


 Science Says

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## Teen Childbearing in Rural America

### Key Data

- In 2010, the teen birth rate in rural counties was nearly one-third higher compared to the rest of the country (43 per 1,000 girls age 15 to 19 vs. 33).
- The teen birth rate in rural counties surpassed that in suburban counties and even that in major urban centers.
- The teen birth rate was higher in rural counties than in other areas of the country regardless of age or race/ethnicity.
- Even so, rural counties accounted for a minority of teen births (20%), which is not surprising given that only 16% of teen girls live in rural counties.
- Between 1990 and 2010, the birth rate among teens in rural counties declined by 32%, far slower than the decline in major urban centers (49%) and in suburban counties (40%).

### Background

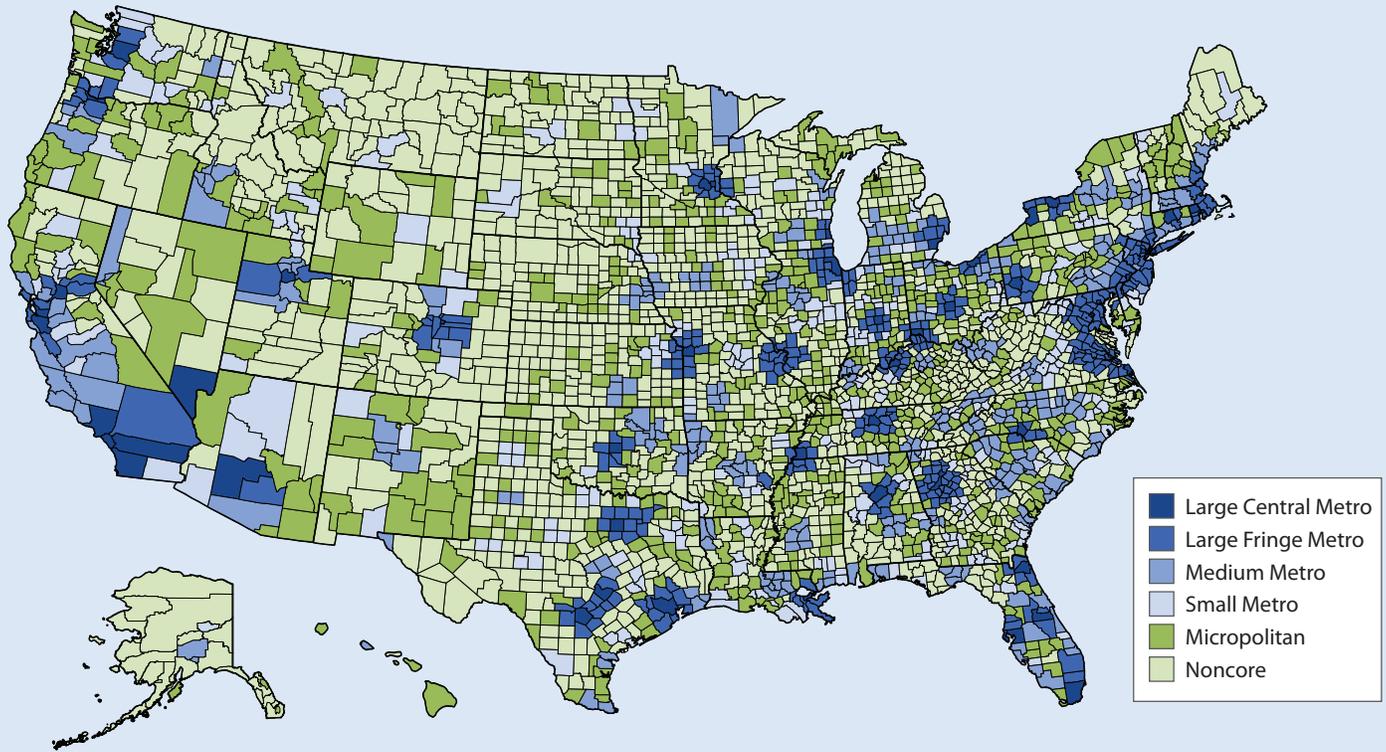
In recent years, efforts to prevent teen pregnancy have focused increasingly on the needs of underserved youth. Teens living in rural areas, in particular, have been a source of growing concern. Yet, we know very little about teen childbearing in rural areas. Current research is unable to answer even the most basic question as to whether the risk of teen childbearing is higher or lower among rural teens compared to other teens. While many believe that teen

childbearing is primarily a concern in urban areas, others speculate that rural teens have limited access to opportunities and services and therefore may be at higher risk.

This research brief provides the first-ever data comparing teen childbearing in rural, suburban, and urban areas nationwide and examining how this has changed over time. The results presented here are part of a broader set of analyses that will also explore how these outcomes relate to rural-urban differences in teen sexual activity and use of contraception, as well as variation in poverty and economic opportunity, availability of services, and education.

The results presented here are based on county level data from the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), and the NCHS Urban-Rural Classification Scheme, as described below. It is important to note that there are numerous ways to define rural areas, and those defined as rural in this brief are highly diverse. For example, in terms of their economic activity, only 20% of rural counties are dependent on farming. The rest are dependent on manufacturing (28%), federal or state government activity (11%), the service sector (6%), mining (5%), or have a non-specialized economy (30%). The poverty rate is higher on average in rural areas, yet 39% of rural counties have poverty rates below the national average. Rural counties vary by whether or not they are a frontier area or border town, their urban proximity, and commuting patterns. In short, rural communities share many traits in common, but the characteristics of these communities vary considerably.

**FIGURE 1. Map of U.S. Counties, According to the NCHS Urban-Rural Classification Scheme, 2010**



**The Rural Teen Population**

As shown in Figure 1 above, rural counties can be found in every region and almost every state. Although rural counties cover 75% of the land area in the U.S., only 16% of teen girls live in rural counties. This definition of rural includes both teens who live in counties with small towns (micropolitan), as well as those who live in the most rural counties (noncore).

The six levels of urbanization in the map above are defined in Figure 2.

For the sake of simplicity, the majority of the analyses below further collapse these breakouts into four categories: rural (including noncore and micropolitan), small or medium metro, large fringe metro (also referred to as suburban), and large central metro (also referred to as major urban centers).

According to the 2010 census, there were more than 1.7 million girls age 15-19 living in rural counties. The age distribution of teens in rural counties was the same as the rest of the country (59% were young teens age 15-17). By contrast, the racial/ethnic makeup is quite different, as shown in Figure 3. Three-quarters of teen girls in rural counties were non-Hispanic white, compared to 36% in major urban centers. There are also notable differences in the proportion of teens that were non-Hispanic black and Hispanic.

**FIGURE 2. Definition of the NCHS Urban-Rural Classification Scheme**

Metropolitan Status	NCHS Urban-Rural Classification Scheme	Definition*
Metro	Large Central Metro	Counties in a Metropolitan Statistical Area of 1 million or more, which include the largest city
	Large Fringe Metro	Counties in a Metropolitan Statistical Area of 1 million or more, which do not qualify as Large Central Metro
	Medium Metro	Counties in a Metropolitan Statistical Area of 250,000-999,999 population
	Small Metro	Counties in a Metropolitan Statistical Area of 50,000-249,999 population
Non-metro	Micropolitan	Counties in a Micropolitan Statistical Area (An area with an urban population of 10,000 to 49,999)
	Noncore	Counties outside of any Metropolitan or Micropolitan Statistical area

## Characteristics of Teen Childbearing Across the Rural-Urban Continuum

As the characteristics of the teen population vary based on level of urbanization, so do the characteristics of teen childbearing. The section below describes what share of teen childbearing is accounted for by various subgroups, and how this varies by level of urbanization.

Given that non-Hispanic white teens make up such a large share of the rural teen population, it is not surprising that they also account for nearly two-thirds of teen childbearing in rural counties (63%) as shown in Figure 4. In the most urban counties, non-Hispanic white teens account for less than one-fifth of teen births, both because they make up a smaller share of the urban population, and because their birth rate is lower, as shown in the next section.

Despite this variation, in many respects teen mothers across the rural-urban continuum are more alike than different. The percent who are unmarried is similar (85% in rural counties compared to 89% in the rest of the country) and this pattern holds true for both younger and older teens. The vast majority of births to teen girls are first births (82%), regardless of metropolitan status. As shown in Figure 5, teen mothers in rural counties are somewhat older than in the rest of the country, but not dramatically so. In rural counties, roughly one-quarter of births (28%) are to young teen girls (15-17 years old), compared to nearly one-third (32%) among teen mothers in major urban centers (large central).

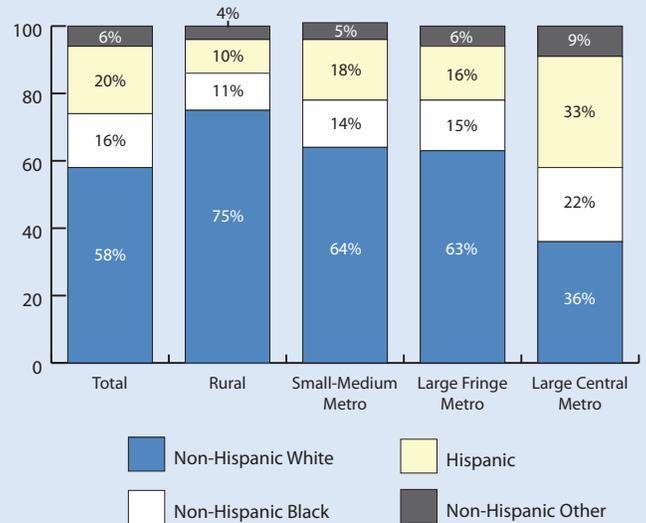
Furthermore, the age differential between teen mothers and the fathers of their children is only slightly greater in rural counties compared to the rest of the country. For example, the age differential was three years or greater for 46% of teen mothers in rural counties compared to 42% in all other counties (not shown).

## Prevalence of Teen Childbearing Across the Rural-Urban Continuum

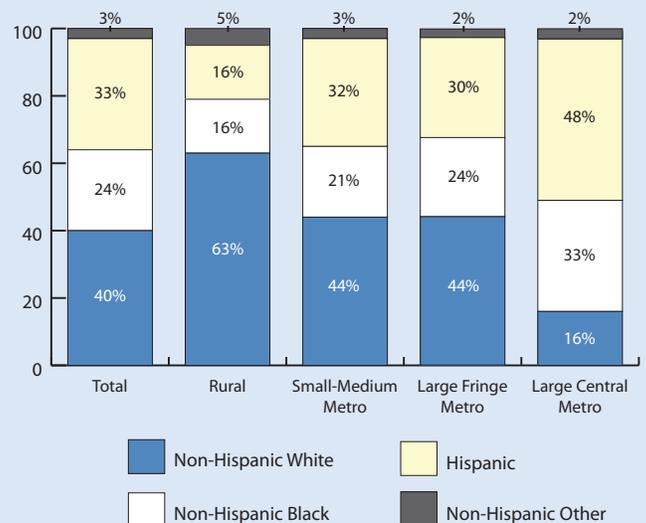
Given that most of the teen population lives in metropolitan counties, it is not surprising that the vast majority of teen births occur to teens living in metropolitan counties (shown in Figure 6). In 2010, nearly half of teen births were to teens living in major urban centers (large central) or suburban (large fringe) counties (47%). Teens in rural counties accounted for only 20% of teen births, although this is disproportionately high given that they accounted for only 16% of the female teen population.

The disproportionate share of teen childbearing in rural areas is reflected in higher birth rates among rural teens. In fact, the teen birth rate increases steadily as the level of urbanization decreases. Teen birth rates along the full rural-urban continuum are shown below to illustrate this pattern. While rates in the major urban centers

**FIGURE 3. Teen Female Population by Metropolitan Classification, 2010**



**FIGURE 4. Racial/Ethnic Composition of Teen Births, by Metropolitan Classification, 2010**



are somewhat of an exception, they remain well below rates in rural areas. By far, the lowest rates are among teens who live in suburban counties (large fringe).

Teen birth rates remain higher in rural counties even after taking into account differences in age and race/ethnicity. Figure 8 shows the difference in teen birth rates by metropolitan status within racial/ethnic subgroups. These results show:

- Among non-Hispanic white teens, the rural teen birth rate is more than twice as high (36.0) as that for major urban centers (16.0).

- The birth rate for non-Hispanic black teens is also higher in rural counties (60.8) than in major urban centers (53.4).
- Among Hispanic teens, the birth rate is far higher in rural counties (71.7) than in major urban centers (52.1).
- While the Asian/Pacific Islander teen birth rate is low regardless of metropolitan status, the rural teen birth rate (25.6) is still higher than that for major urban centers (8.7).
- The largest difference based on metropolitan status is among Native Americans, whose rural teen birth rate is more than three times higher (65.7) than that of major urban centers (17.6).

The results in Figure 9 also show that the difference in teen birth rates between rural counties and other counties was particularly pronounced among older teens (age 18-19), whose rate in rural counties was 74.7, compared to a rate of 58.2 in major urban centers.

### Changes between 1990 and 2010<sup>b</sup>

In 1990, the teen birth rate in major urban centers (70.4 births per 1,000 teen girls age 15-19) was somewhat higher than in rural counties (62.8). Both of these rates were much higher than among teen girls living in suburban counties (large fringe).

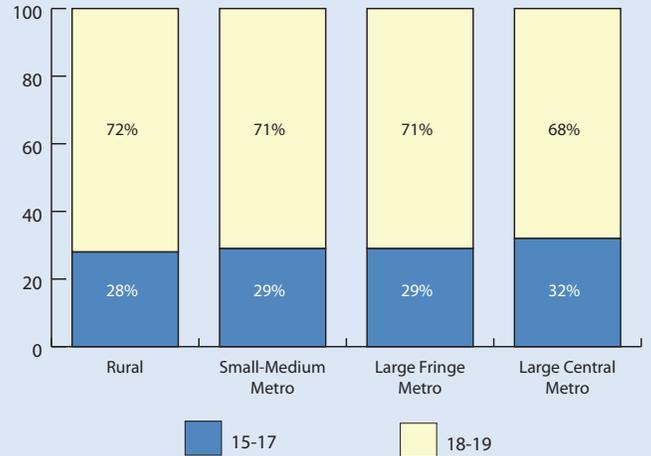
Over the past 20 years, the birth rate among teen girls living in major urban centers (large central) has plummeted by 49% compared to a 32% decline in the rural teen birth rate. The teen birth rate also fell more steeply in suburban counties (down 40%) despite the fact that suburban counties had far lower rates to begin with.

### What it All Means

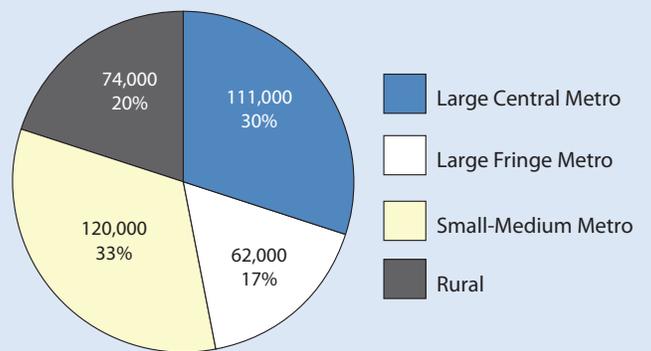
This brief provides compelling empirical evidence on a straightforward but previously unanswered question: is rural teen childbearing higher or lower than teen childbearing overall? In fact, the data tell us that teens in rural counties face the greatest risk of pregnancy, even greater than in urban centers. This is particularly true for older teens (age 18-19), and for teens in some racial/ethnic subgroups such as Native American teens. In addition, rural teens are falling further behind over time. Therefore, the need for teen pregnancy prevention efforts is particularly great among rural teens, and prevention efforts focused on underserved populations should consider rural teens as a particularly high-risk group.

Although in many ways teens across the country are more similar than they are different, teens in rural areas also face unique challenges. There are many factors that may account for the significant and growing disparity in teen birth rates across the rural/urban continuum, including differences in economic wellbeing and op-

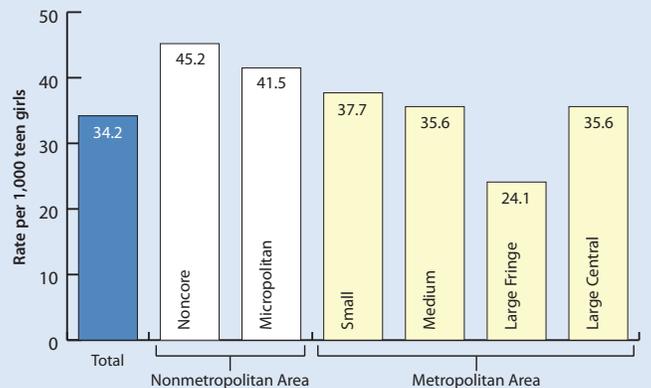
**FIGURE 5. Age Composition of Teen Births by Metropolitan Classification, 2010**



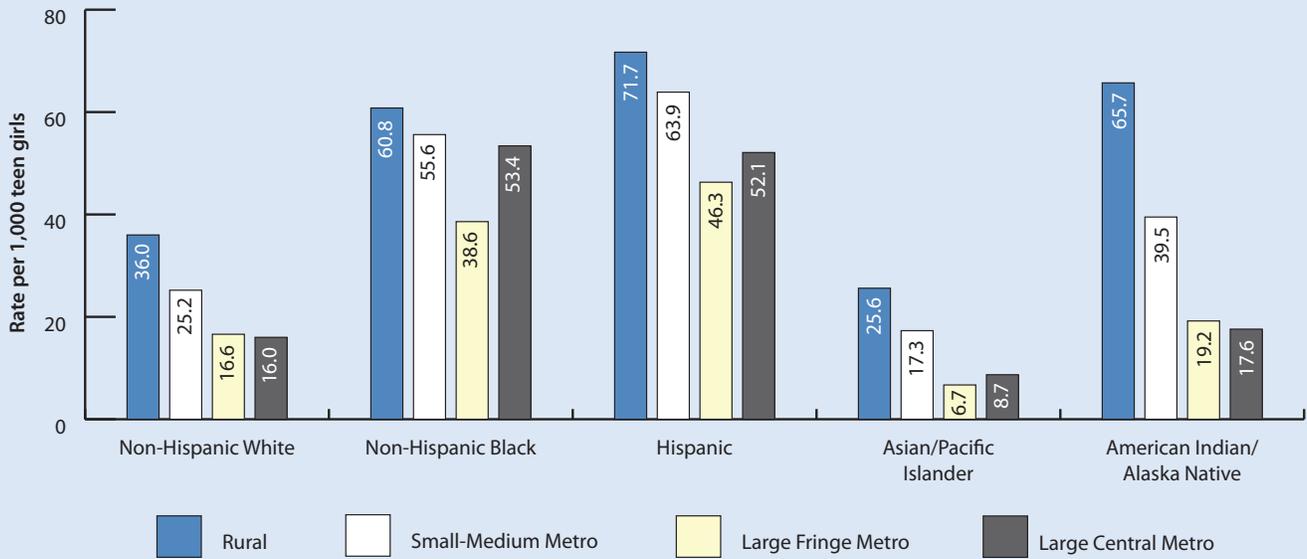
**FIGURE 6. Distribution of Teen Births by Metropolitan Classification, 2010**



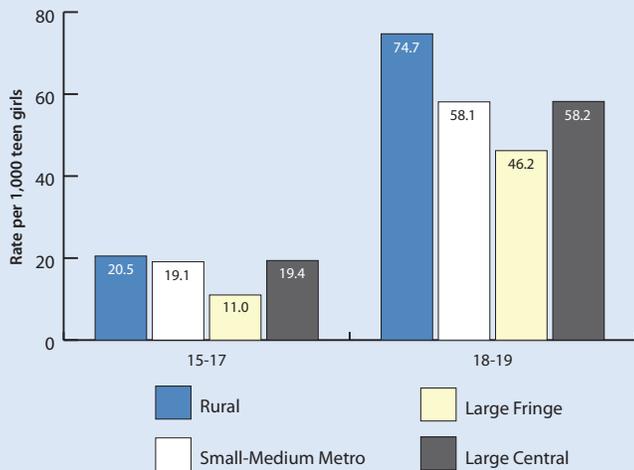
**FIGURE 7. Teen Birth Rate by Metropolitan Classification, 2010**



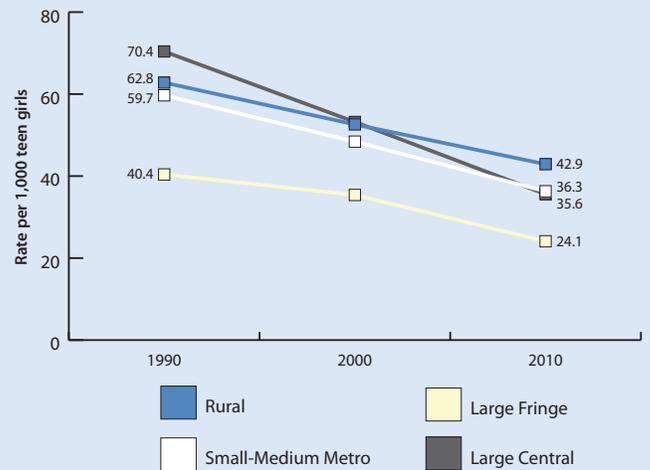
**FIGURE 8. Teen Birth Rate Among Racial/Ethnic Groups, by Metropolitan Classification, 2010**



**FIGURE 9. Teen Birth Rate Among Age Groups, by Metropolitan Classification, 2010**



**FIGURE 10. Teen Birth Rate by Metropolitan Classification, 1990-2010**



portunity, service availability, and more. The analyses presented here are the first in a broader set of analyses that will also explore the role of factors such as variation in educational outcomes, income disparities, labor market opportunities, health care availability and more, as well as the implications for teen pregnancy prevention efforts among youth in rural areas.

**Methodology**

The results on teen births presented in this research brief were based on the authors’ tabulations using national vital statistics birth

data provided by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS). Restricted-use data files were used for this study, as public-use birth data files do not provide birth data separately for counties with a population of less than 100,000.

Results reflecting 2010 are based on the 2006 NCHS Urban-Rural Categorization Scheme (the most recent available), which defines rural and urban areas at the county level. This is beneficial given that data on many related factors are also widely available at the county level. However, it is also the case that some areas considered to be rural but located within metropolitan counties will not be counted as rural in our analysis.

When looking at trends over time, it is important to note that where counties fall along the rural-urban continuum has changed somewhat since 1990. In part this reflects shifts in the population and in part it reflects slight definitional changes in the NCHS categorization scheme. The goal of this analysis is to show trends over time in rural and urban America, rather than trends over time in specific counties. To reflect this, results for 1990 are based on the 2001 NCHS Urban-Rural Categorization scheme, which is based on the results of the 1990 Decennial Census. Results for 2000 and 2010 are based on the 2006 version, which is the next and most recent available. We explored the impact of this approach by analyzing trends based solely on the 2001 scheme, solely on the 2006 scheme, and this combination of the 2001 and 2006 scheme. Given that we found only marginal differences, we concluded that the trends measured over time reflect true trends in the teen birth rate for rural and urban areas, and not a difference in the definition of 'rural.'

Birth rates are calculated by dividing the number of births to teen girls age 15-19 in each year by the population derived from the April 1st decennial census counts in each year. The results on contextual measures of rural counties presented in this research brief were based on the authors' tabulations of data from the Economic Research Service.

## About the Authors

This research brief was written by National Campaign staff members Alison Stewart Ng, Research Coordinator, and Kelleen Kaye, Senior Director of Research.

## About The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization supported largely by private donations. The National Campaign's mission is to improve the lives and future prospects of children and families and, in particular, to help ensure that children are born into stable, two-parent families who are committed to and ready for the demanding task of raising the next generation. Our specific strategy is to prevent teen pregnancy and unplanned pregnancy among single, young adults. We support a combination of responsible values and behavior by both men and women and responsible policies in both the public and private sectors.

## Funding Information

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## Notes:

- a. The definitions provided in the table have been simplified for brevity. For further details on how these categories are defined, please see the original publication from the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS).<sup>7</sup>
- b. Rural counties in 2000 and 2010 are not necessarily the same rural counties in 1990. Eighty-nine percent of counties were consistently categorized as either rural (64%) or metropolitan (25%). Only 1.5% of counties were originally defined as metropolitan and redefined as rural, while 9.5% of counties were originally defined as rural and redefined as metropolitan. Classifications were mostly reassigned due to changes in population, although the definition of "rural" had been simplified slightly since the 1990 classification. For further details, see the original publication by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS).<sup>7</sup>

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