



Photo by Ann Olson

HOUSING ASSISTANCE COUNCIL

Rural Research Brief



Rurality in the United States

For most of the nation’s history, the United States has been a predominately rural place. In 1790 the first U.S. census revealed that 95 percent of the population resided in rural areas. The populace remained largely rural throughout much of the 19th century, but settlement patterns started to shift rapidly in the early 20th century in response to an increasingly urban-oriented economy. In 1920, the census reported, for the first time, that more than half of the U.S. population lived in urban areas. From this point until today, the trend towards urbanization in this nation has been unabated.

The 2010 Census revealed a population of approximately 308 million people in the United States. Of those, roughly 65 million or 21 percent reside in rural or small town America. Almost half (49.1

percent) live in suburban or exurban communities, while 92 million residents, comprising 30 percent of the population, live in the urban core of our nation’s large cities.

Urban America now dominates much of our industry, commerce, and media culture. But rural areas cannot be dismissed as a residual, or someplace other than urban. Rural America and its people are integral to the national society, economy, identity, and well-being. Rural America covers more than 90 percent of our nation’s land mass, comprises one-fifth of the population, and supplies our nation with food, fiber, and fuel.

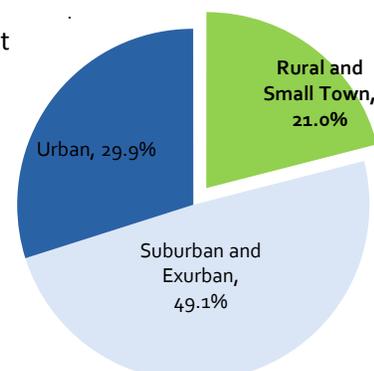
ABOUT THIS SERIES

Rurality in the United States is the first in a series of *Rural Research Briefs* presenting data and findings from the recently released 2010 Census and American Community Survey (ACS).

The Housing Assistance Council (HAC) presents *Rural Research Briefs* to highlight selected social, economic, and housing characteristics of rural Americans.

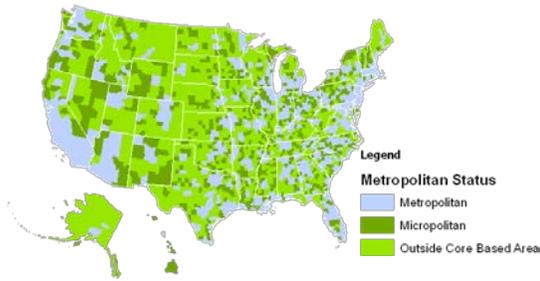
The *Rural Research Briefs* series previews HAC’s decennial *Taking Stock* report - a comprehensive assessment of rural America and its housing. Since the 1980s, HAC has presented *Taking Stock* every ten years following the release of Census data.

Population by Rural, Urban, and Suburban Residence, 2010



DIFFERING MEASURES OF RURAL

OMB Outside Metropolitan Areas



There are many definitions and designations of "rural." No definition of rural is perfect, and each measure has strengths and weaknesses.

OMB Outside Metropolitan Areas

Among the more widely used definitions to delineate rural areas, The Office of Management & Budget's (OMB's) Metropolitan Areas designation is based on county level geography and is predominately a measure of population density and community. Approximately 17 percent of the U.S. population and 75 percent of the nation's land mass are located outside of OMB designated Metropolitan Areas.

What is "Rural?"

The question of "what is rural?" confuses, perplexes, and confounds nearly everyone who works in rural areas or with rural populations of the United States. Establishing a universal definition of rural poses many challenges. In general, rural areas share the common characteristics of comparatively few people living in an area, limited access to large cities (and sometimes even to smaller towns), and considerable traveling distances to "market areas" for work and everyday-living activities. But rurality, like most other things in society, exists along a continuum and varies extensively based on proximity to a central place, community size, population density, total population, and various social and economic factors.

Some of the more commonly used definitions to designate rural areas are promulgated by agencies and organizations such as the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and the Census Bureau and USDA Rural Development. However, these classifications are far from synonymous or mutually exclusive concepts. For example, after the 2003 OMB Metropolitan Areas reclassification, a majority of Census defined rural population now live in Metropolitan areas. Such incongruities illustrate the complexity of developing a rural definition for research and programmatic purposes.

U.S. Census Bureau Defined Rural Areas



Census Defined Rural Areas

A measure based largely on population density, the U.S. Census Bureau classifies all population and housing units outside of "Urbanized Areas" and "Urban Clusters" as rural territory. Under the Census Bureau designation roughly 23 percent of the population and 97 percent of the nation's landmass are considered rural.

Political and economic geography is another important consideration when determining the rural composition of an area. The county is commonly used as a unit of geography from which to classify rural or nonmetropolitan areas. In many rural areas, the county is often most-identified with in terms of political, social, and economic contexts. However, county-based designations are a less than optimum criteria on which to base a rural definition. Large counties, particularly in the Western United States, may dilute or mask rural population given their geographic size and influence.

A number of government agencies and private sector organizations, including the Housing Assistance Council (HAC), define rural using differing measures. Policy makers often view the concept of rural through an urban-centric perspective. Many definitions contextualize rural within the framework of omission, in which urban and metropolitan areas are the focal point and all other territory is classified as rural by default. This type of analysis relegates rural areas and population to the background and treats them as secondary.

USDA-RD Eligible Areas

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) utilizes a specific definition to establish "Eligible Areas" for rural housing programs administered by its Rural Development (RD) agency. USDA's Eligible Areas designation is one of the most expansive classifications of rural territory, encompassing approximately 34 percent of the nation's population.

Legend
RD Ineligible Areas
RD Eligible Areas



**A NEW WAY TO DEFINE RURAL:
HAC'S SMALL TOWN AND RURAL
DESIGNATION**

Given recent changes and noted shortcomings to more commonly used definitions used to identify rural areas (e.g., OMB Metropolitan Areas, Census Defined Urban and Rural Areas), the Housing Assistance Council (HAC) developed a sub-county designation of rural and small town areas which incorporates measures of housing density and commuting at the Census tract level.

This new definition includes three general classifications of,

- 1) rural and small town tracts;
- 2) suburban and exurban tracts, and;
- 3) urban tracts.

While there is no perfect definition of "rural" HAC believes this housing density measure is a more precise indicator of rural character.

This definition classifies areas at a sub-county census tract level, and identifies important development patterns of suburban and exurban communities, which most major rural/urban definitions omit.

For programmatic purposes, HAC also recognizes and supports USDA's eligible areas definition.

For more information about defining rural areas contact HAC at lance@ruralhome.or

FAST FACTS

64.8 Million

people in Rural and Small Town areas of the United States



21%

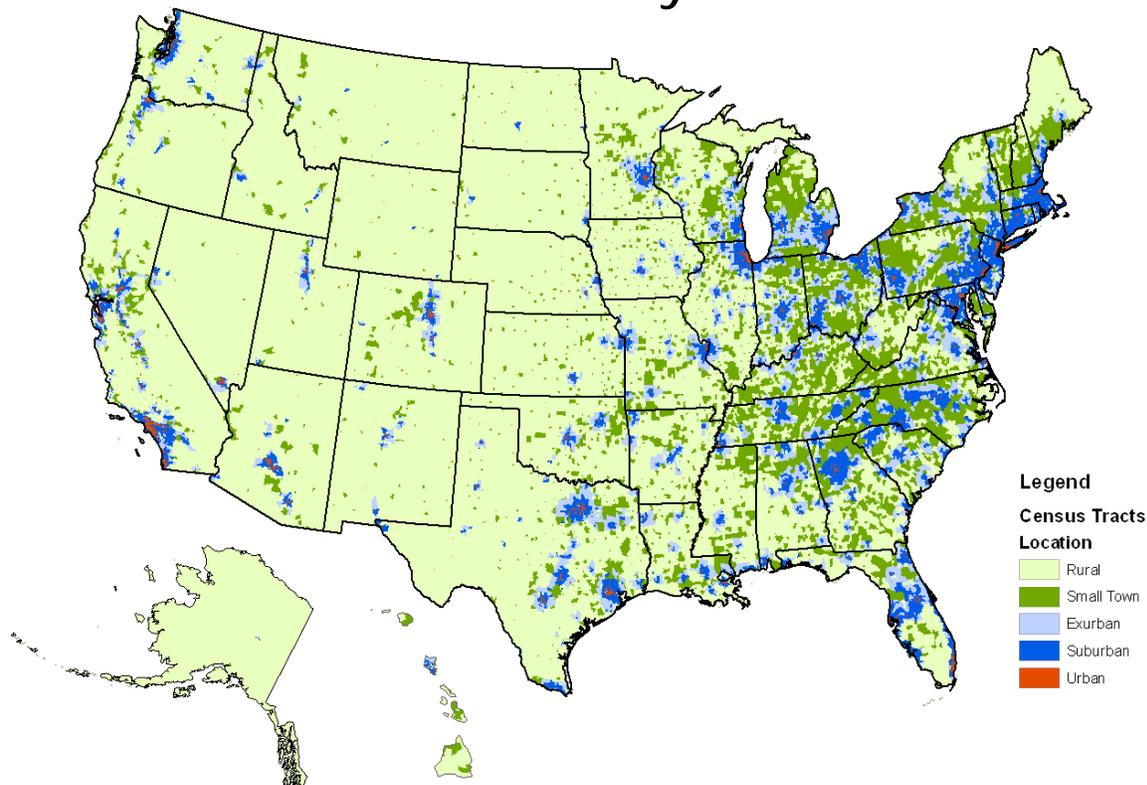
of the U.S. population are rural and small town residents



97%

of U.S. landmass that is rural or small town

How Rural is Your Community?



10 Most Rural States – Rural and Small Town Population as a Percent of Total State Population

- Wyoming—74.0%
- Montana—72.2%
- Vermont—70.6%
- South Dakota—62.2%
- Mississippi—61.7%
- North Dakota—57.7%
- Maine—51.9%
- West Virginia—51.9%
- Iowa—51.6%
- Alaska—50.6%

10 States with the Largest Rural and Small Town Population

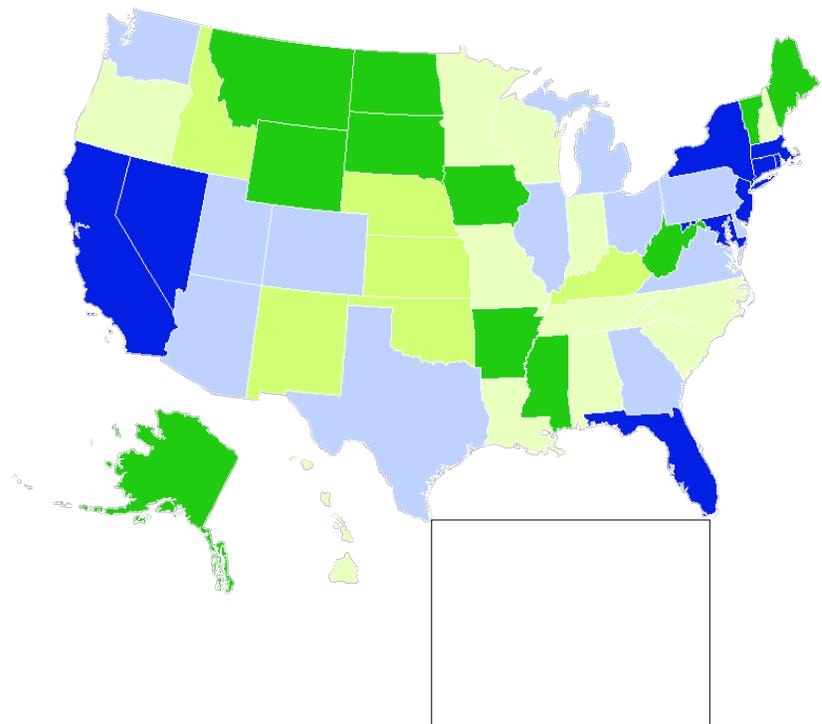
- Texas—4,377,018
- California—3,015,350
- North Carolina—2,944,145
- Ohio—2,626,905
- Georgia—2,405,547
- Pennsylvania—2,396,337
- Kentucky—2,171,340
- New York—2,060,418
- Missouri—2,028,202
- Illinois—1,992,480



STATE OF RURAL

While rural areas encompass roughly one-fifth of the nation’s population, they still comprise half or more of the population in 11 states. The proportion of the population in these states is predominately rural, but they only make up about 14 percent of small town and rural population nationwide. In contrast, states with the 10 largest rural populations by number such as Texas, California, North Carolina, Ohio, Georgia etc. make up more than 40 percent of nation’s rural population.

Rural & Small Town Population by State, 2010



ABOUT THE DATA

Unless otherwise noted, all data presented in this Research Brief are based on HAC tabulations of the 2010 Census, Summary File -1.

For more information on this Research Brief or defining rural, contact Lance George at the Housing Assistance Council

lance@ruralhome.org

202-842-8600

POPULATION BY RURAL, SUBURBAN, AND URBAN RESIDENCE, 2010

State	Rural & Small Town		Suburban & Exurban		Urban		Total Population
	Population	%	Population	%	Population	%	
Alabama	1,636,673	34.2	2,921,817	61.1	226,548	4.7	4,785,038
Alaska	359,152	50.6	209,041	29.4	142,038	20.0	710,231
Arizona	1,242,135	19.4	2,702,580	42.3	2,450,354	38.3	6,395,069
Arkansas	1,485,102	50.2	1,368,099	46.3	103,477	3.5	2,956,678
California	3,015,350	8.1	12,860,109	34.5	21,383,793	57.4	37,259,252
Colorado	901,730	17.9	2,283,953	45.4	1,847,833	36.7	5,033,516
Connecticut	207,821	5.8	2,424,630	67.8	946,252	26.4	3,578,703
Delaware	201,095	22.3	524,132	58.2	175,436	19.5	900,663
District of Columbia	0	0.0	41,851	7.0	559,872	93.0	601,723
Florida	1,622,504	8.6	11,316,839	60.2	5,861,967	31.2	18,801,310
Georgia	2,405,547	24.8	6,513,714	67.1	788,821	8.1	9,708,082
Hawaii	422,536	31.1	467,255	34.3	470,510	34.6	1,360,301
Idaho	662,530	41.9	782,177	49.5	135,669	8.6	1,580,376
Illinois	1,992,480	15.5	5,671,585	44.2	5,166,567	40.3	12,830,632
Indiana	1,766,914	27.2	3,905,261	60.1	829,879	12.8	6,502,054
Iowa	1,573,531	51.6	1,135,208	37.2	340,284	11.2	3,049,023
Kansas	1,289,769	45.2	1,169,125	41.0	395,693	13.9	2,854,587
Kentucky	2,171,340	49.4	1,646,536	37.4	579,610	13.2	4,397,486
Louisiana	1,476,318	32.5	2,348,190	51.7	715,828	15.8	4,540,336
Maine	689,897	51.9	555,491	41.8	82,973	6.2	1,328,361
Maryland	465,330	8.0	3,233,179	55.7	2,101,109	36.2	5,799,618
Massachusetts	228,614	3.5	3,906,232	59.6	2,421,006	36.9	6,555,852
Michigan	1,915,035	19.4	5,392,363	54.6	2,576,242	26.1	9,883,640
Minnesota	1,687,709	31.8	2,655,670	50.0	967,508	18.2	5,310,887
Mississippi	1,824,915	61.7	1,095,881	37.0	38,054	1.3	2,958,850
Missouri	2,028,202	33.9	2,954,984	49.4	995,878	16.7	5,979,064
Montana	718,957	72.7	193,701	19.6	76,757	7.8	989,415
Nebraska	830,370	45.5	602,144	33.0	392,006	21.5	1,824,520
Nevada	290,761	10.8	952,697	35.3	1,457,093	54.0	2,700,551
New Hampshire	503,248	38.2	705,658	53.6	107,564	8.2	1,316,470
New Jersey	132,985	1.5	4,825,493	54.9	3,830,687	43.6	8,789,165
New Mexico	853,578	41.4	787,795	38.2	420,624	20.4	2,061,997
New York	2,060,418	10.6	5,962,063	30.8	11,358,207	58.6	19,380,688
North Carolina	2,944,145	30.9	6,120,671	64.1	476,548	5.0	9,541,364
North Dakota	390,412	57.7	166,813	24.7	119,236	17.6	676,461
Ohio	2,626,905	22.7	6,354,773	54.9	2,588,136	22.4	11,569,814
Oklahoma	1,686,924	44.9	1,485,124	39.5	583,409	15.5	3,755,457
Oregon	1,166,556	30.6	1,387,913	36.4	1,262,290	33.1	3,816,759
Pennsylvania	2,396,337	18.9	6,387,141	50.3	3,918,882	30.9	12,702,360
Rhode Island	23,831	2.3	570,138	54.8	445,769	42.9	1,039,738
South Carolina	1,341,050	29.1	3,148,741	68.3	117,256	2.5	4,607,047
South Dakota	501,717	62.2	262,141	32.5	42,149	5.2	806,007
Tennessee	1,957,892	31.2	3,770,714	60.1	544,561	8.7	6,273,167
Texas	4,377,018	17.4	14,060,290	56.0	6,677,658	26.6	25,114,966
Utah	485,660	17.5	1,549,689	55.9	735,041	26.5	2,770,390
Vermont	439,660	70.6	156,036	25.0	27,459	4.4	623,155
Virginia	1,510,973	18.9	4,675,776	58.6	1,792,936	22.5	7,979,685
Washington	1,126,678	16.8	3,814,675	56.7	1,783,187	26.5	6,724,540
West Virginia	931,626	51.9	778,986	43.4	84,519	4.7	1,795,131
Wisconsin	1,859,138	32.7	2,639,668	46.4	1,184,384	20.8	5,683,190
Wyoming	400,937	74.0	116,154	21.4	25,078	4.6	542,169
TOTAL	64,830,005	21.0%	151,560,896	49.1%	92,354,637	29.9%	308,745,538

Source: HAC Tabulations of 2010 Census of Population and Housing

The Housing Assistance Council

The Housing Assistance Council (HAC) is a national nonprofit organization that supports affordable housing efforts in rural areas of the United States. HAC provides technical housing services, seed money loans from a revolving fund, housing program and policy assistance, and research and information services. HAC is an equal opportunity lender.

HAC Rural Research Brief

1025 Vermont Avenue
NW Suite 606
Washington, DC 20005

202-842-8600

www.ruralhome.org



Southeast Office
600 W Peachtree St., N.W.
Suite 1500
Atlanta, GA 30308
Tel.: 404-892-4824
Fax: 404-892-1204
southeast@ruralhome.org

Midwest Office
10920 Ambassador Dr.
Suite 220
Kansas City, MO 64153
Tel.: 816-880-0400
Fax: 816-880-0500
midwest@ruralhome.org

Southwest Office
3939 San Pedro, N.E.
Suite C-7
Albuquerque, NM 87110
Tel.: 505-883-1003
Fax: 505-883-1005
southwest@ruralhome.org

Western Office
717 K Street
Suite 404
Sacramento, CA 95814
Tel.: 916-706-1836
Fax: 916-706-1849
western@ruralhome.org