

## Chapter 2

# Population Distribution

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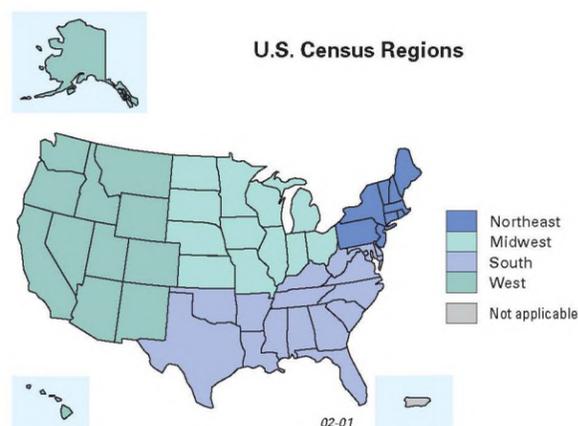
One of the key characteristics of a population is the way in which it is geographically distributed. Is the population primarily urban, for instance, with people living in densely settled cities and adjacent or nearby communities? Or is the population spread across a sparsely settled, rural landscape, with sizable distances separating communities? To give geographic context to the social and economic characteristics of the U.S. population shown in subsequent chapters, it is useful to know the size and geographic distribution of the population and how these features have changed over time.

### Historical Changes in Population Distribution

When the United States conducted its first census in 1790, the new nation's population of 3.9 million people was overwhelmingly rural. The most populous settlements at that time were the port cities of New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Charleston, and Baltimore. There were 24 urban places (population of 2,500 or more), nearly all located on or close to the Atlantic coastline. The largest urban place was New York, with 33,000 inhabitants.

By 1900, the country's population had grown to 76.2 million. Population centers such as St. Louis, New Orleans, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Louisville, and Memphis emerged near major rivers, and cities such as Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, Buffalo, and Milwaukee grew up around the Great Lakes. Also during this period, the railroad penetrated the West, and railroad towns such as Columbus, Ohio; Indianapolis; and Denver developed. The South remained predominantly rural, while the industrial Northeast and Midwest were home to most of the larger cities. (Map 02-01 displays the boundaries of the four census regions.)

At the end of the twentieth century, the country's population totaled 281.4 million, over 70 times as large as the population in 1790, and it continued to be distributed unevenly across the landscape. High population densities existed in some parts of the country,



such as the populous “megapolis” region stretching from Boston to Washington, DC, and the urbanized regions on the Great Lakes and along the Pacific Coast. Many areas of the Great Plains and the West continued to have low population densities.

### Population Growth by Region

While all four census regions of the United States—the Northeast, the Midwest, the South, and the West—grew considerably during the twentieth century, the South and the West experienced the largest increases in population, 76 million and 59 million, respectively. Combined, these two regions increased by 471 percent during the century, compared with the combined increase of 149 percent for the Northeast and the Midwest. Between 1900 and 2000, the total increase of 135 million people in the South and the West represented 66 percent of the U.S. population's increase of 205 million people. The population in the West was

more than 14 times as large in 2000 as in 1900, increasing from 4.3 million in 1900 to 63 million.

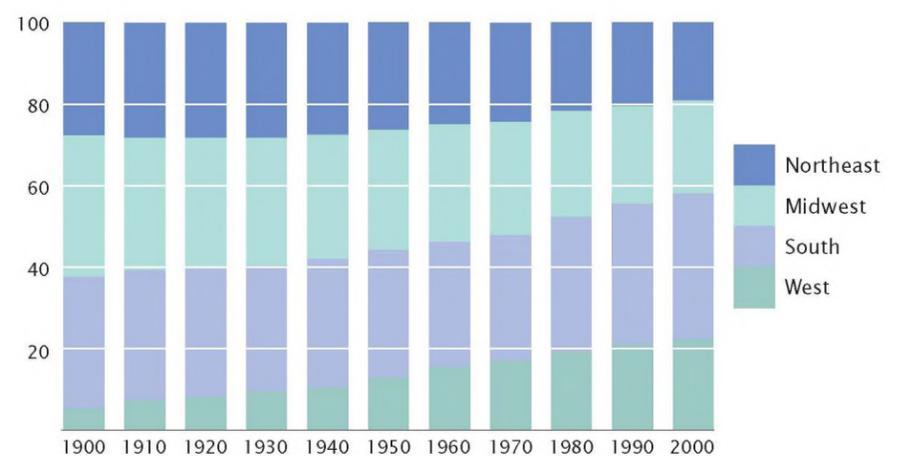
In 1950, the proportion of the total U.S. population in the West (13 percent) was half that of the next-largest region, the Northeast (26 percent). By 1990, the population in the West had surpassed the population in the Northeast, and by 2000 it was close to overtaking the Midwest as the country's second-most-populous region.

### Increased Urbanization, 1900 to 2000

U.S. population growth during the twentieth century occurred against a backdrop of increasing population density. In 1900, the urban share of the U.S. population was 39.6 percent, and the percentages for individual states and territories ranged from under 10 percent urban to over 80 percent (map 02-02). Several states in the Northeast were more than 60 percent urban, while most states in the South were less than 20 percent urban.

By 1950, the percentage urban for the nation as a whole had increased to 64 percent, with noticeable increases since 1900 in the percentage urban for

Figure 2-1.  
Percent Distribution of Population by Region, 1900 to 2000



states in the South and the West (map 02-03). While several states in the Northeast continued to be highly urban, other states had urbanized at faster rates. In all states, at least 26 percent of the population was urban.

In 2000, 79 percent of the U.S. population was urban (map 02-04), and the differences in percentage urban among the states were smaller than in previous decades. The West, which grew most rapidly during the twentieth century, was the most urbanized region in 2000 and included five of the ten most urbanized states (California, Nevada, Hawaii, Utah, and Arizona). Nevada in 2000 had a higher percentage urban than Massachusetts, while Utah and Arizona both had higher percentages urban than New York.

### Increasing Metropolitanization

In addition to becoming more urban, the population has become more metropolitan. For Census 2000, the general concept of a metropolitan area was that of a core area containing a substantial population nucleus, together with adjacent counties (or minor civil divisions in New England) having a high degree of social and economic integration with that core. Over the course of the twentieth century, increasing proportions of the U.S. population lived in metropolitan areas. In 1910, less than a third (28 percent) of the total

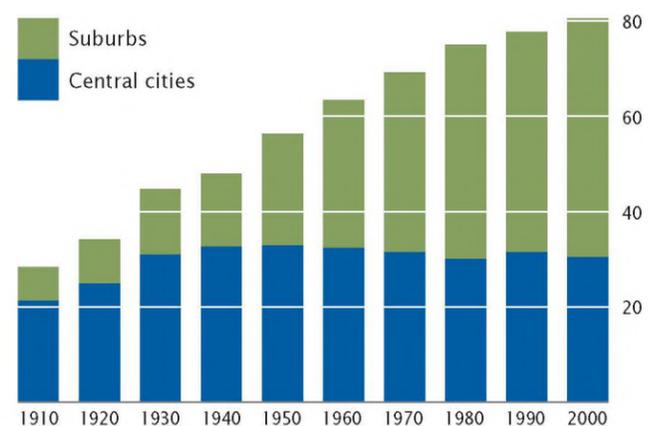
population lived in metropolitan areas (known as metropolitan districts at the time); by 1950, the proportion in metropolitan areas had grown to more than half of the U.S. population (56 percent). By 2000, the metropolitan population represented 80 percent of the U.S. total of 281.4 million people (Figure 2-2).

Metropolitan areas include central cities and their suburbs. Between 1910 and 1960, a larger proportion of the total population lived in central cities than in suburbs. For example, in 1910, 21 percent of the total U.S. population lived in central cities and 7 percent lived in suburbs. From 1940 onward, suburbs experienced more population growth than central cities, and by 1960, the proportion of the total U.S. population living in suburbs (territory within metropolitan areas but outside central cities) was 31 percent, almost equal to the proportion of the population living in central cities (32 percent). By 2000, half of the entire U.S. population lived in the suburbs of metropolitan areas.

### Population Change for States and Counties, 1990 to 2000

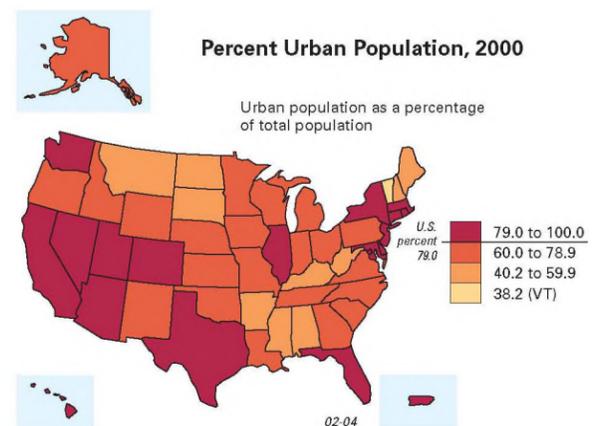
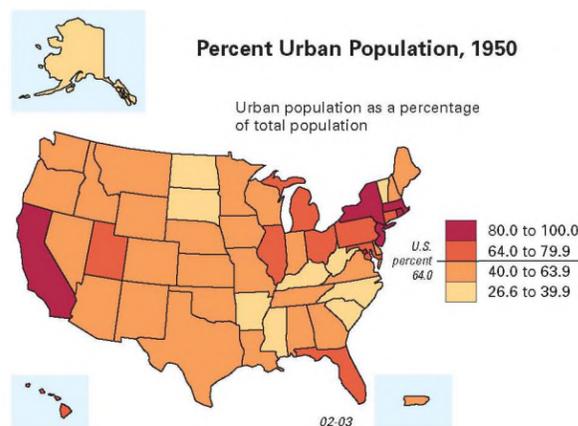
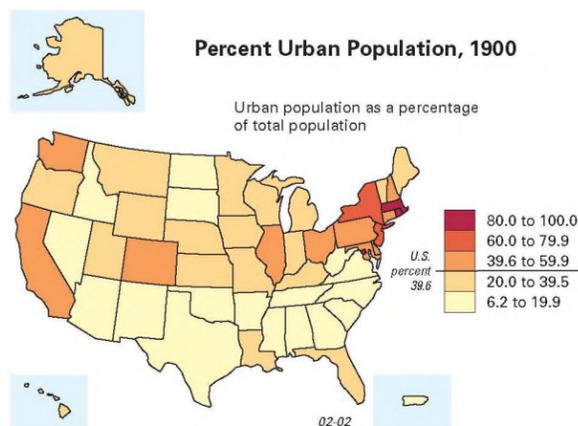
Between 1990 and 2000, all 50 states gained population, with the largest percentage increases in states in the West or the South (map 02-05). Nevada had the highest percentage gain for the decade, increasing by 66 percent, compared with the U.S. gain of 13

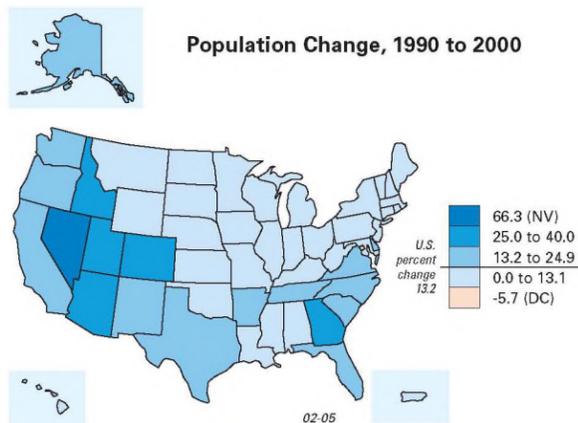
Figure 2-2.  
**Percent of Population in Metropolitan Areas by Central Cities and Suburbs, 1910 to 2000**



percent. Five other states had gains of 25 percent to 40 percent: Arizona, Colorado, Utah, Idaho, and Georgia. All states in the Northeast and the Midwest grew at rates lower than the U.S. rate. The District of Columbia's population declined by 6 percent.

During the 1990s, counties with rapid population growth were found throughout the nation but most often within or adjacent to rapidly growing





metropolitan areas in the South or the West. High rates of growth also occurred in some counties in the interior West that had natural resource amenities (scenic lakes, mountain vistas, or mild climates), as well as in some coastal counties along the Atlantic seaboard that were attractive to retirees.

Many of the counties that lost population during the 1990s are located in a large band of sparsely populated nonmetropolitan counties in the Great Plains stretching from North Dakota to western Texas. Other pockets of population decline included some Appalachian counties and the Mississippi Delta. Population declines also occurred in some large cities in the Northeast and the Midwest, such as Philadelphia and Detroit.

### This Chapter's Maps

Patterns of population distribution and redistribution in the United States can be seen in the various types of changes over the centuries, such as the westward and southward movement of the population, twentieth-century suburbanization, population declines in the rural Midwest, and continued urban and metropolitan growth—particularly in the South and the West.

Map 02-07 portrays the country's overall population distribution in 2000, with each dot on the map representing 1,000 people. The uneven distribution of the population illustrated in this map is

a key underlying dimension of patterns displayed in many maps in subsequent chapters.

Maps 02-09 through 02-20 show that all states had periods of rapid growth, and many states had swings in their growth rates over time. Nevada was the fastest-growing state for the four final decades of the twentieth century, yet it was also the state with the largest drop in population in consecutive decades, falling 23.9 percent between 1880 and 1890, and a further 10.6 percent between 1890 and 1900.

The different state-level rates of population growth are also evident in maps 02-58 through 02-81, which show the changes in the distribution of congressional seats between 1789 and 2002. Some states have experienced only increases in the size of their congressional delegation over time; other states have seen both increases and decreases. The final map in the series, showing the number of seats each state was apportioned for the 107th Congress in 2002, is a state-level representation of the cumulative impact of two centuries of population growth and redistribution.

Population trends are also seen in map 02-23, showing the year of maximum population by county. While in 2000 many counties had their largest decennial-census population ever, a large number of counties nationwide experienced their census year of maximum population decades earlier. The prominence of the Great Plains, Appalachia, and parts of the lower Mississippi River Valley illustrates the latter pattern. Several dozen counties in the Midwest had their maximum decennial population in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Maps 02-24 through 02-29 chart the increase in the number of large cities (populations of 100,000 or more) in the United States, from 3 in 1840 to 234 in 2000. The series of six maps also demonstrates the emergence of large cities across all four regions of the country. While almost all of the large cities in 1890 were located in the Northeast or the Midwest, by 2000, many were also in the South and the West.

Variations exist in the tract-level population density patterns for the largest cities in 2000 (maps 02-43 through 02-51). New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, and

Los Angeles all contained many census tracts with densities of 10,000 or more people per square mile. Densities were generally lower across the tracts in Phoenix, San Antonio, Dallas, and Houston.

Reflecting regional population trends discussed earlier, many cities and metropolitan areas of the West and the South had much larger populations in 2000 than in earlier decades. In 1950, the city of Phoenix, Arizona contained just over 100,000 people; by 2000, its population had increased to 1.3 million. The percentage of the population residing in northeastern and midwestern cities of 100,000 or more decreased from 36 percent in 1950 to 23 percent in 2000. The percentage residing in southern and western cities increased from 20 percent in 1950 to 29 percent in 2000. So, while Americans were slightly less likely to live in a large city in 2000 than 50 years earlier (56 percent in 1950; 52 percent in 2000), the region where that large city is located was far more likely to be in the South or the West than it was 50 years earlier.

Still, the national patterns of relative population density in 2000 were visible over a century ago, as shown in maps 02-30 and 02-31 on national patterns of population density in 1880 and 2000. Map 02-30 is reproduced from *Scribner's Statistical Atlas of the United States*, created following the 1880 census. This map shows that density levels were higher across the eastern half of the continental United States and along urban stretches of the Pacific coast and lower in much of the interior of the West. Denver and Salt Lake City are visible pockets of higher density in low-density regions. Population distribution in 2000, seen in map 02-31, displays a similar pattern. While the 2000 map contains an additional category (1,000 and above), and densities were much higher in parts of California, Florida, and Texas, the basic patterns in the two maps are roughly similar.

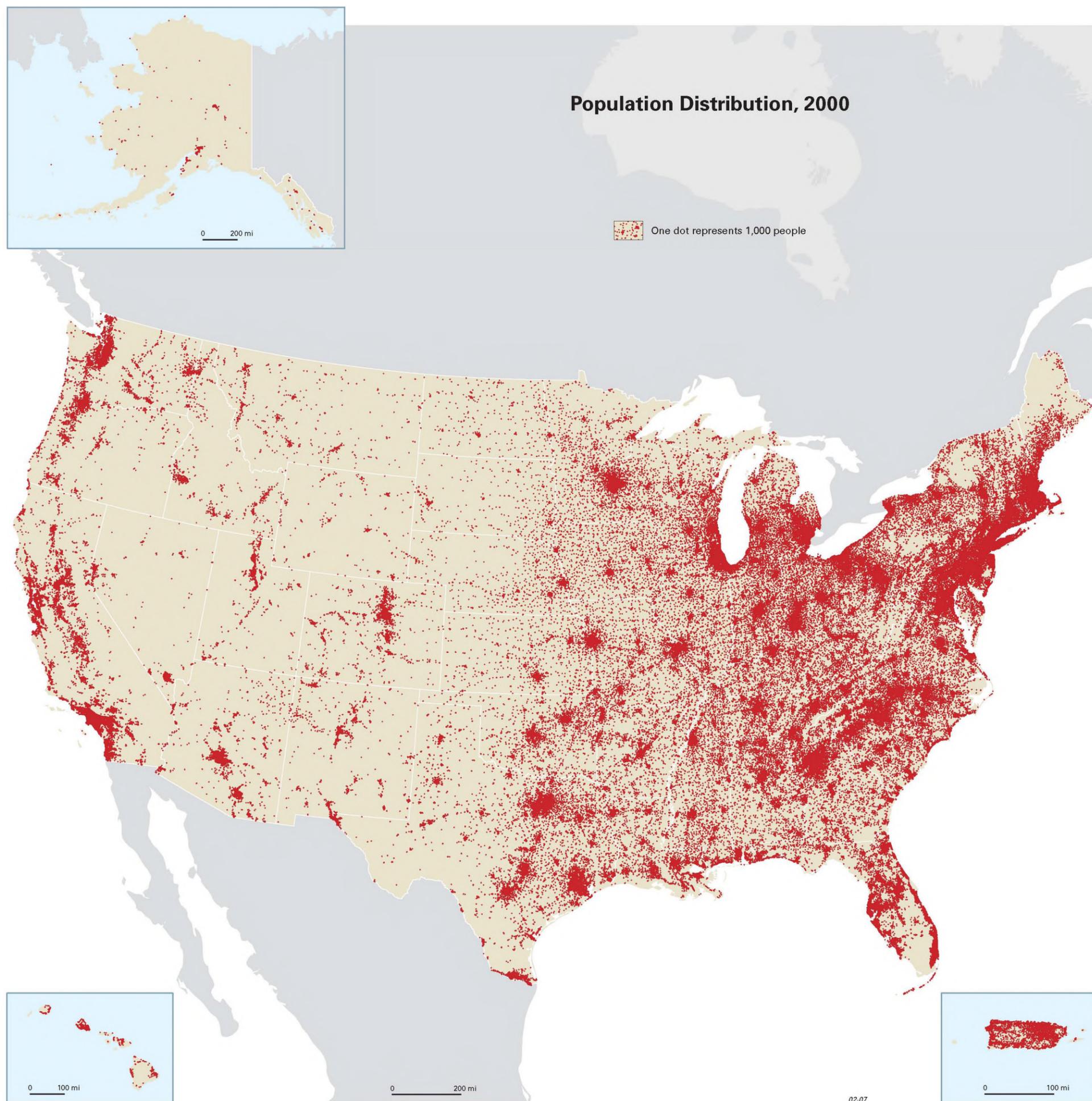


Each decade, as part of its tabulation and publication activities following the decennial census, the U.S. Census Bureau calculates the country's center of population. The center is determined as the place where an imaginary, flat, weightless, and rigid map of the United States would balance perfectly if all residents were of identical weight. For Census 2000, the mean center of population was at 37°42'N latitude and 91°49'W longitude. (Alaska, Hawaii,

and Puerto Rico were not included in the calculation of the center of population.)

This location was in Phelps County, Missouri, approximately 2.8 miles east of the rural community of Edgar Springs. The center of population had moved 12.1 miles south and 32.5 miles west of the 1990 center of population, which was 9.7 miles southeast of Steelville, Missouri.

Historically, the movement of the center of population has reflected the expansion of the country, the settling of the frontier, waves of immigration, and migration west and south. Since 1790, the center of population has moved steadily westward, angling to the southwest in recent decades. The center of population in 2000 was more than 1,000 miles from the first center in 1790, located near Chestertown, Maryland.

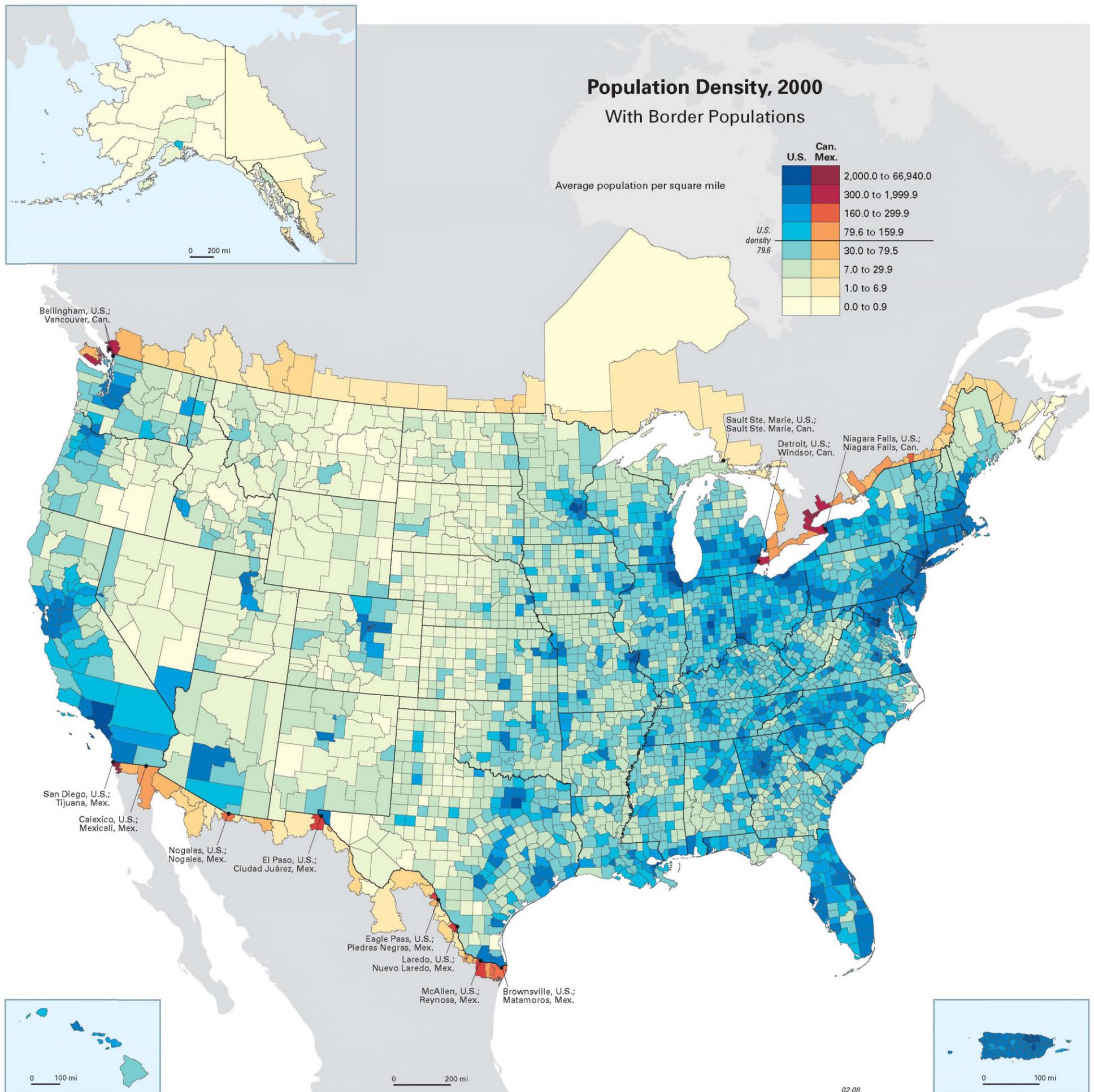


The U.S. population in 2000 continued to be distributed unevenly across the country. Solid dark areas in the above map contained large numbers of people in relatively densely settled territory, while the lighter-shaded areas contained few, if any, permanent residents. The eastern half of the United States contained a sizable number of settled areas in 2000, with the nearly uninterrupted string of densely settled territory stretching from

southern Maine to northern Virginia clearly visible. In the eastern half of the United States, the most visible areas with few residents are the Everglades of southern Florida and the wilderness areas of southern Georgia, upstate New York, and northern Maine.

Unlike the eastern half of the United States, where population density generally lessens gradually as distance from an urban center increases, the West is an area of

population extremes, containing populous metropolitan areas surrounded by large areas of mainly unpopulated terrain. As the Los Angeles area shows, density transitions in the West can often be abrupt. The thin lines of population concentration connecting larger metropolitan areas in the West—for instance, between Las Vegas and Salt Lake City—are often the locations of highways or rivers or both.



The border populations in the United States, as this map reminds us, often coexist with neighboring population concentrations across the border in Canada or Mexico. While much of the U.S. border—for instance, along the Canadian border from Minnesota to Washington—is lightly populated and has low population densities, other

areas have sizable population concentrations, as shown by the darker shadings of some border U.S. counties, Canadian census areas, and Mexican municipios on this map.

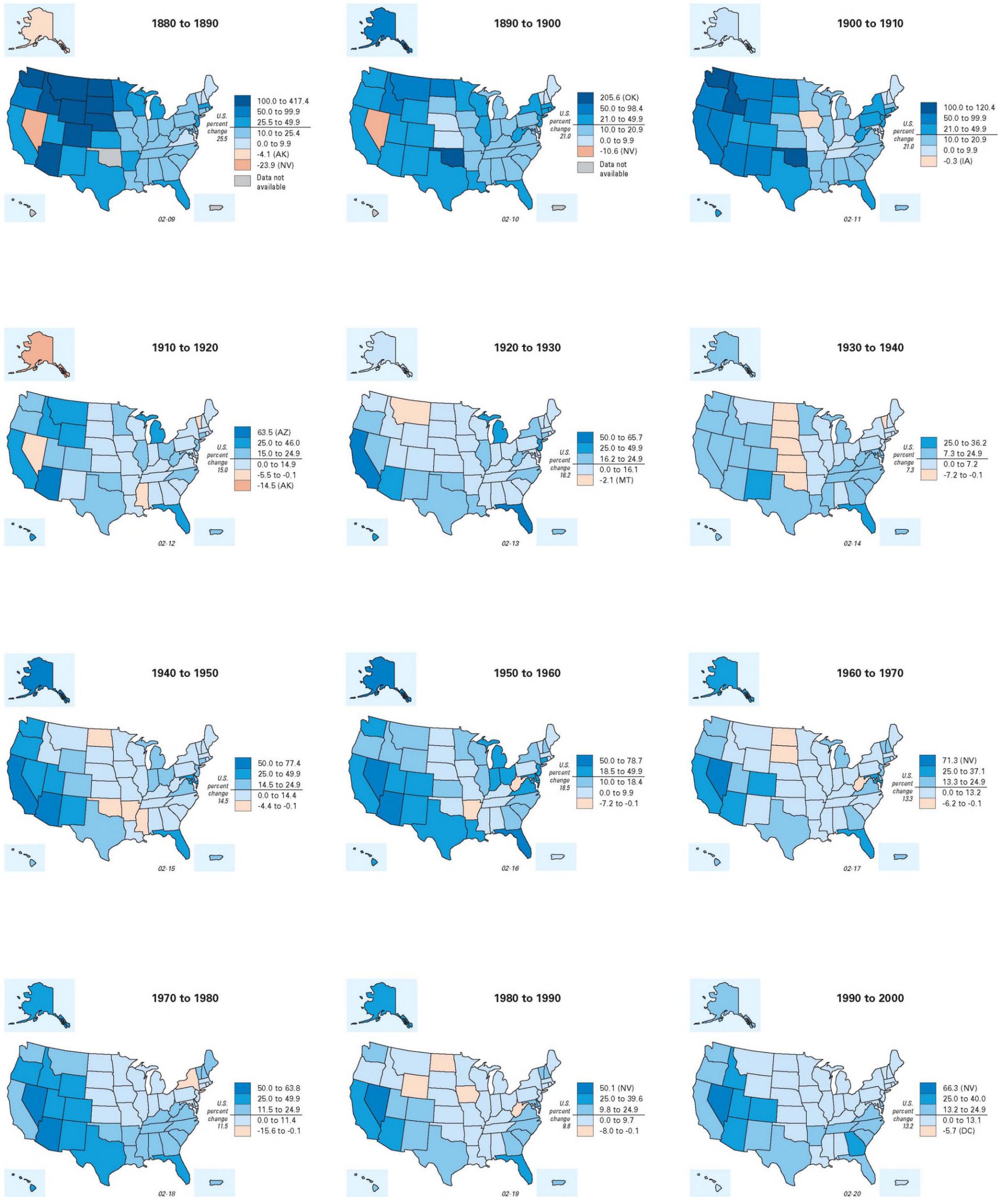
The pairs of cities shown represent major centers within cross-border urban areas. The duplication or near-

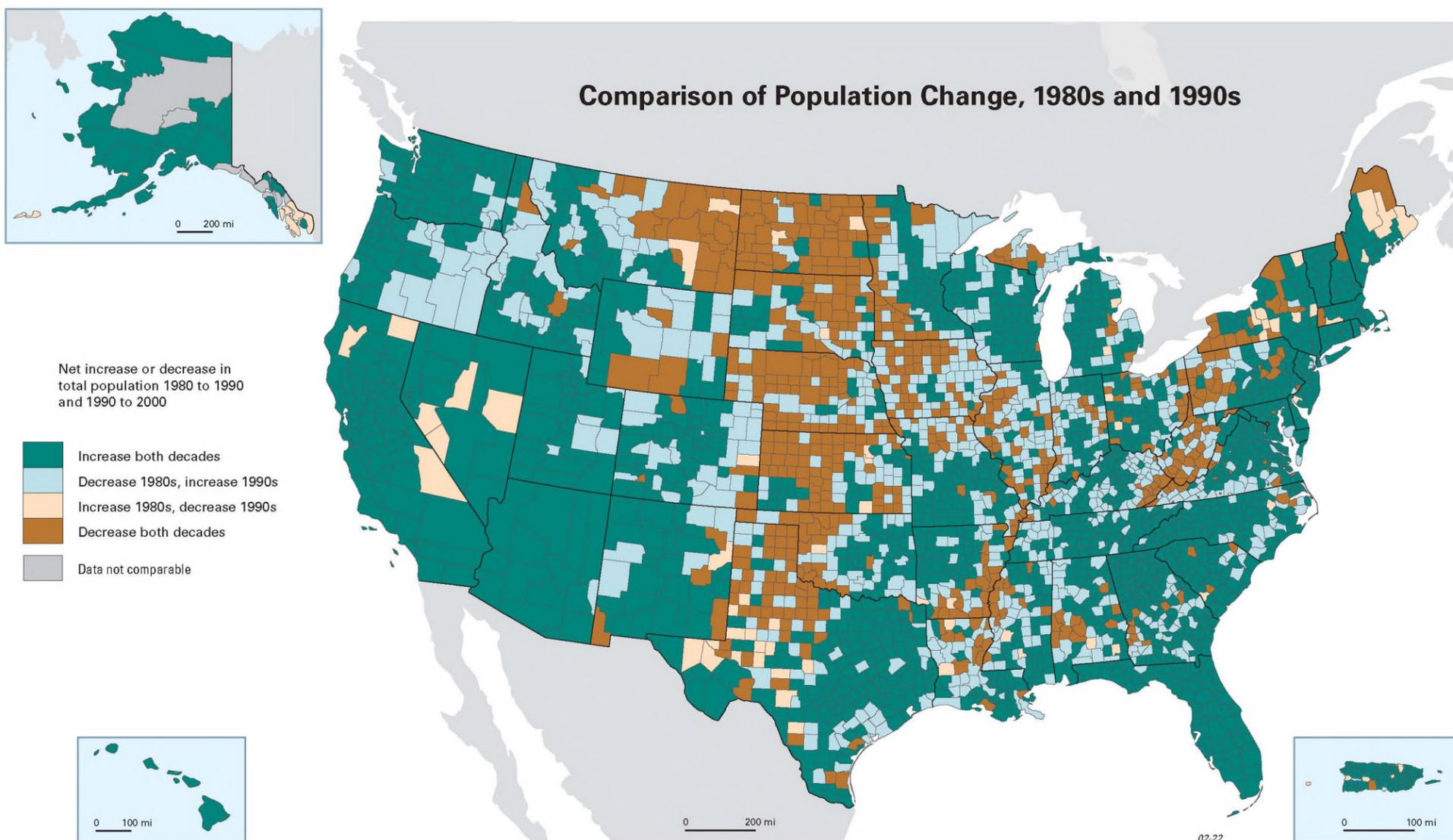
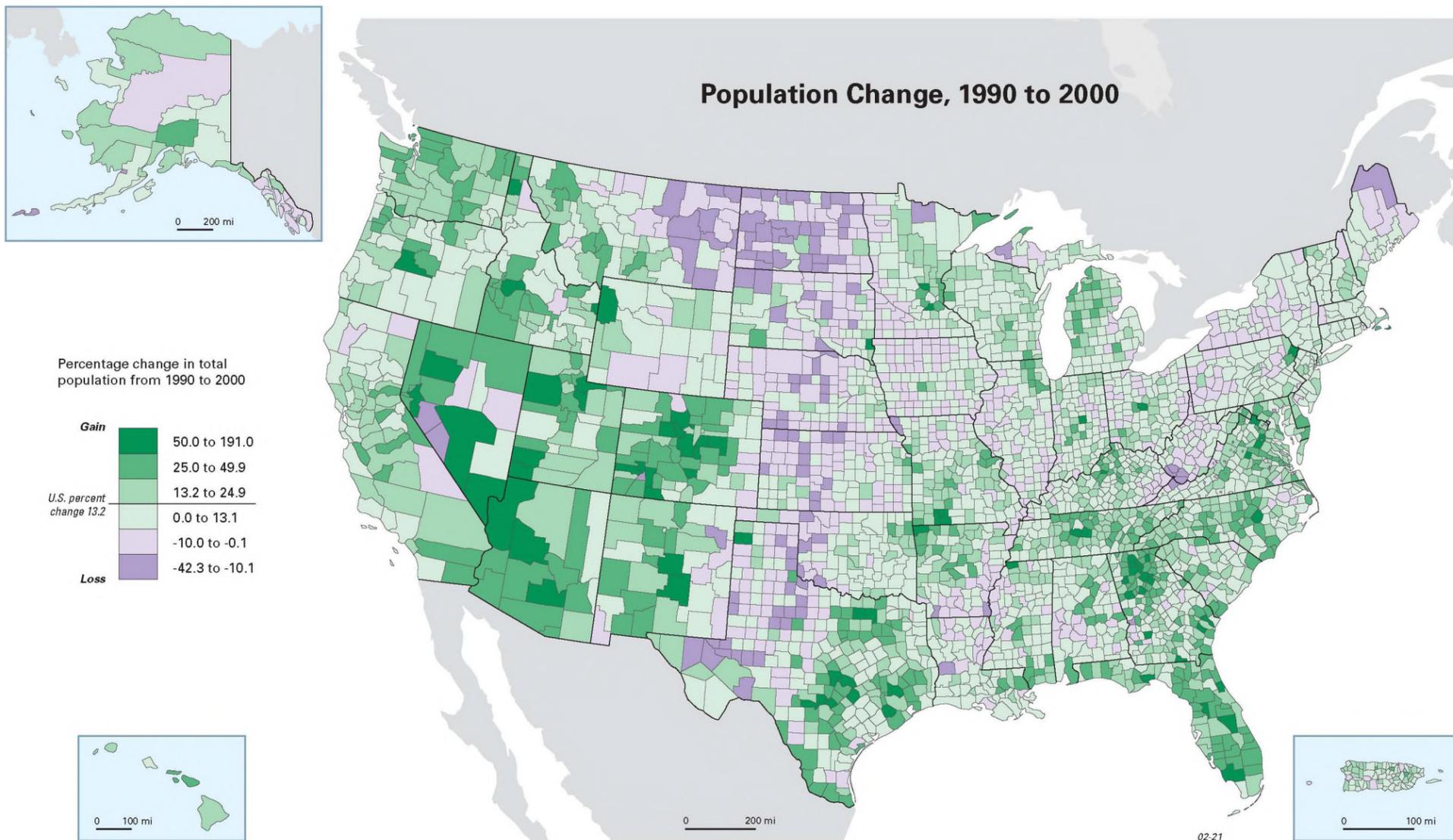
duplication of city names on both sides of the border in some instances is testament to their intertwined histories and longstanding relationships.

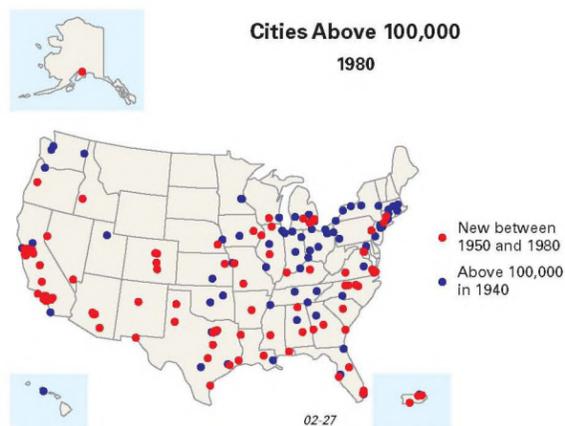
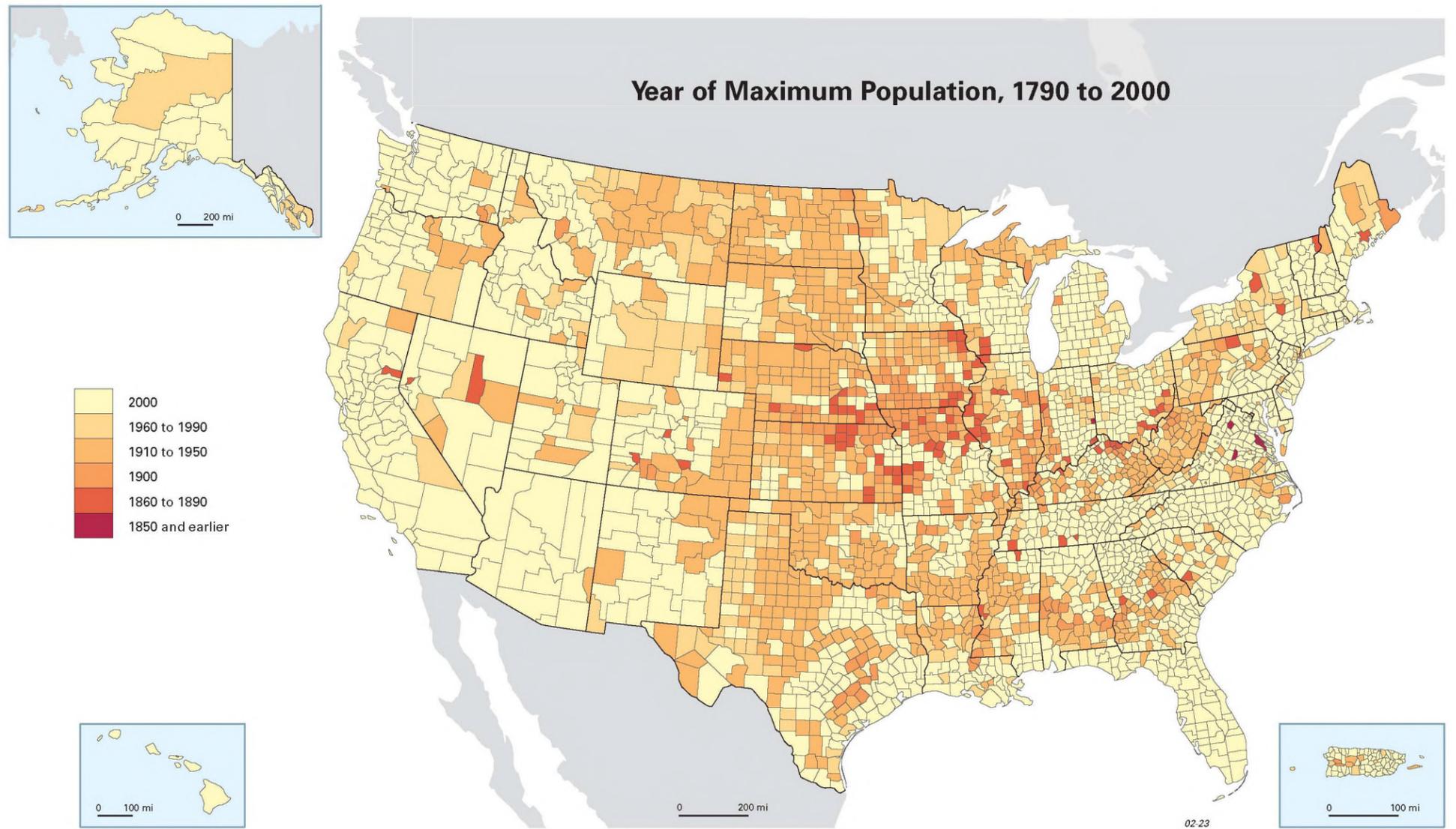
Data for Mexican municipios are from 2000. Data for Canadian census areas are from 2001.

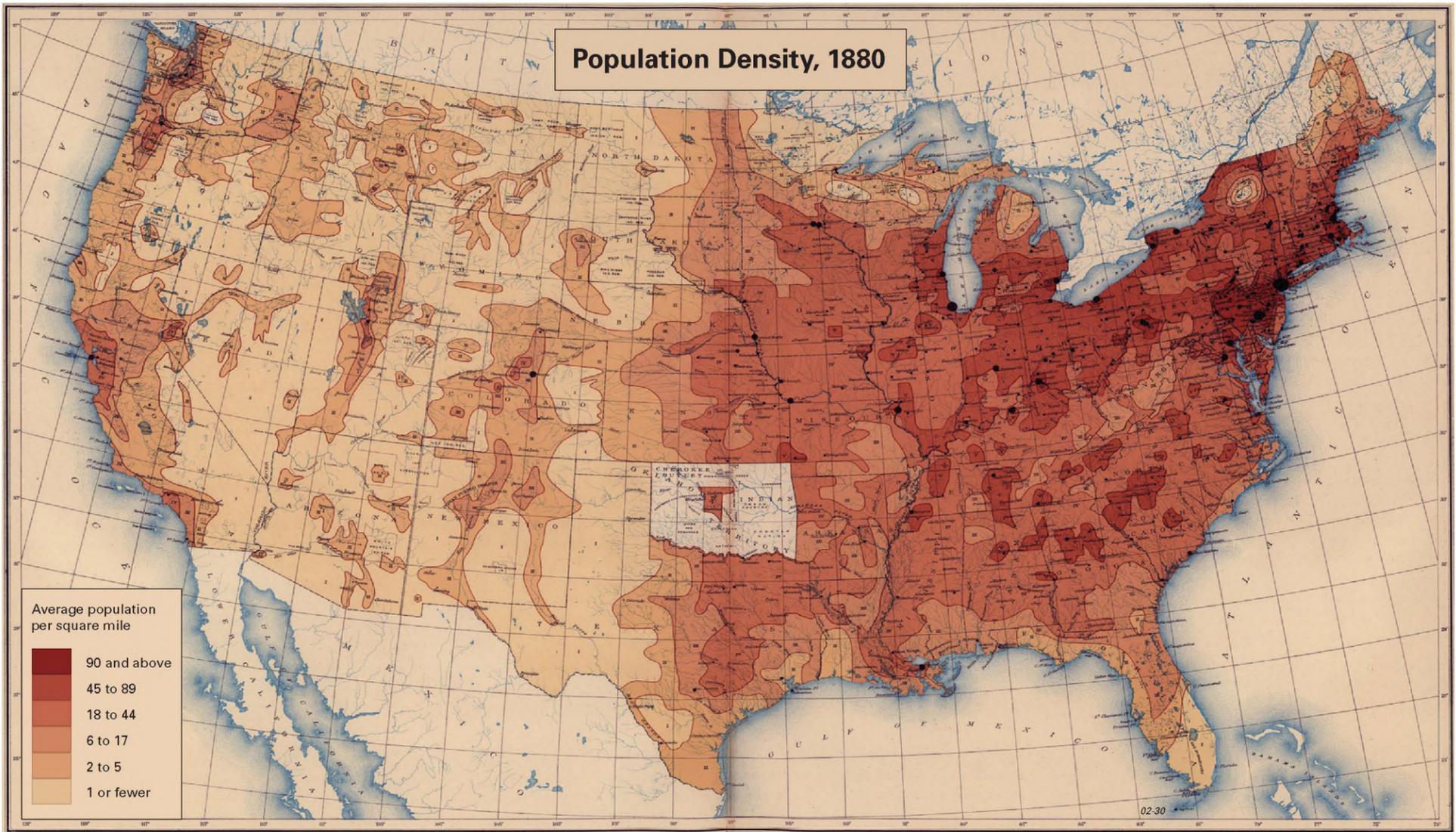
Chapter 2. Population Distribution

PERCENT CHANGE IN POPULATION

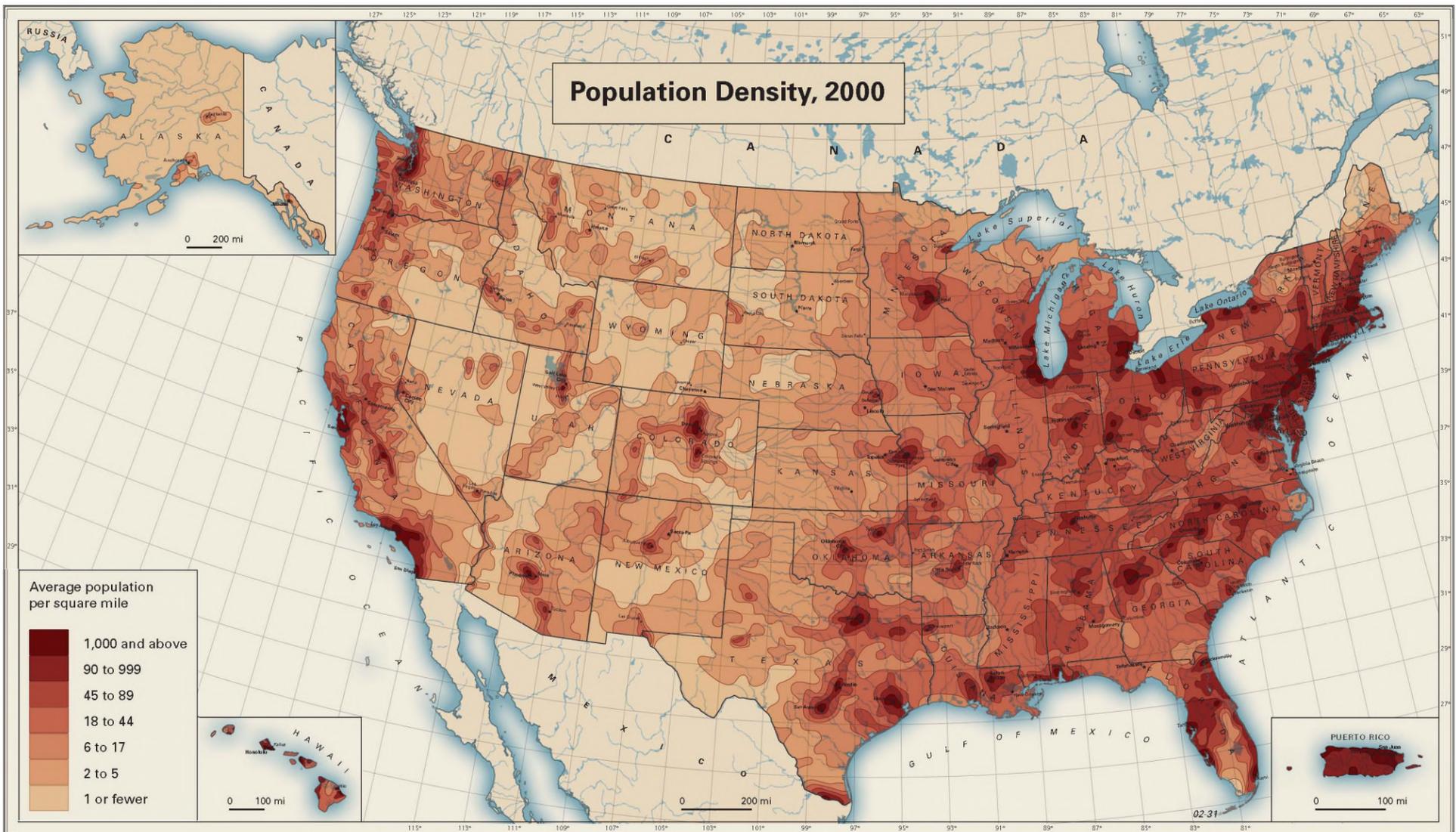




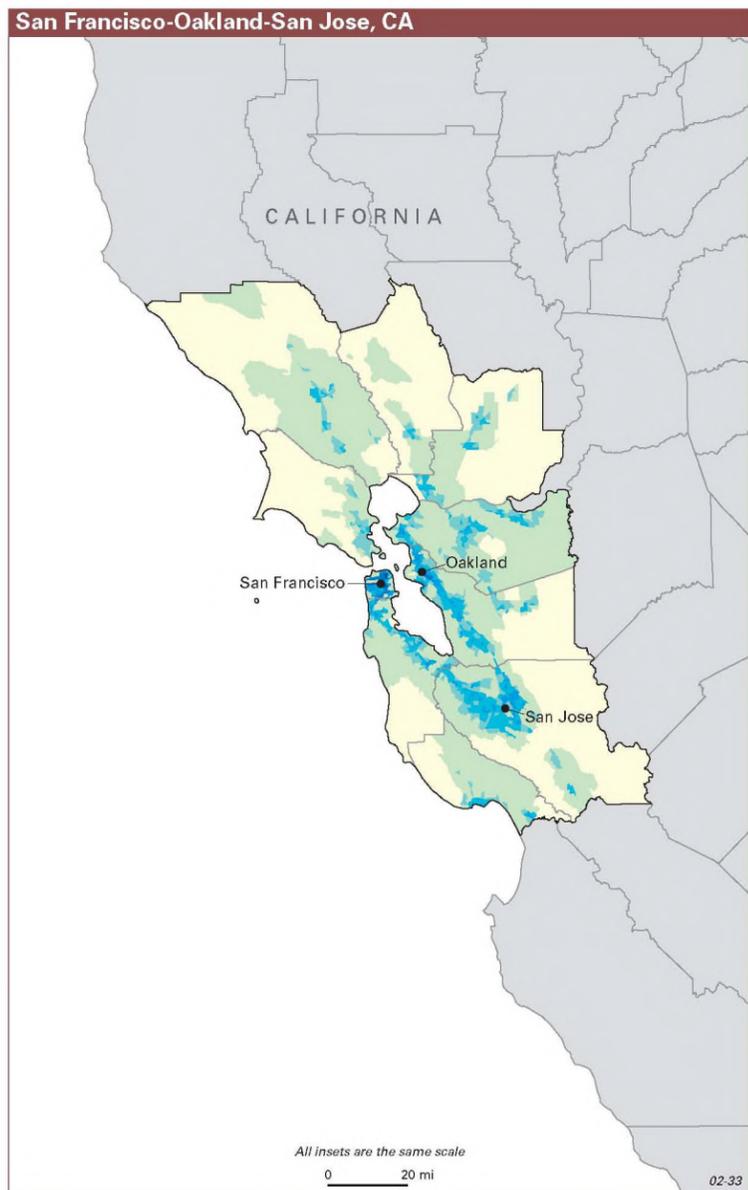




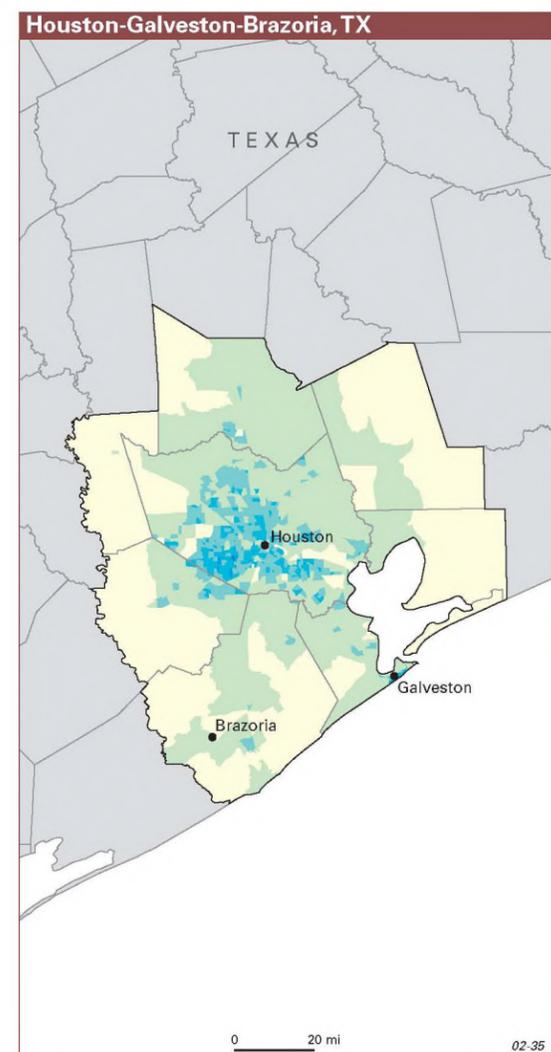
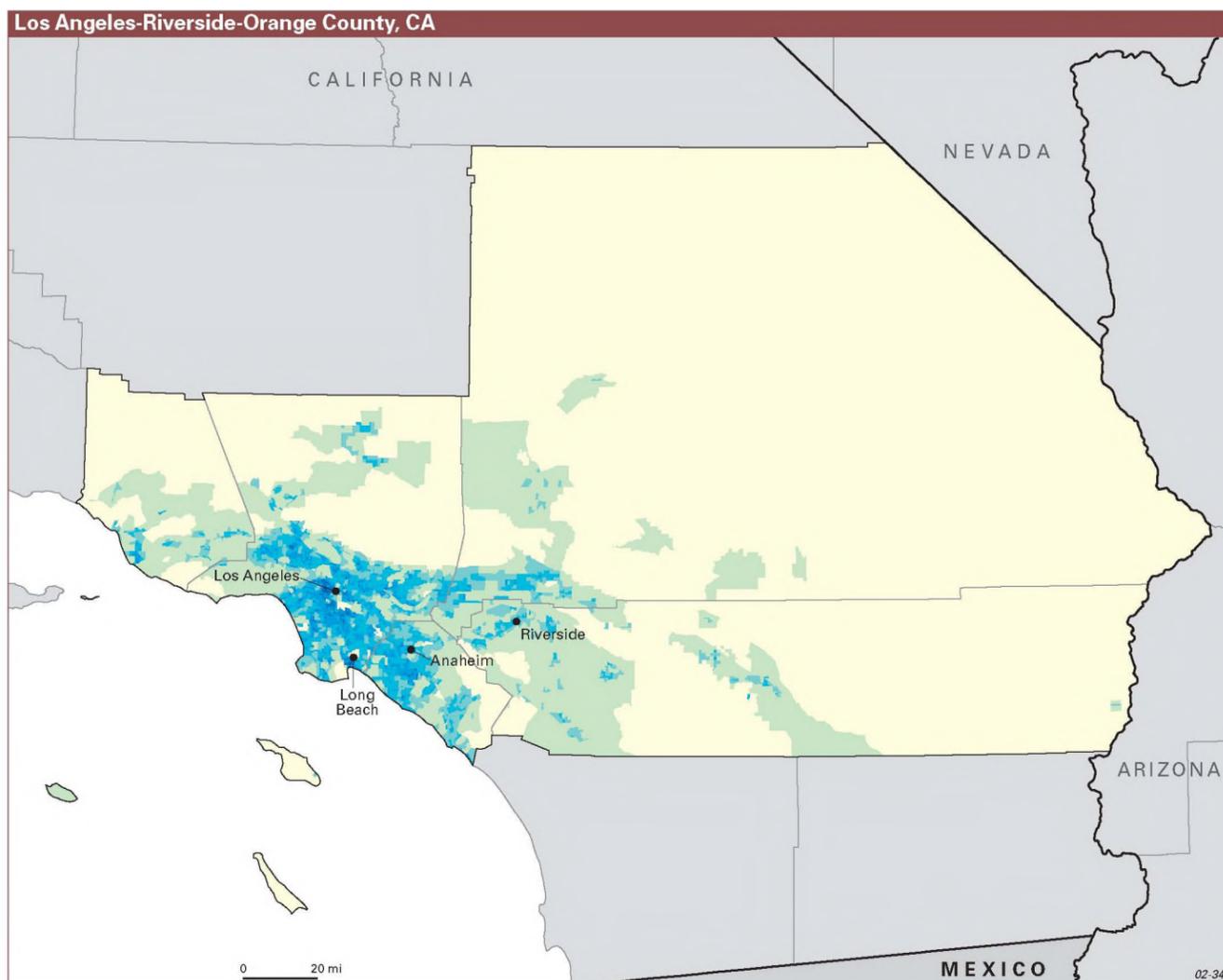
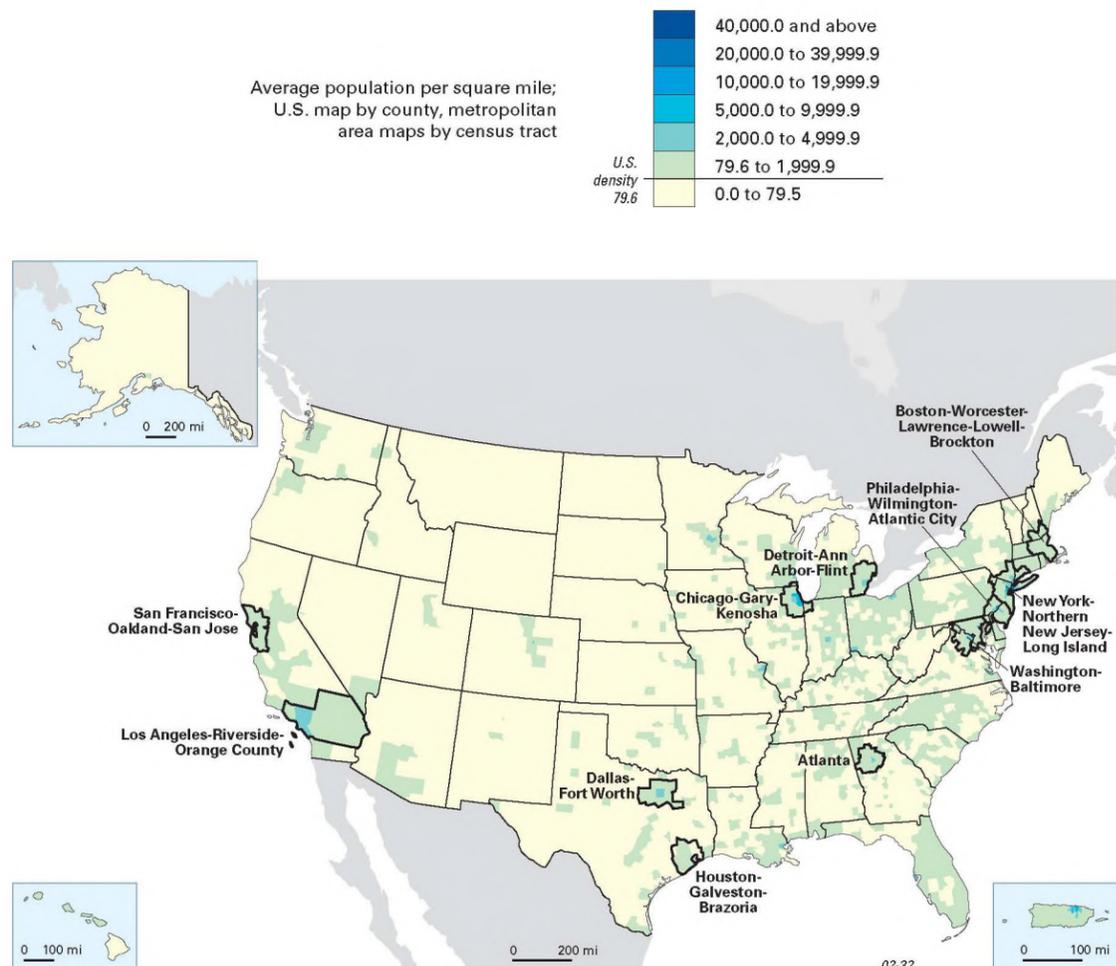
Reproduced from: *Scribner's Statistical Atlas of the United States: 1883*, with additional title and key.

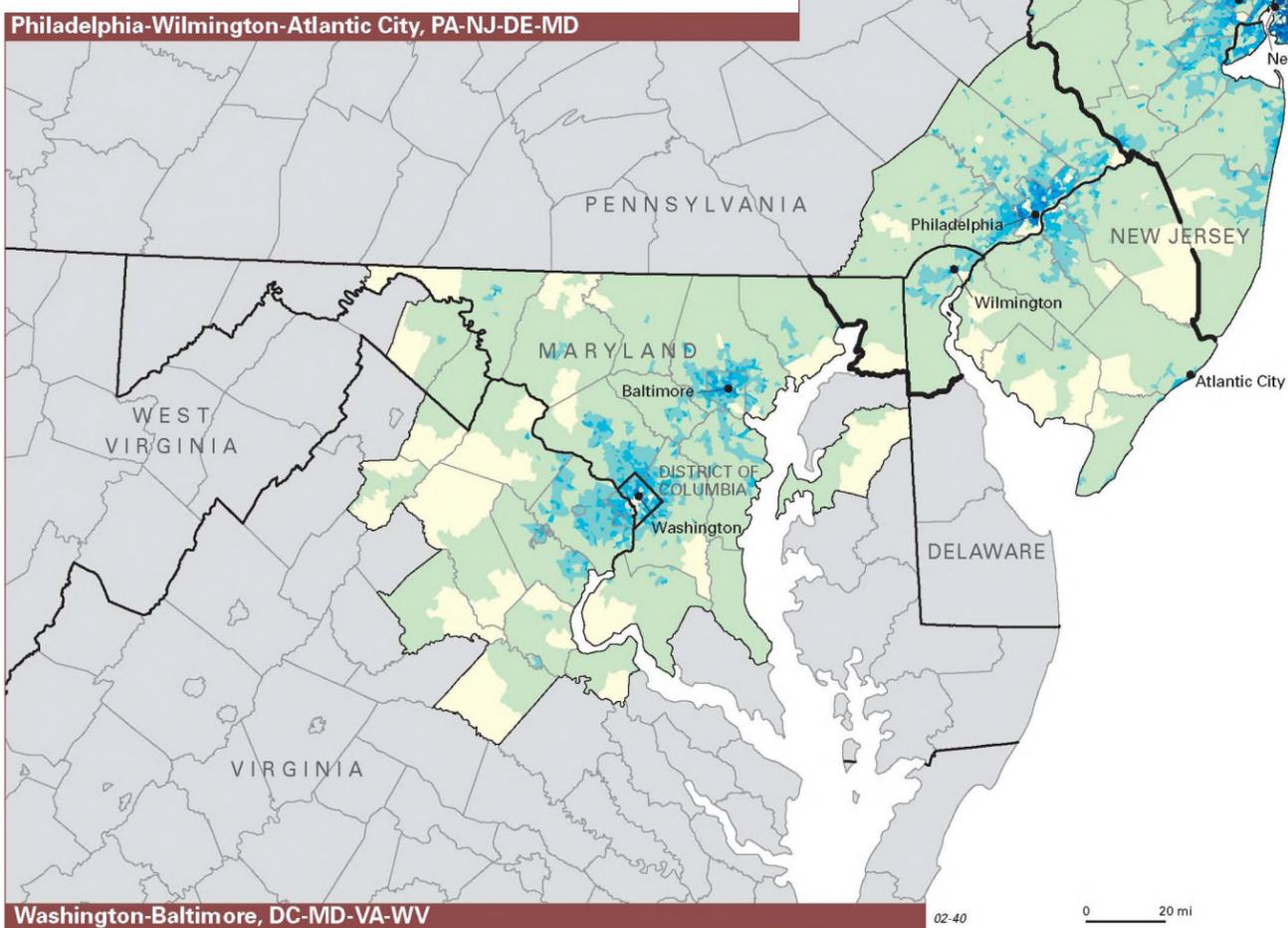
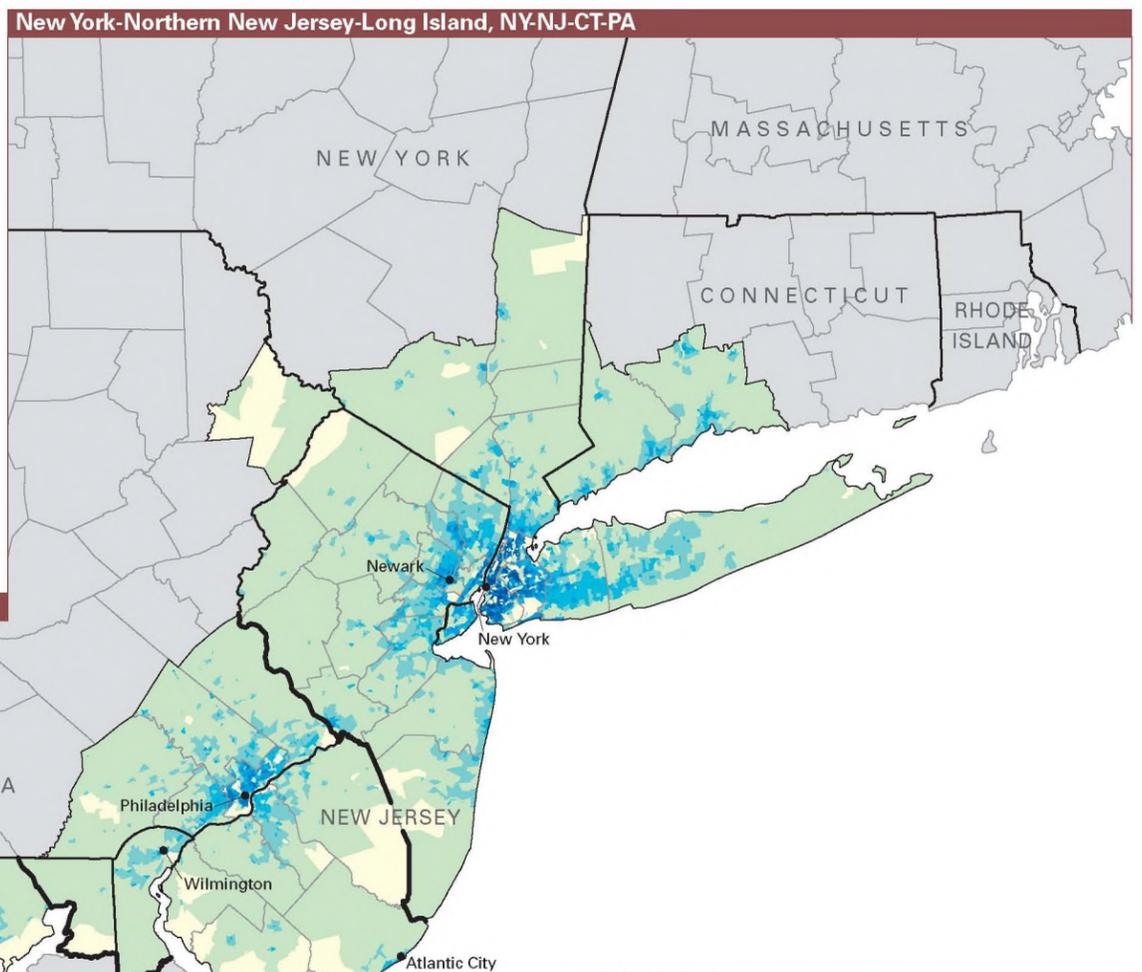
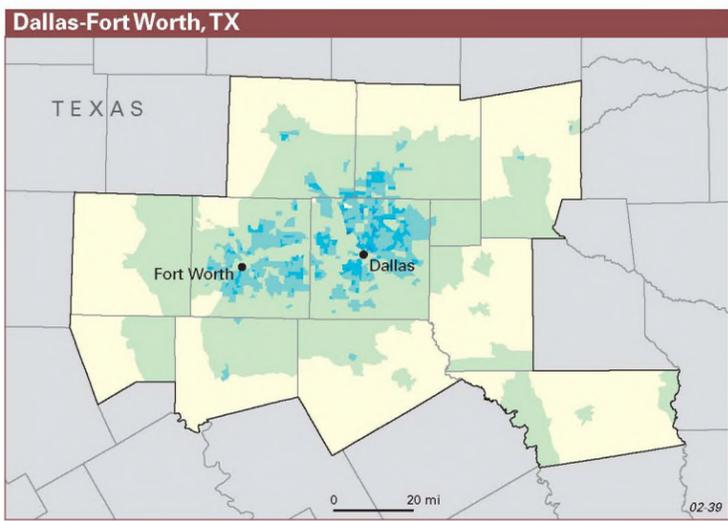
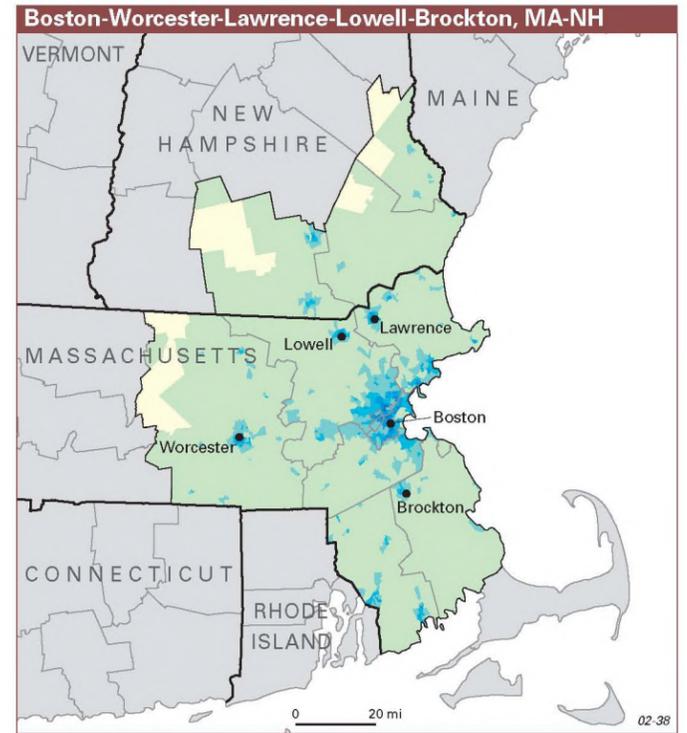
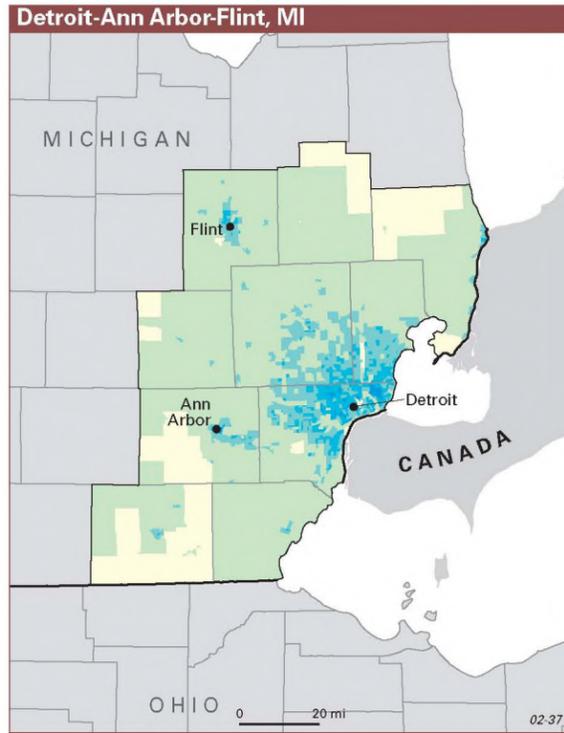
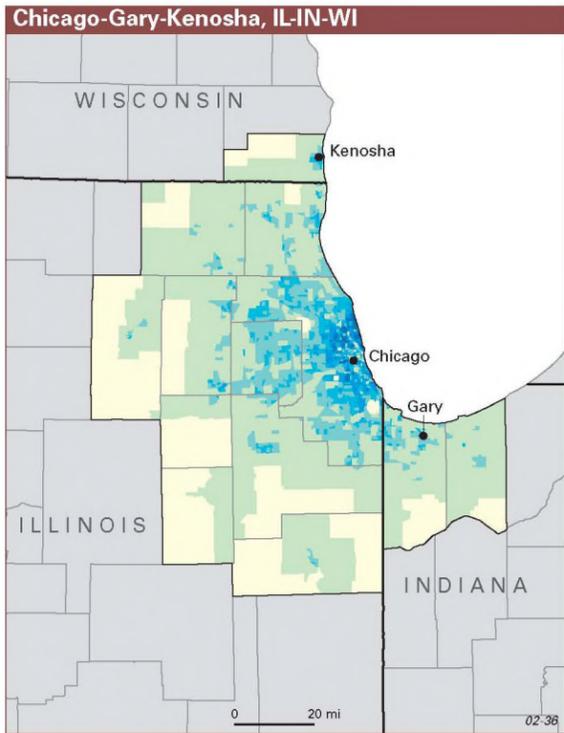


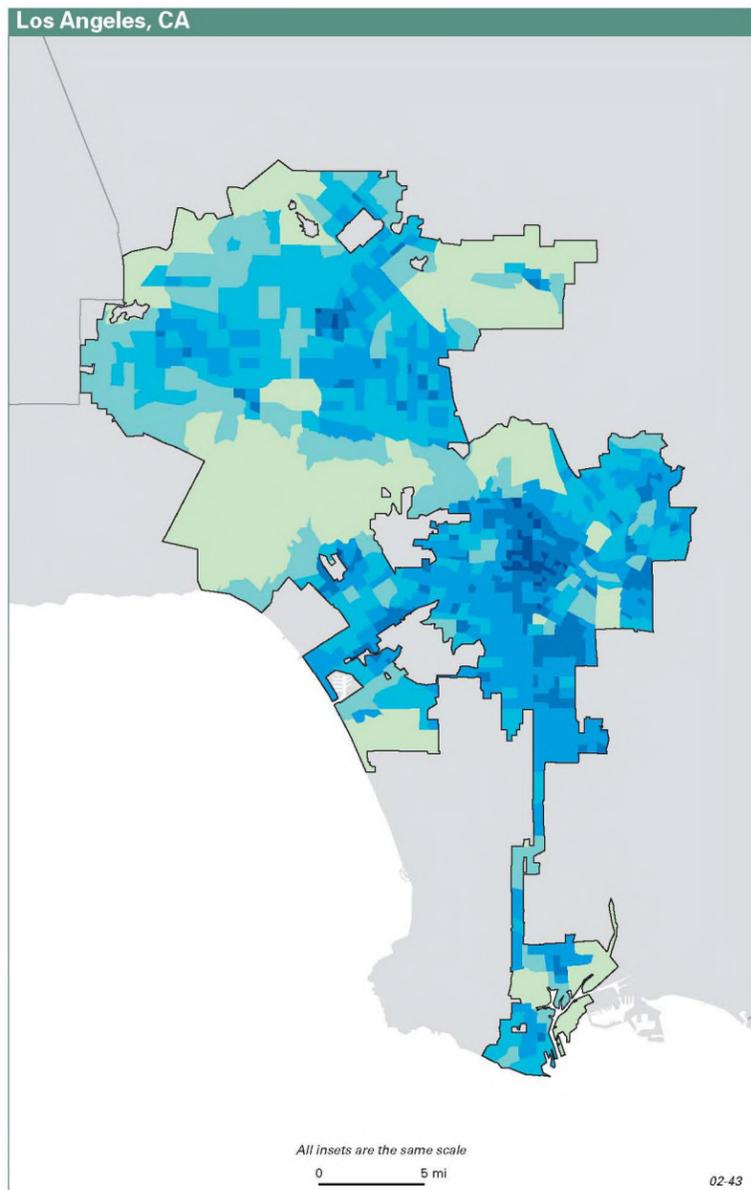
METROPOLITAN AREAS



**Population Density, 2000**  
Largest Metropolitan Areas

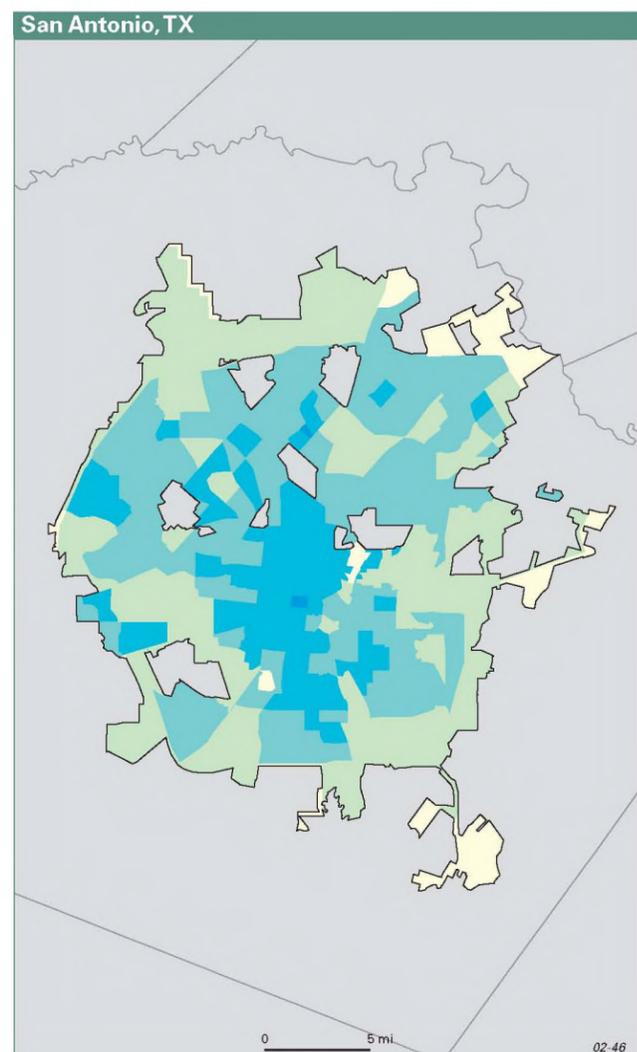
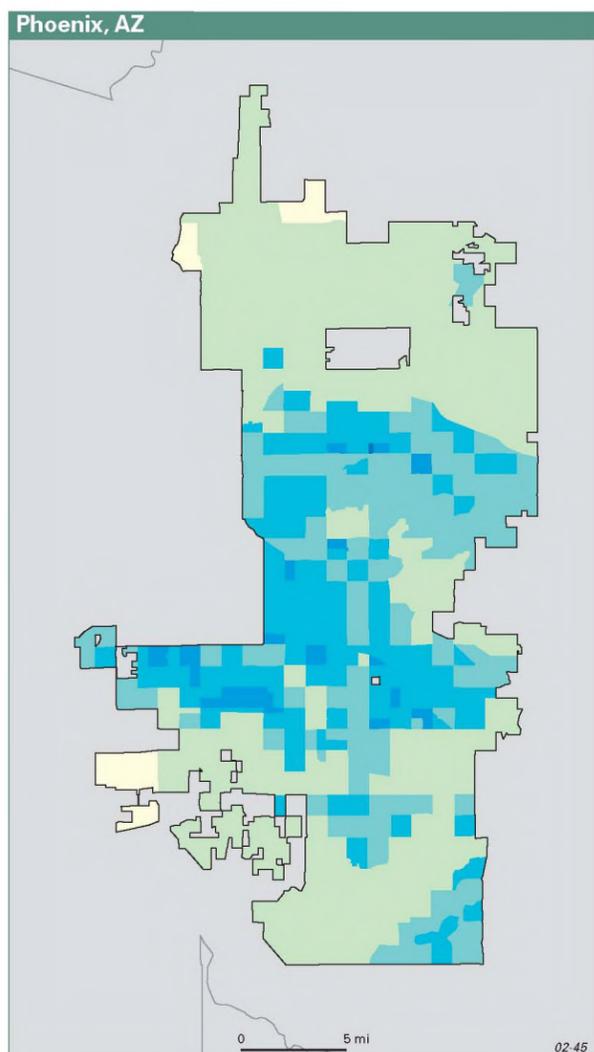
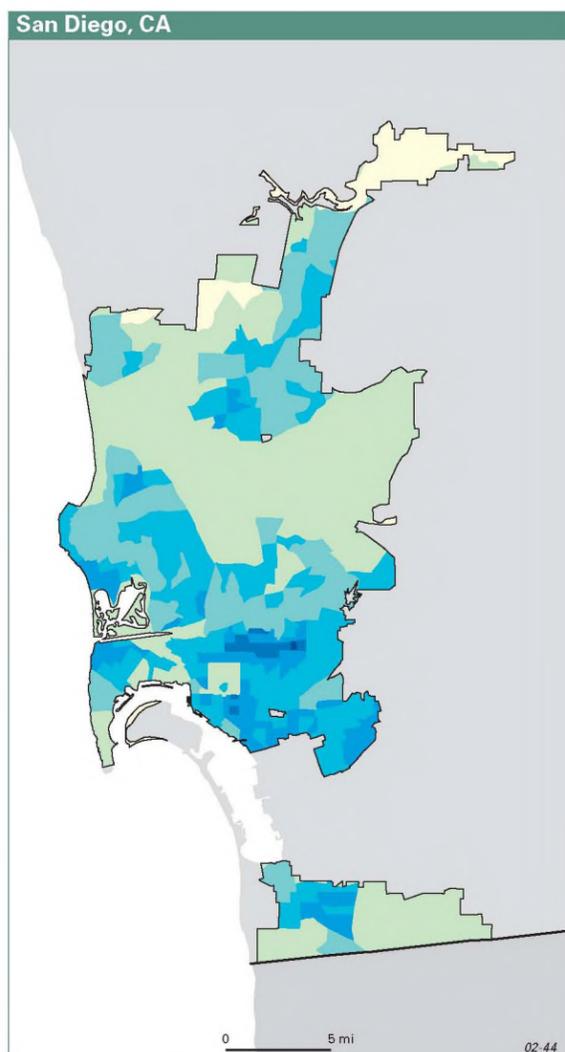
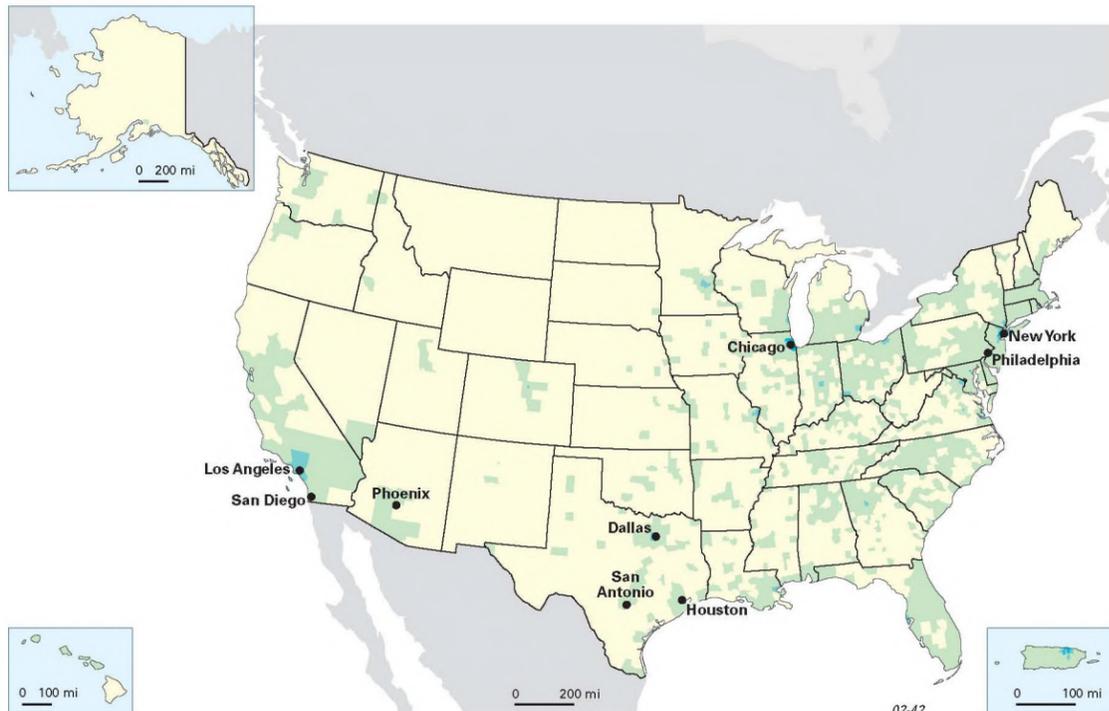
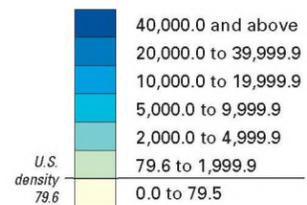


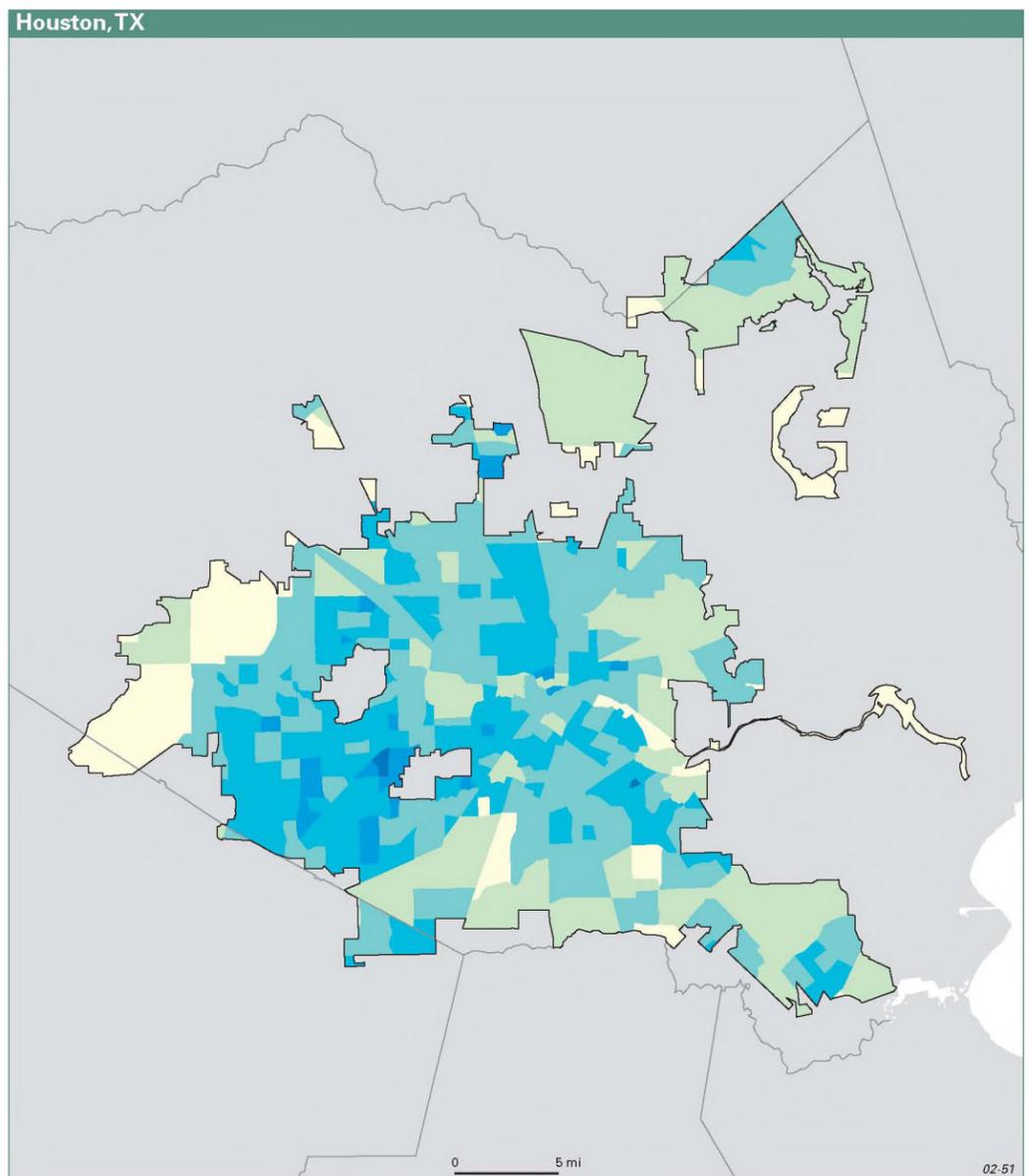
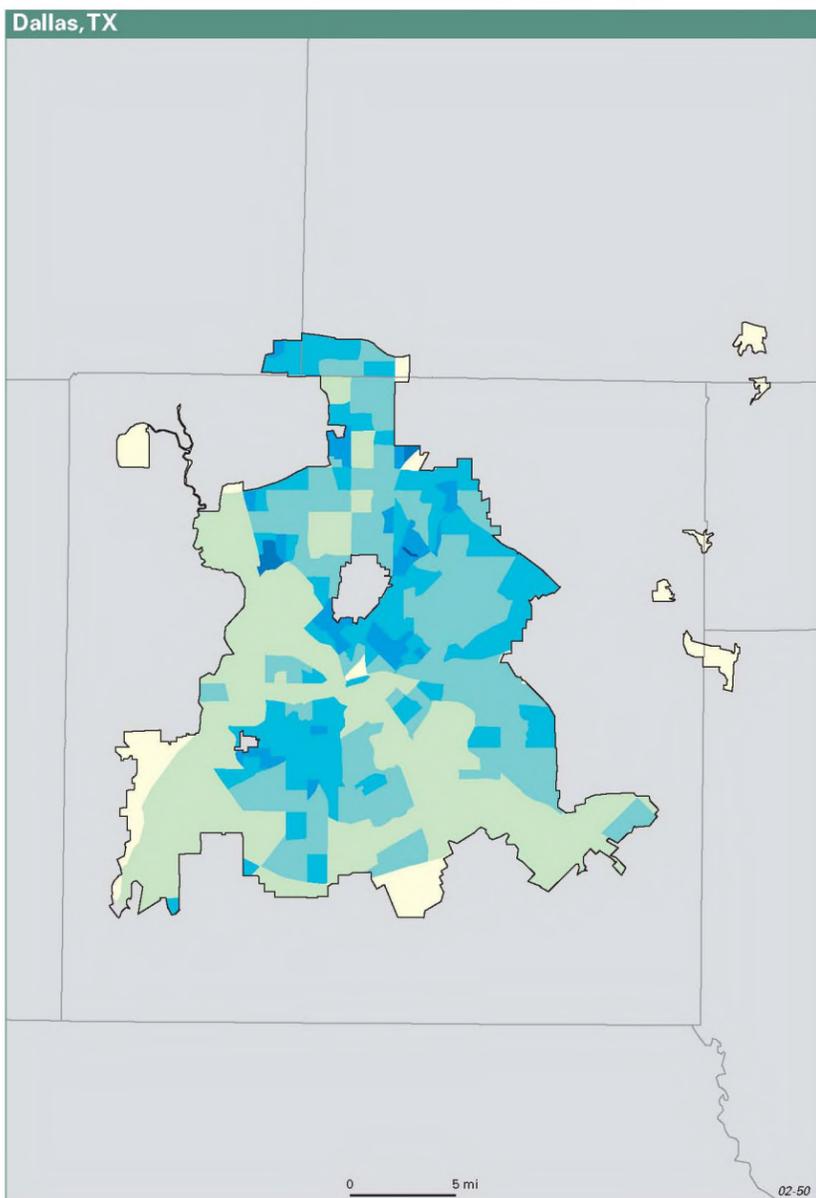
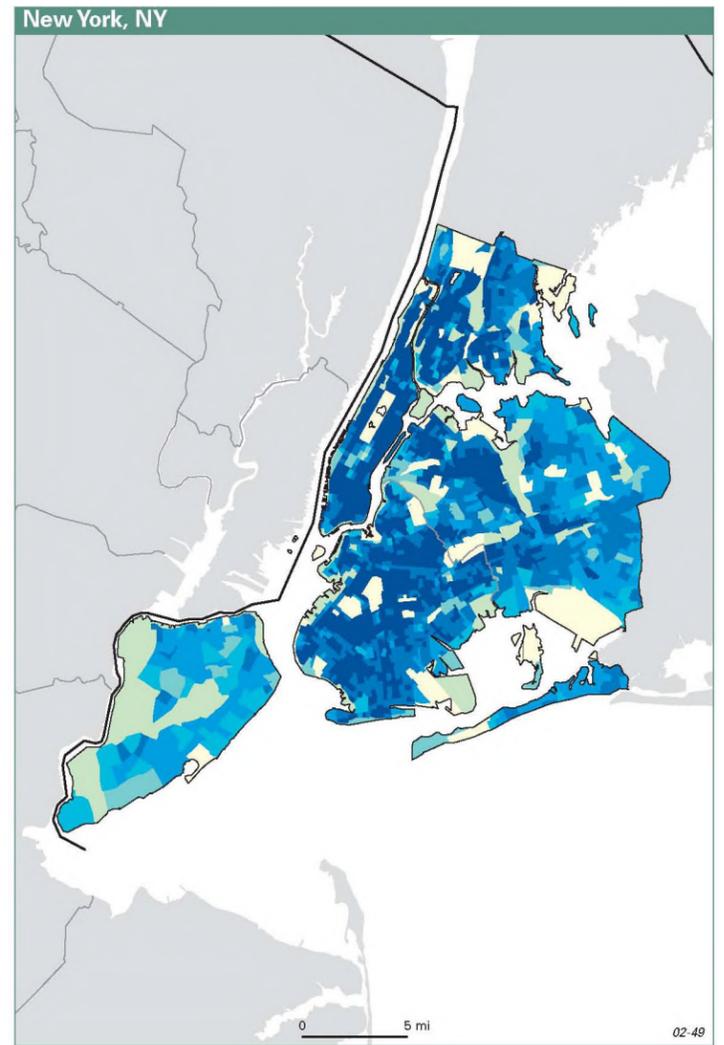
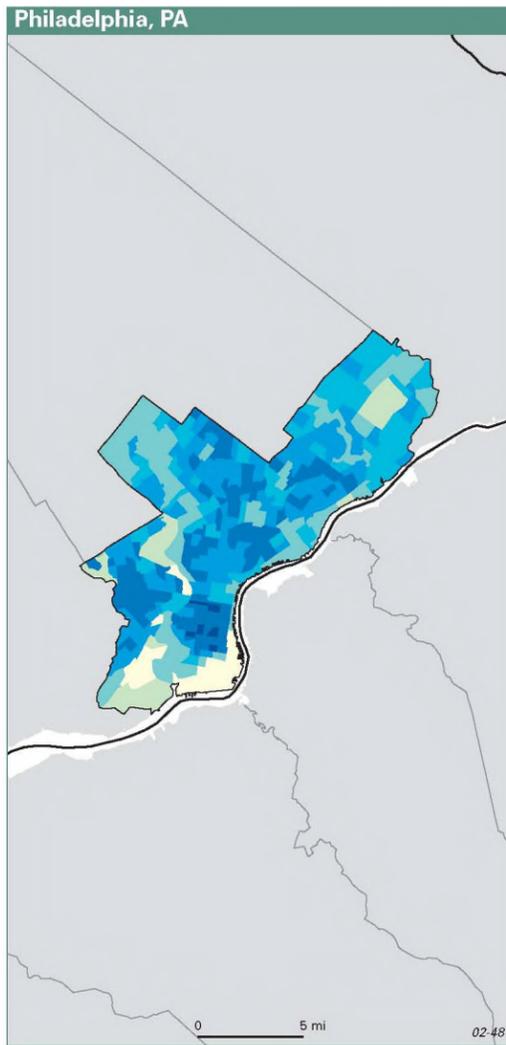
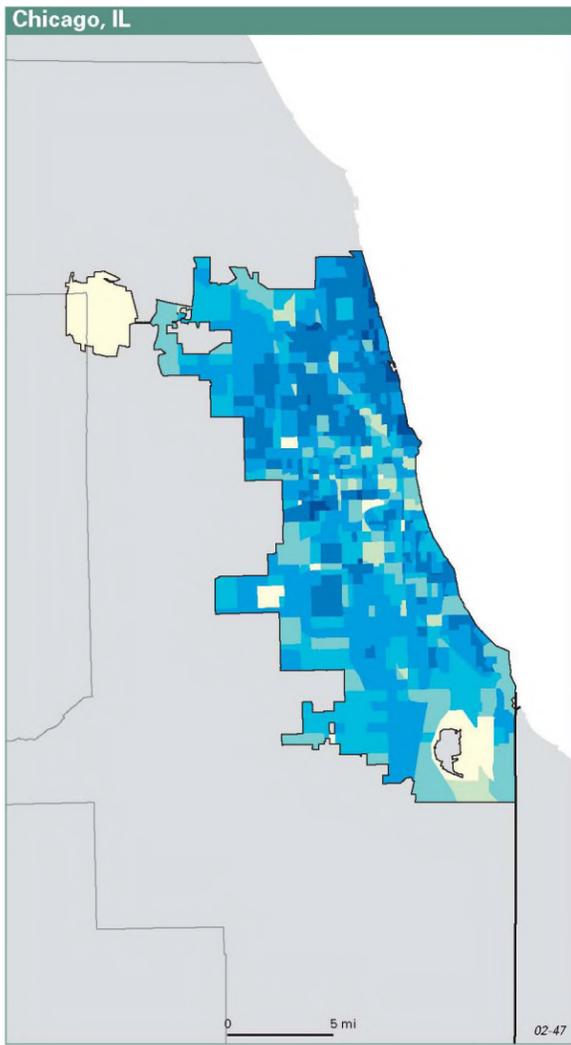


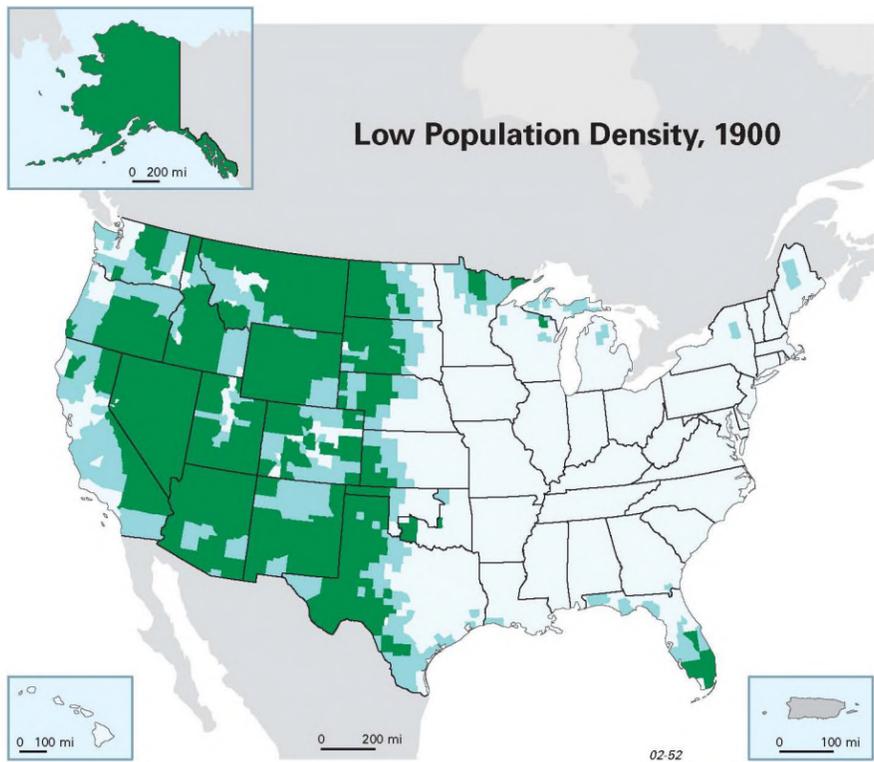


**Population Density, 2000**  
Largest Cities

Average population per square mile; U.S. map by county, city maps by census tract

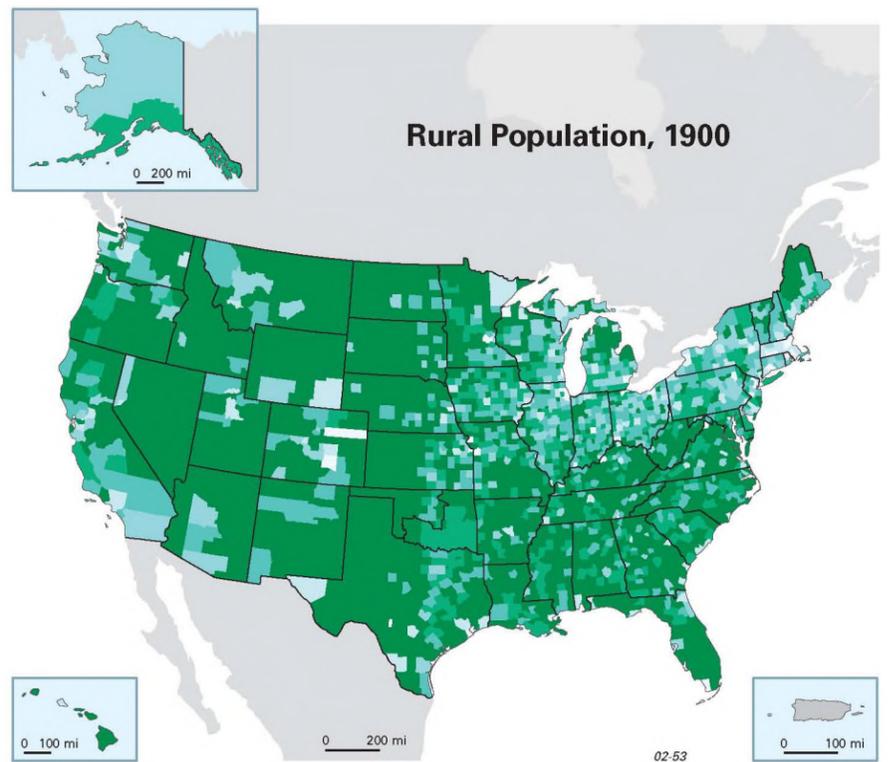






Average population per square mile; U.S. density 21.5

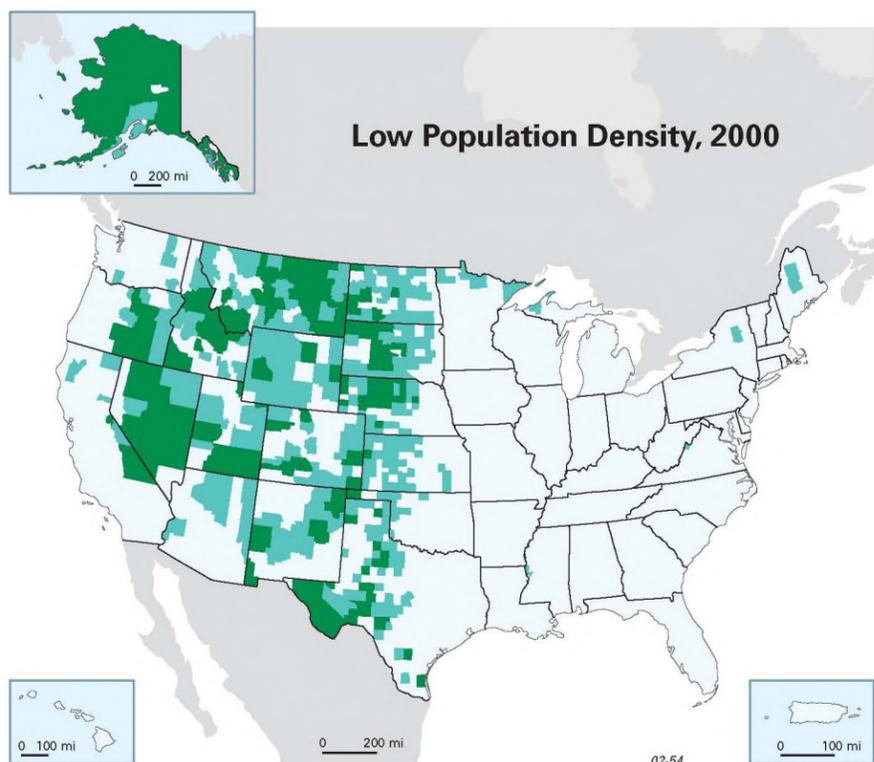
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Medium blue	2.0 to 6.9
Dark green	0.0 to 1.9
Grey	Data not available



Rural population as a percentage of total population

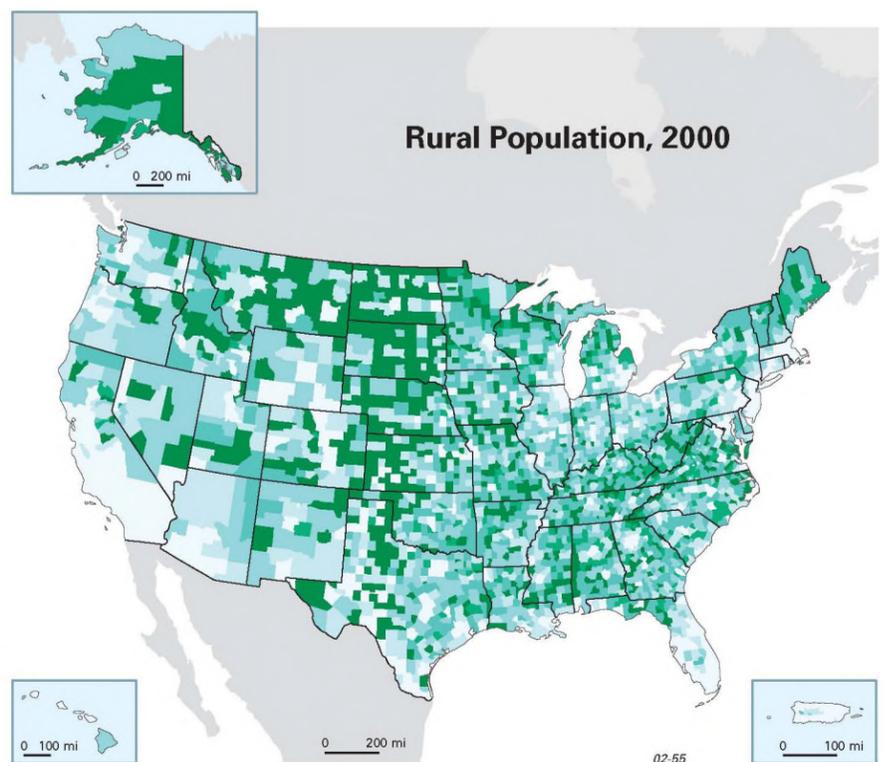
Dark green	100.0
Dark green	80.0 to 99.9
Medium green	60.2 to 79.9
Medium blue	40.0 to 60.1
Light blue	20.0 to 39.9
Very light blue	0.0 to 19.9
Grey	Data not available

U.S. percent 60.2



Average population per square mile; U.S. density 79.6

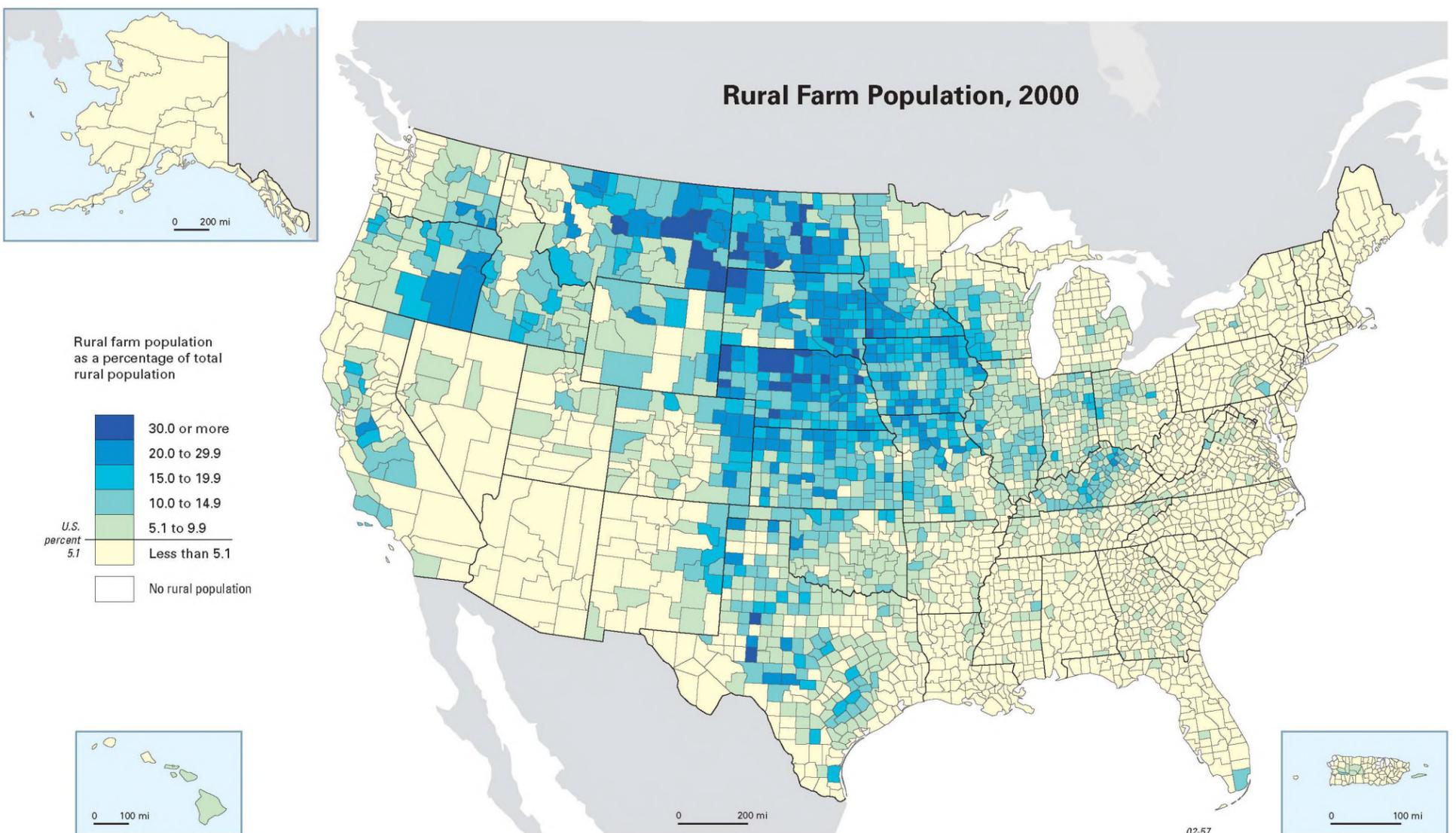
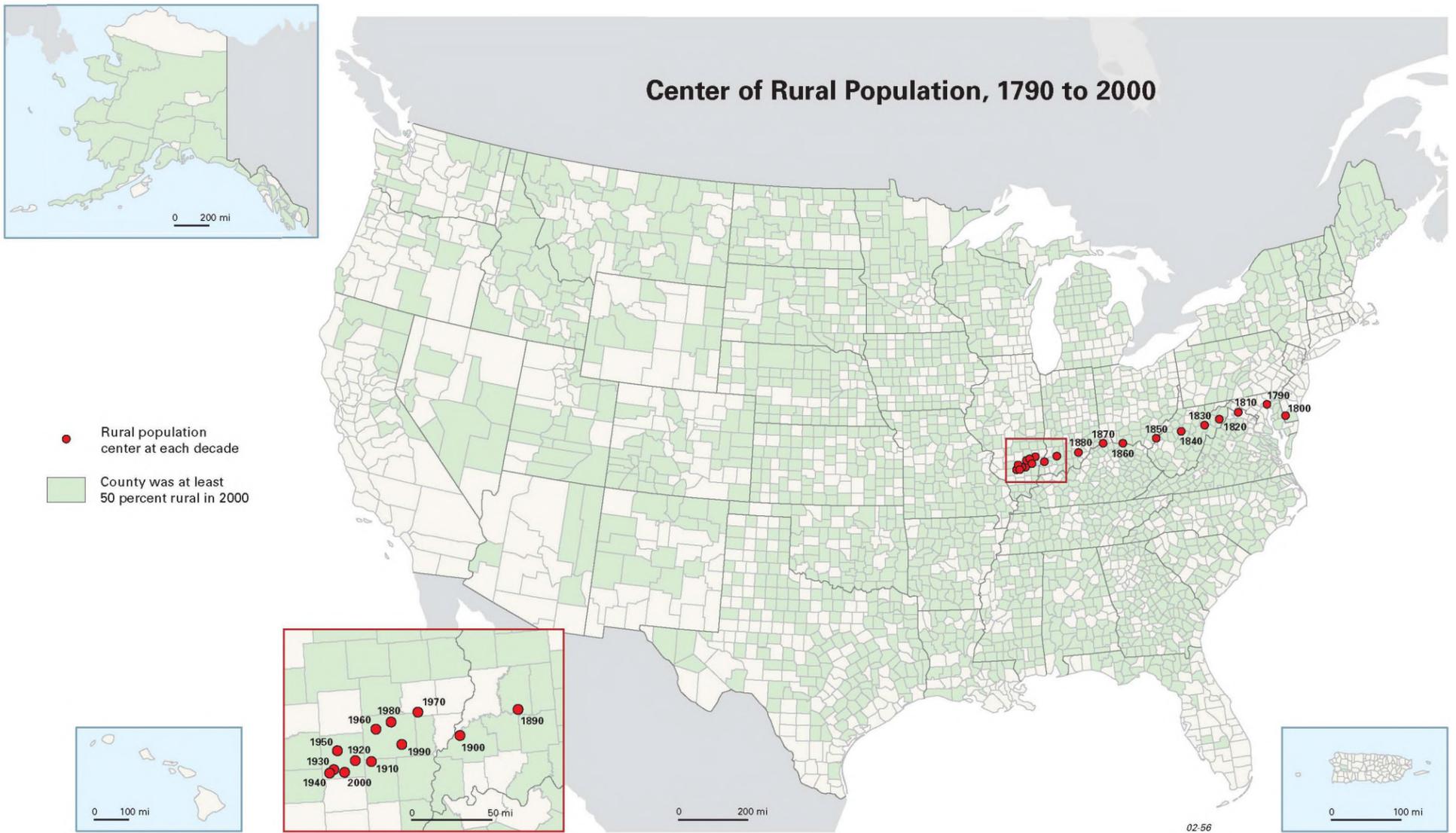
Light blue	7.0 and above
Medium blue	2.0 to 6.9
Dark green	0.0 to 1.9
Grey	Data not available



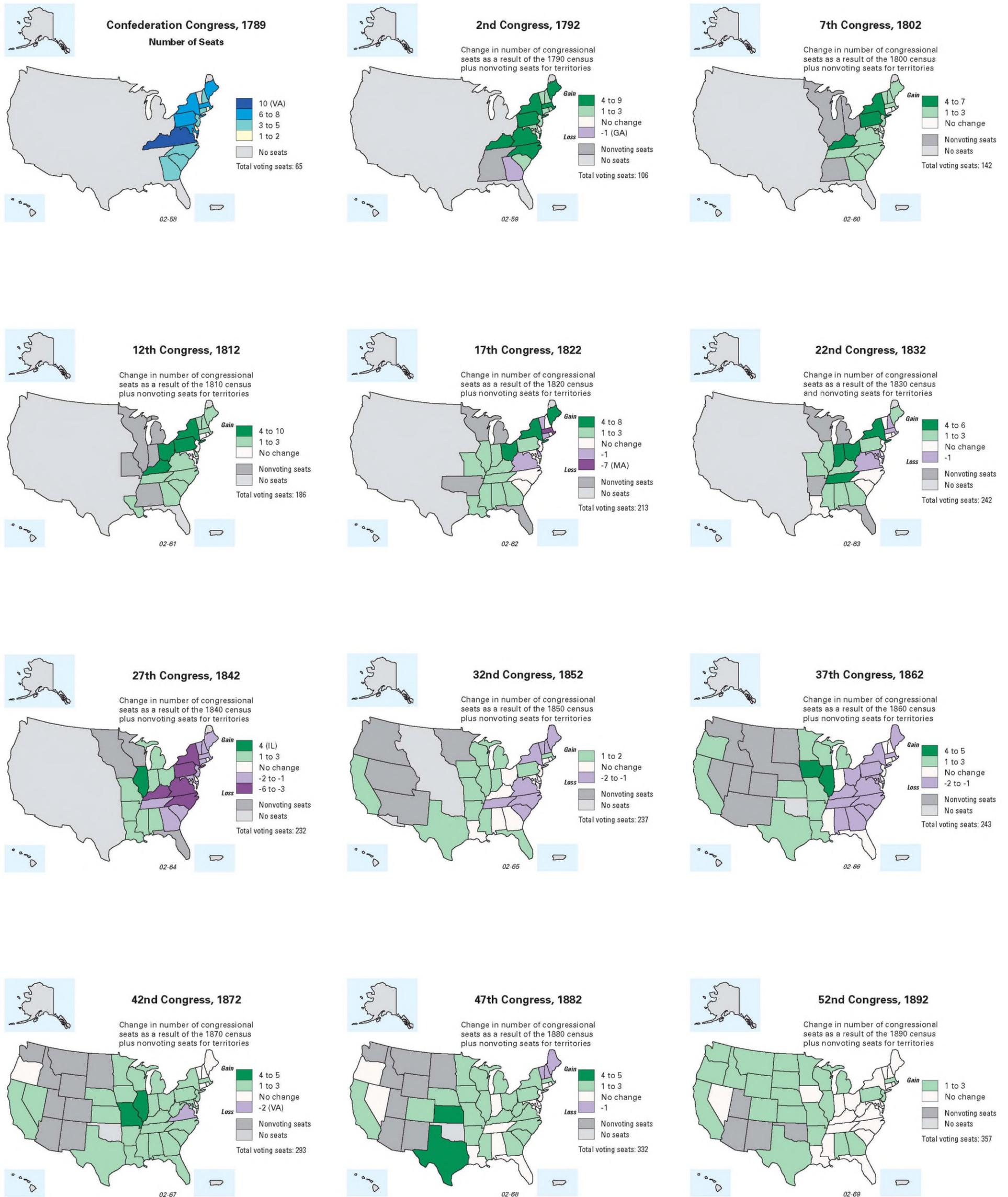
Rural population as a percentage of total population

Dark green	100.0
Dark green	80.0 to 99.9
Medium green	60.0 to 79.9
Medium blue	40.0 to 59.9
Light blue	21.0 to 39.9
Very light blue	0.0 to 20.9
Grey	Data not available

U.S. percent 21.0



CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION OF CONGRESSIONAL SEATS



CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION OF CONGRESSIONAL SEATS

