

Rural California

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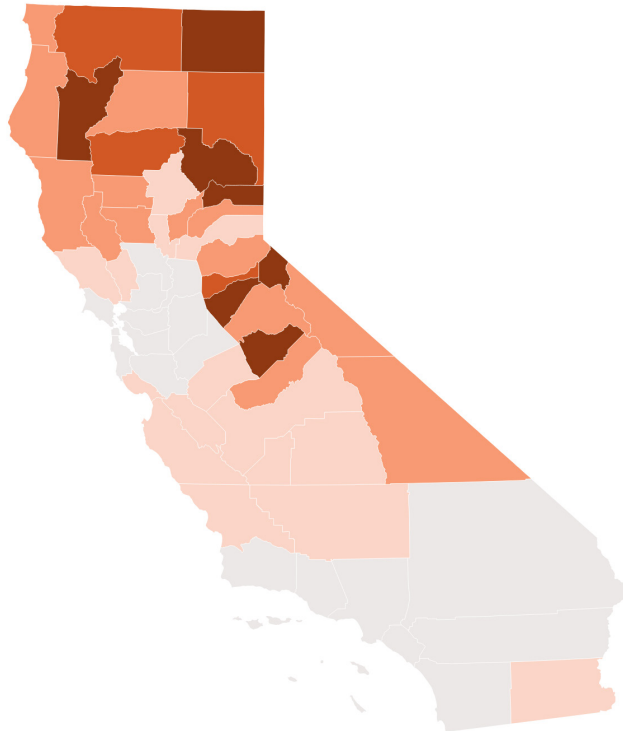
Rural California is vast—and varied.

- ▶ Rural California is home to 2.3 million residents—5.8% of the state’s population. Any place with fewer than 5,000 people or 2,000 housing units—or low population densities (less than 425 housing units per square mile)—is considered rural by the [US Census Bureau](#).
- ▶ Every county in California—except San Francisco—has rural populations. Six counties are entirely rural: Alpine, Mariposa, Modoc, Plumas, Sierra, and Trinity. Rural populations are larger than urban populations in another five counties: Amador, Calaveras, Lassen, Siskiyou, and Tehama.
- ▶ Only 66,000 people live in counties that are entirely rural, and another 158,000 live in counties where more than half the population is rural. Most rural residents live in counties with large urban areas. For example, more than one million people live in Fresno County, and the city of Fresno is the fifth-largest in the state. But about 114,000 residents live in small towns and other rural areas throughout the county.

Every county in California, except San Francisco, has rural populations

Percent rural population in the county

< 10%
 10%–25%
 25%–50%
 50%–75%
 ≥ 75%



Source: Authors’ calculations using 2020 Decennial Census.

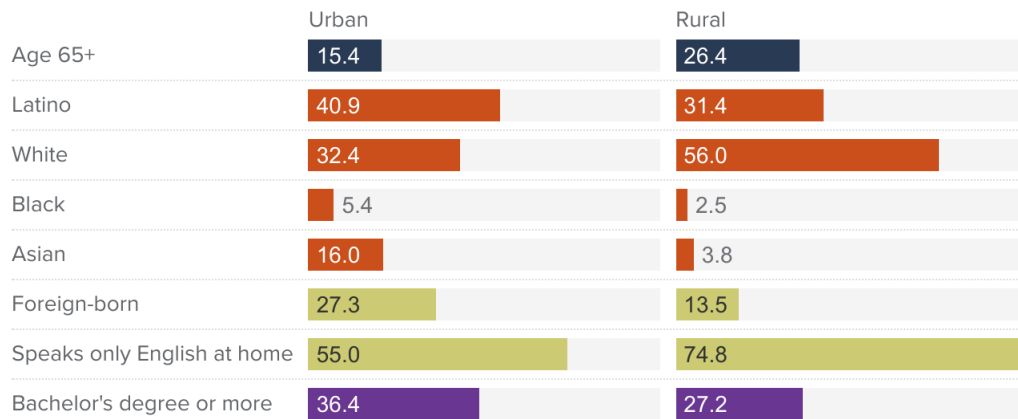
Note: Percent of the 2020 Census population in the County within rural blocks.

Rural Californians differ demographically from urban residents.

- ▶ Statewide, rural Californians are more likely than urban residents to be older, white, male, and born in the US. Asian Americans are especially underrepresented in rural areas.
- ▶ Immigrants make up only 13.5% of rural Californians, compared to 27.3% of urban residents. The vast majority of rural Californians (75%) speak only English at home.
- ▶ Rural Californians are less likely to have graduated from college: 27% have at least a bachelor’s degree, compared to 36% of urban residents.

Rural Californians have a different demographic profile than urban Californians

Percent



Source: Authors' calculations using the 2022 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates - IPUMS.

Note: The educational attainment distribution is restricted to those 25 and older.

The economic landscape of rural California is mixed.

- ▶ Rural Californians are less likely than urban residents to be in the labor force (53% vs. 64%) and more likely to be unemployed (7.0% vs. 6.4%). Some of these differences likely reflect the older age profile of rural residents. Wages and incomes also tend to be lower. Median income is \$83,100 for rural households compared to \$92,400 for urban households.
- ▶ Housing costs are lower for rural Californians. As a result, they are more much likely than urban residents to own their own home (76% vs. 55%) and pay a lower share of their income on rent. The median value of owner-occupied homes in rural areas is \$547,000 compared to \$728,000 in urban areas; median gross rent is \$1,290 compared to \$1,880.
- ▶ In general, economic outcomes tend to be worse for Californians who live in remote rural areas than for those who live closer to cities. For example, residents of Modoc County have much lower personal incomes than other rural residents (\$30,000 vs. \$36,000) and urban Californians (\$40,000).

Rural counties are losing population.

- ▶ Rural counties have been losing population well before recent statewide population declines. The rate of population loss in primarily rural counties is twice that of urban counties (2.9% vs. 1.1% from 2020 to 2023).
- ▶ Three counties have lost more than 10% of their population relative to their population peak (Lassen, Modoc, and Sierra). Lassen has lost the most, declining 21% since its population peak in 2007. Changes in prison populations, including prison closures, have affected some rural counties, including Lassen.
- ▶ The main source of population loss is natural decrease (more deaths than births). In primarily rural counties there were 60% more deaths than births from 2020 to 2023, based on Department of Finance data. This trend is contrary to the rest of the state, where births exceed deaths by wide margins.
- ▶ A secondary source of population loss is domestic migration. Rural counties tend to lose young adults to larger urban areas, most likely for educational opportunities.

Rural California faces distinct challenges, especially the most remote areas.

- ▶ A significant number of rural hospitals have experienced [severe fiscal distress](#), and some have closed. For remote rural residents, access to health care can be limited by a lack of providers.
- ▶ Rural Californians are much more dependent on cars. For older residents, the lack of public transit can be an obstacle to accessing needed services.
- ▶ Students in rural areas experience [numerous challenges](#), including high rates of [absenteeism](#) and [homelessness](#). They often live far from higher education opportunities.
- ▶ One in eight (12.7%) rural households lack internet broadband access, compared to only one in twelve (8.3%) urban households.

Sources: California Department of Finance Population Estimates; 2020 Decennial Census; 2022 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates.