



# Critical access medication for opioid use disorder (MOUD) treatment facilities in the continental United States

Harold A. Pollack<sup>a,b,c,\*</sup>, Francis Lee<sup>d</sup>, Susan Paykin<sup>e</sup>, Javier Andres Rojas Aguilera<sup>e</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy & Practice, University of Chicago, 969 East 60th St., Chicago, IL 60637, United States

<sup>b</sup> University of Chicago Urban Health Lab, 33 North LaSalle St., Chicago, IL 60602, United States

<sup>c</sup> Department of Public Health Sciences, University of Chicago, 5841 S Maryland Ave, Chicago, IL 60637, United States

<sup>d</sup> Department of Medicine and Epidemiology, University of Chicago, 5841 S Maryland Ave, Chicago, IL 60637, United States

<sup>e</sup> Center for Spatial Data Science, University of Chicago, 1155 East 60th St. Room 212, Chicago, IL 60637, United States

## A B S T R A C T

**Research objective:** Medication opioid use disorder (MOUD) treatment is the first-line approach to the treatment of opioid use disorder (OUD). This analysis seeks to identify “critical access” MOUD facilities that ensure geographic access for MOUD patients. Using public-source data and spatial analysis, we identify the top 100 “critical access” MOUD units across the continental U.S.

**Study design:** We use locational data from SAMHSA’s Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator and DATA 2000 waiver buprenorphine providers. We identify the closest MOUDs to each ZIP Code Tabulation Area (ZCTA)’s geographic centroid. We then construct a difference-in-distance metric by computing the difference in this distance measure between closest and second-closest MOUD, multiplied by ZCTA population, ranking MOUDs by difference-distance scores.

**Population studied:** All listed MOUD treatment facilities and all listed ZCTA’s across the continental U.S., and all listed MOUD providers proximate to these areas.

**Principal findings:** We identified the top 100 critical access MOUD units in the continental United States. Many critical providers were in rural areas in the central United States, as well as a band extending east from Texas to Georgia. Twenty-three of the top 100 critical access providers were identified as providing naltrexone. Seventy-seven were identified as providing buprenorphine. Three were identified as providing methadone.

**Conclusions:** Significant areas of the United States are dependent on a single critical access MOUD provider.

**Implications for policy or practice:** Place-based supports may be warranted to support MOUD treatment access in areas dependent upon critical access providers.

## 1. Introduction

Medication for opioid use disorder treatment (MOUD) improves medical outcomes, well-being, and social functioning for many patients who experience opioid use disorders (Johnson et al., 1992; Mattick et al., 2009; Minozzi et al., 2011). Ensuring proper access to MOUD is thus a key priority in public health. While patients in-need of MOUD often face financial (Liebling et al., 2016) or social (Schleimer et al., 2021) barriers to treatment access, simple geographic proximity is a basic concern for many patients (Saloner et al., 2022).

Previous work examining geographic factors and substance use disorder treatment adherence has found that travel distance was a pivotal factor in treatment adherence (Amiri et al., 2018; Amiri et al., 2020). While recent research has examined geographic availability by region (Cantor et al., 2021) and by urban-rural contrasts (Kiang et al., 2021) we examine geographic availability relative to the presence/absence of other local MOUD providers. As there many barriers may hinder consistent treatment for opioid use disorder (OUD), including cost, transportation, and job schedules, we seek to explore the closest treatment facilities for three types of treatment and identify key

strategic points to identify areas that may be under-served from local resources. Cole et al. (2019) found that every additional mile from an MOUD provider was associated with a 1.2% reduction in the odds of receiving MOUD (Cole et al., 2019 cited in Saloner et al., 2022). Geographic proximity is also associated with fewer missed methadone doses, and with longer duration of buprenorphine treatment (Cole et al., 2019).

Given the importance of such proximity, we seek in this short paper to identify MOUD providers who play a critical role in ensuring geographic proximity for nearby communities—providers whose absence might create a treatment ‘desert’ were they to shut down or prove unable to treat additional patients.

## 2. Methods

We measured geographic access to MOUD resources using the following data sources. The primary data source was the SAMHSA Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator for all substance use treatment facilities providing methadone and extended-release naltrexone (derived from the 2019 National Survey of Substance Abuse Treatment Services) and DATA 2000 waiver buprenorphine providers, obtained on August

\* Corresponding author at: Harold Pollack, Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy & Practice, University of Chicago, 969 East 60th St., Chicago, IL 60637, United States.

E-mail address: [haroldp@uchicago.edu](mailto:haroldp@uchicago.edu) (H.A. Pollack).

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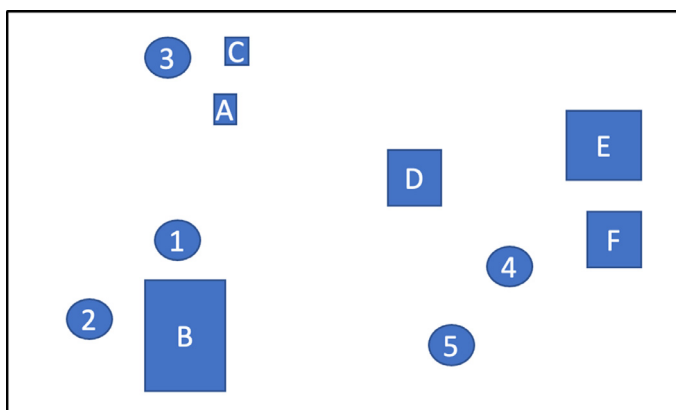


Fig. 1. Conceptual Illustration of critical access providers.

29, 2020. All analyses were conducted in R version 3.6.0. A total of 43,502 unique MOUD treatment providers were included in the analysis.

We included all ZIP Code Tabulation Areas (ZCTA)s in the U.S.. ZCTAs are generalized aerial representations of populated US Postal Service ZIP Code service areas. From every ZCTA in the US, we identify the top 5 closest providers to the geographic center (centroid) of the ZCTA and their corresponding distances. Distance was measured by Euclidean (straight line) distance, from each MOUD location to the ZCTA centroid, as an approximation of travel distance. Alaska and Hawaii were not included in this analysis. MOUD providers at the same physical location (as indicated by common latitude and longitude) were considered to be a common resource for the purposes of this analysis.

We then examine the difference in distances between the closest and second-closest provider from that area, to quantify the distance one must travel beyond the closest provider in order to reach the second provider if the closest were unavailable. We aggregate these additional distances from every zip code to characterize a notion of the strategic value of the provider with regards to distance traveled. We then weight distance metrics by population, to gauge which units are critical access for many people.

Fig. 1 provides geographic intuition regarding the access challenge. Here MOUD treatment units are shown as circles. The zip codes that utilize a particular treatment center are shown as squares. The area of each square represents population size.

As shown, MOUD Unit 4 is the closest unit to zip codes D, E, and F. These zip codes are also reasonably populated. Unit 1 is the closest unit to a highly-populated zip code. However, Unit 2 is nearly the same distance from that service area. Unit 3 is closest to several zip codes, but the affected service areas are thinly populated. On our population-weighted distance metric, Unit 4 would thus likely be judged the most important critical-access unit, given the combination of these factors.

The mathematics of our method is presented formally in Eq. (1) below. We may characterize the critical access value (CAV) of a particular clinic (denoted as  $C_j$ ) out of the set of all providers ( $C$ ) below for the centroid of a zip code ( $z_i$ ) from the first zip code to the last by calculating the distance ( $Dist$ ).

$$CAV(C_j) = \sum_{i=z_1}^{z_n} I(\text{argmin}(Dist(C, z_i)_{(1)} == C_j) * (Dist(C, z_i)_{(2)} - Dist(C, z_i)_{(1)})) \tag{1}$$

In our analysis, the critical-access value of a particular provider is dependent on the distance of the other providers available in adjacent areas, measuring additional travel distance as opposed to absolute travel distance. Thus, if the closest provider to a particular zip code is 50 miles away, and the second-closest is 51 miles away, our measure would characterize the critical-access value of that provider associated with that zip code as 1 mile. We weight these distances traveled by the zip code's population.

Table 1  
Top 100 critical-access providers, Continental United States.

Treatment	Number of Critical-access Providers	Proportion of Non-Critical-access Providers offering medication
Offers Naltrexone	23	19.6%
Offers Buprenorphine	77	80.7%
Offers Methadone	3	2.93%

We also threshold the traveling distance of the closest provider as needing to be within 100 miles away from the centroid of the zip code to have its critical-access value counted, under the assumption that people will not travel more than 100 miles to receive treatment. Based on this metric, we identify the top 100 critical-access MOUD providers in the continental United States. We then analyze characteristics of these providers (identified treatment type) and the areas surrounding it. Publicly available data from the U.S.Census describing the 2019 population showcase the population sizes of a zip code within that year.

### 3. Results

The top 100 critical-access MOUD units are mapped in Fig. 2 below (See Appendix Table A1 for more specific information.). Table 1 presents the corresponding treatment modality of critical-access units, compared with others.

We compare the proportion of different types of treatment available relative to the treatments offered by providers that aren't in this subset in Table 1 (Percentages do not add to 100, because some providers offer multiple forms of MOUD.). Seventy-seven of the top 100 providers offered buprenorphine service, four of which also offered naltrexone or methadone services. Three of the top 100 units offered methadone services, one of which also offered buprenorphine. Twenty-three of the top 100 units offered naltrexone, two of which also offered buprenorphine.

Differences between these proportions in critical-access versus other units are not statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 0.765, p = 0.68$ ). Binomial proportion tests indicate that the pairwise differences in the medication being dispensed are not statistically significant for buprenorphine ( $\hat{p} = 0.77, p = 0.3742$ ) naltrexone ( $\hat{p} = 0.23, p = 0.3791$ ), and methadone ( $\hat{p} = 0.03, p = 0.7695$ ), indicating no difference in the top 100 providers relative to the overall sample.

**Robustness analysis:** Our methodological assumptions are reasonable but arbitrary. We therefore varied these assumptions to examine whether these alter our qualitative results. In particular, we analyzed our data with a 50-mile rather than a 100-mile threshold. This lower threshold might be somewhat more realistic in suburban or urban areas. Although this reanalysis changes the dependence metrics and the subsequent ordering of critical access providers, we identify precisely the same list of the top 100 providers, indicating that our findings are robust to this assumption.

To assure the robustness of our results, we also examined the top 200 critical-access providers (See Fig. A1 and Table A1). We found generally similar geographic patterns to the top 100 providers, with one exception. We did identify more providers in the Illinois-Indiana-Kentucky

tristate area areas distinctively affected by the opioid overdose epidemic.

### 4. Discussion

Geography poses important barriers to initiation and continued engagement with MOUD treatment. In this analysis, we identify the top

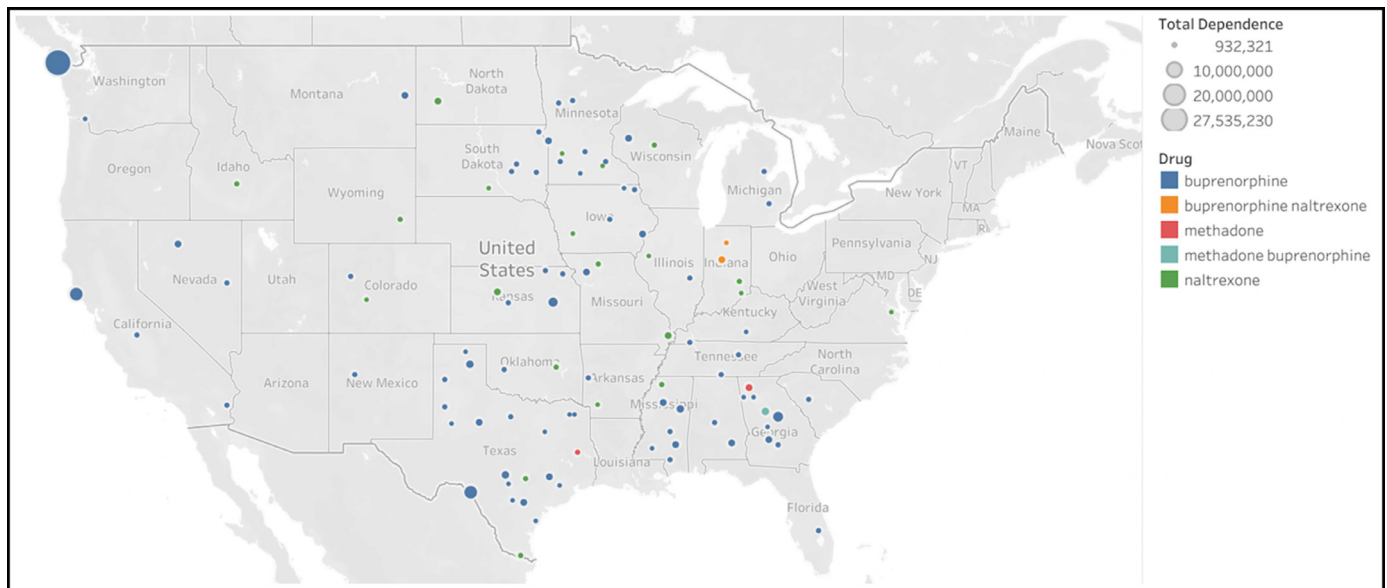


Fig. 2. Top 100 Critical Access MOUD treatment facilities, Continental United States.

100 critical access providers in the continental United States, whose presence specifically reduces these geographic barriers.

A conspicuous proportion of critical access providers are located in the central United States, roughly within a north-south segment bounded by Texas, Wisconsin, and North Dakota, and an additional ribbon extending east from Texas to Georgia in the Southeastern United States. Almost one-quarter of identified critical access providers are identified as providing naltrexone treatment. Only three of the top 100 critical access offer methadone treatment.

#### 4.1. Study limitations

Our findings should be considered in light of several study limitations.

First and foremost, our treatment access metric is based solely on geographic distance. Other barriers impact the practical accessibility and attractiveness of MOUD treatment beyond physical proximity. Euclidean distance may also provide a misleading metric for travel time in congested metropolitan areas. We will examine more realistic drive-time metrics in future work, drawing on zip-code-focused driving metrics now appearing in the literature (Hu et al., 2020).

Conversely, we do not consider geographic access barriers within a given zip code area. An MOUD provider is considered to have distance zero to any point within its own ZTAC. We also do not consider potential nonlinear relationships in our distance measures. If one MOUD provider is fifty miles from a ZTAC centroid and another is 51 miles away, our algorithm yields the same results as it would if one unit were three miles away, and another four miles away. Depending on local context, these may be qualitatively different situations, for example if patients are unwilling or unable to access treatment fifty miles away in the first example, or if patients lack access to an automobile.

We also do not model local demand for MOUD services. Given similar MOUD treatment capacity, areas with high concentration of OUD patients may experience greater access challenges. We hope to include these factors in future analyses, particularly given some patterns we observed in the set of top-200 critical-access providers.

Third, we provisionally accept as ground-truth the accuracy of our underlying SAMHSA treatment locator data. Existing studies underscore the limitations of these data (Beetham et al., 2019). Our data do not indicate whether a particular provider is accepting new patients and is well-equipped to serve those who seek MOUD care

(Presnall et al., 2022). Some units may not be taking new patients or favor patients with specific forms of insurance coverage (Richards et al., 2022). We hope in future work to audit treatment availability at these providers.

## 5. Conclusion

Particularly, but not exclusively, in midwestern and southeastern states, some areas of the United States are strikingly dependent on a limited set of critical-access providers for proximate access to MOUD care.

Also concerning is the high representation of naltrexone-only units among critical access providers. A notable fraction of MOUD patients state a preference for methadone or buprenorphine over naltrexone (Brenna et al., 2022). These findings are also concerning because injectable extended-release naltrexone may be less effective than other forms of MOUD in reducing overdose and other substance use risks (Lee et al., 2018; Murphy et al., 2019; Waddell et al., 2021).

Geographic dependence is particularly important in light of evidence that proximity exerts a strong impact on treatment adherence and care continuity. Most care-seekers do not wish to travel far to receive care (Garnick et al., 2020; Rosenbaum et al., 2011). Critical access MOUD units that service high local demand may face capacity constraints that likewise hinder treatment quality or timeliness (Bouchery et al., 2015).

Place-based supports may thus be warranted to expand, sustain, and ensure quality of MOUD treatment in areas dependent upon critical access providers. Given the importance of such providers, state substance use agencies and SAMHSA might specifically monitor these providers, monitoring on an annual basis whether these providers remain open and able to accept new patients. States and SAMHSA might also provide focused investments for quality assurance, staff recruitment/retention, and expanded capacity at these critical access providers. States and SAMHSA might provide additional supports for expanded treatment capacity in opioid “treatment deserts,” and other local areas identified as dependent upon critical-access providers (Hyder et al., 2021).

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**Declaration of Competing Interest**

No conflict declared.

**CRediT authorship contribution statement**

**Harold A. Pollack:** Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Francis Lee:** Formal analysis, Writing – original

draft, Writing – review & editing. **Susan Paykin:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing. **Javier Andres Rojas Aguilera:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing.

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**Appendix A**

**Table A1**  
top 200 Critical access providers.

	County	State	Medication(s) offered	Population-weighted Distance-dependence metric
1	CLALLAM	WA	buprenorphine	27,535,230
2	SONOMA	CA	buprenorphine	7,666,646
3	VAL VERDE	TX	buprenorphine	7,189,558
4	BALDWIN	GA	buprenorphine	4,408,768
5	LYON	KS	buprenorphine	3,784,824
6	OKTIBBEHA	MS	buprenorphine	3,136,198
7	GRAY	TX	buprenorphine	3,124,979
8	GILLESPIE	TX	buprenorphine	2,908,022
9	BUTTS	GA	Methadone, buprenorphine	2,565,032
10	SCOTT	MO	naltrexone	2,386,473
11	MUSCATINE	IA	buprenorphine	2,363,868
12	BARRON	WI	buprenorphine	2,317,933
13	CRISP	GA	buprenorphine	2,270,888
14	WASHINGTON	TX	buprenorphine	2,222,640
15	STARK	ND	naltrexone	2,138,097
16	JONES	MS	buprenorphine	2,088,920
17	DAWSON	MT	buprenorphine	2,081,360
18	GORDON	GA	methadone	2,026,169
19	CLINTON	IN	Buprenorphine, naltrexone	2,024,639
20	PIKE	AL	buprenorphine	1,980,596
21	BIG STONE	MN	buprenorphine	1,980,049
22	FISHER	TX	buprenorphine	1,973,202
23	KARNES	TX	buprenorphine	1,910,213
24	CLINTON	MO	buprenorphine	1,767,173
25	GRENADA	MS	buprenorphine	1,757,270
26	HUMBOLDT	NV	buprenorphine	1,744,397
27	ELLIS	KS	naltrexone	1,730,476
28	CALLOWAY	KY	buprenorphine	1,685,738
29	GRUNDY	MO	naltrexone	1,625,589
30	HOCKLEY	TX	buprenorphine	1,616,198
31	ANGELINA	TX	methadone	1,593,926
32	ALLAMAKEE	IA	buprenorphine	1,582,640
33	BARTON	KS	buprenorphine	1,517,563
34	RIVERSIDE	CA	buprenorphine	1,517,490
35	LYON	MN	buprenorphine	1,509,129
36	MCLEOD	MN	buprenorphine	1,492,283
37	WASHITA	OK	buprenorphine	1,459,423
38	DEAFSMITH	TX	buprenorphine	1,445,785
39	HUBBARD	MN	buprenorphine	1,402,917
40	BEN HILL	GA	buprenorphine	1,361,640
41	DECATUR	IN	naltrexone	1,359,846
42	LIVINGSTON	MI	buprenorphine	1,356,314
43	BEADLE	SD	buprenorphine	1,355,987
44	YOUNG	TX	buprenorphine	1,330,806
45	HIDALGO	TX	naltrexone	1,324,484
46	TRAVIS	TX	naltrexone	1,310,891
47	COLES	IL	buprenorphine	1,308,716
48	SCOTT	AR	buprenorphine	1,302,085
49	MARSHALL	KS	buprenorphine	1,295,025
50	SCOTT	MS	buprenorphine	1,288,128
51	BLAINE	ID	naltrexone	1,287,290
52	LEXINGTON	SC	buprenorphine	1,287,129
53	OKEECHOBEE	FL	buprenorphine	1,279,762
54	GARFIELD	CO	buprenorphine	1,260,011
55	LINCOLN	TN	buprenorphine	1,251,945
56	LAKE	SD	buprenorphine	1,243,212

(continued on next page)

Table A1 (continued)

	County	State	Medication(s) offered	Population-weighted Distance-dependence metric
57	OKMULGEE	OK	naltrexone	1,242,566
58	BECKER	MN	buprenorphine	1,241,088
59	MARSHALL	IA	buprenorphine	1,233,832
60	LAMAR	MS	buprenorphine	1,232,547
61	TATE	MS	naltrexone	1,212,351
62	WHITE	TN	buprenorphine	1,189,744
63	CHILTON	AL	buprenorphine	1,188,389
64	CIBOLA	NM	buprenorphine	1,184,767
65	ROBERTS	SD	buprenorphine	1,177,767
66	MADERA	CA	buprenorphine	1,170,371
67	DAKOTA	MN	buprenorphine	1,159,978
68	ARENAC	MI	buprenorphine	1,151,992
69	BROWN	KS	buprenorphine	1,147,845
70	TAYLOR	WI	naltrexone	1,134,844
71	PLATTE	WY	naltrexone	1,132,298
72	WHITE PINE	NV	buprenorphine	1,115,386
73	JERAULD	SD	buprenorphine	1,111,957
74	SAN PATRICIO	TX	buprenorphine	1,100,518
75	LINCOLN	MS	buprenorphine	1,089,591
76	FRANKLIN	TX	buprenorphine	1,081,251
77	COBB	GA	buprenorphine	1,079,470
78	DAWSON	TX	buprenorphine	1,068,801
79	FULTON	IN	Buprenorphine, naltrexone	1,061,478
80	GUNNISON	CO	naltrexone	1,057,167
81	ATASCOSA	TX	buprenorphine	1,051,482
82	TITUS	TX	buprenorphine	1,046,498
83	KENDALL	TX	buprenorphine	1,039,651
84	YELLOW MEDICINE	MN	naltrexone	1,039,026
85	ELLIS	TX	buprenorphine	1,036,821
86	CASS	IA	naltrexone	1,032,618
87	POLK	GA	buprenorphine	1,015,221
88	RUSSELL	KY	buprenorphine	1,012,203
89	TRIPP	SD	naltrexone	1009,282
90	PEACH	GA	buprenorphine	989,532
91	HOWARD	IA	buprenorphine	986,274
92	RICE	MN	naltrexone	975,829
93	JEFFERSON	IN	naltrexone	975,283
94	CLARK	WA	buprenorphine	970,830
95	HEMPSTEAD	AR	naltrexone	958,577
96	FORT BEND	TX	buprenorphine	951,938
97	HANSFORD	TX	buprenorphine	948,863
98	PALM BEACH	FL	buprenorphine	945,653
99	RICHMOND	VA	naltrexone	938,132
100	MCDONOUGH	IL	naltrexone	932,321
101	OGLALA LAKOTA	SD	buprenorphine	927,951
102	JACKSON	IA	buprenorphine	926,029
103	CALHOUN	GA	buprenorphine	902,845
104	JACKSON	GA	methadone	901,497
105	REDWOOD	MN	buprenorphine	899,177
106	PRICE	WI	buprenorphine	891,024
107	FANNIN	GA	buprenorphine	886,245
108	SPOKANE	WA	naltrexone	880,333
109	KAUFMAN	TX	buprenorphine	878,673
110	MILLE LACS	MN	buprenorphine	878,195
111	STEPHENS	TX	buprenorphine	870,981
112	MARTIN	MN	naltrexone	870,938
113	CONECUH	AL	buprenorphine	865,711
114	WASHINGTON	MN	buprenorphine	863,425
115	PRENTISS	MS	buprenorphine	862,274
116	KERSHAW	SC	buprenorphine	859,459
117	GRANT	WA	naltrexone	850,558
118	GARVIN	OK	buprenorphine	848,256
119	MONTGOMERY	TX	buprenorphine	840,649
120	COLUMBIA	AR	buprenorphine	837,775
121	SHERBURNE	MN	buprenorphine	835,301
122	JEFFERSON DAVIS	LA	buprenorphine	834,256
123	VAN ZANDT	TX	naltrexone	814,706
124	HENDERSON	IL	buprenorphine	813,552
125	KAUFMAN	TX	naltrexone	810,953
126	CLAY	IA	buprenorphine	810,209
127	JEFFERSON	PA	naltrexone	809,642
128	WHITLEY	IN	Buprenorphine, naltrexone	806,691
129	OUACHITA	AR	buprenorphine	806,639
130	CLARE	MI	naltrexone	806,298
131	HUNTINGTON	IN	Buprenorphine, naltrexone	804,546

(continued on next page)

Table A1 (continued)

	County	State	Medication(s) offered	Population-weighted Distance-dependence metric
132	DEKALB	TN	naltrexone	796,619
133	SEVIER	AR	buprenorphine	793,737
134	SENECA	OH	naltrexone	790,865
135	OCONTO	WI	buprenorphine	789,830
136	LABETTE	KS	buprenorphine	786,944
137	PAWNEE	KS	buprenorphine	774,471
138	MERCED	CA	buprenorphine	771,770
139	POLK	MO	naltrexone	770,060
140	CLARKE	IA	naltrexone	768,588
141	SCOTT	MN	buprenorphine	766,138
142	VERNON PARISH	LA	buprenorphine	764,633
143	GIBSON	IN	buprenorphine	764,360
144	MARION	IA	methadone, naltrexone	762,957
145	HARDEMAN	TN	buprenorphine	747,544
146	MARION	OR	naltrexone	747,479
147	PONDERA	MT	buprenorphine	745,350
148	GREENE	VA	buprenorphine	743,584
149	NICOLLET	MN	buprenorphine	740,887
150	GREENE	MO	buprenorphine	737,733
151	JEFFERSON DAVIS	MS	buprenorphine	734,050
152	ASCENSION	LA	buprenorphine	733,767
153	YADKIN	NC	naltrexone	732,639
154	ELLIS	TX	buprenorphine	729,567
155	BOND	IL	naltrexone	723,735
156	COAHOMA	MS	buprenorphine	721,374
157	MADISON	MO	naltrexone	716,608
158	SIOUX	ND	buprenorphine	715,276
159	KINGMAN	KS	buprenorphine	709,199
160	PAGE	VA	naltrexone	709,110
161	TIPPECANOE	IN	buprenorphine	708,342
162	SABINE PARISH	LA	buprenorphine	706,437
163	MAHASKA	IA	buprenorphine	702,674
164	LOGAN	IL	buprenorphine	698,100
165	FRANKLIN	KS	naltrexone	696,224
166	PALO ALTO	IA	buprenorphine	684,732
167	CHRISTIAN	IL	buprenorphine	679,421
168	DORCHESTER	SC	buprenorphine	678,997
169	OTOE	NE	buprenorphine	674,897
170	ANDERSON	KY	naltrexone	674,889
171	ST. CROIX	WI	naltrexone	673,732
172	ALAMEDA	CA	buprenorphine	672,171
173	YANCEY	NC	buprenorphine	668,288
174	TAZEWELL	IL	buprenorphine	662,951
175	SHARKEY	MS	buprenorphine	662,025
176	UVALDE	TX	buprenorphine	660,173
177	BUREAU	IL	buprenorphine	659,628
178	COWLEY	KS	naltrexone	658,585
179	WARREN	MO	naltrexone	656,836
180	GREGG	TX	buprenorphine	656,119
181	MOBILE	AL	buprenorphine	651,260
182	NAVAJO	AZ	naltrexone	647,764
183	ST FRANCOIS	MO	buprenorphine	646,245
184	TAMA	MT	buprenorphine	642,348
185	TELFAIR	GA	buprenorphine	637,846
186	GUADALUPE	TX	buprenorphine	637,400
187	WELLS	IN	naltrexone	634,993
188	SACRAMENTO	CA	buprenorphine	633,898
189	TULSA	OK	buprenorphine, naltrexone	632,539
190	WOODS	OK	buprenorphine	632,259
191	MARION	AL	buprenorphine	627,502
192	COPIAH	MS	naltrexone	625,711
193	ONEIDA	WI	buprenorphine	624,605
194	TODD	KY	buprenorphine	624,462
195	FLOYD	IA	buprenorphine	624,130
196	LASALLE	IL	naltrexone	619,949
197	COCONINO	AZ	buprenorphine	619,660
198	FOND DU LAC	WI	buprenorphine	618,480
199	ALLEN	KS	buprenorphine	617,247
200	CARROLL	ME	buprenorphine	616,024

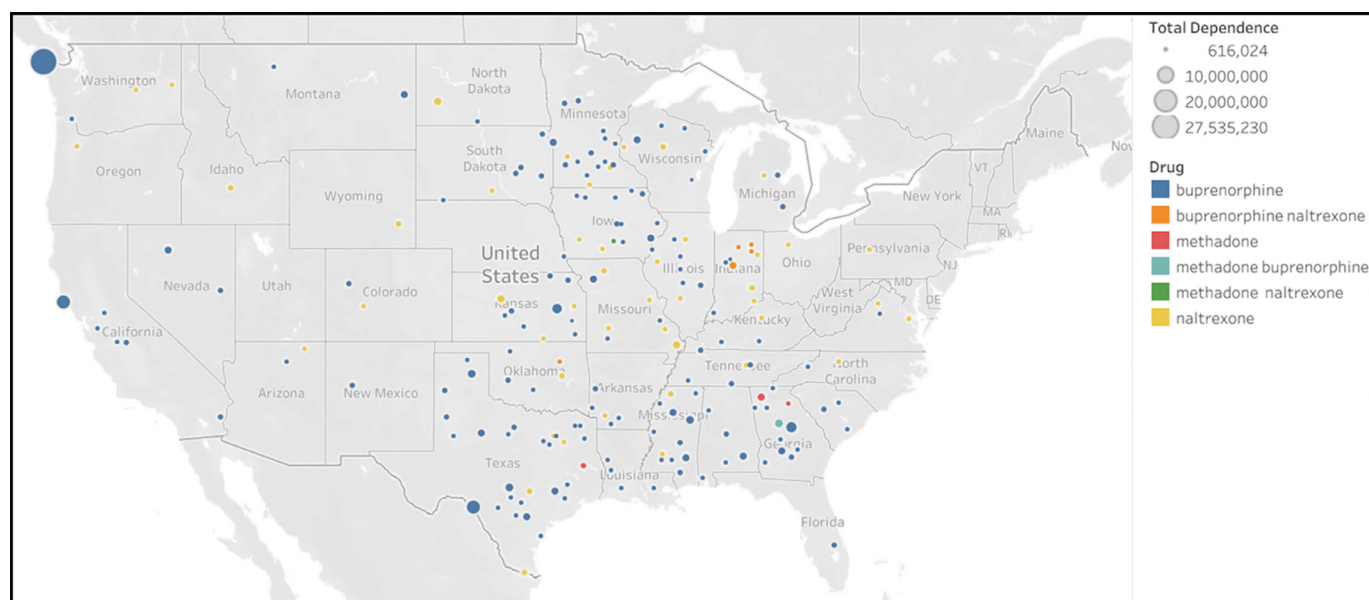


Fig. A1. Top 200 Critical Access MOUD treatment facilities, Continental United States.

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