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# Understanding Youth Health in the Capital Region

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

 The  
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Healthy Youth/Healthy Regions produced a series of twelve related Working Papers. These papers can be accessed via the Center for Regional Change website: <http://regionalchange.ucdavis.edu/hyhr/main>

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## Key Findings

Youth health is best understood by looking at how a variety of factors culminate in a young person's overall life experience. Sometimes health is a *driver* that either promotes or impedes youth success, where physical or mental health problems dominate an individual's experience, such as with teen pregnancy, accidental injury, or death. In most cases, though, physical and mental health may be considered an *outcome*- a way to measure how all processes are working together to shape individual well-being.

During the years between 12 and 24, young people may be exposed to formative environments or become involved in risk-taking behaviors. Attitudes and behaviors developed during this time, whether positive or negative, will influence ongoing behaviors and have life-long impacts. The variables affecting youth health comprise broad and often overlapping segments of healthcare, social and environmental systems further influenced by socioeconomic status, education attainment, race/ethnicity and geography.

Across the Capital Region, disparities there are important disparities in health outcomes based on place and population. In many cases, the Capital Region counties do not meet target levels (such as the national Healthy People 2010) for the various indicators, although some are closer than others. Ill-health has significant costs, both to individuals and to the region as a whole.

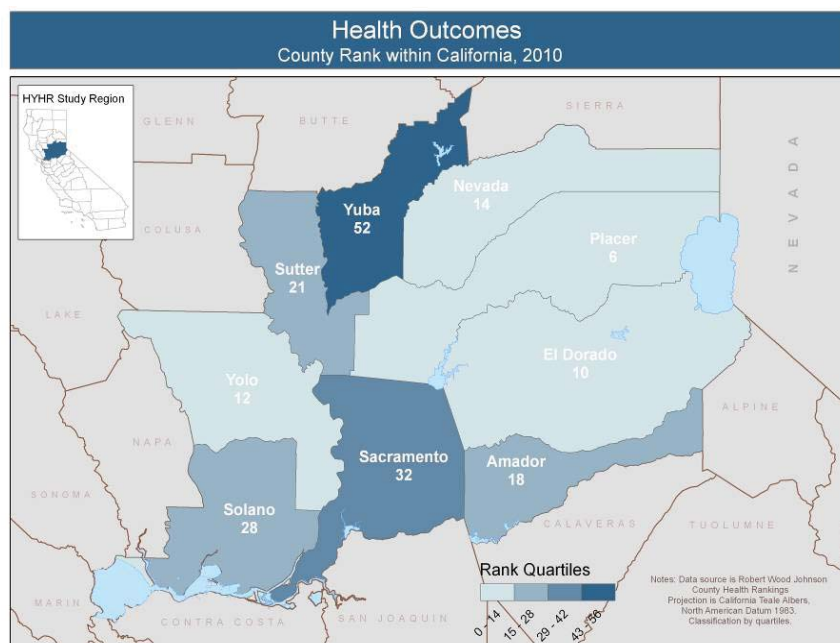
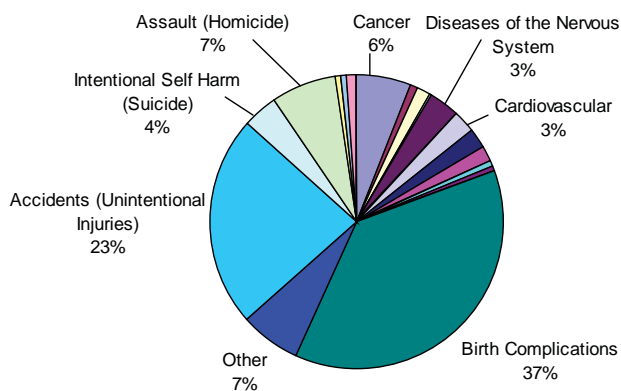


Figure 1: County Ranks in Overall Health Outcomes, 2010

The issue of teen birth provides an example. In the region, the economic burden of teen birth is approximately \$70 million/year (in 2004 dollars), the culmination of lost tax revenues, public assistance, child health care, foster care and involvement with the criminal justice system. Teens

having babies are much less likely to graduate high school (66%) than teens not having children (94%). Teen mothers frequently face unemployment, poverty and welfare dependency. Their children often have decreased health and social well-being. There is also a racial and ethnic disparity in the teen birth rate such that African American, Asian and Latina women are disproportionately affected. Disparities also exist in the attainment of early prenatal care, a significant risk factor for low birth weight babies and their subsequent health consequences. Yuba County has the highest teen birth rate in the region and Placer County has the lowest.

Mental health is another important indicator for an individual’s overall well-being and quality of life. Data measuring mental health services in populations are under-developed, making specific observations and recommendations difficult. From the data available, it is clear that the entire Capital Region struggles with high levels (top 20% in the state) of binge alcohol use, illicit drug dependence or abuse, non-prescription pain medication use and an unmet need for illicit drug treatment. Cigarette use and an unmet need for alcohol treatment are also issues.



Youth death is a tragedy and in many cases is related to highly preventable causes. Boys aged 15-19 are at greatest risk of preventable deaths. Most youth deaths occur during weekends and in the summer months, having implications for interventions aimed at providing safe places for young people to ‘hang out’ when not in school. Most homicides occurred at home, suggesting that programs promoting better interpersonal relationships and family dynamics may save lives.

Figure 2: Causes of Youth Death (2004-7)

Research shows that the ability of an individual to achieve good health depends, in part, on their ability to access health care services when needed for illness or disease prevention. In the Capital Region, Placer County does best in terms of the number of healthcare providers, but most counties are under target levels. Amador County is comparatively behind in both providers and insurance coverage for young people.

Having adequate social support and a physical environment that promotes healthy lifestyles improves the likelihood that a young person will make healthy choices like good nutrition and regular physical activity. The physical environment in the region provides a mixed picture such that each county does well in some measures but poorly in others. In particular, Sacramento County does less well in all categories of physical environment.

## Implications for Action

By adopting a positive youth development and empowerment approach, rather than focusing on illness prevention alone, strategies would emphasize the potential of young people to participate in improving their own environments and health outcomes. Such an approach fosters assets and emerging capacities which ultimately support the growth of healthy behaviors. In this way, health becomes less about the absence of disease and more about attainment of full human potential.