

# Pandemic slashed US life expectancy by 1.5 years in 2020

Trévon Austin  
21 July 2021

Life expectancy in the US plummeted by 1.5 years in 2020, according to a report released this week by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), marking the largest one-year drop since 1943, when young men were dying every day on the battlefields of World War II. The precipitous decline is a continuation and acceleration of a downward trend in US mortality since 2015.

Life expectancy is defined as an estimate of the average number of years a person born in a given year may expect to live. The metric does not precisely predict actual life span, instead being a measure of a society's general health. The drastic fall in 2020 reflects the accelerating decay of American society under the pressure of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has been allowed to run rampant under a bipartisan "herd immunity" policy, resulting in more than 35 million infections and over 625,000 deaths so far.

According to the report, if an American child were born today and lived his or her entire life under the conditions of 2020, the child would be expected to live 77.3 years, down from 78.8 in 2019. Life expectancy for American males declined 1.8 years from 2019 to 2020, while life expectancy for American women dropped by 1.2 years from 2019. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, US life expectancy has not been so low since 2003.

The report estimated COVID-19 deaths contributed to approximately 74 percent of the decline in life expectancy. Researchers discovered disparities among racial groups, with the virus being responsible for 90 percent of the decline in life expectancy among Latinos, 68 percent among the non-Hispanic white population and about 59 percent among the non-Hispanic black population. There was no data on Asian Americans or other racial groups in the report.

According to CDC data, black Americans are hospitalized with COVID-19 at 2.9 times the rate of white Americans and die at two times the rate. Nonwhite Hispanics are hospitalized at 2.8 times the rate and die at 2.3 times the rate of white Americans. Federal data indicates life expectancy for black Americans has not fallen so much since the mid-1930s amid the Great Depression. While health officials have not recorded Hispanic life expectancy as far back, the 2020 decline was the largest recorded year-to-year drop.

The report's authors and bourgeois publications, such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, were quick to attribute the discrepancy among racial groups to "systemic racism" inherent in American society. In reality, these differences reflect the disproportionate impact the pandemic has had on the working class and poor. Minorities are more likely to be employed in jobs deemed "essential" by the ruling class and forced to expose themselves to the deadly disease.

Poor workers more commonly depend on public transportation, risking exposure with every outing, or live in multigenerational homes in cramped conditions more conducive to spreading the virus. Experts say it is also possible Hispanics are disproportionately affected because many are undocumented and ineligible for federal pandemic relief or unemployment benefits. Additionally, there are obstacles related to accessing coronavirus tests, treatments and vaccines for the undocumented.

The overall decline in life expectancy reflects the pandemic's massive toll on American society and its broader impacts on social health, including a record-high number of deaths from drug overdoses and other so-called deaths of despair. In 2020, more than 93,000

Americans died from drug overdoses. This staggering figure is more than 10 times the estimated 9,000 overdose deaths recorded by the CDC in 1988, around the height of the crack epidemic.

Experts state approximately 11 percent of last year's decline stems from accidents or unintentional injuries. Drug overdose deaths, which spiked 30 percent during the pandemic, made up about one-third of unintentional injuries in 2020. The report also noted an increase in homicides and diabetes, which together accounted for about 5.5 percent of the decrease in life expectancy. Chronic liver disease and cirrhosis, which suggest growing alcohol abuse, accounted for nearly 2.5 percent of the decrease.

These “deaths of despair” cannot be separated from the broader impact of the pandemic. With hospitals overwhelmed with coronavirus patients, addiction treatment and other mental health programs have been cut when they are needed most, due to the social isolation and financially insecurity spawned by the pandemic. The stress and depression caused by job loss, housing insecurity, and the pandemic itself have exacerbated issues with substance abuse. According to the American Medical Association, more than 40 states have recorded increases in opioid-related deaths since the pandemic began.

Researchers noted even if COVID-19 deaths decline in 2021, the socio-economic effects of the pandemic will linger for years. A study last month from the Virginia Commonwealth University found the pandemic widened the life expectancy gap between the US and 16 other high-income countries. Researchers found the gap increased from 3.05 years in 2018 to 4.69 years in 2020.

More than 225,000 Americans have died from the coronavirus so far this year—a number expected to increase significantly as deadly variants continue to spread among the population. This massive loss in life is not simply a result of the deadly disease but the consequence of a deliberate policy pursued by capitalist governments across the globe.

Since the onset of the pandemic, governments around the world responded to the greatest public health emergency in a century by pumping trillions into the stock markets and corporations to prop up world capitalism. Determined to extract this money from the working-class, governments have forced workers into

unsafe plants and factories to continue production. The ruling classes of the world allowed the virus to spread and have even welcomed its deadly rampage in pursuit of the disastrous “herd immunity” policy.

The entire response to the pandemic has been guided by the prerogatives of the wealthiest sections of society. The world's billionaires added more than \$4 trillion to their collective wealth in the first year of the pandemic. Over the same period, nearly 3 million people succumbed to the virus. The victims include both the young and old and are disproportionately working class and poor.

The pandemic has laid bare the grim reality of capitalism, which subordinates all aspects of social life to the pursuit of profit. Furthermore, it demonstrates the inability of the capitalist system to deal with a global crisis.

The working class must counter the capitalist policy of misery and mass death with socialist program that places the interests of the vast majority of the population at its center. The only way forward requires the independent political intervention of the working class, mobilized as an international social force to bring a pandemic to an end and save millions of lives.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**