



POLICY BRIEF



Healthy High Desert: Pioneering a New Frontier for Healthy Communities

SUMMARY: The High Desert region faces a health crisis. Compared to California, the region faces a higher mortality rate for seven of the ten leading causes of death. Moreover, current health markers do not bode well for the health of this generation. Across many key modifiable behaviors, the High Desert fares worse than the state. Although lifestyle choices have historically been the main culprit, the environment where High Desert residents live, work, learn, and play also shapes our choices. This policy brief documents the health crisis in the High Desert, examines the reasons for the poor health outcomes, and presents a health agenda to address it.

HEART OF THE MATTER

Over the last century, advances in medical science have improved the health of many Americans. Life expectancy has increased and infant mortality has plummeted. Diseases such as polio, smallpox, and typhoid have been practically eliminated. And we have cleaned up environmental hazards. It would seem we live in a healthy society.

Though fewer Americans suffer from infectious disease, chronic diseases have, unfortunately, taken center stage. Seven of ten deaths are due to heart disease, cancer, and other chronic diseases. And despite progress in life expectancy, the United States falls behind peer nations.¹

The nation's public health crisis is not isolated to central cities or enclaves; it affects communities of every size and location. Increasing numbers of people are overweight, unhealthy, and suffer from chronic and preventable disease. And this epidemic is widespread here in the High Desert.

Consider just one piece of evidence: at least 71% of adults and 31% of youth in the High Desert are overweight or obese. This is a staggering statistic—10 percentage points higher than in 2007. Moreover, the High Desert's mortality rates for seven of the ten leading causes of death well exceed Healthy People 2020 objectives.²

Our current generation is also at risk. Obesity, diabetes, lung disease, and other health conditions are more pervasive. Many underlying behaviors exist (sedentary lifestyle, poor diet, smoking, etc.). If these risk factors do not lead to premature death, they do result in lifelong disabilities.

This policy brief is the first in a series focusing on the High Desert. It illustrates the health crisis facing our region, explores critical factors affecting our health, and offers practical ways to turn the tide.

In the High Desert, the mortality rates for 7 of the 10 leading causes of death exceed the average in California.

*St. Mary Medical Center, 2012
Community Health Report*

GRADING OUR HEALTH

The public health crisis in our nation is often obscured by sharp political rhetoric. But health is a subject that affects all Americans at some point, either due to normal aging or chronic disease. However, to best understand the health crisis in the High Desert for meaningful dialog to occur, the place to start is with the numbers.

LEADING CAUSES

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, chronic diseases are the leading causes of death and disability. Heart disease and cancer account for half of all deaths. Moreover, almost half of America’s adults live with at least one chronic health condition that limits health, activity, work, and quality of life. These findings also apply to the High Desert.

Figure 1 compares mortality rates in the High Desert with Healthy People objectives (HP2020 program).³ HP2020 provides science-based, 10-year national objectives for improving health and wellness. Public health officials use the HP2020 framework to set priorities, track public health outcomes, and develop policies and programs that improve health.

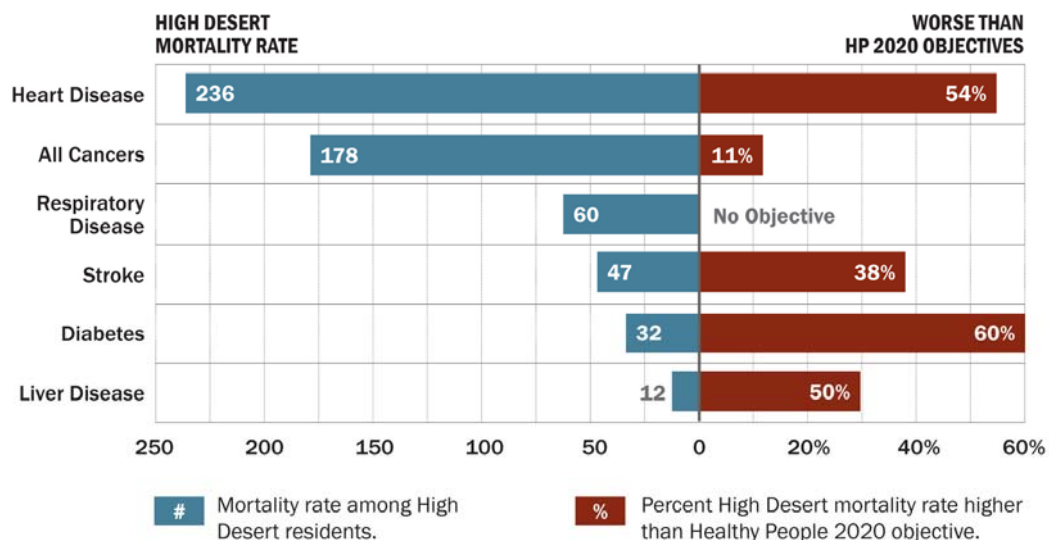
Leading causes of death for residents living in the High Desert are heart disease, cancers, chronic lower respiratory disease, stroke, diabetes, liver disease, and others. What is most germane, however, is the magnitude of the mortality rates. In the High Desert, the leading causes of death are 20–50% higher than national goals.⁴

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, half of all adults have one or more chronic health conditions. In the High Desert, chronic diseases include:⁵

- 11% lung disease
- 15% diabetes
- 30% high cholesterol
- 34% obesity
- 35% high blood pressure

Although average life expectancy in the High Desert equals the national average, chronic diseases still exact a steep price. Disabilities due to chronic disease detract from health, reduce productivity at work, limit recreation, and reduce quality of life. Chronic diseases are also costly and make it difficult for individuals to afford housing, transportation, and other living expense.

FIGURE 1: LEADING CAUSES OF DEATH IN THE HIGH DESERT



Source: Professional Research Consultants, St. Mary Medical Center, 2012.
Note: Mortality rates are age-adjusted deaths per 100,000 residents.

HEALTH RISK FACTORS

In the High Desert, lifestyle choices are the root causes of many chronic diseases. Cumulatively, 87% of High Desert residents have one or more risk factors that lead to premature death or disability.

Smoking and Tobacco Use

Smoking and tobacco use cause premature death from cancer, lung and heart disease. Children exposed to second-hand smoke experience severe asthma, respiratory infections, and poor lung development. Yet tobacco use continues to be a significant risk factor in the High Desert: 20% of adults and 15% of high school seniors smoke cigarettes.⁶ In addition, one in five high school students uses marijuana.

Nutrition and Unhealthy Diet

A healthy diet helps to maintain a healthy weight, reduce the risk of obesity and heart disease, and improve overall quality of life. Despite its benefits, 60% of adults fail to consume a recommended 5 or more servings of fruits or vegetables daily—nearly 10 percentage points below national averages. Local school surveys suggest that only half of 11th grade students meet nutrition goals for consuming fruits and vegetables.⁷

Sedentary Lifestyle

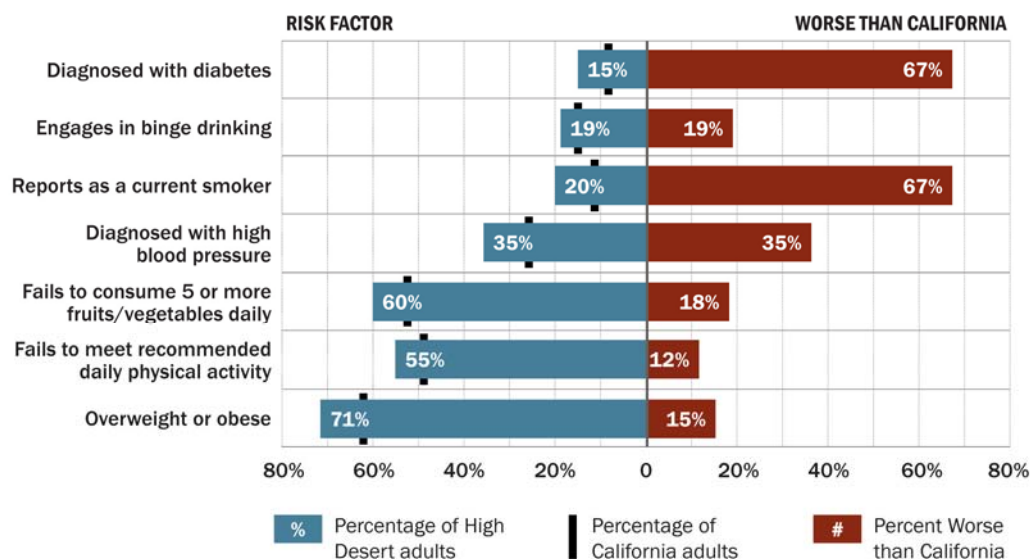
Regular physical activity improves quality of life, reduces the premature onset of chronic disease, and improves physical fitness and mental health. Yet 55% of adults do not meet the recommended physical activity standards. Children fare worse: only 20% pass all the recommended physical fitness tests at school, and 45% spend more than 3 hours daily of “screen time” on computers, video games, or television for entertainment.⁸

Alcohol and Drug Use

Excessive alcohol use, either in the form of chronic drinking or binge drinking, can lead to increased risk of health problems such as liver disease or unintentional injuries. In the High Desert, almost 1 in 5 adults engages in binge drinking, but the rate is highest in rural communities. Alcohol and drug misuse is a health concern in local schools: 15–20% of high school students binge drink and one in five report smoking marijuana in any given month.⁹

Figure 2 compares select risk factors in the High Desert with California averages.

FIGURE 2: LEADING HEALTH RISKS IN THE HIGH DESERT



Source: Professional Research Consultants, St. Mary Medical Center 2012
 Note: Risk factors are prevalence rates for the adult population.

“Many of the strongest predictors of health and well-being fall outside of the health care setting. Social, economic, and environmental factors all influence health.”

*National Prevention Strategy;
America’s Plan for Health¹³*

FORGING A HEALTH AGENDA

How do we stem the tide of chronic health conditions in the High Desert? The traditional approach is to define healthy living as a matter of personal choice. However, despite public education and advances in medicine, chronic disease have increased. Many now realize that if we are to improve personal health, we must look at how our environment shapes our choices.¹⁰

DEFINING A HEALTHY COMMUNITY

It has long been known that San Bernardino County experiences many health challenges, and many of them can be attributed to the design of our communities. According to the national County Health Rankings, San Bernardino County ranks as one of the poorest in California for its physical environment, health risk factors, and poor health.

City planners, physicians, school officials, and local officials have come to realize that our communities influence lifestyle choices. If we are to materially improve health, we must consider health in every aspect of the physical, social, and economic aspects of communities. This realization has inspired a national healthy community movement.

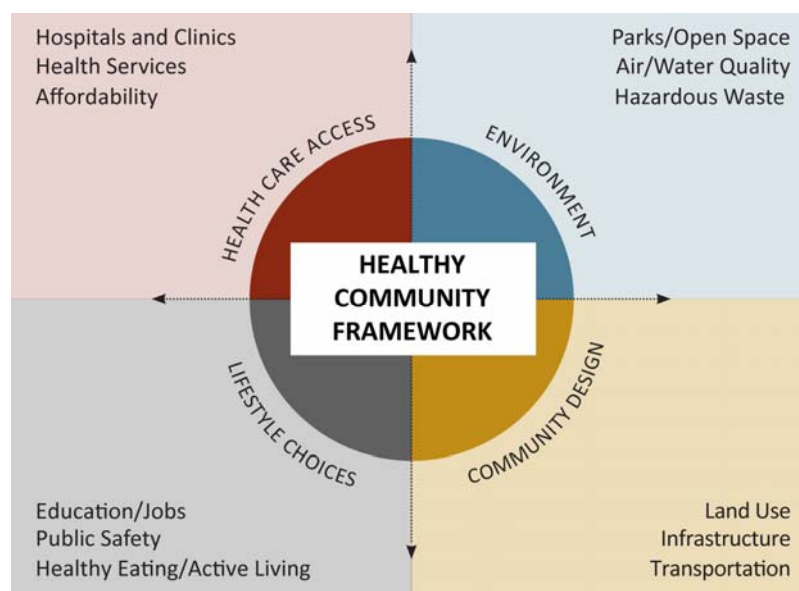
So what defines a healthy community? For this brief, a healthy community is “a community that offers a positive physical, social, natural, and economic environment that supports the health and well-being of all its members and enables them to live to their fullest potential.”

To implement this definition, a healthy community should incorporate health into at least four areas, described below:¹¹

- **Clean Environment**, including the availability of clean air, water, and soil that are healthful for residents of all ages.
- **Community Design**, where land uses, parks, housing, and transportation are designed to support health.
- **Healthy Lifestyles**, where our schools, homes, workplaces, and communities support health and wellness.
- **Health Care Infrastructure**, where quality health services and facilities are affordable and accessible to residents.

A healthy community should address all of the above considerations. However, how programs are chosen or implemented will vary depending on a community’s needs.

FIGURE 3: HEALTHY COMMUNITY FRAMEWORK



“There is great power to improve health by working through city policies and community-wide partnerships to create healthy environments.”

*Maxwell Ohikhuare, MD,
Health Officer, San Bernardino*

CHARTING A NEW COURSE

The communities of Adelanto, Apple Valley, Hesperia, Victorville, and Barstow have all adopted resolutions committing to becoming healthy communities. These efforts are in partnership both with the San Bernardino County Healthy Communities initiative and with the Healthy High Desert Coalition, which pioneers a regional health agenda.

The Healthy High Desert has a diverse membership, including local hospitals—Barstow Community, Desert Valley, Kaiser Permanente, St. Mary Medical, and Victor Valley Community. Other members include Hesperia Recreation and Park District, High Desert Community Foundation, High Desert Resource Network, the County Public Health Department, County Superintendent of Schools, and Mojave Desert AQMD.

Healthy High Desert members recognize that pioneering a new health agenda requires a change in culture—from one that takes health for granted to one that explicitly considers health in community decisions. This perspective is often referred to as a “Health in All Policies” (HIAP) approach.¹² An HIAP approach can help people, business, schools, and city hall adjust their lens to see how our actions influence health.

An HIAP approach begins by asking how policies, systems, and practices can be implemented, where feasible, to improve the health of a community. For example,

- For local government planners, do decisions in land use, zoning, subdivisions, and projects improve health?
- For civic leaders, is the health of the community considered in reviewing projects and funding decisions?
- For developers, are buildings designed that contribute positively to health and wellness of the occupants?
- For transportation engineers, are streets designed to be walkable, multi-modal, and safe?
- For schools, is student health meaningfully integrated into the daily curriculum, food choices, and school safety?
- For business, are incentives available for employees to make choices that are healthy and improve productivity?

These are just a few of the many questions that need to be asked and answered to make the High Desert a healthier place to live, work, play, and retire.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Healthy High Desert’s goal is to encourage the development of a region known for inspiring a lifestyle of health and well-being, and each of us has a role to play.

1. Healthy City Initiative

Join your local healthy community initiative. Learn about the latest in health and wellness in your community.

2. Put Policy into Action.

Work with partners in your community to adopt “health in all policies” approach at work, school, and the community.

3. Be an Example.

Set a positive example by making healthier choices.

References

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7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
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Healthy High Desert Mission and Values

The Healthy High Desert is a group of organizations in the High Desert region of San Bernardino County, organized to improve the health of High Desert residents and provide a platform for:

- Creating a safe, healthy community for all residents
- Supporting local Healthy City initiatives
- Exploring key health-related issues
- Developing peer support and learning relationships
- Developing opportunities for collaboration
- Creating joint funding appeals
- Advocacy and public education

Members

City of Adelanto
 Town of Apple Valley
 City of Barstow
 City of Hesperia
 City of Victorville
 Barstow Community Hospital
 Desert Valley Hospital
 Kaiser Permanente
 St. Mary Medical Center
 Victor Valley Community Hospital
 Hesperia Recreation & Park District
 High Desert Community Foundation
 High Desert Resource Network
 County of San Bernardino, First District Supervisor's Office
 County of San Bernardino, Department of Public Health
 County of San Bernardino, Superintendent of Schools
 Mojave Desert Air Quality Management District
 Victor Valley Dental Service Program

A COLLABORATIVE EFFORT



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