SENTINEL COMMUNITIES INSIGHTS

Spotlight on COVID-19
Sanilac County, Michigan

July 2020
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Photos: Ken Lund/Flickr (Street in Lexington, Mich., cover; boat dock in Lexington, Mich., p. 3); Todd McInturf/Detroit News via AP (Volunteers and staff pack food boxes in Madison Heights, Mich., p. 6)
As the nation confronts the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the legacy of racial inequities that the disease highlights, there is an opportunity to review how diverse communities across the United States are planning for, mitigating, and recovering from the pandemic’s effects. Here, we take a deeper look at Sanilac County, Mich., exploring the impact of and the county’s response to COVID-19 based on information available through early June 2020.

Community Overview

Considered a summer home destination, Sanilac County is a rural county located on the “thumb” of Michigan. The largest industries in the county include manufacturing, health care, and retail, which experience seasonal fluctuation. A strong part of Sanilac’s summer culture includes local agriculture with local orchards, farms, and farmers markets.

The state of Michigan adopted and implemented the federal Medicaid expansion in 2014. The Healthy Michigan Plan is available for individuals at or below 133 percent of the federal poverty line who do not qualify for or are not enrolled in another Medicare or Medicaid program. County residents experience high mortality rates of heart disease, liver disease, and diabetes. Barriers to health care access include transportation and internet connectivity. Sanilac County is a Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA)-designated, medically underserved area and population.

About Sanilac County

- **Population:** 41,170
- **American Indian:** 0.6%*
- **Asian:** 0.4%
- **Black:** 0.6%
- **Hawaiian, Pacific Islander:** 0.0%
- **Hispanic or Latino:** 3.7%
- **White, not Hispanic:** 94.0%
- **Two or more races:** 1.2%
- **High school graduate:** 87.9%
- **Median income:** $45,277
- **Age 65 and older:** 21.4%
- **Persons in poverty:** 15.9%
- **Uninsured:** 8.0%

* Percentages of population by race/ethnicity may add to more than 100 percent because categories are not mutually exclusive.
COVID-19’s Community Impact

The state of Michigan reported over 60,000 confirmed cases at the end of May, although the majority of cases have been in the southeastern part of the state. On April 11, Gov. Gretchen Whitmer banned travel “between residences,” meaning that residents were prohibited from traveling north to their summer homes. This ban may have played a role in the low number of cases to date, but with the ban lifting in late May and summer around the corner, Sanilac County may see an increase in COVID-19 cases in the coming months. An increase in cases has the potential to overburden Sanilac’s rural health care system and impact care delivery for residents.

Although the community has not been heavily affected by COVID-19 cases, the restrictions put in place for both travel and business have placed a heavy burden on a community that relies on an influx of people in spring/summer and seasonal retail. In April, unemployment claims grew as much as 900 percent in Sanilac County. Although not specific to Sanilac County, a survey conducted by the Small Business Association of Michigan found 1 in 7 small businesses in Michigan do not feel confident about surviving the economic effects of the pandemic.

There are also concerns among health officials that individuals within the county may be delaying seeking health care due to fear over COVID-19. According to Sanilac County Community Mental Health Chief Executive Director Wil Morris significantly fewer people than usual are utilizing mental health care services, despite the availability of remote options for support. This may be due to lack of access to technology, which is a barrier to health care access in the region.

COVID-19 in Sanilac County, Michigan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total cases: 43</th>
<th>Total number of cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cases per 100,000: 104</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of state’s cases: 0.1%</td>
<td>&lt;20</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21–29</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30–92</td>
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<td></td>
<td>93–185</td>
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<td>186–300</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>301–970</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>971–22,180</td>
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</tbody>
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As of June 13, 2020

Map was obtained from the CDC website on June 13, 2020. https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/cases-updates/county-map.html?state=MI
The Community Response to COVID-19

The state of Michigan restricted mass gatherings on March 13, closed nonessential services on March 23, and issued a stay-at-home order on March 24. Shortly after the order was issued, Sanilac County Health Department Officer Bryant Wilke made a statement in support of the stay-at-home order encouraging residents to practice social distancing, despite the low number of confirmed cases in the area. The stay-at-home order was extended through early June, although restrictions loosened prior to that to allow some industries to re-open, including construction and landscaping services, and retail stores to open with up to ten customers inside at a time. Gatherings of ten or fewer individuals are also allowed.

Sanilac County’s response to COVID-19 has been focused on helping to meet the immediate needs of residents:

- The Sanilac County Sheriff’s Office is delivering meals to seniors while volunteers are unable to contribute during the pandemic.

- Sanilac County, in collaboration with neighboring St. Clair County, established a Community Mental Health COVID-19 Support Line to assist community members who are feeling anxious and overwhelmed.

- The County Health Department posted two infographics about when it is safe to leave home and what you should do if you think you have been exposed.

- Other COVID-19-related information is provided through a link to the state’s COVID-19 information page.

- The Michigan Thumb Public Health Alliance, that includes Sanilac and surrounding counties, recently launched a Michigan COVID-19 Business Response Center, which offers a compilation of state and CDC guidelines and public health resources for a wide range of businesses to support re-opening.

Larger-scale coordination or collaborative efforts have not yet occurred, which may be due to the low prevalence of COVID-19 in the county.
Resources for Sanilac County residents financially impacted by COVID-19 are coming largely from the state:

- The state has supplied several resources for Michigan businesses impacted by the virus, including:
  - An Emergency Relief Fund, which issues one-time grants up to $5,000 that are distributed to businesses across the state.
  - The Mobility Solutions grant that addresses mobility challenges presented by the spread of COVID-19.
  - The Michigan Small Business Program will benefit approximately 1,100 businesses, according to the Michigan Economic Development Corporation.  

- Many Michigan health insurers have eased restrictions on telehealth, so providers can be fully reimbursed for services.

- The state will buy back unopened alcohol while restaurants are closed for dine-in services to help Michigan bars and restaurants.

It is difficult to know, however, the extent to which these resources are being leveraged or secured within Sanilac County.
The Role of Health Equity

Prior to COVID-19, Sanilac County did not place a heavy emphasis on innovative, cross-sector solutions to addressing the health needs of residents, despite having high mortality rates for several preventable conditions like heart disease and diabetes. In fact, the only significant health-related collaborative in the county, the Sanilac County Drug Task Force, was narrowly focused on addressing the opioid epidemic. Moreover, the county is comprised of a largely homogeneous white, non-Hispanic population, residing in a rural area with incomes below the state average. As a result, issues of equity and health equity do not receive much attention.

Given the reliance on small retail and seasonal traffic to bring dollars into the county, Sanilac County residents have felt the economic impacts of COVID-19 much more than the health impacts. With unemployment claims skyrocketing in April and continued restrictions on retail shops, some families will be harder hit than others, and it is not clear whether small-town shops will be able to weather the financial strain.

What’s Next

Changes to state orders at the end of May to allow residents to travel “Up North” could bring some economic relief but may also result in an increase in COVID-19 cases across the county, complicating recovery efforts. In future reports, it will be important to assess the impact of increased travel to this more rural region and what that might mean for economic recovery and the health of the community.
References


