

Changes in the Population Age 60 and Older, by Age and Residence

To determine whether rural-urban residence is an important factor in understanding the changing size and age distribution of the older population, let us first look at indicators of U.S. population aging and then examine data on regional and rural-urban differences.

One indication of the aging of the U.S. population is the increase in the median age from 30.0 in 1980 to 32.9 in 1990 and 34.0 in 1998 (table 1). The older population 60 years and over increased by 17 percent between 1980 and 1990 and by 7 percent between 1990 and 1998. The nonmetro population is older than the metro population, with a median age of 36.0 in 1998, compared with 34.0 for the metro population. Also, the older population accounted for a larger proportion of the total population in nonmetro counties (18 percent in 1998) than in metro counties (15 percent). The proportion of elderly in the nonmetro population has grown as a result of both in-

migration of retirees and the outmigration of young adults.

The number of older persons varies from region to region, reflecting in part the distributional differences in the total population. In both metro and nonmetro areas, the older population is concentrated in the South, with a substantial proportion of the nonmetro elderly residing in the Midwest and the metro elderly residing in the Northeast. The nonmetro Midwest also has the largest proportion of its older population who are age 85 and older, compared with other regions, reflecting aging-in-place. The large concentration of the older population, especially those 85 years and older, in the nonmetro Midwest and metro Northeast raises social policy issues for local governments in these areas (Bean, Myers, Angel, and Galle, 1994).

Elderly persons have become increasingly concentrated geographically. This pattern is reflected in the large concentration of elderly persons in the Sunbelt States in general, and in several specific retirement areas, including northern Michigan and a band of counties stretching from northwestern Arizona, the Ozarks in Arkansas, and central Texas to western

Table 1—Age distribution of the older population by metro-nonmetro residence, 1980, 1990, and 1998
The aging of the U.S. population is reflected in the increase in the median age, from 30 in 1980 to 34 in 1998

| Residence and year | Median age | 60 years and older | | 85 years and older | |
|--------------------|--------------|--------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|----------------------------------|
| | | Number | Share of total population | Number | Share of 60-and-older population |
| | <i>Years</i> | <i>Number</i> | <i>Percent</i> | <i>Number</i> | <i>Percent</i> |
| 1980: | | | | | |
| U.S. total | 30.0 | 35,637,048 | 15.7 | 2,240,067 | 6.3 |
| Metro | 29.9 | 25,500,112 | 15.1 | 1,574,667 | 6.2 |
| Nonmetro | 30.1 | 10,136,936 | 17.7 | 665,400 | 6.6 |
| 1990: | | | | | |
| U.S. total | 32.9 | 41,857,998 | 16.8 | 3,080,165 | 7.4 |
| Metro | 32.6 | 31,002,048 | 16.1 | 2,233,652 | 7.2 |
| Nonmetro | 33.8 | 10,855,950 | 19.4 | 846,513 | 7.8 |
| 1998: ¹ | | | | | |
| U.S. total | 34.0 | 42,145,000 | 15.7 | 2,928,000 | 6.9 |
| Metro | 34.0 | 32,465,000 | 15.0 | 2,252,000 | 6.9 |
| Nonmetro | 36.0 | 9,680,000 | 18.4 | 676,000 | 7.0 |

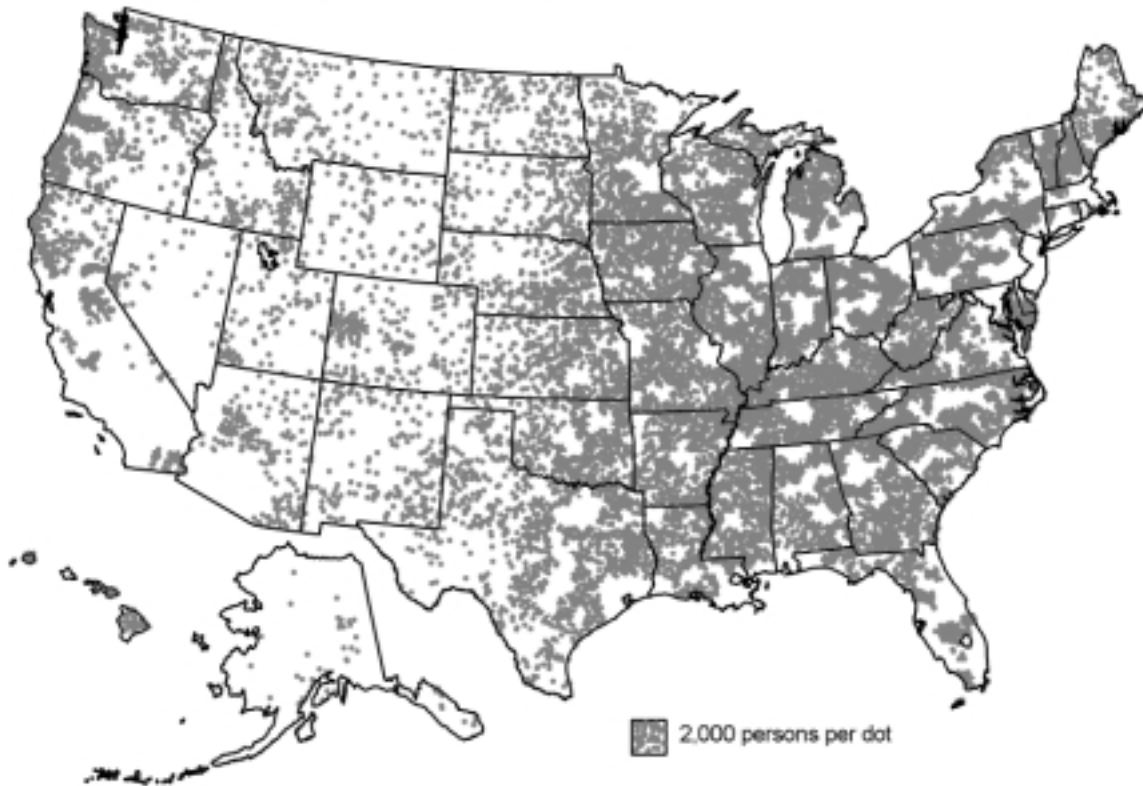
¹Data set does not include the institutional population.

Source: Calculated by ERS from March 1998 Current Population Survey (CPS) data file, and 1980 and 1990 Census of Population, General Population Characteristics, U.S. Summary.

North Carolina and eastern West Virginia (Siegel, 1993). The nonmetro older population is concentrated in the eastern United States, the Midwest, and coastal areas of northern California, Oregon, and Washington (fig. 1). Nonmetro retirement counties have grown at a rapid pace since 1980 (fig. 2), much faster than other nonmetro counties (Reeder, 1998). Rural retirement counties are defined as those with a 15-percent or greater increase in population age 60 and older from inmovement of population between 1980 and 1990. These counties benefit significantly from retirees, as seen in their population growth, increased family incomes, greater economic diversification, and reduced unemployment rates. Besides boosting local populations and tax bases, immigrating retirees contribute to and help sustain local businesses, churches, charities, volunteerism, and other civic activities (Reeder, 1998). Metro retirement areas have also grown, with notably increased concentrations in counties with climate and recreation amenities such as those in central and southern Florida.

Many nonmetro regions have been aging through the loss of young adults, especially regions dependent on farming and mining such as the Corn Belt, Great Plains, and Southern Appalachian Coal Fields (Fuguitt and Beale, 1993). Older persons have remained in these areas and become an ever-increasing proportion of the total population. Other nonmetro areas have gained older residents, largely due to an influx of retirees (Reeder, 1998). This changing geographic distribution of the older population has resulted in disparities between resources and needs—such as medical services, social services, housing, and long-term care—in communities, States, and regions. Small rural counties of the Midwest potentially have the most serious problems in providing services for the elderly. In addition to the relatively greater demand for services and the relatively low tax base, special problems of transportation, availability of facilities and resources, and delivery of services associated with the geographic dispersion and isolation of the population complicate service delivery (Siegel, 1993).

Figure 1
Nonmetro population 60 years and older, 1990
Older persons are generally concentrated in the Sunbelt

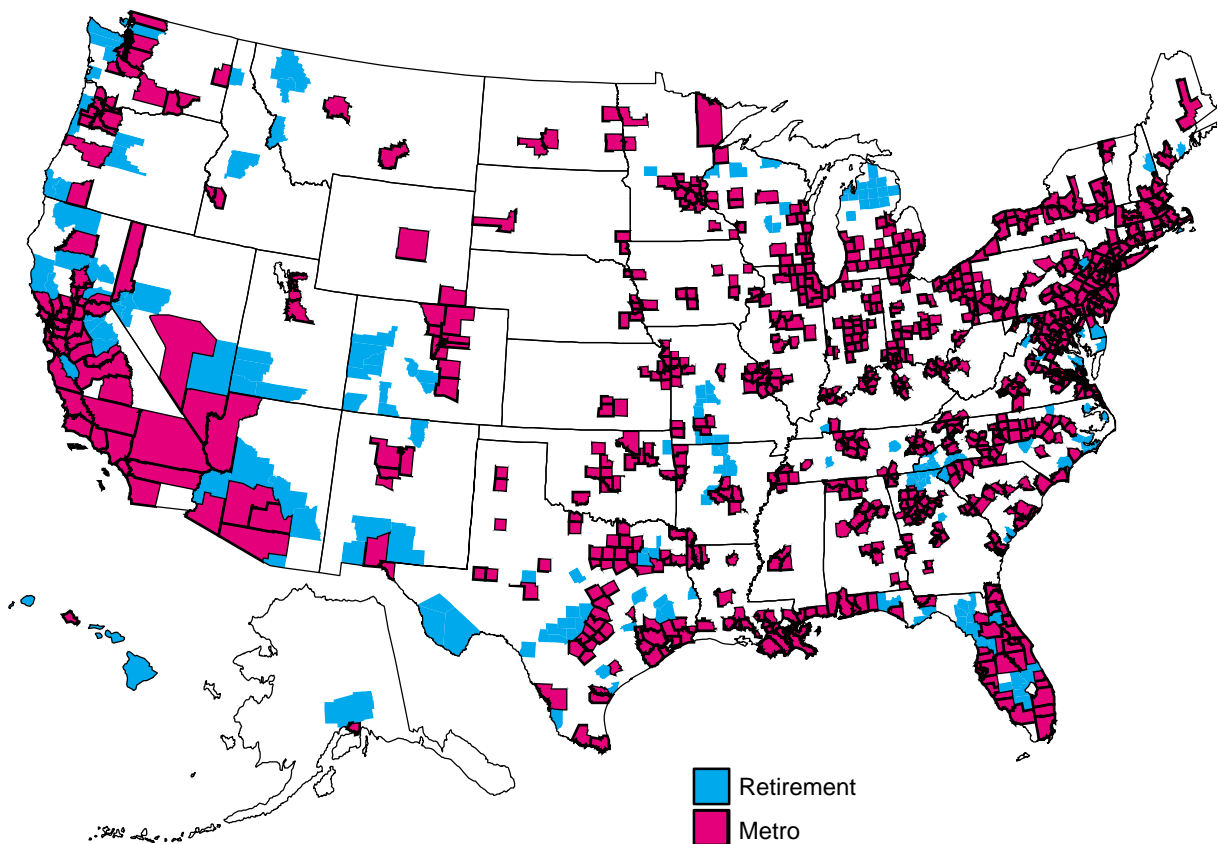


Source: Food and Rural Economics Division, using data from the 1990 Census of Population, Bureau of the Census.

In short, the consequences of changes in the older population vary widely for rural areas based on the county economic type and the composition of the older population—either relatively young retirees or persons who have remained and grown old in the community. Rural retirement areas seem to benefit the most, as immigrating retirees boost the tax base and help sustain local businesses. On the other hand, nonmetro areas dependent on farming and mining have been losing younger working-age persons and

experiencing declining populations and tax bases. The remaining older population has become an ever-increasing proportion of the population, increasing demands for medical and social services and long-term care. This mismatch between availability of and demand for services can create serious problems for service delivery in such areas.

Figure 2
Nonmetro retirement-destination counties, 1990*
Retirement-destination counties have grown rapidly since 1980



*Counties with 15 percent or more immigration of persons aged 60 and over, 1980-90.
Source: Rural Economy Division, Economic Research Service, USDA, using data from the Bureau of the Census.