



# A New Portrait of Rural America

## A Report from the American Communities Project

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The geographic, demographic, and socioeconomic landscape of rural America is remarkably diverse. Rural communities can be distant and remote, or they can sit on an interstate exit. Their racial and ethnic composition can look like America from 50 years ago, or be ahead of the demographic changes that are reshaping the country. Their economies might be driven by tractors and commodity prices or by factories and retail trade.

And those different rural communities have different strengths, face different trials, and need different policy solutions.

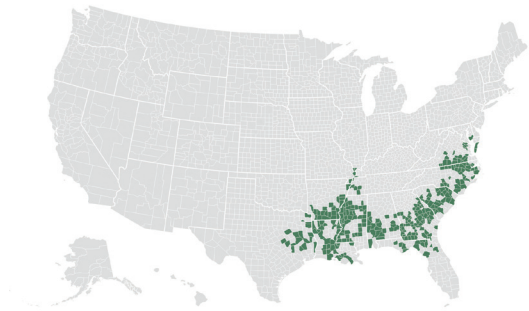
This report from the American Communities Project (ACP) at The George Washington University explores **nine different kinds of rural communities**. The analysis here, funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and released in cooperation with the National Association of Counties, should inform the growing discussion about the “urban/rural” divide by showing the enormous complexity behind the phrase “rural America” in 2019.

Our analysis of more than 2,200 rural counties reveals six major findings – and a long list of important factors driving them:

- **The physical and demographic landscape of rural America is remarkably diverse.** There are more than 500 counties where the median white, non-Hispanic population percentage is below the national average.
- **The economic challenges and opportunities in rural America vary greatly.** The average median household income in the rural Mormon-oriented, LDS Enclave counties is roughly \$55,000. In the African American South, it is less than \$40,000. Those differences drive sharp splits in challenges on issues such as child poverty.
- **Education matters.** The three community types with the highest unemployment rates are also below the rural America average for some college. The data suggest that a push toward extending educational expectations to community college could pay large dividends.
- **There are stark differences in health care** as evidenced in health insurance rates. In rural Working Class Country counties, only 9% of the population lack health insurance. In the rural Hispanic Centers, the figure is 18%.
- **Some parts of rural America are seeing steep losses in population, but other types of communities are growing.** Nearly 80% of the rural communities in the African American South have lost population since 2010. But fewer than 50% of the rural counties in Graying America have lost population since then.
- **Infrastructure challenges – real and digital.** Across rural America, there is little correlation between population and paved roads. Internet connections and speeds also look very different in different types of communities.

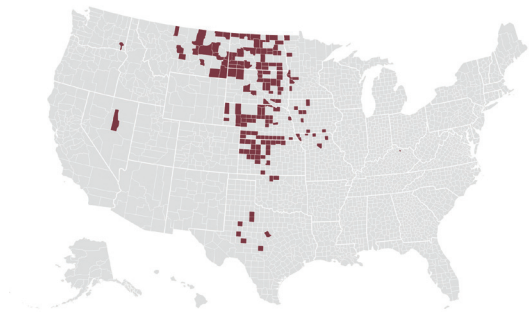
# The ACP Rural Universe

For this report, the ACP focused on truly rural **types** of community, and merged the Project's county typology with the list of counties that qualify for rural health grants from the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA). We focused on the counties in any type where more than 80% of the counties fall into the HRSA rural definition. Our universe is a collection of 2,243 counties in nine types scattered across the country. The universe is mapped and outlined here:



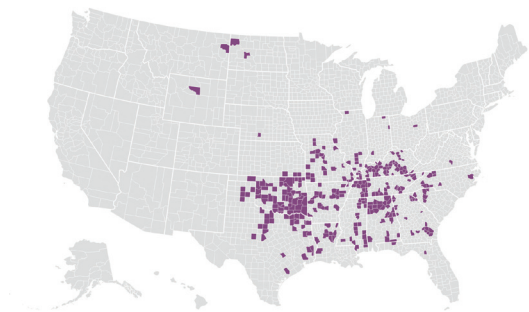
## African American South

- 306 rural counties scattered from Maryland to Texas.
- Demographics: Median county is 37% African American and only 55% white.
- Economics: Lower median household income, \$37,900, and high child poverty rate, 33%.
- Leading industries: 23% are employed in educational services, health care, and social assistance; 15% work in manufacturing.
- Education: Less than 50% of the population has some college education in the median county, under the national and rural averages.
- Health-care gap: 14% do not have insurance; it's much lower for children at 5%.



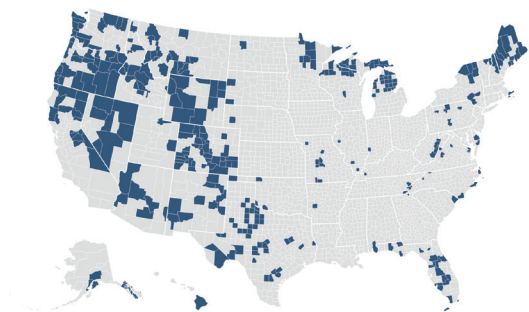
## Aging Farmlands

- 161 counties concentrated in the Central and Great Plains.
- Demographics: At 94% white, they are also among the least diverse communities in rural America.
- Economics: Low poverty and unemployment, but shrinking population. 123 counties have declined since 2010. Median population is 2,850.
- Leading industry: Primarily agriculture, accounting for 21% of the jobs in the median county.
- Education: 68% of residents have some college education.
- Health-care gap: 11% are uninsured.



## Evangelical Hubs

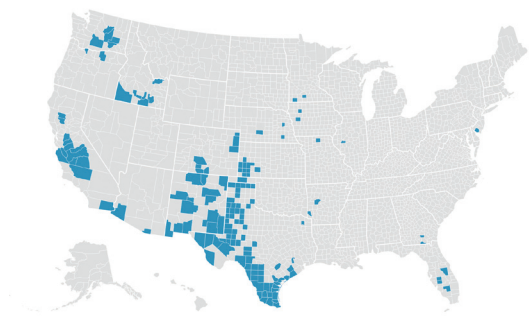
- 324 counties centered in the Southeast, from North Carolina to Oklahoma.
- Demographics: Median county is 83% non-Hispanic white, 4% Hispanic, and 4% African American.
- Economics: Lower than average median household income at \$42,900; child poverty rate is 25%. Low number for severe housing cost burden, 10%.
- Education: 50% have some college education; 90% graduated from high school in four years.
- Health concerns: Teen birth rate is high at 43 per 1,000 females ages 15 to 19; 15% of the population are food insecure.
- Health-care gap: 13% are uninsured.



## Graying America

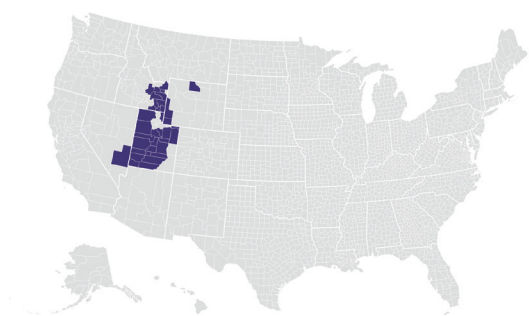
- 348 counties scattered across the Southeast, West, Northeast, and Upper Midwest.
- Demographics: 23% are 65 or older; 84% are non-Hispanic white; 49% of counties have declined in population since 2010.
- Economics: Median household income is \$47,100, above the overall rural figure; 15% face severe housing problems.
- Education: 56% have some college education; 87% graduated from high school in four years.
- Health concerns: 16% say they are in poor or fair health; 13% are food insecure.
- Health-care gap: 11% are uninsured.





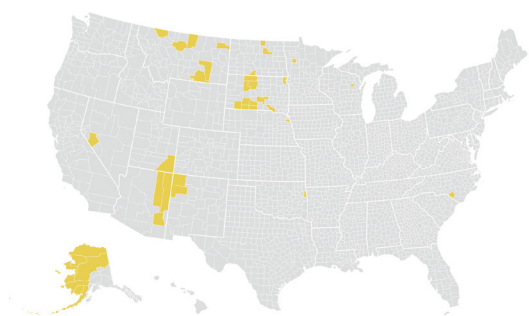
## Hispanic Centers

- 153 counties concentrated in the West.
- Demographics: Youth population is high, as 27% are under age 18; 53% are Hispanic; 40% are non-Hispanic white; 9% are not proficient in English.
- Economics: Below average for unemployment. Median household income is \$46,200; child poverty is 25%.
- Leading industries: 20% work in educational services, health care, and social assistance; 16% are employed in agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting, and mining.
- Education: 46% have some college education; 88% graduated from high school in four years.
- Health-care gap: 18% are uninsured.



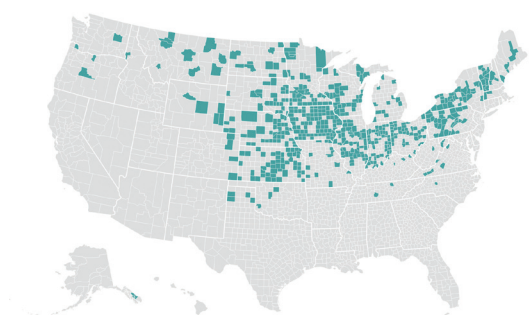
## LDS Enclaves

- 36 counties in Idaho, Nevada, Utah, and Wyoming.
- Demographics: Youth population ranks high with 29% under age 18; 87% are non-Hispanic white; 8% are Hispanic.
- Economics: High median household income of \$54,950; child poverty rate is low at 15%.
- Leading industries: 22% are employed in educational services, health care, and social assistance; 12% work in retail trade.
- Education: 64% have some college education; 89% graduated from high school in four years.
- Health-care gap: 12% are uninsured.



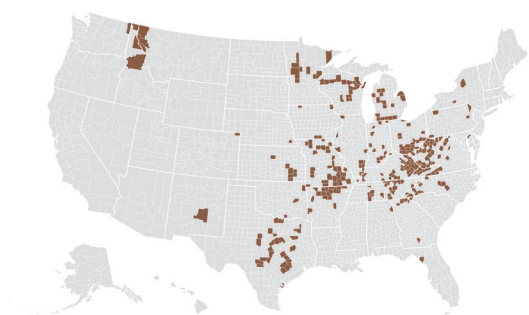
## Native American Lands

- 43 counties in the Great Plains and the West, including Alaska.
- Demographics: Youth population stands out, as 31% are under age 18.
- Economics: Low median household income at \$41,900; high child poverty rate at 31%; 21% have severe housing problems.
- Leading industries: 27% are employed in educational services, health care, and social assistance; 11% are in public administration.
- Education: 48% have some college education; 72% graduated from high school in four years.
- Health-care gap: 18% are uninsured.



## Rural Middle America

- 551 counties that run across the northern half of the country.
- Demographics: 93% are non-Hispanic white.
- Economics: High median household income of \$53,200. 74% of counties have lost population.
- Leading industries: 23% are employed in educational services, health care, and social assistance; 16% work in manufacturing.
- Education: 62% have some college education.
- Health-care gap: Low uninsured rate of 7%.



## Working Class Country

- 321 counties in the eastern half of the country, including Appalachia, the Ozarks, and the Upper Midwest.
- Demographics: 94% are non-Hispanic white.
- Economics: Median household income is \$43,800; child poverty rate is 24%; 67% of counties have lost population.
- Leading industries: 23% are employed in educational services, health care, and social assistance; 14% work in manufacturing.
- Education: 51% have some college education.
- Health-care gap: Low uninsured rate of 9%.

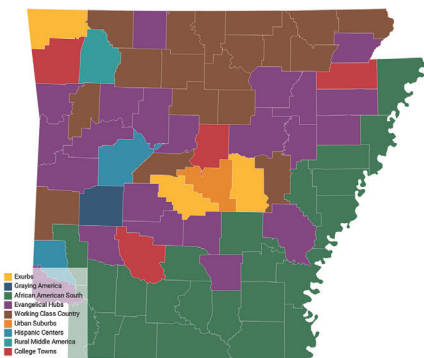
# Rural Regions

As part of the report, the American Communities Project traveled to six counties in four states — Arkansas, Kansas, North Dakota, and South Dakota. The goal of the visits was to explore how different rural America can look even in communities that are not far apart. Below find details of the three regions we visited. There are lengthy profiles online.

## The Rural South Along Racial Cleavages

An **African American South** community in the Mississippi Delta, St. Francis County, Arkansas is 52% black. Part of **Working Class Country** in the foothills of the Ozarks, Fulton County, Arkansas is 95% white. Both counties highlight the challenges of the rural South — low incomes and population loss — as well as racial differences that are a legacy of the region's history.

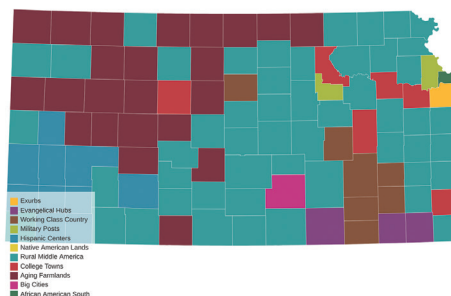
### Arkansas



## The Rural Midwest Along Agricultural Gulfs

Finney County, a **Hispanic Center** in southwest Kansas where the population is 50% Hispanic, has held steady since the 2010 census. Gove County, an **Aging Farmland** in northwest Kansas with a mostly white population, has shrunk 3.3% since 2010. Finney, a local economic hub, shares the traits of an urban area, particularly its diversification of industry and population. In Gove, a truly small farming community, agricultural industrialization has led to population decline even as production has grown. The counties' population changes show the fissures of the modern agricultural economy.

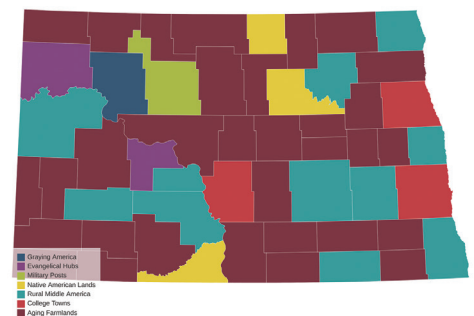
### Kansas



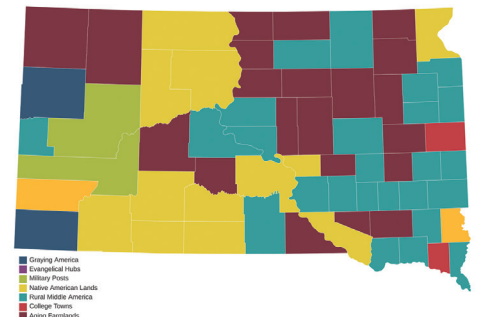
## The Rural West Along Resource Disparities

From gold to oil, the boom-bust cycle has been a part of life in America's rural communities throughout their collective history. Near the state capital of Bismarck, Morton County, North Dakota, in **Rural Middle America**, has seen 12% growth since the 2010 census, partly driven by the oil boom. In south-central South Dakota where resources seem scarcer, Todd County, within the **Native American Lands**, has long struggled with poor health factors and outcomes. Both counties are searching for a new equilibrium.

### North Dakota



### South Dakota



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