



Rural, Ruralness, Rurality

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By: Audrey Spalding

There is no universally applicable definition of "rural." But there are some consistent images: few people in a large area, fairly low levels of education, higher rates of poverty, a tight-knit community, and — let's just say it — farmers.

The Census Bureau has come up with some [criteria](#). To simplify, a place is "rural" if it has fewer than 500 people per square mile. The census can, and will, classify a place as partly rural and partly urban.

The [few times](#) we do talk about public education in rural areas, the census is not the be-all-and-end-all. The definition used depends on the author. Is Missouri rural? As someone who grew up in a large Michigan city, my knee-jerk reaction has been, "of course."

In reality (rurality?), about 25 percent of Missouri's student-age population is rural. That's the 15th-largest percentage of the 50 states, according to a 2007 study by the [Rural Schools and Community Trust](#).

In fact, much of the United States itself is rural. In any given state, a fairly large percentage

of students attend rural school districts.

Rural Schools and Community Trust chose to use the [National Center of Education Statistics](#) ' definition of rural. The NCES definition took the one used by the census (fewer than 500 people per square mile), and broke "rural" into three categories, based on how far away a rural area is from a non-rural one. Those are "fringe," "distant," and "remote."

The other way to look at Missouri schools is to ignore the size of the community and instead look at the size of the district itself.

The Missouri Breakdown:

For example, student enrollment during the 2005-2006 school year. How many of Missouri's 917,905 students attended a small school district that year?

- If your definition of a small district involves fewer than **1,000 students**, the answer is **15.17 percent**.
- If you prefer **2,000 students** as the dividing line (which [has been proposed](#) as the ideal size for an efficient school district), then **26.25 percent** of Missouri's K-12 students attended a small district.
- And if you think a school district with fewer than **5,000 students** is small, then a majority — **50.57 percent** of K-12 students — attended such a district.

So, where do we draw the line? Well, wherever things are different. This is not an arbitrary argument. A school district of 500 students is incredibly different than one with thousands. Policies that work for one have no guarantee of working for the other. Organization of an "urban" school district will look different than that of a "rural" one.

The best way to untangle this entails not limiting ourselves to statistics. The people who know best what characterizes a small school district are those who work in one. And that's where we'll be going from here. I'll try to post later this week about the difficulties and strengths that are unique to small school districts.

As always, if you have comments about rural school districts, questions about our research, or suggestions, please [email me](#) .

P.S.: The assumption that farming is the largest industry in rural areas is absolutely 100 percent false. Nationally, farming employs fewer than 1 in 10 rural workers, according to a study by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement in the mid-1990s. Unfortunately, the assumption about higher poverty rates is accurate.

About the Author



Audrey Spalding

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[3] <https://showmeinstitute.org/2008/06/how-do-they-do.html>

[4] <http://www.ruraledu.org/site/apps/nlnet/content3.aspx?c=beJMIZOCirH&b=1103313&ct=4537855>

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[7] <mailto:Audrey.Spalding@showmeinstitute.org>

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Show-Me Institute

5297 Washington Place 3645 Troost Avenue
Saint Louis, MO 63108 Kansas City, MO 64109
Phone: (314) 454-0647 Phone: (816) 287-0370
Fax: (314) 454-0667

Email: info@showmeinstitute.org

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