Health Care Disparities Tied to Big Drop in Life Expectancy for Black Chicagoans

COVID-19 paired with treatable chronic diseases has led to the lowest life expectancy for Black and brown Chicagoans in decades.

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The impact of COVID-19 combined with disparities in health care has led to a significant drop in life expectancy for Black and brown Chicagoans, according to new data released by the Chicago Department of Public Health.

The life expectancy for Black Chicagoans has fallen below 70 years for the first time in decades. In 2020, there was a 10-year gap in life expectancy between Black and white residents, marking an increase from 8.8 years in 2017.

In a news release, Brenda Battle, senior vice president of community health transformation and chief diversity, inclusion and equity officer at University of Chicago Medicine, noted that among Chicagoans of color, COVID compounded already existing disparities, including higher rates of heart disease, hypertension and diabetes, “further damaging the health and life of these individuals…already experiencing marginalization.”

The life expectancy gap between Chicago’s West Side and downtown is 14 years, according to West Side United, which pointed out that the most common causes of death related to this life expectancy gap are cardio-metabolic disease, opioid overdose, cancer, homicide and infant mortality. Ayesha Jaco, the executive director of the organization, which is working to close this gap, said social and systemic issues, such as neighborhood, physical environment and education, also help account for the difference in life span.

The Chicago Department of Public Health said COVID deaths played a significant role in the decline of life expectancy. Chronic diseases like diabetes, cancer, and heart disease also contributed to the racial divide.

According to Battle, these diseases can and must be treated and prevented with proper access to health care services.

To learn more, read “Minorities Experience Greater Decline in Life Expectancy.”

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