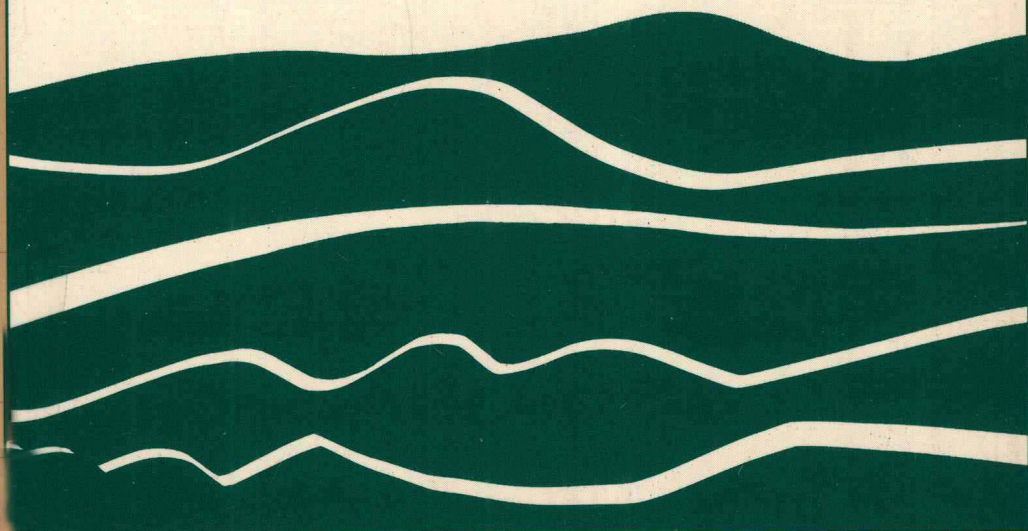


Guide to Rural Data

Revised Edition

Priscilla Salant and Anita J. Waller



Rural Economic Policy Program

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Rural Economic Policy Program
of The Aspen Institute

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Introduction

The first edition of this book, *A Community Researcher's Guide to Rural Data*, was prepared at the request of the Rural Economic Policy Program of The Aspen Institute and supported with funds from The Ford Foundation. Staff from both organizations recognize that reliable and timely data are a prerequisite for sound planning and development policy. Unfortunately, decision makers in rural communities are often hampered in their work because they don't know that such data exist or where to find them.

Hence, our purpose in writing this book is to acquaint researchers with data they can use to describe and better understand rural communities. We have written primarily for people in locally based organizations, but we hope that researchers in universities, state government, and policy institutes will also find the book useful.

Background

Rural America has experienced dramatic demographic and economic changes in the last several decades. During the 1960s and '70s, population and employment in rural communities grew and the long-standing gap between rural and urban incomes became smaller. Just when many analysts were predicting an economic revival in rural America, the fortunes turned and news from the heartland became relentlessly discouraging. The income gap began to grow again and migration from rural to urban areas resumed.

Although population data from the early 1990s show that conditions are improving in many small towns, national-level statistics still tell of a rural America that lags behind the rest of the country in income and job growth. Poverty and unemployment rates are higher, education levels lower, and the effects of recession often more severe. Especially in the Midwest, many rural places are steadily losing population as people leave in search of better jobs. In small communities that have been hard hit economically and lost population, access to health care, education, and other services is often a serious problem.

People who work with and live in rural places are searching for new development models that promise more stability and prosperity than in the past. While some people still yearn for the "good old days," others agree that if rural communities are to survive—let alone prosper—they must find new

goods to produce, new services to offer, and new ways of interacting with each other and the world around them. Many communities are making progress toward these goals by finding new ways to cooperate, share resources, and take advantage of savings that often come with increased size (17).^{*} Accomplishing these goals is an enormous challenge that requires reliable information and analysis.

Unfortunately, data collection efforts have not kept pace with changing rural conditions. Part of the reason for the gaps in rural data is obvious: the cost of collecting reliable statistical data increases as population becomes more sparse. To save money, most data collection activities use sample designs that yield more information for urban than rural areas. Sampling rates typically used in national surveys produce enough observations to make estimates with relatively small sampling errors in urban areas but not in rural areas. Despite these problems, a wealth of secondary data is available to describe rural places, people, and businesses. This book documents these data sources for both experienced researchers and local decision makers who are unfamiliar with statistical data.¹

What Are “Rural” Data?

In the context of identifying data sources, “rural” is a geographic concept based on two standards defined by Federal agencies that collect statistics. The first standard is the urban/rural designation used by the Bureau of the Census in its decennial count of population and housing units. According to the Bureau’s definition, an *urban* area is any incorporated or unincorporated place with a population of at least 2,500. Everything else is *rural*.

The second standard is the metropolitan designation assigned to every U.S. county by the Office of Management and Budget. Counties are considered *metropolitan* if they have a city with a population of at least 50,000 or close economic ties with such a city. All other counties—2,276 in 1993—are *nonmetropolitan*. Because the county is the building block of the vast majority of Federal data systems, nonmetro counties are the building blocks of rural data systems, if only by default.

We emphasize that almost without exception, data on rural places in the United States are based on one of these two definitions. When it comes to statistics, the designation of “rural” refers either to a place with less than 2,500

^{*}Underlined numbers in parentheses refer to sources listed in the Reference section of this book beginning on page 129.

¹Readers interested in the status of and outlook for rural data are referred to *Rural Information Systems: New Directions in Data Collection and Retrieval* (2).

people or to a nonmetropolitan county. Because very few Federal agencies collect data in a way that yields statistics on places with populations of less than 2,500, most of the data we use to describe "rural" places actually describes nonmetropolitan counties.

Luckily, we can speak a little more precisely about nonmetro counties by using two classification schemes developed by the USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS). The first is the Beale coding system, which classifies six groups of nonmetro counties according to how urban or rural their population is (based on the Census Bureau's definition of "rural") and whether or not they are adjacent to metropolitan areas (see box). At one end of the nonmetro spectrum are "urbanized adjacent" counties that have an urban population of at least 20,000 and are adjacent to a metro area. At the other end are "totally rural nonadjacent" counties that (1) have no urban population (that is, no place with a population of at least 2,500) and (2) are not adjacent to a metro area. (Codes for all U.S. counties are available on diskette from "ERS Data," Room 228, 1301 New York Avenue N.W., Washington, DC, 20005-4788. Call (202) 219-0534 for more information.)

The second classification scheme we can use to be more precise about nonmetro counties is the ERS County Typology system, which ERS recently revised (4). It includes six mutually exclusive economic types. Five of them—farming, mining, manufacturing, government, and services—reflect dependence on particular economic specializations. A sixth type, called "nonspecialized," includes counties not classified as having any of the five

Beale Nonmetro County Classification	Number of Counties
Urban population of 20,000 or more, and adjacent to a metro area	133
Urban population of 20,000 or more, and not adjacent to a metro area	113
Urban population of 2,500–19,999, and adjacent to a metro area	611
Urban population of 2,500–19,999, and not adjacent to a metro area	647
Completely rural (no places with a population of 2,500 or more), and adjacent to a metro area	247
Completely rural (no places with a population of 2,500 or more), and not adjacent to a metro area	525
Total nonmetro counties	2,276

Definitions used in the ERS County Typology (4)

Economic Types

Farming-dependent Farming contributed a weighted annual average of 20 percent or more of total labor and proprietor income over the three years from 1987 to 1989. There are 556 farming-dependent counties.

Mining-dependent Mining contributed a weighted annual average of 15 percent or more of total labor and proprietor income over the three years from 1987 to 1989. There are 146 mining-dependent counties.

Manufacturing-dependent Manufacturing contributed a weighted annual average of 30 percent or more of total labor and proprietor income over the three years from 1987 to 1989. There are 506 manufacturing-dependent counties.

Government-dependent Government activities contributed a weighted annual average of 25 percent or more of total labor and proprietor income over the three years from 1987 to 1989. There are 244 government-dependent counties.

Services-dependent Service activities (private and personal services, wholesale and retail trade, finance and insurance, transportation and public utilities) contributed a weighted annual average of 50 percent or more of total labor and proprietor income over the three years from 1987 to 1989. There are 323 services-dependent counties.

Nonspecialized Counties not classified as a specialized economic type over the three years from 1987 to 1989. There are 484 nonspecialized counties.

Policy Types

Retirement-destination The population aged 60 years and over in 1990 increased by 15 percent or more from 1980–90 through in-migration of people. There are 190 retirement-destination counties.

Federal lands Federally owned lands made up 30 percent or more of a county's land area in 1987. There are 270 Federal lands counties.

Commuting Workers aged 16 years and over commuting to jobs outside their county of residence were 40 percent or more of all the county's workers in 1990. There are 381 commuting counties.

Persistent poverty Persons with poverty-level income in the preceding year were 20 percent or more of total population in each of four years: 1960, 1970, 1980, and 1990. There are 535 persistent poverty counties.

Transfers-dependent Income from transfer payments (Federal, state, and local) contributed a weighted annual average of 25 percent or more of total personal income over the three years from 1987 to 1989. There are 381 transfers-dependent counties.

economic specializations. The ERS County Typology scheme also identifies five overlapping, policy-relevant types: retirement-destination, Federal lands, persistent poverty, commuting, and transfers-dependent.

State tables containing the ERS county classification codes, with descriptive profiles of the different county types, are available from the ERS AutoFAX Service. (Dial (202) 219-1107 and request information directory document number 5600. See the box in Chapter 4 in the section "Agriculture" for details on using the ERS AutoFAX.) The state tables are also available via Internet-Bitnet. (E-mail Peggy J. Cook, *PROSS@ERS.BITNET*, or Karen Mizer, *KMIZER@ERS.BITNET*, for complete information.)

With these refinements to commonly used statistical reporting practices, we can at least begin to describe rural America. The centerpiece of our information base is the Census of Population and Housing that is conducted by the Department of Commerce every ten years. Using this rich data file, we can describe in detail the demographic and economic characteristics of small area populations. For example, the decennial census allows us to answer questions about work and income distribution, educational attainment, and the economic well-being of particular types of households.

In between the decennial censuses, we supplement our knowledge about rural America with a variety of less comprehensive sources. A few examples make the point. Estimates from a joint Federal-state program give us a rough idea of population change in small areas from year to year. The economic censuses that are conducted every five years permit us to describe the structure and activity of the most important industries in each county in the United States (albeit with few details). The Bureau of Economic Analysis estimates annual county-level per capita and total personal income and its components. And, data published in the *County and City Data Book* describe the health resources and status of county populations.

Who needs this kind of data? The answer is: people who analyze and make decisions about where rural communities are heading. Public and private community development practitioners, university researchers, elected officials, and policy makers from the local to the Federal level all use data and information about rural communities. The purpose of this book is to help them find what they need.

Organization of the Book

Chapter 1 describes a few basic concepts for readers who are not experienced data users. The topics discussed are: primary vs. secondary data; survey vs. administrative data; sample vs. population surveys; the media in which data are available; census geography; data mapping; and public vs. private data.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of major data sources that can be used to describe rural communities, including the Census Bureau's decennial and current population programs; the Census Bureau's agricultural, economic, and government censuses; personal income data from the Bureau of Economic Analysis; and labor market data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The chapter concludes by explaining where researchers can find data that are issued by these agencies, as well as where they can find more information about their state and region.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 show how researchers can use Federal, state, and local data to understand social and economic change in the very diverse communities that make up rural America. Sample counties from the ERS County Typology groups are used to put the data sources in context. This classification scheme enables us to show how various data sources can be used to explore major rural issues, including the performance of critical economic sectors, population change, and persistent rural poverty.

The sample counties are:

- Attala County, Mississippi, a “nonspecialized,” “persistent poverty,” and “transfers-dependent” county;
- Coos County, New Hampshire, a “manufacturing-dependent” county;
- Kossuth County, Iowa, a “farming-dependent” county;
- Latah County, Idaho, a “government-dependent” county;
- Nicholas County, West Virginia, a “mining-dependent” and “transfers-dependent” county; and
- Yavapai County, Arizona, a “services-dependent,” “retirement destination,” and “Federal lands” county.

The appendices provide readers with postal and electronic addresses and phone numbers for state and Federal offices that house or collect data. They also give details about Census Bureau publications and economic census programs. A glossary at the end of the book gives definitions of research and statistical terms and, finally, a reference table on the inside back cover explains acronyms used in the text.

Several comments before we begin: First, most of this book concerns data reported by Federal agencies. However, researchers who are interested primarily in local conditions may find more up-to-date and detailed data from state and private sources (such as local employers). We also encourage people to pursue contacts in their own communities, as well as state resources (see Appendix D).

Second, knowing where to find reliable data is only one important part of research. Also critical is interpretation and analysis for decision making. To find out what kind of analysis has been done on rural communities in your

state or region, contact your state land grant university, Regional Rural Development Center, or state Rural Development Council. These organizations are discussed at the end of Chapter 2.

Finally, three caveats about using the data described here: First, the value of most data lies not with a single statistic for one particular area, but in comparable statistics for different areas or different time periods. For example, an individual county's unemployment rate is more telling when compared to the rate in surrounding counties because it is put in a relative context. Our statistical indicators are too imprecise to contain "absolute truth" by themselves.

Second, statistics are only as valuable as the questions people ask. The most carefully collected data are useless if researchers have not asked questions whose answers inform us about issues that matter. To emphasize that good research begins with good questions, data in this book are described in the context of how they can be used. It is hoped that the illustrative questions we pose will encourage more substantive and useful research on rural communities.

Third, we have tried to provide accurate addresses and phone numbers for the various information contacts in this book. However, many agencies move or change phone numbers periodically. If you are unable to reach a contact with the information we provide here, please persevere by calling directory assistance or the state or regional office of the agency you are trying to contact.