

Impact Essex County

An Overview of Key Trends

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Prepared for:

Essex County Community Foundation

Prepared by:

Erika Rosenberg

Project Director



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Introduction

Impact Essex County is an initiative of the [Essex County Community Foundation](#) (ECCF) that uses Community Indicators as measurements of social, environmental and economic factors that affect a community's quality of life. The [Impact Essex County](#) website is aimed at creating a holistic picture of Essex County to deepen knowledge and understanding of our community and its local areas.

The data and analysis of 100 indicators on this website will serve as a common source of information on critical topics that affect progress in Essex County. The metrics tracked will inform not only ECCF but also all community stakeholders to facilitate collaboration within Essex County and monitor the impact of collective efforts.

Impact Essex County was developed with assistance from the [Center for Governmental Research](#) (CGR), based in Rochester, New York. CGR is a nonprofit research and consulting firm that has been delivering expert support to the public, nonprofit and private sectors for over a century. CGR has developed community indicator projects across New York, Tennessee, Florida and Delaware.

This project includes data for local areas within Essex County and for three comparison counties wherever available. The comparison counties are Middlesex County, MA, Westchester County, NY and Lake County IL. These counties are similar to the Essex County in key areas, including being part of a larger metropolitan region, having both wealthy areas and pockets of poverty, and sharing some demographic characteristics, such as a highly educated population.

These points of comparison provide context and a reference point for looking at and interpreting Essex County's data. As much as the areas are alike, they also have different factors and characteristics impacting them. Our intention is not to rank the areas or put them in competition with one another, but to provide a frame of reference for making meaning out of Essex County's data.

Overview

While much of Essex County is thriving, there are pockets of poverty, economic struggle, low student achievement and unequal access to resources including jobs and transportation. These disparities impact geographic areas such as the Cities of Lynn and Lawrence as well as populations such as people of color.

The County's assets are many: proximity to the ocean, significant open space (22% of all land in the county is protected), and rich historic and artistic institutions and communities. Job growth in the County has matched the national level, high-paying sectors like Financial Activities are growing, and average salaries are high. Lynn and Lawrence have historically been magnets for immigrants and today boast some of the county's most diverse neighborhoods.

Though the poverty rate for the county overall is low (11%), Essex County is an expensive place to live, and it can particularly tough for single parents with children. A living wage model suggests a single parent of 2 needs more than \$72,000 to afford basic necessities - far above the actual median incomes for single-parent households. Nearly 30% of all county residents have incomes between 100% and 299% of the poverty level – incomes that may not be high enough for a comfortable living. Homes are expensive, with a median value of \$373,000. Owning a home is out of reach for some populations; homeownership rates are quite low for African Americans and Hispanics at 21% and 26%, respectively.

In addition, local areas like Lynn and Lawrence have substantial challenges including higher poverty rates, lower educational performance and higher rates of lead exposure among young children. Access to resources is lacking in some areas: for example, nearly a quarter of residents in those cities do not have a vehicle, which makes it more difficult to get to jobs, educational opportunities and other services.

Essex County seems to have experienced the sharp edge of the nation's opioid epidemic early. Drug overdose rates had outpaced the state and nation but now the state and nation have caught up. Reported rates of illegal drug use are somewhat higher in the County than in the nation, among both youth and adults.

Below are our key data findings in each of the 7 focus areas covered by this project: Demographics, Children and Youth, Community Life, Economy and Workforce, Education and Financial Self-Sufficiency.

Demographics

Essex County is home to 785,000 residents, with [small but fast-growing minority groups](#), a high proportion of [foreign-born residents](#) in some local areas, and an overall [aging population](#). Demographic trends are important to understand because they impact the economy, health care needs and outcomes, what services government and nonprofits provide, and many other local and national concerns.

Essex County is composed of 34 cities and towns, including the cities of Lynn, Lawrence, Amesbury, Beverly, Gloucester, Haverhill, Methuen, Newburyport, Peabody and Salem. Lynn, Lawrence, Haverhill, Methuen, Peabody and Salem are considered Gateway Cities. [Gateway Cities](#) are targeted for increased state investment and have below average incomes and adult education levels and populations between 35,000 and 250,000. Though Lynn, with 94,000 people, and Lawrence, with 80,000, are the largest localities in Essex County, they are not the fastest growing. Lynn's population has grown 6% since 2000 and Lawrence's 11%, outpaced by growth in smaller towns such as Middleton, Salisbury and Georgetown.

Lynn and Lawrence are two centers of diversity and immigration, with [foreign-born residents](#) making up 35% of Lynn's population and 39% of Lawrence's. Lawrence is also home to nearly 63,000 of the county's 152,000 Hispanic residents. In 2013-17, 78% of Lawrence residents [speak a language other than English at home](#). Immigration has historically been a key driver of population growth throughout the U.S. and is projected to be increasingly important in the next several decades.

The county's [population overall has grown](#) 8.5% since 2000, similar to the state but below the national rate of growth (16%). [Growth was fastest among Hispanic residents](#) (91%), African Americans (76%) and Asians (54%), though the county as a whole remained majority white (80%).

Overall, 16% of the county's population was [foreign-born](#) and 26% spoke a foreign language at home – comparable with state and national rates and a bit below rates in some otherwise similar counties.

Among both sexes, older age brackets have grown more than younger ones since 2000, in line with America's overall ["graying" trend](#). Among men, the greatest increases were in the age brackets of 60-84 (44%) and 85 or older (72%), along with a 29% increase in the population of women in both of these age brackets. There were much smaller increases in the age brackets of 20-39 for men (2%), and for women under 20 (2%).

The age distribution of a population has major implications for what types of services are needed (schools, health care, etc.), and how they are delivered and paid for. It also matters where people live – in Essex County, about 40% of [people 65 or older in the county live alone](#), which can make it difficult to access services or care. In addition, 12% of Essex County’s population has some type of [disability](#) (both rates are similar to state and national rates).

Most [households](#) in Essex County are made up of singles living alone (27%) or married couples without children (28%), followed by married couples with children (21%), similar to state and national proportions. Although singles living with children made up just 11% of all households in Essex County, they accounted for 35% of all families with children under 18. That’s an increase from 26% in 2000, and rates were especially [high among some groups](#) (Hispanics – 64%, African Americans – 55%, whites – 36%, Asians – 27%). [Female-headed single families](#) made up 78% of the total. Children raised by single parents tend to be poorer and can be at risk for lower educational and life outcomes.

Children and Youth

More children in Essex County are living in poverty, but fewer are [exposed to damaging lead](#) and [teen births](#) have fallen dramatically. The available data paint a mixed picture of how children and youth in the county are faring.

Children are set on a trajectory through life in their earliest years, and even before they are born. A healthy pregnancy has a better chance of resulting in a healthy, full-term baby. In Essex County, most pregnant women begin prenatal care in their first trimester, which is the first step toward good birth outcomes. However, the [rates vary among racial and ethnic groups](#), with 82% of Asian mothers, 80% of white mothers, 75% of Hispanic mothers and 74% of African American mothers beginning care early. In addition to the disparities, these rates have not been rising in Essex.

Premature babies are at higher risk for a host of problems and delays. In Essex County in 2017, 10% of [births were preterm](#), equal to state and close to national rates. [Infant mortality](#), the death of babies before age 1, has declined from 5.0 per 1,000 live births in 2000-04 to 4.1 in 2012-16 (rates are five-year averages).

Lead is an especially powerful environmental toxin for babies and young children that can cause permanent damage to cognitive, physical and behavioral abilities. The [rate of elevated lead levels in children](#) has been falling, down 33% from 2010 to 2017, to 3.1 per 1,000 children - though that was up from 2.8 in 2016.

Perhaps the greatest risk factor to children's success is poverty. In 2013-17, 15% of Essex County [children were living at or below the poverty level](#), up from 12% in 2000 but below the national rate of 20%. The cities of Lawrence and Lynn had higher rates, 31% and 27%, and poverty was greater among African American (27%) and Hispanic (31%) children.

As children grow up, some exhibit risky behavior. [Teen births](#) in Essex County have fallen more than 60% since 2000 to 12 per 1,000 in 2017. This is somewhat higher than the state rate but far below the national rate of 24. [Youth arrests](#), in contrast, have fluctuated up and down over the past decade. In 2017, Essex County recorded 6,600 youth arrests, a rate of 85 per 10,000 youth, similar to the state rate and above a similar county, Middlesex, MA (61). About 5% of [young people between 16 and 19 are not in school or working](#) – similar to the state and below the national rate of 7%.

Community Life

Transportation, safety, amenities like the arts and the environment all contribute to the quality of life in Essex County. Available data show a lack of transportation options to be a major challenge, while crime has been declining.

The vast majority of residents of Essex County drive to work, with 79% [driving alone to work](#) and another 9% carpooling. A small, but increasing share of residents use public transportation or bike or walk to work. Nearly 31,200 households in Essex County, comprising 11% of the county's total, [do not own a car](#). This is a lower rate than the state as a whole (at 12%), but still concerning given challenges with public transportation in the county. More than 1 in 5 households in Lawrence (24%) and Lynn (22%) were without cars.

In 2017, 86% of households in Essex County [have access to the Internet](#), on par with the state and greater than the national rate of 80%. However, Internet access was considerably lower within certain communities in the region. In Lawrence, only 76% of resident had Internet access in 2017, a decrease of 4 percentage points from the prior year.

The crime rate in Essex County has declined slightly since 2008. In 2017, the rate of reported [crimes against people](#) was 7.9 per 1,000 residents, lower than the statewide rate of 9.3, and down from 8.4 in 2016. More notably, the rate of [crimes against property](#) was 19 per 1,000 residents in 2017, down from 30 in 2008 and 24 in 2014. The rates of crimes against people and crimes against property in Essex County are a bit lower than the statewide rates, and slightly above the figures in Middlesex County.

At 1.3 arrests per 1,000 residents, the [drug-related arrest](#) rate in Essex County in 2017 was similar to the statewide rate of 1.1 during the same year and more than double the rate found in Middlesex County.

The rate of reported [victims of domestic violence](#) in Essex County in 2017 was 2.9 per 1,000 residents, even with the rate in 2011 and down slightly from the prior year. While lower than the statewide figure, the rate of domestic violence in Essex County has been higher than the rate in Middlesex County.

In 2017, an average of 22 residents per 10,000 were [incarcerated](#) in Essex County, greater than the statewide rate of 17, and over 3 times greater than Middlesex County. The [recidivism rate](#) in Essex County declined, among inmates released in 2014, 28% returned to prison within 3 years, down from 42% of inmates released in 2009. The decline in Essex County matches a statewide figure over the same time period.

[Voter participation](#) was 64% in the 2016 elections presidential election. The turnout rate in 2016 was similar to previous presidential elections since 2000. Voter participation in the county over the past two elections is similar to Middlesex County and a bit higher than the statewide figure.

[Charitable giving](#) has declined in Essex County since 2011. In 2016, Essex County residents contributed 1.4% of their income to charitable organizations, a decrease of 3% since 2011, and lower than the state and national charitable donation rates of 2.0% and 2.3%, respectively.

Over \$918 million was [spent on travel and tourism](#) in Essex County in 2016, good for \$1,180 per county resident. This was an 11% increase for the county since 2006. Essex County's increase since 2006 was slightly higher than the state's.

In 2017, 88% of days with air quality measurements in Essex County were categorized as [good air days](#), similar to the rate in 2016 and a 20 percentage point increase from 2000. Still, Essex County lags behind Middlesex County (96%) in terms of air quality.

Economy and Workforce

Essex County's economy has rebounded to a degree from the depths of the national recession of 2008-09 and several key sectors are gaining jobs, but salaries have only kept pace with inflation.

[Total jobs](#) increased 18% from 2001 to 2017 to 464,500. That rate of growth is similar to the nation, a bit higher than the state and above Essex County's comparable counties.

[Growing sectors](#) in Essex County include Financial Activities, which increased 64% in total jobs from 2001 to 2017, Healthcare and Social Assistance (54%) and Leisure and Hospitality (32%) sectors. The biggest decline among major sectors was in Manufacturing, where jobs fell 31%. Trends in Essex County were very similar to statewide and national trends, as well as to comparable counties.

The largest sectors in Essex County were very similar to the state and nation: 16% of total jobs were in Health Care and Social Assistance and Trade, Transportation and Utilities, 14% in Professional and Business Services, 10% in Leisure and Hospitality and 9% in each of the following: Financial Activities, Government, and Manufacturing.

The [highest paid sector](#) in Essex County was Manufacturing, with an average annual salary of \$92,700 in 2017. This was followed by Financial Activities (\$86,300) and Professional and Business Services (\$83,200). The lowest paid sector was Leisure and Hospitality (\$22,800). This was a bit different from the state and nation, where the Financial Activities (\$135,900 and \$92,700, respectively) and Information sectors (\$109,500 and \$101,800, respectively) that were the two highest earning sectors.

Overall, [yearly salaries](#) in Essex County averaged \$58,200 in 2017 and increased 4% from 2000 after adjusting for inflation. This is in contrast to the state, where the average salary has increased by 11% and the nation, with a 10% increase over the same time period. (All financial data is presented in real terms.)

From 2000 to 2017, salaries grew fastest in Essex County in the Financial Activities (+39%), Government (+22%) and Manufacturing (+21%) sectors, while the Information sector had the largest decrease (-18%). Although Essex County, the state and nation had similar changes in many sectors, the state and nation both had increases in average salaries in Information of 14% and 25% respectively.

In Essex County, as in the state and nation, [women's earnings](#) tended to lag men's earnings in the same occupations. For all occupations, Essex County women earned 80% of men's earnings.

Like the state and nation, Essex County's economy is dominated by [small employers](#). In 2016, over half (54%) of businesses in Essex County employed 1-4 people, 19% employed 5-9 people, 12% employed 10-19 people and the remaining 14% employed 20 people or more. Only 2% of employers, less than 500 businesses, had 100 or more employees. This has not changed substantially since 2000.

[Self-employment](#) in Essex County brings in more revenue per resident than for the nation as a whole. Essex County had just over \$6,500 in self-employment revenue per resident in 2016, on par with the state and \$800 higher per resident than the nation. However, Essex County's level was down 3% since 2000.

[Unemployment](#) in the county fell to 3.8% in 2017, a continuation of the steady decline in unemployment rates since the peak of 8.7% in 2009 and similar with the state, and below the nation and comparable counties except Middlesex which was 3%. However, Essex County's unemployment is still nearly twice the low of 2.7% in 2000.

In 2013-17, [unemployment was higher among Hispanic and African American](#) residents at about 9% than among Asian and white residents, similar to the disparities seen at the state and national levels.

In 2015, around 128,000 workers (43%) entered Essex County for work each year, and 120,000 residents (43%) left for work each year.

Education

In Essex County as in much of the nation, the available data about education paints a picture of stark disparities – concentrated groups and communities with low test scores, graduation rates, and low education levels among adults, against state and regional statistics of high-achieving students, schools and adults.

Educational success hinges upon myriad factors, but important ones include prekindergarten participation, school attendance and the adequacy of school funding. Prekindergarten helps prepare children both socially and academically for school, and can be especially important for low-income children who tend to be exposed to a less rich vocabulary and have access to fewer resources than their peers. In Essex County in 2017, 44% of 4-year-olds were [enrolled in public or private prekindergarten programs](#), up from 26% in 2002.

School attendance is increasingly measured by the share of students who miss 10% or more of the school year and are deemed "[chronically absent](#)." In 2017, 15% of students were chronically absent in Essex County, the same as the state rate and little changed since 2009. But some local districts had rates near or above 20%, including Haverhill, Lawrence, Methuen, Rockport and Salem.

[School spending](#) in Essex County across public school districts was \$15,200 per student in 2016, less than the statewide level of \$15,900 and the level in Middlesex, MA of \$16,700. Spending in Essex County has decreased 10% since 2008, after adjusting for inflation. The highest spending districts in Essex County were some of the vocational schools, with per-student spending levels at or above \$20,000.

[Enrollment in higher levels of schooling](#) favors females, with women making up 58% of undergraduate college students and 63% of students in graduate and professional schools in Essex County. These disparities are similar to the state and national levels.

Measures of academic achievement show the majority of students in Essex County are considered proficient in key subjects, but many are not. Disparities in academic achievement remain significant, though some groups have made considerable progress over the last decade.

Third grade is an important milestone, particularly in the development of students' literacy skills. Through third grade, many students are learning to read; from third grade on, they need to be able to read to learn. In Essex County in 2018, 50% of [3rd graders were considered proficient on the state's English Language Arts exams](#), up 5 points from the previous year.

Proficiency was lower among economically disadvantaged students (34%), Hispanic students (35%) and African American students (42%) compared with those who were not disadvantaged (61%) and white and Asian students (58% and 65%, respectively).

Similarly, 8th grade is an important benchmark for the development of math skills, as students are studying or will soon move into study of algebra and other high school-level math courses. In 2018, 49% of Essex County [8th graders were considered proficient on the state's math exam](#). But on this exam as well, rates were lower among some groups: 32% among economically disadvantaged students and 34% among Hispanic and African American students.

Massachusetts requires student to pass [10th grade level state tests in math](#) and English in order to graduate. Most students in Essex County are passing these tests. In 2018, 88% of [10th graders passed the state's language arts](#) exam and 75% passed the math exam – higher proportions than 10 years ago. Disparities were less pronounced on the English exam, with 78% of economically disadvantaged students, 76% of Hispanic students and 86% of African American students passing in 2018. In addition, passing rates rose 41 percentage points for African American students and 40 points for Hispanic students from 2007 rates.

[High school graduation rates](#) in Essex County have been rising, with 87% of the 2013 cohort graduating in 2017, up 10 percentage points from 2006 and similar to the state graduation rate. Thirteen districts in the county had graduation rates of 95% or higher. The lowest graduation rates were in the high-poverty districts of Lawrence (72%) and Lynn (74%). Lawrence, however, had the largest gain since 2006, with a 31-point increase.

Students from low-income backgrounds graduated at a somewhat lower rate, 78% in 2017, though that was up from 61% in 2006. While 94% of Asian students and 93% of white students in the 2013 cohort graduated in 2017, rates were somewhat lower

among African American and Hispanic students (84% and 76%). These disparities were comparable to rates at the state level among the same groups.

[Essex County is a highly educated county](#) in terms of the adult population, with 39% of adults in 2013-17 having at least a bachelor's degree, up from 31% in 2000. That is above the national rate (31%) but below Massachusetts' rate of 42% and below the rates in comparison counties: 54% in Middlesex, MA, 48% in Westchester, NY, and 44% in Lake, IL.

Some parts of Essex County and some groups within Essex County were significantly less well educated. In the cities of Lawrence and Lynn, just 11% and 20%, respectively, of adults had at least a bachelor's. And throughout the county, only 12% of Hispanic residents had a bachelor's or higher degree.

Financial Self-Sufficiency

Despite generally low poverty rates, Essex is an expensive county that requires a level of income that data suggests many residents and families lack.

In 2013-17, 11% of Essex County residents had [incomes at or below the poverty level](#), the same as the state rate and less than the national level of 14%. [Median incomes](#) in Essex County were generally 15-30% higher than national levels as well, depending upon the group.

But Essex County has pockets of poverty and [stark disparities among racial and ethnic groups](#). In the cities of Lawrence and Lynn, poverty rates are 24% and 18%. Countywide, 18% of African Americans and 24% of Hispanics were living in poverty, compared to 12% of Asians and 9% of whites.

[Median household incomes](#) are far higher for Asians and whites (in the \$78,000-\$95,000 range) than for African Americans and Hispanics (\$41,000-\$52,000). Single-parent households are particularly disadvantaged, [with a median income](#) for female-headed households with children of just \$29,800.

Actual incomes are far below what is needed to make ends meet in Essex County for some residents and families. [Living wages](#) for a family of three with a single earner (a working parent and two children) would require an annual income of more than \$72,600 in Essex County – far above the actual median income for either female- or male-headed households (which is \$40,000).

In addition, the living wage model and income statistics suggest that a broader group of families may find it difficult to get by. A family of four with two earners (two working parents and two children) needs \$79,075 annually, or nearly three times the

poverty level, which is \$24,900 for such a family. In Essex County, 62% of residents have incomes that are triple the poverty level, and 27% have incomes between 100% and 299% of poverty. While these statistics are not an exact match (mixing family and individual metrics), they do suggest that the cost of living in Essex County may push a broader group near the edge of self-sufficiency.

In terms of participation in programs to help needy individuals and families, Essex County has seen the biggest increase in the share of [people receiving federal food assistance](#) (SNAP). In 2016, 13% of Essex County residents received SNAP benefits, a dramatic increase from 3% in 2000 and the largest increase among comparison counties, the state and nation. About 3.5% of Essex County households in 2013-17 [received TANF](#) (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), largely unchanged from 2000 and higher than the state and nation.

About 14% of residents filed for the [Earned Income Tax Credit](#), which provides tax credits or refunds to working poor. That was a bit higher than the state and lower than the nation, likely reflecting that incomes in Essex County are above national incomes.

In 2018, 34% of Essex County students were [economically disadvantaged](#), up from 28% in 2015. Here too, Essex County was above the state rate (32%).

A lack of financial self-sufficiency shows up in Essex County's statistics on [homeownership](#) and [housing affordability](#).

[Home values](#) in Essex County have risen by 23% since 2000, and at \$373,000, the median home value in the county in 2013-17 was higher than both the state and the nation. This is good for homeowners, but the rising costs of homeownership can make it difficult for residents to purchase their first home. [Housing affordability for homeowners](#), as determined by the ratio of median home value to median household income, shows that homeownership is becoming increasingly unaffordable in the county, with the value of homes rising faster than household incomes.

The same is true for [renters](#) in Essex County, who spent 37% of their household income on rent in 2013-17, similar to the state level, and higher than renters nationwide (32%).

[Homelessness](#) is a growing issue in Essex County, with 17 homeless persons per 10,000 residents in 2017. The rate also increased in Massachusetts over this time span from 23 to 26. Nationwide, homelessness has decreased from 22 to 17 per 10,000 residents over the same period of time.

The homeownership rate in Essex County has remained steady since 2000. In 2013-17, 64% of all homes were owner-occupied, the same rate as 2000. Despite this

consistency, [homeownership rates](#) vary greatly among local areas. Only 28% of homes in Lawrence were owner-occupied in 2013-17, along with 44% in Lynn and 51% in Salem. By contrast, the homeownership rates in Boxford, Topsfield, and West Newbury were over 90%. Essex County has greater [racial and ethnic disparities in homeownership](#) than the nation. In 2013-17, 69% of white residents and 65% of Asian residents owned their home, compared to 31% of African Americans and 26% of Hispanics. Nationwide, homeownership was higher among African American and Hispanic residents at 42% and 46% respectively.

Health

While [health insurance](#) is widespread in Essex County, as it is throughout Massachusetts, the county shares many of the same health concerns as the nation: [obesity](#), [diabetes](#), [smoking](#), [cancer](#) and [drug addiction](#). The opioid crisis has hit Essex County particularly hard, as evidenced by high [rates of admissions for treatment](#) and [deaths from overdose](#).

Just 3% of Essex County residents under 65 in 2016 [lacked health insurance](#), on par with the state but far below the national rate of 10%. Spending on medical care was \$524 per member, per month in 2017, higher than 2016 and below the statewide level of \$630.

While Essex County was not immune from any of the nation's leading health-related problems, the area where it stood out was substance abuse. A national survey found rising rates of [illegal drug use](#) that were somewhat higher in the county (19% of adults and 17% of youth said they used an illegal drug in the last 30 days) than in the nation. And the rate of [drug overdose deaths](#) in Essex County, 23 per 100,000 residents, was higher than the national rate of 20.

State data on [treatment admissions](#) shows the growing problem of heroin. While total admissions rose 15% from 2005 to 2014 to nearly 10,500, admissions primarily due to heroin increased 60% while several other categories declined. By 2014, heroin and other opioids were responsible for 60% of admissions, up from 46% in 2005. Essex County's rate of admissions, 136 per 10,000 residents, was below the state rate of 154 but far higher than the Middlesex County rate of 90.

In other areas of behavioral health and general health, Essex County more closely mirrors other areas:

- About 15% of adults [smoke](#).
- About 4% report suffering from [mental illness](#).

- The [suicide rate](#) of 0.9 deaths per 10,000 residents reflects an increase from 53 in 2000 to 72, but the rise was not steady.
- About 62% of [adults](#) and 32% of [children](#) were overweight or obese.
- The overall [mortality rate](#) has been declining, falling 17% since 2000.

Essex County had relatively high rates in a few other areas:

- The rate of newly identified [diabetes](#) cases was 79 per 10,000 in 2015, far higher than the state, nation and comparison counties
- The rate of new [cancers](#) was slightly higher than the state, nation and two of the three comparison counties.