Midwestern states were healthier, overall, than the country as a whole in 2016, according to the United Health Foundation’s newest “America’s Health Rankings Annual Report,” released in December 2016 (based on data as of October). The report found that:

- Minnesota is the fourth-healthiest state in the union, with a low rate of drug deaths (9.3 per 100,000) as well as low percentages of children in poverty (8 percent) and population without insurance (5.2 percent).
- Iowa posted the best one-year improvement, rising five spots from 22nd to 17th — a move attributed to improvements in the percentage of children aged 19 to 35 months receiving recommended immunizations and a 32 percent increase in HPV immunization among adolescent females, along with improvements in public health funding and reductions in the rates of pertussis (whooping cough).
- Wisconsin rose from 24th to 20th, placing it, too, among the five states with the most improved scores. South Dakota, however, dropped five slots from 19th to 24th.

Seven of the 11 Midwestern states’ overall scores were above the national median. The report rated states on “health determinants” and “health outcomes.”

Determinants include smoking, obesity, drug deaths, excessive drinking, high school graduation rate, physical inactivity, air pollution, rate of children in poverty, infectious disease rates, occupational fatalities, violent crime, immunization rates, lack of health insurance, level of public health spending, number of dentists and primary care physicians, preventable hospitalizations and low birthweights.

Outcomes include deaths from cancer, cardiovascular disease or diabetes; health status; frequent mental and/or physical distress; infant mortality rates; and premature deaths.

The report cautions that each state, from Hawaii (No. 1 overall) to Mississippi (No. 50 overall), has its own strengths and weaknesses. The report’s stated purpose is “to be a catalyst for data-driven discussions on indicators that have the potential to improve health and drive positive change.”

The report identified obesity, along with increased deaths from drugs and cardiovascular diseases, as troubling national trends —for example, the cardiovascular death rate rose for the first time in the report’s history.

Moreover, 30 percent of adults nationwide were considered obese in 2016 — a 157 percent increase since the first report was issued in 1990. Kansas was the only state to see a “significant” increase in the prevalence of obesity in 2016: 34 percent of adults were considered obese, up from 31 percent in 2015.

Smoking trends in the states varied; between 2012 and 2016, smoking by adults 18 and older decreased fastest in Illinois (minus 1.37 percent annually), but Indiana was one of three U.S. states with a higher average prevalence of smoking relative to other states.