

THE CHANGING DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF RURAL AMERICA

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Overview

- Age – Rural Populations are increasingly aging, due to the outmigration of rural youth and a resultant lack of natural increase
- Sex – Associated with the aging of rural populations has been a slow, but steady increase in the proportion females living in nonmetro areas – a phenomenon which reverses previous relative increases in females living in metro areas
- Race/ethnicity.- Rural places are generally declining in their proportions of non-Hispanic whites and increasingly are Latino, Asian, American Indian, or African American, due primarily to rural places being “new immigration” destinations and to minority ethnic groups’ generally higher fertility levels.

About the Data

- The data presented in this Policy Brief are from Annabel Kirschner, E. Helen Berry, and Nina Glasgow, “The Changing Faces of Rural America” in *Population Change and Rural Society*. Edited by William A. Kandel and David L. Brown. 2006. Springer.
- Series sponsored by Western Region Multi-State Project, W1001, *Population Change in Rural Communities*.

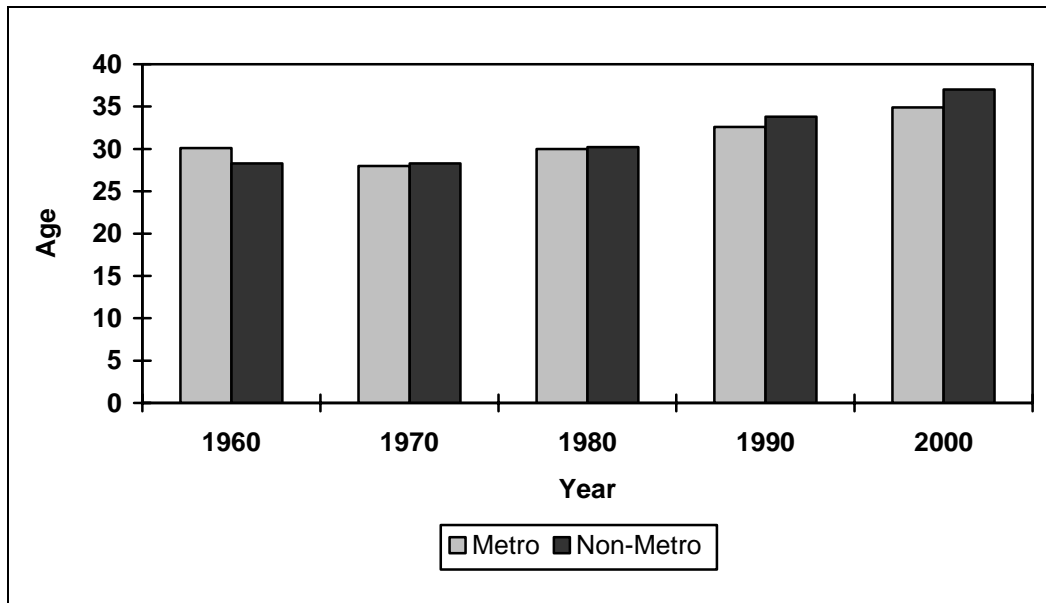
The Changing Demographic Profile of Rural America

The demographic profile of rural and small town America has changed rapidly and significantly in recent decades. The continued out-migration of increasingly educated young adults, in-migration of ethnic minorities, and growing numbers of retirees, have transformed rural economies and influenced a range of public policies. Nonmetro residents are older, more ethnically diverse, and more likely to be female than in the recent past.

Since the 1960s, the nonmetropolitan or rural population has aged more rapidly than the urban or metropolitan population (Table 1). In 2000, the median age in nonmetro counties was nearly 4 years greater than the metro population, an unprecedented gap that is evident in all regions of the nation. This more rapid aging is due to three important trends:

- * Throughout the 20th century, young adults in rural areas have migrated disproportionately from rural to urban areas for education and employment.
- * Higher rural birth rates, which historically offset youth out-migration, declined more rapidly for rural than urban women beginning in the 1960s, and both rates have converged at “below-replacement” levels.
- * Since the 1970s, a steadily increasing number of older persons seeking natural amenities or retirement destinations have moved to a growing number of rural areas.

Figure 1: Median Age by Metro Status, 1960-2000



Source: U.S. Census Bureau Decennial Census 1960-2000.

Age

More rapid population aging is occurring even though the oldest baby boomers (born in 1946) will not reach age 65 until 2011. While some question whether baby boomers are as likely to retire in nonmetro areas as

previous age groups, most rural areas can look forward to substantial population aging because of the large size of the baby boomer generation. In addition, the 55 to 64 year old age group that precedes the Baby Boomers also increased in all regions, except the Northeast (Table 1)

Table 1: Percent Change in Nonmetro Population by Age and Region, 1990–2000

| Age group | Northeast | Midwest | South | West |
|--------------|-----------|---------|-------|------|
| under 20 | -13.3 | -5.1 | -5.3 | 2.9 |
| 20-34 | -29.1 | -16.8 | -11.8 | -8.2 |
| 35-54 | 11.3 | 19.4 | 17.1 | 26.4 |
| 55-64 | -1.6 | 2.6 | 6.5 | 18.5 |
| 65-74 | -13.4 | -8.8 | -6.4 | -1.8 |
| 75 and older | 5.5 | 6.2 | 6.7 | 23.0 |

Source: U.S. Census Bureau Decennial Census 1990-2000.

Table 1 also shows a widespread percentage decline of rural youth and young adults under age 35 in all regions except in the West, an exception due to immigration and its effects (discussed below). At the other end of the age continuum, the 75 and older population grew in all regions, but the 65-74 year-old population – the age group born

during the Great Depression when birth rates were extremely low – declined. The baby boom, represented by 35 to 54 year-olds, grew the fastest of all age groups in the last decade. By 2010, this group will fall into the 45 to 64 age group. Even without retirement in-migration, the very size of this

group sets the stage for a rapid increase in older adults in nonmetro areas.

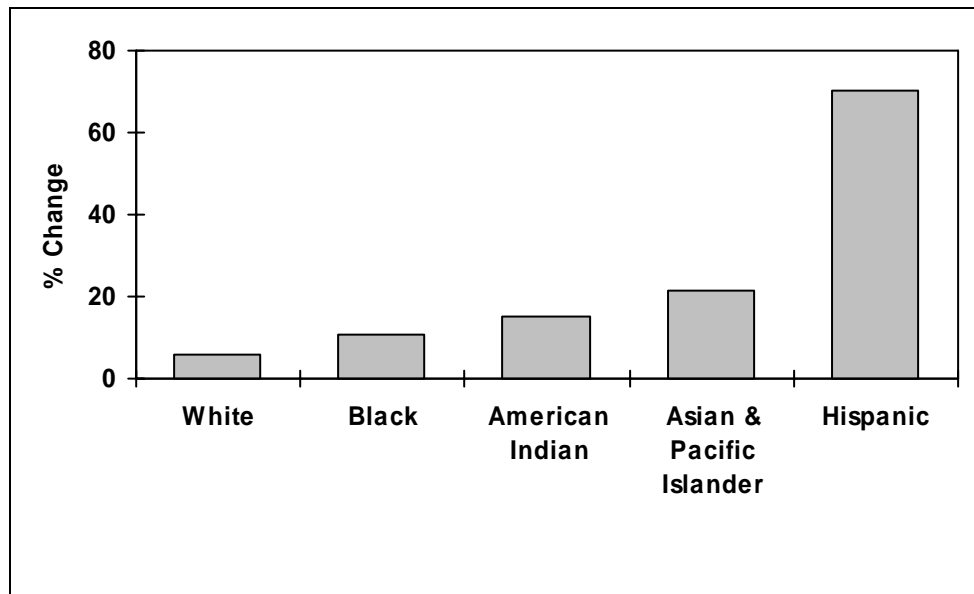
Diversity

While rural areas are becoming older, many are also becoming more diverse. These areas have always had regions of great diversity: the Black population in the rural South; Native American populations and reservations in the rural West and Southwest; and a Mexican heritage population in the Southwest which was once part of Mexico. These historical sources of

diversity have been augmented by natural increase and by immigration, especially in the last decade as rural industries increasingly hire foreign-born workers to do low-skilled jobs.

In every region, the non-Hispanic White (White) population grew more slowly than any other major racial/ethnic group during the last decade (Figure 2). This is partly because the White population is larger. But the difference in growth rates was so substantial that the White population declined between 2 and 5 percentage points, depending on the region.

Figure 2: Percent Change in U.S. Race/Ethnicity for Nonmetro Areas, 1990-2000



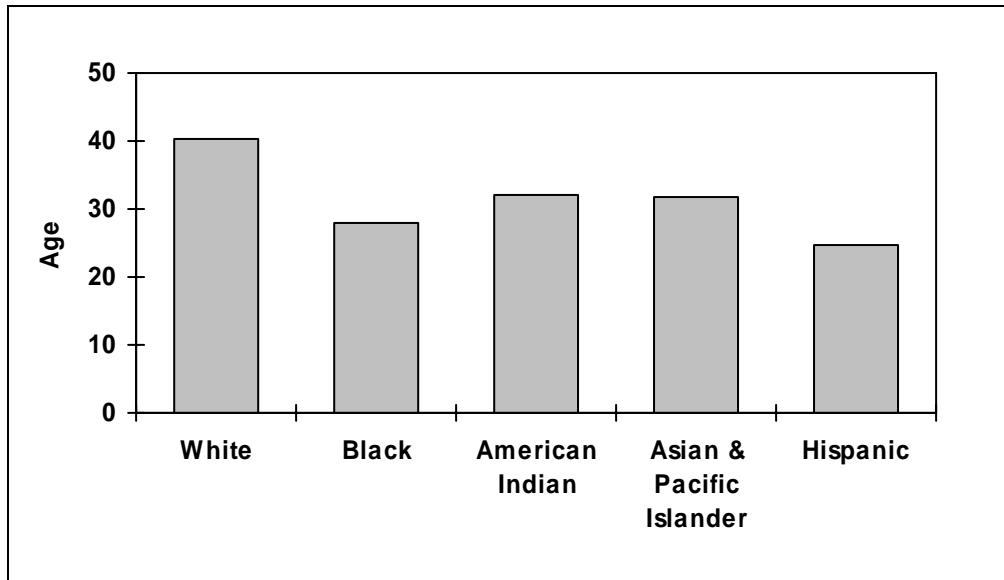
Source: U.S. Census Bureau Decennial Census 1990-2000.

Some counties are untouched by increasing diversity, but many have witnessed a rapid growth in diversity, especially in local school systems. This is because the median age of the non-White population is 10 to 15 years lower than that of the White population (Figure 3).

The non-White population will inevitably grow faster because a larger proportion is in its childbearing years. Moreover, the non-

White population has somewhat higher fertility, and immigration is adding to this population in rural areas. Immigrants are much more likely to be young adults who bring their child-bearing capacity and/or their children with them. Thus rural areas that are currently experiencing more rapid growth in the non-White population can expect to see this continue at least through the next decade and probably longer.

Figure 3: Median Age by Race, Nonmetro Counties, 2000



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000.

Gender

An important factor of aging rural populations is the female-male life expectancy gap. Because women live about 4 years longer than men, rural areas that age will become increasingly female. In 2000, almost two thirds of the rural population age 75 and older was female. Many of these rural women may live alone and often for the first time since, until recently, young women customarily lived at home or with relatives until marriage.

Perhaps equally important is that rural places have long been thought of as being dominated by males, and by male occupations. Figure 4 below shows that, after a 40 year decline, the proportion of women in nonmetro places is on the increase.

Policy Considerations

These rural demographic shifts have

important policy implications. Nonmetro population aging will vary depending on each rural area's characteristics:

- Those with greater outflows of younger people will age more rapidly;
- Those with natural amenities or proximity to urban places may age more rapidly
- Those with a diverse economic base may age less rapidly

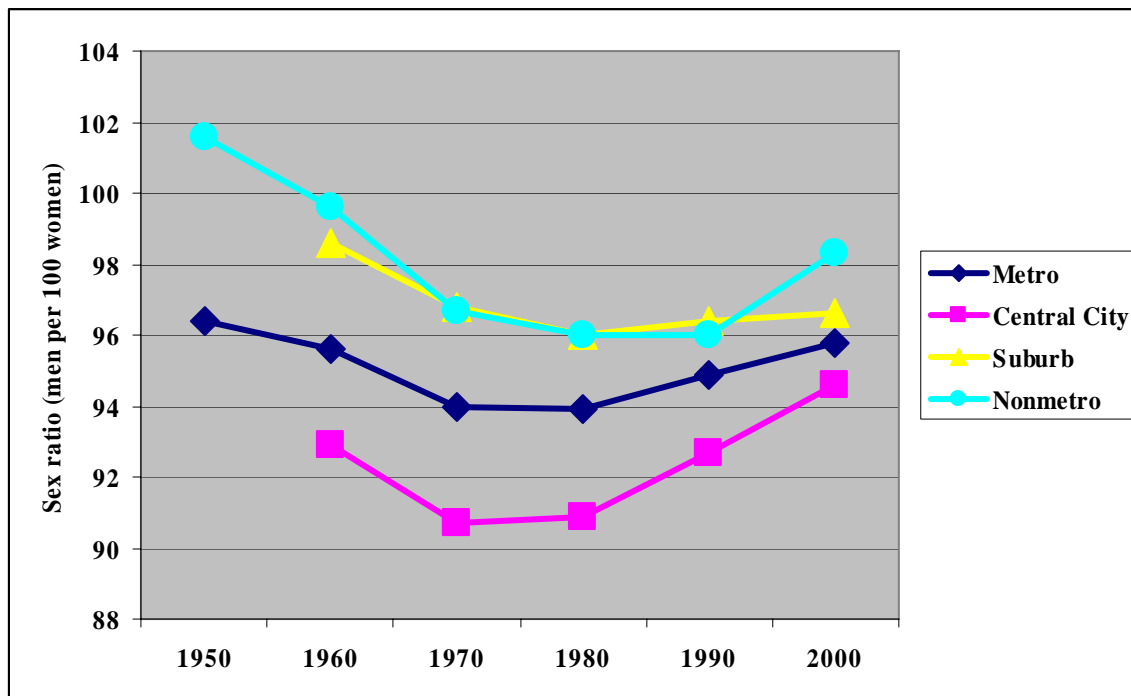
Nonmetro areas typically experience greater challenges providing public services for older people than metro areas because of greater distances from sparse settlement patterns and lower capacity among rural governments (Krout, 1998). Elderly parents living in rural areas characterized by chronic youth out-migration are less likely to live near to their adult children than older metro parents. Consequently, formal and informal services provided by adult children may be scarce, and rural communities will face a growing need to compensate for this

shortfall (Glasgow, 2000).

A growing older adult population also brings benefits to rural areas. Older adults today are wealthier, more active, and healthier than in the past. Employment growth related to this population should continue well in the future. These jobs may range from low-wage service employment, such as housecleaning and yard work, to better-paying jobs in specialty health, medical, dental and vision services.

Communities will need to insure that more goods and services demanded by older and wealthier populations are available locally if they want to maintain or improve their economic foundations relative to urban areas. On-line, catalogue, and telephone purchases can also remove retiree dollars from the local community. Older female populations will be particularly loyal to service providers and businesses they see as safe and reliable. Communities will do well to develop these contacts.

Figure 4: Sex ratios (Males per 100 females) by County Type, 1950- 2000



Source: U.S. Census Bureau Decennial Census 1950-2000.

An important question increasingly confronting aging individuals and nonmetro communities, is the extent to which those communities can meet the medical and housing needs for the oldest old. Will the very elderly find it more convenient to leave rural for urban communities to have access to these services? To what extent do or can rural communities provide services for this population?

Nonmetro racial/ethnic diversity is increasing because non-White populations generally have younger age structures, slightly higher birth rates, and continuous in-migration from other American cities and from overseas. These influxes, which include Southeast Asians, add to an historically diverse mix of Blacks, American Indians, and Hispanics. Growing diversity complicates the picture for nonmetropolitan areas. Some counties will remain primarily

White, while others have notable non-White populations that have lived there for generations. Yet, others are experiencing rapid growth of Hispanic and/or Southeast Asian families who seek to improve their standard of living and meet the ever-growing demand for low-skilled and low-wage employment.

Immigration streams often draw more heavily on males and have increased the proportions of young Hispanic men in nonmetro areas who are often joined subsequently by their wives and children or who marry and start families. Hispanics remain the youngest segment of the nonmetro population and their age structure, fertility, and migration patterns ensure that they will remain so in the coming decades. Hence, they represent the future of many rural communities.

If this relatively young minority population is to contribute fully to community viability, policy-makers must consider numerous implications.

This population must be healthy and educated. Pregnant and nursing mothers need routine pre- and postnatal care. Young children need routine vaccinations and doctor visits to avoid serious and costly health emergencies. Children need good schooling and after school programs to move into jobs with benefits and above-poverty-level pay scales.

Older adults, the population most likely to vote, may oppose taxes and tax increases especially for property taxes, to pay for local services such as public schools and public health facilities.

Conclusions

Many rural communities will confront public policy issues related to their bifurcated populations of increasingly older, non-Hispanic White, and female native residents, and younger, minority, more male newcomers, many of whom will bring or start families with young children. This generation gap and, to a lesser extent, gender gap is reinforced by a culture gap of differing languages and backgrounds. The ongoing viability of rural communities has always depended on how well residents work together. It is important for rural places to ensure that all segments of the population are included in community decisions and that all benefit from community services. Cooperation and understanding between all segments of the population will enhance the viability of rural areas. Without such cooperation, many rural areas will confront increasing rates of poverty, failing education systems and increasing social tension.

For More Information: See Chapter 3, “Changing Faces of Rural America,” by Annabel Kirschner, E. Helen Berry and Nina Glasgow in William Kandel and David L. Brown (Eds.), *Population Change and Rural Society in the 21st Century*.

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