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Geographic Variation in Pneumonia and Influenza in Long-Term Care Facilities: A National Study

Authors: Elliott Bosco,1,2 Andrew R. Zullo,1,2,3,4 Kevin W. McConeghy,1,2,4 Patience Moyo,1,2 Robertus van Aalst,5,6 Ayman Chit,5,7 Kevin M. Mwenda,8 Catherine A. Panozzo,9 Vincent Mor,1,2,4 Stefan Gravenstein1,2,4,10

Affiliations: 1Department of Health Services, Policy, and Practice, Brown University School of Public Health, Providence, RI, USA; 2Center for Gerontology and Healthcare Research, School of Public Health, Brown University School of Public Health, Providence, RI, USA; 3Department of Epidemiology, Brown University School of Public Health, Providence, RI, USA; 4Center of Innovation in Long-Term Services and Supports, Providence Veterans Affairs Medical Center, Providence, RI, USA; 5Sanofi Pasteur, Swiftwater, PA, USA; 6Department of Health Sciences, University of Groningen, University Medical Center Groningen, Groningen, the Netherlands; 7Leslie Dan School of Pharmacy, University of Toronto, Ontario, Canada; 8Spatial Structures in the Social Sciences (S4)/Population Studies and Training Center (PSTC), Brown University, Providence, RI, USA; 9Department of Population Medicine, Harvard Pilgrim Health Care Institute and Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA, USA; 10Department of Medicine, Warren Alpert Medical School, Brown University, Providence, RI, USA

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**Corresponding Author:** Elliott Bosco, Department of Health Services, Policy, and Practice, Brown University School of Public Health, 121 South Main Street, Box G-S121-3, Providence, RI, 02912, Phone: 401-863-3211, Email: elliott_bosco@brown.edu

**ABSTRACT**

There is large U.S. county-level geographic variation in pneumonia and influenza (P&I) hospitalizations among short-stay and long-stay long-term care facility (LTCF) residents. LTCFs in counties in the Southern and Midwestern regions had the highest rates of P&I from 2013 to 2015. Future research should identify reasons for these geographic differences.

**Key words:** Pneumonia, Influenza, Medicare, Long-Term Care, Spatial Analysis
INTRODUCTION

Between 2015 and 2016, 50% of influenza-associated hospitalizations and 64% of deaths related to pneumonia and influenza (P&I) occurred among Medicare-eligible adults aged ≥65, many of whom live in long-term care facilities (LTCFs) [1]. A growing body of evidence has documented the particularly high risk of respiratory infections among the 1.3 million frail older adults residing in LTCFs annually [2-5]. P&I infections increase the risk of hospitalization for these older adults, leading to many adverse outcomes and increased healthcare costs [6].

No studies have employed national data to identify geographic patterns in the incidence of P&I in LTCFs across all counties in the United States. Our prior work described LTCF factors affecting P&I incidence across LTCFs for short-stay and long-stay LTCF populations, each respectively receiving post-acute and long-term care [4]. One might expect differences in P&I between the short and long-stay LTCF populations because of differences in clinical acuity, staffing, and LTCF resources. Quantifying the county-level burden of P&I in LTCFs is critically important to help identify geographic differences and opportunities for interventions to reduce respiratory infections. Such information is highly relevant to local public health leaders and clinicians responsible for making decisions about resource allocation, treatment efforts, and infection control interventions to improve health outcomes for the vulnerable LTCF population.

Geospatial analyses incorporate geographic information to explore variation that might be due to differences in location. We extend our prior work by conducting a geospatial analysis to 1) determine how P&I hospitalization rates from LTCFs vary across U.S. counties adjusting for LTCF resident characteristics, and 2) identify clusters of counties with similarly high and low P&I rates. We hypothesized that there would be wide variation in rates across counties for both short-stay and long-stay LTCF populations.
METHODS

This was a retrospective cohort study derived from a national population of over 7.2 million Medicare beneficiaries residing in 15,887 LTCFs between January 1, 2013 and December 31, 2015. In brief, we used 100% of 2013-2015 Medicare claims, Minimum Data Set clinical assessments, and facility-level data to identify eligible short-stay (<100 days) and long-stay (≥100 days) LTCF residents (Supplementary Table S1) [4]. We identified all U.S. counties using Federal Information Processing Standards (FIPS) County codes and aggregated resident covariates to the county-level. County was the chosen unit of analysis because counties are often the smallest geographic unit with policy implications and the unit at which Medicare beneficiaries typically select LTCFs. P&I was identified by the presence of an International Classification of Diseases, 9th revision, Clinical Modification (ICD-9-CM) or 10th revision (ICD-10-CM) diagnosis code for pneumonia or influenza-like illness (480-488.XX, J09-J18) in the principal position on the hospitalization claim [7]. We calculated crude P&I hospitalization incidence rates (IRs) and risk-standardized incidence rates (RSIRs) in each county to adjust for resident-level differences. We used risk-standardization via hierarchical Poisson modeling adapted from CMS methodology (Supplementary Text S1, Supplementary Table S2) [4].

Geospatial analyses were employed to explore geographic patterns in the crude IRs and RSIRs. We identified the degree to which county RSIRs are related to neighboring county’s rates across all counties by calculating a Global Moran’s I statistic (Supplementary Text S2). We further explored patterns by calculating an Anselin Local Moran’s I statistic to identify clusters of counties with similarly high or low P&I rates (High-High or Low-Low clusters), or outlier counties (High-Low or Low-High outliers) with rates differing from neighboring counties (Supplementary Text S2). Hawaii and Alaska are geographic outliers from the continental U.S. and were excluded. Choropleth maps were used to plot the quintiles of crude IRs and RSIRs across counties. Data were analyzed using SAS version 9.4 (SAS Institute, Inc., Cary, NC), R version
3.5.1 (R Foundation for Statistical Computing, Vienna, Austria), and ArcMap 10.5.1 (ESRI, Redlands, CA). The institutional review board at Brown University approved the study protocol.
RESULTS

Study Cohorts and Pneumonia and Influenza Incidence Rates

The final study cohort consisted of 1,771,960 short-stay residents (14,306 LTCFs) across 2,745 counties, and 922,724 long-stay residents (14,536 LTCFs) across 2,784 counties (Supplementary Figure S1, Supplementary Table S2). During the study period, the average county-level crude IR per 1,000 person-years among short-stay residents was 163.7 (Standard Deviation (SD): 218.3) with a minimum of 0.0 and maximum of 2,463.8. The average county-level crude IR among long-stay residents was 116.9 (SD: 82.1) with a minimum of 0.0 and maximum of 873.2. Short-stay county-level RSIRs per 1,000 person-years were a mean 110.6 (SD: 29.8) with a minimum of 32.7 and maximum of 340.9 (Figure 1). Long-stay county-level RSIRs were a mean 100.5 (SD: 50.2) with a minimum of 19.7 and maximum of 685.4 (Figure 1).

Geospatial Analysis of Pneumonia and Influenza Incidence Rates

The highest crude IRs and RSIRs were concentrated among counties in the Midwestern and Southern parts of the U.S. for both short-stay and long-stay residents (Supplementary Figure S2, Supplementary Figure S3, Figure 1). Positive spatial autocorrelation of county-level RSIRs was observed for short-stay residents (Moran’s I: 0.14, p<0.01) and long-stay residents (Moran’s I: 0.23, p<0.01). Clusters of counties with short-stay residents with High-High RSIRs were observed in the Southern and Midwestern parts of the U.S., with Low-Low clusters along East and West coasts (Figure 1). A similar pattern of county-level P&I events was observed for counties with long-stay residents, though the High-High clusters extended further East and the Low-Low clusters extended further from East to West (Figure 1). Outlier counties differed between the short-stay and long-stay populations.
DISCUSSION

In this national study of LTCF residents, we found marked geographic variation in the rates of P&I for both short-stay and long-stay populations. For both populations, higher RSIRs were observed for counties in the Southern and Midwestern parts of the U.S., with lower RSIRs in counties along the East and West coasts. Clustering of counties with similar P&I rates was present for all LTCF residents, but particularly pronounced for long-stay residents. The clustering of adjacent counties with high and low P&I rates suggests that important factors influencing LTCF P&I rates may exist at the county-level, with differences in outlier counties reinforcing that possibility. Counties with the highest and lowest rates might be particularly influenced by geographically-varying characteristics such as hospital proximity or similar policies across chain-affiliated LTCFs. Outlier counties with low rates might have unique programs to manage P&I within LTCFs, while those with high rates might lack formal infection prevention and management policies [8]. Similarities between county-level short-stay and long-stay P&I rates may result from the co-location of residents in the same LTCF, with rates reduced by similar infection prevention programs. Conversely, differences may reflect the intensity of services provided for the short-stay population, reflecting less need to hospitalize for P&I compared to the long-stay population. Our study provides foundational evidence to inform strategic efforts at the county level to improve health outcomes of older adults by reducing and managing LTCF P&I infections.

When considering factors that may affect P&I, differences in county-level quality of care and LTCF practices may explain some of the observed geographic variation [4]. LTCF staffing hours and the presence of skilled staff, such as nurse practitioners or physician assistants, have been associated with reduced P&I event rates and likely vary by county [4, 9]. LTCF resident pneumococcal and influenza vaccination rates also vary geographically and could be explanatory [2, 10]. Additionally, state departments of health may influence vaccination rates by
providing vaccines directly to LTCFs, reducing supply disruptions [11]. Hospitals may have also established relationships with LTCFs specifically to reduce infections or resident hospitalizations [12]. Such relationships may lead to distinct patterns of P&I across counties served by specific hospitals. These findings suggest more research is necessary to identify and understand the factors affecting geographic variation in P&I rates among LTCF residents.

Our study has several limitations. First, while risk-standardization of county-level estimates adjusts for differences in person-level characteristics related to P&I risk, it does not adjust for other county-level differences. Second, some counties have a higher number of unique LTCF residents and thus more person-time, which influences the precision of risk-standardized rates across counties. Third, our measure of P&I is subject to error since coding of P&I on hospital claims varies geographically, and does not disentangle variation in P&I hospitalizations from geographic variation in hospital coding practices. Also, using hospital claims provides a measure that may capture severe incident P&I, but may not capture mild P&I events not requiring hospitalization. Finally, we did not explore seasonality of infections or set outbreak thresholds. Further study of these factors is warranted to shed additional light on regional care practices. Other limitations have been previously described [4].

In conclusion, we found wide variation in county-level P&I hospitalization rates for short-stay and long-stay LTCF residents. Well-defined clusters of high rates for both populations appeared in counties of the Midwestern and Southern U.S. These findings can help local public health authorities and clinicians effectively reduce P&I by targeting resources and efforts to counties with high P&I rates. Additional research is necessary to identify the sources of geographic variation in P&I and support improved health outcomes of frail older adults in LTCFs.
NOTES

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Conflicts of Interest

Potential conflicts of interest. EB, ARZ, KWM, PM, KMM, and CAP declare no conflicts of interest. RVA and AC are employed by Sanofi Pasteur. SG reports grants from Seqirus, Sanofi; and consulting or speaker fees from Sanofi, Seqirus, Merck, Longeveron, Gerontological Society of America related to vaccines or nursing home care quality. VM’s research is in an area related to that of several different paid activities. VM also periodically serves as a paid speaker at national conferences, where he discusses trends and research findings in long-term and post-acute care. VM holds stock of unknown value in PointRight, Inc., an information services company providing advice and consultation to various components of the long-term care and post-acute care industry, including suppliers and insurers. PointRight sells information on measurement of nursing home (NH) quality to NHs and liability insurers. VM was a founder of the company but has divested much of his equity in the company and relinquished his seat on board. VM Chairs the Independent Quality Committee for HRC Manor Care, Inc., a nursing home chain, for which he receives compensation in the $20,000 to $40,000 range. VM serves as chair of a scientific advisory committee for NaviHealth, a post-acute care service organization, for which he also receives compensation in the $20,000 to $40,000 per year range. VM serves as a technical expert panel member on several Centers for Medicare and Medicaid quality measurement panels. VM is a member of the board of directors of Tufts Health Plan Foundation, Hospice Care of Rhode Island, and The Jewish Alliance of Rhode Island.
REFERENCES


FIGURE LEGENDS

Figure 1. A, Risk-standardized incidence rates (RSIRs) of pneumonia and influenza hospitalizations per 1,000 resident person-years among short-stay residents in long-term care facilities (LTCFs) by U.S. county (N=2,745). B, Anselin Local Moran's I county-level clustering of RSIRs among short-stay residents. C, Risk-standardized incidence rates (RSIRs) of pneumonia and influenza hospitalizations per 1,000 resident person-years among long-stay residents in long-term care facilities (LTCFs) by U.S. county (N=2,784). D, Anselin Local Moran's I county-level clustering of RSIRs among long-stay residents. The following county types can be identified: Not Significant, the county has non-significant clustering with Local Moran's I p>0.05; High-High Cluster, a county with a high value surrounded by counties with similarly high values; High-Low Outlier, a county with a high value surrounded by counties with low values; Low-Low Clusters, a county with a low value surrounded by similarly low values; Low-High Outlier, a county with a low value surrounded by counties with high values.