Rural Definitions

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Two major types of definitions

- U.S. Census Bureau
  - Urban and Rural Areas
- Office of Management and Budget
  - Core Based Statistical Areas – Metropolitan and Nonmetropolitan Areas
Urban and Rural Areas

- The U.S. Census Bureau defines urban areas:
  - Core blocks and block groups with population density of 1,000 people per square mile.
  - Surrounding blocks with overall density of 500 ppmi²
  - Range in size from 2,500 people to nearly 2 million people.
  - Rural is everything that is not urban.

- Based on the 2000 Decennial Census:
  - 59 million people live in rural areas (21%)
  - 222 million people live in urban areas (79%)
Census Defined Urban Areas
Is all urban the same, though?

New York–Newark
Population 1.8 million

Hermann, MO
Population 2,515
If these are the official definitions of urban and rural, why are we still talking about it?
Boundaries are only defined every 10 years.

Urban area boundaries don’t align with boundaries of cities and towns.
- There is no governmental jurisdiction over Census defined urban areas.

Very limited data at the sub county level makes it difficult to understand conditions and trends, and therefore to target resources.
- The most comprehensive data is at the county level.

Most agree that some “urban” places are really much more rural in character – but what’s the right population threshold?
Core Based Statistical Areas

- Defined by the Office of Management and Budget.
- Designed to be **functional regions** around urban centers.
- Classification is based on counties.
- Three classifications of counties:
  - **Metropolitan**
  - **Nonmetropolitan** counties are divided into two types:
    - Micropolitan
    - Noncore
How CBSAs are Defined

Step 1. Urban Areas of 50,000 or more form the principal city of a Metro Area.

Step 2. The county containing that urban area is the central county of the metro area.

Step 3. Nearby counties with high commuting flows are included as outlying counties.
Usually, metropolitan is equated with urban and nonmetropolitan is equated with rural.

So, if metropolitan is urban, then...
This is urban:

Los Angeles, California
Population 1.2 million
And so is this:

Armstrong County, Texas
Population 2,071

Part of the Amarillo Texas Metropolitan Area
And if nonmetropolitan is rural, then...
This is rural:

Loving County, Texas
Population 55
And so is this:

Paducah, Kentucky
Population 48,035
Most Counties are Urban and Rural!

Coconino County, Arizona
Population 127,450
Flagstaff Metro Area
Most metropolitan areas contain rural territory and rural people.

In fact...

Over half of all rural people live in metropolitan counties!
Dothan Metropolitan Area, Alabama

Total Population: 130,861

Rural Population: 69,655

The Metro Area is 53 percent Rural!
Other ways to define rural

- Economic Research Service, USDA
  - Urban Influence and Rural Urban Continuum Codes
  - Further delineate metro and nonmetro counties based on size of urban populations and adjacency to metro areas.

- Dr. Andrew Isserman, U. of Illinois
  - County typology based on rural and urban populations

- Rural Urban Commuting Area (RUCA) Codes
  - 33 categories of census tracts
  - Based on relationships between places via commuting flows.
What does this mean for research?

How we define rural impacts what we can say about rural people.
An example: Study of States’ Rural Populations with Disabilities

University of Montana studied the percent of population with disabilities under 3 different rural definitions

- Population in nonmetro counties
- Population in Census defined rural territory
- Population outside urban areas of 50,000 or more

The result: There was no state in which all three definitions had the same number.
“Rural poverty rates are higher than urban poverty rates”

True, when rural is defined as nonmetro and urban is defined as metro.

- Metropolitan Areas 11.9%
- Nonmetropolitan Areas 15.4%

But aggregating masks differences within:

- Metro, in principal cities 16.5%
- Metro, outside cities 9.0%
- Nonmetro areas 15.4%
The key is to know your definition and how that impacts your analysis.
What all this means for policy.....

How do federal agencies target rural people and places?
The Federal Government’s Definition of Rural

- There isn’t one!

- Different agencies and departments use different targeting criteria.

- Many agencies use a base definition, then add specific characteristics to more directly target their resources.
No uniform definition utilized within this one Department.

Programs use a place size threshold to describe ineligible areas.
- Population thresholds range from 10,000 to 50,000 in USDA RD programs

Additional targeting toward communities experiencing certain conditions
- Natural disasters, economic structural change, population decline, persistent poverty
Leading up to the legislation, much media attention was placed on places that had received USDA-RD investments.

- Washington Post headline: “Rural Aid Goes to Urban Areas” describing USDA RD investments in Cape Cod, MA.

Legislation proposed many changes to USDA-RD program eligibility.

- The majority of changes involved removing Census defined urbanized areas from eligibility.
- Contentious debate regarding this legislation
Final passage incorporated many of these changes, but there is still considerable uncertainty regarding implementation.

The Farm Bill mandates that a study be conducted of rural definitions and their implications within 2 years of passage.
Health and Human Services

- Combination of CBSA and Census Tract Level classifications
  - In general, all nonmetropolitan counties are eligible for programs
  - Additional census tracts in metropolitan counties that meet “rural” criteria are eligible

- Areas of low population density ("frontier areas") are also considered eligible for many programs.
  - The definition of “frontier” is currently under reconsideration.
Education

“Metro–centric locale codes”
- The location of schools in relation to place size and CBSA.

In addition, apply additional criteria for rural support in NCLB
- Average daily attendance
- Poverty among school aged children
Do we need a universal definition of rural?

- We’re not likely to ever see one!

- But...different agencies have very different program objectives
  - A one size fits all definition would not appropriately target to each Agency’s goals

- Important to understand the various definitions and their implications
  - Who are we leaving out?
  - Who are we calling rural that really may not be?
Thank you!