

Exploring Health across Whatcom County

Executive Summary of 2018 Community Health Snapshots

Introduction

Where you live affects your health.

The 2011 and 2018 *Community Health Assessments* found that while Whatcom County residents are healthy on average, not everyone experiences the same level of good health or access to healthy opportunities. Income, education, and zip code are some of the well-known factors that contribute to differences in health.

This report describes what we learned in taking a closer look at the relationship between place and health in Whatcom County. It summarizes seven reports, or *Community Health Snapshots*: one for each of the school districts in Whatcom County. The snapshots provide greater detail about how geographic communities within Whatcom County compare to the health of the county overall. Each snapshot and this executive summary also include feedback from community members about concerns and strengths related to their community's health that they feel are important.

The information on the following pages is a companion to the 2018 *Whatcom County Community Health Assessment*. While not comprehensive, it gives further information about some of the similarities and differences in how health is experienced throughout our county.

Why School Districts?

Schools can help create a sense of community for many people. We used school districts as community boundaries in these assessments because people often identify their community in connection to schools and school districts. School districts also have clear geographic boundaries, and some school district-level community health data is readily available.

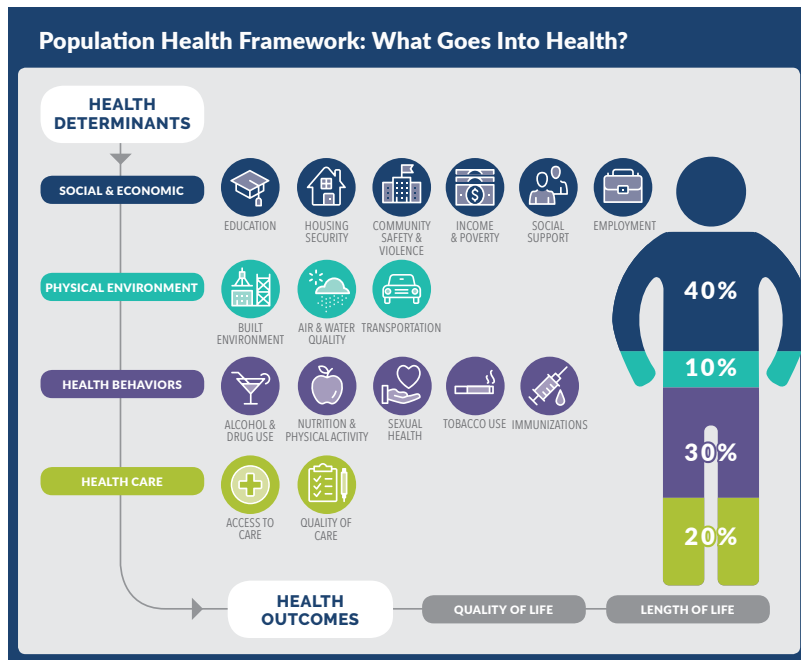
Key Themes

In reviewing the available community-level, public health indicators and collecting qualitative data through community listening sessions, we found few, but important, differences and many shared health concerns across Whatcom County. We also developed a better understanding of the challenges experienced by rural residents. Key themes include:

- 01** While Whatcom County is predominantly white (80% on average), this is not equally true in all communities. There are larger percentages of American Indian/Alaska Natives in the Ferndale, Nooksack and Mt. Baker school district areas; a greater percentage of Hispanic/Latino individuals in the Nooksack Valley school district, and a higher percentage of Asian individuals in Bellingham and Blaine. **Overall, younger generations are becoming more racially and ethnically diverse, a statistic being particularly noticed by school and early learning professionals.**
- 02** Some key health outcomes, including **rates of death due to heart disease, cancer, and traffic fatalities, are statistically better in the Bellingham and Lynden communities.**
- 03** Rural residents have voiced that the **lack of employment opportunities, grocery stores, healthcare and social services**, as well as limited transportation options to access such amenities, have a negative impact on quality of life and individual health.
- 04** Residents in smaller communities, such as those in the Mt. Baker, Ferndale and Nooksack Valley school districts, report that **helping one another is a community value. At the same time, isolation can be a challenge** for those living in more rural areas, particularly for older adults and individuals with limited mobility.
- 05** **Mental and behavioral health**, including drug and alcohol use, lack of treatment options, and youth depression and anxiety, are common topics of concern.
- 06** **Homelessness and the affordability, availability, and quality of housing** are shared concerns throughout all Whatcom County communities.

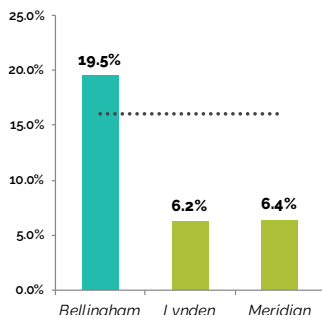
Understanding the Report

The data in this summary is presented using the categories of the Population Health Framework.



We've used the population health framework shown to the left in our assessment of community health. It demonstrates how health outcomes – the length and health-related quality of one's life – are the result of complex interactions between many factors, or **health determinants**. Health determinants fall into one of four categories: social and economic factors, physical environment, health behaviors, and health care.

The Population Health Framework is adapted from the County Health Rankings population health model. More information can be obtained at <http://www.countyhealthrankings.org/explore-health-rankings/what-and-why-we-rank>



Public Health Data

Indicators in the *Community Health Snapshots* were selected where data is available at a school district level, taken from 23 standard population health data systems.

Data is graphed within the report when a specific community is statistically higher or lower than the county average (indicated by a dotted line). Communities are not included if their data is similar to the county average.



Community Views

Each part of this report includes qualitative data in sections called *Community Views*. The *Community Views* summarize discussions with residents and service providers about factors that impact health in their community. They represent what we heard directly from community members.



We collected data at **15 listening sessions** throughout the county and heard from **90 participants**.



Demographics



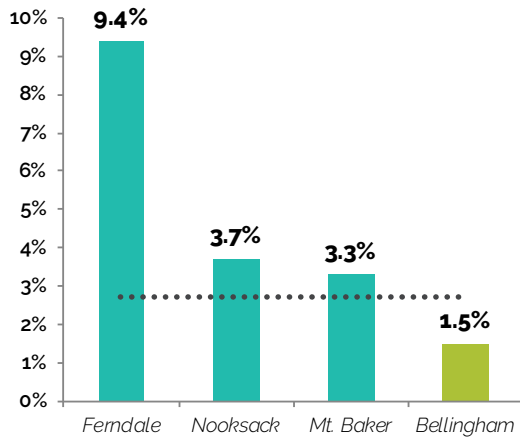
Knowing more about the population trends in a community helps in understanding the needs that might be unique to each community or to particular groups of people.

Race & Ethnicity:

Percent of American Indian/Alaska Native residents

WHATCOM COUNTY AVERAGE: 2.7% ●●●●

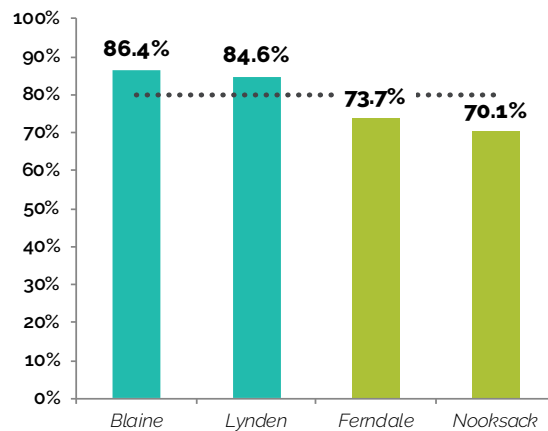
Source: American Community Survey, 2012-16



Percent of White residents

WHATCOM COUNTY AVERAGE: 80.1% ●●●●

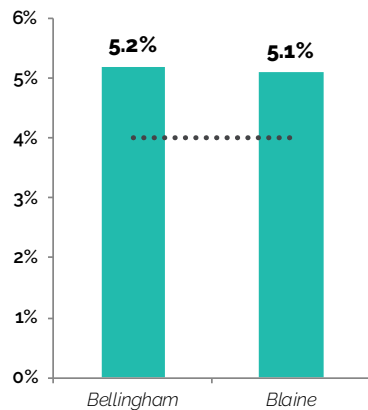
Source: American Community Survey, 2012-16



Percent of Asian residents

WHATCOM COUNTY AVERAGE: 4.0% ●●●●

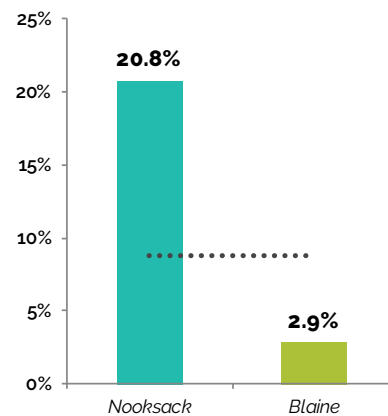
Source: American Community Survey, 2012-16



Percent of Hispanic/Latino residents

WHATCOM COUNTY AVERAGE: 8.8% ●●●●

Source: American Community Survey, 2012-16



Community Views

What we heard...

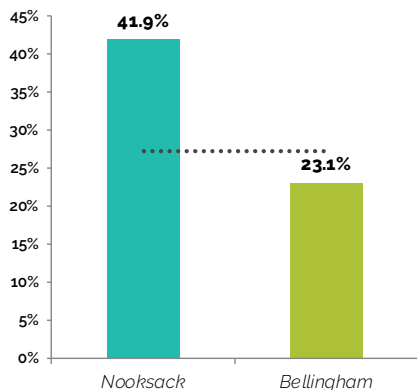


- **Bellingham has a larger percentage of young adults** due to the presence of the university, community college, and technical college.
- **Whatcom County is experiencing a demographic shift toward younger generations that are more racially and ethnically diverse.** This “racial generational gap” creates the potential for residents to feel disconnected from their community and government services.
- **Community members report that it's harder for people of color to find jobs and housing,** and that without addressing this disparity, marginalization and racism remain present within our communities.
- **There is a sense of distrust and lack of connection between residents based on socio-economic status.**

Percent of households with children

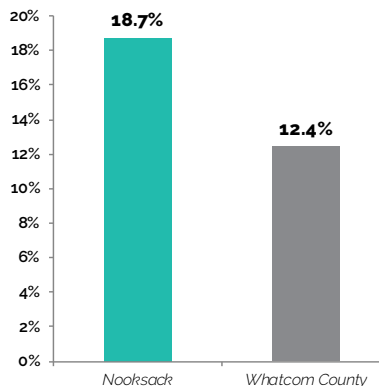
WHATCOM COUNTY AVERAGE: 27.0% ●●●●

Source: American Community Survey, 2012-16



Percent of households who speak a language other than English at home

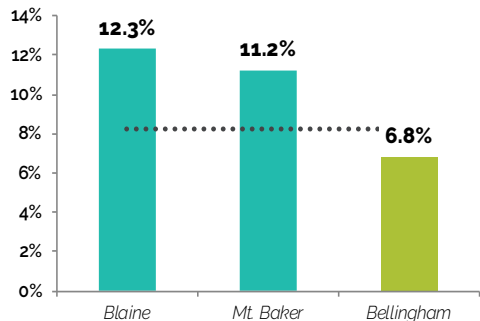
Source: American Community Survey, 2012-16



Veteran population

WHATCOM COUNTY AVERAGE: 8.0% ●●●●

Source: American Community Survey, 2012-16



Health Outcomes



Bellingham and Lynden both have better health outcomes than the county averages when it comes to some of the leading causes of death.

Bellingham has lower rates of death caused by:

- Heart Disease**
- Stroke**
- Motor Vehicles**
- Cancers**

Lynden has lower rates of death caused by:

- Cardiovascular Disease**
- Cancers**
- Chronic Lower Respiratory Disease**

Social & Economic Factors

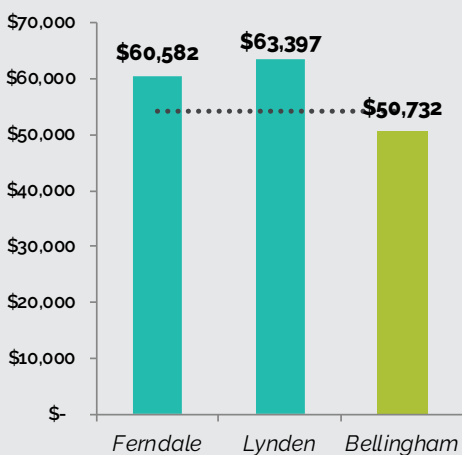


Income and poverty, as well as related factors, like employment and food security, are tied to health outcomes and quality of life.

Median household income

WHATCOM COUNTY AVERAGE: \$54,212

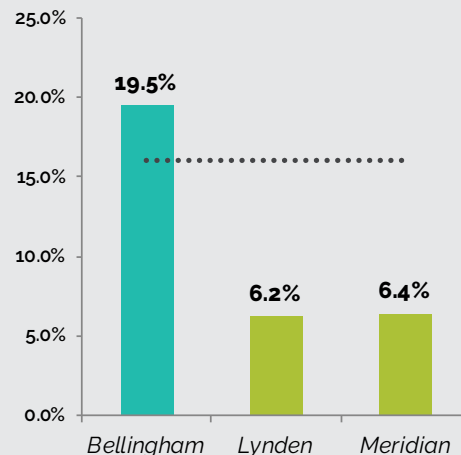
Source: American Community Survey, 2012-16



Poverty rate

WHATCOM COUNTY AVERAGE: 16.0%

Source: American Community Survey, 2012-16



Community Views



What we heard...



EDUCATION

- **Education is a key concern for community members. Kindergarten readiness varies throughout the county,** and many communities, like Ferndale, are using data to drive a focus on early childhood education.
- **For many children, issues around basic needs including consistent meals and housing security is impacting their ability to sleep at night and learn during the school day.** Community members report that school districts are proactive in getting services, supports, and scholarships to students in need.
- **School administrators, service providers, and residents see that race, sexual orientation, and English language proficiency impact student opportunity for success.** There is a need to address these issues and provide support for staff and students in order to improve equity.
- **In all areas of the county, residents expressed that affordability, availability, quality of childcare and early childhood education, as well as staff training and compensation,** are problems in their community. Quality childcare and early childhood education have impacts on family income, stress, and future educational attainment.



COMMUNITY SAFETY & VIOLENCE

- **Community safety is a concern in rural parts of the county, particularly in eastern Whatcom County where residents report concerns about drug use, and a reduced sense of safety on trails and roadways.** Additionally, it can take a long time for law enforcement or other services to arrive, increasing the sense of vulnerability.
- **The rate of child abuse and neglect is a significant community concern in many areas of the county.**



HOUSING

- **Housing affordability, availability, quality and homelessness** are concerns voiced in every area of the county. Affordability is straining family resources and residents see the negative impact of homelessness on individuals, families, and the community as a whole.



EMPLOYMENT

- **In east Whatcom County, changes in farm production have impacted the economy and job opportunities.** The transition from dairy to berry farming has resulted in a loss of farming jobs.



SOCIAL ISOLATION

- **In Bellingham, neighborhoods create social networks** within the city and help some community members find a sense of place and safety.
- **Residents throughout the county consider community facilities, groups and events as assets to improving community health and creating strong communities.** Residents value the resources of county libraries, the East Whatcom Regional Resource Center, food banks, Meals on Wheels, hosted community meals, senior center meals and activities, substance abuse prevention coalitions, and the support of youth by Boys and Girls clubs and the YMCA. Positive events include Sumas Days, Everson and Ferndale Pioneer Days, Bellingham's Ski to Sea, Friday art walks, summer music nights, and many others.
- **Communities including Ferndale, Nooksack Valley, and Mt. Baker recognized that helping one another is a community value.** The smaller size of these communities helps create a sense that community members can make a difference in each other's lives.



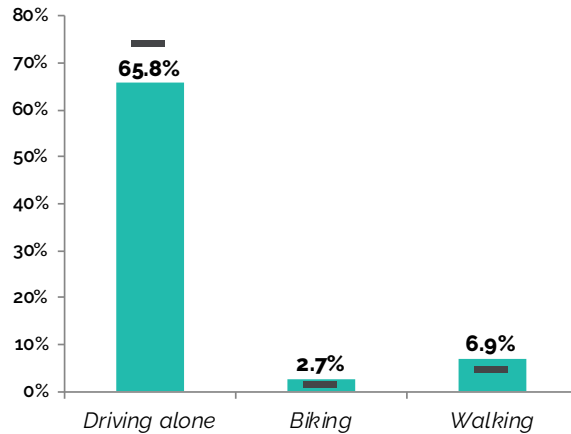
Physical Environment



The physical environment in Bellingham is generally more conducive to non-motorized transportation, with more commuters biking and walking to work than throughout the rest of the county and state. This is not true of all areas within Bellingham.

Commute to work

BELLINGHAM ■
WHATCOM COUNTY AVERAGE —
Source: American Community Survey, 2012-16



Community Views

What we heard...



- **Transportation barriers make it difficult for rural residents outside of Bellingham to access jobs, healthy food, health care, childcare and connection with community.**
- **The Mt. Baker Highway is dangerous with high speeds, lack of shoulders and unsafe passing,** and this makes biking and walking in the area unsafe and unavailable due to lack of alternative routes or trails.
- **Whatcom County's natural environment and beauty is regularly cited as an asset** within all areas of the county.
- **Local farms are a healthy source of food for many residents.**
- **Urban planning in some areas within Bellingham has supported the development of walk- and bike-friendly areas,** promoting physical activity and enjoyment of the natural environment. Residents report that greenspaces are well-used and that outdoor recreation is part of the culture of the community.

Health Behaviors

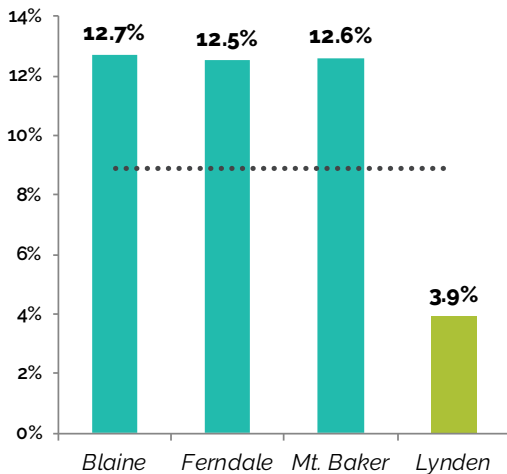


The rate of women who smoked during pregnancy in Lynden was notably lower than the county average, while the rate was significantly higher in Blaine, Ferndale, and Mt. Baker.

Women smoking during pregnancy

WHATCOM COUNTY AVERAGE: 8.9% ●●●●

Source: Washington State Dept. of Health, 2012-16



Community Views

What we heard...

HEALTH BEHAVIORS

- Residents report that many areas, both rural and within Bellingham, lack adequate access to healthy foods, that healthy foods are expensive and not available to those without the resources to buy it, and that there is a need for nutrition education.
- Stigma around mental health and substance treatment in small communities, combined with a lack of resources, create barriers to addressing these health needs for many residents. Transportation to services is also noted as a deterrent to seeking help.
- High rates of youth depression and suicide contemplation are concerns for residents, and is being noticed by school nurses and other service providers. Professionals working in schools find this issue is often more acute for youth who are bullied and/or identify as LGBTQ.



Health Care



Bellingham boasts the best rate of adult health insurance coverage in Whatcom County. In Mt. Baker and Nooksack, fewer adults have health insurance compared to the county average.



- **Alcohol and drug use, including opioids and heroin,** is a big problem in urban and rural parts of the county. Substance use is intertwined with issues of depression and hopelessness, and also results in theft and community safety issues.

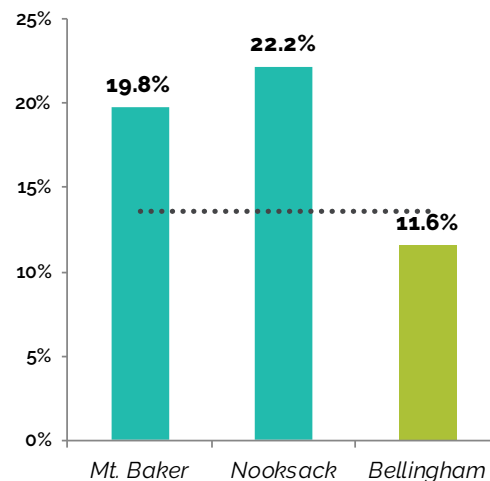
HEALTH CARE

- **Time and transportation hurdles deter many residents from seeking the health care they need.** The lack of health services outside of Bellingham is challenging for many residents. This includes primary care, urgent care, mental and behavioral health services, substance use treatment, and lab work facilities.
- **Specialty care and veterans' care often cannot be addressed in Whatcom County.** Transportation to Seattle or other locations is a challenge.

Adults without health insurance

WHATCOM COUNTY AVERAGE: 13.6% ●●●●

Source: American Community Survey, 2012-16



13.6%

of adults in Whatcom County do not have health insurance.



Evidence has demonstrated that people without health insurance are less likely than those with insurance to receive preventive care and services for major health conditions and chronic diseases.³⁷



Both the countywide 2018 *Community Health Assessment* and the seven *Community Health Snapshots* contribute to a Community Health Improvement process that includes developing a *Community Health Improvement Plan*. Ultimately, the purpose is to take actions that change the underlying factors that affect the community's health, make healthy choices easier, improve access to care, and provide everyone with an equal chance at a healthy life.

USING THIS INFORMATION FOR COMMUNITY HEALTH IMPROVEMENT PLANNING:

Data from this summary of the *Community Health Snapshots* will be used to inform decisions in the next phase of Community Health Improvement: the Focus phase. During the Focus phase our county's top health priorities will be selected.

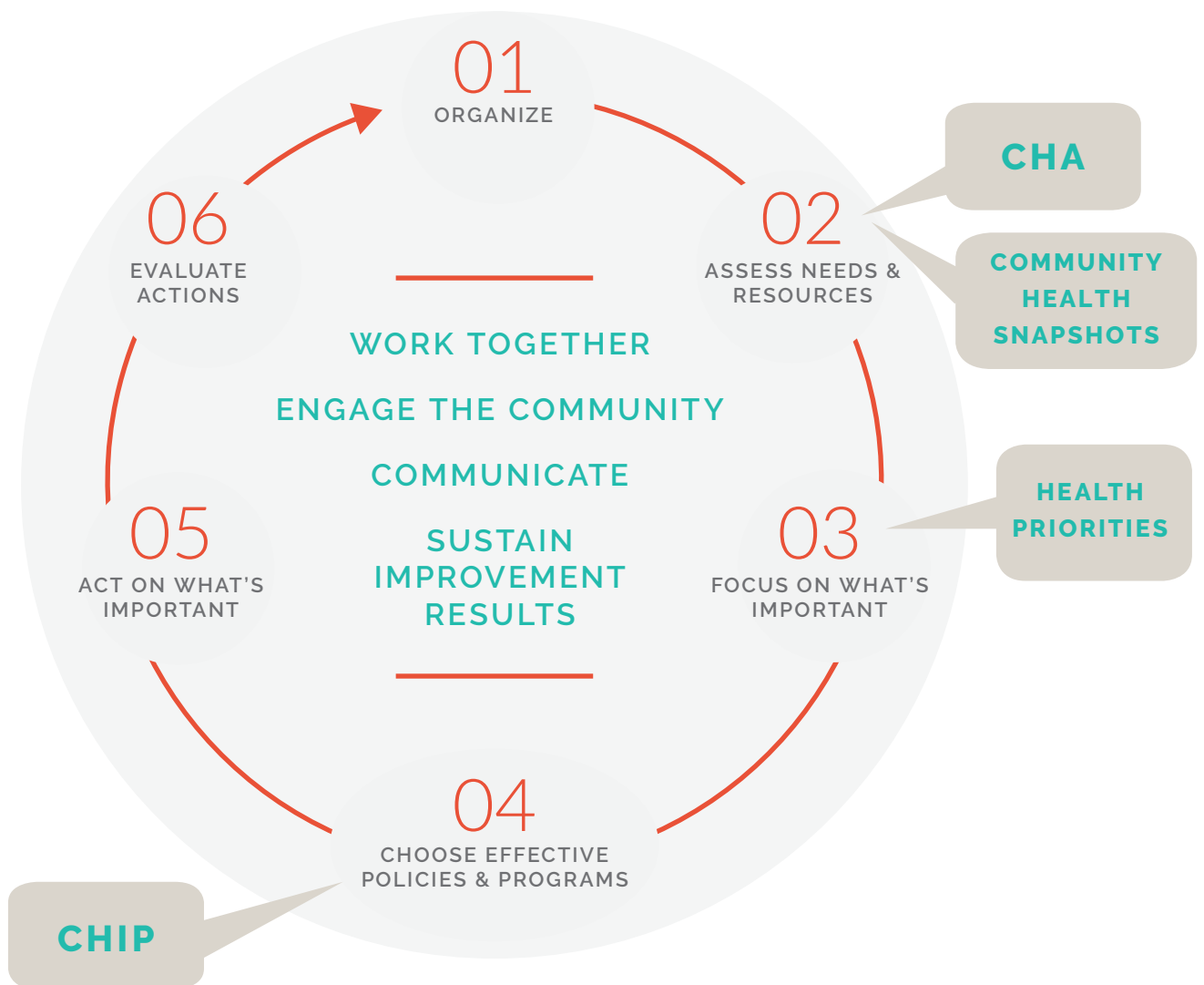
USING THIS INFORMATION FOR COMMUNITY-BASED ACTION:

Many community groups and hard-working residents are already at work improving their communities. The findings in each *Community Health Snapshot* can further inform their actions to mobilize and create change or further build on their assets and strengths.

LIMITATIONS: Limited availability of public health data at the school district level narrowed the number of health indicators to examine for geographic differences. Due to small sample sizes, statistical differences were not available for several geographic areas. Limited community participation in listening sessions, as well as the limited number, scheduling, location, accessibility, and perceived value of the listening sessions restricted the range and depth of community health issues explored in these community conversations. In all, there were 90 participants who attended the 15 community listening sessions held throughout the county in 2017 and 2018. For most of the complex concerns brought forward by community members, there are not available ways of examining the topic area in greater depth from an objective or quantitative data standpoint, emphasizing the importance of additional community participation in community health assessment and improvement efforts.

Phases of Community Health Improvement

Community Health Improvement is a multi-year, repeating cycle that builds upon previous efforts.





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Amy Hockenberry, Health Information and Assessment Supervisor
ahockenb@whatcomcounty.us

Katie Stanford, Assessment Specialist
kstanfor@whatcomcounty.us

Whatcom County Health Department
509 Girard Street
Bellingham, WA 98225
(360)778-6000

