

Coachella Valley's visitors healthier than locals

Written by Victoria Pelham *The Desert Sun*

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Coachella Valley snowbirds tend to be significantly older, whiter, wealthier and better insured than the desert's full-time residents, a new study released Tuesday shows.

The part-time residents from colder climates also have higher levels of education, better mental health, strong exercise habits and more access to health care, the study from the Health Assessment Resource Center reveals.

But they also tend to engage in more sexual activity than the valley's younger full-time residents and use less protection, including condom use. They also get tested for HIV less, the study found.

"We're a winter retreat environment, and we thought it would be interesting to know if there were any major differences," said Eileen Packer, CEO of HARC.

Most of the information did not surprise the Palm Desert-based nonprofit group that conducts health surveys for the Desert Healthcare District, she said.

The vast majority of snowbirds, 78.2 percent, are over age 65, according to the HARC data, compared with 52 percent of permanent residents. The temporary residents — considered those living in the desert for 30 days to six months — are 97.6 percent white, while permanent residents are 78.5 percent white.

Their incomes are much higher than permanent residents, with 63.7 percent of snowbirds reporting their annual income of more than \$75,000, compared with only 22.6 percent of permanent residents falling in that bracket.

Jean Viereck, 75, who spends part of the year in Rancho Mirage and the other half in Seattle, said she came to the valley partly because of the high quality of care at the hospitals. She said most of the results backed up her experience in the valley.

"If you're bored in the desert, you are boring. There is so much to do; there's so many people that need your help," she said.

Viereck was happy to learn a snowbird study had been conducted.

"I think anytime anybody investigates from an unprejudiced platform of service that is being rendered, that is a good thing," she said.

Overall, snowbirds take good care of themselves, Packer said.

Only 10.8 percent of snowbirds have not visited a dentist within the past year, compared with a third of permanent residents, and only 5.6 percent had not visited a doctor. Only 2 percent were uninsured, but 11.4 percent of permanent residents lack any health care coverage. This could be linked to the older age of snowbirds and access to Medicare, the report says.

Snowbirds are also about 10 percent more likely to have performed aerobic exercise in the past seven days.

Only 5.2 percent of them had experienced emotional, mental or behavioral problems in the past year, compared with 22.1 percent of permanent residents.

Packer was especially intrigued by the sexual health data. She said the information reflects trends starting to crop up of older Americans engaging in more sexual activity, but she was concerned by the lack of protection.

“As far as using condoms, at their age, they don’t think it’s necessary, but again, that’s not really a good parameter because sexually transmitted diseases can be transmitted at any age,” Packer said.

A total of 58.8 percent of snowbirds were sexually active in the past year in the survey, while 49.2 percent of permanent residents said they were. Only 6.7 percent of those surveyed used condoms and 15.4 percent had been tested with HIV, compared with 21.6 percent of permanent residents using protection and 31.1 percent of valley residents who had been tested.

Packer said she’s glad they now have health data on the area’s significant snowbird population, who often come south from places such as Seattle and Canada.

“What our goal is is to collect the data, report it to the community and there’ll be different organizations that will look at it and utilize some of it or all of it in looking at programs and services that they provide,” Packer said.