Understanding the Closing of Racial Mortality Gaps

Raj Chetty, John N. Friedman, Nathan Hendren, and Michael Stepner

Abstract: How have racial gaps in mortality rates and life expectancy changed in the past 20 years, and what do these changes tell us about the underlying drivers of health inequality?

Previous work (e.g. Schwandt et al. PNAS 2021) document partial convergence between Black and white Americans, driven by faster growth in life expectancy for Black individuals and slower growth for white individuals (relative to Europeans). These estimates use the US Vital Statistics from NCHS, which do not include individual information on socio-economic status or other characteristics.

We propose to study these questions using the combination of IRS tax records and US Census data (accessed via the US Census Bureau). These data, which essentially permit analysis on the full US population, enable analysis at a granular level not possible in other survey-based datasets such as the National Longitudinal Mortality Study (NLMS). These data also include direct measures of race, in contrast to administrative datasets used in previous work studying health inequality for individuals with similar incomes (Chetty et al. JAMA 2016).

We will first study the extent to which racial differences in mortality exist between individuals with similar income, as well as other demographic characteristics. We will then exploit variation in mortality gaps across areas in the US – both between and within metro areas – to understand drivers of both the convergence in mortality as well as remaining gaps.

These results will speak directly to the distributional impacts of several SSA programs on the populations that they seek to serve. More generally, our analysis of the variation in the income-mortality gradient will inform our understanding of the structural factors that contribute to disparities by race and ethnicity.

This work will be complementary to other projects on health inequality in these data that are supported by NIH Grant U01 AG076557-01, which focuses primarily on 1) producing a public dataset of granular mortality estimates and 2) understanding the on-going effects of COVID-19 on health inequality in the US.

Funding: We request ½ of a 1/9th for each of the four co-authors, plus funding for half of the time of an RA who will be based at the NBER.

References

Chetty, Raj, Michael Stepner, Sarah Abraham, et al. (2016). "The Association Between Income and Life Expectancy, 2001-2014." *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Vol 315(16):1750–1766.

Schwandt, Hannes, Janet Currie, et al. (2021). "Inequality in mortality between Black and White Americans by age, place, and cause in comparison to Europe, 1990-2018." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* Vol. 118 (40) e2104684118.