

HEALTH INDICATOR 21: LIFE EXPECTANCY

DESIRED RESULT: INCREASE LIFE EXPECTANCY



DEFINITION

Average number of years of life remaining for persons who have attained a given age

DETAILS

Life expectancy listed is for a person born in that year

NC LIFE EXPECTANCY (2016-18)

78.0 years

2030 TARGET

82.0 years

RANGE AMONG NC COUNTIES

73.1 – 82.1 years

RANK AMONG STATES

Not Available

DATA SOURCE

NC State Center for Health Statistics, Vital Statistics

STATE PLANS WITH SIMILAR INDICATORS

Not Applicable

Rationale for Selection:

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.

Context

The ultimate measure of health that many people consider when thinking of population health is life expectancy. For most of human history, average life expectancy has steadily increased with improvements in health care, sanitary conditions, decreases in disease epidemics, and improved safety measures. Yet, in the past several years, the United States average life expectancy has been slowly creeping down, from 78.9 years in 2014 to 78.6 in 2017.¹⁹³ This is due to an increase in deaths from drug overdose and suicide.¹⁹⁴ The 2016-18 state average life expectancy was 78.0, with similar decreases as the national average (2014 life expectancy: 78.3). The top three causes of years of life lost in North Carolina are ischemic heart disease; trachea, bronchus, and lung cancers; and road injuries. Self-harm and drug use disorders rank sixth and seventh, respectively, in top causes, mirroring the national trends impacting overall life expectancy.

Disparities

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. African Americans, American Indians, people in rural areas, and men typically have lower life expectancies than the average. Among African Americans (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).¹⁹⁵ For African American 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).¹⁹⁵ The disparities for African Americans compared to whites are due in part to issues stemming from limited health care access,¹⁹⁶ lack of trust in medical professionals, social and economic factors like racism (e.g., weathering, [see Page 31](#) in Introduction) and unemployment,¹⁹⁶ and firearm deaths of younger African American men.¹⁹⁷ On the other hand, Hispanic populations see the higher life expectancies despite lower average socioeconomic status. This is largely due to lower rates of smoking, leading to lower cancer and cardiovascular disease mortality in adults, but also lower rates of suicide and accidental poisoning among young Hispanics compared to whites.¹⁹⁸

Geographic disparities are also clear across North Carolina ([See Figure 36](#)). 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 African American population in the same county.¹⁹⁹

^{DDD} The life expectancy averages listed here are averaged across three years, 2016 to 2018.

^{EEE} Estimated life expectancy for the Hispanic population in North Carolina for 2016 to 2018 is 90.8 years. This estimate has been excluded from the HNC 2030 report data presentation because of concerns that it may be unreliable.

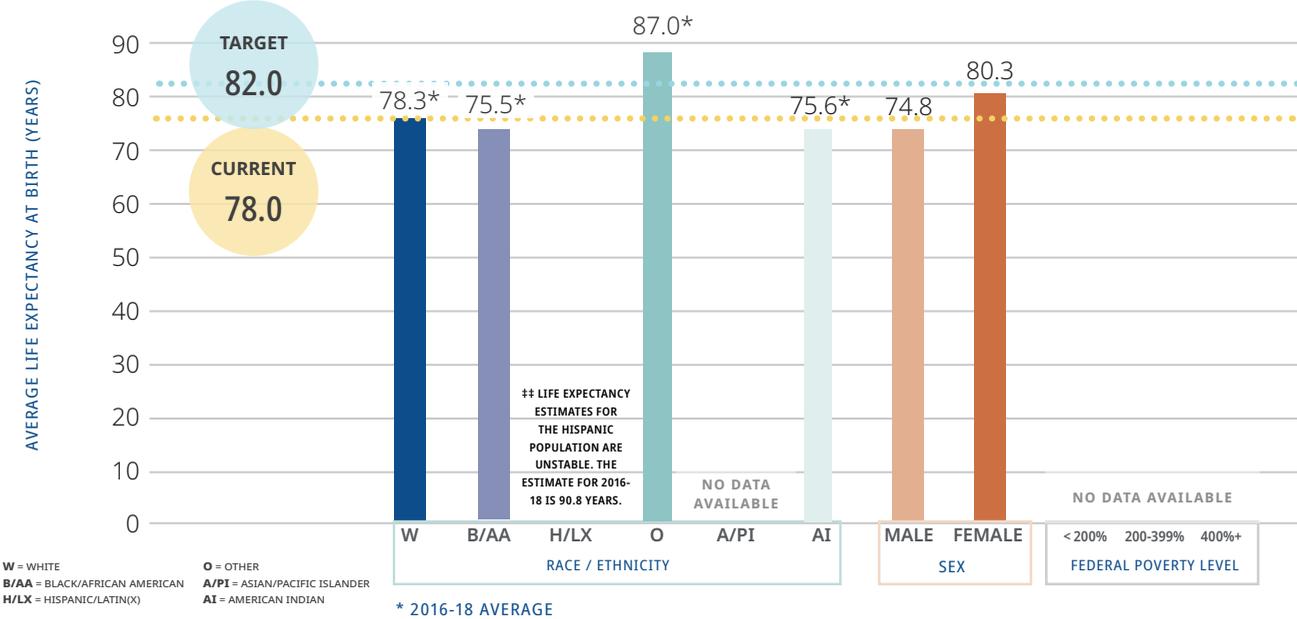
^{FFF} North Carolina State Center for Health Statistics, 2016-2018 County Life Expectancy at Birth, North Carolina Counties. <https://schs.dph.ncdhhs.gov/data/lifexpectancy/2016-2018/2018%20State%20and%202016-2018%20County%20Life%20Expectancies%20at%20birth.html>

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FIGURE 35

Life expectancy across populations in North Carolina and distance to 2030 target



2030 Target and Potential for Change

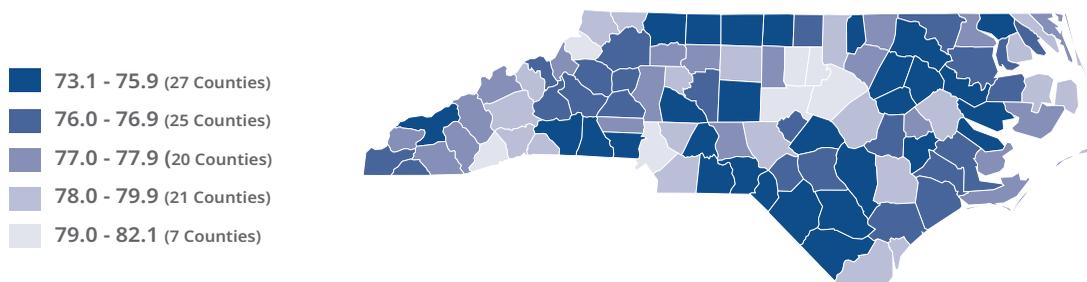
The HNC 2030 group reviewed data across several years, populations, and states, and a forecasted value for North Carolina based on historical data to set a target for 2030. With the best life expectancy (average for 2016-18) in North Carolina currently at 82.1^{FFF} years in Orange County the group chose to set an aggressive target of 82.0 years for the population overall for 2030. If improvements are made across the health indicators discussed in this report, overall life expectancy will likely see an increase. Increases toward this target will be seen as success, particularly as they will signal a change in the downward trend seen over the past several years.

Levers for Change

- See Levers for Change throughout this report

FIGURE 36

Average Life Expectancy for People in North Carolina Counties, 2016-2018



Source: North Carolina State Center for Health Statistics; <https://schs.dph.ncdhs.gov/data/lifexpectancy/2016-2018/2018%20State%20and%202016-2018%20County%20Life%20Expectancies%20at%20birth.html>
 Note: Life expectancy is the average number of additional years that someone at a given age would be expected to live if current mortality conditions remained constant throughout their lifetime.