

FAIRFAX COUNTY

March 2026

Premature Deaths

Per 100,000 people

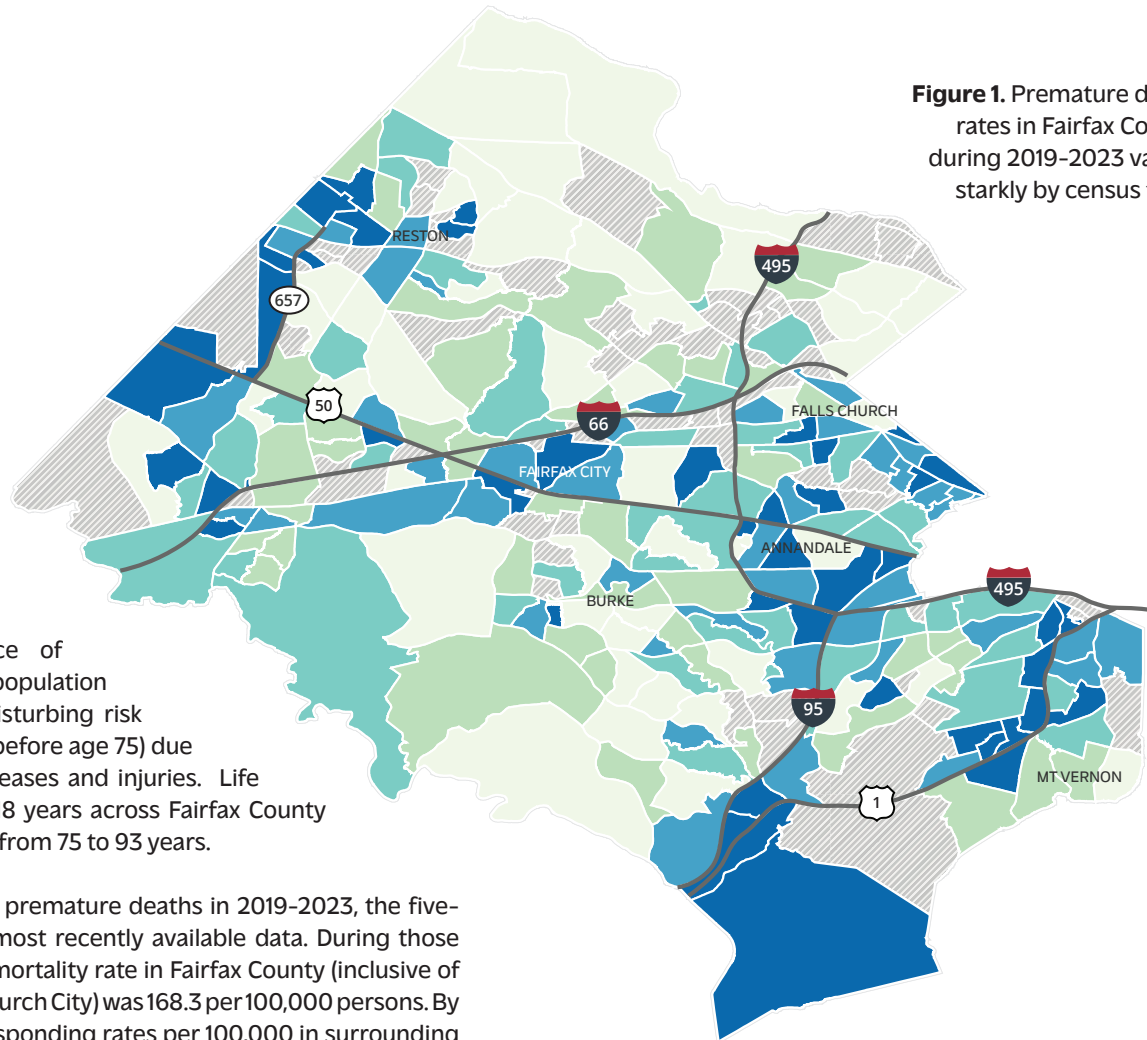
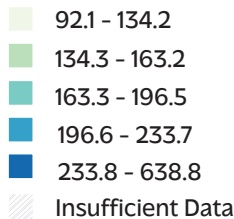


Figure 1. Premature death rates in Fairfax County during 2019-2023 varied starkly by census tract

Despite the affluence of Northern Virginia, the population continues to face a disturbing risk of premature deaths (before age 75) due to life-threatening diseases and injuries. Life expectancy varies by 18 years across Fairfax County census tracts, ranging from 75 to 93 years.

We calculated rates of premature deaths in 2019-2023, the five-year period with the most recently available data. During those years, the premature mortality rate in Fairfax County (inclusive of Fairfax City and Falls Church City) was 168.3 per 100,000 persons. By comparison, the corresponding rates per 100,000 in surrounding jurisdictions were 196.3 in Alexandria, 167.0 in Arlington County, 163.9 in Loudoun County, and 245.9 in Prince William County.

The risk of premature death varied almost 7-fold across Fairfax County, with rates ranging from 92.1 per 100,000 in census tract 4310.01 in Burke to 638.8 per 100,000 in tract 4214 in Groveton (**Figure 1**). Rates were 48% higher among non-Hispanic (NH) Black residents of Fairfax County (250.6 per 100,000) than among NH White residents (169.3 per 100,000), but the lowest rates occurred among Hispanic (153.1 per 100,000) and NH Asian (125.4 per 100,000) residents. NH Black residents were twice as likely to die prematurely than NH Asian residents of Fairfax County.

Fully 68% of the premature deaths in Fairfax County were avoidable, meaning that they could have been averted through preventive measures (e.g., screening tests, vaccines) or more timely treatments. The 10 leading causes of premature death in Fairfax County were cancer, heart disease, accidental poisoning

(e.g., drug overdoses), COVID-19, suicide, cerebrovascular diseases (e.g., stroke), diabetes, chronic lower respiratory disease, infant death, and transport (e.g., motor vehicle accidents).

However, leading causes of death varied across racial and ethnic groups. For example, suicide, the 5th leading cause of death in the overall population, ranked 4th in the NH White population but 11th in the NH Black population. During 2019-2023, COVID-19 ranked as the 2nd and 4th leading cause of death in the Hispanic and NH Black populations, respectively, but 7th in the NH White population. Infant deaths were the 5th leading cause of death in the Hispanic population but the 16th in the NH White population.

This snapshot of conditions in 2019-2023 obscures important changes that occurred in recent years, not least the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and the heavy loss of life in Fairfax County at its peak (2020-2021). During those years, 379 residents of Fairfax County died from COVID-19.

However, premature death rates from non-COVID causes also shifted over time. For example, between 2015-2019 and 2019-2023, the premature death rate in Fairfax County increased by 7.9%, reflecting not only COVID-19 deaths but also large increases in death rates from heart disease (9.4%), stroke (15.0%), diabetes (17.0%), and drug overdoses (24.8%). Although COVID-19 death rates skyrocketed in 2020-2021, becoming the third leading cause of death in Fairfax County, they waned with widespread vaccination. The most striking contrast between the pandemic's peak in 2020-2021 and what occurred in 2022-2023 was a 73.3% decrease in COVID-19 mortality, but there were also increases in non-COVID deaths. This interval saw continued increases in death rates from heart disease (20.9%), stroke (28.5%), diabetes (9.1%), and drug overdoses (23.4%) as well increases in infant mortality (43.8%), motor vehicle accidents (28.5%), and suicides (8.5%).

Risk factors for premature death include not only unhealthy diet and behaviors (e.g., smoking) and inadequate health care but also social and environmental conditions. For example, rates are higher for residents of Fairfax County with limited education and income

and those living in marginalized neighborhoods that lack resources for healthy living (e.g., affordable and healthy food and housing, walkways and green space for physical activity) or that expose residents to health threats such as gun violence and pollution. Table 1 contrasts the social and environmental conditions for census tracts in Fairfax County with the highest and lowest premature deaths rates. In the quintile (20%) of census tracts with the highest death rates, the percentage of children living in poverty and of adults being uninsured or lacking a high school diploma was three times higher than in the quintile with the lowest mortality.

Strategies to reduce premature death rates in Fairfax County must focus on these root causes. This includes policies to widen access to quality health care and promote healthy behaviors but also to reduce socioeconomic hardship, racial or ethnic discrimination, and food and housing insecurity. Environmental threats to health ranging from firearms to toxins and severe weather events are also priorities. For Fairfax County and other jurisdictions, inattention to these issues or disinvestment in public health priorities pose the risk of increasing premature deaths.

Table 1. Premature mortality and social conditions in Fairfax County, grouped by mortality quintiles¹					
Premature death rates					
Quintile	1	2	3	4	5
Average premature mortality rate (per 100,000)	116.9	143.0	169.8	202.7	268.2
Social Conditions					
Educational attainment					
No high school diploma	4%	3%	7%	9%	14%
Bachelor's degree or higher	74%	71%	62%	57%	48%
Poverty					
Children	3%	3%	7%	11%	15%
Adults (18-64 years)	4%	4%	5%	7%	9%
Adults (65 years and older)	3%	4%	6%	7%	7%
Other living conditions					
Single-parent household	11%	13%	13%	20%	24%
Limited English	5%	4%	7%	8%	11%
Uninsured	6%	5%	10%	11%	19%
Overcrowded housing	1%	1%	4%	4%	6%
Racial and ethnic composition of population					
NH White	58%	56%	48%	40%	33%
NH Black	6%	6%	8%	13%	14%
Hispanic	11%	11%	19%	21%	31%
NH Asian	20%	21%	20%	20%	17%
Foreign-Born	25%	25%	31%	35%	39%
Source: Social conditions data from American Community Survey, 2019-2023					
NH = non-Hispanic					
¹ Census tracts in Fairfax County were grouped by quintiles, with quintile 1 representing the 20% of census tracts with the lowest premature mortality rates and quintile 5 representing the 20% of tracts with the highest mortality rates.					