Decade of Pessimistic Nonmetro Population Trends Ends on Optimistic Note

Two years ago, Calvin Beale wrote an article for us on nonmetro population trends from 1980-86 (see June 1988 issue). That article focused on the sharp downturn in nonmetro growth since the 1970's, and the progressive inability of remote farming and mining counties to retain their people. With the decade now at an end, and a couple more years of data available, Beale and Fuguitt here take a look at what has happened since. Their findings should give readers a preview of the results of the 1990 Census, now being processed.-Ed.

Growth of the nonmetro population was lower in every year from 1980 to 1988 than it was in the 1970's, but the 1986-88 period showed some evidence of recovery. There was much variation, however, with some areas losing people, and others showing consistent, albeit moderate, increases throughout the 1980's. Here are some of the major patterns we found:

• Counties primarily dependent on agriculture had difficulty holding their people but showed greater retention in the late 1980's, as the farm crisis subsided.

• Manufacturing counties have slowly recovered from the national recession of the early 1980's.

• After starting the decade with rapid growth, mining areas quickly shifted to population loss after 1983, when the price of metallic and energy minerals fell.

• Retirement counties grew by 2 percent a year throughout the decade, twice the growth rate of the total U.S. population.

There was also diversity in migration trends, with a large outmovement from counties with net outmigration almost balanced by inmovement into other counties. A new development for nonmetro America in the 1980's was a fall in the margin of births over deaths, which contributed to the lower growth rate. Taken as a whole, the demographic balance sheet for nonmetro areas in the 1980's will prove to be intermediate between the substantial outmovement and decline of the 1960's and the remarkable inmovement and growth of the 1970's.

County population estimates released by the Census Bureau through 1988 show basically two things: a pessimistic situation and an optimistic trend. Unhappily for those concerned with the vitality of rural and smalltown America, the data reveal that the nonmetro population grew more slowly in every year from 1984 through 1988 than in any year from 1980-84 or during the 1970's (fig. 1). There were more nonmetro counties declining than growing in both the years July 1986-July 1987 and July 1987-July 1988. In contrast, from 1980-84, a sizeable majority of nonmetro counties grew in each year, albeit at a slower rate than in the 1970's.

Most notable was a reversion during the decade from growth to decline in several areas, namely, the Southern Appalachian coalfields, the Mississippi Delta, east Texas, and both the Northern and Southern Great Plains (fig. 2). The Rio Grande area, the Gulf of Mexico-South Atlantic Coast, Rocky Mountains-Columbia Basin, and the old Coastal Plain Cotton Belt have simultaneously shifted from growth to an essentially stationary level of population (fig. 3). In the West, this change was probably due to depressed employment in oil and other mineral industries. In the Coastal Plain, it may relate more to poor conditions in agriculture and lack of manufacturing growth.

Yet there is a brighter note. The nadir of rural and smalltown population retention seems to have been reached in the year July 1985-July 1986 when the nonmetro population grew by just 0.15 percent. Each of the next 2 years shows evidence of a trend of demographic recovery in most parts of the country (other than those named above), despite the fact that a slight majority of counties were still declining in population. By 1987-88, nonmetro growth had edged up to 0.48 percent. Because growth was somewhat concentrated in larger counties and losses in smaller ones, nonmetro areas as a whole showed growth, even though more counties were declining than growing. The recovery trend is
Diversity of nonmetro growth patterns
After decade of growth, some areas reverted to population losses...

Rate of nonmetro population change (percent)

Figure 2

Southern Appalachian coalfields
Southern Great Plains
Mississippi Delta

1970-71 72-73 74-75 76-77 78-79 80-81 82-83 84-85 86-87

Figure 3
...Other areas fell to a stationary level of population...

Rate of nonmetro population change (percent)

Figure 4
...And still others, after several years of population decline, now show signs of an upturn.

Rate of nonmetro population change (percent)

Diversity of growth by county type

Nonmetro counties primarily dependent on farming had an uptick in their growth from July 1986 to July 1988 (fig. 5). This probably signals an end to losses caused by the earlier farm crisis. Such an outcome would be consistent with the improved farm income of 1986-88, which has continued improving since. In 1987 and 1988, farm income (in dollar-adjusted terms) was the best since the boom years of 1973-75 and a fourth higher than in 1983 and 1984.

Manufacturing counties, a populous group, edged slowly upward in population from 1986-88. The nonmetro unemployment rate, which is significantly related to the state of manufacturing, fell from 8.2 percent in the second quarter of 1986 to 6.0 percent in the same quarter of 1988. (Metro unemployment in the same period dropped from 6.8 percent to 5.3 percent.)

Nonmetro counties that are destinations for retired people had no greater rate of increase from 1986-88 than the very rapid growth that they had experienced earlier in the decade. But with a consistent increase of more than 2 percent per year, they attracted 1.27 million net new residents of all ages by inmovement between 1980 and 1988, and are by far the most rapidly developing class of rural and smalltown counties. This is the only county group that has had a higher growth rate than metro areas in every year since 1970. Many of the retirement communities are recreation or second-home areas as well and pro-
For the first time since U.S. records have been kept, the rural birth rate no longer exceeds the urban rate; both are now about the same.

There has been little change in mining employment since 1988.

Outmigration and Inmigration Almost Balanced

Growth diversity also is clearly shown by data on net migration, the major source of population change in hundreds of counties. For the period April 1980 to July 1988, nonmetro counties showed a national net outmovement of just 22,000 people. This may seem trivial and unbelievably small in light of the serious consequences for the rural economy of the farm crisis and the business recession of the early and middle-1980's.

The very nominal net national migration becomes more meaningful, however, when disaggregated. There were 1,565 nonmetro counties (nearly two-thirds of the total) that had net outmigration from 1980-88. They lost a net of 1,965,000 people in the process. Nearly offsetting these losses, however, was movement into 817 nonmetro counties that attracted a net of 1,943,000 people. These two classes of counties tend to be located in different parts of the country.

Figure 6 shows the nonmetro counties affected by outmovement and by inmovement between 1980 and 1988. The outmovement plot points show clearly the widespread loss of 1,000 persons or more per county in the agricultural Corn Belt, Mississippi Delta, many parts of the Great Plains States, and Idaho's Snake River Valley. Similar losses occurred in the southern coalfields and many nonmetro industrial counties of the Northeast and eastern Midwest. Newly depressed mining areas in the West are also evident, as in Wyoming, Utah, and New Mexico.

The inmovement plot points show more concentrated activity. Several nonmetro counties in Florida and California grew by more than 40,000 people from migration alone, whereas no county had outmovement of more than 12,000 persons. Most of the nonmetro counties attracting large numbers of people are retirement and recreation areas. These counties are by no means confined to Florida and the Southwest, the traditional retirement areas of the past. They include many growing counties in New England, along the South Atlantic coast, in the Ozarks, the Texas hill country, north-central California, Hawaii, and the Pacific Northwest.

Other nonmetro counties attracting new residents lie just beyond the periphery of certain metro areas, such as Washington, DC, Atlanta, Dallas-Ft. Worth, Houston, St. Louis, and Albuquerque. Over time, many of these counties will become suburban in character and will be reclassified as metro because of extensive worker commuting into the adjacent metro areas.

Several other nonmetro counties have already achieved metro size in their own right since 1980 because of their growth and have been given metro status by the Office of Management and Budget. Most notable are the counties containing Naples, FL; Santa Fe, NM; and Merced, CA. Scattered growing areas in the South have continued to acquire manufacturing work. And, in the West, a few counties have had growth from mining, in spite of the more general decline in that industry. This is particularly true of Nevada's gold boom areas.
Of persons who moved to the growing nonmetro counties, only a minority are likely to have come from the losing counties. Much of the economically based outmovement from distressed areas was destined for thriving metro areas, and much of the movement into growing nonmetro counties has come from metro areas or from abroad.

Metro Birth Rate Now Exceeds Rural

Because of the net outmigration of only 22,000 people from a nonmetro population that averaged more than 55 million in 1980-88, the nonmetro population grew nationally by nearly the rate of its natural increase, that is, its surplus of births over deaths. This surplus averaged about 0.56 percent a year. In contrast, metro America had an estimated net immigration of 5,590,000 people during the period, derived almost entirely from foreign immigrants. But in addition, the metro population now has a lower death rate and slightly higher birth rate than the nonmetro population, in part because of the younger average age of metro residents. The result was a metro rate of natural increase of 0.75 percent per year from 1980-88.

There was little difference between metro and nonmetro rates of natural increase at the beginning of the 1980's (fig. 7). Both had fallen steadily in the 1960's and early 1970's with the end of the "baby boom." Both gradually recovered during the rest of the 1970's. Since then, however, the metro rate has been steady, but the margin of births over deaths has sagged further in rural areas and small towns. Outmovement of young adults of childbearing age and inmovement of retired older people have contributed to the nonmetro trend. But, the decline also appears to result from an actual drop in birth rates among nonmetro women of childbearing age. If the difference between metro and nonmetro rates of natural increase had not widened after 1980, the nonmetro population would have grown by about 640,000 more than it did from 1980 to 1988, an amount equal to a fourth of its actual growth.

Although women living in nonmetro areas have traditionally had larger families than those in metro areas, there is no longer any apparent difference in the childbearing expectations of the two groups. Among women 18-34 years old, both groups expected to average 207 lifetime births per 100 women, according to the Census Bureau's 1988 survey of expected lifetime fertility. This is a number that is marginally below that needed for replacement of the childbearing generation when mortality of children is taken into account. It is also the first time in the 16-year history of this survey that nonmetro women did not expect to average more births than metro women.

In the Corn Belt and both the northern and southern Appalachian coalfields, the rate of nonmetro natural increase in 1988 was below 0.3 percent and less than half as high as it had been in 1980. Such a rate is little more than half of the U.S. nonmetro rate. Except for Florida, where natural increase is curtailed by deaths among the large retired population, the lowest surplus of births over deaths is found in the southern Corn Belt. Here it amounted to only 0.14 percent in 1988, and a number of counties in the area now have more deaths than births.

At the other extreme, the rate of natural increase in some nonmetro areas is still well above the national average. These include all areas west.
of the Rockies, plus the Rio Grande Valley and Gulf of Mexico coast, and range as high as 0.95 percent per year. Young age composition, and relatively large families in the Hispanic, Indian, and Mormon populations all contribute to this condition. But, in all cases, the rates in these areas have been in decline at a faster pace than the national average.

The reduction in current and potential nonmetro family size means that even modest amounts of outmigration now result in population decline in counties where there is little surplus of births over deaths. Unless the birth rate rises, the nonmetro population will ultimately become totally dependent on immigration for further overall growth or retention of current levels. In a number of nonmetro counties that is already the case.

The Late 1980's and Beyond

In the 21 months between mid-1988 and the taking of the 1990 Census, now being processed, employment conditions in rural and smalltown America are known to have improved substantially. The labor force expanded by a million persons, with no increase in unemployment. Income levels presumably responded to this change.

Given this favorable recent economic trend, it would not be surprising to find, when the census results are published, that the nonmetro counties of 1980 received some net inmigration of people over the decade. But it would be very minor in comparison with the 4.5 million net immigration into nonmetro America during the 1970's.

However modest the nationwide net migration proves to be, it will be a composite of extensive outmovement from hundreds of nonmetro counties that have lagged behind the Nation in economic growth and substantial inmovement into areas that have acquired new jobs or attracted retirees and commuters. There is wide diversity of trend, whether viewed by region or by types of counties.

The reduction in the nonmetro birth rate is an event not foreseen at the beginning of the 1980's and has clearly contributed to the decline in nonmetro population growth. The notion that rural and smalltown families have more children than do city families is one of the oldest and hitherto most valid premises in demography. But today, there is no longer any meaningful difference in metro and nonmetro childbearing per family, and the birth rate is now lower in nonmetro areas.

The future of this trend is uncertain. There is room for still further lowering of the nonmetro birth rate, especially as more of the smaller post-baby boom birth groups come of age. The same reasoning could be applied to the metro population. But, whether from the more buoyant condition of the metro economy or from the continued large additions of young immigrants to the metro population, the metro birth rate has resisted decline.

In a manner defying advance prediction, nonmetro America ended its period of population "turnaround" as it was buffeted by the farm, industrial, and foreign trade crises of the early and mid-1980's. The demographic balance sheet of the decade will fall between that of the 1960's, with its 1.7 million exodus from nonmetro areas, and that of the 1970's with its remarkable 4.5 million inmovement. We believe that we see reliable signs of at least partial demographic and economic recovery in the last years of the 1980's.

As is always the case, some of the larger nonmetro communities will be designated as new metro areas after the 1990 Census because they will have grown to metro size. A number of other counties will become metro by virtue of suburbanization and commuting, a product of being adjacent to a growing metro area. In both situations, the reclassified counties will have grown at above-average nonmetro population growth rates. Thus the roster of nonmetro counties will again be pruned of some of those with healthy economies and will revert to a somewhat lower growth rate as we start the new decade.

It is impossible to predict confidently the demographic course of rural and smalltown America in the 1990's, just as it was in the 1970's and 1980's. We have not seen the last of population losses in agriculturally dependent counties, or of concern over the community consequences of such losses. Yet the population base of these counties is no longer large enough to dominate the trend of the total nonmetro population. For most nonmetro areas, population change will probably be determined by the degree of success in retaining industrial employment, the extent to which jobs in business services grow in nonmetro areas, and the pace of growth in retirement/recreation communities and in commuting to nearby cities.

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