

JoCo Still Among Unhealthiest Counties

Figure “2015 Health Outcomes - Oregon” Source: University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute
Oregon counties are ranked by a health outcomes score that includes smoking, obesity, teen birth rates, housing problems and violent crime. Lighter colors indicate healthier counties.

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http://www.thedailycourier.com/articles/2015/04/04/healthy_living/news01.txt

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Josephine County — and much of Southern Oregon — has once again ranked near the bottom of the state for quality of health, according to the recently released 2015 County Health Rankings.

For at least the past five years, Josephine County has been among the least healthy counties in the state, in overall health and performance in specific categories, from unemployment, high school graduation rates and children in poverty to adult smoking, adult obesity, teen pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, violent crime and alcohol-impaired driving deaths.

The rankings show that the healthiest county in the state is Washington County in suburban Portland, home to Nike,

Columbia Sportswear, Reser's Fine Foods and high-tech powerhouses such as Tektronix, Lattice Semiconductor and chipmaker Intel, the state's largest private employer with 17,500 employees.

Five of the eight unhealthiest counties on Oregon, meanwhile, are clustered in the economically hard-hit southwestern part of the state: Josephine (27), Coos (29), Curry (31), Douglas (32), and Klamath (34).

Jackson County appears as an island of better health, but only barely. It ranked 22nd on the list, out of 36 counties in the state. Two counties in Eastern Oregon (Gilliam and Wheeler) were not included in the study.

Oregon State Health Officer Katrina Hedberg said economic factors and health factors are closely tied. "I've found that the rural areas, particularly those that have been hit by the timber industry and are economically challenged, those are the ones with higher unemployment and many other high factors," she said.

The report is published annually by the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute and funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, a nonprofit that funds health research.

Most of the data can be found on the Oregon Health Authority's Public Health website, Hedberg said, since that's where the University of Wisconsin's researchers got their information. Researchers also collected data from federal agencies such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the U.S. Census Bureau.

Among the negatives: 24 percent of Josephine County residents are tobacco smokers, versus 19 percent in Jackson County and 14 percent in Multnomah County, which includes much of the Portland metro area. Overall, Oregon has a 16 percent adult smoking population statewide, according to the report.

More negatives for Josephine County: 39 percent of traffic fatalities are caused by use of alcohol or other intoxicants, 25 percent of the population has severe housing problems (caused by overcrowding, lack of plumbing or kitchen facilities, or excessive cost vs. income), 18 percent have no health insurance, 26 percent are obese, and 31 percent of children live in poverty.

The percentage of high school graduates is fairly similar in Josephine and Jackson counties, with 68 percent for Josephine and 67 percent for Jackson. Teen births (35 per 1,000 females ages 15-19) are the same.

One major difference between the two counties: Josephine County's violent crime rate of 210 incidents per 100,000 population is much lower than Jackson's, which has a rate of 298 per 100,000. Multnomah County had the highest violent crime rate in the state.

Some factors involved allow researchers to get a bird's eye view of overall health, including behaviors and socio-economic status, while other factors help predict where each county could be in future years, based on those same factors and environmental impacts.

Some data also appears somewhat irrelevant, as doctor-to-patient ratios and under-insured data was compiled in 2012, prior to any impact from the Affordable care Act, also known as Obamacare.

Despite this, much of the data can be seen as offering a catalyst for change, according to Hedberg.

"If you look at health behavior, all of these things, social and economic, play a huge part in your overall health. How much schooling and education you have, and who your parents are," Hedberg said, adding, "The primary factor is that people age. We are all getting older and the risk for things like cancer are all there.

"But, what you can change is your behavior. Smoking, physical inactivity, diet, substance abuse, all these are things you have control over. I always say, 'Tomorrow is a new day. Carpe diem.' People can change."

Josephine County Public Health Director Diane Hoover was out of the office this week and not returning phone calls.

To read more of the information in the 2015 County Health Rankings, visit www.countyhealthrankings.org.