



Annotated List of Resources for Measuring Rural Development Progress



Version 1.0 – Released June 2022

This *Annotated List of Resources for Measuring Rural Development Progress* was developed and is maintained by the Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group (CSG). CSG created it in response to requests from rural community and economic development practitioners who want to share resources and ideas with each other as they work individually and collectively to improve outcomes for rural families, communities and regions.

CSG enthusiastically encourages you to alert us to other useful resources for measuring rural progress – as well as your perspective on any of the resources included in this list. If you have any perspectives or resources to offer, please email them to: CSG.Program@AspenInstitute.org

We will update the version number and release date each time we revise this list. You can always find the most current version online at: AspenCSG.org



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THE BASICS ON THE DEFINITION OF RURAL¹

Why is this important? There are many ways to think about which places and people qualify as “rural.” In many cases, federal agencies set up specific rural definitions to establish eligibility for participating in or receiving funds from specific programs. In fact, there are dozens of definitions of “rural” used just within the federal government.

But, of those dozens, two definitions are dominant, and they generally provide the basis for other definitions:

- **Census definition of “rural”:** The United States Census Bureau defines “rural” based on population density. The Census assigns its rural designation to *population* at the sub-county level – down to individual Census tracts.
- **OMB “nonmetro” designation:** The federal Office of Management and Budget (OMB) designates counties (but not smaller areas) as “metropolitan” or “nonmetropolitan.” This definition is commonly used in analysis – with “nonmetropolitan” standing in for “rural” – even though the nonmetropolitan designation is only an informal equivalent to rural.

The USDA Economic Research Service notes that: “OMB ‘Nonmetro’ and Census ‘Rural’ provide different but equally useful perspectives on rural populations.” At the same time, the fact that these distinct definitions are both commonly used creates some important challenges for the field. It can be difficult to understand any analysis of rural people and places, or the implications of that analysis, without digging into which definition – or which variant of which definition – is being used. This is doubly true when it comes to comparing “facts” about rural, especially those that may conflict. For example, many “rural” people, as defined by the Census Bureau, live in “metropolitan” (commonly called urban) counties, as defined by OMB. This situation adds levels of complexity to any rural initiative that is trying to use commonly available data, either for planning or for assessing results. (For a visual illustration of the dramatic differences between commonly used rural definitions, see the [Defining Rural map](#) from the Center on Rural Innovation.)

[Read on to find where you can learn more about varying federal definitions of rural.](#)

The Census Bureau Definition of Rural

This site presents a series of interactive maps and text that describes how the Census Bureau defines rural based on population density. The Census defines “urban” populations based on specific density thresholds; any remaining population that does not meet the “urban” criteria is categorized as “rural.” The land area where the rural population is located is thus also identified as rural. This site highlights the counter-intuitive reality that the majority of America’s rural *population*, as defined by the Census Bureau, is located in counties that OMB classifies as *metropolitan*, often relatively close-in to major urban areas. It also illustrates that rural is far more than the OMB “nonmetropolitan” designation.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. Follow the text on the left to learn about the current definition and the evolution of the definition over time. The maps shown on the right illustrate the text, and you can zoom in or out to states and sub-state places. Use the two other tabs on this site to find rural-related Census data and interesting facts about rural demographics.

¹ Note that much of the data referenced in this section is updated after each Decennial Census; it can take up to two years after the completion of a Census for those updates to happen, depending on the level of the data. As of the release of this Call to Action, only topline 2020 Census updates had been released.



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USDA Economic Research Service Review of Rural Definitions

This concise review of the difference between the Census definition of rural and the OMB nonmetropolitan designation complements the Census Bureau discussion described above.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. Use this site to understand the multidimensional nature of rural, and how different definitions are suited for different uses. Between this site and the Census Bureau visualization above, you can gain a better understanding of a complex topic. This site also provides high-quality downloadable maps.

Percent Rural and Urban in 2010 by State and County

This Census Bureau site provides spreadsheets with detailed figures for urban and rural populations, and the land area where those populations live, in every state and county in the United States. (At the time of this writing, the data on this site is from the 2010 Decennial Census, but the Census Bureau will be updating it with the 2020 Decennial Census data.)

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. Scroll down to the subsection titled *List of Population, Land Area, and Percent Urban and Rural in 2010 and Changes from 2000 to 2010*. The Excel file titled *Percent Urban and Rural in 2010 by State and County* provides total rural and urban population, their relative percentages of total population, and land area that is rural or urban. Note that the land area is given in square meters; convert to square miles by dividing the total meters by 2,589,988 (the square meters in a square mile). Also note that this dataset does not include water area in the land area totals, as some other datasets do. Once the site is updated with 2020 Census data, you will be able to use it to understand changes in rural population and land area between 2010 and 2020.

ON THE CHALLENGES OF RURAL DATA AND MEASUREMENT

Why is this important? Economic and community development practitioners in communities and Native nations across the rural United States express frustration that so much federal data is inadequate for their analysis and program design needs. (See the brief discussion of this in the *important Context* section on page 4.) The resource highlighted here gives important context for that frustration, as well as potential solutions.

In Search of Good Rural Data: Measuring Rural Prosperity

This is a well-researched report published by the [Urban Institute](#) in partnership with the [Housing Assistance Council](#) and the [Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group](#). Its analysis describes the challenges of locating and using reliable rural data, and it makes helpful suggestions for possible solutions.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. This report can help practitioners and others understand the “why and what” of rural data limitations. More importantly, it highlights a number of policy and administrative suggestions on how to increase data usability. This report is useful reading to ground rural development practitioners and policymakers in the challenges of “measuring” rural.



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RESOURCES THAT ASSIGN RURAL TYPOLOGIES USING DATA

Why is this important? Some researchers and scientists construct typologies and categories to analyze and understand their subject. Because local rural and Native nation regions in the rural United States are diverse and complex, classification systems can be useful tools to find commonalities and differences – and useful for practitioners in peer communities and for policymakers when they design targeted program solutions.

County Typology Codes – USDA Economic Research Service

The Economic Research Service, the research arm of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), has long classified rural counties using two different typologies:

- **County Economic Types** assign each county to a category based on its dominant economic or industry activity, such as manufacturing, mining, or agriculture – categories that are mutually exclusive.
- **County Policy Types** assign each county to one or more (or none) of six “policy” types: persistent poverty, low educational attainment, low employment, population loss, persistent child poverty, or retirement destination. Note that five of these six County Policy Types describe a negative condition. Also note that unlike the County Economic Types, the Policy Type classifications are not mutually exclusive, and some counties receive no designation at all.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. This site provides maps and documentation that you can use to identify economic and policy contexts for specific counties, or to analyze trends across counties.

Distressed Communities Index – Economic Innovation Group

This resource provides analysis at both county and zip code levels and is remarkable for its simplicity and clarity of presentation. Because its data can be sorted by racial composition, education, occupation, and nativity, it is a good resource for doing equity analysis. For example, the data show that in North Carolina, approximately 35 percent of the state’s African American population, as compared to 17.6 percent of the state’s total population, lives in a distressed county.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. Based on seven socioeconomic indicators, this resource assigns each county and zip code to one of five typologies: Prosperous, Comfortable, Mid-tier, At Risk, or Distressed. Data can also be sorted by racial composition to show the percentage of a selected population that lives in one of the five typologies. This framework can be used to show the geographic distribution of racial or ethnic groupings, education, nativity and occupation. (Congressional district is also noted but may be more difficult to use in running an analysis.)

Fifteen County Types – American Communities Project (ACP)

This is an interesting high-altitude portrait of America that works to portray and categorize the diversity and division that exists across the country. Now based at Michigan State University School of Journalism, the American Communities Project has created 15 county classifications based on a rich array of data that attempts, in their words, “to understand the subtleties and complexities of the United States as the country reimagines its future and its place in the world.” Every county – rural and urban – is assigned to one of the classifications. ACP also produces an offshoot analysis using its classifications, in partnership with the Center on Rural Innovation, on [Deaths of Despair](#) across America.



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HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. This product is most useful for seeing broad patterns and similarities across the 15 county classifications. The stories generated from the classifications can also provide useful insights, and the Deaths of Despair data can be useful in identifying health-related population conditions that may tie to both economic and social outcomes.

Reenvisioning Rural America – Urban Institute

This recently released Urban Institute product flips the script on nearly all the other typologies and classification systems. Rather than assigning places to categories based on distress indicators, this analysis uses a framework of strengths, potential, and assets – called “capitals” – to classify rural places. As they rightly note, “rural communities are much more than what they need.”

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. Using a Community Capitals framework based on seven major “capitals” – Built, Cultural, Financial, Human, Natural, Political, and Social – this resource assigns every rural Census tract to one of seven “rural peer groups” (e.g., Centers of Wealth and Health; Diverse Outlying Tracts; and Diverse, Institution-Rich Hubs). This resource takes on an admirable but daunting challenge: constructing a data-driven framework, even though, as the authors acknowledge, there is little place-comparative data available for many of the capital types, others are difficult to quantify, and many community assets overlap. Nonetheless, this new typology might prove helpful to rural communities working to understand, define, and prioritize their own assets.

RESOURCES FOR IN-DEPTH EXPLORATION OF MULTIPLE INDICATORS

Why is this important? No single data point exists in a vacuum. Tools like digital “atlases” that show multiple indicators can help demonstrate connections, target interventions, and identify new ways to measure progress. These resources also help advance Measurement Principle #1 that surfaced during the TRALE process: *Expand the range of individual and community assets used to indicate critical rural development progress.*

Annual Rural America at a Glance – USDA Economic Research Service

This annual publication is developed and published by the [Economic Research Service of USDA](#). The *Rural America at a Glance* series has a useful-content ratio far above its relative brevity. The staff of the Economic Research Service have consistently produced high quality products that convey not just information, but usable knowledge. Every year’s edition has a timely theme for its analytic focus.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. This is the resource you pull out of your back pocket or shoulder bag for current facts useful in two-minute elevator advocacy. For example, the 2021 edition offers a solid overview of rural demographic change between 2010 and 2020 and focuses on persistently poor counties, the impact to date of the COVID-19 pandemic on rural and urban places, and broadband coverage. (Enter “Rural America at a Glance” in the website’s search bar to find previous editions with other focus topics.)



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Atlas of Rural and Small Town America – USDA Economic Research Service

The Economic Research Service is the flagship federal institution that does research and analysis on rural and agricultural conditions across the nation. This data atlas does not have all the graphic punch of other sites, but its importance is that the data (which goes only to the county level) is regularly updated and rigorously reliable, which sets it apart from other data resources.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. The landing page for this website provides a good overview of what can be found and how you can use it. The link to the interactive atlas is on the left. The Atlas link opens up to its default map: national population change rate. In the upper left-hand is a small drop-down menu titled “Select Map to Display” where you can select a specific data category: people, jobs, income, county classifications, or veterans – each of which provides a drop-down link to individual indicators in that category. On the right side of the map, you can select all geographies, Metropolitan, or Nonmetropolitan. Clicking on any county in the US will provide you the data on any indicator you select. Also note that, if you wish, you can download the entire database or a subset on one specific indicator or place, down to the county level.

Digital-Economy Opportunity – Center on Rural Innovation

Based in rural Vermont, the Center on Rural Innovation (CORI) provides much-needed analysis linking rural opportunity to digital innovation. CORI aims to fill gaps in access to rural data especially related to the connections between digital infrastructure and economic development, including broadband availability, rural community assets, digital workforce, and potential for tech-based business development.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. CORI’s many maps and data tools can help rural practitioners understand and communicate their communities’ status and potential in the digital economy. For example, the *Data for Action* map allows users to compare communities across 40 variables spanning demographics, housing, economy, entrepreneurship, community assets, and federal funding, and the *Scouting rural digital economy opportunities* map shows indicators like patent activity and broadband access that contribute to a digital-economy ecosystem. Other data tools include the *Tech Talent Tracker*, which generates in-depth reports on a selected county and peer counties on indicators related to developing a robust tech workforce. All charts are easily downloadable for presentations, grants, and reports. CORI’s blog is also a great resource for guidance on using data; for example, *How to tell your community’s story using data*.

Economic Profile System – Headwater Economics

The **Economic Profile System** developed by Headwaters Economics offers quick facts and immediately downloadable local-profile reports on a wide range of data for individual communities, counties, indigenous areas, or states. Besides current data, when possible, it presents change data over a longer period; seeing these long-term change trends offers a perspective that is hard to find elsewhere. Also unique is that they explain why specific indicators are important. In addition, in their Population at Risk data portrait, they highlight where data is less reliable in very rural settings. (Both practices should be standard in data presentations.)

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. Users can enter the name of a community, county, indigenous area, or state, and immediately download a data report covering up to four standard subject areas: Demographic, Populations at Risk, Socioeconomic Trends, and Key Indicators. Beyond that, Headwaters also offers area reports on industry sectors that predominate in rural places (e.g., timber, tourism) and county-level reports on natural hazards as well as land management and use. Their comprehensive and detailed information makes this a go-to site. Note also that users have the option to produce a report that compares one selected geography to another. Also see Headwaters recently released [\(2022\) Rural Capacity Map and Index](#).



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Housing Plus – HAC Data Portal

For fifty years, the Housing Assistance Council (HAC) has been one of rural America's greatest partners in building and preserving decent affordable housing. HAC's data resources are significant, diverse, and can be fine-grained down to the county level. HAC's data portal has a simple, intuitive layout and includes a wide range of economic, demographic, social, housing, and housing finance data. They make an additional major contribution by providing information on USDA Rural Development Obligations. They also produce briefs and visualizations on special and timely topics, for example, COVID-19 in rural America, rural diversity, rural homelessness, Native American housing, and much more.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. The HAC Data Portal has a simple but comprehensive design. A user can select a state or county, and then select a data theme: demographic, social, economic, housing, or housing finance. Once that is selected, you can choose to generate a report that has all the data for the section, or you can drill down further and choose specific data sets. Users can also produce reports to compare rural, suburban, and urban data within a specific state. Like Headwaters' Economic Profiles, another notable advantage of this data platform is that they indicate the reliability of specific data.

Income Tax Form Statistics Data – Internal Revenue Service

This is an exceptionally detailed, seldom used (or even known) source that breaks out 1040 tax form data at the zip code level. The data is available sorted by levels of adjusted gross income. The Internal Revenue Service carefully scrubs this data, and there is generally a two-year lag in releasing it. At the time of publication, the most recent data is for the 2019 tax year.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. This data series goes back to 1998, so a deep longitudinal analysis of the many data points collected on income tax returns is possible. Among the 148 columns of data are, besides AGI, the salaries and wages portion of AGI, home mortgage interest paid, total charitable contributions, child and dependent care credits, earned income credits, and much more. Besides zip code, the data is also available at the County, Metropolitan and Micropolitan geographies, and by Congressional District for years 2017 through 2019.

Net Migration Patterns for U.S. Counties

Population change takes place in two ways: by natural growth and decline (the change caused by the number of children born and people who die in a geography) and by migration (the change in the number of people who choose to move into or out of a geography). This resource focuses on the latter. One indicator of community vitality is the in-migration of families, especially (but not only) those of prime child-bearing ages. Understanding the pattern of in- and out-migration is useful for targeting development priorities. This resource has been supported by different funders and analysts over its 60 years; the current project analysis was conducted by the Department of Social Sciences at Michigan Technological University, the Applied Population Laboratory at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and the Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. This dataset provides age-cohort breakouts for both in-migration and out-migration for every county in the nation. Users can download maps, charts, and data for any state, county, or multiple-county groupings on net migration; specify it by decade, race, or gender; and append other data to it. Users can also examine the data according to USDA ERS County Typologies (see above). This resource uses Decennial Census data and covers ten-year intervals going back to the 1950s. At this writing, its most recent data is from 2000 to 2010, however it should be updated soon with 2020 Decennial Census data to cover the 2010 to 2020 period.



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RESOURCES FOR RURAL DATA FOCUSED ON EQUITY ISSUES AND OUTCOMES

Why is this important? The fourth Measurement Principle that surfaced in the TRALE process – to measure decreases *in place, race, and class divides...as inherent elements of increasing rural prosperity* – focuses on the importance of measuring equity as a rural development outcome. These resources can help advance that aim.

ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) – United for ALICE

This data initiative, pioneered by one New Jersey county's United Way more than a decade ago, is now a national effort with county-level data available nationwide. The power of ALICE is its focus on households with employed individuals who earn more than the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) but less than the basic cost of living for the state – which is called the “ALICE Threshold.” ALICE provides a data-driven, reality-based counter to the conventional belief that only those below the “official” poverty line face challenges.² The ALICE methodology is simple and powerful, and its narrative-changing presentation is compelling – which explains why many rural development practitioners use it in their work.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. The ALICE website provides three statistics for each state and county: (1) households in poverty as measured by FPL, (2) “ALICE” households based on the local cost of living, and (3) households living above the ALICE threshold. For example, in the most recent ALICE analysis (2020 report based on 2018 data), 10 percent of Virginia's households are in government-defined poverty, but its ALICE households tally at 29 percent; the remaining 61 percent live more comfortably above the ALICE threshold. Partnerships in 23 states have produced deeper [county and municipal-level ALICE analyses](#) published at regular intervals, including modified cost of living analyses, the “Landscape of Work,” and labor force trends especially focused on ALICE workers. If you are in a state without a deeper ALICE analysis, strike up a conversation; producing state reports typically involves a combination of local United Ways and one or more philanthropic and/or corporate partners.

Index of Deep Disadvantage

This useful analysis adroitly addresses these key questions: *What does disadvantage look like across the United States? And where is it found?* A University of Michigan/Princeton University research team incorporates three types of data in this index: health (life expectancy, low infant birth rate), poverty (rates of poverty and deep poverty), and social mobility (using [Opportunity Atlas](#) data analysis, highlighted elsewhere in this Resource List – the “social mobility” measure estimates income change across generations for very low- income households). The methodology is exceptional in that it integrates more conventional and available measures on health and poverty with the mobility measure – and does so in a way that allows for comparing places.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. This composite portrait is best used as a snapshot to compare both similar (rural compared to other rural counties) and dissimilar geographies (counties to cities, and rural counties to urban counties or cities). Using this index and data can help inform strategies both to design household-level assistance and to address systemic needs in a region.

² As the ALICE website points out: “ALICE is your child care worker, the cashier at your supermarket, the gas attendant, the salesperson at your big box store, your waitress, a home health aide, an office clerk. ALICE cannot always pay the bills, has little or nothing in savings, and is forced to make tough choices such as deciding between quality child care or paying the rent. One unexpected car repair or medical bill can push these financially strapped families over the edge.”



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COVID-19 Dashboard for Rural America – The Daily Yonder

The Daily Yonder, the ground-breaking rural news and information service produced by the Center for Rural Strategies, has been publishing this COVID-19 Dashboard since early in the pandemic. There are numerous COVID-19 dashboards at the state and national level, but this effort by the Daily Yonder focuses on rural incidence and impact and is carefully constructed by knowledgeable rural data geeks. It is kept up-to-date, and the commentary with each update identifies rural-important trends from a national perspective, across the broad spectrum that is rural and Native nation America.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. The data are cleanly and logically laid out in both maps and charts. The lead map presents detailed data on infection rates across the nation – and also reports pop-up data for every county as you mouse over it. The map classifications indicate cases per 100,000 people using gradations of color for both rural (nonmetro) and metro counties. Maps predominate on the dashboard, but the graphic/chart visualizations – on rural and urban vaccination and death rates over time, for example – are equally informative and powerful. Another stand-out feature of this site is the diversity of stories on how COVID challenges rural America, especially rural hospitals. It is a reminder that behind every data point there is a person, a struggle, a grief – and often an example of hope and resilience.

Economic Mobility and Equity – Opportunity Atlas

The Opportunity Atlas is a data visualization tool developed by Opportunity Insights, based at Harvard University. The Atlas is a visually powerful, interactive data platform for researchers and policy advocates to gain understanding about economic outcomes for people based on where one grew up. This site is unique in its view of equity through the lens of economic mobility later in life, showing that people who grow up in some neighborhoods and rural places experience far less economic mobility over their lifespan than those raised in other areas, and that there are clear differences in that mobility based on race, gender, and parental income as well as zip code.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. This is a comprehensive resource for recognizing gaps in racial and ethnic socio-economic metrics. Navigating the site is a challenge at first, but it is well worth the investment of time to learn. Opportunity Insights has a [series of tutorial videos](#) to maximize use of the Atlas. Users can select a geography, then an indicator – for example, household income at age 35 – and then a race and gender filter. Note that data are available down to the Census tract level, but data at that level can be less available and reliable for very rural geographies. Practitioners and advocates who seek to measure and close the relative gap in socioeconomic outcomes may find this a major resource for analysis and strategy-setting.

Living Wage Calculator – MIT

This Living Wage Calculator is maintained by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The cost of living varies across the United States, and for low-wealth families with narrow financial margins, this difference matters. For advocates and policymakers, it is important to understand how the difference in wage levels can enable working families to move from just surviving toward thriving.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. Although a number of living-wage calculators are available, this one is simple to use and reliably updated. You can select a state, and then either a county or metro region (data is not available below the county level). The data is arrayed in a table that provides the area's living wage, poverty wage, and minimum wage for different sized families. A second table provides typical annual costs for each family classification. This is an informative and useful data resource for understanding and communicating the situation facing low-wealth families.



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Rural and Underserved Counties List – Consumer Financial Protection Bureau

This list identifies counties that have a low volume of financial transactions for mortgages and commercial loans, based on the amount and diversity of lending activity reported by financial institutions that is required by the Home Mortgage Disclosure Act (HMDA). Generated annually by CFPB, for 2022, it includes 1,608 rural counties. To facilitate their increased lending activity in the listed counties, both mortgage and commercial lenders are allowed some regulatory exemptions (a “safe harbor”).

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. This dataset can inform policy makers and local development practitioners about how robust (or not) commercial lending systems are in a given county. If a rural county is listed, it might be an appropriate market for a Community Development Finance Institution to tailor lending and other assistance products to meet entrepreneurial demand, or boost access to homeownership.

Social Determinants of Health (and Equity) – County Health Rankings and Roadmaps

This resource, developed and maintained by the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute, provides a comprehensive data portrait that convincingly connects health outcomes to socio-economic conditions, using the internationally researched social determinants of health (SDOH). The SDOH measures assess a wide range of conditions in the places where people are born, live, learn, work, play, worship, and age that affect a wide range of life outcomes. The Health Rankings introduction says it best: “Many factors influence how well and how long we live, from our access to affordable housing or well-paying jobs to opportunities for a good education for our kids. The County Health Rankings model shows us how these factors work together and illustrates where we can take action to improve health and eliminate unjust barriers to opportunity.”

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. The County Health Rankings site makes it easy to query for 82 community, population, and health indicators for any specific county, rural or urban. The tool also ranks every county – overall, and on each of the 82 individual indicators – compared to other counties in its state. The Rankings provide data in two categories: (1) *health factors*, which include social and economic, physical environment, health behavior, and clinical care “input” factors; and (2) *health outcomes*, which include how long people live, and how people feel in terms of their well-being. This site is worth investing time to learn and explore, and it directly connects a county’s ranking status to a *Take Action to Improve Health* tab that practitioners and advocates can use to consider potential strategies and make peer connections. The site has an [introduction to equity section](#) that is designed to prepare the user to see equity implications in the data.

Youth And Young Adults: A Decade Undone – 2021 Update

In 2019, Measure of America, a program of the Social Science Research Council, produced *A Decade Undone*, a comprehensive national report on disconnected youth — which they then updated in 2021. “Disconnected youth” — also called “opportunity youth” — are defined as individuals between the ages of 16 and 24 who are neither in school nor in the workforce. They are a critical population to address and include in the development process, both for them as individuals and for community futures. Their current status is also an indicator of significant rural and urban divides. One *Measure of America* finding is that rural counties have a youth disconnection rate of 17.3 percent on average, compared to 11.2 percent in urban centers and 9.9 percent in suburbs.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. The website includes both the full report — a rich resource — and an interactive site that encourages exploration of data by state, major metro region, congressional district, and county. Note that for very rural counties with small populations, data limitations prevent getting a good estimate.



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RESOURCES RELATED TO NATIVE NATION DATA AND MEASUREMENT

Why is this important? Native American rural development practitioners that participated in TRALE discussions noted that doing development in Native communities and tribal lands requires an understanding of significant factors that are distinct from those important to rural development in general. They underscored that it is important for non-Indigenous practitioners, policymakers, and resource providers to better understand Native realities if they hope to partner with Native development practitioners and practices.

About Tribes – National Congress of American Indians

This important resource from the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) Policy Research Center covers a wide range of topics – including demographics, health, tribal economies and natural resources, and public safety. The entire website for the National Congress of American Indians is a solid resource for practitioners working across rural and Native nation communities.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. Use the Demographics tab to quickly access a wealth of statistics on Native nations overall. Drill down to the Regional Profiles to access well-contextualized data on each of NCAI's 12 regions, including clearly presented maps, charts, and graphs. A separate PDF report is available for each region.

Data Justice Talk Story – Vibrant Hawai'i

This is an embedded video on the Vibrant Hawai'i website – also available [here](#) on YouTube. It offers a personal and powerful perspective on how cultures that have been pressed to give up agency and sovereignty perceive data collection from the outside. *"What counts as knowledge? What knowledge counts? And who decides? We do. If it is not by us, for us, and with us, then it is against us."*

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. Any community or economic development practitioner, policymaker, or funder can build understanding by watching this discussion. Use it to spark conversation and action on data justice for Native nations.

Fast Facts: Native American Youth and Indian Country – Aspen CNAY

Native nations have a higher percentage of the population that is under 18 compared to the nation as a whole. This resource provides information on Native youth demographics and equity disparities in health, education, and the criminal justice system. It is maintained by the Aspen Institute Center for Native American Youth (CNAY).

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. This set of data points can provide a quick grounding of facts on Native nations and individuals overall across the country, and on the challenges facing Native youth.

Land Issues – Indian Land Tenure Foundation

Understanding the history and reality of legal and administrative systems that have inhibited Native people from owning and controlling reservation lands is one key component of understanding data and measurement difficulties in Native communities. The Indian Land Tenure Foundation works to increase Indian control and management of reservation lands through education, cultural awareness, economic opportunity, and legal reform.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. This website is a portal of information that can help those working in or partnering with Native communities. Use it to explore the history of Indian land tenure, as well as specific issues and challenges facing Native nations, including fractionated ownership, land loss, sovereignty, and more.



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Native Nation Building: It Helps Rural America Thrive – Aspen CSG

This Field Perspectives brief, authored by Native nation practitioners and researchers, and published by the Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group, details the evidence-based characteristics of successful Native nations, focusing on five factors that distinguish the Native nations that achieve their community development goals from those that are less successful. It also explains why strengthening (and measuring) these Native nation building characteristics is also critical to making rural development progress in the regions adjacent to Native nation communities.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. Use this brief to understand the role of data in equitable rural development from a Native perspective, as well as how Native nation building factors can be a foundation for rural development.

RESOURCES FOR MEASURING NETWORKS, COLLABORATION, AND CAPACITY BUILDING

Why is this important? Collaboration and community capacity are notoriously difficult to measure and demonstrate, but these resources can help. Together, they advance Measurement Principle #5 that surfaced in the TRALE process: *Identify, value, and measure effective collaboration as progress toward rural prosperity.*

Data in Collective Impact: Focusing on What Matters

The Collective Impact framework for high impact collaborative initiatives was introduced in a 2011 article in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. Over time, collective impact practice has generated the vibrant [Collective Impact Forum](#) managed by the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions. One of the five conditions necessary for collective impact is “shared measurement systems.” This resource, written by Justin Piff of Equal Measure, discusses the importance of data in collective impact: “The data we collect – and the data we don’t – reflect our values and what we think are important... Getting partners to agree on what matters—including definitions of success and how to get there – is therefore critical.”

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. The resource introduces four data-related lessons from the Collective Impact field. Think of them as diagnostics you can apply to your own organization: *Prioritize the learning, not the data system, Be clear about whose lives you hope to improve, Use qualitative data, and Keep the short and long games in view.* The essay ends with suggestions for what funders can do, recommendations that echo many of the TRALE Call to Action points in this report.

Measuring Community Capacity Building

Though it dates back to 1996, this workbook never goes stale because it guides local practitioners to select and measure their own indicators. The workbook articulates the importance of capacity building – and that it takes time – as a call for why it is vital to measure it in practical, locally-determined increments so that hope, energy, and momentum can be sustained. The Workbook was a product of the Rural Community Capacity Building Learning Cluster, a cohort of 15 expert rural community capacity building practitioners convened over several years by the Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group. It is appropriately subtitled a “Workbook-in-Progress,” as capacity building in rural places will always be a work in progress – a gift and a challenge from one generation to the next.



Annotated List of Resources

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. The workbook is organized around eight outcomes of community capacity-building: e.g., expanding diverse, inclusive citizen participation; expanding leadership base; strengthening individual skills; widely shared understanding and vision; strategic community agenda, and more. The workbook then provides an extensive menu of *potential* indicators and sub-indicators and accompanying measures for each. Any community or initiative can choose what it wants from the menus to gauge progress for each outcome, based on the community's situation and starting point, over a time period of its choosing.

Net Gains: A Handbook for Network Builders Seeking Social Change

One contention of the participants in the TRALE process is that useful (outcome-focused) collaboration at the rural local and regional levels is an important indicator of rural progress. The strength and extent of network links is a connective- tissue indicator that can be used to measure the potential for collaboration. While not a recent publication, this resource remains an excellent introduction to the power of networks and how they are nurtured; it remains a core resource for network building and nurturing collaboration.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. Draw on this handbook for practical guidance on network building, including approaches to measuring and mapping different aspects or components of networks.

FRAMEWORK RESOURCES: USING DATA TO SHAPE PRIORITIES, STRATEGIES, AND OUTCOMES

Why is this important? The principles in this TRALE Call to Action make the case that when communities and individuals define their own priorities and starting points, they create a foundation for more authentically measuring progress and maximizing success. Frameworks can provide a key tool for this self-definition. These resources advance TRALE Measurement Principle #2: Do not dictate what to measure. *Work with rural initiatives to define the progress indicators that make local – and mutual – sense.*

20 Clues to Rural Community Survival

This succinct checklist developed by the Heartland Center for Leadership Development has been a compass of progress for small towns for many years. It remains as vital as when it was developed because it identifies enduring elements of community vitality. The Heartland Center also offers workshop training around the Clues.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. The 20 Clues is a solid discussion-generating and diagnostic tool for local rural elected, appointed, and volunteer leaders who may just be learning about the elements of community and economic development. For more experienced practitioners, it is a reminder that beneath complexity there are simple indicators that matter. To name just four of the 20: community pride, a cooperative community spirit, celebrating diverse leadership, and the conviction that, in the long run, you have to do it yourself.

Crisis to Thriving Framework – AKA Whole Family Approach Life Scale

The Crisis to Thriving framework, recently renamed the Whole Family Approach Life Scale by its originators, was designed for community action agencies and other two-generation or whole-family programs to help families set their own specific goals and measure progress. This framework is organized around a matrix of domains familiar to all families: for example, nutrition, housing, childcare, transportation, and financial management. Indicators of the current status of a family's situation are articulated as practical statements (e.g., *I am currently renting but*



Annotated List of Resources

it is not affordable, or I am homeless and couch-surfing, or I own a home that needs repairs, or I am in a stable housing situation, etc.) and arrayed along a clear and practical five-status spectrum describing where the family is currently: Crisis, Vulnerable, Safe, Stable, or Thriving. Above all, it recognizes that individuals and families are most invested in solutions when they set their own quality of life priorities, and it makes it easy for families to see their progress along a spectrum.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. Organizations that work with families ask them to indicate which status describes their current situation, and then ask the families to set goals for which status they want to make progress on next. This framework could be adapted for rural community and economic development self-analysis and goal-setting by defining “crisis” to “thriving” descriptors for a community or region as a whole.

Thrive Rural Framework for Equitable Rural Prosperity

The Thrive Rural Framework is a new (2022) tool to help take stock, target action, and gauge progress towards this outcome: *Communities and Native nations across the rural United States are healthy places where each and every person belongs, lives with dignity, and thrives.* Developed by the Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group in partnership with seasoned rural and Native community, economic development, and health experts and practitioners from across the country, this framework diagrams the essential building blocks that must be in place – ten each at the Local Level and the Systems Level – in order to advance toward that outcome. It also includes the essential Foundational Element of dismantling rural-discriminatory practices based on place, class, and race that are embedded in policy, practice, and behavior at both the Local and System Levels.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. Communities, program designers, and policymakers can use this framework in generative discussion and formal processes to assess the status of individual building blocks in rural communities and regions or in regional and national systems – and to define what progress will look like in strengthening specific building blocks that are both near-term and long-term priorities. The Framework can help conceive and pinpoint missing and relevant indicators useful for making progress and impact – and refining action – over time. (Ancillary material will be developed going forward for using the Framework.)

WealthWorks

WealthWorks is a systemic approach to strengthen rural and regional economies to “do development differently” by connecting community assets to market demand to build lasting livelihoods. WealthWorks practitioners build connected value chains of activity in any community or economic development effort that pursue three simultaneous “wealth-creation” outcomes: (1) strengthening eight different forms of capital or assets while damaging none; (2) increasing local ownership of and influence over those assets; and (3) ensuring that low-wealth people, places, and businesses are always part of the decision-making and reap benefits in the effort. When these elements are present, more wealth becomes rooted in local people, places, and firms, which sets a community or region in a stronger position for future development.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. When using the [WealthWorks approach](#) to economic development, community actors work together to identify the stock and quality of their assets in eight “capital” categories – Individual, Social, Natural, Built, Intellectual, Political, Cultural, and Financial – and how they might be deployed to strengthen a particular economic sector(s) while meeting documented demand for goods and services that the region can produce. Just as the Crisis to Thriving framework can do for families, WealthWorks can become a dynamic tool for measuring progress in a community. Note other resources on the website specifically related to measurement, for example: [Measuring Rural Wealth Creation: A Guide for Regional Development Organizations](#), produced by the National Association of Development Organizations, and a good example of using it in the [Minnesota Region 5 Development Commission WealthWorks Evaluation](#).

Community Strategies Group

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*Support for this report was provided by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.
The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foundation.*

Since 1985, the Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group has been committed to equitable rural prosperity. We work towards a future where communities and Native nations across the rural United States are places where each and every person belongs, lives with dignity, and thrives.

CSG serves as a connecting hub for equitable rural community and economic development. We design and facilitate action-inducing peer learning among rural practitioners, national and regional organizations, and policymakers. We build networks, foster collaboration, and advance best practices from the field. The foundation of our work is the Thrive Rural Framework – a tool to take stock, target action, and gauge progress on equitable rural prosperity.

For more on Aspen CSG,
see: www.aspencsg.org

For more on the Thrive Rural Framework,
see: www.thriverural.org