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Milwaukee One of Unhealthiest Places in Wisconsin

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WAUSAU, Wis. (AP) -- Southeast Wisconsin is home to some of the state's healthiest -- and least healthy -- people, according to a University of Wisconsin-Madison study released Thursday.

It showed that Milwaukee is one of the unhealthiest places to live in Wisconsin, while suburban Ozaukee and Waukesha counties are among the healthiest.

The study calls "attention to the fact we have health discrepancies in Wisconsin," said Pat Remington, director of UW Population Health Institute. "It is a challenge for the entire state to think about what we might call the unequal distribution of health across the state and what approaches the entire state might do to provide resources and support for communities who need it the most."

A healthy county is one where people live to be 75 and older, their health is generally good and their quality of life is high, Remington said in a telephone interview from Madison.

The sixth annual study ranked Wisconsin's counties based on 30 factors including mortality rates, surveys of people about how they felt, the availability of health care, whether people smoked or were obese, binge drinking, level of education, exercise and living in housing with an increased lead risk.

Along with Ozaukee and Waukesha counties, Dane County, home to Madison and state government, ranked as the healthiest.

Menominee County, home of the Menominee Tribe in northeast Wisconsin, was once again the least healthiest, followed by the city of Milwaukee and Marquette County in central Wisconsin.

Lisa Waukau, chairwoman of the Menominee Indian Tribe, said being last on the list again was disappointing but not unexpected.

Menominee County has many people without health insurance, "a lot of risky behavior," such as smoking, and a high incidence of diabetes because of genetics and poor diet, Waukau

said.

"We are not a wealthy tribe. We are a poor tribe," she said. "Poor people don't have the luxury of having that diet that middle class people do. We just don't have the dollars that we can pour into prevention programs."

Waukau said the tribe's No. 1 need is universal health care.

"I would like the insurance for my people that Congress has, so we wouldn't have to go begging when it comes to health care," she said.

The study found 7.5 percent of the state's population under age 65 did not have health insurance.

"The general sense is the number is increasing," Remington said. "People without health insurance have more diseases. Cancers are detected later, and people have an increased chance of dying. It is certainly not acceptable to have that many people uninsured."

Jefferson and Langlade counties had the fewest people lacking health insurance -- 2.8 percent and 3.2 percent -- while Sawyer and Clark counties had the most -- 22.8 percent and 21.5 percent, according to the research.

"Those are big differences. They are not occurring by chance alone," Remington said.

For example, Sawyer County may have more seasonal employers not providing health insurance to workers, while a larger manufacturing base in Jefferson County, near Milwaukee, does, the researcher said.

Sawyer County includes the reservation for the Lac Courte Oreilles band of Lake Superior Chippewa in northwest Wisconsin, and Clark County is a farming area just east of Eau Claire in western Wisconsin.

The study also found wealthier counties tended to be healthier, which was no surprise, Remington said. People with education and money are more likely to have healthy behaviors, good health care and better overall health, he said.

In surveys, only 7.8 percent of people in Ozaukee County and 8.6 percent in Waukesha County rated themselves in fair or poor health, compared with 26.6 percent in Menominee County, 19.6 percent in Marquette County and 19.3 percent in the city of Milwaukee, the study found.

The state's five leading causes of death are cancer, heart disease and stroke, respiratory diseases, unintentional motor vehicle accidents and suicide, according to the study.

On the Net:

2008 Wisconsin County Health Rankings:

<http://www.pophealth.wisc.edu/uwphi/research/rankings--2008/rankings--2008.htm>

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