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## DESTINY BY ZIP CODE

United States of America is a large country with a population of 331 million. It has the largest economy in the world, with an excellent human and technical resources at its disposal. It spends over 10000 dollars per person, the largest in the world, on healthcare. However, its recent handling of the Covid pandemic that resulted in over a million deaths in US – higher than any other developed country [0.3% of the population], has clearly exposed the deficiencies of our current health care delivery model.

In the last American Public Health meeting that was held before Covid pandemic, which shut most live events across the globe – there was a large billboard indicating average life span in various counties of the United States. As a healthcare professional, I was aware that disparities exist for healthcare access by various segments of the society, however, the consistent difference in life span across various zip codes – was both depressing and a revelation to me of our current broken health care delivery system.

As Findlay, where I live, is a small town with only one zip code, making comparisons across zip codes is not possible. So, for this article, I would use an example city of Cleveland in Ohio. However, similar differences can be found across America.

Cleveland is home to the world-famous Cleveland Clinic which ranks as a premiere healthcare provider in several global ratings. Equidistant from Cleveland Clinic in two directions are the zip codes of 44124 [Mayfield Heights] – life expectancy of 82 years and zip code of 44103 [St-Claire Superior] with a life expectancy of 70 years. Even the presence of world-renowned Cleveland Clinic, that has branches around the world – is unable to bridge this disparity in life expectancy of 12 years between the two zip codes in Cleveland!

Inability of Cleveland Clinic to close the life expectancy gap in the two zip codes of Cleveland clearly demonstrates that technology and skill of the physicians could not simply reverse the various negative life experiences faced by the citizens of the 44103 zip code.

Covid pandemic further exploited the broken and variable level of healthcare access to different zip codes. Between 2019 and 2020, primarily as a result of Covid – life expectancy for the Hispanic population decreased by 3 years [81.8 to 78.8], by 2.9 years for the non-Hispanic black population (74.7 to 71.8) and by 1.2 years for the non-Hispanic white population (78.6 to 76.6) <sup>[1]</sup>.

## **Fast-food impact on health and life expectancy**

*Fast Food.* : Empty calories without nutrition. Study reported in the December issue of AJPH finds that most fast-food companies still serve oversized portions of meals and beverages. For example, coca cola when originally first introduced was 6.5 ounces and now it is offered in six serving sizes that range from 7.5 to 24 ounces.

Even though US grows huge quantity of food and exports a significant portion of it, unfortunately, 23.5 million, 7% of its population lives in areas defined as food desert – means they have limited access to affordable



and nutritious food <sup>[2]</sup>.

While one solution is for government mandated legislation on serving sizes, but in a country where a large population is averse to even vaccination mandate that offers immediate health benefit, their willingness to give up immediate gratification for long-term benefit is doubtful. In March 2013, New York city mayor Bloomberg passed a legislation banning sugary soft drink more than 16 fluid ounces (0.47 liters). But before that rule could take effect, it was blocked by Judge Milton in the New York State Supreme Court.

One factor that affects obesity and diet related diseases is the proximity of fast-food restaurants and convenience stores. Ver Ploeg et al <sup>[3]</sup> have demonstrated that while proximity to fast food restaurants correlates to higher BMI, proximity to grocery store correlates to lower BMI.

Interestingly, many low - income communities contain higher number of pharmacies. That should indicate better access to “healthcare”, but those pharmacies besides carrying prescription and OTC medications carry a large number of snack foods, such as candy, sugary beverages and salty snacks – negating any health benefit pharmacy location may provide.

Food deserts interestingly have large number of liquor stores. Majority of population in such communities are ethnic minorities. Both Latinos and African Americans are predisposed to disease mediated by alcohol – such as stroke, hypertension, diabetes, colon, GI cancer and obesity.

Supreme court’s recent decision on abortion – curtailing women’s right to their own healthcare; reinterpreting second amendment in a way that equates modern semi-automatic

gun to the one available 200 years ago – would invariably widen the life expectancy gap between the two zip codes of Cleveland!

Closing the gap will require - for us as a society to realize that in the most affluent country in the world – access to universal healthcare is a human right and not just a privilege. Also, to systematically eliminate barriers that impacts certain segments of the society in accessing services that many of us take it for granted – childcare, transportation, education etc.

## References:

1. <https://www.rwjf.org/en/library/interactive/s/whereliveaffectshowlongyoulive.html>
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3. Ver Ploeg, M.; Breneman, V.; Farrigan, T.; Hamrick, K.; Hopkins, D.; Kaufman, P.; Lin, B-H.; Nord, M.; Smith, T.A.; Williams, R.; Kinnison, K.; Olander, C.; Singh, A.; Tuckermanty, E. (Jun 2009). *"Access to Affordable and Nutritious Food: Measuring and Understanding Food Deserts and Their Consequences: Report to Congress" (PDF)*. *Administrative Publication (AP-036)*. *Archived (PDF) from the original on June 13, 2018. Retrieved August 6, 2017.*