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Demographic Trends in Nonmetropolitan America

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Rural America is dynamic: continuously affected by changes that have influenced who and how many live there; and where and how they earn their living, go to school, shop, and obtain health care services. As society has modernized, rural America has been swept along in the process, losing general stores, one-room schools, family farms, and many of the traditions, values, and customs that have produced distinctive rural life styles. These changes have been so profound socially, economically, and demographically that rural and urban have lost much of their meaning. Indeed, differences between rural "then" and "now" often are greater than present differences between rural and urban.

Although dichotomies like rural/urban are widely used and even serve as a basis for public policy, they have become mere abstractions: Their meaning is generally impressionistic, based on multiple subjective criteria and inferred from constructs often based on extreme examples of each. At the extremes, differences are clear and their implications easily appreciated. Whether rural/urban is thought of geographically as certain kinds of settlements or sociologically as distinctive lifestyles, ecological and social changes have blurred the boundaries between these two categories. Cities have deconcentrated into the countryside, and rural and urban lifestyles have converged under the effects of a mass society with its mass media and mass consumption. A consequence is that most Americans are no longer either rural or urban; rather, they have become suburban.

Despite these changes, *rural* and *urban* retain program and policy relevance and, therefore, require operational definition and specification (recognizing that any definition that divides the nation in two will be arbitrary). The United States Bureau of the Census has data collection and reporting responsibilities; their criteria for reporting data, therefore, have become the standard. The Census definition of rural and urban is based on "places" and their population. The nation's rural population resides in towns of 2,500 or fewer, or outside incorporated places. But the more widely used Census distinction is metropolitan/nonmetropolitan. With this measure, counties are the unit of analysis and the population of entire counties is classified as either metropolitan or nonmetropolitan. That classification emerged to capture the effect of deconcentration of cities into the countryside.

Metropolitan counties include a city of at least 50,000 and/or adjoining counties that have a highly urbanized population. Actually, only metropolitan counties are technically defined; nonmetropolitan is a "residual"—i.e., all those counties that are not metropolitan. For much research and descriptive profiles (e.g., Stern, 1994; United States Department of Agriculture [USDA], 1993) as well as for many policies, metropolitan/nonmetropolitan has become the operational definition of rural and urban largely because of the greater wealth of data available for counties than for places.

But metropolitan/nonmetropolitan is not a valid basis for specification of rural schools since rural/urban and metropolitan/nonmetropolitan are not mutually exclusive. There are rural places and rural schools within metropolitan counties, just as there are urban places and urban schools within nonmetropolitan counties (e.g., see Elder, 1992).

Nevertheless, I employ the metropolitan/nonmetropolitan classification of counties here because I wish to emphasize the diversity of social and economic circumstances that influence the support and effectiveness of public education in nonmetropolitan America. Because of that diversity, an implication of my analysis is that nonmetropolitan schools and school districts should better understand pertinent social and economic factors affecting education in their particular locality.

A Nonmetropolitan Profile

Recognizing that any statistic for nonmetropolitan America is likely a result of averaging very different local circumstances, there nevertheless are descriptive statistics that help to place nonmetropolitan into a national context.

In 1990, there were 56.7 million people (23% of the U.S. population) living in nonmetropolitan America; up from 46.4 million (26% of the U.S. population) in 1960

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(USDA, 1993). However, the Midwest and South include roughly three quarters of the total 1990 nonmetropolitan population.

Although there is a technical distinction between metropolitan and nonmetropolitan, a significant part of the nonmetropolitan population is in close proximity to urban economic and demographic influences. In 1990, approximately half of the total nonmetropolitan population lived in a county adjacent to a metropolitan area; an additional 24% lived in a nonadjacent county having a town with a population of 10,000 or greater (USDA, 1993).

Reflecting the ongoing economic diversification of nonmetropolitan America in 1990, 39% of the nonmetropolitan population lived in a county classified as manufacturing dependent, 24% lived in a retirement dependent county, but only 14% lived in a farming-dependent county (USDA, 1993). Contrary to widely held impressions that equate nonmetropolitan with agriculture, fewer than 10% of nonmetropolitan residents are directly involved with agriculture.

Although minorities account for a significant proportion of the nonmetropolitan population in some regions, the two largest minority populations (African Americans and Hispanics) are disproportionately concentrated in metropolitan areas. In 1990, only 16% of African Americans, 10% of Hispanics, but 50% of Native Americans lived in nonmetropolitan counties (USDA, 1993).

For reasons I will describe below, nonmetropolitan America is at an economic disadvantage. Although wealth is scattered throughout nonmetropolitan America, nonmetropolitan income is lower and is not catching up; and rural poverty rates are higher, especially among children. The lack of higher-paying jobs with greater skill requirements in nonmetropolitan counties also contributes to the long term and continuing outmigration of more highly educated youth from nonmetropolitan to metropolitan counties (Fuguitt, 1985).

Nonmetropolitan Demographic Trends

For most of the 20th century, before rural became nonmetropolitan and farming was still the dominant occupation, demographic change in nonmetropolitan America consistently followed two fundamental trends. First, natural increase accounted for virtually all of the growth in the nonmetropolitan population. With some relatively minor fluctuations, there was always a substantial surplus of births over deaths. Second, the number of people leaving nonmetropolitan areas far exceeded the number entering. The magnitude of this migration loss fluctuated, but the flow was always from nonmetropolitan to metropolitan areas (Johnson, 1993).

But the 1970s departed from earlier trends. There was a rural population turnaround: For the first time this century, net migration was *from* metropolitan *to* nonmetropolitan areas, and there was a sharp reduction in the rate of natural increase as well. Contributing to these demographic shifts were (a) relocation of mature product industries from cities to rural areas, especially toward the southeast; (b) urban retirees attracted to lower cost of living and environmental amenities in some rural areas; (c) expanded range of commuting to employment in cities; and (d) the emergence of many new rural recreation concentrations. These factors, and the change in demographic trends that accompanied them, caused many to observe the occurrence of a rural renaissance. But the renaissance proved to be short lived.

The 1980s showed smaller nonmetropolitan population gains than in the 1970s, and the nonmetropolitan net outmigration returned to pre-1970 levels. About 71% of nonmetropolitan counties experienced net outmigration during the 1980s, a significant increase from the 32% experiencing net outmigration during the 1970s (Johnson, 1993).

But because of the social and economic changes that contributed to the rural population turnaround and a continuation of some of those trends, the nonmetropolitan America of the 1980s was greatly different from what it had been prior to the 1970s. The Economic Research Service of the USDA, in an effort to reflect the growing diversity of nonmetropolitan America, developed a classification system of nonmetropolitan counties based on the leading source of economic activity of counties (Bender et al., 1985). The Bender et al. classification included counties identified as agricultural dependent, manufacturing dependent, mining dependent, government dependent, federal lands, retirement destination, and persistent poverty. The value of this classification for an improved understanding of nonmetropolitan America is reflected in very different patterns of population change, across these types, during the 1980s. For example, agricultural dependent counties continued a net loss in population attributable to high levels of outmigration; conversely, retirement destination counties had a population gain of 16%, mostly attributable to inmigration (Johnson, 1993). As nonmetropolitan America has become more socially and economically diverse, patterns of population change have varied both from county to county and from region to region. Accordingly, these variations make generalizations about aggregate nonmetropolitan population change less valid than they were prior to the 1970s.

The corresponding policy and program implications for education are important because regional variation in economic and demographic circumstances places a premium on analysis of trends in individual communities and regions. Even rural counties adjoining each other in the same state and region experienced substantially different patterns of population change during the 1980s. In nearly every state, it is possible to find some rural counties growing rapidly while others are losing population. And the

nonmetropolitan age distribution changes along with, and because of, population change. Many rural counties are experiencing significant population growth largely attributable to inmigration, but some are gaining young families while others are gaining retirees. Thus, population growth may not be indicative of increasing student numbers. Educators and education planners should seek sources of demographic data and trend analysis for their localities.

Causes of Population Change

From a human ecology perspective, population change is regarded as a dependent variable: Population changes in response to changes in the social and economic environment of particular communities and regions (Johnson, 1993). Using that perspective, I regard demographic changes contributing to recent nonmetropolitan population redistribution as having been stimulated by prior economic shifts. Among the more important shifts have been (a) the long-term replacement of labor with capital throughout agriculture, (b) improvements in transportation and communications and the concomitant growth and deconcentration of urban areas, and (c) regional shifts in employment and economic opportunities (Fuguitt, 1985; Greenwood, 1988; Johnson, 1993; Long, 1988). To these can be added the contribution of growing rural/urban differences in property values and the effect of perceived rural/urban differences in quality of life on the relocation of population and change in patterns of non-farm investments and employment. Educators and education policy makers should be aware not only of patterns of local population change, but also of the factors that contribute to those changes and prospects for their continuation.

Nonmetropolitan Population Change in the 1980s

Between 1980 and 1990, the population grew in 45% of the 2,369 nonmetropolitan counties. The nonmetropolitan population increased by approximately 2.2 million (4.1%) during that period. For comparison, 80% of the 769 metropolitan counties grew by an aggregate 12% during the same period. During the 1970s, the nonmetropolitan population grew by 14% compared to a metropolitan growth rate of 11% (Johnson, 1993).

But more recent statistics suggest a change in this pattern (O'Malley, 1994). Between April 1990 and July 1992, more than 64% of nonmetropolitan counties gained population. In just that 2-year period, nonmetropolitan population increased by 880,000 compared with an increase of only 2.2 million for the entire decade of the 1980s. Forty-three percent of the new population in rural areas came from outsiders moving in, rather than from rural residents having more babies (O'Malley, 1994). But *where* the population growth occurred reflects the changed demography of rural America. Eighty-seven percent of the 443 nonmetropolitan retirement counties gained population, as did 87% of the 288 recreational counties. It was only in the 510 farming-dependent counties that fewer than half (34%) gained population. These changes have led to discussion about how "typical" the population changes of the 1980s were. Johnson (O'Malley, 1994:26) feels that the 1980s were an oddity and that the nonmetropolitan population upturn of the early 1990s is likely to continue.

However, figures for the 1990s are estimates and include no detailed data on population characteristics. Consequently, since my concern here is not only aggregate population change but also the implications of that change for rural schools and education policies, the remainder of my analysis will focus on trends during the 1980s using the more detailed 1990 Census data.

For purposes of highlighting regional nonmetropolitan variation, I have divided the lower 48 states into 5 regions based on a number of considerations relevant to rural education policies and delivery. Such considerations include regional differences in the proportion of minority populations, differences in the nature of the economic base, density of population, distribution of metropolitan areas, and other characteristics of the population (e.g., proportion of retired population, proportion of children living in households with below poverty level income). Figure 1 illustrates the five regions used in the analyses below.

Table 1 shows differences in patterns of population change between metropolitan and nonmetropolitan populations in each of the five regions. The Midwest had the highest percentage of nonmetropolitan counties losing population (71%), followed by the West (60%). Conversely, the nonmetropolitan Northeast had the highest percentage of counties gaining population (70%). The Southwest had the highest percentage of nonmetropolitan counties having a population gain of greater than 10% (37%).

In all regions, at least 70% of the metropolitan counties gained population, led by the Southwest with 97% gaining. Eighty-five percent of metropolitan counties in the West gained population, 57% by more than 10%. Generally, because of the larger and more diversified economic base of metropolitan areas, there is less variation between the regions in metropolitan than in nonmetropolitan population change. In comparison with metropolitan areas, rural economies tend to be more specialized and, therefore, more subject to the effects of change in one sector (e.g., agriculture, energy, logging, retirement, manufacturing). The farm crisis of the early 1980s, for example, contributed greatly to population loss in several midwestern states, but had little effect elsewhere.

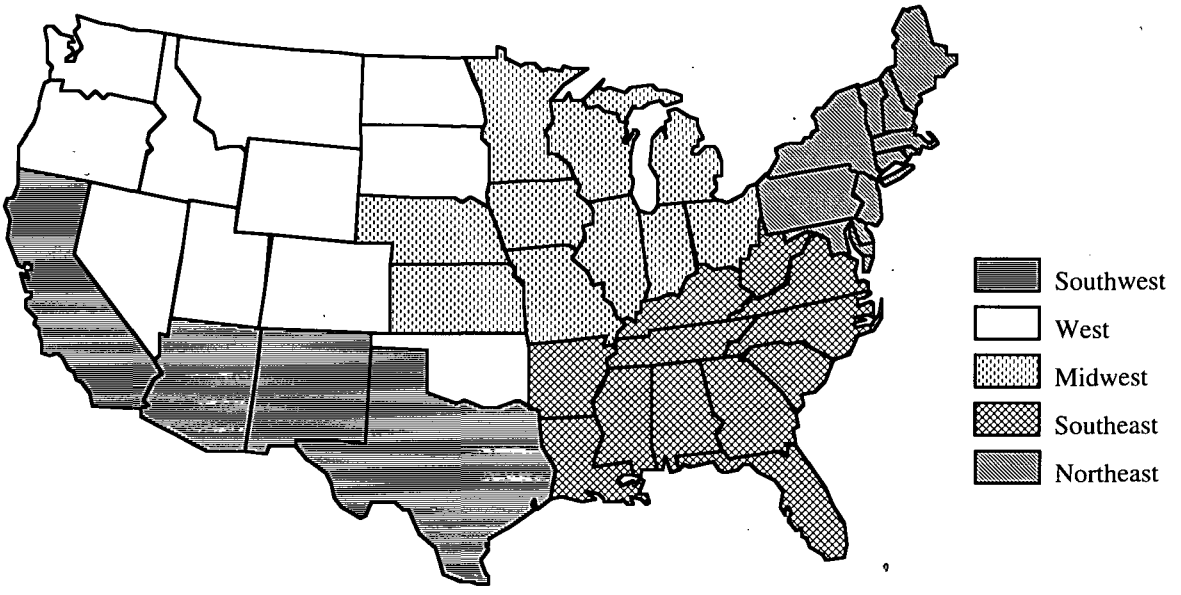

Figure 1. United States Regions.

Nonmetropolitan Population by Age

Table 2 shows the distribution of the population age 65 and over for metropolitan and nonmetropolitan counties by region. The Midwest leads the regions with 28% of nonmetropolitan counties in which people over 65 account for more than 20% of the population. More than 12% of the population is over 65 in 93% of nonmetropolitan Midwest counties. About 21% of West nonmetropolitan counties and 24% of Southwest nonmetropolitan counties have 20% or more of their population over age 65. By contrast, less than 5% of nonmetropolitan counties in the Southeast and the Northeast have a high proportion of older population.

Table 2 also shows that metropolitan areas have substantially lower proportions of older population in each region. There are no metropolitan counties in the Southwest, West, or Midwest in which more than 20% of the population is over 65.

Partially because of the greater concentration of older people, the rate of natural increase in the nonmetropolitan population slowed substantially during the 1980s. Compared with metropolitan, nonmetropolitan America has proportionately 13% fewer persons age 20-29, 11% more age 60 to 69, and 20% more age 70 and over. Predictably, there were fewer rural births and more rural deaths. Nationally, births rose by 13% during the 1980s, but by only 3.1% in nonmetropolitan areas. Concurrently, nonmetropolitan deaths increased by 4.7%.

The higher concentrations of rural elderly are contributing to a growing number of nonmetropolitan counties having a greater number of deaths than births. In 1950, only 2 counties reported more deaths than births; by 1960 that was up to 38 counties; by 1970, 322; and by 1990, 464 (Johnson, 1993). The 464 counties are largely concentrated in the Midwest. Accordingly, many rural school districts, especially in the Midwest and parts of the West, can expect continued and even accelerating decline in student numbers.

Migration By County Type and Age

Retirement destination counties emerged as the fastest growing group of nonmetropolitan counties during the 1980s, a trend that is continuing in the 1990s. Of 478 retirement destination counties (Hady & Ross, 1990), 81% gained population and 71% had a net inmigration (Johnson, 1993). In aggregate, those counties had a 16% increase in population while all remaining nonmetropolitan counties increased by 0.5%. From 1990-1992, 87% of retirement counties gained population (O'Malley, 1994).

Recreation counties, which overlap substantially with retirement-destination, were also substantial population gainers. Of 497 nonmetropolitan counties having the highest levels of hotel expenditures per capita during the 1980s, 67% gained population with counties in this group increasing by an aggregate 11% (Johnson, 1993).

The 276 nonmetropolitan counties in which farming accounts for 30% or more of total employment had an aggregate population loss of 9.8% (Johnson, 1993). Those counties are generally experiencing *both* outmigration and a natural decrease in population.

The long term exodus of young adults from nonmetropolitan areas, which diminished sharply during the 1970s,

Table 1
County Population Change by Region, 1980-1990

Region	Population Change					
	Decline		0-10% Increase		> 10% Increase	
	N of Counties	% of Counties	*N* of Counties	% of Counties	*N* of Counties	% of Counties
Nonmetropolitan						
Southwest	107	39.3	65	23.9	100	36.8
West	264	59.5	97	21.9	83	18.7
Midwest	525	70.5	171	23.0	49	6.5
Southeast	363	45.7	280	35.2	152	19.1
Northeast	31	30.1	44	42.7	28	27.2
Metropolitan						
Southwest	3	3.4	14	15.9	71	80.7
West	9	15.0	17	28.3	34	56.7
Midwest	59	30.9	78	40.8	54	28.3
Southeast	53	19.6	69	25.5	149	55.0
Northeast	32	22.7	65	46.1	44	31.2

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census; University of Missouri Office of Social and Economic Data Analysis.

accelerated again during the 1980s. Between 1980 and 1990, there was a net outflow of approximately 1.5 million individuals from nonmetropolitan areas who would have been 20 to 29 years old in 1990. In contrast, there was a net inflow of nearly 650,000 over the age of 50 to nonmetropolitan areas between 1980 and 1990 (Johnson, 1993). The inflow of older persons was largely concentrated in the retirement destination counties.

The net effect of migration—fewer young people, more older people—has been to increase the relative age of the nonmetropolitan population, but rural counties having a high proportion of older people occur as a result of two quite different patterns of population change. One pattern is reflected by those counties, generally farming dependent, experiencing high rates of outmigration of young adults, leaving behind a population having a higher proportion of older persons. Quite different are the retirement destination counties, which are increasing in proportion of older people because of in-migration. There are many such clusters of counties scattered across nonmetropolitan America including the Missouri-Arkansas Ozarks, northern Minnesota, Michigan, Wisconsin, Carolina coasts, northern Idaho, central New Mexico, and several smaller areas.

While both kinds of counties have high concentrations of older people, they can be expected to differ in the attitudes, values, life styles and other characteristics of the older population. The older people of retirement destination counties are generally coming to those places from a career in a metropolitan area, whereas those remaining in agricultural counties are more likely to epitomize local traditions and life styles. In either case, a local population having a higher proportion of retired persons may have less incentive to support funding for local schools (Deller & Walzer, 1993).

The Effect of Metropolitan Proximity

Yet another factor affecting population change of nonmetropolitan counties is their proximity to metropolitan counties. The continued deconcentration of metropolitan areas into the countryside has created a new type of rural county: those adjacent to metropolitan areas. In 1990, those counties included half of the total nonmetropolitan population (USDA, 1993).

Being adjacent to a metropolitan county effectively expands the range of employment opportunities available to residents of nonmetropolitan counties. Adjacent counties are consequently more likely to retain their population. They also frequently gain population as metropolitan residents move to peripheral rural areas for cost of living or rural life style considerations. The aggregate effect on population change is clear: Nonmetropolitan counties adjacent to metropolitan areas enjoyed an aggregate 5.6% increase in population during the 1980s, whereas nonadjacent counties increased by an aggregate of 1.2%. And nonadjacent counties experienced an average outmigration of 4.5%, whereas

Table 2
Older Population by Metropolitan/Nonmetropolitan and Region, 1990

Region	Distribution of County Population Age 65+					
	< 12%		12-20%		> 20%	
	N of Counties	% of Counties	*N* of Counties	% of Counties	*N* of Counties	% of Counties
Nonmetropolitan						
Southwest	71	26.1	137	50.4	64	23.5
West	106	23.9	245	55.2	93	20.9
Midwest	53	7.1	486	65.2	206	27.7
Southeast	129	16.2	631	79.4	35	4.4
Northeast	9	8.7	89	86.4	5	4.9
Metropolitan						
Southwest	63	71.6	25	28.4	0	0.0
West	38	63.3	22	36.7	0	0.0
Midwest	97	50.8	94	49.2	0	0.0
Southeast	158	58.3	100	36.9	13	4.8
Northeast	46	32.6	93	66.0	2	1.4

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census; University of Missouri Office of Social and Economic Data Analysis.

adjacent counties experienced a small aggregate inmigration (Johnson, 1993).

The population growth of counties adjacent to metropolitan areas affects historical analysis of metropolitan/nonmetropolitan population change. Nonmetropolitan counties that grow substantially as a result of urban deconcentration may be reclassified by the Census Bureau as metropolitan counties. This, by definition, increases metropolitan population at the expense of nonmetropolitan and further reduces the rate of reported nonmetropolitan population growth while increasing the rate of metropolitan population growth. In 1992, for example, four Missouri metropolitan adjacent counties that had experienced significant population growth over the preceding 2 decades were reclassified as metropolitan counties. As a result, Missouri, like many other states, lost nonmetropolitan and gained metropolitan population by a stroke of the pen. Approximately 100 counties were reclassified from nonmetropolitan to metropolitan in 1992—further evidence that both metropolitan and nonmetropolitan continue to change, at least in part, by administrative classification.

Obviously, the five regions differ in the number and distribution of metropolitan areas and, therefore, also in the opportunities for rural residents to commute to larger labor markets for employment. Table 3 shows the distribution of nonmetropolitan counties in each of the regions by percentage of workers commuting to work outside their county of residence. As reported in Table 3, the nonmetropolitan West is least affected by proximity to metropolitan areas. In only 21% of West nonmetropolitan counties do 25% or more of workers commute to work outside their home county. By contrast, counties are smaller and metropolitan areas are greater in number in the Southeast, Northeast, and the eastern half of the Midwest. Correspondingly, in the Southeast region more than 25% of workers commute to work outside their home county in 67% of nonmetropolitan counties. Indeed, in that region more than 15% of workers commute in 90% of all nonmetropolitan counties. More than 25% of workers commute outside their home county in 51% of Northeast region counties and in 50% of nonmetropolitan Midwest counties. A growing number of rural places are becoming bedroom communities—with all that implies for schools (e.g., diminished involvement of parents as more time is spent commuting to work).

Economic Change By Region

Economic change affects population change. Table 4 reports the number of metropolitan and nonmetropolitan counties in each region having at least a 15% increase in employment from 1980 to 1990 and those achieving a gain in real median household income during the same period. In all regions except the Northeast, employment gains were far greater in metropolitan than in nonmetropolitan counties. A higher percentage of nonmetropolitan counties in the South-

Table 3
Nonmetropolitan Commuting to Work Outside of Home County by Region, 1990

Region	Distribution of Counties by Persons Commuting to Work					
	< 15%		15-25%		> 25%	
	N of Counties	% of Counties	*N* of Counties	% of Counties	*N* of Counties	% of Counties
Southwest	104	38.2	81	29.8	87	32.0
West	254	57.2	98	22.1	92	20.7
Midwest	186	25.0	187	25.1	372	49.9
Southeast	83	10.4	178	22.4	534	67.2
Northeast	18	17.5	33	32.0	52	50.5

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census; University of Missouri Office of Social and Economic Data Analysis.

east and the Northeast had 15% or greater gains in employment than in the other three regions.

Despite general gains in employment during the 1980s, many U.S. counties experienced a decline in real median household income (constant dollars). Among nonmetropolitan counties in the Southwest, West, and Midwest, only 25% had an increase in median household income. Forty-seven percent of Southeast nonmetropolitan counties had an increase and 74% of Northeast nonmetropolitan counties.

Table 4
Economic Changes by Region, 1980-1990

Region	Counties gaining 15% or more in wage and salary employment		Counties having a net gain in median household income (constant dollars)	
	N	%	*N*	%
Nonmetropolitan				
Southwest	74	27.2	67	24.6
West	121	27.3	111	25.0
Midwest	250	33.6	174	23.4
Southeast	340	42.8	375	47.2
Northeast	52	50.5	75	73.8
Metropolitan				
Southwest	61	69.3	51	58.0
West	43	71.7	11	18.3
Midwest	116	60.7	53	27.8
Southeast	183	67.5	184	67.9
Northeast	62	44.0	118	83.7

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census; University of Missouri Office of Social and Economic Data Analysis.

Metropolitan counties in the West and Midwest did not fare as well as those in the other three regions. Eighty-four percent of metropolitan counties in the Northeast had an increase in real median household income compared with only 18% of metropolitan counties in the West.

The apparent contradiction of growing employment and declining real household income is accounted for by the kinds of jobs gained and lost in nonmetropolitan areas during the 1980s. Porterfield (1990) shows that, for the period from 1981 to 1986, the four types of jobs with the greatest decline in employment in nonmetropolitan areas (e.g., coal mining, oil and gas, telephone communications, machinery and equipment) paid more than three times as much as the leading employment gainers (e.g., eating and drinking establishments, grocery stores, nursing and personal care facilities, department stores). Many nonmetropolitan families found it necessary to take more than two jobs to replace the one they lost. A result was a great increase in labor force participation among women, especially those having children at home. Between 1980 and 1990, women accounted for 78% of total nonmetropolitan labor force growth; labor force participation among nonmetropolitan women having children under 18 at home increased from 54% to 68% (USDA, 1993).

The increase in labor force participation of mothers of school age children has further implications for nonmetropolitan schools and communities. Among those are an expanded demand for child care and less time available for parenting and school involvement. Missouri data show parental involvement to be highly associated with student school performance; but parents report "work conflicts" to be the major factor limiting their school involvement (Sun, Hobbs, & Elder, 1994).

Table 5
Nonmetropolitan Poverty Rates, 1990

Region	Nonmetropolitan counties with 25% or more of population below poverty level		Nonmetropolitan counties with 25% or more of children below povery level	
	N of Counties	% of Counties	*N* of Counties	% of Counties
Southwest	84	30.9	175	64.3
West	44	9.9	122	27.5
Midwest	32	4.3	106	14.2
Southeast	259	32.6	461	58.0
Northeast	0	0.0	1	1.0

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census; University of Missouri Office of Social and Economic Data Analysis.

Distribution of Nonmetropolitan Poverty Rates

Economic and social change during the 1980s resulted in increasing poverty rates, especially among children. In most parts of the nation, a higher percentage of children were living in households with an income below the poverty line in 1990 than in 1980. Rural areas were particularly affected. Table 5 shows the percent of nonmetropolitan counties in each region having a high percentage (25% or more) of total population and of children below the poverty level. The table shows 419 nonmetropolitan counties with 25% or more of the total population below the poverty level, but 865 counties in which more than 25% of the children were below poverty income. The highest rates are found in the Southwest and the Southeast both for total population and children. Nearly two thirds of all Southwest nonmetropolitan counties and 58% of nonmetropolitan Southeast counties had a child poverty rate of 25% or more in 1990. By contrast, only a single county in the nonmetropolitan Northeast and 14% of counties in nonmetropolitan Midwest had a high rate of child poverty.

Factors highly associated with nonmetropolitan child poverty rates are minority status (which I return to below) and the growth of single-parent households. In 1990, 17% of nonmetropolitan white children, 49% of nonmetropolitan African American, and 23% of Hispanic children were living in single-parent families. The proportion of nonmetropolitan children living in one-parent households increased by more than 30% for all three racial/ethnic groups during the 1980s (USDA, 1993). In 1990, 51% of nonmetropolitan families with children headed by a woman had income below the poverty level (USDA, 1993).

Increases in the rate of poverty among rural children is a matter of great concern for education, considering the high correlation between poverty status and classroom performance. Failure of schools to improve student performance should be considered in the light of related changes outside the classroom.

Minority Populations of Nonmetropolitan Counties

An important consideration in the delineation of regions here is their correspondence to the highest concentrations of nonmetropolitan Hispanics (Southwest), African Americans (Southeast), and Native Americans (West).

Table 6 shows, by region, the number of nonmetropolitan counties having 20% or more African American population, 20% or more Hispanic population, and 5% or more Native American population. Of the 151 nonmetropolitan counties having 5% or more Native American population, two thirds are located in the West region, with an additional 19 counties in the Southwest and 23 in the Midwest.

Table 6
Minority Populations of Nonmetropolitan Counties, 1990

Region	Counties with 5% or more Native American population		Counties with 20% or more African American population		Counties with 20% or more Hispanic population	
	N of Counties	% of Counties	*N* of Counties	% of Counties	*N* of Counties	% of Counties
Southwest	19	7.0	20	7.4	124	45.6
West	100	22.5	0	0.0	15	3.4
Midwest	23	3.1	4	0.5	2	0.3
Southeast	9	1.1	369	46.4	2	0.3
Northeast	0	0.0	4	3.9	0	0.0

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census; University of Missouri Office of Social and Economic Data Analysis.

Counties with a concentration (i.e., 20% or more) of African American population are mostly confined to the Southeast. Of the 397 nonmetropolitan counties having 20% or more African American population, 369 (93%) are located in the Southeast. African Americans account for 20% or more of the population in 46% of all Southeast nonmetropolitan counties. The remaining 28 nonmetropolitan counties having a concentration of African American population are located in states contiguous to the Southeast.

Counties with a high concentration of Hispanic population are largely confined to the Southwest. Of the 143 nonmetropolitan counties having 20% or more Hispanic population, 124 (86%) are located in the Southwest. However, in contrast to other minorities, there was significant nonmetropolitan Hispanic population growth outside the Southwest region during the 1980s, especially in parts of the nonmetropolitan West and Midwest (Grant, 1992).

There is a strong correspondence between nonmetropolitan minority concentrations and poverty status. In 1989, 39% of the nonmetropolitan African American population and 27% of the nonmetropolitan Hispanic population had below poverty level income. The corresponding metropolitan rates were 28% for African Americans and 23% for Hispanics (USDA, 1993). Although a higher proportion of nonmetropolitan African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans have income below the poverty level, a majority (72%) of the rural poor are white.

Table 7
Education Attainment of Adult Population

	Counties in which 30% or more of adults are not high school graduates		Counties in which 15% or more of adults are college graduates	
Region	*N*	%	*N*	%
Nonmetropolitan				
Southwest	212	77.9	43	15.8
West	114	25.7	152	34.2
Midwest	180	24.2	87	11.7
Southeast	751	95.5	69	8.7
Northeast	20	19.4	42	40.8
Metropolitan				
Southwest	24	27.3	59	67.1
West	5	8.3	46	76.7
Midwest	8	4.2	108	56.5
Southeast	128	47.4	138	50.9
Northeast	16	11.4	107	75.9

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census; University of Missouri Office of Social and Economic Data Analysis.

Education Attainment of Adult Population

Table 7 shows the distribution of educational attainment of the adult population by region and by metropolitan/nonmetropolitan status. Two measures are presented: (a) counties in which more than 30% of adults have not completed high school and (b) counties in which more than 15% of adults have at least a college degree.

There is considerable variation in adult education attainment among the regions. More than 30% of adults have not graduated from high school in 96% of Southeast nonmetropolitan counties and in 78% of Southwest nonmetropolitan counties. In none of the other three regions do more than 25% of counties fall in that category.

The Northeast leads the other regions in percentage of nonmetropolitan counties in which more than 15% of the adult population are college graduates (41%), followed by the West with 34% of counties. The Southeast and Midwest are lowest in this regard with 8.7% and 12% of nonmetropolitan counties respectively. On this same measure, metropolitan counties far exceed nonmetropolitan. In the West, 15% or more of adults have a college degree in 77% of metropolitan counties, followed by the Northeast with 76%, the Southwest with 67%, the Midwest with 57%, and the Southeast with 51%.

The metropolitan/nonmetropolitan and regional differences in proportion of college graduates are attributable mostly to the effects of migration, not necessarily to lower nonmetropolitan rates of college attendance. Migrants from nonmetropolitan to metropolitan areas are disproportionately the more highly educated; the effect of migration is to modify the distribution of educational attainment in both the place they left and the place they moved to.

Nonmetropolitan areas have difficulty capturing an economic return on their educational investments because of the scarcity of nonmetropolitan employment requiring higher levels of education and training (Porterfield, 1990; USDA, 1993). Creating or attracting more employment requiring high levels of education and skill should be high on the agenda for rural development. Were quality of jobs in nonmetropolitan areas to improve, it would likely reduce outmigration rates as well as improve rural income.

Rural Schools and School Districts By Region

Despite my use of counties as the unit of analysis, schools, as well as school districts, can be classified as either rural or urban. By using a rural/urban rather than metropolitan/nonmetropolitan classification, the number of rural schools and rural districts is increased. Of the 15,133 U.S. school districts, 7,145 (47%) are located in

Table 8 (continued on page 159)
Districts Administering Regular Public Schools and Schools for Rural Districts, 1989-1990

Region	*N* of Districts (Total)	*N* of Rural Districts	% of Rural Districts	*N* of Schools (Total)	*N* of Schools in Rural Districts
Southwest	2,423	990	40.9	14,375	2,223
West	2,606	1,776	68.1	9,969	3,704
Midwest	5,379	2,933	54.5	22,448	7,279
Southeast	1,663	603	36.3	16,780	2,521
Northeast	3,005	798	26.6	14,884	1,662
United States	15,133	7,145	47.2	79,307	17,679

Source: Merged files of NCES Common Core Data Public Schools Universe, 1989-90.

rural places, as classified by the U.S. Census Bureau (Elder, 1992). Of the nation's 79,307 schools, 22,412 (28%) are located in rural places (Table 8). The Midwest leads in both number of rural school districts (2,933, or 41% of all rural districts) and number of rural schools (8,007, or 36% of all rural schools). In the West 68% of all school districts are rural; in the Midwest 55% of districts are rural.

The Southeast has the smallest number of districts, largely because of the prevailing pattern of county-wide districts throughout that region. Despite the smaller number of districts, the Southeast follows only the Midwest in number of rural schools (5,053). In the Southeast, 30% of all schools are located in rural places.

An important factor in defining rural schools is the number that are located in urban districts. Because of the prevalence of county-wide districts (with district headquarters usually located in a larger town), 52% of rural schools in the Southeast are located in urban districts. Thirty-one percent of rural schools in the Northeast are in urban districts. The percentage of rural schools in urban districts is much smaller in the other three regions: 10% in both the Southwest and Midwest and 12% in the West.

Table 9 shows regional variation in enrollment in nonmetropolitan school districts (Elder, 1992). The highest concentration of small-enrollment districts (fewer than 300 students) is found in the West (58%), followed by the Northeast (42%), Midwest (41%), Southwest (36%), and Southeast (12%). Again, largely because of the prevalence of county-wide districts, 71% of Southeast nonmetropolitan districts have an enrollment of 1,000 or more. At the other extreme is the West, where only 17% of districts have an enrollment of that size.

As Elder (1992) emphasizes, characterizing rural schools is significantly dependent on one's definition of rural. The metropolitan/nonmetropolitan dichotomy is crude: It excludes many small schools serving rural populations

Table 9
Students per Nonmetropolitan School District

	< 300		300-1,000		1,000+	
Region	*N* of Counties	% of Counties	*N* of Counties	% of Counties	*N* of Counties	% of Counties
Southwest	453	36.4	420	34.2	365	29.4
West	1,234	57.6	550	25.7	360	16.8
Midwest	1,538	40.7	1,331	35.2	909	24.1
Southeast	160	12.2	223	17.0	928	70.8
Northeast	581	42.0	351	25.4	452	32.7
United States	3,966	40.2	2,881	29.2	3,014	30.6

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census; University of Missouri Office of Social and Economic Data Analysis.

% of Schools in Rural Districts	N of Rural Schools	N of Rural Schools in Rural Districts	% of Rural Schools in Rural Districts	N of Rural Schools in Urban Districts	% of Rural Schools in Urban Districts
15.5	2,459	2,211	89.9	248	10.1
37.2	4,197	3,691	87.9	506	12.1
32.4	8,007	7,178	89.7	829	10.3
15.0	5,053	2,432	48.1	2,621	51.9
11.2	2,338	1,606	68.7	732	31.3
22.3	22,412	17,402	77.7	5,010	22.4

simply because they are located in a metropolitan county and, conversely, includes among nonmetropolitan school districts those including a town of up to 50,000 population. Elder's analysis also emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between schools and school districts in efforts intended to more adequately define rural education for policy and administrative purposes. Just as using counties (metropolitan/nonmetropolitan) as the unit of analysis excludes significant numbers of rural schools, categorizing districts as either rural or urban reduces the number of rural schools.

However, despite these definitional problems, analysis of rural education will be augmented when the National Center for Education Statistics completes and releases the National School District Data Book. This volume will make available detailed population census data for each of the nation's 15,133 school districts. Such data would have made possible a more refined analysis of the socio-demographic environment affecting education in rural America than was possible above.

Conclusion

I intended to show that recent social and economic changes have caused nonmetropolitan America to become more heterogeneous, with nonmetropolitan schools confronting widely different local environmental effects. Although this analysis has necessarily been confined to counties and regions, my purpose has been to identify some of the major trends affecting nonmetropolitan localities.

The 1970s and 1980s broke a pattern of rural demographic change that had been remarkably uniform since 1900. The 1970s represented the only significant rural population turnaround in the 20th century, while the 1980s produced a mixed pattern of growth and decline. Early indications reveal a more general pattern of nonmetropolitan population growth during the 1990s. These changes have been concurrent with the rural American shift from almost exclusive dependence on farming and other natural resource industries to a more diversified set of economic sectors and income sources. This diversification began with extensive rural industrialization of the 1960s and has continued with greater metropolitan sprawl and the more recent emergence of rural retirement/recreation concentrations. It is this diversity that has contributed to the mixed and less predictable pattern of nonmetropolitan demographic change characteristic of the past 20 years.

To say that nonmetropolitan America, in aggregate, has become more economically diversified also is to say that individual nonmetropolitan communities have become more dissimilar from each other. Rural diversification means that some formerly farm communities have become factory towns, bedroom communities, retirement communities, recreation/tourism centers, or the site of a major government installation—each producing its own economic, social, and demographic effects. But many other rural communities remain dependent on the same declining economic base they had prior to the 1970s. While the effects of nonmetropolitan economic diversification have been uneven, they also have contributed instability to many local economies. Factories relocating from metropolitan areas to rural localities contributed significantly to the rural population turnaround of the 1970s, but some of those factories are now closing in favor of location in other countries offering even lower labor costs. Many rural communities that became energy "boom" towns during the oil shortages of the late 1970s became energy "bust" towns by the middle 1980s as shortages were succeeded by gluts. Schools are no more protected than communities from the consequences of such, increasingly frequent, nonmetropolitan economic dislocations.

Demographic prospects for the 1990s and beyond depend greatly on where in rural America one is located. Nonmetropolitan population will continue to increase, probably more rapidly than in the 1980s, but that increase will be the result of an average of many localities and regions growing rapidly with an equal or greater number that will lose population.

An underlying assumption in my argument has been that social and economic changes in the environment are affecting the viability and educational effectiveness of nonmetropolitan schools. A growing appreciation for the effect of social capital—e.g., strength of family and community support—on student performance (Coleman, 1988) has caused educators to become more conscious of social and economic changes that affect each school's stock of social capital. As we have emphasized, many of the recent changes are placing added stress on nonmetropolitan families and communities, thus, at least potentially, diminishing the stock of social capital.

Pertinent to the idea of social capital is that all education is basically local and localities vary in the strength of social capital supporting their students. The interaction between school and local environment is an important contributor to educational effectiveness. This places a premium on nonmetropolitan school districts regularly attempting to assess and evaluate the effects of social and economic change within their locality.

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