

How healthy is your county?

Reno Gazette-Journal / RGJ.COM

Tuesday, March 9, 2010

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and University of Wisconsin's Public Health Institute have recently unveiled a fascinating website and series of companion reports on county-level health rankings for Nevada and the US.

For the first time, counties and local policy makers can get a snapshot of how healthy their residents are by comparing their overall health and the factors influencing population health with other counties in Nevada. These rankings allow local residents to see on a county-by-county basis where their community stands on a wide range of population health measures and, more importantly, where they need to improve.

The premise of "County Health Rankings: Mobilizing Action Toward Community Health" is the simple, but powerful observation that "where we live matters to our health." In other words, the health of any community is driven by local social and economic factors and these community-level characteristics vary considerably across Nevada and most other states.

In contrast to numerous state-level health rankings that provide a useful starting point for understanding how Nevada compares with other US states – we perennially rank somewhere between ugly and awful in most of these rankings – the new county health rankings will assist communities in establishing local health priorities.

The new rankings will also guide efforts to identify specific opportunities for local residents and advocates to improve healthy behaviors, build appropriate clinical care resources in their community, and shape environments conducive to health.

The report distinguishes health outcomes and health factors. Health outcomes represent how healthy a county is – Douglas County is the healthiest Nevada county, Mineral County is the least healthy – while health factors are what influence the health of the county.

Rankings on health factors or the determinants of population health highlight the striking degree of variation across Nevada counties and thus the limited utility of one-size-fits-all approaches to improving public health. For example, Mineral County's low overall ranking on health outcomes has much more to do with the unhealthy behaviors of its residents and the poor socioeconomic environment of that community than it does with the quality of and access to clinical care for local residents.

In contrast, while Washoe County has a comparatively high ranking on health outcomes such as mortality or length of life measures (3rd), our community is all over the map in its rankings on health determinants – Washoe County ranks highly on healthy behaviors (3rd) and clinical care resources (1st), yet ranks poorly in socioeconomic factors (9th) and physical environment (14th).

Additionally, the state's urban counties are home to the lion's share of clinical care resources yet have overall health rankings – Washoe County (5th healthiest), Clark County (9th), and Carson City (10th) – in the middle of the county spectrum in Nevada.

The data contained in the community health rankings for Nevada point to the need for targeted, community-based programs and policies attentive to local needs and deficits. The information contained in the “County Health Rankings” thus serves as both a call to action and a much needed tool in efforts to improve the public's health in Nevada.

For more information on county health rankings in Nevada and the methodology used to derive these estimates, please visit www.countyhealthrankings.org.

John Packham, PhD is Director of Health Policy Research at the University of Nevada School of Medicine and Past President of the Nevada Public Health Association.

Health Outcomes in Nevada

Rank	Summary Health Outcomes Ranking	Mortality	Morbidity
1	Douglas	Pershing	Douglas
2	Pershing	Douglas	Humboldt
3	Humboldt	Washoe	Churchill
4	Elko	Elko	Storey
5	Washoe	Humboldt	Elko
6	Churchill	Clark	Lyon
7	Storey	Lyon	Pershing
8	Lyon	Carson City	Lincoln
9	Clark	Churchill	Washoe
10	Carson City	Storey	Clark
11	Lincoln	Lincoln	White Pine
12	White Pine	White Pine	Carson City
13	Nye	Lander	Nye
14	Lander	Nye	Lander
15	Mineral	Mineral	Mineral

Source: "County Health Rankings," Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (2010).

Note: Due to small populations and missing data, Esmeralda and Eureka Counties are not ranked. The summary county health outcomes ranking is based on a combination of mortality and morbidity measures. Mortality measures include indicators of premature death and length of life, while morbidity measures include indicators of poor physical and mental health, or quality of life.

Health Factors in Nevada

Rank	Summary Health Factors Ranking	Health Behaviors	Clinical Care	Socioeconomic Environment	Physical Environment
1	Douglas	Douglas	Washoe	Storey	Pershing
2	Storey	Lincoln	Carson City	Elko	Nye
3	Washoe	Washoe	Douglas	Lincoln	Lyon
4	Lincoln	Carson City	White Pine	Douglas	Churchill
5	White Pine	Storey	Clark	White Pine	Douglas
6	Elko	Clark	Mineral	Lander	White Pine
7	Churchill	White Pine	Nye	Churchill	Elko
8	Carson City	Churchill	Churchill	Humboldt	Carson City
9	Lander	Lander	Lander	Washoe	Humboldt
10	Humboldt	Elko	Humboldt	Clark	Storey
11	Clark	Lyon	Lyon	Lyon	Lincoln
12	Lyon	Nye	Elko	Carson City	Mineral
13	Nye	Humboldt	Storey	Pershing	Lander
14	Pershing	Pershing	Lincoln	Nye	Washoe
15	Mineral	Mineral	Pershing	Mineral	Clark

Source: "County Health Rankings," Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (2010).

Note: Due to small populations and missing data, Esmeralda and Eureka Counties are not ranked. The summary county health factors ranking is based on a combination of measures of health-related behaviors (e.g., smoking, drinking), clinical care (e.g., percent of uninsured adults, preventable hospital stays), social and economic factors (e.g., poverty rates, high school graduation rates), and physical environment (e.g., air quality, access to healthy foods).