

Jefferson County Health Action Partnership

Using Data as a Tool for Equity Policy Change

County Health Rankings & Roadmaps

Building a Culture of Health, County by County



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Part of an evaluation for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation for their
County Health Rankings & Roadmaps program, from October 2020 to March 2022


Robert Wood Johnson
Foundation

Jefferson County, Alabama

Jefferson County is the most populous county in Alabama, and it houses the state's largest city, Birmingham. While about one-third of Jefferson County residents live in Birmingham's urban center, the county is a mix of urban, suburban, and rural areas. Jefferson County has a wealth of employment and healthcare resources. For example, Jefferson is home to Children's of Alabama, the third-largest pediatric medical facility in the US, and the world-class research institution the University of Alabama at Birmingham—Alabama's largest employer. Despite these resources, Jefferson County ranks moderately on quality of life, social, economic, and health indicators compared to other counties in Alabama. Decades of racial and residential segregation, such as Jim Crow laws and racial zoning policies, have had a lasting impact on the health and well-being of Black residents. Black residents face poor access to education, employment, and housing opportunities. Families in historically Black neighborhoods have higher rates of infant mortality, limited access to healthy foods, and lower life expectancy.

Addressing Drivers of Health

Formed in 2007 by the Jefferson County Department of Health, the Jefferson County Health Action Partnership (the Health Action Partnership) aims to create a healthier community for all residents by bringing together multisectoral agencies and stakeholders. The partnership has focused on impacting the social determinants of health through community-specific, place-based initiatives in the areas of health, education, and financial stability in Central Alabama. Three backbone organizations, the Community Foundation of Greater Birmingham, United Way of Central Alabama, and the Jefferson County Department of Health, use a collective impact approach to guide the Health Action Partnership's more than 100 organizational partners. The partnership's members share a common belief that improving the conditions that support health, such as access to high-quality education, healthy food, and transportation, will help residents live an optimal life. To achieve its mission, they advocate for policy and systemic changes to the built environment, transportation, safety, mental health, physical well-being, and healthcare access.

"[None] of our organizations has all the answers—together we are stronger." —Bryn Manzella, Jefferson County Department of Health

The partnership operates on the belief that no single agency can address the drivers of health without the participation of other agencies and sectors across the community. The partnership uses a workgroup structure to advance its work. Multisectoral participation in the Health Action Partnership has yielded many benefits: a common agenda across partner organizations, the breaking down of organizational silos, and collective alignment on outcome measures. Partners leverage each other's resources, operate with greater synergy, and consolidate resources to address social determinants of health in the region.



Established in 2007

The Jefferson County Health Action Partnership works with diverse stakeholders to make Central Alabama a healthier place for all residents to live, learn, work, play, and achieve their highest possible quality of life.

JEFFERSON COUNTY, AL

Geography: urban, suburban, rural

Population: 658,573

People of color: 50.5%

Median household income: \$82,986

Centering Health Equity through Data

The Health Action Partnership believes that advancing health equity requires adequate, standardized, and inclusive training to empower communities, organizational partners, and political entities with knowledge and tools to advocate for healthier communities. The partnership has been using data as a tool for changing the narratives on health and spurring collective action to address upstream factors since its inception. They have developed reports, toolkits, and trainings that visualize and uplift social inequities in Jefferson County while also tracking the impact of its efforts.

One of the Health Action Partnership's reports that set the stage for its mission to improve health and quality of life in Jefferson County was [Our Community Roadmap to Health](#). In 2018, the Health Action Partnership released the Jefferson County [Community Health Equity Report](#). The *Community Health Equity Report* uses mapping and data visualization to highlight the specific communities of Jefferson County that are most impacted by past and present systemic inequities and describes collaborative efforts to address health equity. The maps in the report serve as a tool to ignite conversations among community members, decision makers, and organizational partners. They also help make the case for systems change and can shift the way that stakeholders talk about health. As Ryan Parker, Health Action Partnership's facilitator, explains, "Putting data in place helps us show people stark differences within a two-mile radius...it's harder for people to push back with data."

The Health Action Partnership offers a variety of resources and toolkits that frame how structural and institutional barriers sustain inequity and identify strategies for advancing health equity. These efforts include the manual *Principles for Advancing Health Equity in Jefferson County, Alabama*, which articulates guiding principles on health equity for collaborative efforts to consider. The partnership has also developed train-the-trainer trainings and educational videos that discuss the meaning of health equity. Collectively, these resources aim to equip partnership members, as well as other coalitions, with the knowledge and practices to develop sustained partnerships and take action toward health.



Dr. Monica Baskin

Chair of the JCHAP's Advancing Health Equity priority group

Dr. Baskin, an associate professor at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, has been part of the Health Action Partnership for over 10 years and is leading the Advancing Health Equity priority group. Her leadership has been pivotal in integrating health equity across all the partnership's priority groups. Dr. Baskin has normalized the discussion of health equity among partners through the Advancing Health Equity priority group. The group created a common definition of health equity, developed guiding principles for achieving health equity, and established health equity as a cornerstone of the partnership's efforts. These discussions laid the foundation for the development of the [Community Health Equity Report](#), which provided a historical perspective and data to track progress toward equitable outcomes for all of Jefferson County's residents.

"Everyone knows [health equity] is a major part of what we do. It's across all the groups, embedded in metrics for each priority group [and] how they are advancing health equity in what they lead."

—Dr. Monica Baskin, University of Alabama at Birmingham Heersink School of Medicine

Advocating for Lasting and Equitable Changes

The Health Action Partnership made several important changes to the policies, systems, and environments that impact health in Central Alabama. Using a health equity lens, the partnership advances policy changes, coordination of services, cross-sector partnerships, and increased investments in low-income Black and Latino communities. For example, to expand access to healthy foods and reduce hunger, the partnership collaborated with senior living facilities, food pantries, and healthcare providers to deliver groceries to more than 1,000 low-income seniors. Similarly, the partnership has established meal networks to provide children with free healthy lunches and snacks over the summer. The Advancing Health Equity priority group has helped ensure that an upstream equity lens is reflected throughout each of the partnership's policy initiatives.

Building a comprehensive mental health system in schools

To improve mental health support for students, the Health Action Partnership's Mental Health priority group is collaborating with school districts and community partners to increase access to services and improve service coordination for mental health in schools. From anecdotes from community partners and Alabama state data from the Mental Health America report, the priority group and its stakeholders learned that Jefferson County students were struggling with mental health concerns at an early age. In response, they provided technical assistance to increase access to assessments, enhance mental health trainings, and improve linkage to resources in three school districts. The Mental Health priority group also provided de-escalation training to school staff and supported districts to adopt screening tools for teachers to evaluate student behavior and identify the need for additional services. Finally, the partnership is also advocating for more local and state funding to increase the number of school counselors and expand access to a wider range of mental health services.



Double Up Bucks: advocacy for statewide investment change

The Jefferson County [Community Health Equity Report](#) found notable variation in healthy food access between census tracts in Jefferson County. Black, Latino, and low-income communities had poor access to healthy foods. In one census tract, one-third of the residents lived a mile away from a supermarket or grocery store.

The Double Up Bucks program is a partnership with community food banks, churches, and farmer's markets. The program doubles the value for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) recipients, so they receive two dollars for every one dollar spent at farmer's markets. The program aims to improve access to healthy food. The Health Action Partnership leveraged the pilot program's county-level success to receive millions of dollars in federal funding to match state funding so the Double Bucks program could be implemented statewide.

Complete Streets Ordinance: advocacy for city-level policy change

Access to safe, convenient recreational spaces reduces barriers to physical activity and contributes to a person's overall health and well-being. Residents living with disabilities have lower rates of physical activity; furthermore, limited access to safe spaces can impede optimal health. The 2018 Jefferson County [Community Health Equity Report](#) found that higher concentrations of residents living with a disability resided within the Birmingham metropolitan area.



Complete Streets in City of Birmingham

To address this gap in access, the Health Action Partnership partnered with a variety of organizations focused on multiple issues, including disability rights, environmental protection, and economic development, and the City of Birmingham staff to design and adapt a Complete Streets Ordinance, a policy that requires the city to consider all modes of transportation in the design of roadway projects. The partnership consulted CHR&R's What Works for Health tool to identify model policies and supported the modification and passage of a Complete Streets Policy in the City of Birmingham in 2018. This policy serves as a guide for future city development, ensuring that streets accommodate all residents, regardless of how they travel.

"We developed something strong. We didn't know about Complete Streets until we saw it in the CHR&R toolkit. It helped us make it more legitimate and find out we were doing something that could work." —Ryan Parker, United Way of Central Alabama

Equity-Informed Data Mapping

The Health Action Partnership has used CHR&R resources to set priorities and goals since its inception. The county health department used County Health Rankings data during the Community Health Assessment / Community Health Improvement Plan process, which helped inform the early priorities of the partnership. The partnership has analyzed census tract data and community surveys to complement its county-level data. Local data from these sources helps provide a fuller picture of factors that drive health. As it looks toward the future, the partnership values guidance on policy change, how to measure health outcomes by race, data on mental health, and resident engagement.



JCHAP Toolkit for Community Collaboration

JEFFERSON COUNTY HEALTH ACTION PARTNERSHIP

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