

Data Note

November 10, 2020

Key Updates from the Health Center COVID-19 Survey (Week #29)

Community Health Center Telehealth Utilization in Rural and Urban States During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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With routine operations disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, many community health centers rapidly pivoted to providing telehealth or virtual visits. In 2019, less than half (43 percent) of community health centers reported using telemedicine to provide remote clinical care services,¹ and virtual visits accounted for only 0.4 percent of the 122.8 million health center visits that year.² This year, data from the Bureau of Primary Health Care's Health Center COVID-19 Survey indicate that the peak in health center telehealth utilization occurred the week of April 24th, when 54 percent of community health center visits, on average, were conducted virtually.³ This percentage had fallen by half as of October 16th, with virtual visits accounting for just over a quarter (26.7 percent) of visits that week.⁴

The average figures obscure differences by health center, state, and region, with the reported proportion of visits conducted virtually ranging from a low of 6.7 percent for health centers in Arkansas to a high of 52.7 percent amongst those in Connecticut. Using data from the Health Center COVID-19 Survey and the 2011-2015 American Community Survey (ACS), this analysis compares the proportion of federally-funded community health center visits that were conducted virtually the week prior to October 16, 2020 to the proportion of the population residing in Census-designated rural areas, by state.

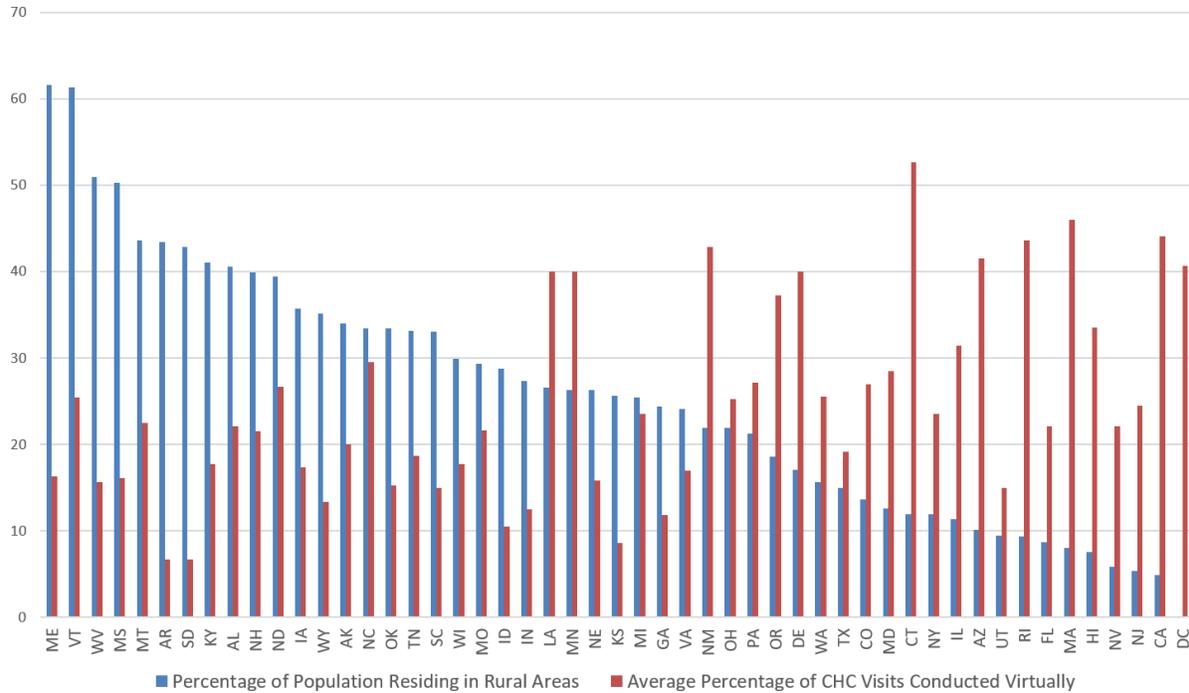
The U.S. Census defines a rural area as any area that is not an Urbanized Area (50,000 or more people) or an Urban Cluster (at least 2,500 and less than 50,000 people⁵). In 2010, the latest date for which comprehensive data is available, the proportion of the population residing in rural areas averaged 19.3 percent.⁶ **Figure 1** shows the proportion of community health center visits conducted virtually, and the proportion of the population residing in rural areas, by state. A simple bivariate test for these two variables showed a significant inverse association: those states with a higher percentage of the population residing in rural areas tended to have a lower proportion of health center visits conducted virtually. Among the states in the lowest quartile of telehealth utilization – that is, the lowest average percentage of visits conducted virtually – were more-rural states in the Midwest census region (KS, NE, SD) as well as the West (ID, UT and WY) and the South (AR, GA, SC, OK, WV) regions (**Figure 2**). Conversely, states reporting a greater proportion of health center visits conducted virtually (top quartile) tended to be those with less-rural populations and located in the Northeast census region (CT, DC, DE, MA, RI) and in the West (AZ, CA, HI, NM, OR) (**Figure 3**).

These data suggest that while telehealth utilization appears to be widespread, and peaked in the early months of the pandemic, there may be important differences in the availability of telehealth services by location, with health centers in more-rural states less likely to offer virtual visits. Barriers and challenges to expanding telehealth, including payment parity, cost, and the availability of robust infrastructure⁷, should be the focus of analysis as well as policies to improve access to care in all communities.

¹ Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA). (2020). 2019 Health Center Data: National Data. Table ODE: Other Data Elements. <https://data.hrsa.gov/tools/data-reporting/program-data/national/table?tableName=ODE&year=2019>

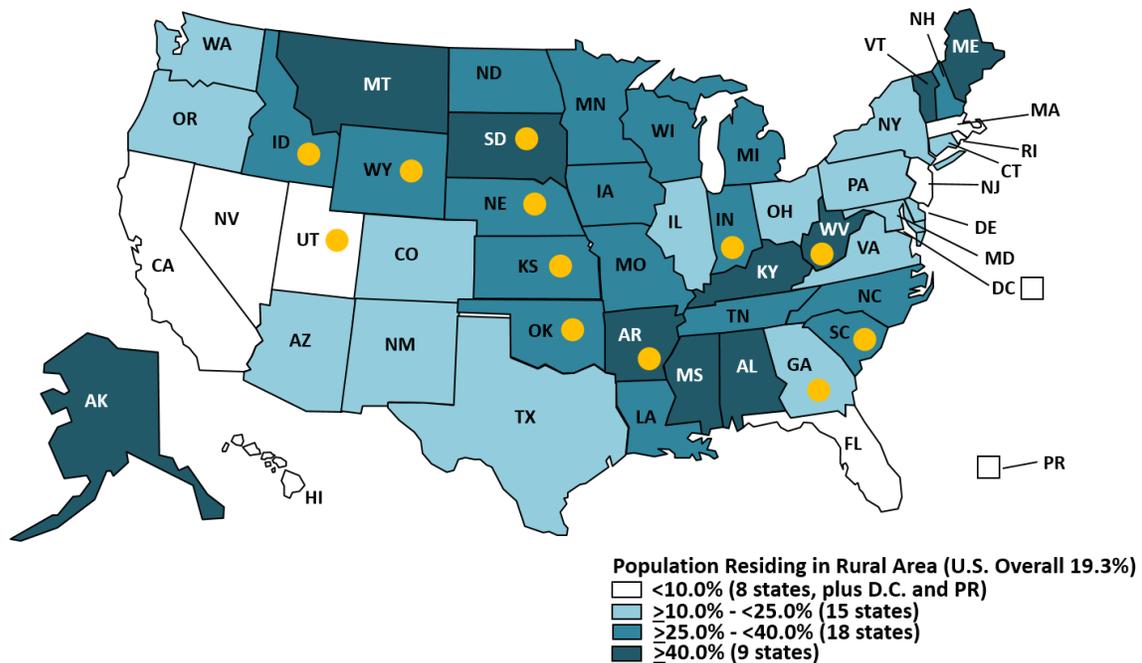
² Sharac, J., Shin, P. & Rosenbaum, S. (2020). Community Health Centers on the Eve of the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Overview of Findings from the 2019 Uniform Data System. Geiger Gibson/RCHN Community Health Foundation Research Collaborative, George Washington University. Policy Research Brief No. 63. <https://www.rchnfoundation.org/?p=9180>

Figure 1. Community Health Center Visits Conducted Virtually, and Rural Population, by State



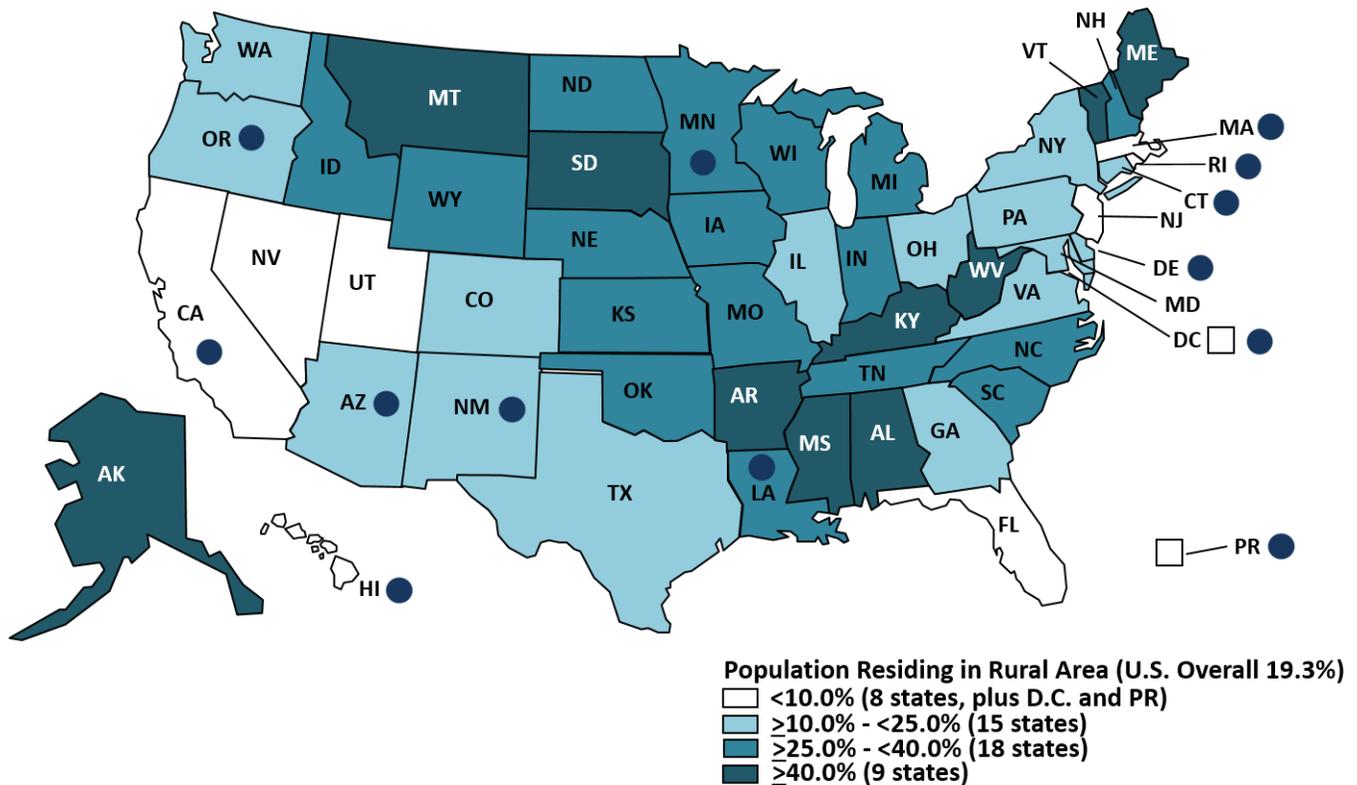
Notes: National Average for CHC visits conducted virtually was 26.7% as reported October 16, 2020. Bureau of Primary Health Care. Health Center COVID-19 Survey.
 National average population residing in rural areas was 19.3% from Decennial Census, with state estimates from 2015 ACS 5-year estimates. United States Census Bureau. 2011-2015 American Community Survey, 5-year estimates. 2010 Decennial Census.

Figure 2. States with Lowest Reported CHC Visits Conducted Virtually – (Bottom Quartile)



Notes: National Average for CHC visits conducted virtually was 26.7% as reported October 16, 2020. Bureau of Primary Health Care. Health Center COVID-19 Survey.
 National average population residing in rural areas from Decennial Census, with state estimates from 2015 ACS 5-year estimates. United States Census Bureau. 2011-2015 American Community Survey, 5-year estimates. 2010 Decennial Census.

Figure 3. States with Greatest Reported CHC Visits Conducted Virtually – (Top Quartile)



Notes: National Average for CHC visits conducted virtually was 26.7% as reported October 16, 2020. Bureau of Primary Health Care. Health Center COVID-19 Survey.

National average population residing in rural areas from Decennial Census, with state estimates from 2015 ACS 5-year estimates. United States Census Bureau. 2011-2015 American Community Survey, 5-year estimates. 2010 Decennial Census.

³ Sharac, J., Hernandez, J., Jacobs, F., Shin P. (2020) Months into the COVID-19 Pandemic, Community Health Centers Report Signs of Improvement, But Face Financial Uncertainty. Geiger Gibson/RCHN Community Health Foundation Research Collaborative, George Washington University. Policy Research Brief No. 64 <https://www.rchnfoundation.org/?p=9227>

⁴ Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) COVID-19 Survey. Bureau of Primary Health Care. Health Center COVID-19 Survey, as reported October 16, 2020. <https://bphc.hrsa.gov/emergency-response/coronavirus-health-center-data>

⁵ United States Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/geography/guidance/geo-areas/urban-rural.html>

⁶ United States Census Bureau. 2010 Urban Area FAQs. Urban Area Delineation Results <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/geography/about/faq/2010-urban-area-faq.html#:~:text=What%20percentage%20of%20the%20U.S.,or%2019.3%25%20of%20the%20population.>

⁷ Morris, R., Hernandez, J., Rosenbaum, S., Jacobs, F., Shin, P., Sharac, J. (May 6, 2020) What Can We Learn from Telehealth Experience of Community Health Centers During the COVID-19 Pandemic? Geiger Gibson/RCHN Community Health Foundation Research Collaborative, George Washington University. Data Note. <https://www.rchnfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/What-Can-We-Learn-from-the-Telehealth-Experience-of-Community-Health-Centers-During-the-COVID-19-Pandemic-2.pdf>