The pursuit of an equitable + prosperous future meets at the crossroads of education, workforce, and economic development.
INTRODUCTION

While considerable attention has been given to the impact of COVID-19 on urban areas, very little research has examined its impact on rural America. This is despite the fact that rural communities – which make up tens of millions of people from diverse backgrounds – are among the nation’s most vulnerable populations and may be intrinsically less resilient to the effects of such a large-scale exogenous shock.

In response, Thomas P. Miller and Associates (TPMA), a national workforce and economic development consulting firm, initiated Prosperity Through Equity—a national stakeholder engagement initiative to collaboratively use data and feedback to identify best practices, develop equitable policy initiatives that result in long-term sustainable solutions, and most importantly, pinpoint the most pressing economic development challenges of rural America.

METHODOLOGY

The survey was distributed through email, social media, personal invitations, and in newsletters. It became available for participation on May 5, 2021 and closed September 7, 2021 with 148 survey respondents. Once surveys were closed, the data were exported from the survey tool into Excel for analysis. The data were cleaned and prepped for analysis with a variety of potential univariate and multivariate analyses available depending on the data gathered. After cleaning, close-ended responses were examined with a calculation of response frequencies (i.e., a count of responses).
SURVEY QUESTIONS

To identify the importance of needs, respondents were shown a list of broad categories of common community needs. Acknowledging that each category captures several specific needs within that broad category, respondents were asked to rank the broad needs in your community from 1 (most important) to 12 (least important). The “Most Important” percentage represents the sum of the responses that put each category as “Significant Priority” and “Moderate Priority.”

In order to measure the amount of community access to these needs, respondents were asked how much of their county has access to common community needs. The “Access” percentage represents the sum of the ratings respondents put down as “All of County” and “Most of County” from a scale of “All of County” to “None of the County.” Respondents were also asked to select from a list of 5 barriers which they believed prevents access to those needs in their community.

Finally, respondents were asked if their community has a plan for addressing access to that need and what the key solutions are to meet the need for access in their community.

LISTENING SESSIONS

The survey launch was preceded by one of two listening sessions. The first session, held with economic development, education, and workforce leaders across the state of Louisiana, was held to ensure the survey questions were on par with the issues local leaders were facing. After a robust discussion, including virtual polling sessions and white board sessions, the team indicated that our direction and methodology were sound.

At the midway point of the survey, a second listening session was held. This time feedback was gathered from state and local rural leaders across the state of Indiana. We shared preliminary findings, conducted similar feedback sessions as those in Louisiana, and encouraged discussion about the qualitative results we were observing in the survey data.
**SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS**

**Gender**
- Female: 54%
- Male: 41%
- Prefer not to answer: 5%

**Race**
- White: 82%
- 2 or more races: 7%
- Prefer not to answer: 11%

**Age**
- 18-24: 0%
- 25-34: 6%
- 35-44: 22%
- 45-54: 27%
- 55-64: 22%
- 65+: 12%

**Employment Status**
- I am retired: 10%
- I am a student at a college/university or trade school: 1%
- I work multiple jobs: 13%
- I work more than full-time: 32%
- I work full-time: 49%
- I work part-time: 15%
- Unemployed: 3%

**Ethnicity**
- Not Hispanic or Latino: 76%
- Hispanic or Latino: 15%
- Prefer not to answer: 9%
### Total Annual Household Income

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income Range</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$140,000 or more</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$120,000 - $139,000</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$100,000 - $119,000</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$80,000 - $99,999</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$60,000 - $79,000</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$40,000 - $59,000</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$20,000 - $39,000</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than $20,000</td>
<td>3%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Location of Respondents

[Map showing the distribution of respondents by state with percentages indicated for each state.]
Over three-quarters of respondents identified affordable, quality housing as the most important need in their rural community, followed closely by access to living wage jobs, and access to broadband internet. Additionally, childcare and affordable, quality housing were reportedly the most inaccessible needs for those in rural communities, followed by criminal justice reform.

### Rank of Most Important Needs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Need</th>
<th>Rank</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Affordable, quality housing</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to living-wage jobs</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to broadband internet</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to quality healthcare</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to quality K-12 education</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to reliable transportation</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to mental health support</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to childcare</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community infrastructure</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime prevention</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to healthy food</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminal justice reform</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Importance – Access (I-A) ranks were calculated from the “Most Important” findings and “Access” findings, by multiplying the “Most Important” percentage by (1 – “Access” percentage). This calculation provides a rating for each need that was then ranked and placed into the “Very High Priority,” “High Priority,” or “Medium Priority.”

**VERY HIGH PRIORITY NEEDS**

The “Very High Priority” category contains the needs with an I-A rating of .40 or greater. These “Very High Priority” needs include affordable, quality housing, access to broadband internet, access to living-wage jobs, access to childcare, and access to reliable transportation.
Affordable, Quality Housing

According to Habitat for Humanity, most Americans report finding it challenging to find affordable, quality housing in their communities. Housing instability has been identified as a large need in rural communities in previous examinations on the effects of COVID-19 on rural America. The Housing Assistance Council highlighted that the decreasing rental income due to pandemic policies for renters may lead to a decline in the supply of rental properties in rural housing markets. Survey responses reflected this issue of supply; **Respondents indicated the availability of affordable housing was the biggest barrier preventing access to affordable, quality housing in their community (79%).** Further, a lack of financial resources was indicated as another barrier to access (67%).

Access to Broadband Internet

Broadband access in rural communities has been a priority need for a considerable amount of time. The Federal Communications Commission reported in April 2020 that 22.3% of Americans in rural areas lack high-speed internet, which is essential – especially during a pandemic – for work communication, online learning, telehealth services, and access to current health information. However, installing the infrastructure necessary to support broadband internet is expensive, leading companies to resist progress in rural areas. **Indeed, most survey respondents (80%) identified a lack of infrastructure as the main issue preventing access to high-speed internet in their community.**

Access to Living-Wage Jobs

Respondents to the survey agreed that the lack of access to living-wage jobs is largely the result of the unavailability of these jobs (60%). The Job Quality Index found that there is an increasing number of low-paying jobs compared to jobs with above-average pay. Although some states have increased minimum wages, American Progress reported that many rural states have not and as a result, rural workers tend to make significantly less than their urban counterparts. In addition, many rural states are “right-to-work” states, in which the state does not require union membership for employment. “Right-to-work” laws often correspond with lower wages in those states. Even when an increase in jobs in rural areas is seen, many of those new jobs still do not provide wages and benefits that are necessary for living.
Access to Childcare

Very few reports exist highlighting COVID-19’s effect on childcare access. Prior to COVID-19, American Progress reported that almost 60% of rural families live in a childcare desert, “or an area where there are at least three young children for every licensed childcare slot—or no licensed childcare providers at all.” With COVID-19 shutting down many childcare facilities, the access to childcare likely decreased even more in these rural childcare deserts. Respondents acknowledged several barriers to access of quality childcare in their community; Most prevalent (73%) was the lack of availability of quality childcare in area. This was followed by lack of financial resources (67%), which is consistent with the fact that families in rural areas spend an average of 12% of their income on child care. Finally, respondents identified that there is a lack of alignment between childcare and their work schedules (66%).

Access to Reliable Transportation

Respondents’ reported preventions to reliable transportation access were split between a lack of public transportation infrastructure (65%), a lack of financial resources for personal transportation (63%), and the availability of public transportation (62%). The American Public Transportation Association noted that rural public transit spending is lower than in urban areas, likely impacting the lack of public transportation infrastructure in these rural communities. Further, the presence of public transportation infrastructure does not necessitate its availability. Via’s analysis of the National Transit Database data found that 87% of the 200 least-productive bus networks are located in rural counties. This low productivity – measured as passenger trips per revenue-hour – leads to lack of availability of public transportation. According to the 2019 ACS five-year estimates data, 56% of the 292 counties in the U.S. where at least 10% of households do not have access to private transportation, are rural. Thus, rural communities are faced with a lack of public transportation as well as a lack of private transportation.
HIGH PRIORITY NEEDS

The “High Priority” category contains the needs with an I-A rating of .20 to .40. These “High Priority” needs include access to mental health programs/support, community infrastructure, and access to quality healthcare.

Access to Mental Health Programs/Support

According to the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE)’s Mental Health Program, more than 60% of rural Americans (as of 2018) live in mental health professional shortage areas. They present the three main challenges that rural Americans experience that interfere with receiving mental health support/services: Accessibility, availability, and acceptability. Survey respondents also identified two of these three issues as the most prevalent barriers. Most (68%) reported that there is a lack of acceptability in terms of education about quality mental health programs/support in their community. Likewise, respondents (64%) identified availability of quality mental health programs/support as a major barrier. WICHE explained that this deficit of acceptability is the result of a shortage of programs that train professionals to work specifically in rural places, in which urban models may not be suitable, as well as stigma surrounding mental health in rural areas. Similarly, the barrier of availability stems from the scarcity of mental health professionals in general and a lack of specialty providers with comprehensive services.

Community Infrastructure

With the national focus generally fixed on urban infrastructure, rural infrastructure is often overlooked. The American Farm Bureau Federation explains that federal investments work to repair community infrastructure to a degree, however that funding is not enough to cover the all the needs of rural infrastructure. Respondents agreed (65%), naming a lack of funding as the largest barrier preventing quality infrastructure in their community. The Farm Bureau suggests the need for private partnerships in rural America, as well as reducing regulations and requirements, in order for rural community infrastructure needs to be met.
The Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI) Health Panel provided a literature review and synthesis of information regarding access to rural healthcare. They summarize the three types of access barriers to healthcare in rural regions: Structural, financial, and personal/cultural. Survey respondents’ reported top barriers to access of quality healthcare in their community fall under financial and personal/cultural. A lack of financial resources was the most common prevention reported (60%), categorized under RUPRI’s financial barriers. A lack of transportation followed closely behind (57%) as a prevention, falling under the personal/cultural barrier. Indeed, when access to those quality healthcare providers in the community do exist (and 44% of respondents reported their availability as a barrier), many rural Americans still cannot access it due to the financial cost or the inaccessibility of transportation to those providers. A lack of financial resources aligns with general American sentiment regarding American healthcare. However, a lack of transportation is discussed far less.

"NO PLAN IN PLACE" FINDINGS

Respondents were asked if their community had a plan in place for addressing the access to the community needs. Access to childcare, access to living-wage jobs, criminal justice reform, access to reliable transportation, and affordable, quality housing were the top five issues with no plan in place for addressing the needs. Notably, four of the five issues with no plan in place, also ranked as a very high priority need – access to childcare, access to living-wage jobs, access to reliable transportation, and affordable, quality housing. This demonstrates a misalignment between community planning and community priorities.

Access to Childcare

Access to childcare was ranked as the fourth highest priority need and ranked first of the “no plan in place” needs, with over 47% of respondents listing “no plan”. That said, access to childcare also received the lowest percentage of respondents who listed there was a plan in place in their community to address childcare accessibility, with
only roughly 8% responding yes. The impacts of not having any future planning to address the accessibility of childcare for communities can be crucial. City leaders and government entities are well positioned to support community programs and initiatives that help young children succeed. Even in the smallest communities, local governments and community members can play key roles in improving the lives of families and children. The National League of Cities provides an in depth report on how municipal leaders can act to help early childhood success. Solutions to expanding access to childcare included providing data, building a supply of funds, reviewing zoning, developing public-private partnerships, and addressing transportation issues. It is evident that without proper planning in place, it is near impossible to implement any of the solutions provided.

Access to Living-Wage Jobs

Access to living-wage jobs was the second highest priority rated for having “no plan in place”, with roughly 45% of respondents indicating “no plan.” Additionally, access to living-wage jobs was ranked as the third highest priority need. Providing solutions to attracting and retaining living-wage jobs takes support from multiple sectors in a community, as the educational, private, and public sectors all must be engaged. That said, the importance of creating a strategic approach on how a community can bring in companies that support higher wages, as well as help provide companies in the community resources to raise wages, is vital for the supply of high wage jobs.

Criminal Justice Reform

While criminal justice reform was ranked as one of the lowest priority needs by respondents. Although ranked low in terms of importance, criminal justice reform received the third highest percentage of “no plan in place” votes by respondents with roughly 45% indicating “no plan.” Criminal justice reform has long been discussed as a community need that impacts other aspects of the community. The Prison Policy Initiative supplies ample research done on the impacts of the current criminal justice system, including the impacts it has on community well-being, housing, employment, and education. While several studies shared by the initiative focus on how reform could be implemented, many involve working within the community to address what needs are present and starting with a basic plan in place.
Access to Reliable Transportation

Transportation is fundamental issue in many areas, as respondents cited transportation as an issue for non-transportation related issues. Additionally, access to reliable transportation was ranked as the fifth highest priority need, while receiving the fourth highest percentage of “no plan in place” selections by respondents. Over 40% of respondents indicated that no plan was in place to address the accessibility of reliable transportation. The Rural Health Center has long researched the impact of transportation in rural areas, indicating that access to transportation contributes to the health, quality of life, and economic development of rural communities. Additionally, the economic stability for many rural residents is dependent on the quality and reliability of the transportation available, as transportation options are a common barrier to employment. Planning on how transportation can be collaborative, effective, and efficient in a community, by engaging residents, employers, and stakeholders, can be a keyway for rural communities stay competitive and improve current conditions.

Affordable, Quality Housing

Affordable, quality housing was ranked the most important priority need by respondents, while also gaining the fifth highest percentage of “no plan in place” selections at over 40%. Interestingly, with the affordable, quality housing being an increasingly disputed and public discussion, the priority need also received the lowest percentage of “Unsure” votes, possibly indicating that respondents are more educated on how their communities are, or are not, addressing this issue. Undoubtedly like many of the priority needs addressed providing affordable, quality housing takes collaboration and resources from several community stakeholders. That said, housing studies and housing planning initiatives have been one solution in attempting to understand how communities can better their supply of units. The National Association of Counties provides a toolkit and research data findings regarding affordable housing across the United States. Without question the solutions and options provided for communities require extensive planning to take place, as well as understanding of how important comprehensive plans are to the future success.
A common outlier in response to the question of their community having a plan in place for addressing access to a community need, was that many respondents reported being “unsure.” This means that respondents in a majority of the priority needs listed were unsure if their community had a plan in place to address accessibility. In fact, “Unsure” had the highest percentage of voters over “Yes” or “No” for 8 of the 12 priority needs. **While this may impact the results in terms of validity, it does highlight that the many community members are not involved in community planning and/or the communication of these plans is not sufficient.** The large quantity of unsure voters for the broad ranging priorities indicates that much work is needed in many rural communities in educating their citizens and businesses on what initiatives are in place, and engaging stakeholders so they can be more involved on future plans.

**DISCLAIMER FOR “NO PLAN IN PLACE” DATA**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priority Need</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Access to childcare</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to living-wage jobs</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminal justice reform</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to reliable transportation</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affordable, quality housing</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to mental health programs/support</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to healthy food</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community infrastructure</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to broadband internet</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to quality K-12 education</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to quality healthcare</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime prevention</td>
<td>20%</td>
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</table>
CONCLUSION

TPMA’s Prosperity Through Equity initiative sought to determine the most pressing economic development challenges in rural America. Through this endeavor, “Very High Priority” needs in rural America were identified and included affordable, quality housing, access to broadband internet, access to living-wage jobs, access to childcare, and access to reliable transportation. Further, four of the five “Very High Priority” needs also ranked in the top five issues with no community plan in place to address them – access to childcare, access to living-wage jobs, access to reliable transportation, and affordable, quality housing. This overlap emphasizes the need for community input in community planning.

Overall, many respondents who list funding as being the primary barrier to ensuring community members have access to resources. However, many also comment on 1) inefficiencies at the local level in managing and administering existing resources, and 2) limited community input or knowledge of how to connect with the government entities that represent them (and can connect them with those resources).

Many issues seem to be a result of poor connectivity and organization. The funds exist, as do the technologies required to provide everyone with housing, broadband, jobs, childcare, transportation et cetera. The missing piece is the conversations which connect government offices, local organizations, and other stakeholders in a way that allows them to pool resources and direct their efforts toward a clear, easy-to-understand action plan.
SOLUTIONS CHALLENGE

We know that changing the status quo in our communities involve identifying the problems, pinning the best ways to solve them, and then working until a functional solution is in hand.

To conclude the Prosperity Through Equity initiative, TPMA is starting a Solutions Challenge, an innovative and collaborative approach to solving rural America’s most pressing tasks. We invite organizations, practitioners, and community champions to submit their unique solutions that address one of the top 5 challenges identified:

- **Challenge #1:** Access to affordable quality housing
- **Challenge #2:** Access to broadband internet
- **Challenge #3:** Access to living-wage jobs
- **Challenge #4:** Access to childcare
- **Challenge #5:** Access to reliable transportation

The Solutions Challenge will launch on October 23rd, 2021, #NationalMakeADifferenceDay and remain open until January 31st where a winner with the most compelling solution will be awarded a grand prize of $5,000 for being a thought leader and advocate as we strive for economic recovery. Participants can [submit their unique solutions here](tpma-inc.com/prosperitythroughequity).

Thank you for your efforts, we know there are amazing ideas out there waiting to be actualized and implemented!