

The Above Average Burden of Hearing Loss for Rural Counties in Florida

BACKGROUND

Hearing loss is the second most common health issue afflicting older adults in the country, and is currently affecting one-third of those over the age of 65.¹ In the state of Florida, a large percentage of these older adults are currently residing in assisted living communities (ALC). Unfortunately, many people in these communities who suffer from hearing loss may not have access to hearing health care, as it was previously estimated that only 3% of Florida's ALCs offer audiology services.² The lack of ALCs offering these services may be restricted by their proximity to counties with large urban populations, which accounts for almost half of the counties in Florida.³ This leaves older adults in rural counties with little to no audiology services. This policy brief reports on the burden of hearing loss within rural counties in Florida.

STUDY METHOD

Data on ALCs and audiology services was collected from the Licensing and Surveying Agency for Healthcare Administration (AHCA)* for the state of Florida. AHCA provided county level addresses for the ALCs, which was then matched to the 2010 U.S. Census data.³ Hearing loss prevalence and population data for 2018 was collected from the Florida Department of Health⁴ and stratified into rural and urban counties. Data on the number of audiology clinics in Florida was collected from *HealthyHearing* and was originally presented in a previous brief.² A county was considered rural if it had 100 or less persons per square mile.³

FINDINGS

Almost 45% of Florida counties (30 of 67) were considered rural in 2010. A total of 26 rural counties were found to have no audiology clinics compared to 36 of the 37 urban counties with audiology clinics. Out of all the rural counties, 2 had at least one ALC that provided audiology services (Highlands & Walton). This resulted in 28 rural counties, with a combined population of about 154,000 people over the age of 65, having ALCs with no audiology services (see Fig. 1). Among these counties, an average of 19% of adults 65 and older have hearing loss. This is about 5% above the current average for the state of Florida.³

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Rural counties in Florida have a population of older adults experiencing hearing loss that is above the state average. Older adults residing in ALCs often suffer from comorbid conditions that require round the clock care. Hearing loss can both exacerbate some of these conditions, such as cognitive decline, yet treatment in the form of amplification (hearing aids) and rehabilitation are efficacious.⁵ Therefore, it is essential that ALCs begin to offer audiology-based services in these underserved, rural counties.

One way to address this issue is through the application of communicative technology. A model to follow may be the Echo Project,⁶ where the internet is used to share information between health care providers and patients. A similar system could be implemented for audiologists in order to get hearing services to rural communities.⁷ Policy makers could consider

*Data was collected on November 4, 2019

providing incentives for audiologists to use these advancements in technology to help residents of rural ALCs.

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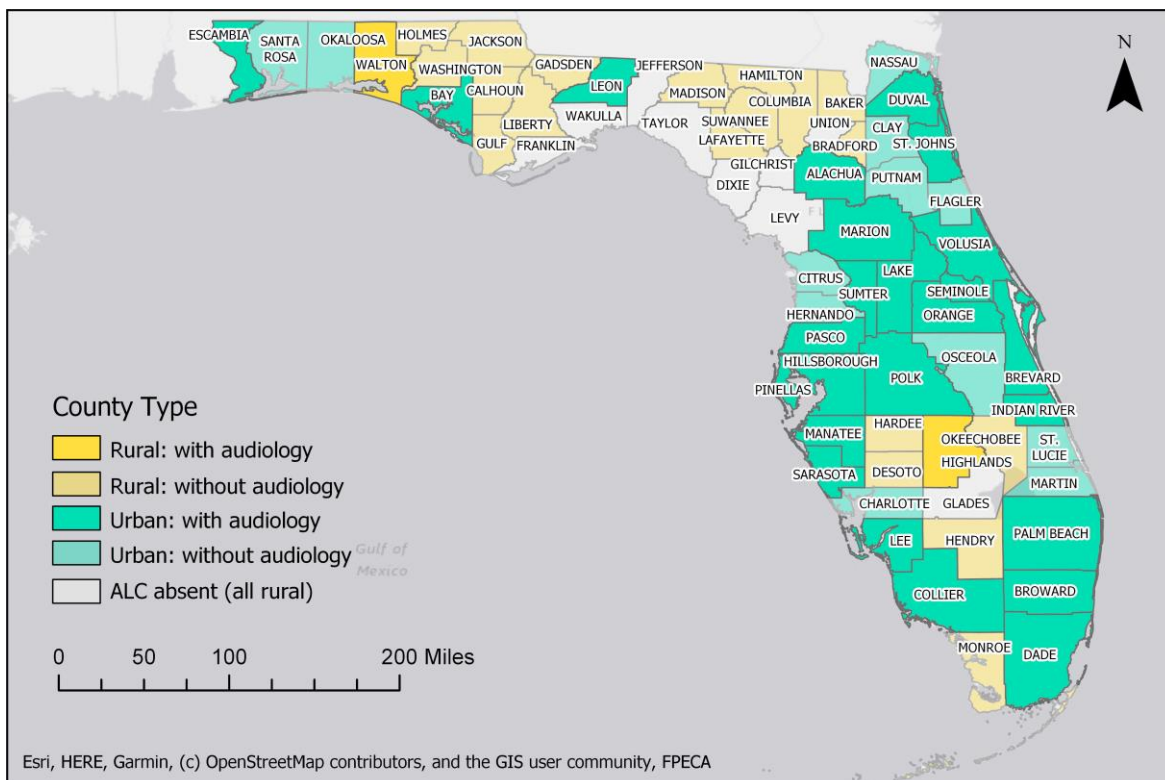


Figure 1. Florida Counties With and Without Assisted Living Communities with Audiology Services.

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Table 1. Number of ALCs, County Population and hearing loss percent by County in Florida

Urban Counties					Rural Counties				
County	Number of ALCs	ALCs with Audiology Services	County Population (65+)	Percent Hearing loss	County	Number of ALCs	ALCs with Audiology Services	County Population (65+)	Percent Hearing loss
Alachua	12	1	35,866	15.0	Baker	1	0	3807	20.1
Bay	12	1	30,643	20.0	Bradford	2	0	5030	15.2
Brevard	129	4	136,070	15.0	Calhoun	2	0	2722	23.1
Broward	275	11	309,167	12.0	Columbia	9	0	12827	18.7
Charlotte	20	0	69,190	15.0	Desoto	4	0	7823	15.6
Citrus	23	0	52,130	17.0	Dixie	0	0	3927	24.6
Clay	16	0	32,528	14.0	Franklin	0	0	2822	17.1
Collier	33	5	115,680	12.0	Gadsden	4	0	8266	18.1
Duval	89	7	130,488	14.0	Gilchrist	0	0	3586	25.5
Escambia	25	1	52,242	14.0	Glades	0	0	3571	23.4
Flagler	21	0	32,598	13.0	Gulf	1	0	3366	21.3
Hernando	27	0	51,160	18.0	Hamilton	3	0	2596	20.3
Hillsborough	260	7	198,970	13.0	Hardee	3	0	4414	13.5
Indian River	20	1	49,033	15.0	Hendry	1	0	5272	18.3
Lake	49	1	90,800	15.0	Highlands	9	1	35942	15.1
Lee	62	6	201,800	13.0	Holmes	2	0	4020	27.3
Leon	18	1	37,473	14.0	Jackson	2	0	9671	18.5
Manatee	42	1	102,252	14.0	Jefferson	0	0	3354	13.2
Marion	34	1	101,739	15.0	Lafayette	2	0	1346	32.8
Martin	18	0	47,402	14.0	Levy	0	0	10158	16.4
Miami-Dade	822	4	447,396	9.0	Liberty	2	0	1269	29.8
Nassau	6	0	17,950	14.0	Madison	7	0	3881	19.0
Okaloosa	13	0	31,139	16.0	Monroe	3	0	16595	10.9
Orange	110	2	160,006	13.0	Okeechobee	1	0	8522	14.0
Osceola	34	0	46,646	15.0	Suwannee	2	0	9453	17.5
Palm Beach	189	12	339,885	13.0	Taylor	0	0	4391	13.6
Pasco	47	1	116,794	15.0	Union	0	0	2263	16.4
Pinellas	178	11	235,341	14.0	Wakulla	0	0	4885	14.5
Polk	40	1	137,262	15.0	Walton	4	1	13447	18.7
Putnam	10	0	16,550	14.0	Washington	7	0	4431	18.3
Saint Johns	19	1	47,791	12.0	.	.	.	.	.
Saint Lucie	78	0	71,952	16.0	.	.	.	.	.
Santa Rosa	11	0	27,454	17.0	.	.	.	.	.
Sarasota	85	7	150,135	14.0	.	.	.	.	.
Seminole	60	1	70,106	12.0	.	.	.	.	.
Sumter	12	4	71,624	14.0	.	.	.	.	.
Volusia	100	3	128,412	17.0	.	.	.	.	.
Total	2,999	95	3,993,674		Total	71	2	203,657	

Sources: Licensing and Surveying Agency for Healthcare Administration, United States Census 2010 and Hearing Health*.

Note. ALC= Assisted living community.

* Data Retrieved from: <https://www.healthyhearing.com/hearing-aids/FL-Florida>