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‘Dashboard’ spells out the health of 500 cities — including several in Georgia

FEATURE May 18, 2018 Andy Miller and Naomi Thomas
Georgia Health News

How healthy is your city?

A newly released “City Health Dashboard” tracks 36 measures affecting health for the 500 largest U.S. cities – those with populations of about 66,000 or more.

In Georgia, 11 cities were measured on factors ranging from education and poverty to their rates of chronic diseases and their walkability.



The report was produced by the New York University School of Medicine's Department of Population Health.

"What we've tried to do is bring together measures of health and drivers of health to motivate change and health improvement," said Dr. Marc Gourevitch, of NYU School of Medicine.

"A number of education factors are key to producing health later on in life," he said, adding that "poverty is just a huge driver of health outcomes."

Unlike some other data reports on the health of places in the United States, the Dashboard is strictly informational and does not try to "rank" cities for better or worse. But a review of several factors studied showed that the cities of Sandy Springs, Roswell and Johns Creek – all in northern Fulton County in the Atlanta suburbs – generally had Georgia's most favorable scores on the health factors, including low levels of uninsured people and premature deaths.

Still, the suburbs are not without problems. The data show that Johns Creek is below average on access to healthy food, and it has a relatively high rate of binge drinking.

Johns Creek, Sandy Springs and Roswell also have low "walkability" scores, meaning they don't make it easy enough to be a pedestrian and get exercise safely on foot. Atlanta and Savannah are the most walkable Georgia cities.

Atlanta has a high rate of children in poverty, at 38.1 percent, while it has roughly average percentages of adults who are smokers and who are physically inactive, and of adults accessing dental care.



Diabetes rates among the 11 cities range from a low of 7.2 percent of adults in Sandy Springs to a high of 16.7 percent in Macon.

Among other findings:



** Augusta has a relatively low number of premature deaths. But 35 percent of residents are obese, and one-third are physically inactive.

** Macon has one of the highest rates of obesity, at 40 percent of adults, and it also has one of the lowest scores for park access and walkability. Macon has the highest percentage of uninsured people, at 25 percent, and 43 percent of its children are living in poverty.



Macon

** Athens has a high level of children in poverty, at almost 40 percent. But it rates low in premature deaths. Warner Robins has a rate of children living in poverty of 34.5 percent, and 35 percent of adults are obese. But its uninsured rate is below that of several cities.

** Savannah has a high rate of breast cancer, cardiovascular and colorectal cancer deaths.

** Columbus has a high rate of cardiovascular disease deaths and of premature deaths.

** Albany and Columbus have a much higher rate of teenage births than the average city.

** Albany has very poor scores on several measures. Almost half of its children live in poverty. Forty percent of adults are obese. About one-fourth of adults are smokers. And its adult diabetes rate of 15 percent is much higher than the U.S. city average of 9.8 percent.

The measures uses data from several national sources, including the U.S. Census and the CDC, as well as state figures.

The findings from the City Health Dashboard can be useful, said Dr. Harry Heiman, a health policy expert at Georgia State University's School of Public Health.



Heiman

“Anything that creates an opportunity for a city to look at [health] indicators, why they are positive or negative outliers, can be valuable,” he said.

Improving health factors for a city “is all about leadership,” Heiman added.

But some health measures rely on action at the county or state level, he said. Health improvement “will require actions on all levels.”