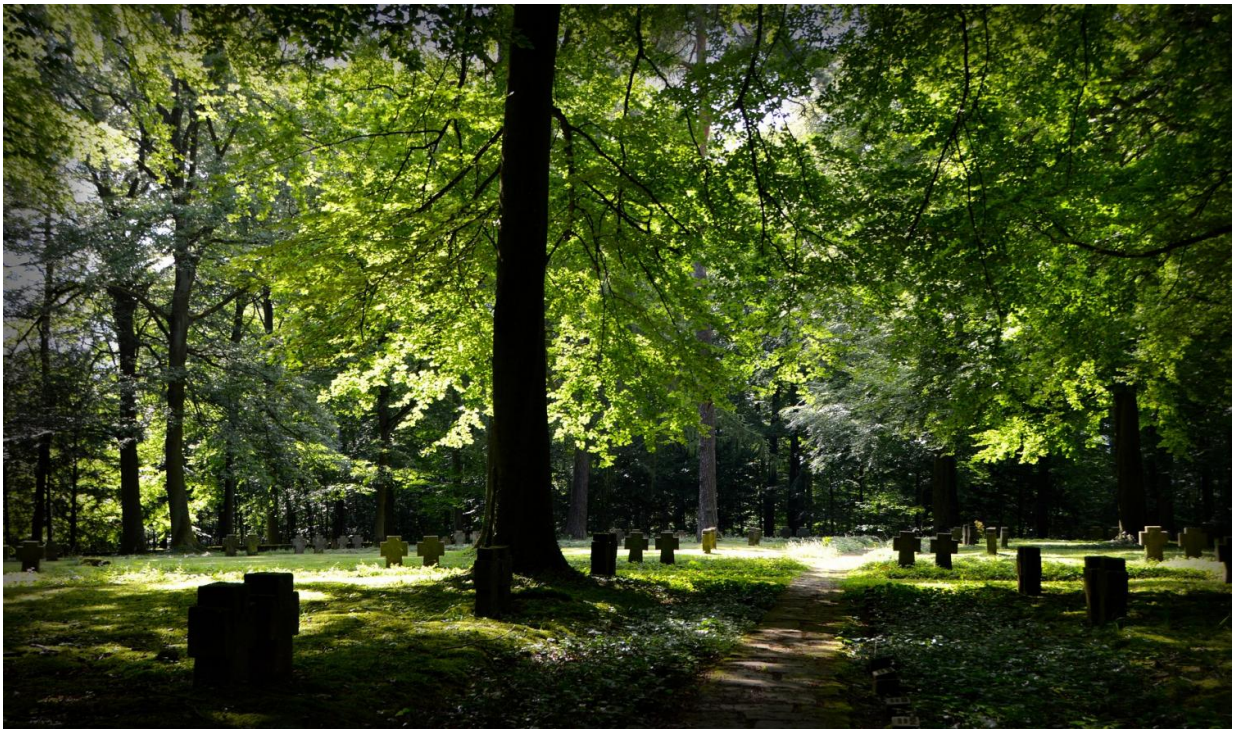


U.S. lifespans trail that of other affluent nations, even for the wealthy

November 18 2020, by Yasmin Anwar



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The gap in life expectancy between disadvantaged and privileged Americans has widened over the past half-decade, but so has the gap between the most affluent Americans and their peers in other prosperous nations, according to a new UC Berkeley study.

Even average residents of wealthy countries belonging to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), such as Japan, were on par with or outliving affluent Americans in 2018, said UC Berkeley demographer Magali Barbieri, associate director of the [Human Mortality Database](#) and author of the report funded by the Society of Actuaries and published today (Tuesday, Nov. 17).

"Life expectancy for the most affluent American men was one year less than for the average Japanese man," Barbieri said. "Meanwhile, the gap between average Japanese women and the most affluent American women reached nearly 3.5 years."

Using U.S. Census and other national vital statistics data, Barbieri tracked [mortality rates](#) for residents in dozens of U.S. counties based on education, income, employment, occupation, housing costs and quality, and other [socioeconomic characteristics](#). She calculated the average lifespans of men and women, separately, in all these counties for every year from 1999 to 2018.

Notably, Barbieri discovered that, in 2018, men in the most affluent U.S. category could expect to live at least seven years longer than those in the most disadvantaged U.S. group (80.5 vs. 73.2 years). For women, that gap was six years (84.9 vs. 79.9 years). The socioeconomic gap was particularly high for children and for adults between the ages of 40 and 60.

By comparison, the socioeconomic gap in [life expectancy](#) in 1999 amounted to 5.5 years for men and 3.4 years for [women](#).

Although she did not factor in data for 2019 and 2020, which is still being collected, mortality rates in the U.S. and worldwide are projected to rise sharply due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Over the last century, life expectancy in the United States and other OECD nations has risen at a rate of three to four months per year.

But Barbieri found that, after 2010, life expectancy in the U.S. leveled off and then decreased from 2014 to 2017, going up slightly in 2018. The higher death toll, she said, is partly due to the opioid epidemic and unsuccessful efforts to control [cardiovascular disease](#), the leading cause of death in the U.S.

While the most disadvantaged U.S. counties saw a rise in mortality between 2010 and 2014, the life expectancy of affluent Americans increased only slightly over that same period.

As for how the lifespan of Americans compares to that of other industrialized countries, Barbieri finds the U.S. is losing ground.

"Overall, Americans are lagging further and further behind in life expectancy, compared to similarly wealthy democratic countries where [mortality](#) has continued to decline at a relatively fast pace over the first two decades of the 21st century," Barbieri said.

"Only the 10% of Americans in the most affluent U.S. counties can now expect to live as long as their peers in similarly wealthy nations," she added. "And, when compared with Japan where the length of life is particularly long, and where progress has continued unabated, all socioeconomic categories of Americans are falling further and further behind."

Provided by University of California - Berkeley

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