

Technology and the Urban–Rural Divide in America

WRITTEN BY RICHARD FLORIDA

The dominant narrative in America today is that urban and rural face divergent futures. The belief that technology is driving urban prosperity and rural decline shapes this view.

A full-page photograph of Richard Florida, a man with grey hair and glasses, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and dark tie. He is standing in a field of tall, dry, golden-brown grass. In the background, there are some trees and a building under a cloudy sky. The text is positioned on the right side of the image.

Richard Florida:
"As the COVID-19
pandemic demands
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rural agenda."



This perceived divide is also reflected in popular assumptions about the COVID-19 pandemic as web searches for homes in rural communities have spiked, ostensibly driven by individuals seeking to flee the dangers of density.

This narrative fails to capture the transformation taking place across America and the pandemic threat. Advances in AI, robotics and biotechnology are sparking job and population growth in large metropolitan areas. But these same technologies are transforming rural manufacturing, agriculture, remote finance and logistics operations and giving rise to new recreational com-

munities while some mid-sized urban areas struggle.

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Urban vs. rural community, winners and losers

A study I completed with my colleague **Karen King** of changes in economic vitality between urban and rural communities between 2001 and 2016 reveals the complex state of urban and rural communities. Urban America has driven population and job growth over the last two decades. Every urban county has experienced population growth

between 2001 and 2016 while the rural population declined. But the decline was not uniform. Nearly half of all rural counties grew at a rate that exceed the national average.

Similarly, while large metro areas account for over a third of the counties in the top 10% for job growth between 2001 and 2016, rural counties not adjacent to large metro areas had the second largest group of counties in the top 10%. These were counties located in states like the Dakotas, Iowa, Louisiana and Oklahoma.

Similar patterns exist in the growth of talent. Urban counties in large metro areas saw the largest increase in college grads between 2010 and 2016. But 8 of the 10 counties that saw the larg-



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est increase in college grads were rural counties located in places like Alaska, Colorado, Nebraska and Montana.

Is density a risk?

Assumptions about the impact of COVID-19 on urban and rural America are equally susceptible to broad brush generalizations. Large urban areas with dense populations and strong global connections such as New York and London are experiencing surging rates of infection and hospitalizations as are cities linked to major supply chains such as Detroit.

Analysis I undertook for CityLab found that density alone fails to capture the dynamics of the pandemic. Distinctions in the nature of jobs impacts

the risks created by density. A greater proportion of workers who can easily shift to remote work and telecommuting may explain why lockdowns in places such as San Francisco are more effective at bending the curve of new infections than in cities such as New York that have more jobs dependent upon face to face interaction.

A similar distribution of risk factors exists in rural communities. Research by **Bill Bishop** and **Tim Marena** of the *Daily Yonder** has found COVID-19 spreading through rural communities at about the same rate as large cities, but recreational centers, such as ski towns and areas adjacent to lakes that are linked to national and global tourists, are seeing infection rates four times their rural counterparts.

A new vision for economic and social vitality

Americans in large urban centers now line up, six feet apart, to enter food stores with a new appreciation of the bonds to rural workers utilizing advanced technologies to sustain the national food supply chain. Health Researchers in places such as New York and San Francisco racing to discover COVID-19 treatments may draw upon the power of cloud computing clusters located and maintained in places like rural Virginia, North Carolina and Iowa, whose communities may depend upon telemedicine services from cities.

Students in rural communities outside of cities such as Pittsburgh face hurdles posed by inadequate access to high speed broadband as school closures shift learning online. But their fellow students some urban Pittsburgh neighborhood also suffer from the digital divide.

Post-pandemic America will demand a reset, a new vision for economic and social vitality. A reawakened sense of the value of all occupations and interregional economic bonds creates an opportunity to shape a vision for leveraging technological advances to craft a new narrative for urban and rural America.

* *Daily Yonder* 1.4.2020, *Pandemic spreads into rural America at rate similar to urban areas*, <https://www.dailyyonder.com/pandemic-spreads-into-rural-america-at-rate-similar-to-urban-areas/2020/04/01/>



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Who?

Richard Florida is University Professor at University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management and School of Cities, where he also serves as Chief Urbanist in the Creative Destruction Lab. He is a Distinguished Fellow at New York University.

He is the author of more than ten books including *The Rise of the Creative Class* and more than one hundred books chapters and articles in peer-reviewed academic journals.

He is a Senior Editor at *The Atlantic*, where he co-founded and serves as Editor-at Large for *CityLab*, the world's leading publication devoted to cities and urbanism.

Florida previously taught at Carnegie Mellon, George Mason University and Ohio State University, and has been a visiting professor at Harvard and MIT and a non-resident Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution. He earned his Bachelor's degree from Rutgers College and his Ph.D. from Columbia University.