BOOM TOWN
AMENITY MIGRATION IN THE RURAL WEST
& THE RISE OF THE “ZOOM TOWN”

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GEOGRAPHER – USDA RURAL ECONOMIC RESEARCH SERVICE
Natural change — fewer births, more deaths, and an aging population — is creating a major demographic challenge for many regions across rural and small-town America, according to USDA’s Economic Research Service (ERS) research. But nonmetropolitan (nonmetro) areas that border on metropolitan areas seem to fare better in attracting new people and retaining the current population.
Nonmetro areas end the decade with near-zero population change

Note: Metro and nonmetro status are determined by metro area designations from the Office of Management and Budget that are updated following each decennial census. Some counties change status in 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2010. Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Census Bureau.
Increasing rates of nonmetro net migration offset by reductions in natural change

Note: Metro and nonmetro status are determined by metro area designations from the Office of Management and Budget that are updated following each decennial census. Some counties change status in 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2010. Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Census Bureau.
Increasing rates of nonmetro net migration offset by reductions in natural change

![Graph showing population change, migration, and natural change over time]

Two time periods compared in following maps and charts

Note: Metro and nonmetro status are determined by metro area designations from the Office of Management and Budget that are updated following each decennial census. Some counties change status in 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2010. Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Census Bureau.
Nearly 1,400 nonmetro counties lost population from 2011 to 2014

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Census Bureau.
Population rebounded in counties adjacent to metro areas during the second half of the decade.

Nonmetro counties, 2016-19

- Population decline (1,210 counties)
- Population growth below 2 percent (458 counties)
- Population growth 2 percent or higher (308 counties)

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Census Bureau.
Population growth returns to nonmetro counties near metro areas but continues to decline in more remote settings

![Bar chart showing percent change in population growth across different categories.](chart)

- **Metro central**: 2.7% (2011-14), 1.8% (2016-19)
- **Metro outlying**: 2.0% (2011-14), 0.3% (2016-19)
- **Nonmetro adjacent**: 3.3% (2011-14), 0.0% (2016-19)
- **Nonadjacent with town**
  - 2011-14: -0.5%
  - 2016-19: -0.4%
- **Nonadjacent rural without town**
  - 2011-14: -0.8%
  - 2016-19: -0.6%

Note: Categories are based on 2013 metro definitions. Metro central counties contain urbanized areas of 50,000 or more. Metro outlying counties are tied to central counties through high commuting levels (25% or higher). Nonmetro adjacent counties are both physically adjacent to a metro area and have 2-25 percent commuting to the central counties. Nonadjacent counties are divided into those with and without urban populations.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Census Bureau.
Population shifts reflect cut-backs in energy-sector employment and renewed migration to recreation destinations.

Note: County types are described in the 2015 ERS County Typology Codes data product: http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/county-typology-codes.aspx
Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Census Bureau and the Bureau of Economic Analysis.
Components of Population Change - Nonmetropolitan West

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Demographic Composition - Nonmetropolitan West

- Non Recreation
- Recreation

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Recreation brings more than just tourism

“It would be good to settle in a place that has recreational facilities.”
Recreation brings more than just tourism

Ave. Net Migration per 1,000 Residents, 2010-2016

- Metro: 12.5 (Non-Recreation) vs. 45.9 (Recreation)
- Micro: -15.6 (Non-Recreation) vs. 21.6 (Recreation)
- Rural: -19.9 (Non-Recreation) vs. 1.3 (Recreation)

https://headwaterseconomics.org
Familiar challenges, exacerbated

The Washington Post

New homes on the range: Weary city dwellers escape to Montana, creating a property gold rush

The New York Times

The Virus Sent Droves to a Small Town. Suddenly, It’s Not So Small.

The population boomed in Winhall, Vt., as people tried to get away from Covid-19 hot spots. Bear complaints are up. Plumbers are booked until Christmas. And the dump is “sheer pandemonium.”

Coronavirus Threatens Strained Rural Health Care System

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