

Where you are born can predict how long you live

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Credit: Virginia Commonwealth University

There's a growing understanding of what's causing big differences in people's health—and it's far more than having access to a doctor. The Virginia Commonwealth University Center on Society and Health and

the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation recently concluded a 21-part series with the release a [life expectancy map](#) of the Washington, D.C. region showing an eight-year gap between just a few stops along Metro's Blue and Orange Lines.

The maps, which show life expectancy at birth have been utilized by [public health officials](#), business owners, housing advocates, and other community leaders across the country to raise awareness of the many factors that shape health and to advance their work to improve health for residents of their communities. Notable findings from [the series include](#):

- In Richmond, life expectancy differs by 20 years in the 5.5 miles between Westover Hills and Gilpin and by 14 years in the 2.8 miles that separate Westover Hills and Swansboro.
- In Philadelphia, if you travel five miles from Society Hill to North Philadelphia, life expectancy can differ by as much as 20 years.
- In Chicago, life expectancy can differ by as much as 16 years between the seven "L" stops that separate The Loop from Washington Park.
- In New York City, life expectancy can differ by nearly 10 years in the six subway stops that separate East Harlem from Murray Hill.
- In Las Vegas, life expectancy can differ by as much as 16 years in the nine miles that separate The Strip from Southeast Las Vegas.
- In Miami, if you travel less than one mile from Overtown to Downtown, life expectancy can differ by as much as 15 years.
- In both North Carolina—along the mostly rural stretch of U.S. Route 64 that leads from Martin County to Wake County—and Mississippi—along a stretch of U.S. Route 82 that leads from Oktibbeha County to Sunflower County, [life expectancy](#) can differ by as much as seven years.

Research shows that today, nearly one in five Americans live in neighborhoods that make it hard to be healthy. The series of maps from cities and rural areas across the country illustrate that a person's ZIP code may have as much to do with their health as their genetic code and that opportunities to lead a long and [healthy life](#) can vary dramatically by neighborhood.

Health differences between neighborhoods are rarely due to a single cause. Instead, a complex web of factors influence health—opportunities for education and jobs, safe and affordable housing, availability of nutritious food and places for physical activity, clean air, and access to health care, child care, and social services.

"When it comes to health, the choices we make depend on the choices available to us," said Derek Chapman, Ph.D., associate director for research, VCU Center on Society and Health. "Some neighborhoods have more liquor stores than grocery stores, lack safe and affordable housing, or have poor quality schools. And many urban and rural areas have experienced generations of isolation from opportunity. America cannot be healthy if we are leaving behind whole communities."

In addition to showcasing gaps in health short distances apart, the project identified solutions that are working in communities to create opportunities to live longer, healthier lives. For example:

- The City of Miami's [Community Health Initiative](#) provides free health care (health, dental, vision, and mammogram screenings) and employment services to residents at local parks.
- In Cleveland, the [Achieving Equity Initiative](#) seeks to ensure that policymakers consider the health implications of decisions that impact residents of Cuyahoga County and surrounding neighborhoods, particularly East Cleveland, where nearly one in three residents live in poverty.

- The [Tulsa Regional Chamber of Commerce](#) is leading several initiatives to foster student success and build a healthy workforce. The Partners in Education program connects local business leaders with the Tulsa Public School district to increase the quality of education for all students and help them develop critical thinking and leadership skills.

"To build a Culture of Health we must build a society where everyone, no matter who they are or where they live, has the opportunity to lead a fulfilling, productive and healthy life," said RWJF President and CEO Risa Lavizzo-Mourey, M.D. "There's no one-size-fits-all solution. Each community must chart its own course and everyone has a role to play for better health in their homes, in their neighborhoods, in their schools and in their towns."

Provided by Virginia Commonwealth University

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