

# **Future Directions for Rural Population Research:** Findings from RPRN's Stakeholder Listening Sessions

---

Paige Kelly<sup>1</sup>, Kristina Brant<sup>1</sup>, Sreedhar Upendram<sup>2</sup>, Danielle Rhubart<sup>1</sup>, John Green<sup>3,6</sup>,  
Katherine J Curtis<sup>4</sup>, Jason de Koff<sup>5</sup>, Eleanor Green<sup>3</sup>, and Gloria Mangoni<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Pennsylvania State University; <sup>2</sup> University of Tennessee-Knoxville; <sup>3</sup> Mississippi State University; <sup>4</sup> University of Wisconsin-Madison; <sup>5</sup> Tennessee State University; <sup>6</sup> Southern Rural Development Center

Authors acknowledge support from the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture and Multistate Research Project W5001: Rural Population Change and Adaptation in the Context of Health, Economic, and Environmental Shocks and Stressors (#PEN04796, Accession #7003407), as well as the support The Southern Rural Development Center receives from USDA-NIFA.

# Project Team



Paige Kelly,  
Assistant Professor of Rural Sociology  
Penn State University



Kristina Brant,  
Assistant Professor of Rural Sociology  
Penn State University



Sreedhar Upendram,  
Associate Professor of Agriculture  
Economics and Resources  
University of Tennessee-Knoxville

# Project Team



Danielle Rhubart,  
Assistant Teaching Professor of  
Biobehavioral Health  
Penn State University



John Green,  
Director of Southern Rural  
Development Center & Professor  
Mississippi State University



Katherine Curtis,  
Director of Center of Demography and  
Ecology & Professor  
University of Wisconsin-Madison

# Project Team



Jason de Koff,  
Professor of Agronomy and  
Soil Science  
Tennessee State University



Eleanor Green,  
Assistant Director of  
Delta Scholars Program  
Mississippi State University



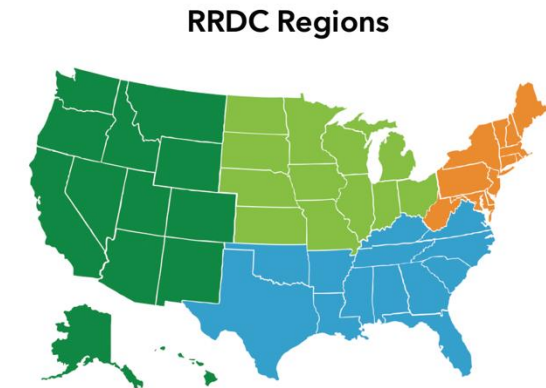
Gloria Mangoni,  
PhD Student in Rural Sociology  
Penn State University



# Background

- The four Regional Rural Development Centers (RRDCs) conducted a stakeholder survey and virtual listening sessions in 2021/22.
- There were four general regional sessions and four national sessions.
- **Key finding: More attention is needed on rural population characteristics and change.**

*\*\*Funded by the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, National Institute of Food and Agriculture*



Scan for project reports

# Methods: Recruitment

- **Nashville, TN**
  - Professional connections to stakeholders working in community and economic development, federal and state agencies, and Extension staff.
- **Online Sessions (4 total)**
  - Targeted Extension stakeholders for diverse regional representation (e.g., Pennsylvania, Montana, Utah, Wisconsin, Tennessee, Mississippi).

***\*\*We received IRB exemption through our respective institutions.***

# Methods: Listening Sessions

- **Listening Sessions**

- 1 face-to face (September 2023)
  - Hosted in Nashville, TN
  - ~38 of participants
- 4 virtual sessions (February 2024)
  - Split between four themes
  - ~ 89 participants



**Rural Population Research Network**  
A USDA-supported multi-state research project on the causes and consequences of demographic change in rural America.

**Stakeholder Listening Session:  
Areas for Further Research**

**\*\*\*As You Arrive, Please Introduce Yourself in the Chat\*\*\***  
Preferred Name  
Affiliation, County and State

# Methods: Listening Sessions

## Session Themes Included:

1. Agriculture and Food Systems
2. Community and Economic Development
3. Environment and Natural Resources
4. Health, Healthcare, and Disability Services

How is rural population change impacting \_\_\_?

How does \_\_\_ impact or affect rural population shifts?

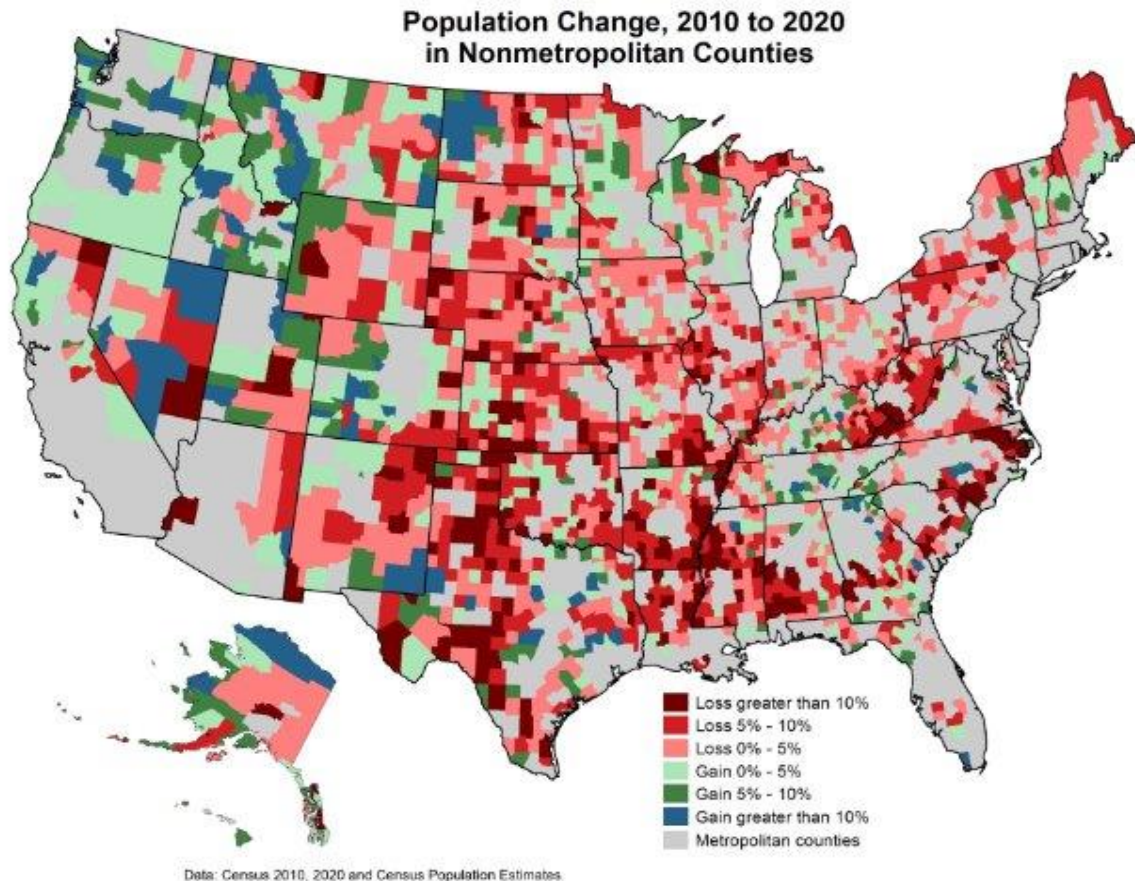
What are the critical issues your community and/or state are facing that require more attention?



# Methods: Analysis

- Conducted thematic analysis on focus group transcripts
  - 1) Team members generated a list of codes inductively
  - 2) First coder used this list to code each transcript
  - 3) Second coder double checked each coded transcript
  - 4) Discrepancies reconciled by consulting a third team member

# Rural Population Changes



- Themes of **Rural Population Growth and Decline** featured prominently across sessions:
  - We sought to elevate when themes were distinct for growing or declining rural areas, or when they were present in both.

# Agriculture and Food Systems

## Shortage of Fresh Food

- Withdrawal of major grocery stores and the lack of culturally appropriate food.

### ***Fresh Food Gaps amid Population Decline***

"...Food prices...we live in, I don't say it's kind of like a quasi food desert, but a lot of people to do their affordable shopping have to travel half hour, 40 minutes to a grocery store. And the grocery store that we do have, I mean those prices are 50 to 60% higher than say going to Aldi or Walmart."

### ***Fresh Food Gaps amid Population Growth***

"So where I live, we have a large population of Hmong, a big Hmong community here... So there's a large population here and it's in the rural areas, it's harder to go to grocery stores and even if there is the food, it's not geared towards minority ethnic populations, so it's harder to access."

# Agriculture and Food Systems

## **Rising land prices**

- Barrier to financial viability of small-and mid-scale farmers.

## **Farmland consolidation**

- Barrier to entry of new farmers.

## **Loss of farmland**

- Competition between farming and non-farming land use in growing rural places.

## **Farmland intensification**

- A major source of pollution and conflict over natural resources.

# Community and Economic Development

## Limited economic opportunity and skilled workforce

- Deficit of employers to meet job needs, the offshoring or relocation of jobs.

### ***Limited Economic Opportunities***

"...I guess I feel like it's kind of cyclical . . . So I'll say there is no reliable labor, but there's not jobs. It's kind of a weird thing. So more ag jobs would support the rural businesses. So, I have several towns that just don't really have any place to eat in town... [and you can't] buy your groceries where you live, rather [you have end up] driving three hours."

### ***Local Workforce and Employer Recruitment***

"What we see is, if there's not a good pool of employees there, either [the workers] stay or they don't come at all... And so that is an issue especially for the communities that lose an employer and we've had that happen with a number of 'em, and it's hard to get something back in to replace."

# Community and Economic Development

## **Limited community services**

- These included health, childcare, aging services and broadband.
- Seen as impediments to recruiting newcomers and retaining old timers in rural communities.

## **Limited housing**

- Included a lack of both housing stock, quality of housing, and affordability.



# Environment and Natural Resources

## Pollution and Natural Resource Degradation

- Population growth - demands on natural resources and infrastructure
- Population decline - loss of tax base and resources leading to poor infrastructure

### ***Pollution amid Population Growth***

"We've got a lot of industries coming in and obviously they're bringing jobs, but they're also bringing a lot of changes with respect to construction and housing. Of course they're building a lot of roads... It enhances traffic, which enhances some pollution type issues, air quality and water quality."

### ***Resources/Utilities amid Population Decline***

"We are seeing, on an increasing basis, resources being pulled out of our rural areas... So we have some truly crumbling towns and some areas that have poverty levels that are shocking to most Americans. People don't have sewage, and they don't have access to safe water, don't have electricity year round, those kinds of things."

# Environment and Natural Resources

## **Natural resources and infrastructure**

- Growing demand on natural resources and infrastructure in growing areas; crumbling infrastructure in declining areas.

## **Renewable energy development**

- Requires land, uses rural resources, contributes to urban-rural tensions.

## **Climate change**

- Will create even greater land competition and resource demands.

# Health, Health Care, and Disability Services

## Gaps in health care services

- Due to closures (declining areas) or increased demand (growing areas)

### ***Health Care Gaps amid Population Decline***

*"There's not that many hospitals, and there's even fewer mental health providers. So that's forcing some people to sometimes move away from the places that they love to go to those few places where they can access the care that they need... and then it pulls away resources from those rural areas as a result."*

### ***Health Care Gaps amid Population Growth***

*"The population increases, and the health care is decreasing, and there's not a good balance. There's more people. There's more needs... We're seeing a lot of very bad things in terms of both physical health and mental health in our rural areas. We can't keep up."*

# Health, Health Care, and Disability Services

## Trust and stigma in local health care

- Lack of trust and concerns of stigma lead people to seek care elsewhere

### ***Lack of Trust in Rural Health Care***

*"We have a local hospital we call the bandaid station because they don't have very many resources [or] up-to-date medical equipment... It's one of those communities where you go right after medical school to get some of your student loans forgiven. So there's high turnover, low quality. People will drive an hour in an emergency to avoid that hospital, even though it's there."*

### ***Stigma in Rural Health Care***

"Stigma is such a big barrier... People will travel out of our counties to get mental health or any kind of physical health treatment because they don't want to be stigmatized because, oh, their cousin works at the hospital or so-and-so will see them and they don't want people to know that they have an opioid use disorder or have been thinking of suicide or have a disability."

# Health, Health Care, and Disability Services

## **Increased travel and transportation needs**

- Because of these gaps, rural residents need to travel further for care

## **Increased costs for care**

- Needing to travel for care leads to higher costs and can impact productivity / wages

## **Telehealth possibilities and barriers**

- Could close gaps, but barriers remain in access, affordability, and adoption

# Stakeholder Needs and Recommendations

## Sharing information and raising awareness

- There are unique barriers to sharing information and raising awareness in rural areas, e.g., limited internet use and decline in newspapers.

## Local knowledge and impactful research

- Research should include local voices in the research process and findings should be shared in a relevant way with stakeholders.

**Contextualize and Collaborate**  
*"[Researchers should] provide context with the results of [their] research on population change. What does it mean for different states and different parts of states?"*

*And then work really closely with Extension professionals to communicate that effectively to rural communities and make it useful to them."*



# Stakeholder Needs and Recommendations

## **Need for data, research, best practices, and better evaluation**

- Stakeholders want localized data and research to inform local decision making and improved measures of evaluation for their programs.

### ***Provide Tools***

*"Just give me some tools... Give me the data, give me the tools where I can pull the mayors and county commissioners aside and say, look, here's what the research is saying is going to happen. ..."*

*...here's the reality. This is what happened over in Kentucky. This is what happened in Mississippi. So that's the kind of stuff that I need as far as a stakeholder like myself to disseminate your findings. So just send it to me, I'll use it."*

# Conclusion and Next Steps

- **Disseminating findings** through our report and presentations



*Scan for project report*

# Conclusion and Next Steps

- **Soliciting useful resources and programs** regarding each of these topics/concerns from stakeholders
- Compiling this information and publishing a companion **resource guide** for stakeholder use



*Scan to submit resources*

# Questions or comments?

---

Paige Kelly<sup>1</sup>, Kristina Brant<sup>1</sup>, Sreedhar Upendram<sup>2</sup>, Danielle Rhubart<sup>1</sup>, John Green<sup>3,6</sup>,  
Katherine J Curtis<sup>4</sup>, Jason de Koff<sup>5</sup>, Eleanor Green<sup>3</sup>, and Gloria Mangoni<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Pennsylvania State University; <sup>2</sup> University of Tennessee-Knoxville; <sup>3</sup> Mississippi State University; <sup>4</sup> University of Wisconsin-Madison; <sup>5</sup> Tennessee State University; <sup>6</sup> Southern Rural Development Center

Authors acknowledge support from the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture and Multistate Research Project W5001: Rural Population Change and Adaptation in the Context of Health, Economic, and Environmental Shocks and Stressors (#PEN04796, Accession #7003407), as well as the support The Southern Rural Development Center receives from USDA-NIFA.