

U.S. Health Care in the Midst of a Global Pandemic: A Message from Rural America Part II: A Survey of Rural Residents in Southern States

Approximately 19% of the U.S. population lives in rural areas. They experience many health care challenges such as fewer physicians, lack of mental health services, higher rates of disability, lower rates of insurance coverage, and poor internet services reducing access to telemedicine and other educational and care services¹. In summer 2020, Families USA Action launched a project to survey people in rural areas about their attitudes on health care. We were curious to learn whether their attitudes align with national attitudes, and whether they experience any unique challenges because of their geography.

To understand the health care issues most important to rural residents, Families USA Action commissioned Hart Research Associates to survey 805 men and women ages 18-85, across employment status, religious affiliation and political identification. Survey participants came from rural areas in several states — including Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio— and answered questions on issues such as Medicare, affordability, access, the economy, employment, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

The results of that survey are [captured in this presentation](#) and summarized [here](#).

Some of the key findings from that survey were that:

- » Half of the rural survey respondents choose Coronavirus or health care as one of their top two health care issues;
- » Survey respondents listed affordability of coverage, COVID-19, and Medicare as the health issues that matter most to them; and

- » Their number one issues are jobs and the economy. Health care and COVID-19 both have major effects on jobs and the economy in rural communities.

In addition to these findings, other data show that, due to existing system vulnerabilities such as barriers to care that are specific to rural regions, rural populations have a higher risk for contracting coronavirus. To further compound matters, the pandemic has disproportionately affected communities of color in rural areas, where there are typically higher concentrations of racial/ethnic minorities.

Surveying Rural Residents in Southern States

To further the work of the first phase of this project, we canvassed residents in rural areas of Southern states (Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia) to compare insights with data from the first survey. We will use these Southern-region data to inform and advance our health equity work.

A snapshot of this second round of survey results follows.

- » Half of Southern rural voters ranked **jobs and the economy** as their top voting issue for the 2020 Presidential election.
- » 31% of Southern rural voters ranked **health care** and/or the coronavirus pandemic as their top voting issue for the 2020 Presidential election.
- » 86% of Southern rural voters say affordability and availability of healthcare are very or fairly important to them.
- » On a scale of 0-10 of importance, “0” being “Not Important At All” and 10 being “Extremely Important,” **71 % say reducing prescription drug costs is extremely important.**
- » On a scale of 0-10 of importance, “0” being “Not Important At All” and 10 being “Extremely Important,” **69% say making sure there is affordable health insurance coverage for everyone who needs it is extremely important.**
- » On a scale of 0-10 of importance, “0” being “Not Important At All” and 10 being “Extremely Important,” **68% say slowing and stopping the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus is extremely important.**

Companion project collaterals present survey data — Southern voters’ attitudes about health care, the COVID-19 pandemic, jobs, and the economy — in greater detail.

Endnotes

¹ https://ruralopioids.soc.iastate.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/210/2020/06/Peters_2020_IRuralHealth_COVID19.pdf

² <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2017/08/rural-america.html>

³ <https://gis-portal.data.census.gov/arcgis/apps/MapSeries/index.html?appid=7a41374f6b03456e9d138cb014711e01>

⁴ <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2017/08/rural-america.html>

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