

Graphic detail | Daily chart

# America's university graduates live much longer than non-graduates

And the gap is widening

Oct 2nd 2023

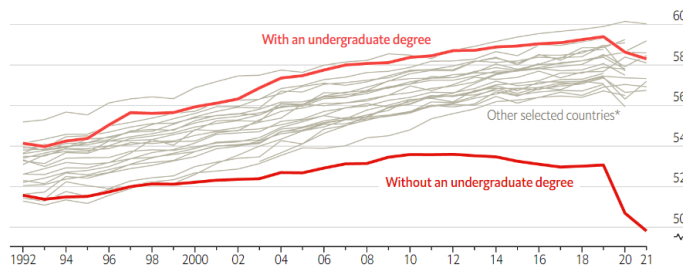
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AMERICA'S ECONOMIC record over the past 20 years has been impressive, outperforming other rich countries. Less impressive is its measure of wellness, or how long people live. A study by Anne Case and Angus Deaton, two economists at Princeton University, is a case in point. Their latest research shows that in America there is a huge and growing gap between the life expectancy of people with degrees and those without. In 2021, at age 25, Americans who do not have a four-year college degree (about two-thirds of the adult population) were expected to live on average about ten years less than those who do. In 1992 the gap was a third of that (see chart 1).

## Survival of the richest

United States, remaining life expectancy at age 25, years



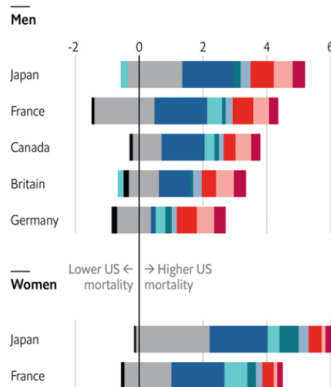
\*Australia, Austria, Belgium, Britain, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, South Korea, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland  
Sources: Human Mortality Database; \*Accounting for the widening mortality gap between American adults with and without a BA', A. Case and A. Deaton, *BPEA*, 2023

The study builds on something that has become all too apparent as the effects of covid-19 have filtered through into life-expectancy estimates (which are calculated from raw mortality data at different ages). That is, even as it gets richer, America has been falling behind other industrialised countries in terms of life expectancy: a generation ago, America was in the middle of the pack; now it is behind most other rich-world countries. Even before covid-19, Americans' chance of dying younger was increasing, and so life expectancy was gently shrinking. Big killers such as heart disease and the complications of diabetes explain a lot of the gap between America and other countries (see chart 2). But much higher rates of deaths by drug overdose, shooting or car accident also have an outsized effect, in particular because they disproportionately affect the young.

## Hard numbers

Difference in life expectancy at birth, compared with United States, 2016, years

- By cause of death
- Circulatory disease
  - Respiratory disease
  - Alzheimer's
  - Diabetes
  - Treatable/screenable cancers
  - Drug overdose
  - Firearm-related
  - Road accident
  - Other



This latest study shows that the effects of that are far from equally distributed. "Americans with a college degree, if they were a separate country, would be one of the best performers, just below Japan," the authors report. That is perhaps an unfair comparison—were other countries' populations split in the same way, presumably their graduates would also live longer, since graduates are richer and more able to insulate themselves from danger than non-graduates everywhere. In all likelihood Americans with degrees are still more likely to be murdered or to die of a drug overdose than their peers elsewhere, if not necessarily to die of cancer. But it underlines how much it is inequality that explains the general decline in American mortality. (Inequality in America more generally is the topic of Mr Deaton's new book,



Source: "Causes of America's lagging life expectancy: an international comparative perspective", by Jessica Y. Ho, May 2022, The Economist

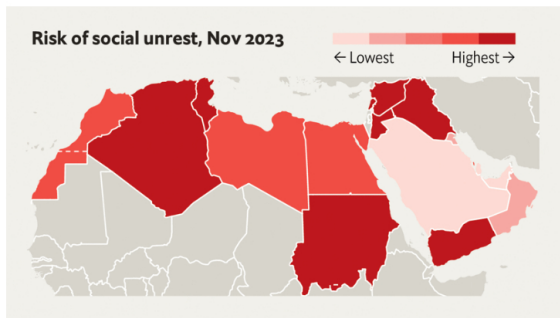
"Economics in America")

The authors, who previously made waves with their book on "Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism", speculate that the cause of this divergence is different status. "Jobs are allocated, not by matching

necessary or useful skills, but by the use of the BA as [a] screen," they say. That is persuasive, but not a complete answer. Greater despair might explain drug overdoses rising among the poor. It hardly explains why Americans are four times more likely to die in a car crash than people in Germany. As [we recently reported](#), America does not do a very good job of keeping its people safe. ■

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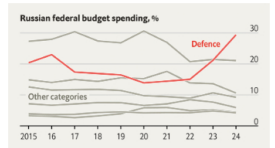


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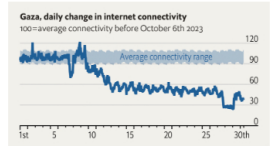
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