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OPINION | COMMENTARY

## The False Stereotype of Two Americas

Statistically speaking, big cities and rural places have a lot more in common than we commonly believe.

By Elizabeth Currid-Halkett

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In the popular stereotype since the 2016 election, America is divided into two unappealing halves: irate, disenfranchised, often poor rural dwellers versus smug, satisfied and woefully obtuse urban elites—the latter joined in 2018 by suburbanites. The voting map illustrates this narrative: skinny coastal arms of blue, likely holding oat-milk lattes, alongside a giant, angry sea of red.

This story of division may be unsettling, but it isn't true. Using the American Community Survey's five-year data estimates, I studied socioeconomic and demographic data for 16,732 census-designated places, ranging from major cities like New York City and San Francisco to rural communities with fewer than 5,000 people like Danville, Pa., where I grew up. With my doctoral student Andy Eisenlohr, I divided these places into cities, with populations above 100,000; small towns significantly outside cities, with 5,000 to 15,000 inhabitants; and rural America, those places with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants. We tracked homeownership, unemployment, white unemployment, mortgage payment and household income, along with demographic measures such as education and ethnic diversity.

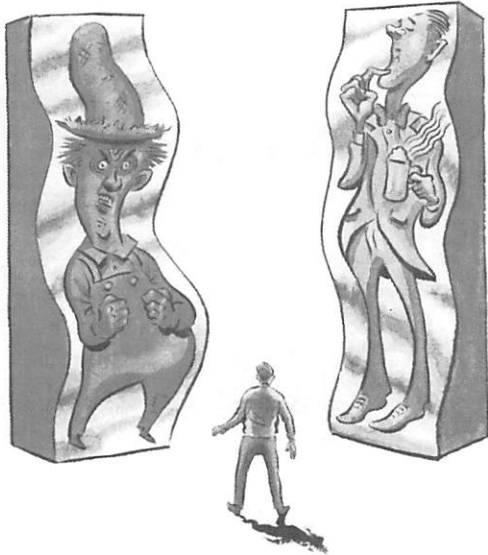


ILLUSTRATION: DAVID GOTHARD

What we discovered surprised us. By most measures other than education, median households in small-town America tend to be doing at least as well as their counterparts in urban America. Congressional districts that voted Republican in both 2016 and 2018 tend to have higher median incomes than those that went Democratic in both years. Of the 45 states we studied in detail, 28 have a lower share of significant poverty (defined as family income of under \$10,000 a year) in small towns than in urban centers. Fifteen of them have a higher median household income in small towns than in cities. That share would undoubtedly be higher if we adjusted income for cost of

living, which is lower in small towns. And 40 of the 45 states we analyzed have lower unemployment rates in small towns than in cities.

These results hold true for rural America, too. Take the mid-Atlantic, where 90% of all communities with fewer than 5,000 people voted Republican for president in 2016. The median homeownership rate for these places is around 73%, compared with 32% in New York City and 52% in Philadelphia. Fifty-eight percent of rural communities have a higher median household income than that of their state's reference city. Between 2012 and 2016, these places had a median unemployment rate of 6%, which is lower than in New York City (9%), Philadelphia (13%) and Washington (9%).

Midwestern rural communities, 96% of which voted Republican in 2016, show similar trends, with a median unemployment rate of 5%, both overall and for the white population. Forty-two percent of these rural places have higher median household incomes than cities such as St. Louis, Chicago and Milwaukee. In New England, these results are even starker. Sixty percent of rural communities have a higher median household income than the nearby cities. Rural New England places have a 66% homeownership rate, in contrast with New England cities such as Boston (34.7%), Providence, R.I. (34%), and Manchester, N.H. (47%). Homeownership—a key factor for intergenerational upward mobility—is almost universally lower in cities.

The data are more complicated than the stereotype when it comes to income inequality, too. Philadelphia's income distribution is remarkably similar to that of small Pennsylvania towns, which if anything are closer to a statistically normal distribution. While 3% of Philadelphia residents make over \$200,000, so do 2.1% of small-town Pennsylvanians, and whereas 14% of Philadelphians make less than \$10,000, only 8.1% of small-town Pennsylvanians do. A greater share of small-town Pennsylvanians fall into the prosperous \$100,000 to \$150,000 income range than do Philadelphians, and the proportions making \$150,000 to \$200,000 are similar (2.9% in small towns vs. 3.4% in the city).

The same pattern holds in New York City and Pittsburgh compared with the small towns of New York state and West Virginia, respectively. While 17.7% of Pittsburghers make \$100,000 or more, 18.5% of small-town West Virginians fall within this income bracket. Consistent with the wider income gaps in cities, notably more New York City households earn more than \$200,000 (8.3%) than in the Empire State's small towns (3.3%).

Education is the one area in which urban Americans exceed rural ones. Almost half of Austin, Texas, residents have bachelor's degrees, vs. 12% of Southern rural dwellers. The same contrast holds for Minneapolis and Denver compared with the rural Midwest and Southwest. (The same pattern is evident comparing cities with small towns.) Yet in urban areas we see ranges from 12% (Santa Ana, Calif.) to 60% (Seattle). If anything, the differences within urban or rural America are greater than those between the two.

And that's the point. We have created a false dichotomy between urban and rural America by cherry-picking places like San Francisco and New York and pitting them against equally specific examples of rural America, like Appalachian Kentucky. We have painted a portrait of an out-of-touch elite vs. an angry populist movement. But both are tiny minorities of the population. Most Americans aren't in the top 1% and don't attend Pilates classes or read the New Yorker. But neither are the lives of most rural Americans captured in the pages of "Hillbilly Elegy," nor are they angry and resentful of globalization and Manhattanites.

Extreme poverty and chronic unemployment exist in rural America. But these problems exist in the cities, too—evidence of a class divide that cuts across geography and demographics.

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