

a  
four-hour  
documentary  
series  
exploring  
America's  
racial and  
socioeconomic  
inequities  
in health



# UNNATURAL CAUSES

...is inequality making us sick?

**A documentary series & public impact campaign**

**[www.unnaturalcauses.org](http://www.unnaturalcauses.org)**

Produced by California Newsreel with Vital Pictures  
Presented on PBS by the National Minority Consortia of Public Television  
Impact Campaign in association with the Joint Center Health Policy Institute



# **How does American life expectancy compare to other countries?**

(Based on 2005 data reported in the 2007 United Nations Human Development Report)

- A. Number 1**
- B. In the top 10**
- C. 29th place**

# **ANSWER: C. 29th place**

At 77.9 years, we are tied with South Korea and Denmark for 29th – 31st place, despite being the second wealthiest country on the planet (measured by per capita GDP).

Japan has the highest life expectancy at 82.3 years

# How much does the U.S. spend per person on health care?

- A. Three quarters as much as the other industrialized countries
- B. The same as the other industrialized countries
- C. More than double other industrialized countries

**ANSWER:**  
**C. More than double**

We spent \$6102 per person on medical care in 2004 (estimates for 2007 are \$7600). That's more than double the \$2552 median of the 30 OECD countries. Yet our health outcomes are among the worst.

**Where does the U.S. rank in the percentage of the population that smokes cigarettes?**

(of the 30 OECD countries)

- A. #1 (highest smoking rates)**
- B. Top 5**
- C. Top 10**
- D. 11-20th place**
- E. Below 25 (lowest smoking rates)**

# **ANSWER: E. Below 25**

Japan has the longest life expectancy AND the highest percentage of smokers. The French smoke more and live longer. The Germans drink more and live longer.

But the U.S. has by far the greatest inequality, the fewest social protections, and the most poverty.

**What is the greatest difference in life expectancy observed between counties in the U.S.?**

- A. 7 years**
- B. 15 years**
- C. 22 years**
- D. 25 years**

# **ANSWER: B. 15 Years**

Populations in some wealthy communities live on average well into their 80s, while others in some inner city neighborhoods and Native American reservations barely scratch 60.



**African American males in Harlem have a shorter life expectancy from age five than which of the following groups?**

- A. Japanese**
- B. Bangladeshis**
- C. Cubans**
- D. Algerians living in Paris**
- E. All of the above**

**ANSWER:**  
**E. All of the above**

The biggest killers of African American males in many poor, segregated urban neighborhoods are not violence nor drugs nor AIDS, but heart disease, stroke and other chronic diseases that cut men down in middle age.

**Children living in poverty are how many times more likely to have poor health, compared with children living in high-income households?**

- A. 3 times**
- B. 4 times**
- C. 5 times**
- D. 7 times**

# **ANSWER: D. 7 Times**

Children are most vulnerable.

Not only are they susceptible to sub-standard housing, poor food, bad schools, unsafe streets and chronic stress, but the impacts of childhood poverty are cumulative, leading to a pile-up of risk that influences adult health and can even affect the next generation.

**On average, how many more supermarkets are there in predominantly white neighborhoods compared to predominantly Black and Latino neighborhoods?**

- A. About the same**
- B. 2 times as many**
- C. 4 times as many**
- D. 6 times as many**

**ANSWER:  
C. 4 times**

Predominantly Black and Latino neighborhoods have more fast-food franchises and liquor stores, yet often lack stores that offer fresh, affordable fruits and vegetables.

**Generally speaking, which group has the best overall health in the U.S.?**

- A. Recent Latino immigrants**
- B. Native-born whites**
- C. Native-born Latinos**
- D. Native-born Asian Americans**

# **ANSWER:**

## **A. Recent Latino immigrants**

Recent Latino immigrants have better health outcomes than other U.S. populations despite being, on average, poorer. However, the longer they live here, the worse they fare.



**On average, which of the following conditions is the strongest predictor of your health?**

- A. Whether or not you smoke**
- B. What you eat**
- C. Whether or not you are wealthy**
- D. Whether or not you have health insurance**
- E. How often you exercise**

**ANSWER:**  
**C. Whether or not you are  
wealthy**

The wealthier you are, on average, the better your health, from the bottom all the way to the top. Genes, diet, exercise and other behaviors are important. But a poor smoker still stands a greater chance of getting ill than a rich smoker.

**The most important factor behind the 30 year increase in U.S. life expectancy during the 20th century was:**

- A. New drugs (like penicillin)**
- B. Social reforms (like wage and labor laws, housing codes, etc.)**
- C. The development of the modern hospital system**
- D. Migration from the countryside to the cities**
- E. More exercise and less smoking**

# **ANSWER:**

## **B. Social Reforms**

Researchers attribute much of our increase in life expectancy to social changes--better wages, housing, job security and working conditions, civil rights laws, sanitation and other protections that improved our health by improving our lives.

**Citizens of other industrialized countries have longer life expectancies and better health than we do because:**

- A. They spend more on medical care**
- B. They are more homogeneous**
- C. They are more egalitarian**
- D. They smoke less**
- E. They have universal health care coverage**

**ANSWER:**

**C. They are more egalitarian**

While universal health care coverage is important, its impact on health is less than the social conditions that make us sick in the first place.

Social policies like living wage jobs, paid sick and family leave, paid vacations, universal pre-school and guaranteed health care are mandated by law in many other countries.

**Today, the top 1% of American families owns as much wealth as the bottom:**

- A. 30% combined**
- B. 50% combined**
- C. 76% combined**
- D. 90% combined**

# **ANSWER: D. 90% combined**

Between 1979 and 2005, the top 5% of American families saw their real incomes increase by 81%, while the net worth of the bottom 40% of American households fell by half.



**What is the annual cost to businesses in the U.S. due to chronic illness?**

- A. \$601 million**
- B. \$2.2 billion**
- C. \$1.1 trillion**

# **ANSWER: C. \$1.1 Trillion**

The financial burden of chronic illness takes an even greater toll on economic productivity in the form of extra sick days, reduced worker performance and other losses not directly related to medical care.

**Ireland, Sweden, France, Spain, Portugal and the other western European nations all mandate by law paid holidays and vacations of 4 to 6 weeks.**

**How many days of paid vacation are mandated by law in the U.S.?**

**A. None**

**B. 10**

**C. 12**

**ANSWER:**

**A. None**

The United States is the only rich country that does NOT guarantee any paid vacation NOR any paid sick days by law.

47% of private sector employees must choose between going to work sick and staying home and losing a day's pay.

Between 1980 and 2000 the gap in life expectancy between the most and least deprived counties in the U.S:

- A. Declined by 12%
- B. Remained the same
- C. Widened by 60%

# **ANSWER: C**

## **Widened by 60%**

As economic inequality grew after 1980, so did the life expectancy gap between the rich and the rest of us.

In contrast, a recent study (Krieger et al) showed that premature death and infant mortality gaps narrowed between 1966 and 1980.