

Transcript: Rural America at a Glance, 2019 Edition

Slide 1: Good afternoon everyone and welcome to our webinar, Rural America at a Glance 2019 Edition. My name is Kellie Burdette and I will be your host. This webinar is being recorded and will be posted on the ERS website next week. At any time during the webinar, you may enter a question into the chat feature at the bottom left corner of your screen, and our speaker will answer questions at the end of the presentation. Our speaker today is John Pender. John is the Economic Research Service's rural liaison in the Rural Economy branch, Resource and Rural Economics Division. His research focuses on rural household and community wealth and prosperity, impacts of economic development programs, and other policies on the U.S. rural economy. Prior to joining ERS, John led research on rural development and natural resource management in developing countries at the International Food Policy Research Institute. I think we're ready to start, so John, you may begin your presentation.

Thank You Kellie. As Kellie mentioned, I'm John Pender and I'm the rural liaison for the Rural Economy branch of the Economic Research Service. That means I focus on issues affecting the rural economy and the well-being of rural people. Today I'll be presenting some results from our latest publication on these issues, Rural America at a Glance, 2019 Edition.

Slide 2: Rural America at a Glance, 2019 Edition was just released this afternoon, about an hour ago. It's one of a series that provides an annual summary of demographic and economic trends in rural America. The specific focus of those trends vary somewhat from year to year in order to highlight current opportunities and challenges that face rural America. This annual publication is part of the ERS' 'At a Glance' series, which also includes specialized reports on specialized topics, such as real manufacturing and real education.

Slide 3: So, the topics this year in Rural America at a Glance include a focus on population change and its components, including those components being net migration, which means immigration minus outmigration, and natural change which is births minus deaths. We also look at employment growth and labor force participation or the share of the adult population that's working or looking for work. We look at poverty trends, and then trends and real personal income per person. All of the trends that we discuss in this report, cover the time period from at least 2002 to the latest year data are available. In some cases, we go back a few years earlier, just prior to the Great Recession, for comparison purposes. Most of the trends are compared across county types across what we call the rural urban continuum. What do I mean by the rural urban continuum? Turning to the next slide we have some explanation of that.

Slide 4: So, the map on this slide shows the rural urban continuum based on geographic characteristics of counties. Counties are classified as metro or nonmetro, based on the size of the urban population of the county. So, for metro counties, having an urban population of at least 50,000, and also for counties without such large urban populations that have strong commuting linkages to an urban core in a metro region. Nonmetro counties are all other counties and are often used as a synonym for rural. In this report however, we do not refer to nonmetro counties as rural counties because we're distinguishing them by the size of the urban population within these counties, as well as whether they are adjacent to metro counties. So, to avoid confusion we

refer specifically to metro and nonmetro counties rather than urban and rural. But we do talk about different degrees of urban or rural within nonmetro counties.

So, on the map you see the different colors for different counties. The darker greens are all showing the metro counties in the United States, and then the other colors, the lightest green, the yellow, on up through the red and the brown, are all the nonmetro counties. So, the nonmetro counties make up about almost three-quarters of the nation's land area and are home to about 14% or 46 million U.S. residents. Now on the map you see the different classifications here represented in the nonmetro areas according to the urban population of the county. So, nonmetro counties that had an urban population of 20,000 or more, we're referring to as more urban. And then if they had an urban population of 2,500 to 20,000 we refer to them as less urban, and then those that had very small, very limited urban populations of less than 2,500, we're calling completely rural. We also classify these counties based on whether or not they're adjacent to a metro county. So that leaves us six categories of nonmetro counties.

19 million people of the 46 million in nonmetro counties live in more urban nonmetro counties. 14 million of those were in counties adjacent to a metropolitan area, and then five million were in nonadjacent nonmetro counties. In the remaining 27 million of nonmetro residents live in less urban counties that have 2,500 to 20,000 urban residents or completely rural counties with less than 2,500 urban residents. Well more than half, about 17 million of those, live in adjacent counties, and 11 million of those live in nonadjacent counties.

Slide 5: So, turning to the next slide we start to look at population trends. So, first looking at population change along the rural-urban continuum, this chart shows overall population change from 2010 to 2018 for metro counties combined, and for the six categories of nonmetro counties presented on the previous slide. We show the total percentage population change for each group of counties with using the blue bars, and then the change due to net of that population change (the change is due to natural change or births minus deaths) with the orange bars, and then the change due to net migration using the gray bars.

Overall nonmetro population decline by 0.4% between 2010 and 2018. Compared to growth in population in metro counties of almost 7%. There was low growth in nonmetro population due to natural change, which failed to offset than the losses in population due to net outmigration from nonmetro counties. This is part of a long-term declining trend and natural growth in nonmetro counties as a result of aging of the population, and an overall decline in birth rates nationwide.

Now within nonmetro county types there are large variations in population change. Where we see growth in more urban nonmetro counties, especially the nonadjacent counties, and decline in all other nonmetro types. The natural change in population was positive in all county types except the completely rural counties, whereas net outmigration occurred in all the nonmetro county types.

Slide 6: So now, turning to employment trends we see on this next slide, the chart shows the difference in employment in each quarter from the level of employment in the fourth quarter of 2007, which was just at the start of the Great Recession. The black line shows employment levels for metro areas, and the orange line shows employment levels for nonmetro areas, were basically

the levels and how they change since the fourth quarter of 2007. So, what we see here, is that at between the end of 2007 and the end of 2009, employment fell by 5% in both nonmetro and metro counties reflecting the effects of the Great Recession. Then between 2010 and 2018, nonmetro employment grew at an average of only 0.4% per year compared to a much faster 1.5% per year growth in metro areas. By the second quarter of 2019, nonmetro employment was still more than 1 % below the pre-recession level, while metro employment was more than 9 % above the pre-recession level. Onto the next slide.

Slide 7: Now we look at employment change across the rural urban continuum for the same period and compare it to population change. In the chart on the slide, the blue bars show total employment change in percent, from 2010 to 2018 for each group of counties, and the orange bars show population change. We see that employment grew more rapidly than population in all county types during this period. So basically, the employment to population ratio was growing during this period in all county types.

Among nonmetro counties employment growth was fastest, or more than 4 %, over the period in the more urban counties. Among the less urban and completely rural counties, metro adjacent counties had faster employment growth than nonadjacent counties. Then the completely rural nonadjacent counties actually had a slight decline in employment over this period of minus 0.4%.

Slide 8: As suggested in the previous slides, one reason for slower employment growth in nonmetro areas is slower population growth. Another reason is lower labor force participation in nonmetro areas. Labor force participation, which is the share of the adult population that's working or looking for work, is lower in nonmetro areas and in metro areas. As a percentage of all of the adult population, labor force participation is 6.1 percentage points lower in 2018 in nonmetro areas than in metro areas. This can be explained by three key differences between metro and nonmetro population. On average, the nonmetro population is older, less educated, and more likely to be disabled. So, these three factors explain pretty much all of the difference. About half of the gap is due to the older nonmetro population, and then about a 1/4 each of the gap is explained by lower educational attainment and greater disability. But even among the prime working age population, the population aged 25 to 54, labor force participation is lower in nonmetro areas, and the gap is increasing over time, as shown in the chart on this slide.

Slide 9: Now we look at poverty trends. As of population and employment, poverty rates also differ across the rural urban continuum. Poverty rates are always somewhat higher in nonmetro areas than in metro areas, and the gap has widening since 2010. The chart on this slide shows poverty rates only for different types of nonmetro counties along the rural urban continuum. We see that poverty rates have declined since 2013 in all types of nonmetro counties, that decline has also occurred in metro counties as well. In fact, the gap between metro and nonmetro counties, and poverty rates has increased from 3.0 percentage points in 2011 to 3.5 percent points in 2017.

Within nonmetro counties, we see the poverty rates has decline in these different types of nonmetro counties. Among these counties, poverty rates are highest in the completely rural, non-adjacent counties, as shown with the yellow dots on the chart, and are lowest in the more urban adjacent counties as shown by the black dots in the chart.

Slide 10: Finally, we look at trends in real inflation-adjusted personal income per person across the rural urban continuum. The chart that is showing on this slide, shows that throughout the entire 2010 to 2017 period, real personal income per person was higher in metro areas than in nonmetro areas. In 2017, real personal income per person was \$54,000 in metro areas but \$40,000 in nonmetro areas. The gap between metro and nonmetro areas has grown over this period, for example metro areas had 13.5 % growth and real income per person between 2010 and 2017, there was only about 10% in the nonmetro areas. Then among the nonmetro areas the levels and changes in personal income per person have been fairly similar across the rural urban continuum. What we do see, is not easy to see in the chart, but for one of the county types that is completely rural non adjacent counties, real personal income per person actually declined between 2015 and 2017.

Slide 11: One reason that real personal income per person declined in the last part of the study period, in completely rural non-adjacent nonmetro counties, is that these counties are more dependent on farming or mining than other counties, and both farming and mining income declined significantly during the latter part of the study period. In the chart on this slide we see evidence of this by looking at trends in real personal income per person by county economic type. County economic vacation of counties the ERS developed based primarily on the share of employment and earnings from particular industries. The chart shows the real personal income per person declined in farming dependent counties after 2013 and declines after 2014 in mining dependent counties. These are the periods when farming income and mining income began to decline pretty substantially. This relates back to the previous slide in that the completely rural non adjacent counties, where we saw some decline in personal income per person, are more likely to be farming or mining dependent than the other types of counties.

Then looking at the other economic types on this slide we see that between 2010 and 2017, real personal income per person grew the most and is now at the highest level in recreation counties. On the other hand, personal income per person was lower and grew more slowly than the other three nonmetro county economic types: manufacturing dependent counties, federal and state government dependent counties, and non-specialized types that don't have such strong dependence on any of these industries.

Slide 12: So to summarize, on this slide I'm showing some of the key findings from this year's publication. First of all, nonmetro America as we've seen is quite diverse. There are many dimensions of diversity in nonmetro America. Certainly, as we've emphasized, some of the geographic characteristics, such as the size of the urban population and access or distance to metro areas, is one key component of diversity, but corresponding to that, we see lots of diversity in terms of some of the economic trends that we've been discussing. In particular we've seen population loss in the less urban and completely rural nonmetro counties compared to population gains in the more urban not nonmetro counties, and definitely in the metro counties.

Employment growth has been slower in nonmetro areas than in metro areas, and perhaps not surprisingly because of the much slower population growth. Among nonmetro areas there's been more employment growth in the more urban counties, and in the metro adjacent counties among the less urban or completely rural counties. Generally, we see that the places that had lower

population growth had lower employment growth, although in all cases the employment growth exceeded the population growth.

Now, another factor besides differences in population growth, that account for differences between metro and nonmetro areas, and their growth, employment, and levels of employment, is labor force participation. And we have seen that labor force participation is lower in nonmetropolitan areas and the gap that's growing. We also discussed the fact that three factors account for as much of that difference. The fact that people in nonmetro areas are older on average, have lower education levels on average, and are more likely to be disabled. Then looking at poverty, we saw that poverty rates have declined since 2013 in all types of counties, but less in the more rural and remote counties than in the other county types.

Then we looked at personal income per person, we saw that's higher and growing more rapidly in the metro areas than the nonmetro areas. And then, in one type of county, the completely rural non adjacent counties, we actually saw a decline in real personal income per person after 2015 and we explained that in part, as a result of declining farm and mining income, which was of course important in farming and mining dependent counties.

Among other nonmetro areas real personal income per person is highest, or this is among all nonmetro or is actually, real personal income per person is highest and grew the most and recreation county.

Slide 13: So, that concludes the presentation and I'll be happy to answer questions. On this last slide I provide information on where you can go for more information, or if you need to contact me if you have questions about this product or any other products related to the rural economy that ERS produces. I'll be happy to take questions.

Thank you John, we do have some questions for you, not sure if this was included in your research, but if it is, what is the labor force participation rate of those of prime working age in rural areas being affected by the opioid problem, and is the pattern different from metro areas or is there no significant difference across metro and nonmetro areas?

That's a very good question, and I guess the simple answer is I don't know, we haven't looked at that specifically. We do know that the opioid problem, or crisis, has affected both metro and nonmetro areas, and we have a study that's kind of being completed now, and we hope it will be published in the next several months. But basically, what I recall is that the nature of that problem has been changing, and what used to be perhaps more urban focused in some of the problems, the problem has shifted into some of the more urban areas, in particular regions of the country. So, I don't know how much, I mean certainly that does affect the labor force participation, but I don't know by how much.

All right here's another question. How often are these data measures updated, is it census driven?

Well, so we have data, we didn't put the data sources on this presentation, but on the publication itself we list all the data sources and of course we list on all the charts as well. So, there are different data sources, the population data comes from the Census Bureau, and the population estimates program, which those numbers are updated every year. The employment data, much of

that came from the local area unemployment service statistics, from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Those are quarterly estimates so that's why we had estimates right up through the second quarter of 2019 for the total employment numbers. Then other numbers, labor force participation, that also comes from the Bureau of Labor Statistic's local area unemployment statistics. So, again that's quarterly. Poverty rates came from the Census Bureau's Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates program, those are also updated annually. And then, finally, the person data on personal income per person, comes from, well the personal income comes from the Bureau of Economic Analysis in the Department of Commerce that's the same organization that publishes the national income and product accounts, but they also published statistics on personal income by county. Those are updated annually as well.

All right, here's another question. Why does the urban rural poverty gap persist and what might cause it to narrow?

Okay that's a good question. I can think of several factors that account for differences in poverty rates between rural and urban areas. Some of them I've mentioned here, some of them I haven't gone into in this particular publication. One factor is the lower labor force participation rate. Certainly, when people are out of the labor force, they tend to have lower incomes, and maybe more prone to being in poverty. I've seen evidence on that, that the rate of poverty among working people is generally lower than the rate of poverty for unemployed or people that aren't in the labor force.

The second factor, which also relates to the labor force participation that I have mentioned, was education levels. So, on average, educational attainment is lower in nonmetro areas than in metro areas. Because wages and salaries are positively associated with educational attainment, there's a higher rate of poverty in nonmetro areas because a greater percentage of the people are at lower educational levels (either people that haven't finished high school, people that have only completed high school and haven't gone beyond that, in terms of college education). So, those are a few major factors. Even controlling for education, there's evidence, which we saw in the rural education at a glance publication a few years ago, there's one chart in there that shows that for people of the same level of college education or high school education in metro areas, you tend to have higher wages for the same education level. Especially when go for higher levels of education, like college graduates, or people who have more advanced degrees, or in substantially higher incomes on average for the same level of education as people in metro areas. But certainly, the main issue for poverty is probably at the lower end of the educational distribution. So, those are a few main factors.

One other factor that has been raised in recent years, or one of the issues that come up, is that poverty rate as it is measured, is based on income poverty, and it doesn't account for the cost of living that might differ between metro and nonmetro areas. So, if the cost of living is lower, because for example the housing prices tend to be low in nonmetro areas, then that means that for the same income people are in a sense less poor, or less economically stressed in nonmetro areas. So, there have been efforts by the Census Bureau to measure what's called the Supplemental Poverty Measure, which accounts for differences in housing costs, and transportation cost, and some other differences between, rural and urban areas. They do find, that

when you account for those differences, that the Supplemental Poverty Measure, a lot of the difference between rural and urban poverty rates is eliminated.

Thanks, here's another question. Could you give some examples of recreation counties and what they're more specific types of industry are, such as hiking or skiing?

Well it could be any of those. Basically, the way we classify recreation counties was, its based again as in the other types, on the share of income and employment in particular industries. So, recreational based industries, such as resort employments, and so on, that's part of it. Also, the employment and accommodations, and the food service industry. Then one additional factor that's taken into account is the share of housing that's kind of seasonal, temporary housing that you find a lot more in recreational areas. Certainly, ski resorts, and resort areas in other locations, like along beaches and places near lakes and water bodies, near the coast, a lot of these places that have, what we call, high natural amenities, tend to have greater potential for recreation economies. There's also, I would say, a close correlation between recreation economies and places that become destinations for retirees. So, some of the places that are retirement destinations have been places that people have gone to for recreation throughout their younger adult period, and then decide to move there as retirees.

Speaking of recreational communities, not sure I understand this question, but we'll try it. Did the real person income in recreational counties increase because of the influx of populations with the wealth already established, or did the annual wage rate increase in salaries?

That's a good question and the short answer is I'm not sure. I would like to investigate that, that'd be something to look into. I'm trying to remember what we learned, because we looked at this a few years ago in rural America glance with a little more detail. We looked at different components of income. One of the puzzles is that often wages tend to be low in recreational counties because, or relatively low, because you have a lot of people in service industries, food service, and accommodations, and so on, that don't make high wages and also people that are willing to live in such places with low wages because of the natural beauty and the amenities. But at the same time, you have people that come into these areas that have retirement income, and I believe that's one of the important factors. It's not just the wages that the workers make that affect the incomes of these income per person but, it includes also the retirement incomes, and then the incomes from assets, and from people's investment portfolios, and things like that, their ownership of land, and rental income, and things may tend to be higher than people in other types of nonmetro areas.

All right, we have a lot of questions today. Have you assessed the correlation between your data set and food deserts, food security, and food justice initiatives?

I haven't personally done that. We may have people here that...I haven't personally looked at food deserts myself, so I would have to talk to the people in our food economics division that have studied that issue, to find out to what extent they correlated that with some of these rural indicators. I mean...I believe that there certainly are relationships, and there are people at ERS that know that topic better than I do.

All right and Becca writes, thanks John this was pretty depressing though valuable. Are there any bright spots in nonmetro America?

Okay. I don't think it's all negative. Let me go back to the last slides which kind of show some bright spots I guess, or a bright spot. I mean, maybe the main bright spot that we see in terms of personal income per person is the recreation counties, and you see actually some acceleration apparently after 2013, and their growth of personal income per person. Whereas, the downside is, we had a bright spot many years ago with the shale oil and gas boom, which you see reflected in the mining income and growth, and income in mining dependent counties. Then of course that's kind of fallen off in recent years. And then, farming is of course a bit cyclic, and we know in recent years, income has been down from a quite high level in 2012. So, in 2013 I think we had some pretty record years. So, some of this was probably cyclical.

The other good news I would say, is that in all of these cases, the real personal income per person is growing and in all of these categories, just not as fast as in metro counties. I would say, except for the recent cases that I mentioned, on average, over all of the non-metric energy of growth of almost 10% in real personal income per person between 2010 and 2017. So, there are of course differences across different county types and so on. It's not all depressing, I don't think.

The other point is, if we look at the poverty numbers, I think I showed those. the poverty rates are down, broadly across nonmetro counties of all types. I didn't show the results here, but unemployment rates have also fallen. Pretty much, the unemployment rates move in tandem pretty closely between metro and nonmetro America. So, over the last seven or eight years, I didn't show this but, basically, they moved right together. So as metro unemployment rate has fallen so has nonmetro, and nonmetro unemployment rate tends to be a little bit higher. It's averaged about 0.3 percentage points higher than the metro unemployment rate throughout this entire period. But both of those have seen a dramatic recovery. And then there's even some, you know, in the labor force participation the story isn't quite as good. There's less recovery of labor force participation in nonmetro than metro areas but there's been a slight uptick in that in the last few years.

The biggest difference I would say, what seems apparent to me is, the population trends are so different, and then, I think that implies that the employment trends overall are going to be different. So, attracting people and retaining people in rural areas, especially ones that don't have high levels of natural amenities to attract people, is always a challenge.

Good, here's another question, is spending in nonmetro as strong as in metro, or weaker?

Spending... I'm not sure what... I'm not sure I quite understand the question. I mean spending generally follows income, I think. I didn't look at savings rates so, I'm not sure that... I don't know there's a difference in savings rate between metro and nonmetro. But I think, generally, if I had data on expenditures, which I don't, you know by metro nonmetro, I would expect they should follow the trends for personal income.

All right. Do you have any information on this data, as far as veterans in these areas?

We do, we've done in the past. We've had a publication at least once, maybe more in Rural Veterans at a Glance. We also have some information, I believe, in our website about rural veterans. So, it has been a topic that we look at, and I'm not certain if we have one planned. I think we may have one that's being planned as well, another Rural Veterans at a Glance type publication.

All right, here's another question. Is there data to show that nonmetro older population is working longer or pushing off retirement?

That's a good question. That's something I should look into. I appreciate that question because some of these questions really suggest some future research topics. We have demographer here that studies these issues more than I do, and he may be aware of that kind of work. But you know, I'd be surprised honestly, if there wasn't something of that effect going on. I mean, we know that one of the puzzles that's happened in this last decade since the Great Recession, is the fact that the sort of retirement boom, that some people expected, as baby boomers start to retire you expect that some of those retirees are going to be settling down in nonmetro areas. So, there's a potential kind of boom to these places that are able to attract retirees because they're expectedly attracting their retirement incomes to the communities, and the spending and the other contributions that they can make to those communities. But we haven't so far seen a lot of that boom happening since the Great Recession. One hypothesis is that it's because people are delaying their retirement decisions not only in nonmetro but perhaps in metro America as well, so it's something that we should look into.

I have another question for you. What does this data tell us about what solutions we need to advanced opportunity and well-being in different types of rural places?

Oh well that's always the, whatever they call it, the \$64,000 question I don't sort of have a silver bullet menu of solutions for every rural area, but I would say, one point is that the diversity of situations in rural America means that there's probably not a one-size-fits-all solution. I mean, what has to be done needs to be tailored to different localities and even different sort of economic potentials. So, what works in a place with high natural amenities, and the potential for attracting lots of, say recreationalists and retirees, may not work in some place in the middle of the Great Plains, and so different strategies are needed there.

I think, this isn't drawn from this particular research but, there is a widespread sense in the policy arena, that investments in certain types of infrastructure are quite important, especially in places that are being left behind with respect to access to services like broadband. So, there's fairly high priority that the administration and Congress have been putting on that, actually putting a fair amount of money invested in new programs for promoting broadband. But we don't know if that's going to be the panacea or I doubt that there's a panacea for rural America, but certainly that can open up new opportunities by increasing connectivity, opening up opportunities for e-commerce and telecommuting, and other kinds of activities. It may also be important, I just mentioned the potential for attracting some of these baby boom generation people as they retire. Well you may need to have investments, and various kinds of infrastructure and amenities, to attract people to retire and stay in rural communities. So, it's not only natural amenities but

infrastructure like broadband and healthcare services, and other kinds of services also are important to consider.

All right another question. It looks like employment and nonmetro counties is still below the level before the recession, is that correct?

That's correct, but also employment per person has gone up. So basically, some of that is a reflection of the decline in the population. So yeah, you had some decline in population that is being now, you know, it has just been starting to turn around, but throughout the period after the recession you had growth in employment. So, there was a decline in sort of labor force participation as well around the time of the recession, and we're just starting to see that turn around a bit.

Okay, are the conditions in rural areas structural or can they be changed with government and business programs?

Well I'm not exactly sure what is meant by structural in the question, but there are certain kind of, I would say, inherent issues that are involved in achieving development in rural areas. I mean, especially places that are more remote from urban centers, the frontier areas, and in places that are low population density, it's just more costly to provide services especially an infrastructure. I mean the cost per person goes up as you have less population density, and then, in addition, some of the rural areas of this country are not only a remote, but they're in mountainous areas and places where it's also just costly to provide infrastructure and services. So, that creates kind of a difficulty right there, and then as populations move out of some of these areas, that sort of increases the problem of providing access to services and goods, because the fixed costs of providing those have to be spread over fewer people. So, the difficulty of providing educational services, healthcare services, and other kinds of services and goods increases.

Somebody mentioned food deserts and that that can also be a problem in in places where you don't have enough population to support large supermarkets and things. So, on the other side of it you have changes with the way things are provided, so there is a potential now for people to be employed and to access services through the internet, through broadband, and so on. You've got telemedicine for some kinds of medical services, distance learning programs, so those are both things that the USDA supports through government programs. So, there are kind of ways of trying to address some of these structural issues, I mean, I talked about broadband and investment programs that USDA and the Federal Communications Commission invest in in rural areas. There are some substantially very large new programs, over a billion dollars being appropriated by Congress to finance the new reconnect broadband program through USDA.

So, yes there are structural problems, but there's long been structural problems and yet policies have addressed some of them. An example that people cite would be rural electrification. Back in the 1930s and 40s the same arguments were made, well it's just too costly to provide electricity to rural areas because of the high cause of reaching, low debts, low density areas that the country made the investment anyway. The commitment was made, and rural areas have been electrified for a long time. You could make the same argument about, well the federal highway system. There was also commitment there and that's not just the serve rural areas, but it certainly has

with a large investment and a major commitment, and it has effective rural areas as well as urban areas.

Another question. Has anything improved for rural America from last year to this year?

Well I think it's a similar questions to what was asked before by Becca and as I said, there have been improvements. Some of the indicators I don't have through 2018 like the personal income per person numbers, and the poverty numbers were only through 2017, but I believe that you probably would be seeing similar trends continuing on into 2018 for the poverty and income numbers. I mentioned that there has been some increase in the labor force participation population. The employment levels are still increasing, they're not increasing as fast in metro areas but they're continuing to grow. Unemployment, well it's kind of stabilized I think in a pretty low level now. So, yeah there are a lot of trends that are still going positive, and I think overall if the story is positive trends in many ways but still lagging in most, in many places behind metro areas or the more urbanized of the nonmetro areas.

All right. This is somebody asking have we done research in this; assuming someone in a nonmetro area does have a high educational level, is there any accessibility to higher paying occupations, within a reasonable radius, for those living in nonmetro areas?

Well certainly, I mean the opportunities are more limited and that's one of the reasons I think that though the salary levels are lower for people with college degrees or higher, advanced postgraduate degrees or professional degrees, they don't earn as much in the rural areas as they do in an urban area. They still earn more than the less educated people in those areas. You have doctors, lawyers and other professionals that work in nonmetro areas that make more money than a high school graduate or whatever, but they probably know that they're taking a loss, economically, to live in a in a rural area as compared to in an urban area. I think a lot of people just prefer the rural lifestyle or they want to kind of know, like say doctors for example want to know their patients personally. They like that kind of small-town atmosphere and so on. There's some sort of non-monetary aspects to it that also factor out, I think, to people's decision.

All right, and has the Economic Research Service done any research in this, are there government incentives for firms to move into nonmetro areas?

Well there are various programs that try to promote investment in rural businesses. We've actually, at ERS, have done some research on a few of the rural business programs and in the last year publicly published some results looking at two programs. One was the Business and Industry Guaranteed Loan program of USDA, which is the largest rural business program. We also looked at the Value Added Producer Grant program. The Value Added Producer Grant program is trying to encourage farmers to shift into higher value-added activities, going into processing and so on from just producing based basic commodities. We looked at the impacts of those programs on business survival and growth in terms of employment growth. In both cases we found positive effects, especially on sort of business survival but they both also have positive effects on the growth of recipient businesses. So, those are a couple of examples. I mean, there are several other kinds of programs that promote particular types of activities in rural areas.

Alright we have one more question. Can we assume that your employment data does not include farmers and those who are self-employed?

No, this includes all occupations. So, including farmers and self-employed, business people and so on. The data that we use was local area unemployment statistics, which uses the same concepts and approaches as the current population survey, which produces the official numbers. So, it does count employment. In terms of any kind of part-time employment, it counts as employment. So, you could have some trends in here that are being affected by a growth in part-time employment, that's something we haven't looked at carefully yet. So, there may be more to the story, there usually is more to the story when you look underneath the numbers. I would say one of the possible trends you might be seeing is, especially in the immediate aftermath of, during, and immediately after the Great Recession. These anecdotal reports where there was a lot more sort of part-timing going on and so on, and so, at least in that period, I would expect you saw you know some of the growth and employment may have been part-time rather than full time equivalent. There are other data sources that look at full-time equivalents and there's ways of estimating that, so that'd be an important thing to look at.

All right, I want to thank you so much John and thanks everybody for all of your very interesting questions, and for joining us today. This concludes our webinar, so everybody, have a great rest of the day.