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Two Guides

A Community Researcher's Guide to Rural Data. By Priscilla Salant Washington, DC Island Press, 1990, 93 pages, \$19.95 (paperback)

and

Guide to Economic Indicators. By Norman Frumkin Armon, New York M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 1990, 242 pages, \$15.95 (hardback)

Reviewed by Edward Reinsel

Here are two helpful guides for users of data and economic indicators. Salant's handbook "acquaints researchers with data that they can use to describe and better understand rural communities." Frumkin's is "a practical book for obtaining information quickly about the main characteristics of economic indicators." Both guides effectively serve the purposes for which they were written.

Salant's five-chapter manual begins with a few basic data concepts followed by an overview of data sources. Her primary focus is on secondary data from the Federal Government. Census data receive the most attention. The Census of Population and Housing is viewed as the core "of our knowledge about rural communities." Readers who are unfamiliar with rural data will certainly find the handbook to be informative. Those who already understand the Census of Population and Housing may find that they can spend their time more profitably in other ways.

Besides pointing the reader toward sources of data on rural populations, resources, economies, and governments, Salant frames appropriate questions, adds helpful hints, and identifies cautions worth observing. Nonmetro counties are classified according to Economic Research Service county types. Throughout the manual, six sample counties are the basis for her demonstration of how the various data sources can be used.

To Salant rural does not mean farm. It takes her only slightly more than one page to cover the vast amount

of farm-related data from the Census of Agriculture, the National Agricultural Statistics Service, and the Economic Research Service. The scant treatment of farm data limits the manual's usefulness for analysts who have a special interest in the farm sector. But, they were not the intended audience.

Salant writes from the perspective of one who is familiar with and has used rural data. What she has to say is practical and can be easily grasped. A quick reference guide at the front, a table of contents, several pages of references, a glossary, five appendixes, a rather detailed index, and a list of acronyms are there to assist users. As a former analyst with ERS, she shows the organization and lists major activities of ERS's Agriculture and Rural Economy Division, the primary unit in the Federal Government that studies and reports on rural communities and their economies.

Frumkin uses a standard format to describe more than 50 economic indicators. His background in government statistics should be helpful to almost anyone with an interest in how the U.S. economy works. An introduction explains a few statistical concepts. It also describes uses for economic indicators, their interpretation, and their evaluation. Like Salant, he writes so that little background is needed. Because the presentations are listed in eight general topics and the indicators are presented in alphabetic order, users can quickly find what they need.

The book is not likely to be read from cover to cover. It is not for the highly sophisticated user who wants to delve deeply into the details of how any given indicator is produced. Still, it will often be taken off the reference shelf for review or to gain an understanding of a particular indicator. The book is mostly limited to indicators that help in understanding the general economy. Frumkin makes no distinction between the rural and urban economies.

Analysts differ in the way they view economic indicators. But, not many people who are familiar with the range of indicators available would agree with Frumkin's choice of the conceptually obsolete farm parity ratio as the sole indicator for the agricultural and rural economies. That choice betrays a lack of interest in or limited knowledge of the large number of economic indicators available on food and agriculture.

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