Delineating Rural Areas in the United States

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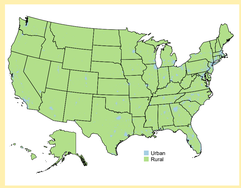
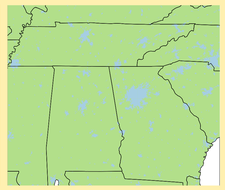
One challenge in addressing rural-urban disparities is the lack of a common definition. Multiple federal systems exist using different levels of geography (e.g. county versus census tract). Multiple definitions of the "rurality" of a place or population means that the degree of the disparity may vary (or even switch direction) depending on the definition. Here, we consider some of the more common federal rural definitions and use representative population characteristics to demonstrate the sensitivity of the disparity to the specific rural definition.

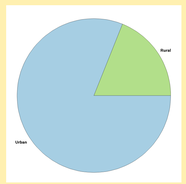
Binary Systems—Rural/Urban

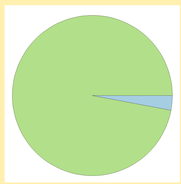
Urbanized Areas and Clusters: US Census Bureau

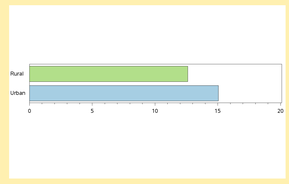
This system includes Urbanized areas (UAs) with 50,000 or more people and Urbanized Clusters (UCs) of 2,500 to 49,999 people in densely settled integrated communities. It is a unique geography that is not constituted of counties, cities, census tracts, or ZIP Codes. Rural areas are considered to be areas outside UA and UC areas.

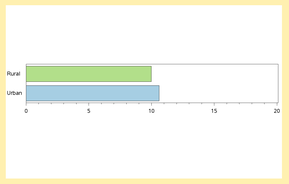


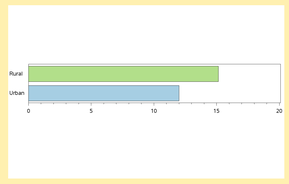






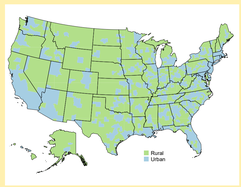


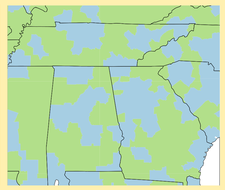


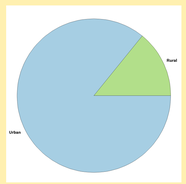


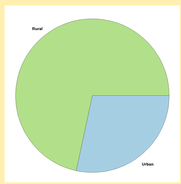
Core Based Statistical Areas: US Office of Management and Budget

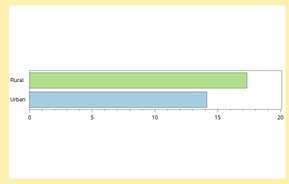
CBSAs include Metropolitan areas with one or more counties in an economically integrated area of 50,000 residents and Micropolitan areas of 10,000 to 49,999 residents. Remaining areas are called NonCore areas. The combination of Micropolitan and NonCore areas constitute rural areas in this system.

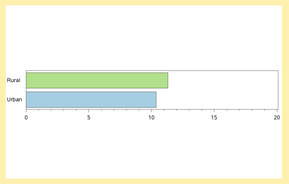


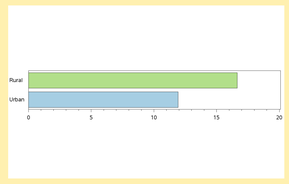






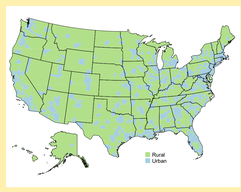


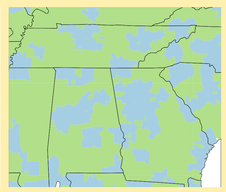


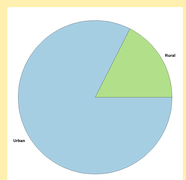


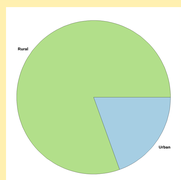
Rural-Urban Commuting Areas & CBSAs: Multiple Institutions

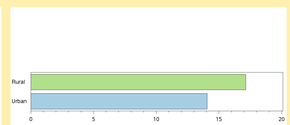
Rural-Urban Commuting Areas (RUCAs) are a sub-county, 1 to 10 classification that is further described below. This modification of the CBSA system classifies portions of Metropolitan counties with RUCAs of 4 or greater as rural, as well as Micropolitan and NonCore counties. This is the preferred system of CMS and the Office of Rural Health Policy.

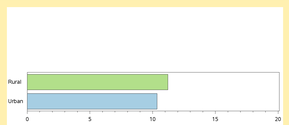


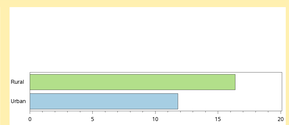






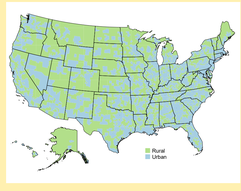


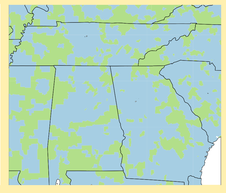


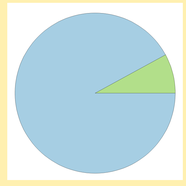


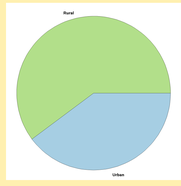
Rural-Urban Commuting Areas: US Dept. of Agriculture

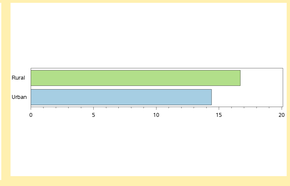
Rural-Urban Commuting Areas (RUCAs) are a subcounty, 1 to 10 classification combining CBSAs and UA/UCs that is defined by Census Tracts (used here) and adapted to ZIP Codes. The major categories can be further broken into 21 subcategories designations offering great flexibility. This method is offered by the University of Washington.

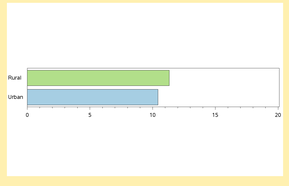


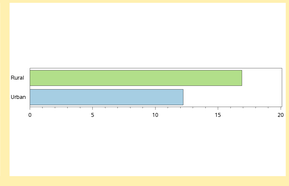








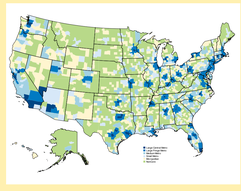


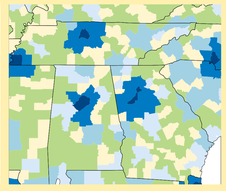


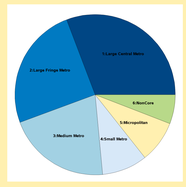
Multi Level Systems

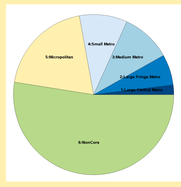
National Centers for Health Statistics

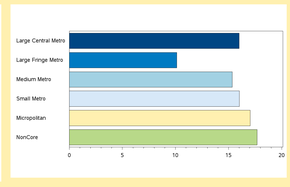
National Centers for Health Statistics (NCHS) Urban-Rural Classification Scheme for Counties is an adapted version of the CBSA system, offering stratification of urban counties. This system is useful for the current, growing interest in characterizing suburban and exurban counties' differences from the metropolitan core.

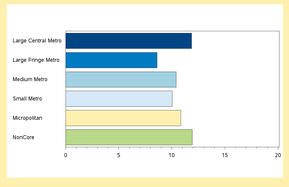


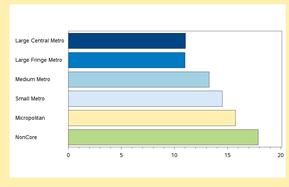






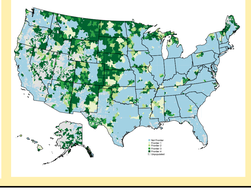


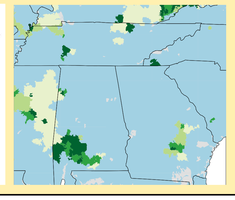


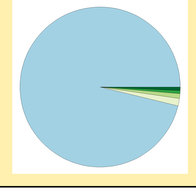


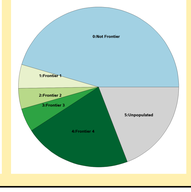
Frontier and Remote Areas: US Department of Agriculture

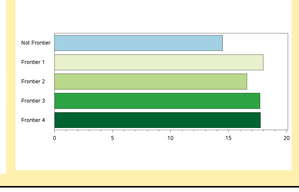
The US Department of Agriculture has facilitated study of sparsely populated areas and isolated areas with their Frontier and Remote (FAR) Area codes. Comprised of ZIP/ZCTA Codes, the system classifies four levels of extreme rurality using proximity to Urbanized Areas and sparse population. Census ZCTA/ZIP areas without population are excluded.

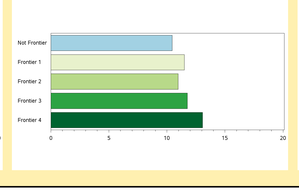


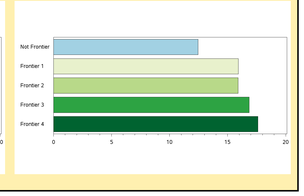












Sources:
Core Based Statistical Areas: https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/metro-micro.html
Frontier and Remote Areas: https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/frontier-and-remote-area-codes/
Rural Urban Commuting Areas: https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/rural-urban-commuting-area-codes/ and http://depts.washington.edu/uwruca/ruca-uses.php
National Centers for Health Statistics Urban-Rural: https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data_access/urban_rural.htm
Urbanized Areas/Urbanized Clusters: https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/geography/guidance/geo-areas/urban-rural.html

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