

BEYOND *the* AUCTION

Social Impacts of Nebraska's
Livestock Sale Barns



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In-depth research results and methodology available at: cap.unl.edu/salebarns



Executive Summary

There is growing interest worldwide in understanding how social connections translate into actions with tangible outcomes, both economic and non-economic, that impact individual livelihoods and community well-being.

This pilot project adapted and expanded on a research project developed by BlueWren Connections for the Australian Livestock Markets Association and applied it to Nebraska livestock sale barns—a key rural economic entity. Using a variety of research tools, the team assessed the initial social value of these sale barns and explored their implications for individual and community well-being and resiliency. The findings from the Nebraska pilot study found that in-person livestock sales highlight the broader contributions of rural businesses and organizations beyond traditional economic metrics. The findings also identify social connections that foster a sense of belonging and connectivity, offer pathways to enhance educational program delivery, specifically Extension delivery, and strengthen community engagement.



To organize the data, University researchers developed a graphic to illustrate key concepts of the findings, which described components of the social interaction that occurs within and outside of the sale barn environment. See page 11 for more details.

Key Findings:



Each livestock sale barn has a culture that is unique to their location. It is shaped by its history and the people who work at and attend the sale barn auctions. In the sale barn environment, people build social connections by sharing stories, finding common ground, and establishing social norms. This culture can also affect how individuals become part of a community outside the sale barn.



The sale barn environment offers a wealth of knowledge, often passed down through generations, from interactions between buyers and sellers, and from sale barn owners and auctioneers. People learn by watching and evaluating cattle in the ring and then sharing insights about cattle and range management at the lunch counter. Livestock sales offer an opportunity to learn about current market trends, animal health, and feeding practices.



Besides buying and selling livestock, 60 percent of the study participants at sale barns said that socializing, such as building relationships and offering support to others, was a reason they attended livestock auctions. Additionally, 63 percent said they have made new friends as a result.



Sale barn interactions help producers gain marketing skills that are used to develop future marketing plans for livestock. Learning is also translated into daily operational decision-making, such as how to manage the impacts of weather and drought, and increased business opportunities gained through referrals.



Sale barns offer spaces that support mental health through social interactions that foster a sense of community and belonging. These encounters provide an outlet to help individuals cope with industry challenges, which range from simple recognition for their hard work in producing quality cattle to more in-depth, one-on-one conversations about personal life.



Additionally, the sale barn plays a vital role in supporting the local economy. Many attendees often visit other nearby establishments to purchase supplies and conduct personal business. Without a sale barn, participants observed community changes such as the disappearance of local businesses, the loss of a gathering place for people to socialize, and the erosion of community identity.



In-depth research results and methodology available at: cap.unl.edu/salebarns

Throughout the report, a sale barn may also be referred to as a livestock market or livestock auction.

Introduction

The benefits of social interactions may seem like a simple concept to grasp; however, human relationships are complex and can be difficult to interpret.

The reason for this pilot study stemmed from a connection to an Australian research report focused on understanding the social role and value of Australian livestock sale yards. Two research areas of particular interest were 1) uncovering the social contributions of a traditional, and often overlooked, rural economic business, such as livestock sale barns (Ellis, 2022), and 2) the potential to move beyond the acknowledgement and importance of social capital to a more defined value (Measuring Social Value, n.d.).

★ Study Design

To allow for comparison with the Australian study, Nebraska researchers replicated many aspects of their research. However, some components of the research study needed to be modified to accommodate U.S. culture and specific Nebraska conditions. The University of Nebraska research team closely collaborated with the Australian researcher, who readily shared the initial tools and study methods. The study gathered information using: 1) a 15-question survey that was distributed at pilot sale barns to producers, buyers, and sale barn workers; individuals volunteered to complete the survey. 2) in-depth interviews with study participants who had completed the survey were conducted through video and phone conferencing at a later date; and 3) sale barn observations, in

and outside of the sale ring which occurred on the same day as when participants completed the survey. Data from the mixed-method research study revealed insights into the Nebraska sale barn experience. More information on research methodology is available at cap.unl.edu/salebarns.

★ Research Aims

The key research aims for exploring the social value of Nebraska sale barns were to gain:

1. Greater knowledge of the social role and value of Nebraska sale barns.
2. Increase understanding of how social connections contribute to individual and community resiliency and well-being.
3. Enhance awareness of how social interactions influence business decision-making.
4. Greater understanding of potential educational and service opportunities that leverage social connections within the sale barn environment.

★ Study Limitations

As a pilot study, the primary limitation was the small number of sale barn facilities used in the study. The four Nebraska locations were purposefully selected for their specific attributes, representing different geographic locations, sales volume, and customer bases. The demographics of research participants reflected the demographics of the farm and ranching professions who were present during the on-site research study. There was no attempt to randomly choose participants, which limits the generalization of the study.

★ Study Participants

Observations were conducted at four livestock sale barns during September and October 2024. Three sale barn locations offer a traditional mix of livestock, with the primary focus on cattle. One barn, located near a metropolitan city, specializes in small animal and personal property sales. The paper-pencil survey was conducted at the sale barns, which took approximately 10 to 15 minutes to complete. One hundred forty-five individuals completed the survey and were given a thank-you gift for their time. Of the participants who completed the study, 16 were later interviewed via video conference or telephone and were provided with a \$40 thank-you gift certificate. Figure 1 shows which sale barn location the survey and interview participants attended during the on-site research study.

Of the individuals who participated in the survey, (Fig. 2) 32 individuals were between the ages of 61 and 70 years, followed by 71 years or older (28) and 51 to 60 years of age (26). The least number of participants were from 19 to 30 years of age. Individuals under the age of 19 were not eligible to participate in the study. Sixty-one percent of the sale barn attendees who participated in the survey were male, and 39 percent were female. The individuals interviewed were predominantly males (14) compared to females (2). In the interviews, individuals were not asked their ages.

Survey participants (Fig. 3) were asked to identify the multiple roles they have within the livestock sale barn environment. The largest group identified was ranchers, with 68 percent, followed by farmers and buyers, each at 17 percent. Of the interview group, 14 individuals identified as livestock sellers, 11 as livestock buyers, and four as employees. Like the survey participants, many indicated that they had dual roles at the sale barn, operating both as buyers and sellers of livestock.

Figure 1: Number of Survey and Interview Participants by Location

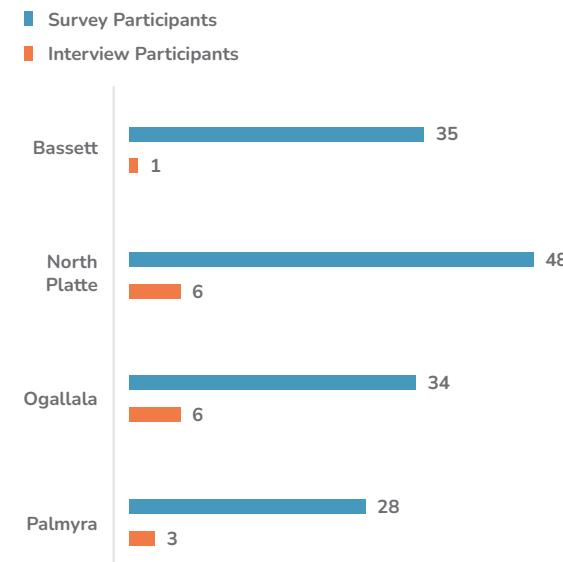


Figure 2: Survey Participants by Age

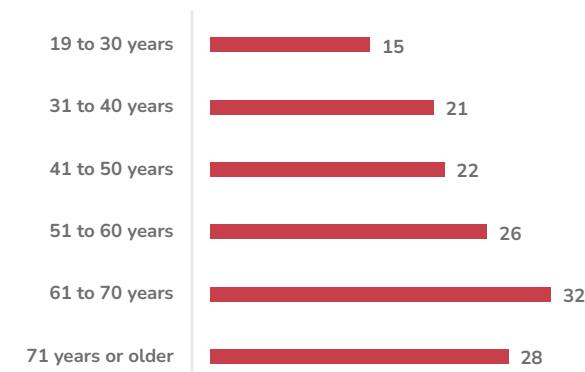
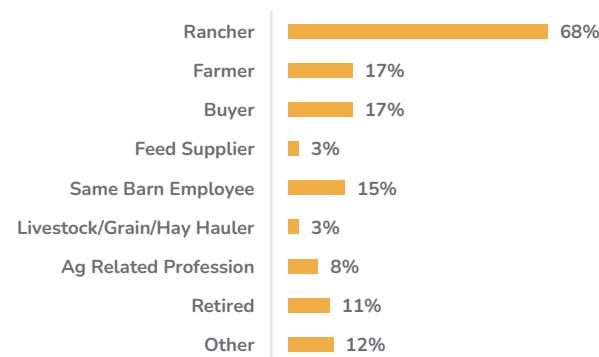


Figure 3: Survey Participants' Roles within the Sale Barn Environment



Sale Barn Locations

The four pilot sale barns are located in three regions of the state: northeast, southeast, and west central Nebraska.

Bassett, Nebraska



The Bassett Livestock Auction has a history dating back to the early 1930s. It began with the Kelly family's arrival in 1931, when they established one of the first sales in north-central Nebraska and constructed a barn for livestock auctions. The first strictly livestock sale was held in October 1931. The auction has since become a prominent location for cattle sales in the region. Today, Bassett Livestock Auction is owned and operated by Jake Maurer and Shane Kaczor. Sales are held on Wednesdays, and they are currently selling 130,000-140,000 head of cattle annually.

North Platte, Nebraska



The North Platte Stockyards has a rich history as a central hub for cattle and horse trading in the region. It has experienced periods of immense success, including setting national and state records for feeder calf sales, while also facing closures and changes in ownership. Currently, Jay Nordhausen and Lance Van Winkle own and operate the business. The Stockyards has traditionally been a place where ranchers and farmers could primarily buy and sell cattle. The sale barn remains a vital part of the local economy and community, hosting weekly cattle sales and monthly sales of sheep, goats, pigs, and horses. The sale barn's history dates to the 1950s.

Ogallala, Nebraska



The Ogallala Livestock Auction Market dates back to 1935, with its current location established in 1951. It is known as the largest livestock market in Nebraska and is a significant economic driver for the area. The Ogallala Livestock Auction Market handles a substantial volume of cattle, selling approximately 150,000 head annually. They have even held sales with over 11,000 head, requiring careful coordination to manage the influx of livestock. Despite the rise in video sales, the current management, particularly Jay Nordhausen, emphasizes the importance of live auctions, citing the social and communal aspects of the livestock business. Jay Nordhausen and Lance Van Winkle own and operate the Ogallala Livestock Auction Market.

Palmyra, Nebraska



The Palmyra Livestock Market was built and owned by Dale and Becky Steinhoff in 1980, then known as Southeast Nebraska Livestock Market. Purchased in 2011 by their son Brad and Emily Steinhoff, the name was changed to Palmyra Livestock Market. The sale barn specializes in twice-monthly Saturday sheep and goat auctions, hogs and cattle sales, and a monthly horse sale. Weekly Saturday auctions feature a variety of items, including hay, produce, plants, caged poultry and rabbits, as well as personal property. Auctions are streamed live on YouTube (no online bidding) with early consignments posted on Facebook.



★ Study Definitions

SOCIAL CAPITAL

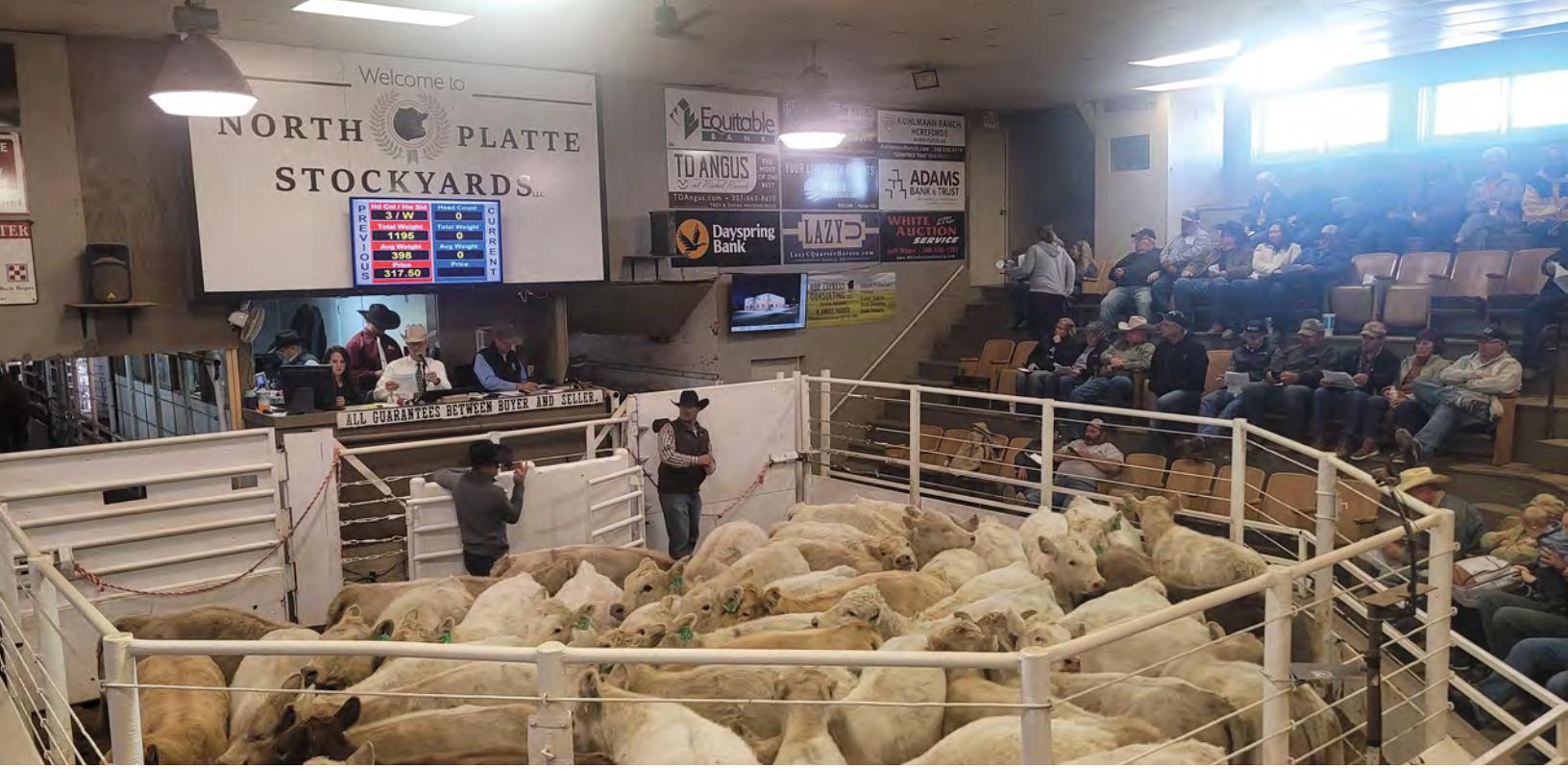
Social capital is often referred to as one of the basic components of community, economic, and social well-being. It supports the concept that “relationships matter”. Generally defined, social capital reflects the connections between people and organizations. Social capital is often broken down into three categories: 1) bonding capital – the close connections between family and friends that develops community cohesion; 2) bridging capital – which indicates loose connection between individuals of different classes or races usually shown through community groups and organizations; and 3) linking capital – indicating connections between community members with outside resources or institutions (Aldrich and Meyer, 2015).

Intuitively, one can recognize that these relationships are important, but often there is a desire to understand them in even more detail. For instance, it may be helpful to examine how social capital evolves and how it can be strengthened to benefit both the individual and the community. There is also research interest in measuring and assigning value to social capital to quantify the personal, organizational, or community benefits it provides.

SOCIAL VALUE

According to Social Value International, social value is “about understanding the relative importance of changes that people experience and using the insights we gained from this understanding to make better decisions.” (Social Value International, n.d.). Social value is often referred to as the non-financial impacts made through stakeholder interactions and programs that create both intended and unintended, positive and negative changes. These changes create outcomes that can be measured. However, the difficulty lies in quantifying these changes into measurable economic terms. Researchers, especially in countries affiliated with the United Kingdom, are actively working to explore ways to measure social value. (Measuring Social Value, n.d.).

In the context of this report, researchers define Social Value as the broader impact an activity, organization, or service has on individual and community well-being. This encompasses relationships and connections among individuals, support networks, shared knowledge, and enhancements in people’s lives.



Proposed Model of the Social and Economic Value of Nebraska Sale Barns

Research analysis of the data collected through surveys, interviews, and observations provided insights into the social relationships that occur during the livestock sale barn experience. Key concepts emerged that highlight the social interplay between individuals, businesses, and the community. To organize the data, the University researchers developed a graphic to illustrate these key concepts (page 11).

As part of the primary sale barn experience, individuals encounter and create a distinct culture for each location; social relationships enhance personal well-being; and conversations and interactions bolster individual knowledge and confidence. Subsequently, the sale barn experience extends beyond the location. It influences the on-ranch/farm daily decision-making, opens doors to new business opportunities, and provides economic benefits to the local sale barn community.



This research study aimed to assess the social value of the Livestock Sale Barn Experience. Findings are described as components of the social interaction that occurs within and outside of the sale barn environment:

Strengthen the Culture of Place

Individuals and history contribute to the unique characteristics of a sale barn.

Enhance Personal Well-being

Individual relationships positively impact personal mental health through affirmation and recognition.

Bolster Knowledge and Trust

Informal conversations foster a shared knowledge base, building confidence in both marketing and operations.

Subsequently, positive social interactions and relationships flow beyond the sale barn environment, influencing other aspects of the livestock industry.

- **Business Decision-Making** – Knowledge gained at the sale barn influences the daily decisions on the ranch or farm.
- **Expanded External Business Opportunities** – Sale barn interactions provide valuable network contacts and referrals that open doors to new business opportunities for both producers and buyers.
- **Support of the Local Economy** – The sale barn and its customer base have a positive impact on the local economy as producers and buyers frequent local businesses and financial institutions to conduct their transactions.

In addition to the above themes, three additional subthemes emerged from the surveys and interviews, specifically related to online auctions, resiliency, and respect for others. These are shared online at cap.unl.edu/salebarns.

Social Relationships Strengthen the Culture of Place



Culture is “how we do things around here”—it gives identity to a group and influences both individual and group actions. It is a shared set of values, customs, and behaviors that a group of people use to understand their environment (place) and how they interact with one another. It is passed from generation to generation and can help newcomers assimilate. It shapes how people live, work, and play.

Researchers found that each livestock sale barn has a unique culture that integrates the owners, employees, producers, and family members into a single social environment. There were commonalities across the four pilot locations, as well as differences. Three of the locations were traditional livestock sale barns located in rural areas. The Palmyra location presented a different culture due to its proximity, within 20 miles, to the city of Lincoln, NE, population of 291,000. The Palmyra attendees were more diverse, including having different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. This location primarily caters to urban buyers, acreage owners, and small-scale farmers. The products offered include a wide range of livestock and various items for sale, including household goods and small animals.



Sale Barn Culture

OBSERVATIONS

Owners, auctioneers, and other employees play a crucial role in establishing the barn culture. UNL researchers observed on the day of the auction, legacy families being recognized for their quality livestock and long-standing support of the sale barn. Sale barn employees asked attendees about their families and operations, and trust in the owners helped producers maximize their selling options. In each location, researchers observed many social activities among the attendees. There were multiple conversations, acknowledgements, handshakes, hat-tips, smiles, and laughter. Often, families were seen watching the livestock sales together, passing along knowledge and experience. Although many families attended the urban location, observers noted significantly less interaction between groups, which may have been due to language barriers and limited historical social connections.

During the interviews, individuals identified multiple ways they connected with the sale barn culture. They expressed comfort in interacting with friends and family or comfort in knowing how they fit in with others. Participants explained this in the following quotes.

Note: To ensure anonymity, the names of the participant quotes have been altered.

"I don't feel that I have to watch what I say, because the people around me, we speak the same language, essentially have the same kind of values. So you just get comfortable. [...] It's kind of like going to church, with people that you've been in the same sanctuary, in the same meetings with for the last 10, 15 years. You're comfortable when you go there because you understand who they are, and where their values are."

—Vincent, Producer/Buyer



"Usually, when you go to the livestock auction, you won't find people who are pretentious. They're people that say what they think and they're direct, but they're also very cheerful and friendly, and they're very accepting. [...] They're a very pleasant, friendly crowd at the livestock auctions. The old country farmer types are the nicest people around."

—William, Producer



Figure 5: Social Benefits from Attending Livestock Sale Barns



Survey participants selected multiple options for two questions: *"Besides buying and selling livestock or hay, for what other reasons do you attend livestock auctions?"* and *"As a regular attendee, how has the livestock sale barn community helped you?"* N=136

Café Gatherings

OBSERVATIONS

The on-site café serves as an important gathering spot for social interactions. Individuals may visit the café for a cup of coffee or a meal, joining others they know to share news of drought, rain, family, or multiple topics that create a shared community.

The social interaction in the cafés was casual and friendly. If someone was sitting by themselves, it would not be long before another person would join them and start talking immediately. The conversation was warm and cordial. Sometimes it focused on business, but often the observers would hear a laugh or a string of laughter erupting from the entire table. One person told another, “I’ll watch that piece of pie for you,” which then sparked a few giggles and snickers from others in that area of the café. Observers could tell that many people knew each other, and the time spent talking was like a conversation at a kitchen table.

In one location, two children, under the age of 10, appeared comfortable in the café, chatting with other individuals and showing their toys at the tables. It appeared the customers informally “adopted” them and were comfortable sharing time with the children.

Interviewees shared personal café experiences that ranged from having hearing issues that made it hard for them to converse in the noisy environment to sharing time with others to get family and friend updates or to discuss markets, weather, and production practices. The café not only provides social connections but also offers business-building opportunities.

“You walk into these cafés, and every place I go, it seems like they’re filled up. Everybody comes to town and comes to eat at the sale barn. It’s from 80-year-olds all the way down to my age, or even younger, that are there. It’s pretty generational.”

—George, Producer

“ ”



Learning the Culture

OBSERVATIONS

Sale barns are often generational, not only for the barn owners but also for the families who bring their business to the sale barns. Observers saw many multi-generations sitting together during the sale and in the cafés. Grandparents entertained and taught their grandchildren, parents held newborns and wrangled their young children, and fathers worked alongside their older sons or daughters, assessing livestock and prices. In one instance, observers witnessed, prior to sale start, an employee lift his grandchildren over the arena fence and allowed them to play with the cattle paddles. Multiple generations were part of this group, laughing and taking photos.

“As a father with kids, [I like] having them involved in asking questions, having them take interest and actually pay attention. The auctioneer notices them and they’ll maybe joke around with the kids a little bit or something. But to take time to I guess notice the next generation of producers and let them know you notice them, because as a young kid [...] that’s big time. And from a father’s standpoint, watching that happen with my kids, it [gives me] a sense of pride and gratefulness.”

—Sam, Producer

“I liked the little kids that were looking for their first animals, or pets or something, and I liked to watch them ask Mommy and Daddy if they could have them all [...] I think that’s really a good place to start: take your kids.”

—Mary, Producer

OBSERVATIONS

The barns also provide environments that assimilate newcomers through social norms and relationships. Interview participants shared insights into how the livestock barn environment helps them overcome barriers and navigate diverse backgrounds and experiences.

“I’ve never been to a sale barn where it wasn’t like a little community. Where I didn’t grow up in the livestock business or family, that was something scary to me, going to the sale. You don’t know nobody, but when you walk in, it doesn’t matter. I mean like, I said, you sit by somebody, and very soon they’ll turn around and say, ‘Oh, what are you doing here today?’”

“It’s a pretty inviting environment. I’m not gonna say [like a] warm and fuzzy Hallmark™ card. I will say caring and inviting for sure.”

—Bill, Producer



“Whenever we have individuals, immigrants from other countries, they feel right at home at the sale barns. [...] It makes them feel more comfortable, more at home, more like they have control of their life, and you know they’re buying and they’re selling and it’s a good way for them to socialize and interact with all the Americans. And also they are picking up American customs and cultures better at these sale barns and understanding expectations just from being around the farmers.”

—William, Producer



Social Relationships Enhance Personal Well-being



The livestock industry can be a high-stress environment, with sellers and buyers facing financial and operational pressures, and the sale barn owners navigating through market and technology changes. One of those stressors discussed was the cattle industry's volatile nature, with the costs of feed, cattle, and land being a primary concern, as well as the weather. However, the sale barns can provide spaces that support mental health, as the social interactions and sense of community fostered there give an outlet to help individuals cope with the challenges of their work and isolation. In this way, the sale barn provides an environment where farmers and ranchers can access and offer support to one another without the stigma associated with directly addressing mental health concerns. This support is provided through casual comments of recognition and more in-depth, personal relationships.

Note: To ensure anonymity, the names of the participant quotes have been altered.



Value of Personal Recognition

OBSERVATIONS

At each location, a strong sense of community, appreciation, and emotional support was evident within the sale barn environment. Sellers were observed thanking buyers for their purchases, buyers complimenting sellers on the quality of their stock, and auctioneers recognizing families for their livestock practices and support of the livestock sale barn. There appeared to be sincere appreciation and gratitude amongst all parties throughout the observed market sale days. For instance, at one location, the brand inspectors were observed to be on friendly terms with the ranchers, laughing and joking while remaining serious about their work. One brand inspector shared that she returned to this sale barn because she loved working there—the people were great, and that was important to her.

"To get that pat on the back, or a good job and attaboy is always a good feeling when you're doing a good job for somebody [...] and they come back and respect the work that you do."

—George, Producer



"Cattle are not cheap right now, and interest rates are crazy. There are a lot of guys that could be set up to go bankrupt on this deal if it falters in any way. So for somebody to stick their neck out that far and pay what they're paying for my product. I mean, it's humbling. And like I said, I'm dang sure grateful."

—Sam, Producer



OBSERVATIONS

The value of recognition extends beyond the sale ring and business. Well-placed personal comments can lead to deeper relationships among attendees. Researchers observed many conversations taking place outside the arena, in the lobby, café, or outside the livestock barn. People were sharing their “latest” happenings in the family, offering condolences and providing comforting physical touches. In one instance, a gentleman with a visual impairment was assisted in navigating the sale barn property by either friends or family members and was recognized by many others present.

"When you eat at the café, you're usually sitting with somebody you know, and then you're just discussing what's going on, [...] in general, talking about life events."

—Richard, Producer



"[I] ask how the spouse is, how the kids are doing, how the grandkids are doing, what the grass looked like, how their hay crop was, and just visit. I mean, you may not take time, if you're like me, to call those people as often as you should, but you know, if you can sit down and visit with them over lunch, or during a lull in the sale, or when they're marketing something neither of you have an interest in, you know you can catch up for lost time."

—Bill, Producer



Creating Community

OBSERVATIONS

Interviewees expressed camaraderie and support for others during the interviews. Most individuals enjoyed being part of the sale barn social environment, sharing conversations with strangers and long-time friends. Observers noticed these sentiments also in the sale ring. In one instance, a goat owner was having a hard time emotionally while her goats were being sold. The ring employee noticed and went over to talk to her, shared a laugh, and appeared to have helped her relax during the sale. On the other hand, due to medical or business reasons, a few interviewees expressed minimal desire for conversations, at least while the auction was in progress.

"You know you're not gonna sit there all day and not say hello or introduce yourself—just socialize a little bit. Maybe here is somebody who has got the same issues you do, or maybe, has it worse. Makes you feel like you got it a little bit better than what you thought."

—Bill, Producer



"You gain respect for the other people sitting there. Whether it be cattle buyers taking the time to look at your product, and maybe give you a reasonable market value for it, or the people that are still sitting there, even though their cattle are sold, to support you. Because they could have just sold theirs, got up and walked out, and if everybody did that, it would be a pretty lonesome sale barn."

—George, Producer



Mental Health and Wellness

OBSERVATIONS

Although researchers did not observe individuals outwardly dealing with mental health issues, the topic was mentioned during the in-depth interviews. Many participants expressed the importance of social relationships to help maintain balance and combat the stigma associated with mental health care. Two primary factors, stress and isolation, were identified as impacting their mental health. As interviewees discussed health, physical health issues were also addressed.

Ranching and Farming Stress

Livestock producers face numerous stressors throughout the year, including weather, drought, health issues for their livestock, market value fluctuations, high production costs, and high interest rates, all of which contribute to business stress, which doesn't include family issues.

"I think that helps mentally knowing that there's other people that feel the same way you do, that are going through the same things you're going through. I think it helps you mentally and health-wise."

—Erwin, Producer



"Anytime you can interact with someone outside your everyday habit or rituals, it's good for your mental health, to see other people going through some of the same things you are. You don't have to open up and share everything with them, but it helps—just to listen to others."

—Abe, Producer



Combating Isolation

Rural life can be isolating for producers, often due to the long distances between neighbors. Travel to the nearest town may be limited by both distance and the rising cost of fuel, leaving some producers with little interaction beyond their immediate family – or, at times, no one at all – for days at a stretch. In addition, livestock production is a labor-intensive occupation that demands significant personal commitment, further reducing the time available for social connections.

“You’re kind of a loner out here on the hills by yourself. Yeah, [the sale barn auction] is a social event. To get you out there, whether you even talk to any other people or not, just being around other people [...] gives you a sense of not being alone.”

—Wayne, Producer

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“And this sale thing is kind of like that, somewhat of a stress reliever. You’re working, you got your nose to the grindstone. You take off, just take a day off, and kind of sit back, relax and visit... just relax.”

—Brad, Producer

“ ”

“Well, agriculture, you know a lot of times, we spend a lot of time alone, and if we’re in this we like to spend time alone. So by getting out and seeing others, and visiting with them, it kind of helps you. Everybody needs some social interaction.”

—Ron, Producer

“ ”

Impacts on Physical Health

Inherent to livestock sale barn environments are the dust, dander, and ammonia smells associated with animals in a confined space, primarily the sale ring. According to some interviewees, long-term and consistent exposure in the arena does have health implications.

“I should have known what my wife told me 20 years ago, wear a mask every day. But masks drive me nuts. I suck in a lot of animal dander and a lot of dust. So I cough a lot. I guess I coughed a lot when I was running a bald-headed tractor disc in the field too, so that’s part of it. But I would say this: yeah, there’s probably some definite health risks on that side of it.”

—Marcus, Buyer

“ ”



Social Relationships Bolster Knowledge and Trust



Social relationships bring value to the businesses that sales barn attendees represent – both financially and operationally. Participants noted that social connections formed at the sale barns play a significant role in enhancing their farm and ranch marketing skills, as well as their knowledge of livestock production. The knowledge is gained through numerous interactions and mentoring between producers, buyers, sale barn staff, and owners. These conversations cover topics such as assessing livestock quality, market pricing, and timing for optimum sales. The knowledge enhances confidence that extends beyond the sales ring, impacting day-to-day decision-making, expanding producer and buyer networks, and creating new business opportunities.

Note: To ensure anonymity, the names of the participant quotes have been altered.



During in-depth interviews, many emphasized the importance of fair and transparent transactions. The sale barn auctions fulfill this marketplace need, as one interviewee stated, "it's price discovery in its purest form." To support market transactions, various social relationships underlie the trust among parties. This includes sharing knowledge that supports the buying and selling process and daily business operations, thereby building confidence in decision-making.

Sharing Knowledge

OBSERVATIONS

Observers noted multiple acknowledgements and conversations in and outside of the sale barn. There were tips of hats, slaps on the back, and hand gestures. Attendees talked shop, commenting on the green cattle or the "rough-looking stuff" on some animals in the ring. Other conversations focused on bulls, grass conditions, and who was selling calves that day. Researchers observed young adults being mentored by older family members and reaching an agreement about the livestock in the ring. Attendees also had one-on-one conversations in the hallways and throughout the sale barns. After selling, one couple was observed conversing with their banker and sharing the results.

"You get to see people that you may only see a couple or three times a year, maybe. It's a good place for networking too if you're needing something, or if you need to get rid of something."

"It's kind of like the beauty salon of the cowboy world."

—Bill, Producer



Buyer and Seller Relationships

OBSERVATIONS

The relationship between buyers and sellers can be somewhat contentious due to the nature of the auction/bidding process. The buyer is seeking the best quality at the lowest cost, while the seller is aiming for the highest price for their livestock, which may represent a year's worth of income. An observer noticed a seller who was disappointed in the sale results, saying quietly to himself, "Couldn't you get a little higher price?" Conversely, another rancher was overheard expressing how pleased he was with the price he received for his cattle. Although the buyers and sellers have different objectives, individuals felt it was important to maintain a positive relationship between the groups. A buyer was observed complimenting a seller on the quality of their livestock and genetics.

"There's a difference in attitude between buyers and sellers because their job is completely different. The producer is sitting in there. He's got a product he wants to sell and is not sure what price you're gonna give him [...] From the buyer's perspective, he's looking for the imperfection – the things that are different. That's the first thing you look for, and then the second thing you look for is this product truly what I'm looking for and how much am I going to vary my price because it varies from the ideal of what I'm looking for to the point that I won't even buy. So you try to balance the two."

—Vincent, Producer/Buyer



Relationships with Owner/Auctioneers

OBSERVATIONS

The sale barn owner and auctioneer's relationship with the buyers and sellers is essential not only to their business but also to the individuals attending the auction. It can be one of the primary reasons individuals bring their cattle to the sale barn. The interactions can be personal, such as when an auctioneer was observed saying, "I haven't seen you in forever. How are you doing? Feeling good?" In the sale ring, auctioneers often commented on the quality of the livestock and would thank the rancher for bringing in the cattle that day. The observer felt the comments were heartfelt in their appreciation for the business.

"Now a lot of the sale barn owners, if you want to survive, you have to have relationships with both sides. I think it benefits everybody by them doing that. A lot of the ones that survived through those hard times were ones where they started building their relationships."

—Ron, Producer

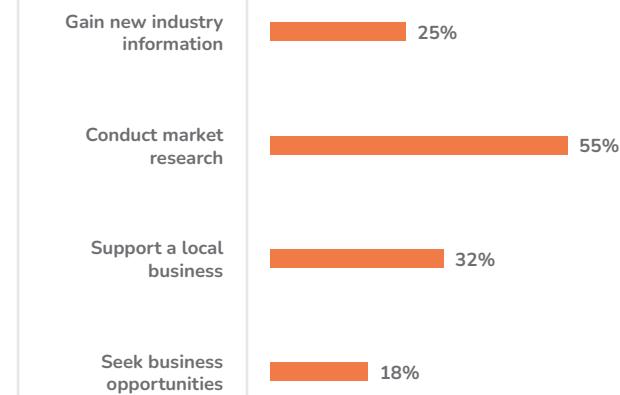


"I've got a good relationship with one auctioneer. He knows my type of cattle. He knows the bulls I buy. He takes it upon himself to get to know you. [...] I think a good auctioneer, whether he's a barn owner or hired as the auctioneer, makes the barn successful or unsuccessful. He can make you want to be there."

—Erwin, Producer

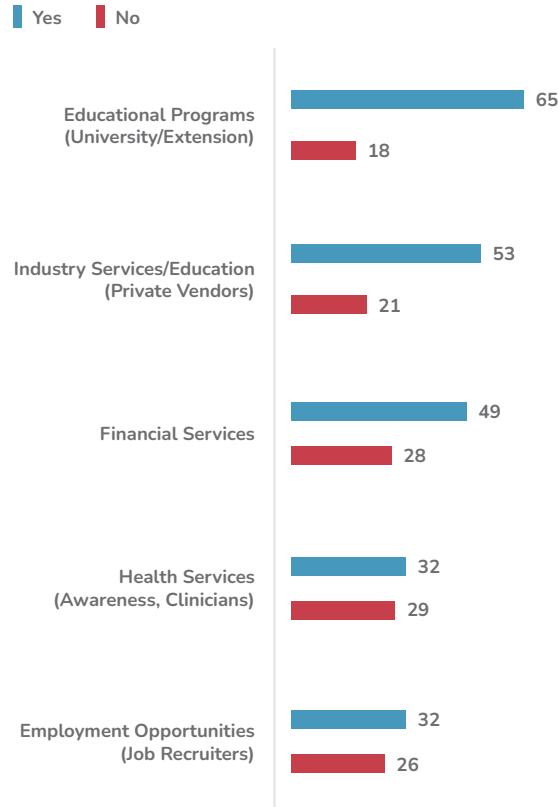


Figure 6: Besides Buying and Selling, Why Individuals Attend Livestock Auctions (Internal Impacts)



Survey participants selected multiple options to the question: **"Besides buying and selling livestock or hay, for what other reasons do you attend livestock auctions?"** N=136

Figure 7: Interest in Types of Services Available at the Sale Barns



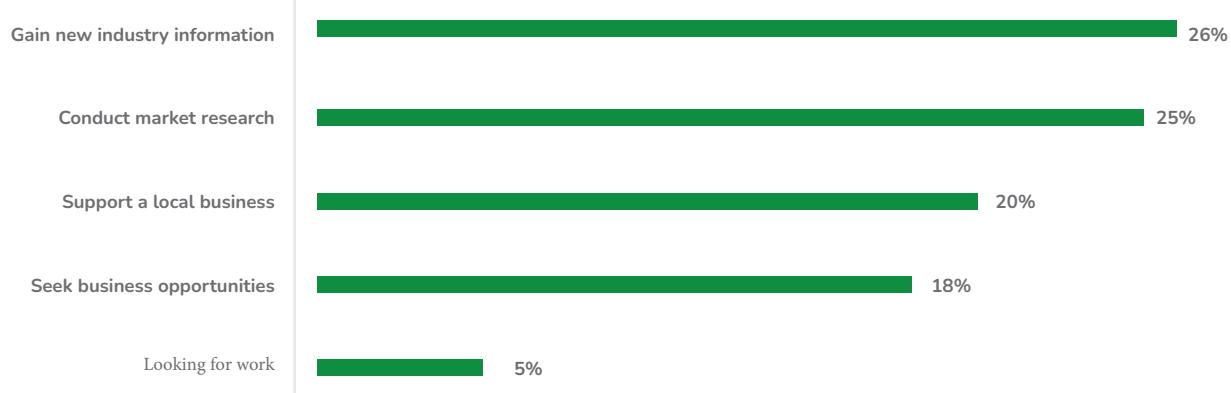
Survey participants were provided multiple options for the question: **"Would you like to have these services available in the future?"** N=113

Social Value Extends Beyond the Sale Barn



The sale barn experience is not confined to the sale barn walls; it extends beyond and impacts individuals and communities. The interactions at the sale barn often have positive impacts on producers' and buyers' business decision-making skills. Through conversations, individuals gain the knowledge and skills that are transferred to their daily operations. Secondly, interacting with a diverse group of people in the livestock industry allows individuals to acquire an expanded list of business contacts that lead to new business opportunities. Lastly, the act of coming to the sale barn allows for spillover actions to take place in the community, such as purchasing supplies at the local farm store or visiting the local banker or insurance agent. It is an opportunity to strengthen the local economic development connections. However, loss of these social and economic businesses can have a detrimental impact on individuals and the community.

Figure 8: Besides Buying and Selling, Why Individuals Attend Livestock Auctions (External Impacts)



Survey participants selected multiple options to the question: ***"Besides buying and selling livestock or hay, for what other reasons do you attend livestock auctions?"*** N=136

Positive Impacts on Operational Decision-Making

OBSERVATIONS

Although the social greetings and personal conversations between sale barn attendees were readily seen, observers also overheard conversations about ranch and farm operations, such as harvesting, weather, prices, bull genetics, grass condition, weights, and repairs. These types of conversations were not observed at the urban location, possibly due to language barriers. However, that does not imply that information gained from the urban sale barn experience is not translated into attendees' daily on-farm or business operations.

"You bounce ideas off somebody. 'Say if you think this will work, have you tried this before in the past?' You don't have to reinvent the wheel, or you don't want to reinvent the wheel, it costs too much. So, you might ask. You have to be careful what you do, and who you get it from. If you don't respect someone you're getting that information from, you don't want to base your decisions on that. So, some you want to take with a grain of salt, and some you probably want to take and use."

—Abe, Producer



"It's so interesting to see what some of those other guys are doing. You might pick up some tips on what maybe I should be doing that I'm not doing."

—David, Producer



Expanded External Business Connections

OBSERVATIONS

Social relationships within the sale barn environment create opportunities for outside connections that further business opportunities and broaden economic impacts for the ranchers and farmers. Attendees were observed sharing business cards and reading promotional flyers for local businesses. Interviewees shared that personal referrals were provided that helped them expand business connections.

"You know, in my world, if I'm not there, then I may not get more business in the future. So, for me, being at the sale barn, people see that I'm buying cattle and if I'm doing a good enough job in their eyes there might be a phone call for me to expand my business personally."

—George, Producer



"Once I needed some hay and they didn't have the hay that I needed at the auction, so I got it from someone there instead. [...] I've purchased things or helped people with things who were there at the auction. So, it's a good place. It's like having a classified ad, but it's all on feet."

—William, Producer



Support the Local Economy

OBSERVATIONS

Economic support for the local sale barn community occurs as individuals travel to and from the sale barn locations. Individuals were observed carrying take-out food bags into the sale barn, talking with their local banker, and parking their livestock trailer outside a farm supply store. Twenty percent of survey respondents indicated they conduct other business in the surrounding community, and most of the interviewees stated they also conduct business in the community. Survey participants indicated that they saw changes to communities that have lost their local sale barn. Most noticeable were the observations of other lost community businesses.

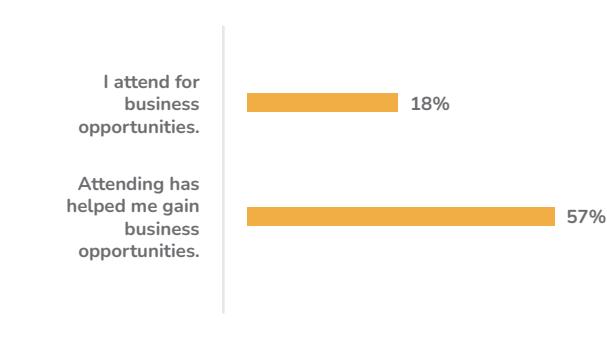
“As far as patronage, [there are] lots of different facets—you know, clothing, feed, tires, mechanics. [...] Every time you can spend a dollar, that is a dollar in your community.”

—George, Producer

“The few that I know around us that were in smaller towns that closed—it kind of hurt the economy. The wives would come in and do their grocery shopping while the guys went to the sale barn. Yeah, it does impact the community.”

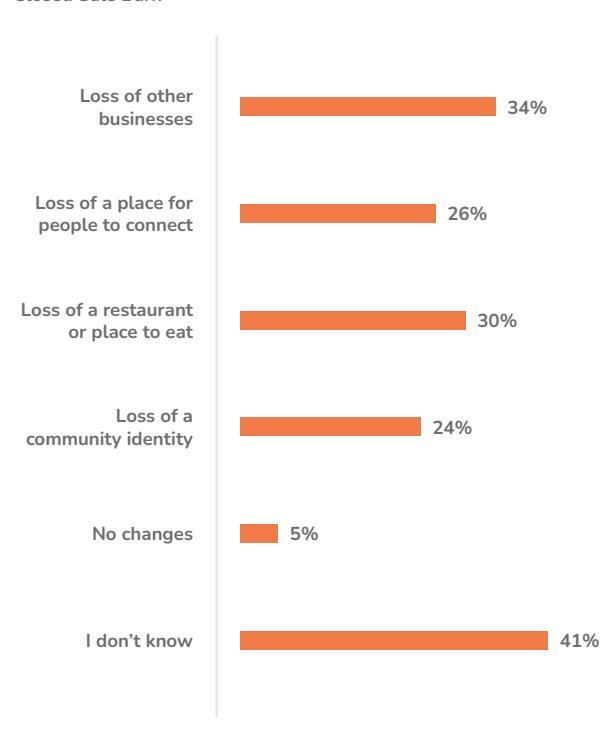
—George, Producer

Figure 9: Additional Reasons to Attend Livestock Sale Barns and Business Opportunities Gained



Survey participants selected multiple options for two questions: ***“Besides buying and selling livestock or hay, for what other reasons do you attend livestock auctions?”*** and ***“As a regular attendee, how has the livestock sale barn community helped you?”*** N=136

Figure 10: Survey Participants Notice Changes to Communities and Closed Sale Barn



Survey participants selected multiple options to the question: ***“If you previously attended a now closed sale barn location, have you noticed any changes to the community since the sale barn closed?”*** N=118



Research Recommendations

This pilot study of Nebraska Livestock Sale Barns has provided some insights for owners, attendees, and service providers on how they can utilize the research findings to further provide support to farmers and ranchers in their business and personal lives.

Sale Barn Owners and Employees

Study and interview participants shared the importance of having good working and personal relationships with the owners and employees of the sale barn. They want to have trust in the recommendations provided, such as when to bring cattle in for which sales and ideal sale weights. Appreciation was expressed for the sale barn owners who provided that type of information to the producers. As Judy, an employee, stated, "They'll [the owners] give it to them straight and they'll give them the ups and downs of it." Producers also need to have trust in the business transactions and rely on price transparency, critical components for maintaining professional relationships.

Personally, producers appreciate recognition of the quality of their products, as well as acknowledgment of their family legacy and future generations. They appreciate words that

acknowledge their hard work and diligence in caring for their livestock. Recognizing the unique traits and practices also helps the producer who is looking for premium pricing.

Individuals shared mixed feelings about online sales. Ideally, individuals would prefer to attend sales in person; however, online sales offer producers and buyers convenience during busy times, inclement weather, and a larger geographic region for potential sales. Individuals expressed lack of social connections that they felt were important. Finding ways to increase online dialogue and personal connections, potentially through shared or private chats (or other methods), may help individuals enhance online relationships and reduce feelings of isolation.

Producers and Buyers

Buyers, producers, and other sale attendees are building relationships throughout the sale barn

environment. This is inherent to one's desire for social bonding and creating a sense of belonging. However, being intentional about increasing social interactions and building relationships while at the sale barn (and beyond) can assist in enhancing personal self-worth and balance feelings of isolation, especially during bad years, and when one is personally struggling.

Mental health challenges in the farm and ranch industry, and in rural areas in general, are higher than in urban areas, primarily due to the lower availability of mental health providers, longer wait times, and longer travel distances (RHIHub, 2025). Being intentional about supporting others can be a life-altering conversation, as shared by interviewees.

Learning from each other was also vitally important to helping the next generation of producers and buyers gain the skills needed to be successful in their farm and ranch operations. Informally sharing lessons learned helps others gain insights to understanding markets, the buying process, evaluation of livestock, genetics, and operational decision-making. Intentionally building a mentoring relationship can further enhance their knowledge and skills. As one producer stated, "There's a lot of learning experiences that can be gained from sitting in a café at a sale barn."

Educators and Private Industry

The sale barn environment fosters informal learning through personal connections and the exchange of life experiences. At the same time, survey respondents expressed interest in more formal educational opportunities offered by University Extension staff and private industry within the sale barn setting. Potential topics could include intergenerational transfer and succession planning. To better understand this potential program outlet, further information is needed. Educators are encouraged to work with sale barn owners to explore how educational offerings could complement and enhance existing business services.

Health Service Providers

Like potential educational outlets, sale barns could offer a space for periodic health screenings and mental health education. Although survey respondents indicated a lower interest in these services, more insights are needed to determine if this is due to personal preferences or if these services are available elsewhere. Individual consultations and/or educational sessions for family members may be of interest. Again, consultation with the sale barn owners is needed to determine optimum delivery options. In comparison to Australian sale yard auctions, health screening and education are regularly offered to producers.

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BEYOND *the* AUCTION

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