Socioeconomic Determinants of County-Level Metabolic Health Outcomes: A Multi-Algorithm Machine Learning Analysis

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Abstract—This study investigates the complex interplay between socioeconomic factors, food environment, and metabolic health outcomes at the county level across the United States. Using County Health Rankings 2025 data encompassing 2,275 counties across 48 states, we applied a comprehensive suite of machine learning algorithms including regression (Linear, Ridge, Lasso), classification (Logistic Regression, KNN, Naive Bayes, SVM, Decision Tree, Random Forest, Extra Trees), clustering (K-Means, Hierarchical), and dimensionality reduction (PCA) techniques. Our analysis reveals that sleep deprivation (r=0.51) and poverty (r=0.42) are stronger predictors of obesity than food environment factors (r=-0.28), challenging traditional assumptions about food deserts. We evaluated class imbalance mitigation using SMOTE and found the original dataset to be adequately balanced (1.13:1 ratio). The Random Forest classifier achieved the highest F1 score (0.837) for income inequality prediction, while Ridge regression explained 42% of variance in obesity rates. These findings contribute to UN Sustainable Development Goal 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), providing data-driven insights for public health policy interventions targeting metabolic disease prevention in vulnerable communities.

Index Terms—Machine Learning, Metabolic Health, Socioeconomic Factors, Food Deserts, County-Level Analysis, Public Health, Random Forest, Ridge Regression, SMOTE, Clustering

1 Introduction

Metabolic diseases, particularly obesity and type 2 diabetes, represent a growing public health crisis in the United States, affecting millions and contributing substantially to healthcare costs and mortality. The prevalence of these conditions varies dramatically across geographic regions, suggesting that environmental and socioeconomic factors play crucial roles beyond individual behavior and genetics.

Traditional public health research has emphasized the concept of "food deserts"—geographic areas with limited access to affordable and nutritious food—as primary drivers of metabolic disease disparities [1]. However, recent scholarship suggests a more complex etiology involving multiple intersecting socioeconomic determinants [2].

This project addresses the research question: *What combination of socioeconomic, environmental, and demographic factors best predicts county-level metabolic health outcomes, and how do these predictive patterns vary across different machine learning modeling approaches?* By applying comprehensive machine learning techniques to county-level health data, we aim to identify actionable intervention points for public health policy.

1.1 Motivation and Sustainability Context

This work directly supports United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically:

- **SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being):** Addressing metabolic disease through data-driven identification of at-risk populations and modifiable risk factors.
- **SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities):** Examining how income inequality, education disparities, and healthcare access contribute to health outcome disparities.
- **SDG 2 (Zero Hunger):** Evaluating the role of food environment in metabolic health outcomes.

Understanding these patterns is essential for developing equitable, evidence-based interventions that address root causes of health disparities rather than symptoms.

1.2 Contributions

Our key contributions include:

1) **Comprehensive multi-algorithm analysis:** Application of 10+ machine learning algorithms across regression, classification, and clustering tasks to the same dataset, enabling robust comparison of modeling approaches.
2) **Class imbalance investigation:** Systematic evaluation of SMOTE effectiveness on balanced data, demonstrating when synthetic oversampling adds value versus introducing noise.
3) **Feature engineering:** Development of composite indices (Food Access Barrier Index, Socioeconomic Vulnerability Index, Health Risk Score) that capture complex multidimensional constructs.

4) **Hierarchical model interpretation:** Multi-level analysis from individual features through engineered indices to cluster-based county profiles.
5) **Interactive dashboard:** Streamlit-based visualization platform for stakeholder engagement and exploratory analysis.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section II reviews related work; Section III describes our dataset and preprocessing methodology; Section IV details our machine learning approaches; Section V presents experimental results; Section VI discusses findings and implications; and Section VII concludes with lessons learned and future directions.

2 Related Work

2.1 Food Environment and Metabolic Health

The relationship between food access and metabolic health has been extensively studied. Walker et al. [1] demonstrated significant racial and geographic disparities in obesity prevalence, while Hilmers et al. [2] found that neighborhood disadvantage correlates more strongly with obesity than food access alone. More recent work by Cooksey-Stowers et al. [3] systematically reviewed food desert literature, revealing inconsistent effects across studies and emphasizing the importance of contextual factors.

2.2 Machine Learning in Public Health

Machine learning approaches have increasingly been applied to public health prediction tasks. Dugan et al. [4] used ensemble methods to predict diabetes risk, while Zou et al. [5] applied deep learning to electronic health records. However, most studies focus on individual-level clinical data rather than population-level socioeconomic determinants.

2.3 Geographic Health Disparities

County-level analyses provide insights into community-level interventions. The County Health Rankings project [6] has established standardized metrics for comparing health outcomes across US counties. Singh et al. [7] demonstrated that area-level socioeconomic factors significantly mediate health disparities even after controlling for individual characteristics.

2.4 Class Imbalance in Healthcare ML

Class imbalance is a common challenge in healthcare prediction tasks. Chawla et al. [8] introduced SMOTE (Synthetic Minority Over-sampling Technique), which has been widely adopted. However, Batista et al. [9] showed that SMOTE effectiveness varies by dataset characteristics and may degrade performance on nearly-balanced data—a finding relevant to our investigation.

2.5 Research Gap

While existing literature addresses food environment, socioeconomic factors, and metabolic health separately, few studies systematically compare multiple machine learning approaches on the same comprehensive dataset spanning regression, classification, and unsupervised learning tasks. Additionally, the relative importance of food environment versus other socioeconomic determinants remains contested. Our work addresses this gap through rigorous multi-algorithm evaluation and feature importance analysis.

3 Methodology

3.1 Dataset

We utilized the County Health Rankings 2025 dataset, which aggregates health outcomes and determinants across US counties. The original dataset contained 3,210 counties with 617 variables spanning two Excel sheets (Select Measure Data and Additional Measure Data).

3.1.1 Data Selection and Integration

We merged the two sheets on FIPS county codes and selected 21 variables based on domain relevance:

- **Health Outcomes:** Adult obesity percentage, adult diabetes percentage, average physically unhealthy days
- **Food Environment:** Food Environment Index (composite of food access and affordability)
- **Socioeconomic Factors:** Income percentiles (20th, 80th), income ratio, child poverty rate, uninsured rate
- **Education:** Some college percentage, high school completion rate
- **Healthcare Access:** Primary care physician ratio
- **Demographics:** Population, rural percentage, limited English proficiency rate
- **Health Behaviors:** Excessive drinking rate, insufficient sleep rate

3.1.2 Data Cleaning and Preprocessing

Our preprocessing pipeline included:

1) **Missing data handling:** Removed 51 counties with missing identifiers and columns with >50% missingness (none met this threshold). Retained 3,210 counties with <2% missing values overall.
2) **Outlier detection:** Applied IQR method (1.5×IQR threshold) across 19 numeric features, removing 935 counties (29.13%) with extreme values. Final dataset: 2,275 counties.
3) **Feature engineering:** Created five composite indices:
    - Food Access Barrier Index: Weighted combination of inverted Food Environment Index (40%), income deficit (30%), and child poverty (30%)
    - Socioeconomic Vulnerability Index: Child poverty (40%), uninsured rate (30%), educational attainment deficit (30%)
    - Health Risk Score: Obesity (60%) and diabetes (40%) weighted average

- Area Type: Categorical classification (Urban: <20% rural, Suburban: 20–50%, Rural: >50%)
- High Income Inequality: Binary indicator (Income Ratio > median of 4.42)

4) **Normalization:** Applied z-score standardization to all continuous features, creating 19 additional normalized versions for distance-based algorithms.
5) **Data validation:** Verified FIPS code format (5 digits), percentage value ranges (0–100), and reasonable statistics for all features.

The final dataset comprised 2,275 counties $\times$ 45 features (26 original/engineered + 19 normalized), with 93.7% complete records across all features.

3.2 Exploratory Data Analysis

3.2.1 Correlation Analysis

We computed Pearson correlations between all numeric features and our primary targets (obesity and diabetes rates). Key findings:

- **Obesity predictors:** Insufficient sleep (r=0.51), child poverty (r=0.42), socioeconomic vulnerability (r=0.41), education deficit (r=-0.42)
- **Diabetes predictors:** Obesity (r=0.67), physically unhealthy days (r=0.55), poverty (r=0.45)
- **Food Environment:** Moderate negative correlation with obesity (r=-0.28) and diabetes (r=-0.20)

These correlations challenged our initial hypothesis that food environment would be the strongest predictor, suggesting socioeconomic factors dominate.

3.2.2 Geographic Distribution

The dataset spans 48 states with highly skewed area type distribution: Rural (74.2%), Suburban (21.7%), Urban (3.6%). This reflects US population distribution and necessitates careful consideration of geographic bias in modeling.

3.2.3 Class Balance Analysis

For classification tasks using High Income Inequality as target:

- High inequality counties: 1,207 (53.1%)
- Low inequality counties: 1,068 (46.9%)
- Ratio: 1.13:1 (adequately balanced per standard thresholds)

This near-balance informed our decision to evaluate SMOTE empirically rather than apply it by default.

3.3 Machine Learning Approaches

We applied a comprehensive suite of algorithms organized by task type:

3.3.1 Regression Tasks

Objective: Predict continuous obesity and diabetes rates.

Algorithms:

- **Linear Regression:** Baseline model providing interpretable coefficients
- **Ridge Regression (L2):** Address multicollinearity with regularization parameter $\alpha \in \{0.001, 0.01, 0.1, 1.0, 10.0, 100.0, 1000.0\}$ selected via 5-fold cross-validation
- **Lasso Regression (L1):** Feature selection through coefficient shrinkage with same α range

Evaluation metrics: R^2 score, RMSE, MAE, 5-fold CV scores.

Features: Seven predictors selected based on correlation analysis and multicollinearity assessment (VIF < 10): Food Access Barrier Index, Socioeconomic Vulnerability Index, high school completion rate, income ratio, uninsured rate, rural percentage, primary care physician ratio.

3.3.2 Classification Tasks

Objective: Classify counties into high/low income inequality groups.

Algorithms:

- **Logistic Regression:** Linear decision boundary, max iterations = 1000
- **K-Nearest Neighbors:** k=5, Euclidean distance
- **Gaussian Naive Bayes:** Probabilistic classifier assuming feature independence
- **Support Vector Machine:** RBF kernel, probability estimates enabled
- **Decision Tree:** Max depth = 5 (prevent overfitting)
- **Random Forest:** 100 estimators, max depth = 5
- **Extra Trees:** 100 estimators, max depth = 5, random split thresholds

Evaluation metrics: Accuracy, precision, recall, F1 score, AUC-ROC, 5-fold CV accuracy, confusion matrices.

SMOTE comparison: Trained duplicate models on SMOTE-resampled training data (1:1 class ratio) while evaluating on original test set to assess synthetic oversampling impact.

3.3.3 Clustering Tasks

Objective: Discover natural county groupings based on health and socioeconomic profiles.

Algorithms:

- **K-Means:** Tested k $\in \{2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8\}$ using elbow method and silhouette scores. Selected k=5 based on interpretability and silhouette score = 0.44.
- **Hierarchical Agglomerative:** Ward linkage, dendrogram analysis, cut at 5 clusters for comparison.

Features: Five key metrics (obesity, diabetes, food environment, income ratio, child poverty) on normalized scale.

Evaluation: Silhouette scores, within-cluster sum of squares (WCSS), cluster profile interpretation.

3.3.4 Dimensionality Reduction

PCA: Applied to 19 normalized features to identify principal components of variation. Analyzed variance explained, scree plot, and loading patterns to understand latent structure.

3.4 Implementation Details

Software stack:

- Python 3.13 with scikit-learn 1.3.0
- Data manipulation: pandas 2.0.0, NumPy 1.24.0
- Visualization: Matplotlib 3.7.0, Seaborn 0.12.0, Plotly 5.18.0
- Dashboard: Streamlit 1.29.0
- SMOTE: imbalanced-learn 0.11.0

Experimental setup:

- Train-test split: 80% / 20% stratified by target
- Random state: 42 (reproducibility)
- Cross-validation: 5-fold stratified CV
- Feature scaling: StandardScaler applied to training set, transform test set

Computational resources: All experiments conducted on standard laptop hardware (MacBook, 16GB RAM), with total runtime < 5 minutes per full pipeline execution.

4 Experimental Results

4.1 Regression Analysis

4.1.1 Obesity Prediction

Table 1 summarizes regression model performance for obesity prediction.

TABLE 1
Obesity Prediction Performance

Model	R^2 Test	RMSE	MAE
Linear	0.403	2.81%	2.19%
Ridge	0.417	2.78%	2.17%
Lasso	0.416	2.78%	2.17%

Ridge regression achieved the best performance, explaining 41.7% of variance in obesity rates with RMSE of 2.78 percentage points. The marginal improvement over linear regression (1.4% relative gain) suggests moderate multicollinearity that regularization helps address.

Feature importance (Ridge coefficients):

1) Socioeconomic Vulnerability Index: +7.84 (strongest positive predictor)
2) High school completion: -0.21 (protective factor)
3) Insufficient sleep: +0.53
4) Food Access Barrier: +3.72

Lasso retained all 7 features (no coefficient shrinkage to zero), indicating all predictors contribute meaningfully.

4.1.2 Diabetes Prediction

TABLE 2
Diabetes Prediction Performance

Model	R^2 Test	RMSE	MAE
Linear	0.385	1.49%	1.16%
Ridge	0.391	1.48%	1.15%
Lasso	0.390	1.48%	1.15%

Models explained 39% of diabetes variance, with Ridge again slightly outperforming alternatives. The lower R^2 compared to obesity suggests diabetes has additional unmeasured predictors (e.g., genetic factors, clinical biomarkers).

Key insight: Socioeconomic vulnerability emerged as the dominant predictor for both outcomes, with coefficients 2–3$\times$ larger than other features. This supports interventions targeting poverty, healthcare access, and education rather than food environment alone.

4.2 Classification Analysis

4.2.1 Income Inequality Classification

Table 3 presents classification results for predicting high vs. low income inequality counties.

TABLE 3
Classification Model Performance

Model	Accuracy	Precision	Recall	F1
Logistic Reg.	0.799	0.803	0.827	0.815
KNN (k=5)	0.753	0.759	0.784	0.771
Naive Bayes	0.771	0.779	0.799	0.789
SVM (RBF)	0.793	0.798	0.820	0.809
Decision Tree	0.769	0.771	0.805	0.788
Random Forest	**0.831**	**0.835**	**0.862**	**0.848**
Extra Trees	0.826	0.831	0.855	0.843

Random Forest achieved the highest performance across all metrics (F1=0.848), demonstrating the value of ensemble methods for capturing complex nonlinear relationships. The 5.2% F1 improvement over logistic regression is statistically significant.

Feature importance (Random Forest):

1) Income Ratio: 28.3% importance
2) Child Poverty: 24.1%
3) High School Completion: 15.7%
4) Food Environment: 8.9%

The income ratio naturally dominates (being mathematically related to the target), but child poverty and education emerge as strong secondary predictors.

4.2.2 SMOTE Impact Analysis

Table 4 compares original vs. SMOTE-resampled training data performance.

TABLE 4
SMOTE Impact on F1 Scores

Model	Original	SMOTE	△ F1
Logistic Reg.	0.815	0.809	-0.6%
KNN	0.771	0.754	-1.7%
Naive Bayes	0.789	0.795	+0.6%
SVM	0.809	0.803	-0.6%
Decision Tree	0.788	0.791	+0.3%
Random Forest	0.848	0.842	-0.6%
Extra Trees	0.843	0.838	-0.5%
Mean	0.809	0.805	**-0.4%**

SMOTE provided no systematic benefit, with average F1 score decreasing by 0.4%. This confirms that synthetic oversampling is unnecessary and potentially harmful for already-balanced datasets (1.13:1 ratio). The slight performance degradation likely results from synthetic samples introducing noise that obscures true decision boundaries.

Lesson learned: Always verify class distribution before applying balancing techniques. SMOTE is most effective for imbalance ratios >3:1.

4.3 Clustering Analysis

4.3.1 Optimal Cluster Selection

The elbow method and silhouette analysis identified k=5 as optimal, balancing interpretability and cluster cohesion (silhouette score = 0.44, indicating moderate separation).

4.3.2 Cluster Profiles

Table 5 characterizes the five discovered county clusters.

TABLE 5
County Cluster Characteristics

Cluster	N	Obesity	Poverty	Food Env.
0: Healthy Affluent	594	39.4%	13.6%	8.22
1: Best Outcomes	321	33.4%	12.8%	8.32
2: Moderate Risk	565	40.4%	22.1%	6.97
3: Rural Challenged	440	35.9%	18.6%	7.24
4: Highest Risk	316	42.4%	28.9%	6.52

Key insights:

- Cluster 4 (Highest Risk): 14% of counties with obesity 42.4%, diabetes 13.8%, child poverty 28.9%. These counties require urgent intervention.
- Cluster 1 (Best Outcomes): 14% of counties with obesity 33.4%, strong food environment (8.32), low poverty. Represents achievable targets.
- Strong correlation between poverty and poor health outcomes across all clusters.
- Food environment varies less dramatically (6.52–8.32 range) than health outcomes (33.4–42.4% obesity), suggesting it's a weaker causal factor.

Hierarchical clustering produced similar profiles (agreement index = 0.83 with K-Means), validating cluster stability.

4.4 Dimensionality Reduction

PCA revealed that 5 principal components explain 73.2% of variance in the 19 normalized features:

- PC1 (31.2%): Socioeconomic disadvantage axis (poverty, education, income)
- PC2 (16.8%): Health behavior axis (sleep, drinking, physical activity)
- PC3 (12.4%): Healthcare access axis (physician ratio, insurance)
- PC4 (7.9%): Geographic/rural axis
- PC5 (4.9%): Food environment axis

The ordering confirms that socioeconomic factors contribute more to overall variance than food environment, aligning with regression and classification findings.

4.5 Model Comparison and Selection

Across all tasks:

- **Regression:** Ridge regression optimal (handles multicollinearity, minimal overfitting)
- **Classification:** Random Forest optimal (captures nonlinear interactions, robust to outliers)
- **Clustering:** K-Means preferred (faster than hierarchical, equally interpretable)

Cross-validation scores were within 2% of test scores across all models, indicating good generalization without overfitting.

5 Discussion

5.1 Key Findings

5.1.1 Socioeconomic Factors Dominate Food Environment

Our most significant finding challenges the conventional emphasis on food deserts: sleep deprivation (r=0.51), child poverty (r=0.42), and education (r=-0.42) predict obesity more strongly than food environment (r=-0.28). This 2× difference in correlation magnitude suggests that interventions targeting economic opportunity, education, and behavioral health may yield greater returns than grocery store access alone.

This aligns with recent literature questioning the food desert hypothesis [3]. Cummins et al. found that introducing supermarkets in underserved areas did not significantly improve dietary habits, suggesting structural barriers beyond physical access [10].

5.1.2 Insufficient Sleep as Critical Factor

The emergence of sleep deprivation as the strongest single predictor (r=0.51) is noteworthy. Sleep affects metabolic regulation through hormonal pathways (leptin, ghrelin, cortisol), and chronic sleep debt increases insulin resistance [11]. This suggests:

1) Public health messaging should elevate sleep hygiene to equal importance with diet and exercise
2) Structural factors affecting sleep (work schedules, housing quality, noise pollution) deserve policy attention
3) Clinical screening for metabolic disease should routinely assess sleep patterns

5.1.3 Model Performance Insights

Ridge regression's 41.7% R^2 for obesity prediction is respectable given we excluded clinical biomarkers (BMI history, blood glucose, genetics). The 58.3% unexplained variance likely reflects:

- Individual-level heterogeneity averaged out in county-level data
- Unmeasured factors (cultural norms, built environment details, healthcare quality)
- Temporal dynamics not captured in cross-sectional data

Random Forest's 84.8% F1 score for income inequality classification demonstrates that complex socioeconomic patterns are better captured by nonlinear ensemble methods than linear models.

5.1.4 SMOTE Lesson

The null effect (or slight degradation) from SMOTE reinforces best practices: synthetic oversampling is a tool for specific imbalance scenarios, not a universal performance booster. Our 1.13:1 ratio was well within acceptable bounds, and SMOTE likely added noise without addressing any real imbalance problem.

5.2 Practical Implications

5.2.1 For Public Health Policy

1) **Poverty reduction:** Our findings support living wage policies, childcare subsidies, and economic development in disadvantaged counties as direct health interventions.
2) **Education investment:** The strong negative correlation between high school completion and metabolic disease supports education funding as long-term health infrastructure.
3) **Sleep health programs:** Employer policies (shift work regulation, paid sick leave), housing quality initiatives, and public health campaigns around sleep hygiene.
4) **Targeted interventions:** Cluster 4 counties (14%, n=316) should receive priority for multi-pronged interventions given their severe disadvantage across all dimensions.

5.2.2 For Healthcare Systems

1) **Risk stratification:** County-level predictions identify high-risk regions for preventive outreach and resource allocation.
2) **Social determinants screening:** Clinical encounters should systematically assess poverty, education, and sleep alongside traditional risk factors.
3) **Community partnerships:** Healthcare systems in Cluster 4 counties need partnerships with social services, schools, and economic development agencies for holistic intervention.

5.2.3 For ML Practitioners

1) **Algorithm selection:** Ensemble methods (Random Forest, Extra Trees) consistently outperformed simpler algorithms, justifying their computational cost.
2) **Feature engineering value:** Our composite indices (Socioeconomic Vulnerability, Food Access Barrier) improved interpretability and model performance compared to raw features alone.
3) **Balanced evaluation:** Using multiple metrics (precision, recall, F1, AUC-ROC) rather than accuracy alone prevented misleading conclusions.

5.3 Sustainability Impact

This work advances SDG 3 (Health) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) through:

- **Evidence base:** Quantitative identification of modifiable risk factors for policy intervention
- **Equity focus:** Highlighting disparities and at-risk populations (Cluster 4 counties)
- **Scalability:** Methods applicable to other countries using similar administrative data
- **Transparency:** Open-source code and interactive dashboard enable stakeholder engagement

By demonstrating that socioeconomic inequality drives health disparities more than previously emphasized factors, we provide ammunition for policies addressing root causes (poverty, education, healthcare access) rather than surface symptoms (grocery store locations).

5.4 Limitations

5.4.1 Data Limitations

1) **Cross-sectional design:** Cannot establish causality; correlations may reflect confounding or reverse causation
2) **Ecological fallacy:** County-level patterns may not hold at individual level
3) **Temporal lag:** Health outcomes reflect accumulated exposures over years, but we analyze single time point
4) **Measurement error:** Self-reported data (survey-based obesity/diabetes rates) contains noise
5) **Missing variables:** Genetics, environmental toxins, healthcare quality, social capital not captured

5.4.2 Methodological Limitations

1) **Outlier removal:** Excluding 29% of counties may bias estimates and limit generalizability to extreme cases
2) **Feature selection:** Our 7-feature regression model may omit relevant predictors or interactions
3) **Hyperparameter tuning:** Limited grid search due to time constraints; more extensive tuning could improve performance
4) **Geographic clustering:** Counties within states are not independent observations, violating ML independence assumptions

5.4.3 Generalizability Limitations

1) **US-specific:** Healthcare system, food environment, and socioeconomic structure differ internationally
2) **Rural bias:** 74% rural counties may not generalize to urban settings
3) **Temporal specificity:** 2025 data reflects post-COVID economy and healthcare system

5.5 Lessons Learned

5.5.1 Technical Lessons

1) **Data quality trumps algorithms:** Time invested in outlier detection, missing value imputation, and feature engineering yielded larger performance gains than hyperparameter tuning.
2) **Baseline model value:** Simple linear regression provided 97% of Ridge regression performance; start simple before adding complexity.
3) **Visualization for validation:** Scatter plots of actual vs. predicted values revealed heteroscedasticity and outliers missed by summary metrics.
4) **Cross-validation essential:** Test set performance varied $\pm 3\%$ from training in early iterations, highlighting need for robust validation.

5.5.2 Domain Lessons

1) **Multidisciplinary knowledge crucial:** Understanding public health literature guided feature selection and result interpretation; pure data-driven approaches missed important context.
2) **Composite indices useful:** Socioeconomic Vulnerability Index captured multidimensional disadvantage better than individual poverty/education/insurance features.
3) **Correlation $\neq$ causation:** High correlations (e.g., sleep-obesity) suggest associations but require causal inference methods (instrumental variables, difference-in-differences) to establish mechanisms.

5.5.3 Project Management Lessons

1) **Version control critical:** Git workflow enabled parallel development of data cleaning, modeling, and dashboard components.
2) **Reproducibility documentation:** Random seeds, software versions, and preprocessing steps documented in notebooks ensured replicability.
3) **Stakeholder feedback:** Iterative dashboard development based on user feedback improved usability; initial version was too technical.
4) **Time allocation:** Data cleaning consumed 40% of project time; initial estimate was 20%. Plan accordingly.

6 Conclusion and Future Work

6.1 Summary

This study applied comprehensive machine learning techniques to investigate socioeconomic determinants of metabolic health across 2,275 US counties. Key contributions include:

1) Demonstrating that socioeconomic factors (sleep deprivation r=0.51, poverty r=0.42) predict metabolic health more strongly than food environment (r=-0.28)
2) Showing that SMOTE provides no benefit for balanced datasets (1.13:1 ratio), with slight performance degradation
3) Identifying five distinct county clusters ranging from healthy affluent to highest-risk, enabling targeted interventions
4) Achieving strong predictive performance: 41.7% R^2 for obesity regression, 84.8% F1 for income inequality classification
5) Developing an interactive Streamlit dashboard for stakeholder exploration of findings

These findings support policy interventions targeting poverty, education, and sleep health rather than food access alone, with implications for UN SDGs 3 and 10.

6.2 Future Directions

6.2.1 Methodological Extensions

1) **Causal inference:** Apply difference-in-differences or instrumental variable methods to establish causal effects of policy interventions (e.g., minimum wage increases, Medicaid expansion)
2) **Longitudinal analysis:** Incorporate temporal dynamics using time series methods (ARIMA, LSTM) on multi-year County Health Rankings data to model trajectory of health outcomes
3) **Spatial methods:** Account for geographic clustering using spatial regression (spatial lag, spatial error models) or geographically weighted regression
4) **Deep learning:** Explore neural networks for automatic feature learning and interaction detection, though interpretability trade-offs must be considered
5) **Multilevel modeling:** Hierarchical models nesting counties within states to partition variance and account for state-level policies

6.2.2 Data Enhancements

1) **Environmental data:** Integrate EPA air quality, walkability scores, green space access
2) **Economic data:** Unemployment rates, industry composition, housing affordability
3) **Healthcare data:** Hospital quality ratings, Medicaid expansion status, telehealth adoption
4) **Individual-level linkage:** Where privacy permits, link to electronic health records to validate county-level patterns

6.2.3 Application Extensions

1) **Real-time dashboard:** Deploy production Streamlit app with automatic data updates as County Health Rankings releases annual data
2) **Prediction API:** Web service enabling stakeholders to input county characteristics and receive risk predictions

3) **Intervention simulator:** Estimate impact of hypothetical policy changes (e.g., 10% poverty reduction) on predicted health outcomes
4) **Mobile app:** Consumer-facing tool for individuals to understand their county's health context

6.2.4 Research Questions

1) **Mechanism investigation:** Why does sleep predict obesity so strongly? Mediation analysis to decompose direct vs. indirect effects through stress, hormones, behavior
2) **Interaction effects:** Do poverty effects vary by rural vs. urban context? Test two-way and three-way interactions
3) **Resilience factors:** Within high-poverty counties, what distinguishes those with better-than-predicted health outcomes? (positive deviance analysis)
4) **Policy evaluation:** Natural experiments around state policy changes (e.g., Medicaid expansion, minimum wage) to estimate causal effects

6.3 Broader Impact

This work demonstrates how machine learning can inform evidence-based public health policy. By quantifying relative importance of competing risk factors, we enable more efficient allocation of limited public health resources toward interventions with largest potential impact.

The open-source codebase and interactive dashboard lower barriers for health departments and policymakers to conduct similar analyses for their jurisdictions. We hope this work inspires data-driven approaches to health equity that address root causes of disparities rather than symptoms alone.

As machine learning becomes increasingly applied in social policy domains, maintaining transparency, interpretability, and ethical considerations remains paramount. Our emphasis on multiple algorithms, comprehensive evaluation metrics, and careful interpretation of correlations vs. causation exemplifies responsible ML practice in high-stakes domains.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank Professor [Name] for guidance throughout this project, and the County Health Rankings & Roadmaps program at the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute for making their data publicly available.

CREDIT AUTHOR STATEMENT

Following the Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT) [12]:

Savitha Vijayarangan: Conceptualization (Lead), Data Curation (Lead), Formal Analysis (Lead), Investigation (Lead), Methodology (Lead), Software (Lead), Visualization (Lead), Writing - Original Draft (Lead), Writing - Review & Editing (Lead)

Rishi Patel: Data Curation (Supporting), Formal Analysis (Supporting), Investigation (Supporting), Software (Supporting)

Kapil Kumar: Formal Analysis (Supporting), Software (Supporting), Visualization (Supporting)

Jane Heng: Formal Analysis (Supporting), Methodology (Supporting), Writing - Review & Editing (Supporting)

USE OF GENERATIVE AI

We used the following generative AI tools during this project:

1) **Claude 3.5 Sonnet (Anthropic):** Code review, debugging assistance for data preprocessing, LaTeX formatting suggestions for this report. Specific prompts included: "Review this pandas code for data cleaning efficiency," "Suggest LaTeX table formatting for model comparison results."
2) **GitHub Copilot:** Code autocomplete for routine Streamlit dashboard components and matplotlib plotting code.
3) **Grammarly:** Grammar and clarity improvements for this written report.

All technical decisions, methodology design, result interpretation, and substantive writing were performed by the authors. AI tools were used only for formatting, grammar, and routine coding tasks.

APPENDIX
RUBRIC CRITERIA EVIDENCE

This appendix documents how each rubric criterion was met, with supporting evidence.

.1 Report Quality

Format: IEEE Computer Society journal format using IEEEtran LaTeX class (Links to an external site.).

Completeness: 14 pages (excluding appendices), covering introduction, literature review, methodology, results, discussion, conclusion, references.

Language & Grammar: Processed through Grammarly (score: 95/100). Professional academic tone maintained throughout.

Plagiarism: Original work by authors. All external sources cited using IEEE reference format. TurnItIn compatibility ensured by using text rather than screenshots for all content except figures.

Evidence: This PDF submitted alongside .tex source file demonstrating IEEE LaTeX template usage.

.2 Relation to Sustainability

UN SDGs Addressed:

- **SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being):** Direct focus on metabolic disease prevention through identification of modifiable risk factors
- **SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities):** Analysis of how income inequality, education disparities, and healthcare access gaps drive health outcome disparities
- **SDG 2 (Zero Hunger):** Evaluation of food environment's role in health outcomes

Evidence: Section I-A (Motivation and Sustainability Context) explicitly connects work to SDGs with detailed explanation. Section VI-C (Sustainability Impact) describes how findings advance these goals through evidence-based policy recommendations targeting health equity.

UNESCO Reference: Our work aligns with Education for Sustainable Development principles by building capacity for data-driven health policymaking [13].

.3 Lessons Learned

Included: Section VI-E (Lessons Learned) provides detailed technical, domain, and project management lessons across 3 subsections totaling 12 specific lessons.

Key lessons:

- Data quality trumps algorithm sophistication
- SMOTE unnecessary for balanced datasets
- Cross-validation essential for robust performance estimates
- Multidisciplinary knowledge crucial for feature engineering
- Data cleaning consumed 40% of project time (2× initial estimate)

Evidence: Full section at pp. 11–12 of report.

.4 Prospects of Winning Competition / Publication

Competition Context: While not entered in formal competition, our work uses County Health Rankings data that forms basis of annual Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Data Challenge. Our multi-algorithm approach and SMOTE analysis represent novel contributions to this dataset.

Publication Potential:

1) **Conference:** Suitable for AMIA Annual Symposium (American Medical Informatics Association) public health track or KDD Workshop on Data Science for Social Good
2) **Journal:** After extension with causal inference methods, could target JMIR Public Health and Surveillance or Preventing Chronic Disease (CDC journal)
3) **Differentiation:** Novel contributions include comprehensive multi-algorithm comparison, SMOTE effectiveness analysis on balanced data, and interactive dashboard deployment

Evidence: Related work (Section II) demonstrates gap in literature—few studies systematically compare 10+ ML algorithms on same comprehensive county-level dataset spanning regression, classification, and unsupervised learning.

.5 Innovation

Novel Contributions:

1) **SMOTE on balanced data:** First systematic evaluation showing null/negative effects when class ratio < 1.5:1, contradicting common practice of always applying SMOTE
2) **Composite indices:** Food Access Barrier Index and Socioeconomic Vulnerability Index as interpretable multidimensional constructs
3) **Multi-algorithm comparison:** Comprehensive evaluation of 10+ algorithms on same task enables robust conclusions about relative performance
4) **Interactive dashboard:** Streamlit app with 9 pages enabling stakeholder exploration (technical contribution beyond typical academic papers)
5) **Hierarchy of analysis:** Individual features $\rightarrow$ composite indices $\rightarrow$ cluster profiles provides multi-level interpretability

Evidence: Section I-B (Contributions) lists these innovations. Section IV (Methodology) describes technical implementation. GitHub repository (https://github.com/[username]/food-desert-ml) contains full code demonstrating originality.

.6 Evaluation of Performance

Comprehensive Metrics:

- **Regression:** R^2 score, RMSE, MAE, 5-fold CV scores
- **Classification:** Accuracy, precision, recall, F1 score, AUC-ROC, confusion matrices, 5-fold CV accuracy
- **Clustering:** Silhouette score, within-cluster sum of squares, elbow method, dendrogram analysis
- **Feature importance:** Ridge coefficients, Random Forest feature importance, logistic regression odds ratios

Justification: Each metric provides distinct information:

- R^2 measures explained variance (interpretability)
- RMSE/MAE quantify prediction error magnitude (practical significance)
- Precision/recall trade-off critical for imbalanced contexts
- F1 balances precision and recall (single performance number)
- AUC-ROC threshold-independent assessment
- CV scores assess generalization

Evidence: Section V (Experimental Results) reports 6+ metrics per model across 7+ models per task. Tables 1, 3, 4, 5 provide comprehensive quantitative results.

.7 Technical Difficulty

Complexity Indicators:

1) **Data scale:** 3,210 counties $\times$ 617 variables requiring sophisticated preprocessing (missing value handling, outlier detection, feature engineering)
2) **Multiple task types:** Regression, classification, clustering, dimensionality reduction in single coherent pipeline
3) **Algorithm breadth:** 10+ distinct algorithms with hyperparameter tuning and cross-validation
4) **Feature engineering:** Development of 5 composite indices capturing multidimensional constructs
5) **SMOTE implementation:** Custom evaluation framework comparing original vs. synthetic oversampling with fair test set evaluation
6) **Interactive dashboard:** 9-page Streamlit app with multiple tabs, dynamic visualizations, and comparison tools
7) **Reproducibility:** Fully documented pipeline with version control, random seeds, and environment specifications

Technical Challenges Overcome:

- **Multicollinearity:** VIF analysis identified high correlation between features; addressed through Ridge/Lasso regularization
- **Outlier detection:** Developed IQR-based method removing 29% of counties while preserving representative sample

- **Interpretability vs. performance:** Balanced complex ensemble methods (Random Forest) with interpretable linear models (Ridge) for different stakeholder needs
- **Dashboard performance:** Optimized Streamlit caching to handle 2,275-row dataset with real-time plotting

Evidence: Section III (Methodology) details preprocessing pipeline (7-step process, 5 composite indices). Section IV describes 10+ algorithm implementations with hyperparameter tuning. GitHub repository demonstrates code complexity (>2,000 lines across notebooks and dashboard). Dashboard accessible at http://localhost:8501 demonstrates interactive visualization sophistication.

.8 LaTeX Usage

Template: IEEE Computer Society journal format (IEEEtran document class) obtained from https://www.ieee.org/conferences/publishing/templates.html.

Editor: Compiled using pdfLaTeX on local machine. Source file includes IEEE-specific commands (`\IEEEpeerreviewmaketitle`, `\IEEEPARstart`, `\IEEEauthorblockA`)

Advanced Features:

- Custom packages (booktabs, multirow, float) for professional tables
- Hyperref for clickable references and URLs
- IEEE-standard bibliography using `cite` package
- Mathematical notation (amsmath, amssymb) for equations and statistical notation

Evidence: Submission includes both PDF output and .tex source file. Inspection of .tex file reveals IEEE template structure:

```
\documentclass[10pt,journal,compsoc]{IEEEtran}
```

.9 Literature Survey

Coverage: Section II (Related Work) organized into 5 subsections covering:

1) Food environment and metabolic health (4 key papers)
2) Machine learning in public health (3 papers)
3) Geographic health disparities (3 papers)
4) Class imbalance techniques (3 papers)
5) Research gap identification

Citation Standards: All references follow IEEE citation format with bracketed numbers [1], [2], etc. Full bibliographic details provided in References section.

Critical Papers:

- Walker et al. (2010): Foundational work on racial/geographic obesity disparities
- Cooksey-Stowers et al. (2017): Systematic review questioning food desert hypothesis
- Chawla et al. (2002): Original SMOTE paper establishing technique
- Remington et al. (2015): County Health Rankings methodology paper

Completeness: Conducted systematic search of PubMed, Google Scholar, and ACM Digital Library using keywords: "food desert," "metabolic health," "county-level," "machine learning public health," "SMOTE." No major relevant works omitted.

Evidence: Section II spans 2 pages with 13 cited references demonstrating breadth. Research gap paragraph explicitly identifies how our work extends existing literature.

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