

**Governor's Rural Affairs Council
(Executive Order 11-04)**

2023 Annual Report



Chaired by Illinois Lt. Governor Juliana Stratton

LETTER FROM LT. GOVERNOR STRATTON

In Illinois, we recognize the power of partnerships and collaborations to build pathways that uplift our rural communities. As we have entered another season of service, I am proud of the strides we have made to foster growth and opportunities in nonmetro areas across our state. Rural communities face unique challenges as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic—particularly economic concerns, and access to healthcare and education. These realities drive us to continue to work together with community members address these needs and stand in the gap.

As Chair of the Governor’s Rural Affairs Council (GRAC), it is my pleasure to share with you our 2023 report. You will find information on ongoing rural community population trends and how they impact our state’s small towns and nonmetro counties, as well as a host of GRAC activities in rural Illinois aimed at providing solutions. These include the various projects each GRAC subcommittee is working on—from expanding broadband access to addressing educational attainment gaps in rural areas to expanding telemedicine access in regions facing disparities in healthcare access.

Additionally, this report outlines collaborative efforts among GRAC members, agencies, and communities most impacted by our work that demonstrate how far we can go together. For example, I am grateful for the work and dedication of various stakeholders and GRAC members that ensured Cairo, Illinois, had critical support in opening the RISE Community Market. The work of the community engaged GRAC also continues to center the voices of rural regions to create a roadmap tailored to what they need to thrive.

Looking ahead, many of the challenges that have deeply affected rural Illinois require a long-term, multifaceted approach. We are meeting the moment, by taking on the initiatives and Council-led projects that pave the way to a brighter path forward. The great leaps we have made only drive us to continue this journey, and we are committed to taking the next step ahead alongside our rural communities.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'JS', written in a cursive style.

Juliana Stratton
Illinois Lieutenant Governor
Chair, Governor’s Rural Affairs Council

Executive Summary¹

Introduction

Pursuant to Executive Order 11-04, this report from the Governor’s Rural Affairs Council (GRAC) provides a summary of current social and economic conditions in rural Illinois. It also summarizes the Council’s policy and advocacy recommendations for improving the delivery of state services to rural Illinois to expand opportunities and enhance the quality of life for all Illinoisans, with a particular focus on rural residents.¹ These recommendations originate from general discussions within the GRAC. Policy recommendations also emerge from three issue-based committees the Council opted to create: Education and Workforce Development; Health and Healthcare; and Economic Development and Infrastructure.

Council Overview and Activities

The State of Illinois created the GRAC pursuant to Executive Order 86-07 in 1986. Since then, different Illinois Governors amended the original Executive Order three times by issuing Executive Order 91-13 (1991), Executive order 00-01 (2000), and Executive Order 11-04 (2011). These executive orders establish the GRAC’s responsibility to issue the Annual Report on the State of the Rural Illinois Economy, in collaboration with the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs (IIRA) at Western Illinois University (WIU). These executive orders also require the GRAC to develop a comprehensive plan for improving the quality of life in rural Illinois.^{2, 3} The Council executes its duties through its board – not to exceed 25 members – which includes representatives from state agencies and institutions, non-profits, and individuals appointed by the Governor of Illinois.

Under the Pritzker-Stratton Administration, the GRAC has held quarterly meetings. Through these meetings, the Council developed three issue-based committees including the Education and Workforce Development Committee; Health and Healthcare Committee; and the Economic Development and Infrastructure Committee. These committees propose policy recommendations and initiatives outlined every year in the GRAC’s annual report. The GRAC also collaborates with the IIRA and Rural Partners each year hosting a rural development conference.

Committee Recommendations, Rural Conditions, and Actions

Committees propose recommendations based on current conditions in rural Illinois, which include population decline, an aging population, workforce recruitment concerns, business succession planning, a rural-urban digital divide, as well as challenges to healthy food access, rural healthcare, and education delivery. These recommendations also address the lingering impacts of Covid-19 on rural communities, small businesses, and overall economic development. The Council will use these recommendations to advise the Governor’s Office, General Assembly, and additional stakeholders on ways to advance policy and advocacy that improves the lives of rural Illinoisans. This report also documents the actions already taken by GRAC members to address the policy recommendations.

¹ As stipulated by Illinois Executive Orders 91-13 and 11-04, the 2023 Annual Report of the Governor’s Rural Affairs Council is a collaboration between the Office of the Lt. Governor, the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs at Western Illinois University, and the constituent members of the Governor’s Rural Affairs Council.

Acronyms

ACS	American Community Survey
AIRSS	Association of Illinois Rural and Small Schools
BEA	Bureau of Economic Analysis
BLS	Bureau of Labor Statistics
BRFSS	Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System
CMS	Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Medicare Services
CSE	Community Supported Enterprise
DCEO	Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity
GRAC	Governors Rural Affairs Council
ICCB	Illinois Community College Board
ICJIA	Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority
IDES	Illinois Department of Employment Security
IDNR	Illinois Department of Natural Resources
IDOA	Illinois Department of Agriculture
IDOT	Illinois Department of Transportation
IHDA	Illinois Housing Development Authority
IIN	Illinois Innovation Network
IIRA	Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs
ISBE	Illinois State Board of Education
MAPPING	Management and Planning Program in Non-Metro Groups
OMB	Office of Management and Budget
RCDG	Rural Cooperative Development Grant
RDRG	Rural Development Resource Guide
REH	Rural Emergency Hospital
RICC	Rivers of Illinois Coordinating Council
SBA	Small Business Administration
SBDC	Small Business Development Center
SIU	Southern Illinois University
UIUC	University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign
USDA	United States Department of Agriculture
USDA-ERS	United States Department of Agriculture—Economic Research Service
USDA-RD	United States Department of Agriculture—Rural Development
WIU	Western Illinois University

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Council Overview and Activities

Executive Mandate

Pursuant to Executive Order 11-04 the Governor's Rural Affairs Council must:^{4, 5}

- Develop and implement strategies for improving the delivery of state services to rural Illinois.
- Expand opportunities and enhance the quality of life for rural residents.
- Issue the Annual Report on the State of the Rural Illinois Economy in collaboration with the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs at Western Illinois University.

Composition

The following membership positions compose the Governor's Rural Affairs Council, pursuant to Executive Order 11-04:⁶

- **1 chair**
 - Illinois Lt. Governor's Office – Lt. Governor
- **17 agency and institution representatives from these agencies and institutions:**
 - Illinois Community College Board
 - Illinois Department of Agriculture
 - Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity
 - Illinois Department of Employment Security
 - Illinois Department of Human Services
 - Illinois Department of Natural Resources
 - Illinois Department of Public Health
 - Illinois Department of Transportation
 - Illinois Department on Aging
 - Illinois Environmental Protection Agency
 - Illinois Finance Authority
 - Illinois Housing Development Authority
 - Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs at Western Illinois University
 - Illinois State Board of Education
 - Southern Illinois University
 - University of Illinois – Cooperative Extension Service
 - University of Illinois – President
- **2 non-profit representatives from the following non-profits:**
 - Illinois Agricultural Association (The Illinois Farm Bureau)
 - Rural Partners
- **0-6 citizen members appointed by the Governor of Illinois, with the total number of appointees bringing active membership to 25 people at most.**

Membership

The GRAC appointed the following citizen members to serve on the Council:

- David Ardry
- Betsy Dirkson-Londrigan
- Heather Hampton-Knodle
- Sonja Reece
- Norman Walzer

Activities

Under the Pritzker-Stratton Administration, the GRAC has held quarterly meetings each year from the time of inauguration to the development of this report. The Lt. Governor led discussions focused on the Council's goals and potential strategies to achieve these goals. The GRAC formed three issue-based committees: Education and Workforce Development; Health and Healthcare; and Economic Development and Infrastructure. Subsequent quarterly meetings focused on developing committee recommendations for including within this report. Committee meetings supplemented this work, wherein committee members proposed, reviewed, and discussed recommendations.

In addition, the GRAC collaborates each year with the IIRA and Rural Partners to host the Annual Rural Development Conference. This conference has been held every year for the past 34 years. In 2021 and again in 2022, the IIRA and GRAC delivered the conference virtually with technical assistance from the Illinois Innovation Network (IIN) and University of Illinois System. In 2023, the conference returned to an in-person format.

The GRAC has also hosted guest speakers and representatives from GRAC member agencies at quarterly meetings. These speakers delivered presentations on specific topics related to rural development. For example, in the last year, Amy Bashiti from the Illinois Housing Development Authority (IHDA) discussed state programs to support rural housing. Sean Park from the IIRA summarized his efforts to start rural grocery store cooperatives.

Finally, the GRAC started to host "community-engaged" GRAC meetings. Communities that have gone through the IIRA or other strategic visioning process to create development plans for the future are invited to attend a GRAC meeting. These communities share their specific development goals and then GRAC member agencies discuss how their respective technical assistance and funding programs could help the community achieve their goals. During the Fiscal Year 2023 (FY2023), the GRAC invited representatives from the cities of Mattoon and Charleston at two "community-engaged" GRAC meetings. GRAC members have already followed up with these communities to help them implement their community economic development goals.

Socioeconomic Trends and GRAC Activities in Rural Illinois

Introduction

This report documents current socioeconomic trends in rural Illinois. It also describes GRAC’s actions and policy initiatives to improve the quality of life in rural Illinois. To accomplish these goals, this section of the report unfolds in three parts. Part one defines “rural” and then identifies several aspects of rural versus urban population change in Illinois. Section two summarizes activities conducted by the three GRAC working groups: (i) Education and Workforce Development, (ii) Health and Health Care Access, and (iii) Economic Development and Infrastructure. The third section summarizes how the GRAC coordinates technical assistance among state agencies and collaborates with other organizations and initiatives to promote rural community and economic development.

1. Demographic Trends in Rural versus Urban Illinois

In order to document rural Illinois conditions, this report adopts the definition for rural used by the Federal Office of Management and Budget (OMB), the U.S. Census Bureau, and the United State Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service (USDA-ERS). These agencies define metropolitan counties as those with at least one densely-settled core area with a minimum of 50,000 people.”⁷ Counties adjacent to a metropolitan county also count as metro if 25% of the workers in the adjacent county work in the core county or if 25% of the workers in the core county work in the adjacent county. The OMB and USDA-ERS define all counties outside these metro counties as non-metropolitan (rural).

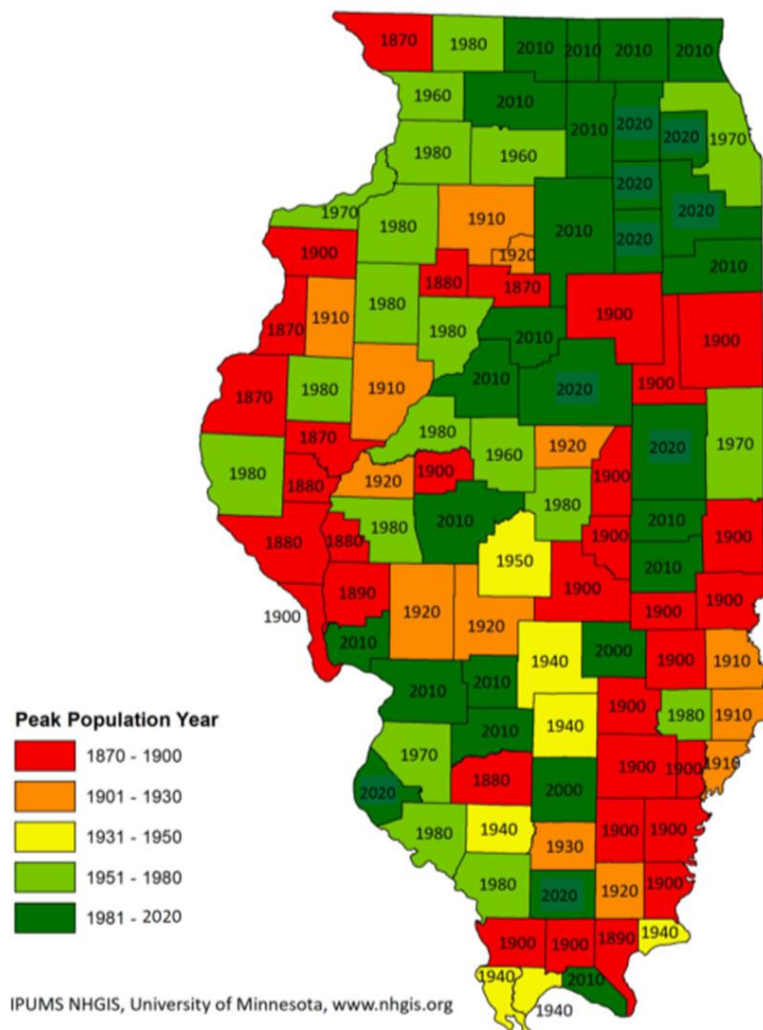
Illinois currently has 40 metropolitan and 62 non-metropolitan counties (Figure 1). The number of metro versus non-metro counties has changed over time. After each decennial enumeration, the U.S. Census Bureau evaluates the population in each county to determine if it meets the criteria to be a metropolitan county. During the 1990 Census, shortly after the establishment of the GRAC, Illinois had 28 metro counties and 74 non-metropolitan counties. Over the past four decades, the population of 12 counties grew large enough to become metro counties. This partially explains why the Illinois rural population has declined since 2000 (Table 1). However, it is also true that most Illinois non-metro counties have also lost population and have done so for several decades (Figure 2; Figure 3).

Table 1. A Comparison of Rural versus Urban Population Change in Illinois⁸

Year	Rural Population	% Rural Population	Urban Population	% Urban Population	Total Population
1980	1,624,924	14.2	9,802,485	85.8	11,427,409
1990	1,534,076	13.4	9,896,526	86.6	11,430,602
2000	1,558,686	12.5	10,861,241	87.5	12,419,927
2010	1,528,935	11.9	11,302,637	88.1	12,831,572
2020	1,439,587	11.2	11,372,921	88.8	12,812,508
2021	1,427,612	11.3	11,243,857	88.7	12,671,469

At least four factors contribute to rural population decline. First, technological change transformed rural communities over the past century. Farming had traditionally been labor-intensive, and as farmers embraced new farm technology in the early twentieth century, fewer farmers were needed to produce increasingly more farm commodities. Consider that in 1920, 237,181 farmers operated in Illinois. A century later, that number has dropped to 72,200.¹¹ The 164,981 decline represents a 69.5 percent drop in the Illinois farmer population. As the number of farmers dropped by two-thirds, the average size of farms more than tripled, growing from an average of 115 acres in 1920 to 358 acres by 2017. The declining farm population sparked a demographic ripple effect, reducing consumer demand in local market communities. This resulted in fewer people shopping at or attending local stores, schools, and churches. This explains why the population of most agriculturally-dependent counties in Illinois peaked over a century ago (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Census Year of Peak County Population¹²



Second, rural-to-urban migration also contributes to rural population decline. With fewer farm jobs or opportunities for off-farm employment, many young adults migrate to cities. This may first occur as they leave for post-secondary education. Once they graduate, young adults may stay in urban areas because of better job opportunities. More recently, researchers identified increased student debt as a driver of rural-to-urban migration. With lower wages in rural areas, the more indebted a rural student is, the more likely that student is to migrate to urban areas to find higher paying jobs.¹³

Third, dropping birthrates have compounded rural population decline. Over the past century, rural birthrates have been higher than those in urban areas. However, birthrates have been dropping in both rural and urban areas

and are now below what is needed to sustain current populations without immigration.^{14, 15} This threatens the future supply of workers in rural Illinois.

Fourth, constraints on immigration and rural resistance to diversity also drives rural depopulation. As noted above, macroscale factors such the mechanization of agriculture, declining birthrates, and rural outmigration are driving population decline. Immigration is the one macroscale process that could stabilize rural populations. Recent census data shows that international immigration to rural counties slowed, stabilized, or even reversed population decline in some instances.¹⁶ Policymakers and business groups support immigration reform to address population decline and labor shortages in rust belt cities and Midwestern rural communities.¹⁷ Without immigration reform to offset declining birthrates and outmigration, rural communities will continue to shrink.¹⁸

Continued population decline affects rural quality of life and economic development in several important ways. In particular, declining population affects the profitability of private businesses and the ability for communities to pay for physical infrastructure and social services. Here are examples of how population decline either directly or indirectly affects rural communities.

- ***Loss of Anchor Institutions.*** Anchor institutions are the government agencies, businesses, and non-profit organizations that offer essential services to the community. These include community libraries, schools, grocery stores, places of worship, and healthcare services. As populations decline, grocery stores close, schools consolidate, churches shutter, and health care facilities cut back services or close.^{19, 20, 21}
- ***Declining Tax Base and Rural Infrastructure.*** Basic infrastructure including schools, local roads, parks, streetlights, wastewater, snow removal, and other services rely on local tax dollars to function. As the population shrinks, the local tax base also decreases. The cost to maintain infrastructure does not decline commensurately. Local public officials have two options -- they can maintain services by raising taxes or maintain current tax levels by cutting services. Either way, rural residents will experience a deteriorating quality of life.
- ***Educational Attainment Gap.*** The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) reports that 64.5% of public-school funding comes from local taxes. Salaries and school operations are the largest school district budget items. As the local tax base declines, a school district can cut positions, reduce operational expenditures, or close buildings to address a budget shortfall. These disinvestments contribute to the ongoing rural-urban educational attainment gap because they result in larger class sizes, reduced course options, fewer investments in teaching technology, and possible school consolidation (Table 2). Illinois has increased state funding for rural and low-income school districts, which will reduce the rural-urban education attainment gap in the future. It will be a continuing problem, though, as long as, public education in Illinois remains so dependent on the local tax base, which is directly affected by population decline.

Table 2. Rural versus Urban Educational Attainment, 1980 to 2021²²

Not completing high school	Rural (%)	Urban (%)	Total (%)
1980	38.8	33.5	33.5
1990	27.6	23.2	23.8
2000	20.1	18.3	18.6
2008-2012	13.2	13.0	13.0
2017-2021	10.2	10.1	10.1
Completing high school only			
1980	40.0	35.1	35.1
1990	38.7	28.6	30.0
2000	37.8	26.2	27.7
2008-2012	37.4	25.8	27.2
2017-2021	36.0	24.0	25.4
Completing some college			
1980	11.7	15.2	15.2
1990	22.7	25.6	25.2
2000	28.6	27.5	27.6
2008-2012	33.1	28.1	28.7
2017-2021	34.5	27.5	28.3
Completing college			
1980	9.5	16.2	16.2
1990	11.0	22.6	21.0
2000	13.5	28.0	26.1
2008-2012	16.3	33.2	31.1
2017-2021	19.3	38.4	36.2

- **The Digital Divide.** Rural communities have less access to broadband than urban areas in Illinois. Rural households also have lower internet subscription rates than urban areas do (Figure 4). We must help rural communities narrow the digital divide because broadband is an essential part of our education, health care, and economic development infrastructure.
- **Youth Outmigration and Workforce Development.** Many young people leave rural places due to low wages or limited opportunities (Figure 5). This contributes to a declining rural workforce (Figure 6). The worker shortage, in turn, hinders the diversification of the rural Illinois economy. Illinois counties most resistant to population decline are those with diverse economies, with jobs in manufacturing, the public sector, healthcare, education, and other sectors beyond agriculture. Note that rural Illinois counties are proportionately more reliant on manufacturing jobs than urban areas (Figure 7). Many rural and downstate Illinois manufacturers struggle to find workers because of rural outmigration.²³ Rural outmigration is both

a cause and consequence of the larger forces driving rural depopulation.

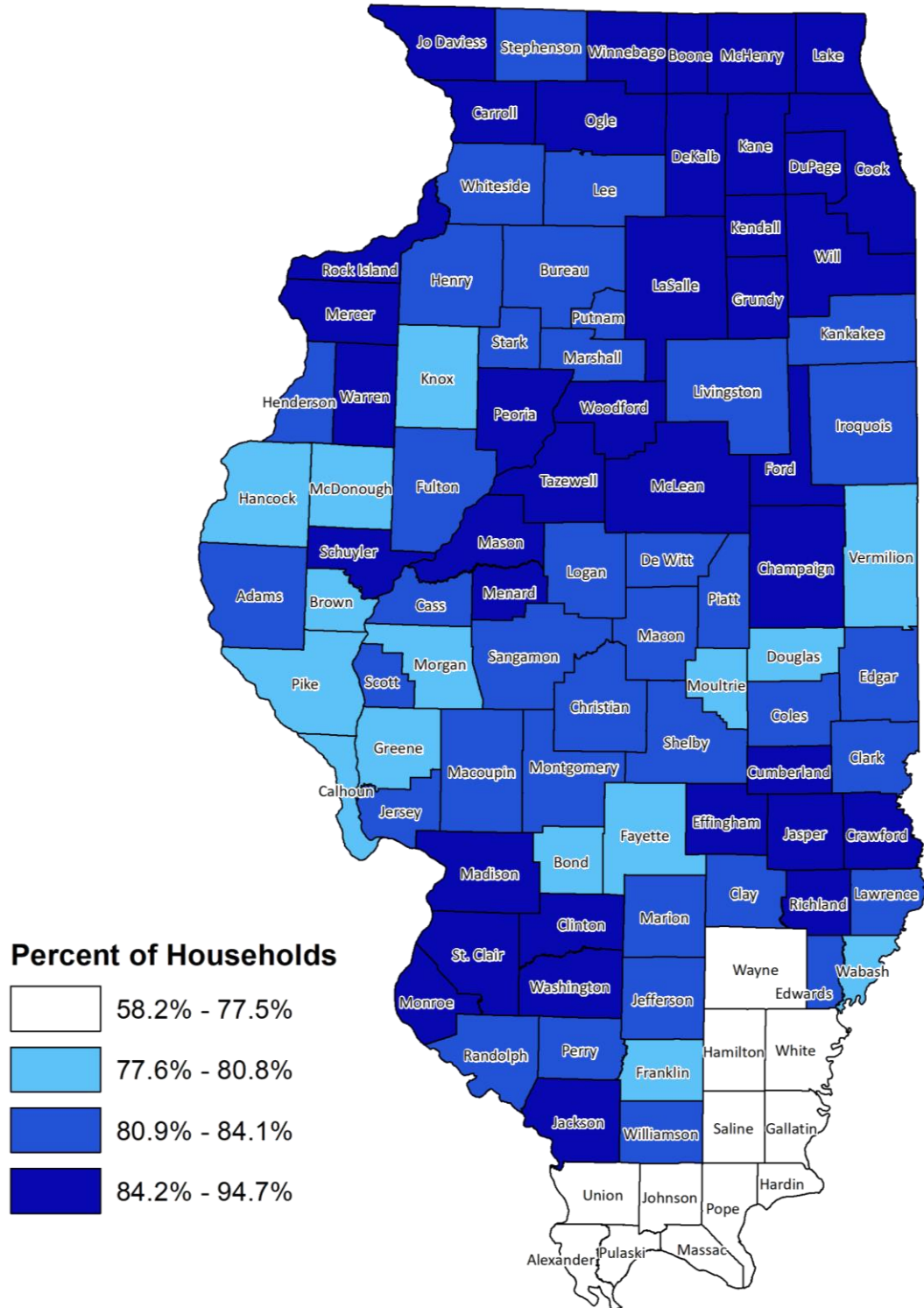


Figure 4. Percentage of Households with an Internet Subscription, 2021²⁴

Figure 5. Average Wage Change in Rural versus Urban Illinois²⁵

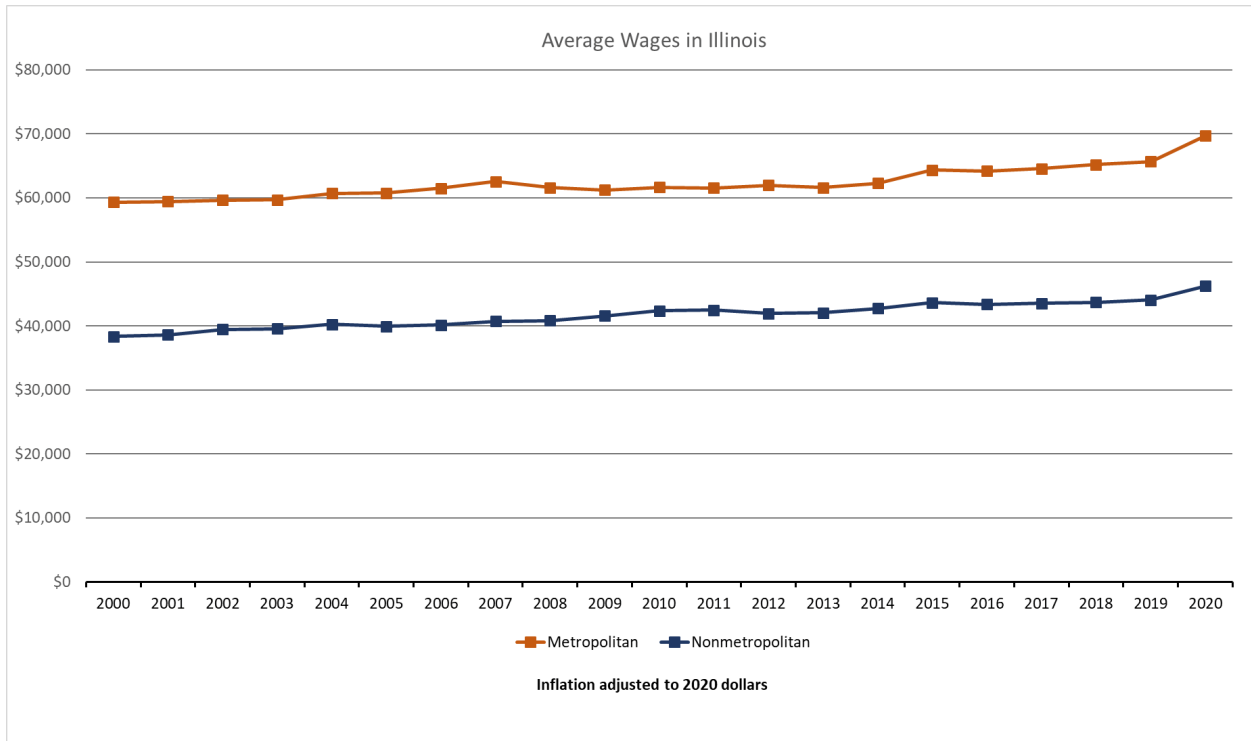


Figure 6. Index of Workforce Growth, 2000 to 2022²⁶

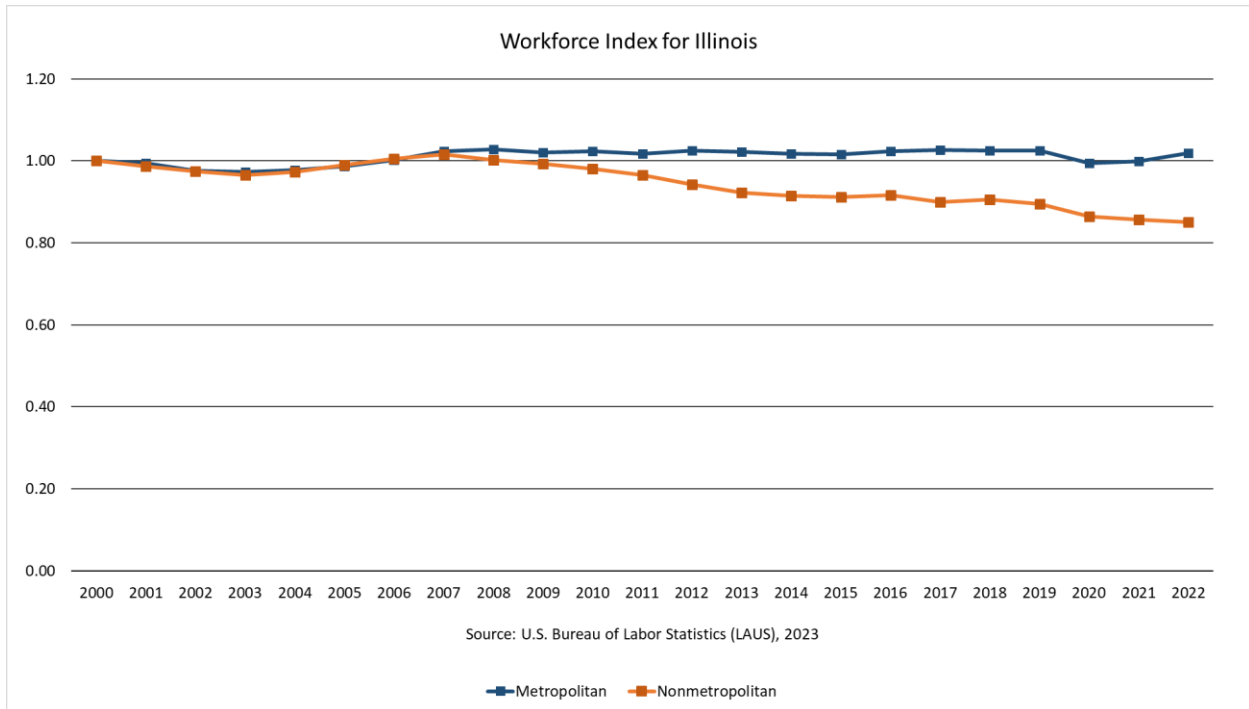
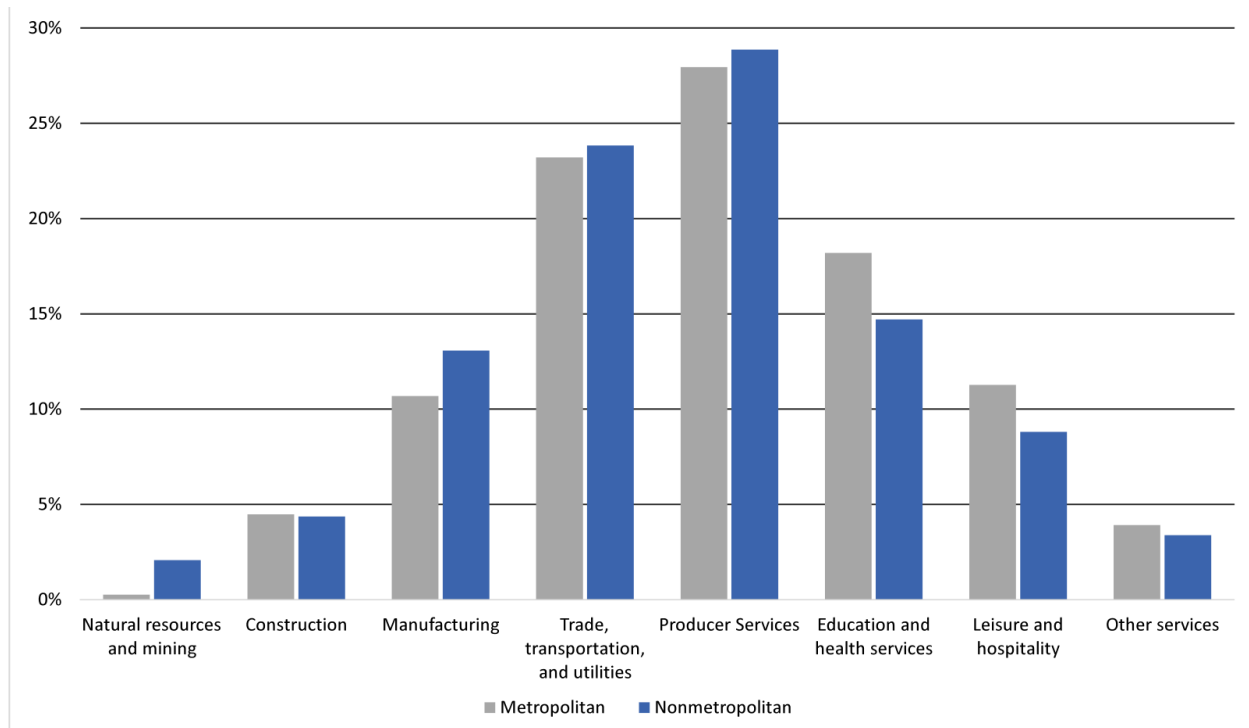


Figure 7. Rural versus Urban Employment by Industry, 2022²⁷



- Poverty.** Poverty rates are higher in rural versus urban counties in Illinois (Table 3). Rural poverty has many causes, including the aforementioned educational attainment gap and the lower average wages. The higher median age of rural

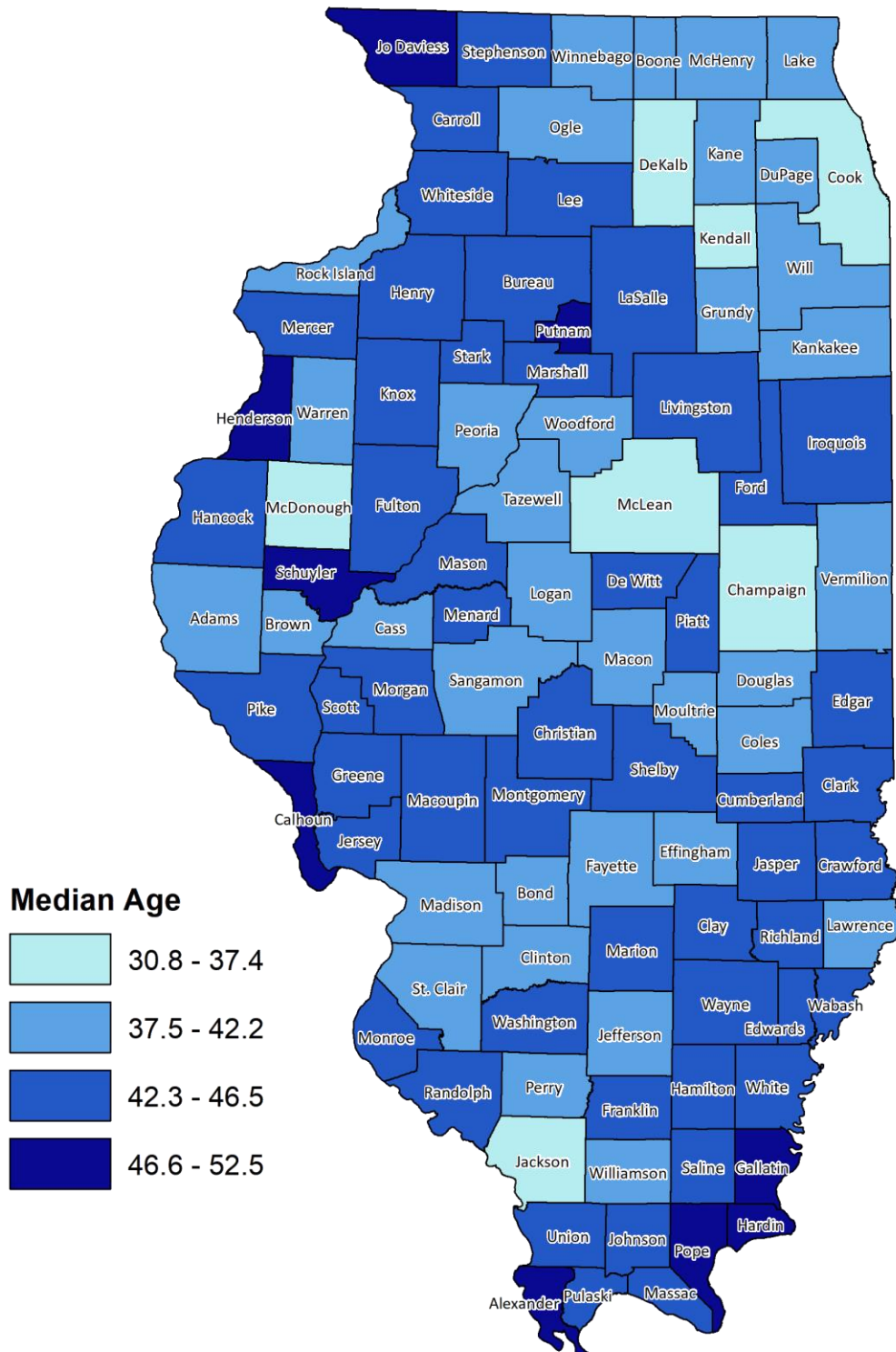
residents also contributes to higher poverty rates because rural residents are more likely to be retired or on a fixed income.

Table 3. Poverty Rate (%) in Rural versus Urban Counties in Illinois²⁸

Year	Rural	Urban	Total
1979	10.5	11.1	11.0
1989	13.3	11.7	11.9
1999	10.7	10.7	10.7
2020	12.0	10.9	11.0

- Aging Population and Healthcare Access.*** A corollary to rural youth outmigration and the declining birth rate is that rural counties have a higher median age than urban areas (Figure 8). This poses a challenge because rural areas are less likely to have the health care facilities that older patients with more complex health issues might need. Senior citizens are also more likely to have mobility issues because of disabilities or because they can no longer drive a car. This makes it difficult for the elderly to age in place if the rural community lacks public transit options.

Figure 8. Median Age by County, 2020²⁹



2. GRAC Working Groups

The GRAC has organized its members into three working groups to focus more attention on key issues. This section provides a brief overview of each working group and a summary of their policy positions and initiatives.

Health and Healthcare Access Working Group

The health care impacts of Covid-19 and opioid misuse, plus the challenges presented by the declining, aging rural population with limited access to broadband, prompted this working group to focus on telemedicine. Specific projects and research initiatives undertaken by GRAC members includes:

- ***Southern Illinois University (SIU) School of Medicine Telemedicine Project.*** The SIU School of Medicine plans to pilot a project in partnership with the Illinois Farm Bureau and University of Illinois Extension. The SIU School of Medicine will establish two telemedicine facilities in rural communities without a local healthcare facility. This will provide rural residents with a place offering broadband access and privacy to confer with health care professionals.
- ***Research Related to Health and Healthcare Access.*** IIRA researchers authored several research briefs over the past three years focused on telemedicine. More recently, the IIRA published research papers focused on health care access, as well as patient and societal costs of healthcare. Examples include:
 1. ***Hospitals in Illinois that are Likely to Seek the Rural Emergency Hospital Designation: An Exploratory Analysis.***³⁰ The Rural Emergency Hospital (REH) designation offers current Critical Access Hospitals and rural Prospective Payment System hospitals with fewer than 50 beds to provide emergency department and observation services. A principal component analysis of microdata from the CMS (Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services) suggests that there are 13 potential REH members in Illinois, ten in the non-metro and three in the metro area of Illinois.
 2. ***Health and Healthcare Disparities in Illinois, Metro vs. Non-metro.***³¹ This paper explores the status of health and healthcare disparities in Illinois using data from three sources: American Community Survey (ACS), 2017-2021; Health Cost & Utilization Project, 2018-2020, and Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS), 2021. Results show that health disparities exist in Illinois. For example, the inability to pay for health care services has prevented some Hispanics in non-metro places from seeing a doctor in the past 12 months. The largest potential for improvement in minority health lies in addressing behavioral risk factors such as smoking and lack of exercise.
 3. ***Health Policy for Rural Illinois, Data for Policy Development.***³² This paper provides data for rural Illinois health policy; the state's metropolitan data are provided for comparison purposes. The construct, "health policy", is

conceptualized to be a function of four factors: healthcare access, cost, quality, and equity; each facet, in turn, was measured using indicators derived from multiple data sources. Data analysis suggests that disparity in healthcare between white and minority populations is more pronounced in the rural places and is getting worse.

4. *Cost of Dementia in Illinois: Metro versus Non-metro.*³³ This paper explores metro-non-metro differences in the prevalence of Alzheimer's dementia. Data analysis suggests that more non-metro Illinoisans experience cognitive difficulties; dementia is less of a concern for metro residents, men, and for persons not enrolled in Medicare / Medicaid Programs; and Alzheimer's dementia cost is estimated at \$76.9 billion.

Education and Workforce Development Working Group

The educational attainment gap and workforce development challenges should be addressed to ensure rural prosperity. The State of Illinois is working to reduce K-12 disparities by reformulating the way the state allocates funds to school districts.³⁴ The Office of the Lt. Governor promotes educational attainment as it collaborates with the Hunt Institute to host webinars and conferences focused on inclusive education.³⁵

The GRAC is also equipped to tackle these issues because its members include education and workforce development experts from the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB), Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO), Illinois Department of Employment Security (IDES) and several state universities including University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), the IIRA at WIU, and SIU. Most recently, the GRAC also added the Association of Illinois Rural and Small Schools (AIRSS) to its roster of member agencies.

The GRAC focuses on education and workforce development issues at the annual rural development conference. In the past three years, the conference has featured speakers from university-based teacher education programs, the AIRSS, and workforce development offices. These speakers discussed ways to address teacher shortages in rural schools, the role K-12 schools can play in rural development, and workforce development challenges and strategies in rural communities. In addition, the IIRA continues to publish research on education and workforce issues.

- ***Research Related to Education and Workforce Development***

1. *Impacts of Automation on Employment: Metro and Non-metro Illinois.*³⁶ This paper explores the impact of automation on occupations in Illinois. Empirical analysis suggests that workers in rural firms are more likely to be affected by automation than workers in urban settings.
2. *Farmers Involvement in Educational Activities: Insights from the American Time Use Survey (ATUS) and Consumer Expenditure Survey (CES) Microdata Sets.*³⁷ This paper explores time spent by self-employed farmers on work and

work-related educational activities. Data analysis reveals that farming is primarily learned by experience and discovery; farmers spend little or no time on formal education and training. Policy efforts aimed at stimulating continuing learning among farmers should focus on developing new pedagogical approaches to reach the farming community.

3. *Young Illinoisans' Interests in Farming.*³⁸ This research explores the desire young adults have to farm as a career using data from the Census of Agriculture and related sources. About 92% of young persons from farming families look for employment off the farm. The consequence is reflected in the median growth rate of young producers in Illinois, which is -2.7%.

Economic Development and Infrastructure Working Group

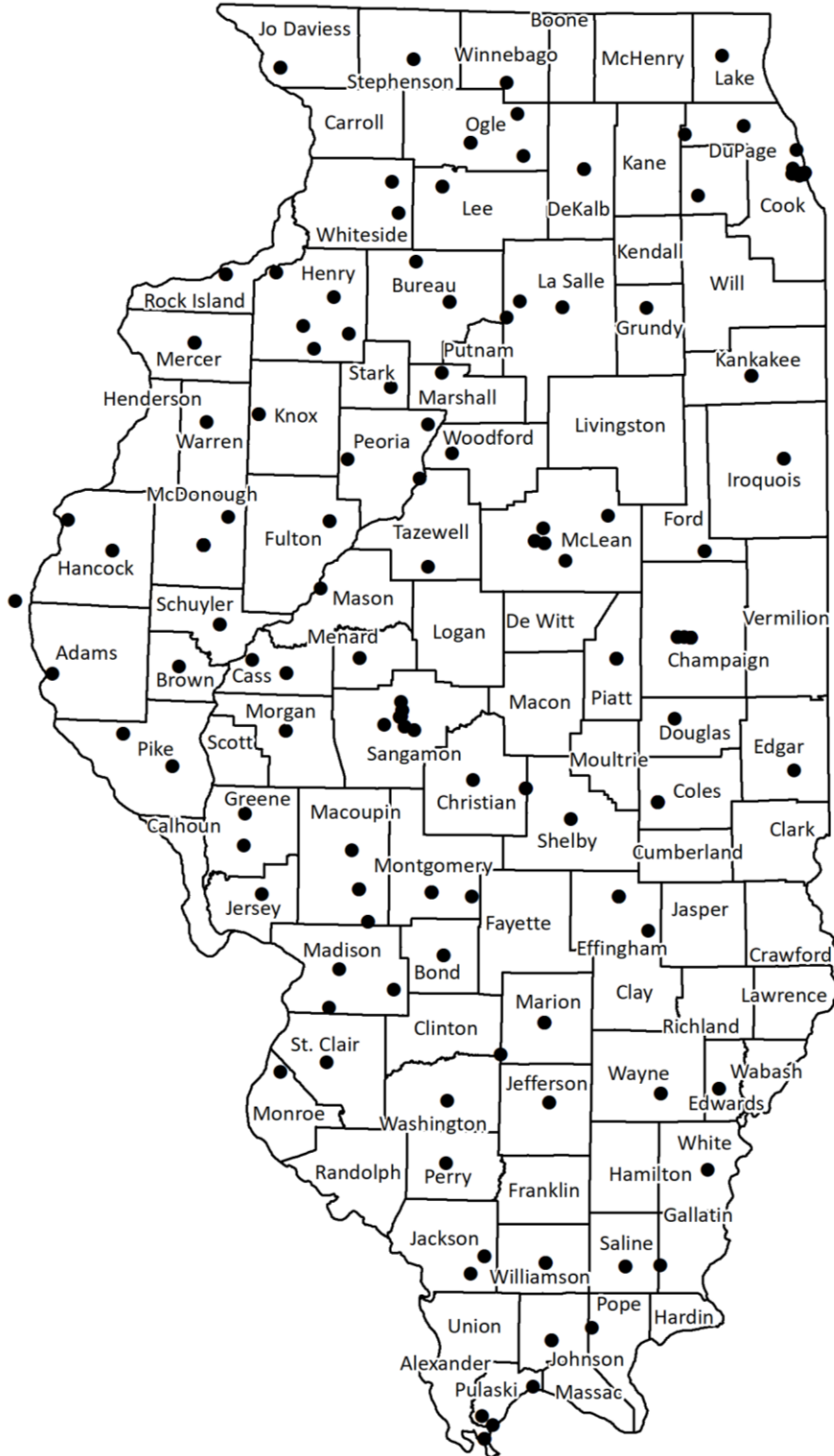
Rural Illinois communities should diversify their economies if they hope to stabilize their populations, maintain their local tax base, and retain their quality of life. GRAC members and this working group conducted research and took actions that could help rural places in at least three ways.

- ***Expanding Broadband Access.*** Broadband is now an essential part of the infrastructure for every community. Unfortunately, not every community or household has access or can afford broadband. The USDA-Rural Development (USDA-RD) and the DCEO Office of Broadband are working to reduce the digital divide. These agencies have distributed funds to internet providers and community organizations to build out the broadband network.³⁹ Several GRAC members secured DCEO Broadband READY grants to promote broadband adoption and digital literacy. Examples of projects include implementing Chromebook lending programs in partnership with community libraries and offering digital literacy courses on cybersecurity and data analytics.⁴⁰
- ***Business Succession Planning.*** Small businesses are central to the rural main street economy. All business owners will eventually want to sell their business, especially as they think about new opportunities, including retirement. Consequently, business owners should have a business succession plan in place so that the business remains open long after they retire. A failure to adequately plan for succession could mean that the business closes, employees lose jobs, and there is an empty storefront in the downtown business district. GRAC members such as DCEO, the IIRA, and UI Extension have a longstanding interest in business succession planning to prevent this kind of negative outcome. GRAC members are working to educate business and community leaders about the importance of succession planning. Here are some specific projects:
 - *Business Succession Planning Outreach.* In 2022, the IIRA secured a \$400,000 Small Business Administration (SBA) Grant with assistance from Rep. Cheri Bustos. The IIRA is working with a former Small

Business Development Director (SBDC), GRAC citizen member Norman Walzer, and UI Extension to deliver workshops, publish an edited book, and develop an online resource guide to help economic developers and business owners create viable succession plans.⁴¹

- *Community Supported Enterprises*. Sean Park from the IIRA received a \$200,000 SBA and a USDA-RD Rural Cooperative Development Grant (RCDG) to support rural grocery store cooperatives, also known as community-supported enterprises (CSEs). Communities can use the CSE model to keep a business open if a sole proprietor cannot be found to purchase the business in transition. This model can also be used to reopen a business after it has closed. The IIRA has worked with several partners including USDA-RD, UI Extension, the Illinois Innovation Network (IIN), and community leaders to open rural grocery cooperatives in five communities across Illinois. The *New York Times* covered IIRA's Sean Park as he worked on the Great Scott community market in Winchester, Illinois.⁴²
- **Annual Rural Development Conference**. Since 1989, the GRAC has collaborated with the IIRA and Rural Partners to host an annual rural development conference. Conference speakers discuss many rural development topics including education, healthcare, and especially economic development. At the 34th annual conference held this year in Springfield, Lt. Governor Juliana Stratton delivered opening remarks. Other speakers represented the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, University of Wisconsin, Kansas State University, UI Extension, WIU, AIRSS, economic developers, and community members. Speakers discussed entrepreneurship, rural grocery stores, remote worker recruitment, the role of schools in rural development, and inclusive rural development.⁴³ A map showing where the 290 conference attendees came from reveals that this conference attracts a statewide audience (Figure 9).
- **Conduct Research**. The IIRA conducted research on several topics related to economic development, infrastructure, sustainability, and quality of life in rural Illinois. Here are some examples of research from 2022 and 2023.
 1. *Foreign Businesses in the Agricultural Sector in Illinois*.⁴⁴ Fourteen overseas companies operate 27 subsidiaries in the Illinois farm sector. The typical parent company has been in business since 1954, employs 23,500 people, and has an annual revenue of \$10.03 billion. The 27 subsidiaries function in 50 different industries, with slightly more than 40% of the firms operating in the livestock industry.

Figure 9. Distribution of 2023 Conference Attendee Home Residences⁴⁵



2. *Rural Illinois in Numbers: Content-Valid Indicators for Governance.*⁴⁶
 Economic development matters to the extent that it improves community

quality of life. This paper identifies and validates 18 quality of life indicators measured longitudinally for each county in Illinois.

3. *Illinois Farm Ownership by Race and Farm Productivity*.⁴⁷ This paper explores the impact of producer's race on farm productivity. Data analysis suggests that: (i) minority farmers own farms that are less than 50 acres in size; the opposite is true for white producers, 64% own more than 50 acres of farmland; and (ii) on average, farms operated by white farmers receive more conservation-programs payments and other federal program payments.
4. *Climate and Mortality in Non-metro Illinois: Retrospective Study, 1999-2021 and Projections of Mortality for 2030*.⁴⁸ Climatic predictions for the Illinois region are for extreme heat, heavy rainfall, and flashfloods, which suggest that heat-related illness and waterborne disease would be public-health and community infrastructure concerns. Data analysis reveals that maximum temperatures in non-metro places during 1999-2021 have increased at an annual compound growth rate (ACGR) of 0.32%. Specifically, of the 12,883 deaths that occurred during the summer months of 1999 to 2021, an estimated 5,926 to 6,828 of the deaths could be attributed to heat-related mortality. Hence, heat-related mortality is expected to grow at an ACGR of 1.6% and reach 6,841 to 7,884 deaths by 2030. These results suggest that investments in green infrastructure could help communities adapt to climate change.

3. Internal and External GRAC Collaborations

The Office of Lt. Governor Juliana Stratton and the GRAC define rural development broadly. They also recognize that promoting rural development is a complex challenge. That explains why the Lt. Governor and the GRAC are guided by the philosophy that more can be accomplished through partnerships and collaboration. This section explores how the GRAC and its members collaborate with each other to help rural places. This section also explores the intersections and collaborations between GRAC members and initiatives beyond the GRAC that have a significant rural focus. These initiatives include:

- ***Agricultural Equity and Food Insecurity***. In 2022, Lt. Governor Stratton announced the **#AGConnectsUsAll** initiative to draw attention to agricultural equity and food insecurity in both urban and rural regions of the state. The Lt. Governor is working with GRAC members such as the Illinois Farm Bureau, UI Extension, the IIRA, and SIU School of Medicine to help minority farmers thrive and support marginalized rural and urban communities that do not have access to affordable, healthy foods.
- ***Farmer Equity Study***. In 2019, Illinois State Representative Sonja Harper sponsored legislation to address farmer inequity and to bring more minorities

into agriculture. This legislation included funding to conduct a study of farmer inequity with a focus on barriers to land access and inequalities in farm income based on race. Five GRAC member organizations are involved in this study, including the Illinois Department of Agriculture (IDOA), the Lt. Governor's Office, UIUC, SIU, and the IIRA. Researchers submitted preliminary results to the Illinois General Assembly in December 2022.^{49, 50}

- **Illinois Innovation Network (IIN).** The IIN is a network of 15 innovation hubs located at Illinois public universities. The state of Illinois created the IIN to spur university-driven research, innovation, as well as workforce and economic development. The IIN has connections to the GRAC and rural development in at least six ways. First, the Lt. Governor chairs the IIN Advisory Committee. Second, 10 of the 15 innovation hubs focus on rural development or rural-urban supply chain linkages. Third, the IIN sponsors the rural development conference hosted by the IIRA, GRAC, and Rural Partners. Fourth, the IIN-sponsored Illinois Broadband Lab works with GRAC members. Fifth, IIN leadership has presented at GRAC meetings and the rural development conference. Finally, the Office of the Lt. Governor worked with the IIN, University of Illinois System, UI Extension, and the IIRA at WIU to help establish the RISE cooperative grocery store in Cairo, Illinois. This store opened on June 16. The photo below shows Lt. Governor Stratton, Cairo's Mayor, and representatives from the University of Illinois System and IIRA at the grand opening of the store (Figure 10).

Figure 10. Opening of the RISE Community Market in Cairo, IL (June 16, 2023)



L to R: Kyle Harfst, UI System Associate VP for Economic Development & Innovation / Director of the IIN, IIRA Director Chris Merrett, Lt. Governor Juliana Stratton, Cairo Mayor Thomas Simpson, and IIRA Program Manager Sean Park.

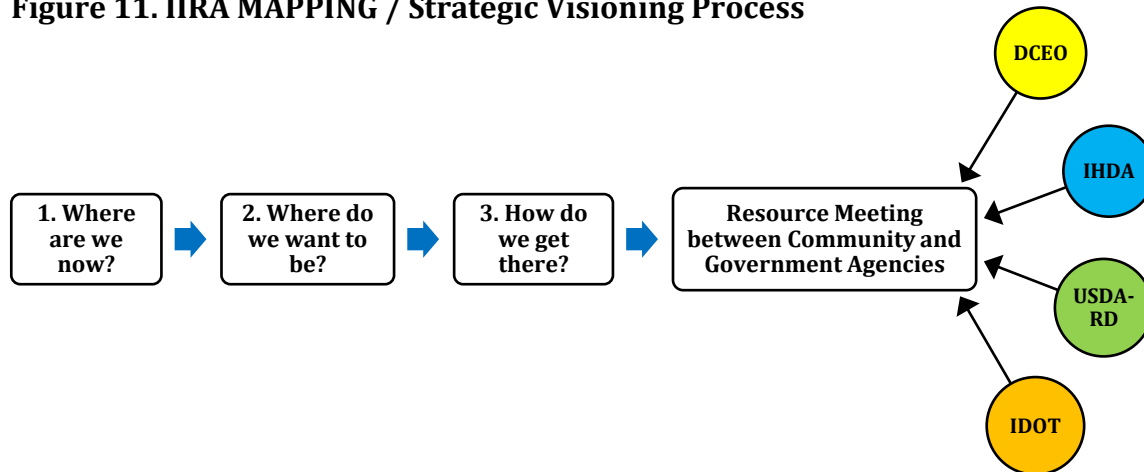
- **Restore, Reinvest, Renew (R3) Program.** The State of Illinois created the Restore, Reinvest, Renew (R3) Program to help communities that experienced disinvestment and decline as a consequence of the war on drugs. Administered

by the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority (ICJIA), the R3 Program uses tax revenues generated from the sale of cannabis to operate a grant program. Grantees use funds to promote community and economic development in struggling communities. Lt. Governor Stratton serves on the Restore, Reinvest, Renew (R3) Program Board. Working with several GRAC and community partners, the IIRA secured an R3 grant to help start the RISE cooperative grocery store in Cairo, Illinois, mentioned above (Figure 10).⁵¹

- ***Rivers of Illinois Coordinating Council.*** Lt. Governor Stratton chairs the Rivers of Illinois Coordinating Council (RICC). This council promotes stewardship of the Illinois River Watershed, as well as the Mississippi, Ohio, and Wabash Rivers. To focus its efforts, the RICC established three committees: the Carp and other Invasive Species Committee, the Economic Development and Infrastructure Committee, and the Conservation and Environment Committee. GRAC members are engaged in activities that significantly overlap with RICC activities. For example, the IIRA helped to create a fish producers cooperative along the Illinois River that catches and processes the invasive species known as Copi, which most people recognize as Asian Carp.⁵² This promotes economic development along the river, while addressing the invasive species problem. In addition, GRAC members such as UIUC, SIU, WIU and affiliated partners in the IIN recently secured a \$1,000,000 National Science Foundation grant to improve intermodal supply chain management and logistics. A portion of this project will focus on the infrastructure of ports along the Illinois and Mississippi Rivers.
- ***Community-Engaged GRAC.*** The GRAC recently enhanced the way it engages rural communities. The original governor’s executive order outlining the GRAC mission said it should identify innovative ways to deliver services to rural communities. The GRAC was intended to directly coordinate state agency outreach. Over time, the GRAC evolved into a forum where agencies met to share ideas, but it moved away from direct community engagement. The Office of the Lt. Governor has now brought the GRAC closer to its original role.

The premise of creating a “community-engaged” GRAC draws on the community planning conducted by the MAPPING (Management and Planning Program in Non-Metro Groups) Program, which operates from the IIRA. It takes a community through a strategic visioning or design-thinking process to help the community create a plan for future economic development. Community members are asked three questions: (i) Where are you now, (ii) Where do you want to be, and (iii) How do you get there? In a consensus-based process, community members use answers to these questions to identify and prioritize three to five community and economic development objectives the community can pursue in the next three to five years (Figure 11).

Figure 11. IIRA MAPPING / Strategic Visioning Process



Once the community identifies its list of prioritized goals, the IIRA MAPPING program invites state agency representatives to attend a meeting hosted by the community. If the community wants to expand affordable housing options, the MAPPING program would invite representatives from the USDA-RD and IHDA because of their expertise in housing. If a community wants to expand entrepreneurship and tourism, the MAPPING program could invite members from DCEO, Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR), and even the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT), among other possible agencies. The GRAC now serves in this kind of community-engaged role because so many government agencies and other experts are GRAC members.

In December 2022, the Lt. Governor hosted a community-engaged GRAC meeting in Mattoon, Illinois.⁵³ Mattoon had already gone through the MAPPING process in 2017 and achieved most of its economic development goals. It went through the MAPPING process again in 2022 to identify a new set of goals. At the community-engaged GRAC meeting, GRAC member agencies listened to Mattoon leaders describe their identified goals and then suggested technical assistance programs and funding options available to Mattoon. For example, Mattoon wants to expand its supply of affordable housing. The IHDA and USDA-RD both described their respective housing programs and then met with Mattoon leaders. The IHDA has already started a housing assessment survey in Mattoon to help them move forward.

In June 2023, the Lt. Governor hosted a community-engaged GRAC meeting in Charleston, Illinois.⁵⁴ In addition to GRAC members, participants included Eastern Illinois University (EIU) leaders, business owners, local government officials, and interested residents. Charleston would like to expand tourism, increase the role of arts in the community, invest in their parks, and build on the university-community partnership. GRAC members offered to help in several ways, including helping EIU with its plans to enhance town-gown relationships.

- ***Rural Development Resource Guide (RDRG)***. To augment the community-engaged GRAC meetings, the IIRA is also working on its Rural Development Resource Guide. It is currently available on the IIRA website: <https://www.iira.org/data-tools/rural-development-resource-guide-2/>. The RDRG is a searchable online database that includes all of the technical assistance and funding opportunities that GRAC members offer to promote community and economic development in rural communities. It also includes information on government agencies and nonprofit organizations beyond the GRAC that also offer support for community and economic development. The challenge is to keep the RDRG database current because programs and funding opportunities change over time. The IIRA is working with GRAC members this year to update the RDRG. This resource will be an asset for all communities interested in promoting local community and economic development.

Looking Forward

The GRAC has identified key issues affecting rural Illinois, including a digital divide affecting education, health care, and economic development; a declining and aging rural population; workforce development challenges; and the impact of Covid-19 on rural places. The GRAC created three committees to tackle these interrelated issues. This report documents that the GRAC has moved beyond simply identifying issues. GRAC and its constituent members have conducted research and taken direct action to improve the quality of life in rural places.

Moving forward, the GRAC and its members will work to implement its rural telehealth pilot project. GRAC members will continue to generate research focused on healthcare and healthcare access; education and workforce development; and economic development and infrastructure. The GRAC has already implemented its community-engaged GRAC initiative in Mattoon and Charleston and plans to host one or two community-engaged GRAC meetings this upcoming year. Future actions also include hosting the Midwest Community Development Institute (Midwest CDI) in August 2023. This event is organized by the IIRA with significant support from UI Extension and Rural Partners. Planning has already begun and will continue through the autumn for the 35th Annual Rural Development Conference, which is scheduled to take place in Springfield in February 2024. Additionally, the IIRA will continue to work with GRAC members to update the RDRG. The three working groups will continue to work on specific projects, including the telemedicine demonstration project lead by SIU School of Medicine and the business succession planning outreach led by the IIRA, with support from UI Extension and other GRAC partners.

Rural communities in Illinois have significant challenges. However, these communities also have a wealth of assets. The GRAC and its constituent agencies are working to help communities identify and then effectively deploy these assets to promote sustainable rural community economic development.

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