

St. Johns healthiest county in Florida for eighth straight year

By Matt Soergel
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St. Johns County is the healthiest county in Florida for the eighth straight year, according to an annual study that ranks all 67 of the state's counties.

Duval County comes in at 44th healthiest, down two slots from the previous year. Clay was 16th, Nassau 36th, and Baker was 50th.

Putnam County ranked 66th, ahead of only Union County, the state's smallest, which is located just below Baker County. Neighboring Bradford County, where Starke is the county seat, was just slightly ahead, at 64.

The study was conducted by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute and shows, according to the report, that "where you live influences how well and how long you live." All 50 states are part of the report.

A variety of factors contribute to the ratings, including the availability of healthy food, access to doctors, rates of smoking, obesity and teen births. Researchers also looked at how long people live, how healthy they say they feel and the percentage of low birth-weight newborns.

Across the country, not everyone has access to recent health improvements, the study reported: "There are fewer opportunities and resources for better health among groups that have been historically marginalized, including people of color, people living in poverty, people with physical or mental disabilities, LGBTQ persons, and women."

Nationally, longevity and health outcomes are worse for blacks and Native Americans. Even in the wealthiest counties in the U.S., premature death rates for those groups are about 1.4 times higher than for whites.

Researchers found that poverty plays a large role in how healthy someone is. St. Johns, for example, is the state's sixth-wealthiest county, while Union ranks last in income and in health.

This year's study emphasized the link between affordable housing and health, saying that those who spend a bigger percentage of their income on housing are forced to spend less on health — while also facing stress, overcrowded or unsafe housing, unplanned moves and even homelessness.

The rankings are available at countyhealthrankings.org.