

# Migrants Settling Far and Wide in the Rural West

*The West led a rebound in nonmetro population growth from the mid-1980's through the early 1990's, caused mostly by changing patterns of net migration. Growth rates in the West have remained above other areas since 1970, but have fluctuated over time and shifted geographically. Scenic settings accessible to metro areas continued to attract a disproportionate share of new residents, but record numbers of recent migrants chose more sparsely settled and isolated areas with fewer natural amenities. The costs as well as the benefits of population-related development are being felt in a broader cross-section of rural places.*

Contrary to Frederick Jackson Turner's proclamation 100 years ago, the U.S. frontier is not dead. As in early days, the modern frontier offers wide open spaces, cheap land (compared with city prices), new types of economic opportunity, and a relatively young, rapidly developing population base. The ability to attract newcomers is both a key indicator of a region's economic health and a generator of future growth, and many frontier communities show new signs of life as attractive destinations, reversing patterns in the 1980's. But unlike the early days, frontier opportunity is not limitless. Old and new residents alike are discovering that unchecked growth can be a threat to the environmental and social amenities that attracted people in the first place.

Nowhere are limits to population growth and urban development being more hotly debated right now than in the West, where migration rates have been consistently higher than for other regions and migration patterns more widespread than during other growth periods. Small communities in high-amenity settings everywhere are grappling with the often conflicting goals of finding their place in an increasingly internationalized economic system and maintaining a high quality of life in the face of demographic change. While these critical environmental and social issues associated with rapid population growth have been around for some time, only recently have they captured the attention of a much larger audience in all

corners of the West. Such issues are not likely to go away any time soon.

Many of the growth-related issues in this region have cropped up in other high-amenity areas along the southern Atlantic seaboard; in the Appalachian, Cumberland, and Ozark uplands; and throughout the upper Great Lakes. Many of the lessons learned and solutions being formulated by rural Western communities to deal with growth-related problems may end up being usefully applied elsewhere.

This article examines changing population patterns in the nonmetro West since 1970. Placing the latest population rebound in a broader time frame shows that characteristics that attract migrants to specific types of places have become less defined. The recent nonmetro population upturn has been led by high-amenity settings accessible to metro areas, but has also penetrated less scenic and more isolated districts. This latest nonmetro population upturn may have already peaked—the highest recent annual rate of population growth in the nonmetro West was in 1993. However, several factors, including a young population and a burgeoning nearby metro population, point to continued high growth for the nonmetro West.

## Migrants Are Heading to the Nonmetro West

The frontier character of the rural West continues to appeal to migrants from all sections of the country, especially nearby urban residents. Despite having one-fourth of nonmetro territory, the West had less than one-seventh of the 51 million nonmetro residents in the United States in 1990 (table 1). But the area captured one-third of non-

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Table 1

**Nonmetro and metro population growth by region, 1990-97***Nonmetro West grew three times as fast as other nonmetro areas, mostly from net migration*

Region	Population		Change, 1990-97		Natural increase, 1990-97		Net migration, 1990-97	
	1997	1990						
	Thousands		Percent		Thousands		Percent	
United States:								
Nonmetro	54,235	50,867	3,369	6.6	1,327	2.6	2,042	4.0
Metro	213,401	197,898	15,502	7.8	11,393	5.8	4,109	2.1
Outside West:								
Nonmetro	45,965	43,704	2,261	5.2	948	2.2	1,313	3.0
Metro	162,370	152,348	10,022	6.6	7,615	5.0	2,407	1.6
West:								
Nonmetro	8,271	7,163	1,108	15.5	379	5.3	729	10.2
Metro	51,031	45,551	5,480	12.0	3,778	8.3	1,702	3.7

Notes: See box, "Defining the West," for definition of regions; natural increase is the surplus of births minus deaths; net migration is the difference between the number of people moving into a region and the number moving out.

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

metro population growth since 1990, adding over 1 million people in 7 years. Two-thirds of the growth in the nonmetro West came from net migration (the number of people moving in minus those moving out), with the remainder accounted for by natural increase (the surplus of births over deaths).

Metro areas in the West also grew rapidly during this period, adding over 5 million people. Many of the metro areas outside California attracted large numbers of migrants from California and other parts of the country, but overall the metro West (dominated by California) depended much more on high births and immigration from abroad than on domestic migration. In fact, the metro West had more domestic outmigrants than immigrants, and retained a positive net migration only because of immigrants from abroad. In particular, metro California continues to lose migrants to other parts of the United States, though this net loss is more than compensated for by immigration and high births.

The recent history of the nonmetro West includes continuous population growth at rates higher than other nonmetro areas, but also severe fluctuations in growth rates due to economic restructuring and other causes (fig. 1). With a smaller population base and a less varied economy, the nonmetro West has been more volatile demographically than other regions since 1970, moving from 3 percent population growth in 1978-79 down to almost no growth in 1986-87 and back to 2.5 percent just 5 years later. The nonmetro West failed to develop a strong manufacturing base to complement its core natural resource industries. With the general nonmetro economic downturn of the 1980's, the gap between the population growth rates of the nonmetro West and the rest of the country nearly converged. Although the nonmetro West never lost population as did the rest of nonmetro America during a 3-year period in the mid-1980's, many areas in the West did lose population, especially those dependent on mining (including oil and gas).

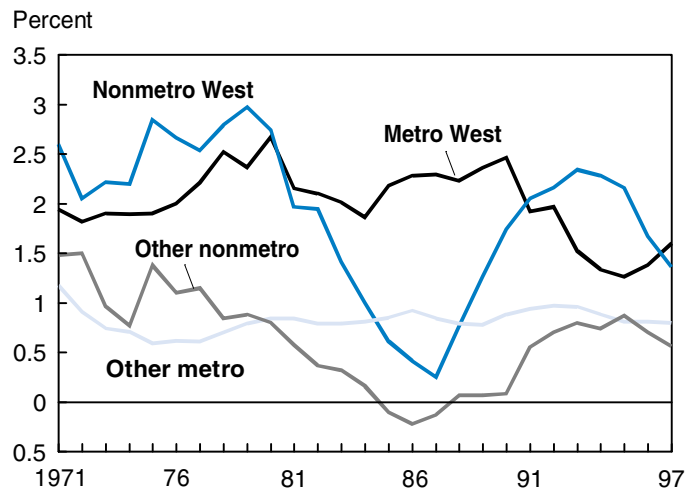
The recent rural revival started earlier in the West and was stronger there, so by the early 1990's the region was growing at triple the rate of other rural areas. This growth paralleled a downturn in the growth rates of the metro West from 1989 to 1995, when an economic recession struck California's metro economies hard.

Nonmetro areas have seen a steady drop in the share of population growth from natural increase, due both to an overall aging of the population and to the baby boom's transition out of its childbearing years (fig. 2). The nationwide trend toward more deaths and fewer births began earlier in nonmetro areas because the population is older, immigration is lower, and delayed childbearing among the youngest baby boomers is less common. With a younger population than other nonmetro areas and a high proportion of Mormons, Hispanics, and Native Americans (groups with higher than average fertility rates), the non-

Figure 1

**Annual rates of change in population, 1971-97**

*Nonmetro West growth rates have been consistently higher but more volatile than other nonmetro settings*

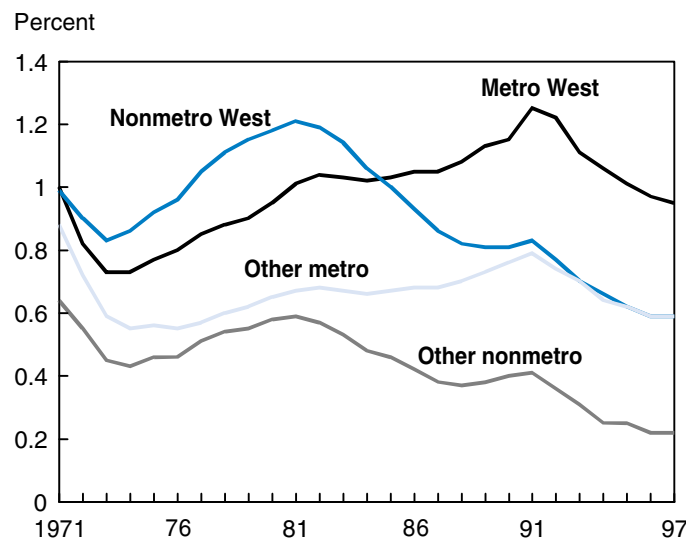


Source: Calculated by the Economic Research Service, USDA, using data from the U.S. Bureau of the Census' Annual Population Estimates.

metro West had the most to lose from this trend, dropping from 1.2 percent growth per year from natural increase in 1981 to half that in 1997.

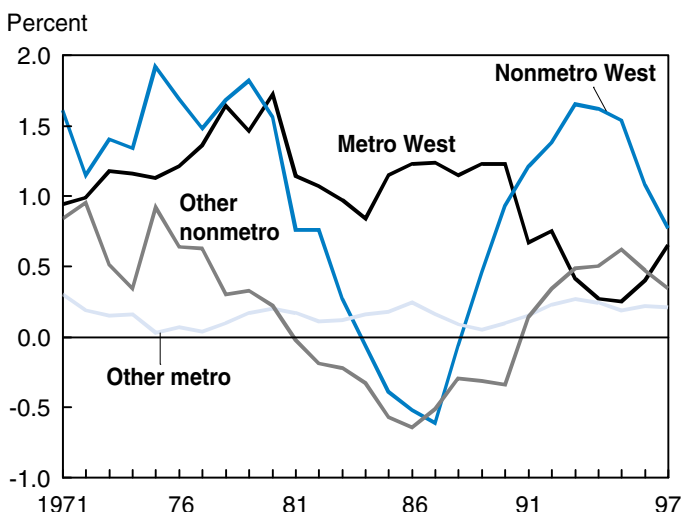
The latest nonmetro population rebound took place because patterns of net migration dramatically favored such areas at the expense of metro areas (fig. 3). Due to net migration, the nonmetro West lost 40,000 people in 1987 but gained 120,000 people in 1993. This recovery and

Figure 2  
**Annual rates of natural change, 1971-97**  
*The number of births over deaths in the nonmetro West has been declining since the early 1980's*



Source: Calculated by the Economic Research Service, USDA, using data from the U.S. Bureau of the Census' Annual Population Estimates.

Figure 3  
**Annual rates of net migration, 1971-97**  
*Net immigration in the nonmetro West increased dramatically after a period of outmigration during the mid-1980's*



Source: Calculated by the Economic Research Service, USDA, using data from the U.S. Bureau of the Census' Annual Population Estimates.

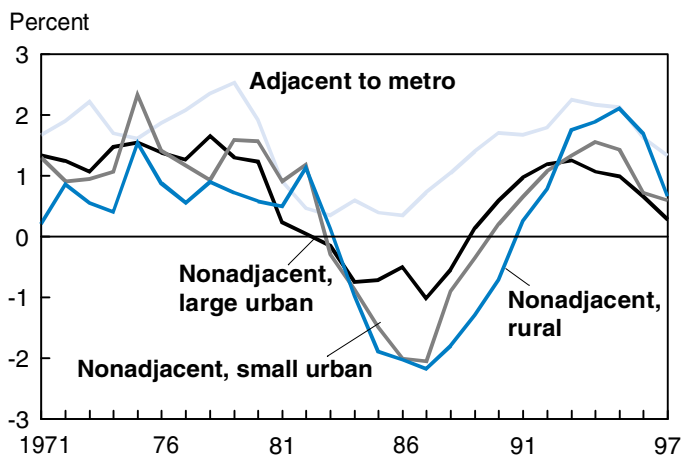
the subsequent moderation of net migration gains since 1993 coincide with a downturn and subsequent recovery of migration trends in Western metro areas. The economic booms and busts of the West's largest urban centers are felt throughout the region via migration.

### Nonmetro Growth From Migration Is More Geographically Dispersed

Overall, rates of nonmetro population growth from net migration during the early 1990's were still below those of the 1970's, but more counties participated. In the nonmetro West, county net migration rates averaged 1.5 percent a year during the 1970's, with 65 percent of counties having net immigration. Average rates were slightly lower (1.2 percent) during 1990-97, but the number of counties with net immigration rose to 73 percent. The deconcentrated migration is explained partly by a loosening of ties to certain place characteristics that traditionally attract migrants.

**Urban Areas Exert Less Pull.** People appear to be less tied to the urban hierarchy, moving to areas with less access to metro areas and with smaller cities or towns. The relationship between net migration and urban structure has fluctuated dramatically during 1971-97 (fig. 4). Metro areas appear to have a large "spillover" effect on adjacent counties, which typically have had higher growth rates throughout the period, especially during the recessionary period in the 1980's. The downturn in the 1980's was most severely felt in the most rural nonadjacent areas, so that a clear urban hierarchical pattern emerged during this time. Since then, the positive relationship between net migration and urban proximity mostly disappeared as rates converged and different types

Figure 4  
**Annual rates of net migration in the nonmetro West by rural-urban continuum, 1971-97**  
*Nonadjacent, rural areas grew rapidly from migration during the early 1990's*



Source: Calculated by the Economic Research Service, USDA, using data from the U.S. Bureau of the Census' Annual Population Estimates.

## Defining the West

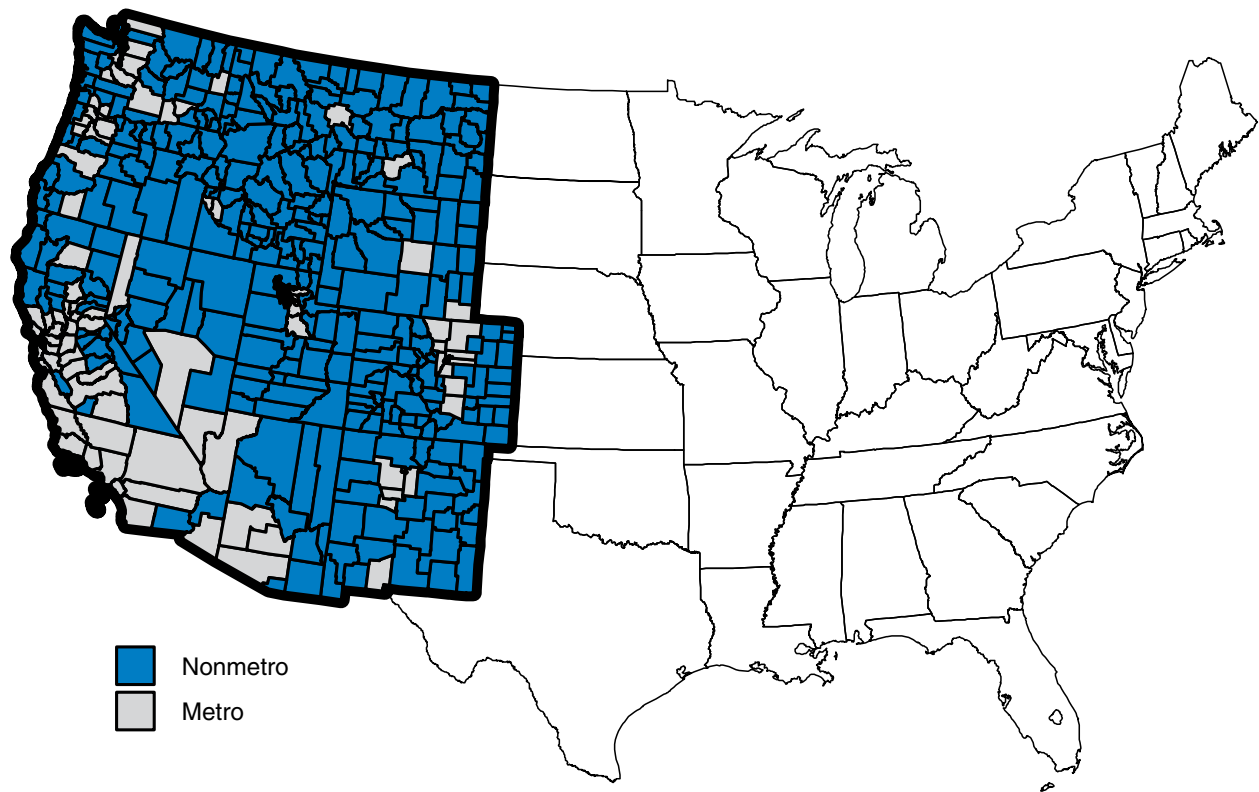
Unlike more fixed settings, such as New England or the Great Plains, the West, like the South and Midwest, is harder to stake out. The frontier line dividing East and West has shifted over time from the Appalachians to the Mississippi River to the 98th meridian, where lack of rainfall marks the western fringes of the Corn Belt. The image perhaps most conjured by Americans today is the Interior West, defined by William Riebsame in *Atlas of the New West* as stretching from the Front Range of the Rockies in the east to the Sierra Nevada and Cascades Ranges in the west. Even this subregion encompasses a diversity of landscapes other than spectacular mountains, ranging from deserts of the Great Basin to the canyonlands of the Colorado Plateau to the fertile valleys of the Columbia and Snake Rivers.

In this article, we use the Census Bureau's definition of the West, based on State boundaries and encompassing the Interior West along with the Pacific Coast and portions of the Great Plains (see figure). Alaska and Hawaii, also part of the Census West, are excluded from our analysis. Other articles in this issue use the entire region or a subregion within it. For instance, Vias uses the Census Bureau's Mountain division (excluding the three States on the Pacific coast), which closely resembles Riebsame's Interior West. Other articles use data from smaller subregions and individual States.

The rural West is also hard to pin down. Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSA's), defined by the Office of Management and Budget, include core counties containing a city of 50,000 or more people and outlying counties that are economically integrated with the core through commuting. Nonmetro counties, those falling outside MSA's, define the rural West in this and other articles (see figure). We use 1993 definitions of metro areas, based on the 1990 census, which leaves as nonmetro five cities (Flagstaff, AZ; Corvallis, OR; Grand Junction, CO; Missoula, MT; and Pocatello, ID) that have since become metro.

### The West

*The definition of the West used here comprises 89 metro and 325 nonmetro counties in 11 States*



Source: Produced by ERS.

of areas attracted migrants. Especially striking is the post-1990 surge of immigration into the rural nonadjacent counties, which had higher rates of growth from net migration than in the 1970's. Rates for these counties equalled those of adjacent counties during 1995-96. In addition, small nonmetro cities and towns have been more attractive to migrants than larger ones since 1990, after experiencing much lower rates in the 1980's. Thus, the recent boom in

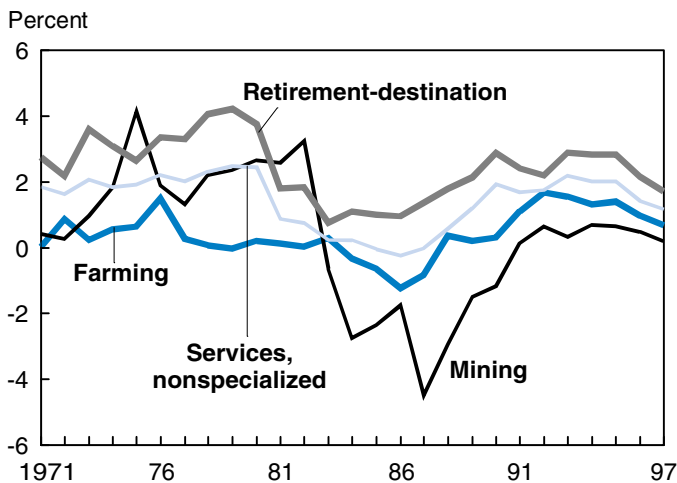
the nonmetro West was not limited to accessible, large communities but reached remote, sparsely populated settings as well.

**Recent Migration Patterns Not as Closely Tied to Fluctuations in Farming or Mining.** Recent migrants are less tied to the dominant economic activity characterizing places. The boom in the mining industry, including oil

Figure 5

**Annual rates of net migration in the nonmetro West by dominant economic activity, 1971-97**

*Farming and mining counties rebounded from migration losses of 1980's, but remained below other economic types*



Source: Calculated by the Economic Research Service, USDA, using data from the U.S. Bureau of the Census' Annual Population Estimates.

and gas, caused high population growth in many parts of the nonmetro West during the 1970's. Downturns in mining during the 1980's usually entailed high levels of outmigration (fig. 5). In counties identified by ERS as mining-dependent (see "Data and Definitions"), rates fell from 3 percent net immigration to 3 percent net outmigration in just 2 years during the mid-1980's. This moved mining counties from rates above to rates far below the levels of other functional county types. But the recovery in these counties after 1987, back up to positive immigration by 1990, paralleled population upturns elsewhere. Similarly, the gap in migration rates between agricultural communities and those with a more diverse service economy is much smaller today than in the past.

Retirement destinations, characterized by high levels of immigration among those 55 years or older, attracted a surplus of migrants (of all ages) throughout the 1980's and approached growth rates of 3 percent a year during the early 1990's. The upturn in farming and mining areas had less to do with the traditional extractive industries that characterize those areas than with growth in the service-based jobs that fuel retirement destinations. Many farming and mining areas are making a dramatic transition to the "New West" economy of recreation, tourism, and retirement, while other such areas remain stalled.

**Migrants Broadening the Search for Natural Amenities.** Despite the consistently high growth of ski resorts, national park "gateway" communities, and retirement destinations, the relationship between natural amenities and net migration in the nonmetro West has changed recently in ways that suggest a deconcentration of population into new areas of growth. People are settling for less in terms of the number and quality of natural amenities, as meas-

ured by an index combining mild climate, rugged but accessible topography, and the presence of bodies of water (see "Data and Definitions"). During most of the 1980's, net migration was strongly correlated with natural amenities (fig. 6). Counties in the highest amenity quartile maintained net immigration for all but 2 years during 1971-97. But in the 1990's, not only have rates converged for all categories, but the highest net migration is now found in the second highest amenity quartile of counties. As real estate and other costs of living have soared in many of the best known settings in the West, other areas have come into their own as recreation, retirement, and second-home destinations. This progression represents a shift of high migration rates from areas near the Pacific coast, which score high on this particular measure of amenities, toward the region's interior, especially the northern Rockies (fig. 7). An earlier analysis indicated that the movement down the amenity hierarchy is spilling over into portions of the Great Plains as well (Cromartie).

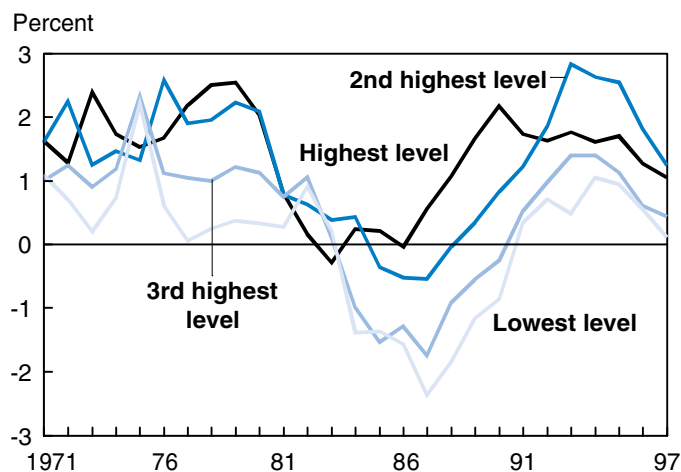
**Future Growth in Nonmetro West Population Likely To Remain High**

Although the recent nonmetro upturn may have already peaked in 1993, several factors point to continued high growth. First, the nonmetro West is still quite sparsely settled compared with nearby, rapidly growing metro regions. Three-quarters of the West's population growth during both the 1980's and early 1990's occurred in metro areas. Several counties have changed from nonmetro to metro in the last few years. Seven cities (Cheyenne, WY; Flagstaff, AZ; Grand Junction, CO; Merced, CA; Missoula, MT; Pocatello, ID; and Santa Fe, NM) have grown into metro status since 1980, and four existing metro areas

Figure 6

**Annual rates of net migration in the nonmetro West by level of natural amenities, 1971-97**

*Immigration is highest in counties with the second highest level of natural amenities*



Source: Calculated by the Economic Research Service, USDA, using data from the U.S. Bureau of the Census' Annual Population Estimates.

## Data and Definitions

The basic units of analysis were 89 metro and 325 nonmetro counties comprising the Census Bureau's West region minus Alaska and Hawaii (see "Defining the West" for a map). Annual estimates of county population, natural increase, and net migration were obtained from the Bureau of the Census for 1990-97 and from a special file created from Census Bureau data by Glenn Fuguitt at the University of Wisconsin-Madison for 1970-89. Annual net migration rates were expressed as the percentage change in population from net migration during the given year. 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.

Location within the West's nonmetro settlement system was measured using the Economic Research Service's Rural-Urban Continuum Code, a 10-level refinement of the 1993 Metro Area system. The six nonmetro categories, based on adjacency to metro areas and size of the urban population, were combined into three for this analysis.

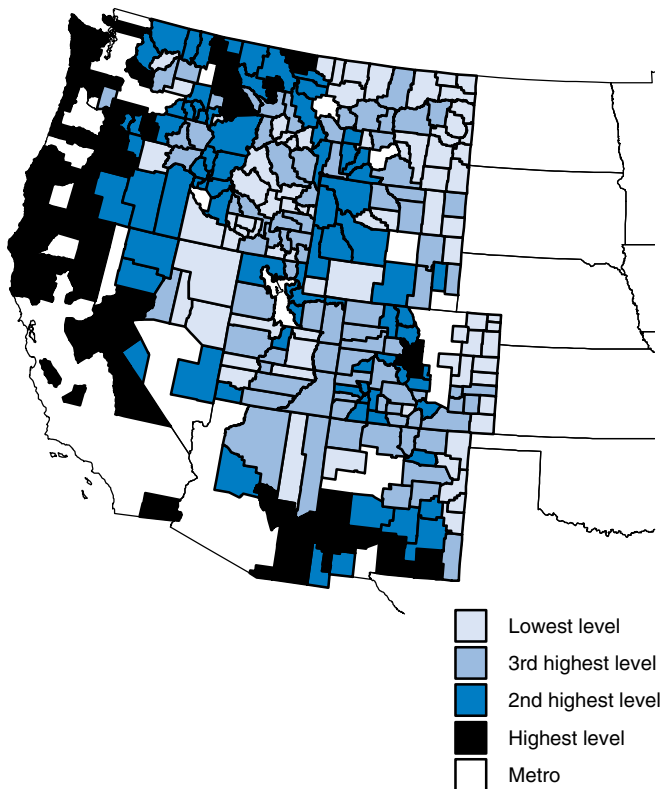
The county typology codes, described in Cook and Mizer (1994), are developed and periodically revised by ERS to group counties by economic and policy-relevant characteristics. Farming, mining, and services-dependent counties are classified based on a high proportion of total labor and proprietors' income over the 3 years 1987 to 1989. Nonspecialized counties (which were grouped here with services-dependent counties) were all nonmetro counties not classified as a specialized economic type. Retirement-destination counties were delineated based on high in-movement during 1980-90 of people age 60 or over.

Natural amenities are measured using a single index, also created by the Economic Research Service, combining 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 as the difference between an index of mountainous or rugged terrain and average elevation. The presence of bodies of water is measured using the percentage of land area covered by water. The updated version of the ERS natural amenities index, published in McGranahan (1999), differs slightly from the one used here because it excludes average elevation.

Figure 7

### Natural amenities index

*Highest values are found along southern rim of Rockies and Pacific coast*



Source: Produced by ERS.

(Albuquerque, NM; Boise, ID; Las Vegas, NV; and Phoenix, AZ) have added territory. Las Vegas as a metro area has tripled its territory and doubled its population since 1980, growing to over 1 million people today. Clearly, growth in the nonmetro West is closely tied to the region's large cities, with the number of potential immigrants from these cities rapidly growing.

Second, regional growth will come from an aging population nationally. The U.S. age profile is still dominated by the post-World War II rise in fertility rates known as the baby boom, whose members are currently age 36-54. Many of the older members of this cohort have finished raising families, have begun to change careers or consider early retirement, and are deciding where to invest significant nest eggs. The rural West offers tremendous incentives to such people, and their decisions already are having an impact on many communities throughout the region. This period of large-scale, long-term growth in early-retirement and second-home population patterns will blossom around 2006, when the oldest baby boomers reach the age of 60.

Third, the youthful age structure of the nonmetro West itself guarantees relatively higher growth rates. Net immigration of young families and higher fertility rates among resident populations have created built-in growth momentum. During the 1980's, while the population age 0-17 in other nonmetro areas declined (by as much as 9 percent in the Midwest), the same age group grew by 8 percent in the nonmetro West.

Fourth, once established, migration networks often assume a life of their own. Migration itself generates jobs, which in turn attract more migrants in a self-reinforcing pattern. The more people gain information through family, friends, and the media about the opportunities in a newly expanding area, the more likely they are to consider a move themselves. The skyrocketing number of recreational visits to the West's parks, forests, and wilderness areas adds to the pool of potential migrants. Recent non-metro growth due to net immigration and the more deconcentrated pattern of population growth throughout the region may establish more permanent migration networks than during the 1970's, when extractive industries pulled workers into sparsely settled regions for what often turned out to be temporary assignments.

Current population distribution and age structure suggest continued high population growth for the nonmetro West, but the extent of growth depends on economic and social factors that are impossible to predict. If future growth occurs at the high end of what is possible and the growth is not dealt with through more comprehensive planning strategies, especially at the local level, it will continue to challenge the quality of life and rural ambience that are attracting migrants in the first place.

#### **For Further Reading . . .**

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