

denver & the west

Long life comes with the land

Ten counties share the nation's highest longevity rate, and seven of them are in Colorado, according to a new study.

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Want to get old? Live in Clear Creek County - or Eagle, Gilpin, Grand, Jackson, Park or Summit county.

Those seven Colorado counties, along with two Iowa counties and Montgomery County, Md., have the nation's longest life expectancies - 81.3 years - according to a Harvard University researcher.

Fifteen Colorado counties scored in the top 50 in Dr. Christopher Murray's life-span and health-disparities study, which appears in the September issue of the journal PLoS Medicine.

The six counties with the lowest predicted life span were all in South Dakota, near the Pine Ridge Indian reservation.

The good news for everyone is that over the 20 years studied, from 1980 to 2000, life span continued inching up.

The bad news, Murray said, is that the gap between the greatest life expectancies and the lowest continues to grow.

Among ethnic groups, Asian- Americans enjoy the longest lives, on average. African-Americans in poor urban areas have the poorest life-span outlook.

Nevertheless, Murray insists it isn't money, health insurance or access to medical care that determines who will linger longest - at least not entirely.

"Of the top 50 counties, almost all of those are rural, and rural counties, on average, are poorer," he said.

"Something very geographic is going on," Murray said. "But typical analytic methods miss that part of the story because researchers tend to look at race, income and education, but rarely at place."

Although most public health efforts focus on infants, pregnant women and the elderly, Murray argues that "most of the disparities we see are disparities in middle-aged adults.

"It has to do with risk factors: tobacco use, alcohol, blood pressure, obesity, diet and physical inactivity," Murray said.

Jackson County, with 13 percent of residents living below the federal poverty level and no full-time doctors, seems to bolster Murray's argument.

Clear Creek, Gilpin and Eagle counties may be technically rural, but as home to ski resorts and the jet-set enclaves of Beaver Creek and Vail, they may not be typically rural.

With a median income of \$58,190, - nearly \$9,000 above the statewide average - Eagle County is one that doesn't fit the standard description of rural.

And Colorado, overall, is the least obese state, according to Trust of America's health study.

All of which creates a chicken-or-egg question for Colorado's top-performing counties, Murray said.

"Is it people moving to those counties because they want the healthy lifestyle, or is it people who are there in the first place that had the healthy lifestyles?" he said.

Angela Beck can vouch for Eagle County as a healthy place - having lived there all of her 76 years.

Beck and her husband, Buster Beck, 81, raised 10 kids in Red Cliff, a hamlet of about 300 that in its mining heyday was the Eagle County seat.

"We had a good life. We didn't have any money, and we never went to Disney World or anything. But we went fishing, hunting, sleigh riding, and skied," she said.

The study findings are based on data from the U.S. Census Bureau and the National Center for Health Statistics.

"We found a huge range of life span across counties," Murray said. "That got us interested in trying to understand what were the causes of those differences."

Statistics, though, can't explain everything.

Until Buster Beck retired, he had made a living blowing up rock as a powder foreman at a mine.

During World War II, his job was to keep land mines from blowing up.

"He's extremely careful and cautious," Angela Beck said, "but you have to have a little bit of luck, too."

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The extremes

Counties with the nation's longest life expectancy:

Clear Creek, Eagle, Gilpin, Grand, Jackson, Park and Summit counties, Colo.;

Montgomery, Md.; Lyon and Sioux, Iowa

Areas with the shortest:

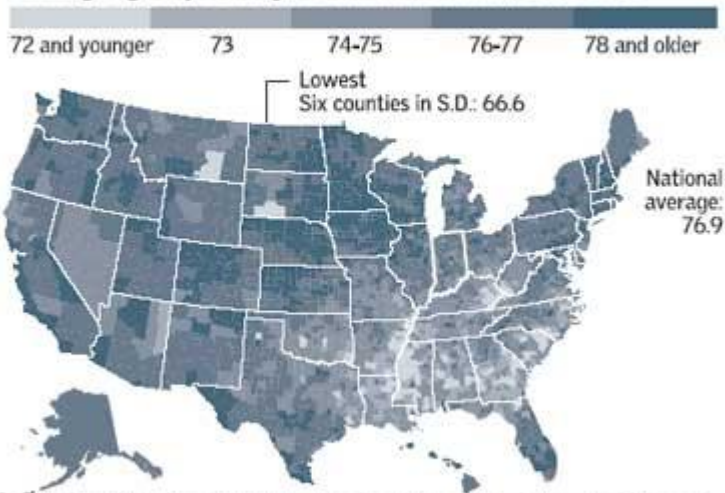
Six counties in South Dakota; Baltimore City, Md.; Petersburg, Va.; Marlboro, S.C.;
Phillips, Ark.

Sources: Harvard University Initiative for Global Health; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Living longer in the northern Plains

Life expectancy is higher among Americans living in the rural northern Plains, while rates are much lower in the South.

Average age expectancy for men and women, 1997-2001



NOTE: Clear Creek, Eagle, Gilpin, Grand, Jackson, Park and Summit counties in Colorado; Montgomery County in Maryland; and Lyon and Sioux counties in Iowa had the highest life expectancy, 81.3 years.

Source: Harvard School of Public Health

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