

## What is “Rural?”

Jim Pease

“Rural” is a term that almost everyone claims to understand. When pressed for a definition, individuals may respond by mentioning such terms as “open country,” “wide open spaces,” or “not city.” An individual may consider a particular area to be rural, while another might not. Merriam Webster dictionary defines rural as “of or relating to the country, country people or life, or agriculture.”<sup>1</sup> The vagueness of such a definition recalls the famous observation of Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart about pornography, “I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced . . . [b]ut I know it when I see it.”<sup>2</sup>

Why is it important to define rural? Since the programs of the New Deal, it has been considered socially important to assist residents of rural areas. In general, rural residents are poorer and less educated, have higher poverty rates, and have poorer health care. Understanding alternative definitions of rural is important because many public and private agency programs are directed to rural areas and their residents, and the definitions will determine who is eligible to participate in such programs. In some cases, one Virginia citizen may be eligible for a government program for rural citizens, while a neighbor who lives less than one mile away may not.

The question was taken up by the Virginia Rural Prosperity Commission (Commission), formed by the Virginia General Assembly in 2000. The legislation instructed the Commission to “. . . undertake a detailed analysis of rural Virginia economies and recommend flexible but targeted state policies which, combined with local efforts, will help foster sustainable economic growth in Virginia’s rural areas.”<sup>3</sup> The Commission

examined alternative methods of determining rural counties. One candidate method was to define rural counties by resource-based economies (farming, mining, forestry, fisheries). However, only two Virginia counties were defined as dependent upon agriculture (Highland and Cumberland), while only four southwestern counties were defined as mining-dependent. No counties were forestry or fisheries dependent. Only a tiny proportion of the state’s area and population would be regarded as rural under the resource-based economy definition.

An alternative economic definition was based upon the availability of business services establishments by county/city. Business services ranged from 1 (in Lee, Buckingham, Craig, and Surry) to 3,692 across cities/counties. If rural cities/counties are defined as having fewer than 100 business services, all but 11 counties (and cities contained within them) would be considered rural. The Commission did not choose to define rural/urban counties by their number of business services because of the difficulty in communicating such a definition and because business services definitions changed from Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) to the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS).

The Commission reached the conclusion that the Federal metropolitan/nonmetropolitan definition placed many primarily rural counties into metropolitan or micropolitan statistical areas (Figure 1). For example, although Craig County has only one business service establishment, the county is adjacent to a metropolitan area and is considered to be a metropolitan area county because of the commuting to work pattern of its residents.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.m-w.com>, accessed October 28, 2006

<sup>2</sup> *Jacobellis v. Ohio*, 378 U.S. 184, 197 (1964)

<sup>3</sup> Quoted from “From the Grassroots: Final Report of the Rural Virginia Prosperity Commission to the Governor and the General Assembly of Virginia,” Rural Virginia Prosperity Commission, <http://www.rvpc.vt.edu/>, accessed October 30, 2006.

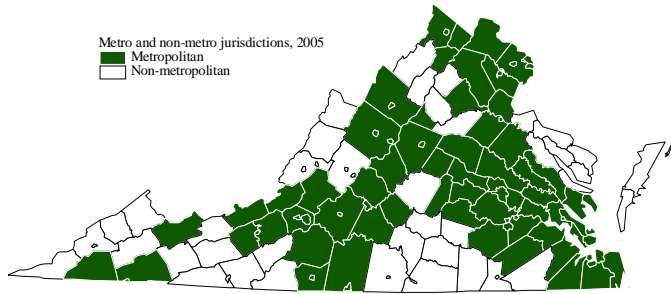


Figure 1. Metropolitan and non-metropolitan jurisdictions, 2005.

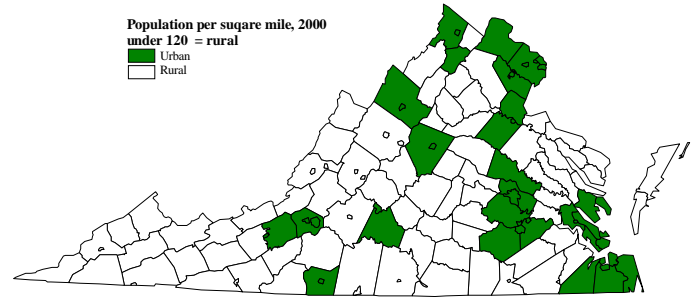


Figure 2. Rural and urban Virginia jurisdictions, 2000.

### Metropolitan and micropolitan statistical areas

The Census Bureau defines metropolitan/nonmetropolitan counties using the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) definition. The primary units of the metropolitan and micropolitan area definitions are counties and, in Virginia, independent cities. The OMB defines a metropolitan statistical area (MSA) as having at least one urbanized cluster of at least 50,000 inhabitants, and a micropolitan statistical area as having at least one urbanized cluster of between 10,000 and 50,000 inhabitants. The MSA includes, besides the “central county/city,” adjoining counties/cities that have a high degree of economic integration with the central area as measured by the proportion of the workforce commuting among the central and outlying counties. The OMB definition is designed to provide a nationally consistent basis for tabulating Federal statistics based on geography, but the OMB clearly states that their definitions of MSAs do not distinguish urban and rural regions.<sup>7</sup> Some counties within MSAs, OMB admits, are essentially rural.

The Commission’s final report provides a designation of urban and rural areas by using a population density definition. Under the Commission definition, a county or city with less than 120 people per square mile is considered to be rural. This definition is based on assessment of population densities across all Virginia counties and cities, and the determination that a natural break occurs at 120 people per square mile. Figure 2 and Table 1 indicate the Virginia counties/cities that were defined as rural under the Commission definition. In 2000, 85 localities were designated “rural” by the population density definition, including counties and cities with approximately 25 percent of the Virginia population. As an outgrowth of the recommendations presented by the Commission, the Center for Rural Virginia (<http://www.centerforruralvirginia.org>) has adopted this definition for all its activities and programs.

<sup>4</sup>U.S. Census Bureau. Found at <http://www.census.gov/>.

Within some jurisdictions, population density may vary so widely that one portion of the area would be considered highly urbanized while another is very rural. Nevertheless, the definition works well for communication and discussion of rural policy. For example, the per capita income of Virginia urban residents (“urban” defined by population density) in 2003 was \$36,624, while the per capita income of rural residents was \$24,809. Poverty rates in rural Virginia counties averaged 12.6 percent in 2003, while rates in urban counties/cities averaged only 9.1 percent. Per pupil real expenditures K-12 in rural counties were only 90 percent of the expenditures per pupil in urban counties in 2004. Clearly, the socio-economic gap between the “two Virginias” is starkly apparent with the population density definition of rural and urban areas.

### What Difference Does “Rural” Make?

The definition of rural matters in terms of eligibility for government agency programs. Each of the federal and state agencies has many types of grant programs. Examples of rural program eligibility issues are discussed below for U.S. Rural Health Grant Programs (administered by grantee institutions including the Virginia Department of Health), USDA Rural Housing programs (administered directly by USDA/Rural Development), and the US Department of Education Small Rural School Achievement Program (administered by Virginia local school districts).

### Rural Health Grant Programs

Examples of Federal rural health grant programs offered through the Office of Rural Health Policy (ORHP) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and delivered in Virginia include the Small Rural Hospital Improvement Grant Program (SHIP) and the Small Health Care Provider Quality Improvement (SHCPQI) Grant Program.<sup>4</sup> In Fiscal Year 2005, \$1.9 million were granted to Virginia providers through these rural health programs. The SHIP program provides funding to small rural hospitals for a wide range of

**Table 1A. Rural jurisdictions: Less than 120 people per square mile**

Jurisdiction	Population	Jurisdiction	Population	Jurisdiction	Population
Accomack	92	Essex	37	Northampton	77
Alleghany	51	Fauquier	85	Northumberland	61
Amelia	31	Floyd	36	Norton <sup>a</sup>	108
Amherst	67	Fluvanna	70	Nottoway	52
Appomattox	41	Franklin	66	Orange	75
Augusta	109	Franklin City <sup>a</sup>	43	Page	74
Bath	10	Galax <sup>a</sup>	74	Patrick	40
Bedford <sup>a</sup>	85	Giles	47	Pittsylvania <sup>a</sup>	110
Bedford City <sup>a</sup>	85	Goochland	58	Powhatan	83
Bland	19	Grayson	40	Prince Edward	57
Botetourt	56	Greene	97	Pulaski	105
Bristol <sup>a</sup>	117	Greensville <sup>a</sup>	60	Rappahannock	26
Brunswick	32	Halifax	45	Richmond	47
Buchanan	55	Highland	6	Rockbridge <sup>a</sup>	56
Buckingham	27	Isle of Wight	92	Russell	63
Buena Vista <sup>a</sup>	56	King and Queen	20	Scott	43
Caroline	41	King George	95	Shenandoah	70
Carroll <sup>a</sup>	74	King William	46	Smyth	73
Charles City	35	Lancaster	86	Southampton <sup>a</sup>	43
Charlotte	26	Lee	53	Staunton <sup>a</sup>	109
Clarke	71	Lexington <sup>a</sup>	56	Surry	24
Covington <sup>a</sup>	51	Louisa	50	Sussex	25
Craig	16	Lunenburg	31	Tazewell	86
Culpeper	90	Madison	39	Washington <sup>a</sup>	117
Cumberland	31	Mecklenburg	48	Waynesboro <sup>a</sup>	109
Danville <sup>a</sup>	110	Middlesex	79	Westmoreland	67
Dickenson	50	Nelson	31	Wise <sup>a</sup>	108
Emporia <sup>a</sup>	60	New Kent	60	Wythe	58

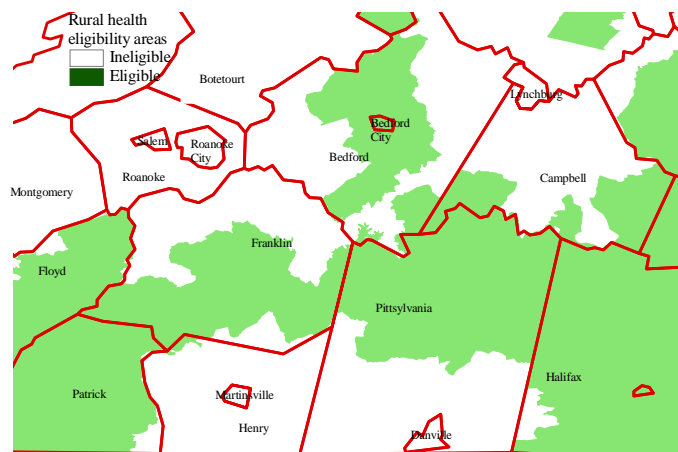
<sup>a</sup> Data availability makes it necessary to combine some cities with the counties from which they originated thereby impacting both county and city population per square mile.

**Table 1B. Urban jurisdictions: 120 or more people per square mile**

Jurisdiction	Population	Jurisdiction	Population	Jurisdiction	Population
Albemarle <sup>a</sup>	170	Harrisonburg <sup>a</sup>	124	Prince George <sup>a</sup>	193
Alexandria	7,431	Henrico	1,095	Prince William	939
Arlington	7,321	Henry <sup>a</sup>	193	Radford <sup>a</sup>	253
Campbell <sup>a</sup>	214	Hopewell <sup>a</sup>	193	Richmond City	2,905
Charlottesville <sup>a</sup>	170	James City <sup>a</sup>	378	Roanoke <sup>a</sup>	406
Chesapeake	586	Loudoun	320	Roanoke City	3,001
Chesterfield	594	Lynchburg <sup>a</sup>	214	Rockingham <sup>a</sup>	124
Colonial Heights <sup>a</sup>	139	Manassas <sup>a</sup>	939	Salem <sup>a</sup>	406
Dinwiddie <sup>a</sup>	139	Manassas Park <sup>a</sup>	939	Spotsylvania	258
Fairfax <sup>a</sup>	2,437	Martinsville <sup>a</sup>	193	Stafford	332
Fairfax City <sup>a</sup>	2,437	Mathews	143	Suffolk	158
Falls Church <sup>a</sup>	2,437	Montgomery <sup>a</sup>	253	Virginia Beach	1,591
Frederick <sup>a</sup>	198	Newport News	2,397	Warren	147
Fredericksburg <sup>a</sup>	258	Norfolk	4,852	Williamsburg <sup>a</sup>	378
Gloucester	163	Petersburg <sup>a</sup>	139	Winchester <sup>a</sup>	198
Hampton	2,883	Poquoson <sup>a</sup>	532	York <sup>a</sup>	532
Hanover	179	Portsmouth	2,862		

<sup>a</sup> Data availability makes it necessary to combine some cities with the counties from which they originated thereby impacting both county and city population per square mile.

expenses. The SHCPQI program supports rural health care providers, such as critical access hospitals or rural health clinics, to improve the quality of chronic disease management, such as diabetes or cardiovascular disease. These rural health programs have differing criteria for eligibility. The geographic eligibility criteria for these and other rural health programs delivered in Virginia include that the health provider or hospital must be located outside of a metropolitan county (as defined by the OMB criteria), except if the health provider or hospital is located within a census tract that is identified as rural according to the Rural-Urban Commuting Area (RUCA) codes developed in 2000 by USDA/Economic Research Service. As an example, Figure 3 indicates areas in Southside



Virginia eligible for rural health care.

Figure 3. Southside areas eligible for rural health care programs

### Rural Housing and Community Facilities Grant Programs

USDA Rural Development programs support community facilities and services, economic development opportunities, rural housing, and agricultural and other cooperatives (technical assistance). Such programs are administered directly in Virginia through USDA's state office.<sup>5</sup> Among other criteria, eligibility for USDA Housing and Community Facilities programs is determined by whether the property is in a rural area. The Field Office Handbook<sup>6</sup> contains rural area designations. Rural areas are defined as

- Open country that is not part of or associated with an urban area; or
- Any town, village, city, or place (including the immediately adjacent densely settled area) that is not part of or

<sup>5</sup> USDA Rural Development. Found at <http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/va/>

<sup>6</sup> USDA Rural Development Handbooks. Found at <http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/regs/hblist.html>.

### Census geography

The Decennial Census of Population counts 100% of the population in the beginning year of each decade. The terms tracts, block groups, and blocks define areas. Census tracts are small, relatively permanent subdivisions of a city or county averaging about 4,000 inhabitants. Census tract boundaries usually follow geographic features, but they always nest within counties/independent cities. Virginia has 1,541 census tracts. Census block groups and blocks are subdivisions of census tracts; census blocks are the smallest geographic units for which tabulations are available. Virginia has 145,399 census blocks.

The Census Bureau distinguishes census blocks as either "rural" or "urban." An urban block consists of at least one densely populated central place and adjacent densely populated blocks that together have a population of at least 2,500. For example, the Census Bureau considers approximately one-half of the census blocks in Chesterfield County (part of the Richmond metropolitan area) as urban and one-half as rural. The 2000 Census-defined urban areas within Virginia had 5.17 million people (73%) on a total land area of 2,367 square miles, an average population density of 2,184 people per square mile. The Virginia rural population was 1.91 million on a total land area of 37,227 square miles, with an average population density of 51 people per square mile.<sup>4</sup>

associated with an urban area, and that

- ▷ Is rural in character with a population of less than 10,000; or
- ▷ Is not contained within a Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), has a population between 10,000 and 20,000 and has a serious lack of mortgage credit.

An eligible site in "open country" must be separated by open space from any adjacent densely populated area. Open space includes agricultural land, undeveloped land, and sparsely settled areas. The Handbook assures field offices that all rural areas suffer from a lack of mortgage credit and releases them from determination of that qualifying criterion. Additional flexibility is provided for previously designated rural areas and contiguous towns. Reviews of rural area designation are mandated at least every five years and after the decennial census. No definition is presented for geographic entities that are "rural in character." In Virginia, relatively few areas are designated as ineligible for rural housing and community facility programs. Figure 4 shows eligible areas in two regions in Virginia: Richmond and Bristol.

<sup>7</sup> Office of Budget Management. Found at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/bulletins/index.html>.



Figure 4. Richmond, Chesterfield, Henrico, Prince George area and Bristol, Washington, and Russell area. Dark areas are ineligible.

### Rural Education Grant Programs

The U.S. Department of Education’s Small Rural School Achievement program is designed to provide funds directly to local school districts for meeting their state’s definition of “Adequate Yearly Progress” under the “No Child Left Behind” legislation. Approximately \$84 million are granted under this program throughout the U.S., with an average school district grant of approximately \$18,000. Schools do not compete for Small Rural School Achievement grants, but instead receive funds on a formula basis if they meet eligibility requirements. The program eligibility requirements are 1) either the average daily attendance of all schools in a district is fewer than 600 or the county’s population density is less than 10 people per square mile, and 2) all schools administered by the district have school locale codes of 7 or 8. A school locale code and database for over 100,000 U.S. K-12 schools is maintained by the National Center for Education Statistics within the U.S. Department of Education (<http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/CCDLocaleCode.asp>). The rural school locale codes include any area *outside* the metropolitan/micropolitan statistical area or any area *within* a metropolitan/micropolitan statistical area that is considered rural by the Census Bureau.<sup>8</sup> Under the locale code definition, 79 of Virginia’s 222 school districts are considered rural for purposes of U.S. Department of Education programs. A new definition, incorporating more

information on rural areas within metropolitan and micropolitan counties/cities will further increase the number of rural Virginia school districts to 107, nearly one-half of all Virginia districts.<sup>9</sup> In addition, any school district is allowed to demonstrate rural status and with the concurrence of the Virginia Department of Education, receive grants under this and other programs.

### In the End, What is Rural?

This discussion shows that rural can be defined in many ways, depending on the purpose for which one asks the question. In general, residents or businesses of a rural area may be eligible for programs designed to provide opportunities for regions considered to be disadvantaged. In other words, “rural” for these purposes is a regulatory definition that can be distinguished in geography down to the census block level. However, for purposes of rural policy, the unit of administration (and data collection) is usually the county or city, and a more aggregate rural/urban distinction is necessary. Many MSAs include Virginia counties that face economic and social challenges that are characteristic of rural jurisdictions. The population density definition of rural developed by the Rural Prosperity Commission and adopted by the Center for Rural Virginia is a good compromise definition that offers the most flexible discussion arena for analysis of rural Virginia challenges and opportunities.

<sup>8</sup> The U.S. Department of Education will update their rural school designation from the 2003-2004 “metro-centric” to the OMB-consistent “urban-centric” geography, but grant fund eligibility requirements have not yet been updated.

<sup>9</sup> The Virginia Department of Education lists 134 school divisions/(districts) on its web site, and 1,878 total schools. Found at <http://www.pen.k12.va.us>

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