

## **Changes in the Older Population and Implications for Rural Areas.**

By Carolyn C. Rogers. Food and Rural Economics Division, Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture. Rural Development Research Report Number 90.

### **Abstract**

The older population in the United States has been growing and aging rapidly, with the fastest growing segment being the oldest old—those age 85 and older. This segment of the older population increased 37 percent between 1980 and 1990 compared with a 17-percent increase in the total population of elderly (60 and above). The oldest old are more likely to be women, to be in poor health, to live alone, and to be poor. This analysis presents data on changes in the age distribution and socioeconomic status of the older population by rural-urban residence and examines the implications for resources, services, and programs in rural areas.

**Keywords:** Older population, elderly, oldest old, metro-nonmetro residence, rural-urban, poverty, socioeconomic characteristics

### **Acknowledgments**

The author wishes to thank Leslie Whitener, Calvin Beale, Richard Reeder, and Glenn Fugitt (University of Wisconsin) for their constructive comments and critical review. The author acknowledges the valuable assistance of Tina Terry-Eley in preparing the tables and of Alma Young in preparing the charts for publication. Appreciation is also extended to Timothy Parker and Anne Pearl for assistance with the map files as well as to Lindsay Mann for expert editorial assistance.

# Contents

Summary .....	.iii
Introduction .....	.1
Data and Definitions .....	.4
Changes in the Population Age 60 and Older, by Age and Residence .....	.5
The Rural-Urban Continuum .....	.8
Changes in Economic Status of Persons 60 and Older, by Residence .....	.11
Differences in Poverty Rates .....	.11
Differences in Income .....	.13
Sources of Income .....	.14
Assets and Homeownership .....	.14
Social and Economic Well-Being of the Older Population .....	.17
Implications for the Future .....	.23
References .....	.25
Appendix Tables .....	.27

## Summary

The older population of the United States has been growing rapidly, with the fastest growing segment being the oldest old—those age 85 and older. This segment of the older population increased 37 percent between 1980 and 1990. The nonmetro population has also grown markedly and has been aging rapidly as a result of aging-in-place, outmigration of young persons, and immigration of elderly persons from metro areas. Poverty rates of older nonmetro residents are higher than those of metro residents, a disparity that is even more pronounced among the oldest old. Three aspects of the aging U.S. population are of major public concern: (1) failing health and the consequent loss of the ability to take care of oneself; (2) poverty in old age, especially among the oldest old, those living alone, and the most rural elderly; and (3) the preponderance of women, with their greater economic vulnerability. This assessment of the socioeconomic status of today's older population will help planners anticipate the need for programs and services for the elderly.

This report examines the relationship between changes in the age and socioeconomic composition of the older population by metro-nonmetro residence and the implications of such changes for current and future rural policy decisions in terms of resources, services, and programs. The report originated from the Task Force on Aging's recommendation for research on the dynamics of the geographic distribution of the older population and its effects on disparities between resources and needs. A knowledge of both the geographic distribution of the older population and their demographic and socioeconomic characteristics will help inform public policies for this growing segment of the population.

- The median age of the U.S. population increased from 30.0 in 1980 to 32.9 in 1990 and 34.0 in 1998. The older population 60 years and over increased by 17 percent between 1980 and 1990 and by 7 percent between 1990 and 1998. The nonmetro population has an older age structure than the metro population, with a median age of 36.0 in 1998, compared with 34.0 for the metro population.
- Metro counties had a greater rate of increase in population age 60 and older between 1980 and 1990 than nonmetro counties, with the highest rate of increase for fringe counties of 1 million or more population (27 percent). Among nonmetro counties, the increase in the elderly population was greater for counties with larger urban populations, and the increase was greater for those adjacent to metro counties. Nonmetro adjacent counties with 20,000 or more urban population grew 18 percent among the 60-and-older population, while in the most rural nonadjacent counties of the rural-urban continuum, the growth in the older population was 5 percent. Both local level of urbanization and metro status influence growth in the older population.
- Women have a greater survival rate than men at all ages. In each age group over 60 years, women constitute a larger share of the population. In nonmetro areas, women represent 53 percent of the population age 60 to 64 and 63 percent of the population age 85 and older. Because women live

longer than men on average, their health and economic status are quite vulnerable at later ages.

- With advancing age, economic well-being declines. In 1998, over half of nonmetro persons age 85 and older were poor or near-poor (income of 100 to 149 percent of poverty level), compared with only one-quarter of those age 60-64. The oldest old are the most economically vulnerable population and also the most in need of health, medical, and other services in rural areas hard-pressed to provide such services. Since a higher proportion of the nonmetro than metro elderly population is age 85 and older, this becomes an urgent issue in nonmetro areas.
- Older persons living alone are considerably more likely to be poor than are older married couples. While 8 percent of nonmetro elders age 60-64 in married-couple families were poor in 1997, 32 percent who lived alone were poor. Poverty increases with advancing age, so that by age 75 and older, 12 percent of the nonmetro elderly in married-couple families were poor, as were 36 percent of those living alone.
- Most older persons own their own homes. In 1998, 83 percent of those 60 and older owned their homes, as did 71 percent of those 85 and older. Nonmetro elders were more likely to own their homes (87 percent of those 60 and older) than were metro elders (81 percent). Nonmetro elderly homeowners tend to have small or no mortgages and thus lower housing costs than metro elders. Eighty-six percent of elderly homeowners in nonmetro areas in 1995 owned their homes free and clear, compared with 78 percent of older metro homeowners. The homes of the nonmetro elderly also tend to be lower in value and in somewhat poorer physical condition.
- While 61 percent of nonmetro elders age 85 and older had not completed high school, only 28 percent of those 60 to 64 years old had not done so. A substantially higher proportion of the elderly living in metro areas completed high school than did the elderly in nonmetro areas. The educational attainment of older persons has been rising rapidly. This pattern is due partly to younger persons with more education aging into the 60-and-older category and partly to the death of older persons with less education. Also, in some nonmetro retirement areas, higher-educated older persons are moving into the area, raising overall educational levels.
- The majority of older persons under age 85 assessed their health as good to excellent in 1998. Metro elders reported somewhat better health than nonmetro elders across all age groups. With advancing age, self-assessments of health as well as physical functioning consistently decline. At age 60 to 64 years, 35 percent of nonmetro elders reported excellent or very good health, but by age 85 and older, only 20 percent did so.