

less than the national average for nonmetro counties in 1990, but slightly more in 1994.⁴ North Carolina's rural workers earned 79 percent of the national average of \$22,044 per capita in 1994, up from 73.4 percent in 1990. Rural workers nationwide earned only 77 percent of the average in 1994, up slightly from 76 percent in 1990. North Carolina's urban workers also gained ground, earn-

ing 90.9 percent of the nation's average per capita income in 1990 and 94.5 percent of the average in 1994.

Although many rural counties are doing quite well, Carlisle says it will take a tailored approach to solve economic problems in the more distressed, struggling rural counties. And he warns that the solutions won't be easy for these counties. "This

What Is Urban and What Is Rural?

Deciding what is urban and what is rural in North Carolina is not as easy as it might seem. The federal government can't even agree with itself on the issue. Two federal agencies—the Bureau of the Census and the Office of Management and Budget—use two different definitions of the urban-rural split. The N.C. Rural Economic Development Center uses yet a third definition. None talk about kudzu per acre or gallons of sweet tea guzzled per pound of barbecue served or any other common-sense indicator of the rural good life. Instead, the definitions focus on such non-subjective if somewhat dull details as population density and commuting patterns. Confused? Here's a quick guide to the three definitions used by the three different agencies to determine if a given Tar Heel is a city slicker or a rural resident:

(1) U.S. Bureau of the Census—The U.S. Census Bureau basically defines urban residents as those who live in cities and towns with at least a population of 2,500 or in suburbs outside the municipal boundaries but considered urban because of population density. This definition breaks each county into urban and rural sections. Even in Mecklenburg County, with more than 500,000 residents, the Census considers about a tenth of those citizens to be rural. And all 4,392 of the Pitt County tobacco town of Farmville's residents are considered to be urban. The Census Bureau tallies the U.S. population each decade. At last count—in 1990—the Census Bureau found a slight majority (50.3%) of the state's population to live in urban areas.

(2) The U.S. Office of Management and Budget—The U.S. Office of Management and Budget takes a different approach. It looks at commuting patterns, total population, and other indicators to see if a county is part of a metro-

politan area. Some counties, such as Onslow, are their own metro area. Others encompass a region, such as the 11-county Piedmont Triad, which surrounds the counties of Greensboro, High Point, and Winston-Salem. By this definition, roughly two-thirds of the state's population (67 percent) now live in urban areas.

(3) The N.C. Rural Economic Development Center—The N.C. Rural Economic Development Center has settled on the broadest definition of the three. It counts as rural any North Carolina county with a population density per square mile of less than 200 persons. The list includes 85 counties as rural, so it's simpler to name the 15 counties that are not considered rural. By order of population density, North Carolina's urban counties are: Mecklenburg, 969.05 residents per square mile; New Hanover, 651.80; Forsyth, 644.58; Durham, 610.72; Guilford, 533.86; Wake, 498.97; Gaston, 490.06; Cumberland, 417.97; Catawba, 299.28; Cabarrus, 271.74; Buncombe, 265.15; Alamance, 249.83; Orange, 234.47; Davidson, 231.04; and Rowan, 213.10. By the rural center's definition, North Carolina is still predominantly rural, though barely, at 52 percent.

What difference does any of this make? Belonging to a metropolitan area may hold some small promotional advantage in recruiting industry or attracting retail chains. And whether an area is urban or rural may play a role in whether that area is eligible to receive certain government funding or grants such as those administered by the rural center. Yet it's hard to think of Farmville as a major metropolis. In the end, rural may be more a state of mind, and that's something hard to quantify, even for the Bureau of the Census.

—Mike McLaughlin