

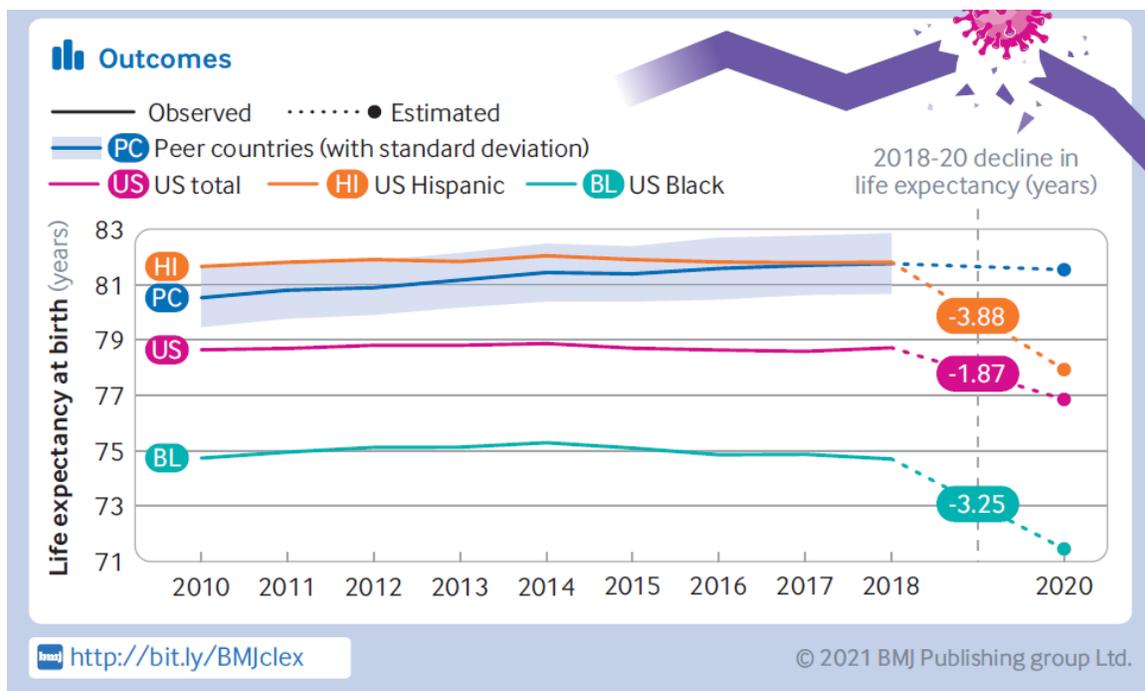
U.S. Life Expectancies Plummeted in 2020

Americans of a certain age will remember banter between the great Johnny Carson, and his “sidekick” Ed McMahon. In response to a statement by Carson about how something wasn’t very good, McMahon would ask “how bad was it, Johnny?” Johnny would respond, “it was so bad that ...”. Laughter would generally ensue.

Well, OK, we know that 2020 was a bad year for health because of COVID-19. “How bad was it, YB?”

YB: It was so bad that life expectancies at birth fell in the United States by 1.87 years between 2018 and 2020 (see Wolf, Masters, and Aron, 2021). Exactly how bad is that? Life expectancy in the United State rose by a total of 0.08 years from 2010 to 2018. It fell by *more than 20 times* that much between 2018 and 2020.

For subgroups, it was even worse. As one can see in the graphic below, it fell by 3.88 years for US Hispanics, and by 3.25 years (from a lower base) for US Blacks. Compared with 16 “peer countries” for the same period (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Israel, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, South Korea, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan, and the United Kingdom), the US aggregate fall of 1.87 years was over eight times as large (1.87 v. 0.22 years).



Scholars of the HIV/AIDs era will remember that in many countries of sub-Saharan Africa, including South Africa, Lesotho, Botswana, and Zimbabwe, in

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the 1990s and 2000s, life expectancies for those with HIV/AIDS were 15 or more years lower than for those without, and the incidence of HIV/AIDS was extraordinarily high in those countries. In economic terms, the loss of human capital was staggering, and in the early 2020s many of these countries have not yet recovered from the HIV/AIDS carnage of the last several decades.

It would not surprise health professionals that the calculated U.S. expected lifespan is three to four years lower than the peer countries. The difference is probably even more because Japan was excluded from the calculation, due to inadequate data, and Japanese longevity rates far outpace ours. The losses were worse for Black Americans, and for Hispanic Americans, whose numbers converged on the overall aggregate, after being close to three years higher for most of the decade. Men's life expectancies fell (from a lower base) more than women's life expectancies.

So, 2020 was a bad year. It was really bad for Hispanic and Black Americans. It was also particularly bad for younger Americans because the heightened death rates at older ages play out for longer. While a large number of older (over 65) Americans died of COVID-19, their deaths had a smaller impact, because they were already much closer to death. That is how the statistics work.

YB has calculated economic losses several times in the past 15 months, so he will refrain here. The losses from the loss of longevity were large, and they are lasting. 2020 was bad.

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Reference

Woolf, SH, RK Masters, and LY Aron, Effect of the covid-19 pandemic in 2020 on life expectancy across populations in the USA and other high income countries: simulations of provisional mortality data, *BMJ* 2021;373:n1343
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n1343>