

Student Study Guide & Glossary

Demographic Trends in Rural America (Johnson)

Use this guide to prepare for class and exams. It lists what you should be able to do, a glossary of key terms, essential facts, section-by-section reading questions, and a short self-check.

What you should be able to do

- Explain the “not one rural America” thesis.
- Distinguish natural change from net migration and decompose a population change.
- Describe the rural continuum and the four county types.
- Analyze how the Great Recession and COVID-19 reshaped rural population change.
- Interpret demographic charts and read real county data.
- Evaluate rural America’s demographic future and its policy implications.

Key terms glossary

Nonmetro (rural) — Counties outside metropolitan areas, classified by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget; used interchangeably with “rural” here.

Metro — Counties in metropolitan areas; in 2020, 1,166 metro counties held 285 million people.

Micropolitan county — A nonmetro county containing a town of 10,000–50,000 residents.

Adjacency — Whether a nonmetro county borders a metro area (adjacent) or not (nonadjacent).

Rural continuum — The grouping of nonmetro counties by adjacency and micropolitan status (four groups).

Natural change — Births minus deaths in a population.

Natural increase / natural decrease — More births than deaths (increase) or more deaths than births (decrease).

Net migration — In-migrants minus out-migrants, including both domestic moves and immigration.

Domestic migration vs immigration — Movement between U.S. counties versus movement into the U.S. from abroad.

Components of change — The breakdown of population change into natural change and net migration.

County typology — The USDA classification of counties by dominant economy (farm, manufacturing, recreation, retirement, and others).

Amenity migration — Movement to counties with natural, recreational, or quality-of-life advantages.

Depopulation — Sustained, long-term population loss; about 35% of nonmetro counties have experienced it.

Downward demographic spiral — The self-reinforcing loop of young-adult out-migration, aging, and rising mortality that deepens decline.

Deaths of despair — Deaths from drugs, alcohol, and suicide that have raised working-age mortality (Monnat).

Facts & figures worth knowing

- Decadal nonmetro population change: +8.3% (1990–2000), +3.4% (2000–2010), –0.6% (2010–2020) — the first decline in history.
- In 2010–2020, net outmigration (–1.1%) exceeded natural increase (+0.5%); 67% of nonmetro counties lost population.
- The 1,974 nonmetro counties held 46 million people — 14% of the U.S. — in 2020.
- From 2020 to 2024, nonmetro deaths averaged 620,000/year and births 487,000/year (fewest in 50+ years).
- 82% of nonmetro counties had more deaths than births in 2020–2024 (up from 54% in 2019) — the highest share ever.
- Despite that, nonmetro America grew by 407,000 (2020–2024); recreation and retirement counties gained ~376,000 of it.
- The share of counties with net migration gains rose from 28% (2010–15) to 41% (2015–20) to 65% (2020–24).

Reading-guide questions (by section)

A turbulent era: How did the Great Recession affect migration and births nationally?

Overall change 2000–2020: Why did nonmetro America lose population in the 2010s, and which engine mattered most?

Variation by type and location: How do the continuum and county types shape different trajectories?

The pandemic: How did COVID-19 change rural deaths, births, and migration?

Conclusions: Why does the future “hinge on migration,” and what is the depopulation spiral?

Quick self-check

Answer, then check yourself against the glossary and facts above.

1. What are the two “engines” of population change?
2. What was unprecedented about nonmetro population change in 2010–2020?
3. What share of nonmetro counties had natural decrease in 2020–2024?
4. How did rural America grow after 2020 despite record natural decrease?
5. What is the “downward demographic spiral”?

Answers: 1) Natural change (births minus deaths) and net migration (in minus out). 2) The nonmetro population declined in absolute terms (−0.6%) for the first time in recorded history, as migration loss outran a minimal natural increase. 3) 82% — the highest ever. 4) Nearly a million in-movers offset the excess of deaths over births, for a net gain of about 407,000. 5) The self-reinforcing loop of young-adult out-migration, aging, and rising mortality that deepens decline and is hard to escape.

These teaching materials were generated with the assistance of Claude (Anthropic). All content was reviewed and verified by the chapter authors.