



Colorado Rural Health Center

Am I Rural?

I have pulled this file up and tried to finish this paper so many times over the past few years. It's not only very hard to simplify the technical concepts of rural and urban, but it's also not a whole lot of fun. That's why I delayed it for several years with the "Rural Is..." book. Now pulling that together was fun! But, folks keep expecting that an office of rural health would be able to define rural, so here it is.

Denise Denton, Executive Director, Colorado Rural Health Center (CRHC)
from 1991—2006

Am I rural?

This is one of the questions most frequently asked of us here at the Colorado Rural Health Center (CRHC). But I'm afraid there isn't an easy answer. In fact, even if someone from the town of Grover (Weld County, population 153) called, I'm afraid our answer would be "*Well, it depends.*" Here's why.

There are many definitions of what constitutes rural and urban. In fact, one report found over 20 different definitions of rural used by federal agencies. (*In fact, within some agencies they use different definitions in different situations.*) These definitions were created for many different reasons. The set of definitions I'll address here concern those that affect either governmental policies in health care financing and delivery or those that affect the structure and organization of health care delivery in rural places. I'm going to ignore the many definitions used by the Forest Service, Department of Agriculture, the Farm Bureau and others.

There are two generally accepted, national classification systems that define urban and rural: the Census Bureau's "urban and rural" classifications for persons; and the Office of Management and Budget's (OMB) "metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas" definition which is applied to counties.

Urban and Rural Areas

The US Census Bureau defines "urban" as places of 2,500 or more people. Territory, population and housing units not classified as urban constitute "rural." In other words, only "urban" is truly defined, all else is considered rural.

(Continued)

"Enhancing healthcare services in Colorado by providing information, education, linkages, tools & energy toward addressing rural healthcare issues."

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According to the US Bureau of the Census, here is an urban/rural break down of the population in Colorado in 2000:

Urban Population	Rural Population	Total Population
3,634,746	666,515	4,301,261
84.5%	15.5%	100%

The Census Bureau’s term “urbanized area” is also used in federal criteria. For example, Rural Health Clinics cannot be located in urbanized areas (*Note: They don’t have to be in a rural area, they just can’t be in an urbanized area. I know it’s confusing, but hang in there.*) An “urbanized area” (UA) is defined as a central place and its “urban fringe,” or surrounding territory, which is populated by at least 50,000 people.

UA’s are not limited to county or state boundaries and many UA’s cross county and or state lines. There are 405 UA’s identified nationally in the 1990 census. In Colorado, the UA’s are Boulder, Colorado Springs, Denver, Fort Collins, Grand Junction, Greeley, Longmont, Louisville, and Pueblo.

Metropolitan and Non-metropolitan Areas

The US Office of Management and Budget (OMB) defines a Metropolitan Area (MA) as a “core area containing a large population nucleus, together with adjacent communities having a high degree of economic and social integration with that core.” (*Note: These used to be called Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas or Metropolitan Statistical Areas. This was changed in 1990.*) The definition of an MA is a county that has:

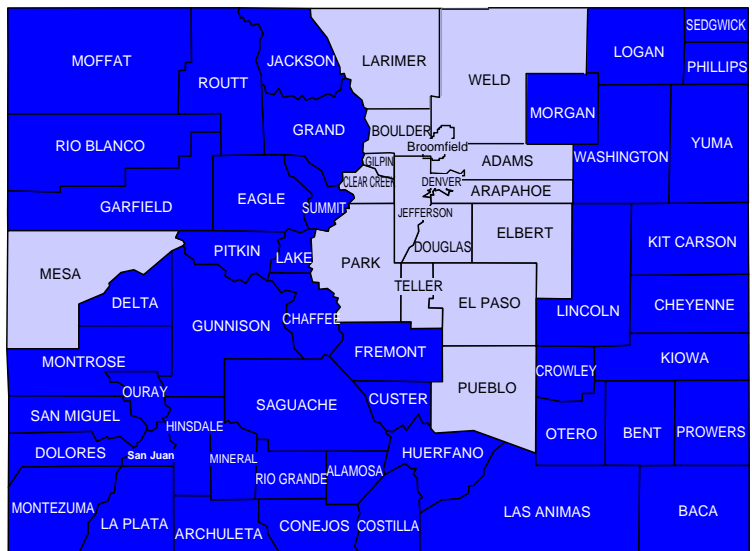
- a) One city with 50,000 or more inhabitants, or
- b) A Census Bureau-defined urbanized area (of at least 50,000 inhabitants) and a total metropolitan population of at least 100,000 (*Note: I kid you not, but in the New England states they only need a population of 75,000. I guess folks are a little bigger out there.*)

These are county designations, so if there’s a city with 50,000 within a county, that whole county is considered an MA. No matter how big the county is or how isolated some little towns within the county might be, if those towns are within the county, they are considered metropolitan. If the city or MA crosses county lines, both counties are considered MAs. (*Note: County-wide definitions have always been a contentious Western issue because of the size of the counties out here. We have counties the size of eastern states out here in the west so countywide data, planning, or allocation of resources can present quite a challenge.*) As of July 2003, Colorado has seventeen MA’s.

(Remember these are countywide.) They are:

- 1. Adams
- 2. Arapahoe
- 3. Boulder
- 4. Broomfield
- 5. Clear Creek
- 6. Denver
- 7. Douglas
- 8. El Paso
- 9. Elbert
- 10. Gilpin
- 11. Jefferson
- 12. Larimer
- 13. Mesa
- 14. Park
- 15. Pueblo
- 16. Teller
- 17. Weld

Any county or place outside these seventeen Metropolitan Areas is considered Non-metropolitan.



Dark counties are non-metropolitan

According to the OMB, in 2000 in Colorado our population looked like this:

Metropolitan Population	Non-metropolitan Population	Total Population
3,607,656	693,605	4,301,261
84%	16%	100%

Rural and Non-metro Used Interchangeably

The term “non-metropolitan” is often used interchangeably with “rural” even though, as you’ve now learned, the terms are quite different. For example, in [Health Care in Rural America](#), published by the Office of Technology Assessment, they explain “throughout this report, “rural” refers to non-metro areas unless otherwise stated.” The program guide for federal Rural Health Outreach Grants defines “rural” as “a non-Metropolitan Statistical Area as defined by the OMB.” The non-metro definition and the term “rural” are combined so often because 1) it’s frankly just easier to say “rural” and have folks know generally what you mean and 2) it is easier to define and describe data on a county-wide level.

Comparing the Two Definitions in Colorado

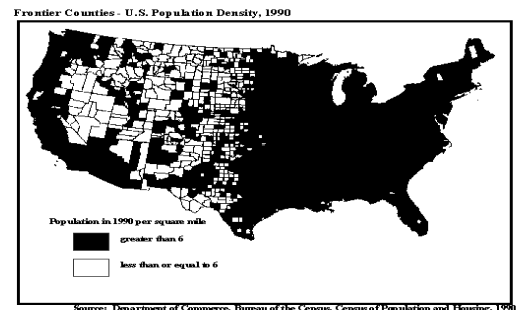
In considering Colorado’s overall population, it doesn’t make a lot of difference whether you use the rural/urban or metro/non-metro definition; the overall percentages look much the same. (See the chart below.) However, the definition used could make a great deal of difference to a community applying for a federal grant. Let’s take Grover for instance. If the grant guidelines use the Census Bureau’s term for “rural,” Grover with a population of only 153 would certainly qualify because they have well under 2,500 people. Under the OMB’s metropolitan definition, Grover would be ineligible because they would be considered part of the booming Metropolitan Area of Greeley because they are in Weld County even though they are almost 100 miles and worlds apart.

	Number	%
Census Bureau Definition		
Urban population	3,634,746	84.50%
Rural population	666,515	15.50%
Total population	4,301,261	100%
OMB’s Definition		
Metro population	3,607,656	83.87%
Non-metro population	693,605	16.13%
Total population	4,301,261	100%

- Optional information is included at the bottom of page 5 regarding how many of these OMB non-metro folks are considered Census Bureau urban and rural. You might want to skip this section on your first reading though. Pace yourself.

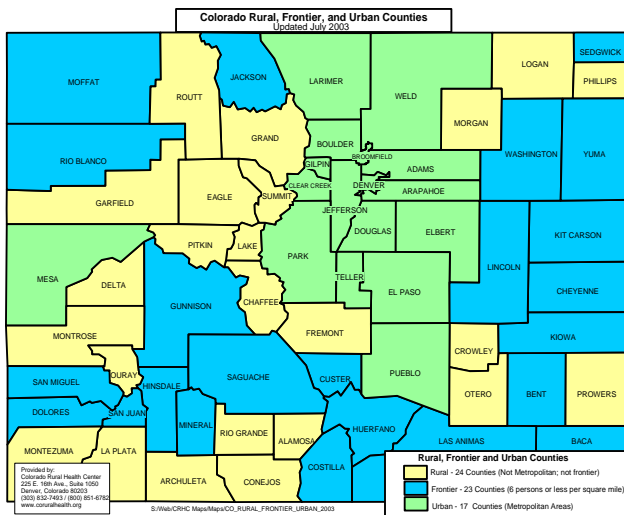
Frontier Areas

Because the term “rural” just didn’t adequately describe the vast, sparsely populated areas found in the western United States, in the late 1980s another term started cropping up, “frontier.” Like metropolitan, frontier is a [countywide](#) term. The definition of frontier is “a county with six (6) or fewer people per square mile.” (Note: There is some discrepancy among federal and state agencies with this number, some use “fewer than seven,” others “fewer than 6.”) (Another note: I once heard that the real definition of frontier is “vast area surrounded by vast area.”) As you can see by the map to the right, which shows frontier counties, frontier is largely a western phenomenon.



Based on the 2000 Census, 23 of Colorado's 64 counties are considered frontier.

- | | | | |
|-------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| 1. Baca | 8. Hinsdale | 15. Mineral | 22. Washington |
| 2. Bent | 9. Huerfano | 16. Moffat | 23. Yuma |
| 3. Cheyenne | 10. Jackson | 17. Rio Blanco | |
| 4. Costilla | 11. Kiowa | 18. Saguache | |
| 5. Custer | 12. Kit Carson | 19. San Juan | |
| 6. Dolores | 13. Las Animas | 20. San Miguel | |
| 7. Gunnison | 14. Lincoln | 21. Sedgwick | |



Note: These 23 counties make up 43% of Colorado's land mass and represent only 3% of the population. (Like I said, vast area surrounded by vast area.)

The map to the left shows Colorado's Frontier Counties (in Blue), Rural Counties (in Yellow), and Urban Counties (in Green).

Some federal and state programs give preference to frontier areas so it's a good idea to know if your county qualifies as frontier. While I've listed the frontier counties, to find out for yourself, just divide your population by the number of square miles. If the answer is 6 or less, you're frontier all right.

Rural Places in Metropolitan Counties

Now this next part is real tricky, but hang in there.

When Rural Health Outreach Grants first came out, if a community was located in a metropolitan county, they were ineligible to apply, no matter how big the county was or how far the applicant was from that city of 50,000 people. Because the counties out west are so big (*and some of us rural health advocates worked so hard*) the federal government finally recognized there just might be areas considered rural within large metro counties, so the "Goldsmith Provisions" were created. Here's how this works.

Metropolitan counties are broken down into census tracts (CT's). These are small, relatively permanent subdivisions of a county identified by a number ranging from 0001 to 9499.99. CT's usually have between 2,500 to 8,000 people (at least when they are created) and are meant to represent a group of people with similar population characteristics, economic status and living conditions.

So why am I confusing you with all this?

Several key federal grants use the Goldsmith Provisions to allow certain CT's within metropolitan counties to be eligible for rural funding. Examples are the Rural Health Outreach Grants, Rural Health Network Grants and the recent Federal Communications Commission rural telecommunication subsidies.

If you are considering applying for a grant or other resources that are limited to non-metropolitan counties, and you are in a metropolitan county but feel pretty darn rural, you need to find out if the Goldsmith Provisions are also being used to determine eligibility. *(Now, don't get your hopes up. These metropolitan CT's are considered "rural" because not many people live there!)*

Because several key grant programs use the term, I thought I better mention it. In Colorado, here are the metropolitan CT's considered rural for some federal programs: (Remember, only metropolitan counties have census tracts.)

Eligible Census Tracts Within Metropolitan Counties

Metropolitan Counties	Eligible Census Tracts
Adams	84, 85.13, 87.01
Arapahoe	None
Boulder	None
Denver	None
Douglas	None
El Paso	38, 39.01, 46
Jefferson	None
Larimer	14, 17.02, 19.02, 20.01, 22
Mesa	12, 15, 18, 19
Pueblo	28.04, 32, 34
Weld	19.02, 20, 24, 25.01, 25.02

Here at CRHC we currently don't have a map showing the exact location of these census tracts. To find out if you are located in an eligible CT, contact the Bureau of the Census Regional Information Service in Denver at (303) 969-7750.

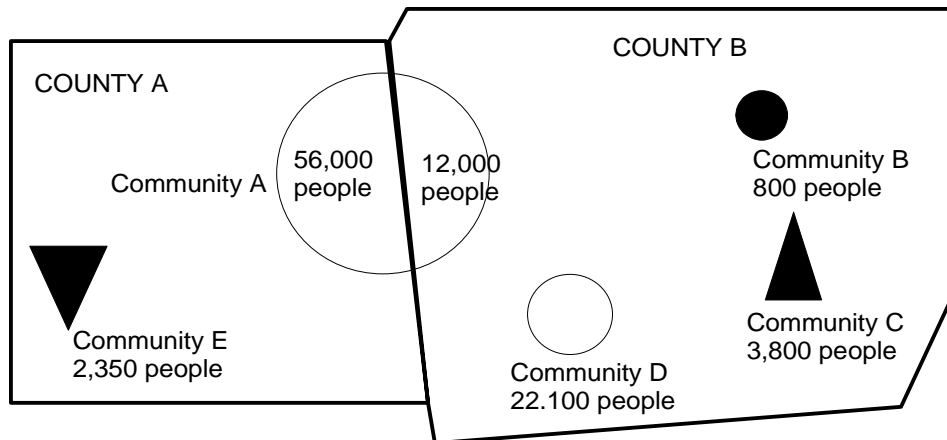
Other Rural Definitions

I've just given you the most commonly used federal definitions for determining rurality. Our office (and most offices of rural health) start with these basic federal definitions, but at times these are "tweaked" in an attempt to make better policy and programmatic decisions. For example, another commonly used term for rural at a state level is "a community of under 25,000, not part of an Urbanized Area." Here at CRHC, we use that definition of rural to determine the rurality of our board members and in determining eligibility for some grants.

As you can see, it isn't easy to answer the question, "What is rural?" And in trying to figure out if you qualify as rural under certain programs, first you have to determine which definition they are using.

Optional Quiz

If you want to test your ability to understand (and MY ability to explain) these urban/rural and metro/non-metro concepts, here's a little quiz you can take.



Questions (Answers below)

1. Which county is considered Metropolitan?
2. Which communities are considered rural?
3. Would Community B be eligible for a grant limited to OMB's non-metropolitan areas?
4. Would Community C be eligible for a grant limited to the Census Bureau's rural areas?
5. Is Grover, Colorado rural?

Answers:

1. Both counties are considered metropolitan because the urbanized area extends into both counties.
2. Communities B and E because they have under 2,500 people.
3. No, because they are considered metropolitan because they are located in a county with a community of over 50,000 people.
4. No, because they have over 2,500 people.
5. It depends, you'd first have to know how "rural" was being defined.

If you didn't do well on the test, don't worry, it's a very confusing issue. And remember, I only gave you a couple of the most commonly used definitions for rural. If you have questions about whether or not you are considered rural, call our office, we'll be happy to try and help.