The poorer your neighborhood, the shorter your life

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Not everyone has an equal opportunity to live a long and healthy life, as is evidenced by the wide disparities in life expectancy throughout the State of Ohio. There is much more to health than health care; the conditions in the community in which you live influence how healthy you will be and how long you will live. Being able to measure health outcomes at the very local level is important if we are to shape policies and services that improve these conditions for vulnerable communities. It is in that spirit that the U.S Small-Area Life Expectancy Estimates Project (USALEEP)¹ came to be, and through this research, we are able to look at life expectancy at the census tract level. As of 2017, the average life expectancy at birth in the United States was 78.6 years.² Individuals who are 65 years old can expect to live an additional 19.4 years on average. Life expectancy is a broad measure of the overall health of communities, and although life expectancy in the U.S. has risen dramatically over several decades, it has actually fallen slightly for the past few years. Some researchers attribute this to increases in suicide and drug overdose deaths.³ Measuring life expectancy at birth gives us a good picture of the longevity and health of the next generation, while looking at life expectancy at age 65 can give us a picture of older adults as they enter retirement age.

The below map allows you to see what the life expectancy is anywhere in the State of Ohio. (There is an interactive map available at CommSols.com/LifeExpectancyOhio.) Areas of the map that are gray are tracts for which there was no data available (USALEEP does not provide life-expectancy data for census tracts with a standard error more than four years, due to lack of confidence in these estimates. This means researchers were not at least 95 percent confident in these estimates as they were in the average of all of the reported estimates.)

Included in the information for each area is the life expectancy at birth (how long a newborn can expect to live), as well as the life expectancy at age 65 (how many additional years a 65-year-old can expect to live). We have also included some demographic information for each of the tracts: the poverty rate, the percentage of the population that is white and the percentage of the population that is Black. The demographic information is important because both socioeconomic status and race are factors that influence health, and are correlated to life expectancy.

¹ https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/usaleep/usaleep.html
Life Expectancy at Birth in Ohio, by Census Tract

Correlations exist between life expectancy, poverty and race

Throughout the state, if you live in a poor area, you are likely to live a shorter life than those who live in wealthier areas. Similarly, if you live in an area with a high percentage of Black residents, your life expectancy will be lower than that of counterparts living in majority white areas. These correlations are statistically significant, but do not prove causation.

As poverty rates increase by census tract, life expectancy decreases. In Ohio, we see increased poverty rates mainly in the urban cores and the rural Appalachian parts of the state. While the lowest life expectancies in the state are in parts of the cities of Columbus (60 years old) and Dayton (61.1 years old), the third lowest life expectancy, 61.6 years old, is in part of Steubenville, Ohio, located right on the East Central border of the state near West Virginia. The highest life expectancy in the state, 89.2 years old, is in exurban Stow, Ohio.

Similarly, in areas where a higher percentage of the population is Black, life expectancy tends to be lower. This is a slightly weaker correlation than the correlation with poverty, but it is still significant. This is likely because poverty is a broader measure than race, and because Black people tend to be more concentrated in urban areas in Ohio. These patterns of racial segregation, a consequence of redlining in the 1930s and 1940s, are directly related to disinvestment in communities of color even in the present
day. Lack of access to fresh foods, environmental hazards such as lead and pollution, under-funded schools and lack of high quality employment opportunities are all factors that negatively impact health in many urban areas. Rural poverty, which impacts mostly white Ohioans, also negatively impacts health outcomes, which explains why poverty is a better predictor of life expectancy than race in Ohio.

Wide disparities exist in Cuyahoga County

In examining life expectancy in Cuyahoga County, it is clear that wide disparities persist in our community. Broadly, the map shows that life expectancies are lowest in the center of Cleveland, and grow higher as you look into the outer ring suburbs. However, the highest and lowest tracts for which we have life expectancy data are less than two miles apart.
Residents in the census tract with the lowest life expectancy can expect to live to age 65.4, just past the age when they would first qualify for Medicare. This census tract is located partially in the University Circle neighborhood and partially in the Buckeye-Woodhill neighborhood. It is just across the rapid transit tracks from Case Western Reserve University’s campus, the University Hospital Medical Center and the Cleveland Clinic. In addition to some small, mostly dilapidated residential areas, this tract also contains the Baldwin Water Treatment Plant, the Fairmount Reservoir and the Artha Woods Park. It is also located just north of the CMHA Woodhill Homes public housing development, which is currently undergoing a comprehensive planning process to determine its future.  

While this tract is very close to a large employment center (University Circle) and many community assets, the residential areas within the tract are largely disconnected from the assets that surround them.

Just two miles down the road, a mere three stops away on the Blue Line, is the highest life expectancy census tract in the county, located in Shaker Heights. Residents of this tract can expect to live to age 88.6, more than 23 years longer than their neighbors just across the Cleveland border. This tract is home to three schools- Woodbury Elementary, Onaway Elementary and Shaker Heights High School, in

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addition to Marshall Lake, and some walking trails. Otherwise, the tract is comprised mostly of tree-lined residential streets, characteristic of much of Shaker Heights. The disparity between these two communities, located so close together, yet so vastly different in access to opportunity, is striking.
Life Expectancy at Birth by Census Tract in Cuyahoga County

Municipal boundaries are outlined in white

While access to quality health care and personal choices impact our health, looking at life expectancy by geography further illustrates that place matters when it comes to health outcomes. Not all neighborhoods are created with equal opportunities for their residents to live healthy lives. The result of this is that many Ohioans’ lives are cut short of their full potential. Improving social and environmental factors throughout the state will lead to better health outcomes and longer lives for Ohioans.