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Annual Health Check-Up Highlights Healthiest and Least Healthy Counties In Every State

County Health Rankings Show That There Is More to Health Than Health Care

Madison, WI and Princeton, NJ - How healthy is your county? A new set of reports released today rank the health of nearly every county in the nation and show that much of what affects health occurs outside of the doctor's office. For the second year, the *County Health Rankings* confirm the critical role that factors such as education, jobs, income, and environment play in how healthy people are and how long they live. This year, the *Rankings* allow people in more than 3,000 counties and the District of Columbia to compare the overall health of their counties against other counties in their state, and also compare their performance on specific health factors against national benchmarks of top-performing counties.

Published on-line at www.countyhealthrankings.org by the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the *Rankings* help counties understand what influences how healthy residents are and how long they will live. The *Rankings* look at a variety of measures that affect health such as the rate of people dying before age 75, high school graduation rates, access to healthier foods, air pollution levels, income, and rates of smoking, obesity and teen births.

The *Rankings*, based on the latest data available for each county, is the only tool of its kind that measures the overall health of each county in all 50 states on the multiple factors that influence health. It includes snapshots of nearly every county with a color-coded map that compares each county's overall health with other counties in each of the 50 states. People can compare how their county is doing in areas like diabetes screening rates or number of uninsured adults to national benchmarks.

Each county's rank reveals a pattern of strengths and weaknesses. And, the *Rankings* reveal that all counties have areas where they can improve, even those that are the healthiest. Some highlights of what counties look like nationally:

- People are nearly twice as likely to be in fair or poor health in the unhealthiest counties;
- Unhealthy counties have significantly lower high school graduation rates;
- Unhealthy counties have more than twice as many children in poverty;
- Unhealthy counties have much fewer grocery stores or farmer's markets; and
- Unhealthy counties have much higher rates of unemployment

"The *Rankings* really show us with solid data that there is a lot more to health than health care. Where we live, learn, work and play affect our health, and we need to use the information from the *Rankings* to shine a spotlight on where we need to improve so we can take action to address our problems," said Patrick Remington, MD, MPH, director of the *County Health Rankings* project and Associate Dean for Public Health at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health.

Like last year's *Rankings*, researchers used five measures to assess the level of overall health or "health outcomes" by county: the rate of people dying before age 75; the percentage of people who reported being in fair or poor health; the number of days in poor mental health; and the rate of low-birthweight infants. Researchers then looked at factors that affect people's health within four categories: health behaviors, clinical care, social and economic factors, and physical environment.

As a result of the *Rankings*, several communities already have begun to take action, such as passing smoke free laws, boosting educational opportunities for young children, or pushing for healthier grocery stores and farmer's markets. For example, in Wyandotte County, KS, Mayor Joe Reardon, after seeing his state's low rank in a *County Health Rankings* report, worked with other local stakeholders to create a Healthy Communities initiative. He says the *Rankings* were a wake-up call that forced him to focus not only on just health care but on the overall health of his community, including the social and economic factors.

"It's hard to lead a healthy life if you don't live in a healthy community," said Risa Lavizzo-Mourey, M.D., M.B.A. president and CEO of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. "The *County Health Rankings* are an annual check-up for communities to know how healthy they are and where they can improve. We hope that policymakers, businesses, educators, public health departments and community residents will use the *Rankings* to develop solutions to help people live healthier lives."

To help counties like Wyandotte translate the *Rankings* into action, Dr. Lavizzo-Mourey today said the Foundation was launching a new program to help communities improve the health of their residents. Under this new program—part of an initiative called *Mobilizing Action Toward*

Community Health—RWJF will provide grants to up to 14 communities around the country to strengthen broad-based community efforts to improve health.

In addition, to further illustrate the connection between social factors and health, the Foundation along with the Virginia Commonwealth University's Center on Human Needs today unveiled the *County Health Calculator* (www.countyhealthcalculator.org). The *County Health Calculator* is a new interactive online app that shows people how much higher levels of education and income influence premature death rates in a county.

For more information, visit www.countyhealthrankings.org

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About the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation focuses on the pressing health and health care issues facing our country. As the nation's largest philanthropy devoted exclusively to improving the health and health care of all Americans, the Foundation works with a diverse group of organizations and individuals to identify solutions and achieve comprehensive, meaningful and timely change. For more than 35 years the Foundation has brought experience, commitment and a rigorous, balanced approach to the problems that affect the health and health care of those it serves. When it comes to helping Americans lead healthier lives and get the care they need, the Foundation expects to make a difference in your lifetime. For more information, visit www.rwjf.org.

About the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute

The University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute is the focal point within the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health for translating public health and health policy research into policy and practice. The Institute strives to:

- Address a broad range of real world problems of topical importance to government, business, providers, and the public;
- Promote partnerships of inquiry between researchers and users of research, breaking down barriers between the academic community and public and private sector policy makers;
- Advance the development of interdisciplinary research, along the spectrum from public health to health care;
- Provide continuing education for practitioners and opportunities for applied learning for graduate and medical students; and
- Make useful contributions to public health and health policy decisions that improve the health of the public.

For more information, visit, <http://uwphi.pophealth.wisc.edu/>.