



Rural Populations Growing, Slowly

BY DOUG FARQUHAR

Rural counties in the U.S. are beginning to grow in population for the first time since the 2008 recession, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. In 2016-2017, nonmetro rural counties gained 33,000 people, reversing a decade-long population loss trend.

Urban counties gained as well, increasing by almost 16 million people since 2016. The vast majority of population growth in this country occurred in the nation's 1,166 metro counties. The 1,932 rural counties, which make up 61% of the landmass in this nation, accounted for 0.1% of that increase.

The upcoming 2020 census will count the changes in the population growth in the U.S. The count affects how much federal money flows to states (which could lose an estimated \$2,000 per person for each person not counted), how state legislative districts are drawn and each state's number of congressional seats.

For legislative reapportionment purposes, most urban counties will gain legislative seats. As for rural counties, about one-third (673 counties) will show an increase, meaning they may gain seats. Another third will show a steady population, while another third (676 counties) will show they lost people since the last census and likely will lose seats after reapportionment.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 35% of rural counties have experienced solid growth since the last census in 2010. These are often counties with scenic retirement and recreational opportunities that are relatively close to metropolitan centers. Places such as the Hill Country of Texas, the Ozarks, the Upper Great Lakes and rural areas in the Pacific Northwest have witnessed a surge in population, leading to the highest number of people ever living in these counties.

Other counties have suffered from population loss.

Did You Know?

- Population growth in rural counties accounts for 0.1% of the nation's growth since 2010.
- Of the nation's 327 million people, 46.1 million live in rural counties.
- One-third of rural counties are gaining population, one-third have a stable population and one-third are depopulating.

The Census Bureau found that 24% of all counties lost population—9% in metro counties and 91% in rural areas. Of the rural counties, 35% are depopulating, meaning they have fewer people today than they did in 1950.

The reasons for depopulation are varied. Certain areas in oil and gas-producing states, such as North Dakota, Montana, Texas and Wyoming, saw a population surge before a decrease, reflecting fluctuations in the energy industry. Counties in eastern Kentucky and West Virginia lost people as coal production slowed and jobs dissipated.

Counties in the central and northern plains, Appalachia and the rural Southeast have experienced chronic population loss. These are areas reliant on farming. Agriculture no longer requires the same number of people to produce the same amount of food, meaning fewer people are needed in farming counties. These areas have seen a continuous loss of people beginning well before the 2008 recession.

With fewer people living in rural counties, rural areas have seen less representation in the legislature. Fewer rural representatives mean most legislatures are dominated by urban interests. Even in Nebraska, with its rich agricultural tradition, the majority of its legislative members come from the urban centers of Omaha and Lincoln.

Rural interests differ from urban interests. Rural counties have fewer financial services and educational opportunities, and lack the technological links that are vital in the global economy. The nature of most of rural manufacturing has made it vulnerable to overseas competition. Rural areas have lost almost a quarter of all their manufacturing jobs since 2000 because of globalization and increases in productivity. The apparel and textile industries have been particularly hard hit.

Yet rural counties provide most of the nation's food, minerals, energy, clean air and water necessary for the urban counties to function. They are vital to the nation's economic well-being.

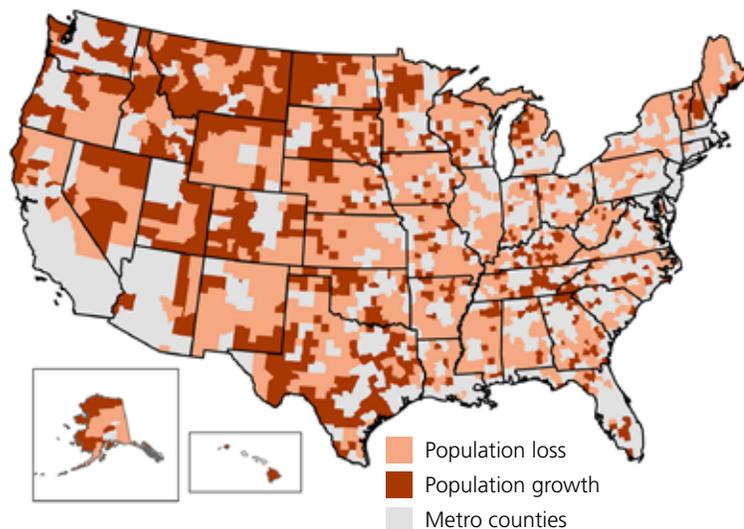
State Action

Census workers have noted the difficulties in reaching people who do not have access to government services, lack internet access or live in remote areas. These factors are more common among rural residents, prompting some states and rural counties to be extra diligent in ensuring every person is counted.

Twenty legislatures have dedicated funding for the 2020 census and 36 states created [state-level Complete Count Committees](#) through executive or legislative action. The committees were formed to encourage everyone living within their boundaries to fully and accurately complete the census form.

Nonmetro Population Change

2010-2017



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Census Bureau

While the census is a federal activity, conducted with federal funds, states may see an advantage in assisting the Census Bureau with its goal of “counting everyone once, only once and in the right place.” State efforts are often focused on “hard to count” populations, including rural residents, along with others such as immigrants and renters.

Legislatures in several states are working to help rural areas thrive beyond the 2020 census. In Georgia, the House convened the [Rural Development Council](#) to address the economies of the state's rural areas. New York has the long-standing [Legislative Commission on Rural Resources](#), which looks at the needs, interests and concerns of the state's 33 rural counties.

The legislature in Pennsylvania supports the [Center for Rural Pennsylvania](#), which serves as a resource for rural policy within the Pennsylvania General Assembly. Wisconsin established the [Legislative Rural Initiative](#) to focus on and provide leadership for rural parts of the state. Legislative committees on rural issues have been convened in California, Illinois, New Mexico, New Hampshire, Vermont and West Virginia.

Arkansas enacted [HB 1443](#) to include health care services in its rural development efforts. The [2019 Empower Rural Iowa Act \(HB 772\)](#) provides broadband development and workforce housing in rural areas. [Utah enacted legislation](#) establishing grants for rural online working hubs and to promote outdoor recreation. The [legislature in Washington](#) created the rural development and opportunity zone act to incentivize private investments and job creation in rural and distressed communities.

Additional Resources

- [NCSL's Challenges Facing Rural America webpage](#)
- [NCSL's 2020 Census Resources and Legislation webpage](#)
- [Rural America at a Glance, United State Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service](#)
- [“Rural Depopulation in a Rapidly Urbanizing America,” Carsey School of Public Policy, University of New Hampshire](#)

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