

Lifespan gap shrinks between whites, blacks

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Still, report shows about a 4 to 5.5 year difference in U.S.

(HealthDay) -- The gap in life expectancy between U.S. whites and blacks narrowed between 2003 and 2008, yet significant disparities remain, a new study finds.

Researchers analyzed data from the U.S. National Vital Statistics System and found the disparity in life expectancy between whites and blacks declined by one year.

Specifically, between 2003 and 2008, life expectancy at birth rose from 75.3 years to 76.2 years for [white men](#) and from 68.8 to 70.8 years for black men. For white women, life expectancy rose from 80.3 to 81.2 years and for [black women](#), it went from 75.7 to 77.5 years.

The improvements reduced the [racial gap](#) from 6.5 to 5.4 years among men and from 4.6 to 3.7 years among women, according to the study in the June 6 issue of the [Journal of the American Medical Association](#).

The new statistics follow a trend also seen between 1993 and 2003, said study author Sam Harper, an assistant professor of epidemiology at McGill University in Montreal.

"It is mostly a good news story for a few reasons. Life expectancy from 2003 to 2008 went up for white men, white women, [black men](#) and black women," Harper said. "The gap between blacks and whites narrowed for both men and women by about a year and, at present, the gap is the lowest it's ever been."

However, the good news is tempered by the fact that a significant gap remains, Harper said. "The life expectancy gap, particularly among men, is still quite wide. It's still about 5.5 years between black and white men, and roughly four years for black and white women. That continues to be a problem," he said.

There are multiple explanations for the continuing racial gap in life expectancy, Harper said. According to the [mortality statistics](#), blacks are still more likely to die from heart disease, HIV, diabetes and homicide, while [infant mortality rates](#) remain higher among blacks than whites.

And yet, many of those same factors were also factors in narrowing the gap. From 2003 to 2008, blacks notched improvements in multiple categories, with death rates from [heart disease](#) and HIV markedly declining.

The statistics also revealed some disheartening information. The gap narrowed in part because more whites died of "unintentional injury," specifically, poisoning. While car crashes have been the main cause of injury-related deaths in the [United States](#), deaths from auto accidents remained mostly stable from 2003 to 2008 and there wasn't a difference between the races.

Instead, the big difference was seen in poisoning, which Harper and his colleagues believe is related to overdoses on prescription medications, such as painkillers. According to the study, poisoning has eclipsed motor vehicle accidents as the leading cause of unintentional death.

Among those aged 20 to 54, death rates from poisoning shot up by 58 percent for white men and 74 percent for [white women](#), while remaining relatively steady among blacks.

Dr. David Ansell, senior vice president for clinical affairs and chief medical officer at Rush University Medical Center in Chicago, said the national statistics obscure more worrisome realities.

The first is that life expectancy in the United States is significantly lower than that of nearly all industrialized nations, and nearly three years less than Canadian life expectancy.

"If you look at all the industrialized countries, we tend to be 35th or 40th overall," Ansell said. "In a good year, we are a little bit ahead of Slovenia. In a bad year, we are behind it. Life expectancy is a problem in the United States."

Within the United States, there are also significant differences within communities. Ansell cited a 2008 study that found a significant [life expectancy](#) gap between Mississippi and wealthier Connecticut.

And things aren't necessarily headed in the right direction, he added. "You've seen some narrowing overall in the United States, but in the cities and in some isolated rural areas, the [gap](#) has actually gotten bigger between blacks and whites," he said.

In 2000, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' "Healthy People 2020" set the goal of reducing health [disparities](#) between whites

and minorities; by 2012, the goal was to eliminate them.

"When we look at the 25 largest cities across the United States, almost all of them have gaps that have grown between blacks and whites," Ansell said. "We have to ask ourselves, 'Why do we have this problem in the U.S.?' It's a combination of poverty, racism and a health care system designed to serve people who have the ability to access the best that our health system has to offer."

More information: The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has more on [health disparities](#).

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