

Rural America, Urban America, or E Pluribus Unum?

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We live in a nation where deep cultural, social, political, and regional divisions are exacerbated by those receiving benefit from their continuation. Therefore, voices of moderation, accommodation, and understanding seldom carry the day in our current public discourse. Hype, hyperbole, and hubris rule the public green, and are equally employed by both sides, in every one of these battles.

Those of us who know and love rural America are well aware that she has also become embroiled in this dynamic and not fared well in the public consciousness of our nation over the past several months. This began during last fall's election cycle and was reinforced following the December tragedy in Newtown, and the ensuing gun control debate, when "rural" became a convenient label to attach to cultural or political norms with which one disagreed. Indeed, this word has almost become a pejorative adjective, which is very troubling.

As we all know, rural America is an amazingly diverse and dynamic place, and far from homogenous, in almost all ways. As the old saw goes, "Once you have seen one rural community, you have, indeed, seen just one rural community!" While this stereotyping is unfortunate, rural America has a far deeper challenge, which became very evident when the Farm Bill stalled at the end of the last Congress. Although Secretary Vilsack's comments regarding this outcome were the issue at the time, the political realities are clear—there are less rural votes than ever, and urban Americans have little understanding of the importance of this omnibus legislation to their lives. This should be a clarion call to us all!

Like so many of these issues which currently divide us, "rural" and "urban" are not polar opposites. The U.S. settlement pattern is forever altering, on a continuum from the central city to the most remote rural homestead. The U.S. urban population surpassed rural in the 1920 Census. However, the non-farm rural population share has remained around 20% since our country's founding. Indeed, rural population declines have largely been due to consolidation in the agricultural sector. Two other factors are important to note: the definition of urban, and therefore, rural, changed dramatically with the 2000 Census; and "rural" and "nonmetropolitan" definitions are complex and quite confusing to most, including policymakers. The new Census confirms a further blurring of these rural and urban definitions. Today, most counties are both rural and urban, and most metropolitan counties contain rural territory and rural people. In fact, as the charts below show, 54% of all rural people now live in metropolitan counties. Finally, many

“Noncore” counties become either “Micropolitan” or “Metropolitan” over time, because of regional growth dynamics—a rural success story!

Distribution of the U.S. Population, 2010

	Urbanized Area	Urban Cluster	Rural	Total
Metropolitan	219,677,256	10,766,879	32,007,997	262,452,132
Micropolitan	228,950	13,852,786	13,072,477	27,154,213
Noncore	15,917	4,711,483	14,411,793	19,139,193
Total	219,922,123	29,331,148	59,492,267	308,745,538

Urbanized areas are areas of densely settled territory with over 50,000 in total population, and urban clusters have between 2,500 and 49,999 population. Rural is all other territory.

Metropolitan, Micropolitan, and Noncore are county level designations based on the location of urbanized areas and larger urban clusters, and commuting relationships with surrounding counties

Over half (54%) of all rural people live in metropolitan counties

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Decennial Census population by urban and rural classifications; Office of Management and Budget delineation of metropolitan and micropolitan statistical areas as of February 2013, based on application of the 2010 OMB standards to 2010 Census and 2006-2010 American Community Survey data

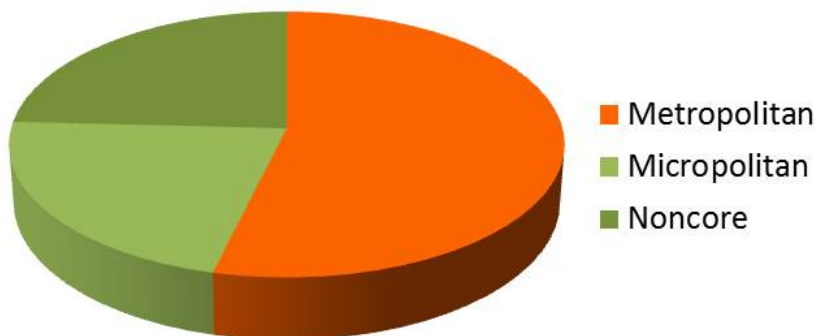


Just as rural and urban America are less definitive categories than once thought, urban growth and rural decline stereotypes must also be challenged. Two recent publications are a case in point. In 2011, Harvard economist Edward Glaeser published *Triumph of the City: How Our Greatest Invention Makes Us Richer, Smarter, Greener, Healthier, and Happier* (New York, Penguin Press, ISBN 978-1594202773). This became a cause célèbre for urban advocates, further driving the Mega-City, “Global City” hegemony sweeping current domestic policy discussions. Professor Glaeser is a brilliant scholar, and has made significant contributions to the urban policy field. However, this encyclopedic tour de force stands in rather stark contrast to a landmark 2012 publication from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD): *Promoting Growth in All Regions*. This report drew upon statistical analysis and case studies from 23 specific regions across all OECD countries from 1995 to 2007, prior to the Global Recession. This study found that less developed regions make vital contributions to national growth, and

that predominately rural regions have, on average, enjoyed faster growth than predominantly urban ones. Specifically, this report found that regions with average GDP per capita below the national average accounted for 43% of aggregate growth across the OECD and countered the widespread view that rural is synonymous with decline. Over the study period, rural regions, on average, outperformed urban ones.

Where Do Rural Residents Live?

“Rural” is a sub-county designation, and counties are most often a mix of urban and rural landscapes. Counties classified as metropolitan usually include a significant portion of rural landscape and population. This chart illustrates the distribution of the rural population by the county classification types.



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Decennial Census population by urban and rural classifications; Office of Management and Budget delineation of metropolitan and micropolitan statistical areas as of February 2013, based on application of the 2010 OMB standards to 2010 Census and 2006-2010 American Community Survey data



The study recommended that policies targeted at less developed regions should not merely be advocated on social equity grounds, but rather for their contribution to national growth. While no single or unique path to growth was common, there was general convergence across all rural regions. It also found that only 45% of metropolitan regions grew faster than the national average, and that metro regions also appear to have entered a process of convergence, with signs of inefficiency across a significant number. While the study did find that significant contributions to aggregate growth flow from major hub regions, accounting for 32% of all growth, 68% of growth occurred across all remaining regions. (Source: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264174634-en>, OECD, 2012, *Promoting Growth in All Regions*)

I began my public policy career shortly after passage of the Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act of 1972. In every Farm Bill since then, the most important rural development question raised by the Ag Committees has been how to define “rural.” Sadly, this remains the case now, despite my best efforts. At this time of global economic restructuring, in which our nation must manage major transitions in all sectors, when re-shoring has become an actual possibility, and when risk and resilience considerations should be driving innovative approaches to a distributed, dispersed configuration of regionally-appropriate supply chains and clusters, could we not at least acknowledge that there are emerging costs to urban density and diseconomies of agglomeration?

Perhaps the sequel to Professor Glaeser's book could be entitled “...Until the Clean Air, Water, Food, and Energy Are All Gone!” Rural regions steward these resources for urban America, and regional collaboration must be our common future commitment.

As the poet Wordsworth put so well: “We murder to dissect.” We are not a rural or urban America; we are one America. We are not a rural or an urban economy; we are a national economy, operating on a global scale. Let us hope that policymakers, both rural and urban, can see a common vested interest in this new understanding, and act accordingly.