

Rate of Living Alone by Rurality and Age

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Key Findings

- Rates of living alone are higher in Census-defined urban areas than in rural areas across all age categories, but rates are also higher in non-metro counties than in metro counties. This seeming contradiction is possible because of the differences in how “urban areas” and “metro areas” are officially defined.
- The higher rates in both urban areas and non-metro counties indicate that living alone is especially prevalent in outlying small cities and large villages (areas that are officially both urban and non-metro) but relatively uncommon in the surrounding “countryside” (officially rural areas in either metro or non-metro counties).
- The likelihood of living alone increases with age, so areas with older populations generally have higher rates of living alone and vice versa. This partly explains the urban/rural trends.
- Among non-metro counties, there is a pattern of high rates of living alone across the Great Plains and in a few smaller regions in the Upper Midwest, the Deep South, and the Mountain West.
- When developing policies and programs to ensure that people living alone have appropriate support and resources, the higher rates in non-metro cities and in certain non-metro regions should receive special attention.

Purpose

Living alone is increasingly common and is associated with higher risk of social isolation and poor health for populations without access to appropriate support and resources. Little is known about how rates of living alone vary by rurality, however. In this infographic, we identify rates of living alone for all adults and within specific age groups using two different classifications of rurality.

Data

To compute rates of living alone by rurality and age, we use summary data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2013-2017 American Community Survey (ACS) 5-Year Estimates, acquired through the IPUMS National Historical Geographic Information System (www.nhgis.org). We limit all figures to *adults in households* (excluding children and people living in group quarters).

Figure 1: Percent Living Alone by Age and Census-Defined Rural/Urban Location

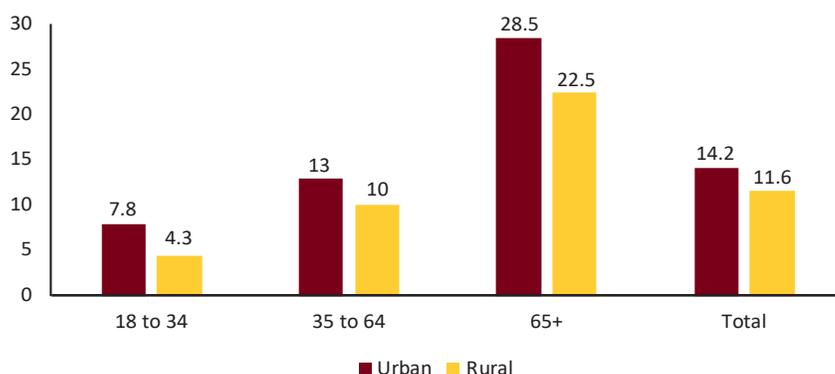


Figure 2: Percent Living Alone by Age and Metropolitan/Non-Metropolitan County

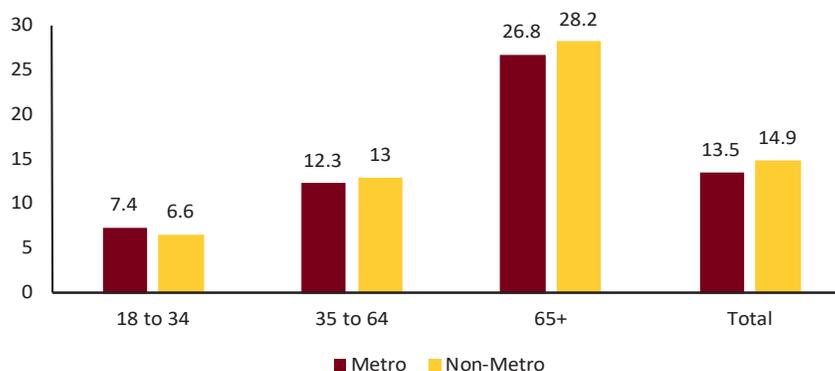
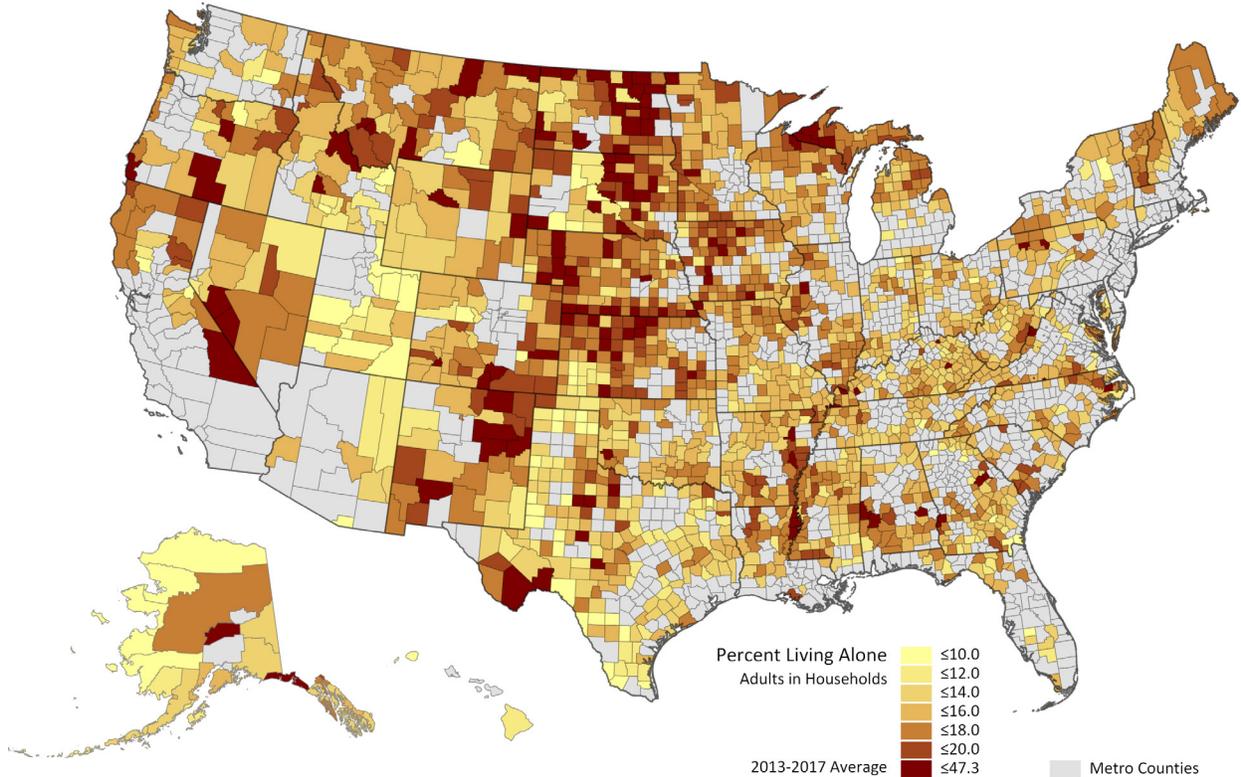


Figure 3: Percent of Adults Living Alone in Non-Metro Counties



Urban vs. Metro

We use two standard classification systems to distinguish “rurality.” First, the urban/rural classes defined by the U.S. Census Bureau generally distinguish people “in town” (in concentrated settlements of at least 2,500 people, delineated by grouping census blocks and tracts with higher population densities) from people “in the country.” Second, the metropolitan/non-metropolitan (metro/non-metro) classes, defined by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), generally distinguish large commuting systems (sets of counties with substantial commuting flows to a central urban core with at least 50,000 residents) from smaller and more remote communities. Importantly, both metro and non-metro counties include a mix of urban “in-town” population and rural “country” population. The Census-defined rural

population totals 60.8 million people (18.9% of the country) while the non-metro population totals 46.0 million (14.3%), which further indicates how these two concepts of rurality delineate distinctly different sets of population.

Overview

Within both Census-defined urban and rural areas and both metro and non-metro counties, more than one in ten adults lives alone. Living alone is more common in Census-defined urban areas than in rural areas, but living alone is more common in non-metro counties than in metro counties. Rates of living alone also vary considerably across the country. Altogether, this suggests a higher prevalence of living alone among adults in “small town” non-metro cities and suggests that resources and programs to support people living alone should be informed by geography.

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