

Rising Midlife Mortality: Economic Causes or Effects

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NBER Meeting on Inequalities in Mortality in the US and Beyond

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Discussion by **David Molitor** (University of Illinois & NBER)

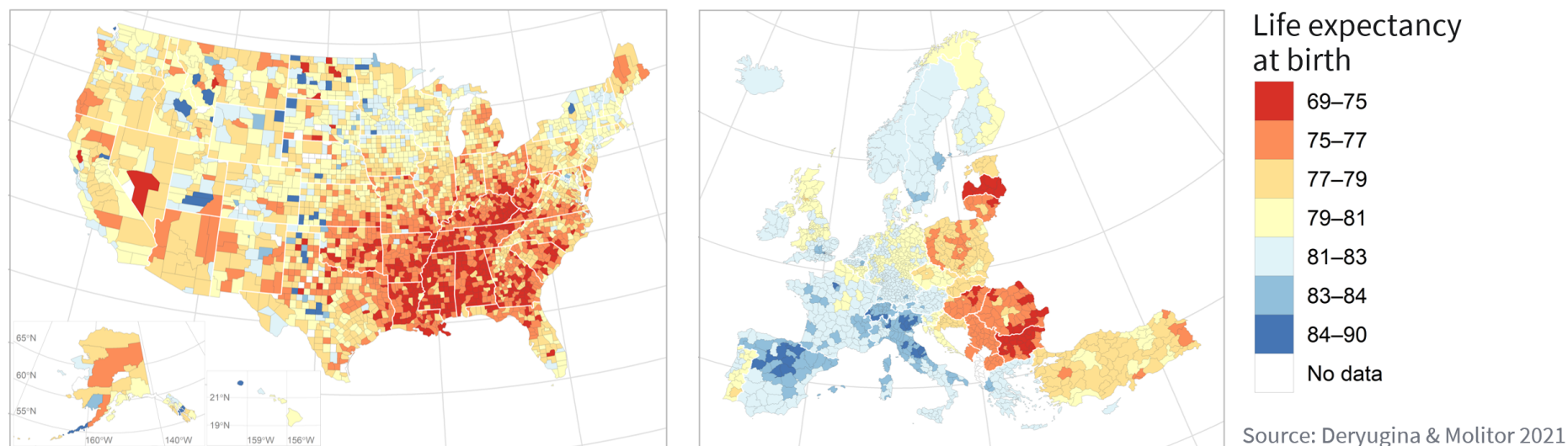
U.S. life expectancy woes: a call to action

- Life expectancy in the United States has
 - Risen more slowly than in peer countries for decades
 - Declined in recent years, as midlife mortality has increased
- Even as U.S. health care spending has outpaced peers
- Taken together, these patterns point toward
 - Inefficiencies in health care spending
 - More systemic problems that deteriorate health and increase spending
- The NASEM report presents a call to action for US public health reform

Drawing lessons from peers

- **United States vs. Europe**

European life expectancy is higher and more equitable than in US (Schwandt et al. 2021, Deryugina & Molitor 2021)



- **Comparisons across local regions within the US**

(Deryugina & Molitor 2020; Finkelstein, Gentzkow, & Williams 2021; **Hui Ding 2021**;
Finkelstein, Gentzkow, Li, & Williams 2021)

Mindset: 1% steps

- Enormous complexities in addressing rising mortality
- Analog to fixing inefficiencies in health care
- No “silver bullet”
- Accumulate steps solving individual problems at many levels



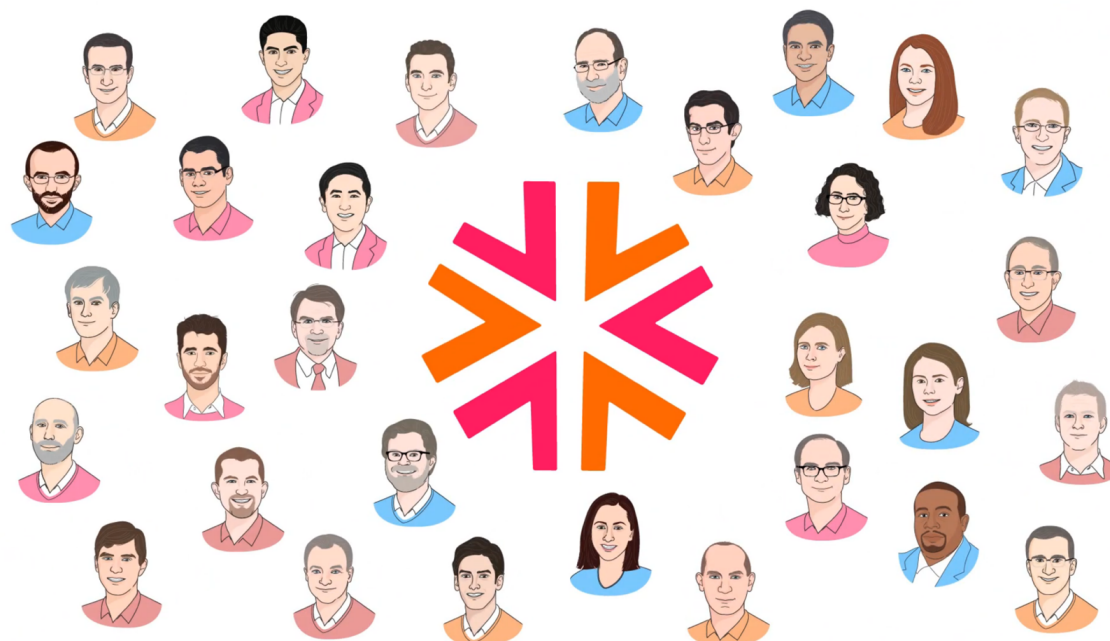
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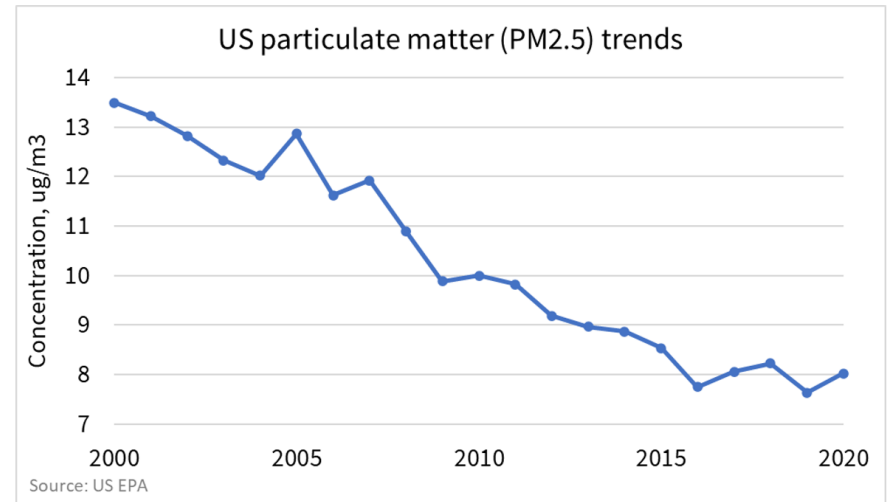


The goal of the 1% Steps for Health Care Reform Project is to shift the way we think about health care spending in the US and offer a roadmap to policy makers of tangible steps we as a country can take to lower the cost of health care in the US. We want to leverage leading scholars' work to identify discrete problems in the US health system and offer evidence-based steps for reform. We will continually update the project with new proposals that are based on the latest academic research.

The current recommendations would lower US health spending by 9% (with more to come as we add more policy briefs)

Example: environment and health

- Large improvements in US air quality (Currie & Walker 2019, Shapiro 2022)
- Progress has stalled (Clay, Muller, & Wang 2021)
- Can continue to find ways to reduce exposure
- Can also look for ways to increase resiliency when exposed —
“flatten the damage curve”
(Bailey & Goodman-Bacon 2015; Mullins & White 2020)



The New York Times

Supreme Court Considers Limiting E.P.A.'s Ability to Address Climate Change

Members of the court's conservative majority voiced skepticism that Congress had authorized the agency to decide what they said were major political and economic questions.

Feb. 28, 2022

Concluding thoughts

- Stalled progress in US life expectancy a cause for concern
- Larger and more equitable gains in peer countries demonstrate that US can do better
- Opportunities for research and policy to reinforce each other
 - Research findings can help guide policy design
 - Policy can improve data measurement and linkages
- Urgent and exciting area for future research