

## LOST LETTER RETURNS ON FIVE TOPICS FROM URBAN, WATERFRONT, AND SMALLER RURAL COMMUNITIES<sup>1</sup>

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*Summary.*—Of 850 letters “lost” in Florida, 339 (39.9%) were returned in the mail and indicated across 5 addressees, 2 sizes of community, and 2 destinations, community size and addressees’ affiliations were associated with returned responses, but not destinations. These findings seem to indicate that there was no bias in the willingness of people to help some strangers with a mailing address in another Florida county. The similarities of our findings with other measures of public response were discussed.

The lost letter technique is a research tool for measuring community sentiment toward political organizations, including deviant ones (5). Milgram, *et al.* (5) addressed stamped letters to fictitious persons, some considered differing in conformity to conventional social norms, and distributed a large number of them in various public locations where they could be found by passersby. It was assumed that a passerby would either ignore the letter, respond to it but not take it, or pick it up and take it with them possibly for return in the mail. Presumably, a letter finder’s attitude toward a particular person or group might affect this decision. Thus, the dependent variable was subjects’ willingness to pick up and return in the mail these “lost letters.” By changing the name of the organization in the address of the lost letter, varied rates of return for each political group were noted by Milgram *et al.* (5).

### METHOD

The present experiment modified and extended the design of Bridges and Clark (1) by using some of the same affiliations for addressees and the “in-town” and “out-of-town” destination condition, but in an adjacent county, and adding new community-size conditions (cities and waterfront communities). The addressees’ affiliations were either EscaRosa Coalition for Promoting Leisure-time Physical Activity, Committee to Keep Physical Education in Santa Rosa Public Schools, Committee to Remove Physical Education from Santa Rosa Public Schools, Committee in Favor of Legislation to Ban Smoking in All Public Places, or Committee Opposed to Legislation to Ban

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Smoking in All Public Places. A total of 850 lost letters were distributed in Santa Rosa County (population=115,186). Of these, 680 letters, i.e., 34 letters for each of five affiliations for addressees in two sizes of communities and for two destination conditions: 340 letters within the cities' limits ( $M$  populations=24,955) and 340 in four waterfront communities ( $M$  populations=5,527). Another 170 letters, i.e., 17 letters for each of five affiliations for addressees in one size of community and for two destination conditions, were distributed in 10 smaller rural communities ( $M$  populations=2,974). Stamped envelopes were distributed in equal numbers in public places such as at automated teller bank machines, on sidewalks of streets and telephone booths. A coded note was enclosed in each envelope to indicate the location of the letter drop. The destinations were an Escambia County Post Office Box (out-of-county address) in Pensacola, Florida for one-half of the letters and a Santa Rosa County Post Office Box (in-county address) in Milton, Florida, for the other half.

#### RESULTS

Of 850 letters distributed, 339 (39.9%) were returned in the mail. Community size was significantly associated with overall rates of return of letters, rates being lowest from the smaller rural communities [ $\chi^2(N=850)=9.4, p < .03$ , effect size=.10]. Returned responses for the "EscaRosa Physical Activity" affiliate were not significantly associated with returns from cities, waterfront, and smaller rural communities [ $\chi^2(N=170)=5.0$ , ns, effect size=.17]. Addressees' affiliations were significantly associated with rates of return [ $\chi^2(N=850)=57.6, p < .001$ , effect size=.26]. The "Keep" vs "Remove Physical Education" affiliates were significantly associated with rates of return [ $\chi^2(N=340)=12.9, p < .001$ , effect size=.20], but not the "Favor" vs "Oppose Smoking Ban" ones. Community size and addressees' affiliations were significantly associated with rates of return in the cities [ $\chi^2(N=340)=9.7, p < .05$ , effect size=.17], smaller rural communities [ $\chi^2(N=170)=14.0, p < .01$ , effect size=.28], and waterfront communities [ $\chi^2(N=340)=46.5, p < .001$ , effect size=.37]. In *only* the waterfront communities were the "Keep" vs "Remove Physical Education" affiliates significantly associated with rates of return [ $\chi^2(N=136)=18.4, p < .001$ , effect size=.38]. Destination condition was not associated with different over-all rates of letters returned. The rates of return in each of the conditions are depicted in Table 1.

It was expected that as the size of the communities' populations decreased, there would be an increase in the returned responses; however, although returned response from the cities was higher than that of the smaller rural communities, it was actually lower than that from the waterfront communities. The present findings are not consistent with Bridges and Rodriguez (2) using a beach community in an adjacent county instead of our

TABLE 1  
 NUMBER AND PERCENT OF LETTERS RETURNED AS A FUNCTION OF  
 LOCATION, ADDRESSEES' AFFILIATION, AND POST OFFICE BOX

	Condition (Addressee)					Total
	EscaRosa Coalition	Physical Education		Smoking Ban		
		Keep	Remove	In Favor	Opposed	
City						340
In-county Box, <i>n</i>	18	14	12	8	12	64
Out-of-county Box, <i>n</i>	16	17	17	11	10	71
Both Boxes						
<i>n</i>	34	31	29	19	22	135
%	50.0	45.6	42.6	27.9	32.4	39.7
Rural Communities						170
In-county Box, <i>n</i>	6	8	6	0	6	26
Out-of-county Box, <i>n</i>	8	8	4	3	3	26
Both Boxes						
<i>n</i>	14	16	10	3	9	52
%	41.2	47.1	29.4	8.8	26.5	30.6
Waterfront Communities						340
In-county Box, <i>n</i>	20	22	9	8	12	71
Out-of-county Box, <i>n</i>	22	26	13	9	9	79
Both Boxes						
<i>n</i>	43	48	22	18	21	152
%	63.2	70.6	32.4	26.5	30.9	44.7
Total						850
In-county Box, <i>n</i>	44	44	27	16	30	161
Out-of-county Box, <i>n</i>	46	51	34	23	22	176
Both Boxes						
<i>n</i>	91	95	61	40	52	339
%	53.5	55.9	35.9	23.5	30.6	39.9

similar-size waterfront communities. The present finding does not agree with Milgram's hypothesis (4) that people in small towns (like smaller rural communities) help others more often than those in cities. Our findings suggest the possibility that there may be some community bias in the willingness of people to help some strangers. That is, regardless of the address on a lost letter, a strange in need is more likely to have a letter returned from cities or waterfront communities than from smaller rural communities.

Unexpectedly, across kinds of addressees, there was considerable variation in the returned responses in the cities, waterfront, and smaller rural communities. These findings are consistent with use of identical addressees' affiliations (1) located only in smaller rural communities. Unexpectedly, the returned response from smaller rural communities for the "EscaRosa Physical Activity" affiliate was only moderately less than that from the cities and waterfront communities. As such, our attitudinal data appear to offer little help in possibly explaining why more rural Southerners than urban ones re-

ported being physically *inactive* during leisure-time (3). Surprisingly, the “Keep” and “Remove Physical Education” affiliates were only associated with returned responses from the waterfront communities. This is not consistent with use of identical addressees in smaller rural communities (1).

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