

Executive Summary

The Durham County Health Assessment Survey, commissioned by Durham Health Partners to explore specific health access issues, was administered between June 30 and August 20, 2003. Information on eight major health domains was assessed via a telephone survey for a randomly selected sample of the Durham County adult population and Hispanic over-sample based on Hispanic surnames. Data collected from these survey samples are a rich source of information and are intended to provide baseline data from which health care leaders can: (a) identify critical health issues, (b) prioritize health improvement initiatives, and (c) evaluate improvement work and outcomes over time.

The intent of this report is to provide community leaders with a broad overview of the data collected. This report should serve as a concrete focus for engaging with these data and *using* them to design and implement strategies for local health improvement. However, every summary statement made in this report will generate numerous questions from the reader about how this data element or piece of information applies to another specific strata of the population or health domain. Many of these questions can readily be answered by the extensive cross tabulations that are provided for each survey question in Appendix A and B of this report. But, some of the questions that will be generated by this report will require more extensive and sophisticated analyses of these data. Knowing this, it is our hope that Durham Health Partners will share these data with other academics and community organizations who will actively use these data in an on-going way to help the Durham County community discover more about their local population and about how better to target health improvement initiatives to meet the needs of those who are most vulnerable to poor health outcomes.

The conclusions drawn from the data summarized in this report will not surprise Durham County residents, but rather will validate available public health data and county residents' assumptions regarding the changing composition and needs of the local population. Demographically, Durham County is in good shape. Its residents are on average prosperous, well educated, and young. This is a racially diverse county that is on average very healthy, having average physical and mental health status scores similar to those of the general U.S. population. Those residents with access to health insurance have higher health status scores and report having good access to care, and most Durham County residents report being happy with the social environment of Durham.

Risks for poor health outcomes for Durham County include high levels of residents who currently report having no health insurance (17%), high levels of residents who are overweight or obese (56%), and smoking and drinking levels above the suggested Healthy People 2010 target levels. From the literature on health improvement, we know the social environment in which people live, and the coping skills possessed by an individual or group, influence health behaviors. Thus, although future health improvement efforts of Durham County organizations should focus on improvement of individual health behaviors, they should concurrently address the social and environmental influences associated with these behaviors. For example, being overweight is a dominant health risk for the majority of the Durham population, especially for African Americans. And, while some individuals who are overweight or obese get no exercise, others report that when they do exercise, they prefer to walk. However, only 68% of Durham County residents feel safe walking in their neighborhoods at night and those most likely to be overweight (those with low income or education) are most worried about being the victims of a crime. Thus, an improvement effort focused on increasing the physical activity and decreasing the weight of the Durham population should take community safety and access to safe walking routes during both the day and night into account, especially in poorer neighborhoods.

Additionally, as is true across most of the U.S., while overall the population is doing well, disparities in health status exist in Durham across income, education, and racial strata of the population. The major findings of this report confirm the strong correlation between a person's level of education and their income with health status (low education and income are associated with low health status scores). These data also provide evidence that those with low income or low education levels have the weakest

coping skills, and have high levels of personal stress. Thus, if Durham is to seriously commit its resources to improving the health of its local population, it should now target its resources to helping these vulnerable groups out of the vicious cycle of poverty and need. Increasing opportunities to improve the technical skills and income of poorly educated Durham residents would have a positive and lasting impact on overall improvement of health status and well-being of this vibrant county population.

This report provides an assessment of Hispanic health. Durham has evidenced a rapid growth of this minority population over the past several years and needs to know more about their health needs. From this survey we have learned that the Hispanics of Durham County are on average younger, less well educated, and poorer, than the average Durham County resident population. The Hispanic population surveyed had slightly lower physical and mental health status scores compared to the average Durham County resident and in addition, far fewer Hispanics rated their health as being excellent or very good. However, despite reporting lower levels of health Hispanics were less likely than Durham County residents to report that their health was not good in the past 30 days.

While the Hispanic population reported having risks factors for future health outcomes similar to those of the Durham population (high rates of obesity, smoking, no exercise), this population is more apt to report living in a poor social and physical environment. Hispanics are more socially isolated, less apt to belong to a church or civic group, and more likely to be dissatisfied with where they live and worried about being victims of crime than the average Durham County population. Additionally, 21% of the Hispanic population surveyed report having health insurance, and not surprisingly, Hispanics are less apt to have regular routine medical screening exams.

Future efforts to improve the health of the Hispanic population should be specifically tailored to address the educational, social (integration, language, isolation) and health system access issues accounted for by these data.

Finally, this report provides an assessment of African American health compared to the overall population of the county. The African American population has slightly lower physical health status scores, but slightly higher mental health status scores. However, African Americans are more likely to be smokers and more likely to be overweight than the overall county population.

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