



# Rural Population Research Network

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

March 18, 2022

Brief # 2022-10

## Rural America Gets a Boost from Migration Changes During the COVID-19 Pandemic

**Julia Petersen and Richelle L. Winkler**

Of all the changes that COVID-19 brought to our lives, one that appears positive for rural America has been the disruption of typical migration patterns. Prior to the pandemic, most rural counties were experiencing net out-migration, particularly of young adults, posing challenges for community and economic development. Pandemic conditions made moving to large urban centers less attractive.<sup>1,2</sup> Could this migration shift have lasting impacts on rural communities?

This brief uses data from U.S. Postal Service change-of-address request forms to document changes in migration during the first and second years of the pandemic for counties across the rural-urban gradient.<sup>3</sup>

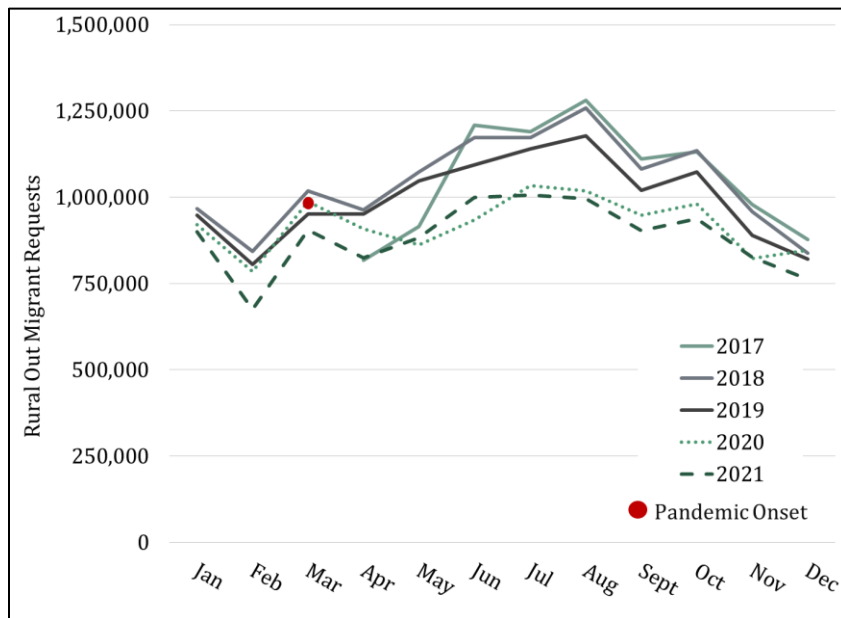
### KEY FINDINGS

- Migration out of Rural America slowed during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Most counties that saw net population loss prior to the pandemic saw either less net loss or net gains during the pandemic.
- Rural recreation counties saw greater net migration gains during the pandemic than other types of rural communities.

### Migration Out of Rural America Slowed during the Pandemic

The number of people filing change-of-address forms out of a rural address declined markedly after March 2020 (see Figure 1). The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic likely froze people in place, as pandemic restrictions limited peoples' ability to move and limited the social and economic drivers, such as employment change or university enrollment, that motivate moves to urban areas.

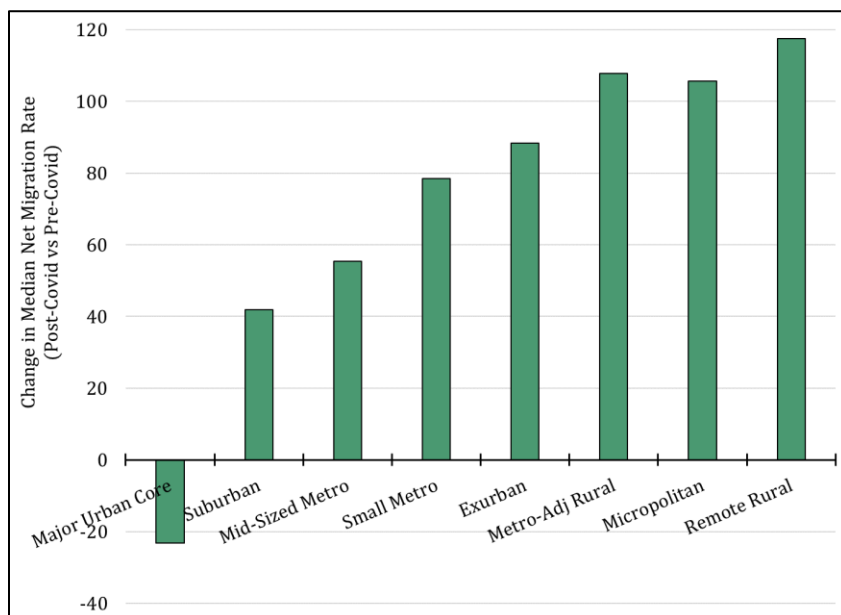
The slowdown in out-migration from rural areas meant that rural population loss declined during the pandemic relative to years prior. The largest cities (Major Urban Core counties) experienced more population loss due to migration during the pandemic, as fewer people moved into these places than had been typical before (see Figure 2). All other county types across the rural-urban gradient saw less population loss or more migration gain in the pandemic compared to the three years prior. The most rural counties (Remote Rural) saw the greatest increase in the net outcome of migration (in-migration minus out-migration) during the pandemic, because out-migration slowed down while in-migration changed little.



**Figure 1. Rural Requests for Change-of-Address Out, Monthly 2017-2021**

*Data Source:* U.S. Postal Service Change-of-Address forms, April 2017-Dec 2021.

*Notes:* Data show the estimated number of people with permanent moves away from a rural address. Some of these migrants remained within Rural America. Rural includes all Nonmetro counties, plus Small Metro and Exurban counties.



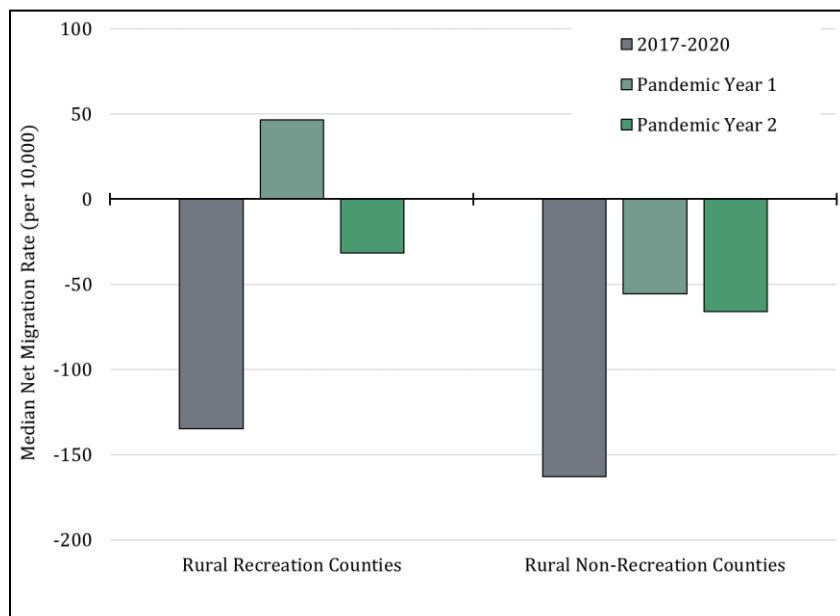
**Figure 2. Net Migration Rates along Urban-Rural Gradient**

*Data Source:* U.S. Postal Service Change-of-Address forms, April 2017-January 2022.

*Notes:* Net Migration Rates are calculated as people requesting changes in minus people requesting changes out, divided by total population. Pre-COVID is average net migration rate April 2017-February 2020. Post-COVID is average net migration March 2020-January 2022.

## Rural Recreation Counties Experienced Increases in Net Migration during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Among rural counties, those rich in outdoor recreation amenities (Recreation counties) experienced greater increases in net migration during the pandemic (see Figure 3). In the three years prior to the pandemic, rural recreation counties experienced almost as much net out-migration as other rural counties. This shifted in the first year of the pandemic (March 2020-Feb 2021) when rural recreation counties experienced more in-migrants than out-migrants (net gain). In the second year of the pandemic (March 2021-Jan 2022), most recreation counties again experienced net loss due to migration, but this loss was not as extreme as non-recreation counties, nor as extreme as what they experienced prior to the pandemic.



**Figure 3. Rural Recreation County Net Migration Before and During COVID-19 Pandemic**

*Data Source:* U.S. Postal Service Change-of-Address forms, April 2017-January 2022.

*Notes:* Recreation counties defined by the USDA Economic Research Service County Typologies (2015). Net migration is the net outcome of in-migration minus out-migration.

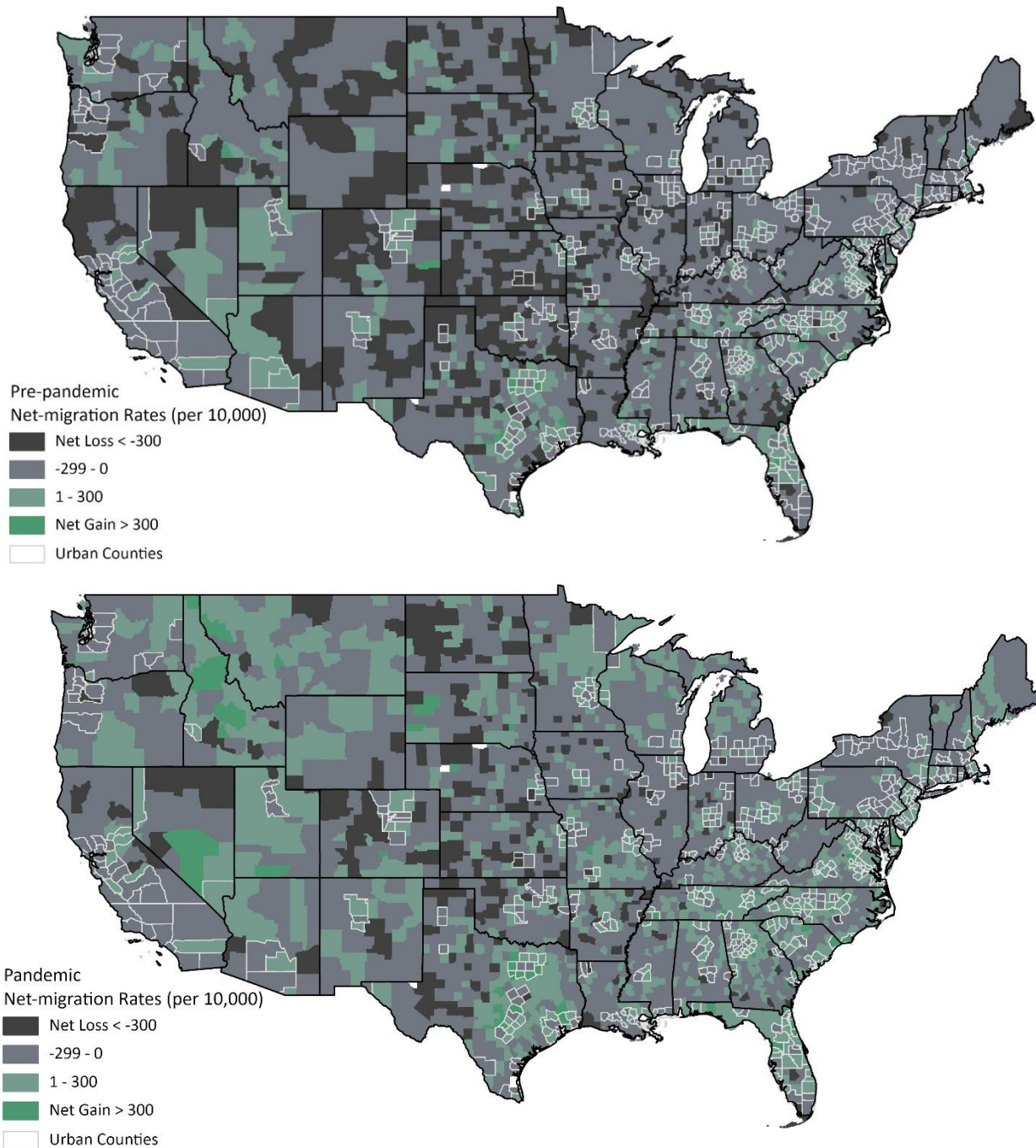
## Migration Changes During the Pandemic were Widespread across Most of Rural America

Figure 4 shows counties' net migration rates pre-pandemic (top map) and during-pandemic (bottom map). Most of the rural counties that were experiencing net loss prior to the pandemic saw either less net loss or net gains during the pandemic. Pandemic increases in net migration happened across all regions of the country, including shifts to positive net migration in much of Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Kentucky, and Tennessee, across the Northwoods of the Upper Midwest, and through the Missouri Ozarks. While rural counties (on average) continued to experience net loss due to out-migration in the pandemic years, this loss was considerably less than in years prior.

## Rural Communities Should Invest in Outdoor Recreation

Out-migration from rural America slowed during the pandemic. Looking ahead, will rural areas become more attractive places for young people and families to remain, offering a demographic boost to their aging populations? That will depend, in part, on the social and economic resources rural communities can provide.

Rural America could see lasting change, but this will be likely only if policy changes protect rural places from longstanding out-migration. Outdoor recreation investments could provide opportunities for employment and enjoyment, retaining current residents and increasing migration into rural America. Investments in broadband access will also be critical, particularly now that more people can work remotely and may need to work online. Pandemic conditions have kept more people in rural places, even where those rural places continued to see net population loss. Policies and programs that invest in recreational amenities and other rural services and that engage rural youth in community-building could help rural communities maintain pandemic gains or otherwise reduce future losses.



**Figure 4. Map of County Net Migration Rates Before vs During COVID-19 Pandemic**

*Data Source:* U.S. Postal Service Change-of-Address forms, April 2017-January 2022.

*Notes:* The top map shows county net-migration rate averages pre-pandemic, April 2017-February 2020. The bottom map shows county net-migration rate averages post pandemic onset, March 2020-January 2022.

## Data and Methods

Migration data are from U.S. Postal Service permanent change-of-address request forms, monthly April 2017-Jan 2022, [online](#). The authors assumed each family form represented three people and imputed suppressed values, using county averages in other months. Only permanent change requests are included. Analysis is restricted to the continental U.S. Rural is defined following the Rural-Urban Gradient (3), including all Nonmetro, plus Small Metro and Exurban counties. Net-migration rates are calculated by subtracting out-migrants from in-migrants then dividing by population total, published by U.S. Census Bureau Population Estimates. Recreation Counties are classified according to the USDA Economic Research Service County Typology (4).

## References

1. Haslag, Peter H. and Weagley, Daniel. 2021. "From L.A. to Boise: How Migration Has Changed During the COVID-19 Pandemic." Available at

[SSRN](#).

2. Whitaker, Stephan D. 2021. "Did the COVID-19 Pandemic Cause an Urban Exodus?" Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland District Data Brief. [Retrieved](#) March 11, 2022.
3. Golding, S. A., & Winkler, R. L. 2020. "Tracking urbanization and exurbs: Migration across the rural-urban continuum, 1990-2016." *Population Research and Policy Review* 39(5): 835-859.
4. U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service. 2019. "County Typology Codes." ERS County Typology Codes, 2015 Ed.

## About the Authors

**Julia Petersen** ([juliapet@mtu.edu](mailto:juliapet@mtu.edu)) is a doctoral student in the Environmental and Energy Policy PhD program at Michigan Technological University.

**Richelle Winkler** ([rwinkler@mtu.edu](mailto:rwinkler@mtu.edu)) is Professor of Sociology and Demography in the Social Sciences department at Michigan Technological University.

*Suggested Citation:* Petersen, Julia and Richelle L. Winkler. 2022. "Rural America Gets a Boost from Migration Changes During the COVID-19 Pandemic." Brief 2022-10. Rural Population Research Network.

---

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>