The contemporary United States is mainly an urban society. Most Americans reside in cities or their surrounding suburbs, and metropolitan areas are our centers for economic activity and mass media. As a nation, the result is that where we live and work, and how the media portrays society, is decidedly urban centric. Modern American sociology also reflects this tendency, taking urban life as its disproportionate focus. So why in this context should we pay attention to rural areas and sociological issues therein? What sociological lessons are there to learn from focusing on social, economic, and demographic changes in, and the problems and prospects facing, rural America?

These questions provide the guideposts for this book. Our central argument is that there is much to learn about rural America, and that doing so can help us to better understand the United States as a whole. While smaller than urban America, rural population numbers remain substantial. In 2020 roughly 14 to 20 percent of the U.S. population lived in rural areas (depending on the definition of
rural). That translates into between about 46 and 66 million people. Those are not small numbers.¹ They are larger than the population of any single state in the country (e.g., California, the most populous, was home to under 40 million in 2020) or the number of people in most ethnoracial groups nationally (e.g., Black people represented 12.4 percent of the U.S. population or 41.1 million in 2020, and Asian and American Indian numbers were smaller).² In addition, rural America accounts for 70 percent or more of the nation’s land area and holds most of its natural resources (e.g., minerals, timber, water, and fertile land) and natural amenities (e.g., open country, forests, lakes and rivers, mountains, and canyons).³ It also supplies disproportionate shares of the country’s food, energy inputs, and military personnel. And there is no denying the continued cultural relevance of rural people, places, and things, whether to our foodways, music, or politics. In fact, despite common notions casting rural and urban as separate spaces, the rural-urban continuum is more socially and economically integrated and interdependent today than ever before.⁴ For all these reasons and many more that we cover throughout this book, gaining a better understanding of contemporary rural and small-town America is an important endeavor.

This is an inherently transdisciplinary project that welcomes readers from across the social sciences—including sociology, demography, geography, economics, and political science—as well as those with interests in policy, practice, and social issues in general. While at times we invoke sociology as our home discipline, our aim is for this volume to appeal to a much broader readership.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON RURALITY IN AMERICA

It is important to begin a historical account of rurality in America by acknowledging that prior to European colonization, millions of diverse peoples were already settled throughout what would later
become the United States. Over millennia, complex societies and cultures had risen and fallen and evolved across the landscape. The idea that European settlers discovered a vast, uninhabited wilderness upon their arrival is a myth and misunderstanding, the product of a Eurocentric framing of American history. Indeed, the very terms *American Indian* and *Native American* are rooted in the arrival of Europeans in the 15th century. Although this book concentrates on rural population changes and challenges in the contemporary United States, we should be clear that the territory’s social demographic story began long before the inception of the nation.

A history better known to most Americans is that over the course of the 17th and early 18th centuries, Britain established 13 colonies along what is now the eastern seaboard United States. The economies of the colonies varied regionally but were mostly focused on agriculture and the harvest of natural resources for export back to Britain. Agriculture in the southern colonies centered on large plantations reliant on the labor of enslaved people to produce cash crops like cotton and tobacco, while the northern colonies were primarily organized around smaller family farms. In the late 18th century, the colonists revolted against the British in the American Revolutionary War (1775–1783), issuing the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776. After independence, the social and spatial composition of the U.S. population continued to evolve. This process included people of European and African descent, the latter both free and enslaved, as well as the acquisition of territory previously settled and governed by other nations (e.g., France, Mexico, and Indigenous peoples).

Early American society was mostly rural. As of 1790, there were just six communities in the United States with a population over 8,000 residents, and these places were home to only about 3 percent of the nation’s population. Most Americans at the time lived in open country settings and small villages where people’s livelihoods revolved around farming and natural resources (e.g., logging and hunting). However, in the late 19th to early 20th centuries, the U.S. population underwent major changes associated with the Industrial
Revolution, which corresponded with rapid shifts in immigration from abroad and internal migration to fuel urbanization. As industrialization pulled people from farms to factories and from the countryside to cities, the character of American life was radically transformed. By the middle of the 20th century, most Americans were living in metropolitan settings.\(^8\)

The significance of this transformation—and parallel developments in western Europe—was not lost on early sociologists. Indeed, rural-urban social change and associated challenges were a central concern for sociologists from the birth of the discipline. For example, much of the scholarship of Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), a founding figure in sociology, was devoted to the question of how social solidarity could be maintained as society moved from rural-agrarian to urban-industrial forms of social organization. Durkheim introduced the concepts of \textit{mechanical} and \textit{organic solidarity} to help understand this process.\(^9\) Mechanical solidarity characterized social relations in traditional, small, and undifferentiated societies, where collective bonds were maintained by shared values and beliefs and the widespread performance of similar activities in daily life (e.g., farming and churchgoing). Organic solidarity, he argued, emerged as societies grew larger, more differentiated, and increasingly complex. In these contexts, collective bonds were forged based on people’s specialization in the division of labor and related interdependencies. That is, people filled many more types of jobs, but as a result depended more upon one another to get by. Instead of sewing their own clothes, growing their own food, and building their own furniture, they hired a tailor and a carpenter and bought their food at the market. According to Durkheim, it was organic solidarity that would provide the social glue in modern urban society.

Similarly, Ferdinand Tönnies (1855–1936), another prominent early sociologist, developed the concepts of \textit{gemeinschaft} and \textit{gesellschaft} to understand the sociological implications of the rural to urban transition.\(^10\) Tönnies contended that traditional rural societies were characterized by \textit{gemeinschaft}, a context in which social
relationships were governed by the bonds of kinship, religion, and direct interpersonal interaction. In contrast, modern urban society was distinguished by gesellschaft, a milieu in which people’s connections were more impersonal, indirect, and rationally directed toward economic and transactional ends. In short, both Durkheim and Tönnies saw the transformation from rural to urban life as fundamentally altering the nature of social relations.

The pioneers of American sociology also engaged rurality. W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963), a founder of sociology in the United States, directed much of his scholarship toward changes in rural communities and the structure of agriculture, with a special focus on implications for Black people. While perhaps better known for his groundbreaking research on urban Black populations, Du Bois’s empirical studies at the turn of the 20th century concentrated on rural Black communities in the South undergoing social and economic transformations amid the agrarian-industrial transition. His work documented the experience of rural Black people whose lives had been characterized by plantation enslavement and the subsequent fall of that system, many of whom would be part of the Great Migration to northern cities in the coming decades (1910s–1970s).

*The Philadelphia Negro*, among Du Bois’s most famous studies, was in part about the trials of urbanization among the growing number of Black people who had undertaken that journey.

Pitirim Sorokin (1889–1968), another leading voice in early American sociology, also devoted a great deal of research to understanding rural and urban social organization from a comparative perspective. And between 1919 and 1953, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) housed the Division of Farm Population and Rural Life, led by sociologists Charles Galpin (1864–1947) and Carl Taylor (1884–1975). Dedicated to studying the social structure of rural America and related public policy, the office was the first in the federal government to pursue sociological research.

While the focus of this book is on contemporary rural and small-town America, the point here is that thinking about social change
across the rural-urban continuum, and related problems and prospects, has deep roots in sociology. Thus, this book contributes to a vein of sociological scholarship that, while often overshadowed by urban concerns today, traces back to the foundations of the discipline.

**Structure of the Book**

The goal of this book is to paint a social demographic portrait of rural and small-town America, with an emphasis on changes and challenges. In doing so, we provide a social scientific basis for thinking about geographic space and rurality as axes of inequality. Today we are inundated with misinformation and opinions masquerading as facts. The use of a social scientific approach helps us to arrive at more reliable and valid conclusions about the social world. It does not mean we will all agree on the importance of these facts or how best to address existing challenges. But it does allow us to begin conversations on contemporary issues from an empirically informed point of departure.

A narrative tool we use throughout the book is *myths* and *misunderstandings* about rural America. This lens encourages us to grapple with the ways conventional wisdom about rural America is often inaccurate or oversimplified. Here are some examples:

* Aren’t all rural communities shrinking and fading away? Although it is true that urbanization is a dominant demographic trend, the population of rural America remains significant in size and social and economic influence. Moreover, if we rely on measures that define rural as some combination of small population size and low population density, places that experience sustained population growth only remain rural for so long before they transition to being urban. Sometimes the absence of consistent population growth is cast as a social problem. But if that is the case, it implicates rurality itself.

* Isn’t rural synonymous with farming? Although agriculture is a vital industry, it represents only a small share of the contemporary
rural labor force (less than 10 percent even in completely rural counties).\textsuperscript{17} Services and manufacturing are the two largest employment sectors in rural America. Indeed, trends toward deindustrialization have been quite painful for many small communities where manufacturing jobs have long been a mainstay. It is one thing for a factory to shut down in a thriving and diversified metropolis, but quite another when it is the main employer in town.

\textit{Didn’t a “rural revolt” lead to the election of President Donald Trump?} Although it is true that the rural vote disproportionately went to Trump in 2016, rural voters have been increasingly voting Republican for decades. The 2016 (and subsequent 2020) Republican vote shares in rural counties were consistent with a trend that predated Trump. In fact, it was changes in voting patterns in a few small and medium-sized Rust Belt cities that tipped the vote in Trump’s favor in 2016.\textsuperscript{18} Rural America is also not a political monolith. For example, rural areas with substantial Black, Hispanic, and Native American populations, and places with economies driven by natural amenity recreation, often vote in the Democratic column.

This sample highlights one of the book’s primary objectives: unpacking myths and misunderstandings about rural America by confronting the empirical evidence from the social sciences.

The chapter outline is as follows. In chapter 1 we focus on population change in rural America. We describe how three major demographic processes—fertility, mortality, and migration—have contributed to rural-urban population transformations, including instances of “rural rebounds” when social forces coincided to reverse the prevailing trend of urbanization. The chapter also deals with how depopulation, amenity in-migration, youth out-migration, aging, and ethnoracial shifts are reshaping rural America.

Chapter 2 examines how the economy of rural America has changed over time and the implications of these changes. Issues related to economic diversity and industrial sector dependence are covered, as well as the impacts of globalization and deindustrialization. We also explore concerns regarding poverty and underemployment. Last, we
INTRODUCTION

discuss participation in informal work—economic activities undertaken outside the regulatory framework of the state—and the role of the social safety net in rural America.

Chapter 3 covers issues related to rural racial and ethnic diversity. Here, we emphasize that rural America has always been more ethnoracially diverse than is commonly assumed, and it is trending toward increasing diversity over time. However, where this is happening is highly uneven. The chapter attends to the experiences of a variety of minoritized rural ethnoracial groups, including American Indian people and the special consideration of reservations; Black people and the special consideration of the rural South; Hispanic people and the special consideration of “traditional” and “new destination” settlement patterns; and Asian people, who though comprising a small share of the overall U.S. rural population have a long history of settlement in some parts of rural America. The connection between minoritized rural ethnoracial groups and persistent poverty regions, the latter introduced in chapter 2, also receives attention. Questions around ethnoracial inequities and their roots in historical and contemporary racism guide the chapter.

Chapter 4 addresses rural-urban population health disparities. The chapter covers geographic disparities in various health indicators (e.g., life expectancy and chronic disease prevalence) as well as the “rural mortality penalty” (i.e., mortality rates are higher and life expectancy is lower in rural than urban areas). In addition, we examine the drug overdose epidemic and the COVID-19 pandemic, the impacts of which have varied significantly between rural and urban areas but also across different types of rural places. A point of emphasis in the chapter is the role of upstream determinants of health and mortality disparities, such as political and economic structures.

Chapter 5 turns to a discussion of rural politics and policies. We describe the political tendencies of rural America, including attention to elements of the contemporary rural-urban political divide, but also highlight that the rural United States is not politically
monolithic. In addition, we cover the conceptual question of policies that focus on people and others that focus on places (i.e., person-versus place-based policy). A guiding concern in this chapter is how policies can address not only who and what but where.

Finally, in the conclusion we summarize the book’s major themes and what they portend for the future of rural America.

This by no means represents an exhaustive account of the changes and challenges facing rural America. For example, one issue to which we do not devote a stand-alone chapter is the environment. That said, environmental concerns are woven throughout the topics covered, including how the environment interfaces with population change (e.g., natural amenity migration), how people make a living (e.g., agriculture and natural resource extraction), where different groups are located (e.g., Black people in the rural South), environmental contributions to health disparities (e.g., exposure to toxins and natural disasters), and major policy questions of the day (e.g., climate change). Other issues one might point to being absent from our chapter outline are housing and crime. However, to address every problem and prospect in rural America is beyond the scope of this (and maybe any) book. Instead, we provide a sample of topics that we hope will pique readers’ interest and encourage critical thinking about rural people and places in contemporary America.

WHAT IS RURAL?

At this point it is imperative to ask a seemingly simple question: What is rural? Rural, of course, is a concept with which most of us are familiar. We all have ideas about what rural is that flow from our own lived experiences. But our lived experiences are extraordinarily varied, and therefore so are our images of rural places. These subjective interpretations are vitally important from a sociological perspective because they hold implications for meaning making and identity. They shape the ideas we draw on to make sense of the
world around us and our place in it. However, given the social demographic thrust of this book, our presentation primarily relies on definitions of rural as a geographic location. In the following we outline the major methods used by social scientists and policymakers to define rural in the United States: namely, the official U.S. definitions of urban-rural and metropolitan-nonmetropolitan. While we often use the terms *rural* and *nonmetropolitan* interchangeably to make our writing more accessible (a frequent practice among rural sociologists), it is important to remain mindful of the distinctions. It is also important to recognize that these definitions do not capture all sociocultural aspects of rurality, an issue we elaborate in the following.

**Urban-Rural**

The official federal definition of urban-rural comes from the U.S. Census Bureau. Drawing on data from the decennial census, in the 2020s urban areas are defined as densely developed territory encompassing residential, commercial, and other nonresidential land uses. Each urban area must include at least 2,000 housing units or at least 5,000 people. Urban areas are often incorporated places but do not necessarily conform to official municipal boundaries. Rather, they are clusters of settled territory like one might observe on the landscape from an airplane. Rural areas are then defined as the residual: all places not defined as urban. The Census Bureau makes these designations after each decennial census, and they stand for a decade. In fact, the definition of urban areas outlined here is a change from the previous population minimum of 2,500 people, which had been in place from the 1910s through the 2010s. Given the timing of this change, many of the statistics we report in this book rely on the previous definition of urban-rural.

Figure 1 is a map of rural and urban areas based on the definition for the 2020s. It is easy to observe areas many of us commonly think of as urban: the corridor spanning from Boston to Washington, D.C.,
in the East; Seattle, San Francisco, and Los Angeles in the West; and cities like Chicago, Atlanta, Dallas, and Houston. It is also notable that the vast majority of the land area of the United States fits the rural definition. This space was home to about 66 million people, or one in five Americans, in 2020.\textsuperscript{22}

\textit{Metropolitan-Nonmetropolitan}

More widely used in rural sociology and demography (including in this book) is the official federal definition of metropolitan (metro) and nonmetropolitan (nonmetro) areas, a designation made by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB). Conceptually, this definition is focused on population size, density, and economic integration. The units of analysis are counties and equivalent entities (i.e., places comparable to counties but called by different names,