

Public Abstract

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Influence of Economic Restructuring on Rural Missouri High School Dropout Rates

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This research has argued that large scale social forces can influence individual level decisions, such as the decision to leave high school before graduating. The influence of Globalization, via economic restructuring, as measured by the transition from a manufacturing based economy to an economy of services and information, was found to influence students' decisions to drop out. Such economic restructuring has been occurring not only among the nations of the world but also down to the level of localities including rural areas of Missouri. This research measured economic restructuring as the changes taking place between 1980 and 1990 in local employment opportunities down to the level of rural school areas. Economic changes were assessed utilizing three occupation categories defined and explicated by Robert Reich: symbolic analysts, in-person service providers, and routine manufacturing and production workers and the subsequent influence of these changes on high school dropout rates as well as family structure and the perceptions of students regarding school and education.

A GIS was developed that captured the social and economic environment in a ten-mile radius buffer around 335 rural Missouri high schools. Census data from 1980 and 1990 comprised the social and economic data captured by the high school buffer. Data from the student portion of the Missouri School Improvement Program (MSIP) Advance Questionnaire were used to capture student perceptions regarding schooling and education within their high schools. The final dataset was comprised of rural high schools with attributes from the social and economic environment in which the individual schools were located as well as the perceptions of the students associated with that high school.

Structural equation models were used to analyze the rural trends taking place from a rural-regional state-wide level. Findings indicated that increases in symbolic analyst and in-person service employment decreased high school dropout rates and the increase in routine production employment increased the dropout rate. Changes in all three occupation categories affected student family characteristics during the 1980s. Increases in in-person service employment had the greatest influence on family structure characteristics. Findings regarding student perceptions of education that resulted in increases in school commitment contributed to decline in high school dropout rates while increases in the number of hours students spent working at a part-time job increased the high school dropout rate.