

Profile of Rural Pennsylvania Women

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This research provides a profile of the social and economic well-being of rural Pennsylvania women through a detailed understanding of their lives, livelihoods, and families. It used data from the 2005-2009 and 2014-2018 American Community Survey (ACS).

Key Findings

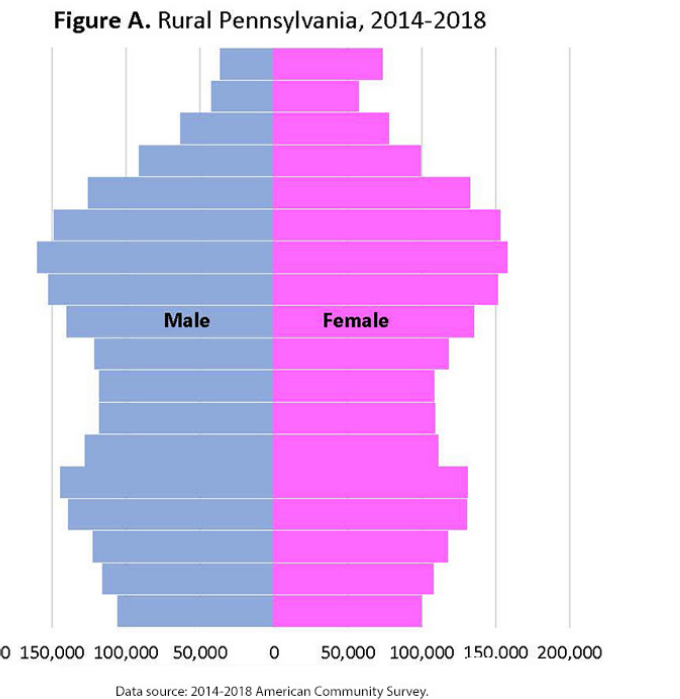
Unless specifically stated, the findings below pertain to trends and patterns in the 2014-2018 population.

- Pennsylvania had about 251,000 fewer rural residents in 2014-2018 than in 2005-2009, while the overall state population increased by about 275,000 people.
- The rural population was relatively older than the urban population in 2014-2018 and has been aging faster from 2005-2009.
- Rural populations were overwhelmingly white and non-Hispanic, although young and middle-aged rural women were more diverse in 2014-2018 than in 2005-2009.
- Older rural women tended to live alone more so than their younger rural peers. However, from 2005-2009 to 2014-2018, fewer older rural women lived alone. Rates of living alone were lower in rural versus urban locations.
- Overall, rural women were more likely to be married than urban women and rural and urban men. However, from 2005-2009 to 2014-2018, young and middle-aged rural women were less likely to be married.
- Rural women had less access to communication technologies than urban women. Access decreased with age among rural women.
- The most common level of educational attainment among rural women was high school: 42 percent of young rural women, 46 percent of middle-aged rural women, and 56 percent of older rural women completed no more than high school. From 2005-2009 to 2014-2018, completion of college increased across all age and population groups. Completed schooling was higher among urban women than rural women, and lower for rural men than rural women.
- Most young and middle-aged rural women participated in the labor force and were currently employed. Nevertheless, for all age groups, rural women had the lowest labor force participation rates compared to rural men and urban women and men.
- Four of the top 10 occupations held by rural and urban women were at high risk of being eliminated due to automation.
- Compared to rural men, the jobs held by rural women, on average, required more education, while rural women's jobs required less schooling than urban women and men.
- Among all age groups, rural women had the lowest mean earnings (personal wages and salaries) and the lowest mean family incomes.
- Poverty rates were higher for rural and urban women than for rural and urban men.

This research provides a profile of the social and economic well-being of rural Pennsylvania women through a detailed understanding of their lives and livelihoods within their communities and families. Using multiple years of data from the American Community Survey (ACS), the research describes the life circumstances of contemporary rural women (Ruggles, et al. 2020; StataCorp, 2019). Rural women, grouped into three broad age groups (young adults, aged 18-34 years; middle-aged adults, aged 35-64 years; and older adults, aged 65 years and older), were compared to their urban counterparts as well as to both rural men and urban men. Trends spanning about a decade, based on the 2014-2018 ACS and the 2005-2009 ACS, were analyzed to provide depth to the profiles of these women’s lives. Many of the challenges faced by rural women resembled issues shared by rural men and urban women and men, while other concerns were unique to rural women.

Importantly, rural Pennsylvania is aging at a rapid pace compared to the rest of the state. As depicted by the wider and narrower horizontal bands in the population pyramid for rural Pennsylvania (Figure A), the age and gender structure of the rural population includes relatively fewer young-middle-aged adults (aged 25-34 years) compared to middle-middle-aged and older-middle-aged adults (aged 35-64 years). The wide “bulge” for rural adults aged 50-64 years is the aging post-World War II “baby boomer” generation.

Pennsylvania’s rural population has decreased in size, while the urban population and the state as a whole have experienced modest growth over the previous decade. It would be an over-simplification to say that rural Pennsylvania and its



women have experienced “decline.” Community and economic development have been uneven across Pennsylvania (Alter, Fuller, Raybuck & Sontheimer, 2018), and rural women and rural men are being “left behind” (Breathitt, 1967) relative to their urban counterparts. Notably, rural women experienced gains in some areas, and often gains and losses were unevenly shared.

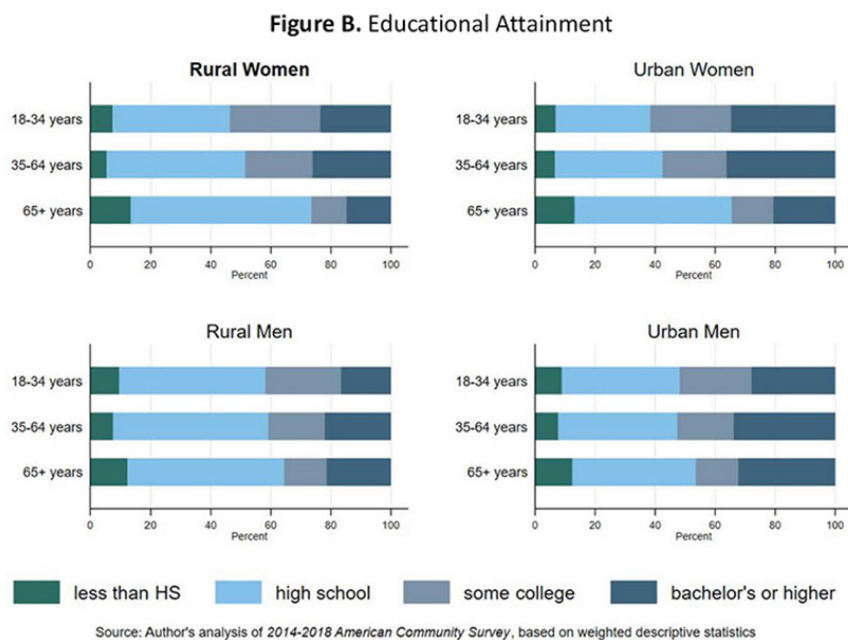
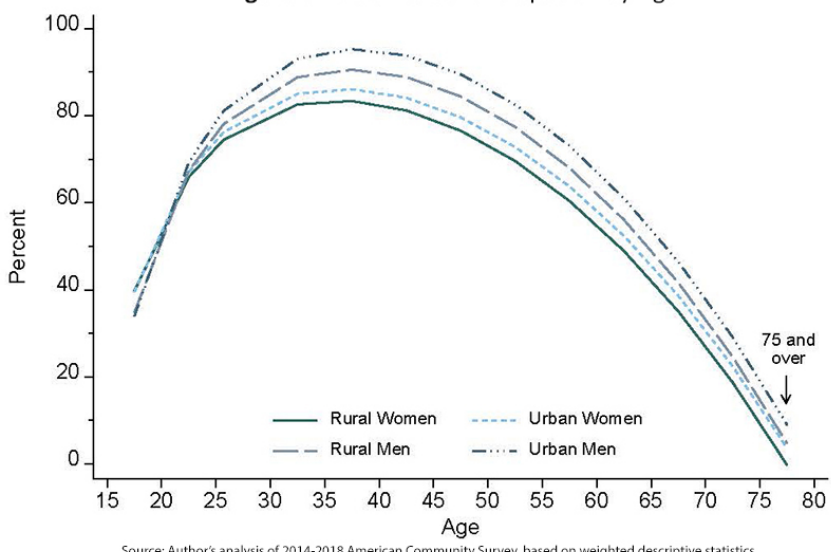


Figure C. Labor Force Participation by Age



Source: Author's analysis of 2014-2018 American Community Survey, based on weighted descriptive statistics.

Referred to as “the great equalizer,” education and schooling provide people with basic literacy and communication skills, with specialized and advanced knowledge, and with experiences that enhance their human and social capital. Figure B depicts educational attainment by age group across the four populations under study. The educational attainment of rural women increased in the previous decade, as it has for Pennsylvanians as a whole. High school graduation remained the most common level of completed schooling for

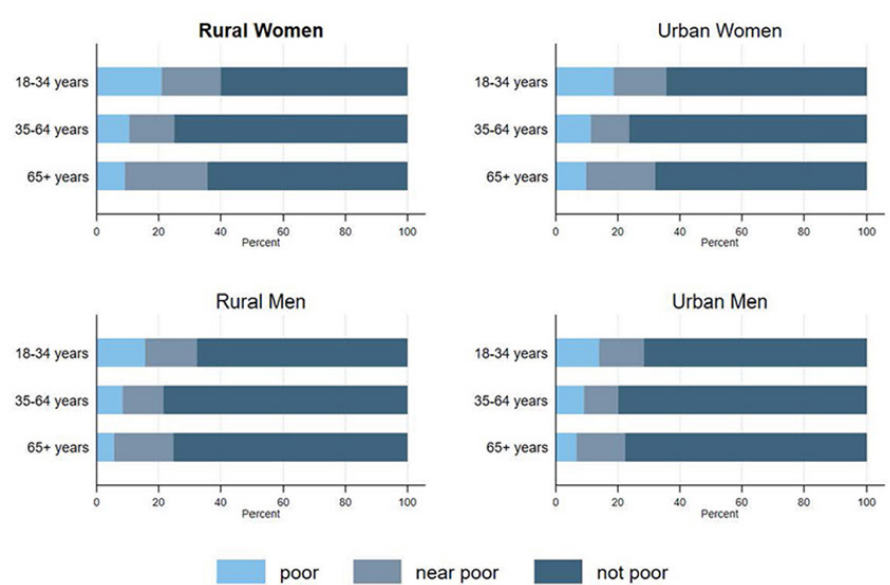
recently employed than others. Increasingly the jobs held by Pennsylvania women required college credentials. Many of the most commonly held jobs among rural women are at risk of replacement due to automation or other economic restructuring. However, rural men face this threat of precarious employment more acutely.

More rural women work now than in the past, and their time “on the clock” increased. Relative to rural men and to urban women and men, though, rural women continued to work fewer hours

overall. Trends and patterns in earnings were also mixed. Personal wages and salaries of working rural women increased over the previous decade, while, relatively speaking, they also earned the least.

Rural jobs tend to pay less than urban ones, contributing to overall higher rates of poverty in rural places (Cromartie, 2018; Tickamy, Sherman, & Warlick, 2017; Mather & Jarosz, 2014). Despite increased personal earnings and family incomes for rural women of all ages, poverty became more prevalent among middle-aged

Figure D. Poverty Status



Source: Author's analysis of 2014-2018 American Community Survey, based on weighted descriptive statistics.

women (ages 35-64 years) in rural and urban populations. Relatedly, mean income-to-needs ratios were stagnant for middle-aged rural women and declined for urban women in their middle years. Older women had the lowest labor force participation by age group, and, as a group, they also had a lower poverty prevalence compared to 10 years prior. Older rural women increasingly lived in families receiving support from government programs, (e.g., Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and Social Security, etc.).

These varied indicators are pressing given the high economic dependency of Pennsylvania's rural population. The ratio of people outside the labor force relative to workers is higher in rural areas, and the rural-urban gap is widening. If rural sectors continue to restructure, lose capital investments, and slacken in labor demand (Blinder, 2009; Frey & Osborne, 2013), it will be crucial to monitor the social consequences of these economic shifts on rural communities and families.

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