

What is the status of rural California today?

When most Americans think of California, they typically conjure up visions of beaches, Hollywood, the Golden Gate Bridge, or an ^{Siskiyou Valley} upscale urban/suburban lifestyle. But for many decades, as reported by the U.S. Census Bureau, California also had more rural residents than any of the eleven western-most states of the contiguous forty-eight. Census 2000 found California's rural population totaled 1,876,753 persons, nearly twice as large as second-ranked Washington state's non-urban population (Census 2010 has not yet reported rural population findings).

Rural economies of California have been historically dominated by natural resource production (some would say "exploitation"): farming, ranching, fishing, logging, mining and hunting. During the past several decades, only farming has experienced real growth in economic terms, largely due to a major expansion of the annual output of high value commodities, such as fruits and nuts, vegetables, ornamentals and dairy products. The fishing and logging industries are in serious decline and may never recover, while mining and hunting long ago depleted their natural resource bases.

Traditionally, rural residency was thought to be associated with better health: clean air and water, active outdoor lifestyles and occupations, and a low incidence of crime and/or personal health risk behaviors, such as smoking. Urban life, especially within the inner city, was regarded as associated with poverty, unhealthful housing conditions and crime.

The latest measures of health outcomes in California tend to belie the notion that rural people have better health outcomes. The ten counties with the reportedly worst health outcomes in the state are those tending to have the greatest percentage of rural residents. All ten have vast areas of fisheries, timber, ranch and farm land that serves as the basis of their residents' livelihoods. From the bottom of the list in ascending order these ten counties are Del Norte, Siskiyou, Lake, Trinity, Yuba, Kern, Inyo, Tulare, Madera and Modoc (University of Wisconsin et al, 2010). Ranking first among all of the state's 56 counties in reported health outcomes is Marin County.

The Great Recession has had a disproportionately larger adverse impact on rural areas of the state than was the case in the 50-mile swath of California that faces the Pacific Ocean and extends from Marin County toward the Mexican border. Whether it is measured by the unemployment rate, the proportion of mortgaged homes in foreclosure or having had a notice of default filing, or the decline in housing valuation, the historically rural areas of the state have generally fared worse.

It is difficult to develop accurate measures of the status of rural California because nearly every socio-economic characteristic – health status, educational attainment, family income – is reported according to city, county, or other standard political sub-division, not separately by rural geographic status. With this limitation in mind, California's 20th Congressional District (C.D.), in the heart of the agricultural region on the West Side of the San Joaquin Valley, ranked as the very worst among all of the nation's 436 Congressional Districts according to the "Human Development Index" (Burd-Sharps et al, 2008). The measures used to rank C.D.'s were: life expectancy at birth, educational attainment, school enrollment (as percent of eligible children) and median earnings.

Significantly, a plurality of all private-sector male workers in the 20th C.D. population is employed in agriculture.¹ Of considerable importance, the 20th C.D. is a major success story of agricultural production, ranking 14th in the nation out of 436 C.D.s in value of farm output. Total farm cash receipts from the sale of agricultural commodities in the 20th C.D. was reported by the 2007 Census of Agriculture to be \$4.4 billion, and it ranked 2nd in the nation in vegetable sales.

Until recently, rural was defined by the Census Bureau to be incorporated cities or census designated places outside of metropolitan areas that had less than 2,500 residents as well as non-metropolitan areas with low population density outside of incorporated and census designated places. But this changed in 2003 with the development of Rural-Urban Continuum Codes (RUCC) to allow fine-grained distinctions among counties with urban populations of differing size. Just two of these codes specifically include the term “rural” in their descriptive definitions, but in both cases were defined in reference to a county’s proximity to metro areas (either adjacent, or non-adjacent, to a county with a metro area).

Using the 2003 RUCCs, just four California counties were classified as rural, as a “Nonmetro county completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, adjacent to metro area” (Alpine, Mariposa, Sierra, Trinity). Paradoxically, more than 98% of the state’s rural residents lived in counties described as “metro” or as “non-metro” with substantial urban populations. Less than 2% of California’s rural population lives in the four counties specifically identified as rural.

California’s geographically huge counties – several encompass areas larger than some individual states of the Eastern U.S. – present a curious demographic dilemma: counties with very sizeable urban populations may also have substantial numbers of rural residents spread over hundreds of square miles of sparsely populated farmland, desert, timberland or mountains. For example, the city of San Bernardino (San Bernardino County) has 209,924 residents (Census 2010), and tens of thousands more within its metropolitan area. But the county also had 96,453 rural residents (Census 2000), and comprises some 20,000 square miles, almost twenty times larger than the average for all counties of the contiguous forty-eight states (1,032 sq. mi.).

The major demographic change in California during the past decade has been the remarkable increase in the populations of counties that have historically had small, somewhat isolated, rural communities spread over large distances. The Inland Empire, the San Joaquin Valley, and several Sierra Foothill counties have experienced population growth rates substantially exceeding that of the state as a whole, and by much greater factors than the state’s major metropolitan areas.

While California’s population increased by about 10% between 2000 and 2010, Riverside County’s grew by 42%, Kern’s by 27%, San Joaquin’s by 22% and Tulare’s by 20%. In contrast, during the same decade, Los Angeles County’s population increased by a mere 3% and Orange County’s by 6%. There can be little doubt that the rural population of the state has diminished by a substantial amount during the past ten years, although Census 2010 data is not yet available.

¹ U.S. Bureau of the Census, Census 2000, 20th Congressional District, California, Table P51. Sex by Industry by Class of Workers for the Employed Civilian Population 16 Years and Over. Excluding government workers, there were 104,864 men employed, of which 37,717 were employed in agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting. Cf. www.census.gov, Census 2000 Summary File 3, accessed 8/2/08.

Scholars have identified this shift of population to areas that had previously been considered to be rural in character as resulting from either spillover out of traditional urban boundaries (expansion of suburbia) or from counter-urbanization, i.e., net migration out of urban areas to less densely populated regions. People who leave major urban centers include those changing jobs, or seeking less expensive housing costs, or desiring communities with lower crime rates, or retirees seeking amenities and a life-style more to their liking. Indeed, whole new communities, termed “new towns”, have been developed to meet the perceived needs or expectations of specific socio-economic strata, including the rich who desire an amenity-driven community.

There is an interesting divide between academic demographers and community residents when discussing “rural” in the context of California. Many communities that are classified as “urban” by the criteria of the Census Bureau are viewed as undeniably “rural” by the people who actually live there. Huron, Mendota, Mecca, Orange Cove, Parlier and Arbuckle, among many others, have populations that substantially exceed the 2,500 population cutoff to be classified as rural. But nearly every resident of these communities will say they live in a rural community.

References

Burd-Sharps S Lewis K Martins EB, *The Measure of America: American Human Development Report 2008-2009*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2008, 245 p.

University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, *County Health Rankings: Mobilizing Action Toward Community Health. California. 2010*, cf. www.countyhealthrankings.org, accessed 3/1/10.