In 2015–2019, the leading causes of premature deaths in Prince William County were cancer, heart disease, drug overdoses, suicide, and diabetes. Most of these deaths were avoidable, either through preventive measures or treatment, but access to such services is limited. In Prince William County, 69% of the 5,721 premature deaths that occurred in 2015–2019 were avoidable.

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During 2020–2021, Prince William County experienced 634 deaths from COVID-19, which became the third leading cause of death in the county. Not surprisingly, many of the “islands of disadvantage” experienced higher COVID-19 death rates.
These high levels of avoidable death signal the need for stronger efforts to broaden access to health insurance and to high-quality, affordable primary care, preventive services, and treatments for chronic disease. Access to mental health and substance abuse services is also vital, underscoring the need to address deficiencies in the local behavioral health system, shortages of mental health professionals, and the heightened demands created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Local public health departments, on which the community relied during the pandemic, are chronically underfunded. They need adequate resources to provide ongoing services and to remain prepared for future health emergencies.

Disproportionately high mortality rates among people of color, and their over-representation in marginalized neighborhoods in Prince William County, offer yet another reminder of the need to address the legacy of systemic racism and to work proactively to dismantle structural factors in our communities that block doors to opportunity.

The opportunity for good health should be available to all residents of Prince William County, and reducing inequities is also good for the economy. Both government and the private sector should redouble their efforts to improve access to education, good jobs that pay livable wages, and affordable food, housing, health care, transportation, and child care. Until this occurs, the risk of dying prematurely in Prince William County will continue to depend on one’s ZIP code.

Figure 3. Disparities in local conditions help explain disparities in death rates

Premature death rates refer to deaths before age 75 (per 100,000 persons), adjusted for differences in age distribution.