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Six charts that illustrate the divide between rural and urban America

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The divide is in the data. American Community Survey (ACS) 2011-2015 5 year estimates, Table S1810, CC BY

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Editor's note: We've all heard of the great divide between life in rural and urban America. But what are the factors that contribute to these differences? We asked sociologists, economists, geographers and historians to describe the divide from different angles. The data paint a richer and sometimes surprising picture of the U.S. today.

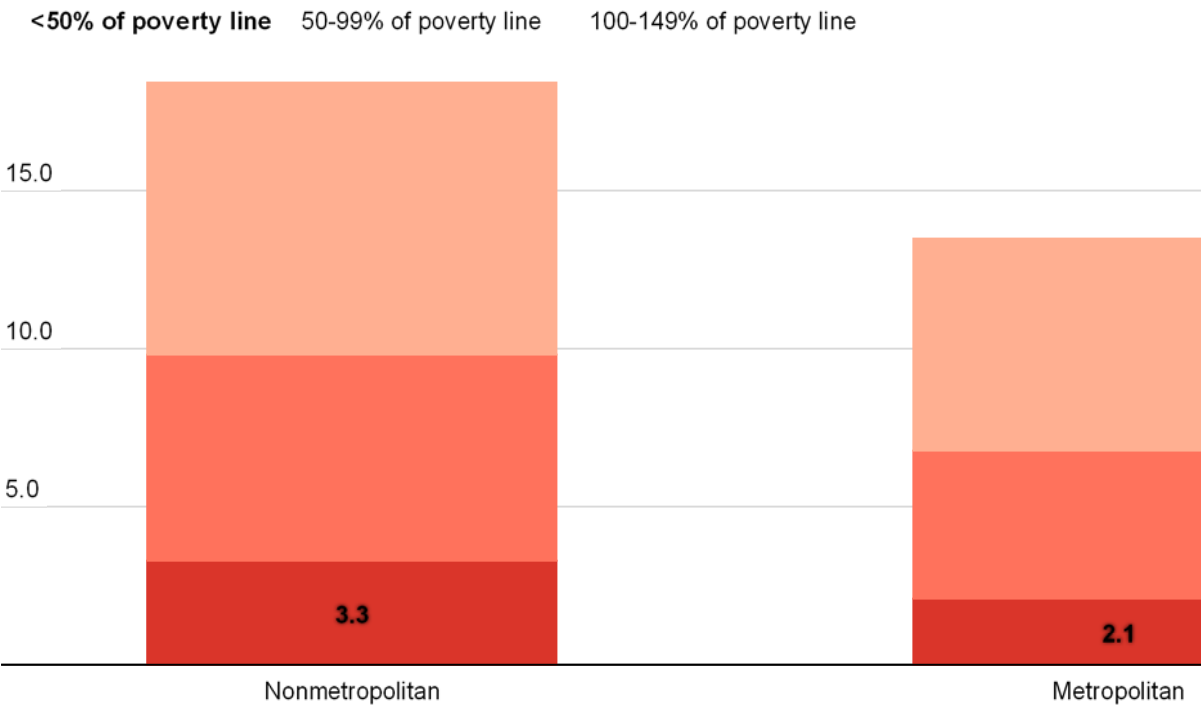
1. Poverty is higher in rural areas

Discussions of poverty in the United States often mistakenly focus on urban areas. While urban poverty is a unique challenge, rates of poverty have historically been higher in rural than urban areas. In fact, levels of rural poverty were often double those in urban areas throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

While these rural-urban gaps have diminished markedly, substantial differences persist. In 2015, 16.7 percent of the rural population was poor, compared with 13.0 percent of the urban population overall – and 10.8 percent among those living in suburban areas outside of principal cities.

American workers in poverty

Percent of U.S. householders aged 25-54 that worked at least part of the year in 2015, by poverty threshold.



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Source: 2016 March Current Population Survey Public Use Microdata [Get the data](#)

Contrary to common assumptions, substantial shares of the poor are employed. Approximately 45 percent of poor, prime-age (25-54) householders worked at least part of 2015 in rural and urban areas alike.

The link between work and poverty was different in the past. In the early 1980s, the share of the rural poor that was employed exceeded that in urban areas by more than 15 percent. Since then, more and more poor people in rural areas are also unemployed – a trend consistent with other patterns documented below.

That said, rural workers continue to benefit less from work than their urban counterparts. In 2015, 9.8 percent of rural, prime-age working householders were poor, compared with 6.8 percent of their urban counterparts. Nearly a third of the rural working poor faced extreme levels of deprivation, with family incomes below 50 percent of the poverty line, or approximately US\$12,000 for a family of four.

Large shares of the rural workforce also live in economically precarious circumstances just above the poverty line. Nearly one in five rural working householders lived in families with incomes less than 150 percent of the poverty line. That’s nearly five percentage points more than among urban workers (13.5 percent).

According to recent research, rural-urban gaps in working poverty cannot be explained by rural workers’ levels of education, industry of employment or other similar factors that might affect earnings. Rural poverty – at least among workers – cannot be fully explained by the characteristics of the rural population. That means reducing rural poverty will require attention to the structure of rural economies and communities.

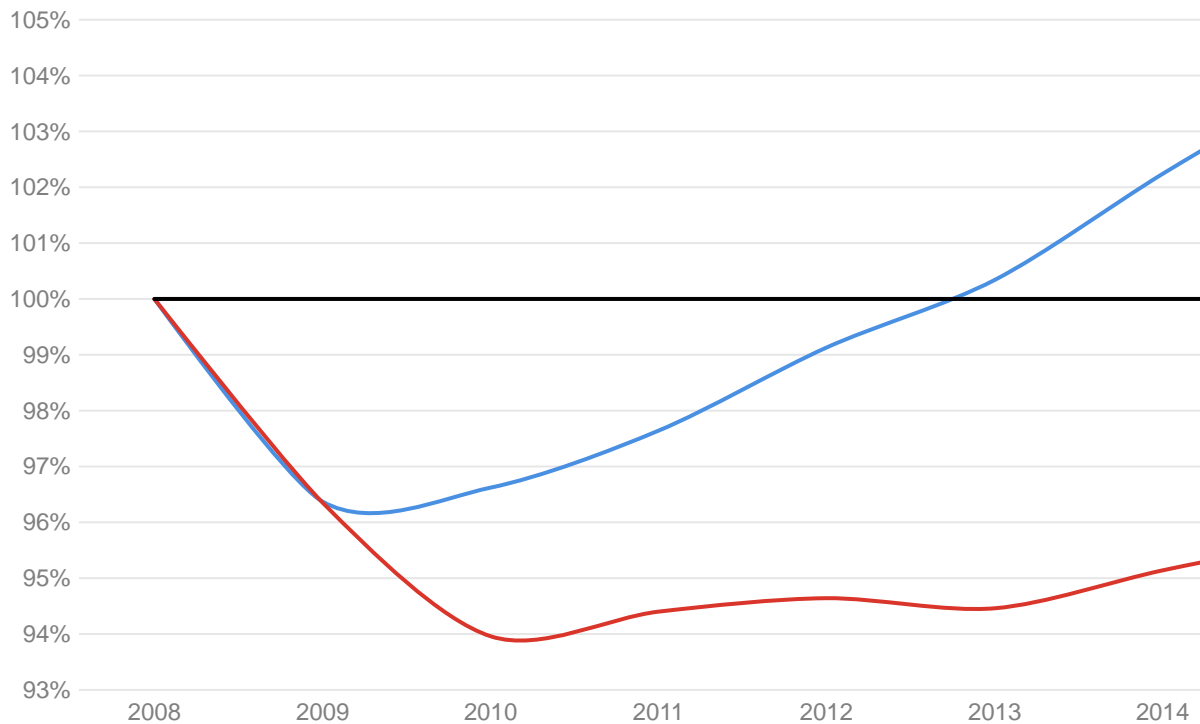
– Brian Thiede, Assistant Professor of Rural Sociology and Demography, Pennsylvania State University

2. Most new jobs aren’t in rural areas

It’s easy to see why many rural Americans believe the recession never ended: For them, it hasn’t.

Job growth in America

Since 2008, job growth in metropolitan areas has outpaced that in rural areas.



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Source: [Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 6.0, 2008-2015 ACS](#). [Get the data](#)

Rural communities still haven’t recovered the jobs they lost in the recession. Census data show that the rural job market is smaller now – 4.26 percent smaller, to be exact – than it was in 2008. In these data are shuttered coal mines on the edges of rural towns and boarded-up gas stations on rural

main streets. In these data are the angers, fears and frustrations of much of rural America.

This isn't a new trend. Mechanization, environmental regulations and increased global competition have been slowly whittling away at resource extraction economies and driving jobs from rural communities for most of the 20th century. But the fact that what they're experiencing now is simply the cold consequences of history likely brings little comfort to rural people. If anything, it only adds to their fear that what they once had is gone and it's never coming back.

Nor is it likely that the slight increase in rural jobs since 2013 brings much comfort. As the resource extraction economy continues to shrink, most of the new jobs in rural areas are being created in the service sector. So Appalachian coal miners and Northwest loggers are now stocking shelves at the local Walmart.

The identity of rural communities used to be rooted in work. The signs at the entrances of their towns welcomed visitors to coal country or timber country. Towns named their high school mascots after the work that sustained them, like the Jordan Beetpickers in Utah or the Camas Papermakers in Washington. It used to be that, when someone first arrived at these towns, they knew what people did and that they were proud to do it.

That's not so clear anymore. How do you communicate your communal identity when the work once at the center of that identity is gone, and calling the local high school football team the "Walmart Greeters" simply doesn't have the same ring to it?

Looking at rural jobs data, is it so hard to understand why many rural people are nostalgic for the past and fearful for the future?

— *Steven Beda, Instructor of History, University of Oregon*

3. Disabilities are more common in rural areas

Disability matters in rural America. Data from the American Community Survey, an annual government poll, reveal that disability is more prevalent in rural counties than their urban counterparts.

The rate of disability increases from 11.8 percent in the most urban metropolitan counties to 15.6 percent in smaller micropolitan areas and 17.7 percent in the most rural, or noncore, counties.

Disability rates

Rates of disability increase from more urban (metropolitan) to more rural (non-core) counties.

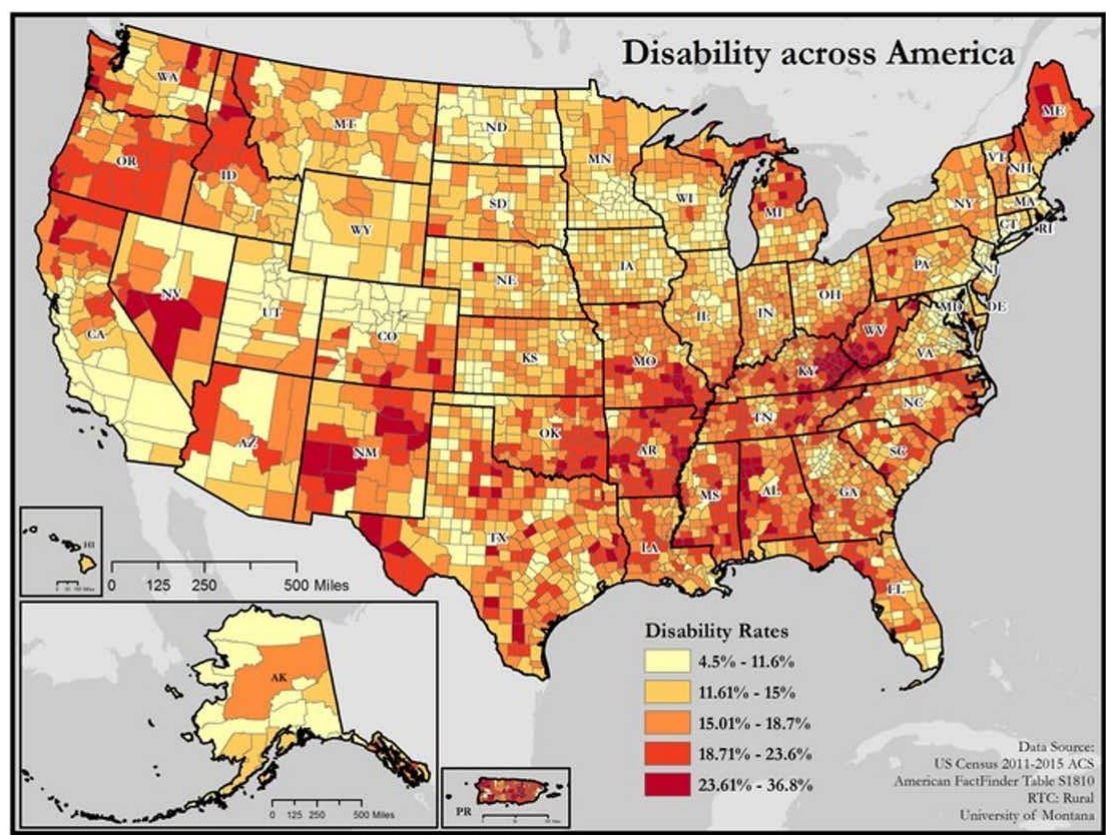
Metropolitan: counties with an urban population of 50,000+	11.8
Micropolitan: counties with an urban population of 10,000-50,000	15.6
Non-core: counties with an urban population of less than 10,000	17.7

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Source: [RTC: Rural](#) [Get the data](#)

While rural-urban differences in disability have been analyzed previously, researchers have had little opportunity to further explore this disparity, as updated data on rural disability were unavailable until recently. Fortunately, the census released updated new county-level disability estimates in 2014, ending a 14-year knowledge gap.

The release of these estimates has also allowed us to build a picture of geographic variations in disability across the nation. Disability rates vary significantly across the U.S. Although the national trend of higher disability rates in rural counties persists at the regional and even divisional level, it is clear that disability in rural America is not homogeneous. Rates of rural disability range from around 15 percent in the Great Plains to 21 percent in the central South.



A variety of factors may be behind these regional and rural differences, including differences in demographics, economic patterns, health and service access and state disability policies.

While this survey provides a glimpse into the national prevalence of disability and reveals a persistent rural-urban disparity, it is important to note its limitations. Disability is the result of an interaction between an individual and his or her environment. Therefore, these data do not directly measure disability, as they measure only physical function and do not consider environmental factors such as inaccessible housing.

– *Lillie Greiman and Andrew Myers, Project Directors at the Rural Institute for Inclusive Communities at the University of Montana; Christiane von Reichert, Professor of Geography, University of Montana*

4. Rural areas are surprisingly entrepreneurial

The United States' continuing economic dominance is perhaps most attributable to the very smallest elements of its economy: its entrepreneurial start-ups. Nearly 700,000 new job-creating businesses open each year. That's almost 2,000 every day, each helping to create new market niches in the global economy.

Most people mistakenly believe these pioneering establishments occur in overwhelmingly in metropolitan areas, such as in the now-mythic start-up culture of Silicon Valley.

Yet, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, it is in fact nonmetropolitan counties that have higher rates of self-employed business proprietors than their metropolitan counterparts.

Entrepreneurship per 1000 residents

Most people mistakenly believe that startups occur overwhelmingly in metropolitan areas. Yet it is in fact rural counties that have higher rates of self-employed business proprietors.

Rural (pop. less than 2,500, not adjacent to metro area)	234
Rural (pop. less than 2,500, adjacent to metro area)	177
Rural (pop. 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to metro area)	160
Rural (pop. 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to metro area)	140
Rural (pop. 20,000 or more, not adjacent to metro area)	130
Rural (pop. 20,000 or more, adjacent to metro area)	121
Metro (pop. less than 250,000)	126
Metro (pop. 250,000 to 1 million)	122
Metro (pop. 1 million or more)	131

Entrepreneurship is measured here by proprietorship, a tax status indicative of at least one self-employed individual, who may also employ others. One proprietor may own multiple businesses.

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Source: Authors' analysis of data from the Bureau of Economic Analysis [Get the data](#)

Furthermore, the more rural the county, the higher its level of entrepreneurship. Some of these counties have a farming legacy – perhaps the most entrepreneurial of occupations – but farmers represent less than one-sixth of business owners in nonmetro areas. Even for nonfarm enterprises, rural entrepreneurship rates are higher.

The reality is that rural areas have to be entrepreneurial, as industries with concentrations of wage and salary jobs are necessarily scarce.

Start-up businesses have notoriously difficult survival prospects. So it is perhaps even more surprising that relatively isolated nonmetropolitan businesses are on average more resilient than their metro cousins, despite the considerable economic advantages of urban areas, which boast a denser networks of workers, suppliers and markets. The resilience of rural start-ups is perhaps due to more cautious business practices in areas with few alternative employment options.

Five-year business survival rates

Rural businesses are, on average, more resilient than their metro cousins, despite the considerable economic advantages of urban areas.

Rural (pop. less than 2,500, not adjacent to metro area)	71.6%
Rural (pop. less than 2,500, adjacent to metro area)	70.9%
Rural (pop. 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to metro area)	70%
Rural (pop. 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to metro area)	69.5%
Rural (pop. 20,000 or more, not adjacent to metro area)	68.5%
Rural (pop. 20,000 or more, adjacent to metro area)	68.3%
Metro (pop. less than 250,000)	68.3%
Metro (pop. 250,000 to 1 million)	67.6%
Metro (pop. 1 million or more)	66.5%

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Source: Authors’ analysis of data from the National Establishment Time Series [Get the data](#)

This resilience is also remarkably persistent over time, consistently being at least on par with metro start-ups, and regularly having survival rates up to 10 percentage points higher than in metro areas over 1990-2007.

– *Stephan Weiler, Professor of Economics, Colorado State University; Tessa Conroy and Steve Deller, Professors of Economics, University of Wisconsin-Madison*