
Energy, public opinion, and public policy— a survey of urban, suburban, and rural communities

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The California lifestyle depends on easy access to inexpensive energy. Continued rising energy costs probably will mean drastic alterations in that lifestyle and consequently in the growth patterns of the state's communities. It seems apparent, furthermore, that public attitudes about the energy crisis — its causes and consequences — will influence state and national policy.

In this study, three groups of Sacramento Valley residents were polled in the spring of 1975 to determine whether place of residence (urban, suburban, rural) affected:

- attitudes about the causes and potential consequences of the energy crisis
- energy-related community behavior and lifestyle
- preferred alternatives for public policy on energy

Study sample and method

A 14-page questionnaire covering citizen attitudes over a wide range of energy-related areas was mailed to 800 randomly selected people in metropolitan Sacramento, 600 in the small city of Winters, and 200 in rural Capay Valley. Telephoned and mailed reminders to those who had not responded achieved a 62.5 percent return rate (843 questionnaires returned of those that were actually delivered).

Results were edited and coded for computer analysis. To have the results properly represent the area surveyed, the data were weighted in terms of their contribution to the population (Sacramento 456, Winters 4, Capay Valley 1). The percentages reported here are weighted.

Findings

The most surprising and revealing finding was that respondents, regardless of residence or income levels, held relatively similar opinions on the energy crisis and its overall consequences for themselves and the nation. There was little difference among metropolitan, small-city and rural respondents on four principal issues:

- cause of the energy crisis
- potential duration of the crisis
- capacity of public officials and institutions to respond to the crisis
- preferred alternatives to resolve the energy crisis



Analyses by income level also revealed no statistically significant differences on these questions. There were, however, some differences on other issues.

Public morale and confidence. The sample population, regardless of place of residence, was to a large extent dubious and dispirited on the energy issue. Nearly 40 percent of both suburban and rural people and nearly 46 percent of urbanites held negative impressions of the impact of the crisis on the nation (table 1). Attitudes were similar when respondents were asked to gauge the long-term impacts of the crisis on the American public.

Obviously, lack of credence in its institutions by a majority of the public greatly influences the range of choices that policy-makers have in attempting to develop or implement change. According to the sample population, it appears that no public body currently enjoys sufficient public confidence to provide effective leadership in the area of energy.

Community behavior and lifestyle. As anticipated, the rural lifestyle is more frugal than the urban and suburban. The survey showed that rural people already use fireplaces, keep their home temperatures lower at night, use space heaters more judiciously, and use air conditioning less than the urban and suburban populace. In essence, this group has fewer possible sacrifices to make. Even among entertainment activities, like going to movies, restaurants, or Sunday drives, rural people are seldom participants (table 2).

Despite their lower use of energy, 14 percent of the rural people reported higher incidences of slow or unavailable services during the height of the energy crisis in 1973 and a continuing pattern of high prices as well as inferior service.

The price mechanism and other energy allocation alternatives would seem to be more detrimental to rural populations than to others. The energy crisis could make rural areas less attractive and might force more people off the farm or slow the current rejuvenation of rural areas.

Community and energy policy alternatives. Introduction of new energy-production techniques, including some safe nuclear energy, was favored over other measures to increase energy resources. The favored conservation alternative was mass transportation.



Rural and suburban people were more opposed to direct government intervention and controls than were urban residents (table 3). Forty-six percent of the suburban and 51 percent of the rural respondents opposed nationalization — compared to 35 percent of the city residents. All segments of the sample population disapproved of rationing, with rural and suburbanites the most antagonistic toward this form of control.

Conclusion and Implications

The real dichotomy between urban and rural California on the energy issue concerns the role of government in solving the problem. There is fairly uniform agreement as to acceptable alternatives, but the mechanism for implementing them remains a point of contention among urban, suburban, and rural people.

Certain public policy implications for California also may be drawn from the survey results:

1. Public confidence in the process of energy resource allocation needs to be restored before new alternatives or restrictions are imposed. Without increased confidence in the institutional framework for policy formulation and enforcement, proposed changes may be undermined by apathy or active civil disobedience, as during Prohibition.

2. Making existing technology conform to human needs should be an underlying goal. The survey indicated that the public will support additional research to make existing technologies—atomic energy, the Alaskan pipeline, and others—better meet the needs of individuals.

3. The uniform application of rationing, price mechanisms, and the like may have adverse effects on parts of the highly interdependent network of communities. Policies should allow different applications according to local situations.

4. The growth pattern of California communities may well be dictated directly or indirectly by energy policies. Current price and other free-market strategies penalize those who desire rural lifestyles. Somehow, considerations concerning quality of community life should be woven into energy policy.

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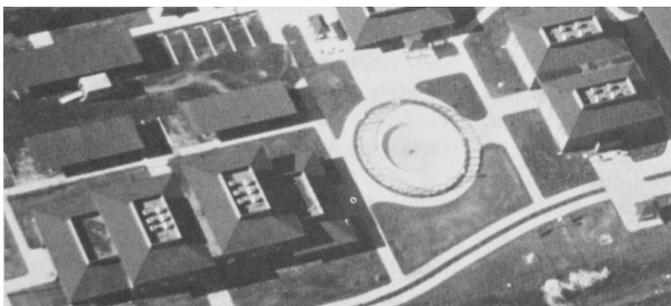


TABLE 1. PERCEPTIONS OF PUBLIC MORALE AND CONFIDENCE

Question	Urban	Suburban	Rural
	percent		
In your opinion, what have been the overall effects of the energy crisis on the morale (spirit) of the nation?			
Very positive	5.0	8.0	3.7
Positive	17.6	26.8	24.8
No difference	19.9	16.9	26.6
Negative	45.9	39.6	35.7
Very negative	11.5	8.6	9.2
If the energy crisis continues for years, do you expect that the effects on the morale of the Americans in the long run will prove to be:			
Very positive	7.2	12.2	6.4
Positive	22.9	28.9	22.0
No difference	20.9	16.1	32.1
Negative	30.9	31.2	27.5
Very negative	18.1	11.6	11.9
Capacity of public officials and institutions to respond to the energy crisis (percent rated good and excellent).			
The federal administration	13.0	11.6	17.1
The Congress	9.1	11.9	11.6
Oil companies	8.1	9.9	11.6
Public utilities	24.8	23.0	38.4

TABLE 2. FREQUENCY OF PUBLIC AND PRIVATE ENTERTAINMENT

Entertainment	Urban	Suburban	Rural
	percent		
Going to the movies:			
Once or more a week	2.8	0.6	0.0
One to three times a month	11.9	8.9	4.5
Several times a year	34.7	26.5	23.2
Never or almost never	50.6	64.0	72.3
Going to restaurants:			
Once or more a week	20.4	9.8	10.2
One to three times a month	37.8	34.8	29.6
Several times a year	33.4	38.8	40.7
Never or almost never	8.3	16.6	19.4
Going out for pleasure drives:			
Once or more a week	6.3	7.4	2.8
One to three times a month	18.8	18.0	8.3
Several times a year	34.2	31.5	23.1
Never or almost never	40.7	43.1	65.7

TABLE 3. ATTITUDES TOWARD GOVERNMENT INTERVENTION AS A MEANS TO EASE OR RESOLVE ENERGY SHORTAGES

Form of intervention	Urban	Suburban	Rural
	percent		
Putting oil and gasoline companies under national control:			
Strongly disagree	15.4	15.4	22.0
Disagree	19.4	30.4	29.4
Neither agree nor disagree	21.1	18.4	13.8
Agree	30.8	24.1	22.0
Strongly agree	13.4	11.7	11.7
Nation-wide rationing of gasoline and other energy sources:			
Strongly disagree	20.0	21.3	20.8
Disagree	37.7	37.7	24.9
Neither agree nor disagree	19.2	18.4	13.2
Agree	18.3	19.0	24.5
Strongly agree	4.8	3.6	6.6
Energy crisis requires:			
Greater government role	45.8	41.7	12.5
Smaller government role	37.5	43.8	18.8