

Rural Decline in Maine
A Story of Five Counties
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No subject has ever captured my attention more than the decline of the rural section of Maine. This decline manifests as population loss, especially among the younger cohorts, economic activity loss, loss of educational opportunity, loss of jobs, and loss of quality of life and ultimately, loss of hope. Rural Maine is holder of Maine culture, history and identity from the “lobsta gangs” of the Downeast Washington County coastline to the potato farmers of Aroostook County and the French Canadian and Scottish loggers of the Great North Maine Woods in Aroostook and Piscataquis Counties. What has defined Maine as a rural state is now at risk. This decline is not endemic to Maine but systemic for all of rural America, if not for all rural parts of this Earth. It is this concern that prompted my research in rural sustainable development and my going studies of anything and everything related to rural policy. For Maine, this decline is exemplified by stories that the data tells about Maine’s three most rural counties, Washington, Aroostook and Piscataquis, and the two counties that house Maine’s two fastest growing metropolitan areas; Bangor Me in Penobscot County and Portland ME in Cumberland county. Of Maine’s 1.3 million population, over 515, 000 (39%) now live in the greater Portland area and over 153, 000 (11.5%) people in the Greater Bangor area.¹ With over 50% of Maine population in these two urban areas, can we still claim to be rural state?

Chart 1
5 Counties Population Totals (US Census Data)
1995-2011

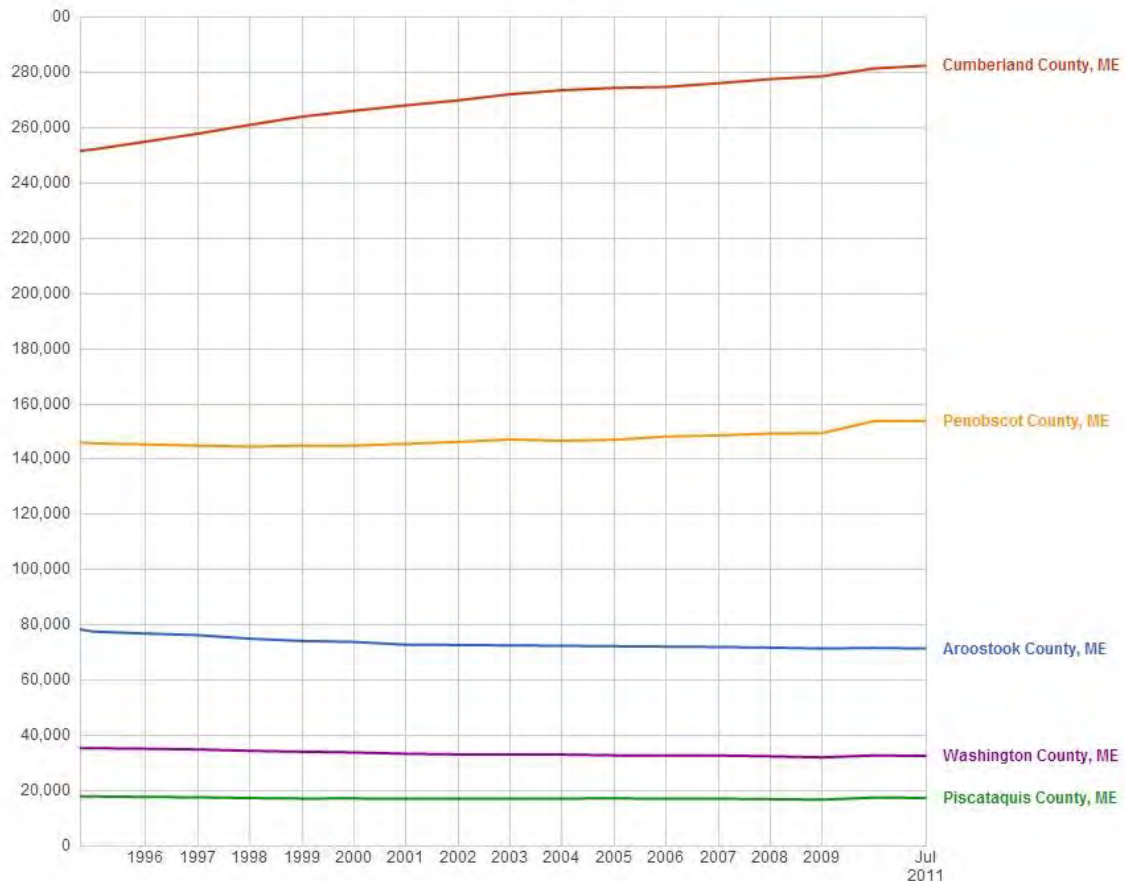
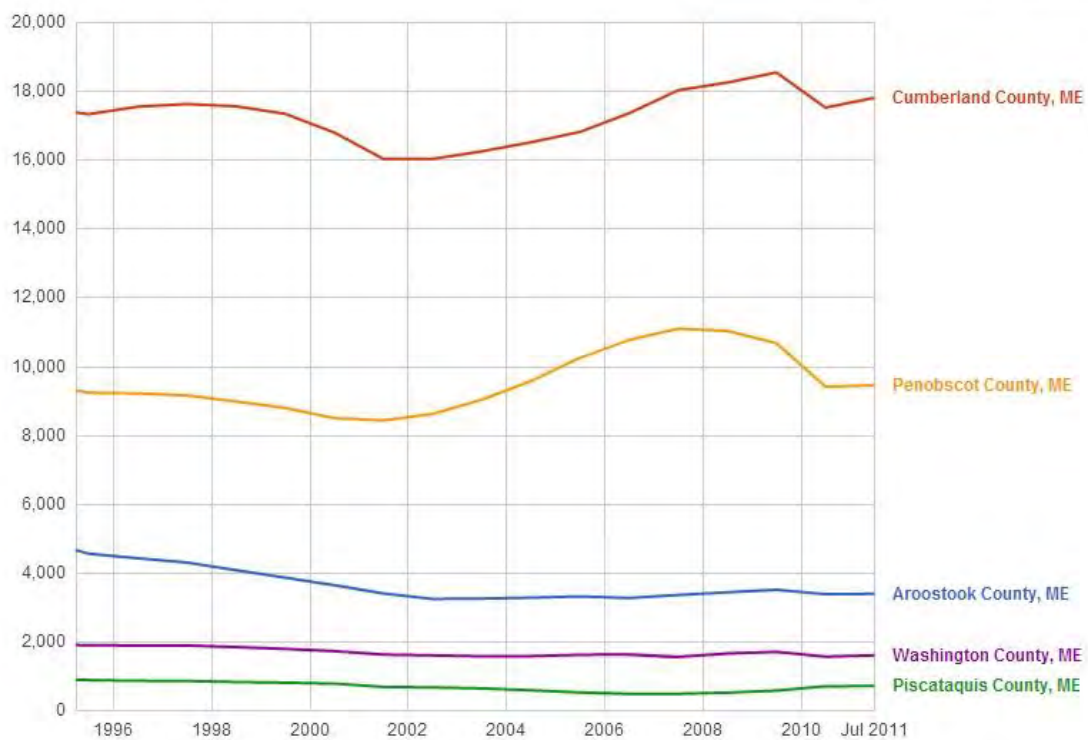


Chart 2
5 Counties Population of 24-29 Year Olds (US Census Data)
1995-2011



The US Census data from 1995-2011 (Chart 1) confirms steady growth of the urban counties and the steady decline in the three rural counties. Starting in 2002, this phenomenon is much more evident among the 24-29 age group (Chart 2). Of great interest was the sudden decline of the age group in the urban counties, and a slight rise in the rural counties, when the US economy slipped into a recession in 2008 and the resumption of growth among this age group in 2011 when the economic recovery began. The dip in growth rates is evident in Cumberland and Penobscot counties but not in the three rural counties. These young people were leaving the rural counties of Maine for the economic opportunities in Portland (Cumberland County) and Bangor (Penobscot County) and returning home to rural Maine when jobs became scarce. Unemployment rates in the five counties seen to confirm that thought with unemployment rates spiking early in 2008 in all five counties (Chart 3). Throughout the last decade, the employment picture was always rosier in Cumberland and Penobscot counties. The greater seasonal variation in the three rural counties' unemployment rates is indicative of the employment opportunities available in natural resource base industries. Whether it is fishing, farming or logging, all three of these industries suffer seasonal ebbs and flows in labor requirements with logging shutting down in mud season and farming and fishing idle in winter.¹ Traditionally, many farmers and commercial fishermen in Maine used to spend winters logging but the mechanized nature of modern industrial logging has created a longer logging season that precludes such dual industry opportunities and incomes.

¹ Mud season is Maine's fifth season starting in April and extending through June or July. The five Maine seasons would be fall, winter, spring, mud, and a much longed for and too short summer.

Chart 3
5 Counties Unemployment Rates (US Bureau of Labor Data)
2001-2012

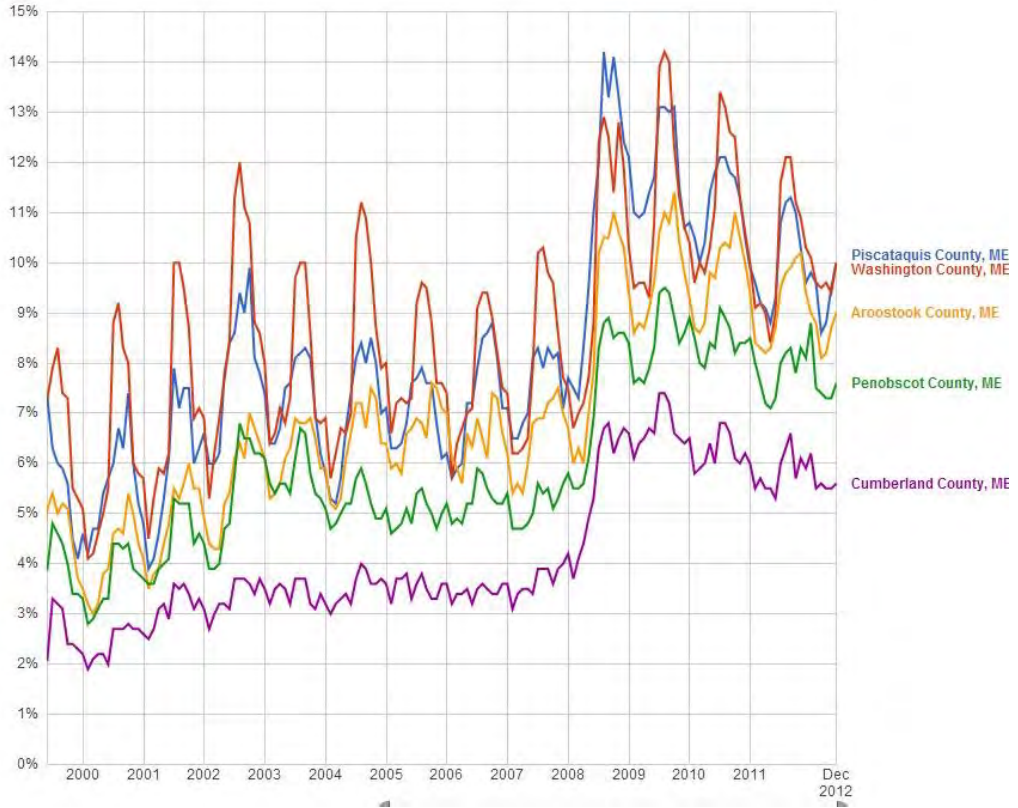
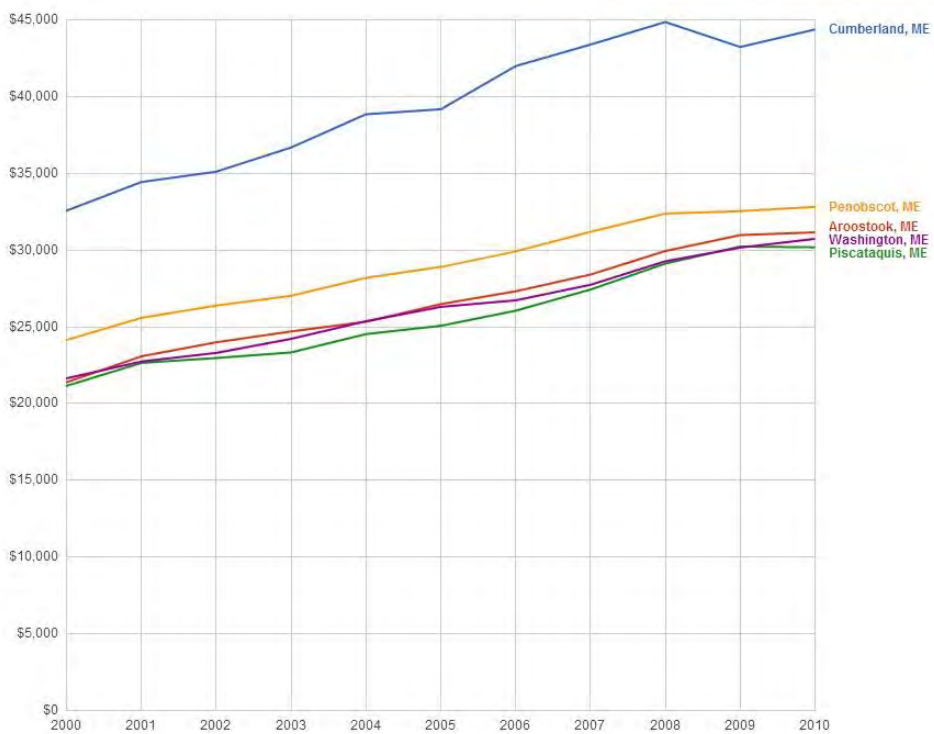
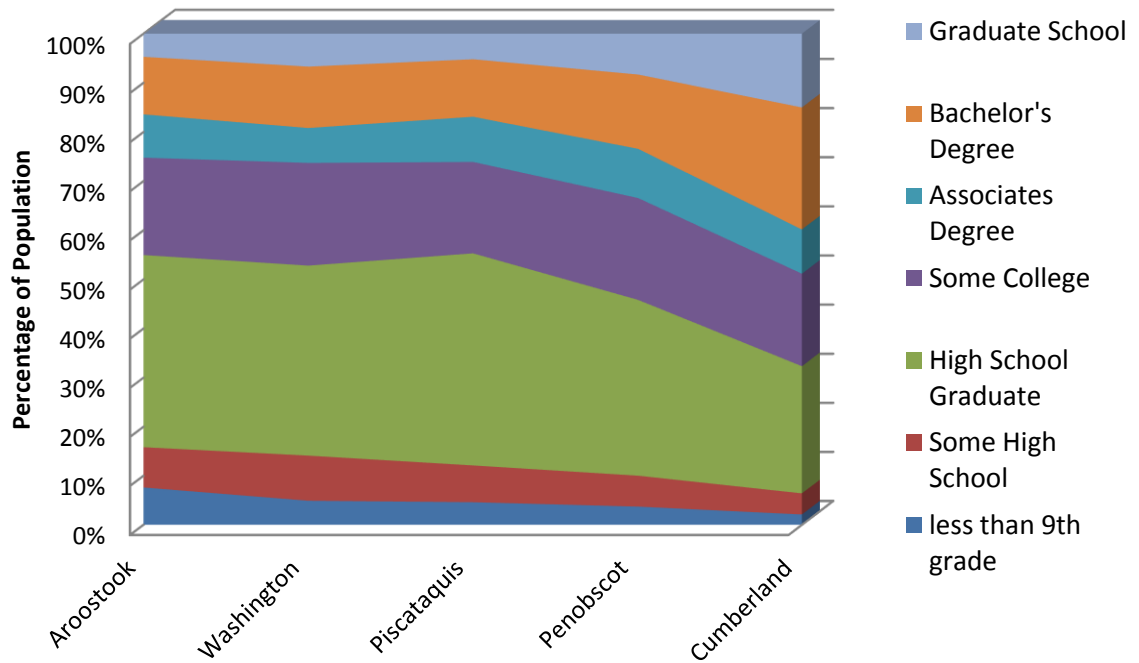


Chart 4
5 Counties Personal Income per Capita (US Bureau of Economic Analysis)
2000-2010



The employment outlook in the five counties affects income levels that are obtainable in the five counties. In 2010, the average income level per capita in Cumberland County was \$14,000 per year higher than in Piscataquis County (Chart 4). A person moving from Aroostook County to neighboring Penobscot county may see a 10% rise in income, a possible 30% increase if they continue to drive to Cumberland County. The poverty rates among the five counties also vary widely. In 2010, Washington County, the poorest and most economically distressed county in Maine, had a poverty rate of 19.4% with 30.9% of children under the age of 17 living in povertyⁱⁱ. This compares to some of the counties in America’s Appalachia poverty belt. Cumberland County has the lowest poverty rate in Maine at 10.3% with 13.6% of children under 17 living in poverty. This economic disparity among the five counties is alarming and cause for great concern especially in these tougher economic times. It is no wonder that younger people are living Rural Maine for Urban Maine. This 2008 recession has also negatively affected the federal and state government abilities to provide programming to mitigate for poverty or help for local economic development.

Chart 5
5 Counties Highest Educational Attainment
2010 US Census Data



Traditional, higher forms of education are viewed as paths to greater economic prosperity and this is certainly true for Maine's citizens. The question that needs revisiting is what level and type of education is required for success in rural economies and is that level of education different in urban economies? Does an education drive rural economy or is educational attainment a benefit of a vibrant rural economy? When we compare the five counties, there is a distinct difference in the level of education of the citizens of the rural counties from those residing in the two urban counties. Of the seven campuses of the University of Maine systems, two, UMPI and UMFK, reside in the rural county of Aroostook and one, UMM, in Washington County. The two largest campuses, USM and UM, reside in Cumberland and Penobscot County. Of the seven campuses of Maine's Community College System, there is a campus in each of the five counties with the exceptions of Piscataquis County, which has no institutes of higher education within its boundaries. Despite the three rural counties having differing numbers of colleges, there are no significantly different patterns of educational attainments among the citizens of the three rural counties. Educational attainment in the two urban counties, however, differs significantly from the three rural counties and from each other. There are greater numbers of college-educated citizens in Cumberland and my guess that it is due to Portland more active economy.

Younger people are leaving Rural Maine for Urban Maine with good reason; they need economic opportunity and economic security. The unfortunate part is higher education institutes in Rural Maine are preparing rural students for urban jobs. Those young people desiring to remain in Rural Maine may not view higher education as the correct venue but we have decimated any vocational training opportunities they could have sought out when Maine's Vocational Technical Schools all became Community Colleges. Our best and brightest leave Rural Maine to help build the economies of Urban Maine. Rural decline is no mystery, as Bill Clinton's political strategist James Carville sated in 1992 presidential campaign, "It's the economy, stupid". To reverse rural decline in Maine, we have to develop innovative economic strategies for Rural Maine. Maine's Systems of Higher Education should lead that charge. The answer for Rural Maine should not be to become more Urban, it is to figure out how to become economical sustainable given the resources available in Rural Maine.

ⁱ US Census Data

ⁱⁱ US Department of Agriculture Data