

## Limitations of Healthcare Access in Rural Areas

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### DESCRIPTION

Access to healthcare services is crucial for good health, but rural communities encounter a number of hurdles. Access to Healthcare in America, a 1993 National Academies report, defined access as "the timely use of personal health services to achieve the best possible health outcomes. A 2014 RUPRI Health Panel report on rural healthcare access summarizes additional definitions of access and provides examples of measures that can be used to determine access. Residents should ideally be able to obtain services such as primary care, dental care, mental health, emergency care, and public health services with ease and confidence. Rural communities sometimes face healthcare challenges that limit their capacity to access the treatment they require. To provide rural communities with adequate access, required and suitable healthcare services must be offered and accessible in a timely way. Even when the community has an acceptable quantity of healthcare services, there are other issues to consider in terms of healthcare access. For example, to have decent access to healthcare, a rural person needs also have: Financial means to pay for services such as health or dental insurance.

Rural residents are more likely to travel considerable distances to get healthcare services, especially subspecialist treatments. In terms of travel time, money, and time away from work, this may be a substantial hardship. Furthermore, a lack of dependable transportation is a barrier to care. Public transportation is often an alternative for patients to go to medical appointments in metropolitan regions; however, these transportation options are sometimes unavailable in rural locations. Rural towns frequently have a higher proportion of elderly individuals who have chronic diseases that necessitate many trips to outpatient healthcare facilities. This becomes difficult in the absence of public or private transportation. The Transportation to Support Rural Healthcare subject guide on RHIhub provides resources and information for rural areas on transportation and associated challenges.

Healthcare labor shortages influence rural healthcare access. One indicator of healthcare access is having a consistent supply of care, which is contingent on having a sufficient healthcare

staff. Some health services experts think that merely quantifying provider availability is not an appropriate metric for properly understanding healthcare access. No-use values measures, such as including rural individuals who were unable to locate an acceptable care provider, can assist offer a more complete picture of whether rural inhabitants have access to an adequate healthcare workforce. Individuals who do not have health insurance have reduced access to healthcare. According to a U.S. Census Bureau study titled Health Insurance Coverage in the United States, 2018, 9.1 percent of the population residing outside metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs) lacked health insurance in 2018, compared to 8.4 percent of the people living within MSAs. According to the data from Newborns Without Health Insurance: Racial/Ethnic and Rural/Urban Disparities in Infant Households' Insurance Coverage, 2011-2015, 19.9 percent of infants in rural homes lacked health insurance, which was higher than the 16.8 percent of infants in urban households. Access to healthcare also is limited by a lack of health literacy. The ability of a patient to understand health information and instructions from their healthcare professionals is affected by health literacy. This is especially problematic in rural places, where individuals frequently have lower educational levels and a higher prevalence of poverty. Residents who lack health literacy may be hesitant to seek treatment because they are afraid of talking with a healthcare expert. Because there is minimal privacy in rural locations, societal stigma and privacy concerns are more likely to function as obstacles to healthcare access. Due to privacy concerns, rural populations may be hesitant to seek assistance for mental health, substance addiction, sexual health, pregnancy, or even common chronic conditions. Personal ties with their healthcare practitioner or those working in the healthcare institution may contribute to patients' sentiments. Many private foundations aim to increase rural healthcare access by sponsoring transportation services, boosting the workforce, and addressing other problems. Foundations may help rural healthcare access through investing in current safety net providers and programs, providing grants to develop and implement novel healthcare delivery models, and sponsoring research to examine policy issues related to rural healthcare access.

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