Environmental health priorities of residents and professionals: Implications for improving environmental health services in rural versus urban communities

Abstract

Previous research has suggested differences between public and professional understanding of the field of environmental health (ENH) and the role of ENH services within urban and rural communities. This study investigated ENH priority differences between 1) rural and urban residents and 2) residents and ENH professionals, and presents quantitative and qualitative methods for establishing locality specific ENH priorities. Residents (N=588) and ENH professionals (N=63) in Alabama identified ENH priorities via a phone or online survey. We categorized rurality of participants’ residences by rural-urban commuting area codes and population density and tested whether ENH priorities were different between urban and rural residents. Built environment issues, particularly abandoned houses, and air pollution were high priorities for urban residents; whereas, water and sanitation issues, and paper mill related pollution were high priorities in rural communities. ENH professionals ranked food safety and water and sanitation issues as higher priorities compared to residents. Results highlight the importance of urbanicity on environmental risk perception and the utility of simple and inexpensive engagement methods for understanding these differences. Resident-ENH professional differences suggest improving stakeholder participation in local-level ENH decision making may lead to greater awareness of ENH services, which may improve support and effectiveness of those services.

Keywords: Environmental health; Place-based health disparities; Rural versus urban communities; Community-engaged approach; Health risk perception