

Minnesota has some of nation's worst racial, geographic health disparities

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Princeton, N.J. and Madison, Wis. – Carver county ranks healthiest in Minnesota and Mahnomen is the least healthy county in the state, according to the fifth annual *County Health Rankings*

released today by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) and the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute (UWPHI). The

Rankings

are available at

www.countyhealthrankings.org

According to the 2014 *Rankings*, the five healthiest counties in Minnesota, starting with most healthy, are Carver, followed by McLeod, Waseca, Steele and Nobles. The five counties in the poorest health, starting with least healthy, are Mahnomen, Cass, Mille Lacs, Traverse and Wadena.

"Minnesota has some of the worst racial and geographic health disparities in the country," said Liz Doyle, TakeAction Minnesota's Associate Director. "As evidenced by these 2014 rankings, our state's least healthy counties include large numbers of lower-income and Native American populations living in remote areas of our state. These counties also disproportionately face worse health factors such as lower access to primary care physicians and mental health providers, elevated tobacco and alcohol use, higher rates of poverty and geographic isolation. We need to improve health care access and increase living wage job creation in these areas to bring up the health rankings."

The *County Health Rankings* rank the overall health of nearly every county in all fifty states. The *Rankings* allow counties to see how well they are doing on twenty-nine factors that influence health including smoking, high school graduation rates, employment, physical inactivity, and access to healthy foods.

Justin Terrell, the Justice 4 All program manager at TakeAction Minnesota also noted how growing incidences of poverty and racial health disparities also pushed two of Minnesota's biggest counties – Hennepin and Ramsey – to 54th and 67th worst in the rankings. "Minnesota has the worst racial jobs gap in the country and the worst recidivism rate as well," Terrell said. "The criminal justice system creates barriers to employment – and ultimately, barriers to health – by unfairly targeting communities of color. Barriers to employment create barriers to being able to afford healthcare and to living in a healthy community free of pollution and unsafe housing situations. TakeAction Minnesota is fighting to improve health incidences by improving

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jobs access for those with past criminal records rebuilding their lives."

"The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's vision for a culture of health is one where everyone has the opportunity to be healthy," said Dr. Risa Lavizzo-Mourey, RWJF president and CEO. "The *County Health Rankings* are a starting point for change, helping communities come together, identify priorities, and create solutions that will help all in our diverse society live healthier lives, now and for generations to come."

The *Rankings* provide county-to-county comparisons within a state. Nationally, this year's *Rankings* show that people living in the least healthy counties are twice as likely to have shorter lives as people living in the healthiest counties. Unhealthy counties also have twice as many children living in poverty and twice as many teen births as the healthiest counties. This year's *Rankings* also feature several new measures including housing, transportation, and access to mental health providers.

The *County Health Rankings* is part of the *County Health Rankings & Roadmaps*. The program includes the *Roadmaps to Health* Action Center which provides local leaders with tools, step-by-step guides, and stories to help communities identify and implement solutions that make it easier for people to live healthy lives. The program also includes the annual *RWJF Culture of Health Prize*, which celebrates communities who are harnessing the collective power of leaders, partners, and stakeholders to build a culture of health. This year's Prize winners and the call for 2014-2015 prize applications will be announced in June at the Aspen Ideas Festival, Spotlight: Health.

"The *County Health Rankings* show us how health is influenced by our everyday surroundings—where we live, learn, work, and play," said Bridget Catlin, PhD, MHSA, director of the *County Health Rankings*. "The *County Health Rankings* often provide the spark for businesses, community planners, policy-makers, public health, parents, and others to work together for better health."