

Migrants in the Rural South Choose Urban and Natural Amenities

John B. Cromartie

The rural South added over 16 million people from migration since the early 1970's. But population growth and economic development persistently favor areas with specific attributes attractive to migrants. Both urban and natural amenities—such as high-tech jobs and favorable climates—have delineated areas of high rural growth from places left behind, and exacerbated rural economic development problems that fall along lines of race, income, and education.

The rural South, along with rural areas elsewhere, experienced a significant population rebound during the early 1990's following a decade of economic restructuring and urban-bound migration. The rural South grew by only 250,000 through net immigration during the 1980's, and only because large gains in counties along the edge of metro areas offset losses in more remote areas. By 1991, most rural areas were participating in a demographic upswing echoing the "rural renaissance" of the 1970's, and rural migration growth in the South exceeded 1 million people over the next 4 years. Net migration continues to favor rural counties nationwide, but the flows have moderated considerably since the mid-1990's. The moderating trend is especially apparent in the rural West and Northeast, but certainly evident in rural areas of the South as well.

Like flood-controlled rivers, migration flows in the South tend to be channelized, favoring the same areas and bypassing others even as overall migration levels rise and fall. Urban-based amenities

(jobs, suburban housing, schools, and services) and natural amenities (mild and sunny winters, mountains, lakes and beaches) have consistently attracted migrants moving to and within the South since 1970, when the region's migration escalated dramatically, and certainly before then as well. Place-specific amenities have acted as "levees" in the migration system, preventing any major shifts in spatial dynamics affecting rural Southern areas and reinforcing the effects of significant economic change, such as declining employment in agriculture. As a result, 140 counties (of 1,021 rural Southern counties) have had persistent net outmigration since the 1970's; they are concentrated in large subregional clusters marked by high poverty, low human capital, and high minority presence. An equal number of persistent high-inmigration counties (growing 1 percent or more per year through net migration since 1970) face a different set of challenges related to rapid growth—inadequate development planning,

environmental degradation, traffic congestion, a disrupted sense of community—all of which have garnered much attention recently under the rubric of "urban sprawl." Many of these counties form the leading edge of metropolitan expansion.

In this article, I present an overview of recent population trends in the rural South and factors underlying the spatial pattern of net migration within the region. County-level population estimates are used to track both the urbanization of the countryside and the pull of natural amenities through 1999, the latest year estimates are available (see "Data and Methods," p. 14). I focus on net migration rather than natural increase (births minus deaths) because the latter contributes much less to the spatial pattern of growth and decline; natural increase also contributes less to overall population growth as the very large baby boom generation ages beyond its childbearing years. I expand the list of counties typically used to analyze rural trends by

John B. Cromartie is a geographer with the Food Assistance and Rural Economy Branch, Food and Rural Economics Division, ERS, USDA.

including along with nonmetro counties all predominantly rural metro counties (see “Defining the Rural South,” p. 17); I include this small set of high-growth counties because so much of recent rural demographic change in the South has come in the form of metropolitan expansion.

Rural Growth in the South Favored the Metro Fringe in the Late 1990’s

For most of its history, the South grew at rates far below the rest of the Nation. But the region began expanding economically and attracting new residents soon after World War II, even while large numbers left Southern farms. The

Net immigration dropped to 250,000 in the 1980’s, with growth in rural metro counties offsetting a loss of nearly a half million people in nonmetro areas.

growth accelerated after 1970 as declines in agricultural employment leveled off, a manufacturing boom commenced, and a large baby boom cohort entered the labor market and fueled Sun Belt migration. Rapid economic growth and movement into the South have more or less continued unabated since then as the region developed a diversified, service-based economy. Despite employment losses in traditionally important sectors such as textiles, apparel, chemicals, and coal, the South’s population and job growth has been the highest, on average, of any region since 1970.

The South recorded nearly half of the estimated U.S. population growth in the 1990’s (11 million out of 24 million people) and over 70 percent of the growth attributed to net migration, including immigration from abroad.

The success of Southern economic development during the past 30 years lies largely in its cities. Eighty-five percent of population growth in the South since 1970 has been in counties currently defined as metro. According to a report by MDC, Inc., of Chapel Hill, NC, Southerners improved their competitive advantage by bettering their cities through State and local efforts: “They expanded airports and widened roads, enriched schools, diminished racial discrimination and created favorable climates for business” (MDC, Inc., p. 16). Although the region as a whole has benefited, larger cities have been in the best position to undertake and build on these types of improvements, and the South’s metropolitan areas have captured the lion’s share of population growth from net migration (table 1). Urban core counties in the metro South grew by almost 1.5 million through net migration during 1991-95, compared with just 115,000 growth in urban core counties outside the South. These aggregate measures mask a great deal of diversity among individual cities. Most non-South metro areas grew from net migration, but some of the largest lost considerably. Relatively few Southern metro areas—almost all of them below a half million in population—lost population from net outmigration during the early 1990’s.

When growth in the South took off in the 1970’s, it appeared likely that rural areas would not be left behind. Counties currently classi-

fied as either nonmetro or rural metro grew by over 2.7 million people during the 1970’s, a conservative indicator of the rural turnaround since many of the fastest growing rural counties have since shifted into the urban metro category. Some important factors behind this unprecedented outward shift of population had many believing that it was likely to continue. The expansion of the interstate highway system, the extension of public utilities, advances in telecommunications technology, the availability of standardized consumer goods, and lifestyle changes oriented toward lower density settings seemed to signal long-term deconcentration. A leading Southern demographic expert and policy analyst was led to declare that the “trends appear secular and mutually reinforcing since more migrants mean a larger nonmetropolitan population to serve and sustain, which in turn generates more local employment opportunities, which acts further to attract additional migrants” (Kasarda, p. 382).

Rural growth in the South instead turned into a mix of consistently high growth along the metro periphery and uneven cycles of in- and outmigration in other settings. Net immigration dropped to 250,000 in the 1980’s, with growth in rural metro counties offsetting a loss of nearly a half million people in nonmetro areas. The mutually reinforcing advantages accruing to rural areas gave way under economic recessions, a farm debt crisis, and other “period” effects. Rural areas in the South and elsewhere suffered from an overall drop in migration numbers as baby boomers moved out of young adulthood—the time of most frequent migration—and began settling down.

National demographic trends turned around following the economic downturn of the early 1990's, which in contrast to previous recessions hit urban areas harder. People once again moved out of cities in greater numbers than moved into them. Urban out-migration was concentrated outside the South, where net migration gains continued in metro core areas only because immigration from abroad (estimated to be roughly 3.5 million nationally during 1991-95) was higher than domestic migration losses. Metro core areas in the South continued to draw migrants from other regions, growing by 1.5 million during the early 1990's (table 1). The rural South grew by over 1 million at the same time; the number of new residents was evenly divided between nonmetro and rural metro counties, although the net migration rate was over three times as high along the metro fringe because the base population was much lower.

Renewed growth in the early 1990's has rural experts once again predicting a permanent, gradual dispersion of the population, brought about by improved transportation and technological innovations such as overnight shipping and the Internet. According to Kenneth Johnson, migration patterns since 1970 are consistent with a longer term, deconcentration perspective: "Such advances have freed businesses to select non-metropolitan locations and enjoy their perceived advantages: lower labor and land costs, the absence of unions, what many executives see as the superior work ethic of the rural labor force, and economic incentive programs offered by state and local governments" (Johnson, p. 11).

It remains to be seen whether the forces of concentration or deconcentration will prevail in the near future. Domestic migration continues to favor rural areas slightly but has dropped off consid-

erably since 1995 in regions outside the South. This is especially true in the West, where widespread growth in isolated, high-amenity settings was thought to be a harbinger of a highly deconcentrated settlement pattern closely associated with telecommuting and other activities of the New Economy. Outside the South, nonmetro net immigration rates dropped from 2.4 percent in the early 1990's to just 1 percent during 1995-99 (table 1). Nonmetro rates have also dropped in the South at the same time that net migration growth picked up in rural metro counties. When non-metro and rural metro counties are considered together, the number of migrants is the same (1.1 million) between the early and late 1990's. The momentum, however, is no longer one of widespread outward dispersal. During each period of economic retrenchment, rural growth in the South is more concentrated, favoring a small set of close-in areas connected to metro

Table 1

Regional population change, 1991-99

Nonmetro population growth and net migration decreased in the South after 1995 but not as sharply as elsewhere

Region	Counties	Population, 1991	Population change		Net migration		Net migration rate	
			1991-95	1995-99	1991-95	1995-99	1991-95	1995-99
	<i>Number</i>	<i>Thousands</i>	<i>Percent</i>		<i>Thousands</i>		<i>Percent</i>	
South:								
Nonmetro	1,008	22,543	4.0	3.3	594	474	2.6	2.1
Rural metro	145	6,512	10.5	12.7	529	667	8.1	10.2
Urban metro	234	57,836	5.7	5.4	1,468	1,379	2.5	2.4
Outside South:								
Nonmetro	1,267	28,806	3.9	2.2	703	282	2.4	1.0
Rural metro	101	5,638	5.3	5.1	183	186	3.3	3.3
Urban metro	333	130,818	3.3	3.3	115	584	0.1	0.4

Note: Population change and net migration rates for both time periods are the number of people added as a percentage of 1991 population. Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the U.S. Census Bureau and the Federal-State Cooperative Program for Population Estimates.

centers that have had high growth for several decades, and moving away from more remote areas that have experienced only sporadic change.

Net Migration Follows Urban and Scenic Amenities

The rural population rebound in the early 1990's never reached the levels of the 1970's "rural renaissance," when net migration growth was 12 percent. Nor has the current downturn dropped as far as during the 1980's, when nearly 60 percent of rural counties had net outmigration—today the number is closer to a third. But it is enough of a change to lower development prospects in communities

Much of migration to the South, as well as the rearrangement of population within the region, is based on the search for good jobs, quality housing and neighborhoods, decent schools, and access to an array of services (retail shopping, entertainment, health care) that are found in abundance along the urban fringe.

throughout the region and to affect quality of life. Lower migration can be both an indicator and cause of lower job growth. Migration is concentrated among the young, especially families just beginning their childbearing years, and those with higher education; their outmigration dampens future population potential and economic expansion (along with community spirit),

erodes the tax base, and raises per capita service delivery costs.

On the other hand, rising immigration along the urban fringe contributes to congestion, pollution, and rising infrastructure costs. These and other manifestations of "urban sprawl" are spawning citizen action and policy initiatives at all government levels to promote mixed-use development, higher densities around transportation hubs, preservation of open space, and greater metropolitan cooperation. In the last 2 years, over 300 "smart growth" ballot measures have been adopted by States and towns nationwide, including a \$3 billion preservation and recreation initiative in Florida (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, p.74).

These two sets of problems are exacerbated because the geographic pattern of high in- and outmigration has held over an extended period. We can trace much of this stability to the staying power of urban and scenic amenities—two important place characteristics that have drawn people southward for decades and that vary considerably across the region. As migrants remain attracted to the same types of place-specific amenities, spatial migration patterns tend to be entrenched, favoring the same areas and bypassing others even as overall levels rise and fall.

Urban access. In 1950, when the U.S. Census Bureau first mapped out urbanized areas to measure the population of large cities together with their surrounding densely settled suburbs, the Atlanta, GA, area boasted 500,000 residents in 100 square miles. In 40 years, its urbanized area grew to 1,100 square miles with a population of 2.2 million people. The sprawling nature of new settlement

dropped urban density from about 5,000 persons per square mile to 2,000. The Atlanta metropolitan area began with 3 counties in 1950 and now includes 20, 14 of which still have a settlement pattern that is rural in character—most people live outside places of 2,500 or more. Atlanta is an extreme example, but the pattern of massive suburbanization and the broad expansion of urban commuting into rural hinterlands is found for all sizable metro areas in the South. On average, Southern urbanized areas have expanded to nearly five times their original size. Much of migration to the South, as well as the rearrangement of population within the region, is based on the search for good jobs, quality housing and neighborhoods, decent schools, and access to an array of services (retail shopping, entertainment, health care) that are found in abundance along the urban fringe.

The 145 rural metro counties in this analysis lie at one extreme of urban accessibility and have grown four times faster than the other (nonmetro) areas included here. They are so highly integrated into urban economies that they are rarely included in county-based studies of rural population trends. But urban influence is uneven even on the periphery of metro areas, being stronger on the edges of larger and faster-growing cities. The pull of urban amenities extends across nonmetro areas as well; not only is suburban "spillover" a common feature of counties adjacent to metro areas, but smaller cities that fall within the nonmetro category organize economic activity and draw migrants in a similar fashion. To capture the variation in urban access across the Southern landscape, we devised a single index that for each county measures its

distance to, and size of, surrounding populations (see “Data and Methods,” p. 14). The index ranges from a value of 1 in the Great Plains of west Texas to over 1,000 in the Washington-Baltimore metro area.

As expected in a measure of this type, anomalies exist among individual counties, in part because the index is affected by differences in county size (smaller counties will have higher values on average), but it does depict the broader regional picture fairly accurately (fig. 1). Accessibility is high in northern Virginia and across the eastern Piedmont Crescent from eastern North Carolina through central Alabama. The highly distributed settlement pattern in the Carolinas contrasts sharply with Texas and

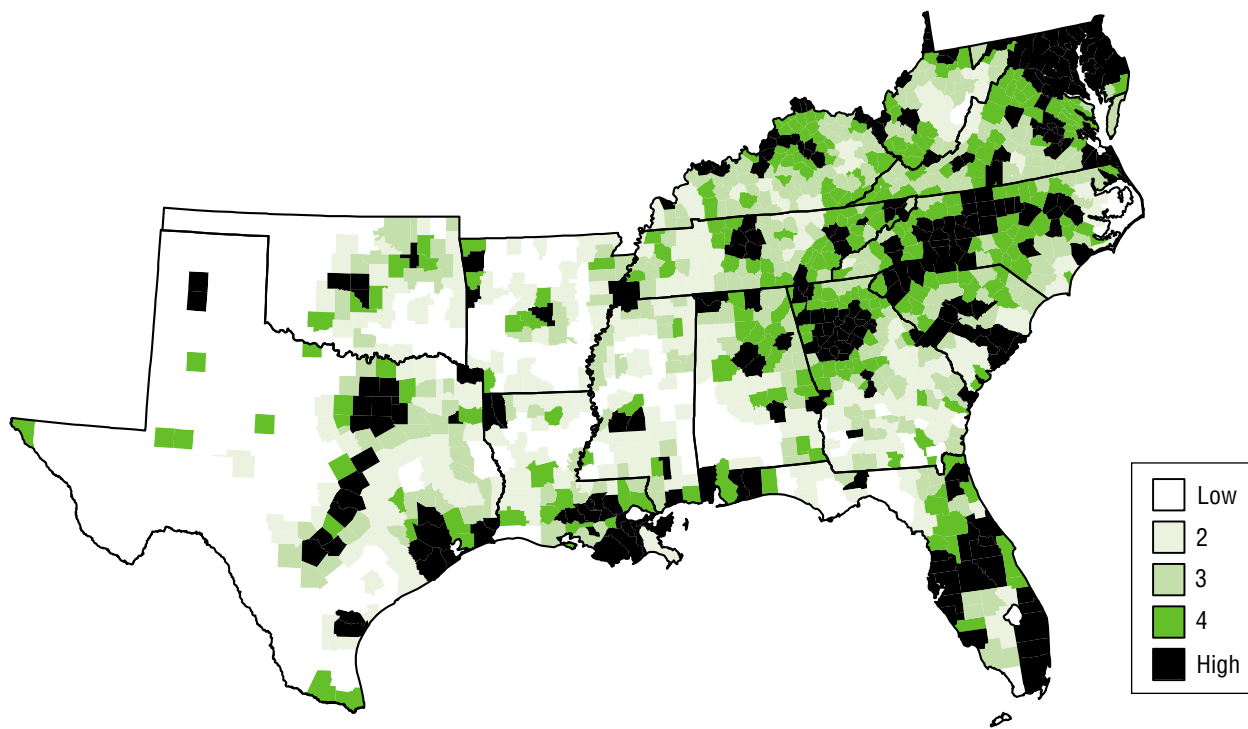
other western locations, where accessibility is more concentrated and urban-rural transition zones end more abruptly.

The strong and persistent relationship between urban access and net migration in the rural South may be visualized by sorting counties along this index and dividing them into five equally sized groups (fig. 2). The two lines depicting net migration rates in the early and late 1990’s are bracketed by the very high and low values for the 1970’s and 1980’s, respectively. Only once in all four time periods does a higher urban access group have a lower net migration rate, and in all cases the highest and lowest groups are noticeably set apart. Even in the 1970’s, when rural deconcentration was strongest, the highest urban

access counties were attracting migrants at a rate three times as high as the lowest groups. And like a river falling back within its banks after a flood, net migration is concentrated in urban access “channels” during periods of low migration; in the 1980’s, all groups except the highest were experiencing net outmigration. The switch to a more concentrated pattern of settlement during 1995-99 compared with the previous 4 years is also evident; areas with the highest urban access increased their share significantly, and the least accessible places dropped below zero.

Natural amenities. Migration to the nonmetro South since the end of World War II has been largely driven by the lure of warm climates, access to water-based recre-

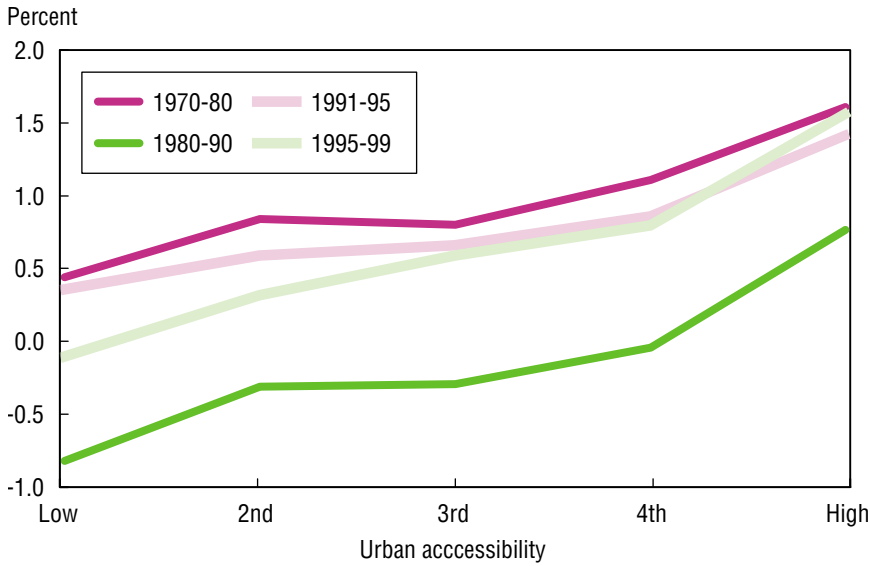
Figure 1
Index of urban accessibility
Access to urban jobs and services is widely distributed in the eastern part of the region, more concentrated in the west



Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

Figure 2
Annual net migration in the nonmetro and rural metro South by urban accessibility, 1970-99

As population growth from migration fluctuates over time, urban attraction remains a constant

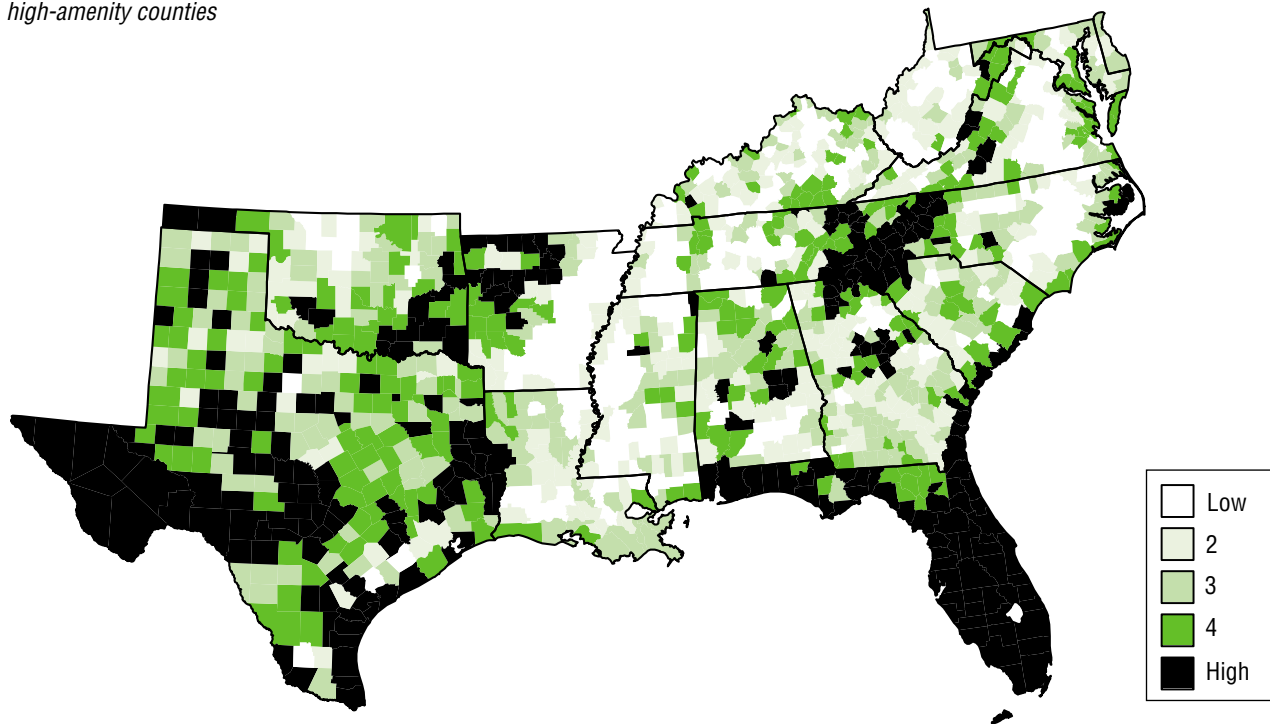


Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the U.S. Census and the Federal-State Cooperative Program for Population Estimates.

ation, and the cheap land and wide open spaces available for development. Both firms and individuals have shown strong preferences for the comforts and lifestyle offered by a relocation to the South. David McGranahan recently developed the ERS natural amenities index, which combines the attractiveness of mild climate, varied topography, and proximity to surface water into one measure. His analysis of national population trends found that areas “scoring high in a scale of these amenities had substantial population growth in the last 25 years. High-scoring counties tended to double their population, while the average gain for the low-scoring counties was only 1 percent, and over half lost population” (McGranahan, p. iii).

Figure 3
Index of natural amenities

Texas and Florida, along with southern Appalachia and the Ozarks, have the largest clusters of high-amenity counties



Source: Calculated by ERS; see McGranahan.

Table 2

Regression results for net migration in the nonmetro and rural metro South, 1970-99

Net migration is less tied to urban access and natural amenities during periods of high net migration

Explanatory variable	1970-80	1980-90	1991-95	1995-99
<i>Percent, county average</i>				
Net migration rate	12.1	-0.6	3.3	2.6
<i>Percent of net migration variance explained (adjusted R²)</i>				
Economic measures only	13	12	13	17
Urban accessibility added	20	23	16	27
Urban accessibility and natural amenities added	27	36	23	33

Note: Economic measures include percent of jobs in farming and manufacturing, and percent of persons in poverty; each is measured at the beginning of the time period except that the 1990 poverty rate is used for both the 1991-95 and 1995-99 time periods.

Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the U.S. Census Bureau, the Federal-State Cooperative Program for Population Estimates, and the Bureau of Economic Analysis.

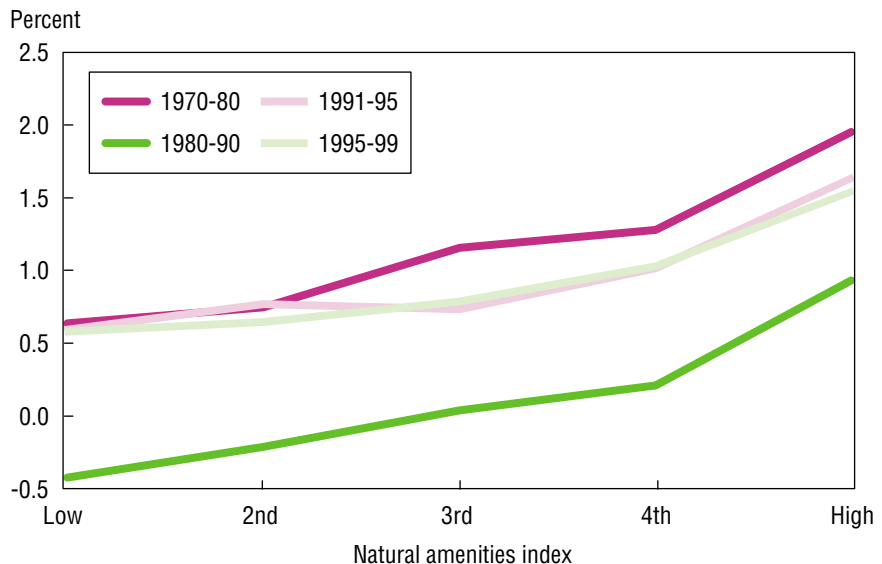
Scenic amenities play a larger role in drawing people from other regions to the South, but also serve to differentiate more and less attractive destinations within the South (fig. 3). The importance of year-round warm and sunny climates is clear in Texas and Florida, where 38 percent of all net migration growth in the South has occurred since 1991. In Georgia and North Carolina, the States next in line in terms of net migration growth, the attractiveness of mountains and coasts combine with their urban advantages. The interior sections of the Coastal Plains of Virginia and North Carolina, along with the Mississippi Delta, stand out as areas with low scenic values. Anomalies exist as in our urban access measure, but the value lies not in situating individual counties but in depicting the broader regional patterns.

Within the South, scenically attractive places received the lion's share of newcomers since 1970 (fig. 4). The one-fifth of counties scoring highest on the ERS natural amenities index grew at three times the rate of the lowest group during the 1970's, and managed to grow by almost 1 percent even during the difficult years of the 1980's. The relationship between scenic areas and net migration has moderated somewhat and remained essentially unchanged during the 1990's; the lowest three groups are no longer strongly differentiated, but the competitive advantage of the highest two groups is still quite strong.

Combined effects of urban and natural amenities. The amount of variation in net migration in the rural South that can be attributed to urban and scenic amenities, holding constant the effect of other economic measures, was much higher

Figure 4
Annual net migration in the nonmetro and rural metro South by levels of natural amenities, 1970-99

The strong correlation between net migration and natural amenities has lessened somewhat in the 1990's



Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the U.S. Census and the Federal-State Cooperative Program for Population Estimates.

Data and Methods

Annual county-level estimates of net migration for 1990-99 were obtained from the U.S. Census Bureau's Federal-State Cooperative Program for Population Estimates. For 1970-89, net migration data were taken from a special file created from Census Bureau data by Glenn Fuguitt at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Net migration rates were expressed as the percentage change in population from net migration during the given time period. Annual net migration was measured from July to July except in the decennial census years (1970, 1980, and 1990) when migration was measured from April to July of the following year; rates were adjusted to account for the extended time period.

Urban access may be measured in several ways. ERS publishes two classifications of nonmetro counties, the Rural-Urban Continuum Code and the Urban Influence Code, that measure both adjacency to metro areas and the size of the urban population within nonmetro areas. Here I measure urban access using a single index that captures the combined effect of metro proximity and urban size. For each county, the 1990 population of every other county was divided by its cubed distance from the county, and these values were summed to form the urban access index. The higher the population of a neighboring county, and the shorter the distance, the higher the urban access index. Cubed distance is used rather than linear distance to increase the weight of nearby populations in the overall measure and diminish the effect of urban centers that are farther away and thus likely to be outside an area's commuting range.

Natural amenities are also measured using a single index, created by David McGranahan at ERS, that combines normalized measures of climate, topography, and the presence of bodies of water. The index of climate attractiveness is defined using January temperature, number of days with sun in January, July temperature (expressed as a residual when regressed against January temperature), and July humidity. Topography is defined using an index of the type of terrain dominant in a county, from flat to mountainous. The presence of bodies of water is measured using the percentage of land area covered by water. These measures were standardized so each had a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one, then summed to form a single natural amenities index (McGranahan).

Measures of poverty, education, and race-ethnicity were calculated using data from the 1990 decennial census. Income and employment data for several years between 1970 and 1998 come from the Bureau of Economic Analysis.

in periods of low growth (table 2). These statistics were calculated using ordinary least squares regression, a technique that measures the influence of several possible explanatory variables on the dependent variable at the same time in measuring their influence on the

dependent variable. The economic variables included in the analysis—percent of jobs in farming, percent of jobs in manufacturing, and percent of persons living below the poverty line—capture change in areas where large-scale economic restructuring has been most keenly

felt. Their combined impact on net migration varied little from one period to the next.

The role of urban access in controlling patterns of net migration was lowest during the expansion of the early 1990's and highest in the latest period of retrenchment. Natural amenities were most closely associated with net migration, other factors being equal, when migration flows were at their lowest levels in the 1980's. When we compare the power of these place-specific amenities in drawing migrants toward some areas and away from others across the four time periods, the results are mixed. The relationship between these attributes and net migration is persistently positive and significant, but in periods of higher net migration growth they explain less of the overall pattern. In the early 1990's, deconcentration occurred both outward from urban access areas and down the natural amenities hierarchy. We appear to be entering another period of renewed concentration in the rural South, due more to a tilt back toward higher urban amenities rather than a change in preference back toward higher natural amenity settings.

Persistent Outmigration and High Immigration Areas Differ Along Lines of Income, Race, and Education

Place-specific amenities have created well-worn migration paths in the rural South, channeling newcomers to areas along the edge of booming urban regions and areas with scenic qualities that attract recreation, retirement, and second home development. Other parts of the South, especially those lacking urban access and natural amenities, consistently fail to attract migrants and retain current residents. By

Table 3

Comparison of persistent net-outmigration and high net-inmigration counties in the rural South, 1970-99

High poverty and minority status, low education, and loss of manufacturing jobs accompany chronic low migration

Characteristic	Net outmigration	High net inmigration	Other nonmetro and rural metro
		<i>Number</i>	
Number of counties	140	133	880
		<i>Percent</i>	
Net migration:			
1970-80	-8.2	36.6	11.2
1980-90	-14.3	25.9	-1.5
1991-95	-2.8	11.4	2.9
1995-99	-3.4	12.3	2.3
Persons in poverty, 1990	29.7	12.4	19.8
Adults 25 years and older with less than high school degree, 1990	41.7	30.3	38.6
Minority populations, 1990			
Black	34.5	9.0	15.9
Hispanic	7.6	3.7	2.8
Wage and salary growth, 1991-98	21.0	26.0	22.5
Manufacturing job growth, 1991-98	-7.1	17.5	2.6

Note: Net-outmigration counties lost population from migration during all four time periods: 1970-80, 1980-90, 1991-95, and 1995-99. High net-inmigration counties consistently grew by 1 percent or more annually from migration.

Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the U.S. Census Bureau, the Federal-State Cooperative Program for Population Estimates, and the Bureau of Economic Analysis.

comparing net migration rates since 1970, it is possible to identify 133 counties in the rural South that have had a high rate of net inmigration—over 1 percent per year—in all four time periods studied here. Another 140 counties have experienced population loss from net migration in each period. In both cases, the degree of persistence is quite high; over a third of counties in either category during 1995-99 have been there since 1970.

Persistent high-inmigration counties, together with other counties currently in the top tier, form a

large cluster around Atlanta extending into the lower Appalachians in North Carolina and Tennessee. The combined drawing power of urban access and scenic qualities is evident as well in the Hill Country of Texas and the Florida Panhandle. The strong attraction of these types of places for migrants of all ages is clear in surveys of residential preferences dating back to the 1970's; they offer a rural lifestyle in an attractive setting within close proximity to much-desired urban jobs and services. Areas of both long-term and emerging suburbanization

surround Atlanta, Nashville, Houston, Dallas-Fort Worth, Washington, and other large metro regions in the South.

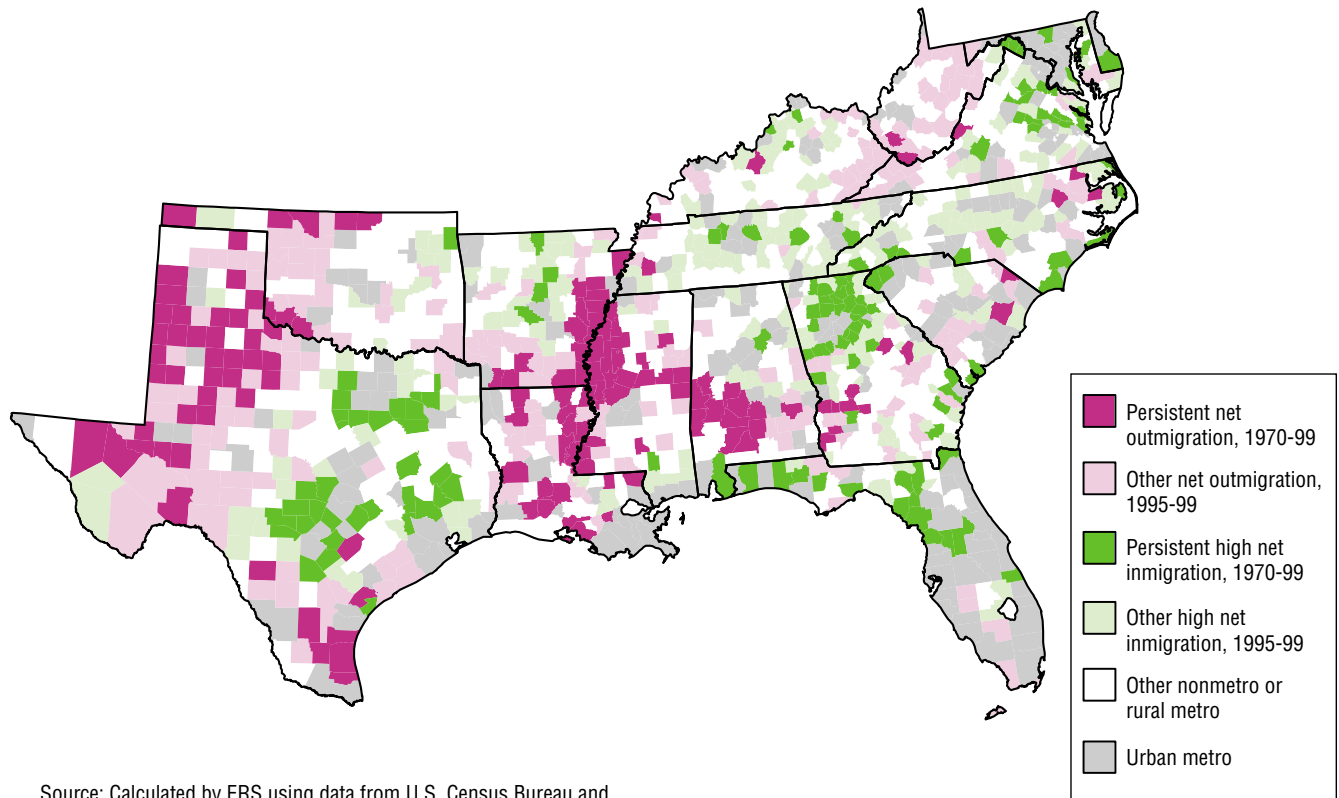
The ability to attract newcomers is both a key indicator of a region's economic health and a generator of future growth and economic expansion. Persistently high-inmigration counties maintained a net migration growth rate of 26 percent during the 1980's (while outmigration counties were losing 14 percent) and they have grown by another 24 percent since then (table 3). The cumulative effect of high net migration adds generously to the human capital stock—increasing the share of younger, more educated workers—and serves to maintain low poverty rates and high wage and salary growth. In addition, these areas captured almost all of the growth in manufacturing in the rural South during the 1990's by being able to provide the skilled workforce increasingly demanded of this sector.

The significant clustering of persistent-outmigration counties also reflects the role of urban access and scenic amenities (fig. 5). The Great Plains sections of west Texas and Oklahoma, where a large number of persistent-outmigration counties are found, have the lowest urban access of any part of the region. It is safe to say that the “perceived” quality of natural amenities here is also quite low in the minds of most Americans, even though the natural amenities index does not type the area as such. The lower Mississippi Valley, which scores low on both indices, contains a large unbroken subregion of persistent outmigration extending into the Black Prairie section of Alabama. Other parts of the Coastal Plains, along with the Rio

Figure 5

Persistent net-outmigration and high net-immigration areas in the rural South, 1970-99

The region's metro areas continue to develop outward, but more isolated sections are left behind



Source: Calculated by ERS using data from U.S. Census Bureau and the Federal-State Cooperative Program for Population Estimates.

Grande Valley and coal mining areas of Appalachia, are currently experiencing outmigration but have fewer counties that exhibit persistent outmigration.

Poverty rates in persistent-outmigration counties were 2.5 times higher than in high-immigration areas and 10 points above the rest of the rural South in 1990. Over 40 percent of adults had less than a high school education in these areas, and the types of routine, low-skill manufacturing jobs that provided low-skill workers with a decent wage in these areas are vanishing. The bleak economic conditions and prospects that typify persistent-outmigration counties come down hard on the region's

minority populations. Over a third of the population in these counties was Black, compared with just 9 percent in high-immigration areas, and another 8 percent was Hispanic in 1990. Poverty, low education and skill levels, and entrenched population loss from net outmigration in the rural South are linked by historical patterns of racial discrimination. The desire on the part of minorities to escape economic and social barriers by moving elsewhere firmly established a long-term pattern whereby those with the most human capital left. This legacy continues to affect low-migration areas today, hampering their ability to attract jobs and improve the overall quality of life.

Conclusions

Without the controls currently in place, the mighty Mississippi would share its wealth of sediment across a broad landscape through frequent flooding and changes of course. Under current constraints, the sediment raises the elevation of the riverbed at the same time that surrounding lands drop, creating problems down the road for engineers intent on keeping the river in place. Similarly, the place-specific attributes falling under the categories of urban access and natural amenities act to steer migration flows into well-worn channels, so that population persistently rises in favored areas and falls consistently in some others. Migration spills over these levees during periods of

Defining the Rural South

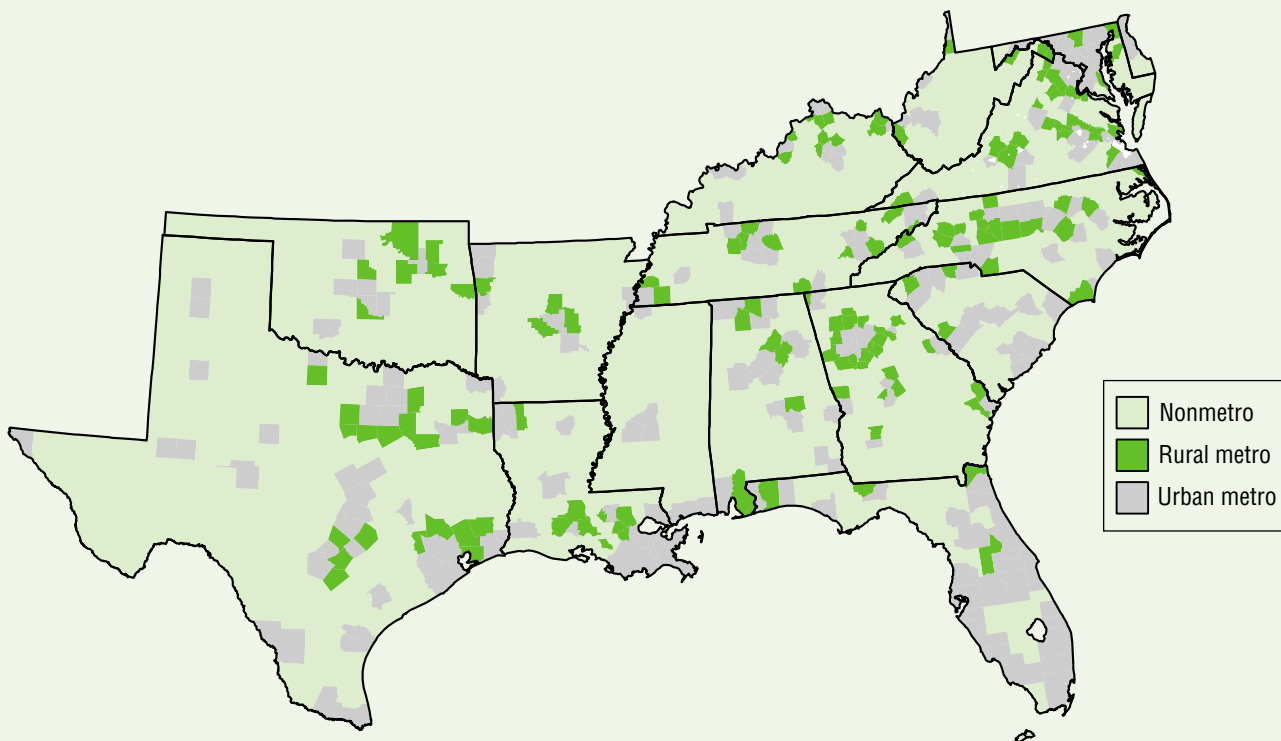
The basic units of analysis are the 1,387 counties comprising the Census Bureau's South region (fig. 6). Researchers using county-level data usually identify the U.S. rural and small-town population as those living outside Metropolitan Statistical Areas, defined by the Office of Management and Budget using population and commuting data from each decennial census. Metro areas include core counties that contain a city of 50,000 or more, and any other counties that are economically integrated with the core counties through high commuting. This analysis of the rural South includes the 1,008 counties in the region that were defined as nonmetro based on the 1990 census.

Each decade, a large number of nonmetro counties are reclassified as metro, either because a city grows to include more than 50,000 people or an existing metro area expands beyond previous borders. Today's metro areas encompass a great deal of territory that remains rural in character, especially in the South where population is more evenly distributed across the landscape. In this analysis, I add to nonmetro counties all metro counties in which the majority of people are classified as rural, defined by the U.S. Census as those living outside of places of 2,500 or more population. Rural metro counties almost completely ring the inner, urban core of metro Atlanta, and form significant bands around other large metro areas, such as Houston, Dallas-Fort Worth, Nashville, Greensboro-Winston Salem-High Point, Richmond, and Washington (fig. 6). By including these counties, I am returning some nonmetro territory that was lost to reclassification since 1970, the starting point of the analysis, and allowing a more complete analysis of the type of rapid population growth and economic development occurring in sparsely settled areas along the ever-expanding metro-nonmetro boundary.

Figure 6

Rural counties in the South, 1990

For this article, the rural South consists of nonmetro and predominantly rural metro counties



Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the U.S. Census Bureau.



Bayou Cane, Terrebonne Parish, Louisiana. Photo courtesy John B. Cromartie.

higher growth, but has so far fallen back into the same courses in times of slower growth.

Rural areas taking part in persistent expansion through net immigration include those in or near metro areas, especially metro areas that are large or rapidly growing, and scenic areas with growing recreation, tourism, and retirement-based activities. Areas with desirable urban and natural amenities have been growing rapidly for decades and changing in character as cities expand and development seeks new ground. Such places typically see rising incomes and expanded job opportunities as residents move in and businesses expand.

Persistently high-migration counties face a unique set of potentially negative circumstances that have come under much recent scrutiny by policymakers at all levels and by voters at the ballot box. Rapid development of sparsely settled territory often occurs with

inadequate planning, resulting in environmental degradation, increased traffic congestion, financial burdens related to infrastructure development, and other threats to the rural and small-town quality of life that attracted migrants in the first place. Policies to improve community viability in high-migration areas are currently under serious consideration as part of several Federal initiatives; these include plans to encourage reinvestment in central cities to take advantage of existing infrastructure, “smart growth” practices such as more compact and mixed-use develop-

ment, and the fostering of regional connections that encourage cooperation among all government entities in addressing environmental quality, access to jobs, housing, and other economic development issues.

Persistent outmigration is certainly the more dire condition, an indicator of weak economic performance and inadequate employment opportunities. Economic development in the rural South faces serious challenges in areas where entrenched outmigration has eroded the population base, causing additional business closures and more outmigration, and increased the per capita cost of delivering needed services such as transportation and health care. In the South, these areas exhibit high poverty, high minority presence, and low human capital, all of which exacerbate long-term problems experienced in these places. Addressing these issues requires reaching across barriers of race and income that have traditionally divided the rural South. **RA**

For Further Reading . . .

Kenneth M. Johnson, “The Rural Rebound,” *Population Reference Bureau Reports on America*, Vol. 1, No. 3, Sept. 1999, pp. 1-19.

John D. Kasarda, “The Implications of Contemporary Redistribution Trends For National Urban Policy,” *Social Science Quarterly*, Vol. 61, Nos. 3 and 4, Dec. 1980, pp. 373-400.

David A. McGranahan, *Natural Amenities Drive Rural Population Growth*, AER-781, Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1999.

MDC, Inc. *State of the South: A Report to the Region and its Leadership*, Chapel Hill, NC, April 1996.

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, *The State of the Cities 2000: Megaforces Shaping the Future of the Nation's Cities*, Washington, DC, June 2000.