

# Challenges and Opportunities for Studying Mobility in Rural Areas

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Workshop on “*Strengthening the Evidence Base to Improve Economic and Social Mobility in the United States*”

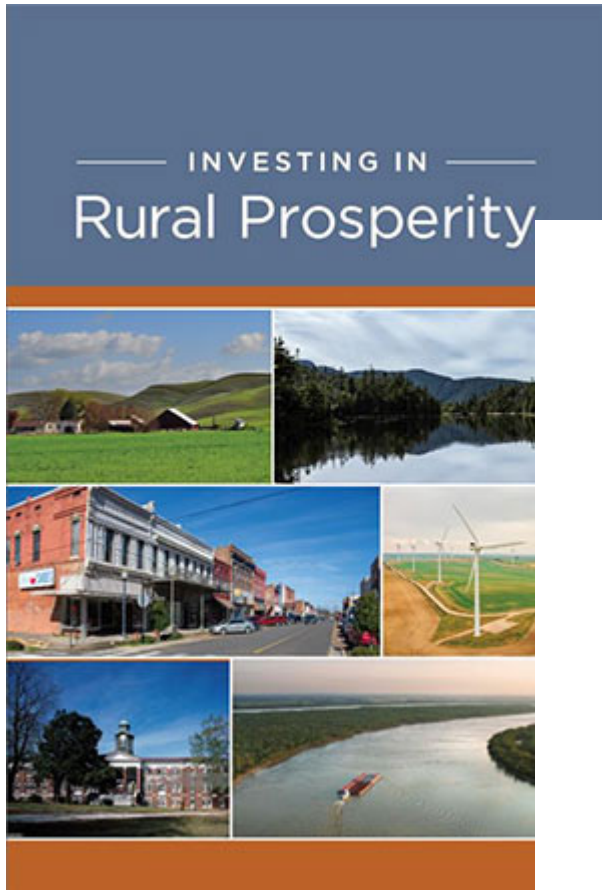
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# Main Objective

*Refocus on rural America—necessary to insure a spatially inclusive approach to studying social mobility*

# Opportunities

*Rural America is on America's political and legislative policy agenda*



## Defining "Rural" for the Study on Human Services Programs in Rural Contexts

January 2022

Dallas Elgin and James Murdoch

2M RESEARCH

Corianne Payton Scally and Heather Hahn

URBAN INSTITUTE

2M Research and the Urban Institute, in partnership with the Administration for Children and Families and Health Resources and Services Administration, are conducting a mixed-methods study to assess the challenges and opportunities for administering human services programs in rural contexts. How we define "rural" affects how we design and execute the study, as well as what the findings mean and how they can be applied to policy and practice. This brief explains how our study defines rural counties and specific regions along with some key limitations to these definitions.

### Human Services Programs in Rural Contexts Study

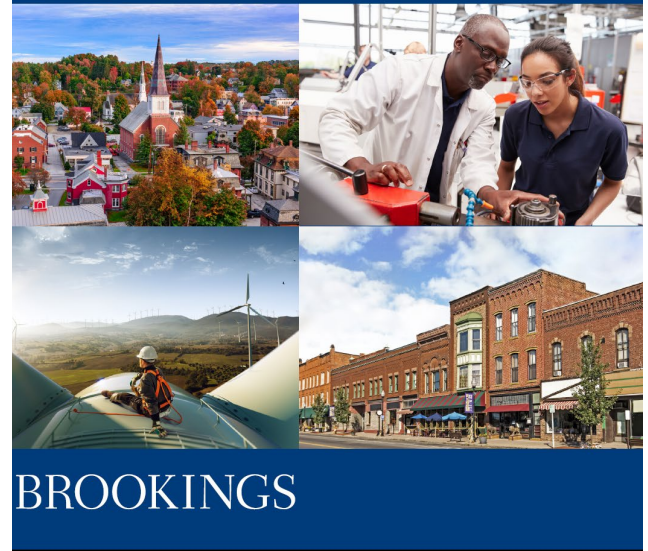
Through a mixed-methods research design, including administrative and secondary data and 12 site visits, the project aims to (1) provide a rich description of human services programs in rural contexts, (2) determine the unmet need for human services in rural communities, and (3) identify opportunities for strengthening the capacity of human services programs to promote the economic and social well-being of individuals, families, and communities in rural contexts. The study will examine several human services programs administered by the US Department of Health and Human Services, including Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood, Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting, Health Profession Opportunity Grants, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, as well as programs on early childhood development, family development, employment, and higher education and technical training.

November 2020

## Reimagining rural policy:

Organizing federal assistance to maximize rural prosperity

Tony Pipa and Natalie Geismar



# Why?

- Trumpism and disaffected/resentful/forgotten rural voters.
- Growing spatial rural-urban inequality—concentrated poverty, intergenerational poverty, employment, family patterns, health outcomes, and life expectancy.
- The 3 D's: Depopulation, Death, and Diversity.
- Research on comparative rural communities—"when you've seen one rural community you've seen one rural community."
- The boundaries that separate rural and urban America are fluid and ambiguous—a new "rural-urban interface."

# Challenges

*The research community must work toward mainstreaming rural-oriented work as opposed to relegating it to the backwater as unimportant or, worse, falling prey to conventional stereotypes about rural people and places*

## The New Rural-Urban Interface: Lessons for Higher Education

Daniel T. Lichter and David L. Brown

*JEL Classifications: J6, O2, Y8*

*Keywords: Agriculture, Community Development, Land Grant, Rural Population, Social Sciences*

Americans—taxpayers, politicians, and policy makers—have an urban-centric world view. Big cities and suburbs are where most of us live and work. Urban issues and interests understandably dominate our everyday discussions; they also define America's problems and policy solutions. Urban America is where culture is shaped and reshaped by politics, media, and money, where new jobs and technology are incubated, and where big ideas start and flourish. Rural Americans—all 46 million of them—are often left on the sidelines, presumably waiting to develop, prosper, and join the American mainstream.

For many rural Americans, waiting for rural development is no longer an option. Between 2010 and 2012 alone, 170,000 rural Americans lost their jobs, and the number of

or in the countryside. Yet, we contend that *all* Americans have a large and growing stake in the demographic and economic vitality of rural people and places. At a minimum, we cannot forget that urban Americans depend on rural America for food and fiber, natural resources (for energy), recreation and entertainment, and much more. The fact that nonmetro counties today make up 72% of America's land area also demands good stewardship. Rural America requires our attention, perhaps as never before.

The paradox is that rural and urban America are highly interconnected and embedded in a rapidly globalizing world. The rural-urban interface has been given new meaning and shape by the increasing back and forth flows of capital, labor, population, information, and ideas, and

# Rural data needs

## *Augmenting sample sizes*

- Imprecise estimates and the power of the test
- Data suppression (e.g., differential privacy)
- Rural heterogeneity requires larger samples
- Tracking/retention as respondents move
- Depth versus breadth (e.g., Three Cities study, Fragile Families, *Los Angeles Family and Neighborhood Survey*[L.A.FANS])
- Administrative infrastructure and data (e.g., government and schools)
- Place-effects for place-based interventions

# Sharkey and Faber

*Annual Review of Sociology* (2014, 560)

The current preoccupation with urban neighborhoods “has distracted attention from the larger question of how different dimensions of the residential context, which operate at *multiple geographic and social scales*, become salient in the lives of individuals and families” (emphasis added).



# Rural Measurement

## *Building a consensus*

- What is rural? Binary or gradient? What?
- Core-based units based on counties
- What should be measured in rural areas?
- Administrative boundaries defining rural and urban people and places change over time (e.g., CPS).
- Mobilities: Spatial and social mobility co-occur
- Rural regions, commuting zones, rural neighborhoods



# Rationalizing Rural Area Classifications

for the Economic Research Service

A Workshop Summary

*The National Academies of*  
SCIENCES • ENGINEERING • MEDICINE

# Conclusion

*Rural youth and young adults face constraints to upward intra- and inter-generational mobility*

- They lack resources from family, government, and the economy (e.g., living wage, work supports, childcare).
- They face cultural obstacles—systemic racism, xenophobia, and sexism that affect schooling and economic outcomes.
- Individual and collective wellbeing in rural areas often work at cross-purposes (e.g., moving to opportunity).
- Do we invest in rural places or rural people?

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