

Tobacco Use and Rural Americans



Despite dramatic reductions in smoking prevalence since the first Surgeon General's report on the consequences of smoking in 1964, smoking remains the leading cause of preventable death in the United States. Smoking is responsible for over 490,000 deaths in the United States each year and is a major risk factor for four leading causes of death: heart disease, cancer, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and stroke.¹ Rural Americans bear a disproportionate burden of health harms and high risk of suffering from tobacco-related death and disease partly because of their higher rates of tobacco use.

Tobacco Use in Rural Communities

Americans who live in rural areas of the United States have among the highest rates of tobacco use in the country.

- In 2024, cigarette smoking was higher among adults living in rural areas (15.4%), compared to adults living in large metropolitan areas (8.0%).² E-cigarette use was also higher among adults living in rural areas (9.1%), compared to adults living in large metropolitan areas (6.1%).³ Adults who live in rural areas also have higher rates of any tobacco product use (27.0% vs. 17.5%) and smokeless tobacco product use (5.4% vs. 2.1%), compared to their urban counterparts.⁴
- Research shows disproportionately high rates of tobacco use in many rural subpopulations. For example, a national survey of adults found that current use of any tobacco product, cigarettes, and smokeless tobacco products was higher for rural non-Hispanic Whites as well as rural residents living in poverty, those with any mental illness or substance use disorder and veterans, compared to their urban counterparts.⁵
- Rural populations are more likely to start smoking at earlier ages and be heavier smokers.⁶
- The states with the highest smoking rates are also among the most rural: West Virginia (20.8%), Kentucky (17.2%), Tennessee (17.0%), Arkansas (16.5%), and Louisiana (15.0%).⁷
- Rural communities also experience higher rates of poverty, lower educational attainment and are less likely to have health insurance, compared to urban areas.⁸

Youth living in smaller metropolitan areas and rural/small town communities are also more likely to use tobacco products like cigarettes and smokeless tobacco than youth living in larger metropolitan areas.⁹ According to the national Monitoring the Future Survey of 8th, 10th and 12th graders, cigarette smoking, e-cigarette use, and smokeless tobacco use is higher in smaller metropolitan and rural areas.¹⁰ Specifically:

- Eight, tenth and twelfth graders living in rural areas have higher smoking rates than youth in the same grades living in urban areas. (0.9% vs. 0.6%, 3.3% vs. 1.6% and 4.4% vs. 2.9%, respectively).
- Rural youth use e-cigarettes at higher rates than youth living in larger urban areas. In 2024, 6.8% of 8th graders, 15.9% of 10th graders and 21.1% of 12th graders living in rural areas used e-cigarettes, compared to 5.4% of 8th graders, 9.0% of 10th graders and 9.2% of 12th graders living in urban areas.
- Rural youth also have significantly higher rates of smokeless tobacco use compared to youth living in more urban areas. In 2024, 2.5% of 8th graders, 6.3% of 10th graders, and 5.6% of 12th graders living in rural areas used smokeless tobacco, compared to 1.3% of 8th graders, 1.2% of 10th graders, and 2.2% of 12th graders in urban areas.

Higher Rates of Tobacco Use in Rural Communities Contributes to Health Disparities

Those living in rural communities experience higher rates of disease and death in part due to their higher rates of tobacco use. Tobacco use is a major risk factor for four out of the five leading causes of premature death (heart disease, cancer, chronic lower respiratory disease, and stroke) for people living in rural areas.¹¹

- People living in rural areas have an 18-20% higher chance of developing lung cancer than people living in urban areas.¹² Smoking causes more than 8 out of 10 lung cancer deaths each year.¹³
- Prevalence of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) is significantly higher in rural areas (8.2%) compared to urban areas (4.7%).¹⁴
- From 1999 through 2019, death rates in rural areas were higher than in urban areas for heart disease, cancer, and chronic lower respiratory disease (CLRD), all diseases that can be caused by tobacco use. Of concern, differences in death rate by urban-rural status increased over time and by 2019, the death rate in rural areas was 21% higher than the rate in urban areas for heart disease, 15% higher for cancer, and 48% higher for CLRD.¹⁵
- Diabetes is one of the leading causes of death in the United States, and diabetes mortality has been reported to be as much as 17% higher in rural areas.¹⁶ The risk of developing diabetes is 30-40% higher for cigarette smokers than nonsmokers.¹⁷
- Rural populations are less likely to be advised by a health care provider to quit smoking. In fact, rural smokers are three times less likely to receive any sort of cessation treatment compared to urban smokers. As a result, rural smokers have lower rates of smoking cessation.¹⁸

In addition to high rates of tobacco use, other factors that contribute to the high burden of disease in rural areas include more limited access to health care, lower levels of health insurance coverage and lower levels of income and education.¹⁹ While these factors contribute to health-related disparities among rural Americans, research shows that disparities in tobacco use and tobacco-related disease burden remain even after controlling for these other factors.²⁰

The Tobacco Industry Targets Rural Americans Using a Variety of Marketing and Promotion Efforts

A major reason why rural populations have disproportionately high rates of tobacco use is because the tobacco industry has targeted them for years with heavy advertising and discounted prices.

- The tobacco industry has saturated the rural market with advertising using themes and images like cowboys, race car drivers and farmland that resonate with rural populations. Tobacco advertising also often includes a focus on rural values such as self-reliance and resiliency.²¹
- One study of tobacco retailers in California found that rural stores charged less for the cheapest cigarette pack regardless of brand and were more likely to advertise discounts on chewing tobacco compared to non-rural areas.²² Another study, using a sample of over 100 urban and 100 rural tobacco retailers in Ohio, found that the cheapest packs of cigarettes were, on average, sold for the lowest prices in rural areas.²³
- Rural counties have experienced increased access to tobacco retailers in recent years as discount stores, like Dollar General and Family Dollar, began selling tobacco products and opened many new stores, specifically targeting small towns in rural areas.²⁴
- Tobacco companies have sponsored rodeos in rural areas where rodeos are popular.²⁵

To make matters worse, people in rural areas are less likely to be protected by strong tobacco control policies that would help prevent them from ever starting to use tobacco or help them to quit. States with higher proportions of rural residents tend to have less robust smoke-free air and tobacco tax policies, and local tobacco control provisions may be less prevalent in some rural areas.²⁶

- ¹ HHS, Eliminating Tobacco-Related Disease and Death: Addressing Disparities - A Report of the Surgeon General, 2024; Xu, J, et al., "Mortality in the United States, 2021," *National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) Data Brief No. 456*, December 2022, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db456.pdf>.
- ² National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS). Percentage of current cigarette smoking for adults aged 18 and over, United States, 2024. National Health Interview Survey.
- ³ Sohi I, Ng AE, "Cigarette and electronic cigarette use among adults by urbanization level: United States, 2024," *NCHS Health E-Stats*, March 2026.
- ⁴ Agaku, I, et al., "Tobacco Product Use among U.S. Adults, 2023-2024," *NEJM Evid* 2026;5(4). Rural/urban designation is based on the 2023 National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) Urban-Rural Classification Scheme for Counties, with large central metro, large fringe metro, and medium and small metro counties classified as urban and nonmetropolitan counties as rural.
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- ⁶ CDC, Health Equity in Tobacco Prevention and Control, Best Practices User Guide, <https://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/42355>.
- ⁷ CDC, Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, 2024. Tennessee adult smoking rate from 2023 BRFSS.
- ⁸ Talbot JA, Williamson ME, Pearson KB et al., "Advancing Tobacco Prevention and Control in Rural America," Washington, DC: *National Network of Public Health Institutes*; 2019.
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- ²⁰ Talbot JA, Williamson ME, Pearson KB et al., "Advancing Tobacco Prevention and Control in Rural America," Washington, DC: *National Network of Public Health Institutes*; 2019.
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