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America's Health Rankings Reveals State-by-State Rural Health Insights

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By America's Health Rankings, 10/27/2025

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AMERICA'S HEALTH RANKINGS MODEL SHOWS THE MOST RURAL STATES CONSISTENTLY RANK AS LESS HEALTHY

The *America's Health Rankings*[®] model serves as a framework for identifying and quantifying health drivers and outcomes that impact population health. It aims to offer decision-makers and advocates a way to understand their state's health – and to compare it with the health of other states and the nation overall. Leaders can look to the platform each year to assess their progress toward goals and drive conversations about emerging needs.

This model ranks states' health based on scores in five categories: Behaviors, Clinical Care, Health Outcomes, Physical Environment and Social & Economic Factors. Each category is broken down into three to four topics, and each topic contains three to five measures.

For each category, a state is assigned a score – positive scores are associated with better health, and negative scores are associated with poorer health – based on its performance relative to the national average on each individual measure.*



Learn more about the individual measures and how they are incorporated into the model on the [Explore Health Measures](#) page.

The platform’s holistic understanding of health underscores how it is influenced by where a population lives and other factors. In particular, rural areas often face unique challenges, and the health of rural populations is affected by a complex mix of factors. [Financial insecurity](#), remote location, lower socioeconomic status and higher rates of unhealthy behaviors contribute to the measurable [health disparities](#) between rural and urban populations.

This analysis compares the health of the nation’s 10 most and 10 least rural states using categories from the *America’s Health Rankings* model. Rurality is defined by the percentage of a state’s population estimated to live in a rural area.**

10 Most Rural States in 2024 (percentage of state population estimated to live in a rural area)	10 Least Rural States in 2024 (percentage of state population estimated to live in a rural area)
Vermont (66.1%)	California (5.8%)
Maine (61.5%)	Nevada (6.2%)
West Virginia (55.2%)	New Jersey (6.3%)
Mississippi (54.4%)	Massachusetts (8.9%)
Montana (47.1%)	Florida (9.1%)
Arkansas (43.9%)	Rhode Island (9.7%)
New Hampshire (42.4%)	Utah (10.8%)
South Dakota (42.3%)	Arizona (11.5%)
Alabama (42.0%)	New York (12.9%)
Kentucky (41.6%)	Illinois (13.2%)

[Explore more about rural populations in the United States.](#)

ANALYSIS OF MODEL CATEGORY DATA

OVERALL RANKING

The [Overall](#) ranking combines all five model categories into one measure of a state’s health compared with other states. Overall, in 2024, **the most rural states had a less healthy average score (-0.10) than the least rural states (0.20).**

The most rural states varied considerably in their Overall ranks:

Most Rural States (less healthy than the average)	Overall Score	Rank	Most Rural States (healthier than the average)	Overall Score	Rank
Mississippi	-0.936	49	Montana	0.053	25
Arkansas	-0.770	48	South Dakota	0.171	22
West Virginia	-0.683	46	Maine	0.495	12
Alabama	-0.599	45	Vermont	0.810	2
Kentucky	-0.360	41	New Hampshire	0.857	1

HEALTH OUTCOMES

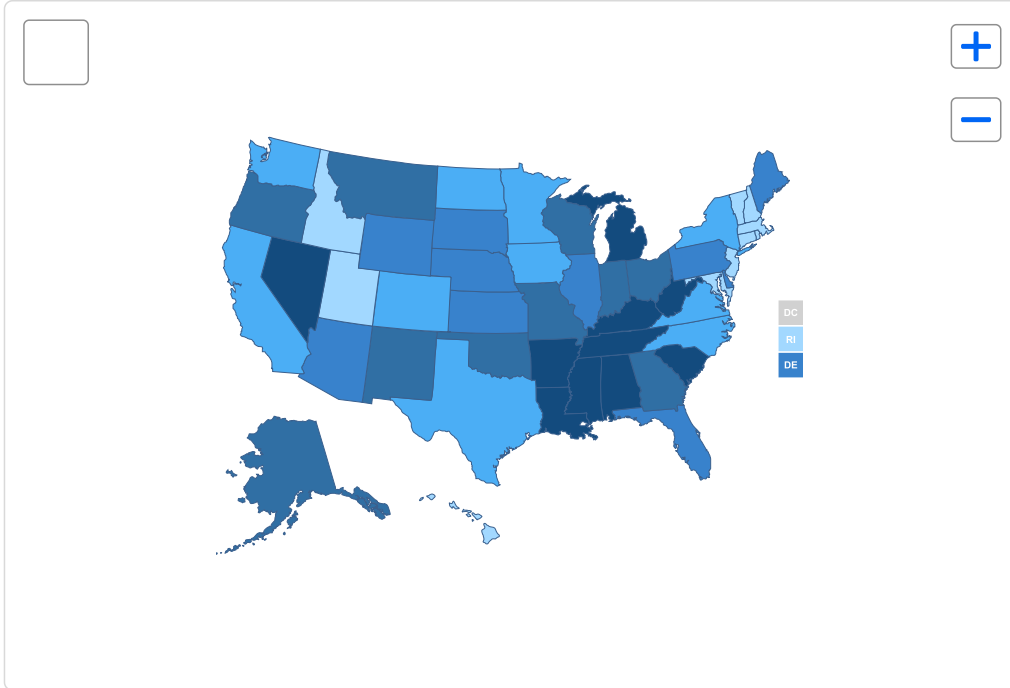
The [Health Outcomes](#) category directly measures the burden of disease and impacts on life expectancy and mental and physical health and well-being, and its measures include [high blood pressure](#) and [frequent physical distress](#). These unique and varied challenges can complicate health outcomes; for example, compared with those living in urban areas, rural populations have a [23% higher mortality rate](#). ↗

Out of all model categories, **the largest difference in scores** between the most and least rural states was in Health Outcomes.

- The 10 most rural states, on average, had worse Health Outcomes (-0.23) scores compared with the 10 least rural states (0.29).
- Three of the top 10 most rural states – Vermont (0.540), New Hampshire (0.535) and South Dakota (0.062) – scored better for Health Outcomes.

Health Outcomes by State

Rank based on: Sum of weighted z-scores of Annual Report ranking health outcomes measures



Data from America's Health Rankings composite measure, 2025



• Data Unavailable

Explore more about how populations living in rural areas fare on many measures included in the [Health Outcomes](#) category, including [higher rates of chronic conditions](#).

BEHAVIORS

The [Behaviors](#) category represents practices that impact health and are influenced by individual, community, system and policy factors. It includes measures like [smoking](#) – a behavior that [varies significantly](#) by education, race, ethnicity and geography, and is more common in adults living in more rural areas compared with those living in less rural areas[†] – as well as [exercise](#) and [insufficient sleep](#).

- In 2024, the **most rural states** (-0.22) **had an average score for Behaviors that was worse** than that of the least rural states (0.27).
- Behaviors category scores were highest for Vermont (1.177) and New Hampshire (1.040). Two of the other most rural states had positive Behaviors scores: Montana (0.457) and Maine (0.456).

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC FACTORS

The [Social and Economic Factors](#) category represents the broader impact that society and the economy have on an individual or community's ability to make healthy choices. This includes measures like [high school completion](#) and [food insecurity](#).

The most rural states, on average, scored lower on Social and Economic Factors than the least rural states in 2024 – with notable variation among the most rural states:

- The 10 most rural states (-0.12) scored lower, on average, than the 10 least rural states (0.20) in this category.
- New Hampshire (0.998), Vermont (0.717), Maine (0.582), South Dakota (0.326) and Montana (0.104) all had positive scores.
- Arkansas (-0.971), Mississippi (-0.971), West Virginia (-0.795), Kentucky (-0.602) and Alabama (-0.542) scored as less healthy than the national average.

CLINICAL CARE

The [Clinical Care](#) category represents access to quality health care and preventive services and takes into account measures like [childhood immunizations](#) and [preventable hospitalizations](#). Rurality can have an impact on clinical care, as geographic isolation and shortages in the health care workforce that make [access to care](#) a very serious challenge for rural populations.

In 2024, there was **little connection between a state's proportion of rural population and its Clinical Care score**:

- The 10 most and least rural states had similar scores, on average, in the Clinical Care category (-0.02 and 0.05, respectively).
- Vermont (1.193), New Hampshire (1.107), Maine (0.968) and South Dakota (0.207) scored healthier than the national average.

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

The [Physical Environment](#) category represents the spaces where individuals live, work and play and their interaction with this space and includes measures such as [air pollution](#) and [severe housing problems](#).

The 10 most rural states **scored higher than the least rural states in the Physical Environment category**, with a score healthier than the national average – a notable exception among other *America's Health Rankings* model categories where more rural states were less healthy.

- In 2024, the Physical Environment score for the 10 most rural states was 0.43, on average, while the average score for the least rural states was 0.03.
- All 10 of the most rural states had positive scores for Physical Environment – Maine (0.833), South Dakota (0.807), Kentucky (0.500), New Hampshire (0.497), Vermont (0.457), Alabama (0.423), Arkansas (0.272), Montana (0.195), West Virginia (0.182) and Mississippi (0.138).

LEARN MORE ABOUT RURAL STATES WITH AMERICA'S HEALTH RANKINGS

For Overall rankings and three of the five model categories, the nation's 10 most rural states scored as less healthy than the least rural states. However, in the Physical Environment category, the most rural states were healthier than the least rural states. Notably, in 2024, two of the most rural states – New Hampshire and Vermont – scored healthier than the national average in all five categories.

The wide range of categories, factors and measures included in the *America's Health Rankings* model can help monitor the health and well-being of rural and other populations across the country – and where those populations are experiencing progress, stagnation or worsening challenges over time.

Dive deeper into your state's data on the [America's Health Rankings platform](#), and explore which measures have positive and negative impacts in your state. To use these tools, hover over **Explore Data** on the top menu bar, select a state and scroll to view positive impacts, negative impacts and key measures.

State rankings are updated using the America's Health Rankings model based on the latest data. [Sign up here](#) to receive new insights as they are released.

* Category scores are a weighted sum of the measure-level z-scores, which indicate the number of standard deviations a state value is above or below the national average. A z-score with the value of zero indicates a state has the same value as the nation. For more information, see [Ranking Methodology](#).

**There are many ways to define rurality, and not all rural communities are alike. Rural population, or the percentage of the population that lives in rural areas, is measured and defined using the [American Community Survey](#) (ACS) 2023 data. In this piece, data from the ACS are used to define the 10 most rural states and the 10 least rural states.

For more information on data sources and methodology, see [Our Model and Methodology](#).

† In this section, America's Health Rankings data on Behaviors come from the [Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System \(BRFSS\)](#) 2023 dataset, which classifies respondents by whether they live in nonmetropolitan or metropolitan areas. Nonmetropolitan includes micropolitan and noncore communities.

In this section, adults living in nonmetropolitan areas as classified by BRFSS are referred to as "adults living in more rural areas," while adults living in metropolitan areas are referred to as "adults living in less rural areas."

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