

Life Expectancy

Life expectancy at birth is often used to appraise the overall health of a given population (NCHS, 2016a). Changes in life expectancy over time are commonly used to describe trends in mortality. Life expectancy is the average number of years at birth a person could expect to live if current mortality trends were to continue for the rest of that person's life.

This indicator is based on data from the National Vital Statistics System, which registers virtually all deaths and births nationwide. The temporal coverage of this indicator is from 1940 to 2014 and data are collected from all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

What the Data Show

Exhibit 1 presents the historical trends in life expectancy at birth for the entire population as well as by sex, race, and ethnicity between 1940 and 2014, showing an upward trend in life expectancy in the U.S. over time. Life expectancy at birth has increased throughout the 20th and now into the 21st century. The highest overall life expectancy of 78.8 years was recorded in 2012, and remained the same in 2013 and 2014.

For all races and ethnicities, life expectancy increased over time. For example, over the most recent 10-year data period, life expectancy increased for both males (75.0 years in 2005 to 76.4 years in 2014) and females (80.1 years in 2005 to 81.2 years in 2014). The gap in life expectancy between males and females was greatest (7.8 years) in 1975 and 1979. This gap has continued to slowly narrow through 2014, with life expectancy 4.8 years longer among females compared with males.

Reported life expectancy among blacks has also increased over time. For the most recent 10-year data period, life expectancy among blacks increased from 73.0 years in 2005 to 75.6 years in 2014. However, life expectancy in 2014 continued to be higher in whites (79.0 years) compared to blacks (75.6 years). Also in 2014, white females continued to have the highest life expectancy at 81.4 years, followed by black females at 78.4 years, white males at 76.7 years, and black males at 72.5 years. Life expectancy has also increased from 2006 to 2014 among Hispanics (80.3 to 81.8 years), non-Hispanic whites (78.2 to 78.8 years), and non-Hispanic blacks (73.1 to 75.2 years) (Exhibit 1).

Limitations

- Life expectancy at birth is strongly influenced by infant and child mortality rates. It is important to consider such influences when making comparisons among subgroups, as differences in life expectancy among certain subgroups may be mostly attributed to differences in prenatal care and other important determinants of infant and child mortality.
- Life table data presented for years prior to 1997, from 1997-1999, from 2000-2007, and from 2008 onward are based on slightly different methodologies. In most cases the differences are quite small, but it is important to note these changes.

Data Sources

The annual life expectancy data used for this indicator were obtained from the life tables report published by CDC's National Center for Health Statistics for 1940-1974 data (NCHS, 2014) and from life expectancy data in NCHS's Detailed Tables for the National Vital Statistics Report (NVSR) "Deaths: Final Data for 2014" for 1975-2014 (NCHS, 2016b). Life table methodologies used to calculate life expectancies are presented in each of these NCHS reports.

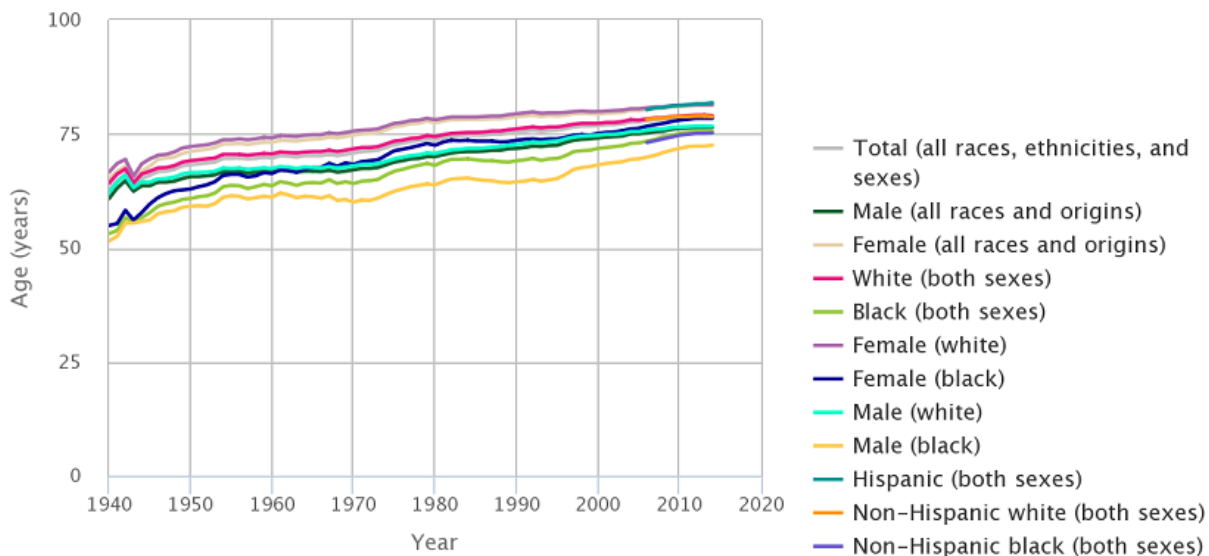
References

NCHS (National Center for Health Statistics). 2016a. Health, United States, 2015, with special feature on racial and ethnic health disparities. Hyattsville, MD. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hus/hus15.pdf> (PDF) (461 pp, 13.0MB).

NCHS. 2016b. Detailed tables for the National Vital Statistics Report, deaths: Final data for 2014. Table 8. National Vital Statistics Reports 65(4). https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr65/nvsr65_04.pdf (PDF) (122 pp, 4.4MB).

NCHS. 2014. United States life tables, 2010. National Vital Statistics Reports 63(7). Table 19. https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr63/nvsr63_07.pdf (PDF) (63 pp, 2.0MB).

Exhibit 1. Life expectancy at birth in the U.S. by sex, race, and ethnicity, 1940-2014



Life table data presented for years prior to 1997, from 1997-1999, from 2000-2007, and from 2008 onward were calculated using slightly different methodologies, and may have small differences from those previously published.

Life expectancies are not available for the individual categories of Hispanic (both sexes), non-Hispanic white (both sexes), and non-Hispanic black (both sexes) until 2006.

Information on the statistical significance of the trends in this exhibit is not presented here. For more information about uncertainty, variability, and statistical analysis, view the technical documentation for this indicator.

Data source: NCHS, 2014, 2016b