

Our Voice: Health assessments are vital

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(Photo: Richard Lui/The Desert Sun)

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The Coachella Valley is fortunate to have the Health Assessment Resource Center.

It paints an objective picture of who we are, instead of a general feeling based on our anecdotal observations.

For instance, we know there are a lot of senior citizens in the valley.

HARC's third Community Health Monitor released in February quantifies this: The average age in the valley is 53. The national average is 37.2.

HARC breaks the numbers down further. The largest age group is 65 to 74 at 20 percent. The second-largest is 75 and older, 16.4 percent.

The Health Monitor also confirms that the valley has a higher percentage of residents who served in the military, 14.1 percent. The California average is 7.8 percent.

Ammunition for grant writers

Perhaps the most important need that HARC fulfills is providing grant writers the baseline data they need.

At the release of the Health Monitor at the Cal State's Palm Desert campus, Riverside County Supervisor John Benoit said HARC data helped him convince his fellow supervisors to contribute \$20 million to help launch the UCR School of Medicine. It also was critical for the creation of the Coachella Valley Volunteers in Medicine, a free clinic in Indio.

"Since the last survey, I'm told that more than 50 organizations have qualified for more than \$4.7 million in grant funding for our valley," he said. "This is important data to have."

Trends

HARC was established with a grant from the California Wellness Foundation in 2006 and gets extensive support from the Desert Healthcare District. This is the third three-year survey to be released — 2007, 2010 and 2013 — so we can now see trends and start to measure what's working and what isn't.

CEO Eileen Packer said HARC was embraced by organizations throughout the valley. Kent State University was hired to conduct the 23-minute telephone surveys based on a random digit-dial system. The latest survey asked 160 questions of 1,950 adults and 500 children. It cost \$1.3 million.

Dr. Glen Grayman, president of HARC's board of directors, said the first goal is to understand what's going on in the realm of health and wellness in the valley.

"But our ultimate goal is for us to pull together and work to improve the deficiencies," he said.

Key findings

One of the most disturbing trends is a growing percentage of adults in the valley who lack health insurance. In 2007, 22.7 percent said they didn't have insurance. The percentage rose to 28.6 percent in 2010 and reached 33.6 percent in the 2013 survey — 74,656 adults.

Grayman admits that in many cases, he can't explain the trends. But in this one, it's clear that the lingering affects of recession kept more people out of the doctor's office. The survey said the main reasons for lacking health insurance were the inability to pay premiums and losing a job.

It will be interesting to see in the next three years whether economic growth, an increase in primary care physicians and the Affordable Care Act will decrease those numbers.

Another disturbing but inexplicable finding was that among those who drink alcohol, 30 percent admitted to binge drinking at least once in the previous month. That's much higher than the state and national averages of 16.9 percent. The percentage dropped between 2007 and 2010, but increased nearly 9 points from 2010 to 2013.

Binge drinking is defined as a woman drinking four or more drinks on one occasion or a man drinking five or more drinks.

"I suspect the real number is substantially actually higher," Grayman speculated, "because who would want to admit that to an unknown person on the other end of the telephone?"

Even more disturbing is the finding that 4 percent of adult drinkers — 9,558 people — admit to driving drunk, a number that also could be higher.

There's so much material in the survey, it's also easy to find encouraging trends.

In her column on this page, Packer notes the good news that obesity among children fell in the past three years, to 39.8 percent.

Among adults, 59.5 percent are overweight or obese, about the same as the national average.

Maybe this means that the Alliance for a Healthier Generation with the stronger emphasis in our schools on fitness and nutrition is getting through to our young people and that adults find it hard to break lifelong habits.

The good news is that nearly half of adults engage in aerobic activity five days a week or more.

The valley is blessed with so many new health initiatives, such as Clinton Health Matters, new clinics in Desert Hot Springs, and training doctors at Eisenhower Medical Center and through UCR. It is critical that HARC continues to measure the success or shortcomings of those programs.

OTHER KEY FINDINGS

- Cancer: 13.8 percent of Coachella Valley residents have been diagnosed with some form of cancer. Up from 9.6 percent in 2007.
- Mental health: 25.3 percent of valley residents have had a emotional, behavioral or mental problems that concerned them in the past year. Up from 18.2 percent in 2010.
- Dental care: 17.3 percent of children have never been to the dentist.
- Vaccinations: 53.7 percent of parents and guardians are "not at all concerned" about potential risks associated with vaccinations. Up from 36.2 percent in 2010.
- Respiratory disease: 9.2 percent of adults have been diagnosed with respiratory disease (other than asthma). Up from 3.6 percent in 2007.
- Elder abuse: 4 percent of seniors have been mistreated or neglected physically or mentally in the past year. Up from 1.7 percent in 2010.
- Senior mobility: 14.1 percent of seniors have fallen one or more times in the past three months.
- Child health care: 92.1 percent of children have visited a health care provider within the past year.
- Eating dinner together: 69.3 percent of children 2 or older eat dinner with their families every day. Up from 54.7 percent in 2010.
- Reading to children: 6.3 percent of children 5 and younger have not been read to in the home in the past three months. But 46.8 percent have been read to.

MORE ONLINE

- [Read the executive summary of the Community Health Monitor 2013 \(http://www.harcddata.org/pdfs/HARC_CV_ExecutiveReport_2013.pdf\)](http://www.harcddata.org/pdfs/HARC_CV_ExecutiveReport_2013.pdf)
- For more information, go to [harcddata.org \(http://harcddata.org\)](http://harcddata.org)

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