

*Behind the Numbers* takes a look at specific measures or indicators to provide a better understanding of what the data for the indicators mean, how data are used and where you can get them.

# Behind the Numbers Rural

## Defining Rural

For some people, rural is a subjective state of mind like “where everybody knows your name” or “where the sidewalk ends,” while for others, rural is an objective quantitative measure. That’s why numerous and very different definitions exist for the term rural. Some definitions are created to show the most accurate picture while others are for statistical purposes or funding allocation.

### **Census Bureau**

First, the Census Bureau’s definition of rural is all people and territory that are not urban. Urban is, essentially, population centers and the densely settled areas around them. The actual definition is quite detailed and is based geographically on the Census block, whose boundary can be defined by a street, stream or merely a fence as well as by a political boundary. This means that urban areas on a map look something like ink blots with a solid center and rough edges that creep out all around. Since this definition is very precise, data from sources outside the decennial Census cannot easily be applied. For example, because a county or municipality can have both urban and rural parts, data available at the county or municipal level cannot be aggregated into rural and urban areas using this definition. So, for most purposes, this definition is not practical.

### **Federal Office of Management and Budget (OMB)**

OMB does not define rural or urban, but many organizations use its Core-Based Statistical Area (CBSA) definitions for that purpose. CBSAs can be metropolitan or micropolitan areas. Metropolitan areas are counties with a large population center and surrounding counties that are tied economically by worker commuting patterns. Micropolitan areas are similar but with smaller population centers. The remaining counties are referred to as “outside core-based statistical areas.” Because counties are large and often

### **What’s rural?**

For the average person, rural is a subjective concept that conjures up images of small towns, farmlands and forests. For others, rural is an objective, quantitative measure that is clearly defined.

### **How is rural defined?**

There is no single definition of rural. However, many definitions tend to identify rural areas as having low population densities and unique economic and social conditions. Historically, federal and state agencies have developed their own definitions or have used other agencies’ definitions of rural to meet program needs and to describe different populations. For example, most definitions start with population density as a foundation, and add other factors, such as commuting patterns or total population, to fit specific needs.

### **What are the typical elements used to define rural?**

Many rural definitions include two common elements: the measurement of spatial areas and the measurement of that area’s population and its characteristics.

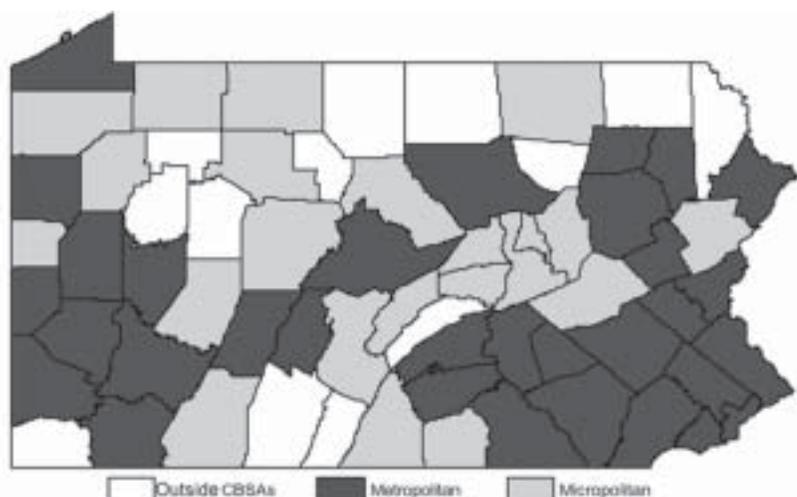
### **Why is it important to define rural?**

Having a measure of rurality tells us that there are differences in population and that distance, population density, and isolation impact the character of the populations that live in these areas.

diverse, they usually have both rural and urban portions. However, many organiza-

tions refer to all metropolitan counties as urban and all other counties as rural. Data

## Pennsylvania’s Core-Based Statistical Areas



compiled this way reflect rural and urban differences relatively accurately at the national level, but can be quite misleading at a small scale. For example, in Pike, Wyoming, and Perry counties, 85 to 89 percent of the population is rural according to the Census, but all three are considered metropolitan by OMB because many workers commute to a nearby county.

### **United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)**

For funding purposes, USDA primarily uses the Farm Bill, which has a number of definitions of rural that differ for various programs. The definitions include:

- a community of 50,000 inhabitants or less,
- a community of 20,000 or less,
- a community of 10,000 or less,
- a community of less than 5,000,
- a community of less than 20,000 and not in a Metropolitan Area, and
- a community outside a Metropolitan Area or inside one but in a Census tract with a population density of less than 20 persons per square mile.

Each definition is carefully formulated to direct funding for that particular program in the most appropriate way to communities in need.

### **Center for Rural Pennsylvania**

The Center for Rural Pennsylvania's definition of rural and urban is based on population density. As of the 2000 Census, the population of Pennsylvania was 12,281,054 and the number of square miles of land in Pennsylvania was 44,820. Therefore, the population density of the state was 274 persons per square mile. From there, the Center identifies counties, municipalities, and

school districts that are rural or urban relative to Pennsylvania as a whole.

A county or school district is rural when its population density is less than the state's 274 persons per square land mile. Counties and school districts that have 274 persons or more per square land mile are considered urban.

The municipal definition is more complex to account for very small but densely populated places within a rural area. A municipality is rural when its population density is less than 274 persons per square land mile or its total population is less than 2,500, unless more than 50 percent of the population lives in an urbanized area, as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau. All other municipalities are considered urban.

This threefold definition allows for rural/urban comparisons of data that are only available at the county level as well as for a more local comparison where school district or municipal level data can be collected.

### **Other state definitions**

Most states have no official definition of rural. Here are examples of what a few states do to define rural:

- New York's definition is codified into law. It says that rural counties are those with a total population of less than 200,000 persons and rural municipalities are those with a population density of less than 250 persons per square mile.
- North Carolina's definition has been used in some laws and says that the rural portion of the state consists of those counties with a population density of less than 200 persons per square mile.
- Washington's definition has been used in some laws and says that the rural portion of the state consists of those counties with a population density of less than 100 persons per square mile.
- Indiana's Office of Rural Affairs defines rural as counties that have approximately one-half or more of their populations living outside areas of 2,500 or more residents.
- Some states, like Illinois, use OMB's definition of metropolitan to distinguish rural from urban areas.

### **Other federal definitions**

Other definitions serve specific purposes. Some of the more common of these definitions include:

- Rural Urban Continuum Codes and Urban Influence Codes developed by USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS)
- Rural Urban Commuting Areas (RUCAS) developed mainly for health care sector funding
- School District locale codes.

**Pennsylvania's Rural/Urban Municipalities (shaded = urban)**

