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Investments in Rural Education Can Mean Higher Incomes, But In The Cities

by Thomas Carlin and Peggy Ross

There is a strong, positive association between years of formal education and earnings. In metro areas in 1986, for example, the earnings of household heads with some college training was two-thirds more than the earnings of high school graduates. Likewise, household heads graduating from high school had earnings over 20 percent above those who did not graduate from high school. Similar relationships exist in nonmetro areas. However, the difference in earnings between high school and college graduates is less.

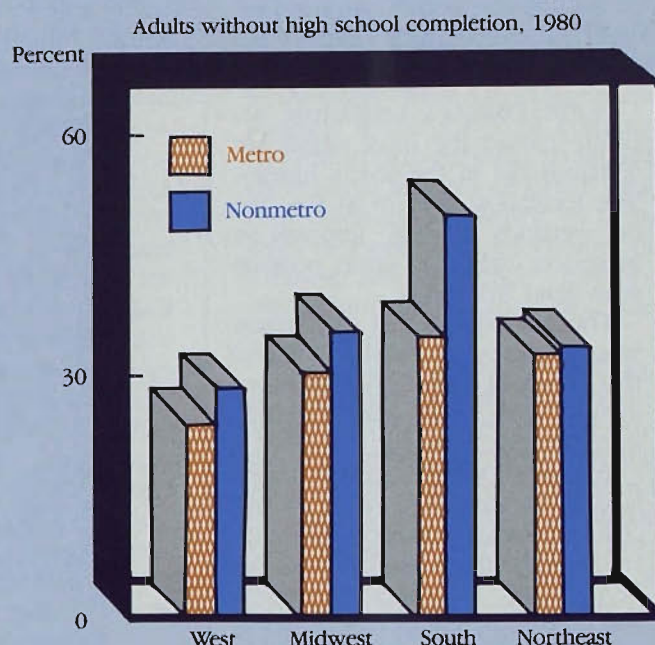
The Challenge: Educate to Leave Rural America

Investments in education are critical for future well-being of rural children if they are to fully participate in our economy—in either rural or urban America. During the 1960s and early 1970s the manufacturing sector led job expansion in many rural communities. Farming also prospered during the 1970s. But U.S. supremacy in manufacturing and agriculture has come to an end. Industries that dominate many local rural economies are facing stiff foreign competition.

Consequently, many rural communities are again facing the problem of outmigration of young people much as they did in the 1950s. Thus, local investments in education will not be captured in the local workforce. Income streams facilitated by improvements of rural elementary and high school education will be realized in urban America and not in rural America. Still, education is critical in helping rural children access urban high tech positions. In the face of economic difficulties, rural America is challenged to maintain and improve the quality of local education.

Thomas Carlin is an agricultural economist and Peggy Ross is a sociologist, in the Economic Research Service, USDA.

Many Adults Are Not High School Graduates

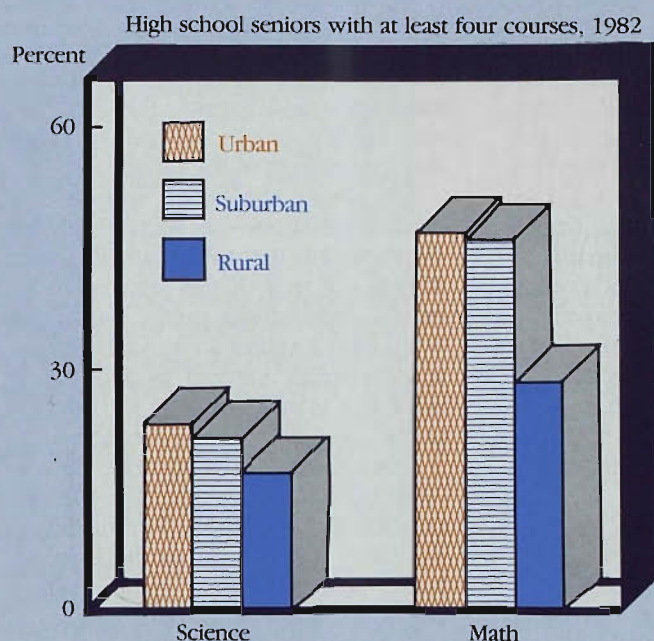


Education In Rural America Lags

Rural people (as a group) have historically not been as well educated as their city cousins. In 1960, only 35 percent of rural (nonmetro) adults at least 25 years old had completed high school. In urban (metro) areas the high school graduate percentage was 44 percent. By 1980, 60 percent of rural people were high school graduates. In urban areas it was 69 percent. Dramatic progress occurred in the 1960s and the 1970s. However, rural areas still have smaller proportions of high school and college graduates than do urban areas.

Educational attainment varies by region. The rural south has the lowest levels. The urban west has the highest. Educational attainment also varies by race. For example, as recently as 1986, only 42 percent of nonmetro blacks at least 26 years old had completed high school, compared to 64 percent of nonmetro whites.

Rural Areas Lag in Sciences and Math

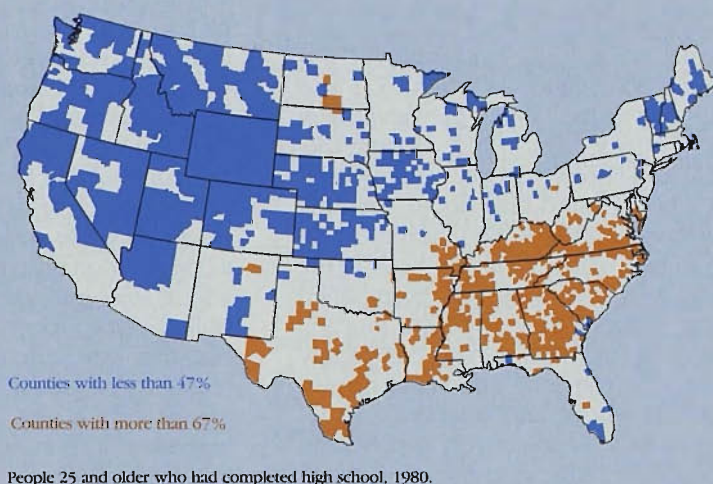


Lag Greatest in Math

Good indicators of the quality of education are not available in either urban or rural areas. However, some numbers indicate that the quality of education in rural areas is sometimes less than the quality of education available in urban schools. For example, substantially fewer rural high school seniors have taken at least 4 science or math courses in high school compared to seniors from urban school systems.

We arrayed the nonmetro counties from high to low on the basis of the proportion of the population (at least 25 years old) that were high school graduates. The lowest percentage was 25 percent. Twenty percent, 489, of the counties had percentages of high school graduates of less than 47 percent. These counties are shown in red. They are almost exclusively in the South. Many have economies dominated by manufacturing and mining, persistent poverty, and many, though not all, have relatively large minority populations. These factors are all associated with lower levels of educational attainment.

Regions Differ In Education



Lowest in South, Highest in West

The blue counties represent the 489 counties with the highest percent of high school graduates. In these counties, the proportion of the adult high school graduates was as high as 95 but also as low as 68. These counties are concentrated in the West with a few scattered in the Midwest and Northeast. Included are areas whose economies are dominated by farming. Counties with economies dominated by slow growing or declining industries, such as farming, face potential population outmigration and will have difficulty maintaining quality education services.