

U.S. life expectancy drops, as Black and Latinos hardest hit

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Life expectancy down in U.S., especially in communities of color

Atlanta, February 19 (RHC)-- Life expectancy in the United States dropped a staggering one year during the first half of 2020 as COVID-19 caused its first wave of deaths that disproportionately affected people of color, according to a new report (PDF) by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released on Thursday.

"This is a huge decline," Robert Anderson, who oversees the numbers for the CDC, told the Associated Press. "You have to go back to World War II, the 1940s, to find a decline like this."

Life expectancy is how long a baby born today can expect to live, on average. In the first half of last year, that was 77.8 years for Americans overall, down one year from 78.8 in 2019. For males, it was 75.1 years and for females, 80.5 years.

Black Americans lost nearly three years, going from 74.7 to 72 years, and Hispanics, nearly two years from 81.8 to 79.9, CDC data shows. Non-Hispanic white people's overall life expectancy fell from 78.8 to 78.0, the report found. The difference in life expectancy between white and Black Americans increased from 4.1 to 6.0 years between 2019 and the first half of 2020, the CDC said.

"What is really quite striking in these numbers is that they only reflect the first half of the year ... I would expect that these numbers would only get worse," Dr Kirsten Bibbins-Domingo, a health equity researcher and dean at the University of California, San Francisco, told the Associated Press. "Black and Hispanic communities throughout the United States have borne the brunt of this pandemic," Bibbins-Domingo said.

These groups have also faced a greater economic toll. Latinos have faced hospitalisation rates 4.4 times higher than whites, while the unemployment rate for Latinos reached 14.5 percent in June, higher than during the Great Recession, research from nonpartisan think-tank Pew found.

By August, Black unemployment was at 13 percent, versus seven percent for whites, research nonprofit Rand found.

U.S. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said during a February 6 virtual meeting with the Black Chamber of Commerce that "African Americans were the first to lose their small businesses. They were the first to lose their jobs." Yellen went on to say: "We've seen early data that suggest Black workers will be the last rehired when the economy opens back up."

Members of Black and Latino communities still employed are more likely to be in front-line, low-wage jobs and living in crowded environments where it is easier for the virus to spread, and "there are stark, pre-existing health disparities in other conditions" that raise their risk of dying of COVID-19, Bibbins-Domingo said.

More needs to be done to distribute vaccines equitably, to improve working conditions and better protect minorities from infection, and to include them in economic relief measures, she said.

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