

Regional Coordination

In addition to the Blaine County government and the five cities therein, community partners in livability include:

Blaine County Recreation District (BCRD)

Blaine County Education Foundation

Blaine County School District

Bureau of Land Management (BLM)

Hailey Urban Renewal Agency

Ketchum Urban Renewal Agency

The Hunger Coalition

The Senior Connection

Spur Foundation

St. Luke's Wood River Foundation

Sun Valley Economic Development (SVED)

Sun Valley Institute for Resilience

Visit Sun Valley

Wood River Trails Coalition

Baseline Characteristics:

LIVABILITY

Among planners, livability is generally regarded as “the sum of various elements that add up to a community’s quality of life— including the built and natural environments, social stability and equity, economic prosperity, educational and cultural opportunity.”²²³ The AARP measures livability for every neighborhood and community across the country, based on assessments of “the services and amenities that affect people’s lives the most.”²²⁴ AARP’s Livability Index relies on housing, neighborhood location, transportation environment, health, engagement and opportunity indicators— because livability is largely influenced by the physical qualities of a place and community.

In seeking to maintain and enhance quality of life for the diversity of people in Blaine County, the Wood River Land Trust’s community planning program will focus on land use decisions that impact livability locally. Livability factors hinge on connection or access to basic needs, access that reduces stress and supports independent living. Local policy statements prioritize livability; valuing access to healthy food, enjoyment of nature, participation in the local economy, social connection to each other and representative leadership, reflecting the diversity of people and cultures in Blaine County.²²⁵

If these are the elements that make for a happy life in Blaine County—if they underpin and amplify “quality of place” in the parlance of Sun Valley Economic Development—some cracks are starting to show. Aspects of this small-town self-image are challenged by growth accelerating in resort areas and gateway communities across the mountain west, including the Wood River Valley.²²⁶

The 2022 Resident Opinion Survey from Visit Sun Valley found that 43% of full-time residents said that the quality of life in the Wood River Valley was in decline, compared to 26% of second-home owners.²²⁷ Locals were also more likely to say that the valley was too crowded, too expensive and changing in ways that concerned them. A smaller percentage of locals (47%) than seasonal residents (63%) said that they were “very proud” of the Wood River Valley as a place to live.²²⁸

These polls, though, fail to capture the whole valley; the south valley communities were underrepresented. Overrepresentation of the northern cities means that respondents were more likely to be older, whiter and wealthier than the valley as a whole— 97% of respondents were white. These older residents are also better equipped to weather the valley’s mounting costs,²²⁹ including housing and food, and are less likely to rely on wages from the local economy for money.²³⁰ While the survey asked important and insightful questions— worthwhile asking again, across the County— its methodology and findings ought to be considered as a symptom of local disparities, rather than representative findings. Why did the survey unintentionally overrepresent the north valley? And, had it considered the opinions of people living in the south valley, would its findings have been different?

The county’s southern cities are not only younger but also more diverse, supporting a large and growing Latino population. In 2023, 45.8% of students in Blaine County School District were Hispanic or Latino; 50.5% were white.²³¹ Carey, the county’s youngest community, is already majority Latino.²³² Compare that to the whole county, where 23.7% of people identified as Hispanic or



Children practiced safe-cycling skills through place-based education with Mountain Rides’ former Safe Routes program in 2021.

Latino, and 73.2% said they were white.²³³

Ketchum and Sun Valley, the cities with the highest housing costs, have median ages of 51 and 64 respectively.²³⁴ The population skews younger moving south: 41 in Hailey; 37 in Bellevue and 30 in Carey.²³⁵ Overall, Blaine

County’s median age rose from 38.8 in 2009 to 45.9 in 2023. From 2021 to 2022, Blaine County had the joint highest jump in median age of any county in the country.²³⁶ The shift in median age is not solely attributed to growth but also population change.²³⁷ People have migrated out of the County, and the people moving in are significantly older and wealthier.^{238,239}

With population change, the County has grown increasingly racially segregated. Based on the U.S. Census Bureau’s racial dissimilarity index, Blaine County is the second most segregated county in Idaho.²⁴⁰ To achieve integration in neighborhoods and cities throughout the County, so that “each neighborhood’s racial/ethnic composition [would] match that of the larger area”²⁴¹ or County, nearly 40% of residents would have to move census tracts.²⁴²

Zooming out, the picture is one of a county with stark disparities— a county that is home to extreme wealth, as well as to a working class struggling to keep pace with the high cost of living. The United Way found that, while Blaine County’s median household income was higher than Idaho’s average, 41% of households here can’t afford the basic cost of living in the area.²⁴³ In 2018, the nonprofit Economic Policy Institute announced Blaine County to be the most unequal county in Idaho, with the top 1% of earners making on average 46.8 times more than the bottom 99%.²⁴⁴ That coefficient makes Blaine the 27th most unequal county in the United States. Looking at other resort mountain towns— Teton County, Wyoming is the most unequal in the country, where the 1% make 142.2 times more than the bottom 99%.²⁴⁵ Only three other mountain resort town counties experience greater inequality than Blaine County— two in Colorado and one in New Hampshire.²⁴⁶

How inequality affects livability— including access to the recreational, social and cultural amenities in Blaine County— is anecdotally understood yet understudied. “Livability is frequently used as an umbrella of indicators. However, in many cases, the indicators are chosen first and then gathered under the livability ‘umbrella’ rather

than following from a distinct conceptual framework.”²⁴⁷ As a community, the planners in Blaine County have not settled on a set of core community values, nor a distinct conceptual framework for livability. Once there is consensus on a local definition for livability, recent studies and data points can be referenced to measure it. From afar, the AARP rates Blaine County as having an Overall Livability Score of 57— ten points above the average county score in the nation and eleven points below the highest scoring county. Within the County, Hailey and Bellevue achieved the highest score of 62. Ketchum scored 61, Sun Valley scored 57 and Carey scored 48.

Acting as a buffer, the local philanthropic community supports a suite of non-profit organizations providing access to basic needs— including housing, food, education and more. The non-profit community significantly offsets the consequences of the socioeconomic disparities in Blaine County, oftentimes “supply[ing] community support where government funding falls short.”²⁴⁸ Across sectors, health and human services organizations consist of the largest number of non-profit organizations in Blaine County; locally, the sector also experienced the most significant increase in non-profit organizations since 2017.²⁴⁹

According to Spur Community Foundation, 8% of annual Blaine County revenue, or \$96 million, comes from nonprofits.²⁵⁰ “The nonprofit sector is a major player in the local economy, supplying 10% of the jobs in Blaine County and paying out about \$30 million in salaries and wages annually to local workers.”

Nonprofits in Focus

Looking at philanthropic giving in 2021, non-profit organizations in the Health and Human Services sector received by far the most funding— \$31,374,000. In order of decreasing magnitude, the Arts and Culture sector received \$14,118,000, Education received \$10,287,000, Environment \$4,298,000, Animal Welfare received \$3,245,000, Sports and Recreation, received \$1,871,000, Housing received \$829,000 and Economic Development received \$482,000.²⁵²



At the height of the COVID pandemic, the City of Ketchum piloted the long-term “open street” vision for downtown 4th Street by closing it to cars and opening it up to people.²⁵³



Teens and staff share a nutritious meal at The Hunger Coalition.²⁵¹