



AcademyHealth

# The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality Addresses the Health of Rural Americans



## Key Takeaways:

- The first step in providing better health outcomes and quality of life for rural communities is identifying unique challenges, including health care quality and access. AHRQ prioritizes rural America's health by confronting their unique needs.
- AHRQ has pioneered projects and programs dedicated to understanding telehealth and its' place in improving rural patients' health.
- Rural areas have seen a rapid increase in opioid-related deaths. AHRQ funds initiatives to teach rural doctors about effective treatment.

The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) is the only federal department dedicated to researching health care delivery systems and improving health care professionals' training and tools.

AHRQ recognizes rural Americans as a priority health group and focuses on identifying drivers of poor health outcomes, finding connections through telehealth, and tackling the opioid epidemic.

## AHRQ is working with rural communities to address lagging health care quality

AHRQ continually publishes a report highlighting health care quality and disparities within rural America. Most recently, AHRQ notes how rural America's health care quality lags behind urban areas (see image). This affects rural residents' health outcomes along the lifespan.

AHRQ has identified rural mothers and their babies as at-risk populations because they have less access to OB-GYN doctors increasing the risk of pregnancy-related deaths and injury. AHRQ has also found that older adults in rural communities have fewer quality nursing homes to choose from which has led to an unhealthier older population. AHRQ has also acknowledges that rural Black and Hispanic residents. Identifying the unique challenges faced by rural communities is the first step in

solving them to provide better health outcomes and quality of life.

## Telehealth provides crucial connection

Telehealth provides long-distance connection between doctor to patient and doctor to doctor. Project ECHO (Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes) is an innovative telehealth model designed to teach rural primary care doctors new treatment methods. By connecting doctors in more resourced areas to doctors in rural America, ECHO participants work together across 48 states to solve rural patients' biggest issues like diabetes, opioid use disorder, and cancer. ECHO played a critical role in the COVID-19 response. AHRQ continues to evaluate how telehealth has a place in helping rural communities thrive.

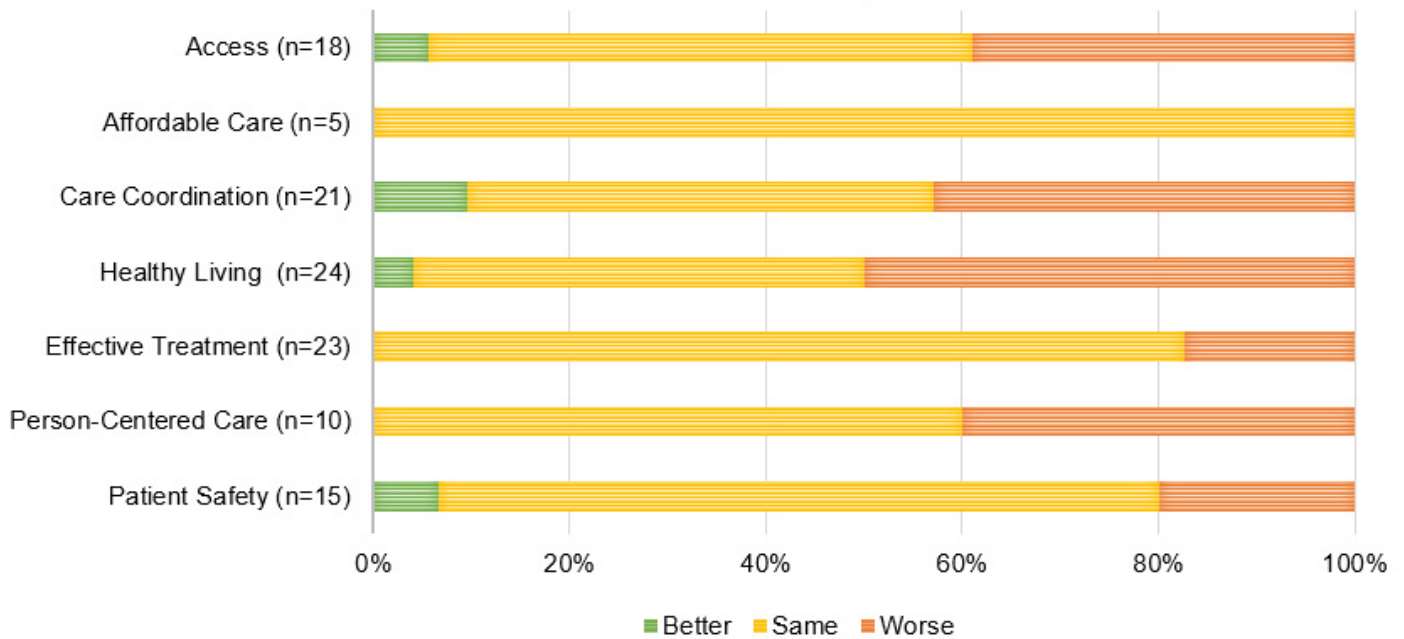
## Initiatives teach rural doctors the latest in opioid treatment

Opioid misuse is a problem across the country, but rural areas have seen a rapid increase in opioid-related deaths in recent years. From 2019-2021, rural Illinois saw a 39% increase in opioid-related deaths and in between 2019-2020, rural South Dakota saw a 50% increase.

Opioid recovery works better when the approach combines talk therapy and medication. Since there are not enough rural mental health professionals to support all rural opioid users, primary care doctors often take on the work.



## Rural Health Care Quality from 2016-2018



**Note:** For each measure, the earliest and most recent year available were analyzed through 2016-2018; n=number of measures; Rural defined using NCHS Urban-Rural Classification Scheme for Counties. Adapted from AHRQ National Healthcare Quality and Disparities Report Chartbook on Rural Healthcare (11/21).

Rural doctors may not have access to new medication recovery options, so AHRQ facilitates an innovative education program to increase their access and enhance doctors' skills. Prescribing medication, such as buprenorphine, can prevent opioid-related overdoses. By providing education on the benefits of medication assisted recovery, doctors have the tools and expertise to provide better care for patients experiencing opioid addiction. This initiative both improves health outcomes for opioid users and improves rural doctors' confidence in treating patients.

Building awareness of rural health needs is the first step to getting them solved. AHRQ will continue to support rural America's health through cutting-edge research and programs. Learn more about AHRQ's work at [ahrq.gov](http://ahrq.gov).

### About AcademyHealth

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