

## **Social Security Administration: Health and Mortality of Retirement-Aged Workers**

*This research project investigates mortality and health of male Social Security covered workers who claim benefits at different retirement ages, and life expectancy of male Social Security covered workers aged 60 and older by socioeconomic status.*

### **Lead Agency:**

Social Security Administration

### **Agency Mission:**

To advance the economic security of the Nation's people through compassionate and vigilant leadership in shaping and managing America's Social Security programs.

### **Principal Investigator:**

Hilary Waldron  
500 E Street, S.W., 9<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Washington, D.C. 20254-0001

### **General Description:**

This research project investigates mortality and health differences among Social Security covered workers. Past work studied how mortality and health differed between men claiming Social Security benefits at different Social Security entitlement (retirement) ages. The most recent work analyzed trends in male life expectancy by socioeconomic status for male Social Security covered workers aged 60 and older. Mortality and health differences among Social Security covered workers can impact the Social Security program in many ways, including possible effects on disability applications, mortality projections, and possible behavioral responses to any hypothetical future increases in Social Security's Early Entitlement Age (EEA) or Full Retirement Age (FRA).

Mortality and health differences among Social Security covered workers can impact the Social Security program in many ways, including effects on disability applications, mortality projections, and behavioral responses to possible future increases in Social Security's EEA or FRA.

The retirement policy community is currently debating the advisability of raising Social Security's EEA as a means of encouraging greater work participation at older ages in the U.S. Knowledge of differences in health and mortality risk among older persons is crucial when analyzing such proposals. Many studies have found health to be a powerful factor in retirement decisions, leading to conjectures that improving health levels should make retirement later than age 62 more desirable and more feasible for workers. Most studies of health trends, however, have looked only at *average* health levels among workers nearing retirement, concluding that average health is improving and that only a minority of individuals are in poor health as they reach age 62.

The studies in this project delve beneath the population averages. The earlier work looked at the health and mortality of workers retiring at 62 compared to those who retired later, finding there was substantial evidence that the early retirees tended to be less healthy and to die earlier than those who retired later. The most recent work looked at trends in life expectancy. Although average life expectancies have been increasing, the study found significant evidence that life expectancies at lower socioeconomic status have not been increasing as fast as those at higher socioeconomic status.

The life expectancy trends have wider implications than the determination of early entitlement policy. The U.S. currently lags in life expectancy behind most wealthy developed nations, while simultaneously spending more on health care than these other nations. This project compared U.S. life expectancy to that of other countries. Other relevant work underway in this area includes a National Academy of Sciences panel of prominent researchers investigating “Divergent Trends in Longevity in High-Income Countries.”

In addition, trends in life expectancy by socioeconomic status may have implications for future Social Security expenditures. This project’s study of life expectancy trends was cited in this regard in the April 2008 CBO issue brief, “Growing Disparities in Life Expectancy.”

- Excellence:*** What makes this project exceptional?
- Significance:*** How is this research relevant to older persons, populations and/or an aging society?
- Effectiveness:*** What is the impact and/or application of this research to older persons?
- Innovativeness:*** Why is this research exciting or newsworthy?

Mortality and health differences among Social Security covered workers can impact the Social Security program in many ways, including effects on disability applications, mortality projections, and behavioral responses to possible future increases in Social Security’s EEA or FRA.

The retirement policy community is currently debating the advisability of raising Social Security’s EEA as a means of encouraging greater work participation at older ages in the U.S. Knowledge of differences in health and mortality risk among older persons is crucial when analyzing such proposals. Many studies have found health to be a powerful factor in retirement decisions, leading to conjectures that improving health levels should make retirement later than age 62 more desirable and more feasible for workers. Most studies of health trends, however, have looked only at *average* health levels among workers nearing retirement, concluding that average health is improving and that only a minority of individuals are in poor health as they reach age 62.

The studies in this project delve beneath the population averages. The earlier work looked at the health and mortality of workers retiring at 62 compared to those who retired later, finding there was substantial evidence that the early retirees tended to be less

healthy and to die earlier than those who retired later. The most recent work looked at trends in life expectancy. Although average life expectancies have been increasing, the study found significant evidence that life expectancies at lower socioeconomic status have not been increasing as fast as those at higher socioeconomic status.

The life expectancy trends have wider implications than the determination of early entitlement policy. The U.S. currently lags in life expectancy behind most wealthy developed nations, while simultaneously spending more on health care than these other nations. This project compared U.S. life expectancy to that of other countries. Other relevant work underway in this area includes a National Academy of Sciences panel of prominent researchers investigating “Divergent Trends in Longevity in High-Income Countries.”

In addition, trends in life expectancy by socioeconomic status may have implications for future Social Security expenditures. This project’s study of life expectancy trends was cited in this regard in the April 2008 CBO issue brief, “Growing Disparities in Life Expectancy.”