

## LONG ISLAND

# How long will you live?

Life expectancy on Long Island: Will you live to 73 - or 93? It may depend on your neighborhood, research shows. Some of the starkest disparities turn up just miles apart.



On Long Island and elsewhere, there can be marked disparities in life expectancy from one neighborhood to the next. Above, commuters at the Hicksville Long Island Rail Road station on Thursday. Photo Credit: Danielle Silverman

**By Craig Schneider**

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Where you live on Long Island can play a powerful role in how long you live, new statistics show.

The number of years swings from 73.2 in North Bellport to 92.9 on Shelter Island, according to life expectancy estimates for census tracts.

In the United States, the average life lasts 78.6 years. Living the longest are the residents of Hawaii — 82 years. Mississippi has the lowest life expectancy: 74.9 years.

In New York, the life expectancy is 81 years, the third highest in the nation. New York City has the lowest and highest estimates of longevity nationwide: 59 years along the East River in North Roosevelt Island and 93.6 years in lower Manhattan.

On Long Island, as with other parts of the country, some of the starkest disparities turn up just miles apart, the research shows.

If you live in the western part of East Meadow, you have a good chance of making it to 85, the figures show. But cross Meadowbrook Parkway into Uniondale and your life expectancy drops to 73.5. In a West Babylon census tract, your average number of years is 83.6, but simply walking into Wyandanch cuts your life span to 77.4. The life span in a North Bellmore census tract averages 79.

The differences let Long Islanders take a look for the first time at life expectancy for their neighborhoods, according to The Associated Press, which analyzed data from nearly 66,000 census tracts nationwide. Each covers roughly 4,000 people.

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The geographic lens shows how demographic variables — household income, education, employment, race and access to health care — affect longevity, said researchers, who chose the markers because of their high correlation with life expectancy.

For a suburban policy expert at Hofstra University, the numbers reflect how the

Island has become more diverse over the decades.

“Almost without exception, the neighborhoods with the lowest life expectancy are the poorest and most minority,” said Lawrence Levy, who heads Hofstra's National Center for Suburban Studies.

## The factors

Being out of work has the biggest impact on life expectancy, and not in a good way, the analysis showed. Residents of neighborhoods that had an increase of 10 percentage points in the unemployment rate can expect to see their life expectancy drop by 18 months, according to the data.

The kind of work you do often is tied to how much education you have and determines how much money you make, research has shown. Your job also is key to whether you have access to health insurance or can afford medical care.

In the analysis, Americans who have higher incomes live longer: A \$10,000 increase in median income translates to an extra six months of life.

"Income is a major factor," said Martin R. Cantor, who heads the Long Island Center for Socio-Economic Policy.

Earning less money can mean not going to the doctor or not going as often as you should. A 10 percent increase in uninsured residents translates to a loss of six months, according to the data.

Less schooling means a shorter life, too. Those who don't graduate from high school, for example, lose 10 months, the figures show.

Finally, your race also factors into your life span. A neighborhood with a larger percentage of black residents can have a lower life expectancy because African-Americans historically have had a lower life expectancy than whites. In 2011, for instance, white men nationwide had a life expectancy of 76.6 years while black men had an average life span of 72.2 years, according to the National Institutes of Health.

Shelter Island epitomizes the influence of demographic variables.

The 4-mile-by-5-mile slice of Suffolk County has a median income of \$94,000. What money can buy abounds: pricey homes and luxury automobiles. The unemployment rate stands at just above 2 percent.

Nearly everyone — 99 percent — is at least a high school graduate. Nine out of 10 residents are white and have health insurance, the numbers show.

The average life span is tops on the Island: 92.9 years.

"The more educated people are, the greater the chances that they are making higher income," Cantor said.

## **Tale of two census tracts**

North Bellport and Bellport are a three-minute drive from each other, but they're worlds apart in so many ways.

Bellport has its fair share of mansions and a downtown alive with restaurants, specialty shops, a deli and an antique store.

North Bellport is dotted with industrial sites and bisected by Montauk Highway and Long Island Rail Road tracks. Over the years, abandoned houses have been a challenge.

The numbers reflect their differences.

Bellport's median income is \$82,500. The population is 92 percent white, and about 97 percent of the residents graduated from high school. Joblessness is at roughly 3 percent; just under 4 percent of residents don't have health insurance. The average life expectancy: 86.9 years.

In North Bellport, the median income is \$50,000. The rates of unemployment and the uninsured are more than 4 percent and almost 17 percent, respectively. Roughly two-thirds of the residents have a high school diploma. And the population is diverse: 43 percent Hispanic, 30 percent African-American and 27 percent white and other backgrounds. The average number of years to live: 73.2

Pastor Michael Caiazzo sees the statistics play out on the street every day. He works for the Lighthouse Mission in North Bellport, which provides food and counseling to lower-income families.

His focus is on the kids, especially those who live in single-parent households where money can be even tighter.

"It's harder, there are more challenges," said Caiazzo, who grew up in the area. "It's easier for them to give up."

His message: Take hold of your own life.

"In the end of the day I tell them to look in the mirror and ask, 'What did I do to help myself today?'"

## **Moving the goalposts**

Life expectancy isn't set in stone: Both public policy and personal responsibility can tip the scales, experts said.

Everyone can make choices that increase the odds of a longer life, said Cantor, of the Center for Socio-Economic Policy.

Eating well, exercising, not smoking, getting enough sleep and staying in school are decisions made by each and every one of us, he said.

"It's not a done deal," Cantor said. "There are always outliers."

Martine Hackett is a public health expert who lives in Uniondale, where the census tract has a life expectancy of about 74 years. She agrees that individuals have a measure of control over how long they live, but she also sees conditions in her community that can counter good decisions.

Fast-food outlets, for example, can line major thoroughfares, and fear of crime can keep parents from taking their kids to the park, said Hackett, who is an associate professor of public health at Hofstra University.

One option might be to simply find a new place to settle down, she said.

"I know that sounds kind of trite," said Hackett. "People have community ties, and there's affordability issues, and people might not feel welcome in some other place."

Moving, though, is a fix for only a relatively few, Hackett said. Society as a whole needs to work at reducing the disparities from neighborhood to neighborhood, she said.

For activists Rebecca Sanin and Elaine Gross, public policy can play a big part in leveling the playing field.

"There's so many governments, so many school systems operating independently," said Sanin, president of the Health and Welfare Council of Long Island, an umbrella nonprofit that aims to improve the lives of the needy by advocating for public policies and services.

Long Island is becoming increasingly connected, Sanin said. Twenty years ago, a child living in Brentwood might never cross paths with one in Manhasset. Today, because of technology and social media, the chances are good that they know each other, she said.

"We need to look at more regional planning, rather than this block versus that block," she said.

As president of ERASE Racism, Gross is focused on getting Long Island to talk more about segregation and racism. The conversation has never been easy, she said.

"It's disheartening — the discriminatory policies that shape where people can live," she said. "We bake in these racial disparities."

More discussion will help the Island become more proactive on dealing with inequities, she said.

Gross is seeing positive signs. In the past two months, ERASE Racism held a handful of community forums that drew some 700 residents Islandwide, more than she expected.

The sessions touched on a wide range of topics, from unconscious bias to the role that media and culture play in fostering stereotypes to the policies and practices that perpetuate prejudice, she said.

"It was encouraging," Gross said.

Hackett sounded a cautionary note: The role of government can quickly become controversial, she said.

A discussion about life expectancy can devolve into politics, she said.

"It feels disconnected from health," she said. "It can become a discussion about what people deserve."



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