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## The NATION'S HEALTH

A PUBLICATION OF THE AMERICAN PUBLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION

News | Nation

# Low wages can raise health risks, harm well-being, new report says

Michal Ruprecht

The Nation's Health July 2022, 52 (5) 6;



An employee operates a forklift at a farm. Women workers earn 80 cents for every dollar men earn for doing the same job, according to the County Health Rankings and Roadmaps report.

Photo by JackF, courtesy iStockphoto

Many people in the U.S. are struggling to make a living wage, putting their health at risk, an April report finds. People of color and women are impacted the most.

The finding is part of the annual County Health Rankings and Roadmaps report created by the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute, with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

The report provides local communities with data on more than 90 health-influencing factors, including housing, education, jobs, tobacco and alcohol use, and access to quality health care.

The report uses data collected between 2014 and 2021 to evaluate counties on health outcomes — length and quality of life — and factors impacting health. It also shares insights on national health trends.

“We’re bringing forward a suite of new measures that really help illuminate the ways that systems and structures get in the way of how long and how well people are living,” Sheri Johnson, PhD, MA, co-director of the institute, told *The Nation’s Health*.

Some U.S. counties would require a 73% increase in salaries to meet a living wage standard, while other areas in the U.S. would need to increase by 230%. On average, the hourly living wage necessary to meet basic needs for a household with one adult and two children is \$35.80. In some U.S. counties, the living wage dips to a minimum of \$29.81 an hour and increase to a high of \$65.45. Inadequate earnings can affect both health and well-being.

The challenges of securing a living wage, affording child care or receiving equitable pay regardless of gender are all interconnected, according to the report. This means the whole community — businesses, policymakers, community and economic development professionals and, most importantly, residents who are directly impacted — must be at the table determining solutions.

County residents and public health leaders can use the report’s online interactive map to see how their community is faring on health and see its ranking compared to other counties. For example, in Kansas, Johnson County has the highest health ranking, while Edwards County has the lowest. In Pennsylvania, Chester County is the overall healthiest, while Philadelphia County came in last among 67 counties. Over one-third of Philadelphians have obesity and 27% live in poverty.



Some workers in U.S. counties would require a 73% pay raise to make a living wage, report says.

Photo by Perfectlab, courtesy iStockphoto

Across the U.S., women of color earn the lowest paychecks, according to the report. Overall, women earn 80 cents for every dollar men earn for the same work. Black women would need to work three additional months to earn the salary of a white man, the report said. The figure is even higher for American Indian and Alaska Native and Hispanic women, who would need to work eight and 10 months more, respectively. This discrepancy is a result of historic gender discrimination that disproportionately burdens women of color.

In addition to wage disparities, Americans are struggling to pay for child care. A family with two children spends about a quarter of its household income on child care.

To combat the challenges, report authors recommend that leaders implement child care subsidies and universal basic income to eliminate wage discrepancies. Johnson said the changes need to be individualized for communities and created together.

“The decisions that we’ve made collectively about how we resource communities is what matters for peoples’ health,” Johnson said. “All of the things that we know are important for health — safe, secure, affordable housing — (are) about the collective decisions we make, not just the individual decisions that people may have available to them.”

For more information on the “2022 County Health Rankings National Findings Report,” visit [www.countyhealthrankings.org](http://www.countyhealthrankings.org).

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[← Previous](#)

[Next →](#)

[▲ Back to top](#)

### In this issue



The Nation's Health

Vol. 52, Issue 5  
July 2022

[Table of Contents](#)

[Table of Contents \(PDF\)](#)


[Index by author](#)

[Complete Issue \(PDF\)](#)





-  [Print](#)
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-  [Email Article](#)
-  [Citation Tools](#)

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