



# How the government defines **rural** has implications for education policies and practices



Summary



Institute of Education Sciences

U.S. Department of Education



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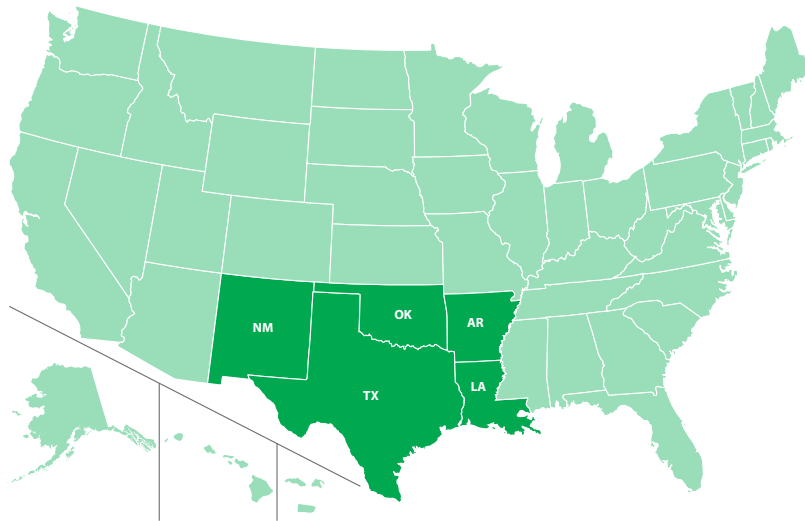
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## Summary

# How the government defines *rural* has implications for education policies and practices

**Clearly defining what rural means has tangible implications for public policies and practices in education, from establishing resource needs to achieving the goals of No Child Left Behind in rural areas. Six definitions of rural are commonly applied in different contexts.**

The word *rural* has many meanings. It has been defined in reference to population density, geographic features, and level of economic and industrial development. Some definitions use census tracts as the geographic building block to classify rural places, while others use counties or parishes. Some definitions use proximity to a metropolitan area as a measure of rurality, while others use proximity to an urbanized area. One system classifies rural schools according to their distance to an urbanized area, but others do not. Rapidly changing conditions and growing diversity in rural America make defining rural even more difficult.

This report documents national and state definitions of rural and considers their application to education policies and practices. Defining rural accurately is especially important for addressing two kinds of education policy

questions. One involves identifying the resource needs of rural populations and monitoring and evaluating effective use. Who receives resources and who does not? Another concerns whether rural schools are achieving the goals of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Are there obstacles related to being rural that make achieving the goals more difficult, and if so, what accommodations can be equitably made for rural schools to help them achieve the goals?

Six definitions and classification systems for rural were identified through searches of major federal agency documents and databases. Some of these definitions were developed specifically to classify schools and districts, while others focus on a broader range of issues. All have been used in some way to better understand the challenges facing rural schools. In order of use, beginning with the most common, they are:

- U.S. Census Bureau classifications, which define rural by geographic features, population, and as a residual.
- Metropolitan status codes, which define rural relative to a core-based statistical area.

- Urban-rural continuum codes, which define rural by population and proximity to urban areas.
- Metro-centric locale codes, which are used primarily for statistical procedures.
- Urban-centric locale codes, which improve the reliability and precision of locale code assignment.
- Core-based statistical areas, which are statistically defined geographic areas.

Several issues need to be considered in applying definitions of rural to education policies and practices. One issue is the unit of analysis. The way rural is defined and specified (by school or district) is likely to yield different portrayals of rural students, which can affect education policies and practices. A second issue involves geographic and political differences among regions. What is considered rural in one part of the country may not be considered rural in another.

Demographic changes in rural America are a third issue. Some communities are gaining population, while others are losing population. School districts experiencing growth are noting an increase in student diversity.

Several questions arise from this study. Is a single definition of rural needed for educational policy and practice? Is it better to have multiple definitions that can be applied according to context? What are the key elements of a typology that can accurately reflect conditions in the Southwest Region? Research is needed to answer these questions by applying the most relevant definitions to demographic and geographic profiles of rural districts and communities. These profiles can then be used to examine the implications of applying each definition to rural education issues. The results can provide useful insight for developing policy initiatives aimed at improving educational outcomes in rural schools.

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