

RWJF Culture of Health
Sentinel Community Snapshot:

Adams County, Mississippi



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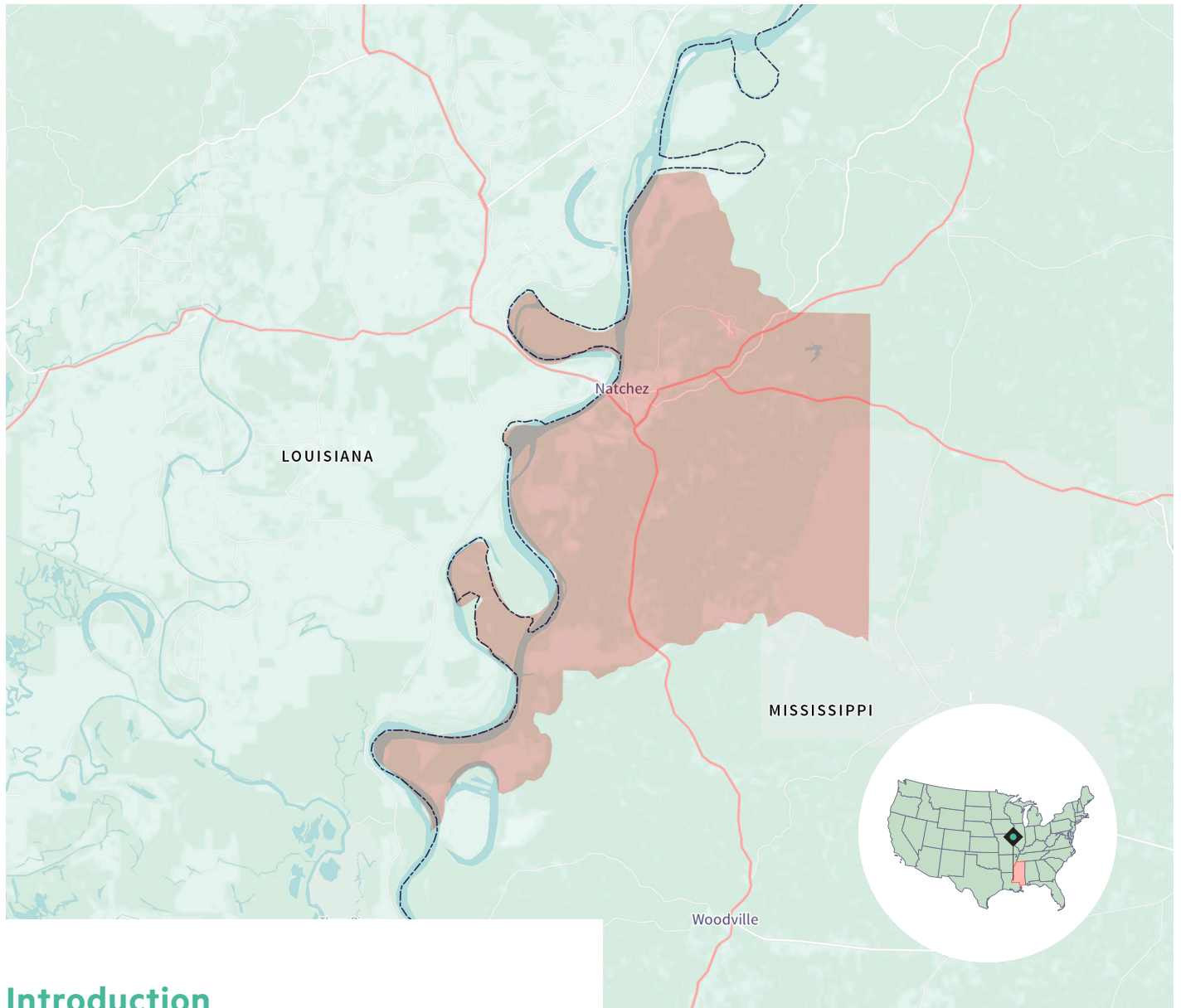
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ABOUT THIS REPORT

The Sentinel Communities project, conducted by RTI International in collaboration with the RAND Corporation, is sponsored by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The project will monitor activities in each of 30 diverse communities around the country for at least 5 years. This Snapshot is the first in a series of planned reports about this Sentinel Community. Using data compiled in early 2016, it provides an initial overview of the community's history, challenges, and approaches to building a Culture of Health. Visit cultureofhealth.org to see the full list of communities and links to other reports and information about the project.



Introduction

Adams County, Mississippi, is located on the state's southwestern border with Louisiana. Considered the birthplace of Mississippi, Natchez is the county seat and oldest town along the Mississippi River, which once served as a booming center of manufacturing and trade.¹ Adams County has a population of 31,737, with black residents comprising the majority (57%) and white people making up 38% of residents. More than 48% of the population lives in Natchez.²

The county has been shaped by a long history of racial oppression, and black residents continue to face stark economic and health inequities. The French colonized Natchez in 1716 and named the town for its first settlers, the Natchez Indians. Because of its prime location along the river, Natchez became Mississippi's first capital and a major producer of cotton,

dependent on slave labor. This history formed the initial foundation of the county's tourism industry, which draws approximately 700,000 visitors each year and accounts for nearly 20% of local employment.³ Since the Civil Rights movement, black residents have challenged local tourist attractions that focus on the antebellum mansions without discussing the historical experiences and hardships of slaves.^{4,5} In recent years, stakeholders in the county have made progress toward a focus on black historical tourism, with events such as the "Southern Road to Freedom," a choral storytelling held by the Rose Hill Baptist Church and Holy Family Catholic Church during the annual Natchez Pilgrimage.⁵

The benefits of Adams County's federal recognition as a Preserve America Community for its celebration of history⁷ and its growing

reputation as a travel destination⁸ have not accrued to the majority of community members. Nearly 21% of residents have less than a high school diploma, compared with 15% for the United States.² Almost one-third of all residents are below the federal poverty level, an issue that disproportionately affects black residents (Figure 1).^{2,9} Adams County residents also experience poorer health outcomes—including higher rates of infant mortality, smoking, obesity, and diabetes—than the nation as a whole.¹⁰

In response to these significant challenges, local, state, and national initiatives are underway in Adams County to improve economic opportunities and change the environment to support healthy behaviors. However, data are not available to determine how these initiatives are working together or promoting their benefits and services to the community. Sharp disparities in poverty, employment, and health outcomes between Adams County’s black and white residents underscore the importance of cross-initiative collaboration and opportunities for meaningful engagement of all community members to ensure that investments yield equitable, population-wide improvements.

A WEAKENED ECONOMY AND INCOME DISPARITY

After the Civil War, the Natchez economy began to suffer because of a lack of diversification and manufacturing capability.¹¹ As railroads replaced steamboats, the prosperity of railroad traffic bypassed many river towns, including Natchez. Later in the 20th century, the town’s tourist attractions, including more than 200 antebellum mansions and structures, helped boost the economy to some extent; however, manufacturing long remained the major economic driver.¹²

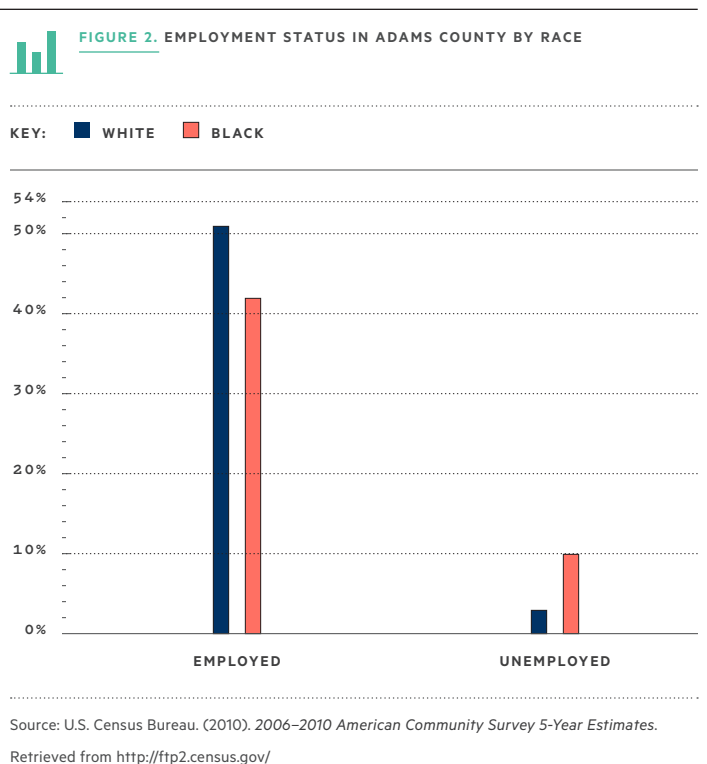
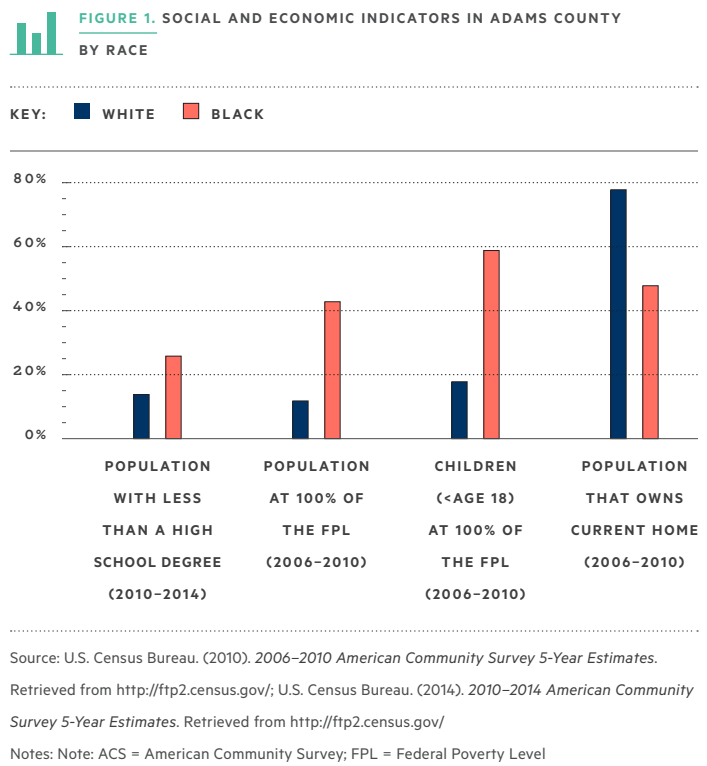
At the start of the 21st century, however, major companies began departing or shutting down their plants, sparking severe economic disruption. Titan Tire closed in 2001, followed by Johns Manville in 2002. International Paper, the third largest employer in the county, shut down in 2003, leaving 640 middle-income employees jobless and causing a deficit of nearly \$1 million to the county budget.¹³ Today, Natchez markets itself as a retirement community and relies mainly on tourism—recreation along the river, a local casino—and education, health care, social assistance, and retail industries.¹

In Adams County, just 41% residents are employed, compared with 52% in Mississippi and 58% in the United States. Unemployment disproportionately affects black residents (Figure 2).² Black residents earn a median income of \$19,795, and almost one-third work in the service sector. In contrast, white residents have a median income of \$42,923, and most work in the management, business, science, and art sectors (Figure 3).²

The vast majority of children in Adams County (87%) are eligible for free lunch, and 24% of black residents participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (or food stamps), compared with less than 4% of white residents.^{9,10}

POOR COVERAGE, POOR HEALTH

Residents in Adams County fare worse than the nation on nearly all health indicators, including health behaviors, morbidity and mortality, and insurance coverage (Figure 4).^{2,10}



Approximately 80% of residents have health insurance, compared with 86% nationally.² This stems in part from Mississippi's decision not to expand Medicaid as part of the Affordable Care Act, leaving many working poor without an affordable insurance option. Workers who are paid hourly or work for small businesses might make too much money to qualify for Medicaid, but not enough to receive government assistance for private insurance.¹⁴ On top of this, the county faces severe shortages of primary care, dental, and mental health providers. Adams County scores 19 out of 26 on an index of health professional shortage, with higher scores indicating a more severe shortage.¹⁵

Within the county, 37% of residents are obese, compared with 35% in Mississippi and 30% in the United States. In addition, only 59% of Adams County residents have access to safe, dedicated locations for physical activity, compared with 80% in Mississippi.¹⁰ The county's teen birth rate is more than double the national rate, and the rate of preventable or premature deaths across all ages is 1.5 times the national rate.¹⁰

Building a Healthier Adams County

Across Adams County, individuals, organizations, and corporations are actively focused on creating jobs and making environmental changes to support healthy behaviors.

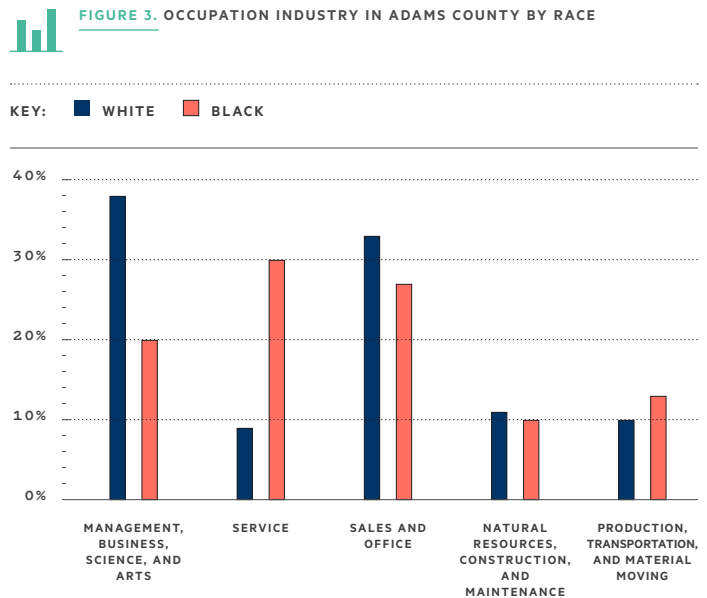
Private businesses and local government are collaborating to improve the economic climate and attract new businesses to Natchez, the primary city in Adams County. Still in an early stage, such efforts will require well-calibrated, sustained application of resources to ensure equitable improvements in economic and health indicators among white and black residents.

Other efforts to improve health outcomes include enhancing the built environment and leveraging existing assets, like churches and workplaces, to deliver health promotion programs. Although many initiatives share common values and objectives, they do not appear to be working in close collaboration or coordinating efforts to maximize overall reach and impact.

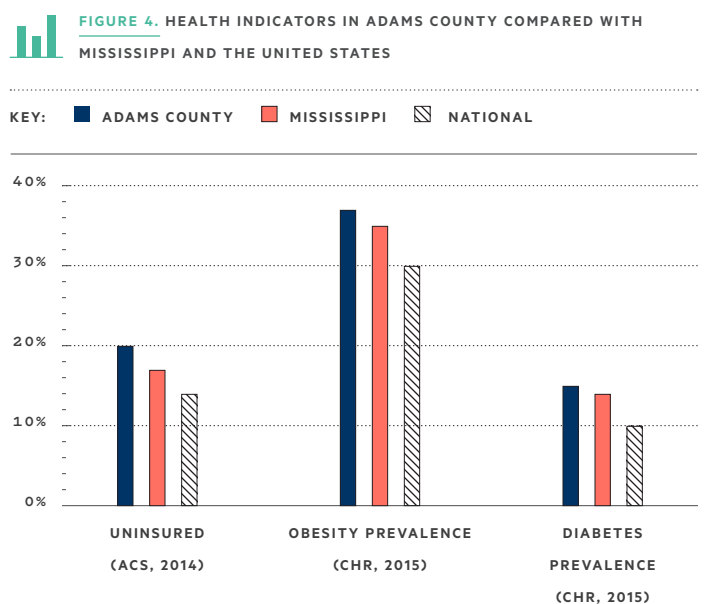
CREATING JOBS TO FIGHT POVERTY

Natchez, Inc., a local public-private partnership established in 2010, is the county's primary economic development agency. The group includes business professionals and elected officials from the Adams County Board of Supervisors, city of Natchez, Business and Civic League, Chamber of Commerce, and Natchez Now, a group representing private business interests.

To attract new businesses around the river port, Natchez, Inc. helps businesses find available sites and buildings, supports small business and entrepreneurial development, and identifies local incentives and benefits for businesses, and offers county residents workforce training and



Source: U.S. Census Bureau. (2010). 2006–2010 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <http://ftp2.census.gov/>



Source: U.S. Census Bureau. (2014). 2010–2014 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <http://ftp2.census.gov/>; County Health Rankings. (2015). Retrieved from <http://www.countyhealthrankings.org/app/mississippi/2015/rankings/adams/county>. Note: ACS = American Community Survey; CHR = County Health Rankings.

education.¹⁶ In the past 3 years, two newly arrived manufacturers—Delta Energy and VonDrehle—have created nearly 200 new jobs.^{17,18} However, in May 2016, Vidalia Apparel announced the closing of a distribution center, causing the loss of 167 jobs.¹⁹

Limited information exists on who the group is reaching with these services and how many jobs it has helped to create. It is particularly unclear how job creation in Adams County is affecting the economic prospects and health outcomes of its poorest residents.

CHANGING THE ENVIRONMENT TO PROMOTE HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

The Mississippi State Department of Health aims to overcome gaps in insurance coverage and access by focusing on disease prevention and management outside the doctor's office. In District 7, which consists of Adams and eight other counties, the health department's Community Health and Prevention Program focuses on increasing access to physical activity, nutrition, health care, and systems, and reducing exposure to tobacco through policy, system, and environmental change, including workplace wellness programs and increased walking trails. The initiative collaborates with the Community Alliance of Natchez-Adams County and local churches, hospitals and clinics, businesses, and community groups to achieve these aims.

Even before the Department of Health's focus on improving the built environment, a grassroots effort in Adams County emerged with a similar mission. Aiming to provide safe areas for physical activity and boost the local economy, a volunteer group called Community Alliance of Natchez-Adams County initiated the Natchez Trails project. The project team includes the Community Alliance of Natchez-Adams County, the city of Natchez, the Chamber of Commerce, the Natchez Downtown Development Association, and the Historic Natchez Foundation. The volunteers secured nearly \$2.3 million in federal and state funding and raised another \$390,000 through a grassroots campaign to develop nearly 6 miles of walking, running, and biking trails in Natchez's historic downtown and along the river bluff. All five trails include visually appealing, museum-like panels that illustrate the county's history, which have helped tourism and won an award from the Mississippi Economic Development Council in 2012.²⁰

In the project's second phase, completed in mid-2016, the team developed a mile-long trail along St. Catherine Street, a black neighborhood rich in history. On one end of the street is the old slave market, and on the other is Rest African Methodist Episcopal Church—the church of pastor Hiram Rhodes Revels, the first black member of Congress, who served in the U.S. Senate in 1870–1871.²¹ Importantly, this street links downtown and other low-income residential neighborhoods to the Natchez farmers market.

In November 2016, the alliance nominated a Civil Rights Trail as its next project. The historic walking trail would be achieved through a number of planned and coordinated efforts including community forums; a memorial to the 1965 arrest of hundreds of black residents for peaceful rallying, called the Parchman Ordeal²²; preservation of the Brumfield school and MLK Triangle filling station²³; two buildings important to black history; and art projects focused on health disparities, led by Natchez Art Association and Ideas xLab.²⁴

Although the Natchez Trails initiative reflects successful civic engagement and economic development, it is unclear whether the trails are promoting better health and cultivating a sense of community in the county. According to a local newspaper, *The Natchez Democrat*, the trails have improved the quality of life, with “dozens of feet” hitting the trail on any sunny afternoon.²⁵ In addition, physical inactivity has decreased substantially from 37% of residents being inactive in 2011 to 29% in 2016.¹⁰ However, more information is needed to determine who is using the trails and how the trails are connecting people and neighborhoods, especially those disproportionately affected by economic and health challenges.

The Mississippi-based organization My Brother's Keeper also aims to foster more active lifestyles and reduce obesity rates, particularly in underserved areas. The organization awarded more than \$247,000 to Adams County to renovate parks and recreational areas in low-income and black neighborhoods. Through collaboration with the Community Development Director and partnerships with Natchez Children's Services and the Natchez-Adams School District, the organization committed its 2016 funds to resurfacing eight tennis courts, purchasing new playground equipment, and refurbishing walking trails in two local parks.²⁵

A 5-YEAR BLUEPRINT FOR ACTION

In addition to these grassroots and state efforts, the Clinton Health Matters Initiative (CHMI) and Humana are partnering to shine a national spotlight on Adams County. In May 2015, the partnership released a 5-year plan titled *Blueprint for Action for Natchez and Adams County*.³ The Blueprint emerged with input from representatives of local universities, businesses, health centers, government, and community-based organizations.

In early 2016, the partnership launched three programs targeting health needs identified in the community:

- Healthy Moms, Healthy Babies, providing maternal coaching to reduce the county's infant mortality rate, which is more than double the national rate;¹⁶
- Diabetes and Heart Disease Prevention Program, which aims to change behaviors of residents at risk of developing diabetes; and
- Million Hearts, a federal initiative working across organizations to support and standardize the “ABCs” of heart attack and stroke prevention—aspirin for high-risk patients, blood-pressure control, cholesterol management, and smoking cessation.²⁶

Already recruiting and training staff, CHMI leaders are partnering with local worksites and churches to integrate and deliver wellness programs.²⁷ The initiative also seeks to link existing trails to a countywide trails plan.

INCREASING OPPORTUNITIES TO COMMUNICATE, COLLABORATE, AND BOOST IMPACT

Despite activities and initiatives taking shape across Adams County, it is challenging to find information promoting these initiatives to the people they aim to serve, aside from limited coverage in the local newspaper.

Some initiatives, including CHMI, have tried to spread the word by speaking at the weekly “Friday Forum,” which is open to everyone and sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce, Alcorn State University, and Natchez Coffee.²⁸ Community leaders guide discussions on predetermined topics, many of which are controversial, such as the community’s civil rights history.²⁹ Mission Mississippi, a statewide ministerial initiative, also addresses sensitive issues with the aim of promoting dialog and racial recognition across the state. On the first Tuesday of every month, the group holds meetings at Natchez Children’s Services.³⁰ However, it is not clear which community groups are represented at these gatherings or how many people the meetings can accommodate on weekday mornings. In addition, the gatherings are not televised, and the minutes are not posted online for those who cannot attend in person. The various economic and health initiatives also do not appear to report widely their progress and impact or ways community members can get involved. For instance, although the Community Alliance of Natchez-Adams County maintains a Facebook page that lists upcoming events, engagement on the page and dialog about its priorities and progress are very limited.³¹

Community leaders share a commitment to revitalizing the economy and environment to improve the well-being of Natchez residents. However, there appears to be a gulf between community leaders and residents. For instance, although local leaders from education, health care, businesses, and nonprofit organizations gathered to inform the priorities of the CHMI blueprint, it is unclear whether residents who are served by these agencies participated.³ Moving forward, enhanced communication, collaboration, citizen participation, and evaluation of the initiatives will be important to ensure that all community voices, particularly those of black and low-income residents, are heard and involved in planning, implementing, and sustaining change.

- Which initiatives are addressing health inequities that disproportionately affect black residents? How is success being measured?
- In what ways have grassroots accomplishments, such as Natchez, Inc. and Natchez Trails, improved the social, economic, and health-related environments?
- What evidence exists to demonstrate effects of the Natchez Trails Initiative or other initiatives on the decrease in residents’ physical inactivity that occurred between 2011 and 2016?
- Have public projects to increase access to physical activity through park facilities and trails had a measurable, equitable impact?
- How is Adams County measuring the impact of completed and ongoing initiatives to create jobs and change the environment to support healthy behaviors?
- What evidence is there that the initiatives are equitably improving the health and well-being of Adams County residents? For instance, what are the trends in employment and obesity prevalence among white and black residents? Are any of the gaps narrowing?
- How is Adams County sustaining or expanding the local and national initiatives, particularly given the community’s serious economic challenges?

Creating and Maintaining Equitable Change

Individuals, groups, and corporations in Adams County are taking steps to revitalize the social and economic environment, which are key drivers of health inequities. Additional surveillance, data and information gathering, analysis, and reporting will examine how the initiatives are coordinating their efforts with each other and assess the impact of these initiatives on increasing employment, decreasing poverty, and improving health outcomes, particularly among black residents.

The following questions could provide insights into the degree to which meaningful change is taking place and can be sustained:

- How are the various initiatives communicating and collaborating with each other and the people they aim to serve, and how are underserved groups involved in decision making?

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