

# RACE, ETHNICITY, AND HEALTH IN NORTHERN VIRGINIA

## THE HEALTHY PLACES INDEX

Although residents of Northern Virginia generally enjoy good health and a strong economy, living conditions are uneven across the region. While the majority of the population fares well, 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) where residents face very difficult living conditions and poor health.<sup>1</sup>

Why does life expectancy vary by 19 years across the region? It’s not health care, which accounts for 10–20% of this variation.<sup>2</sup> 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. Neighborhoods with the worst living conditions are often communities of color, where residents are largely African American or Hispanic, immigrants, and people with low incomes and few assets. (Northern Virginia is also home to many Asian American families, although Asians in our region—as a group—often have better health, and sometimes more affluence, than whites.)

A new tool provides clear data on such inequities. 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 status of households, and 26% was explained by differences in housing and transportation.

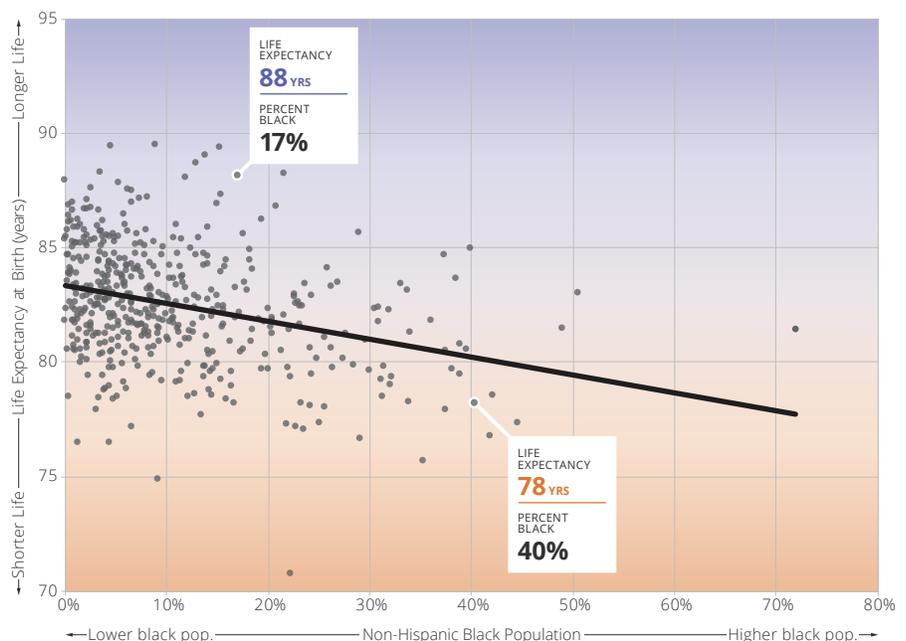
When race-ethnicity was included in the model, the researchers also found that nearly half (47%) of the variation was associated with race-ethnicity and immigrant status.

Black residents are more likely to live in places with low life expectancy

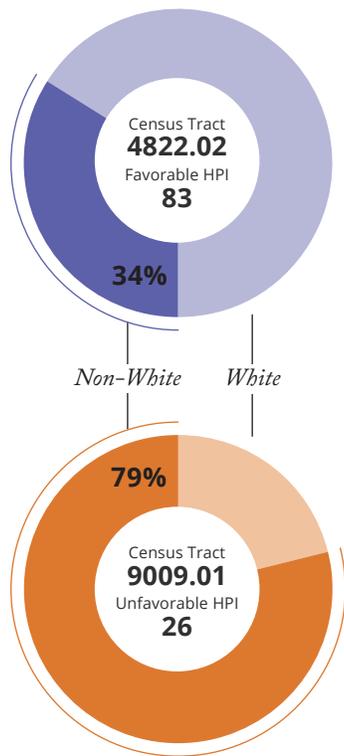
**Figure 1. Scatter plot of relationship between black populations and life expectancy**

*The diagonal trend line provides the takeaway: the larger the percentage of the population that is black, the lower the census tract’s life expectancy. People of color are more likely to live in places that provide fewer opportunities for health.*

● = census tract



**Figure 2. Race/Ethnicity of Neighboring Census Tracts in Prince William County**



**Above:** Areas with less favorable conditions for health disproportionately impact people of color, as shown by the uneven racial composition of the above census tracts.

People of color and immigrants are more likely to live in neighborhoods with fewer resources for good health (reflected in low HPI scores). 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 and 26% are Hispanic (Figure 2). In this tract, the adult poverty rate is 21% and life expectancy is only 77 years (compared to 89 years in areas of Fairfax County like tract 4822.02 in Reston). Elsewhere in Fairfax County, in tract 4516.01 in Bailey’s Crossroads, the HPI is 43, 61% of residents are immigrants, and 34% of children live in poverty.

The higher the proportion of African Americans in a census tract, the lower the life expectancy (Figure 1). On average, minority and low-income individuals have reduced access to resources for good health, such as education, income, affordable housing, and transportation. The experience of racism is itself biologically harmful: chronic stress accumulates over time (and across generations) and harms body organs and the immune system. Segregation and low incomes force marginalized groups to live in neighborhoods with adverse health conditions, such as pollution, crime, and limited access to healthy food, green space, and health care.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

Policies and investments to bring education, good jobs, and affordable housing to marginalized neighborhoods will improve economic opportunity, improve health, and reduce racial-ethnic inequities. The benefits extend far beyond the residents of those communities: the entire region gains from a stronger economy and greater wellbeing. 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>

