

Data Maps

These six maps report the age-adjusted death rate from various types of cancer for the 3,056 counties of the United States. Each map portrays some 21,000 numbers.¹ Only a picture can carry such a volume of data in such a small space. Furthermore, all that data, thanks to the graphic, can be thought about in many different ways at many different levels of analysis—ranging from the contemplation of general overall patterns to the detection of very fine county-by-county detail. To take just a few examples, look at the

- high death rates from cancer in the northeast part of the country and around the Great Lakes
- low rates in an east-west band across the middle of the country
- higher rates for men than for women in the south, particularly Louisiana (cancers probably caused by occupational exposure, from working with asbestos in shipyards)
- unusual hot spots, including northern Minnesota and a few counties in Iowa and Nebraska along the Missouri River
- differences in types of cancer by region (for example, the high rates of stomach cancer in the north-central part of the country—probably the result of the consumption of smoked fish by Scandinavians)
- rates in areas where you have lived.

The maps provide many leads into the causes—and avoidance—of cancer. For example, the authors report:

In certain situations . . . the unusual experience of a county warrants further investigation. For example, Salem County, New Jersey, leads the nation in bladder cancer mortality among white men. We attribute this excess risk to occupational exposures, since about 25 percent of the employed persons in this county work in the chemical industry, particularly the manufacturing of organic chemicals, which may cause bladder tumors. After the finding was communicated to New Jersey health officials, a company in the area reported that at least 330 workers in a single plant had developed bladder cancer during the last 50 years. It is urgent that surveys of cancer risk and programs in cancer control be initiated among workers and former workers in this area.²

¹ Each county's rate is located in two dimensions and, further, at least four numbers would be necessary to reconstruct the size and shape of each county. This yields $7 \times 3,056$ entries in a data matrix sufficient to reproduce a map.

In highest decile,
statistically significant



Significantly high, but
not in highest decile



In highest decile, but not
statistically significant



Not significantly different
from U.S. as a whole



Significantly lower than
U.S. as a whole



²Robert Hoover, Thomas J. Mason, Frank W. McKay, and Joseph F. Fraumeni, Jr., "Cancer by County: New Resource for Etiologic Clues," *Science*, 189 (September 19, 1975), 1006.

Maps from *Atlas of Cancer Mortality for U.S. Counties: 1950–1969*, by Thomas J. Mason, Frank W. McKay, Robert Hoover, William J. Blot, and Joseph F. Fraumeni, Jr. (Washington, D.C.: Public Health Service, National Institutes of Health, 1975). The six maps shown here were redesigned and redrawn by Lawrence Fahey and Edward Tufte.