

Why Your ZIP Code Can Predict Your Life Expectancy

By Neha Shariff

Honorable judges ladies and gentleman,

Imagine this: two babies are born in the same city, just five miles apart. One is likely to live into their 80s. The other? Maybe into their 60s. The reason why isn't genetics, or even personal choices, it's their ZIP code.

It sounds unbelievable, but where you live can predict how long you'll live more accurately than your DNA, your lifestyle, or even your education. And this isn't just a theory, it's backed by decades of public health data.

Take Chicago. In the Englewood neighborhood, the average life expectancy is about 60 years. Just a few miles north, in Streeterville, it's nearly 90. That's a 30-year gap in the same city. And this pattern shows up all over the U.S., in New York, LA, Dallas, Atlanta.

So, what's causing it?

Health access is a enormous aspect. Wealthier neighborhoods have clinics, hospitals, and specialists, while lower-income areas often don't, and even regular checkups become a luxury. Food plays a role as well. Some neighborhoods have countless grocery stores and farmers markets. Others only offer fast food and corner stores. That difference feeds into long-term health issues.

Then there's stress. If you live in an unsafe area, where sirens are constant and walking outside isn't always safe, your body lives in a continual survival mode. High stress levels over time actually shorten your life.

Pollution, bad infrastructure, poor public transportation—all of these silently chip away at health. And in many struggling neighborhoods, people don't often have strong community networks to rely on, which makes it that much more difficult.

Unfortunately these ZIP code gaps are not random. They're rooted in race and income. Generations of redlining, segregation, and economic inequality have pushed communities of color into underfunded areas. And the wealthier areas, with higher property values, get better schools, safer streets, and overall healthier lives.

So what can we do?

First, we need systemic change, with better policies that invest in healthcare, housing, and clean environments for underserved neighborhoods. Cities can make small but powerful changes too, like opening clinics, building walking trails, and supporting local health programs.

And awareness matters. Even just knowing about this helps. If enough of us care, we can push for better policies. If you have the privilege to live in a well-resourced area, use your voice and use your vote to support change.

So here's the takeaway: your ZIP code should never be your destiny. It shouldn't decide how long you live. Everyone deserves a fair shot at a long, healthy life, no matter what side of town they're born on.

Let's stop treating neighborhood inequality like a distant issue, because for too many people, it's already life or death.

Thank you.