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# The Rural Rebound

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# THE RURAL REBOUND

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# THE RURAL REBOUND

*Small towns, farms, forests, sparkling lakes*

*Abandoned homesteads, boarded-up main streets, shuttered schoolhouses*

Both of these visions of rural America reflect a fundamental fact: Throughout most of the 20th century, millions of people moved out of the thousands of towns and counties nestled far from major highways and city lights. American agriculture prospered, but the mechanization of farm work, several droughts, and the changing economics of farming hurt once-thriving small towns and counties. Millions of mostly young rural men and women migrated to metropolitan centers, attracted by the economic, social, and intellectual opportunities that cities offered.

The magnitude of this loss varied from decade to decade, but the pattern was quite consistent—rural areas grew only when the excess of births over deaths was sufficient to offset migration losses.

But this long era of rural population stagnation and decline is now over. In the past 30 years, rural (or nonmetropolitan) areas have undergone a remarkable demographic revival. The first signs came in the 1970s, when population in the nation's rural regions suddenly jumped, lifted by an unprecedented influx of newcomers and those returning from urban areas. This "nonmetropolitan turnaround" resulted in a nonmetropolitan population gain that actually exceeded the gain in metropolitan areas for the first time in at least 150 years.

Economic disruptions in the 1980s shut down the turnaround. The farm debt crisis, a wave of deindustrialization that downsized rural manufacturing, and an urban revival stopped people from returning to rural areas. Rural populations grew during this decade only because rural women had enough babies to offset out-migration as well as deaths.

But since 1990, most nonmetropolitan areas have been enjoying a "rural rebound." More people are moving from urban to rural areas and fewer rural

people are leaving. Combined with a modest natural increase in population (more births than deaths), these trends have produced another large rural population gain. This rebound is occurring in virtually every part of the nation and is not limited to a single age group or kind of county. In all, some 600 more rural counties are growing in the 1990s than was the case during the 1980s (see Figure 1).

What the United States experienced between 1970 and 1998 is "deconcentration"—people gradually moving from larger, more densely settled places into smaller, more lightly settled places. It's a rebound, not a reversal. Americans are not returning to a pioneer life of farming. They are using technology, a booming economy, and new attitudes toward work to diminish the "friction" of distance.

The new arrivals are a mixed lot of retirees, blue-collar workers, lone-eagle professionals, and disenchanted city dwellers; all see a better way of life in rural areas.

The turbulent nonmetropolitan demographic trends since 1970 are without historical precedent. The striking similarities between the rural rebound of the 1990s and the turnaround of the 1970s suggest that a new era of population deconcentration is underway. Yet the slowdown in the 1980s, which in some ways is a weak echo of history, separates them.

Why, after so many decades of rural population loss, has one of the country's most enduring demographic trends reversed itself? Because of a complex set of economic, social, and geographic forces.

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# RURAL TRENDS

**B**etween 1930 and 1970, rural populations grew slowly; over 40 years these areas gained only 6.6 million people (see Figure 2). This growth was fueled entirely by more births than deaths (what demographers call “natural increase”).

Growth in rural America between 1930 and 1970 occurred because births to rural women were sufficient to offset the number of deaths and the number of people moving out. Rural

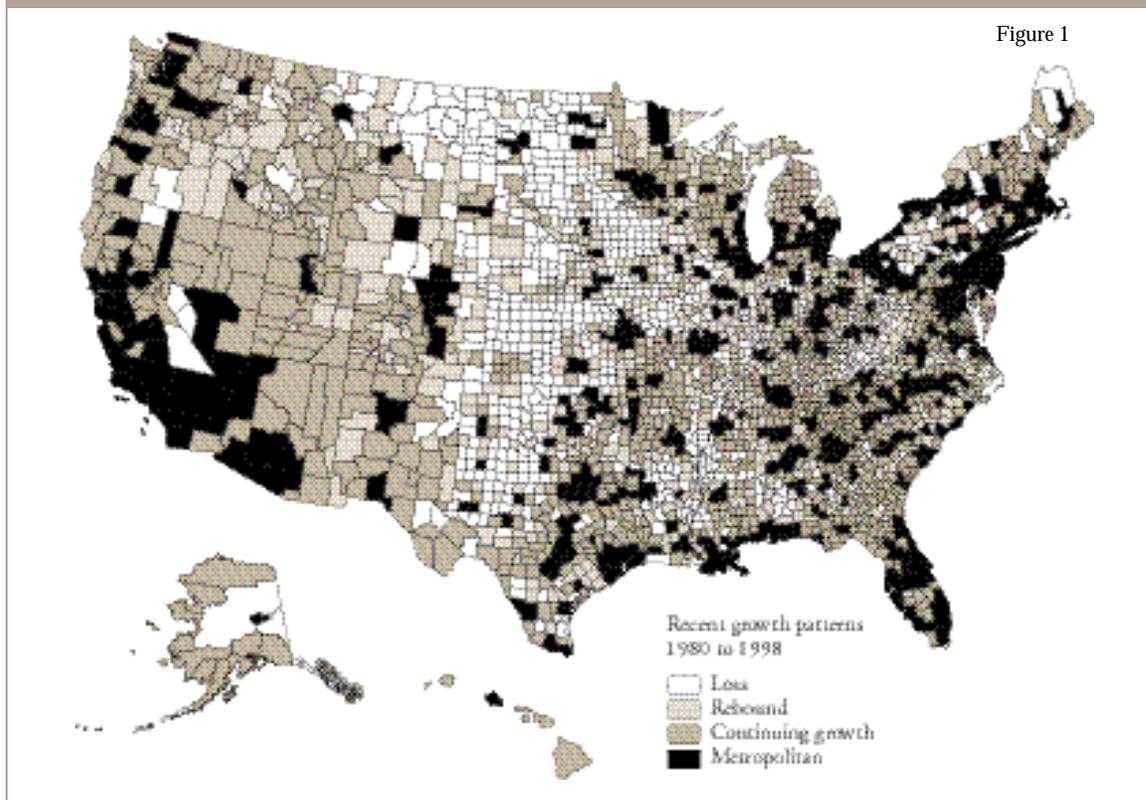
women have traditionally had more children than their urban counterparts. Though the gap between rural and urban birth rates has now disappeared, it was considerable throughout much of the nation’s history.

In spite of the historically high birth rates among rural women, in each decade from 1940 onward, most nonmetropolitan counties actually lost population. These migration losses were greatest during the 1950s and

smallest during the Depression of the 1930s. For example, some 88 percent of all nonmetropolitan counties lost residents during the 1940s, and even during the best of these decades (the 1960s), some 75 percent of all nonmetropolitan counties had more people move out than move in.

At least 17 million people moved out of rural areas between 1930 and 1970. Most who moved out were young adults—a significant loss of human capital for

THE RURAL POPULATION REBOUND SINCE 1990 HAS BEEN WIDESPREAD. MORE THAN 670 RURAL COUNTIES REBOUNDED FROM LOSS IN THE 1980S TO GROWTH IN THE 1990S.



small towns. Some rural communities lost as much as 50 percent of their high-school graduating class within one year of graduation. These departing young people depleted a rural community's potential pool of new parents and new business and government leaders.

Despite staggering migration losses, natural increase sustained nonmetropolitan growth between 1930 and 1970. It is against this background that the turnaround of the 1970s occurred.

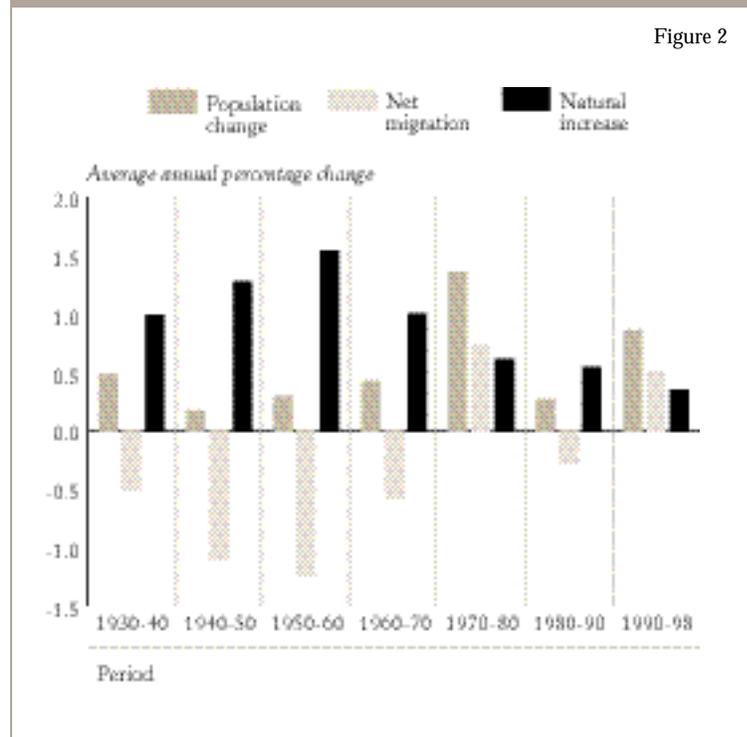
## THE TURNAROUND OF THE 1970s

The demographic situation in nonmetropolitan America changed abruptly in the 1970s when, for the first time in at least 50 years, population gains were widespread.

Demographer Calvin Beale, with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service, was the first to identify this "nonmetropolitan turnaround." Collectively, more than 80 percent of the counties then defined as nonmetropolitan gained 8.4 million people from 1970 to 1980—an increase of about 15.6 percent—nearly 2 million more than these same areas had gained in the previous 40 years.

This gain was so great that it actually exceeded the gain in metropolitan areas—an occurrence virtually without precedent in the nation's history. This growth occurred in almost every area of the country, but a significant proportion of the growth occurred in counties distant from urban centers (for instance, Camden, Mo., Dare, N.C., and Eagle, Colo.).

BETWEEN 1930 AND 1970, RURAL POPULATION GREW SLOWLY. GAINS WERE WIDESPREAD IN THE 1970s, SLOWED IN THE 1980s, AND ARE REBOUNDING IN THE 1990s.



Even more startling was that the growth resulted from people moving into rural areas; natural increase contributed much less to the nonmetropolitan gains of the 1970s than it had to the growth during any previous decade in this century.

The turnaround represented such a break from historical trends that it stimulated a significant amount of research. Glenn Fuguitt, who specializes in rural demography, identified several factors responsible for this turnaround:

- The turnaround was due in part to the spillover of population from metropolitan areas. Growth was consistently highest in nonmetropolitan counties adjacent to metropolitan areas, where people could take advantage of the metropolitan economic opportunities while residing in rural areas. The "urban sprawl" widely discussed today is a contempo-

rary manifestation of this phenomenon.

- Much of the loss of employment in the farm sector, which resulted from the effects of mechanization and from agribusiness, had run its course by the 1970s. The relatively few remaining farmers had less impact on overall population shifts than in the past.
- New communications technology made rural areas less isolated than they once had been.
- Nonmetropolitan counties with recreational amenities were increasingly attractive to retirees and other "footloose" populations.
- Narrowing wage differentials between rural and urban areas, coupled with a lower cost of living in rural areas, enhanced the appeal of rural areas.
- Employment opportunities in manufacturing and service jobs in nonmetropolitan areas

helped retain existing residents and attract new ones.

- People seemed to prefer living in rural areas.

Researchers were quite surprised by the population turnaround of the 1970s. Yet even as efforts to explain this turnaround gathered steam, demographic trends were shifting again.

## THE SLOWDOWN OF THE 1980s

By the late 1970s, growth in rural America was beginning to slow, and the slowdown became much more pronounced in the 1980s. Between 1980 and 1990, only 45 percent of the nonmetropolitan counties gained population. Rural America grew by only 1.3 million (2.7 percent), a far cry

from the substantial gains of the 1970s. Rural areas had a net migration loss of 1.4 million between 1980 and 1990. Only about 27 percent of the nonmetropolitan counties experienced net in-migration (more people moving in than moving out) between 1980 and 1990, significantly fewer than the 68 percent in the 1970s.

Except in parts of the West and in recreational and retirement areas, the few migration gains that occurred took place in counties adjacent to metropolitan areas. Population losses were extremely common in areas distant from metropolitan centers. Natural increase was sufficient to offset such migration losses and to allow nonmetropolitan America to grow during the 1980s, but the gain from natural increase was less than it traditionally had been. Young adults of childbearing age were again leaving in substantial numbers, and rural women were having fewer children, like their

urban contemporaries.

The 1980s puzzled demographers. If the 1970s represented a “clean break” from historical patterns, how could the 1980s be explained? Were the downward patterns of the 1980s simply a pause in the renewed growth of nonmetropolitan areas? Or was the turnaround a fluke?

It now appears that the trends of the 1980s were neither a repeat of the turnaround nor a reversion to historical trends. Before answering any of these questions, however, researchers had to contend with another shift in rural population trends.

## THE REBOUND OF THE 1990s

Since 1990, rural areas have been rebounding. More than 71 percent of all nonmetropolitan counties gained population between 1990 and 1998. The estimated nonmetropolitan population was 54.6 million in July 1998, a gain of nearly 3.6 million (7.1 percent) since April 1990. The nonmetropolitan population still grew at a slower pace than did the metropolitan population (9.1 percent) between 1990 and 1998, but the gap was much narrower than during the 1980s.

The geographic breadth of the rebound has been just as impressive as its sheer size. Gains were widespread across most of the country, while losses occurred only in the Great Plains and the Mississippi Delta. Areas that lost population are most dependent on farming and mining, and many of these counties have long histories of population loss. But the rebound is there now too: Losses are generally smaller now than in the 1980s.

### TURNAROUND, SLOWDOWN, REBOUND

Rural demographic trends over the past several decades have been complex.

#### THE TURNAROUND OF THE 1970s

More than 80 percent of rural counties gained population, after decades of losing population. The gain represented 8.4 million people, a 16 percent increase. Most of the growth came because more people moved into rural areas and fewer people left.

#### THE SLOWDOWN OF THE 1980s

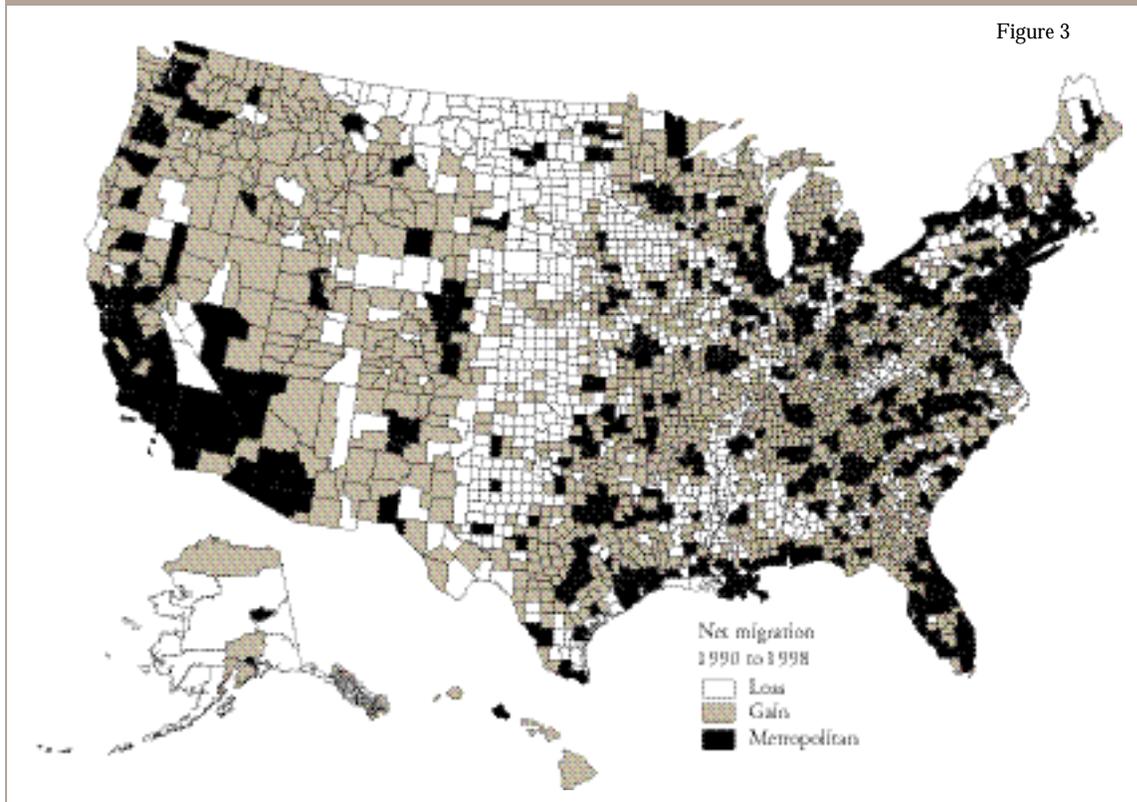
Only 45 percent of rural counties gained population. The gain represented 1.3 million people, a 2.7 percent increase. What little population gain there was resulted from an excess of births over deaths. More people left rural areas than moved to them.

#### THE REBOUND OF THE 1990s

More than 71 percent of rural counties gained population. The gain represented 3.6 million people, a 7.1 percent increase. Migration accounted for most of this gain. Fewer rural people left for the cities, and more former metropolitan residents moved in.

FEWER PEOPLE ARE LEAVING RURAL AREAS AND MORE METROPOLITAN RESIDENTS ARE MOVING IN.

Figure 3



Migration has accounted for most of this rebound. So far in the 1990s, many fewer people have left rural areas, and a surprising number of urban residents have moved in. The migrants of the 1990s have settled in the mountain West, the upper Great Lakes, the Ozarks, parts of the South, and rural areas of the Northeast (see Figure 3). Natural increase, the traditional engine of nonmetropolitan growth, contributed much less to the rural population gains in the 1990s, accounting for 41 percent of the nonmetropolitan population increase between April 1990 and July 1998.

In contrast to the differences between the 1980s and the 1990s, there are two similarities between the 1970s and the 1990s. First, growth in the 1990s and 1970s was fueled by both net migration gains and natural increase.

Second, nonmetropolitan growth during the 1990s is widespread geographically, just as it was during the turnaround decade of the 1970s. Thus, the 1970s and 1990s represent a significant departure from the historical demographic trends in nonmetropolitan areas.

## BIRTH RATES AND BIRTHDAYS

The rural rebound of the 1990s underscores the fact that net migration now has the greatest impact on the redistribution of the nonmetropolitan population. From the turnaround of the 1970s through the rebound of the 1990s, migration has determined whether a rural county grew or declined. Natural

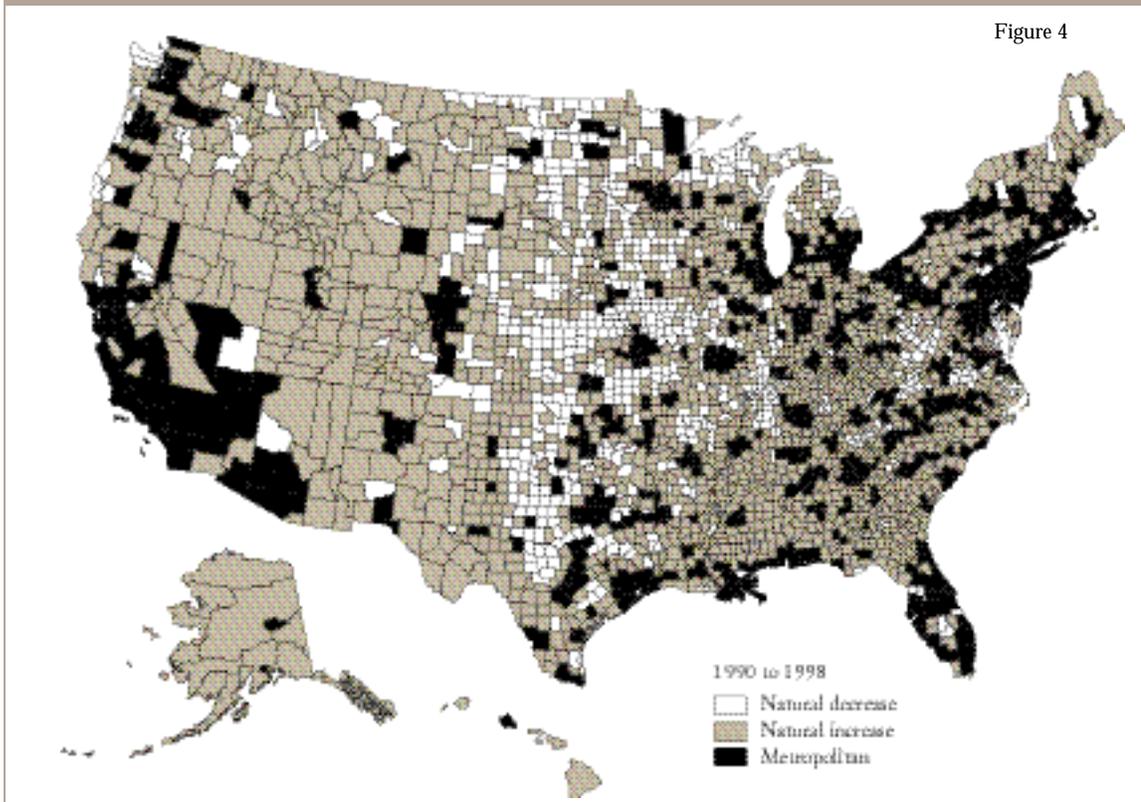
increase, which for most of this century accounted for virtually all of the rural population growth, no longer produces the substantial excess of births over deaths that are needed to offset migration losses. In fact, in a growing number of rural counties, births are no longer even sufficient to offset the rising number of deaths, leaving migration into a county as the only potential source of growth.

In virtually every migration stream, the incidence of migration is highest for young adults. The flow has traditionally been from rural to urban areas, with young adults most likely to be attracted to a metro area's social and economic advantages, especially given the diminishing demand for labor in farming and mining industries.

While the amount of migration has varied from decade to decade since the 1950s, there is striking consistency in overall age-

SINCE 1990, NEARLY 650 RURAL COUNTIES HAVE HAD MORE DEATHS THAN BIRTHS. THIS IS THE GREATEST NUMBER OF COUNTIES EXPERIENCING "NATURAL DECREASE" IN U.S. HISTORY.

Figure 4



specific migration patterns. Since the 1950s, people in their 20s moved the most from rural to urban areas. The only significant deviation from this trend is the increasing propensity for those in their 30s (and their children) to move to or remain in rural areas. The migration gains in this important age group may mean that the appeal of these areas for raising children carries more weight with families. This rural lifestyle also seems to be attractive to people over age 50; this age group has recently shifted from a migration loss to a migration gain.

Migration data for specific age groups are not yet available for the 1990s. However, demographers Glenn Fuguitt and Calvin Beale have found that the under-65 age group may now be contributing much more to the rural migration gains than those over 65. This is surprising given the historical

propensity of older adults to move to or remain in nonmetropolitan areas. If further data substantiate this startling finding, it suggests that a considerable majority of the migration gain fueling the rural rebound is accounted for by those under 65. This would be a significant change from what happened in the 1970s, and it would suggest that rural areas might now be appealing to a broader cross-section of the population.

## WHEN DEATHS EXCEED BIRTHS

A protracted loss of young people to urban areas has steadily depleted the ranks of potential parents and lowered the rate of natural increase in rural

areas. In 1990, for example, there were approximately 1.5 million fewer 20-to-29-year-olds in nonmetropolitan areas than would have been expected had no net migration occurred. This represents a loss of 16 percent of the population of prime childbearing age. This loss, coupled with the rising number of older people who have greater mortality risks, has resulted in fewer births and more deaths in rural areas.

High fertility rates in rural areas also contributed historically to greater levels of natural increase. Farm families and small-town residents had more children than their urban counterparts, and enough babies were born to offset the constant departure of working-age people for the opportunities of the cities.

But over the last two decades, rural women have been bearing fewer children, as the trends that

influenced urban women—rising levels of education, paid employment outside the home, and delayed marriage—have reached into the countryside. Fertility levels among the two groups are now virtually indistinguishable.

A growing number of areas have been experiencing “natural decrease,” a demographic phenomenon not usually seen in America. Natural decrease occurs when deaths in an area exceed births. Between 1990 and 1998, an estimated 648 nonmetropolitan counties (out of a total of 2,305 rural counties) experienced natural decrease.

The incidence of natural decrease in American counties is now higher than at any point in history. It is also geographically widespread, though its incidence and severity are greatest in the Great Plains and Corn Belt (see Figure 4).

In some rural counties, deaths have exceeded births in each of the last 30 years. Such natural decrease, combined with the continued out-migration that many of these counties have experienced, signals hard times ahead for some parts of rural America.

## METROPOLITAN AND NONMETROPOLITAN AREAS

Counties are the basis for the Office of Management and Budget’s system for defining metropolitan areas. A metropolitan area is a county containing one or more central cities with a combined population of at least 50,000, and any other counties that are economically and socially linked to the central city/county. Commuting patterns between the central city and surrounding counties are the primary basis for determining such social and economic integration.

Generally a metropolitan area may be thought of as a city and its suburbs. Counties are divided into those that are part of a metropolitan area and those that are outside of the metropolitan areas; the latter are classified as nonmetropolitan. In 1993, there were 837 metropolitan counties and 2,305 nonmetropolitan counties. This report on recent rural demographic trends is based on an analysis of these 2,305 nonmetropolitan counties. (The words “nonmetropolitan” and “rural” are used interchangeably in this report.)

Efforts to examine nonmetropolitan demographic trends are complicated by metropolitan expansion. Such expansion occurs through two distinct processes. First, nonmetropolitan counties may be added to existing metropolitan areas; and second, entirely new metropolitan areas may be created from previously nonmetropolitan territory. Census Bureau researchers Larry Long and Alfred Nucci report that, since 1963, 412 nonmetropolitan counties containing 15.2 percent of the U.S. population have been reclassified as metropolitan. Ironically, many of the rural counties exhibiting prolific growth eventually lose their rural status because they are annexed to existing metropolitan areas or form the nucleus of entirely new metropolitan areas. Thus, an analysis of the nonmetropolitan demographic trends of the past 30 years must take into account that rural growth has occurred in spite of the loss of many dynamic counties to metropolitan areas.

The boundary between the nation’s metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas is blurry at times. Some counties, though officially metropolitan, are hardly “close in.” Clarke County, Va., for example, is classified as metropolitan, although it is more than 65 miles from downtown Washington, D.C., and looks quite rural.

The rural revival owes some of its vigor to spillover effects from the rise of “edge cities” on the periphery of metropolitan areas. These quasi-urban agglomerations of office parks and shopping centers make it easier for people to reside in rural areas without severing their links to the metropolitan economy.

# METROPOLITAN AMERICA

Rural demographic trends cannot be isolated from demographic trends in urban areas.

America is and will remain a metropolitan nation. Nearly 216 million people, almost 80 percent of the U.S. population, reside in the nation's metropolitan areas. The largest of these metropolitan areas are the "world cities" that serve as the command and control centers of the nation's economy—cities such as New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Chicago. They are the portals for global trade and the entry points for immigrants. What happens in these urban centers affects people in rural areas too.

Historically, metropolitan areas attracted large numbers of people from rural areas in the United States and immigrants from other countries. Cities flourished as manufacturing, business, and service firms replaced agriculture as the primary sources of employment.

But as open space dwindled and as cities became more congested, suburbs arose to offer city dwellers a wider variety of residential options. A modest movement of people to the suburbs began early in this century. After World War II, suburbs rapidly became the residences of choice for the burgeoning middle class, especially for families with children.

Technological innovations, including automobiles and trucks,

the interstate highway system, telephones, and mass production techniques for housing, helped suburban growth. Shopping centers kept retailers close to their customers, office parks kept service providers near their clients, and business and industrial parks kept employers near the skilled and specialized suburban labor force.

All this began to change in the 1970s, when urban population gains diminished dramatically. Demographer William Frey found that the urban slowdown of the 1970s was greatest in larger metropolitan areas, especially in the industrial areas of the North. In such areas, economic problems combined with increased overseas competition to cause widespread downsizing of the manufacturing sector and substantial job loss.

People also became dissatisfied with overcrowding, crime, and environmental degradation. Meanwhile, continuing transportation and communication innovations made it easier for people to live and work in rural areas.

The 1980s brought renewed growth to many metropolitan areas. This growth was selective, with the greatest gains in urban areas around world cities and among those that had a larger proportion of their labor force employed in high-tech industries and economically diversified.

Older industrial cities such as Detroit, Cleveland, and

Pittsburgh were slower to recover in the 1980s, but certainly did better than in the 1970s. By the 1990s, growth was again widespread in metropolitan areas, including many of the older industrial areas.

## METRO SPLITS

How could metropolitan areas continue to grow in the 1970s and 1990s when they were losing population to nonmetropolitan areas?

Metropolitan population gains have been fueled both by immigration and by natural increase, with most of the growth coming from natural increase (see Figure 5). Metropolitan natural increase is high both because the population is younger and because of the flow of immigrants. Not only are immigrants young, they also have fertility levels above those of U.S.-born women. (In 1995 for instance, immigrant Hispanic women had about three children each on average, compared with two children each for all U.S. women.)

Almost all immigrants settle in metropolitan areas, and the "port of entry" cities of Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, Chicago, and Miami receive a substantial share. Other major metropolitan areas such as Atlanta, Seattle, Las Vegas, and Phoenix receive few immigrants,

METRO AREAS ARE GROWING IN THE 1990s, BUT THE SOURCES OF GROWTH DIFFER DRAMATICALLY.

Figure 5

	Immigration	Domestic Migration	Natural Increase	1998 Estimated Population
<b>High Immigration Metro Areas</b>				
Los Angeles	1,134,095	-1,556,052	1,657,332	15,781,273
New York	1,346,932	-1,819,997	1,093,008	20,364,375
Chicago	325,167	-481,329	626,240	8,809,846
<b>High Domestic Migration Areas</b>				
Atlanta	70,015	449,060	271,947	3,746,059
Phoenix	56,655	349,469	208,352	2,931,004
Seattle	77,312	161,520	204,462	3,424,361
<b>High Out-Migration Areas</b>				
Detroit	67,769	-222,636	287,853	5,457,583
Cleveland	18,719	-92,015	112,043	2,911,683
Pittsburgh	8,533	-61,223	11,874	2,346,153

*Note: Domestic migration includes those who move from one U.S. county to another*

but these cities become home to people from other parts of the United States. Some older industrial cities, such as Detroit and Cleveland, depend entirely on natural increase to offset migration losses.

Frey believes that some U.S.-born residents choose to leave port-of-entry cities to avoid competing with immigrants, thus causing “demographic Balkanization.” This happens because the metropolitan population splits into one group of a few port-of-entry cities with a diverse popula-

tion (including a large number of immigrants), and a second group of metropolitan areas with mostly native-born populations growing because residents are moving from one urban area to another. But some of these “domestic migrants” are going to nonmetropolitan areas, thus contributing to the rural rebound.

The United States is not alone in experiencing this kind of demographic Balkanization. It is underway in parts of Europe as well.

# EXPLANATIONS

**T**rying to explain why demographic trends are changing is more difficult than documenting that they have changed.

Population change depends on many factors, such as prior organizational and technological change, changes in the environment, shifts in social attitudes, and residential preferences. Since the turnaround of the 1970s, researchers have tried to account for the turbulent pattern of population change in rural America. In reviewing this work, Bill Frey and Alden Speare have identified three perspectives, each offering a partial explanation for trends over the past 30 years.

## PERIOD EFFECTS

**T**he “period effects” perspective attributed recent nonmetropolitan population shifts to short-term economic, social, demographic, and political forces.

The energy crisis of the 1970s is an example of a period effect. It and the recession it produced both adversely affected manufacturing employment, particularly in Northern and Midwestern cities where energy was expensive and difficult to obtain, older manufacturing plants were less energy-efficient, and wages were higher. As a result, many people moved

out of such cities. While the energy crisis hurt urban areas, the great demand for domestically produced energy stimulated the rural mining and oil industry. As a result, many people moved to rural areas and many rural residents stayed put.

While period effects exerted a positive influence on rural growth in the 1970s, the severe recessions of the early 1980s hurt rural industry, which depended more on exports than did metropolitan areas. Monetary policies instituted to cope with these recessions stimulated a farm debt crisis that raised concerns about the future of rural America. The substantial migration losses from nonmetropolitan areas during the 1980s may have been a result of these period effects.

Noneconomic period effects played a part too. Large numbers of people reached both college age and retirement age in the 1970s. Both groups were attracted to rural areas—college students by the large number of state universities situated in rural areas, and retirees by the amenities, temperate climates, and lower cost of living.

## REGIONAL RESTRUCTURING

**T**he “regional restructuring” perspective attributes rural growth to structural forces rather

than to episodic effects. In particular, deindustrialization is viewed as a driving force underlying the geographic redistribution of the U.S. population. Much of the heavy industry that fostered the growth of the nation’s large cities was approaching obsolescence by the 1960s and 1970s. Unable to compete with cheaper labor overseas, many industrial firms were forced to drastically downsize or shut down entirely; either option meant significant employment losses.

The economic hardships and loss of workers from the larger, older metropolitan areas of the East and Midwest support this argument. To control expenses, some manufacturers shifted plants to lower-cost rural areas primarily in the Southeast, but also to nonmetropolitan counties close to the Great Lakes industrial belt. Jobs in these plants contributed to rural population gains. But this was a short-term fix, because not even low-wage rural workers could compete for long against overseas competitors.

The regional restructuring perspective assumes that large metropolitan areas and areas specializing in knowledge-based and high-tech industries will eventually grow. Once the low-wage industries that temporarily settled in rural areas flee to cheaper markets overseas, the regional restructuring model assumes that nonmetropolitan growth will slow down.

## DECONCENTRATION

The “deconcentration” perspective represents a much clearer break from historical trends than either of the other two perspectives. It predicts a long-term and gradual dispersal of the population into smaller, less densely settled areas.

Technological innovations in communications and transportation help deconcentration—people and businesses have more flexibility to locate in more areas. Decades of state and federal investment in roads and airports—building and widening highways, paving runways, subsidizing equipment purchases—have also made an enormous difference.

At the same time, congestion has increasingly clogged the nation’s large metropolitan areas, reducing the value of one of the cities’ great competitive advantages: proximity. Catalog distributors such as Lands’ End and L.L. Bean now operate huge national distribution centers from rural Wisconsin and Maine, respectively, because upgraded highways and air service give them easy access to their customers, and 800 telephone numbers and Web sites give their customers easy access to them. With the assurance that crucial parts and supplies can be secured overnight, many owners of small factories can now set up shop virtually anywhere.

Such advances have freed businesses to select nonmetropolitan locations and enjoy their perceived advantages: lower labor and land costs, the absence of unions, what many executives see as the superior work ethic of the rural labor force, and economic incentive programs offered by state and local governments.

## PREFERENCES

Important as economic and technological forces have been in fostering the rural revival of the past quarter-century, it would be a mistake to see them as the driving forces. Many people now prefer to live in smaller communities, and many people now have the freedom to choose where to live.

Opinions polls have long suggested a preference among a significant proportion of Americans to reside in smaller places. Through the decades of exodus from the rural areas to the cities—much of it more a matter of economic necessity than choice—many people retained a strong attachment to the rural ideal. The draw of nonmetropolitan areas stems not only from the desire to retreat from big city stresses and hazards, but also from the desire to live in a community where people know one another and where individuals can make a difference and live in closer touch with nature.

Recent work by William Frey and Kao-Lee Liaw suggests that racial and ethnic factors may also be contributing to rural growth. They report that major metropolitan areas receiving large influxes of immigrants are simultaneously experiencing an exodus of white residents. They suggest such “white flight” may be fueling some rural growth, particularly in the West.

If data from the next census substantiate Frey and Liaw’s findings about white flight, they will demonstrate another important parallel between the rise of the suburbs and the rural rebound. Given these parallels, will rural deconcentration prove to be as powerful a force in the next century as suburbanization has been in this century? Will we

see a hundred years from now a nation of people and businesses widely dispersed across the landscape? It is simply too soon to tell.

It’s still unclear which of these three perspectives, if any, fits recent nonmetropolitan population trends. In general, the pattern of population change in nonmetropolitan areas between 1970 and 1998 is most consistent with the deconcentration perspective. The growth slowdown during the 1980s underscores how period effects can interrupt such deconcentration, but the rebound of the 1990s weakens the argument that the 1970s’ turnaround was solely a function of unique demographic and economic period effects. Because the pronounced period effects of the 1970s and 1980s are not evident in the 1990s, recent nonmetropolitan demographic trends may be more unambiguously attributed to deconcentration influences. But these influences have affected some areas more than others.

# SELECTIVE DECONCENTRATION

“Rural America” is a deceptively simple term for a remarkably diverse collection of places and things: vast swaths of wheat and corn; auto plants on the outskirts of towns along I-75 in Kentucky and Ohio; ultramodern catalog distribution centers along country lanes; small villages on pristine northern lakes; the cool, mountainous forests of the Pacific Northwest; and the flat and humid spread of Florida’s Everglades (see “County Snapshots,” page 14).

To address the diversity of rural America, the Economic Research Service of the Department of Agriculture has developed a widely used typology that classifies nonmetropolitan counties along several dimensions.

Rural counties near metropolitan areas are much more likely to be growing than are those distant from cities. Many people view such adjacent nonmetropolitan counties as an excellent compromise between rural and urban life. Counties adjacent to urban areas are close enough to give people access to urban labor markets, amenities, and services, yet distant enough so that people can also enjoy the advantages of rural life.

But nonmetropolitan growth has not been limited to areas near metropolitan centers. Even among more remote nonmetropolitan counties, recent population gains were significantly greater than during the 1980s (see Figure 6).

Among the most important contributors to rural growth are retirees, who are free to go almost anywhere their pension and social security checks can take—and reach—them. Most retirees do not move, but if they do they are attracted to certain kinds of places: areas in the Sun Belt, coastal regions, parts of the West, and the Upper Great Lakes—places that have lakes, ski slopes, golf courses, and the like. Of the 190 rural counties classified as “retirement destination” counties, 99 percent gained population between 1990 and 1998, mostly because the number of people moving in was greater than the number moving out.

Most other people who move to rural areas are still tied to jobs. They include older people who have cut back their work weeks and a growing number of working-age people who have been freed by new communications technologies and changes in the organization of work to move far from major cities, perhaps needing to show up at the office only a few days a week.

Among the most appealing destinations for these people are the 285 “recreational” counties. Such counties grew prominently during the 1970s, 1980s, and the 1990s. These counties included the forested lake counties of Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan; the winter sports areas of California, Nevada, Wyoming, and Utah; coastal areas of

California, South Carolina, and Florida; and the foothills of the Appalachians and Ozarks in Virginia, Kentucky, North Carolina, and Tennessee, where mountain vistas and golf courses abound. Ninety percent of these recreational counties grew between 1990 and 1998, again because more people moved in than left.

Often overlooked in the discussion of such fast-growing counties is that an influx of retirees or seasonal residents creates jobs and opportunities for local residents as well. For example, the building boom in recreational and retirement counties produces a demand for workers in the construction trades. Demand is also high for employees in the many retail, service, and other commercial establishments required to support the population. As a result, young people who traditionally would have had to leave these recreational and retirement counties to find work are now able to stay.

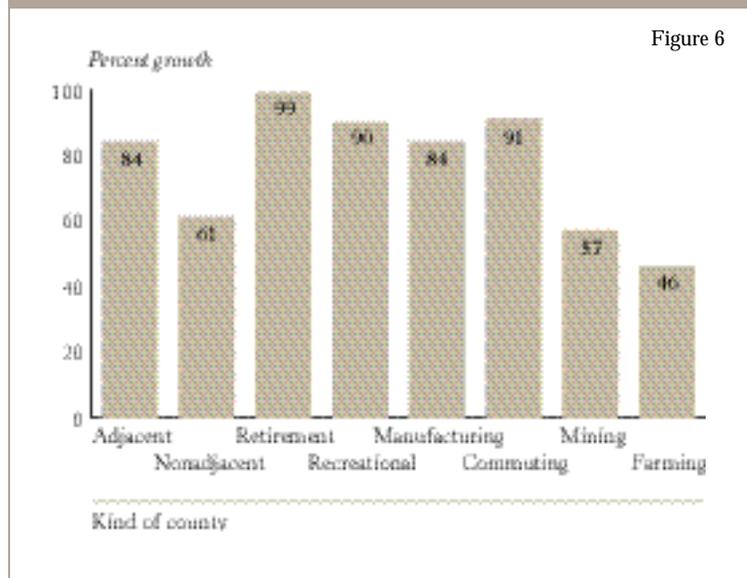
Few people think of rural America as having industrial complexes. Yet the proportion of the rural nonfarm labor force employed in manufacturing is higher than that in metropolitan areas (18 percent vs. 12.8 percent). Many of these fast-growing counties experienced little, if any, growth during the 1980s, but they rebounded during the 1990s. More than 84 percent

have gained population since 1990, with migration and natural increase both contributing significantly. The roster of rural industries is varied, including poultry processors, clothing manufacturers, clothing manufacturers, auto-parts makers, and manufacturers of computer equipment. Some of these enterprises are relatively small and self-contained, but others are big enough to generate considerable ripple effects. The auto-assembly plants along I-75, for example, don't stockpile parts but use just-in-time manufacturing techniques that effectively require many suppliers to have their own plants less than 100 miles away. And workers at these plants carry their paychecks home to communities perhaps as much as 60 miles distant, where chances are good that the money finds its way to local retailers and other businesses.

Workers living far from their workplaces are common in rural America. There are 381 nonmetropolitan counties, or almost 17 percent of all rural counties, with a large proportion of their workforce commuting to jobs in other counties. They are gaining population rapidly. Many commuter counties are near metropolitan areas, but many remain rural counties.

Some nonmetropolitan areas continue to lose population because they remain linked to farming and mining, which continue to shed jobs and consolidate despite more than a century of adjustment in which capital and technology replaced labor. Rural America was originally settled by people whose livelihood depended upon their ability to wrestle food, fiber, and minerals from the land. Though the days when such tasks monopolized the rural economy are long past, farming and mining remain

RURAL POPULATION GAINS SINCE 1990 HAVE BEEN MOST COMMON IN RETIREMENT AND RECREATIONAL COUNTIES, AND LEAST COMMON IN FARMING AND MINING COUNTIES.



important elements of the local economy and psyche in vast stretches of nonmetropolitan America.

Farming still dominates the local economy of some 556 rural counties—the most of any economic type. Mining is a major force in another 146. Counties dependent on farming and mining were the least likely to gain population during the 1990s. In many farming counties, so few young adults remain that births to their depleted numbers no longer offset deaths.

The smaller-than-average population gains and widespread population losses from counties dependent on mining and farming during the 1990s represent a continuation of the slowdown of the 1980s, although the population losses there in the 1990s have been much less severe than during the 1980s.

# COUNTY SNAPSHOTS

The experiences of just a few counties tell a powerful story of the diversity of rural America and the impact of the rebound.

## TURNAROUND IN THE HEARTLAND

Missouri's Mercer and Sullivan counties tell one tale of deconcentration. They adjoin one another near the Iowa border in the southern Corn Belt, where, because of poor soil and sloping terrain that promotes soil erosion, farm productivity lags behind the best farming areas in the Midwest. These two counties have never generated enough wealth to sustain a strong local economy. The result has been an extraordinarily prolonged population decline.



Mercer County's population peaked at 14,700 in 1900 and then fell to only 3,700 in 1990. Sullivan County's population went from 20,300 in 1900 to 6,300 in 1990.

Physically Sullivan County was in tough shape as well. Some 14 percent of the housing was vacant or dilapidated and 21 percent of the remaining population was below the poverty line. The local electric cooperative had lost 41 percent of its customers in recent years and had miles of transmission wire for which no houses or businesses remained in service.

Then, in the early 1990s, an entrepreneurial area firm armed with some capital and encouraged by a strong market for pork opened a large new hog-raising and pork-processing business. The company's decision to locate in the area was facilitated by the efforts of the local electric cooperative and government officials who helped cut through red tape and obtained block grants to pay for needed infrastructure. The firm located its headquarters in Mercer County and a packing plant in Sullivan County.

And the workers have come. Census Bureau estimates for Mercer County in July 1998 indicate that its population had spurted by 7.5 percent, while Sullivan had recovered by 11.3 percent. Now there's a local housing shortage, but it has fueled residential construction. All is not rosy though. Some local residents are concerned about the environmental impact of the massive amount of waste produced by the hog farms and processing plants.

## GROWTH IN THE ROCKIES

Chaffee County, Colo., is set in the Arkansas River valley and is flanked by the high peaks of the Rockies. The county suffered during the 1980s with the shutdown of a large mine that extracted a metal used to fabricate high-tech alloys for military aircraft and other products.

From 1990 to 1998, however, the population level rose by 18.9 percent, thanks largely to the arrival of newcomers fleeing growing congestion and dense settlement in Denver and elsewhere in the Front Range. The county also attracted employees who worked in the nearby resort towns of Vail and Breckenridge but who couldn't afford to live there.

Some of the more affluent Chaffee newcomers have launched new businesses or bought out older businesses. A number of small-scale manufacturing plants have sprouted up: a toolmaker, a manufacturer of archery equipment, and an assembler of first-aid kits. Motels, restaurants, and recreation provide jobs and attract visitors.



## HAVE JOB, WILL TRAVEL

Wolfe County, Ky., illustrates how commuting has contributed to growth in rural America. Mountainous and thickly wooded, the county lies three counties away from Lexington, the nearest metro center. The county's population fell by 2.9 percent in the 1980s as coal-mining jobs in the area were lost to mechanization, but the county benefits from the four-lane Combs Mountain Parkway, which permits residents to work an hour away in Lexington or in the new auto plant located yet another county distant. The county has also attracted a fair number of retirees, some returning after having made lives elsewhere, some leaving the rawer Appalachian hill country to the East.



In the 1990s, Wolfe County began growing again, with population up 13.3 percent between 1990 and 1998.

## SPIRALING DOWN THE PLAINS

Though widespread, the rural rebound is not ubiquitous. Jewell County, Kan., is one place it hasn't reached. Straddling the boundary between the Corn Belt and the Wheat Belt, with more than 30 percent of its labor force engaged in farming, Jewell is a classic Great Plains farming county. Farmers grow wheat, sorghum, corn, and soybeans. Raising cattle is also an important part of the local economy.

Jewell is far removed from the urban scene; the nearest metropolitan area, Lincoln, Neb., is more than 100 miles to the northeast.

Jewell's population peaked in 1900 at 19,420, growing from just 207 in 1870. But the population has declined ever since, and by 1990 only 4,251 people remained in the county, some 22 percent of the 1900 total. Jewell's population was down by another 9 percent to 3,867 in 1998.

The county has few young adults and many seniors. Nearly 25 percent of Jewell's population is over 65, compared with 13 percent of the U.S. population. In contrast, only 4.3 percent of the population is 18-to-24 years old, roughly 40 percent of the U.S. average. As a result, Jewell County has had more deaths than births in 27 of the last 30 years.

## ON THE URBAN EDGE

Walworth County, Wis., is located about 70 miles northwest of Chicago's Loop and 40 miles southwest of downtown Milwaukee. Looking over the county's rolling hills and lakes, you'd never know that more than 10 million people live just over the horizon.

Nearly 1,000 farms occupy about 66 percent of the county's rich farmland. Industry is also important, employing nearly 30 percent of the labor force. Tourism is the third major component of the local economy. The area has long served as a recreational getaway, first for Chicago's wealthy, who commuted by special train to their summer "cottages" along the shores of Lake Geneva, and later for the urban middle and working classes, who had cars and took advantage of better roads. In 1990, 21 percent of the housing units in Walworth County were for vacation or recreation.

As nonmetropolitan counties go, Walworth is a big one. Its estimated population was 85,353 residents in 1998, some 10,000 more than in 1990. Unlike many rural counties, it has grown rapidly for decades, though the growth rate did slow during the downturn of the 1980s. Much of the growth is from people migrating from Chicago. Some are retired or

semi-retired and have moved to vacation homes they have maintained for years. Others work on the periphery of the Chicago or Milwaukee metropolitan areas but prefer the slower pace and smaller communities of Walworth County. The county's success in attracting new industry has created a labor shortage: Unemployment is currently less than 3 percent. With a diversified economy, urban proximity, and a scenic location, the primary concern of many local residents and officials is how to handle all the growth.

## JEWEL ON THE GREAT LAKES

Michigan's Grand Traverse County exemplifies the substantial growth occurring in recreational and retirement areas. Situated on a beautiful Lake Michigan bay in Michigan's Lower Peninsula, the county is well known for its crystal clear lakes, ski slopes, golf courses, restaurants, and lodging.

It has a well-earned reputation as a year-round recreational center, but its economy is actually quite diverse. The county seat, Traverse City, is the largest town in the area and is a major commercial, retail, and health center for a multicounty area. The county also has a significant manufacturing base, which employs some 15 percent of the labor force. Agriculture remains important as well, with 22 percent of the land in farms. The proximity to Lake Michigan makes the area well suited to the production of cherries and other orchard crops.

Grand Traverse has attracted both retirees and those seeking temporary respite from the hectic pace of urban life. The result has been rapid population increase. The population grew from 39,175 in 1970 to 64,273 in 1990, a 64 percent gain in just 20 years. Growth has continued since 1990, with a gain of 9,861 (15.3 percent) by 1998. Most of the growth is from migration, with a substantial flow of migrants coming from the metropolitan areas of southern Michigan. Many who previously vacationed in the area opted to move there after retiring. Growth has also increased employment opportunities. But growth has had negative consequences as well. Some residents are concerned about the impact of so much growth on the environment and pace of life in the community, and longtime residents are complaining about the traffic and congestion.

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# WILL THE REBOUND CONTINUE?

Planners and policymakers have recently become concerned about the impacts of population growth, specifically on “suburban sprawl,” which is generally characterized as peripheral growth on the outer edge of metropolitan areas. But the special needs associated with the rapid pace of rural growth also must be considered. Rural residents are concerned about how the influx of people and businesses is going to influence the rural way of life. Will all this growth ruin rural America? It is already exacting tolls of various kinds in many rural communities.

Local governments in non-metropolitan areas experiencing significant population change face greater fiscal problems than those with more stable populations. A population surge is likely to accelerate the demand for new services and the replacement of aging infrastructure in growing counties, yet the cost of such improvements often exceeds short-term revenue gains. After decades of population loss, revenue sources are limited in such areas and are likely to grow more slowly than the demand for roads, schools, sewers, emergency services, and the myriad other things required to support a growing population. Local revenue sources in areas that continue to experience population losses, even with people moving in, are even more limited.

While people who move to rural areas may want to escape the

problems associated with urban life, they often expect the same services they are accustomed to in more urban places. Often they demand not just a greater quantity of services but better quality as well. People coming from cities and suburbs with professional emergency service staffs, municipal sewage systems, and regular garbage pick-up may be dissatisfied with volunteer fire departments and backyard septic systems.

Yet long-time residents may resist the addition of services and amenities they consider an unnecessary tax burden. Funding education may be particularly difficult in areas where the young adult population continues to diminish while the middle-aged and older population grows. Retirees lured to an area by low living costs may not be sympathetic to pleas to increase spending on public schools.

Medical services also are limited in nonmetropolitan areas, especially if they are remote from urban centers. Many remote rural counties that lost population during the 1980s find it difficult to attract and retain doctors. The influx of newcomers, however, combined with the continuing aging of the established population, almost certainly increases the need for medical care. Yet federal programs designed to encourage physicians to locate in such underserved areas were cut back in the early 1980s.

## MANAGING GROWTH

Trying to manage growth exemplifies the complex challenges local governments face. Development pressures have led many local governments to adopt growth-management strategies. In some areas, the result has been careful preparation for large-scale development by extending water and sewer lines and annexing large tracts of land in anticipation of residential and commercial development. In other areas, local officials are scrambling just to keep up. Such development sometimes fosters competition among taxing districts as they vie with one another for new homes and commercial areas that will enhance their tax base. Without a comprehensive development strategy and a consensus about how to implement it, sophisticated developers may play local governments off against one another to get what they want. Issues less central to development (such as affordable housing, and services to the poor, disabled, and elderly), but critical to the long-term stability of a community, may be shortchanged as well.

Though any rural county experiencing rapid growth faces problems, in some areas the problems are particularly acute. In farming areas, the question of how to preserve farmland and the

agricultural way of life is particularly vexing. Development can turn thousands of acres of prime farmland into residential and commercial areas virtually overnight. Such development often so fragments the remaining agricultural land that farmers have difficulty raising crops on it. And, as development pushes land costs higher, young farmers have more difficulty getting started and older farmers have more difficulty giving the family farm to the next generation. Rapid development also quickly makes farmers a minority despite their centrality to the area's rural character and tradition. In other agricultural areas, family farms have been replaced by large-scale meat and poultry processors that create jobs but generate enormous amounts of concentrated environmentally hazardous wastes.

Recreational areas face unique problems because of the seasonal variability in their population. Often their service delivery systems and infrastructure must be designed to meet seasonal peak demands that are well above the capacity required for most of the year. This excess capacity has significant fiscal implications.

There are also fears about the impact that rapid growth will have on environmental quality, especially on lakes, rivers, and scenic areas that make the localities appealing. For example, septic systems designed for weekend and occasional use by second-home owners often do not have the capacity to handle the daily use of dishwashers and laundry facilities common when these owners become permanent residents.

Many rural areas now face a labor shortage. For example, a manager in a meatpacking plant in Kansas recently reported that he could put 50 additional qualified people to work on the spot. The

demand for skilled workers is especially acute. Plumbers, electricians, and carpenters are all in short supply. Despite labor shortages, many of the jobs created in rural areas do not pay well and some, like those in the meatpacking industry, are dangerous.

Finding affordable housing is often difficult, particularly in recreational areas where rich urban residents are purchasing vacation homes. One county building director in Wisconsin has noted that many kitchen renovations to second homes around Lake Geneva cost more than the houses of the tradespeople remodeling them. And in Vail, Colo., many workers in the resorts and retail businesses cannot afford to live in Vail and must commute to surrounding less-expensive areas.

## PROBLEMS OR SOLUTIONS

**D**espite the rebound, some rural areas continue to lose residents to metro areas. In these rural areas, long-term population loss often causes a debilitating pessimism that may stymie future population growth and economic development.

In contrast, scattered reports from communities experiencing renewed population growth suggest that newcomers bring needed economic and technical expertise as well as the energy and enthusiasm needed to reinvigorate rural communities. While many long-time residents welcome the energy and enthusiasm new arrivals bring, others fear they will undermine the very "rural way of life" they seek.

Some rural counties are already beginning to see congestion and sprawl, such as Teller County, Colo., and Grand Traverse County, Mich. The newcomers, moreover, have few ties to the traditional rural economy or way of life; they are in rural America but not of it. It is almost inevitable that they will change it. Those who value the perceived security and serenity of rural life are concerned that "big city" problems will come to rural areas. Problems commonly mentioned include crime, drugs, and gangs.

In some ways, recent rural population gains resemble the suburbanization process that started transforming the urban landscape in the 1950s. In fact, suburbanization may well have constituted a prior stage of deconcentration. The forces underlying suburbanization were complex, but prominent among them were transportation and technological innovations that diminished the need for geographic proximity, the desire for more space and a better environment for family life, dissatisfaction with the style and pace of city life, and concerns about the changing racial structure of the city. All these factors have also contributed to the rural rebound.

The rural revival may continue for a long time, but the revival is likely to continue to be uneven both geographically and chronologically. Because rural America no longer enjoys the high fertility rates that traditionally fueled its population growth, its demographic prospects in coming decades will depend more than ever on the course of migration. This links the fate of rural areas more tightly than ever to national and global economic, political, and social forces—the forces that directly influence the millions of individual decisions that people

and businesses make about where to locate.

We need look no further than the slowdown of the 1980s for a reminder that such large changes seldom proceed at an even pace. Even now, the most recent demographic data suggest that the rebound is slowing somewhat, though this may be little more than a short-term blip.

A larger and longer-term question is whether the revival of rural fortunes will someday pose a

threat to the health of cities. It seems unlikely. Metropolitan areas remain the great economic engines that drive the American system and direct the development of the economy, government, media, and the arts.

Rural America has changed. The isolation, loss of population, and economic decline that made a bleak future appear inevitable only a few short decades ago have ended. The greatest challenge facing many rural communities

may well be that of incorporating new residents and employers while preserving as much of the rural character as possible. Though coping with growth is no less daunting than coping with decline, most rural people and institutions seem to welcome the challenge.

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*Editor's note:* An appendix, "Population change, net migration, and natural increase by adjacency and metropolitan status, 1970 to 1998," can be accessed on PRB's Web site: [www.prb.org](http://www.prb.org). The appendix is part of the electronic version of this report.

## APPENDIX

POPULATION CHANGE, NET MIGRATION, AND NATURAL INCREASE BY ADJACENCY  
AND METROPOLITAN STATUS, 1970 TO 1998

Table 1

	No. of cases	Initial population	Population change			Net migration			Natural increase			
			Absolute change	Percent change	Percent growing	Absolute change	Percent change	Percent growing	Absolute change	Percent change	Percent growing	
<b>1970 to 1980</b>												
All nonmetropolitan	2,458	53,769	8,392	15.6	80.8	4,921	9.2	68.1	3,470	6.5	88.8	
Nonadjacent	1,484	25,872	3,585	13.9	74.5	1,882	7.3	62.8	1,703	6.6	87.0	
Adjacent	974	27,896	4,807	17.2	90.6	3,040	10.9	76.3	1,768	6.3	91.4	
Metropolitan	651	148,433	14,545	9.8	86.2	4,185	2.8	70.5	10,360	7.0	98.0	
Total	3,109	202,201	22,937	11.3	82.0	9,107	4.5	68.6	13,830	6.8	90.7	
<b>1980 to 1990:</b>												
All nonmetropolitan	2,305	49,578	1,320	2.7	45.1	-1,370	-2.8	27.3	2,690	5.4	89.6	
Nonadjacent	1,298	22,612	134	0.6	36.4	-1,175	-5.2	20.7	1,309	5.8	87.0	
Adjacent	1,007	26,966	1,186	4.4	56.3	-194	-0.7	35.8	1,382	5.1	92.9	
Metropolitan	836	176,965	20,848	11.8	81.0	6,575	3.7	57.7	14,271	8.1	97.7	
Total	3,141	226,543	22,168	9.8	54.7	5,206	2.3	35.4	16,962	7.5	91.8	
<b>1990 to 1998:</b>												
All nonmetropolitan	2,305	50,827	3,594	7.1	71.1	2,121	4.2	63.0	1,473	2.9	71.9	
Nonadjacent	1,299	22,674	1,252	5.5	61.4	595	2.6	54.0	657	2.9	66.4	
Adjacent	1,006	28,153	2,342	8.3	83.7	1,526	5.4	74.5	816	2.9	81.0	
Metropolitan	837	197,939	17,939	9.1	88.2	5,113	2.6	71.9	12,826	6.5	95.2	
Total	3,142	248,765	21,533	8.7	75.7	7,234	2.9	65.3	14,300	5.7	78.1	

Notes: 1993 metropolitan status used for 1980 to 1990 and 1990 to 1998. 1974 metropolitan status for 1970 to 1980. Alaska and Hawaii not included. Initial population and absolute change values reported in '000s.

Source: 1970-1990 Census and Federal-State Cooperative Population Estimates



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