



Defining Rural Indiana—The First Step

Introduction

Driving across the vast farmland in northern Indiana or through the forested hills in the southern part of the state, you might believe that most of Indiana is rural. Not so. In fact, less than 14% of Indiana's total population lives in rural counties. Unless you live in an urban area, it may be hard to grasp the urbanization that is underway in the state.

But "less than 14%" is nearly 900,000 citizens, and that figure grows even larger if you count the people who live in rural parts of counties that are mixed urban and rural. There is a real danger that their voices and interests may be lost in an increasingly urban-oriented Indiana.

So we know Indiana is changing, but what we don't know is how well the most rural counties in the state are doing relative to their more urban counterparts, and we need to. Are there issues specific to rural counties that create new opportunities for the future or barriers that inhibit progress? With the availability of the 2010 U.S. Census, we can examine conditions across a broad spectrum of concerns to determine how well rural Indiana has fared over the last decade and identify issues important to consider as communities move forward.

But before we can do that, we must take the first step—we must define "rural."

This publication explains the complications involved in arriving at such a definition and describes the process we went through to develop the definition we present here. Then, we provide a figure and a table that, together, depict a picture of rural Indiana that lays the groundwork for further discussion of the issues confronting the state.

Rural Definitions

We may know rural when we see it, but *defining it* in terms of data analysis is another matter. It is not as easy as it might seem. In fact, federal agencies use over two dozen definitions of "rural" to meet their various program needs (Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008).

The U.S. Census Bureau defines rural on the basis of what's urban or, more accurately, what's not urban. Rural "encompasses all population, housing, and territory not included within an urban area" <www.census.gov/geo/www/ua/2010urbanruralclass.html>.

The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) employs a commonly used data structure based on Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSA). An MSA is a merger of a county with a principal city of 50,000 or more population and its surrounding counties that have strong economic ties to the city (25% or more commuting

Janet Ayres, Brigitte Waldorf, and Melissa McKendree
Department of Agricultural Economics

Laura Hoelscher
Department of Agricultural Communication
Purdue University

The Rural Indiana Issues Series

Audience: Local and state leaders who work with rural communities.

Purpose: To find data about issues of concern in rural communities and to interpret that data in meaningful ways to aid in decision-making.

Method: U.S. Census data analyzed across the county groupings—rural, rural/mixed, urban.

Potential Topics: Demographic changes, business development, health, health care, local government, taxes, education, agriculture, natural resources, leadership development, etc.

Outcome: Better, more informed decisions by rural decision-makers.

population). An example is the Lafayette Metropolitan Statistical Area, which is made up of Tippecanoe, Benton, and Carroll counties. Researchers commonly use these MSAs to analyze socio-economic data, and they consider counties inside an MSA as urban counties and those that not part of an MSA as rural. However, such a division can mask what’s really going on in rural areas because many counties with a very rural character, such as Benton, Brown, Ohio, Franklin, Washington, or Carroll, are part of an MSA and therefore classified as “urban” (Waldorf, 2007).

At the County Level

As several researchers have noted, any classification system to define rural has its limitations (Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008; Isserman, 2005; Waldorf, 2007). One challenge is using county-level data. In Indiana, all counties are a mix of both urban and rural areas. Even the most urban county, Marion, has rural places. Many counties, such as Clinton or Lawrence, have small cities surrounded by countryside, and some counties are quite rural by any standard, such as Brown or Crawford. However, we felt that using county-level data was pragmatic for three reasons:

1. It is the most common level of data collection;
2. The data are easily accessible; and
3. County government officials and many local non-profit organizations make policy decisions and carry out programs at the county level.

Divided into Three

Our aim was to gain the most accurate picture of conditions in the *most* rural counties of Indiana over the last decade and to identify important concerns and policy implications. We started by delineating rural counties with criteria suggested by Isserman (2005, p. 475), which included overall county population, population density, and size of the largest city or town in the county. We discovered, however, that the thresholds he established for a national classification system did not fit well in Indiana. So we adjusted the criteria to more accurately reflect Indiana county characteristics. We also included a criterion called “county identity,” which was a subjective indicator of how most people view the county. We then grouped the 92 Indiana counties into three categories: rural, rural/mixed, and urban. These county groupings align with those identified in Waldorf’s “Index of Relative Rurality” (Waldorf, 2007).

The highlighted sections of Table 1 present the thresholds we established for each of the three categories. With this classification system, there are 42 rural counties with a county population under 40,000; population density less than 100 people per square mile; and the population of the largest city in the county less than 10,000. The most rural counties represent less than 14% of the state’s population.

Rural Indiana Picture

The figure and table in this section are really the heart of the matter. They are the reason for this publication and the result of our research. Figure 1 shows the distribution of the counties across Indiana according to our classification system.

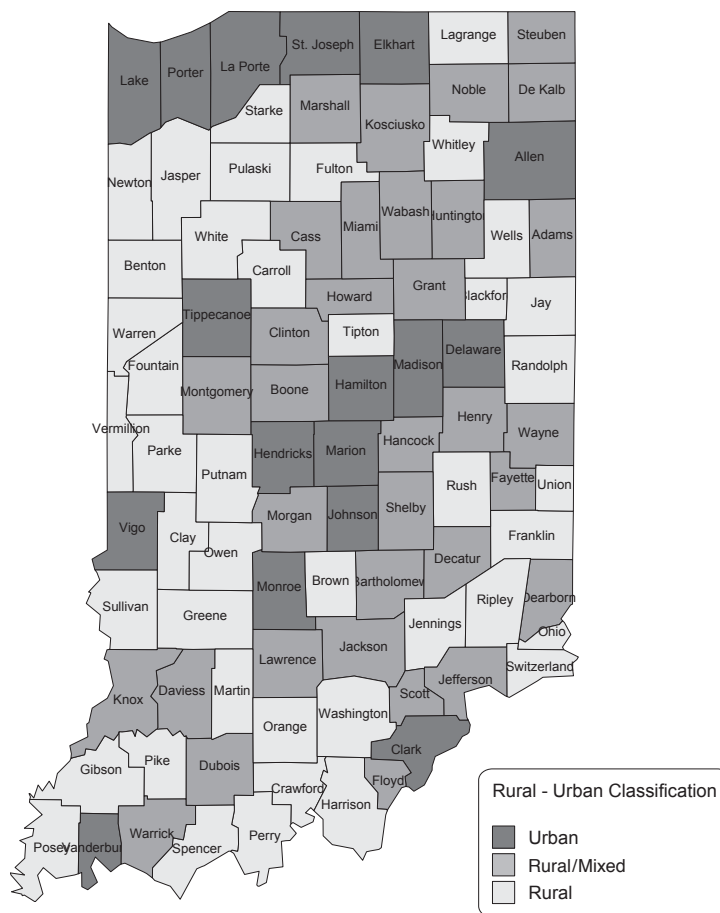


Figure 1. Indiana County Groupings

Table 1. Criteria Used for Classifying Indiana Counties

Criteria	Rural	Rural/Mixed	Urban
Population	Less than 40,000	40,000 – 100,000	Over 100,000
Density (people per sq. mi.)	Less than 100	100 to 200	Over 200
Population of largest city	Less than 10,000	10,000 to 30,000	Over 30,000
Identity	Rural	Rural with larger town(s)	Urban/suburban
Number of counties	42	33	17
Total population & percent of state’s population	891,906 (14%)	1,827,247 (24%)	4,012,542 (62%)
Area (sq. mi.) & percent of total state’s land mass	15,963 (44%)	12,783 (35%)	7,674 (21%)

And Table 2 (back page) presents the characteristics of the 42 most rural counties. Here we define rural Indiana by what we agree it *is*—not merely by what it isn't.

Conclusion

Now that we have defined what we mean when we talk about "rural Indiana," we can begin to examine the issues important to its citizens and to consider policy options in terms of how they might affect *all* of the people in Indiana. We hope this publication and the forthcoming publications in the Rural Indiana Issues series contribute to a better understanding of the rural context, to identification of appropriate strategies to meet the unique needs of rural people, and to fuller, more informed policy debate.

References

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About the Authors

Janet Ayres and Brigitte Waldorf are professors in the Department of Agricultural Economics at Purdue University. Janet has worked as an Extension specialist in the areas of leadership and community development in rural Indiana for over three decades. Brigitte's expertise is in demography and she has written about a variety of population issues in Indiana, including immigrants, educational attainment, and poverty. Melissa McKendree is a graduate research assistant in Agricultural Economics. Laura Hoelscher is a Senior Editor in Purdue's Department of Agricultural Communication and the editor of the Journal of Extension. She has collaborated extensively with Janet and Brigitte to communicate the results of their work to the public.

For further information, contact Janet Ayres at: ayres@purdue.edu or Brigitte Waldorf at bwaldorf@purdue.edu.

Table 2. Characteristics of the Most Rural Counties in Indiana

Rural County	2000 Population	2010 Population	Percent Change in Population	Density (Number of People per Sq. Mi.)	Largest City	Largest City Population
Benton	9,421	8,854	-6.0	22	Fowler	2,156
Blackford	14,048	12,766	-9.1	77	Hartford City	6,313
Brown	14,957	15,242	1.9	49	Nashville	769
Carroll	20,165	20,155	-0.0	54	Delphi	2,837
Clay	26,556	26,890	1.3	75	Washington	8,217
Crawford	10,743	10,713	-0.3	35	Marengo	808
Fountain	17,954	17,240	-4.0	44	Attica	3,256
Franklin	22,151	23,087	4.2	60	Brookville	2,885
Fulton	20,511	20,836	1.6	57	Rochester	6,431
Gibson	32,500	33,503	3.1	69	Princeton	8,427
Greene	33,157	33,165	0.0	61	Linton	5,673
Harrison	34,325	39,364	14.7	81	Corydon	2,801
Jasper	30,043	33,478	11.4	60	Rensselaer	6,333
Jay	21,806	21,253	-2.5	55	Portland	6,061
Jennings	27,554	28,525	3.5	76	North Vernon	6,279
Lagrange	34,909	37,128	6.3	98	Lagrange	2,927
Martin	10,369	10,334	-0.3	31	Loogootee	2,581
Newton	14,566	14,244	-2.2	35	Kentland	1,639
Ohio	5,623	6,128	9.0	71	Rising Sun	2,408
Orange	19,306	19,840	2.8	50	Paoli	3,872
Owen	21,786	21,575	-1.0	56	Spencer	2,458
Parke	17,241	17,339	0.6	39	Rockville	2,561
Perry	18,899	19,338	2.3	51	Tell City	7,473
Pike	12,837	12,845	0.1	38	Petersburg	2,380
Posey	27,061	25,910	-4.2	63	Mount Vernon	6,945
Pulaski	13,755	13,402	-2.6	31	Winamac	2,464
Randolph	27,401	26,171	-4.5	58	Winchester	4,576
Ripley	26,523	28,818	8.6	65	Batesville	6,414
Rush	18,261	17,392	-4.8	43	Rushville	6,014
Spencer	20,391	20,952	2.7	53	Santa Claus	2,303
Starke	23,556	23,363	-0.8	76	Knox	3,796
Sullivan	21,751	21,475	-1.3	48	Sullivan	4,429
Switzerland	9,065	10,613	17.1	48	Vevay	1,588
Tipton	16,577	15,936	-3.9%	61	Tipton	4,999
Union	7,349	7,516	2.3	47	Liberty	1,878
Vermillion	16,788	16,212	-3.4	63	Clinton	4,776
Warren	8,419	8,508	1.1	23	Williamsport	1,884
Washington	27,223	28,262	3.8	55	Salem	6,463
Wells	27,600	27,636	0.1	75	Bluffton	9,165
White	25,267	24,643	-2.5	49	Monticello	5,192
Whitley	30,707	33,292	8.4	99	Columbia City	8,369

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