



University of
New Hampshire

Carsey School of Public Policy

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COVID-19 Research Spotlight: Rural Places

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Given the multitude of rural spaces in Maine, this spotlight section highlights some of the most recent research on diagnoses, experiences, and implications of COVID-19 in rural places.

The Rural Policy Research Institute (RuPRI) and the University of Iowa [have published an animated map](#) (1) detailing patterns of spread across rural and urban counties over since January,1 which shows COVID-19 infections arrived later in rural places than in urban. However, [new research from Penn State](#) (2) confirms that rural COVID-19 infections are doubling at a faster rate than in urban (metropolitan) areas. Rural blog The Daily Yonder (from the Center for Rural Strategies) shows that rural counties with recreational economies [have infection rates that seriously outstrip rates in other kinds of rural places](#), (3) and forthcoming research from the Carsey School shows that rural counties with high shares of seasonal homes have infection rates twice as high as in other kinds of rural counties, and 15 percent higher than in urban counties. (4)

These elevated rates and aggressive spreads in rural communities have serious implications for rural outcomes; as The Daily Yonder points out, rural populations tend to be older, have increased rates of chronic health conditions, and live in areas with more limited health care infrastructure (for example, only 1% of ICU beds across the nation are in rural places). The same article notes that COVID-19 testing rates have also been concerningly low in many rural places, although Maine is among the exceptions. Another concern facing rural areas is the impact that worsening economic conditions could have on long-term population health. As the Bangor Daily News notes, Maine's generally hospitality-driven economy [is especially vulnerable to COVID-19](#), (5) making the risks of deteriorating economic conditions a serious concern for Mainers too.

Finally, the Journal of Rural Health has published some rapid-response materials that focus on rural responses to the pandemic. In one commentary, a scientist at a medical school reviews strategies for disseminating and implementing prevention practices in rural areas (6). She suggests that community leaders acknowledge and contextualize risk in meaningful ways, like acknowledging high rural reliance on grandparents as caregivers; engaging business leaders, who can signal that not working is acceptable; and employing strengths-based messaging. A second publication by a rural pediatric specialist identifies a silver lining in the pandemic by noting that the rapid expansion of telehealth options, particularly around mental health, may have long-lasting implications for rural residents' access to specialty care (7). While more providers are trained and more practices have the required infrastructure, he notes that

issues around coverage, reimbursement, broadband access, and privacy, are still being negotiated nationwide.

Footnotes

(1) https://rupri.public-health.uiowa.edu/publications/other/COVID_map.gif

(2) <https://www.dailyyonder.com/penn-state-research-center-confirms-faster-pace-of-covid-19-infections/2020/04/06/>

(3) <https://www.dailyyonder.com/rural-counties-with-recreation-economies-show-higher-infection-rates/2020/03/25/>

(4) Carson, Jessica A. Forthcoming. "Rural Areas with Seasonal Homes Hit Hard by COVID-19." Data Snapshot. Durham, NH: Carsey School of Public Policy.

(5) <https://bangordailynews.com/2020/03/28/politics/why-maines-hospitality-driven-economy-was-so-vulnerable-to-coronavirus/>.

(6) Prusaczyk, Beth. 2020. "Strategies for Disseminating and Implementing COVID-19 Public Health Prevention Practices in Rural Areas." Commentary accepted for publication in *Journal of Rural Health*, ahead of print.

(7) Nagata, Jason M. 2020. "Rapid Scale-Up of Telehealth during the COVID-19 Pandemic and Implications for Subspecialty Care in Rural Areas." Commentary accepted for publication in *Journal of Rural Health*, ahead of print.