

ROBIN MEJIA

You Are Where You Are From

Can we change that?

At a party not long ago, I met Nick Stockton, a journalist who had just relocated to San Francisco. A reporter for *Wired*, Nick said he had come from New York but that he was originally from California.

“Northern California?” I asked. He said no.

“Oh, where in SoCal?” I followed.

“Actually, I’m from the part of the state no one thinks about,” he replied. He was from Shafter, a small agricultural town in the Central Valley.

It was an embarrassing moment. It hadn’t crossed my mind that a professional journalist from California might have come from anywhere other than the greater San Francisco or Los Angeles areas. Maybe San Diego. But while that was a prejudiced and dumb assumption on my part, unfortunately it wasn’t entirely unfounded. “Nobody leaves, ever,” Stockton says of his hometown. Heading to New York for journalism school and then taking a job with Condé Nast in San Francisco was not a standard trajectory.

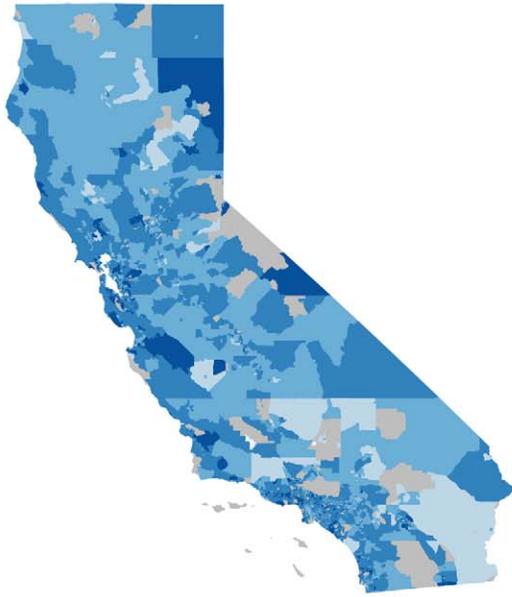
Stockton was talking about leaving town in a literal sense, but lack of mobility is an increasing problem in the United States in more ways than just that. By many measures, socioeconomic mobility—a key component of the American dream—is becoming in America even more of a dream and less a reality.

It’s not just access to magazine jobs that vary by where you live. Numerous things that shape your future are determined by where you were born. Whether a kid has access to a good school and a safe neighborhood where children play outside—these things vary from region to region, even across city blocks. Researchers call these kinds of differences “social determinants of health.”

It’s easy to look at an adult’s life—whether they go to college or stock shelves or spend time in prison—as the result of personal decisions. And that’s not entirely

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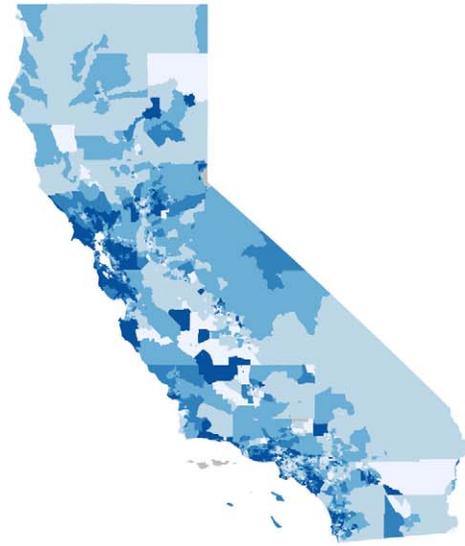
Life Expectancy by Census Tract



Years

64 to 70
70 to 74
75 to 79
80 to 84
85 to 90

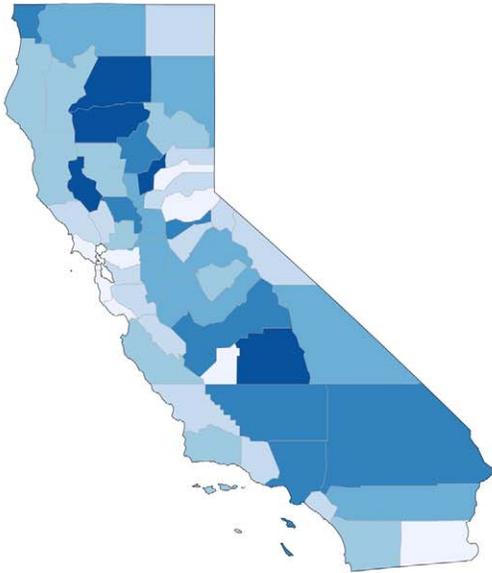
Per Capita Income by Census Tract



Dollars

628 to 14,999
15,000 to 24,999
25,000 to 34,999
35,000 to 44,999
45,000 to 174,695

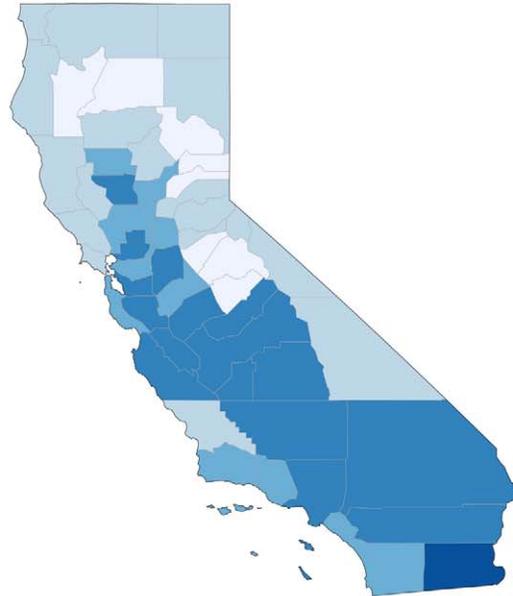
State Incarceration Rates by County



Per 100,000

142 to 249
250 to 349
350 to 449
450 to 549
550 to 649
650 to 1,030

Percent Non-White Population by County



Percent

0-19
20-39
40-59
60-79
80-100

wrong. But our decisions are shaped, and too frequently limited, by where we live. One way to visualize this is by looking at how life outcomes cluster geographically.

In 2012, researchers at Virginia Commonwealth University dug into health statistics for Alameda County, where I live. Alameda is home to the University of California, Berkeley and is just across the bay from San Francisco. Not surprisingly, there are neighborhoods where people are doing quite well. But that's only part of the story. In their report, part of a series called Place Matters, the researchers found differences in life expectancy of more than twenty years between neighborhoods in the same county. Poverty, education, and income levels all showed huge variations.

You can predict a lot about a person by where he or she lives. Start with life expectancy. If you want to reduce health and quality of life to a single number, it's hard to do much better. Exercise, diet, income, stress—they all affect how long a person lives. And average life expectancy incorporates the effects of violence, as well; if a high proportion of young men are dying, that can bring down an overall average.

The Virginia Commonwealth researchers compiled life expectancy by census tract for most of California. Census tracts aren't a perfect proxy for neighborhoods; they're set by population, so their geographic size varies. In rural areas, tracts can be quite large; in cities, a tract may cover only part of a neighborhood. However, census tracts are widely used in research because they're comparable in population size and often as close to a "neighborhood" as it's possible to get with rich data.

I produced the maps accompanying this piece using data from Place Matters and other sources. In California overall, the average person can expect to live to about eighty. But as the maps here show, there's a lot of variation. In the census tract with the lowest life span (in Sacramento County), it's just under sixty-five. In the tract with the highest life expectancy (in Los Angeles), residents can expect to live to ninety. But it's not a straight-up L.A.-versus-Sacramento difference. Los Angeles has areas with life expectancies of less than seventy.

Using data from the census and the California Department of Corrections, we can also look at income levels and incarceration rates. We aren't always able to tease out neighborhood-level differences. For example, the California

Department of Corrections records the county where prisoners are committed. I converted this to a rate per one hundred thousand residents using census population data. I then looked at the percentage of minority residents in those counties. Even at this scale, you can see some support for President Obama's recent comments about the possibility of losing an "entire generation" of young minority men.

I'm currently a graduate student at Berkeley, studying biostatistics in the School of Public Health. Over the past year, I've gotten to know the young woman who works at the front desk for my program. Ernestina Quintero is now in her junior year, finishing a degree in social work. She's also from the Central Valley, specifically a town called Porterville. When Quintero was ten, her mother was arrested and her godmother took her in. Five years later, her mother was deported to Mexico, making the situation permanent. Along the way, Quintero decided she wanted a different path and focused her sights on UC Berkeley: "I thought my best chance to get out of poverty was to go to the best public university." In some ways, she says, it's just as well she didn't know what she was up against. "I knew you had to get good grades, but I didn't know what the applicant pool looked like. I didn't know there were SAT prep courses people paid money to take. I had no clue that that stuff existed until I went to college."

Many kids in Porterville don't. When Quintero was accepted to Berkeley, her story made the local newspaper. She's only the second student she knows from the town to attend the university, and the first Latina. While she's smart, intensely focused, and dedicated, she can't be the only smart kid to ever graduate from her high school.

At some point, wouldn't it be great if where you're from didn't imply so much about where you're going? **B**

Note

Data sources: per capita income by census tract and race by county from the United States Census 2013 American Community Survey. 2010 life expectancy by census tract from Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) Center on Human Needs (CHN). Count incarceration rates created from the California Department of Corrections "Year at a Glance" 2010 report, which gave the county of commitment, with thanks to the Prison Policy Initiative. I used 2013 American Community Survey population data to generate the rates.



Amador Angeles, field worker, Santa Maria, California, 3457'12' N 12026'6" W. Photograph by Matt Black. Angeles told Black: "I wish for my kids to study so they don't have to carry on like us." This photograph is part of Black's #geographyofpoverty series.