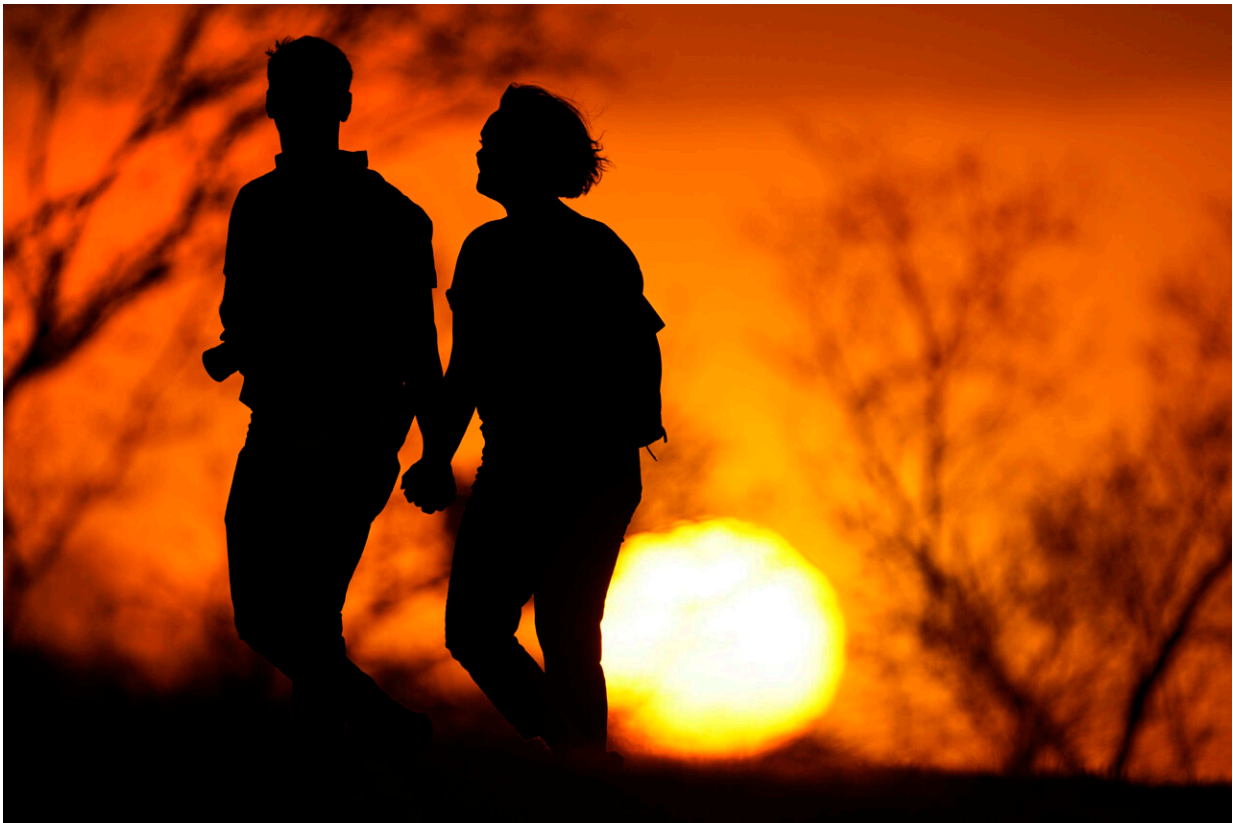


US life expectancy rose last year, but it remains below its pre-pandemic level

November 29 2023, by Mike Stobbe



A couple walks through a park at sunset, March 10, 2021, in Kansas City, Mo. U.S. life expectancy rose in 2022 — by more than a year — after plunging two straight years at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a new government report released Wednesday, Nov. 29, 2023. The rise was mainly due to the waning of the pandemic in 2022, researchers said at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Credit: AP Photo/Charlie Riedel, File

U.S. life expectancy rose last year—by more than a year—but still isn't close to what it was before the COVID-19 pandemic.

The 2022 rise was mainly due to the waning pandemic, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention researchers [said Wednesday](#). But even with the large increase, U.S. life expectancy is only back to 77 years, 6 months—about what it was two decades ago.

Life expectancy is an estimate of the average number of years a baby born in a given year might expect to live, assuming the [death rates](#) at that time hold constant. The snapshot statistic is considered one of the most important measures of the health of the U.S. population. The 2022 calculations released Wednesday are provisional, and could change a little as the math is finalized.

For decades, U.S. life expectancy rose a little nearly every year. But about a decade ago, the trend flattened and even declined some years—a stall blamed largely on [overdose deaths](#) and suicides.

Then came the coronavirus, which has killed [more than 1.1 million people](#) in the U.S. since early 2020. The measure of American longevity plunged, dropping from 78 years, 10 months in 2019 to 77 years in 2020, and then to 76 years, 5 months in 2021.

"We basically have lost 20 years of gains," said the CDC's Elizabeth Arias.

A decline in COVID-19 deaths drove 2022's improvement.

In 2021, COVID was the nation's third leading cause of [death](#) (after heart disease and cancer). Last year, it fell to the [fourth leading cause](#). With more than a month left in the current year, preliminary data suggests COVID-19 could end up being the ninth or 10th leading cause

of death in 2023.

But the U.S. is battling other issues, including drug overdose deaths and suicides.

The number of U.S. suicides reached an [all-time high](#) last year, and the national suicide rate was the highest seen since 1941, according to [a second CDC report](#) released Wednesday.

Drug overdose deaths in the U.S. went up slightly last year after two big leaps at the beginning of the pandemic. And through the first six months of this year, the estimated overdose death toll [continued to inch up](#).

U.S. life expectancy also continues to be lower than that of dozens of other countries. It also didn't rebound as quickly as it did in other places, including France, Italy, Spain and Sweden.

Steven Woolf, a mortality researcher at Virginia Commonwealth University, said he expects the U.S. to eventually get back to the pre-pandemic life expectancy.

But "what I'm trying to say is: That is not a great place to be," he added.

Some other highlights from the new report:

- Life expectancy increased for both men and women, and for every racial and ethnic group.

- The decline in COVID-19 deaths drove 84% of the increase in life expectancy. The next largest contributor was a decline in heart disease deaths, credited with about 4% of the increase. But experts note that [heart disease](#) deaths increased during COVID-19, and both factored into many pandemic-era deaths.

- Changes in life expectancy varied by race and ethnicity. Hispanic

Americans and American Indians and Alaska Natives saw life expectancy rise more than two years in 2022. Black life expectancy rose more than 1 1/2 years. Asian American life expectancy rose one year and white life expectancy rose about 10 months.

But the changes are relative, because Hispanic Americans and Native Americans were hit harder at the beginning of COVID-19. Hispanic life expectancy dropped more than four years between 2019 and 2021, and Native American life expectancy fell more than six years.

"A lot of the large increases in [life expectancy](#) are coming from the groups that suffered the most from COVID," said Mark Hayward, a University of Texas sociology professor who researches how different factors affect adult deaths. "They had more to rebound from."

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Citation: US life expectancy rose last year, but it remains below its pre-pandemic level (2023, November 29) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-11-life-rose-year-pre-pandemic.html>

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