



The World's Largest Open Access Agricultural & Applied Economics Digital Library

This document is discoverable and free to researchers across the globe due to the work of AgEcon Search.

Help ensure our sustainability.

Give to AgEcon Search

AgEcon Search

<http://ageconsearch.umn.edu>

aesearch@umn.edu

*Papers downloaded from **AgEcon Search** may be used for non-commercial purposes and personal study only. No other use, including posting to another Internet site, is permitted without permission from the copyright owner (not AgEcon Search), or as allowed under the provisions of Fair Use, U.S. Copyright Act, Title 17 U.S.C.*

No endorsement of AgEcon Search or its fundraising activities by the author(s) of the following work or their employer(s) is intended or implied.

targeted for a development effort. An excellent model for an ongoing local development program is being used by George Morse, at Ohio State University (see references).

Any strategy for economic diversification requires considerable and continuing local effort. No one group can, or should, undertake the task alone. Perhaps local city and county government can serve as a catalyst or coordinator, but many groups and interests should cooperate. Groups that can make important contributions are Chambers of Commerce, downtown development committees, county and regional planning bodies, private industry councils, State government economic development offices, and extension services of agricultural and business colleges.

These findings provide information that can help identify service-oriented businesses that may assist community development and fit a community's particular characteristics. Service-oriented businesses are part of the export base in rural areas. And even though fewer than 30 percent of the firms studied were primarily exporters, their presence ought to convince developers to try to attract more. For in many ways they are even more desirable than manufacturers. **ADP**

For Additional Reading . . .

George Morse. "Retention and Expansion: A Popular Economic Tool." Economic Development Notes, No. 20, Department of Agricultural Economics And Rural Sociology, Ohio State University, Columbus, June 1983.

George Morse. "Starting a Local Retention and Expansion Visitation Program." Cooperative Extension Service, Ohio State University, Columbus.

America's elderly population is expected to double in the next 40 years.

USDA photo

Nina Glasgow
Calvin L. Beale

Rural Elderly in Demographic Perspective

Living conditions of most of the rural elderly are now roughly comparable with those of the urban elderly. The two major differences remaining are in income and health. The proportion of elderly living in poverty is more than half again as great in rural areas as in cities. And, paradoxically, while the rural elderly require more hospitalization and medical care, they have become concentrated in many rural areas poorly equipped to serve their special medical and other needs.

Growth in social security, medicare, and Other Government transfer payments, as well as the development of mass communication and transportation systems, have tended to equalize the living conditions of all older Americans. Despite those equalizing trends, we expect somewhat different and poorer living conditions to remain among older people in rural areas and small towns, for life there is still shaped by the scattered nature of settlement, the small size of communities, and the persistence

of historical urban/rural differences in economy, income, and facilities.

We examine here the general social and economic situation of older rural people and how their conditions do or do not differ from those of older urbanites. Without such comparisons, program developments would likely be based on national averages that do not entirely fit the conditions of older rural and smalltown people. First, to provide necessary background information on the rural elderly, we show their numbers, where they are located geographically, and recent trends in their moving patterns.

Nonmetro residents 65 or more years old numbered 7,425,000, or 13 percent of the 1980 nonmetro population (table 1). In general, the percentage is highest in rural villages of under 2,500 residents (15.4 percent), and lowest in large towns and the open countryside. It is still common for many farm people or other open country dwellers to move into a village or a town after they retire. Older people are a somewhat smaller share of the metro population—less than 11 percent.

Because of regional differences in rural settlement and retirement patterns, the distribution of the rural elderly is different from



Table 1—U.S. population 65 and older

Area	Elderly
Nonmetro	
People	7,425,000
Percent of nonmetro population	13.0
Metro	
People	18,124,000
Percent of metro population	10.7
U.S. total	
People	25,549,000
Percent of U.S. population	11.3

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *General Population Characteristics, U.S. Summary, 1980 Census of Population*, table 43, page 27.

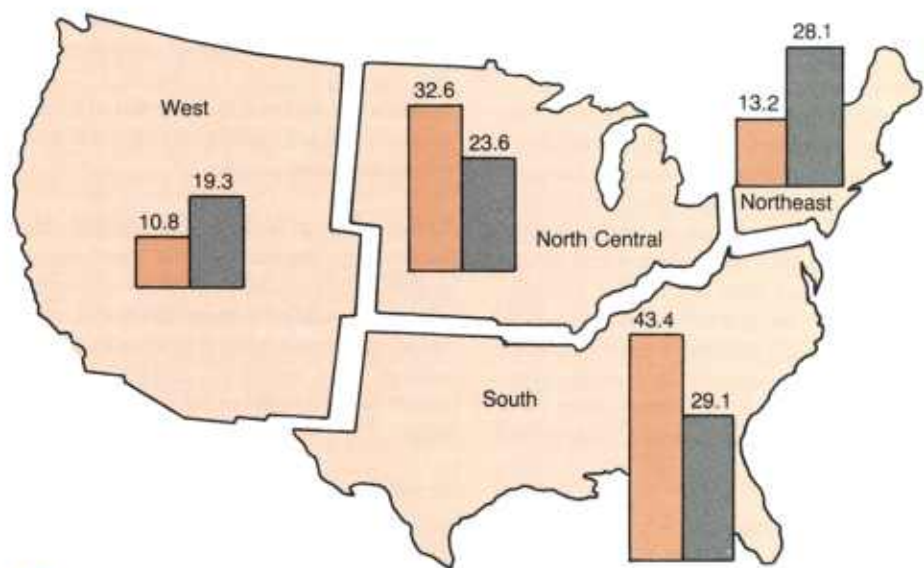
that of the metro elderly. The regional proportion of the older metro population varies rather little—from 19 percent in the West to 29 percent in the South (fig. 1 and table 2). The older nonmetro population is much more concentrated: 43 percent of the Nation's rural elderly live in the South and only 24 percent live in the Northeast and West combined.

The proportions of older people differ widely among different parts of the country. In over 500 rural and smalltown counties, people 65 and over comprise one-sixth or more of the total population, and in 178 of those counties the proportion exceeds one-fifth of the population. These counties are heavily concentrated in the central part of the Nation, from Minnesota and North Dakota south to Texas. In the agricultural areas of this belt, the proportion of elderly is high because many of the young people moved away over the years to seek employment elsewhere, as the number of farms declined. In other places, such as the Ozark Plateau and the Texas Hill Country, the population has become older because retired people moved in. Counties with high percentages of older people are much more common in rural areas than in metro America. Naturally, such areas have a higher need for services for the elderly.

Migration

Many older people moved to rural areas and small towns in the last two decades. From 1975-80, a net of 275,000 people 60 years and over moved to nonmetro areas

Figure 1
Rural elderly concentrated in South, North Central regions



■ Percent of Nation's nonmetro elderly living in each region
■ Percent of Nation's metro elderly living in each region

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *General Population Characteristics, U.S. Summary, 1980 Census of Population*, table 55.

Table 2—Regional distribution of population 65 years and over

Age group and region	Nonmetro elderly		Metro elderly	
	Thousand	Percent	Thousand	Percent
United States	7,425	29.1	18,125	70.9
Northeast	978	16.1	5,094	83.9
North Central	2,421	36.2	4,271	63.8
South	3,221	38.0	5,267	62.0
West	804	18.7	3,494	81.3

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *General Population Characteristics, U.S. Summary, 1980 Census of Population*, table 55, pages 68, 74, 80, and 86.

(table 3). Nearly all of them were between 60 and 74 years old; above age 74, just as many people move away from rural areas and small towns as to them. Declining health and widowhood prompt some people to seek the services and facilities of large urban areas or to move nearer their children.

Rural and smalltown counties with rapid growth of older population are spread more widely about the country than those with high proportions of elderly. Rapid growth of a county's elderly population does not necessarily lead to high relative concentrations, if the number of younger people also grows. Many counties in the West, the Southeast (except for Florida), and north-

ern Michigan, for example, attract younger age groups as well as older people, and their populations have not become disproportionately old.

Older people who move from an urban to a rural area are more affluent than the non-migrant, long-term elderly populations they join. They are also more affluent than older people who move from one nonmetro location to another. The difference is especially striking for those 75 and over, among whom only 12 percent of the metro-to-nonmetro migrants are impoverished compared with 25 percent of longer term residents. Metro-to-nonmetro migrants,

therefore, bring new wealth to rural areas and small towns.

Most migrants age 60 and over are married couples. Such households have frequently moved to nonmetro areas high in recreational opportunities, scenic beauty, and other outdoor amenities. These rural newcomers often cite environmental reasons for their decision to move, couched either in terms of negative views of urban life or positive views about the merits of rural and small-town life. Most have earlier ties (friends, relatives, property) to the areas to which they move. Older migrants from metro areas also seem more inclined to seek an open-country residence than other older rural people who, upon retirement, often prefer living in town.

Living Arrangements

Three-fourths of the nonmetro elderly 60-74 years of age live with other family members, usually with a spouse. Among those 75 and over, only half live with a spouse or other relative, mostly because of widowhood; a third live alone (table 4). The living arrangements of metro and nonmetro older people are rather similar, the one important difference being that more nonmetro elderly live as married couples, while metro older people more frequently live with relatives other than a spouse.

The ratio of men to women among nonmetro elderly (75 men per 100 women) is

higher than the metro ratio of 68:100. Single or widowed men are more likely to remain in rural areas and small towns than are single or widowed women. The more even ratio of men to women contributes to the higher proportion of married couple households, and thus to more stable family and social relationships among rural and smalltown older people.

The percentage who live alone is probably increasing, because of the more rapid growth of the population 75 and over, among whom widowhood is most common. Living alone can pose special problems in a rural setting, since neighbors cannot as easily detect emergencies or be summoned for help.

Income

Older rural people are more likely to be poor than the urban elderly, despite the low poverty rate among urban-to-rural migrants. Twenty-one percent of all nonmetro people 65 years and over had poverty-level incomes in 1979, compared with 13 percent of the same age group in metro areas (fig. 2). Rural areas also have a greater generational difference in poverty status than do cities. Whereas there was little difference in the incidence of poverty among the elderly and nonelderly in metro areas (13 percent vs. 10 percent), the difference was substantially wider in rural and smalltown areas (21 percent vs. 13 percent). Poverty in rural areas and small towns hits harder

at the elderly than at young adults: half of all older people in America with poverty-level incomes live in rural areas and small towns, compared with less than three-eighths of the young and middle-aged poor.

Elderly persons living alone have higher poverty rates than the elderly in family households (table 4). Advancing age, nonmetro residence, and living alone are all negative influences on the economic well-being of the elderly: 41 percent of nonmetro elderly 75 years and over living alone have poverty level incomes.

Table 4—Living arrangements and poverty among elderly

Item	Nonmetro	Metro
Number of people 60-74 years	7,251,000	18,475,000
Percent		
Living in family households	76.7	75.2
In poverty	(11.0)	(5.6)
Living with nonrelatives	1.4	2.3
Living alone	20.2	20.7
In poverty	(33.9)	(22.9)
Living in institutions	1.7	1.8
Number of people 75 years and over	2,893,000	7,015,000
Percent		
Living in family households	52.1	53.3
In poverty	(15.2)	(7.0)
Living with nonrelatives	1.6	2.4
Living alone	34.6	33.0
In poverty	(41.0)	(27.0)
Living in institutions	11.7	11.3

¹Numbers in parentheses are percentages of the number immediately above.

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *General Social and Economic Characteristics, U.S. Summary, 1980*, table 98.

Table 3—Elderly migration (1975-80) and poverty by residency status

Item ¹	Age			Total
	60-64 years	65-74	75 years and over	
Number of elderly				
Nonmetro-to-metro	108,000	186,000	129,000	423,000
Metro-to-nonmetro In poverty	234,000 (9.4%)	317,000 (10.1%)	147,000 (11.6%)	698,000 (10.2%)
Nonmetro-to-nonmetro In poverty	392,000 (20.9%)	683,000 (22.5%)	514,000 (19.6%)	1,589,000 (21.2%)
Nonmetro nonmigrants In poverty	2,175,000 (13.7%)	3,728,000 (18.4%)	2,306,000 (25.1%)	8,209,000 (19.0%)

¹Numbers in parentheses are percentages of the number immediately above. For instance, 10.2% of total metro-to-nonmetro elderly migrants had poverty-level incomes. Migrant status was determined by whether persons changed county of residence between 1975-80.

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Public Use Micro Sample, 1980.

Poverty rates also differ between men and women. Twenty-five percent of older rural and smalltown women lived in poverty in 1979, compared with only 17 percent of nonmetro men (fig. 2). Much of this difference is caused by the higher rates of widowhood among women and the lower incomes of such women. Moreover, the difference in poverty rates between older nonmetro men and women was slightly wider than it was between older metro men and women.

Housing, Transportation, and Communication

Most older people have adequate housing. Where housing deficiencies still exist, they are most common among the rural elderly. In 1980, about 5 percent of rural households containing people 60 years and older either lacked a flush toilet, a bathtub or shower, hot and cold running water (or perhaps all of these basic elements), or had to share facilities with others. This was more than twice the rate of plumbing deficiencies in the homes of the urban elderly. Inadequate plumbing is especially prevalent among rural elderly in the South (13 percent of homes) and among elderly renters (19 percent). Rural elderly who own their own places are also more likely than urban elderly to have structural defects or inadequate sewage disposal and kitchen facilities.

The rural elderly have one presumed housing advantage over urban elderly—a higher proportion own their own homes (83 percent vs. 73 percent, fig. 2). This factor may partly offset the lower economic status of older rural people, although upkeep of homes and property taxes become harder to manage with age.

Rural and smalltown older people are much more likely than metro elderly to own or have access to a motor vehicle (fig. 3), a sign of the greater reliance of nonmetro people on personal rather than public transportation. With advancing age, many metro and nonmetro households give up their cars, which probably puts the rural elderly at a greater disadvantage. They usually have no access to public transportation and live farther from medical and shopping services.

Nonmetro elderly are twice as likely as metro elderly to have no telephone (6 percent vs. 3 percent), although the vast majority of

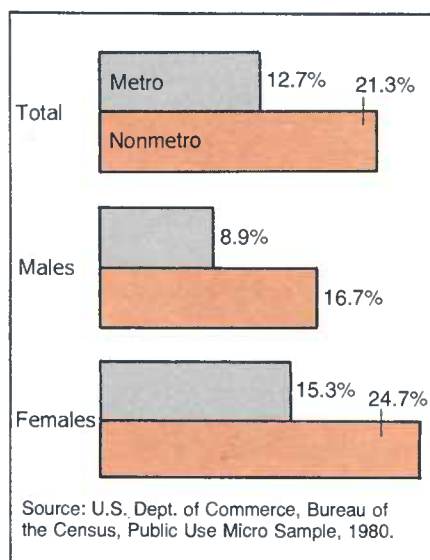
the elderly do have one. The recent breakup of the nationwide Bell Telephone system may have increased costs of rural telephone service more than elsewhere. It is not known what effect this change may have on telephone coverage of the rural elderly.

Health

The rural elderly are more prone to chronic health conditions that limit their activity, according to the National Health Survey taken by the National Center for Health Statistics. In 1982, 44 percent of nonmetro people aged 65 and over reported some activity limitation due to chronic health problems. The corresponding figure for metro people of the same age was 39 percent. This difference is not due to the elderly population of nonmetro areas being older on average than metro elderly.

Both nonmetro and metro elderly report about 32 days per year of restricted activity (a day when a person misses work or cuts down on usual activities because of illness or injury). Data from the 1974 version of this survey showed both chronic health conditions and restricted activity days to be most common among nonmetro elderly in the South.

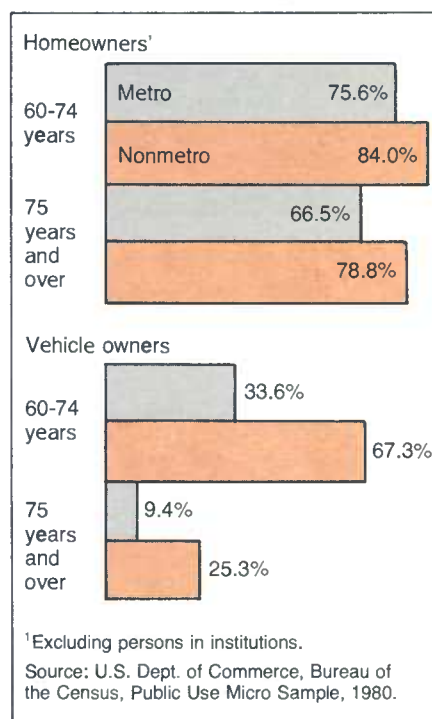
Figure 2
Elderly in poverty (65 and over, 1979)



Nonmetro elderly are more likely to need medical or other help because of the greater incidence of chronic disabilities, but they do not have higher incidence of acute conditions. The disproportionate occurrence of chronic activity-limiting health conditions among nonmetro people is present also among middle-aged people, and, therefore, is not a problem that will end with the current older generation.

The nonmetro elderly are somewhat less likely than metro elderly to visit physicians, but they are much more likely to require hospitalization. In 1982, they averaged 339 hospital stays per 1,000 population, compared with 277 among metro people of the same age. The nonmetro elderly did not have longer average stays, but their greater frequency of hospitalization suggests that they may have more need for such care because of less convenient access to physicians and outpatient treatment. Fewer sophisticated medical procedures are available on an outpatient basis in rural areas than in urban areas, and rural people must drive greater distances to get treatment, thus creating a greater need for inpatient care.

Figure 3
Elderly ownership of homes, vehicles declines with advancing age



What Is Rural?

There is no standard definition of "rural." The results of the 1980 Census of Population, however, make it possible to show statistics for people classed by different degrees of rurality. For brevity, we rely mostly on nonmetro statistics, and we use the terms nonmetro and rural rather interchangeably. The difference between the concepts is that nonmetro areas may include cities of less than 50,000 people, but they exclude open country and village residents who live within the official boundaries of a metro area. Most of the statistics presented are from the 1980 Census.

Who Are the Elderly?

We have defined the older population as starting at either 60 or 65 years of age, depending on what seemed more appropriate for the topic under discussion. Statistics are often displayed for different age groups within the older population.

What Is Poverty?

Families and unrelated individuals are classified as being above or below the poverty level using the official Federal index originated by the Social Security Administration. The poverty index is based on money income only, including cash transfers. In the 1980 census, a family of four was deemed to have poverty-level income if it received less than \$7,412 in 1979.

Conclusions

From this overview of the older rural population, we wish to stress several points:

- More than a quarter million older people moved to rural areas and small towns from 1975-80.
- The nonmetro elderly population is concentrated in the South and the North Central regions. High percentages of older people are much more common in rural areas and small towns than in metro areas, and the number of rural counties with high concentrations of elderly is growing rapidly.
- Many rural older people are poor. Poverty is considerably more prevalent among them than it is among urban elderly.
- Problems of inadequate housing and access to communication affect rural elderly more than metro elderly.
- The rural elderly have more chronic disabilities, increasing their need for assistance and requiring hospital care, than do urban elderly. Yet, much of the growth of the older rural population has occurred in areas of the country that are below average in community wealth and in services and facilities for elderly people.
- Despite awareness of the more limited availability of certain services in rural areas and small towns, older people in these areas, including former urbanites, express a preference for living in rural areas and small towns.

The older population of rural and small-town areas seems likely to continue to increase rapidly, with the most rapid growth at the very oldest ages, where physical or mental infirmities and widowhood are most common. As the conditions of rural life have improved, the similarity in the conditions and needs of the rural and urban elderly has increased. But, all meaningful differences in the circumstances of these people have not ended, nor are they ever likely to. Small-scale settlements and sparsity of population will always impose somewhat different conditions and entail different solutions to problems in rural areas. **RDP**

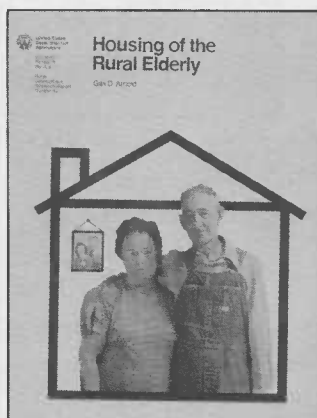
For Additional Reading . . .

William B. Clifford, Tim B. Heaton, Paul R. Voss, and Glenn V. Fuguitt. "The Rural Elderly in Demographic Perspective." Pages 25-55 in Raymond T. Coward and Gary R. Lee (eds.), *The Elderly in Rural Society*. New York: Springer Publishing Co., 1985.

Nina Glasgow. "The Older Metropolitan Origin Migrant as a Factor in Rural Population Growth." Pages 153-169 in Andrew J. Sofranko and James D. Williams (eds.), *Rebirth of Rural America: Rural Migration in the Midwest*. Ames, Iowa: North Central Regional Center for Rural Development, 1980.

U.S. Senate. "Rural Older Americans: Unanswered Questions," Hearing of the Special Committee on Aging, 1982.

Also Available . . .



Housing of the Rural Elderly
July 1984, 20 pages, \$1.50, GPO
order no. 001-019-00335-9.

The rural elderly are more likely to have housing problems than others. Fifteen percent lived in inadequate housing and about 20 percent of rural elderly homeowners had trouble meeting their house payments along with nearly half of rural elderly renters.

The rural West and South had the highest proportions of elderly living in inadequate housing (19 and 18 percent respectively); those figures compare with 12 percent in the North Central region and 10 percent in the Northeast. Many of the inadequate housing problems are probably associated with the low incomes of the rural elderly, nearly a third of whom live in poverty.

Based on the 1979 Annual Housing Survey conducted by the Census Bureau.

Order from

Superintendent of Documents
U.S. Government Printing Office,
Washington, D.C. 20402.