

**Governor's Rural Affairs Council
(Executive Order 11-04)**

2020 Annual Report



Chaired by Illinois Lieutenant Governor Juliana Stratton

Letter from Lieutenant Governor Juliana Stratton

In my time as Lieutenant Governor, one of my greatest responsibilities and privileges has been championing the voices of Illinoisans. I have always believed the only path to enact real and sustainable change is one rooted in a pursuit of equity. Chairing the Governor's Rural Affairs Council, and working on this report, was a charge I met with this in mind. But above all else, it was crucial that I took the time to listen and learn. Doing this gave me insight that I, growing up in the city of Chicago, may not have previously had.

The well-being of each of our communities is tied to that of the others. Rural Illinois, in many ways, serves as the backbone for its suburban and urban counterparts. Agriculture and manufacturing jobs are at the root of the state's economy, sustaining our growth and the livelihood of communities throughout Illinois. Illinoisans are also connected by the challenges they face, such as a need for better healthcare. The opioid crisis severely harms communities both rural and urban, with devastating impacts on families across the state. It is abundantly clear to me, now more than ever, that the concerns of rural Illinois are deeply entwined with the concerns of our state as a whole.

What we must also remember is that the statistics and trends we have compiled in this report represent real people. Nearly 1.5 million Illinoisans in rural counties deal daily with distinct issues such as limited broadband and healthcare accessibility, a declining population, and gaps in attaining higher education. These issues are visibly related to one another and have been worsened by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. As we continue to fight for the lives and livelihoods of Illinoisans, it is critical for us to be continually attentive and supportive to the needs of rural Illinoisans.

This report is a vital part of that ongoing effort and was made possible with the help and input of all those involved in its development. This year has shown us not only challenges, but hope, light and a real opportunity for change. We must persist in preserving our state's agricultural work, empowering the small businesses of rural Illinois, and actively working to craft the better present and future we envision for rural Illinoisans.

Respectfully,



Juliana Stratton
Lieutenant Governor, State of Illinois
Chair, Governor's Rural Affairs Council



Lt. Governor Stratton on a visit at Mitchell Dairy and Grain LLC in Winnebago, Illinois.

Executive Summary¹

Introduction

Pursuant to Executive Order 11-04, this report from the Governor's Rural Affairs Council (GRAC) details the Council's policy and advocacy recommendations for improving the delivery of state services to rural Illinois and expanding opportunities and enhancing the quality of life for all Illinoisans, with a particular focus on rural residents.² These recommendations were furnished by focusing on rural affairs within the purview of the three issue-based committees the Council opted to create: Education and Workforce Development; Health and Healthcare; and Economic Development and Infrastructure.

Council Overview and Activities

The Governor's Rural Affairs Council was created pursuant to Executive Order 86-07 in 1986. Since its signing, the Executive Order was amended on three occasions by the respective signing of Executive Order 91-13, Executive order 00-01, and Executive Order 11-04 under previous administrations. Collectively, these executive orders have established, among other things, the Governor's Rural Affairs Council's responsibility to develop and implement a comprehensive plan for improving the lives of rural Illinoisans by addressing rural affair challenges, and to issue the Annual Report on the State of the Rural Illinois Economy in collaboration with the Institute for Rural Affairs at Western Illinois University.^{3, 4} The Council is to execute its duties through its board—not to exceed 25 members—which includes members representing state agencies and institutions, nonprofits, and individuals appointed by the Governor of Illinois.

Under the Pritzker-Stratton Administration, the Governor's Rural Affairs Council has held six quarterly meetings—on May 16, August 8, and November 7 of 2019 and then on March 18, June 11, and September 10 of 2020. Throughout these quarterly convenings, the Council developed three issue-based committees—Education and Workforce Development; Health and Healthcare; and Economic Development and Infrastructure—discussed the development of this strategic report, proposed policy recommendations and initiatives to include within this report, and subsequently finalized the document in late-2020.

Status Reports and Recommendations

Committees proposed six recommendations, two related to education and workforce development, two related to health and healthcare, and two related to economic development and infrastructure. These recommendations are based on current conditions in rural Illinois, which include population decline, an aging population, workforce recruitment concerns, a rural-urban digital divide, as well as challenges to rural healthcare and education delivery. The recommendations also address the impact of COVID-19 on rural communities, especially in the area of economic development.

The Council will utilize these recommendations to advise the Governor's Office, General Assembly, and additional stakeholders on ways to advance policy and advocacy that improves the lives of rural Illinoisans by addressing rural affair challenges in Illinois. To this end, the Governor's Rural Affairs Council will engage with relevant stakeholders in and outside of government to strategically implement these recommendations throughout the state.

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Council Overview and Activities

Executive Mandate

Pursuant to Executive Order 11-04, the Governor's Rural Affairs Council is to:^{5,6}

- Develop and implement strategies for improving the delivery of state services to rural Illinois
- Expand opportunities and enhance the quality of life for rural residents
- Issue the Annual Report on the State of the Rural Illinois Economy in collaboration with the Institute for Rural Affairs at Western Illinois University

Composition

The following membership positions compose the Governor's Rural Affairs Council, pursuant to Executive Order 11-04:⁷

- 1 chair
 - Illinois Lt. Governor
- 17 agency and institution representatives from the following agencies and institutions:
 - Illinois Department on Aging
 - Illinois Department of Agriculture
 - Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity
 - Illinois Department of Employment Security
 - Illinois Department of Human Services
 - Illinois Department of Natural Resources
 - Illinois Department of Public Health
 - Illinois Department of Transportation
 - Illinois Environmental Protection Agency
 - Illinois Community College Board
 - Illinois State Board of Education
 - University of Illinois, Cooperative Extension Service
 - Illinois Housing Development Authority
 - Southern Illinois University
 - Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs at Western Illinois University
 - Illinois Finance Authority
- 2 nonprofit representatives from the following nonprofits:
 - Illinois Agricultural Association
 - Rural Partners
- 0-6 resident members appointed by the Governor of Illinois, with the total number of appointees bringing active membership to 25 people at most

Membership

Below are the resident members appointed to the Council at the time of the creation of this report. Government, institution, and nonprofit representatives are not listed below.

Heather Hampton-Knodle	Montgomery CEO Program, Knodle Limited
Norman Walzer	Western Illinois University
Sameer Vohra	Southern Illinois University, School of Medicine
Sonja Reece	McLean County Board of Health

Activities

Under the Pritzker-Stratton Administration, the Governor's Rural Affairs Council held six quarterly meetings from the time of inauguration to the development of this report—on May 16, August 8, and November 7 of 2019 and then on March 18, June 11, and September 10 of 2020. Following member introductions and discussions regarding the Council's goals and potential success strategies during the first meeting, the Council deliberated to form three issue-based committees during the second quarterly meeting: Education and Workforce Development; Health and Healthcare; and Economic Development and Infrastructure. The November 2019 and March 2020 quarterly meetings were then used to discuss the development of this strategic report, propose recommendations for including within this report, and help finalize the report in late-2020. This work was supplemented by committee meetings, which occurred between council meetings, and in which committee members proposed, reviewed, and discussed recommendations.



Lt. Governor Stratton with the Mayor of Springfield, Jim Langfelder, and the Route 66 Caucus for the unveiling of the Historic Route 66 Display in the William G. Stratton Building of the Illinois General Assembly.

Status Reports and Recommendations

Introduction

The following section includes a summary of Illinois rural and urban demography. Subsequent sections include status reports, which describe the challenges and opportunities faced by rural communities as it relates to the Governor's Rural Affairs Council's three issue-based committees. The status reports are a brief description of the landscape relevant to the different issue areas, and do not reflect the entire policy landscape in these spaces within Illinois. Status reports are made for each issue-based committee, with committee-based recommendations appended to the end of the status reports.

Population Change in Rural Illinois

The U.S. Census Bureau defines any community as rural if it has fewer than 2,500 residents.⁸ An additional definition offered by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget focuses on counties. It defines a county as metropolitan, if at its core, it has one or more cities of at least 50,000 people. A county may also be identified as metropolitan if it is adjacent to a core metropolitan county, and it falls within the commuting zone.⁹ As a corollary, a non-metropolitan or rural county is therefore one with fewer than 50,000 residents at its core and not adjacent to a county that has at least 50,000 residents.

As populations change, the number of non-metropolitan counties in a state can change. When the first GRAC report was submitted in 1992, there were 74 non-metropolitan counties in Illinois.¹⁰ After each decennial census, every county in a state is reevaluated to determine its metropolitan status.¹¹ Currently, out of 102 counties in Illinois, 40 are identified as metropolitan and 62 are non-metropolitan or rural counties (Fig. 1). Between 1990 and 2010, 14 Illinois counties moved from non-metropolitan to metropolitan status.

The declining number of non-metropolitan counties vividly shows the demographic changes affecting Illinois. In 1980 (Table 1), Illinois was 14.2% rural. By 2010, rural residents only represented 11.3% of the Illinois population, a decline of 170,122 residents. It is worth noting that the estimated 2018 rural Illinois population of 1,454,802 is larger than the entire populations of 11 states, including Hawaii and New Hampshire.¹²

Figure 1. Location of Non-Metropolitan Counties in Illinois

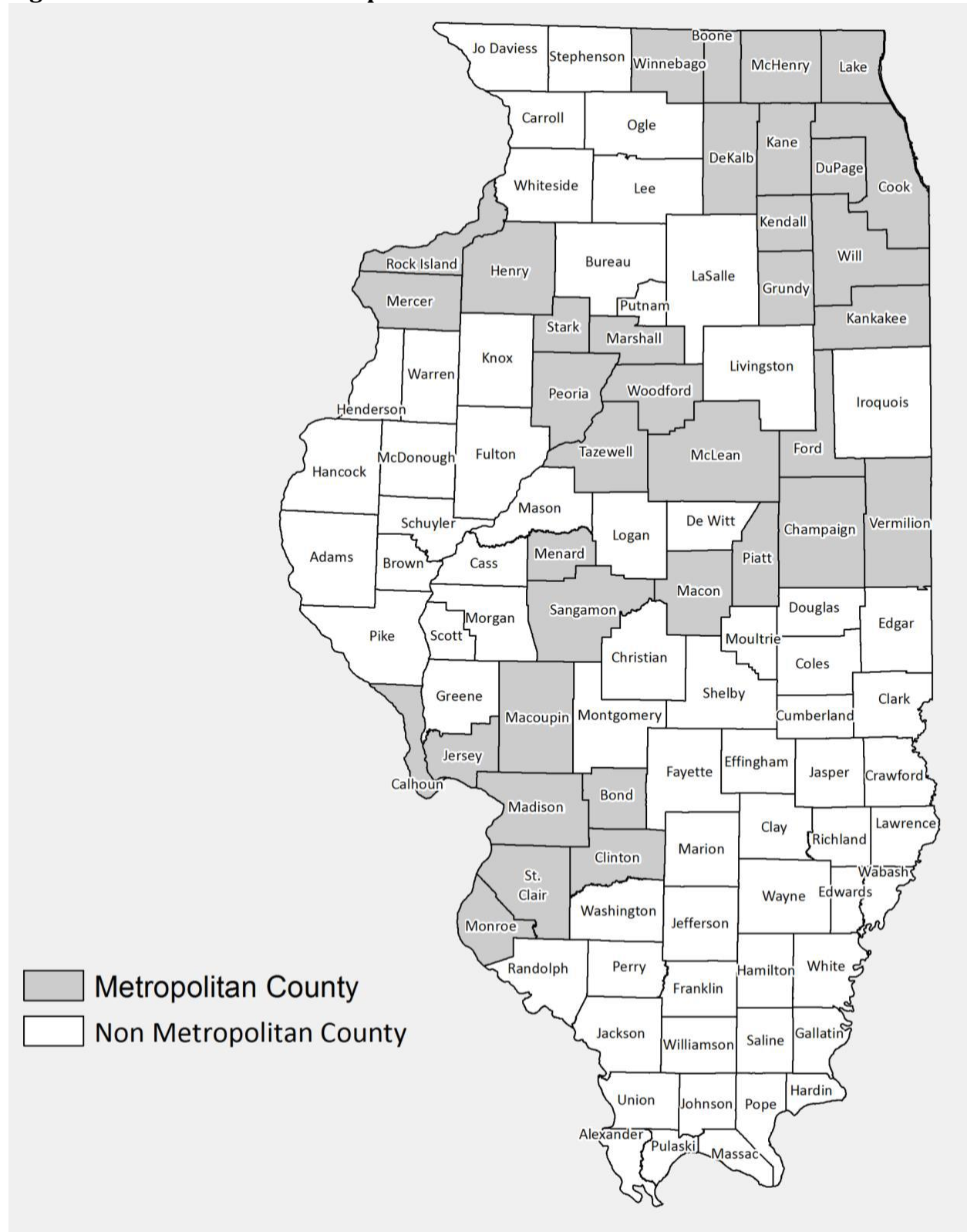


Table 1. A Comparison of Rural Versus Urban Population Change in Illinois¹³

Year	Rural Population	% Rural Population	Urban Population	% Urban Population	Total Population
1980	1,624,924	14.2	9,802,485	85.8	11,427,409
1990	1,534,076	13.4	9,896,526	86.6	11,430,602
2000	1,558,686	12.5	10,861,241	87.5	12,419,927
2010	1,528,925	11.9	11,302,647	88.1	12,831,572
2018	1,454,802	11.3	11,286,278	88.7	12,741,080

While Illinois has a large rural population in an increasingly urban state, the continuing rural population decline raises significant policy questions. The shrinking population will have profound educational, healthcare, and economic development implications. Rural Illinois relies on manufacturing and retail. As the population declines, it might become increasingly difficult to find skilled workers for demanding manufacturing jobs. Mechanization of agriculture has also been driving down the farmer population since the 1930s.¹⁴ Technological innovation in agriculture means that fewer farmers are able to grow more and more food. This decades-long factor has transformed the rural landscape in Illinois.

Education and Workforce Development Status Report

The first GRAC committee focused on education and workforce development. We can justify connecting education and workforce development for at least two reasons. First, research shows that the more highly educated the workforce, the more productive the economy.¹⁵ Hence, it makes sense for local, state, and federal governments to invest in education because it will improve overall economic competitiveness. Second, it makes sense to connect education and workforce development because evidence shows that the more education and training a worker has, the more highly paid the worker will be. Hence, investment in education can improve the economic well-being of individual workers, too.¹⁶ With these justifications in mind, it makes sense for GRAC to focus specifically on rural education and workforce development because there is a persistent gap between rural versus urban educational attainment at the high school and college levels (Table 2).¹⁷

Table 2. Rural Versus Urban Educational Attainment, 1980 to 2018

Not completing high school	Rural	Urban	Total
1980	38.8	33.5	33.5
1990	27.6	23.2	23.8
2000	20.1	18.3	18.6
2014-2018	11.0	11.1	11.1
Completing high school only	Rural	Urban	Total
1980	40.0	35.1	35.1
1990	38.7	28.6	30.0
2000	37.8	26.2	27.7
2014-2018	36.3	24.7	26.1
Completing some college	Rural	Urban	Total

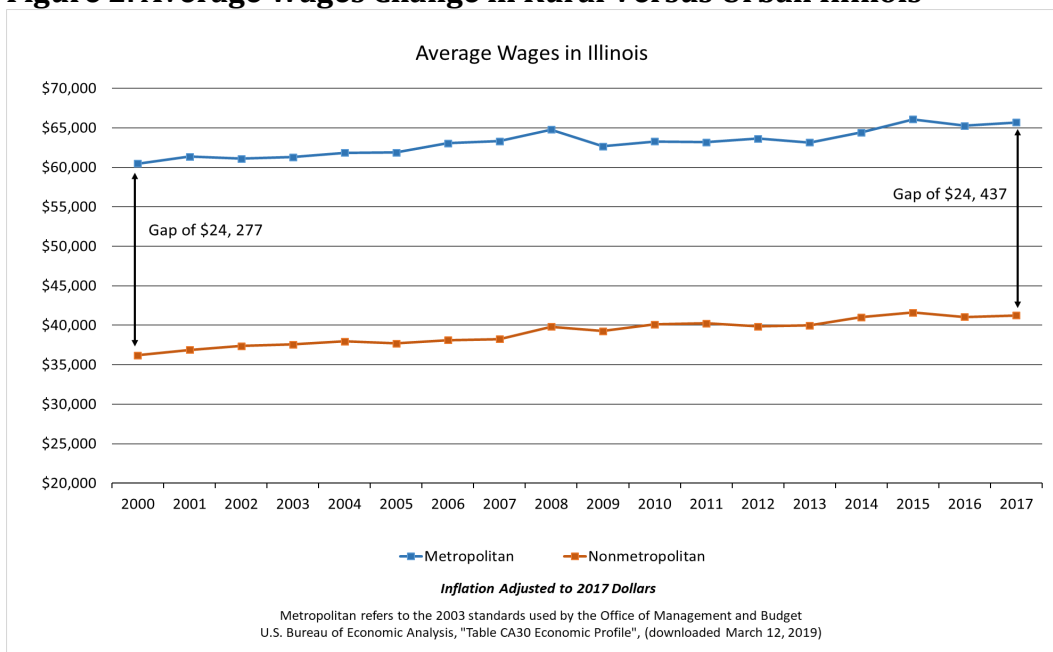
1980	11.7	15.2	15.2
1990	22.7	25.6	25.2
2000	28.6	27.5	27.6
2014-2018	34.5	27.9	28.7
Completing college	Rural	Urban	Total
1980	9.5	16.2	16.2
1990	11.0	22.6	21.0
2000	13.5	28.0	26.1
2014-2018	18.3	36.2	34.1

Obtaining a college or university degree can improve one's income prospects. However, attending college often takes significant personal or family wealth, which many rural residents do not have. Rising tuition costs complicate matters as many students from low-income families are unwilling to take on student loans.

While the gap between rural and urban higher educational attainment has narrowed in some ways over time as the overall Illinois populace has become more educated, urban residents are still more likely to have a high school education than rural residents. At the college level, while there is a higher proportion of rural residents with a college education in 2018 than in 1980, the proportion of urban residents with a college education was already higher than rural areas in 1980 at 16.2 percent, and grew much more quickly, to 36.2 percent, by 2018.

There are several contributing factors when it comes to the difference between rural and urban higher education attainment. First, many rural students simply cannot afford to attend college. There is a persistent rural-urban wage gap (Fig. 2).

Figure 2. Average Wages Change in Rural Versus Urban Illinois¹⁸

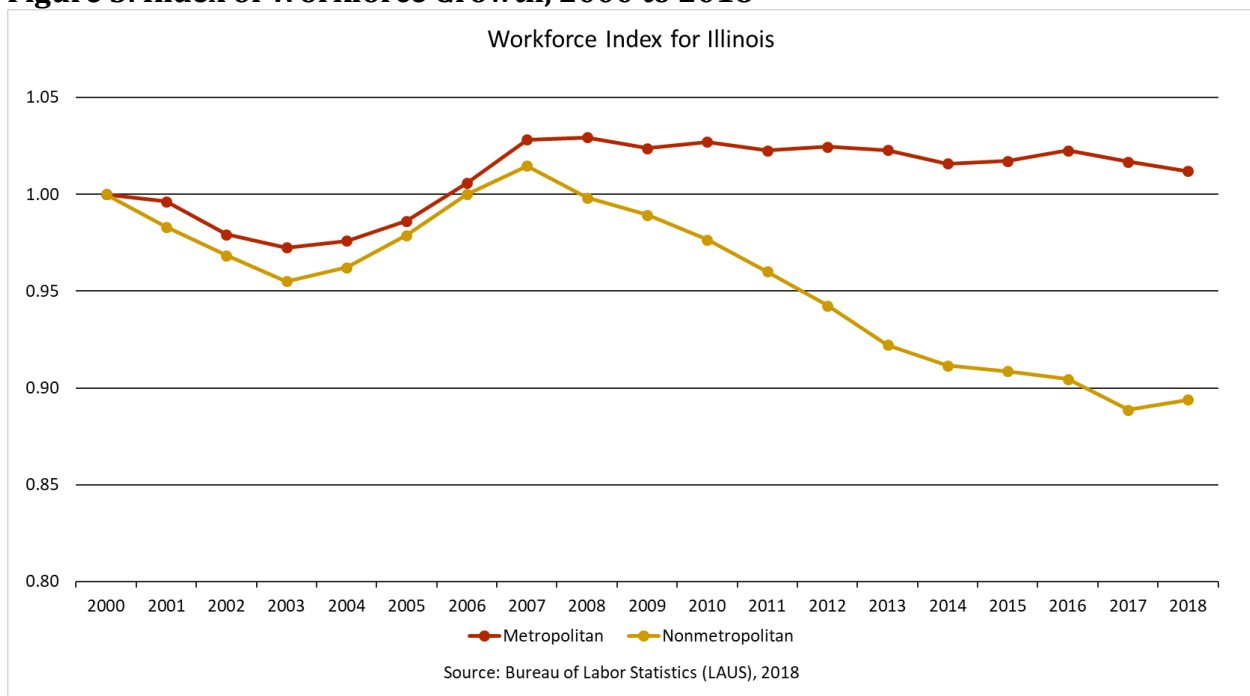


Second, many rural residents live in so-called “education deserts.” Simply put, many rural residents live too far away, even from their local community college, to pursue education beyond high school.¹⁹ While many urban students can cut costs by living at home, rural students are not able to do this as frequently. Many students are able to reduce college costs by taking Advanced Placement (AP) courses. However, there is a rural-urban gap in AP course access.²⁰

These factors combine to perpetuate the rural-urban educational attainment gap. This also contributes to the persistent rural-urban wage gap. This leads to an even larger issue: the declining size of the rural Illinois workforce (Fig. 3). The overall Illinois population has plateaued. However, the rural population is declining (Table 1), and with it the rural Illinois workforce.

Manufacturing jobs require increasingly skilled workers with technological training. Without more investments in various forms of higher education, the rural economy will lag behind urban places.

Figure 3. Index of Workforce Growth, 2000 to 2018



Education and Workforce Development Recommendations. As outlined above, there are many challenges for rural education and workforce development. GRAC has at least two strategies to address these challenges:

- Improve access to opportunities for degree and credential attainment, emphasizing the importance of post-secondary education, including career and tech education and work-based learning, in the future of rural economies
- Increase alignment of workforce development programs across Illinois

The Office of Lieutenant Governor Stratton hosted a three part webinar series with the Hunt Institute to discuss building a pipeline of rural higher education, the rural digital divide for higher education students, and how institutions of higher learning can help rural students succeed in July and August 2020 in accordance with the first recommendation of the Education and Workforce Development Committee.



Lt. Governor Stratton with the Illinois Association Chapter of the Future Farmers of America.

Health and Healthcare Status Report

Long-term divergent trends affect rural health and healthcare delivery in Illinois, including increasing median age of the rural population and a declining overall rural population (Fig. 4). An aging population brings a different, more complex set of medical needs to the fore. As people age, they experience increased chronic diseases such as diabetes and more costly-to-treat illnesses such as cancer. Population decline challenges rural America's market-based healthcare system because hospitals need patients as customers to survive. The aging population with more complex medical issues often require medical specialists and medical technology, which rural hospitals are less likely to have. Rural hospitals struggle to recruit

healthcare specialists, which prompts many patients to bypass local hospitals to seek out healthcare in larger urban areas.²¹

Opioid misuse affects many aspects of community life in rural Illinois. The Illinois Department of Public Health maintains an "Opioid Data Dashboard," which enables visitors to examine datasets documenting the spread and impacts of misuse across the state. Addressing the opioid misuse and overdose issues uncovers other challenges in rural healthcare delivery, too. Often, patients who overdose need ambulance transport to emergency services. The added time it takes for rural emergency medical support to reach those in need points to the chronic challenge of providing emergency medicine across long distances and low population density.

The opioid misuse crisis also exposes another issue in rural health: "epidemic of despair." Health researchers have identified the intertwining of mental health issues and opioid misuse as contributing to the premature deaths among many rural residents. Improved telehealth and broadband infrastructure could make a difference, too, by extending healthcare, including mental health counseling and telehealth, across rural regions.²²

Recognizing the gaps in broadband accessibility, the State of Illinois began expanding broadband into rural and low-income communities. The Illinois Office of Broadband, housed within the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO), is administering a \$400 million grant program to help expand broadband throughout Illinois, including downstate and rural communities.^{23, 24} The maps on the Illinois Office of Broadband's site show regional differences in broadband access across the state, with large gaps in service to rural areas.²⁵

Expanding broadband coverage must be coupled with internet connection uptake. Data from the U.S. Census American Community Survey shows that rural counties have lower internet subscription rates (Fig. 5). There are some rural Illinois counties where almost half of the households lack internet access.

Figure 4. Median Age in Illinois by County

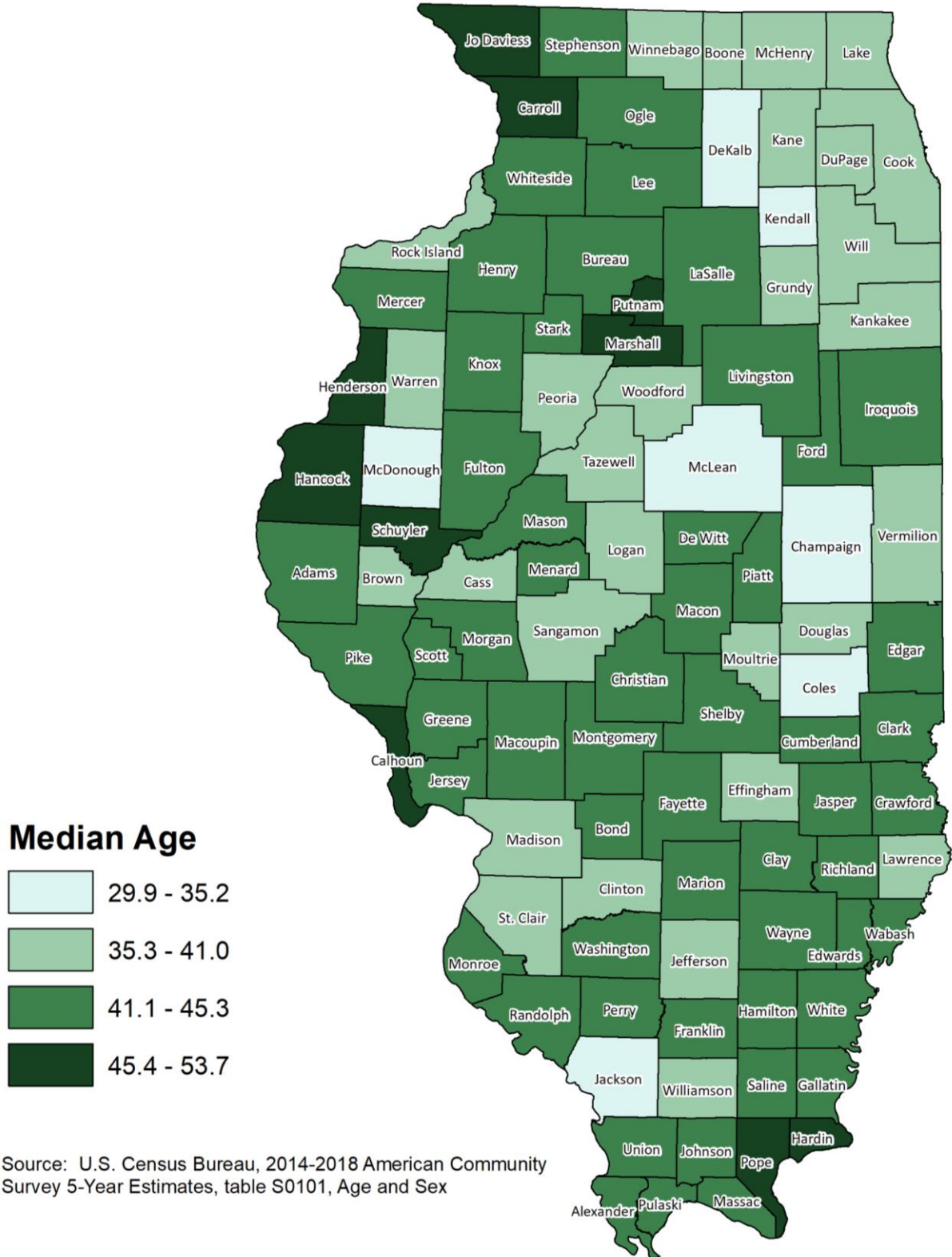
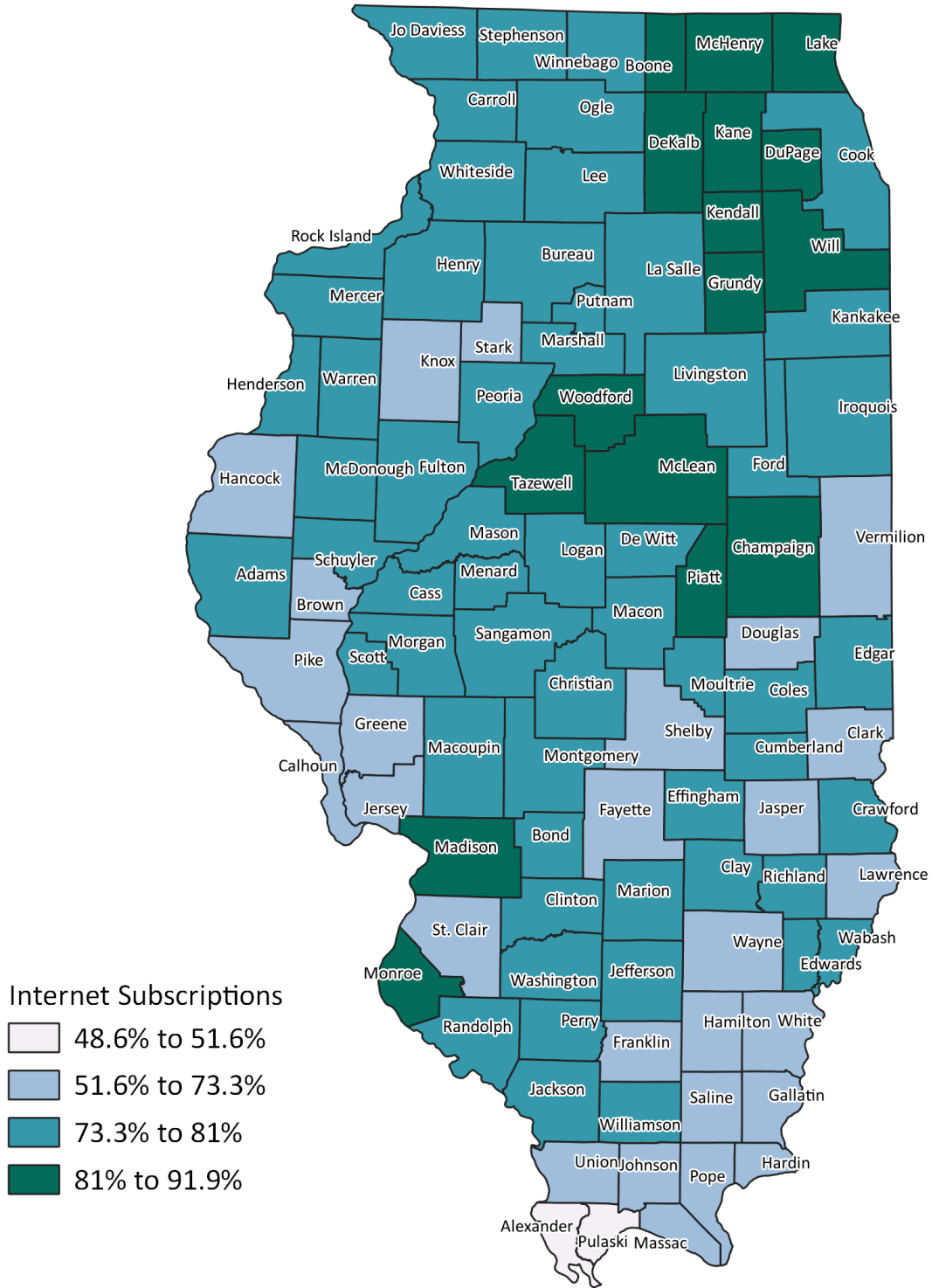


Figure 5. Percentage of Households with an Internet Subscription, 2018



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2014-2018 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, PRESENCE AND TYPES OF INTERNET SUBSCRIPTIONS IN HOUSEHOLD.

Health and Healthcare Recommendations. The aging, shrinking rural population, coupled with the more recent challenges of COVID-19 and Opioid misuse, prompts GRAC to propose the following policy initiatives:

- Improve access to healthcare by supporting telemedicine, telehealth, and broadband expansion in rural communities
- Support efforts to reduce the negative impacts of the Opioid crisis



Lt. Governor Stratton attending the The Farm Progress Show in Decatur, Illinois.

Economic Development and Infrastructure Status Report

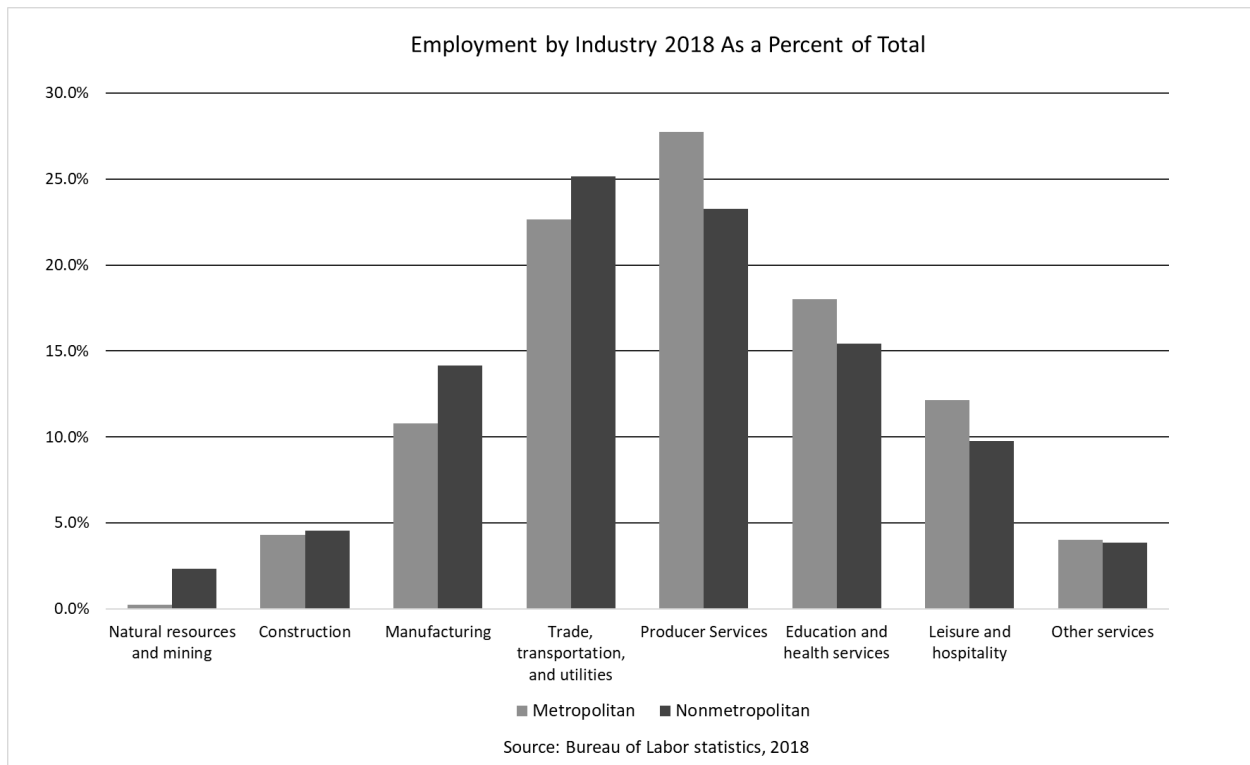
Over the past decade, the Illinois economy has grown more rapidly than other Midwestern states, using gross state product as a metric.²⁶ This growth can be attributed in part to the diverse nature of the economy in Illinois, including rural Illinois. While agriculture is an enormous part of the economy, rural Illinois also relies heavily on manufacturing, producer services, and many other sectors. Reliance on other industries like coal mining has decreased over time as automation and changes in demand have occurred.

The diverse nature of the rural Illinois is revealed in a comparison of rural versus urban employment by industrial sector (Fig. 6). While there are more manufacturing jobs in urban versus rural counties in absolute terms, manufacturing jobs make up a larger proportion of the rural workforce compared to the urban workforce. The importance of manufacturing jobs to the rural economy justifies why it is so important to invest in rural workforce development and broadband. Rural manufacturers need skilled workers, which are increasingly difficult to find due to rural youth outmigration and population decline. Illinois needs to adopt strategies which retain and attract skilled, young workers who see potential career opportunities in downstate communities.

Small businesses and entrepreneurship also play a very important role in the rural Illinois economy. The U.S. Small Business Administration defines a small business as any commercial entity with fewer than 500 employees. In Illinois, rural counties clearly rely on small businesses more than urban counties do (Fig. 7).²⁷

Self-employment or entrepreneurship is also a very important part of the rural economy. The map below shows that many rural counties have higher levels of self-employment than cities (Fig. 8).²⁸ The greater rural reliance on small business and self-employment has at least two implications for future rural economic development.

Figure 6. Rural Versus Urban Employment by Industry, 2018



The United States Small Business Administration recognized the plight of small businesses and created several programs such as the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) to help small businesses survive. The challenge for rural areas is that they are more reliant on small businesses than urban areas, and there were no PPP funds specifically designated for rural, minority-owned, or female-owned businesses in the first round of PPP funding.²⁹

The concern is that the COVID-19 epidemic will exacerbate the existing rural versus urban income and poverty gaps (Table 3).³⁰ With a great reliance on small businesses, the COVID-19 virus could increase the unemployment in rural Illinois more than in urban areas. This could also increase the rural poverty rate, which is already higher than the poverty rates in urban Illinois (Fig. 9).

Figure 7. Percent of Workers Employed by Small Businesses by County, 2015

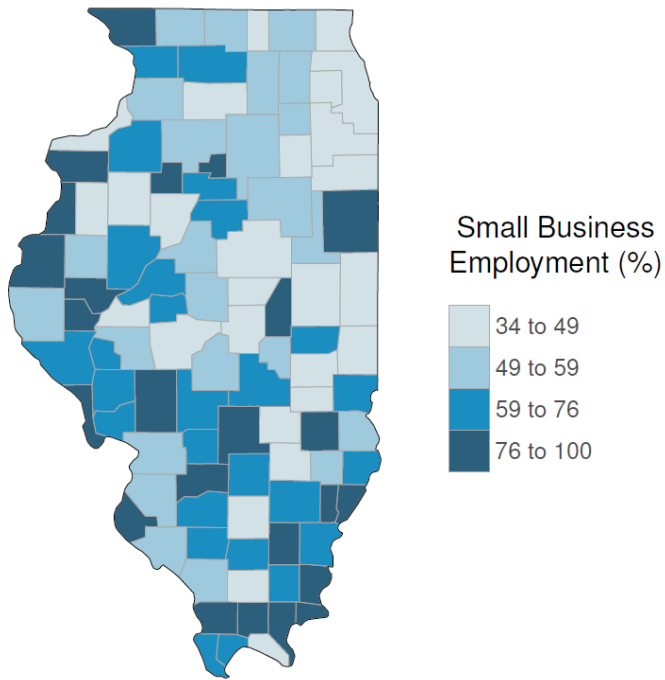


Figure 8. Illinois Self-Employment Rate (%) by County

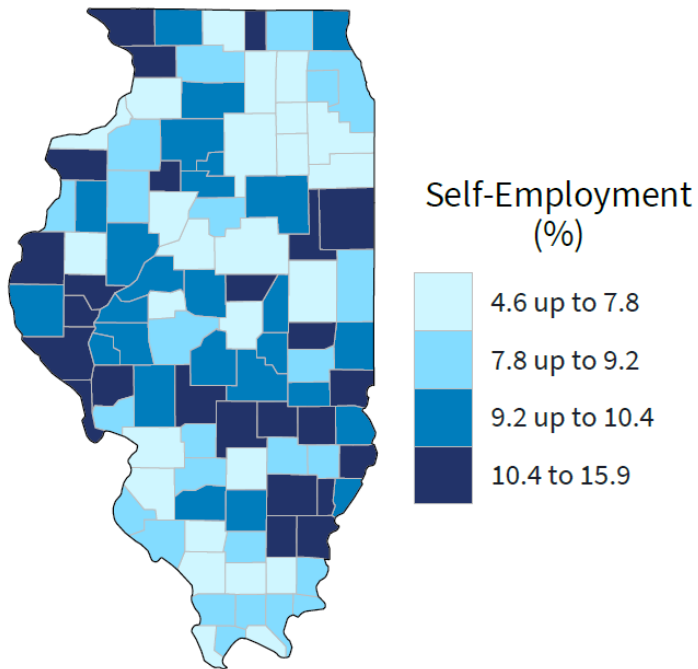


Table 3. Rural Versus Urban Income and Poverty Rates

Income	Rural	Urban	Total
Per-capita income			
2017	40,427	55,690	53,943
2018	42,622	58,671	56,839
Percent change	5.4	5.4	5.4
Earnings per job			
2017	46,668	66,056	64,255
2018	48,226	67,852	66,044
Percent change	3.3	2.7	2.8
Poverty rate (percent)			
1979	10.5	11.1	11.0
1989	13.3	11.7	11.9
1999	10.7	10.7	10.7
2018	13.6	12.0	12.1

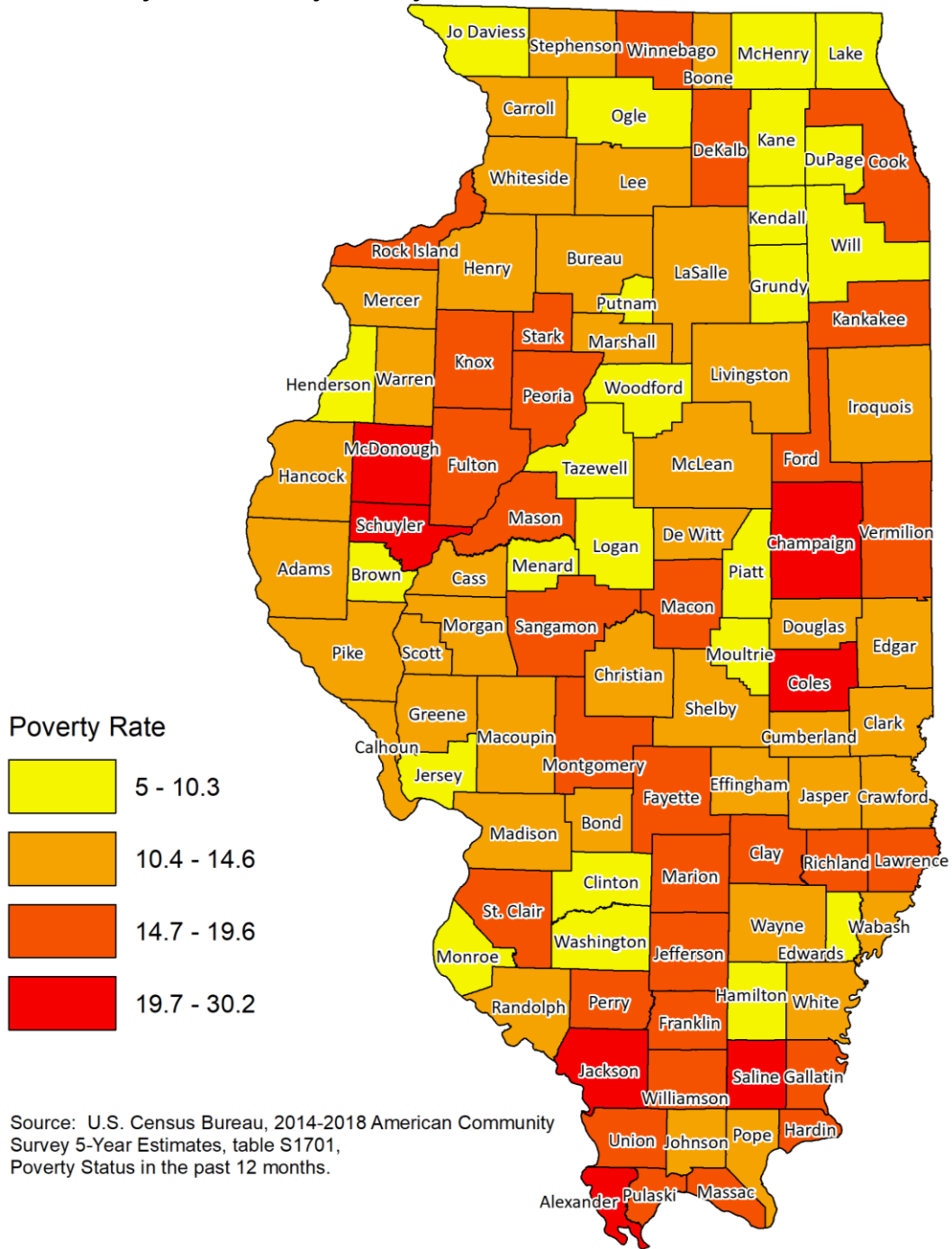
Economic Development and Infrastructure Recommendations. Opportunities for rural Illinois to expand economic development and spur recovery from COVID-19 include:

- Expanding affordable access to broadband so rural residents can take advantage of innovative healthcare, shopping, and telecommuting opportunities.
- Working with state agencies and local leaders to support rural businesses and help connect them with available federal relief during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Lt. Governor Stratton visiting Jan and Aagje Ton Farm in Chicago, IL. The farm served as a safe house for freedom seekers on the Illinois Underground Railroad.

Figure 9. Poverty in Illinois by County, 2018



Next Steps

Moving forward, the Council will convene working groups on key recommendations. Working groups will include council members and other relevant stakeholders, and will work to strategically implement the recommendations outlined in this report. These efforts will not only ensure the Council has the necessary support for the successful implementation of these recommendations, but will also ensure that consistent feedback on progress is provided.

Acknowledgements

The Council is extremely grateful to the members, public guests, organizations, and governmental bodies that contributed their time, talent, and ideas to discuss the Governor's Rural Affairs Council and this report. The Council would especially like to thank the Illinois Department of Natural Resources; the University of Illinois Springfield Performing Arts Center; the Starved Rock Lodge and Conference Center; and the Southern Illinois University School of Medicine for allowing the Council to use their venues for quarterly meetings held throughout 2019 and 2020.

The Office of Lieutenant Governor Stratton served in an administrative capacity to support council convenings and the drafting of this report. The Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs deserves great thanks for their work to develop this report.

Endnotes

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- ¹ The 2020 annual report of the Governor's Rural Affairs Council is a collaboration between the Office of the Illinois Lt. Governor, the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs at Western Illinois University, and the board members of the Governor's Rural Affairs Council.
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