

Built Environment

In the United States, life expectancy varies widely across geographical regions, neighborhoods, and even city blocks. These life-span disparities across even small geographical areas underscore the importance of the environments on mental and physical health. From the walkability of neighborhoods, access to parks and outdoor spaces, and exposures to hazardous chemicals, physical environments affect human health and well-being throughout life. Optimizing the built environments, in which children grow up and adults grow old is of paramount importance as we strive for healthier and more equitable societies in the era of 100-year lives.

Notable Statistics

- **Health:**
 - Only 1 in 10 of the 500 largest cities in the U.S. are very walkable.¹
 - 1 in 3 homes with children younger than age 6 contains significant lead-based paint which impairs neurological development in children.²
 - Only 1 in 3 Americans has access to a nearby green space.³
 - Only 4 in 10 Americans live in areas with recommended levels of air quality.⁴
- **Social connection:**
 - Neighbors are becoming less connected over time.⁵
 - Average household size is one half of what it was 100 years ago.⁶
- **Inequality:**
 - Across the US, life expectancy varies widely -- up to 20 years between different counties.⁷
 - 23 million mostly lower-income Americans live in food deserts, which typically only provide high-fat and high-sugar products.⁸
 - Differences in built environments affect disadvantaged populations the most dramatically. High income individuals from both New York and Detroit have the same average life expectancy, while the lowest income individuals living in Detroit live 5 years less than New York City residents.⁹

Areas of Investigation

- How can we shift the narrative from age-friendly cities to longevity-ready cities?
- Which environmental design interventions are most effective in changing behaviors?
- Which interventions at the local level (especially in rural America) are most likely to close disparities in job opportunities, age diversity, and health outcomes?



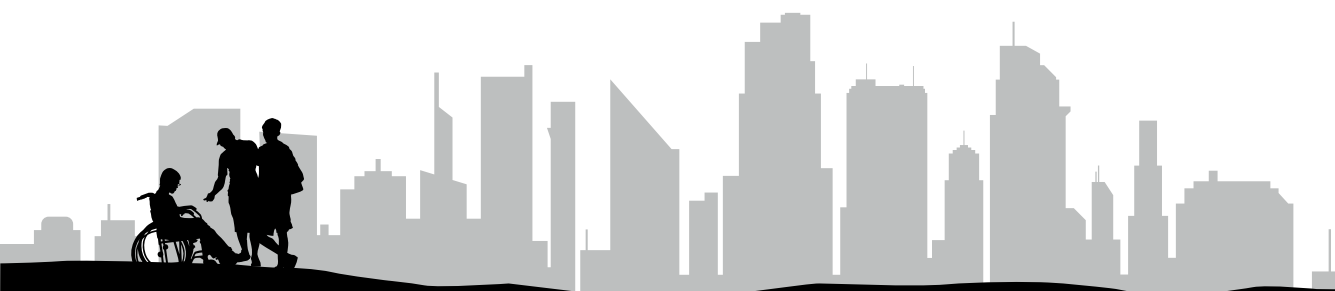
Two children born in different regions of the U.S. may face differences in life expectancies of up to 20 years.⁷ This reality varies greatly around the country where regions, neighborhoods, and even city blocks are associated with stark differences in life expectancies. Those living in the South and Appalachian regions of the country have relatively shorter lives than other parts of the country, yet disparities are evident even on more local scales. In New York City, for example, children who live just 10 miles from one another can anticipate differences of five years in life expectancy.¹⁰ Household, neighborhood, and community characteristics are associated with risks in cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, emotional well-being, and overall life expectancy.

Today, one in every three households with children six years or younger has a high risk of lead exposure because of old paint. Household lead exposure has been extensively linked with slower neurological development in children and an increased difficulty learning to read in school.²

Neighborhood conditions also play a fundamental role in health and quality of life. Access to green spaces and living in areas with less air pollution have been consistently associated with better physical and mental health for both children and older adults, including lower mortality rates from respiratory diseases, increased physical activity, lower obesity, and reduced stress.¹¹ However, only 10% of the nation's 500 largest cities are rated as very walkable,¹ just 30% of people have access to a nearby green space,³ and only 40% live in areas with recommended levels of air quality.⁴ Additionally, food deserts, where access to healthy food supplies is lower, make it nearly impossible for many Americans to improve their diets. High-fat and high-sugar diets are the most affordable options for lower income families, and mothers who are exposed to such diets unintentionally predispose multiple generations to metabolic problems linked to obesity and diabetes.¹²

Neighborhood environments that enable us to feel supported in our community also influence our success in growing up and growing older. Unfortunately, neighborhoods are growing less connected over time⁵ and the average household has been reduced to half its size over the last century.⁶ As people feel lonelier, they are more susceptible to inflammation-related diseases. Neighborhood features that support community cohesion can yield positive effects on participation in social activities and individuals' mental and physical health.¹³

Designing longevity-ready living environments is crucial for healthy, productive, and equitable societies. This is particularly true for Americans living in poverty, who experience the biggest difference in life expectancy based on where they live. As an example, individuals in the highest income bracket from both New York City and Detroit have the same average life expectancy. Individuals in the lowest income bracket in Detroit live five years less than similar New York City residents. To underscore the magnitude of this disparity, eliminating cardiovascular disease, the leading cause of death in the U.S., would only increase overall U.S. life expectancy seven years.¹⁴ We need to design environments that provide equitable opportunities for everyone, regardless of where they are born, to have healthy century-long lives.



Endnotes

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