1. DEFINING "RURAL" AREAS

What does it mean for an area to be classified as "rural?"

Federal agencies, researchers, and other analysts use two main classification systems to define rural areas: (1) the U.S. Census Bureau's urban and rural definitions, and (2) the Office of Management and Budget's (OMB's) Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Area standards.

> TIP: Some analysts use the OMB standards to classify areas outside of metropolitan statistical areas as "non-metropolitan." But nonmetropolitan is not synonymous with rural and was not designed for that purpose.

This section describes these two classification systems and how they relate to each other, so that American Community Survey (ACS) data users can choose the appropriate geographic areas for their analysis.

Rural/Urban Areas

The Census Bureau does not actually define "rural." Rather, rural areas include all geographic areas that are not classified as urban. Data from the ACS indicate that about 61 million people, or 19 percent of the population, lived in rural areas of the United States in 2016. Although less than one-fifth of the U.S. population lives in rural areas, these areas encompass about 97 percent of the total land area in the United States. Figure 1.1 shows a sample image of rural areas in Texas.

Geographic areas that are not rural are, by definition, urban. The Census Bureau defines "urban areas" as either:

- Urbanized areas, which contain 50,000 or more people.

- Urban clusters, which have at least 2,500 people but fewer than 50,000 residents.

Figure 1.1. **Rural Areas in Texas: 2016**

Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

What Users of Data for Rural Areas Need to Know
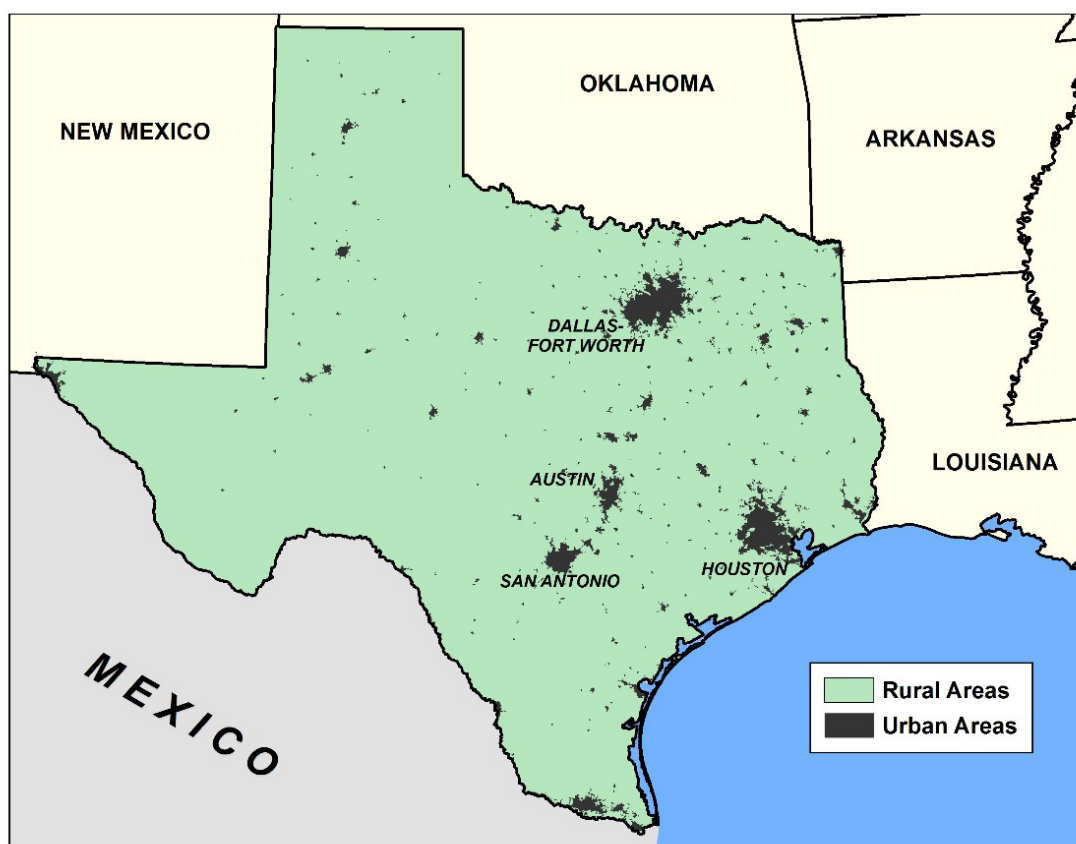
U.S. Census Bureau

Both urbanized areas and urban clusters are delineated primarily on the basis of population density—or the extent to which areas are built-up and densely settled. The Census Bureau also uses land use/land cover and distance criteria in assessing whether to include territory in an urban area.

The Census Bureau defines urban areas after each decennial census. After the 2010 Census, the Census Bureau delineated 3,573 urban areas nationwide, including 486 urbanized areas and 3,087 urban clusters. About 262 million people, or 81 percent of the population, lived in urban areas in 2016, according to ACS data. Figure 1.2 shows a sample image of urbanized areas and urban clusters in Pennsylvania.

The Census Bureau's American FactFinder (AFF) includes ACS estimates for rural and urban portions of the nation, regions, divisions, each of the 50 states, and Puerto Rico. Information about how to access estimates for urban/rural areas is included in the section on "Accessing ACS Data."

TIP: *While the Census Bureau releases ACS data for urban and rural areas each year, the boundaries for urban areas are delineated based on decennial census results and do not change through the decade. Given that urban and rural area definitions are not updated between censuses, data for urban and rural areas from the ACS (and other sources) do not necessarily reflect the results of ongoing urbanization.*

As the decade progresses, data for rural areas from the ACS may include densely settled population that will be defined as urban in the next round of delineations. For more information about urban/rural area definitions, see the Census Bureau's brief on Defining Rural.[2]

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[2] Michael Ratcliffe, Charlynn Burd, Kelly Holder, and Alison Fields, Defining Rural at the U.S. Census Bureau, ACSGEO-1, 2016, <www.census.gov/library/publications/2016/acs/acsgeo-1 .html>.

Figure 1.2. **Urban Areas in Pennsylvania: 2016**
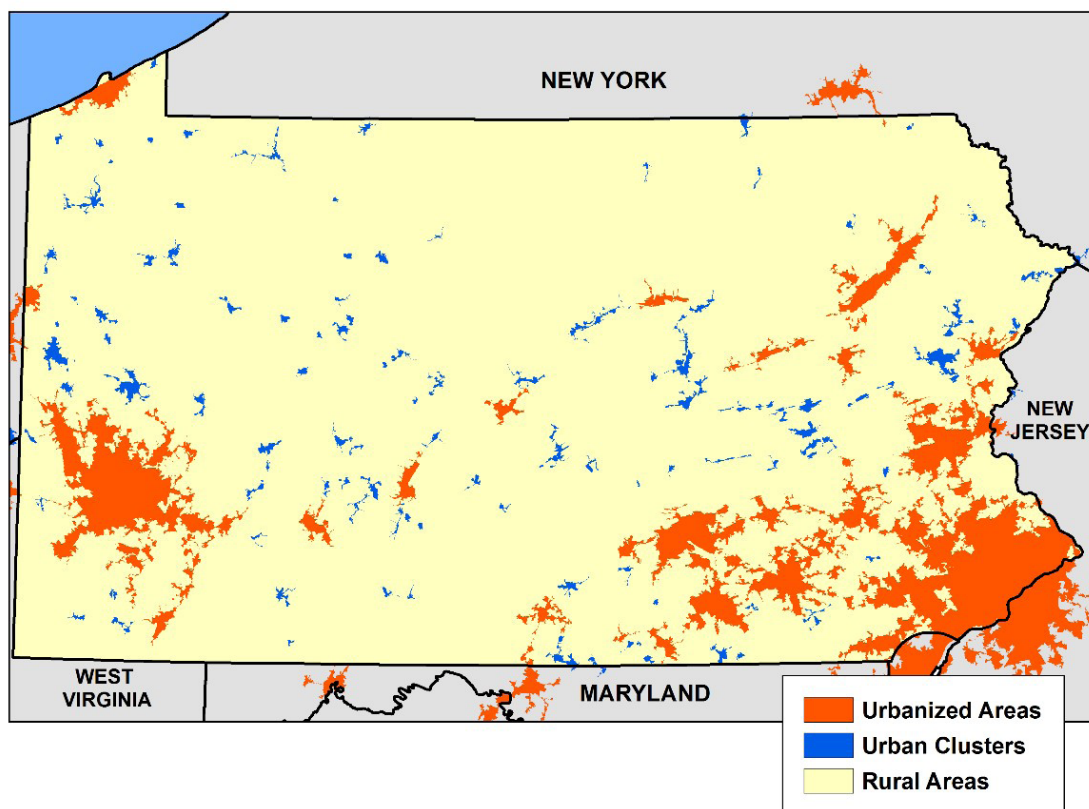
Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

Other federal agencies and programs use different classification systems to define rural and urban areas (see Box 1.1). For example, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service (ERS) uses Rural-Urban Commuting Area (RUCA) codes to classify census tracts based on measures of population density, urbanization, and commuting patterns. The Census Bureau does not publish ACS estimates based on these RUCA codes, but data users could merge tract-level ACS estimates with the ERS codes to compare population and housing patterns across rural and urban communities.

Office of Management and Budget Delineations

OMB designates counties as metropolitan or micropolitan—collectively known as core-based statistical areas. Counties that do not fall into either of these categories are classified as being "outside metropolitan and micropolitan statistical areas."

OMB delineates metropolitan statistical areas as agglomerations of one or more counties (or county equivalents) that contain at least one urbanized area of at least 50,000 people. Metropolitan statistical areas include the county or counties containing the core urbanized area, as well as adjacent counties that, through commuting patterns, are highly integrated economically and socially with the central county.[3] Dallas-Fort Worth-Arlington, Texas, is an example of a metropolitan statistical area.

Beginning in 2003, OMB also delineated "micropolitan" statistical areas. Micropolitan statistical areas consist of at least one urban cluster of at least 10,000 but fewer than 50,000 residents. Like metropolitan statistical areas, micropolitan statistical areas consist of the county or counties containing the core area, plus adjacent counties integrated socially and economically with that main county through commuting patterns.[4] Del Rio, Texas, is an example of a micropolitan statistical area.

The July 2015 OMB classification includes 382 metropolitan statistical areas and 551 micropolitan statistical areas (excluding Puerto Rico). Collectively, these areas accounted for 94 percent of the U.S. population in 2016, according to ACS data. They also make up about 47 percent of the total land area in the United States. Figure 1.3 shows a sample image of counties classified as metropolitan, micropolitan, and outside

[3] U.S. Office of Management and Budget, Bulletin No. 15-01, Revised Delineations of Metropolitan Statistical Areas, Micropolitan Statistical Areas, and Combined Statistical Areas, and Guidance on Uses of the Delineations of These Areas, <www.census.gov/programs-surveys /metro-micro/about/omb-bulletins.html>.

[4] U.S. Office of Management and Budget, Bulletin No. 15-01, Revised Delineations of Metropolitan Statistical Areas, Micropolitan Statistical Areas, and Combined Statistical Areas, and Guidance on Uses of the Delineations of These Areas, <www.census.gov/programs-surveys /metro-micro/about/omb-bulletins.html>.

Box 1.1. **How Federal Agencies Define Rural and Urban Areas**

Federal agencies do not have a standard definition of "rural." Definitions differ in terms of minimum population thresholds that are applied to distinguish urban areas from rural areas (for instance, fewer than 2,500 people, 5,000 people, or 10,000 people) and different geographic building blocks (census blocks, census tracts, ZIP Code Tabulation Areas, places, or counties).

In some classifications, "rural" represents one category among many—as in the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural-Urban Commuting Areas or the National Center for Education Statistics' School Locale Codes. In other classifications, rural is one of two categories, the other is "urban." In both multilevel and two-level ("dichotomous") classifications, rural may be simply a residual category—that is, whatever is left over after the other categories are defined.

Rural (and urban) definitions may also differ in terms of the kinds of areas or landscapes they represent. Some definitions are based on political or administrative units; for example, a city or town of fewer than 10,000 people may be defined as rural. Other definitions, like the Census Bureau's urban and rural classification, may refer to settlement patterns that are based on measures of population density.

Finally, definitions may refer to social and economic relationships, often defined based on a measure of interaction between an urban center and surrounding territory. The Office of Management and Budget's Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas classification, described below, is an example of this type of classification.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service offers a variety of materials to help data users navigate these various definitions on its Rural Classifications Web page.*

* U.S. Department of Agriculture, Rural Classifications: Overview, <www.ers.usda.gov/topics/rural-economy-population /rural-classifications/>.

metropolitan and micropolitan statistical areas in Oregon. There are only three states—Delaware, New Jersey, and Rhode Island—where all the counties are classified as metropolitan. The District of Columbia is also entirely metropolitan.

Some demographers, economists, and other researchers classify counties that are outside of metropolitan statistical areas (those in the micropolitan statistical area and "outside metropolitan and micropolitan statistical areas" categories) as "rural" or "nonmetropolitan." Researchers often use these terms interchangeably in their work on rural America because so much data for local areas are only available at the county level. The ERS report series, Rural America at a Glance, provides a good example of research on social, economic, and demographic trends in rural America based on county-level data.[5]

However, OMB notes that the county-based "metropolitan and micropolitan statistical area standards do not equate to an urban-rural classification; many counties

included in metropolitan and micropolitan statistical areas, as well as those outside these areas, contain both urban and rural territory and populations."[6] Confusion over these concepts can lead to difficulties in analysis and program implementation.

Many counties classified as metropolitan include rural territory, while many counties outside of metropolitan and micropolitan statistical areas contain urban clusters. Based on the Census Bureau's urban/rural classification, 54 percent of the rural population in 2016 resided within metropolitan counties. Rural areas within metropolitan counties encompass a wide variety of landscapes and settlement patterns—from sparsely populated desert lands within large metropolitan counties in the Southwest to small-town landscapes and "large-lot" (one-, three-, or five-acre) housing subdivisions on the fringes of large metropolitan statistical areas.

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[5] John Cromartie, "Rural America at a Glance, 2017 Edition," 2017, <www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details/?pubid=85739>.

[6] U.S. Office of Management and Budget, Bulletin No. 15-01, Revised Delineations of Metropolitan Statistical Areas, Micropolitan Statistical Areas, and Combined Statistical Areas, and Guidance on Uses of the Delineations of These Areas, <www.census.gov/programs-surveys /metro-micro/about/omb-bulletins.html>.

Figure 1.3. **Metropolitan Counties, Micropolitan Counties, and Counties Outside of Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas in Oregon: 2016**

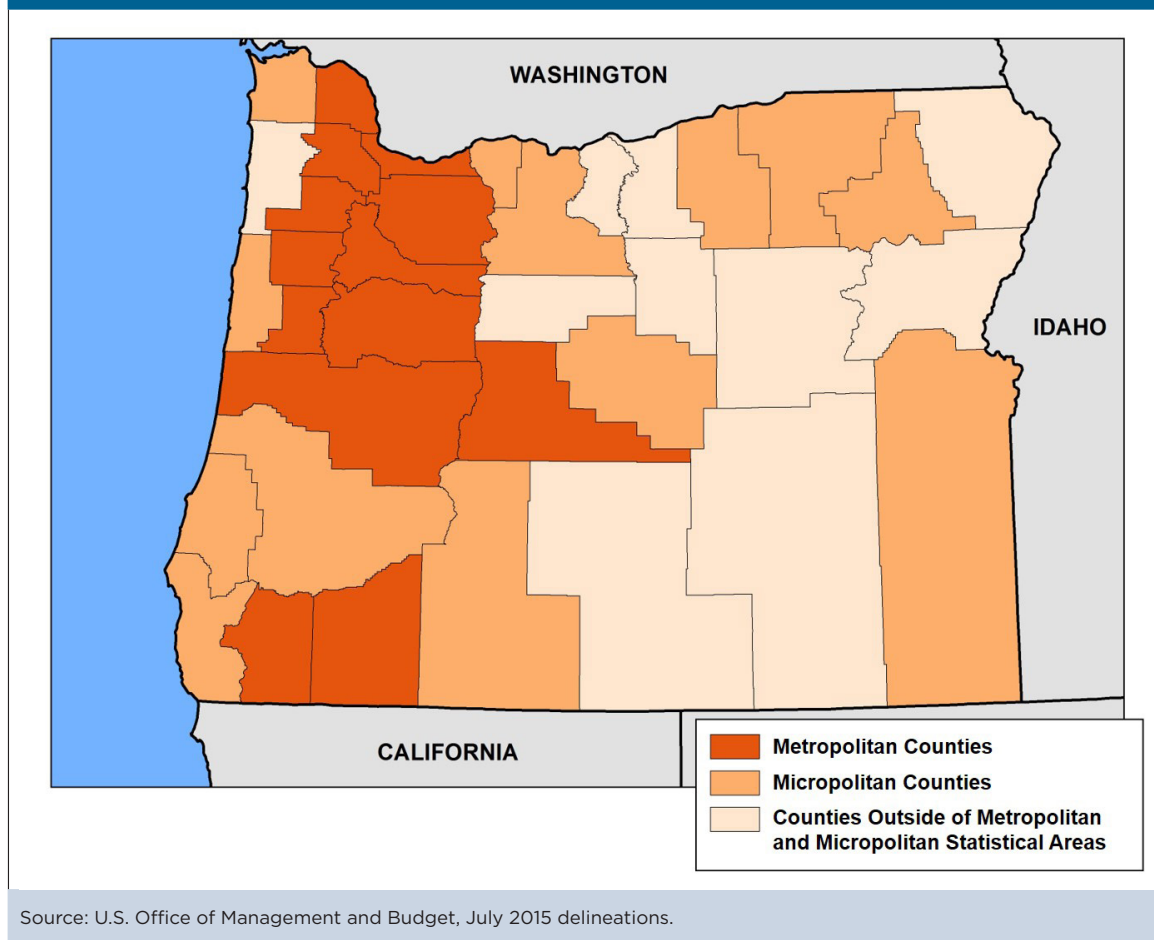Source: U.S. Office of Management and Budget, July 2015 delineations.

Figure 1.4 shows an image of urban areas (shown in dark grey) in the Dallas-Fort Worth-Arlington, Texas Metropolitan Statistical Area. While large portions of Dallas, Tarrant, Collin, Denton, and Rockwall Counties are classified as urban, the surrounding counties are predominantly rural (areas shown in blue). Thus, it would not be appropriate to classify population and territory in Wise County—a predominantly rural county on the fringe of a metropolitan statistical area—as "urban." The challenges posed by metropolitan counties that include rural territory are not new, and researchers have proposed various ways of modifying classifications—as through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's RUCA codes—to subdivide counties into urban and rural components.

> TIP: Because OMB's classifications are county-based, they are well suited for the ACS, which provides social, economic, housing, and demographic estimates for every county in the nation.

Information about how to access ACS estimates for metropolitan statistical areas, micropolitan statistical areas, and areas outside of metropolitan and micro-politan statistical areas is included in the section on "Accessing ACS data."

OMB reviews, and if warranted, revises the standards for delineating metropolitan and micropolitan statistical areas every 10 years, before each decennial census. Between censuses, the delineations are updated to reflect the Census Bureau's latest population estimates, resulting in changes in the portions of the United States identified as metropolitan, micropolitan, and outside of metropolitan and micropolitan statistical areas. Data users analyzing long-term trends with ACS or decennial census data need to be aware of these changes and adjust their analyses and interpretations accordingly. Current and historical delineations of metropolitan statistical areas and micropolitan statistical areas are available through the Census Bureau's Delineation Files.[7]

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[7] U.S. Census Bureau, Delineation Files <www.census.gov /geographies/reference-files/time-series/demo/metro-micro /delineation-files.html>.

Figure 1.4. **Urban and Rural Areas in the Dallas-Fort Worth-Arlington, Texas Metropolitan Statistical Area**
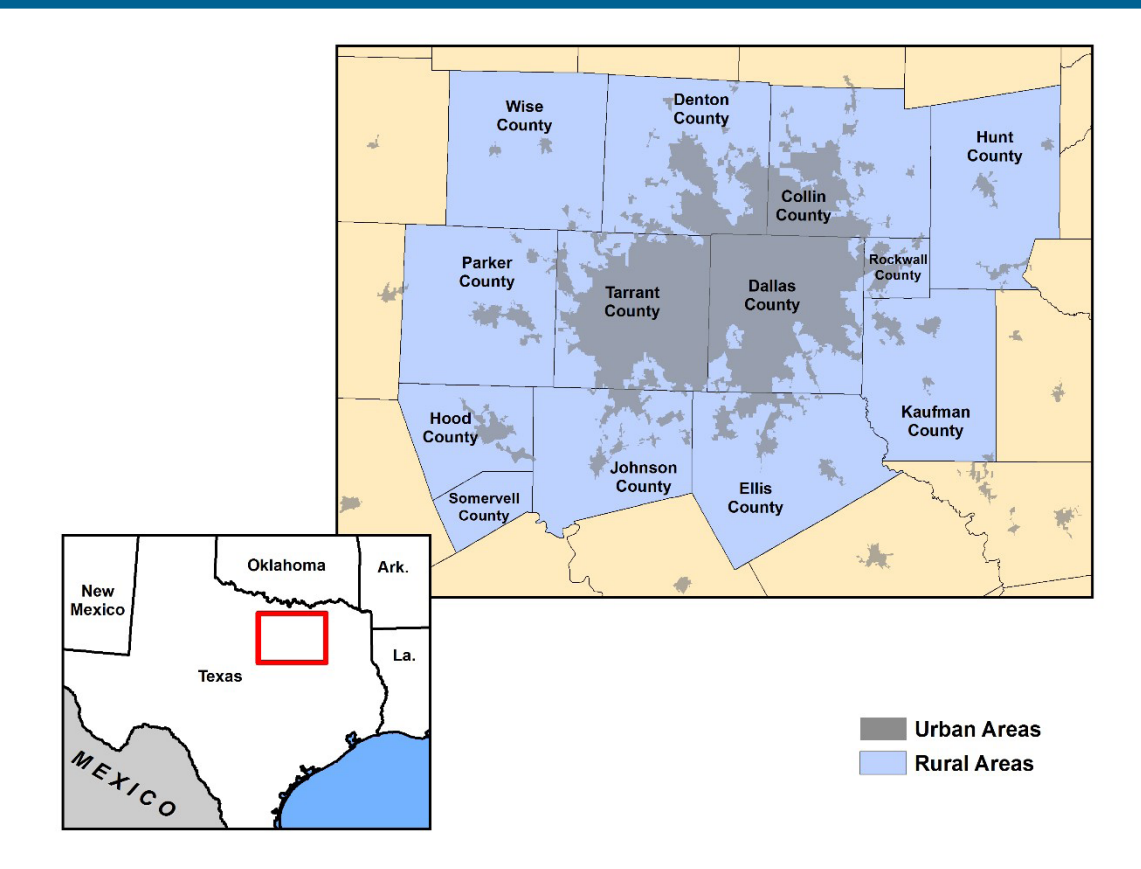
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Office of Management and Budget, July 2015 delineations.