

Colorado Local Data Workbooks

Putting the Numbers in Context

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Communities across Colorado face important decisions surrounding access to health care. Do they have enough providers? Are residents able to access the care that they need? How should cities and counties plan for the future?

Answers to these questions require granular data that hone in on local conditions. The Colorado Health Institute has assembled workbooks to help county leaders analyze their communities to make informed decisions that address local needs, gaps and nuances.

With these workbooks, all people in 64 counties now have an easy way to obtain local data on more than 50 indicators, from demographics to the number of providers to the use of emergency departments.

The idea for this project came from a desire expressed by many local health experts for a better understanding of health care workforce needs. The problem of local workforce gaps is one of the most pressing — and least understood — health policy issues today. As we put together these numbers, we realized they will not only be useful for answering workforce questions, but also can be applied toward addressing a much broader set of health policy issues at the county level.

How Can This Data Be Used?

Health is Local

Decisions about the health system need to be grounded in local context.

When local leaders develop a stronger understanding of their counties — and how they compare to state averages — they can implement more informed health policies and practices. This process can empower community leaders and residents across Colorado to use data to drive decision-making.

- The data can help assess local health care workforce situations and lead to better decisions and workforce development, provider recruitment and retention.
- Local public health agencies are tasked with completing community health needs assessments for their counties. The data included in the workbooks can inform their assessment process, guide their understanding of the community's health and result in a more useful final report.
- Health is related to other important community values, such as quality of life and economic stability. These workbooks can inform planning for economic development, education and infrastructure.

Statewide Use of Local Data

- Policy development and planning happen on a system or statewide level, but implementation often occurs at the local level. For legislators, advocates, lobbyists and researchers, a solid understanding of the local context can be an effective launching pad for policy discussions and solutions.
- Colorado's academic institutions educate the future health care workforce to serve communities across the state. Local data can inform education pipeline decisions within academic institutions to ensure that the supply of health care workers matches the demand, and that these newly educated workers have the ability to fulfill a real need wherever they choose to live and practice.
- Despite having a statewide reach, many of Colorado's

foundations emphasize local needs within their grant-making strategies. Local data can provide context to their grant planning and decisions.

Measuring Health at the Local Level

The workbooks provide data to answer several crucial questions that counties need to address.

- **What are the demographics of the current population?** The number of residents — and their ages — provide a starting point for understanding differences among counties.
- **What will the population look like in 2020?** Shifting demographics will require changes in planning initiatives, educational efforts and the workforce pipeline.
- **What are the economic characteristics of the population?** Household income and poverty in a community indicate the potential uptake for public coverage and other services. Income is also correlated with access to health care and health outcomes.
- **What is the insurance status of the population?** With Medicaid expansion and the implementation of the Affordable Care Act, more Coloradans have coverage, but the coverage mix and gaps are important points for policy conversations.
- **What is the makeup of Colorado's health care workforce?** The data show the number of each provider type in each county and how it compares to the size of the local population. For context, these rates are compared with the state average. These data help answer fundamental questions about the supply and potential gaps in the health care workforce across the state.
- **Where can county residents go to receive health services?** The number of safety net clinics, hospitals and other health care facilities are important factors in assessing the local health landscape and community capacity to serve the surrounding population.
- **To what extent is the population using health care services?** Are residents actually receiving care? These indicators assess the extent to which residents are using the emergency department, visiting a health care facility or receiving care from a dental professional.
- **What is the prevalence of chronic disease in the area?** Cancer and heart disease are the two most commonly diagnosed chronic diseases in Colorado.

The maintenance and treatment of chronic diseases are large burdens on the health system, and some counties struggle with higher rates of disease than others.

Challenges in Measuring at the Community Level and Data Limitations

Measuring health, particularly at the local level, poses difficulties with regards to measurement and analysis.

- **Limitations of survey data:** Some of the data in these workbooks are drawn from surveys in which information is self-reported. This means that what a respondent chooses to share or remembers to report during a survey may deviate from his or her actual experience. Using survey data at the county level can be particularly challenging in areas with very small populations. Data for small counties should be interpreted with caution.
- **Limitations of health professional workforce data:** There is not a robust, validated body of data on the health professional workforce in Colorado or nationally. It is very difficult to track providers — where they live, where they practice, who they serve and how they work. Most of the health professional data included in this report is licensure information from the state Department of Regulatory Agencies. Other health workforce data comes from Medical Quest, which is a privately owned company that measures the number of providers who are actively practicing across the state. For more information on the limitations of these data sets, please see the Data Sources tab in the workbooks.
- **Data from multiple sources:** The numbers can be inconsistent because of differing methods of data collection; however, the resulting county-level workbook is a compilation of the most up-to-date, robust data available.

Conclusion

The Colorado Health Institute embarked on this project to help Colorado's communities as they make crucial decisions about the health professional workforce and our state's health system. The intent is for community leaders and other decision-makers to use these workbooks to drive informed decision-making, with a strong understanding of their local context.

For any questions regarding this tool or how to interpret the data, please contact Jessica Fern at fernj@coloradohealthinstitute.org.