



**For IR Public Health column**

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## **Where We Live, Work, Play Has Major Impact on Our Health**

**By Melanie Reynolds  
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The conditions in which we live, learn, work, and play have a tremendous impact on how healthy we are.

In fact, collectively, they're the single biggest reason why some people are healthier than others. They have more influence than genes, unhealthy behaviors, and medical care combined.

Public health professionals call these modifiable lifestyle conditions "social determinants of health." They include things like:

- Income;
- Education;
- Housing;
- Availability of health care;
- Transportation;
- Opportunities for physical activity;
- Access to nutritious food;
- Social relationships and supports;
- Quality of water, food, and air; and
- Exposure to crime, violence, and other traumatic experiences, especially in childhood.

From a statistical standpoint, Lewis and Clark County doesn't seem to have much in the way of socially disadvantaged populations. U.S. census data paint a very homogenous picture of our county, even compared to other parts of Montana.

Our residents are mostly white (94 percent), well educated (95 percent have graduated from high school and 38 percent have a college degree), and financially secure (our household income is higher than the Montana average).

Nonetheless, there are segments of the population that carry a heavier burden of disease and illness simply because of the conditions they live in. Among them are those in poverty, those with disabilities, and those who live in rural areas.

## **Rural Living**

The U.S. Census Bureau defines the term “rural” as land that’s sparsely settled with communities of fewer than 2,500 residents. With the exception of Helena, that’s the county we live in. Twenty percent of our residents face a higher risk of poor health simply because they live in rural settings.

Research shows that rural residents are more likely to be older, have lower incomes, have chronic illnesses, and be uninsured than people living in urban areas. They’re more likely to smoke, be physically inactive, have a poor diet, and shun seatbelts. Deaths from injury and suicide are more common in rural areas.

On top of this, rural residents often have to travel longer distances to medical providers and may have limited emergency medical services nearby.

## **Socioeconomic Status**

Inequality in education, income, and occupation widens the gap between those who are healthy and those who aren’t. It’s linked to a wide range of health problems, including low birthweight, heart disease, high blood pressure, arthritis, diabetes, and cancer. It’s also associated with shorter lifespans.

Education is the most basic component of socioeconomic status because it shapes a person’s future job opportunities and earning potential. It also provides knowledge and life skills that help a person access resources that promote health. Research shows that early educational experiences, like high-quality preschool, as well as how much education a person has, are important indicators of health status.

Research also shows a strong relationship between income and health. Individuals with more money have the means to buy health insurance, which has a significant impact on their ability to access health care regularly. A higher income can mean better nutrition, housing, schooling, and recreation.

Residents with lower incomes and less education are more likely to live and work in risky physical environments. Poorer neighborhoods are more likely to be located near highways, industrial areas, and toxic waste sites, in part because land there is cheaper. This can lead to exposure to health-damaging stuff in the environment, including lead, asbestos, carbon dioxide, and industrial waste. Housing quality is also generally poorer for those with low income.

People with low incomes are also more likely to live and work in stressful circumstances, which can affect health both directly and indirectly through its effects on health behavior.

## **Disability**

Disability is part of life. Any one of us might become disabled at any age.

It’s important to remember that disabilities don’t define people or their health, talents, and abilities. People with disabilities play an important and valued role in every community. All people, including those with disabilities, should have a chance to take part in daily activities that add to their growth, development, fulfillment, and community contribution.

Research shows that people with disabilities often shoulder a heavier burden of poor health. They’re more likely to use tobacco, be overweight or obese, have high blood pressure, be under- or unemployed, have symptoms of psychological distress, and have difficulty getting the health care they need. They’re less likely to visit the dentist, have preventive health screenings, and engage in fitness activities.

More than one of every four residents of our county (26 percent) reports having a disability. Even more (29 percent) say they have a health problem that limits their activities. That's higher than both the state (24 percent) and national (21 percent) rates.

### **A Fair Shot**

Although the number of county residents who are disadvantaged because of socially determined circumstances is relatively small, they, too, deserve a fair shot at a healthy life. We have a responsibility as good citizens to recognize and address unfair and avoidable socioeconomic differences so our neighbors get that fair shot.

How do we do that? Health experts believe we need to focus on these things:

- Make sure everyone can afford to see a medical provider when they're sick. Health insurance coverage is an important way to do that.
- Make preventive care, like screening for cancer and heart disease, readily available to all.
- Make high-quality care and early education available for all children.
- And finally, stop thinking of health as something we get at the doctor's office. We need to view health as something that starts in our families, schools, and workplaces, in our playgrounds and parks, and in the air we breathe and the water we drink.

It will take all of us working together to create social and physical environments that promote good health for everyone. That's the only way we'll significantly improve public health.