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Map Facts: Disability in Rural America

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Rural Facts

Map Facts: Disability in Rural America

Newly released data on disability in America show that the prevalence of impairments leading to disability is significantly higher in non-metropolitan counties (16.5%) than in metropolitan counties (13.4%). The U.S. Census Bureau recently updated the data about disability in small rural areas. This report provides a new glimpse at the heart of rural America for the first time in 13 years. These data fill a gap that has left policy makers and program planners in the dark and has meant that many decisions were made without adequate understanding of the demographics of rural people with disabilities. For example, it is a common belief that if someone acquires an impairment that may lead to disability, they move to a city where they have access to more services. These data suggest otherwise. There is some evidence to suggest that when a person in a city acquires such impairment, they may move to small rural areas for several reasons. Obviously, these data may challenge such common assumptions and lead to a very different policy response.

These data, collected between 2008-2012, will be available more frequently in the future. Nonetheless, they offer new insight into the distribution of disability across America and will improve our understanding of the diverse and complex nature of rural disability. This factsheet reports preliminary analyses of this new U.S. Census data.

The Data and the ACS

In 2005, the American Community Survey (ACS) replaced the U.S. Census' detailed long-form sample (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). The "long form" involved an extensive set of questions asked of a sample of 17% of the population once per decade as part of the decennial census required by the Constitution. In contrast, the ACS samples 2.5% of the population each year. This arrangement produces data for larger areas annually, but it takes up to five years to accumulate a sufficient sample to conduct the same analyses for smaller, more rural areas (e.g., counties with populations below 20,000). Five-year estimates for the smaller, rural areas have been published annually since 2010; however, because the questions used to estimate disability were not asked before 2008, it took five years (through 2012) to develop a sufficient sample to estimate the prevalence of disability in the smaller rural areas.

Disability Measures

The ACS asks six questions that are used to estimate disability. Four questions ask about functional limitation, including (1) serious difficulty hearing or is deaf; (2) serious difficulty seeing or is blind; (3) difficulty concentrating, remembering or making decisions because of a physical, mental or emotional problem; and (4) serious difficulty walking or climbing stairs (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

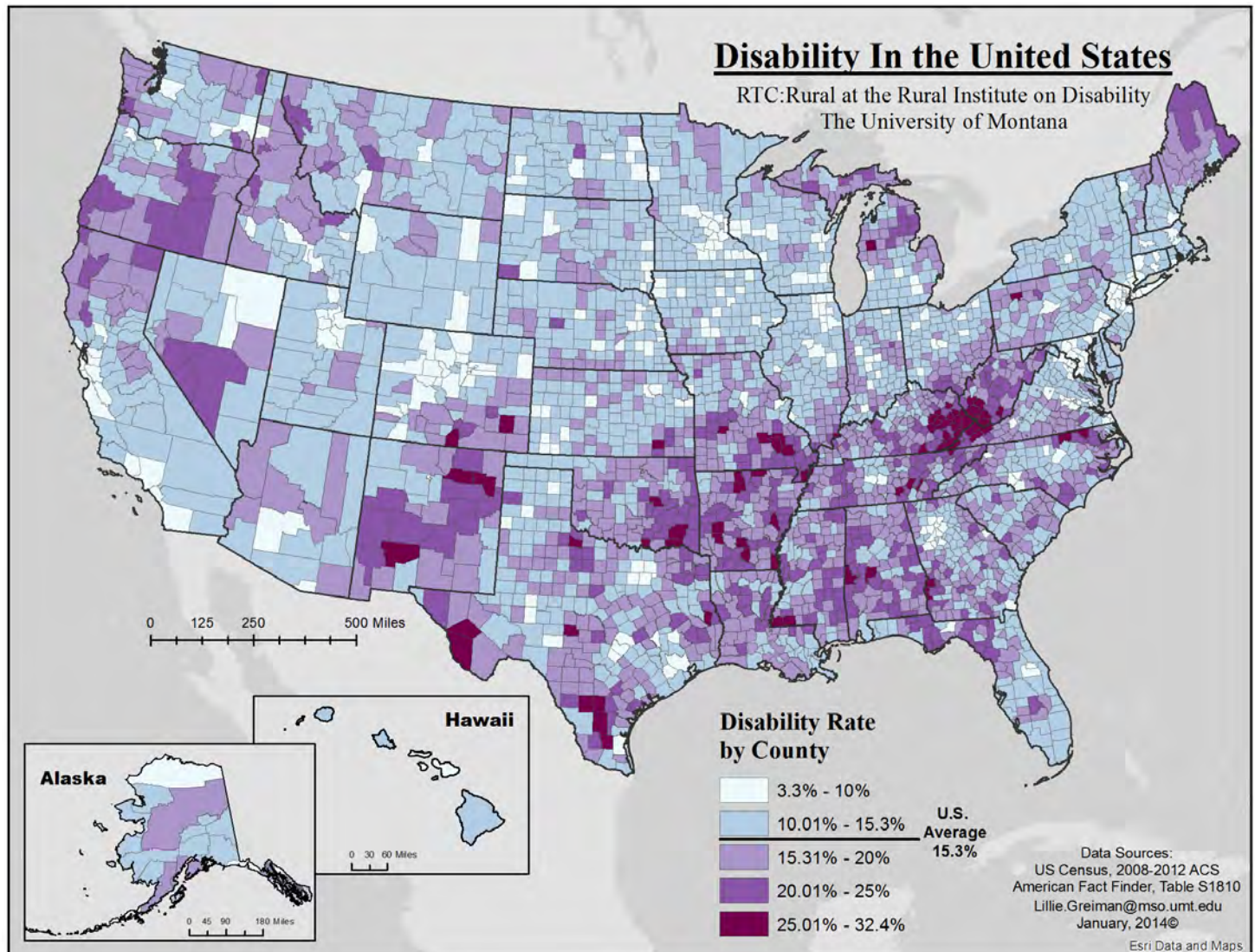
These functional limitation questions are supplemented by questions about selected difficulties with Activities of Daily Living (ADL) and Instrumental Activities of Daily Living (IADL). One item is on self-care and asks if a respondent

has difficulty bathing or dressing. The last item is on independent living (IL) and asks whether a household member has difficulty doing errands on one's own because of a physical, mental or emotional problem.

Maps and Analysis

Map 1 highlights the significant geographic disparity of disability across counties in the United States. The prevalence of disability varies dramatically – from a low of 3.7% of the population in Summit County, CO to a high of 32.4% in Warren County, NC. Regionally, there are higher concentrations of disability in the rural South, with an average of 18.76% and lower concentrations in the rural Midwest of 14.62%.

Map 1. United States disability rates by county. Counties are shaded by rates of disability from light blue (low rates of disability) to dark purple (high rates of disability).¹



Nationally

- The average rate of disability by county is 15.3%.
- 1,431 of 3,143 counties (45.6%) have rates higher than the national average.
- 165 counties (5.2%) have rates of disability at least 1.5 times the national county average (at or above 22.9%).

Disability in Non-Metropolitan Counties

- Aside from regional differences, non-metropolitan² counties have higher rates of disability. The average rate of disability across non-metropolitan counties is 16.5% compared to the national county average of 15.3%.
- 1,111 of 1,976 non-metropolitan counties

(56.2%) have disability rates that are higher than the national county average.

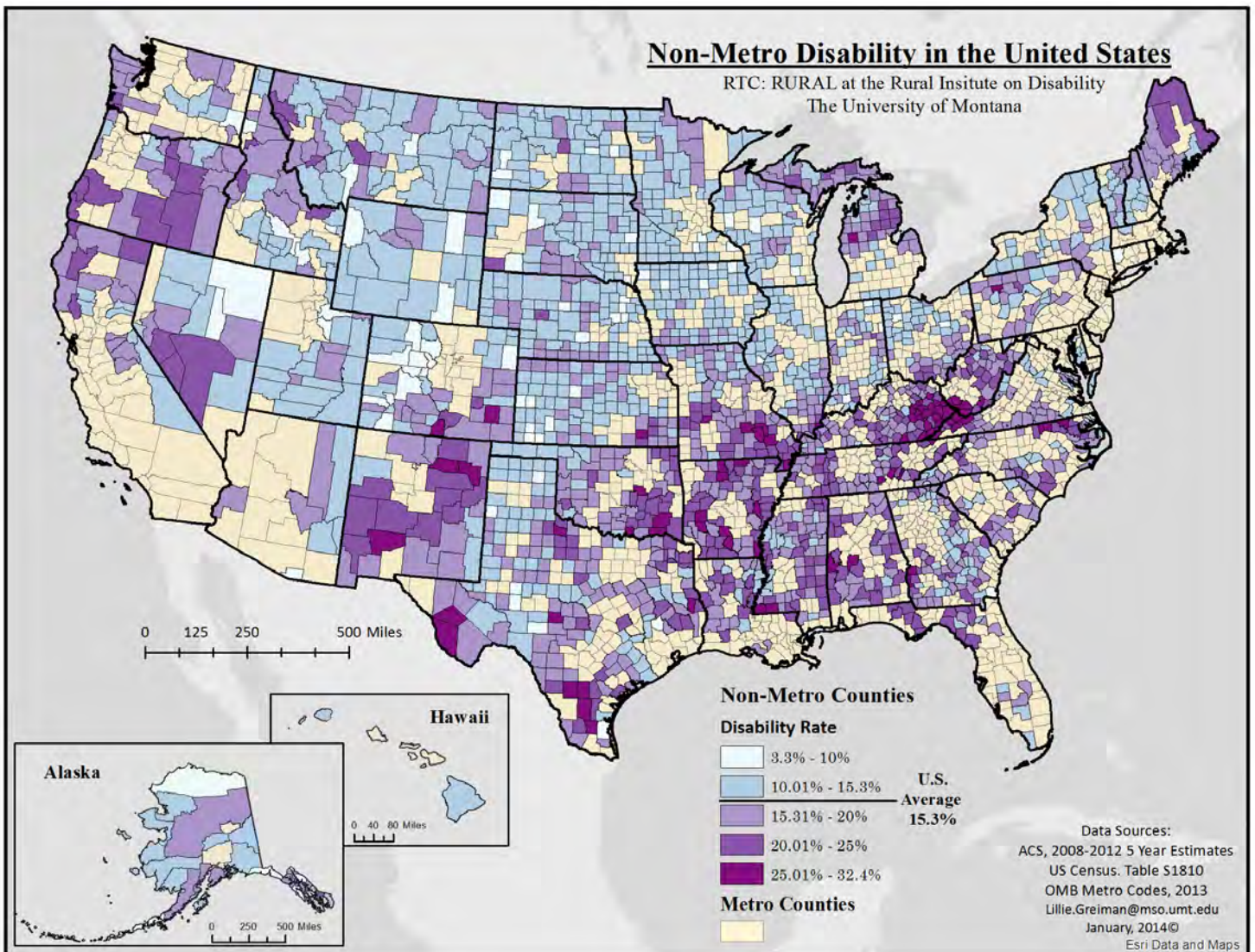
- 159 (94%) of the 169 counties with high rates of disability (22.9% or greater) are non-metropolitan.

Disability in Metropolitan Counties

- Conversely, metropolitan counties have a lower average disability rate of 13.4%.
- Only 321 metropolitan counties (27.5%) have disability rates above the national county average.

These new data clearly show that disability matters for rural America. This higher proportion of disability among rural population highlights a rural disparity that should be addressed through disability and health policy.

Map 2. United States county disability rates across metro and non-metro counties. The counties in beige are metro counties. Non-metropolitan counties are shaded by rates of disability from light blue (low rates of disability) to dark purple (high rates of disability).



Conclusions and Next Steps

Rural and non-metropolitan ACS data are critical for continuing to understand disability in rural America. It is important to note the Census – and most other data – presents data only on the distribution of individual impairments and functional limitations, assuming that a “diagnosis” is equivalent to disability. But for any given impairment, the environment determines the extent to which an individual is limited. The lack of measurement and data about the environment continues to hamper our ability to formulate effective policies that promote participation. Rural communities, disability organizations and advocates have waited a long time for updated data to analyze their circumstances and to inform future policy and program development.

The RTC: Rural is analyzing the new ACS data and will develop and disseminate a series of factsheets, maps and policy briefs.

Notes:

¹ The data provided by the ACS are indirect estimates produced by the statistical model based methods using sample survey, decennial census, and administrative data sources. The estimates contain error stemming from model error, sampling error, and non-sampling error.

² Non-metro counties are determined by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) by applying population and worker commuting criteria to the results of the 2010 Census and the 2006-2010 American Community Survey. For more information on the OMB’s metro/non-metro distinction please see this [OMB bulletin](#).

References:

U.S. Census Bureau. (2009). *A Compass for Understanding and Using American Community Survey Data: What Researchers Need to Know*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.

U.S. Census Bureau. (2012). *American Community Survey and Puerto Rico Community Survey 2012 Subject Definitions*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.

Resources:

ACS and Census Data information: <http://www.census.gov/acs/www/>

US Census and Disability information: www.census.gov/people/disability

For additional information please contact:

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