



# Rural Population Research Network

A USDA supported multi-state research project on the causes and consequences of demographic change in rural America

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Brief: #2022-11

## Counting Moves to Rural Counties: 1991-2016

*In exurban America, 'Moving to the country' means 'staying close to the city.'*

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New people moving to rural communities bring economic opportunities, but only a few rural places attract more movers than they lose. Most movers to rural America live along the outer periphery of cities (the “exurbs”). Exurbanization brings more people to “rural America”, but it is part of a broader urbanization pattern whereby remote rural areas and small cities have lost residents and resources for 25 years. As urbanization becomes both more dominant and more regionally concentrated, there are implications for communities, households, and the entire country.

### KEY FINDINGS

- Over the last 25 years, rural migration gains clustered around large cities.
- Most movers to rural places settled in exurban areas of the South and West.
- On average, micropolitan and remote rural areas lost more households from migration than they gained.

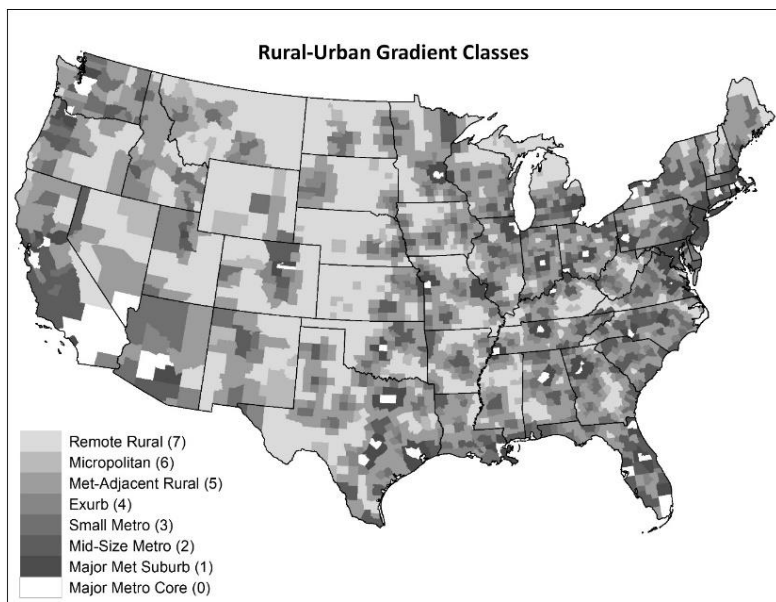


Figure 1. The Rural-Urban Gradient Classification

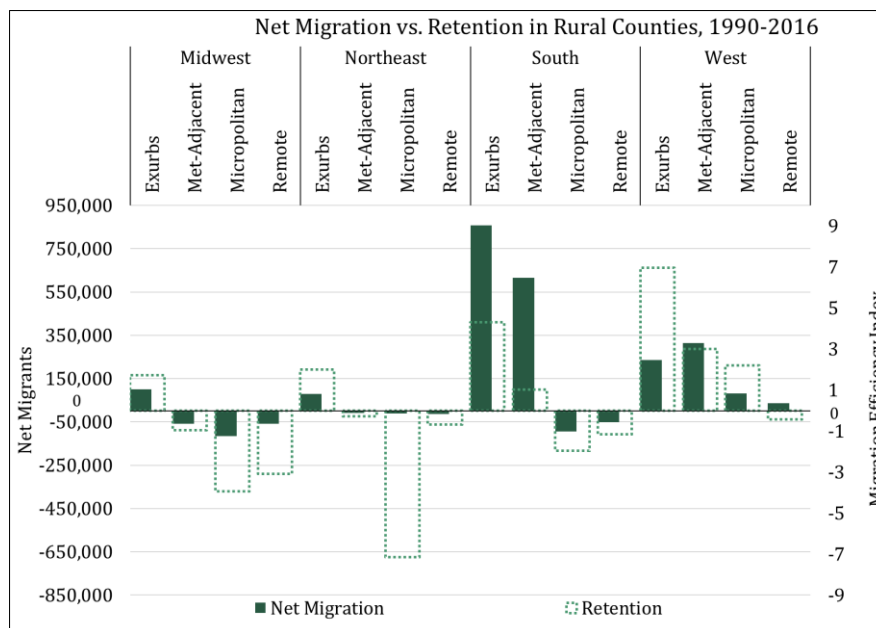
Data Source: Adapted from USDA ERS Rural-Urban Continuum

This brief summarizes a project that used data from IRS records to track U.S. migration between 1991 and 2016. We introduce the ‘RUG’ (Rural-Urban Gradient) classification for US counties (see Figure 1). The RUG separates major metropolitan core counties from suburbs and exurbs by holding metro classification constant.<sup>1,2</sup> To do so, federal changes incorporating rural counties into growing metro areas were ignored. Instead, those counties are labeled ‘exurbs’ and compared to other rural counties, revealing unique ways migration impacts rural places along urban peripheries.

## Where is urban appeal strongest for rural movers?

The RUG helps illustrate just how important urban adjacency was to rural migration between 1990 and 2016. Counties bordering metropolitan areas (Exurbs and Metro-Adjacent combined) accounted for 96.5% of all rural net-migrants. Exurban counties alone accounted for nearly 66%. This growth occurred primarily in the South and West. Exurbs and Met-Adjacent counties in those regions accounted for 87% of total rural domestic net migration gains.

One difference between the South and the West is how well they retained households, what we refer to as “migration efficiency” (see Figure 2). While both regions welcomed (on average) more rural movers than they lost, the West’s exurbs saw lower rates of leaving than the South’s exurbs. By contrast, in the Micropolitan Northeast, the small net migration deficit resulted from very low rates of in-migration.



**Figure 2. Rural Net Migration and Mean Migration Efficiency**

*Data Source:* Aggregated from annual IRS migration data

*Note:* Migration efficiency is a measure used to characterize a place’s net loss or gain of movers with respect to the total volume of all moves in and out of a place. See the Data and Methods section for more detail.

## How Consistent Are These Patterns over Time?

Urbanization was so consistent over the study period that Suburbs and Exurbs saw aggregate net migration gains even during the Great Recession (2007-2009), when migration slowed dramatically across the country. Suburbs saw gains in every year under consideration, and Exurbs saw gains in all years but two. Since the Great Recession, however, the largest cities have seen less out-migration, and suburbanization and exurbanization have both slowed. On the other hand, most Remote Rural and Micropolitan counties (small cities in rural areas) experienced consistent net out-migration since the mid-1990s.

Across the U.S., the COVID-19 pandemic is known to have increased the appeal of rural places, especially for city dwellers in places hard hit by the virus. The longevity of that shift in appeal is still uncertain. Future research will examine exurbanization under these new socio-demographic conditions.

## What does Urbanization Mean for America?

Rural American communities and rural Americans are becoming more different. An increasing number of rural American people live near cities and work in their prosperous labor markets, but a growing number of rural American communities are slowly losing

their residents and suffering the associated economic consequences.

Politically, urbanization affects legislative bodies. Concentrated exurbanization means remote rural communities that constitute a shrinking share of state populations may wield disproportionate representation in state government.

From a policy standpoint, exurbs confront unique problems for state and local governments. Climbing home values coupled with relatively high poverty speak to the potential for acute housing affordability challenges. Low density housing and long commutes leave communities vulnerable to oil price spikes and present mobility barriers for an aging population. In the context of climate change, most exurban growth observed between 1991 and 2016 occurred in landscapes that already rely on air conditioning or in forests that are increasingly susceptible to wildfire.

## Urbanization and Opportunity in Rural America

Rural communities have diverse migration profiles, and therefore they have diverse economic outlooks and needs. One size-fits-all rural policies should be reimaged to focus on the specific problems confronting rural people across the rural-urban gradient.

This diversity in rural conditions opens the door for learning and sharing policy ideas and practices between cities, suburbs, and small communities. Places all along the rural-urban gradient have endured migration extremes in recent decades, which means that rural America can, for example, look to growing suburbs for models to plan social programs and environmental protections, or to shrinking cities for policy and program ideas to drive revitalization.

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### Data and Methods

Migration data come from IRS migration files tallied from annual tax return filings. RUG categories are adapted from USDA ERS Rural-Urban Continuum Codes.

- Net Migrants = inflow-outflow
- Net Migration Rate (NMR) =  $(\text{inflow} - \text{outflow}) / (\text{non-movers} + \text{outflow})$
- Migration Efficiency Index =  $(\text{inflow} - \text{outflow} / \text{inflow} + \text{outflow}) * 100$ . More details are provided in the [peer-reviewed journal article](#).

### References

1. Johnson, K. M., & Winkler, R. L. (2015). Migration signatures across the decades: Net migration by age in U.S. Counties,

1950-2010. *Demographic Research*, 32(1), 1065–1080.

2. USDA Economic Research Service (2013). Rural Urban Continuum Codes. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/rural-urban-continuum-codes/documentation/#DataSources>

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The Rural Population Research Network is a USDA NIFA supported network of scholars who conduct research on the most pressing demographic, economic, social, and environmental challenges faced by rural communities in the United States. Our current project (2017-2022) is titled 'W4001: Social, Economic and Environmental Causes and Consequences of Demographic Change in Rural America'. <https://www.nimss.org/projects/view/mrp/outline/18389>