

Changing Census Concepts of Rural Population in Indiana

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With the approach of the 1960 Census of Population, and on the Seventy-fifth Anniversary of the Indiana Academy of Science, it seems appropriate to examine the way in which the conception of rural population in Indiana has been influenced by the changing definitions used by the Bureau of the Census, and how these definitions in turn have been affected by changing patterns of American life, especially the effects of the automobile on population distribution.

The United States was essentially a rural nation until the last third of the nineteenth century. New York, then as now the largest city, had only four thousand more people in 1840 than Indianapolis had in 1940, and as late as 1870 only a quarter of the nation's people—and only one Hoosier in seven—lived in a town with a population of 2,500 or more persons. Cities and towns were so unique, in fact, that they received little special attention before the Census of 1870.

The first real distinction the Bureau of the Census made between urban and rural population was almost entirely a by-product of a population density map drawn for the Statistical Atlas published in 1874, on the basis of 1870 data (1). The cartographers realized that a city which occupied only a small portion of a county's area might make the entire county appear densely settled if the city population were included in the computation of density. As a consequence, the population of cities having 8,000 or more persons was excluded from the computations, and these places were shown separately on the maps by graduated circles. It was implied that the remainder of the population was rural, but no data other than density were published for this rural population.

It was soon realized that many places of less than 8,000 persons were essentially urban in character, and in the Census of 1880 separate data were published for places of 4,000 or more. There were still no published data on the rural population, and it was not discussed, although there was an implication that the rural population was merely whatever happened to be left when the urban population was subtracted from the total.

The Census of 1890 is the first in which the rural population was specifically defined. The rural population was the remainder when the population of all cities or compact bodies of 1,000 or more persons was subtracted from the total population, although for comparability with earlier Censuses the term rural was also applied—rather confusingly—to the population outside places of 8,000 or more.

The confusion was resolved, in a sense, in 1900, by using the term "semi-urban" for all persons in incorporated places whose size was smaller than 4,000 persons, which was the new lower limit of the urban population. This was the first Census in which figures representing the rural population were formally published (1).

It is easy to see that these shifting definitions could produce some confusing figures. According to the definition used in 1890, for instance, the rural population of Indiana was 1,488,271, but when the definition

used in 1900 is applied to 1890 data the rural population is almost two hundred thousand persons greater: 1,685,271, of whom 294,654 were semi-urban. Between 1890 and 1900 the semi-urban population increased by some sixty thousand persons, but the remaining rural population gave a hint of things to come by losing a total of 574 persons.

Between 1900 and 1910 Census statisticians had been experimenting with the data collected in 1900, and in 1906 a Supplementary Analysis of the Census of 1900 was published; in this Analysis the lower limit of the urban population was placed, for the first time, at 2,500 persons (1). No specific reasons were given to explain why this figure should replace the former lower limit of 4,000 persons, but it was used in the Census of 1910, again without specific justification, and by the Census of 1920 it apparently had become so hallowed with use that justification was no longer necessary. Today, after having been used in five consecutive Censuses—and six after April 1960—it appears to be well established and accepted, despite the fact that it almost appears to have been “pulled out of the hat” when it was first used. It is herewith suggested, however, that we need additional investigation to discover whether the best minimal population size for urban places is 2,500 persons, or whether some other minimal size is more realistic. (This suggestion recognizes the fact that any distinction between urban and rural areas for Census purposes will be an arbitrary one, and that it will presumably be based on a minimal population size.)

On the basis of a minimal population of 2,500 persons for urban places, the Bureau of the Census has computed the size of the rural population in Indiana for each censal year since 1800, when the total population of Indiana Territory was only 5,641 persons (Table I). The entire population of the state was classified as rural until 1840, when three towns exceeded the 2,500 mark; in order of decreasing size they were New Albany (4,226), Madison (3,798), and Indianapolis (2,692). The combined population of these three towns represented only 1.6 percent of the population of Indiana. The urban population of our state has increased enormously since then, of course, and in 1950 Indiana had 119 urban places with a population of 2,357,196, representing 59.9 percent of the state's people.

The population outside places of 2,500 or more in Indiana has also grown, if not so spectacularly nor consistently as the urban population. The rural population grew from the original 5,641 souls of 1800 to 1,653,773 persons a century later, in 1900. But by 1910 the rural population had declined, and again in 1920, and once more in 1930, although at a decreasing rate. Then between 1930 and 1940 there was an increase, which was roughly equal to the decrease between 1900 and 1910, but the total rural population of 1,540,084 persons in 1940 was more than a hundred thousand less than in 1900. This deficit was more than made up by an increase of 176,672 persons between 1940 and 1950, and in 1950 Indiana's rural population of 1,716,756 persons was the greatest ever recorded.

Long before 1950, however, it had become obvious to students of population that startling changes were taking place in the rural population. Until the First World War the people classified as rural were

TABLE 1

Population of Indiana, Urban and Rural, 1800 to 1950

Year	Total population	Rural population	Rural population as a percentage of the total population	Rural farm population	Rural farm population as a percentage of the total rural population
1950	3,934,224	1,716,756	43.6	667,154	38.8
1940	3,427,796	1,540,084	44.9	812,651	52.9
1930	3,238,503	1,442,611	44.5	808,981	56.0
1920	2,930,390	1,447,535	49.4	902,820	62.3
1910	2,700,876	1,557,041	57.6		
1900	2,516,462	1,653,773	65.7		
1890	2,192,404	1,602,365	73.1		
1880	1,978,301	1,592,090	80.5		
1870	1,680,637	1,432,980	85.3		
1860	1,350,428	1,234,524	91.4		
1850	988,416	943,784	95.5		
1840	685,866	675,150	98.4		
1830	343,031	343,031	100.0		
1820	147,178	147,178	100.0		
1810	24,520*	24,520	100.0		
1800	5,641*	5,641	100.0		

* Includes population of area which became Michigan Territory in 1818.

* Includes population of area which later became Illinois and Michigan Territories.

Source: Various publications of the Bureau of the Census.

almost entirely farmers and their families. Not only did they live in the country, but they worked there, and they were distinctly different from city people. The terms "rural" and "urban," in fact, had far greater connotations than mere place of residence, because each actually signified an entire way of life, a complex of interrelated social and economic characteristics with a distinct set of values. No one then could ever confuse urban and rural people, because they differed so noticeably in their dress, talk, manners, diet, even in their very way of thinking; there was probably considerable justification for the stereotypes of the "city slicker" and the "country bumpkin," with all of their associated characteristics.

These stereotypes began to break down after the First World War, however, and largely because the automobile facilitated greater social intercourse between the city dweller and his country cousin. When the farmer began coming to town more often he found it useful to take on some of the protective coloring of the city man, and he also found it easier to participate in the social and cultural life of the city. It is probable, however, that in the long run the ability of the city man to travel in the country was of far greater importance. At first he came just to visit, and then he talked the farmer into selling him a plot of land on which he could build a house, and then clever real estate developers began to capitalize on the new trend by buying entire farms for subdivision. Without the automobile, of course, this would have been almost impossible, and suburban development might well have consisted largely of well-to-do

homes clustered near stops on rapid transit lines. But with the automobile city workers have been able to penetrate virtually every nook and cranny of the countryside, and some of them live at astonishing distances from their place of work.

The physical transfer of residence from city to country is an important phenomenon, of course, and it is readily apparent, but there seems to have been a less apparent but equally or more important change in values associated with the move. Two children were about all a family could take in a crowded apartment in the crowded city, with little space for play. But out in the country, with plenty of room, it seemed almost a shame not to have another child, and besides, everyone else seemed to be doing it. In 1950, for instance, for every thousand women in the child-bearing ages 20-44, Indianapolis had 480 children under 5 years old but the remainder of Marion County had 605. Comparable figures were 500 for Fort Wayne and 720 for the remainder of Allen County, and similar urban-suburban fertility differentials characterize most of the other cities of Indiana.

The striking changes that were transpiring in rural areas, and especially rural areas near metropolitan centers, led the Bureau of the Census to adopt a new concept in the Census of 1930, when the rural population was divided into those persons who lived on farms and those who did not (1). The rural farm population in 1930 was 808,981 persons, or only 56 percent of a total rural population of 1,442,611. By 1940 the rural farm population had risen slightly to 812,651 persons, but it comprised only 53 percent of a total rural population of 1,540,084. By 1950 the rural farm population had dropped to 668,064 persons, or only 39 percent of a total rural population which had increased to 1,716,756 (or 1,577,028, according to the new definition of urban).

The population classified as rural by the Bureau of the Census is increasingly concentrated in the rural nonfarm category, and an increasingly large proportion of the rural nonfarm population live in suburban areas or in villages of less than 2,500 persons (2). In other words, the rural population is composed, to an increasing degree, of urban people who dwell in the countryside, or in small towns, and many students of population are coming to believe that the traditional system of population classification by residence requires careful reconsideration. It would seem, for instance, that stereotypes of rural and urban have lost whatever validity they may formerly have had, and that the former distinctions associated with rural and urban have lost much of their significance. The farmer is no longer a hick; in fact, he frequently is more cosmopolitan than many city dwellers, and he differs from them primarily in terms of his occupation.

It has been suggested, therefore, that the present classification by residence—into urban, rural nonfarm, and rural farm population—should be replaced by a classification based upon occupation, but this suggestion presents several problems. If a classification of population is based upon occupation, how does one classify the children of a farmer whose wife teaches school? Furthermore, the rural population is now the legal basis for allocation of some Federal funds to the individual states for Agricultural Extension, Agricultural Experiment Stations, and highway con-

struction, among others, and at least six states allocate funds for highway construction at least partially in proportion to the rural population.

It appears to me that the basic structure of the present classification is sound, that the concept of the farm population is a valid one, and that it should be retained, *if* the farm population can be defined more stringently so that it only includes bona fide farmers. The crux of the problem, I submit, is the heterogeneous group known as the rural nonfarm population, and it is here that much more research is needed. Inasfar as I know, there has been little or no investigation of the demographic, social, and economic characteristics of the rural nonfarm population of selected rural areas. Who are these people? Why do they live in rural areas? How are they distributed through the rural area? What do they do for a living? Are they a part of the local community? How do they differ—if at all—from the people who live in town? I believe that the rural nonfarm population of Indiana, and the United States, should be subdivided into its components, but first we need to learn more about the rural nonfarm population in order to understand more surely what those components are.

Literature Cited

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