The number of people living in rural (nonmetro) counties declined by nearly 200,000 between 2010 and 2016, the first recorded period of rural population decline. Population loss for rural America as a whole has averaged just -0.07 percent per year in that span, but this loss has not been evenly distributed across all rural counties. The number of nonmetro counties losing population reached an historic high of 1,351 during 2010-16, with a combined population loss of just under 790,000. Long-term population loss continued in counties dependent on agriculture, in the Great Plains, Midwest, and southern Coastal Plains. New areas of population loss emerged throughout the eastern United States, especially in manufacturing-dependent regions.

The 487 rural counties with positive but below-average growth (less than the U.S. population growth rate of 2.2 percent) for the period 2010-16. Many are located in rural parts of the Mountain West, southern Appalachia, and other scenic areas where population growth slowed considerably for the first time in decades. Counties identified by ERS as having precarious economic conditions grew by 4.6 percent during 2002-2008 but only by 1.2 percent during 2010-16.

Most nonmetro population growth was concentrated in just 138 counties that grew by 5 percent or more during 2010-16, adding 317,000 people. Workers attracted to the oil and gas boom caused rapid growth in the central Great Plains, western Great Plains, south-central and south Texas, and New Mexico. However, production cutbacks slowed population growth in these regions during 2015-2016.

Most other high-growth counties during 2010-16 were counties in scenic areas that maintained higher-than-average growth despite the overall population slowdown in these types of areas.

This first-ever period of overall nonmetro population loss may be short-lived. The cyclical economic downturn that began in 2007 bottomed in 2009 and recovery began in 2010-12, and increasing population growth since 2012 continues to substantial nonmetro employment growth. The current population signs estimate of recovery in nonmetro population growth is for parts of rural America in 2015-16, especially in tourism and recreation destinations.

Wage and salary employment growth continues to lag in rural areas

After 6 years of economic recovery, increases in rural employment remain limited. While the Great Recession’s impact was felt more equally severe in urban and rural counties (both showed average wage/salary employment declines of 2.2 percent per year during 2007-10), subsequent job recovery has been much slower in rural areas. Overall, rural counties have the lowest 10 percent annual employment growth compared with 1.9 percent in urban areas over 2010-15. The same trend occurred prior to 2007: similar rates of job loss during a recession and its aftermath (2001-03), followed by more rapid urban employment growth during the recovery (2003-07).

Many factors contribute to rural population loss

County population change includes two components: births (minus deaths) and net migration (immigrants minus outmigrants). Since 2010, the increase in rural population from births has been greater than the decrease in population from net migration (462,000 more people moved out than moved in). But due to productivity gains, the number of people likely to be not working and contributing to lower population growth.

Rural mortality rates continue to decline for all age groups, from an average annual rate of 815 deaths per 100,000 people in 1999-2001 to 785 deaths in 2013-15. Rising rates of prescription medication abuse, especially of opioids, and the related rise in accidental heroin-overdose deaths are contributing to this unexpected rise in age-specific mortality rates after a century or more of steady decline. Though if it will not ever be a slowing population but will increase what is known as the dependency ratio: the number of people needing to work (children and retirees) relative to the number of people like working-age earners (working-age adults). A final factor affecting future rural (nonmetro) population growth is the immigration classification of counties from nonmetro to metro due to ongoing urbanization. The United States has transformed from roughly 35 percent metro in 1990 to 86 percent today. Urban transformation of rural and the reclassification that results each decade leaves behind a smaller rural America made up of population-shrinking counties with more limited economic potential. More than 80 million people live in the more than 100 counties that were classified as nonmetro in 1974, and their population grew by 2 percent between 2010 and 2016. Fewer than 50 million people live in the 1,976 counties that remain classified as nonmetro today, and those counties lost population.

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Rural economies have historically relied on goods production (farming, mining, and manufacturing), whereas U.S. job growth as a whole has been service oriented for several decades. Agriculture and mining are still major rural industries in terms of production and employment. But due to productivity gains, the number of people likely to be not working and contributing to lower population growth.

Household income is lower in rural areas and poverty is more regionally concentrated

Median household income is substantially lower in rural areas than in urban areas, although this shortfall may be mitigated by differences in the cost of living. Since 2007, rural median income has averaged 25 percent below the urban median. This rural-urban income gap stems partly from lower levels of labor force participation in rural areas due to older population characteristics, shorter commuting times, and fewer retirement-age workers. The rural elderly population in income-eligible areas is substantially below the national average rate during 2001-15. If actual job growth in a sector is lower than the expected job growth, then nonmetro areas are said to be at a competitive disadvantage in that sector. The Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW) data use hourly wage and salary employment only. Nonmetro counties are defined as of 2015.

When self-employed farm proprietors are included with wage and salary workers, the share of rural employment which includes farm proprietors is larger than the national average rate during 2001-15. If actual job growth in a sector is lower than the expected job growth, then nonmetro areas are said to be at a competitive disadvantage in that sector. The Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW) data use hourly wage and salary employment only. Nonmetro counties are defined as of 2015.

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rates were first officially recorded. The rural-urban poverty gap has narrowed since that time, from 17.0 percentage points in 1960 to 3.6 percentage points in 2016.

Rural poverty is regionally entrenched. Over 300 counties (15.2 percent of all rural counties) are persistently poor, compared with just 50 urban counties (4.3 percent of all urban counties). ERS defines persistently poor counties as those with 20 percent or more of their populations living in poverty over approximately 30 years (measured by the 1980, 1990, and 2000 decennial censuses and 2007-11 American Community Survey). Nearly 65 percent of rural, persistently poor counties are in the South, comprising more than 20 percent of all rural counties in the region. Many of these counties are not entirely poor, but rather contain multiple and diverse pockets of poverty and affluence. Rural poverty is also entrenched in parts of the Southwest and Northern Great Plains.

Rural poverty rates rose during the Great Recession and in initial post-recession years. Overall, the rural poverty rate declined slightly from 2010 (16.5 percent) to 2016 (15.8 percent), a slow recovery based on historic precedent. Over similar spans following the 1981-82 and 1990-91 recessions, the rural poverty rate declined by about 2.5 percentage points. Persistent poverty is currently measured from 1980 to 2007-11, which captures the effects of the Great Recession (2007-09). Comparing these counties with new high-poverty counties based on more recent data identifies 71 high-poverty rural counties in 2011-15 that were not high poverty at any point from 1980 to 2007-11. Only a few of these newly poor counties are located in or around existing persistent poverty regions. Most are in regions that are typically more affluent, including parts of the California and counties in the Southeast and Midwest that were affected by the closing of manufacturing jobs during the Great Recession.

Broadband and other infrastructure investments would likely benefit rural areas

USDA programs support infrastructure development—including water and sewer, electric utilities, internet broadband services, community facilities, and housing—in rural areas. Large-scale projects to upgrade transportation networks, utilities, and internet connectivity could benefit rural communities. Increased access to high-speed internet, in particular, could improve delivery of education, healthcare, public safety, and other services. Such investments would be economically efficient if the benefits of doing so outweighed the costs.

Household broadband internet use in rural areas increased from 2 to 61 percent—versus 4 to 99 percent in nonmetro counties. The rural-urban poverty gap has narrowed since that time, from 17.0 percentage points in 1960 to 3.6 percentage points in 2016.

Rural employment has not returned to its pre-recession level, and job growth since 2010 has been well below the urban average. Median incomes remain below those of urban areas, and rural poverty rates are higher, especially in the Mississippi Delta, Appalachia, and the Rio Grande Valley.

Rural areas are defined here using nonmetropolitan (nonmetro) counties. The terms “rural” and “nonmetro” are synonymous, though “nonmetro” is more commonly used. Rural areas and counties are defined using the 2010 census definition, with new groups of counties reclassified to the 2013 definition.

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