

The Definition of Rural and Its Implications

Alex Petric & Neil Stoop, University of Guelph

Introduction:

Everyone can conceive of urban and rural spaces, but there is no common, rigorous definition of these terms. How can we collectively decide what they mean? We present an overview of definitions of “rural” with a focus on the Canadian context and discuss their implications for research and policy formation, along with a plan for future investigation.

Spatial Definitions of Rural:

Some argue that rurality is a spatial concept reduced to one or more measurements such as population, population density, labour market conditions, distance to essential services or an urban area, and/or dominant industries.

At the national level in Canada, several definitions of “rural” exist, including²:

1. Census Rural – Regions with less than 1,000 persons
2. Rural and Small Town – Census subdivisions with less than 10,000 persons living in the core
3. OECD Rural Communities – Regions with less than 150 persons per square kilometre.
4. OECD Predominantly Rural Regions – Regions with over 50% of inhabitants in OECD rural communities
5. Non-Metropolitan Regions – Regions with less than 50,000 persons
6. Rural Postal Codes – Postal codes with a “0” as the second character in their postal code, which implies that an area has no letter carrier; however, Quebec and New Brunswick do not follow this system

In research, it is wise to choose a definition based on the context of the work² and to be clear in explaining the criteria used and the reason for choosing them. Each definition captures a different cross-section of a population, as evidenced in Fig. 1.

Socio-Cultural Definitions of Rural:

Self-Perceptions of Rurality

Key aspects of rurality can be derived from the lived experience and perceptions of individuals who identify as rural.³ Commonly reported identifiers of rural spaces include a feeling of safety, a close-knit community, high levels of gossip, and a lack of formal activities.^{3,10} This suggests that, for these individuals, a rural place is a location where these identifiers exist.

Socio-Cultural Urban/Rural Dichotomies

The socio-cultural factors that make a place rural can be defined as the opposite of those which make a place urban.⁵ Various dichotomies have been constructed over time, each focusing on different elements of urban and rural life.⁵ A sample of these dichotomies can be found in Fig. 2.

Future Investigation

Research Questions

1. How do the descriptive definitions that are often employed by policy makers compare to the definitions of rural held by individuals living in communities in Ontario?
2. What implications do these differences have on policy, programs individuals, and communities?

1. Case Selection

Case selection will occur using the following criteria:

- Located in Ontario
- Not be defined as Rural, or Rural Small Town
- Be a new, or small census agglomeration
- Be growing

2. Community Survey

In person survey for members of the case community asking:

- Gender, age, etc.
- Do they consider themselves to be rural?
- Do they consider their community to be rural?
- Why do they hold these opinions?

3. Data Analysis

By virtue of the case selection process, the selected community will not be defined as rural by descriptive means. This will be compared to the findings to see if survey responses support this classification. Analysis will also consider differences in age and gender of respondents.

Some Current Programs Relying on a Definition of Rural:

1. The Northern and Rural Recruitment Retention Initiative⁸ compensates physicians working in rural and remote areas. Funding varies by a municipality’s score on the Rurality Index of Ontario.⁷ Thus, physicians may locate strategically around municipal borders to receive more funding.
2. Groups within Census Subdivisions (CSDs) with low population or population density can apply to Ontario’s Rural Economic Development Program⁶ for project funding. This criteria can lead to questionable results. Due to the shapes of CSDs, agricultural areas within the municipal limits of Ottawa are ineligible, while the City of Niagara Falls (2016 pop. 88,071)⁹ is eligible.
3. The Homelessness Partnering Strategy⁴ funds projects that prevent or reduce homelessness across Canada. 61 communities are considered “Designated Communities” that receive ongoing support. The rest are considered “Rural/Remote” or “Aboriginal,” regardless of size. Funding amounts differ based the group to which a community belongs.

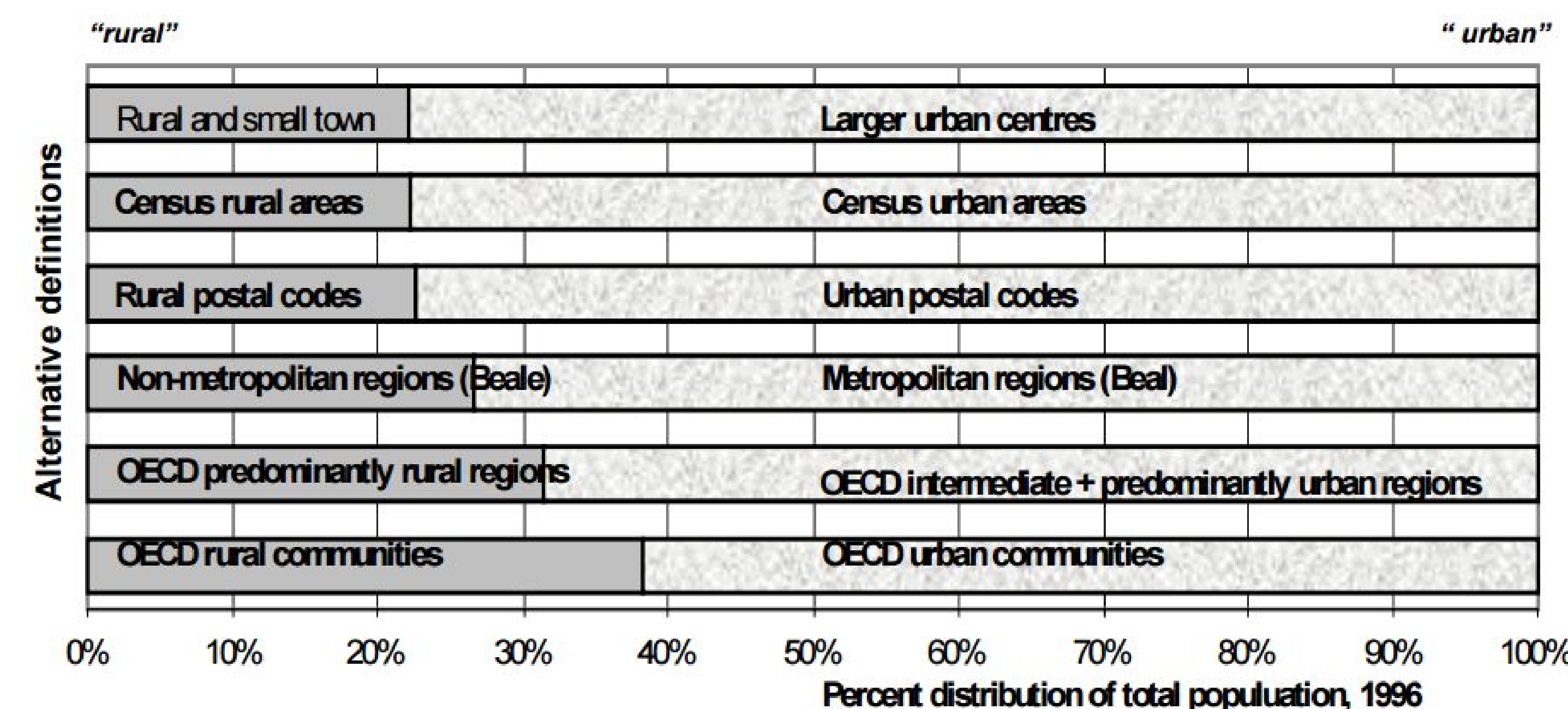


Fig. 1: Percentages of Canada’s 1996 Population Classified as Rural by Various Definitions²

Author	Urban Category	Non-urban Category
Becker	Secular	Sacred
Durkheim	Organic Solidarity	Mechanical Solidarity
Maine	Contract	Status
Redfield	Urban	Folk
Spencer	Industrial	Military
Tonnies	Gesellschaft (Society)	Gemeinschaft (Community)
Weber	Rational	Traditional

Fig. 2: Existing Frameworks of Urban/ Rural Dichotomies⁵



Seaforth, Ontario
Image Source: Wikimedia Commons



Inuvik, Northwest Territories
Image Source: Wikimedia Commons



Pont Perrault, Quebec
Image Source: Wikimedia Commons

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