RWJF Culture of Health
Sentinel Community
Snapshots:

Rexburg, Idaho
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ABOUT THIS REPORT
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. The Sentinel Communities project, conducted by Research Triangle Institute 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. Visit cultureofhealth.org to see the full list of communities and links to other reports and information about the project.
Introduction

Known to residents as “America’s family community,” Rexburg, Idaho, is home to a fast-growing population of members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS or Mormon Church), who make up approximately 98% of the population. Located in the northeast corner of Idaho, Rexburg is the largest city in Madison County, accounting for 69% of the county’s population. The population is overwhelmingly white (91%) and identifies almost exclusively as members of the LDS Church. Residents have traditionally been employed in the agriculture industry, including farming or producing Idaho’s famous potatoes. Over the past decade, Brigham Young University-Idaho (BYU-Idaho) has become Rexburg’s largest employer.

Reflecting its pioneer heritage, early settlers of Rexburg were LDS members who traveled from neighboring Utah in the late 19th century and built farms, roads, and the area’s first irrigation system. The town’s first settlers sought to create a “strong family-centered community” founded on education and commerce. The LDS Church continues to have a strong influence on residents’ health, the local economy, and the character of religious and educational institutions in Rexburg.

The expansion of LDS Church-owned institutions is largely responsible for Rexburg’s recent growth. Its population of approximately 26,000 residents has grown by nearly 50% since the conversion in 2001 of Ricks College, a junior college, to BYU-Idaho, a 4-year college owned and operated by the LDS Church. In 2015, BYU-Idaho had its highest enrollment in school history with 17,562 students. (The university operates year-round; thus, students are included as part of Rexburg’s population.)
Faithful Mormons follow the “Word of Wisdom,” a church law that prohibits consumption of coffee, tea, alcohol, and tobacco. Because LDS Church members hold most positions in Rexburg’s city council, school board, coalitions, and chambers of commerce, their values influence policy and subsequently behavior in Rexburg, among LDS and non-LDS residents alike. Students, faculty, and staff at BYU-Idaho are required to sign a church educational system honor code outlining how they will conduct themselves while they are affiliated with the university. In addition to the LDS Church’s restrictions on alcohol, tobacco, and other substances, the code prohibits any form of sexual contact outside of marriage and requires regular participation in church service.

Due to the health-promoting practices of LDS Church members and a large population of young people, Madison County, whose county seat is Rexburg and its largest city, was ranked as Idaho’s healthiest county from 2013 to 2015. But Rexburg is not immune to social, economic, and health issues. Nearly half of the city’s population, primarily BYU-Idaho students, lives at or below the Federal poverty level, as do nearly one-third of Rexburg’s children (Figure 1). Children and adolescents exhibit signs of stress: almost 10% of Madison County middle- and high-school students report using alcohol, and the prevalence of suicide among 15- to 19-year-olds, although low, more than doubled between 2010 and 2014. While community members are working together to confront certain risks facing its youth, the pervasive influence of the LDS Church and its strict code of social norms can make identifying and addressing some health concerns especially challenging.

**HIGH HEALTH AND EDUCATION, LOW INCOME**

The LDS Church’s prohibitions against tobacco and alcohol play a strong role in positive health outcomes that exceed that of the state and the nation. Although health data were not available at the city level, Rexburg residents account for more than two-thirds (69%) of Madison County’s population, so county data are a reasonable proxy for Rexburg’s health indicators.

Men have an average life expectancy of 78 years, and women have a life expectancy of 81 years, both slightly above state and national averages. Cancer rates of 376 cases per 100,000 for Madison County are far lower than state (446 per 100,000) and national (454 per 100,000) rates and are among the lowest of the surrounding counties. Additionally, only 3% of residents in Madison County smoke, compared with 17% in the state. The teen birth rate is 8 per 1,000 in Madison County compared with 35 per 1,000 people in Idaho. Obesity prevalence is also much lower in Madison County compared with state and national rates (Figure 2).

The positive health outcomes seen in Madison County and in Rexburg appear to have little correlation with income, however. Rexburg’s median household income is $25,606, slightly higher than the 2016 Federal poverty level of $24,300 for a family of four. By contrast, Idaho’s median household income is $47,334.

Nearly 50% of households have an annual income of less than $11,958. Nearly one-third (29%) of children in Rexburg live in poverty, a rate that has increased since 2010 (26%) and is higher than the county, state, and nation levels. In Madison County, 29% of children are eligible for free or reduced price lunch, less than the state average of 39%. More than half of Rexburg residents spend 30% or more of their monthly income on housing.

Rexburg’s high poverty rates are influenced by the presence of a large student population that makes up more than one-third of the city’s...
population. Students aged 18 to 24 account for 76% of people aged 18 or older living below the poverty level. The high student population reflects the high educational attainment in Rexburg relative to Madison County, Idaho, and the nation. More than one-third (39%) of Rexburg residents have a bachelor’s degree or higher, which is above county, state, and national averages (Figure 3).

In keeping with the value that the LDS Church places on family, many students marry and have children while in school, thus increasing the number of households that require financial support. More than half (53%) of adults aged 20 to 34 are married, which is higher than the county and state rates (52% and 41%, respectively) and nearly twice the national rate (28%) for this age group. To support their families, students often take out loans and depend on federal assistance, such as subsidized housing and the Women, Infants, and Children program.

Lack of health insurance coverage can be a barrier to accessing health care services and is often an issue in small, rural communities. However, compared to Idaho residents (84%), nearly all (91%) Rexburg residents have health insurance coverage, through an employer, insurance company, or government assistance. Medicaid covers 10% of the Rexburg population covered by insurance. Although Idaho did not expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act to low-income adults, many of Rexburg residents who are students and who do not qualify for Medicaid can enroll in the BYU-Idaho Student Health Plan.

Rexburg’s health infrastructure supports access to varying levels of primary and acute services. Madison Memorial Hospital serves residents in Rexburg and the surrounding counties of Fremont, Jefferson, and Teton. It provides emergency services; a surgery center; a family maternity center; specialty clinics; health education; and physical, speech, and occupational therapy. The hospital’s advisory board is made up of members of the community, including LDS members in Rexburg.

### Creative Solutions to a Limited Tax Base

With the tax-exempt LDS Church owning nearly half of the property within Rexburg, city officials have used alternative public financing approaches to pay for infrastructure and improvements to the physical environment. The city enacted a development impact fee program in October 2003 to serve as the primary financing mechanism for public facility improvements to accommodate new development and to overcome Rexburg’s comparatively low property tax revenues. Businesses pay these fees when building permits are obtained; fees vary based on the type of building (e.g., single family residence, commercial building). Impact fees are commonly used in the United States, although legislation governing their use varies by state. Twenty-nine states have enabling legislation allowing impact fees, while other states allow for their use for individual jurisdictions by approval from the state legislature.

### RESTORING PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION AND RECREATION SPACES

Like many frontier cities, Rexburg offers few options for public transportation, and walkability is limited. Recent efforts are poised to change that. A bus system is available for students and for the elderly and a fixed route feeder service operates Monday through Friday. The fixed route service travels to specific destinations, while the feeder service provides transportation for riders to be picked up from a specific location and feed into fixed transit routes. New daily bus service serving Rexburg and Idaho Falls began service as of June 2016 since its establishment, the Rexburg Urban Renewal Agency has funded improvements to the built environment through the reconstruction of dilapidated streets and buildings, and installation of traffic signals to ensure pedestrian safety. In 2015, the agency committed $570,000 toward the construction of a municipal baseball diamond and is considering matching a $5,000 grant for development of a bicycle park.

### CROSS-SECTOR EFFORTS TO SUPPORT YOUTH AND FAMILIES

The centrality of the family in the LDS Church is reflected in a range of
programs and initiatives to support Rexburg youth and their families, who have faced concerns about substance abuse and mental health in recent years. Although programs are not directly administered by the LDS Church, the predominance of the Church is reflected in program development and planning decisions.

The Madison County Community Coalition, which was founded in 1994 and focuses on family and youth, represents approximately 65 county, civic, public, religious, and business organizations. It was created to respond to growing concerns over crime, poverty, and drug use. Substance use, including alcohol and marijuana, as well as prescription drug misuse have been on the rise in recent years. In 2014, the coalition was awarded a $400,000 grant from the Idaho Office of Drug Policy to increase cross-sector collaboration, with a focus on anti-bullying and anti-drug programs, parenting classes, and social media campaigns that target prescription drug misuse. In 2015, the coalition partnered with the Madison County Sheriff’s Office, the Madison County Extension Agency, and Walmart to provide a permanent drop box location to allow residents to dispose of prescription drugs and educate them about prescription drug abuse.

Madison Cares, operated out of the Madison School District, stresses the importance of family and addresses the mental health care needs of children and adolescents. In 2009, the school district received an $8.9 million Systems of Care grant from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) to fund programs that include free parenting classes and support groups, autism support groups, and youth activity groups. In 2015, SAMHSA awarded the program a $4 million expansion grant, a move that the school district said would allow them to continue and extend programs into the community.

Madison Cares offers families an integrated care model comprising individualized “strength-based care” and connection to a variety of comprehensive services. Strength-based care identifies family’s individual strengths and needs and creates plans to connect families to services. It aims to support young people and their families who experience mental health challenges to be successful at home, at school, and in the community. In addition to its parent and youth classes, Madison Cares partners with the Family Crisis Center and the Idaho Food Bank to provide food to those in need with the Rexburg Mobile Food Pantry. All services through Madison Cares are free and available to all Rexburg youth aged 0 to 21 and their families, regardless of religious affiliation.

Identifying New Strategies for Growth

The health and well-being of Rexburg is deeply tied to its relationship with the LDS Church, whose norms influence the behaviors of the overwhelming majority of its residents. The LDS Church’s restrictions against the use of tobacco and alcohol and its prohibitions on premarital sex have resulted in positive overall health outcomes. However, residents are not immune to effects of social and economic stress, as evidenced by recent increases in substance abuse and suicide rates among youth. As the city’s population expands, Rexburg residents are also facing the need for new strategies for economic growth to provide employment for its growing college-educated population.

Additional surveillance, data and information gathering, analysis, and reporting will examine how Rexburg responds to the following concerns:

- What outreach efforts have community coalition members undertaken to reach the youth populations affected by bullying or drug use, and how does LDS affiliation affect willingness to seek or accept help?
- What is the impact of community initiatives on crime, poverty, mental health, behavioral health, and substance abuse?
- How will Rexburg continue to address poverty among a substantial portion of its population, especially in providing resources for its large student population?
- How will Rexburg adjust to its growing population?
- How will the LDS Church continue to shape the social and economic environment of Rexburg?
References


