

Report: Harney County has highest COVID-19 death rate on West Coast

County's death rate, 487 per 100,000 over the past two years, surpassed that of any other county in the state

By **LYNNE TERRY**
Oregon Capital Chronicle

SALEM — Harney County had the highest COVID death rate on the West Coast, according to a report published on Monday, April 4.

The Poor People's Pandemic Report 2022 shows that 36 people died in Harney County between February 2020 and February 2022, giving the county a death rate of 487 per 100,000 people. That's higher than any other county in Oregon, Washington or California.

Imperial County in Southern California, where 860 people died over the two-year period, came next with 475 deaths per 100,000. The highest death rate in Washington state was in Columbia County in the west-central part of the state. A total of 13 people died over the two-year span, giving it a rate of 326 deaths per 100,000, the report said.

The report, which relied on death data from Johns Hopkins University in Maryland, was prepared by the Poor People's Campaign, an advocacy group for low-income people, and the Sustainable Development Solutions Network, a nonprofit created by the United Nations to promote sustainable development.

Overall, Oregon, Washington and California had among the lowest COVID death rates in the country. Galax County in Virginia had the highest rate at 1,134 per 100,000. Hancock County in Georgia came next with a death rate of 1,029 per 100,000. It was followed by

Motley County in Texas, with 1,000 people dying per 100,000.

"The 10% of counties that had the highest death rates had death rates exceeding approximately 526 deaths per 100,000," Alaina Lynch, senior research manager of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network, told the Capital Chronicle in an email.

The Oregon Health Authority said Oregon fared much better than many states because so many Oregonians wore masks and followed other COVID mandates. "Our COVID-19 strategy helped to save lives and kept cases and hospitalizations lower than in other states," Rudy Owens, an agency spokesperson, said in an email.

The report considered vaccination rates but said they didn't explain variation in death rates.

"Average vaccination rates are in general higher in the highest income counties than in the middle- and low-income counties; however, these differences do not explain the whole variation in death rates in the later waves of the pandemic," the report said.

Poverty and demographics

Poverty and demographics wound together as the common thread, according to the report.

"Counties with the highest death rates are poorer than counties with lower death rates, with higher percentages of people of color," the report said. "The 300-plus counties with the highest death rates



Wind speeds hit 74 mph in Harney County on April 4, 2022. The low-population Eastern Oregon county has the highest COVID death rate on the West Coast.

Rick Vetter/Contributed Photo

have a poverty rate of 45%, which is 1.5 times higher than in counties with lower death rates."

The health authority said the pandemic made it clear that not everyone has an equal opportunity to be healthy.

"This includes people of color, people with low incomes, people who identify as LGBTQ+, people with disabilities, and people who live in rural areas of the state," Owens said. "People in these communities face considerable barriers due to inequities in the social and physical infrastructures that affect health."

Nic Calvin, director of Harney County's Public Health Department, said poverty could have been a factor in the county's death rate.

"In terms of access to the vaccine, it's completely free so we've tried to break down any barriers," he said. "Once a person got COVID, poverty could have been a factor" in the severity of the disease.

The report found that in Harney County, nearly 40% were living in poverty, defined as a maximum of \$2,265 a month for one

person and \$4,625 a month for a family of four.

In Josephine County, which had the second highest death rate in the state at 354 deaths per 100,000, nearly 44% were living in poverty, the report stated. In Malheur County, which had the third highest death rate at 330 deaths per 100,000 in the two-year time span, the report found that 48% were living in poverty.

Calvin said Harney County's low population — about 7,300 people — could have skewed the numbers.

"We're such a small population," he said. "If we have an additional five people die, that puts our per-capita death rate higher."

Politics and race

Other Eastern Oregon counties also have low populations, and among the lowest vaccination rates in the state. Lake County has the lowest vaccination rate in the state, with 46% of adults receiving one dose, according to the Oregon Health Authority. Malheur, Grant, Gilliam and Baker come next, in that order. Harney County has the sixth

COVID DEATHS IN OREGON COUNTIES

County rates per 100,000 people

- Harney County: 487
- Josephine County: 354
- Malheur County: 330
- Douglas County: 318
- Jefferson County: 316
- Lake County: 292
- Crook County: 279
- Baker County: 273
- Klamath County: 271
- Union County: 265
- Umatilla County: 255
- Grant County: 250
- Morrow County: 233
- Wheeler County: 225
- Tillamook County: 211
- Gilliam County: 209
- Coos County: 209
- Jackson County: 204
- Wasco County: 199
- Wallowa County: 194
- Curry County: 191
- Marion County: 181
- Hood River County: 180
- Yamhill County: 175
- Linn County: 175
- Sherman County: 169
- Columbia County: 141
- Polk County: 137
- Lincoln County: 132
- Multnomah County: 125
- Deschutes County: 122
- Clackamas County: 121
- Lane County: 116
- Clatsop County: 94
- Washington County: 81
- Benton County: 63

67% of adult Hispanics have had one dose compared with 83% of whites, according to July 1, 2021, estimates from the U.S. Census bureau.

The discrepancy is even bigger when looking at booster shots. About 28% of Hispanics have had one booster shot compared with 49% for whites.

The state's most populous counties, largely in the Willamette Valley, all have relatively low poverty rates, like Deschutes, and low death rates. Benton County, which had the lowest death rate in the state at 63 deaths per 100,000, had a poverty rate of 33%, comparable to most other Willamette Valley counties.

Race was a factor in high rates in counties across the country, the report said, but it appeared to be less relevant in Oregon, where 87% of the population is white. For example, in Harney County only 5% were Hispanic, and in Josephine County, with the second highest death rate, 7% of the population was Hispanic. That compared with Malheur County, where 34% were Hispanic.

The groups behind the report hope it will rally members of Congress and President Joe Biden to do more to help poor people.

"The findings of this report reveal neglect, and sometimes intentional decisions, to not focus on the poor," said Bishop William Barber II, president of the nonprofit advocacy group Repairers of the Breach. "It is further evidence why we have called for the president to meet, at the White House, with a diverse delegation of poor and low-wealth people, religious leaders and economists to put addressing poverty and low wealth front and center."

lowest rate: 56% of adults have had at least one dose.

"Like most Eastern Oregon counties, there was some resistance to getting vaccinated due to the political nature of the vaccine," Calvin said. "We have had vaccinations available every day basically since the vaccine came out."

The Oregon Health Authority, which considers equity a top priority, has acknowledged that racial and ethnic minorities had the lowest vaccination rates in the first half of 2021. But the agency said it has since narrowed the difference between minorities and whites. About

Anthony Lakes wraps up successful ski season

By **JAYSON JACOBY**
Baker City Herald

NORTH POWDER — It wasn't the snowiest winter on record, but Anthony Lakes Mountain Resort had plenty on its slopes to keep skiers and snowboarders sliding all season.

"Overall, we had a great season," said Chelsea Judy, marketing director for the ski area in the Elkhorn Mountains about 45 miles southwest of La Grande.

A dearth of early storms delayed the start of the season until Dec. 18.

But once the resort was open, the snow base was sufficient, despite a prolonged dry stretch that lasted for most of February, to keep Anthony Lakes on its usual schedule through the final day, Sunday, April 3.

The importance of the resort's elevation — 7,100 feet at the lodge, the highest base elevation among Northwest ski areas — proved itself yet again, Judy said.

Anthony Lakes' lofty position largely insulates it from thaws that can force

less-elevation ski areas to temporarily close or reduce operations due to a lack of snow.

Much of the winter's snow fell in December and early January.

March, which in many years brings the biggest storms of the winter, was something of an anomaly this year, with only about two feet of total snow.

Nonetheless, "we had great skiing all year and the snowpack held up great," Judy said.

She didn't have visitor numbers available, but Judy said this season was "definitely quieter than last year."

During the first year of the pandemic, outdoor recreation proved popular across the West as the cancellation of most large events prompted people to seek other forms of entertainment.

Camping and hiking in the summer were attractive since social distancing was simpler.

And the trend continued into the winter of 2020-21, with skiers, both downhill and cross-country, flocking

to Anthony Lakes and other resorts.

This winter was more typical in terms of attendance, Judy said, although last winter's growing popularity of cross-country skiing continued this year.

Some other, less welcome, effects of the pandemic did dissipate this season.

Last winter, Anthony Lakes limited seating on the chairlift to ensure social distancing, and that, combined with the large crowds, resulted in longer lift lines and waits than is typical.

This winter, though, the seats accommodated three skiers as usual, with much shorter lines, Judy said.

She said visitors also appreciated the end of the indoor mask mandate in early March.

The only other significant effect of the pandemic was a four-day closure of the lodge in early January — the resort was open for skiing — when several employees were out after testing positive for COVID-19.

According to Anthony Lakes, the resort paid

\$555,000 in wages to employees from October 2021 through the end of the season.

The resort's total expenditures during that period were \$807,000, 90% of which were spent locally.

Its "support local" program, which gives visitors a discounted \$25 lift ticket if they bring a recent receipt of \$40 or more from a locally owned restaurant or shop in Baker and Union counties, resulted in 289 tickets being sold, representing a minimum of \$11,560 spent in local businesses.

The resort's free skiing program for fifth and sixth graders had an average of 45 students over the eight-week program.

Anthony Lakes also hosted 24 youth and community groups, offering discounted rates, this winter.

Although the ski season has ended, Anthony Lakes plans to have meals and other events at the lodge this summer. More information is available at www.anthonylakes.com.

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Union County will begin their roadside spraying program to control vegetation and noxious weeds that are encroaching on county road shoulders and right-of-ways. In most locations, spraying will extend four to eight feet from pavement edges. Property owners who do not want herbicides applied near their property must sign an "Owner Will Maintain" agreement with the county which must be updated annually. The county will provide signs for the owners participating. Property owners wishing to participate can sign up for the "Owner Will Maintain" program at the Union County Public Works Department located at 10513 N. McAlister Road in Island City. Any questions, please call Brian Clapp 541-805-5399 or email bclapp@union-county.org.

Charles & Eileen Stewart

10304 A 1st St.
Island City, OR

cstewartpc@gmail.com

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