



Health Gaps: A Guide to Continuing the Conversation

The 2015 *County Health Rankings* Health Gaps Report was produced by the *County Health Rankings & Roadmaps* (CHR&R) program, a collaboration of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) and the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute (UWPHI). Since 2010, CHR&R has provided an annual check-up of counties across the nation on the broad range of factors that matter to health.

Your state's [Health Gaps Report](#), available at countyhealthrankings.org/health-gaps-report, provides an overview of the different types of gaps in health that exist from one county to another within your state and offers next steps that policymakers and leaders, together with communities, can take to improve health. **This guide is intended to encourage conversation among state and local community residents, leaders across sectors, decision-makers, and others about health gaps and how to take action collectively to close them.**

Closing the health gaps in our communities requires that we work together with a range of partners, building on unique assets and initiatives within the community. In convening diverse stakeholders, it is important to respect community members' time and efforts by having a clear and agreed-upon purpose for engagement. Working together also means empowering community partners to amend, adapt, and co-create a sense of purpose for their efforts. Finally, it is important to create a shared space where everyone feels welcome and every voice can be heard.

In this guide, we offer a few important considerations and tips on how to bring together diverse stakeholders to continue a conversation on health gaps, and how to create a safe space for dialogue.

Gaps in length and quality of life

Residents in one county are more likely to die prematurely or not be as healthy as residents in another county in the same state if they do not have the same kinds of opportunities to be their healthiest.

Gaps in the factors that influence health

Health is influenced by every aspect of how and where we live. In addition to access to medical care, access to affordable housing, safe neighborhoods, job training programs, and quality early childhood education are examples of important changes that can put people on a path to a healthier life. But access to these opportunities varies county to county. This limits choices and makes it hard to be healthy.

What Can You Do In Your Area?

REACH OUT TO DIVERSE STAKEHOLDERS

- **Understand the context of the community, partnerships, and initiatives.** Know the history of the community as well as past engagement efforts to understand any issues and to build on lessons learned.
- **Examine the barriers to participation.** Try to get an accurate picture of how your engagement strategies may be perceived. Work with community leaders to address any barriers to engagement.
- **Outreach is ongoing; build relationships as you go.** Stay open to recruiting new voices to your conversation. Partnerships may need to change over time as the focus narrows to specific issue areas or on strategies that require different expertise or influence.

Helpful tools and resources (available at countyhealthrankings.org/resources): [Building a Contact List](#) , [A Practitioner's Guide for Advancing Health Equity](#) , [Defining Boundaries Conversation Guide](#) , [Historygram Process](#)

CONVENE DISCUSSIONS ON HEALTH GAPS IN YOUR COMMUNITY

- **Engage in conversation in a variety of settings and group sizes.** Not everyone can attend or will feel welcome in a large group forum. Consider the right group size to enable participants to build trust and achieve new understanding of how they relate to each other. Meet community members on their own turf.
- **Facilitate participant ownership.** Plan for how each participant can make meaningful contributions. Choose someone to facilitate who can leave his/her opinions at the door and can focus dialogue while also making space for the creative energy of the group.

Helpful tools and resources (available at countyhealthrankings.org/resources): [Team Blueprint](#) , [Conversation Café](#) , [Gather: The Art & Science of Effective Convening](#)

CREATE SAFE SPACE FOR PEOPLE TO TELL THEIR TRUTH

- **Set guidelines that promote inclusiveness and make room for open conversation.** Ask participants to generate guidelines that will make conversations safe. Engage in collective history-telling and landscape-mapping (understanding who's doing what) so that all participants can be heard and establish shared understanding of issues. Request that participants speak openly with respect and reserve judgment.
- **Expect a wide range of beliefs and attitudes about what causes health gaps and how to fix them.** Avoid blaming and shaming in the dialogue. Be aware of power dynamics and encourage open and honest participation by everyone.

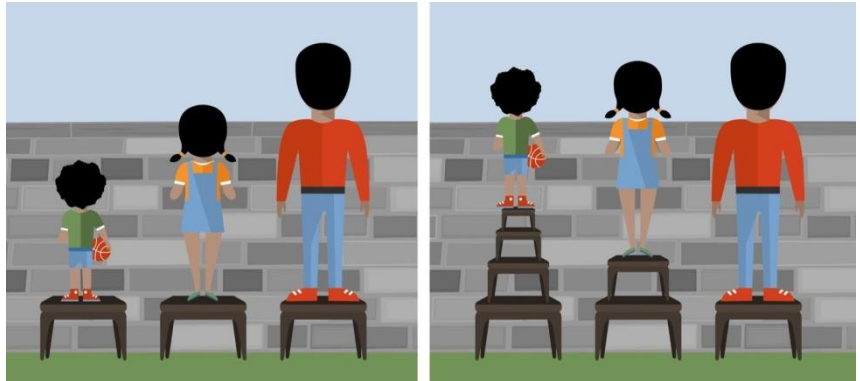
Helpful tools and resources (available at countyhealthrankings.org/resources): [Race to Equity Toolkit for Conversation](#), [Guidelines for Creating Team Norms](#) , [Historygram Process](#)

Discussion Questions: Exploring Health Gaps in Your Community

Have a copy of your state's Health Gaps Report on hand as you consider these discussion questions. You can find the reports on our website at countyhealthrankings.org/health-gaps-report.

Reflection questions

- ✚ Consider the graphic on the right. In your community, what might the wall and the stools represent? Who might the three children represent? How might everyone benefit when the stool sizes are adjusted?
- ✚ Has this picture changed over time in your community? If so, what are the opportunities and challenges associated with those changes?
- ✚ Think about your opportunity to make the most of the community's assets within housing, education, and other key drivers of health. How can you work with others to offer everyone a bench that is the right size for their height?
- ✚ What strategies are currently being pursued at the state or local levels that can help to close health gaps in your state? Are there stories of success that can be shared?



Equitable opportunity means having a fair chance to lead the healthiest life possible by addressing key drivers of health such as education, employment, and housing. But a fair chance does not necessarily mean offering everyone the same resources or opportunities; it means offering the resources necessary for everyone to be their healthiest.

This analogy of the three children of different heights offers an example of the variations in resources or opportunities necessary to have a fair chance. On the left you can see that offering these three children the same size bench to stand on would mean that shorter children do not have a fair chance to see over the wall. While on the right, offering each child a bench to stand on that is the right size for their height gives all children a fair chance to see over the wall.

Visit *What Works for Health* at countyhealthrankings.org/what-works-for-health for information on strategies to improve health in your community.

Discussing your Health Gaps Report data

- ✚ In what ways did the Report confirm or challenge what you know about health gaps in your state?
- ✚ What issues surfaced that you would like to know more about? How can you learn more about these?

Digging into other dimensions of health gaps

- ✚ The Health Gaps Report provides data on differences by place. What types of health gaps may exist in other dimensions (e.g., by race, age, gender, sexual identity, or income) within your state?
 - What might be the drivers of these gaps?
 - How similar or different are they from those highlighted in the Report?
 - Where might you find data for other types of health gaps? (Note: Check the *County Health Rankings & Roadmaps* website's [Using the Rankings Data](https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/using-the-rankings-data) at [countyhealthrankings.org/using-the-rankings-data](https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/using-the-rankings-data) for other data sources that can help you find more data for your state and dig deeper on differences in health factors by geography or by population sub-groups.)

Discovering community knowledge, assets and opportunities

- ✚ Who can you bring together in your community to:
 - Better understand the community's strengths and resources (e.g., residents or individuals from underserved groups of the community and community leaders)?
 - Better understand the opportunities, existing efforts, and leadership in the community?
 - Develop and implement sustainable solutions (e.g., representatives and community leaders from government, businesses, non-profit organizations, and community development)?
 - Track your progress in addressing health gaps (e.g., public health and academic data partners)?



Guided Activity: Root Cause Analysis

Root cause analysis (RCA) is a tool for identifying fundamental problems and strategies to improve health as part of an effort to build healthier communities and move beyond a culture of blame.

- **Root Cause(s)** – the 1-3 key factors that if changed could prevent the undesirable outcome.

You can use this tool to discover:

- What happened
- Why it happened
- What to do to prevent it from happening again

The RCA process can help you to develop an action plan to reduce the chance of similar health gaps occurring in the future.

How to Identify 'Root Causes' Using the "But Why?" Technique:

1. Write down the specific problem.
2. Ask why the problem happened. Write down the answers.
3. Ask whether an answer provided in step 2 could have been prevented. If so, how?
4. Repeat these steps until there is agreement from the team that a root cause has been identified. Remember that complex problems can have a number of different root causes.

Example:

Problem: Children in some neighborhoods cannot get to school on time.

- **Q: But why?** They don't have a ride to school.
- **Q: Could that have been prevented?** Yes.
- **Q: How?** Their parents could drive them.
- **Q: But why don't their parents drive them?** Some families can't afford a car or gas.
- **Q: Could that have been prevented?** Yes.
- **Q: How?** Their parents could have jobs that pay a living wage
- **Q: But why don't their parents have jobs that pay a living wage?....(and so on to arrive at a root cause)**



Root Cause Analysis Analogy

Problems are like weeds.

If you leave a weed alone, you will get more weeds.

If you remove a weed by cutting it at the surface, the weed will grow back.

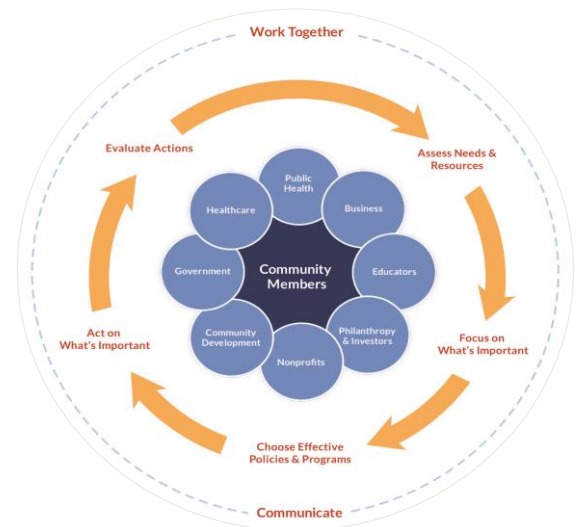
You have to remove the weed's root to prevent future weeds.

Visit the *Roadmaps to Health* Action Center to learn more about this and other tools that can help to focus on what's important: [Analyzing Root Causes of Problems: The "But Why?" Technique](#)

Ready to take the next steps?

Check out the resources in the *Roadmaps to Health* Action Center:

- **Communicate:** Ensure effective communication with your partners, develop strategic messages, and deliver those messages to the right people.
- **Assess needs and resources:** Take stock of the community's needs, resources, strengths, assets, and values that can help your efforts to improve health for all.
- **Focus on what's most important:** Focus your efforts and resources on the most important issues and opportunities to close health gaps.
- **Choose effective policies and programs:** Explore and select evidence-informed policies and programs to address priority issues. Visit *What Works for Health* for information on strategies to improve health in your community.
- **Act on what's important:** Make it happen – ensure that selected strategies reflect stakeholder and partner input, and are adopted and implemented to improve health for all.
- **Evaluate actions:** Monitor and evaluate your progress and what's working to close health gaps.



For more detailed tools and guidance on how to improve health for all, visit the *Roadmaps to Health* Action Center:

countyhealthrankings.org/action-center

Learn More About *County Health Rankings & Roadmaps* Resources!

CHR&R brings actionable data and strategies to communities to make it easier for people to be healthy in their neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces. Providing data on the health of nearly every county in the nation, the *County Health Rankings* illustrate **what we know** when it comes to what is keeping people healthy or making them sick. The *Roadmaps* show **what we can do** to create healthier places. You can learn more about *County Health Rankings & Roadmaps* by visiting us at countyhealthrankings.org.

Roadmaps to Health Coaching provides local leaders with direct support from community coaches to strengthen their capacity to build a Culture of Health in their communities. Ready to take action, but not sure what to do next? We offer personalized, free help. Contact us at countyhealthrankings.org/contact