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## Using Data to Understand Your Community

According to the Institute of Medicine, health care should be safe, effective, patient-centered, timely, efficient, and equitable. The Institute for Healthcare Improvement's Triple Aim<sup>®</sup> adds to this, stating that health care should seek to achieve better population health ("better health"), experience of care ("better care"), and per capita cost ("lower cost").

How are you seeking to achieve these goals in your rural community? Using data to understand your community's population can be a useful starting point. It's challenging to offer equitable health care if you don't know which groups of people might be disadvantaged in your population. It's difficult to improve the health of your population if you don't have a big picture of health status (and other factors that impact health status) in your community.

### IDEAS AND NEXT STEPS FOR USING DATA TO UNDERSTAND YOUR COMMUNITY

Some useful websites that include demographic, population, health, and other data for ZIP codes, cities, counties, and states are included below. Before you start exploring these resources:

- **Start by thinking about your goals.** Overall, what do you hope to learn and why do you want to know it? Are you hoping to understand your population as a whole, or a certain group within it? Are you searching for data to support an application for a funding source? Are you seeking to better know your community or population in hopes of creating an innovative program to address health concerns or disparities?
- **Next, identify some specific questions you would like to answer about your population.** For example, if you are considering an innovative program to pursue better health for vulnerable seniors, you might ask how many people 65 years and older in your community are living alone or have incomes below the federal poverty level, or you might seek to describe the environment in which your community's seniors live. Or, if you are seeking funding to implement community-based chronic disease management programs, you might want to understand how the prevalence of some of your community's health behaviors (inactivity, drinking, or smoking) compares to other communities.
- **Finally, look through descriptions of and uses for the data sources below, and begin to explore any that might address your questions.**



## Kaiser State Health Facts

**Main website:** <http://kff.org/statedata/>

**Primary data type:** Health and hospital descriptors

**About:** “State Health Facts provides free, up-to-date, and easy-to-use health data for all 50 states, the District of Columbia, the United States, counties, territories, and other geographies. State Health Facts is comprised of more than 800 health indicators and provides users with the ability to map, rank, trend, and download data.”

**Detail:** Kaiser State Health Facts is a compilation of a wide range of health data, organized into 12 categories such as Health Reform, Minority Health, and Providers and Service Use.

**Specific ideas for using this resource:** Kaiser State Health Facts is based on data at a state level, but it is still a useful resource for better understanding the population—particularly in comparison to other states. A small rural hospital seeking grant funding for an innovation might use Kaiser State Health Facts to frame its state in terms of its place among all of the nation’s states, then provide more specific community-level data.

## State Health Access Data Assistance Center (SHADAC)

**Main website:** <http://www.shadac.org/datacenter>

**Primary data type:** Insurance and access descriptors

**About:** “[The Data Center includes] a web-based table generator tool allowing users to customize tables and graphs of health insurance coverage estimates within a pre-defined set of parameters.”

**Detail:** SHADAC compiles census-based data around health insurance into an easy-to-access portal.

**Specific ideas for using this resource:** As with Kaiser State Health Facts, the SHADAC Data Center provides state-based data that could be used to better understand a state’s population with respect to other states, and could potentially be used to help frame funding proposals around health insurance or health access.

## Factfinder2 (U.S. Census Bureau)

**Main website:** <http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml> (population projections at <http://www.census.gov/population/projections/>)

**Primary data type:** General population descriptors

**About:** “American FactFinder provides access to data about the United States, Puerto Rico, and the Island Areas. The data in American FactFinder come from several censuses and surveys.”

**Detail:** Factfinder2 is a data portal for the U.S. Census Bureau. It provides easy-to-use search functions at the state, county, city, and ZIP code levels. Data from the 2010 census is included, as well as yearly updates after 2010 based on the American Community Survey and the Population Estimates Program.

**Specific ideas for using this resource:** From the main Factfinder2 webpage, the Community Facts search box can provide information on frequently requested community characteristics. This option could be used to understand age, race/ethnicity, relationship, and housing characteristics for a community’s population. For more specific information, the Guided Search option on the main Factfinder2 webpage makes it easy to search for and find exact population information. Both of these options can help you to better understand your rural community from city, county, and ZIP code perspectives, and can provide data to help support decision making around population health.

## County Health Rankings

**Main website:** <http://www.countyhealthrankings.org/>

**Primary data type:** Population health descriptors

**About:** “The *County Health Rankings* show the rank of the health of nearly every county in the nation and illustrate that much of what affects health occurs outside of the doctor’s office.”

**Detail:** The *County Health Rankings* uses a model of population health to rank U.S. counties within each state, basing the rankings on available data. [View the \*County Health Rankings\*’ model here.](#)

**Specific ideas for using this resource:** While Factfinder2 and the U.S. Census Bureau provide population and demographic information, County Health Rankings provides detail on various population health status factors. This resource could be used to supplement and support decisions around population health, in conjunction with Factfinder2. It can also be used to help identify relevant health concerns in counties.

## Measure of America – American Human Development Index

**Main website:** <http://www.measureofamerica.org/maps/>

**Primary data type:** General population and environmental descriptors

**About:** “The American Human Development Index is a composite measure of wellbeing and opportunity. It combines indicators in three fundamental areas—health, knowledge, and standard of living—into a single number that falls on a scale from 0 to 10.”

**Detail:** The Index provides both the composite measures described above as well as the specific data elements that contribute to those composite measures. These data come from sources such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Center for Health Statistics, the American Community Survey, and the U.S. Census Bureau. Data are primarily available at the state and county levels. Data are presented on an interactive map of the United States, and by clicking on specific geographic areas, more data elements specific to those areas appear.

**Specific ideas for using this resource:** Look at your county or state’s status (as compared to others in the United States) on a wide range of data criteria in an easily accessible map. This interactive tool is useful for fully describing your community’s characteristics. Hover your mouse over the index at the top left of the screen to select the indicators/data elements of interest, change the geographic level, look at specific racial/ethnic subgroups, and define the year of data. Click on the state or county of interest on the main map, or use the “Find by zipcode” box at the top of the screen to locate a specific place. Data can be downloaded into an external file, or you can use the data as it appears on the screen. In addition to the color-coded map, the scale on the left side of the screen can be used to compare populations and factors in your area of interest to other areas in the United States.

## The Commonwealth Fund

**Main website:** <http://www.commonwealthfund.org/Maps-and-Data.aspx>

**Primary data type:** Health and hospital descriptors

**About:** The Commonwealth Fund seeks to promote a high performing health care system that achieves the Triple Aim, and offers a wealth of maps and data in interactive and easy-to-use formats. Data are available at the state and local (geographic areas around cities) areas.

**Detail:** Available data includes measures of access, treatment, cost, insurance, equity, and more.

- For state-based Commonwealth scorecards that measure state and local area health system performance, visit the Health System Data Center:  
<http://datacenter.commonwealthfund.org/#ind=1/sc=1>. Data are also available to be printed or accessed in different ways by visiting ChartCart.
- Explore the main Commonwealth Fund data website (listed above) for additional information.

**Specific ideas for using this resource:** Health performance data from the Commonwealth Fund's scorecards could be used to compare your region to other similar regions, and could be useful in describing community access to care.

### Dartmouth Atlas

**Main website:** <http://www.dartmouthatlas.org/>

**Primary data type:** Health and hospital descriptors

**About:** "For more than 20 years, the Dartmouth Atlas Project has documented glaring variations in how medical resources are distributed and used in the United States. The project uses Medicare data to provide information and analysis about national, regional, and local markets, as well as hospitals and their affiliated physicians."

**Detail:** The Dartmouth Atlas provides information at the regional or hospital level, and allows users to search for data using ZIP codes. Available data varies, but includes elements such as Medicare reimbursement, prescription drug use, hospital use, and details on primary care service areas.

**Specific ideas for using this resource:** For place-based information specific to hospital and health care utilization, the Dartmouth Atlas is a good resource. Data can be organized by region, hospital, or topic, and can help you better understand your hospital or region's performance on various levels of access and health care, and identify areas for improvement.

### Community Commons

**Main website:** <http://www.communitycommons.org/maps-data/>

**Primary data type:** General population and environmental descriptors

**About:** "Community Commons is an interactive mapping, networking, and learning utility for the broad-based healthy, sustainable, and livable communities' movement."

**Detail:** Community Commons offers maps and charts that portray data on race/ethnicity, economic indicators, education, community and environmental factors, food access, and health indicators, at various geographic levels (county, state, census tract, and beyond). Data are based on the U.S. Census Bureau, the American Community Survey, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, and more.

**Specific ideas for using this resource:** Similar to the American Human Development Index, Community Commons offers easy-to-use interactive maps that allow you to look at and compare your community to others on a wide range of factors. It includes elements such as road network density; crime rates; and population breakdowns by age, gender, race, and household size. Community Commons bases much of its data on U.S. Census Bureau data or other governmental sources, and can be an easily accessible way to use those types of data. This is a useful tool for better understanding the environment and population your hospital or community serves, and could be used to inform decision making around population health.

## WhyNotTheBest.org

**Main website:** <http://www.whynotthebest.org/>

**Primary data type:** Health and hospital descriptors

**About:** “WhyNotTheBest.org was created and is maintained by The Commonwealth Fund, a private foundation working toward a high performance health system. It is a free resource for health care professionals interested in tracking performance on various measures of health care quality. It enables organizations to compare their performance against that of peer organizations, against a range of benchmarks, and over time.”

**Detail:** WhyNotTheBest.org includes process measures, HCAHPS patient satisfaction measures, readmission rates, mortality rates, reimbursement rates, and other measures of population health, hospital care, and cost at the county, hospital referral region, state, and national level.

**Specific ideas for using this resource:** WhyNotTheBest.org offers data that allows comparison of states, referral regions, hospital types, or counties by various levels. It is a useful resource for understanding your hospital or community’s characteristics or performance, and comparing and contextualizing this against others.

## State Demography Offices

**Main website:** Varies (search the Internet for your state’s office)

**Primary data type:** General population descriptors

**About:** State demography/demographer offices provide retrospective, current, and projected demographic data and analysis for their state population.

**Detail:** State demography offices can provide data such as population projections by age, sex, and race/ethnicity; immigration estimates; and housing and job characteristics by various regions. Data may be available for cities, counties, or other geographic levels, depending on the office.

**Specific ideas for using this resource:** Population projection data could be used to forecast demand for specific innovative services or facilities you might consider developing, or to plan programs based on current population demographics.

## UDS Mapper

**Main website:** <http://www.udsmapper.org>

**Primary data type:** Health, facility, insurance, and population descriptors

**About:** “The UDS Mapper is designed to help inform users about the current geographic extent of U.S. federal (Section 330) Health Center Program (HCP) grantees and look-alikes.” It is a robust mapping tool meant to help users visualize service area information, as well as to help these HCP grantees and look-alikes view data and compare data to community and population-level data.

**Detail:** The creators of UDS Mapper incorporated data elements from the [Uniform Data System](#), making this tool particularly relevant to HCP grantees and look-alikes. Data elements available in the tool include a wide variety of population health, demographic, and uninsurance data elements – nearly all at the ZCTA (an approximation for ZIP code) level. UDS Mapper is free, although it requires the user to set up a user account before it can be accessed.

**Specific ideas for using this resource:** UDS Mapper creators recommend using the tool for community health assessment, health planning, and grant writing & reviewing. UDS Mapper can be used to create service area maps (by geography, patient location of origin, or driving distance), look specifically at various population health indicators or levels of uninsurance, and can even be used to create maps with your own data.

## HealthLandscape

**Main website:** <http://www.healthlandscape.org>

**Primary data type:** Health and population descriptors

**About:** “HealthLandscape is an interactive web-based mapping tool that allows health professionals, policy makers, academic researchers, and planners to combine, analyze and display information in ways that promote better understanding of health and the forces that affect it.”

**Detail:** HealthLandscape is the “parent” of UDS Mapper. It incorporates data from a range of publicly available datasets, including data on education, criminal justice, demographics, and healthcare. HealthLandscape is available to anyone at no cost after creating a user account.

**Specific ideas for using this resource:** Similar to UDS Mapper, HealthLandscape may be used for community health assessment, health planning, and grant writing. It would be particularly useful in describing and sharing community characteristics. The tool also allows you to upload limited amounts of your own data, if what you’d like to map isn’t available in the datasets included.

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