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Using the 2003 Urban Influence Codes To Understand Rural America

County-level data analysis adds depth to research on rural America. The size of the largest city or town in a county determines the variety of goods and services available and the adequacy of the labor supply to meet business needs. Proximity to larger economies also has a significant effect on county development, as easy access to larger centers of information, trade, health care, and finance may connect the county to national and international marketplaces. These basic concepts underpin ERS's new 2003 *urban influence codes*, which were developed to help researchers and policymakers understand geographic differences in economic opportunities at the county level. The importance of city size and adjacency to larger places is reflected in various county-level measures, such as population change, educational attainment, managerial/professional employment, and earnings.

ERS's 2003 *urban influence codes* divide counties, county equivalents, and independent cities in the United States into 12 groups—2 metropolitan (metro) and 10 nonmetropolitan (nonmetro) (see Behind the Data, page 47). Metro counties are either large (those with populations of 1 million or more) or small (those with less than a million residents). Nonmetro counties are first classified as either micropolitan (with an urban core of at least 10,000 residents) or noncore (without an urban core that large). The micropolitan (micro) counties are further classified by adjacency to a large metro area, a small metro area, or no metro area. The noncore counties are further classified by adjacency to metro or micro areas and by whether or not they have a town of at least 2,500 residents. The 2003 *urban influence codes* are based on the June 2003 Office of Management and Budget (OMB) definitions of metro and nonmetro areas.



