



ACHIEVING HEALTH EQUITY THROUGH CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION

The Root Cause Coalition is focused on a range of social drivers and their effect on public health. Below is a selection and summary of timely news articles, research and advocacy efforts focused on rural health disparities and health equity. This complements the Coalition's May Research on Rural Disparities and Social Drivers of Health, available [here](#).

Rural Disparities and Health Equity

[Enduring effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on food access, nutrition, and well-being in rural appalachia](#) - May 2024

A qualitative study conducted in Martin County, Kentucky, explored the lasting impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on health behaviors and well-being. This region, part of Appalachia, already faces heightened levels of chronic diseases such as obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and cancer, with food insecurity being a significant contributing factor. The pandemic exacerbated existing vulnerabilities, as supply chain disruptions further limited food access by interrupting distributions and deliveries. Additionally, the pandemic contributed to feelings of social isolation, leading to mental health challenges and compounded by household financial strains due to inflation.

[What's health care like in rural America? We're taking a close-up look](#) - April 2024

As part of their initiative to improve heart health in rural America, The American Heart Association (AHA) has begun a research project aimed at highlighting both the beauty and the challenges facing individuals living in remote, rural areas. The project will visit five states with larger rural populations, including: North Dakota, West Virginia, Kentucky, Alaska, and Kansas. Discussions will focus on challenges related to limited transportation, access to health care and telehealth services, and the unique health challenges present in each state. To read their first state-specific article on health challenges in North Dakota, [click here](#).

[Social determinants of rural food security: Findings from Michigan's Upper Peninsula](#) - April 2024

This paper analyzes a regional survey assessing factors that contribute to food insecurity in rural Michigan's Western Upper Peninsula. The study analyzed economic conditions, access to food and engagement in informal foodways finding that household income, cost, and lack of time were significant factors affecting food insecurity. While driving oneself to access food reduced food insecurity, transportation remained a barrier, particularly during harsher winters. Additional findings found that despite 38% of respondents using food assistance programs, their impact on food security was limited with poorer individual and household economic conditions. This points to the need for addressing underuse of food assistance programs and supporting informal foodways as a solution to improving food security.

[Internet price, speed and disparity: The case of rural health care providers in the United States](#) - March 2024

This article studies the effects of successful subsidy programs specifically implemented in the hope of improving telehealth in rural areas. Results from a comparison of the trends between rural and urban health care providers (HCPs) suggests that the rural/urban divide in internet access has shrunk during the study year indicating that the subsidy programs have achieved their stated goal of improving rural internet access; these findings reinforce the need for similar programs in other areas.

[Frustration Builds as some rural Minnesotans struggle to get to medical appointments](#) - March 2024

This article discusses the increasing issues Minnesotans are facing with access to health care transportation including missed appointments for oncology and dialysis appointments, dentist visits and substance abuse treatment due to lack of transportation services. Rural Minnesota is faced with extreme weather, staffing shortages, rising costs, and low state reimbursements as major hurdles, causing the lack of both emergency and additional health care transportation. Additionally, there's a growing need for protected transport for individuals requiring specialized care, yet starting and sustaining such services is challenging due to low reimbursement rates and high operational costs. This exacerbates strains on already resource-limited emergency vehicle services and transportation services in the area, reducing access to proper health care.

[Millions of Americans will soon lose internet access. That's a disaster for rural health.](#) - March 2024

The Affordable Connectivity Program, initiated on New Year's Eve 2021, has helped more than 20 million American households afford internet access through subsidies of up to \$30 monthly (or \$75 on certain tribal lands). However, funding is set to expire in May of 2024, potentially impacting vital services such as online telehealth, especially for rural communities where internet access and health care access are intertwined issues. Telehealth has become essential, particularly in areas with doctor shortages, aiding patients in managing chronic conditions.

Experts warn that cutting internet access could exacerbate health care disparities, especially for disabled individuals and those in rural areas who rely on telehealth.

[Barriers to Transportation in Rural Communities: Perspective of Older Adult Users](#) - January 2024

A cross-sectional study was conducted throughout rural Wisconsin to identify specific barriers to transportation, uncover personal factors associated with identified barriers, and measure causal relationships between identified barriers and travel satisfaction. A total of 580 older adult respondents from 92% of rural counties across the state provided answers regarding specific transportation barriers. Top barriers to accessing transportation included service hours, service areas, trip destinations, getting in/out of service vehicles, service reservations, and operational scheduling.

[The digital divide in access to broadband internet and mental health care](#) - January 2024

This study analyzed corresponding broadband access with mental health care access in 3,138 U.S. counties. Key findings revealed that U.S. counties with reduced broadband access have lower average densities of mental health care physicians, non-physician mental health practitioners, inpatient psychiatric and substance abuse treatment facilities, and outpatient facilities. Additionally, counties with reduced broadband access are at a far greater risk of having no mental health providers, particularly mental health physicians, non-physician mental health practitioners, psychiatric and substance abuse hospitals, and outpatient treatment facilities. These findings underscore that, while telemedicine may mitigate many key barriers to in-person mental health care, lack of broadband access may present an additional barrier to care for individuals already living in medically under-resourced communities.

New in the Equity Legislation Monitor!

[The Rural Veterans Transportation to Care Act](#)- March 2024

The Rural Veterans Transportation to Care Act, introduced by Rep. Marie Gluesenkamp Perez (D-Skamania) aims to restore funding to the Skamania County program and expand the program to Clark County and other counties in Southwest Washington. The Act would expand eligibility for the VA's Highly Rural Transportation Grant Program which funds transportation at no cost to veterans via veteran service organizations and state veterans service agencies. For more information, please refer [to this news release](#).