

Chronic Disease in St. Louis: **PROGRESS FOR BETTER HEALTH**

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This fifth and final brief in the *For the Sake of All* series focuses on chronic disease in the St. Louis region. This brief will examine our progress in fighting chronic disease and will discuss how where we live, work, and play influences our health.

Chronic diseases like heart disease, cancer, and diabetes affect many of us. Nearly half of all adults in the US had at least one chronic disease in 2008.¹ Although chronic diseases affect many people, more African Americans suffer from chronic diseases and the complications that follow. These alarming differences in health have been highlighted in recent Missouri and St. Louis reports.^{2,3} The health of African Americans in St. Louis has improved over the last ten years, but there is still much work to be done.

Tracking our progress in chronic disease

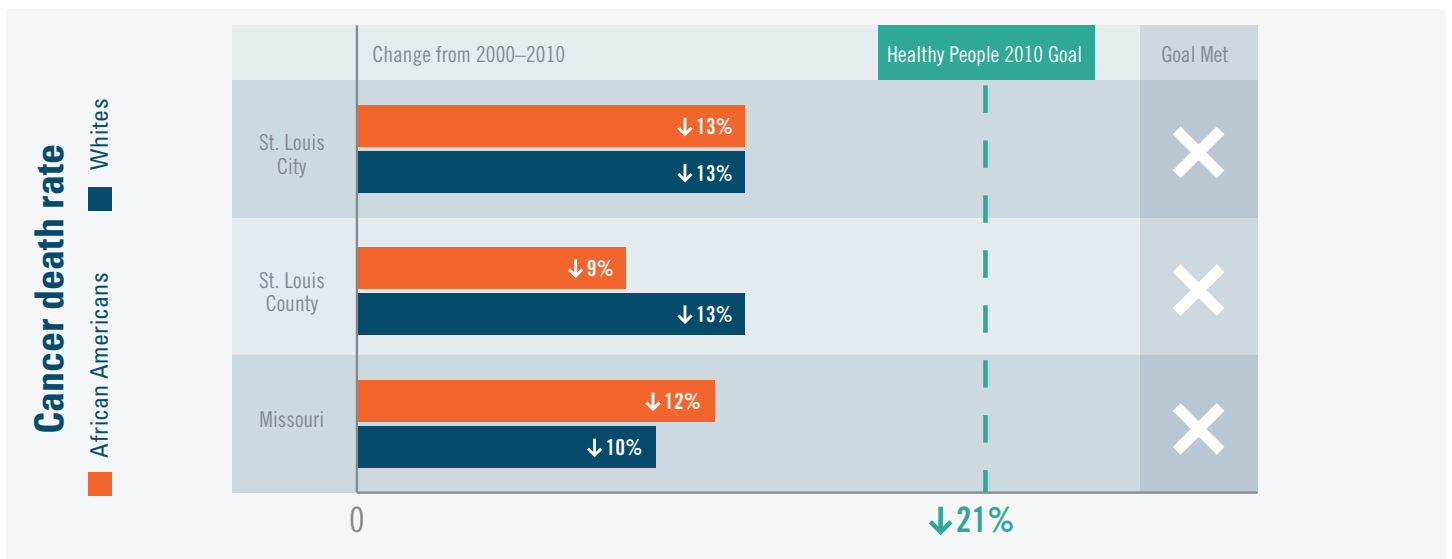
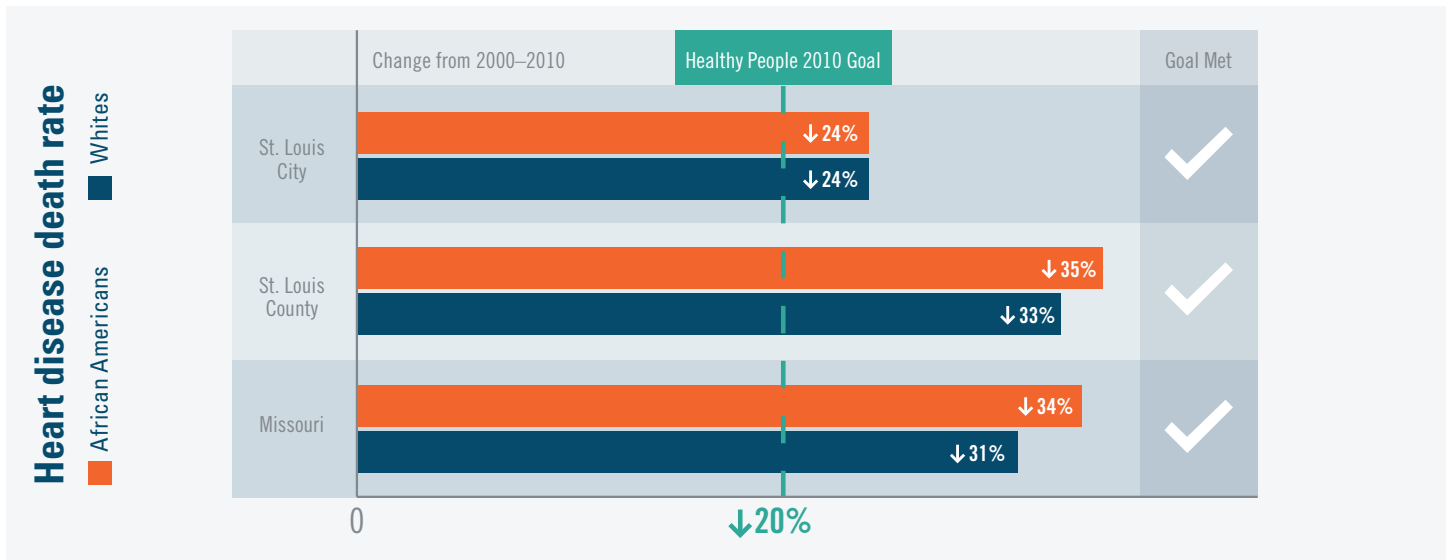
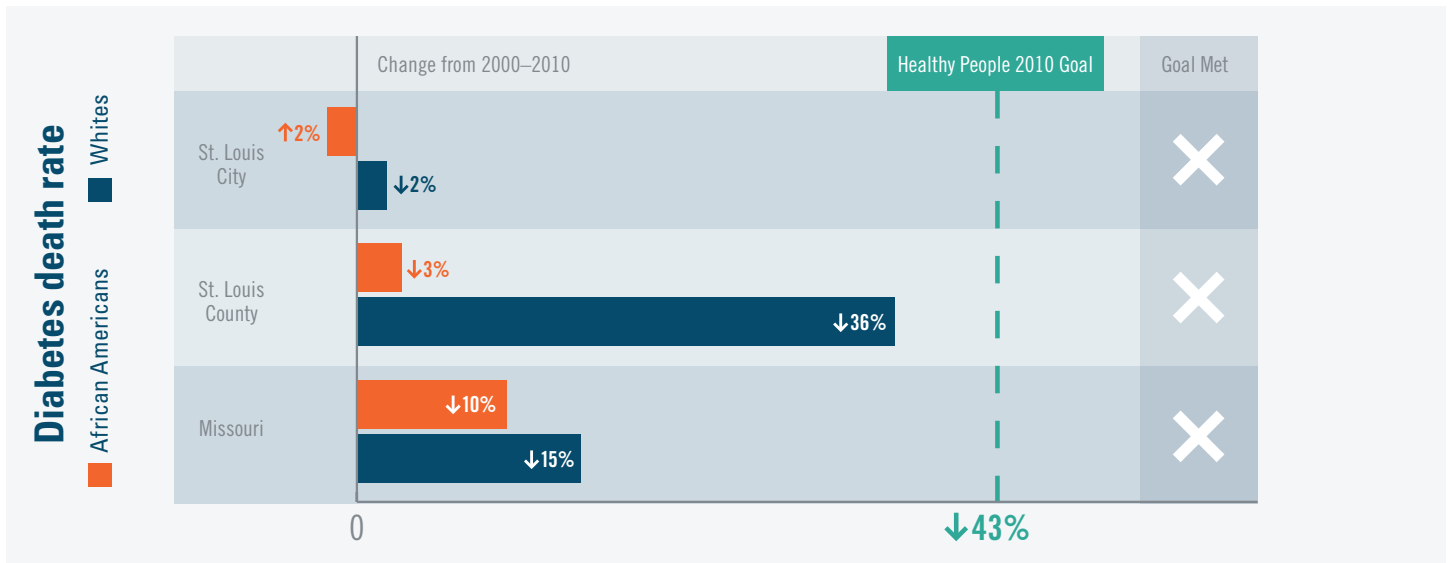
To make better policy decisions that affect health, we first must track how we are doing. An important benchmark for doing this is Healthy People. Healthy People is a program that provides goals based on science to improve the health of all Americans.

Beginning in 2000, benchmarks were set each decade to provide goals for decreasing disease and improving chronic disease preventive behaviors. Benchmarks for heart disease, cancer and diabetes were set for Healthy People 2000, 2010, and current benchmarks have been set for 2020.

Progress was assessed using the goals established by Healthy People. To do this we determined how death rates of heart disease, cancer, and diabetes changed between 2000 and 2010. The results are very encouraging for deaths due to heart disease. In St. Louis City, the Healthy People goal of a 20 percent decrease by 2010 has been met for everyone and the decrease for African Americans and Whites is similar for both groups. The results are also similar for St. Louis County and Missouri as well.



Figure 1: Healthy People goals and progress in St. Louis and Missouri



Source: MODHSS, Chronic Disease MICA
 Notes: Death rates used in percent change calculations are per 100,000 and age-adjusted using the 2000 US Standard Population.
 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Healthy People 2020.

The Healthy People 2010 goal for cancer death rates was a 21 percent decrease between 2000 and 2010. In St. Louis and Missouri, this goal was not met; however some progress is being made. African Americans have seen less progress in cancer death rates compared to Whites. The Healthy People 2020 goal for cancer death rates is a 10 percent decrease between 2010 and 2020. The goal for 2010 was not met; however, with continued progress the 2020 goal is within reach.

There is a lot of work to be done in decreasing diabetes death rates for everyone. In St. Louis City, there was a decrease in diabetes death rates of 1.6% among Whites and an increase of 2.2% among African Americans. This means that African Americans are moving away from the goal, while Whites have made a very small progress in diabetes death rates. St. Louis and Missouri did not meet the Healthy People goal of decreasing diabetes death rates by 43% between the years 2000 and 2010 (figure 1).

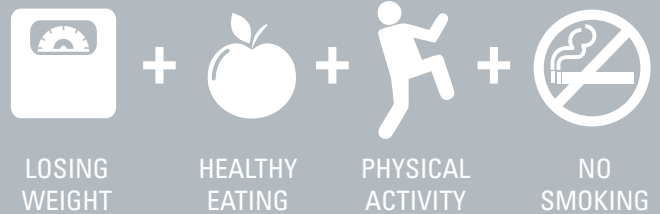
A recent study among women was the first to show that the risk of death from diabetes is similar across races.⁴ However, because diabetes is more common among African Americans, a higher number of African American women will die from diabetes-related conditions. Because of this, attention should be focused on diabetes prevention. This includes a focus on healthy lifestyles such as losing weight, eating a healthy diet, increasing physical activity, and not smoking. This focus on healthy lifestyles will also improve cancer and heart disease death rates.

What influences chronic disease?

There are many reasons why a person develops chronic disease. Some include things that are not preventable. For example, a person cannot do anything to change their family history of diabetes. But there are things that can be changed to help prevent chronic disease. It is estimated that about a third of all deaths in the US are due to just three behaviors: smoking, lack of exercise, and poor eating habits.⁵ Each can increase your risk of developing many chronic diseases.

Obesity also plays a big role in the development of chronic diseases such as heart disease, diabetes, and certain cancers.⁶ In St. Louis County, a 2011 study showed that 46% of African American adults are obese.⁷ The same study showed that in St. Louis City 38% of African American adults are obese. Behaviors like exercising and eating healthy play an important role in preventing obesity and other chronic diseases. Despite the benefits of being physically active, many African Americans in the St. Louis region are not exercising. In St. Louis County, 31% of African American adults do not exercise in their free time. And in St. Louis City, 28% of African American adults do not exercise in their free time.⁷

HEALTHY LIFESTYLES HELP PREVENT CHRONIC DISEASE



How does our environment affect our health?

The opportunity to make the healthy choice the easy choice starts where we live, work, and play. Our families, schools, workplaces, and parks can help us to live healthy lives. But our environment can also make it difficult for people to choose healthy behaviors such as eating fruits and vegetables, exercising, and not smoking. Unfortunately, not everyone has the opportunity to live in a neighborhood that makes it easy to choose healthy behaviors.

For example, people living in the St. Louis region reported differences in environmental supports for healthy lifestyles (figure 2). In a recent survey, only 39% of African Americans living in St. Louis City considered their neighborhood to be safe. Neighborhood safety is related to chronic disease because people who do not feel safe in their neighborhood are less likely to spend time playing, exercising, or actively commuting outdoors. Our environment also affects our ability to access grocery stores with fresh foods. In St. Louis City, only 66% of African Americans found it easy to buy healthy food. These numbers show that it is difficult for many African Americans in the St. Louis region to make healthy choices and better their health.⁷



Learn more about how our environment affects our health. [Click here](#) to watch a short video titled "This is Bill," and produced for the St. Louis Beacon.

How do chronic diseases affect our economy?

Chronic disease accounts for nearly one-third of all health spending in the US, which is about \$350 billion dollars.⁸ Local health care spending for chronic disease is also incredibly high. In 2011 alone, the cost of hospital care for diabetes, heart disease, and cancer among St. Louis residents was \$1.1 billion. Among African Americans, the cost of hospital care for diabetes, heart disease, and cancer was \$395 million.⁹

\$1.1 BILLION

HOSPITAL CHARGES FOR HEART DISEASE, CANCER, AND DIABETES IN ST. LOUIS

WHICH IS EQUIVALENT TO BUYING 3 EDWARD JONES DOMES EVERY YEAR!



Chronic diseases are a concern for us all because they weaken businesses and our local and state economy. Chronic disease cripples our economies in the form of missed school and work days, lost productivity, and high health care costs. A healthier workforce in the St. Louis region would mean a decrease in health care spending and a more productive local economy.

Figure 2: A higher percentage of White residents in the St. Louis region consider their neighborhood to be safe and find it easy to buy healthy foods compared with African American residents

	St. Louis City		St. Louis County	
	Whites	African Americans	Whites	African Americans
Consider neighborhood to be safe	65%	39%	87%	62%
Find it easy to buy healthy food	86%	66%	91%	73%

Source: MODHSS, Community Data Profiles

Notes: Prevalence estimates are among adults age 18 and older except where noted. Estimates are age-adjusted using the 2000 US Standard Population. Data is derived from the 2011 County-level Study.

All St. Louisans should have the opportunity to MAKE CHOICES THAT LEAD TO BETTER HEALTH

Here are the steps we can take now:

1 Expand partnerships and embed health in all policies

Health in all policies is a cross-sector collaboration to improve health. This happens by making health a part of the equation when decision makers such as policy makers, business leaders, and community organizations come together to make decisions. In other words, it's a way to incorporate health into the decision-making process.

Here are some ways to do it:¹⁰

- > Continue and enhance partnerships across sectors (e.g., hospitals and public health agencies)
- > Expand partnerships between the city and county health departments
- > Consider health in early stages of policy-making, planning, and program development
- > Consider long-term health impacts of decisions in addition to short-term financial projections
- > Consider how decisions could impact the health of disadvantaged populations



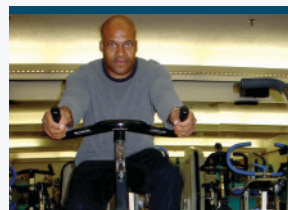
How do we adopt a health in all policies approach? [Click here](#) to read *Health in All Policies: A Guide for State and Local Governments*.

2 Invest in chronic disease prevention and management

A chronic disease prevention strategy recommended by the CDC is to create more opportunities for physical activity and to improve informational outreach to raise awareness about places for physical activity.¹¹ One recommendation is to invest in existing recreation centers, parks, and places for exercise and play.

- > Support and improve programs and activities at existing places for exercise and play
- > Increase awareness of existing exercise and healthy lifestyle programs that are available to the community
- > Improve existing places for exercise and play with increased safety and maintenance
 - Remove deterrents such as trash
 - Fix or replace vandalized amenities
 - Provide adequate lighting

There are great models here in St. Louis. One example is the O'Fallon Park Recreation Complex in North St. Louis City. The complex provides opportunities for physical activity and also focuses on outreach in order to keep the community informed, involved, and connected. Further support for efforts like this can get more people to be physically active.



[Click here](#) to visit the O'Fallon Park Recreation Complex website to learn more.

Another effective way to prevent chronic disease is to improve access to healthy food choices such as fresh fruits and vegetables.

- > Attract grocery stores and retailers that sell healthy foods with financial and regulatory incentives.¹²
- > Provide access to grocery stores by locating them in convenient distance to areas with poor access to grocery stores and healthy foods.



[Click here](#) to find out more about the St. Louis Healthy Corner Store Project.

Other groups and efforts in St. Louis are also working to help others manage their chronic diseases and empower people. The Breakfast Club for instance is a sisterhood of breast cancer survivors and co-survivors. They focus on impacting the community through education, awareness, and resources. The group also supports cancer prevention and screening. Another example is the Empowerment Network which is a prostate cancer advocacy group. Their aim is to raise awareness, improve screening, and provide information, services, and support.



[Click here](#) to visit the Breakfast Club website to learn more.

[Click here](#) to learn more about the Empowerment Network.

This is the fifth in a series of five briefs prepared by a team of researchers at Washington University and Saint Louis University. The data and recommendations discussed in the briefs will be explored in-depth in the forthcoming report, “For the Sake of All: A Report on the Health and Well-Being of African Americans in St. Louis.”

Resources

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