US life expectancy fell in 2008

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Life expectancy fell slightly in the United States in 2008 for the first time since 2004. According to a report by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Health Statistics released Thursday, US life expectance fell to 77.8 years in 2008, from 77.9 years in 2007.

The CDC's National Vital Statistics Report is based on death records comprising more than 99 percent of the demographic and medical files of all deaths in the US in 2008. It showed a decrease in life expectancy for both men and women, falling by about one-tenth of a year from 2007 to 2008, or the equivalent of about a month. It went from 80.4 to 80.3 years for females; 75.4 to 75.3 years for males.

Life expectancy for white women in 2008 was the highest, 80.6 years, down 0.2 since 2007; followed by black women at 76.8 years, unchanged since 2007. White men born in 2008 could expect to live to 75.7 years, down 0.2 since 2007. Life expectancy for black men was the lowest, although rising by 0.2 over 2007 to 70.2 years in 2008, an all-time high.

The drop in US life expectancy measured by the report is the first decline since 2004. Although small, any drop in life expectancy is a retrograde development, and the decline observed by the CDC report almost certainly corresponds to rising levels of social inequality, poverty, and lack of access to health care as a result of the recession.

The top leading causes of death in 2008, in descending order, were (1) heart disease; (2) cancers; (3) chronic lower respiratory diseases (CLRS), such as asthma, bronchitis, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and emphysema; (4) stroke; and (5) unintentional injuries and accidents.

Heart disease and cancer remain the two top killers in the US, accounting for 48 percent of all deaths. While death rates from stroke fell 3.8 percent from 2008 to 2007, deaths from CLRS rose sharply, by 7.8 percent, according to the report.

It is notable that deaths from accidents fell significantly in 2008, by 3.5 percent, which may be related to a decrease in car accidents as less people commute to work due to rising unemployment. The CDC report showed that 39,831 deaths in 2008 could be attributed to motor vehicle accidents, compared to 43,945 deaths in 2007.

Life expectancy in the United States consistently ranks behind rates in Europe. According to figures from the CIA World Factbook, the US, with an estimated life expectancy of 78.11 in 2009, came in 50th of 223 countries listed. Those European states with higher life expectancies included France, Sweden, Italy, Spain, Greece, Britain, the Netherlands, Denmark, Bosnia and Herzegovina, among many others.

On a world scale, Americans born in 2008 could also expect to live shorter lives than people in Japan, Australia, Israel, South Korea, New Zealand, Singapore and Hong Kong.

Although the gap between the life expectancy of white and black Americans tightened slightly in 2008, by 0.2 years, the difference is still 4.6 years. Life expectancy for black American men rose to 70.2 years in 2008, still more than five years less than US men overall.

While dropping slightly since 2007, the infant mortality rate for African-Americans stood at 13.24 deaths before age one for every 1,000 live births in 2008, 2.3 times the 5.54 rate for white infants.

The overall US infant mortality rate stood at 6.59 in 2008, as measured by the CDC report. The CIA World Factbook estimates the 2010 US infant mortality rate at 6.14 deaths out of 1,000 live births, significantly higher than its 2010 estimate for the European Union as a whole, 5.61 deaths. The US infant mortality rate is only slightly lower than that in Croatia, Belarus, Lithuania, Serbia or Poland.

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