

Ebel: How Healthy is Licking County?

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Each year the County Health Rankings & Roadmaps report is released. The rankings are a collaboration between the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, with a goal of improving health outcomes for all and closing the health gaps between those with the most and least opportunities for good health.

Last year the Licking County Health Department released a life expectancy map of Licking County which highlighted the health disparities between our residents based on where they are born, with some areas experiencing nearly fifteen years less life expectancy (</story/news/local/2018/09/20/licking-county-ohio-newark-south-end-lowest-life-expectancy-data-shows/1359148002/>) than residents born in other parts of the county.

The Health Rankings and Roadmaps takes a similar approach in comparing the health status of counties based on Health Outcomes and Health Factors.

For 2019, Licking County was ranked 25th out of Ohio's 88 counties for Health Outcomes, and 19th in Health Factors. These results are up from 32nd and 29th in the 2018 report, respectively.

Health Outcomes represent how healthy a county is right now. They reflect the physical and mental well-being of residents within a community through measures representing not only the length of life, but quality of life as well.

Health Factors represent the things we can modify to improve the length and quality of life for residents. These include health behaviors, like alcohol and drug use, diet and exercise, sexual activity, and tobacco use. Health Factors also include access to quality health care, and social and economic factors, like education, employment, income, family and social support, as well as community safety, the quality of our physical environment, including air and water quality, and our transit and housing resources.

Highlights of the report in Licking County include low uninsured rates, high mammography screening rates, a 92% high school graduation rate, low unemployment, and a lower number of children living in poverty. While areas identified as needing improvement in Licking County include smoking and obesity rates.

One of the benefits of this county-to-county comparison is to realize the disparities between counties across the state. Delaware County, which shares a border with Licking County, was rated as the healthiest in Ohio. Examples of the reasons include a 14% smoking rate compared to Licking's 21% rate, 5% of children in poverty compared to 12% in Licking, and an adult obesity rate of 27% compared to Licking's 32%.

These statistics show what is achievable and gives us peer comparisons to help us identify areas of improvement. I believe in health equity – the idea that everyone has a fair and just opportunity to be as healthy as possible regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, income, location, or any other factor. Looking across county and state lines, as well as looking within our own communities, helps to identify areas of health disparity where we need to focus our efforts to allow everyone to achieve their best health.

Visit <http://www.countyhealthrankings.org> (<http://www.countyhealthrankings.org>) to view the full Health Rankings report.

Joe Ebel is the Licking County health commissioner.

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