

The real (surprisingly comforting) reason rural America is doomed to decline

By Andrew Van Dam
May 24, 2019

Update: This story has been updated to reflect the fact that a paper in an academic journal exploring similar themes about rural America was published in 2018. Its authors were Stephan Goetz (Pennsylvania State University), Mark Partridge (Ohio State University) and Heather Stephens (West Virginia University).

According to the United States' original 1950 urban classifications, rural America is crushing it. It's home to about as many people as urban America, and it's growing faster. So why do headlines and statistics paint rural areas as perpetually in decline?

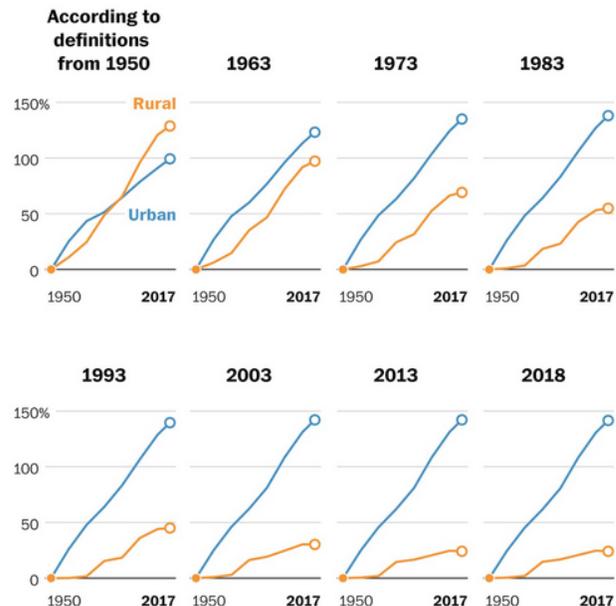
Because the contest between rural and urban America is rigged. Official definitions are regularly updated in such a way that rural counties are continually losing their most successful places to urbanization. When a rural county grows, it transmutes into an urban one.

In a way, rural areas serve as urban America's farm team: All their most promising prospects get called up to the big leagues, leaving the low-density margins populated by an ever-shrinking pool of those who couldn't qualify.

Imagine how unfair a sport would seem if one team automatically drafted the other's best players the moment they showed any promise. That's essentially what happens when we

Change in population since 1950

The areas defined as metropolitan in 1950 have since grown more slowly than the rural remainder of the country.



Sources: Office of Management and Budget; Census Bureau via NHGIS
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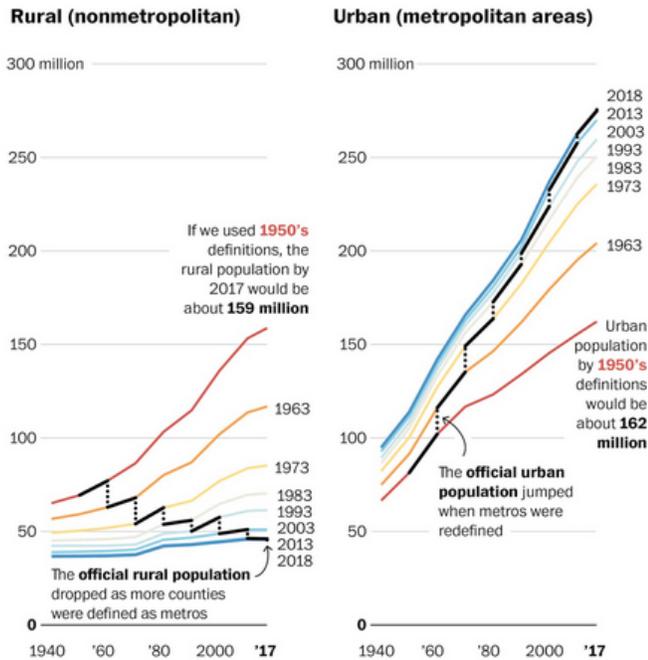
measure rural areas as whatever's left over after anywhere that hits a certain population level is considered metropolitan. It distorts how we see rural America. It skews our view of everything from presidential politics to suicide to deaths caused by alcohol.

Officially, the years since 2010 have marked a turning point for rural counties. For the first time, they have lost population. Their share of the U.S. population hit an all-time low of 14 percent. But those startling statistics are due entirely to changes in county definitions, according to a paper presented to the Rural Sociological Society by Ken Johnson of the University of New Hampshire, Daniel Lichter

of Cornell University and John Cromartie of the Agriculture Department.

Where rural America would be under prior definitions

When we break the United States down by older county classifications, we see the entire population shift from rural to urban comes from fast-growing counties being redefined as metropolitan statistical areas.



Note: This is an update of a chart published in "Rural America at a Glance" by the Agriculture Department's Economic Research Service.
Sources: Office of Management and Budget; Census Bureau via NHGIS
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Any attempt to make a clean break between urban and rural will look arbitrary, as Kentucky lawyer Amanda Kool writes in the Daily Yonder, a publication focused on rural news and issues. Bracken County, where she lives, has about 8,000 people. Hay trucks and Amish buggies often disrupt her commute. And yet, because of commuting patterns, Bracken was designated as part of the Cincinnati metropolitan area in 2003

"There are places on the outer edge of big metropolitan areas where you'd swear you were in a rural area," Johnson said. But because many residents commute to a central city, they're considered part of that metro area.

A few years after every census, counties like Bracken are reclassified, and rural or "non-metropolitan" America shrinks and metropolitan America grows. At least on paper. The character of a place doesn't necessarily change the moment a city crosses the 50,000-resident mark.

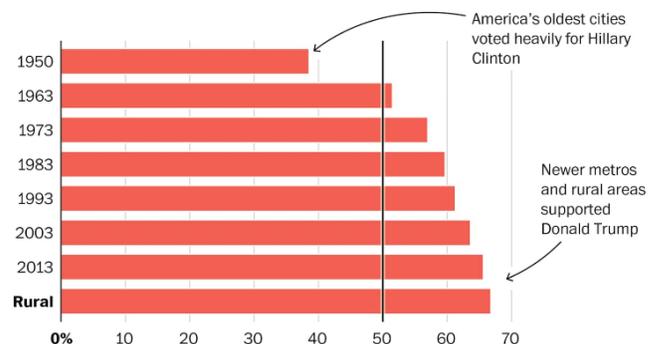
The sprawling, diverse segment of the United States that has changed from rural to urban since 1950 is the fastest-growing segment of the country. Culturally, newly urban areas often have more in common with persistently rural places than with the biggest cities.

Most notably, in 2016, Hillary Clinton would have won only the counties defined as urban when the metropolitan classification began in 1950, while Donald Trump would have won every group of counties added to metropolitan after the initial round, as Stephan Goetz (Pennsylvania State University), Mark Partridge (Ohio State University) and Heather Stephens (West Virginia University) showed in their review of rural America at the dawn of the Trump era, published in 2018 in the journal Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy.

"What might be described as rural culture and values will have faded some, but they're more alive in places that have recently ur-

Trump's urban support came in recently rural areas

Group metro counties by the period in which they changed from rural to urban and you see Donald Trump won the two-party vote in every set of new metros apart from the original one, created in 1950.

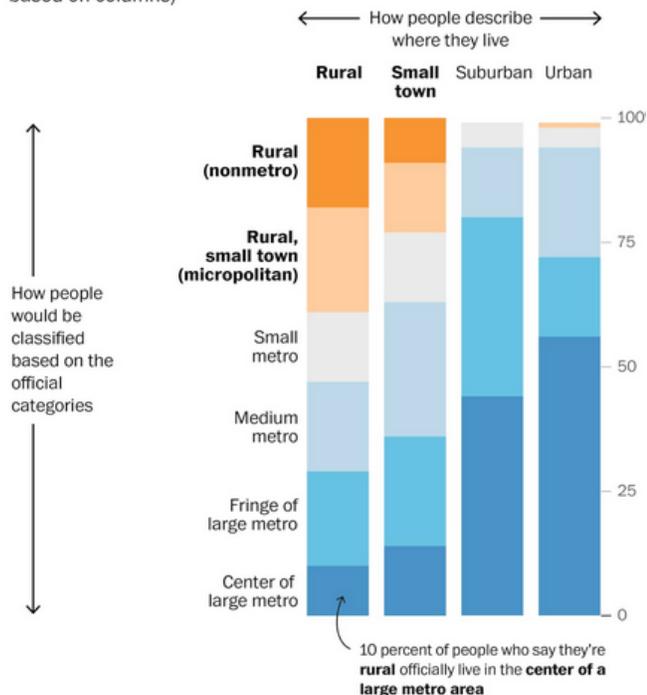


Sources: Office of Management and Budget (metros); Census Bureau via NHGIS (population)
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banized than in places that have been more highly urbanized for longer,” said University of California at Davis legal scholar Lisa Pruitt.

Official classifications vs. people’s perceptions

Where people who describe themselves as “rural” or “suburban” in a poll actually live, according to official statistics. (Percentages are based on columns)



Note: Percentages may not total to 100 due to rounding. Official categories are based on classifications from the National Center for Health Statistics
 Source: Washington Post-Kaiser Family Foundation poll conducted in 2017
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About 6 in 10 U.S. adults who consider themselves “rural” live in an area classified as metropolitan by standards similar to those used above, according to a Washington Post-Kaiser Family Foundation poll conducted in 2017. And 3 in 4 of the adults who say they live in a “small town”? They’re also in a metro area.

This report focuses on the widely used definitions from the Office of Management and Budget, with metropolitan statistical areas labeled as “urban” and unclassified areas, as well as the smaller towns officials call “micropolitan areas,” labeled as “rural.” But the issue transcends technicalities. Any which way you look at it, “rural” is everything that’s not a city.

“If you go every single decade and you keep winnowing out the ones with the best prospects for growth, when you get to the post-2010 period you’re getting to some pretty disadvantaged rural areas,” Cornell’s Lichter said. “They’re not likely to experience much in-migration. You’re not going to see a lot of growth.”

While there’s no easy answer for the definitional issues, we can be sure the narrative of “rural economic malaise and population decline” is an oversimplification, Lichter said. “We’re misrepresenting what’s really happening in rural areas.”

Without growing cities, the remaining rural areas paint a dark picture

Rural America today is a different place than in 1950. It’s much smaller and has lost its midsize towns and the counties that surrounded bigger cities.

The areas left after seven decades of reclassification tend to be defined by their history of clawing resources, such as copper, timber or winter wheat, from the open country, and their present of clawing a living from an older population and a shrinking economy.

“Those kinds of areas have been losing population for a long time. When they leave, they leave behind an older, aging population with no reproductive potential,” Lichter said. “It’s very hard to see how these places are going to recover,” he added.

Such places include much of the Great Plains, Appalachia, the Mississippi Delta and other regions where little industry developed beyond farming, mining and logging. Many followed a trajectory similar to Lincoln County, Wyo., home of Kemmerer, the “Fossil Fish Capital of the World.” Once a thriving mining town where retailer James Cash Penney opened his first store, Kemmerer is reeling.

The owner of a nearby coal mine went bankrupt, and a potential sale fell through last month.

Even before the mine faltered, Lincoln County's population growth slowed dramatically from 2010 to 2017, the most recent year for which we have data from the Census Bureau. Contrast that with Wyoming's two metro areas, Cheyenne and Casper, which added more people than the rest of the state combined.

Both of Wyoming's fast-growing metro areas were once defined as rural areas. But because they grew, they no longer count as rural America in the official statistics. Because Lincoln county has struggled, it's still counted as rural.

Ben Winchester, longtime rural specialist at the University of Minnesota Extension, bristles at the suggestion that rural America's fate is sealed. It's been demonstrated that immigration has slowed population loss, and his work has shown that folks in their 30s and older are moving to rural areas.

Rural America is only doomed to decline if you define it so restrictively that it's not allowed to grow. Defined more broadly, and when judged by metrics beyond population growth, rural America is holding its own.

"Everybody just continues to use these historical notions of what rural is," Winchester said. "We've got a diverse economy. We've got people moving in. We're not all farmers. We're starting nonprofit groups left and right."

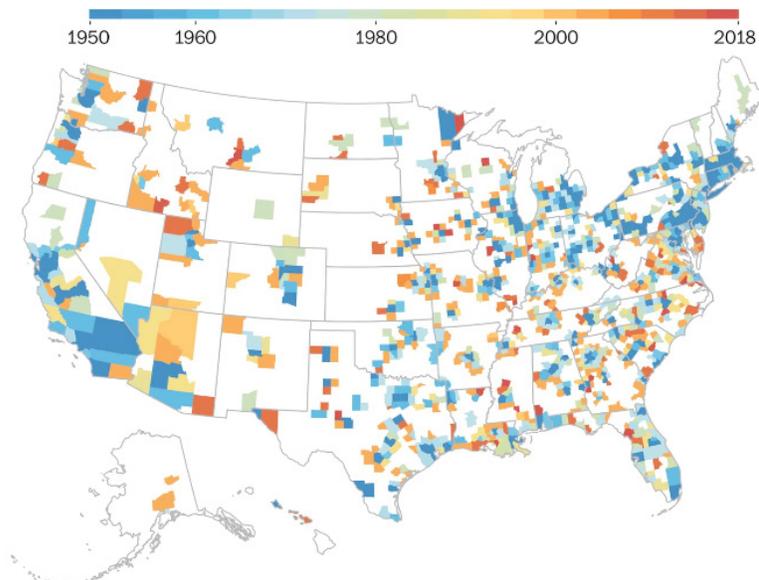
Definitions meet the real world

If rural Americans complain of being left behind, it might be because they literally are. In government statistics, and in popular conception, rural is defined as what's left after you have staked out all the cities and their satellites.

It makes rural areas look poorer, whiter, older and more prone to alcohol-related death or suicide than under broader definitions. Statistics such as these affect everything from Medicare reimbursement to the larger perception that the nation's breadbasket is also a basket case.

Year each county was classified as metro

Based on a widely used government definition first used in 1950.



Source: Office of Management and Budget

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“Yes, rural communities have problems,” Winchester said. “We hear about them all the time. But that can’t be the only way to define rural,” he added.

The nation has long fretted about the fate of its rural margins, but after the 2016 election the discussion took on a different tenor.

“Rural women — like rural and white working-class folks more generally — have become downright toxic in my world, the world of progressive elites,” Pruitt wrote in the University of Toledo Law Review. Pruitt actually has a foot in both worlds. Before she became a widely cited scholar in California, she grew up in one of the least-populated counties in Arkansas.

Policymakers’ disdain for rural people has prevented them from seeing and solving the challenges rural Americans face, Pruitt said.

“At one time,” she said, “farm life or rural living was seen as integral to the American narrative, but that’s hardly the case any longer.”

Emily Guskin and Scott Clement contributed to this report.

Andrew Van Dam covers data and economics. He previously worked for the Wall Street Journal, the Boston Globe and the Idaho Press-Tribune.