

SNAPSHOT

U.S. life expectancy gap widens

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Researchers found that the gap in life expectancy has increased over the past two decades across racial, ethnic, and socio-economic groups in the United States. *Harvard Public Health* spoke with lead author Laura Dwyer-Lindgren, associate professor of health metrics sciences at the Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington.

Why study this topic?

The United States has health disparities along many different dimensions. About 20 years ago, a paper called “[Eight Americas](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/16389119/) (<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/16389119/>)” approached this problem by studying groups of people in the U.S. based on where they lived, their racial identity, and their income. We wanted to revive that approach and look at how life expectancy disparities have evolved since 2000.

What did you find?

We had about a 13-year gap in life expectancy across the U.S. groupings in 2000, and by 2010, that gap had grown, spanning 71.2 years to 85.2 years. The decade from 2010 to 2019 was not good for life expectancy in the United States. It really stagnated. In the end, the gap spanned almost 16

years, from 70.2 to 86 years. American Indian and Alaska Native populations had the shortest life expectancies and Asian American populations had the longest. All U.S. groups saw declines in life expectancy during [the COVID-19 years we measured, 2020 and 2021], but the size of the declines really varied.

What would you like to see happen based on the study's results?

I do not think there is one solution to this problem, but I would like to see much more attention given to why the United States is so far behind other high-income countries. Research points toward fundamental causes such as income, education, employment opportunities, and housing conditions. There is a little bit of risk in focusing on specific causes of death because it can obscure these society-wide features that are probably responsible.

—*Sarah Muthler*

(Study in *The Lancet* ([https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(24\)01495-8/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(24)01495-8/fulltext)), December 2024)
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