

Effects of Rural Living in Tioga, Texas

[REDACTED]

Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center

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Dr. John Pearson, MSA, DHA

[REDACTED]

The United States Department of Agriculture recognizes the concept of rural and urban communities as multidimensional. Rural can be defined using statistical data such as population density, geographic isolation, and population size, or it can be based on a combination of administrative, land-use or economic concepts. There is not a one-size fits all to defining whether a community is rural or not, so researchers and policymakers ultimately decide how to appropriately define these communities.

Defining whether a community is rural is the basis for growth and development of said community. While multiple definitions can be confusing, according to Cromartie and Bucholtz, it actually deems itself helpful depending on the situation. An administrative definition of rural is often the starting point in order to determine program eligibility for rural development programs that provide assistance through local governments, while a land-use concept definition would prove to be more useful when applying for infrastructure programs for members of the community to gain access to water and sewage systems in a sparsely populated region.

Growth and development of these rural communities stem from specific issues that they face due to sparse population and or geographic isolation. These issues can range from social differences to deficient economic status to healthcare challenges. Geographic isolation can result in restricted access to quality healthcare ranging from prompt emergency department visits to healthcare specialists, a low health literacy, and insufficient or lack of health insurance coverage. Individuals residing in rural areas may also suffer from inadequate education systems suffering from poverty, staff shortages, and lack of extracurricular activities.

In order to examine the effects of rural living, I travelled to Tioga, Texas. Tioga is a small community with an estimated population of 1,008 people according to the 2018 dataset from the United States Census Bureau. The town encompasses 1.2 square miles of which 0.81% is water.

Tioga is located 58 miles northwest of Dallas, TX and 30 miles from the closest hospital in either direction towards Denton, TX or Sherman, TX. While there are many definitions to define what makes a community rural, due to an estimated population below 2,500, Tioga will be considered a rural community for this discussion.

From observation, the social and economic infrastructure of Tioga is in place to operate as a fully functional city, but the town itself does not necessarily have all the necessities. Tioga is home to a police department that is fully staffed with 1 chief and 3 officers, a fire department with 7 responders, a post office, a community hall, a park, two gas stations, a convenience store, a liquor store, a dollar general, a handful of churches, and a K-12 school system. In addition, there are several homes densely populated around the town center while the town itself is surround by agricultural farmland. On the north and south side of Tioga, one must travel on highway 377, a two-lane highway, and across a bridge over Lake Ray Roberts to enter the town. You can also enter the town from the west from I35, about 20 minutes, and from the east from I75, about 30 minutes, although these will be country roads the whole way. The main entrance and exit to Tioga is highway 377, a busy two-lane highway that travels north and south, and takes less than 5 minutes to drive through the town.

Ultimately, the town seems safe. All individuals I came into contact during this trip were kind and helpful; one person even helped me get a wasp out of my car that flew in my window while trying to take photos! The town did not have true neighborhoods like you would see in many suburban areas of DFW, but rather a dense housing area centered on the town center. Most of the houses didn't have fences, but the houses themselves and yards were well maintained. It appears that a building boom is occurring as duplexes were being built in the north part of town and many single-family homes have been built in the main center part of town. Every few houses

you would see a more dilapidated home, but these were sparse amongst all the new builds and renovated homes. The majority of the housing is centered on the town hall, fire department, park, and schools, making everything within walking distance. The major difference from this neighborhood to mine is that there were no sidewalks. Many kids were playing or riding their bikes in the street, which did not appear to be a problem as there were very few cars. In addition, the major road is highway 377, stretching north to south on the west part of town. There are no stoplights and the speed limit does not drop below 60 MPH unless you turn into town, which could worry some families for their child's safety.



Figure #1. Community building established in an older building without renovations. April 10th, 2020.



Figure #2. Town Park located in a dense housing area to the east of city hall and the fire department. April 10th, 2020.



Figure #3. Tioga Volunteer Fire Department. April 10th, 2020.



Figure #4. Tioga City Hall. April 10th, 2020.



Figure #5. Behind City Hall. April 10th, 2020.



Figure #6. Example of one of the sparsely located dilapidated homes. April 10th, 2020.

The education does not appear to lack in Tioga. While taking photos, I got the chance to talk with one of the four officers employed in the town, and heard only positives about the school district. The positive review received was further verified by the 7/10 rating on greatschools.org. The small 1.2 square mile town is home to an elementary and middle school that is attached and a separate high school that just opened in 2018. In 1961, Tioga closed the doors to its separate, freestanding high school and sent students grades 9-12 to Gunter High School, 12 miles away. By 2015, Tioga converted the elementary and middle school into a Pre-K-12 facility and housed all students in the same building in preparation to open their own high school in the upcoming years. In 2018, Tioga ISD opened a new high school campus located just 1 mile northeast of the

remaining elementary and middle school campus in order to give relief to the 630 students housed in the same campus. The new campus allows room for growth while it can serve the current 300 students and can seat up to 1,400 individuals in their gymnasium and 1,637 in the new football stadium. By observing the school campus and reading the recent development, it appears that education is one that takes priority in the community. Students have access to a safe and clean building to further their education and the ability to partake in extracurricular activities, as demonstrated by the baseball, softball and football fields surrounding the school.



Figure #7. Front of the newly built Tioga High School. April 10th, 2020.



Figure #8. Back of the newly built Tioga High School. April 10th, 2020.



Figure #9. Tioga High School Football Stadium. April 10th, 2020.



Figure #10. Tioga Elementary and Middle School campus. April 10th, 2020.



Figure #11. Close up of Tioga Middle School campus. April 10th, 2020.



Figure #12. Close up of Tioga Child Development Center (Pre-K) attached to Tioga Elementary and Middle School campus. April 10th, 2020.



Figure #13. Tioga Child Development Center (Pre-K) attached to Tioga Elementary and Middle School campus. April 10th, 2020.



Figure #14. Football field behind the Tioga Elementary and Middle School campus. April 10th, 2020.



Figure #15. Softball field behind the Tioga Elementary and Middle School campus. April 10th, 2020.

In addition to a high-ranking school district, Tioga has benefits and disadvantages from the rural location of this town. Being so small, Tioga does not have a true grocery store, any healthcare facilities, fast food options or entertainment businesses. Luckily, Tioga has three mom-and-pop restaurants, and residents of the town only have to drive 8 minutes to the nearest grocery store and fast food joint. This being said, any individual who does not have a vehicle would struggle more than someone who does have a car. There is a dollar general, post office, city hall, park and school district all within walking distance to the majority of houses, but the dollar general is across a busy highway that sees an average of 700 cars per hour, based on a

survey I took between 2 and 2:15 PM on a Friday during the COVID-19 pandemic in a county where a stay-at-home order has been issued. The possibility of that average increasing after the pandemic is very likely to rise, especially during peak traffic times in the morning and afternoon. Even more unfortunate is the access to healthcare.



Figure #16. Tioga United States Post Office. April 10th, 2020.



Figure #17. Shopping center with a bank with a walk-up ATM and a salon. April 10th, 2020.



Figure #18. Shopping center continued with a boutique, Mexican restaurant and barber shop.

April 10th, 2020.



Figure #19. Close up of the side of the shopping center. Part of the brick is crumbling and cracks go through the side of the building. April 10th, 2020.

Tioga does not have any healthcare facilities in town. There are no primary care physicians, physician assistants, or nurse practitioners. In addition, there are no healthcare specialists, urgent care facilities, or emergency rooms within 20 minutes of the town center. The closest hospital is 30 minutes in either direction: west towards Denton or northeast towards Sherman. In emergent situations, 30 minutes can be life or death, especially when the 30 minutes doesn't include the time it takes for emergency medical services to respond. While speaking with the police officer, I was also about to talk with a member of the fully volunteer fire department located in Tioga to learn more about their services. The fire department is made up of 7 responders while the emergency medical service responders are stationed in Whitesboro, TX, 15 minutes from Tioga. Knowing this means that a call can be placed to 9-1-1 and take 15 minutes to arrive on scene, another 5-15 minutes on the scene, and then an additional 30 minutes to the hospital. Being this far from an emergency room can pose threats to any individual's health in an emergency, but especially those individuals who experience an exacerbation of a chronic illness that has not been managed.

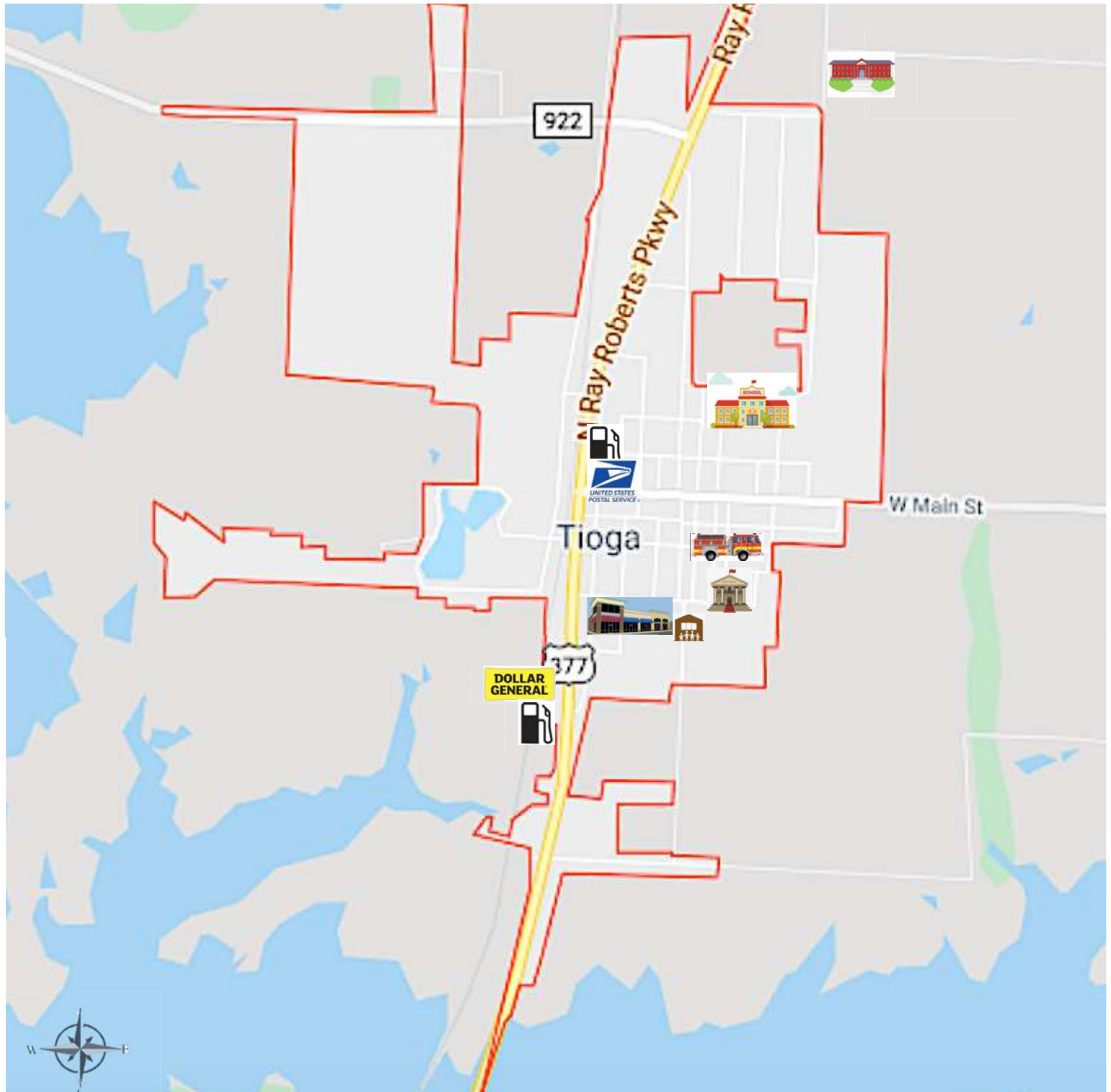
To enhance the access to healthcare issue, there is no public transportation in Tioga, so individuals must drive themselves or have a friend or family member that can take them to their scheduled appointments. As individuals become older, it's becoming increasingly more important to have friends and family members be able to flex their schedules to take them to their appointments. Working in healthcare administration, many times our patients miss their appointments due to lack of transportation, not wanting to impose on friends and family and the distance to their appointments. These examples are coming from patients that live in the DFW metropolis with access to public transportation, so I could only imagine what happens in a rural town.

As a healthcare administrator, knowing the limitation on access to healthcare yields many opportunities for growth in the community. While immediately opening a primary care clinic or urgent care may not be the best idea from a business standpoint, one could start by providing a traveling healthcare professional to make home visits in this town. As home visits start to increase, one could look at opening a stand-alone clinic in the town. In the meantime, individuals still have access to major cities without impeding on their own care and could eventually transition to a closer provider as one gets established. Healthcare ultimately begins with social and physical influence, so there is only so much you can see from your windshield driving through town. It has been proven that educated individuals live longer and healthier lives and are more likely to thrive than the uneducated, and Tioga is already off to a great start at promoting education. In addition, housing is thriving in this small town with all the new housing options and renovated homes. In order to promote a healthy style of living, a more in depth survey would be needed to focus on the town's tobacco, alcohol and drug use, diet and exercise style, and the social support system embedded in the town.

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TIOGA, TX



 COMMUNITY CENTER

 VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPT

 SHOPPING CENTER
BANK/SALON/BARBERSHOP/2 RESTAURANTS)

 HIGH SCHOOL

 ELEMENTARY & MIDDLE SCHOOL

 GAS STATION

 POST OFFICE

 CITY HALL

 DOLLAR GENERAL/
CONVEINACE STORE