



HealthVoices

Rural Health and Healthcare in Georgia: 2015 Georgia Poll Results

Issue 1, 2015

It has been said that when it comes to the economy, there are two Georgias: a vibrant Atlanta and the rest of the state. Today, this **Two Georgias** distinction applies to the growing disparities in health and healthcare between metro Atlanta and what remains a predominantly rural Georgia.

A “windshield survey” on the roads through rural Georgia reveals challenges in community infrastructure further compromised by poverty, unemployment, education, transportation, and changing demography. And, the data confirm what was observed—there is a significant health penalty for living in rural Georgia. Rural Georgians experience:

- Higher death rates due to heart disease, stroke, cancer, and motor vehicle accidents
- Higher rates of smoking, diabetes, teen births, and low birth weight babies
- Higher rates of uninsured and more individuals are covered by public supported health insurance
- Longstanding designation as a workforce shortage area for primary care, mental health, and medical specialties

Yet, are the public perceptions of rural Georgians aligned with the data and the Foundation’s observations?

About This Survey

In the winter of 2015, Healthcare Georgia Foundation provided support to **Opinion Savvy** to conduct a public opinion survey among rural Georgians. The Foundation’s interest was to understand if better health and healthcare were important issues among the two million residents calling

rural Georgia their home. The survey also sought to reveal rural Georgians’ personal experience with healthcare, unique local healthcare issues, and perceptions regarding responsibility for rural healthcare. More than 400 rural Georgians shared their experience and expectations for better health and healthcare. Respondents were asked to consider:

- The importance of better health and healthcare as an issue where they live
- How they personally experience access to affordable, quality healthcare
- What it means to get the right care, at the right time, at the right place, by the right provider

Personal Experience with Local Healthcare in Rural Georgia

What is the experience among rural Georgians with respect to accessing and consuming healthcare? Recognizing the important distinctions between health insurance coverage and access to healthcare, more than half of all rural Georgians surveyed directly experienced issues regarding the affordability of health insurance (59.9%) and the cost of healthcare (53.1%). This was evident across all income levels, and particularly among younger and minority respondents.

One's health should not be determined by their place of residence or their zip code.



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More than 40% of those surveyed lacked health insurance. In addition to cost of *coverage* and cost of *care* respondents cited lack of doctors and other health professionals (32.6%) and transportation (18.0%) respectively as barriers in accessing healthcare services. Among those with coverage, nearly 3/10 rural Georgians stated “Doctors won’t take my type of insurance.” Surprisingly, a relatively large percentage of respondents with household incomes over \$120,000 cited lack of insurance as a barrier they personally experienced.

Figure 1: Issues Experienced with Personal Healthcare?

Affordability of Insurance	59.9%
Cost of Care	53.1%
Lack of Doctors/Providers	32.6%
Lack of Insurance	41.9%
Transportation	18.0%
Insurance not Accepted	28.2%

Perceived Rural Healthcare Issues and their Impact on Communities

What do rural Georgians perceive as the biggest problem in local healthcare? Sixty-eight percent of respondents cited cost as the biggest problem, followed by quality (24.8%) and access to care (6.4%). Older respondents more frequently cited cost. Surprisingly, no single demographic characteristic cited lack of doctors as a personal barrier they experienced.

Figure 2: Biggest Problem in Local Healthcare?

Access	6.4%
Cost	68.8%
Quality	24.8%

Responding to the most important healthcare need in their rural community, nearly half of rural respondents cited clinics (49.6%), and the remaining cited local care (19.2%), hospitals (18%) and transportation (13.3%).

Figure 3: Most Important Healthcare Need In Your Community?

Clinic	49.6%
Local Emergency/Urgent Care	19.2%
Transportation	13.3%
Hospital	18.0%

Asked to describe the shortage of medical providers in their community, 22.8% of respondents indicated there was no shortage, 49.5% a moderate shortage, and 27.7% a serious/extreme shortage. Family Practitioners (66%), followed by Specialists (24.1%), Mental Health Professionals (6.9%) and Dentists (3.0%) were identified as having the greatest impact on the health of the community.

Figure 4: Shortages of Doctors/Providers in Your Community?

None	22.8%
Moderate	49.5%
Severe	16.6%
Extreme	11.1%

Figure 5: Type of Provider Having the Greatest Impact On Health of Community?

Family Practitioner	66%
Specialist	24%
Dentist	3.0%
Mental Health Professional	6.9%

Rural respondents were asked to identify how a lack of healthcare access would impact their community. They identified quality of life (77.2%), the community’s economic health (66.6%), loss of jobs (64.7%), and loss of population (34.2%) as the most important economic consequences. Through the health lens, respondents indicated that a lack of access contributed to a less healthy population (61.9%), problems accessing mental health services (62.7%), dental care (62.5%), and emergency care (49.9%). Loss of jobs and population were more frequently cited by older respondents.

Figure 6: Community Impact Due to Lack of Healthcare Access?

Loss of Jobs	64.7%
Loss of Population	34.2%
Community's Economic Health	66.6%
Quality of Life	77.2%
Less Healthy Population	61.9%
Accessing Mental Health Services	62.7%
Getting Dental Care	62.5%



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Most Important Healthcare Initiatives and Issues Facing the Rural Community

Figure 7: Most Important Healthcare Initiatives in Your Community?

Expand free/reduced cost clinics	61.6%
Provide case management services	72.9%
Attract more doctors and healthcare providers	80.2%
Provide better transportation to medical care	57.5%
Provide more health education	71.2%
Improve access to emergency care	78.8%
Ensure access to mental health services	77.0%
Ensure access to dental services	80.7%

Where does the Responsibility for Rural Healthcare Rest?

No specific sector, public or private was identified as having the most responsibility for ensuring local access to quality care. Elderly, African-American, and female respondents identified local government most frequently. In terms of the role of city/county government, the funding role increased in terms of importance as income increased and as education level decreased. Results were somewhat contradictory with regard to the role of taxpayers and the role of city/county government. Overall, there was no single demographic profile (age, race, income, education) that believed that taxpayers should be responsible for covering the costs of hospitals and essential health services.

Figure 8: Responsibility for Ensuring Local Access to Quality Care?

Local Government	19.6%
State Government	20.1%
Federal Government	13.1%
Private Sector	27.3%
Community at Large	19.9%

Figure 9: Most Important Role for City/County Government?

Funding	27.8%
Oversight	21.4%
Policy	35.7%
Direct Services	15.1%

Figure 10: Taxpayers Should be Responsible for Local Hospital/Essential Health Services?

Yes	18.3%
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About the Survey Conducted by Opinion Savvy

Target Population Rural Georgia registered voters

Sampling Method The survey uses a blended sample, mixed mode IVR: Registered voters were selected randomly from rural Georgia counties (as defined by the USDA ERS) and surveyed on the evenings of February 11th-13th, 2015 using an interactive voice response system

Mobile/Online: Registered voters not otherwise reachable by landline telephone were surveyed on their mobile devices

Weighting The poll was weighted for age, race, gender and political affiliation according to 2014 general election voter statistics (from GA Secretary of State)

Total Number of Respondents 491 (weighted)

Margin of Error ±4.4% – 4.5% (95% confidence)

The Results in Context: Reflections by the Foundation

We in Georgia are dealing with older, sicker and poorer people relying on a severely compromised healthcare system. A disproportionate burden of uninsured patients, the shifting healthcare landscape under the Affordable Care Act, healthcare workforce shortages, and an aging rural population are factors compromising the delivery of rural healthcare. If ignored, our healthcare delivery system is at risk of collapsing on the shoulders of these frail rural communities.

Many rural Georgians reside in “medical deserts” where access to affordable, quality healthcare does not exist. The capacity to deliver and sustain the “traditional” model of a healthcare system in a rural community is simply not possible. As long as we continue to rely on such a model of care, there will be winners and losers, including rural Georgians, their families, and their communities.

Going forward, our efforts will be directed to supporting models of rural healthcare that are community-driven with attention to innovation, flexibility, and local choice. A focus on health and healthcare issues has never been greater, nor so urgently needed in this country. While the national stage is currently focused on who has access to care, the quality of care, and who is going to pay for care, we know that more robust discussions about issues affecting the health of rural Georgians should be happening at the community level. We invite you to join us in our pursuit of better rural health and healthcare: The **Two Georgias Initiative**, to be launched in 2016.

– Gary Nelson, Ph.D., President



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To view previous surveys on healthcare access, cost and quality, visit www.healthcaregeorgia.org/publications-and-research/issues-category.cfm/type/HealthVoices.

About the Two Georgias Initiative: The initiative is Healthcare Georgia Foundation's blueprint for better health and healthcare for rural Georgians. Scheduled for implementation in 2016, this grantmaking program represents an investment in selected rural communities seeking to eliminate disparities in health.

About Opinion Savvy, LLC: Opinion Savvy, LLC is a public opinion research and consulting firm, based in Atlanta, Georgia. Matthew Towery, Managing Partner

Healthcare Georgia Foundation is a catalyst for better health and healthcare in Georgia.

Through strategic grantmaking, Healthcare Georgia Foundation supports organizations that drive positive change; promotes programs that improve health and healthcare among underserved individuals and communities; and connects people, partners and resources across Georgia.

HealthVoices is published periodically by Healthcare Georgia Foundation as an educational service to Georgians interested in health policy.

HealthVoices is available online at www.healthcaregeorgia.org. For further information, please contact Toni Almasy, Avatar Communications, 404-688-9005 or toni@getavatar.com.

Healthcare Georgia Foundation is a statewide, private independent foundation whose mission is to advance the health of all Georgians and to expand access to affordable, quality healthcare for underserved individuals and communities.

