The Demography of Rural America

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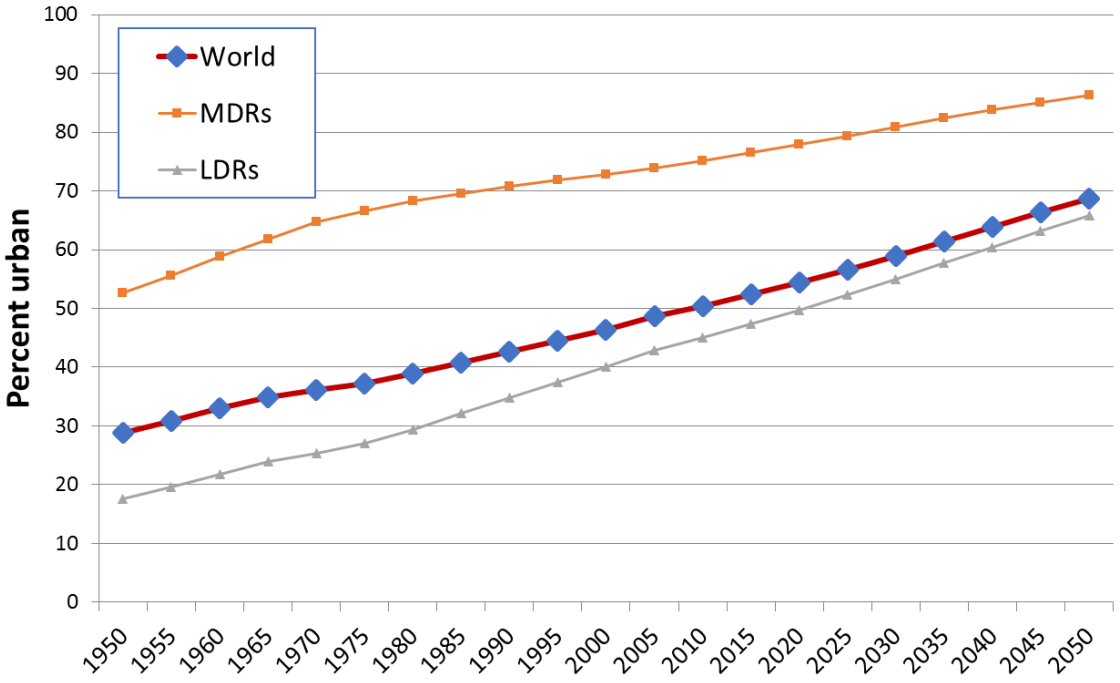
Conceptual issues and measurement

In 2008, the urban population of the world has exceeded 50 percent (Figure 1). This unprecedented crossover, a one-time event in human history, grabbed both academic and media attention. According to the United Nations Population Division (2018), in 1950 just over 30 percent of the world was urban, increasing to 55 percent by 2018, and projected to reach 68 percent by 2050. In more developed regions, the numbers are much higher. In the United States, it is 82 percent today, projected to reach almost 90 percent by 2050. The urban crossover has already happened in the U.S. by the 1950 census (Johnson and Lichter, 2019).

Figure 1. The urban-rural crossover



The simplicity of the urban-rural dichotomy used to highlight this change masks a considerable heterogeneity of rural (as well as urban) areas. While it is understandable why supranational organizations, like the United Nations, use simple definitions for the sake of international comparison, by the time of the urban-rural population crossover, rural demographic scholarship has been focusing on understanding this heterogeneity for decades.

Until the 1970s, the narrative of rural demographic change was fairly simple and almost universal. Rural communities were population reserves with predictable high fertility and steady outmigration. Given that the Baby Boom generation was to enter childbearing age around that time, most rural places have not yet faced aging and natural decrease. In the 1970s though, this stable trend has changed, and rural places gained population, largely due to in-migration. The turnaround, as it was called later, vanished in the 1980s, just to reappear in the 1990s, leading selective population deconcentration (Johnson and Cromartie, 2006).

This remarkable fluctuation ended decades, if not centuries, of stable rural population dynamics. It was not an exclusively American phenomenon either, triggering two major threads of new scholarly discourse. The first was focusing on the various social and economic conditions in rural areas to understand why certain places or regions experienced the turning demographic dynamics differently. This coincided with the recognition that rural demographic dynamics are no longer a sole function of employment opportunities, but more complex residential preferences and natural and leisure amenities play an increasing role in the changing fortunes of rural places. Research has established, and continued to find evidence for, that many people prefer to live in smaller places, especially if those are in commuting distance to larger cities (Brown and Schafft, 2011).

The second discourse focused on the measurement of rural. Traditionally, rural has not been defined, rather it was left as a residual after establishing what is urban. In the United States, two common official definitions are used. One is developed by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), identifying county-based metropolitan and micropolitan statistical areas, consistent across the United States. These definitions are contingent on population size and economic networks, using the proxy of commuting for the latter. Rural, or as it is called, nonmetropolitan, remains the residual category. The other definition is from the Bureau of Census, designating urban and rural places based on a population threshold of 2,500 people. Since most official statistics are county-based, and the U.S. has 3,142 counties (or county equivalents) to provide a fairly detailed picture for most national comparisons, scholars typically use the OMB definitions.

Besides these two indicators, the Economic Research Service (ERS) within the US Department of Agriculture has also developed a 9-category classification, called Rural-Urban Continuum

Codes. Apart from population size, the degree of urbanization and adjacency to a metropolitan area are also accounted for, providing a complex indicator. The code is sometimes called the Beale-code, named after the late Calvin Beale, the grandfather of rural demography in the U.S., and the first person to observe the nonmetropolitan turnaround in the 1970s (Beale, 1975).

By the 1990s, definitions based on the urban-rural dichotomy became increasingly insufficient for academic and policy purposes. The blurring of the boundaries between urban and rural were highlighted in the seminal volume by Champion and Hugo (2004), arguing that space matters beyond the dichotomy, and what we should be looking at is in fact a continuum with various gradients of urban (or rural for that matter). This line of thought has become the focus of rural scholarship in the coming decade, leading to a more refined understanding of urban and rural categories. Excellent examples of this work are Lichter and Brown (2011) and Lichter and Ziliak (2017) on the urban-rural interface, calling attention to the economic and political interdependencies between places. Of course, the more complex the measurement has become the more exceptions and unique cases one was expected to find, creating a tradeoff between accuracy and generalizability. At the end, we probably have to accept Calvin Beale's succinct point on definitions: "Although there have been always graduations of rurality, the vastness of the United States and the complexity of modern society make it increasingly impossible to define rural precisely." (Kandel and Brown, 2006: xvii).

The quest to define rural beyond a simple indicator and move away from the dichotomy also led to the emergence of various conceptual exercises over time, looking into what rural means to people. In the early 1990s, Keith Halfacree categorized the definitions of rural used in the previous decades of scholarship (Halfacree, 1993). This has not resulted in a universally accepted definition; however, it highlighted an increasingly important aspect of the issue: the social construction of rural, or rather the understanding that rural itself is a social construct (Cloke, 2006). Halfacree (1993) made this point by separating rural as space from rural as *representing* space.

This line of thought may seem unnecessarily abstract from a demographic or policy point of view. However, in a post-truth society, where facts seem to have lost the battle against perceptions that are easy to form and manipulate, the social construction of reality must be a fundamental consideration. An example for this is the "rural mystique" or "rural idyll" rooted in

the symbolism of what is rural. In a complex, metropolitan society, embedded in fast-paced global economic and cultural networks, people tend to develop nostalgia for both rural environments (imagined as bucolic and pastoral landscapes), and rural values (or what they perceive to be rural values).

This nostalgia has a direct, causal link to new rural social and economic dynamics. From a functionalist perspective, this can be expressed as a shift from production to consumption. Rural areas used to be exclusively associated with agricultural production and natural resource extraction. However, over the past couple of decades, rural areas have increasingly become the places of consumption. The growing importance of natural amenities "consumed" for leisure purposes together with the shrinking employment in agriculture and extraction led to new trends, such as rural gentrification (Nelson et al, 2014) or rural retirement migration (Brown and Glasgow, 2008; Brown et al, 2011). These trends, due to the accompanying unique demographic dynamics, are often pursued by rural communities as viable and desirable economic development strategies, although these may also increase local income inequalities and lead to residential segregation (Winkler, 2013).

The newfound importance of natural amenities (if they come with leisure, transportation etc. infrastructure on the ground) created a new division between rural places. It would be easy to see this as a simple distinction between places like Jackson Hole, WY and Cowley County, KS, but the reality is a bit more complex. Places without natural amenities could still produce wealth through agriculture and resource extraction. However, these places are not perceived as representatives of the rural idyll, and the value most people assign to them has a much lower premium. This happens because in a highly urbanized society, these perceptions are driven by urban residents, many of whom have little if any firsthand knowledge of rural places. They tend to experience rural through the "urban gaze", carefully selecting charming New England small towns and spectacular Western vistas over the cornfields in Iowa or the plains of the Texas panhandle. While the social narrative of rural is mostly written from an urban viewpoint, looking at the facts on the ground can reveal paradoxes in relation to economic prosperity. The gently rolling beautiful landscape of the Black Hills in South Dakota may hide despair and deep inequality, while the sparsely populated Great Plains counties with endless wheat fields may not even show up on the poverty maps.

The demographic aspect of this paradox can be explained through the thesis of agricultural dependence. Demonstrated by Johnson and Rathge (2006) and Curtis White (2008), agricultural dependence is a form of path dependence, emerging when farm consolidation and mechanization displaces labor, which is then not absorbed by alternative industries, because these were displaced or not even developed in the first place due to the high productivity of agriculture. The lack of economic diversification and the success of large-scale agricultural production together are strong drivers of population loss in rural areas relying on farming. Farming in these areas does remain profitable, in fact, more productive than ever, but it also comes with the eroding capacity of rural communities to maintain stable populations.

Summarizing three decades of rural scholarship, the edited volume by Kandel and Brown (2006:5) started by making the point that contrary to the public belief that "rural places are stable and unchanging repositories of what we believe has been lost during our nation's urban and industrial transformations", it is change and not stability that characterizes rural America. This change, however, is not exclusive to rural places. Many of the local demographic trends we see are embedded into national or even international population dynamics.

Big picture, small pictures

At the most basic level, demographic change can only occur through fertility, mortality, or migration dynamics. These tend to be long term trends, rooted in broad societal changes, and as such, once established, they take time to change course. Even migration, the most sensitive to local or short-term changes needs years to make an impact on large-scale population trends. No wonder that the 19th century term "demography is destiny" has been central in how we think about these trends ever since.

The nonmetropolitan population of the U.S. has remained fairly stable throughout the 20th century (Figure 2.), around 50 million at each census year, although we can see a slow decline in the past few decades. This technically means that the entire population growth of the U.S. over more than 110 years was absorbed by urban areas. This apparent stability masks drastically different natural increase and migration dynamics though (Figure 3.).

Figure 2. Metropolitan and nonmetropolitan population, 1900-2017

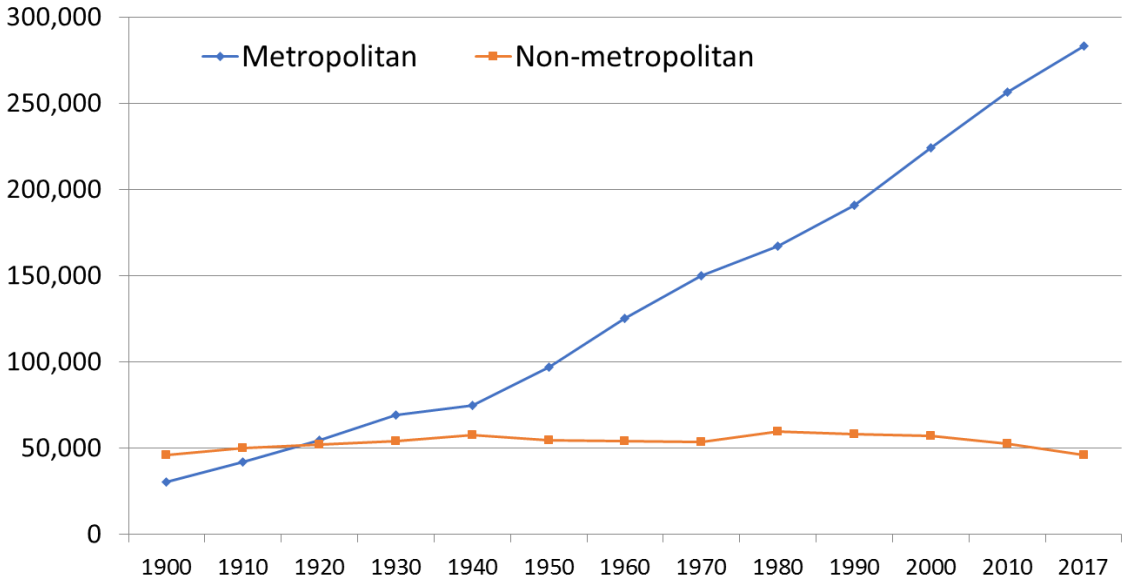
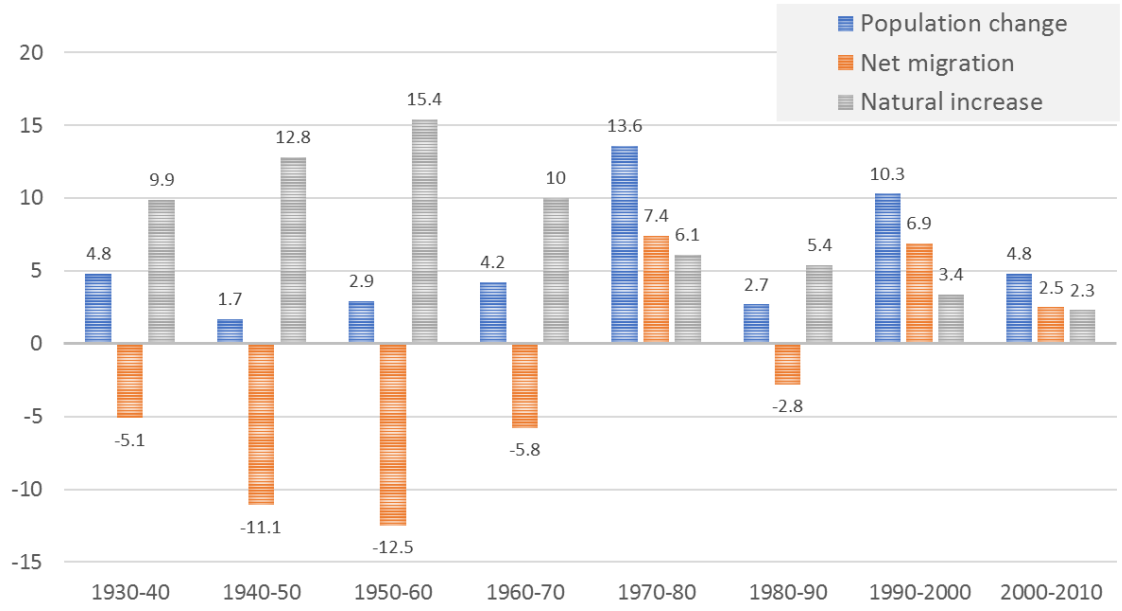


Figure 3. Components of population change in nonmetropolitan counties



Fertility has been declining in the U.S. for most of the 20th century, and this change corresponds with a general fertility drop around the developed world. While the Baby Boom was a defining

event in American demography, from this perspective, it can be seen as an anomaly. Today the total fertility rate, an estimated completed fertility based on current trend, is below 2.1, the replacement level. According to the CDC estimates (Ely and Hamilton, 2018), nonmetropolitan fertility is still higher (1.95) than metropolitan one (1.71 – 1.79, depending on the size of the metro area), but it has shown the same declining pattern in the past ten years. More significantly, it fell below the replacement level during the Great Recession, ending a demographic regime that characterized rural America for centuries.

Fertility dynamics are typically a result of two separate trends, one social and one technical. The social trend refers to the decisions and preferences about the number of children and more broadly, family formation. Over the last hundred years or so, these pointed towards fewer children for a variety of reasons, including female participation in the labor force and in higher education, new family norms, changing economic structures, and so on. The technical trend is the age composition of the population, namely the number or share of women in childbearing age. Childbearing has a biological limit, even if this limit is very slowly increasing. In absolute terms, it is unlikely for a woman to have a child beyond a certain age. In relative terms, the later a woman has her first child, the fewer children she would eventually have.

Since giving birth is age-selective, a decreasing number of women in relevant age categories will ultimately lead to fewer children even if family formation and childbearing norms would remain the same. Rural areas are impacted by both trends. Women have their first child later, while at the same time the persistent outmigration of young families removes a large number of them from the pool. In addition, smaller birth cohorts mean significantly reduced fertility capacity a generation later.

Regarding mortality, for most of the postwar period, we have been accustomed to increasing life expectancies, as the norm in developed countries. Medical advances and healthier lifestyle choices have driven this trend for decades, even if the U.S. has consistently been behind other developed nations. In the early 21st century, however, this trend has ended, and the U.S. has entered a mortality stagnation period (Elo et al, 2019). Similar to fertility dynamics, rural areas have been on the short end of the stick in this trend as well. In 1970, there was only 0.4 years of life expectancy difference between metropolitan and nonmetropolitan counties, but by 2005-2009, this has grown to 2.0 years (Singh and Siahpush, 2014). In this period, life expectancy

grew in both metro and nonmetro categories (from 70.9 to 78.8 and from 70.5 to 76.8, respectively), but the gap has widened.

Rural areas have had a historical morbidity and health disadvantage, including smoking prevalence, obesity, and access to health services (Berry, 2014; Tanaka et al, 2014). Adding income and education deficits, as well as more limited labor market opportunities to this picture explains a lot behind these unfavorable trends. However, these only account for the historical lag, and not the current divergence, which started in the late 1990s and largely happened after 2000. The most accepted explanation is the "deaths of despair" thesis, the rising morbidity and mortality from alcohol, drugs, suicide, and the opioid epidemic in general (Case and Deaton, 2015; Monnat and Rigg, 2016). Research has also shown that the mortality stagnation hit rural counties harder regardless of their poverty rates. Death rates in rural, low-poverty counties are the same as in urban high-poverty ones (Cosby et al, 2019).

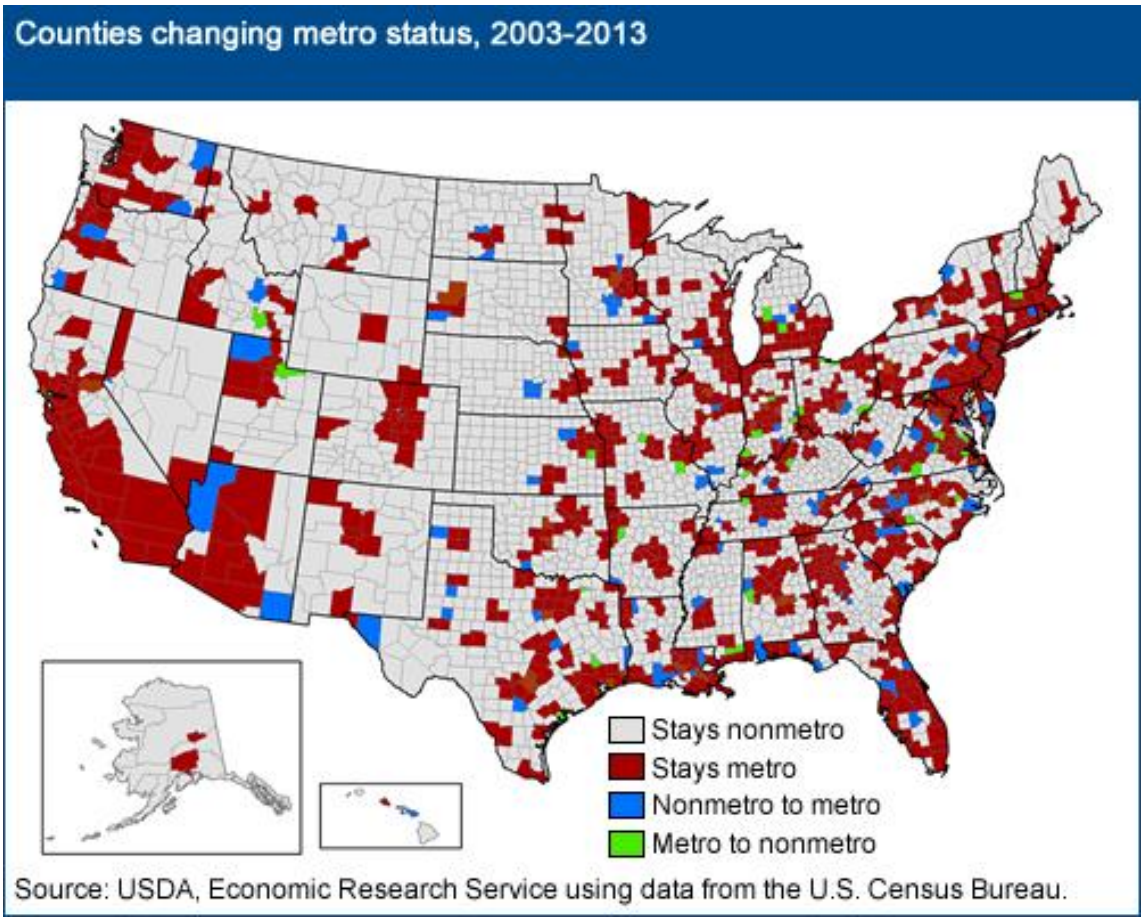
The first cohort of the Baby Boom reached retirement age in 2011, and today we are witnessing a major age transition in the U.S. This transition alters the age composition of the country no matter what and creates a context for various social and economic challenges related to labor force participation, healthcare, social services provision, funding social security, and so on. Paradoxically, the increasing life expectancy, a positive change over the 20th century, further contributed to this pressure.

In the context of this national trend, rural areas, as it may seem typical by now, are facing additional challenges (Glasgow and Berry, 2013). The same outmigration stream that depletes the number of women in childbearing age (as well as men in the same age), leaves a disproportionately large elderly population behind. Rural aging happens primarily due to age-selective outmigration and declining fertility, and not because increasing life expectancy. Unfortunately, just as rural communities would need more resources to overcome decades of underdevelopment in health and social services, they are hit by accelerated extreme aging, triggered by the departure of the most resourceful, young segment of the population. This removes considerable revenue and economic capacity, and predictably leads to significant problems with service provision in rural communities (Thiede et al, 2016; Brown et al, 2018).

Migration has always been central to rural demography (Fuguitt et al, 1989; Johnson and Fuguitt, 2000; Curtis and Kulcsar, 2019). Before 1970, this largely meant the loss of farm population, as

agricultural production required less and less labor (Johnson and Cromartie, 2006). At the same time, population growth at the metropolitan fringe due to suburbanization led to the reclassification of the fastest growing nonmetropolitan counties, further eroding the pool of demographically successful rural areas (Figure 4.). This erosion is more significant than a simple technicality. The latest reclassification wave in 2013 added 113 new metro counties and removed 36 from the same category, resulting in a net loss of 4.9 million people for nonmetropolitan America (Cromartie, 2017).

Figure 4. Metropolitan reclassification after the latest decennial census



As Johnson and Cromartie (2006:45) noted: "With nonmetropolitan birth rates now at historically low levels and death rates on the rise due to an aging population, migration will

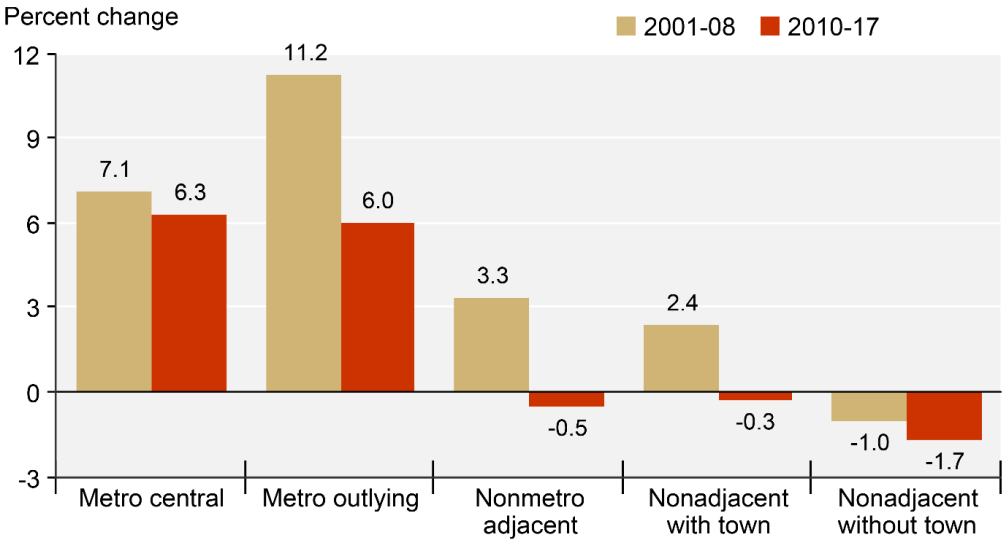
dominate future rural demographic trends." They also pointed out that the rural population rebound in the 1990s was heavily influenced by external forces, subsequently limiting the ability of rural communities to address demographic challenges.

One specific external force shaping migration dynamics at least in some rural counties was the arrival of minority, largely Hispanic, populations, as immigrants have found new destinations (Massey, 2008; Lichter and Johnson, 2009). This is a crucial new trend, as while Hispanics represented just 8 percent of the non-metropolitan population in 2010, they accounted for 63 percent of the entire non-metropolitan population gain between 2000 and 2010 (Johnson and Lichter 2016). Due to the age-specific nature of migration, Hispanics enter the population in childbearing years, and often reverse population decline (Lichter et al, 2012). In fact, the reason why national fertility rates were above replacement level in the 1990s has a lot to do with Hispanic immigration in the same period. Their presence is particularly visible in rural food processing industries, and while the boost they provide to local demographic dynamics is undeniable, so are the challenges of their integration (Broadway and Stull, 2006; Kulcsar and Iaroi, 2013). In any case, Hispanic rural in-migration (rooted in Hispanic immigration) was a strong driver of the rural rebound in the 1990s.

In 2007, the U.S. entered the Great Recession, which had a strong impact on migration trends. The basic impact was what Johnson et al (2017) called "frozen in place", referring to how migration intensity declined considerably during the recession. While this also meant that rural outmigration slowed down, at the same time, the recession cut back Hispanic immigration as well as the fertility of rural Hispanic populations, which both had been significant drivers of rural population growth (Johnson and Lichter, 2019).

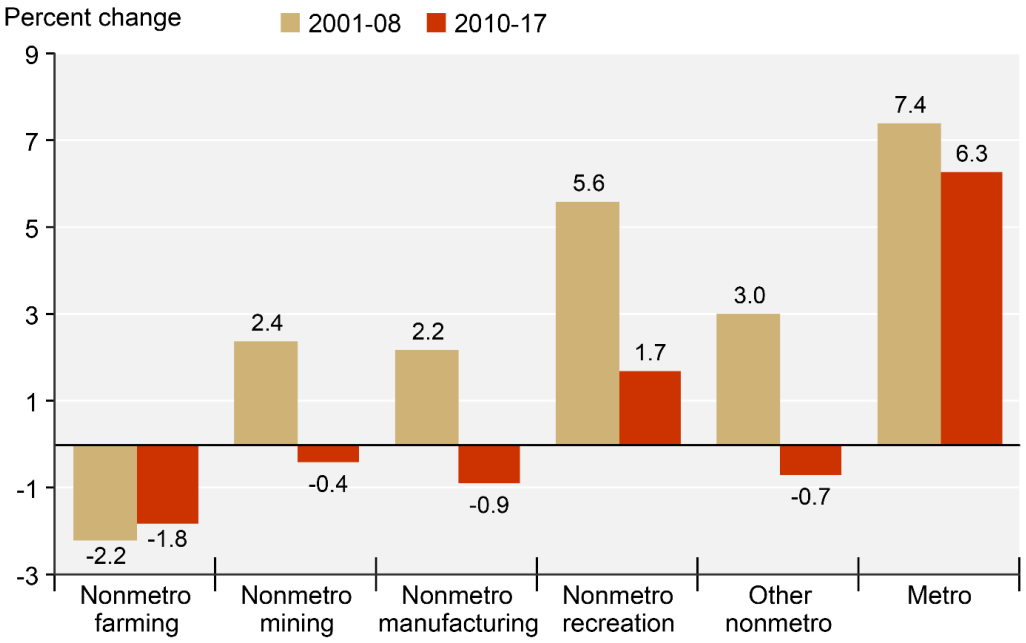
Looking at the 2001-2008 and 2010-2017 periods to see the impact of the recession (Figures 5 and 6), it seems clear that adjacency does make a difference. While adjacent nonmetropolitan counties also declined in 2010-2017, their pre-recession dynamics were positive. At the same time, nonadjacent counties lost populations in both periods. In terms of county types, farming counties indeed froze as population loss became smaller due to the inability to move, while mining and manufacturing counties changed their positive dynamics to negative. Recreation counties saw smaller increase in 2010-2017 but stayed on the positive side.

Population change by county's place on the rural-urban continuum, 2001-08 and 2010-17



Note: Categories are based on 2013 metro definitions. Metro central counties contain urbanized areas of 50,000 people or more. Metro outlying counties are tied to central counties through high commuting levels (25% and higher). Nonmetro adjacent counties are both physically adjacent to a metro area and have 2-25 percent commuting to the central counties. Nonadjacent counties are divided into those with and without urban populations.
Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

Population change by county type, 2001-08 and 2010-17



Note: County types are described in the ERS County Typology Codes data product: http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/county-typology-codes.aspx
Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

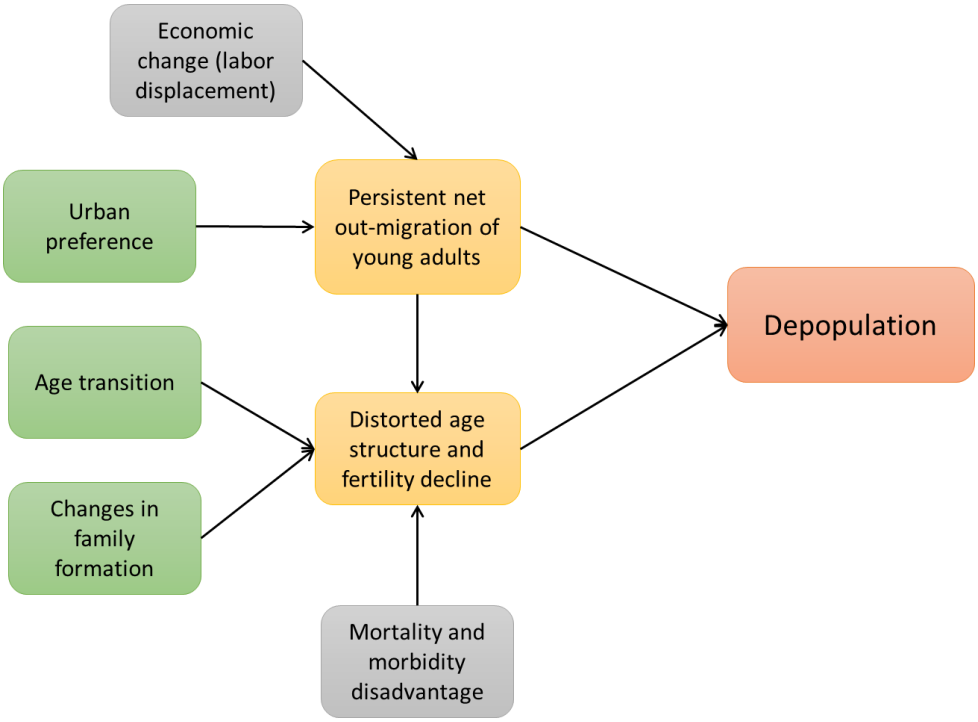
The migration slowdown during the recession also highlighted the impact of natural decrease. Natural decrease happens when the number of deaths surpass the number of live births. Given the relatively high fertility in rural areas, this has not been a concern for a long time. In fact, high natural increase has counterbalanced rural outmigration for decades. The combination of fertility decline and persistent outmigration, and the resulting old age structure, however, not only made natural decrease a reality for a third of the U.S. counties, disproportionately from the rural category (Johnson, 2011), but also locked in the demographic reality of depopulation. We must remember that this is embedded in the national trend of the Baby Boom age transition, which makes the population older regardless of anything else. Ironically, the Baby Boom provided a positive demographic impact to many of these communities in the 1950s (boosting fertility) and in the 1970s (when Boomers entered childbearing age themselves). In many cases, we see diverging age structures: age pyramids with wide bases indicating a growing population where there is a significant Hispanic in-migration (with all its social challenges), and pyramids that no longer look like pyramids, showing a rapid concentration of older adults with no replacement capacity left.

The nonmetropolitan population of the U.S. peaked at 75 million in 1940, shrinking to an all-time low of 46 million by 2016 (Johnson and Lichter, 2019). As mentioned, some of this decline is a function of metropolitan reclassification. If we take the current nonmetropolitan counties, we can see how depopulation has already been taking place for a long time. As Johnson and Lichter (2019) demonstrated, 49% of these counties had their population peak in 1950 or before. What this means is that these places were unable to utilize any of the major social and economic changes and growth following the Second World War. We can also observe a bifurcation of county types: farming and manufacturing counties are depopulating in far greater numbers than recreation or retirement destination counties, indicating how the economic structure of rural America has changed in the past century, lending empirical support to the production to consumption thesis.

The overall conceptual picture of rural depopulation (Figure 7.) shows a challenging situation. National trends (urban preference, age transition, and changes in family formation) set the stage for persistent outmigration and a distorted age structure. Specific rural dynamics, such as changing economic conditions, labor displacement, and mortality disadvantage further contribute

to the same trends. Intervening at any point in this picture to stem rural depopulation requires a focused, long-term effort and significant resource transfer.

Figure 7. The conceptual picture of rural depopulation



In summary, rural areas have been facing significant demographic challenges. Chronic migration loss, selective to the younger cohorts, have been the reality for most of these communities since 1950, if not longer. The resulting age structure both further depletes fertility capacity and increase mortality rates, establishing path dependent demographic dynamics. Fertility decline and aging occur in the context of similar transitions at the national level but are exacerbated due to challenging local conditions. It is important to note though that there is considerable geographic variation in how particular rural places experience these trends. Places where farming and natural resource extraction provided most of the employment experience the most severe depopulation, while those with natural amenities to be utilized for recreation or retirement migration and those in proximity to metropolitan areas have a more positive outlook.

Thoughts on the way forward

The first question about the way forward (that is forward in time at least) is whether we could expect any of these demographic trends to chance. The short answer to this question is no, albeit with a caveat.

Demographic trends, barring some major shock events, such as catastrophes or wars, never change overnight. It would be unrealistic to expect that rural America by and large suddenly experiences large-scale in-migration or any fertility revival. The forces shaping demographic trends are broad societal and economic transformations, influencing millions of individual decisions about moving or family formation. One might imagine similarities to the task Hari Seldon, Isaac Asimov's fictional hero, faced when he wanted to outline the future course of civilization through scientific methods. The future is very difficult to change, because the forces shaping it only change either over a long period of time or if the behavior of the majority of society changes. On the other hand, and for the same reason, basic trends are quite possible to predict.

Demography is probably the closest to Asimov's imaginary psychohistory. We have every reason to believe that contemporary fertility and family formation behavior will not change enough to produce a surplus of births in the near future. At best, fertility will hover around replacement level. We can also predict that aging in place will remain the reality for most rural communities, at least until the Baby Boom passes, which is another 25-30 years. There is no major economic transformation on the horizon either, which would provide employment opportunities on the scale of what agriculture or extraction used to be in rural areas. If anything, the quest for increasing production and profitability will lead to further mechanization, and labor, the traditionally most expensive part of any business will decline further.

The most flexible component of demography is migration. Migration was the main driver behind all rural population trends for decades, until the natural decrease regime became entrenched by the end of the 20th century. Migration is still important, because of all the decisions humans make related to demographic outcomes, it is the easiest to influence by policy tools. Make no mistake, it is still very difficult, but far simpler than manipulating fertility behavior or addressing long-term morbidity trends.

In its most basic form, migration is a function of two fundamental and somewhat overlapping considerations: residential preferences and employment opportunities. It is also important to note that migration needs financial, social and human resources, so poor families can easily get stuck in poor places without a chance to improve their lives. Until the 1970s, employment opportunities determined the fortune of places, but in the past decades, natural amenities started to provide a powerful magnet to certain segments of the population. This may not result in large-scale in-migration but could generate enough revenue to stem outmigration from the area, preventing the emergence of an unfavorable age composition.

Thus, the caveat is that the unfavorable demographic trends are far from being uniform. There are opportunities, such as the aforementioned natural amenities, that certain rural places could utilize. However, these will not be available to all, hence any development strategy based on those would likely not be transferable directly. In addition, as Brown et al (2011) demonstrated on the example of retirement migration, amenities themselves are just necessary but not sufficient conditions for such development.

Strategies based on residential preferences must take into consideration the perceptions about rural. Landscapes with stunning natural amenities evoke certain emotions about the environment and quality of life, but for every image of rural serenity one can find an image of rural despair too. No wonder that the most successful rural areas are the ones adjacent to metropolitan places, where residents can have the best of both worlds: a small town, low density environment in close proximity to urban cultural amenities and well-paid jobs.

In terms of employment, rural is no longer about agriculture. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2018 there were 876,000 agricultural jobs in the U.S. Employment in agriculture plummeted by 2000 and hovered around 1.3% of total employment since then. With the national decline in employment in manufacturing, the number and share of service jobs increased in rural areas too, however, these are more likely to be in low-wage consumer services (Brown and Schafft, 2011). For agriculture, it is time to shift our thinking from farming to food systems, after all, food will still mostly be grown in rural areas, and rural populations will have an important role in it. At the same time, this system has become embedded in the global economy, which removes considerable power from local communities to influence production, employment, and revenues.

A specific area of perceptions about rural is that of held by young people who make decisions about their careers and family life. The life course perspective helps understanding how the preferences change. In young adult age, it is difficult to resist the lights of the city, and the increasing participation in higher education also draws young people away from rural communities. Some may go back, but most do not, as when they are ready to establish their families they have to balance a safe area and good schools with well-paid jobs necessary to pay the mortgage, and increasingly (due to the Baby Boom transition) to support their parents as they grow old. Later they have to pay for their children's college education, so it is easy to see why rural employment tends to lose the competition. There has to be specific pull factors (family, strong preference for rural values and norms, love of the land etc.) to overcome the urban premium not only in cultural amenities but income opportunities, especially if personal investment in higher education needs to be paid off.

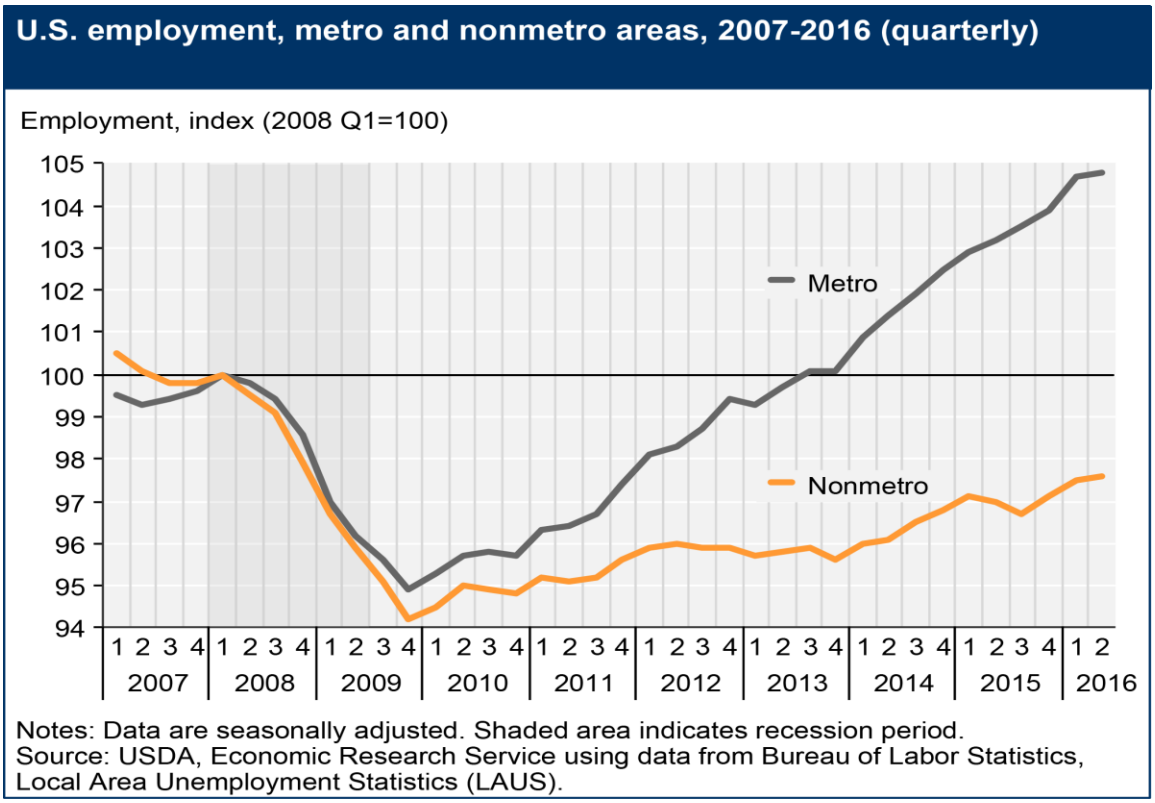
The macro level trends of prosperity and poverty were summarized by Curtis and Kulcsar (2019:608): "Slow-moving stressors that have appeared over the past 40 years, e.g., industrial transformation, wage stagnation, rising income inequality, population aging, and immigration, along with short-term economic and policy shocks, e.g., the Great Recession, and safety net policy/program changes, affect rural people and places differently than they do their urban counterparts. This is due in part to a greater concentration in rural America of vulnerable groups, less diversified economies, thinner and weaker institutions, and fewer local services." Poverty has become persistent for many rural areas, and there is also an increasing prevalence of the phenomenon of the "working poor" (Thiede et al, 2018).

Poverty tends to come hand in hand with health problems that translate into high morbidity and mortality. Low rates of health insurance and high rates of food insecurity are more common in rural areas. Together with sparse healthcare network (for some of which even the most advanced telehealth system cannot substitute), this affects the ability to work, leading to lower efficiencies of production. In addition, this creates a family environment, in which children's ability to break out of the poverty cycle will be significantly reduced.

Prosperity and poverty in rural America cannot be discussed without the impact of the Great Recession. As Cromartie (2018) noted, rural employment in 2018 was still under the pre-recession levels. One contributor to this lag was the population loss due to outmigration and

natural decrease, which depleted the rural labor force. Rural unemployment rates are not that different from urban ones, but this is largely a function of accelerated aging in rural areas, because rural employment growth lags far behind urban one. Taking the first quarter of 2008 as 100% of the employment index, we can see a steady decline until Q4 in 2009 as the recession unfolded, after which both metro and nonmetro employment increased (Figure 8: Cromartie, 2018). However, while the metro employment index reached the per-recession level by the end of 2013, the nonmetro index was still at only 98% of the pre-recession level in mid-2018.

Figure 8. Metropolitan and nonmetropolitan employment index



As it was argued by Kandel and Brown (2006), rural areas are far from static places. They change the same way as metro areas under macro level social and economic forces. As noted by Curtis and Kulcsar (2019:611): “The decline of labor-intensive agriculture from the 1960s, the changing residential preferences in the 1970s, the energy booms and busts of the 1980s, the rise

of amenity-rich places from the 1990s following the retirement dynamics of the Baby Boom, and the stagnation of migration during the Great Recession of the 2000s are all factors that influence most rural places, either enabling them to leverage new trends to their advantage or exacerbating already difficult conditions."

It seems clear that only in-migration can turn or at least mitigate the demographic challenges. Both fertility and mortality are long-term trends that are very difficult to address at the local level. Significant in-migration alters the age structure, which in turn will positively influence fertility outcomes. The question of course is how to turn the migration tide?

Johnson and Lichter (2019) in their recent overview on rural depopulation provided broad policy suggestions, while noting that all of these require considerable work around a feasible consensus. Two suggestions revolved around investing resources in either urban employment centers or rural "demographic winners" to generate regional growth, which spills over to the surrounding areas. As they noted, this would be a contentious policy, as the selection of target areas and communities will likely generate a considerable debate. The common theme in these policies is the recognition that resource investment programs targeting declining places, such as the Rural Opportunity Zones in Kansas, showed little evidence for any success. The third policy suggestion was for rural places to market themselves as immigrant destinations to capitalize on age-selective in-migration. This strategy of course is contingent on available employment for immigrants as well as a successful integration effort from the local community.

As we can see, there are no silver bullets to solve the demographic challenges of rural communities. Even if most rural places would likely not end up as the "Buffalo Commons" (Popper and Popper, 1987), many of them have long passed the point of return to their former economic, social, and demographic realities. But as we continue to look for feasible and sustainable solutions to revive their economies and communities, we should keep in mind the importance of the social construction of rural. The aftermath of the 2016 U.S. presidential election created a polarized view on rural society, largely for incorrect reasons. The rural electoral backlash has already been debunked (Monnat and Brown, 2017), but its legacy lives on, and in the current political climate, it will take a long time to return to a more accurate representation and understanding of what is rural and who lives there.

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