

Milwaukee County
Community Health Needs Assessment 2024

Milwaukee County Housing Profile



MILWAUKEE HEALTH CARE
PARTNERSHIP

Background

The Milwaukee Health Care Partnership (MHCP) health system and local public health agency partners conduct a collaborative Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA) every three years. In 2024, a CHNA was implemented in Milwaukee County to inform hospital systems’ and public health agencies’ strategic planning and community improvement initiatives. The assessment results are also used by other community-based organizations and the broader community to understand the major health issues Milwaukee is currently facing.

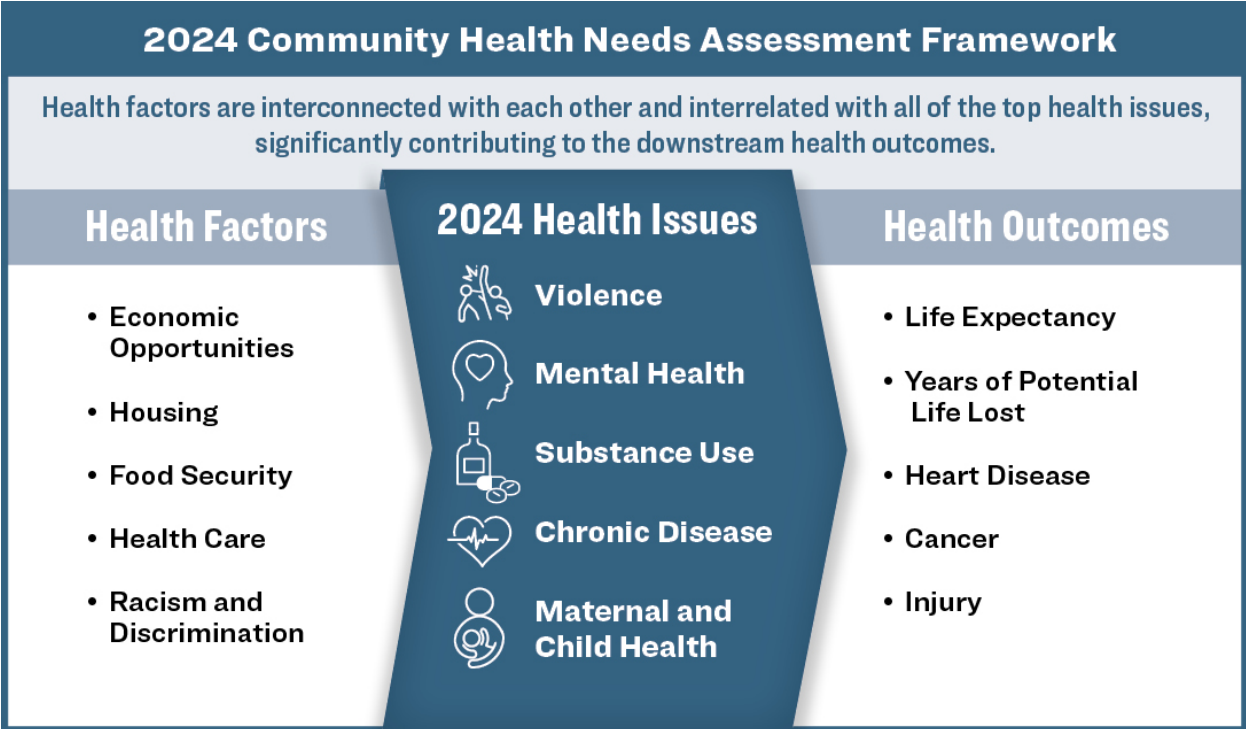
The 2024 Milwaukee County CHNA relies on three sources of information:

- Milwaukee County Community Health Survey, an online survey completed by 6,265 Milwaukee County residents;
- Key informant interviews and focus groups, with input from 42 interviewees and 11 focus groups; and
- [Health Compass Milwaukee](#), a compilation of publicly reported data sources on one website.

Introduction

A healthy Milwaukee is a place where everyone has a fair and just opportunity to reach their best health and well-being. Critical to achieving this vision is addressing the issue of housing, which has been identified as the most important health factor. Housing is directly connected to other social and economic factors like financial stability, environmental conditions, community safety, and access to healthy foods, health care, and other supportive services.

In the 2024 Milwaukee County CHNA, through surveys, key informant interviews, and focus groups, the community has identified housing to be interrelated with the other health factors and directly associated with the five top health issues of violence, mental health, substance use, chronic disease, and maternal and child health. The new 2024 Milwaukee County CHNA framework below depicts the relationship between community-identified key health issues, the factors that drive them, and the resulting health outcomes seen in the data.



The following profile is intended to complement the full 2024 Milwaukee County CHNA report. It will highlight data and concepts specific to the issue of housing, especially for low-income, underserved populations in Milwaukee County, with the aim of improving health outcomes. This profile seeks to provide insight into the various ways in which housing influences health and provide a better understanding of the relationship between housing and health. It utilizes primary and secondary data. The secondary data sources can be found on HealthCompassMilwaukee.org.

Framing

In the 2021 Milwaukee County CHNA, the issue of housing was described as one of **place, space, and economics**. In 2024, we are delving deeper into housing with new data to build upon the 2021 framework. Where housing is placed is closely linked to segregation, environmental conditions (pollutants, etc.), community safety, and access to transportation. The space of a home, or the quality of housing, affects health in several ways, including lead exposure, lack of adequate facilities and utilities, and overcrowding. Further, there is a correlated toll on stress and mental health for individuals who are homeless, precariously housed, or living in poor-quality housing. Housing affordability and homeownership are key economic factors that connect housing to health.

Beyond the ways in which housing impacts health, housing is a complex, nuanced, and nonlinear experience for community residents. Like Milwaukee, communities that are connecting housing and health are exploring new frontiers for collective impact strategic partnerships. Traditional housing infrastructure is a separate system from health care and public health, necessitating engagement with other public sector agencies, as well as with private sector housing markets.

Housing Types and Housing Stability

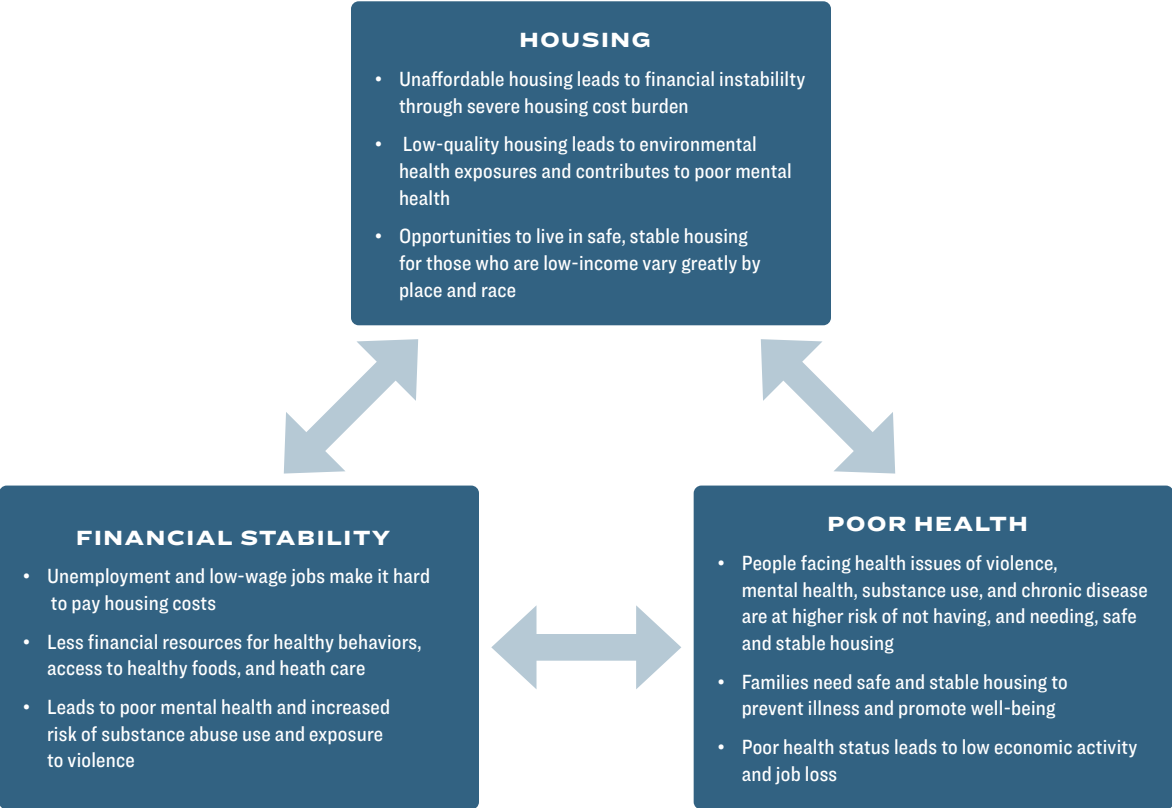
Improving health through housing is complex, with many potential points for action or intervention. Affordable housing types, challenges, supports, and services can be plotted along a continuum to better understand the complexity. It is important to note that a housing continuum is not clean and linear. Individuals and families may get housed, achieve housing stability, progress, and then face new challenges, causing them to regress into another cycle of housing instability. The Housing Continuum Milwaukee, a framework to visualize this continuum, is depicted below. It demonstrates a continuum of housing types and supports. It is important to identify how health is impacted and can be improved at each point along the continuum. Regardless of where a low-income individual or family is on the continuum, the household's opportunities for better health increase as housing and financial stability increase.

HOUSING CONTINUUM MILWAUKEE



Connecting Health Issues with Housing

There is a vicious cycle between poor health, unaffordable and unsafe housing, and financial instability. The 2024 Milwaukee County CHNA top health issues of violence, mental health, substance use, chronic disease, and maternal and child health have downstream health outcomes for individuals and families who live at the precarious intersection of poor housing conditions and financial instability. Poverty is at the root of this relationship in that those individuals and families living in poverty have less access to safe and affordable housing and ultimately have worse health outcomes. The framework below provides more detail on this relationship.



The multi-directional relationship for each of the top health issues is further explained below:

1. **Violence:** Lack of economic opportunities can be a cause of interpersonal violence. Survivors of gun violence and domestic violence often do not have a safe and stable home, nor a community to return to, and thus, are more likely to engage in or become victims of further violent acts.
2. **Mental Health:** Poor social and economic conditions and social isolation lead to poor mental health. Poor mental health status and undiagnosed mental health conditions are challenges that unhoused populations face.
3. **Substance Use:** Substance use leads to financial instability through job loss and the economic cost of substances. Those who use substances may face more barriers to finding safe and supportive housing.
4. **Chronic Disease:** Chronic disease leads to financial instability through employment challenges and job loss. Those with chronic diseases often require costly housing supports, medical care, and medications.
5. **Maternal and Child Health:** Pregnant mothers and children are at higher risk for environmental exposures attributed to unsafe housing.

The data gathered in the 2024 Milwaukee County CHNA provides more detail to this broad understanding of the interrelation of housing and top health issues.

2024 Milwaukee County CHNA Housing Data

Access to affordable housing was one of the most selected community needs in the 2024 community health survey. 44.2% of respondents identified access to affordable housing as one of the top three most important community needs to be addressed to improve health for everyone in the community. Relatively higher percentages of Black/African American respondents (55.6%) and respondents living in high-need ZIP codes (46.4%) reported access to affordable housing as a top three community need compared to Milwaukee County overall.

Housing-related costs, including mortgage, rent, and utilities, present a serious burden for many Milwaukee residents. From 2019 to 2023, more than 16% of households in Milwaukee County experienced severe housing cost burden, defined as spending 50% or more of their household income on housing. This is a higher percentage of households compared to both state and national levels.

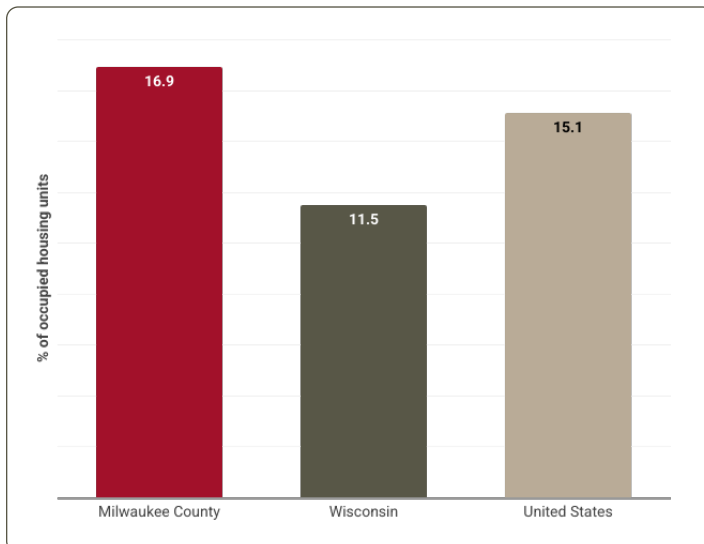
Survey Question: From the following list, what do you think are the three most important community needs that have to be addressed to improve health for everyone in the community?

Response	County overall (%)	Black/African American (%)	Hispanic/Latino (%)	High-need zip codes (%)	Households with children (%)	Older adult (>65 years) (%)
Access to affordable health care	47.5	41.1	50.5	44.0	39.6	49.1
Access to affordable housing	44.2	55.6	40.7	46.4	40.0	39.6
Access to mental health services	32.9	36.1	29.5	30.9	32.3	27.5
Addressing community safety/gun violence	28.3	27.5	30.3	30.8	22.8	35.9
Access to affordable, healthy foods	27.0	37.1	29.7	31.1	30.4	17.5

Created on Health Compass Milwaukee | healthcompassmilwaukee.org | Data source: American Community Survey (ACS) (Tables B25070/25091)

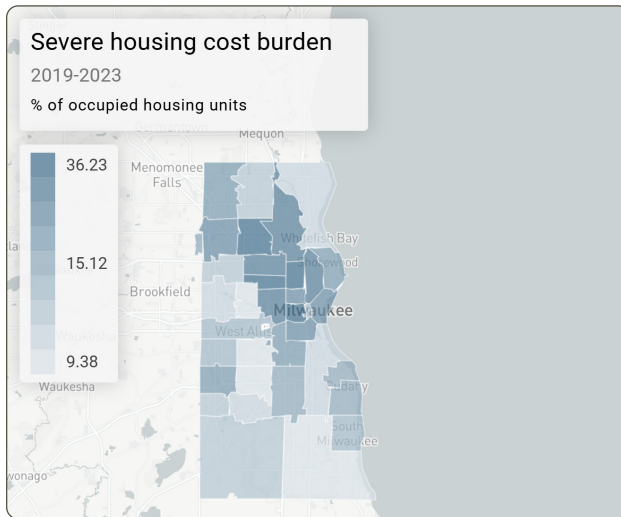
Severe housing cost burden: Households spending more than 50% of income on housing are considered severely housing cost-burdened. Includes both renters (rent) and owners (mortgage and other owner costs). For renters, cost include any utilities or fees that the renter must pay, but do not include insurance or building fees

Severe Housing Cost Burden, Milwaukee County and Comparison, 2023



Health Compass Milwaukee | Tiles © Mapbox, Data source: American Community Survey (ACS) (Tables B25070/25091)

Severe Housing Cost Burden, Milwaukee County, 2019-2023



In general, ZIP codes in the central and northwest portions of the City of Milwaukee show a higher percentage of occupied housing units experiencing severe housing cost burden compared to other parts of the county. ZIP codes with the highest percentage of households experiencing severe housing cost burden from 2019 to 2023 were 53233, 53206, and 53218 in the City of Milwaukee and 53210 in Wauwatosa.

The 2024 community health survey respondents and key informants/focus groups also emphasized that housing stability and economic stability are interrelated. As noted by one informant, “I think the primary factor in a lot of these issues is just income or poverty. It’s just a lack. The poverty drives a lack of access to housing, to health care, even though maybe it doesn’t need to.”

A total of 14.7% of survey respondents reported that their household did not have the money or resources to meet its needs during the past month.

Survey Question: During the past month, my household has been able to meet its needs with the money and resources we have.

Response	n	Percent (%)
Agree	4,655	85.3
Disagree	803	14.7

When asked what issues survey respondents had with their current housing situation, many reported housing-related expenses. Utilities and the expense of rent/facility were reported as top concerns.

Survey Question: What issues, if any, do you have with your current housing situation? Select all that apply.

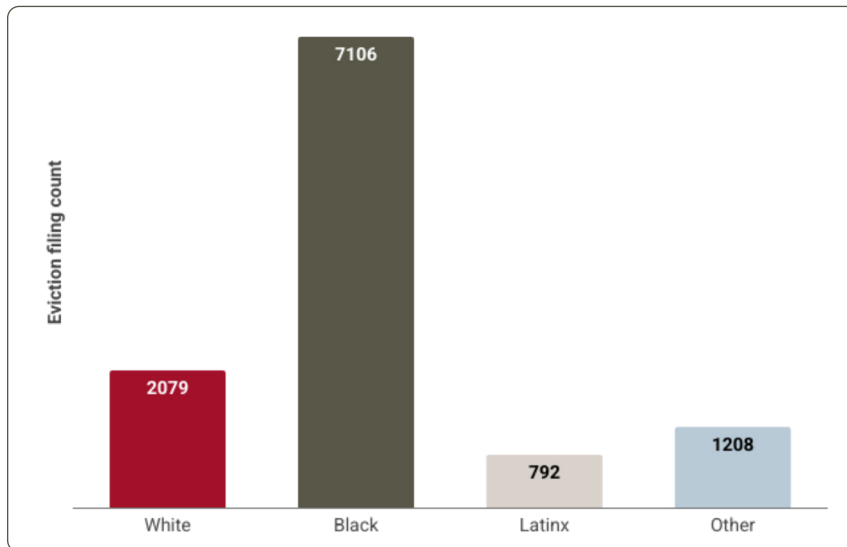
Issue	n	Percent (%)
Utilities (water, heat, electric)	790	14.5
Rent/facility is too expensive	724	13.3
High crime	559	10.2
Mortgage is too expensive	403	7.4
Too run down or unhealthy environment (ex. Mold, lead, radon)	252	4.6
Eviction concerns (prior, current, or potential)	154	2.8
Current housing is temporary, need permanent housing	152	2.8
Too small/crowded problems with other people	147	2.7
Need supportive and/or assisted living	115	2.1
Too far from town/services	68	1.2

When only including survey respondents who indicated their household did not have the money or resources to meet its needs during the past month, an even greater percentage listed utilities and expense of rent/facility as top concerns; 40.8% reported issues with utilities cost, and 34.1% reported rent/facility was too expensive.

Housing Instability

Key informants and focus group participants discussed numerous inequitable housing issues impacting neighborhoods in Milwaukee, including eviction disparities. They noted this also significantly contributes to housing instability. There continue to be significant racial disparities in eviction filings, as seen in the chart below. Milwaukee neighborhoods with a majority of Black residents saw many more eviction filings in the last year compared to neighborhoods with other racial/ethnic majorities.

Eviction Filings by Neighborhood Racial/Ethnic Majority, Milwaukee County, 2024



Sourced from Eviction Lab | <https://evictionlab.org/eviction-tracking/milwaukee-wi/> | Data source: American Community Survey (ACS)

When asked about concerns with their housing situation, 154 community survey respondents reported they had concerns about eviction.

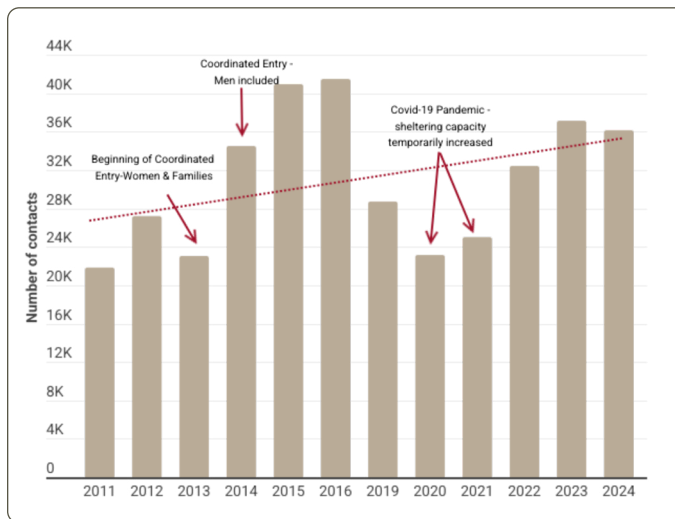
Housing Instability and Homelessness

Being homeless or precariously housed impacts health. People who are homeless or precariously housed make greater than average use of hospital emergency departments, substance use treatment centers, and mental health services. People who are homeless also have on average longer hospital stays than individuals with stable housing and may be less likely to seek early treatment or utilize preventative health care.

Housing instability and homelessness remain a concern in Milwaukee County. A total of 458 community health survey respondents reported worrying about losing their housing or not having a steady place to live at the time. Out of survey respondents who stated they did not have the money or resources to meet their household needs in the past month, only 71% said they had a steady place to live.

Key informants named challenges with homelessness in Milwaukee County, including a growing population of older adults experiencing homelessness and shelters often operating at or past capacity. 211 data from IMPACT on calls related to shelter/homelessness indicate a steady upward trend, with 36,177 calls in 2024.

IMPACT 211 Calls Related to Shelter/Homelessness, 2011-2024



Data source: IMPACT Inc. | impactinc.org

“When you’re unsheltered or experiencing pretty consistent housing insecurity, your sort of day-to-day is the things that we take for granted, like breakfast, taking a shower, cleaning clothes. That’s really a lot of our folks, that’s all they’re doing all day long is just trying to meet those basic needs.”

KEY INFORMANT

Key informants noted impacts on health behaviors and health care utilization in addition to the amount of energy expended in meeting basic daily needs.

“I think all those things sort of lead you to a lack of focus on preventative health care. Focusing on eating healthy, non-processed food is about all you can eat when you’re on the street. And so I think those sort of simple things accumulate.”

KEY INFORMANT

Despite these challenges, Milwaukee County has made progress in reducing homelessness through innovative policies and programs. Milwaukee County’s “Housing First” strategy prioritizes addressing homelessness through meeting housing needs first, over other requirements such as employment. Since the implementation of “Housing First” in 2015, Milwaukee County has become a national leader in the effort to end homelessness. Milwaukee County has been recognized as the lowest per capita unsheltered population in the nation twice since 2015, and as the second lowest twice.

▶ **Learn more:** [Housing First | Housing | Milwaukee County](#)

Milwaukee Health Care Partnership (MHCP) member organizations, Milwaukee County Housing Services, and IMPACT Inc. have also joined forces to address homelessness through the MHCP [Housing is Health](#) program. This program focuses on homeless and vulnerably housed patients receiving care at Milwaukee area health systems and safety net clinics. MHCP member hospitals and clinics are partnered with Milwaukee County Housing Services and IMPACT Coordinated Entry social workers to help patients secure temporary housing, provide case management, and aid in the transition to permanent housing stability.

▶ **Learn more:** [Wisconsin Policy Forum Healthy Investment Report](#)

*The Housing is Health program received **3,216 referrals** from 2020 to 2024.*

*Over this time period, the Housing is Health Program helped secure **549 total housing placements.***

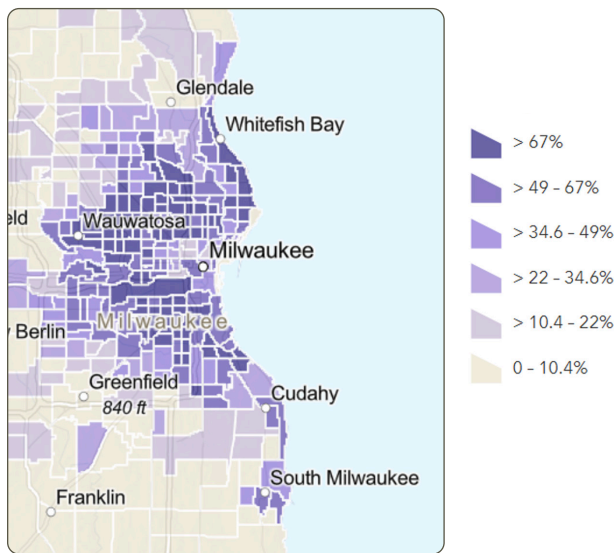
“The longer you’re on the street, the more entrenched you get just trying to survive, which, again, has long-term health effects. I mean, we’ve seen it with so many of our folks. And generally, not all the time, generally after you’re in housing for a little bit, by no means, you know, or like a picture of like perfect health, nobody is, but we’ve seen them move in the direction of just a more organized, structured way of living, just like any one of us would, you know?”

KEY INFORMANT

Housing Quality and Environmental Hazards

As with access to affordable housing, housing quality and environmental exposures in homes impact health. Exposure to home environmental hazards, including deteriorating lead-based paint and lead piping, flooding issues, mold, pest control problems, and other environmental hazards, presents health risks to children and families. These concerns are particularly prevalent in Milwaukee County, given the older housing stock in the city and much of the county. Although the use of lead-based paint was banned in 1978, prior to 1950, the use of lead-based paint in homes was particularly common. Communities with a high proportion of housing built before 1950, like Milwaukee, are at greater risk of higher blood lead levels in children. In Milwaukee County, 39% of houses were built before 1950, while 81% were built before 1980.

Percent of Housing Built Prior to 1950 by Wisconsin Census Tract, Milwaukee County



Wisconsin Department of Health Services Childhood Lead Poisoning Data Explorer

Age of Housing pre-1950 | 2021

Percent of housing built prior to 1950:

Milwaukee County: 39.1% (total 165,576)

Wisconsin: 24.2% (total 658,017)

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, lead poisoning can have serious consequences, including growth and developmental delays, damage to the brain and nervous system, learning and behavioral problems, and speech and hearing difficulties. Children less than six and children with special needs are particularly susceptible to lead poisoning due to their developmental stage and behaviors, such as playing or crawling on the floor, where lead dust may accumulate, and hand-to-mouth behaviors that can increase the risk of ingesting lead paint chips or dust.

Other home environmental hazards, including mold, present health risks for children and families. A key informant reflected on the older and deteriorating homes in Milwaukee, stating, “They’re wetter, they’re moldy, so on and so forth. Longitudinal exposure to mold will give you, you know, long-term respiratory issues.”

Key informants emphasized that when it comes to dealing with home environmental hazards, some residents may face greater barriers than others. Particular challenges were described for refugee populations and renters.

“So, a lot of these first houses that they have are not in the best condition. But if you think of it, like they’ve come some of them from a refugee camp. So, they’re pretty used to living in these bad conditions. So that’s not always at the top of their list. But you know, there can be lead in the house there. You know, we deal a lot with pests like bed bugs, roaches, and like there just isn’t any support where we can’t, all we can do is refer them to an extermination agency or program, but that costs so much money. There just isn’t like, and you can’t hold landlords like really responsible. It seems like there’s not many avenues that we can help like families feel empowered to stand up for themselves in these bad living conditions.”

KEY INFORMANT

Notable work in progress to address lead and environmental hazards in homes includes the City of Milwaukee Health Department’s Lead Hazard Reduction Program and Healthy Homes Program. The Lead Hazard Reduction Program provides eligible property owners with a grant to replace home lead hazards. The Healthy Homes program provides up to \$5,000 per unit to address common home hazards.

What’s Next for Improving Housing and Health?

As noted, improving health through housing is complex, with many potential points for action or intervention. Targeting upstream improvements to housing conditions will have positive downstream impacts on health. Referring back to the Housing Continuum Milwaukee framework, a multi-pronged approach that addresses multiple points on the continuum should be considered in a collective, strategic fashion. This could include:

- Increasing supply of all types of housing:
 - Emergency crisis housing
 - Supportive housing
 - Low-market affordable rentals
 - Entry-level homes for ownership
- Increasing housing referral pathways for unhoused populations.
- Investing in flexible rental assistance programs for individuals and families.
- Increasing the supply of transitional and medical respite housing.
- Investing in emergency shelter and seasonal warming rooms.
- Leveraging Medicaid reimbursements for housing supports.

Housing is an issue that is ripe for **collective impact** as it crosses multiple sectors. Health care and public health need to work in conjunction with the housing sector, community-based organizations, and philanthropic funders to bolster existing programs and services and explore investments in innovative initiatives to improve access to safe and affordable housing.

