

Where you live is tied to how long you live

Scorecard to help counties tackle health issues

BY ROBIN ERB
FREE PRESS MEDICAL WRITER

What does the number of liquor stores, high school graduation rates and your paycheck have to do with the health of Michiganders?

Just like predictable factors such infant mortality, obesity and smoking rates, researchers say they are key indicators of how healthy we are.

A new report out of the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute used these and other variables to rank the counties on their health.

Among the winners: Oakland and Washtenaw counties at 18th and 7th, respectively. Livingston topped the list. Ranking lowest: Wayne County and Clare County, in the center of the state.

The report is limited: "They chose a good selection of metrics to make these comparisons, but there are a lot of things missing, too," said Steve Gold, acting director of Macomb County Public Health Department, which ranked No. 34 in health outcomes.

For example, Macomb has spent millions to improve parks and water -- factors absent in the report, Gold said.

The researchers say what's important is the conversation it begins about the many variables that play into healthy communities -- plenty of doctors or improving air quality, for example.

Said Bridget Booske, one of the researchers: "We're hoping to get people to realize that health is everyone's business."

How does your community's health rate?

Your chance of living longer has a lot to do with your ZIP code, according to a new report that may hand Michigan's health officials a rough scorecard of their communities' health.

"Where you live makes a big difference on how you live and how you behave," said Jean Chabut, deputy director for public health administration at the Michigan Department of Community Health. "Are you using tobacco? Are you having unsafe sex? Is there a liquor store on every corner? What is the air quality where you live?"

The report ranks the health of Michigan's counties, in part by figuring out who dies before their 75th birthday, where they lived and why they died.

But it also considers the kind of information not listed on death certificates -- air-quality data from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, birth rates, liquor store addresses and the availability of primary care doctors.

It even relies on interviews with local residents, asking them how they're feeling.

Even your education and pay can play a big part in your health, said Bridget Booske, one of the researchers.

Role of education

For one thing, the most educated residents not only know more about health and nutrition, they're also more likely to find resources when they are in a health crisis.

As for income: "If you're struggling with three part-time jobs, it's hard to fit a workout schedule into that. And if you have a higher income, maybe you're more likely to join a health club," she said.

Some of Michigan's wealthiest counties fared well. But scoring poorly was Wayne County, which includes Detroit, and a rural stretch of mid-Michigan.

It's not surprising, Booske said, that some of Michigan's healthiest counties -- Washtenaw County, for example -- might sit next to some of its unhealthiest.

Fractions of points

Still, she and others caution against putting too much importance on the rankings. For one thing, the report doesn't grade counties specifically. Rather, it ranks them against one another.

"And we don't know what the distance is between the rankings," said Mary Kushion, health officer for Central Michigan District Health Department, which covers seven counties, including Clare. "There could be a fraction of a point between one county and another."

And in Detroit, health officials haven't yet seen data that pulls out Detroit's scores from Wayne County's.

It's important because the two entities have different health departments, and it may mean a difference in what issues they target, said Mike McElrath, spokesman for Detroit's health department.

The report is meant as a starting point for conversation, Kushion and others said.

Clare officials have planned a daylong meeting March 10 at a hotel in mid-Michigan, hoping to gather health experts, residents and policy-makers to tackle the health issues related to Clare's low score -- poverty rates, for example -- and build on health factors related to Clare's strong points -- relatively good air quality, for example.

"We've got our baseline data, and we've got a starting point," Kushion said.

The full details of the report, which was funded by the New Jersey-based Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, are expected to be released today.