Understanding American Health Trends: Deaths of Despair, and The Declining Health in Boomers to Millennials

Abstract

U.S. population health faces many challenges, including increasing morbidity and stagnating life expectancy. Against this backdrop, Professor Zheng will evaluate Case and Deaton's "Deaths of Despair" narrative and analyze the cohort health trend. The first study directly investigates despair as a determinant of death and the temporal variation and racial heterogeneity therein. This endeavor will elucidate (1) whether drug-, alcohol-, and suicide-related (DAS) deaths, which Case and Deaton and many other researchers have focused on, over- or under-estimate the impact of despair on mortality; and (2) whether the trend of DAS-related death is driven by despair and how this pattern may vary by race and ethnicity. The second study investigates whether the increasing morbidity and mortality among middle-aged and young-old Americans since the turn of the century has been extended to younger cohorts. Professor Zheng will explore conditions from birth to the present by investigating the nutrition, health, socioeconomic, psychological, and bio-behavioral factors throughout the life course across multiple birth cohorts. He probes both protective resources that might advantage recent cohorts and risk factors that might disadvantage recent cohorts. By doing so, we gain a preliminary but plausible account of what may or may not contribute to adverse cohort health trends, and what disadvantages may offset advantages to which recent cohorts are subjected. To wrap up, Professor Zheng will discuss the policy implications from these two studies.