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Where COVID-19 Testing Lags Community Need in Northeast Illinois

Residents Who Are Uninsured or Undocumented Most Likely to be Undertested, New Research by UChicago Poverty Lab Finds

CHICAGO – As Illinois seeks to reduce COVID-19 positivity rates as part of Governor Pritzker’s *Restore Illinois* recovery plan, [new research](#) by the [UChicago Poverty Lab](#) finds that communities with high shares of **residents who are uninsured** or of **residents who are undocumented** are most likely to be in need of expanded testing.

These two characteristics were consistently associated with higher test positivity rates, according to the Poverty Lab’s analysis, which also looked at community-level characteristics including racial composition, household size, density of essential workers and population density. Furthermore, the analysis shows that while overall testing in Illinois has increased, testing in these two communities lags in proportion to test positivity rates, suggesting they face additional barriers to testing and care.

Key Findings for the Northeast Region of Illinois:

- **For residents who are undocumented:** A neighborhood in the top 10th percentile for residents without citizenship status has an average test positivity rate that is 84 percent higher than the regional average, but a testing rate that is only 49 percent higher.
- **For residents who are uninsured:** A neighborhood in the top 10th percentile for uninsured residents has a test positivity rate that is 78 percent higher than the regional average, but a testing rate that is only 52 percent higher.

“Illinois policymakers have succeeded in dramatically expanding testing while reducing test positivity rates across much of the state. Nevertheless, our study shows that communities that are home to larger shares of residents who are uninsured or undocumented continue to have higher test positivity rates,” said economist and Poverty Lab researcher **Matt Notowidigdo**. “As policymakers work to expand access to testing, it is important to prioritize these communities, as WHO guidance indicates that a positive test rate above 10 percent may imply that many infected individuals may benefit from being identified.”

These findings do not negate well documented evidence of unevenly distributed COVID-19 mortality risks, but rather provide policymakers with new information for identifying infected individuals and thereby reducing transmission.

“We know that the mortality risk sharply increases for medically vulnerable patients, African Americans, and residents of long-term care facilities, and policymakers should continue pursuing targeted strategies for these individuals,” said **Carmelo Barbaro**, Executive Director of the Poverty Lab. “By focusing upstream on need, capacity, and equitable access to testing, our study provides policymakers with an additional lens for addressing the pandemic, reducing transmission to the highest-risk groups, and keeping Illinois on the path to recovery.”

Full analysis, including graphs and recommendations to local policymakers:

<https://urbanlabs.uchicago.edu/projects/where-covid-19-testing-lags-community-need-in-illinois>

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About UChicago Poverty Lab

Founded in 2015, [The University of Chicago Poverty Lab](https://urbanlabs.uchicago.edu) conducts rigorous experimental studies that lead to greater economic opportunity for communities that have been harmed by disinvestment and segregation. The lab partners with policymakers, community-based organizations and others to identify their most urgent and pressing challenges, co-generate evidence about what works, and translate findings into policy changes that reduce urban poverty and improve people’s lives. One of five Urban Labs based at the [Harris School of Public Policy](https://harris.uchicago.edu), the Poverty Lab is led by Pritzker Director [Marianne Bertrand](https://povertylab.uchicago.edu), Chris P. Dialynas Distinguished Service Professor of Economics at the Booth School of Business. <https://povertylab.uchicago.edu>