

Frequently Asked Questions About Rural America

FAQs

The following questions were identified by FrameWorks researchers as those likely to arise from public forums and media interviews, based on the kinds of issues that ordinary people struggle to understand. In each example, we offer a typical answer that advocates might be inclined to offer, and an analysis of its weaknesses. We then compose an answer based on the FrameWorks research and deconstruct its key elements.

Definition of small town/rural America

1. Where do you mean when you talk about rural America? What characterizes rural America?

False Start

Rural America is home to some 55 million people, or 20 percent of us, and it covers 80 percent of our land. The people who live on this land are the storehouse of our history, the keepers of our values and the guardians of our environment. Farms and small towns make up much of Rural America.

Analysis

Leads off with numbers that do not create a useful mental picture

Triggers unhelpful stereotypes of the yeoman farmer and (simple, unchanging) “rural utopia”

Unnecessarily reinforces the exaggerated association between “rural” and “farms”

Reframed

Rural America is the region of our country where towns or small cities provide the focal points for counties that are lightly populated. The people who live here are much like people who live in cities and suburbs. Most earn their living from professional, service, and industrial jobs. Small town America and Big City America share similar concerns. They are both part of the national body politic, acted upon by national and state policies, and faced with similar social issues. You might say they share the national DNA and what affects one, affects the other.

Analysis

Establishes that the people in Small Town America are much like everyone else in the country

Counters agricultural stereotypes; notes interdependence

Notes that like all regions, small town America is acted upon by national and state policy

Doesn't frame rural American as a world apart, but notes that rural and metro are part of a national system or "body"

2. Rural America is all about farms and agriculture, is it not?

False Start

Farms are the first image that comes into our heads when we think about rural America. We all know the stories about farmers rising at the break of day to put food on our tables. Farmers are important. However, more people make their living from other occupations.

Analysis

Reinforces the stereotype by repeating it – disclaimer comes too late
Sets up an idealized, stereotypical image of the farmer, evoking the “rural utopia” frame

Reframed

No – in fact, most people in small towns and less populated counties make their living the way the rest of us do, and the economic base is much the same in rural and other areas. There are tradesmen, storekeepers, industrial workers, teachers, doctors, lawyers and so on. One of the most effective methods of building up the rural portions of the American economy has been to invest in small business creation.

Analysis

Doesn't repeat the reference to farming
Rejects and challenges the rural utopia frame
Provides information (not numbers) that allows the formation of a new picture of rural economic life
Refers to effective, systemic solutions
Ties rural economics to the national economy

Responsibility

3. Can't rural America solve its own problems? I don't see the need for federal involvement. Why can't local governments and local people take care of these problems?

False Start

Rural America is known for ingenuity and independence and it does try to solve its own problems. There are many local initiatives to improve health care, develop local economies and guide growth. However, there is also a real need for national and state policies to support local efforts.

Analysis

Repeats stereotypes about rural character (which are damaging even if positive)
Emphasis on rural self-sufficiency implicitly suggests that outside "interference" is unneeded, unwanted and even counterproductive
Reference to national policy is too little, too late

Reframe

Like other American communities, small towns can tackle those problems that have local roots. But in fact, national policies have created many of the challenges that rural America faces, and national action is needed to help with solutions. For example, the No Child Left Behind Act mandates expensive programs without acknowledging that rural areas have a more limited tax base for funding the programs. Refinements to the law could allow local school districts to improve in ways that suit the local situation.

Analysis

- _____ Sets up an appropriate sharing of responsibility between local and national
Offers a concrete example of outside forces acting on rural America

Stereotypes

4. Most people think of rural America as very poor, with many poorly educated people living in run-down houses. We tend to think of reservations, Appalachia, some shack in the desert. Is this true?

False Start

It is true that rural poverty is rampant. Nearly one-fifth of all rural children are poor and rural poverty rates average 14.2 percent—or about three percentage points higher than those in metro areas. In fact, of the nation's

200 poorest counties, 189 are rural. However, those numbers do not tell the whole story about rural America. Moreover, the stereotypes we have do not help us understand rural America as it really is.

Analysis

Initial statistics reinforce the “rural dystopia” stereotype – disclaimers come too late

Relies on statistics to communicate by themselves without “translation”

The word “rampant” over-dramatizes and misleads.

Reframe

Most people who live in rural America are middle class, and just like big cities, small towns and less populated counties have complex economic and social systems with people at every level of income, education, age, and ability. That said, there are a number of economic trends and government policies that are proving effective in raising poverty levels in rural areas.

Analysis

Introduces the idea that rural areas are complex systems

Reduces the difference between rural and metro, rather than reinforcing it

Acknowledges economic distress without triggering the dystopia frame

5. When I think about the country I think about farmers and a simpler life. Is that wrong? Am I mistaken?

False Start

It’s easy to think about farmers when you think about the country, but there is a lot more to the country than farms and farming. There are thousands of small towns, for one thing. While life may be slower, I wouldn’t say it was simpler.

Analysis

Repeats and reinforces the rural utopia frame, including agricultural images

Identifies rural areas as “the country” and therefore undermines the point about towns

Only weakly rejects the unhelpful stereotype of slow, simple life

Reframe

If you want a picture of rural America, think of carpenters at work, along with plumbers, mechanics, schoolteachers, dentists, shopkeepers, and industrial workers – that’s rural America going about its business. In fact, only a small percentage of people make their living as farmers. And even they are operating in the same complex, interdependent world as the rest of us, facing familiar problems like the lack of affordable health care and the diminishing number of dentists in our country.

Analysis

Introduces a concrete image that effectively counters the agriculture frame
Effectively counters the stereotype of simplicity
Draws connections and parallels between rural and metro America

6. Isn’t it easier to be poor if you live in the country?

False Start

People think because farmers and small town folks are close to nature, able to get outside, or live close to the land, they don’t suffer poverty the way people in the city do. Many even perceive a spiritual and physical reward in the hard work and struggle. But the effects of poverty—like poor health and poor housing – are just as corrosive for people who live on farms or in small towns.

Analysis

Reinforces the images it is trying to counter – offers several apparent reasons why rural poverty *is* less difficult

Reframe

Let me use an example from science: A developing brain doesn’t care where you live, but does care about the quality of its environment. The fact is that poverty, whether urban or rural, creates stress and anxieties for parents – and these stresses can affect children’s healthy development, including the developing architecture of the brain. The stress and anxiety that parents experience from poverty affects the environment that children are growing up in, and recent research suggests that this difference can even influence the physical structure and size of the developing brain.

Analysis

States that poverty has harmful consequences no matter where it is experienced

Frames the consequences in concrete and compelling terms

Avoids counterproductive references to nature, or other “protective” factors

Change and Growth

7. My understanding is that growth is gobbling up a lot of farmland. That seems inevitable. It’s a changing world. If people want to move out of the city, nothing’s going to stop them, is it?

False Start

Farms and forests provide the landscape and the cultural identity for this region and it would be a shame to lose them. Growth is both inevitable and healthy, but there are ways to control growth so we are able to preserve the landscape. For example, ...

Analysis

Frames rural America as (beautiful) *land*, obscuring the existence of social and economic *systems*

Sets up the “rural utopia” view with phrases like “cultural identity” and references to farms, forests and landscape

Suggests a museum-like approach to small towns and farms, rather than promoting economic, systemic change, etc.

Reframe

The question, which should concern city dwellers as well as rural residents, is really about responsible planning and about *where and how* growth occurs. There are many government policies that can both shape growth and protect farmland. A good sign is the increasing cooperation between cities and surrounding rural counties. It makes possible regional planning and policies that encourage the reuse of industrial brownfields, guide infrastructure investments, and so forth.

Analysis

Introduces the central value of responsible management

Points to effective solutions (“can do”)

Treats rural areas as systems rather than mere landscapes

Makes the issue about something larger than individual farms/farmers

7A Follow-up: Doesn’t an individual farmer sell out because he can make more money that way?

False Start:

Farmers don't like to take their land out of farming. When they do it is because they can no longer make a good living farming. It's not greed, but when the balance tips toward selling, many will.

Analysis:

Accepts the "little picture," individualistic frame of the question

Evokes a stereotype of the iconic American Farmer—stoic and self-reliant

Obscures the bigger picture – economic forces that have nothing to do with individual farmers

Reframe:

National policies need to change to keep independent farmers competitive and in business. Farmers need new crops and markets in which they can compete. They need support—both technical and financial—to help them make the transition to those new markets. A farmer who makes a good return on his invested capital and labor will not sell his farm for development. And that, I'm sure you agree, is good for all of us.

Analysis

Focuses on a systems perspective, not an individual one

Discusses proactive steps that can be taken

Provides a segue for a more complete answer – "I'm sure you agree (the farmer staying in business) is good for all of us."

7B Follow-up: Well, tell me why it is good for all of us.

Continuing Reframe:

In a small-town county, losing a farmer creates a domino effect. A mechanic has less work and buys less. A seed and implement dealer loses a customer. A shopkeeper in town loses business from all three of them. He has less to spend with his supplier in the city, who has less to spend with the manufacturer.

There are also effects in the nearby city: The farmer no longer has produce to sell and local consumers miss an opportunity for fresh, locally grown foods. And so the loss goes, rippling through the system.

Analysis

Presents rural economic systems

Moves the discussion beyond symptoms towards solutions

Conveys the interdependence of small towns and cities.

Policies/Challenges

8. Tell me about the disadvantages rural America faces. How was rural America left behind? What needs to change? What policies do you advocate?

False Start

Economic growth is lagging in 6 out of 10 rural areas because traditional economic engines—agricultural, industrial, timber, and mining—are consolidating and facing increasing global pressures. Farmers are forced to work with big Agri-Business. Commodity consolidation empties the landscape and narrows opportunity. And as people leave, the local economic system breaks down.

Analysis

Avoids triggering utopian or dystopian frames, and does suggest a systems perspective – but uses language and ideas that only relative insiders can follow
Treats “big Agri-business” as a negative without really explaining why

Reframe

First, it’s important to note that this isn’t just about “rural economies,” because these cannot be separated from our national economy. In fact, what affects one region ultimately affects the rest of the country. That said, the particular economic problems arising in rural areas have some very basic causes: ...

Analysis

Emphasizes interdependence between rural and metro America
Sets up the possibility of offering some causal explanations

Follow-up: What are those causes?

One of the main ones is increasing global competition, which is steadily lowering incomes in certain key industries. Think of the nation’s economy as a clock, with one mainspring driving the movement of all the parts. In the past, the mainspring got its power from agriculture, timber, mining, and a variety of industries that produced commodities. And the other “moving parts” of the economy included grain elevator operators, bankers, merchants, railroads and truck companies, professionals, artists and everyone else you would find in any community. Even if most people weren’t employed directly in the “mainspring” industries, their jobs ultimately depended on those industries. Now those traditional industries are under great pressure from global competition. That pressure has led to

consolidation, falling prices, and economic stagnation. As those industries slow, so do all the gears, and the clock runs down.

Follow-up: That sounds bleak. What can be done?

Rural America needs to make a transition. Unfortunately, national policy still is set up to support the old, stagnating industries in ways that encourage still more consolidation. It does not encourage regions to develop new economies, the kinds of economies, based on regional advantages, that economists say will win in the global market.

There are good examples of regions stepping out to break the old molds and build new industries based on regional advantages. Now the federal government needs to update its policies and create support for regional economic planning, support for the brain trusts found in universities, and the drive of entrepreneurs to build new driving industries.

Analysis

Presents a “simplifying model” based on the clock and mainspring

Focuses consistently on systems rather than individuals and anecdotes

Points out the role for federal policy

Notes the interdependence between rural and urban economies

Makes clear that progress is possible