RWJF Culture of Health
Sentinel Community Snapshot:

Oxford County, Maine
Table of Contents

Introduction

Challenges of a Rural Community

LACK OF EMPLOYMENT

HEALTH ISSUES AND SUBSTANCE USE

Collaborating for Economic Growth

LOW HEALTH RANKINGS DRIVE IMPROVEMENTS

CREATING SAFE AREAS TO PROMOTE OUTDOOR ACTIVITY

CROSS-SECTOR BUSINESS COLLABORATION

Creating a Healthier Community

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 five 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, links to other reports, and information about the project.
Introduction

Located in the western region of Maine, Oxford County is home to 57,517 residents, 96 percent of whom are white. The rural county boasts some of New England’s highest mountain peaks and Sunday River, one of the state’s largest ski resorts. However, this natural landscape of sprawling hills has fragmented the population, creating a population density of 26 people per square mile. The county’s largest towns do not exceed 6,000 persons.

Historically, the manufacturing of wood products, paper, shoes, leather, and metalworking formed the base of Oxford County’s economy. The growth of manufacturing in Oxford County was in part the result of the 1851 expansion of the Atlantic & St. Lawrence Railroad that ran from Portland, Maine, to Montreal, Canada. Oxford County capitalized on its connection to Portland and Montreal and developed its manufacturing and tourism industries. For many years, these industries, especially manufacturing, sustained the Oxford County economy. Over the last three decades, with the expansion of free international trade, some of these manufacturing companies have closed their Maine factories, including some in Oxford County. These closures resulted in a loss of 22,400 jobs statewide, from 1998 to 2008. Although manufacturing remains a mainstay of the county’s economy, the economic base has shifted from manufacturing to other industries, such as tourism with the Sunday River Ski Resort, health care, and education. This shift has led to an increase in unemployment and underemployment, and a decline in economic opportunities because of lower wages and seasonal employment.
As economic opportunities in Oxford County have declined, poverty has become an increasing concern for residents. In addition to poverty, the county is facing rising rates of mental health issues; a lack of public transportation; high rates of obesity; and increasing substance use. In the last 15 years, health coalitions and state legislators have worked to connect Oxford County residents and address these challenges through strategic partnerships and community engagement. Despite these improvements, Oxford County still faces several challenges, including potential legislative changes that could threaten public health funding.

Challenges of a Rural Community

Rural communities often experience worse health outcomes compared with other segments of the population. In addition to higher rates of unhealthy behaviors and chronic disease, rural communities tend to experience more geographic isolation, limited job opportunities, and lower socioeconomic status. These issues are no different in Oxford County, which is one of the least populated counties in Maine. In 2014, Oxford County residents reported a median income of $40,695, compared with $48,804 in Maine and $53,482 nationally. Although nearly 90 percent of Oxford County residents have a high school diploma, only 19 percent have a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared with more than 28 percent in the state and 29 percent in the nation.

Lack of Employment

Although Oxford County’s unemployment and poverty rates are similar to national levels, these rates have exceeded the state’s levels over the past decade (Figures 1 and 2). The percentage of unemployed residents in Oxford County rose from 6 percent in 2010 to 10 percent in 2014 compared with 7 percent in Maine. Consequently, the percentage of Oxford County residents living in poverty increased from 13 percent in 2010 to nearly 16 percent in 2014, compared with 14 percent in Maine. The percentage of children living in poverty also increased from nearly 18 percent in 2010 to almost 21 percent in 2014, compared with 19 percent in the state.

Economic hardship is often associated with poor health. A 2016 health needs assessment identified drug and alcohol abuse; physical inactivity and poor nutrition; mental health; obesity; and diabetes as top health concerns for Oxford County residents.

Health Issues and Substance Use

The rates of substance abuse in Oxford County have increased in recent years. The percentage of adults at risk for heavy drinking rose from 6 percent in 2006 to 9 percent in 2011, compared with less than 8 percent in the state and 7 percent in the nation. Nearly 12 percent of high school students have taken a prescription drug not prescribed to them, and 3 percent have used heroin at least once. Law enforcement agencies have begun to tackle this issue through the adoption of an “angel” program.
program, which provides a buddy to guide those who are seeking help for substance addiction through the rehabilitation process. The program also allows them to turn in any drug paraphernalia without penalty.16

The percentage of Oxford County residents diagnosed with depression increased from approximately 19 percent in 2006 to 23 percent in 2011, compared with 24 percent in Maine and 18 percent nationally.14 In 2010, 9 percent of Oxford County residents reported that they rarely or never receive the social and emotional support they need, which is similar to the state rate of 8 percent.16

Additionally, in 2015, 31 percent of the county’s residents were obese, compared with 28 percent in the state.18 Just over one-third of the population of Oxford County residents (36%) have access to locations for physical activity (measured as percentage of individuals in a county who live reasonably close to a location for physical activity), which is much lower than the state (68%) and nation (77%).18 In addition to limited access to locations for physical activity, residents have limited access to public transportation, which sometimes leaves them geographically isolated. Oxford County has several state routes, but no major highways run through this region, potentially exacerbating problems travelling to distant health care and employment opportunities.17 Community Concepts—a community nonprofit organization that offers housing, economic development, and social services for Oxford and two surrounding counties—provides transportation to medical appointments and is also available for hire for nonmedical use.17

Low Health Rankings Drive Improvements

Residents also became resolute in their commitment to tackle community issues in 2010 when County Health Rankings ranked Oxford County lowest of all Maine counties on health outcomes (length and quality of life) and health factors (behaviors; clinical care; social and economic factors; and physical environment).14 In an effort to understand and respond to the ranking, in 2011 representatives from health care; public health; media; government; education; foundations; financial institutions; faith-based groups; and nonprofits formed the Oxford County Wellness Collaborative (OCWC). Healthy Oxford Hills serves as the administrative home of the OCWC and Stephens Memorial Hospital acts as fiscal agent for all grants supporting its work. Stephens is a member of MaineHealth and has supported the OCWC since its inception through its Community Health division. The close, collaborative relationship between OCWC and these health care partners—which provide technical assistance, data analysis, and in-kind and direct financial support—augments the overall capacity and stability of the OCWC. The collaboration also is improving alignment of community and health care system population health efforts.

Creating Safe Areas to Promote Outdoor Activity

In 2012, OCWC participated in the community health needs assessment required of nonprofit hospitals to identify priority areas requiring community action.19 To address these priority areas, OCWC formed workgroups around healthy food, active living, behavioral health, and community safety. In addition, OCWC created a Community Engagement group charged with engaging residents from different demographics, income levels, and towns in project planning and development. OCWC was awarded funding to develop a marketing plan called Oxford County Moves to highlight the potential for active transportation in Oxford County, and mapping accessible and safe bike routes in the county.20, 21 They worked with active bikers and walkers to develop educational materials, maps, and other resources to promote walking and biking around Oxford County. The current efforts of the OCWC Active Living workgroup are focused on contributing to the Department of Transportation’s work plans so that when roads are rebuilt, shoulders are a part of that plan to ensure safer routes for walking and biking.22

Although these efforts brought together agencies from different sectors, several subgroups were not at the table, such as low-income populations.23 Through its collaborative efforts, OCWC applied for and received funding from the Maine Health Access Foundation to create an asset-based community engagement model. The model focused on collective impact; included community members from all backgrounds; and fostered more collaboration from diverse sectors and populations.23

Cross-Sector Business Collaboration

The Oxford Hills Chamber of Commerce, which represents more than 300 area businesses and organizations, is an active partner of OCWC. In 2014, they partnered with the Maine Department of Health and Human Services’ Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and Additional Support for People in Retraining and Employment, and Department of Labor-Bureau of Employment Services. This partnership enabled the
Chamber to participate in employment and training programs offered to the community. The state agencies designed the programs to develop an individual’s critical employability skills and help them successfully transition to employment. The Oxford Hills Chamber of Commerce also led the effort to build Oxford Casino in 2012, the only casino in southern Maine. Although initially some residents were hesitant to bring a casino to the county, the resulting Oxford Casino has generated more than $2 million in revenue for Oxford County and employs over 400 people. Oxford County’s economy may see another boost with the casino’s plans to expand. This expansion—to include a hotel, meeting rooms and additional casino space—is expected to generate 60 new full-time positions and about 1,000 temporary construction jobs.

Although these cross-sector collaborations are making strides to improve the health and well-being of Oxford County residents, the initiatives are in jeopardy with pending state funding cuts that would change the structure of HMPs. New funding requirements stipulate that prevention services vendors should have a statewide reach. The local HMPs, including those in Oxford County, will not be able to satisfy this requirement. The local HMPs hope that when larger state agencies receive funding, they will call on HMPs to do the work on the ground.

Creating a Healthier Community

Oxford County’s residents, policymakers, and businesses have identified physical isolation and disconnection as key challenges to residents’ health and well-being. Yet despite these geographical challenges, multiple stakeholders across myriad sectors have been actively collaborating over the last 15 years to prevent substance abuse; address issues of mental health; foster safe and active lifestyles; and support job development. Additional surveillance; data and information gathering; analysis; and reporting will examine the progress and impact of these initiatives on the health and well-being of Oxford County residents—especially at-risk, low-income residents. As the state funding discussions continue and new strategies are developed to build a Culture of Health, the following key questions remain:

- What are the interrelationships among economic, educational, and other social drivers of health in Oxford County, and how are leaders addressing them in a coordinated way?

- How will Oxford County respond to pending funding cuts that affect their public health efforts?

- How will the expansion of Oxford Casino affect the economic, social, and health status of Oxford County residents?

- How have local coalitions and partnerships overcome physical and social isolation to engage residents in efforts to improve their health and well-being?

- To what extent are substance abuse, mental health, and economic hardships interconnected in Oxford County? How are stakeholders addressing poverty, depression, and heroin use in the county?

- How is Oxford County continuing to ensure that all residents, especially low-income residents, are involved in the county’s decision-making process to building a Culture of Health?
References