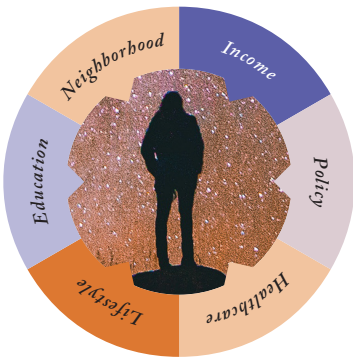


A NEW TOOL FOR BUSINESSES AND INVESTORS: THE HEALTHY PLACES INDEX



Health is about more than health care. It is shaped by an array of social and environmental factors, from the amount and quality of education we receive to our income, housing, and the physical and social conditions of our neighborhoods.

EDUCATION	34%
ECONOMIC/OTHER HOUSEHOLD RESOURCES	26%
HOUSING	16%
TRANSPORTATION	10%
AIR QUALITY	9%
HEALTHCARE ACCESS	6%

The business and financial sectors in Northern Virginia—from local employers and industry leaders to investors and philanthropists—appreciate the region’s strong economy and high quality of life. However, living conditions are uneven across the area. Some residents suffer from poor health and limited resources for economic opportunity. A 2017 report by the Northern Virginia Health Foundation identified 15 “islands of disadvantage”—neighborhoods (clusters of census tracts) across the region where residents face very difficult living conditions and poor health.¹

Life expectancy varies by 19 years across Northern Virginia. What explains such large differences? It’s not health care: doctors and hospitals account for less than 10% of this variation.² Increasingly, business leaders recognize that the health of employees—and their health care costs—are shaped by the conditions in which they and their dependents live, such as their housing, transportation, and food security. Unhealthy workers are less productive and may be more absent for medical care.

The same conditions also affect the local economy. Green space, safety, and the other amenities that produce healthy communities also attract new industries, jobs, work talent, and a consumer market that buys products and services. But the Northern Virginia economy has left many neighborhoods behind—victims of historic disinvestment—and these are often the same neighborhoods that suffer from health inequities. People of color and immigrants are disproportionately exposed to these living conditions.

Reversing these inequities has become an investment priority for many community development financial institutions, lenders, philanthropy, and new investment models (e.g., pay for performance). They see the “win-win” proposition: bringing businesses, jobs, and capital to low-to-moderate income communities can generate returns on investment while also reducing health and social inequities.

Investments in mixed-income housing, mixed-use commercial spaces, education, and transportation will not only stimulate the economy but also reduce health inequities and potentially save lives.

A new tool can help businesses assess the condition of their workers' neighborhoods and help investors identify solutions. Researchers at the Center on Society and Health at Virginia Commonwealth University developed the Healthy Places Index (HPI)—a score that can be used to quickly size up the health of neighborhoods. The HPI rates census tracts on a scale of 0–100; higher scores mean more favorable living conditions. In computing the index, the researchers estimated which factors drive the variation in life expectancy across Northern Virginia (see graphic).

Places with high a HPI enjoy more ideal living conditions that produce good health. Areas with a low HPI have fewer resources and opportunities. For example, in census tract 6105.05 in Leesburg, where the HPI is only 48, just 56% of adults have a high school diploma. In tract 4802.02 near Tyson's Corner, the HPI is 92 and 97% of adults have attended college.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The bottom line: employers and investors increasingly recognize the business case for improving the economic vitality of all neighborhoods. Investments in mixed-income housing, mixed-use commercial spaces, education, and transportation will not only stimulate the economy but also reduce health inequities and potentially save lives. The upfront costs are clear, but the return on investment is even clearer. Use the HPI to help identify areas in our region with the greatest needs.



1. Woolf SH, Chapman DA, Hill L, Snellings LK. *Getting Ahead: The Uneven Opportunity Landscape in Northern Virginia*. Richmond: Center on Society and Health, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2017. Commissioned by the Northern Virginia Health Foundation.



2. Woolf S, Chapman D, Hill L, Schoemaker H, Wheeler D, Snellings L, Lee JH. *Uneven Opportunities: How Conditions for Wellness Vary Across the Metropolitan Washington Region*. Richmond: Center on Society and Health, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2018.

Want to explore these data further?

Visit our interactive map at:

<https://novahealthfdn.org/interactive-map-opportunity>

