



Social Science Program: Quicknote #4

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Monitoring Community Sustainability in the Foothills Model Forest A 2001 Census Update

Introduction

This report provides a census-based assessment of community well being in the Foothills Model Forest (FMF). Using 2001 census data, it provides a five-year update of the previous assessment that was conducted by Parkins and Beckley (2001). During this five-year period from 1996 to 2001, several significant events have taken place in the Foothills region, including the closure of several coalmines. These events have had an observable impact on the social and economic profile of the region.

Consistent with the previous monitoring framework, the assessment is organized into six indicator domains (**population and migration, employment, income distribution, poverty, human capital, and real estate**). These domains provide an extensive overview of the social and economic trends over the past 20 years within the region. Three jurisdictions within the Foothills Model Forest are examined: Hinton, Jasper and the Yellowhead County (YHC). The YHC represents the rural region that surrounds Hinton and extends east well beyond the boundary of the Foothills Model Forest, but provides the 'best fit' based on data available from Statistics Canada.

Indicator Measurements

Population and Migration

Population change is a valuable sustainability indicator, as fluctuations in population can influence social organization within the community, economic activity, and change local needs for regional services. This indicator assesses population growth, age distribution and migration. Census data reveal that the population of the FMF region dropped by 2% to 4% in 2001. The data also show that the population of the FMF region is ageing, with an increase of over 400% in the 65-74 year old age group in the past 20 years. Migration and transience is an issue in Jasper, owing to seasonal work opportunities and the relatively young population in this jurisdiction.

Employment

This indicator tracks characteristics of employment, such as the unemployment and participation rates for males and females, as well as labour force participation and employment and occupation by sector. There are significant social costs associated with poor employment conditions and employment is therefore a key indicator of sustainability. The unemployment and participation rates are higher for males than for females throughout the FMF region. The unemployment rate for males in Hinton has increased between 1996 and 2001, likely reflecting the closure of several mines in area. Census data also show that the female participation rate increased slightly during this period, while the male rate decreased slightly. Although female participation in the labour force is increasing, more than half of the female labour force is involved in part-time employment. There has not been a significant change in the FMF region labour force distribution by occupation or sector.

Income distribution

When income is fairly equally distributed between community members, it suggests that community members are benefiting from the economy to a similar extent. Income distribution is assessed by measuring median income, and the proportion of households and individuals in the FMF region at various income levels. Overall, household and individual income in the FMF region is relatively high, particularly when compared to the rest of the province. Jasper has the lowest median income of the FMF region, and income actually dropped between 1996 and 2001. Census data also suggests that there is an increasing disparity in household income in the

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population, with growing high and lower income households between 1996 and 2001, and decreasing middle income households.

Poverty

This indicator examines the incidence of low income for economic families and unattached individuals in the FMF region, and also describes the region's census family characteristics. Low-income cut-offs are used to identify families that are worse off than average. Compared to the province overall, the FMF region has a much lower incidence of low income. A greater proportion of unattached individuals than economic families are in the low-income category but this number appears to be increasing. The FMF region has a small proportion of single parent families—which are more at risk of living in poverty than two parent households—while most of these families are female single parent families.

Human Capital

Education attainment and school enrolment are used to assess human capital in the FMF region. Human capital is the education, training, knowledge, and creativity held by members of the community that can improve the community's ability to adapt to change and take advantage of opportunities. In most FMF regions, education attainment is fairly low, especially when compared to the rest of province. Jasper is an exception to this regional trend, with higher education attainment in this community. Nearly half of the population of the FMF between 15 and 24 years of age in 2001 was enrolled in full-time education, and this average is similar to the provincial trend. Enrolment in Hinton increased between 1996 and 2001, but decreased in Jasper.

Real Estate

Real estate values are important to track in an assessment of community sustainability, as a private dwelling is often the largest investment an individual will make in his or her lifetime, and values often fluctuate with regional economic fluctuations. The average value of dwellings, average major housing payments and gross rent, as well as the change in the number of owned and rented dwellings in the FMF region are documented by this indicator. Jasper continues to be the most expensive FMF jurisdiction in which to secure housing. This community has the highest payments on housing and rent, as well as the highest household payments as a proportion of median income. Gross rent and major payments as a proportion of median income are decreasing in the YHC and Hinton jurisdictions, suggesting that the housing expenses are becoming increasingly affordable in these communities. Despite economic shocks in Hinton, the average value of dwellings in the FMF region is increased between 1996 and 2001.

Conclusion

According to our analysis, if the following trends continue, they may have some significant negative impacts on the long-term well being of communities in the Foothills Model Forest. Of particular concern is the ageing population and the potential lack of services and resources to maintain this population. Increasing unemployment rates and low education attainment is also of concern. Finally, if in the longer term, housing costs in Jasper continue to rise, this community may experience increasing out-migration of lower-income families and a significant transformation in community characteristics.

The issues raised in this discussion are complex and often difficult to address. This report is not intended to identify specific strategies for action, but the identification of trends can focus attention on specific community issues before issues become more acute.

The next Census of Canada will be in 2006. Data from this Census will be available in 2008, at which time another 5-year update will be available.

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