



Health and Place in America, 2018:

A Report from the American Communities Project

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The health of Americans varies greatly depending on the kind of community they call home, and different types of communities have knowledge they can share to improve citizens' well-being. Those findings are at the heart of months of research and reporting from the American Communities Project (ACP) at The George Washington University.

The ACP, working with data from the 2018 County Health Rankings and with the support of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, examined thousands of data points through the prism of the ACP's 15 community types — distinguishable by demographic variables such as income, occupation, race and religion — to find common worries and shareable solutions.

Three dominant themes emerged in the analysis.

1. Communities with large populations of people of color fare poorly on a variety of important health and community measures. The data suggest the scores are less about specific populations in these communities than they are about the economic and cultural divides running through them.

2. Mental health concerns cross all community types. The ACP's community types hold very different geographies, people and economies, but the median county in every type has between 10% and 16% of its population reporting 14-or-more poor mental health days per month.

3. Some commonly held understandings of many communities and the challenges they face are incorrect. For instance, raising children in a single-parent home is not just an urban worry. And the nation's most racially and ethnically diverse communities, the big cities, are also its most segregated.

The data make clear that all kinds of communities — from well-educated urban enclaves to rural blue-collar boroughs — face health challenges. Furthermore, the data show what those specific concerns are.

The ACP also visited five communities, each representing one of its 15 types, to find best practices to address citizen health. Interviews with community leaders and officials in Dallas County, Texas; Douglas County, Colorado; Hood River County, Oregon; Jones County, Georgia; and Lake County, Ohio, led to insights into how those communities deal with their respective challenges and revealed programs and ideas that others can put into practice. (Profiles of those communities and a more complete exploration of this report's findings and data can be found online: americancommunities.org/healthreport).

Combined, the ACP's research and community investigations encompass a deep examination of the socioeconomic, cultural and health-related ties that bind together the United States' complicated patchwork of communities in 2018 and an exploration of what these communities can learn from one another.

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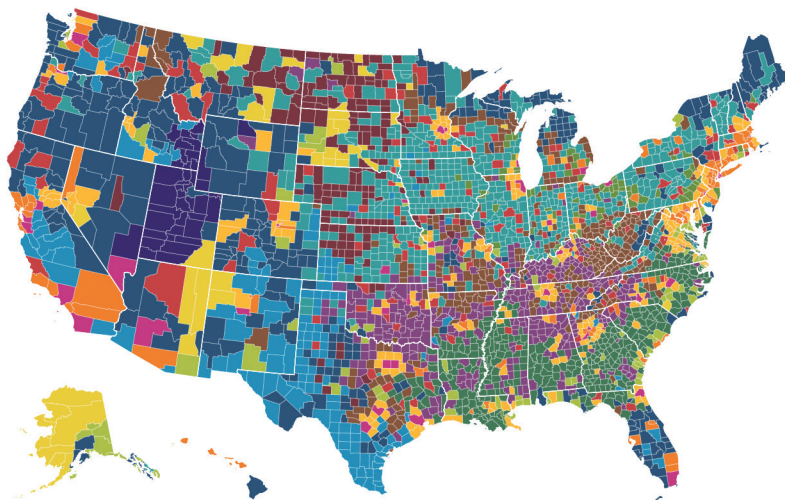
The Tapestry of American Communities

Your community is more than your home; it defines your life, from job opportunities and consumer choices, to the quality of education, to air quality and exercise options. And just a few miles can make a dramatic difference. Consider three Michigan counties that abut one another — Oakland, Macomb and Wayne.

In the 2018 County Health Rankings & Roadmaps — a partnership of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute — those three neighboring counties are, in essence, different worlds. Wealthy Oakland is in the top quartile of the state's health results and factors. Neighboring Macomb sits in the middle quartiles and Wayne sits in the bottom quartile.

The amount of variation in such a small geographic area is noteworthy, but not exceptional. Those communities are not just different places; based on the ACP community types, they are different *kinds* of places. Oakland, an educated, well-to-do county to the northwest of Detroit, is a quintessential *Urban Suburb*. Macomb, east of Oakland, is a blue-collar *Middle Suburb*. Wayne, just south of both, includes Detroit and, thus, holds the density and diversity of a *Big City*.

When you look at the nation as a whole, the complexity of community types grows. The ACP's map of the United States defines 15 community types among the nation's 3,100 counties. These 15 types were created using dozens of demographic variables and are designed to explore likenesses and differences that exist among communities at the county level. The ACP's 15 types are mapped below.



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- African American South
- Aging Farmlands
- Big Cities
- College Towns
- Evangelical Hubs
- Exurbs
- Graying America
- Hispanic Centers
- LDS Enclaves
- Middle Suburbs
- Military Posts
- Native American Lands
- Rural Middle America
- Urban Suburbs
- Working Class Country

Defining the ACP Types

African American South — Places with large African American populations. Lower incomes and higher unemployment.

Aging Farmlands — Sparsely populated and overwhelmingly white communities. Low unemployment, agricultural economy.

Big Cities — Counties holding the nation's largest cities. Dense and diverse.

College Towns — Urban and rural communities that are home to campuses and college students.

Evangelical Hubs — Places with above-average numbers for evangelical adherents. Largely Southern with fewer college graduates.

Exurbs — Wealthy communities usually on the edge of metro areas. Largely white with lower crime rates.

Graying America — Places with large senior communities. Generally rural and less diverse, middle-income.

Hispanic Centers — Large Hispanic populations in mostly rural communities. Younger with lower incomes.

LDS Enclaves — Places dominated by Latter-day Saints adherents. Younger and middle-income.

Middle Suburbs — Middle-income, blue-collar communities mostly around metro areas.

Military Posts — Located around military installations. Younger, middle-income, diverse communities.

Native American Lands — Places with large Native American populations. Young communities with lower incomes.

Rural Middle America — Largely rural and white communities. Middle-income and average educational attainment.

Urban Suburbs — Educated and densely populated communities around major metros. Racially and economically diverse.

Working Class Country — Rural, blue-collar communities. Low incomes and college graduation rates.

What the Numbers Say

By merging the ACP and the Health Rankings, we explored if and how differences at the community-type level fit into broader, hidden national trends.

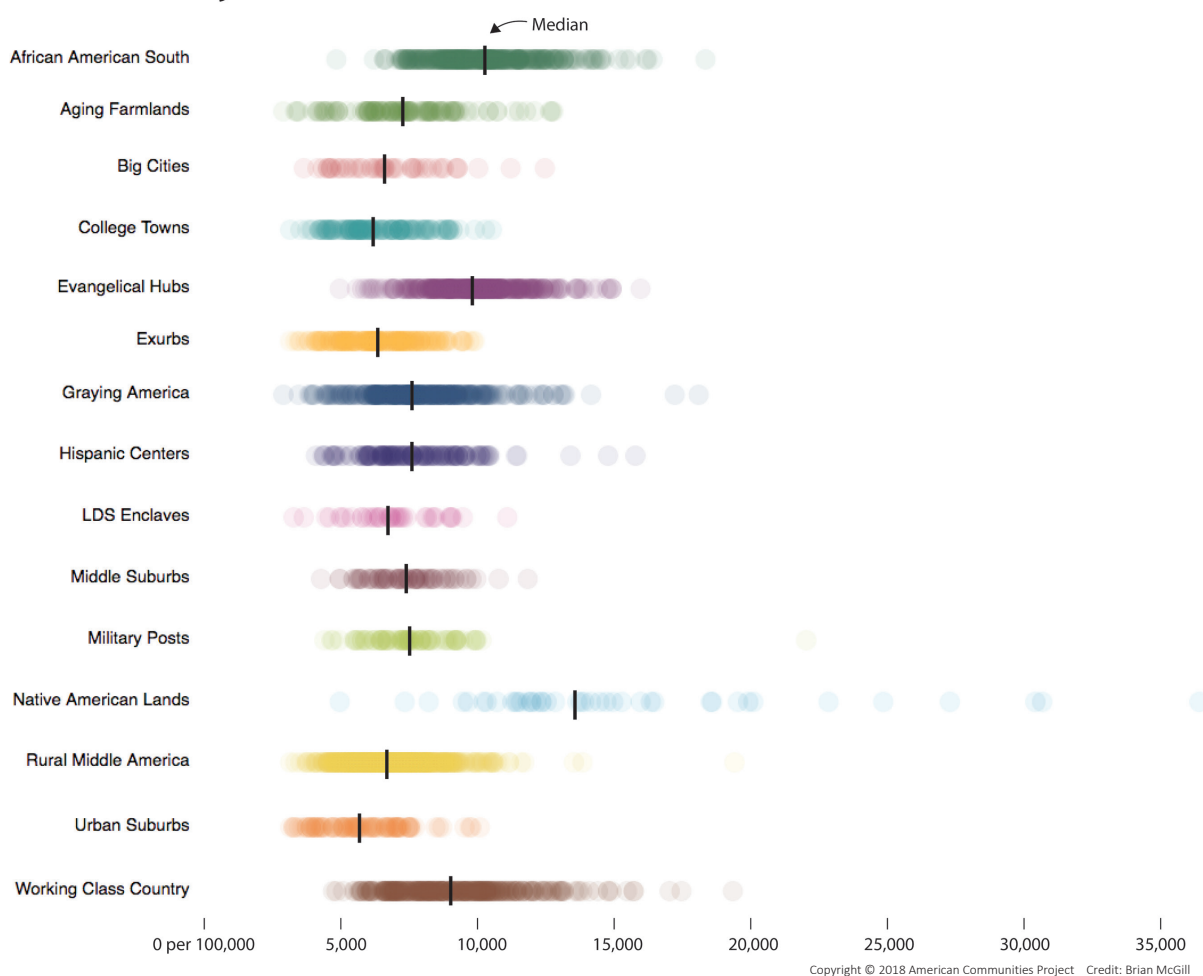
On behalf of the ACP, the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute used data compiled by the County Health Rankings & Roadmaps program to determine variation within and across ACP county types. It also calculated a composite measure of length and quality of life for counties, which was then used to sort counties within each typology. The top-performing counties within each typology were further classified by their within-state rank on health outcomes and health factors.

There were limitations. The ACP types are not evenly spread across the country. But the numbers showed some broad trends.

The chart below, for instance, shows the differences in mortality rates by county and type. The black line in each type represents the median for years of potential life lost before the age of 75, and each circle on the chart represents an individual county. You can see not only the differences in the medians but also how communities are clustered in some types and spread across the line in others.

Mortality Rate

Years of potential life lost before age 75 per 100,000 population (age-adjusted)



Read the five community narratives online.

African American South: **Jones County, Georgia**

Big City: **Dallas County, Texas**

Exurb: **Douglas County, Colorado**

Hispanic Center: **Hood River County, Oregon**

Middle Suburb: **Lake County, Ohio**

Of course, that's only one data point. Digging into the numbers, there are marked differences across many measures, including the three key findings in the analysis.

Communities with large populations of people of color fare poorly on a variety of important health and economic measures. This seems to be less about the specific populations in these communities than it is about the socioeconomic and cultural divides running through them. Those pressures create special challenges for these communities. The challenges are visible in data on the African American South, Hispanic Centers and Native American Lands.

The median county in those three types stands apart on a range of important factors and outcomes. They sit above the other counties on the percentage of people reporting they are in poor or fair health and the percentage of uninsured adults, but also on broader socioeconomic measures including the percentage of disconnected youth and the percentage of children eligible for free or reduced school lunch. That combination of scores suggests that limited economic and educational opportunities are at the root of the obstacles these communities face.

Mental health concerns cross all community types. The ACP's community types look very different in their geographies, people and economies, but the median county in every type has between 10% and 16% of its population reporting 14-or-more poor mental health days per month.

Those numbers are particularly arresting when you take into account the Centers for Disease Control 2018 report that death by suicide climbed by 25% between 1999 and 2016. And though the figures are higher in some places than others, they seem to defy simple explanation. The well-to-do, semi-urban Exurbs and Urban Suburbs, at 11%, look the same as middle-income Rural Middle America. The number for the youthful College Towns, 12%, is the same as the number for the aging Graying America counties.

The data also reveal how we may misunderstand different kinds of communities. Some findings in the County Health Rankings are somewhat counterintuitive.

For instance, while urban areas are often seen as the core of the nation's struggle with single-parent homes, the figures are spread across the country to many different kinds of communities. About 38% of the children in the median Big City county, as well as 36% in the Middle Suburbs, live in single-parent homes.

Looking at diversity, we also found noteworthy revelations. Big City communities are among the most diverse in the country — the median Big City is only about 47% white. But those same communities also score higher on segregation than other kinds of communities, even those with fairly multicultural populations such as the Urban Suburbs, African American South and Hispanic Centers. That is to say, even if you live in a place that looks like a melting pot from 30,000 feet, on the ground it may look much more monochromatic.

More Online and to Come

americancommunities.org/healthreport

There are other large patterns in the data and they can be explored in appendices of this report available online. We believe these community trends and data sets are crucial for communities and community leaders to understand. First, they allow community leaders to see how their home compares to similar places — to see whether their community is an outlier and in what ways. Second, the trend data should give communities other places to turn to for models and approaches to community health and engagement.

In a country as big and diverse as the United States, we need a new way to understand geography. Sometimes a community has more in common with a place hundreds of miles away than it does with the city or county next door. This report begins to explore this idea. There will be more deep dives in subsequent work, including one into the complexities of rural America.



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County Health
Rankings & Roadmaps

Building a Culture of Health, County by County