

County Health Rankings & Roadmaps

Building a Culture of Health, County by County

>> This is In Solidarity, a podcast where we draw connections between power, place, and health and discuss how our lives, our fates are all interconnected. Here are your hosts, Ericka Burroughs-Girardi and Beth Silver.

>> Hi there, and welcome to In Solidarity. I'm Beth Silver here with my cohost, Ericka Burroughs-Girardi. Great to be together again, Ericka, for another series of In Solidarity.

>> Hi, Beth. I love getting into the studio. It's the culmination of so much work and a chance to talk about the release of new data and strategies from county health rankings and roadmaps to improve health and equity. We recently released the latest data on the health of nearly every county in the United States and a national findings report that focuses on civic health.

>> Hard to believe, but we're already into our third season of In Solidarity. For those of you who are new to this podcast, we've tackled two important topics, the racial wealth divide and the gender pay gap. We've spoken with some of the country's leading scholars, authors, and community leaders to gain a better understanding of how we got here, how these economic inequities impact our health, and the ways we can improve conditions so we all have an opportunity to live long and live well. Such interesting conversations, Ericka.

>> They sure were, Beth. I've been in public health a long time, and what really makes these series so compelling is the idea of social solidarity, or interdependence. It's the foundation of this podcast.

>> Absolutely, Ericka. It's at the forefront for us here on In Solidarity, a podcast from County Health Rankings and Roadmaps, a national program of the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute, with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

>> In this series of In Solidarity, we're tackling something that undeniably connects us all, our civic health, the opportunities we have to participate and use our voice to shape our communities.

>> By the way, when we say civic health, we're talking about civic participation, things like voting, volunteering, participating in a school board meeting. We're also talking about the infrastructure that supports participation, spaces like schools and parks, the internet, and policies that make it easier to vote or participate in decision-making. Civic health is about making sure that everyone has a say in their future and the future of the community they live in.

>> And I'm sure listeners may be thinking, but how does this actually impact our physical and mental health? Research, including our 2023 National Findings Report, shows that there is a connection. In places where there's higher participation, folks are experiencing all kinds of benefits. There's less income inequality in these areas. Unemployment is down. High school completion rates are typically higher, and so are wages. There's even growing evidence that people tend to live longer in places that have more civic participation. Several organizations are drawing attention to this connection, including the World Health Organization, the American Medical Association, and the American Public Health Association.

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>> We also see this connection, Ericka, when we look back in history. Women won the right to vote in 1920, fundamentally shifting electoral power in the United States. And lawmakers responded by setting up maternal and child health departments in every state health department and supporting home visiting programs. As a result, infant mortality rates dropped dramatically.

>> What a powerful example, Beth, an example that shows that, when people closest to the problems have opportunities to participate, the solutions, they're part of work and benefit everyone. Over the course of this series, we're going to bring on eight guests to talk about civic health. In this, our first episode, we'll discuss how civic health is defined and measured. We'll discuss how and where we live shapes the opportunities we have or don't have to participate. And we'll delve into why civic health makes a difference in how long and how well people live.

>> We're starting with Dr. Julia Kaufman of the RAND Corporation. She's a senior policy researcher and a professor at the Pardee RAND Graduate School. Last year she coauthored a report titled, Defining and Measuring Civic Infrastructure. Next, we'll talk with Dawn Hunter of the Network For Public Health Law. She's also the lead author of the Health and Democracy Index and an expert on racial and health equity.

>> What a lineup. We have a lot to cover, Beth. So what do you say we get started.

>> Yes. Let's get to it.

[Music]

>> Hi, Julia. Thank you for joining us.

>> Yeah. I'm so pleased to be here. This season, we are covering the idea of civic health and its connection to thriving people and places. How would you define civic health?

>> So, in our work, we examined civic health as part of a larger framework that we call civic infrastructure. And we've used civic infrastructure as this foundation that supports civic participation. We see it as a framework that includes things you might think of as part of your civic health like civic engagement, like voting, community service, activities to drive social change. But then there are all these other factors that are intertwined with civic engagement and civic health. Like, for example, there is civic literacy and identity. So the feelings and knowledge people have about civic issues and topics. And then there's also, if we back up even further, other factors that relate to civic literacy and an identity and engagement and drive those things like democratic governance or civic education or the civic spaces in which we engage about civic issues. So we consider all of these factors as part of this package that we call civic infrastructure.

>> Yeah. Thank you for unpacking that. In the report mentioned earlier, you talk about the role civic infrastructure plays in improving our civic health. What do we know about our civic infrastructure today?

>> Well, what we know is limited by the existing measures that are available to us. So, if we look across measures for all those factors that I talked about -- democratic governance, access to civic education, what

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we know about civic literacy identity and engagement, some of those factors are tracked and collected much more than others. So, for example, we know a fair amount about voter turnout because it's tracked nationally, as well as in states and even down to the regional level. But we know less about other factors, given limited data. So we don't know much about political protest in particular states, or other measures of civic engagement, like community service or volunteering. And we also don't know a lot about in individual states how students are doing in terms of their civic literacy or their civic engagement in schools.

>> Why is it important that we define and measure that aspect of our society, those civic engagements that you're talking about?

>> Well, for me as a researcher, the dilemma is that, if I can't measure it, I can't study it. So if we don't know how to compare civic outcomes state by state, we can't really know how changes in state laws, for example, are impacting civic health, like voting or civic identity or civic literacy. So that's one of those reasons that we just need these better measures and more fine-grained measures so we can both understand what's happening in all these different areas of our civic infrastructure, but also how different things might be related to civic engagement or might drive civic engagement and civic health because, if we don't know that, we can't repair those things, or at least advocate for ways to repair them.

>> Yeah. Let's hone in on that a little bit more. What is needed to better understand our civic infrastructure?

>> One of the pieces of civic infrastructure that we think in our report we know less about is just state by state what's happening. So, on one hand, it's the job of researchers to try to collect that data. But we can't do that without support, support from foundations and the federal government and state policymakers. For example, the Electronic Registration Information Center, or ERIC, that's an example of a collaboration among states that work together to improve the accuracy of voter registration data. And, also, the federal government could do more to prioritize participation in data collection like the international data collection of the International Civics and Citizenship Study that collects data on civics achievement and the kinds of factors that might drive civic achievement across a number of countries. And the US hasn't participated in that since 1999. So there are a lot of things that we can do at the state or the national level. State networks, too, I really do believe could catalyze collection of better information across a range of standardized measures. But right now that's not really happening.

>> In your report, you state that, in recent years, state legislatures have been pretty active, either restricting or expanding American civic and political rights. In what ways, and what are the impacts of this?

>> So, for example, in our data -- and, now, we don't have measures of everything that would potentially be able to measure our civic infrastructure. But we do know that the number of election bills introduced by state legislatures was at an all-time high in 2021. So the national congress's of the state legislatures found that 3676 election bills were introduced in 2021.

>> Wow.

>> That's the highest number in decades. So, of course, part of that was the larger demand for absentee or mail ballots during the pandemic. But there were also a whole lot of other concerns that were related to the bills that were introduced and some that were subsequently passed. Like some bills focused on ballot drop boxes and limits on ballot collection, although there was a whole other group of states that expanded voter registration and mail-in voting. So we saw that these election bills were both focused on limiting and expanding, depending on the state that you're in. And we see that pattern again and again in the other data that we look at to understand civic infrastructure. So, for example, over 70 laws in 2021 either expanded or limited LGBTQ+ rights. Some of these expanded parental rights, nondiscrimination laws, sanctioning hate crimes for those populations. But other bills in other states limited those rights, including preventing transgender youth from playing sports in schools or receiving gender-affirming healthcare. And then, of course, there are a lot of states that have limited what teachers can address related to race and gender topics of the classroom, although it's important to note that other states have passed bills that have actually expanded such education. So we see states growing apart in the rights that they protect.

>> And I want to talk a little bit about civic education. What's the state of civic education in our schools?

>> This is an area where we don't have that much transparency into what is actually happening in the classroom state by state. We have this one big national test, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, which tracks student proficiency in grades 4, 8, 12 nationally, every four years. The last time we saw those results was back in 2018. The 2018 results, they didn't show much change in scores compared to 2014. And, really, if you look back years before that, basically, performance has been the same, pretty much flatlined over the period of time that this has been measured. In addition, students haven't really been performing that well. So, based on the 2018 test, a little less than one-quarter of students scored at or above proficient in civics. But what we don't know is how that civics performance varies state by state. And that's important because we know that state standards for social studies and civics do vary, and state requirements vary. So if these requirements vary but we don't really know differences and civic performance across states, then we don't really know what states should be doing, where states could have some leverage to really help improve students' performance.

>> How do we improve civic infrastructure? And whose job is it to do so? And I'm also curious about how public health can engage in this work.

>> Well, public health is definitely not my area of expertise. But what we do know is that civic engagement appears to be connected to improved health. And we don't know all the reasons why, but they're likely mutually reinforcing. Civic engagement likely increases feelings of agency and social cohesion, which might then influence health. Improved health in communities might influence civic engagement. So they are definitely intertwined. But I do think it's the job of many different people in many different places to improve our civic infrastructure. I don't think as researchers or as organizations that advocate for civic

infrastructure that we haven't necessarily made the case well enough about where there are problems or solutions that would catalyze more advocacy or action. And part of that, as I said before, is a measurement issue. We need better measures so that we can see how we differ across states, potentially in concerning ways regarding civil and political rights, regarding civic education. And there are lots of ways that we could get better measures. But an important finding we also had in our data is that US governance is considerably older than governance in other nations. So that's another piece of our civic infrastructure, whether our democracy is really representing everyone across the United States. And this finding that our US government officials are considerably older than government in other nations suggests the need for more education engagement initiatives that inspire youth and younger generations to get involved in politics and efforts to help make the difference in their communities. Health equity is one of those issues around which we could bring people together, including young people, to rally to improve our democracy. But there are lots of other examples.

>> Yeah, yeah. How does civic health connect to social solidarity?

>> In my mind, social solidarity is one factor that could support civic engagement. But, as you know, social solidarity can move in multiple directions. It could support civic engagement. But it could also support less civic engagement, depending on the values of the social group and what they consider is important. So, for that reason, we think creating spaces for more social civic engagement is important. We call them civic spaces in our work so places where people not only come together but can engage in respectful, thoughtful discourse. Spaces we discuss in our work include physical spaces like libraries but also virtual spaces like the internet. And, really, it is the responsibility of all of us to ensure that these are places where all voices can be heard, all speech is protected but also places where everyone is respected. And you can actually share opinions and talk together and possibly come to consensus but also agree to disagree.

>> Yeah. Well, I think that's a really nice connection between civic health and social solidarity. So informative. So thank you, Julia. You have helped set the stage for this series, and I appreciate you joining us today.

>> It was a great pleasure. Thank you so much.

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>> Ericka, I was struck by the way that Julia described civic infrastructure, that it's the foundation that supports participation. In other words, the opportunities we have to participate are shaped by our access to civic spaces like libraries and schools, by the civic education we receive, and by the policies and systems that shape our ability to vote and support democracy.

>> Exactly. And I appreciated how Julia described why it's important to be able to measure civic infrastructure. If we can't measure how infrastructure is changing over time, it's difficult to know what

impact investments or disinvestments have on our opportunity to participate and how those opportunities vary by place.

>> And even though we can't measure all aspects of civic infrastructure, as Julia noted, County Health Rankings and Roadmaps data show some interesting differences across the country, whether it be an access to opportunities to vote, differences in how well schools are funded, whether there are libraries, broadband access, the data show that all of that goes hand in hand with social and economic opportunity. Counties with more available and well-resourced civic infrastructure tend to have higher rates of high school completion, higher household incomes, and less income inequality.

>> So much to unpack here. I'm looking forward to learning more about how civic infrastructure varies by place.

>> As am I, Ericka. Our next guest is Dawn Hunter. She was the lead author of the Health and Democracy Index, which draws connections between health indicators and voting policy. And she's the director of the Network For Public Health Law's Southeastern Region office. She's also an experienced state health department policymaker and legislative analyst whose work has focused on using law and policy to improve health outcomes and advance racial equity. Thank you for joining us, Dawn. Can you talk to us about democracy and its relationship to civic health, civic infrastructure, and civic participation?

>> Yes. I've personally always been very passionate about voting rights. I have been a voter registration captain leading up to the general election. I have worked at the Election Protection Hotline and volunteered for Election Protection over the years. I also have done volunteer work for Voting Rights Restoration. And so I think it's really important. I want to start by saying that because I believe it honors my ancestors and keeps the door to opportunity open. And so it's just something that I have always been very interested in. And I'm very fortunate that I get to also focus on this in my work. And so I -- I've realized the important connection between democracy and shaping how policy and, in particular, the health outcomes for people of color. And one of the things that always stands out to me from history is Dr. King, who was a very strong advocate for leveraging Title XI of the Civil Rights Act, that was to ensure fair access and treatment in healthcare facilities that receive federal funding. So, for me, it's important to think about how we leverage existing law and policy to improve people's outcomes. And that's related to this because I really first became aware of this relationship between voting and health and civic participation through the World Values Survey. So there's this research paper that analyzed World Value Survey data across 44 countries, including the United States. And that research showed that people who participate in voting and voluntary social activities report better subjective or self-rated health. I thought, wow; 44 countries, that's a lot. Right. And the finding was true across the board. So there's actually other literature out there that confirms this finding. And while there's definitely more research needed, there -- there's a lot of evidence of why we see this particular result. So people just feeling that they have better health by participating in democracy, participating in voting.

>> Why else is it important to our health and, beyond that, our overall wellbeing?

>> So it's important both at the individual health level and at the population health level. So based on the study that I just mentioned and some additional research, we know that people who participate in democratic processes report both better physical and mental health. And this is partly because of feelings of agency and empowerment and belonging. So really being able to shape your community, to shape your own life, and to be connected to other people who are also engaged. This builds -- importantly, builds a sense of social cohesion. So this is something that we know is an important factor in community health and well-being. And so that's kind of at the individual level. And at the population level, this is important for shaping policy. So I like to give the example of think about your typical high turnout voter. This is someone who is older, someone who is White, someone who is highly educated, and someone who has a higher income level. These are folks who probably don't know anyone who's on Medicaid, who may own their homes, or may have even been passed down at home from their family. They have maybe significant financial investments. And so the things that they take with them to the polls are -- are their personal experience as homeowners, as people with money, as people with a, you know, education. And so they aren't necessarily predisposed to thinking about these policies that also shape other people's health and economic and social well-being. And so it's important to make sure that we have more inclusive and representative democracy because it helps to shape the kind of policy that results from that engagement.

>> What about the Health and Democracy Index? Can you tell us what that is and how that is a part of this discussion?

>> Yes. So the Health and Democracy Index was something that was developed -- I served as the lead author, and we developed that as part of the Healthy Democracy Healthy People initiative. And that index is an interactive tool that helps to visualize the relationships that I was just explaining that we see between civic engagement and self-rated health. So we started out just looking at those two. But then, when we started looking at the trends, we realized that this trends showing that higher cost of voting is associated with worse health outcomes, it actually holds true across a lot of other population health indicators, including very strongly for premature and infant mortality, for family and community safety, but also for things like insurance rates and poverty rates. So the index actually illustrates these health indicators, but it also illustrates the relationship with voting policies that we know shape participation and engagement. And these are things like inclusive registration options, vote at home options. We're going to see a lot of that debate in the current legislative sessions. Absentee ballots, for example. Voter ID laws, we also are going to see a lot of that in the current legislative sessions. And then voting rights restoration, which I've mentioned. And really, ultimately we hope that it's a really useful tool to help people see this connection and see the relationship and then use this information to engage with policymakers, advocates, community based organizations and members on the importance of participating in our democracy.

>> You referenced the cost of voting. Can you explain what that is.

>> Yeah. The cost of voting returns to the relative ease or restriction of being able to vote in a state. And it looks at two buckets of policies, and this is being able to register to vote and then being able to actually cast your ballot. So it looks at things like voter ID laws, polling locations and poll wait times, third-party registration laws, and things like that. And it creates a number, and this is actually published in the Election Law Journal, by Dr. Scott Schraufnagel and colleagues at Northern Illinois University. It assigns a number, a value on this index to the states to assess their relative ease or restrictiveness of voting in those states.

>> In the research you've done, what are some of the characteristics you've seen among states with a high cost of voting, and how does that relate to civic participation and to health?

>> So in states that have a higher cost of voting, they have worse health outcomes. This is kind of across the board. So you make it harder for people to engage. That means we're also making it harder for people to access things that we know improve health. So I like to point out that some of the things that make it harder to vote are -- also make it make it harder to access healthcare. So transportation issues, language access issues, other accessibility issues, these are all things that create both voting and health disparities. We also see worse social and economic outcomes. And so I really want to emphasize the disparities perspective because we also see that the cost of voting is very strongly associated with the percentage of Black population in a state. So states that have a higher percentage of black population have a higher cost of voting and worse health outcomes. That's really significant because, I think from a policy perspective, we can look at that and say that's not something that should be happening. How can we improve health outcomes for Black people who are living in the state but then also for the population as a whole because the reality is that restrictive voting policies that are intended to suppress the vote, like limiting drop boxes and early voting options and restricting polling locations and restrictive voter ID laws, these suppress everyone's vote. So these are policies that affect all of us and all of our ability to participate and, consequently, all of our health.

>> As you've noted, state legislators have been busy passing laws that impact voting rights, some states expanding them, others decreasing them. Where does that stand in 2023, and where do you see voting policy headed?

>> So we're really seeing kind of a split. So things that are pro-voting rights and then things that are kind of anti-voting rights. We're seeing a trend around criminal oversight activities in states. So in a state like Florida where I live, there is this kind of election police force, if you will, that is intended to investigate fraud. But the reality is that fraud in elections is actually kind of rare. But that doesn't stop states from trying to establish their own similar force. And so we're seeing other states that are more conservative try to enact similar laws. We are also seeing kind of on the restrictiveness side of things an attempt to limit voter ID options and to restrict access to mail ballots or to place additional requirements on being able to vote via mail ballots. So one example of that is in Ohio. Ohio just passed a very restrictive voter ID law that allows no alternative photo ID. So, in most states, kind of the trend is, you do need to have an ID to vote.

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You can also have some other kind of proof of who you are to verify that your vote can be counted. But what Ohio has done is said you have to have a photo ID, and that's it. And if you don't have that with you on Election Day, you can show up at the elections office with your photo ID, and then we'll count your ballot. But that's it. So you can no longer do things like take a utility bill or take an alternative form of ID with you to prove who you are. But this is -- I don't think a lot of people realize that a lot of people may not have a photo ID, and there are lots of reasons for that. So this is a very restrictive law that's going to prevent people from voting. Having alternatives that can help to prove who you are as a voter is something that's really important to ensure that people can engage. On the flip side of things, we're also seeing states consider things like expanding automatic voter registration options, making Voter IDs a lot less restrictive and so making sure that more alternatives are accepted. So I think that's going to be an ongoing debate, and it has been. It's not new, making ID laws more restrictive versus less restrictive. Ultimately, I think the trend is really about how do you strike the balance between ensuring safe and secure elections, which I think is what a lot of these more kind of restrictive or conservative measures are about and the flip side of that, ensuring that everyone who is eligible to vote can register and cast their ballot.

>> Are there any sort of happy mediums where you can ensure trust in government and in the voting process and, yet, still make it accessible?

>> Yeah. So a lot of elections administration laws that currently exist actually do ensure that we have safe and secure elections. So I think this goes back to the I think narrative, the question of narrative. So the reality is that we have very safe elections. We have secure elections. We have elections that encourage participation. And I think the challenge is not that we need to update all of those laws necessarily but that we need to shift the narrative around whether or not we have safe and secure elections. And so I think, over the last few years in particular, we've seen this, you know, much heavier discussion around fraud and people taking advantage of the system, the system not being safe, this need for -- perceived need for greater accountability. So double checking ballots, monitoring the people who are counting and tallying ballots or the systems that make that happen. But the reality is that those -- the systems actually operate really well. So I don't know that it's necessarily, like, we need to put more laws and policies in place to make that happen as we need to shift the narrative about what's already going on. Election fraud is not something that happens all the time. It's not frequent. And putting resources there draws attention away from the real issues, which are things like voter ID laws that make it nearly impossible for some people to vote.

>> We've discussed narrative as an important driver of what people think is possible in previous episodes of In Solidarity, narrative being the stories that help us make sense of the world. Can you think of any narrative shifts that would contribute to civic health?

>> You know, I talked about the sense of belonging and empowerment and agency. So I think, from a narrative shift perspective, part of what we hope to do by having this conversation about voting and health is really helping people to understand, like, the importance of us as individuals being engaged. So I shared,

like, why I am interested in voting rights and why I want to participate in democracy. I think we all have to understand why it's important for us to be involved and what our motivation is to participate and to engage in the democratic process. And so I think at a population level or, you know, thinking about society and thinking how we can help to shift that narrative is really helping to draw attention to people about the power of people to shape the way our future looks and the way our present looks as well. One example of that is I think in the 2022 midterms we actually saw the real power of ballot initiatives. And I like to share that example because I think that really is the power of the people. Ballot initiatives are either initiated by voters, or they're something that are measures that have gone through the legislature and then are put to the voters on a ballot. And, you know, as a result of ballot initiatives in the midterm elections, we saw progress on protecting abortion rights and reproductive health rights, in general; drug policy; on healthcare; on labor, transportation, education, infrastructure. You name it, ballot initiatives helped to really drive better conditions or a better at least legal framework for supporting the social determinants of health. And so threats to use ballot initiatives -- so I think that's another trend, potentially, is limiting our ability to use ballot initiatives is something that we have to watch out for. That is actually not a new trend. This has been going on since who knows how long. But ballot initiatives are really powerful. It's really, like, this is the power of the people. And I think when people we help to talk about that and normalize talking about how we, as voters, turn up and shape these outcomes, I think that helps to shift kind of the larger narrative at the population level.

>> Well, thank you so much, Dawn. We really appreciate being able to talk to you today.

>> Thank you so much for having me.

[Music]

>> What a way to start the series. Loved getting a chance to talk with Julia and Dawn.

>> I agree. Dawn really helped me to understand how voting policies, you know, which are part of our civic infrastructure, shape civic participation and health. She also shared the findings from the Health and Democracy Index. The findings show that states with more restrictive voting policies often experience poorer health outcomes. Our work at County Health Rankings and Roadmaps shows a similar pattern. In short, when you make it harder for people to participate in their community, you're also making it harder for people to access things that are good for health, things like health insurance, well-funded schools, and parks.

>> And these policies vary depending on where you live. Julia said that, in many ways, states are growing apart in the rights they protect. Yet, as Dawn pointed out, it is possible to ensure safe and secure elections and ensure that everyone who is eligible to vote votes.

>> Yes. Because we bring our personal experiences to the polls which, in turn, shapes policy. This episode has me reflecting on my own community and how it does or doesn't foster civic participation. It's eye

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opening to see where you live through the lens of civic health, where everything is a product of countless decisions made over the years, some with lots of participation, and some with very little.

>> Good point, Ericka. And it's interesting that you mention how our communities are a product of years of policy decisions. We'll be getting into that in our next episode of the Civic Health Series when we talk with Daniel Dawes from the Institute of Global Health Equity at Meharry Medical College about his political determinants of health framework.

>> And, after that, we'll speak to Dr. Peniel Joseph of the University of Texas about how tools of democracy have been used in the past, keeping some in power at the expense of others. He's the founding director of the LBJ School's Center for the Study of Race and Democracy. It will be a riveting conversation. Until then, I'm Ericka.

>> And I'm Beth.

>> And we're In Solidarity, connecting power, place, and health.

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>> The views expressed by guests of In Solidarity are their own. Their appearance on In Solidarity does not necessarily reflect the views of County Health Rankings and Roadmaps nor the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. To learn more about our guests' work, to discover additional resources on the topics we've discussed, or to find out how healthy your community is, visit us at countyhealthrankings.org.