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A Different Rural America Is Emerging, New Carsey Institute Report Finds

Report analyzes Census data to document demographic changes remaking rural America
Policymakers Urged To Consider Implications Of New Population Patterns

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DURHAM, N.H. -- If you think most rural Americans wear overalls and wake up at 5 a.m. to milk the cows, think again.

A new report from The Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire finds, among other significant population and demographic changes, that while agriculture remains important in some rural communities, only 6.5 percent of the rural labor force is engaged in farming. At the same time, the proportion of the rural labor force engaged in manufacturing exceeds that in urban America.

"Much of what people think about rural America is based on outdated stereotypes that equate rural America with farming," the report concludes. "Though agriculture remains important in hundreds of counties, rural America is now very diverse."

The report is based on U.S. Census data and is being released at the same time as a new round of population estimates are being issued by the Census Bureau.

The Carsey Institute report finds that population gains in rural areas waned in the 1980s, rebounded in the early 1990s, and slowed again in the later 1990s. Rural growth picked up again after 2001, although recent gains remain smaller than in the early 1990s. In most cases, population growth occurred in areas with scenic landscapes, mild climates or proximity to rapidly growing metropolitan areas, or a combination of these elements.

The report shows that many rural areas are also growing more racially diverse, a trend fueled in part by an increase in the number of immigrants settling in these areas.

People in their 50s and 60s are moving into certain rural areas at an accelerating rate. This structural shift in migration patterns has significant implications for those areas because the ranks of residents over the age of 60 are beginning to swell with the first of 75 million baby boomers.

The report by Kenneth M. Johnson, a sociology professor and demographer at Loyola University-Chicago, reviews decades of data about demographic shifts in rural counties, highlights important trends and identifies some of the policy implications these trends hold.

Among the key findings:

- Rural areas had a net inflow of 2.7 million people during the 1990s. That growth slowed in the later 1990s but picked up again after 2001.

- Some 1,458 rural counties – 71 percent of the total – gained population between 1990 and 2000. The gains were widespread in large areas of the Mountain West, the Pacific Northwest, the Upper Great Lakes, the southern Highlands and Piedmont, Florida, and the eastern half of Texas.
- Those rural counties losing population are seeing a loss of young people of childbearing age and an increase in the proportion of older people.
- Although immigrants remain a small percentage of the rural population, immigration accounted for a disproportionate share of the rural growth between since 1990. In 2000, the foreign-born populations in 297 counties exceeded five percent for the first time.

The report concludes that policymakers must consider a wide array of issues confronting many rural communities – including health care, sprawl concerns and environmental problems.

"This report reminds us that rural America is changing. Many places are seeing large increases in population, whether it is retirees and others looking for a different quality of life or the many 'new Americans' choosing to live and work in rural communities," said Cynthia Mildred Duncan, director of The Carsey Institute. "This demographic phenomenon holds broad implications for issues ranging from water quality to the availability of affordable health care to support for core community institutions and infrastructure. And we need to be deeply concerned about the people in chronically poor areas that continue to struggle with stagnation and underinvestment."

The growth in rural population in many areas has stemmed in part from technological innovations in communications and transportation, which have given people and businesses more flexibility to locate in more areas, Kenneth Johnson concludes.

And the economies of scale and geographic proximity that had long provided a significant competitive advantage to locating in an urban core have been eroded by congestion, high housing costs and densities, land shortages and high labor costs.

The report, "Demographic Trends in Rural and Small Town America," is part of a series of Carsey Institute policy reports on topics concerning rural America.

The report includes a first-hand look at how the demographic changes are playing out in Surry County, N.C., by reporter Julie Ardery.

Copies of the report are available by contacting Amy Seif at The Carsey Institute, 603-862-2821. Or visit www.carseyinstitute.unh.edu.

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The Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire conducts research and analysis on the challenges facing families and communities in New Hampshire, New England, and the nation. The Carsey Institute sponsors independent, interdisciplinary research that documents trends and conditions affecting families and communities, providing valuable information and analysis to policymakers, practitioners, the media, and the general public. Through this work, the Carsey Institute contributes to public dialogue on policies that encourage social mobility and sustain healthy, equitable communities.

The Carsey Institute was established in May 2002 through a generous gift from UNH alumna and noted television producer Marcy Carsey.