

# Why do people die young here? Project aims to send 'citizen scientists' out to investigate

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By Rich Lord / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The cost of being poor can include decades of life. A just-launched partnership between a Homewood-based community group and a University of Pittsburgh research team intends to explore that grim price tag, and to create a corps of “citizen scientists” who could lead the charge to close the life expectancy gap.

A jarring example of the gap: Life expectancy in most of Highland Park is 86 years, but in one neighborhood to the south, in Larimer, residents live just an average of 62 years. That’s the region’s most extreme life expectancy chasm, according to Noble Maseru, director of the Center for Health Equity within Pitt’s Graduate School of Public Health, but it’s far from the only one.

Life expectancy in Homewood is just shy of 70 years, while in Point Breeze it’s 86. In parts of McKeesport, people live, on average, a decade less than they do in White Oak. Same with Clairton versus Jefferson Hills.

Make people aware of that ultimate inequity, Mr. Maseru said, and you can spur “empowerment activism” in which citizens sleuth for the causes of premature death in their communities, then advocate for solutions.

That’s the aim of the project called Live Longer: Empowering and Engaging Pittsburgh Communities, which is backed by a \$170,000 grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Urban Institute.

It pairs Mr. Maseru’s team and its data smarts with the grassroots Community Empowerment Association and the consultancy UrbanKind Institute. Their process will include community meetings starting next month in Homewood, and later in McKeesport and Clairton.

“The general objective is to look at how life expectancy is impacted by the social determinants of health,” Mr. Maseru said.

He said life expectancy in the U.S. increased by 30 years over the course of the 20th century, and that was almost entirely due to social and economic changes — better housing, transportation and jobs, for instance.

It follows that some communities that lag in life expectancy do so because they haven’t seen the economic advances of their neighbors. In other communities, other factors may be in play.

“We recognize that there is this huge environmental contribution to health and life expectancy,” added Jim Fabisiak, associate professor in the Department of Environmental and Occupational Health at Pitt’s public health school. “We know that Pittsburgh does have an air pollution burden greater than most other comparable cities throughout the United States,” and that can contribute to a host of lung and heart ailments that can shorten life.

The Pitt team doesn’t want to leap to conclusions. After all, the team won a highly competitive grant in part because its plan calls for the communities to take the lead.

“One of the goals that we’re trying to work toward is to have the citizens or residents of these communities put themselves in the role of researcher or scientist,” Mr. Fabisiak said.

The job of generating neighborhood interest and bringing forth citizen scientists falls to Community Empowerment Association, which is based in Homewood with a satellite office in McKeesport.

“We’re going a little bit deeper than just talking about life expectancy,” said Rashad Byrdsong, the nonprofit organization’s president and CEO.

He expects the three communities to talk about the effects of housing, employment, nutrition, drugs, abandoned houses, the environment and many other socioeconomic factors on physical health and length of life.

Following the recruitment and training of citizen scientists in the three neighborhoods, the researchers and organizers anticipate six months of community engagement, investigation and data crunching. And then?

“The community is going to have to engage in the political process” to draw the resources needed to start bridging the life expectancy gap, Mr. Byrdsong said.

“We hope to be able to establish what we would call solutions-oriented interventions that would involve the public and private sector, as well as community-based organizations,” Mr. Maseru said.

He has seen this work before. In his past job as health commissioner for Cincinnati, he and his assistant commissioner, Camille Jones, spurred a similar data-and-community-engagement process, called the Live Longer Project. It prompted newly empowered community members to challenge the civic leadership.

“It really influenced the policymakers,” Mr. Maseru said Thursday.

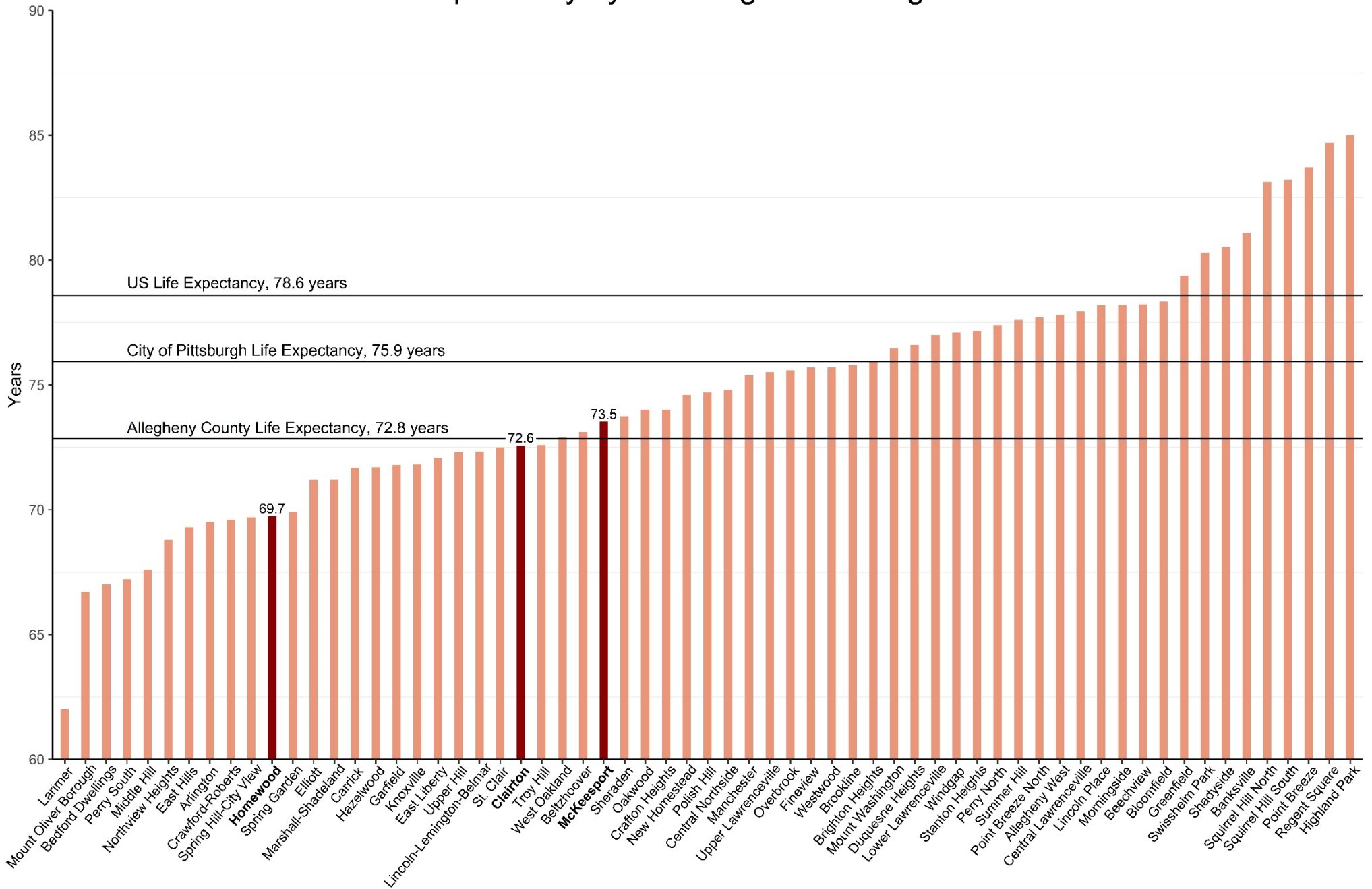
The project helped to spur several improvements in transportation and employment programs, he said, as well as a living-wage ordinance.

Mr. Maseru, who is starting his third year in Pittsburgh, said he hopes his new project will ultimately contribute to the development of “a master plan for eliminating poverty.”

Early in his time here, he said, he saw the region’s leadership come together in an ultimately unsuccessful effort to lure Amazon’s second headquarters. He said he would love to “have that same vigor actually be developed in terms of eradicating poverty within these neighborhoods and communities so we don’t have a 20-year, eight-year or even three-year differential in terms of life expectancy.”

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# Life Expectancy by Pittsburgh Area Neighborhood

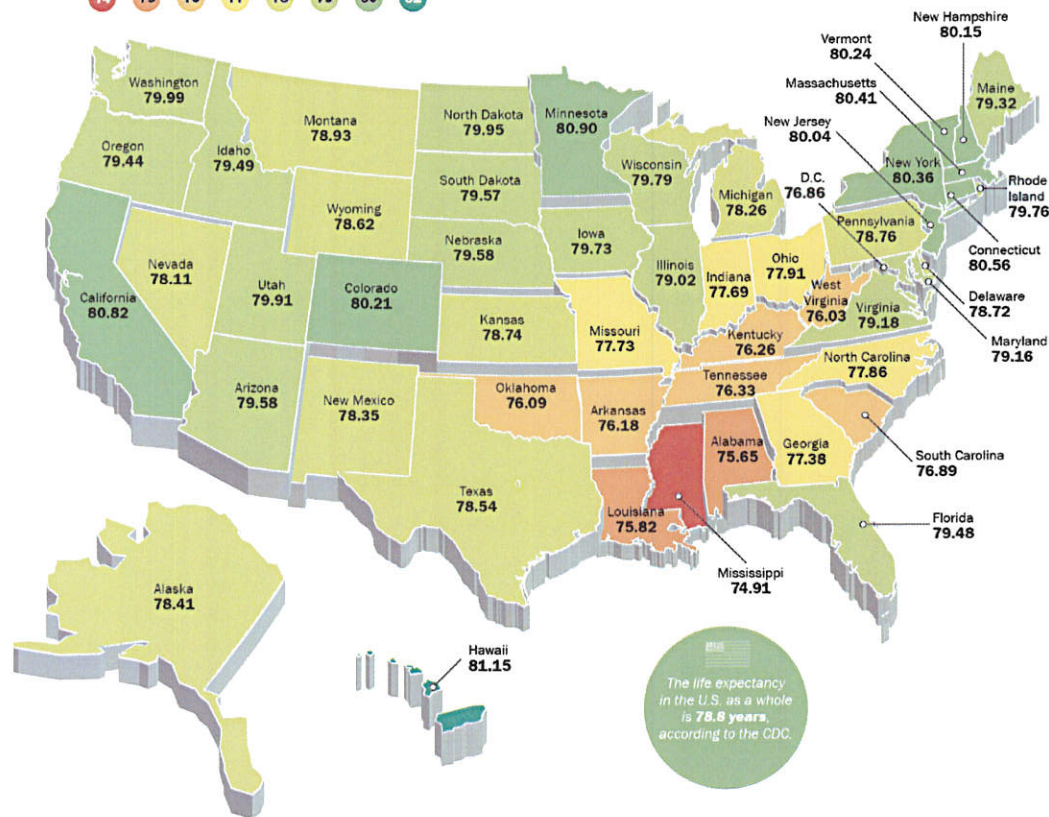


# Why Aren't We Living As Long?

Homewood Community Conversation #1  
October 8, 2019

# LIFE EXPECTANCY in the United States

Average  
LIFE EXPECTANCY

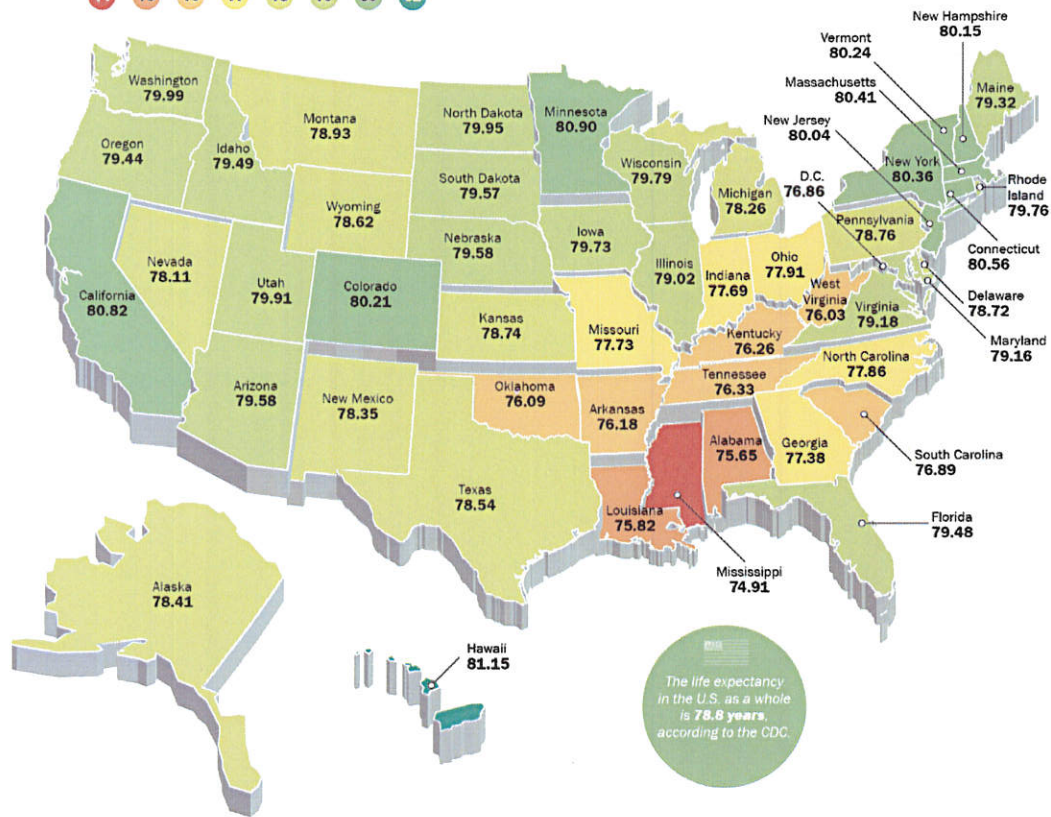


The life expectancy in the U.S. as a whole is **78.8 years**, according to the CDC.

Life Expectancy = the average age that a particular group will be when they die.

# LIFE EXPECTANCY in the United States

Average  
LIFE EXPECTANCY

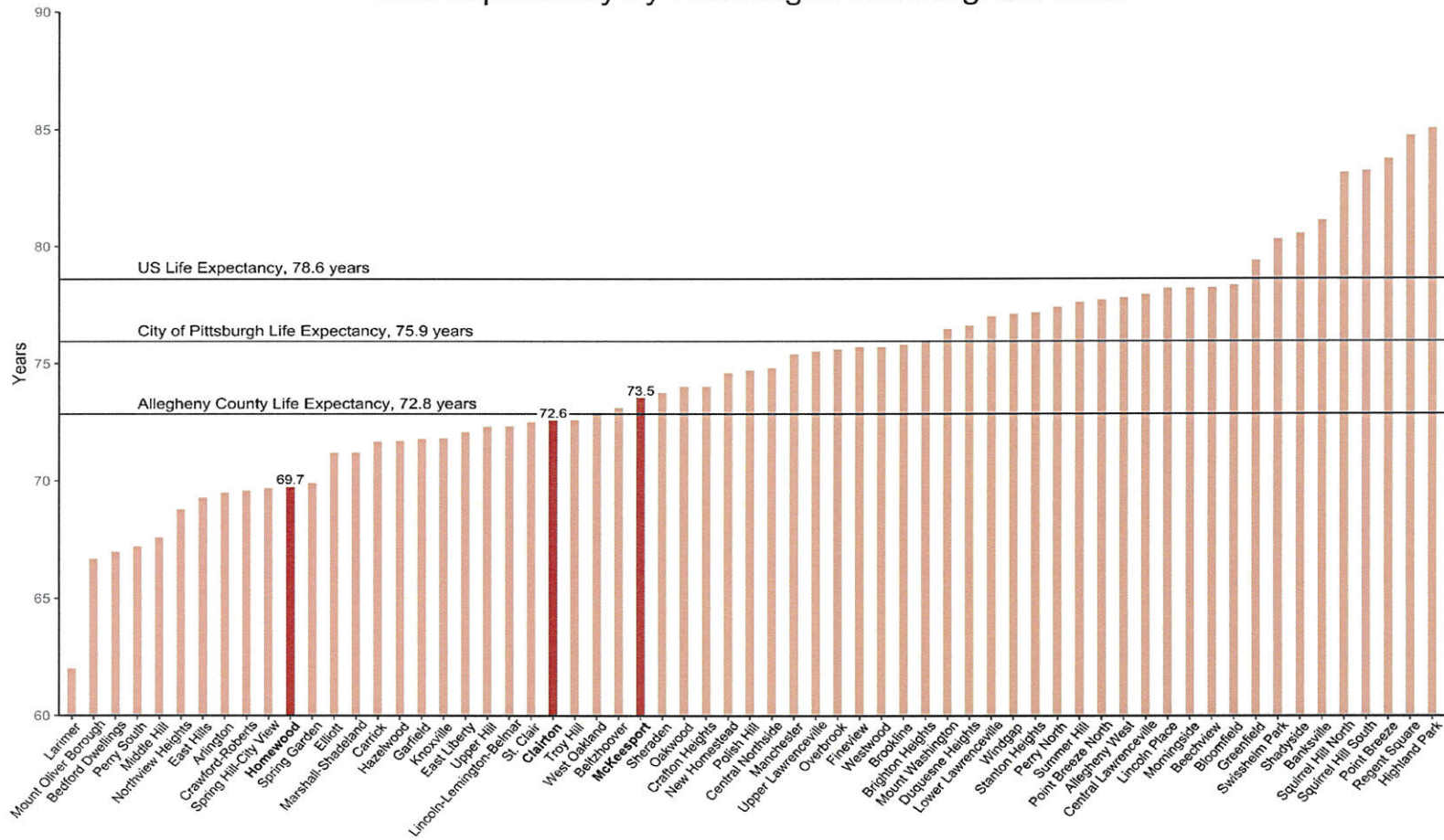


Life Expectancy = the average age that a particular group will be when they die.

**Premature Death =**  
Dying before age of Life Expectancy

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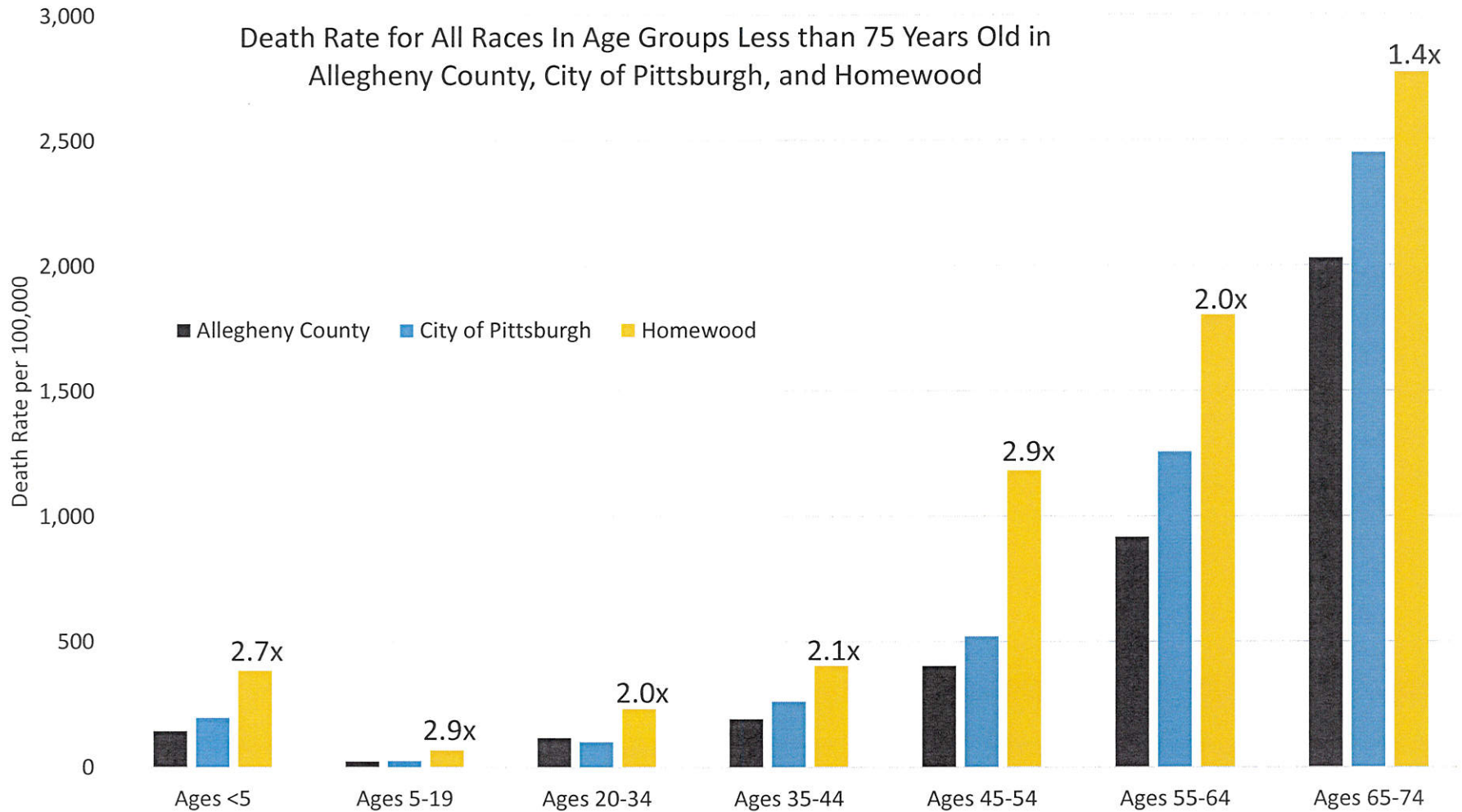
### Life Expectancy by Pittsburgh Area Neighborhood



## Who Is Affected the Most?



Death Rate for All Races In Age Groups Less than 75 Years Old in Allegheny County, City of Pittsburgh, and Homewood



# How Do Premature Deaths Impact Life Expectancy?

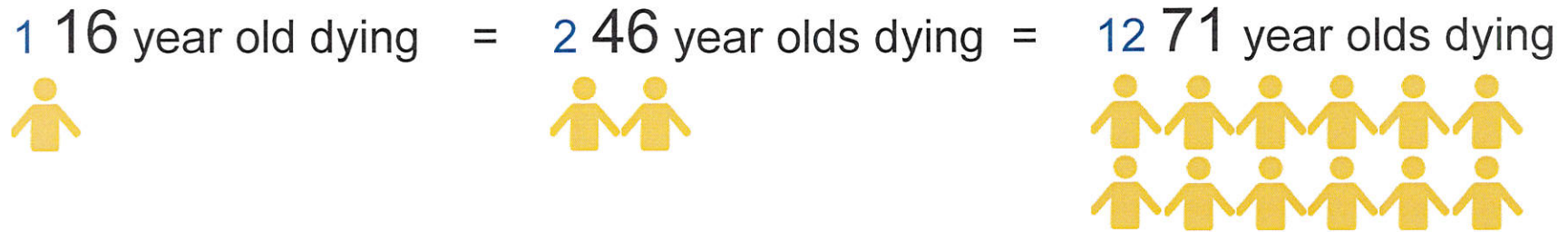
# How Do Premature Deaths Impact Life Expectancy?

1 16 year old dying = 1 46 year old dying = 1 71 year old dying



Life Expectancy = 76

# How Do Premature Deaths Impact Life Expectancy?



Life Expectancy = 76

## How Do Premature Deaths Impact Life Expectancy?

1 16 year old dying = 2 46 year olds dying = 12 71 year olds dying



$$1 \times (76 - 16) =$$

60 years of life lost

$$2 \times (76 - 46) =$$

60 years of life lost

$$12 \times (76 - 71) =$$

60 years of life lost

Life Expectancy = 76

## Years of Life Lost

- Says that all deaths are NOT equal
- More impacted by deaths in young people
- Helps determine which premature deaths most lower life expectancy

# What Is Causing These Premature Deaths?

# Community Perceptions: What Do Most People Die From?

## Homewood

1. Guns/Violence
2. Drugs
3. Illness/Disease/Old Age
4. Lack of Exercise/Healthy Food
5. Police brutality



## Top 5 Causes of Death – Under 75 Years Old

### Allegheny County

1. Cancer
2. Heart disease
3. Accidents (including drug overdose)
4. Respiratory diseases
5. Diseases of digestive system

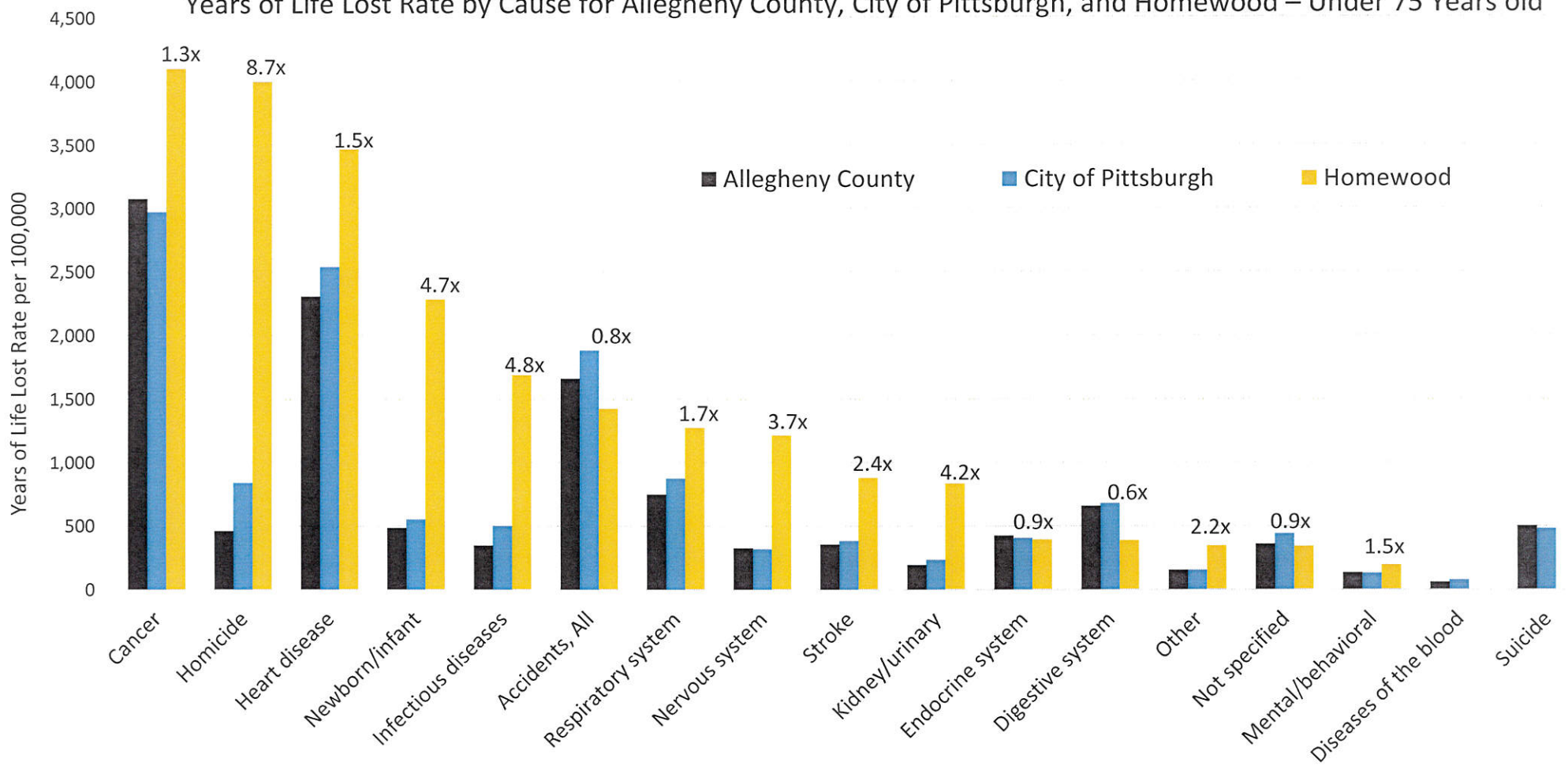
### City of Pittsburgh

1. Cancer
2. Heart disease
3. Accidents (including drug overdose)
4. Respiratory diseases
5. Diseases of digestive system

### Homewood

1. Cancer
2. Heart disease
3. Homicide
4. Respiratory diseases
- 5T. Infectious diseases/  
Accidents (including drug overdose)

Years of Life Lost Rate by Cause for Allegheny County, City of Pittsburgh, and Homewood – Under 75 Years old



## Top Causes of Death and Years of Life Lost in Homewood

### Top Causes of Death

1. Cancer
2. Heart disease
3. Homicide
4. Respiratory disease
- 5T. Infectious disease/ Accidents  
(including drug overdose)

### Top Causes of Years of Life Lost

1. Cancer
2. Homicide
3. Heart disease
4. Newborn/infant
5. Infectious disease

# What Do We Think About Our Community's Health?

## Responses from the Community Questionnaire

## Community Perceptions: What Is Making Us Unhealthy?

### Top Causes of Illness

1. Drugs & Alcohol
2. Unhealthy Lifestyle
3. Stress/Depression
4. Food Insecurity/Unhealthy Food
5. Air & Water Pollution

### Top Things Making Us Unwell

1. Crime/Violence/Guns
2. Drugs & Alcohol
3. Pollution/Poor Air & Water Quality
4. Garbage/Littering
- T5. Animal/Animal Feces  
Unhealthy Food  
Poverty

## Community Perceptions: What is Making Us Healthy?

### Best Things About Homewood

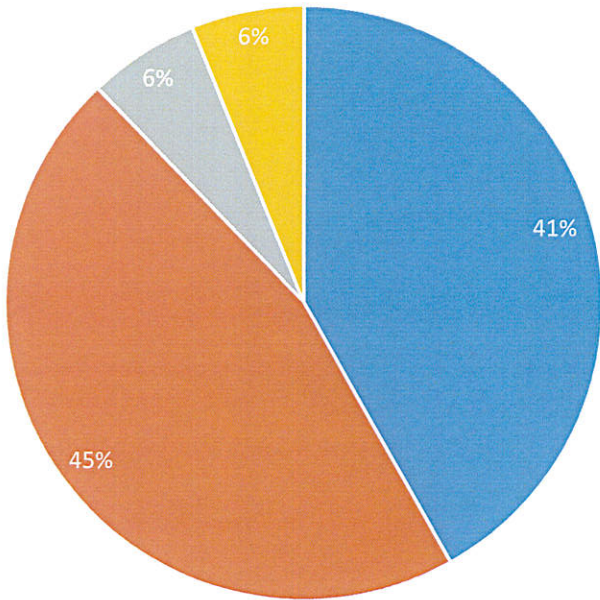
1. Friends & Family/Neighbors
2. Local Schools (Pitt, CCAC, Westinghouse Academy)
3. Home Development
4. Community Events/Programs
5. Police Patrol

### Top Things Making Us Healthy

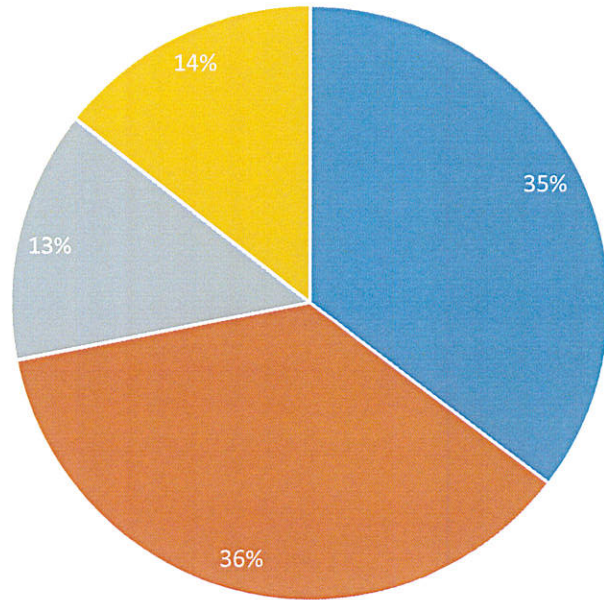
1. Food/Garden/Farmer's Market
2. Community Centers/Programs & Events
3. Outdoor Parks/ Pools/Exercise
4. Friends & Family/Neighbors
5. Public Transportation/Walkability

# All Deaths by Race & Sex

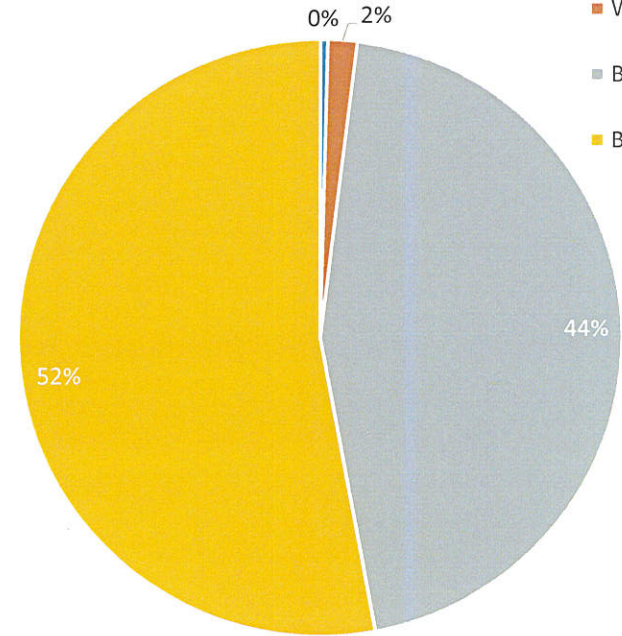
Allegheny County



City of Pittsburgh

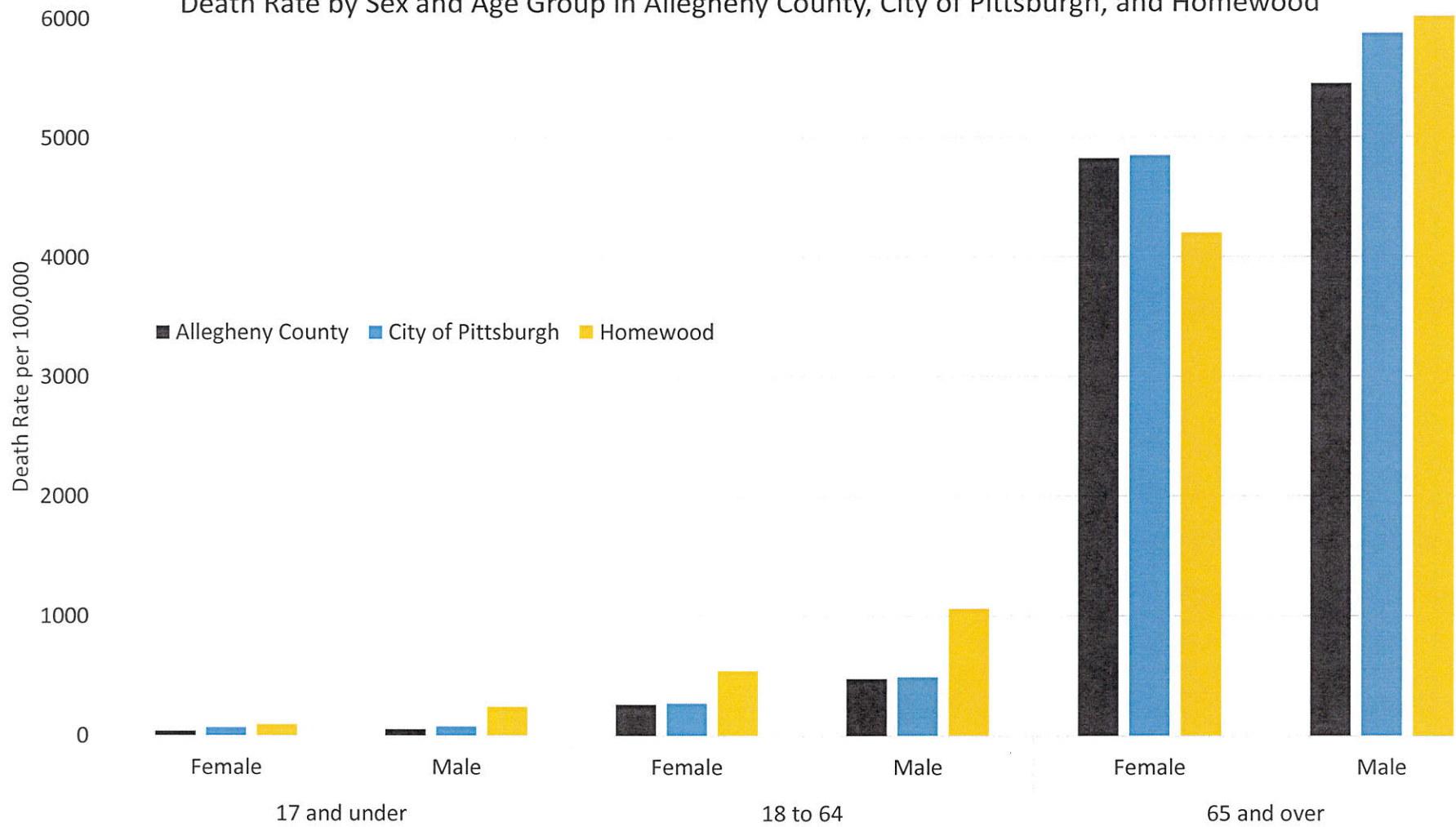


Homewood (All)



- White males
- White females
- Black males
- Black females

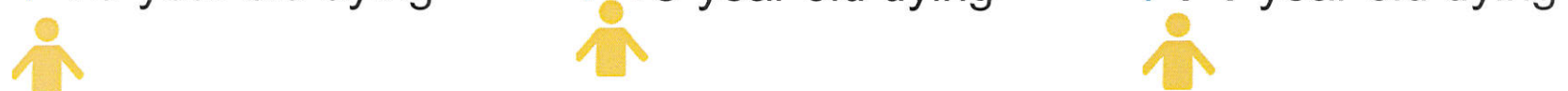
Death Rate by Sex and Age Group in Allegheny County, City of Pittsburgh, and Homewood





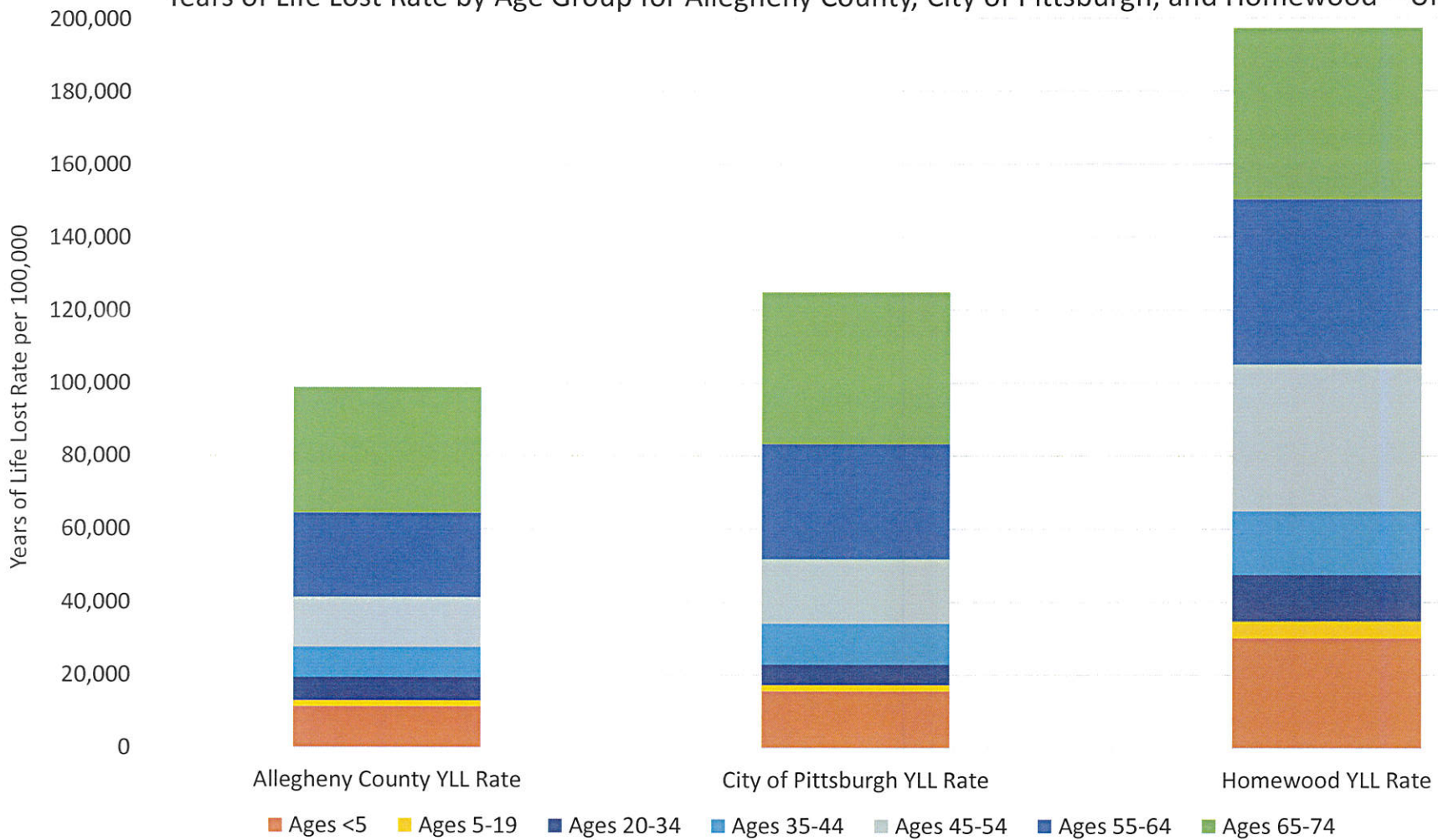
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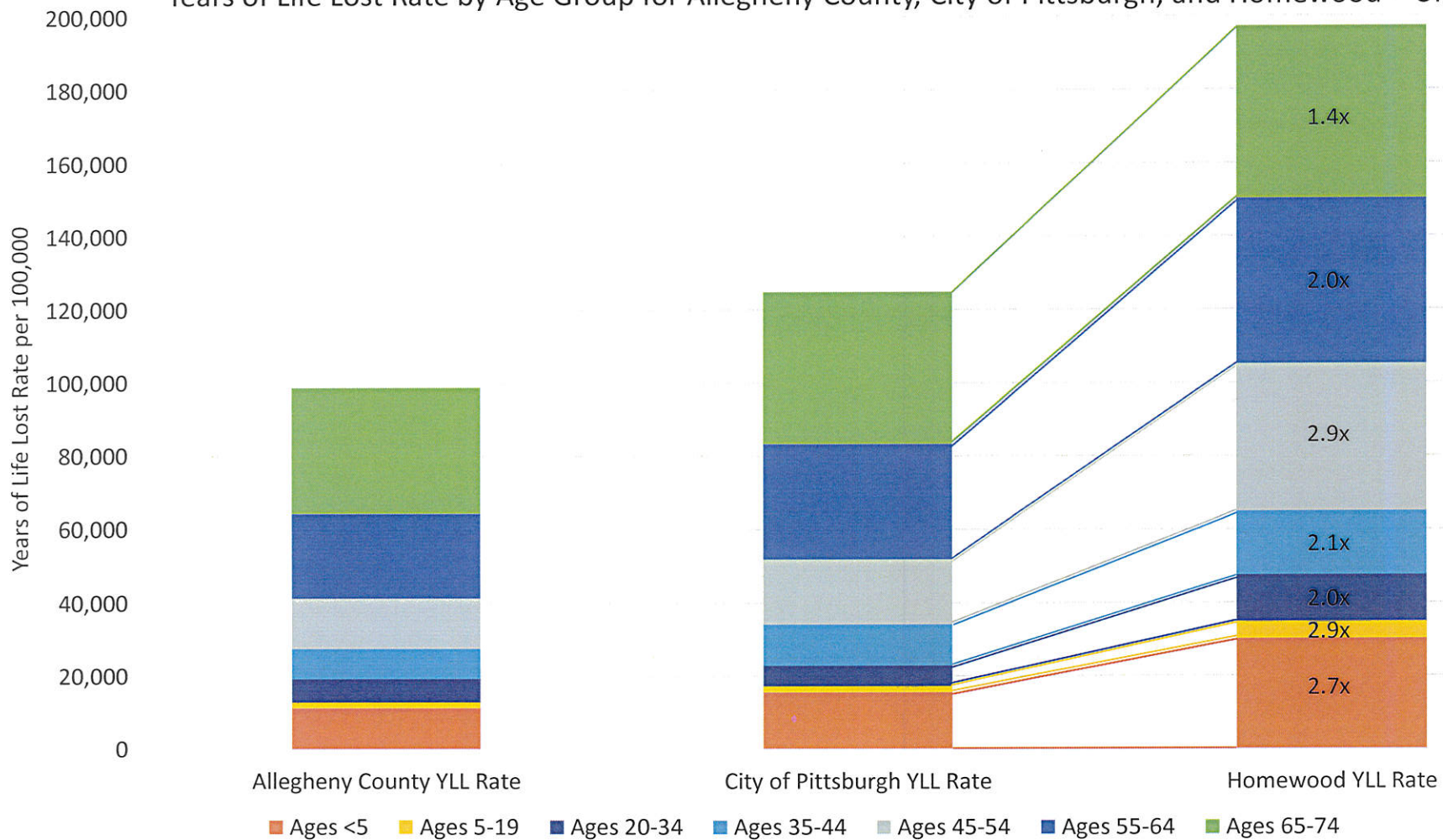


Life Expectancy = 76

Years of Life Lost Rate by Age Group for Allegheny County, City of Pittsburgh, and Homewood – Under 75 Years Old



Years of Life Lost Rate by Age Group for Allegheny County, City of Pittsburgh, and Homewood – Under 75 Years Old



## Top 5 Causes of Death – All Ages

### Allegheny County

1. Heart disease
2. Cancer
3. Respiratory diseases
4. Mental and behavioral disorders
5. Diseases of the nervous system

### Pittsburgh

1. Heart disease
2. Cancer
3. Respiratory diseases
4. Accidents (including drug overdose)
5. Mental and behavioral disorders

### Homewood

1. Heart disease
2. Cancer
3. Respiratory diseases
4. Stroke
5. Homicide

## Top 5 Causes of Death – Under 75 Years Old

### Allegheny County

1. Cancer
2. Heart disease
3. Accidents (including drug overdose)
4. Respiratory diseases
5. Diseases of digestive system

### Pittsburgh

1. Cancer
2. Heart disease
3. Accidents (including drug overdose)
4. Respiratory diseases
5. Diseases of digestive system

### Homewood

1. Cancer
2. Heart disease
3. **Homicide**
4. Respiratory diseases
5. **Infectious diseases/**  
Accidents (including drug overdose)

## Community Perceptions: Most Like to See Changed (before learn/earn responses)

### Most Like to See Changed

1. More Community Recreational Programs
2. More Police/Crime Watch
3. Better Infrastructure/Homes
4. Better Attitude
5. More Youth Programs

## Community Perceptions: Most Like to See Changed

### Most Like to See Changed

1. More Community Recreational Programs
2. More Police/Crime Watch
3. (tie) Better Infrastructure/Homes  
Fewer shootings/Safer
4. Better Attitude

## Community Perceptions: What Do Most People Die From? (Before learn/earn responses)

### Homewood

1. Guns
2. Drugs
3. Illness/Disease/Old Age
4. Diet/Lack of Exercise
5. Poverty



## Community Perceptions: What Is Making Us Unhealthy? (Before learn/earn responses)

### Top Causes of Illness

1. Drugs & Alcohol/Violence
2. Chronic Illness
3. Lack of Healthcare/Community Resources
4. Air & Water Pollution
5. Food Insecurity/Unhealthy Food

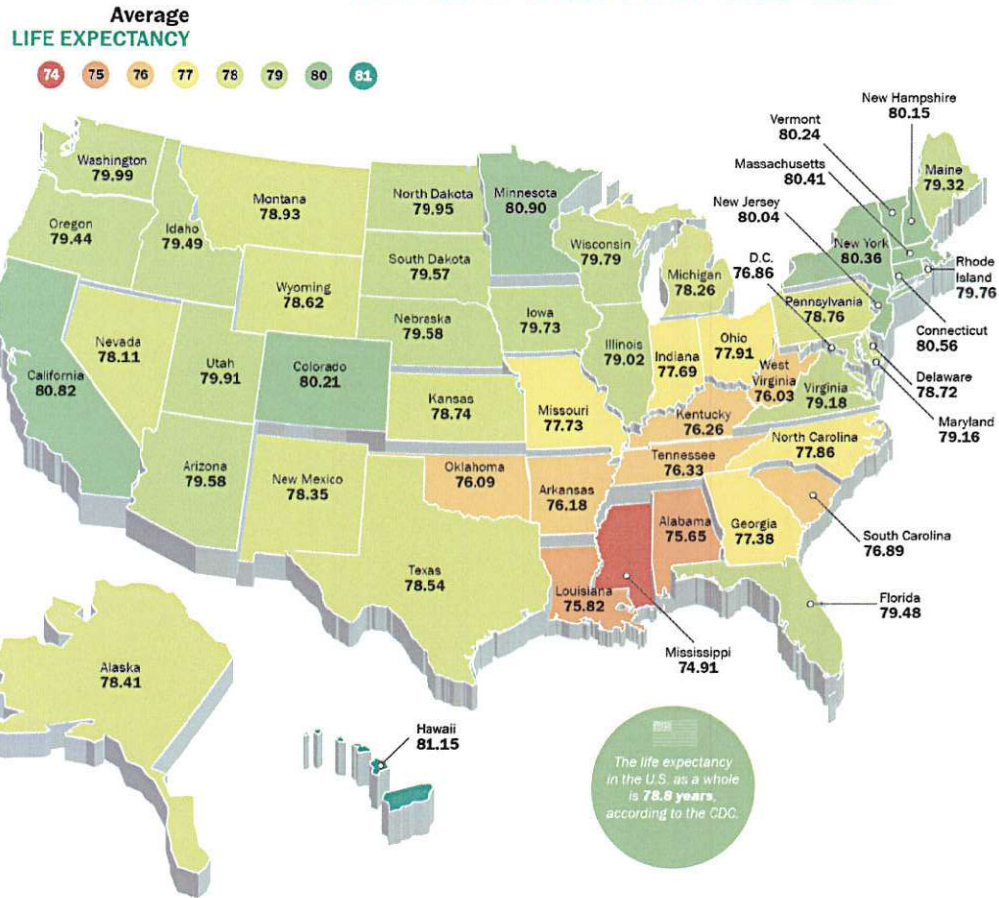
### Top Things Making Us Unwell

1. Crime/Violence/Guns
2. Pollution/Poor Air & Water Quality
3. Drugs & Alcohol
4. Wild Animals
5. Unhealthy Food/Bad Healthcare

# Why Aren't We Living As Long?

McKeesport Community Conversation #1  
December 3, 2019

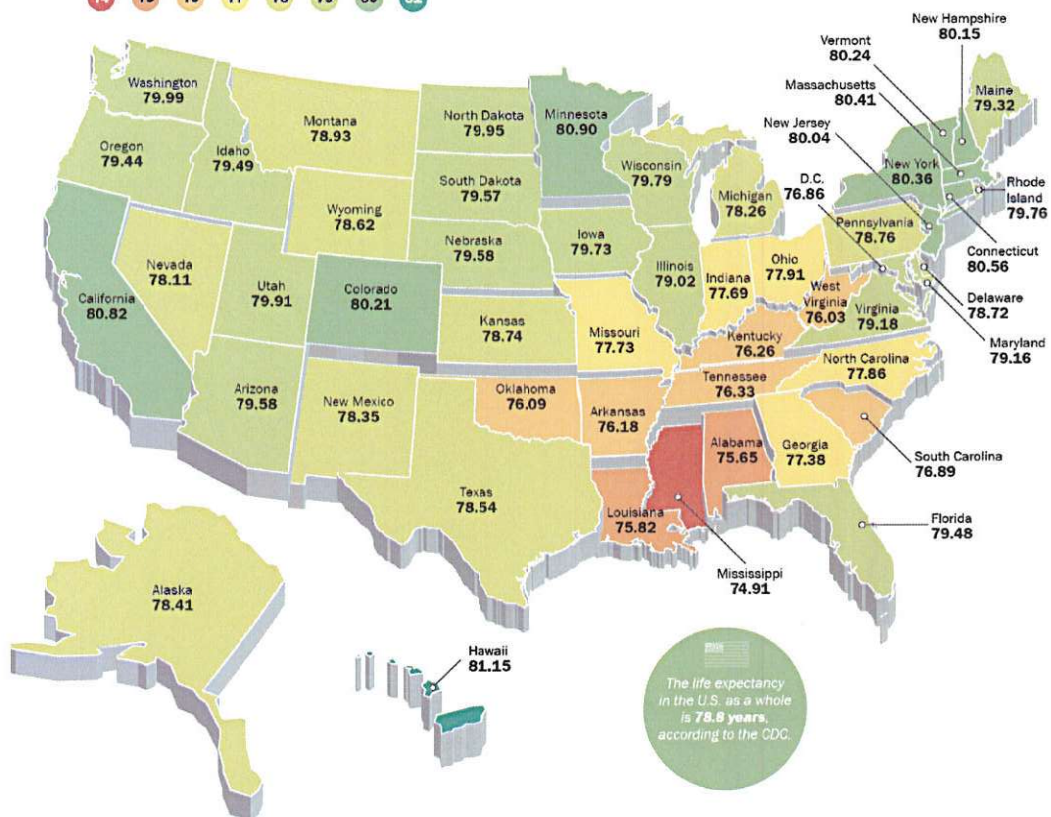
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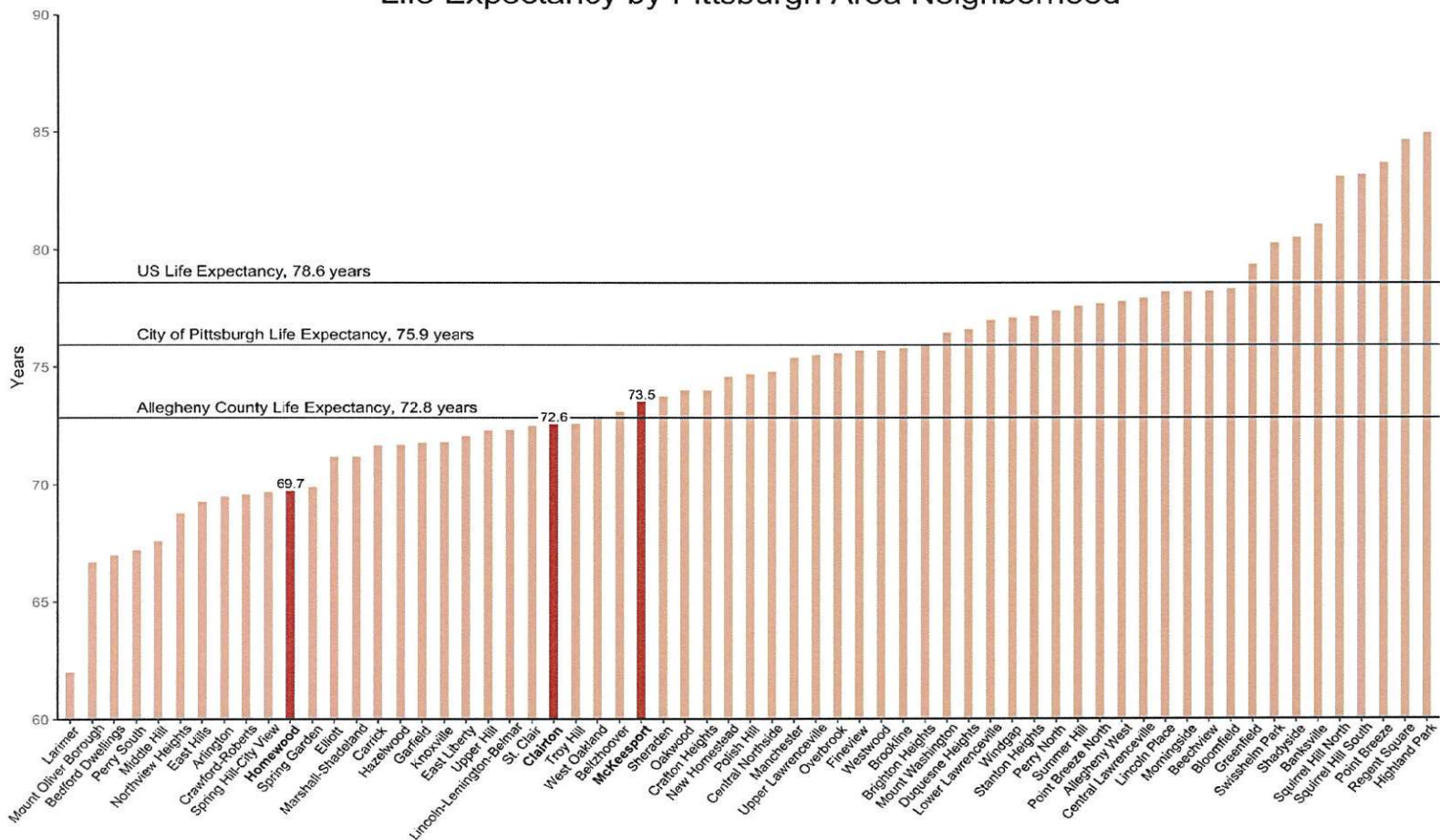
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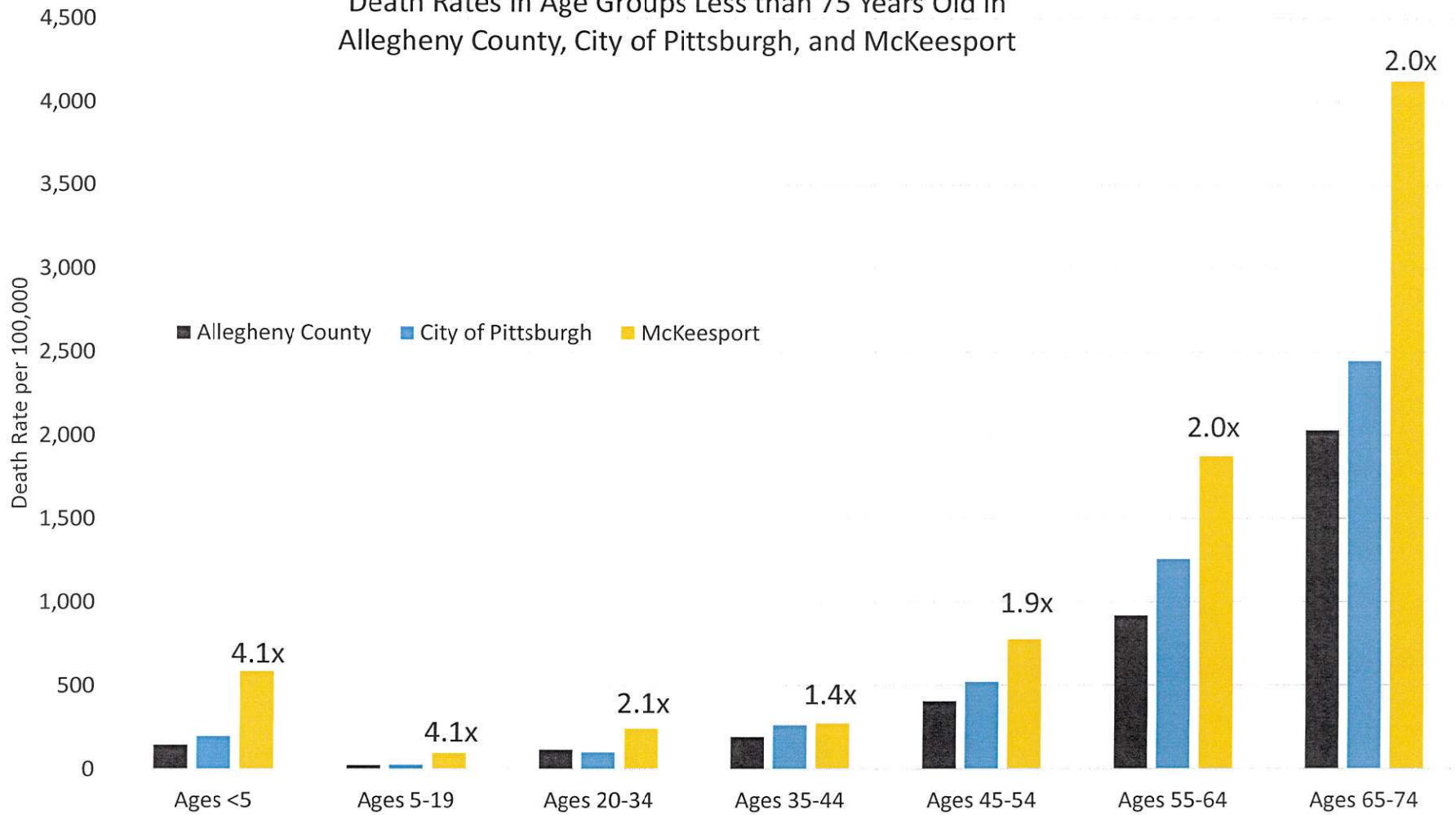
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### Life Expectancy by Pittsburgh Area Neighborhood



# Who Is Affected the Most?

Death Rates in Age Groups Less than 75 Years Old in Allegheny County, City of Pittsburgh, and McKeesport



# How Do Premature Deaths Impact Life Expectancy?



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# What Is Causing These Premature Deaths?

## Top 5 Causes of Death – Under 75 Years Old

### Allegheny County

1. Cancer
2. Heart disease
3. Accidents (including drug overdose)
4. Respiratory diseases
5. Digestive system diseases

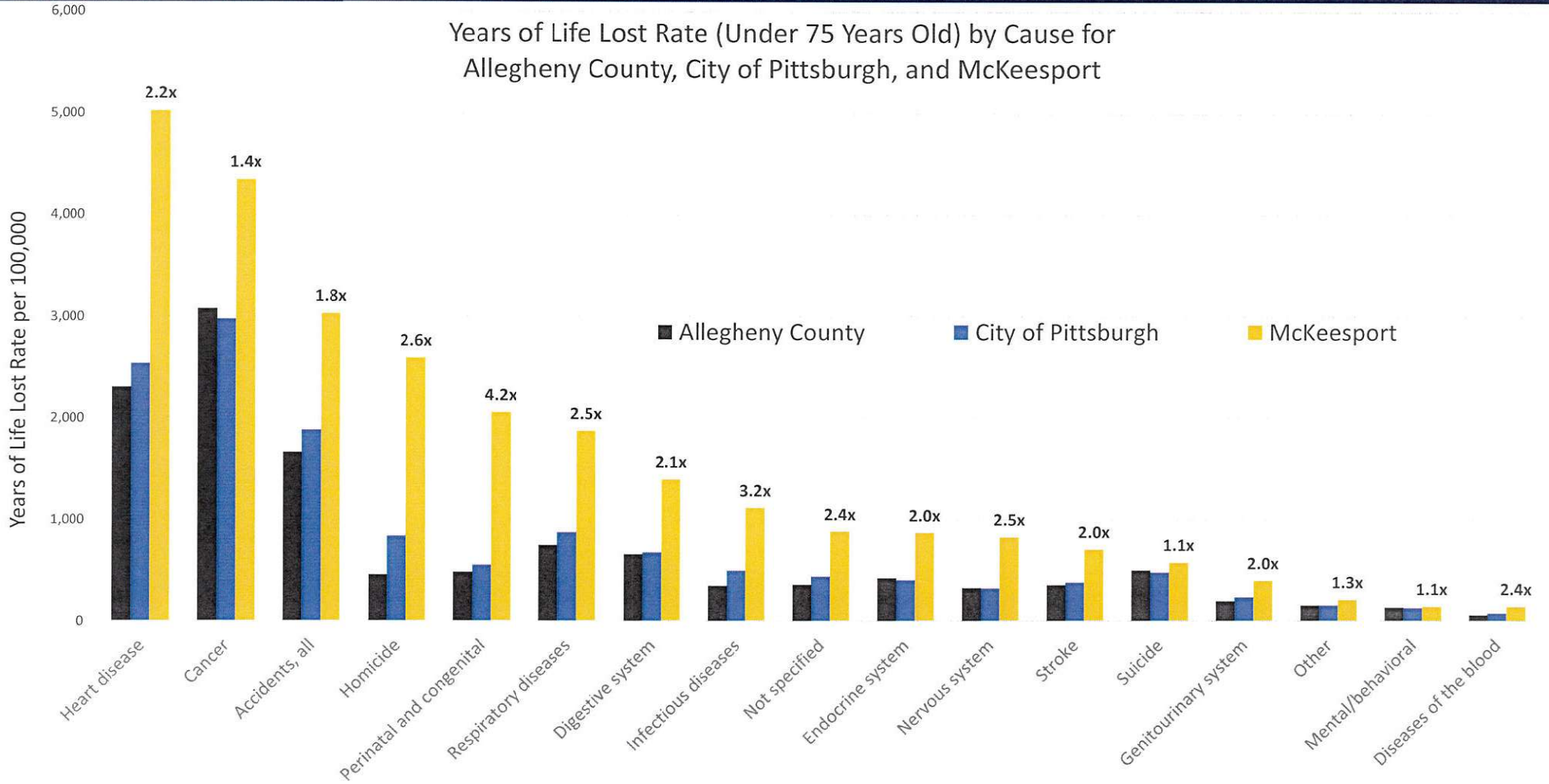
### City of Pittsburgh

1. Cancer
2. Heart disease
3. Accidents (including drug overdose)
4. Respiratory diseases
5. Digestive system diseases

### McKeesport

1. Heart disease
2. Cancer
3. Respiratory diseases
4. Accidents (including drug overdose)
5. Digestive system diseases

Years of Life Lost Rate (Under 75 Years Old) by Cause for Allegheny County, City of Pittsburgh, and McKeesport



# Top Causes of Death and Years of Life Lost in McKeesport

## Top Causes of Death

1. Heart disease
2. Cancer
3. Respiratory diseases
4. Accidents (including drug overdose)
5. Digestive system diseases

## Top Causes of Years of Life Lost

1. Heart disease
2. Cancer
3. Accidents (including drug overdose)
4. Homicide
5. Newborn/infant