Rural & Farm Finance Policy Analysis Center
University of Missouri




Consistency and Change in Demographic Patterns in Farming-Dependent Counties

Kyra Palange

Rural and Farm Finance Policy Analysis Center

University of Missouri

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This policy brief identifies key findings from the 2025 update of the USDA-ERS County Typology Codes, with a focus on rural counties whose primary economic activity is farming. It identifies areas for further research into age-related population shifts and opportunities for policy focus to help build resilient rural and agricultural communities.

Introduction

Every 10 years, the USDA Economic Research Service (ERS) publishes an update to its County Typology Codes dataset, which categorizes each U.S. county based on its primary economic activity: agriculture, mining, manufacturing, government, or recreation. Counties that are not classified as one of these types are considered 'nonspecialized'. The dataset also indicates whether a given county is rural or urban and assigns a yes-or-no rating to each county on several metrics of socioeconomic health. These metrics include, among others, low employment, high poverty, population loss, and, as of 2025, housing stress.

This report summarizes notable trends from the 2025 data release, with a focus on agricultural and rural counties. It expands upon the dataset by integrating Census data on age cohorts to shed light on population composition changes in agricultural counties, in alignment with the focus of the 2024 edition of the USDA-ERS's Rural America at a Glance report (Farrigan, et al., 2024).

Setting the Stage: Urban Expansion Continues, Pandemic Prompts Growth in Rural Zones

The share of the population that lives in America's metropolitan areas has steadily increased over the last few decades. The USDA reports that as of 2023, 46 million people, or 14% of the total U.S. population, live in rural areas, with most of those being concentrated in metro-adjacent areas (Farrigan, et al., 2024). While part of this shift is due to population losses from natural change and migration out of rural areas as people seek better educational and employment opportunities, a significant share is due to population growth in exurban areas. Specifically, formerly rural geographic districts are reclassified as urban when metropolitan areas expand outward in geographic size. As of 2025, 1,960 of the United States' 3,152 counties were classified as rural – a share of 62.2%, while as recently as 1993, nearly three-quarters of the counties were considered rural. A 2022 report by the University of Missouri and CoBank discusses some of the challenges in determining rurality and the interconnectedness of rural and urban economies (Spell, Jacobs, Low, & Krohn, 2022).

Between 2010-2020, the total U.S. population grew by 7% to approximately 332 million. While the total urban population[1] grew by approximately 23 million (8%) during this decade, the total rural population decreased by 479,000, or 1%. The Coronavirus pandemic, which fueled a desire for more space and accelerated the rise of remote work, created a well-documented exodus of urban and suburban Americans to less densely populated areas. This helped rural counties regain lost population, with 2024 estimates showing the rural population nearly back to 2010 levels. Notably, as the USDA reports, this recovery of population is exclusively the result of migration, as the natural population (births less deaths) of rural America continues to decline.

County Economic Activity: Agriculture Decreases, Manufacturing and Nonspecialized Rise

The USDA classifies counties into one of five specializations: farming, mining, manufacturing, government, or recreation. A county is classified as 'high concentration' in a particular sector if that sector meets the threshold for the share of either total earnings or total employment for the sector. The thresholds differ for each specialization; therefore, a county may have a high concentration in more than one sector, and a county can have a high concentration in a sector without being classified as "dependent" on that sector.[2]

If a county does not meet the criteria to be considered specialized in one of the five sectors of consideration, it is classified as nonspecialized. Broadly, as the American economy has shifted away from manufacturing and natural resources and toward service-sector occupations over the last several

[1] Using 2013 metro/nonmetro classifications

[2] A full explanation of the classification methodology is available on the USDA-ERS website.

decades, county specialization has generally decreased. In the 2025 update, the share of rural and non-rural counties classified as nonspecialized increased to a record high of 50.1%, which is an 11-percentage point increase from the 2015 figure of 39.2%. This magnitude of the change was fairly similar across rural and urban county types, with rural counties increasing from 29.6% to 39.6% nonspecialized (Figure 1).

In 2015, farming-dependent counties accounted for 14.1% of all counties and 19.8% of rural counties. By 2025, that number had decreased to 11.2% of all counties and 16.8% of rural counties. Currently, 354 counties are classified as farming-dependent, which represents a 20% net decrease from the 2015 figure of 444. The vast majority of farming-dependent counties – 329, or 93% – are also classified as rural. Just over 50% of farming-dependent counties are located in the Great Plains region, where, as RaFF reports in its semiannual farm income projections[3], cattle, corn, soybeans, and wheat account for a large share of agricultural production. Figure 2 depicts the geographic distribution of high-farming counties, categorized into urban and rural.

Farming is now the third most common county classification in rural areas, behind nonspecialized (39.6%) and manufacturing (25.3%). Notably, rural county specialization in manufacturing increased from 17.6% of counties in 2015. The majority (304, or 85.8%) of the 354 counties classified as farming-dependent in 2025, were also classified as farming-dependent in 2015. Of the 140 counties that were reclassified out of farming-dependent status, the majority – 113 – were reclassified as nonspecialized, as depicted in Figure 3. Similarly, of the 50 counties that were reclassified into farming-dependent status in 2025, 26 were classified as nonspecialized in the 2015 update.

Agricultural Counties Score Well on Socioeconomic Metrics, But Population Loss Persists

Farming-dependent rural counties tended to score better on measures of socioeconomic health, such as poverty, housing stress, and unemployment, than rural counties in general (Table 1). Counties with low employment – defined as less than 63% of 25-to-54-year-olds employed over a five-year period – accounted for 4.2% of urban counties, 13.5% of all rural counties, and 8.2% of rural farming counties. Persistent poverty – more than 1 in 5 residents in Census surveys since 1990 – characterized 4.3% of urban counties, 13.6% of rural counties, and 7.9% of rural farming counties. Housing stress, measured on a five-point scale[4], affects 31.9% of urban counties, 14.7% of all rural counties, and just 4.6% of agriculturally dependent rural counties. These percentages are similar across the 304 consistently agricultural counties and the 50 counties which transitioned to agriculture since the 2015 update.

[3] https://raff.missouri.edu/farm-income/

[4] At least 29 percent of owner- and renter-occupied housing units had at least one of the following conditions: 1) lacking complete plumbing facilities, 2) lacking complete kitchen facilities, 3) with 1.01 or more occupants per room, 4) selected monthly owner costs as a percentage of household income greater than 30 percent, and 5) gross rent as a percentage of household income greater than 30 percent.

Manufacturing-dependent rural counties likewise outperformed the rural-county average on share with low employment (7.5%) and housing stress (8.9%).

The dataset classifies a county as experiencing population loss if the number of residents declined during the last two Decennial Census periods (i.e., 2000-2010 and 2010-2020). Like the definition of persistent poverty, this longitudinal view helps capture longer-term shifts. Although reclassification of fringe counties from rural to urban often complicates rural population analysis, as discussed above, some trends are still observable.

Among counties classified as rural in the 2025 update, 40% experienced population loss during the 2000-2020 period. Over 70% of rural farming-dependent counties are classified as population loss counties, more than 30 percentage points higher than the next-highest specialization. While farming-dependent counties only accounted for roughly a quarter (26.8%) of all population-loss counties, the within-group share with population decline merits further attention.

Of the 46 million Americans who live in rural areas, approximately 2.6 million live in areas characterized as 'high-farming', whether or not those counties are classified as farm-dependent. An additional 455,000 Americans live in 44 high-farming urban counties.

As detailed above, the rural population declined by 1% during the 2010s, but regained a similar amount during the early part of the 2020s due to in-migration[5]. Among all 453 counties classified as high-farming in 2025, population decreased by a larger-than-average 5% and remained flat since 2020. Among the 280 counties which were classified as rural and farming-dependent in both the 2015 and 2025 updates, overall population decreased by 5% during the 2010s and has continued to decrease in the first portion of this decade, by nearly 1% relative to 2020.

A key subgroup in the shifting rural population are working-age individuals, especially those in the prime working-age cohort (ages 15-44). This group, which tends to be more geographically mobile than older individuals (Palarino, 2025), declined in rural areas by 4% during the 2010s but rebounded by 3% during the first part of the 2020s – again due to changing work patterns and geographic preferences as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic. These effects were similar but of smaller magnitude in consistently rural farming counties, which saw a 3% decrease in the 2010s followed by a 2% increase in the early 2020s.

Longer lifespans and the Baby Boomer generation reaching retirement age both contributed to the general growth in the over-65 population during the 2010s. This cohort accounted for 15.9% of the urban population and 20% of the rural population as of 2020, and represented the fastest-growing age group for both urban and rural counties. Although the growth of this population was slower in consistently rural farming counties, the total share was marginally higher than rural counties broadly, at 21.2% (Figure 4).

Notably, urban counties saw a 9% growth in children under 15 from 2010-2020, while the rural population in this age group decreased by 6%, and the population in consistently rural farming counties decreased

[5] In-migration is a term used by demographers to refer to movement of people into a region or community, generally within the same country. This is distinct from immigration, which refers to international migration. Out-migration is the analogous term used to describe movement out of a region.

by 5%. Twenty-three percent of all rural counties saw positive population growth in this cohort, compared with 31% of consistently rural farming counties.

The age cohort with the largest population shift in rural farming communities was the 45-64 group. While this group grew 5% in urban counties and declined 8% in non-farming dependent rural counties during the 2010s, the rate of decline was 14% in counties that were farming-dependent in 2023. Several possible explanations emerge for this phenomenon, including migration to retirement-friendly areas and a possible lack of senior-level positions for workers towards the end of their careers

Key Takeaways and Policy Considerations

A greater share of agriculturally dependent counties is losing population compared to other rural counties, despite the data showing that agricultural counties are less likely to score highly on measures of socioeconomic stress such as persistent poverty, housing stress, and low employment. Although population loss is not necessarily a negative phenomenon[6], understanding the reason for these declines is a prerequisite to ensure the long-term resilience of these areas.

Likewise, although population in rural areas rebounded due to Coronavirus, there is a natural decline of population in rural areas. Migration trends tend to be more volatile than natural changes, as people move in and out of an area based on economic conditions and personal circumstances. Growing successful rural communities for the long run requires policies and initiatives aimed at stable, sustainable development.

Contact Information

Kyra Palange, RaFF Senior Research Associate: kpalange@missouri.edu

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[6] https://projects.vrac.iastate.edu/ruralshrinksmart/

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Tables & Figures

Table 1. Share of Counties with Selected Characteristic by Category, 2025 Update.

	Urban	Rural	Rural Farm	Consistent Farm
Low Employment	4.19%	13.52%	8.21%	7.90%
Persistent Poverty	4.28%	13.62%	7.90%	7.60%
Housing Stress	31.90%	14.70%	4.56%	4.28%
Population Loss	11.24%	39.69%	70.21%	70.72%

Figure 1. Share of Rural County Economic Dependency Classifications, 2015 and 2025.

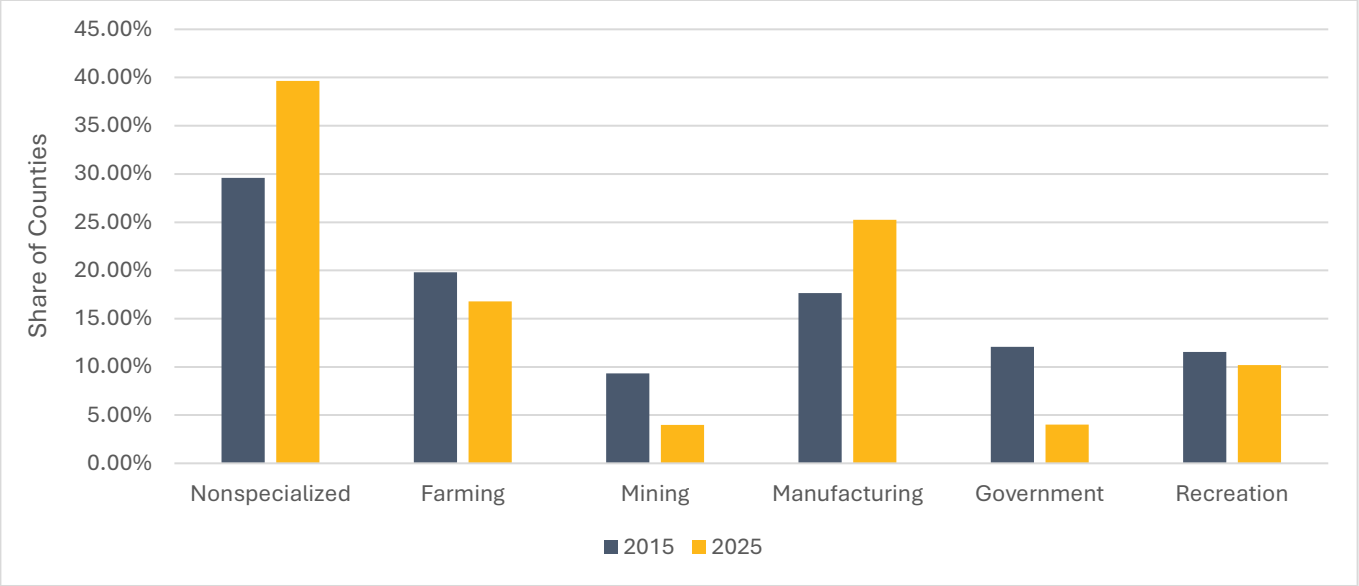
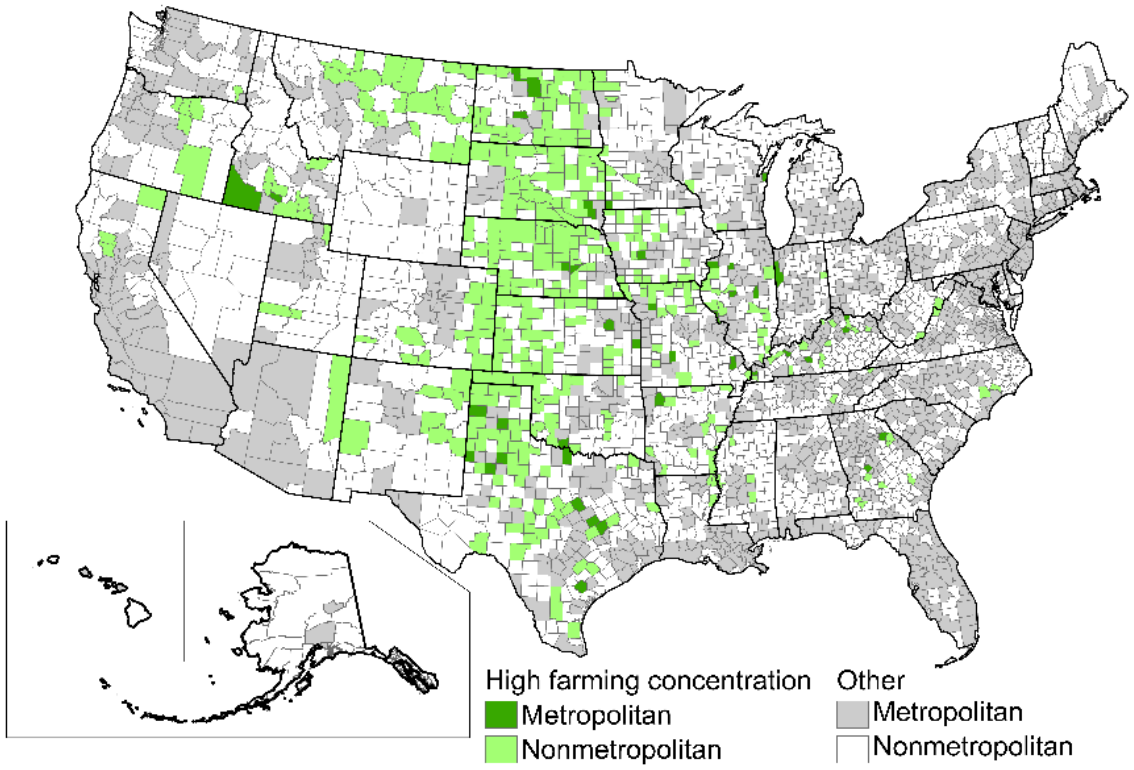


Figure 2. High farming-concentration counties, 2025



Note: High farming-concentration counties are those where at least 20 percent of the annual average labor and proprietors' earnings—or at least 17 percent of the annual average number of jobs—were derived from farming over the 3-year average of 2019, 2021, and 2022. Metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas are based on the U.S. Office of Management and Budget 2023 delineation of core based statistical areas.
Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis, Regional Economic Accounts.

Image Source: United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service

Figure 3. 2025 Classification of 2015 Farming-Dependent Counties

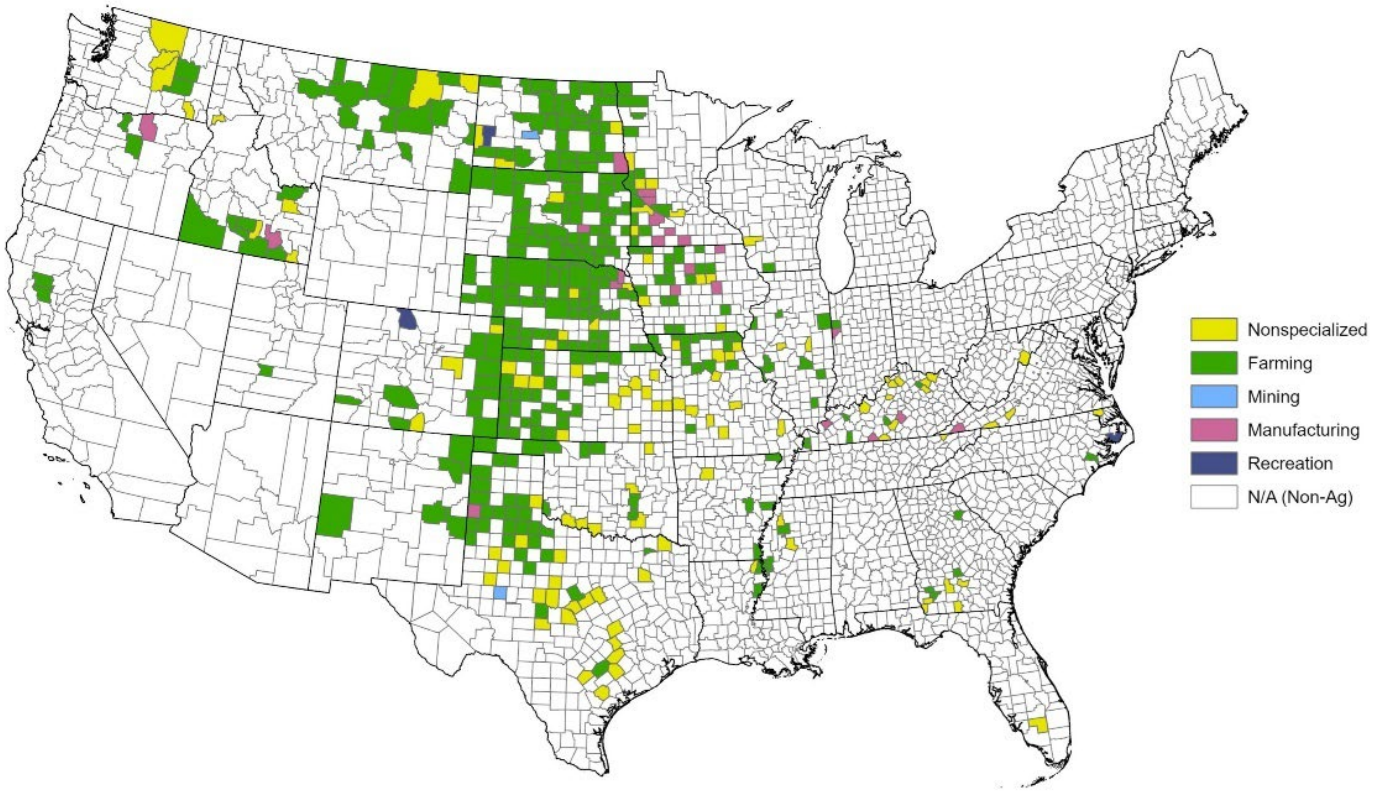


Figure 4. Population by Age Cohort in Rural, Rural Farm, and Urban Counties