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**County Health Rankings Show Drug Overdose Deaths Are Fueling
a Dramatic Increase in Premature Deaths Nationally**

85 Percent of Overall Spike Can Be Attributed to Rising Death Rates Among the Young

Princeton, N.J. and Madison, Wis.—The 2017 *County Health Rankings* released today show premature death rates are rising nationally because of an increase in deaths among 15-44 year-olds. From 2014 to 2015, 85 percent of the increase in premature deaths can be attributed to a swift increase in deaths among these younger Americans. The *Rankings* Key Findings Report reveals that while myriad issues contributed to the rise, the drug overdose epidemic is the leading cause of death among 25- to 44-year-olds and is a clear driver of this trend. Drug deaths are also accelerating among 15- to 24 year-olds, but nearly three times as many people in this age group die by homicide, suicide or in motor vehicle crashes.

The *County Health Rankings & Roadmaps*, a collaboration between the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) and the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute (UWPHI), compare counties within each state on more than 30 health-influencing factors such as education, jobs, and housing. Over the past eight years, the *Rankings*, which are available at www.countyhealthrankings.org, have become an important vehicle for local communities building a Culture of Health. In addition to the *Rankings* data, the *Roadmaps to Health* Action Center and *What Works for Health* offer a rich collection of tools and evidence-informed strategies that can help communities develop solutions. The program also offers coaches who can provide customized assistance and guidance to local communities working to improve health.

“The *County Health Rankings* show us that where people live plays a key role in how long and how well they live,” said Risa Lavizzo-Mourey, MD, RWJF president and CEO. “The *Rankings* allow local leaders to clearly see and prioritize the challenges they face — whether it’s rising premature death rates or the growing drug overdose epidemic — so they can bring community leaders and residents together to find solutions.”

With this year's exploration of rising premature death and drug overdose rates, stark disparities became apparent from community to community and among racial/ethnic groups:

- **A tragic turn in suburbs:** Drug overdose deaths are climbing in communities of all shapes and sizes, but a significant shift occurred in the suburbs, which a decade ago had the lowest rates of premature death due to drug overdoses but now have the highest. (The rate increased 5.4 percent.) Smaller metro and rural counties also have higher rates of premature death due to drug overdoses.
- **Differences among racial and ethnic groups:** Premature deaths due to drug overdoses were highest among whites and Native Americans in 2015. Premature deaths have consistently been highest among American Indians/Alaskan Natives and blacks. Suicide and homicide rates in 2015 are highest among Asian/Pacific Islanders and blacks, respectively, among those ages 15 to 24.

This year's *Rankings* also introduce a new measure focused on young people, those 16 to 24, who are not in school or working. About 4.9 million young people in the U.S. — 1 out of 8 — fall into this category. Rates of youth disconnection are higher in rural counties (21.6 percent), particularly those in the South and West, than in urban ones (13.7 percent).

“Young adults who are not in school or working represent untapped potential in our communities and our nation that we can't afford to waste,” said Julie Willems Van Dijk, PhD, RN, director of the *County Health Rankings & Roadmaps*. “Communities addressing issues such as poverty, unemployment, and education can make a difference creating opportunities for all youth and young adults. The *County Health Rankings* are an important springboard for conversations on how to do just that.”

The countyhealthrankings.org website features stories of community solutions, including the innovative efforts that Manchester, New Hampshire is implementing to address the drug overdose crisis.

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About the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

For more than 40 years the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has worked to improve health and health care. We are working with others to build a national Culture of Health enabling everyone in America to live longer, healthier lives. For more information, visit www.rwjf.org. Follow the Foundation on Twitter at www.rwjf.org/twitter or on Facebook at www.rwjf.org/facebook.

About the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute

The [University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute](http://uwphi.pophealth.wisc.edu) advances health and well-being for all by developing and evaluating interventions and promoting evidence-based approaches to policy and practice at the local, state, and national levels. The Institute works across the full spectrum of factors that contribute to health. A focal point for health and health care dialogue within the University of Wisconsin-Madison and beyond, and a convener of stakeholders, the Institute promotes an exchange of expertise between those in academia and those in the policy and practice arena. The Institute leads the work on the *County Health Rankings & Roadmaps* and the *RWJF Culture of Health Prize*. For more information, visit <http://uwphi.pophealth.wisc.edu>.