



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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The U.S. Rural Population Declined for the First Time between 2010 and 2020

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Recent data from the 2020 U.S. Census reveal that the rural population declined between 2010 and 2020. The loss was minimal, just 289,000 out of 46 million people, but it is the first decade-long rural population loss in history. Nearly 67% of rural counties lost population because more people moved out than moved in, births diminished, and deaths increased. These demographic changes are important to policy making to increase the viability of rural communities and enhance their contribution to the nation's material, environmental, and social well-being.

The Aftermath of the Great Recession Contributed to Rural Population Decline

Rural demographic trends were influenced by the economic turbulence of the Great Recession and its aftermath. Between 2010 and 2020, immigration slowed, internal migration diminished, births declined to a 40-year low, and deaths reached record highs across the nation. These demographic changes had a significant impact on rural America. The rural population declined by .6% because a migration loss reduced the rural population by 1.1%, which exceeded a 0.5% gain from more

KEY FINDINGS

- Rural America lost population for the first time in history between 2010 and 2020.
- The rural population declined because there were fewer births, more deaths, and a migration loss.
- Rural population loss was widespread, but rural America is not monolithic. Some rural areas gained population.

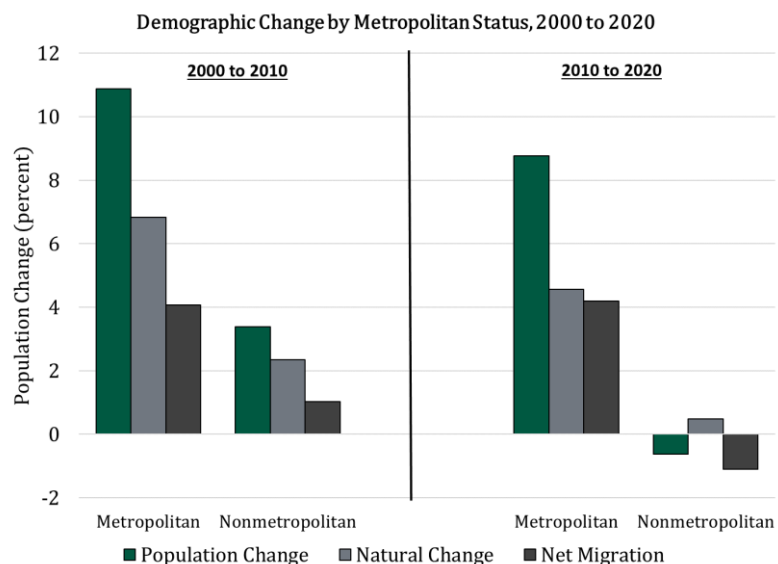


Figure 1. Rural Counties Lost Population between 2010 and 2020 Due Primarily to Net Out-Migration

Data Source: Census 2010, 2020 and Population Estimates

births than deaths (Figure 1). In the prior decade, the rural population grew by 3.4% due to a net migration gain and significantly more births than deaths. Metropolitan areas were also impacted by the economic turbulence of the era and experienced less population gain between 2010 and 2020 than in the prior decade. Most of the metropolitan slowdown was the result of fewer births and more deaths.

Rural America is not Monolithic – Most Areas Declined, but Some Grew

Rural America spans nearly 70% of the land area of the United States. Demographic trends in this broad expanse are far from monolithic. Rural population gains were widespread in the West and parts of the Southeast, as well as in retirement and recreational areas (Figure 2). In contrast, population losses were common in the Great Plains and Corn Belt, Mississippi Delta, Northern Appalachia, and in the rust belt.

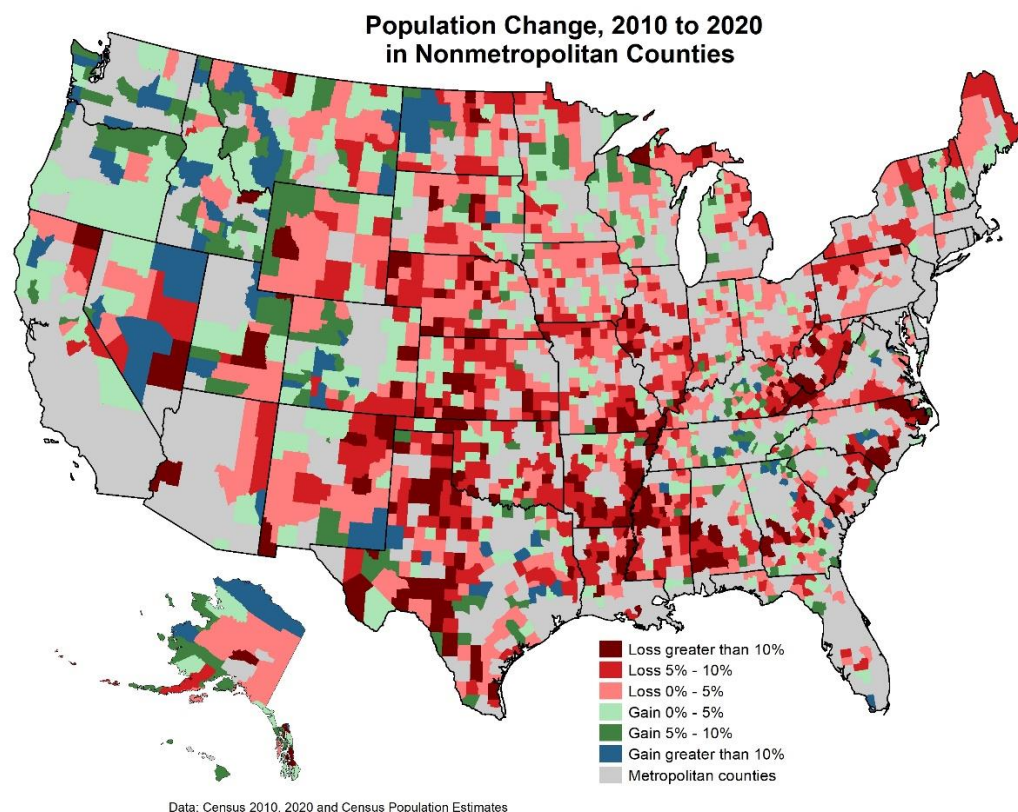


Figure 2. Most Rural Counties Lost Population between 2010 and 2020

Data Source: Census 2010 and 2020

Diversity is Growing in Rural America

Rural America became more diverse between 2010 and 2020 because the non-Hispanic White population declined by 5.4%, while the minority population increased by nearly 18% percent. In 2020, 76.0% of rural residents reported to the Census Bureau that they were White alone and not of Hispanic origin, compared to 80.0% in 2010. In contrast, the population grew among groups other than non-Hispanics Whites to 24.0% of the rural population in 2020 from 20.2% in 2010. Hispanics are the largest share of this growing population, comprising 9% of the rural total. Non-Hispanic Blacks represent 7.7% of the rural population, a modest decline from 2010. Those reporting that they were Native Peoples or of “Some Other Race” increased to 2.5% and Asians are now .9% of the rural population. The largest gain was among multiracial non-Hispanic residents, who now

represent 3.9% of the rural population. Children are at the leading edge of this growing diversity. In all, 32.4% of the rural population under age 18 belonged to a minority group in 2020, compared to 21.6% of the rural population over age 18. The greater diversity of the rural population, both among children and adults, is the result of minority population gains and non-Hispanic White population losses over the past decade.

Recommendations for Policy

Policymakers must recognize that there is not one rural America, but several. Policy must be tailored to address the challenges facing specific rural areas. Fast-growing rural communities need programs and infrastructure to support growth and development. Rural areas with diminishing populations need programs to ameliorate the adverse impacts of population loss.

Data and Methods

This analysis uses data from the 2020 Census and Census Population Estimates. It predates the COVID-19 pandemic and does not reflect its impact. Rural counties are those classified as nonmetropolitan in 2013 by the U.S. Office on Management and Budget (OMB). Data quality and differential privacy concerns in the 2020 Census remain unresolved currently. Changes in Census Bureau procedures make it challenging to make direct comparisons between the racial categories in the 2010 Census and 2020 Census. The 2020 Census undercounted Hispanics, African Americans and Native peoples on reservations, and overcounted the non-Hispanic White and Asian populations.

Acknowledgments

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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>