



Discussion Of Themes

In this report, the health status of Huron County residents has been described using a social determinants of health framework.

Elements of this framework have included: describing how social factors impact health (using a snakes and ladders metaphor), understanding the sociodemographic characteristics of Huron County residents, and examining various health topics through a social determinants of health lens. Major findings of the report are highlighted in the Executive Summary.

Several themes have emerged from this report. Themes were identified through focused discussions among health unit staff on the common elements linking unique health outcomes in Huron County (i.e. health outcomes that were significantly different in Huron County when compared to the province). Staff identified three major themes – the physical environment, rural sociodemographics, and limited access to health services. In essence, these themes identify the major determinants of health of Huron County residents, as viewed by Huron County Health Unit staff. While other factors make important contributions to the health of this community, the determinants described here appear to play important roles in understanding and describing the health status of Huron County residents.

In this section, these themes and their impact on health are briefly described. In addition, examples of several snakes and ladders associated with each determinant have been provided. Snakes are the barriers or obstacles that can be encountered on the path to wellness, while ladders are the resources available which help us achieve optimum wellness. Education, employment, access to health services and community support act as ladders in achieving good health, while low income, poor environments and low social status act as snakes. Identifying snakes helps to develop strategies to minimize or eliminate barriers to health in our community. Identifying

ladders helps develop an understanding of how to further build on and extend these resources to our community. Minimizing barriers and increasing resources are important steps to take to make optimum wellness easier for Huron County residents to achieve.

The Physical Environment

Increasingly the physical environment has been recognized as a major determinant of health. However, the majority of research has focused on air, water and soil quality in urban environments¹ and additionally, on the impacts of the urban built environment on health. Rural environments have largely been understudied; yet, we know rural landscapes differ dramatically from urban landscapes.

In Huron County, defining characteristics of our rural environment include:

- the predominance of recreational beaches;
- higher dependence on private drinking well water and private septic systems;
- low population density and geographic dispersion;
- rich agricultural land; and
- poor outdoor air quality due to transboundary air pollution.

All of these characteristics directly and indirectly impact the health of Huron County residents. Geographic dispersion, for example, results in a higher number of rural roads which are known to be of poorer quality and have higher speed limits, contributing to increased motor vehicle collisions. In Huron County, land transport occurrence mortality and hospitalization rates are significantly higher than the province.

Geographic dispersion can also lead to isolation and subsequent mental health issues; in Huron County, the rate of attempted suicide and suicide deaths is significantly higher among males than the province. Recent research has shown that both motor vehicle collision deaths and suicides are significantly higher in rural areas when compared to urban areas even after adjusting for socio-economic and demographic factors.¹

The rural landscape and predominance of farmland is another key feature of the Huron County environment which impacts health. Wide open spaces and the abundance of parks and recreational beaches promote a sense of well-being and reduce stress levels. However, rural work conditions in resource-based industries can be hazardous, putting workers at higher risk of unintentional injuries and even enteric disease incidence (due to animal handling). Other safety issues in rural communities such as Huron County include access to safe drinking water and proper maintenance of private septic systems.

Snakes

- Geographic dispersion can result in isolation and reduce the opportunities for active transportation such as walking and biking
- Lack of public transportation creates barriers to accessing recreation, healthy food sources and health services
- Resource-based industries (such as farming and fishing) have higher levels of occupational hazards
- Rural roads can be more dangerous to travel on

Ladders

- Increased green space and access to beaches promotes sense of well-being
- Productive agricultural land
- Opportunities to enjoy nature (fishing, etc)
- Lower reported stress levels than urban settings
- Sense of safety

Rural Sociodemographics

Rural communities have unique socio-demographic characteristics when compared to urban communities. As with most rural communities, Huron County has a high

dependency ratio, meaning there is a large population of children and youth that are dependent on a relatively small population of working-age individuals. In addition, Huron County residents are less educated than the province, with a smaller percentage reporting attending university than Ontario. Other challenges include a lower median income, higher seasonal unemployment than urban areas and lack of affordable housing. These findings are corroborated by existing research on rural communities.¹²

Disadvantages in income levels, employment and education impact health. Income specifically influences health by limiting access to resources required for healthy lifestyles, while education improves an individual's ability to access and understand information needed to make healthy choices.³ Rural health research has shown that rural residents tend to smoke more, are less physically active and are more likely to be obese^{1,4}. All of these health behaviours are associated with income and education levels.⁴ In Huron County, a significantly higher percentage of residents are classified as obese when compared to Ontario, although physical activity levels are similar to the province.

Education levels, income and employment (among other sociodemographic factors) are also important contributors to the development of chronic disease. In Huron County, self-reported prevalence of chronic conditions increased as income level decreased.

Snakes

- Fewer educational, training and job opportunities
- Increased reliance on resource based industries results in fluctuating seasonal unemployment
- Lower education and education levels which create barriers to good health

Ladders

- Increased sense of community belonging
- Lower cost of living in rural areas
- Strong social support networks

Limited Access to Health Services

Rural areas often have fewer health care services.¹ Only 16% of family physicians and 2% of specialists practice in rural, remote or northern communities.⁵ According to the 2007 Canadian Community Health Survey, 80.2% (95% CI 73.8-86.6) of Huron County residents aged 12 years and older reported having a regular medical doctor, which was significantly lower than the province.⁶ Lack of access to a family physician can result in greater utilization of hospital services for preventable health conditions as preventive care and management is not available or accessible.⁷ Huron County has higher age-standardized hospitalization rates than the province; however, it is unclear the proportion of hospitalizations that were related to preventable health issues.

When services are available, barriers due to cost of the service, location of the service and lack of anonymity can prevent utilization. In Huron County, focus groups have identified that living in small communities where “everyone knows everyone” can limit use of services for which they may be stigmatized for using, such as sexual health clinics, mental health supports, etc. Financial resources can impede service use as there are costs associated with utilizing the service (such as travel, daycare, etc). For example, in Huron County, only half of residents report having dental insurance which covers all or the majority of dental costs, which likely explains infrequent dental preventive check-ups. Additionally, many specialized services are available outside of the county, which increases travel costs. Limited choice can also prevent use of services if individuals are not able to form comfortable relationships with those who provide the service due to discrimination or gender issues.⁸ This can increase the burden for those in already vulnerable situations.

Snakes

- Difficulty to recruit and retain qualified health professionals
- Fewer health care services available (and increased distance to travel to access services)
- Lack of anonymity and potential stigmatization

Ladders

- Well integrated health services (smaller number of health practitioners facilitates communication⁸)

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 - 2 Eberhardt MS, Ingram DD, Makuc DM, et al. Urban and Rural Health Chartbook. Health, United States, 2001. Hyattsville, Md: National Centre for Health Statistics, 2001.
 - 3 Raphael D. Social Determinants of Health: Canadian Perspectives. Toronto, ON: Canadian Scholars Press Inc., 2004.
 - 4 Hartley D. Rural Health Disparities, Population Health, and Rural Culture. American Journal of Public Health, 2004;94(10): 1675-1678.
 - 5 Society of Rural Physicians of Canada. Comparative Regional Statistics. Accessed 12 September 2008 from <http://www.srpc.ca/numbers.html>.
 - 6 Statistics Canada. Canadian Community Health Survey 2007. Accessed 12 September 2008 from <http://cansim2.statcan.ca/cgi-win/CNSMCGI.PGM>.
 - 7 Saskatchewan Health Research Foundation. Rural and Remote Health Services in Saskatchewan: Identifying Research Priorities. Saskatoon, SK: Saskatchewan Health Research Foundation, 2006.
 - 8 Whyte JM and Havelock J. Rural and Remote Women and the Kirby-Keon Report on Mental Health. Winnipeg, MB: The Prairie Women's Health Centre of Excellence, 2007.