

ASPE RESEARCH SUMMARY

OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR PLANNING AND EVALUATION
OFFICE OF HUMAN SERVICES POLICY - U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

RURAL RESEARCH NEEDS AND DATA SOURCES FOR SELECTED HUMAN SERVICES TOPICS

Volume 1: Research Needs

Volume 2: Data Sources

Rural areas are different from urban areas in their socioeconomic conditions, the status and prevalence of health and human services-related conditions, the availability and characteristics of services and social supports, and the social and cultural factors that can affect the quality, availability, use, and cost of needed services. These factors can affect rural areas in both positive and negative ways, but, in contrast to urban areas, less is known about them. Rural human services research is considerably less developed as a discipline than rural health services research, due in part to the difficulty of finding suitable data for study.

The main goal of this study was to develop an inventory of databases (federal, nonfederal, and state-level administrative data) that researchers could use to study selected human services-related conditions and the accessibility and utilization of human services in rural areas. Three human services issues were focal topics for the project – work supports for low-income families, substance abuse, and child welfare. While these topics address serious challenges for all low-income families, the potential for limited access or effectiveness of services in rural areas makes research on the rural aspect of these topics particularly important.

Volume 1 summarizes contemporary literature on the three focal topics and identifies methodological shortcomings and gaps in existing rural research on each topic. Volume 2 identifies sources of data that include rural samples that could be used to study the three focal topics in rural areas. Twenty federal and nonfederal data sources are described in Volume 2, along with 60 state administrative data sources from 23 states. State administrative data, though not designed or collected for research purposes, have several attributes that can make it useful for rural research, e.g., it includes all (urban and rural) program participants, and it generally includes detailed geographic identifiers for each record.

Findings

There is no single, standardized definition that designates populations and places as rural or urban. Rural areas are defined

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH SUMMARY

This ASPE Research Summary highlights findings of research performed under contract by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. on human services conditions in rural America. Volume 1 describes general conditions and key trends in rural areas and identifies gaps in existing rural research on three focal topics – work supports, substance abuse, and child welfare. Volume 2 describes the characteristics of 20 federal and nonfederal and 60 state administrative data sources that could support empirical research on the three focal topics in rural America. To help address the problem caused by multiple “rural” classification systems, Volume 2 also describes the geographic coding characteristics of several key rural definitions.

Office of the Assistant Secretary
for Planning and Evaluation

Office of Human
Services Policy

U.S. Department of Health
and Human Services

Washington, DC 20201

Michael J. O’Grady, Ph.D.
Assistant Secretary

Barbara B. Broman
Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for
Human Services Policy



by population size, population density, commuting patterns, or other measures of isolation. Key rural definitions have been developed by the Office of Management and Budget and the U.S. Bureau of the Census, along with other, more detailed classification systems. The choice of definition can affect the data that are available for research. In addition, a researcher needs to understand how the “rural” label was applied in a dataset and whether the label is consistent with both the aims and approach of the research project and the other data with which it may be combined or compared.

In contrast to urban areas, less is known about human and social services conditions in rural areas, the social services rural residents need and use, and the effectiveness of those services. Research limitations include both methodological constraints in existing studies and an overall lack of empirical research on some important issues. Taken as a whole, much of the research on rural areas addresses circumstances in a specific locality with results that may be the consequence of local implementation factors, and not generalizable to other or all rural areas. Some national studies exclude rural sites altogether or, if they do include both rural and nonrural sites, do not report rural and nonrural results separately.

One of the major difficulties in conducting rural research is finding suitable data. To address this finding, Volume 2 of the report, Data Sources, is a compilation of federal, nonfederal and state data sources that can be used to conduct research on the rural aspects of three human services focal topics: work supports, substance abuse, and child welfare. Descriptions of the content of each database, strengths and weaknesses for rural research purposes, and availability to researchers, including the circumstances under which the data can be made available and any safeguards that must be in place before researchers can access it, are provided.

Several steps could be taken by researchers or their sponsors to strengthen rural data and research and improve the quantity and quality of rural human services information:

- *Include rural populations, areas, or systems in more studies.* Including rural people, areas, or systems in more studies – particularly large national or regional studies and surveys – could provide new perspectives and produce additional insights about the differences between urban and rural issues and environments.
- *Incorporate rural sites into program evaluations.* Differences in geography, culture, and community and social services infrastructures in rural and urban areas may lead to differences in social and budgetary impacts. Since nearly one-fifth of the nation’s population lives in rural areas, it is important to assess these differences.
- *Oversample rural sites and subpopulations.* Oversampling of rural areas would permit more sophisticated analyses and identify significant rural characteristics and rural-urban differences. It also would make it possible to detect differences among racial/ethnic or other demographic subgroups.
- *Report rural findings.* While many national and regional studies include rural sites, discussions of rural experiences and findings often are not analyzed or reported unless rural issues are a specific focus of the study. Providing such information on rural experiences or findings nonetheless would help expand the rural human services literature and may be valuable in contexts other than the original objective of a study.
- *Make better use of existing, detailed rural classification systems.* The detailed classifications of rural areas developed for use in demographic and economic studies have not been used widely in research on poverty and human services issues, with the result that little information is available on variations across rural areas or on rural-urban differences. Including geographic identifiers (e.g.,

county identifiers and census tract data) in rural data would support the use of more refined rural classification typologies.

- *Disclose rural definitions and classifications used in studies.* Operational definitions used to define rural samples and regions should be disclosed and fully described to aid in interpreting research findings, and in summarizing and synthesizing findings across studies.
- *Add information to make small, region-specific rural studies more generalizable.* Findings from small, region-specific studies can be useful in the absence of nationally representative studies. They can provide detailed, rural-specific information useful for comparative purposes when authors provide detailed descriptions of their rural samples, along with descriptive and demographic information about the study sites.

A copy of the full report can be accessed at: <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/05/rural-data/>.

Contractor: Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.

Project Staff: Michael Ponza, Debra A. Strong, Patricia Del Grosso, Andrew Burwick, Venita Jethwani, Jigar Bhatt, Shannon Phillips and Kathryn Schepke

Project Officers: Peggy Halpern and Ann McCormick, ASPE Office of Human Services Policy

**DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
& HUMAN SERVICES**

Office of the Secretary
Washington, DC 20201

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