

NATION

# America's life-expectancy map

BY JEREMY NEY

THE AVERAGE U.S. LIFE EXPECTANCY HAS HIT ITS worst decline in 100 years, and America's standing is dismal among peer nations. But the average obscures a more complex story. The U.S. is facing the greatest divide in life expectancy across regions in the past 40 years. Research from American Inequality found that Americans born in certain areas of Mississippi and Florida may die 20 years younger than their peers born in parts of Colorado and California.

The decline is not occurring equally throughout the country. In the land of opportunity, millions of people are not even given a fair shot at life.

America is unique among wealthy countries when it comes to how young its people die, and the trend is only getting worse. From 2019 to 2021, U.S. life expectancy declined by almost two years, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the worst two-year decline since 1921 to 1923. When COVID-19 hit, America experienced a larger decline in life expectancy than any other wealthy country. Life expectancy in the U.S. is now 76 years.

What is driving the differences in who lives and who dies in America?

State policies tremendously influence life expectancy. Income support, Medicaid expansion, stronger gun control, drug-overdose prevention, and safe abortion access are among the drivers of regional divides in life expectancy. Overdoses kill more than 100,000 people each year. Guns kill more people than cars do. Digging into communities also sheds light on even more fundamental American divides.

American Inequality's research has found a high correlation between household income and life expectancy. Income is a major driver of higher life expectancies. In the wealthiest places like Aspen, Colo., and Santa Clara, Calif., median household incomes reach the hundreds of thousands of dollars and residents live to 87 on average, the highest in the country. But in poorer places like Owsley County, Kentucky, and Union County, Florida, the median household income is \$35,000 and life expectancy floats around 67 on average, the lowest in the country.

Poverty in America is not about income alone. Low-income communities, regardless of state, are more likely to struggle with access to affordable health care; they are more likely to live near toxic sites and to develop lung cancer; they are more likely to live in food deserts and to wrestle with illnesses like heart disease and obesity; and they are more likely to die younger from drug overdoses.

Demographics also have a huge influence, as Black Americans in every state have lower life expectancies than their

## DIFFERENT LIVES

There are huge gaps in life expectancy across the country

AVERAGE AGE AT DEATH



87  
YEARS

**Summit County, Colo.,** includes Aspen. It is 80% white and has the U.S.'s highest life expectancy

68  
YEARS

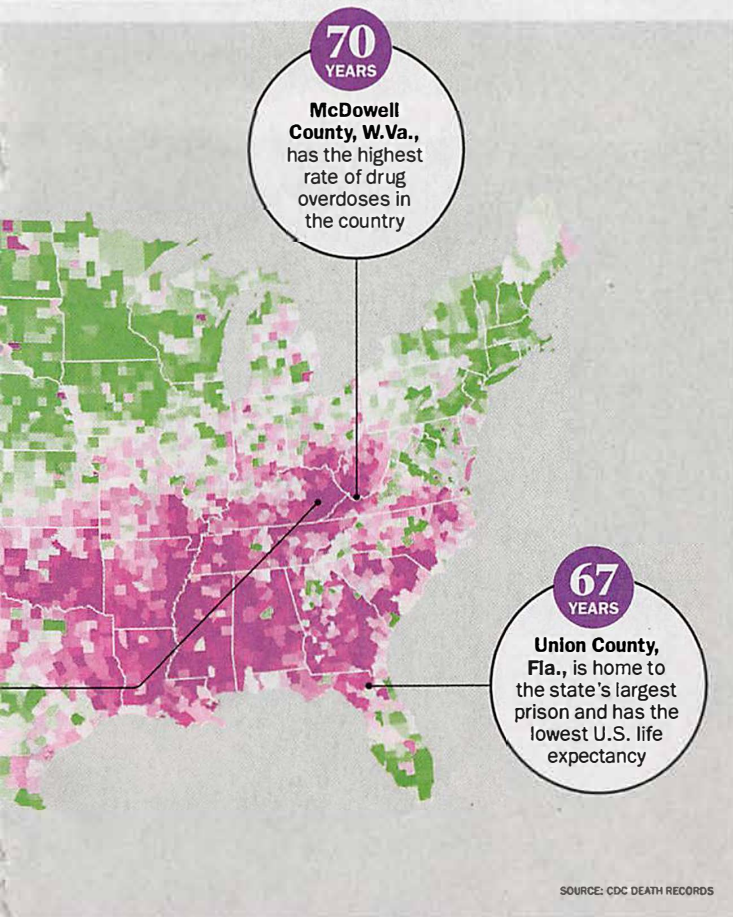
**Owsley County, Ky.,** has the lowest household income in the South; 1 in 4 lives in poverty

white peers by five years on average. This is largely because of the lower-quality care Black communities receive for conditions like cancer, heart problems, and pneumonia, as well as for pain management, prenatal and maternal health, and overall preventive health.

Thomas McGuire, professor of health economics at Harvard Medical School, explained, "In terms of health, there's approximately a five-year penalty for being African American compared to being a White male."

Pemiscot County, Missouri, represents this gap most clearly, as it has one of the lowest Black life expectancies in America. In Pemiscot, Black residents die at 64 on average, effectively meaning that they will work until they die. One in 4 county residents is Black. Pemiscot has one public hospital, which almost closed in 2013, and it's one of the poorest counties in Missouri.

**GEOGRAPHY MAY LOOK** like destiny: States in the Deep South have lower life expectancies than states north of the Mason-Dixon Line. But there appear to be specific factors at play.



of the poorest states in America, with the lowest life expectancy, are still refusing to expand Medicaid even though the federal government would cover the bulk of the cost.” Individuals in turn are at the mercy of policies that differ state to state.

**3 GUN CONTROL** Stronger gun-control measures in states also improve life expectancy. The South, which has some of the most lenient gun-control measures, lost 5.7 million years of life expectancy from 2009 to 2018 because of firearm-related deaths. Conversely, Northeastern states, which tend to have much stronger gun-control measures like background checks and secure-storage laws, had one-fifth the loss in life expectancy. Guns are now the No. 1 killer of children in America, and 1 in 25 American 5-year-olds now won't live to see 40, largely because of guns. If we stopped these deaths, it would effectively add three years of lifetime to every 5-year-old in the South.

**4 DRUG-OVERDOSE PREVENTION** States that introduced policies to prevent drug-overdose deaths saw life expectancies increase by 11%. The CDC estimates that half of all the unintentional deaths last year that took people's lives too early were attributed to drug overdoses. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recently approved Naloxone to be sold over the counter at pharmacies, which could help close the state-to-state gap. In the meantime, McDowell County, West Virginia, has one of the lowest life expectancies in the country and has the highest rate of opioid overdoses in the country.

**5 ABORTION ACCESS** Lastly, while the data has not fully revealed the impact of the Supreme Court's ruling in *Dobbs v. Jackson*, this decision may drive further divides in life expectancy for Southern states that have in turn limited abortion access. Arkansas has a maternal mortality rate that is 50% higher than the national average. In Mississippi, because of poor health care, it is 75 times more dangerous for women to carry a pregnancy to term than to have an abortion. Mississippi has the lowest life expectancy in America at 71. Causing more women to carry a pregnancy to term may increase deaths of mothers in their 20s to 40s.

The 20-year gap in life expectancy across regions tells the story of America. The divide is deeply interwoven with health care, housing, race, gender, location, education, and more. But improving life expectancy across regions is possible, and it starts with state legislatures. States can learn from one another about what has worked best and implement new policies with proven effectiveness. Data will be the driving force for finding patterns of inequality and leading changemakers toward solutions that engender equality.

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**1 EXPANDING THE EITC AND CTC** More money means more time alive, and certain programs that put cash directly into low-income homes have improved life expectancy. The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and the Child Tax Credit (CTC) have been among America's most successful federal poverty-alleviation programs. Eleven states have enacted their own CTC programs and 31 states have implemented their own EITC programs, putting more cash into the most needy homes. Residents of states that have adopted both the EITC and CTC tend to live two years longer than states that have implemented neither. This may even be more cost-effective at increasing life expectancy than many other policies. These programs are designed to support children too.

**2 MEDICAID EXPANSION** States that expanded Medicaid saved more than 200 lives per every 100,000 people and decreased the risk of premature death by roughly 50% for older adults who gained coverage. As Nobel Prize-winning economist Paul Krugman has explained, “Some

**Guns are the No. 1 killer of children in America**