

The Drivers of Rural Economic Decline in the United States: A Review of Post-Recession Literature

Amina Adam¹ and Adwoa Agyeiwaa Ampomah-Britwum²

¹LeadingAge Kansas, Topeka, KS, USA

²Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Ghana

Abstract: Rural America is at a crucial point, with many communities experiencing ongoing economic struggles, especially since the Great Recession. This review examines the recent literature to pinpoint and understand the main causes of this decline, providing a clear picture of the various challenges facing non-metropolitan areas in the U.S. We found that rural economic stagnation is not just one issue; it is the result of many interconnected factors. We highlighted four major themes: First, there are significant demographic changes, including population loss, an aging population, and skilled workers leaving, often referred to as "human capital flight." Second, there are major shifts in both the national and global economies that have hurt traditional industries, such as manufacturing, agriculture, and resource extraction. Third, there is a growing lack of essential infrastructure, particularly in broadband access, which limits economic growth and diversity in the region. Finally, the relationship between rural and urban areas often deepens inequalities, concentrating opportunities in cities while sidelining rural regions. These findings show a cycle in which job losses lead to more people moving away, which then reduces local tax revenues and public services, creating even more challenges. We emphasize the need for local policies that tackle these complex issues together rather than considering isolated causes. Additionally, there is a call for more research to explore rural resilience and develop better strategies for sustainable economic recovery.

Keywords: Demographic shifts, human capital flight, structural economic transformation, digital divide, rural-urban inequality.

INTRODUCTION

Since the 2008 Great Recession, the US economy has recovered unevenly. Cities have bounced back with industries based on knowledge and global connections. But rural areas are still struggling with many problems. These include losing people, weakening social services, less access to healthcare and education, and weakening community ties (Mishra, 2025). Understanding these issues is important for making good public policies to help the whole country. This article looks at the problems facing rural America today. It studies the causes and effects of economic decline to help future research and guide policymakers. To stop rural decline, we need to understand its causes and find specific solutions to create economic variety and a sustainable future for rural areas. After the recession, rural economies got worse. Many areas did not recover well, leading to ongoing economic problems. Rural areas were hit hardest by local economic issues, and the national recovery did not help all regions equally (Marre, 2020). Decline has been sped up by global trends and local factors like automation, globalization, and changes in consumer habits. These have hurt traditional industries like manufacturing, agriculture, and mining. The move to a knowledge- and service-based economy is hard for areas lacking infrastructure, skilled workers, and strong institutions (Kaiser *et al.*, 2022). This review combines academic and policy studies since the

Great Recession to understand what drives rural economic decline. The ongoing issue shows its complexity, needing a broad view beyond simple explanations. Recent studies see it as a system-level problem, with demographic trends, economic structures, infrastructure gaps, and changing rural-urban relationships all linked, causing decline. For example, economic gaps lead to school closures, pushing young people to leave and increasing disadvantage (Johnson & Lichter 2019).

The review is organized around four main themes from post-recession studies. The first, "The Accelerating Impact of Demographic Shifts and Human Capital Flight," looks at population loss, an aging workforce, and "brain drain." The second, "Structural Economic Transformation and the Erosion of Traditional Industries," examines globalization, technological change, and market consolidation in key rural industries. The third, "Persistent Infrastructure Deficits and the Widening Digital Divide," explores poor investment in physical and digital infrastructure. Finally, "Evolving Rural-Urban Interdependence and Spatial Inequality," studies the changing relationship between cities and rural areas and the concentration of economic power in cities (White *et al.*, 2025).

Emerging Trends and Thematic Analysis

The economic reality of rural America in the wake of the Great Recession is **not** fired by one cause, as

it is hammered into place by many other related drivers that have made what has been bad even worse and set up new vehicles for decline. A recent analysis of the literature highlights four primary thematic dimensions that shape, in aggregate, rural places' ongoing challenges: accelerating demographic shifts and human capital out-migration, deep structural economic change, persistent deficits in infrastructure with a particular emphasis on the digital dimension, and transformational (yet often asymmetrical) relationships between rural places and their urban counterparts. The two themes in question do not act independently but interact within a complex causality nexus: stress in one field is reinforced by stresses generated from the outset and work together to generate an auto-catalytic circle of economic stagnation and social pressure. This section draws together the main findings and theoretical insights across these four pillars, offering an integrated view of the dynamics driving the modern rural economy.

The Accelerating Impact of Demographic Shifts and Human Capital Flight

The demographic vitality of a region is intrinsically linked to its economic fate. For much of rural America, post-recession demographic trends have not been a source of strength but rather a primary driver of economic decline. The persistent out-migration of young, educated individuals, a phenomenon often termed "human capital flight" or "brain drain" coupled with an aging population, has created a demographic deficit that undermines economic dynamism, strains public services, and diminishes the capacity for future growth (Farid *et al.*, 2020).

At the heart of this problem is population loss, a chronic reality in much of rural America. While cities were bouncing back and even growing again after the 2008 economic downturn, many rural counties continued to lose population. Scarce economic evidence finds that regional-scale economic conditions play an outsized role in determining rural population trends, such that a booming national economy may at best provide some "lift" towards robust demographic recovery but is otherwise generally insufficient to offset underlying local weakness (Marre, 2020). There is an absence of good jobs, or at least a lack of ability to attract them, which represents a strong "push" factor forcing working-age individuals and families to look for alternative opportunities. This outward migration is no flight of fancy; it is highly selective, exporting the best-educated, most

skilled, and far-and-away most entrepreneurial slice of professional workers. This depopulation is especially harmful because it is a direct drain of the human capital needed for innovation, entrepreneurship, and civic leadership. The educational/skills gap has socio-economic implications, one of which is a vicious cycle in which less human capital spurs increased economic downturns and thus promotes additional out-migration (Chandra *et al.* 2020).

This human capital flight directly impacts the labor market from both the supply and demand sides. On the supply side, it creates a smaller and often less skilled labor pool, making it difficult for existing businesses to expand and for new industries to relocate to the area. Employers may face chronic shortages of qualified workers, which stifles productivity and growth. On the demand side, a shrinking population translates to a smaller consumer base, reducing revenues for local businesses, from retail stores to service providers, and so on. This contraction in local demand can lead to business closures, further job losses, and the hollowing out of rural main streets. The tax base also erodes, placing immense pressure on local governments to fund essential services, such as schools, healthcare, and public safety, with dwindling resources. This can lead to painful decisions, including school consolidations or closures, which not only reduce the quality of life but also act as a further deterrent to families considering moving to the area (Petersen *et al.*, 2024).

Compounding the issue of out-migration is the concurrent trend of an aging population in the region. With fewer young people staying or moving in and a larger cohort of residents entering retirement age, the demographic pyramid in many rural counties has become inverted. This aging dynamic presents a set of economic challenges. The older population generally has lower labor force participation rates and higher healthcare needs. The increased demand for healthcare services often collides with a declining supply of rural hospitals and medical professionals, creating significant access issues. Furthermore, a workforce nearing retirement can signal a pending crisis for local businesses facing succession challenges, as there may be no younger generation to take over family farms or local enterprises (Melo *et al.* 2024).

The combined impact of these demographic changes is the destruction of the flywheel effect.

Population decline contracts the local economy, which subsequently diminishes job prospects, increasing outbound migration. An aging population demands services, and a shrinking tax base means that those demands are harder to fulfil. This demographic drag is particularly felt when trying to pull communities out of economic stagnation. There is no possibility of evolving and growing without a pipeline of new talent, thinking, and energy. Therefore, if these demographic trends are to be reversed, the retention and attraction of talent become not merely an indirect objective for rural development but a central precondition for any sustainable economic recovery (Marre 2020).

Structural Economic Transformation and the Erosion of Traditional Industries

Beyond demographic headwinds, the economic foundation of rural America has been fundamentally reshaped by powerful forces of structural transformation. For generations, the prosperity of many rural regions has been built upon a narrow set of industries, primarily agriculture, manufacturing, and natural resource extraction. However, the post-recession era has seen an acceleration of trends, including globalization, automation, and market consolidation, which have systematically eroded the viability of these traditional economic pillars. The failure of many rural communities to sufficiently diversify and adapt to this new economic reality is a central driver of their persistent decline (Marre, 2020)

No sector has been more negatively impacted than manufacturing. For generations, low-skill, well-paying manufacturing work has been a secure route to the middle class for rural laborers. However, globalization-driven competitive pressures spurred the offshoring of production, and whirlwind technological improvements in automation and robotics displaced humans with robots. This has been followed by floods of plant closings and mass layoffs, with their devastating effects on the economies of innumerable rural towns. Unlike in more diverse urban economies, where displaced workers may find jobs elsewhere, replacement opportunities are far fewer, if any at all, when a large factory closes in rural towns and small cities. This naturally generates economic hardship, but it sets off a chain of events that leads inexorably to trickle-down trouble in the form of falling property values, diminished local tax earnings, and increased demand for social services (Balcázar, 2023).

Likewise, agriculture, the traditional backbone of rural identity and the economy, has dramatically changed. There has been an unswerving drift toward consolidation in the industry, with huge capital-intensive corporate farms driving smaller family farms out of business. This change has been underlain by technological changes in precision agriculture and economies of scale, but it has also fundamentally changed the economic composition of farming communities. Agricultural production continues to remain high, but the number of people working in farming has decreased rapidly (Ronzhin *et al.*, 2025). Profits are increasingly concentrated in the hands of large agribusinesses rather than circulating through the local economy. Policies and markets tend to support these larger operations, making it difficult for smaller farms to compete and stay in business (Ronzhin *et al.*, 2025). The result is a landscape where the business of agriculture remains robust, but the communities that were once able to depend on it are no longer able to do so.

In natural resource-rich areas, such as the coal fields of Appalachia or the timberlands of the Pacific Northwest, economic prospects have surrogated volatile markets for commodities and the changing tides of national policies. The collapse of the coal industry, a result of competition from natural gas and renewables as well as environmental regulations, has led to decades of unemployment, poverty, and ecological ruin. These communities also often suffer from a “monoculture economy,” in which the whole local ecosystem of jobs and businesses to cultural identity is attached for dear life to a single industry. Once the industry collapses, the social system is left with very few mobile skills and without an economic infrastructure to build on, and recovery is extremely difficult (Lobao *et al.* 2016).

The challenge for these communities is not simply the loss of jobs but also the transition to a new economic paradigm. The global economy has increasingly shifted toward knowledge- and service-based industries that tend to cluster in urban areas with high concentrations of human capital, advanced infrastructure, and robust innovation ecosystems (Marre, 2020). Rural areas are often structurally disadvantaged during this transition. They may lack an educated workforce, venture capital, research institutions, and cultural amenities that attract and sustain knowledge-economy businesses. Consequently, the new jobs created in the national economy are often

geographically and qualitatively out of reach for displaced rural workers. The jobs that do emerge in rural areas are frequently in the low-wage service sector, such as retail, hospitality, or elder care, which do not offer the same level of pay, benefits, or stability as the manufacturing or mining jobs they replaced. This has led to a rise in underemployment and precarious work, contributing to wage stagnation and deepening economic insecurity for many rural families in China. Without proactive strategies to foster new economic activities and build local capacity for innovation, rural regions risk being permanently left behind in this ongoing structural transformation process.

Persistent Infrastructure Deficits and the Widening Digital Divide

Modern and reliable infrastructure is the backbone of a competitive economy, enabling the efficient movement of goods, people, and information. However, many rural communities across the United States are grappling with a legacy of underinvestment in foundational infrastructure, creating significant barriers to economic growth and diminishing residents' quality of life. In the 21st-century economy, this challenge has become most acute in the digital domain. The gap in access to high-speed, affordable broadband Internet, the digital divide, has emerged as one of the most significant drivers of rural economic decline, creating a new form of spatial inequality that touches nearly every aspect of modern life.

Traditional physical infrastructure deficits, a historic challenge, continue to impede rural economies. "The crumbling of roads, bridges and rail lines drives up the cost of transportation for agricultural producers, manufacturers ... who have to find ways to get their products to market and compete nationally or globally," (Kaiser *et al.*, 2022). The lack of water and sewer systems can restrain the opportunity for new housing or industrial development and sometimes threaten public health. For most rural communities, their tax base is simply not enough to meet the enormous capital need that would bring their aging infrastructure system into the modern age, contributing to an ongoing cycle of deferred maintenance and increased decay. These physical infrastructure deficiencies drive economic costs and send potential investors and migrants the signal that a community is declining, further undermining the private investment necessary for renewal (Hussain *et al.*, 2022).

While these physical deficits remain critical, the widening digital divide represents a more modern and perhaps more insidious barrier to rural prosperity. In an era where economic and social activity has migrated online, access to reliable broadband is no longer a luxury but an essential utility, comparable to electricity or running water. Yet, a significant portion of rural America remains unserved or underserved. The market-based model for broadband deployment has often failed rural areas due to low population density and high per-household connection costs, which provide little incentive for private internet service providers to invest. This has left millions of rural residents and businesses on the wrong side of the digital divide.

The economic consequences of this connectivity gap are severe and multifaceted. Without high-speed internet, rural businesses are cut off from the vast opportunities of the digital economy. They struggle to engage in e-commerce, access cloud-based software and services, utilize digital marketing tools, or connect with a global customer base. Precision agriculture, which relies on high-speed data transmission for optimizing crop yields and managing resources, becomes inaccessible to farmers who lack reliable connections. This digital isolation stifles entrepreneurship, limits productivity, and places rural enterprises at a significant competitive disadvantage.

The digital divide also greatly affects human resource development and retention. In education, it results in a "homework gap" where students are prevented from accessing online learning resources and completing homework, which make them to lag their urban counterparts (Anlimachie *et al.*, 2020). In healthcare, it ensures that telemedicine, which can help bridge access gaps by linking rural patients with specialists and better managing chronic disease, is not more widely rolled out. And without broadband, the opportunities for remote work are limited, and this is a strategy with enormous promise for reviving rural America. Remote work might in theory enable talent to move into rural geographies and work for a company headquartered anywhere but it only really works in places with successful digital infrastructure. Without it, rural America won't be able to attract or hold onto these high-paying workers who are crucial to the area, and the human capital drain will grow even worse.

The effort to close the digital divide is thus central to the future of rural America. Research on the impact of digital development suggests that it can

be a powerful tool for narrowing economic disparities by promoting non-agricultural employment, enhancing human capital through online education, and boosting agricultural productivity (Liu, 2024). Closing this gap is not merely about providing an amenity; it is about providing access to the fundamental infrastructure of the modern economy. Failure to achieve universal broadband coverage will cement a two-tiered system of economic opportunity, condemning digitally disconnected rural communities to a future of deepening isolation and decline.

Evolving Rural-Urban Interdependence and Spatial Inequality

The relationship between rural and urban America is not one of simple independence but of complex and evolving interdependence. Historically, this linkage was often symbiotic, with rural areas supplying food, raw materials, and labor to fuel urban industrial growth. However, in the post-recession economy, this relationship has become increasingly asymmetric, characterized by patterns of spatial inequality that often disadvantage rural regions. The economic fortunes of rural and urban areas are diverging, and the nature of their connections; economic, political, and social is a critical, yet often overlooked, driver of rural economic outcomes (Kaiser *et al.*, 2022).

The concentration of economic growth and opportunity within a small number of metropolitan hubs is the most obvious aspect of this new spatial dynamic. The knowledge economy relies on agglomeration effects, in which firms and skilled professionals form urban clusters to benefit from shared knowledge pools, wide labor markets and specialized services. This competition between places for people and investment creates a competitive gravitational pull in favour of the urban core (Mucciardi, 2025). The result is that many parts of rural America have been transformed from part and parcel of a regional economy into economic backwaters whose fate rests on decisions made in far-off cities. This "core-periphery" framework accounts for the long-lived divergence of economic performance in AR, in which urban prosperity does not necessarily "spill over" to surrounding rural areas but may further impoverish them by sucking out their most asset: human capital (Suss *et al.*, 2024).

The economic linkages that do exist are often extractive in nature. Rural areas continue to provide essential resources such as food, energy,

water, and recreational landscapes for urban populations, but they often fail to capture the full economic value of these assets. For example, profits from large-scale agriculture or energy extraction are frequently repatriated to corporate headquarters in urban centers rather than reinvested locally. Similarly, tourism and recreation in amenity-rich rural areas can create low-wage, seasonal service jobs while the bulk of the economic benefit flows to outside investors and non-local businesses. This pattern reinforces a dependency relationship where rural economies serve the needs of the urban core without achieving sustainable, self-directed development.

This spatial inequality is also reflected in the provision of public and private services. As rural populations decline, it becomes less economically viable to maintain a robust network of hospitals, schools, banks, and grocery stores. This leads to service consolidation, forcing rural residents to travel longer distances to urban or suburban centers to access necessities. The closure of a rural hospital or school is not just a loss of services but a major economic blow, as these institutions are often among the largest local employers (Vogler, 2021). This erosion of local institutional capacity further diminishes the quality of life and makes it harder to attract and retain residents, reinforcing the cycle of decline. The expansion of urban and suburban areas, or urban sprawl, can sometimes bring benefits like infrastructure expansion closer to rural peripheries, but it can also increase land-use pressures and create new forms of competition without fundamentally altering the underlying economic power imbalance (J *et al.*, 2024).

Furthermore, the growing economic and cultural gulf between rural and urban America has manifested in a stark political divide. Divergent economic realities have fostered different political priorities and a sense of mutual misunderstanding or resentment. This polarization can hinder the development of effective, bipartisan regional and national policies to address rural decline. Policies designed in urban-centric political contexts may fail to account for the unique challenges and assets of rural communities, while rural political interests may focus on nostalgic appeals to declining industries rather than forward-looking development strategies. This political fragmentation undermines the potential for collaborative, regional approaches to economic development that recognize and leverage the interdependence of rural and urban areas for mutual benefit (Brown *et al.*, 2025). A more

nuanced understanding of rural-urban linkages is essential for crafting policies that promote balanced regional development and ensure that rural communities are not merely resource colonies for metropolitan centers but are empowered to build diverse and resilient economies of their own.

Future Directions and Research Gaps

The literature provides a comprehensive discussion on the myriads of forces bringing about rural economic decline in the post-recession U.S. Demographic changes, a brain drains of young talent, significant economic shifts and chronic infrastructure gaps: The key drivers shaping today's rural reality are largely understood. A forward-looking analysis, however, indicates a few important research gaps and uncharted territories that need to drive scholarly attention if it is going to inform the next generation of policy and practice. Future work needs to not just diagnose the problems of past but interrogate the complex and emergent dynamics in the present and future for nuanced and placed-based interdisciplinary research.

A primary avenue for future inquiry lies in the deeper analysis of heterogeneity within rural America. Much of the existing research, while valuable, tends to aggregate data at broad regional or national levels, often obscuring significant local and sub-regional variations. The monolithic concept of "rural" masks a diverse tapestry of communities with distinct economic bases, demographic profiles, and development trajectories. Future studies should employ more granular, typological approaches to differentiate between, for example, amenity-rich communities experiencing growth from remote agricultural areas facing depopulation, or former manufacturing hubs grappling with industrial legacy costs. Longitudinal case studies that track the divergent paths of proximate but structurally different rural counties could yield powerful insights into the specific mechanisms of resilience and decline. Understanding why some rural areas decline while others stabilize or even thrive requires moving beyond broad trends to examine the interplay of local leadership, institutional capacity, social capital, and policy implementation (Connor *et al.*, 2024).

Second, the far-reaching socioeconomic fallout of an expanding digital divide warrants further thorough and long-lasting analysis. So, there is a divide, of that we know, but little is understood

about its second- and third-order impacts. Further study must move beyond drawing broadband availability and quantifying impact on significant economic activities including new business formation, wage growth and labor force participation rates. What's the economic impact of excluding a rural from digital exposure over a decade, for example? What does it mean for firm productivity, the ability to access telehealth and remote education, and for residents who may want to partake in the gig economy or engage in remote work? Global experience with digital village building indicates that investment in targeted digital infrastructure technology will have positive effects on human capital and non-agricultural employment, and the channels for second generation human capital and income-generating activities through ICT infrastructure, but subject to local conditions and complementary investments (Racman, 2025). Subsequent research that is dedicated to the U.S. context should empirically test these mechanisms and investigate when broadband access results in real economic development versus just facilitating local commerce moving to national e-retailers.

A third critical research gap concerns the evolving nature of rural-urban interdependence and its implications for spatial inequality. Traditional core-periphery models are being reshaped by new economic and social forces, including the rise of remote work, regionalized supply chains, and shifting migration patterns post-pandemic. Research is needed to understand these new dynamics. For example, are "Zoom towns" creating sustainable, integrated local economies, or are they becoming enclaves of affluence that exacerbate housing unaffordability and strain local services for long-time residents? Conversely, how are economic struggles in peripheral rural areas affecting the labor markets, supply chains, and social fabric of nearby metropolitan centers? The political and economic interests of declining rural areas often diverge from those of their urban neighbors, leading to policy friction over issues like taxation and resource allocation, which can entrench economic disparities (Silva *et al.*, 2025). Future scholarship should employ network analysis and spatial modelling to map these complex flows of capital, goods, and people, providing a more dynamic understanding of the contemporary rural-urban interface.

Fourth, there is an urgent call to critically examine rural development policy and intervention in more evidence-based ways. A lot of the literature exists

as a description of policy failures or arguments for approaches without serious empirical evaluation. Likewise, future research should concentrate on sound quasi-experimental evaluations of interventions. How about the ROI for rural business incubators, regional food hub development or targeted workforce retraining? What is the impact on outcomes depending on the intervention design and local conditions? Such a comparative policy analysis of the “why” behind why some state level approaches to rural revitalization seem to be more successful than others can have actionable implications. As becomes evident throughout theoretical and empirical analyses in international contexts, the success of well-meaning agricultural as well as infrastructure policies depends per se on their fit or misfit with the local economy (Léger *et al.*, 2025). Future research should aim to develop a robust evidence base from which to inform the development of targeted, adaptive and implementable strategies rather than an approach that sees one size fits all.

Finally, the intersection of climate change and rural economic vulnerability represents a rapidly emerging and critically under-researched frontier. Rural economies, particularly those dependent on agriculture, forestry, and tourism, are on the front lines of climate-related risks such as drought, wildfires, extreme weather events, and shifting growing seasons. Research is urgently needed to model the potential economic impacts of these changes at a regional level and to assess the capacity of rural communities to adapt. This includes exploring pathways for economic diversification away from climate-sensitive industries, evaluating the potential of renewable energy development as a new economic engine, and understanding the social and institutional barriers to building climate resilience. This line of inquiry is inherently interdisciplinary, requiring collaboration between economists, climate scientists, sociologists, and policy analysts to develop integrated models and strategies that can support a sustainable and prosperous future for rural America.

CONCLUSION

Post-recession literature reveals that economic decline in rural U.S. landscapes results from a complex interplay of reinforcing pressures, creating persistent disadvantage. Accelerating demographic shifts, including population loss and skilled youth out-migration, erode human capital, diminish the local tax base, weaken the labor

force, and strain public services, creating a feedback loop of decline.

Evolving rural-urban interdependence often deepens spatial inequalities. Many rural areas are peripheral to metropolitan centers, experiencing a net outflow of wealth and talent, with their economic and political interests increasingly disconnected from urban policy agendas, leading to marginalization.

Rural economic decline is a structural, not temporary, feature of the contemporary American economy. The post-recession era shows a deepening divergence between thriving urban centers and rural America, which has been left behind by economic, technological, and demographic trends. Addressing this requires moving beyond simplistic, outdated policy frameworks; one-size-fits-all solutions are inadequate. Effective strategies must be place-based and holistic, integrating economic development with human capital, modern infrastructure, and healthcare. Fostering rural prosperity is essential for national economic health, social cohesion, and equitable opportunity.

Simultaneously, structural transformations in the national and global economy have undermined traditional rural industries. The decline of manufacturing, consolidation of agriculture, and wane of resource extraction have eliminated foundational employment, leaving communities without a viable economic core. The knowledge-based economy largely benefits urban centers, while many rural areas lack the infrastructure, skilled workforce, and economic diversity to compete. This structural vulnerability is exacerbated by infrastructure deficits, particularly the digital divide.

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