

County among healthiest in state

Crime rate, drinking, poverty remain concerns

Health By JONDI GUMZ 441
jgumz@santacruzsentinel.com

SANTA CRUZ — Santa Cruz County is one of the healthiest places in the state.

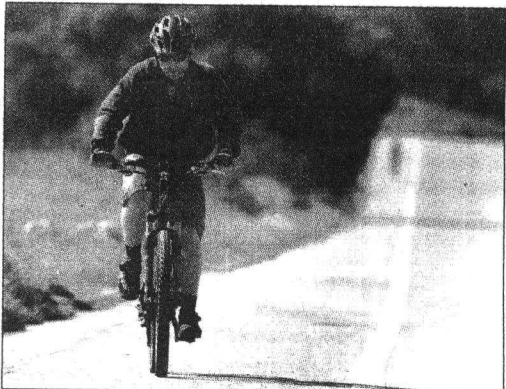
It ranked as the seventh healthiest county in California, up from eighth a year ago, according to the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Marin County ranked first in health outcomes, followed by San Benito, Placer, Santa Clara, San Mateo and Orange.

The health ranking project, which started in Wisconsin and went nationwide last year, allows people to see how healthy their county is, compare it with others and find ways to improve.

Researchers looked at outcomes, measured by statistics such as people dying before the age of

SEE HEALTH ON A2



BILL LOVEJOY/SENTINEL

Tom Wilson takes on the hill on McLaughlin Drive Sunday morning at UCSC.



KEVIN JOHNSON/SENTINEL

Bicyclists and a jogger take a tour of West Cliff Drive on Friday afternoon. The county ranks as the seventh healthiest in the state.

HEALTH

Continued from A1

75 and low birthweight babies.

They also looked at behaviors such as smoking and excessive drinking, social and economic factors such as crime and single-parent households, access to health care such as doctors and diabetic screenings, and environmental aspects such as air pollution and access to healthier foods.

In terms of healthy behavior, Santa Cruz County ranked No. 1 in California.

"We are seeing lots of positive progress overall with smoking and heart health," said Rama Khalsa, county Health Services Agency administrator.

Rates of smoking, adult obesity, teen births, fatal car crashes and sexually transmitted diseases are all lower than the state average.

The physical environment, with zero bad air days, was rated fifth best.

But Santa Cruz County falls short of national benchmarks in three measures of health care access.

About 23 percent of adults are uninsured compared to 13 percent; the diabetic screening rate is 74 percent compared to 89 percent; and the ratio of population to primary care providers is 644 to 1, compared to 631 to 1.

In preventable hospital stays, Santa Cruz County matched the national average.

There's also room for improvement in social and economic factors, with 17 percent of children living in poverty, a high school graduation rate of 80 percent, and a rate of violent crime four times the national average.

Angela Russell, associate researcher with the University of Wisconsin Population

Health Institute, said the rankings can be used as a starting point for discussions to improve community health.

"We're cautioning people not to look for trends — two years of data don't make a trend," she said. "If all communities improve health, the rank isn't necessarily going to change."

Researchers changed some measurements this year. Liquor store density was dropped because licensing laws differed from state to state. Hospice use by Medicare patients was replaced by mammography screening, which was considered a more accepted measure of health care quality.

Dr. Nanette Mickiewicz, president of Dominican Hospital, pointed out its Coumadin clinic helps people with chronic heart failure avoid hospitalization, monitoring their regimens for blood thinning medications. The hospital's PEP program offers classes in smoking cessation, exercise, birth preparation, mindful eating and diabetes management.

Mickiewicz said a new partnership between Dominican and Second Harvest Food Bank stresses nutrition and prevention of youth obesity, a precursor to diabetes later in life.

Khalsa said county officials are working with health providers to expand services to uninsured adults, with a focus on chronic conditions such as diabetes, cancer, cardiac problems and substance abuse.

"We estimate that we can offer care to another 1,000 patients per year," she said. "This program will begin in July if the state finishes the contract with us."

Other priorities are grants for preventing childhood obesity and boosting immunizations.

Santa Cruz County ranked lower last year because of bad air days due to wildfires,

WHERE WE STAND

Measurement Santa Cruz County National benchmark

HEALTH OUTCOMES COUNTY RANKING: 7TH

| | | |
|---------------------------|-------|-------|
| Death before age 75 | 5,252 | 5,564 |
| In poor health | 16% | 10% |
| Poor physical health days | 2.9% | 2.6% |
| Poor mental health days | 3.8% | 2.3% |
| Low birthweight babies | 5.5% | 6% |

HEALTH BEHAVIORS COUNTY RANKING: 1ST

| | | |
|---------------------------------|-----|-----|
| Smoking | 11% | 15% |
| Adult obesity | 17% | 25% |
| Excessive drinking | 19% | 8% |
| Motor vehicle crash death rate | 11 | 12 |
| Sexually transmitted infections | 266 | 83 |
| Teen birth rate | 31 | 22 |

CLINICAL CARE COUNTY RANKING: 24TH

| | | |
|----------------------------|-------|-------|
| Uninsured adults | 23% | 13% |
| Primary care providers | 644:1 | 631:1 |
| Preventable hospital stays | 52 | 52 |
| Diabetic screening | 74% | 89% |
| Mammography screening | 67% | 74% |

SOCIAL & ECONOMIC FACTORS COUNTY RANKING: 17TH

| | | |
|---------------------------|-------|------|
| High school graduation | 80% | 92% |
| Some college | 66% | 68% |
| Unemployment | 11.2% | 5.3% |
| Children in poverty | 17% | 11% |
| Inadequate social support | 21% | 14% |
| Single parent households | 27% | 20% |
| Violent crime rate | 473 | 100 |

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT COUNTY RANKING: 5TH

| | | |
|-----------------------------------|-----|-----|
| Particulate matter days | 0 | 0 |
| Air pollution, ozone days | 0 | 0 |
| Access to healthy food | 80% | 92% |
| Access to recreational facilities | 15 | 17 |

SOURCE: www.countyhealthrankings.org

according to Mary Lou Goeke, executive director of the United Way of Santa Cruz County, which sponsors the annual Community Assessment Project to measure quality of life.

"We ranked very well against other counties in California, especially on smoking, which is the cause of so many diseases and premature death," she said.

Only 11 percent of adults in the county are smokers compared to 15 percent statewide; 17 percent are obese, compared

to 23 percent statewide.

Goeke wants to meet national benchmarks.

"We still have a lot of work to get our adults insured, get more diabetic screenings, decrease our violent crime rate, and reduce excessive drinking," she said. "The underlying issues we need to focus on include getting more education for adults who do not have high school degrees, lifting our children out of poverty and increasing social supports."