Rural Health, Data, and Data Challenges in the Age of Rural Transformation

Presented by Michael Meit, MA, MPH
Prepared by Nathan Dockery, MPH
September 2nd, 2026

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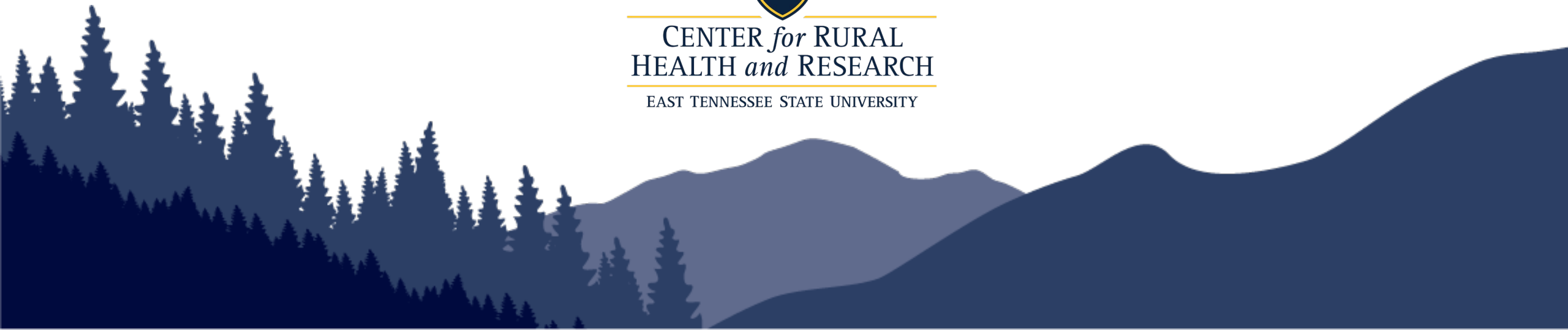

Agenda

DISCLAIMER:
Information and topics discussed in this webinar are sensitive. Please consider this as background. If you wish to quote, please reach out.

- Current state of rural
  - Populations and communities
  - Health status/indicators
  - Rural Health Transformation & Medicaid Cuts
  - Rural as a National Security Concern
- Limitations in rural data
- Changing landscape of rural data and research
- Data resources

Current State of Rural

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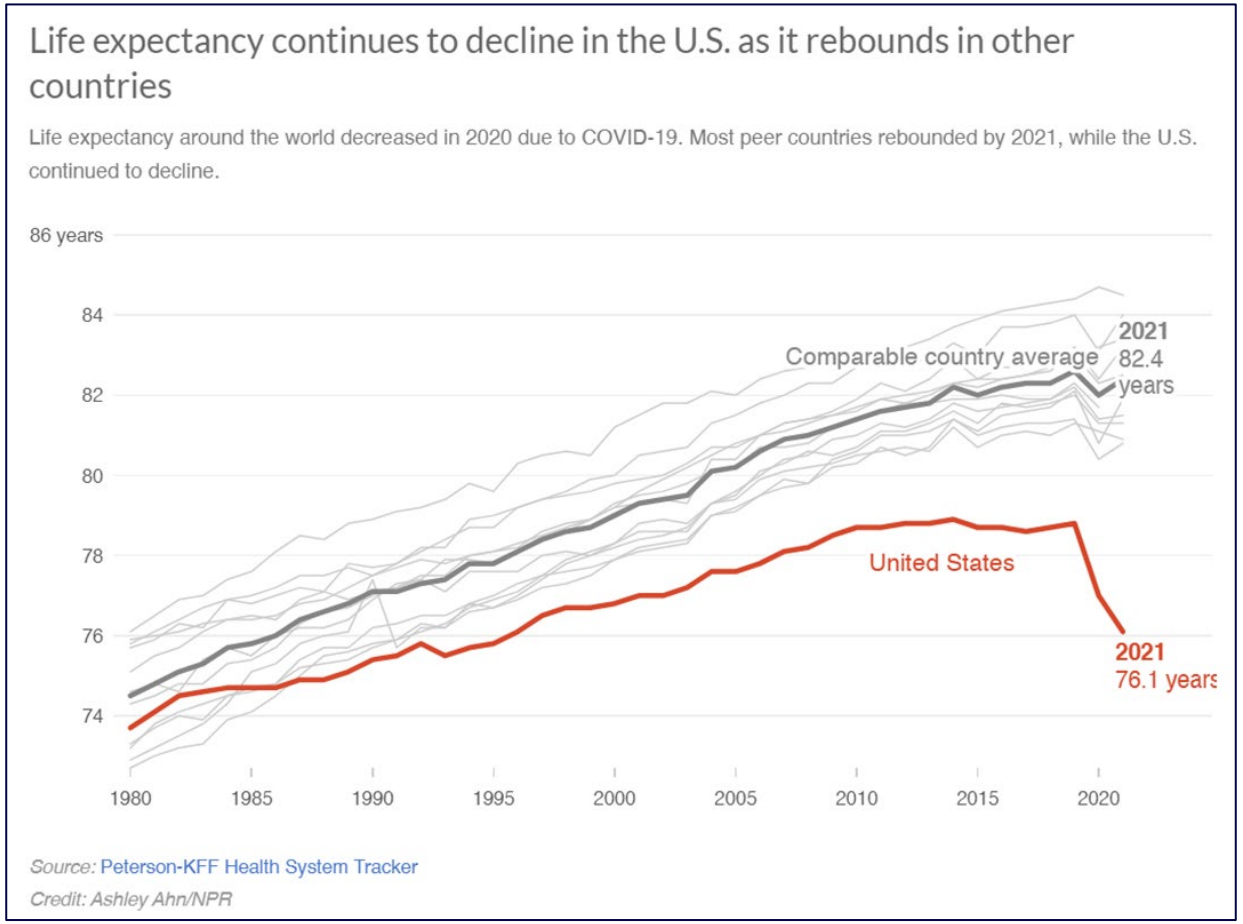
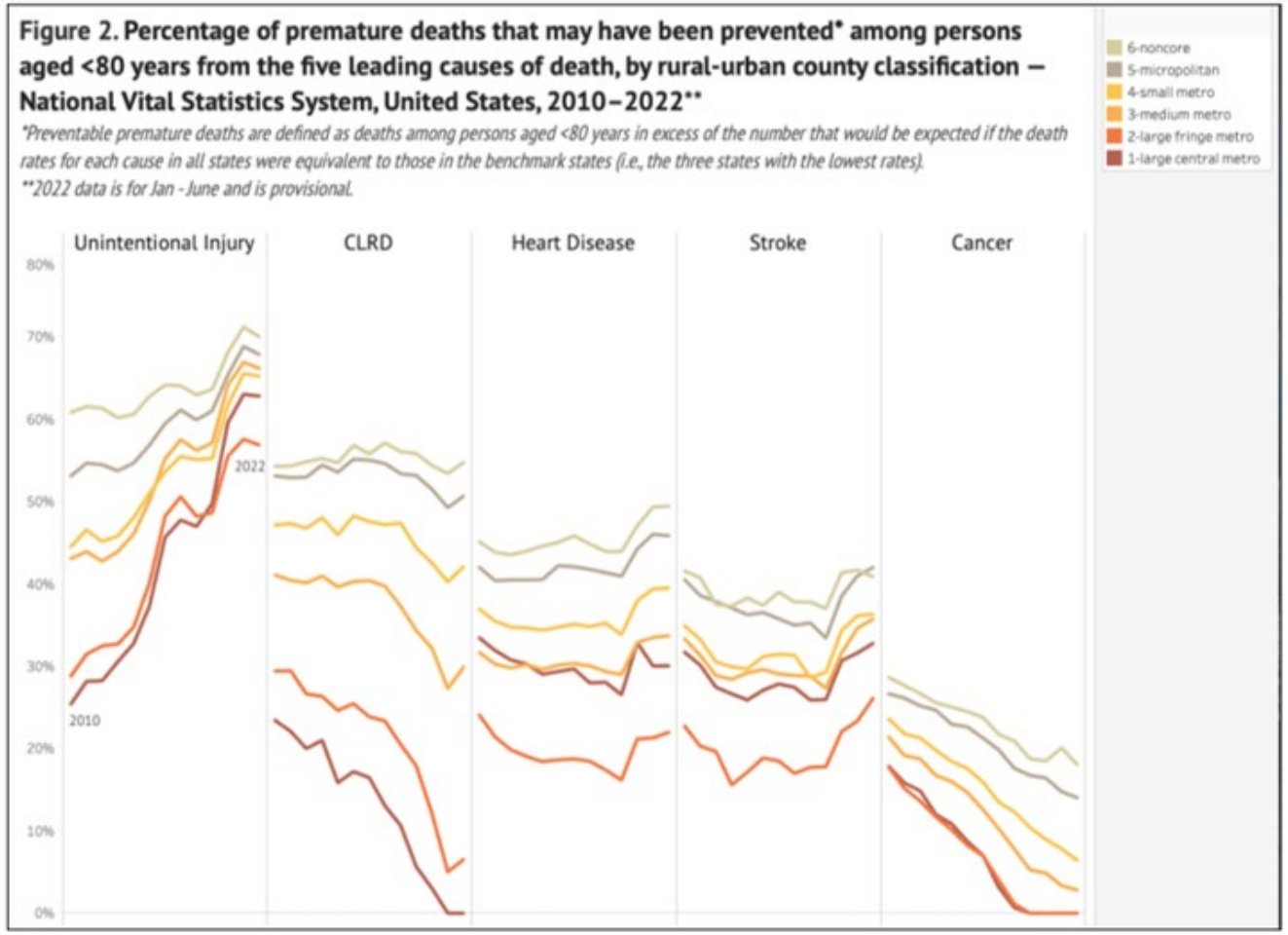
LIFE EXPECTANCY IN THE US IS DECLINING



RURAL VS. URBAN DIFFERENCES – LEADING CAUSES



Garcia M, Rossen L, Matthews K, et al. Preventable Premature Deaths from the Five Leading Causes of Death in Nonmetropolitan and Metropolitan Counties, United States, 2010-2022. MMWR Surveill Summ 2024;73 (No: 2)

American Journal of Preventive Medicine
Volume 68, Issue 4, April 2025, Pages 773-783

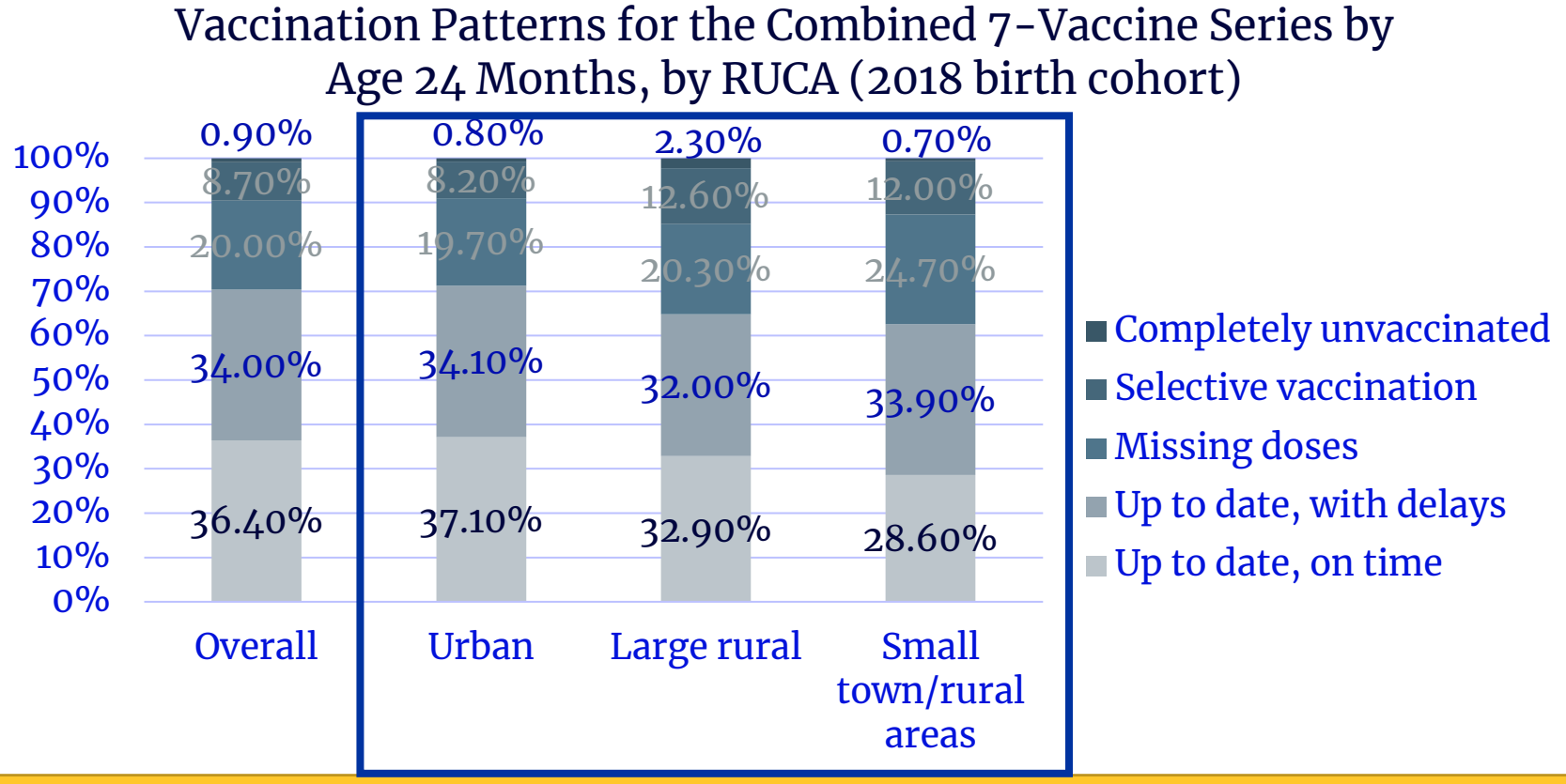
Research Article

Early Childhood Vaccination Coverage and Patterns by Rural–Urban Commuting Area

Sophia R. Newcomer PhD [1 2], Sarah Y. Michels MPH [1], Alexandria N. Albers MPH, MS [1 2], Rain E. Freeman MPH [1 3], Christina L. Clarke MS [4], Jason M. Glanz PhD [4 5], Matthew F. Daley MD [4 6]

Generated with data from Newcomer, et al, 2025

Rural areas have lower rates of children up to date on recommended childhood vaccines than urban areas

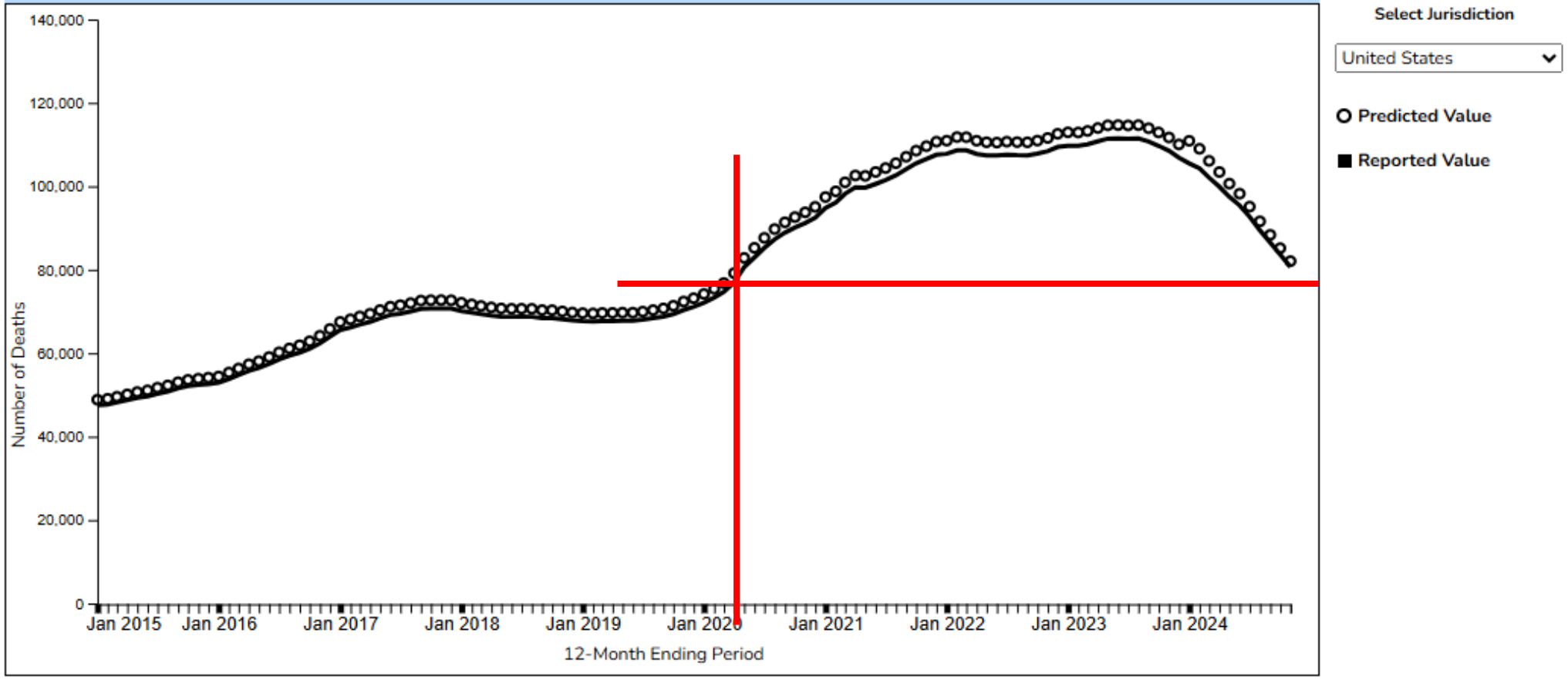


A positive change, and a cautionary tale about provisional data

12 Month-ending Provisional Number and Percent Change of Drug Overdose Deaths

Based on data available for analysis on: April 6, 2025

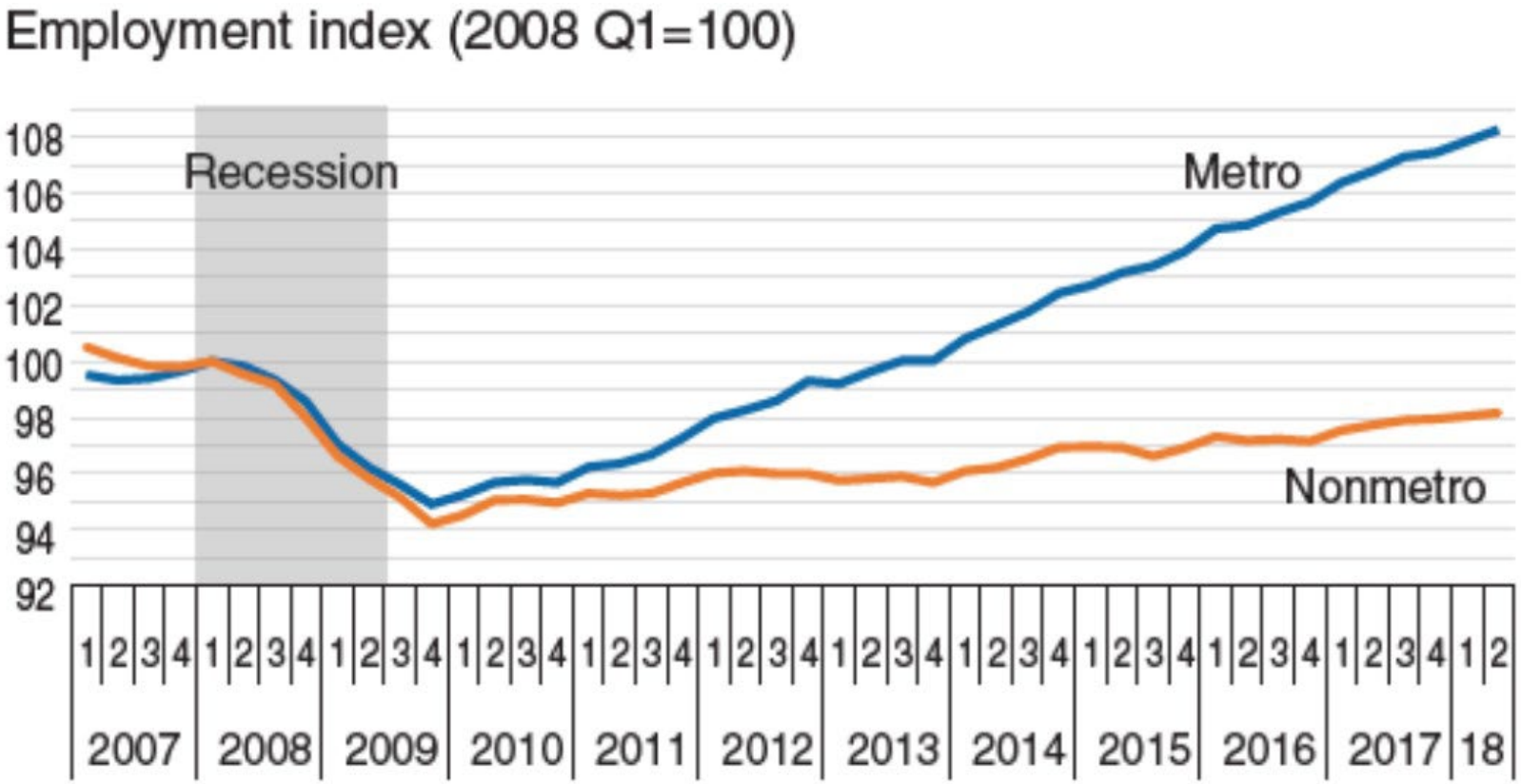
Figure 1a. 12 Month-ending Provisional Counts of Drug Overdose Deaths: United States



SOCIAL DETERMINANTS (DRIVERS) OF HEALTH

https://health.gov/healthypeople/objectives-and-data/social-determinants-health

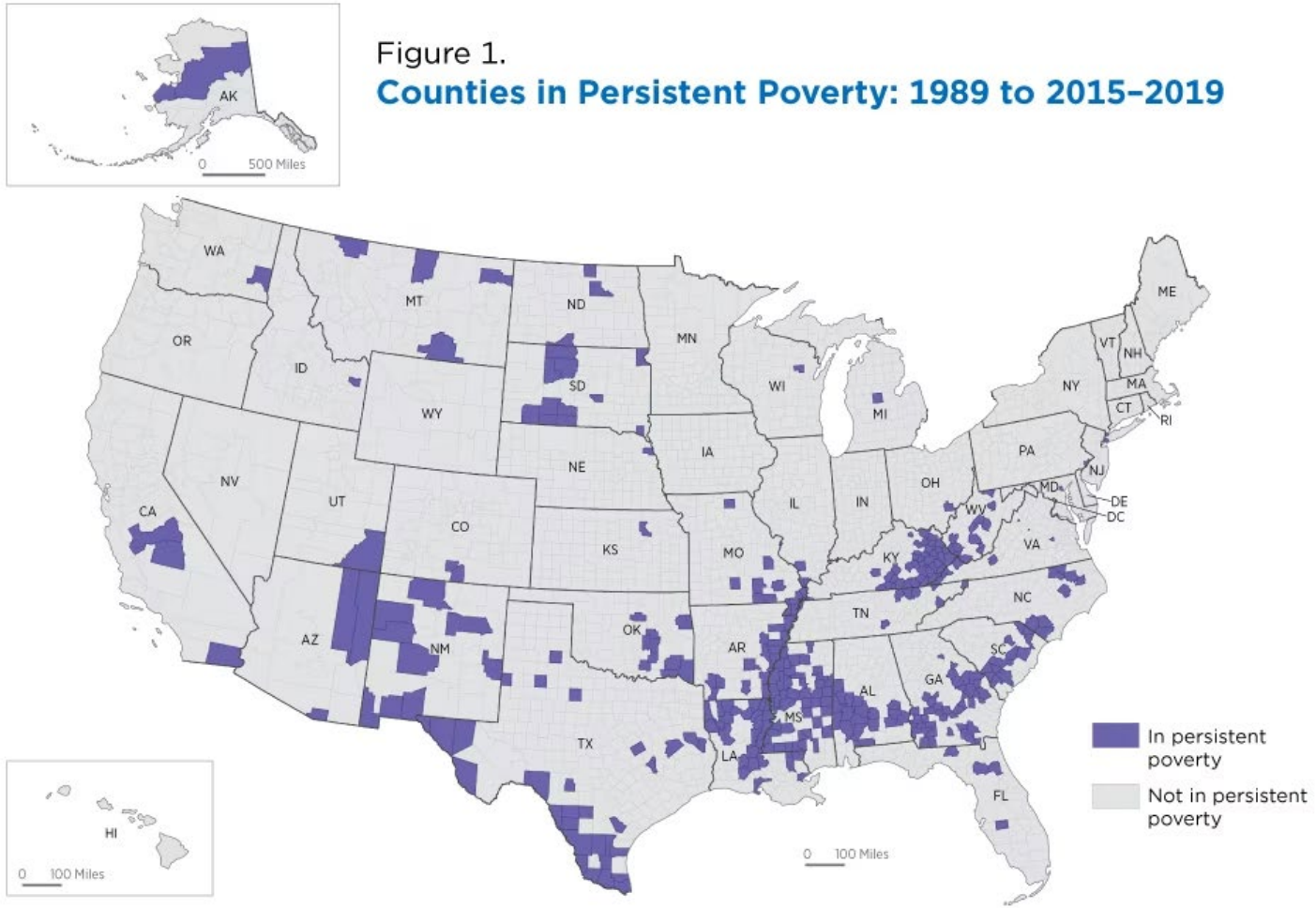
RURAL VERSUS URBAN JOB GROWTH SINCE RECESSION



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Local Area Unemployment Statistics (LAUS), seasonally adjusted.

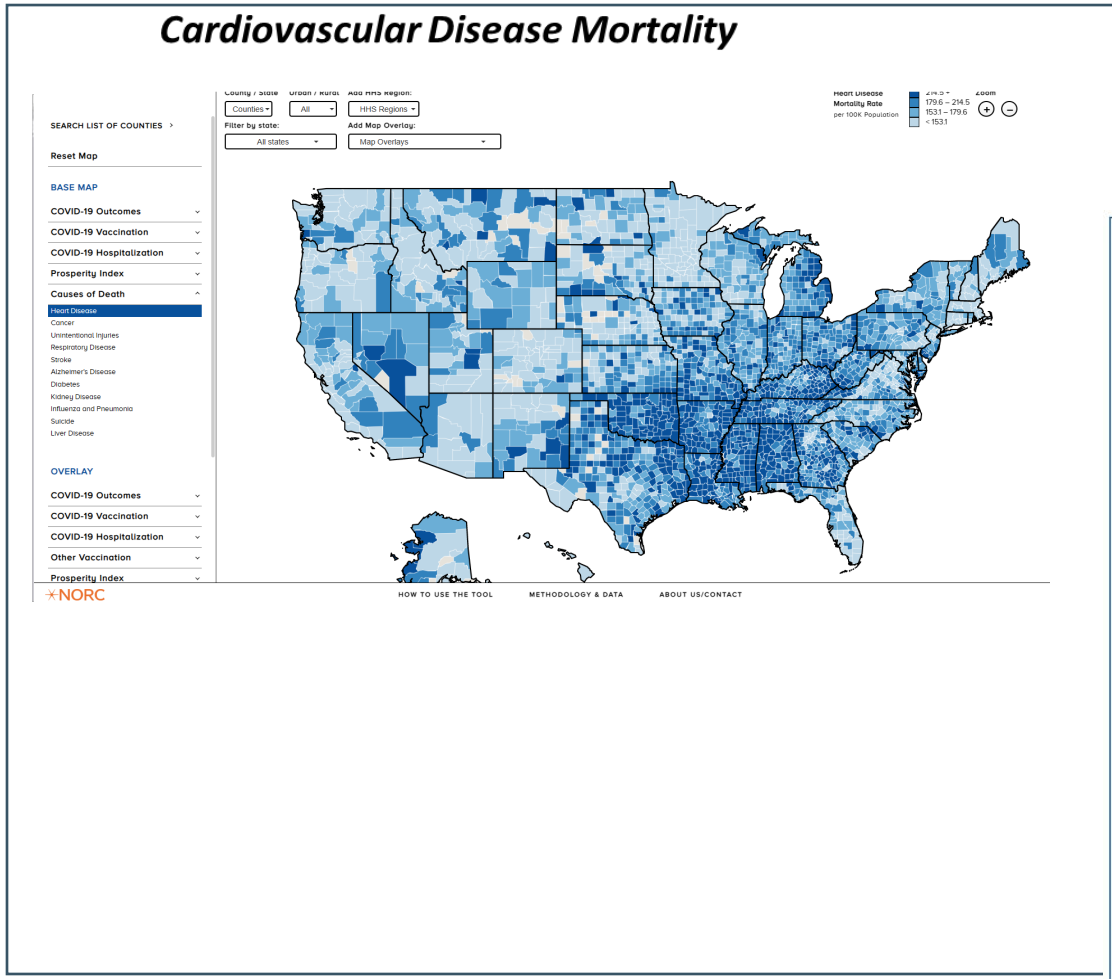
Figure 1.

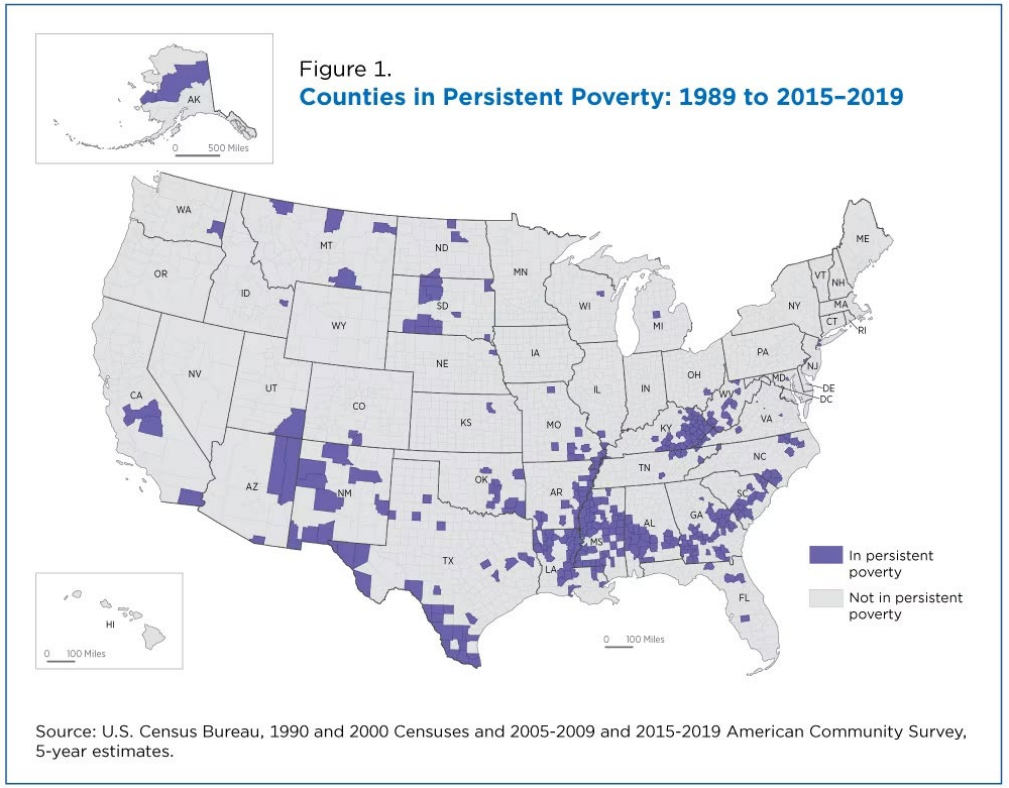
Counties in Persistent Poverty: 1989 to 2015–2019



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1990 and 2000 Censuses and 2005-2009 and 2015-2019 American Community Survey, 5-year estimates.

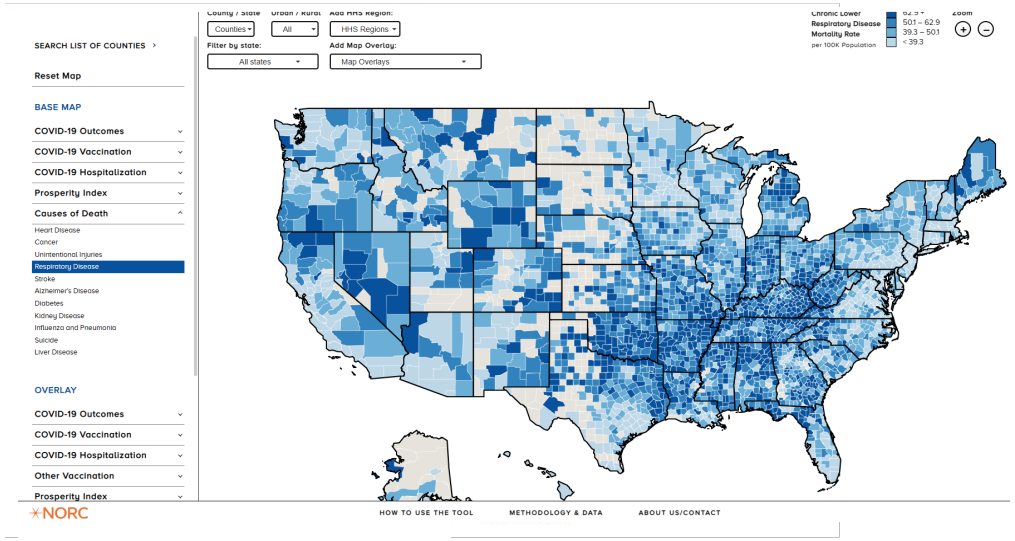
CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE VS. PERSISTENT POVERTY

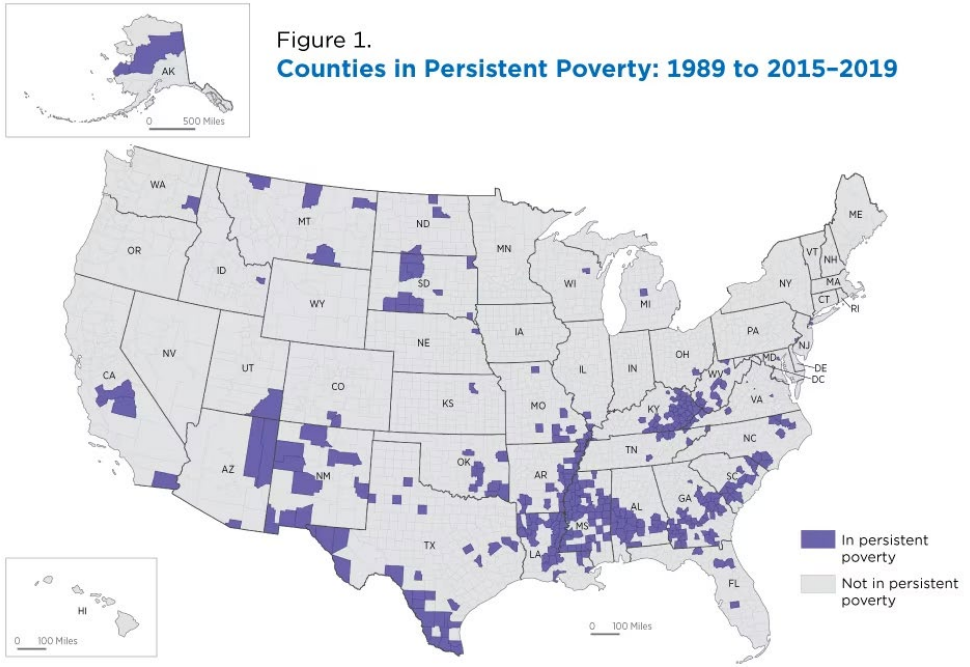




RESPIRATORY DISEASE VS. PERSISTENT POVERTY

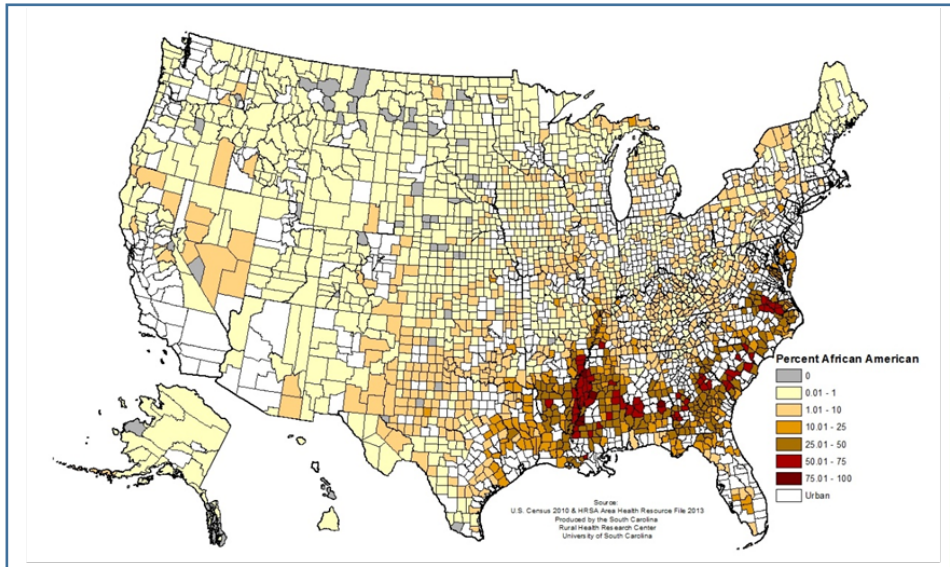
Respiratory Disease Mortality

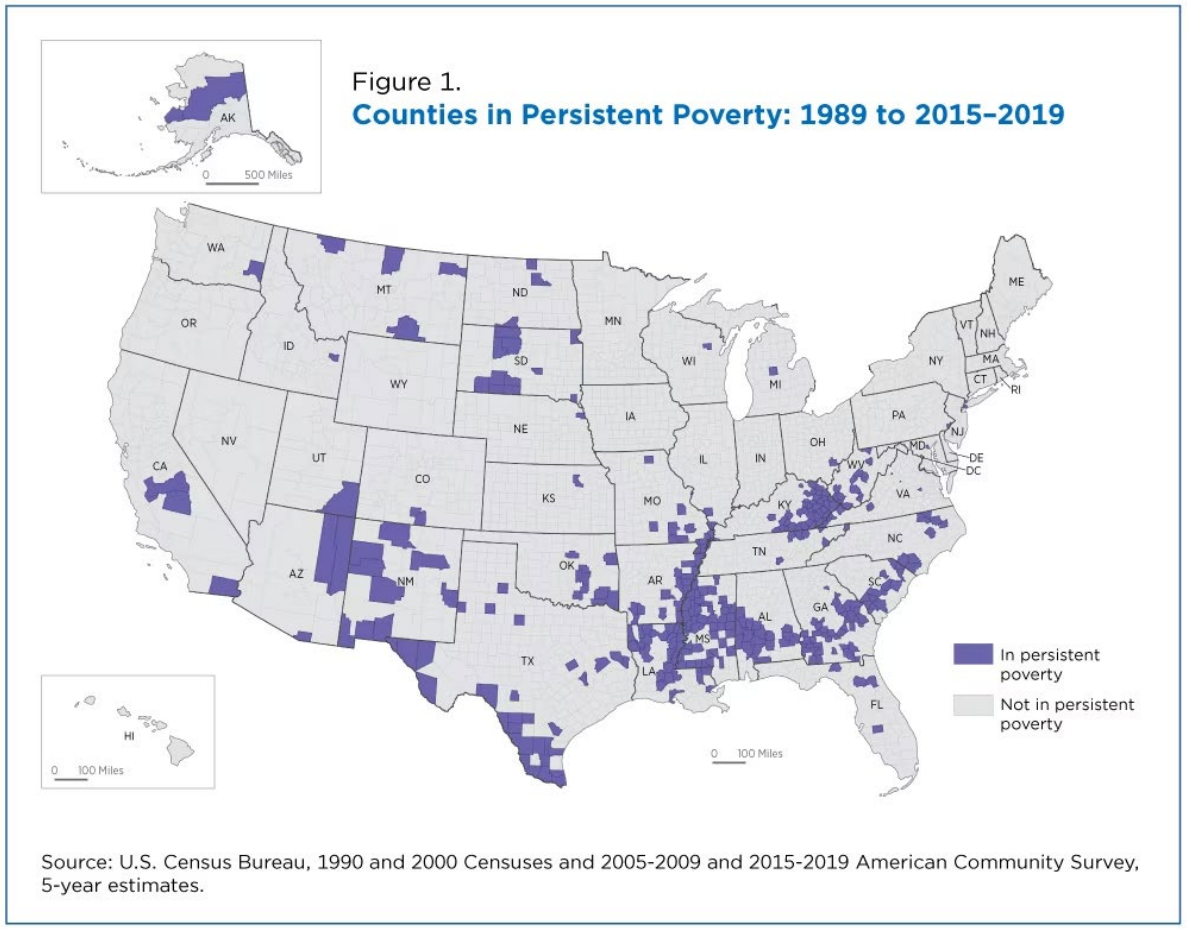




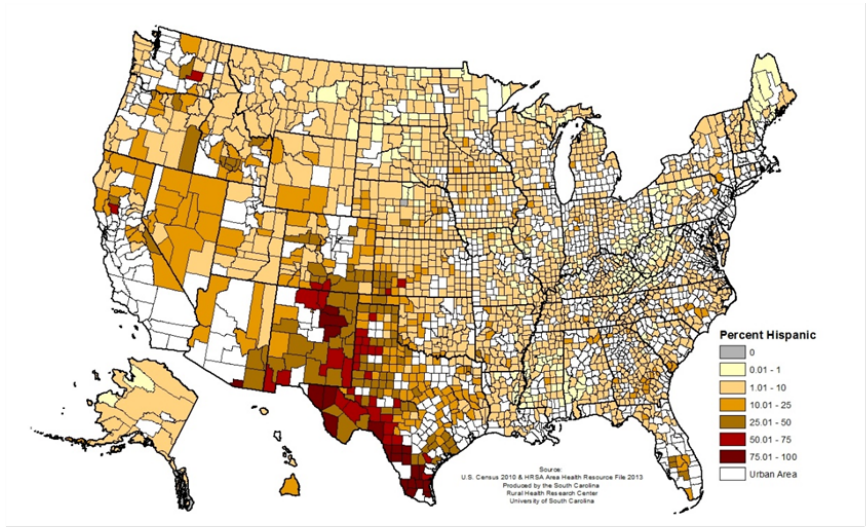
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1990 and 2000 Censuses and 2005-2009 and 2015-2019 American Community Survey, 5-year estimates.

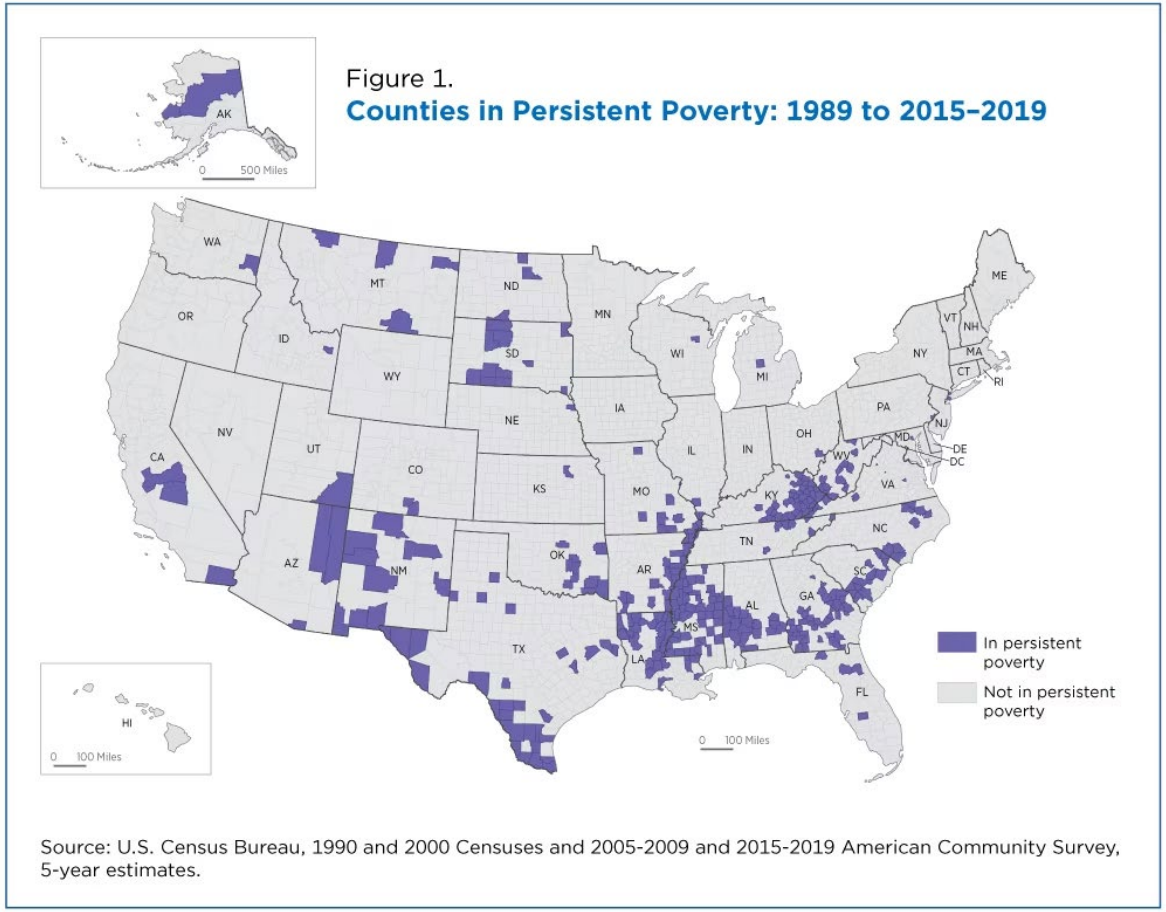
AFRICAN AMERICANS IN RURAL COUNTIES





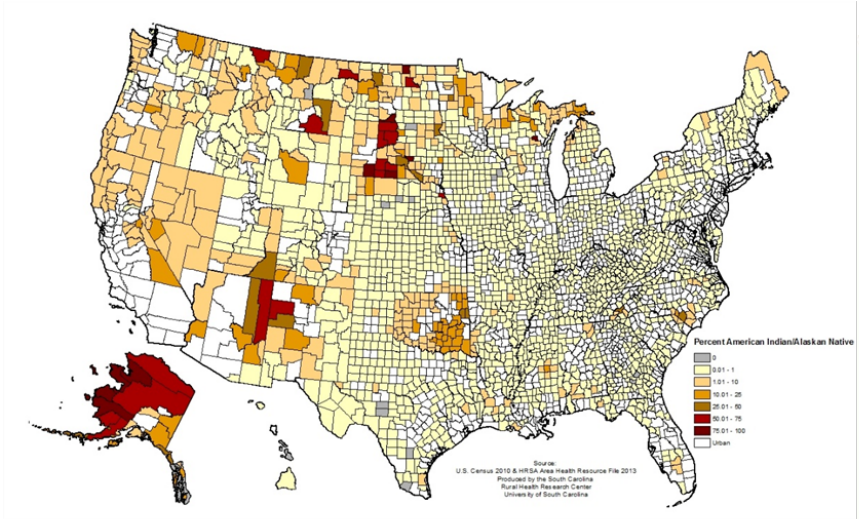
HISPANICS IN RURAL COUNTIES

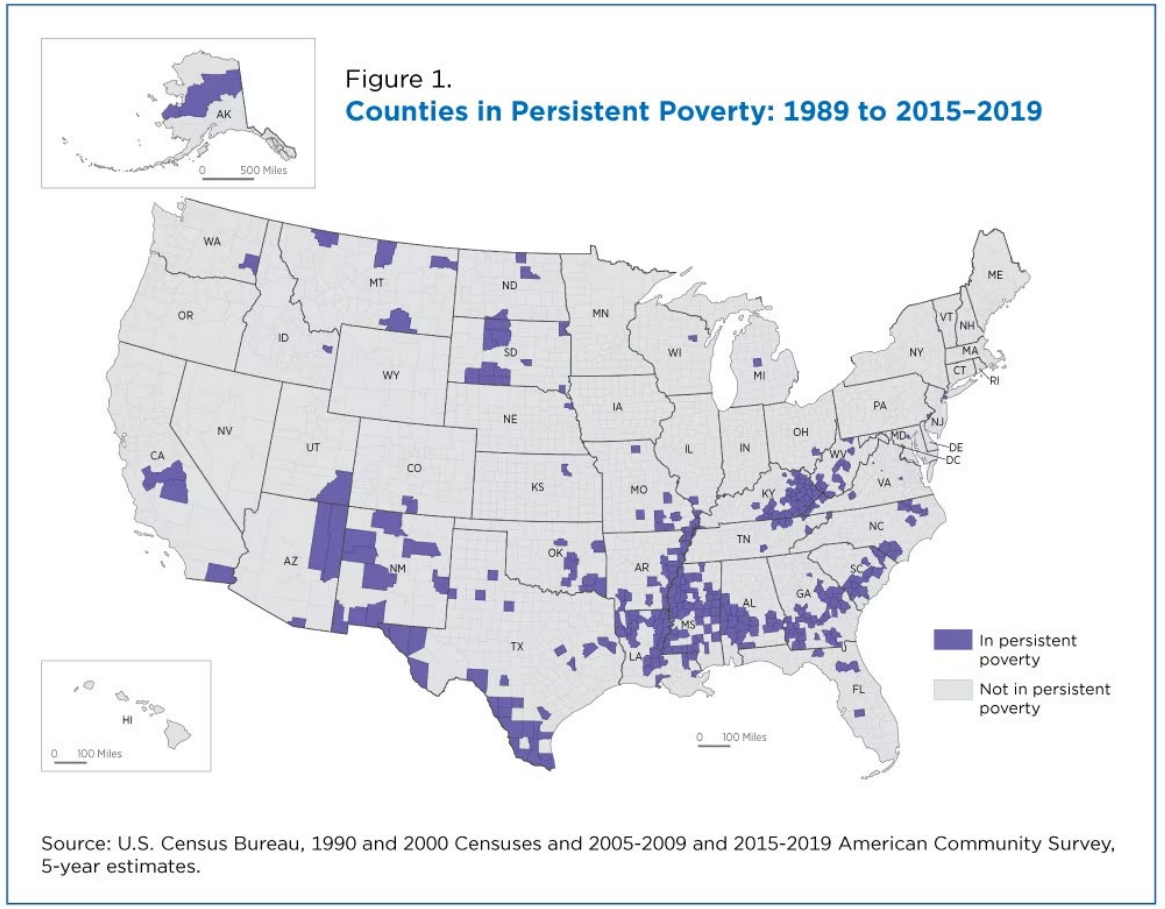




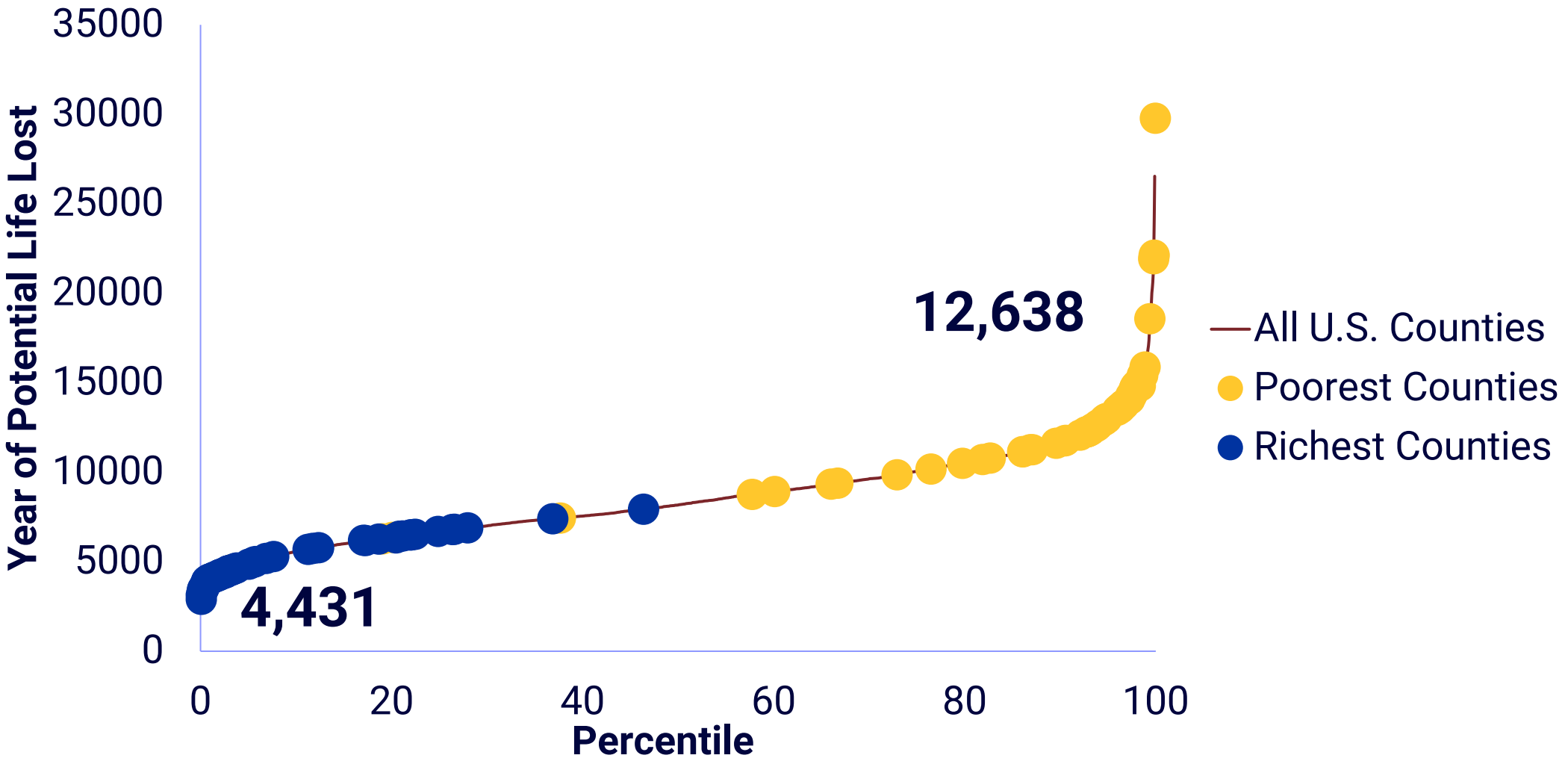
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1990 and 2000 Censuses and 2005-2009 and 2015-2019 American Community Survey, 5-year estimates.

AMERICAN INDIAN/ALASKA NATIVES IN RURAL COUNTIES





PREMATURE DEATH (YPLL):
2% WEALTHIEST COUNTIES VS 2% POOREST COUNTIES



Health and Social Conditions of the Poorest Versus Wealthiest Counties in the United States. Egen, et. al.
American Journal of Public Health 107:130-135 (2017)

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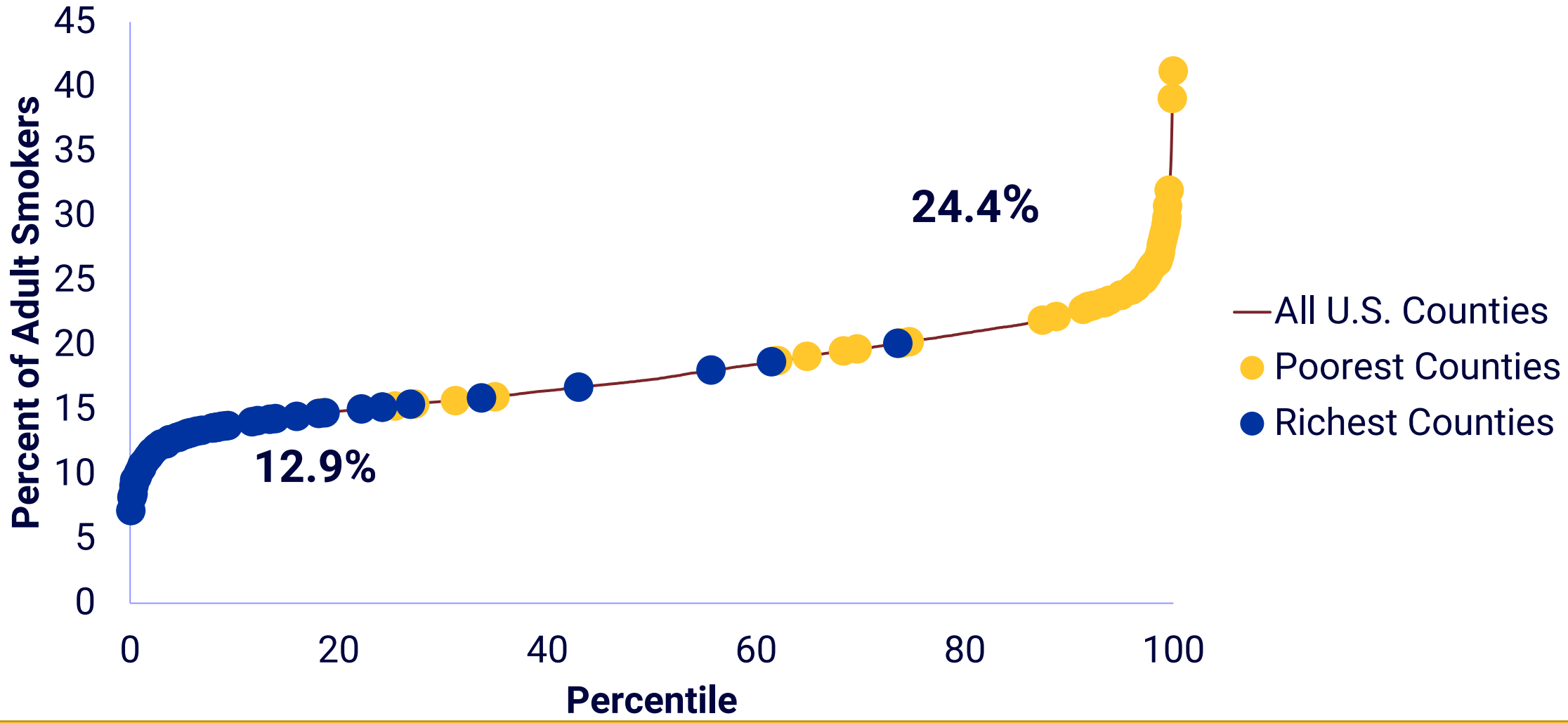
ADULT SMOKING PERCENTAGE
2% WEALTHIEST COUNTIES VS 2% POOREST COUNTIES



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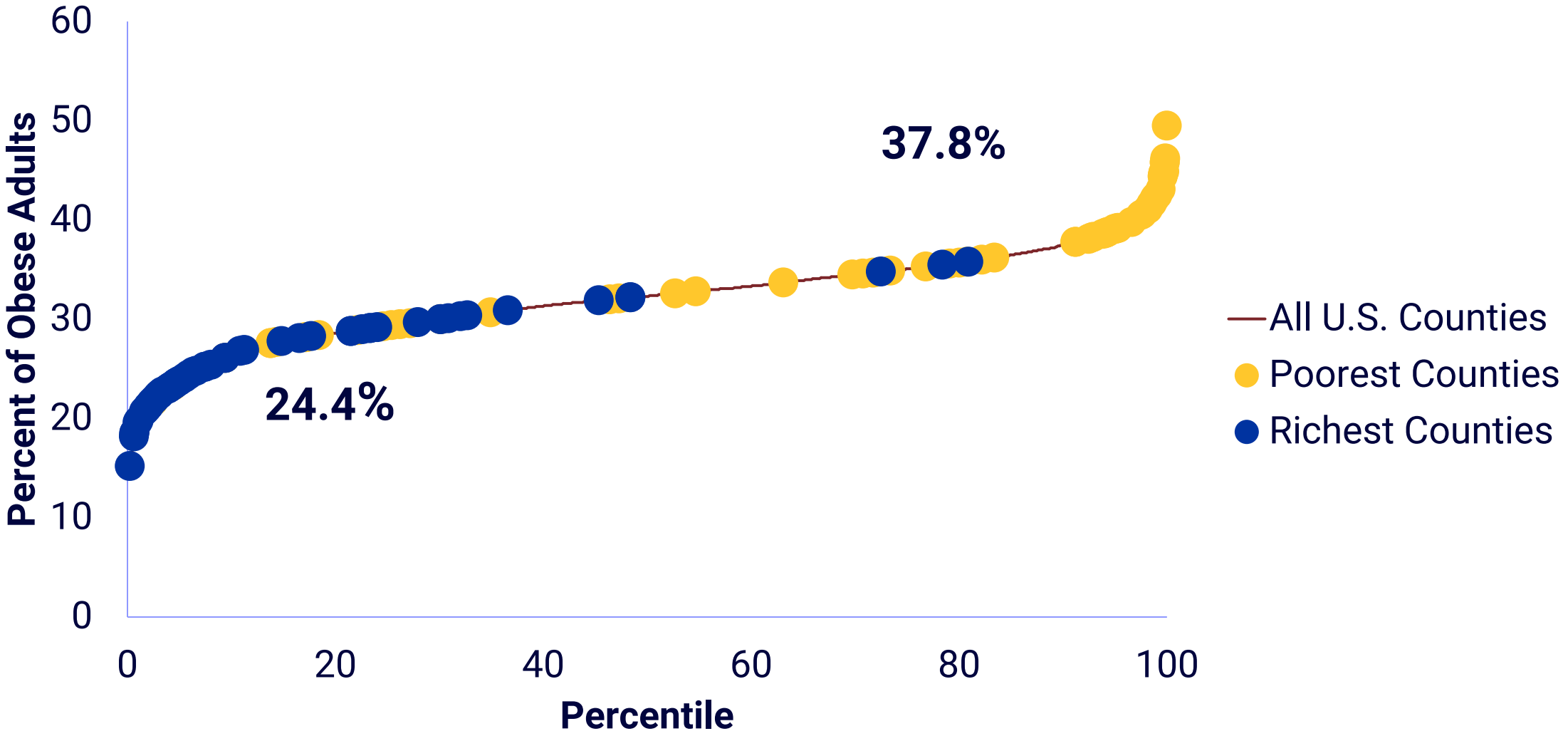
ADULT OBESITY PERCENTAGE
2% WEALTHIEST COUNTIES VS 2% POOREST COUNTIES



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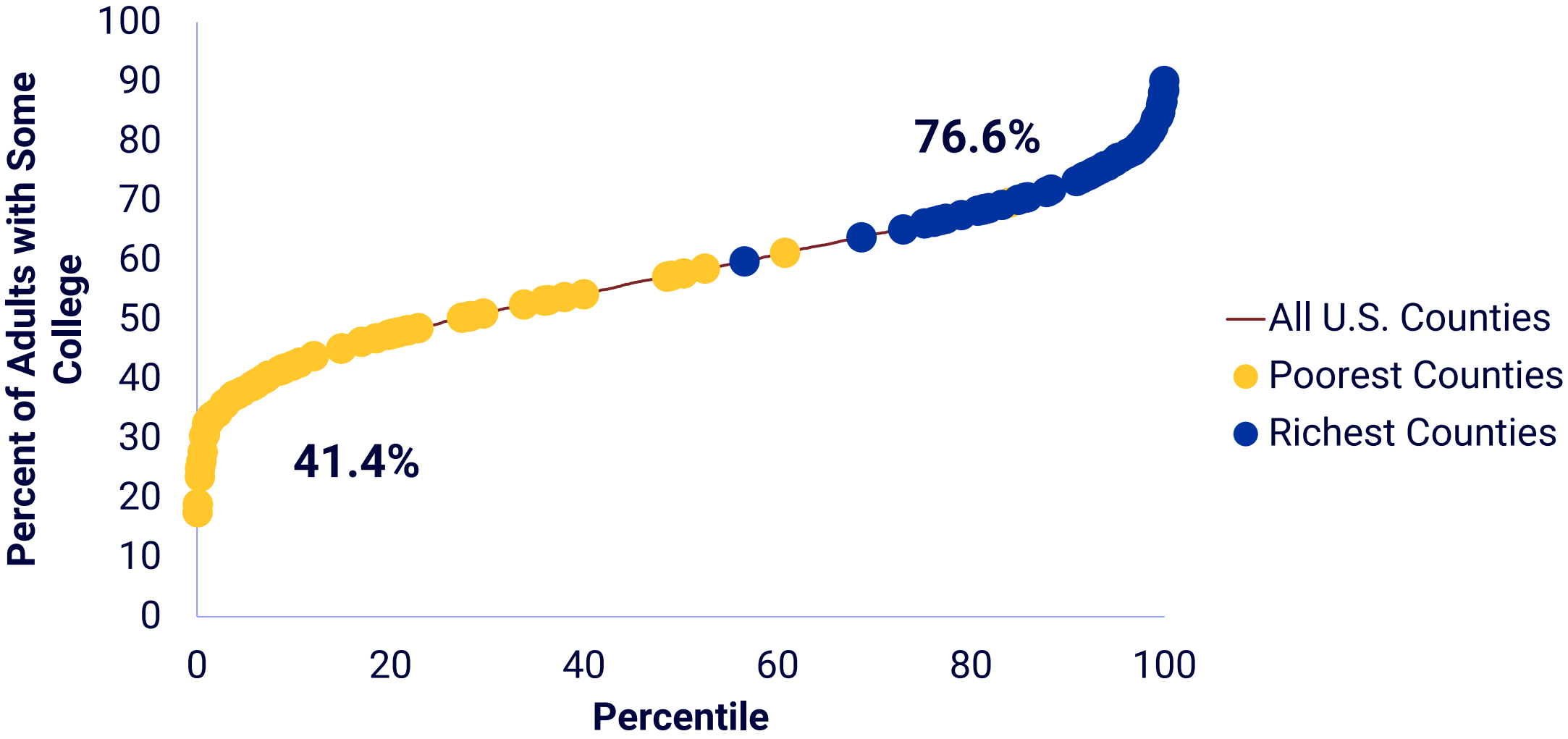
ADULTS WITH SOME COLLEGE PERCENTAGE
2% WEALTHIEST COUNTIES VS 2% POOREST COUNTIES



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American Journal of Public Health 107:130-135 (2017)

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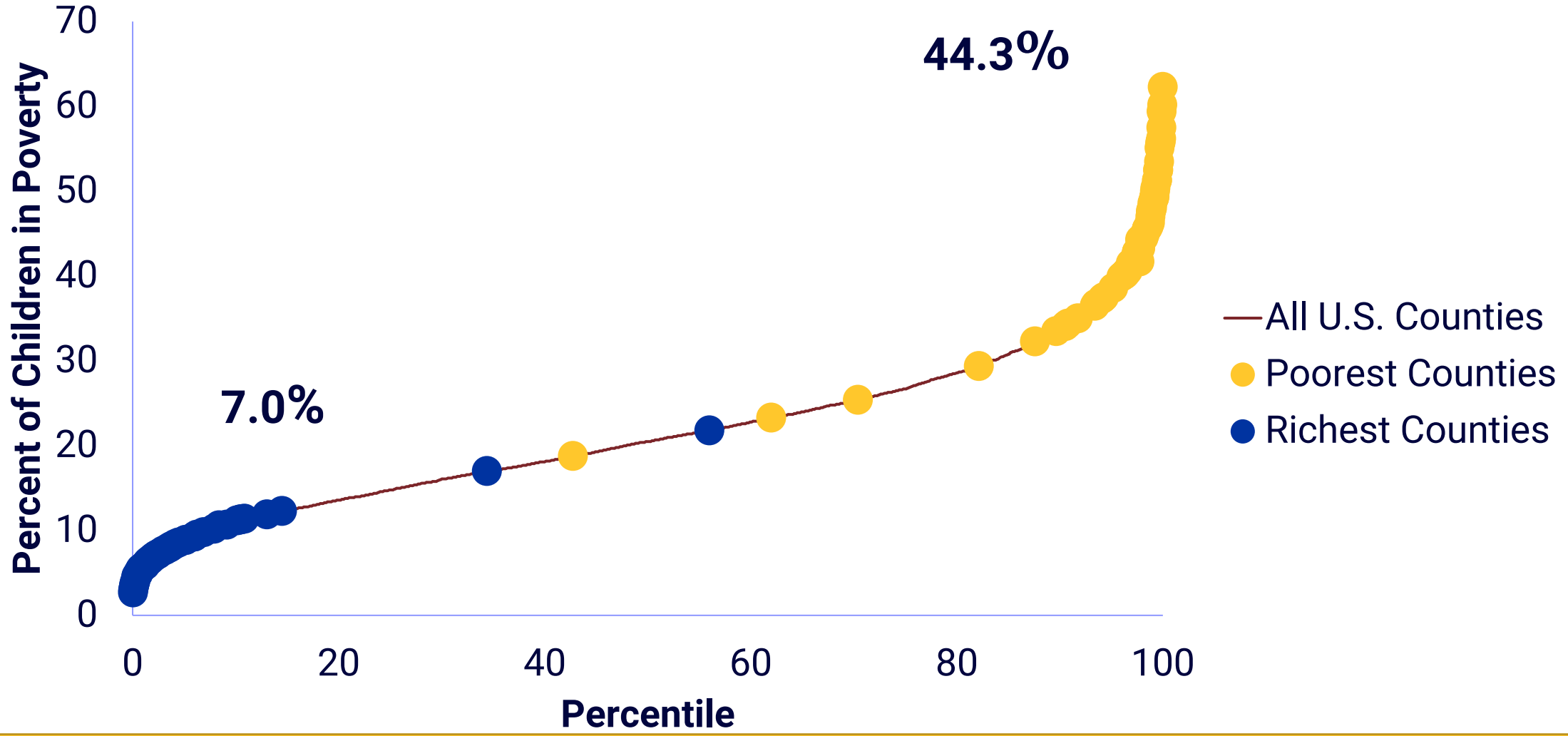
CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY PERCENTAGE
2% WEALTHIEST COUNTIES VS 2% POOREST COUNTIES



Health and Social Conditions of the Poorest Versus Wealthiest Counties in the United States. Egen, et. al.
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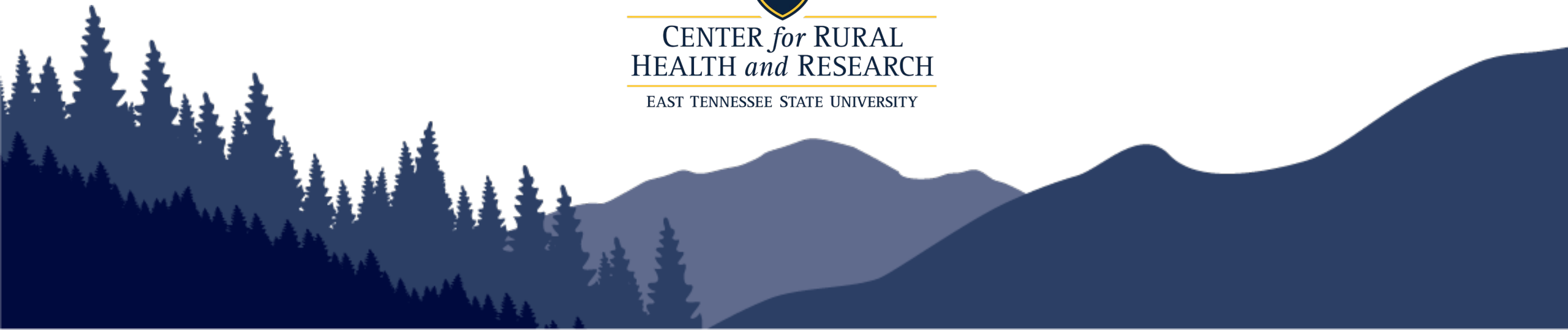
Rural Health Transformation & Medicaid Cuts



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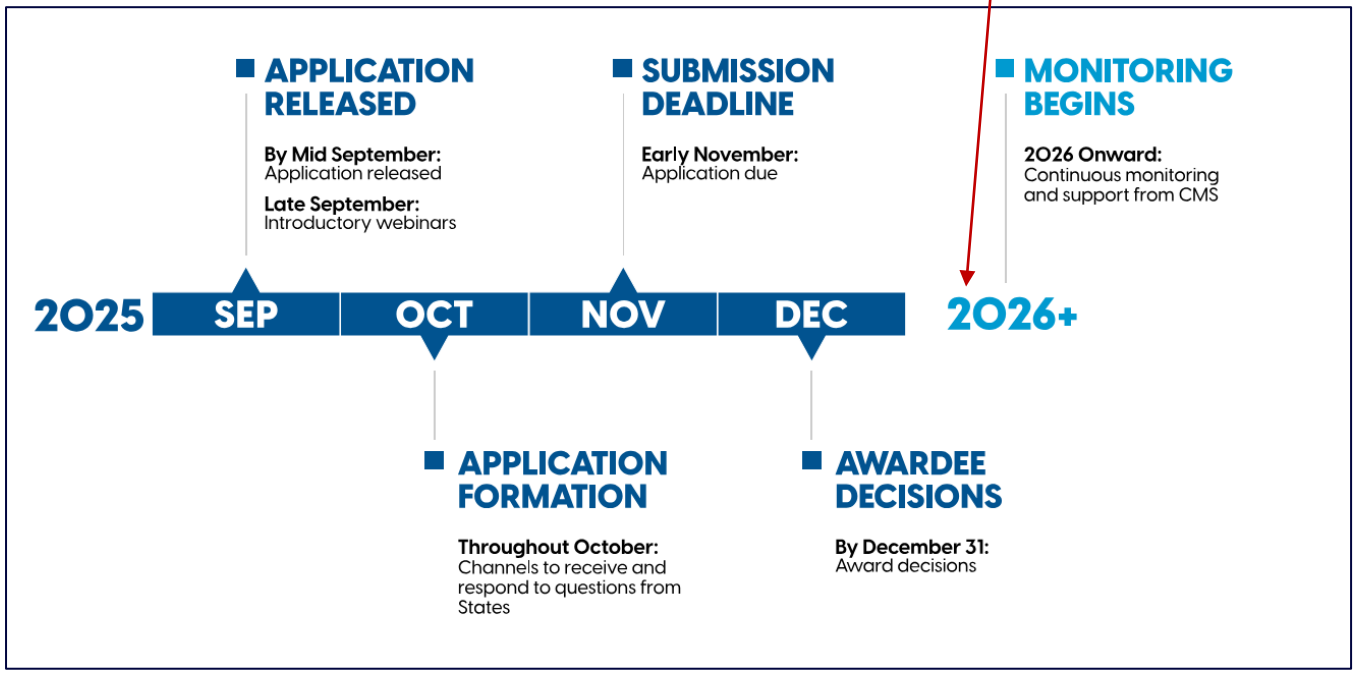
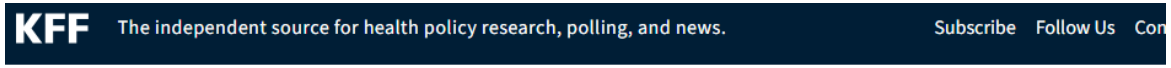
Background on Rural Health Transformation

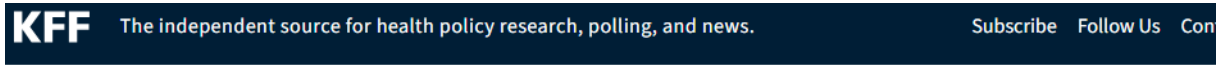
- $50 billion over five fiscal years
  - Half equally distributed among approved states
  - Half distributed by CMS based on a formula
- State-led with unique priorities
- Introduced in H.R 1 on July 4, 2025





How Might Federal Medicaid Cuts in the Enacted Reconciliation Package Affect Rural Areas?

Authors: Heather Saunders, Alice Burns, and Zachary Levinson
Published: Jul 24, 2025



ACA Marketplace Enrollment Is Down By 3 Million After Big Jump in Premium Payments

Cynthia Cox

Published: June 29, 2026

- Estimated $137 billion lost in rural communities (KFF)
- Medicaid covers 1 in 4 people in rural areas (KFF)
- Coverage loss estimates are in the millions (RWJF)
- Marketplace coverage down 13% following expiration of tax credits (KFF)
- Plus work requirements and declining Marketplace coverage

Search state, RFP name, keyword...

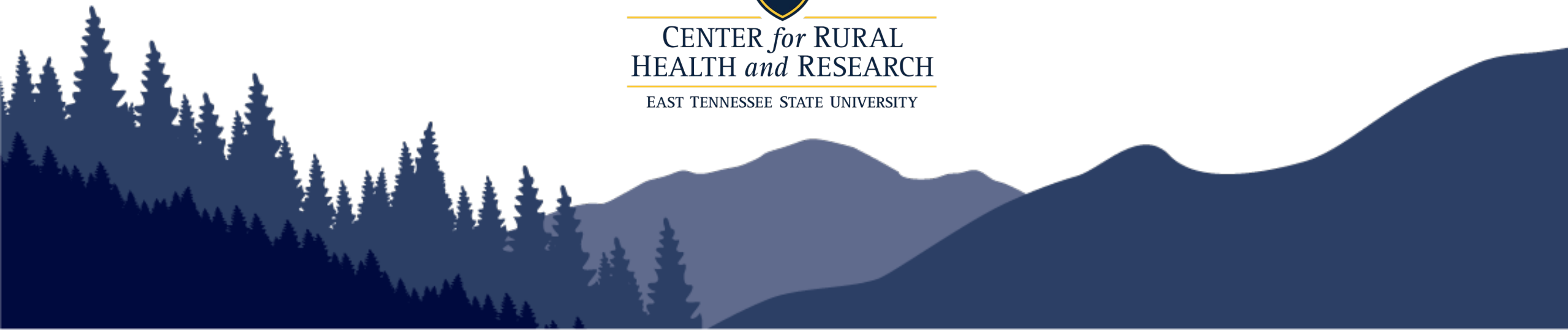
All stages

RFP detail

407 of 407 entries

State	RFP opportunity	Stage	Site	Open date	Due date	Award / notif.	Est. start
Alabama	Cancer Digital Regionalization Initiative	Posted/open	Site ↗	7/17/2026	August 7, 2026 5pm CT	—	—
Alabama	EMS Trauma and Stroke Initiative	Posted/open	Site ↗	7/17/2027	August 7, 2026 5pm CT	—	—
Alabama	EMS Treat-In-Place Initiative	Posted/open	Site ↗	7/17/2028	August 7, 2026 5pm CT	—	—
Alabama	Maternal and Fetal Health Initiative	Posted/open	Site ↗	7/17/2029	August 7, 2026 5pm CT	—	—
Alabama	Simulation Training Initiative	Posted/open	Site ↗	7/17/2030	August 7, 2026 5pm CT	—	—
Alabama	Collaborative EHR IT and Cybersecurity Initiative	In review	Site ↗	6/3/2026	June 26, 2026, 5pm CT	3-4 weeks after deadline	—

Why is rural important? Rural as a National Security Concern



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The Role of Rural in National Security

FOOD &
AGRICULTURE

ENERGY
PRODUCTION

WATER

MANUFACTURING

TRANSPORTATION

DEFENSE

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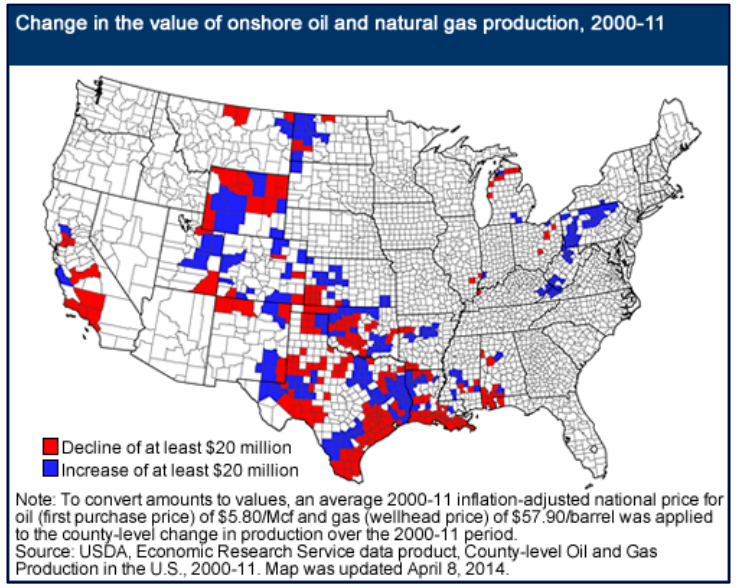
Food and Agriculture

- The Numbers:
  - 97% of all American land is rural (Census Bureau)
  - 1.9 million farms as of 2022 (USDA Census of Agriculture)
  - 95% of farms are operated by families (USDA Census of Agriculture)

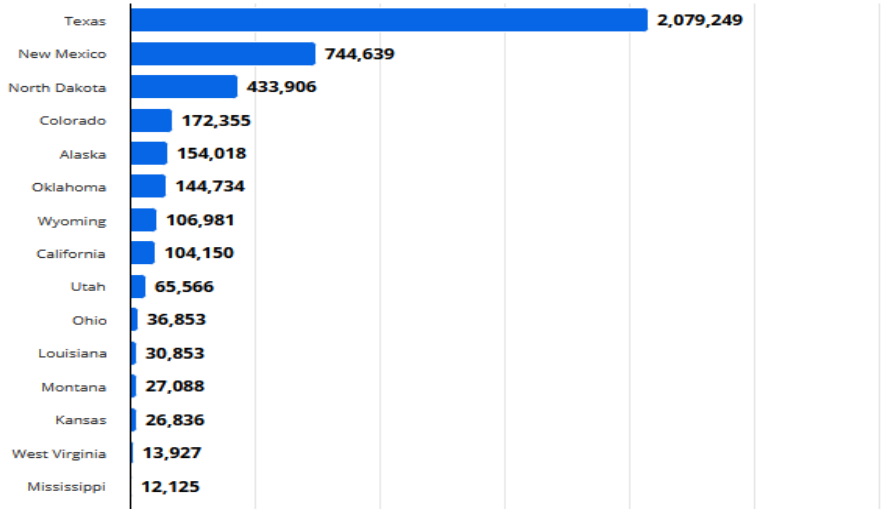
- National security lens:
  - Lack of independent food supply is a risk
  - Unhealthy and malnourished population

Energy Production

- Coal mining
  - Accounts for nearly 15% of U.S. energy production (AAF)
- Oil and gas
  - US crude oil production reached 13.6 million barrels/day in 2025 (DOE)
- Natural gas
  - Rural counties drive growth (USDA ERS)
- Renewable energy
  - Grown 50% in rural areas since 2021 (E2)
- National security lens:
  - Energy Independence



Crude oil production in U.S. by state, 2024 (in 1,000 barrels)



Source: Statista Research Department

Water

- Watersheds are located in rural areas
- Need for protected environments in the context of agricultural production, wastewater runoff, and municipal sewage (RAND)
- National Security Lends:
  - Water quantity and quality is dependent upon healthy rural ecosystems

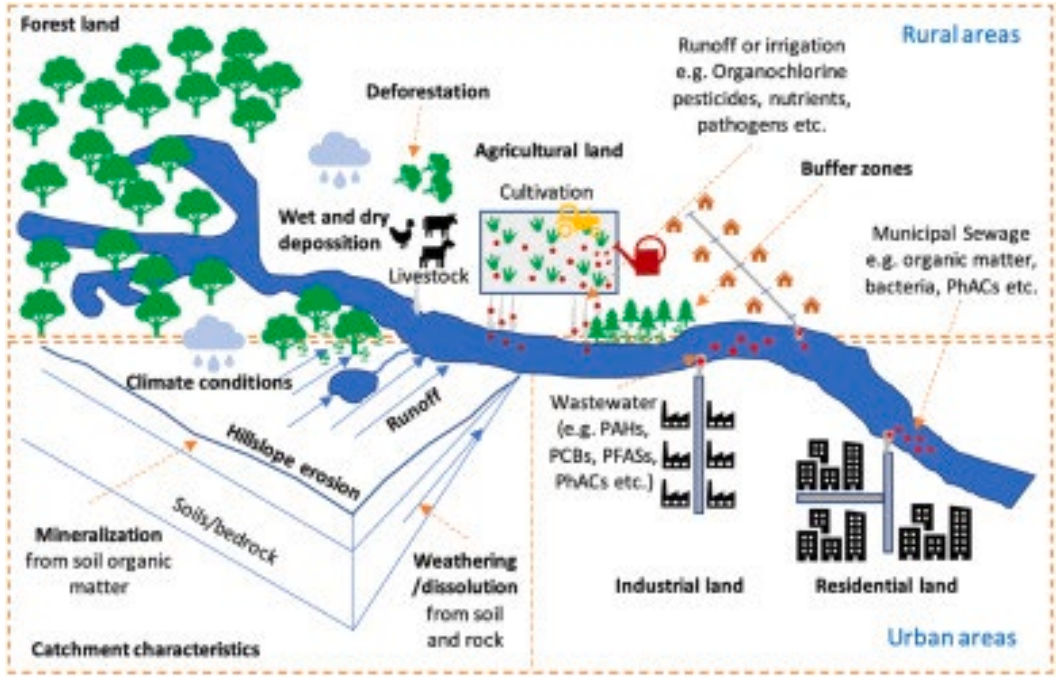
RAND Topics Research & Commentary Experts About

RAND / Research & Commentary / Visualizations /

From Water Supply Crises to Building Urban Water Security

Sara Hughes, Michael T. Wilson, Jonathan Cohen, Rebecca Tisherman, Linnea Warren May, Jay Balagna, Sara Stullken

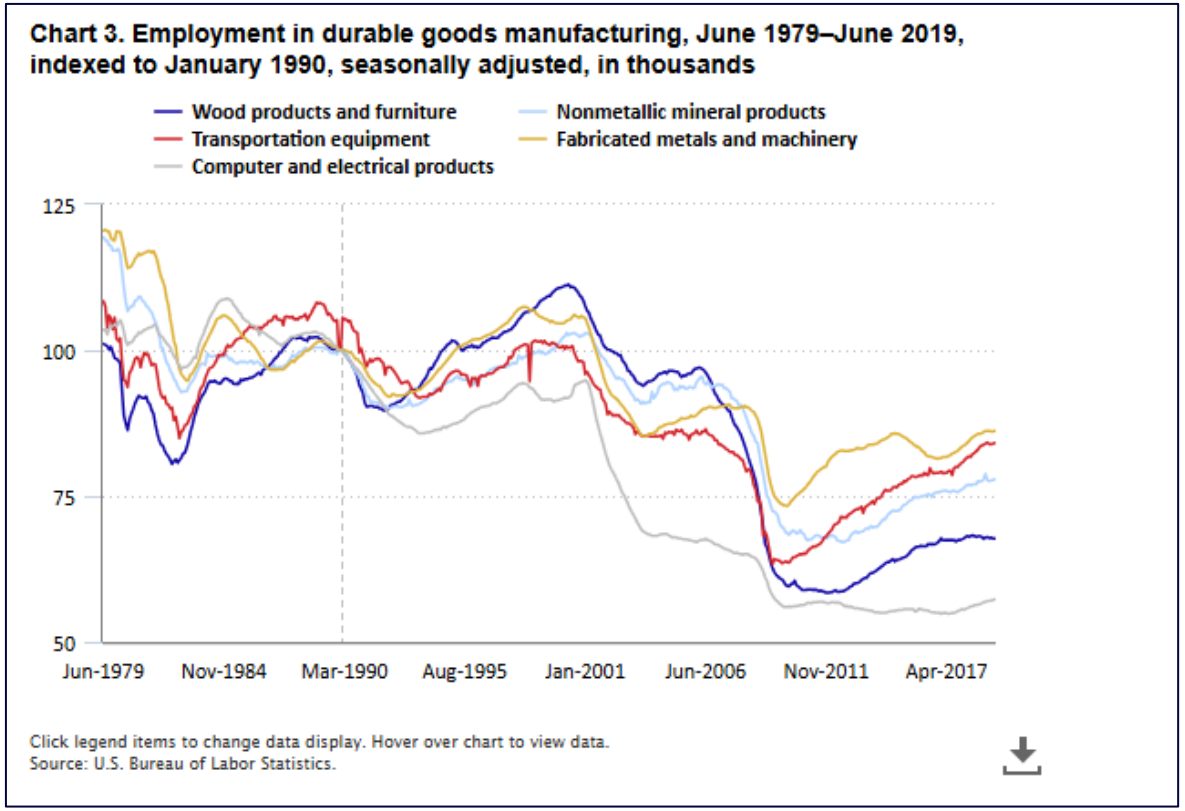
DATA VIZ — Published Jan 15, 2025



Source: Influences of Key Factors on River Water Quality in Urban and Rural Areas: A Review by Anh et al

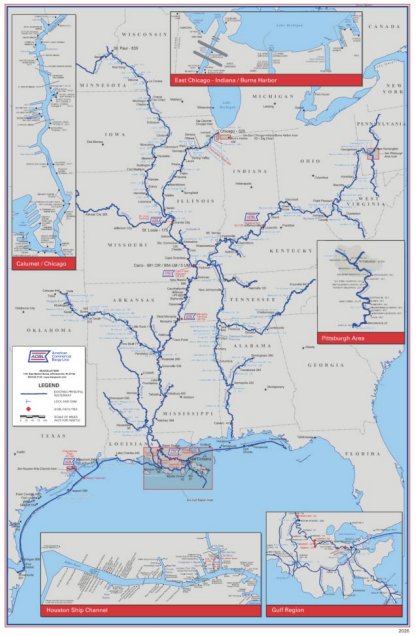
Manufacturing

- The numbers:
  - More than 3.5 million Americans work in manufacturing (Aspen Institute)
  - Rural America's second largest sector (Aspen Institute)
- Stalling growth
  - Negative growth rate from 2023 to 2024 (USDA Rural at a Glance)
  - Loss of rural jobs and economic stimulus
- National Security Lens:
  - Increased reliance on other nations

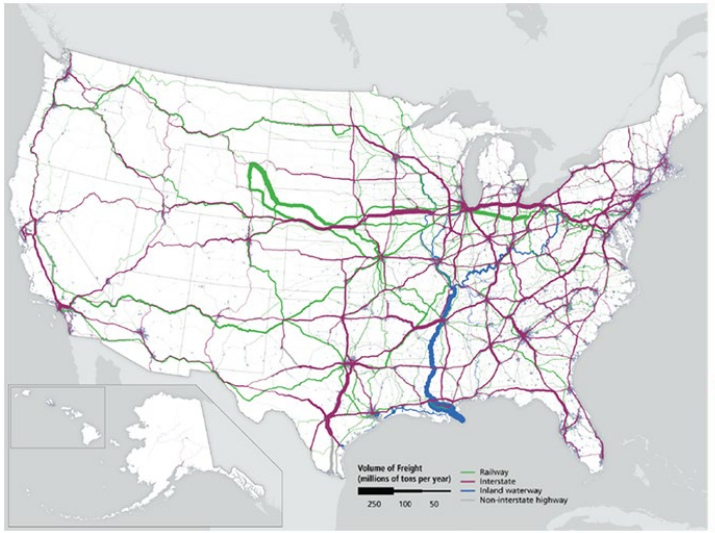


Transportation

- The numbers:
  - 68% of America's road miles are in rural areas (U.S. DOT, 2025)
  - 46% of truck vehicle miles occurred in rural areas between 2000 and 2019
- More than 630 short line railroads (American Association of Railroads)
  - Connect rural towns, farms, and businesses
  - Operate over 45,000 route miles
- Barge lines connect rural areas to goods, services, and to urban centers
- National Security Lens:
  - Highly dependent on rural areas for the movement of goods and services



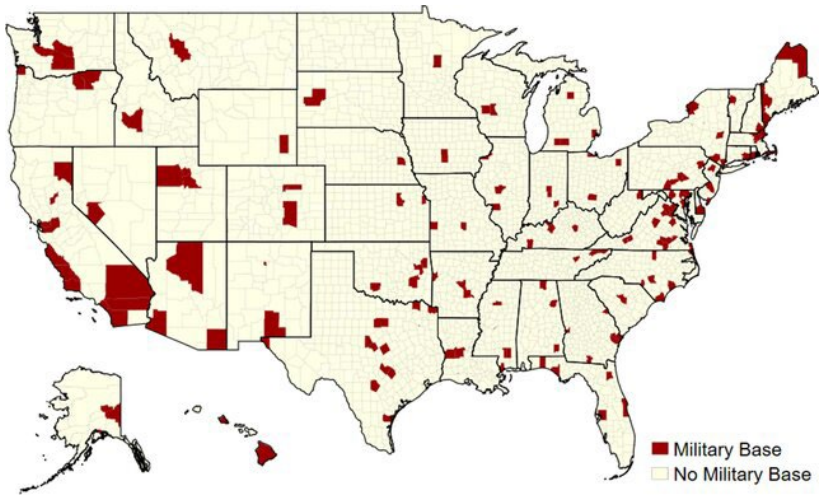
Map of large inland barge routes through rural America



Source: Department of Transportation

Defense

- Rural young people are more likely to enlist than their urban peers (Veteran Scholars)
- Rural jurisdictions are home to the majority of military bases
- National Security Lens:
  - Rural is critical for military defense



Source: *Military spouse licensing: a case study of registered nurses near military bases*

Rural Data

Limitations, Loss, Challenges, and Opportunities

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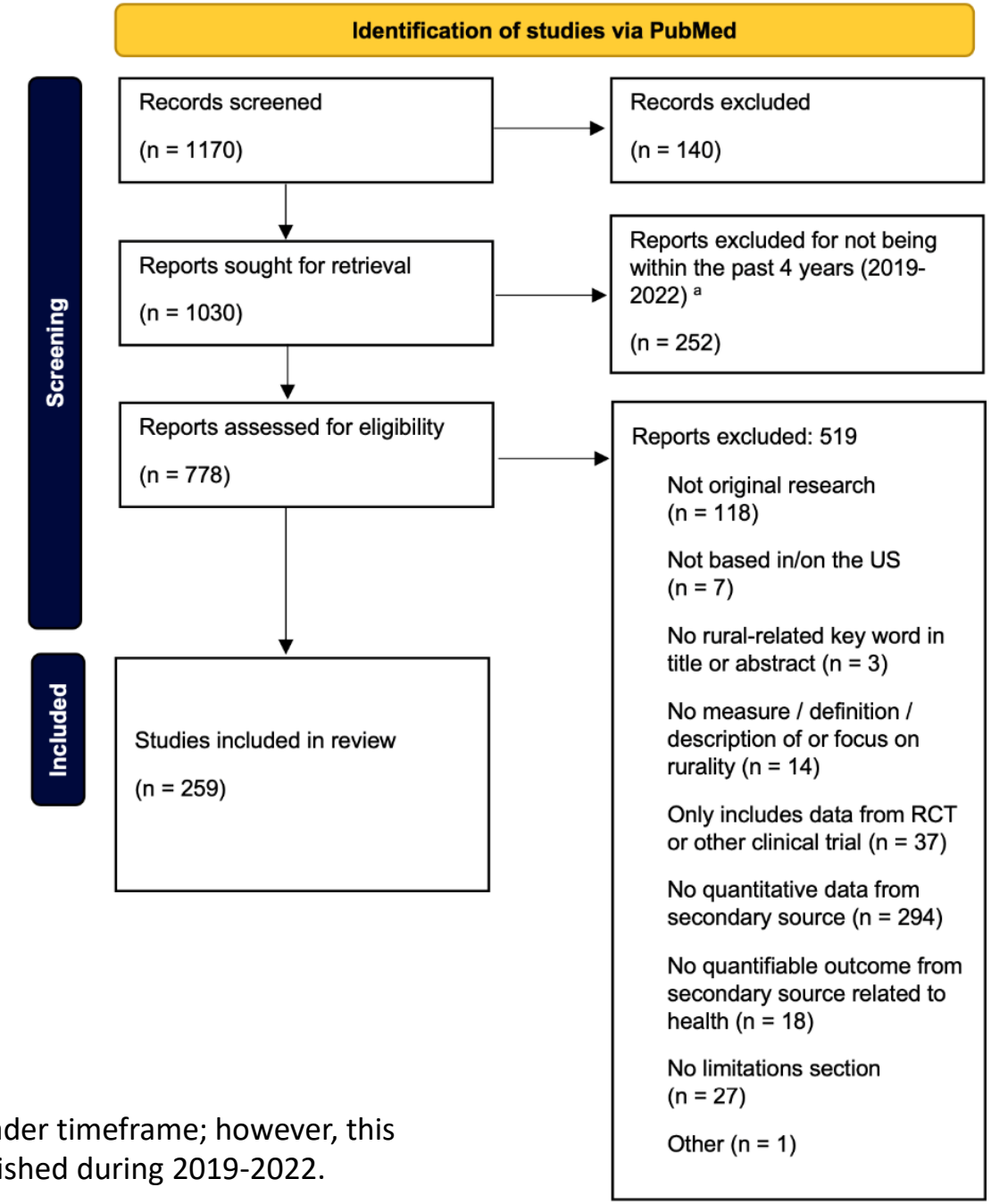
ETSU Data Challenges Study

- Systematically reviewed a subset of the peer-reviewed literature that considered rurality, *with a focus on limitations sections*
  - Guided by the PRISMA reporting guidelines
  - Supported by a health sciences librarian

- Focused on original research studies using *secondary, quantitative data*

PRISMA. PRISMA 2020. Accessed July 23, 2024. https://www.prisma-statement.org/

PRISMA Diagram



[a] The primary search strategy included a broader timeframe; however, this review was ultimately limited to studies published during 2019-2022.

Author-Reported Study Limitations

Limitation Type	**Count of Studies [a]** N (%)
Missing, unmeasured, or proxy variables or confounding	218 (84.2)
Underreporting or underestimating, overreporting or overestimating, or other measurement errors	156 (60.2)
Generalizability, sample characteristics or representativeness, or selection bias	144 (55.6)
Definitions of rurality or geographic measures	101 (39.0)
Study design	97 (37.5)
Outdated data, delayed data, or other time-related limitations	54 (20.8)
Self-reported data and associated biases or limitations	53 (20.5)
Small sample size, data suppression, or limited statistical power	49 (18.9)
Missing data	21 (8.1)
Data modeling or other statistical limitations	21 (8.1)
Other	9 (3.5)

[a] Categories for limitations were not mutually exclusive. Totals may not sum to 100% or 259.

Sample Sizes, Quality, and Reliability

- Small sample sizes and “invisible populations”
- Response rates/survey data
- Data suppression or censoring
- Modeling
- Provisional data
- Differences in data access by state
  - State priorities for data collection/monitoring

EXAMPLE

CDC WONDER data is suppressed when the count is less than 9 (for confidentiality) and unreliable when less than 20 (for large standard errors)

Geographic Limitations

- Large versus small geographic levels
  - May mask within-rural differences
- Granular data often proprietary or limited in geographic scope
  - Example: health system electronic medical record data has encounter-level data, but only for their system
- Data without rural indicators, or with indicators but no geographic identifier to match with other sources
  - Changing geographic definitions (census tracts, ways to define geography)

Administrative Challenges

- Expenses to purchase data
- Requirements for accessing data
  - Access to specific software and/or data expertise
  - Restricted access requiring lengthy approval processes

Not all measures mean the same thing across the country, including by rurality

Different physical, cultural, and political landscapes can result in measures being more or less relevant to different areas

- Examples:
  - Having a personal vehicle vs. public transportation
  - Distance in miles vs. considerations of terrain

Data and data access are changing

- Some data may be harder to find or nonexistent
- Holes in data and inability to compare with previous or future data
- Lacking robust baseline data to observe impact from new policy changes
- Some studies may not control for known confounders

Compromised Federal Data

Compromised Federal Data

- Terminated datasets include:
  - Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement (USDA)
  - Drug Abuse Warning Network (SAMHSA)
  - Indicators of School Crime and Safety (ED)
  - Pregnancy Risk Assessment Monitoring System (CDC)
  - Future Risk Index (FEMA)
  - National Beneficiary Survey (SSA)
  - Air Toxins Screening Assessment Cancer Risk Estimates (EPA)

Compromised Federal Data

- Key data elements removed from other datasets
  - Equity
  - Social Drivers of Health
  - Gender Identity
  - Race and ethnicity
  - COVID vaccination
  - Racial discrimination
  - Sexual/gender discrimination

Discontinuation of County Health Rankings & Roadmaps

County-by-County BLOG

Project updates, commentaries, events and news about health across the nation from the County Health Rankings & Roadmaps team.

RWJF funding for CHR&R to end in 2026

March 18, 2025

For 15 years, County Health Rankings and Roadmaps (CHR&R) has provided data, evidence and tools to help communities better understand health and how they can take action to improve health and equity. Unfortunately, our primary funder, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, has decided to end funding for CHR&R at the end of 2026. This means that the 2025 Annual Data Release will likely be our last.

We are providing news about our funding so the more than 700,000 people who use our resources every year have time to identify alternate resources and ways to continue important work that improves health and equity.

Our work is rooted in a long-term vision where all people and places have what they need to thrive. While CHR&R's grant from RWJF is ending, the work to realize this vision will not.

In sum…

- There are existing challenges with rural data
- Data is nuanced
- Challenges with data access, reliability, and guidance are everchanging
- Agencies, researchers, and organizations may have limitations in what they can release, even if not federally funded
  - Different organizations and individuals are responding differently
- Some journals are federally supported

Things to consider when covering research or reviewing data

Does the study present analyses by gender, race, and ethnicity?

Does the study control for factors such as gender, race, and ethnicity?

How recent is the data?

Are the data preliminary, modeled, or predicted?

Was the research funded? By who?

What research questions or analyses were not conducted?

Following the Money: Do Block Grant Resources Reach Rural Communities?

Research center: ETSU/NORC Rural Health Research Center
Phone: 423.439.5509

Lead researcher: Michael Meit, MA, MPH

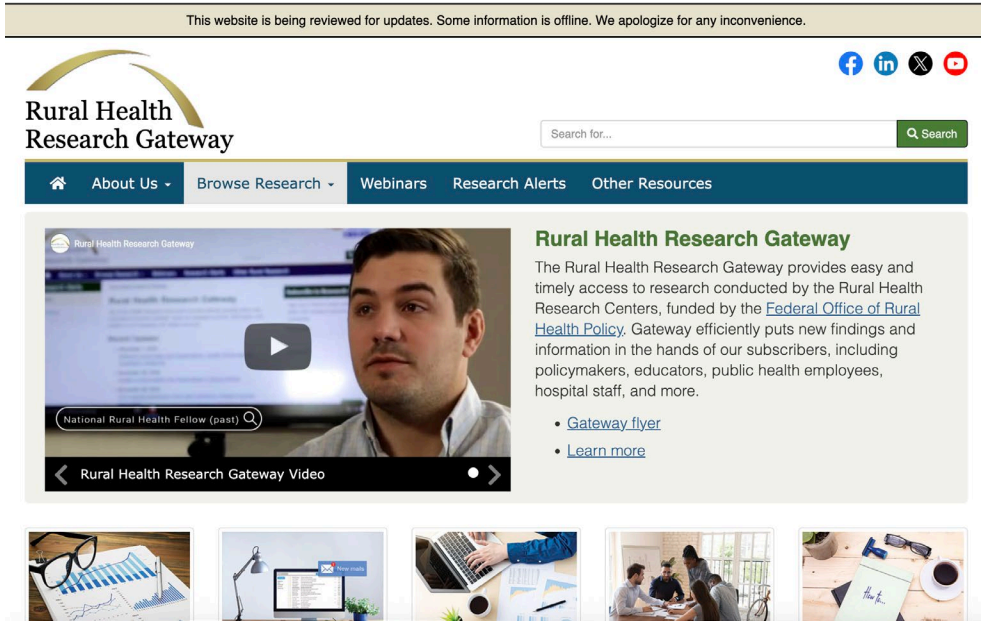
Contacts: Michael Meit, MA, MPH, 240.273.2751, meitmb@etsu.edu
Angela Hagaman, DrPH, MA, 423.439.7532, hagaman@etsu.edu

Research staff: Kate Beatty, PhD
Casey Balio, PhD
Stephanie Mathis, DrPH, MPH

Project funded: September 2021

Project completed: November 2023

Topics: Health services, Healthcare financing, Public health, Rural statistics and demographics



Comparing Across Health Indices: Differences by Rurality, Missingness, and Associations With Health Outcomes

Research center: ETSU/NORC Rural Health Research Center
Phone: 423.439.5509

Lead researchers: Casey Balio, PhD, 630.561.6713, balioc@etsu.edu
Kate Beatty, PhD, 423.439.4482, beattyk@etsu.edu

Project funded: September 2023

Project completed: July 2025

Topics: Healthcare access, Poverty, Rural statistics and demographics, Social determinants of health, Uninsured and underinsured

A Closer Examination of Rural Hospital Bypass

Research center: ETSU/NORC Rural Health Research Center
Phone: 423.439.5509

Lead researcher: Craig Holden

Contact: Craig Holden, 301.634.9387, holden-craig@norc.org

Project funded: September 2021

Anticipated completion date: August 2026

Topics: Critical Access Hospitals (CAHs), Health reform, Health services, Healthcare access, Hospitals and clinics, Medicaid and CHIP, Medicare, Medicare Advantage (MA), Private health insurance, Uninsured and underinsured

Going Beyond Hospital Closures: Estimating Rural and Urban Changes in Access to Hospital Service Lines

Research center: ETSU/NORC Rural Health Research Center
Phone: 423.439.5509

Lead researchers: Casey Balio, PhD, 630.561.6713, balioc@etsu.edu
Michael Meit, MA, MPH, 240.273.2751, meitmb@etsu.edu

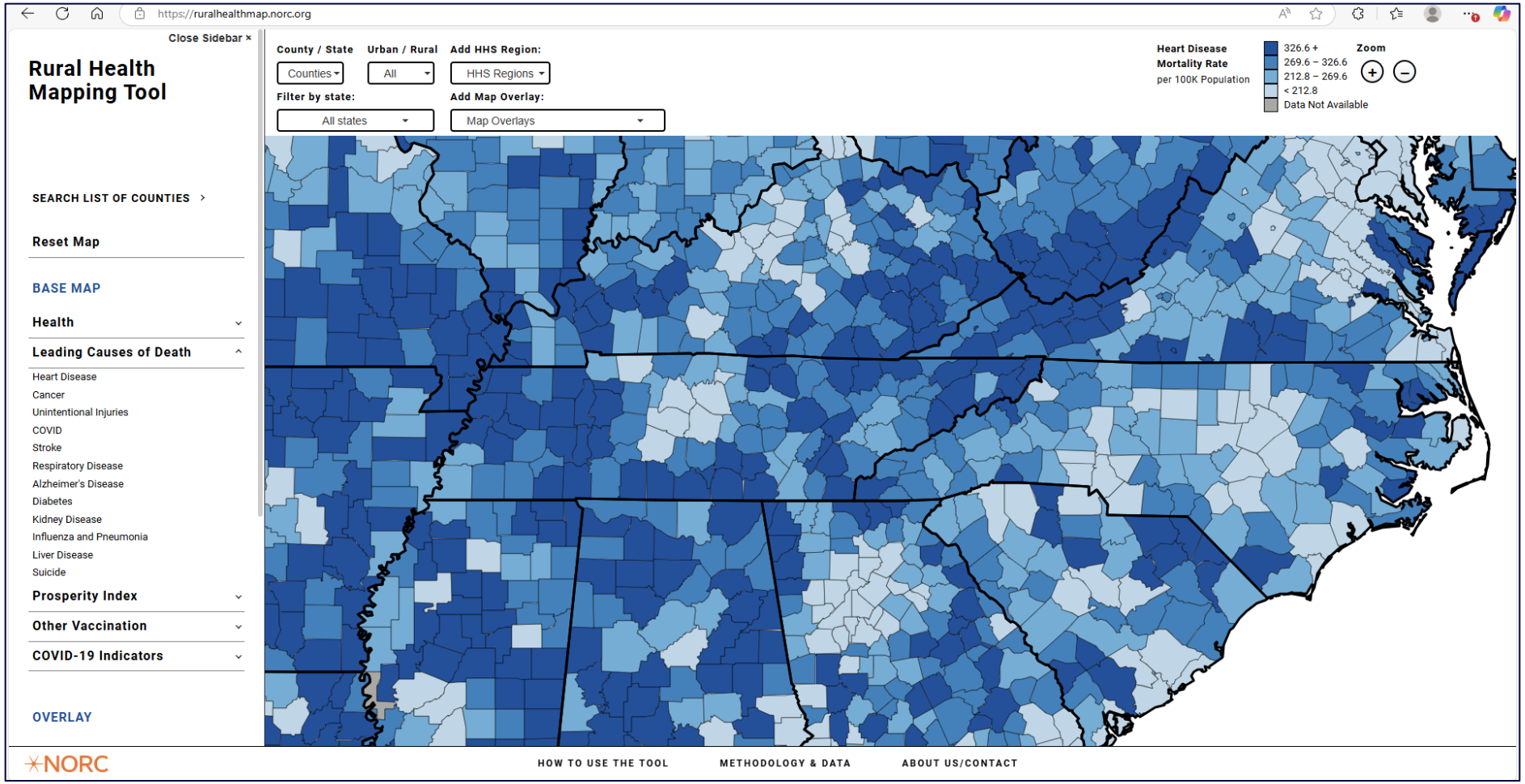
Research staff: Stephanie Mathis, DrPH, MPH

Project funded: September 2024

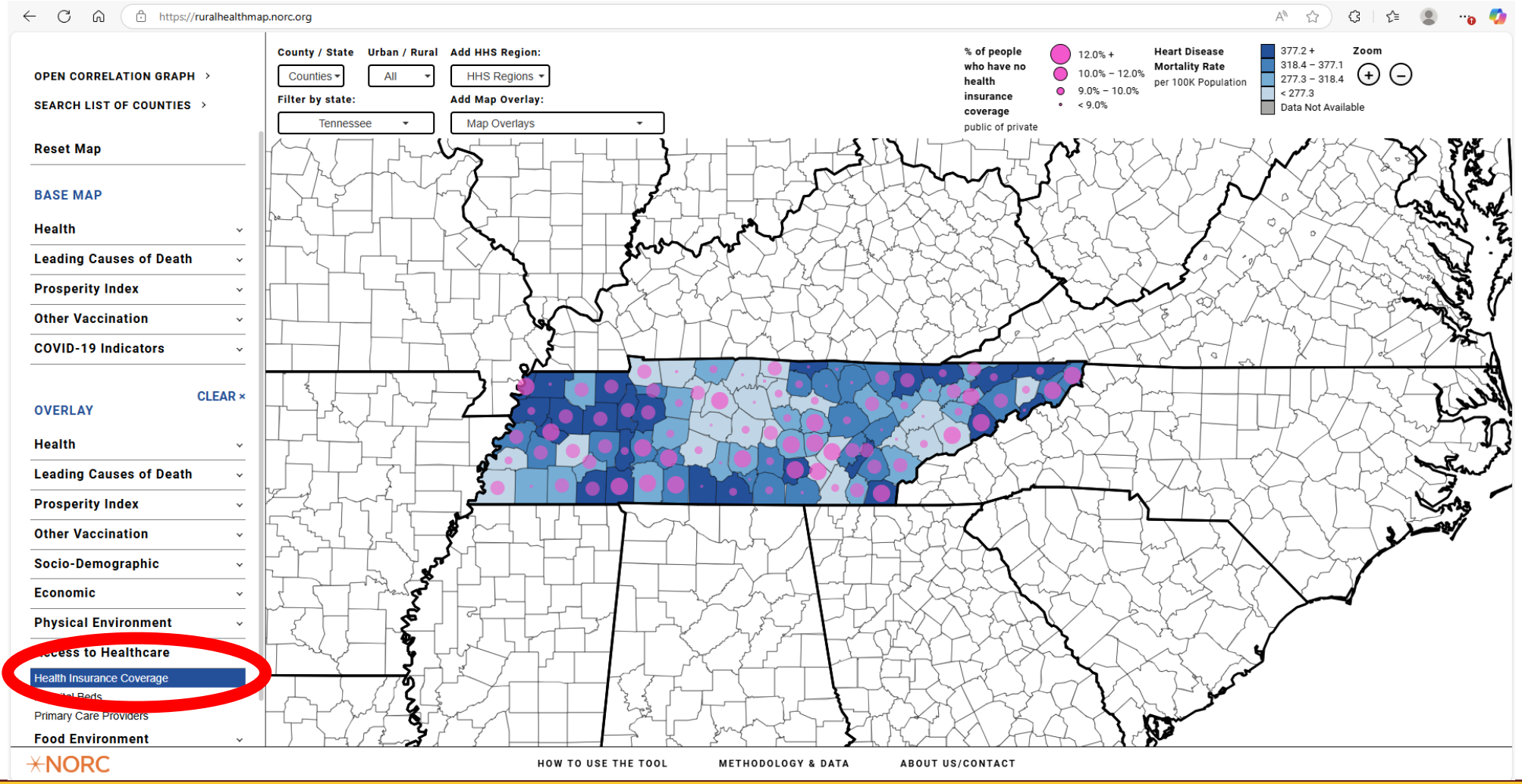
Anticipated completion date: August 2026

Topics: Critical Access Hospitals (CAHs), Health services, Healthcare access, Hospitals and clinics

Rural Health Mapping Tool



Rural Health Mapping Tool



RURALHEALTHMAP.NORC.ORG

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Rural Health Mapping Tool

CLOSE

Crockett County, TN

Heart Disease Mortality Rate per 100K Population	**470.2**
Population (Urban, Small metro)	**13,955**

The mortality rate for counties with 10 to 19 deaths during the time period is considered unreliable and therefore not presented. The mortality rate for counties with fewer than 10 deaths during the time period is suppressed.

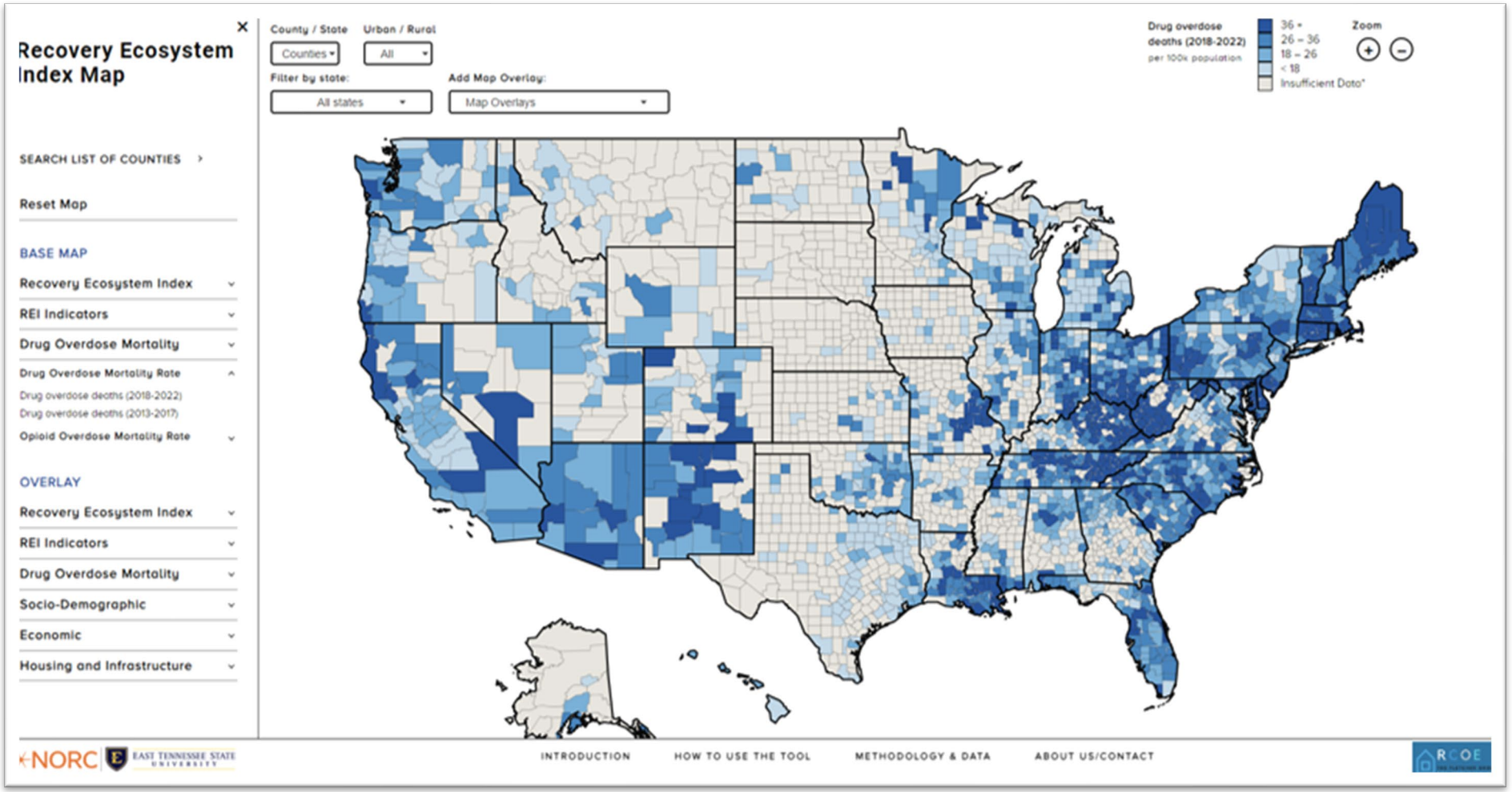
Click on a variable in the leftmost column of the data table to see it's definition.

Select data table: Leading Causes of Death

Print Data Tables

Leading Causes of Death Data Table

Leading Causes of Death	Crockett County	Tennessee	United States
Heart Disease	470.2	256.0	206.6
Cancer	280.4	208.8	182.7
Unintentional Injuries	70.8	85.9	60.2
COVID	147.5	115.5	95.9
Stroke	69.4	53.1	47.7
Respiratory Disease	76.5	64.9	46.0
Alzheimer's Disease	58.1	46.8	37.4
Diabetes	31.2	35.3	29.0
Kidney Disease	Unreliable	16.6	16.2
Influenza and Pneumonia	Unreliable	20.5	15.2
Liver Disease	29.7	18.4	15.2
Suicide	Unreliable	17.6	14.5


Recovery Ecosystem Index Map
SEARCH LIST OF COUNTIES
Reset Map
BASE MAP
Recovery Ecosystem Index
REI Indicators
Drug Overdose Mortality
Drug Overdose Mortality Rate
Drug overdose deaths (2018-2022)
Drug overdose deaths (2013-2017)
Opioid Overdose Mortality Rate
OVERLAY
Recovery Ecosystem Index
REI Indicators
Drug Overdose Mortality
Socio-Demographic
Economic
Housing and Infrastructure
County / State
Counties
Urban / Rural
All
Filter by state:
All states
Add Map Overlay:
Map Overlays
Drug overdose deaths (2018-2022)
per 100k population
36 +
26 – 36
18 – 26
< 18
Insufficient Data*
Zoom
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INTRODUCTION
HOW TO USE THE TOOL
METHODOLOGY & DATA
ABOUT US/CONTACT

Recovery Ecosystem Index Map

SEARCH LIST OF COUNTIES

Reset Map

BASE MAP

Recovery Ecosystem Index Scores

Recovery Ecosystem Index Indicators *new*

Drug Overdose Mortality

OVERLAY

Recovery Ecosystem Index Scores

Recovery Ecosystem Index Indicators *new*

Drug Overdose Mortality

County / State: Counties

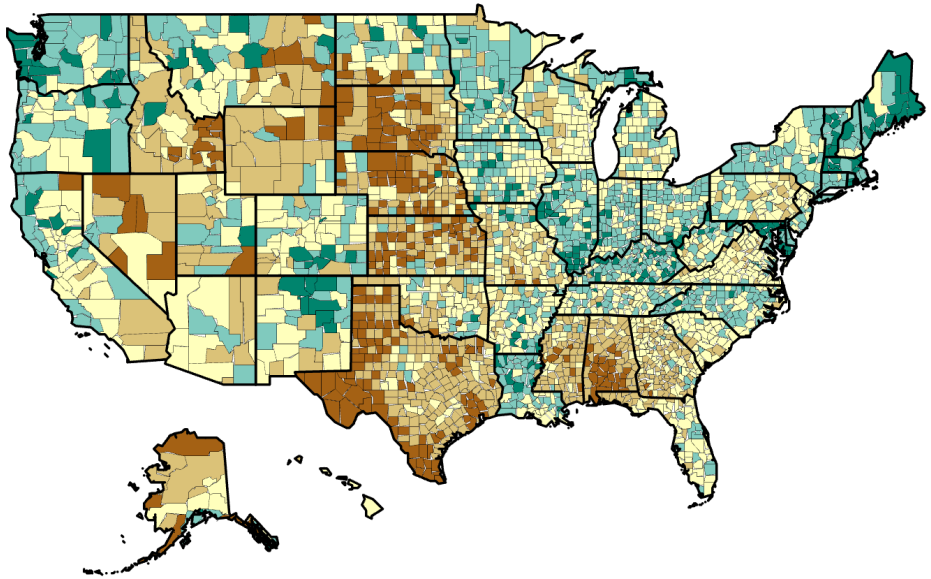
Urban / Rural: All

Filter by state: All states

Add Map Context: Map Overlays

Recovery Ecosystem Index Score
1=strongest; 5=weakest
5
4
3
2
1

Zoom



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INTRODUCTION HOW TO USE THE TOOL METHODOLOGY & DATA ABOUT US/CONTACT

RCOE THE FLETCHER GROUP RURAL CENTER OF EXCELLENCE

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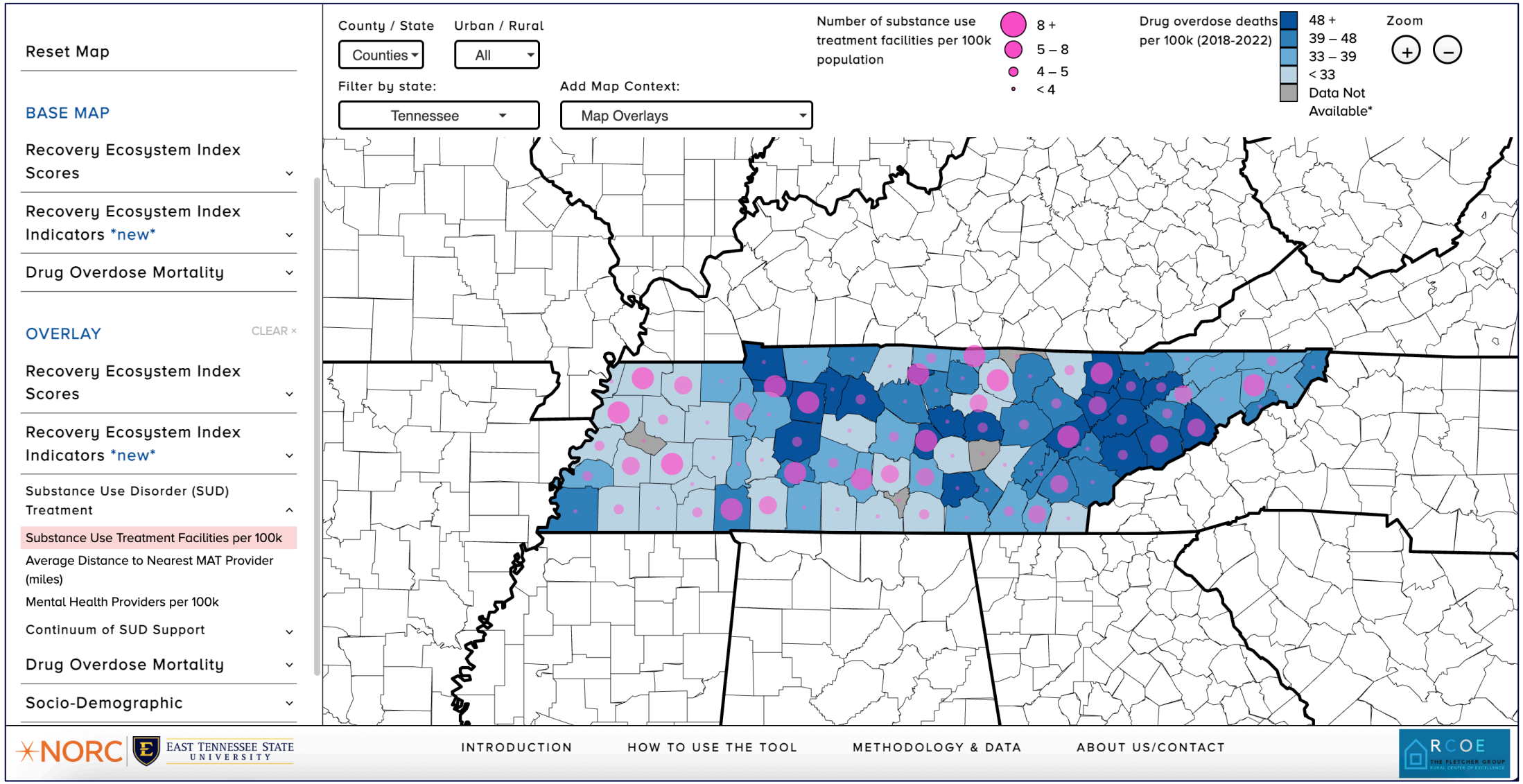

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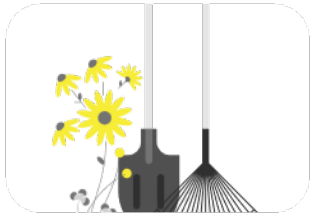
Livability Indicators Dashboard

- One unique example of rural data leveraged for rural communities

- Joint partnership between academic and state government

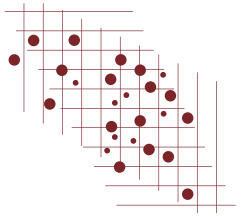
INDICATOR CATEGORIES

Age-Friendly Communities (3)



Community Engagement (3)

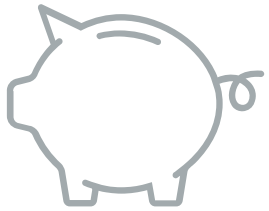
Community Infrastructure (5)



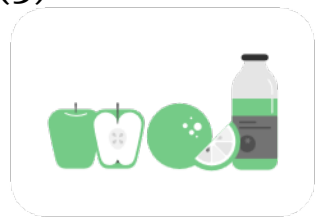
Economy (8)

Education (13)

Employment (3)



Fiscal Responsibility (2)

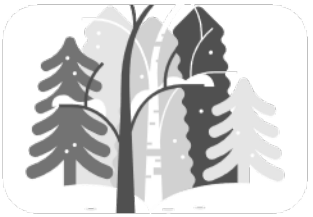


Food Access and Nutrition (8)

Health Care Access (31)

Health Status (12)

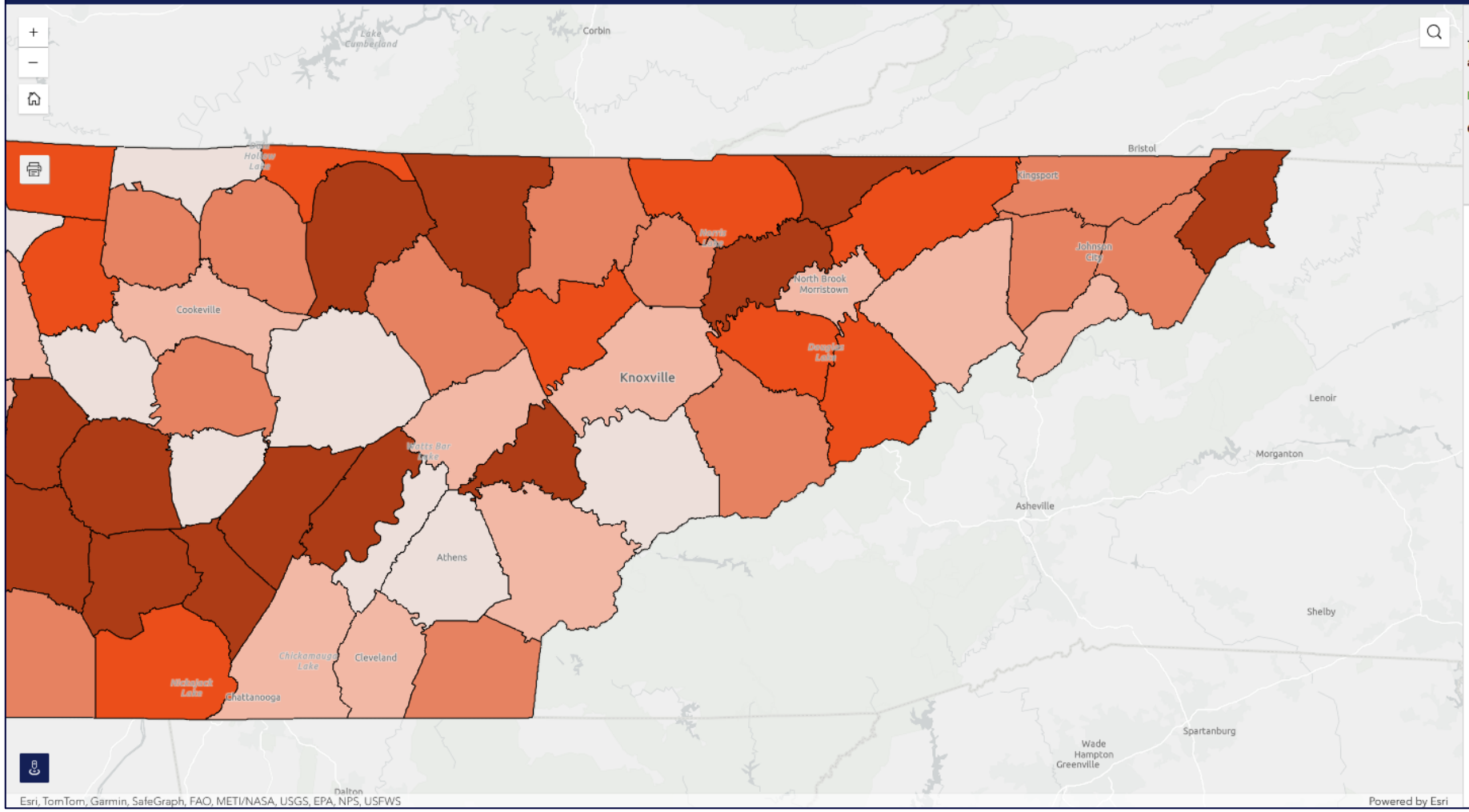
Housing (9)



Natural Environments (2)

Transportation (6)

Economy



To view Infographic, click on in the bottom left corner of the map, select the area of interest, and click "Run Infographic."

Please select only one variable at a time.

Click to view the legend. Click to print the map.

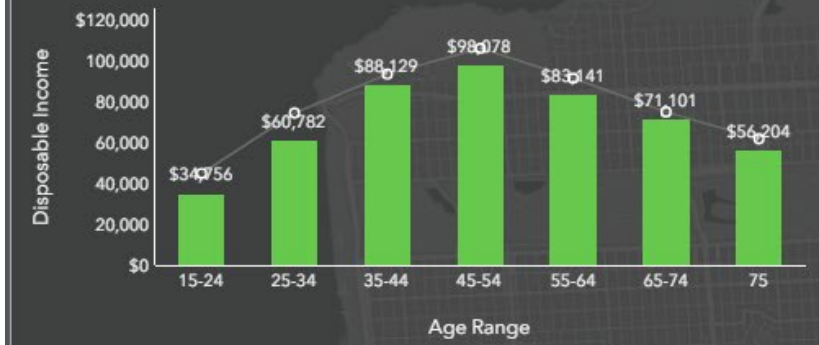
- [ ] Population Growth
- [ ] Poverty
- [ ] Income Inequality
- [ ] Market Income and Change
  - [ ] Per Capita Market Income
  - [ ] Per Capita Market Income Change
- [x] Poverty Rate for Disabled Individuals
  - [x] Under 18
  - [ ] Age 18 to 64
  - [ ] Age 65 and Older

Financial Profile

Washington County
Washington County

esri
THE SCIENCE OF WHERE

Average Disposable Income by Age



Dots show comparison to Tennessee

Disposable Income for this Area

$73,972 ↓

Average Disposable Income is $9,249 lower than **Tennessee**, which has a value of **$83,221**

Financial Trends

79 2026 Wired or Sent Money w/Bank Wire Transfer/6 Mo: Index
Which is more than **85%** of all **ZIP Codes**

107 2026 Have Personal Loan (Not for Education): Index
Which is less than **85%** of all **ZIP Codes**

101 2026 Have United Healthcare Medical Insurance: Index
Which is more than **85%** of all **ZIP Codes**

80 2026 Own Shares in Exchange Traded Fund: Index
Which is more than **85%** of all **ZIP Codes**

82 2026 Have GEICO Home/Pers Property Insurance: Index
Which is more than **85%** of all **ZIP Codes**

74 2026 Used Bank of America Bank/12 Mo: Index
Which is more than **85%** of all **ZIP Codes**

86 2026 Pay Annual Fee for Credit Card: Index
Which is more than **85%** of all **ZIP Codes**

An Interesting Facts infographic reveals information about your site that makes it distinctive compared to other areas using statistical comparisons. Learn more...

Key Facts

73
Wealth Index

26.6%
Percent of Income for Mortgage

$92,862
2026 Average Household Income

$106,560
2031 Average Household Income

Average Annual Lifestyle Spending

$405
Cash Gifts to Charities

$57
Movies/Museums/ Parks

$577
Life/Other Insurance

$2,716
Travel

$1,495
Education

Source: This infographic contains data provided by Esri (2026, 2031), Esri-U.S. BLS (2026), U.S. Census (2010). © 2026 Esri

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