

Northland counties among Minnesota's least healthy

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By: [John Lundy](#), Duluth News Tribune

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The problem is glaringly apparent in the annual County Health Rankings, released Tuesday by the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institution. The study is a compilation of 50 reports that gauge the overall health of counties in every state across the country.

According to the study, 20 percent of Minnesotans admit to "excessive drinking" — defined as either binge or heavy drinking. In Wisconsin, it's 25 percent. That compares with a national benchmark of 8 percent. The benchmark isn't an average; it's more like an "A" on a report card if the teacher is grading on a curve. It means only 10 percent of counties do better.

But the fact that Minnesota falls so far short of the benchmark speaks to the state's failure to take alcohol seriously as a public health issue, Ehlinger said.

"We haven't had a tax increase in this state for alcohol since 1989, and that was a federal tax increase," he said. "Alcohol is now cheaper than it has ever been in this state. ... If you raise a pack of beer by 50 cents or a bottle of wine by 50 cents, drinking rates would go down, and in addition you would have a decreased level of mortality on the highways. We would have decreased levels of medical problems like cirrhosis. We would have decreased crime, decreased absenteeism."

That means Ehlinger isn't a fan of the bill to allow Sunday sales of alcohol in the state. "Anything that we do to increase access to alcohol will increase alcohol use," he said.

But he also wants the state to change its spending priorities. "We only have funding for one position at the State Health Department to deal with alcohol," Ehlinger said. "That tells me that we have not, as a state, really made a commitment to do something about alcohol."

Numbers in Northland counties aren't any better. In Douglas County, 27 percent of respondents admit to excessive drinking. In St. Louis County it's 20 percent and in Carlton County, 19 percent.

Overall, the Northland counties are almost entirely in the bottom halves of their respective states in the two broad categories of the report: health outcomes and health factors. The former is measures of length of life and quality of life; the latter combines health behaviors (including alcohol use), clinical care, social and economic factors and physical environment.

Among 85 Minnesota counties in the report, St. Louis County ranks 61st in health outcomes and 45th in health factors; Carlton County 64th and 47th; and Lake County 81st and 39th. Cook County is one of two Minnesota counties not included. Leyla Kokmen, health reform communications coordinator for the Minnesota Department of Health, said there simply wasn't enough data from those counties.

Douglas County ranked 57th in health outcomes and 52nd in health factors among 72 Wisconsin counties in the report.

Dave Lee, director of the Carlton County Health Department, noted that Minnesota ranks among the country's healthiest states. "Overall, were fortunate to live in a state that's progressive (about health care)," he said.

But Lee said he's concerned that may be changing. The Statewide Health Improvement Program (SHIP), implemented as part of a 2008 health reform law "is at risk of being cut by the current state Legislature," he said.

Improving health is a matter of policy choices, St. Louis County Health Department Administrator Guy Peterson said.

"Do people support schools?" he asked. "If you support schools in your community, that's supporting health. If you can help the people who have no jobs, or low incomes, if you can get programs or money to help them. ... We're trying to get that message out more and more in public health, that social policy is health."

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