The physical environments where Idahoans live — from their home to their neighborhood — can all have a deep impact on health and well-being. For instance, hazardous and unhealthy housing can lead to preventable illnesses like lead poisoning, asthma, respiratory illness, cancer, and unintentional injuries.82 These conditions can lead to missed school days and poor school performance for children, and missed workdays and forgone income for parents.83 Similarly, neighborhoods with increased barriers to affordable, healthy foods and physical activity opportunities make it increasingly difficult for their residents to achieve and maintain good health.

Idaho is a predominantly rural state, which provides many benefits yet poses important challenges to health and well-being. Given Idaho’s expansive geography and relatively small population, it is one of the least densely populated states in the nation. In fact, 35 of Idaho’s 44 counties do not have a population center of at least 20,000, and 18 counties have fewer than six people per square mile. It is also graced with the second-largest wilderness in the contiguous 48 states and 19,000 miles of hiking trails, which promote healthy outdoor recreational activities.84 This rural geography provides ample opportunity to enjoy the solace of open space, and Idahoans are understandably proud of the frequent opportunities to connect with nature. However, the low population density creates a challenge to ensure that all residents have access to essential infrastructure such as transportation, broadband internet access, and in some places, even electricity and indoor plumbing. It can also make it harder to sustain small but critical businesses and services, such as grocery stores and child care.

Some of the health burdens of the rural setting are seen in car accidents and broadband access. Idahoans spend a significant time driving and most (73%) traffic fatalities occur in rural areas. Relative to the rest of the country, Idahoans have higher car accidents and fatalities per mile driven, and accidents are more likely to include alcohol.85 There is also increasing recognition of the role that access to broadband plays in advancing health — particularly by increasing access to jobs and health care services.86 Many parts

---

83 Ibid.
of Idaho still have limited access to the internet; for example, over 13% of households in Twin Falls lacked access to internet in 2018.87

Despite these challenges, Idaho’s neighborhoods and environments support health in many ways. Between 2011 and 2015, 85% of Idahoans reported living in households that were not experiencing severe housing problems, which include factors like overcrowding, severe housing costs, and lack of plumbing facilities.88 At the community level, 39% of parents across the state report having access to attractive neighborhood amenities like parks and playgrounds, recreation centers, community centers, libraries, and sidewalks, which is higher than the national average (29.8%).89 Importantly, even the vast majority of low-income Idahoans live close to a grocery store (within 1 mile in urban areas, or 10 miles in rural areas).90 There is strong evidence that access to grocery stores promotes health and reduces premature death.91 Also, rates of violent crimes are 40% lower in Idaho than the average rates across the U.S., and safer communities can support mental health and promote healthy behaviors, like outdoor recreation.92

Unfortunately, not every Idahoan has the same opportunity to enjoy the benefits of Idaho’s built and natural environment, putting them at greater risk of preventable and costly poor health outcomes. About one in 10 (11%) Idahoans reported living in neighborhoods with poorly kept or dilapidated housing.93 Forty-five percent of housing in Idaho was built before 1978, making homes likely to contain lead-based paint.94 Three percent of homes in Boise, Bonner, and Boundary counties reported lacking basic facilities such as an indoor kitchen and bathroom.95 These housing challenges all pose well-documented health risks.

While Idaho is known for its agriculture, not all communities have access to fresh foods. In some rural counties, including Clark, Lincoln, and Camas, more than half of low-income residents do not have a nearby grocery store.96 The rise of online grocery shopping may also lead some essential grocery stores in rural communities to close down, further limiting food access in those communities. Without access to healthy foods, the foods available to Idahoans are those with empty calories and little to no nutritional value, which can be damaging to their health. There is a strong correlation between lack of access to healthy food and the development of obesity and the devastating chronic

---

People are moving further out to afford housing, but any benefit gets canceled out by the transportation burden to get there.

KELLI BADESHEIM, Executive Director, Valley Regional Transit

![Image]

The growth itself is bringing everyone to the table to have conversations that in the past they didn’t need to and now they do. That is bringing attention to the issues.

CHARLENE MAHER, President and CEO of the Blue Cross of Idaho

illnesses associated with it, including hypertension, heart disease, and diabetes. In 2015, 28% of adults in the state were obese, putting their health in jeopardy.97

Lastly, due to rising housing costs in urban areas, people are being forced to move further out into surrounding areas, which increases transportation challenges. More than 23% of Idahoans who drive themselves to work are commuting for more than 30 minutes.98 In Boise County, 62% are doing these long commutes, and evidence has shown long commutes increase rates of obesity and poor mental health.99, 100 As Kelli Badesheim, Executive Director of Valley Regional Transit, summarizes, “People are moving further out to afford housing, but any benefit gets canceled out by the transportation burden to get there.”

Transportation challenges are magnified by Idaho’s limited public transportation, even in urban areas. Idaho is one of two states that neither allocates state dollars toward public transportation nor levies a tax for public transportation.101 Given Idaho’s population is aging, one growing concern is seniors who are not able to drive do not have transportation and may forego critical health-related services.

Thoughtfully designed communities will enable all Idahoans to get and stay healthy and help sustain the state’s rapid economic growth that relies on engaged and productive residents. The quality of a person’s home and the amenities and infrastructure available in their neighborhoods and communities are necessary resources so Idahoans can have the building blocks for health and well-being. The recent population and economic growth of the state provides a unique opportunity to build communities where residents have convenient access to goods and services needed in daily life (e.g., housing, grocery stores, schools, public open spaces and recreation facilities, affordable active transportation) which would not only support health, but also attract talent and businesses.102 As Charlene Maher, President and CEO of the Blue Cross of Idaho says, “The growth itself is bringing everyone to the table to have conversations that in the past they didn’t need to and now they do. That is bringing attention to the issues. The growth is also bringing more funds for business infrastructure, and if you have conversations early in the process, you can direct those funds in the right ways, like making communities healthier.” As Idaho continues to respond to its population and economic changes, leaders can consider ways to foster neighborhoods and built environments that help all Idahoans lead healthier lives.

99 Ibid.