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Census Definition Changes May Influence Rural Policy in Illinois

by Bill Westerhold and Timothy Collins¹

Introduction

In conjunction with the 2000 Census, the federal government refined and redefined its rural and urban definitions. The new definitions delineate Core-Based Statistical Areas (CBSAs) made up of metropolitan areas, newly defined micropolitan areas, and their outlying counties. Nonmetropolitan areas include counties not economically or socially connected with CBSAs. (For definitions, see the sidebar and U.S. Bureau of the Census 2005a.)

The Census's adoption of a micropolitan classification recognizes the diversity of both rural and urban areas, as well as the connections between them. In 1976, Luther Tweeten and George L. Brinkman introduced the term *micropolitan* in a now classic, rural economic development textbook, *Micropolitan Development*. At the time, they noted that smaller cities surrounded by rural areas face different problems than those experienced by larger metropolitan areas. In addition, the authors argued that rural development should not only include open country and rural towns, but also cities of less than 50,000 residents that are centers for jobs, services, trade, and other activities for nearby rural residents. Micropolitan areas divide the country into regions that better reflect the population and provide another layer for understanding nonmetropolitan statistical data.

Clearly, the new federal definitions will have long-term implications for rural areas in Illinois and nationally. Yet, it is important to consider caveats of the new definitions. In fact, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) (2005), which helped develop the new definitions, cautions that its classification of core-based areas . . .

is intended to provide nationally consistent definitions for collecting, tabulating, and publishing Federal statistics for a set of geographic areas. The Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Area Standards do not equate to an urban-rural classification; many counties included in Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas, and many other counties, contain both urban and rural territory and populations.

OMB (2005) is also cautious about the policy implications of the new definitions:

Metropolitan Statistical Area and Micropolitan Statistical Area definitions should not be used to develop and implement Federal, state, and local nonstatistical programs and policies without full consideration of the effects of using these definitions for such purposes. These areas are not intended to serve as a general-purpose geographic framework for nonstatistical activities, and they may or may not be suitable for use in program funding formulas.

While metropolitan-nonmetropolitan definitions have been revised several times (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1994), the revised county classifications may affect rural Illinois. As written, the definitions cast a new light on rural geography for both researchers and policymakers. Despite the OMB caveats, however, it is possible that state and federal government agencies will establish rules, provide resources, and allocate funds to different localities based on the new definitions. The new definitions will change

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Definitions

Core – A densely settled concentration of population, made up of either an urbanized area (of 50,000 or more population) or an urban cluster (of 10,000 to 49,999 population) as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau, around which a Core-Based Statistical Area is defined.

Core-Based Statistical Area (CBSA) – A statistical geographic entity consisting of the county or counties associated with at least one core (urbanized area or urban cluster) of at least 10,000 population, plus adjacent counties having a high degree of social and economic integration with the core as measured by commuting ties with the counties containing the core. Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas are the two categories of CBSAs

Metropolitan Statistical Area – A CBSA associated with at least one urbanized area of at least 50,000 residents. The Metropolitan Statistical Area is made up of the central county or counties containing the core, plus adjacent outlying counties that have a high degree of social and economic integration with the central county as measured through commuting.

Micropolitan Statistical Area – A CBSA associated with at least one urban cluster with a population of at least 10,000, but less than 50,000. The Micropolitan Statistical Area is made up of the central county or counties containing the core, plus adjacent outlying counties that have a high degree of social and economic integration with the central county as measured through commuting.

Outlying County – A county that qualifies for inclusion in a CBSA on the basis of commuting ties with the CBSA's central county or counties.

Outside Core-Based Statistical Areas – Counties that do not qualify for inclusion in a CBSA.

Source: OMB 2000.

statistics that researchers and government agencies use to determine rurality and program eligibility.

The impacts of these definitional changes are unclear. Much depends on the treatment of newly designated micropolitan areas. Will they be considered urban? Or will they be treated as the rural service centers that Tweeten and Brinkman (1976) envisioned?

To understand how these changes could affect our perceptions of rural in Illinois, we must first understand the concepts of Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas and then compare some of the statistical information that will change. After this, we will develop a more complete profile of Illinois' population and economic conditions using two different interpretations of the new standards.

Background. The revised OMB standards are still based on the concept of a Metropolitan Statistical Area, an area with a large population containing a core city with a relatively large population and surrounding counties linked socially or economically by commuting patterns (Van Geffen 2003).

After World War II, the federal government wanted a method to account for the population in growing cities in order to guide various laws, programs, and statistical analysis. For example, the U.S. Bureau of the Census developed a metropolitan district based on townships and election districts, but there was no national standard for other agencies and programs. By 1949, the Bureau of the Budget (OMB's predecessor) and the Bureau of the Census agreed to use counties as the geographic unit for Standard Metropolitan Areas (SMAs). They created new definitions to cover smaller areas within those metropolitan areas. The Bureau of the Census created the Urbanized Area (UA) to define densely populated areas; the SMA would define areas socially and economically connected to the overall metropolitan area. The two bureaus applied these standards to the 1950 census (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1994). Since then, OMB has periodically changed the standards to reflect population changes. Changes to the Metropolitan Statistical Area standards have mostly been minor, reflecting changing population patterns.

By the late 1990s, technological changes and urban development in formerly rural areas meant the 50-year-old

standards no longer represented the country's metropolitan structure. In 1998, OMB chartered the Metropolitan Area Standards Review Committee to examine the 1990 classifications and recommend changes. This committee included various agencies that collect and distribute statistical information, including the Bureau of the Census, Bureau of Economic Analysis, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, Department of Agriculture, and the National Center of Health Statistics (General Accounting Office 2004).

Changes to the Metropolitan Statistical Area classification implemented in 2003 refined the previous standards rather than completely overhauling them. Adding Micropolitan Statistical Areas could help increase our understanding of rural areas. In developing the new standards, OMB wanted to provide a more efficient and easier way to define metropolitan areas and wanted counties included in a Metropolitan Statistical Area to have a greater connection with the central city.

Changes from the 1990 Classification in Illinois

Previous MSA classifications defined counties as either Metropolitan Statistical Areas or Nonmetropolitan Statistical Areas. The new classification creates a Core-Based Statistical Area (CBSA). Table 1 compares the old and new standards. A CBSA can have two separate county-based designations: (1) the Metropolitan Statistical Area and (2) the Micropolitan Statistical Area. A Metropolitan Statistical Area has at least one urbanized area with a population of 50,000. A Micropolitan Statistical Area must have an urban cluster of at least 10,000 residents (Slifkin, Randolph, and Ricketts 2004).

Central cities also have a new definition. Previously, a Metropolitan Statistical Area contained a central city of 50,000 population or an urbanized area of 50,000 population, with a total Metropolitan Statistical Area population of 100,000. Now, an MSA needs only an urbanized area of 50,000 population. This will affect counties where the city does not quite have 50,000 residents; by adding urbanized unincorporated areas, however, the population would reach 50,000, making the county a Metropolitan Statistical Area.

Table 1. Comparison of Old and New Census Classifications

<i>Old</i>	<i>New</i>
Metropolitan Statistical Area	Core-Based Statistical Area <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Metropolitan Statistical Area • <i>Micropolitan Statistical Area</i> • <i>Outlying Counties</i>
<i>Nonmetropolitan Statistical Area</i>	<i>Outside Core-Based Statistical Area</i>

Classifications set in italics are likely to be rural or have rural characteristics.

The commuting criteria for outlying counties are also far less complicated. To be included as an outlying county in a CBSA, the county must have at least 25% of its employed residents working in the central county. This change affects many Illinois counties. In addition, all other counties are considered to be outside CBSAs.

Illinois Counties Affected by the Changes

Nationally, most counties that were metropolitan in the 1999 standard remain that way under the new definition; 94% are still metropolitan, 5% have moved to micropolitan, and only 0.7% are now outside a CBSA (Slifkin et al. 2004). Across the nation, 34.7% of the counties are metropolitan, up from 27.2% in the previous definition; 21.5% of counties are micropolitan; and 43.8% are outside a CBSA.

Rockford area. Of the nine new metropolitan counties, only one gained this status on its own. Vermilion County, including the city of Danville (population 33,904), became metropolitan when the revised definition counted the county's urbanized area. By adding several smaller towns, the Census Bureau brought Danville's 2000 urbanized area population to 53,223. Even though the urbanized area passed the 50,000 mark, Danville does not provide enough jobs to attract a large commuting workforce. As a result, the Danville MSA includes only Vermilion County.

The revised definition added nine Illinois counties to the metropolitan list (Map 1), bringing the total to 36. Ogle County, which was metropolitan in 1990, became micropolitan (Map 2); the majority of the labor force works inside Ogle County and does not commute out to the

Each of the other eight new metropolitan counties in Illinois is included as an outlying county to another MSA (Map 3).

For example, Marshall and Stark Counties, with few large towns, are linked to Peoria, which offers job opportunities.

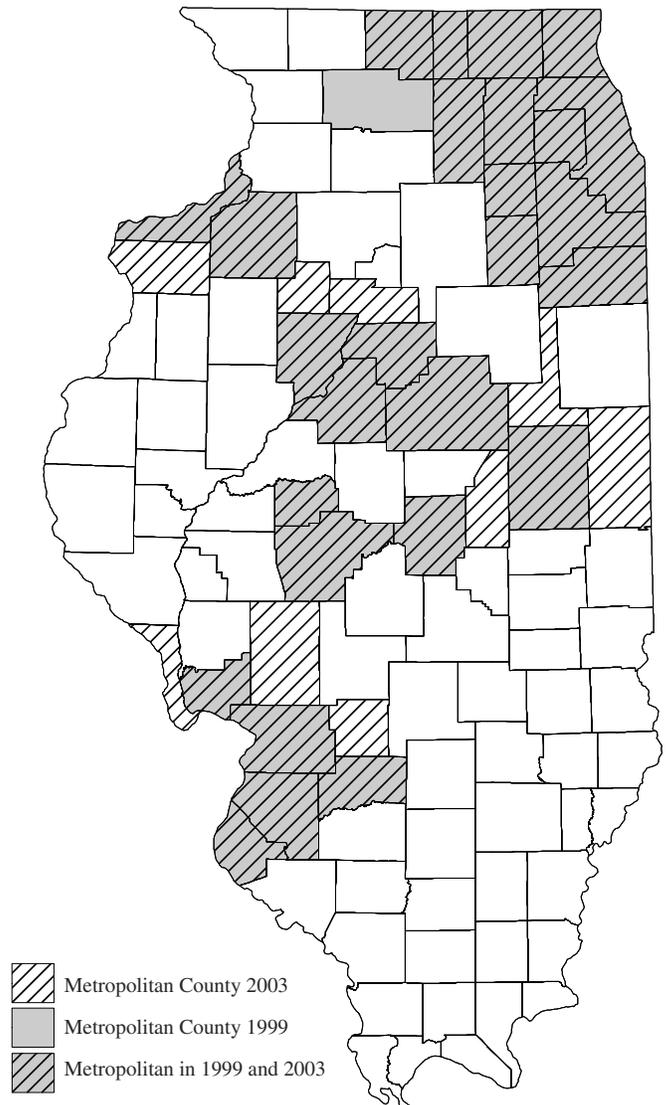
Ford and Piatt Counties are now part of the Champaign-Urbana MSA. These newly linked counties also have small populations and are adjacent to Champaign County, which has employment opportunities in manufacturing, government, education, and retail that are not available in their own counties.

Bond, Calhoun, and Macoupin Counties now belong to the St. Louis MSA because of commuting patterns. Bond County joins Clinton to the south and completes a pattern of urban-rural interface in the Metro-East St. Louis area. Calhoun County is small and has few job opportunities for residents. Macoupin is unusual. It covers a large area with a substantial population and several small cities. Yet many Macoupin County residents commute to work on Interstate 55, which passes near most of the county's small cities.

Shared characteristics of these seven Illinois counties that are now considered parts of MSAs include the following:

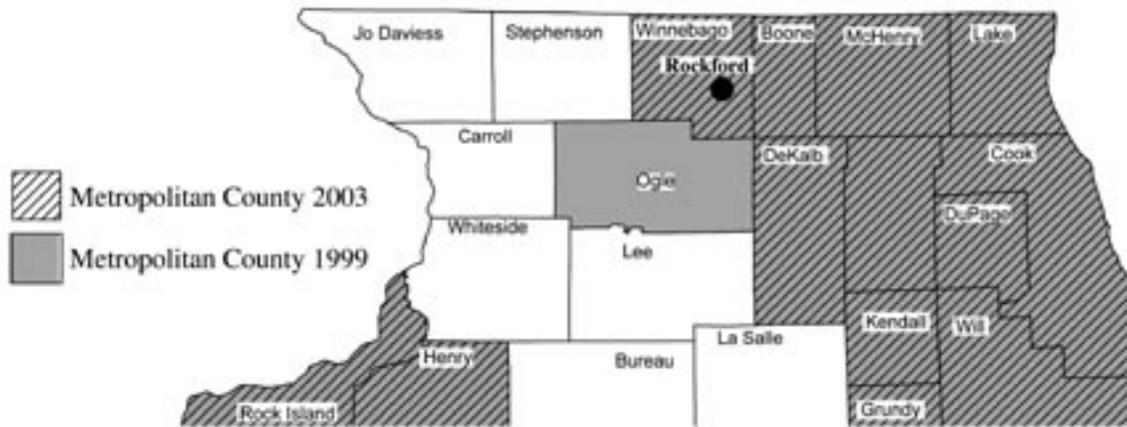
- Relatively easy access to the urban core
- Apparent willingness of residents to travel greater distances to work because of limited employment opportunities in their home counties
- Rural character, with small towns, considerable land devoted to agriculture, and people living in a rural setting

Map 1. Metropolitan Counties for 1999 and 2003 Compared



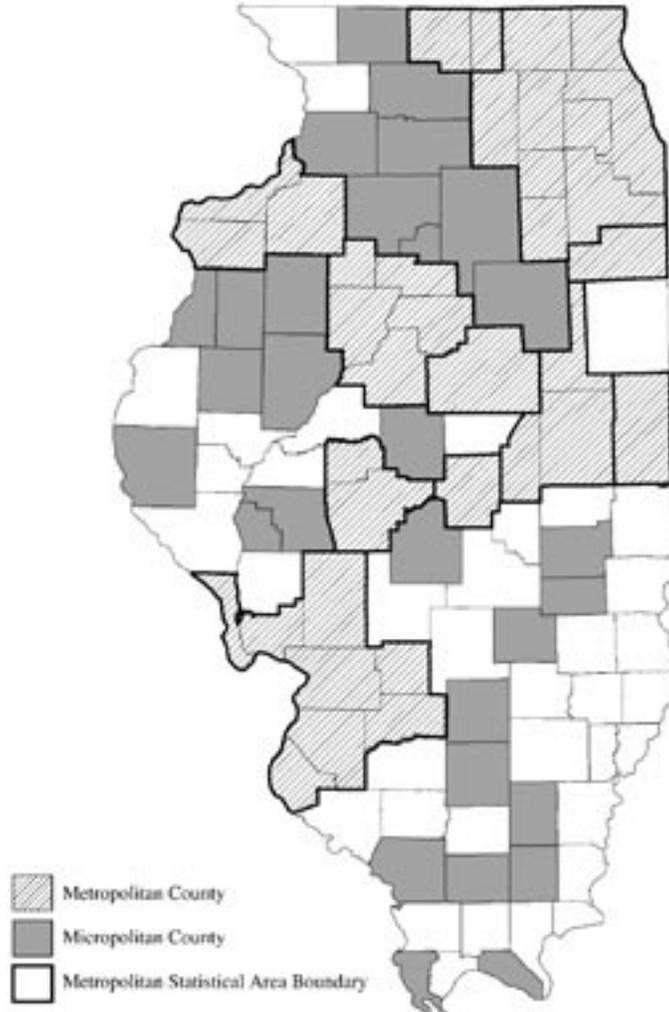
Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999, 2004.

Map 2. Enhanced View of Northern Illinois Counties from Map 1



Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999, 2004.

Map 3. Core-Based Statistical Areas in Illinois, June 2003



Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999, 2004.

Population Trends

The major impact of the Census definition changes in Illinois comes from shifting population and employment between the revised metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas. Total metropolitan population increased because nine counties have been added to that category. The difference between the 1999 and the 2003 MSA standards is 171,698—only a 1.6% population increase for Illinois Metropolitan counties (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2005b); the switch means a 9.1% decrease in the total Illinois' nonmetropolitan population, however (Table 2).

Table 2. Population Characteristics Comparing 1999 and 2003 Metropolitan Classifications

<i>Percent Change in Population – 1990 to 2000</i>			
	Total Population 1990	Total Population 2000	Percent Change 1990 to 2000
<i>1999 Definition of Metro Counties</i>			
Metro	9,573,799	10,541,708	10.11%
Nonmetro	1,856,803	1,877,585	1.12%
<i>2003 Definition of Metro Counties</i>			
Metro	9,750,584	10,713,406	9.87%
Micro	1,058,387	1,081,896	2.22%
Non-CBSA	621,631	623,991	0.38%
Nonmetro	1,680,018	1,705,887	1.54%
<i>Percentage of Total Population in 2000</i>			
<i>Using 1999 Standard</i>		<i>Population</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Illinois		12,419,293	100%
Metro		10,541,708	84.9%
Nonmetro		1,877,585	15.1%
<i>Using 2003 Standard</i>		<i>Population</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Illinois		12,419,293	100%
Metro		10,713,406	86.3%
Micro		1,081,896	8.7%
Non-CBSA		623,991	5.0%
Nonmetro		1,705,887	13.7%

Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census 1990, 2002, 2005b.

From 1990 to 2000, the new and old standards show different growth rates. Nonmetropolitan counties grew 1.5% using the 2003 standard, compared to 1.1% with the 1999 standard. Metropolitan counties grew 9.9% using the 2003 standard and 10.1% using the 1999 standard. The nine counties added to the metropolitan category by the 2003 standard had no significant population change between 1990 and 2000. The nonmetropolitan counties' population boost came from Ogle County. According to the 1999 standard, Ogle County was in the Rockford MSA. Under the 2003 standard, it is a micropolitan county, which moves

it under the nonmetropolitan statistics. Ogle County has a relatively large population (51,032) (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2005b); its population grew 11% during the 1990s.

The 2003 MSA standard suggests positive population trends for nonmetropolitan Illinois, but reduces the number of nonmetropolitan residents in the state. The new standard means 9.1% of the population in nonmetropolitan Illinois shifted to the metropolitan counties. In addition, nonmetropolitan Illinois represents 13.7% of the total Illinois population, compared with 15.1% under the 1999 standard (Table 2).

A closer look at population groups by age shows that the decline in the school-age population is lessened by moving some counties into the 2003 metropolitan group (Table 3). Both metropolitan and micropolitan counties gained in population between 1990 and 2000, while the non-CBSA counties declined. This trend also applies to the 65-and-

Table 3. Population by Age Comparing 1999 and 2003 Metropolitan Classifications

<i>Population Change by Age – 1990 to 2000</i>			
	<i>School Age 5 to 17</i>	<i>Working Age 18 to 64</i>	<i>Elderly 65 and Over</i>
Metro 1999	13.90%	9.38%	5.26%
Nonmetro 1999	-2.32%	4.16%	-1.65%
Metro 2003	13.69%	9.30%	5.15%
Micro 2003	0.08%	4.67%	0.21%
Non-CBSA	-4.16%	4.46%	-3.89%
Nonmetro 2003	-1.52%	4.59%	-1.42%

Percent of Population by Age – 2000

	<i>School Age 5 to 17</i>	<i>Working Age 18 to 64</i>	<i>Elderly 65 and Over</i>
Metro 1999	19.16%	62.02%	11.70%
Nonmetro 1999	17.90%	59.71%	16.54%
Metro 2003	19.15%	62.00%	11.75%
Micro 2003	17.89%	60.41%	15.83%
Non-CBSA 2003	18.00%	58.78%	17.45%
Nonmetro 2003	17.93%	59.82%	16.43%

Per Capita Income – 1999

Metro 1999	23,554
Nonmetro 1999	17,610
Metro 2003	23,504
Micro 2003	18,010
Non-CBSA 2003	17,118
Nonmetro 2003	17,684

Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census 1990, 2002, 2005b.

older age group, where only the non-CBSA counties showed a population decrease.

The 18-to-64 working age group differed from the other two age groups; metropolitan, micropolitan, and non-

CBSA counties have increasing populations. The reason for the significant and uniform increases in this age group are unclear, especially in the non-CBSA counties. The gains could be related to the baby boom, migration and retirements, or other factors.

Policy Implications

While the long-term implications of these definition changes are unclear, it is likely that nonmetropolitan policy and programming in Illinois will be altered before long. It is not too soon to consider how to use the new standards in both research and practice.

First, the remaining Illinois nonmetropolitan counties now contain a smaller proportion of the state's total population. Surely, they will have more difficulty making a case for equitable funding for infrastructure and programs. In addition, the basic U.S. Department of Agriculture funding formula considers nonmetropolitan population, poverty, and unemployment, so the state could suffer reduced federal funding.

On the other hand, formerly nonmetropolitan counties that have become metropolitan could find themselves in a more competitive position when it comes to applying for funds for housing for the elderly and physically disabled from the Department of Housing and Urban Development. There may be a downside for low-income renters, however, because the inclusion in metropolitan areas means that the subsidy for Section 8 housing rent increases. There also could be rent increases for low-income families because the area is now considered metropolitan.

Second, counties once considered nonmetropolitan may no longer be eligible for targeted programs, even though they remain fundamentally rural. Conversely, these counties may become eligible for programming directed toward metropolitan areas; however, the programs may not fit the counties' needs because of their rural character.

Third, it is relatively clear that the research community will benefit from the new standards because they allow a picture of a more diversified nonmetropolitan America. Yet, the same caveats apply for researchers and policymakers alike. It is important to consider the impact of the definition changes on the counties under consideration.

We offer several propositions for consideration by researchers, policymakers, and those who deliver programs:

- True to Tweeten and Brinkman's (1976) original conceptualization of "micropolitan," it is important to remember that these relatively small urban areas serve larger rural regions. Because of their size, they face different issues than larger urban areas. They also offer a key to regional rural development activities.
- The Census's tract-level analysis of population density, aerial photographs, and ground truthing can help increase understanding of localized areas in counties where rural and urban distinctions may be blurred.
- Outlying and adjacent counties probably differ extensively from the urban core and, therefore, need different policy treatment in terms of economic development, schools, and other services. These counties' government activities and service provision are limited by the lack of employment opportunities; less-developed infrastructure; and lower wealth, income, and tax base.
- Cross-checking with other statistical sources, such as county-level Bureau of Economic Analysis figures, will help understand the needs and opportunities of micropolitan and outlying counties.
- Using USDA's rural-urban continuum can help with analyzing a county's status.

Even if the implications of the new standards for metropolitan and nonmetropolitan counties remain somewhat unclear, the figures presented here suggest significant changes in the nonmetropolitan Illinois statistical landscape. Yet, the new definitions should allow researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to better understand the nuances across the diverse areas of metropolitan, micropolitan, and nonmetropolitan Illinois.

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