



From the Smokies to Beale Street: Understanding Urban and Rural Tennessee

New Census data reveals similarities and differences across Tennessee communities

The U.S. Census Bureau in July 2017ⁱ released data that provides a snapshot of what every Tennessee county looked like in 2016. This data both confirms the distinctiveness of our cities and ruralⁱⁱ areas and reveals important similarities between the two.

Finding One: Tennessee is more “gray” than the nation overall, but the proportion of seniors is especially pronounced in rural Tennessee.

- Nearly **one in seven Tennesseans are above the age of 65**, making Tennessee’s population slightly “grayer” than the national population overall (15.2%). However, Tennessee’s **most rural counties had, on average, a significantly higher share of senior citizens** in 2016 (21.6%) than Tennessee’s most urban counties (14.1%).
- Moreover, Tennessee’s most **urban counties have a greater percentage of working-age residents** (63.9%) than did our most rural ones (59.2%).

Finding Two: Both urban and rural Tennessee communities are home to diverse populations.

- The Tennessee counties with the **largest share of African-American residents can be found in urban centers like Shelby County (54.1%)**, home to Memphis, **mid-sized communities like Madison County (37.6%)**, home to Jackson and **more rural areas like Haywood (50.6%)**, Hardeman (41.7%) and Lauderdale (35.0%).
- Four of the five Tennessee counties with the **highest percentage of Hispanic residents are located in rural and mid-sized communities** across the state (11.8% in Bedford, 11.5% in Hamblen, 10.4% in Crockett and 10.0% in Montgomery). Davidson was the only urban county among the top five, with 10.1% of its residents identifying as Hispanic.

Finding Three: Urban and rural Tennessee alike have disability rates above the national average, but rates outside the cities are highestⁱⁱⁱ.

- Disability rates in the state’s poorest and most rural counties are more than twice that of the rates in cities. **One in six Tennesseans in our poorest and most rural counties is disabled**, compared to one in eleven in the state’s most urban counties.

- Despite having a lower rate of disability than more rural counties, all but one of **Tennessee's four most urban counties have a disability rate higher than the national average of 8.6%.**

Finding Four: With an average commute time of 24.5 minutes, there are few short drives to work in Tennessee, but travel times are worst in the ring just beyond the suburbs.

- The longest commutes in Tennessee belong to **residents of the mostly rural counties that make up the exurbs** around major metropolitan areas. Residents in counties such as Hickman, Stewart, Cannon, Union and Fayette have an average daily commute of more than 30 minutes.

ⁱ 2016 U.S. Census Bureau data retrieved from: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045216>.

ⁱⁱ Urban and rural classifications at the county level adhere to the definitions set by TACIR in its 2016 report, *Just How Rural or Urban Are Tennessee's 95 Counties? Finding a measure for Policy Makers*, available here: <https://www.tn.gov/assets/entities/tacir/attachments/2016JustHowRuralOrUrban.pdf>.

ⁱⁱⁱ According to the U.S. Census Bureau, a person is disabled if they have serious difficulty (1) hearing, (2) seeing, (3) remembering, concentrating, or making decisions, (4) walking or climbing stairs, (5) bathing or dressing, or (6) doing errands alone as a result of a physical, mental, or emotional problem. <https://www.census.gov/people/disability/methodology/acs.html>.