A Demographic Snapshot of Rural Fathers

Roughly one in five people and more than one in 10 men between the ages of 18 and 44 in the United States live in rural communities. Although rural and urban fathers are similar in many ways, there are significant differences shaping their lives and opportunities that have implications for fatherhood programs. For instance, program staff working in rural communities often report that higher rates of unemployment, lower educational attainment, limited job opportunities, and lack of transportation translate to challenges that are difficult to address and unique to rural communities. This demographic snapshot highlights some of these important characteristics to provide information for practitioners working with rural fathers and to inform policy makers and community stakeholders of the needs of fathers in rural communities. On behalf of the Office of Family Assistance (OFA), the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse has released a companion publication, Spotlight on Rural Fatherhood Programs, to further inform work with fathers in rural areas.

What do we know about fathers in rural areas?

The following are some general factors that contribute to the experiences of fathers in rural areas:

- Rural areas are shaped by low population density, which influences many aspects of people’s lives.
- Rural areas are often comprised of tight-knit social circles, which can provide much needed support for individuals and families.
- Rural areas have different opportunity structures with different types of jobs and fewer employers compared to urban areas.
- The poverty rate is higher in rural areas than in urban areas, and this is especially the case in southern states.
- Many rural areas are geographically isolated and residents often have to travel long distances to access resources and human services, which influences the types of services available, how services are delivered, and the quality of services available.

Below, we highlight characteristics of rural fathers and contrast the information with the experience of fathers living in urban areas.

Men who live in rural areas are more likely to be fathers than their urban counterparts.

In rural communities, 39% of men between the ages of 18 and 44 are fathers, compared to 33% in urban areas.
The vast majority of rural and urban fathers live with their children.

- In rural areas, 85% of fathers are resident fathers living with all of their children (biological, step, or adopted); 5% live with at least one, but not all of their children; and 10% are non-resident fathers who do not live with any of their children.

- In urban areas, 89% of urban fathers live with all of their children; 3% live with some, but not all of their children; and 8% are non-resident fathers.

There are fewer black and Hispanic fathers in rural areas.

- In rural areas, 79% of fathers are non-Hispanic white, 9% are black, 7% are Hispanic, and 5% have other racial or ethnic roots.

- In urban areas, 59% of fathers are non-Hispanic white, 19% are Hispanic, 13% are black, and 9% have other racial or ethnic roots.

In both rural and urban communities, black fathers are less likely to be resident fathers than their white and Hispanic counterparts.

- In rural areas, 90% of white fathers, 93% of Hispanic fathers, and 73% of black fathers live with at least one child.

- In urban areas, 94% of white fathers, 93% of Hispanic fathers, and 80% of black fathers live with at least one child.
Rural fathers are more likely than urban fathers to live in households that receive support from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

This is the case for both resident and non-resident fathers:

- In rural areas, 30% of non-resident fathers and 15% of resident fathers live in a household that receives nutritional assistance.
- In urban areas, 18% of non-resident fathers and 11% of resident fathers live in a household that receives nutritional assistance.

Rural fathers have higher rates of unemployment (15%) than urban fathers (12%).
In both rural and urban areas, non-resident fathers are more likely to be unemployed than resident fathers.

- In rural areas, 24% of non-resident fathers and 14% of resident fathers are unemployed.
- In urban areas, 31% of non-resident fathers and 11% of resident fathers are unemployed.

Rural fathers are less likely to have attended college (30%) than urban fathers (44%).
In both rural and urban areas, resident fathers are more likely to attend college than non-resident fathers.

- In rural areas, 32% of resident fathers and 17% of non-resident fathers have some college experience.
- In urban areas, 46% of resident fathers and 25% of non-resident fathers have some college experience.

Data and Methods

We used data from the 2015 Current Population Survey (CPS). This annual survey is nationally representative of the U.S. population and provides information about rural households and communities. Rural areas are defined as counties that do not contain an urban area (50,000 or more people, including outlying counties of these areas with at least 2,500 people).¹ ²

The analytic sample is comprised of men (age 18-44) in households who were identified as fathers (biological, step, or adoptive). Analyses were conducted using Stata (version 14.0) and weighted to be nationally representative. All figures depict statistically significant differences (p<.05).

We present comparisons between rural and urban fathers, and resident (living with at least 1, but not necessarily all of their children) and non-resident (living with none of their children) fathers when the differences are statistically significant.


References


