

Project suggests longer, healthier lives are possible

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Social connections, along with health and financial security, are the factors most closely associated with long life, according to a new report from Stanford's Center on Longevity. Credit: Diego Cerva/Shutterstock

More Americans are living to their 80s, 90s and beyond, unthinkable just a century ago. Most say they expect to live to their 80s or longer, and want to live to 100 if they can do so in good health.

But the policies, products and personal behaviors to support such lives are not yet widespread, according to a new study by Stanford's Center on Longevity.

The report, which was released today, is titled, [The Sightlines Project: Seeing Our Way to Living Long, Living Well in 21st Century America](#). The research focuses on trends in three key areas scientifically associated with longevity – health, financial security and social connections. The benchmark analysis is based on data from eight multi-year studies that include more than 1.2 million Americans.

"The Sightlines Project shows a way to a better future for Americans as they live longer than ever

in history," said Stanford President John L. Hennessy. "It provides a data-driven analysis for researchers, industries and the public sector to use as the nation begins to capitalize on one of the greatest opportunities of our times."

Both positive and negative trends

The Stanford research indicates that the past two decades have been a mixed bag, with both positive and negative trends. For example, more Americans are engaging in healthy living activities like regular exercise, and fewer are smoking. But the level of obesity is rising, and Americans are now sitting for long stretches, an emergent health risk. Problems with diet and sleep are widespread and show no signs of abating.

The good news is that people, policies and private sector services can adapt and improve the outlook for century-long, healthy lives.

"Rather than focus on factors like social class and level of formal education – which clearly predict whether lives are long and healthy – we focused on factors that most Americans can control like exercising, eating well and spending high-quality time with friends," said psychology Professor Laura Carstensen, who is the founding director of the Stanford Center on Longevity.

"There is a great deal that people can do to ensure satisfying long lives," she said. These individual choices can be encouraged by adopting new social policies that promote longevity."

Sparking a national discussion

Later this year, Carstensen said, the center plans to host roundtable discussions with policymakers, [private sector](#) leaders and researchers to develop solutions to longevity problems. The ultimate goal is to build a culture that better supports living long and living well.

"Examining trends for factors that are known to influence longevity will help to inform national debate and stimulate entrepreneurial innovation," Carstensen said.

The study tracked 27 indicators across at least 12 years, focusing on changes between two key points in time.

According to the research, financial security is a growing challenge for American longevity and well-being, particularly among less-educated people and the so-called millennials generation, which is defined as people currently between the ages of 25 and 34. Millennials who went to college are struggling with student loans and credit card debt five times that of 25- to 34-year-olds only 15 years ago.

Provided by Stanford University

"The outlook is even worse for the least educated, who are more likely to live at or near poverty levels, lack resources for emergencies, and are unable to invest in traditional asset growth vehicles that provide a financial cushion later in life," said Martha Deevy, director of the Stanford Longevity Center's [financial security](#) division.

Weaker social networks

Social engagement with individuals and communities appears weaker than 15 years ago, the research revealed. This is especially true for 55- to 64-year-olds, who exhibit notably weaker relationships with spouses, partners, family, friends and neighbors. They also are involved less in their communities than their predecessors.

"The vulnerability and disengagement in the group headed into retirement warrants further attention," Carstensen said.

The study does not address trends in the use of social media.

Amy Yotopoulos, director of the center's mind division, said, "It's too soon to tell whether asynchronous, technology-mediated forms of [social engagement](#) – texting, chat, posting and tweeting – will provide comparable social benefits to more traditional forms of interaction with family and friends."

The research focused on six age groups – 25 to 34; 35 to 44; 45 to 54; 55 to 64; 65 to 74; and 75 plus.

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