

# Key Health Disparities in the Rural Context

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At the time of this publication, Miriam E. Delphin-Rittmon, Ph.D, served as Assistant Secretary for Mental Health and Substance Use in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the Administrator of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

The opinions expressed herein are the view of PTTC Network and do not reflect the official position of the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), SAMHSA. No official support or endorsement of DHHS, SAMHSA, for the opinions described in this document is intended or should be inferred.

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Post in the chat the words that best describe living and/or working in a rural community.





# Learning Objectives



1. Describe the importance of addressing health disparities in rural communities.



2. Identify risk factors for health disparities in the rural context



3. Formulate strategies for addressing unique challenges to prevention in rural settings



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# What Do We Mean By “Rural” ?

- 97% of the U.S. land mass is considered “rural”.
- Approximately 19.3% of the U.S. population live in rural areas.<sup>1</sup>
- Rural designation includes some of the poorest as well as some of the wealthiest counties in the U.S.



1. Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2017) What is Rural America? <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2017/08/rural-america.html>



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# Defining Rural

- The U.S. Census Bureau defines “rural” as anything not urban.
- All localities with a small population (less than 10,000) outside an urban cluster. These can include different types of localities such as:



**Small Towns**  
Densely Settled



**Exurban Pockets**  
Outskirts of Cities



**Frontier Areas**  
Sparsely Populated



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# Rural Communities Vary Widely

Though the stereotypical rural community is small, homogeneous, and embedded in a rolling agricultural landscape, rural communities vary widely in both location and demographics.

*If you have seen one rural community...*



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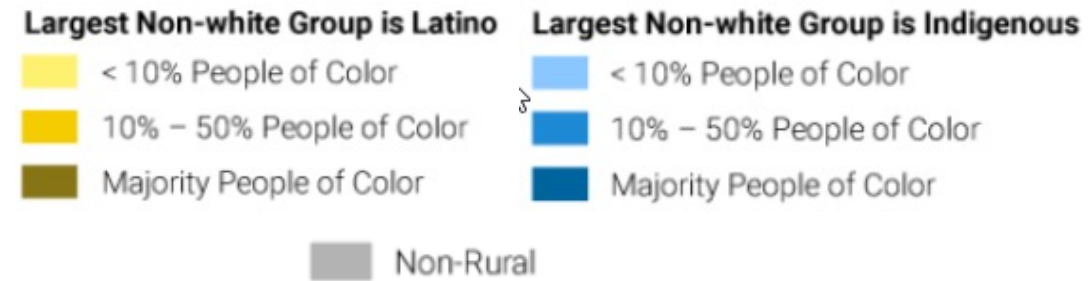
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"Narratives that erase the 24% of rural Americans who are people of color—as well as the many rural counties that are majority people of color—devalue the needs of rural people of color who face systemic barriers to opportunity, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, while giving rhetorical priority to the concerns of an imagined white rural monolith."

Brookings, Mapping Rural America's Diversity and Demographic Change, (2021) <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2021/09/28/mapping-rural-americas-diversity-and-demographic-change/>

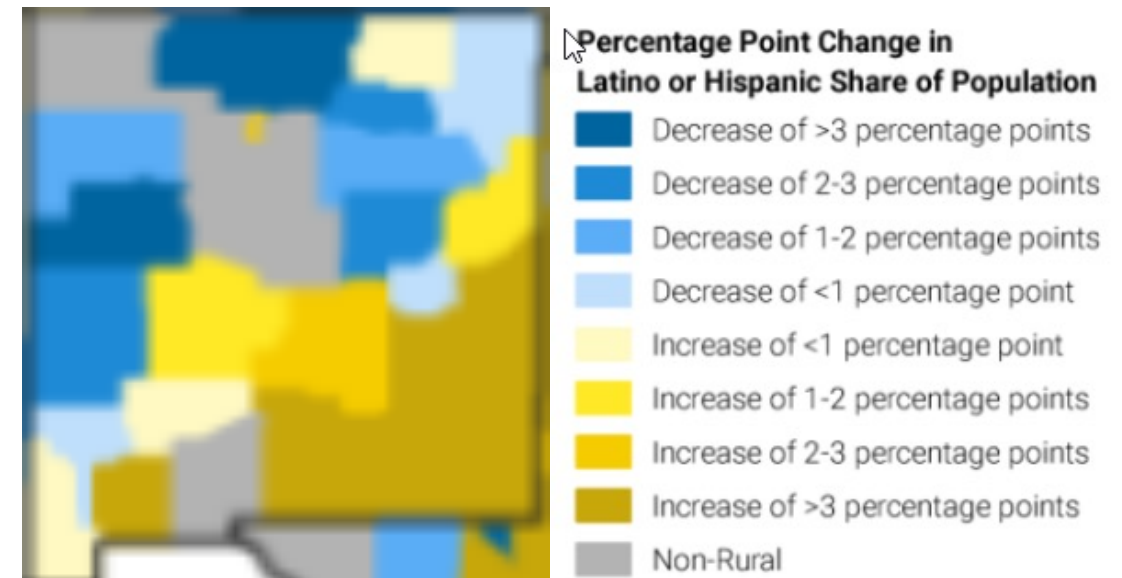
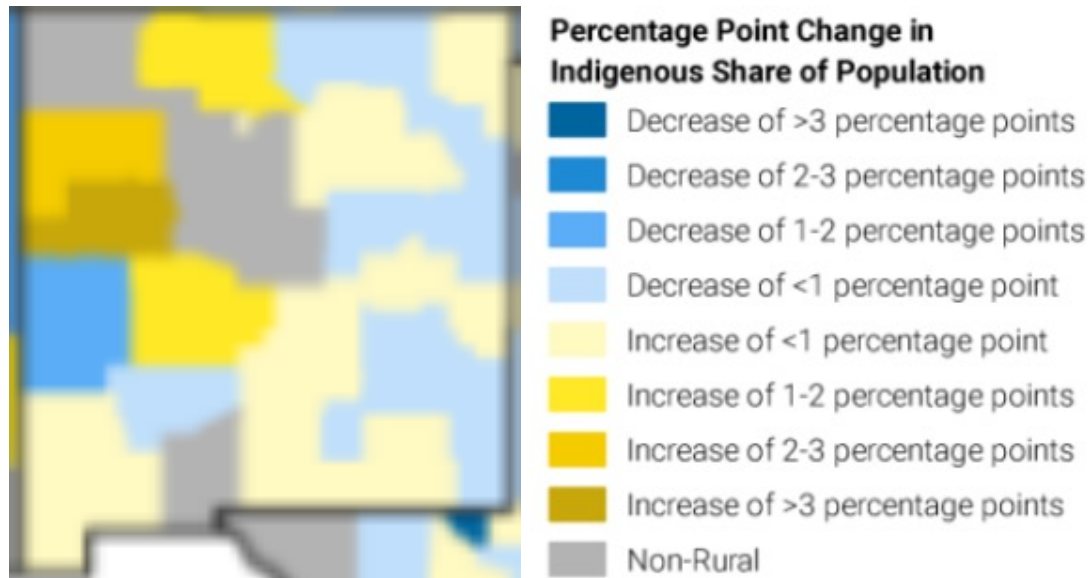


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# Shifts in NM Rural Demographics: Key Findings



Brookings, Mapping Rural America's Diversity and Demographic Change, (2021) <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2021/09/28/mapping-rural-americas-diversity-and-demographic-change/>



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# The Importance of Addressing Health Disparities in Rural Communities.

Health Disparities



Health Equity



Health Inequity





# The Prevalence of Substance Misuse in the Rural Context

- Substance use disorders
- Risky alcohol-related behaviors including binge drinking
- Tobacco



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## The Prevalence of Substance Misuse in the Rural Context *Cont.*

- Illicit drug use including heroin, prescription medications, and methamphetamines (meth).
- Prescription opioids



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# The Prevalence of Behavioral Health Disorders in the Rural Context

- Depression
- Suicidality
- Mental Distress
- Subpopulations  
(women, low-income children, veterans, non-Hispanic blacks, and American Indian/Alaska Natives)



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# Key Health Disparities in the Rural Context

- In general, rural populations experience worse health status than urban populations.
- Life expectancy is generally lower in rural than in urban counties.
- The consequences of greater opioid use in rural areas include increases in opioid-related overdose deaths and increased exposure to human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and hepatitis C virus (HCV).
- The high rates of injection drug use and the resistance to needle exchange programs also pose an ongoing and growing risk to many rural communities.



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A photograph of a rural setting. In the foreground, a dark metal park bench with wooden slats sits on a concrete pad. To the left of the bench is a large, dark tree trunk. Further left, a black street lamp stands on a sidewalk. In the background, a large, multi-story building with many windows is visible, possibly a school or community center. The sky is overcast and the overall tone is somewhat somber.

# Risk Factors for Health Disparities in Rural Context





**ACCESS**



**ACCESSIBILITY**



**AVAILABILITY**



**ACCEPTABILITY**



**CULTURE**

**Conditions in Rural Communities (Four A's & C)**

# Factors Contributing to Substance Misuse in Rural America

- High rates of poverty, unemployment, and community disorganization
- Community norms that encourage (or do not discourage) SU
- Low academic achievement
- Lack of hope and opportunity for the future
- Low neighborhood attachment
- Fewer opportunities for positive social involvement



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# Factors Contributing to Behavioral Health Disparities

- Rural BH disparities are closely linked to the socioeconomic characteristics of rural populations and communities.
- Higher proportion of families living below the poverty level, more unemployment, and a greater percentage of residents who have public insurance or are uninsured than do urban areas.
- Rural individuals also experience a greater sense of stigma, a higher sense of isolation and hopelessness, lower education rates, and higher rates of chronic illnesses..

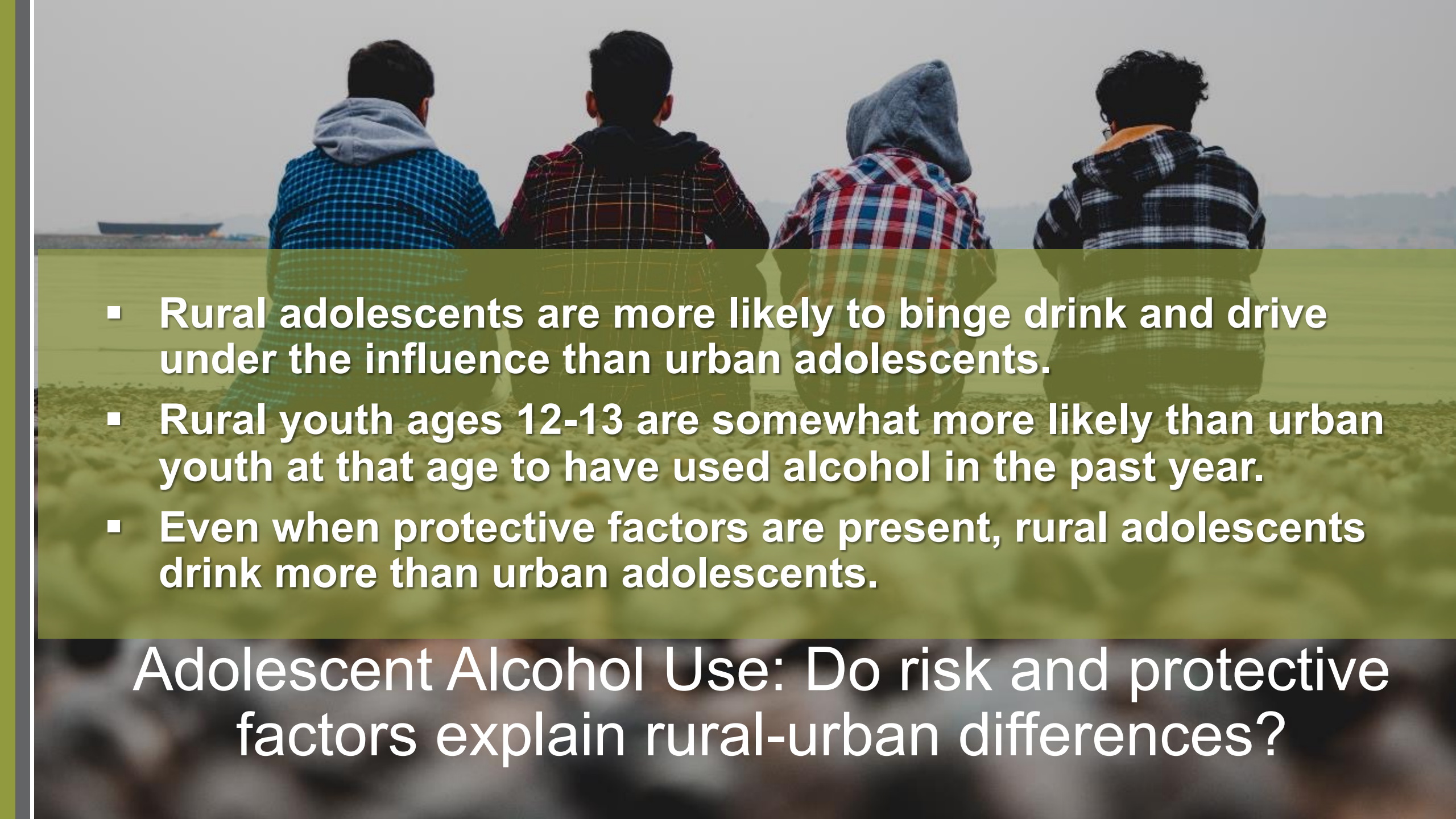


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- 
- A photograph of four adolescents sitting on a grassy field, looking out over a body of water. They are wearing plaid shirts and hoodies. In the background, a ship is visible on the water under a cloudy sky.
- Rural adolescents are more likely to binge drink and drive under the influence than urban adolescents.
  - Rural youth ages 12-13 are somewhat more likely than urban youth at that age to have used alcohol in the past year.
  - Even when protective factors are present, rural adolescents drink more than urban adolescents.

Adolescent Alcohol Use: Do risk and protective factors explain rural-urban differences?

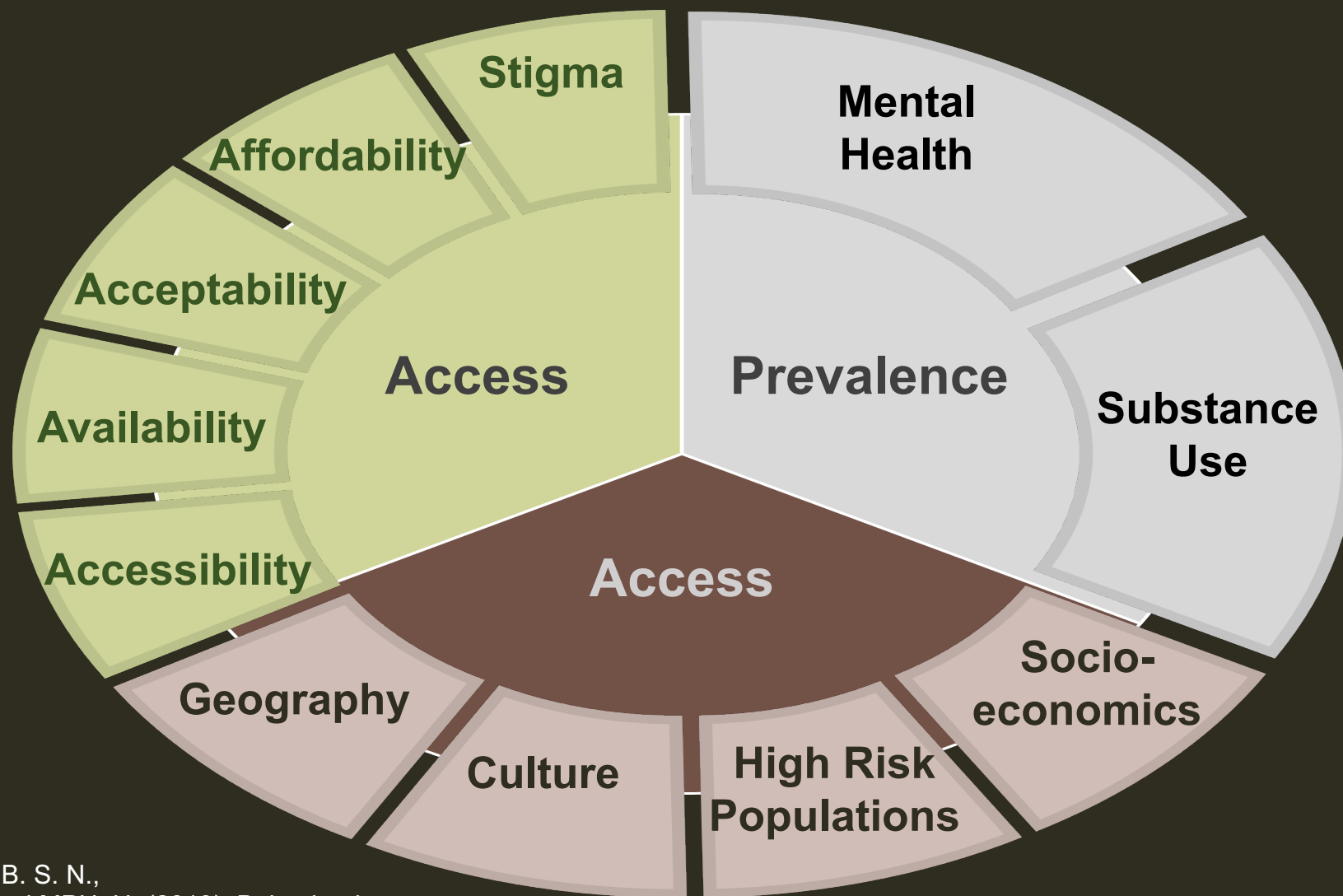




# Rural Subpopulations at High Risk

- Women
- Children and Adolescents
- Veterans
- People of Color
- Indian, and Alaska Native Populations
- Older Adults
- Individuals with Co-occurring Conditions

# The Context for Understanding Rural Mental Health and Substance Use



Source: Gale MS, J., Janis, B. S. N., Coburn PhD, A. F., & Rochford MPH, H. (2019). Behavioral Health in Rural America: Challenges and Opportunities.



# Policy Change



“[Policy](#) is a tool for achieving health promotion and disease prevention program goals. Policy decisions are made by organizations, agencies, and stakeholders. Policy approaches include legislative advocacy, fiscal measures, taxation, and regulatory oversight.”

Source: RHI Hub

## Policy Change Examples

# Policy Change in Rural Context .



## Policy Change



## Systems Change



“Systems change refers to a fundamental shift in the way problems are solved. Within an organization, systems change affects organizational purpose, function, and connections by addressing organizational culture, beliefs, relationships, policies, and goals.”

Source: RHI Hub

## Systems Change Examples

# Systems Change



## Policy Change



“Environmental change strategies involve changing the economic, social, or physical surroundings or contexts that affect health outcomes. Environmental strategies address population health outcomes and are best used in combination with other strategies. Examples of environmental strategies for health promotion and disease prevention include: Increasing the number of parks, greenways, and trails in the community ”

Source: RHI Hub


## Environmental Change



## Environmental Change Examples

# Environmental Change in Rural Context .



- 
- A photograph of a white church with a brown steeple and a blue roof. In the background, several industrial smokestacks are visible, emitting smoke. The scene is set against a clear blue sky with some trees in the foreground.
- ✓ Healthcare
  - ✓ Social services
  - ✓ Law enforcement
  - ✓ Schools

- ✓ Local and tribal governments
- ✓ Faith-based organizations
- ✓ Businesses
- ✓ Consumers

# Community Engagement

# Finding Promising Programs



Toolkits



Drug or  
Problem



Populations



**Handout: Promising Approaches for Reducing Substance Misuse-Related Health Disparities in Rural Context**







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# National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities Research Framework

		Levels of Influence*			
		Individual	Interpersonal	Community	Societal
Domains of Influence (Over the Lifecourse)	Biological	Biological Vulnerability and Mechanisms	Caregiver–Child Interaction Family Microbiome	Community Illness Exposure Herd Immunity	Sanitation Immunization Pathogen Exposure
	Behavioral	Health Behaviors Coping Strategies	Family Functioning School/Work Functioning	Community Functioning	Policies and Laws
	Physical/Built Environment	Personal Environment	Household Environment School/Work Environment	Community Environment Community Resources	Societal Structure
	Sociocultural Environment	Sociodemographics Limited English Cultural Identity Response to Discrimination	Social Networks Family/Peer Norms Interpersonal Discrimination	Community Norms Local Structural Discrimination	Social Norms Societal Structural Discrimination
	Health Care System	Insurance Coverage Health Literacy Treatment Preferences	Patient–Clinician Relationship Medical Decision-Making	Availability of Services Safety Net Services	Quality of Care Health Care Policies
Health Outcomes		 Individual Health	 Family/ Organizational Health	 Community Health	 Population Health

National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities, 2018

\*Health Disparity Populations: Race/Ethnicity, Low SES, Rural, Sexual/Gender Minority

Other Fundamental Characteristics: Sex/Gender, Disability, Geographic Region

Morales et. al. (2020)





# Moving Forward

- Do Your Homework
- Partner with Faith-based Organizations
- Identify cultural brokers who can help you understand community conditions
- Use Social Networks
- Empower Residents to Act as First Responders
- Increase Access to Online Treatment
- Take the Long View

# References

Afifi RA, Parker EA, Dino G, Hall DM, Ulin B.(2022). Reimagining Rural: Shifting Paradigms About Health and Well-Being in the Rural United States. *Annual Review of Public Health*, 43 pg.135-154. Online access: <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-publhealth-052020-123413>

Jaffiajee R, Allison L, Bohnert SB, Goldstick JE (2019) Characteristics of US Counties with High Opioid Overdose Mortality and Low Capacity to Deliver Medications for Opioid Use Disorder. *JAMA Network Open*  
[https://jama.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?doi=10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2019.6373&utm\\_campaign=articlePDF%26utm\\_medium=articlePDFlink%26utm\\_source=articlePDF%26utm\\_content=jamanetwo rkopen.2019.6373](https://jama.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?doi=10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2019.6373&utm_campaign=articlePDF%26utm_medium=articlePDFlink%26utm_source=articlePDF%26utm_content=jamanetwo rkopen.2019.6373)

Miller CE & Vasan RS (2021) The Southern Rural Health and Mortality Penalty: A Review of Regional Health Inequities in the United States. *Social Science Medicine*, 268:113443. Online free access: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7755690/pdf/nihms-1640235.pdf>



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Morales DA, Barksdale CL, Beckel-Mitchner AC (2020) A Call to Action to Address Rural Mental Health Disparities. *Journal of Clinical and Translational Science* 4; pg. 463-467. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cts.2020.42>

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Thomas N, VandeVen K, Mulrooney KJD (2020) The Impact of rurality on Opioid-Related Harms: A Systematic Review of Qualitative Research. *International Journal of Drug Policy* 85; pg. 102607. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2019.11.015>

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Let's hear from you!

What are your questions?



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# Your Feedback Is Important!



**Post-Event Survey URL:**  
<https://ttc-gpra.org/P?s=681072>



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## About the Rural Health Information Hub

Your *First STOP* for *RuralHealth* INFORMATION

The Rural Health Information Hub, formerly the Rural Assistance Center, is funded by the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy to be a national clearinghouse on rural health issues.

The RHIhub is your guide to improving health for rural residents—provide access to current and reliable resources and tools to help you learn about rural health needs and work to address them.

([ruralhealthinfo.org](http://ruralhealthinfo.org))



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For further questions, contact:

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