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Population Change in the Midwest

Nonmetro Population Growth Lags Metro Increase

Willis **Goudy**

The Midwest posted population growth in both its nonmetro and metro areas from 1990 to 2000, but nonmetro areas with larger cities and closer to metro centers were more likely to gain residents than were completely rural counties. Nonmetro counties closer to urban areas were also less likely to lose youth and more likely to gain residents of working age. The Midwest saw a dramatic increase in Hispanic residents from 1990 to 2000, with numbers at least doubling in many nonmetro counties.

The Midwest (Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, Wisconsin) has strong rural traditions, many of which are reflected in small towns, agriculture, and related processing and manufacturing industries. As the structure of agriculture has evolved, so have other industries, and this has affected rural population trends in the Midwest.

Changes in agriculture, including the consolidation of production onto larger farms and vertical integration through production contracts, have been dramatic. Such factors draw farm operators beyond the local community to take advantage of better prices and lower costs in regional trade centers (Barkema and Drabenstott). That can leave farm-dependent counties without sufficient employment opportunities to hold current residents or attract others, thus creating problems for small towns and their businesses (Rathge and Highman). Those nonmetro counties with major value-added enterprises related to agriculture have bucked the population declines noted elsewhere; few such counties exist, however. Thus, the Midwest maintains its image as agricultural heartland, although the agricultural sector alone has been insufficient to retain residents in many of its nonmetro counties.

While manufacturing has grown, it too has failed to stem rural population decline, in part because manufacturing gains have favored areas already experiencing population growth (McGranahan). And while food processing industries continue to blanket the Midwest, their wages are relatively low (Barkema and Drabenstott). In addition, employment in such industries has caused rapid (often migrant) population growth in some rural communities, which has strained county resources and upended demographics.

Initial data from the 2000 census indicate that the Midwest's population gains in the 1990s were eclipsed by other regions, a trend evident throughout much of the 20th century. And nonmetro areas didn't fare as well as metro counties did. Indeed, the less populous and more distant a nonmetro county was from a metro area, the less likely it was to gain residents in the Midwest. This is partly due to the different median ages of residents in metro and nonmetro counties, with the oldest age structure in the most rural counties. Rural areas, generally, lost youths to other areas. Many nonmetro counties in the Midwest gained Hispanic residents in the 1990s, but again numerical increases were much larger in metro counties.

Because the Midwest accounts for much of the U.S. nonmetro population and because many regard it as the Nation's agricultural backbone, trends in these 12 States deserve attention. What is happening there should interest policymakers who deal with such issues as migration to rural communities low in human capital and the use of technology to offset the lack of infrastructure thought to handicap some nonmetro counties (Stauber).

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Photo of Neola, Iowa courtesy, Renea Miller, Iowa State University.

Midwest Population Grows, But at a Slower Rate Than Other Regions

In 2000, the 12 States in the Midwest census region included 64 million residents, or 22.9 percent of the Nation's population. Only the South (35.6 percent) had a greater share of the U.S. total. The West had 22.5 percent and the Northeast 19 percent. The Midwest had contained 34.6 percent of the Nation's population in 1900 and 29.4 percent in 1950, indicating a century-long decline.

The Midwest counted 4.7 million more residents in 2000 than in 1990, representing 14.4 percent of the national population increase. In the 1990s, the South had 45.2 percent and the West 31.8 percent of the Nation's growth; only the Northeast (8.5 percent) reported a smaller share of the increase than the Midwest.

Nonmetro Population Change Varies by Size of County and Distance From Metro Area

The population of the nonmetro Midwest increased by more than 900,000 between the 1990 and 2000 censuses (table 1). However, the percentage of residents living in nonmetro areas slipped from 26.8 percent in 1990 to 26.2 percent in 2000. This paralleled the national shift downward from 20.5 to 20.0 percent. The West (20.7 percent) and South (11.7

Table 1

Population change in the Midwest, 1990-2000

Nonmetro counties not adjacent to metro areas were less likely to gain population

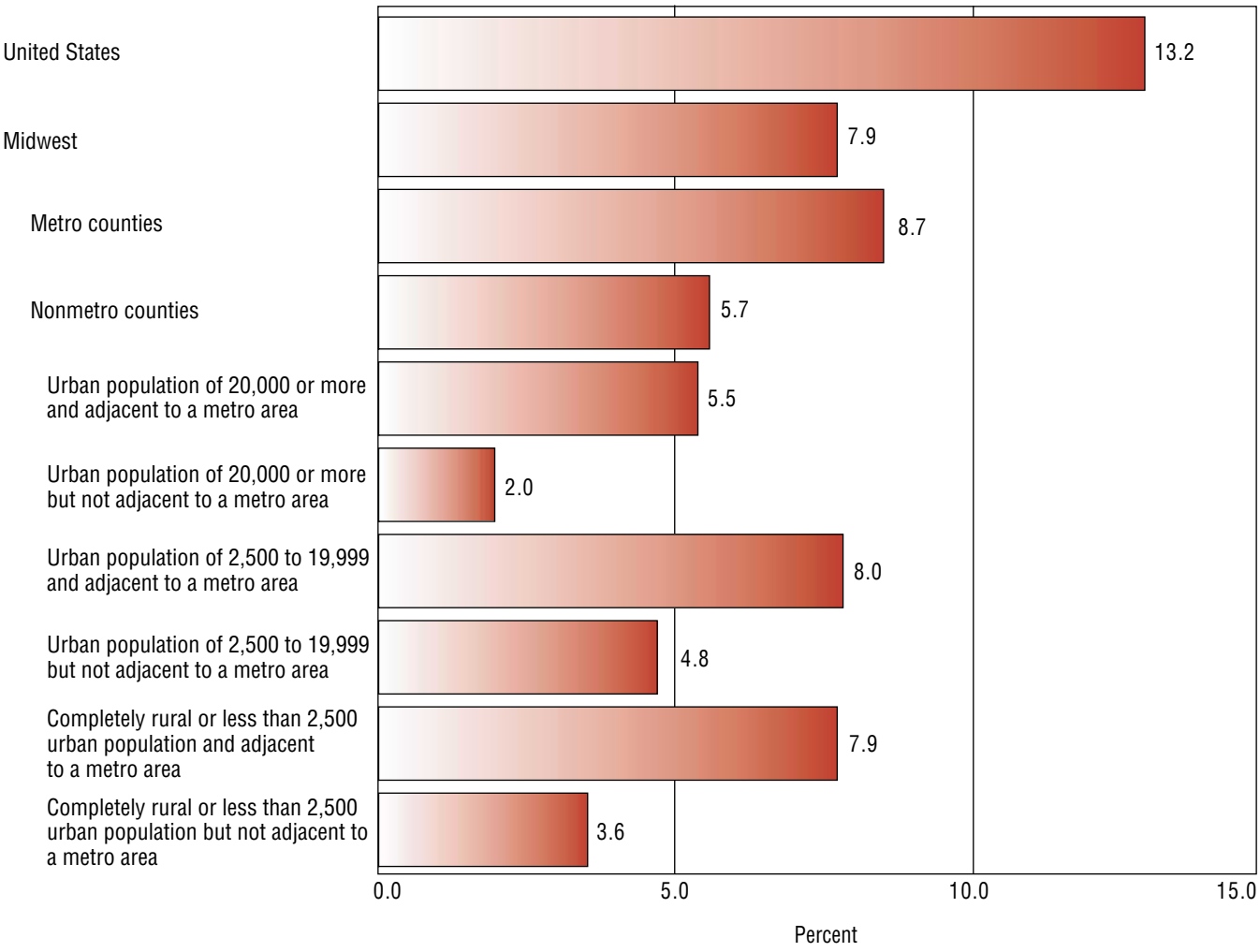
Counties	1990	2000	Change	Number of counties	Number of counties with specified change from 1990 to 2000: Population increase	Age 0-17 increase	Age 18-64 increase	Age 65+ increase
All counties	59,668,632	64,392,776	+4,724,144	1,055	703	498	817	609
Metro counties	43,691,022	47,505,299	+3,814,277	221	196	170	197	198
Nonmetro counties	15,977,610	16,887,477	+909,867	834	507	328	620	411
Urban population of 20,000 or more:								
Adjacent to a metro area	2,711,360	2,860,267	+148,907	42	35	20	39	33
Not adjacent to a metro area	1,530,967	1,562,319	+31,352	34	20	10	25	21
Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999:								
Adjacent to a metro area	5,006,248	5,407,128	+400,880	199	172	110	190	134
Not adjacent to a metro area	4,440,312	4,653,905	+213,593	236	136	78	178	114
Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population:								
Adjacent to a metro area	749,976	809,537	+59,561	68	45	35	53	22
Not adjacent to a metro area	1,538,747	1,594,321	+55,574	255	99	75	135	87

Note: Metro/nonmetro definitions, set after the 1990 census, were applied to the 1990 and 2000 data.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

Figure 1

Population change 1990-2000

Midwest growth lagged that of the Nation and growth in the nonmetro Midwest lagged that in metro areas



Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

percent) had higher percentage gains in nonmetro population than the Midwest (5.7 percent). Still, the share of nonmetro residents out of the total population was higher in the Midwest (26.2 percent) than in any other census region (Northeast, 10.3 percent; South, 24.9 percent; West, 13.9 percent).

The metro population in the Midwest increased more rapidly than did the nonmetro population (fig. 1). Nonmetro counties with urban populations of less than 20,000 and adjacent to a metro county were the only nonmetro areas in which increases approached 8 percent; nonadjacent categories grew especially slowly.

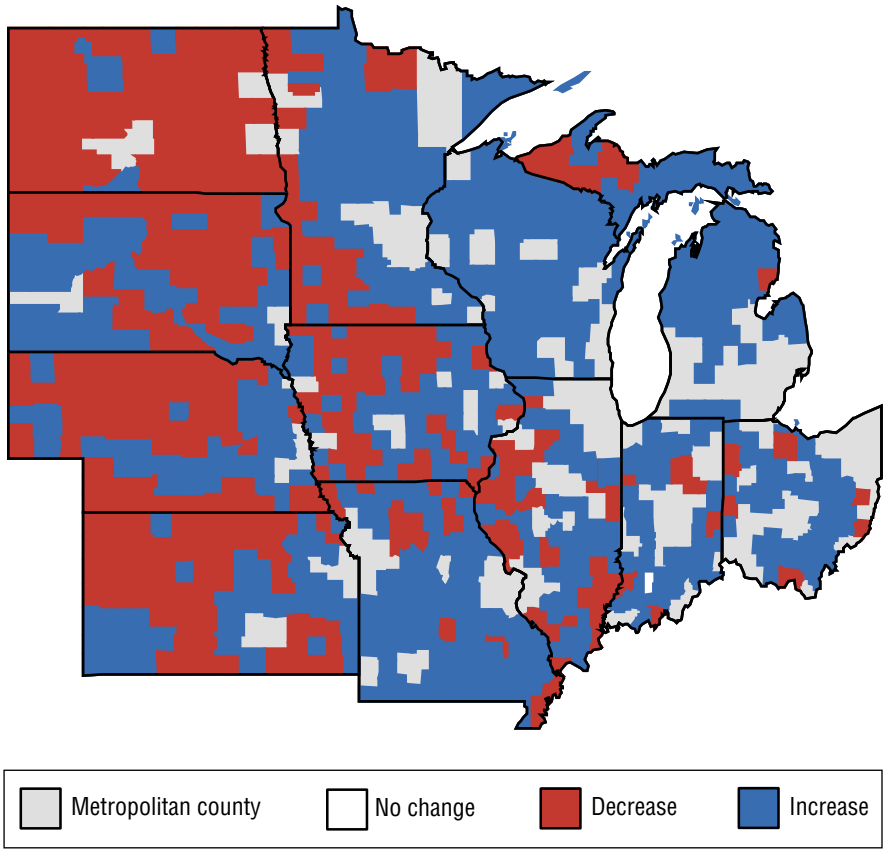
The most rapid growth among midwestern States from 1990 to 2000 was in Minnesota (12.4 percent), although even that increase was less than that of the entire Nation (13.2 percent). North Dakota grew just 0.5 percent in population, the least of any State in the 1990s. While all Midwest States gained metro residents, North Dakota lost nonmetro population (fewer than 23,200 residents), unlike the other 11 States. Nonmetro gains exceeded 100,000 in Indiana, Michigan, Missouri, Ohio, and Wisconsin.

While 61 percent of the 834 nonmetro counties in the Midwest gained residents from 1990 to 2000, 89 percent of its 221 metro counties did so (table 1). In general, nonmetro counties were more likely to gain population in the

Figure 2

Population change, 1990-2000

A majority of nonmetro counties lost population



Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

eastern portion (Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin), where only 53 of the 288 nonmetro counties lost residents in the 1990s. In contrast, 186 of the 295 nonmetro counties in Kansas, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota reported fewer residents in 2000 than in 1990 (fig. 2).

Differences occurred among nonmetro county types as well. Using the rural/urban continuum codes developed and revised by Butler and Beale, nonmetro counties adjacent to metro counties were much less likely to lose population (18.4 percent) than nonadjacent counties (51.4 percent). Size of the largest incorporated place in the county also affected population change. Among nonmetro counties with a place containing at least 2,500 residents, about 7 of every 10 had growth. Among counties in which the largest place had fewer than 2,500 residents, a majority (55.4 percent) lost population from 1990 to 2000. The combination of adjacency and size of largest incorporated place led to relatively great differences in the nonmetro Midwest. For example, 207 of the 241 nonmetro counties with places of at least 2,500 and adjacent to metro counties had higher populations in 2000 than in 1990. But among nonmetro counties with no place of at least 2,500 and not adjacent to a metro county, 156 of the 255 counties lost population (table 1).

Of course, nonmetro counties can be categorized by different criteria. Of the 292 farm-dependent counties[1] in the Midwest, for example, two-thirds (196) had fewer residents in 2000 than in 1990. Among those designated as dependent on manufacturing, however, more than 4 of every 5 (123/149) gained population. Those nonmetro counties in the Midwest that were dependent on services also tended to increase (80 of 123), as did those that were nonspecialized (144 of 181).

Population Continues To Be Older in Nonmetro Than Metro Areas

The average median age in nonmetro counties of the Midwest in 2000 was more than 3 years higher (38.9) than in metro (35.4) counties. While only 2 of the 221 metro counties had medians of 40.0 years or greater, 323 of the 834 nonmetro counties did.

The loss of youth in nonmetro counties has been a long-term concern in the Midwest. That trend continued in the 1990s, with about three-fifths of the nonmetro counties having fewer residents under age 18 in 2000 than in 1990 (fig. 3). Only 13.3 percent of the metro counties noted declines among youth, however. Major influx of youth was much more likely in metro counties, where more than 4 of every 10 reported gains of at least 10 percent among youth from 1990 to 2000. (Increases of 10 percent or more took place in only 1 of every 10 nonmetro counties.) In

[1]Defined by Cook and Mizer as counties in which farming contributed a weighted annual average of 20 percent or more of total labor and proprietor income over the 3 years from 1987 to 1989.

sum, the Midwest's 221 metro counties had over 1 million more residents under the age of 18 in 2000 than 10 years earlier; the corresponding gain among the 834 nonmetro counties was less than 21,000.

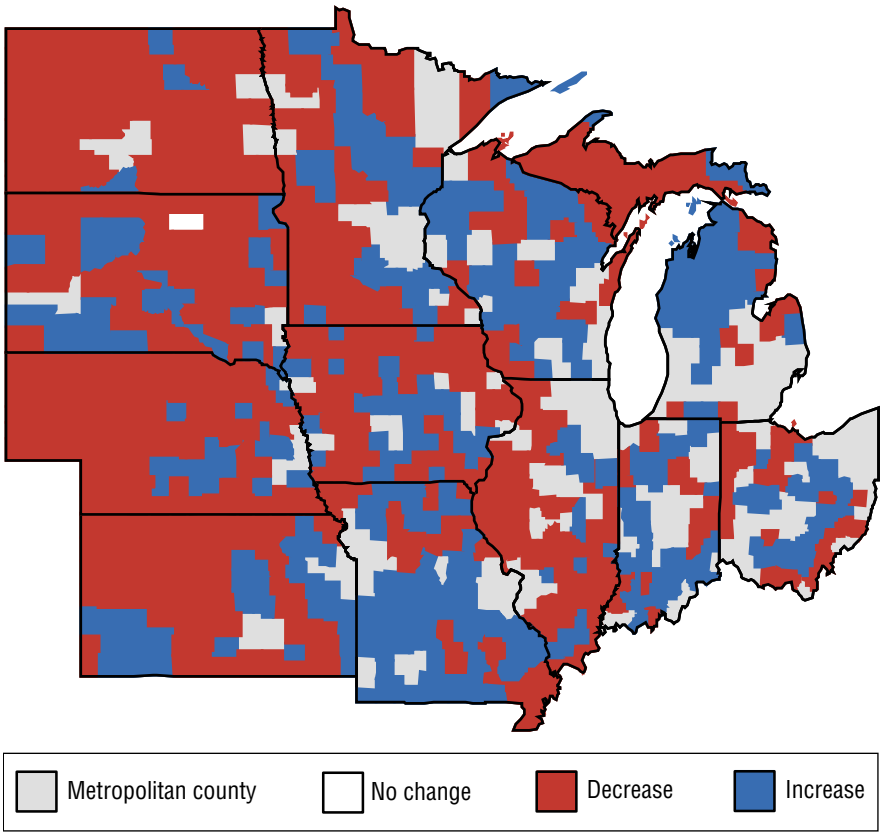
Nonmetro counties adjacent to a metro area or with a larger city (> 2,500 population) were far more likely to gain youth in the 1990s than were nonadjacent (smaller city) counties. Residents under age 18 increased in more than half of the nonmetro counties adjacent to a metro area and with an urban population of at least 2,500. In contrast, such gains occurred in less than a third of the completely rural counties that were not adjacent to a metro area.

At the other end of the age continuum, slightly fewer than half (49.3 percent) of the nonmetro counties noted increases in residents 65 or older from 1990 to 2000 (fig. 4). The total increase in older residents across nonmetro counties in the Midwest was 83,000. Meanwhile, 90 percent of metro counties in the Midwest gained older residents, for a total of 427,000 more in 2000 than in 1990.

Differences between older residents in nonmetro counties were relatively great; for example, 39 counties declined by at least 10 percent while another 278 gained by that amount. Changes among those 65 or older were not as great in many counties as in previous decades, however. That's because the 10-year cohort that aged into the 65-or-older group between 1990 and 2000 was born in the late 1920s and early 1930s; the birth rate dropped substantially during that period, particularly in the initial years of the Great Depression. Thus, there were fewer born into that category than in previous cohorts.

The working age group (18-64) is critical to nonmetro areas because they are most likely to be fully employed, to head families, and to patronize institutions such as local schools, businesses, health-care agencies, and churches. Here the results were encouraging. Three-quarters of the nonmetro counties reported more 18-64 year-olds in 2000 than in 1990 (fig. 5). Those completely rural counties that were not adjacent to a metro center were least likely to gain in this age category. Still, 53 percent of these counties increased their numbers age 18 through 64. Indeed, across all nonmetro counties, there were 806,000 more members of this age group counted in the most recent census than in the previous one. The metro gain of 2.4 million among those 18-64 was much greater.

Figure 3
Change in population age 17 or younger, 1990-2000
Fewer youth lived in a majority of nonmetro counties



Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

Residents of Hispanic Origin Increase in the Midwest

Perhaps no segment of the population changed as rapidly in the Midwest as did residents of Hispanic origin. The increase between 1990 and 2000 was 81 percent, greater than the change in the Nation or in other census regions (table 2). Numerically, however, the gain of nearly 1.4 million

Table 2

Hispanic population by census region, 1990 and 2000

The Midwest had the greatest percentage gain but the lowest numerical gain

Region	1990	2000	Change	
			Number	Percent
Midwest	1,726,509	3,124,532	1,398,023	81.0
Northeast	3,754,389	5,254,087	1,499,698	39.9
South	6,767,021	11,586,696	4,819,675	71.2
West	10,106,140	15,340,503	5,234,363	51.8
United States	22,354,059	35,305,818	12,951,759	57.9

Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

Hispanics in the Midwest was lowest of all regions.

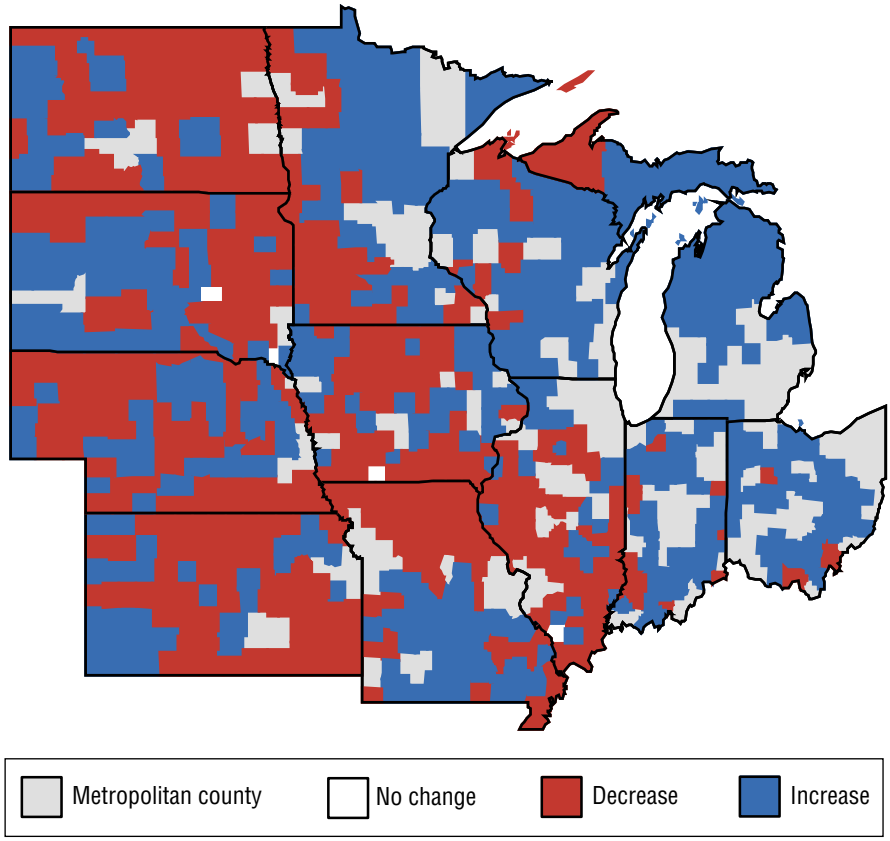
In the Midwest, Hispanic residents more than doubled in 7 of the 12 States (Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Nebraska, South Dakota, Wisconsin) during the 1990s. Percentage gains across nonmetro areas of all but Kansas, Ohio, and South Dakota were greater than those for metro sections. Still, numerical gains among Hispanics were greater in metro than nonmetro areas in all but North Dakota. The differences were relatively great in some States. For example, Illinois counted nearly 610,000 more Hispanics in metro counties in 2000 than it did 10 years earlier; its increase across nonmetro counties was less than 16,100 (table 3). For the entire census region, the absolute increase of Hispanics in metro areas (1,180,955) far outnumbered that in nonmetro locations (217,068).

In 458 of the 834 nonmetro counties, the Hispanic population in 2000 doubled that reported in 1990 (some from a very low base). Indeed, 27 counties reported increases of at least 1,000 percent. When only the 524 nonmetro counties with at least 50 Hispanic residents as of 1990 were examined, nearly half (251) at least doubled their populations by 2000, and 10 increased by more than 1,000 percent (fig. 6). Each of these 10 counties (Cass in Illinois; Cass in Indiana; Buena Vista, Crawford, Marshall, and Sioux in Iowa; Barry and McDonald in Missouri; Colfax and Saline in Nebraska) included one or more major food processing industries. In most instances, relatively young males constituted the first wave of migrants, followed shortly by young females, thus changing the age structure of the local community. Such rapid increases occurred in selected non-

Figure 4

Change in population age 65 or older, 1990-2000

Older residents increased in more than half of the nonmetro counties



Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

Table 3

Hispanic residents of metro and nonmetro counties by State, 1990 and 2000

Numeric gains among Hispanics were greater in the metro than the nonmetro population in each State

State	Metro population					Nonmetro population				
	Number of counties	1990	2000	Change		Number of counties	1990	2000	Change	
				Number	Percent				Number	Percent
Midwest	221	1,534,108	2,715,063	+1,180,955	+77.0	834	192,401	409,469	+217,068	+112.8
Illinois	28	881,657	1,491,405	+609,748	+69.2	74	22,789	38,857	+16,068	+70.5
Indiana	37	85,535	177,615	+92,080	+107.7	55	13,253	36,921	+23,668	+178.6
Iowa	10	19,470	46,862	+27,392	+140.7	89	13,177	35,611	+22,434	+170.3
Kansas	9	50,186	102,236	+52,050	+103.7	96	43,484	86,016	+42,532	+97.8
Michigan	25	182,939	290,367	+107,428	+58.7	58	18,657	33,510	+14,853	+79.6
Minnesota	18	42,450	108,522	+66,072	+155.6	69	11,434	34,860	+23,426	+204.9
Missouri	22	50,421	90,785	+40,364	+80.1	93	11,281	27,807	+16,526	+146.5
Nebraska	6	20,004	49,861	+29,857	+149.3	87	16,965	44,564	+27,599	+162.7
North Dakota	4	2,188	3,509	+1,321	+60.4	49	2,477	4,277	+1,800	+72.7
Ohio	39	115,609	184,176	+68,567	+59.3	49	24,087	32,947	+8,860	+36.8
South Dakota	3	2,448	5,697	+3,249	+132.7	63	2,804	5,206	+2,402	+85.7
Wisconsin	20	81,201	164,028	+82,827	+102.0	52	11,993	28,893	+16,900	+140.9

Note: The metro and nonmetro definitions set in the mid 1990s are used with both the 1990 and 2000 data.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

metro counties in previous decades, with employment opportunities again being the primary cause of the gain among Hispanics.

Population Change and Policy Needs Vary Widely Across the Nonmetro Midwest

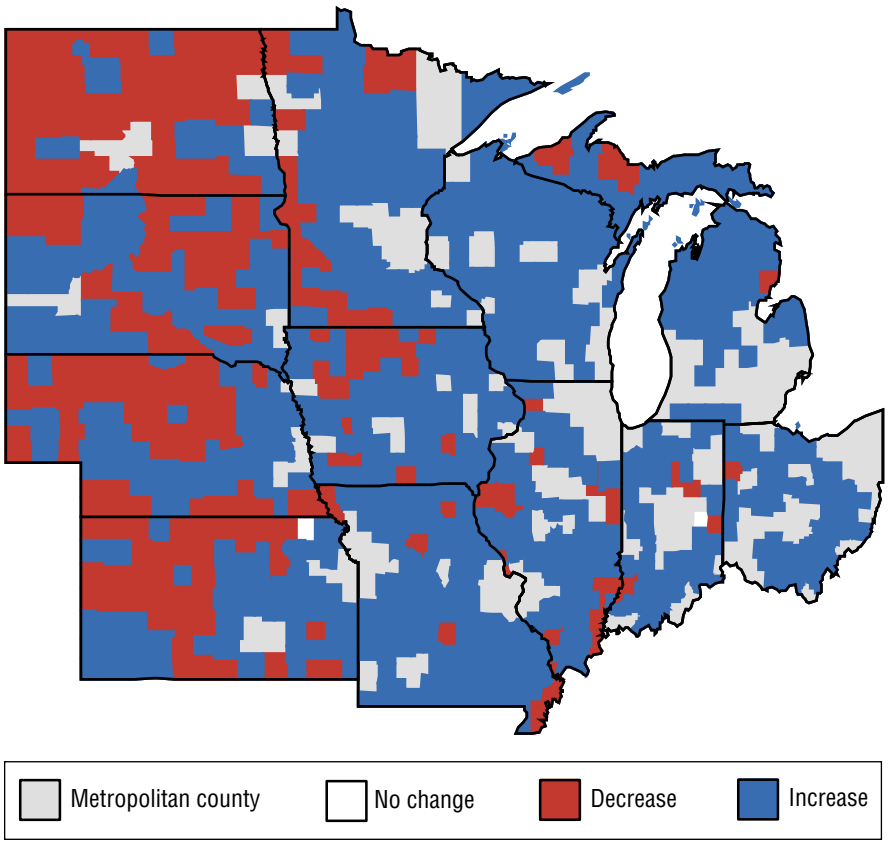
While population has increased in the Midwest as a whole, metro areas have been far more likely to benefit than nonmetro counties. And rural counties with fewer residents in the largest town and more distant from a metro county are particularly at risk for further decline. Many such counties not only lost population from 1990 to 2000, but lost a disproportionate number of youth, which makes it more difficult to reverse population decline in the future. Finding ways to provide services, including education and medical care, to less dense residential settlements will continue to be an important issue.

Many nonmetro counties near metro centers in the Midwest, on the other hand, continue to grow. Indeed, rapid increases occurring in

Figure 5

Change in population age 18 to 64, 1990-2000

Working-age residents increased in most nonmetro counties

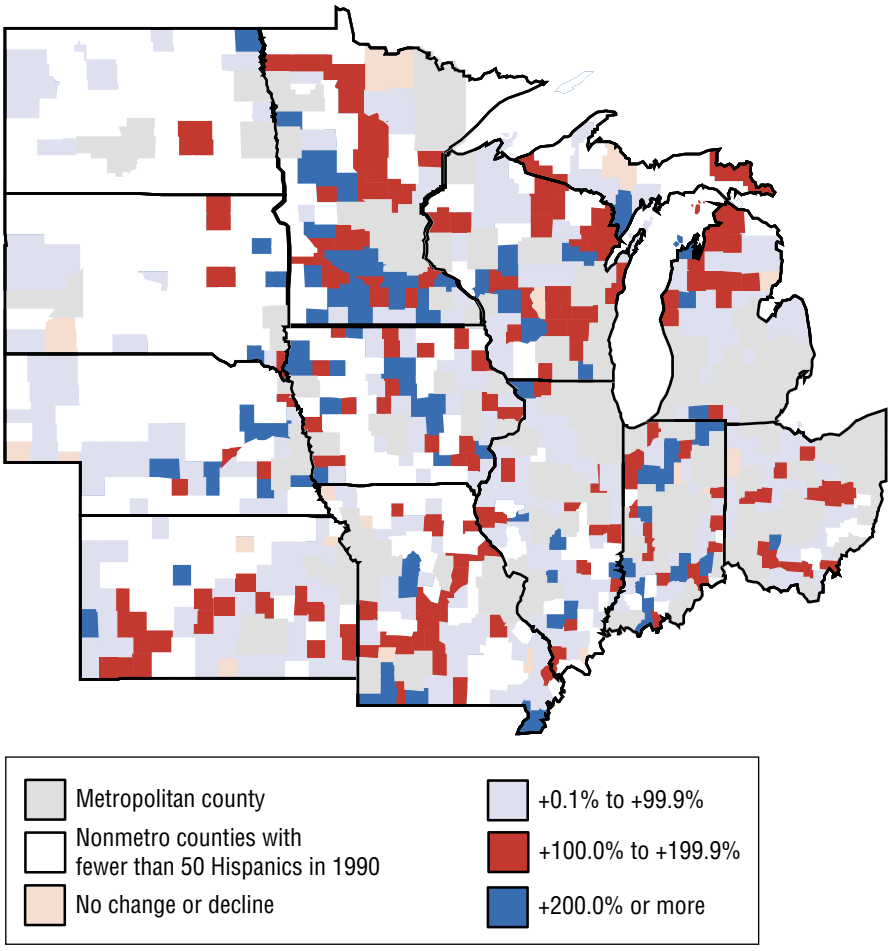


Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

Figure 6

Percent change in Hispanic population, 1990-2000

Hispanic residents in some nonmetro areas more than tripled



Note: Includes only those counties with 50 or more Hispanic residents in 1990.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

several will likely push them into the metro category once metropolitan statistical areas are redesignated, as they are after a census. The needs of these counties vary greatly from those of other nonmetro areas.

In many parts of the Midwest, populations in nonmetro counties did not change greatly in the 1990s. Some have had slow declines or modest growth for decades. This frequently masks major changes occurring within the population, however. Some, for example, have much older populations than previously; others, however, have a share of youth much like that in suburban portions of metro counties. Such differing trends make one rural development policy impractical. Policies must be geared to geographic places as well as economic sectors (Johnson). Not only do metro and nonmetro areas differ, but nonmetro counties vary greatly within each of the 12 midwestern States. Discussions and programs need to address the great variety of situations in rural areas even in the Midwest, a region often characterized as homogeneous. RA

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