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Growth in Recreation Counties Stumbles

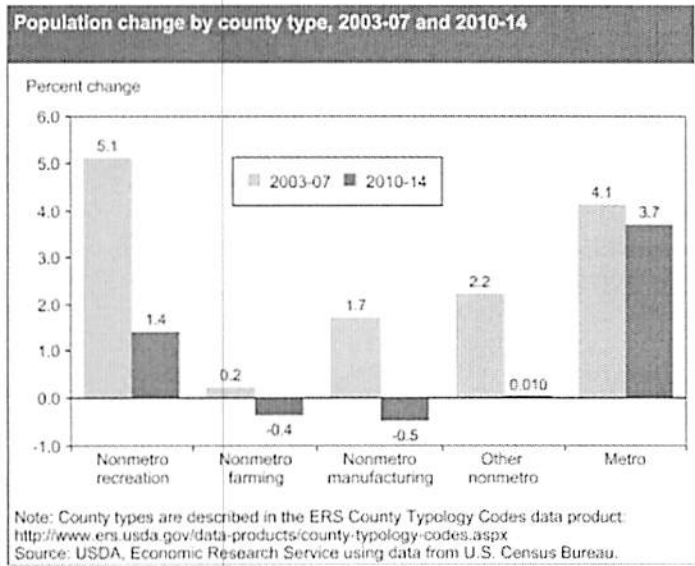
Main Street Economics

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For years, the high point in rural population growth was amenity-rich recreation counties. Since the Great Recession, the growth rate in those counties has dropped b

By Tim Marema



The population growth in rural counties that depend on tourists and retirees isn't what it used to be, a new analysis by the USDA Economic Research Service shows.

As the Daily Yonder has reported, nonmetropolitan counties overall have lost population for the last two years, but some counties managed to add population rather than lose it. We've already reported on how larger rural counties with 10,000 and 50,000 residents – grew in population last year.

The new ERS analysis by John Cromartie looks at other geographic factors in rural population change. Factors used to contribute to population growth for rural counties aren't as strong as they used to be.

Urban population size, metro proximity, attractive scenery, and recreation potential have influenced rural population growth. For the time being at least, their influence has weakened. Over the last decade, rural population growth has contracted considerably—for the first time since World War II—affecting not only rural counties adjacent to metro areas as well.

The analysis looks at nonmetropolitan population change by “county type”:

- “Recreation” counties have lots of exceptional natural amenities like lakes, mountains, and national parks like Yellowstone National Park, or of counties along the Upper Great Lakes in parts of Michigan,
- “Farming” counties are like they sound – counties where agriculture is the dominant economic activity.
- “Manufacturing” counties, where factories still make up a good portion of the economic activity.

And "Other" counties, which don't match one of the other categories.

The analysis found that recreation counties were the only type of rural county to show any appreciable population growth.

In recreation counties, the population grew by 1.4 percent. That's still pretty anemic compared to the growth rate before the Great Recession. But at least it's in positive territory, unlike farming and manufacturing counties.

Before the recession, the population in recreation counties climbed by nearly 5.1 percent, the ERB reports, more than the growth rate for metropolitan counties overall.

Population loss in manufacturing counties was caused by the recession, global competition, and the loss of jobs in the sector.

Farming counties, focused in the Great Plains and Corn Belt, lost population overall despite growing crop production.

Both these types of counties have an aging population, Cromartie reports, which results in lower birth rates. This Yonder story looks at that trend.

Population change, 2010-14



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from U.S. Census Bureau

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