

## Study Shows Panhandle Where to Improve Health

**Hayden** – A study out of the University of Wisconsin that ranks Idaho’s counties according to factors that determine health shows that Kootenai County residents live long and prosper compared to much of the state and, in particular, to residents of Shoshone County.

Shoshone County ranked second to last in the state for how long its residents live and how good they feel. It ranked last for factors that affect overall health, such as smoking, drinking, obesity, sexually transmitted diseases and the number of children living in poverty.

The report, funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, ranks health environments for nearly every county in the nation. It compares counties within states, but does not compare them to counties in other states. In Idaho, 42 of 44 counties were ranked. Not enough information was available for Camas and Clark counties.

The report aims to spur improvements that lead to better overall health by providing communities with a guide to where to focus those improvements.

“Many health factors are affected by smoking, physical activity, obesity, diabetes, teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases,” said Lora Whalen, Panhandle Health District director. “We all need to be aware of how our behavior is linked to our personal health.”

Some factors that affect health are easier to change than others. In the five northern counties in the Panhandle Health District, unemployment numbers climbed anywhere from 3 percent to more than 5 percent in 2010. Shoshone County led the pack with a 5.1 percent increase in its jobless rate.

The rate of adults without health insurance also climbed since last year in all five counties. It now ranges from 16 percent in Shoshone County to 22 percent in Boundary County.

Panhandle counties progressed to a small degree in health factors that have motivated national movements over the past few years.

Obesity rates dropped slightly in Bonner, Boundary and Benewah counties, but increased one percentage point in Kootenai and Shoshone counties. Shoshone County’s 30 percent obesity rate is four points higher than the state’s.

Smoking rates decreased slightly in Bonner, Shoshone and Boundary counties, although Shoshone’s 27 percent rate is 9 points higher than the state’s overall smoking rate.

The teen birth rate fell in Boundary and Bonner counties and remained the same in the other three counties. The motor vehicle crash rate also dropped slightly in all but Benewah County.

Some factors combined to lower rankings. Benewah County’s high smoking rate of 25 percent plus its high rates of teen births and sexually transmitted diseases ranked it 40th for behaviors that affect health. Last year, it was ranked 35<sup>th</sup>.

The rate of children living in poverty ranged from a low of 15 percent in Kootenai County to a statewide high of 26 percent in Shoshone County. Shoshone is one of only three counties in Idaho with so many children living in poverty.

“The county health rankings give us a snapshot of how our five northern counties compare to other Idaho counties in select health outcomes and factors,” Whalen said.

“There’s always room for improvement. This helps us zero in on the areas where it’s needed the most.”

County Health Rankings bases its study on vital statistics and data from the Centers for Disease Control and Protection and the National Center for Health Statistics. It also uses information from the U.S. Census, the American Community Survey and other national research organizations. To see the rankings and their details, visit [www.countyhealthrankings.org](http://www.countyhealthrankings.org).