The Geography of Worker Cooperatives in the United States

An exploratory critical GIS study by Patrick Hanly, Alexander Sandy, Angelika Winner, and Kyle Winslow

Introduction

Worker cooperatives (WCs) refer to business entities that are both owned and managed by the workers of the firm themselves. According to the US Federation of Worker Cooperatives (USFWC), their two central characteristics are:
(1) worker-members invest in and own the business together and it distributes surplus to them, and (2) decision-making is democratic, adhering to the general principle of one member-one vote. Worker cooperatives have been associated with a range of objectives, including local economic development, reductions in income inequality, and an improved work experience because of participatory management.

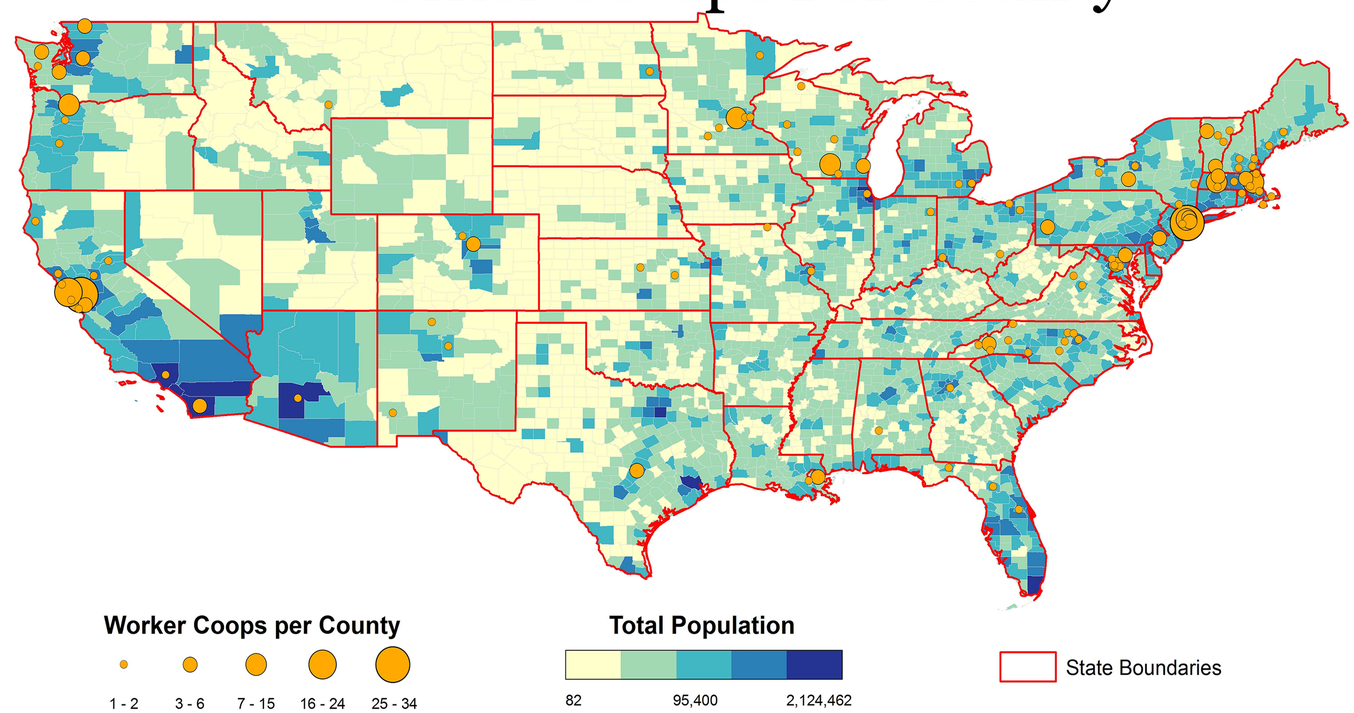
Methods

We geocoded as many of the cooperatives as possible using a plugin for QGIS. About thirty of the WCs were without valid addresses and a dozen more had errors in geocoding and had to be excluded from the map. The remaining 338 were added to maps with county boundaries and/or urban area shapefiles. WCs that were within the urban area shapefiles were classified "urban" and those outside those bounds were classified "rural." A map was constructed depicting counties and their populations and clusters of WCs in graduated circles within those counties.

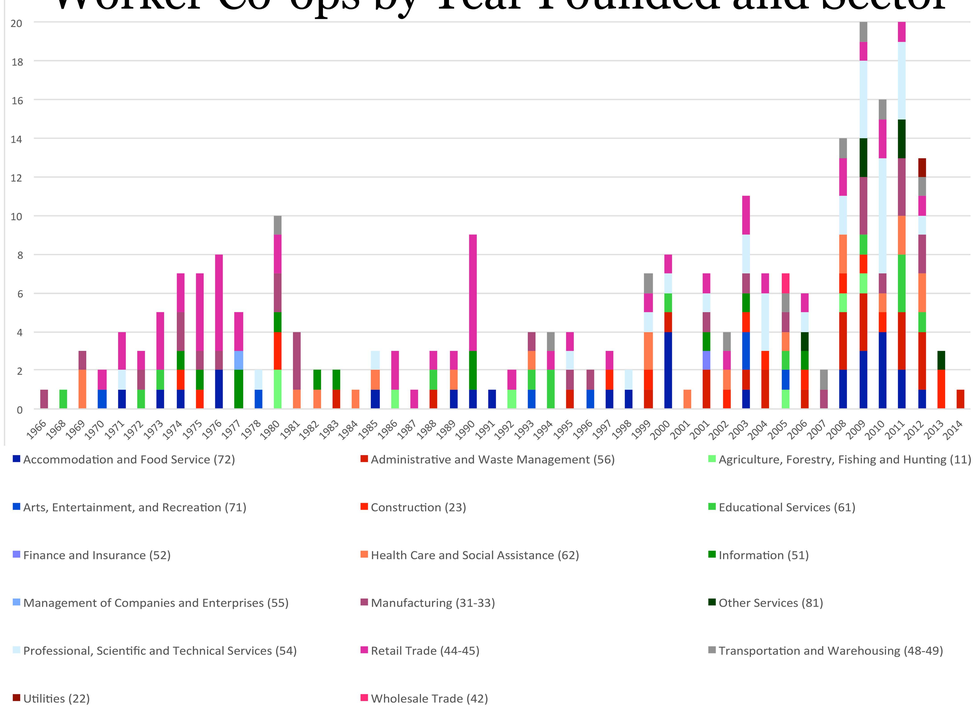
Findings

Worker cooperatives, when found in clusters, are in urban centers, especially San Francisco, NYC, and the Boston metro area. Urban WCs differ somewhat from their rural counterparts: prof. services and retail dominate in urban areas - in rural areas it's manufacturing and construction. There were a few waves of WC creation, most notably the mid-70s and late-2000s. Earlier waves of WCs were largely retail oriented, but have greatly diversified over time. Many cooperatives in the prof. services sector have closed, but retail and manufacturing co-ops are comparatively resilient. Obtaining data such as the number of workers per co-op and their revenue would allow greater opportunity for analysis, but would need to be collected from each entity separately since no central dataset exists.

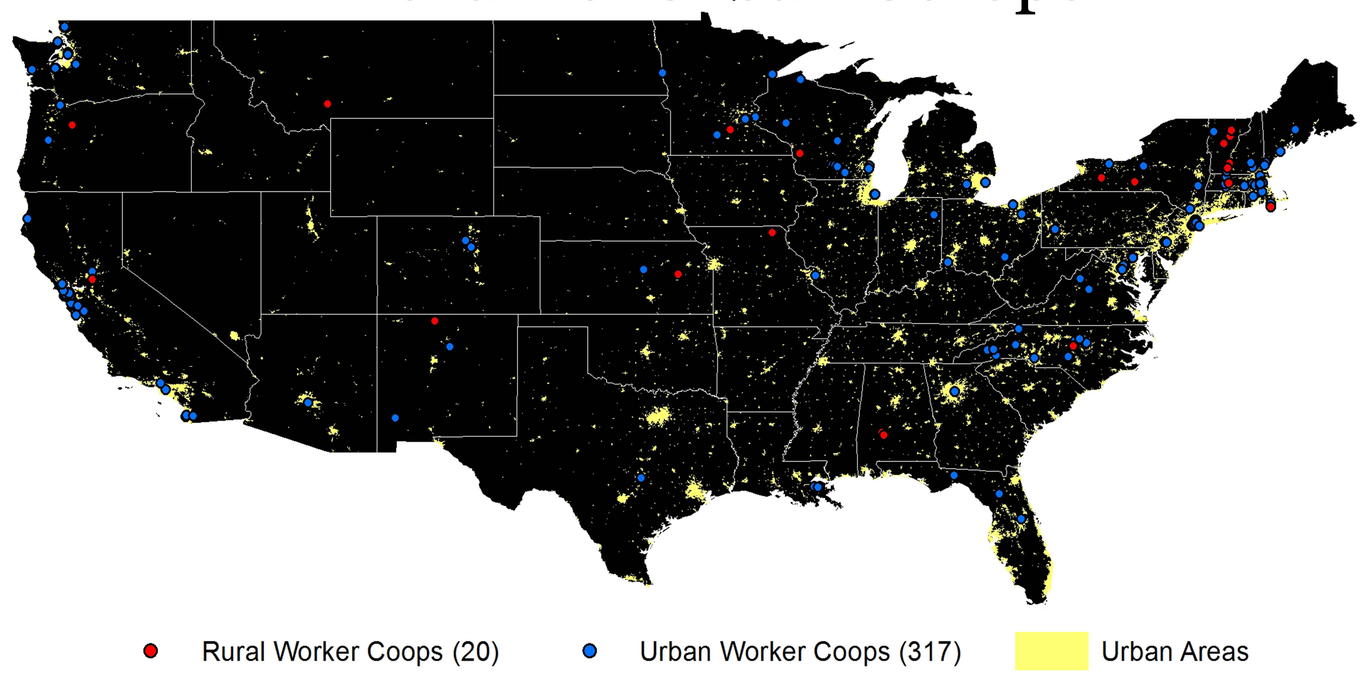
Worker Co-ops Per County



Worker Co-ops by Year Founded and Sector



Rural vs. Urban Co-ops



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For the US Federation of Worker Cooperatives

Sources:
-https://usworker.coop/about/what-is-a-worker-coop
-http://www.census.gov/cgi-bin/sssd/naics/naicsrch?chart=2012
-Marianna Pavlovskaya, GISSG Fall 2015
-http://institute.coop/resources/us-worker-cooperatives-state-sector