Digital Divides and Funding Flexibility: Consequences of Rural Classifications Used for Federal Education Programs

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Abstract: Achieving the goal of closing the digital divide has received much attention in recent years. However, the definitions of rural and urban areas have implications for program eligibility and the allocation of resources. This study examines the consequences of using different rural classifications for federal education programs. The study finds that the program definitions vary significantly and that the differences in definitions result in a variety of consequences for rural areas and the programs. The study also highlights the importance of understanding the differences in rural classifications and their implications for program eligibility and resource allocation.

Background: The definitions of rural and urban areas have been changing over time to reflect changes in population and demographics. The Census Bureau’s rural classification system has been used since 1990 to define rural areas for federal programs. The system is based on the population of the census block group, the location of the residence, and the location of the workplace. The program definitions for rural and urban areas have implications for program eligibility and the allocation of resources.

Methods: The study used a variety of data sources, including the Census Bureau’s Rural-Urban Continuum Classification (RUCC), the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) locale layer, and the Rural/Low-Income Community Technology Act (REAP) program. The study compared the definitions of rural and urban areas used by these programs and identified the differences in definitions.

Results: The study found that the definitions of rural and urban areas used by federal education programs vary significantly. The differences in definitions result in a variety of consequences for rural areas and the programs.

Conclusions: The study highlights the importance of understanding the differences in rural classifications and their implications for program eligibility and resource allocation. The study recommends that policymakers consider the implications of different definitions when designing and implementing federal education programs.

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Table 1: Federal Education Program Rural Classifications and Criteria

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Figure 1: NCES Locale Classifications

Figure 2: Racial Change if REAP Adopted NCES Criteria

Figure 3: Racial Change if E-Rate Adopted NCES Criteria

Figure 4: Distribution of Rural School Districts - REAP

Figure 5: Distribution of Urban/Rural School Districts by State and Program

Figure 6: Distribution of Rural School Districts - E-Rate

Discussion:

1. How does the distribution of urban and rural schools and school districts compare across programs?

2. What are the key differences in the definitions of rural and urban areas used by federal education programs?

3. What are the consequences of using different definitions for rural areas?

Results:

1. The distribution of urban and rural schools and school districts varies significantly across programs. For example, the REAP program defines rural areas as clusters with population less than 25,000, while the E-Rate program defines rural areas based on a variety of criteria. The NCES program defines rural areas based on demographic and geographic estimates.

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