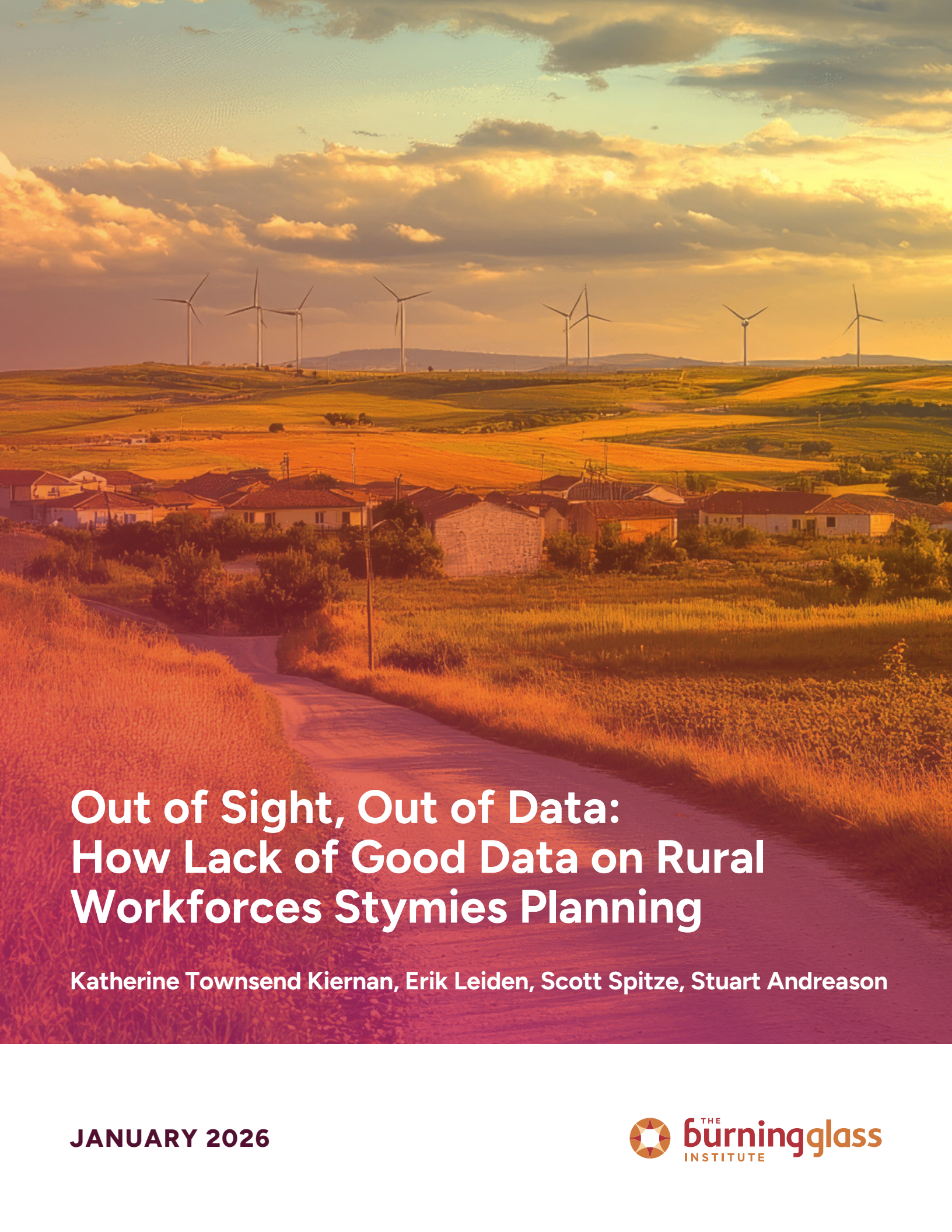




Out of Sight, Out of Data: How Lack of Good Data on Rural Workforces Stymies Planning

Katherine Townsend Kiernan, Erik Leiden, Scott Spitze, Stuart Andreason

JANUARY 2026

Out of Sight, Out of Data: How Lack of Good Data on Rural Workforces Stymies Planning

Katherine Townsend Kiernan, Erik Leiden, Scott Spitze, Stuart Andreason

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors thank their colleagues Gwynn Guilford, Melissa DiMarzio, Olivia Gunther, Gad Levanon, Caylee O'Connor, and Jenny Duan for their valuable contributions to this report. Thank you to Walmart for funding this work and investing in our research that helps communities be seen, understood, and better served. We are also grateful to Lightcast for providing access to job postings data used in this analysis.

We also extend our sincere appreciation to our partners who generously shared their time, expertise, and deep knowledge of the communities they represent and serve:

- Mother Lode Workforce Development Board: Amy Frost, Deputy Director of Training; Alex Bloom, Economic Development Manager; James Hanson, Business Services Manager; Dave Theony, Executive Director
- Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond: Laura Ullrich, Director, Community College Initiative
- North Carolina Community College System: Zachary Barricklow, Associate Vice President for Strategic and Rural Innovation; Bill Schneider, Vice President of System Effectiveness
- North Carolina Chamber Foundation: Vincent Ginski, Director of Workforce Competitiveness

SUGGESTED CITATION

Townsend Kiernan, K., Leiden, E., Spitze, S., Andreason, S. (January 2026). *Out of Sight, Out of Data: How Lack of Good Data on Rural Workforces Hold Back Planning*. Published by Burning Glass Institute.

Introduction

While the term “data-driven” can feel overwrought, the fact remains that data is constantly being driven into new domains – and the demands for workforce data to inform economic strategy at even the hyperlocal level have never been greater. With the growth of data mining, monitoring, and data science, analytics promised to make economic opportunity measurable. New data and traditional labor data promised to level the playing field, expose inequities that have been overlooked, and guide us to new solutions. Despite the vast amounts of data available, some places remain invisible – especially rural communities and places with small populations. The illusion of universal measurement creates an expectation that all communities should use the same methods to achieve their goals. Rural communities, rich in social capital but unsupported by administrative infrastructure – both due to scale and investment challenges – lack the systems they need to translate their lived reality into data that outsiders recognize as credible.

Rural communities are an analytical and data blind spot, lacking granular, usable data to drive decisions. Even when trying to leverage data that is available, the realities of these smaller communities are drowned out in large geographic combinations that are not representative of their communities. The broad share of economic and workforce data currently available do not serve rural contexts. Uncertainty about how to define “rural” adds to the challenges, making solutions hard to pinpoint. In some instances, data is missing due to privacy concerns; in others, data is misreported, causing major distortions in reporting.

Current tools and systems were not designed for the scale or context of a rural community. For example, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the primary public source for labor market information, does not collect information on “agricultural workers” or “unincorporated self-employed” as part of its employment survey, the Current Employment Statistics.¹ Since agricultural workers and the unincorporated self-employed are central to many rural economies, their exclusion creates major blind spots in BLS reporting, leaving out large parts of the employment landscape.

Because of their size and connection to each other, demands on rural communities to develop robust data systems have come later than in large metros. However, the digital world is demanding data, and without it, rural communities are losing out on opportunities. As these areas see their populations and workforce numbers declining, they lack the information they need about their particular community to bring in new investments.²

This creates a self-perpetuating cycle: without investment, communities cannot modernize their data; without strong data, they struggle to attract investment. Rural leaders are finding creative ways to collect, interpret, and act on the data they do have, demonstrating that they do not lack capability. Through interviews with community leaders, technical assistance providers, and researchers, this paper explores where rural economies are already succeeding and how their approaches can serve as models for more responsive, equitable data systems nationwide.

Strengthening rural data systems requires reimagining the design of data infrastructure — moving from extractive models toward collaborative, community-centered ones. Building data systems with rural communities, rather than for them, can make their assets visible, attract investment, and create a more accurate, inclusive picture of the nation’s economy.

The Illusion of Measurement

Over the last decade and a half, data availability and an attendant analytical revolution have changed how the world operates. For communities, data has become the foundation of organized decision-making and strategy. Phrases like “the numbers don’t lie” have become commonplace in persuasive conversations. The ability to tell a credible data-driven story determines whether communities secure the funding needed to act on their vision. Despite the pervasive demand for data, the supply and reliability of that data have not kept pace. Too many rural communities don’t see themselves in the data – due to either their absence or deeper contextual issues that lead to data being disconnected from reality in ways distinguished from populous geographies.

A clear example of this is in the definition – or lack thereof – of rural communities. There is no single definition, even within the federal government, of what it means to even be “rural.” The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and the U.S. Census Bureau (USCB) offer the two dominant federal definitions, but even those are misaligned with each other.³ Rather than a system of measurement that captures lived experiences, communities have found themselves operating in arbitrary geographic or administrative boundaries, increasing difficulty and decreasing accuracy. For example, Newton County, Indiana is frequently lumped with “urban” counties since under the OMB definition it is part of the Chicago metro. Newton County though, has 14,131 residents and 55,694 hogs – or four hogs per person.⁴

Beyond definitional distinctions, the USCB releases community data at the county level, but 73% of counties with populations must rely on five- or ten-year dataset releases since they have less than 65,000 residents.⁵ Since the USCB does not define counties as rural, determining the overlap between the counties that receive data and those that do not is complicated. This means a place can be officially “urban” and still lose access to timely data simply because the county it sits in has fewer than 65,000 residents.

Consider, too, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), which publishes employment data by industry using the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) in the Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW). The six-level NAICS system starts with 20 overall sector categories, but the sixth level has over 1,000 different classifications. Even at the broadest level, for example, “Manufacturing,” only 71% of employment in small counties (less than 25,000 people) is publicly available.⁶



Figure 1. Allegedly ‘Urban’ Newton County, according to the Office of Management and Budget

Meaningful workforce analysis, which includes understanding if the “Manufacturing” jobs are of elevator/escalator parts, mattresses, surgical appliances, or frozen fruit and vegetables, is only available for 21% of the workforce in small counties. This makes it nearly impossible to design targeted training programs, leverage industry data as a means to attract new businesses, or communicate the need for investments to workforce grantors. By contrast, America’s largest counties (over 1 million residents) have 93% of their workforce classified into NAICS’s most specific categories, enabling incredibly targeted workforce planning.

Figure 2. Share of Workers Covered at Each NAICS Level by County Size

County Population	6-Digit Specificity	5-Digit Specificity	4-Digit Specificity	3-Digit Specificity	2-Digit Specificity	Unclassified Industry
0-25K	21%	24%	32%	54%	71%	29%
25K-50K	35%	41%	54%	76%	89%	11%
50K-75K	44%	51%	64%	83%	94%	6%
75K-100K	52%	59%	72%	87%	97%	3%
100K-1M	69%	76%	84%	94%	99%	1%
1M+	93%	96%	98%	99%	99.6%	0.4%

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, [Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages \(QCEW\)](#), 2023 and BGI analysis.

Another BLS survey, the Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS), also fails to capture essential types of employment or employers.⁷ Gig work and informal labor markets are largely invisible, even though partners report them as critical economic drivers in their communities.⁸ This type of employment—from seasonal jobs to family-run businesses and “side hustles”—demonstrates the adaptability that keeps rural economies afloat. Yet they remain analytically hidden, meaning policy and investment decisions are based on incomplete pictures of rural life.

A common understanding of rural communities, compared to urban ones, is that the industries are entirely different. Analysis of public datasets supports common beliefs about their differences – namely more agriculture, mining, and manufacturing. Below is a table of the five most and least represented industries in small counties relative to the largest counties, according to the QCEW. However, the lack of classification of 29% of employment, the exclusion of farm employment, and the lack of information on gig work make it difficult to compare or truly understand the economic makeup of a small county.

Figure 3. Sector Stack

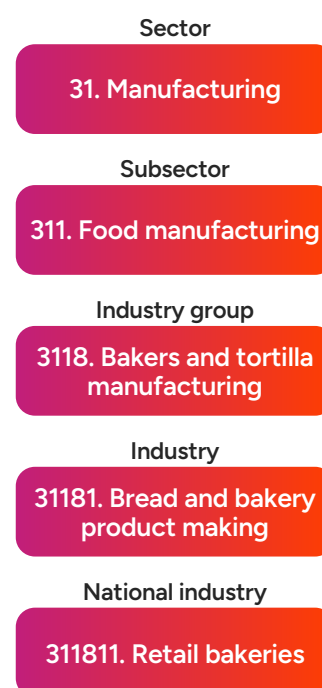


Figure 4. Industry Representation by County Size

Color scale shows within-industry concentration relative to average across county sizes. Green indicates over-representation; red indicates under-representation.

Industry	0-25K	25K-50K	50K-75K	75K-100K	100K-1M	1M+
Mining, quarrying, and oil and gas extraction	2.9%	1.1%	1.3%	0.5%	0.4%	0.2%
Agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting	3.7%	1.3%	0.8%	0.8%	0.9%	0.5%
Manufacturing	13.4%	19.2%	16.0%	15.3%	11.6%	6.5%
Utilities	0.6%	0.5%	0.6%	0.4%	0.4%	0.3%
Retail Trade	14.8%	15.9%	15.9%	15.2%	14.2%	10.6%
Administrative, support, waste management, and remediation services	2.2%	3.7%	4.5%	4.8%	6.1%	7.5%
Information	0.7%	0.9%	0.9%	1.0%	1.3%	2.7%
Professional, scientific, and technical services	2.1%	2.5%	3.1%	4.0%	5.7%	9.9%
Educational services	0.3%	0.7%	1.2%	1.4%	1.9%	2.8%
Management of companies and enterprises	0.2%	0.4%	0.6%	1.0%	1.4%	2.3%

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, [Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages \(QCEW\), 2023](#) and BGI analysis. These are average employment shares across counties conditional on positive employment.

One indicator of risk in an economy is how diversified the market is, and one way economists look at industry concentration is through the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index.⁹ The ironic challenge for a paper researching rural workforce data systems is: because rural area data coverage is so much weaker and less specific, we are only able to observe HHI at the broadest level of industries (i.e. Manufacturing, Food Services, Finance and Insurance, etc.) compared to more meaningful segments. Even calculated at the broadest level, the accuracy of the measure declines with county population size since the data coverage is too low to be truly representative. The result is that most rural communities are likely to look more concentrated through this measure than they are, losing important signal about what kinds of jobs and employers actually exist in the local workforce.

The same blind spots exist across labor market data systems. Rural employers are more likely to hire through word of mouth, community reputation, or local papers rather than online postings.¹⁰ Consequently, national datasets built from digital traces capture only a fraction of rural employment, underrepresenting the full range of local opportunity. One of the leading providers of labor market data on job demand is Lightcast. While their job postings data covers all but two U.S. counties, it has lower coverage of sub-100K

counties than their share of population would suggest. For counties with fewer than 75K people, Lightcast's coverage share is approximately half. Additionally, since Lightcast coverage of industries concentrated in rural communities is also limited, the data is again less reliable.¹¹

Figure 5. Online Posting Coverage versus Share of the Population

County Population	Number of Counties	Population Percent	Postings Number of Counties	Postings Percent	2-Digit Specificity	Unclassified Industry
0-25K	1,526	5.1%	1,524	2.4%	71%	29%
25K-50K	616	6.6%	616	3.9%	89%	11%
50K-75K	252	4.6%	252	2.9%	94%	6%
75K-100K	132	3.4%	132	2.5%	97%	3%
100K-1M	570	51.2%	570	55%	99%	1%
1M+	48	29.1%	48	33.3%	99.6%	0.4%

Source: Burning Glass Institute analysis of Lightcast Job Posting Data, 2023 and U.S. Census Bureau, [Annual Estimates of the Resident Population for Counties, 2023](#)

There are some existing efforts to capture rural scrappiness. For instance, the US Department of Agriculture releases datasets on farm workers, hired, self-employed, or family labor, through their [Economic Research Service](#). The USCB's [Nonemployer Statistics](#) program also has some supplementary information on self-employment. Unfortunately, this data is updated a year after the OEWS data and, while available at the county level, it excludes crop and animal agriculture.

According to local leaders, the lag in data availability hinders planning and limits responsiveness. For example, when Hurricane Helene struck Western North Carolina and Eastern Tennessee in September 2024, it devastated infrastructure and wiped out portions of I-40. Yet, months later, affected communities still lacked current, granular data to quantify the economic damage or guide reinvestment.

The Cost of Invisibility

These inconsistencies and data blind spots are not just technical problems; they shape how resources flow and which communities are seen as investment-worthy. These effects can be seen for rural counties across the country.

Communities that feel rural in every practical sense are disqualified from programs intended to serve them. For instance, two grants focused on rural development from the United States Department of Agriculture have seemingly arbitrary eligibility requirements – one requiring communities with fewer than 20,000 residents, the other with at least 50,000.¹² This exclusion leaves mid-sized rural communities (20,000–50,000 residents) without access to either program and creates unnecessary inconsistencies across similar grants, increasing the risk that eligible communities overlook opportunities.

The consequences are not only structural but personal. Take community colleges, which act as the cornerstone of rural workforce systems: National data tools such as IPEDS routinely understate their reach because of the types of students they exclude. For instance, dual-enrollment students—especially common in rural high schools—are routinely undercounted, leaving their needs out of program design and funding decisions.¹³ Other uncounted student populations include noncredit students and participants in short-term or alternative programs, who, according to interviewees, are precisely the learners who sustain rural talent pipelines. Without an accurate record of participation in rural education programs, states cannot consistently fund these programs through traditional funding formulas, even when local demand and community benefit are evident.

THE RICHMOND FED SURVEY: BUILDING DATA TOGETHER

Sometimes, telling a better story starts with asking the right questions in a way that reflects the realities of rural institutions. The Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond's Wraparound Services Survey, part of their broader Survey of Community College Outcomes, offers a compelling example of how low-stakes, high-impact data collection can help surface the breadth of support they provide to students.

Originally launched with just 10 questions, the survey focuses on whether colleges offer essential student support such as food pantries, childcare, transportation assistance, and emergency aid. Most responses are simple yes/no answers, allowing busy institutional staff to complete the survey in as little as 15 minutes.

Results from the survey's first year are compelling: 92.5% of community colleges surveyed provide food pantries for students, 94% have emergency aid programs, and at least half provide mental health or social services spaces on campus. The survey also revealed that the biggest challenge to providing more comprehensive services is funding.

What sets this model apart is its collaborative, grassroots design. Rather than imposing a complex reporting framework, the Richmond Fed team worked directly with colleges to shape the survey's scope. That partnership ensured the questions reflected real institutional practices—capturing not just formal programming, but also the “hustle funding” and informal strategies that often sustain rural student success.

Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond, “Community College Survey: Data and Results,” Regional Data Analysis, November 19, 2024

Without credible, locally grounded data, rural communities must rely on relationships and intuition to communicate their needs. Even when they succeed in bringing funders for site visits, there is a risk that an outside observer—after just an afternoon—will decide the community needs something different from what residents themselves have identified. This is more than frustrating; it can derail long-term plans and erode trust, as a single missed grant or misaligned intervention due to vibes-based, rather than data-based decision-making, can stall broader efforts to strengthen the local economy.

Rural investments must include resources to measure, not just to implement. Only by resourcing this measurement can funders and policymakers truly partner with rural communities to scale their success. Until rural data systems are funded to capture these nuances, the critical opportunities for development in rural economies may remain hidden in plain sight. Building measurement tools that recognize and resource these opportunities is essential to document progress and direct investment where it can have the most impact.

Rural Communities Aren't Waiting

Faced with limited infrastructure and fragmented funding, rural communities are designing innovative, locally driven strategies to grow their economies and expand opportunity. Across stakeholder interviews, local leaders described the experience of operating with extremely limited capacity. As one stakeholder noted, rural leaders are “just figuring it out” while managing high administrative burdens and siloed systems. Their strategies—ranging from remote work initiatives to entrepreneurship networks and new funding collaborations—reflect a grounded understanding of what works locally, even when national systems lag behind. Together, they illustrate how adaptation within existing systems can serve as a foundation for long-term resilience and inclusive growth.

Attracting and Activating Talent with Remote Work

One of the most visible shifts in rural workforce development is the embrace of remote work. Rural areas are promoting remote opportunities in two ways: by recruiting remote workers from urban areas to relocate, and by helping local employers rethink their hiring models to include remote-eligible roles.

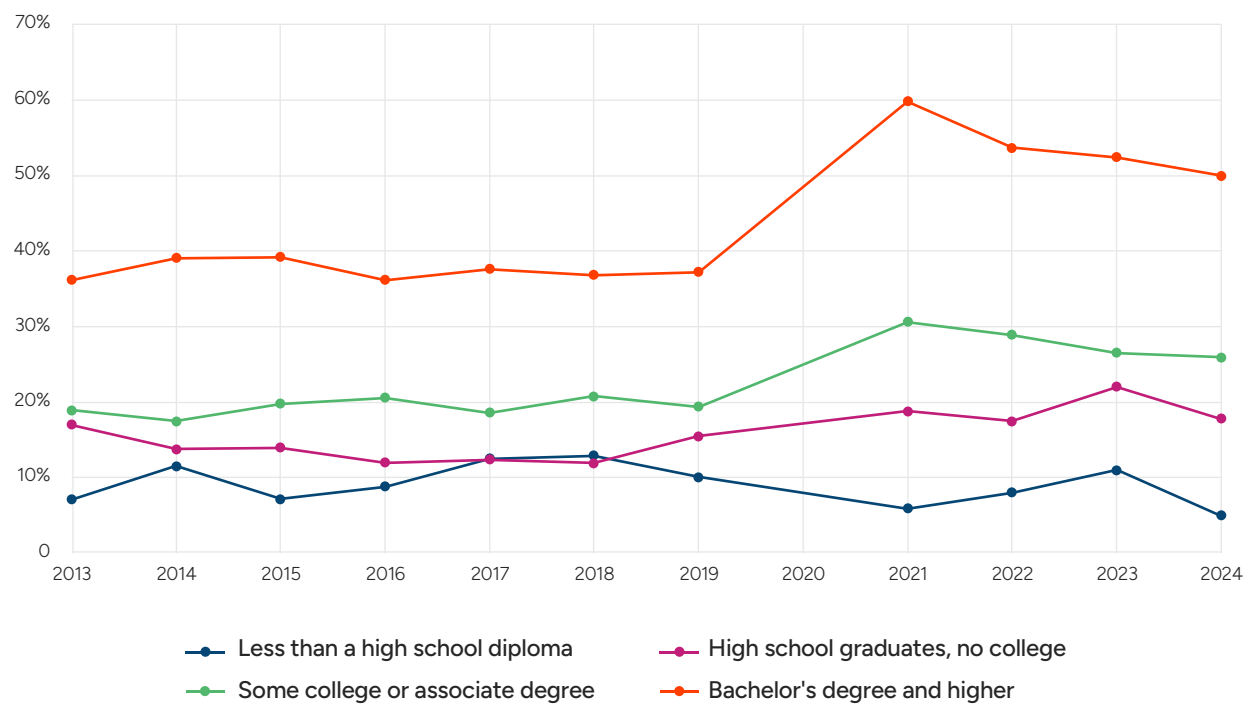
Remote work strategies include investments in infrastructure, amenities, and intentional placemaking. Because remote workers are usually college-educated and seek both connectivity and community, investments in broadband infrastructure, walkable downtowns, and shared workspaces have become essential to rural revitalization. In this way, workforce strategy and community development are increasingly intertwined—creating places that attract talent while sustaining local life.¹⁴

This strategy is not only about importing talent.¹⁵ Rural leaders are encouraging employers – existing and prospective – to reimagine their roles to include remote or hybrid positions, particularly for administrative, marketing, or technical support functions. A manufacturing firm, for instance, can continue local operations while sourcing back-office talent regionally if not all needed talent is available in a commutable distance.

Tapping into underutilized workers in other rural areas helps employers expand their recruitment pool and better match skills with roles, even in sparsely populated regions.

Remote work also helps stabilize year-round populations in rural communities once dependent on tourism, allowing them to build more diverse local economies. In California’s Mother Lode region, for example, the influx of remote workers has reduced reliance on seasonal visitors and created demand for year-round services like healthcare. Local leaders are now testing whether shifting as few as 10% of workers from hospitality into healthcare could spark lasting transformation. These locally-grounded experiments reflect how rural leaders are connecting talent, infrastructure, and identity to build resilient economies.

Figure 6. Percent of employed people who worked at home on days they workers, age 25 years and over, by educational attainment



Note: Annual 2020 estimates cannot be produced due to the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on data collection.
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, ATUS Table 6 (2024) and The Economics Daily (2023 telework data), and BGI analysis

Fueling Growth Through Rural Entrepreneurship

While rural areas have long shown higher rates of self-employment, communities are now cultivating full entrepreneurial ecosystems.¹⁶ Unlike small business owners who tend to focus primarily on family income, entrepreneurs create jobs, drive innovation, and anchor long-term economic growth. Conversely, attracting large outside employers without investments to broaden the workforce and employment base can depress local economies, leading to lower wages and reliance on a single dominant employer when pursued without thoughtful planning.¹⁷

Entrepreneurship and small businesses are a critical component of workforce development as small businesses account for two of every three jobs.¹⁸ Even the way businesses are financed can help with job creation; most frequently, local businesses in rural communities choose financing through their small, local banks. This helps employ workers at the banks and create a more integrated economy.¹⁹

The combination of job creation and placemaking shows that entrepreneurship can have lasting effects. The potential is evident in places like Wilkes County, North Carolina, where Lowe's began, or Bentonville, Arkansas—home to Walmart. In both communities, what started as an ambitious local business grew into national corporations with the ability to reinvest in their communities. Though these stories are on the top rung of success, they demonstrate that in the long run, rural entrepreneurship isn't just about profit—it's about renewal.

MOTHER LODGE JOB TRAINING: HOMEGROWN DATA TOOLS AND FEEDBACK LOOPS

Serving a sprawling four-county region across 5,000 square miles, the team at Mother Lode Job Training in California is redefining how rural workforce agencies adapt, advocate, and deliver results.

Rather than wait for perfect data, the team blends tools like Lightcast and Econovue with local insight. Job postings and federal data fall short—especially in rural healthcare and in misclassified tribal communities, so the Mother Lode staff lean on community engagement to understand true demand. As one staff member put it, “Data will never tell the full story—conversations and engagement are critical.” This people-first approach has revealed

hidden needs, like the call for dozens of CNAs despite only one formal job posting.

The strategy also supports new opportunities. MLJT acts as a workforce board and a central convener for the community. By partnering with economic development agencies early, sometimes even before new business sites break ground, they help design training programs that align with future hiring. They've supported employers with everything from business planning to hosting interviews and running job fairs, ensuring that local residents are connected to real opportunities.

Creative Funding to Fill the Gaps

None of these strategies succeed without capital—and rural communities are finding inventive ways to bridge funding gaps when traditional streams fall short.

Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs) are playing a growing role in rural workforce development, placemaking, and entrepreneurship. These mission-driven lenders help fill capital gaps that mainstream banks overlook, especially for small business development and infrastructure investments. As social investors as well as economic ones, CDFIs are underused allies in their regions' economic future.

In parallel, communities are increasingly relying on what interviewees called “hustle funding”—a patchwork of philanthropic dollars, one-time grants, and flexible funding streams that support pilots, fill gaps in public funding, or empower rapid experimentation. While not a substitute for sustainable investment, hustle funding has allowed communities to try bold ideas without waiting for federal or state systems.

Finally, rural communities are turning to each other by building regional partnerships around data sharing, storytelling, and pooled investment. These collaborations allow communities to specialize by sector or training program and tell a shared story of regional strength. Yet such partnerships depend on trust and patience. As one leader noted, “Regional work is slow work—it only moves at the speed of relationships.”

Community Owned Data

Learning and Employment Records (LERs) offer individualized, verifiable views of workers' skills and experiences. For rural communities, this technology could make visible the diverse ways residents earn income across agriculture, tourism, construction, and other seasonal or project-based work—activities that traditional datasets currently overlook.

A key distinction of LERs is their ownership model: workers and communities retain control of their information. This structure, and the infancy of LERs, creates an opportunity for rural areas to shape how their data are collected, interpreted, and shared from the outset. By engaging early in LER design and implementation, rural leaders could help ensure that new data systems reflect their economic realities instead of reinforcing existing blind spots.

LERs could also allow rural communities to leapfrog traditional data infrastructure—skipping a generation of legacy systems that have historically excluded them. Well-designed LER pilots could provide rural areas with timely, worker-centered insights that strengthen local planning, attract investment, and make them more competitive for state and federal funding.

A Path Forward: From Invisibility to Impact

When rural data is incomplete, the potential of workers, students, and communities goes unseen, and the investments that could change their trajectory never arrive. Local leaders are left navigating without direction, stretching scarce resources across too many fronts. Without evidence from data analytics, policy will continue undercutting mobility, weakening competitiveness, and eroding public trust.

Breaking that cycle starts with redesigning data infrastructure to work with rural communities rather than around them. A modern system must reflect the dynamic, cross-sector nature of rural economies and value community insight alongside quantitative metrics. Localized, community-driven data initiatives give rural leaders the tools to set priorities, design responsive programs, and measure success in ways that align with how rural economies actually function. To achieve this, several commitments are essential.

First, rural communities need stronger data systems—including investment in timely, locally relevant data that updates with economic shifts such as natural disasters or major employer exits. Federal datasets must also expand to include the rural learners and workers currently invisible in the numbers: dual-enrollment students, noncredit learners, gig workers, and households that patch together multiple income streams. Agencies could oversample smaller communities so that the agencies can provide a more robust data sample with the same level of privacy. They could also work with rural communities to understand the privacy risks at the current sampling level to determine if those risks are worth the cost of lost investment.

Second, policymakers and philanthropy must support community-driven, worker-centered data collection. Rural leaders need tools, templates, and technical assistance to run their own data strategies, and the lived experience of residents should be treated as a vital input rather than anecdotal evidence. Pilot LER initiatives could capture the full arc of rural work and make rural workers more visible to employers and funders. Investing in replicable survey models, dashboards, and lightweight reporting tools can build data ownership and trust while making information actionable for planning and funding.

Finally, stronger public-private partnerships could weave these efforts together. Regional collaborations between workforce boards, economic development organizations, community colleges, and employers can co-design shared data dashboards and reduce duplication. To support this, federal agencies could work together to understand the most meaningful regional boundaries for data reporting. This might mean creating an interactive database that allows users to toggle between relevant administrative boundaries, such as counties, school districts, regional workforce coalitions, etc.

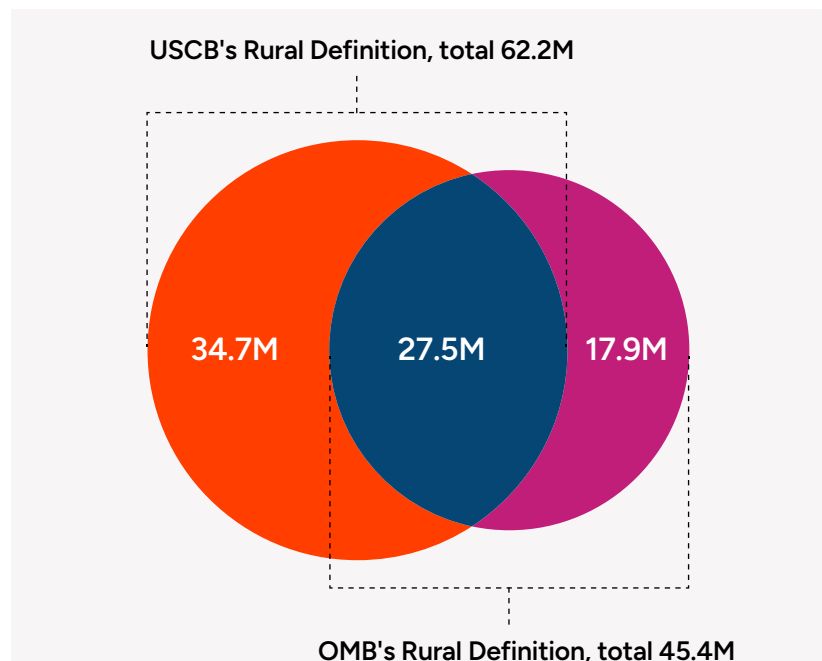
None of these tools alone will solve the problem, but together they can build a more inclusive data ecosystem. A modern rural data infrastructure—built on accuracy, accessibility, and community leadership—does more than describe the economy; it shapes who gets to participate in it. Every rural community deserves to see itself—and be seen—in the data that drives economic opportunity.

Appendix A. Defining Rural

One of the greatest challenges facing rural communities, who – ironically – are treated as a single, uniform category, is that there is no standard definition of what it means to be “rural.” This ambiguity exists in public perception as well as in the data infrastructure that shapes policy, funding, and research.

The two dominant federal definitions come from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and the U.S. Census Bureau (USCB). OMB’s “nonmetro” definition identifies rural areas as populations existing outside major metropolitan areas. A **Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA)** is a core area containing a substantial population nucleus, together with adjacent communities having a high degree of economic and social integration with that core. Each metropolitan statistical area must have at least one urban area of 50,000 or more inhabitants. While widely used, it can misrepresent counties on the edges of metro regions. For instance, 387 counties with fewer than 25,000 people are part of a Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), and 116 of those have populations under 10,000 – yet under the OMB definition, none of these counties would be considered rural because of their proximity to economic activity.²⁰ In practice, many counties classified as “metropolitan” are largely rural in both geography and character.

Figure 7. Census Rural and Non Metro Rural Definition Overlap



The USCB, by contrast, defines rural areas based on population density, including areas on the edge of an MSA in addition to most of the places covered under the non-metro definition.²¹ The **chart** above from the Center on Rural Innovation shows the overlap and size of populations considered rural under each definition.²² At first glance, the USCB definition might seem like a more inclusive approach. Yet because the Census definition encompasses suburban populations, their large numbers often skew analyses focused on rural communities and overrepresents the experience of more populated communities.

Endnotes

- ¹ Bureau of Labor Statistics, [Current Employment Statistics: Frequently Asked Questions](#), U.S. Department of Labor.
- ² Linda K. Lobao and Mark Partridge, [“Demographic Shifts and Economic Opportunities for the Rural Workforce.”](#) Choices Magazine, Agricultural & Applied Economics Association, 2023.
- ³ See Appendix A.
- ⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, [County Population Totals and Components of Change: 2020–2024](#), March 2025; and U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Statistics Service, [2022 Census of Agriculture – County Data, Indiana: Table 12. Hogs and Pigs – Inventory and Sales: 2022 and 2017](#), 2022.
- ⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, [“Areas Published: American Community Survey,”](#) U.S. Department of Commerce.
- ⁶ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, [Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages \(QCEW\), 2023](#) and BGI analysis.
- ⁷ [The OEWS survey](#) covers wage and salary workers in nonfarm establishments and does not include the self-employed, owners and partners in unincorporated firms, household workers, or unpaid family workers.
- ⁸ The CPS does run a supplemental survey called the [Contingent Work Supplement](#) which is available periodically at the national level. While the data can be requested at lower geographic levels (such as a state), users must reach out to the BLS directly.
- ⁹ The Herfindahl-Hirschman Index is a common measure of industry concentration. Large values of the index indicate more concentration within an industry, smaller values less. U.S. Census Bureau, [Herfindahl-Hirschman Index \(%\)](#).
- ¹⁰ Burning Glass Institute analysis of Lightcast Job Posting Data, 2023, combined with qualitative insights from employer and community partner interviews.
- ¹¹ Lightcast, Job Posting Data, 2023, proprietary database accessed via Burning Glass Institute.
- ¹² U.S. Department of Agriculture, [Rural Community Development Initiative \(RCDI\) Fact Sheet, FY2025](#); and [Community Facilities Direct Loan & Grant Program Fact Sheet](#)
- ¹³ Fikri, Kenan. [“Dual Enrollment Students and Community College: Insights from a Survey”](#) Regional Matters (Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond), December 21, 2023.
- ¹⁴ Interviews with rural leaders and stakeholders conducted by the Burning Glass Institute, 2025.
- ¹⁵ “Zoom towns” are rural or small-town communities that have attracted an influx of remote workers seeking affordable housing, broadband access, and quality-of-life amenities during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. For examples and analysis, see [BBC ‘Zoom towns’](#) and the [Center on Rural Innovation’s The Rise of Remote Work in Rural America](#).
- ¹⁶ Dobis, E. A. and J. E. Todd. May 2022. [Health Care Access Among Self-Employed Workers in Nonmetropolitan Counties](#), AP-099, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.

- ¹⁷ Penn State University, "[Locally Owned Small Businesses Pack Powerful Economic Punch.](#)", Penn State News, October 12, 2023.
- ¹⁸ U.S. Small Business Administration, Office of Advocacy, [Small Business Job Creation Fact Sheet](#), April 2022.
- ¹⁹ Emily Wavering Corcoran and Anthony Tringali, "[How Different Are Rural and Urban Small Businesses?](#)", Regional Matters (Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond), 2025.
- ²⁰ Annual Estimates of the Resident Population for Counties in the United States: April 1, 2020 to July 1, 2024 (CO-EST2024-POP); U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division; Release Date: March 2025
- ²¹ U.S. Census Bureau, "[Urban and Rural.](#)" Geography Program Guidance, U.S. Department of Commerce.
- ²² Center on Rural Innovation, "[Defining Rural America.](#)" Rural Innovation Blog, December 14, 2021.