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Dying Too Soon: New Report Reveals Deep and Persistent Disparities in Reaching Age 75 Across Northern Virginia

Race, Ethnicity, and Address Are the Biggest Predictors of Dying Prematurely

ARLINGTON, VA. (June 28, 2023) – In Northern Virginia, your chances for reaching age 75 depend largely on your race and ethnicity and where you live, according to a new report by the Center on Society and Health at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) commissioned by the Northern Virginia Health Foundation (NVHF). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the report found, these factors had an even greater impact on whether people lived or died.

The report, *Dying Too Soon: In Northern Virginia, the Risk of Dying Before Age 75 Depends on Race, Ethnicity and Address*, offers a unique look at how death rates vary across Northern Virginia, focusing on two time periods: 2015 to 2019, before the pandemic struck, and 2020 to 2021, at the height of the pandemic. Statistics are reported for counties, legislative districts, and census tracts, and are compared across racial and ethnic populations, showing the higher health risks that people of color face.

Neighborhoods that were already experiencing low life expectancy and poor living conditions became “hot spots” during the pandemic. In these 15 “islands of disadvantage,” often located only a few blocks from much more affluent communities, many more people died prematurely from COVID-19 and other causes.

“Disinvestment in neighborhoods populated by people of color, fueled by centuries of systemic racism, led to conditions that made these places unhealthy to live in,” said NVHF President and CEO Patricia N. Mathews. “It will take leadership at the local and state levels and new approaches to policymaking and community investment to reverse these conditions so that everyone has a fair and just opportunity to live a long and healthy life.”

Two Thirds of Premature Deaths Could Have Been Prevented

The report found that, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the risk for Northern Virginians dying before age 75 was far lower than the statewide average, but rates of premature death by census tract varied more than sixfold across the region. Black residents were 44% more likely to die before age 75 than their White counterparts, and the risk was higher for those living in marginalized neighborhoods.

Across the region, approximately two thirds of deaths before age 75 could have been averted through preventive services or better medical treatment. Although cancer and heart disease were the first and second leading causes of premature death across the region, the third and fourth leading causes of death varied between census tracts with high and low overall death rates. In tracts with lower overall death rates, suicide was the third leading cause of death. In census tracts with the highest death rates, drug overdoses, stroke, and diabetes, ranked as the third, fourth, and fifth leading causes of death, respectively.

Pandemic Worsened Health Disparities

From 2020 to 2021, premature death rates increased across the region. However, the wealthiest 10% of census tracts in Northern Virginia saw no increase in premature deaths.

Across the region, COVID-19 was the third leading cause of premature death, after cancer and heart disease. It was, however, the top cause of premature death for Hispanics in the region. Among Prince William's Hispanic population, COVID-19 death rates were almost six times higher than for Alexandria's White population.

"For people of color, the pandemic made a bad situation terrible," said Steven Woolf, MD, MPH, lead study author and director emeritus of VCU's Center on Society and Health.

But, he added, the circumstances in which people lived and worked also played a huge role in their COVID-19 risks. Across the region, COVID-19 death rates varied as much as twofold within the same racial-ethnic group, depending on where they lived. And across racial-ethnic groups, COVID-19 death rates varied almost six-fold.

The probability of dying from COVID-19 was highest in Prince William County. People living in Prince William County were 77% more likely to die from COVID-19 than residents of Fairfax County.

"Poverty was a major factor," Dr. Woolf said. "We found 18 census tracts in Northern Virginia with higher poverty rates than in Balkan and Caucasus countries." Rates of premature death from alcoholic liver disease, other forms of chronic liver disease, drug overdoses, diabetes, heart disease, and stroke all increased significantly during the pandemic—likely due to disruptions in access to health care services.

Using Data to Advance Change

Ms. Mathews noted that solutions for addressing health inequities in Northern Virginia must focus not only on health but on a range of factors that affect health, including education, employment, and housing.

"Data like ours that identify the precise census tracts experiencing the greatest threats to health and wellbeing can provide important insights to policymakers, service providers, and funders," she said. "They can help target investments in neighborhoods that have been neglected and prioritize efforts to improve living conditions by offering more affordable housing, expanding educational opportunities, and improving opportunities for employment."

NVHF hopes that local officials, community leaders, and state representatives will use the new report to work together on expanding opportunities for health and wellbeing across the region.

To read the full report, visit: <https://novahealthfdn.org/resources/dying-too-soon-report>

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About the Northern Virginia Health Foundation: The Northern Virginia Health Foundation is dedicated to improving the health and health care of residents of Northern Virginia, with a particular emphasis on low-income, uninsured, and underinsured persons. Follow the Foundation on Twitter at [www.twitter.com/novahealthfdn](https://twitter.com/novahealthfdn).

About the Virginia Community University (VCU) Center on Society and Health: The VCU Center on Society and Health is an academic research center that studies the health implications of social factors—such as education, income, neighborhood and community environmental conditions, and public policy. Follow the Center on Twitter, @VCUSocHealt

