



**Testimony of Dr. Kyle C. Kopko  
Director, Center for Rural Pennsylvania<sup>1</sup>**

Good afternoon Chairman Nordenberg, Leader Ward, Leader Costa, Leader Benninghoff, and Leader McClinton. Thank you for the opportunity to speak before the Commission. My name is Dr. Kyle C. Kopko, and I serve as the Director of the Center for Rural Pennsylvania.

As you know, the Center is a bipartisan, bicameral legislative research agency of the General Assembly. The Center's legislative mandates include two broad charges: 1) conducting and sponsoring applied policy research to benefit our rural communities; and 2) maintaining a comprehensive database of statistical indicators to assist policymakers in meeting the needs of rural Pennsylvania. I will use information from this database to discuss a variety of population and demographic trends in rural Pennsylvania in the hopes that these data will be useful to the Commission.

Although the detailed results of the 2020 Census will not be available for several more weeks, we are able to rely on a variety of existing secondary data sources to highlight population and demographic changes in recent years.

Today, I will provide an overview<sup>2</sup> of three data trends or themes that the Commission may wish to consider when reapportioning Pennsylvania's legislative districts:

1. Population changes over time, including what we refer to as the "Bifurcation of Pennsylvania" – that is, population shifts to the southeastern part of the Commonwealth;
2. Demographic changes with regard to age and race/ethnicity; and
3. The division of school districts within legislative districts.

Before addressing each of these topics, it is important to provide a brief methodological summary. The data presented here are primarily from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (both 5-year average surveys and 1-year surveys) and various decennial censuses. It is possible that American Community Survey data, and other survey data from federal and state agencies, may

<sup>1</sup> Portions of this written testimony were previously included in a submission to the Pennsylvania Senate State Government Committee on May 26, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> This written testimony is intended to provide an overview of key data findings. The data visualizations that accompany this testimony provide a greater level of detail, and more information, than what is presented here. Among other things, the accompanying visualizations include maps of rural/urban Pennsylvania, school district maps, population estimates by county and legislative district, information on group quarters, Census response rates, and other data.

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625 Forster St., Room 902  
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not precisely align with updated Census data that will be released in the coming weeks. Nevertheless, these estimates represent the best available data currently at our disposal.

Additionally, much of our data analysis occurs at the county level. The Center for Rural Pennsylvania defines a county as rural when the number of people per square mile is below the average statewide population density (284 people per square mile, as of the 2010 Census). All other counties are considered urban. The Center also classifies school districts and municipalities as rural or urban.<sup>3</sup> The rural/urban school district definition mirrors that of counties – if a school district is below 284 people per square mile, the district is classified as rural; all others are classified as urban. A municipality is classified as rural when the population density within the municipality is less than the statewide average density of 284 persons per square mile, or the total population is less than 2,500, unless more than 50 percent of the population lives in an urbanized area as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau. All other municipalities are classified as urban. Later this year, the Center will begin the process of updating its classification of rural/urban communities based upon the 2020 Census data.

### **Population Bifurcation**

In terms of population changes, Pennsylvania can be divided into two regions: the southeast and the rest of the state.

Generally speaking, we are including counties that are east of Interstate 81 from Franklin to Lebanon counties and south of Interstate 78 from Berks to Northampton counties as the southeast region. All counties south and east of these two major transportation corridors have seen significant population increases, while counties west and north of this line have seen population declines, with some exceptions. From 1980 to 2019, the southeast corner of the state has experienced a 22 percent increase in population, while the rest of the state has seen a 6 percent decline.

This population shift also mirrors an economic shift. Per capita household income in the southeast has increased, and it has increased at a faster rate than the rest of the state. After adjusting for inflation, in 1980, per capita income in the southeast was \$33,085, and by 2019, it was \$63,111, an increase of more than \$30,000 or 91 percent. In comparison, the per capita income in the rest of the state went from \$29,194 in 1980 to \$51,497 in 2019, an increase of about \$22,300 or 76 percent. In addition, the unemployment rate in the southeast has been 1 percentage point lower than the rest of the state.

Many rural counties have seen population stagnation and decline in recent years. Specifically, from 2010 to 2019, 38 of Pennsylvania's 48 rural counties have seen their populations decrease. Rural Pennsylvania, however, was not alone in this trend. Across the United States, two out of every three rural counties lost population during the last decade. This trend was especially prevalent among rural counties in the Pennsylvania border states of Ohio, New York, Maryland, and West Virginia.

When examining these population shifts within legislative districts, these changes will primarily affect legislative districts in northern and western Pennsylvania, particularly in rural areas. Of the 203 House legislative districts, 100 experienced no change or population decline between 2014 and 2019. Of the 50 Senate districts, 23 experienced no change or population decline during this same timeframe.

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<sup>3</sup> Maps of school districts and municipalities classified according to the Center's rural/urban definition are included in the supplemental data visualizations.

While we do not have adequate longitudinal data on “group quarters,”<sup>4</sup> we can provide information based upon the 2010 Census. At the time, there were 5,553 group quarters throughout the Commonwealth, of which 1,530 (or 28 percent) were located in rural areas. As of 2020, there was not a substantial difference in the percentage of the rural or urban population that lived in group quarters. About 3 percent of the urban population lived in group quarters (N=278,111), while 4 percent of the rural population lived in group quarters (N=148,002).

## **Changing Characteristics of Rural and Urban Pennsylvanians**

Pennsylvania’s overall population is becoming older and more diverse. I will discuss each of these trends in turn.

### Pennsylvania’s Aging Population

In 2019, 20 percent of rural residents were 65 years old and older. Among urban residents, the percentage was slightly lower at 17 percent. In that same year, 14 of Pennsylvania’s 67 counties had more senior citizens (65 years old and older) than youth (under 20 years old). This trend will likely continue as more Baby Boomers turn 65 years old. In fact, projections suggest that 47 counties will have more senior citizens than youth by 2030.

The aging of our population will likely have profound effects on educational institutions and employers. There will likely be fewer students enrolled in schools and fewer employees in the workforce.

### Increasingly Diverse Population

From 2000 to 2019, people of color in Pennsylvania (non-white, including those who identify as Hispanic/Latino) increased 54 percent. This dramatic increase has occurred throughout the state, especially in rural counties, where the number of people of color increased 88 percent.

Within rural Pennsylvania, the increase in diversity among rural residents is primarily attributable to a higher birth rate among people of color. Over the past 15 years, the birth rate for people of color who live in rural areas was higher than white residents who live in rural areas. In addition, the fertility rate for rural people of color is 2.17, while the fertility rate for white rural residents is 1.66. Generally speaking, a fertility rate of 2.1 is needed to sustain population levels.

Based upon the data available to the Center, it does not appear that people of color who are living in group quarters in rural areas are the primary cause of this demographic group’s population increase in recent years. A larger percentage of rural Pennsylvania’s people of color population live in group quarters, relative to their counterparts in urban areas. As of 2010, approximately 17 percent (N=43,155) of people of color who lived in rural areas resided in group quarters. Approximately 4 percent (N=90,172) of people of color who lived in urban areas resided in group quarters.

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<sup>4</sup> The United States Census Bureau “classifies all people not living in housing units (house, apartment, mobile home, rented rooms) as living in group quarters.” Group quarters includes both institutional (e.g., corrections facilities, nursing homes, long-term care hospitals, etc.) and non-institution (e.g., college dormitories, military barracks, group homes, homeless shelters, etc.) settings. See United States Census Bureau. 2018. “Group Quarters/Residence Rules.” <https://www.census.gov/topics/income-poverty/poverty/guidance/group-quarters.html>. Last accessed July 27, 2021.

## School Districts and Legislative Representation

There are 500 school districts throughout Pennsylvania. Of these school districts, 235 (or 47 percent) are located in rural areas, and 265 (or 53 percent) are located in urban areas.

Most school districts in Pennsylvania are divided between two or more House districts. As of 2020, 287 (or 57 percent) of all school districts in Pennsylvania were represented by two or more members of the House. Understandably, the division of school districts across House districts was more common in urban areas (N = 166, or 63 percent of urban school districts), than rural areas (N = 121, or 51 percent of rural districts).

As of 2019, population estimates suggest that 473 school districts (or 95 percent of school districts) across the Commonwealth have a population of fewer than 63,012 residents (the average population per House district in Pennsylvania). In theory, any of these school districts could be included entirely within a single House district. However, there are obviously a variety of considerations that warrant the splitting of school districts across legislative district boundaries.

As one may suspect, given the size of Senate districts, there are far fewer instances where a Senate district divides a school district. In fact, 73 percent of rural school districts and urban school districts are included within a single Senate district.

### What does this mean for reapportionment?

First, many legislative districts, particularly those in rural areas, will become geographically larger. For some rural constituents, this means that they have to travel farther to meet with their legislator.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the Center's previous research<sup>6</sup> has demonstrated that rural residents are more likely than their urban counterparts to lack adequate internet access for the purpose of electronic communication.<sup>7</sup> For this reason, the Commission may wish to consider the ease of transportation within a district and the (in)ability of residents to effectively engage with legislators and their staff through broadband access.

Second, legislators will likely be challenged to balance the interests and concerns of southeastern Pennsylvania with those of the rest of the state. Population shifts within the Commonwealth may present a variety of policy challenges in the years to come as legislators seek to meet the needs of their constituents.

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<sup>5</sup> The supplemental data visualizations included with this testimony provide estimates of miles of roadways within Pennsylvania's legislative districts.

<sup>6</sup> See Meinrath, Sascha, et al. 2019. "Broadband Availability and Access in Rural Pennsylvania." Center for Rural Pennsylvania Report.

[https://www.rural.palegislature.us/broadband/Broadband\\_Availability\\_and\\_Access\\_in\\_Rural\\_Pennsylvania\\_2019\\_Report.pdf](https://www.rural.palegislature.us/broadband/Broadband_Availability_and_Access_in_Rural_Pennsylvania_2019_Report.pdf).

Accessed July 27, 2021. See also Meinrath, Sascha, et al. 2020. "Broadband Demand: The Cost and Price Elasticity of Broadband Internet Service in Rural Pennsylvania." Center for Rural Pennsylvania Report.

<https://www.rural.palegislature.us/documents/reports/Broadband-Demand-Report-October-2020.pdf>. Accessed July 27, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Readers are also encouraged to review the broadband coverage maps created by the staff of Penn State Extension for recent information on coverage gaps throughout the Commonwealth. See <https://extension.psu.edu/pennsylvania-broadband-map>. Accessed July 27, 2021.

Finally, due to an aging population and increased diversity, legislators will need to consider the distinctive needs of these constituents. In particular, legislators may be challenged with balancing the needs of an aging population along with those of younger adults and families.

Thank you again for this opportunity to discuss population and demographic trends in Pennsylvania. I hope this information is helpful and I am happy to answer your questions.