Rural America

USDA/ERS • Volume 17, Issue 3 • Fall 2002

This issue of *Rural America* focuses on the older population in rural areas. Older Americans are better educated and more prosperous than previous generations, but their increasing longevity and growing numbers are drawing attention to the societal implications of such growth. Moreover, those age 85 and older have been increasing more rapidly than any other age group. With the leading edge of the baby boom generation reaching age 65 in 2011, policymakers, researchers, and community leaders must plan for their health and economic needs.

Rural areas have a higher proportion of older persons (20 percent) in their total population than do urban areas (15 percent). And as Carolyn Rogers demonstrates in her article, the older rural population, like the rural population generally, is increasingly heterogeneous. The young old (age 60 to 85) and the oldest old (85 and older) exhibit clear differences in social and economic well-being. With advancing age, the oldest old are more likely to experience widowhood, health problems, and poverty.

Glenn V. Fuguitt, Calvin L. Beale, and Stephen J. Tordella find that the nonmetro population 65 and older grew more slowly than the rural nonelderly between 1990 and 2000, and attribute this to declines in both elderly natural increase (fewer people turning 65) and net migration. Growth of the older population varies considerably by region, with agriculture-dependent areas of the Great Plains experiencing the largest decline in population 65 and older in the 1990s.

Richard J. Reeder and Samuel D. Calhoun find that—despite recent declines in the numbers of elderly—most counties with disproportionately older populations are highly rural, farming areas in the Great Plains and such counties have special needs. Nonmetro elderly counties (at least 20 percent of the population 65 or older) received more Federal funding per capita than other counties, and relied heavily on agricultural/natural resources programs and income support programs.

Fred Gale finds that older farmers are leaving farming more slowly than in the past. The percentage of U.S. farmers age 65 and older has risen steadily since 1978, accelerating in the 1980s and 1990s. This is due to an absolute increase in numbers as well as a steady decrease in the number of farmers under age 65. Tellingly, older farmers own one-third of farm assets.

The growth of the older population is not unique to the United States. In Australia, Gerald Haberkorn finds that the older population quadrupled between 1950 and 2000. Growth of the older population there is not evenly dispersed, but fastest in metro and coastal areas. The implications for an aging Australian population are similar to those for the United States, raising issues relating to able stewardship of agriculture and natural resources, the viability of remote rural communities, and equitable provision of services for older Australians.

Also in this issue, Faqir Singh Bagi examines the unique problems of rural water systems. Often too small to achieve economies of scale, rural water systems must pay dearly for capital expenditures and maintenance, which raises rates for consumers. Rural systems also have a harder time complying with Safe Water Drinking Act requirements, although 1996 amendments have helped ease this burden.

Darryl S. Wills looks at rural housing prices in the 1990s using three different measures, including measures that adjust for differences in housing quality. All show that rural housing prices increased substantially faster than urban housing prices—from 15 to 24 percent faster according to the method used. Migration to rural areas in the 1990s inflated the cost of housing, as did rising household income.

F. Larry Leistritz, Nancy M. Hodur, and Dean A. Bangsund use a survey of 16 North Dakota counties to explore the effects of USDA's Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). Like much of the Great Plains, North Dakota farmers have embraced the CRP. Surveyed farmers rated the CRP as both cost-effective and highly beneficial to the environment and recreation. Community leaders agreed about the environmental and recreational benefits, but expressed concern about the effects of the program on local economies.

Jack L. Runyan provides new data on hired farmworkers using the Current Population Survey for 2001. The number of hired farmworkers dropped to 745,000 in 2001, the lowest level in over a decade. It is too early to tell, however, whether this represents a new trend. Earnings for hired farmworkers moved up slightly in 2001, but not enough to change their position as one of the lowest paid occupations.

Finally, Richard J. Reeder and Samuel D. Calhoun analyze the different types of Federal funds going to nonmetro areas and their regional distribution. Nonmetro counties still receive fewer funds per capita than metro counties, 4.5 percent less in 2000, mainly because metro counties get more from Federal contracts and salaries. The South leads all regions in per capita Federal funds due to higher transfer payments. Farm program payments give the most remote rural counties higher average Federal funds than other nonmetro counties.

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