The Older Population in Rural America: 2012-2016
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Introduction
The older population, those aged 65 and older, is distributed across the urban and rural landscapes in ways that help shape the population and the country overall.

According to the 2012-2016 American Community Survey (ACS) data, there were 46.2 million older persons in the United States, with 10.6 million living in areas designated as rural by the U.S. Census Bureau.

Considering that the oldest of the baby boomers, those born between mid-1946 and 1964, began turning 65 years old in 2011, the demographic changes ahead for rural America have only begun.

Most older people do not live in rural areas and most rural residents are not older. But an older, increasingly rural, population requires specialized medical and rehabilitation services, as well as innovative housing and public transportation options. An aging population clearly has the potential to shape rural America in new and important ways. The older population is becoming more diverse on a variety of demographic, social, and economic characteristics.

This brief primarily uses 2012-2016 ACS 5-year estimates to describe the rural older population compared to their urban counterparts. This brief also delves into differences within the rural population by examining the older population by level of rurality.

Data
The data presented in this report are based on the ACS sample interviewed from January 2012 through December 2016. The estimates based on this sample describe the average values of person, household, and housing unit characteristics over this period of collection.

All comparative statements in this report have undergone statistical testing for significance. For documentation on sampling and estimation methods, see the ACS Multiyear Accuracy of the Data document at https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/tech_docs/accuracy/MultiyearACSAccuracyofData2016.pdf.

Urban and Rural Population by Size and Geography
A larger segment of the population was 65 years and older in rural areas (17.5 percent) compared to urban areas (13.8 percent) during the 2012-2016 period (Figure 1). While the overall size of the rural population has both increased and decreased since 1980—hovering around 60 million—the share made up by the older population has consistently grown, from 10.9 percent in 1980 to 17.5 percent during the period 2012 to 2016.

Although the total population in urban areas is much larger and has increased more dramatically over this period, the older population share has not changed as dramatically. The urban older population grew 11.4 percent in 1980, increasing to 13.8 percent in the period 2012-2016.

Figure 2 shows that Vermont (65.3 percent) and Arkansas (63.8 percent) had the largest per- centages of rural older populations among states. Other states with large percentages of older rural population were in the South including Mississippi (54.7 percent), West Virginia (52.5 percent) and Arkansas (63.8 percent) and the Midwest including South Dakota (49.4 percent), North Dakota (46.5 percent), and Iowa (41.1 percent). Western states with high percentages of older rural population included Montana (49.6 percent), Wyoming (40.6 percent), and Alaska (37.1 percent).

The three states or state equivalents with the smallest percentages of rural older population were the District of Columbia (0.0 percent), New Jersey (5.8 percent), and California (7.1 percent).

Overall, the rural share of the older population in 33 states exceeded the national average of 22.9 percent. The largest county by the working-age population (18 to 64), children and older adults) by the working-age population (18 to 64), introduces an indication of economic dependency. The dependency ratio was 71% in completely rural counties, 67% in mostly rural counties and 59 in mostly urban counties. While the percentage of older men is larger than that of older women at all levels of rurality, as rurality increased the percentage of women decreased.

The median age of the population 65 years and older across the three rurality groups showed relatively little variation. The median age for the population in completely rural counties was 73.3 years, compared with 73.2 years in mostly rural counties and 73.4 years in mostly urban counties. Looking at age another way, the percentage of 65 years and older increased with rurality, pointing to the looming impact that baby boomers will have on the most rural areas in coming years.

Selected Demographics by Level of Rurality
While the percentage of older men was larger than that of older women at all levels of rurality, as rurality increased the percentage of women decreased.

The dependency ratio, calculated by dividing the dependent-age-population (children and older adults) by the working-age population (18 to 64), introduces an indication of economic dependency. The dependency ratio was 71% in completely rural counties, 67% in mostly rural counties and 59 in mostly urban counties. The sex ratio was most balanced in completely rural areas and least balanced in mostly rural counties.

Considering other characteristics, in most cases completely rural and mostly rural areas were more alike than the mostly urban counties. For instance, the percentage of White alone population in completely rural and mostly rural counties was 91 percent, compared to 82 percent in mostly urban counties. This pattern continued across other race and Hispanic origin groups.