



## County leads state in annual health rankings

By Stuart Korfhage  
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The continued influx of new residents to St. Johns County has done nothing to dent its mark as one of the healthiest places to live in the country.

According to the latest County Health Rankings, released today by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute, St. Johns County has retained its ranking as the healthiest county in Florida.

It's now the seventh straight year St. Johns County has ranked No. 1. This is the ninth year of the study.

According to the 2018 rankings, the five healthiest counties in Florida are St. Johns, followed by Collier, Martin, Seminole and Miami-Dade.

The five counties in the poorest health are: Union, Putnam, Madison, Gadsden and Dixie.

St. Johns County received high marks for several of the categories considered in determining the rankings. In fact, the county was tops in the state in the subcategories of quality of life, and social and economic factors as well as No. 2 for clinical care.

In fact, the only area in which the county didn't score well was in the subcategory of physical environment. That subcategory included factors like housing issues, where St. Johns County skews expensive.

It also includes transportation. Because the county has limited public transportation, it has a high percentage of people who drive alone to work everyday (81 percent). That counted negatively against the county ranking.

Still, by most measures, this is a fantastic place to live. The growth in population from about 125,000 in 2000 to about 235,000 in 2016 is a testament to that.

Access to quality medical care is good in the county as it has one of the lowest rates of premature deaths and an extremely small percentage of the population under 65 without health insurance (13 percent).

Ericka Burroughs-Girardi, a community coach with County Health Rankings, said St. Johns County's success is about more than medical care.

"Having access to a doctor is certainly part of the story, but also having access to those other things that contribute to good health as well," Burroughs-Girardi said. "Like having access to fresh food, having access to places to be active, that's also helpful."

Burroughs-Girardi pointed out that although its raw numbers are positive, there are still problems here. For instance, there are large discrepancies by race in some measures.

She pointed to the fact that black residents are about four times more likely to be children who grow up in poverty (32 percent, compared to 10 percent for white residents). Overall, St. Johns County has the lowest rate of children in poverty in Florida.

"St. Johns is one of the counties in which we find that overall they look really really good, but when you start to dig underneath the layers, you start to see that there are some holes, some gaps that can be filled," she said.

Part of her job is to help communities address those gaps. Burroughs-Girardi said one of the best solutions she's found is better educational offerings, especially in early childhood.

"When (children) grow up in poverty, their opportunities are limited," she said. "What we have seen is that investing in early childhood education is one of the best ways to turn around poverty."