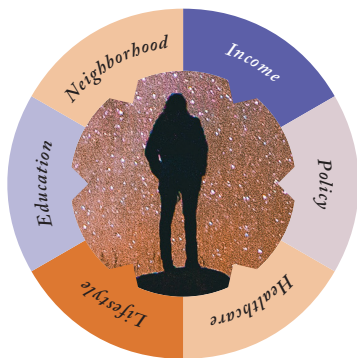


# A NEW TOOL FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT: THE HEALTHY PLACES INDEX



*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%

Local leaders know that 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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> Increasingly, county and city officials recognize that the health of residents—and the costs of providing health care—are shaped dramatically by “non-health” policies. Specifically, the health of a county or neighborhood is influenced by policies on education, income, housing, transportation, zoning, the environment, and social services, among others. These local conditions also affect economic development and strategic growth, and are important not only to elected officials (e.g., county supervisors, mayors) and voters but also to municipal agencies, school systems, and regional planners.

To help compare living conditions 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).

# Efforts by local government to improve the economic vitality of households and neighborhoods will reduce health inequities across Northern Virginia and potentially save lives.

Places with a high HPI enjoy more ideal living conditions that produce good health. Areas with a low HPI 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 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

Efforts by local government to improve the economic vitality of households and neighborhoods—from investments in education to broader access to public transportation—will 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>

