Development of the *Cookbook*

A Guide to Using CDC Data for Rural Analysis

OVERVIEW

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) provides several widely available public health datasets with rural variables. To increase awareness of these variables and provide guidance for accessing them to help inform rural public health knowledge base, the CDC Office of Rural Health (ORH) and the Population Health Innovation Lab (PHIL) developed *The Cookbook: A Guide to Using CDC Data for Rural Analysis*. The *Cookbook* provides step-by-step instructions (i.e., recipes) for accessing and processing CDC data for secondary analysis for rural public health research.

METHODS

The following strategies were employed to develop initial *Cookbook* content:

- Reviewed 482 peer-reviewed articles with a rural focus published by CDC staff
- Conducted 16 discovery calls (i.e., interviews) with rural public health data experts and potential *Cookbook* end users
- Developed and facilitated a Rural Data Workgroup comprised of 8 members with experience in rural data across diverse contexts

482
Peer-reviewed articles reviewed

16
Discovery calls conducted

8
Rural data experts engaged in Rural Data Workgroup

For more information on the methods used to develop initial *Cookbook* content please refer to Methods to Develop the *Cookbook: A Guide to Using CDC Data for Rural Analysis.*

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IMPORTANCE OF RURAL DATA

Rural public health data is important because it provides insights into how rural populations face problems distinct from urban areas. It can also inform strategies and approaches for addressing public health challenges in rural populations.

"It's hard to fix what you can't see. So having good data, being able to understand the strengths and challenges and what's happening in rural communities is key to maintaining and improving health for rural people."
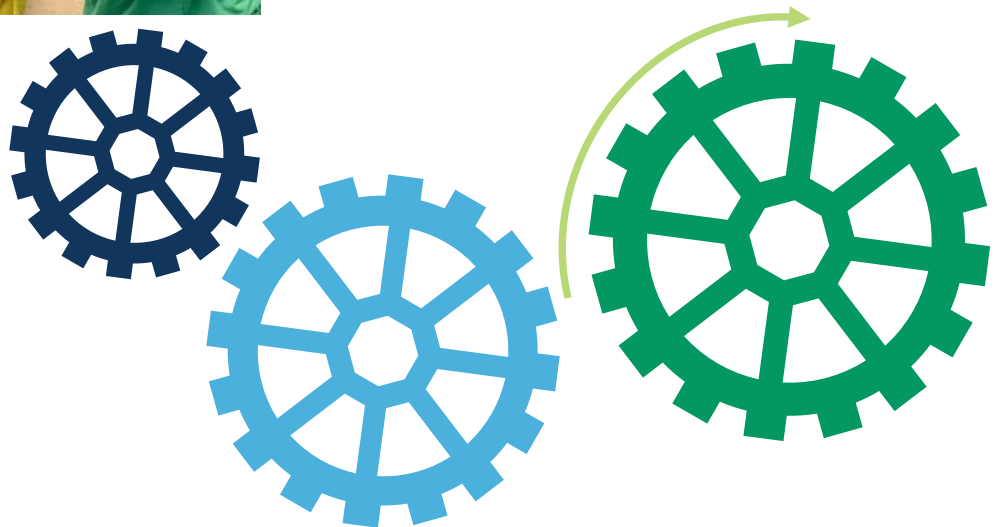

DEFINING 'RURAL'

Defining 'rural' in the United States is difficult since there are many rural definitions and classifications. Depending on which definition or classification is used, a single area could be defined as urban or rural.

"Once you've decided that this is the rural definition that we're going to use, for better or worse, there is no good rural definition. There's no single perfect rural definition."

NEED FOR PRACTICAL RESOURCES

There is a need for a practical resource that provides guidance on using CDC data for rural public health analysis. This tool would be especially beneficial for people who: 1) conduct data analysis as part of their job, but do not consider it a primary responsibility; and 2) have limited experience using CDC datasets, such as undergraduate or graduate students.

"If I'm going to use vital statistics data, as an internal [to CDC] scientist, I know what to do, because I've done it. But as an external researcher, you may know how to access that data. But you may need to know additional things about that data, to conduct your research properly, to align your methodology. And being external, you don't necessarily know who to contact to figure that out.

So, I think having a guide written by the data experts, right, the owners of the data to say, 'Hey, this is what you need to know about the data. These are the limitations. This is the classification scheme we use. And if you are going to conduct an analysis using this data, here are the most important things to know about this data.' So that's absolutely valuable."

OBSTACLES TO USING CDC DATA

Rural public health analysts face many obstacles to using CDC data: CDC websites are hard to navigate; the process to access CDC datasets is difficult, especially for people who are not trained analysts; and some datasets require travel to data centers to obtain access to data, which is expensive and time-consuming.

"The biggest obstacles for people outside the agency [are] just getting the data and finding who to talk to, if they have questions. It's just sort of like this big, faceless thing … And sometimes you actually have to travel to the data center. That's expensive. It takes time. Neither of which really work for doing something timely in a rural area. And the cost of it is ridiculous, because rural areas can't bear that cost the way a bigger university or something like that in a more urban area could."

CONCLUSION

The *Cookbook* was developed as a user-friendly guide to help make CDC data about the health of rural Americans more accessible and expand the rural public health knowledge base. The PHIL team's work represents Phase I of the *Cookbook*. In the next phase, CDC's ORH will add more recipes, and the *Cookbook* website will be created and launched on the CDC website by Spring 2025.[*]

Connect with Us

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[*] As of February 2025, it is unknown if the *Cookbook* will be released due to executive orders issued by the Trump Administration.