



Rural Pennsylvania: Where Is It Anyway?

A Compendium of the Definitions of Rural and Rationale for Their Use

Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health

**310 Nursing Sciences Building
University Park, PA 16802
Telephone: 814-863-8214
Fax: 814-865-4688
E-mail: porh@psu.edu
www.porh.psu.edu**

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The Concept of Rural and the Rationale for Multiple Definitions

Everyone has a general idea about what defines the term “rural.” However, these ideas often are not well articulated. Some examples of expressions of these general notions include, “Where the farms are”; “areas that are located away from the city”; “small places”; or other similar characterizations. These perceptions vary from person to person. For example, someone who lives in the center of a city may think that a farming area five miles outside of the city is a rural area, while a logger who lives in a remote forested area may think of it as urban.

Although these vaguely defined definitions of rural are adequate to serve the needs of the lay person, they are not specific enough to be used in the administration of public programs or in conducting research. It is important to consider both uses since the definitions used in public programs are borrowed from the research literature. For researchers, the definition of rural begins with a theoretical understanding of rural areas and the manner in which they differ from urban areas, both socially and economically. Among the characteristics that have been entertained in the theoretical conception of rural are: (1) population size, (2) population density, and (3) the social and economic ties that the population maintains with more urban centers. These characteristics need to be more clearly defined so that they can be measured consistently and accurately.

Each of these characteristics has been used to operationalize the definition of rural and in developing the multiple definitions of “rural.” Although having more than one definition introduces some confusion, there are advantages associated with the opportunity to select from several definitions. Researchers can choose the definition that has the best fit with the research question being posed or, on a more practical level, the definition for which data are available. Researchers often use one of the definitions used by the U.S. Census Bureau, since significant quantities of data are classified by these definitions. Some of the definitions currently in use may reflect one of the three characteristics in favor of others, while others incorporate a combination of characteristics.

Similar to the definitions used in research, the definition of rural in the administration of public programs also has to be well-defined. Since organizations and agencies at the federal, state, and community levels are involved in the administration of these programs, it is not surprising that several definitions also are used in these applications. Most organizations have relied on U.S. Census Bureau-based definitions because of their availability and the availability of associated data.

One size does not fit all. Different programs use different definitions and the definition that is used may exclude some areas for which the program was intended, while at the same time, including other areas that were not targeted by the program. Nevertheless, it would be administratively prohibitive for a sponsoring agency to use multiple definitions, allow for many exceptions, or make decisions on an *ad hoc* or case-by-case basis.

The general scenario can be summarized as follows. In everyday life, we use a very general conception about where rural is. This conception is not well-defined, varies from person to

person, but has a common basis. There are a variety of definitions that are used in both scientific research and the administration of public programs. These definitions are based on the theoretical understanding of rural which distinguishes urban from rural on the basis of: (1) population size, (2) population density, and (3) the social and economic ties that the population maintains with urban centers. Consequently, there is more than one answer to the question, “Rural, where is it anyway?” If one participates in any rural-targeted programs or is engaged in scientific research, it is unarguably beneficial to be familiar with the several possible answers to that question, that is, to be aware of the different definitions of rural currently in common usage.

Click here <http://ims2.missouri.edu/rac/amirural/> to see if your location is considered to be rural and eligible for several federal programs.

Rural: Where Is It Anyway? *The Most Frequently Used Definitions of Rural*

There are two essential features common to all definitions of “rural.” For each definition, there is a (1) unit of analysis and (2) one or more criteria used to classify those units. The unit of analysis is a common geographic unit such as a county, a municipality, a ZIP Code, a school district, a census tract, or some other geographic unit. It is important to note that different definitions use different units to define areas as rural. The criterion is the characteristic on which the rural designation is made for the unit of analysis. This could be the population density of the unit, the population size of the unit, the commuting patterns of residents of the unit, or some other criterion. In some cases a combination of criteria may be used.

It is common to define the term “urban” first. Those areas not classified as urban are considered to be rural. Consequently, rural is a residual category. Most definitions are simple dichotomies. That is, all units are classified as either urban or rural. Other definitions use multiple categories indicating the degree or type of rural. Many times, these multiple category definitions are calculated and then collapsed into the two categories of “urban” and “rural.”

Definition 1: Metropolitan—Non-Metropolitan

The most frequently used definition of rural has been the non-metropolitan definition. A metropolitan area is a county or a group of counties that includes a city and the densely settled areas surrounding it; anything outside of this area is considered to be non-metropolitan. Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSA) are defined and areas within the MSAs are labeled metropolitan while those areas outside of MSAs are labeled non-metropolitan. Metropolitan is commonly considered and labeled “urban” while non-metropolitan is commonly considered and labeled “rural.” Metropolitan Statistical Areas are defined as an urbanized area (or combined urbanized areas) of 50,000 or more population plus adjacent counties that have a high degree of social and economic integration (as measured by commuting ties) with the core urbanized area. The MSA always includes the county in which the urbanized area is located.

MSAs are defined by the federal Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and periodically updated. The latest update occurred in 2013. Most know this definition through the use of U.S. Census Bureau data and consider it to be a Census definition. The 2013 update resulted in significant changes for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, including the addition of the Gettysburg, Chambersburg-Waynesboro, and Bloomsburg-Berwick MSAs.

In the past decade, there have been some complementary classifications added to the basic MSA categorization. This multitude of classification schemes can result in some confusion for the user which can be minimized if one considers them to be complementary and not affecting the original MSA categorization. The Micropolitan Statistical Area is one of these additions. A Micropolitan Statistical Area is an area including at least one urban cluster of at least 10,000 but less than 50,000 population, plus adjacent territory that has a high degree of social and economic integration with the core as measured by commuting ties. Both Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas are delineated in terms of whole counties. In addition, several adjuncts to the MSA have been added, including the Metropolitan Division (part of an MSA that could conceivably stand alone) and the Combined Statistical Area which is a combination of adjacent metro-metro or metro-micro areas.

Figure 1 shows the metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas of Pennsylvania using the OMB definition.

Click here <http://www.census.gov/population/metro/> to access the U.S. Census Bureau's website on Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas.

Definition 2: Census Urbanized Area, Urban Cluster, Urban and Rural

The U.S. Census Bureau defines an urban area as a densely settled core of census tracts and/or census blocks that meet minimum population density requirements, combined with adjacent territory including less densely settled areas that connect two parts of the densely settled core. To qualify as an urban area, the territory must encompass at least 2,500 people. This classification includes both Urbanized Areas (UAs) of 50,000 or more people and Urban Clusters (UCs) of at least 2,500 and less than 50,000 people. It is important to note that the building block of urban is the census tract or the smaller census block; urban need not be an entire county. "Rural" is defined as the residual, i.e., any areas not identified as "urban." Consequently, rural encompasses all population, housing, and territory not included within an urban area.

Figure 2 shows the urban and rural areas of Pennsylvania using the U.S. Census definition.

Click here <http://www.census.gov/geo/reference/ua/urban-rural-2010.html> to access the U.S. Census Bureau's website on the 2010 Census Urban and Rural Classification and Urban Area Criteria.

Definition 3: Rural-Urban Commuting Areas (RUCAs)

The Rural-Urban Commuting Area codes, known as RUCAs, is a Census tract-based classification scheme that combines Urbanized Area and Urban Cluster definitions with work

commuting patterns. The result is a detailed rural and urban status classification scheme that highlights commuting patterns. The original census tract-based RUCA classifications have been mapped and converted to a ZIP Code geography. Most people use the ZIP Code version rather than the original census tract version.

The classification was developed in the 1990s as a collaborative project between the Health Resources and Service Administration's (HRSA) Office of Rural Health Policy (ORHP), the Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service (ERS), and the University of Washington's WWAMI Rural Health Research Center. A scheduled update of the data is expected soon, the current data are based on 2000 U.S. Census data.

The scheme has 10 major categories (a more detailed classification exists that includes secondary commuting flows). The categories are as follows:

1. Metropolitan area core: primary flow within an urbanized area (UA)
2. Metropolitan area high commuting: primary flow 30% or more to a UA
3. Metropolitan area low commuting: primary flow 10% to 30% to a UA
4. Micropolitan area core: primary flow within an Urban Cluster of 10,000 to 49,999 (large UC)
5. Micropolitan high commuting: primary flow 30% or more to a large UC
6. Micropolitan low commuting: primary flow 10% to 30% to a large UC
7. Small town core: primary flow within an Urban Cluster of 2,500 to 9,999 (small UC)
8. Small town high commuting: primary flow 30% or more to a small UC
9. Small town low commuting: primary flow 10% to 30% to a small UC
10. Rural areas: primary flow to a tract outside a UA or UC

Such a detailed classification can be useful for some research purposes, but for administrative purposes it is too detailed. Consequently, RUCA codes 4 through 10 are considered to be rural for the purposes of grants administered through the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy, as well as for many other applications.

Figure 3 shows the urban and rural areas of Pennsylvania using the RUCA definition.

Click here <http://depts.washington.edu/uwruca/> to access the WWAMI Rural Health Research Center's Rural-Urban Commuting Area (RUCAs) website.

Definition 4: The Center for Rural Pennsylvania's Urban and Rural for Counties, School Districts, and Municipalities

In Pennsylvania, a rural definition that is gaining some favor is one developed by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania. The Center for Rural Pennsylvania's definition of rural and urban is based on population density whereby counties and school districts with population densities less than the Commonwealth as a whole are classified as rural, and those with densities equal to or greater than the Commonwealth as a whole as urban. The population density of Pennsylvania in 2010 was 284 persons per square mile. For municipalities, the classification has an additional criterion. The definition for municipalities is: A municipality is rural when the population density within

the municipality is less than the statewide average density of 284 persons per square mile, or the total population is less than 2,500, unless more than 50 percent of the population lives in an urbanized area as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau. All other municipalities are considered to be urban.

Figure 4 shows Pennsylvania using the Center for Rural Pennsylvania definition of urban and rural with the county as the unit of analysis. Figure 5 shows Pennsylvania using the Center for Rural Pennsylvania definition with the municipality as the unit of analysis and Figure 6 shows Pennsylvania using the Center for Rural Pennsylvania definition with school districts as the unit of analysis.

Click here http://www.rural.palegislature.us/demographics_rural_urban.html# to access the Center for Rural Pennsylvania's website and the information on their definitions of rural and urban.

Other Definitions

In addition to these commonly used definitions, other rural definitions have been developed over the years. One of the most frequently used is the Rural-Urban Continuum Code classification, commonly known as Beale Codes. This is a scheme that distinguishes metropolitan counties by the population size of their metropolitan area, and nonmetropolitan counties by their degree of urbanization and adjacency to a metro area. Other *ad-hoc* definitions are in use, as well as, locally-specific definitions.

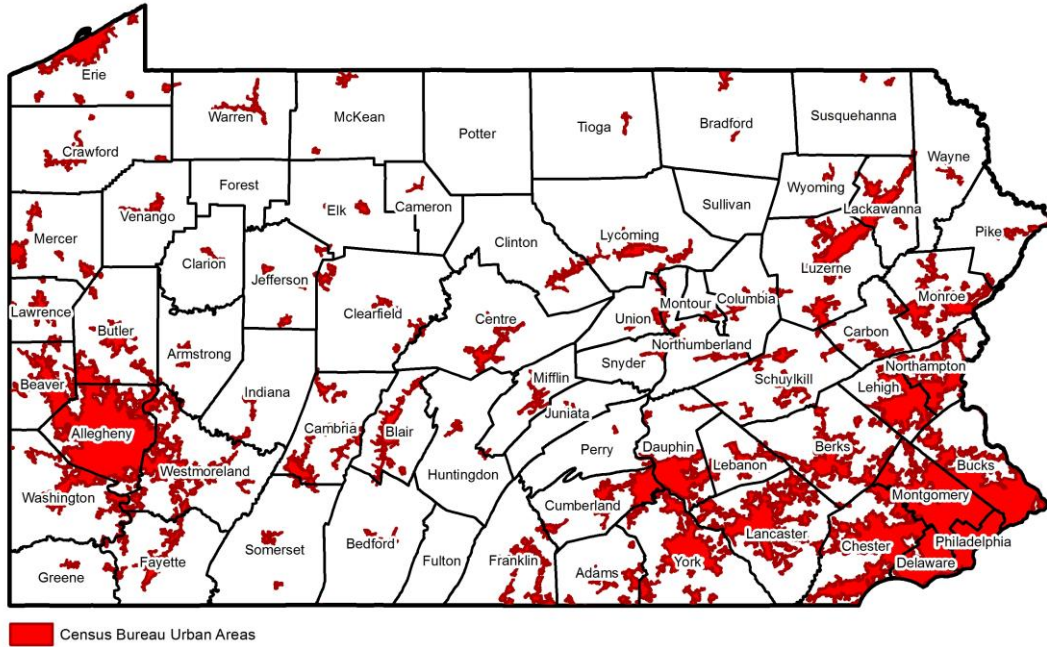
What Definitions Do Rural Health Programs Use?

All of the definitions described have been used as eligibility requirements for publicly sponsored programs. Users of this site are likely most interested in programs related to rural health and in funding opportunities available through the federal Office of Rural Health Policy (ORHP) which treats all non-metro counties as rural, but uses RUCA codes in metropolitan counties to identify additional rural areas. While use of the RUCA codes has allowed identification of rural areas in metropolitan counties, there are some that are extremely large and where use of RUCA codes alone fails to account for distance to services and sparse population. In response to these concerns, ORHP has designated 132 large area census tracts (nationally) with RUCA codes 2 or 3 (usually considered to be urban) as rural. These tracts are at least 400 square miles in area with a population density of no more than 35 people. This is called the Goldsmith modification. The ORHP definition includes about 20 percent of the population and 91 percent of the area of the United States.

Programs not administered by ORHP, such as those that support the establishment of Rural Health Clinics, may use other definitions. Users are strongly encouraged to check eligibility requirements for each program.

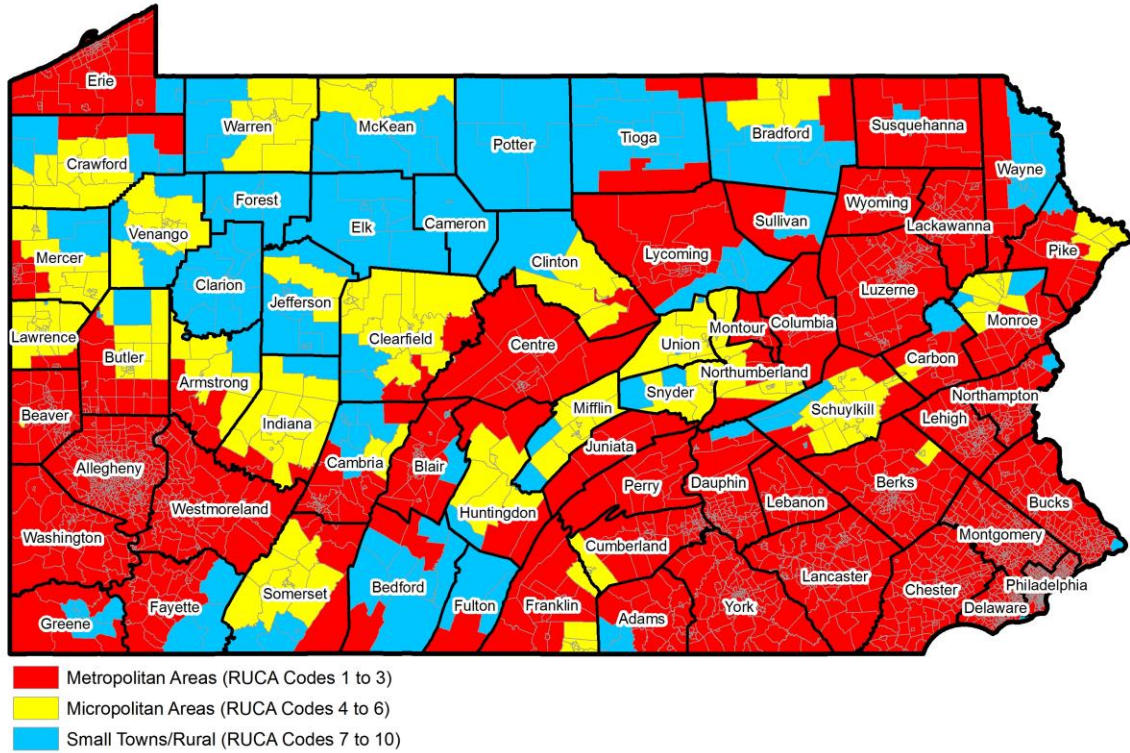
Click here <http://ims2.missouri.edu/rac/amirural/> to see if your location is considered to be rural and eligible for several federal programs.

Figure 2: Map of Pennsylvania Using the U.S. Census Bureau Urban and Rural Definition for Rural (2010)



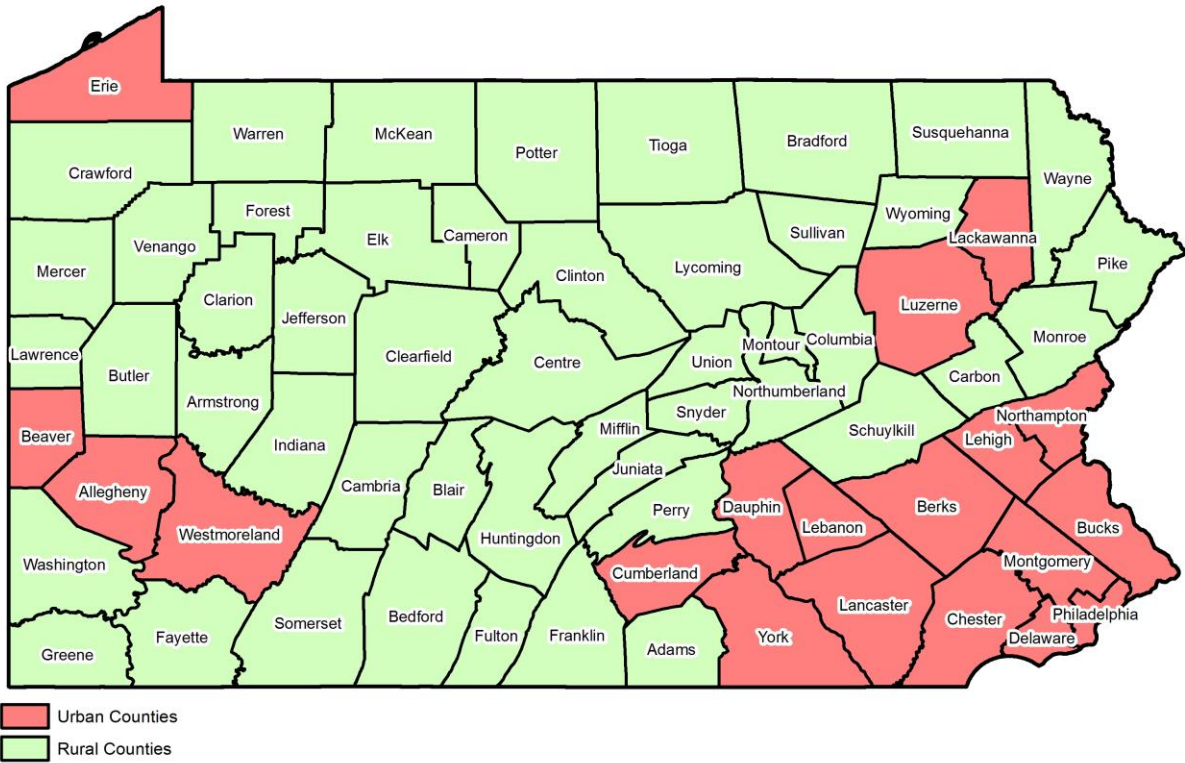
Source: Center for Rural Pennsylvania

Figure 3: Map of Pennsylvania Using the Rural-Urban Commuting Area (RUCA) Definition for Rural and Urban (2010)



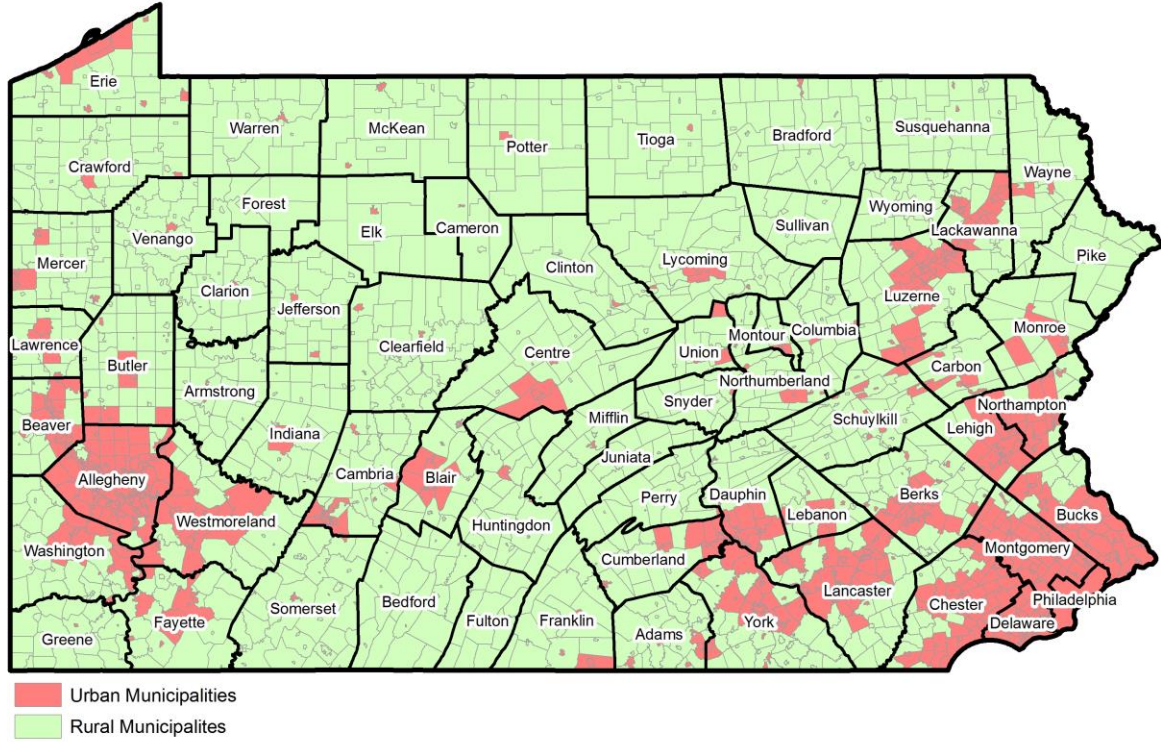
Source: Center for Rural Pennsylvania

Figure 4: Map of Pennsylvania Using the Center for Rural Pennsylvania Definition (County as Unit of Analysis, 2013)



Source: The Center for Rural Pennsylvania

Figure 5: Map of Pennsylvania Using the Center for Rural Pennsylvania Definition (Municipality as Unit of Analysis, 2013)



Source: The Center for Rural Pennsylvania

