

# The Older Population in Rural America: 2012-2016

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## Introduction

The older population, those aged 65 and older, is distributed across the urban and rural landscapes in ways that help shape the population and the country overall.

According to the 2012-2016 American Community Survey (ACS) data, there were 46.2 million older persons in the United States, with 10.6 million living in areas designated as rural by the U.S. Census Bureau.

Considering that the oldest of the baby boomers, those born between mid-1946 and 1964, began turning 65 years old in 2011, the demographic changes ahead for rural America have only begun.

Most older people do not live in rural areas and most rural residents are not older. But an older, increasingly rural, population requires specialized medical and rehabilitation services, as well as innovative housing and public transportation options. An aging population clearly has the potential to shape rural America in new and important ways. The older population is becoming more diverse on a variety of demographic, social, and economic characteristics.

This brief primarily uses 2012-2016 ACS 5-year estimates to describe the rural older population compared to their urban counterparts. This brief also delves into differences within the rural population by examining the older population by level of rurality.

## Data

The data presented in this report are based on the ACS sample interviewed from January 2012 through December 2016. The estimates based on this sample describe the average values of person, household, and housing unit characteristics over this period of collection.

All comparative statements in this report have undergone statistical testing and comparisons are significant at the 90 percent level, unless otherwise noted. For documentation on sampling and estimation methods, confidentiality protection, and sampling and nonsampling errors, see the ACS Multiyear Accuracy of the Data document at [https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/tech\\_docs/accuracy/MultiyearACSAccuracyofData2016.pdf](https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/tech_docs/accuracy/MultiyearACSAccuracyofData2016.pdf).

## Urban and Rural Population by Size and Geography

A larger segment of the population was 65 years and older in rural areas (17.5 percent) compared to urban areas (13.8 percent) during the 2012-2016 period (Figure 1).

While the overall size of the rural population has both increased and decreased since 1980 – hovering around 60 million – the share made up by the older population has consistently grown, from 10.9 percent in 1980 to 17.5 percent during the period 2012 to 2016.

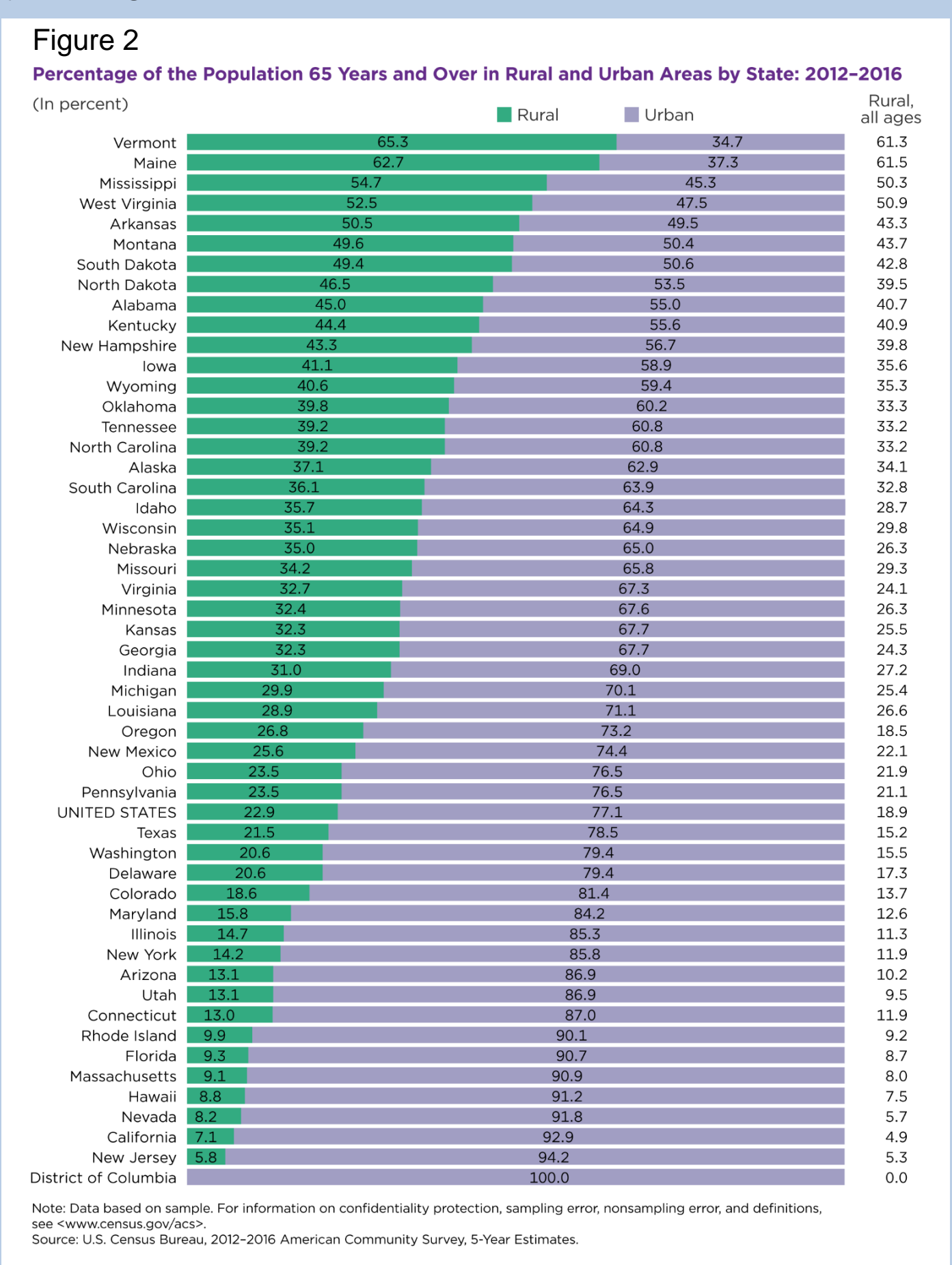
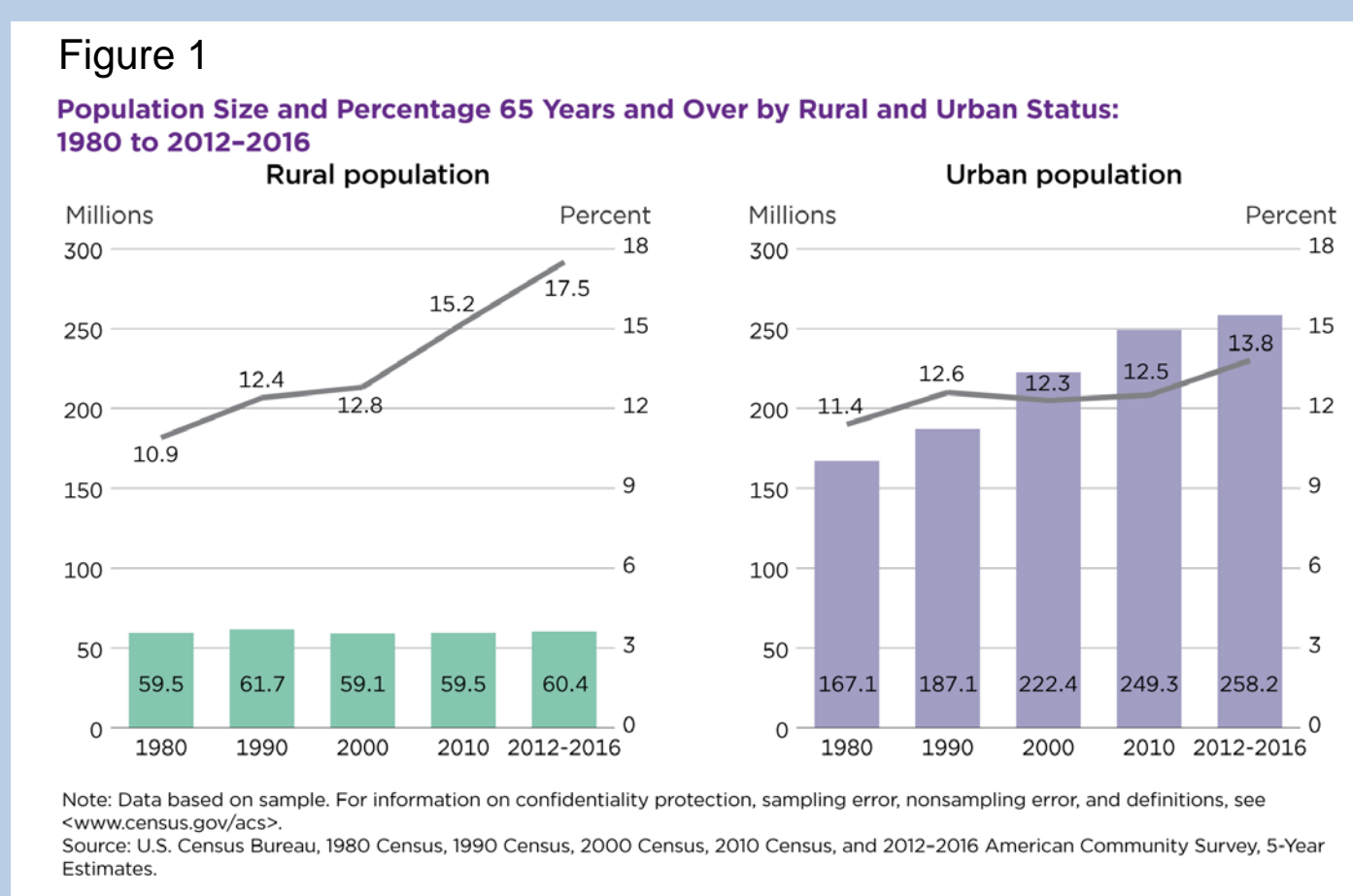
Although the total population in urban areas is much larger and has increased more dramatically over this period, the older population share has not. The urban older population share was 11.4 percent in 1980, increasing to 13.8 percent in the period 2012-2016.

Figure 2 shows that Vermont (65.3 percent) and Maine (62.7 percent) had the largest percentages of rural older populations among states. Other states with large percentages of older rural population were in the South including Mississippi (54.7 percent), West Virginia (52.5 percent) and Arkansas (50.5 percent) and the Midwest including South Dakota (49.4 percent), North Dakota (46.5 percent), and Iowa (41.1 percent). Western states with high percentages of older rural population included Montana (49.6 percent), Wyoming (40.6 percent), and Alaska (37.1 percent).<sup>1</sup>

The three states or state equivalents with the smallest percentages of rural older population were the District of Columbia (0.0 percent), New Jersey (5.8 percent), and California (7.1 percent).

Overall, the rural share of the older population in 33 states exceeded the national average of 22.9 percent. In five states, more than half of the older population lived in rural areas (Arkansas, Maine, Mississippi, Vermont, and West Virginia). In eight states, 10 percent or less of the older population lived in rural areas (California, District of Columbia, Florida, Hawaii, Massachusetts, Nevada, New Jersey, and Rhode Island).

<sup>1</sup> The Montana and South Dakota rural older population shares were not significantly different.



## Urban and Rural Population Demographics

In figure 3 clear differences exist in the rural and urban age distributions. The largest rural population shares were apparent starting just before age 50 and continuing to around age 62. The largest shares of the urban population were apparent in the youngest ages and then again from ages 18 to the late 30s. Age composition differences nearly disappeared approaching the oldest-old ages (those aged 85 and older).

The urban-rural age distribution reflects rural out-migration by younger persons in search of better educational and economic opportunities and away from diminished labor opportunities related to rural farming and mining.

Figure 4 completes the snapshot of the older population by sex and age by showing sex ratios. The rural sex ratio jumped up dramatically to 120 at age 19 and did not start to level-off again until about age 30. From ages 35 to 50, the urban and rural sex ratios followed a similar pattern, with both populations achieving near parity between men and women. At age 50 the rural and urban sex ratios started to diverge. The urban sex ratios declined steadily, while the rural sex ratios hovered around 100 until age 73.

The factors that explain these differences indicate sex selectivity including: the fact that those who do seek rural farming and mining industry jobs in their 20s and 30s are overwhelmingly men, differences in life expectancy between men and women, and the migration of the older population – typically married couples – moving to rural retirement destinations further contributing to a balanced ratio of men and women.

## Rural Older Population by Level of Rurality

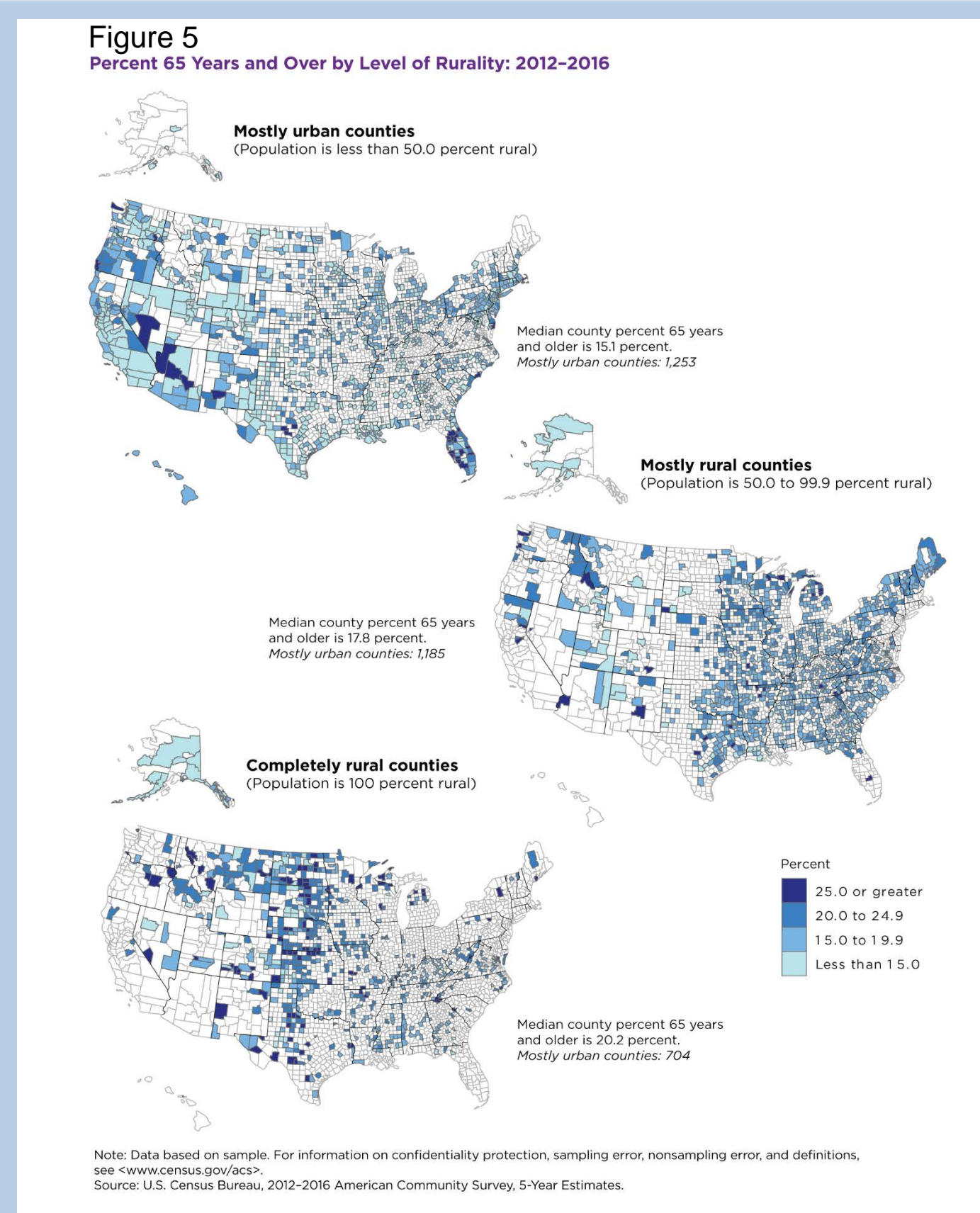
The largest share of the older population resided in mostly urban counties (83.7 percent), followed by mostly rural counties (14.0 percent) and completely rural counties (2.3 percent).

The completely rural counties are primarily located in parts of the Pacific

Northwest, the Great Plains, and areas in the South. The median county percentage of 65 years and older in completely rural counties was 20.2 percent (Figure 5).

The mostly rural counties were primarily located in the eastern half of the United States. The median percentage of 65 years and older was 17.8 percent.

The mostly urban counties made up the largest number of counties and were scattered across the U.S. The median county percentage of 65 years and older was 15.1 percent.



## Selected Demographics by Level of Rurality

While the percentage of older women was larger than that of older men at all levels of rurality, as rurality increased the percentage of women decreased.

The median age of the population 65 years and older across the three rurality groups showed relatively little variation. The median age for the population in completely rural counties was 73.3 years, compared with 73.2 years in mostly rural counties and 73.4 years in mostly urban counties. Looking at age another way, the percentage of 65 years and older increased with rurality, pointing to the looming impact that baby boomers will have in the most rural areas in coming years.

The dependency ratio, calculated by dividing the dependent-age-population (children and older adults) by the working-age population (18 to 64), introduces an indication of economic dependency. The dependency ratio was 71 in completely rural counties, 67 in mostly rural counties and 59 in mostly urban counties.

The sex ratio was most balanced in completely rural areas and least balanced in mostly urban counties.

Considering other characteristics, in most cases completely rural and mostly rural counties were more alike than the mostly urban counties. For instance, the percentage of White alone population in completely rural and mostly rural counties was 91 percent, compared to 82 percent in mostly urban counties. This pattern continued across other race and Hispanic origin groups.