Micropolitan areas and the measurement of American urbanization

DAVID L. BROWN¹, JOHN B. CROMARTIE² & LASZLO J. KULCSAR¹

Abstract. With the official designation of micropolitan areas in June 2003, as part of the new core-based statistical area system, non-metropolitan territory is no longer an undifferentiated residual. In this paper we compare the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of a preliminary set of micropolitan areas with more highly urbanized territory and with territory outside core-based statistical areas, to answer questions about the micropolitan category’s conceptual validity. Demographic and economic data are used, along with a mail survey of county officials in a random sample of small metropolitan, micropolitan, and non-core-based statistical areas (non-CBSAs). The analysis shows substantial differentiation between micropolitan and non-CBSA areas, and demonstrates the importance of distinguishing between these two types of non-metropolitan areas. As an intermediate category, micropolitan areas provide stability to the decade-to-decade swings in non-metropolitan population change during periods of higher out-migration, but share almost equally with non-CBSA areas in attracting migrants during periods of high non-metropolitan in-migration. In terms of services available and their function as urban centers, micropolitan areas are intermediate between small metropolitan and non-CBSA areas, but more similar to small metropolitan areas.

Keywords: Metropolitan, Micropolitan, Non-metropolitan turnaround, Rural rebound, Urbanization

Introduction: area classification and social and economic reality

No one doubts that America is a predominately metropolitan nation. However, researchers disagree on the conceptual definition of metropolitan, the nature of the social and economic processes that transform territories and populations from non-metropolitan to metropolitan status, and the operational procedures used to distinguish metropolitan areas from their non-metropolitan counterparts. Federal statistical agencies in most developed nations create territorial classification systems to delineate metropolitan areas, and to differentiate them from areas that lack metropolitan functions and/or character. The relationship between social and economic structure and change on the one
hand, and the statistical systems designed to depict that reality on the other hand is often tenuous. As Duncan and his colleagues (1960:4) observed with respect to metropolitanization, “...the metropolis is not a creation of the federal (or any other) government, nor is it an artifact of bureaucratic statistical procedures.” Hence, the validity of official classifications is extremely important because statistical practice has a marked effect on what is considered to be metropolitan (and non-metropolitan) at any point in time, and on the perceived pace of metropolitanization.

Official classification systems must change along with a nation’s settlement system. If they are rigid and resistant to change they will not give an accurate representation of the metropolitanization process. Statistical categories must be revised to reflect the long-term restructuring processes that affect and are affected by population redistribution. While most researchers agree that comparability over time is desirable for certain types of longitudinal analysis, classification systems must be periodically updated to reflect changes in a nation’s settlement system. As Fuguitt et al. (1988:126) indicated, an obvious disadvantage of the fixed classification system approach “is that strict adherence to the same universe means that the concept of ‘metropolitan’ necessarily becomes more ambiguous as territorial units change in character (i.e., become more or less metropolitan) over the period of study.”

Purpose of the study

This paper examines socioeconomic and demographic trends experienced by micropolitan areas and compares these with changes occurring in both metropolitan areas and in territory that is outside of non-core-based statistical areas (non-CBSA). We seek to determine the degree to which micropolitan areas act as an intermediate settlement type that is located between smaller metropolitan cities and non-CBSA counties. This analysis contributes to knowledge of diversity within non-metropolitan America, and demonstrates that the non-metropolitan residual is differentiated in ways that affect opportunities, life chances, and prospects for development.

Some researchers contend that the U.S. is simply one huge “daily urban system,” and that non-metropolitan territory retains little or no economic or social autonomy (Berry 1967). However, one’s perception of the role and status of non-metropolitan people and places in contemporary American society may depend on how one conceptualizes