Economic Research Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

A report summary from the Economic Research Service

Migration and Aging Across the Rural-Urban Continuum

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Key Points

- Populations in U.S. nonmetropolitan (nonmetro) counties are considerably older than populations in U.S. metropolitan (metro) counties because of more than 30 years of consistent age-specific net migration patterns redistributing younger people towards more urban places and older people toward more rural places.
- Nonmetro counties attracted prime working-age people (age 25–54) in the 1990s and 2000s, but lost people at prime working ages in the 2010s due to both migration and natural changes in the population age structure. This was especially true in the most rural counties and contributed to a diminished workforce.
- Attracting retirees has been an economic development strategy for some communities, but nonmetro counties attracted fewer retirement-aged people in the 2010s than in prior decades, despite the large number of Baby Boomers reaching traditional retirement ages. Recreation and retirement destination counties saw more migration gains at most ages than other nonmetro counties, but less so in the 2010s than in decades prior.
- Out-migration of younger people and in-migration of older people were important contributors to rural population aging in the 1990s and 2000s but aging in the 2010s was almost entirely driven by aging in place.
- The nonmetro counties where out-migration of people under age 65 accounted for more of population aging fared worse on economic and health indicators than other nonmetro counties. Nonmetro counties where in-migration of older people contributed more to population aging tended to have better healthcare availability, but residents spent higher shares of their income on housing than in other nonmetro counties.

Why Does This Matter?

Population change can bring both opportunities and challenges for rural areas. Population growth can bring new industries and money to a community but may create problems with housing affordability and providing services. Population loss can lead to the flight of services and economic opportunities for those who remain. Understanding the age composition of a community is also important because young families, working adults, and retirees contribute to the economy in different ways, such as through demand for schools, hospitals, and other services, as well as working local jobs and paying taxes. The economic implications of an aging population may vary depending on whether those individuals have migrated or are aging in place, as retiring migrants may bring with them wealth generated in more urban areas or demand for services not already in a community. This report provides insights for rural communities and policymakers hoping to better understand changing population dynamics and their implications for retaining a prosperous community.

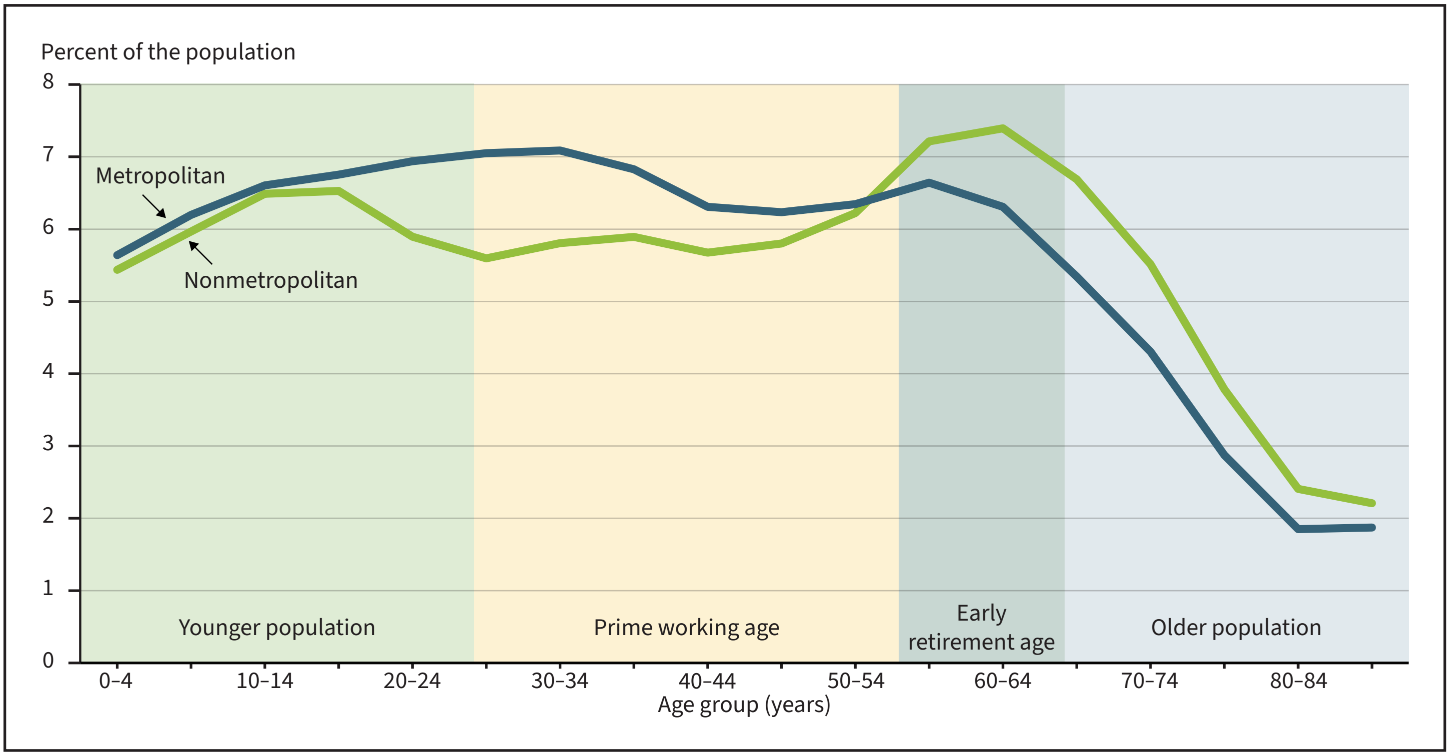
A Few More Details

This report provides an analysis of aging patterns in rural communities. As of 2020, people older than 65 years of age made up more than 20 percent of the population in 1,410 U.S. counties, compared to just 390 in 1990. Age-specific migration patterns have contributed to rural aging with younger people tending to move away and older people tending to move in, depending on the rurality of the county. Across all age groups and county types, however, migration rates during the 2010s were lower than in previous decades, suggesting households were aging in place. In the 2010s, rural communities lost people aged 15–54 due to migration. They also gained people aged 55–74 from migration, but at the slowest rate in three decades.

This report also shows differences in age-specific migration by economic typologies, with farm and manufacturing nonmetro counties experiencing large outward migration of young, working-age individuals while retirement destinations gained people aged 30–79 from migration. These patterns, coupled with natural changes in aging, help explain population growth and losses across the rural United States. While, on average, all types of nonmetro counties experienced population declines of working age individuals due to natural aging (aged 25–54), losses were at least partially offset by positive net migration in recreation counties and retirement destinations. For farming and manufacturing counties, however, outmigration of working age individuals compounded their losses due to natural change.

Finally, this report highlights the differences between counties aging due to migration and those aging due to natural change. Those aging because of the outmigration of younger people generally were associated with lower incomes and employment. Those aging due to an increase in migration among retirement-aged individuals had higher home prices relative to incomes, but also better availability of healthcare facilities.

Metropolitan and nonmetropolitan county population in 5-year age groups, 2020



Note: This figure shows the percentage of residents by 5-year age group, from those younger than 5 years old to those 85 years and older. The percentages in each line add up to 100. The metropolitan-nonmetropolitan delineation used here is based on the modified rural-urban continuum (see box "Defining a Rural-Urban Continuum"). Urban core, suburban, and mid/small sized metropolitan categories are classified here as metropolitan. Exurban, small city, and rural are classified as nonmetropolitan.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the 2020 Census, Demographic and Housing Statistics.

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