Minorities Experience Greater Decline in Life Expectancy

Researchers attribute disparities in mortality rates to COVID-19–related deaths and persistent health inequities.

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Life expectancy in the United States fell sharply between 2018 and 2020 compared with that of 16 other high-income nations. The decline, attributable in part to the COVID-19 pandemic, affected some minorities significantly more than it did whites, according to mortality data published in the British Medical Journal. White Americans can now expect to live 1.36 fewer years, while life expectancy for Black people and Hispanic Americans dropped 3.25 and 3.88 years, respectively.

Ryan Masters, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Colorado Boulder and a coauthor of the study, does not doubt that existing health inequities played a role in the disparity.

"It's devastating, or horrific—an absolute tragedy. One that we probably could have seen just because of the deeply rooted systemic factors," Masters said, according to Colorado Public Radio (CPR).

The decline in life expectancy is the steepest recorded since the height of World War II in 1943. Besides coronavirus infections and resulting COVID-19 complications, other factors that drove this decrease include strokes, heart attacks and drug overdoses, according to Kaiser Health News. Rates of such medical events increased precipitously in 2020 for reasons that ranged from stress to health treatment delays and accessibility issues.

Steven Woolf, MD, a professor of family medicine and population health at Virginia Commonwealth University and the lead author of the study, called the decline "pretty catastrophic."

Findings from previous studies show that a reduction in life expectancy of this magnitude was all but inevitable given the rising financial inequality caused by a dearth of economic opportunities—problems that have existed for decades.

"[W]e are in really big trouble, and that was true before we knew a pandemic was coming," Woolf said.

In fact, the decrease in life expectancy is nearly nine times higher than that recorded in countries

such as Spain, Norway, Italy and New Zealand over the same period of time. Residents of those nations can now expect to live 4.7 more years than their American counterparts, according to investigators.

“If this doesn’t bring shock and alarm to how poor the U.S. is doing in terms of population health, I don’t know what will,” said Masters in a comment to CPR.

For more on the impact of systemic racism on Black health, read “Racism Is Morally Reprehensible. Does It Also Pose Health Risks?” And for more on drug overdose deaths during the pandemic, read “Opioid Overdose Deaths Hit an All-Time High.”

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