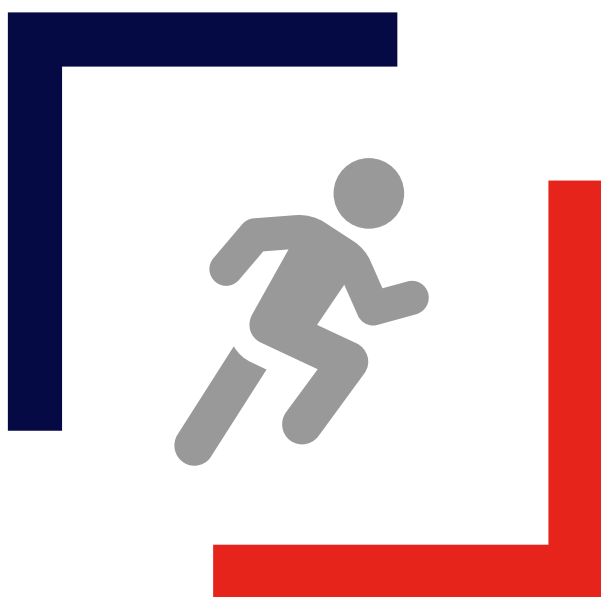


11

Section



Physical Health



Physical Health

Introduction. The importance of our physical health may seem self-evident. We value living long and prosperous lives. We also cannot achieve our potential if we are sick or unsafe. Physical health is also intricately connected to mental health and other measures of psychological well-being.

Summary of Results. Life expectancy, or the number of years we can expect to live, is the sole measure that the board agreed to include. (Suicides are related but are located in the Mental Health section.) Life expectancy was steadily improving for decades, even centuries, through 2014 but then, in almost unprecedented fashion, life expectancy actually declined. The main immediate causes behind this decline were drug overdoses and alcohol-related deaths among young people and the middle-aged, especially men. It is also increasingly recognized that adult physical health and life expectancy are shaped by the environment and experiences in early childhood. This decline in life expectancy began prior to the COVID pandemic, which produced an additional, though brief, decline. Life expectancy has since bounced back and is once again at an all-time high, though we remain in the middle of the pack of higher-income countries globally.



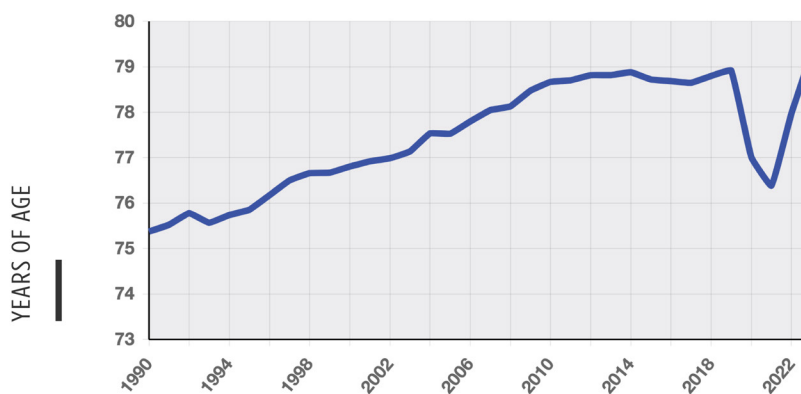
Life Expectancy

Specific measure: The number of years today's newborn children would live if subject to the mortality risks prevailing for the US population. (Source: UNICEF).

National Trend  % of countries the US outperforms **62%** Intl. Rank Trend 

Why did we include this measure? Life expectancy is a common and intuitive measure of how well we succeed in living long and healthy lives. When people die young, it reflects unhealthy habits, availability and quality of health care, and external threats to safety, such as violence. (We note that life expectancy is not simply the average age at which people are currently dying, which, for older Americans, is partially based on factors that occurred in the distant past. Life expectancy tells us how long we can expect today's newborns to live based on the risks that the rest of the population faces now.)

Figure 23: Life Expectancy (National Trend)



How does the US rank globally?

- **Specific Measure:** (Same as above.) (Source: Same as above).
- **Percentage of countries the US outperforms:** 62% (out of 117 countries)
- **International Rank Trend:** ↓

What do the data show? Life expectancy currently stands at 79.3 years, an all-time US high, though we remain in the middle of the pack of high-income countries globally. This figure was steadily improving for decades, even centuries, through 2014 but then actually declined. A sharp decline and rebound also occurred during the COVID pandemic. Currently, we fall just behind Panama, Albania, and the Czech Republic.

What might explain these patterns? The main immediate causes behind the pre-COVID decline were increased drug overdoses and alcohol-related deaths among young people and the middle-aged, especially men. During COVID, the US also had an unusually high “excess mortality” rate, which reflects both the direct and indirect effects on mortality from COVID.

Related Topics: Life expectancy is partly rooted in our experiences when we are growing up, such as low birthweight (see the Children and Families section) and poverty (see the Inequality section). Another cause of lower life expectancy is social isolation (see the Life Satisfaction section).

For more information about data sources and treatments, see the Data Notes section.

Board and Public Support for this Topic and Measures

	Support from Board	Support from Public
Physical Health (as topic)	100%	73%
Life Expectancy	100%	60%

Other Measures Considered: The board also considered, but did not include, other measures, including body mass index (BMI), physical disability rate, and a more subjective measure of self-reported general health. The public did not support any of these additional measures either, although the general health measure received the most support (67%).