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State's health ranking: 38th

And we're falling as we grow fatter

Angela Mapes Turner | The Journal Gazette

Last year saw more Hoosiers living without insurance and a rise in obesity in the state, according to an annual report that ranks states by the health of their residents.

And the rate of uninsured in Indiana increased from 11.9 percent to 13.2 percent, contributing to Indiana's 38th-place spot in the annual America's Health Rankings report. Indiana dropped from 36th place in 2009.

United Health Foundation, the non-profit arm of UnitedHealth Group, conducts the study, which is in its 21st year. It evaluates socioeconomic factors, health measures and environmental factors to determine state rankings, using data primarily from government resources.

One factor pointed out in the report has long been a challenge for Indiana's public-health advocates: Obesity. Since 1990, the prevalence of obesity increased from 14.5 percent to 29.9 percent of the state's population; it increased by 2.9 percent of the population in the past year alone.

Among the bad news was a glimmer of hope. In the past five years, the rate of deaths in Indiana from cardiovascular disease decreased from 346 to 300.5 deaths per 100,000 people, according to United Health Foundation.

But to Dr. Deborah McMahan, the Fort Wayne-Allen County health commissioner, the bad news in the report overshadowed the good.

"This really is a call to act," she said. "We've really got to take this stuff seriously, or we're not going to like where we find ourselves 10 years from now."

McMahan said two things stood out in her mind when she read the report. First, that so many of the issues pulling Indiana's ranking down are preventable factors – including obesity and smoking – that lead to long-term health problems.

Second, she said, the report showed the interconnectivity between health factors and economic classes. By pointing out the increase of children in poverty, the report took into account the difficulty those kids have getting healthy food.

"Life is harder for kids when they're poor and when they start out poor," she said.

Child poverty in Indiana has increased by half over the past decade, said Bill Stanczykiewicz, president and CEO of the Indiana Youth Institute.

"It's just another reminder of how much challenge there is in families and in communities with this economy," Stanczykiewicz said.

Stanczykiewicz cites Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke, who recently said during a "60 Minutes" interview that the income gap is creating two societies, based on educational differences. College graduates have an unemployment rate of 5 percent, while for those with high school educations, it's 10 percent or more, Bernanke is quoted as saying by the New York Times.

The best way to ensure better futures for young Hoosiers is to impart the importance of education now, Stanczykiewicz said.

Both Stanczykiewicz and McMahan see importance in continuing to encourage adults to quit smoking and children never to start.

"You can talk to your kids all you want, but the No. 1 influence is what you do," Stanczykiewicz said. "We need to be demonstrating and modeling good behavior."



Samuel Hoffman | The Journal Gazette

Brandon Stuckey hits a treadmill. He said he works out every other day.



Samuel Hoffman | The Journal Gazette

Naveed Ahmad works out at Anytime Fitness in Covington Plaza. Ahmad said he works out there on a daily basis.

By the numbers

America's Health Rankings 2010 assigned states positions based on multiple health, socioeconomic and environmental factors.

Bottom 5

- 50...Mississippi
- 49...Louisiana
- 48...Arkansas
- 47...Nevada

Rachele Jordan is regional manager for three local Anytime Fitness franchises. Jordan said her company, which caters to adults with busy lifestyles, has seen more people drop their gym memberships as they lose jobs and cut expenses.

But she's also seen what she thinks is a different effect of the recession. More people, often with preventable health issues and without health insurance, are taking up a fitness center membership as a way to get healthier and potentially avoid medical expenses down the road.

Jordan said the fitness centers also have seen an increase in companies encouraging employees to exercise to stay healthy.

Nicole Liddell, the YMCA of Greater Fort Wayne's director of mission advancement, said her organization has not seen a decrease in membership and has also seen greater emphasis on fitness by employers.

"Our corporate membership is growing by leaps and bounds," Liddell said.

Those are positive signs, McMahan said, but they won't be enough to pull Indiana up without more communities increasing access to healthy foods for lower-income families and incorporating exercise in families' daily lives.

McMahan thinks a comprehensive statewide smoking ban should also be on the agenda.

"We don't want to be the last state that does that," she said.

Rep. Charlie Brown, D-Gary, said last week he again plans to sponsor legislation to prohibit smoking in indoor public spaces – with no exemptions – and Gov. Mitch Daniels said he would sign such legislation if it crossed his desk.

That's the kind of comprehensive step that will increase overall health and wellness, McMahan said.

"It's great that we have people taking advantage of things," she said. "But when you have levels of a problem like this, you really need to look for more systemic changes."

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46...Oklahoma

Top 5

1...Vermont

2...Massachusetts

3...New Hampshire

4...Connecticut

5...Hawaii

In our area

Illinois

2010: 29th; '09: 29th

Michigan

2010: 30th; '09: 30th

Ohio

2010: 34th; '09: 34th

Indiana

2010: 38th; '09: 36th

Kentucky

2010: 44th; '09: 41st

Source: United Health Foundation America's Health Rankings

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