

Executive Summary

The 2023 Coos County Community Health Assessment provides a comprehensive snapshot of health conditions and social determinants affecting the county's 64,999 residents. This assessment utilized both primary data (focus groups and community questionnaires) and secondary data to identify key health challenges and community priorities.

Demographics

Coos County has an aging population with 25.9% aged 65 and older, significantly higher than Oregon's 17.6%. The county has the second-highest disability prevalence in Oregon at 38.4%. Veterans comprise 13.2% of residents, nearly 60% higher than the state average. The population is predominantly white (94.7%), with American Indian/Alaska Native residents at 6.2%, nearly double the state percentage.

Economic Stability

Unemployment peaked at 16.9% during the COVID-19 pandemic before rebounding to near pre-pandemic levels. Median household income varies significantly by race and ethnicity, ranging from \$97,340 for Asian residents to \$38,007 for those identifying with two or more races. Men earn approximately 45% more than women in the county.

Housing

Housing affordability emerged as the top priority in community questionnaires. Over 66% of housing units were built before 1979, and cost-burdened households remain a significant challenge. Homelessness affects both families and students, with homeless student populations fluctuating over recent years.

Food Environment

Food insecurity affects 14.6% of the overall population and 21.8% of children, both higher than state averages. While Coos County has better access to healthy foods than most Oregon counties, three distinct food desert areas exist. Community members identified rising food costs and restrictive SNAP eligibility requirements as barriers to healthy eating.

Health Behaviors

Tobacco use remains significantly higher than state averages, with 34.6% of adults reporting current tobacco use compared to 23.7% statewide. Youth substance use patterns show concerning trends, particularly in alcohol consumption among 11th graders. Physical activity rates among 6th graders (81.6%) exceed state averages. Childhood vaccination rates declined to a five-year low in 2022 at 60%, compared to Oregon's 69%.

Mental Health and Health Outcomes

Mental health challenges are pervasive. In 2022, 37.8% of 11th graders experienced depressive symptoms, and 17% seriously considered suicide. The county's suicide rate (26.3 per 100,000) consistently exceeds the state rate. Adult mental health shows similar patterns, with residents experiencing more mentally unhealthy days than state averages.

The crude death rate in Coos County (1,769.6 per 100,000) is markedly higher than Oregon overall. Leading causes of death include heart disease, cancer, COVID-19, Alzheimer's disease, and unintended injuries, all occurring at rates substantially higher than state averages. Tobacco-related deaths rank second-highest among all Oregon counties at 220.5 per 100,000.

Health Care Access

The entire county population lives in a Health Professional Shortage Area. Primary care physicians, mental health providers, and dentists are in short supply. While most residents have health insurance, affordability and provider availability remain significant barriers to care.

Physical Environment

Access to exercise opportunities declined from 77% in 2021 to 64.3% in 2022. The county's natural beauty and outdoor recreation opportunities were identified as community strengths. Most residents commute by driving alone (75.4%), with minimal public transportation use.

Community Priorities

Questionnaire respondents ranked the following as most important for improving quality of life:

1. Affordable housing
2. Food and nutrition
3. Addressing homelessness
4. Reducing illegal substance use
5. Mental health services

Additional priorities include more affordable health care, increased mental health services, affordable food options, and access to healthy food.

Key Findings

Focus group participants emphasized that substance use is closely linked to mental health challenges, trauma, and economic insecurity. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted student mental health and academic progress. While the county has strong community programs supporting health and wellness, gaps in mental health services, affordable housing, and health care access persist.

The assessment reveals that Coos County faces substantial health challenges related to an aging population, economic instability, substance use, mental health crises, and chronic disease burden. Community members identified both strengths—including natural beauty, outdoor recreation, and community support programs—and critical needs that must be addressed to improve population health.

Biggest Gaps in Service and Barriers to Care

Health Care Provider Shortages

The entire county population (100%) lives in a Health Professional Shortage Area. Specific shortages include primary care physicians, mental health providers, and dentists.

Affordability Barriers

Questionnaire respondents ranked affordable health services as the most important health outcome factor. Community members reported that health care costs prevent access to needed services.

Mental Health Service Gaps

Mental health services for stress, anxiety, depression, and grieving were identified as critically needed. Long wait times for mental health and behavioral health services create significant barriers to care. This gap is particularly concerning given high rates of depression and suicide in the county.

Specialty Care Access

Limited availability of specialty care services forces residents to travel long distances for specialized medical care.

Geographic Barriers

Rural areas face compounded challenges with residents needing to travel significant distances to access health care providers and services.

Fear and Discrimination

Some community members reported avoiding or delaying health care due to fear, discomfort, or experiences of discrimination within the health care system.

Service Integration

Respondents identified the need for better access to and integration of health care services across physical health, mental health, and social services.

The Unique Needs of the Community

Aging Population

With 25.9% of residents aged 65 and older (compared to 17.6% statewide), the county requires services tailored to older adults, including affordable senior living and age-appropriate health care.

High Disability Prevalence

At 38.4%, Coos County has the second-highest disability prevalence in Oregon, creating need for accessible services and support for people with hearing, vision, cognitive, mobility, self-care, and independent living disabilities.

Veteran Population

Veterans comprise 13.2% of residents, nearly 60% higher than the state average, requiring specialized veteran services and support.

Rural and Geographic Challenges

Rural communities face significant geographic barriers to accessing services, requiring solutions for long-distance travel to care and services in remote areas.

Substance Use and Mental Health Crisis

Substance use is closely linked to mental health challenges, trauma, and economic insecurity. The community needs comprehensive behavioral health services, substance abuse treatment, and trauma-informed care.

Youth Mental Health

Students experienced significant socioemotional challenges from the COVID-19 pandemic. High rates of depressive symptoms (37.8% of 11th graders), suicidal ideation (17% of 11th graders), and suicide attempts require targeted youth mental health interventions.

Housing Instability

Affordable housing was the top-ranked priority. The community needs solutions for homelessness, cost-burdened households, and affordable housing options.

Food Security

With 14.6% of the population and 21.8% of children experiencing food insecurity, the community needs affordable food options, expanded SNAP eligibility, and support for food assistance programs in rural areas.

American Indian/Alaska Native Community

At 6.2% of the population (nearly double the state percentage), this community requires culturally appropriate services and recognition of specific health needs.

Economic Support

Lower median incomes, significant income disparities by race and gender, and pandemic-related economic impacts create need for employment support, economic stability programs, and affordable services across all sectors.

Strengths of the Community

Natural Beauty and Outdoor Recreation

Community members consistently identified the area's natural beauty as a major strength. Access to outdoor recreation encourages exercise and physical activity among residents.

Food Programs and Local Resources

Food Pharmacies, farmers' markets, and local grocery stores facilitate healthy eating habits. These programs help provide healthy foods to county residents despite affordability challenges.

Community Organizations and Support

Strong community-based organizations, faith-based organizations, advocacy groups, and United Way provide vital social services and support networks for residents.

Youth Physical Activity

Coos County 6th graders showed exceptional physical activity rates (81.6%) compared to Oregon peers (62.1%), demonstrating engagement in healthy behaviors.

Healthy Eating Among Youth

Both 6th graders (22.9%) and 11th graders (16.1%) exceeded state averages for healthy eating habits, with 11th graders showing particularly strong outcomes compared to the state (7.7%).

Social Association Rate

The county's social association rate (12.6 per 10,000 in 2022) has been consistently higher than Oregon's rate, indicating strong civic engagement through membership in civic, political, religious, sports, educational, and professional organizations.

Community Engagement

The steering committee represented diverse sectors including local government, public health, education, and health-related organizations, demonstrating collaborative capacity for addressing health issues.

Vaccination Rates for Specific Populations

Older adults and Native Americans in Coos County showed the highest COVID-19 vaccination rates and booster uptake among all demographic groups.