

US life expectancy drops to lowest level since 1996

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Life expectancy in the United States decreased for the second year in a row in 2021, according to final mortality data released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The death rate for the population increased by 5.3 percent above 2020, leading to a decline in life expectancy from 77 years to 76.4 years, the lowest level since 1996.

The progress of a quarter-century of medical advances has essentially been wiped out in just two years.

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, life expectancy in the US has fallen by 2.4 years total. The decrease of a .6 year in 2021 mounts on top of the loss of 1.8 years recorded in 2020.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted when the CDC's preliminary mortality report was issued in August, the figures constitute "a damning indictment of the homicidal response to the pandemic that has characterized the Trump and Biden administrations. Biden—who was elected in large part because of popular revulsion at Trump's callous and anti-scientific response to COVID-19 and who was armed with effective vaccines from the beginning of his term—stands thoroughly exposed."

Indeed, despite the availability of lifesaving COVID-19 vaccines and Democratic control of the White House and Congress, 2021 was far deadlier than 2020. According to CDC data, total US deaths increased by 80,502 compared to 2020, above all, due to the continuing pandemic.

Citing CDC statistician Kenneth Kochanek, NPR notes that COVID-19 accounted for nearly 60 percent of the decline in life expectancy in 2021. The total number of deaths in which COVID-19 was the underlying cause increased by 18.8 percent, from 350,831 in 2020 to 416,893 in 2021. It remained the third leading cause of death in 2021 following heart disease and cancer.

In addition to COVID-19, death rates also increased for eight of the 10 leading causes of death. These include

unintentional injuries (which increased 12.3 percent), a category which includes the soaring rates of drug overdose; chronic liver disease and cirrhosis (which increased 9.0 percent); kidney disease (which increased 7.1 percent) and stroke (which increased 5.9 percent).

Both influenza and pneumonia dropped from the top 10 causes of death in 2021, likely due to the limited mitigation measures that were still in place last year but which have since been abandoned. As the WSWS correctly warned, with the ending of remaining COVID-19 mitigations, viruses such as influenza would be able to freely circulate and deaths from these illnesses could easily climb again.

Data suggests this is exactly what is taking place. The CDC currently estimates there have been between 12,000 and 35,000 influenza deaths so far this season, compared to an estimated 5,000 deaths last flu season. In late November, weekly influenza cases reached the highest level on record.

One of the most alarming aspects of the report is the fact that death rates are increasing in every age group above one year old. Among ages 1-4, the death rate increased by 10.1 percent. Adults aged 35-44 experienced the largest increase in the death rate at 16.1 percent.

Should these trends continue, a child born in the US today is expected to live a shorter life than his or her grandparents. The CDC report estimates that the average 65 year old in America will live another 18.4 years, bringing them to age 83.4 years old, compared to the 76.4 years now expected at birth.

According to a study published this October in the journal *Nature Human Behavior*, increasing mortality among the younger population is the leading cause of the US's declining life expectancy. The study examined life expectancy in 29 countries throughout the pandemic. Speaking to the *USA Today*, the authors noted that the US was the only country that had continued life expectancy

losses in 2021 attributed to increasing mortality in people under 60. They found that “more than half of the loss in U.S. life expectancy since the start of the pandemic” was due to increasing mortality in this age group.

While COVID-19 has greatly accelerated this regressive trend in one of the most significant indices of population health, the process predated the pandemic, beginning nearly a decade ago. A report by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health released earlier this month notes that US life expectancy steadily increased until 2014, peaking at 78.9 years, then stagnated between 2015-2019 before turning sharply down in 2020.

A major factor driving down life expectancy before the pandemic was the staggering rise in “deaths of despair,” driven mainly by rising social inequality. These include fatal drug overdoses, which doubled between 2014 and 2021 and killed over 106,000 people last year. During this same period, gun-related homicides and suicides rose by 44 percent, and alcohol-related liver disease rose by 63 percent. Teen suicides (ages 13-19) rose by 29 percent.

As was true in the preliminary CDC report in August, absent from the final report is any analysis of the relationship between socioeconomic status and life expectancy. Data are presented for race and gender but not class. However, multiple studies during the pandemic have strongly associated income and socioeconomic status with life expectancy, with the gap between the economic elite and the working class widening dramatically in the last three years across racial and gender groups.

Adding to this, the CDC data refutes the notion that the pandemic’s impact is primarily driven by race. After non-Hispanic, American Indian or Alaskan Native females, the largest increase in death rates in 2021 occurred in non-Hispanic white males, followed by non-Hispanic white females. Death rates decreased last year among Hispanic males and non-Hispanic black males.

Though the United States saw a decline in COVID-19 deaths in 2022 compared to the two previous years of the pandemic, over 250,000 Americans have needlessly died so far this year, according to Our World in Data, while cases and hospitalizations have been rising since November. Globally, *The Economist’s* excess death estimate indicates that around 5 million people died from COVID-19 in 2022.

Since the beginning of 2022, the Biden administration has overseen the systematic dismantling of testing, reporting and what else remained of the mitigation measures that were in place during the first two years of

the pandemic. The CDC played a central role in this, including with the agency’s guidelines released in August that recommended quarantine, isolation and testing be discontinued in most settings, including schools. This agenda has been justified under the false claim that the population must “learn to live with” COVID-19 forever.

Now, the third year of the pandemic is drawing to a close with one of the most horrific developments to date—the abandonment of Zero-COVID by the Chinese Communist Party government and its rapid embrace of “herd immunity.” In addition to the immediate catastrophe that is unfolding in China, one-sixth of the world’s population is being exposed to the virus for the first time, creating conditions for the virus to mutate into even more transmissible, and potentially more virulent, variants which will spread quickly around the world. As the WSWS commented in a recent perspective, a whole new stage in the pandemic is now beginning.

The decline in life expectancy signifies that a terrible social regression is occurring in the United States. Despite continuous advances in scientific and medical knowledge and tools, society in the wealthiest country is moving backward. The capitalist system, under which human life is subordinated to private profit, can neither answer this indictment nor reverse course. On the contrary, capitalist governments worldwide have consciously adopted policies that they know will kill masses of their own citizens in the pursuit of profit.

It is the international working class which has the power to reverse this regression, end the pandemic and eradicate social inequality. This requires not pleas to the capitalists but a revolutionary struggle to abolish the capitalist profit system and rebuild the world on socialist foundations, with a globally planned economy and public health system whose primary goal is to protect and improve human life.



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