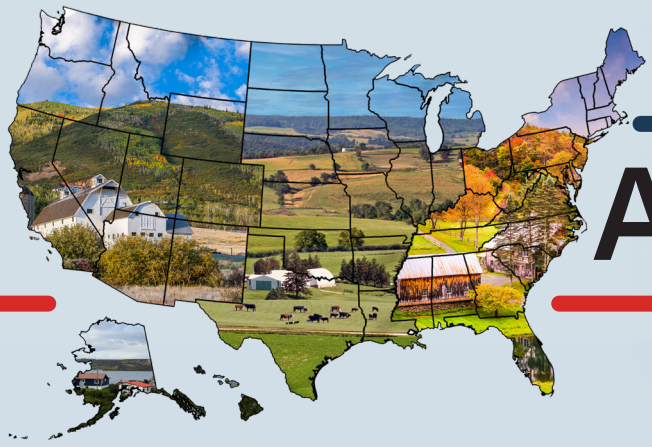
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2026 Edition

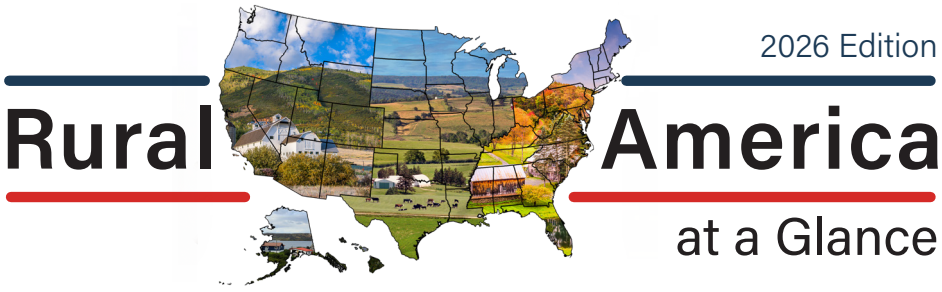
Rural America at a Glance

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Economic Research Service
Economic Information Bulletin Number 313
November 2026

USDA Economic Research Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE



Recommended citation format for this publication:

Farrigan, T., Sanders, A., Winikoff, J., Paul, L., Shcheglovitova, M., Winkler, R. (2026). *Rural America at a glance: 2026 edition* (Report No. EIB-313). U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.

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RURAL AMERICA AT A GLANCE

is an annual report that highlights social and economic conditions in rural areas of the United States. This edition offers aggregate and county-level statistical analyses of population change and indicators of economic well-being for rural areas, including employment, poverty, income, and housing. In recognition of 2026 being the 25th year of publication of this report, a 25-year perspective of change is presented for most indicators in addition to discussion of recent changes within the last 5 years.

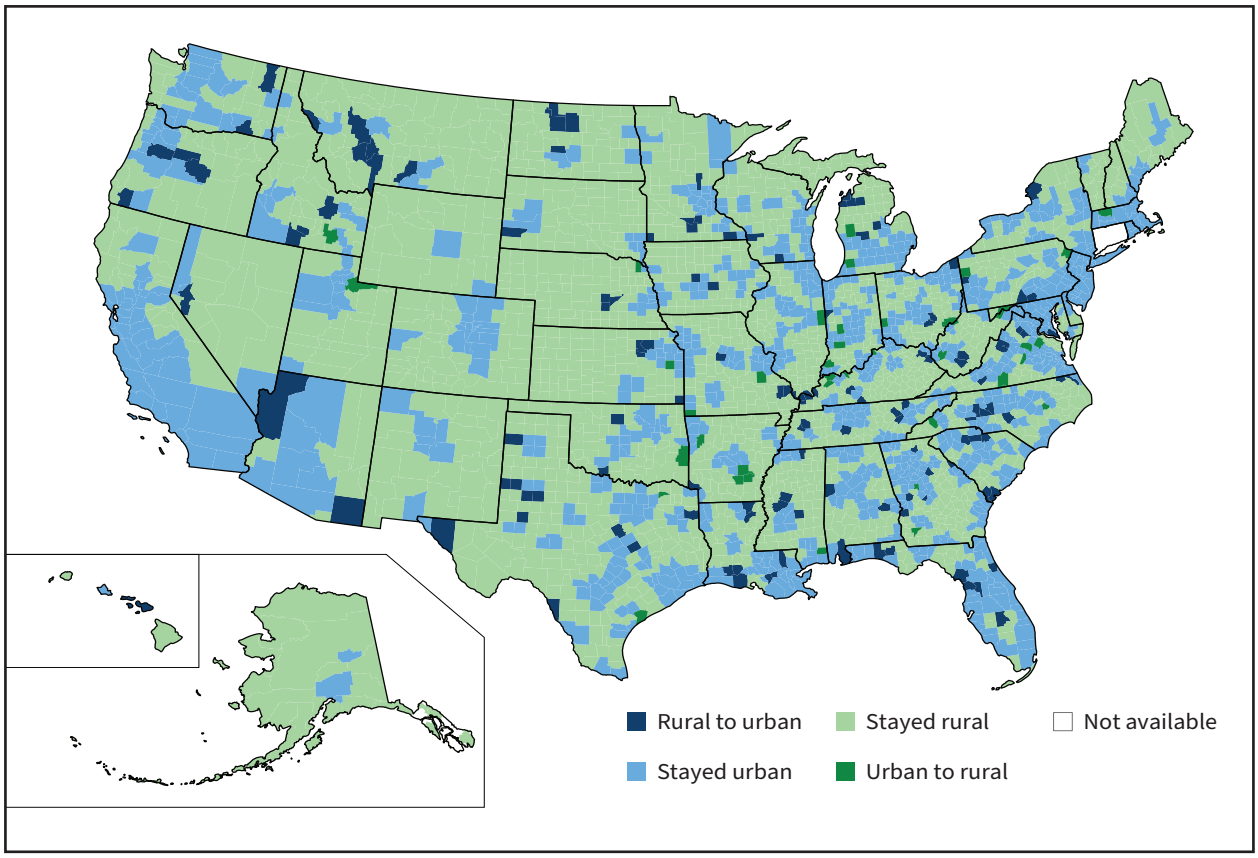
MULTIPLE GEOGRAPHIC LENSES HELP DEFINE AND CHARACTERIZE RURAL AMERICA

Rural is a multifaceted term that is defined differently across Federal programs, policy contexts, and academic fields, each applying distinct conceptual, geographic, and socioeconomic criteria to distinguish rural from urban areas. Although definitions vary, most statistical approaches share two underlying concepts: the size of nearby population centers and the distance from them. Larger cities and towns typically offer a wider range of businesses and public services and are classified as urban, while areas farther from those centers are considered more rural because residents must travel longer distances to access goods, services, and employment opportunities. This report series has long employed a rural definition based on nonmetropolitan (nonmetro) area status, supplemented by detailed county and regional geographies to examine spatial variation in rural demographic and economic trends. This edition continues that approach but shifts from making rural (nonmetro) versus urban (metro) comparisons to presenting rural outcomes within the broader context of national statistics.

Rural refers to nonmetro areas as defined by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget's (OMB) core-based statistical area delineations. Counties are designated metropolitan when they contain a city of at least 50,000 people or have substantial commuting ties to such a city; all others are classified as nonmetro (rural). OMB updates these delineations periodically based on new census data, population estimates, and commuting patterns, causing rural and urban geographies to shift over time. For example, 62.3 percent of U.S. counties were designated rural in 2023 (the most recent decennial update), down from 65.3 percent in 2003, reflecting changes in population and commuting patterns (figure 1). Unless otherwise noted, the rural and urban classifications used throughout this report refer to constant 2023 nonmetro and metro delineations.

Figure 1

Change in rural and urban county geography between 2003 and 2023



Note: Rural counties are defined by nonmetropolitan area status, based on the U.S. Office of Management and Budget's delineation of core-based statistical areas. The rural/urban county geographies shown reflect the change from 2003 to 2023 delineations. Data are not available if a county or county-equivalent's 2003 boundaries could not be aligned with 2023 boundaries.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service.



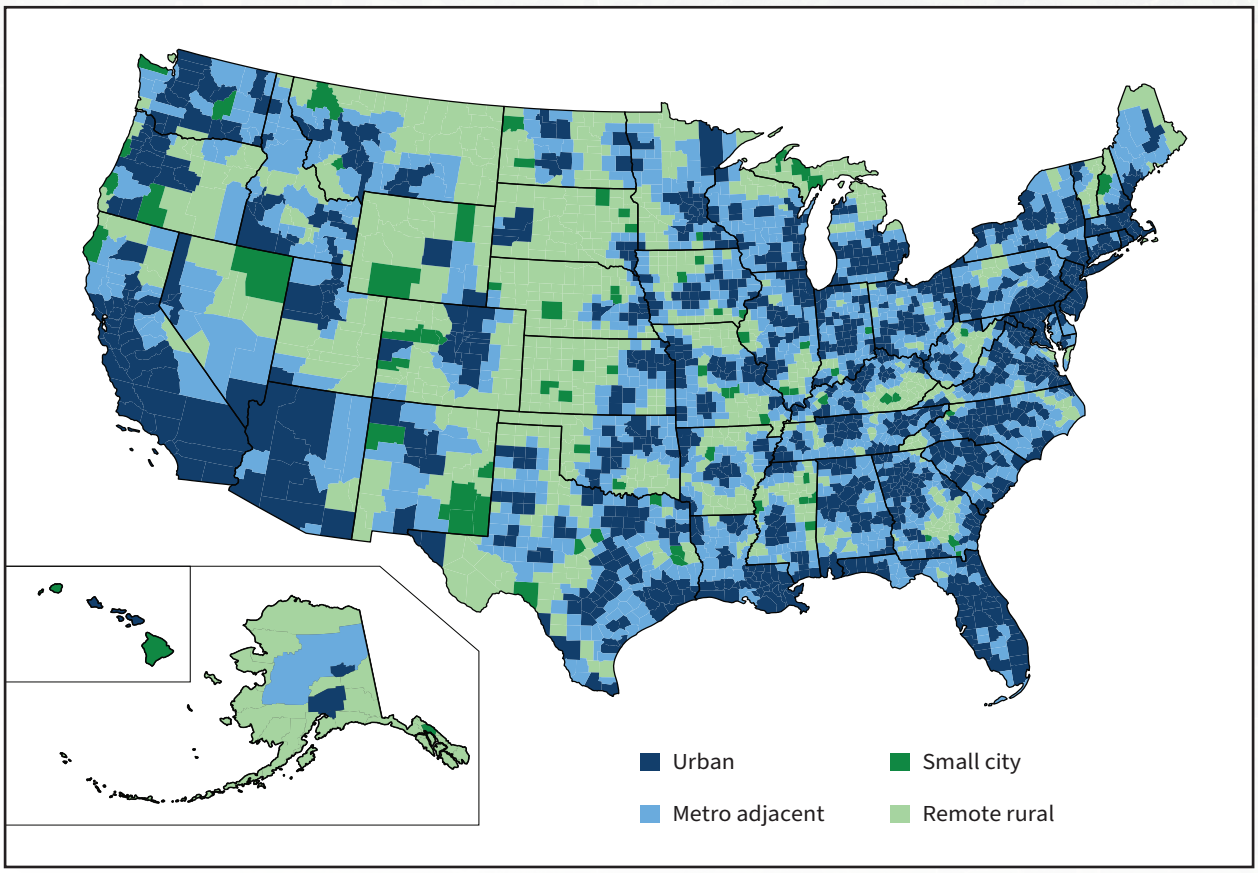
Rural-Urban Continuum Codes (RUCC) capture the gradient between rural and urban areas, recognizing that counties range from low-density rural places to villages and small cities, with intermediate zones that blend rural and urban characteristics. While a simple rural-urban split is useful for broad comparisons, it can mask important differences in access to services, employment opportunities, and travel times across rural counties. To highlight these distinctions, this report uses a modified RUCC that groups counties into one urban category and three rural categories: metro adjacent, small city, and remote rural (figure 2). Metro-adjacent counties lie next to large metropolitan areas and generally have better access to specialized services; small city counties contain mid-sized towns that serve as regional hubs; and remote-rural counties are the most isolated, with smaller communities and long travel times to large cities. This simplified system preserves meaningful differences among rural places while reducing complexity, keeping the classification easy to use, and minimizing the number of groups analyzed.

These settlement and proximity differences represent one dimension of rural diversity; rural counties also vary in the economic structures that shape local opportunity. Rural economies are generally smaller and less diversified than those in urban areas, and many rely heavily on one or two key industries. USDA, Economic Research Service (ERS) County Typology Codes identify counties whose economies depend primarily on farming, mining, manufacturing, government, or recreation—export-oriented industries that bring income into local economies by producing goods and services for markets beyond the county (figure 3). While these industries can support local growth, heavy reliance on a single sector can leave counties vulnerable to industry-specific booms and busts. Using this classification helps illustrate how a county's economic base contributes to differences in demographic and economic outcomes across rural America.



Figure 2

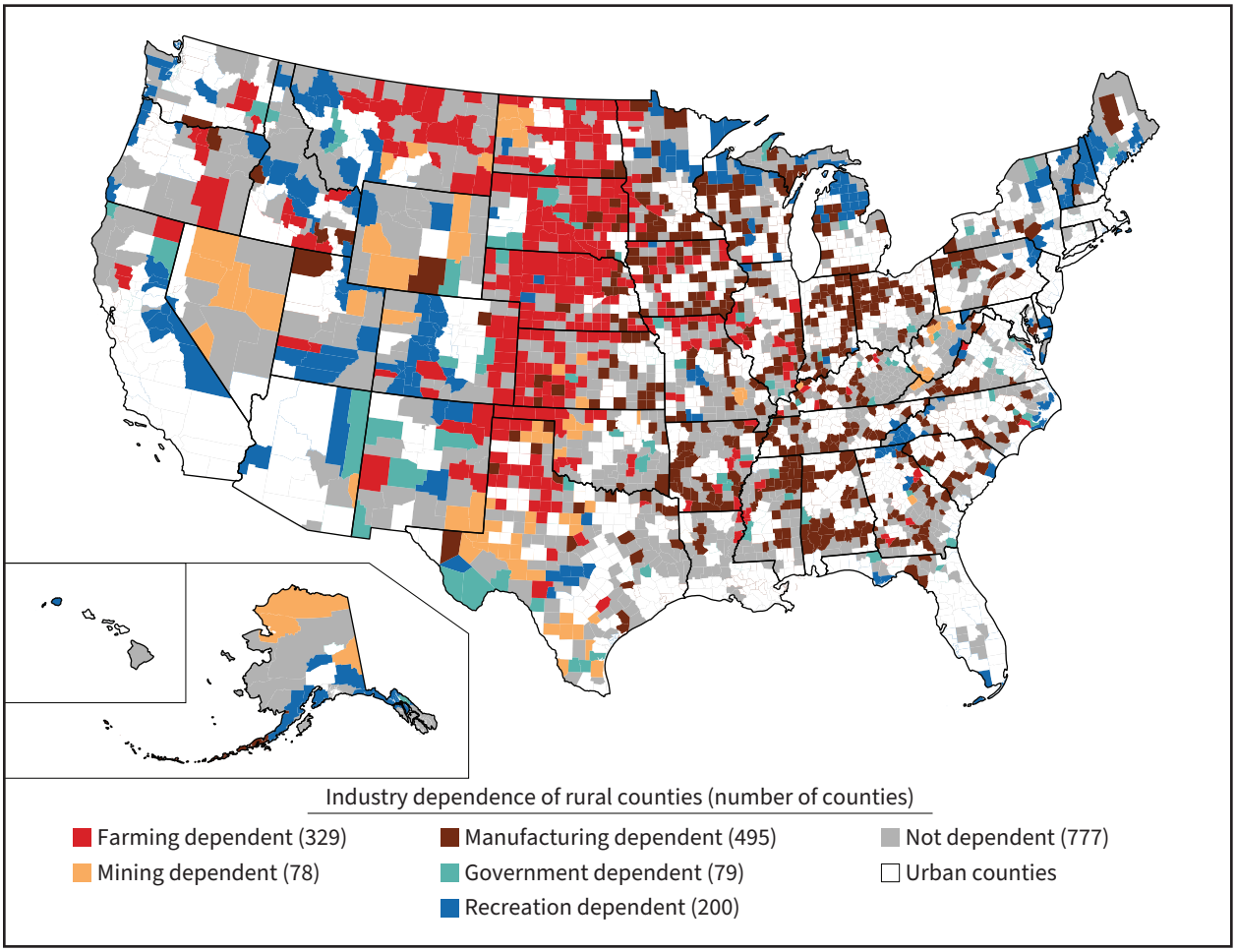
Modified USDA, ERS Rural-Urban Continuum Codes (RUCC), 2023 edition



Note: The modified rural-urban continuum codes collapse the nine classifications from the official RUCC into four categories to simplify the codes for analysis while keeping meaningful distinctions between rural county types. Urban counties refer to metropolitan counties (RUCC 1, 2, and 3). Metro-adjacent counties are all counties that are physically adjacent to metropolitan counties and where at least 2 percent of county workers commute to the urban core of a neighboring metropolitan area (RUCC 4, 6, and 8). Small city counties (RUCC 5) are not adjacent to metropolitan counties but contain an urban area of between 20,000 and 50,000 people. Remote-rural counties (RUCC 7 and 9) are not adjacent to metropolitan counties and contain no urban areas of 20,000 people or more.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service (ERS).

Figure 3
Rural counties by economic type, USDA, ERS County Typology Codes



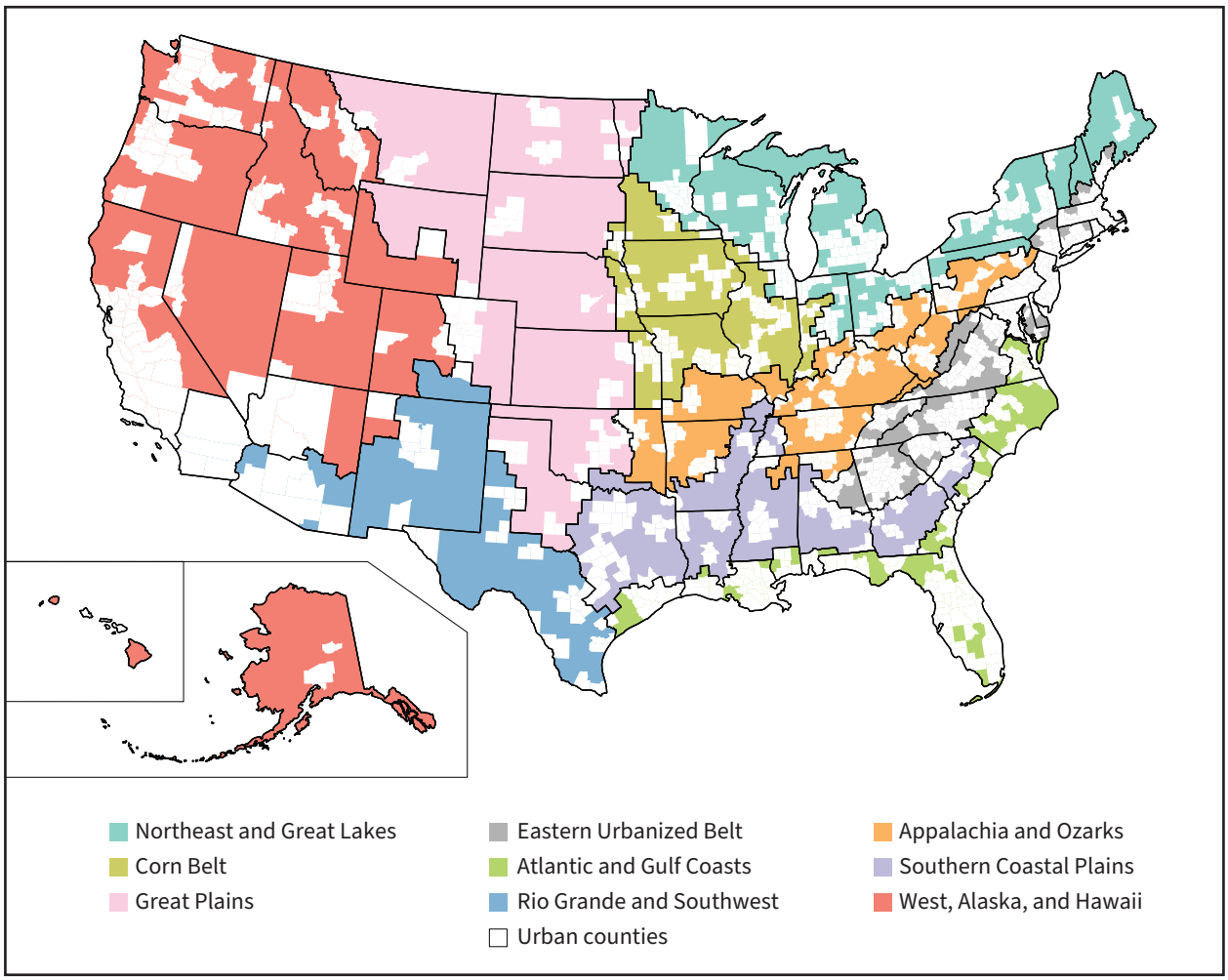
Source: USDA, Economic Research Service (ERS).

A regional perspective offers another way to summarize variation across rural counties by grouping places that share common physical, economic, and socio-cultural characteristics. Although the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census's regions and divisions follow State boundaries and are useful for policy and statistical consistency, political boundaries often overlook differences in landscape, weather trends, and historical settlement patterns. To better reflect these underlying characteristics, this report uses a nine-region classification developed by USDA, ERS researchers that organizes counties into descriptive, familiar regions without adhering to State lines (figure 4). This approach provides a clearer picture of how rural conditions differ across the country while remaining straightforward for readers to interpret.





Figure 4
Rural counties by region, USDA, ERS Regional Classification System



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service (ERS).

Taken together, these geographic classifications show that rural America is diverse across multiple dimensions: whether a county is metro or nonmetro, how its communities are situated along the rural–urban continuum, the industries that anchor its local economy, and the broader regions that shape its physical and socio-cultural context. This multi-layered framework provides a consistent foundation for interpreting the demographic and economic patterns discussed in this report, where trends in population, employment, income, poverty, and housing are examined through the lens of these rural geographies.



HIGHLIGHTS OF RURAL CONDITIONS AND TRENDS

Between 2024 and 2025, the rural population continued to grow, but the increase was modest and slower than national growth, reflecting a sharp decline in positive net migration—a key driver of rural population gains in recent years. Growth remained strongest in metro-adjacent and recreation-dependent rural counties. Rural employment also increased over the past 5 years, yet gains have slowed since the post-Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic recovery, and overall rural employment in 2025 remained below levels seen in 2000, even as national employment rose substantially. Although the rural poverty rate in 2025 was relatively low—compared with earlier decades dating back to when measurement began in 1959—it showed little net change from its 2000 level. Real per capita personal income continued its long-run upward trend and grew faster than the national average. Rural homeownership rates remained consistently higher than national rates, but low homeowner vacancy rates indicate limited opportunities to purchase homes in many rural counties. Taken together, these indicators show that recent change in rural America has been generally positive but modest, with some measures showing slower or uneven progress.

Conditions varied widely across rural counties, with outcomes closely tied to regional context and economic structure. Farming-dependent counties and those in the Great Plains tended to perform well across many indicators, even amid population decline. By contrast, rural counties in the Northeast and Great Lakes region and the Corn Belt region—especially those dependent on manufacturing—were more likely to experience employment challenges and rising poverty. Rural counties in parts of the South, including the Southern Coastal Plains region and stretches of the Rio Grande and the Southwest region, showed mixed outcomes: some saw meaningful long-run poverty reductions linked to economic diversification, while others faced continued decline. Counties in the West, Alaska, and Hawaii further demonstrate this geographic diversity, with recreation-dependent counties experiencing relatively strong employment growth and more remote areas seeing notable population losses. These patterns underscore that rural America is not monolithic; progress and challenges are distributed unevenly across regions, industries, and community types.

Overall, the findings from this report suggest that while rural America continues to make gradual economic and demographic gains, its future will depend on the resilience and adaptability of local economies and the capacity of regions to respond to shifting population dynamics, labor market conditions, and long-term structural change.

POPULATION

Rural Population Grew Modestly, Driven by Migration to Metropolitan-adjacent Counties

The number of people residing in rural areas increased modestly (0.16 percent) between July 2024 and July 2025, reflecting an increase of 76,234 residents to 46,333,972 (table 1). The U.S. population grew more than three times faster than the rural population (0.52 percent). As of July 2025, the rural population encompassed 13.56 percent of the U.S. population, slightly down from 13.61 percent in 2024. Population shifts are due to natural change (the number of births minus the number of deaths) and net migration (the number of people who move into an area minus those who move out). For rural counties, population growth was driven by positive net migration, with an increase of 171,119 people. However, natural change in rural areas from 2024 to 2025 was negative, with a total of 94,885 more deaths than births (-0.21 percent).

There were differences in population growth depending on where counties fell along the rural-urban continuum. Remote-rural counties saw overall population decline in the last year because net migration was not sufficient to make up for population decline due to natural change. Metropolitan (metro)-adjacent counties grew faster than other rural counties due to relatively high net migration rates, despite a negative rate of natural change. Age structures tend to be younger in small city counties and therefore these counties saw only a slight natural decrease, which, coupled with moderate net migration, led to population growth.

Table 1
Population change and components of change, 2024 to 2025

	Number of counties	Population	Population change		Natural change		Net migration	
			Number	Rate (%)	Number	Rate (%)	Number	Rate (%)
Entire U.S.	3,144	341,784,857	1,781,060	0.52	518,858	0.15	1,262,202	0.37
Urban	1,186	295,450,885	1,704,826	0.58	613,743	0.21	1,091,083	0.37
Rural-all	1,958	46,333,972	76,234	0.16	-94,885	-0.21	171,119	0.37
Metro adjacent	1,046	31,570,512	83,205	0.26	-65,952	-0.21	149,157	0.47
Small city	76	4,204,381	5,426	0.13	-266	-0.01	5,692	0.14
Remote rural	836	10,559,079	-12,397	-0.12	-28,667	-0.27	16,270	0.15

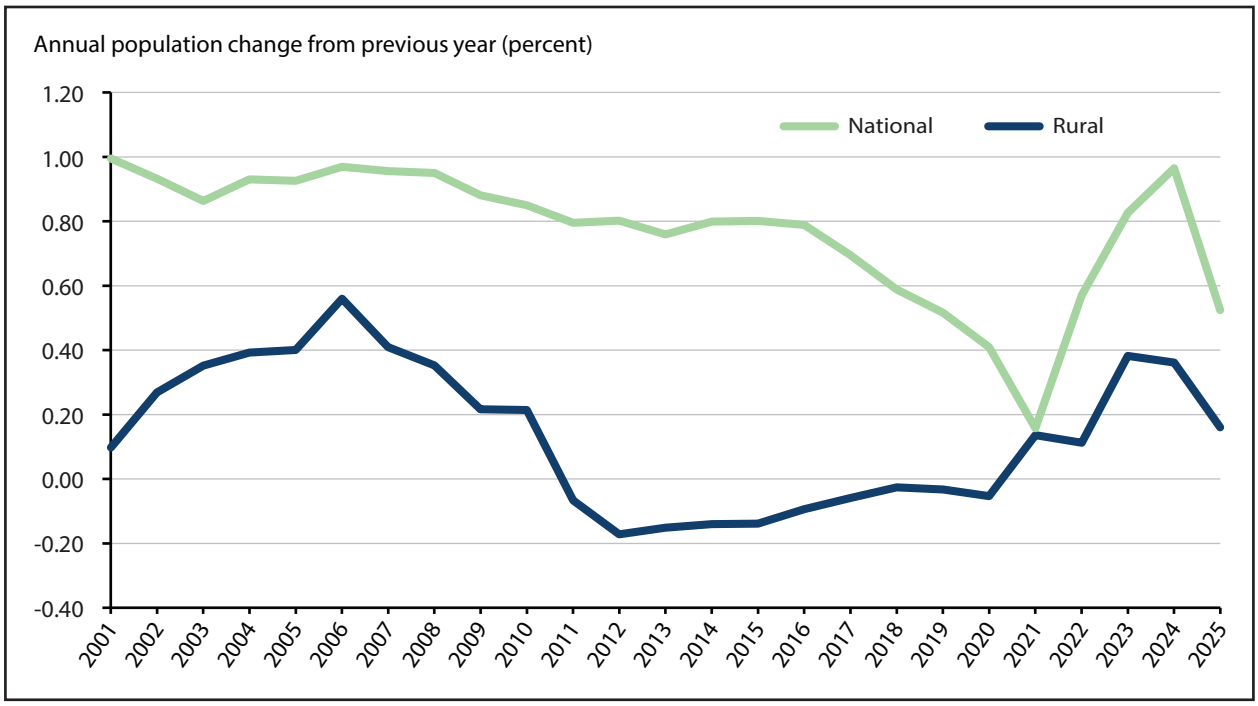
Note: Rural is defined by nonmetropolitan area status, based on the U.S. Office of Management and Budget's 2023 delineation of core-based statistical areas. Rural county categories are based on the USDA, Economic Research Service 2025 Rural-Urban Continuum Codes (RUCC). Metropolitan-adjacent counties have a RUCC equal to 4,6, or 8. Small city counties have a RUCC equal to 5, and remote-rural counties have a RUCC equal to 7 or 9.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Population Estimates Program, Vintage 2025.

Rural Population Growth Slowed in 2025

Although the rural population grew in 2025, the rate of growth was at its lowest level since 2022 (figure 5). In 2024, the rural population grew at a rate of 0.36 percent, more than double the 2025 rate. The sharp decline was due to a large decrease in the net migration rate. A lower net migration rate could have implications for critical rural industries such as agriculture and manufacturing as the available labor force shrinks. Still, when looking at all rural areas together, the total population grew for the fifth consecutive year, continuing a post-Covid-19 trend after about a decade of annual population declines in the 2010s. Over the past 25 years, rural population growth always remained below the national rate, meaning urban areas consistently grew more. National and rural growth rates nearly converged in 2021 when many people migrated from some urban places to rural areas, but began to diverge thereafter.

Figure 5
Annual population change in rural counties and the United States, 2000–25



Note: Rural is defined by nonmetropolitan area status, based on the U.S. Office of Management and Budget's 2023 delineation of core-based statistical areas.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Population Estimates Program, Vintage 2025.

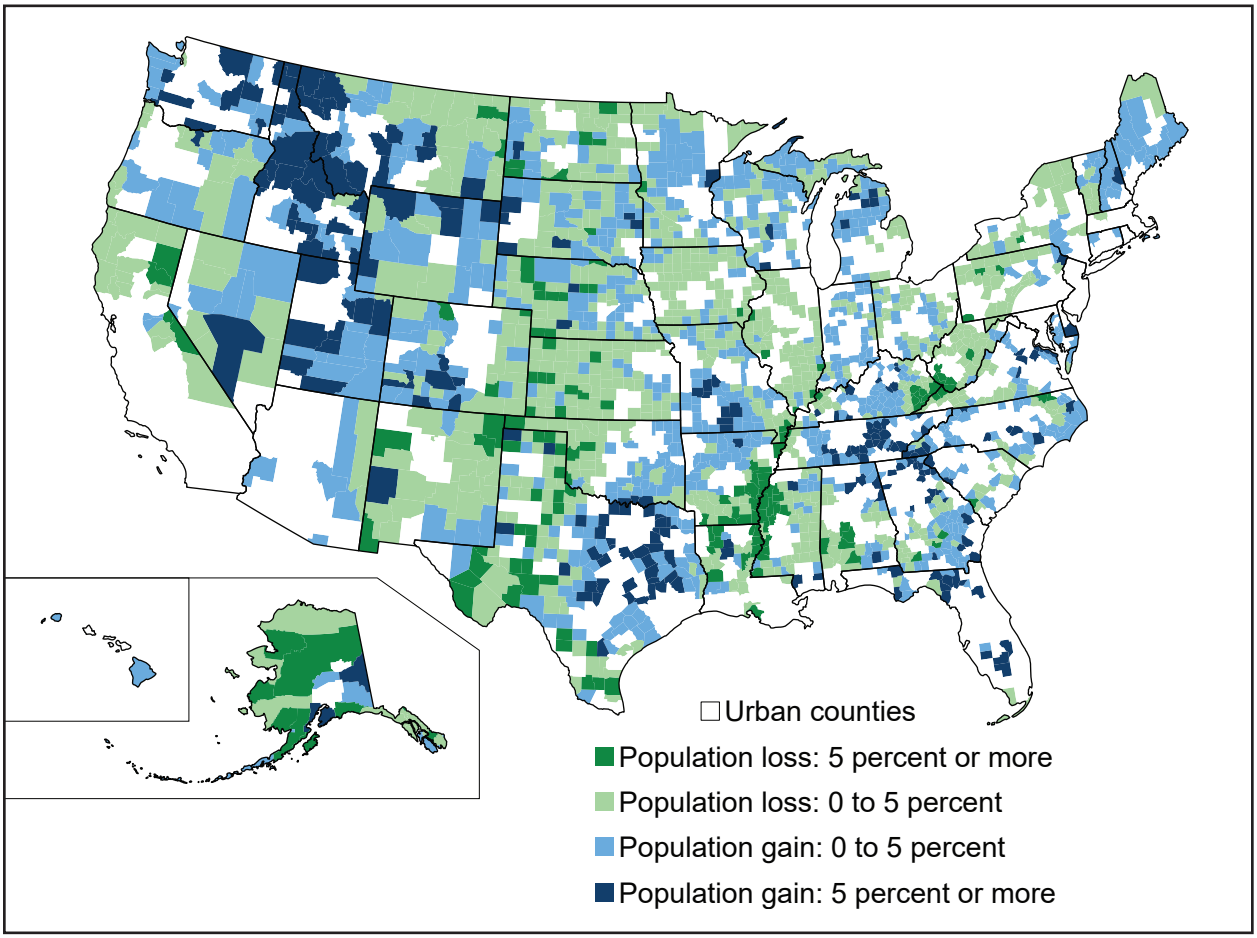
Nearly Half of Rural Counties Have Experienced Population Growth Since 2020

More recently, nearly half of all rural counties (49.4 percent or 968 out of 1,958 counties) had population growth between 2020 and 2025. In addition, 243 or 12.4 percent of all rural counties grew by 5 percent or more over the 5-year period that encompassed the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent years.

Many of the higher growth rural counties were located in parts of the West, Alaska, and Hawaii region, particularly in parts of Idaho, Montana, and Utah. Other rural counties with more modest population growth (up to 5 percent growth) were found in Tennessee, eastern Texas, and Florida (figure 6).

The remaining rural counties (990 counties or slightly more than 50 percent) lost population between 2020 and 2025. About 8 percent, or 163 counties, lost more than 5 percent of their population over this 5-year period, representing average annual population losses of about 1 percent. Many of the largest population declines occurred in parts of the Great Plains; southern Coastal Plains; and Appalachia and Ozarks regions, particularly in western Oklahoma and Kansas, as well as in Mississippi, Louisiana, and West Virginia. Northern and western Alaska similarly saw significant decreases in population. Smaller population losses occurred in rural counties in the Corn Belt, including Illinois and Iowa, as well as in California and New York. Although there were exceptions, these findings suggest population growth and loss followed strong regional patterns.

Figure 6
Rate of population change in rural counties, 2020–25



Note: Rural is defined by nonmetropolitan area status, based on the U.S. Office of Management and Budget's 2023 delineation of core-based statistical areas.

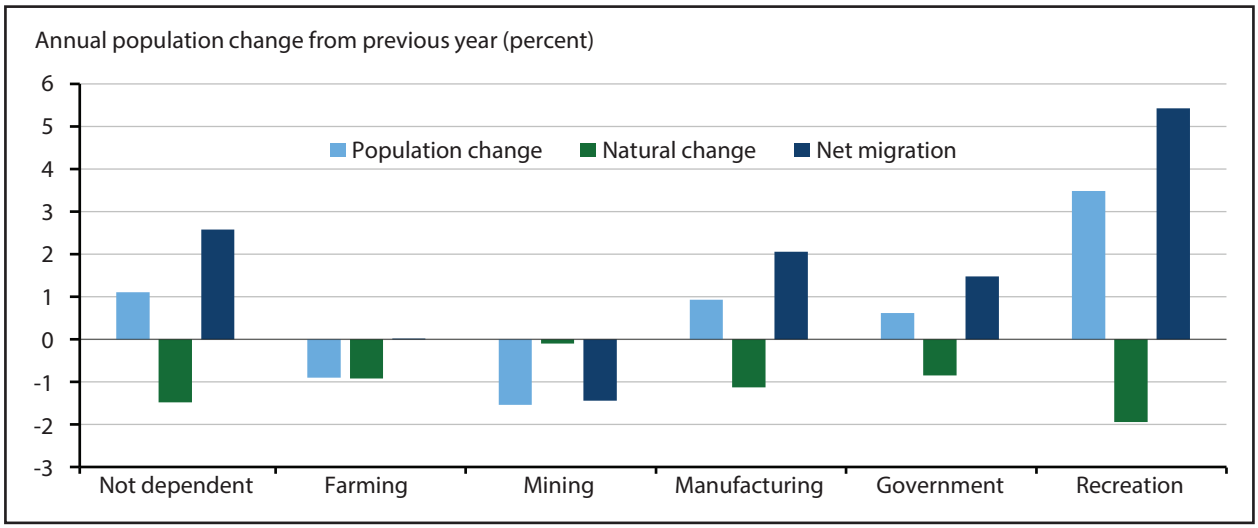
Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Population Estimates Program, Vintage 2025.

Rural Farming and Mining Counties Lost Population, While Recreation Counties Grew

Rural counties in each of the six USDA, ERS economic typology categories experienced a natural decrease in the most recent 5-year period between 2020 and 2025, meaning they had more deaths than births (figure 7). Mining-dependent counties (such as in North Dakota and Texas) tend to have a younger age structure and experienced only minimal natural decrease (0.1 percent). Recreation-dependent counties (concentrated in the West, Alaska, and Hawaii; the Northeast and Great Lakes; and the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts regions) tend to have an older age structure and experienced more natural decrease (1.9 percent).

In mining- and farming-dependent counties (most common in the Corn Belt and Great Plains regions), more people moved out than moved in (negative net migration). This was especially true among mining counties, where approximately 1.4 percent of the population left between 2020 and 2025, on net. Because of the combination of natural population decrease and out-migration, farming- and mining-dependent counties lost 0.9 and 1.5 percent of their population between 2020 and 2025, respectively. Other county types saw populations grow, driven exclusively by positive net migration. Recreation-dependent counties saw the largest influx of people with a migration rate of 5.4 percent, yielding a population growth rate of 3.5 percent despite a relatively large natural decrease. Not dependent (broadly distributed, unspecialized counties), manufacturing-dependent (mostly in the Northeast and Great Lakes; Southern Coastal Plains; and Appalachia and Ozarks regions), and government-dependent counties (clustered in the Rio Grande and Southwest; Southern Coastal Plains; and West, Alaska, and Hawaii regions) saw populations grow by 1.1, 0.9, and 0.6 percent, respectively. Overall, the varying rates highlight significant growth discrepancies among the different types of rural economies.

Figure 7
Aggregate rural population change and components of change by county economic type, 2020–25



Note: Rural is defined by nonmetropolitan area status, based on the U.S. Office of Management and Budget's 2023 delineation of core-based statistical areas. Rural economic typology categories are based on the USDA, Economic Research Service 2025 County typology codes.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Population Estimates Program, Vintage 2025.

EMPLOYMENT

Rural Employment Growth Has Slowed in Recent Years

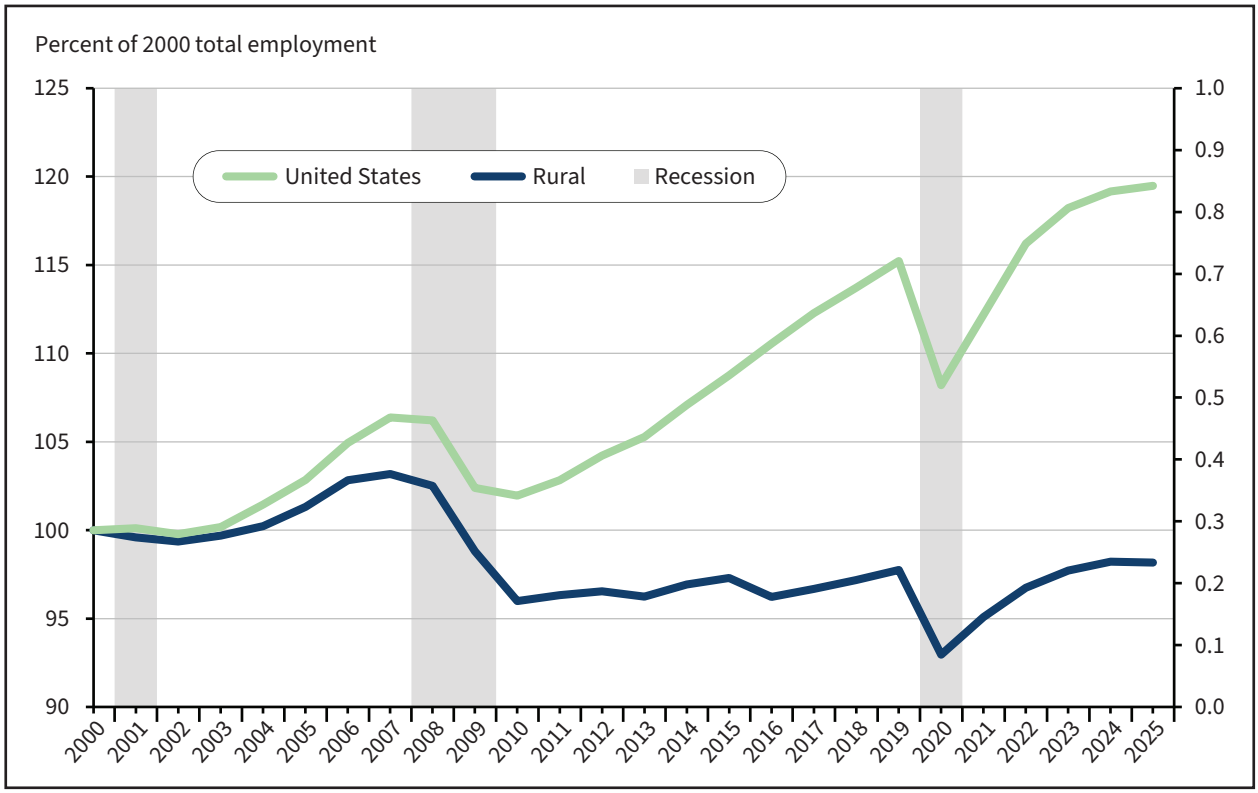
After 5 years of recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic, rural employment was 0.4 percent higher in 2025 than its pre-pandemic level in 2019, compared with a 3.7-percent increase nationally. Although total employment had returned to pre-pandemic levels in both rural areas and the U.S. overall by 2024, the number of employed rural residents declined slightly from 2024 to 2025—by 0.05 percent or about 10,000 workers—even as national employment grew modestly by 0.3 percent (figure 8). These aggregate trends mask substantial variation across industries, where recovery was uneven.

Rural employment recovery from 2019 to 2024 varied considerably by industry. The professional, scientific, and technical services industry experienced the largest net gain in rural jobs and accounted for 4.1 percent of rural total employment in 2024. Employment in the educational services and construction industries also increased by more than 100,000 people during the period, representing 9.8 percent and 7.9 percent of rural total employment, respectively. Much of this growth—particularly in the professional, scientific, and technical services industry and in educational services—was driven by increases in the number of rural residents working from home. In contrast, several industries experienced notable rural employment declines, including wholesale trade (1.7 percent of rural employment in 2024), manufacturing (13.3 percent), and accommodation and food services (6.5 percent).

Overall, the net increase in total wage and salary employment among rural residents from 2019 to 2024 resulted primarily from growth in work-from-home opportunities. In contrast, employment tied to on-site or in-office work for rural residents remained below 2019 levels in 2024, highlighting how changing work arrangements played a central role in rural job recovery.



Figure 8
Change in annual average total employment in the United States and rural areas, 2000–25



Note: Rural is defined by nonmetropolitan area status, based on the U.S. Office of Management and Budget's 2023 delineation of core-based statistical areas. Each data point represents a given year's annual average employment level expressed as a percentage of its respective areas' annual average employment level in 2000. Total employment is a model-based estimate from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The data and assumptions that underly the model change over time and can result in series breaks for years in which the changes are implemented. All years that overlapped with a recessionary period as defined by NBER are shaded in grey.

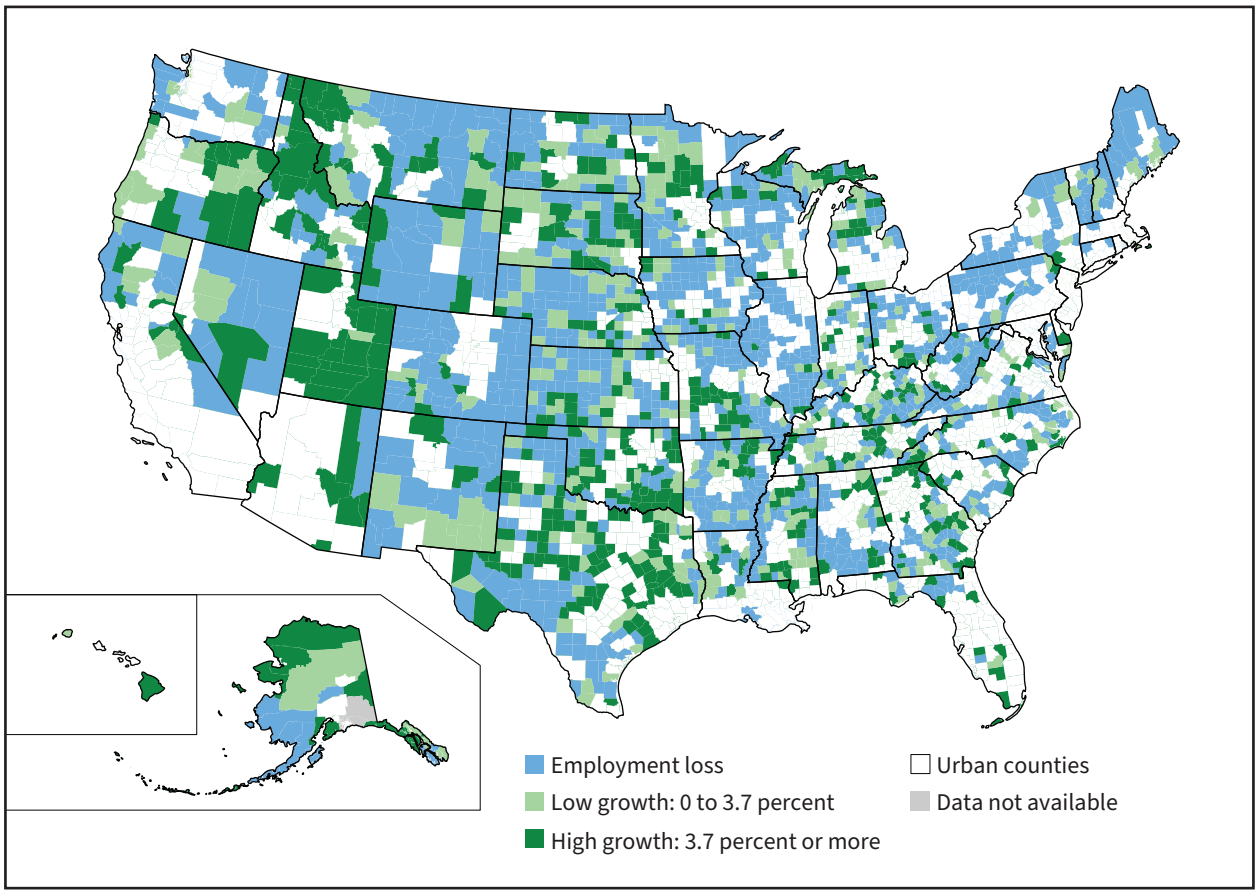
Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Local Area Unemployment Statistics (LAUS) estimates, June 3, 2026, release and the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER); Recession Indicators for the United States from the Period following Peak through Trough (USREC) were retrieved from the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis.

Against the backdrop of slowing rural employment growth, other recent labor market indicators provide additional context for understanding current conditions. The unemployment rate increased slightly in rural areas from 4.0 percent in 2024 to 4.2 percent in 2025, remaining near its pre-pandemic value of 4.1 percent. Civilian labor force participation rates held relatively steady from 2024 to 2025, increasing from 57.3 to 57.4 percent for the overall working age population (ages 16 and over) and decreasing from 80.5 to 80.2 percent for the prime working age population (ages 25 to 54). At 57.4 percent, the working age labor force participation rate was near the pre-pandemic rate of 57.6, and the prime working age rate of 80.2 percent was 0.8 percentage points higher than it was in 2019.

Pre- and Post-pandemic Changes in Employment Varied Across Rural Counties

The employment impact from the COVID-19 pandemic was not uniform across rural counties. In 2025, employment in 53.3 percent of rural counties was below pre-pandemic 2019 employment levels (figure 9). The decrease in total employment was particularly prevalent in the Corn Belt and the Northeast and Great Lakes regions, with 71.3 percent and 60.3 percent of rural counties in these regions, respectively, having lower total employment levels in 2025 than in 2019. Meanwhile, employment levels in 25.7 percent of rural counties grew faster than the national rate of 3.7 percent in the period from 2019 to 2025. Approximately 44.5 percent of rural recreation-dependent counties—many of which are located in the West, Alaska, and Hawaii region—had these high growth rates during the period.

Figure 9
Employment change for rural counties, 2019–25



Note: Rural is defined by nonmetropolitan area status, based on the U.S. Office of Management and Budget's 2023 delineation of core-based statistical areas. Employment change is calculated using model-based estimates of annual average total employment in 2019 and 2025 from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The data and assumptions that underly the model changes over time and can result in series breaks in years where the changes are implemented. Total employment growth was 3.7 percent higher in 2025 than in 2019 in the United States as a whole and 0.4 percent higher in the rural portion of the country. Rural counties with growth rates equal to or exceeding the U.S. growth rate are defined as “high growth” counties.

Source: USDA Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Local Area Unemployment Statistics (LAUS) estimates, June 3, 2026, release.



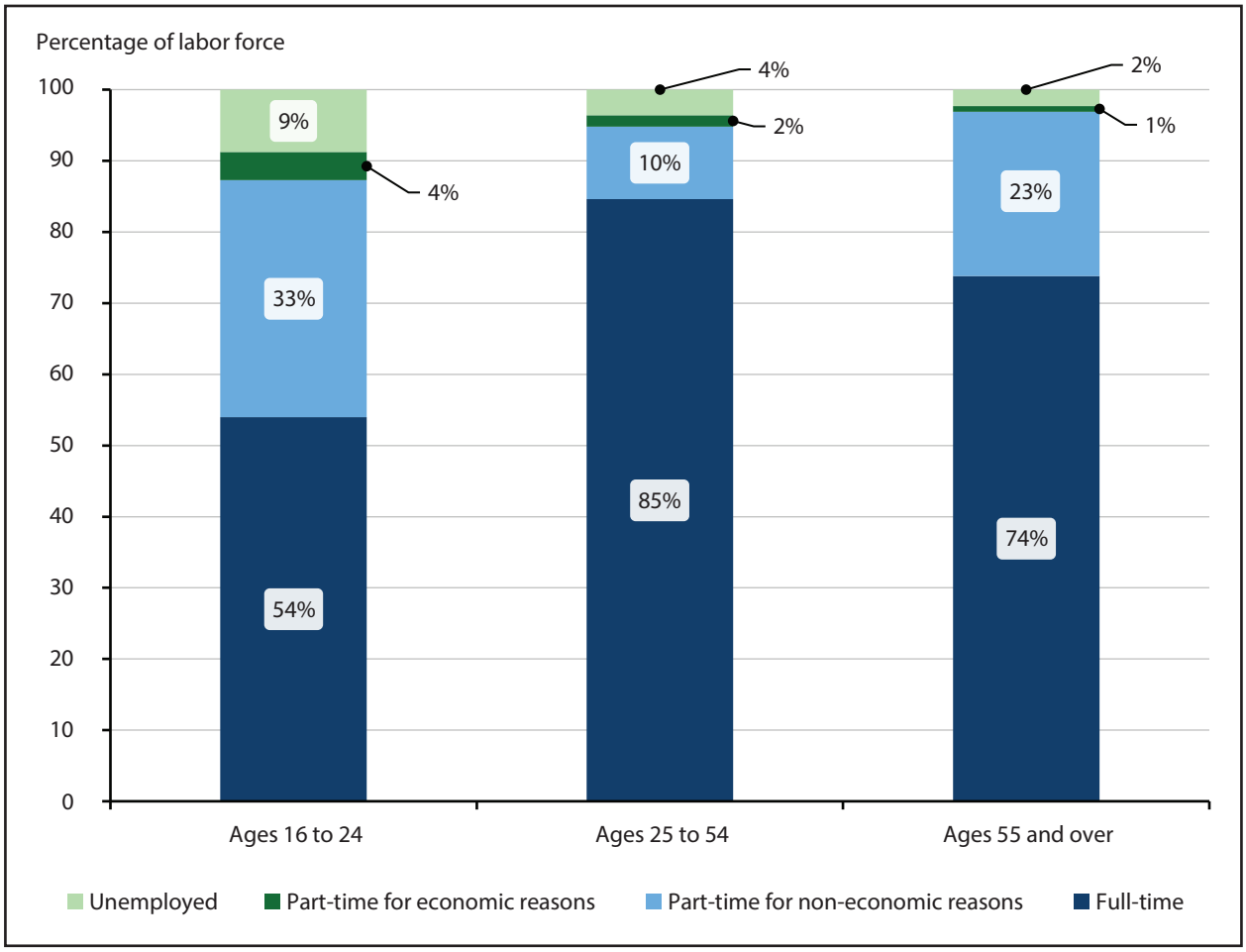
Workers Aged 25–54 Were Less Likely to Work Part-time Than Younger and Older Age Groups

The number of employed residents includes both those who are employed full-time and part-time. The share of the rural labor force that is employed full-time compared with the share employed part-time varied by age group in 2025 (figure 10). About 84.6 percent of the prime working age (ages 25–54) labor force was employed full-time in 2025, compared to 54 percent of young adult workers (ages 16–24) and 73.8 percent of older workers (ages 55 and up).

Young adult workers were the most likely to be working part-time for both economic and for non-economic reasons and were the most likely age group to be unemployed, with an unemployment rate of 8.8 percent. Economic reasons for working part-time include slack work, material shortages, repairs to plant or equipment, start or termination of the job during the week, and inability to find full-time work. Non-economic reasons for working part-time include labor disputes, bad weather, own illness, vacation, demands of home housework, school, no desire for full-time work, retired or social security limit on earnings, and full-time worker only during peak season. Young workers were most likely to report school or training as their reason for working part-time for non-economic reasons and older workers were most likely to report being retired and/or social security limits on income as their primary reason. Older workers were the least likely to be unemployed, with an unemployment rate of 2.3 percent.

The share of the prime working age labor force employed part-time has been relatively stable over the last two economic cycles. Part-time work increased during the Great Recession from 10.9 percent in 2007 to a peak of about 12.9 percent in 2009 but had decreased to 10 percent by 2022. This increase and subsequent recovery was primarily driven by the number of people working part time for economic reasons. The share of the prime working age labor force working part-time increased to 11.8 percent in 2025. This increase was primarily driven by the increasing share of the labor force working part-time for non-economic reasons, which increased from 8.4 percent of the prime age labor force in 2020 to 10.2 percent in 2025. From 2007 to 2019, the share of the prime age labor force working part-time for non-economic reasons was consistently around 9 percent.

Figure 10
Employment status of the rural labor force by age group, 2025 average



Note: Rural is defined by nonmetropolitan area status, based on the U.S. Office of Management and Budget's 2023 delineation of core-based statistical areas. Labels may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding. Full-time workers are those who reported usually working 35 hours or more per week. Part-time workers are those who reported usually working 1 to 34 hours per week. Economic reasons for working part-time include slack work, material shortages, repairs to plant or equipment, start or termination of the job during the week, and inability to find full-time work. Non-economic reasons for working part-time include labor disputes, bad weather, own illness, vacation, demands of home housework, school, no desire for full-time work, retired or social security limit on earnings, and full-time worker only during peak season. Respondents who were not at work during the CPS reference week and reported usually being part-time are included in the "part-time for non-economic reasons" group.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey (CPS), Basic Monthly CPS 2025 annual average.



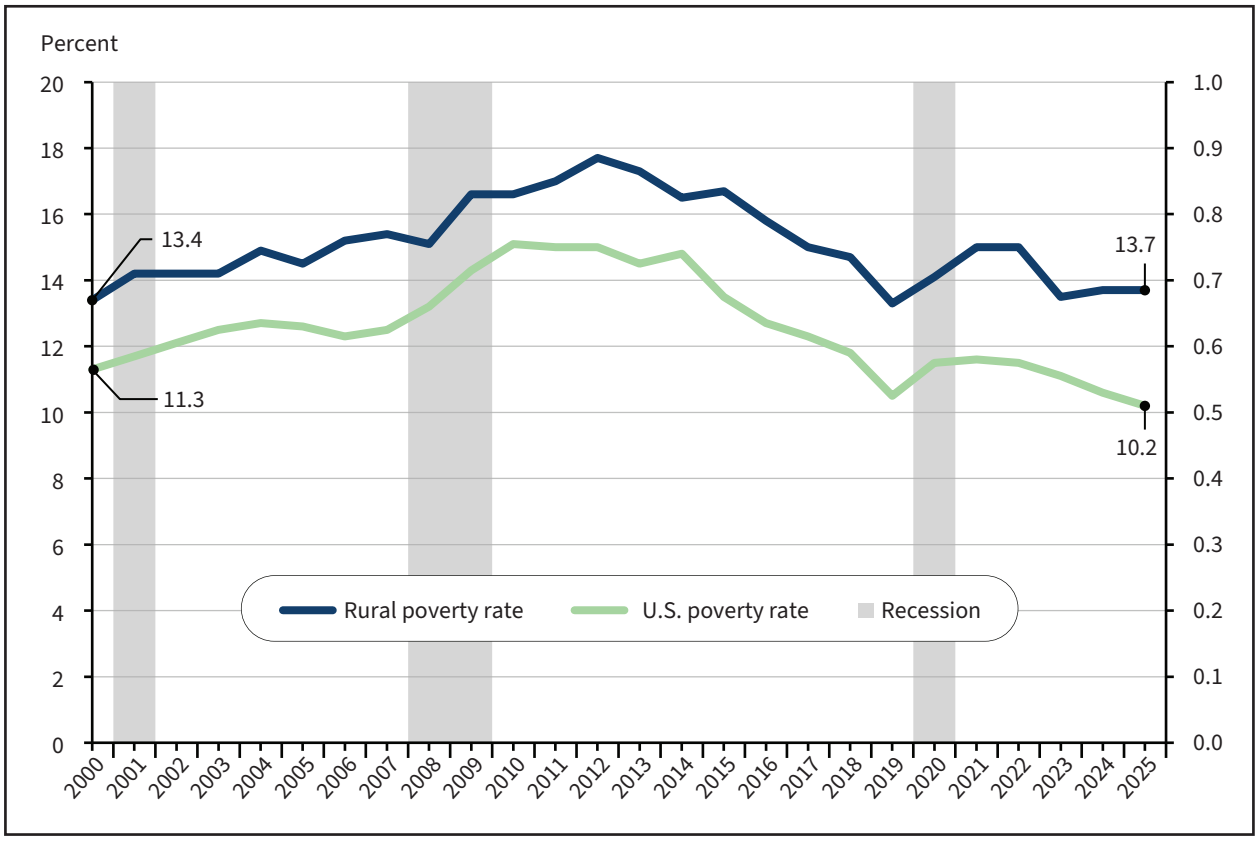
POVERTY

Recent Rural Poverty Rates Remain Near Historic Lows After 25 Years of Little Net Change

In 2000, the U.S. economy was nearing the end of a long period of economic expansion that began in 1991. As expressed in the first edition of this report (2002), that expansion "greatly benefited rural economies, raising earnings, increasing incomes, and reducing poverty." The rural poverty rate in 2000 was 13.4 percent, among the lowest levels recorded and only slightly above the record low of 13.3 percent reached in 2019 (figure 11). Since the official poverty rate was first measured in 1959, the annual poverty rate has fallen below 14.0 percent only eight times: three times in the 1970s, 2000, 2019, and each year from 2023 through 2025.

Therefore, from an historical perspective, recent rural poverty rates have been relatively low. However, the rate has changed little over the past quarter century, measuring 13.4 percent in 2000 and 13.7 percent in 2025. Thus, despite cyclical fluctuations and economic shocks, long-run progress in reducing rural poverty has been limited. This overall stability masks substantial variation across rural regions and counties, where poverty rate trends have diverged in response to local economic conditions, demographic change, and long-term shifts in industrial structure. Nationally, the poverty rate reached a record low of 10.2 percent after trending downward since 2022, reflecting a progressive decline in the urban poverty rate while the rural rate remained relatively stable.

Figure 11
Annual aggregate poverty rates for rural areas and the United States, 2000–25



Note: Poverty status is defined by the official poverty measure of the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. Rural is defined by nonmetropolitan area status, based on the U.S. Office of Management and Budget's delineation of core-based statistical areas. Metropolitan status of some areas changed in 2004, 2014, 2018, 2020, and 2024.

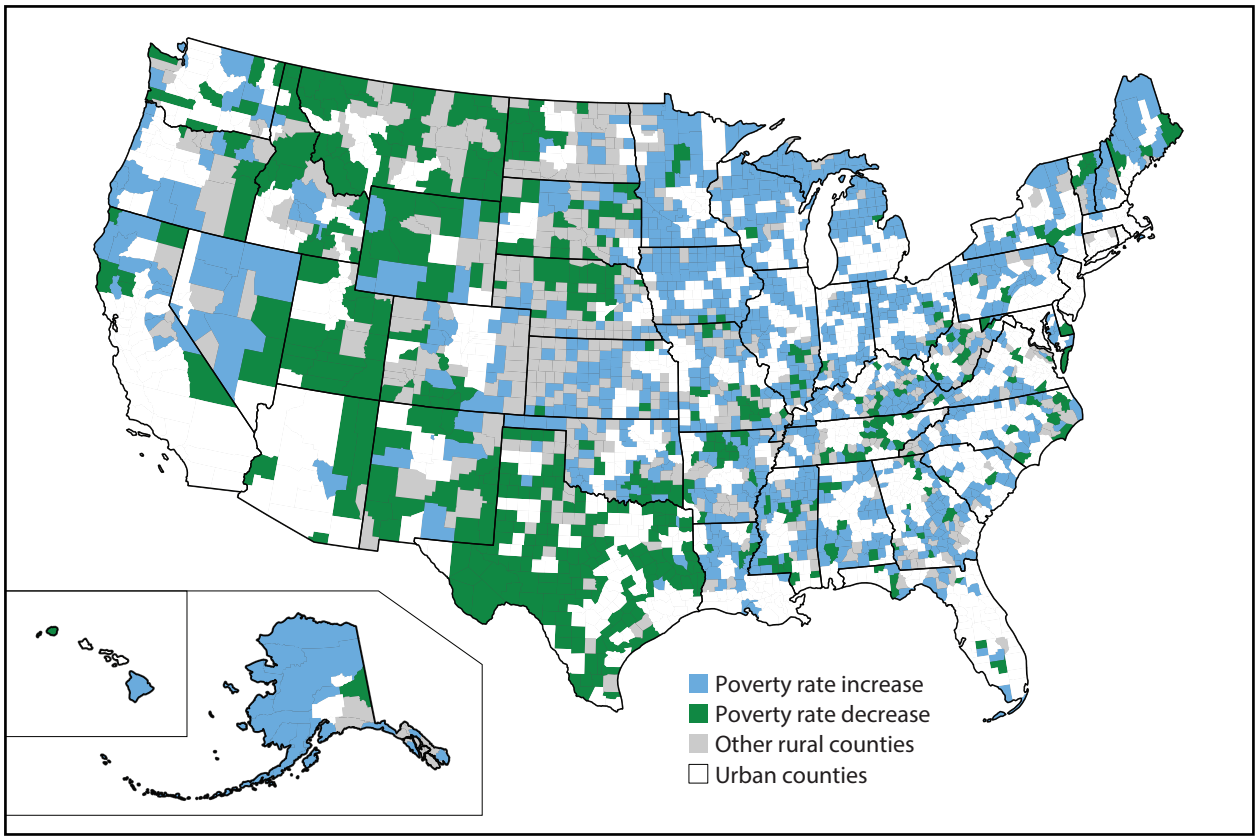
Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey (CPS), 2001-2025.

Industry Composition Underlies Regional Differences in Rural Poverty Trends

About one-quarter of all rural counties (25.3 percent or 495 counties) experienced decreases in their poverty rates between 2000 and 2024 (figure 12). These declines were concentrated in regions that saw more economic diversification over the period—particularly the Great Plains; the Southern Coastal Plains; and the Rio Grande and Southwest regions, which together accounted for more than half of these counties (55.2 percent or 273 counties). Many counties in these regions have economies that have expanded into energy, tourism, and technology and innovation sectors, providing new sources of earnings and contributing to reductions in poverty. This pattern was especially evident in rural areas of Texas, Montana, and Utah, where sectoral growth reinforced longstanding regional strengths and supported downward poverty trends.

By contrast, rural poverty rate increases were more widespread (50.5 percent or 989 of all rural counties) and occurred disproportionately in manufacturing-dependent counties—372 counties among those with poverty rate growth (37.6 percent)—located largely in the Northeast and Great Lakes; Corn Belt; and Eastern Interior and Uplands regions. The former two regions have not historically exhibited the highest rural poverty rates; rather, their recent poverty increases align with long-run declines in rural manufacturing employment, a sector that remains an important source of earnings in many counties within these regions. As manufacturing has contracted nationally, counties that are more reliant on the sector have faced greater exposure to job loss and associated income declines.[1] As a result, poverty has risen in many rural counties across these regions and elsewhere where the manufacturing sector has had a strong presence. Overall, these patterns demonstrate that regional differences in poverty trajectories largely reflect differences in industrial composition rather than historical disparities in regional poverty levels.

Figure 12
Rural counties with increases and decreases in poverty rates between 2000 and 2024



Note: Poverty status is defined by the official poverty measure of the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. Rural is defined by nonmetropolitan area status, based on the U.S. Office of Management and Budget's 2023 delineation of core-based statistical areas. "Other" consists of rural counties or equivalents that had no data in at least 1 year, had unreliable estimates based on a coefficient of variation greater than 40 percent, or where the poverty rate change was determined to be statistically insignificant at the 90-percent confidence level.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE), 2000 and 2024.

[1] USDA, ERS has long documented national and regional trends in rural manufacturing and related economic conditions; see, for example, the recent editions of Rural America at a Glance listed in the suggested reading section of this report.

Progress Toward Combatting High Poverty in Rural Counties Has Been Slow

A county is considered to have a high poverty rate in any given year if 20 percent or more of its residents lived in poverty when surveyed. That level of poverty puts the county at or near the top 10 percent of all counties nationwide. For example, using data from the Census Bureau's Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE) for 2000 and 2024, the 90th percentile thresholds were 20.7 percent and 21.0 percent, respectively. Areawide poverty rates of that magnitude have been linked to systemic poverty conditions that are increasingly difficult to overcome the longer high poverty persists. Therefore, a decrease that moves an area's poverty rate below the critical 20 percent level may be considered meaningful regardless of the size of the change. Further, the extent to which a rate below 20 percent is sustained can be critical to shaping economic security, health, and broader quality of life aspects for area residents.

Over the 25-year period spanning 2000 to 2024, a large majority of rural counties (83.1 percent or 1,627 counties) had poverty rates below 20 percent every year (figure 13). These continuously non-high poverty counties were geographically and economically diverse and had a median poverty rate of 12.5 percent in 2000 and 13.2 percent in 2024. At the same time, there were 177 rural counties (9.0 percent) with continuously high poverty rates. These counties were also economically diverse but were more likely to be non-dependent or manufacturing-dependent counties than any other economic type. They were concentrated in the Southern Coastal Plain and the Eastern and Interior Uplands regions. The median poverty rate for continuously high poverty counties was 24.7 percent in 2000 and 25.9 percent in 2024.

There were 139 rural counties (7.1 percent) with intermittently high poverty, meaning their poverty rates moved above and below the 20-percent threshold at different points between 2000 and 2024. These counties were most likely to have not dependent, farming-dependent, or manufacturing-dependent economies and were concentrated in the Southern Coastal Plains region, as well as the Rio Grande and Southwest region. Their poverty rates generally hovered near the high-poverty threshold over the long run, with median rates of 21.7 percent in 2000 and 19.9 percent in 2024.

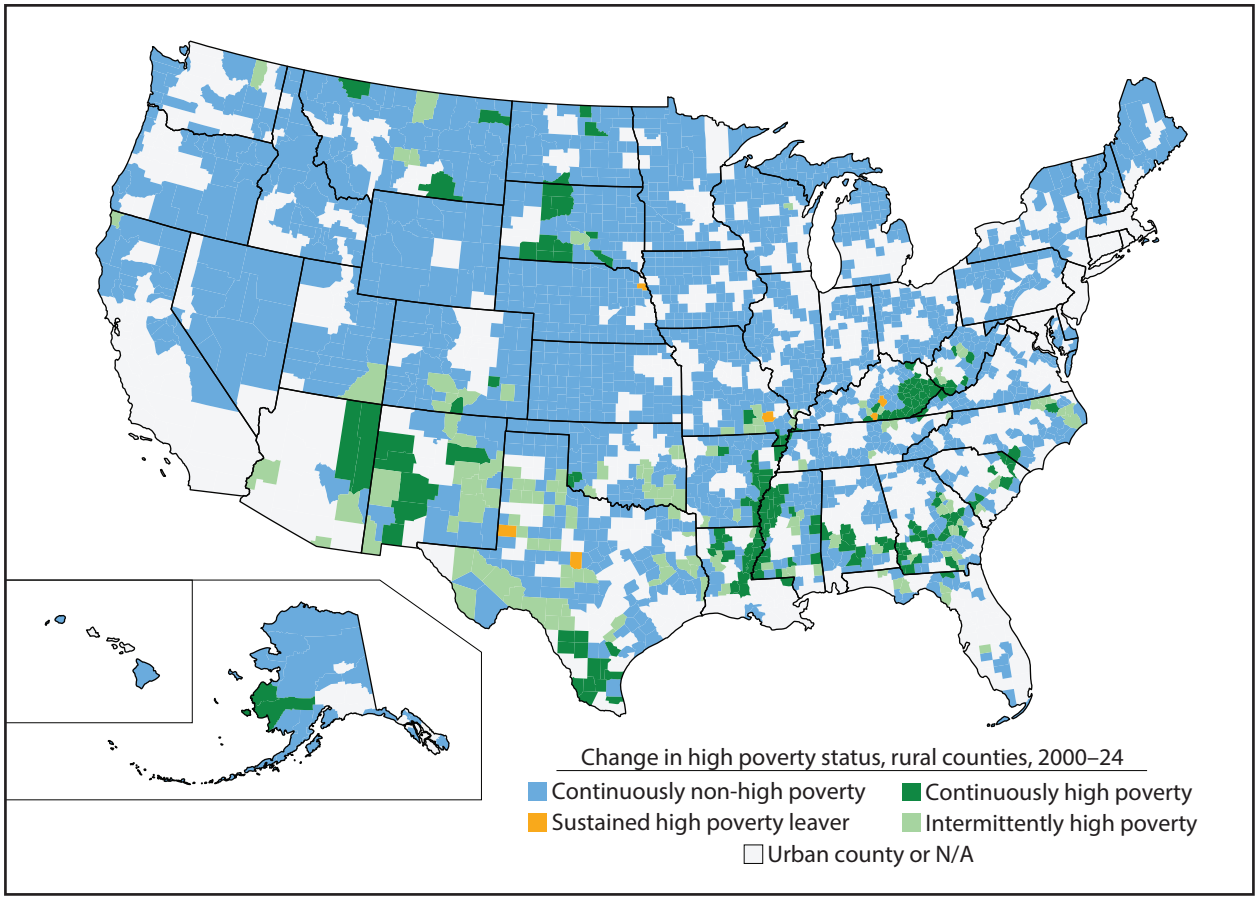
A much smaller group—six rural counties (0.3 percent)—left the high-poverty classification. These counties had poverty rates at or above 20 percent for at least 1 year during the period but later experienced a decline below 20 percent that remained in place for the rest of the 25-year span. Like the intermittently high-poverty counties, they began the period with poverty rates near the 20-percent threshold (median 21.8 percent in 2000 and 18.8 percent in 2024). Half the counties were located in the Eastern and Interior Uplands region, and most (five counties) had unspecialized (not dependent) economies.

Overall, the indicators included in this report provide no evidence of distinctive economic or regional conditions that set these groups of counties apart. Where poverty rates have shifted, the changes appear to reflect small movements among counties already near the 20-percent threshold, rather than the result of clear, systematic economic diversification or growth. This underscores that long-run progress in reducing high-poverty in rural areas has been limited and concentrated among counties whose poverty rates have hovered around the cutoff for decades.





Figure 13
Change in high poverty status for rural counties, 2000–24



Note: Rural is defined by nonmetropolitan area status, based on the U.S. Office of Management and Budget's 2023 delineation of core-based statistical areas. Continuously non-high poverty counties had poverty rates of less than 20 percent in every year; sustained high poverty-leaver counties are those that left high poverty status and subsequently maintained a rate below 20 percent; continuously high poverty counties had poverty rates of 20 percent or more in every year; intermittently high poverty counties are those that had poverty rates that fluctuated above and below 20 percent over the 25 year study period; N/A includes counties with missing data.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE), annual estimates 2000 through 2024.

INCOME

Rural Income Growth Increased From 2000 to 2024, Narrowing the Long-run Gap With the Nation

Real per capita personal income (inflation-adjusted average income per person, including working and non-working individuals) is a key indicator of economic well-being. When real per capita personal income (PCPI) rises, it can increase individual purchasing power and decrease the incidence of poverty. It also often reflects broad economic growth, such as increased productivity, higher wages, and economic diversification, particularly in instances where growth is sustained.

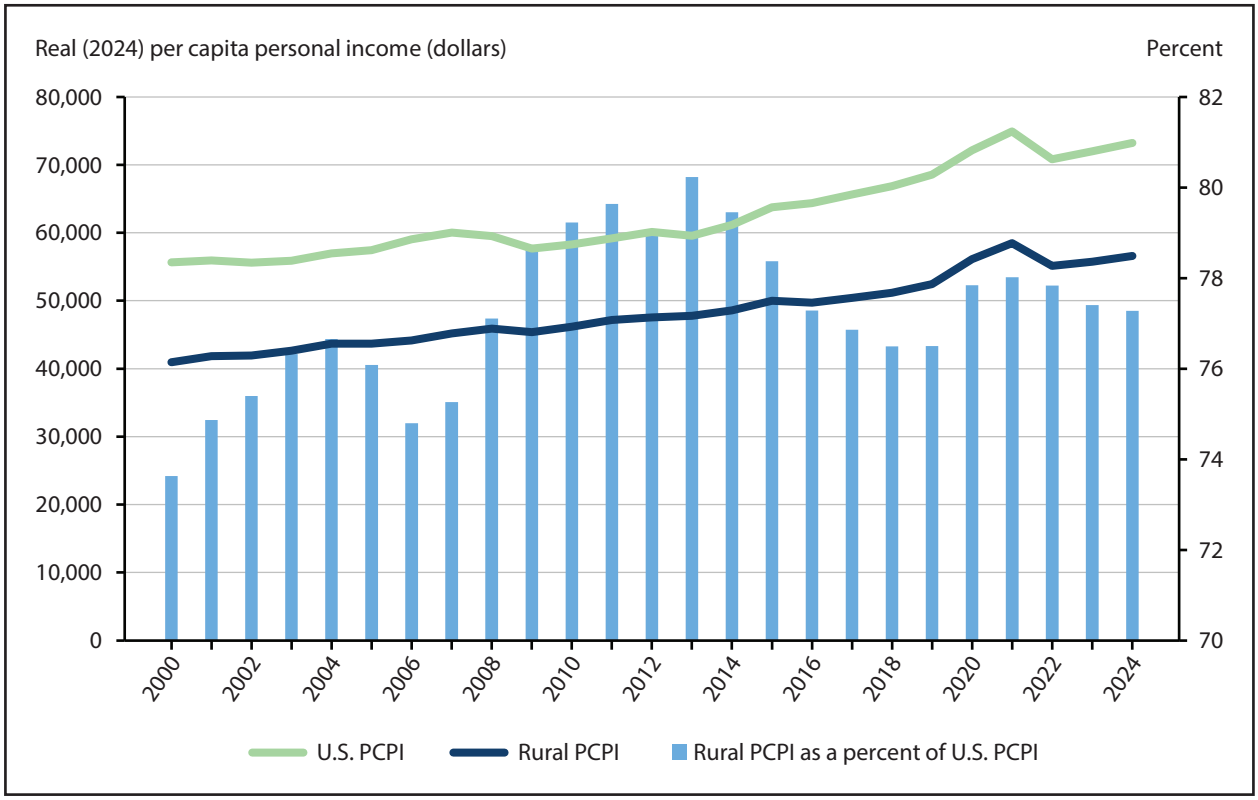
Real PCPI for rural areas has consistently been lower than for the nation (figure 14). However, rural PCPI increased steadily over the last 25 years, rising by $15,606 between 2000 and 2024 and narrowing the gap with the national average from 73.6 percent of U.S. PCPI in 2000 to 77.3 percent in 2024. Throughout this period, rural PCPI experienced cyclical declines during recessions and faster gains during expansions, as well as temporary shifts associated with the onset and expiration of pandemic era income supports. These fluctuations contributed to periods when the rural U.S. PCPI gap briefly narrowed, such as during the Great Recession recovery years, and widened at other points, suggesting that rural income is somewhat more responsive to cyclical economic conditions than urban-dominated national income. To assess overall long-run performance, a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) smooths these year-to-year swings, indicating that rural PCPI grew at an annualized rate of 1.3 percent from 2000 to 2024 compared to 1.1 percent nationally.[2] This means rural incomes grew about 0.2 percentage points more per year than the national average—indicating that rural PCPI increased at a pace slightly faster, yet broadly consistent, with national growth.



[2] Compound annual growth rates (CAGR) for aggregate (rural and U.S.) PCPI values between 2000 and 2024 were estimated using the following formula: CAGR (percent) = ((2024 per capita personal income/ 2000 per capita personal income) ^ (1/25) – 1) * 100. Where the term “annualized” growth rate is used it is in reference to the CAGR.

Figure 14

Real per capita personal income (PCPI) for rural areas and the United States, 2000–24



Note: Rural is defined by nonmetropolitan area status, based on the U.S. Office of Management and Budget's 2023 delineation of core-based statistical areas. Values are 2024 Consumer Price Index for Urban Wage Earners and Clerical Workers (CPI-W) dollars, not seasonally adjusted.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis, Table CAINC1, Annual Personal Income by County, 2000–24.



Rural Farming-dependent Counties Exhibit Diverging PCPI Trajectories

From 2000 to 2024, per capita personal income grew at an annualized rate of 1.3 percent across all U.S. counties and 1.4 percent in rural counties, but growth patterns varied substantially. Only 16 counties recorded annualized increases above 4 percent, including 14 rural counties, representing 0.7 percent of all rural counties. These high-growth counties were largely remote-rural, farming- and mining-dependent counties in both the Great Plains region and the Rio Grande and Southwest region (figure 15). Their elevated PCPI growth does not appear to stem from a shifting industry base, such as toward recreation or service-oriented industries. Instead, findings in other parts of the report suggest that it may reflect a mix of volatile earnings in agriculture and resource extraction, pandemic-era income supports, and increases in per-capita income that can occur when total income is distributed across a declining population. Moderate, stable growth rates of 2–4 percent characterized 248 rural counties (12.7 percent), most of which were also remote-rural, farming-dependent counties in the Great Plains region. Growth was considerably slower across most other rural counties.[3]

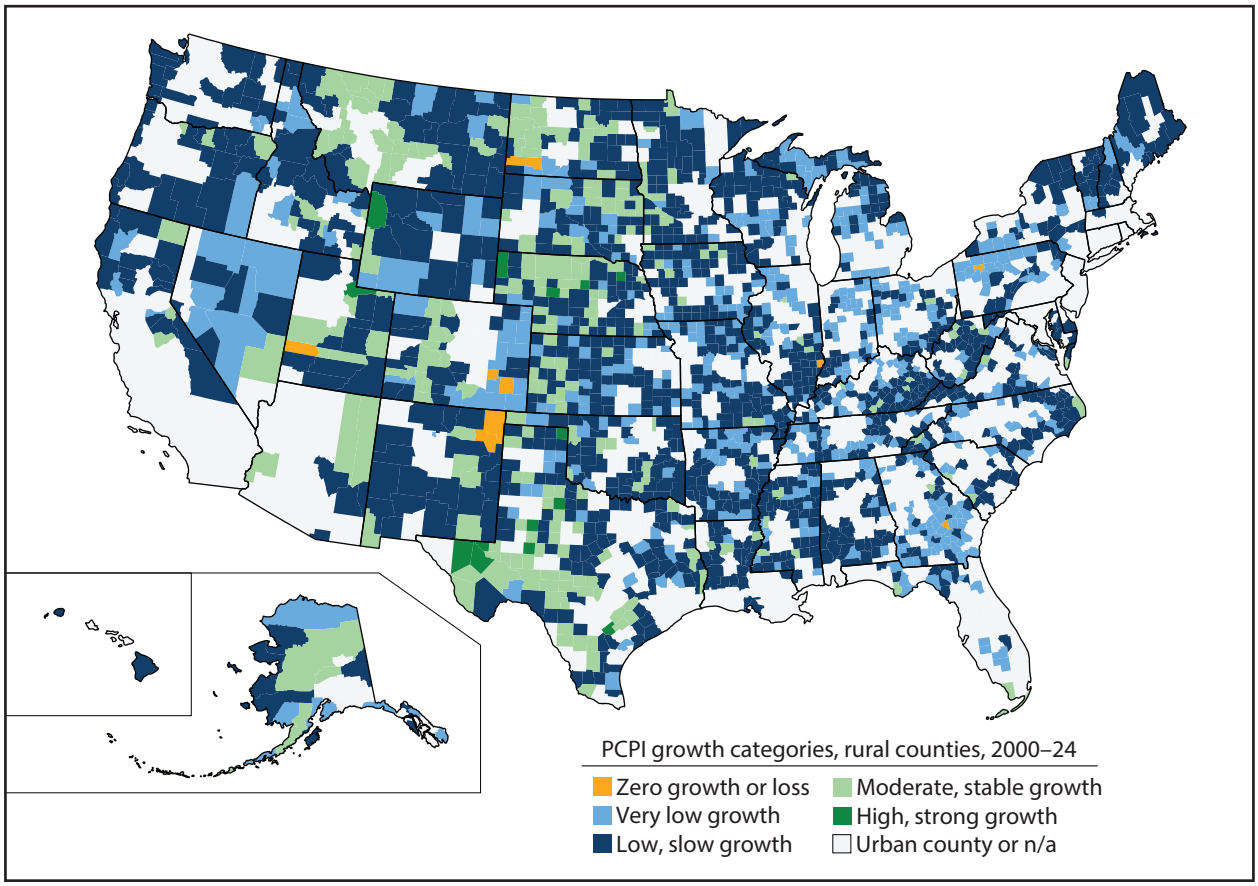
Annualized increases between 1 and 2 percent—considered low, slow PCPI growth—were the most common outcome, with 1,156 rural counties (59.0 percent) falling into this category. These counties were geographically diverse but tended to have manufacturing-dependent or not dependent economies, aligning with broader report findings that show long-term competitive pressures in manufacturing and limited expansion in other tradable sectors. Another 521 rural counties (26.6 percent) experienced PCPI growth of greater than zero but less than 1 percent. These counties were also predominantly manufacturing-dependent or unspecialized (not dependent) and were more likely to be metro adjacent, reflecting uneven economic transitions in rural areas near metropolitan centers.

Finally, a small share of rural counties (0.5 percent, or 10 counties) saw zero or negative PCPI growth. Like some high-growth counties, they were mostly remote-rural and farming-dependent, but in contrast they faced demographic and industry-specific pressures that constrained income gains. Taken together, zero- and very-low-growth counties accounted for a notable share of rural farming-dependent counties (16.1 percent of 329 counties; figure 16), underscoring the wide variation in income trajectories across agricultural regions and the importance of population change, industry structure, and long-term economic trends in shaping rural performance.

[3] The growth categories follow the report's compound annual growth rate analysis, which defines high, strong (>= 4 percent), moderate, stable (between >=2 percent and <4 percent), low, slow (between >=1 percent <2 percent), very low (between >0 percent and <1 percent), and zero or loss (<=0 percent) long-run PCPI growth. Although derived from this study's analytical framework, these thresholds are also broadly consistent with common economic interpretations, where sustained annual increases above 4 percent are considered strong and rates below 2 percent typically indicate modest, slow-moving growth.

Figure 15

Rural counties by real per capita personal income growth category for the 2000 to 2024 period



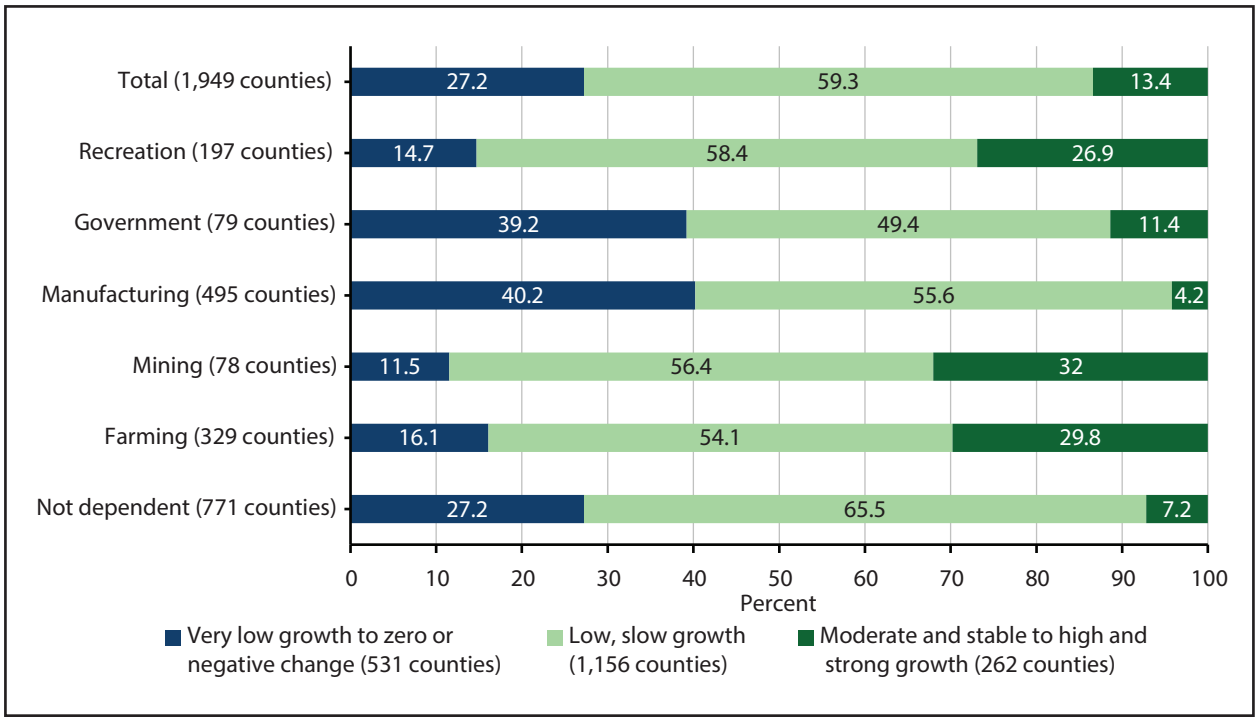
Note: Rural is defined by nonmetropolitan area status, based on the U.S. Office of Management and Budget's 2023 delineation of core-based statistical areas. Income growth categories are based on compound annual growth rates (CAGR) for county per capita personal income (PCPI) values between 2000 and 2024: CAGR (percent) = ((2024 per capita personal income/2000 per capita personal income) ^ (1/25) – 1) * 100. The CAGR represents the smoothed annual growth rate, where: high, strong growth counties had a CAGR >= 4.0 percent; moderate, stable growth counties had a CAGR of 2.0 percent up to 4.0 percent; low, slow growth counties had a CAGR of 1.0 percent up to 2.0 percent; very low growth counties had a CAGR greater than zero but less than 1.0 percent; zero growth or loss counties had a CAGR at or below zero. N/A includes counties with missing data.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis, Table CAINC1, Annual Personal Income by County, 2000–24.



Figure 16

Per capita income growth (2000–24) for rural counties, combined growth categories by USDA, ERS county economic types



Note: Rural is defined by nonmetropolitan area status, based on the U.S. Office of Management and Budget's 2023 delineation of core-based statistical areas. Income growth categories are based on compound annual growth rates (CAGR) for county per capita personal income (PCPI) values between 2000 and 2024: CAGR (percent) = ((2024 per capita personal income/2000 per capita personal income) ^ (1/25) – 1) * 100. The CAGR represents the smoothed annual growth rate, where: high, strong growth counties had a CAGR >= 4.0 percent; moderate, stable growth counties had a CAGR of 2.0 percent up to 4.0 percent; low, slow growth counties had a CAGR of 1.0 percent up to 2.0 percent; very low growth counties had a CAGR greater than zero but less than 1.0 percent; zero growth or loss counties had a CAGR at or below zero. CAGR is not reported for 9 rural counties due to missing data in 1 or more years. Rural economic typology categories are based on the USDA, Economic Research Service 2025 County typology codes.

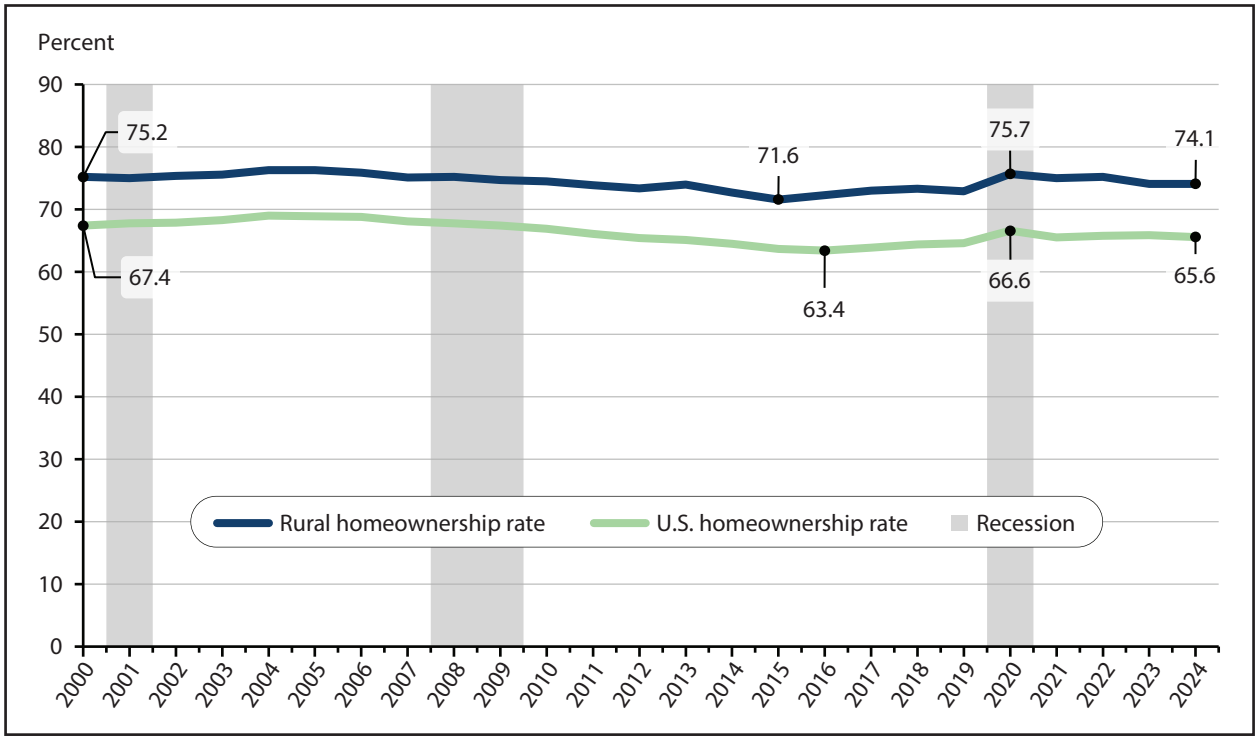
Source: USDA, Economic Research Service (ERS) using data from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis, Table CAINC1, Annual Personal Income by County, 2000–24.

HOUSING

Aggregate Rural Homeownership Rates Have Been Stable, but Vary by Age Group

The aggregate rural homeownership rate remained relatively stable over the last quarter of a century, ranging between 71.6 percent and 75.7 percent with little year-over-year variation (figure 17). When short-term fluctuations occurred, they were consistent with transitory economic shocks or policy shifts that influenced homeownership rates nationally. As such, changes in rural homeownership rates tracked closely with changes at the national level between 2000 and 2024, albeit the rural homeownership rate was consistently higher than the national rate. In 2024, the difference was 8.5 percent, with the rural rate at 74.1 percent and the national rate at 65.6 percent.

Figure 17
Rural and U.S. annual homeownership rates, 2000–24



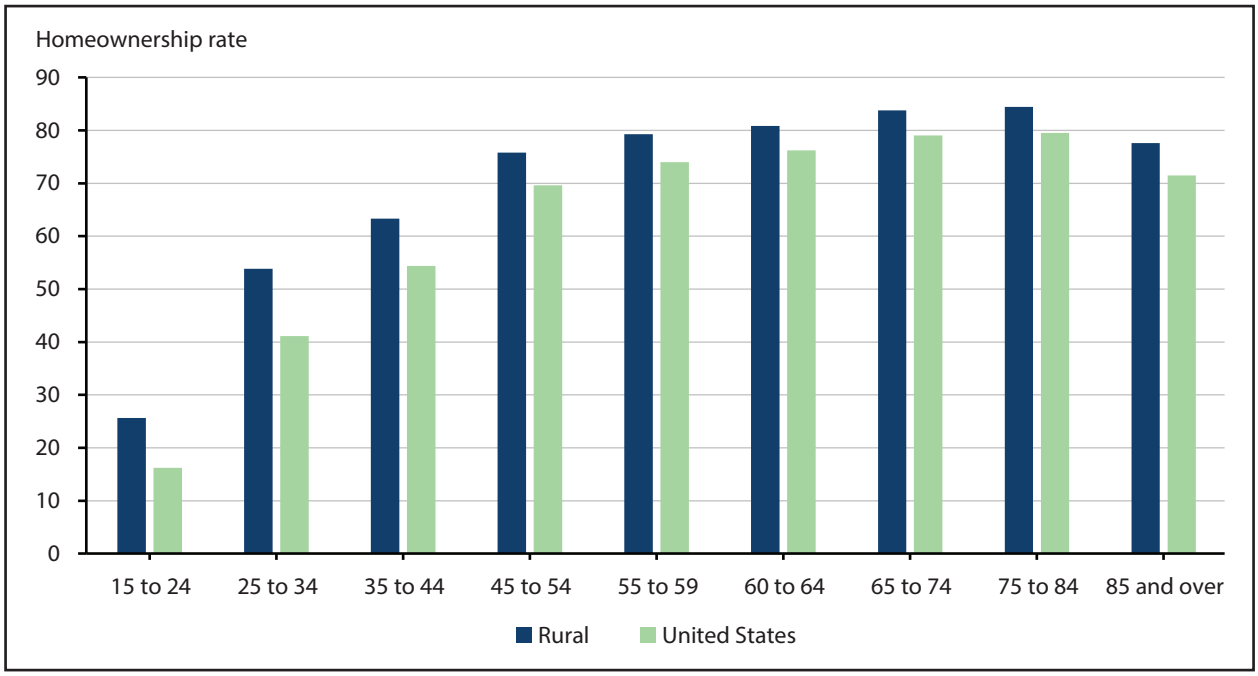
Note: Rural is defined by nonmetropolitan area status, based on the U.S. Office of Management and Budget's delineation of core-based statistical areas. Metropolitan status of some areas changed in 2004, 2014, 2018, 2020, and 2024.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey/Housing Vacancy Survey, 2001–25.

There are numerous factors that contribute to relatively higher homeownership rates in rural areas, including a combination of historical settlement patterns, market dynamics, and demographic differences. Considering the latter, rural Americans tend to be older on average compared to the nation. Older

age cohorts are most likely to be homeowners. In 2024, 75.0 percent of households headed by adults 45 or older were owner occupied compared to 48.1 percent of households with a head of household younger than 45. Higher rural homeownership rates, however, are due to both the older average age of the rural population and higher rates of rural ownership for all age groups. In rural counties homeownership rates were higher among all age groups when compared to national rates (figure 18).

Figure 18
Rural and U.S. annual homeownership rates by age, 2020–24, 5-year period



Note: Rural is defined by nonmetropolitan area status, based on the U.S. Office of Management and Budget's 2023 delineation of core-based statistical areas.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the American Community Survey 2020–24 5-year estimates. Homeownership rates are calculated based on occupied households within each age group following methods established in the Current Population/Housing Vacancy Survey.

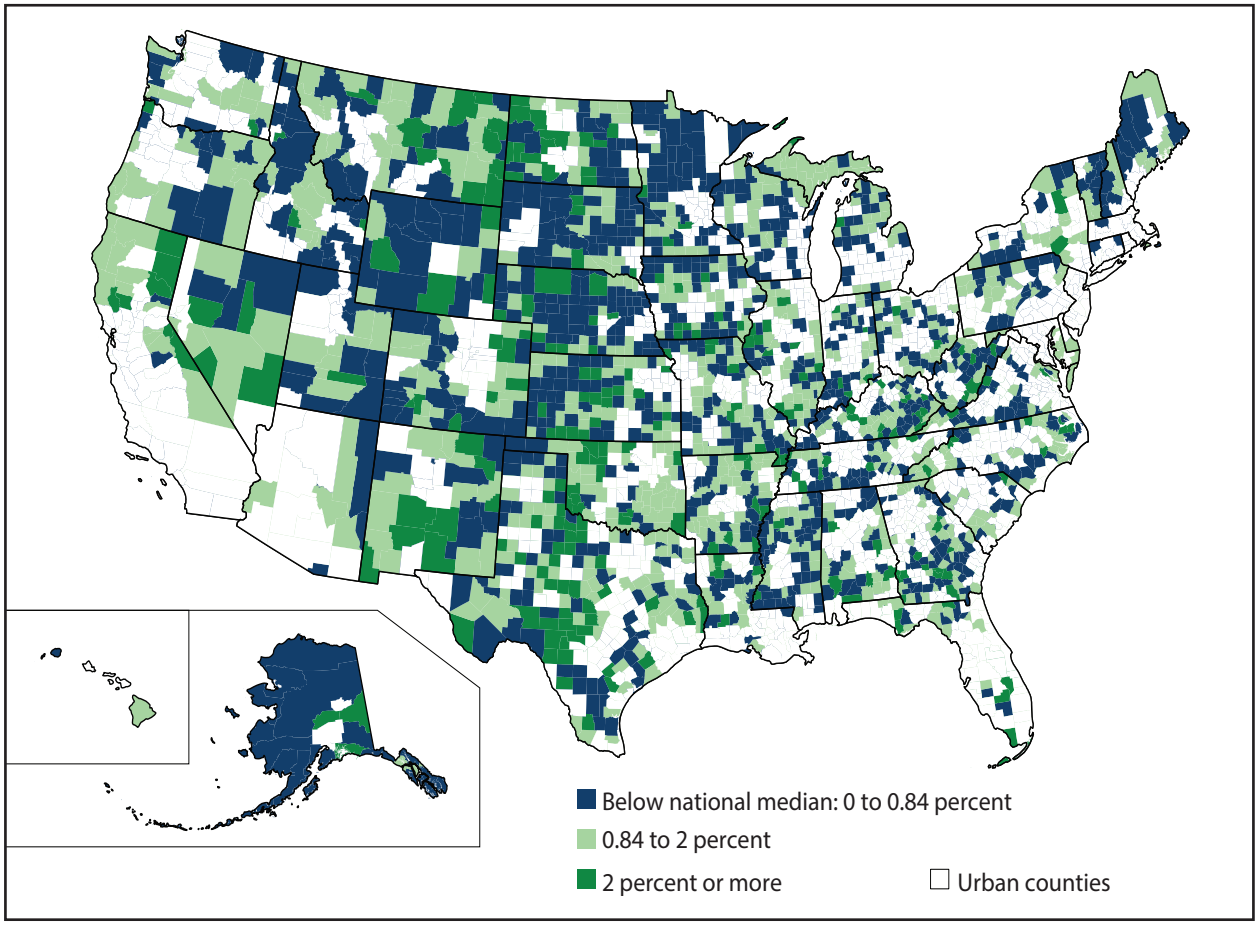
Rural Housing Markets Remain Tight in a Majority of Counties

Homeowner and rental vacancy rates indicate the availability of homes for purchase or rent. The vacancy rate at which rents and sale prices remain steady varies by location and can fluctuate over time but is typically estimated to be between 7 to 8 percent for rentals and 1.5 to 2 percent for homes for sale. These levels are generally considered to be moderate and reflective of a balanced housing market. Lower vacancy rates are indicative of a tight housing market where there is insufficient housing to meet community needs. Higher vacancy rates suggest a looser market where there is greater availability but can also indicate declining housing demand or economic distress in an area. A number of developmental factors can influence homeowner vacancy rates. For instance, in addition to new construction, the repair or adaptive reuse of existing structures for residential housing, creation of Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs), and home sharing programs are among the diverse set of strategies being adopted by rural communities to make homes available, leading to increased vacancy rates and potentially more balanced housing markets. Manufactured homes are also an important component of housing stock in rural communities

and can provide affordable pathways to homeownership, particularly in resident-owned manufactured home communities where residents can have greater control of their housing costs.

Over the period spanning 2020 to 2024, the U.S. homeowner vacancy rate was notably low at 0.9 percent, underscoring limited availability in the national for-sale housing market. Homeowner vacancy rates varied across rural counties, but overall they indicate the opportunity to purchase homes in many rural areas was even more constrained than nationally. During this period, nearly half of rural counties (47.4 percent or 933 counties) recorded homeowner vacancy rates below the national median of 0.84 percent, consistent with very tight rural housing markets. Inclusive of that group, a substantial majority of rural counties (84.5 percent or 1,664 counties) had vacancy rates below 2 percent. In contrast, about one in six rural counties (15.5 percent) had homeowner vacancy rates exceeding 2 percent, largely consisting of farming- and manufacturing-dependent counties located in the Southern Coastal Plains and Great Plains regions (figure 19). While higher vacancy rates in these counties may signal increased housing availability and potential affordability, persistently elevated vacancy rates can also reflect weakening demand for housing, especially in counties experiencing employment decline or population loss.

Figure 19
Homeowner vacancy rates for rural counties, 2020–24



Note: Rural is defined by nonmetropolitan area status, based on the U.S. Office of Management and Budget's 2023 delineation of core-based statistical areas.

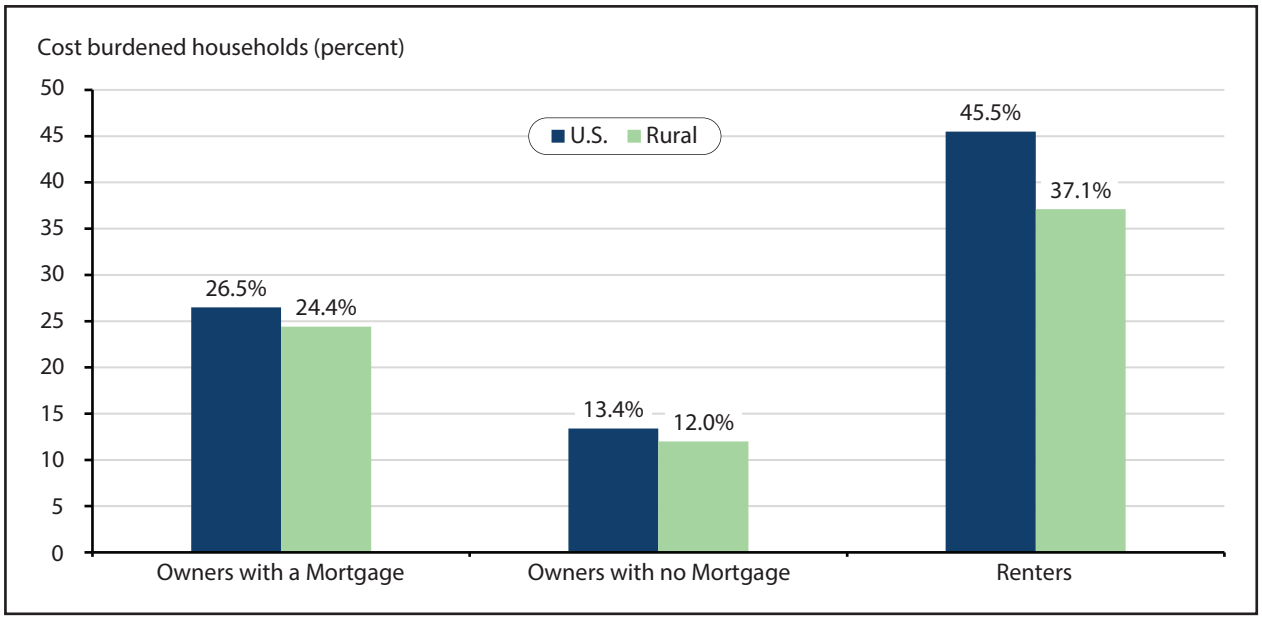
Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from American Community Survey 2020–24 5-year estimates. This metric represents the "opportunity to buy" in an area. Lower owner vacancy rates indicate that there are fewer units available for purchase.

Rural Homeowners Were the Least Housing Cost Burdened

In the 5-year period spanning 2020–24, rural households spent a smaller share of their income on housing costs—including rent and mortgage payments, utilities, and property taxes—than the average U.S. household. About 23.1 percent of rural households were cost burdened, compared with 29.7 percent nationally. This gap reflects lower nominal housing expenses in rural areas. At the same time, U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics consumer expenditure data show that rural households devote roughly one-third more of their income on energy than the average U.S. household, which can force trade-offs between paying utility bills and meeting basic needs. Despite these higher energy burdens, rural households still have lower overall housing cost burdens, indicating that other housing costs such as rent, mortgages, and property taxes remain comparatively lower in rural areas.

Differences in the housing cost burden between rural and all U.S. households varied by housing tenure (figure 20). Among mortgage holders, rural households were less likely to be cost burdened—24.4 percent compared with 26.5 percent nationally. Cost burden rates were roughly half as high for households without a mortgage, where remaining variation largely reflects differences in property taxes and utility expenditures. Renters faced the highest housing cost pressures. About 37 percent of rural renters were cost burdened compared with 45.5 percent of renters nationwide, underscoring the greater vulnerability of renter households, who typically have lower incomes. Although rural renters experience lower cost burdens than renters overall, more than one-third still devote a substantial share of their income to housing, highlighting ongoing affordability challenges in rural rental markets.

Figure 20
Rural and U.S. housing cost burden, 2020–24, 5-year period



Note: Rural is defined by nonmetropolitan area status, based on the U.S. Office of Management and Budget's 2023 delineation of core-based statistical areas. Housing cost burden is defined as spending 30 percent or more of household income on housing costs, including rent or mortgage payments, utilities, and property taxes.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the American Community Survey 2020–24 5-year estimates.



ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Data Resources

This report draws upon the work of USDA, Economic Research Service (ERS) researchers and collaborators. Data used in this analysis come from USDA, ERS and a variety of other Federal sources, including the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis; the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics; the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census; and the Federal Reserve System. The most recent data are provided, ranging from 2000 to 2025.

For more on definitions of metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas, and other rural classifications, such as the Rural-Urban Continuum Codes, see the USDA, ERS What is Rural? topic page.

For more on county typologies (economic and demographic types), such as farming dependent and recreation dependent, see the USDA, ERS County Typology Codes data product.

For more on definitions and measurements of poverty areas, such as high, persistent, and enduring poverty, see the USDA, ERS Poverty Area Measures data product.

For more on ERS subregion geography, see Cromartie, J., & Parker, T. (2014). Population shifts across U.S. nonmetropolitan regions. In C. Bailey, L. Jensen, & E. Ranson, E. (Eds.), *Rural America in a globalizing world: Problems and prospects for the 2010s*. West Virginia University Press.



More USDA, ERS Research on Rural America

USDA, ERS analyzes ongoing changes in rural areas and assesses Federal, State, and local strategies to enhance economic opportunity and quality of life for rural Americans. Included in this report are current indicators of social and economic conditions in rural areas. The following recent publications feature research on rural America:

Farrigan, T., Genetin, B., Sanders, A., Pender, J., Thomas, K., Winkler, R., & Cromartie, J. (2024). *Rural America at a glance: 2024 edition* (Report No. EIB-282). U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.

Farrigan, T., Sanders, A., Miller, L., Paul, L., Winkler, R. L., & Pender, J. (2026). *Rural America at a glance: 2025 edition* (Report No. EIB-295). U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.

Farrigan, T., & Sanders, A. (2024). *The Poverty Area Measures data product* (Report No. TB-1967). U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.

Nkonya, E., & Pender, J. (2025). *Trends and patterns of job quality in the United States* (Report No. EIB-286). U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.

Rupasingha, A., & Cho, J. (2025). *Federal assistance and rural hospital closings: The impact of the USDA Community Facilities Program* (Report No. ERR-344). U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.

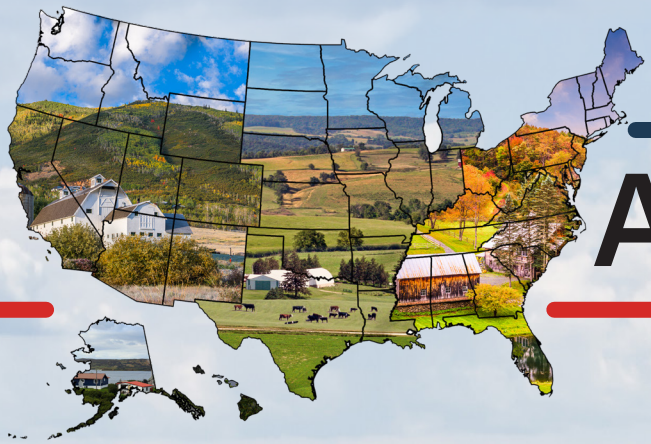
Sanders, A. (2025, August 20). 63 percent of retirement-destination counties are located in rural areas. *Charts of Note*, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.

Winikoff, J. B., Kamen, H., & Winkler, R. L. (2026). *Contributing factors to rural energy use, costs, and affordability* (Report No. EIB-300). U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.

Winikoff, J., Winkler, R. L., Cromartie, J., & Curtis, K. (2026). *Migration and aging across a rural-urban continuum and by county type* (Report No. EIB-306). U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.

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Rural America at a Glance





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