

Fact Sheet

Rural Life Today: Defining “Rural”

by Mark A. Small

Defining a place or people as “rural” often conveys a certain impression. One typically thinks of agriculture and family farms, sparsely populated areas, and a sense of community where people know one another and act accordingly in a friendly fashion. The “rural life” is often associated with the “good life.” Although such a loose connotation may suffice for ordinary conversation, for many purposes a more precise definition of what “rural” means is required. Unfortunately, there is no single agreed upon definition of rural, even among researchers within the same field. Rather, what has emerged is a number of different meanings given to the word “rural” as it is applied to describe people and places. Thus, “ruralness” perhaps best is thought of as a construct, with meaning provided by the particular context in which it is described. Contexts which frequently give rise to meanings of rural are listed below.

Demographic

Demographers group people according to population density, often defining a population or place as rural based on whether there are few people in a given location, or where the number of people is low given the available space. There are many ways to count people and space, and differences abound even within the demographic categories used by federal agencies. The two primary sources of definitions of rural are the U.S. Census Bureau and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (U.S.D.A.). Because definitions change over time as well as places, one should always look to see whether the most current definition applies to a particular place.

Census Bureau

For the 1990 census, “urban” is defined as

comprising all territory, population, and housing units in urbanized areas and in places of 2,500 or more persons outside urbanized areas. Territory, population, and housing units not classified as urban constitute “rural.” Given this definition, there are both rural and urban territories within both metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas.

U.S.D.A.

The Economic Research Service (E.R.S.) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture has the most extensive definitions of rural. Using census data, distinctions are made based upon a county’s urban population as well as proximity to major urban settings. One popular classification provides 10 distinctions, primarily grouped under metropolitan and nonmetropolitan counties.(1)

Metro Counties—

Central counties of metro areas of 1 million population or more.

Fringe counties of metro areas of 1 million population or more.

Counties in metro areas of 250,000 to 1 million population.

Counties in metro areas of fewer than 250,000 population.

Nonmetro Counties—

Urban population of 20,000 or more, adjacent to a metro area.

Urban population of 20,000 or more, not adjacent to a metro area.

Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area.

Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not

adjacent to a metro area.
Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, adjacent to metro area.
Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to metro area.

Nonadjacent Counties

Nonmetro counties physically adjacent to one or more metro areas and having at least 2 % of the employment labor force in the county commuting to the central metro county.

Office of Management and Budget
According to the OMB, Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSA's) include core counties containing a city of 50,000 or more and a total area population of at least 100,000. Additional contiguous counties are included in an MSA if they are economically integrated with the core county or counties. These designations are also based on Census data.

Economic

An area may be defined as rural based on a single dominant economic activity, usually farming. However, the use of the word "rural" to describe areas where a high percentage of land is used for agriculture (farming) is declining as the number of families living on farms decreases. In addition to farming, other economic activities may dominate within an area. Again, the Economic Research Service of the USDA periodically groups counties by economic characteristics, an example of which follows.(2)

Farming Dependent– Farming contributed a weighted annual average of 20% or more of total labor and proprietor income over the 3 years 1987-1989.

Mining Dependent– Mining contributed a weighted annual average of 15% or more of total labor and proprietor income over the 3 years of 1987-1989.

Manufacturing Dependent– Manufacturing contributed a weighted annual average of 30% or more of total labor and proprietor income over the 3 years of 1987-1989.

Government Dependent– Federal, state and local government activities contributed a weighted annual

average of 25% or more of total labor and proprietor income over the 3 years of 1987-1989.

Service Dependent– Service activities (private and personal services, agricultural services, wholesale and retail trade, finance and insurance, real estate, transportation, and public utilities) contributed a weighted annual average of 50% or more to total labor and proprietor income over the 3 years of 1987-1990.

Nonspecialized– Counties not classified as a specialized economic type over the 3 years 1987-1989.

Social

Aside from mere number counting, other approaches to defining rural attempt to capture the social essence of rural. Social scientists may use a composite approach to define rural by combining instruments that measure values, behaviors, beliefs and/or feelings of individuals living within a particular community. The results are often compared to measures taken from urban residents. Because the measures used by researchers vary, arriving at a consistent social measure of rural is difficult.

Psychological

Ruralness can also be thought of as a psychological construct, as a state of mind. Individuals self-identify as being members of a rural community, with decisions based upon attitudes of interactions with other community members.

Cultural

The term "rural culture" often refers to the perceived contrasting lifestyles of people in rural areas. Whereas city dwellers are perceived to be fast-paced, heterogenous, and easily adjustable to change, rural residents are perceived to be slow-paced, homogenous, and reluctant to give up tradition.

Summary

Defining whether or not someone or someplace is rural depends on the definition of rural that is used. The most commonly used definitions focus on population density, though personal and social perceptions of ruralness probably provide a greater understanding of how being rural makes a difference in people's everyday lives.

Sources

1. Butler, M. A., & Beale, C. L. (September, 1994). *Rural-Urban Continuum Codes for Metro and NonMetro Counties, 1993, AGES 8428*. Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.
2. Cook, P. J., & Mizer, K. L. (December 1994). *The revised ERS county typology: An overview, RDR-89*. Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.

December 12, 2000