

Instructor Teaching Guide

Demographic Trends in Rural America (Johnson)

This guide accompanies the 20-minute lecture deck. It contains learning objectives, a lecture outline mapped to the slides, common misconceptions to counter, two in-class activities, and assignment ideas. As the volume's opening chapter, it also sets up the demographic context for the chapters that follow.

Learning objectives

By the end of this unit, students will be able to:

1. Explain the “not one rural America” thesis and the diversity of rural places and trajectories. [Understand]
2. Distinguish natural change from net migration and use them to decompose population change. [Apply]
3. Describe the rural continuum (adjacency, micropolitan status) and the four county types. [Understand]
4. Analyze how the Great Recession and COVID-19 reshaped rural population change. [Analyze]
5. Interpret demographic charts and read real county data. [Apply]
6. Evaluate rural America's demographic future and its policy implications. [Evaluate]

Lecture outline (~20 minutes of lecture & time for discussion)

Segment	Slides & delivery
Framing: many rural Americas	Slides 1–2. “Not one rural America”; why it matters.
Two engines of change	Slide 3. Natural change and net migration.
A turbulent era	Slides 4–6. National shocks; the first-ever decline; how it happened.
Not one rural America	Slides 7–9. The continuum; four county types.
The pandemic shock	Slides 10–13. Natural decrease; the migration surprise; where growth went.
A new demographic map	Slide 14. The widespread but uneven pattern.
What it means	Slide 15. Migration-dependent future; the depopulation spiral.
Synthesis & discussion	Slide 16. Four movements; launch the county-profile prompt.

Combating myths & misunderstandings

- “Rural America is all farms.” Farm counties are just one of four types; recreation, retirement, and manufacturing counties look very different.
- “Rural areas are all dying.” Trajectories vary enormously; many amenity counties grew even during the pandemic.
- “Population loss means people are leaving.” Loss can come from natural decrease (more deaths than births) even when migration is flat or positive.

- “The pandemic only hurt rural areas.” It drove record deaths but also an unexpected surge of in-migration.
- “One good statistic (or one bad one) describes rural America.” National averages hide sharp variation along the continuum and across county types.

In-class activity 1 — Decompose a county

Format: pairs or small groups, 15–20 minutes; students need a phone or laptop.

- Give each group a county (or let them pick their home county). Using Census QuickFacts or data.census.gov, find recent population change and, if available, births and deaths.
- Have them separate the change into natural change and net migration as best the data allow, and classify the county as growing or shrinking, natural increase or decrease.
- Groups report which engine is driving their county’s trajectory and where it might sit on the rural continuum.

In-class activity 2 — Read the charts cold

Format: whole class or small groups, 15–20 minutes; project the deck’s four charts.

- Show each chart with the title and callout hidden. Ask students to state, in one sentence, what the data show before you reveal the interpretation.
- For the decadal chart, ask what is unprecedented about the third bar; for the births-vs-deaths chart, ask what “natural decrease” means in plain terms.
- Discuss how the same pandemic produced both record deaths and a migration boom — two engines pulling opposite ways.

Assignment ideas

- My county’s demographic profile: students pull real Census data for their own county and classify its trajectory.
 - Components-of-change analysis: decompose recent change into natural change and net migration from real data.
 - Local interview or observation: talk with a county planner, economic developer, school administrator, or Extension agent, or observe local indicators of change.
 - Rural trajectory essay: classify a real county on the continuum and typology and analyze its path.
 - Two-county comparison: contrast a growing amenity county with a depopulating farm or “other” county.
 - Policy op-ed or memo: argue for a demographically calibrated policy for a specific local county.
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These teaching materials were generated with the assistance of Claude (Anthropic). All content was reviewed and verified by the chapter authors.