

Your *First STOP* for
Rural Health
INFORMATION



Federal Rural Definitions

Featured Speakers



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Rural Definitions

Rural Health Information Hub

January 22, 2026

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Associate Director

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Statistician

Federal Office of Rural Health Policy (FORHP)

Vision: Healthy Communities, Healthy People



FORHP Overview

Established in Section 711 of the Social Security Act

The Federal Office of Rural Health Policy (FORHP) collaborates with rural communities and partners to support community programs and provide technical assistance to improve health in rural America.

Voice for Rural

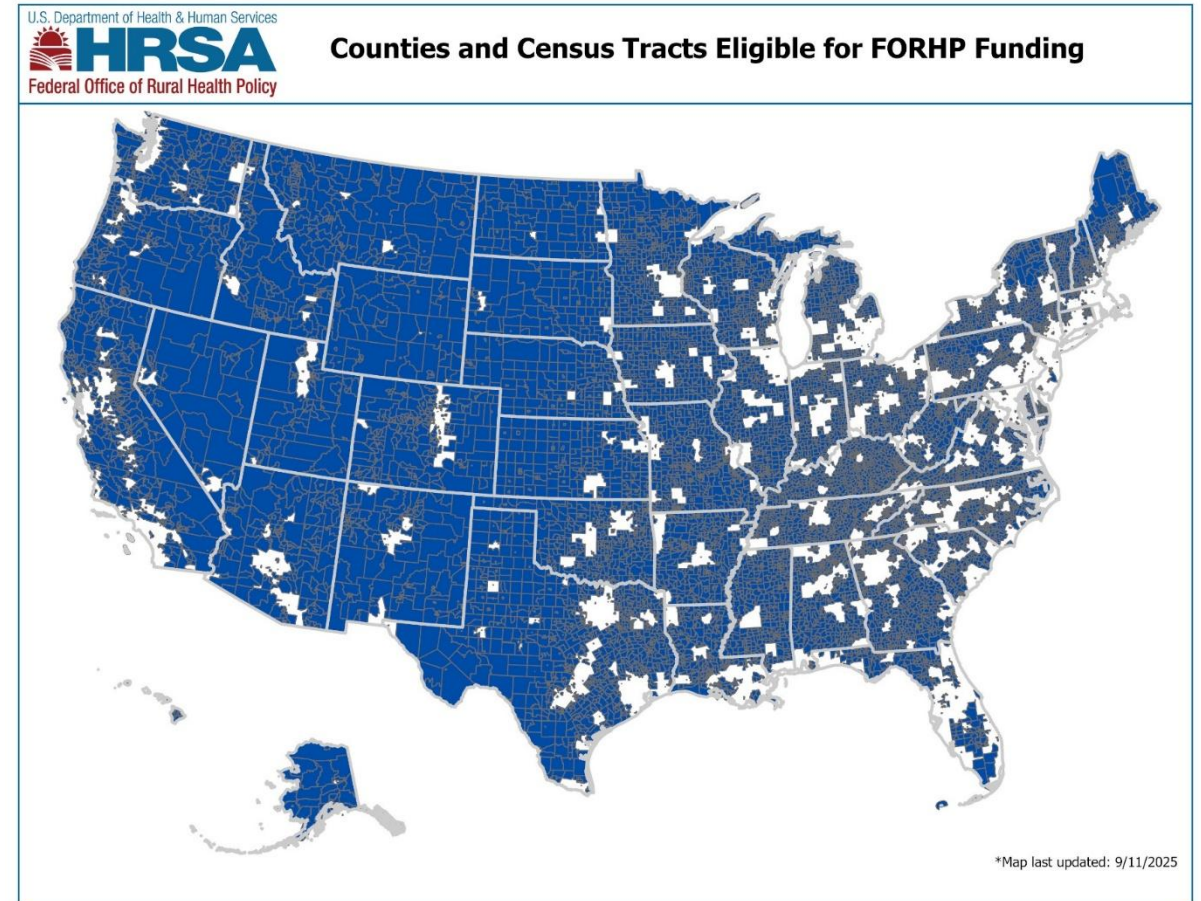
Advises the HHS Secretary on issues that affect rural America

Capacity Building

Increases access to health care for people in rural communities through grant programs and public partnerships

Cross Agency Collaboration

Works across HRSA, HHS, and several other federal partners to accomplish its goals



Overview

- Why rural definitions matter
- Urban/Rural population overtime
- Who defines “rural”
 - Census Bureau
 - Office of Management and Budget
 - Federal Office of Rural Health Policy
 - United States Department of Agriculture – Economic Research Services
- Focus on the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy
- Useful Tools
- Time Permitting: Additional Rural Definitions

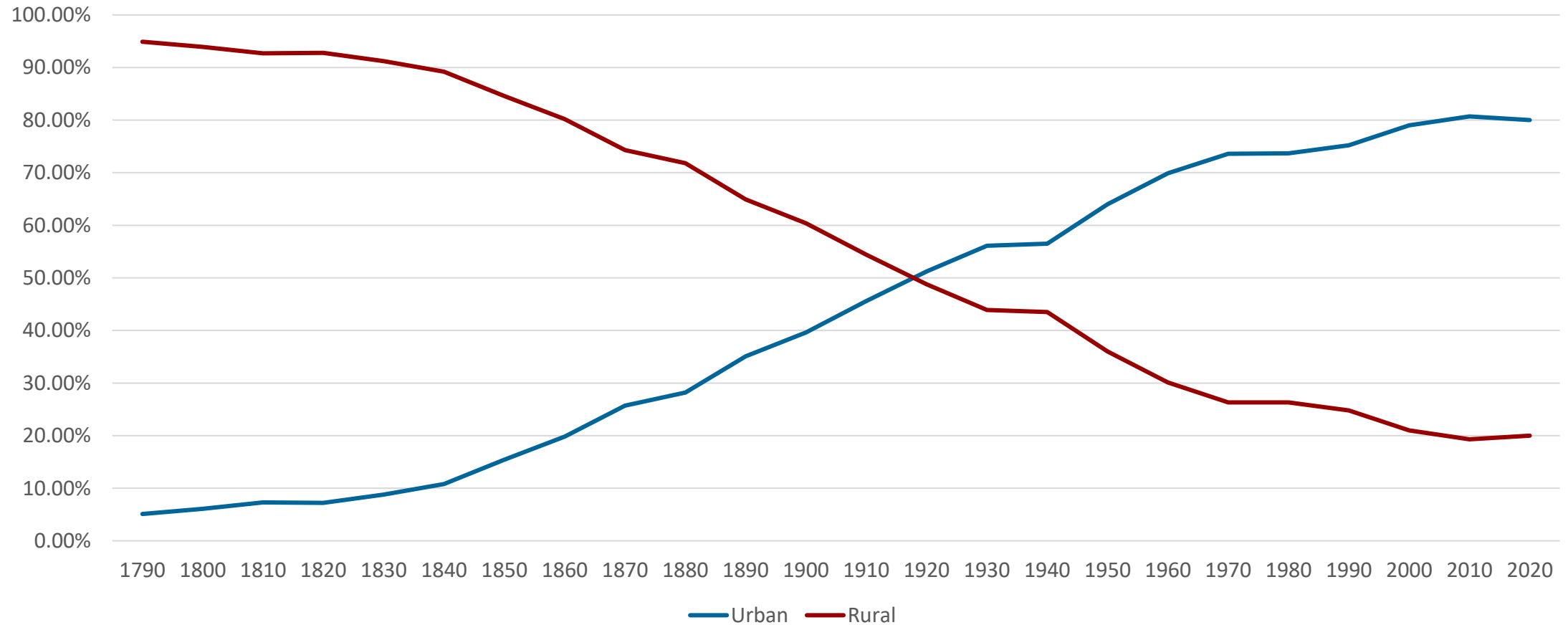


Why Do Rural Definitions Matter?

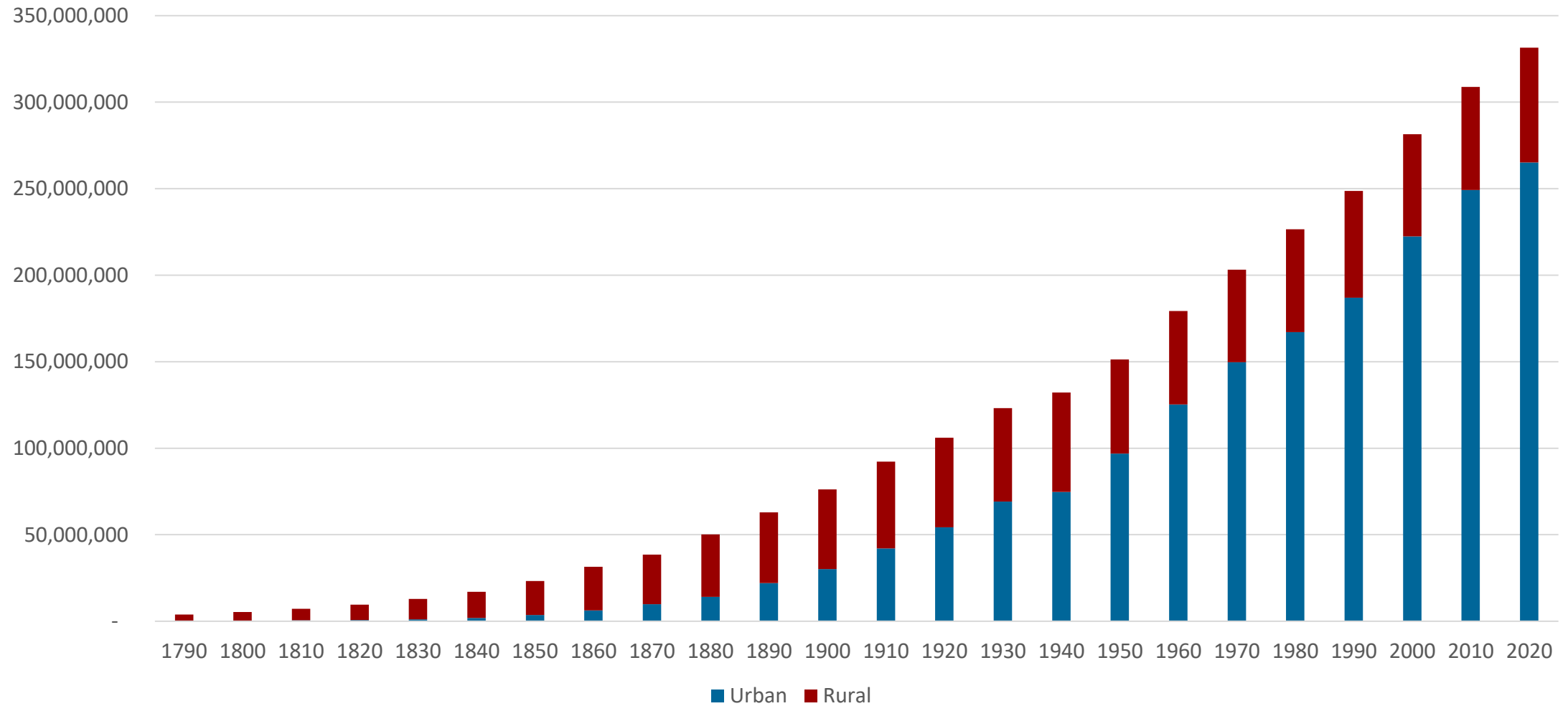
- Congress directs funding specifically to rural communities and for rural issues
- Programs focused on rural populations rely on some kind of criteria for the funding
 - The way rural is defined determines who is eligible to receive federal resources
 - Sometimes rural is defined in statute and sometimes agencies have flexibility to set their own definitions



Census Urban/Rural Population by Percent of Population



Census Urban/Rural Population by the Numbers



Who Defines Rural?

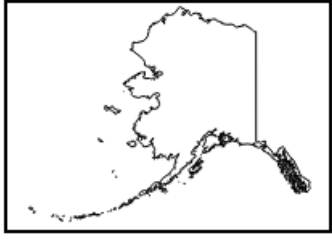
- The Census Bureau
- The Office of Management and Budget (OMB)
- United States Department of Agriculture's - Economic Research Services (ERS)
- MANY others



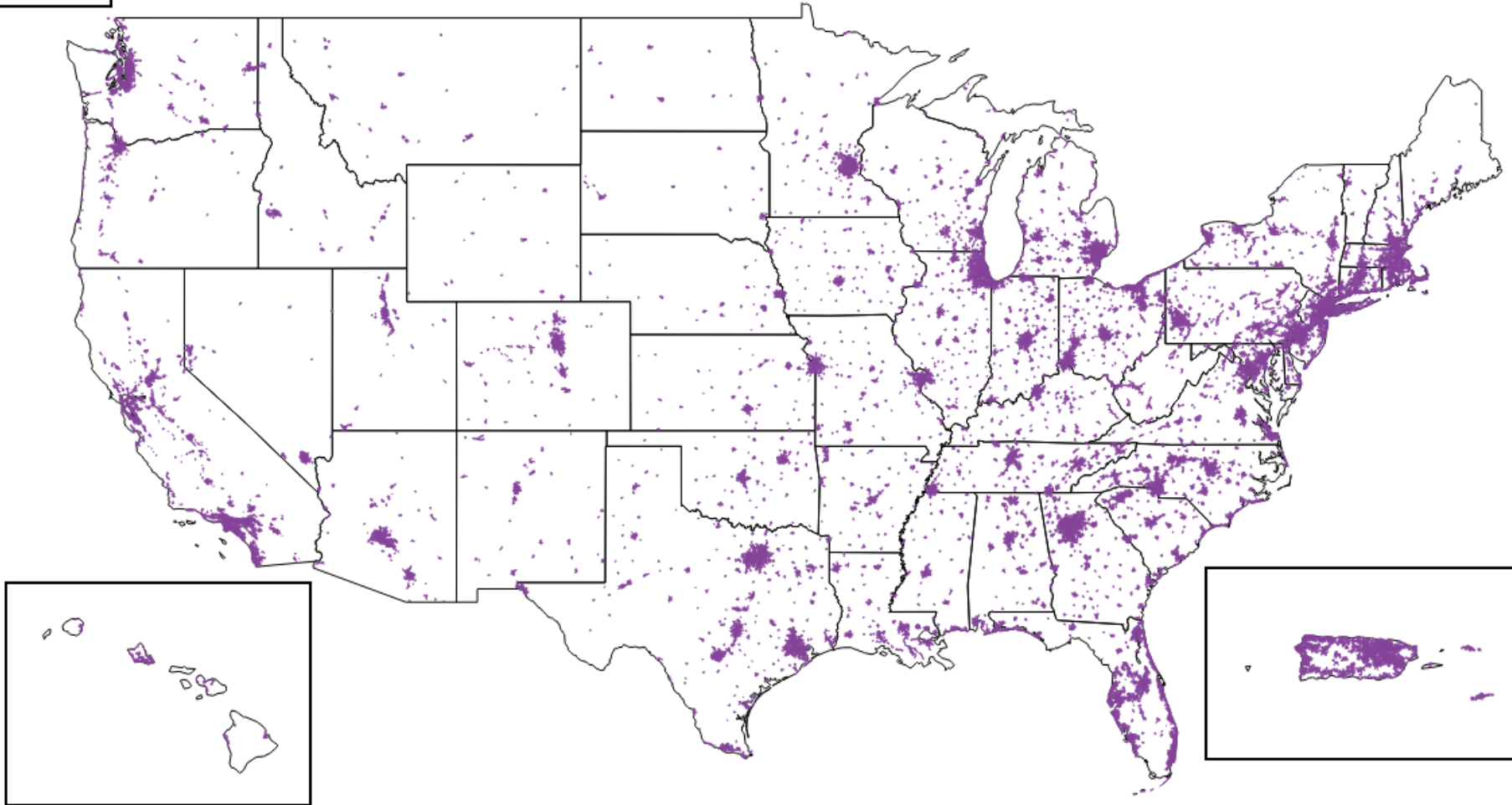
The Census Bureau

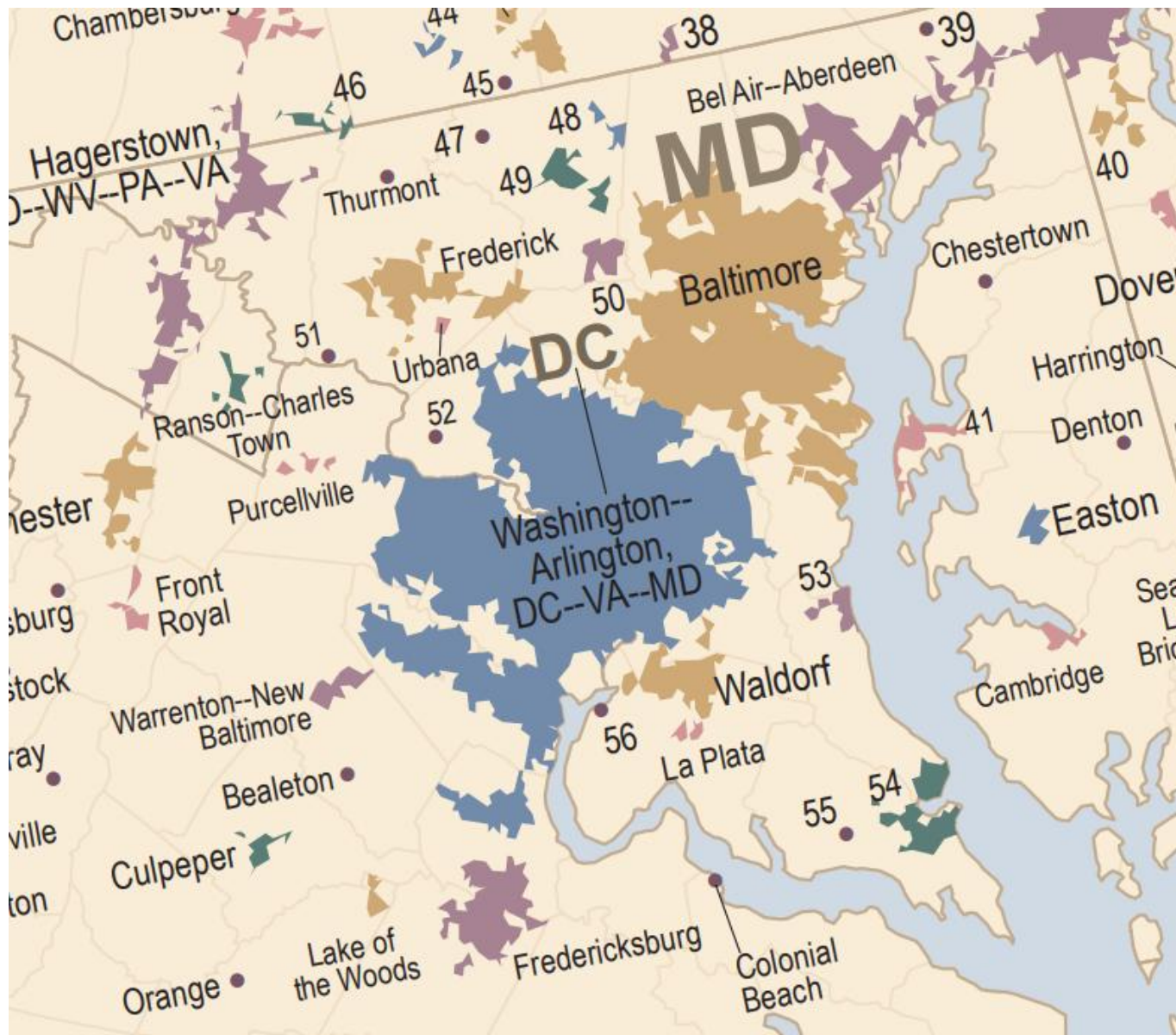
- Delineations based on **census block**
- Developed for statistical purposes – Urban/Rural
- Urban area: “densely developed territory...encompass residential, commercial, and other non-residential urban land uses.”
- Rural area: all population, housing, and territory not included within an urban area
- Updated with every decennial census





2020 Census Bureau Urban Areas





Washington Arlington DC-VA- MD Urban Area

Source: Census Bureau, 2020 Census Urban Areas of the United States and Puerto Rico.

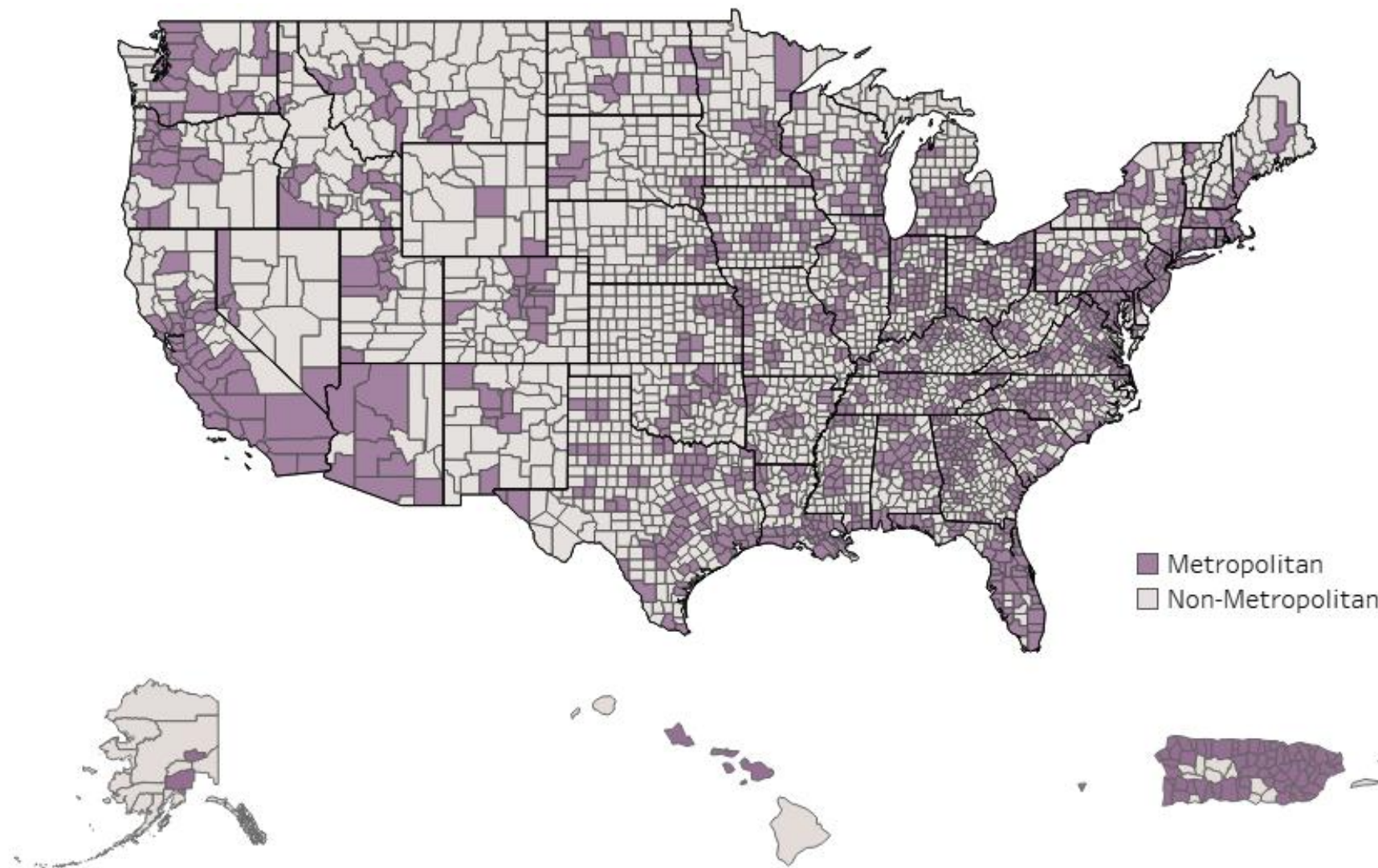
Office of Management and Budget (OMB)

- Takes Census Bureau information and adds detail to identify **Core Based Statistical Areas** at a **County Level**
 - Commuting patterns
 - Economic movement
 - Proximity to metropolitan counties
- Two types of 'core': Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas
 - Metropolitan Statistical Areas contain a core urban area of 50,000 or more
 - Micropolitan Statistical Areas contain a core urban area of between 10,000 and 49,999
- Counties are either 'Central' to the core urban area or 'Outlying'



More information about the 2020 OMB Standards can be found here: [2020 Standards for Delineating Core Based Statistical Areas](#)

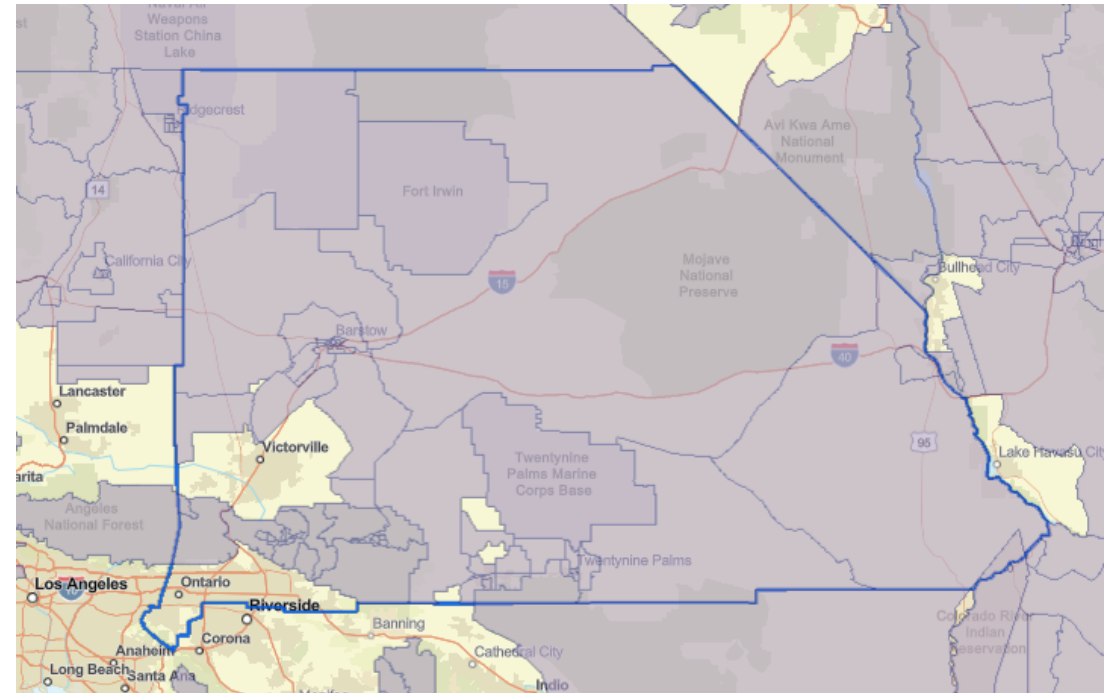
OMB Delineations (Metro/Non-metro)



Building on Census and OMB Delineations

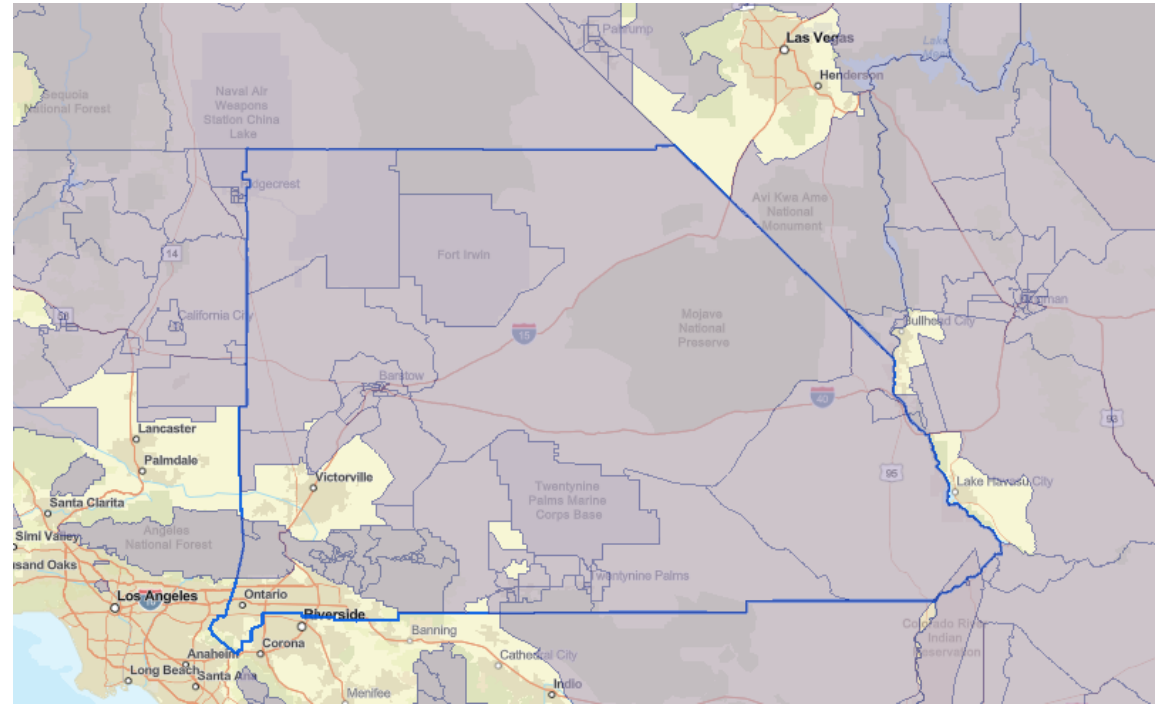
- Rural means different things for different programs
- Can we use OMB's County Designations?
 - Counties are very large!
 - Different levels of access to urban resources throughout counties
- Example: San Bernardino County
 - Southwest corner contains parts of the Los Angeles/Long Beach urbanized area
 - A little over 2000 square miles
- Can we use the Census Urban Area definitions?
 - Census blocks are smaller!
 - Urban areas cross county and state lines

Example: San Bernardino County



A note about the Goldsmith Modification

- 1992 Goldsmith Modification outlined a way to identify rural areas within metropolitan counties
 - Rural Urban Commuting (RUCA) codes were developed
- FORHP definition is the current implementation of the Goldsmith Modification



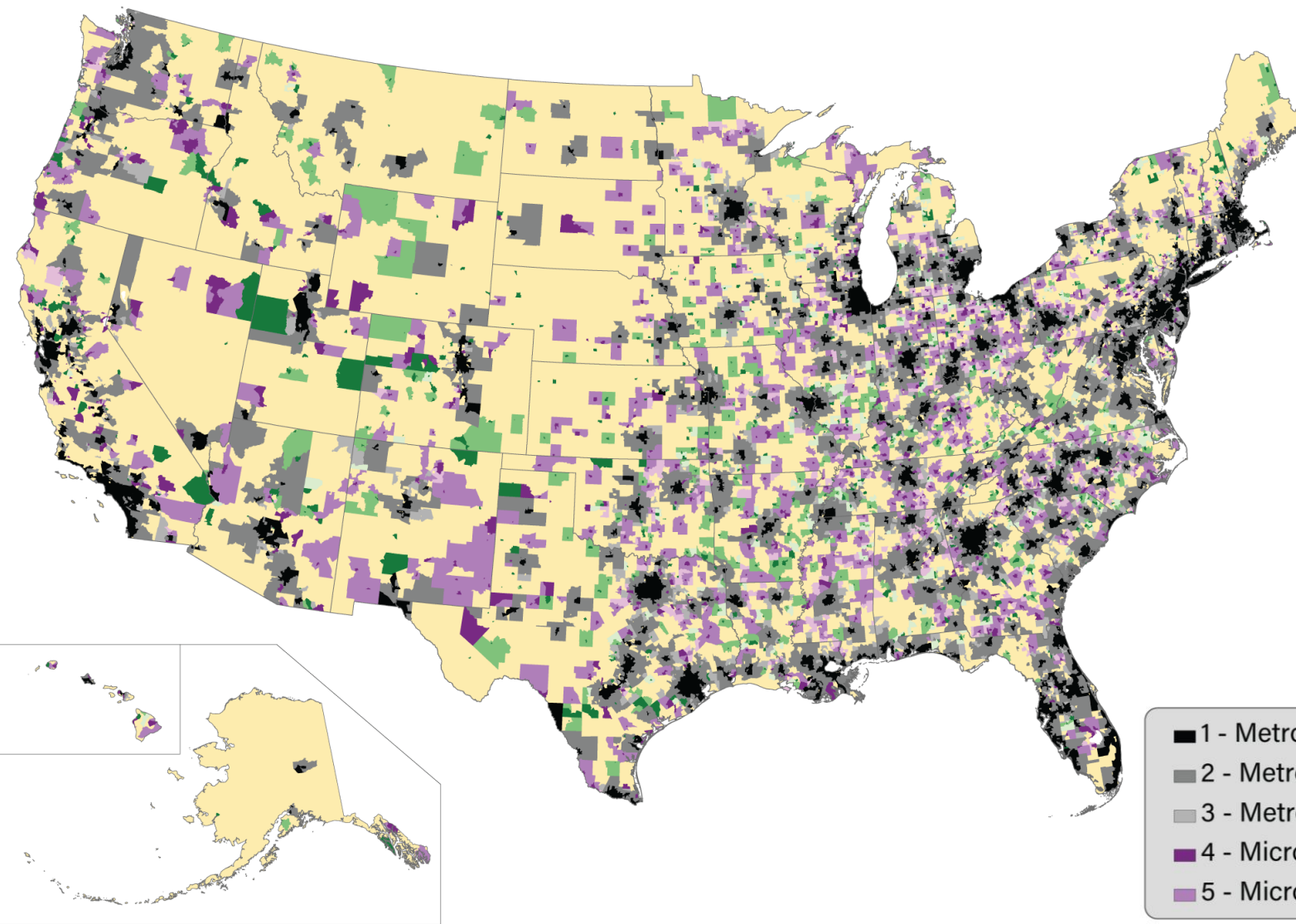
Example: San Bernardino County's Rural Census Tracts (purple)

USDA-ERS Rural-Urban Commuting Area (RUCA) Codes

- Classified by **U.S. census tract**
 - Population density
 - Urbanization
 - Daily commuting
- Developed in partnership between USDA ERS and FORHP
- Mirrors theoretical concepts used by the Office of Management and Budget to define county-level metropolitan and micropolitan areas but is classified by census tracts instead of counties
 - ZIP code approximations are also available
- 10 primary codes can be used to select a combination of codes to meet varying definitional needs



2020 RUCA Code Map



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using the 2020 Rural-Urban Commuting Area Codes data product.

Rugged Terrain

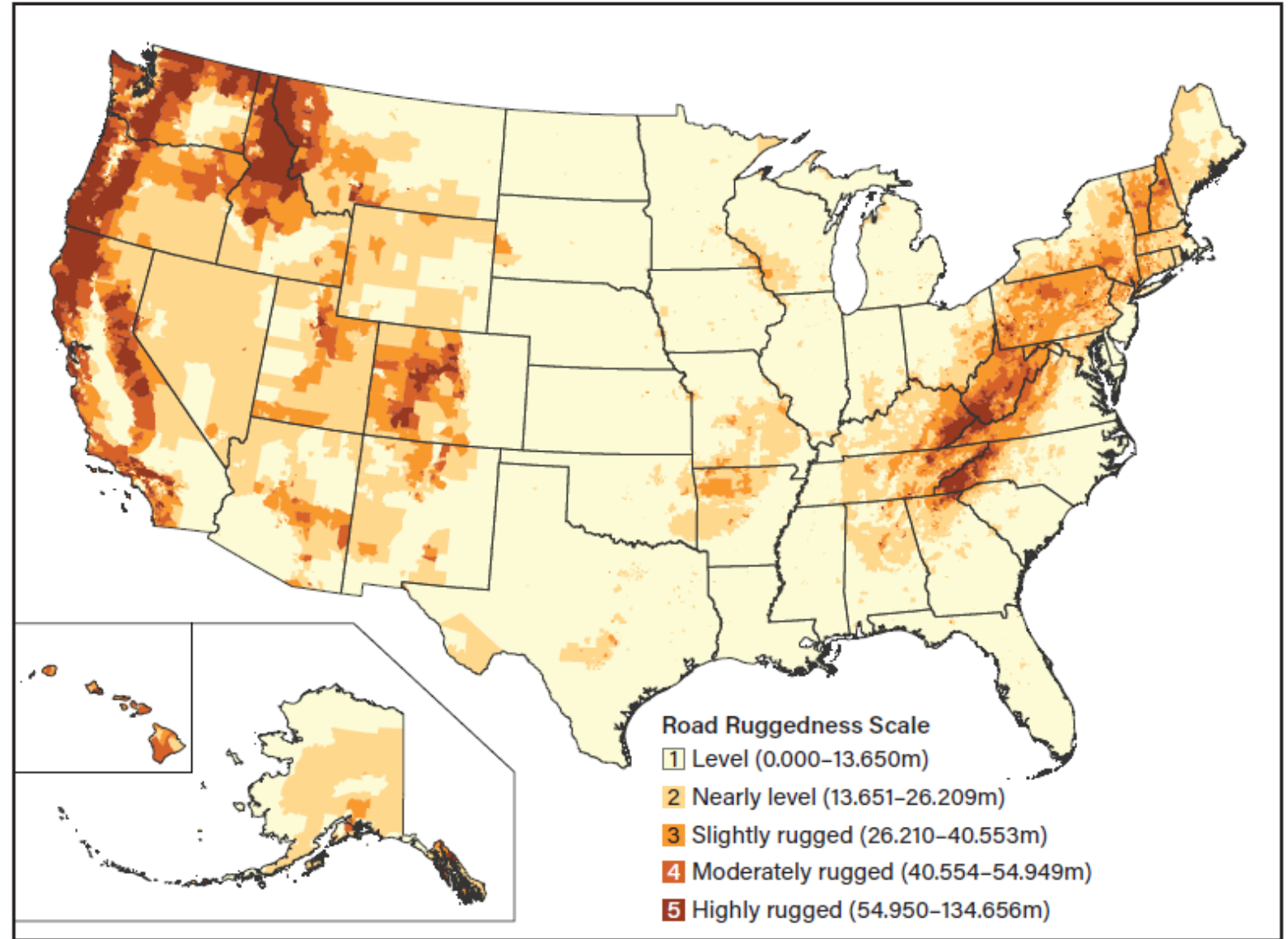
- Background
 - Comments received in 2020 FRN – “FORHP [should] identify difficult and mountainous terrain because travel on roads through such terrain is more difficult and time-consuming”
 - USDA – Economic Research Services and FORHP developed the Rural Urban Commuting Area Codes
 - Reminder: Used to identify census tracts within metropolitan counties that are rural
- New data from the USDA – Economic Research Services variation of characteristics by terrain ruggedness (changes in elevation)
 - Area Ruggedness Scale (ARS)– overall ruggedness
 - **Road Ruggedness Scale (RRS) – ruggedness along roads**
- Full report available on the [USDA-ERS website](#)
- FORHP uses the RRS because roads, rather than the overall topography, have a more defensible connection to access to health care.



Map of the Road Ruggedness Scale (RRS)

The RRS is an ordinal scale of topographic variation along roads in the United States. The RRS is calculated using the average Road Terrain Ruggedness Index (Road TRI) of grid cells within 2010 census tracts.

m = meters

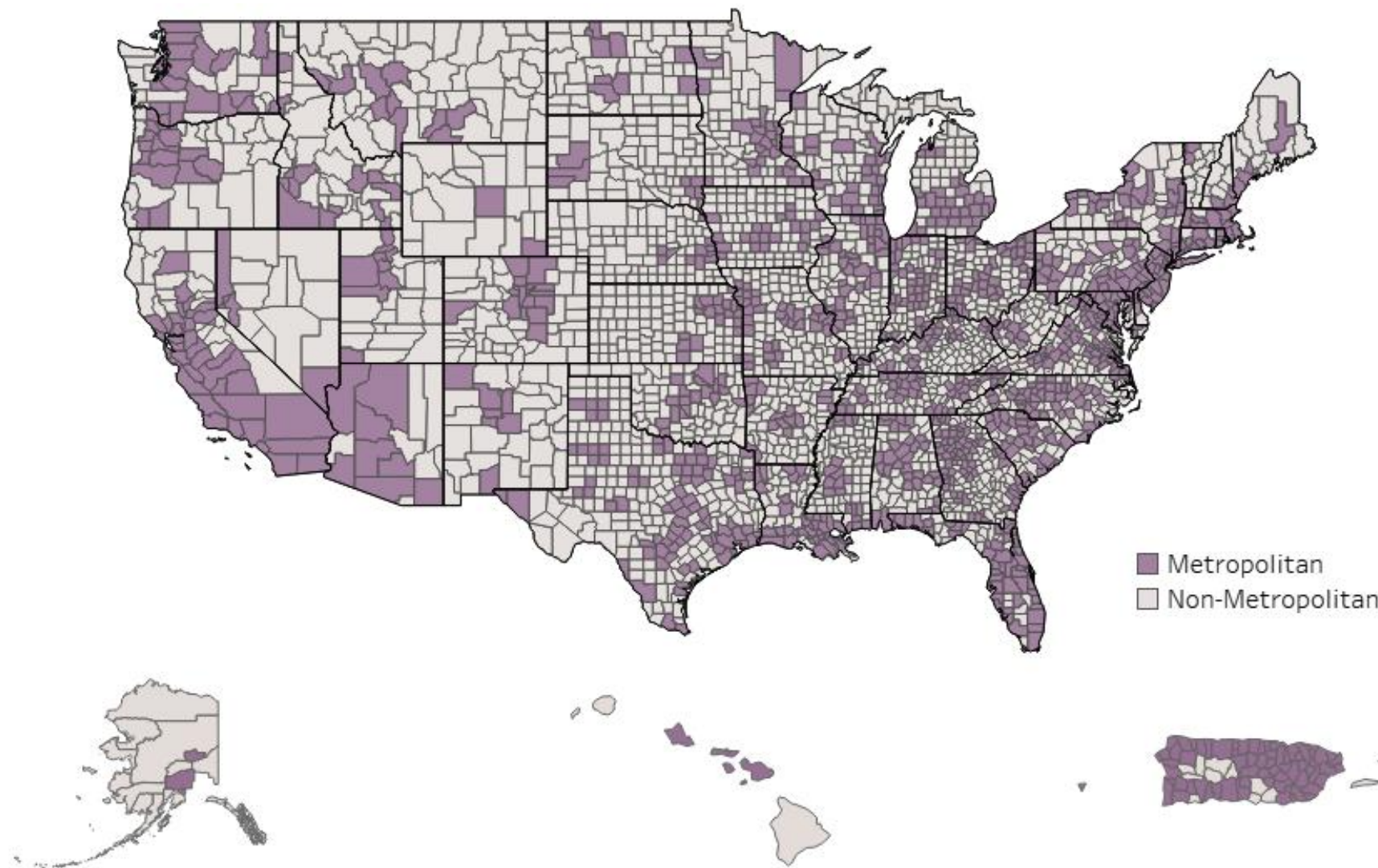


FORHP Rural Definition

- Counties
 - **Non-metro counties (Source: OMB)**
 - Outlying metropolitan counties with no population from an urban area of 50,000 or more people (Source: Census/OMB/FORHP)
- Census Tracts
 - Census tracts with RUCA codes 4-10 in metropolitan counties (Source: USDA ERS)
 - Census tracts of at least 400 square miles in area with population density of 35 or less per square mile with RUCA codes 2-3 in metropolitan counties (Source: Census/USDA ERS/FORHP)
 - Census tracts with RRS 5 and RUCA codes 2-3 that are at least 20 square miles in area in metropolitan counties (Source: USDA ERS/Census)



OMB Delineations (Metro/Non-metro)

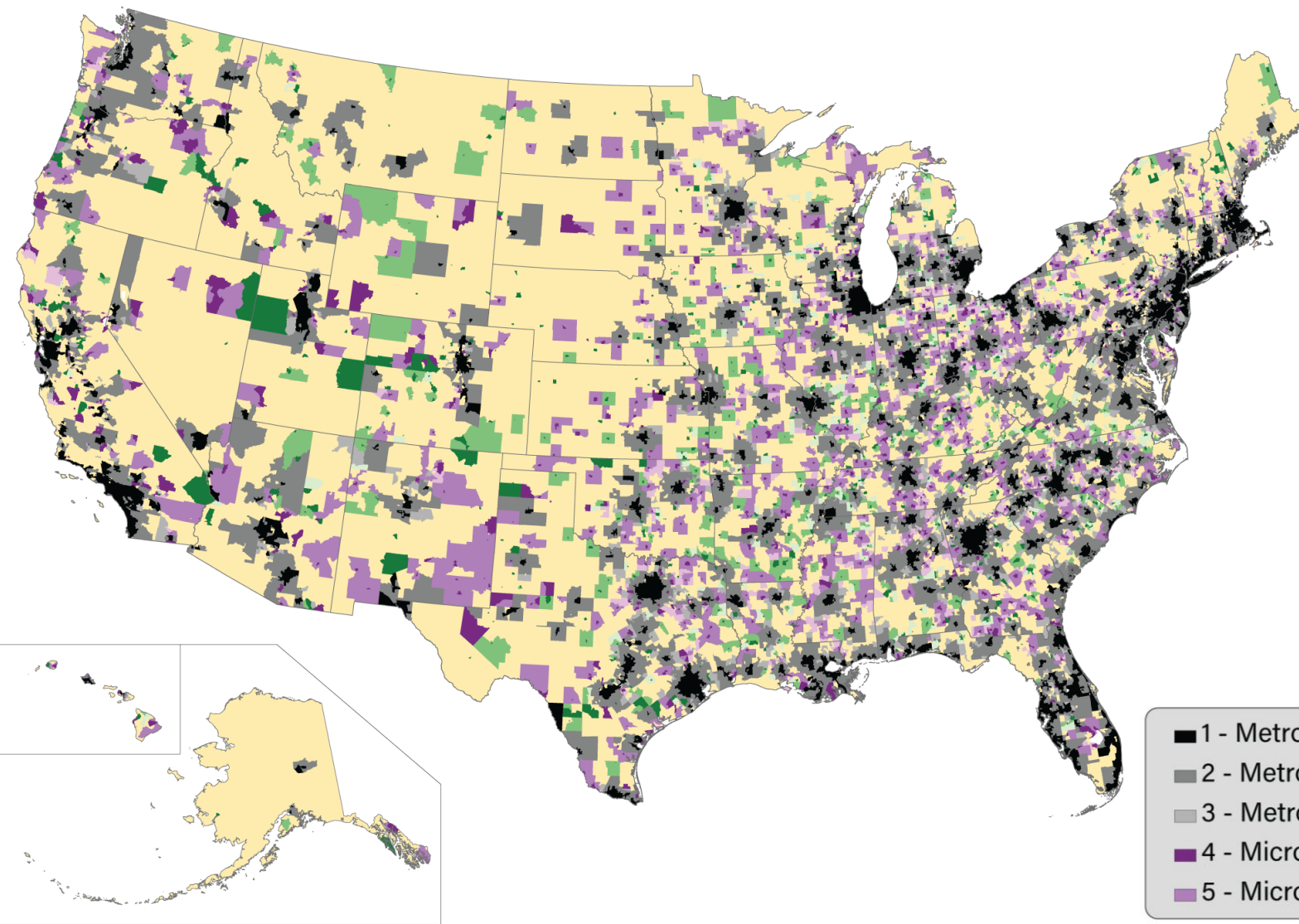


FORHP Rural Definition page 4

- Counties
 - Non-metro counties (Source: OMB)
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 - Census tracts of at least 400 square miles in area with population density of 35 or less per square mile with RUCA codes 2-3 in metropolitan counties (Source: Census/USDA ERS/FORHP)
 - Census tracts with RRS 5 and RUCA codes 2-3 that are at least 20 square miles in area in metropolitan counties (Source: USDA ERS/Census)



2020 RUCA Code Map



- | | |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1 - Metropolitan core | 6 - Micropolitan low commuting |
| 2 - Metropolitan high commuting | 7 - Small town core |
| 3 - Metropolitan low commuting | 8 - Small town high commuting |
| 4 - Micropolitan core | 9 - Small town low commuting |
| 5 - Micropolitan high commuting | 10 - Rural area |



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using the 2020 Rural-Urban Commuting Area Codes data product.

FORHP Rural Definition

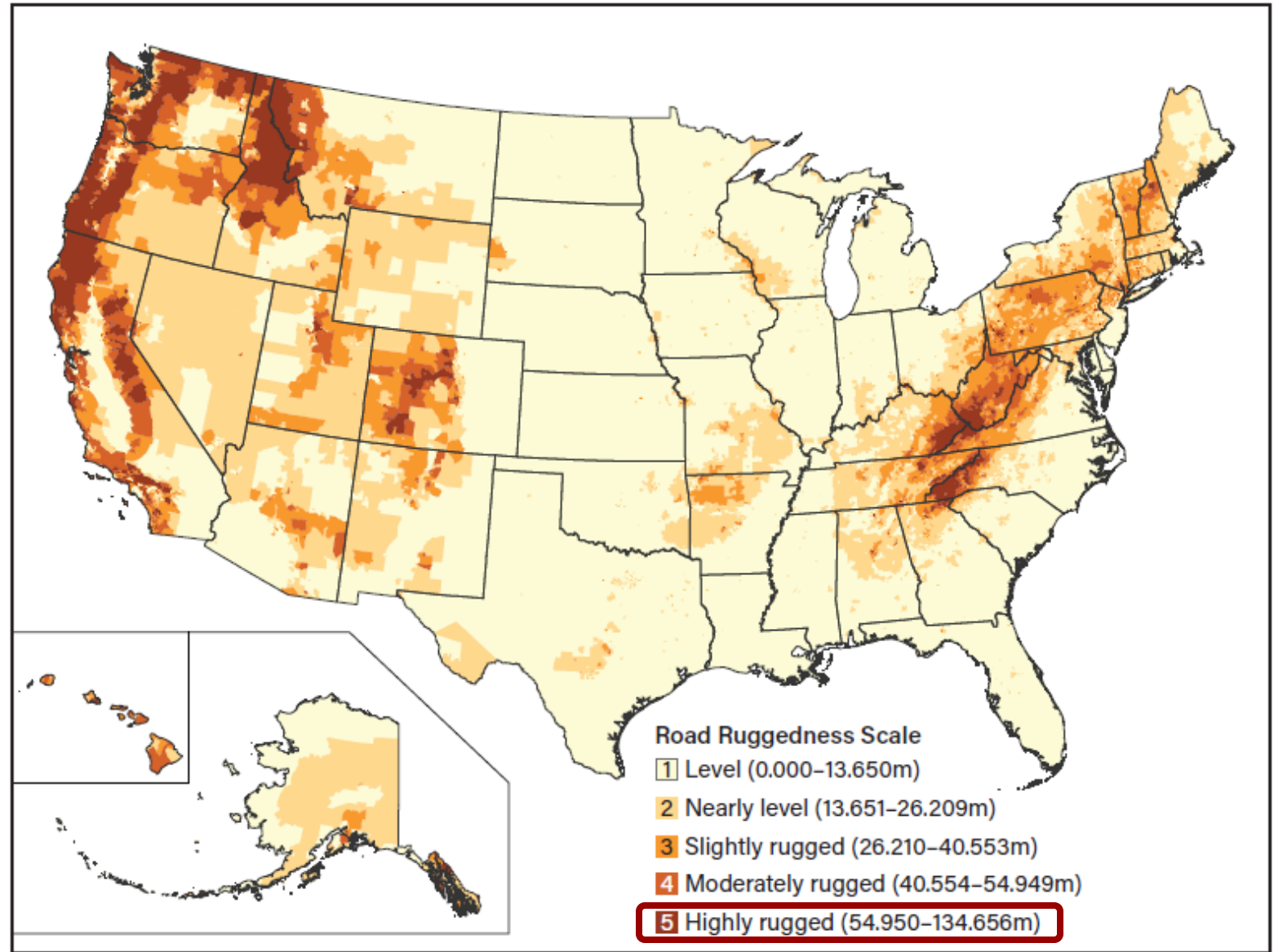
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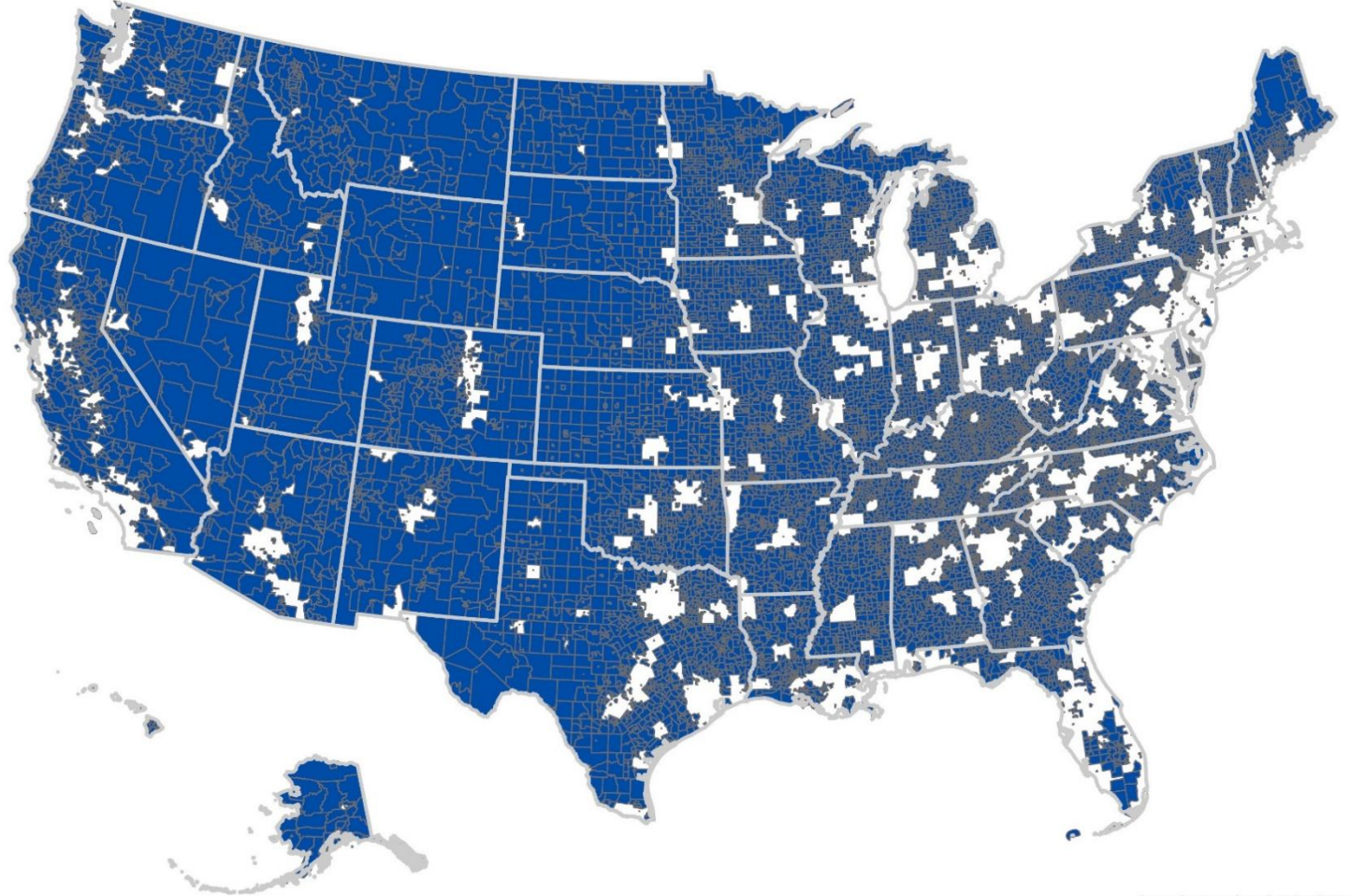
Map of the RRS

The RRS is an ordinal scale of topographic variation along roads in the United States. The RRS is calculated using the average Road Terrain Ruggedness Index (Road TRI) of grid cells within 2010 census tracts.

m = meters



FORHP Rural Health Areas

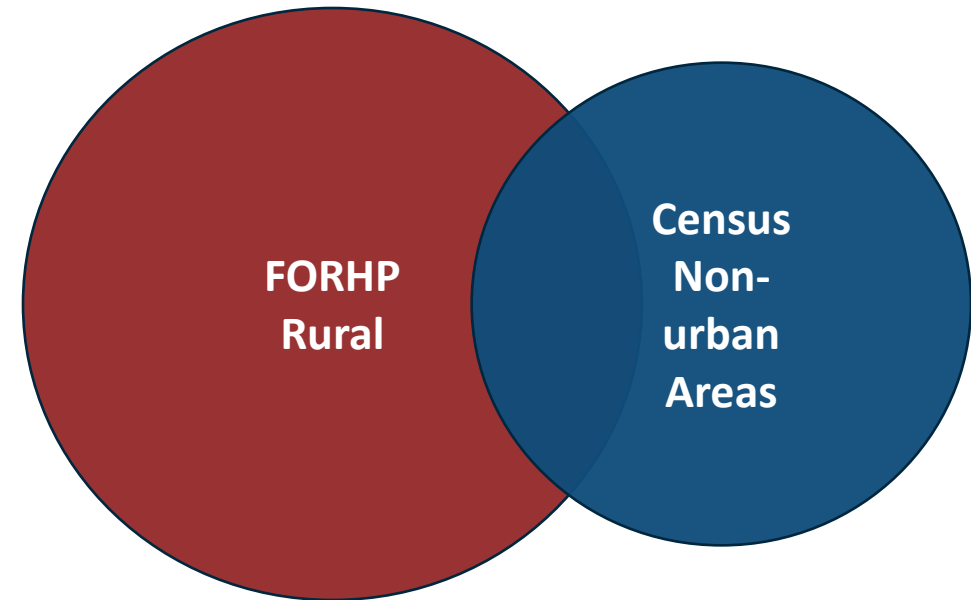
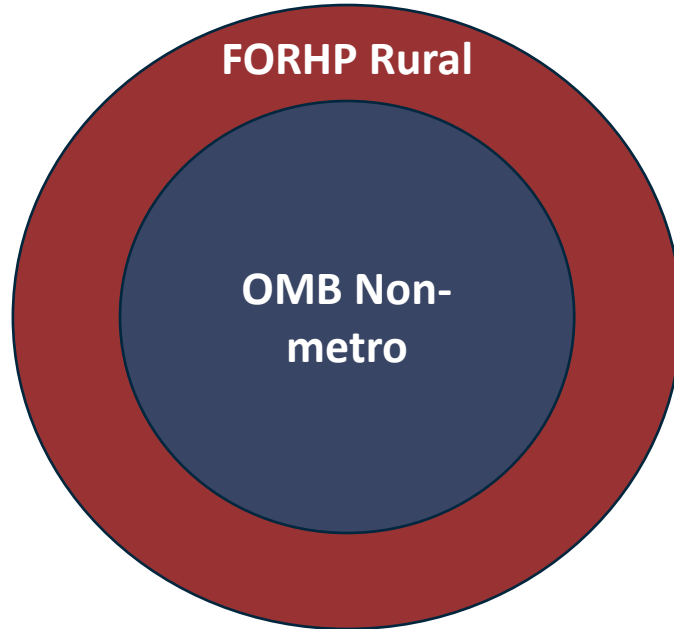


*Map last updated: 9/11/2025

Census, OMB, FORHP Oh My!

How do the areas overlap?

- All people and areas that are non-metro according to OMB are also rural according to FORHP
- Some people and areas that are rural according to the census are not rural according to FORHP and vice versa



FORHP Rural Definition

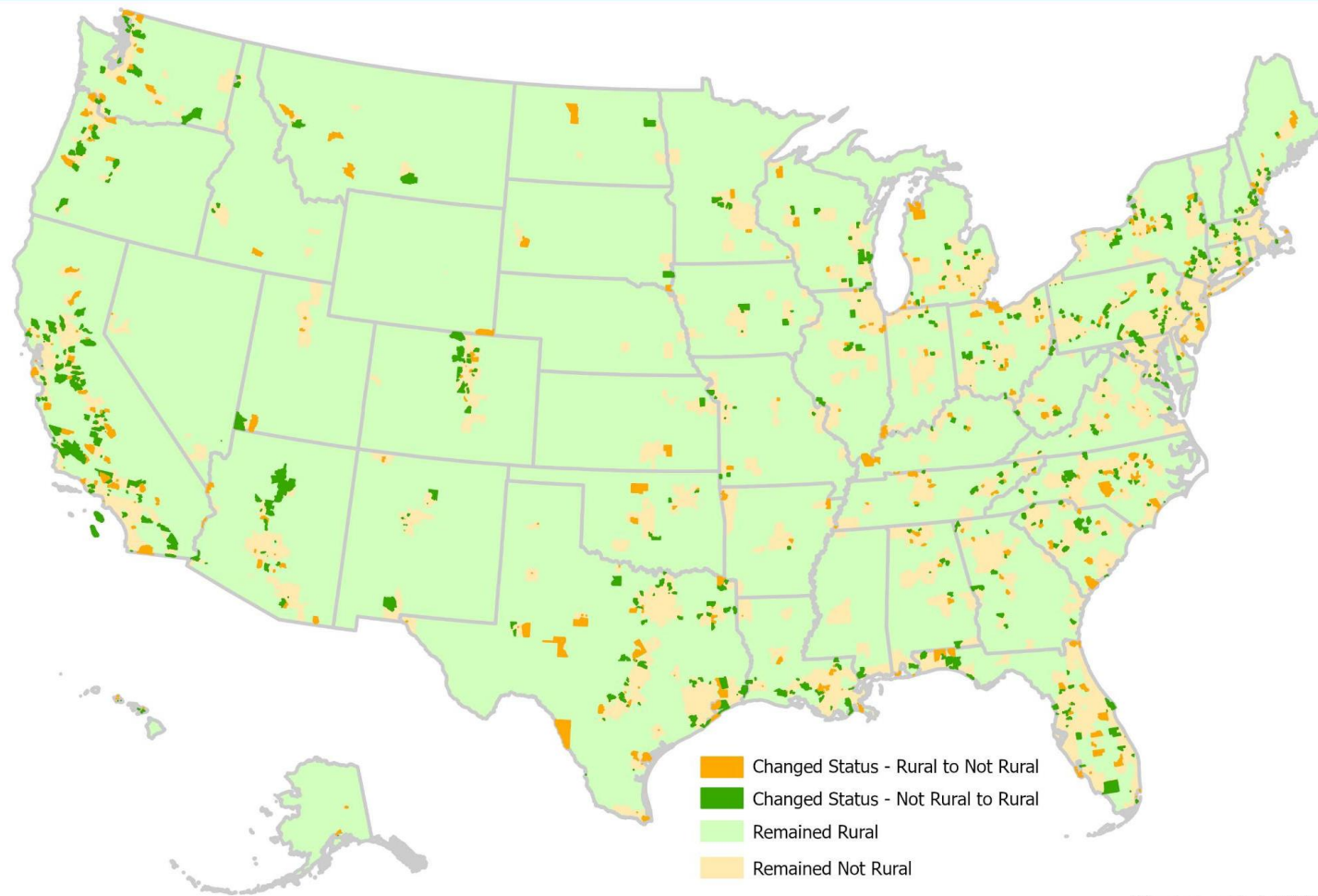
	September 2025 Update	November 2024
Methodology Changes?	None!	Added RRS and addressed the Census Bureau's removal of size differentiation in urban areas*
Data Updates?	2020 Census Tracts** 2025 USDA-ERS RUCA codes 2025 USDA-ERS RRS codes	2023 OMB County Designations (Metro/Micro/Noncore)
Available Files	Counties Census Tracts ZIP Code Approximations	Counties Census Tracts
Rural Land Area	87.7%	87.4%
Rural Population (%)	19.3%	20.3%
Rural Population (#)	64.5 million people	62.8 million people

*FORHP changed “All outlying metro counties without an Urbanized Area (UA) to be rural” to “Outlying metropolitan counties with no population from an urban area of 50,000 or more people”

**Except for Connecticut which is using 2023 Census tracts



FORHP Rural Change Map



*Map last updated: 8/8/25

Looking ahead

- FY26 Applications
 - Applicants have a period of one year to lean on their previous rural status
- Definition of rural methods update?
 - We don't anticipate updating the methods again any time soon
- Underlying data update?
 - Four main sources for underlying data
 - Census
 - USDA ERS – RUCA Codes
 - USDA ERS – RRS Codes
 - Office of Management and Budget
 - We do not expect the Office of Management and Budget to update their metro/micropolitan designations for 2025
 - OMB Updates -> FORHP updates
 - Timing will align with FY27 FORHP NOFO releases





Useful Tools

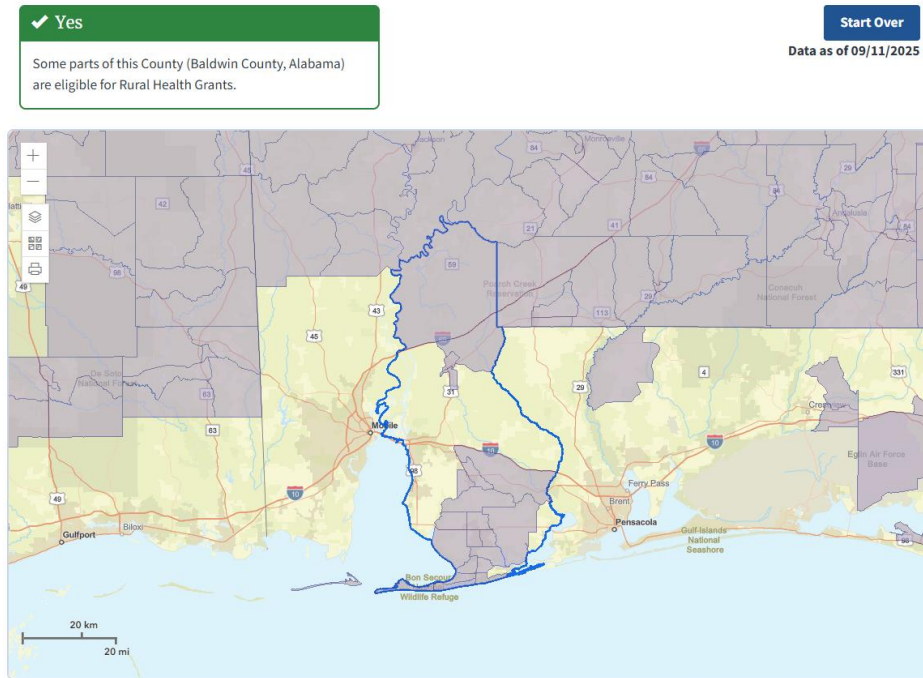
For You and Your Partners

Vision: Healthy Communities, Healthy People



Useful Tools: Rural Health Grants Eligibility Analyzer


- Search by address or state and county



The screenshot shows the web application interface for the Rural Health Grants Eligibility Analyzer. The URL is data.hrsa.gov/tools/rural-health?tab=StateCounty. The page features a navigation bar with links to Find Health Care, Data, Maps, Tools, Topics, and Help. The main heading is "Rural Health Grants Eligibility Analyzer" with a red wrench icon. Below the heading, a text block explains that health care providers in rural areas are eligible for grants and provides instructions to enter an address or choose a state and county. Two tabs are visible: "BY ADDRESS" and "BY STATE/COUNTY". The "BY STATE/COUNTY" tab is active, showing a "Search Criteria" section with dropdown menus for "State/Territory:" and "County:". Search and Reset buttons are at the bottom of the form.



Useful Tools: Am I Rural – RHihub



Updates & Alerts | About RHihub | Contact Us

Online Library ▾
Topics & States ▾
Rural Data Visualizations ▾
Case Studies & Conversations ▾
Tools for Success ▾

Am I Rural? – Tool

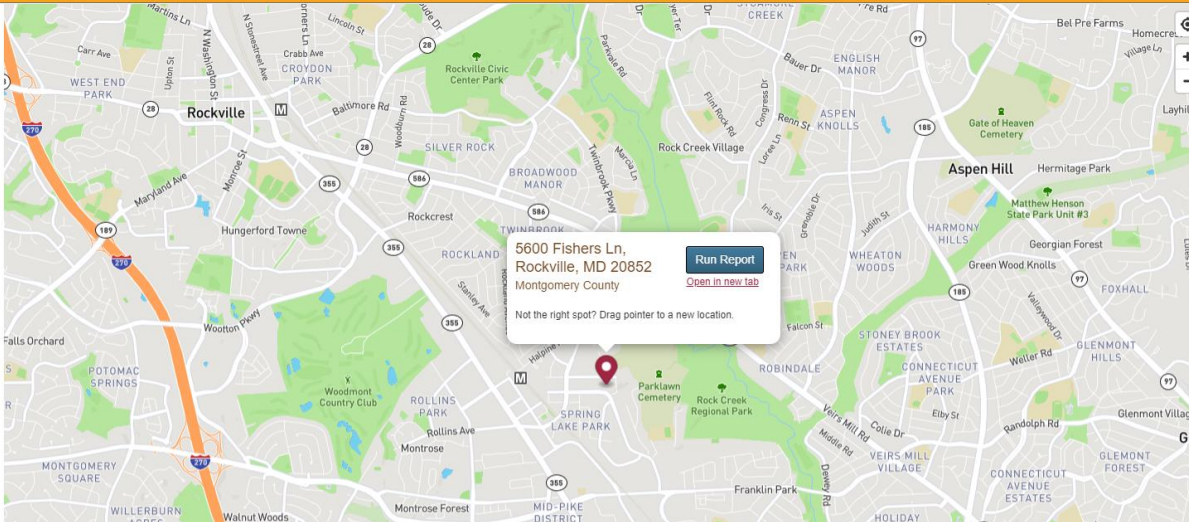
Enter address

Locate

Clear All

Most recent search results

5600 Fishers Ln., Rockville, MD 20852



Works best with addresses. The tool will provide data for a centroid with any other geography.

Am I Rural? – Report

Report produced by the Rural Health Information Hub on 09/25/25.


Location

Report Address:
5600 Fishers Lane, Rockville,
Maryland 20852

Latitude: 39.06195
Longitude: -77.11205

Census Tract:
24031701219 (2020)

County:
Montgomery County, MD



Common Rural Definitions

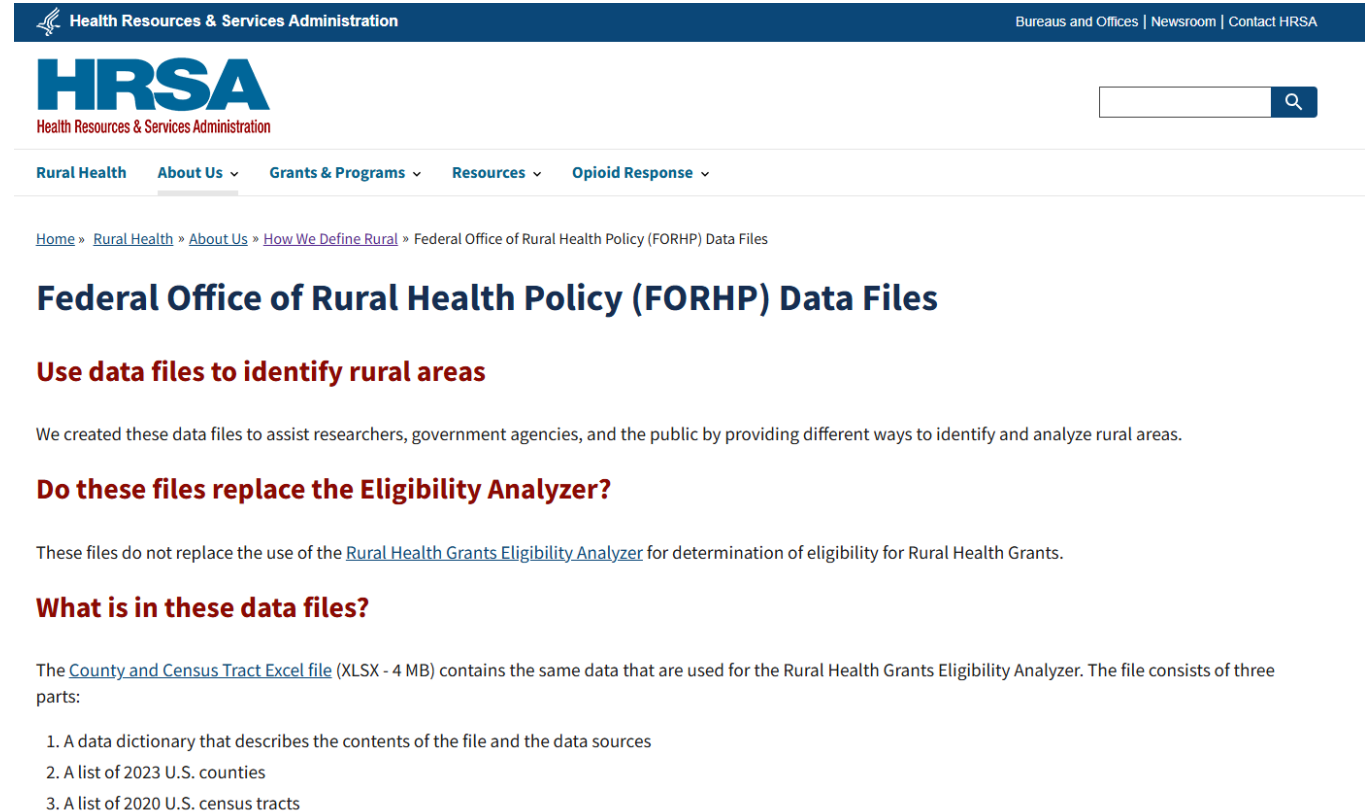
	How Your Location is Defined
Core Based Statistical Areas (CBSAs), 2023 Data Source: 2023 TIGER/Line , U.S. Census Bureau	<ul style="list-style-type: none">CBSA Type: MetropolitanCBSA Name: Washington-Arlington-Alexandria, DC-VA-MD-WV Metro AreaCBSA ID: 47900
Urban Areas, 2020 Data Source: 2023 TIGER/Line , U.S. Census Bureau	<p>Located within an Urban Area.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Urban Area Name: Washington--Arlington, DC--VA--MD Urban AreaUA Number: 92242
Federal Office of Rural Health Policy (FORHP) defined rural areas Data Source: List provided by the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy - updated 9/12/2025	<p>Not in a county or 2020 census tract that has been designated by FORHP as rural.</p>
Frontier and Remote Area (FAR) 2010 Data Source: Frontier and Remote Area Codes , Economic Research Service	<p>Note: FAR levels are based on 2010 ZIP codes, which may be different than what the location currently uses</p> <p>ZIP code (2010): 20852</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Not located in a Frontier and/or Remote area. <p>For a full list of FAR ZIP codes, see: Frontier and Remote Area Codes, Economic Research Service.</p>



RHihub's "Am I Rural?" Tool

Useful Tools: FORHP Data Files

- [County and Census Tracts Excel File](#)
 - List of 2020 Census Tracts
 - ✓ FORHP_Rural
 - Yes
 - No
 - List of 2023 Counties
 - ✓ County_Eligibility
 - Not Fully FORHP Rural
 - Fully FORHP Rural
- [ZIP Code Approximation Excel File](#)
 - FORHP_Rural_approximation
 - ✓ Yes
 - ✓ No



The screenshot shows the HRSA website header with the logo and navigation links. The main content area is titled "Federal Office of Rural Health Policy (FORHP) Data Files" and includes a section "Use data files to identify rural areas". It explains that the data files were created to assist researchers, government agencies, and the public. A section titled "Do these files replace the Eligibility Analyzer?" states that these files do not replace the use of the Rural Health Grants Eligibility Analyzer. A section titled "What is in these data files?" lists three parts: a data dictionary, a list of 2023 U.S. counties, and a list of 2020 U.S. census tracts.

Health Resources & Services Administration

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Home » Rural Health » About Us » [How We Define Rural](#) » Federal Office of Rural Health Policy (FORHP) Data Files

Federal Office of Rural Health Policy (FORHP) Data Files

Use data files to identify rural areas

We created these data files to assist researchers, government agencies, and the public by providing different ways to identify and analyze rural areas.

Do these files replace the Eligibility Analyzer?

These files do not replace the use of the [Rural Health Grants Eligibility Analyzer](#) for determination of eligibility for Rural Health Grants.

What is in these data files?

The [County and Census Tract Excel file](#) (XLSX - 4 MB) contains the same data that are used for the Rural Health Grants Eligibility Analyzer. The file consists of three parts:

1. A data dictionary that describes the contents of the file and the data sources
2. A list of 2023 U.S. counties
3. A list of 2020 U.S. census tracts

Useful Tools: HRSA Map Tool

- Select and plot health centers, shortage areas, rural health areas, HRSA grants, etc.
- Upload your data!

data.HRSA.gov

Search  A-Z Index

Find Health Care ▾ Data ▾ Maps ▾ Tools ▾ Topics ▾ Help ▾

HRSA Map Tool

Select and plot health centers, grants, and other data or upload a CSV file.

Helpful Tips
[Getting Started](#)
[Adding Your Data](#)

Type here to search data below

Or browse all data to map:

- Facilities, Providers, Sites/Areas** ▾
 - Health Centers and Other Facilities/Providers/Sites ⊕
 - Shortage Areas ⊕
 - Rural Health Areas and Other Boundaries ⊖
 - ☐ Persistent Poverty Counties (USDA-ERS)
 - ☐ Qualified Opportunity Zones (Treasury)
 - ☒ Rural Health Areas
 - ☐ U.S. - Mexico Border Health Initiative Area
 - ☐ U.S. - Mexico Border Health Initiative Designated Counties
- HRSA Grants/Loans/Scholarships** ▾
 - Awarded Grants ⊕
 - Population and Public Health Data ▾
 - Demographics ⊕
 - Other Data ⊕
 - Your Data ⊕



North Pacific Ocean

HRSA Map Tool

Select and plot health centers, grants, and other data or upload a CSV file.

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Rural Health Areas



Additional Rural Definitions

Vision: Healthy Communities, Healthy People

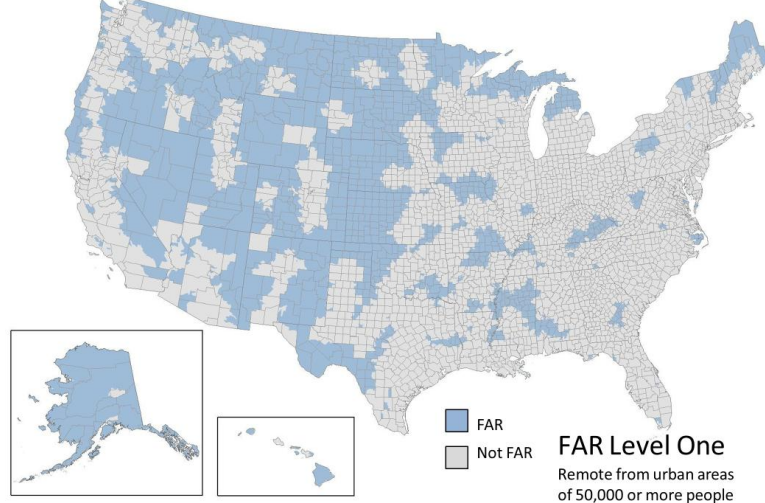


Criteria for Defining Four FAR Area Levels

- **Level 1**— rural and urban areas up to 50,000 people that are 60 minutes or more from an urban area of 50,000 or more people.
- **Level 2**— rural and urban areas up to 25,000 people that are 45 minutes or more from an urban area of 25,000-49,999 people; and 60 minutes or more from an urban area of 50,000 or more people.
- **Level 3**— rural and urban areas up to 10,000 people that are 30 minutes or more from an urban area of 10,000-24,999; 45 minutes or more from an urban area of 25,000-49,999 people; and 60 minutes or more from an urban area of 50,000 or more people.
- **Level 4**— rural areas that are 15 minutes or more from an urban area of 2,500-9,999 people; 30 minutes or more from an urban area of 10,000-24,999 people; 45 minutes or more from an urban area of 25,000-49,999 people; and 60 minutes or more from an urban area of 50,000 or more people.



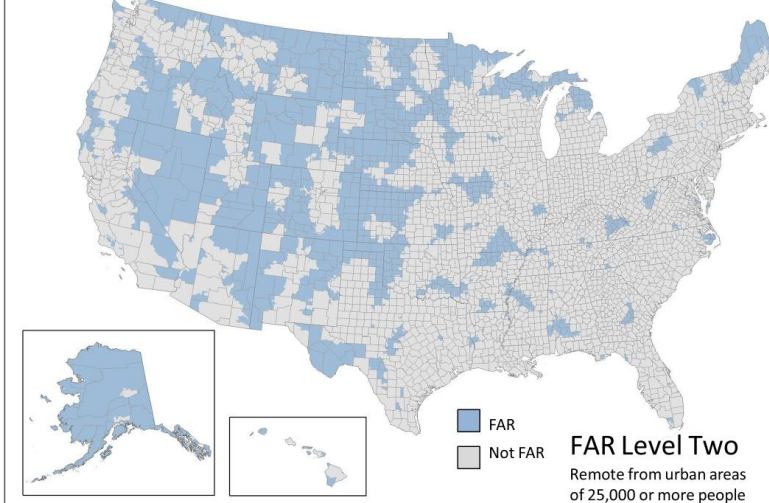
Frontier and Remote (FAR) ZIP Code Areas, 2010



FAR level one includes ZIP code areas with majority populations living 60 minutes or more from urban areas of 50,000 or more.

Source: Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, using data from the U.S. Census Bureau and ESRI.

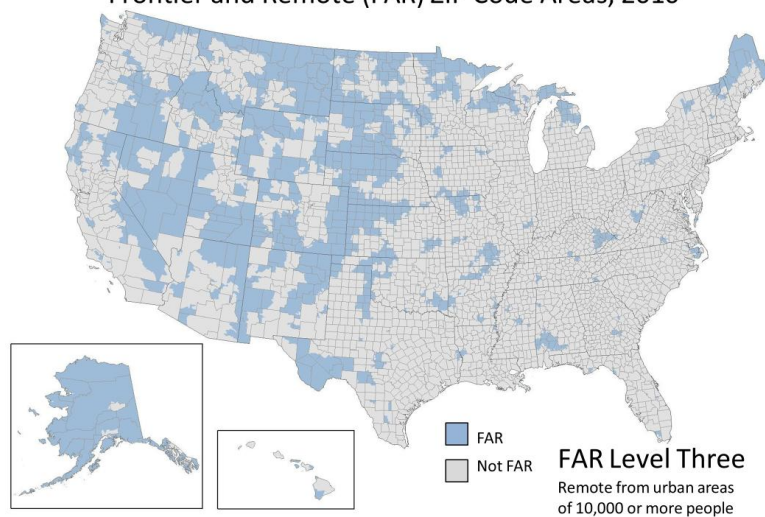
Frontier and Remote (FAR) ZIP Code Areas, 2010



FAR level two includes ZIP code areas with majority populations living 60 minutes or more from urban areas of 50,000 or more people and 45 minutes or more from urban areas of 25,000-49,999 people.

Source: Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, using data from the U.S. Census Bureau and ESRI.

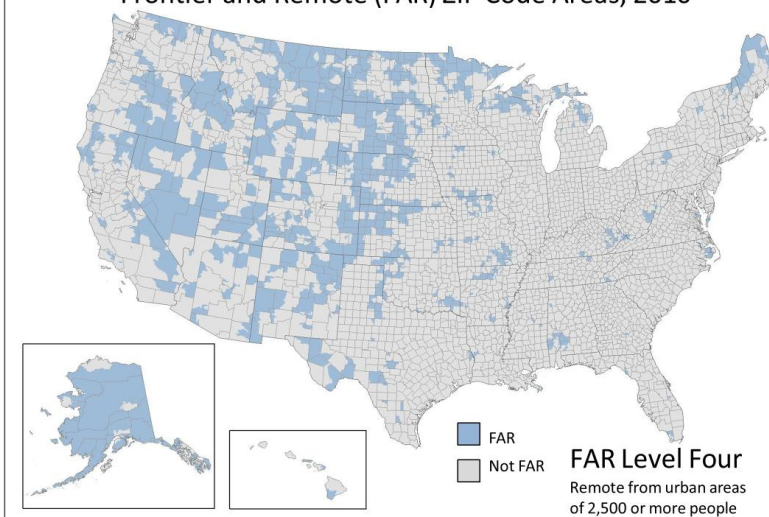
Frontier and Remote (FAR) ZIP Code Areas, 2010



FAR level three includes ZIP code areas with majority populations living 60 minutes or more from urban areas of 50,000 or more people; and 45 minutes or more from urban areas of 25,000-49,999 people; and 30 minutes or more from urban areas of 10,000-24,999 people.

Source: Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, using data from the U.S. Census Bureau and ESRI.

Frontier and Remote (FAR) ZIP Code Areas, 2010



FAR level four includes ZIP code areas with majority populations living 60 minutes or more from urban areas of 50,000 or more people; and 45 minutes or more from urban areas of 25,000-49,999 people; and 30 minutes or more from urban areas of 10,000-24,999 people; and 15 minutes or more from urban areas of 2,500-9,999 people.

Source: Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, using data from the U.S. Census Bureau and ESRI.

USDA-ERS Rural-Urban Continuum Codes

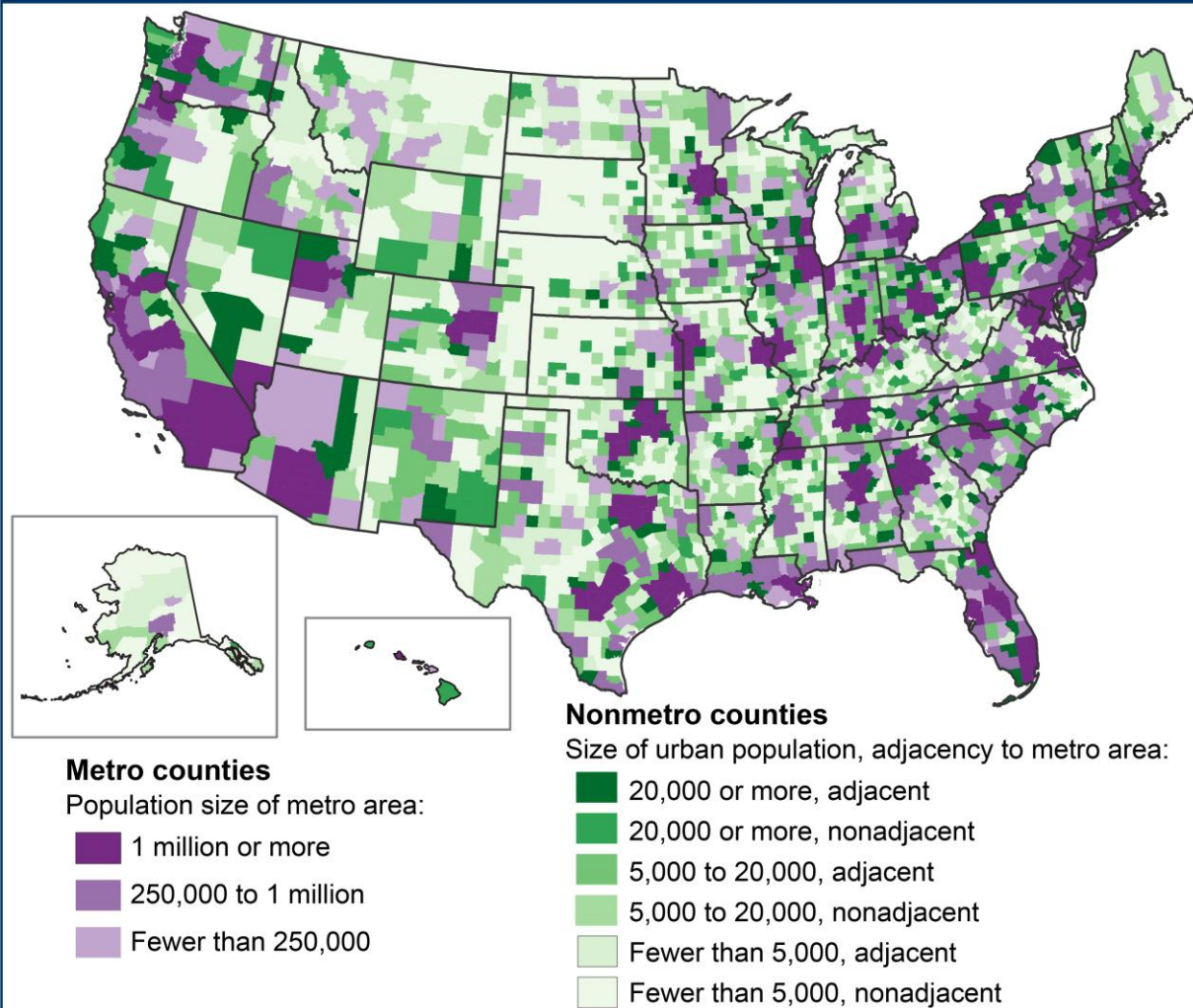
- Metro Counties
 - Classified according to the total population size of the metro area they are a part of
 - 1 million people or more
 - 250,000 to 1 million people
 - Below 250,000 people
- Non-metro counties are classified along two dimensions
 - Divided into three urban-size categories based on total urban population in the county
 - Urban population of 20,000 or more
 - 5,000 – 19,999
 - Less than 5,000
 - Subdivided by whether the county is adjacent to one or more metro areas

Criteria for Classifying Rural-Urban Continuum Codes

Metro counties:	
1	Counties in metro areas of 1 million population or more
2	Counties in metro areas of 250,000 to 1 million population
3	Counties in metro areas of fewer than 250,000 population
Non-metro counties:	
4	Urban population of 20,000 or more, adjacent to a metro area
5	Urban population of 20,000 or more, not adjacent to a metro area
6	Urban population of 5,000 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
7	Urban population of 5,000 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area
8	Completely rural or less than 5,000 urban population, adjacent to a metro area
9	Completely rural or less than 5,000 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area



2023 Rural-Urban Continuum Codes



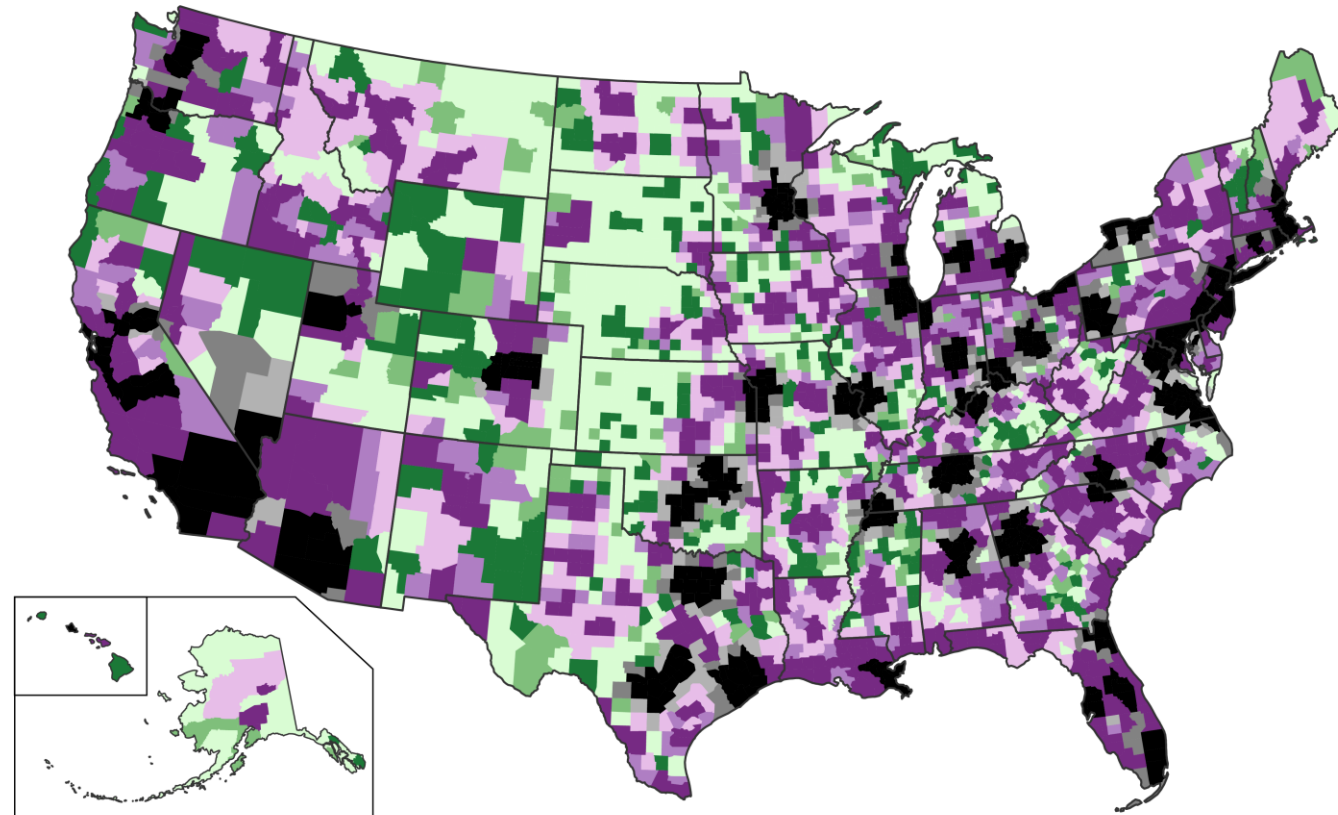
Note: Rural-Urban Continuum Codes are also available for the county-equivalents of U.S. territories not shown in the map: American Samoa, Guam, Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the Office of Management and Budget; and U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census.

Urban Influence Codes

Code	Description
Large metropolitan and adjacent counties	
1	Large metro (in a metro area with at least 1 million residents)
2	Micropolitan, adjacent to a large metro area
3	Noncore, adjacent to a large metro area
Small metropolitan and adjacent counties	
4	Small metro (in a metro area with fewer than 1 million residents)
5	Micropolitan, adjacent to a small metro area
6	Noncore, adjacent to a small metro area
Not adjacent to metropolitan counties	
7	Micropolitan, not adjacent to a metro area
8	Noncore, not adjacent to a metro area and contains a town of at least 5,000 residents
9	Noncore, not adjacent to a metro area and does not contain a town of at least 5,000 residents

2024 Urban Influence Codes

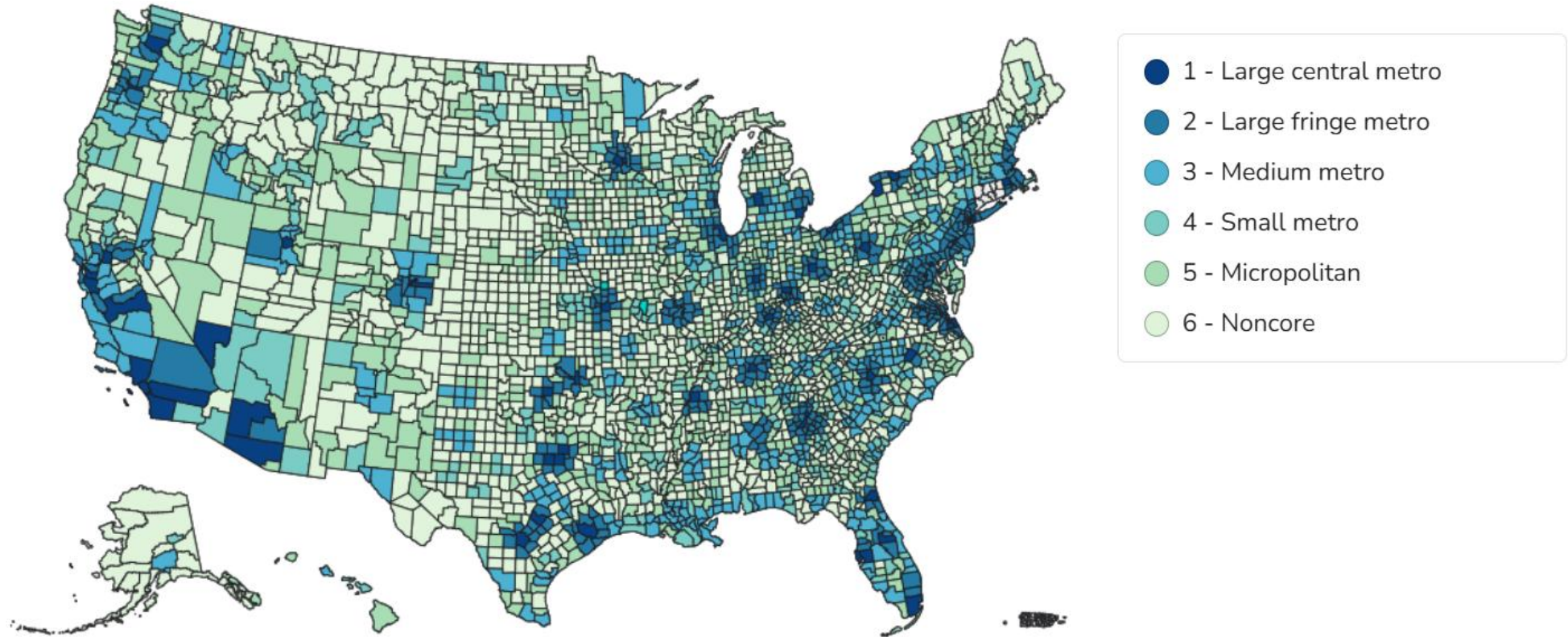


NCHS Urban-Rural Classification Scheme for Counties

1. Large central metro	Counties in metropolitan areas of 1 million or more population that...	... contain the entire population of the largest principal city of the metropolitan area OR are entirely contained in the largest principal city of the metropolitan area OR contain at least 250,000 residents of any principal city in the metropolitan area
2. Large fringe metro		...do not qualify as large central
3. Medium metro	Counties in metropolitan areas of 250,000 to 999,999 population	
4. Small metro	Counties in metropolitan areas of 50,000 to 249,999	
5. Micropolitan	Counties in micropolitan statistical areas	
6. Noncore	Counties that did not qualify as micropolitan	



NCHS Urban-Rural Classification Scheme for Counties



U.S. counties and county equivalents and their classification under the 2023 NCHS Urban-Rural Classification Scheme for Counties. The NCHS Urban-Rural Classification Scheme does not include Puerto Rico or other U.S. territories.

What's the Difference?

Definition	Source	Geographic Level	Most Recent Update
Urban Areas	Census Bureau	Census Block/Urban Areas	2023*
Core Based Statistical Areas	Office of Management and Budget	County	2023*
Rural Urban Commuting Area Codes	USDA Economic Research Services	Census Tract	2025*
Rural	Federal Office of Rural Health Policy	Census Tract/County	2025*
Frontier and Remote Area Codes	USDA Economic Research Services	ZIP Code	2015
Rural-Urban Continuum Codes	USDA Economic Research Services	County	2023*
Urban Influence Codes	USDA Economic Research Services	County	2024*
NCHS Rural Classification Scheme	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention	County	2024*



* Including data from the 2020 decennial census

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Thank you!

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