

Region sees drop in life expectancy, report says

Biggest change among minorities and the poor

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People of color and those living in poor neighborhoods are suffering the steepest drops in life expectancy in the Finger Lakes region as systemic racism fueled health inequality, a new report shows.

Spikes in the number of deaths from drug overdoses, homicide, heart disease and COVID-19 led to a three-year drop in life expectancy overall in the Finger Lakes from 2013 to 2021, according to an analysis by Common Ground Health.

The average life expectancy for the region peaked at 80.5 years in 2013 before falling to 77.3 years by 2021, the health research and planning group found.

Life expectancy declines were largest for people of color and people living in ZIP codes with low socioeconomic status, leading to the largest gap in life expectancies since at least 2000, the report noted.

Among the findings:

- In 2021, those living in the low-status ZIP codes had a life expectancy that was 9.2 years lower than those living in high socioeconomic status ZIP codes.

- Life expectancies fell 7.5 years for Black non-Latino residents and 6.8 years for Latino residents from their respective peaks.

- In contrast, the life expectancy of white residents declined only 2.5 years.

“The color of your skin or amount of resources in your neighborhood should not determine how long you live,” Wade Norwood, CEO of Common Ground Health said in a statement.

“We know how to close these gaps: we can reverse overdoses, we can de-escalate violence and we can prevent

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drug addiction, heart disease and COVID," he added, noting public health efforts focused on addressing social determinants of health are key.

How Rochester compares to U.S. on life expectancy

But as the nation forges ahead in a post-pandemic world, some signs of progress towards improving public health overall have emerged.

Life expectancy nationally rose to 77.5 years on average in 2022, a slight increase of 1.1 years from 2021, the latest

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention analysis found.

The turnaround stemmed largely from decreases in mortality due to COVID-19, heart disease, cancer, unintentional injuries and homicide.

Although life expectancy has slightly improved, it continues to remain below its peak of 78.9 years, occurring a decade ago.

The U.S. life expectancy also falls behind other comparable countries.

For men, life expectancy increased 1.3 years from 73.5 in 2021 to 74.8 in 2022.

For women, life expectancy increased 0.9 year from 79.3 in 2021 to 80.2 in 2022.

What is contributing to the

decade-long decline in life expectancy?

The COVID-19 pandemic and fatal drug overdoses are causing a large death toll in the U.S. COVID deaths took about 186,552 lives in 2022.

In comparison, fatal overdoses consumed 107,941 lives. "Age-adjusted rate of drug overdose deaths nearly quadrupled from 8.2 in 2002 to 32.6 in 2022," CDC officials noted. The rate did not significantly change between 2021 and 2022.

Heart disease and cancer are the leading causes of death in the U.S and have been so since the early-to-mid 1990s, according to the CDC. COVID-19 was the third-leading cause of death in 2021, but in 2022 it fell behind "uninten-

tional injuries," which includes drug overdoses.

Why do some people live longer than others?

Dr. Amit Shah, an internist and geriatrician with Mayo Clinic in Arizona told USA TODAY Network that "up to 25% of longevity is genetic." The rest, he said, comes down "to factors that are in our control." Diet and exercise are two factors that can impact our longevity.

Socioeconomic status also plays a major role in healthy aging and longevity, with impoverished areas that have limited access to healthcare being the hardest hit.

Sara Chernikoff of USA TODAY contributed to this report.