

How Healthy is Mecklenburg County? A National Look at “Health” by County

Anna Vordermark, Contributor

The scores are in, and – as usual – Mecklenburg’s results are mixed. This time the test was a health ranking of all counties in North Carolina. In fact, all counties in all 50 states were ranked as part of the second annual [County Health Ranking](#), a joint project based on a health-ranking model from the University of Wisconsin’s [Population Health Institute](#), with funding from the [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#).

[America’s Health Rankings](#) has been ranking the health of these United States for 20 years, and in 2010 North Carolina ranked 35th, weighed down by some [low scores](#) in unemployment, infant mortality, and high cholesterol. Vermont came in at #1 in the nation, with our old friend Mississippi pulling the caboose of shame at #50.

The 2011 [County Health Ranking](#) takes the health ranking approach down to the county level by analyzing key factors that impact the length of life and the quality of life for residents in each county, based on the latest data available for each county. A high number (#1 or #2) means the county is the “healthiest,” and the counties at #99 and #100 are the least healthy in North Carolina. The factors that determine county “health” are weighted in two major categories:

1. Health Outcomes--rankings are based on 50% length of life (mortality) and 50% quality of life (morbidity) measures
2. Health Factors--rankings are based on weighted scores of four types of factors:
 - Health behaviors 30%
 - Clinical care 20%
 - Social and economic 40%
 - Physical environment 10%

Overall, Mecklenburg County ranked #5 out of 100 North Carolina counties, based on the freshest available data. Wake County (Raleigh) was #1, and Columbus County (between Robeson and Brunswick) was 100th.

In health outcome aspects (morbidity and mortality), Mecklenburg was #5 in the state. In the health factors category, we placed a respectable 15th. On closer inspection, our health factors are quite a mixed bag, demonstrating Mecklenburg’s odd combination of high and low education levels, wealth and poverty, and some of the pains of urban life (‘urban’ by North Carolina standards).

In health behavior factors (obesity, smoking, motor vehicle death rate, teen pregnancy, etc.), Mecklenburg ranks 6th out of 100. We dip to #23 in clinical care, which is measured by factors like

uninsured adults, diabetes and mammography screening, and number of primary care providers. Socioeconomic factors are the most heavily-weighted in the health factors category, at 40% of the total score. Here Mecklenburg ranks #20 due to factors like education levels, employment, poverty, and homicides. Overall, not too bad for a county with the types of challenges we face, but there's definitely room for improvement.

Mecklenburg's black eye comes in the category of physical environment, where we rank 99th out of 100 North Carolina counties. This is driven mostly by our number of air-pollution ozone days: 22 days in Mecklenburg versus a North Carolina average of 6 per year. Thank goodness physical environment is only 10% of the grade, right?

So what does this mean? [County Health Rankings](#) answers the "so what?" question with these facts from their national research:

- People are nearly twice as likely to be in fair or poor health in the unhealthiest counties
- Unhealthy counties have significantly lower high school graduation rates
- Unhealthy counties have more than twice as many children in poverty
- Unhealthy counties have much fewer grocery stores or farmer's markets
- Unhealthy counties have much higher rates of unemployment

If any of these factors are troublesome for us here in Mecklenburg, what can we do to turn things around? *County Health Rankings* recommends [Action Steps](#) specific to your role in the community – educator, business owner, employer, etc. [CountyHealthRankings.org](#) also features stories of communities who are battling low health scores, including North Carolina's own [Columbus County](#).

You can also tune into the national conversation on county health with a [public discussion](#) Tuesday, April 19th, when the County Health Rankings team briefs Congress on their findings.

As a resident of Mecklenburg or the surrounding counties, what surprised you the most about this report? Will you change any behaviors because of the way Mecklenburg stacks up against other counties in North Carolina? When you look at the large number of initiatives Mecklenburg County has to juggle, how should our health as a county affect the way we fund projects and allocate resources? Now that you're armed with the facts, what are your next steps?

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