Consumption in Rural America
Why is Consumption Important?

- The where, what & why of our consumption shapes the quality of our lives and how we impact the environment.
Patterns Have Changed

- 60 yrs ago – easy to distinguish rural residents from urban ones
  - rural residents wore their home made clothing
  - ate the food they produced
  - they were the producers
  - urban dwellers were the consumers
Conspicuous Consumption

- Definition: The habits of middle- and upper-class individuals who achieve their identity and prestige by what they consume rather than by what they produce or by the nature of their character.
Increasing Consumption

- Since WWII – great increase in consumption
- Why?
  - Economic growth
  - Mass Media shape consumer tastes
  - Women entered labor force
- Rural residents poorer, consume more carefully
Trend of Consolidation

- What is consolidation? Businesses become regional or national
Factors Influence Consolidation

- **Central place theory**: larger places provide greater diversity of products & services

- **Economies of scale**: greater volume of business at one particular site allows fixed costs (transportation, land, buildings, equipment, labor) to be spread over a larger number of units
Consolidation Trend Prevalent: Social Services & Businesses

• Medical care, hospitals regionalized

• Schools become regionalized

• Grocery stores become regionalized
  ◦ “food deserts”
Results of Consolidation

- Rural businesses find it difficult to offer variety available in large central markets
  - Rural businesses have trouble taking advantage of economies of scale
- Loss in business for local merchants, decline of revenue for local gov’ts
- Family operated businesses fail or become franchises
- Loss of downtowns, increase in malls
Declining Household Production & Services

- Women in jobs = Loss of Household Production
  - Gardens
  - Food preparation and preservation
  - Child supervision
  - Making/maintaining clothing
  - Bookkeeping

- Results:
  - Expansion of consumer goods and services
  - Increased amount of money a HH needs
Impact of Increased Consumption on Human Capital: Health/Education

- Rural people higher rates of overweight, obesity than urbanites
- Gap between educational level of girls and boys in rural areas
  - Gap greater between male and female minorities
- Teens susceptible to media message
  - Some argue boys more susceptible
Impact of Increased Consumption on Social Capital

- People spend more time alone
  - At home with technology
  - Not visiting with others

- Result:
  - Lack of civic engagement
  - Lack of public gatherings
Impact of Increased Consumption on Natural Capital

- Consumption affects the environment

- U.S. consumes about 25% of the world’s energy & is less than 5% of the world’s population

- Rural areas represent 97% of the US land area
Organize for the Environment

- Rural people are less than 20% ($1/5^{th}$) of the US population
- Live in 97 percent of the US land area

Result of lower population density:
- Likelihood of organized opposition less when density is low
- Decision makers can abuse rural people/areas
Impact of Increased Consumption on Cultural Capital

- Define who we are by what we consume
- Improve our cultural capital by no longer defining ourselves by what we consume
- Re-orient our definitions
- Story of Stuff Project: www.storyofstuff.org