Defining “Rural” for the Study on Human Services Programs in Rural Contexts

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2M Research and the Urban Institute, in partnership with the Administration for Children and Families and Health Resources and Services Administration, are conducting a mixed-methods study to assess the challenges and opportunities for administering human services programs in rural contexts. How we define “rural” affects how we design and execute the study, as well as what the findings mean and how they can be applied to policy and practice. This brief explains how our study defines rural counties and specific regions along with some key limitations to these definitions.

Human Services Programs in Rural Contexts Study

Through a mixed-methods research design, including administrative and secondary data and 12 site visits, the project aims to (1) provide a rich description of human services programs in rural contexts, (2) determine the unmet need for human services in rural communities, and (3) identify opportunities for strengthening the capacity of human services programs to promote the economic and social well-being of individuals, families, and communities in rural contexts. The study will examine several human services programs administered by the US Department of Health and Human Services, including Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood; Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting; Health Profession Opportunity Grants; and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, as well as programs on early childhood development, family development, employment, and higher education and technical training.
Using Rural-Urban Continuum Codes

Many studies of rural counties only use the nonmetropolitan county designation defined by the Office of Management and Budget.¹ Because the purpose of the study on Human Services Programs in Rural Contexts is to explore variation across different types of rural contexts, in addition to the nonmetropolitan county designation we use the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural-Urban Continuum Codes to categorize nonmetropolitan counties across two additional aspects of rural communities.² The first divides nonmetropolitan counties into three categories based on the size of their urban population—an urban population of 20,000 or more; an urban population of 2,500 to 19,999; and an urban population of less than 2,500. The second divides nonmetropolitan counties into two categories based on whether they are adjacent to one or more metropolitan areas. A nonmetropolitan county is adjacent if it shares a boundary with one or more metropolitan areas and at least 2 percent of its employed labor force commutes to central metropolitan counties. Applying these criteria results in six categories of rural counties (figure 1):

1. Urban population of 20,000 or more, adjacent to a metropolitan area
2. Urban population of 20,000 or more, not adjacent to a metropolitan area
3. Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metropolitan area
4. Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metropolitan area
5. Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, adjacent to a metropolitan area
6. Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metropolitan area

FIGURE 1
US Counties Classified as Rural by USDA Rural Urban Continuum Codes, 2013

Adding Rural Regions

Although the study’s rural definition provides a broad classification system for differentiating rural counties, the six categories do not fully reflect the diversity of rural communities, including their distinct histories, cultures, and economic contexts that may affect their human services needs. This study ensures key rural regions are represented in data collection and analyzed fully, including the US Census Regions (Midwest, Northeast, South, and West) and the following four rural regions commonly defined in federal programs:

- **Appalachia**: using the service area of the federal Appalachian Regional Commission, Appalachia consists of 420 counties across 13 states, ranging from southern New York to northern Mississippi. ³
- **Colonias**: the Colonias consist of distinct rural communities along the US-Mexico border that are home to predominantly Hispanic populations and characterized by extreme poverty and a historical lack of potable water, sewer services, and electricity. ⁴
- **Delta**: using the service area of the federal Delta Regional Commission, the Delta region consists of 252 counties in an eight-state region in the Southeastern US and is distinctive for its unique culture and complicated racial history, particularly for Black people. ⁵
- **Native Lands**: the Native Lands consist of a combination of American Indian reservations, trust lands, tribal jurisdiction statistical areas, tribal designated statistical areas, Alaska Native Regional Corporations, and Alaska Native Villages (US Census Bureau 1994). ⁶

Limitations of Using this Approach

Although the study’s rural definition considers some key differences in rural counties—population sizes and how economically integrated they are with metropolitan counties—this definition could be more precise. Definitions and associated measures at the zip-code or census-tract level may align more closely with rural town jurisdictions and local experiences of human services programs and unmet needs, whereas County definitions can miss residents living in rural areas within otherwise designated metropolitan counties (Scally, Burnstein, and Gerken 2020). However, data at this small level of geography are difficult to collect consistently across human services programs and measures of unmet need.

Conclusion

Through categorizing rural counties into six distinct groups and multiple regions, we have generated a range of rural contexts where human services programs operate that allows us to collect and analyze data. Our results will reflect county-level unmet human services needs along with opportunities and challenges of serving residents in different regions of the country, each with unique histories and cultures. These findings can help inform decisions about the future delivery of human services programs in rural contexts.
Notes


4 After significant thought and deliberation, the authors have decided to use the term “Hispanic” to refer to people of Latin American origin living in the United States to align with the language used by research sources. However, the authors recognize that the term “Latinx” or “Latine” may be more inclusive. We use the term Black to describe people of African descent in the US in line with contemporary preferences to respect the experiences across the African diaspora in the US, although we recognize that not everyone belonging to this group identifies as such.


7 The Native Lands definition used in this study is from the Census Bureau’s Geographic Areas Reference Manual (GARM) released in 1994. This study utilizes American Indian Area Geography data from 2018 to identify native lands in accordance with the definition provided in the 1994 GARM. For clarity, we reserve the language used by the data source while acknowledging other terms may be more inclusive.


References


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