

Grade Level(s): 9, 10, 11, 12

Subject(s): Health/Environmental Health

Lesson: Investigating Health Indicators in Your Neighborhood

TIME: One to three class sessions, plus homework.

Note: Time will vary greatly depending on whether students identify their own data sources or are provided with the list, if research is done in class or as homework, and how formally the data is reported. Steps 2 and 3 (identifying health indicator and developing a plan for gathering the data) will take one or two class periods, depending on the level of the class. Step 4 (gathering the data) can happen mostly outside of class, over the period of a few days to a week.

In this lesson, the class expands the work they did on the Features Table by preparing a comprehensive grid of health indicators for neighborhoods in their area.

1. Homework: Kinds of Environments

The following reports provide additional background on the effects of environment on health. Assign reading Why Place Matters as homework, along with one or both of the others.

Why Place Matters: Building a Movement for Healthy Communities, PolicyLink (pages 6 – 10; pages 22 – 46. Students need not read the case studies).

Neighborhoods and Health, Robert Wood Johnson Commission for a Healthier America (pages 1 – 8)

Health and Housing, Robert Wood Johnson Commission for a Healthier America

Ask the students to provide a definition for each of environment and identify possible protective and risk features shaping living conditions and thus health. They should draw from the readings, their viewing of "Place Matters," and their work on the Features Table.

Economic environment. The presence or absence of commercial investment and businesses that provide residents with adequate income (employment, tax base) and health-promoting goods and services (produce, banking).

Social environment. The presence or absence of interpersonal relationships, groups, and networks (church, neighborhood watch, community organizing) that provide support, solidarity, partnership, and sense of belonging for residents.

Physical (built) environment. Presence and quality of features of space and geography that determine access to health benefits or exposure to health risks (parks, housing, power plants, access to other communities).

Service environment. The presence or absence of adequate schools, police and fire protection, water and sewer systems, healthcare facilities, mass transit, and other services that allow residents to live healthy, safe, productive lives.

2. Identify Health Indicators. (15-20 min.)

Divide the class into five groups. Assign a different environment to each group, with the fifth group researching neighborhood health outcomes.

Note: Rather than assign a group to focus on health outcomes, you might invite a county or city public health officer to visit the class and present health outcome data for the neighborhood.

Ask each group to meet and compose a comprehensive list of possible health indicators for their assigned environment type. A health indicator is a measure that reflects, or indicates, the state of health of a defined population. This lesson focuses on local environmental indicators: neighborhood features that may protect or threaten the health of residents. Groups should develop their lists by referencing their Features Table, the "Place Matters" episode, and their readings. Group Five should compose a list of neighborhood health outcomes for which they believe data is tracked. Suggestions for each group's list follow.

Physical and Built Environment: farmers' markets, supermarkets, fast food restaurants, liquor stores; safe, well-tended parks; littered, empty lots; trees and green open spaces; pedestrian friendliness (able to walk to school and shops on safe sidewalks, clean streets); housing conditions (maintenance and quality, peeling or lead paint or mold, proper heating and cooling, adequate number of bedrooms for family size); bike lanes; condition of school buildings; neighborhood connected to rest of community, jobs; heavy traffic and freeways; polluting industries and toxic hazards; noise level; street plan / housing that isolates or connects residents, promotes or discourages social interaction.

Social Environment: crime rates or fear of crime; youth activities and community centers; places of worship; high school graduation rate; day and nighttime noise levels (affect stress levels, sleep quality); neighbors know and trust each other; resident participation in community-based organizations; elders feel cared-for or neglected; residents feel police are friendly and trustworthy or ineffective and abusive; responsiveness and accessibility of local government; connection of neighborhood to rest of community; degree of racial integration or segregation; experiences of discrimination.

Economic Environment: median household income; percentage of households living in poverty (or below 200% of the federal poverty level); percent of college graduates;