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## Rural College Graduates Make a Comeback

The movement of better educated adults from rural areas to urban areas has a longstanding history in America. Data from the 2000 Census, however, show a departure from this trend, as rural areas held their own in the 1990s by attracting and keeping college graduates to work and raise families. In the 1980s, the number of college graduates grew about two-thirds faster in America's central cities and suburbs than in rural areas, but in the 1990s, rural and urban counties enjoyed similar rates of increase.

At the same time that rural America experienced robust growth in college graduates, the number of rural high school dropouts fell. As recently as 1980, there



Photo by John Oubre, Southern University

were six high school dropouts for every two college graduates in rural areas; by 2000, the ratio had improved to three to two. At the current rate of change, college-educated adults will outnumber high school dropouts in rural areas within a decade, and may reorient widespread perceptions about workforce skill levels in rural versus urban areas.

Can we soon expect a plethora of college graduates in every corner of rural America? No, the recent turnaround—the substantial growth in the college-educated population—was not evenly distributed across rural areas. In high-poverty areas in the rural South and Southwest, low-wage resource-based and manufacturing economies limit the kind of high-skill job growth that attracts college graduates. The rural Mountain West, on the other hand, experienced a 50-percent gain in college

graduates, in large part because graduates' greater income and wealth and wider job market networks enable them to settle more easily in highly desirable areas, such as those rich in natural amenities.

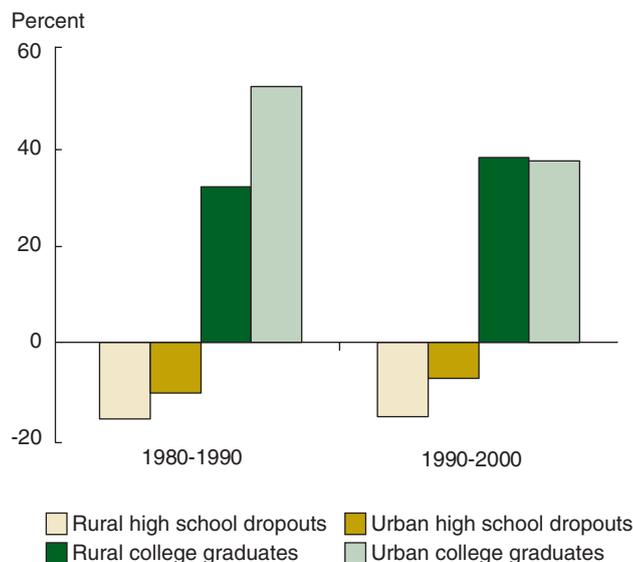
It is probably too soon to tell whether the rapid increase in rural college graduates in the 1990s is the beginning of a long-term narrowing of the rural-urban gap in human resources. Other ERS research found that rural population growth, particularly from college graduates, was much higher during the first half of the 1990s. And, many rural areas will continue to fall short in attracting highly educated workers. The recent improvement in rural educational attainment, nonetheless, is good news in an economy increasingly geared toward high-skill production. *W*

**Robert Gibbs**, [rgibbs@ers.usda.gov](mailto:rgibbs@ers.usda.gov)

### For more information . . .

The ERS Briefing Room on Rural Labor and Education: [www.ers.usda.gov/briefing/laborandeducation/ruraleducation](http://www.ers.usda.gov/briefing/laborandeducation/ruraleducation)

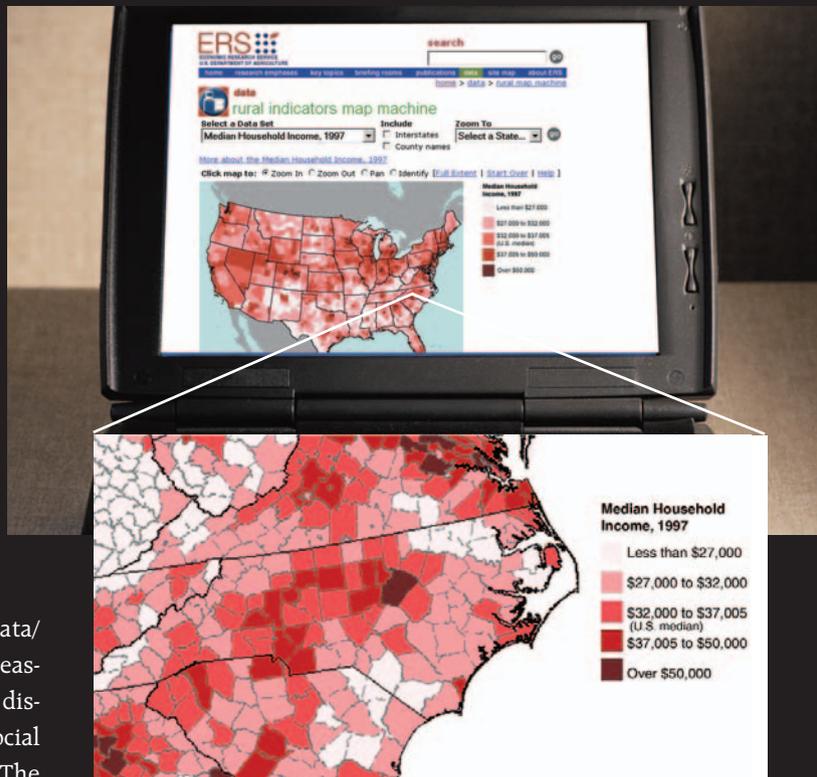
### Change in the number of high school dropouts and college graduates



## Exploring the Diversity of Rural America Through Interactive Mapping

Some rural areas depend on employment in farming and mining. Many of these communities face declining job opportunities and population loss. In contrast, other rural areas, particularly those rich in natural amenities, such as mountains and shoreline, have experienced positive economic transformation and rapid population growth. The Rural Indicators Map Machine, an Internet-based mapping program on the ERS website (available at [www.ers.usda.gov/data/ruralmapmachine](http://www.ers.usda.gov/data/ruralmapmachine)), makes it easier to visualize the geographic distribution of economic and social conditions across America. The program's graphic, user-friendly format enables one to map and explore such trends as rising Hispanic populations and increasing income disparities at the national, State, and county levels.

Maps generated through the program reveal overall population change, population change by race and ethnicity, unemployment rates, and median household incomes at user-specified geographic levels. Users can examine the distribution of these indicators across a variety of ERS classification schemes that categorize U.S. counties by size, degree of urbanization, and natural amenities, and rural counties by their primary economic activity. For example, a user interested in population change in farming-dependent counties can select the county typology codes data set, zoom in to the State or county to identify farming-dependent counties, and then select population change, 1990-2000. Each indicator's median value and range can be displayed on request. These values and ranges can be stacked to make comparisons with other mapped areas.



Unlike pre-generated "static" map images, this program allows users to examine data, get information about the features on the map, move to different geographic levels, and change data layers at their own pace. For example, a user interested in income variability in North Carolina can select North Carolina, zoom in to a rural county such as Halifax County, select the median household income dataset, and compare the income distribution of Halifax County to other North Carolina counties and to the State as a

whole. The program also displays for each indicator tabular data that can be downloaded into a text file for further analysis.

As more data are added to the program, its capabilities will expand. Future updates to the Rural Indicators Map Machine will enable users to map areas by high school and college completion rates, average commuting times to work, and other demographic variables. Additional features will give users more flexibility in generating maps and charts, along with the ability to download data in Microsoft Excel files.  $\forall$

**Timothy S. Parker**, [tparker@ers.usda.gov](mailto:tparker@ers.usda.gov)

**For more information** on rural America, visit: [www.ers.usda.gov/Emphases/Rural](http://www.ers.usda.gov/Emphases/Rural)