



CDC Data: Five leading causes of death in the U.S. more likely to impact rural counties

People who live in rural counties are at higher risk than people living in urban counties to die early from one of the five leading causes of death, according to data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). While many of these deaths are preventable, the disparities between rural and urban areas persist.

More than 46 million people in the U.S. live in rural areas. They face numerous health disparities compared with residents of urban areas. To better understand the health risks, CDC researchers used data from the [National Vital Statistics System](#) to calculate the percentages of preventable early deaths (excluding COVID-19) for people under 80 years old during the period of 2010 to 2022. They found that rates of early death from cancer, chronic lower respiratory disease (CLRD), heart disease, stroke, and unintentional injury are higher in rural counties than in urban counties. These gaps have persisted since 2010 and are widening for some conditions.

Overall, the percentage of preventable early deaths in the U.S. increased for unintentional injuries and stroke, decreased for cancer and chronic lower respiratory disease (CLRD), and remained stable for heart disease. Rates were higher in rural counties than in urban counties for each of those conditions. Some notable findings:

- A decline in preventable early cancer deaths in urban counties outpaced that in rural counties, which further widened the rural-urban gap. Differences in tobacco use and less access to lung cancer screening facilities may explain some of this gap.
- After declining from 2010 through 2019, preventable early deaths from stroke increased steeply at the start of COVID-19, with the highest rates in rural counties by June 2022. The highest percentages of preventable early deaths from stroke in 2022 were in southern states.
- Preventable early deaths from unintentional injury have been trending upward in both rural and urban counties since 2010. They increased steeply at the start of COVID-19. Rates have nearly tripled in large metro counties, narrowing the rural-urban gap. However, preventable early deaths from unintentional injury are still highest in rural counties. The drug overdose epidemic, motor vehicle traffic fatalities, and falls drive this increase.

These data can guide local public health interventions to reduce risk of early death. They also help identify and address social, environmental, and structural inequities that contribute to the rural-urban gap in preventable early deaths. Healthcare providers can support people in rural and urban settings by:

- Screening patients for high blood pressure
- Increasing cancer prevention and early detection
- Encouraging physical activity and healthy eating
- Promoting smoking cessation
- Promoting motor vehicle safety
- Practicing safe opioid prescribing

Take a closer look at the CDC data and find helpful resources at [Leading Causes of Death in Rural America](#). For more information about CDC's work in rural health, visit www.cdc.gov/ruralhealth.