Rural Classifications & Definitions Guide

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Introduction

The United States is the third-largest country in the world by area (World Atlas, 2021). With its mix of cities, towns, mountains, farms, forests, and deserts, it offers a diverse range of landscapes. However, not all locales are created equal. Where someone lives shapes their access to amenities, job opportunities, and social and educational institutions, which in turn influence key community factors like education levels, poverty rates, economic mobility, and health outcomes (National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (US) Office on Smoking and Health, 2021). In other words, place matters.

Few understand this better than rural residents, who, on average, face higher poverty rates, lower levels of educational attainment, lower labor force participation, greater population out-migration, higher disability rates, and elevated levels of morbidity and mortality compared to those in urban areas (Carnevale et al., 2024; Coughlin et al., 2019). While policies aimed at addressing rural disparities are often well-intentioned, their effectiveness can be limited by the reality that rural life is not a one-size-fits-all experience — nor is there a single definition of what "rural" means (Center on Rural Innovation, 2022).

At its core, rurality in the United States refers to areas that are not urban (Ratcliffe et al., 2016). While an estimated 82–86% of the population lives in urban areas, rural land accounts for 97% of the country's geography and is home to anywhere from 45 to 62 million people, depending on how rurality is defined (Center on Rural Innovation, 2022). Delineations between rurality and urbanity are complex and multifaceted, considering dimensions of land use, population size, and social and economic integration (Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008). As the USDA Economic Research Service explains, "Because the U.S. is a nation in which so many people live in areas that are not clearly rural or urban, seemingly small changes in the way rural areas are defined can have large impacts on who and what are considered rural. Researchers and policymakers share the task of choosing appropriately from among alternate rural definitions currently available or creating their own unique definitions" (Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008).

Among the many social forces shaping life in rural America, the education-employment connection is among the most powerful. By 2031, an estimated 72% of all jobs in the United States will require some form of education or training beyond high school (Carnevale et al., 2023). In rural America, workers with a high school diploma or less are more likely than their urban counterparts to hold jobs that provide a self-sustaining wage (Carnevale et al., 2024). However, this advantage is not evenly distributed across gender, race, or geographic region (Carnevale et al., 2024, p. 17). Rural areas offer more opportunities for securing good jobs in blue-collar occupations than urban areas (p. 19), but white-collar jobs—which typically require higher levels of education — still make up a larger share of good jobs (p. 19) and, on average, pay more than blue-collar occupations (p. 13). Education remains a key driver of economic mobility across the United States, particularly for women and non-white residents in rural areas, who face stark disparities in earnings and labor force participation (Carnevale et al., 2024).

This **Rural Classifications & Definitions Guide** provides an overview of approximately 20 different rural definitions used at the federal level, and their relevant terms, along with definitions of rural institutions and students. The guide is designed to assist postsecondary agency and institutional leaders, as well as state-level policymakers, in understanding how rural communities and institutions are classified. By offering insights into these definitions, the guide aims to support the development of funding policies that are more responsive to rural students and their unique contexts.

About This Guide

This guide examines various definitions of rurality, primarily from federal agencies and other recognized organizations. Each classification includes its source, definition, key notes, a link for further details, and, where applicable, a visual representation.

The guide begins by distinguishing rural and urban areas, then explores population-based classifications, socioeconomic and regional definitions, and classifications related to rural institutions and students. It concludes with sections on selecting definitions, rural mapping and data tools, and additional readings.

Rurality is not a single, uniform experience. While these classifications provide useful frameworks for policy and research, they do not fully capture the cultural and personal dimensions of rural life. Instead, this guide serves as a reference for understanding rural definitions that can inform educational policy and practice. Keeping it on hand may be particularly helpful when reading research on rurality, allowing for quick reference to relevant definitions.

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Section 1: Defining "Rural" vs. "Urban"

Rurality in the United States is typically defined by first identifying urban areas, with all remaining areas classified as rural (Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008). This section defines rural areas, urban territories, urbanized areas, and urban clusters.

Classification: Rural Area (U.S. Census Bureau)

The Census Bureau does not actually define 'rural. Rather, rural areas include all geographic areas that are not classified as urban. *Note*: *Using American Community Survey (ACS) data, the Census Bureau defines urban areas after each decennial census*. For more: Understanding and using America Community Survey Data: What users of data for rural areas need to know

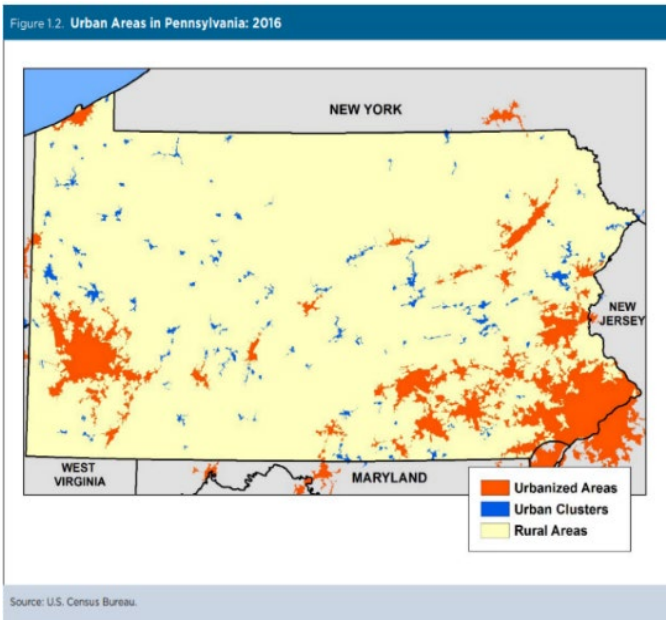
Classification: Urban Territories

"The Census Bureau uses a definition based on population density and other measures of dense development when identifying urban territory. The definition seeks to draw the boundary around an urban area's 'footprint' to include its developed territory." For more: Defining rural at the U.S. Census Bureau: American Community Survey and Geography Brief

Urbanized Areas and Urban Clusters

Urbanized areas contain more than 50,000 people while urban clusters are urban territories containing at least 2,500 but fewer than 50,000 residents**. "**Both urbanized areas and urban clusters are delineated primarily on the basis of population density — or the extent to which areas are built-up and densely settled." For more: [Defining rural at the U.S. Census Bureau: American Community Survey and Geography Brief]

Figure 1. A map depicting urbanized areas, urban clusters, and urban territories in Pennsylvania, 2016. Source: U.S. Census Bureau.



https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2019/acs/ACS_rural_handbook_2019_ch01.pdf

Section 2: Population-Based Classifications

This section outlines geographic designations primarily based on county population, as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). It begins with key terminology essential for understanding population-based classifications, including county, core, core-based statistical area (CBSA), central county, metropolitan statistical area (MSA), and outlying county. Following this, five classification systems are presented in order of increasing complexity.

Essential Terminology

County

Counties are a standard unit for publishing economic data and for conducting research to track and explain regional population and economic trends. Estimates of population, employment, and income are available for counties annually. Counties also are frequently used as basic building blocks for areas of economic and social integration, such as labor-market areas." See: USDA ERS | What is Rural?

Note: Counties are the primary legal divisions of most states. Most counties are functioning governmental units, whose powers and functions vary from state to state. For more: US Census | Terms and Definitions

Core

"A densely settled concentration of population, comprising an Urban Area (of 10,000 or more population) delineated by the Census Bureau, around which a Core Based Statistical Area is delineated". Federal Register | 2020 Standards for Delineating Core Based Statistical Areas

Core-Based Statistical Areas

Defined by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), Core-Based Statistical Areas (CBSAs) "Refer collectively to metropolitan statistical areas and micropolitan statistical areas. CBSAs consist of the county or counties (or equivalent entities) associated with at least one core (urban area) of at least 10,000 population, plus adjacent counties having a high degree of social and economic integration with the core as measured through commuting ties." For more: US Census | Glossary

Central County

"The central county or counties of a metropolitan or micropolitan statistical area are those containing all or a substantial portion of the core urban area. These counties, in turn, are used in measuring commuting with other counties that potentially qualify for inclusion in the metropolitan or micropolitan statistical area as outlying counties." For more: US Census | Glossary

Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSA)

"Metropolitan statistical areas consist of the county or counties (or equivalent entities) associated with at least one urban area of at least 50,000 population, plus adjacent counties having a high degree of social and economic integration with the core as measured through commuting ties." For more: US Census | Glossary

Micropolitan Statistical Areas

"Micropolitan statistical areas consist of the county or counties (or equivalent entities) associated with at least one urban area of at least 10,000 but less than 50,000 population, plus adjacent counties having a high degree of social and economic integration with the core as measured through commuting ties." For more: US Census | Glossary

Outlying County

A county qualifies as outlying under the following circumstances: (1) one-quarter or more of the employed residents work in the central counties of the metropolitan or micropolitan statistical area, or (2) one-quarter or more of the employment is composed of workers who live in the central counties. Furthermore, outlying counties also include the counties of any smaller metropolitan or micropolitan statistical area that are adjacent to the metropolitan or micropolitan statistical area and merge with it. For more: US Census | Glossary

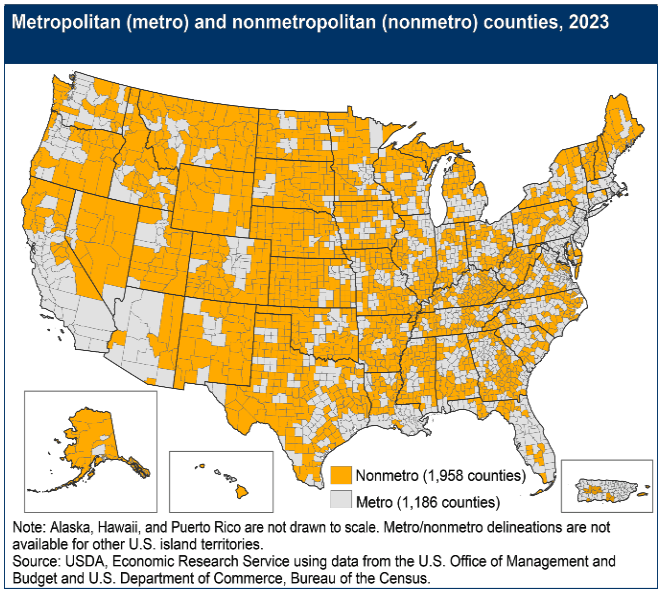
Classification: Metro/Nonmetro

"USDA, Economic Research Service (ERS) researchers and others who analyze conditions in "rural" America most often study conditions in nonmetropolitan (nonmetro) areas, defined on the basis of counties. Nonmetro counties include some combination of:

1. open countryside,
2. rural towns (places with fewer than 5,000 people and 2,000 housing units), and
3. urban areas with populations ranging up to 50,000 people that are not part of larger labor market areas (metropolitan areas)."

Note: "For some research and program applications, counties are too large to accurately distinguish rural and urban settlement patterns. The U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census uses much smaller geographic building blocks to define rural areas as open country and settlements with fewer than 5,000 residents and fewer than 2,000 housing units. For more: ERS | Rural Classifications

Figure 2. U.S. map of metropolitan(metro) and nonmetropolitan (nonmetro) counties, 2023.
Source: USDA ERS



Metropolitan (Metro) Areas

In 2023, OMB defined metropolitan (metro) areas as broad labor-market areas that include:

1. Central counties with one or more urban areas with populations of 50,000 or more people. Urban areas, described in the next section, are densely-settled urban entities defined on the basis of population and housing-unit density.
2. Outlying counties that are economically tied to the central counties as measured by labor-force commuting. Outlying counties are included if at least 25 percent of workers living in the county commute to the central counties, or if at least 25 percent of the employment in the county consists of workers coming out from the central counties — the so-called "reverse" commuting pattern.

Nonmetropolitan (Nonmetro) and Noncore Areas

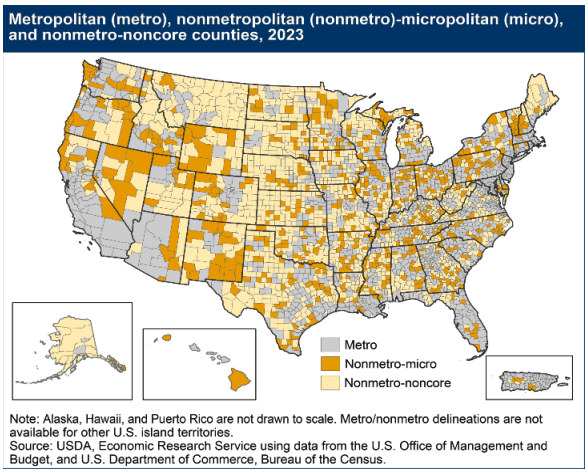
Nonmetro counties are outside the boundaries of metro areas and are further subdivided into two types:

1. Micropolitan (micro) areas, which are nonmetro labor-market areas centered on urban areas of 10,000-49,999 persons and defined with the same criteria used to define metro areas.
2. All remaining counties, often labeled "noncore" counties because they are not part of "core-based" metro or micro areas.

Note: "Every 10 years, following the decennial census, nonmetro counties that have been growing substantially enough or experiencing increasing commuting may be reclassified as metro. At the

same time, some metro counties revert to nonmetro status, for instance when outlying counties experience shifts in commuting patterns. Changes in the criteria used to delineate urban and metro areas may also cause changes in metro-nonmetro status between decades." See: Rural Classifications - What is Rural? | Economic Research Service

Figure 3. U.S. map of metropolitan (metro), nonmetropolitan (nonmetro)-micropolitan (micro), and nonmetropolitan (nonmetro)-noncore counties, 2023. Source: USDA ERS



https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/rural-economy-population/rural-classifications/what-is-rural

Classification: County Rurality Level

"Most counties, whether metro or nonmetro, contain a combination of urban and rural populations." https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/rural-economy-population/rural-classifications. To understand the characteristics of rural residents in different rural settings, the U.S. Census categorized the 3,142 counties in the U.S. into three levels of rurality based on the percentage of the population living in the rural areas of the county. They used the 2010 definition of urban and rural as determined by the decennial census population. For more: US Census | Rurality Matters

Mostly Urban

Less than 50% of the county population lives in rural areas.

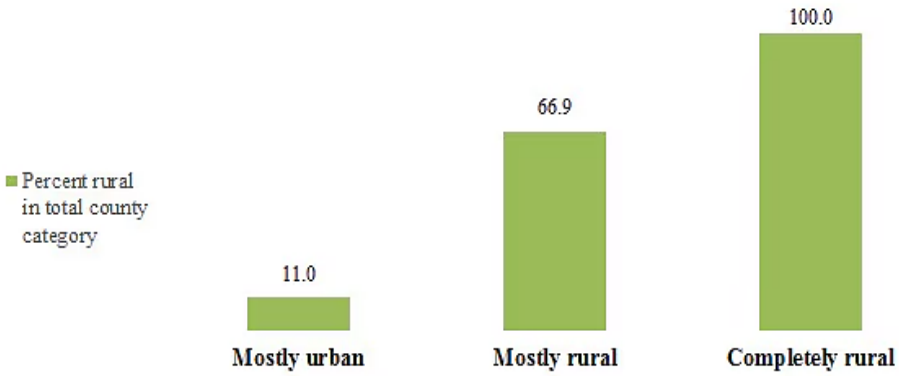
Mostly Rural

50.0 to 99% of the county population lives in rural areas.

Completely Rural

100.0% of the county lives in rural areas.

Figure 4. A 2016 graph showing the population and number of U.S. counties that are mostly urban, mostly rural, and completely rural using 2011-2015 American Community Survey 5-year estimates. Source: US Census | Rurality Matters



	Mostly urban	Mostly rural	Completely rural
Number of Counties	1,253	1,185	704
Total Population	274.4M	36.8M	5.3M
Rural Population	30.1M	24.6M	5.3M

M=millions
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2011-2015 American Community Survey 5-year estimates.

https://www.census.gov/newsroom/blogs/random-samplings/2016/12/rurality_matters.html

Multi-Level Classifications

"In addition to conducting research that uses the basic metro-nonmetro dichotomy, USDA ERS has developed multi-level county classifications to measure rurality in more detail and to assess the economic and social diversity of nonmetro America. Some of these classification schemes have been used to determine eligibility for Federal programs that assist rural areas"

For more: Rural Classifications - What is Rural? | Economic Research Service.

Classification: USDA ERS Rural-Urban Continuum Codes

The 2023 Rural-Urban Continuum Codes distinguish U.S. metropolitan (metro) counties by the population size of their metro area, and nonmetropolitan (nonmetro) counties by their degree of urbanization and adjacency to a metro area. The division of counties as either metro or nonmetro, based on the 2023 Office of Management and Budget (OMB) delineation of metro areas, is further subdivided into three metro and six nonmetro categories. See: Rural-Urban Continuum Codes - Documentation | Economic Research Service

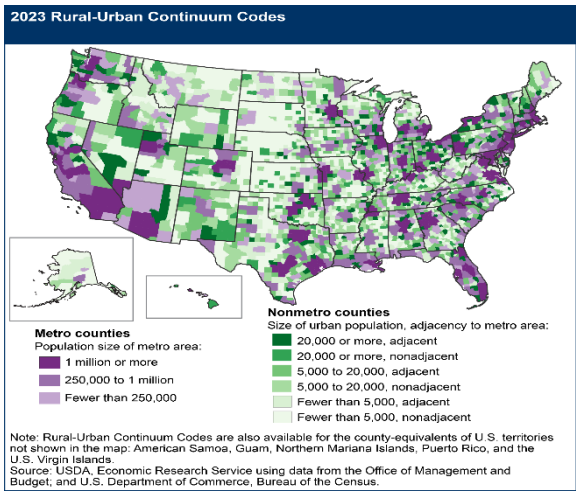
Metro Counties

1. Counties in metro areas of 1 million population or more.
2. Counties in metro areas of 250,000 to 1 million population.
3. Counties in metro areas of fewer than 250,000 population.

Non-Metro Counties

4. Urban population of 20,000 or more, adjacent to a metro area.
5. Urban population of 20,000 or more, not adjacent to a metro area.
6. Urban population of 5,000 to 20,000, adjacent to a metro area.
7. Urban population of 5,000 to 20,000, not adjacent to a metro area.
8. Urban population of fewer than 5,000, adjacent to a metro area.
9. Urban population of fewer than 5,000, not adjacent to a metro area.

Figure 5. A 2023 map showing color-coded counties in the U.S. based on OMB's Rural-Urban Continuum Codes Source: [Rural-Urban Continuum Codes - Documentation | Economic Research Service]



[Service]

Classification: USDA ERS Urban Influence Codes

"The 2024 Urban Influence Codes are a nine-category county classification based initially on the Office of Management and Budget's 2023 three classifications — metropolitan, micropolitan, and noncore counties. They emphasize the role that neighboring urban areas have on rural counties by using adjacent metro size as a criterion for classifying nonmetro counties. Different sized cities offer different bundles of goods, services, and amenities." [Urban Influence Codes - Documentation | Economic Research Service]

Large Metropolitan and Adjacent Counties

1. Large metro (in a metro area with at least 1 million residents).
2. Micropolitan, adjacent to a large metro area.
3. Noncore, adjacent to a large metro area.

Small Metropolitan and Adjacent Counties

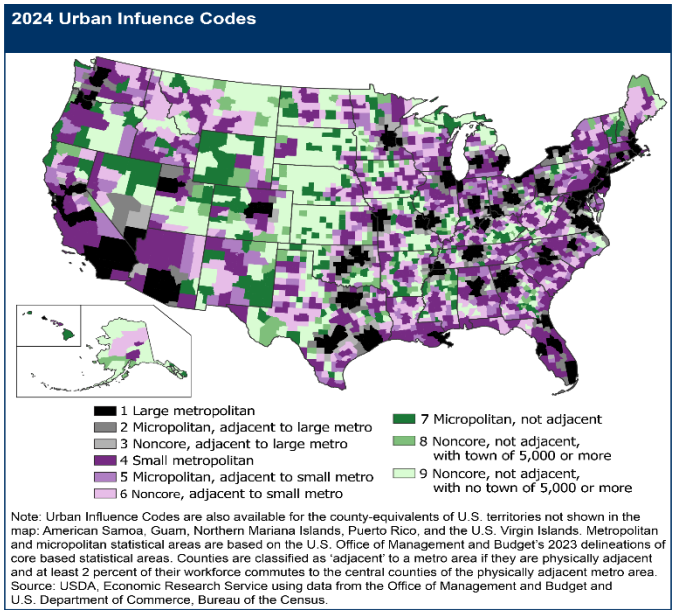
4. Small metro (in a metro area with fewer than 1 million residents).
5. Micropolitan, adjacent to a small metro area.
6. Noncore, adjacent to a small metro area.

Non-Adjacent to Metropolitan Counties

7. Micropolitan, not adjacent to a metro area.
8. Noncore, not adjacent to a metro area and contains a town of at least 5,000 residents.
9. Noncore, not adjacent to a metro area and does not contain a town of at least 5,000 residents.

https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/urban-influence-codes/documentation

Figure 6. A 2024 map showing color-coded counties in the U.S. based on OMB's Urban Influence Codes Source: Rural-Urban Continuum Codes - Documentation | Economic Research Service



Classification: CDC National Center for Health Statistics Urban-Rural Classification Scheme for Counties, 2013

"The levels of the NCHS scheme were chosen because they are useful for studying health differences across areas ranging from the most urban to the most rural (the urban-rural continuum). The NCHS scheme has four metropolitan levels and two nonmetropolitan levels because a large portion of the U.S. population lives in metropolitan areas — 85% in 2010. A key

feature of the NCHS urban-rural scheme is that it separates counties within large metropolitan areas that have 1 million or more population into two categories: Large “central” metro (akin to inner cities); Large “fringe” metro (akin to suburbs).” NCHS Urban-Rural Classification Scheme for Counties | National Center for Health Statistics | CDC

Note: NCHS expects to publish an update of the NCHS Urban-Rural Classification Scheme for Counties in 2025.

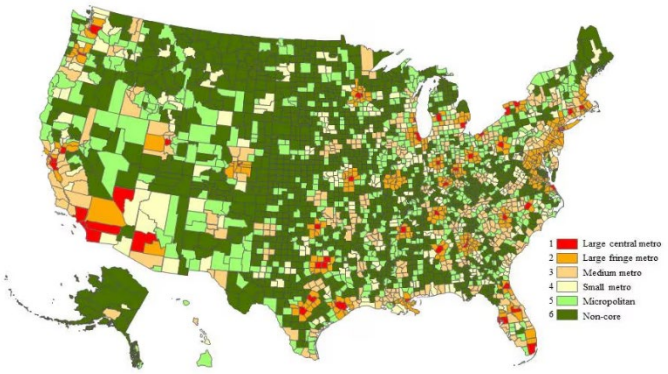
Metropolitan Counties

1. Large central metro counties.
    a. Contain the entire population of the largest principal city of the MSA.
    b. Are completely contained within the largest principal city of the MSA.
    c. Contain at least 250,000 residents of any principal city in the MSA.
2. Large fringe metro counties in MSA of 1 million or more population that do not qualify as large central.
3. Medium metro counties in MSA of 250,000-999,999 population.
4. Small metro counties are counties in MSAs of less than 250,000 population.

Nonmetropolitan Counties

5. Micropolitan counties in micropolitan statistical area.
    a. Micropolitan statistical areas are associated with at least one urban cluster of at least 10,000 but less than 50,000 population.
    b. Micropolitan statistical areas also include adjacent counties having a high degree of social and economic integration with the core as measured through commuting ties.
6. Noncore counties not in a micropolitan statistical area.

Figure 7. A map showing color-coded counties in the U.S. based on NSHS’s 2013 Urban-Rural Classification Scheme for Counties. Source: CDC | NCHS



Section 3: Socioeconomic Classifications

As the section header suggests, this section provides geographic definitions that focus less on population characteristics and more on socioeconomic factors or outcomes that shape a given region. These definitions do not always explicitly define rural territories but help contextualize the socioeconomic landscape of rural or nonmetro areas — highlighting similarities and differences within and between locales.

All definitions in this section come from the United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service (USDA ERS), including USDA Rural-Urban Commuting Codes, USDA County Typology Codes, USDA County Policy Types, and USDA Frontier and Remote Area Levels. These classifications are valuable for informing targeted policy interventions based on specific socioeconomic conditions in a geographic area.

Classification: USDA ERS Rural-Urban Commuting Codes (RUCA) – Primary

"The rural-urban commuting area (RUCA) codes, a detailed and flexible scheme for delineating sub-county components of rural and urban areas, have been updated using data from the 2010 decennial census and the 2006–10 American Community Survey (ACS). RUCA codes are based on the same theoretical concepts used by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to define county-level metropolitan and micropolitan areas. We applied similar criteria to measures of population density, urbanization, and daily commuting to identify urban cores and adjacent territory that is economically integrated with those cores. We adopted OMB's metropolitan and micropolitan terminology to highlight the underlying connectedness between the two classification systems. However, the use of census tracts instead of counties as building blocks for RUCA codes provides a different and more detailed geographic pattern of urban and rural areas. Census tracts are used because they are the smallest geographic building block for which commuting flow estimates are available from the U.S. Census." See: Rural-Urban Commuting Area Codes - Documentation | Economic Research Service

Note: To determine a census tract, please see the Federal Financial Institutions Examination Council's FFIEC Geocoding/Mapping System.

RUCA Primary Codes

1. Metropolitan area core: primary flow within an urbanized area (UA).
2. Metropolitan area high commuting: primary flow 30% or more to a UA.
3. Metropolitan area low commuting: primary flow 10% to 30% to a UA.
4. Micropolitan area core: primary flow within an urban cluster of 10,000 to 49,999 (large UC).
5. Micropolitan high commuting: primary flow 30% or more to a large UC.
6. Micropolitan low commuting: primary flow 10% to 30% to a large UC.
7. Small town core: primary flow within an urban cluster of 2,500 to 9,999 (small UC).
8. Small town high commuting: primary flow 30% or more to a small UC.

9. Small town low commuting: primary flow 10% to 30% to a small UC.
10. Rural areas: primary flow to a tract outside a UA or UC.

Not coded: Census tract has zero population and no rural-urban identifier information.

USDA ERS County Typology Codes

"The economic structure and demographic characteristics of rural counties vary significantly across the country. To provide information about this variation to policymakers, public officials, and researchers, USDA, Economic Research Service (ERS) has developed a set of county-level typology codes.

The 2025 edition of the USDA, ERS County Typology Codes contains a set of Economic Typology Codes based on the industrial composition of nonmetropolitan (nonmetro) counties and a set of Demographic Typology Codes based on demographic characteristics that are often of interest to rural policymakers and researchers." County Typology Codes | Economic Research Service

Note: "The ERS County Typology Codes are primarily intended for the evaluation of conditions in nonmetropolitan counties. The thresholds used to determine if a county has a high industry concentration or industry dependence are based on the earnings and jobs distributions of nonmetropolitan counties only. Economic typology codes are also assigned to metro counties, but researchers should carefully test whether these classifications are meaningful in the metro county context." *County Typology Codes - Documentation | Economic Research Service*

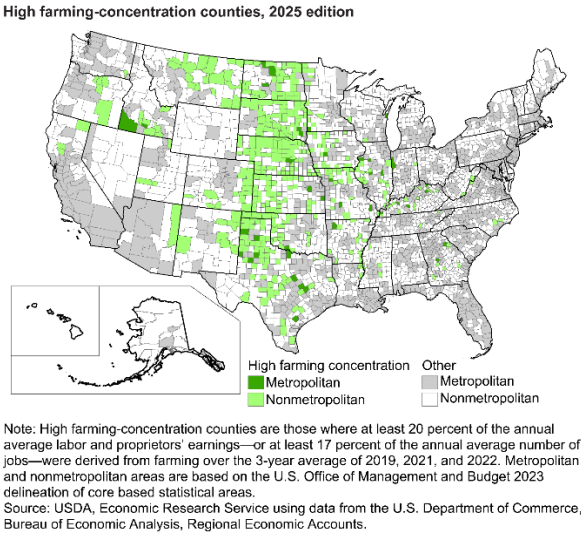
Classification: USDA ERS County Economic Types

County economic types are mutually exclusive. Each county in the U.S. is assigned one economic type.

High Farming-Concentration Counties

Farming-dependent (453 total, 409 nonmetro) counties are those where 20 percent or more of the county's average annual labor and proprietor's earnings — or at least 17 percent of the annual average number of jobs — were derived from farming over the 3-year average of 2019, 2021, and 2022.

Figure 8. A U.S map showing high farming-concentration counties based on ERS 2025 County Typology Codes. Source: ERS | County Typology

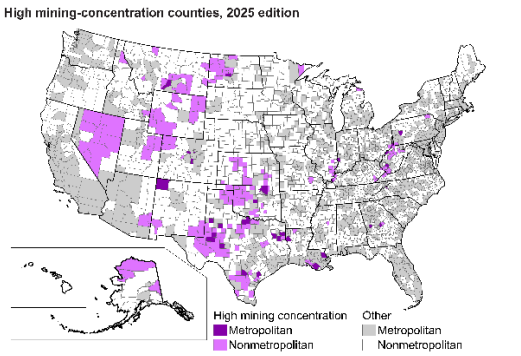


Note: High farming-concentration counties are those where at least 20 percent of the annual average labor and proprietors' earnings—or at least 17 percent of the annual average number of jobs—were derived from farming over the 3-year average of 2019, 2021, and 2022. Metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas are based on the U.S. Office of Management and Budget 2023 delineation of core based statistical areas.
Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis, Regional Economic Accounts.

High Mining-Concentration Counties

High mining-concentration counties (216 total, 184 nonmetro) counties are those where 11 percent or more of the county's average annual labor and proprietor's earnings — or at least 7 percent of the annual average number of jobs — were derived from mining, quarrying, and oil/gas extraction over the 3-year average of 2019, 2021, and 2022.

Figure 9. A U.S map showing high mining-concentration counties based on ERS 2025 County Typology Codes. Source: ERS | County Typology



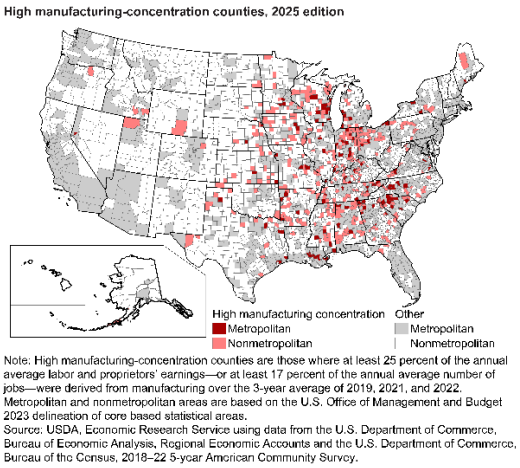
Note: High mining-concentration counties are those where at least 11 percent of the annual average labor and proprietors' earnings—or at least 7 percent of the annual average number of jobs—were derived from mining, quarrying, and oil/gas extraction over the 3-year average of 2019, 2021, and 2022. Metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas are based on the U.S. Office of Management and Budget 2023 delineation of core based statistical areas.
Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis, Regional Economic Accounts and the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 2018–22 5-year American Community Survey.

High Manufacturing-Concentration Counties

High manufacturing-concentration counties (469 total, 348 nonmetro) counties are those where 25 percent or more of the county's average annual labor and proprietor's earnings — or at least

17 percent of the annual average number of jobs — were derived from mining, quarrying, and oil/gas extraction over the 3-year average of 2019, 2021, and 2022.

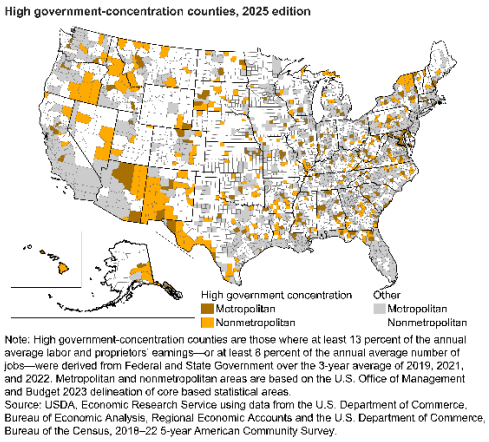
Figure 10. A U.S map showing high manufacturing-concentration counties based on ERS 2025 County Typology Codes. Source: ERS | County Typology



High Government-Concentration Counties

High government-concentration counties (443 total, 278 nonmetro) are those where 13 percent or more of the county's average annual labor and proprietor's earnings — or at least 8 percent of the annual average number of jobs — came from Federal and State Government over the 3-year average of 2019, 2021, and 2022.

Figure 11. A U.S map showing high government-concentration counties based on ERS 2025 County Typology Codes. Source: ERS | County Typology

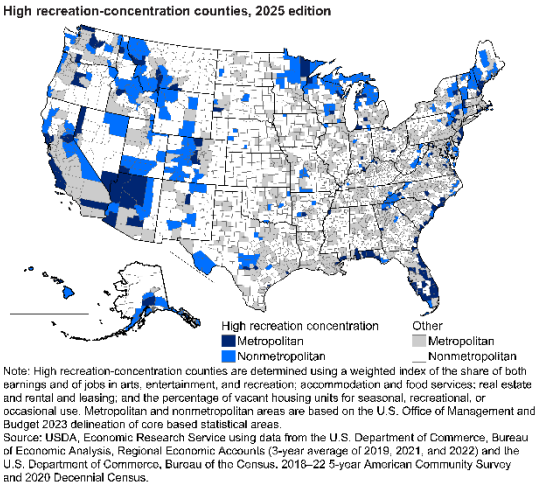


High Recreational-Concentration Counties

High recreation-concentration counties (432 total, 295 nonmetro) are determined using a weighted index of the share of both earnings and of jobs in arts, entertainment, and recreation; accommodation and food services; real estate and rental and leasing; and the percentage of

vacant housing for seasonal, recreational, or occasional use reported in the 2020 Decennial Census.

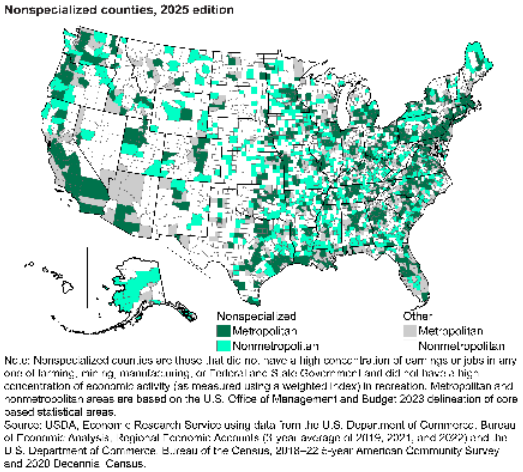
Figure 12. A U.S map showing high recreation-concentration counties based on ERS 2025 County Typology Codes. Source: ERS | County Typology



Nonspecialized Counties

Nonspecialized (1,351 total, 633 nonmetro) counties are those that did not meet the economic threshold for any of the five industries examined.

Figure 13. A U.S map showing non-specialized counties based on ERS 2025 County Typology Codes. Source: ERS | County Typology

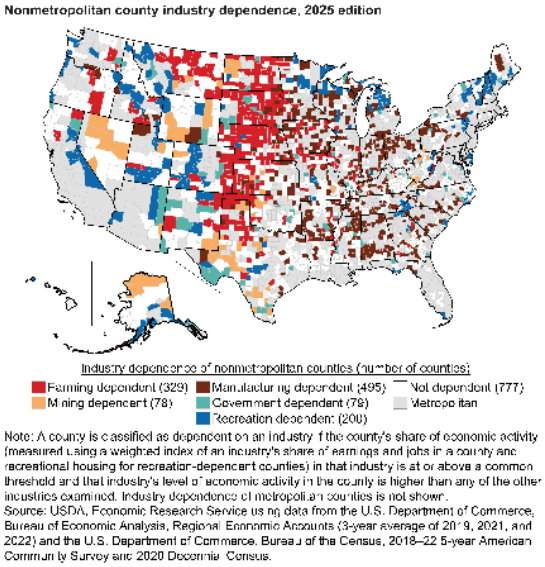


Industry-Dependent Counties

The 'High Industry Concentration' Economic Typology Codes indicate if a county has a high share of earnings or jobs in farming, mining, manufacturing, Federal and State Government, or recreation relative to other counties. These five codes are not mutually exclusive, that is, a

county may have a high industry concentration in more than one sector. These codes indicate the prevalence of a particular industry independent of other industries. The mutually exclusive 'Industry Dependence' Economic Typology Code is a single code that indicates if any of the industries examined have a high combined share of earnings and jobs, and which industry is the most prevalent in a county relative to the other industries. This code is more reflective of nonmetro counties' industrial structures. The code also identifies relatively more manufacturing dependent counties and relatively fewer farming, mining, government, and recreation dependent counties than the High Industry Concentration Codes. This code indicates which of the five industries is the most dominant in a county. County Typology Codes | Economic Research Service

Figure 14. A U.S map showing Nonmetropolitan county industry dependence based on ERS 2025 County Typology Codes. Source: ERS | County Typology



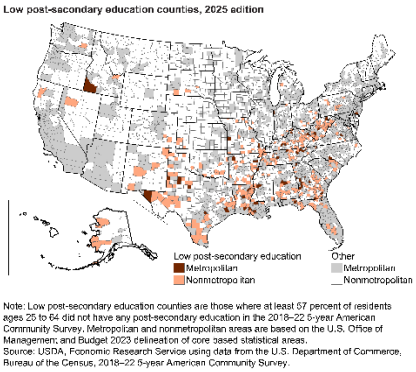
Classification: USDA ERS Demographic Typology Codes

The economic structure and demographic characteristics of rural counties vary significantly across the country. Demographic Typology Codes are based on demographic characteristics that are often of interest to rural policymakers and researchers. County demographic types are not mutually exclusive. A county may be none, one, or more policy type. See: County Typology Codes - Descriptions and Maps | Economic Research Service

Low Post-Secondary Education Counties

Low post-secondary education counties (358, 305 nonmetro) counties are those where 57 percent or more of the county residents age 25-64 did not have any post-secondary education in the 2018-22 5-year American Community Survey (ACS).

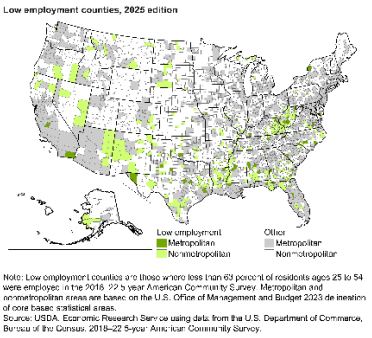
Figure 15. A U.S map showing low post-secondary education counties based on ERS 2025 County Typology Codes. Source: [ERS | County Typology]



Low-Employment

Low-employment (315 total, 265 nonmetro) counties, are those where less than 63 percent of county residents age 25-64 were employed, determined by the American Community Survey 5-year average data 2018-22.

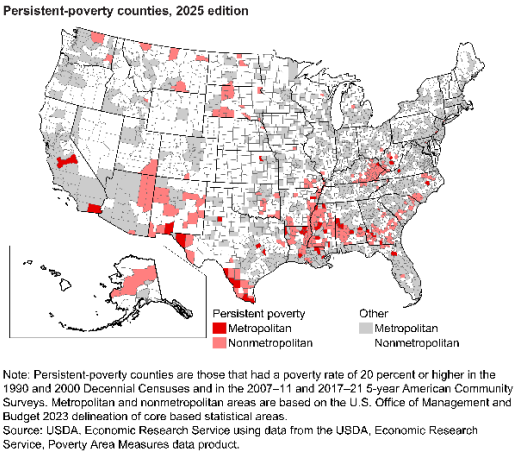
Figure 16. A U.S map showing low employment counties based on ERS 2025 County Typology Codes. Source: [ERS | County Typology]



Persistent Poverty

Persistent poverty (318 total, 267 nonmetro) counties, are those where 20 percent or more of county residents were poor, measured by the 1990 and 2000 Decennial Censuses and the 2017-21 American Community Surveys.

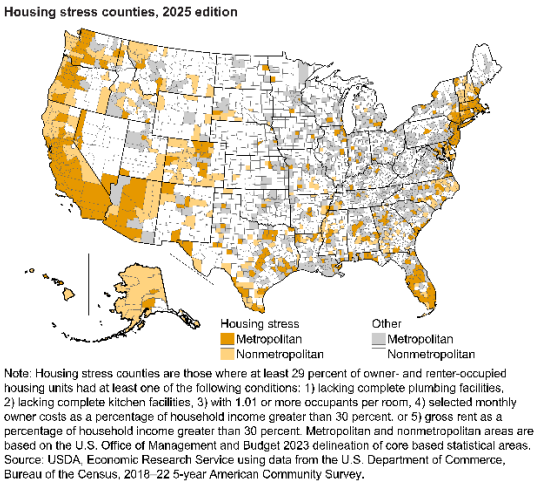
Figure 17. A U.S map showing persistent poverty counties based on ERS 2025 County Typology Codes. Source: ERS | County Typology



Housing Stress Counties

Housing stress counties (668 total, 288 nonmetro), are those where at least 29 percent of owner- and renter occupied housing units had at least one of the following conditions: 1) lacking complete plumbing facilities, 2) lacking complete kitchen facilities, 3) with 1.01 or more occupants per room, 4) selected monthly owner costs as a percentage of household income greater than 30 percent, and 5) gross rent as a percentage of household income greater than 30 percent.

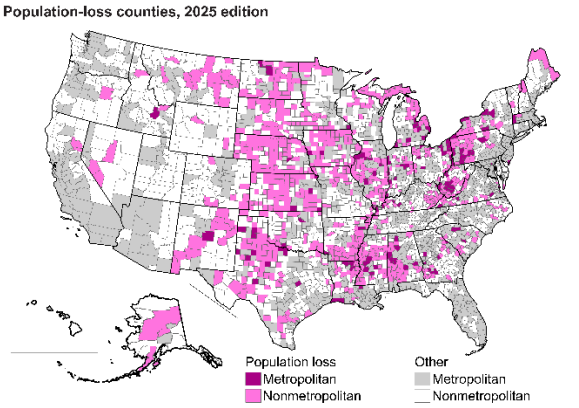
Figure 18. A U.S map showing housing stress counties based on ERS 2025 County Typology Codes. Source: ERS | County Typology



Population Loss

Population-loss counties (912 total, 778 nonmetro) counties, are those where the number of county residents declined from 2000 to 2010 and from 2010 to 2020, based on Decennial Census Data.

Figure 19. A U.S map showing population loss counties based on ERS 2025 County Typology Codes. Source: ERS | County Typology

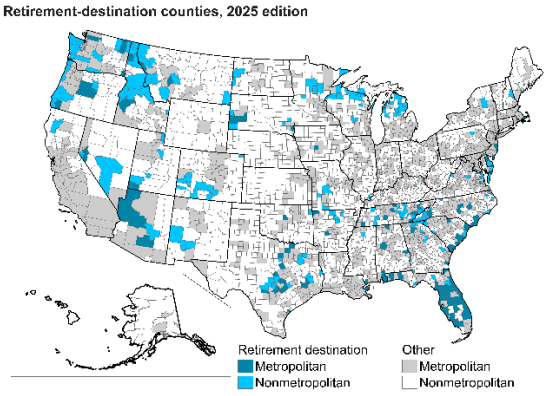


Note: Population-loss counties are those where the number of residents declined from 2000 to 2010 and from 2010 to 2020, based on decennial census data. Metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas are based on the U.S. Office of Management and Budget 2023 delineation of core based statistical areas.
Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 2000, 2010, and 2020 Decennial Censuses.

Retirement-Destination Counties

Retirement destination counties (305 total, 191 nonmetro) counties are those where the number of residents ages 55 to 74 grew by 15 percent or more between the 2010 and 2020 censuses due to net migration.

Figure 20. A U.S map showing retirement-destination counties based on ERS 2025 County Typology Codes. Source: ERS | County Typology



Note: Retirement-destination counties are those where the number of residents ages 55 to 74 increased by at least 15 percent from 2010 to 2020 because of migration. Metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas are based on the U.S. Office of Management and Budget 2023 delineation of core based statistical areas.
Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the Applied Population Laboratory at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Classification: Frontier and Remor (FAR) Area Codes

"Small population size and geographic remoteness bestow highly-cherished benefits for residents and visitors alike, but those same characteristics often create economic and social challenges. Job creation, population retention, and provision of services (such as groceries, health care, clothing, household appliances, and other consumer items) require increased efforts in very rural, remote communities, all things being equal. Recent research indicates that the demographic and economic penalties associated with small size and remoteness may be increasing. ERS has developed ZIP-code-level frontier and remote area (FAR) codes to aid research and policymaking." See: Frontier and Remote Area Codes - Documentation | Economic Research Service

Criteria for Defining Four Frontier and Remote Area Levels:

- **Level 1** — FAR areas consist of rural areas and urban areas up to 50,000 people that are 60 minutes or more from an urban area of 50,000 or more people.
- **Level 2** — FAR areas consist of rural areas and urban areas up to 25,000 people that are: 45 minutes or more from an urban area of 25,000-49,999 people; and 60 minutes or more from an urban area of 50,000 or more people.
- **Level 3** — FAR areas consist of rural areas and urban areas up to 10,000 people that are: 30 minutes or more from an urban area of 10,000-24,999; 45 minutes or more from an urban area of 25,000-49,999 people; and 60 minutes or more from an urban area of 50,000 or more people.
- **Level 4** — FAR areas consist of rural areas that are: 15 minutes or more from an urban area of 2,500-9,999 people; 30 minutes or more from an urban area of 10,000-24,999 people; 45 minutes or more from an urban area of 25,000-49,999 people; and 60 minutes or more from an urban area of 50,000 or more people.

Section 4: Regional Classifications

Rural communities are often shaped by the broader regions in which they are located. Regional classifications extend beyond population size and urban influence to capture — to some degree — shared language and customs, cultural histories, industry dependencies, infrastructure needs, and sociopolitical realities. Natural resources, in particular, also play a significant role in shaping regional identities — defining ways of life, influencing dominant industries, and even creating physical boundaries that separate one place from another.

This section begins with the U.S. Census Bureau's regions and divisions. It then defines other federally-recognized regions, including American Indian and Alaska Native Areas (AIANAs), the Delta Region, Appalachia, the Northern Border Region, and Colonias. Understanding regional contexts is essential for policymakers, researchers, and institutions seeking to develop place-based strategies that reflect the economic, environmental, and social realities of rural communities.

Classification: US Census Regions and Divisions

Census Regions and Divisions are groupings of States that subdivide the United States. Each of the four census Regions is divided into two or more census Divisions. See: US Census | Geographic Levels

Northeast Region

- New England Division: Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont.
- Middle Atlantic Division: New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania.

Midwest Region

- East North Central Division: Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin.
- West North Central Division: Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota.

South Region

- South Atlantic Division: Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia.
- East South Central Division: Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Tennessee.
- West South Central Division: Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Texas.

West Region

- Mountain Division: Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming.
- Pacific Division: Alaska, California, Hawaii, Oregon, and Washington.

Classification: U.S. Census American Indian and Alaska Native Areas

The Bureau of the Census tabulates and publishes population and housing census data for several geographic entities that cover areas of American Indian and Alaska Native settlement, collectively termed American Indian and Alaska Native areas (AIANAs).

These areas include: American Indian reservations and Trust Lands; Tribal Jurisdiction Statistical Areas (TJSAs); Alaska Native Regional Corporations (ANRCs); Alaska Native Village Statistical Areas (ANVSAs); Tribal Designated Statistical Areas (TDSAs).

See: US Census | Geographic Areas Reference Manual

In preparation for the 2010 Census, the Census Bureau offered officials from federally and state recognized tribes, Alaska Native Villages and Alaska Native Regional Corporations the opportunity to review and update the geographic areas below.

Alaska Native Village Statistical Areas (ANVSAs); Alaska Native Regional Corporations (ANRCs); Oklahoma Tribal Statistical Areas (OTSAs); OTSA Tribal Subdivisions; Tribal Designated Statistical Areas (TDSAs); Tribal Census Tracts and Tribal Block Groups; Census Designated Places (CDPs); State American Indian Reservations (SAIRs); State Designated Tribal Statistical Areas (SDTSAs)

For detailed definitions see: US Census | Definitions of the American Indian and Alaska Native Geographic Areas

Classification: U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration (ETA), Workforce Opportunity for Rural Communities (WORC) Initiative Regions

"The purpose of the WORC Initiative is to fund grants that support economic mobility, address historic inequities for marginalized communities of color and other underserved and underrepresented communities, and produce high-quality employment outcomes for workers who live or work in the Appalachian, Delta, and Northern Border regions, enabling them to remain and thrive in these communities. The WORC Initiative is designed to address persistent economic distress by aligning community-led economic and workforce development strategies and activities to ensure long-term economic resilience and enable workers in the regions to succeed in current and future job opportunities."

For more see: ETA | WORC Initiative

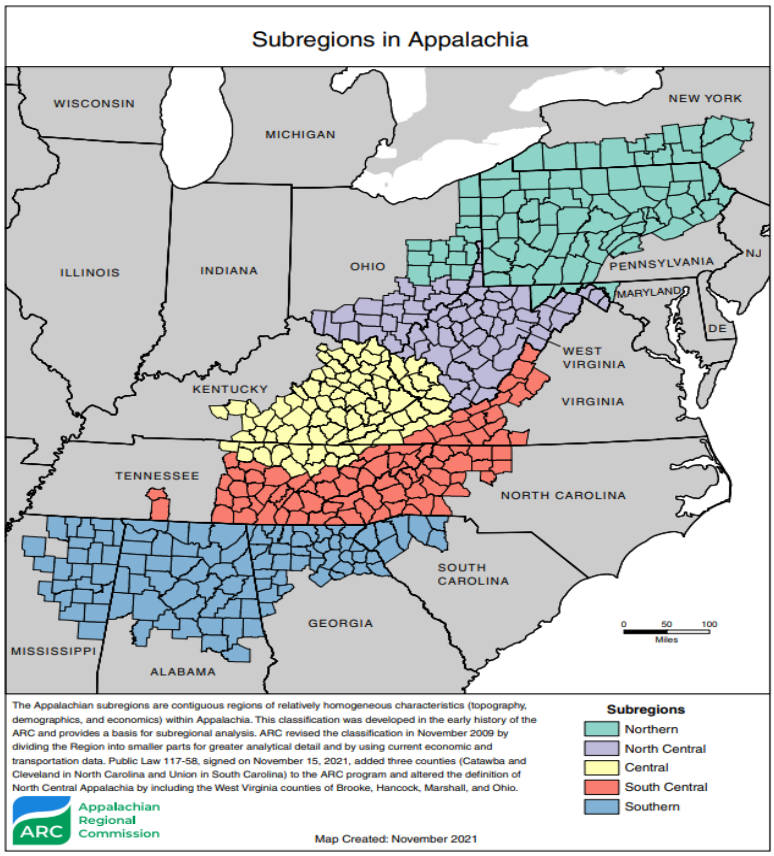
Appalachian Region

Appalachia is made up of 423 counties across 13 states and spans 206,000 square miles, from southern New York to northern Mississippi. The region's 26.4 million residents live in parts of Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia, and all of West Virginia.

The region also comprises three federally recognized and five state recognized Native American Tribal Communities, with Tribal entities in Appalachian Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, New York, and North Carolina." See: About the Appalachian Region - Appalachian Regional Commission

The Appalachian Region is further divided into 5 subregions: Northern, North Central, Central, South Central, and Southern.

Figure 21. Map of Appalachian subregions. Source: Appalachian Regional Commission



Delta Region

"Though rich in natural and human resources, the Delta lags behind the rest of the United States in economic growth and prosperity. The region suffers from a greater proportion of measurable poverty and unemployment than any other region in the United States." Homepage - Delta Regional Authority

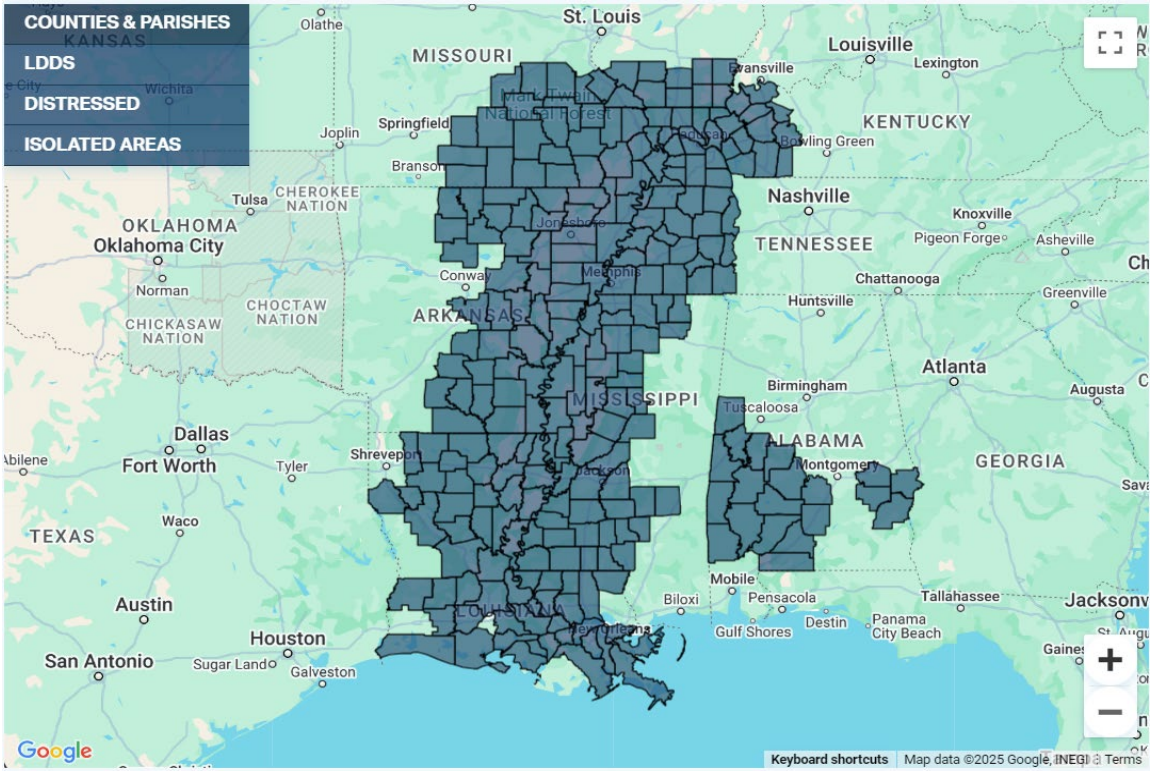
The Delta Regional Authority (DRA) was established in 2000 as a formal framework for joint federal-state collaboration to promote and encourage the economic development of the lower Mississippi River and Alabama Black Belt regions. To fulfill this purpose, DRA invests in projects supporting transportation infrastructure, basic public infrastructure, workforce training, and business development. DRA works to create jobs, build communities, and improve the lives of those that reside in the region.

DRA's region encompasses 252 counties and parishes in parts of Alabama, Arkansas, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, and Tennessee."

Note: "DRA's enabling legislation dictates that at least 75% of DRA's funds must be invested in economically distressed counties and parishes and isolated areas within non-distressed counties

and parishes. In addition, half of DRA's funds must support transportation infrastructure and basic public infrastructure" https://dra.gov/

Figure 22. Map of Delta region counties. Source: Delta Regional Authority



Northern Border Region

"America's northeast has a long and storied history of entrepreneurship, forest product manufacturing, and surviving off the rich natural resources of the region. However, changing markets and global competition have challenged the northeast's once vibrant economy. In response, the NBRC was formed to help alleviate distress in the hard-hit northern counties of each State. Bordering Canada, these counties generally have higher levels of unemployment, population loss, and lower incomes."

The Northern Border Region Commission (NBRC) was formed by Congress in 2008 in order to help fund promising economic and community development projects in Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and New York. See: Northern Border Region | Northern Border Regional Commission

Classification: Colonias

The US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and USDA Rural Development generally define colonias as rural communities along the U.S-Mexico border (Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California) that lack adequate water, sewer systems, or safe housing — or a

combination of these deficiencies. These substandard communities are typically located near larger urban areas, providing access to jobs while remaining outside city limits to bypass zoning regulations and building codes.

Among the four border states, Texas has the largest number of colonias, with over 2,000 communities eligible for funding from sources such as HUD, USDA, and state or local programs. In New Mexico, approximately 150 colonias have been identified as eligible for one or more of these funding sources.

See: Colonias History - HUD Exchangev and https://www.huduser.gov/portal/pdredge/pdr-edge-trending-072516.html

Section 5: Rural Education Definitions

Rurally-situated postsecondary education institutions are essential to the economic development, social integration, and well-being of their communities. The following section outlines how rural institutions and students are defined at the national level.

Classification: National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)Locale Classifications and Criteria

The NCES locale framework is composed of four basic types (City, Suburban, Town, and Rural) that each contain three subtypes. It relies on standard urban and rural definitions developed by the U.S. Census Bureau, and each type of locale is either urban or rural in its entirety. The NCES locales can be fully collapsed into a basic urban–rural dichotomy or expanded into a more detailed collection of 12 distinct categories. These subtypes are differentiated by size (in the case of City and Suburban assignments) and proximity (in the case of Town and Rural assignments). The NCES classifications and corresponding two-digit locale codes are as follows. See: NCES Locale Definitions https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/annualreports/topical-studies/locale/definitions

City

- 11 Large - Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population of 250,000 or more.
- 12 Midsize- Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population less than 250,000 and greater than or equal to 100,000.
- 13 Small - Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population less than 100,000.

Suburban

- 21 Large - Territory outside a Principal City and inside an Urbanized Area with population of 250,000 or more.
- 22 Midsize - Territory outside a Principal City and inside an Urbanized Area with population less than 250,000 and greater than or equal to 100,000.

- 23 Small - Territory outside a Principal City and inside an Urbanized Area with population less than 100,000.

Town

- 31 Fringe - Territory inside an Urban Cluster that is less than or equal to 10 miles from an Urbanized Area.
- 32 Distant - Territory inside an Urban Cluster that is more than 10 miles and less than or equal to 35 miles from an Urbanized Area.
- 33 Remote - Territory inside an Urban Cluster that is more than 35 miles from an Urbanized Area.

Rural

- 41 Fringe - Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an Urbanized Area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an Urban Cluster.
- 42 Distant - Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an Urbanized Area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an Urban Cluster.
- 43 Remote - Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an Urbanized Area and also more than 10 miles from an Urban Cluster.

Classification: Rural-Located Institutions

The Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges (AARC) defines rural-located institutions as colleges and universities located in places officially designated as rural under some state or federal classification. See: ARRC | Rural Serving Institution Project

Classification: Rural-Serving Institutions, ARRC

The Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges (AARC) expands the definition of rural-located institutions to include colleges and universities who serve rural students and provide training and education for industries integral to rural economies but may not be located in rural areas. See: ARRC | Rural Serving Institution Project

RSI

ARRC's uses the five-factor framework below to compile an RSI score for each institution.

1. Percent of institution's home county population classified as rural.
2. Average percent of adjacent counties' population classified as rural.
3. Population size of institution's home county.
4. Institution's home county adjacency to a metro area.
5. Percent of institution's total awards conferred in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Parks & Recreation.

High RSI

Using the metric framework above, ARRC defines an RSI any institution with an RSI score above the average of 1.175. “High RSI” institutions are those with an RSI score greater than one standard deviation (0.965) above the average.

Classification: Rural Students

There is no universally recognized definition of rural students. As a result, researchers, policymakers, and higher education institutions must carefully consider who is included or excluded and how to best support rural students on their campuses.

The Small Town and Rural Students (STARS) College Network, a consortium of 32 colleges and universities across the United States, uses NCES classifications of “rural” and “town” to determine whether a student’s high school qualifies as a rural or small-town school. FAQ | STARS College Network

Section 6: Choosing Definitions

Selecting an appropriate definition of rurality depends on the context and purpose of its use. Different classifications serve distinct functions in policy, research, and practice, influencing funding, program eligibility, and data interpretation. Some definitions prioritize population size, while others consider economic, geographic, or institutional characteristics. Given these variations, it is essential to choose a definition that aligns with the specific goals of a study or initiative.

Rural Mapping and Data Tools

These tools and data sources allow users to visualize and analyze rural classifications. These resources provide insights into how different agencies define rural areas, assess eligibility for federal programs, and highlight rural-serving institutions.

Center on Rural Innovation | Exploring Definitions of Rural Tool

The map provides a visual representation of 10 different federal definitions, showing how different agencies classify locales. See: CORI | Defining Rural

Rural Health Information Hub | Am I Rural Tool

Determine whether a specific location is considered rural based on various definitions, including those used as eligibility criteria for federal programs. See: Am I Rural? Tool - Rural Health Information Hub

ARRC RSI Data Tool

Use the tool to see an institution’s RSI score. Use different search parameters and filters to view RSIs by state, 2-and-4-year classification, and more. See: ARRC Data Tool

USDA ERS | Rural Data Sources

This listing provides a summary of the major Federal sources of statistical data used to analyze rural areas categorized by content, time period, and geographic coverage. Examples include U.S. Decennial Census, American Community Survey, Atlas of Rural and Small-Town America, and Common Core Education data. See: USDA ERS Rural Data Sources

Note: As of January 2025, updates to this page are discontinued.

Wisconsin SSTAR Lab | Mapping Rural Colleges Tool

The University of Wisconsin Student Success Through Applied Research (SSTAR) Lab Mapping Rural Colleges Project defines rural areas using commuting zones and USDA's Rural-Urban Continuum (RUCC) codes. Use the mapping tool to explore where postsecondary programs are offered and the communities they serve. See: SSTAR Lab | Mapping Rural Colleges

Additional Readings on Choosing and Using Rural Definitions

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