

RWJF Culture of Health
5-Year Community Landscape Report

Sanilac County, Michigan



About the Sentinel Communities Surveillance Project

The [Sentinel Communities Surveillance project](#) began in 2016 and has been monitoring activities related to how a [Culture of Health](#) has been developing in each of 29 diverse communities around the country. The purpose of the project is to learn more about how each community is working within its own history and current landscape to message about health and well-being, develop systems that promote health, and address health equity. Information on each Sentinel Community's work is summarized in community [reports](#), as well as cross-community [insights reports](#) on emerging themes, such as the role of [anchor institutions](#), the experience of [small and rural communities](#), and how communities are promoting [health equity](#).

This community landscape report follows from a [snapshot report](#)¹ (released in 2017) and a [community portrait](#)² (released in 2018) for Sanilac County, Mich. and provides a summary of the community's journey towards health, well-being, and equity over the past five years. The report is not intended to comprehensively describe every organization or action underway in Sanilac County, but rather focus on key insights, opportunities, and challenges.

About this Report

The information in this report was obtained using several data collection methods, including key informant telephone interviews, an environmental scan of online and published community-specific materials, review of existing population surveillance and monitoring data, and collection of local data or resources provided by community contacts or interview respondents. Interviews were conducted with individuals in the community representing a number of organization types (for example, grassroots, government, for-profit) working in a variety of sectors (for example, health, business, education, faith-based, and environment). Sector mapping was used to systematically identify respondents in a range of sectors that would have insights about community health and well-being to ensure organizational diversity across the community. We also asked original interviewees to recommend other individuals to speak with in an effort to supplement important organizations or perspectives not included in the original sample.

A total of 24 interviews were conducted between early 2018 and summer 2021 for this report. All interviews (each about 60 minutes long) were conducted using semi-structured interview guides tailored to the unique context and activities taking place in each community and to the role of the respondent in the community. Interviews conducted after spring 2020 also covered the impact of COVID-19 on the community and the community's response. Individuals who participated in a key informant interview are not identified by name or organization to protect confidentiality, rather they are identified as a "respondent." Information collected through environmental scans includes program and organizational information available on internet websites, publicly available documents, and media reports. Population surveillance and monitoring data were compiled from publicly available datasets, including the American Community Survey (ACS); Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS); County Health Rankings (CHR); and other similar federal, state, and local data sources.

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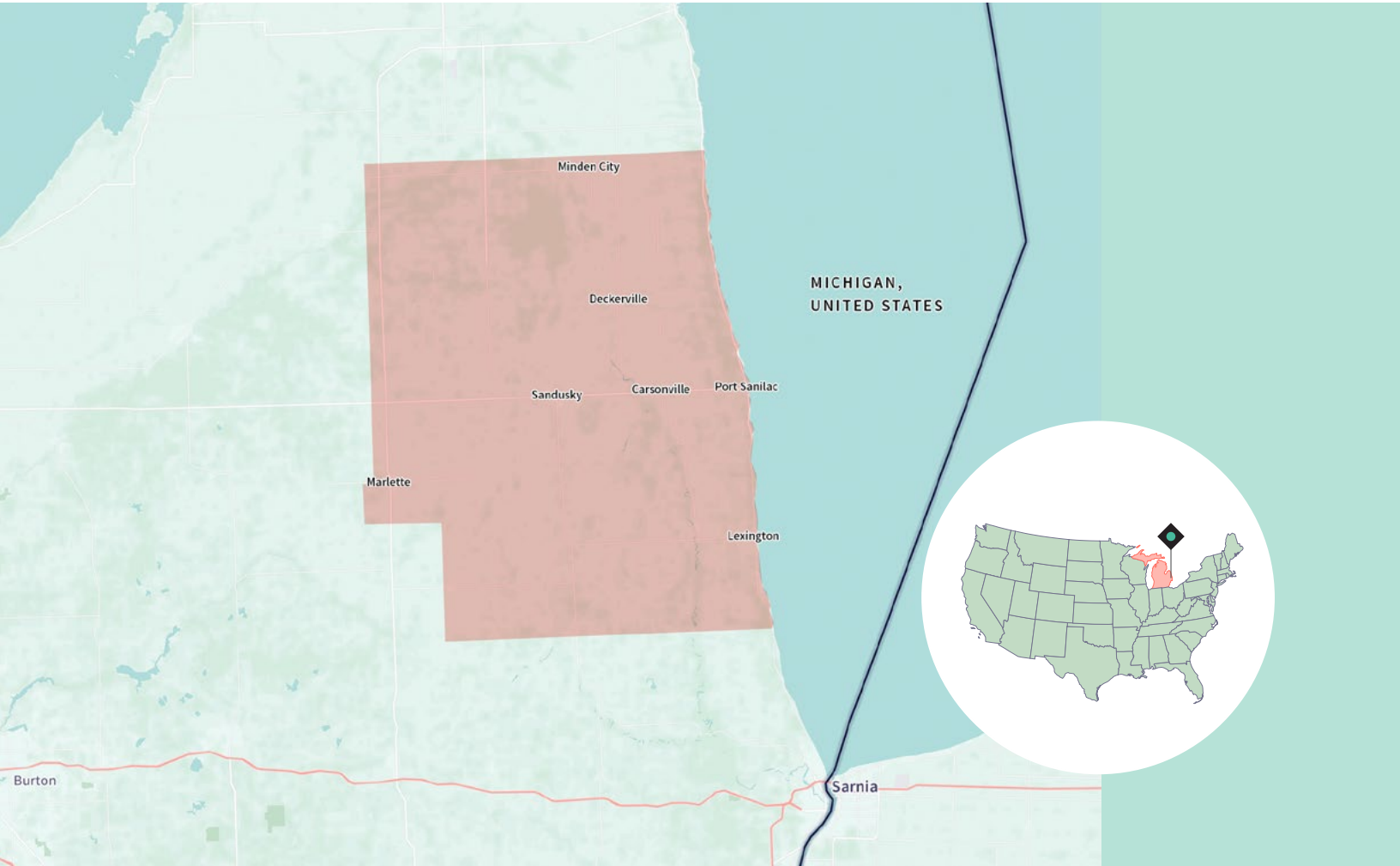
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Introduction

Over the past five years, there have been few major changes in Sanilac County with respect to health, well-being, and equity. However, there has been a slight shift towards a greater recognition of health promotion and prevention activities, likely driven in part by the pandemic and efforts to entice younger people to move to the region. Organizations remain committed to and sustained in their efforts to meet the needs of residents and continue to work together within the county and regionally. Sanilac County health leaders have deferred to the state for many health-related

policies and programs, which they relied heavily on during the pandemic. Although there has been some promising momentum in mental and behavioral health services locally, there continues to be a shortage of healthcare professionals, particularly for women's health. Investments in workforce training and broadband access have been and will continue to be priorities for the region, both of which help to fill important gaps and address inequities.

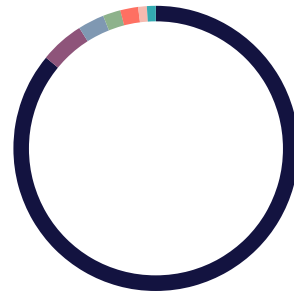
Community Overview

Sanilac County is a fairly large county in Michigan's "thumb" region covering 962 square miles,⁴ with the county seat located in the town of Sandusky. The county, on the southern edge of Lake Huron and Saginaw Bay, has nearly 1,000 square miles of farmland, beaches, and waterways, and it attracts seasonal tourism. Primary industries include manufacturing, healthcare, and retail. The county is a Republican stronghold, and new county commissioners came into office in November of 2020 in three of the five districts.⁵ The county also has a new sheriff as of late 2020, signaling a change in law enforcement leadership for the first time in 12 years.⁶

Sanilac County is fairly rural, and as a result, a lack of transportation and broadband access are common barriers to accessing healthcare and community assets.² The county is also a federally designated Health Professional Shortage Area.⁷ Although 16 percent of households fall below the poverty line,⁸ an additional 38 percent have incomes above the federal poverty level but below the basic cost of living.⁹ Sanilac County is fairly homogeneous in terms of race and ethnicity, and the population is forecasted to decrease slightly over the coming years.¹⁰

FIGURE 1. POPULATION CHARACTERISTICS FOR SANILAC COUNTY, MICHIGAN³

POPULATION 41,170



■ WHITE*	84.0%
■ LATINO	3.7%
■ TWO OR MORE RACES	1.5%
■ SOME OTHER RACE	0.8%
■ BLACK	0.5%
■ AMERICAN INDIAN/ALASKA NATIVE	0.3%
■ ASIAN	0.3%

MEDIAN INCOME \$47,672

6.0%

UNEMPLOYMENT
RATE

22.2%

CHILDREN IN
POVERTY

8.9%

UNINSURED

* Percentages of population by race/ethnicity may add up to more than 100 percent because categories are not mutually exclusive.

Data as of 2019.

Sanilac County's Journey to Promote Health, Well-Being, and Equity

COMMUNITY CAPACITY

Sanilac County's community capacity to promote health and well-being has remained fairly constant over the past five years, grounded by anchor institutions and local collaborations centered around healthcare and economic development. Regional organizations that include Sanilac and neighboring counties also provide important capacity to promote health and well-being.

Health system and health department partnerships have expanded access to a range of health and social services, although some are no longer operational.

- Hospitals and health systems in the area include Marlette and Deckerville Regional Hospitals, McKenzie Health Systems, the Sanilac Medical Care Facility, and the Sanilac County Community Mental Health Authority.
- The Thumb Community Health Partnership includes hospitals, public health and human services agencies, and mental and behavioral health services and seeks to provide an integrated approach and coordinated response to regional community needs.¹¹
- The Thumb Rural Health Network that used to work collaboratively with the Michigan Center for Rural Health at Michigan State University is no longer active. It is not clear whether another organization in the region has taken on this role.

Cross-sector collaborations and partnerships have facilitated health and well-being by meeting a variety of resident needs.

- The Human Development Commission operates more than 70 programs in areas of early childhood, food and nutrition, housing and homelessness, financial assistance, senior services, and crisis centers.¹²
- During the pandemic, a new collaboration between the health department, local hospital, and schools was created to support the safe reopening of schools focused on developing processes for information and data sharing.¹³
- The Great Start Collaborative is a partnership of parents, community agencies, business leaders, educators, healthcare providers, faith-based leaders and other individuals that work together to ensure that every child in Sanilac County is safe, healthy, and ready to succeed in school and life.¹⁴ Focusing on children from birth through third grade, the collaborative addresses five topical areas: parenting leadership, family support, care and early education, pediatric and family health, and social and emotional health.

Sanilac County offers several opportunities for vocational training and has been working to enhance the economic base of the region.

- The Huron Economic Development Corporation aims to enhance the economic base of the region by promoting events, businesses, and providing a range of information relevant to living, working, and playing in the region.¹⁵
- The Sanilac County School District continues to offer vocational programs for adults in collaboration with the Sanilac County Career Center. Several programs focus on medical professional certifications.¹⁶
- The school district also co-facilitates with the Sanilac County Community Mental Health Authority mental health first-aid trainings for social workers, churches, law enforcement, and others, which started within the last five years.

Sanilac County is poised to receive an economic boost from COVID-19 recovery funding, funds earmarked for building high-speed broadband access in rural areas, and private sector investment, but many of these investments are still under discussion.

- The Sanilac County Community Foundation is a collection of endowed funds to benefit the Sanilac County areas. They provide a range of grants and scholarships to residents and local businesses.
- The county expects to receive about \$8 million in funds through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA).¹⁷
- The state of Michigan is expected to receive \$362 million in federal funding for 10 years, aimed at increasing high-speed broadband access in rural areas, although it is not clear whether these funds will impact Sanilac County.¹⁸
- Samsung is considering building a \$182 million solar-power facility, creating over 200 jobs and providing an economic boost to the region, but there is resistance by local residents who have concerns about its impact on property values and quality of life.¹⁹

MAJOR INITIATIVES FOR HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

The community continues to make steps towards better health and well-being with multi-year projects and initiatives. In addition to ongoing work to address substance use in the region, other initiatives have sought to revitalize Sanilac County through scholarships for residents to obtain higher education or complete trade school, campaigns encouraging residents to donate to local nonprofits, and initiatives to encourage former Sanilac residents, particularly with a healthcare background, to move back to the region.

The Sanilac County Drug Task Force continues to make wins with their Drug Take Back Initiative.

Within the past few years, the task force has held events to remove medical prescriptions for safe disposal. As of November 2019, over 160 pounds of prescription drugs were collected through four drop-off locations in the county.²⁰ The task force also has an anonymous tip line, and is working in coordination with the Crime Stoppers Alliance of Michigan, which will pay individuals \$1,000 for anonymous tips related to crimes and felonies.²¹

The Human Development Commission has evolved the way in which they disseminate information on their Community Needs Assessment.

The community health needs assessment is conducted by the Human Development Commission every three years and is pivotal in providing information for local decisionmakers and understanding community needs. For the first time in 2020, the needs assessment was presented in a virtual platform boosting attendance. Respondents from Sanilac County made up 15 percent of the sample.²²

Investments in youth continue to create pathways to higher education through the Promise Fund.

For several years, the Sanilac County Community Foundation—the local leading philanthropic organization—has supported children in local schools through a long-term savings account that students can use towards college or trade school expenses through their Promise Fund, with the goal of increasing college graduation rates. This account is opened for students free of charge as soon as they enroll in kindergarten, and the account receives a balance from local funders, creating an investment for children and their financial futures starting at a young age.²³

Sanilac County recently launched two initiatives to raise funds for local nonprofits and address health professional shortages in the region.

The Sanilac County Community Foundation established two new initiatives. The Welcome Home Scholarship targeted former residents with a degree in nursing, paying for them to return to the county to work and live to help address the healthcare professional shortage in the area.²⁴ This is an extension of the “Welcome Home” scholarships that the foundation offered in the past, which provided incentives for new college graduates to return to Sanilac County to begin their careers. The foundation also hosted a “Give Where You Live” fundraiser in May of 2021 to encourage locals to donate funds to local nonprofits. Over 24 hours, 23 nonprofits received over \$150,000 in donations for a local park and pool facility, local libraries, a domestic violence shelter and other nonprofits working on homelessness and food security among others.²⁵



**SPOTLIGHT ON THE GREAT START COLLABORATIVE
SANILAC COUNTY'S WORK TO PREPARE CHILDREN
FOR THE FUTURE**

In a cross-sectoral effort, families and parents, community organizations, educators, healthcare systems, faith-based leaders, and others are focused on meeting the needs of children from birth to 3rd grade and creating successful childhood development. The focus of their efforts targets social emotional needs, early childhood education, basic needs, healthcare, and parent and family needs and supports.¹⁴

HEALTH PRIORITIES AND NARRATIVE

How stakeholders in a community think and talk about health and well-being, including ways in which health is promoted as a shared value, undergirds the types of approaches leaders and organizations use to promote health and well-being. There has been little movement in terms of health priorities and narrative in Sanilac County over the past five years, although there is slightly more emphasis on the importance of prevention.

Health Narrative in 2017

Five years ago, discussions about health centered around physical health and healthcare access. A priority for the region was improving access to quality care in underserved areas by focusing on filling existing gaps and building a workforce pipeline for the future. These efforts have continued over the past five years. Access to dental care was also a priority, particularly for adults with low incomes. Addressing opioid-related overdoses and deaths in Sanilac County was also an area of emphasis, led by partnerships between law enforcement and health systems.

Evolution of the Health Narrative

Over the past five years, the conceptualization of health has broadened somewhat, attributed in part to the pandemic, and to a demographic shift that is starting to occur as younger people move into the area. More focus has been placed on prevention through increased physical activity and activities like community gardening that promote social engagement and cohesion.^{27,28} Communities are also developing new walking and biking trails that offer more opportunity for residents to spend time outside with family and friends, which are seen as a value-add to the county. With a leadership change at the Sanilac County Community Mental Health Authority, local stakeholders have praised renewed efforts to address mental and behavioral health needs, a topic that is gaining in awareness and acceptance. The Thumb Community Health Partnership is also reducing stigma around help-seeking among men with a new “Man Therapy” program launched in 2021.²⁹ The county also voted to renew a local tax millage fund³⁰ through 2021 to further support organizations addressing domestic violence, homelessness, and sexual assault in the region.

SANILAC COUNTY'S APPROACH TO HEALTH EQUITY

In brief, health equity is the idea of everyone having a fair and just opportunity to be as healthy as possible, though community perspectives and approaches vary. Through the lens of health equity, communities shape and form values about who has access to health-promoting resources and how health is prioritized for population subgroups. Given the racially homogeneous population in Sanilac County, racial equity has traditionally not been a part of the conversation, although this has changed somewhat with state-level initiatives. Within Sanilac County, health equity is largely centered around broadband access.

Health Equity in 2017

Five years ago, health equity was not a priority for county stakeholders, in large part due to the lack of diversity in the population.²

Evolution of Approach to Health Equity

While health equity is still not a term discussed broadly in the community, the pandemic, state-level policies, and other national events have sparked some discussion among stakeholders. In 2020, for example, Michigan declared racism a public health crisis,³¹ and recommendations were made for requiring implicit-bias training for all health professionals in Michigan, which includes Sanilac County.³² The county government also formed a Sanilac County broadband committee in the fall of 2020 after the pandemic highlighted gaps in internet access for residents. The committee is working in collaboration with the county's director of economic development.³³ There is a recognition that increased access to broadband in the community will increase access to telehealth services, improve equity in the virtual learning environment, and enhance access to information about health-related activities in the community.

Factors That Influenced Sanilac County's Journey

Sanilac County has leveraged the connections that residents and community leaders have to one another as a result of being from a smaller region. Because local stakeholders know and have a long history working together, decision-making related to health and well-being, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, was expedited. Yet, barriers remain, particularly with local infrastructure to support health and well-being with a major shortage of health providers, a lack of broadband access in the region, and a lack of public transportation.

FACILITATORS

- State policies and cross-county collaboratives have strengthened efforts to promote health and well-being. In many cases such collaboratives ensured greater efficiency and de-duplication of services.



SPOTLIGHT ON COVID-19

The trajectory of COVID-19 within the county differed from other parts of the state. Sanilac County experienced very few cases early on, but in the spring of 2021 was experiencing some of the highest rates in the state and nation. The county's response was led by the Emergency Operations Center with leaders from multiple sectors who met daily to establish a coordinated response and communications plan. Their efforts to work together were lauded by respondents. Assistance was also driven through the Thumb Community Health Partnership, the county's community foundation and the region's Human Development Commission. Despite efforts to vaccinate individuals, the rate of fully vaccinated people (41.3 percent),²⁶ was lower than the national average (48.3 percent) as of mid-July 2021.

- Walmart is one of the few private sector businesses engaging with the community. Respondents have noted an increase in information sharing with customers about resources or services offered by local organizations working to promote health and well-being.
- While not all organizations or programs have withstood the economic recession and pandemic-related challenges, Sanilac County has a strong "small town feel" and most residents and community leaders know each other personally. This has facilitated support for businesses and families and a commitment from organizations to continue supporting the community.

BARRIERS

- The lack of broadband access in the region has become an even greater barrier as many educational and professional training opportunities have moved online as well as telehealth services to access healthcare.
- Sanilac County is designated as a health-provider shortage area and a medically underserved area/population, and there are few obstetrician-gynecologists locally. Efforts to attract and retain healthcare providers remain a work in progress.
- Lacking a reliable public transportation system, residents without cars have a difficult time getting to jobs, medical appointments, or grocery stores. Although acknowledged as a challenge by some respondents, no coordinated efforts to improve access to transportation are underway.
- Given that Sanilac is a rural county, some stakeholders and helping agencies are "wearing many hats," are not able to address all of the needs, and get burned out faster.
- There is a lack of child care in the region, which prevents some women from entering the workforce.

Conclusion

Sanilac County has remained largely the same in terms of health priorities and efforts to promote health and well-being, although there has been an increasing recognition around the importance of health prevention and promotion, particularly with respect to mental health. Collaborations have been important in meeting a diversity of needs, particularly for children and young families, although there remain important gaps in healthcare and other services, particularly for women of childbearing age. Recent changes in county leadership, efforts to encourage younger people and those with healthcare backgrounds to move to the region, and potential investments in business, broadband, and economic revitalization stemming from the ARPA may result in shifting priorities in the future, but it is too early to tell whether or how these changes will strengthen health and well-being within the community.

Other communities can learn from Sanilac County's investments in its younger children and families and creative strategies to meet mental health needs, particularly for men who may be more reluctant to seek services. Future research could consider the ways in which targeted investments to address critical infrastructure, as in the case of broadband, shape health and well-being in the region.

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