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CHANGES IN THE CENSUS RURAL DEFINITION – IMPACT ON SOUTH CAROLINA

Whitepaper prepared by the South Carolina Center for Rural and Primary Healthcare
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White Paper – March 2023

Changes in the Census Rural Definition – Impact on South Carolina

In February 2021, the US Census Bureau proposed new criteria for defining urban areas based on the results of the 2020 Census¹. After a period for public comment, the final criteria were issued in March 2022². Primary changes include adding housing units in addition to population thresholds to determine qualifying urban areas, as well removing the distinction between Urban Areas (UAs) and Urban Clusters (UCs) (See Table 1).

Table 1 – Key differences in the Census’ Rural-Urban definition

	2010 Criteria	2020 Criteria
Definition based on...	Population	Housing units OR population equivalent ^A
Geographical Level	Census tract ^B	Census block ^C
Urban Area Delineation	-Urban areas have a population of 50,000 or more -Urban clusters have a population between 2,500 and 49,999	-Initial urban core has at least 425 housing units per square mile -Remainder of urban area is adjacent to the initial urban core and has at least 200 housing units per square mile -All urban areas must have at least one high-density nucleus with at least 1,275 housing units per square mile
Initial urban area Cores are identified by...	Census tract or blocks that meet the population density, count, and size threshold.	Census block or aggregation of census block with a housing unit density of 425
A place is considered urban if...	It has at least 2,500 people.	It has at least 2,000 housing units <u>OR</u> 5,000 people
Rural areas are...	All territory, population, and housing units not included within an urban area and urban cluster	All territory, population, and housing units not included within an urban area
US Rural Population	19% of population was rural	20% of population is rural

¹ <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2021/02/19/2021-03412/urban-areas-for-the-2020-census-proposed-criteria>

² <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2022/03/24/2022-06180/urban-area-criteria-for-the-2020-census-final-criteria>

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^A The Census Bureau uses an average of 2.6 people per household in their calculations.

^B Census Tracts are small, relatively permanent statistical subdivisions with population size between 1,200 and 8,000 people, with an optimum size of 4,000 people.

^C Census Blocks are the smallest geographic units used by the Census Bureau. Blocks vary in size and population and are bounded by visible features, such as streets, roads, streams, and railroad tracks, as well as by nonvisible boundaries, such as selected property lines and city, township, school district, and county limits.

In December 2022, the Census Bureau released their final criteria clarifications as well as a list of the 2,613 qualifying urban areas³. Additionally, a dataset was made available that outlines 1,143 areas that were considered Urban in 2010 (either as an Urban Cluster or and Urbanized Area) which have been reclassified as non-urban (i.e. rural) using the 2020 census definition.

In South Carolina, 26 areas were reclassified (See Table 2). All 17 new Rural Areas were considered Urban Clusters in 2010. The remaining 30 Urban Clusters were consolidated into the single Urban Area designation. In addition, 9 areas that were rural in 2010 are now designated as Urban Areas. These newly designated Urban Areas may not be solely the result of the Census definition change as all listed areas also experienced population growth since 2010⁴.

Table 2 – Changes in Census Designation Using 2020 Definition, SC Only

New Rural Areas		
1. Allendale, SC	7. Denmark, SC	13. Pageland, SC
2. Andrews, SC	8. Edgefield, SC	14. Saluda, SC
3. Bamberg, SC	9. Hampton, SC	15. Sun City Hilton Head, SC
4. Barnwell, SC	10. Hardeeville, SC	16. Tabor City, NC—SC
5. Bishopville, SC	11. Honea Path, SC	17. Woodruff, SC
6. Chesnee, SC	12. Lake Murray North Shore, SC	
2010 Urban Clusters Relabeled as Urban Areas		
1. Abbeville, SC	11. Gaffney, SC	21. Marion, SC
2. Batesburg-Leesville, SC	12. Georgetown, SC	22. Mullins, SC
3. Beaufort--Port Royal, SC	13. Greenwood, SC	23. Newberry, SC
4. Belton, SC	14. Hartsville, SC	24. Orangeburg, SC
5. Bennettsville, SC	15. Kingstree, SC	25. Ridgeland, SC

³ <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2022/12/29/2022-28286/2020-census-qualifying-urban-areas-and-final-criteria-clarifications>

⁴ <https://rfa.sc.gov/data-research/population-demographics/census-state-data-center/population-data/population-estimates-places>

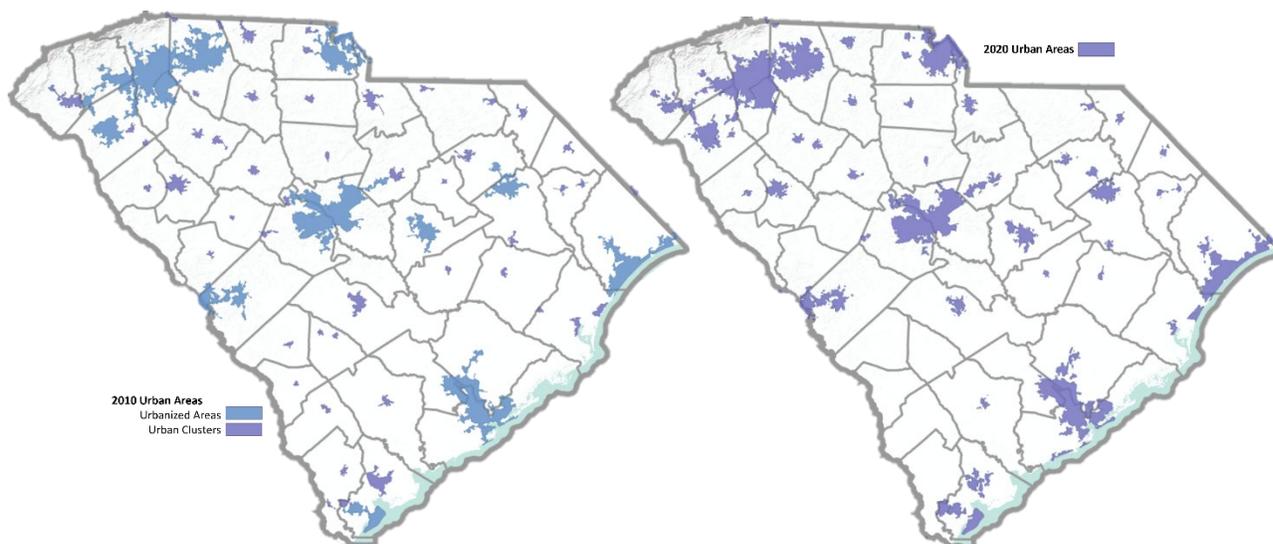
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6. Cheraw, SC	16. Lake City, SC	26. Seneca, SC
7. Chester, SC	17. Lancaster, SC	27. Union, SC
8. Clinton, SC	18. Landrum/Landrum--	28. Walterboro, SC
9. Clover, SC	Tryon, SC—NC	29. Winnsboro, SC
10. Dillon, SC	19. Laurens, SC	30. York, SC
	20. Manning, SC	
New Urban Areas		
1. Bluffton East--Hilton Head Island, SC	4. Inman, SC	7. Seabrook Island, SC
2. Bluffton West, SC	5. Litchfield Beach, SC	8. Walhalla, SC
3. Chapin, SC	6. Pickens, SC	9. Williamston, SC

These changes are best depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1 – Changes in Urban Areas in South Carolina from 2010 to 2020. Map of 2010 includes both Urbanized Areas (blue) and Urban Clusters (purple). This distinction no longer exists for the 2020 definition, as such, Urban Areas are shown in purple⁵. An interactive comparison of these maps can be found on our [website](#).



Overall, we find that these changes did not greatly impact the overall proportion of South Carolina that is considered Rural, both in terms of population and land area (see Table 3).

⁵ Maps from TIGERweb v18.0 <https://tigerweb.geo.census.gov/tigerweb2020/>

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Table 3 – 2020 Rural-Urban Population and Land Area of South Carolina⁶

	Population		Area (in square miles)	
	2010	2020	2010	2020
South Carolina	4,625,364	5,118,425	30,060.70	30,064.28
Urban	3,067,809 (66%)	3,477,869 (68%)	2381 (8%)	2,426 (8%)
Rural	1,557,555 (34%)	1,640,556 (32%)	27,679 (92%)	27,638 (92%)

These changes do, however, impact the people living in areas that experienced a change in designation. Changes in rural/urban designation can impact a community's ability to access designated grant funding and eligibility for special considerations, both from the public and private sector^{7,8}. Therefore, the impact of the changes on these communities warrants monitoring.

⁶ <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/SC>

⁷ National Academies of Sciences E, and Medicine. Achieving rural health equity and well-being: Proceedings of a workshop: National Academies Press; 2018.

⁸ Smith ML, Dickerson JB, Wendel ML, et al. The utility of rural and underserved designations in geospatial assessments of distance traveled to healthcare services: implications for public health research and practice. *Journal of environmental and public health*. 2013;2013.