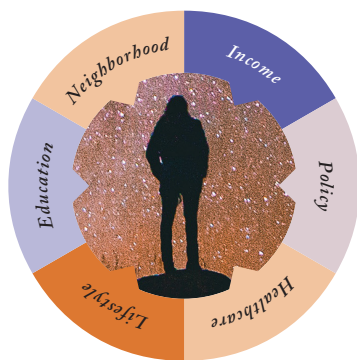


A NEW TOOL FOR COMMUNITY ADVOCATES: THE HEALTHY PLACES INDEX



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%

Although Northern Virginia has a strong economy, living conditions are uneven across the region. This comes as no surprise to grassroots organizations and local residents, who know firsthand that certain neighborhoods have historically suffered 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 Disparities by race or ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or neighborhood reflect inequities in education, income, food security, housing, transportation, clean air and water, and safety net programs, among others. These conditions shape opportunity not only for good health but also for overall wellbeing and economic mobility.

A new tool can help those who advocate on behalf of these neighborhoods. 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 found that 60% of the variation in life expectancy in Northern Virginia was explained by differences in the education and economic resources of households (see graphic). Such information can be useful to residents, advocacy groups, neighborhood associations, faith-based organizations, service providers, and others with social justice missions.

Advocates for equity and social justice can make the case that targeted investments in living conditions and economic opportunity can reduce health inequities across Northern Virginia and potentially save lives.

Places with high HPI scores enjoy more ideal living conditions that produce good health. Areas with low HPI scores have fewer 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 score is 92 and 97% of adults have attended college.

People of color are often disproportionately exposed to adverse living conditions. For example, in Prince William County's census tract 9009.01 in Dumfries, where the HPI is 26—the lowest HPI in Northern Virginia—45% of residents are African Americans, 26% are Hispanic, and 22% are immigrants.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Advocates for equity and social justice can make the case that targeted investments in living conditions and economic opportunity can also reduce health inequities across Northern Virginia and potentially save lives. Such improvements are not without cost, but the return on investment is strong. 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>

