



COVID-19 Isn't the Reason That US Life Expectancy Is Stagnating

Michael Bader, American University

US life expectancy has declined 1.5 years because of Covid-19, to 77.3 years, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said on July 21. This is a sobering statistic. But if it makes you worry that your life (or your children's lives) will be 1.5 years shorter, you can rest easy. As a demographer, I can assure you that's not what the CDC is saying, and the Covid-19 dip in life expectancy is less surprising and less important than many people might think.

Despite its misleading name, life expectancy does not predict how long anyone should expect to live. Life expectancy is a quick but incomplete measure of health, like gross domestic product for the economy or batting averages for baseball players. Like those numbers, its value does not come from predicting the future, but from explaining the past. It provides a way to track trends over time. In this case, it quantifies what we already knew: The US experienced a lot of deaths last year, more than any other year in recent memory. Another thing we already knew is that Black and Hispanic communities, which experienced a three-year decline in life expectancy, were especially hard hit.