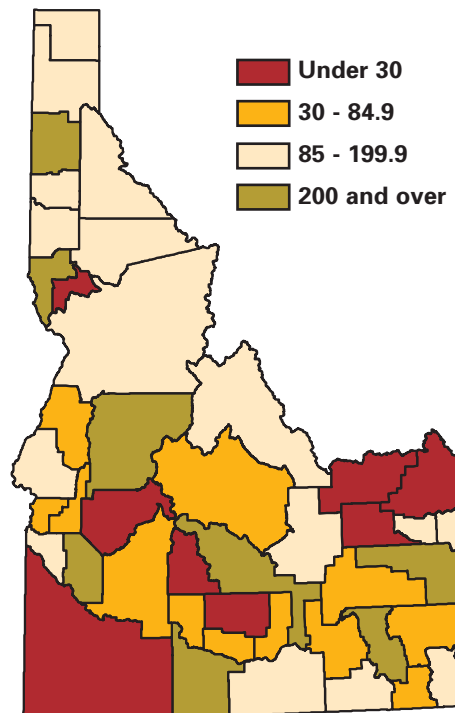


HEALTHCARE

Idaho's rural health care providers face the twin challenges of low population density and rugged geography. Community leaders understand that maintaining and improving services is important to attracting economic opportunities in rural areas. Many small rural hospitals and related health care services are the largest employers in their communities, but there are challenges to maintaining essential services. The shortage of health care providers can often make service tenuous. Recruitment and retention in rural areas continue to be paramount. While rural hospitals are looking for niches of care that they can offer their communities, they struggle to attract clinical support for these expansions. Nationally, fewer physicians are choosing Family Practice. As a lifestyle, especially in rural areas, it is extremely demanding. Isolation, lack of peer access and support, absence of professional and educational opportunities, the constant demand of patients and their easy access and lower pay are all drawbacks. Rural Idaho needs family practitioners, particularly those with a background in obstetrics and increasingly in mental health.

Physicians per 100,000 population, 2004



More than 83 percent of the state is designated as suffering a shortage of primary care health professionals. A shortage of dental health professionals exists in 82 percent of the state, and the entire state has a shortage of mental health providers. More than 61 percent of the state's area or population has been designated as medically underserved. The Health Professional Shortage Area designation may refer to an entire county or portion of a county.

While most urban areas of Idaho exceed the statewide ratio of physicians to population, only two high-amenity rural areas — Sun Valley/Ketchum and McCall — are above average. Idaho ranked 50th for the rate of non-federal physicians in 2002 — 161 per 100,000 population. A growing trend of elderly physicians practicing in rural Idaho will aggravate this problem as they eventually retire.

Still, Idaho ranked well in several health indicators in 2003. Statewide, 6.5 percent of babies had low birth weight— 6.6 percent in rural areas — compared to 7.9 percent nationally. The infant death rate in both urban and rural Idaho was 6.3 per 1,000 live births compared to the national rate of 6.9. The United Health Foundation's 2004 report on America's Health ranked Idaho 18th best among the states. Idaho ranked in the top 10 on four of the 18 measures — low prevalence of smoking, a low rate of cancer deaths, a low incidence of infectious disease and a low violent crime rate.

Accidental death rates in rural Idaho continue to exceed urban rates due largely to a higher number of motor vehicle accidents caused by longer driving distances and concentrated employment in dangerous industries like agriculture, forestry, construction and mining. These accidents make Emergency Medical Services (EMS) units the front line of health care. There are 194 EMS units in Idaho with the majority providing services to rural areas. Maintaining a trained and certified staff of volunteers is a continuing challenge.