

County Health Rankings & Roadmaps

Building a Culture of Health, County by County

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County Health Rankings Reveal Well-Resourced Civic Infrastructure Linked to Better Health

Prioritizing Infrastructure Investments Can Fuel More Civically Active Communities and Healthier Residents

Madison, Wis. — Communities that offer places for their residents to gather and that encourage voting and participation in civic life also experience better health, higher high school completion rates, higher household incomes and less income inequality, according to the [2023 County Health Rankings](#) released today. Residents of these communities also tend to live longer.

Counties in the Northeast, West and some parts of the Midwest have more available and well-resourced civic infrastructure, including access to more civic spaces such as well-funded schools and parks and policies to ensure fair representation and inclusive participation such as automatic voter registration and early in-person voting.

“Our findings reveal that people and places thrive when all residents have the chance to participate in their communities,” said Sheri Johnson, principal investigator of County Health Rankings & Roadmaps and director of the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute. “History shows that we can remake systems and structures through civic participation that are beneficial to all.”

Key Findings:

- Well-resourced civic infrastructure makes it easier for people to get involved in shaping their communities by participating in activities such as voting and the census. For example, in the most recent presidential election, 66% of the citizen voting-age population voted, with the highest turnout in the West, Northeast and Midwest where civic infrastructure is more robust. Similarly,

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an average of 60% of households self-responded to the census, with higher levels of participation in the Midwest and Northeast.

- For all communities, well-resourced civic infrastructure is not a given. Civic infrastructure is less available and under-resourced among counties along the U.S.-Mexico Border, within the Black Belt Region, American Indian/Alaska Native Tribal areas and their surrounding counties, and within Appalachia. Often, these counties have higher rates of children living in poverty, uninsured adults, lower household incomes and more income inequality. There are also more structural barriers to civic health, including restrictive voting laws and gerrymandered districts.
- More structural barriers largely overlap with regions of our country with types of long-standing discriminatory practices and disinvestment, particularly in the southern states. Compared to counties with fewer structural barriers, the life expectancy of residents in counties with more barriers is, on average, more than three years shorter – 75.4 years compared to 78.5 years.

Improving Civic Health Requires Action

“The findings in this year’s County Health Rankings call attention to the fact that past and present forms of discrimination and disinvestment matter,” said Marjory Givens, co-director of County Health Rankings & Roadmaps. “We can only share in a healthy, civically active future for our communities by acknowledging our past and working together to repair and realize what it means to thrive.”

The Rankings offer several solutions to build civic health, including:

- investing in libraries, community centers and other public spaces to encourage in-person connections;
- expanding civic knowledge and skills through youth leadership programs, mentoring and civic education, and
- implementing voter registration and turnout initiatives to expand representation in the democratic process.

In addition to these solutions, the program’s [What Works for Health](#) offers more than 400 evidence-informed strategies to help communities on their health improvement journey. Each strategy is rated for its effectiveness and likely impact on health disparities.

Visit countyhealthrankings.org to learn more.

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About the County Health Rankings & Roadmaps

The County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, a program of the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute (UWPHI) with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, provides local communities with data on more than 90 health-influencing factors such as housing, education, jobs and access to quality health care. The Rankings are available at www.countyhealthrankings.org.

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About the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute

The University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute advances health and well-being for all by developing and evaluating interventions and promoting evidence-based approaches to policy and practice at the local, state and national levels. The Institute works across the spectrum of factors that contribute to health and equity. The Institute leads the work on the County Health Rankings & Roadmaps. For more information, visit <http://uwphi.pophealth.wisc.edu>.