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New County Health Rankings Show a Living Wage Out of Reach for Families in Counties Nationwide

A Just Recovery and Economic Security Possible If Systemic Health Barriers Are Finally Addressed

Madison, Wis. — As the nation emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic and continues to reckon with the intertwined crises of structural racism and economic exclusion, the 2022 [County Health Rankings](#) (CHR&R) examines how a lack of living wages can impact a just recovery. A household with one adult and two children needs to earn an average \$35.80 hourly wage to meet basic needs such as rent and food. Yet, in nearly every county, far less is earned. A more than 73% wage increase is needed in some counties while as much as a 229% increase is needed in others to make a living wage. Jobs must lift workers out of poverty, not keep them in it. To ensure economic security for all, living-wage jobs are essential.

For more than a decade, the Rankings' data, evidence, guidance and stories have broadened the nation's understanding about the many factors that shape health – factors that predate COVID-19 but that have certainly been magnified by the generation-defining crisis.

“The data reinforces what we’ve known for some time. People in both rural and urban communities face avoidable and systematic barriers to living long, healthy lives,” said Sheri Johnson, co-director of County Health Rankings & Roadmaps and director of the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute. “The struggle for economic security is shared across many communities, and evidence-informed solutions that address past harms, increase economic security and promote health for everyone can be implemented.”

The pandemic revealed glaring structural failures related to economic security and family support. The Rankings found troubling issues affecting women and families with children:

- **Equal Pay Is Not Just a Women’s Issue – It’s a Family Issue with Community Impact:** Women earn little more than 80 cents for every dollar men earn, on average, for the same work. To earn the \$61,807 average salary of a white man, an Asian woman must work an extra month (34 days); a white woman, 3 more months (103 days); a Black woman, 7 more months (223 days); an American

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Indian/Alaska Native woman, 8 more months (266 days) and a Hispanic woman, nearly 10 more months (299 days). Systemic gender discrimination contributes to pay gaps between men and women and keeps women from meeting their earning potential.

- **Childcare Costs Exceed What's Affordable:** Our entire society benefits when the childcare system is affordable and accessible. Across counties, a family with two children spends, on average, a quarter of its household income on childcare. For those making the hourly \$7.25 federal minimum wage, childcare costs would take up nearly all – or 90% – of their annual income. During the pandemic, the lack of affordable childcare forced parents – especially mothers – out of the workforce and also hit childcare providers, who were disproportionately women, hard. The costs harm families' and communities' well-being.
- **Stark Differences in School Funding Exist Across Rural, Urban and Suburban Communities:** Every child deserves a quality education no matter where they live. Half of all counties had school districts operating at a deficit. Among those districts, per-pupil spending, on average, was \$3,000 below the annual estimated amount needed to support average test scores. While schools in large urban metro counties, on average, operated under large deficits (more than \$1,000 per student annually), schools in rural counties – the majority of all U.S. counties – were overrepresented among counties with inadequate school funding. Many of the inequities stem from historical racial discrimination in counties with higher Black, Hispanic and American Indian/Alaska Native populations. For example, in the Southern Black Belt region, the legacy of structural racism continues to impact the flow of community resources to this day.

The challenges of securing a living wage, affording childcare, or receiving equitable pay regardless of gender are all interconnected. This means the whole community – businesses, policymakers, community and economic development professionals and, most importantly, residents who are directly impacted – must be at the table determining solutions.

“Working together, we can transform public goods such as affordable and accessible childcare, quality public schools, and jobs that treat people with the dignity they deserve and the wages that will support their families,” said Marjory Givens, co-director of the County Health Rankings & Roadmaps. “This would not only ensure a just recovery from the pandemic for families and communities today but greater economic security, better health and well-being for generations to come.”

The Rankings list several solutions that could improve families' economic security and community health. Childcare subsidies and publicly funded pre-K can support working families, while other evidence-informed strategies such as universal basic income, living wage laws and tax reforms can help to eliminate wage gaps, chip away at the racial wealth divide and create more equitable school funding. 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/takeaction](https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/takeaction) 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.

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 full 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>.