

Dire warning from CDC on US life expectancy: “A drop of two to three years for 2020 isn’t out of the question”

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23 December 2020

As of Thursday evening, the United States had seen more than 18 million cases of the coronavirus and more than 330,000 had died from the disease, according to the Worldometer web site. These grim statistics show that 2020 is on track to be the deadliest year in US history, with deaths topping three million for the first time.

In addition, the US could see a decline of two to three years in life expectancy, the steepest drop since World War II. The drive on the part of the Trump administration, aided by both big business parties, to keep factories and schools open and stock prices soaring is directly responsible for hundreds of thousands of deaths. These deaths could have been prevented by closing all non-essential businesses and schools to contain the virus and allocating the funds needed to cover the lost earnings of laid-off workers and small businesses impacted by the pandemic. Instead, at the behest of the corporate-financial oligarchy, Congress has sanctioned trillions of dollars in handouts and subsidies to the banks and big corporations.

Life expectancy in the US increased nominally in 2018 and 2019 after three consecutive years of declines. However, in January, before the widespread impact of the coronavirus, the United Nations projected that US life expectancy in 2020 would still lag behind that of 35 other nations, including much of Europe.

Data released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Tuesday showed that life expectancy rose to 78.8 years in 2019, an increase of one-tenth of a year. The main drivers of the increase were lower death rates from heart disease and cancer, the number one and number two causes of death, respectively.

Robert Anderson, head of the CDC’s National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), said Tuesday that he had performed a simple simulation based on mortality figures through August and found that life expectancy had already declined by about one-and-a-half years. Anderson said he expects that life expectancy could fall by two or three years for the full year. “We’ve had a lot of deaths added since August,” he said, “so I think a drop of two to three years for 2020 isn’t out of the question.”

The US hasn’t seen a decline in life of expectancy of this magnitude since 1943, when World War II pushed that metric down by 2.9 years. The largest drop was in 1918, when tens of thousands of US soldiers died in World War I and the so-called Spanish Flu claimed an estimated 675,000 lives. Life expectancy that year fell by 11.8 years compared to 1917. This large decline was in part due to the particularly high death rate from the flu among children, whose deaths disproportionately drive down life expectancy.

More than 2.85 million people died in the US last year, the highest number on record. This included about 659,000 deaths from heart disease, nearly 600,000 from cancer and about 173,000 from accidents (including drug overdoses). COVID-19 is now poised to become the third leading cause of death in 2020. There were some periods during the year when the coronavirus was the number one killer.

Other types of deaths have increased alongside the pandemic. Early this year, a surge in pneumonia deaths may have actually been COVID-19 deaths that were not recognized as such.

NCHS’s Anderson said there has also been an unexpected number of deaths from certain types of

heart and circulatory disease, diabetes and dementia. These may also be related to COVID-19, with the virus weakening patients already suffering from other diseases.

It is also likely that the care of these vulnerable patients was compromised due to the overwhelming of hospitals with coronavirus patients. Patients have also been less likely to seek treatment out of fear of contracting the virus at a hospital.

The deaths of hundreds of thousands of Americans has also been accompanied by a sharp rise in drug overdose deaths. The CDC reports that there were 81,000 drug overdose deaths in the 12 months ending May, the highest number on record in a one-year period.

Substance abuse experts point to the disruption of in-person treatment and recovery services as a factor. The pandemic has left many people living on their own and at greater risk of overdosing without the help of friends or family members who could seek emergency help or administer overdose-reversing medication.

Another key to the increase in overdose deaths is the disruption of supply for drug dealers, who are increasingly turning to fentanyl, which is both cheaper and deadlier, and mixing it into heroin, cocaine and methamphetamines.

Illicitly manufactured fentanyl appears to be the primary driver of this increase in deaths, according to the CDC. The role of fentanyl in overdose deaths increased by a staggering 38.4 percent from the 12-month period leading up to June 2019 compared to the 12-month period leading up to May 2020. Overdose deaths involving cocaine increased by 26.5 percent.

A sharp rise in mental health issues among adults has also been seen. The CDC reports that four in 10 US adults say they've had at least one mental health event this year. A CDC study in late June found that 40 percent of adults struggled with mental health or substance abuse. Thirty-one percent reported anxiety or depression; 13 percent started or increased substance abuse; 26 percent reported trauma or stress-related disorder symptoms; and 11 percent said they seriously considered suicide.

The *Guardian* reports that Kenneth M. Johnson of the University of New Hampshire, a demographer, projects that the pandemic will cause deaths to outpace births in more than half of US counties this year for the first

time in history. "We've got people dying and hospital rooms jammed," Johnson said. "Who's going to want to have a baby?"

Plunging life expectancy, increases in heart disease, diabetes and dementia; a sharp rise in drug overdose deaths; increased mental health issues and suicide; decreased birth rates—this misery is not a natural phenomenon. The pandemic's horrific death toll tells only part of the story. Its horror has seeped into every facet of American life.

The incoming Biden administration has pledged to continue the drive to open schools and "not shut down the economy." The \$900 billion coronavirus relief bill adopted by Congress on Monday is totally inadequate to meet the vast social needs of the population in the pandemic.

It offers a pittance at best to alleviate the poverty, hunger, joblessness and housing insecurity faced by millions of workers and their families. It will not pay for workers to stay home from unsafe factories, or technology to provide high-quality at-home learning for their children. Nor will it provide increased funds for hospitals to treat patients suffering from heart attacks and strokes, or provide treatment and counseling for the millions suffering in isolation with substance abuse issues.

The projected two- to three-year decline in US life expectancy is part of the colossal social cost of an economic and political system focused on the stock market and corporate profits at the expense of workers' very lives.

Only the working class, organized as an independent political force, fighting for the closure of nonessential workplaces and schools, with full income protection for workers and small businesses, can provide a way forward in opposition to the ruling elite's policy of death and suffering.



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