

rural new york minute

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What is Rural? And why does it matter?

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For many Americans, the word rural suggests open farmland, untouched forests, rolling hills, and a sparsely populated, rustic environment. Most of us aren't concerned with what is "officially" rural; rather, we simply "know it when we see it." However, because of their different perspectives, a "definitional barrier" often exists between rural residents,

For those who care about rural issues, understanding the various ways in which "rural" is defined is a critical step to speaking the same language.

policymakers focused on improving conditions in rural areas through legislation, and researchers who study rural development issues. While agreement on one single definition may not be ultimately necessary, it is important to have a clear understanding of how working definitions of rurality can vary and the resulting consequences.

Many rural residents associate living in a rural area with a slower pace of life, a sense of community, a connection to nature and tradition. Many rural people live in non-metropolitan counties, with a significant proportion of the land area still in agriculture or protected natural resource areas. Other rural residents live in rural places in metropolitan counties and are significantly impacted by the urban-suburban-rural continuum that exists (e.g., urban and suburban sprawl). Although each type of rural resident considers themselves "rural", their actual daily life experiences may be quite different.

Rural residents' self-definition is usually associated with a way of life, rather than with living in a particular geographical, political, or economic unit.

Policymakers may define "rural" more broadly in order to cast a wider net for legislative support.

Policymakers also face challenges when creating legislation to address "rural issues", such as funding for broadband access. With increasing demands on expensive urban services, rural areas have not always received adequate funding. Tipping the balance further, due to larger population size, urban areas have greater political representation than do rural areas. However, there is growing recognition that urban and rural areas co-exist in a larger regional context, and that more regionally focused programs and policies that acknowledge the particular rural-urban mix within a given region are a more effective approach to improving social and economic conditions.

Understanding how a researcher defines "rural" is an important step in understanding research findings.

Researchers who study rural areas are often torn between more visceral definitions of rural ("I see cows, therefore it must be rural") versus more officially established definitions, generally based on population size and density. However, interpreting research results becomes challenging when researchers do *not* adhere to official definitions, particularly on a policy sensitive topic. For example, two analyses of rural poverty using two different methods of defining rurality could result in quite different conclusions about poverty trends, causes, impacts, etc. Research results are, therefore, only as good as the data and methods used in the analyses, and can have significant public policy implications. ♦

