

A Demographic Lifeline to Rural America: Latino Population Growth in New Destinations, 1990-2019

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Can America's Latino population save rural America?¹ Latinos have provided a demographic lifeline and an engine of economic development in many declining parts of rural America.² Latinos and other immigrant and refugee populations have filled the demand for low-wage, low-skill labor, especially in the meatpacking industry, in corporate agriculture and food processing (e.g., canning vegetables), on dairy farms, and in hospitality jobs in rural recreational and amenity areas.³ The amnesty provisions in the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) gave immigrants a “new freedom” of movement, and many Latinos acted on it when California, in 1994, passed its anti-immigrant Proposition 187. The Latino diaspora from the Southwest was reinforced by the militarization of U.S.-Mexico border enforcement in the aftermath of 9/11 and new threats from international terrorism.⁴

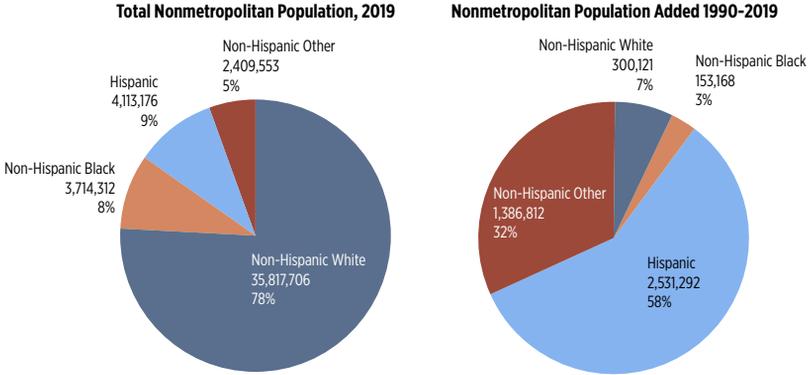
This chapter documents the growing racial and ethnic diversity of rural America since 1990—after IRCA became law. It then identifies post-1990 patterns of nonmetropolitan (nonmetro) county population growth and decline in new Hispanic destinations. The analyses address whether Hispanics have provided a demographic lifeline to “dying” rural areas, those counties that have experienced chronic out-migration for decades and now face the prospect of natural decrease—an excess of deaths over births—over the foreseeable future.

Racial and Ethnic Diversity in Nonmetro America

America's rural and small towns have experienced substantial racial and ethnic change since 1990. This reflects rapid in-migration of racial and ethnic minority populations, including Latinos and other immigrant and refugee populations. Perhaps paradoxically, growing racial and ethnic diversity is also due to white population declines from net out-migration and natural decrease. In 2019, 78% of the nonmetro population was identified as non-Hispanic white (see Figure 1). Between 1990 and 2019, the nonmetro Hispanic population nearly doubled in size. Hispanics are now the largest

FIGURE 1

Nonmetropolitan Population and Population change by Race/Hispanic Origin



SOURCES: U.S. Census 1990 and 2019 population estimates.

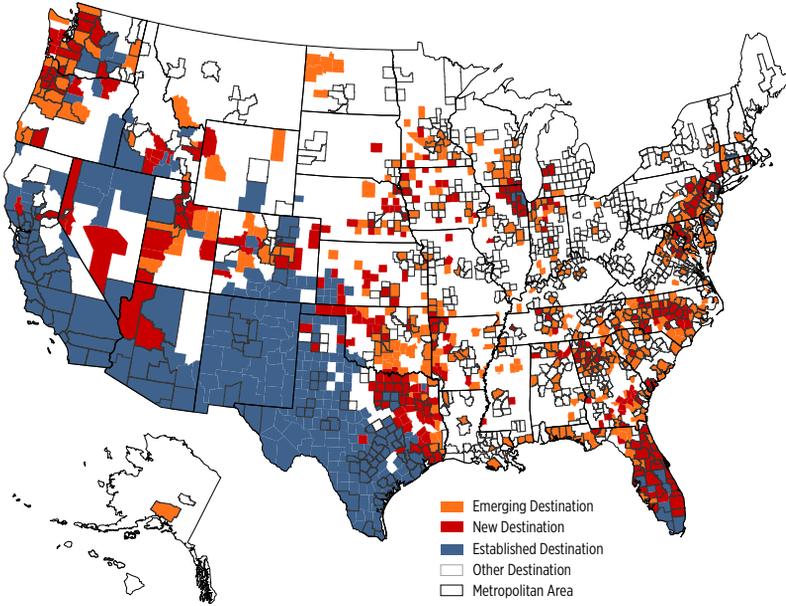
minority population, representing 9% of the rural population compared with 8% of the African American population. Asian, Native and multiracial peoples represent the remaining 5% of the nonmetro population.

The outsized demographic footprint of Latinos is also revealed in their share of all nonmetro growth since 1990 (Figure 1). Latinos accounted for 58% of overall nonmetro growth between 1990 and 2019, compared to only 7% among the non-Hispanic white population. African Americans contributed only 3% of overall rural growth since 1990. Other minority populations (including Asians, Native peoples and multiracial populations) accounted for almost one-third of all nonmetro growth since 1990.

New Latino Destinations, 1990-2019

The Hispanic population has dispersed widely since 1990. Hispanics have left established gateways in the Southwest for rapidly growing “new destinations” located throughout the United States.⁵ Indeed, these patterns are clearly revealed when nonmetro counties are classified by changes in Hispanic population size and percentage from 1990 to 2019. Specifically,

FIGURE 2
Hispanic Destination Types, 1990-2019



SOURCES: U.S. Census Bureau, 1990, 2019.

we identified 155 *New Destinations* representing nonmetro counties that (1) had at least 500 Hispanic residents in 2019, (2) experienced a Hispanic population gain of at least 250% between 1990 and 2019, and (3) had a Hispanic population of at least 10% in 2019. We also identified 197 *Emerging Destinations*, which are now experiencing increases in Hispanic populations and have the potential to become *New Destinations*. These counties (1) had a Hispanic population of at least 500 in 2019, (2) experienced a Hispanic population gain of at least 250% between 1990 and 2019, and (3) were at least 5% but less than 10% Hispanic in 2019. *Established Destinations* represented 203 counties, with Hispanic population shares of 10% or more in 1990, 2000, 2010 and 2019. Finally, the 1,421 remaining nonmetro counties—a residual category—were identified as *Other Destinations*.⁶

The spatial distribution of Hispanics is best described as a pattern of dispersed population concentration (Figure 2). *Established Destinations*

are represented in blue in the Southwest United States, but also extend north into parts of Nevada, Oregon and Washington, among other states. Metropolitan counties also are outlined in this map, which reveals many metropolitan gateway counties, including the Chicago metroplex, the metropolitan corridor from Washington, D.C., to Boston, and South Florida. New and Emerging Destinations have spread outward from traditional Hispanic settlement areas (in the Southwest) into nearby parts of northeast Texas, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Kansas and Colorado. They are also found in the Pacific Northwest, the Carolinas, Florida, and scattered across the agricultural heartland. This map clearly highlights the new geographic spread of the Hispanic population throughout the United States.

Table 1 documents nonmetro Hispanic population growth from 1990 to 2019 for each destination category. These data clearly reveal the rapid growth of the nonmetro Latino population over the study period: 56% in the 1990s, 40% in the 2000s, and 19% in the 2010s. The Hispanic population increased from 1.6 million in 1990 to 4.1 million in 2019 (data not shown)—an increase of 160% in nonmetro America.

In New Destinations, the nonmetro Hispanic population increased 230% in the 1990s, 74% in the 2000s, and 22% in the 2010s. Rural Hispanic growth rates have declined significantly since the Great Recession in the late 2000s. The diminishing growth rate in New Destinations is due, in part, to the economic downturn, but also to the extraordinary growth of the Hispanic population base, from 109,165 in 1990 to 762,872 in 2019. In 1990, Hispanics accounted for just 3% of the population in New Destinations. By 2019 the Hispanic population had increased more than fivefold—to 16%.

Emerging Destinations, as expected, experienced especially rapid increases in the size of the Latino population in the post-2000 period, even exceeding rates observed in New Destinations. Hispanic growth rates also increased substantially in Other Destinations after 2010. Still, Established Destinations remain home to the majority of all nonmetro Hispanics. In 1990, more than 1 million Latinos lived in Established Destinations, compared with only 170,000 in New and Emerging Destinations. By 2019, nearly 1.7 million Hispanics lived in Established Destinations, and the share of the population in these counties that were Hispanic increased from 32% to 44% between 1990 and 2019.

TABLE 1

Percent Hispanic and Percent Change in Hispanic Population, Nonmetro Counties, 1990-2019

	PERCENT HISPANIC				HISPANIC PERCENTAGE GROWTH		
	1990	2000	2010	2019	1990-2000	2000-10	2010-19
Other Destination	1.3	2.0	3.0	4.0	58.6	53.5	28.7
Emerging Destination	1.1	3.1	5.5	7.1	210.3	90.0	30.5
New Destination	3.0	8.5	13.6	16.1	230.3	74.1	21.5
Established Destination	31.9	36.5	40.9	43.9	27.5	16.7	9.0
Total Population	3.8	5.5	7.5	8.9	56.2	39.9	18.9

SOURCES: U.S. Census Bureau 1990, 2000, 2010, 2019.

Hispanics as a Demographic Lifeline

Hispanic population growth prevented overall population decline in many nonmetro counties over the past three decades. Here we identify counties that experienced (1) overall population loss, including Hispanic population loss; (2) population loss but Hispanic population gains; (3) population gains that were only because Hispanic population gains exceeded non-Hispanic losses; and (4) overall growth, including both Hispanic and non-Hispanic population gains. Whether Hispanics provided a demographic lifeline is revealed in the share of counties classified as (3) above, i.e., in counties where Hispanic population growth exceeded non-Hispanic declines.

Over the entire 1990-2019 period (top panel, Table 2), more than 10% of all nonmetro counties grew in population size, but only because Hispanic growth offset non-Hispanic population declines. This represents 200 counties, distributed widely but unevenly across the United States (the light blue counties in Figure 3). In the Midwest, overall county population losses since 1990 occurred mostly in tandem with Hispanic population growth (shown in pink). This pattern also characterizes Appalachia and historical Black Belt counties, spread in an arc from the Ozarks (in southern Missouri and

TABLE 2

Percent of Nonmetro Counties, by Destination and by Hispanic and Total Population Change, 1990-2019 and 2010-19

	POPULATION LOSS—HISPANIC LOSS	POPULATION LOSS—HISPANIC GAIN	POPULATION GAIN—HISPANIC ONLY	POPULATION GAIN
1990-2019				
Other Destination	0.6	52.7	5.7	42.0
Emerging Destination	-	22.3	12.2	65.5
New Destination	-	20.6	22.6	56.8
Established Destination	12.4	28.7	29.2	29.7
Total Population	1.7	43.9	10.1	44.3
2010-2019				
Other Destination	1.1	72.7	6.3	20.0
Emerging Destination	1.5	48.7	10.2	39.6
New Destination	3.2	40.0	20.6	36.1
Established Destination	22.2	35.0	25.6	17.2
Total Population	3.4	63.8	9.8	22.9

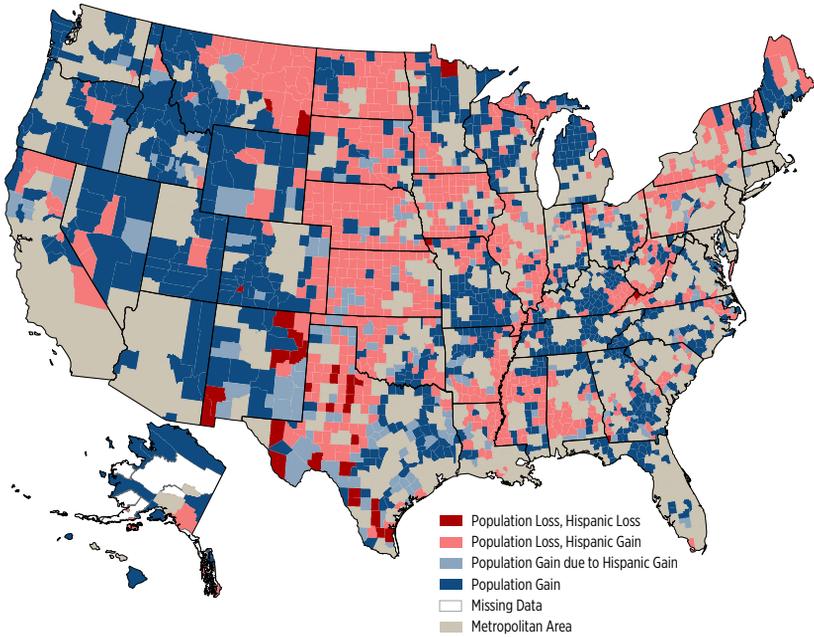
SOURCES: U.S. Census 1990, 2000, 2010 and 2019 population estimates.

northern Arkansas), to the Piedmont region (straddling the North Carolina and Virginia border), as well as various parts of the Mid-Atlantic and New England regions.

The Hispanic population has been an engine of nonmetro growth over the 1990-2019 period, even as Hispanic population growth slowed considerably after 2010 in the wake of the Great Recession (bottom panel, Table 2). Hispanic population growth since 2010 was nevertheless sufficient to fully offset non-Hispanic population declines in nearly 10% of all nonmetro counties. This figure is nearly identical to the percentage for the entire study period. What is different now is the sharp downward shift in the number of counties with both Hispanic and non-Hispanic population gains. This growth-growth pattern represented 44% of all nonmetro counties from

FIGURE 3

Nonmetropolitan Hispanic and Non-Hispanic Population Change, 1990-2019



SOURCES: U.S. Census 1990 and 2019 population estimates.

1990 to 2019, but only 23% since 2010, when depopulation in rural America spiked.⁷ The new majority pattern after 2010 was one of Hispanic population growth, but growth insufficient to avoid overall county population decline (64% of nonmetro counties).

These national patterns varied across New, Emerging and Established Destinations. Indeed, between 1990 and 2019, 23% of New Destination counties exhibited a pattern whereby Hispanic population growth exceeded non-Hispanic population decline—a figure more than double the national average (top panel, Table 2). Another 21% of these New Destinations and 22% of Emerging Destinations declined in population, despite Hispanic population growth. Without Hispanic growth, the overall population losses would have been much larger in these nonmetro counties. In the

post-2010 period, Hispanics once again provided a “demographic lifeline,” with Hispanic growth more than offsetting non-Hispanic decline in nearly 21% of New Destinations and 10% of Emerging Destinations. Even so, New and Emerging Destinations were less likely than in the past to experience Hispanic growth sufficient to offset non-Hispanic population declines.

Figure 4 clearly reveals widely divergent annual growth between Hispanics and non-Hispanics since 1990. The Hispanic population grew rapidly in each of our four county types. Only in Emerging Destinations did Hispanic population growth fall below non-Hispanic growth. The slowest overall county population growth occurred, perhaps surprisingly, in Established Destinations, where the non-Hispanic population actually declined from 1990 to 2019.

Perhaps the most dramatic story of demographic change is observed in Other Destinations, where population growth was substantial over the 29-year study period (Figure 4). After 2010, however, these nonmetro counties experienced unprecedented overall population losses (Figure 5). Hispanic populations continued to grow in all nonmetro counties after 2010, but at levels no longer sufficient to offset mounting non-Hispanic population losses, especially in Other Destinations.

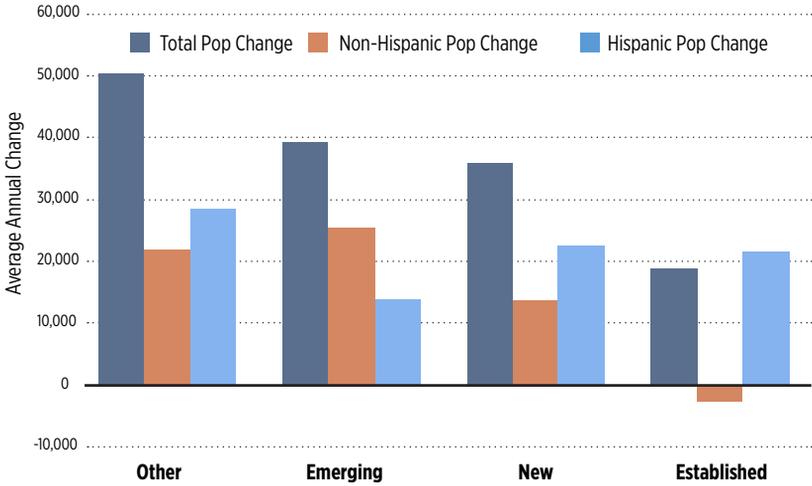
Conclusion

America’s burgeoning Latino population has become the demographic lifeblood of rural America. This demographic fact is clearly revealed in extraordinary Hispanic growth patterns between 1990 and 2019, even during the post-2010 period when the overall nonmetro population experienced, for the first time, absolute population decline. Rural population decline is deeply rooted in ongoing population aging, accelerating natural decrease, and declines in the female population of reproductive ages, which has depressed rural fertility rates.⁸ America’s Hispanic population—both native and foreign-born—is a clear source of rural demographic and economic resilience.

The policy implications are stark. Rural areas are unlikely to thrive economically without new population growth from migration, especially from America’s diverse Hispanic population. Rural America remains disproportionately non-Hispanic white. The U.S. Census Bureau projects future

FIGURE 4

Nonmetropolitan Hispanic and Non-Hispanic Population Change by Hispanic Destination Status, 1990-2019



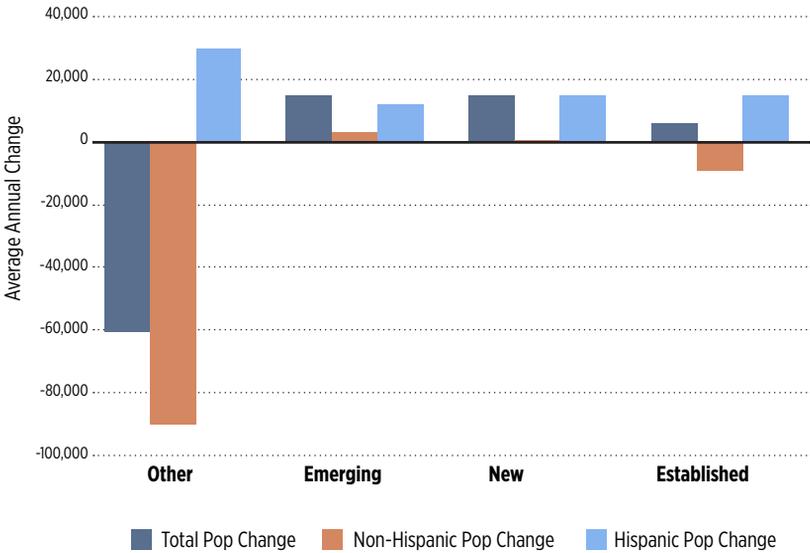
SOURCES: U.S. Census 1990, 2010 and 2019 population estimates.

declines by midcentury in America’s non-Hispanic white population, driven by high mortality rates among America’s aging baby boom generation and fertility rates that fall well below replacement levels.⁹ For rural America, this means that depopulating counties are unlikely to experience a population or economic revival without in-migration from minority and immigrant populations. Hispanics have demonstrated their willingness to move to remote rural areas to work in corporate agriculture or in the hospitality industry at low wages. In contrast, non-Hispanic whites, particularly young adults, continue to leave rural areas in large numbers.

Revitalizing rural and small-town America requires new approaches that incentivize job growth, attract new migrants and retain young adults. Economic development efforts arguably must target those rural regions and communities that are sustainable in the longer term. Investments are most likely to reap success in rural communities with the most potential for growth—those of sufficient population size, with an infrastructure suited to an information-based economy and having a viable civic culture (e.g., with good schools, hospitals and cultural amenities), and located in close

FIGURE 5

Nonmetropolitan Hispanic and Non-Hispanic Population Change by Hispanic Destination Status, 2010-19



SOURCES: U.S. Census 1990, 2010 and 2019 population estimates.

proximity to urban employment centers or natural amenities. Federal, state and local restrictions on legal immigration or on the number of refugees or asylum-seekers will not save rural America, rather those restrictions will limit potential sources of rural population and economic growth. That is why some civic and nonprofit organizations are now calling for heartland visas that could provide immigrants with opportunities to live and work in rural areas.¹⁰ Of course, this strategy has its own challenges. At a minimum, it requires greater tolerance and acceptance of racial and cultural diversity in rural communities with limited previous exposure to diverse populations. Hispanic growth is integral to the future well-being of rural America—to ongoing economic development efforts that promote thriving rural people and sustainable communities.¹¹

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Endnotes

- ¹ This chapter uses *Hispanic* and *Latino* interchangeably, recognizing that *Hispanic* is a term typically used by the U.S. Census Bureau in demographic reports or by demographers, but also is sometimes found objectionable among racial and ethnic scholars, who prefer Latino/Latina/Latinx.
- ² We use *rural* and *nonmetro* interchangeably in this chapter.
- ³ See Lichter and Johnson.
- ⁴ See Kandel and Cromartie.
- ⁵ Growing racial and ethnic diversity is expressed unevenly across nonmetro counties, with much of it concentrated in a relatively small number of counties. For example, only 10% of all nonmetro counties accounted for about 50% of all Hispanic growth in the 2000s. (See Lichter, 2012.)
- ⁶ Here we construct a new typology through the 2010s that builds on previous studies of Latino population growth in the 1990s and 2000s. See Kandel and Cromartie for typology of the 1990s. See Johnson and Lichter, 2016, for the 2000s typology of New and Established Destinations.
- ⁷ See Johnson and Lichter, 2019.
- ⁸ See Johnson.
- ⁹ For a discussion, see Lichter, 2013.
- ¹⁰ See Ozimek et al.
- ¹¹ See Ajilore and Willingham.