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Redefining Rural America

By Thomas D. Rowley

In 17 years of studying the subject, I've come across nearly every definition of "rural" there is. And there are plenty--from the bureaucratic to the bucolic to the downright bawdy (which my editors prevent me from sharing). At a pit stop on a long drive home last week, I even came up with one of my own: Rural is where gas station squeegees all have long handles so little old ladies can reach the bugs in the center of the 4x4 windshield. The beauty of that definition—if I do say so myself—lies in the fact that it hits on three of the dominant factors of rural life: trucks, driving and the elderly.

The abundance of definitions, however, does not mean that rural America is well defined or well served. Indeed, it is neither.

As University of Illinois professor Andrew Isserman points out in the October 2005 issue of *International Regional Science Review*, researchers and policymakers alike stumble when it comes to defining rural America. We have, says Isserman, no satisfactory way to measure rural. Instead, rural is defined in "two different overlapping and often contradictory ways, always defined by what it is not—not urban, not metropolitan." Consequently, we misunderstand rural conditions, misdirect programs and funds and confuse everyone in earshot.

As one small but telling example, Isserman notes that one federal definition lists metropolitan America as home to both the Grand Canyon and more than a million farmers. Go figure.

Understanding that counter-intuitive factoid—and what can be done to bring it in line with reality--requires a brief visit to the world of federal data. So pour yourself another cup of coffee.

Two federal data systems underlie the vast majority of rural research and policy/programs in this country. One uses small geographic units called census blocks to identify urban areas of 2,500 or more people. Everything else gets called rural. The other system uses counties to identify metropolitan areas (and smaller micropolitan areas) that can be several counties wide and linked by commuting patterns. Under this scheme, researchers and policymakers tend to refer to metropolitan counties as urban and, again, the leftovers as rural.

Insulting as it is for rural people and places to be regarded merely as a residual and defined primarily by what we're not, the real damage comes from the huge undercounting

of rural people--undercounting that minimizes rural political clout, results in rural people and places being ineligible for rural programs and leads to all sorts of confusion about the actual needs and conditions of rural America. Indeed, 30 million rural people—the majority of rural people--live in so-called metropolitan counties (as do the Grand Canyon and those million-plus farmers). And because data for any unit smaller than the county is hard to come by, this second system is used most often.

Fortunately, says Isserman, there's a better way—two actually. The ideal way would be for the “federal government to make available the same data for urban and rural areas that are available for counties.” That's possible, but would take some doing. The immediately doable alternative, what Isserman calls an “urban-rural density typology”, would use existing county data in ways that recognize that most counties have both urban and rural areas. It would, in other words, reflect reality.

Without going into the statistical details of the typology (and tanking up on even more caffeine), let me simply suggest that now is the time to get our definitions right. As Congress debates and formulates the 2007 Farm Bill and what hopefully will be the most significant Rural Development Title ever, it needs to recognize that the best policies and programs in the world don't count for beans if they don't reach the people and places that need them. To be effective, programs must be accurately targeted.

As Isserman puts it, “...getting rural right is in the national interest. When we get rural wrong, we reach incorrect research conclusions and fail to reach the people, places, and businesses our governmental programs are meant to serve.”

We've been getting rural wrong for decades; it's time to get it right. It's time for a better, more accurate, more realistic definition of rural America.

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