



Cologne Cathedral and Hohenzollern Bridge

North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany



General overview

Of the 16 federal states (Länder) of Germany, North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) in the western part of the country is the most densely populated. It is home to 18 million inhabitants, with more than 500/km² (1,2). Situated in the heart of Europe and covering an area of 34 000 km², NRW is neighbours with: Lower Saxony to the north, the state of Hessen to the east, Rhineland-Palatinate to the south, and Belgium and the Netherlands to the west. The Rhine-Ruhr area belongs to the European Megalopolis, the corridor of urbanization in Western Europe. The City of Essen, located in the particularly densely populated Ruhr region with more than 2000 inhabitants/km², was designated by the European Union as a European Capital of Culture for 2010. NRW has 396 municipalities, which include 30 administrative districts and 22 independent cities. The average life expectancy in the state is 82.87 years for women and 78.35 years

for men (2020) (3). The gross domestic product (GDP) per capita is €40 951 (4).

One of the fundamental aspects of the German health-care system is the sharing of decision-making powers among the federal states, the federal Government, and legitimized civil-society organizations. In health care, governments traditionally delegate competencies to membership-based, self-regulated payer and provider organizations (5).

Major responsibilities at the state level include the governmental regulation of capital investments (which are based on hospital plans) and public health services, in accordance with the Public Health Act of 1995. Other responsibilities relate to undergraduate medical, dental, and pharmaceutical education, and supervision of

the regional chambers of physicians, the regional associations of physicians, and the sickness funds operating in the state.

Responsibility for health lies with the Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Affairs, the focus of which is on preserving and establishing structures of good medical care. The Ministry sees its remit as organizing the legal framework and social conditions so that everyone can find their place in the community. It is committed to:

- providing area-wide, quality health care, which is appropriate to people's needs and accessible to all;
- ensuring effective and efficient prevention measures; and
- strengthening patients' rights.

Regional activities linked to the WHO European Programme of Work

The following activities are linked to the three core priorities of the European Programme of Work (EPW): (i) moving towards Universal

Health Coverage (UHC); (ii) promoting health and well-being; and (iii) protecting against health emergencies.



Moving towards UHC

The German health-care system offers its population universal health-insurance coverage, a comprehensive benefits basket with comparably low cost-sharing requirements, and good access to care. The system is characterized by its method of mandatory health-insurance coverage, which can be either private or public (through the sickness funds). About 11% of the German population, mainly public officials and civil servants, are covered by private health insurance. Employees contribute about 15% of their income to the sickness funds, half of the amount being paid by their employers. The state covers health-insurance costs for the unemployed, which are financed through taxes (5). In 2020, national health expenditure accounted for 13.1% of Germany's GDP (6).

To achieve the aim of providing the entire population with high-quality health care and prevention, several plans, acts and strategies have been passed and implemented. Examples of these are:

- a **NRW framework prevention agreement** with statutory health-insurance and pension-insurance agencies (2016) on the implementation of the German Prevention Act of 2015 (7);
- the **Pact for the Public Health Service** (2020), according to which governments at the national, state and municipal levels agreed to invest in the public health service by 2026 (8);
- an extensive **care reform** and the launch of a mandatory **nursing-care insurance**;
- regular **conferences on health and on ageing and nursing** held at the local and state levels to prepare the ground for consultations, resolutions, decision-making and networking;
- the **Rural Doctors Act** (2018) – see the section entitled “Initiative specific to NRW” below.



Promoting health and well-being

The **Health-in-all-Policies approach** is a recurring theme in NRW health strategies and policies. Another is the **prevention-chain approach**, which aims to allow children and young adolescents, irrespective of origin, education or social status, the possibility of growing up in a healthy way.

The NRW **state framework prevention agreement** (2016) supports the implementation of health-promotion strategies, particularly in the municipal setting. Currently, approximately 20 projects are underway.

The **German Collaborative Network for Equity in Health** (KGC) aims to improve health equity and support health promotion for socially disadvantaged people. The NRW Centre for Health (LZG.NRW), a subordinate authority of the Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Affairs, is a partner in the Network (9).

Children in NRW are entitled to **ten preventive medical check-ups** before they reach school age, costs being covered by the health-insurance companies (10). The **Central Unit for a Healthy Childhood**, affiliated to LZG.NRW, keeps a record of these check-ups for every child and reminds parents about them, if needed (10).

The Scottish **Place Standard Tool** has been translated, adapted and piloted in four German municipalities (two in NRW). The tool supports community participation in evaluating and improving physical and social environments (11).



Protecting against health emergencies

In the light of the increasing challenges that the health services are facing – such as pandemics and climate change – various efforts and measures are in place to enhance the public health and health-care sectors towards improving their crisis resistance and resilience. This also applies to the network of stakeholders in the field.

LZG.NRW advises and supports the public health service on questions of applied infection hygiene, infection epidemiology, vaccinations and sexually transmitted infections. The State Surveillance Centre at LZG.NRW monitors the situation continuously by analysing the number of reported cases, and supports the local public health authorities in terms of reporting on infectious diseases. The aggregated data are then passed on to the federal level (12). As a result of climate change, NRW is already facing an increasing number of extreme weather events and their catastrophic effects, such as the flooding in 2021 and heat events, which are more or less becoming the norm. In this connection, LZG.NRW advises and supports the municipalities (in particular the local health authorities) in the preparation of their health-related action plans. The Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Affairs is planning further measures related to climate change and health.

Actions linked to the EPW flagship initiatives

(The Mental Health Coalition; Empowerment through digital health; The European Immunization Agenda 2030; Healthy behaviours: incorporating behavioural and cultural insights.)

Initiatives relative to the Mental Health Coalition

One of the focal topics within the NRW Health Promotion and Prevention Initiative (LGP NRW, 2020–2024) is mental health. The Initiative addresses mental health both across the life course (specifically), and as a cross-cutting issue in healthy urban development (13).

Initiatives relative to empowerment through digital health

From 2022 to 2026, government funding from the Federal Ministry of Health will be made available to the German public health service, exclusively for the expansion of digitalization in public health authorities. NRW supports the state's public health authorities in the implementation of measures to this end through the State Coordination Department at LZG.NRW, which provides expert input, facilitates networking, and enables the exchange of experience and cooperation. At the same time, LZG.NRW acts as an interface between the municipal, state, and federal levels and the agency executing the project.

Initiatives relative to the European Immunization Agenda 2030

Peer-to-peer projects are being planned to increase vaccination readiness against COVID-19, especially in socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

Initiatives relative to healthy behaviours, incorporating behavioural and cultural insights

LZG.NRW offers a health-information portal for citizens of NRW with a migration background. It contains quality-checked, multilingual health information, supporting work being carried out in the area of migration and health (16). The portal can be used without any prior knowledge of the health sector.

KIPS Prevention NRW (initiated in 2021) is a 4-year funding programme aimed at setting up efficient support and care structures for children with parents suffering from mental disorders or addiction (14).

Through the Virtual Hospital (Virtuelles Krankenhaus), doctors can connect online with other medical practitioners to discuss treatments and medical decisions. Within this cross-sector network, practitioners and hospital doctors benefit from the specialist knowledge of recognized experts. The Virtual Hospital provides the necessary infrastructure for a legally compliant exchange of health data. During the pilot phase (until approximately June 2023), possible indications for teleconsultation can be limited (for example, by COVID-19 or outbreaks of rare diseases).

The national Measles Protection Act was implemented in and has been in effect since 1 March 2020. Everyone born after 1970 who is being cared for in a community facility must provide proof of vaccination protection (15).

The NRW Framework Prevention Agreement (LRV) between statutory health-insurance companies and pension-insurance institutions aims, for example, to reduce social and gender-related inequalities in health opportunities in municipalities and neighbourhoods, as required by the Federal Prevention Act of 2015 (17).

The Coordination Centre for Equity in Health in NRW (KGC NRW) supports the implementation

of the LRV in NRW with statutory health-insurance funds received through the Alliance for Health (9).

Initiative specific to NRW

One of NRW's flagship initiatives is the Rural Doctors Act (LAG NRW). The rural-doctor quota helps to secure general-practitioner care in NRW where this is currently or foreseeably endangered, thereby making an important contribution to securing skilled workers and professionals. Facing

a constantly growing lack of physicians in rural NRW areas, the state government created an incentive for medical students willing to commit to a rural medical practice for at least 10 years after graduation (18).

The three most important topics for collaboration within the Regions for Health Network

These are:

1. urban health, especially adaptation to climate change in municipalities to protect citizens from heat-related illnesses, strengthen health-promoting settings, and facilitate healthy urban development (including intersectoral municipal public health action plans and participatory neighbourhood analyses);
2. health impact assessment;
3. the sustainable development goals (especially those related to equity) and participatory approaches.

Main partners and collaborators

These are:

- LZG.NRW;
- the statutory health insurance in NRW;
- medical and public health associations;
- various NRW ministries, such as the Ministry for Environment, Conservation and Transport; the Ministry for Regional Identity, Local Government,
- Building and Digitalization; the Ministry for Children, Youth, Family, Equality, Refugees and Integration; and the Ministry of Education;
- NRW Health Campus partners and academic institutions.

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¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all URLs accessed 10 October 2022.

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