Update on the Demography of Rural Disability Part One: Rural and Urban

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Ruralfacts
Update on the Demography of Rural Disability Part One: Rural and Urban

How many people with disabilities live in rural America? It depends on how you define “rural” and “disability.”

Defining Rural:

The 2005 Merriam-Webster Dictionary simply defines rural as “of or relating to the country, country people or life, or agriculture.” Most people have an idea of what makes an area rural, but the perception of ruralness may not always match the specific definitions used by agencies responsible for counting, analyzing, or distributing community resources.

It’s common to use counties as the measurement unit. Counties are categorized as metropolitan or non-metropolitan, with the non-metropolitan counties considered rural. (See Update on the Demography of Rural Disability, Part Two: Non-Metropolitan and Metropolitan for more information.)

However, “rural” and “urban” areas are not geographically tied to counties and may cross county or state lines. These areas are measured by population density. While not accounting for economic diversity, this approach more accurately reflects the aerial view of a settled area’s density. To understand rural America in this context, it is important to define four key U.S. Census terms: urban, urbanized area, urban cluster, and rural areas.

**Urban:** Territory, population and housing units located within urbanized areas and urban clusters.

**Urbanized area:** A densely-settled area with a Census population of at least 50,000. A typical urbanized area has more than 500 people per square mile and consists of all or part of one or more incorporated places, such as towns.

**Urban cluster:** A densely settled area with a census population of 2,500 to 49,999.
Rural areas: Territory, population, and housing units located outside of urbanized areas or urban clusters. Rural areas have fewer than 2,500 people or areas where people live in open country.

The map shows the locations of U.S. urbanized areas (blue) and urban clusters (green). Rural areas are shown in gray and represent 97 percent of U.S. land mass. Urbanized areas and urban clusters comprise the remaining three percent.

Map 1. Where do Rural People with Disabilities Live

Rural America: 3,444,930 square miles; more than 97% of the total U.S. land mass; 21% of the total U.S. population; 59,061,367 people of whom 10,852,330 have a disability.

Urban Clusters: 20,485 square miles; almost 1% of the total U.S. land mass; 11% of the total U.S. population; 30,036,715 people of whom 5,691,886 have a disability.

Urbanized Areas: 72,021 square miles; 2% of the total U.S. land mass; 68% of the total U.S. population; 192,323,824 people of whom 33,202,032 have a disability.

Map Data Source: American Fact Finder Summary Files 1 & 3. Census 2000 DVD Summary File 1, and 2000 TIGER Cartographic Boundary Files.

Disability: As does rural, “disability” has many definitions. The 2000 U.S. Census classified a person as having a disability if any of the following conditions were true: 1. A person aged five or older
individual who acquires a disability or a family with a school-aged child with a disability “moves to town” (an urban cluster) rather than moving to a city.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Civilian, non-institutionalized population, 5 years and older</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
<th>Total Number</th>
<th>Number with a Disability</th>
<th>Percent with a Disability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>281,421,906</td>
<td>257,167,527</td>
<td>49,746,248</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>222,360,539</td>
<td>202,525,481</td>
<td>38,893,918</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urbanized Areas</td>
<td>192,323,824</td>
<td>175,830,154</td>
<td>33,202,032</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban Clusters</td>
<td>30,036,715</td>
<td>26,695,327</td>
<td>5,691,886</td>
<td>21.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>59,061,367</td>
<td>54,642,046</td>
<td>10,852,330</td>
<td>19.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Transit (Rural + Urban Clusters)</td>
<td>89,098,082</td>
<td>81,337,373</td>
<td>16,544,216</td>
<td>20.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another Way to Look at Rural:

There are other ways to categorize rural population density. For example, rural transportation planners and providers create a unique definition using these categories. Because transportation programs usually do not include urban clusters in their urban measurement, “rural” effectively becomes “rural plus urban clusters.” * (See Frequently Asked Questions: Applying 2000 Census Data to Urbanized and Urban Areas.) By this estimate there are about 89 million residents living in rural transportation areas, 16.5 million of whom have a disability.
Table 2. Is Rural America’s Population Declining?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Rural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>96,846,817 (64.00%)</td>
<td>54,478,981 (36.00%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>125,268,750 (69.86%)</td>
<td>54,054,425 (30.14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>149,646,617 (73.64%)</td>
<td>53,565,309 (26.36%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>167,050,992 (73.74%)</td>
<td>59,494,813 (26.26%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>187,053,487 (75.21%)</td>
<td>61,656,386 (24.79%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>222,360,539 (79.01%)</td>
<td>59,061,367 (20.99%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The proportion of the American population living in rural areas has declined, but the absolute number has remained fairly stable. Table 2 shows that the number of rural residents has increased modestly over the past 50 years. However, the number of people living in urban areas has more than doubled.

So how many people with disabilities live in rural America? Based on our analysis of Census 2000 data, more than 10.8 million rural Americans report experiencing disability.

References & Resources


