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County Typology Team

How can policymakers help attract residents to rural areas that have rapidly declining populations? What is the relationship between high poverty rates and population density or proximity to urban areas? Is the workforce in some remote rural areas less educated because teens are dropping out of school or because the more highly educated are leaving for better opportunities elsewhere? The analytical foundation for answering these questions is the ERS County Typology (www.ers.usda.gov/publications/briefing/rurality/typology/).

Led by Linda Ghelfi, the County Typology Team unites experts from several social science backgrounds—economics, sociology, demography, geography—to design a classification scheme that is adaptable to a wide variety of analyses. The typology includes such indicators as population size and nearness to metro centers, dominant industry, and whether a county is persistently poor or a retirement destination. The synthesis and study of all these traits helps policymakers tailor rural development programs and initiatives so that the right funds go to the right places. For example, the typology will be useful in the administration of the new Department of Health and Human Services Frontier Communities Program authorized in the last Congress to provide health assistance to needy rural areas.

The team recently redesigned the typology to better reflect current conditions. Updated with data from the 2000 Census and new industry data from the Bureau of Economic Analysis, the typology also reflects the new metropolitan, micropolitan, and noncore county definitions developed by the Office of Management and Budget in June 2003.

"Times change as technology improves and preferences morph" says Ghelfi. "I like to think of our new typology as keeping pace with shifting rural conditions, with continued emphasis on traits that may merit public intervention."

County Typology Team Members: (l to r) Robert Gibbs, Timothy Parker, Dean Jolliffe, Calvin Beale, Richard Reeder, Linda Ghelfi, William Kandel, David McGranahan, James Mikesell, and John Cromartie.