

Disability Burdens among Older Americans Associated with Gender and Race/Ethnicity in Rural and Urban Areas



At the Heart of Public Health Policy

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Executive Summary

Background and Overview

Policymakers increasingly use disability indicators to measure population health. One useful indicator of population health is called “health expectancy.” To estimate health expectancy, researchers partition total life expectancy into two parts. One part is healthy life expectancy, also often referred to as active life expectancy or disability-free life expectancy. This is a measure of the years an individual can expect to live free of serious disability. The second part measures the years a person can expect to live with disability, also commonly referred to as inactive life expectancy or disabled life expectancy.

No prior research has investigated differences in disability-free and disabled life expectancy associated with rural or urban residence. This project addresses this gap. This project identifies differences in healthy life expectancy that may signal important policy needs. The project:

- Examines total life expectancy, disability-free life expectancy, and disabled life expectancy, comparing people in rural and urban areas.
- Compares these expectancy measures for subgroups of rural and urban areas, distinguished by sex, race (white and African American) and educational attainment.

The data source for this project is the 1982, 1984, 1989, 1994, and 1999 survey waves of the National Long-term Care Survey (NLTC). The sample selected for this project is a nationally representative cohort of respondents to the NLTC aged 65 to 69 in 1982. This sample was selected to enable a retrospective study of a defined younger-old cohort, individuals who may have much in common with more recent retirees. Disability is defined as being unable to perform one or more of six Activities of Daily Living (ADLs) without help from other individuals or assistive devices. Respondents were considered to be “Rural” residents if they lived in any of the following area types: “Open country/not farm,” “Farm,” or “City/Town/Village (Under 50,000).” Residents of all other area types were classified as residents of urban areas.

Separate estimates of total, disability-free, and disabled life were developed for women and men living in rural and urban areas. In both rural and urban areas, a total of eight subgroups were examined: African American women with high and low education; white women with high and low education; African American men with high and low education; white men with high and low education.

Key Findings

Among a cohort of Americans aged 65 to 69 in 1982, in seven of the eight subgroups, individuals in rural areas lived longer lives than those in urban areas. Rural as compared to urban people lived (a) more disability-free years, (b) more disabled years, and (c) a notably greater percentage of their lives with a disability. There were striking differences among the high and low education groups, with individuals with more education living substantially longer, less disabled lives. Women lived longer, more disabled lives than men. For most subgroups, African Americans lived shorter, more disabled lives than Whites.

The key findings for women were:

- African American women with high education in rural areas lived a total of 22.5 years versus 19.5 years for those in urban areas; rural women lived 18.2 years disability-free versus 17.4 years for those in urban areas; rural women lived 4.3 years with a disability versus 2.1 for urban women. Women in rural areas spent a greater percentage of their remaining lives with a disability compared with those in an urban area (19.1% versus 10.7%).
- African American women with low education in rural areas lived a total of 10.6 years versus 8.4 years for those in urban areas; rural women lived 4.2 years disability-free versus 4.3 years for those in urban areas; rural women lived 6.5 years with a disability versus 4.3 for urban women. Women in rural areas spent a greater percentage of their remaining lives with a disability compared with those in an urban area (60.8% versus 49.7%).
- White women with high education in rural areas lived a total of 25.3 years versus 20.7 years for those in urban areas; rural women lived 21.7 years disability-free versus 18.9 years for those in urban areas; rural women lived 3.6 years with a disability versus 1.8 for urban women. Women in rural areas spent a greater percentage of their remaining lives with a disability compared with those in an urban area (14.3% versus 8.5%).
- White women with low education in rural areas lived a total of 9.1 years versus 8.5 years for those in urban areas; rural women lived 6.3 years disability-free versus 4.5 years for those in urban areas. In contrast with the other subgroups, rural women in this group lived fewer years with a disability: 2.8 years versus 4.0 for urban women. Women in rural areas spent a smaller percentage of their remaining lives with a disability compared with those in an urban area (30.7% versus 47.1%).

The key findings for men were:

- African American men with high education in rural areas lived a total of 17.7 years versus 12.8 years for those in urban areas; rural men lived 15.1 years disability-free versus 11.7 years for those in urban areas; rural men lived 2.6 years with a disability versus 1.0 for urban men. Men in rural areas spent a greater percentage of their remaining lives with a disability compared with those in an urban area (14.6% versus 8.1%).

- African American men with low education in rural areas lived a total of 7.4 years versus 5.1 years for those in urban areas; rural men lived 3.6 years disability-free versus 2.9 years for those in urban areas; rural men lived 3.7 years with a disability versus 2.2 for urban men. Men in rural areas spent a greater percentage of their remaining lives with a disability compared with those in an urban area (50.8% versus 43.57%).
- White men with high education in rural areas lived a total of 20.9 years versus 13.5 years for those in urban areas; rural men lived 18.9 years disability-free versus 12.6 years for those in urban areas; rural men lived 2.0 years with a disability versus 0.9 for urban men. Men in rural areas spent a greater percentage of their remaining lives with a disability compared with those in an urban area (9.5% versus 6.4%).
- White men with low education in rural areas lived a total of 7.5 years versus 4.9 years for those in urban areas; rural men lived 3.8 years disability-free versus 2.5 years for those in urban areas; rural men lived 3.7 years with a disability versus 2.4 for those in urban areas. Men in rural areas spent a slightly greater percentage of their remaining lives with a disability compared with those in an urban area (49.4% versus 48.87%).

Implications (See Discussion in Chapter 4)

Our results suggest the following implications:

Promote Research and Policies Focused on Reducing Disability

- Practitioners should focus on strategies to maintain and even enhance physical activity among the old and near-old. Practitioners should become more pro-active in promoting exercise and healthier lifestyles among the older persons they serve. Lifestyle changes seldom come easily, but education and motivation play an important role in bringing them about.
- There should be an increased emphasis in health research and policymaking on postponing chronic illness and maintaining vigor. The findings support a renewed interest on the part of policymakers in promoting healthy lifestyles and additional research on the prevention and treatment of chronic diseases that affect functional status. The most effective way to accomplish these goals is through health promotion education and personal responsibility.