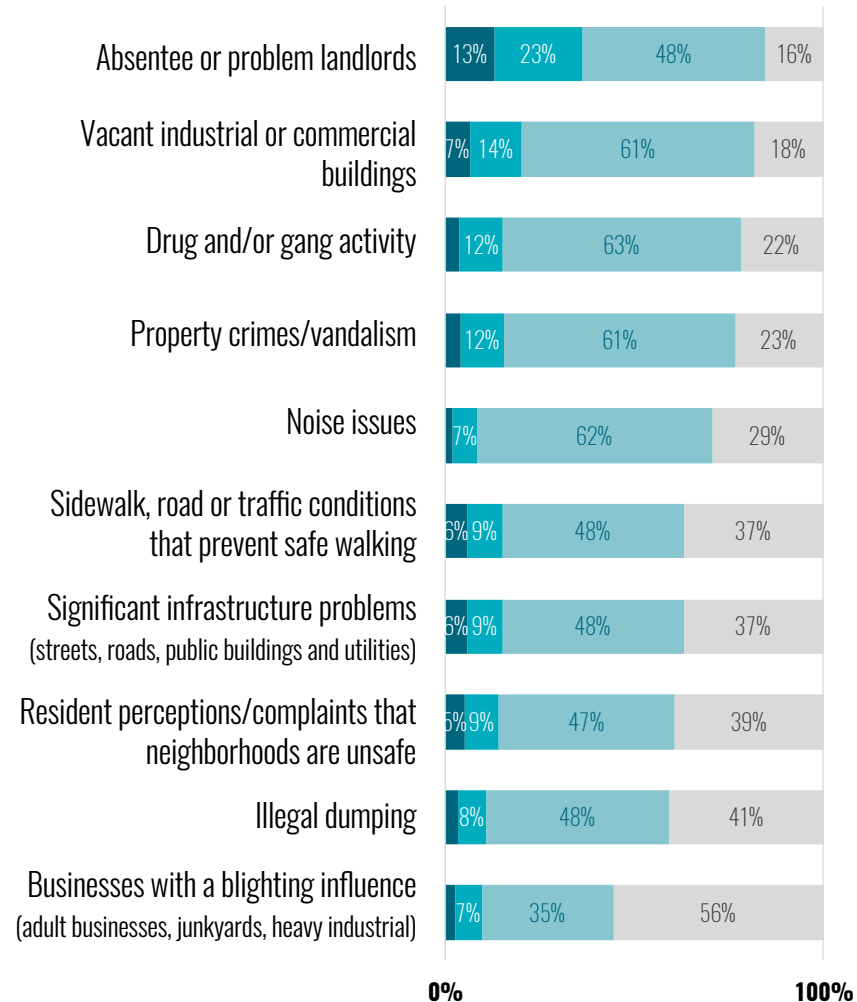
Please rate the extent that the following housing and neighborhood conditions are present in the city:
AN EXTREME AMOUNT, QUITE A BIT, SOME, NONE



Neighborhood quality of life issues

Neighborhood issues that interfere with the quality of life issues were present for a much smaller portion of the communities compared to the housing issues identified above. Absentee or problem landlords were identified as the most common, with over one-third of the communities indicating that it was present either “quite a bit” or “an extreme amount”. The remaining issues were present to a greater extent in a markedly smaller portion of the communities responding to the survey. Over 60% of the communities had at the following issues present to some extent: drug/gang activity, noise issues, property crimes/vandalism, or vacant industrial or commercial buildings.

Please rate the extent that the following housing and neighborhood conditions are present in the city: AN EXTREME AMOUNT, QUITE A BIT, SOME, NONE



METHODOLOGY

This study is based on the analysis of data from a statewide survey of city staff and elected officials designed to explore the relationship between housing needs and neighborhood conditions among rural communities. The data for this study were collected between September and November 2015, using an online survey sent to a database of elected officials and city staff for all municipalities in the state.

The survey questions and target recipients were developed with feedback from the Georgia Municipal Association, staff from USDA Rural Development, and an advisory group comprised of individuals from private and non-profit housing industry, government agencies, and academic institutions. The tool was then tested with a small group of people with characteristics similar to our target group and final revisions were made.

The survey instrument was first distributed through a personalized email message and an individual link to a Qualtrics web-based survey using a database provided by the state municipal association. We sent multiple reminder messages to non-respondents. In the last stage of data collection, we mailed a print version of the survey and a self-addressed, stamped envelope to communities that had not responded to previous electronic requests. We received completed questionnaires from 60.5% of all rural small towns in Georgia. A comparison of frequencies and an independent t-test analysis of community characteristics yielded similarities between non-respondent and respondent communities did not indicate any significant differences between respondent and non-respondent communities, therefore we did not weight the data in the analysis.