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LONGEVITY

U.S. Life Expectancy Lags, Slips in Women

By Alice Park | June 15, 2011 | [Add a Comment](#)

Americans aren't living as long as they should, given the relatively sophisticated and expensive health care system in this country.

That's what the latest report from the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington shows. While some cohorts of Americans do continue to enjoy increases in life expectancy, populations in 80% of U.S. counties surveyed are not keeping pace with gains made by the countries with the 10 highest life expectancies.

Overall, U.S. women's life expectancy at birth was 81.3 years in 2007, a slip of 15 places in the worldwide ranking since 1987, from 20th to 35th. Women in Holmes County, Miss., which has the lowest life expectancy in the country, can expect to live 73.5 years — which was the average life span of women in the 10 longest-lived nations in 1957.

For men, the news is a little better: American men's average life expectancy at birth in 2007 was 76.7 years, which brought them up from 32nd place a decade earlier to No. 24 worldwide.

The report, which will be published in the journal *Population Health Metrics*, found that women in many parts of the U.S. are not living as long as they did even a generation ago. [Health.com reported:](#)

Since 1997, women's life expectancy has slipped or failed to rise in more than 850 counties (compared to just 84 counties for men), including 82% of the counties in Oklahoma, 66% in Tennessee, and 59% in Kentucky. In Mississippi, there are five counties where the life expectancy for women is on par with nations such as Honduras, El Salvador, and Peru.

The reason? One of the study's authors, Dr. Christopher Murray, notes that obesity, smoking and other risk factors associated with overweight such as high blood pressure may be playing a role. Poverty may be contributing as well, since obesity rates and poor eating habits tend to be higher among those who struggle to make a living.

Those dying the youngest, according to the report, live in poverty-stricken urban areas such as St. Louis and Baltimore. In contrast, wealthier Americans tend to live longer, surviving even longer than traditionally long-lived populations in Japan and Switzerland. Residents of Washington, D.C., and San Francisco boast among the highest life expectancies in the world, owing primarily to their healthy lifestyle and eating habits.

But income doesn't explain all of the differences in life expectancy between U.S. counties. The data also support the growing evidence that despite



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largely living in poverty, some immigrant populations tend to have relatively long life expectancies; nearly half of Los Angeles County’s residents are Hispanic immigrants, for instance, yet southern California counties retain respectable life expectancy rates.

That may be because immigrant groups have stronger social networks and are more likely than American-born residents to work physical jobs that promote better health. As Carmen Nevarez, former president of the American Public Health Association **told** the Los Angeles *Times*, in regard to immigrant groups in California: “These are not random people. They are the healthiest people who could get here.”

While the data show that some of the gains in U.S. life expectancy are eroding away, there were bright spots as well. The L.A. *Times* **noted**:

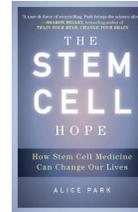
New York City, for example, which has pursued aggressive anti-smoking and anti-obesity campaigns, has among the higher life expectancies in the nation.

That proves that how you live can make a difference in how long you live.



Alice Park @aliceparkny

Alice Park is a staff writer at TIME and covers health, medicine, nutrition and fitness.



Park’s latest book is *The Stem Cell Hope: How Stem Cell Medicine Can Change Our Lives*.

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