Data and Definitions

This report defines the older population, or the elderly, as persons 60 years old and older. Data are presented by age up to the oldest old, age 85 and older, because the aging process itself leads to a number of changes in an individual's social and economic condition, and because many health problems and limitations do not become evident until late in life. The older population is a diverse group, and many differences among the elderly are age-related.

This report is based on data from the 1980 and 1990 decennial censuses, and the March 1998 Current Population Survey (CPS). The decennial census file provides detailed rural-urban distinctions. The CPS provides a wealth of information on the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of households and families, making it an excellent resource for studying the heterogeneous older population, particularly in the years between censuses. Since the CPS excludes the institutional population, estimates from the CPS are not strictly comparable with decennial census figures.

The institutional population includes those in homes for juveniles and for the physically and mentally handicapped, hospitals, nursing, convalescent and rest homes, homes for the aged and dependent, and correctional institutions. Approximately 5 percent of the elderly 60 years and older are in institutions, and this percentage increases with advancing age. In 1990, less than 1 percent of the population age 60-64 years old were in nursing homes, compared with about 1.5 percent of those age 65-74 years, and 10 percent of those age 75 and older. Independent estimates by the Census Bureau of the total population age 60 and older in 1998 show 44,565,000 persons compared with the CPS estimate of 42,145,000, a difference due primarily to noncoverage of the institutional population in the CPS. The proportional shortfall is greater at age 85 and over, where the CPS estimates 2.9 million persons, while the independent population estimates are 4.0 million. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this report, the CPS is a useful source for post-1990 detail on the social and economic characteristics of most of the older population.

As previously mentioned, the metro-nonmetro dichotomy conceals important differences within residential areas. Consequently, such residential comparisons (rural-urban or metro-nonmetro) are limited, and an analytical framework that reflects greater residential variation is preferable. Both size of place and proximity (adjacency) to a metro area are important variables to consider; however, such geographic detail is available only from the decennial census of population. Since the March 1998 CPS data lack this geographic detail, post-1990 comparisons are limited to metro-nonmetro residence.

This report uses the USDA rural-urban continuum code for 1980 and 1990 to distinguish metro counties by total metro area size and nonmetro counties by degree of urbanization and proximity to metro areas. This continuum code yields a 10-part county classification scheme (Butler and Beale, 1994). The four metro categories are (1) central counties of metro areas of 1 million population or more, (2) fringe counties of metro areas of 1 million population or more, (3) counties in metro areas of 250,000 to 1 million population, and (4) counties in metro areas of fewer than 250,000 population. The six nonmetro categories are (1) urban population of 20,000 or more, adjacent to a metro area; (2) urban population of 20,000 or more, not adjacent to a metro area; (3) urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area; (4) urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area; (5) completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, adjacent to a metro area; and (6) completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area.