

Rural America and the Veterans of Michigan's Upper Peninsula

By Jesse C. Sherman

Living in rural America presents challenges, especially in regard to the Veteran Affairs efforts to provide veterans with easy access to quality health care. When compared to urban rates nationally, rural areas are more likely to have higher poverty rates. (Office of Rural Health). Rural areas also tend to have more elderly residents, which contributes to a higher rate of residents with poor health. Rural areas additionally have fewer physician practices, hospitals and other health delivery options. Like their civilian counterparts, rural veterans face challenges that urban civilians and veterans do not have, like hospital closings, limited availability of viable housing, education, employment and transportation options. Rural veterans often have limited access to broadband internet and generally have higher uninsured rates than urban veterans do. Geographic and distance barriers present obstacles to health care access for veterans, and in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan (UP), inclement weather can also be a major issue. The purpose of this report is to develop a better understanding of the rural veteran demographic in the UP.

In 2015, the Upper Peninsula of Michigan was home to about 300,000 residents, with a veteran population of roughly 27,300 (Veteran). All of the veterans who live here are considered "rural" veterans. There are nearly five-million American veterans living in rural communities nationwide, however the veterans who live in the UP have the distinction of being served by the Oscar G. Johnson VA Medical facility in Iron Mountain, MI. This particular VA Hospital is ranked first among the 152 VA Medical Centers for having the "highest rural and highly rural" patient percentages. According to the VA Office of Rural Health, 96.27% of the

patients treated at the Oscar G. Johnson hospital's live in rural or highly-rural areas. In addition to the medical facility in Iron Mountain, the VA also operates five UP outpatient clinics, in Hancock, Ironwood, Manistique, Marquette, Menominee, and Sault Ste. Marie. The VA also maintains a Veterans Center in Escanaba.

According to recent VA Compensation and Pension reports, there were about 28,078 veterans living in the Upper Peninsula as of 2018, which translates to a 9.4 percent veteran/civilian population density (FY2018 VA Disability Compensation and Pension Recipients by County of Residence). Taking this further, Michigan has a total veteran population of about 641,000, and 204,000 of these are considered rural (Cowper).

So, of the 204,000 rural veterans statewide, the UP's contingent of 27,300 rural veterans is 13.5 percent (Cowper). Considering that there are approximately 9.9 million people living in Michigan and 6.5 percent of them are veterans, the Upper Peninsula has a veteran population density that is about 3% higher than the state average.

According to the Veterans Affairs Office of Rural Health, rural veterans enroll in the VA health care system at a rate of about 58%, while urban veterans enroll at about 37%. However, Michigan is trending well below the national average with about 46% of rural veterans and 31% percent of urban veterans enrolled.

Further research to acquire information more specific to the Upper Peninsula's veteran enrollment rate is needed, such as data regarding treatment type and frequency rates at the hospital, community-based outpatient clinics, the Vet Center and its satellite offices.

Rural Definition

VA uses the Rural-Urban Commuting Areas (RUCA) system to define rurality. Developed by the Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the RUCA system takes into account population density as well as how closely a community is linked socio-economically to larger urban centers. RUCA is based on how the U.S. Census Bureau counts citizens.

- Urban Area: Census tracts with at least 30 percent of the population residing in an urbanized area as defined by the Census Bureau.
- Rural Area: Land areas not defined as urban or highly rural.
- Highly Rural Area: Sparsely populated areas – less than 10 percent of the working population commutes to any community larger than an urbanized cluster, which is typically a town of no more than 2,500 people.

Table 1: VA Hospitals with the Highest Rural, Highly Rural, & Insular Island Patient Percentages (top 20)

Station Number	Official Station Name	City	State	Station Rurality	Pts (%)
585	Oscar G. Johnson VAMC	Iron Mountain	Michigan	R	96.27
657A4	John J. Pershing VAMC	Poplar Bluff	Missouri	R	91.55
538	Chillicothe VAMC	Chillicothe	Ohio	R	89.42
405	White River Junction VAMC	White River Junction	Vermont	R	87.98
540	Louis A. Johnson VAMC	Clarksburg	West Virginia	R	82.67
666	Sheridan VAMC	Sheridan	Wyoming	R	80.41
589A4	Harry S. Truman Memorial Veterans' Hospital	Columbia	Missouri	U	79.12
528A4	Batavia VAMC	Batavia	New York	R	78.57
568A4	Hot Springs VAMC	Hot Springs	South Dakota	R	77.54
636A4	Grand Island VAMC	Grand Island	Nebraska	U	77.44
596A4	Lexington VAMC-Cooper	Lexington	Kentucky	U	76.52
676	Tomah VAMC	Tomah	Wisconsin	R	76.38
402	Togus VAMC	Augusta	Maine	R	75.53
596	Lexington VAMC-Leestown	Lexington	Kentucky	U	75.53
528A6	Bath VAMC	Bath	New York	R	75.11
657A5	Marion VAMC	Marion	Illinois	U	74.76
436	Fort Harrison VAMC	Fort Harrison	Montana	R	72.69
656	St. Cloud VAMC	St. Cloud	Minnesota	U	72.15
655	Aleda E. Lutz VAMC	Saginaw	Michigan	U	70.99
653	Roseburg VAMC	Roseburg	Oregon	R	69.35

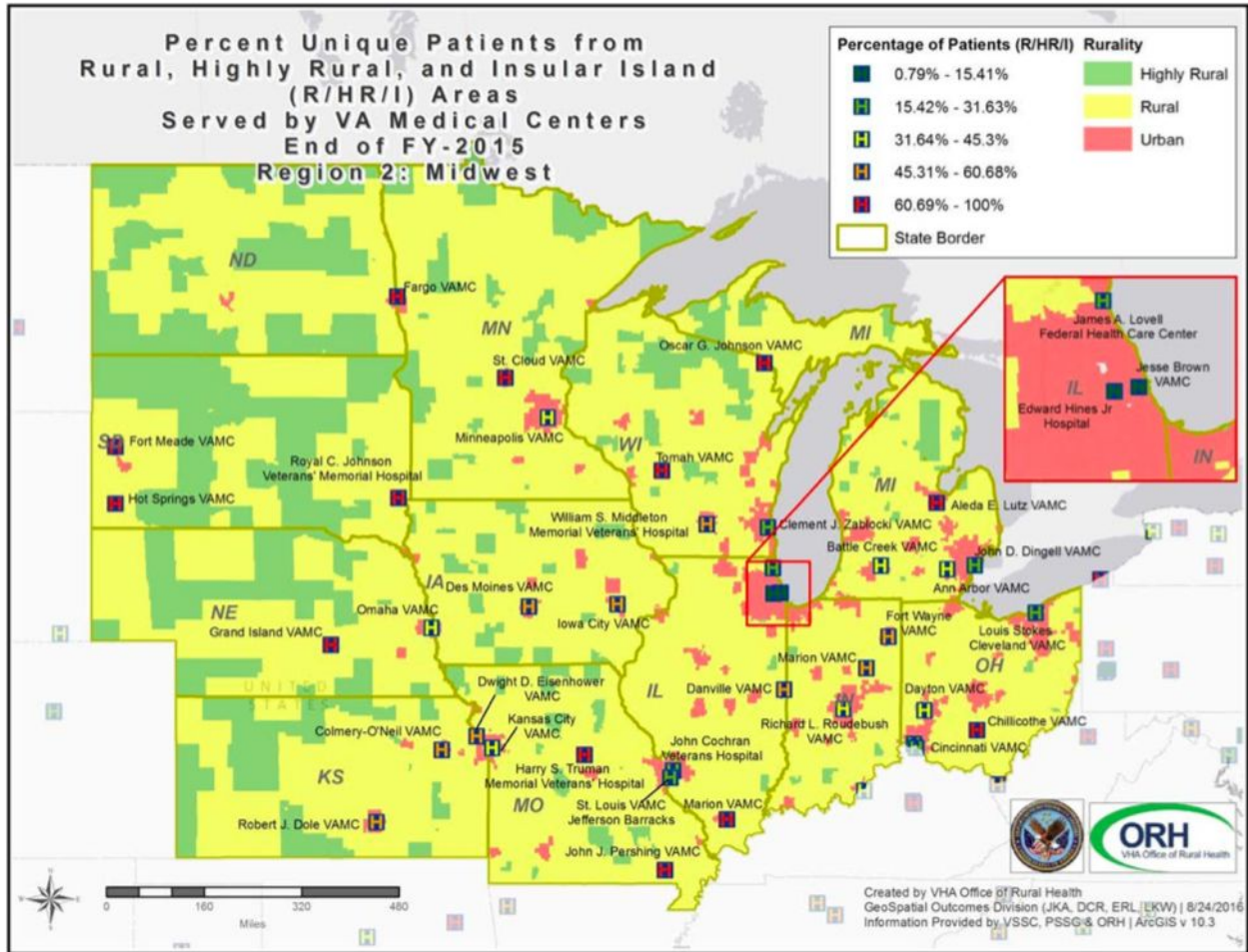


Table 1: Rural and Urban Veteran Population, EOFY-2015

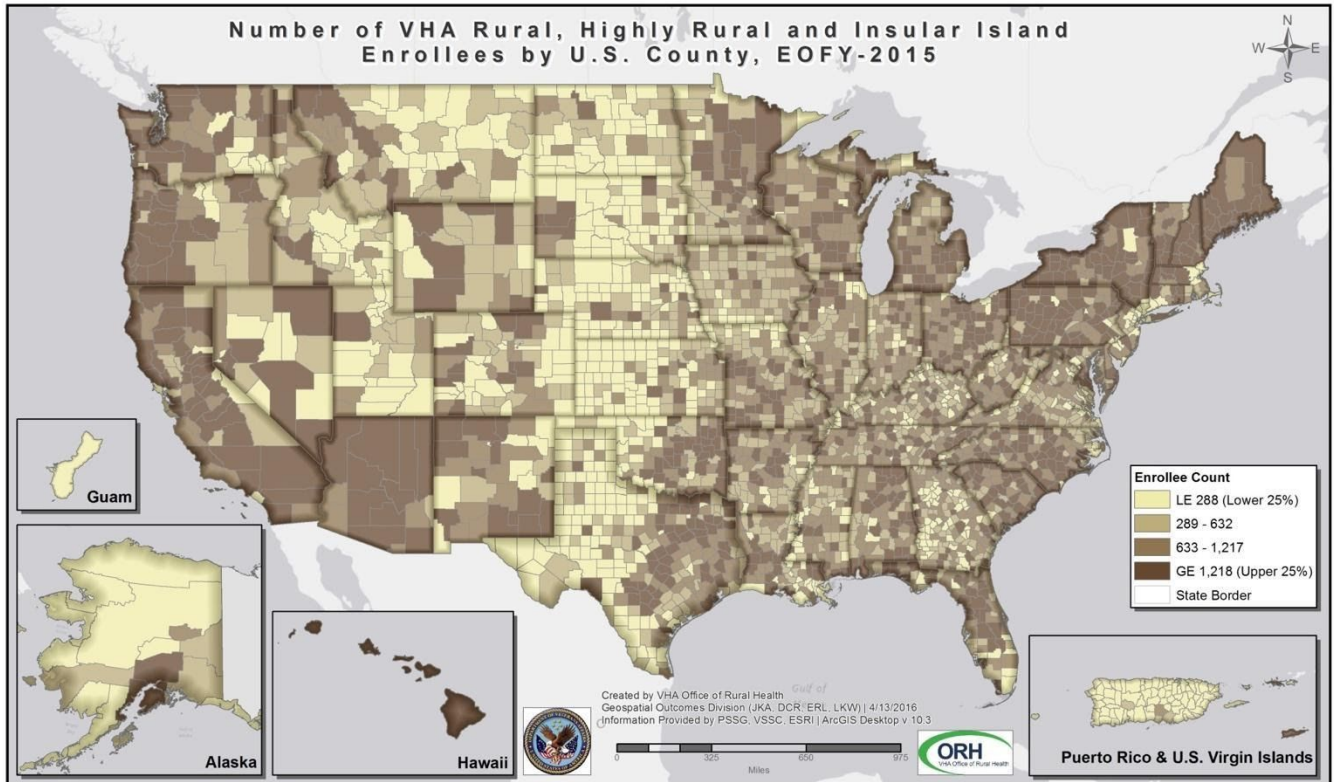
State	Total Number of Veterans	Urban		Rural	
		N	(%)	N	(%)
Michigan	641,000	437,000	68.2	204,000	31.8

(Total No. of MI veterans)

Table 2: VHA Enrollees by Rurality, EOFY-2015

U.S. State	Total Number of Enrollees	Highly Rural, Rural, & Insular Island Enrollees		Urban/Unknown Enrollees	
		N	(%)	N	(%)
Michigan	228,412	94,612	41.42	133,800	58.58

(No. of MI veterans enrolled in VA Healthcare System)



References

Cowper Ripley DC, Ahern JK, Litt, ER, Wilson, LK (2017). Rural Veterans Health Care Atlas, 2nd edition FY-2015. VHA e of Rural Health, Department of Veterans Affairs, Washington, D.C.

Office of Rural Health, Department of Veteran Affairs, 2 Oct. 2019,
www.ruralhealth.va.gov/index.asp.

"Rural-Urban Commuting Codes." *Economic Research Service*, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Oct. 2019, www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/rural-urban-commuting-area-codes/.

Veteran Population." *US Census Bureau*, Department of Veterans Affairs, Nov. 2019,
www.va.gov/vetdata/Veteran_Population.asp.