

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

2024 Annual Report



Chaired by Illinois Lt. Governor Juliana Stratton

LETTER FROM LT. GOVERNOR STRATTON

As we approach the halfway mark of our administration's second term, I maintain that Illinois' strength lies within our people. In every corner of the state, people are doing innovative, impactful, and important work. Now more than ever, I am acutely aware of how powerful collaboration is when identifying ways to uplift our rural communities. We have an opportunity to replace the rural-urban divide with a rural-urban bridge by dedicating time and resources to understanding the complexity of challenges facing nonmetro areas.

I write to you as Chair of the Governor's Rural Affairs Council (GRAC); in that capacity, I am pleased to share our 2024 report. In the coming pages, you will find data on economic and population trends in small towns, information on persistent issues facing rural areas, and summaries of recent GRAC activities aimed at finding solutions. This year, we covered the Farm to Food Bank Program and provided updates on rural broadband deployment, the Local Food Purchasing Cooperative Agreement, Resilient Food System Infrastructure Grant, and Local Food Infrastructure Grant Program.

This report also includes contributions from GRAC members, state and local agencies, and communities most impacted by our work that demonstrate the importance of aligned collaboration. We have a responsibility to ensure all regions are appropriately prioritized in state governance. This community work is crucial in our work to uplift rural residents.

Looking ahead, many of the challenges facing rural Illinois require long term, multi-pronged approaches. To meet this moment, we are staying engaged with the Agricultural industry, Illinois Main Streets, and GRAC-led projects that fortify our path to the future. Every instance of progress must fuel us to continue this. As representatives of all people who call Illinois home, we are committed to working in partnership with rural communities.

Respectfully,



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



Enjoying time at SIU Carbondale with
Women Changing the Face of Agriculture

Executive Summary¹

Introduction

Pursuant to Executive Orders 91-13 and 11-04, this annual report from the Governor's Rural Affairs Council (GRAC) summarizes current social and economic conditions in rural Illinois. It also summarizes the Council's policy and advocacy recommendations for improving the delivery of state services to expand opportunities and enhance the quality of life for all Illinoisans, with a particular focus on rural residents.¹ These recommendations originate from general discussions within the GRAC. Policy recommendations also emerge from three issue-based committees the Council established: Education and Workforce Development; Health and Healthcare; and Economic Development and Infrastructure.

Council Overview and Activities

The State of Illinois created the GRAC in 1986, pursuant to Executive Order 86-07. Since then, different Illinois Governors amended the original Executive Order three times by issuing Executive Order 91-13 (1991), Executive order 00-01 (2000), and Executive Order 11-04 (2011). These executive orders establish the GRAC's responsibility to issue the Annual Report on the State of the Rural Illinois Economy, in collaboration with the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs (IIRA) at Western Illinois University (WIU). These executive orders also require the GRAC to develop a comprehensive plan for improving the quality of life in rural Illinois.^{2, 3} The Council executes its duties through its board – not to exceed 25 members – which includes representatives from state agencies, institutions of higher education, nonprofit organizations, and individuals appointed by the Governor of Illinois.

Under the Pritzker-Stratton Administration, the GRAC has held quarterly meetings. Through these meetings, the Council developed three issue-based committees including the Education and Workforce Development Committee; Health and Healthcare Committee; and the Economic Development and Infrastructure Committee. These committees propose policy recommendations and initiatives outlined every year in the GRAC annual report. The GRAC also collaborates with the IIRA and Rural Partners each year to host a rural development conference.

Committee Recommendations, Rural Conditions, and Actions

Committees propose recommendations based on academic and applied research, which documents current conditions in rural Illinois, including population decline, an aging population, workforce recruitment concerns, business succession planning, a rural-urban digital divide, as well as challenges to food access, rural healthcare, and education delivery. The Council will use 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. This report also documents the research conducted and actions already taken by GRAC members to address the policy recommendations.

¹ The 2024 Annual Report of the Governor's Rural Affairs Council is a collaboration between the Office of the Lt. Governor, the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs at Western Illinois University, and the members of the Governor's Rural Affairs Council.

Glossary

AHEC	Area Health Education Center
AIRSS	Association of Illinois Rural and Small Schools
BEAD	Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment
CSE	Community Supported Enterprise
DCEO	Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity
GRAC	Governors Rural Affairs Council
ICCB	Illinois Community College Board
IIN	Illinois Innovation Network
IIRA	Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs
ISBE	Illinois State Board of Education
MAPPING	Management and Planning Program in Non-Metro Groups
NSF	National Science Foundation
NTIA	National Telecommunications and Information Administration
OMB	Office of Management and Budget
PUMS	Public Use Microdata Sample
RCDG	Rural Cooperative Development Grant
RDRG	Rural Development Resource Guide
REAP	Rural Energy for America Program
REH	Rural Emergency Hospital
RICC	Rivers of Illinois Coordinating Council
SBA	Small Business Administration
SBDC	Small Business Development Center
SIU	Southern Illinois University
UIUC	University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign
USDA	United States Department of Agriculture
USDA-ERS	United States Department of Agriculture—Economic Research Service
USDA-RD	United States Department of Agriculture—Rural Development
WIU	Western Illinois University

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Council Overview and Activities

Executive Mandate

Pursuant to Executive Order 11-04, the Governor's Rural Affairs Council must:^{4, 5}

- 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 Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs at Western Illinois University.

Composition

The following membership positions compose the Governor's Rural Affairs Council, pursuant to Executive Order 11-04:⁶

- **1 chair**
 - Illinois Lt. Governor's Office – Lt. Governor
- **17 agency and institution representatives from these agencies and institutions:**
 - Illinois Community College Board
 - 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 Department on Aging
 - Illinois Environmental Protection Agency
 - Illinois Finance Authority
 - Illinois Housing Development Authority
 - Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs at Western Illinois University
 - Illinois State Board of Education
 - Southern Illinois University
 - University of Illinois – Cooperative Extension Service
- **2 nonprofit representatives from the following nonprofits:**
 - Illinois Agricultural Association (The Illinois Farm Bureau)
 - Rural Partners
- **0-6 citizen members appointed by the Governor of Illinois, with the total number of appointees bringing active membership to 25 people at most.**

Membership

The GRAC appointed the following citizen members to serve on the Council:

- David Ardrey
- Heather Hampton-Knodle
- Neophansya Robinson
- Sonja Reece
- Norman Walzer

Activities

Under the Pritzker-Stratton Administration, the GRAC has held quarterly meetings each year from the time of inauguration to the present time. The Lt. Governor led discussions focused on the Council's goals and potential strategies to achieve these goals. The GRAC formed three issue-based committees: Education and Workforce Development; Health and Healthcare; and Economic Development and Infrastructure. Subsequent quarterly meetings focused on developing committee recommendations that are included within this report.

In addition, the GRAC collaborates each year with the IIRA and Rural Partners to host the Annual Rural Development Conference. This conference has been held every year for the past 35 years.

The GRAC has also hosted guest speakers and representatives from GRAC member agencies at quarterly meetings. These speakers delivered presentations on specific topics related to rural development. For example, in the last year, Matt Schmit from the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) Office of Broadband and Robbie McBeath from the Illinois Broadband Lab (IBL) discussed state programs to help rural communities address the digital divide. Prof. Adee Athiyaman from the IIRA presented his research related to health care access, including barriers to mental health services, in rural Illinois.

Finally, the GRAC continues to host "community-engaged" GRAC meetings. Communities that have gone through the IIRA or other strategic visioning processes to create development plans for the future are invited to attend a GRAC meeting. These communities share their specific development goals and then GRAC member agencies discuss how their respective technical assistance and funding programs could help the community. In FY2025, potential sites for a "community-engaged" GRAC meeting include Coal City, Erie, and Effingham.

As documented in previous GRAC reports from the past decade, key issues that continue to affect rural communities include population decline, youth outmigration, workforce development concerns, the rural-urban digital divide, business succession planning, as well as challenges to food access, rural healthcare, and education delivery. The GRAC and its constituent members are working collaboratively to address these issues and improve the quality of life for the residents of rural Illinois.

Socioeconomic Trends and GRAC Activities in Rural Illinois

Introduction

This report summarizes current socioeconomic trends in rural Illinois. It also describes GRAC actions and policy initiatives to improve the quality of life for rural communities. To accomplish these goals, this section of the report unfolds in three parts. Part one explores rural versus urban socioeconomic trends in Illinois. Section two summarizes recent research and outreach activities related to the three GRAC working groups: (i) Education and Workforce Development, (ii) Health and Health Care Access, and (iii) Economic Development and Infrastructure. The third section explains how the GRAC coordinates technical assistance among government agencies and collaborates with other organizations and initiatives to promote rural community and economic development.

1. Demographic Trends in Rural versus Urban Illinois

This report documents current trends in rural Illinois. To do so, the report relies on the definition for “rural” or “nonmetropolitan” offered by the Federal Office of Management and Budget (OMB), the US Census Bureau, and the United State Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service (USDA-ERS). These agencies define nonmetropolitan by first defining urban or metropolitan counties. Metropolitan counties have at least one densely-settled core area with at least 50,000 people.⁷ Counties adjacent to a metropolitan county also count as metro if 25% of the workers in the adjacent county work in the core county or if 25% of the workers in the core county work in the adjacent county. The OMB and USDA-ERS define all counties outside these metro counties as nonmetropolitan or rural.

Illinois currently has 37 metro and 65 nonmetro counties (Figure 1). The number of metro versus nonmetro counties has changed over time. After each decennial enumeration, the Census Bureau evaluates the population in each county to determine if it meets the criteria to be a metropolitan county. According to the 1990 Census, shortly after the establishment of the GRAC, Illinois had 28 metro counties and 74 nonmetro counties. After the 2010 Census, Illinois had 40 metro and 62 nonmetro counties. This partially explains why the Illinois rural population has declined since 2000 (Table 1).

Table 1. A Comparison of Rural versus Urban Population Change in Illinois⁸

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	1,528,935	11.9	11,302,637	88.1	12,831,572
2020	1,439,587	11.2	11,372,921	88.8	12,812,508
2022	1,416,661	11.3	11,165,371	88.7	12,582,032

However, after the 2020 Census, the OMB recategorized several counties so that now, Illinois has 37 metro and 65 nonmetro counties. This occurred because several small metro counties such as Vermillion, with Danville as its County Seat, experienced so much population decline that it reverted from metro back to nonmetro status. However, it is also true that most Illinois nonmetro counties continue to lose population and have done so for several decades (Figure 2). So, while Illinois has gained three nonmetro counties since 2010, the overall trend has been nonmetro population decline.

As noted in previous GRAC reports, at least four factors contribute to rural population decline in Illinois. First, new farming technologies transformed rural communities over the past century. With mechanized implements, fewer and fewer farmers could produce increasingly more farm commodities. In 1920, 237,181 farmers operated in Illinois. By 2022, that number dropped to 71,123.¹⁰ This explains why the population of most agriculturally-dependent counties in Illinois peaked decades ago.

Second, rural to urban migration also contributes to rural population decline. With fewer farm jobs or opportunities for off-farm employment, many young adults migrated to cities.

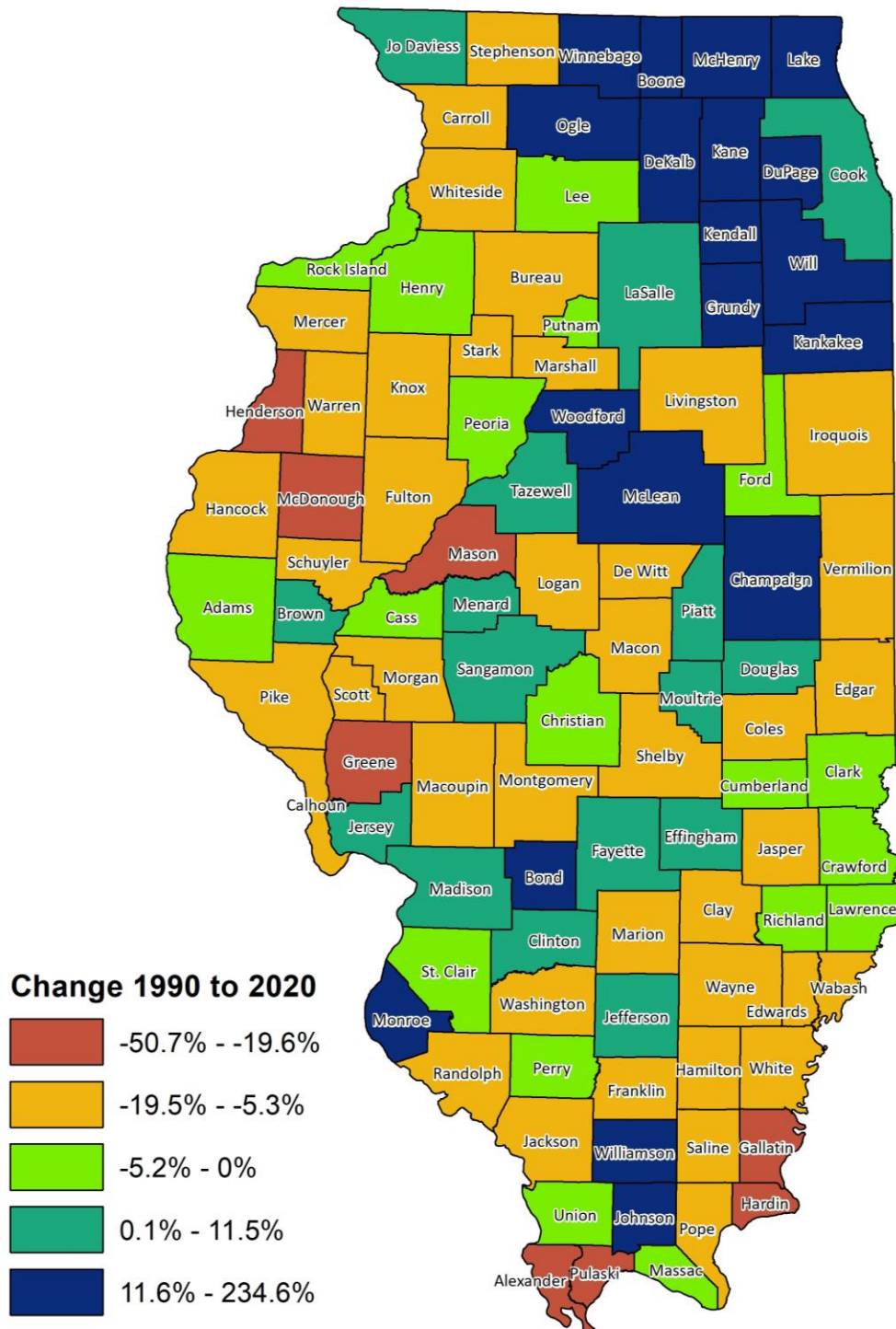
Third, dropping birthrates accelerate rural population decline. Over the past century, rural birthrates have been higher than those in urban areas. However, birthrates have been dropping in both rural and urban areas and are now below what is needed to sustain current populations without immigration.^{11, 12 13}

Fourth, constraints on immigration also drive rural depopulation. The mechanization of agriculture, declining birthrates, and rural outmigration drive population decline. Immigration is the one macroscale process that could stabilize rural populations.¹⁴ Without immigration to offset declining birthrates and outmigration, rural communities will continue to shrink.¹⁵

Rural areas have lagged behind urban areas in many ways, including lower wages, lower educational attainment, and health care access. Continued population decline compounds these issues. Here are some that rural areas continue to lag behind urban areas, and how population decline compounds these issues.

- ***Declining Tax Base and Rural Infrastructure.*** Basic infrastructure such as schools, local roads, water, and other services rely on local tax dollars to function. As the population shrinks, the local tax base also shrinks. However, the cost to maintain the existing infrastructure does not. Local public officials can either raise taxes or cut services. Either way, rural residents will experience a deteriorating quality of life.¹⁶
- ***Loss of Anchor Institutions.*** Anchor institutions include the local businesses, government agencies, and nonprofit organizations that offer essential services to the community. As populations decline, grocery stores close, schools consolidate, churches shutter, and health care facilities cut back services or close.^{17, 18, 19}

Figure 2. Percent Population Change by County, 1990 to 2020²⁰



- **Educational Attainment Gap.** Illinois has increased state funding for rural and low-income school districts, which will reduce the rural-urban education attainment gap in the future. It will be a continuing problem, though, as long public education in Illinois remains so dependent on the local tax base, which is directly affected by population decline (Table 2).

Table 2. Rural versus Urban Educational Attainment, 1980 to 2021²¹

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
2008-2012	37.4	25.8	27.2
2017-2021	36.0	24.0	25.4
Completing college			
1980	9.5	16.2	16.2
1990	11.0	22.6	21.0
2000	13.5	28.0	26.1
2008-2012	16.3	33.2	31.1
2017-2021	19.3	38.4	36.2

- **The Digital Divide.** Rural communities have less access to broadband than urban areas in Illinois. Rural households also have lower internet subscription rates than urban areas do (Figure 3). We must help rural communities narrow the digital divide because broadband is an essential part of our education, healthcare, and economic development infrastructure.
- **Youth Outmigration and Workforce Development.** Many young people leave rural places because of low wages or limited opportunities (Figure 4). This contributes to a declining rural workforce (Figure 5). Illinois counties most resistant to population decline have diverse economies, with jobs in manufacturing, the public sector, healthcare, education, and other sectors beyond agriculture. Note that rural Illinois counties are proportionately more reliant on manufacturing jobs than urban areas (Figure 6). Many rural and downstate Illinois manufacturers struggle to find workers because of rural outmigration.²² Rural outmigration is both a cause and consequence of the larger forces driving rural depopulation.
- **Poverty.** Poverty rates are higher in rural versus urban counties in Illinois (Table 3). Rural poverty has many causes. This includes the aforementioned educational attainment gap and the lower average wages. The higher median age of rural residents also contributes to higher poverty rates because rural residents are more likely to be retired or on a fixed income.

Figure 3. Percentage of Households with an Internet Subscription, 2022²³

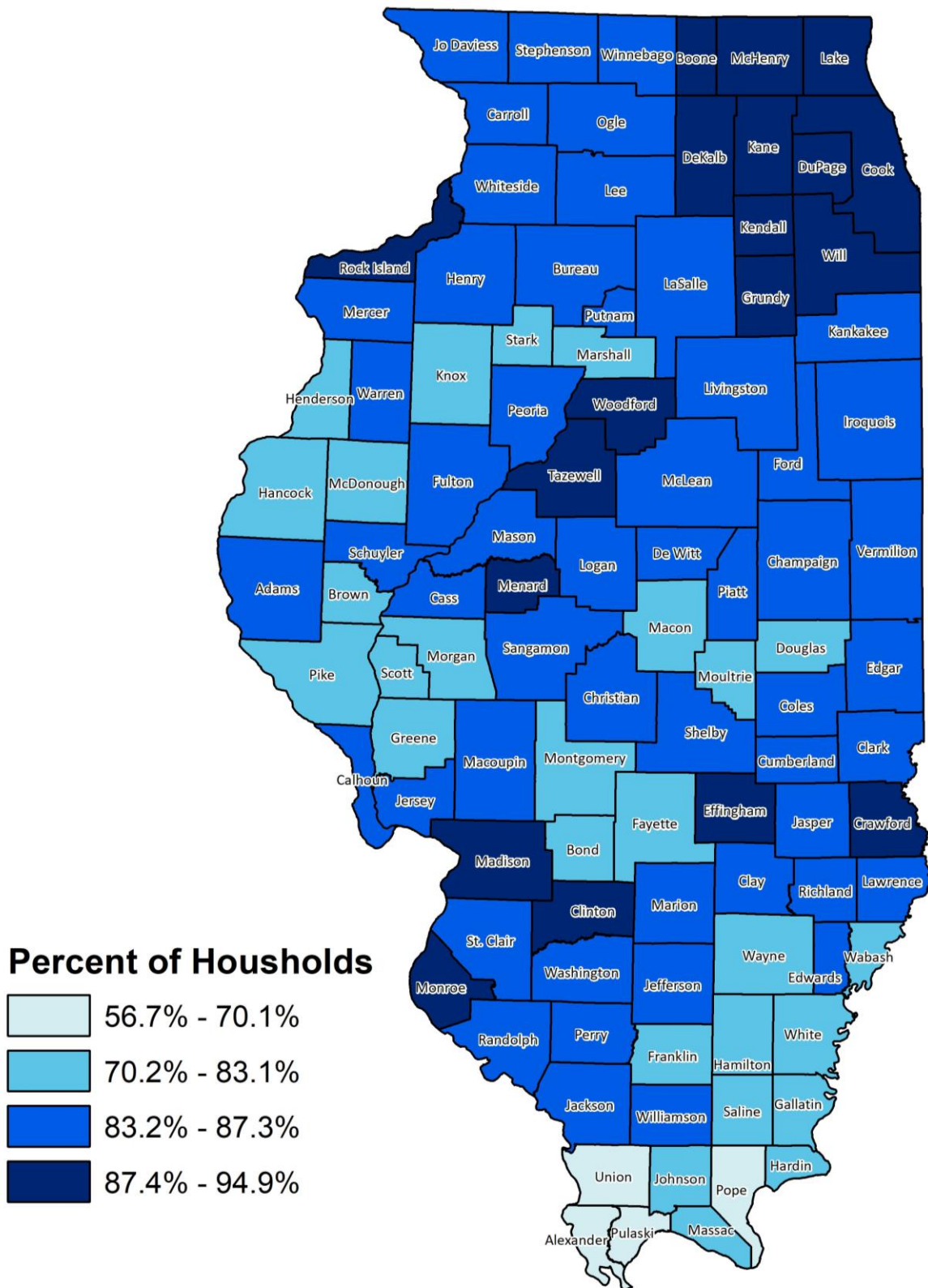


Figure 4. Average Wages and Wage Change in Rural versus Urban Illinois²⁴

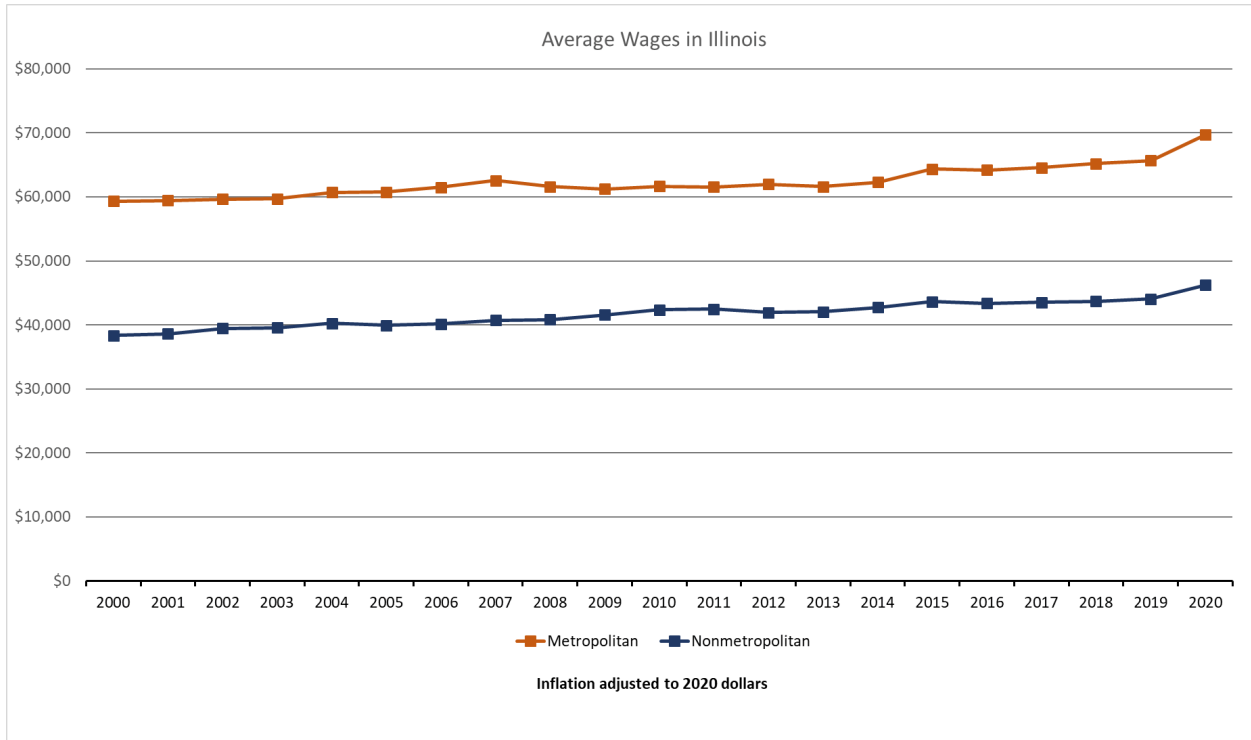


Figure 5. Index of Workforce Growth, 2000 to 2022²⁵

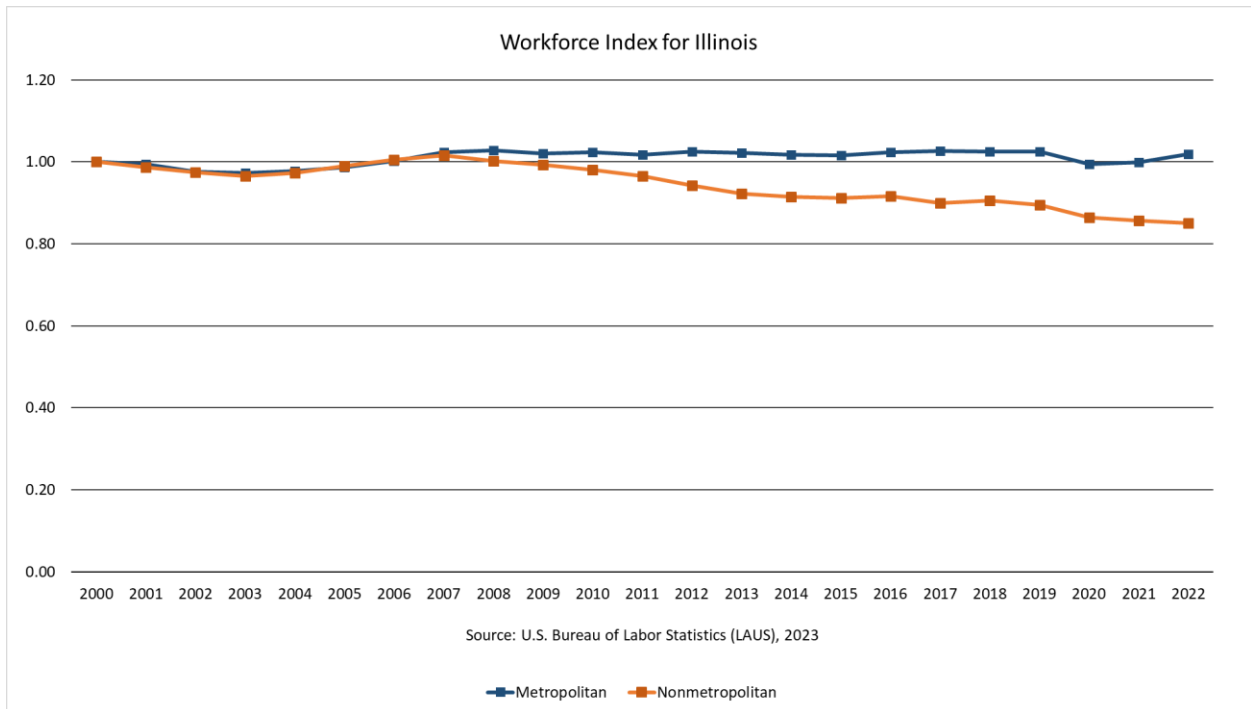


Figure 6. Rural versus Urban Employment by Industry, 2022²⁶

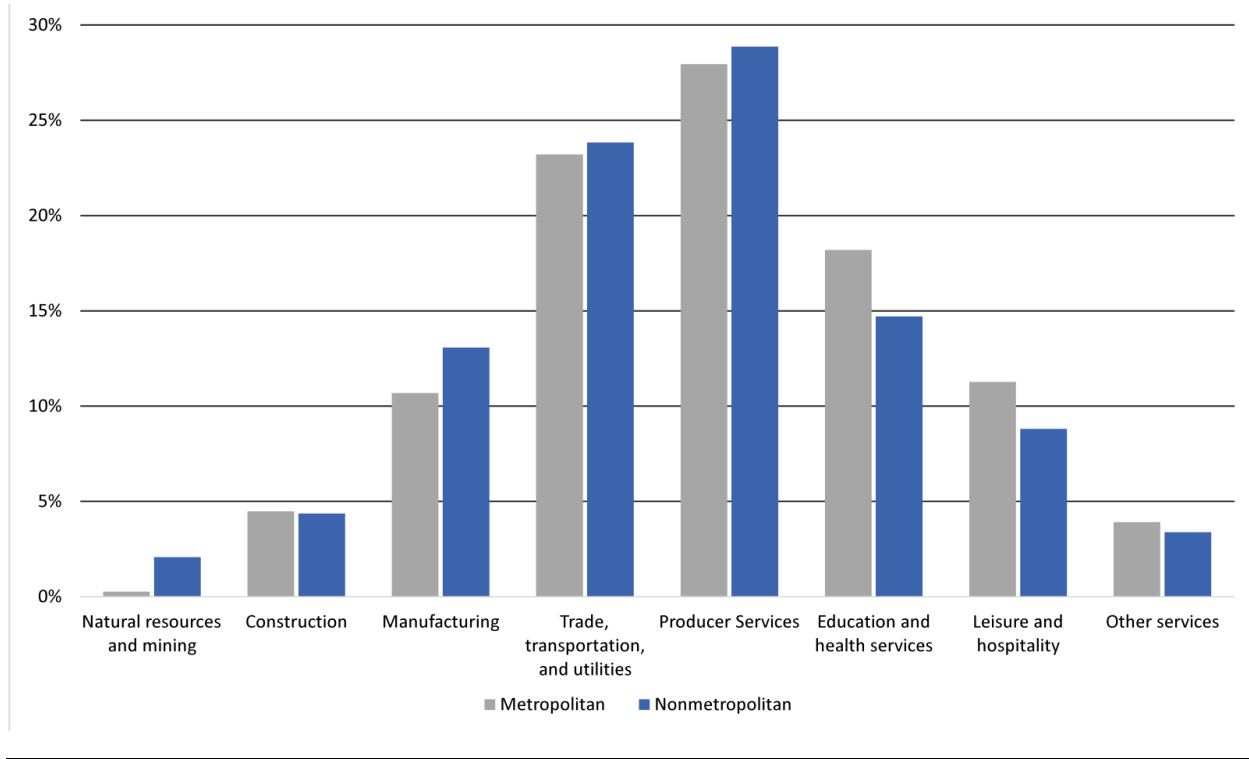
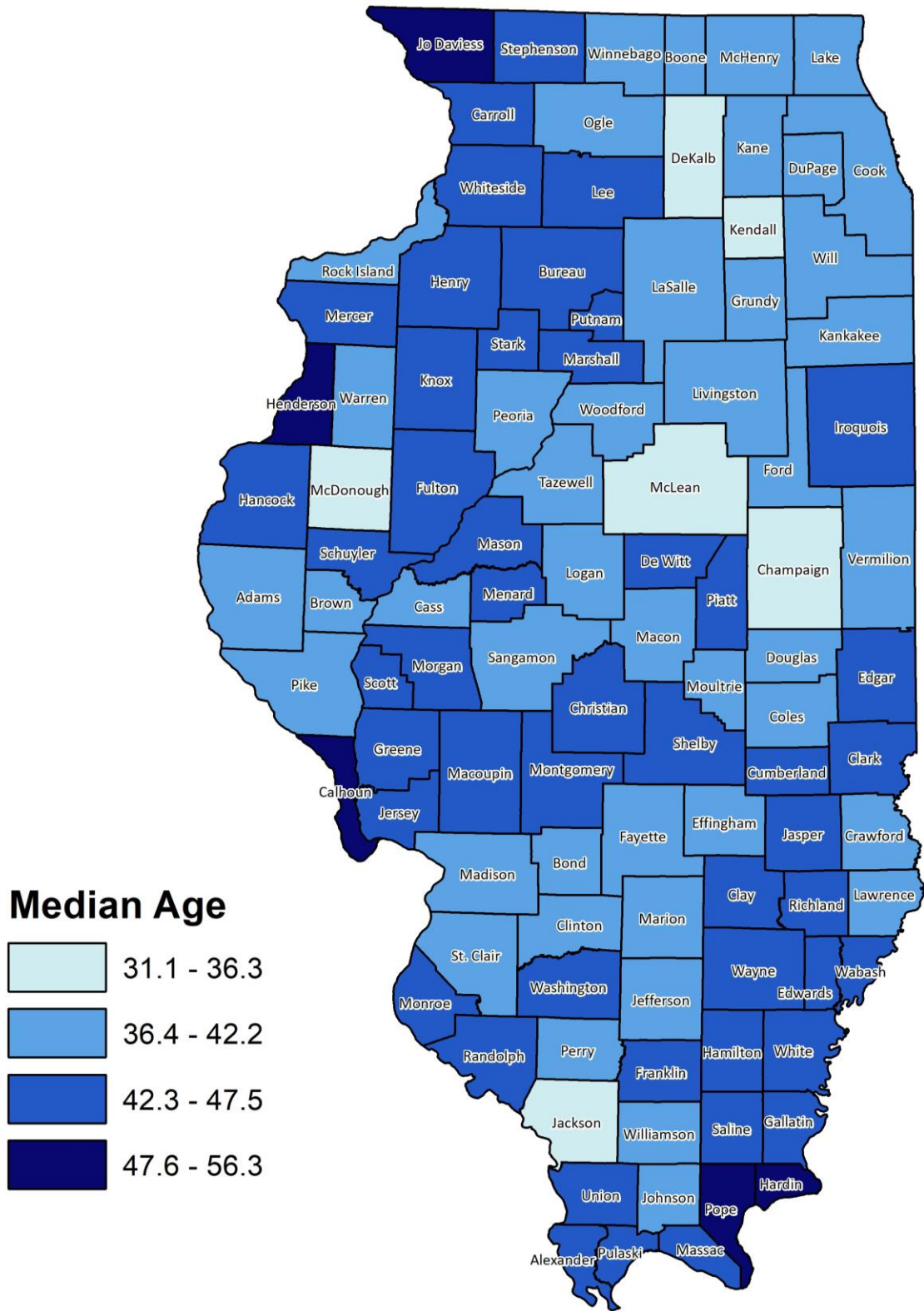


Table 3. Poverty Rate (%) in Rural versus Urban Counties in Illinois²⁷

Year	Rural	Urban	Total
1979	10.5	11.1	11.0
1989	13.3	11.7	11.9
1999	10.7	10.7	10.7
2021	13.3	11.9	12.1

- Aging Population and Healthcare Access.*** A corollary to rural youth outmigration and the declining birth rate is that rural counties have a higher median age than urban areas (Figure 7). This poses a challenge because rural areas are less likely to have the health care facilities that older patients with more complex health issues might need. Senior citizens are also more likely to have mobility issues because of disabilities or because they can no longer drive a car. This makes it difficult for the elderly to age in place if the rural community lacks public transit options. This occurs because ride-hailing services such as Uber or Lyft are less likely to operate in small, rural communities.^{28 29}

Figure 7. Median Age by County, 2022³⁰



2. GRAC Working Groups

The GRAC has organized its members into three working groups to focus more attention on key issues. This section provides a brief overview of each working group and a summary of their policy positions and initiatives.

Health and Healthcare Access Working Group

The health care impacts of opioid misuse, plus the challenges presented by the declining, aging rural population with limited access to broadband, prompted this working group to focus on telemedicine and healthcare access. Specific projects and research initiatives undertaken by GRAC members include the following:

- ***Southern Illinois University (SIU) School of Medicine Telemedicine Project.*** The SIU School of Medicine is currently piloting a project in partnership with the Illinois Farm Bureau and University of Illinois Extension. The SIU School of Medicine opened two telepsychiatry facilities in rural communities that lack a local healthcare facility. This provides rural residents with a place that offers broadband access and privacy to confer with health care professionals.
- ***Research Related to Health, Healthcare Access, and Health Outcomes.*** IIRA researchers recently authored several research briefs focused on rural health care access and other health related topics. Examples include:
 1. ***Healthcare in Illinois: A County-Level Index of 'Readiness for AI' in Healthcare.*** This research paper addresses two salient questions about artificial intelligence (AI) in healthcare: How to conceptualize AI diffusion in healthcare and how could we assess AI readiness of Illinois counties? I argue that AI is not a disruptive innovation; it is a competence-enhancing technology, for example, to manage time consuming administrative tasks in healthcare. Also, I use an index to assess AI readiness of Illinois counties. Data analysis shows that in nonmetro Illinois, Coles and Effingham counties are comparatively more prepared for AI than other counties.³¹
 2. ***Illinois Agricultural Workers' Health: A County-Level Analysis.*** To be employed in industry an individual must be relatively healthy and active. How healthy is the agricultural workforce in Illinois? This research addresses this question using data from the US Census, Medical Expenditure Panel Survey, and the Center for Health Statistics. Results indicate that more than one in five workers suffer from high cholesterol and 18% suffer from high blood pressure. The paper provides PUMA (Public Use Microdata Area) specific indicators on agricultural workers' health. These indicators are benchmarks which Illinois agriculture could use in tracking their workers' health status over time.³²

3. ***Discrimination in Healthcare: Perceptions among LGBTQ Individuals in Metro and Nonmetro Places.*** The LGBTQ communities in the nation report experiences of discrimination across many areas of life. This research explores the healthcare experiences of LGBTQ population in the metro and the nonmetro geographies of the nation. Data are from a national survey of adults conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation and *Washington Post* during the fall of 2022. The results show that the LGBTQ population is discriminated in healthcare; discriminative practices such as failing to treat the LGBTQ patient with dignity and respect are more pronounced among the nonmetro.³³
4. ***Geographic Variation in Trauma Deaths in Rural Illinois: A Hypothesis about Trauma Deserts.*** This paper explores the association between trauma deserts and trauma mortality using counties in rural Illinois as the geographical unit of analysis. Results of data analysis suggest the typical distance to a trauma center in rural Illinois is 14.5 miles. Further statistical analysis indicates that trauma deserts cannot be defined using the commonly prescribed “five-mile radial distance to the trauma center” criterion. A salient outcome of the research is the listing of distances to nearest trauma center from rural zip codes.³⁴
5. ***Maternal Mortality in Illinois Counties by Race, 2000-2023.*** The Institute of Health Metrics based at the University of Washington, School of Medicine, provides visualization of maternal mortality rates (MMRs) at the county level, but to gather time series data and analyze trends in maternal mortality one has to click on the visualization many times. This paper eases this burden; it provides maternal mortality data and change metrics for each of the 102 Illinois counties. Other than a listing of maternal mortality data by race, the paper provides several insights from the data such as: 1. The age-adjusted, typical MMR in Illinois is 2.92 for the Whites, 8.89 for the Blacks, and 3.53 for the Hispanics, and (2) Cook County in the metro had the largest MMRs for Blacks and American Indian / Alaskan natives.³⁵
6. ***Support for Healthy Eating and Active Living in Rural Communities: Insights from a National Survey of Local Governments.*** This paper explores local government policies that facilitate or support healthy eating and active living. Microdata from the “Community Based Survey of Supports for Healthy Eating and Active Living” (CBS HEAL)” were collated to gain insights into healthy living. Data analysis suggests that the nonmetro has fewer municipalities that require installation of dedicated bicycle infrastructure for roadway expansion projects. More than one in five local governments in both the metro and the nonmetro provide tax incentives such as tax abatement, tax credit, or property tax exemption to attract supermarkets and full-service grocery stores to their community.³⁶

Education and Workforce Development Working Group

Data presented earlier in this report show an ongoing rural-urban divide in educational attainment and workforce development. The GRAC is equipped to tackle these issues because its members include education, workforce development, and human services experts from the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB), DCEO, Illinois Department of Employment Security (IDES), Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS), and several state universities including University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), the IIRA at WIU, and SIU. Recently, the GRAC also added the Association of Illinois Rural and Small Schools (AIRSS) to its roster of member agencies. Here are examples of collaboration, conferences, and research conducted by GRAC members to address education and workforce development issues.

- ***Collaboration to Promote K-12 Rural Education.*** AIRSS and the IIRA are collaborating to conduct an economic impact analysis of rural school districts. Using the IMPLAN software, the IIRA is using data provided by AIRSS to calculate the direct, indirect, and induced economic and employment impacts of a rural K-12 school district. The purpose of this study is to provide empirical data to local and state leaders and residents about the economic value of the rural schools.
- ***Webinars on Education and Workforce Development.*** The University of Illinois Extension regularly hosts webinars as part of their Local Government Education Program. In collaboration with Rural Partners, the University of Illinois Extension regularly includes webinars with a rural emphasis. Here are recent examples of webinars from this series that discuss education and workforce development issues.
 1. ***Illinois Area Health Education Centers (AHEC).*** This webinar highlights programs, resources, and partnership opportunities with the Illinois AHEC Network, which works to support and develop the rural and underserved healthcare workforce in Illinois. AHECs help build the rural and underserved healthcare workforce through a collaborative approach with schools, colleges, universities, hospitals, health departments, and others to address gaps in education, workforce, and population health needs.³⁷
 2. ***Entrepreneurship in Illinois' Rural High Schools.*** Entrepreneurship is an important engine of job creation and economic development. The promotion of entrepreneurial initiative in the rural communities across Illinois should rank high on the list of priorities for community leaders and economic-development officials. One key venue for such promotion is high-school classrooms in rural counties. Educational opportunities in entrepreneurship do exist in schools across Illinois, but there is room for expansion. The program will highlight two models of such entrepreneurship education in Illinois and examine the path communities might follow to offer their own versions of entrepreneurship education, in light of its importance as a foundational element in entrepreneurial ecosystems in rural Illinois.³⁸

- **Research Related to Education and Workforce Development**

1. ***The Dynamics of Rural Illinois' Human Capital.*** This paper shows educational attainment by race and gender for rural Illinois. Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) were used to calibrate a human capital metric for rural Illinois. Results show that White females contribute the most to the human capital stock for rural Illinois.³⁹
2. ***The Threat of Automation: Differences in Perceptions Between Metro and Nonmetro Labor Force Participants.*** The present study was constructed to determine the social and economic characteristics of those workers who perceive automation as a threat. Data were from a survey of adults sponsored by the Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University. Results of data analysis suggest that some individuals appear to live as if they are in the process of “becoming”; they are training to develop new skills in order to keep up with changes in the workplace; they are predominantly college-educated men with a household income of \$50,000-\$75,000.⁴⁰

Economic Development and Infrastructure Working Group

Rural Illinois communities need to diversify their economies if they hope to stabilize their populations, maintain their local tax base, and retain their quality of life. GRAC members and this working group conducted research and took actions over the past year that could help rural places in several ways.

- ***Expanding Broadband Access.*** As noted in the 2023 GRAC report, broadband is an essential part of community infrastructure. Unfortunately, not every community or household has access or can afford broadband. The USDA-Rural Development (USDA-RD), the DCEO Office of Broadband, and The Illinois Broadband Lab are working to reduce the rural-urban digital divide. Several GRAC members secured DCEO Broadband READY grants to promote broadband adoption and digital literacy. Examples of projects include implementing Chromebook lending programs in partnership with rural community libraries and the Reaching Across Illinois Library System (RAILS).⁴¹
- ***Business Succession Planning.*** Small businesses that populate the main street economy are the foundation of rural communities across Illinois. A crucial moment for all businesses occurs when the owner decides to retire. In order to keep the business operating, a community will want to help the business owner find a suitable buyer who will keep the business open. Over the years, the topic of business succession planning has been featured in the annual rural development conference. More recently, several GRAC members have collaborated to provide business success planning technical assistance. Here are some specific projects:

1. ***Business Succession Planning Outreach.*** In 2022, the IIRA secured a \$400,000 Small Business Administration (SBA) Grant with assistance from Rep. Cheri Bustos. Since that time, the IIRA has been working with a retired director of the WIU Small Business Development Center (SBDC), and GRAC citizen member Norman Walzer, to publish an edited book, and develop an online resource guide to help economic developers and business owners create viable succession plans.⁴²
 2. ***Community Supported Enterprises.*** Typically, business succession planning focuses on sole proprietorships, with a single owner selling the business to another single owner. However, sometimes a business in transition can be purchased as a community-supported enterprise (CSE) or cooperative. Communities can use the CSE model to keep a business open if a sole proprietor cannot be found to purchase the business in transition. This model can also be used to reopen a business after it has closed. The IIRA has worked with several partners including USDA-RD, UI Extension, the Illinois Innovation Network (IIN), and community leaders to open rural grocery cooperatives in five communities across Illinois.⁴³
- ***Annual Rural Development Conference.*** Since 1989, the GRAC has collaborated with the IIRA and Rural Partners to host an annual rural development conference. Conference speakers discuss many rural development topics including education, healthcare, and especially economic development. At the 35th annual conference held this year in Springfield, Lt. Governor Juliana Stratton delivered opening remarks. Other speakers represented the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, the Aspen Institute, Northwestern University, private sector consultants, state agencies such as USDA-RD and DCEO, and community members. Speakers discussed entrepreneurship, rural grocery stores, worker cooperatives, community design to address the issue of social isolation, the decline of small town newspapers, the importance of rural ports to the rural economy, and inclusive rural development, among other topics.
 - ***Webinars on Infrastructure and Economic Development.*** As noted earlier, the University of Illinois Extension and Rural Partners collaborate to host webinars with a rural emphasis. Once broadcast, the UI Extension archives the webinars on its website for later viewing. Here are recent examples of webinars from this series that discuss infrastructure and economic development issues.
 1. ***The BEAD (Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment) Program: Closing the Digital Divide in Illinois.*** New to the BEAD program? This webinar discusses the \$1 billion coming to Illinois from the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) to connect all households to broadband over the next five years. This webinar is intended for BEAD beginners who might be interested in applying for funds to support their community.⁴⁴

2. ***Rural Vitality in Northern and Central Illinois.*** Rural communities in northern and central Illinois face many challenges—out-migration, an aging population, over-reliance on large employers—but just because these rural communities are changing, does not mean that they are withering. While the pandemic created hardships, it also created opportunities for rural communities. For instance, a surge in new business applications indicates a growing interest in entrepreneurship, and the ongoing expansion of the nation’s broadband infrastructure has created remote work opportunities and made rural living a more realistic option for many people. To help our rural communities thrive, rather than just survive, we must better understand their needs and priorities. This webinar provides an overview of research on rural vitality throughout northern and central Illinois and highlights what community leaders think about the issues that most affect their community’s overall vitality. It will also highlight insights from regional leaders about what drives their local economy, shapes their physical infrastructure, and encourages active and wide-ranging civic engagement.⁴⁵
 3. ***Marketing Rural Tourism.*** This workshop was developed for members of tourism organizations, community leaders, and local volunteers with little background or experience in marketing tourism and recreational assets. Participants will be provided with insights into identifying target markets, the importance of digital marketing, and how to create effective tourism marketing campaigns that reach different generations. The presenter will also be providing information and resources from a recent research project completed by the University of Illinois and Illinois Extension called I-Rural: Reimagining Illinois Rural Tourism Through Community and Extension Collaboration. Resources include an I-Rural Toolkit that communities and organizations can use to better understand and promote local tourism as well as an updated grant resource guide.⁴⁶
 4. ***Clean Energy for Rural America.*** This webinar discusses the benefits of clean energy for rural communities, small businesses, and farmers. Kim Knowles with Prairie Rivers Network will share information about state and federal incentives that make solar more accessible and affordable. Callie Heidbreder with USDA Rural Development will share information about the Rural Energy for America Program (REAP) grant program. REAP provides grant funding and guaranteed loans for renewable energy systems and energy efficiency improvements for small rural businesses and agricultural producers. We’ll also hear a REAP solar success story from Tasha Dunaway, co-owner of Bespoke Gift Company.⁴⁷
- ***Conduct Research.*** The IIRA conducted research on several topics related to economic development, infrastructure, sustainability, and quality of life in rural Illinois. Here are some examples of recent research.

1. ***The Costs and Benefits of Recreational Cannabis Legalization in Illinois: A County Level Analysis.*** Illinois legalized recreational marijuana in January 2020. This paper examines the ‘value’ of cannabis to Illinois counties. The construct ‘value’ was defined as Benefits/Costs . The numerator of the ‘value’ equation, benefits, was measured using county tax revenues. Costs, the denominator of the equation, was measured as healthcare costs for combatting cannabis use disorder among the population. Results of data analysis suggest that recreational cannabis legalization doesn’t provide ‘value’ for 35% of the metro counties and one-in-three of the nonmetro counties.⁴⁸

2. ***Support for Healthy Eating and Active Living in Rural Communities: Insights from a National Survey of Local Governments.*** This paper explores local government policies that support healthy eating and active living. Data analysis suggests that the nonmetro has fewer municipalities that require installation of dedicated bicycle infrastructure for roadway expansion projects. More than one in five local governments in both the metro and the nonmetro provide tax incentives such as tax abatement, tax credit, or property tax exemption to attract supermarkets and full-service grocery stores to their community.

3. Internal and External GRAC Collaborations

The Office of Lt. Governor Juliana Stratton and the GRAC define rural development broadly. They also recognize that promoting rural development is a complex challenge that can only be accomplished through partnerships and collaboration. This section explores how the GRAC and its members collaborate with each other to help rural places. This section also explores the intersections and collaborations between GRAC members and initiatives beyond the GRAC that have a significant rural focus. These initiatives include:

- ***Agricultural Equity and Food Insecurity.*** In 2022, Lt. Governor Stratton announced the **#AGConnectsUsAll** initiative to draw attention to agricultural equity and food insecurity in both urban and rural regions of the state. The Lt. Governor is working with GRAC members such as the Illinois Farm Bureau, UI Extension, the IIRA, and SIU School of Medicine to help minority farmers thrive and support marginalized rural and urban communities that do not have access to affordable, healthy foods. Building on the themes of agriculture and rural development, the Illinois Farm Bureau launched its Rural Development Grant program to support rural initiatives in small towns across Illinois.⁴⁹

- ***Restore, Reinvest, Renew (R3) Board.*** The R3 Program takes 25% of the tax revenue collected from adult-use cannabis sales to fund a grant program designed to help communities affected by poverty, violence, and the collateral damage caused by the war on drugs. The IIRA, in partnership with the R3 Program, University of Illinois Extension, and community partners, is using these funds to invest in the Rise Community Market in Cairo, Illinois.⁵⁰

- ***Illinois Grocery Initiative (IGI)***. The State of Illinois implemented the IGI to help struggling small and family-owned grocery stores invest in new equipment. The IGI also provides funds to help start cooperatively-owned grocery stores in rural and urban food deserts. The IIRA, University of Illinois Extension, Chicago State University are working to provide technical assistance to grocers and communities interested in applying for these funds. The IGI emerged due to the advocacy of many parties in the state legislature and through the work of Lt. Governor Juliana Stratton and the GRAC.⁵¹
- ***Illinois Innovation Network (IIN)***. As noted in the 2023 GRAC report, the IIN and the GRAC are deeply connected. The IIN is a network of 15 innovation hubs located at Illinois public universities. The state of Illinois created the IIN to spur university-driven research, innovation, as well as workforce and economic development. The IIN has connections to the GRAC and rural development in at least six ways. First, the Lt. Governor chairs the IIN Advisory Committee. Second, 10 of the 15 innovation hubs focus on rural development or rural-urban supply chain linkages. Third, the IIN sponsors the rural development conference hosted by the IIRA, GRAC, and Rural Partners. Fourth, IIN leadership has presented at GRAC meetings and the rural development conference. Fifth, the IIN-sponsored Illinois Broadband Lab works with several GRAC members, such as DCEO, the IIRA, and University of Illinois Extension to expand broadband access in rural Illinois. Finally, as noted previously, the Office of the Lt. Governor worked with the IIN, University of Illinois System, UI Extension, and the IIRA at WIU to help establish the RISE cooperative grocery store in Cairo, Illinois.
- ***Rivers of Illinois Coordinating Council***. Lt. Governor Stratton chairs the Rivers of Illinois Coordinating Council (RICC). This council promotes stewardship of the Illinois River Watershed, as well as the Mississippi, Ohio, and Wabash Rivers. To focus its efforts, the RICC established three committees, including the Asian Carp and other Invasive Species Committee, the Economic Development and Infrastructure Committee, and the Conservation and Environment Committee. GRAC members are engaged in activities that significantly overlap with RICC activities. For example, the IIRA is collaborating with the University of Illinois-Chicago and the UIUC among others on a National Science Foundation (NSF) project focused on the “circular economy.” This is the idea that the waste products from one manufacturing process can be used as inputs into another manufacturing process. Part of this research will focus on the ways that Asian Carp, or Copi as it has been rebranded, can be processed into edible products for human and animal consumption. The project will go on to explore how the waste products from the fish processing can be converted into fertilizer. This promotes economic development along the river, while addressing the invasive species problem. In addition, GRAC members such as UIUC, SIU, WIU and affiliated partners in the IIN recently secured a \$1,000,000 NSF grant to improve intermodal supply chain management and logistics. A portion of this project will focus on the infrastructure of ports along the Illinois and Mississippi Rivers.⁵²

- **Community Engaged GRAC.** The GRAC recently enhanced the way it engages rural communities. The original governor’s executive order outlining the GRAC mission said it should identify innovative ways to deliver services to rural communities. The GRAC was intended to directly coordinate state agency outreach. Over time, the GRAC evolved into a forum where agencies met to share ideas, but it moved away from direct community engagement. The Office of the Lt. Governor has now brought the GRAC back closer to its original role.

The premise of creating a “community engaged” GRAC draws on the community planning conducted by the MAPPING (Management and Planning Program in Non-Metro Groups) Program, which operates from the IIRA. It takes a community through a strategic visioning or design thinking process to help the community create a plan for future economic development. Community members are asked three questions: (i) Where are you now, (ii) Where do you want to be, and (iii) How do you get there? In a consensus-based process, the community comes up with a strategic vision or plan that includes four to six achievable community economic development goals. In the Community Engaged GRAC meeting, the community is invited to a GRAC meeting to discuss their plans with all of the GRAC members. Instead of the community having to travel to Springfield or Chicago to meet with agency representatives individually, the community and multiple agencies meet in the same room. This results in a more efficient delivery of technical assistance and funding opportunities for rural communities.

- **Rural Development Resource Guide (RDRG).** To augment the community engaged GRAC meetings, the IIRA has updated its Rural Development Resource Guide. It is currently available on the IIRA website: <https://iira.org/rural-resource-guide/>. The RDRG is a searchable online database that includes all of the technical assistance and funding opportunities that GRAC members offer to promote community and economic development in rural communities. It also includes information on government agencies and nonprofit organizations beyond the GRAC that also offer support for community and economic development. This resource will be an asset for all communities interested in promoting local community and economic development.
- **Birth to Five Illinois.** Birth to Five Illinois is a collaboration between the Illinois Department of Human Services and the Illinois State Board of Education. This program aims to increase access to affordable childcare and to promote early childhood development. The program is deployed alongside the regional offices of education. Many of these regions serve rural Illinois. Access to affordable childcare is both an early childhood development and a workforce development issue. Several GRAC members including the University of Illinois Extension and the IIRA are also working to expand access to childcare and early childhood development programming in rural Illinois.⁵³

Looking Forward

The GRAC has identified key issues affecting rural Illinois, including a digital divide affecting education, health care, and economic development, declining and aging rural population, workforce development challenges, and the importance of business succession planning, among other topics. This report documents how the GRAC has moved beyond simply identifying issues. The GRAC and its constituent members have conducted research and taken direct action to improve the quality of life in rural places.

Moving forward, GRAC members will continue to generate research focused on healthcare and healthcare access, education and workforce development, and economic development and infrastructure. The GRAC has already implemented its community-engaged GRAC initiative in Mattoon and Charleston. Future host communities for a Community Engaged GRAC meeting could include Coal City, Erie, or Effingham, Illinois. Future actions also include hosting the Midwest Community Development Institute (Midwest CDI) in August 2024. This event is organized by the IIRA with significant support from UI Extension and Rural Partners.

Planning has already begun and will continue through the autumn for the 36th Annual Rural Development Conference. It is scheduled to take place in Springfield in February 2025. The IIRA will continue to work with GRAC members to update the RDRG. The three working groups will continue to work on specific projects including the business succession planning outreach led by the IIRA, with support from other GRAC partners.

Rural communities in Illinois have significant challenges. However, these communities also have a wealth of assets. The GRAC and its constituent agencies are working to help communities identify and then effectively deploy these assets to promote sustainable rural community economic development.

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