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# Nonmetro Recreation Counties: Their Identification and Rapid Growth

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# Nonmetro Recreation Counties

## Their Identification and Rapid Growth

Kenneth M. Johnson  
Calvin L. Beale

Recent migration trends, fueled in part by the Nation's love of forests, water, and other natural amenities, are altering the rural landscape. Since the late 1960s, the United States has seen both continued growth of metro populations and renewed population increase in many nonmetro counties. There has been a move toward population deconcentration, reflected both in the tendency of settlement to sprawl outward from large, densely settled urban cores and in the recent rural demographic rebound.

One factor contributing to deconcentration is movement into areas rich in natural amenities and other recreational attractions. Recreational areas have long attracted large numbers of visitors. Recent data show that they are also attracting many permanent residents. Once vacationers discover

*More than 80 percent of the Nation's 285 million people now reside in metropolitan areas. Many in this vast city and suburban population are attracted to the recreational opportunities and attractions of rural areas, such as beautiful scenery, lakes, mountains, forests, and resorts. For rural communities struggling to offset job losses from farming, mining, and manufacturing, capitalizing on the recreational appeal of an area fosters economic development, attracts new residents, and retains existing population. This article outlines a method to identify nonmetro counties with high recreation development. It then examines the linkage between such development and population change, and considers its implications for the future of rural and small-town America.*

an area they like, many make return visits, eventually buy a second home there, and finally migrate to establish their primary residence in the area (Stewart and Stynes). Research has found that a substantial proportion of second home owners expect to retire to their second home within 10 years (Stynes et al., Johnson and Stewart).

Increased recreational activity, the appeal of second homes, and the influx of former urbanites into rural areas all create a demand for housing and for an expanded business, service and governmental infrastructure to support it. By increasing local employment and entrepreneurial opportunities, the flow of visitors and immigrants also encourages many current residents to remain, further bolstering the population. With the baby boom generation fast approaching an age

where leisure activities will increase and retirement migration will peak, the implications of recreational activities for future overall nonmetro migration and population growth are substantial. This article modifies and updates our earlier effort to identify recreational counties (Beale and Johnson), examines the linkages between recreational concentrations and population changes, and considers the implications of these for nonmetro America.

Based on the empirical and contextual analysis (see box, "How Recreation Counties Were Identified," p. 14), 329 nonmetro counties were classed as recreational (44 more than in our earlier work where somewhat different data and procedures were used). They comprise 14.6 percent of all nonmetro counties and have 15.6

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percent of the nonmetro population. The classification method identifies counties where the relative level of recreation-linked employment, income, and housing is high.

McGranahan created a natural amenity index ranking counties based on desirable physical attributes related to climate, topography, and presence of water (McGranahan). People interested in recreational activity often gravitate to areas with appealing natural fea-

tures, so there is considerable—although not predominant—overlap between our list and the counties ranked high in natural amenities. Of the recreation counties, 121 (or 37 percent) rank in the top quarter of McGranahan’s natural amenity list.

### Recreation Counties Most Numerous in the Mountain West and Upper Great Lakes Areas

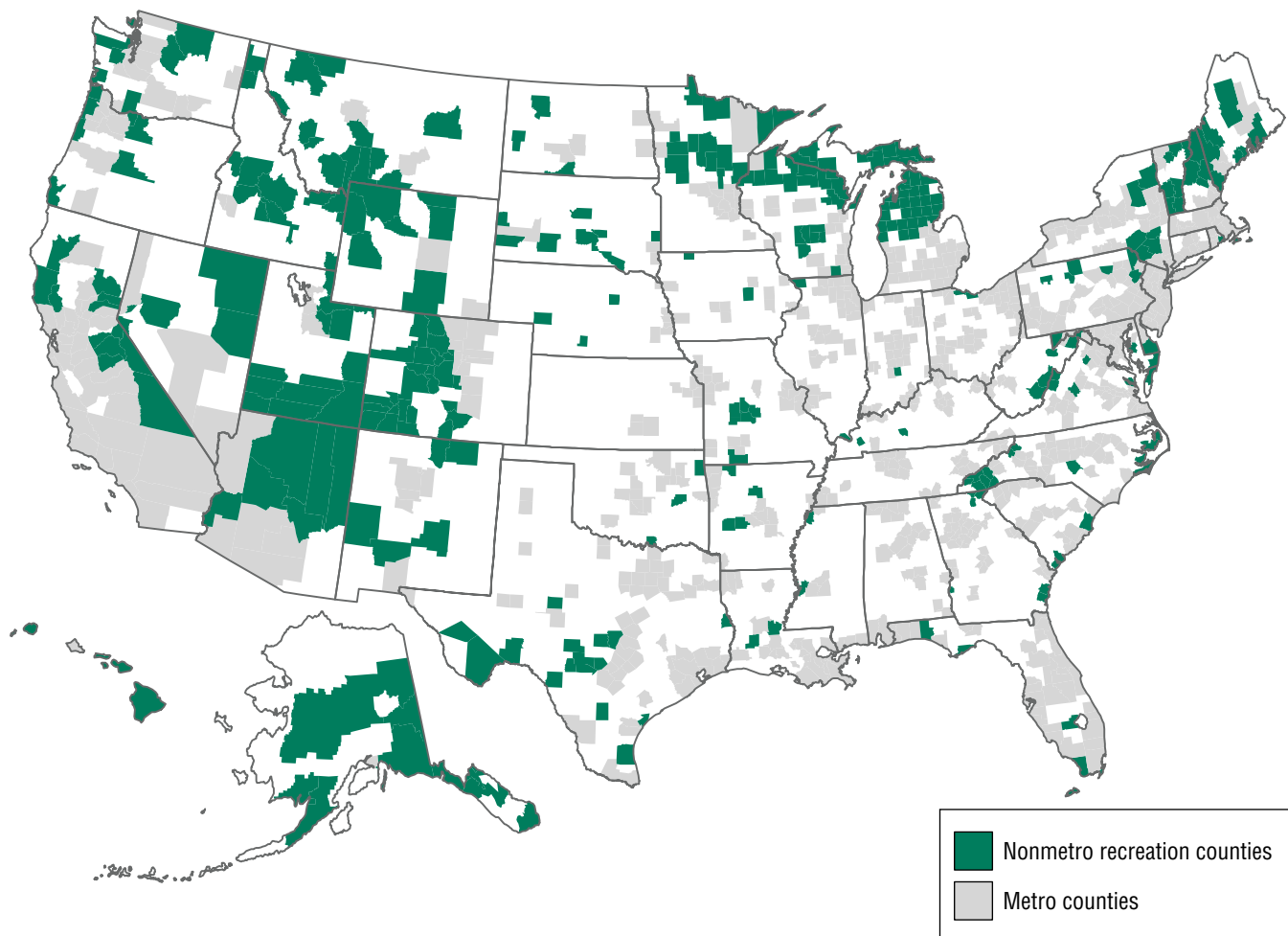
Counties with high economic dependence on recreation are in

45 States, but there are significant regional concentrations (fig. 1). The Upper Great Lakes and the Northeast have numerous lake-oriented counties that are second-home summer vacation areas of long standing, although they have added winter attractions such as snowmobile trails and skiing. In these counties, it is common for a third to half of all housing units to be seasonal or occasional-use places.

Figure 1

#### Nonmetro recreation counties

Most recreation counties are in the Mountain West, the Upper Great Lakes country, and New York-New England



Source: Calculated by the authors from various data of the Census Bureau and the Bureau of Economic Analysis.

## How Recreation Counties Were Identified

The county or county equivalent is our unit of analysis. Counties have historically stable boundaries and are a basic unit for reporting social and economic data. We have done our identification for nonmetro counties only—those lying outside of the borders of the individual metro areas defined by the Office of Management and Budget, using the boundaries established in 1993 after the 1990 Census. In general, a metro area contains an urbanized area of 50,000 or more people, with borders extended out to county lines and including any other counties linked by substantial job commuting to the central county or counties. All other counties are nonmetro. Because metro reclassification after each census complicates efforts to compare data for nonmetro areas across time, a consistent 1993 metro delineation is used. (Metro and nonmetro boundaries based on the 2000 Census will not be available until mid-2003.) Of 3,140 U.S. counties and equivalents, 2,303 are nonmetro and 837 are metro.

A multistep selection procedure combining several empirical measures of recreational activity with a careful review of contextual material was used to identify recreation counties. These measures were: (1) wage and salary employment in entertainment and recreation, accommodations, eating and drinking places, and real estate as a percentage of all employment reported in the Census Bureau's County Business Patterns for 1999; (2) percentage of total personal income reported for these same categories by the Bureau of Economic Analysis; (3) percentage of housing units intended for seasonal or occasional use reported in the 2000 Census; and (4) per capita receipts from motels and hotels as reported in the 1997 Census of Business. The industry categories selected for use with the employment and income statistics as being indicative of recreational activity were chosen after inspection of data for a sample of counties of well-known, undisputed high recreational dependence (e.g., those containing such places as Aspen, Vail, Sun Valley, Nantucket, Bar Harbor, the Outer Banks, Key West, Branson, or Mackinac Island).

The three variables measuring employment, income, and seasonal housing were converted to z-scores and combined into a weighted index (weights of 0.3 were assigned to income and employment and 0.4 to seasonal housing) to reflect recreational activity. Counties with index scores of 0.67 or higher were regarded as potential recreation counties. Additional counties were considered to be recreation counties if their value was greater than 0 (the mean of the index) and they had at least \$400 per capita of hotel-motel receipts. Inclusion of such counties to the list added some comparatively large counties with a high volume of recreation activity but with urban centers big enough to dilute the percentage of direct recreational income and employment or the proportion of second homes (e.g., those containing Sedona, AZ; Coeur d'Alene, ID; Traverse City, MI; Southern Pines-Pinehurst, NC; or Newport, RI).

Counties were also accepted if at least 25 percent of their housing was seasonal, so long as the index exceeded the mean. Each potential candidate was individually appraised from printed and/or Internet sources and personal knowledge to determine or verify the nature of their recreational function. Fourteen counties that ostensibly qualified, but lacked any known recreational function, were deleted from the list either because they were very small in population with inadequate and misleading County Business Patterns coverage or because they reflected high travel activity without recreational purpose, i.e., overnight motel and eating place clusters on major highways.

Recreation counties are also scattered throughout the length of the Rocky Mountains, many best known for their national parks or ski resorts, but most include other features conducive to hiking, mountain biking, climbing, fishing, rafting, or just escaping summer heat and humidity. Upland areas of the South also include recreation counties offering many of the same activities as the West, often featur-

ing leisure use of the reservoirs that are the legacy of the dam-building era.

Alaska and Hawaii are also well represented, although very different in appeal. Hawaii's three recreation counties are all highly developed, thickly populated tropical resorts. In Alaska, where population is sparse, outdoors recreation and the novelty of subarctic location attract enough visitors to place 11 of the

States's county equivalents on our list. Aside from a few casino counties, there is a general dearth of recreation areas in the southern Great Plains, the Corn Belt, and the lower mid-South.

### Recreation Counties Come in a Variety of Types

Recreation counties offer visitors and residents a variety of opportunities to pursue leisure

interests. Some of the counties are dominated by a single function. Others have more than one attraction, or different attractions in different seasons. Some of the variation between counties is determined by their geographic location or the physical attributes of the area. To illustrate the variety of recreational settings and types, we classified the counties into 11 types (table 1).

To many people, water and woods activities epitomize recreation and 91 (28 percent) of the recreation counties fit this description. Of these, 70 are in the Great Lakes States and 21 in the Northeast (table 1). Many have been second-home areas for decades. Although population gains in such counties are less than those for recreation counties overall, their growth rates well exceed those for nonmetro counties as a whole.

Migration accounts for virtually all of this growth because they have long attracted retirees as well as vacationers, resulting in an older population subject to high mortality.

But, one need not go to the Northwoods lakes to enjoy water and beaches. Thirty-eight counties on both coasts were typed as Coastal Ocean Resorts and an additional 27—located largely in the South—were classed as Reservoir Lake counties. Many counties in these two groups have temperate climates in addition to water access and attract retirees as well as tourists and second-home owners. This is reflected in the demographic data, which show migration gains during the 1990s (especially in the Reservoir counties) but little, if any, natural increase.

Mountainous terrain is the dominant feature in several other

recreational types. Twenty counties were so focused on skiing that we labeled them as Ski Resorts, although they usually have summer attractions as well. Another 18 counties were characterized as Other Mountain Areas with Skiing, where skiing is present but not regarded as dominant.

Twenty-one Casino counties are the most recent and unique additions to the recreational mix. They did not exist in the 1980s except for a few in Nevada. The gambling casinos have developed since Federal approval of Indian tribal casinos in 1987 (where consistent with State law), and by the decision of some States to permit non-Indian casinos in designated locations. Some of the casino counties lack any natural amenity base for recreation, in contrast to virtually all other recreation counties.

Population gains in these counties

Table 1

**Population change, net migration, and natural increase for recreation county types, 1990-2000**

*Recreation counties come in a variety of types, but all experienced inmovement of people*

Recreational subgroup	Population change			Net migration		Natural increase	
	Number of counties	Percent change	Percent growing	Percent change	Percent growing	Percent change	Percent growing
Midwest Lake & 2nd Home	70	15.7	93	14.8	96	0.8	51
Northeast Mtn, Lake, and 2nd Home	21	11.5	90	9.6	81	2.0	71
Coastal Ocean Resort	38	18.7	95	14.9	92	3.8	66
Reservoir Lake	27	26.0	89	27.6	89	-1.7	41
Ski Resort	20	34.3	95	26.9	95	7.4	90
Other Mountain (with ski)	17	23.6	100	17.9	94	5.5	76
West Mountain (exc. ski and Nat'l Park)	47	32.3	89	27.6	89	4.6	74
South Appalachian Mtn Resort	17	17.0	88	16.4	100	0.6	53
Casino	21	17.5	95	11.4	67	6.1	95
National Park	21	16.7	76	8.0	52	8.7	90
Miscellaneous	28	26.5	89	22.2	82	4.3	71
Total Recreation	327	20.2	91	16.9	87	3.3	68

Three Alaska counties excluded because of missing data prior to 2000.

Notes: Recreation types are mutually exclusive and reflect the primary recreation activity, though many support multiple leisure activities.

Percent change is aggregate change for all cases in category.

Source: Census 2000 PI-94, 1990 Census, and Federal-State Cooperative estimates.

Table 2

**Population change, net migration and natural increase for recreation, nonmetro, and metro counties, 1970-2000***Population growth rates were consistently higher in recreation counties than elsewhere*

Years/counties	Number of cases	Initial pop. (1,000)	Population change			Net migration			Natural increase			
			Absolute change (1,000)	Percent change	Percent growing	Absolute change (1,000)	Percent change	Percent growing	Absolute change (1,000)	Percent change	Percent growing	
<b>1970 to 1980</b>												
Recreation	314	4,974	1,221	24.5	89.8	931	18.7	85.0	290	5.8	88.5	
All nonmetro	2,274	43,317	5,790	13.4	79.6	3,159	7.3	66.9	2,631	6.1	88.1	
Metro	834	158,884	17,146	10.8	88.6	5,948	3.7	73.4	11,198	7.0	97.8	
Total	3,108	202,229	22,937	11.3	82.0	9,107	4.5	68.7	13,830	6.8	90.7	
<b>1980 to 1990:</b>												
Recreation	327	6,442	813	12.6	73.4	431	6.7	58.4	382	5.9	87.7	
All nonmetro	2,303	49,520	1,296	2.6	45.1	-1,379	-2.8	27.4	2,675	5.4	89.4	
Metro	837	177,012	20,871	11.8	81.0	6,585	3.7	57.7	14,286	8.1	97.7	
Total	3,140	226,542	22,168	9.8	54.6	5,206	2.3	35.5	16,962	7.5	91.7	
<b>1990 to 2000:</b>												
Recreation	327	7,258	1,465	20.2	91.4	1,226	16.9	87.4	239	3.3	67.7	
All nonmetro	2,303	50,816	5,262	10.4	73.9	3,535	7.0	68.4	1,727	3.4	70.8	
Metropolitan	837	197,890	27,456	13.9	90.1	12,124	6.1	77.5	15,332	7.7	94.9	
Total	3,140	248,710	32,716	13.2	78.2	15,659	6.3	70.8	17,059	6.9	77.3	

Alaska and Hawaii excluded from 1970-1980 analysis due to missing data. Three Alaska counties excluded from 1980-2000 due to missing data prior to 2000.

Notes: 1993 metropolitan status used for all periods. Net migration is population change minus natural increase.

Source: Census 2000 PL-94 data, 1970-1990 Census data, and Federal-State Cooperative Population estimates.

were moderate compared with other recreation counties, but certainly substantial by national standards of nonmetro growth. There were 32 counties in other recreation types that also had casinos in their recreation mix, but not as the dominant attraction. In addition, a number of non-recreation counties have casinos whose impact was too small to create an exceptional presence of recreation-related employment and income. Altogether, we identified over 130 nonmetro counties outside of Nevada that now have casinos, representing a substantial new addition to the nonmetro employment mix.

National Parks are the principal attraction in 21 recreation counties. This county type is the only one among the recreation types in which net migration did not overwhelmingly dominate the population change. Although migration gains in National Park counties were well above the U.S. average, they were less than half that of all recreation counties. The rate of natural increase in the National Park counties was nearly three times that of recreation counties as a whole. But this is believed to derive largely from the disproportionate presence of American Indian, Alaskan Native, and Mormon communities in the park counties, rather than from any effect of the national parks themselves.

Finally, 28 counties in a Miscellaneous Recreation group have such attractions as historic towns, amusement parks, golfing, hunting, wind surfing, or performance centers, but are either unique or not numerous enough to treat as a separate type. These counties had significant net in-migration coupled with above-average natural increase from 1990 to 2000 (table 1).

### All Types of Recreation Counties Had Net In-movement of People

In the 1990s, nonmetro areas experienced a significant population rebound. Such growth was particularly rapid and widespread in recreation counties, where overall population increase was 20.2 per-

cent, compared with 10.4 percent in all nonmetro counties and 13.2 percent in the Nation as a whole (table 2). Most of the recreation county growth was fueled by net immigration of people (84 percent). The rate of migration gain in recreation counties was 2.5 times that in nonmetro counties generally. Such gains were very widespread, occurring in 87 percent of the recreation counties. These gains are likely the result of not only increased inmovement to these counties, but also reduced outmovement of native residents because of the greater economic opportunities provided by immigration.

The rate of natural increase in the recreation counties (i.e., growth from surplus of births over deaths) was slightly lower than elsewhere. Indeed, nearly a third of all recreation counties had more

deaths than births. This largely reflects the retirement of many people to these counties who eventually swell the death rate to the point that it exceeds the birth rate.

Although recreation counties have not been immune to events that influence the pace of demographic change in general, they consistently had population and net immigration gains that far exceeded those in other nonmetro counties during each of the last three decades (table 2). In the 1970s, the recreation counties led the remarkable nonmetro growth of that decade. In the 1980s, when nonmetro America as a whole had net outmigration during the long economic downturn of that period, recreation counties continued to attract migrants and had a more rapid growth rate than the national or metro populations.

It is deceptively simple to lump more than 2,300 diverse nonmetro counties into a single category and call it Rural America. To address this concern, USDA's Economic Research Service developed a typology of counties that groups nonmetro counties into a number of economic and policy-relevant types. Comparing the recreational counties to these ERS groupings provides additional insights into the linkages between demographic change and recreational activity.

In the 1990s, population growth rates in recreation counties exceeded those in all but two of the ERS county types (table 3). The exceptions were retirement-destination counties and those containing large Federal land holdings. The rapid population gain in counties with a high proportion of Federal land derives partly from

Table 3

**Population change, net migration, and natural increase in nonmetro counties by type, 1990-2000**

*Retirement, Federal land, and recreation counties exceeded other nonmetro counties in growth*

County type	Population change			Net migration		Natural increase	
	Number	Percent change	Percent growing	Percent change	Percent growing	Percent change	Percent growing
Retirement	190	28.4	100	25.9	99	2.5	59
Federal lands	269	22.3	90	16.4	83	5.9	83
Recreation	327	20.2	91	16.9	87	3.3	68
Manufacturing	506	9.5	87	6.1	76	3.4	86
Commuting	381	15.2	92	12.0	88	3.2	80
Government	243	11.5	85	5.2	74	6.3	77
Service	323	14.6	81	11.7	78	2.9	71
Nonspecialized	484	10.9	84	8.4	80	2.5	73
Transfer	81	8.5	75	6.5	69	1.9	60
Poverty	535	9.1	77	4.4	63	4.7	80
Mining	146	2.3	54	-1.5	44	3.8	81
Farming	556	6.6	49	3.9	49	2.7	53
Total nonmetro	2,303	10.3	74	6.9	68	3.4	71

Three Alaska counties excluded due to missing data prior to 2000.

Notes: All types except recreation defined as in Cook and Mizer, 1994 (14 previously metro counties excluded).

A county may be included in more than one type.

Percent change is aggregate change for all counties in category.

Source: Census 2000 PL-94 data, 1990 Census data, and Federal-State Cooperative population estimates.



Photo courtesy CORELDRAW Professional Photos.

the fact that they are mostly in the West, the most rapidly growing U.S. region. Retirement counties are defined as those with significant inmovement of older people in the 1980s, so it is not surprising that they would have an above-average rate of total population increase in the 1990s. But their overall growth of 28.4 percent from 1990 to 2000 is extraordinary. Retirement counties were the only ones with a larger rate of migration gain than recreation counties. More than half of the 190 retirement counties were also recreation counties, as areas with recreational opportunities often attract retirees.

In contrast, it is not surprising that farming counties had only moderate population growth in the 1990s (6.6 percent). Indeed, the surprise is that they grew at all. But growth in recreation counties was also well ahead of that in areas dependent on manufacturing, government work, trade and services,

or those with nonspecialized economies. Even counties with high rates of intercounty job commuting—many of which adjoin metro areas and are incipiently suburban—did not match recreation counties in the pace of population increase. In sum, the presence of exceptional recreation activity in rural counties is strongly linked to population growth.

### **Implications of Recreational Growth**

Rural America was settled by people who built their lives and communities by extracting sustenance from bountiful natural resources. Originally it was the soil, forests, animals, and minerals that attracted settlement. Extractive industries based on these resources are now mature and consistently operate with fewer workers. But rural areas have other natural resources—bodies of water, mountains, valleys, and scenic

landscapes—that today attract millions of leisure visitors and many new residents, thus creating more jobs in the process. The fact that many recreation areas also are retirement destinations underscores the capacity of climate and scenic amenities to attract people for permanent residence.

The implications of continuing growth in recreational areas are not all positive, particularly because these locations contain many environmentally sensitive areas. Water bodies, shore lines, wetlands, forests, and wildlife are likely to experience more environmental stress as the volume of human activity grows, especially where the physical features and fauna themselves are the objects sought for use or appreciation by the visitors and new residents. Some recreation counties began to be used for leisure purposes on a small scale in the 19th century, but—along with newer ones—have grown at an



accelerating pace in recent decades as affluence and leisure increase in a nation fast approaching 300 million people. Some nonmetro recreation counties had such growth in the 1990s that they now have urbanized areas of over 50,000 people and will be reclassified as metropolitan in 2003 (e.g., Prescott, AZ; Coeur d'Alene, ID; Bend, OR).

The growth in many recreation areas has occurred near and within forests, aggravating fire control problems (as witnessed prominently in the West in the summer of 2002). The rapid growth also complicates agricultural operations, puts additional pressure on riparian areas, impairs air quality, and can diminish the very amenities that initially attracted people. Yet in an era when hundreds of rural and small-town communities need to obtain new sources of income to counter the decline of farm, mine, and timber jobs and the loss of factory work overseas, the rising urban demand for rural recreation has become essential to the continued vitality of many places.

Therefore, when attempting to understand conditions and trends in nonmetro America, it is necessary to determine which counties have developed high dependence on recreation activity. The process of specifying recreation counties is unavoidably somewhat arbitrary because recreation occurs to some degree nearly everywhere. There are counties not on our list that have well-known recreational features. And other researchers might

choose different procedures than we have. However, the consistently large population and migration gains evident over three varied decades in the counties we have delineated as recreational indicates the utility of our classification. As such, we believe it will be a useful tool for researchers and policymakers concerned with the welfare and course of change in rural and small-town America. [RA](#)

#### **For Further Reading . . .**

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