Fairness Across Places?

*Your Health in Pierce County*

2015 Health Equity Assessment Summary
Tacoma - Pierce County Health Department

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Our Vision: Healthy People in Healthy Communities.

Our Mission: To Safeguard and enhance the health of the communities of Pierce County.
The Unfolding Story of Health Disparities in Pierce County

Do all Pierce County residents have equal access to opportunities for good health? At Tacoma–Pierce County Health Department, we’ve been taking a hard look at this question.

We already know that many communities in Pierce County suffer from poor health outcomes. We have data that show very clear trends. But what are we, as a community, doing about it? That’s where our Health Equity initiative comes in.

Recent work, such as the Pierce County Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP), brought into focus the picture that was already clear to so many in our community.

The plan identified health inequities, or differences in health between communities, as one of the county’s top health concerns.1

Health equity means we have fairness across places and the zip code you live in doesn’t determine how healthy you are or can be. It means that everyone is able to reach their full health potential no matter how much money they make, how educated they are, what color their skin is, or what neighborhood they live in. Health equity means that everyone has a fair opportunity to live a long, healthy life.2

We don’t yet have fairness across places in Pierce County. This report will explore the inequities that exist in our communities. Perhaps more importantly, it will also shed light on why those differences exist so we can learn what we can do to impact and improve health for everyone in Pierce County.

Health Starts Where We Live, Learn, Work and Play

When we consider what makes people healthy, many of us think about genetics and family history, access to doctors and medical care, and things we do—our behaviors—that make us more or less healthy. But, data from health experts3 tell us that our social and economic conditions have a greater affect on our health than all of these other factors combined.

What are Social and Economic factors?

How much money and education we have, gender, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, disabilities and immigration status are social factors that affect how we live our daily lives. Conditions in our neighborhoods, such as quality of housing, availability of healthy food, safety, health care services, transportation, parks and more are other social factors. This assessment will focus on:

- Income
- Neighborhood
- Race/Ethnicity
- Education

Income

Nationwide, people with incomes above the federal poverty line typically live more than five years longer than those below the poverty line.4 In Pierce County, the relationship between income and health is also quite strong. In fact, the higher the average household income in Pierce County, the higher the life expectancy.

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1 Tacoma–Pierce County Health Department Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP)
2 www.bphc.org/ches/about/Pages/WhatIsHealthEquityDisparities.aspx
3 Such as the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
4 http://thenationshealth.aphapublications.org/content/45/2/1.1.full
Income and Life Expectancy

As your family income increases you can expect to live longer.

As income increases, so does how long people can expect to live.

From 2009-2013, the median household income in Pierce County was $59,204. But median doesn’t mean equal. People of color, on average, have lower household incomes compared to White residents.

Race and Income

In fact, 12.4 percent of the Pierce County population is living below the poverty level. Among children under the age of 18, 16.9 percent were living in poverty. Some groups have worse rates of poverty than others.

Poverty rates exceed the county average for the following groups of people:
- Hispanics (23.9%)
- American Indian/Alaska Natives (20.2%)
- Black (18.7%)
- Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander (15%)

Poverty and life expectancy are related. In communities with more poverty, the average life expectancy is lower. Life expectancy drops by two months of life for every 1 percent of increased poverty rate in a given population.

Poverty affects health. Living in poverty means you can’t afford quality housing, your neighborhood may not have sidewalks or parks, and healthy foods are too expensive for your budget. And the cumulative stress of living in poverty contributes to chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease and increases the use of stress-related behaviors, like smoking and over eating, that do not support good health. National data show that lifting working families out of poverty will reduce the number of premature deaths and decrease rates of chronic diseases, like high blood pressure, diabetes and heart failure.

Education

Education level is also linked to health. Those with more education tend to have better health. They have lower rates of tobacco use and mental health issues, and they live longer. In 2013, 25 percent of adults in Pierce County had a bachelor’s degree or higher and 36 percent had an associate’s degree or higher.

As with income, education level is not equitable across groups in Pierce County. Education level is highest among Asians and Whites: 41 percent of Asians and 37 percent of Whites had an associate’s degree or higher, compared to 19 percent of people without a high school education experience poor mental health compared to only 9% of people with college degrees.
American Indians and 19 percent of Hispanics.

Race, Place and Health Outcomes

Just like income and education, race affects health outcomes. But are those outcomes related to genetics, or to place? Sickle-cell anemia is a rare example of a disease that is linked to genetic differences. More often, differences in health are linked to historic policies and practices that have benefited some people while creating economic and social barriers for others.

For example, in the 1940s and 1950s, neighborhoods used covenants to prevent people of color from living in certain neighborhoods. This practice fostered racially segregated neighborhoods.

Banks used a practice called "redlining" to draw a red line around neighborhoods on a map and determine how to invest in those communities based on how many non-white residents lived there. Neighborhoods with a high percent of non-whites were less likely to receive small business loans and civic investments like sidewalks, parks, libraries or bus routes.

Industries that were kept out of affluent areas would locate in redlined neighborhoods. Historic policies like these create conditions that led to income and neighborhood inequities that we see today.

Certain industries may have added to environmental risk factors that unfairly affect some neighborhoods. In Pierce County, the death rate for cancer is far higher for American Indian/Alaskan Native and African-American populations than for any other racial groups.

We see those higher cancer-related death rates and lower life-expectancy rates in poorer neighborhoods that have a historic connection to practices such as red lining. These historic policies and practices have a profound influence on how our neighborhoods developed-- and who grew up there.

Fairness Across Places: Your Zip Code Impacts Your Health

Neighborhoods

Where you live, learn, work, and play has more to do with your health than any other factor.

Healthy neighborhoods should have clean water, air, and land so residents can live free of disease. They should offer safe public spaces to meet neighbors and stay active, such as parks to exercise and public sidewalks to safely walk separate from traffic. They should also provide easy and affordable opportunities for people to have adequate housing, access to transportation, access to healthy foods, opportunities to be physically active, and more. Places without convenient and affordable access to a wide range of choices can make healthy behaviors more difficult and negatively affect health.

Our county has a 17-year difference in life expectancy between the healthiest and least healthy zip codes. The zip codes with the highest life expectancy are in Elbe (98330) and Carbonado (98323), each with life expectancies of more than 86 years. The zip codes with the lowest life expectancy are in Tacoma’s Hilltop Neighborhood (98405), and in Vaughn (98394), each with life expectancies less than 75 years.

What causes the difference in health between places? Income, education, and race/ethnicity are important factors. The way we develop our neighborhoods also affects opportunities for physical, social, and mental
Poor mental health is not equal across genders. Pierce County women had a significantly higher percentage of poor mental health (24 percent) compared to Pierce County men (14 percent).

Community members also voiced the need for tobacco prevention and resources to help them quit.

Mental Health

Poor mental health is a big problem in Pierce County. According to the CHIP, 16 percent of Pierce County adults reported 14 or more days of poor mental health in the last 30 days.

Easier Choices for Long, Healthy Lives

Chronic Disease

According to the Pierce County Community Health Assessment (2014), most deaths in Pierce County are from chronic diseases. Heart disease and cancer were the top two causes of death, accounting for more than half of all deaths. In focus groups, workshops, surveys, and other data collection, Pierce County residents identified chronic diseases (e.g., heart disease, asthma, diabetes, and cancer) as top health concerns.

Smoking and obesity, two major contributors to chronic disease, continue to affect residents’ health. One out of every five adults in Pierce County is a current smoker. Thirty percent of Pierce County adults are obese. While similar to the rest of the United States, the number of obese adults in Pierce County continues to increase. And 25 percent of 10th graders are overweight or obese. Obesity can lead to health problems such as diabetes, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke and many types of cancer.

Doctors are telling 10 percent of Pierce County adults that they have diabetes. The distribution of diabetes in Pierce County is not even; see the Diabetes map (Appendix B). Some zip codes have far higher rates than others. Differences in the rates of many chronic diseases are also related to differences in income, education and neighborhoods.

Poor mental health is also a big concern for our youth. In 2012, 33 percent of 10th graders felt so sad or hopeless for two weeks or more that they stopped doing their usual activities.

Among Pierce County youth, depression was significantly higher for females (41%) than males (24%). Hispanic 10th graders also had a significantly higher percentage of youth depression (38%) compared to white 10th graders (31%).

Like many other health outcomes, poor mental health is not equal across groups in Pierce County. Pierce County women (24%) had a significantly higher percentage compared to Pierce County men (14%). Individuals with less than a high school education have a significantly higher percentage of poor mental health days compared to those with a high school education or above.

Mental health issues exist in certain areas because income and education affect what neighborhoods people can afford to live in.
The Mental Health map (Appendix C) shows how mental health issues are more common in some zip codes.

**Access to Health Care**

When the Affordable Care Act was getting underway in 2013–2014, we were talking to residents about a plan to improve our community health. Residents participating in the CHIP identified access to health care as a high impact health issue.

Barriers to health care, such as lack of insurance or few doctors in the community, and the effect of lack of quality health care were regularly mentioned. When people spoke about poverty, health disparities, health behaviors and poor health outcomes, they also brought up access to care. Access to quality health care is one of several factors that influence an individual’s health status. People with access to quality health care are more likely to receive preventive health care, such as immunizations and adequate medical care when sick. The Access to Care map (Appendix D) shows how coverage rates differ across places.

But having health insurance does not assure that health care is accessible or affordable. Co-pays, deductibles and lack of coverage for certain services or conditions create barriers to health care for people who have health insurance. In fact, about 20 percent of Pierce County adults reported there was a time in the past year when they could not afford to see a doctor.

Fortunately, Pierce County has good news about trends in access to healthcare. As of March 2015 Pierce County had 7,418 health insurance plan renewals and 5,934 new enrollees through the Affordable Care Act. Additionally, 61,117 Pierce County residents qualified for health care under Medicaid expansion. This represents a total of 74,469 Pierce County residents who now have access to healthcare who may not have before the Affordable Care Act.

**Take Actions to Reduce Health Inequities**

Tacoma–Pierce County Health Department cares deeply about health for all in Pierce County. We commit to looking at all our work, including our partnerships and our impact on neighborhoods, to make sure we support fairness across places.

We need to work together to make changes that will improve health for those who suffer most from poor health.

At the Health Department, we are taking a hard look at our piece of this puzzle. We are looking at the types and design of our programs, focusing our limited resources in places with the highest need, our hiring practices, and how we engage with and collaborate with the community. Our goal is to do everything in our power to provide opportunities for health to everyone in Pierce County, especially those who currently have the fewest opportunities.

We need your partnership, too. We are engaging local groups that are also working to improve opportunities for all in Pierce County. Together, we can rely on public health information to help us tell the story of health inequities and advocate for policies and programs that will strengthen economic and social opportunities for all Pierce County residents.

When all of us in Pierce County work together to create fairness across places, we will indeed realize the vision of healthy people in healthy communities.

For more information, call (253) 370-5687 or visit tpchd.org/healthequity.
Appendix A: Life Expectancy Map

By Census Tract, Pierce County, 2010-2012
Appendix B: Diabetes Map

By ZIP code, Pierce County, 2011-2013: Diabetes Prevalence Rate per 10,000
Appendix C: Mental Health Map
Appendix D: Access to Care Map
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US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, Table S1701, 2009-2013, 5-Year Estimates.

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