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# 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.

The University of Montana Rural Institute

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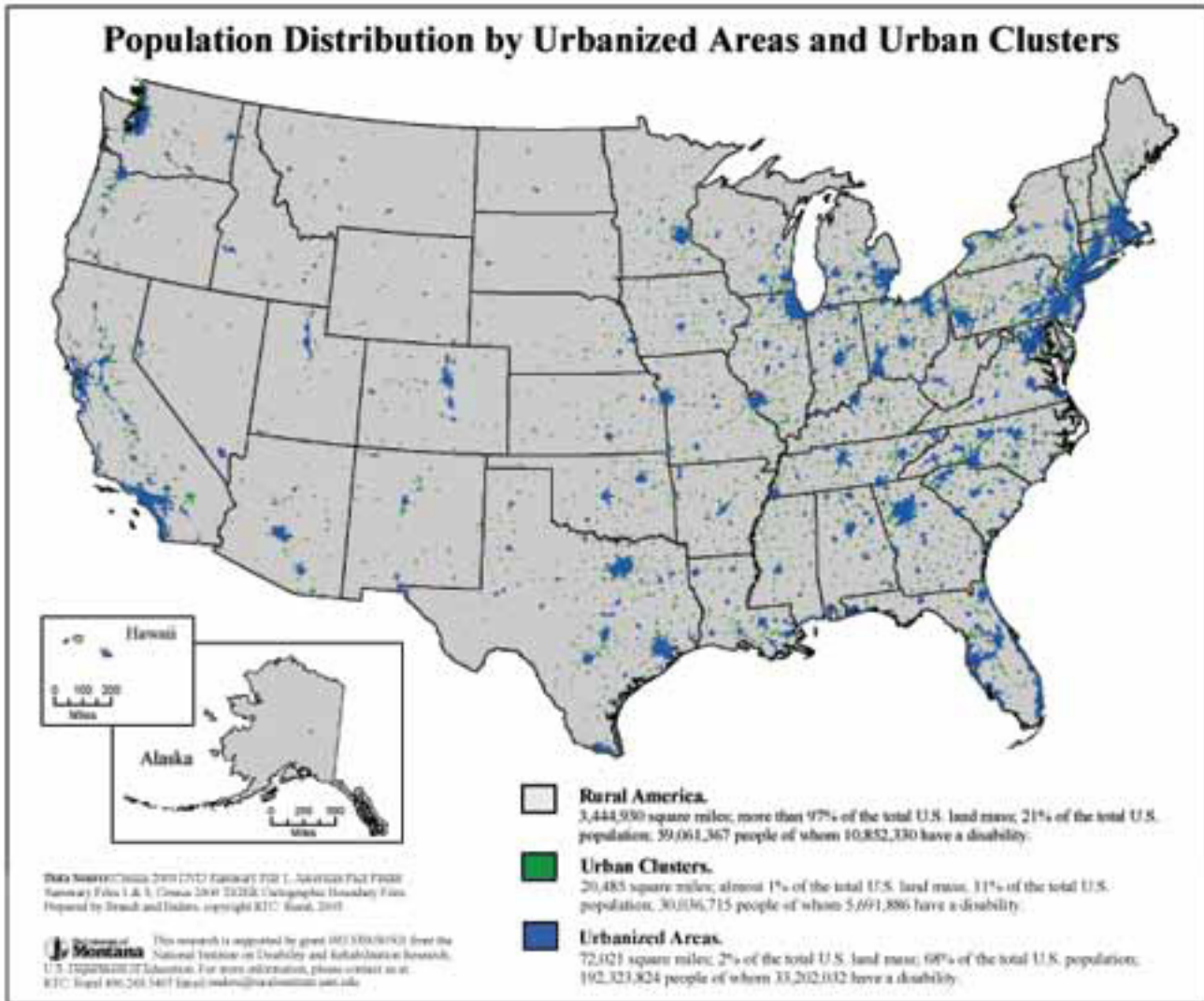
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**Rural areas:** Territory, population, and housing units located outside of urbanized areas or urban clusters. Rural areas have fewer than 2,500 people or areas where people live in open country.

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

reported a long-lasting sensory, physical, mental or self-care disability; 2. A person aged 16 or older reported difficulty going outside the home because of a physical, mental, or emotional condition lasting six months or more; or 3. A person aged 16 to 64 reported difficulty working at a job or business because of a physical, mental, or emotional condition lasting six months or more. For more information, see Census Brief: Disability Status 2000 in the Resources section.

Annual federal data are available for certain county social and economic characteristics. Only the decennial Census, however, currently provides data on the characteristics of urban and rural residents. The annual American Community Survey currently provides data about cities and counties with large populations, and updated data on rural areas and low-population counties should be available in 2010 when the Survey reports its first data on rural America.

The 2000 Census collected disability information only from people aged five and older in the civilian, non-institutionalized population. Disability status was not asked of individuals in institutions or people in the Armed Forces. The percentage of people with disabilities is calculated by dividing the number of persons with a disability by the number of civilian, non-institutionalized persons aged five or older.

Table 1 shows the 2000 Census distribution of people across urban and rural classifications. 10.8 million (19.9%) of the almost 55 million rural Americans aged five or older have a disability. The highest proportion of the population with a disability lives in urban clusters. It may be that a rural 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.

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

**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?

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

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.

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