

Defining Rural

Rural has several definitions and measures, including those used by the U.S. Census Bureau (USCB), U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), and others. This reflects the reality that urban and rural are multidimensional concepts. Which definition to use is determined by whether it will be used for research, policy analysis, or programming, with the metropolitan-nonmetropolitan classification suited for economic and social changes (USDA Economic Research Service [USDA ERS], 2017a).

The USDA divides the U.S. Office of Management and Budget's (OMB) metropolitan (metro) and nonmetropolitan (nonmetro) categories into three metro and six nonmetro categories and assigns each county one of the nine codes, creating the Rural-Urban Continuum Codes (RUCC). The USDA categorizes metro counties by their population size and the nonmetro counties by degree of urbanization and adjacency to a metro area (USDA ERS, 2016b). The nonmetro counties are considered rural (USDA ERS, 2018). In addition to the RUCC Codes, the USDA provides Frontier and Remote area codes that represent areas with a combination of low population density and high geographic remoteness (USDA ERS, 2016a). Using the USDA definition of rural, 72% of the United States land is rural, with 46 million rural residents (USDA ERS, 2017b).

The USCB defines rural on the basis of population density and other measures of dense development (Ratcliffe, Burd, Holder, & Fields, 2016). At its most basic level, the USCB defines rural areas as those outside of urban areas. The 2010 Decennial determined that 19% of the population, or approximately 60 million people, live in the rural United States.

The NCHS six-level 2013 Urban-Rural Classification Scheme (URCS) for counties and county-equivalent entities is used to study health in association with urbanization (CDC, 2017). The scheme includes four metro areas (large central, large fringe, medium metro, and small metro) and two nonmetro areas (micropolitan and noncore), based on OMB's designation of metro, micropolitan, and noncore counties. One reason the URCS separates the counties in the largest metro areas into two groups, large central and large fringe, is that the rural-urban health differences are often largest between the large fringe and the most rural counties. Using URCS, the nonmetro counties contain 14.8% of the United States population (CDC, 2017).

References

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