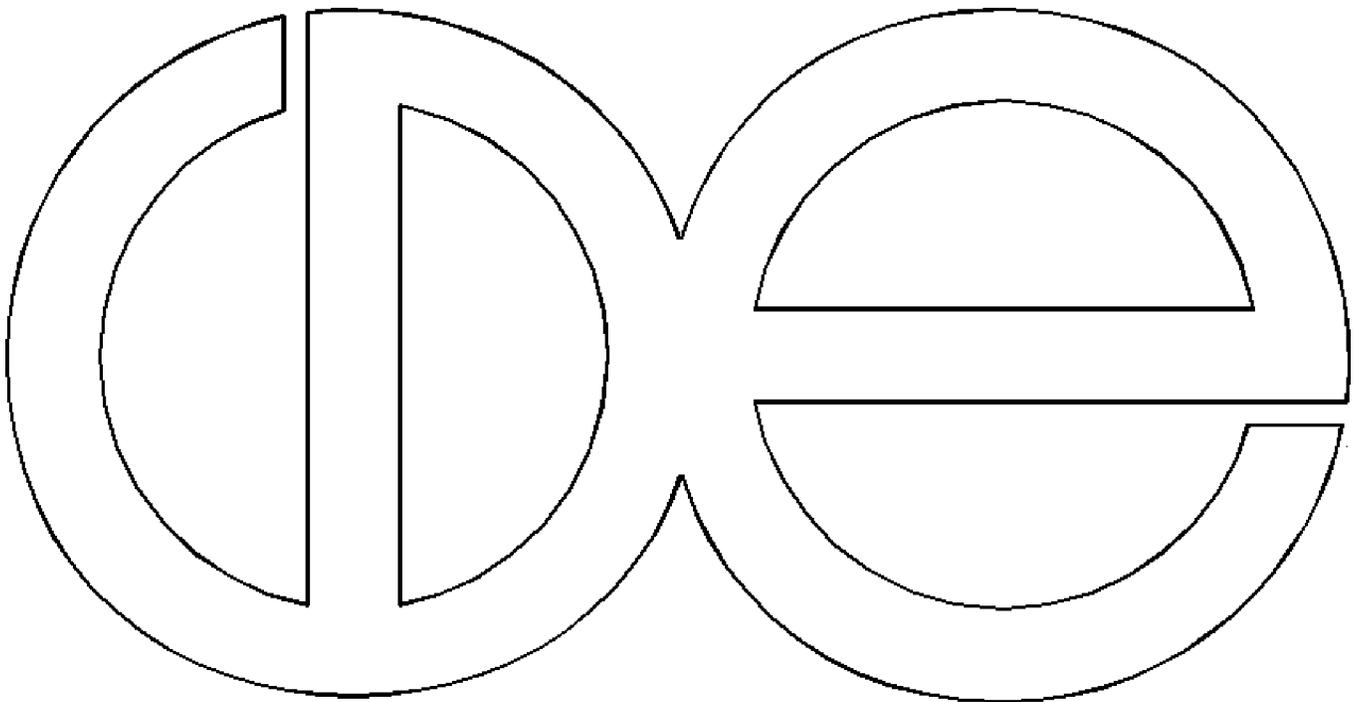


**Center for Demography and Ecology  
University of Wisconsin-Madison**

**Recent Trends in Nonmetropolitan Migration:  
Toward a New Turnaround?**

**Glenn V. Fuguitt  
and  
Calvin L. Beale**

**CDE Working Paper No. 95-07**



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TOWARD A NEW TURNAROUND?**

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**ABSTRACT**

Over the past 30 years there have been three unanticipated shifts in metropolitan-nonmetropolitan population change and migration: the nonmetropolitan turnaround of the 1970s, with a migration balance favoring nonmetropolitan areas; the downturn of the early 1980s when nonmetropolitan areas lost net migrants as they did in the 1960s, and a more recent post-1990 recovery, with nonmetropolitan net migration rates once again above those of metropolitan areas. We have examined these changes since 1970 using annual estimates of net migration, considering the changing metropolitan-nonmetropolitan differential, and differences across geographic and functional county types in nonmetropolitan areas. Some geographic and functional differences stand out across the 24-year period, for example, slower growth or outright loss in the farm belt and faster growth in retirement counties. Yet the most notable finding is the widespread nature of the turnaround, the reversal, and the current recovery. There are differences between the present and the 1970s, but a trend toward greater retention and/or acquisition of people in rural and small town areas is clear.

**RECENT TRENDS IN NONMETROPOLITAN MIGRATION:  
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Over the past 30 years there have been three unanticipated shifts in the pattern of population change for rural and small town areas. In sharp contrast to previous decades, the "nonmetropolitan turnaround" of the late 1960s and 1970s was a period of renewed and widespread nonmetropolitan population growth and migration gain, which overall was at a higher level than that of metropolitan areas. Although much research was stimulated by this new trend, almost none of it anticipated the second change in the early 1980s, during which nonmetro growth slowed considerably, shifted to decline in many areas, and the migration balance once more favored metropolitan areas (Fuguitt, 1985; Beale, 1988; Albrecht, 1993; Johnson, 1993). Again it became common to make pessimistic predictions concerning the future of rural America, and based on most available evidence through 1990, to conclude that the turnaround was an interlude rather than the beginning of a new era (for example, Barkley, 1993; Frey, 1995).

By the second half of the 1980s, however, annual county population estimates suggested a counter-trend (Beale and Fuguitt 1990). Stronger evidence since then, from both county estimates and the March Current Population Survey series, indicates that nonmetro growth has rebounded since the middle 1980s, so that by 1992 U.S. metro and nonmetro net migration rates had become about equivalent (Hansen 1993; Johnson and Beale 1994). The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of nonmetropolitan trends in net migration across these three shifts since 1970, based on annual estimates of net migration between 1970 and 1994.

It is now widely recognized that nonmetropolitan America is a very diverse entity. Nonmetropolitan is not synonymous with rural, and it is far from being coextensive with

farming or other extractive activities. There have always been important social and economic interrelations between metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas which are reflected in nonmetropolitan locational differences. Many nonmetro counties specialize in one or another work activity. More broadly, economic specialization, settlement history, and cultural differences have made it possible to distinguish geographic subregions having distinctive nonmetro social and economic attributes. Accordingly, after a simple metro-nonmetro comparison of net migration trends over the 1970-94 period, we will distinguish nonmetro counties classed by nearness to metro areas and level of local urbanization. Then we will consider net migration trends for counties grouped by specialization, and finally trends for a delineation of geographic subregions that encompass the nation.

Since the data series begins in 1970, we will focus on and compare the turnaround period (approximately 1970-80) with the succeeding downturn (approximately 1980-86) and the most recent and current upturn (1986-94). The demonstration of similarities and differences between these periods should help to improve our understanding of recent trends, and aid in speculations concerning the next period of metro-nonmetro migration and population redistribution. The results of this work also should provide a foundation for more intensive research on this topic based on alternative data, such as gross migration by the characteristics of movers and nonmovers.

## **Data and Procedures**

In addition to county population data from the censuses of 1970, 1980 and 1990, we have utilized annual estimates of county population from the Federal-State Cooperative program made available by the U.S. Census.<sup>1</sup> The Bureau also provided a series of annual births and deaths by counties for the 24-year period, and we estimated net migration by the residual method. The resulting annualized rates per 1000 may, of course, be considered only

approximate, but they should nevertheless provide appropriate information for comparative purposes.

A constant 1993 metropolitan-nonmetropolitan county designation is used throughout this analysis. Since periodic reclassification largely moves the more rapidly growing nonmetro counties into the metro category, using the most recent designation is conservative in terms of nonmetro growth, and biases the results in favor of more rapid growth (and net migration gain) in metro areas.

### **The Trend in Metropolitan-Nonmetropolitan Net Migration**

The three periods of metro-nonmetro migration are clearly seen in Figure 1. From 1970-71 through 1978-79 nonmetro rates were above metropolitan, and this pattern is the hallmark of the turnaround era. (The puzzling nonmetro downturn between 1972 and 1974 was especially characteristic of mining counties, although mining jobs were increasing at the time.) From 1979-80 through 1985-86, in contrast, there was an unbroken decline in the level of nonmetro migration, which became negative overall after 1980-81. Then, following 1985-86 the nonmetro net migration rates increased in an unbroken series, became positive after 1991, and again exceeded the metro rate by 1991-92.

Metropolitan rates do not vary as widely as nonmetro rates, which is not surprising given that the nation's population is three-quarters metropolitan. One would expect a complementary relation between metro and nonmetro rates, since net migration loss in one should lead to gain in the other, net of the effect of international migration. Note that the lowest level of metro net migration was 1974-75, the year of the highest nonmetro rate, and conversely the second highest level for metro areas was in 1985-86, the year of the lowest level for nonmetro areas. Since 1985-86, metro net migration rates have declined over most years, just as nonmetro rates have increased.

Although all cities do not grow, there are important reasons to associate urbanization with growth and net migration gain in nonmetro America. Many counties adjacent to metro areas are part of the process of deconcentration around large cities, and many, though by no means all, middle-sized nonmetro cities grow and deconcentrate in their own right. As a consequence, with each reclassification of counties as metropolitan, many of the most rapidly growing nonmetro counties are shifted to metropolitan status, either as new metropolitan areas or as fringe counties of existing metro areas. Since economic diversity is associated with urban activity, remote, completely rural nonmetro counties tend to be specialized in extractive economic activities, which generally have suffered protracted declines in employment demand.

Consequently, one would expect a nonmetro growth hierarchy associated with degree of identification with urban activity. Yet over the entire 1970-94 period, this was strictly true for only a few years in the 1980s, according to Figure 2. (Here, nonmetro counties are classed as adjacent to a metro area, nonadjacent with urban population, or nonadjacent rural.) That this expectation was not met in the 1970s is a major reason why there was so much interest and research activity during the turnaround period. As shown in this figure, all nonmetro categories were above metropolitan in net immigration from 1970 through 1977. It is rather remarkable that even nonadjacent, completely rural counties had a higher rate of net migration gain than metro counties in that time. Adjacent counties remained above metropolitan for two more years, but by 1981-82 were posting slight net outmigration which continued until the late 1980s. This figure shows that the downturn of the 1980s particularly affected the nonadjacent counties. Consequently, by 1984-85 there was a strong regular net migration hierarchy which continued through most of this decade, with non-adjacent rural showing the lowest level of retention, followed by nonadjacent urban, adjacent, and metropolitan counties.

Conversely, this means that the subsequent recovery of the late 1980s was strongest in the two groups of nonadjacent counties, as the residence groups came together. This convergence was almost complete by the 1990s, and 1991-92 is distinctive in that all residence categories had virtually identical levels of positive nonmetro net migration gain. The last two years of this graph show an interesting pattern that is similar to the early 1970s. Not only are all nonmetro residence groups above metro (this had not occurred since 1976-77), but the migration rate for the rural nonadjacent category is almost identical to that for the adjacent counties, and is notably above that for the urban nonadjacent counties. Together this shows that between 1992 and 1994 we have had a deconcentrating pattern extending to the bottom of the urban hierarchy. Just as nonmetropolitan counties are gaining more through migration than metropolitan counties in this most recent period, so in more remote settings completely rural counties have rates above those counties which include small cities.

### **Range of Growth by County Type**

A second way to show the diversity of nonmetro America is to consider counties grouped by dominant socioeconomic character<sup>2</sup>. We have distinguished commuting counties, (those with more than 15 percent of their workers commuting to metropolitan central counties), and counties specializing in one of three major economic functions as determined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (retirement, manufacturing, and farming). Finally, we consider persistent poverty counties, which have had more than 20 percent of their residents in poverty in each census since 1960. Retirement counties, though leading the way in migration gain during the turnaround, were substantially affected by adverse economic, interest rate, and real estate sector conditions in the first half of the 1980s (Figure 3a). Nevertheless, they managed in every year to retain positive net migration and to grow more rapidly than other types of areas. After 1984-85 the net migration rate for retirement counties

increased each year, and by 1993-94 had reached 1.7 percent. This is still below the rates for each year in the 1970s, however, when the peak influx occurred. A number of these counties are also general recreation areas.

For the most part the trends for retirement areas are mirrored by those in counties with high rates of commuting to metro areas, but at a lower level. During the early 1980s, these counties had essentially zero net migration. Subsequently the annual rate moved higher, and by the 1990s had reached the levels of the late 1970s, at close to one percent. Manufacturing areas contain too much of the nonmetro population to swing very high or low in migration rates, but the overall configuration is very similar to commuting and retirement counties. A span of 10 unbroken years of outmovement ended in 1990-91. These counties, however, had economic growth mostly outside of manufacturing, their dominant industrial sector (Cook and Mizer, 1994).

Farming dependent counties increased their overall net migration rate erratically after 1985-86, gaining over the year proceeding in five of eight years. From 1991 through 1994, however, these counties were again gaining more migrants than they lost, a situation not seen since 1975-76.

After an intensive boom period in the middle 1970s, mining areas were the most severely affected by economic conditions of the 1980s. At their nadir, in 1986-87, they lost three percent of their population by net outmigration in one year. Their demographic recovery was substantial in each succeeding year through 1991-92, yet mining employment in the United States has continued to sag. In most mining counties the recent equilibrium between in and out migration can only be attributed to growth in other sectors of the local economy. In some, much growth of recreation business is present.

One of the most interesting timelines of migration rates is that for counties of

persistently high poverty (Figure 3b). These areas, which are largely a mixture of Southern Highlands, racially Black areas of the South, and Indian and Hispanic areas of the West and Great Plains, peaked in their net immigration rate with the rest of nonmetropolitan America in 1974-75, shifted to outmovement at the close of the decade, but failed to have any onset of recovery in the mid-1980s. Rather, outmovement did not reach its greatest extent until 1989-90, four years later than the rest of the country. Then the shift to a higher degree of population retention in 1990-91 is so large, abrupt, and unrelated to any known events in these counties as to cast some doubt on the full validity of its size. Perhaps this class of counties is the one most affected by the change in the Census Bureau's estimation method after 1990 to complete reliance on IRS administrative records. However, the indicated further upward shift in rates from 1990-91 through 1993-94 cannot be accounted for by such a circumstance.

## **Subregional Trends**

As a means of looking at the geographic variation in recent nonmetro population change, we compared 26 subregions covering the entire United States. This delineation, prepared some years ago for an earlier paper, groups together counties of reasonably similar social and economic characteristics and is not dependent on state boundaries. (For a more detailed discussion, see Fuguitt and Beale, 1978.) We have abridged the results here by grouping the subregions into five patterns of change in net migration (groups A through E), shown in the map which is Figure 4, with net migration patterns given in Figures 5a and 5b.

Groups A and B have the highest net immigration rates overall, but contrast markedly with C, D, and E in that they have not participated in the rebound of population inmovement or diminished loss in the late 1980s that has characterized the rest of the country. Group A consists of subregions that had net inmovement every year in both the 1970s and 1980s. Yet

despite this record and increasingly rapid inmovement from 1985 to 1990, their growth from migration has turned down since 1990. These areas are found in the Southwest, the Northern Pacific Coast and the Florida Peninsula. The well-publicized economic turn-down in many of these sections of the country after 1990, especially in California, may be the major factor producing a trend counter to the national one.

Group B is comprised of Northern New England and the nonmetro areas that are interstitial or adjacent to the Northeastern Metropolitan Belt. Here can be seen a pattern of rising inmovement in the 1980s until 1988 that was quite counter-cyclical to what was happening in most of the rest of the country. But after 1988, inmovement steadily slackened until it was barely positive in 1991-94. This is consistent with the serious economic slump that affected New York and all of New England by 1989. By 1994, the net immigration rate for group B had fallen marginally below that of Groups D and E in Figure 5b, groups that had experienced net outmovement all through the 1980s.

Group C has the most common trend, being negative in migration during part of the 1980s, but positive by 1991 (see Figure 5b). Half of the 26 subregions conform to this pattern, including much of the South, the Rockies, and Rio Grande areas, plus the Upper Great Lakes. The largest shift in trend for any subregion since the time of greatest outmovement in the mid-1980s has occurred in the Rocky Mountains, Mormon Valleys, and Columbia Basin subregion within this group. In the first part of the decade, the collapse of boom-level mining employment led to major outmovement, but from 1986-87 to 1993-94 there was a steady demographic recovery from 1.5 percent annual net outmigration to 1.9 percent net inmovement. The source of this growth is not revived mining work, however, but is more linked to service jobs.

Four subregions that displayed net outmigration throughout the 1980s have apparently

moved to modest immigration since 1990 (Group D). They are somewhat disparate, represented by the Lower Great Lakes Industrial subregion, the Northern and Southern Appalachian Coal Fields, and the old Cotton Belt of the Southern Coastal Plain. Their pattern is nearly that of the nonmetropolitan U.S. as a whole, which saw outmigration in every year of the 1980s, except for 1980-81 (refer to Figure 1).

In Group E, which encompasses the Great Plains (both north and south), the Corn Belt and the Mississippi Delta, net immigration occurred only briefly and minimally during the peak of the 1970s turnaround. Every year from 1977-78 through 1990-91 saw outmovement, more so than any other subregion type. Yet the trend of population retention has been upward since the depth of the farm crisis in 1986 until migration rates shifted to a slight net inmovement by 1992-93.

### **Decline in Natural Increase**

We noted in a previous paper (Beale and Fuguitt, 1990) how the gap in the metro and nonmetro rates of natural increase had steadily widened throughout the 1980s in contrast with a pattern of some closure that characterized the 1970's (Figure 6). In the six years since that study there has been a little further widening, until by 1993-94 the rate of growth from excess of births over deaths in metro America was more than double that in nonmetro areas (.74 vs. .32). The major change in nonmetro natural increase derives from declining birth rates, which in turn seem affected both by declining fertility and advancing age structure.

For several years now, the expected completed childbearing of nonmetro women 18-34 years has been no higher than that of metro women, as measured by the Census Bureau's inquiries on births to date and expected future births. In 1992 both metro and nonmetro women estimated 210 completed births per 100 women (Bachu, 1993). Higher nonmetro crude death rates, associated with an increasingly older population structure, also

add to the lower nonmetro natural increase, but falling nonmetro fertility has been the dynamic variable in the last decade. The metro population now has a distinct capacity to grow at a faster rate than that in nonmetro areas independently of migration, in a manner that was not true at the beginning of the 1980s.

## **Conclusion**

Following a substantial downturn through the first half of the 1980s, the subsequent increase in rates of net migration yielded a pattern of nonmetro change that by 1990 was distinctly intermediate between those of the 1970s and 1980s. Many kinds of counties in varied parts of the country have had a modest to substantial amount of inmovement or improved retention in rural and small town places, but without yet attaining a population growth rate as high as metro places. Data on both employment and income provide supportive evidence. From 1990-94, nonmetro employment rose by 6.6 percent, while metro jobs grew by 3.1 percent -- a significant nonmetro advantage present in each of the four post-1990 years, and unheard of during the 1980s (Economic Research Service, 1994). Now the Census Bureau reports that median household income (in 1993 dollars) fell by 2.9 percent from 1989-93 in nonmetro areas, but by 8.1 percent in metro areas (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1994). In the collective sense, there has been no economic advantage to moving into metro areas from other places as yet in this decade. So despite the reduced level of potential growth from natural increase, nonmetro America has seen a recovery in its ability to retain or attract people that can be identified as originating by 1987 and persisting through 1994, the most recent data period.

Are we in the midst of a new turnaround? More fundamentally, was the aberrant period in recent redistribution patterns during the turnaround, or in the years immediately following? Given the difficulty most everyone has had in predicting changes in metro-

nonmetro growth patterns, we are understandably reluctant to make an assertion. There are, however, a number of differences between the present period and the turnaround era, and a number of unanswered questions. Most explanations of the 1970s turnaround include (1) the period effects that led to booms in major rural extractive industries, (2) regional restructuring that led to loss of jobs, especially in manufacturing, in major metro areas, and supported a deconcentration of industrial activity into many nonmetro areas, and (3) technological and social trends supporting a more deconcentrated settlement for jobs and residences, coupled with the preferences many people hold for low density living.

Today, there is no boom in extractive activities, although there has been some improvement in their economic conditions, particularly in commercial farming since the end of the farm crisis in the early 1980s. Post-1985 upturns in Western mining areas may well be associated with the recreation potential of many of these counties, rather than mining. Continued restructuring and movement to a world market led to a decline in manufacturing in nonmetro areas by the early 1980s, and we found that the renewed growth in the late 1980s and early 1990s in counties dependent on manufacturing was not primarily associated with an increase in manufacturing jobs. The deconcentration of population to counties with amenities, and to counties peripheral to metro areas continued throughout the 1980s but the upturns beginning in the late 1980s result in net migration rates still below those of the turnaround era. There has been much interest in the possible relaxation of locational requirements through technology and organization of work, particularly for service industries through advances in telecommunication (Dillman, 1991). By all accounts, telecommunication is still largely a potential for nonmetro economic growth, although anecdotal evidence of its adoption seems to mount. Also, it is not clear whether new ways of producing goods require greater rather than less mutual access, and greater integration with the world economy means

that those activities that can be done remotely can often be done in foreign settings at lower costs.

One of our findings supporting a renewed turnaround is the widespread nature of the post-1985 trend. Indeed the convergence of many lines in the figures seems remarkable. Although we don't have comparable data for a time just before the turnaround began (it was well underway by 1970), the increased growth and rates of net migration across most types of nonmetro counties during the turnaround has been widely noted. This raises the intriguing question of whether the widespread nature of the new growth in both eras is due entirely to a coincidence of varied reasons for different types of areas, or whether there is an underlying demographic or socioeconomic factor affecting all areas.

On the other hand, the recent increased differential between metro and nonmetro natural increase is undoubtedly slowing nonmetro population growth in a way that was not true in the 1970s, even though rates of net migration may be increasing. This may help to explain why some correspondents have been puzzled about recent findings as inconsistent with the perceived negative situation in local communities in their area. (Others, however, have reported evidence of growth.) Perhaps a more important difference, not covered in this analysis, is found by comparing the 1987 with the 1993 March Current Population Surveys.<sup>3</sup> We found that the recent increase in net migration for nonmetro areas is primarily due to a decline in outmigration, whereas earlier work showed that the 1970s turnaround was more due to increased movement into nonmetro areas (Tucker, 1976). Thus, as we suggest above, the most recent period of increased retention could be based more on a lack of attractive alternative opportunities in metropolitan areas than on an improved economic circumstance in nonmetro areas, though both have been present.

Although much was made of the noneconomic bases of the turnaround, to understand

the present change and where it fits in what has been a succession of demographic surprises, we need to better relate population trends to employment and industry trends in both metro and nonmetro areas. Recognizing that migration is the main force driving population redistribution today, we should move beyond net rates to consider migration streams, and focus on both metro and nonmetro areas as origins and destinations of these streams, taking into account also international migration.

In this paper we have demonstrated that something new is happening in metro-nonmetro population redistribution. If the turnaround of the 1970s was an aberration, here is another one. It is always possible that it will not mature further in terms of population or migration rates, and we have shown a number of differences from the last time. But we need to understand that the current "rebound" in U.S. nonmetro population retention and/or growth is very real and widespread, and recognize it as a major component of the continuing social and economic changes taking place in metropolitan and nonmetropolitan America today.

## Notes

1. Following the censuses of 1970 and 1980, the Bureau adjusted the Federal-State Cooperative estimates for each year of the prior decade to be consistent with the census results. Estimates for 1991 through 1994 are based on the 1990 census, and utilize only data from IRS administrative record series. We find that migration rates for 1990-91, however, although somewhat higher than expected, generally follow the trend begun in the middle 1980s of increasing levels of net migration in each succeeding year. Johnson and Beale (1994), moreover, compared the post-1990 Federal-State Cooperative estimates with independent state-generated estimates, available for more than one-third of the nonmetro counties. They found the results of the two sources to be consistent in terms of growth and decline in 75 percent of the cases.

2. Commuting counties were those with more than 15 percent of their workers commuting to central counties of metropolitan areas in 1980. The USDA classification of retirement counties included those that, for the 1970-80 period, had net immigration rates for people aged 60 and over of 15 percent or more of the expected 1980 population 60 and over. Agricultural, or farming dependent counties, and mining dependent counties were those in which the industry contributed a weighted average of 20 percent or more of total labor and proprietor income over the five years from 1975-79. and in manufacturing dependent counties manufacturing contributed at least 30 percent of labor and proprietor income over the same period (Cook and Hady, 1993). Persistent poverty counties had more than 20 percent of their residents in poverty for the 1960 and all subsequent censuses through 1990.

Although there is some overlap in the classification, we do not consider this a serious problem among the county functions. Results using nonoverlapping procedures, as classing

counties first as commuting or not, then all others as retirement or not, then manufacturing or not, etc., are almost identical with those allowing overlaps. Almost one-fourth of the nonmetro counties fell in none of these groups, and thus are not included in the type-of-county analysis.

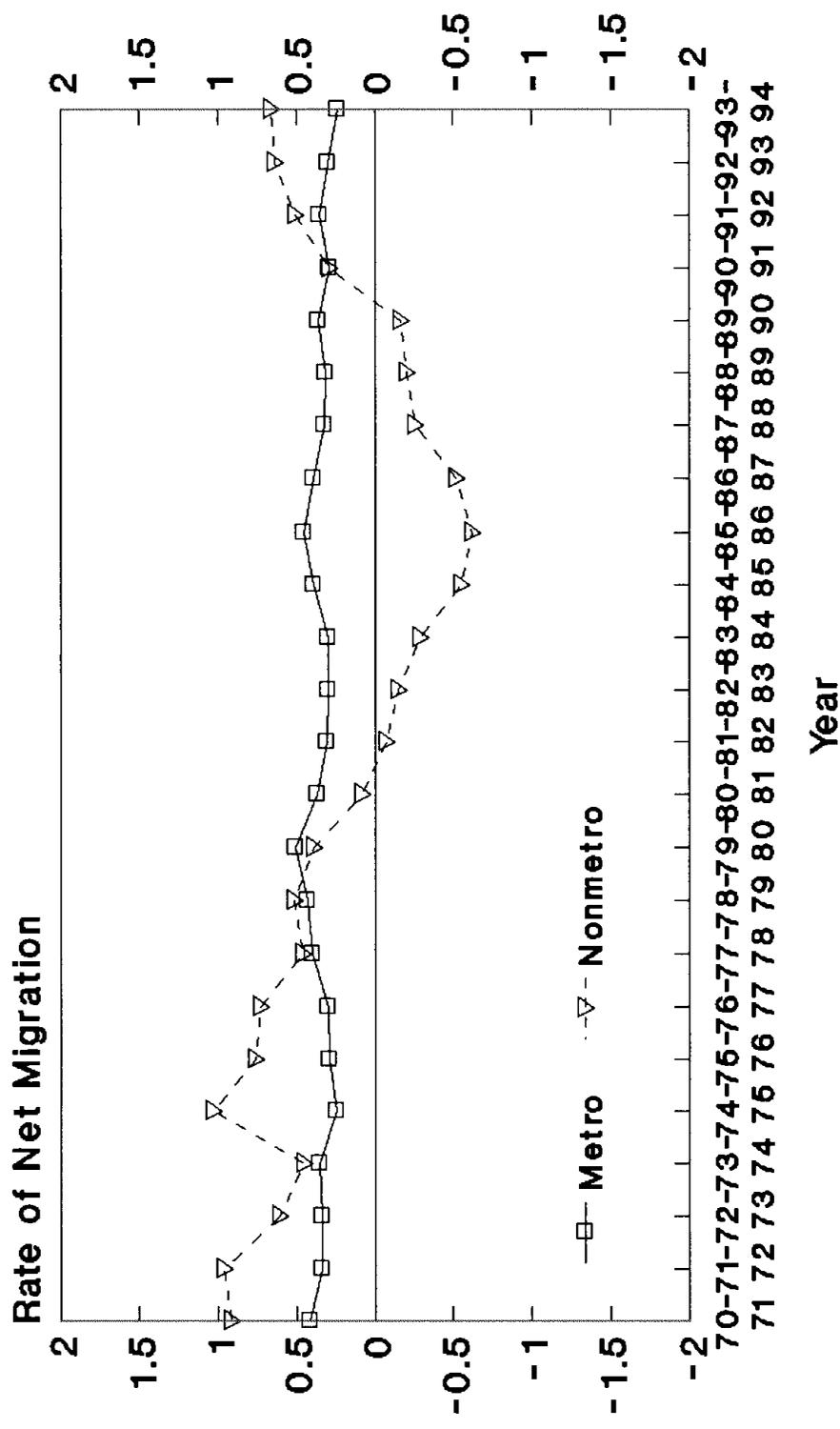
3. Between 1987 and 1993 the nonmetro net migration rate shifted from  $-.92$  to  $.54$ , for an increase of  $1.46$ . This was due to an increase in the immigration rate of  $.18$ , from  $3.11$  to  $3.29$ , and a decline in the outmigration rate of  $1.28$ , from  $4.03$  to  $2.75$ . Similar results are obtained comparing 1986 and 1992.

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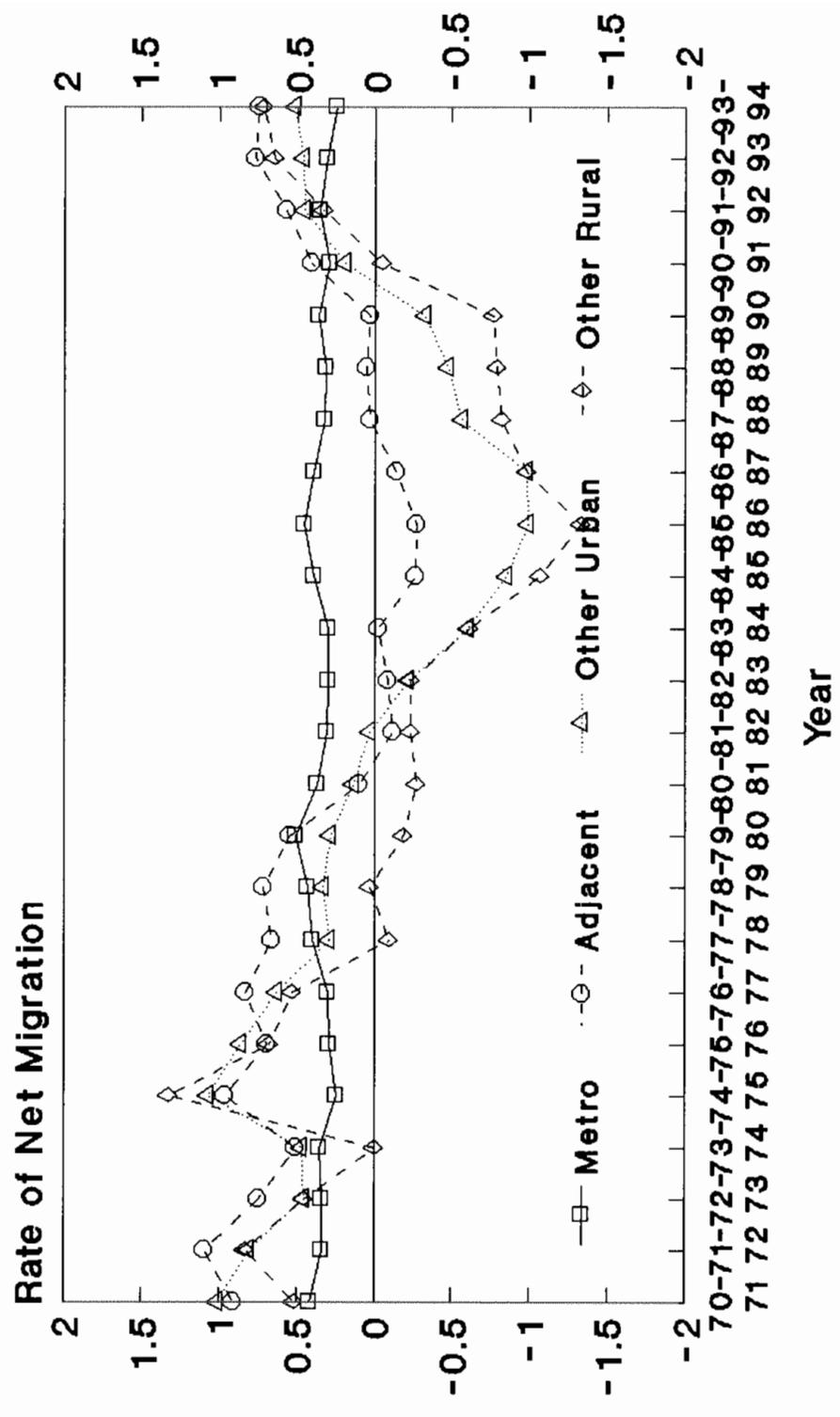
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**Figure 1**  
**ANNUAL RATE OF NET MIGRATION/100**  
**METROPOLITAN NONMETROPOLITAN US, 1970-94**



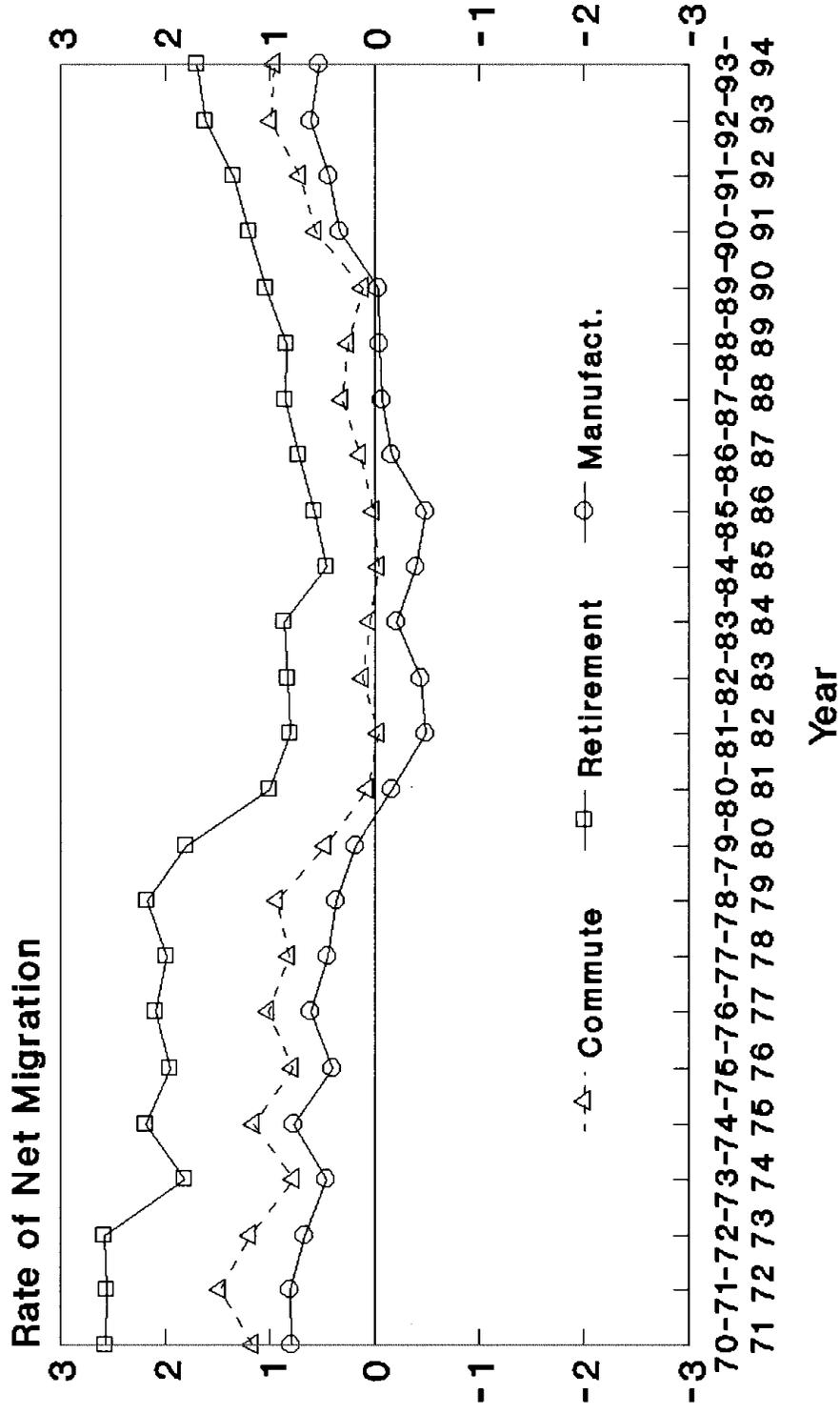
Metro-nonmetro designation of 1993  
 Fugitt & Beale 3/2/95

**Figure 2**  
**ANNUAL RATE OF NET MIGRATION/100**  
**RURAL URBAN GROUPINGS, 1970-94**



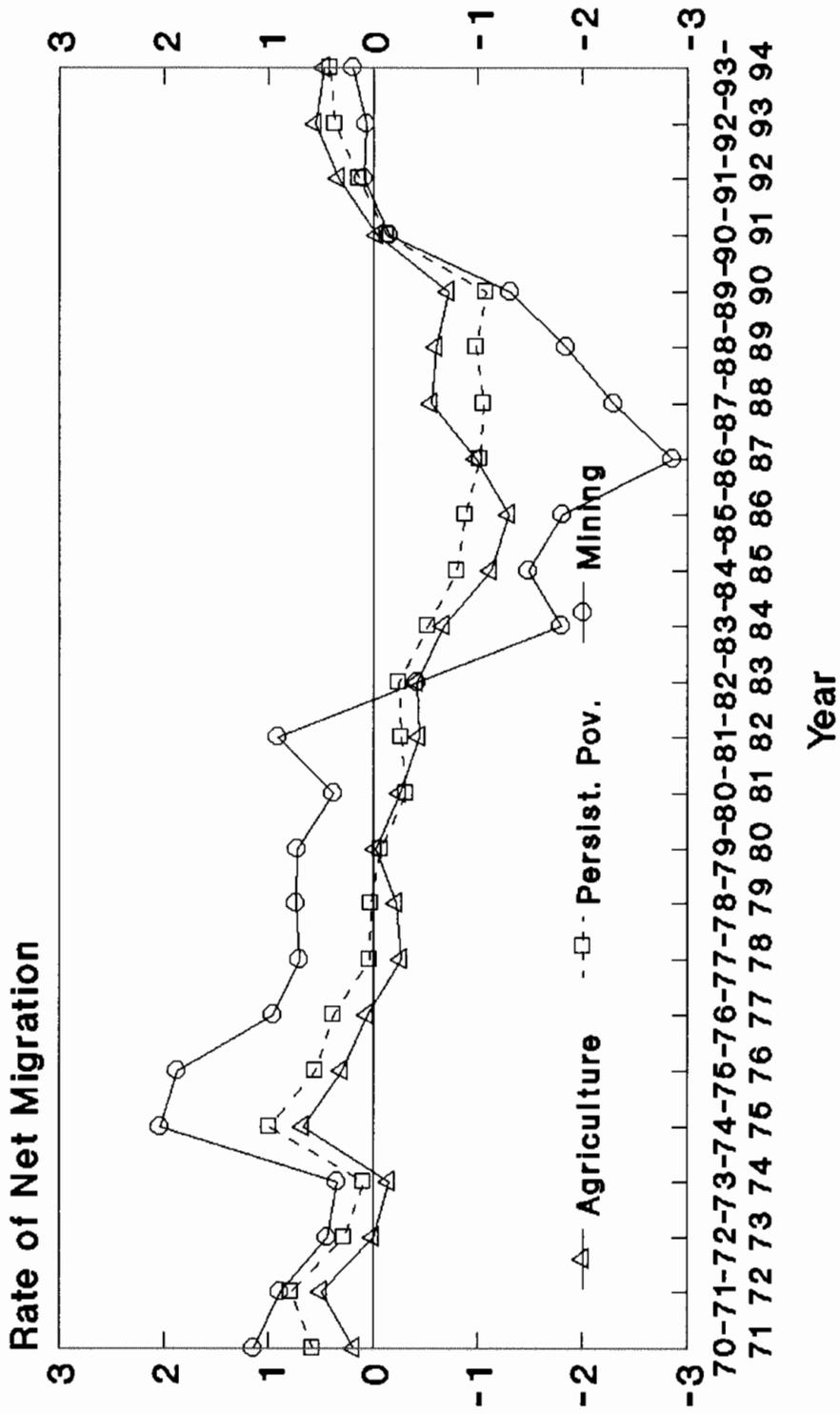
Metro-nonmetro designation of 1993  
 Fugitt & Beale 3/2/95

**Figure 3a**  
**NET MIGRATION RATES BY TYPE OF COUNTY**  
**1970-94**



Nonmetro counties; designation of 1993  
 Fugitt & Beale 3/2/95

Figure 3b  
**NET MIGRATION RATES BY TYPE OF COUNTY**  
**1970-94**



Nonmetro counties; designation of 1993  
 Fugitt & Beale 3/2/95

Figure 4

### Five Groups of Subregions

by Patterns of Nonmetro Net Migration 1970-92

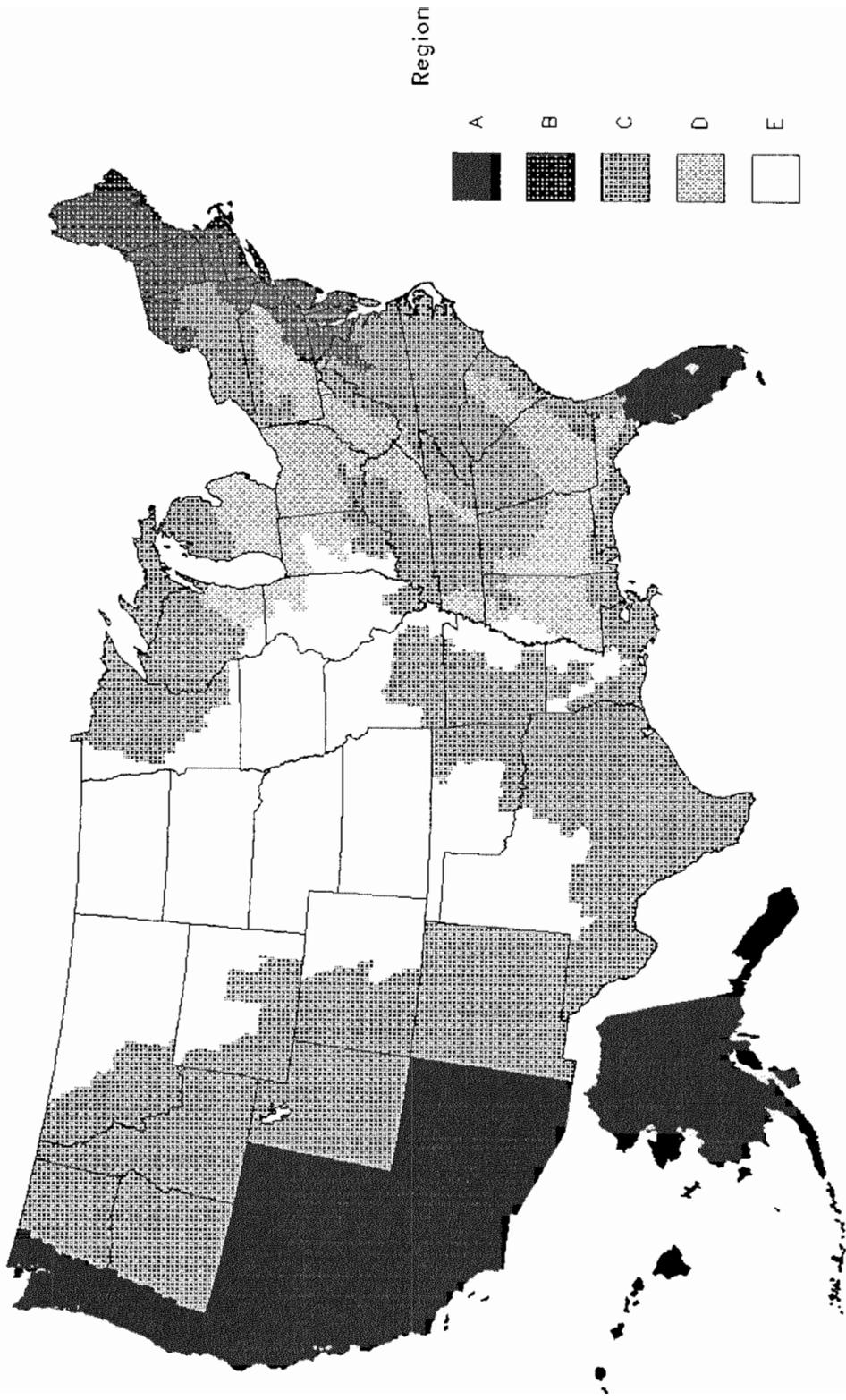
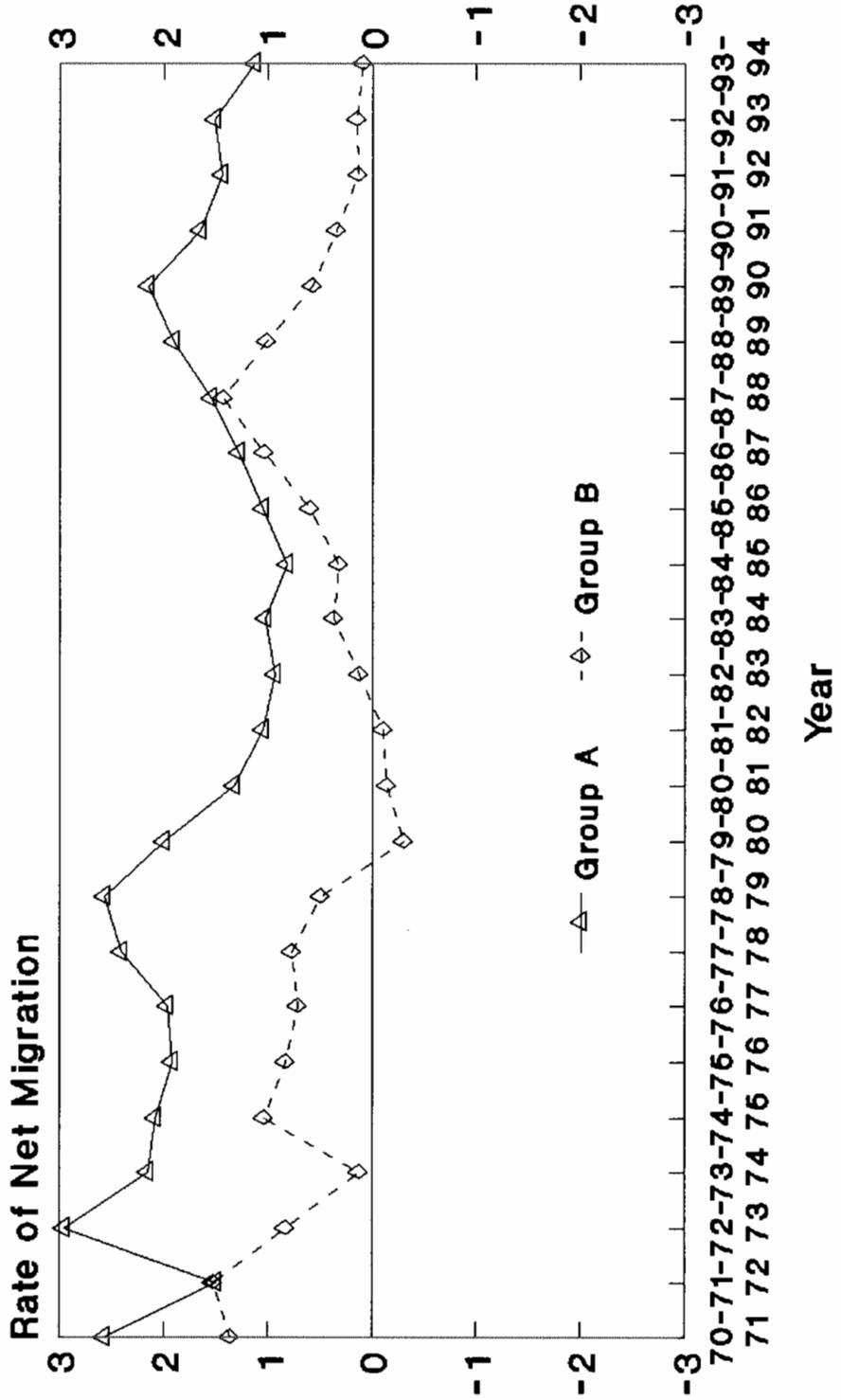
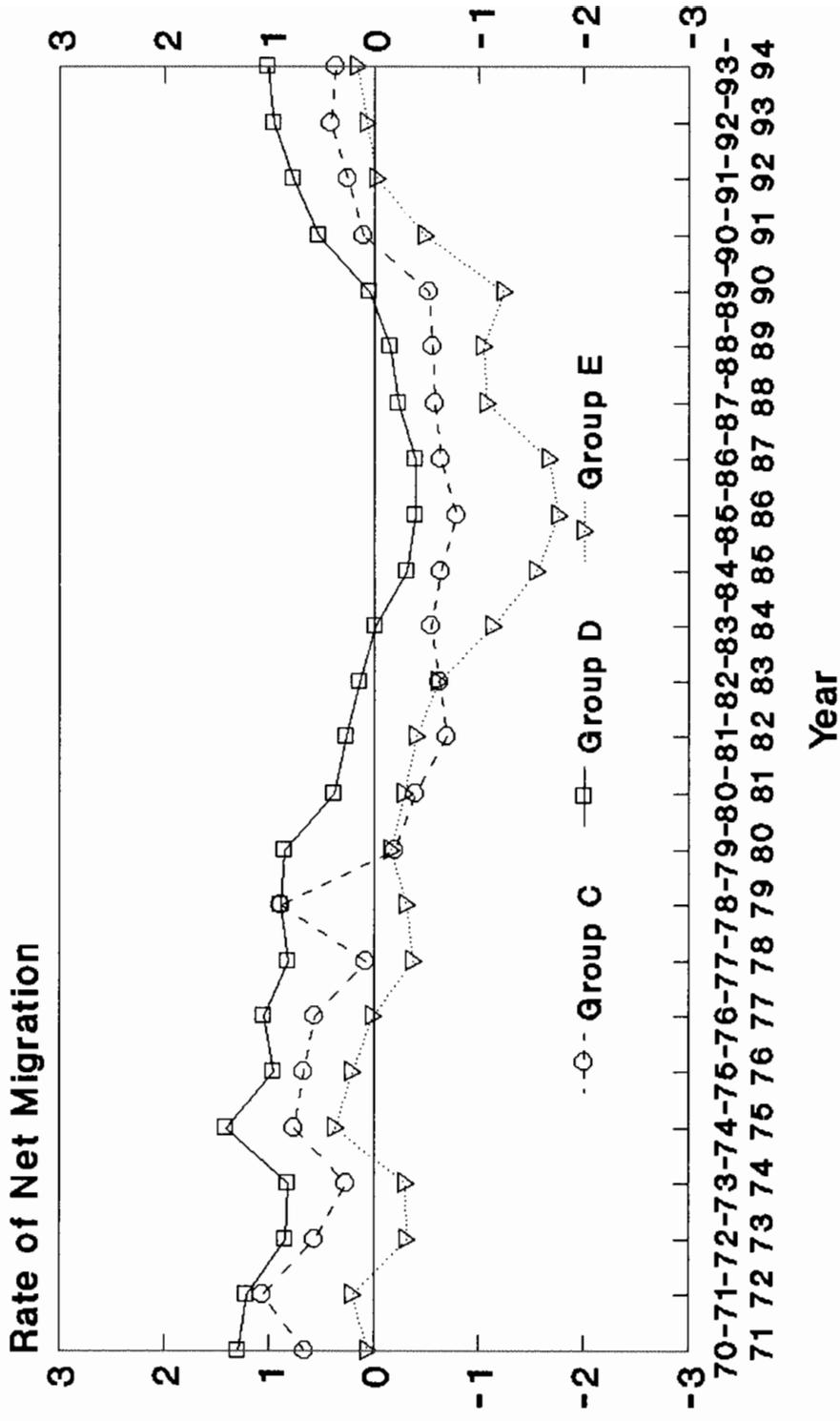


Figure 5a  
**ANNUAL RATE OF NET MIGRATION/100**  
**GROUPS OF SUBREGIONS, 1970-94**



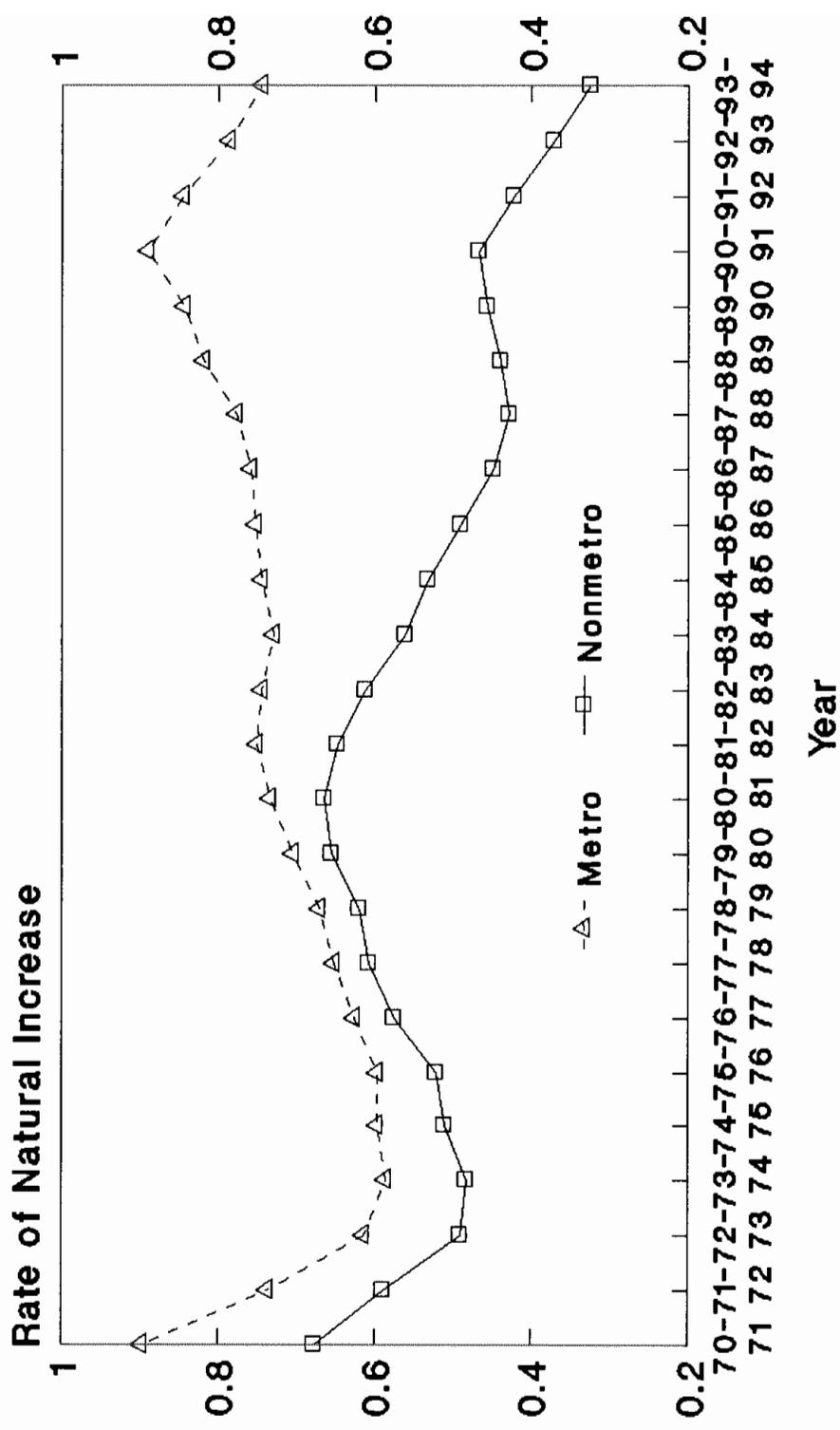
Nonmetro counties; designation of 1993  
 Fugitt & Beale 3/2/96

**Figure 5b**  
**ANNUAL RATE OF NET MIGRATION/100**  
**GROUPS OF SUBREGIONS, 1970-94**



Nonmetro counties; designation of 1993  
 Fugitt & Beale 3/2/96

**Figure 6**  
**ANNUAL RATE OF NATURAL INCREASE/100**  
**METROPOLITAN NONMETROPOLITAN US, 1970-94**



Metro-nonmetro designation of 1993  
 Fugitt & Beale 3/2/96

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