

VOX

# CLOSING THE DEATH GAP

David Ansell, head of community health equity at Rush University Medical Center, on new efforts to even out life expectancy in Chicago

**Last spring, you published *The Death Gap: How Inequality Kills*. How is Chicago doing with life expectancy?** Over time all neighborhoods have improved. The problem is that there are very large gaps in neighborhoods that are very close to each other: Life expectancy in the Loop is 85, and seven stops down the Blue Line in Garfield Park it is under 69. Where you live dictates when you die.

**You've said the main causes of death are heart disease and cancer. Why are these diseases more deadly in poorer places?** People are walking around with a huge amount of mental illness and stress due to the historical injustices like structural racism and impoverished conditions that have been imposed on these neighborhoods. These, in turn, lead to higher smoking rates and poor food choices. It's a vicious cycle.

**So how do you change that?** Not by putting a doctor's office on every corner. It's really about addressing the economic inequities, as well as the neighborhood environment, then health and health care.

**You're a doctor, though. What business do you have working on economic issues?** Doctors have an obligation not only to take care of patients when they're sick but to move upstream and try to treat the social and structural determinants of health. If we don't address the local conditions, we're really not doing our jobs.

**You recently announced that Rush wants to cut the death gap between West Garfield Park and the Loop in half by 2030. What's the plan?** We called on other institutions to join us in creating the West Side Total Health Collaborative. Collectively, we have about 45,000 employees, about 6,000 new hires a year, and billions of dollars in purchasing ability. We're hiring and purchasing locally to generate new business in the neighborhoods. We're also investing in local projects like low-income housing. We have to treat this as relentlessly as we eliminated scourges like smallpox. —INTERVIEW BY NISSA RHEE

