



# RURAL WELLBEING

## Rural Classification Factsheet



### HIGHLIGHTS

- Tying rural classification to population can make it difficult to track changes in rural communities over time if communities lose their rural designation as they grow.
- It is important to consider alternative classification approaches that are more inclusive and celebrate the characteristics of rural life.

## Overview

This factsheet explores different approaches to classifying rural communities and the implications of each approach regarding population and population change.

### Data source:

Statistics Canada. 2022. Census Profile. 2021 Census.  
Statistics Canada Catalogue no. [98-316-X2021001](https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/iprofile/98-316-X2021001).

For interactive maps and data visualizations, please see the [Geographies Dashboard](#).



## What is rural?

It is challenging to define what rural means. For many people, rural is a feeling that cannot be explained or quantified by numbers. And yet, it is important to develop statistical criteria that enable us to examine rural trends, so that we can identify issues and opportunities for rural communities.

Common approaches for defining rural criteria are usually based on community characteristics that reflect the rural continuum such as population size, population density, access to services, or proximity to urban areas. Generally, rural communities have a smaller population and are located further away from large cities. No single classification can adequately represent the unique characteristics of each rural community across Ontario. However, classifying communities as rural can be useful when gathering data and presenting information for decision making, statistical reporting, and advocacy.

Selecting a classification approach has implications for how rural trends are reported and discussed. For example, reported trends in rural population growth may vary widely depending on which classification approach is used. Some measures may indicate that the rural population is growing while others may show a decline. It is important to understand how different approaches to rural classification influence stories about what's happening in rural Ontario.



Check out OMAFRA's **Rural Data Hub** to explore rural trends over time in Ontario!

[Learn more](#)

## Classification approaches

This factsheet explores the differences between six rural classification approaches. We examined how many people and how many communities (i.e., census subdivisions, municipalities) would be considered rural according to each approach.

We selected two approaches using criteria developed by Statistics Canada (Table 1). In addition, two approaches use an adaptation of Statistics Canada criteria, and two more approaches are based only on population thresholds.

The Statistics Canada criteria reflect both dimensions of rurality because they include measures of population size and proximity to services. In contrast, the population threshold approaches are based solely on population size or population density and do not reflect a community's ability to access services. The population thresholds we selected are loosely based on criteria that Statistics Canada uses in some of its definitions, however, these approaches are not commonly used in Ontario and were selected for comparison purposes only.

**Table 1.** List of selected rural classification approaches.

Classification Approach	Rural Criteria
<b>Adaptation of Statistical Area Classification (ROI's Classification)</b>	Rural communities are outside of Census Metropolitan Areas. Sources: <a href="#">Rural Ontario Institute</a> , <a href="#">OMAFRA</a>
<b>Statistical Area Classification</b>	Rural communities are outside of Census Metropolitan Areas and Census Agglomerations. Source: <a href="#">Statistics Canada</a>
<b>Index of Remoteness</b>	Rural communities have an <a href="#">index value</a> greater than 0.29. Source: <a href="#">Statistics Canada</a>
<b>Adaptation of Population Centres</b>	Rural communities do not have a population centre within their boundaries. Source: <a href="#">Statistics Canada</a>
<b>Population</b>	Rural communities have a population of less than 10,000 people.
<b>Population density</b>	Rural communities have a population density of less than 400 people per square kilometre.

## **Adaptation of Statistical Area Classification (ROI's Classification)**

The Rural Ontario Institute (ROI) [classifies communities](#) as rural if they are located outside of Census Metropolitan Areas. Communities are classified as urban if they are part of a Census Metropolitan Area. This approach is also used by the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs for their rural data and analysis accessible on Ontario.ca.

### **Statistical Area Classification**

Statistics Canada groups census subdivisions together based on population size and commuting patterns. Large cities with a population greater than 100,000 and surrounding municipalities within commuting distance are classified as [Census Metropolitan Areas](#). Census Agglomerations are smaller cities with at least 10,000 people and surrounding municipalities within commuting distance.

This approach considers communities as rural if they are located outside of census Metropolitan Areas and Census Agglomerations. According to this approach, small communities may be classified as urban if they are close enough to the services and amenities of an urban area.

### **Population Centres**

According to Statistics Canada, a [population centre](#) has a population of at least 1,000 and a population density of at least 400 persons per square kilometre. Small population centres have a population between 1,000 and 29,999. Medium population centres have a population between 30,000 and 99,999. Large population centres have a population greater than 100,000 people.

Statistics Canada designates areas as population centres at the scale of the [dissemination block](#). However, our analysis uses census subdivision as the smallest geographic scale. For this analysis, we classified communities as rural if they do not have a population centre within their boundaries. Communities were designated as urban if a population centre exists within the boundaries of a census subdivision.

### **Index of Remoteness**

Statistics Canada developed an [Index of Remoteness](#) based on a community's distance to population centres and their population size. The index produces values that range from zero (i.e., not remote, very accessible) to one (i.e., very remote, not accessible). Index values can be categorized in different groups that reflect urban and rural characteristics. We selected the manual categorization of index values, as described by [Subedi et al.](#) (2020). We classified communities as rural if they have an index value greater than 0.29 because these communities are more remote (i.e., less accessible). Communities with an index value less than 0.29 are considered to be less remote (i.e., more accessible), so we classified them as urban.

### **Population and Population Density approaches**

Rural communities have a population of less than 10,000 people, or a population density of less than 400 people per square kilometer. These approaches do not consider the proximity of a community to services, amenities, or urban areas.

## Comparison of classification approaches

We used 2021 population data and community names from the 2021 Statistics Canada Census profile to calculate the number of people and the number of communities classified as rural and urban by each approach. Some communities could not be classified due to missing population data.

The population density approach produces the highest proportion of rural population and a high proportion of rural communities (Table 2). Smaller rural populations result from using the Index of Remoteness and population centres approaches. The population density approach resulted in a higher rural population than ROI's classification and the Statistical Area Classification. However, the ROI classification produced a similar number of rural communities as the population density approach. The Index of Remoteness approach produced the smallest proportion of rural communities.

**Table 2.** Comparison of classification approaches for population and number of communities (2021).

Classification Approach	Proportion of population		Proportion of communities	
	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban
<b>ROI Classification</b>	17%	83%	81%	19%
<b>Statistical Area Classification</b>	10%	90%	73%	27%
<b>Population Centres</b>	4%	96%	60%	40%
<b>Index of Remoteness</b>	4%	96%	49%	51%
<b>Population</b>	7%	93%	70%	26%
<b>Population Density</b>	35%	65%	84%	12%

**Note:** community proportions may not add up to 100% for some approaches due to missing data.

We also examined population change between 2016-2021 for each approach. ROI's classification is the only one to show a slight decline in the rural population since 2016 (Table 3). All other approaches show that rural population is growing, however, urban areas grew more than rural areas. The Index of Remoteness shows a large rural population increase of 25%, which may be a result of methodological changes for the 2021 update. Statistical Area Classification and population density approaches report similar increases in rural populations of 3% and 4%, respectively.

The number of rural communities decreased according to ROI's classification and the population approach. The population centres and population density approaches did not show much change in the number of rural communities since 2016 (Table 3). The Statistical Area Classification and Index of Remoteness show similar increases in the number of rural communities.

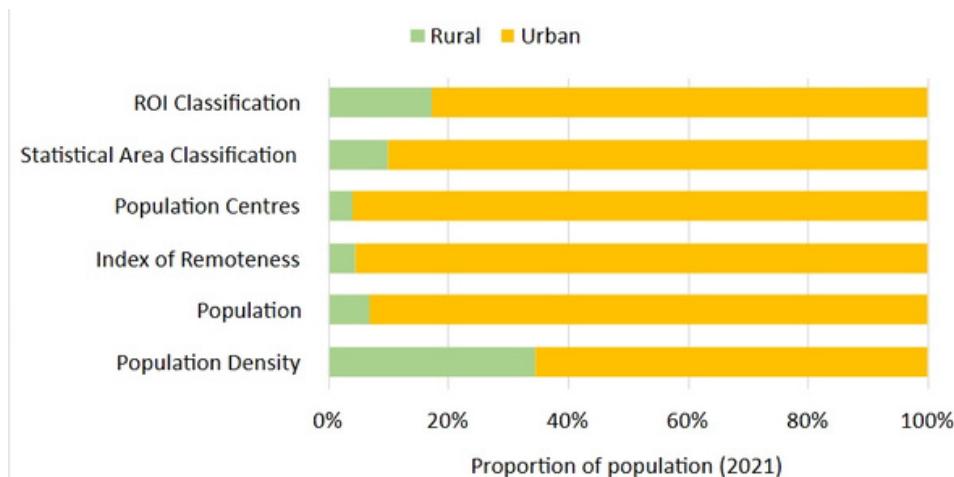
**Table 3.** Comparison of changes in population and number of communities between 2016-2021.

Classification Approach	Population Change		Number of Communities	
	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban
<b>ROI Classification</b>	-0.4%	7%	-1%	8%
<b>Statistical Area Classification</b>	3%	6%	4%	1%
<b>Population Centres</b>	1%	6%	1%	2%
<b>Index of Remoteness</b>	25%	5%	5%	-2%
<b>Population</b>	0.3%	6%	-0.5%	3%
<b>Population Density</b>	4%	7%	1%	6%

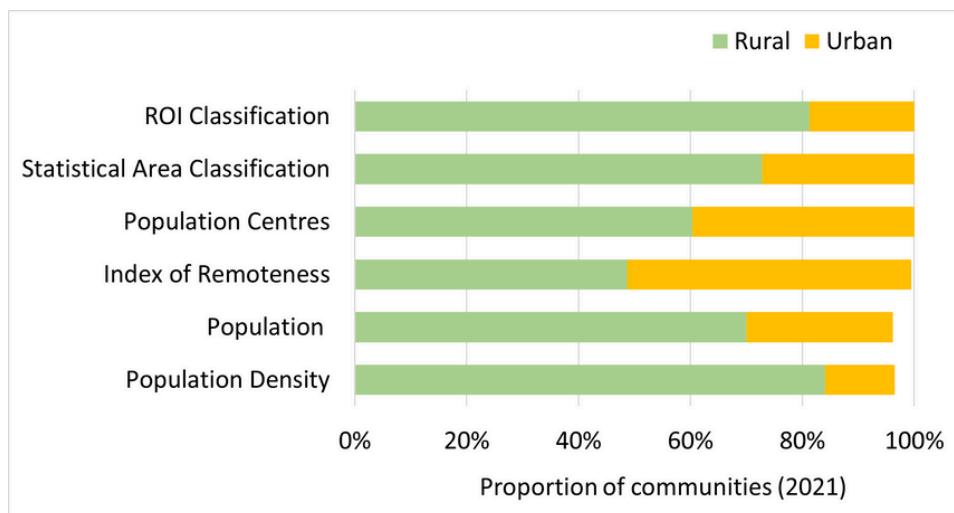
## Rural populations versus rural communities

As the different classification approaches show, most of Ontario's population is urban (Figure 1), while most of Ontario's communities are rural (Figures 2 and 3). This contradiction creates unique challenges for rural communities. Because of their larger populations, urban areas usually have more resources and have better access to data and evidence for planning and decision making.

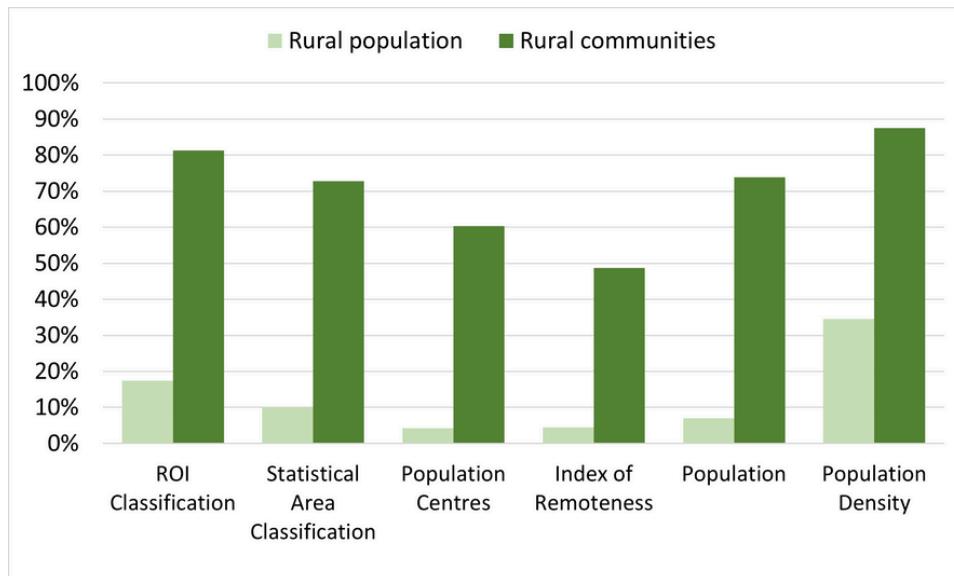
In many cases, rural areas are not prioritized for data collection programs because of their smaller population. However, rural governments must still follow the same planning processes as urban communities but with fewer resources and less information. All communities in Ontario should have access to the same level of data and information, regardless of their population size. Without data, rural communities may struggle to identify issues and needs, direct resources efficiently and effectively, and measure the impact of decisions on the wellbeing of their citizens. Strategies are needed to improve data equity and provide more support to rural communities for evidence-based decision making.



**Figure 1.** Proportions of rural and urban population by classification approach.



**Figure 2.** Proportions of rural and urban communities by classification approach (Note: proportions do not add up to 100% for some classification approaches due to missing data).



**Figure 3.** Proportions of rural population versus rural communities by classification approach (2021).

## Summary

Most of the classification approaches explored here show that Ontario's rural population is growing. We know that people in rural communities tend to be older than people in urban communities, so a lot of rural population growth is a result of migration. People are choosing to move to rural areas. This signals the attractiveness and vibrancy of rural communities in Ontario.

But it can be challenging to talk about rural population growth if we are classifying communities according to their population size. Using these approaches, rural communities will eventually become re-classified as urban once they pass certain population thresholds. This can make it seem like the rural population is shrinking over time, which is not accurate.

For transparency and clarity, reports about rural population change should clearly explain what criteria were used to classify communities as rural. Tying rural classification to population can make it difficult to track changes in rural communities over time if communities lose their rural designation as they grow. This may also marginalize rural populations and downplay their significant contributions to Ontario's economic, social, and ecological wellbeing.

It is important to consider alternative approaches that are more inclusive and celebrate the characteristics of rural life. Is it better to use criteria, like population size, that are dynamic and reflect a community's evolution from rural to urban? Would a different approach, not based on population or access to services, be more reflective of a community's rural identity over time?

The selection of a rural classification approach would benefit by reflecting rural perspectives and statistical needs. The information presented in this factsheet can help rural communities, governments, organizations and researchers better understand the implications of choosing a rural classification approach and make informed decisions about how rural stories are told.



This factsheet was prepared by Danielle Letang, Manager of Data Strategy for the Rural Ontario Institute. Questions about data sources and comments or feedback can be directed to [facts@ruralontarioinstitute.ca](mailto:facts@ruralontarioinstitute.ca).

This factsheet complements the [Geographies Dashboard](#) and provides context for assessments of rural wellbeing.

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