

Defining Rural

Various definitions of rural exist and can include reference to measures of population size and density or geographic location (metropolitan vs. nonmetropolitan areas). When determining the rurality of an institution there is an additional classification that should be indicated, which is rural serving (students served that come from a rural environment). According to the [Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges \(2022\)](#), a rural serving institution is “not located in a place classified as rural but that provide important service to rural populations and places, such as large land-grant universities and regional colleges that exist on the suburban fringe of more urbanized areas.”

[Department of Education](#) [Source: Office of Management and Budget (2000). Standards for Defining Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas; Notice. Federal Register (65) No. 249.]

Fringe: Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster

Distant: Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster

Remote: Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster

[US Census Bureau](#)

“Rural” encompasses all population, housing, and territory not included within an urban area.

[USDA](#)

Researchers and policy officials employ many definitions to distinguish rural from urban areas, which often leads to unnecessary confusion and unwanted mismatches in program eligibility. However, the existence of multiple rural definitions reflects the reality that rural and urban are multidimensional concepts. Sometimes population density is the defining concern, in other cases it is geographic isolation. Small population size typically characterizes a rural place, but how small is rural? Population thresholds used to differentiate rural and urban communities range from 2,500 up to 50,000, depending on the definition.

In 2013, OMB defined metropolitan (metro) areas as broad labor-market areas that include:

1. Central counties with one or more urbanized areas; urbanized areas (described in the next section) are densely-settled urban entities with 50,000 or more people.
2. Outlying counties that are economically tied to the core counties as measured by labor-force commuting. Outlying counties are included if 25 percent of workers living in the county commute to the central counties, or if 25 percent of the employment in the county consists of workers coming out from the central counties—the so-called "reverse" commuting pattern.

Nonmetro counties are outside the boundaries of metro areas and are further subdivided into two types:

Micropolitan (micro) areas, which are nonmetro labor-market areas centered on urban clusters of 10,000-49,999 persons and defined with the same criteria used to define metro areas.

All remaining counties, often labeled "noncore" counties because they are not part of "core-based" metro or micro areas.

Office of Management and Budget

The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) designates counties as Metropolitan, Micropolitan, or Neither. A Metro area contains a core urban area of 50,000 or more population, and a Micro area contains an urban core of at least 10,000 (but less than 50,000) population. All counties that are not part of a Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) are considered rural. Micropolitan counties are considered non-Metropolitan or rural along with all counties that are not classified as either Metro or Micro.

Federal Office of Rural Health Policy

The FORHP accepts all non-Metro counties as rural and uses an additional method of determining rurality called the Rural-Urban Commuting Area (RUCA) codes.