

Health declining in Gen X and Gen Y, national study shows

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Credit: Petr Kratochvil/public domain

Recent generations show a worrying decline in health compared to their parents and grandparents when they were the same age, a new national study reveals.

Researchers found that, compared to previous generations, members of Generation X and Generation Y showed poorer physical health, higher levels of unhealthy behaviors such as [alcohol use](#) and smoking, and more depression and anxiety.

The results suggest the likelihood of higher levels of diseases and more deaths in [younger generations](#) than we have seen in the past, said Hui Zheng, lead author of the study and professor of sociology at The Ohio State University.

"The worsening health profiles we found in Gen X and Gen Y is alarming," Zheng said.

"If we don't find a way to slow this trend, we are potentially going to see an expansion of morbidity and mortality rates in the United States as these generations get older."

Zheng conducted the study with Paola Echave, a graduate student in sociology at Ohio State. The results were published online yesterday (March 18, 2021) in the *American Journal of Epidemiology*.

The researchers used data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey 1988-2016 (62,833 respondents) and the National Health Interview Survey 1997-2018 (625,221 respondents), both conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics.

To measure physical health, the researchers used eight markers of a condition called [metabolic syndrome](#), a constellation of risk factors for heart disease, stroke, kidney disease and diabetes. Some of the markers include waist circumference, blood pressure, cholesterol level and body mass index (BMI). They also used one marker of chronic inflammation, low urinary albumin, and one additional marker of renal function, creatinine clearance.

The researchers found that the measures of [physical health](#) have worsened from the baby boomer [generation](#) through Gen X (born 1965-80) and Gen Y (born 1981-99). For whites, increases in metabolic syndrome were the main culprit, while increases in chronic inflammation were seen most in Black Americans, particularly men.

"The declining health trends in recent generations is a shocking finding," Zheng said. "It suggests we may have a challenging health prospect in the United State in coming years."

Zheng said it is beyond the scope of the study to comprehensively explain the reasons behind the health decline. But the researchers did check two factors. They found smoking couldn't explain the decline. Obesity could help explain the increase in metabolic syndrome, but not the increases seen in chronic inflammation.

It wasn't just the overall health markers that were concerning for some members of the younger generations, Zheng said.

Results showed that levels of anxiety and depression have increased for each generation of whites from the War Babies generation (born 1943-45) through Gen Y.

While levels of these two mental health indicators did increase for Blacks up through the early baby boomers, the rate has been generally flat since then.

Health behaviors also show worrying trends.

The probability of heavy drinking has continuously increased across generations for whites and Black males, especially after late-Gen X (born 1973-80).

For whites and Blacks, the probability of using street drugs peaked at late boomers (born 1956-64), decreased afterward, then rose again for late-Gen X. For Hispanics, it has continuously increased since early-baby boomers.

Surprisingly, results suggest the probability of having ever smoked has continuously increased across generations for all groups.

How can this be true with other research showing a decline in overall cigarette consumption since the 1970s?

"One possibility is that people in older generations are quitting smoking in larger numbers while younger generations are more likely to start

smoking," Zheng said. "But we need further research to see if that is correct."

Zheng said these results may be just an early warning of what is to come.

"People in Gen X and Gen Y are still relatively young, so we may be underestimating their health problems," he said. "When they get older and chronic diseases become more prevalent, we'll have a better view of their [health](#) status."

Zheng noted that the United States has already seen recent decreases in life expectancy and increases in disability and morbidity.

"Our results suggest that without effective policy interventions, these disturbing trends won't be temporary, but a battle we'll have to continue to fight."

More information: Hui Zheng et al. Are Recent Cohorts Getting Worse? Trends in U.S. Adult Physiological Status, Mental Health, and Health Behaviors across a Century of Birth Cohorts, *American Journal of Epidemiology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1093/aje/kwab076](https://doi.org/10.1093/aje/kwab076)

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