Understanding the Regional Divergence in Adult Mortality in the United States

Andrew Fenelon, PhD

University of Maryland, College Park
American Life Expectancy

Source: US Vital Statistics, National Center for Health Statistics
American Life Expectancy

Source: US Vital Statistics, National Center for Health Statistics
American Life Expectancy is in Peril

Life Expectancy in Years

Source: US Vital Statistics, National Center for Health Statistics
A Problem

The United States ranks 26th of 35 high-income countries with an average life expectancy of just 78.8 years.

Source: WHO Life Expectancy estimates from America’s Health Rankings, 2015
Some Context for the Problem

American exceptionalism
Life expectancy at birth, selected OECD countries

84 years
82
80
78
76
74
72
70
68

Australia
France
Canada
Finland
U.K.

U.S. (2016) 78.6

Source: OECD, U.S. Census Bureau
Adult Mortality by State

2004

Adult Mortality by State

2015

Source: CDC Wonder
Regional Divergence

• The regional divergence in American adult death rates has two major components
Regional Divergence

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1. The Southern Disadvantage
Regional Divergence

- The regional divergence in American adult death rates has two major components

1. The Southern Disadvantage

2. Exceptional East Coast improvements
The Southern Disadvantage

- A growing gap between the southern states and other US regions

- Particularly the Central South
  - Kentucky
  - Tennessee
  - Mississippi
  - Alabama
The Southern Disadvantage, Men

The Southern Disadvantage, Women

Data Visualization of Regional Divergence

- Population Reference Bureau
- Funded by the National Institute on Aging
- Michigan Center on the Demography of Aging

- https://assets.prb.org/prb17/mortality/index.html
The Southern Disadvantage

Source: Population Reference Bureau – Declines in Adult Death Rates Lag in the South
The Southern Disadvantage

Source: Population Reference Bureau – Declines in Adult Death Rates Lag in the South
The Southern Disadvantage

Death Rates for Older Women in 2015

Source: Population Reference Bureau – Declines in Adult Death Rates Lag in the South
The Southern Disadvantage

Source: Population Reference Bureau – Declines in Adult Death Rates Lag in the South
Tennessee

Source: Population Reference Bureau – Declines in Adult Death Rates Lag in the South
Arkansas

Source: Population Reference Bureau – Declines in Adult Death Rates Lag in the South
East Coast Improvement

Death Rates for Older Women in 1980
Per 100,000 Women Ages 55 and Older

Source: Population Reference Bureau – Declines in Adult Death Rates Lag in the South
East Coast Improvement

Death Rates for Older Women in 1980
Per 100,000 Women Ages 55 and Older
Lowest  Lower  Medium  Higher  Highest

Source: Population Reference Bureau – Declines in Adult Death Rates Lag in the South
East Coast Improvement

Source: Population Reference Bureau – Declines in Adult Death Rates Lag in the South
East Coast Improvement

Source: Population Reference Bureau – Declines in Adult Death Rates Lag in the South
Maryland

Source: Population Reference Bureau – Declines in Adult Death Rates Lag in the South
New York

Source: Population Reference Bureau – Declines in Adult Death Rates Lag in the South
Explaining the Divergence

The Role of Cigarette Smoking
Smoking-attributable mortality, men

Smoking-attributable mortality, women

A Caution about the Role of Smoking

- Cigarette smoking behavior is not just an individual decision.

- We should avoid blaming the victim, and instead seek to understand the underlying factors that contribute to smoking.
Summary

• The states with the highest adult mortality are largely in the South

• This pattern is relatively recent, and has occurred largely since 1980

• Mid-Atlantic states on the East Coast have seen exceptional mortality improvements
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Andrew Fenelon

afenelon@umd.edu

MPRC
Maryland Population Research Center
State Mortality 1965 and 2004

Mortality Rank 2000-2004

Mortality Rank 1965-69
State Mortality 1965 and 2004

Mortality Rank 2000-2004

Mortality Rank 1965-69
State Mortality 1965-2004

Mortality Rank 2000-2004

Mortality Rank 1965-69