Using Small Area Geographies for Health System Planning: A Provincial POV

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October 22, 2026

Ontario Health

Where Are We Going?

- Take a journey through the thought process of a **provincial level data team** tasked with providing geographic data for planning and decision-making **across Ontario**.
- Examine an example of a practical application of presenting multiple geographic units for health system planning: Primary Care Action Team (PCAT) Data Package.
- Brief discussion of possible future directions.



Source: Illustration by Mari Andrew. Available at: https://bymariandrew.com/

The Journey: Selecting Geographic Unit(s)

A Provincial Point of View

What's the Purpose and Context?

Different geographical units support different needs: there is no singular right answer

Who is doing the planning?

At what level does action occur?

What is the policy context?

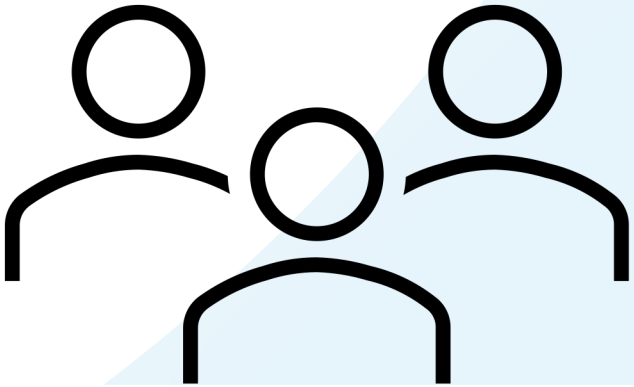
Does it work for Northern? Rural? Urban?

What kinds of comparisons need to be made?

Does it need to roll up to another level?

What geography has been used?

What base data do we have?



Do we need to align with historical data?

Is it intuitive?

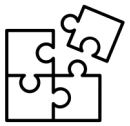
What are the Key Implementation Considerations?



Actionability: ensure the information is relevant to the current context and will inform action.



Replicability: confirm the geography could be readily reproduced by other organizations.



Coverage: determine whether there are gaps in coverage across the province.



Discernment: does a smaller geographic unit display differences that are masked by a larger one (e.g., socio-demographics)?



Privacy: consider the impact of small-cell suppression and the risk of residual disclosure. Will stratification and linkage be possible?

Which Geographies Should We Consider?

Health Administration

- Ontario Health Region
- Ontario Health Team
- Local Health Integration Network
- LHIN sub-region
- Regional Cancer Program boundaries
- Public Health Units

Census

- Dissemination Area (DA)
- Census Tract (CT)
- Census Subdivision (CSD)
- Aggregate Dissemination Area (ADA)

Postal Code

- Forward Sortation Area (FSA)

Other

- Neighbourhoods
- Custom geographies

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A note about OHTs: OHTs are not geographical units. Their population is defined by the Ontario Health Teams Attribution Model (OHTAM), which is based on where patients access services. FSAs were assigned "Primary OHTs" for primary care planning based on market share.

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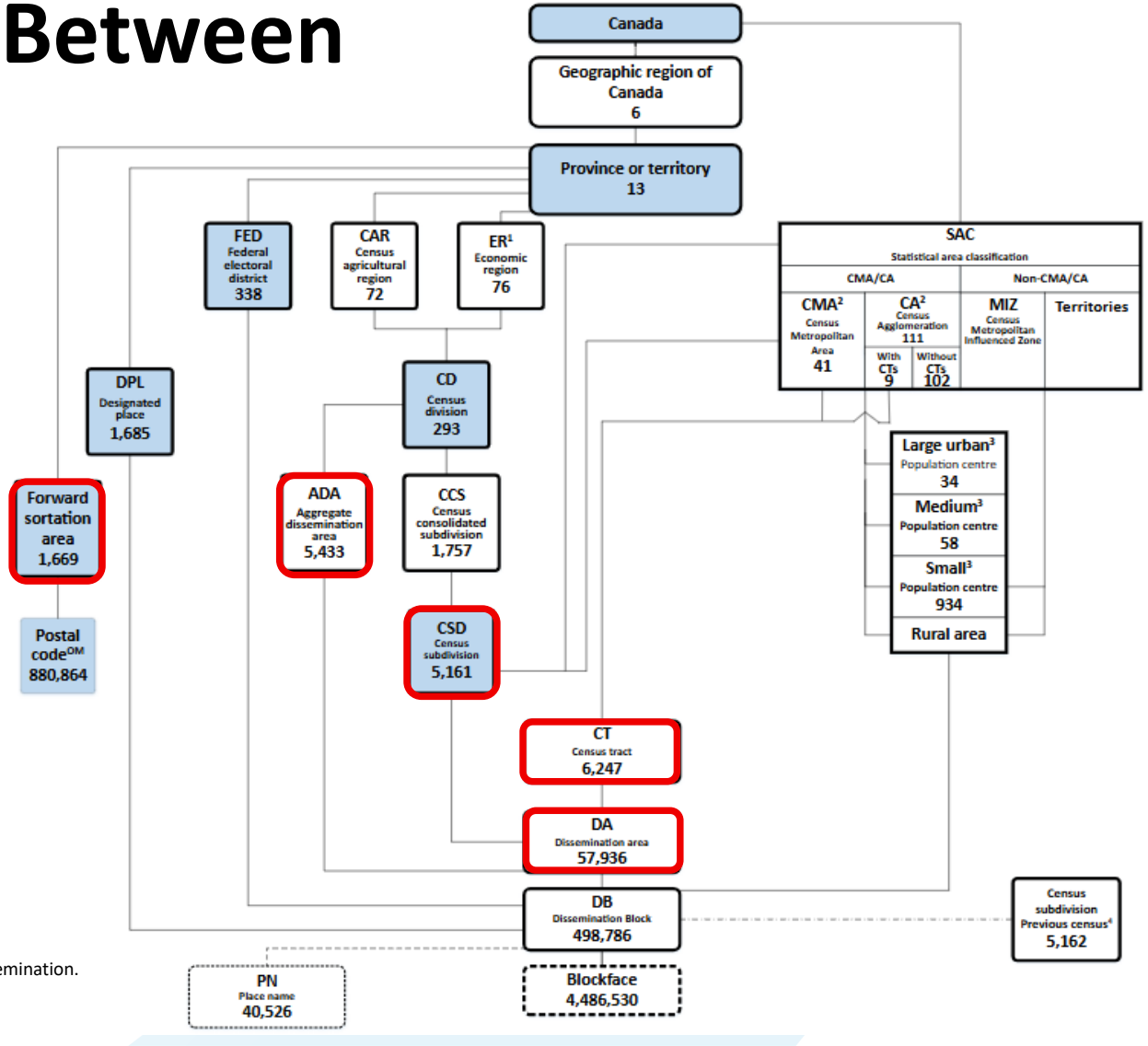
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Relationship Between Geographies



Source: Statistics Canada Hierarchy of Standard Geographies for Dissemination. Available at: https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/ref/dict/fig/index-eng.cfm?ID=F1_1

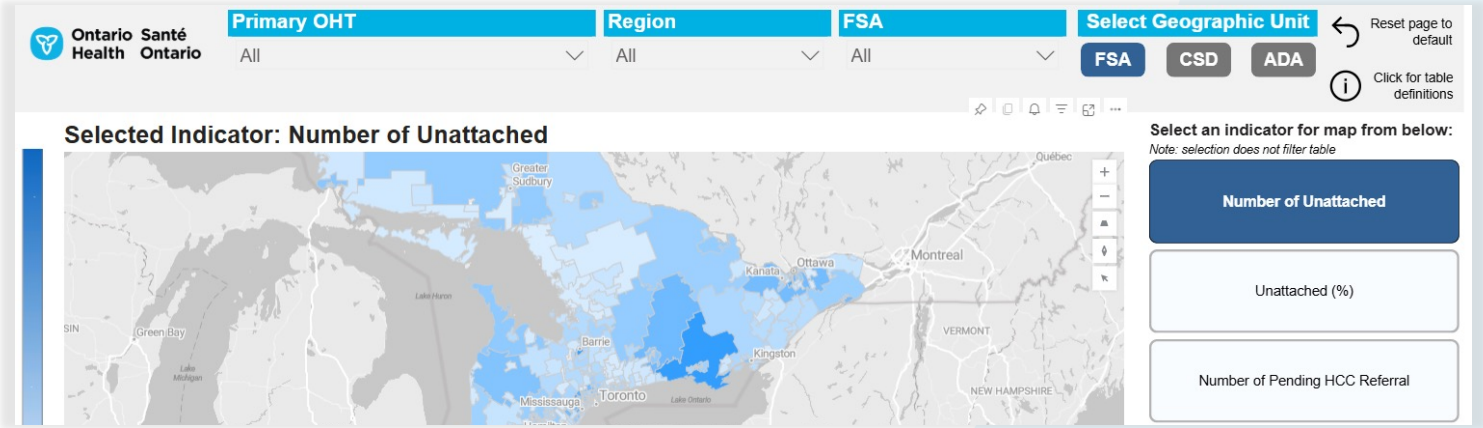
A Brief Comparison

Geographic Unit	Represents	Typical Population	Covers all of Ontario	Benefits	Challenges
Ontario Health Region	Health admin by geography	Varies	Yes	-A core part of health admin	-Masks local variability
Ontario Health Team (OHT)	Health admin by attributed population (or approx. geography)	Varies	Yes	-A core part of health admin	-Does not represent the OHTs attributed population -Masks local variability
Census Tract (CT)	Census admin/analysis	LT 7,500	No	-Building block for many urban neighbourhoods	-Lack of provincial coverage
Census Subdivision (CSD)	Municipality or similar	Varies	Yes	-Interpretability (recognizable)	-Variability in population and land size
Aggregate Dissemination Area (ADA)	Census admin/analysis	5,000-15,000	Yes	-Consistently population-based	-May not reflect how people access services
Forward Sortation Area (FSA)	Postal routes	Variable	Yes	-Interpretability (recognizable) -Already used extensively	-Variability in population and land size -Masks local variability in northern/rural settings
Neighbourhood	Variable	Variable	No	-Interpretability (recognizable)	-Conceptualized differently across areas -Lack of provincial coverage

A Stop in the Road: Current State

A Provincial Point of View

Where Did We Land?



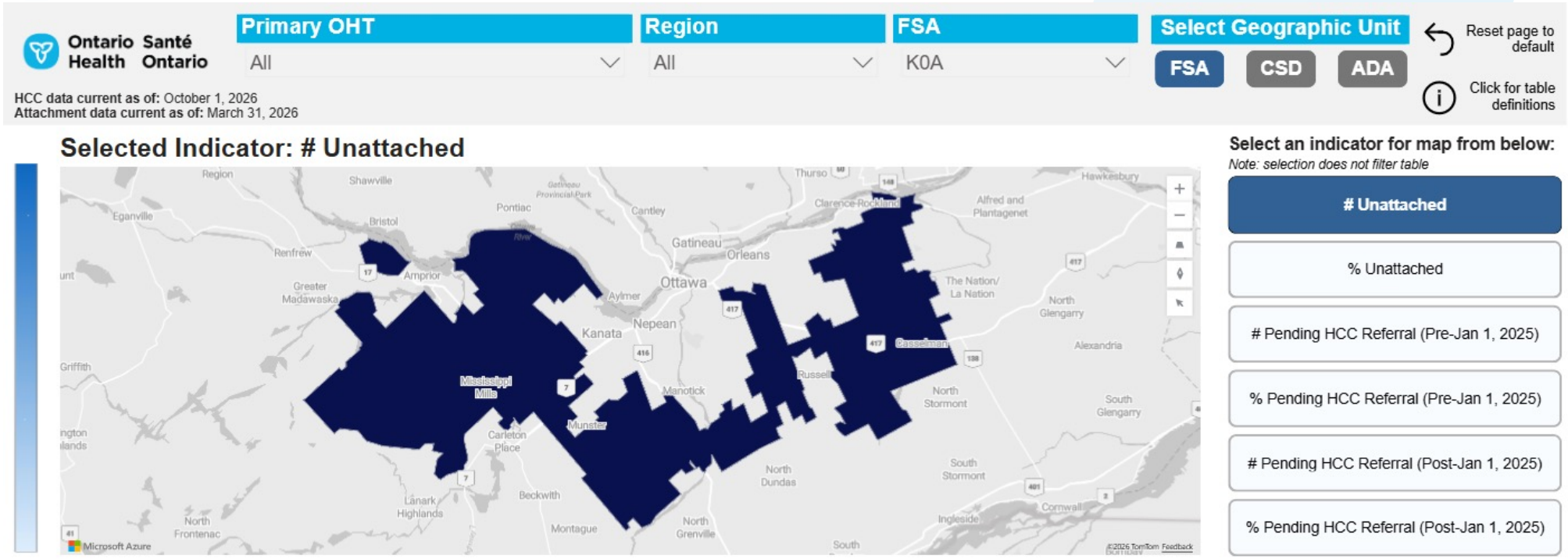
OHT Data Dashboard

- The OHT Data Dashboard is an interactive data tool that launched in fall 2022
- It is available to OHTs and their data partners via a secure platform called eReport
  - Users must have a valid OneID
- To access the OHT Data Dashboard email OHTanalytics@ontariohealth.ca
  - Because the Dashboard is for OHTs, non-OHT users must cc their OHT (apart from Indigenous organizations)

PCAT Data Package

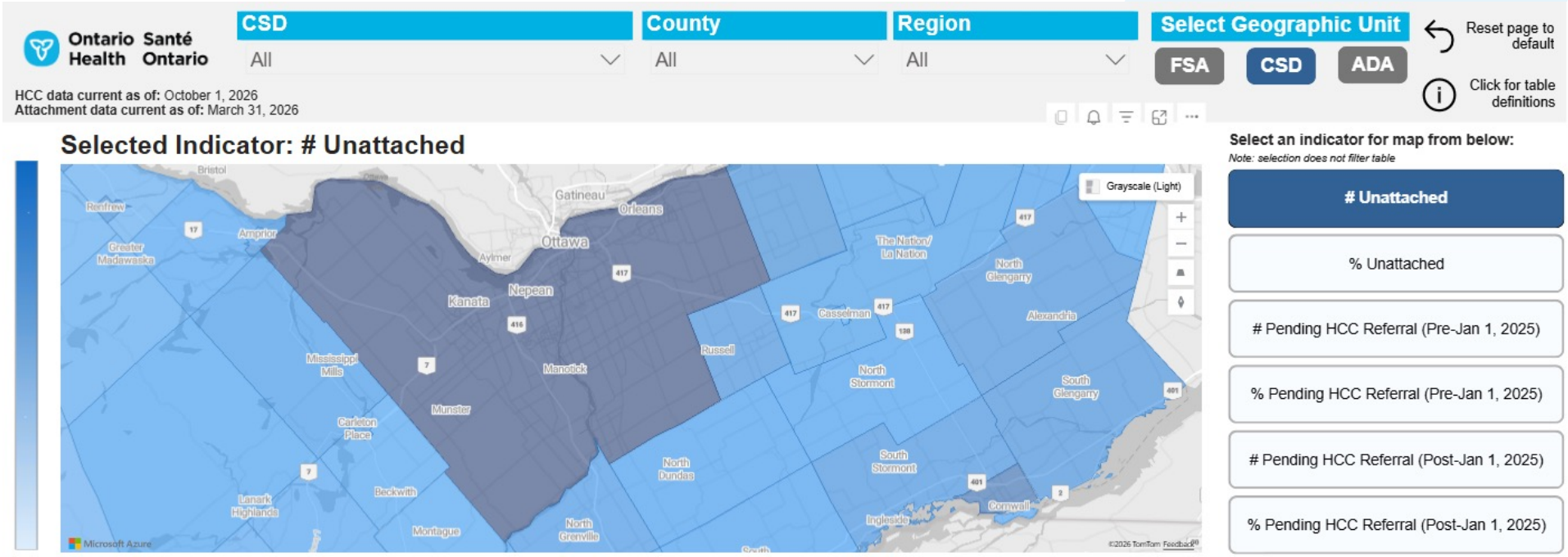
- A report within the OHT Data Dashboard
- It is a collaboration between the Ministry of Health and Ontario Health first released in spring 2025
- Information is available by region, OHT and forward sortation area (FSA); it is also available by census subdivision (CSD) and aggregate dissemination area (ADA) where indicated

East: K0A



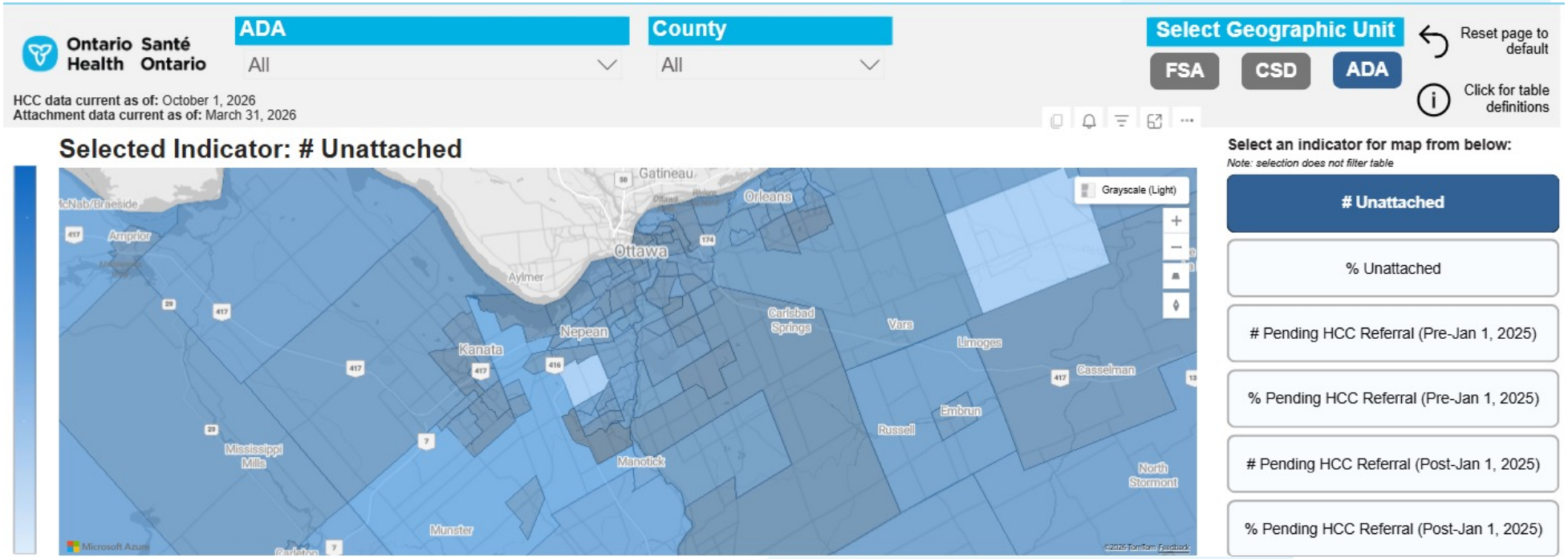
Ottawa West Four Rivers OHT

East: K0A



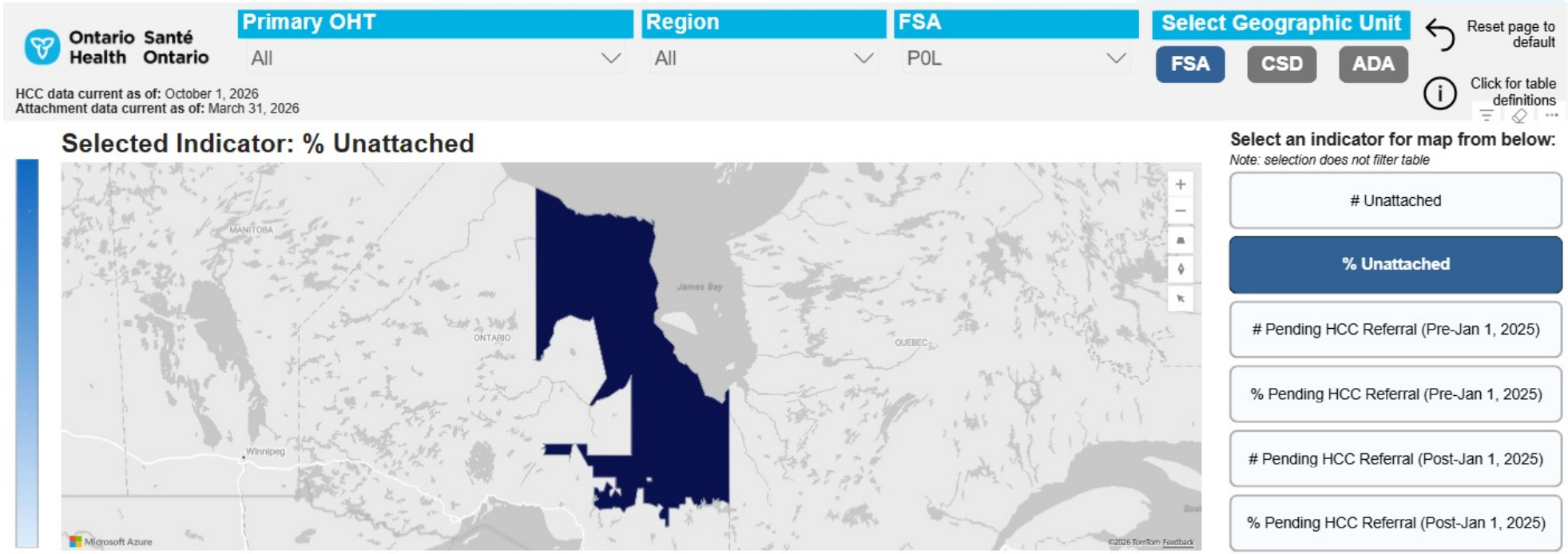
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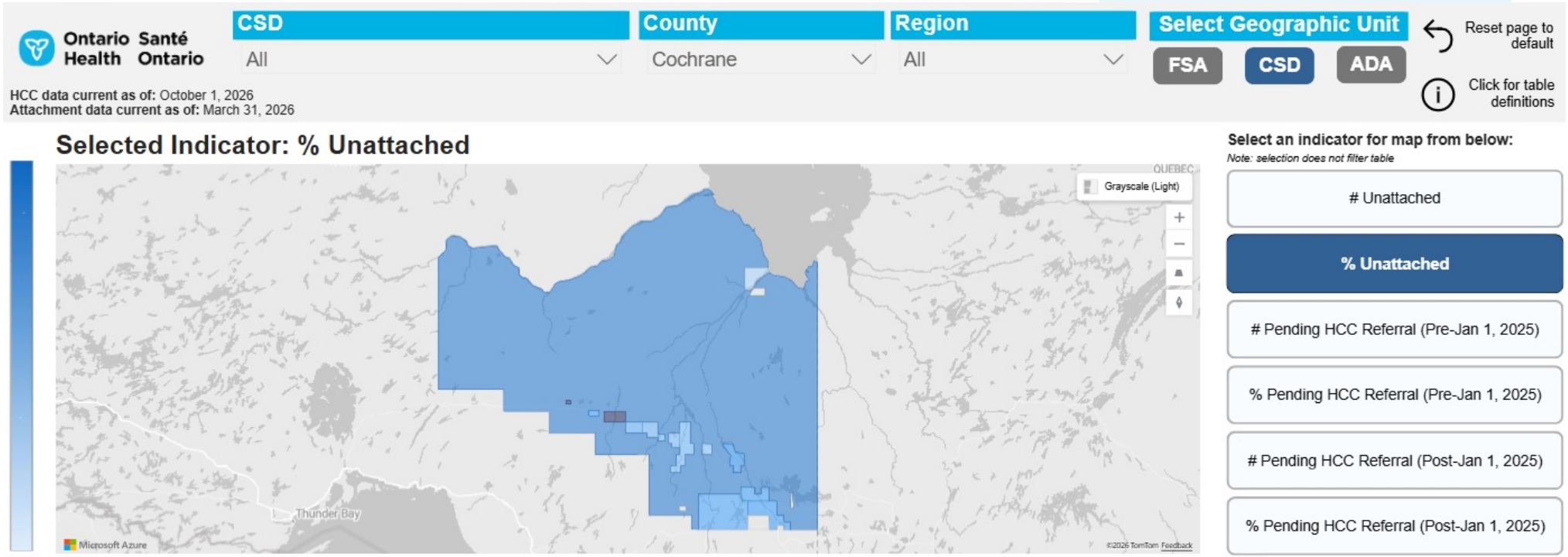
Ottawa West Four Rivers OHT

North East: P0L



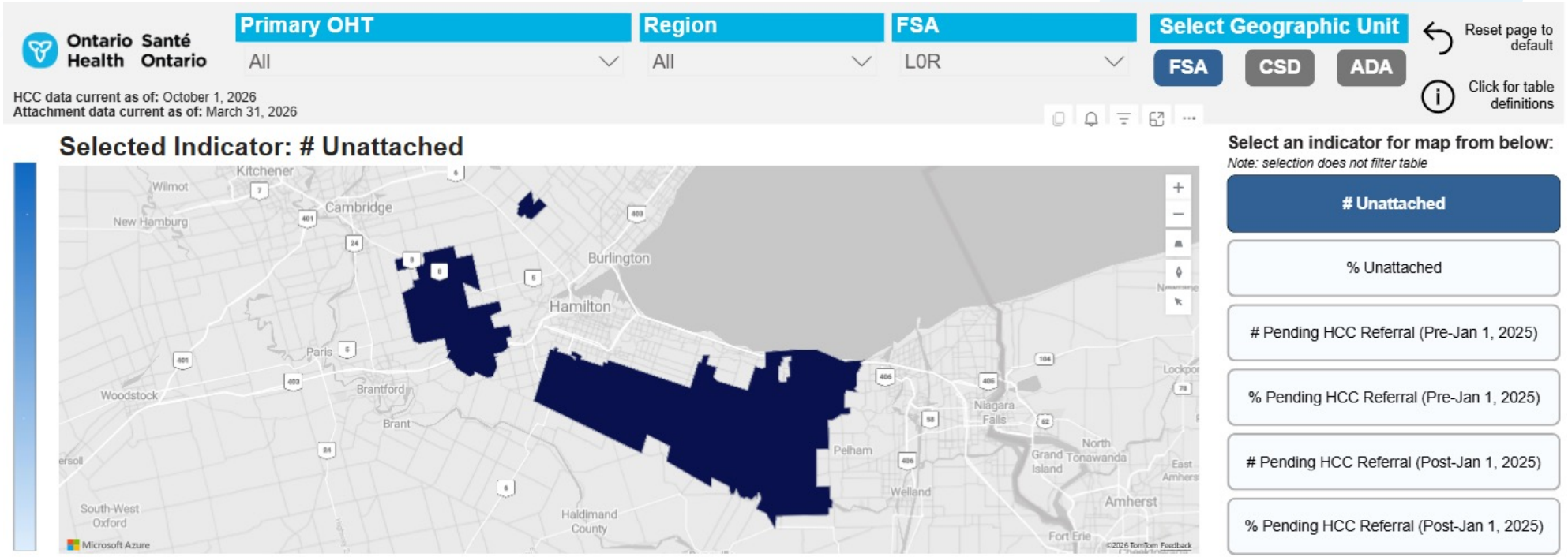
Cochrane District OHT

North East: P0L



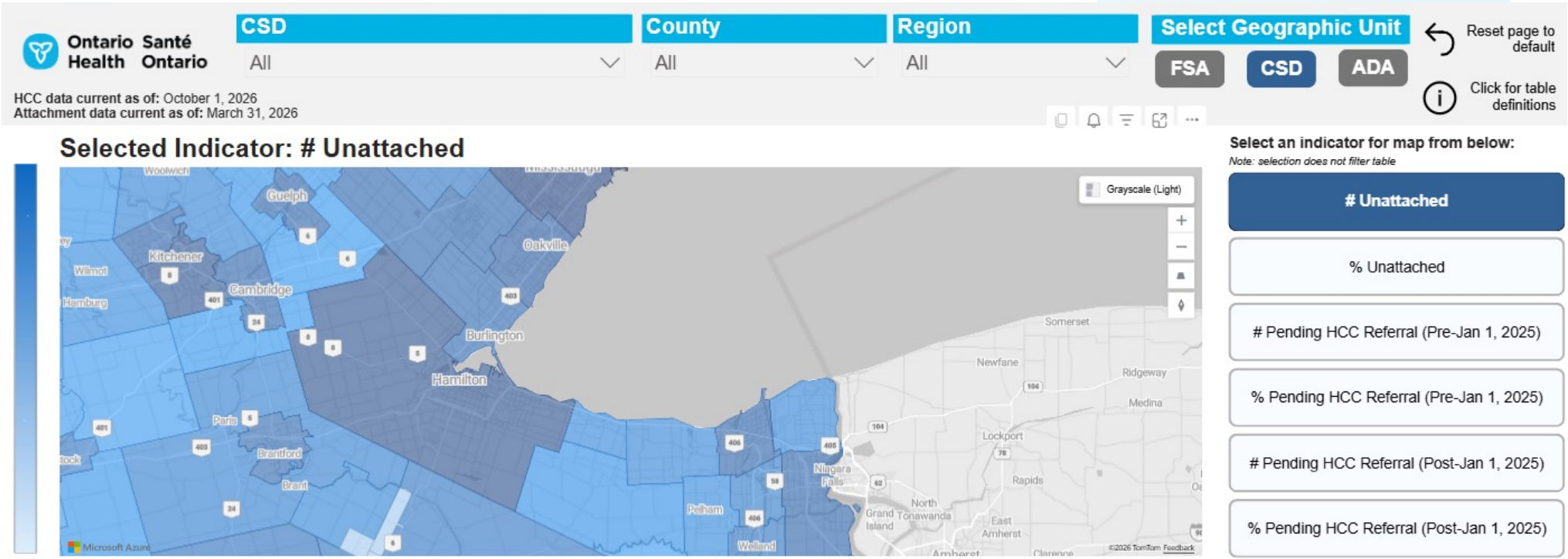
Cochrane District OHT

West: L0R



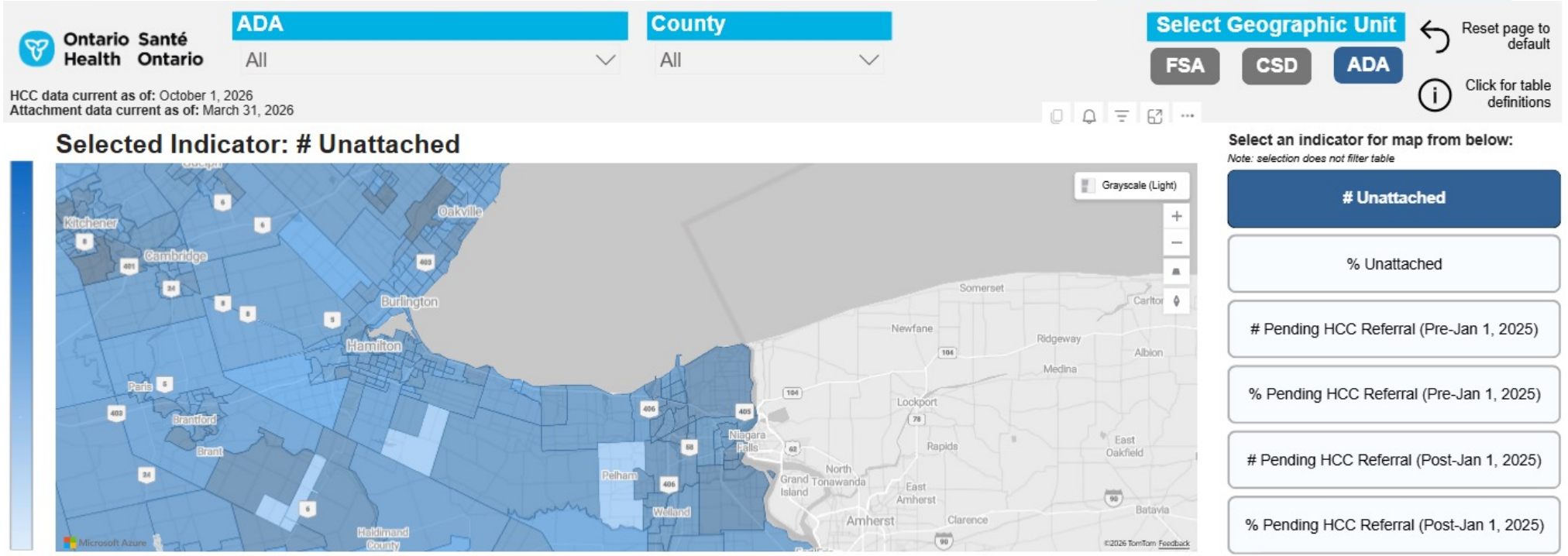
Greater Hamilton Health Network OHT

West: L0R



Greater Hamilton Health Network OHT

West: L0R



Greater Hamilton Health Network OHT

Onward into the Future

A Provincial Point of View

Where Could We Go in the Future?

Planned

- Integrate CSDs and ADAs across the OHT Data Dashboard

For consideration

- Provide more standard geographies? Like census tract (CT) and dissemination area (DA)?
  - Requires nuanced privacy discussion
  - Also need interpretation supports
- Incorporate more custom geographies that use standard building blocks?
  - Requires resourcing and sustainability discussion
- Consider alterative geographic indicators like drive time?
  - Requires methodological development

Thank you!

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