Somos Neighbors: Where we live and how we live in San Antonio

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Where you live plays a role in how long you live. Some of your neighbors in Bexar County could have a life expectancy 10, 15, even 18 years longer or shorter than yours, based solely on where you both live.

The Somos Neighbors project invites San Antonians to meet some of those neighbors, and to take a glimpse at what they have in common, as well as the disparities that divide them. It is an interactive website that allows residents to upload pictures of the neighborhoods they love, while investigating the role of healthcare, education, criminal justice, and city infrastructure in the lives of their neighbors.

Income segregation, our large geographic size, and our car-dependent economy don't allow us many chances to learn about other neighborhoods or connect with our neighbors who live there," said **Laura McKieran,** executive director of CI:Now, "So most members of our community aren't really aware that our chances of living to see our grandchildren grow up vary so much depending on where we live."

When visitors to the website plug in their address, the project matches their neighborhood with another neighborhood in Bexar County. The data begins with what the two neighborhoods have in common, and then shows the difference in life expectancy and other quality of life indicators. Some indicators may be surprising.

"Healthy habits are only about 30% of the equation, and medical care is just 20%. So we can't fix this just by just getting more physically active, or just by expanding access to health care. Those things are important but not enough," said **Elizabeth Lutz**, Executive Director of The Health Collaborative. "We have to deal with the other 50% of the equation – issues like wages, housing, education, transportation, and digital inclusion." The experience ends with calls to actions, ways that every resident of Bexar County can reduce the life expectancy gap between neighborhoods.

The project, supported by the Urban Institute with funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and using USALEEP local life expectancy data, is partially inspired by the work of **Tonika Lewis Johnson,** a Chicago-based social justice artist and photographer. Like Somos Neighbors, her Folded Map project invites Chicagoans to look at their city's unique geography of inequity. Both projects, however, go beyond data as well, demonstrating the vibrancy and connectedness of neighborhoods across the city, regardless of their income, demographics, or even life expectancy.

"The beauty of what art can do [is that] it offers an opportunity for people to engage in difficult large issues," Lewis Johnson said.

Somos Neighbors launched officially on February 27, 2020. For those interested in the health and flourishing of the community—politicians, service providers, journalists, teachers, employers, parents and advocates—the project is a resource to illustrate the urgency of the work ahead. Complete data and findings from the CI:Now team will be available on the site. Anyone can use Somos Neighbors to start conversations, connect humans to data, and better get to know Bexar County.

"Societies with greater inequality fare worse than societies with lesser inequality, said McKieran. "That's true in terms of life expectancy, quality of life, economic growth, crime – whatever. So it's in *everyone*'s best interest to reduce inequality, and to reduce it we need to know what it looks like." Even individual wealth cannot protect families from the effects of broad social inequality that weakens society, she explained.

For questions about the data used to create Somos Neighbors, please contact **Paulina Cano McCutcheon at 210-276-9014.**

Attributions, funding, and data sources:
Community Information Now (CI:Now) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit local data intermediary housed in The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston (UTHealth) School of Public Health in San Antonio. Working with a diverse set of public and nonprofit partner organizations, CI:Now turns local data into information Texas communities can use for planning, trending community change over time, understanding relationships among community issues, and measuring results.

The core of this project is the United States Small-Area Life Expectancy Estimates Project (USALEEP) dataset. USALEEP is the first public health outcome measure available nationwide at the census tract level, measuring life expectancy at birth for nearly every census tract in the country. A joint effort of The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, National Association for Public Health Statistics and Information Systems (NAPHSIS), and the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) at the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), USALEEP data provide unparalleled insights into community health and demonstrate that not everyone has the same opportunity to be healthy where they live.

How to use the Somos Neighbors data:

Most importantly: this project deals only in correlation, not causation. The project does not attribute life expectancy to any specific factor, however it does describe what life is like in these very unequal neighborhoods.

These indicators are neighborhood level, and should not be used to make inferences about individuals in each neighborhood. However, research tells us that neighborhoods on the whole play a large part in personal outcomes. So while not every student in a given neighborhood may end their educational career after high school, having very few neighbors who go to college does affect students in that neighborhood.

For further reading on neighborhood effects:

- Article: https://www.buildhealthyplaces.org/content/uploads/2015/09/How-Do-Neighborhood-Conditions-Shape-Health.pdf
- Article: https://www.macfound.org/media/files/HHM_-_Neighborhoods_Affect_Health_Well-being_Young_Peoples_Futures.pdf
- Topic-specific RWJF landing page and link to issue brief: https://www.rwjf.org/en/library/research/2011/05/neighborhoods-and-health-.html

About the indicators:

To create that description, CI:Now analyzed the relationship between neighborhood average life expectancy and more than 100 other indicators from many sectors and issue areas, not just health. Those issue areas included education, housing stock and affordability, private and public transportation, employment and labor force participation, jobs, mortgage and small business loans, incarceration, and many others.

That local data shows neighborhood-level relationships not just between life expectancy and the 'usual suspects' like poverty and education, but also factors like housing crowding, broadband subscriptions, and the availability of jobs with decent wages.

We hope that having high quality, apples-to-apples data across sectors will lead to broader, more innovative thinking as we report, advocate, and pursue solutions together. If we can be of help in your reporting or advocacy, please do not hesitate to contact us.

To see the full findings, users will soon be able to click on the "Explore Data" tab below the map of Bexar County. To be alerted when this data becomes available, sign up for updates on the CI:Now website. There you will find the Somos Neighbors Data Dictionary with definitions, sources, and links for all Somos Neighbors indicators, including dozens not included in the neighborhood matching tool. Please refer to the data source's own documentation (linked in the dictionary) for answers to questions about how the data were collected, analyzed, or interpreted.

Finally, CI:Now will soon release a guide that should be of help to anyone seeking to understand how Somos Neighbors works or to create a similar tool in their own community. **The [Somos Neighbors](#) page** on CI:Now's website will include information about the census tract matching algorithm and method, indicator calculation and selection, website functionality and open-source tools, and approaches to outreach and encouraging local use of Somos Neighbors.