
Understanding the health gap between North and South County

Eleanor Littman and Kathleen King

This year marks the 17th year that the United Way of Santa Cruz County and its partners have been collecting data about how Santa Cruz County residents view health, the economy, education, public safety and the social and natural environments. The Community Assessment Project CAP collects data on all these indicators through telephone surveys of county residents, which are presented in an annual report to the community.

In 2009 and again in 2011, the Pajaro Valley Community Health Trust PVCHT commissioned an additional set of telephone surveys to oversample residents of the Pajaro Valley so that differences between this part of Santa Cruz County and the county overall could be analyzed more thoroughly.

PVCHT is a member of the Health Improvement Partnership HIP of Santa Cruz County, which is a countywide collaborative of health, foundation, and government leaders dedicated to increasing access to care and building a stronger health care delivery system in Santa Cruz County.

Recently, HIP's executive director, Eleanor Littman, had a conversation with Kathleen King, PVCHT's chief executive officer, to discuss some of the findings from the survey of Pajaro Valley residents.

EL: What made PVCHT decide to conduct these additional telephone surveys in the Pajaro Valley?

KK: We wanted to document some of the trends in health and other indicators that are really different for the northern and southern parts of Santa Cruz County, so that we could be strategic about helping to close some of those gaps.

EL: On the health front, what stands out as the major differences between the county overall and Pajaro Valley in particular?

KK: Compared to the rest of the county, Pajaro Valley residents report significantly more risk factors for chronic disease. For example, 45 percent reported eating fast food one to three times in the past week, compared to only 27 percent of residents who reported that frequency in the rest of the county. Pajaro Valley residents also reported lower rates of physical activity than people in the rest of Santa Cruz County. Not surprisingly, given diet and activity patterns, they also reported higher rates of obesity and diabetes.

It's hard to separate these things. Pajaro Valley residents also told us they were much more concerned about crime and the impact of gangs than people in the rest of the county. That has an effect on being physically active in your neighborhoods and parks, just like the number of fast food outlets affects how often you might choose that option.

EL: Were there any areas of improvement between 2007 and 2011?

KK: Pajaro Valley residents have improved their access to health care and health insurance coverage. This particular gap is narrowing, but it's really because fewer residents overall have access to health care coverage due to losing their employer-based health care coverage along with employment. Pajaro Valley residents did express high ratings for quality of life indicators like enjoying life or feeling that people in neighborhoods help each other out, which is encouraging.

EL: Where can people find out more?

KK: The PVCHT website is a good place to start -- www.pvhealthtrust.org. The Go for Health! Collaborative, which is working on health issues countywide, is another option for information and action.
http://www.unitedwaysc.org/Go_for_Health.php

Eleanor Littman is the executive director of the Health Improvement Partnership; Kathleen King is the chief executive officer of the Pajaro Valley Community Health Trust.