

The Elderly In Rural Society

THE ELDERLY IN RURAL SOCIETY: EVERY FOURTH ELDER is the name of a 1985 book edited by Raymond T. Coward and Gary R. Lee (Springer Publishing Company, New York). Coward and Lee state that research results on rural elderly Americans confront us with a disheartening set of realities. In contrast to the popular images of the "good life," with Grandmom and Grandpop rocking away on the large porch of their freshly painted farmhouse, surrounded by their land, grandchildren and the assurance of a prosperous future, we now know that:

- The average income of the rural elderly is consistently lower than that of their urban counterparts.
- A much higher proportion of rural than urban elderly have incomes below the poverty level.
- The rural elderly occupy a disproportionate share of the

nation's substandard and dilapidated housing.

- The rural elderly have a larger number of health problems, which are more severe compared with those of the urban elderly, resulting in a larger number who retire for health reasons.
- There is a higher percentage of "heavy drinkers" among rural as compared with urban elderly.
- Mental health services are underutilized by the rural elderly. These services must be meshed effectively with other on-going services and informal helping networks, such as senior citizen centers and nutrition sites.
- The rural elderly need more transportation, but it is less accessible to them.
- According to research to date, kin relationships are apparently not significantly stronger in rural society.

Other researchers who contributed to the Coward and Lee book

make important points that are pertinent to Extension staff and advisory groups seeking to address the needs of the rural elderly and their families:

- The needs of the rural elderly are getting more legislative attention. This group was not getting its share of the federal budget at the same time that research showed that the rural elderly have more unmet basic human needs. It was found that many federal programs were initiated from an outdated data base. The quantity and diversity of rural social services have been increasing, but a gap remains, compared with urban areas.
- Social class implications need to be considered, lest we tend to "homogenize" rural elders into one group. They are individuals who differ considerably from each other. Those with higher incomes and better education have better health.

- More elderly people remain or retire to rural locations. Those who "migrate in are better educated and more affluent than those who have "aged in place." Retirees who move to nonmetropolitan areas tend to select locations that have been favorite vacation areas.

- There is no difference in marital satisfaction or adjustment according to residential location. There is apparently greater conservatism and more traditionalism. Younger generations usually live closer to the husband's family.

- Farm men have been found to spend less time interacting with other household members, including spouses, than rural men of other occupations. This contradicts the stereotype of farm families being more family-oriented.

- Rural beliefs and values inhibit use of mental health services. Themes of fatalism, subjugation

to nature, orientation to concrete places and things, and emphasis on personal kinship ties are common. Values held by many rural elderly emphasize cultural stability, gradual change, and acceptance that ways of past living will endure into the future. Professionals who hold other views may myoptically initiate delivery programs which are destined to fail. The independence of the rural elderly may make them less likely to perceive the presence of personal and psychological problems. Rural professionals must be sensitive, gain acceptance, and establish personal credentials before professional credentials will be accepted. They need to be "street-wise" to the rural ecology.

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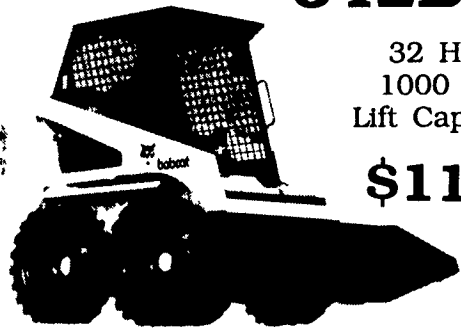
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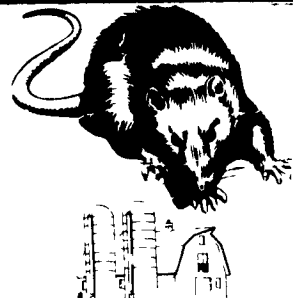
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