

"Rural-Urban Health Gap Must Be Bridged" is an editorial that appeared in *The Globe and Mail*, Canada's national newspaper, on September 25, 2006.

The editorial is in response to *How Healthy Are Rural Canadians? An Assessment of Their Health Status and Health Determinants*, a study jointly conducted by the Centre for Rural and Northern Health Research, the Public Health Agency of Canada and other research partners.

How Healthy Are Rural Canadians? An Assessment of Their Health Status and Health Determinants is available online at: http://secure.cihi.ca/cihiweb/products/rural_canadians_2006_report_e.pdf



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Rural-urban health gap must be bridged

Canadians can forget those stereotypes of hearty living in the delightfully pastoral countryside. As a new report makes alarmingly clear, rural Canadians are simply not as healthy as their urban compatriots. In particular, the rural population is prey to higher death rates, more heart disease and increased likelihood of accidental injury. "The key results point to rural Canadians being slightly less healthy than urban Canadians, and that's reflected in a higher mortality rate," said Marie DesMeules, one of the principal investigators for last week's meticulous 205-page study from the Canadian Institute for Health Information.

The inequality is startling. Rural residents are sprinkled across more than 95 per cent of Canada's land mass and comprise one-fifth of the population. But in the report, they sometimes seem a world away from the often wealthier, better educated and healthier residents of cities. Higher proportions of rural Canadians are smokers: 32 per cent in most rural areas, compared with 25 per cent in cities. Rural Canadians are more likely to be overweight or obese: 57 per cent in most rural areas, compared with 47 per cent of urban dwellers. And despite decades of almost evangelical health advisories, only 31 per cent of people in most rural areas said that they ate five or more servings of fruit and vegetables a day. That compares with 38 per cent in the cities. It is depressing.

It is not surprising that those lifestyle choices have had serious consequences—which emerge from the report's investigation of the annual mortality database from 1986 to 1996. Rural residents have a heightened risk of dying from respiratory disease, diabetes and circulatory disorders. In most rural areas, the risk of death from respiratory disease was significantly higher. Death from circulatory disease was also much higher among both males and

females and across all age groups.

Rural residents are also more likely to die from suicide, injury and automobile accidents. As the report notes, rural-based industries such as farming have higher levels of occupational hazard. Rural men of all ages are at increased risk of suicide, compared with those living in cities. The risk of suicide for females, while extremely high among rural girls, decreases with age. And the very isolation of rural communities, where people often have to drive long distances on dicey roads, has ensured that motor-vehicle accidents are a significant cause of premature death.

Those factors add up to a dismaying picture. Over all, the premature death rate per 100,000 people is 14 per cent higher among most rural residents than among urban dwellers. That has policy implications for both the federal and provincial governments. As the study notes, socioeconomic factors such as education levels and income are often as important as health-care services in determining health status. As well, occupational health and safety issues clearly require more attention, particularly in the farming, logging and fishing industries. Rural roads require improvement. Rural-specific approaches to disease prevention might have a better chance of deterring smoking and overeating, while fostering healthier diets. It is also possible, as the report grimly concedes, that the very distance between rural dwellers and such vital health-care resources as expertise and technology have hindered early detection.

Such problems will only become more acute as more Canadians flock to urban areas, a trend that shows no sign of abating. The report, with its 28 methodical tables, 52 figures and five appendixes, has diagnosed a problem that experts have rarely tackled. It is a commendable and challenging effort.