

Study shows Ottawa, Kent counties have healthier people

By Kyla King The Grand Rapids Press

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Emily Zoladz | The Grand Rapids Press

From right, Katie Roll of Lowell, Amy Reide of Grand Rapids and Holly Williams of Grand Rapids work out on elliptical machines Tuesday at the YMCA in downtown Grand Rapids. Ottawa and Kent counties ranked high in the first-ever county-by-county health rankings for the state.

GRAND RAPIDS -- The state of Michigan may have the dubious distinction of having some of the most overweight residents in the country, but a **new report** shows that on an individual county basis, West Michigan residents are living well.

A first-ever report released today shows Ottawa County has the second healthiest residents in the state and Kent County ranks 22nd out of 82 counties studied.

The study, performed by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute, shows overall West Michigan residents have better access to quality programs that promote good health, are less likely to die before age 75, and are more likely to engage in healthy behaviors.

"It's definitely something to be proud of, but the report is not the end all and be all place to hang our hats by any means," said **Ottawa County Health Department** spokeswoman Shannon Felgner. "It's just another tool in our toolbox."

The reported measured 2006 data from 82 of Michigan's 83 counties. It included the percent of folks reporting fair or poor health, number of reported days of poor physical and mental health, rate of low-birth weight infants, access to healthy foods, diabetic screenings, binge drinking figures, tobacco use, obesity rates and high school graduation rates. Keweenaw County was not rated.

According to the study, Livingston County has the healthiest population and Clare County has the least. Data shows people

How West Michigan stacks up (on a 1-82 scale)

BEHIND THE STUDY

What: A study released today provides the first-ever county-by-county health rankings in every U.S. state.

How it was done: Measuring factors like the rate of people dying before age 75, percent of folks reporting fair or poor health, number of reported days of poor physical and mental health, rate of low-birthweight infants, access to healthy foods, diabetic screenings, binge drinking figures, tobacco use,

who live in counties bunched in the Upper Peninsula and the southeast region of the state are healthiest.

West Michigan fared well, with Ottawa County ranking 2nd in overall health of residents and in the top five in programs that influence good health, the rate of people dying before 75, healthy behaviors, access to care, quality of life and birth outcomes and socio-economic measurements.

Kent County ranked 22 in overall health of residents and in the top 25 in programs that influence good health, the rate of people dying before 75, and healthy behaviors. It's best rating was in access to and quality of care.

Kent ranked 32nd in quality of life and birth outcomes. But local health promoters say that data is from 2006 and since then, county-wide programs have been launched that target prenatal care and early infant care.

"I think we will see even more improvements," said Erin Inman, director of **Spectrum Health's Healthier Communities initiatives**.

Inman said when you consider Kent County has one of the state's highest populations and Grand Rapids is the second largest city in the state, the area fared well against similar counties.

Both Kent and Ottawa had their worst showings in measures of environmental quality and the built environment, coming in 81 and 71 respectively.

Kent County Health Department spokeswoman Bridie Bereza and Julie Sielawa, a community outreach director for **YMCA of Greater Grand Rapids**, say that's because the study considered factors such as air quality and the "built environment," like the number of liquor stores.

Both note that work to promote access to farmers markets in the inner city and by low-income residents, and to build community gardens in schools and neighborhoods was not considered.

"I believe (that) can and will have a greater impact on our families if more community organizations saw the need and/or if additional grant dollars were made available

Ottawa County ranks:

- 2nd in overall health of residents
- 3rd best in programs that influence good health
- 3rd least rate of people dying before 75
- 5th in health-related quality of life and birth outcomes
- 4th best in healthy behaviors like diet and exercise
- 10th in access to and quality of clinical care
- 5th in social and economic measurements like education, employment, income, family support and community safety
- 71st in measures of environmental quality and built environment

Kent County ranks:

- 22nd in overall health of residents
- 25th best in programs that influence good health
- 18th least rate of people dying before 75
- 32nd in health-related quality of life and birth outcomes
- 15th best in healthy behaviors
- 7th in access to and quality of clinical care
- 31st in social and economic measurements like education, employment, income, family support and community safety
- 81st in measures of environmental quality and built environment

obesity rates and high school graduation rates. Data from 82 Michigan counties was studied.

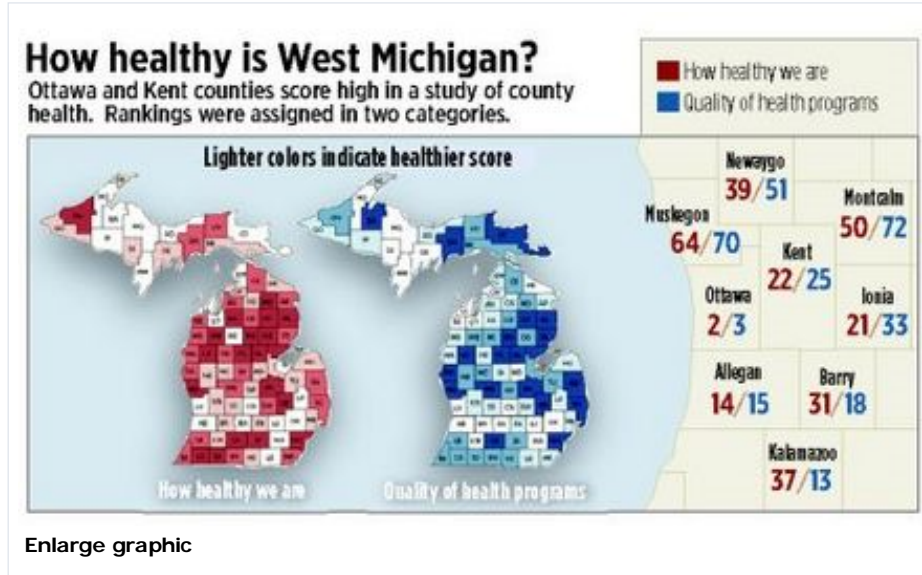
for just such things," Sielawa said.

But, if nothing else, the report has people talking about health and that's always a good thing, Bereza said.

"Like any study, it's got some limitations," Bereza said. "I think the biggest value of this kind of thing is it gets the conversation going."

Source: Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and University of Wisconsin School Population Health Institute

• Michigan has 83 counties. Keweenaw County was not ranked.



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