

Aging in Rural California: Why Action Is Needed Now

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By UC Davis Health and The SCAN Foundation*

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Three Policy Briefs to Advance Rural Aging Equity

Rural older adults face distinct realities that California's statewide planning must address. To support equitable solutions, we are pleased to share three new policy briefs:

- [Addressing Older Adult Homelessness and Housing Instability in Rural California](#)
- [Closing the Care Gap: Strengthening Long-Term Services and Supports in Rural California](#)
- [Rural Health Care Policy Solutions for California's Older Adults](#)

These briefs provide legislators and advocates with clear, actionable recommendations to address the needs of rural older adults, a population that is growing rapidly and already straining under workforce shortages, housing insecurity, and health disparities. Investing in rural aging not only strengthens local communities, it also prevents costly hospitalizations and nursing home placements that strain the state budget, helping ensure the Master Plan for Aging delivers on its promise for all Californians, including the most rural.

Why Rural Matters Now

Programs and policies that work in urban and suburban areas often don't translate to rural communities. With looming fiscal pressures and potential cuts to Medicaid, housing, and long-term services and supports (LTSS), rural older adults risk being left even further behind unless policymakers act now.

Key Facts

- Nearly one in eleven Californians ages 65+ lives in a rural community.¹
- Rural counties have a higher share of older adults (1 in 4 residents vs. 1 in 6 statewide).²
- On average across rural counties, over 40% of older adults live with a disability (vs. 34% non-rural).³
- By 2040, the population ages 85+ in rural counties will grow 158% — far faster than the statewide average of 125% — while the population ages 18-64 barely increases. In some counties, the population ages 85+ will double or triple, creating new pressures on local economies, caregiving, housing, LTSS, and health care.⁴

Projected Population Change in Rural Counties, 2025-2040

AGE GROUP	PERCENT CHANGE
18-64	+3.4%
65+	+1.5%
85+	+158.3%

Why Definitions of Rural Matter

How we define “rural” changes who gets counted and who gets resources. Depending on the definition, California can look either mostly rural or mostly urban. [Learn more here.](#)



Footnotes

1. Authors' analysis of 2023 American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year estimates. Share of Californians ages 65+ residing in rural census tracts calculated using the 2025 Health Resources Services Administration (HRSA) definition of rural (based on OMB county classifications, RUCA codes, and Road Ruggedness Scale adjustments).
2. Authors' analysis of 2023 ACS 5-year estimates. Share of residents ages 65+ calculated for rural (non-metro) vs. non-rural (metro), using 2023 National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) county classification. Results are a county average (unweighted).
3. Authors' analysis of 2023 ACS 5-year estimates. Percent of older adults (65+) reporting any disability, averaged across counties (unweighted). Rural vs. non-rural defined by 2023 NCHS county classification.
4. Authors' analysis of California Department of Finance, Demographic Research Unit, Population Projections (2025 Series). County-level projections for age groups aggregated to rural vs. non-rural counties using the 2023 NCHS county classification. Results are population-weighted.
5. Durazo, E. M., Jones, M. R., Wallace, S. P., Van Arsdale, J., Aydin, M., & Stewart, C. (2011). The health status and unique health challenges of rural older adults in California. UCLA Center for Health Policy Research. <https://healthpolicy.ucla.edu/sites/default/files/2024-11/the-health-status-and-unique-health-challenges-of-rural-older-adults-in-california.pdf>



About The SCAN Foundation

The SCAN Foundation (TSF) envisions a society where all of us can age well with purpose. We pursue this vision by igniting bold and equitable changes in how older adults age in both home and community. Our grants and impact investments prioritize communities that have been historically marginalized with an emphasis on: older people of color, older adults with lower incomes, and older residents in rural communities. Learn more at <https://www.thescanfoundation.org/>



About the Family Caregiving Institute at the Betty Irene Moore School of Nursing at UC Davis

The Family Caregiving Institute at the Betty Irene Moore School of Nursing at UC Davis advances the health and wellbeing of family caregivers through research, education and policy. Its work centers on developing systems of support for the millions of caregivers who provide the majority of long-term care for older adults, elevating their role within health care and communities. Learn more at

<https://health.ucdavis.edu/family-caregiving/>