USDA Economic Research Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

2024 Edition

Rural America at a Glance

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Economic Research Service
Economic Information Bulletin Number 282
November 2024

Recommended citation format for this publication:

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

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Rural America at a Glance is an annual report that highlights recent social and economic conditions in rural areas of the United States. This edition focuses on the age structure of the rural population and the implications of age-related demographic change through the lens of migration, labor market participation, poverty, childcare and eldercare, and broadband. The aging of the population affects rural areas, where residents tend to be older on average than their urban counterparts. Whether due to retirees migrating to rural destinations or the aging of the population in place, recent growth in older age cohorts has implications for rural communities, such as the local labor supply and the demands for goods and services.

Overview

Rural America covers 74 percent of the land surface of the country.[1] About 46 million people lived in rural counties in 2023, comprising 14 percent of the U.S. population.[2] Between 2020 and 2023, population growth occurred in rural America as a whole and in almost all county types regardless of degree of rurality. The age composition of the rural population has been changing as well. In 2023, the rural population was concentrated among younger (under 15 years) and older (65 years or older) age groups. The population ages 65 and over is particularly relevant to rural America. Growth of this age cohort has been outpacing that of younger adults largely due to the aging of the baby boom generation past age 65 beginning in 2011. Over the last decade, this growth has contributed (along with migration and other factors) to more older age counties, where 20 percent or more of the population is age 65 or more. That growth has disproportionately been among rural counties, which on average have older populations than urban counties.

A community's age structure influences demand for various kinds of goods and services, its labor force, and people's ability to balance labor force activities with other responsibilities such as caregiving. Children require economic support and care, while the same may be true of older populations, depending on individual characteristics and circumstances. For instance, after age 55 and especially after age 65, increasing numbers of people exit the labor force, and their health and economic well-being (e.g., assets, savings, retirement income, and benefits such as Social Security) at that time can influence self-sustainability in later years. Communities with relatively few people at working ages may experience slower economic development and may struggle to support the care and service needs of younger and older age groups. While older people and retirees contribute economically and socially to community vibrancy such as through tax revenue, local expenditures, and community service, they are less likely to participate in the active labor force. Important differences also exist within the population ages 65 and older. Individuals within the age group of 65–74 are more likely to continue to engage in the labor force in some capacity, to be healthier, and to be more actively engaged in community activities than are the eldest of the population (ages 75 or older). As a population continues to age, the need increases for public and private services to support older adults, such as healthcare and long-term care.

This 2024 edition of Rural America at a Glance focuses on the age structure of the rural population and the implications of age-related demographic change through the lens of migration to rural areas, labor market participation, poverty, childcare and eldercare, and broadband.

1 Throughout this report, the terms "rural" and "nonmetro" are used interchangeably, as are the terms "urban" and "metro." Unless otherwise stated, statistics are calculated using the 2023 U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) metropolitan area definitions based on data from the 2020 U.S. Census. The exact number of counties in a category may differ depending on the data source used. For more on definitions of metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas, as well as related concepts, such as urbanized areas and central counties, visit the USDA, Economic Research Service web page "What Is Rural?"

2 Population statistics are reported in the aggregate (i.e., sum of all areas by metro or nonmetro definition) throughout this report unless otherwise noted as a county median.

Key findings include:

- After the only decade of overall population loss for rural counties (2010–20), the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic contributed to renewed rural population growth during the 2020s. Since 2020, rural population growth has relied solely on net migration, with more people moving into rural areas each year than moving out.
- Working age populations in rural counties are shrinking, resulting in greater concentration in younger and older age groups. This was particularly evident in remote and rural adjacent counties, indicating that a relatively small working age population must support both a significant child population and a relatively large older population.
- The aging of the baby boom generation contributed to a rapid increase in the rural older population during the 2010s and early 2020s. This resulted in a large increase in the number of older age counties (those with 20 percent or more of their population age 65 or older), which nearly tripled since 2010.
- Total rural employment grew from 2022 to 2023, nearly recovering to 2019's prepandemic levels. This employment growth was accompanied by record low rural unemployment rates. The increasing job opportunities have encouraged people of prime working age (25–54 years) to join or rejoin the labor force and for late career and retirement age people to remain in the labor force longer.
- Poverty disproportionately affected rural part-time workers in 2023. They were more likely to be working poor than their urban counterparts. Their reasons for working part time varied by age group but were primarily noneconomic, such as childcare problems or other family or personal obligations, rather than economic factors, such as rural business conditions.
- The number of private rural childcare establishments and the age cohort that they serve decreased between 2017 and 2022, but the extent of that change varied by degree of rurality. The largest decreases in childcare establishments were in small cities and rural adjacent areas, while the smallest decreases were in small towns.
- The rural eldercare industry has grown over the last decade, particularly in the home healthcare sector, but the industry hasn't kept up with the growing older rural population.
- The rural population has historically had a lower adoption rate of broadband than the urban population. However, an examination of changes between the 5-year periods ending in 2017 and 2022 suggests that people across all age groups in rural areas have been increasingly using broadband. Further, broadband use for economic activities in particular had increased across age groups.

As Nonmetro Areas Experience More Deaths Than Births, Population Growth Relies on Net Migration

After the only decade of overall population loss for nonmetro counties (2010–20), the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to renewed nonmetro population growth during the 2020s. From July 2022 through June 2023, the nonmetro population grew by 0.24 percent compared with 0.53 percent for metro areas (table 1). The components of change differ, however, for nonmetro and metro areas. The larger rate of population growth in metro areas came from both net in-migration and positive natural change (natural increase). In contrast, population gains from net migration (0.51 percent) offset population losses from natural change (-0.27 percent) in nonmetro areas. Negative natural change (natural decrease) happens when an area has more deaths than births. Although natural decreases have been documented for hundreds of individual nonmetro counties, beginning in the 1960s, natural decreases for nonmetro areas as a whole are a recent phenomenon, first recorded in 2018.

Table 1
Population change and components of change, metro and nonmetro, July 2022–June 2023

	Number of counties	Population, July 2023	Population change		Natural change		Net migration	
			Number	Rate	Number	Rate	Number	Rate
U.S.	3,144	334,914,895	1,643,484	0.49	504,495	0.15	1,138,989	0.34
Metro	1,186	288,910,527	1,531,841	0.53	626,950	0.22	904,891	0.31
Nonmetro	1,958	46,004,368	111,643	0.24	-122,455	-0.27	234,098	0.51

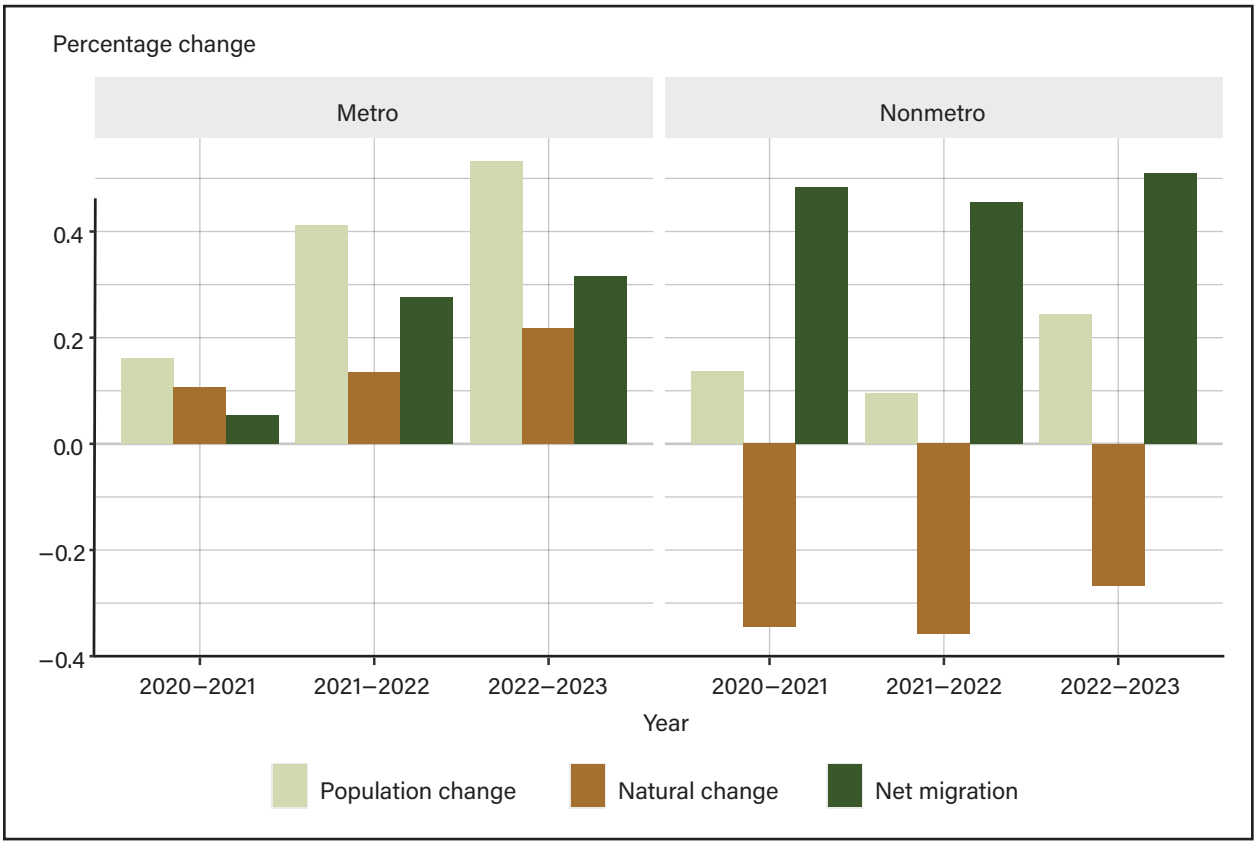
Note: Natural change is births minus deaths. Net migration is the number of people moving in minus the number of people moving out. Rates are the numeric change divided by the beginning-period population (July 1, 2022).

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Population Estimates Program, 2022 and 2023.

Since 2020, nonmetro population growth has relied solely on net migration, with more people moving into nonmetro areas each year than moving out (figure 1). Prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, nonmetro areas experienced a decade of net out-migration and overall population loss. The pandemic and subsequent social and economic changes including increased telework, contributed to changes in migration patterns between metro and nonmetro areas. Nonmetro areas experienced a positive net migration rate near 0.5 percent each year between 2020 and 2023 (dark green bars). The overall population growth for nonmetro areas increased from 0.1 to 0.24 percent between 2021 and 2022 and between 2022 and 2023 (light green bars) due mostly to an increase in natural change from -0.36 to -0.27 (brown bars). Despite this small upward shift in natural change resulting from fewer COVID-19 deaths, persistently low birth rates and an aging population likely will preclude a return to an overall natural increase in nonmetro population growth.

Figure 1

Population change and components of change, metro/nonmetro, 2020–2021, 2021–2022, and 2022–2023

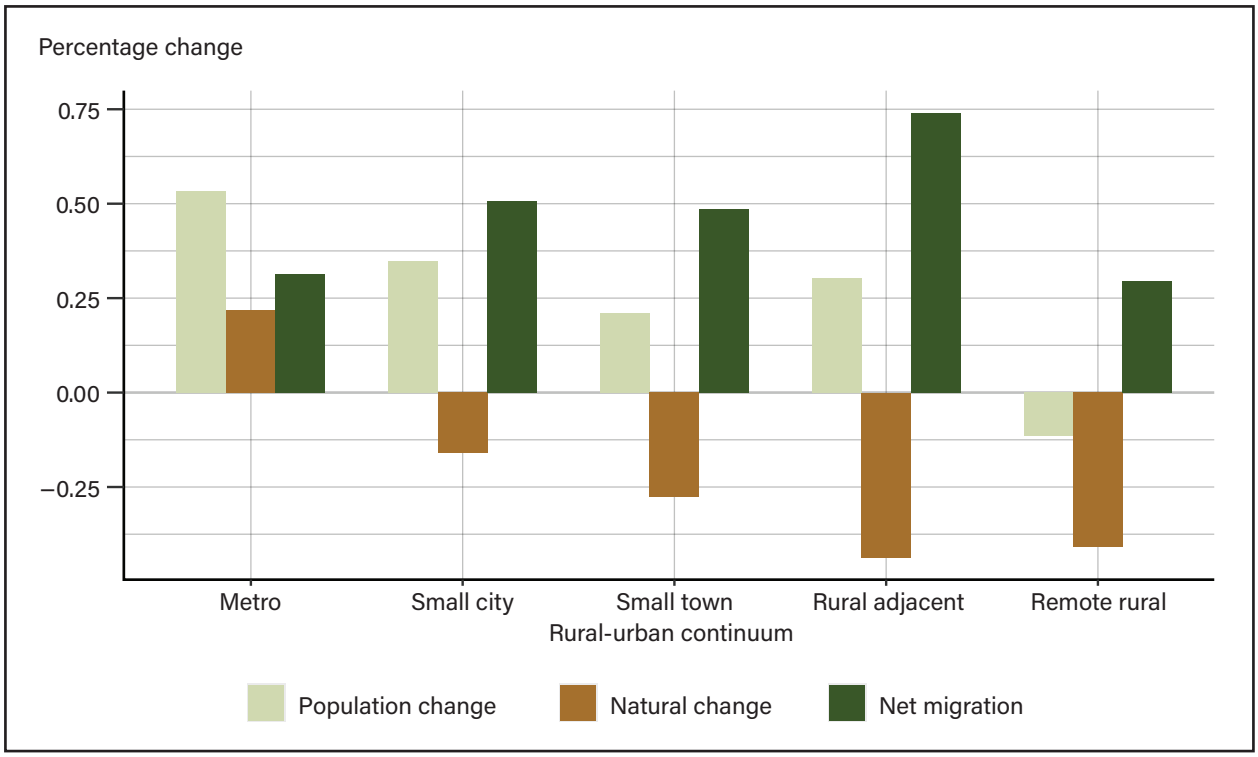


Note: The 1-year periods comprise July through June. Natural change is births minus deaths. Net migration is the number of people moving in minus the number moving out. Rates are the numeric change divided by the beginning-period populations.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Population Estimates Program, 2020–23.

Overall population change, net migration, and natural increase varied across the rural-urban continuum in 2022–2023 (figure 2). Overall population increased in all 5 categories shown in figure 2 except for remote rural counties, those with urban populations of less than 5,000, and not adjacent to a metro area (light green bars). These counties as a group also showed the lowest net migration rate among all categories (dark green bars). Rural counties adjacent to metro areas had a similar level of population loss from natural decrease (brown bars) as did remote rural counties but more than double the rate of net migration.

Figure 2
Population change and components of change by rurality, 2022–2023



Note: The 1-year period comprises July through June. The 5-level rurality classification is an aggregated version of the USDA, Economic Research Service's (ERS) 2023 Rural-Urban Continuum Codes (RUCCs); metro = RUCC 1–3, small city = RUCC 4/5, small town = RUCC 6/7, rural = RUCC 8, and remote rural = RUCC 9. Natural change is births minus deaths. Net migration is the number of people moving in minus the number moving out. Rates are the numeric change divided by the beginning-period population (July 1, 2022).

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Population Estimates Program, 2022 and 2023.

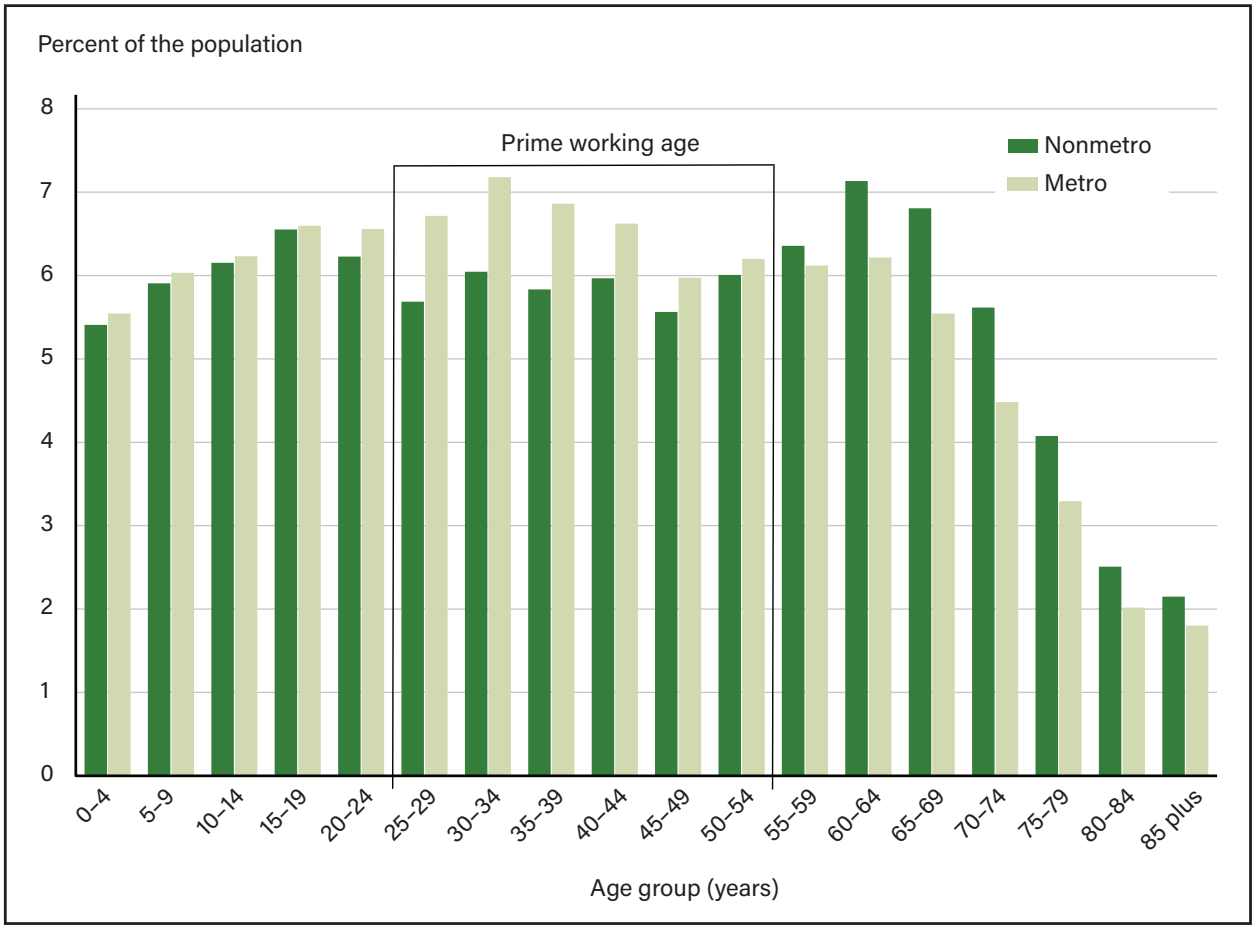
Working Age Populations Are Shrinking Across Rural Counties, While Older Populations Grow

As working age populations[3] in nonmetro counties are shrinking, the populations are becoming more concentrated in younger and older age groups that tend to require more economic support and caregiving. Between 2010 and 2023, the number of nonmetro people between the ages of 15 and 64 decreased from over 30 million to about 28 million, while the population aged 65 and over grew from 7.4 million in 2010 to 9.7 million in 2023. In 2023, nonmetro and metro counties had similar shares of the population under age 15, but nonmetro counties had greater shares of the population over age 65 (figure 3). The relatively small share of

3 This report generally refers to children, working age, and older population groups. Standardized age cutoffs for defining those groups and their subgroups were used where possible. However, in some instances variations were necessary in accordance with the indicator discussed and limitations of the data source (i.e., where the population universe is predefined within the data source and not able to be altered by the author). For instance, in this section, working age is defined to include ages 15 to 64. This is in accordance with the literature on dependency ratios and use of age data that are only available in 5-year increments. The labor force participation section defines working age as 16 to 64, which is standard practice for the reporting of that indicator and is predefined as such in the data source. Further, working age is defined as 16 or older in the poverty section, which is standard practice for the reporting of statistics on the working poor. Each section of the report defines the age groups discussed in the text and chart notes.

people aged 25–54 in nonmetro counties is especially important because people of those ages tend to be most engaged in the labor force (prime working ages). Altogether, the nonmetro age structure poses challenges for providing services and care for both younger and older age groups with a relatively small labor force.

Figure 3
Relative age distribution in nonmetro and metro counties, 2023



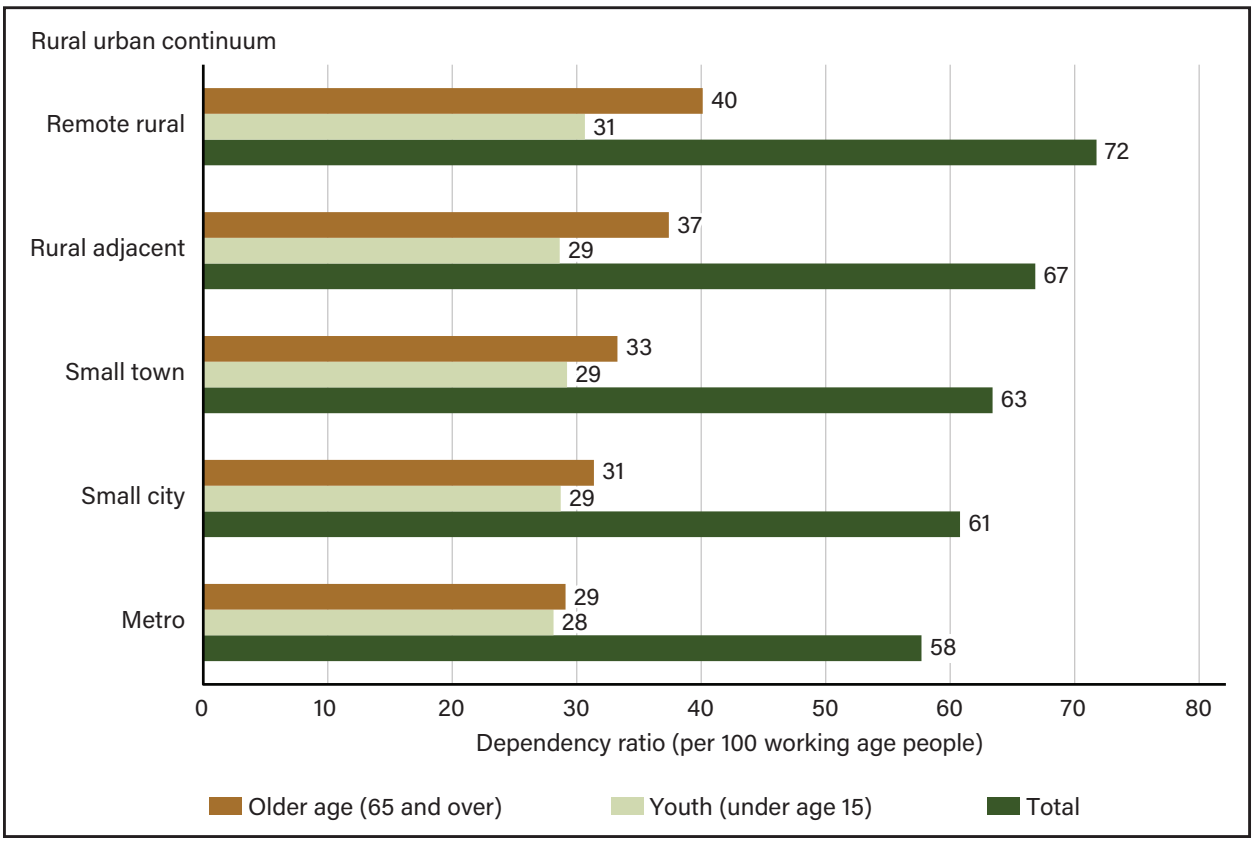
Note: The figure compares age structures of nonmetro (green) and metro (light green) counties. Metropolitan (metro) and nonmetropolitan (nonmetro) area designations are derived from the U.S. Office of Management and Budget's 2020 Standards of Delineating Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Population Estimates Program, 2023.

Dependency ratios are a common demographic measure to compare the population at younger and older ages to the working age population. These ratios tend to correlate with economic development so that populations with lower dependency ratios see greater economic growth. The ratios also indicate social needs for caregiving. Youth dependency ratios measure the population under age 15 in comparison to the working age population (ages 15–64). High youth dependency ratios indicate needs for childcare, schools, and other related children's services and suggest that labor force participation is limited by parental needs to care for children, especially when community services are lacking. Older age dependency ratios measure the population age 65 and over in comparison to those at working ages (15–64). High older age dependency ratios indicate community needs for elder care, specialized healthcare, age-sensitive infrastructure design, and myriad senior services. These ratios can predict shortfalls in the ability of the working-age population to care for an aging population.

Metro counties have lower total dependency ratios than nonmetro counties because their older age dependency ratio is lower (figure 4). Still, nonmetro counties are not all the same. Examining dependency ratios along a rural-urban continuum shows that counties with an urban population fewer than 5,000 (both remote rural and rural adjacent to a metro area) have especially high older age dependency ratios and, therefore, higher total dependency ratios. Youth dependency ratios, however, are similar across counties, by rurality. This indicates that in remote and rural adjacent counties, a relatively small working-age population must support a significant child population and a relatively large older population. For example, the typical (median) remote rural county consisted of 40 older people and 31 youth per 100 working-age population. This means there was an average of 72 people at these younger and older ages per 100 working-aged people. This compares with a national median of 63 younger and older people per 100 working aged, with the difference primarily due to fewer older people (33 per 100 people at working age). Older people contribute significant resources like retirement income, benefits transfers, skills, and experience to rural communities. However, high demographic dependency ratios can pose challenges for maintaining the infrastructure and labor force necessary to support younger and older age groups (childcare and eldercare services) while also maintaining an otherwise healthy economy.

Figure 4
Dependency ratios by rurality, 2023



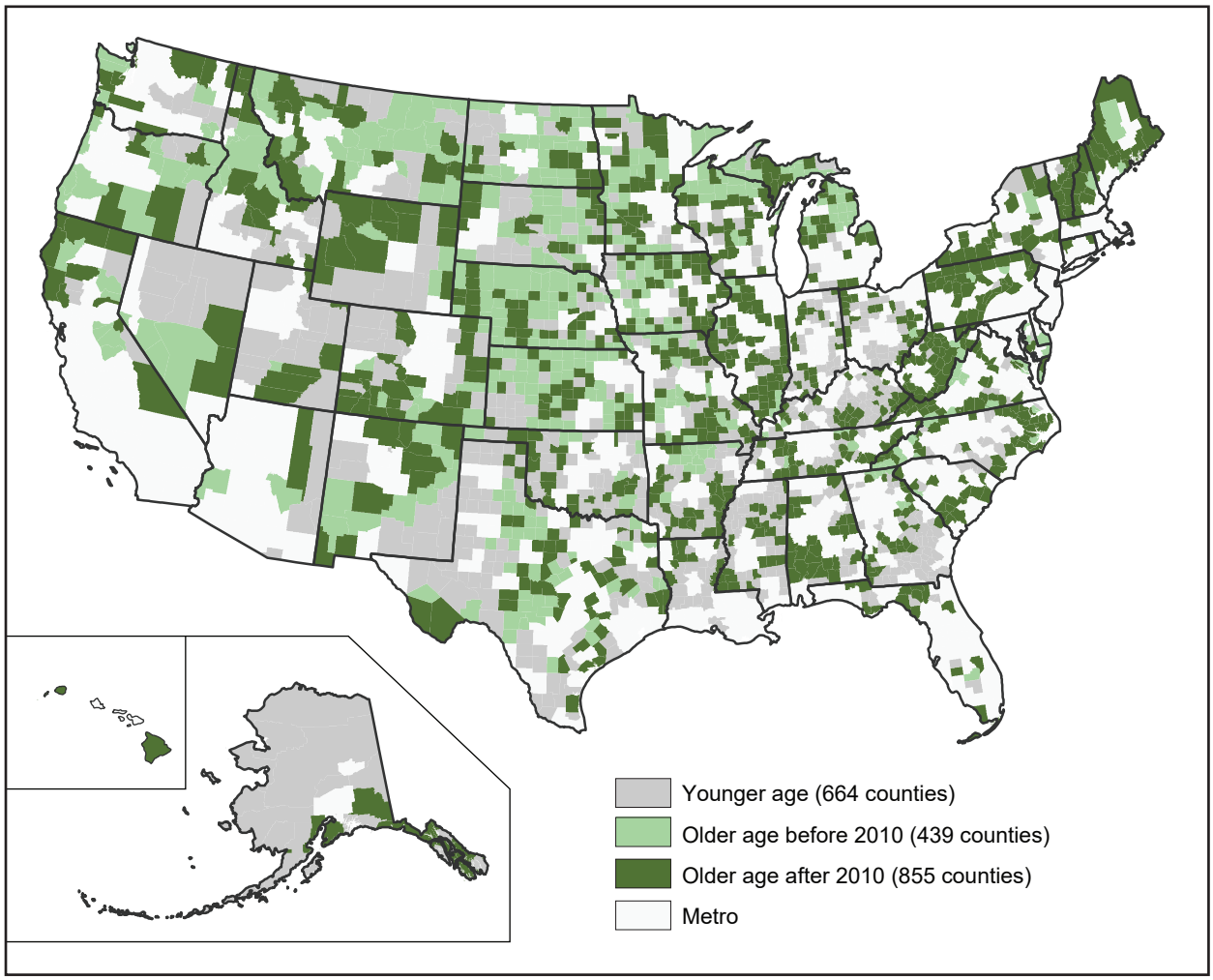
Note: The figure shows county median values of dependency ratios to represent the typical county within each class. Dependency ratios indicate the number of dependents per 100 working-age people (ages 15–64). The youth dependency ratio is a subset of the total, indicating the number of children (under age 15) divided by the number of the working age population. The older age dependency ratio is a similar subset, noting the number of older people (aged 65 and over) divided by the working age population. For counties, youth dependency ratios and older age dependency ratios sum to total dependency ratios. For county groupings in the chart, these do not sum perfectly due to rounding error and because median values are shown. County groupings were made by collapsing categories of the Rural-Urban Continuum Codes (RUCCs), so that small city = RUCC 4/5; small town = RUCC 6/7; rural adjacent = RUCC 8; and remote rural = RUCC 9.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using the Rural Urban Continuum Codes, 2023 edition and data from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Population Estimates Program, 2023.

The Number of Nonmetro Older Age Counties Nearly Tripled Since 2010

The rapid increase in the nonmetro older population during the 2010s and early 2020s resulted in a large increase in the number of older age counties, defined as those with 20 percent or more of their population age 65 or older. Nonmetro older age counties (figure 5) numbered 439 in 2010 and were concentrated in the Great Plains (especially in Montana, the Dakotas, Nebraska, and Kansas), the western Corn Belt (Iowa and Missouri), and the Upper Great Lakes (Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan). With the aging of the baby boom generation, 855 more nonmetro older age counties emerged between 2010 and 2023. At the same time, only two counties moved from older age to younger age status (Gentry County, Missouri, and Galax County, Virginia; included here with younger age counties). The new older age counties are much more widespread, including in regions with few older age counties prior to 2010, such as Northern New England, the Appalachians (especially Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Tennessee) and across the South from Virginia through Texas.

Figure 5
Nonmetro older age counties, 2023

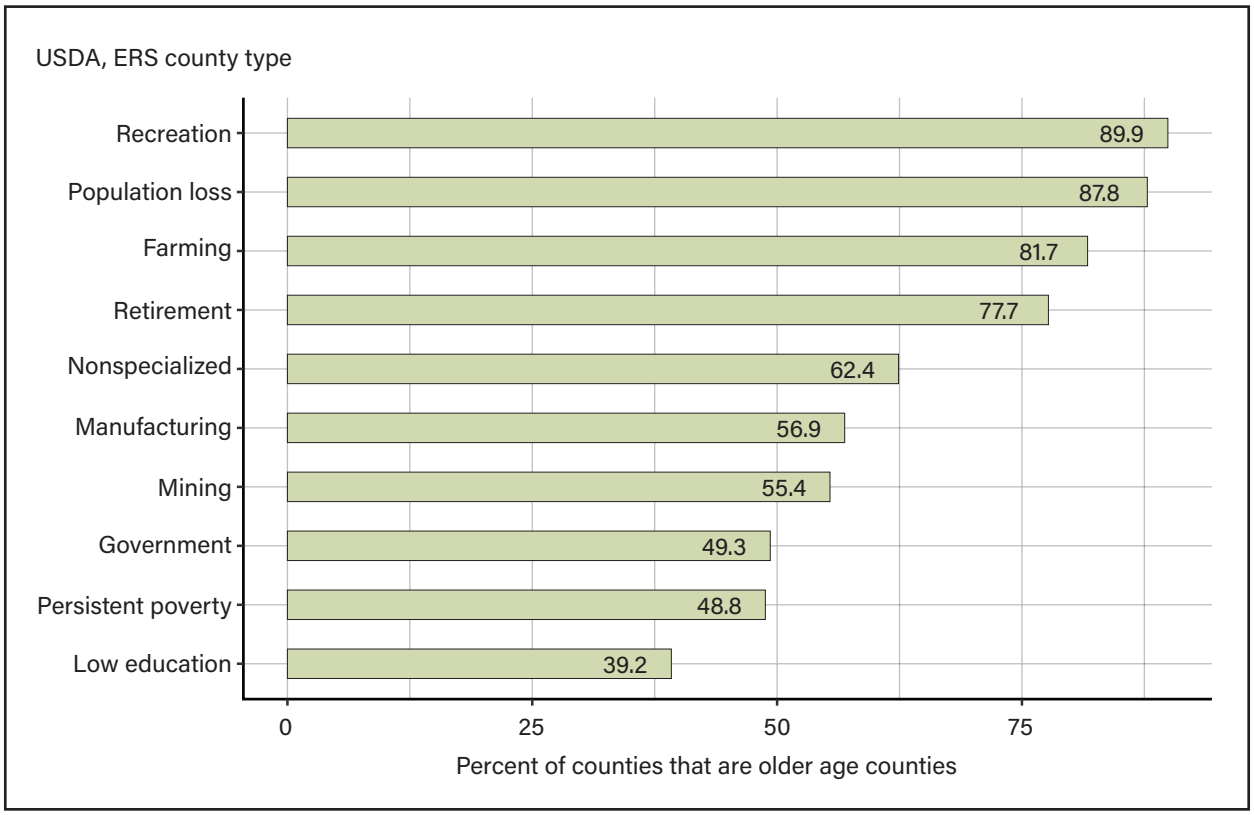


Note: Younger age counties shown in gray are nonmetro counties with less than 20 percent of their population ages 65 or older in June 2023. All 664 of these counties were also younger age counties in April 2010, with two exceptions: Gentry County, Missouri, and Galax County, Virginia. Older age nonmetro counties (those with 20 percent or more of their population 65 years or older in June 2023) are divided into two groups: those counties that were also older age in 2010 (light green) and those that were not (dark green).

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Population Estimates Program, 2023, and Decennial Census, 2010.

The percent of older age counties in 2023 varied across nonmetro counties, related to their economic base (figure 6). The four types of nonmetro counties showing significantly higher percentages of older age counties fall into two distinct groups. Almost 90 percent of recreation counties and 77.7 percent of retirement-destination counties were older age counties. These two categories are comprised of an overlapping set of counties that have older populations due in large part to above-average rates of in-migration among retirees and other older adults. Age-specific patterns of migration typically show an increased rate of nonmetro net migration beginning with cohorts in their late 50s, and much of that migration is to these types of counties. However, population-loss and farming counties (also overlapping) have elevated percentages of older age counties due to historic patterns of above-average outmigration among young adults, generally starting in the years immediately after high school and continuing into the late 20s or early 30s age groups. These differing patterns of migration lead to similar county-level age structures but often very different levels of income and well-being and different demands for services, such as housing and healthcare.

Figure 6
Percent of older age counties by selected USDA, Economic Research Service county types, 2023



Note: Older age counties are those with 20 percent or more of their population ages 65 years or older. USDA, Economic Research Service (ERS) county types are overlapping classifications so counties can be in more than 1 category. For example, many farming-dependent counties are also in the population-loss category. Many counties are both recreation and retirement destinations.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Services using data from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Population Estimates Program, 2023.

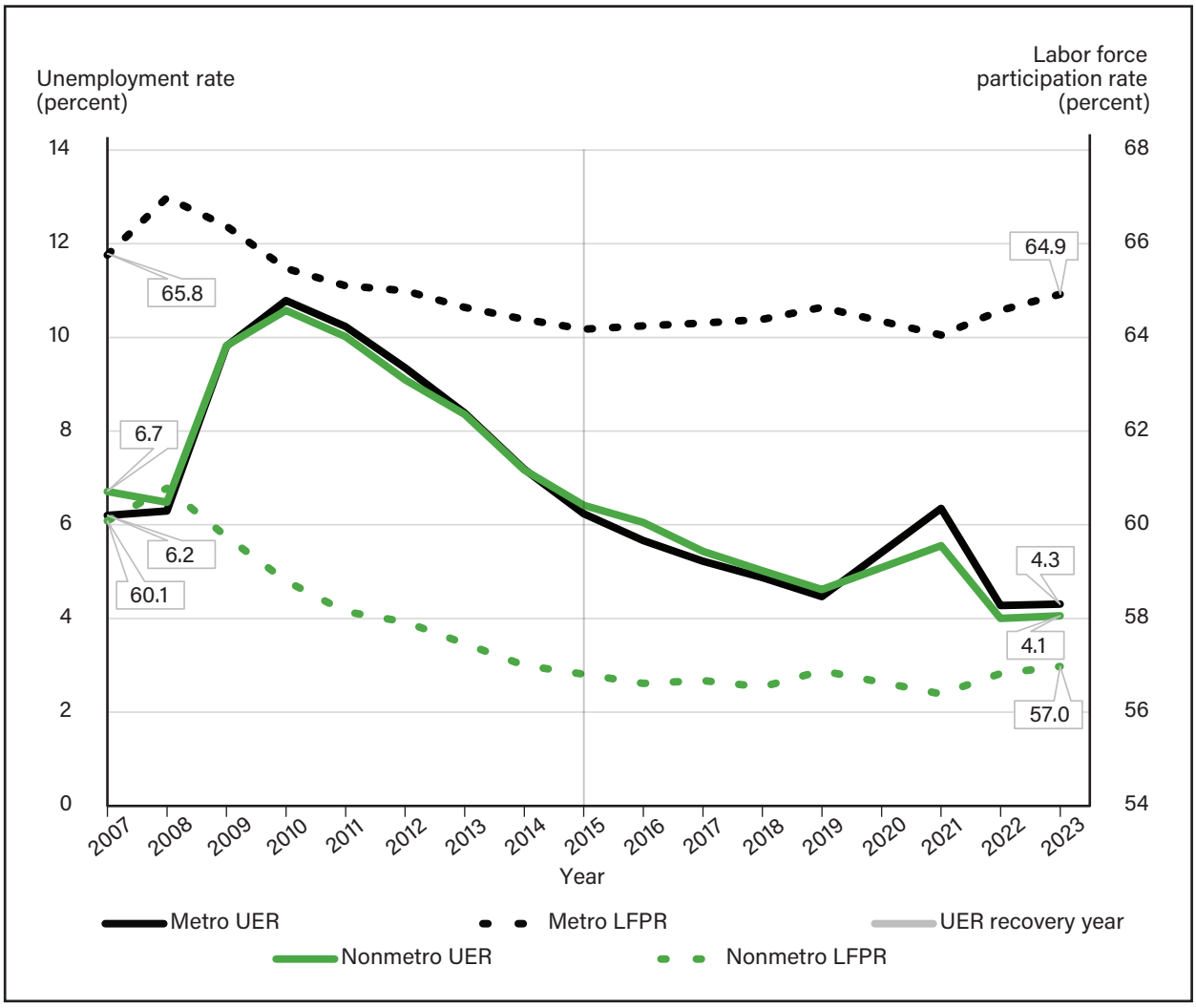
Labor Force Participation Rates Have Increased for Prime Age, Late Career, and Retirement Age Workers Since 2015

Total rural employment grew 0.9 percent from 2022 to 2023, nearly recovering to 2019's prepandemic levels. This employment growth was accompanied by record low rural unemployment rates of about 4 percent. While rural and urban unemployment rates have been nearly equal since before the Great Recession (December 2007 to June 2009), rural employment growth has been consistently slower than urban growth.

During and after the Great Recession, unemployment rates increased quickly from 6 percent in 2008 to 11 percent in 2010 as many people who lost jobs were in search of new ones. Long-term unemployment (unemployment lasting 27 or more weeks) increased significantly during this period, and many unemployed persons became discouraged and stopped looking for jobs. These people leaving the labor force is reflected in a 4-percentage point decline in labor force participation rates in rural areas and a 3-percentage point decline in urban areas from 2008 to 2015 (figure 7).

Figure 7

Unemployment rates and labor force participation rates for the population ages 16 and over, 2007–23



UER = unemployment rate; LFPR = labor force participation rate.

Note: The UER recovery year refers to 2015, the year when metro and nonmetro unemployment rates returned to pre-Great Recession (2007) levels. Comparable 1-year American Community Survey data are not available for 2020; therefore, trend lines do not include data points for 2020. Metro and nonmetro designations change over time as they are updated by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget and the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census.

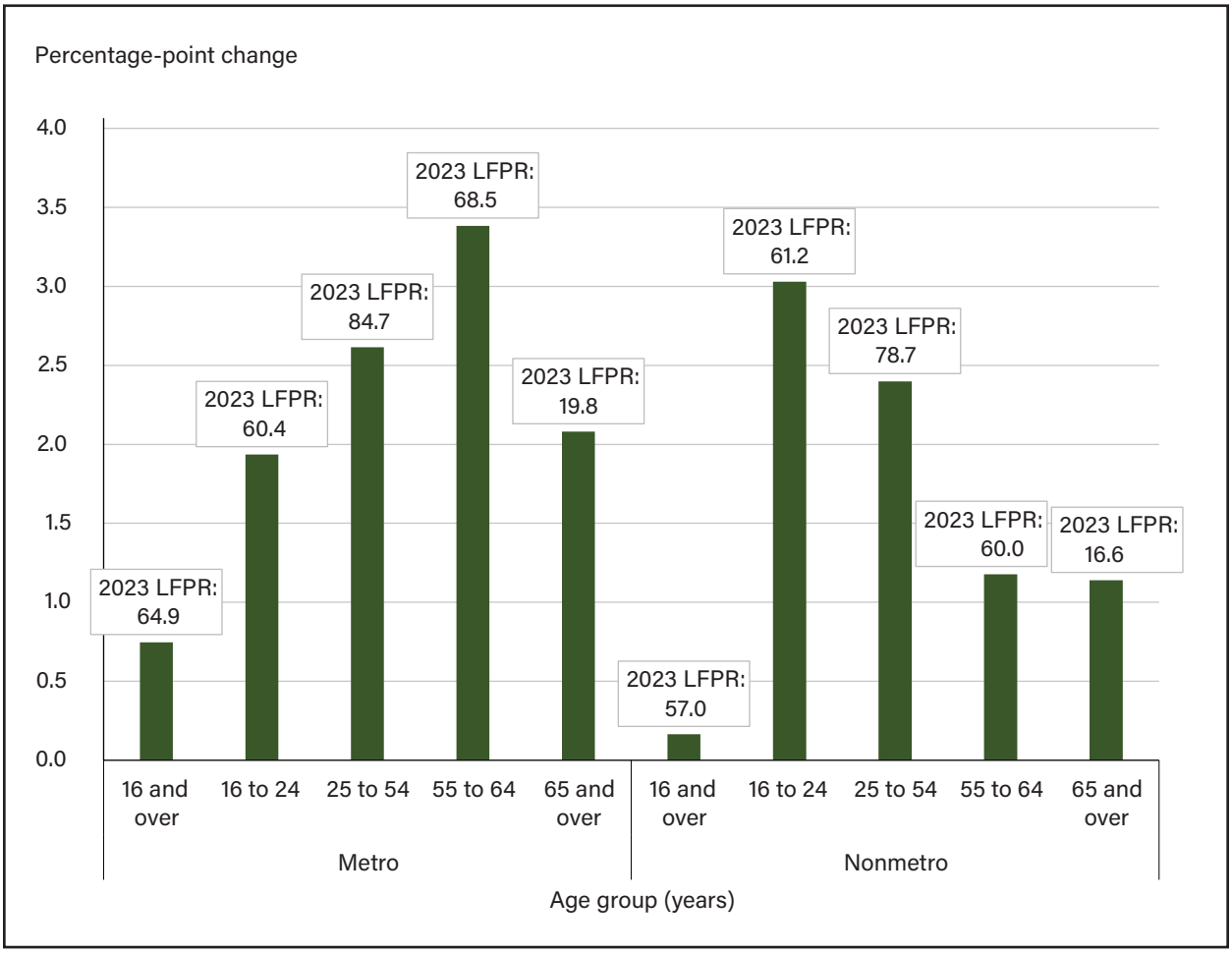
Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, American Community Survey, 1-year period estimates.

By 2015, unemployment rates had returned to prerecession levels, employment was growing in rural and urban areas, and labor force participation rates in rural and urban areas stopped declining. However, as the unemployment rate continued to decline and total employment continued to grow through 2019, labor force participation rates for the population ages 16 and over remained steady at about 64.5 percent in urban areas and 57 percent in rural areas. This suggests that employment growth was fueled by the unemployed finding jobs and by population growth (particularly in urban areas) but not by a greater portion of the population entering and remaining in the labor force.

A primary factor contributing to the flat trend of the overall labor force participation rate is the aging of the U.S. population. The baby boom generation (ages 60–78 in 2024) is significantly larger than the preceding generation and comprises a larger percentage of the total population than the preceding generation did at their

age. Baby boomers have been transitioning from prime working age (ages 25–54) to late career (ages 55–64) and retirement age (ages 65 and over) groups over the last 15 years. These older age groups have much lower labor force participation rates than the prime working age group (figure 8) because this is when most people enter retirement.

Figure 8
Change in the labor force participation rate by age group, 2015–23



LFPR = labor force participation rate (percent).

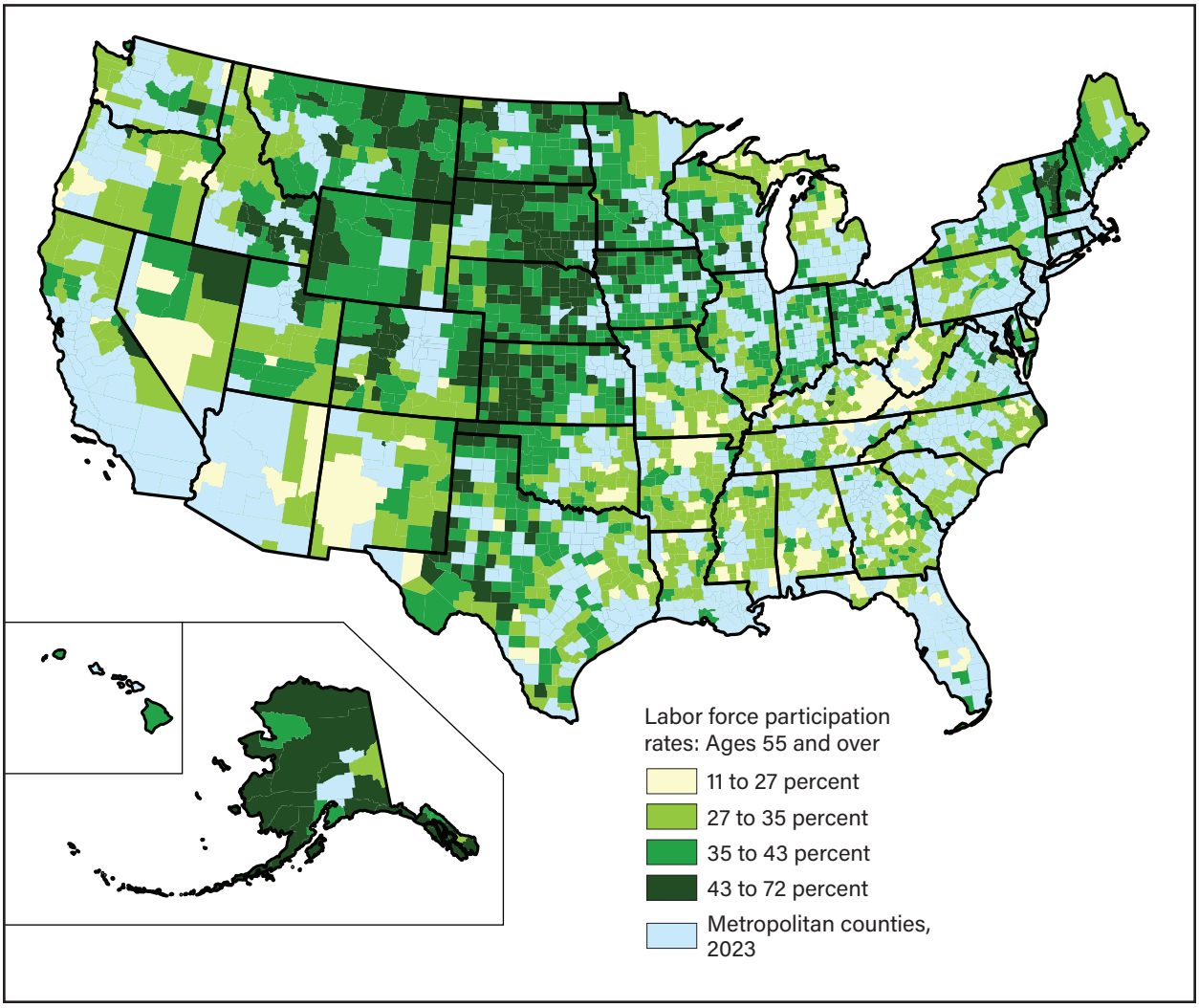
Note: The graph shows changes in labor force participation rates from 2015 to 2023 since metro and nonmetro unemployment rates recovered to pre-Great Recession (2007) levels in 2015. The bar labels show the labor force participation rate levels (percent) in 2023. Metropolitan and nonmetropolitan designations change over time as they are updated by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget and the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey, 2015 and 2023, 1-year period estimates.

While the aging population contributed to the flat trend in the labor force participation rate for people ages 16 and over, prime working age, late career, and retirement age individuals were all more likely to be employed or looking for employment in 2023 than people in those age groups were in 2015. This suggests that the low unemployment rates and increasing job opportunities since 2015 have encouraged people of prime working age to join or rejoin the labor force and for late career and retirement age people to remain in the labor force longer. Studies indicate that additional contributors to the increasing labor force participation rates among late career and retirement age groups are changes to retirement and Social Security benefits, changes in the kinds of occupations available to older workers, and health improvements among these age groups.

The retirement benefits and occupations available to older age groups and these groups' health also vary across space and likely play a role in the differences between labor force participation rates among older age groups in rural and urban areas. The labor force participation rate gap between rural and urban is wider—about 9 percentage points—for the late career age group (ages 55–64) than it is for the prime working age group, where it is about 6 percentage points. Employment in rural areas is more concentrated in industries that require manual labor, such as agriculture, mining, construction, and manufacturing. Employment in urban areas is more concentrated in white collar industries, such as professional services, real estate, finance and insurance, and company management. Due to these industrial compositions, rural workers may have more incentive to retire as soon as they are financially able because of more physically strenuous working conditions and lower average pay than workers in urban areas. The rural population also has a higher rate of disability, which may limit the number of people who can work in positions that cannot accommodate a particular disability.

Figure 9
Labor force participation rates in nonmetro counties for the population ages 55 and over, 2018–22



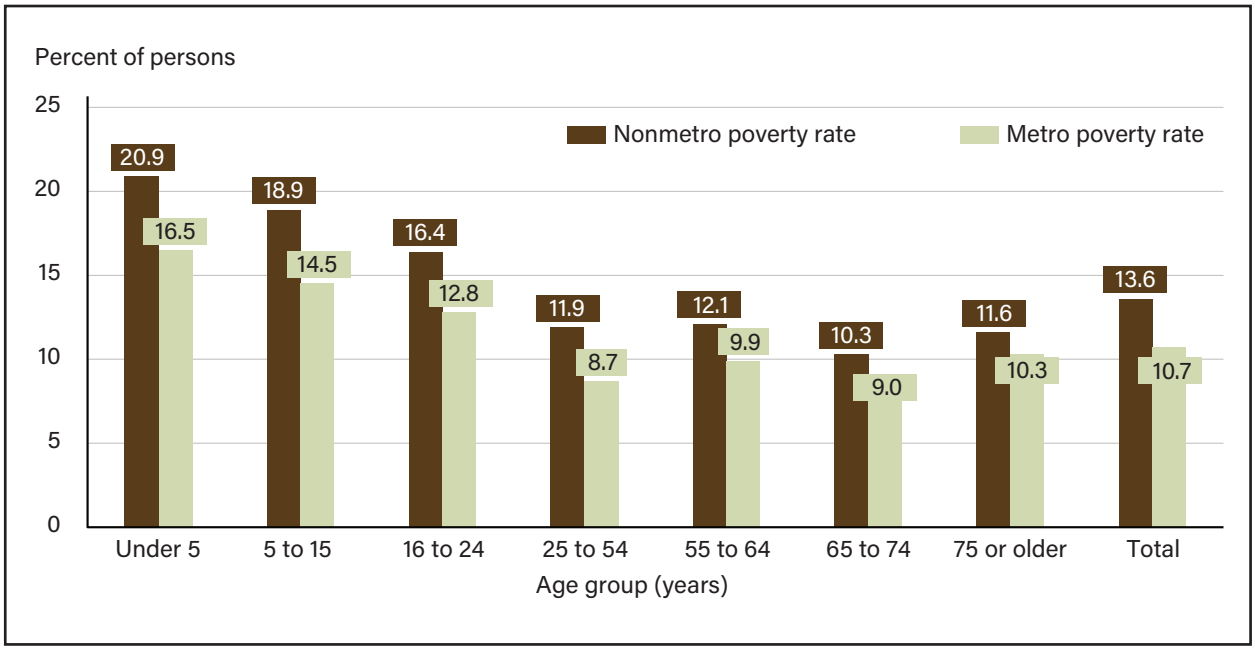
Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, American Community Survey, 5-year period estimates, 2018–22.

Rural labor force participation rates also vary across U.S. regions. The map of labor force participation rates shows that rural counties in the Great Plains, Corn Belt, New England, Alaska, and Hawaii tend to have above-average (over 35 percent) labor force participation rates for people ages 55 and over, while rural counties in the South, Appalachia, Pacific Northwest, and Southwest tend to have below-average rates (figure 9). Counties with high shares of employment or earnings from farming (largely concentrated in the Great Plains and Corn Belt) had an above-average combined labor force participation rate of 38 percent. Manufacturing counties have a high labor force participation rate of 61 percent for the late-career age group. However, the rate for the retirement age group in rural manufacturing counties is similar to the overall rural retirement age rate of 16 percent. Workers in manufacturing are more likely to have employer-sponsored health insurance and retirement plans/pensions. These employer-sponsored benefits may incentivize workers to postpone retirement until they are eligible for Medicare and are able to withdraw funds from retirement accounts without early withdrawal penalties.

Among All Age Groups by Residence, Poverty Rates Were Highest for Rural Children Under 5 Years Old in 2023

About 6 million individuals or 13.6 percent of the rural population lived below the official poverty level in 2023 compared with 10.7 percent for the urban population (figure 10). The poverty rate for rural children was higher than that of other age groups in both rural and urban areas. This included 1.6 million or 19.5 percent of rural children under 16 years old, comprising 26.7 percent of all rural persons in poverty in 2023. Among them, those under 5 years old had the highest poverty rate at 20.9 percent, whereas those ages 5 to 16 had a poverty rate of 18.9 percent. This difference in poverty rates between younger (16.5 percent) and older (14.5 percent) ages was similar for urban children whose total poverty rate in 2023 was 15.1 percent.

Figure 10
Percent of persons who are poor by age group, by nonmetro/metro residence, 2023



Note: Poverty status is defined by the official poverty measure of the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. Metropolitan (metro) and nonmetropolitan (nonmetro) area designations are derived from the U.S. Office of Management and Budget's 2020 Standards of Delineating Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2024 Annual Social and Economic Supplement.

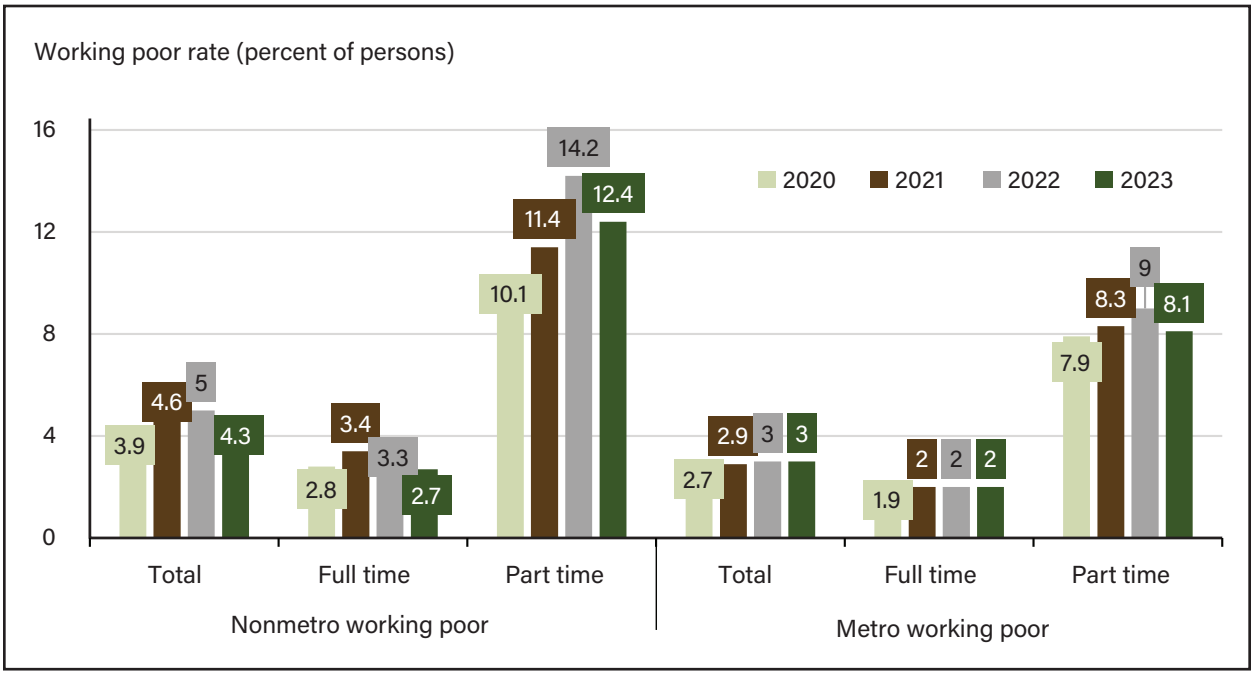
Poverty disproportionately affects rural children under 5 years old due to a myriad of factors. The poverty status of children is based on their family's total money income. Therefore, the experience of poverty among young children regardless of residence is typically correlated with the labor force characteristics of the parent(s). Low levels of education, school enrollment, and early career or limited time in the workforce, which are characteristics prevalent among young adults, may restrict their ability as parents to earn enough to support a family. Further, workers in many rural areas face economic difficulties due to limited job opportunities and lower wages relative to urban areas. Child poverty, particularly for young children, may also be associated with single parenthood (only one potential earner) and lack of childcare, which can inhibit parental engagement in the labor force. Support services are often more limited in rural than in urban areas, which may place rural parents at a greater economic disadvantage.

The Working Poor Rate Was Highest Among Rural Part-Time Workers in 2023

About 14 percent of the total rural poor population in 2023 consisted of the working poor, comprised of persons 16 years of age or older who have spent at least 27 weeks out of the year in the labor force. They worked full time, part time, or were looking for work but their incomes fell below the official poverty level. This group included nearly 1 million rural labor force participants of about 20 million in 2023. The working poor rate (the ratio of the working poor to all individuals ages 16 or older in the labor force for at least 27 weeks) fluctuates from year to year but is consistently highest among rural part-time workers (figure 11). In 2023, their working poor rate was 12.4 percent compared with 8.1 percent for urban part-time workers and 2.7 percent for rural full-time workers.

Figure 11

Working poor rate for metro and nonmetro workers, full time and part time, 2020 to 2023



Note: Poverty status is defined by the official poverty measure of the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. Metropolitan (metro) and nonmetropolitan (nonmetro) area designations are derived from the U.S. Office of Management and Budget's 2020 Standards of Delineating Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas. The working poor are defined as those ages 16 or older in the labor force at least 27 out of 52 weeks for the year, working full time or part time (under 35 hours per week) or looking for work, with an income below the official poverty level, which is a standard definition used by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. The working poor rate is the ratio of the working poor to all individuals ages 16 or older in the labor force for at least 27 out of 52 weeks for the year. All estimates are population weighted, but those for 2020 are based on fewer than typical sample responses for the Current Population Survey in the collection period following the first year of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2021, 2022, 2023, and 2024 Annual Social and Economic Supplement.

Examination of the share of the working poor who were employed part time in 2023 and their reasons for doing so can highlight the challenges young and older adults, many of whom may be parents or caretakers, face in rural America. In general, part-time work offers less opportunity for earnings than full-time work, leading to lower total incomes and relatively higher poverty rates. Yet the factors that contribute to a person's reasons for working part time may be economic or noneconomic and can vary based on individual circumstances, including age.

Part-Time Work Status Among the Rural Working Poor Varied by Age in 2023 as Did Their Reasons for Working Part Time

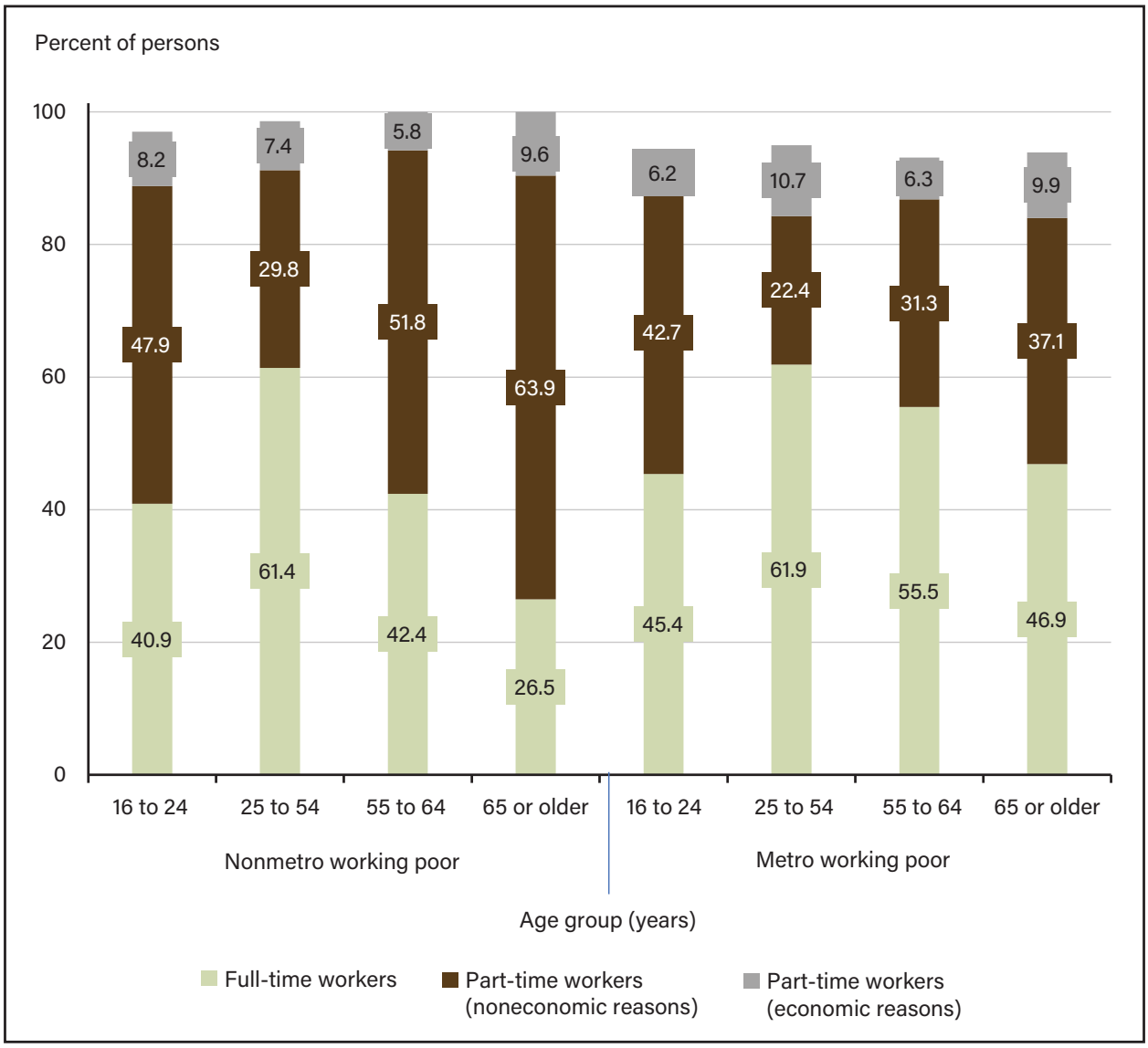
Rural working poor ages 65 or older were more likely to be working part time than any other age group in 2023, rural or urban (figure 12). Two-thirds of that population (63.9 percent) reported that their part-time status was based on noneconomic reasons. Those reasons were primarily due to retirement or Social Security income limits[4] (table 2). Social Security income is known to lift many among the older population out of poverty. Yet those who remain poor may find it difficult to earn enough to supplement their needs due in part to health and/or medical limitations or an inability to find full-time work, which were also noted as primary reasons for part-time work among this age cohort.

More than half (56.1 percent) of the youngest rural working poor group (16 to 24 years) worked part time in 2023, also mainly associated with noneconomic reasons. This group comprised about one-quarter (26.1 percent) of the rural part-time working poor. More than half of that group (58.6 percent) noted school and/or training as their reason for part-time work, which was greater than any other reason provided across age groups. Therefore, schooling/training stood out as the most prominent reason for rural part-time work in the aggregate (20.1 percent for ages 16 or older).

4 Social Security income limits apply until full retirement age, which is about 67 years old for most qualifying recipients. Typically, $1 is withheld from benefits for every $2 earned over the limit.

Figure 12

Percent of working poor persons by age group by full-time/part-time work status and nonmetro/metro residence, 2023



Note: Poverty status is defined by the official poverty measure of the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. Metropolitan (metro) and nonmetropolitan (nonmetro) area designations are derived from the U.S. Office of Management and Budget's 2020 Standards of Delineating Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas. The working poor are defined as those ages 16 or older in the labor force at least 27 out of 52 weeks for the year, working full time or part time (under 35 hours per week) or looking for work, with an income below the official poverty level, which is a standard definition used by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. The balance of working poor persons (to equal 100 percent) not shown in the chart are those looking for work (unemployed).

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2024 Annual Social and Economic Supplement.

Overall, noneconomic reasons were the most reported for part-time work by the rural working poor in 2023. The combination of family and/or personal obligations and childcare problems relating to affordable, available, or adequate childcare stood out more for workers ages 25 to 54 than for other age groups. Childcare problems were the primary reason for part-time work reported by 14.6 percent of that group in 2023, while another 25.5 percent gave family and/or personal obligations as the primary reason. This included all other family or home-related reasons, such as staying home to care for a sick child or an elder parent. However,

workers ages 55 to 64 were most likely to give family and/or personal obligations as their primary reason for working part time (37.8 percent). They were also more likely than any other age group to state health and/or medical limitations as their part-time work reason (27.2 percent). These findings suggest that while some rural working poor, such as retirees, may indeed want to work part time, others may choose part-time work when confronted with involuntary constraints.

Table 2
Primary reason for working part time given by part-time workers who are among the working poor in nonmetro areas, 2023

Primary reason for working part time	Percent of the nonmetro part-time working poor				
	Ages 16 to 24	Ages 25 to 54	Ages 55 to 64	Ages 65 or older	Total (ages 16 or older)
Noneconomic reasons					
Childcare problems	0	14.6	0.8	0	8.2
Other family and/or personal obligations	5.8	25.5	37.8	0	19.7
Health and/or medical limitations	2.7	6.4	27.2	6.2	7.6
Retired and/or Social Security income limits	0	2	1.2	48.4	4.9
School and/or training	58.6	8.6	0	0	20.1
Full-time work week is less than 35 hours	4.6	23.3	14.2	32.8	18.2
Economic reasons					
Slack work and/or business conditions	5	7.4	11.1	2.8	6.8
Could only find part-time work	3.9	6.4	0	9.8	5.3
Other reasons (economic or noneconomic)	19.5	5.9	7.7	0	9.2
Share of part-time working poor	26.1	55.7	10.6	7.7	100

Note: Poverty status is defined by the official poverty measure of the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. Metropolitan (metro) and nonmetropolitan (nonmetro) area designations are derived from the U.S. Office of Management and Budget's 2020 Standards of Delineating Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas. The working poor are defined as those ages 16 or older in the labor force at least 27 out of 52 weeks for the year, working full time or part time (under 35 hours per week) or looking for work, with an income below the official poverty level, which is a standard definition used by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. All estimates are population weighted but are based on relatively small sample sizes resulting from the subdivision of the primary sampling unit (part-time working poor) by age group, part-time work reason, and nonmetro status. For more information refer to Design and Methodology: Current Population Survey—America's Source for Labor Force Data, Technical Paper 77, October 2019, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and U.S. Census Bureau. Values in the table may not add to 100 because of rounding.

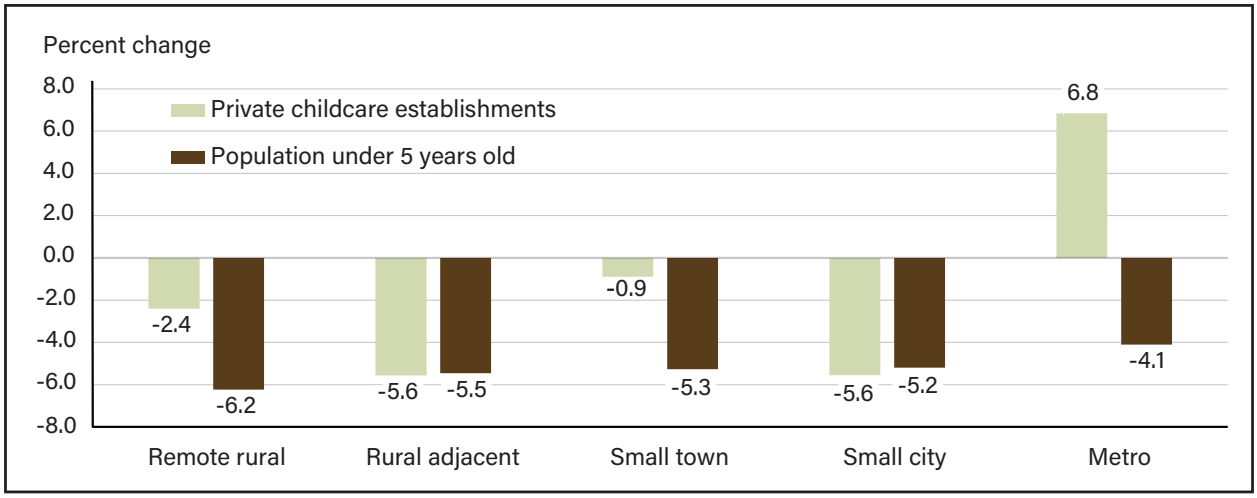
Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2024 Annual Social and Economic Supplement.

The Number of Childcare Establishments in Nonmetro Areas Has Declined; However, So Has the Population of Young Children

The availability of childcare in rural areas affects parents and caregivers who need to return to work after a child is born. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports labor force participation rates of mothers with children under 1 year of age are 15.8 percentage points lower than for mothers of children ages 6–17. Although the number of children under the age of 5 has decreased over time across urban and rural areas, childcare establishments provide a necessary service to working individuals and parents. Those who need childcare are often prime working age and important contributors to the labor force of the rural economy, including people working in care-providing industries. Childcare establishments, especially those that cater to younger children not eligible for State or Federal Government-funded programs, provide a necessary service for working individuals and parents in rural areas.

Comparing the average number of private childcare establishments across two periods (2013–17 and 2018–22),[5] the number grew by 6.8 percent in metro areas but decreased across nonmetro areas (figure 13). The decreases in private childcare establishments varied across nonmetro types. The largest decreases were in small cities and rural adjacent areas, both with a 5.6-percent decrease in private childcare establishments, while the smallest decreases were in small towns.

Figure 13
Percent change in number of private childcare establishments and population of children under 5 years old by residence, 2013–17 and 2018–22



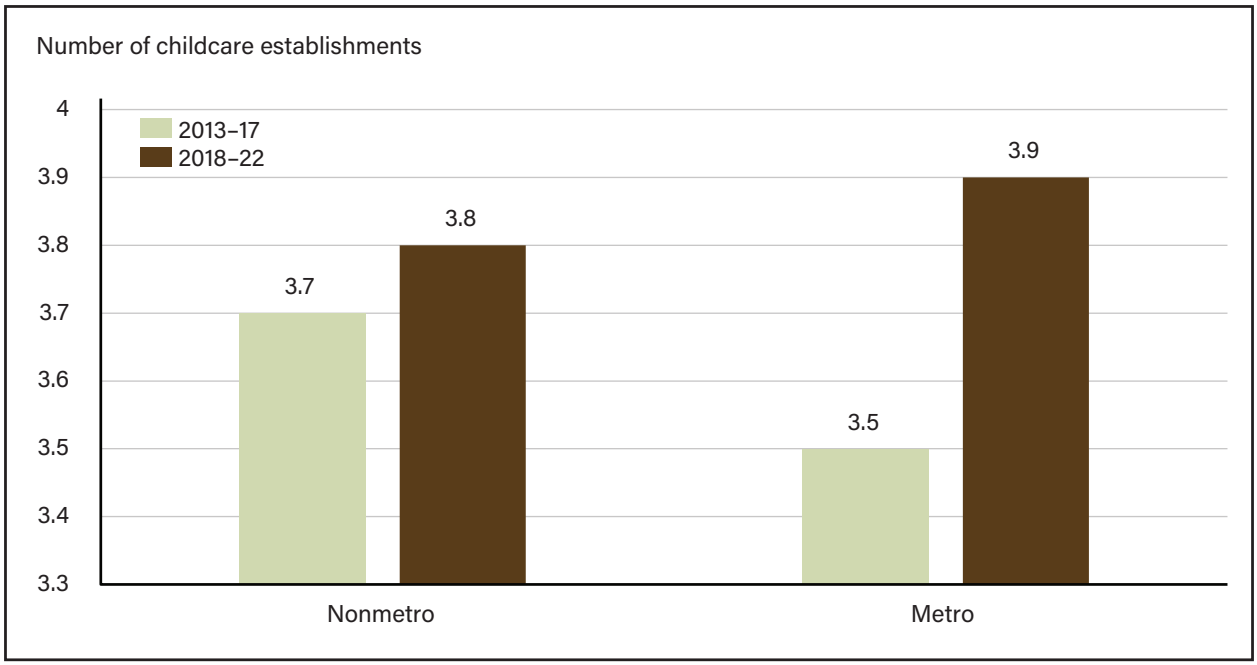
Note: The number of private childcare establishments, defined as North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) 6244, is calculated by first averaging the quarterly counts for each year, then averaging 2013 through 2017 to get a 5-year average. The same is done by averaging 2018 through 2022 to get an overall 5-year average. These 5-year averages are then compared for the 2 periods. Metro = Rural-Urban Continuum Code (RUCC) 1–3; small city = RUCC 4/5; small town = RUCC 6/7; rural adjacent = RUCC 8; and remote rural = RUCC 9.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW) 2013 through 2022, American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year period estimates 2013–17 and 2018–22, and the USDA, Economic Research Service's 2023 Rural Urban Continuum Codes (RUCC).

5 These years were chosen to correspond to the 5-year American Community Survey (ACS) data from 2013 to 2017 and 2018 to 2022 used for the population data. Although the data overlap with the COVID-19 pandemic, they are the most recent comparable data due to nonoverlapping ACS time periods. Additionally, averaging childcare establishment counts over a 5-year period deceases fluctuations in the data, potentially from the COVID-19 pandemic, and allows for a look at more long-term trends.

Childcare capacity varies depending on facility constraints and State-level policies for childcare providers and, therefore, are hard to measure. Comparing the number of childcare establishments per 1,000 children under the age of 5 can give a rough estimate of childcare concentration, or how many private childcare establishments are available for children younger than school age. In 2013–17, the ratio was slightly higher for nonmetro areas, suggesting better coverage compared with metropolitan areas (figure 14). However, while childcare coverage has increased over the two periods (2013–17 and 2018–22) for both metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas, the change in coverage ratio was higher for metro areas. This is due to childcare establishment growth in metropolitan areas coupled by a decrease in the population of children under 5 years old.

Figure 14
Number of childcare establishments per 1,000 children under 5 years old by residence, 2013–17 and 2018–22



Note: The number of private childcare establishments, defined as North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) 6244, is calculated by first averaging the quarterly counts for each year, then averaging 2013 through 2017 to get a 5-year average. The same is done by averaging 2018 through 2022 to get an overall 5-year average. These 5-year averages are then compared for the 2 time periods.

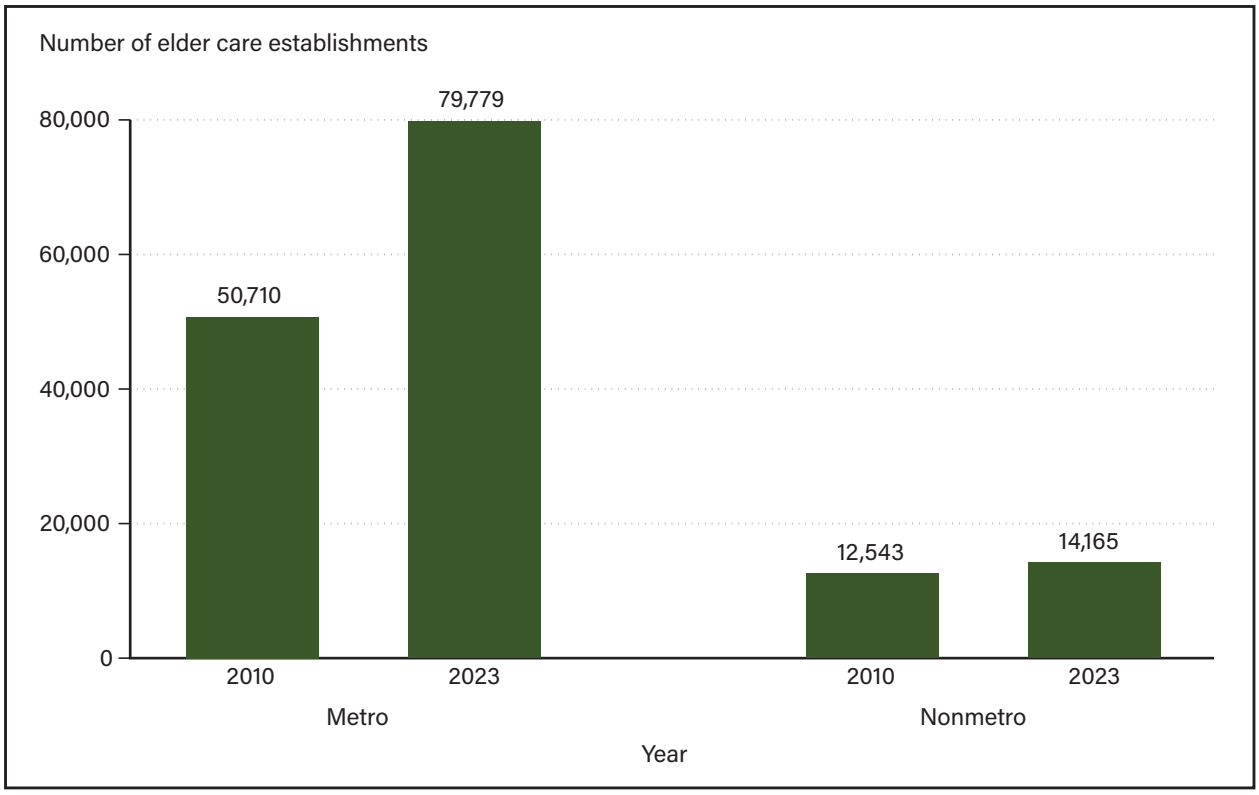
Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW) 2013 through 2022, American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year period estimates 2013–17 and 2018–22, and the 2023 Rural Urban Continuum Codes (RUCCs).

Eldercare Establishments Increased in Rural Areas and Are Concentrated Among Home Healthcare Services

Eldercare establishments provide necessary services for the rural older population (65 years and above). As the age structure of the rural population changes, so does the delivery of eldercare services and preferences in healthcare establishments.

Eldercare establishments experienced significant growth since 2010 with the onset of the aging baby boom population. While the growth occurred in both rural and urban areas, metropolitan counties contained most of the increase in establishments. From 2010 to 2023, the eldercare industry increased by over 29,000 establishments in metro areas (a 57-percent increase) and over 1,600 establishments in nonmetro areas (a 12.9-percent increase). The growth in rural eldercare establishments between 2010 and 2023 did not keep pace with the increase in the rural population age 65 and over, which experienced a 28-percent increase during the same period (figure 15).

Figure 15
Number of eldercare establishments by residence, 2010 and 2023

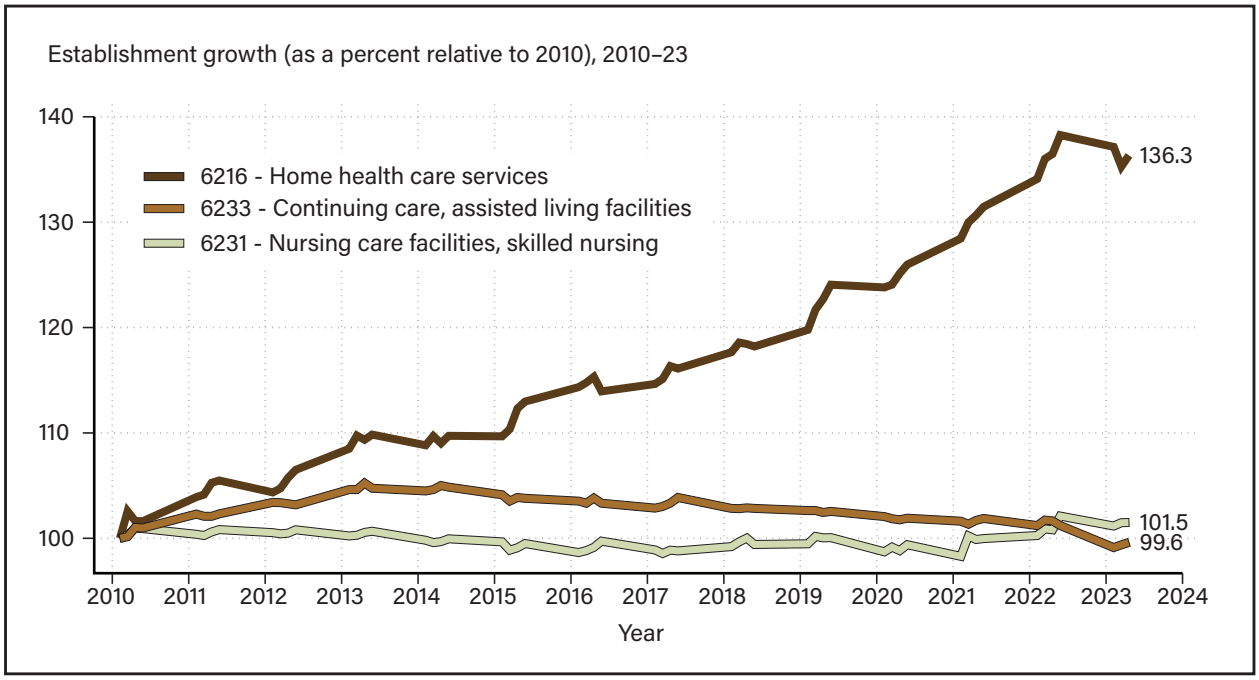


Note: Establishment totals are from first quarter 2010 and first quarter 2023. North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) codes 6216 (home health care services), 6231 (nursing care facilities, skilled nursing), and 6233 (continuing care, assisted living facilities) were utilized to calculate eldercare establishment totals. Metropolitan (metro) and nonmetropolitan (nonmetro) area designations are derived from the U.S. Office of Management and Budget's 2020 Standards of Delineating Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas. Data for Connecticut was classified as counties and not planning regions.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages, 2010 and 2023.

Growth in rural eldercare establishments remained concentrated among nonfacility-based care, such as home healthcare services. Since 2010, almost all growth in rural areas originated from home healthcare services,[6] an industry that experienced steady growth the last 13 years and finished the third quarter 2023 with 36 percent more establishments than in the first quarter 2010 (figure 16). Meanwhile, facility-based care remained relatively stagnant. Continuing care and assisted living facilities grew slightly in the first half of the decade, with the number of establishments peaking in the third quarter 2014 but then experienced a steady decline the next few years, ending the third quarter 2023 at 0.4 percent lower than in the first quarter 2010. Conversely, skilled nursing facilities remained stable throughout the 2010s and experienced a slight increase in 2022, growing 1.5 percent higher in 2023 than the first quarter 2010.

Figure 16
Nonmetro eldercare establishment growth by type of establishment, 2010–23



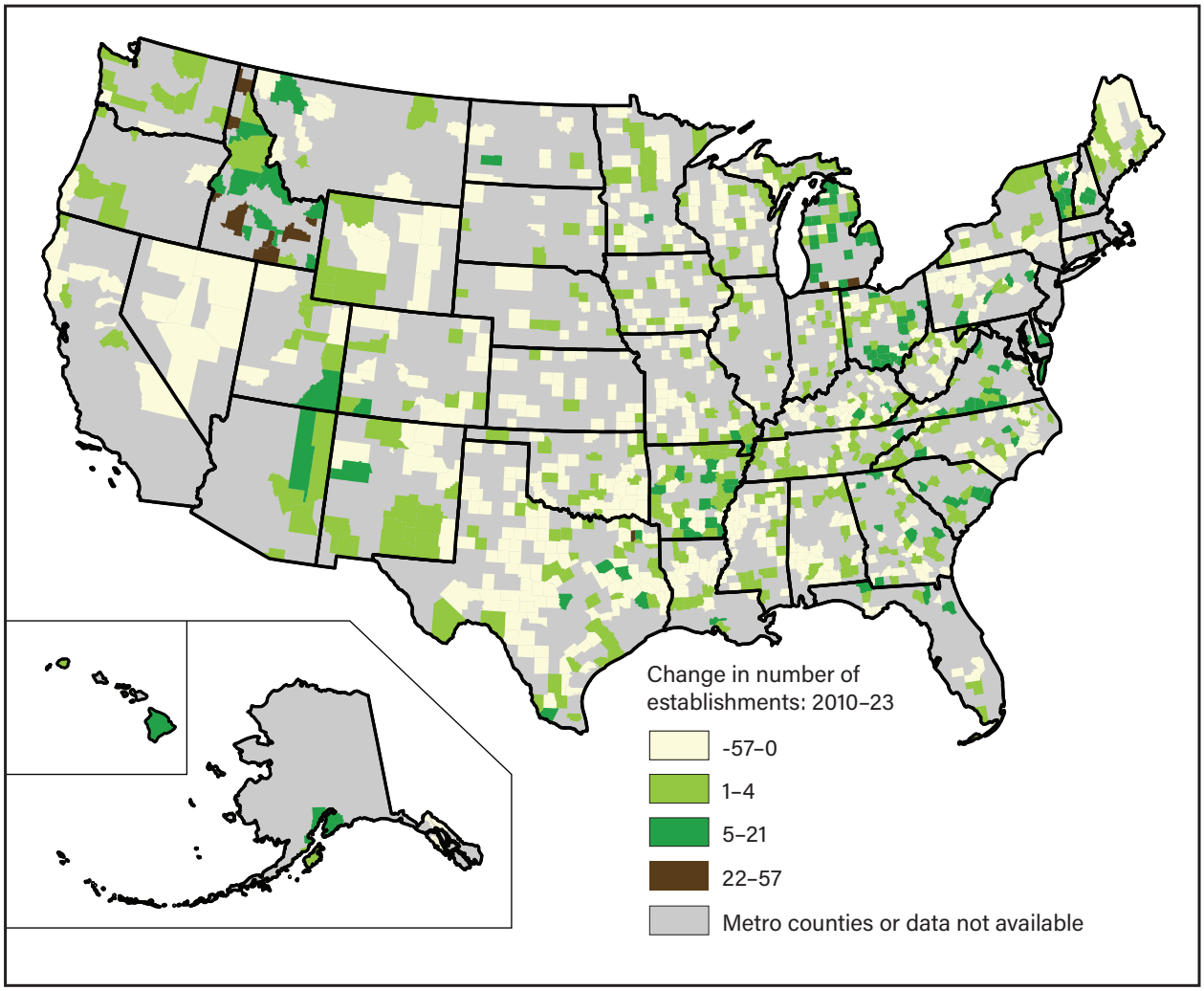
Note: All values represent the number of establishments as a percentage of 2010 levels. Establishment totals are from first quarter 2010 through first quarter 2023. North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) codes 6216 (home health care services), 6231 (nursing care facilities, skilled nursing), and 6233 (continuing care, assisted living facilities) were utilized to calculate eldercare establishment totals. Metropolitan (metro) and nonmetropolitan (nonmetro) area designations are derived from the U.S. Office of Management and Budget's 2020 Standards of Delineating Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas. Data for Connecticut were classified as counties and not planning regions.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages, 2010 through 2023.

6 NAICS code 6216 (home health care services) also includes services that relate to nonelderly populations. According to the industry description, "This industry comprises establishments primarily engaged in providing skilled nursing services in the home, along with a range of the following: personal care services; homemaker and companion services; physical therapy; medical social services; medications; medical equipment and supplies; counseling; 24-hour home care; occupation and vocational therapy; dietary and nutritional services; speech therapy; audiology; and high-tech care, such as intravenous therapy." However, the predominant users of home healthcare services tend to be the elderly, as data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Post-Acute and Long-Term Care Study state that 89.7 percent of home health agency patients are aged 65 and over.

The growth in home healthcare services did not occur uniformly across the rural United States between 2010 and 2023. In the Midwest, Michigan and Ohio primarily experienced growth, with larger increases in home healthcare facilities in northern Michigan and southern Ohio. Home healthcare growth in the Southern and Western United States was clustered among Arkansas, Arizona, New Mexico, Washington, and Idaho. Large parts of Texas as well as the Central Plains States of Oklahoma, Missouri, and Kansas saw an overall decrease in home healthcare establishments (figure 17).

Figure 17
Change in home healthcare establishments for nonmetro counties, 2010–23



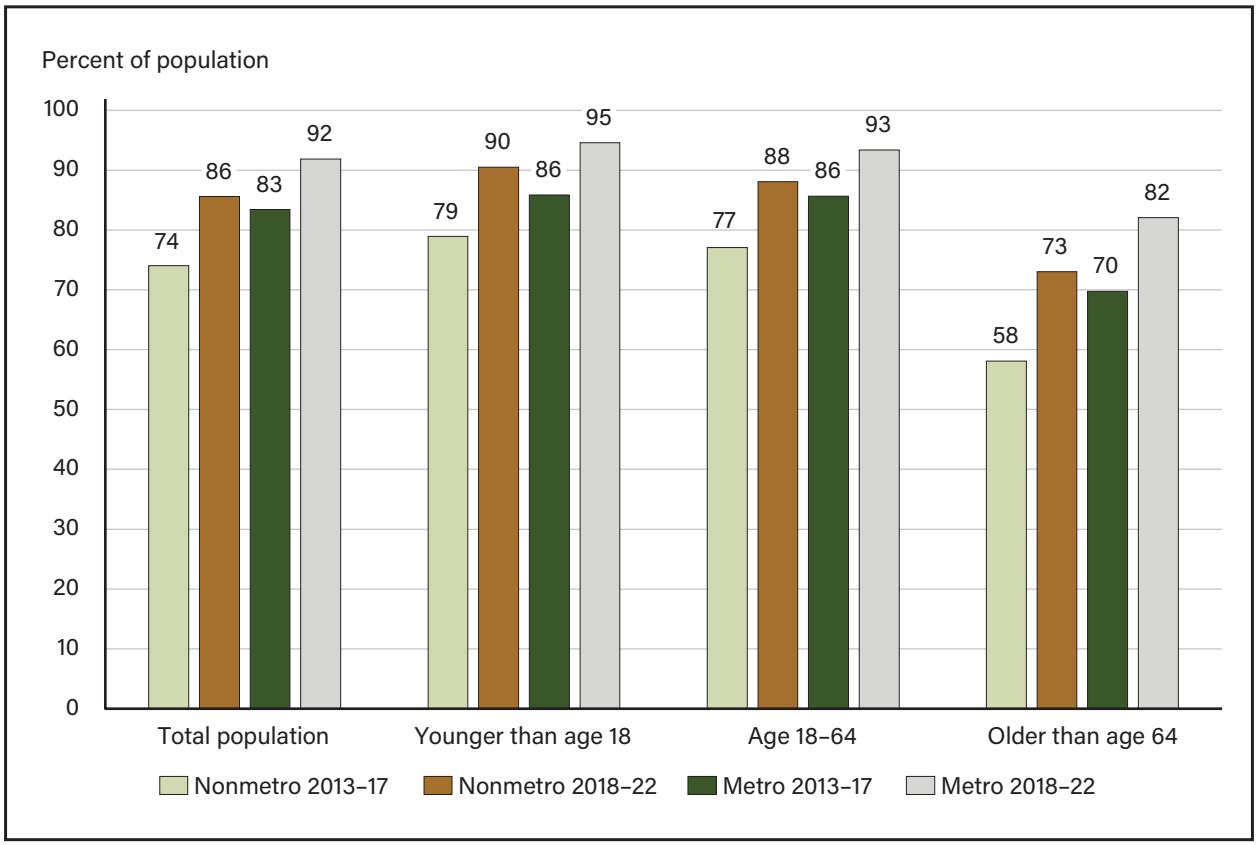
Note: Changes are in the number of home healthcare establishments from first quarter 2010 to first quarter 2023. North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) code 6216 (home health care services) was utilized to calculate home healthcare establishment totals. Metropolitan (metro) and nonmetropolitan (nonmetro) area designations are derived from the U.S. Office of Management and Budget's 2020 Standards of Delineating Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas. Nonmetropolitan counties were excluded if data were missing from first quarter 2010 or first quarter 2023. Data for Connecticut were classified as counties and not planning regions.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages, 2010 and 2023.

Broadband Use Has Increased Across Age Groups in Both Nonmetro and Metro Areas

Rural residents have lower broadband adoption rates than urban residents, though the adoption rate in rural areas is catching up. Across all age groups, the share of the population with a broadband subscription was lower in nonmetro areas than in metro areas in 2013–17 and 2018–22 but increased between those periods to a greater extent in nonmetro areas (figure 18). For example, the share of the nonmetro population with a broadband subscription grew by 12 percentage points (from 74 to 86 percent) between 2013–17 and 2018–22, while the share of the metro population with a broadband subscription grew by 9 percentage points (from 83 to 92 percent). The same qualitative comparison between broadband subscription rates in nonmetro and metro areas was true for all age groups. Broadband subscription rates were similar for children under age 18 and adults aged 18 to 64 but lowest for adults aged 65 and over. The fact that a larger share of the nonmetro than the metro population was aged 65 and over contributed to a lower overall broadband adoption rate in nonmetro areas.

Figure 18
Percent of population in a household with a computer and broadband subscription, by age and metro status, 2013–17 and 2018–22



Note: Broadband subscription refers to a subscription to internet service faster than dial-up, including cable, fiber optic, digital subscriber line (DSL), cellular data plan, satellite, fixed wireless, or other nondial-up types. Metro and nonmetro status is based on the 2023 classification of metropolitan counties by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB).

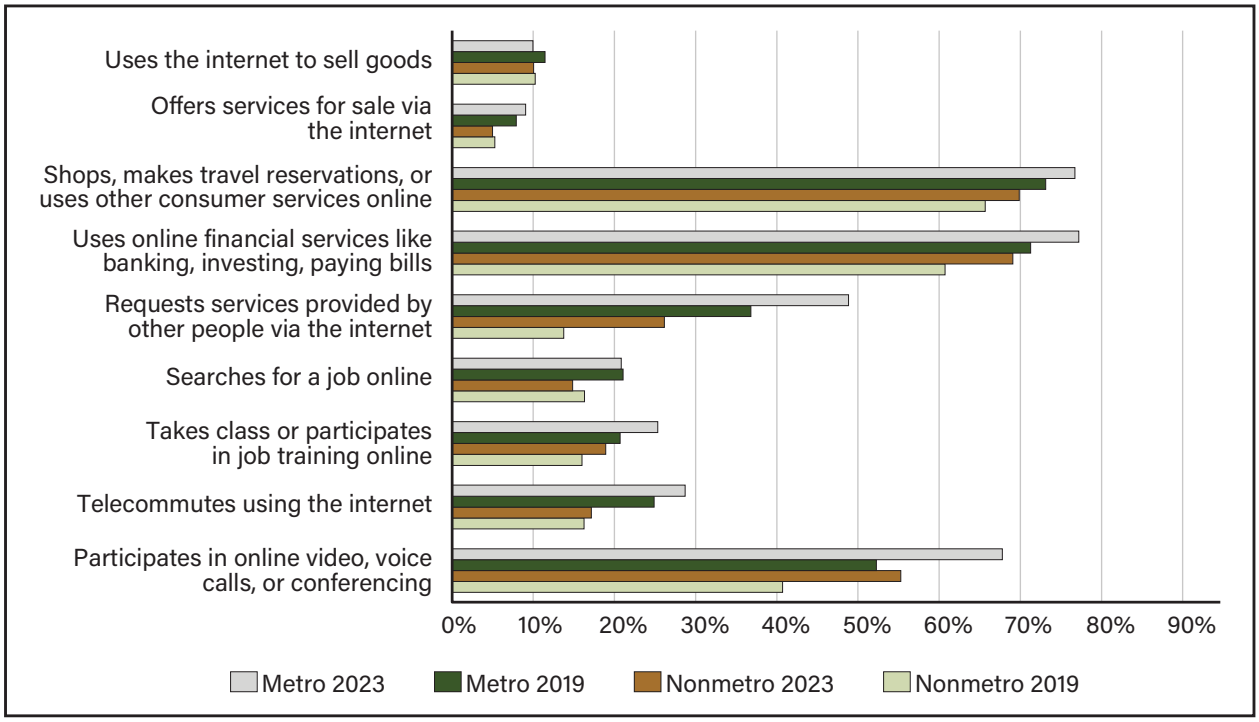
Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, American Community Survey, and the metropolitan classification of counties by OMB, 2023.

Broadband Use for Economic Purposes Has Increased Since 2019 in Both Nonmetro and Metro Areas

People use the internet for many purposes, including social or entertainment uses such as accessing social media or streaming music or films, and for economic purposes, such as buying or selling goods or services, searching for a job, getting job training, telecommuting, or participating in online video conferences. Among the most common economic uses of the internet are accessing online financial services, shopping, making travel reservations, or other consumer services. Almost all the economic uses are more common in metro than in nonmetro areas, and most of these uses increased after the onset of COVID-19 in both nonmetro and metro areas. The most rapidly growing internet use between 2019 and 2023 in nonmetro and metro areas was participation in online video or voice calls or conferencing. In nonmetro areas, this use increased from 41 percent to 55 percent of internet users from November 2019 to November 2023, while in metro areas it increased from 52 percent to 68 percent of internet users (figure 19).

Broadband is also used for telemedicine (e.g., conducting an appointment with a doctor, nurse, or other health professional by video or by phone). The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 expanded the use of telemedicine rapidly, with telemedicine use by office-based physicians increasing from 15 percent of physicians in 2019 to 87 percent in 2021 (National Center for Health Statistics, 2024). According to the National Center for Health Statistics, 37 percent of U.S. adults (ages 18 and older) had used telemedicine in the previous 12 months in 2021, while the percentage declined to 30 percent in 2022. In 2021, telemedicine use was more common among older people, and in both 2021 and 2022, telemedicine was less common in rural areas.

Figure 19
Economic uses of the internet by people ages 15 and over who have internet service in metro and nonmetro areas, November 2019 and November 2023



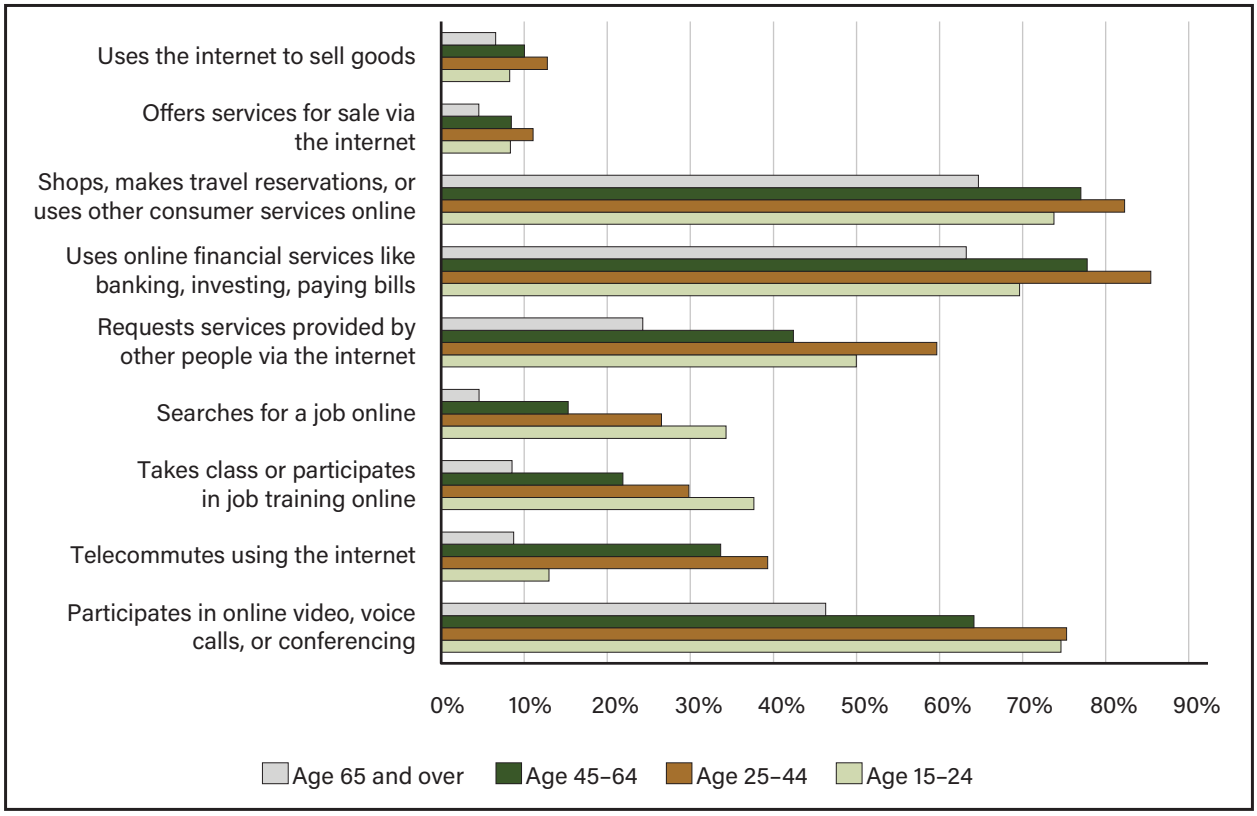
Note: Metro and nonmetro areas are as defined by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget during the reference year. Percentages are of the population ages 15 and older who used the internet in the reference year (214 million people in 2019, 231 million people in 2023).

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Department of Commerce, National Telecommunications and Information Administration, November 2019 and November 2023.

Most Broadband Economic Uses Are More Common Among Younger People

Internet uses vary across people of different ages. All economic uses of the internet are least common among people aged 65 and over. Economic uses are generally most common among adults aged 25–44, except searching for a job online, taking a class, or participating in job training online, which are most common among ages 15–24 (figure 20).

Figure 20
Economic uses of the internet by people ages 15 and over who have internet service by age group, November 2023



Note: Percentages are of the population ages 15 and older who used the internet in the reference year (214 million people in 2019, 231 million people in 2023).

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Department of Commerce, National Telecommunications and Information Administration, 2023.

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