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# Recent Population Change in Adjacent Nonmetro Counties

*Population growth in nonmetro counties adjacent to metro counties was influenced by three factors in the 1980's. Urban spillover—where the metro county fared well, so too, generally, did the adjacent county. Size of metro county—the population of nonmetro counties adjacent to large metro counties (more than 1 million population) grew faster than the population of other nonmetro counties. Region—nonmetro adjacent counties in the West experienced high population growth.*

FOR several decades, the Nation's nonmetro population has grown more rapidly in counties adjacent to metro areas than in more remote counties. Adjacent county growth was pervasive in the 1970's, suggesting that rural economic problems associated with population decline were largely confined to remote areas. But while proximity to metro areas continued to influence population change in adjacent nonmetro counties in the 1980's, the population growth in these counties was far from assured. (See "Comparison of Adjacent Counties in the 1970's and 1980's" for definitions of adjacent counties in each decade.) The influence of metro areas on their nonmetro neighbors depended very much on the metro area growth and size. Where metro areas declined, adjacent counties tended to decline as well. Even in situations where metro areas had modest growth (up to 10 percent in 1980-90), half of the adjacent counties lost population.

Population grew more rapidly in adjacent counties than in more remote counties during both the 1970's and 1980's (table 1). Reversing a pattern dating from the end of World War II, the rural population grew faster than the urban population in the 1970's. While remote county growth (11.5 percent) was higher than metro growth (9.9 percent), the still higher adjacent county growth (17.5 percent) indicates that much of the rural population increase in the 1970's involved the spread of urban population into nearby rural areas. During the 1980's, when the U.S. population was again concentrating in urban areas, remote county population growth fell to 1.7 percent, while adjacent county growth remained substantial (6.7 percent). Although this pattern suggests a modest but continued urban spread into rural areas, the aggregate statistics are somewhat misleading.

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Overall changes in population disguise considerable county-to-county variation in population change, especially in the 1980's (fig. 1). In the 1970's, over 90 percent of the adjacent counties gained population. Well over half of these counties gained at a faster rate than the Nation as a whole. Despite overall growth, over a quarter of the remote counties lost population during this period. This pattern is consistent with the aggregate statistics in suggesting that rural development problems, at least insofar as they involve population

Table 1  
**Metro and nonmetro population change, 1970-90**  
Population growth in adjacent counties surpassed that of metro counties in the 1970's, but returned to a more modest level in the 1980's.

County type	Counties	1970 county classification		
		Population 1970 Number	1980 ----Millions----	Growth, 1970-80' Percent
All U.S. counties	3,087	203.3	226.5	11.5
Metro	627	148.7	163.4	9.9
Nonmetro				
Adjacent	966	28.1	32.9	17.5
Remote	1,494	26.5	30.2	11.5
1980 county classification				
County type	Counties	Population		
		1980	1990	Growth, 1980-90' Percent
All U.S. counties	3,087	226.5	248.7	9.8
Metro	714	172.1	192.0	11.6
Nonmetro				
Adjacent	917	26.8	28.5	6.7
Remote	1,456	27.7	28.1	1.7

<sup>1</sup>Growth calculated with unrounded population numbers.

loss, were located primarily in remote counties in the 1970's.

The difference between the 1970's and 1980's for non-metro counties was not a simple slowing of the rates of growth. The proportion of remote counties losing population rose to over 60 percent. More surprising, given the pervasive adjacent county growth in the 1970's, was that 40 percent of these counties lost population in the 1980's. Not all adjacent counties experienced loss or stagnation. Nearly one in every four (23.7 percent) gained population at above the national rate. Nevertheless, it is clear that adjacency did not assure growth in the 1980's as it had in the 1970's, despite the relatively rapid growth of the metro population in the 1980's. This shift shows up in analyses of poverty as well as of population (see "Changes in Poverty Rates Also Show Adjacency Not a Shield in 1980's," p. 7).

### Changes in Metro Influence on Adjacent Counties

Although adjacent county population growth was highly related to the growth of the abutting metro areas in both the 1970's and 1980's, the overall influence of adjacency changed markedly between the two decades. In the 1970's, three-fourths of the counties adjacent to metro areas with rapidly growing populations (20 percent or more gain) gained population at

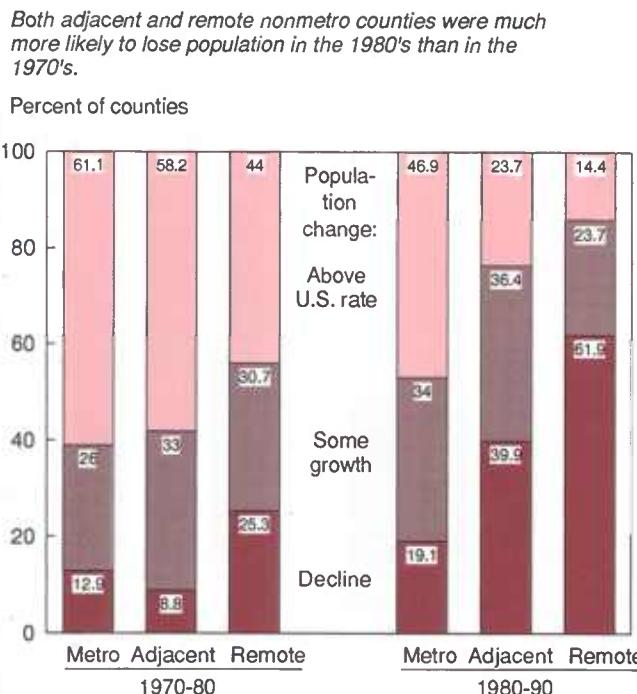
### Comparison of Adjacent Counties in the 1970's and 1980's

A nonmetro county is an "adjacent county" if it abuts one or more Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSA's) and at least 2 percent of its employed labor force commutes to the metro area(s). To compare the changes in adjacent counties in the 1970's and 1980's, we used adjacent county classifications based on the settlement and commuting patterns existing at the start of each decade. There were 966 adjacent counties in the 1970's according to the metro classification issued by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget in 1974, the first classification to use commuting data from the 1970 Census. Urban spill-over into adjacent counties in the 1970's resulted in the reclassification of 97 adjacent counties as metro in the 1980's. These and other changes based on the 1980 Census results, which also included the reclassification of metro counties into adjacent counties and shifts between the adjacent and remote categories, left 917 adjacent counties in the 1980's classification. Only 742 counties, or 77 percent of the original 966 adjacent counties were also classified as adjacent in 1980.<sup>1</sup>

Despite this turnover, the results of our study were largely unaffected by the changes in the composition of adjacent counties between the two decades. Counties classified as adjacent using the 1970 Census gained only slightly more population in the 1980's (8.4 percent) than the 1980 adjacent counties (6.7 percent). While less than 10 percent of the 1970 adjacent counties lost population in the 1970's, over 40 percent of these counties lost population in the 1980's, about the same as the proportion of the 1980 adjacent counties that lost population.

<sup>1</sup>The original 1970 classification of adjacent counties was developed by Fred Hines, David Brown, and Ron Zimmer in *The Economic and Social Characteristics of the Population in Non-metro Counties, 1970* (Economic Research Service, AER-272, March 1975). This was revised by Calvin Beale, who added the 2-percent commuting criterion. This was updated when the metro classification based on the 1980 Census became available along with 1980 commuting data.

Figure 1  
Distributions of metro, adjacent, and remote counties by population change, 1970-90



Note: The U.S. population growth rate was 11.5 percent in 1970-80 and 9.8 percent in 1980-90.

above the national rate (fig. 2). Adjacent counties near slower growing or declining metro areas were likely to gain population, but less often at above the national growth rate.

This correspondence between metro and adjacent county growth was largely a reflection of the spillover from metro growth, but other influences were probably also at work. For instance, this correspondence could reflect common exposure to regional forces such as Frost Belt to Sun Belt migration. It is also likely that, especially in the case of smaller metro areas with a service base, the adjacent county change in employment and population had an influence on metro area population change.

Although the spillover from rapidly growing metro areas continued to affect some adjacent counties in the 1980's, the pattern of urban spread was much less pervasive. Because metro growth was concentrated in fewer, larger metro areas, fewer adjacent counties were near growing metro areas in the 1980's than in the 1970's (table 2). But the major difference was that slower growing and declining metro areas were no longer spreading out. Nearly two-thirds of the non-metro counties adjacent to declining metro areas lost population in the 1980's. Even where metro areas had modest (up to 9 percent) growth, half the adjacent counties lost population. The likelihood of adjacent county growth depended much more on the growth of the abutting metro area.

Larger metro areas, perhaps because of their greater concentration in high-growth services, density, and congestion, generated greater adjacent county growth than smaller metro areas in both the 1970's and 1980's. The more rapid growth of smaller metro areas tended to make up for their small size in the 1970's and aggregate statistics show little difference in adjacent county population change across metro size categories for the decade (fig. 3). In contrast, larger metro areas tended to have greater population growth than smaller metro

Table 2

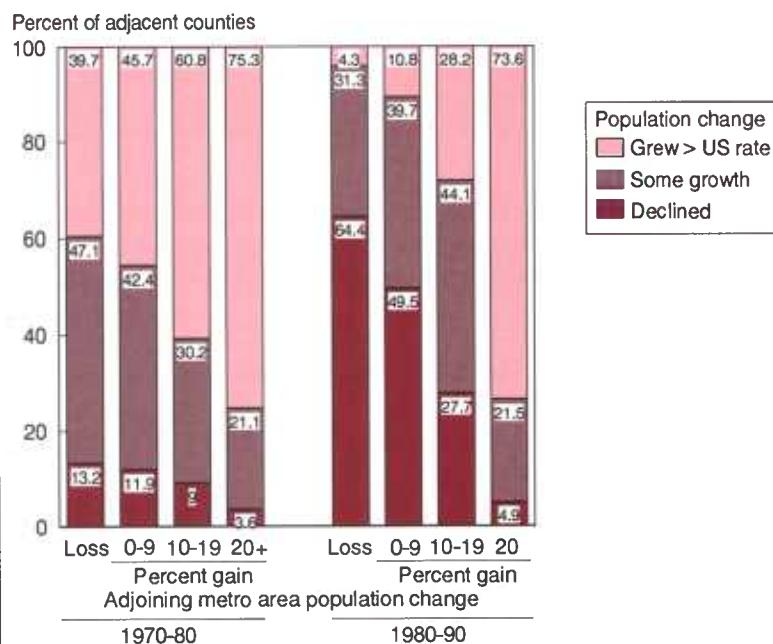
**Distribution of adjacent counties by population change in adjoining metro areas, 1970-90**  
More counties were adjacent to declining metro areas in the 1980's.

Metro population change	1970-80	1980-90
Percent of adjacent counties		
Decline	7.0	17.8
Growth:		
0-9 percent	34.7	42.5
10-19 percent	29.8	24.0
20 percent or more	28.5	15.7
Total	100.0	100.0

areas in the 1980's. The slower growth of small metro areas made growth in adjacent counties less likely. Counties next to metro areas with under 250,000 residents were twice as likely to lose population in the 1980's as were counties adjacent to metro areas with 1 million or more residents.

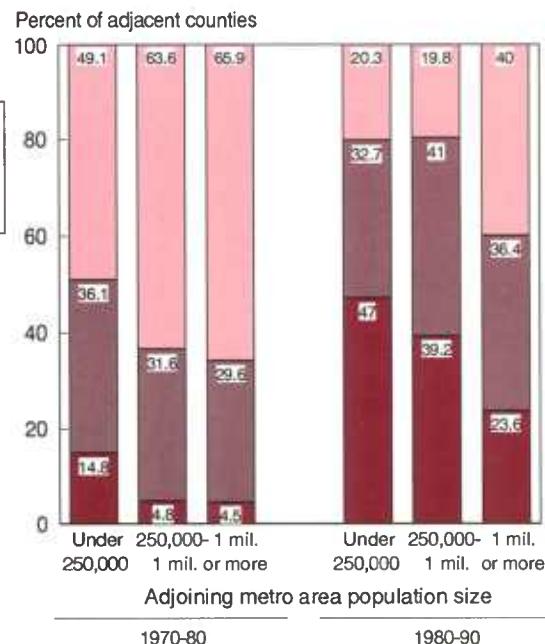
**Figure 2**  
**Distribution of adjacent nonmetro counties by population change in adjoining metro areas and their own population change, 1970-90**

*Unlike the 1970's, declining or even slowly growing metro populations often meant adjacent county decline in the 1980's*



**Figure 3**  
**Distribution of adjacent nonmetro counties by size of adjoining metro area and their own population change, 1970-90**

*Nonmetro counties adjacent to large metro counties were most likely to grow in the 1980's*



Note: The U.S. population growth rate was 11.5 percent in 1970-80 and 9.8 percent in 1980-90.

## Regional Variation

Regional statistics for adjacent counties reflect both the shift in population from the Frost Belt to the Sun Belt across the 1970's and 1980's and the ending of general metro spread in the 1980's (fig. 4). Adjacent counties in the South and West were much more likely to have growth faster than the national rate in the 1970's than adjacent counties in the Northeast and Midwest. Despite the population shift to the Sun Belt, however, few adjacent counties lost population in the Northeast or the Midwest, and many grew faster than the national rate.

The proportion of adjacent counties that lost population rose in all regions in the 1980's, but especially in the Midwest (14.5 percent in the 1970's to 58.3 percent in the 1980's). A higher proportion of adjacent counties in the Midwest were next to declining metro areas in the 1980's (30.2 percent) than in the 1970's (12.2 percent). But more important was the more negative consequence of adjacency to declining metro areas in the Midwest (and in the Nation) in the 1980's. Only 11.1 percent of the counties adjacent to declining metro areas in the Midwest lost population in the 1970's, compared with 71.9 percent in the 1980's.

The only adjacent counties in the Midwest that gained population in the 1980's were around the large, rapidly growing Minneapolis-St. Paul metro area, in southeastern Wisconsin and southwestern Michigan, in the Columbus-Cincinnati area of Ohio, and west of St. Louis in Missouri (fig. 5). Otherwise, across the Great Plains and through Iowa and central Illinois, adjacent counties declined, sometimes despite their proximity to growing metro areas.

The situation was more mixed in the South. Rapid growth of major metro areas such as Dallas-Fort Worth, San Antonio, Houston, Atlanta, and Miami, and of smaller areas such as Nashville, Charleston, or Charlotte spilled over into adjacent counties. But adjacent counties declined in much of the rest of Texas, Oklahoma, and Louisiana, where the collapse of the energy industry was most felt. Adjacent counties in the Deep South also tended to lose people. In the Northeast, which has relatively few nonmetro counties left, western New York and Pennsylvania tended to lose both metro area and adjacent county populations.

Almost all the metro areas of the Pacific and Southwest grew faster than the national rate, as did their adjacent counties. Changes in the Mountain States of Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming, however, resembled those of the Upper Midwest, with both the metro areas and their adjacent counties tending to lose population.

### Why Did Adjacency Assure Growth in the 1970's but Not the 1980's?

Region and metro size and growth had greater bearing on adjacent county growth in the 1980's than in the 1970's, when adjacency itself was usually sufficient to assure at least modest growth. Two changes clearly contributed to the decrease in urban spread in the 1980's. One was the shift in national economic growth away from manufacturing toward producer services. Nonmetro counties, particularly those adjacent to metro areas, tend to specialize in manufacturing while metro areas specialize in producer services (finance, legal services, accounting, for example). Adjacent counties also tend to have a relatively small share of consumer services as people go to the metro area to shop. Manufacturing generated about 2 million new jobs during the 1970's. One in four of these went to adjacent county residents, as manufacturing shifted out of metro areas into new branch plants.

During the 1980's, however, there was no net gain in manufacturing employment nationally. Many of the jobs that were created were in small firms, which are much less likely to locate in nonmetro areas, or they involved management and research activities, also more typically urban. Adjacent county manufacturing

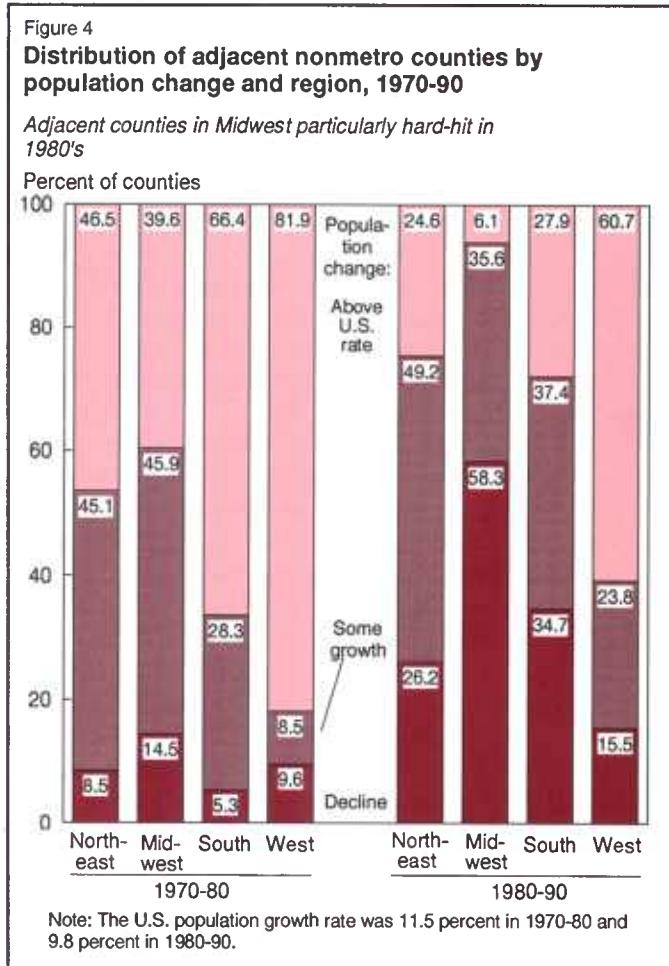
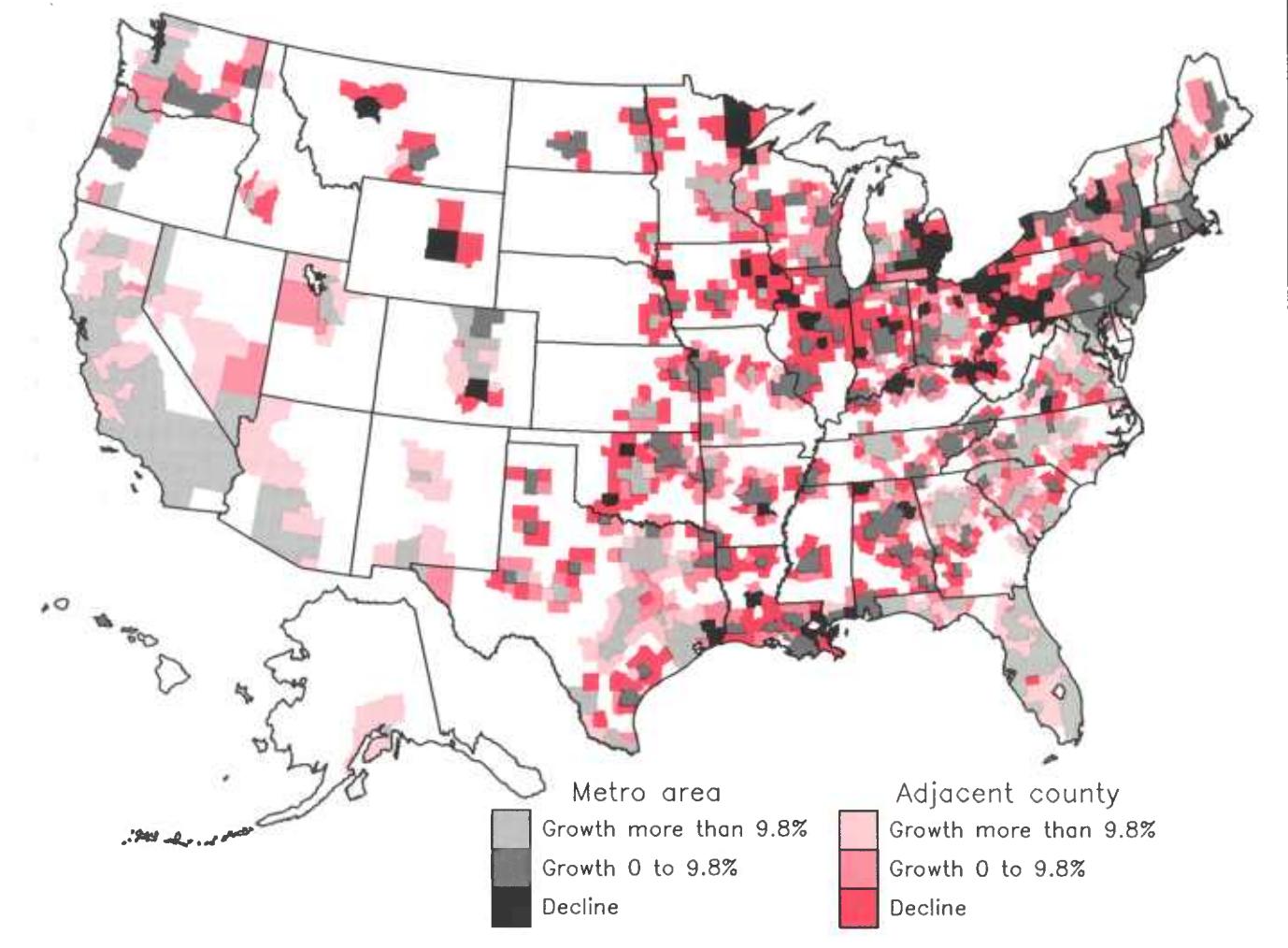


Figure 5

## Metro area and adjacent nonmetro county growth, 1980-90

Population growth remains strongest in the South and West.



employment went from a gain of over 20 percent in the 1970's to a loss of about 2 percent in the 1980's: a major force in adjacent county growth had disappeared. Resource industries also shed considerable employment during the decade, although this affected remote counties more than adjacent.

The coming of age of the baby-boom generation in the 1970's and the subsequent baby bust also contributed to the slowing of urban spread between the 1970's and 1980's. With the baby-boomers setting up their households in the 1970's, yet having few children, the number of households grew over twice as fast (26.7 percent) as the population (11.5 percent). The labor force, because of increased participation of women, grew faster still (29.3 percent). As a result, metro areas with little or no population growth still had substantial growth in households and jobs. For instance, the Midwest metro population gain was only 2.3 percent during this period, but the number of households grew by 17.6 percent and the labor force by 20 percent.

Although population growth slowed only slightly in the 1980's, to 9.8 percent, household growth fell by nearly half, to 14.4 percent. Employment growth was also down by about half. In the metro Midwest, population growth remained about the same (2.7 percent) in the 1980's while household and employment growth fell by half, to 8.3 percent and 10.8 percent, respectively. This decline in household and employment growth helps explain why adjacent counties, particularly those in the Midwest and those near modestly growing metro areas, were much less likely to gain from urban spread in the 1980's than they had in the 1970's.

Adjacency seems unlikely to provide more of a buffer against population decline in the 1990's than it did in the 1980's. With the downsizing of the finance, real estate, and defense-related manufacturing and services industries, and continued lower growth of household and employment, the impetus for metro spread will continue to be relatively weak in the 1990's.

### Changes In Poverty Rates Also Show Adjacency Not a Shield in 1980's

The proportion of "poverty counties," those with at least 20 percent of their residents having below-poverty incomes, declined markedly in the 1970's, especially in adjacent counties. Nearly half of both adjacent and remote counties were poverty counties in 1969. Over the next 10 years, the adjacent county proportion of poverty counties fell by nearly 25 percentage points, much more than the remote county proportion. While some of the reduction in poverty rates was undoubtedly the result of the inmigration of people and families with above-poverty incomes, the pervasiveness of the reduction suggests that conditions improved for long-term residents as well.

Although remaining well below 1969 levels, the proportion of poverty counties rose across all three county types in the 1980's. Although this proportion remained highest among the remote counties (36 percent), adjacent counties had the greatest percentage point increase in the proportion of poverty counties, from 23 percent to 28 percent. Adjacency did not provide the same buffer in the 1980's as it had a decade earlier.

As is true for population change, aggregate poverty statistics disguise the adjacent county problems. The poverty rates for the population living in adjacent counties rose only from 14.4 to 15.5 percent in 1979-89, a smaller increase than found for the remote county population (16.9 to 18.4 percent). Apparently, the smaller adjacent counties have had more than their share of population decline and increases in poverty.

#### Proportion of counties with poverty rates of 20 percent or higher

County type	1970 county classification		1980 county classification	
	1969	1979	1979	1989
<i>Percent</i>				
Metro	16.4	4.9	5.2	8.7
Nonmetro adjacent	46.8	22.6	22.9	27.8
Nonmetro remote	49.8	31.3	32.2	35.9

The wide differences in population growth among adjacent counties and the high correlation between population changes in metro areas and their adjacent counties suggest that the adjacent-remote dichotomy may disguise as much as it reveals about patterns of nonmetro change. One approach is to distinguish among adjacent counties according to characteristics of the abutting metro areas (in this case, size). Another approach is to use intercounty commuting patterns to develop a better understanding of local regional economies, their boundaries, and the forces shaping their growth and change.

#### For Additional Reading...

Calvin Beale, "Preliminary 1990 Census Counts Confirm Drop in Nonmetro Population Growth," *Rural Conditions and Trends*, vol. 1, no. 4, Winter 1990/91, pp. 10-11.

John M. Wardwell and David L. Brown, "Population Redistribution in the United States during the 1970s," Chapter 1 in *New Directions in Urban-Rural Migration*, Brown and Wardwell, eds., Academic Press, New York, 1980, pp. 5-35.

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David A. McGranahan, John C. Hession, Fred K. Hines, and Max F. Jordan, *Social and Economic Characteristics of the Population in Metro and Nonmetro Counties, 1970-80*, RDRR-58, U.S. Dept. Agr., Econ. Res. Serv., Sept. 1986.