

# rural new york minute

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## The Changing Demographic Profile of Rural Areas\*

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The demographic profile of rural and small town America has changed rapidly and significantly in recent decades. The continued out-migration of increasingly educated young adults, the in-migration of ethnic minorities, and the growing numbers of retirees, have resulted in rural communities where residents are older, more ethnically diverse, and more likely to be female than in the recent past. These changes have transformed rural economies and are influencing a range of public policies.

### Age

Since the 1960s, the nonmetropolitan or rural population has aged more rapidly than the urban or metropolitan population. In 2000, the median age in nonmetro counties was nearly 4 years older than the metro population. This more rapid aging is due to three important trends:

- Throughout the 20th century, young adults have migrated disproportionately from rural to urban areas for education and employment.
- Higher rural birth rates, which historically offset youth out-migration, declined more rapidly for rural than urban women beginning in the 1960s, and both rates have converged at “below-replacement” levels.
- Since the 1970s, a steadily increasing number of older persons seeking natural amenities or retirement destinations have moved to a growing number of rural areas.

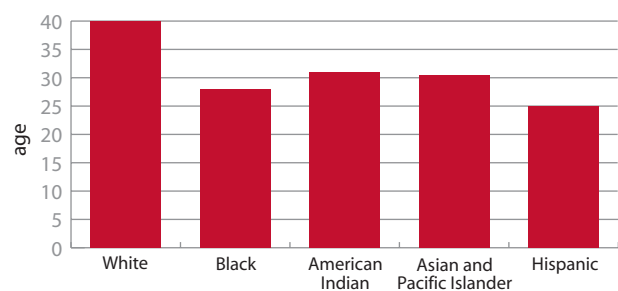
There has been a widespread percentage decline of rural youth and young adults under age 35 in all regions except in the West, an exception due to immigration and its effects. At the other end of the age continuum, the 75 and older population grew in all regions, but the 65-74 year-old population – the age group born during the Great Depression when birth rates were extremely low – declined. The baby boom, represented by 35 to 54 year olds, grew the fastest of all age groups in the last decade. By 2010, this group will fall into the 45 to 64 age group. Even without retirement in-migration, the very size of this group sets the stage for a rapid increase in older adults in nonmetro areas.

### Ethnic Diversity

Rural areas have always had regions of great diversity: the Black population in the rural South; Native American populations and reservations in the rural West and Southwest; and a Mexican heritage population in the Southwest which was once part of Mexico. These historical sources of diversity have been augmented by natural increase and by immigration, especially in the last decade as rural industries increasingly hire foreign-born workers to do low-skilled jobs. In every region, the non-Hispanic White population grew more slowly than any other major racial/ethnic group during the last decade.

Many rural areas have recently witnessed a rapid growth in diversity, especially in local school systems. This is because the median age of the non-White population is 10 to 15 years lower than that of the White population (see Figure 1). The non-White population will inevitably grow faster because a larger proportion is in its childbearing years, has somewhat higher fertility, and is experiencing higher rates of immigration in rural areas. Rural areas that are currently experiencing more rapid

**Figure 1: Median Age by Race, Nonmetro Counties 2000**



Source: U. S. Census Bureau, Census 2000.

growth in the non-White population can expect to see this continue for the foreseeable future.

### Gender

An important factor of aging rural populations is the female-male life expectancy gap. Because women live about 4 years longer than men, rural areas that age will become increasingly female. In 2000, almost two thirds of the rural population age 75 and older was female. Rural places have long been thought of as being dominated by males and by male occupations. In fact, the proportion of men relative to women in nonmetro places declined for 40 years but then increased between 1990 and 2000.

### Policy Considerations

Many rural communities will confront public policy issues related to their bifurcated populations of increasingly older, non-Hispanic White, female native residents, and younger, minority, male newcomers, many of whom will bring or start families with young children. This generation gap and, to a lesser extent, gender gap is reinforced by a culture gap of differing languages and backgrounds. It is important to ensure that all segments of the population are included in community decisions and that all benefit from community services. Cooperation and understanding between all segments of the population will enhance the viability of rural areas. Without such cooperation, many rural areas will confront increasing rates of poverty, failing education systems and increasing social tension. ▲

\*For More Information: See Chapter 3, “Changing Faces of Rural America,” by Annabel Kirschner, E. Helen Berry and Nina Glasgow in William Kandel and David L. Brown (Eds.), *Population Change and Rural Society in the 21st Century*.

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