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**What is Rural?****What is Rural?**

Rural Information Center (U.S.)  
 Beltsville, MD: USDA, National Agricultural Library, Rural Information Center, [2014] Rev.  
 Revised and updated by Louise Reynnells. April, 2014.  
 Original edition: 2006 by Patricia La Caille John.  
 Internet-resource: <http://ric.nal.usda.gov/what-rural>

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**Introduction to What is Rural**

Many people have definitions for the term rural, but seldom are these rural definitions in agreement. For some, rural is a subjective state of mind. For others, rural is an objective quantitative measure.

The USDA, Economic Research Service, provides insight to rural definitions with an article, *Defining the "Rural" in Rural America: The use of different definitions of rural by Federal agencies reflects the multidimensional qualities of rural America.*

In this article one point brought out for defining rural is, "The choice of a rural definition should be based on the purpose of the activity."<sup>1</sup> For example, when looking for funding, it is helpful to clarify the definition of rural with the lending agency or foundation to be sure of your eligibility.

The General Accounting Office, in its publication *Rural Development: Profile of Rural Areas*, pp. 26-31, discusses the three most common Federal definitions of rural:

- Department of Commerce's Bureau of the Census based on the 1990 census criteria (now superseded by the 2010 census criteria)
- The White House's Office of Management and Budget (OMB)
- The United States Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service.

"Metro/urban areas can be defined using several criteria. Once this is done, nonmetro/rural is then defined by exclusion -- any area that is not metro/urban is nonmetro/rural. Determining the criteria used has a great impact on the resulting classification of areas as metro/ nonmetro or urban/rural."<sup>2</sup>

The three primary rural definitions are:

**1. The U. S. Census Bureau**

Urban and Rural Classification page: <http://www.census.gov/geo/reference/urban-rural.html>

"The Census Bureau's urban-rural classification is fundamentally a delineation of geographical areas, identifying both individual urban areas and the rural areas of the nation. The Census Bureau's urban areas represent densely developed territory, and encompass residential, commercial, and other non-residential urban land uses. The Census Bureau delineates urban areas after each decennial census by applying specified criteria to decennial census and other data. The Census Bureau identifies two types of urban areas:

- Urbanized Areas (UAs) of 50,000 or more people
- Urban Clusters (UCs) of at least 2,500 and less than 50,000 people.

"Rural" encompasses all population, housing, and territory not included within an urban area."

**2. Office of Management and Budget**

OMB: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/bulletins/2013/b13-01.pdf> [PDF File 5.47MB]

designates areas on the basis of the "Standards for Delineating Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas." According to the February 28, 2013 revised standards, "Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas are delineated in terms of whole counties (or equivalent entities), including in the six New England States. If specified criteria are met, a Metropolitan Statistical Area containing a single core with a population of 2.5 million or more may be subdivided to form smaller groupings of counties referred to as Metropolitan Divisions." In general:

- Metropolitan Statistical Areas have at least one urbanized area of 50,000 or more population, plus adjacent territory that has a high degree of social and economic integration with the core as measured by commuting ties.
- Micropolitan Statistical Areas have at least one urban cluster of at least 10,000 but less than 50,000 population, plus adjacent territory that has a high degree of social and economic integration with the core as measured by commuting ties.

"OMB establishes and maintains the delineations of Metropolitan Statistical Areas, Metropolitan Divisions, Micropolitan Statistical Areas, Combined Statistical Areas, and New England City and Town Areas solely for statistical purposes. This classification is intended to provide nationally consistent delineations for collecting, tabulating, and publishing Federal statistics for a set of geographic areas. The Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Area Standards do not equate to an urban-rural classification; many counties included in Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas, and many other counties, contain both urban and rural territory and populations."

### 3. U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Services

Rural Classification Page: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/rural-economy-population/rural-classifications/what-is-rural.aspx>

"ERS researchers and others who analyze conditions in "rural" America most often study conditions in nonmetropolitan (nonmetro) areas, defined on the basis of counties. Counties are the standard building block for collecting economic data and for conducting research to track and explain regional population and economic trends. Nonmetro counties include some combination of:

- open countryside,
- rural towns (places with fewer than 2,500 people), and
- urban areas with populations ranging from 2,500 to 49,999

that are not part of larger labor market areas (metropolitan areas)."

1 "Defining the "Rural" in Rural America: The use of different definitions of rural by Federal agencies reflects the multidimensional qualities of rural America." USDA, Economic Research Service. Amber Waves, June 2008.

<http://ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2008-june/defining-the-%E2%80%9Crural%E2%80%9D-in-rural-america.aspx>

2 *Rural Development: Profile of Rural Areas*. United States General Accounting Office. Fact Sheet for Congressional Requestors. GAO/RECD-93-40FS. Washington, DC: The Office, 1993: pp. 26-29. <http://archive.gao.gov/t2pbat6/149199.pdf> [PDF File]

## Tools and Data Sources that Define Rural

### 1. U.S. Department of Agriculture

**Economic Research Service** for research and policy.

**The Atlas of Rural and Small-Town America**. Interactive Map Tool and data source.

<http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/atlas-of-rural-and-small-town-america/go-to-the-atlas.aspx> "...assembles statistics on four broad categories of socioeconomic factors:

- People: Demographic data from the American Community Survey, including age, race and ethnicity, migration and immigration, education, household size and family composition. Data have been added on veterans, including service period, education, unemployment, income, and demographic characteristics.
- Jobs: Economic data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics and other sources, including information on employment trends, unemployment, industrial composition, and household income.
- Agriculture: Indicators from the latest Census of Agriculture, including number and size of farms, operator characteristics, off-farm income, and government payments.
- County classifications: The rural-urban continuum, economic dependence, persistent poverty, population loss, and other ERS county codes."

**Data for Rural Analysis** ERS produces and maintains a number of data sets that are used by policymakers and researchers to identify and describe rural and urban areas.

<http://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/rural-economy-population/rural-classifications/data-for-rural-analysis.aspx>

**State Fact Sheets** Interactive Map and data. Provides nonmetro information by state.

<http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/state-fact-sheets.aspx>

**Rural Development** for Individuals looking to purchase a home.

**Income and Geographic Eligibility**. <http://eligibility.sc.egov.usda.gov/eligibility/welcomeAction.do>

This is an Interactive map that "is used to determine eligibility for certain USDA home loan programs and the USDA Satellite Grant Program. In order to be eligible for many USDA loans, household income must meet certain guidelines. Also, the home to be purchased or served must be located in an eligible rural area as defined by USDA."

### 2. U.S. Census Bureau

- Geographic Terms and Concepts - Urban and Rural. [http://www.census.gov/geo/reference/gtc/gtc\\_urbanrural.html](http://www.census.gov/geo/reference/gtc/gtc_urbanrural.html)
- American Fact Finder: <http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml>

**3. Map Room: National Interactive Maps, Rural-Urban Designation**. Center for Applied Research and Environmental Science (CARES). Columbia, MO: Mizzou University of Missouri. CARES

<http://cares.missouri.edu/portfolio/item/missouri-map-room/>

**4. What's Rural**. National Center for Education Statistics. <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/Definitions.asp>

## Define Rural for Health Programs

### 1. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration

- Rural Health Grants Eligibility Analyzer. Check Rural Health Grants Eligibility by county. <http://datawarehouse.hrsa.gov/RuralAdvisor/ruralhealthadvisor.aspx>
- Defining the Rural Population. <http://www.hrsa.gov/ruralhealth/aboutus/definition.html>
- Health Shortage Designation. Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration. <http://bhpr.hrsa.gov/shortage/>

### 2. U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, Office of Rural Health

**What is Rural?** <http://www.ruralhealth.va.gov/about/rural-veterans.asp>

"At this time, the Department of Veterans Affairs utilizes the US Census Bureau's definition for "Urban", "Rural" and "Highly Rural".

- Urban Area: Census Bureau-defined urbanized area, which is any block or block group having a population density of at least 1000 people per square mile.
- Rural Area: Any non-urban or non-highly rural area.
- Highly Rural Area: An area having < 7 civilians per square mile."

**3. Eligible Rural Areas Search Tool.** Rural Health Care Program. Universal Service Administrative Company. <http://www.usac.org/rhc/telecommunications/tools/Rural/search/search.asp>

**4. Am I Rural?** Rural Assistance Center: <https://www.raconline.org/am-i-rural>

**5. Rural Populations and Health Care Providers: A Map Book.** Randy K. Randolph, Katherine Gaul, Rebecca T. Slifkin. Chapel Hill: North Carolina Rural Health Research and Policy Analysis Center, Cecil G. Sheps Center for Health Services Research, University of North Carolina, 2002. 1 v. (various paging) <http://www.shepscenter.unc.edu/rural/mapbook2003/mapbookintro.pdf> [PDF file]

## Define Frontier

According to the Economic Research Service, "The term "frontier and remote" is used here to describe territory characterized by some combination of low population size and a high degree of geographic remoteness." Identifying frontier areas help service providers identify the populations needs and the resources available to those areas.

### 1. National Center for Frontier Communities

- Defining Frontier: Essential Characteristics of a Frontier Area <http://frontierus.org/defining-frontier/>
- Frontier Maps: 2010 Census <http://frontierus.org/maps/>

### 2. Frontier And Remote (FAR)

- ZIP-code-level frontier and remote (FAR) area codes. Economic Research Service <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/frontier-and-remote-area-codes.aspx>

## Rural America Values & Character

**1.**The Face of Rural America. The 1976 Yearbook of Agriculture. United States Department of Agriculture. p. 288 <http://naldc.nal.usda.gov/naldc/download.xhtml?id=IND50000181&content=PDF> [PDF File] National Agricultural Library Rural Development Publications Digital Collection.

**2.** "The Role of Amenities and Quality of Life in Rural Economic Growth." Deller, Steven C. , Tsai, Tsung-Hsiu , Marcouiller, David W. , English, Donald B.K. London ; New York : Routledge, 2010. Routledge explorations in environmental economics ; 21 p. 83-102. <http://handle.nal.usda.gov/10113/41988> Permanent Handle. National Agricultural Library Digital Collection.

**3.** Rural America. University of New Hampshire. Carsey Institute. <http://carsey.unh.edu/policy/rural-america> Last viewed August, 2015.

**4.** "Rural Values." Douglas E. Bowers . U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service: Washington, DC. Rural Development Research Report No. (RDP - Vol. 12 No. 1) August 1997 : 21 p. <http://webarchives.cdlib.org/sw1bc3ts3z/http://ers.usda.gov/publications/rdp/rdp1096/>

**5.** Rural America at a Glance. 2013 Edition. by Lorin Kusmin. Economic Information Bulletin No. (EB-24). Rural American at a Glance Series. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, November 2013. 6 p. <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/eb-economic-brief/eb24.aspx>

**6.** Understanding Rural America. U.S. Department of Agriculture. Economic Research Service. Agriculture Information Bulletin No. (AIB-710) 36 pp, February 1995. <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/aib-agricultural-information-bulletin/aib710.aspx>

**7.**What is Rural Character? Partnerships for Change (Michigan). <http://www.partnershipsforchange.cc/planningeduc0059.asp> Last updated on 9/3/2003

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