

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT SMALL TOWNS AND RURAL AREAS

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Data cited below is drawn, for the most part, from *New Dimensions in Rural Policy*, a publication of papers written for Congress by the leading rural sociologists and agricultural economists in the United States.

1. About as many people live in rural America—60 million—as ever.
2. While rural farm population has fallen since 1920 to less than 6 million, during the same period rural non-farm has grown from 20 million to 55.6 million people.
3. Non-metropolitan population—that is, people living outside the metropolitan statistical areas—stands at 53 million, down less than 3 percent since 1940 in spite of the impact of urban sprawl and the shrinkage of farm work. (Note: Some of the 60 million rural people live inside metropolitan statistical areas, while some of the non-metropolitan population people live in small cities of less than 50,000 outside of metropolitan statistical areas. In 1990 200 counties were redesignated metro (or non-metro) and nearly 6 billion persons were also redefined as metro. It can be argued that the numbers often hide the culture.
4. As America moves from the era of mass society to the era of high tech, the impact on rural America can be either positive or negative or mixed. Some rural areas will benefit from the decentralization of the work place and of industry. Others will experience continued shrinkage as advances in biotechnology increase yields of food and fiber.
5. Retirement destination counties (mostly in the South in mountains and along seacoasts) and suburbanizing counties have grown the most among rural counties in the 1980s and 1990s.
6. The young (18-29) continue to leave the rural counties for metropolitan areas.
7. Rural people tend to be older and poorer than the average for Americans.
8. The farmers in financial trouble are mostly full-time farmers with gross farm sales between \$40,000 and \$250,000.
9. Ethnic land ownership and rural residency have both declined dramatically since 1940.
10. Increasing numbers of rural people live in villages and small towns rather than on isolated farmsteads.
11. Most small towns of 1,000 to 2,500 people are growing. Consequently, a good strategy for denominations is to start and/or strengthen congregations in such places.
12. Counties more than 50 miles from metropolitan places, particularly those with large ethnic populations, will face growing economic problems.
13. High tech and more foreign competition make the future for American farmers bleak

through the rest of this century. NAFTA and GATT Treaties will cause great change.

14. There will be more vertical integration in the U.S. agriculture with greater stress being placed on our more fertile lands. While this promises short-term bottom line gains, in the long run it may devastate our society.

15. U.S. agriculture lands stand at about a billion acres, down from 1.2 billion in 1940.

16. Small towns relying primarily on farm service trade will find survival difficult in the coming decade.

17. As farm land passes out of the hands of current owners and into the hands of absentee and corporate entities, one can anticipate significant migration by farm managers from place to place as the current owners depart.

18. The fostering of rural entrepreneurial enterprises will receive expanded attention from U.S. and state agencies.

19. We will also witness expanded attention to leadership training by agencies that work with foreign communities.

20. Many rural institutions and services will reorganize, change, or die.

21. Ultimately, the information age, high tech era will further decentralize the work place, revitalizing some rural communities, particularly those nearby.

22. Economic stress will plunge many farm families into emotional and spiritual stress.

23. Modern transportation, communication and commerce are changing the old rural communities into neighborhoods of larger communities which center in part in large towns such as county seats.

24. As the nation comes to the end of the oil age, we may shift to biomass for energy, revitalizing some rural places.

25. In the short run, the picture for much of rural America is not bright. Consequently, the challenge for rural-urban churches and pastors is the greatest ever. More people, more stress, more change.

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