

Equity Measure Domain: Primary Goal

Life Expectancy at Birth

Goal: The primary goal in examining each of the selected equity metrics is to close the gap in life expectancy by race by raising life expectancy in NC to the level of the group with the longest life expectancy.

Description:

Life expectancy is “the average number of years of life a person who has attained a given age can expect to live.”¹ Life expectancy at birth reflects the overall mortality level of a population. It summarizes the mortality pattern that prevails across all age groups - children and adolescents, adults, and the elderly.²

Measure: Number of years of life expectancy at birth by race in North Carolina.

Source: CDC National Vital Statistics Reports³

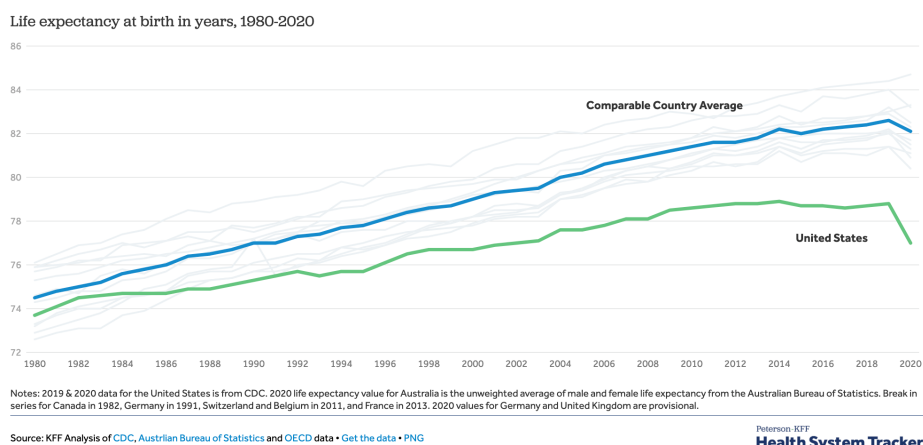
Rationale for measure selection:

(Life expectancy) data can help us better understand the health disparities across our communities and provide a clearer picture of the biggest health challenges and opportunities we experience.⁴

Healthy Carolinas 2030 identifies Life Expectancy as a Key Health Indicator and sets a goal to increase life expectancy from 77.6 years in 2018 to 82 years by 2030.⁵

Life Expectancy in the US Lags Behind Comparable Peer Nations

Figure 1



1 CDC Life Expectancy. Accessed at: <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/life-expectancy.htm>

2 World Health Organization. Accessed at: <https://www.who.int/data/gho/indicator-metadata-registry/imr-details/65>

3 CDC National Vital Statistics Reports. Accessed at: <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr70/nvsr70-18.pdf> for 2019 and <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/vsrr/vsrr015-508.pdf> for 2020

4 Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Accessed at: <https://www.rwjf.org/en/blog/2018/09/new-data-provides-deeper-understanding-of-life-expectancy-gaps.html>

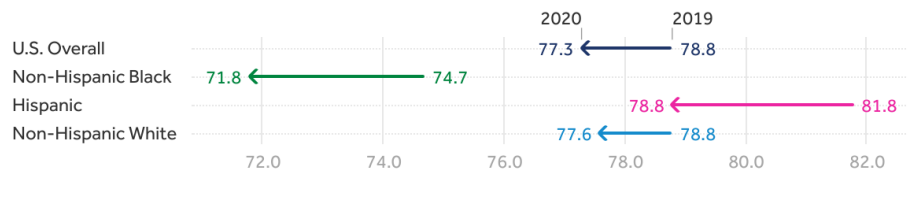
5 NC Institute of Medicine. Accessed at: <https://nciom.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/HNC-REPORT-FINAL-Spread2.pdf>

[The] drop in U.S. life expectancy relative to other countries was driven in part by racial disparities in COVID-19 mortality. Life expectancy at birth decreased across racial and ethnic groups in the U.S. in 2020 based on provisional Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) data. However, life expectancy at birth decreased more for non-Hispanic Black people (-2.9 years) and Hispanic people (-3 years), than for non-Hispanic White people (-1.2 years). The drop in life expectancy for non-Hispanic white people in the U.S. was nonetheless also larger than the average decline across comparable countries (-1.2 years vs -0.5 years).⁶

The discrepancy between life expectancy for white, Black, and Hispanic groups in the US was made clear during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁷

Figure 2

Life expectancy at birth, by race and ethnicity, U.S., 2019-2020



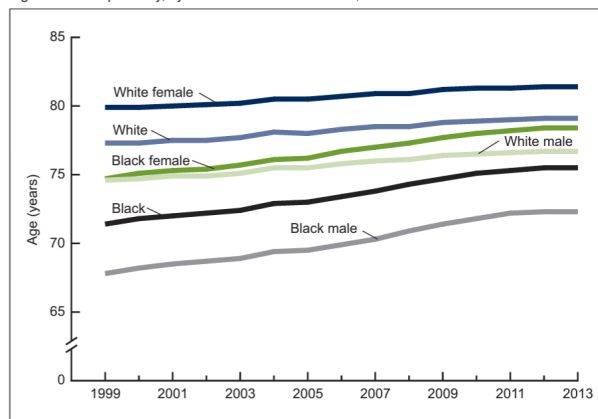
Source: KFF analysis of CDC data

Peterson-KFF
Health System Tracker

But a gap in life expectancy between white and non-white populations existed long before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 3

Figure 1. Life expectancy, by race and sex: United States, 1999–2013



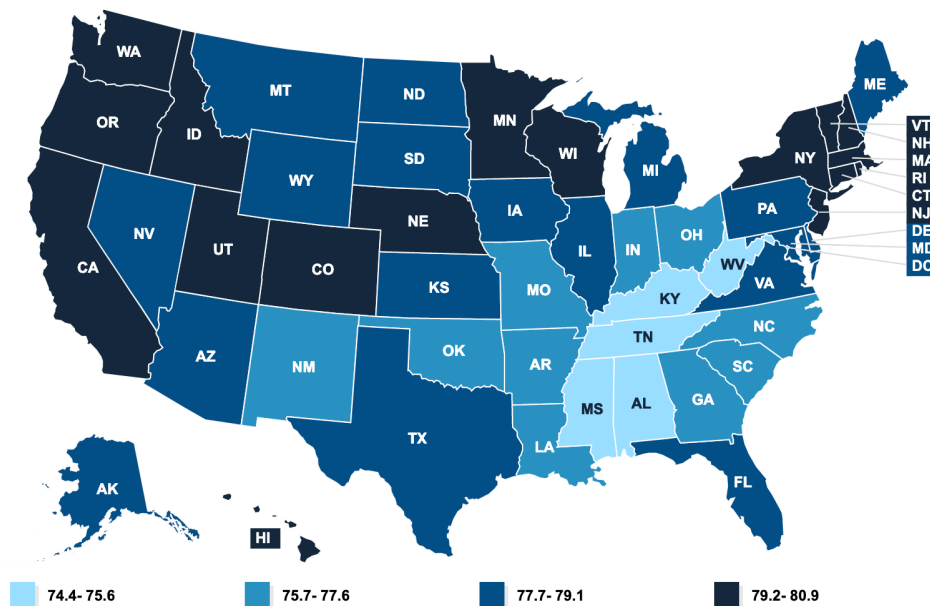
SOURCE: CDC/NCHS, National Vital Statistics System, Mortality.

⁶ Health System Tracker. Accessed at: <https://www.healthsystemtracker.org/chart-collection/u-s-life-expectancy-compare-countries/>

Life Expectancy in NC Lags Behind Other States

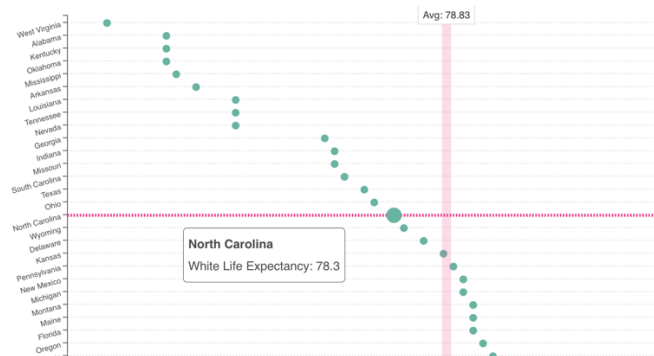
Across the nation, gaps in health are large, persistent, and increasing—many of them caused by barriers at all levels of our society. It is hard to be healthy without access to good jobs and schools and, safe, affordable homes. Health equity means increasing opportunities for everyone to live the healthiest life possible, no matter who we are, where we live, or how much money we make.⁸

Figure 4



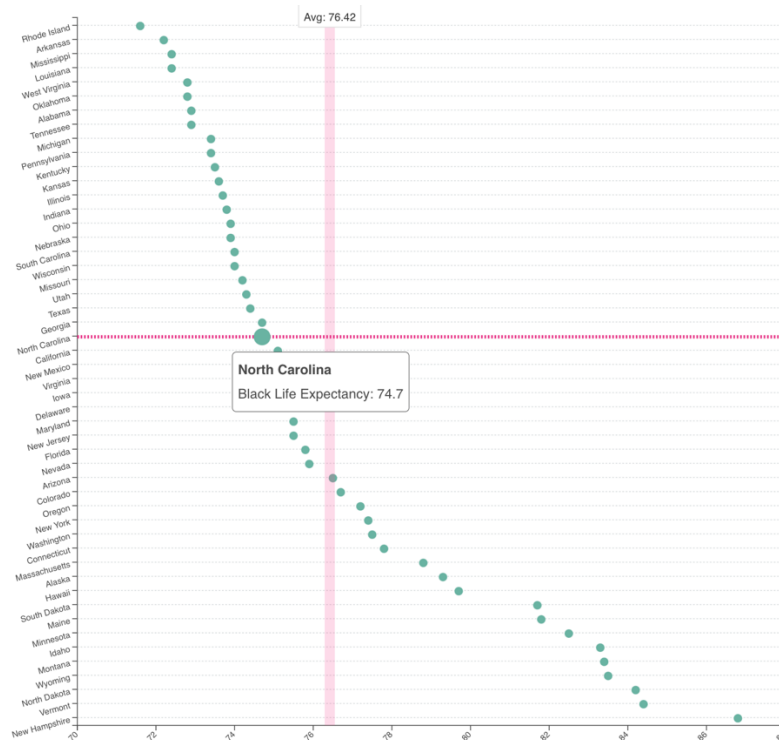
Life expectancy in North Carolina is below average for all groups compared to the US average; however, there is a notable gap in life expectancy between white and non-white populations including Black, Hispanic, and American Indian and Alaskan Native groups.

Figure 5



⁸ Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Accessed at: <https://www.rwjf.org/en/library/features/achieving-health-equity.html>

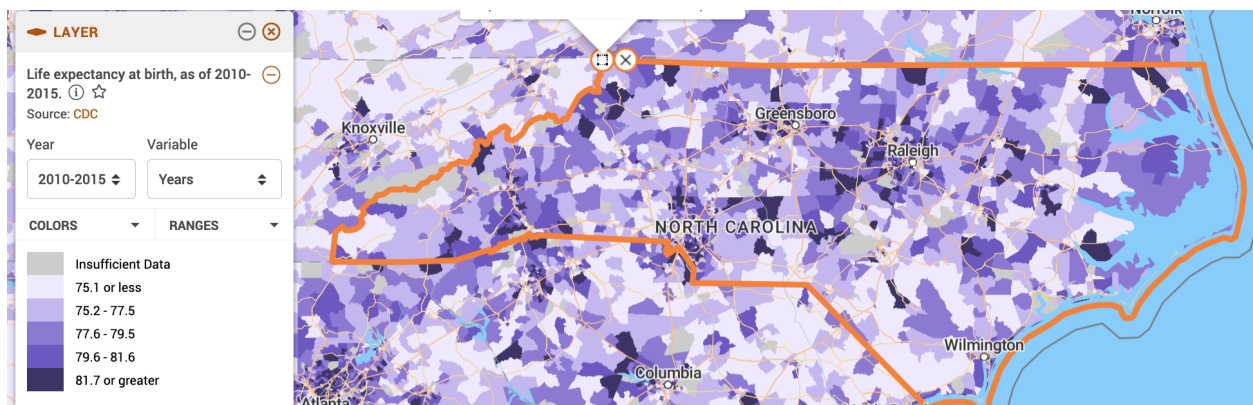
Figure 6



Racial and ethnic mortality disparities in life expectancy increased in 2020. For example, the non-Hispanic White life expectancy advantage over the non-Hispanic Black population increased by 41.5% between 2019 (4.1) and 2020 (5.8). Life expectancy for the Black population has consistently been lower than that of the white population, but the gap had been narrowing during the past three decades, from 7.1 years in 1993 to 4.1 years in 2019. The last time the gap in life expectancy between the White and Black populations was this large was in 1999.⁹

Within NC, Racial and Geographic Disparities Limit Life Expectancy

Figure 7



⁹ CDC. Accessed at: <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/vsrr/vsrr015-508.pdf>

In Healthy North Carolina 2030: A Path Toward Health, the NC Institute of Medicine states: Life expectancy is a proxy measure for the total health of a population. Disparities in life expectancy between populations point to areas where issues of health equity must be addressed.

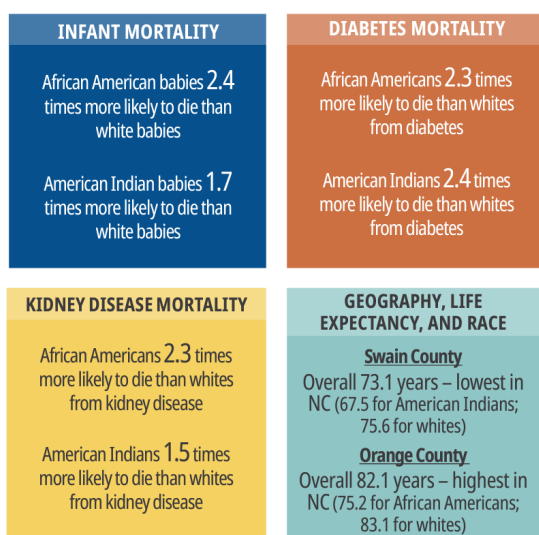
There are stark disparities in life expectancy across race, geography, and gender, as well as intersections of these characteristics that show wide gaps between groups. People who are Black, American Indians, people in rural areas, and men typically have lower life expectancies than the average. Among people of Black race (including those of Hispanic ethnicity), the average life expectancy for women (79.0 years) is slightly above the state average (78.0 years), although lower than the average for white women (including those of Hispanic ethnicity) (81.1 years). For Black men (including those of Hispanic ethnicity) the average is much lower at 72.2 years compared to 76.5 years for white men (including those of Hispanic ethnicity).

The disparities for people of Black race compared to white race are due in part to issues stemming from limited health care access, lack of trust in medical professionals, social and economic factors like racism and unemployment.

Geographic disparities also exist across North Carolina. People born in Swain County have the lowest life expectancy (average for 2016-18) at 73.1 years, while those in Orange County have the highest at 82.1 years. Factoring race and geography together reveals the multiple levels of disparities. Life expectancy for the white population in Swain is 75.6 years and is 67.5 years for the American Indian population. In Orange County the life expectancy for the white population is 83.1 years compared to 75.2 years for the Black population in the same county.¹⁰

Figure 8

Examples of Health Disparities in North Carolina



Sources: NC DHHS, *Health Equity Report, 2018*; NC DHHS, *Life Expectancy, 2016-2018*

¹⁰ North Carolina Institute of Medicine. *Healthy North Carolina 2030: A Path Toward Health*. Morrisville, NC: North Carolina Institute of Medicine; 2020. Funded by the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina Foundation, The Duke Endowment, and the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust. Accessed at: <https://nciom.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/HNC-REPORT-FINAL-Spread2.pdf>