The Demography of Rural America

László J. Kulcsár
The Pennsylvania State University
Global urbanization trends

The rural narrative

• Until the 1970s, rural places were population reserves, with persistent outmigration and predictable, high fertility

• The nonmetropolitan turnaround
  • Changes in residential preferences
  • Rural economic diversification

• Demographic fluctuation and diverging pathways since the 1980s
  • Economic prosperity and demographic trends no longer go hand in hand (agricultural dependence)
  • Natural amenities have become more important
  • Proximity to urban is crucial
  • Many narratives
The rural narrative

- Rural as a social construct (mostly from an urban perspective)
  - From production to consumption
  - The rural mystique
  - Rural is not a place anymore, but a lifestyle (for better of for worse)
US population, 1900-2010 (1000s)

- Metropolitan
- Nonmetropolitan

United States Bureau of Census
US population distribution, 1900-2010, %
Urban reclassification

• Nonmetropolitan population was 46 million in 2016, an all-time low
• A lot of this erosion is due to reclassification
• A net loss of 4.9 million people in 2013
Population change, 2000-2010

Percent population change in rural America

- 1930-40: Population change 4.8, Net migration -5.1, Natural increase -15.0
- 1940-50: Population change 9.9, Net migration -10.0, Natural increase -5.0
- 1950-60: Population change 12.8, Net migration -11.1, Natural increase -5.0
- 1960-70: Population change 15.4, Net migration -12.5, Natural increase -5.0
- 1970-80: Population change 10.0, Net migration -5.8, Natural increase 7.4
- 1980-90: Population change 6.1, Net migration -2.8, Natural increase 5.4
- 1990-2000: Population change 10.3, Net migration 3.4, Natural increase 6.9
- 2000-2010: Population change 4.8, Net migration 2.5, Natural increase 2.3

Data from United States Bureau of Census
Total fertility rates, 1950-2015

Fertility decline, 2007-2017

Total fertility rates by place

- Nonmetro:
  - 2007: 2.21
  - 2017: 1.95

- Large metro:
  - 2007: 2.1
  - 2017: 1.71

Total fertility rates by race, rural only

- NH White:
  - 2007: 2.09
  - 2017: 1.91

- Hispanic:
  - 2007: 3.21
  - 2017: 2.32

Mortality

- The national mortality stagnation and persistent rural mortality / morbidity disadvantage are exacerbated by the recent “deaths of despair”
Net migration rates by age
Finney County, KS

The Christmas fire, 2000

Median age and projected age structure in Smith County, KS
Rural depopulation

Economic change (labor displacement) → Persistent net out-migration of young adults → Depopulation

Urban preference → Persistent net out-migration of young adults

Age transition

Changes in family formation

Distorted age structure and fertility decline

Mortality and morbidity disadvantage
The vicious cycle

Population loss

Loss of services

Loss of consumers

Loss of revenues

Loss of businesses
More on the Great Recession

% population change

- NM Farming
- NM Manufacturing
- NM Recreation
- Metro

U.S. employment, metro and nonmetro areas, 2007-2016 (quarterly)

Conclusions I.

• Demographic trends will not change overnight
  • Demography is almost destiny, but not quite

• Rural fertility
  • Family formation norms will continue to follow the national trends
  • Aging in place will continue to remove reproductive capacity
  • Hispanic fertility will remain the key

• Mortality
  • Long-term, structural disadvantages are unlikely to change
  • New problems (opioids) disproportionately affect rural areas and populations

• Migration
  • Age-selective outmigration removes the most resourceful segment
  • Specific local conditions can create favorable environments for in-migration (natural amenities, proximity to metro, regional centers)
Conclusions II.

• Rural America has been facing more difficulties for several reasons
  • Greater concentration of vulnerable populations (morbidity challenges, aging in place)
  • Less diversified economies
  • Weaker institutions
  • Persistent revenue and service deficiencies

• Most of rural America will see more of the same, as the disadvantages are structural and (just like demography) change slowly over time

• Potential policy actions (Johnson and Lichter, 2019)
  • Economic growth centers (either regional urban or well-performing rural)
  • Boosting immigration and then integration

• No matter what, always keep the narrative in sight, as in our post-truth world, the ultimate political decisions are often based on emotions and partisan agendas instead of facts and science
Thank you.