As the pandemic escalates, rural counties with high shares of seasonally vacant housing are seeing higher rates of COVID-19 cases than either urban or other rural areas. In the nation’s 199 rural counties where seasonal housing accounts for 25 percent or more of all housing units, average cases per 100,000 are more than twice as high as in other rural counties and 15 percent higher than in urban areas as of April 5 (Figure 1). This is consistent with anecdotal reports of hot spots in popular vacation locations as visitors, including some who are unknowingly infected, exit urban areas attempting to socially distance at second homes and seasonal rental properties. There are, however, several possible explanations for the higher prevalence of cases including differences in the level of testing and the higher median age seen in these areas.

FIGURE 1. MEAN COVID-19 DIAGNOSES PER 100,000 BY COUNTY CHARACTERISTICS

Notes: “High” share of seasonal housing is defined as 25 percent or more of all housing units are for seasonal, recreational, or occasional use. Rural-urban designation uses the Economic Research Service’s (2013) Rural Urban Continuum Codes, the most recent available. Horizontal axis begins on February 20, 2020, the earliest reported diagnosis in a rural county.

Source: Author’s calculation using data from The New York Times, U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (2018 5-year estimates), and ERS Rural Urban Continuum Codes. NYT case data downloaded 4/6/20, covering through 4/5/20.