



# Rural America's image problem

RURAL AMERICA has a problem with its image, one that may come to haunt both the Trump administration and the Democrats as they try to address the region's problems and promote economic development.

Over the past several weeks, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post* have all published articles that collectively portray rural Americans as culturally alienated from urban America—either unemployed or working in such dangerous jobs that they are in pain and turn to drugs, or at least cigarettes, for relief. Many articles have also pointed out that rural Americans expressed their frustration by voting for President Trump in the highest percentages in the country.

That image may help members of Congress seek more government assistance for their constituents in everything from health care to high-speed internet service, but it's terrible for attracting private investment and encouraging young people to stay where they grew up. It will be hard for any government interventions to counter the idea that rural America is loser territory.

*The Wall Street Journal* has declared rural America the new “inner city,” where for five straight years the population has declined because more people died than were born and more people migrated out than in. In the 1980s, inner cities were considered the most troubled places in the country but now, the *Journal* reported, “by many key measures of socioeconomic well-being, those charts have flipped. In terms of poverty, college attainment, teenage births, divorce, death rates from heart disease and cancer, reliance on federal disability insurance, and male labor-force participation, rural counties now rank the worst among the four major U.S. population groupings (the others are big cities, suburbs and medium or small metro areas).”

In a separate article, the *Journal* calculated that 40 percent of rural Americans do not have access to the high-speed internet service that is considered vital both to workers being productive and to children doing their homework.

Meanwhile, Judith Feinberg, a professor at West Virginia University who studies drug addiction, told *The New Yorker* that opioids are “the ultimate escape drugs. ... On heroin, you curl up in a corner and blank out the world. It's an extremely seductive drug for dead-end towns, because it makes the world's problems go away.”

And *The New York Times* reported that, while cigarette smoking has gone down in the cities and suburbs, it's still high in rural America, where smokers say it provides them

relief from the many stresses in their lives.

A conspiracy theorist might say that all these articles amount to the urban, coastal media ganging up on rural America. But they point out real problems that government needs to address. No wonder the impact of the Republican health care bills on opioid-treatment programs has become so controversial. And no wonder Trump has promised that rural broadband will be part of his infrastructure proposal.

At the same, *The Washington Post* reported that a survey of 1,700 rural Americans it conducted with the Kaiser Family Foundation showed a deep cultural divide between rural and urban America. Rural Americans believe there is widespread abuse of government programs and that rural people

take care of each other more than urbanites. That survey doesn't address questions of whether the beliefs of rural people are true. Rural Americans get a lot of benefits from government programs, in everything from farm subsidies to housing and wastewater treatment plants. And tight-knit urban ethnic communities are known for caring for each other. Does anyone really believe rural Americans care more for each other than Hispanic immigrants who often have to deal with a hostile larger society? Or that rural Americans help each other more than the urban elites



who arrange internships for each other's children so they will have advantages in hunting for a job?

The very concept of looking at the whole of rural America as one entity is questionable. As University of New Hampshire scholars Dante Scala and Kenneth Johnson said in a Carsey School of Public Policy paper released this week, “Rural America is a remarkably diverse collection of places including more than 70 percent of the land area of the United States and 46 million people. Both demographic and voting trends in this vast area are far from monolithic.” Scala and Johnson say that there is a “continuum” between urban and rural America, with the urban areas the most Democratic and the most rural areas the most Republican.

Anyone who comes from rural America also knows that rural New England is not the same as the rural South, or rural California, or the Plains, or the Pacific Northwest.

Let's hope that investors, young Americans, and political leaders take that diversity into consideration as they make decisions about the future. □

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