

# Rural Research Report



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## Population Trends in Rural Downstate Illinois

Rural areas are undergoing a significant transition with both opportunities and challenges that will require effective management and investment strategies by all levels of government. Since 2007, the recession has magnified long-term shifts in employment and economic activity, especially in rural areas. The employment structure continues to change as relatively high-wage states in the Midwest face more competition from Right-to-Work states and overseas locations offering lower wages, fewer regulations, and/or other competitive advantages. The loss of manufacturing with relatively high-paying jobs, both in rural communities and regional centers, has seriously eroded incomes which, in turn, affects businesses on main streets, leading to further losses in retail employment, construction, government services, and ultimately the tax base. The impacts of these trends on the Illinois economy were examined in previous *Rural Research Reports* published by the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs (see Walzer 2001, 2006; Walzer et al. 1994, 2002).

The continued aging of the population and declining fertility rates have affected the workforce, causing prospective companies to seriously evaluate the availability of skilled workers locally. At the same time, the population's aging process has brought higher demand for health care and related services, placing more pressure on rural areas to provide them.

Secondary school graduates continue to move away from their home communities to pursue higher education opportunities. Rural areas often do not have the business, employment, or income opportunities that allow them to return after completing higher education. Since these are often young families in their child-raising years who would naturally add to the population base, rural areas do not grow as quickly as metro areas that offer better opportunities.

Recent growth in population in some areas has involved higher numbers of immigrants, notably Hispanics, who concentrate in certain parts of Illinois because of employment (Tobias 2011). These residents often hold lower-wage jobs and may need additional educational services to participate effectively in the local economy. Sometimes, if not for these increases, the counties would have declined in population.

The recent boom in prices paid for farm products has meant higher incomes and land prices in rural areas which can be positive for rural economies and local governments, especially those with a strong retail sector. The growing importance of locally raised food and increasing concern about food security also offers opportunities for rural areas to pursue new markets. A continued focus on alternative energy production, such as Ethanol and wind, provides rural areas with a competitive advantage for future production facilities.

Advancements in information technology (IT) over the long term will also offer better opportunities for remote areas to participate effectively in the information-based economy. Because of limited user demand, however, rural areas lag behind in adoption and implementation of basic telecommunications infrastructure. Nevertheless,

continued efforts to bring high-quality IT facilities to rural Illinois are essential to future prosperity.

These and other trends make it profitable for policymakers in downstate Illinois (defined as counties outside of the Chicago metro area), and especially in rural Illinois—the nonmetro downstate counties—to review the implications of demographic and employment shifts in the past decade (2000 to 2010).<sup>1</sup> At the very least, population losses in rural counties mean that their political representation will decline as the geographic size of legislative districts increases.

While detailed Census data are limited, the information available provides several insights into issues that could arise in the future. This *Rural Research Report* examines

demographic and economic trends for three groups: counties in the Chicago metro area and downstate counties, with the latter subdivided into metro and nonmetro counties. This subdivision can provide insights into trends that may require different policies and strategies in the future.

The three types of counties vary in terms of issues to be addressed even though they are linked economically. Revitalizing the Illinois economy will require policies that recognize the unique issues faced and the opportunities available for increasing employment and prosperity. The inability of a “one approach or policy fits all” has never been more apparent. This *Rural Research Report* focuses mainly on demographic changes; a comparable analysis is underway on economic trends and issues.

## Population Trends

Statewide, Illinois had a population increase of 3.3 percent between 2000 and 2010, less than the Midwestern average of 3.9 percent and well below the average of surrounding states (Indiana, 6.6%; Iowa, 4.1%; Kentucky, 7.4%; Missouri, 7.0%; and Wisconsin, 6.0%).<sup>2</sup> Within Illinois, the major story in terms of recent population trends was that 41 Illinois counties gained while 61 lost (Figure 1). In many rural counties, these trends represent a continuation of past population losses and, in some cases, this has been an issue for decades.

A majority of counties with population increases are either in the Chicago metro area or in downstate metro counties. For example, the average county in the Chicago metro area increased 27.8 percent compared with a 4.1 percent increase in downstate metro counties. By contrast, the average nonmetro downstate county *decreased* 2.6 percent.

Statewide, only four counties lost more than one percent per year; unfortunately, all of them are rural. They are small counties, three of which are in deep southern Illinois. The remaining counties with population declines are also in downstate Illinois. Metro status clearly seems to be associated with positive change, probably because of better employment opportunities and/or amenities.

**Counties by Population Size.** Overall, 27 Illinois counties (26.5%) had a population of 15,000 or less in 2010 compared with 25.5 percent in 1970, and the declines are especially present in small counties. For example, 78.6 percent of counties with populations less than 10,000 in 2000 declined in the past decade (Table 1). The probability of a decline decreases to 22.2 percent for counties between 100,000 to 249,999 and 11.1 percent for larger counties. Statewide, more than

50 percent of the counties smaller than 50,000 declined in population between 2000 and 2010.

Special concern is with the 15 counties of 10,000 or less which lost an average of 5.7 percent of their population in the past decade and, in some cases, may ultimately have difficulty providing public services under existing governmental arrangements.

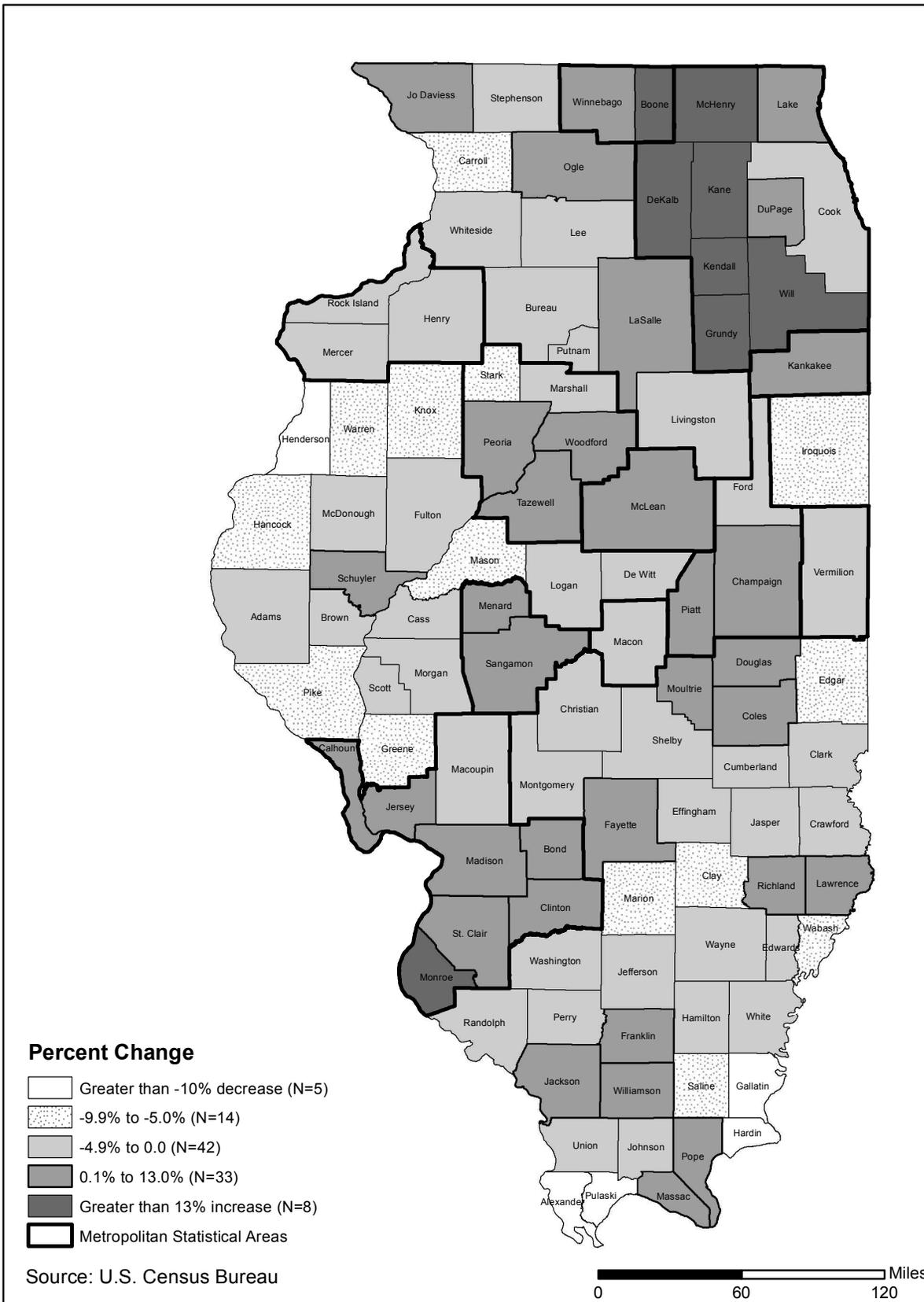
If these trends continue, the ability of small counties to continue financing an increasingly complex set of services, often with shrinking tax bases, will be an issue in the future. This issue could become difficult for county governments if they are called on to help coordinate delivery of services among small communities which also are declining in population (Sudhipongpracha, Walzer, and Tobias 2010). New approaches to cooperation and collaboration will be necessary. In some instances, a better use of IT may offer opportunities to deliver better services at lower cost (Sudhipongpracha and Walzer 2010). More research on these options is definitely needed and is currently underway.

**Table 1. Illinois Population Change by County Size, 2000-2010**

County Population	2000 Census	2010 Census	Pct. Chg. 2000-2010	Pct. with Decreasing Population
Less than 10,000	14	15	-5.7	78.6
10,000 to 24,999	36	36	-1.9	69.4
25,000 to 49,999	23	22	2.4	73.9
50,000 to 99,999	11	10	11.1	55.5
100,000 to 249,999	9	10	5.0	22.2
250,000 or more	9	9	3.0	11.1
Total	102	102		

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, decennial *Census of Population and Housing* 2000, 2010

Figure 1. Illinois Population Change, 2000-2010



Further examination of the population trends shows that 34 counties (33.3%) have had continued growth since 1990, while 25 (24.5%) have had declines (Table 2). A preponderance of counties with growth are metro, while those with continued declines are rural. Perhaps the more interesting comparison involves counties that had *grown* between 1990 and 2000 but then *declined* in the following decade. In fact, 32.4 percent (33) of the Illinois counties are in this category, with rural downstate counties representing the majority. At the same time, ten counties declined in the 1990s but grew in the 2000s. All of these counties (except for St. Clair) are rural downstate counties, and these counties provide positive examples of reversals in population trends. More research is underway to understand factors associated with this growth experience.

The experiences during the past decade suggest that rural counties continue to be at risk regarding long-term viability and, if current trends continue, they may experience significant difficulties financing and delivering the levels of public service needed to retain and/or attract population. New and innovative local development strategies and approaches using the latest technology will be needed for prosperity in the future.

**Changes by Age.** Changes in the age distribution are also important. The average age of population in Illinois counties increased more in rural counties (8.3%) than statewide (4.6%) in the previous decade (Table 3). The average age in rural counties (41.6 years) compares with 35.2 years in the Chicago metro area and 39.7 in downstate metro counties. Changes in average age, however, reflect two distinct trends. The growth in the elderly population (65 years and older) was higher in metro counties (except Cook) than in their rural counterparts, perhaps because of better access to health and retirement facilities. It is difficult, however, to separate differences between “aging in place” and “migration effects” in which elderly residents leave rural areas for better services or to be with family.

A second component involves the very young (five years of age or less). More than three-fifths of the counties (61) reported declines in number of residents in this age cohort. Virtually all counties in this category (except Peoria) are

**Table 2. County Population Trends, 1990-2010**

Population Change	Number	Percent
Loss 1990-2010	25	24.5
Loss 1990-2000, Growth 2000-2010	10	9.8
Growth 1990-2000, Loss 2000-2010	33	32.4
Growth 1990-2010	34	33.3
Total	102	100

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, decennial *Census of Population and Housing* 1990, 2000, 2010

**Table 3. Median Age in Illinois Counties**

Area Name	Median Age (Years)		
	2000	2010	2020
Chicago Metropolitan Area	33.4	35.2	35.6
Downstate Metropolitan Areas	37.1	39.7	40.2
Downstate Nonmetropolitan Areas	38.4	41.6	41.7
State of Illinois	34.7	36.3	37.1

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, decennial *Census of Population and Housing* 2000, 2010; Woods and Poole Economics, Inc. 2011

nonmetro and downstate. At the same time, however, very rural counties on the western edge of Illinois and in southern Illinois show at least slight increases in this cohort. In a few instances, the presence of a state institution such as a university (e.g., McDonough County) can help explain these changes. Counties with declines in the very young cohort will have difficulty maintaining the public school system. Alternative approaches, such as using IT to deliver elementary education, will be important in the future. Otherwise, more collaborative approaches or consolidation of districts may be necessary. This issue will be of special concern in the small counties that have experienced long-term population declines.

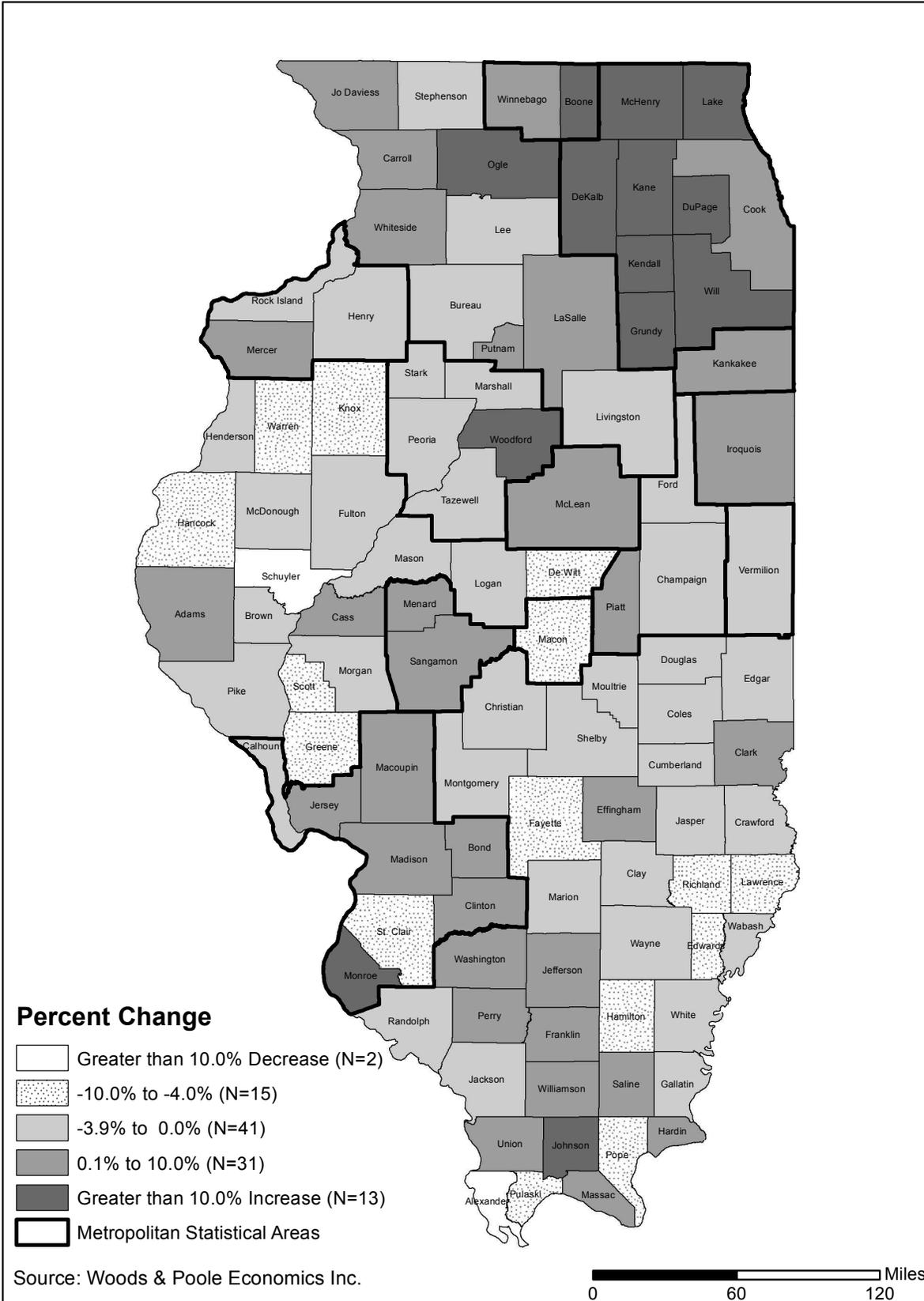
Not to be overlooked in the population trends is the growing importance of immigrant populations such as Hispanics. The increases tend to be in downstate areas with already established concentrations of similar groups or special employment opportunities such as meat processing plants. Likewise, significant increases in Hispanic residents during the 2000s occurred in the Chicago metro area, especially in the collar counties. Increases also occurred in downstate metro areas such as Clark, Lawrence, and Scott Counties.

### Expected Population Trends

Population trends for the future are based partly on economic activity; and during a major recession, it is nearly impossible to accurately predict employment. Nevertheless, it is useful to try to gain some insights into how population changes might affect issues in downstate Illinois. For current purposes, we provide projections from Woods and Poole Economics, Inc. (2011) for the next decade.

In comparing the projections, differences by region in Illinois become readily apparent (Figure 2). Illinois, as a state, is expected to increase by 7.3 percent, well more than the previous decade. On average, the nine counties in the Chicago metro area are forecast to increase 10.3 percent with the growth largely in the collar counties. This is not unexpected because of the global connectivity of Chicago

Figure 2. Illinois Population Forecasts, 2010-2020



and the related business activity and opportunities of large metro areas for innovation and application of technology.

Equally important, however, is that downstate *metro* counties are projected to increase 2.3 percent, while downstate *rural* counties will be stagnant or possibly lose 0.3 percent of their population. If the projections materialize, western and southern Illinois counties will be especially hard-hit. The northeastern counties will continue to increase at more than 10 percent or more, except for Cook, which is still projected to increase. The effects of these increases are likely to be felt by counties in northwestern Illinois, although some of the projected increases there may be from the growth in the Dubuque and/or Quad Cities areas.

Downstate, Springfield, Bloomington-Normal, and St. Louis are likely to continue as economic drivers for surrounding areas. While projections for Champaign-Urbana are less than some of the other downstate metro areas, enrollment

at the University of Illinois is a major influence, and those numbers depend on many exogenous factors. Nevertheless, rural development in Illinois must definitely involve ways to stimulate the downstate metro areas in addition to directly helping rural counties. Other than very small counties at the southern tip of Illinois, many counties smaller than 15,000 are forecast to have slight increases in population, which is encouraging news in light of previous discussions about their ability to provide a full range of services in the future.

Although these projections are based on current economic conditions, they provide broad insights into possible trends. An economic recovery will affect industries differently as will changes in state and federal government policies. For instance, proposed reductions or elimination of ethanol subsidies could adversely affect incomes earned in downstate rural counties. Perhaps the most that can be said now is that current projections suggest a continuation of population trends ongoing for the past decade or more.

## Concluding Comments

Population trends in the past decade and, in some cases, prior, suggest that downstate Illinois, and especially rural counties, will continue to face adverse economic issues that may require policy and/or legislative changes. Many of these population trends are caused by economic shifts and loss of jobs in remote rural areas. Several trends and implications are especially important.

First, downstate rural counties experienced higher population declines than the metro or state areas. Likewise, the smallest counties (population-wise) had the highest probability of a decline and had the greatest percentage of declines. Since these declines have persisted for several decades, the paramount issue is whether some of these counties will reach a size that no longer allows them to deliver public services at reasonable tax rates or levels. Many of these counties are forecast to have population declines in the future, although some are expected to have population reversals as well. The ability to provide services will be especially important with respect to healthcare services that are considered essential to attract and retain residents, especially the elderly.

Second, the governmental structure through which services are delivered in small counties often was created when the county had a much larger population. A policy question, then, will be, with a smaller population size, can residents afford the same density of governments or will they have to find new ways of delivering services? If so, and if some governments are no longer needed, then

statewide policy actions may be necessary to encourage more collaboration and/or consolidation of services. Likewise, do less populous counties have the capacity and/or staff to effectively manage complex operations? In some cases, technology may mean that several counties, by working together, can deliver the services at less cost. In other cases, it may mean that several counties can contract with private agencies for management services.

Third, the average age of populations in rural counties is older than in metro areas, and the increase in age during the previous decade was higher in downstate rural than in either downstate metro or the Chicago metro area. Likewise, the very young age cohort is declining in some rural counties which may pose difficulties with elementary education students who may be required to travel long distances for school.

Fourth, continued loss of youth in rural counties because of a lack of appealing employment opportunities will lessen the attractiveness of the workforce—especially in rural counties. Thus, during the recovery, businesses evaluating locations may have less interest in rural counties which will make recruiting business for economic recovery even more difficult in these areas. Organizing and marketing by region within the state may become more important in the future as a way for rural counties to mount an effective economic development initiative. Clearly, downstate metro areas provide many of the jobs that employ rural residents

in the surrounding counties, so the link between downstate metro and rural counties is likely to increase even more.

Finally, as policymakers continue to pursue rural development policies in Illinois, it is of utmost importance that they recognize the links between downstate metro and rural counties. The rural counties increasingly depend on metro areas for employment with high wages. Likewise, the metro counties draw dependable workers from surrounding counties as an integral part of their labor force. The average commuting distance for rural residents has increased. Absent a major growth in employment opportunities in small communities, it is likely that these commuting

patterns will continue to increase. Higher fuel prices may work against that trend, but commuters may have relatively few alternatives.

It is important that rural areas take stock of their development options and that policymakers continue to invest in transportation and IT infrastructure to help these areas stay competitive as business locations. New industries on the horizon are making more effective use of agricultural products which will offer new opportunities for rural places in Illinois that are prepared to take advantage of these opportunities. A coordinated development effort will enhance the opportunities for success.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> For this analysis, the 2003 metro/nonmetro designation by the Office of Management and Budget is used, but the rural and micropolitan counties have been combined to sharpen the contrast between metro and nonmetro, which are shown as “rural” in this paper although the difference is recognized.
- <sup>2</sup> For more information on national trends, see “Population Distribution and Change: 2000 to 2010.” 2011. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, U.S. Bureau of the Census.

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