Why is US life expectancy falling behind?

Coming in last
The United States now ranks near the bottom of life expectancy rankings, when compared to other high income countries. In a 2018 paper in *The BMJ*, authors Ho and Hendi compared life expectancy trends from 1990 to 2015 in 18 countries commonly used in cross national comparisons. These countries have all achieved high levels of development, and underwent changes in mortality associated with that development at roughly the same time. They also have large enough populations to produce reliable estimates of mortality.

Before their time
Ho and Hendi observed recent widespread life expectancy declines across the 18 high income countries. The decline in most countries was concentrated at ages ≥65, and mostly attributable to diseases related to a severe influenza season. However, the US decline was largely concentrated at younger ages, particularly those in their 20s and 30s, and attributable to external causes like drug overdose.

Who is affected?
Further detail is provided by Woolf et al, in their simultaneously published paper in *The BMJ*. They compared midlife mortality patterns in the US across racial and ethnic groups from 1999 to 2016. Among people aged 25-64 years, increases in mortality rates have been observed in all groups in recent years.

Cause for concern
Within these groups, there are a variety of different reasons for the observed changes in mortality. Changes were driven not only by external causes of death, but also by a variety of organ diseases and increases in mortality from mental and behavioral disorders.

Recent trends in life expectancy across high income countries: retrospective observational study
Jessica Y Ho and Arun S Hendi

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