COVID-19: U.S. life expectancy continued to decrease in 2021, study finds

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"Despite the availability of effective vaccines, life expectancy continued to decline in 2021. Part of this is due to the large number of COVID-19 deaths that occurred in the beginning of 2021, before many individuals were eligible for vaccination," she said. "But even once all adults became eligible for vaccination, many chose not to be vaccinated and even vaccinated individuals were not completely protected against the highly transmissible Delta and Omicron variants."

The study highlighted that significant racial disparities in loss of lifespan have endured throughout the pandemic. Between 2019 and 2021, non-Latino whites lost 2 years on average, while non-Latino Blacks lost 3.5 years and Latinos lost 3.7 years of life expectancy. As noted in Andrasfay and Goldman's previous analyses, Black and Latino Americans have experienced a disproportionate burden of coronavirus infections and deaths, reflecting persistent structural inequalities that heighten risk of exposure to and death from COVID-19. Goldman noted that "although Whites experienced a larger drop in life expectancy between 2020 and 2021 than the Black and Latino populations, resulting in a very modest reduction in racial and ethnic differences, the disparities in life expectancy loss since the start of the pandemic remain regrettably and unacceptably large."

Although COVID-19 is the primary cause of continued life expectancy reductions in 2021, "increases in other causes of death relative to pre-pandemic levels contribute to these life expectancy declines," the authors wrote. The pandemic appears to have played a role in the increase of drug overdose deaths in 2020 and 2021, and increased mortality from conditions such as heart disease or diabetes may be attributable to complications of COVID-19 infections and/or health care shortages and delays.

This week the CDC also released provisional estimates of life expectancy in 2021. "We did not
have access to the same level of detailed data as the CDC, so we arrived at slightly different life expectancy estimates," Andrasfay said. "Despite these differences, our results are largely in agreement in that we find continued life expectancy reductions in 2021 and persistent racial and ethnic disparities."

"COVID-19 mortality has been lower in the first half of 2022 compared to 2021, so if there is a successful booster campaign in the fall and the dominant strains have lower fatality rates than previous variants, it is possible that 2022 life expectancy may improve relative to 2021, though it is unlikely to return to levels seen prior to 2020," she added. "However, what happens with 2022 life expectancy will ultimately depend on this coming fall and winter."


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