FINDINGS

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New York City is a world apart from Hickory, NC, even though both are officially metropolitan (metro) areas. And nonmetropolitan (nonmetro) counties such as Washington County, MS, with a city of 41,000 people (Greenville) and densely settled countryside, differ greatly from sparsely settled Great Plains counties without an urban center and no more than several thousand residents each. Frequently though, researchers compare only metro versus nonmetro totals, either for brevity or because the data are only available as a dichotomy. However, counties are likely to vary systematically in their trends and characteristics by population size and—if nonmetro—by their amount of urbanization and whether they adjoin a metro area. To address this diversity, ERS developed the *Rural-Urban Continuum Code* to classify counties along a residential scale.

This nine-interval code allows a researcher to look at metro counties grouped by the population size of their metro area, and nonmetro counties by their amount of urbanization, if any. Nonmetro counties are also cross-classified by whether or not they are adjacent to a metro central county, on the premise that adjacent counties will typically show characteristics somewhat different from nonadjacent counties due to easier access to metro facilities and employment.

The Rural-Urban Continuum Code is used here to illustrate the percentage of people who were age 65 or older in 2000. The lowest incidence (11.4 percent) was found in metro areas of 1 million or more population. One key reason for this is that the largest metro areas are major gateways for immigrants who are disproportionately young adults or young families with children. Their addition to the population base thus reduces the share of older people.

Nonmetro Counties Vary by Urban Size and Metro Proximity

In contrast, 17.7 percent of residents were age 65 years or older in nonmetro counties without an urban population and not adjacent to a metro area. Many of the counties in this group are farming areas that have long experienced high outmigration of young adults and declining or near stationary population with little infusion of immigrants. In such rural areas, social issues concerning older people are pertinent to a greater share of the population than is true in larger communities.

Between these two extremes, the percentage of people 65 and older generally rises with each step down

The more rural and remote the county, the larger the percentage of older people

Percent of population age 65 and older

11.4	12.7	12.8	14.6	13.4	14.9	15.5	16.4	17.7
1 million+ population	250,000 to 999,999	Less than 250,000	Adjacent	Not adj.	Adjacent	Not adj.	Adjacent	Not adj.
			20,000+ urban population		2,500 -19,999 urban population		Completely rural	
Metro areas			**Nonmetro areas**					
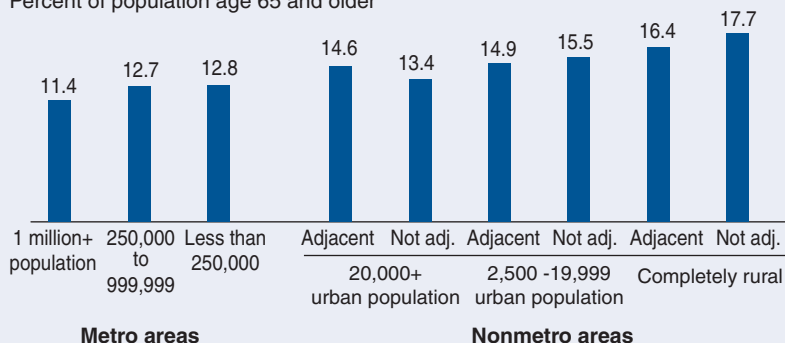
Source: Calculated by ERS from 2000 Census of Population data, U.S. Census Bureau.

the residential scale, with the exception of the category consisting of nonmetro counties that have 20,000 or more urban residents and are not adjacent to a metro area. Although most social and economic variables have at least one exception to a regular progression of increased or decreased values along the continuum scale, they usually have a substantial degree of overall association with the code categories. And that has made the Rural-Urban Continuum code useful in a variety of research. ᗯ

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This finding is drawn from . . .
The County Typology page of the ERS Briefing Room on Measuring Rurality: www.ers.usda.gov/briefing/rurality/typology/

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