

Strategies, Interventions Can Reduce Social Isolation Among PA’s Aging Population



Social isolation and loneliness are problems affecting aging populations in rural America, and in rural Pennsylvania. Research has shown that social isolation increases the risk of early death and disability.

Projections for Pennsylvania show that, in 2040, rural counties will have more senior citizens, who are aged 65 and older, than youth, who are under 20 years old.

To learn more about the extent of social isolation among rural Pennsylvanians aged 62 or older, Dr. Christopher Harris, Dr. FangHsun Wei, Dr. Mary Rita Weller, and Kelly Smith of Kutztown University of Pennsylvania surveyed older rural Pennsylvanians, reviewed available literature, and conducted focus groups with case managers from Area Agencies on Aging and county Mental Health and Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (MHIDD) offices. The research was sponsored by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania.

From the survey of approximately 400 rural Pennsylvanians and the focus groups, the researchers found that women were more likely than men to report feeling lonely, despite reporting that they were in good health and had enough friends and family around on whom to depend. Survey participants also reported preferring in-person social activities.

The focus group results indicated that stigma continues to keep older adults from seeking mental health help or from participating in programs targeting mental illness.

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Research Examines Housing Quality in Rural PA

Rural Pennsylvania residents are more likely to live in sub-quality housing, which could negatively affect their health, safety, and access to other resources, according to recent research sponsored by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania.

Dr. Ying Yang, Dr. Claire Jantz, and Antonia Price of Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania conducted the research to assess housing quality and related policies and programs in rural Pennsylvania.

The research goals and objectives focused on four areas: gaining a quantitative understanding of housing quality for rural Pennsylvania communities; understanding barriers faced by rural residents in securing loans to address home improvement; understanding municipal policy and implementation regarding housing maintenance codes; and develop-

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Chairman's Message

Youth mental health has been an ever-increasing concern across Pennsylvania, and the nation. We know that, over the past two years, the pandemic has increased that concern.

According to the 2021 Pennsylvania Youth Survey, or PAYS, from the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD), about four in 10 Pennsylvania students reported feeling sad or depressed most days. To break that down even further, the survey indicated that 42

percent of rural students and 40 percent of urban students said they felt depressed or sad most days, and about 20 percent of rural students and 18 percent of urban students said they seriously considered attempting suicide. These are some rather grim and disturbing statistics.

To learn more about youth mental health and how our rural schools are trying to address the issue, the Center's board sponsored a public hearing at the Capitol Building in mid-October.

We heard from state government officials, regional health system representatives, and local school officials who provided a wealth of information on how they are using trauma-informed approaches to provide support and resources to children and their families.

Michael Pennington, PCCD executive director, noted that about \$95 million of the total one-time state grant funding of \$190 million from the School Mental Health and School Safety Grants are in the process of being reviewed and rolled out. However, we also learned how workforce shortages are impacting schools and communities, and how telemedicine is playing such a big role in connecting mental and behavioral health specialists with children and their families.

If you were unable to attend or watch the hearing, I encourage you to watch the recording, which is available on the Center's website. The recording offers information about what is being done at the local, regional, and state levels to address youth mental health and what more needs to be done.

Thank you to all of the presenters for sharing information with us, and I know this will not be the end of the Center's work on the topic of mental health.

As 2022 comes to a close, I'd also like to thank everyone who has participated in the Center's hearings, events, and board meetings, and who have produced a wealth of information and policy considerations via our Research Grants program this past year. We've had the opportunity to learn and experience a great deal this year and share an abundance of information about rural Pennsylvania. We look forward to continuing our work with more rural communities in the coming year.

On behalf of the Center's board and staff, I wish you a happy holiday season.

Sen. Gene Yaw

Research Examines Housing Quality in Rural PA (continued from Page 1)

ing policy considerations that address the key issues regarding housing quality in rural Pennsylvania.

The researchers used data from the 2015-2019 American Community Survey and 2019 Home Mortgage Disclosure Act. They conducted field visits to 13 rural Census tracts, reviewed and assessed home improvement loan programs, conducted web-based research on property maintenance codes, and conducted an online survey to assess sub-quality housing and related finance and policy issues in rural Pennsylvania.

Median household income, education levels, median home values, percent owner-occupied homes, median taxes paid, marital status, and race all had significant statistical relationships with housing quality.

Among the key findings were:

- Household income and education level had the strongest association

with housing quality: as the two measurements increase, housing quality increases.

- The top three reasons for rural home improvement loan applications to be denied were poor credit history, debt-to-income ratio, and lack of collateral.
- Minorities were less likely to secure home improvement loans compared to white applicants.
- Out of the 1,592 total rural municipalities in the Commonwealth, 1,417 rural municipalities (89 percent) have not adopted property maintenance codes.
- According to the survey of municipal code enforcement officers, the most common code violation types were excessive weed growth or presence of noxious weeds, the presence and accumulation of objectionable materials and substances, the display of inoperative vehicles, and grading and drainage problems.

- Staffing was a big challenge for small municipalities in enforcing property maintenance codes.

The research offered several policy considerations, which included the following:

- address the social, economic, and demographic barriers to housing quality in rural Pennsylvania;
- use visualization technology, such as GIS, to identify rural areas that have the most critical need in terms of housing;
- review state-level home improvement loan assistance programs and their eligibility criteria to help residents access funding; and
- consider programs/support for municipalities to adopt and enforce property maintenance codes.

The report, *Assessment and Analysis of Housing Quality and Policies in Rural Pennsylvania*, is available on the Center's website.

Strategies, Interventions Reduce Social Isolation Among Aging Population

(continued from Page 1)

Faith-based organizations and social media platforms were mentioned in the survey and focus groups as good resources to help rural older populations make social connections, provide mental health resources, and advertise social activities.

And, not surprisingly, the lack of public transportation and the difficulty in accessing public transportation continued to be common barriers for rural older adults.

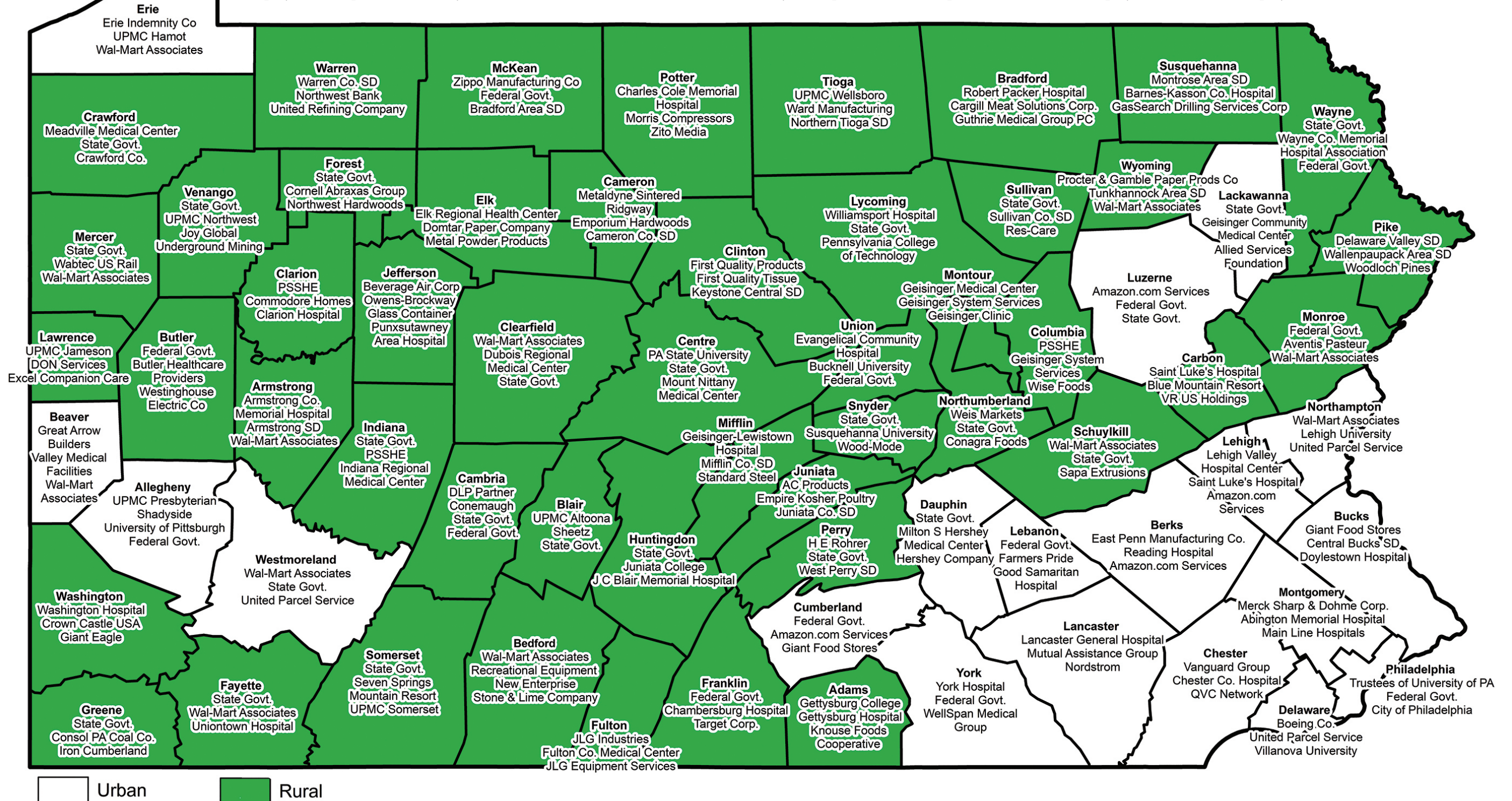
From the focus groups discussions, several strategies, interventions, and policy considerations were highlighted. These included:

- expanding services provided through the Medical Assistance Transportation Program (MATP) to address barriers such as lack of public transportation routes in rural communities and long ride times. More routes, longer hours of operation, and allowing MATP to cross county lines were suggested.
- expanding telehealth, case management services, and Area Agency on Aging and senior center collaborations that focus on education programs for mental health prevention, stigma, and socialization; and
- developing more partnerships among the Area Agencies on Aging, the Pennsylvania Department of Education, and state-based universities to implement community-based interventions. Colleges and universities with social work, nursing, counseling, and psychology programs usually require field work as part of the learning process. Partnerships with service providers could help to provide education, prevention, assessment, and/or intervention for older adults in the community.

The report, *Social Determinants of Health in the Age of COVID: Effects of Social Isolation Among Adults 62+ in Rural Pennsylvania*, is available on the Center's website.

Top Three Employers in Pennsylvania, by County, First Quarter 2022

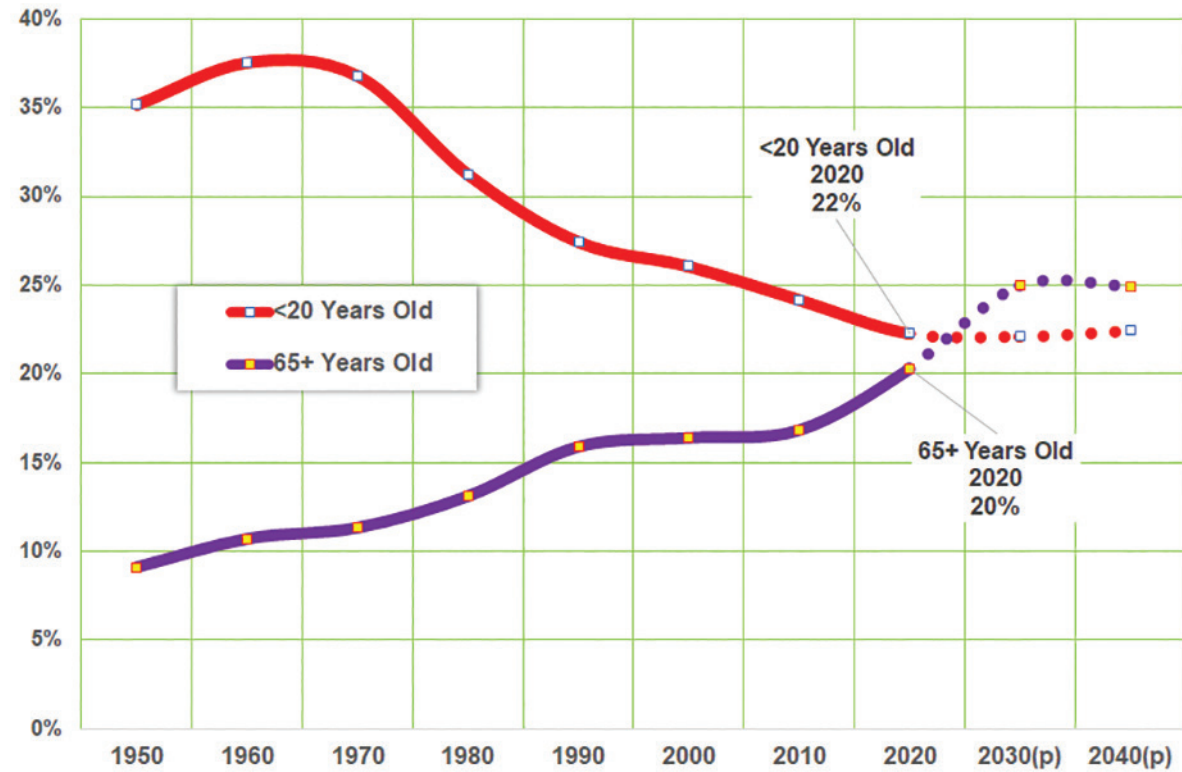
Note: The data are from the Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry. Employer names are presented as reported by the Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry. Some employers may be doing business under a different name. In the dataset, employers are ranked by the number of employees. Employers must be covered under the state or federal unemployment compensation (UC) system to be included in the data. Due to confidentiality, the department does not provide the number of employees for individual employers.



Urban Rural

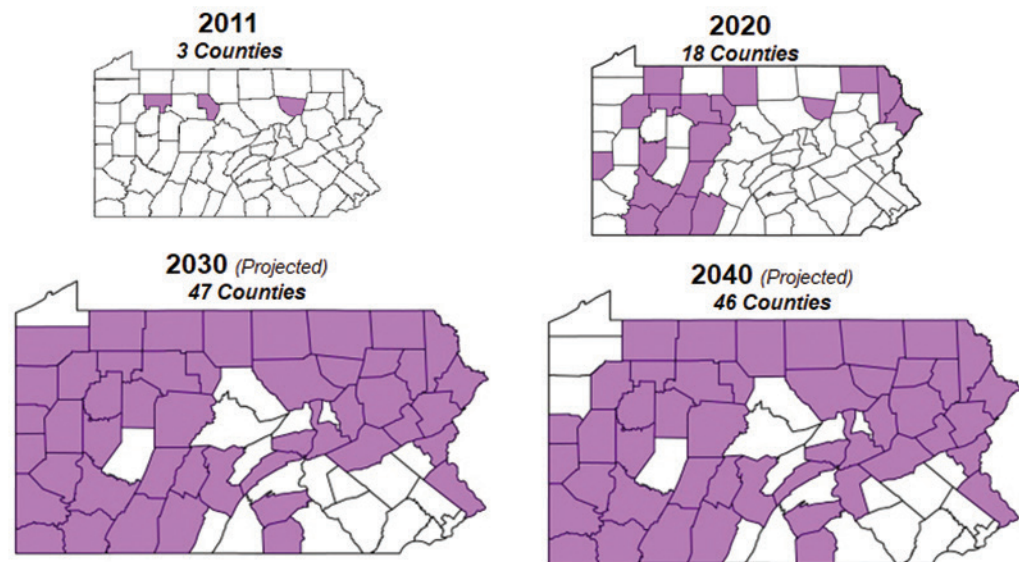
Did You Know . . . The population in rural Pennsylvania is aging rapidly,

Percent of Pennsylvania Population Under 20 Years Old and 65 Years Old and Older, 1950 to 2040 (projected)



. . . and an increasing number of Pennsylvania counties are projected to have more senior citizens than youth in the coming decades.

Shaded counties have more residents 65+ than residents <20 years old.



Data sources: Decennial Censuses, 2020, 5-year Average, American Community Survey, U.S. Census Bureau; and Pennsylvania State Data Center.

JUST THE FACTS: DOCTORS AND LAWYERS

Today's pop quiz: are there more doctors or lawyers in rural Pennsylvania?

If you said doctors, you are correct! According to 2019 data from the federal Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), there are 6,308 active doctors in rural Pennsylvania. For this article, doctors are active Doctors of Medicine (M.D.) and active Doctors of Osteopathic Medicine (D.O.)

According to 2022 data from the Disciplinary Board of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, there are 4,236 active lawyers in rural Pennsylvania.

In urban Pennsylvania, the opposite is true. There are 43,954 lawyers and 42,080 doctors.

The three Pennsylvania counties with the lowest number of both doctors and lawyers are Cameron, Sullivan, and Forest. Each has fewer than 10 doctors and lawyers.

The three counties with the highest number of both doc-

tors and lawyers are Montgomery, Allegheny, and Philadelphia. Each has more than 10,000 doctors and lawyers.

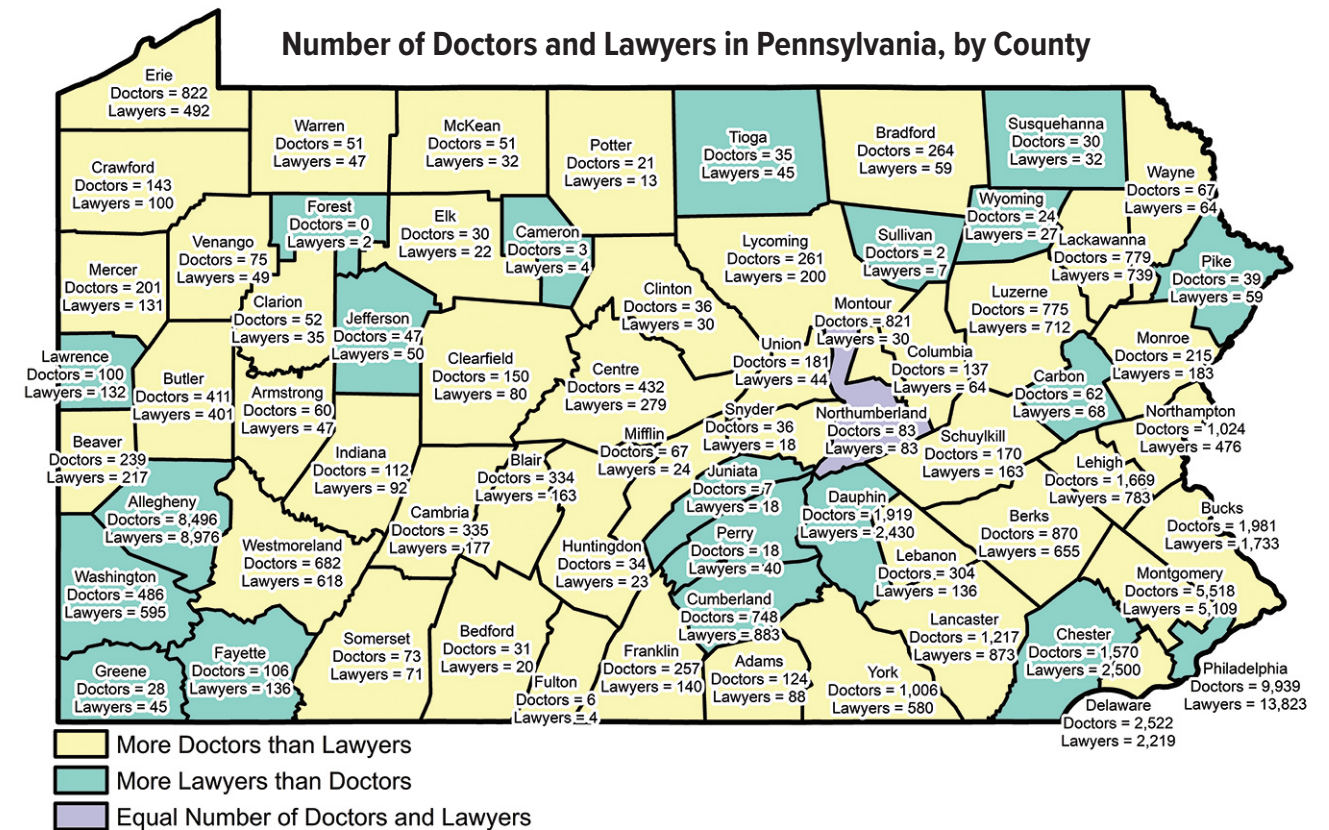
Per capita, there is a significant gap between the number of rural and urban doctors and lawyers.

In rural Pennsylvania, there are 125 lawyers per 100,000 residents. In urban Pennsylvania, there are 457 lawyers per 100,000 residents.

For doctors, rural counties have 186 per 100,000 residents and urban counties have 437 per 100,000 residents.

According to 2020 data from the Census Bureau's American Community Survey, the three states with the lowest number of both doctors and lawyers are South Dakota, North Dakota, and Wyoming. Each has fewer than 70,000 doctors and lawyers.

The three states with the highest number of both doctors and lawyers are Texas, New York, and California. Each has more than 2.8 million.



Data sources: 2019 Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) and 2022 Disciplinary Board of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania.



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Resources

New PA Preferred Website Offers Many New Connections for Farmers and Consumers

To support the increased demand for direct connection between farmers and consumers, the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture launched a website for the PA Preferred brand. At <https://papreferred.com>, Pennsylvanians can search for Pennsylvania products and connect with Pennsylvania farmers. The new website offers: an opportunity for Pennsylvanians to search for PA Preferred members and their products based on location, an accessible way for PA Preferred members to connect with customers and partner with other PA Preferred businesses, a streamlined system for the department to manage membership and data, and information about connecting with veteran farmers through the Homegrown by Heroes program, and information about the Farm to School program. The website will soon offer a searchable events calendar and more. Check out <https://papreferred.com> for more information.

App Helps Students/Families Access Homelessness Services

The Pennsylvania Department of Education has announced the availability of a new app to help students and families experiencing homelessness to access resources and services. The app, Find Your Way PA, at <https://findingyourwayinpa.com/>, can connect users to resources, including shelter, food, health and mental health, personal care items, child care, and education. It is available on three platforms, including the web, Google Play Store and the Apple App Store. The app was developed with funding from the American Rescue Plan Homeless Children and Youth (ARP-HCY) Program, which provides children and youth experiencing homelessness with access to services. For more information, visit <https://findingyourwayinpa.com>.

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