

Executive Summary

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Summary

Data challenges have real world implications for rural places across Canada, impacting decisions, programs, and policies locally, provincially, territorially, and federally. The challenges go beyond whether or not certain data exists (or exists at the appropriate scale). Access to data, the capacity to conduct analysis, and the skills to interpret and communicate results are all important pieces of the puzzle of using data to inform better rural decision-making.

Rural and remote places in Canada have many important assets, but are at a disadvantage with respect to the availability and access to data, as well as its analysis and mobilization. Their small size makes confidentiality issues challenging, their distance from larger centres makes data collection more expensive, and their lower financial and analysis capacity creates barriers to data analysis and use. As a result, the data gaps and deficits they face are more detrimental to their effective development than found in most urban places.

Identifying and filling data gaps is a collective process where everyone – practitioners, policy-makers, and researchers – bear some responsibility for ensuring data is available, accessible, and understandable.

From a pragmatic view, limited time and funds mean that we all must make decisions and take action based on incomplete information. However, there are many innovative examples of rural places doing more with less in order to fill data gaps. The successes of these collaborative efforts show the potential for shared benefits across different stakeholder groups. They also show effective practices that can potentially be adapted to other contexts. In a changing world that forces our communities to adapt to rapid environmental and economic shifts, this kind of innovative problem solving is imperative.

Key Findings

- Data means more than numbers - including both qualitative and quantitative information.
- A single type of data is rarely sufficient. Solving complex challenges requires integration of multiple types of data.
- Data must be appropriate for the question asked or issue explored – having the right data, for the right place, at the right scale.
- How data is collected matters. The approaches and processes used to collect and analyze data matter for it to be accurate and appropriate, as well as respectful of differing cultures and worldviews.
- Equity issues are reflected in data – often revealing disparities in data quality within provinces and territories, between rural and urban regions, and across different types of rural places.
- Data makes a difference to policy and program outcomes. When dependable data is collected, analyzed, and put to use, it can have an impact at any scale.
- Understanding change over time, or comparing jurisdictions or places, requires the ability to benchmark and track evidence.

Recommendations

1. **Build a better understanding of the importance and practical application of data in rural places.** Too often, data is seen as strictly academic and lacking practical application. By mobilizing success stories of innovative ways that rural places collect and apply data, we can help others understand the importance of quality data and inspire creativity regarding how it can be used to address important issues. This includes engaging communities with data collection, drawing links to community needs and aspirations, and demonstrating how a better understanding, built on evidence, can help foster novel solutions. This also includes learning how to anticipate needs and asking the right questions, developing metrics, and collecting data to respond to these questions. In a world clouded by questions that can be manipulated to promote almost any answer, there must be a continuous commitment to critical analysis.
2. **Ensure consistent, longitudinal qualitative and quantitative data are collected and used.** No amount of quantitative assessment is sufficient to understand a whole problem or to develop an effective solution. This book highlights how non-statistical information is equally important for decision-making about rural places, as well as for planning and policy development. While qualitative data is often recognized as important, it is most often collected in single, one-off projects, making it challenging to track or compare over time. There are opportunities for the systematic collection of qualitative data to happen in different ways and at multiple levels. This includes everything from practitioners collecting anecdotes from local stakeholders to provincial, territorial, or federal-scale efforts to collect qualitative data related to quality of life or community resilience over time in a consistent manner. Both private and public funds are necessary to make these initiatives possible, as well as a heightened respect for qualitative research and data.
3. **Support local efforts and capacity-building.** Not all data needs to be collected or analyzed at a national, provincial, or territorial level – some data will be collected or analyzed locally for unique purposes. Support from upper levels of government is needed to help rural communities develop capacity, including human capacity to identify, access, and analyze existing sources of data, as well as the capacity for communities to collect their own data. Resources, in the form of tools, technical assistance, and supports are critical, as are financial resources.
4. **Show rural data in regional, provincial, territorial, and federal data.** Standardized metrics that are collected consistently in a replicable manner are very important. However, if we cannot see the rural story in those databases, if it is obscured or dominated by urban areas, we cannot understand the needs, challenges, and opportunities that exist in rural places across Canada. This challenge requires the disaggregation of national, provincial, and territorial data to allow practitioners and scholars to see how important trends are reflected in rural and remote places. Where possible, these rural data sets should be publicly accessible and supported.