

Environment is a key factor contributing to population health as well as individual health. Where a person lives affects their ability to exercise, access quality foods, reliably have transportation, and even to feel safe in their home. By working together with the community, students can make a major difference in improving the quality of living for inhabitants, which ultimately will have a positive impact on health.

Participating in physical activity has known health benefits, including improving cardiovascular health, mood, and lowering the risk of life-limiting diseases such as obesity. Access to areas to exercise (green spaces, workout facilities) has been linked to increased physical activity. Although the Upper Peninsula is known for having beautiful summers, the long, cold winters can cause barriers in continuing healthy habits year round. According to the Community Health Needs Assessment for the Upper Peninsula, 55.3% of teens and young adults failed to get sixty minutes of physical activity at least five days of the week. The same needs assessment identified that several counties in the Upper Peninsula had a low percentage of the population with access to locations for physical activity. In Keweenaw county, only a shocking 9% of residents had adequate access.

Another concerning trend in the Upper Peninsula is drug use. In 2021, the Western U.P Health department listed substance abuse within its top four priority issues. Substance abuse within communities can promote increased crime rates, put more demand on the already strained mental healthcare system, and lead to ill health for users. Unfortunately, the Upper Peninsula is noted for having rates of drinking and drug use far above the national average. This contributes to a trickle down effect of poor health and feelings of insecurity within communities.

There are many ways university and college students can get involved to influence healthier habits and eventually improve the neighborhood/environment as a whole. Firstly, young adults can serve as positive role models for youth, as building healthy habits should start early. This can be through volunteering with pre-established organizations like the Teen Outreach Program(TOP) or mentoring associations like Big Brothers/Big Sisters. Students can also spearhead initiatives in the community like planning 5ks, hosting group exercise classes, or lock-in parties. Specifically within the Upper Peninsula, students can be integral to breaking down structural barriers to physical activity. For example, many areas have instituted programs designed to help kids be able to walk to school. College students could assist with the building of sidewalks, serve as crossing guards, and teach classes on pedestrian safety.

Students can also focus on promoting a drug-free lifestyle to youth. Because college students tend to be closer in age to youth, encouragement and education may be better received from them. Peer pressure and generational patterns are large factors in triggering and reinforcing substance use, so surrounding youth with non-users can provide the support they need to break the cycle. Although these problems will not be solved overnight, working together as a community can improve outcomes for everyone.