

Place matters when it comes to health

March 2 2012, by Sathya Achia Abraham

The community or neighborhood you live in can impact your health in big ways, and disadvantaged, low-income populations in the United States are at an increased risk of experiencing unhealthy conditions, more sickness and shorter lives, according to a new study by researchers with the Virginia Commonwealth University Center on Human Needs.

In [collaboration](#) with the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies Health Policy Institute and the Virginia Network for Geospatial [Health Research](#), the VCU Center on Human Needs is releasing the first of eight studies assessing [population health](#) inequities and related social and [economic conditions](#) in urban and [rural communities](#) across the [United States](#). Working alongside the project partners are eight “Place Matters” teams consisting of individuals who work and live in each of the communities studied.

The first [report](#) examines health disparities for the large rural population in the San Joaquin Valley of California. In this migrant farm community, social determinants of health and health equity – such as income and education - are playing an important role in shaping health outcomes.

The technical report by the VCU Center on Human Needs has been translated into a policy brief that has been issued by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies Health Policy Institute. Read the policy brief [here](#).

“Our study is part of a larger initiative being led by our partners in California to use the evidence we compiled to inform policy and

improve the health of the San Joaquin community,” said the lead author of the study, Amber Haley, a research epidemiologist at the VCU Center on Human Needs.

Further, according to Haley, the issues in the San Joaquin Valley are similar to issues in other areas across the United States, and she said that those policy implications can serve as examples of how to impact health equity to change policy issues.

“We want the people in the San Joaquin Valley – and each of the places we have examined – to take a leadership position and use the information we have gathered to influence policy and decision makers to move toward change in their communities,” said Haley.

In the San Joaquin Valley population, the VCU team examined how health and environmental conditions impacted mortality and life expectancy. They observed that the risk of premature death – before the age of 65 – in the lowest-income zip codes is nearly twice that of those in the highest-income zip codes.

According to Haley, the air quality in the San Joaquin Valley is very poor and the team wanted to determine if disadvantaged populations are disproportionately exposed to environmental hazards. Areas with the highest respiratory risk tended to have a higher population in poverty and a larger Hispanic population. Also, areas with higher mortality had a less educated population.

In the next several months, the VCU Center on Human Needs will be releasing studies of other communities, including Alameda County in Oakland, Calif.; Baltimore, Md.; Cook County in Chicago, Ill.; Bernalillo County in Albuquerque, N.M.; Boston, Mass.; Orleans Parish, La.; and South Delta, Miss.

The project was funded by grants from the Health Policy Institute and the National Institutes of [Health](#).

Provided by Virginia Commonwealth University

Citation: Place matters when it comes to health (2012, March 2) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-03-health.html>

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