



Defining Rural Rhode Island

Statement of Purpose

The Rhode Island Office of Primary Care and Rural Health (OPCRH) has developed a definition of rural for the purposes of identifying areas in the state that are potentially at risk for health disparities and limits on access to health care that are commonly found in rural areas across the country. It is often assumed that Rhode Island lacks rural areas. It is important to note, however, that the definition of “rural” is programmatic. Federal agencies such as the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy, the US Department of Agriculture or the Office of Management and Budget differ in how they define rural. Given this context the OPCRH has created a systematic definition of rural which the OPCRH, the Department of Health, and other community partners and agencies can use to communicate about and collaborate on new methods and actions to meet the needs of Rhode Island’s rural population.

The Rhode Island Department of Health has three leading priorities that guide the work of the Department. The priorities are as follows:

1. Address the social and environmental determinants of health in Rhode Island
2. Eliminate the disparities of health in Rhode Island and promote health equity
3. Ensure access to quality health services for Rhode Islanders, including our vulnerable populations

The development of the statewide rural definition meets these priorities in a number of ways. First, by identifying the different populations that are facing health challenges related to where they live, work, and play, clear actions can be planned in an effort to reduce and overcome those geographical challenges. In this way, health equity can be promoted while disparities, such as rural-urban differences, are eliminated. Second, a statewide definition of rural enables the OPCRH, as well as other departments and agencies, to better describe the quality, quantity, and accessibility of the health services and resources in rural Rhode Island, and make comparisons with other areas of the state. This can contribute to targeted changes and innovations that enhance the overall quality of health service delivery and accessibility for Rhode Island’s vulnerable rural population.

Fundamentally, a uniform definition for rural used by multiple departments and agencies creates consistency and facilitates collaboration. With a standard definition, all programs at the Department can incorporate rural-focused research, when applicable. With these improvements, changes to the health of Rhode Island’s rural populations are possible. The statewide definition of rural is an important step towards health equity.

Rhode Island's Rural Definition

The OPCRH definition uses population density and size estimates for each town and city in Rhode Island. The use of towns and cities for the definition, instead of counties, is consistent with rural definitions developed by other states. By using a definition with both population density and total population size, all types of rural communities, such as those with large or small populations, low population densities, and those that occupy vast geographic space, are included.

Communities designated as rural are those that have a population density of <1000 AND population size of <25,000.

Rationale

The most commonly used federal guidelines for rurality, which come from the US Census Bureau and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), determine rurality based on proximity to urban centers, commuting patterns, or population size. While these definitions are ideal for a variety of federal purposes, it is important that the statewide concept of rurality encompasses far more than the federal definitions. It is with this premise in mind that a more inclusive definition of rurality has been developed and applied within the Ocean State.

Across Rhode Island's five counties there are many combinations of rural and urban communities. Instead of county data, which is used for the OMB federal definition, the definition of rural for this project uses data from individual towns and cities. The use of towns and cities for the rural definition is consistent with definitions developed by other states, especially those in New England. Community data, as opposed to county data, more accurately reflects the rurality of each individual town and city, because it allows for a more direct consideration of the needs faced by these communities. A hallmark of the US Census Bureau federal definition is that it links rural areas that span county lines, which accounts for the diversity of health needs facing the rural communities that are contained within and extend across large counties.

Drawing on this method, the definition of rural Rhode Island reflects the fact that within the larger five counties, there is a large range of populations and several pockets of low population density, which are two measurements that reflect some of the most central ideas of rurality – namely, geographic isolation and a small number of individuals living in a larger defined area. While the population size of 25,000 may seem like a large cut-off, it reflects the large geographic size of several Rhode Island towns and cities. By using a large population size cut-off, towns and cities that have many of the same health care needs as smaller rural areas are included in the definition. The dual requirement of population size and population density also ensures that areas that may have large populations, but are not especially dense, are considered as a rural area. Overall, the RI state definition of rural includes many communities – those with large and small populations, those with low population densities, and those that occupy vast geographic space – in order to effectively serve the needs of the state's rural populations.

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CITY	POPULATION (2020)	POPULATION DENSITY (2020)
Bristol	22,493	2,297.8
Barrington	17,153	2,095.7
Burrillville	16,158	294.2
Central Falls	22,583	18,913.7
Charlestown	7,997	218.9
Coventry	35,688	604.2
Cranston	82,934	2,925.9
Cumberland	36,405	1,374.4
East Greenwich	14,312	874.1
East Providence	47,139	3,548.6
Exeter	6,460	112.4
Foster	4,469	88.1
Glocester	9,974	183.9
Hopkinton	8,398	195.3
Jamestown	5,559	588.4
Johnston	29,568	1,259.4
Lincoln	22,529	1,246.5
Little Compton	3,616	170
Middletown	17,075	1,344.5
Narragansett	14,532	1,048.1
New Shoreham	1,410	155.3
Newport	25,163	3,286.7
North Kingstown	27,732	642.4
North Providence	34,114	6,052.9
North Smithfield	12,588	526.7
Pawtucket	75,604	8,723.2
Portsmouth	17,871	776.2
Providence	190,934	10,373.5
Richmond	8,020	198.9
Scituate	10,384	215.7
Smithfield	22,118	843.2
South Kingstown	31,931	566.5
Tiverton	16,359	563.0
Warren	11,147	1,810.2
Warwick	82,823	2,366.3
West Greenwich	6,528	129.8
West Warwick	31,012	3,959.7
Westerly	23,359	792.7
Woonsocket	43,240	5,582.2

List of Towns in Rhode Island – Rural Highlighted in Blue

References

U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Rhode Island; United States

<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/RI/POP060220>

2020 Census Redistricting Data-Population, Race, and Housing Units | Rhode Island Division of Statewide Planning <https://planning.ri.gov/ri-census-2020/census-2020-redistricting>

2020 Census Demographic Data Map Viewer <https://mtgis-portal.geo.census.gov/arcgis/apps/mapseries/index.html?appid=2566121a73de463995ed2b2fd7ff6eb7>