

ECONOMY

Rural Counties Dependent on Recreation Industry Show Best Recovery from Pandemic Employment Loss

Rural recreation counties added to their pre-pandemic employment numbers, but other rural economies struggled to recover.

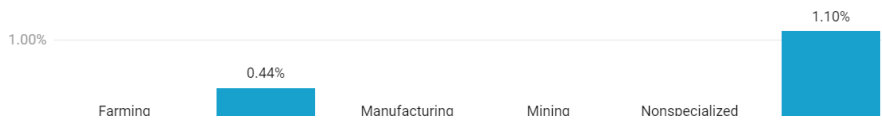
by **Sarah Melotte**
December 21, 2023



Max Patch, North Carolina, is a 4,600 bald mountain and a favorite stop on the Appalachian Trail. Photo: Sarah Melotte

Rural counties where the recreation industry is a big part of the local economy are more likely than other types of rural counties to have regained the jobs they lost during the pandemic, a Daily Yonder analysis shows.

Percent Change in Rural Employment, September 2019 - September 2023



Republish This Story



TRENDING STORIES

- Review: Who Is the Rural Voter? Book Builds on Old Themes to Create New Understanding
- From 'No Resources' to a 'Model Program': NM's Behavioral Health Services Tailored to Rural Needs
- New Survey Examines Motivations of Volunteers at Rural Festivals
- Child Care Gaps in Rural America Threaten to Undercut Small Communities
- The Year in Review – Our Top Stories of 2023

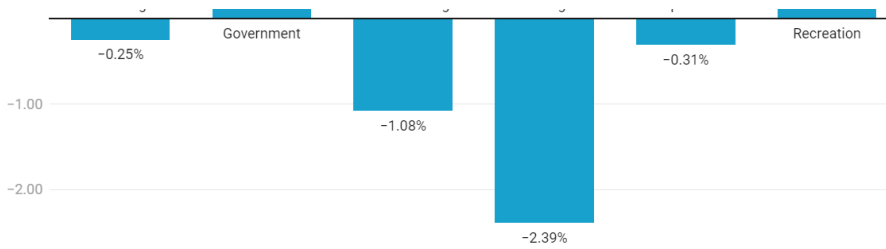


Chart: Daily Yonder / Sarah Melotte • Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Economic Research Service, Census Bureau • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Rural America overall still hasn't regained the jobs it lost in the first months of the pandemic in 2020, [as we've reported](#). But rural recreation-dependent counties – whose economies rely on businesses built around natural amenities, tourism, and activities like hiking and skiing – have 1.1% more jobs today than they did three years ago.

Rural counties that depend on governmental employers like prisons, universities, or public agencies were also in positive territory with jobs compared to pre-pandemic levels, but just barely. Government-dependent counties had 0.4% more jobs in September than they did the year before the pandemic.

Rural mining-dependent counties were the hardest hit, with 2.4% fewer jobs in September than they had before the pandemic.

Rural counties where manufacturing was the primary industry were down 1.1% from pre-pandemic employment.

Farming-dependent counties were down a quarter of a percent in employment for the same period, while “nonspecialized” counties – ones where there was no single industry that predominated the economy – were down a third of a percentage point.

The county economic types are based on categories created by the [Economic Research Service](#) (ERS), a branch of the USDA.

Rural Recreation Communities Did Better than Other Rural Places, but Fell Behind Urban Places

Monthly Percent Change in Employment in Rural Counties

Every month is compared to the corresponding month in 2019.

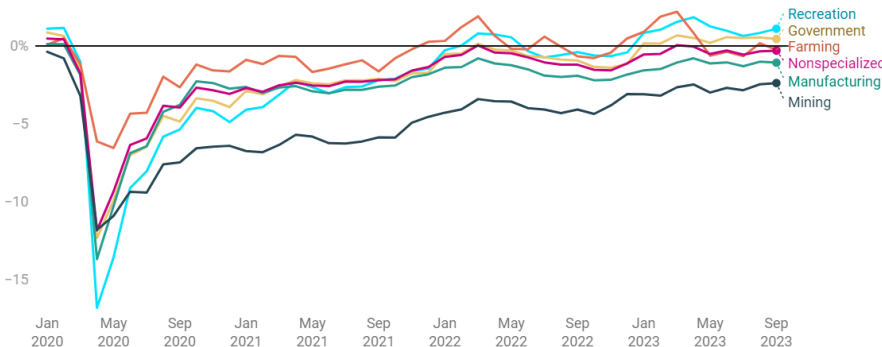


Chart: Daily Yonder / Sarah Melotte • Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Economic Research Service, Census Bureau • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Monroe County, Florida, a rural recreation county with the third largest growth in

employment among rural areas, gained 6,100 jobs by September of 2023, a 14% increase since September of 2019.

Key West is the county seat of Monroe, a coastal destination that attracted 3.5 million visitors in 2022. That's a lot of tourists for a community of only 82,000 full-time residents.

Flathead County, Montana, is another rural recreation county that boomed after the pandemic. Glacier National Park, which spans both Glacier and Flathead counties in northern Montana, is home to about 111,000 residents and sees about 3 million visitors annually. Over 90% of the land area in Flathead is in a national or state park.

Between September of 2019 and September of 2023, Flathead County saw a 13% increase in employment, adding about 6,000 more jobs to the economy.

Flathead isn't the only Montana County that saw that much growth. The eight rural recreation counties in Montana experienced a 9% increase in employment, adding 7,400 jobs to the state's economy. Montana's recreation jobs accounted for 22% of the total employment growth in rural recreation counties nationwide, even though they only comprise 3.5% of the recreation counties in rural America.

But despite these economic success stories, fewer rural recreation counties were back up to their pre-pandemic job numbers compared to their urban counterparts. Fifty-four percent of rural recreation counties fully recovered from the pandemic, while 73% of urban recreation areas recovered.

Urban recreation counties also added half a million new jobs to the market by September of 2023, a 4.4% increase since September of 2019, compared to a one percent growth in rural places.

Percent of Counties back to Pre-Pandemic Employment

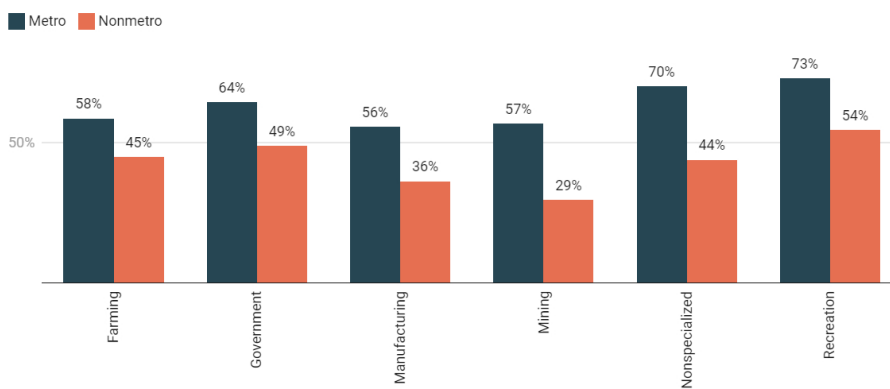


Chart: Daily Yonder / Sarah Melotte • Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Economic Research Service, Census Bureau • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Methods



The Relationship between Population Growth and Job Growth

Previous reporting from the Yonder showed that rural recreation counties vote more Democratic, grow faster, and have higher costs of living than other rural places. They might be appealing places to relocate for those who can afford it, but challenges

associated with increased demand for housing and [natural resources](#) make it hard for long-time residents who could face [displacement](#).

Job growth might therefore be a reflection of rural recreation migrants and not necessarily increased employment rates of the long-term residents. A rural county that shows a one percent change in job growth could see no decrease in outcomes like unemployment if the increase in the number of jobs were just due to in-migration, for example.

This seems to be the case in rural recreation areas. As the population grows in rural recreation areas, so does the number of jobs (in general). And recreation areas saw the biggest gains in population growth via in-migration between 2020 and 2022, according to the [latest census estimates](#).

The Relationship between Job Growth and Population Growth in Rural Recreation Counties

Population change between 2020 and 2022; Job Growth between September of 2019 and September of 2023

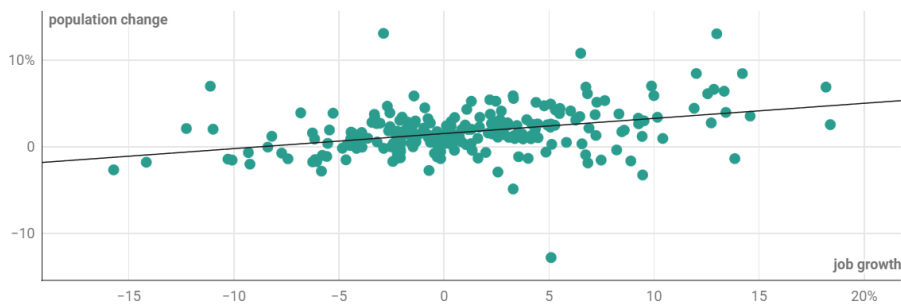


Chart: Daily Yonder / Sarah Melotte • Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Economic Research Service, Census Bureau • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Like this story? Get the latest from the Daily Yonder directly in your inbox, twice each week.

[Sign Up for Our Newsletter](#)

Between 2020 and 2022, 169,000 people moved to a rural recreation county. These counties had the highest in-migration numbers of any other rural economic type.

Government Dependent Counties Do Well, Others Fall Behind

Other than recreation, the only other type of rural county that gained jobs between 2019 and 2023 were those with economies dependent on government. (These are communities where [14% of the labor earnings come from government employment](#), or where at least nine percent of the workers are employed by the government.)

By September of 2023, government dependent rural counties had 12,000 more jobs compared to September of 2019.

But rural counties dependent on mining, manufacturing, or agriculture, (along with those without any economic specialization) lost jobs during the same time period.

In September of 2023, areas dependent on mining showed the most job loss as a

percent of total 2019 employment. Mining economies in rural areas lost 32,000 jobs, a 2.4% decline in their total employment compared to September of 2019.

Percent Change in Employment in Counties Dependent on Mining

Every month is compared to the corresponding month in 2019.

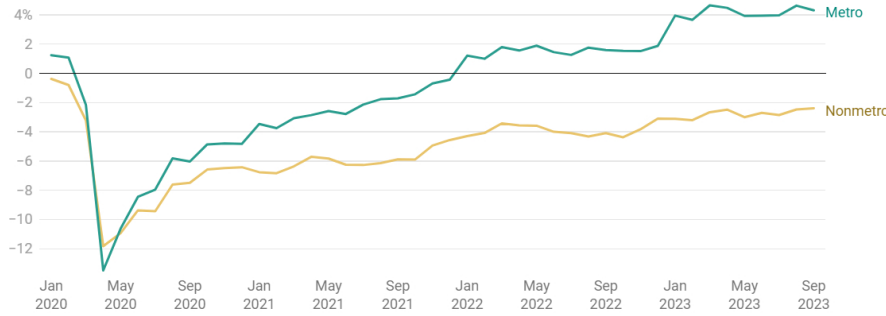


Chart: Daily Yonder / Sarah Melotte • Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Economic Research Service, Census Bureau • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Among mining communities, the gap between metropolitan and rural percent change in employment was almost seven percentage points.

Rural areas dependent on manufacturing, meanwhile, lost 51,000 jobs, the greatest employment loss in terms of raw numbers. But urban manufacturing counties saw a one percent increase in employment.

Percent Change in Employment in Counties Dependent on Manufacturing

Every month is compared to the corresponding month in 2019.

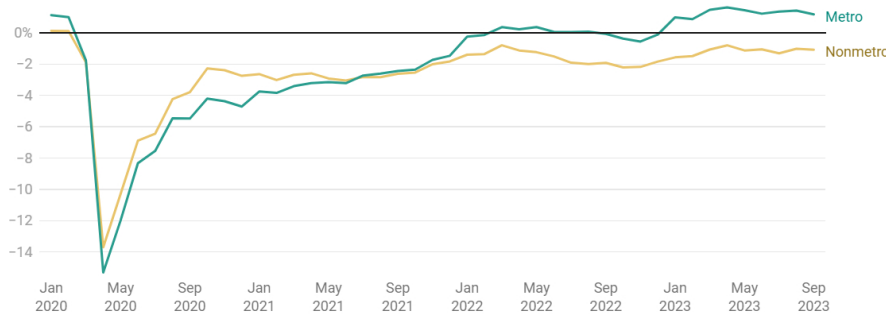
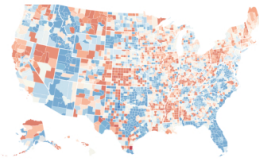
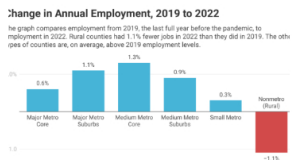


Chart: Daily Yonder / Sarah Melotte • Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Economic Research Service, Census Bureau • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Related



Rural America Added 738,000 Jobs in Last Two Years but Still Falls Short of Pre-Pandemic Employment

Rural Jobs Grew a Percentage Point in September, but the Longer-Term Trend Is Still a Problem

Rural SNAP Recipients Will Have Harder Time with Return to Work Requirements

[Republish This Story](#)



in print, under a Creative Commons license.

TAGGED: data economy jobs

0 Comments

 Login ▾



Start the discussion...

LOG IN WITH

OR SIGN UP WITH DISQUS 



Name

 • Share

Best Newest Oldest

Be the first to comment.

 Subscribe  Privacy  Do Not Sell My Data

DISQUS

[Home](#) [About](#) [Contact](#) [Donate](#) [Republish Our Stories](#)

© 2024 Center for Rural Strategies. Proudly powered by [Newspack by Automattic](#) [Privacy Policy](#)

