

Forbes



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BUSINESS | 6/16/2011 @ 12:55PM | 917 views

Life Expectancy Is Falling For U.S. Women

Or at least that's what we're told by the LA Times, that life expectancy for women in certain parts of the US is falling. This is almost unprecedented in an advanced nation outside of a major epidemic so something must be going seriously wrong, [right](#)?

“ Women in large swaths of the U.S. are dying younger than they were a generation ago, reversing nearly a century of progress in public health and underscoring the rising toll of smoking and record [obesity](#).

Well, actually, maybe not.

I've no doubt that the two points they make, about the high smoking rates among women in the US in the 50s and 60s, and the current prevalence of obesity do make a difference.

But I'm equally certain that there's an error in the way that the figures have been compiled.

For the way that we're being asked to look at it is these are the ages of death of the people who were born in this place for that is what we generally take life span to mean. But that isn't actually what is being measured. What is being measured is the average age of death among women in these places. A crucially different point for people do in fact move around. Even, sometimes, out of the county and can you believe it, state?

Think of it this way. If we looked at everyone born in one county and then measured their age of death then we would know the average lifespan of those born in that county. However, if people are free to move around then by measuring the age of death in that county we would be measuring the average age of death of those who either stayed in the county until they died or moved into the county before they died.

What makes me think that this hasn't been adjusted for is this point:

“ Women in southwest Florida’s Collier County, for example, live to be 86 on average, the highest in the nation. Collier is among a cluster of counties in South Florida with high life expectancies.

What’s the first thing you think of when you think of South Florida? Well, for me, as a foreigner, it’s the propensity of people to retire there. To live their lives, work their jobs, raise their children, elsewhere, then move to Florida in their late 60s. If we look at Collier County we see that [24% or so are over 65](#): as opposed to only [12.9% in the US as a whole](#).

Yup, sure does sound like there’s a little bit of retirement community going on down there.

So, in part, what we’re measuring in Collier County is (note, in part!) the lifespan of those who have already reached 65, retirement age, and are healthy enough and rich enough to be happy to move. Average age of death among those who manage to reach 65 is, unsurprisingly, higher than the average age of death of the whole population. And there’s the corollary: in other, non-retirement type places, we’re measuring the age at death of those who didn’t live long enough to retire or those who did but decided not to move or didn’t feel rich enough (and poverty is a good guide to a shorter life) or well enough to do so.

Now I don’t actually think that this would explain it all: or rather, I’m not confident enough to insist that this explains it all. But it is possible, at least, that this decline of lifespans in certain areas, and increasing gap in age at death, is explained purely and solely by migration of the elderly.

Call it the Golden Girls effect if you like: which is about the only other thing this foreigner can remember about Florida.

H/T [Marginal Revolution](#).

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