



RURAL WELLBEING

Geographies Factsheet



HIGHLIGHTS

- 17% of Ontario's population lives in rural municipalities.
- Rural municipalities cover 96% of Ontario's land area.
- There are 469 rural municipalities in Ontario.

Overview

This factsheet presents summary statistics for rural and urban classifications of 2021 census subdivisions. We also compare the current classification to the previous census in 2016.

Why classify municipalities?

There are 577 [census subdivisions](#) in Ontario. According to Statistics Canada, census subdivisions are municipalities, or areas treated as municipal for statistical purposes, such as unorganized territories and Indigenous reserves and settlements.

Gathering data for so many places results in very large and complex datasets. Classifying municipalities as 'rural' or 'urban' helps organize and summarize large datasets into meaningful groups. This enables us to examine the differences between rural and urban statistics. Mapping this classification helps us visualize where people live, where rural areas are located and how much area they cover. This also helps us understand where rural areas are in proximity to urban areas.

For interactive classification maps, please see the [Geographies dashboard](#).



Rural classification

ROI classifies municipalities as rural (i.e., non-metro) if they are outside of a [census metropolitan area](#). According to this classification, rural municipalities have common characteristics regarding their population size and proximity to urban areas. Rural municipalities have a smaller population and are located further away from large cities.

For details about ROI's classification approach, please see our [website](#).

Rural – any municipality outside of census metropolitan areas.

Urban – any municipality within a census metropolitan area.



Table 1. 2021 classification and statistics.

Classification	2021 Count	2021 Population	Proportion of Populaton	Land area (sq. km)	Proportion of Land Area
Rural	469	2,481,753	17%	858,544	96%
Urban	108	11,742,189	83%	33,868	4%
Grand Total	577	14,223,942	100%	892,412	100%

There are 469 rural municipalities in Ontario, which are home to more than 2.4 million people (Table 1). Rural municipalities cover 96% of Ontario’s land area, and account for 17% of Ontario’s total population. Most of Ontario’s land area is rural while most of Ontario’s population is urban. Ontario’s population is concentrated in large urban centres that make up a very small proportion of the total land area.

Although Ontario’s population grew by 779,176 people since 2016, that growth was mostly concentrated in urban areas. The rural proportion of Ontario’s population decreased from 19% in 2016 to 17% in 2021 (Table 2). This could reflect slower population growth in rural areas, or the reclassification of rural areas to urban. Municipalities are reclassified as urban if their population or commuting pattern meets [Statistics Canada](#)’s thresholds.

The number of rural municipalities decreased since 2016. Municipalities were added to the Ottawa, Windsor and Sudbury census metropolitan areas, which changed their classification from rural (2016) to urban (2021), as follows:

- Ottawa: Arnprior, Beckwith, Carleton Place, McNab/Braeside, Mississippi Mills.
- Windsor: Essex, Kingsville, Leamington.
- Sudbury: St.-Charles.

The total number of municipalities in 2021 is different from 2016. But it is difficult to make a direct comparison to past numbers because municipalities are added, removed, or renamed in between census years. By January 2021, five municipalities were removed, and eight municipalities were added. Municipalities are removed from the census for operational reasons, but they still exist in accordance with provincial legislation.

Table 2. 2016 classification and statistics.

Classification	2016 Count	2016 Population	Proportion of Populaton
Rural	476	2,487,962	19%
Urban	99	10,956,264	81%
Grand Total	575	13,444,226	100%

Summary

The rural classification and statistics presented in this factsheet provide important information about the rural context. This helps us understand how many people live in rural municipalities, where rural municipalities are located, and how much land area they cover.

It is no surprise that most of Ontario's population lives in large urban centres. The urban context is well known, studied, and understood. However, important information is harder to obtain for rural communities. Visualizing rural areas and statistics can help us understand the rural context, including the impacts of policy and funding decisions on rural wellbeing. The facts presented here and, in the dashboard, can help leaders and organizations apply a rural lens to decision making in Ontario.



This factsheet was prepared by Danielle Letang, Manager of Data Strategy for the Rural Ontario Institute. Questions about data sources and comments or feedback can be directed to facts@ruralontarioinstitute.ca.

This factsheet complements the [Geographies Dashboard](#) and provides context for assessments of rural wellbeing.

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