



Rural Population Change

This project has provided data and insights on demographic trends in rural areas that are essential for plans, programs, and policies that support sustainable rural communities and promote residents' quality of life.

Who cares and why?

As rural places and populations change, reformed policies and programs may be necessary to meet shifting needs, overcome new challenges, and take advantage of opportunities. Many rural populations are aging. Younger people are not flocking to rural areas, but many retirees are seeking out rural places. Furthermore, younger people who grew up in rural areas are leaving for urban areas while older residents are staying put. Aging poses both opportunities and challenges, affecting the workforce and economy and changing the kinds of amenities—like health care and recreational activities—that are desired. Rapid population growth, which is happening on the outskirts of major cities and in high amenity rural areas, also presents challenges and opportunities. New residents often revitalize small town economies, but in-migration also creates demands for infrastructure, like houses and schools, and social services. The pressure of these demands can lead to unplanned and environmentally destructive land use. Rapid development can limit agricultural land and local food supplies, degrade air and water quality, and encroach on wildlife habitat. In-migration has also broadened the ethnic diversity of rural areas, impacting rural economies and social norms. For example, new Hispanic residents are raising the fertility of rural populations and increasing the percent of non-English speakers, creating challenges for service providers like schools as well as opportunities for new businesses. Though ethnic in-migrants are often attracted to rural areas by jobs and lower costs of living, they often suffer high poverty rates due partly to limited access to educational opportunities, historic and contemporary racial discrimination in housing and labor markets, and lack of social integration. New research and policies are needed to ensure increased economic opportunities, social integration, and quality of life for all rural area residents.



Understanding how rural populations are changing helps city leaders and service providers plan infrastructure development to support changing needs. For example, rural economies are influenced by Hispanic immigrants, and more and more businesses and service providers are catering to new, ethnically diverse residents, especially those who do not speak English. Top photo courtesy of USDA. Bottom photo by Contemplative Imaging, Flickr.

What has the project done so far?

For the past 10 years, W-2001 participants have been at the forefront of research on rural population change, leading multidisciplinary studies at the national, regional, and local level. W-2001 members have served as consultants for, or made briefings to the: U.S. Census Bureau; USDA; Housing Access Center; National Rural Health Association; members of Congress; advisory councils; and county commissions. The group's recent research has described how migration of older people to rural areas and aging-in-place impact individual and community well-being, political agendas, social values, land use patterns, tax revenues, housing, healthcare, and transportation. Researchers have also made efforts to demonstrate the effects of the recent economic recession

and housing crisis on the wellbeing of the rural elderly. Other studies have analyzed conditions that affect social and economic integration of ethnically diverse immigrants and their impacts on the labor force and social values. A third focus of the project has been the effects of rural population size and composition on land use and land use conflicts. For example, researchers have studied the connection between economic prosperity and increased demand for rural land and recreation in the Intermountain West as well as the impacts of sprawl on agricultural land and wilderness areas. Making research results and insights easily accessible to policy makers and other stakeholders, W-2001 researchers have generated peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and outreach materials, given presentations, hosted conferences and town hall meetings, and created online databases.



Members of W-2001 (E. Helen Berry, Joachim Singelmann, Nina Glasgow, Douglas Gurak, Howard Silver, and Kenneth Johnson) have briefed Congressional representatives on changing rural populations, helping these leaders make decisions that meet changing rural needs.

Impact Statements

Taught rural residents, community leaders, congressional committees, rural program managers, and non-governmental organizations how to access, analyze, and use population data

Helped public policy makers and rural residents design or modify programs so that they address important issues and are adapted to current and projected rural population trends.

Enabled federal, state, and local decision makers to compare situations and learn from each other's experiences.

Helped government leaders and rural residents decide where and when intervention is needed.

What research is needed?

Further research is needed to investigate the effects of The Great Recession on rural demographics. Additional research will also be needed to determine the impacts of the outreach material generated by W-2001, especially the two books: *Rural Aging in 21st Century America* and the *International Handbook on Rural Demography*.



The ethnic composition of many rural areas is changing as ethnically diverse immigrants seek work and low costs of living in rural areas. Photo by Laura Elizabeth Pohl, Bread for the World.

Want to know more?

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Compiled and designed by Sara Delheimer