

Economic and Environmental Issues in Arkansas: **A Policy Perspective**

Measuring Success at County level

Executive Summary

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Introduction

This study is a cooperative venture between the Public Policy Ph.D. program and the Cooperative Extension Service. It was funded by Cooperative Extension Service and the public policy program at the University of Arkansas. The purpose of this venture is to better “measure success” at the county level.

Public policy makers and community leaders are responsible for maintaining and improving the quality of life within their jurisdictions. *Quality of life* has become an increasingly important concern to communities and local governments; hence there is a need to measure the status of the quality of life as well as progress being made toward improving it. Though there are a number of good sources of descriptive information at the county level, county policy advisors and policy makers do not have a variety of good measures by which to evaluate their counties in relation to similar counties, over time or to evaluate policy interventions and determine critical needs. Hence, there is a need to develop indicators to measure success at the county level. Measurement of success is important because “you cannot improve what you do not measure” (De Villa and Westfall, 2001 p.37).

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose for this study was to move data to information which will be helpful in analyzing success at the county level. The hope is that such information will then result in knowledge which can guide decision making. To accomplish this purpose, the following objectives were identified:

- 1.) Develop measures appropriate for the situation in Arkansas counties
- 2.) Develop a system to maintain and distribute these measures to county decision makers
- 3.) Work with county level policy makers and community leaders to select the measures most useful to them and
- 4.) To determine the format(s) for the presentation of these measures
- 5.) Determine appropriate distribution methods

Methodology

Literature Review, Discovery of Available Secondary Data Sources

An extensive literature review was conducted to provide a broad understanding of the research focused on measurement and utilization. Then possible data sources were explored and catalogued.

Survey

The goal of the mailed survey was two-fold. The survey helped us to gather information regarding the desires of county leaders for information concerning their county. Second, the survey helped us to develop a list of policy leaders in the counties who are willing to work with us further as we develop the measures.

Questionnaires were mailed to 250 selected participants across Arkansas in July, 2006 with follow-up letters three weeks later in August 2006. The participants were chosen from 25 randomly-selected counties. They consisted of policy makers/local government staff, Cooperative Extension workers, educationalists, religious leaders, business owners, Chamber of Commerce members, farmers, non-governmental organizations (NGO's) and health and safety workers. The survey instrument consisted of 85 questions and was constructed from indicators gathered from the literature covering the following areas: economic impact, health and safety, education, poverty, environment and communication. The questionnaire consisted primarily of Likert rating scale questions (1 not important and 5 very important).

Focus Groups

Six focus group sessions were conducted in the following cities and counties: Clinton in Van Buren, Forrest City in St Francis, Clarksville in Johnson, Pocahontas in Randolph, Benton in Saline and Ash flat in Sharp. Participants in the focus group were those who participated in the mailed survey and volunteered to work with us further as we develop the measures. The issues discussed were measures related to quality of life broadly defined.

Key Findings

Critical distinctions for measuring success

From our literature review and discussions, we discovered a seeming lack of clarity concerning the various types of measurements and their use and interpretation. It is important both for research purposes and to support utilization in decision making that the various ways to measure success be understood. These various types of measures of success as we define them are:

Descriptive Measures – Descriptive measures tell the user how much, how far, how big and so on.

Indicators - For our purpose an indicator is the representation of a trend over time.

Metrics - A metric is a standardized measure which is useful for comparisons with other entities in order to assess relative performance.

Indexes - The combination of several measures into a single index to model a concept. This may or may not be a metric.

Survey Critical Indicators

The following were measures which survey respondents scored high in importance.

Education: High school graduation rates, students drop out rate and school enrollment rate

Economic Impact: Unemployment rate, annual household income, average wage, and percentage of adults in jobs within county

Poverty: Percent of families at risk of hunger, percent of persons below poverty level and number of homeless.

Health and safety: percent of families with adequate health insurance, violent crime rate and property crime rate.

Environment: Clean water availability for home use and quality of river water and were cited as the very important measures.

Public communication: Voter participation rates and percent of eligible voters registered.

Over all, high school graduation rates, percent of families at risk of hunger, and school enrollment rate were scored highest in importance. Education and economic impact had the highest scores in overall area ratings. In the 2005 Arkansas Poll, Arkansans cited the economy and education as the most important issues. Our survey supports the findings from the Arkansas Poll.

Focus Groups Results

In focus groups, education was supported as most important area. In the area of metrics, participants would like their counties compared with peer counties because they believe that this would be more useful than comparing their county to the entire state.

Conclusion

Comparing the mailed survey with the focus group, in the area of education, both survey respondents and focus group participants agreed that the graduation rate is the most important measure. While the mailed survey rated teachers with degrees as not so important, this measure came out as an important measure in the focus group. This implies that when measuring success at county level, measures related to education should be considered critical.

Next Step

While the development and prioritization of the metrics of success is important, utilization of these measures is equally important. Methods are being developed that focus on maximizing potential use by decision makers while providing continuous feedback to the researcher concerning utilization. The next step of the study is to continue the extensive literature review, conduct an online survey with potential users and more focus group interviews to further develop the measures and identify ways to distribute these measures.

Draft reports, information on measures, links to important data sources and updates on this project may be found at a provisional web site <http://metric.wmillerpolicy.org>.