

Exploring the Social Determinants of Health In Wake County for the John Rex Endowment

Project Summary

The [John Rex Endowment](#) provides support and grantmaking to strengthen environments where children and families can live healthy lives in greater Wake County. The [John Rex Endowment](#) achieves impact through building organizational capacity, shaping community policies and environments and supporting system-level improvements. As part of an effort to inform their upcoming strategic planning process, the John Rex Endowment commissioned the North Carolina Institute for Public Health (NCIPH) to conduct an assessment of the current landscape in Wake County to inform how conditions in the places where children and families live, work and play affect their health and well-being, otherwise known as the social determinants of health (SDOH). The [John Rex Endowment](#) has a strong history of supporting efforts that address SDOH.

The assessment included several components and used an iterative approach, with each part of data collection and analysis informing the development and implementation of subsequent components. NCIPH first conducted a literature review examining various social determinant of health frameworks, followed by a review of data reliability with subject matter experts. The result was a compilation of 40 indicators that could be mapped at the neighborhood level. The Story Map uses census tracts to define neighborhoods because the data available through the American Community Survey 5-year average has the most validity and reliability at this small scale compared to other sources. The full report contains additional information to identify these tracts with landmarks and a main cross street.

Through consultation with staff at the John Rex Endowment and further discussions with subject matter experts, 12 key indicators were chosen to create a Story Map using geographic information system technology to visually identify vulnerabilities and assets at the neighborhood level. The Story Map provides an index of the SDOH, an average of all 12 indicators resulting in a map of the county indicating neighborhoods with highest opportunity for improvements in children's health and well-being.

Below is an overview of the ten priority themes that emerged from the assessment, in alphabetical order:

Connections within communities is of high value — Neighborhoods are increasingly becoming disenfranchised as housing affordability has become scarce and families are forced to relocate. Community development efforts have been limited due to lack of sustained resources and staff turnover.

Housing affordability is at a tipping point for vulnerable families — Housing costs are rising as subsidized housing availability is decreasing. Families are spending a large portion of their income on housing and homelessness is rising.

Housing, food, transportation, employment, childcare and healthcare access are intertwined — These are all pressing issues for vulnerable families and children. Affecting change in one area will likely have impacts or consequences in the others. Food and transportation are particularly connected as are childcare and employment.

Immediate service needs take precedence over prevention — There is widespread understanding and acknowledgement that shifting towards preventive work is needed. The concept of focusing interventions for positive impact on children’s lives prior to the end of third grade is well known.

Immigrant families face challenges in a changing context — Hispanic families are using services less than in years prior while their needs are increasing. Public transportation routes and lack of Spanish speaking staff at service facilities are barriers for Hispanic families. There is also an increase in refugees settling in Wake County which is increasing the mental health needs for children who have experienced trauma.

Investment in organizational capacity building is appreciated — Particularly among community-based organizations, opportunities for organizational training and support are limited and when offered they are greatly valued.

Leaders call for coordination/integration of services and referrals — There is a desire for more centralized locations for multiple services, more holistic approaches for care by improving the ability for systems to work together. Data sharing for referral systems is highly desired.

Mental health service capacity is inadequate to children’s growing needs — There is a need to increase awareness of how trauma impacts children and families. Mental health needs among children, including very young children are growing and there is a scarcity of mental health providers and services. Crisis beds for children are almost nonexistent. Mental health support is needed for caregivers and others who support children such as teachers.

Organizations would benefit from improved prioritization and alignment — There is a multitude of organizations in Wake County with competing priorities. Leadership development around prioritization and focus could be beneficial.

Root causes go beyond poverty — Racial equity, inequity in general, and intergenerational poverty are “upstream” factors that need addressing in order to affect poverty. Leaders who have worked in depth on these issues point to needed investments to improve social connections that build trust, work skills that prepare parents and young adults for employment opportunities that can sustain self and family, and preventive work to avoid adverse childhood events as well as resiliency building.