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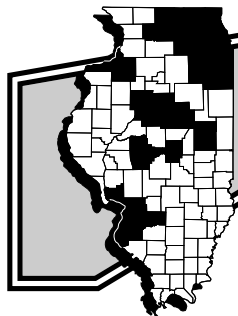
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# Rural **RESEARCH REPORT**

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## **Rural Illinois in the 1990s: On the Rebound?**

by Kenneth Johnson and Norman Walzer<sup>1</sup>

Rural areas of Illinois experienced a widespread population rebound between 1990 and 1995.<sup>2</sup> These recent population gains in Illinois are consistent with a broader rural population growth revival nationwide. Rural Illinois gain nearly 24,000 residents between 1990 and 1995, according to recently released estimates by the U.S. Census Bureau.<sup>3</sup> The population grew in 47 of the 74 nonmetropolitan counties in Illinois during the period. Migration to rural areas accounted for most of this population gain. Most urban areas in Illinois also gained population during the first half of the 1990s. The recent population gains in rural Illinois are modest, but they represent a significant change from the substantial population losses in the same areas during the 1980s.

In contrast to the revival of nonmetropolitan growth in Illinois during the 1990s, the 1980s were a very difficult decade for the state. Between 1980 and 1990, only 4 of the 74 nonmetropolitan counties in Illinois gained population. Overall, the rural population declined by 5.6 percent between 1980 and 1990. Illinois metropolitan counties were also adversely affected, managing an overall population gain of only 1.2 percent. Outmigration accounted for most of the rural population losses during the 1980s as residents left in search of better opportunities elsewhere. In other instances, rural secondary school graduates who left to attend college were unable to return due to the lack of jobs at acceptable

pay levels. Rural counties adjacent to downstate metro areas also were hurt by the economic downturn of the 1980s, which caused substantial manufacturing employment declines in cities such as Danville, Decatur, Peoria, Rockford, and the Quad Cities. The widespread rural losses in Illinois during the 1980s came as something of a surprise because nonmetropolitan gains had been widespread in Illinois and the rest of rural America during the 1970s.

This report examines population and demographic trends in Illinois using recently released Census data. Detailed analysis of these data broadens our understanding of current rural conditions and provides insights into what rural areas might expect during the remainder of the decade. Of particular concern is the question of whether the rural demographic rebound of the 1990s is a short-term fluctuation from the declines of the 1980s, or a continuation of the rural upturn of the 1970s. Also considered is the growing interrelationship between rural and urban areas. Linkages between the two areas have grown stronger as transportation and communications improvements make each area more accessible to the other. As economic and employment expansion continues on the periphery of urban areas, increasing numbers of Illinois residents appear to be taking advantage of the opportunities afforded by urban proximity, while enjoying the quieter lifestyle of the surrounding rural countryside.

<sup>1</sup>The authors are professor of Sociology at Loyola University-Chicago and director of the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs, Western Illinois University. Layout by Nancy Baird.

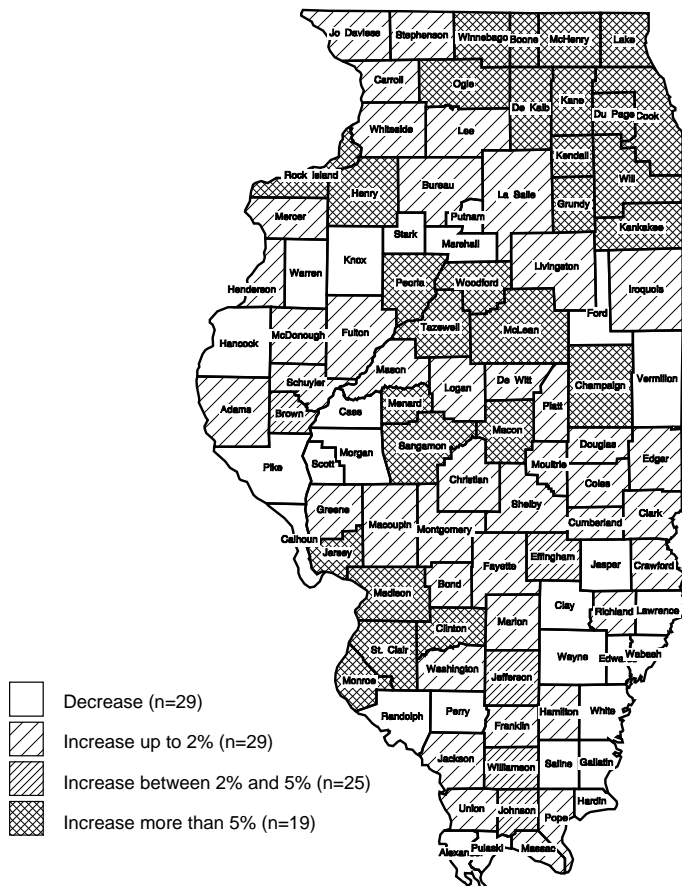
<sup>2</sup>The terms "rural" and "nonmetropolitan" are used interchangeably here. This is consistent with usage by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas are delineated by the Federal Office of Management and Budget. The 1993 classification of such areas is used here.

<sup>3</sup>*Time Series of State and County Population Estimates and Components of Population Change: 1990-95* [Population Distribution and Population Estimates Branches, U.S. Bureau of the Census] (Online). Available: <http://www.census.gov/ftp/pub/population/estimates-extract/county/ccom95il.txt>

## Recent Demographic Trends in Illinois

Between April 1990 and July 1995, the nonmetropolitan population grew by an estimated 23,800 in Illinois. In contrast, such areas lost more than 110,000 between 1980 and 1990. Population gains occurred in 47 of the 74 (63.5 percent) nonmetro counties in Illinois between 1990 and 1995 (**Figure 1**). The average annual population gain between 1990 and 1995 was .25 percent, compared to a loss of .56 percent annually during the 1980s (**Figure 2**). Metropolitan areas also grew between 1990 and 1995, and at a rate considerably higher than that during the 1980s. In all, 26 of the 28 metropolitan counties in Illinois gained population during the period. Overall, the nonmetropolitan population in Illinois grew more slowly than did the metropolitan population between 1990 and 1995, but the gap is much narrower than it was during the 1980s. In addition, there is evidence to suggest that the metropolitan areas are fueling some of the population growth in surrounding rural areas.

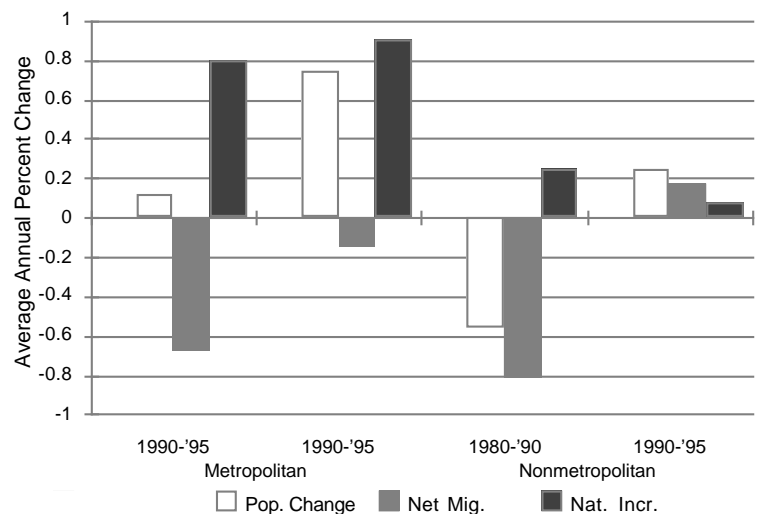
**Figure 1. Estimated Population Change, 1990-1995**



Source: *Time Series of State and County Population Estimates and Components of Population Change: 1990-1995*. Washington, DC: U.S. Bureau of the Census (Internet).

Migration accounted for a significant part (66.7 percent) of the recent population gain in nonmetropolitan areas of Illinois. There was an estimated net inflow of 15,900 people to nonmetropolitan Illinois between 1990 and 1995. In all, migration gains occurred in more than 60 percent of the nonmetropolitan counties of Illinois in the early 1990s, compared with only 4 percent in the 1980s. Although small in absolute terms, the nonmetropolitan migration gain of the early 1990s contrasts sharply with a net migration loss of 158,000 between 1980 and 1990 in these areas. Only the nonmetropolitan regions of Illinois received a net inflow of people during the 1990s. Metropolitan areas in Illinois continued to experience net outmigration, although the rate of outmigration from such areas slowed during the 1990s. Part of the nonmetropolitan migration gain is attributable to urban spillover into surrounding rural areas, but widespread migration gains in nonadjacent counties underscore the point that more than spillover is involved. The nonmetropolitan migration reversal also reflects the fact that manufacturing employment in rural counties has been relatively stable recently. The recession in the early 1990s had a greater impact on white collar industries concentrated in urban areas than it did on the rural employment sectors. In fact, many rural areas now have relatively low unemployment rates. In contrast, the rural sectors of the economy suffered significant losses during the severe economic downturns in the 1980s.

**Figure 2. Demographic Change in Illinois: 1980 to 1990 and 1990 to 1995**



Source: *1980 Census of Population, Vol. 1, Characteristics of the Population*, Washington, DC: USGPO and *Time Series of State and County Population Estimates and Components of Population Change: 1990-1995*. Washington, DC: U.S. Bureau of the Census (Internet).

Throughout most of this century, nonmetropolitan areas in Illinois grew primarily through natural increase. Yet, between 1990 and 1995, natural increases accounted for only 33.2 percent of the total nonmetropolitan population gain. The annualized rate of natural increase in nonmetropolitan areas of Illinois was also smaller in the early 1990s (0.09 percent) than it had been during the 1980s (0.25 percent). In contrast, the annual rate of natural increase accelerated in the metropolitan areas of Illinois during the 1990s, just as it did nationally.

The decelerating rate of natural increase in the nonmetropolitan areas of Illinois is also reflected in the rising incidence of natural decrease there. Natural decrease occurs when the number of deaths in an area exceeds the number of births.

Natural decrease was very rare in the United States prior to 1965. Since then, it has become more common, particularly in the agricultural areas on the Great Plains. Until recently, natural decrease has been less common in Illinois than elsewhere in the Midwest, but it is now on the rise in Illinois as well. In many rural areas, the age structure distortions resulting from the protracted outmigration of young adults, coupled with diminishing fertility, have resulted in fewer births and more deaths. In all, 28 of the 74 nonmetropolitan counties in Illinois experienced natural decrease between 1990 and 1995. These counties tend to be located in the southeastern and west-central portions of Illinois. And, annual figures for the post-1990 period suggest that the pace of natural decrease is accelerating in Illinois.

### Population Change by Selected Groups

In planning for service needs in rural areas, two demographic groups are of particular concern: the elderly and the young. Each of these groups place special demands on the public and private service delivery structure. Thus, recent demographic changes in each of these groups is of considerable interest.

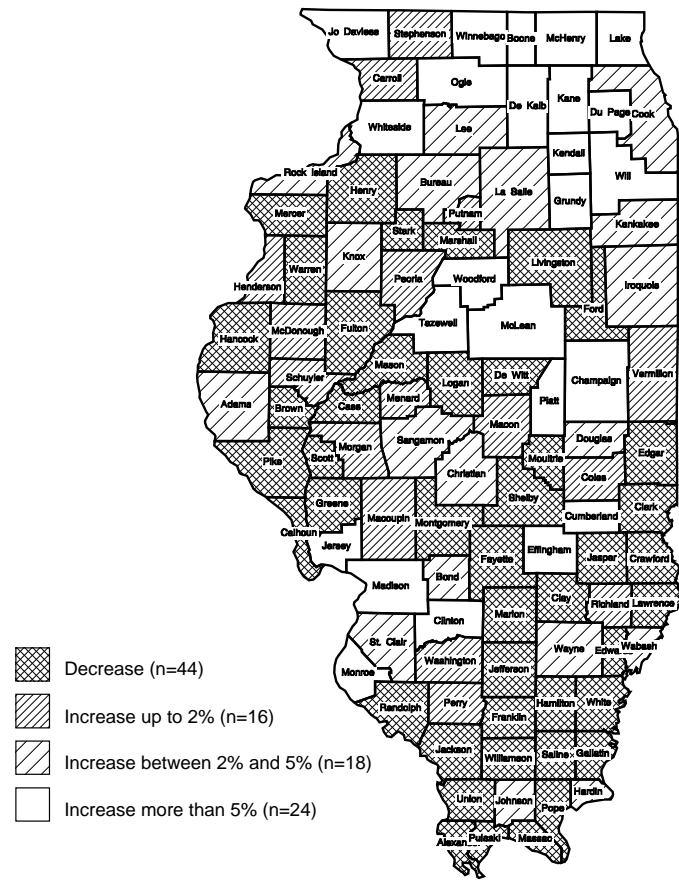
**Elderly.** Increasing longevity and better health care have made the elderly a less homogeneous population than in the past. Historically, those past retirement age were considered a dependent population in need of special, and sometimes very costly, services. This perception of older Americans as a fiscal burden on their area of residence is changing. Attracting affluent retirees is now considered an important component of the economic development strategy for some rural areas. People retire earlier than previously and many bring significant wealth to their retirement destination. They also may make a significant contribution to the volunteer base in a community and often participate in local development efforts. However, questions remain regarding the long-term implications of economic development strategies that seek to attract retirees.

Two different demographic processes influence the size of the elderly population in an area. First, the older population of a county will grow or decline as the existing population ages in place. Second, the older population will be influenced by migration. In this regard, an influx of older migrants may cause the receiving area's elderly population to grow. For example, residents wishing to retire to a warmer climate will either move permanently to another region of the country or purchase a second home there and divide their time between the two. There are 190 such retirement destination counties in the United States that are attracting large streams of older

migrants. They currently are the fastest growing type of nonmetropolitan counties (Johnson and Beale 1995). Most are located in areas with scenic amenities, recreational opportunities, and often a temperate climate. None of these retirement destinations are in Illinois. A second group of older rural migrants remain in Illinois, but move to locations with better public and health care services and/or to areas proximate to their adult children. Such local moves are generally to a bigger place, thus, counties containing a large town or those in metropolitan areas tend to receive a significant share of older rural migrants.

Census estimates suggest the elderly population is growing more rapidly in urban areas of Illinois (**Figure 3**). Rural areas in Illinois generally had declines in elderly population, either because of natural causes or migration. Within the rural areas, however, counties containing cities with more services tended to have increases (Adams-Quincy, Effingham-Effingham, Knox-Galesburg, McDonough-Macomb, and so on). The northeastern portion of the state has generally had the largest increases in elderly population during the 1990s. This pattern is part of the general growth trend involving peripheral growth on the outer fringe of the Chicago metropolitan area. This includes outmigration to fringe suburbs and spillover into the surrounding rural countryside. For example, the collar counties had increases in the older population of more than 5 percent in the first half of the decade which, if they continue, will significantly increase the elderly population in the receiving areas. Although the elderly population is growing more rapidly in and near metro areas, the proportion of the population that is 65 or older remains considerably higher in the rural areas of Illinois. This results from aging in place among the majority of older rural residents who do not migrate.

**Figure 3. Estimated Elderly Population Change, 1990-1995**

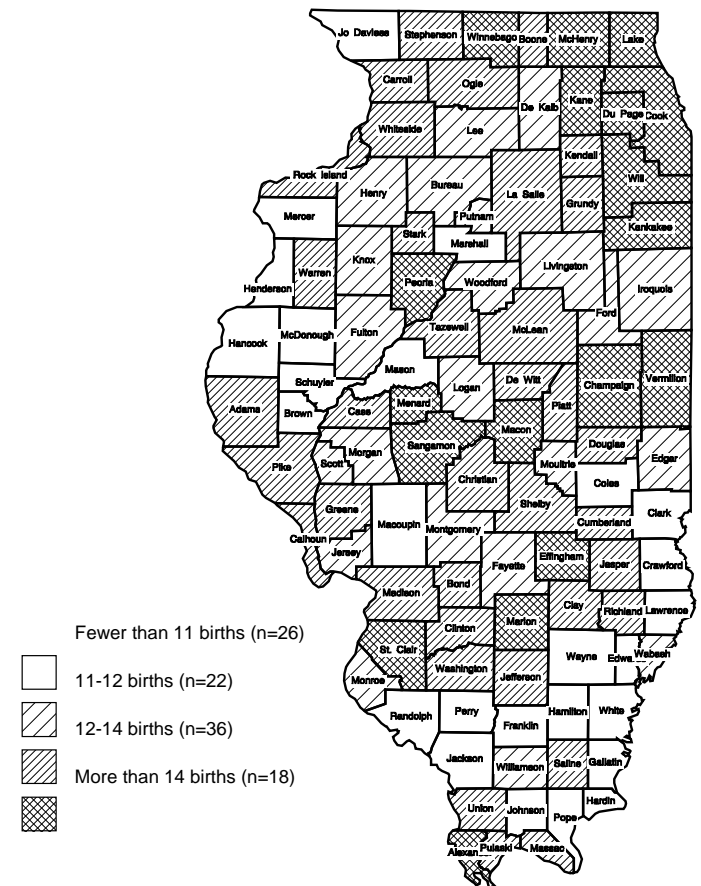


Source: *Time Series of State and County Population Estimates and Components of Population Change: 1990-1995*. Washington, DC: U.S. Bureau of the Census (Internet).

**Births.** At the other end of the age distribution are births. A general overview of birth rates per 1,000 population, by county (**Figure 4**), suggests that they tend to be higher in metro areas and surrounding counties. This trend is particularly evident in the northeastern region of the state. Here, the fact that a larger proportion of the population is young and that there has been a substantial influx of immigrants who have higher birth expectations than the native born population, have combined to produce higher birth rates. In contrast, a major cause of the low birth rates in rural counties has been the protracted outmigration of young adults of childbearing age. This group is traditionally the most mobile segment of the population and many rural counties in Illinois have lost a significant proportion of their young adults for decades. The loss of so many young adults depresses the birth rate because fewer adults of childbearing age remain to have children. A key to attracting and retaining

young residents of childbearing age is plentiful employment opportunities at wage levels that compete with those in urban settings. Good quality schools and health care facilities are also necessary to retain and attract young families. Yet, many rural counties face severe fiscal constraints on local public spending due to their small tax base. This makes it difficult to maintain and improve local services and infrastructure that is needed to stimulate economic development. For example, approximately 40 counties in rural Illinois either do not have hospitals or do not have an obstetrical unit in their hospital.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, many rural counties in Illinois face serious problems financing good schools. Such constraints on the provision of high-quality services and infrastructure, combined with diminished births and a substantial elderly population, are likely to cause problems for many rural areas in Illinois in the future. Labor force measures and other economic indicators in such areas may well lag behind those elsewhere in the state.

**Figure 4. Birth Rates Per 1,000 Residents, 1995**



Source: *Time Series of State and County Population Estimates and Components of Population Change: 1990-1995*. Washington, DC: U.S. Bureau of the Census (Internet).

<sup>4</sup>Illinois Department of Public Health, Center for Rural Health.

## Where Will Rural Illinois Go From Here?

To fully understand the implications of recent demographic trends in rural Illinois, they must be viewed in the larger context of rural demographic trends elsewhere in the United States. Since 1990, growth rates in nonmetropolitan areas of the United States have rebounded from the minimal levels of the 1980s. In all, 74 percent of nonmetropolitan counties are now growing again and nearly 64 percent are experiencing net immigration. Although these growth rates are slightly lower than those in metropolitan areas, the gap between the relative growth rates is quite small.

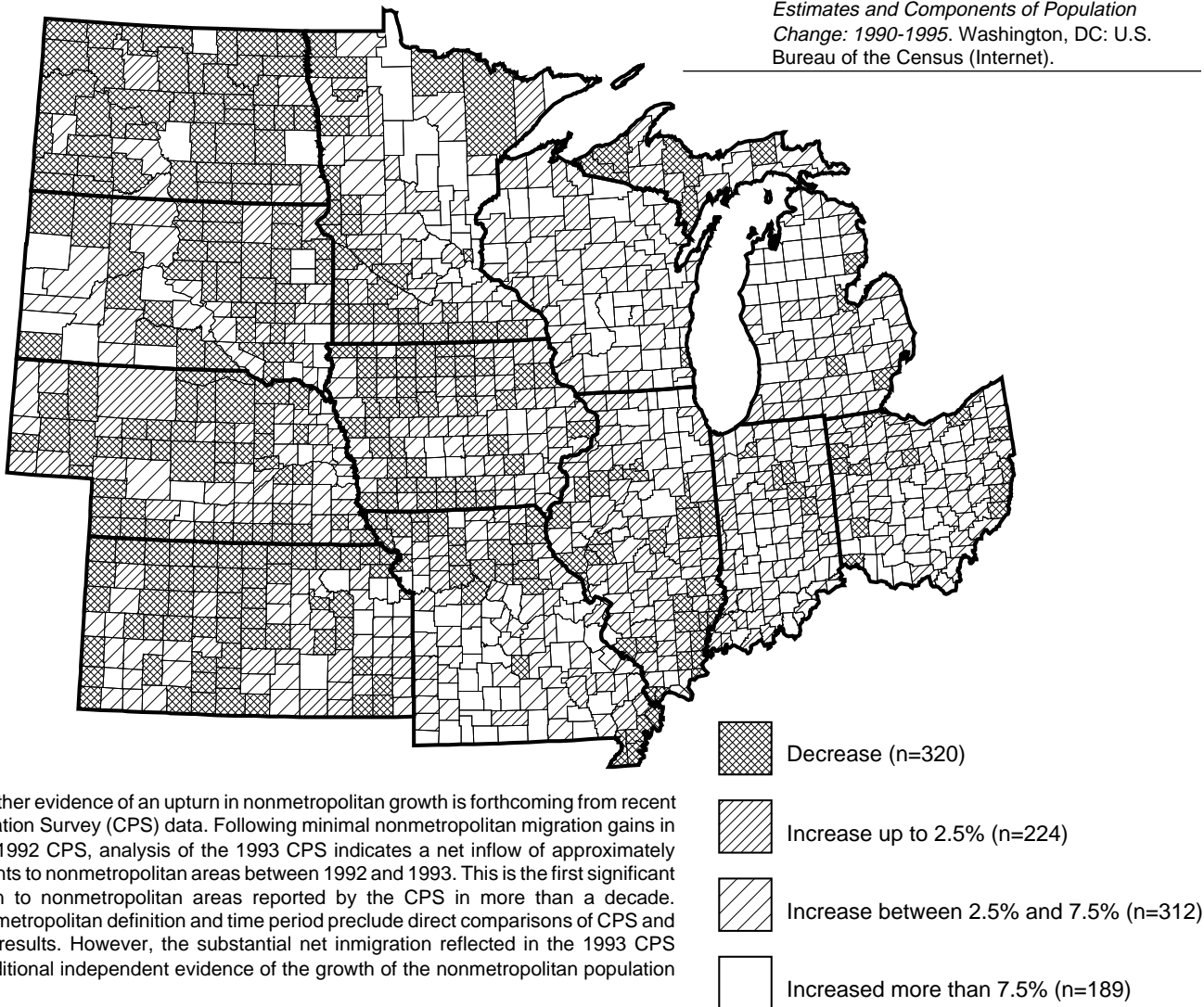
The higher growth rates in metropolitan areas stem from higher rates of natural increase there. In contrast, nonmetropolitan natural increase is lagging far below historical levels. Overall, the growth patterns in nonmetropolitan America during the early 1990s resemble

the patterns of the nonmetropolitan turnaround of the 1970s more than those of any other period. At the very least, these findings offer persuasive evidence that the renewed growth in nonmetropolitan areas first evident in the 1970s was not just a short-term phenomenon.<sup>5</sup>

The extent of the widespread renewal of population increase in rural areas of the Midwest is clearly evident in **Figure 5**. The vast majority of nonmetropolitan counties in the eastern two-thirds of the region are now gaining population. And, in some areas, the rate of population increase is quite high. Illinois has certainly shared in this rural demographic rebound. In all, 42 nonmetropolitan counties in Illinois have renewed growth in the 1990s after population loss in the 1980s (**Figure 6**). In addition, all five nonmetropolitan counties that grew during the 1980s continued to do so during the 1990s.

**Figure 5. Midwest Population Change, 1990-1995**

Source: *Time Series of State and County Population Estimates and Components of Population Change: 1990-1995*. Washington, DC: U.S. Bureau of the Census (Internet).



<sup>5</sup>Further evidence of an upturn in nonmetropolitan growth is forthcoming from recent Current Population Survey (CPS) data. Following minimal nonmetropolitan migration gains in the 1991 and 1992 CPS, analysis of the 1993 CPS indicates a net inflow of approximately 300,000 migrants to nonmetropolitan areas between 1992 and 1993. This is the first significant net immigration to nonmetropolitan areas reported by the CPS in more than a decade. Differences in metropolitan definition and time period preclude direct comparisons of CPS and Federal-State results. However, the substantial net immigration reflected in the 1993 CPS represents additional independent evidence of the growth of the nonmetropolitan population after 1990.

The pattern of growth in Illinois has also been similar to that in the Midwest and U.S., with both migration and natural increase contributing to the overall population increase (**Figure 7**). Population gains in nonmetropolitan areas of Illinois during the early 1990s have been smaller than those in other nonmetropolitan areas. However, even these modest gains reflect a significant recovery from the 1980s. Many more Illinois counties are growing now and migration has played a significant role in this renewed growth. Nearly two-thirds of the nonmetropolitan counties in Illinois are gaining population through migration now, compared to only 4 percent during the 1980s. This is consistent with national and Midwestern trends and constitutes a significant reversal of migration trends. In contrast, the natural increase which traditionally fueled growth in nonmetropolitan areas of Illinois has diminished, just as it has nationwide. A continuation of these trends may usher in a new era for rural Illinois.

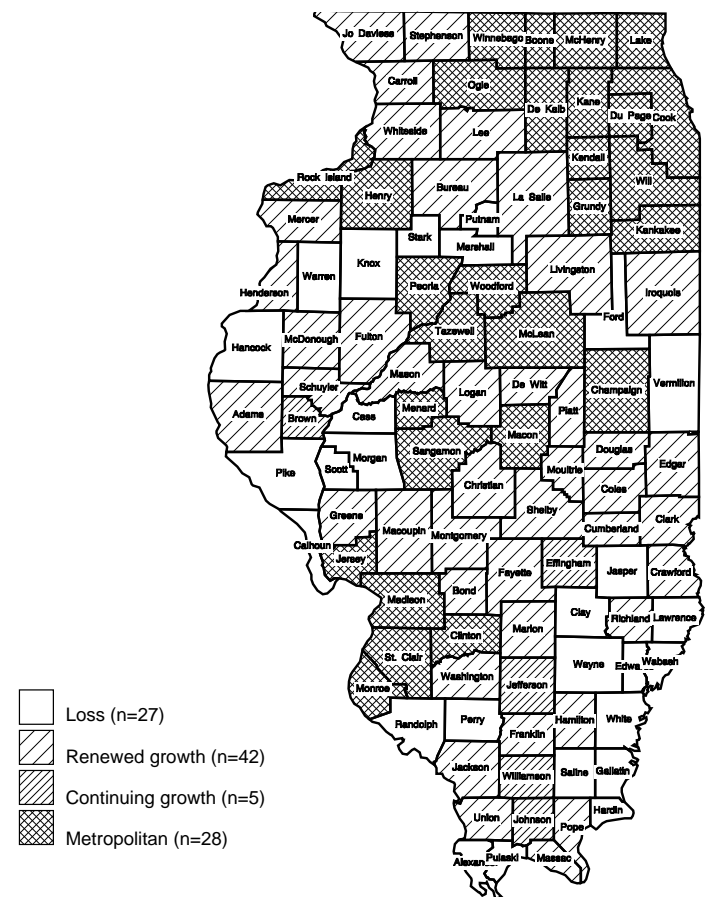
These findings cast doubt on the argument that the turnaround of the 1970s was a function of unique demographic and economic period effects, whereas the redistributive patterns of the 1980s represent a reversion to more consistent historical patterns (Frey 1993; Frey and Speare 1992). The nonmetropolitan demographic trends of the 1980s were neither a repeat of the nonmetropolitan turnaround of the 1970s nor a reversion to the patterns of the 1950s. Rather, the trends of the 1980s straddled the patterns of the previous two decades (Johnson and Beale 1994). It now appears that the diminished nonmetropolitan gains of the 1980s were just a pause—due to period effects—in the growth of nonmetropolitan areas through a combination of net immigration and modest natural increase which began during the 1970s. Multivariate models presented elsewhere show no evidence of fundamental structural shifts in the determinants of migration and natural increase between the 1980s and 1990s (Johnson and Beale 1995). Thus, the pattern of population change in nonmetropolitan areas between 1970 and 1995 appears most consistent with the deconcentration perspective (Frey and Speare 1992). In this regard, the deconcentration slowdown during the 1980s underscores the fact that such trends seldom proceed at an even pace—witness the slowdown in the long-term urbanward flow of population during the 1930s, for example. It is also possible that nonmetropolitan and metropolitan areas have entered a period of equilibrium where short-term demographic shifts are acutely sensitive to “period effects” resulting from changes in the economic, political, and social climate (Wardwell 1977).

The protracted economic recession of the 1980s hurt nonmetropolitan areas more severely than urban areas. The effects of these economic problems were especially pronounced in the Midwest. Agricultural areas were hit hard

by the long farm crisis of 1980-1986. In addition, nonmetropolitan manufacturing—which employs many more nonmetropolitan people than farming—came under increased competitive pressure from offshore firms during the 1980s with much loss of jobs (Elo and Beale 1988; Henry, Drabenstott, and Gibson 1986).

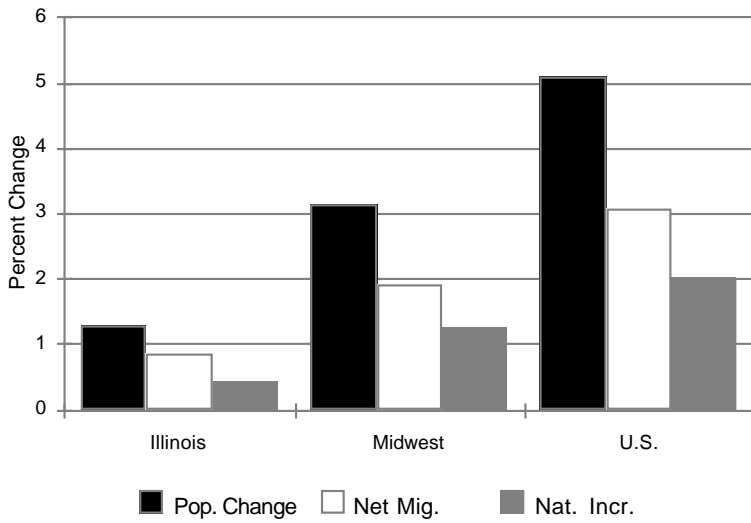
All of these factors contribute to slower overall nonmetropolitan growth in the 1980s, both in the Midwest states such as Illinois and elsewhere in the country. Only in the late 1980s, as the differential impact of these periodic factors began to subside, did nonmetropolitan growth rates begin to rise again. The rate of nonmetropolitan job growth has exceeded that in urban areas annually since 1990 (Economic Research Service 1994). As a result, nonmetropolitan workers have had less economic incentive to migrate to urban areas in recent years.

**Figure 6. Population Change, 1980 to 1995**



Source: 1980 Census of Population, Vol. 1, Characteristics of the Population, Washington, DC: USGPO and Time Series of State and County Population Estimates and Components of Population Change: 1990-1995. Washington, DC: U.S. Bureau of the Census (Internet).

**Figure 7. Nonmetropolitan Demographic Change, 1990-1995  
Illinois, Midwest, and the U.S.**



Source: *Time Series of State and County Population Estimates and Components of Population Change: 1990-1995*. Washington, DC: U.S. Bureau of the Census (Internet).

Speculation about future nonmetropolitan population redistribution is perilous, given the fluidity of the demographic shifts in nonmetropolitan areas of the U.S. during the past several decades. This fluidity reflects the complexity of the forces causing population redistribution. Whatever the future course of nonmetropolitan demographic trends, they are likely to be more volatile than in the past. Recent changes in nonmetropolitan fertility rates and age structures discussed here are sure to diminish the substantial contribution that natural increases have traditionally made to nonmetropolitan population gains. Thus, future nonmetropolitan growth or decline is increasingly dependent on net migration. And, as the integration of nonmetropolitan areas into the national economy continues, nonmetropolitan migration trends are likely to become increasingly sensitive to national and global economic, political and social forces. Careful monitoring of future nonmetropolitan demographic trends is necessary to provide corporate planners and government policymakers with the information required to develop programs to meet the needs of the people and institutions of rural Illinois.

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