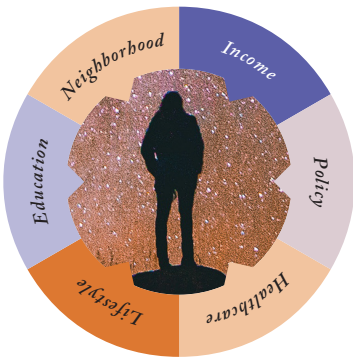


EDUCATION AND HEALTH:

HOW THE HEALTHY PLACES INDEX CAN INFORM POLICY



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%

Northern Virginia is a vibrant region. The economy is strong and residents enjoy a 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 the region. What explains such large differences? It’s not health care: doctors and hospitals account for less than 10% of this variation.² Health is shaped more by our living conditions—such as education, income, and the physical and social environment in which we live—and these vary greatly by neighborhood.

Chief among these is education. A good education is important not only to open doors for good jobs and put children on a path for success, but it’s also important for health. Adults with more education, and the income it provides, are less likely to smoke cigarettes, become obese, develop diabetes or other chronic diseases, or die prematurely.

To help compare education and the other conditions that exist across Northern Virginia’s census tracts, 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).

Policies and investments to improve education will improve economic opportunity and health outcomes.

Places with a high HPI enjoy more ideal living conditions that produce good health. Areas with a low HPI have fewer opportunities, and these often include low levels of educational attainment. 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.

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

Policies and investments to improve education—such as broadening access to preschool, improving primary and secondary education and graduation rates, and making college more affordable—will improve economic opportunity and health outcomes. 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, Schoomaker 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>

