

[spiritof1848] Life expectancy and voting choices in the last election

Posted by: Stephen A Bezruchka <sabez@uw.edu> August 30, 2017

Jacob asks a really important question that I've been obsessed with for perhaps 30 years as I discovered the declining relative health standing of the US. I eventually used the term health Olympics to refer to this (graph at <http://depts.washington.edu/eqhlth/>).

In no mortality indicator does the US rank better than 30th and for most it finishes considerably lower.

The reason to me is that we have crafted policies that are designed to make us less healthy than so many countries. The upstream factor is likely economic inequality, mostly considered as income inequality. Wilkinson and Pickett do this concept great justice in their Spirit Level treatise. Whether this a causal relationship as Jacob questions in his April Lancet paper is in dispute. In public health in the US causality is mostly implied and there are bandwagons that the discipline jumps on. I hope there are few on this list that want our obscene economic inequality to increase further but that will almost certainly happen. I would say public health as constituted in this country has failed the nation. Recall the three principles of assessment, policy development, and assurance as stated in the 1988 IOM report. Assessment never talks about comparing ourselves to other countries. Hence no policies are developed that might impact our health in meaningful ways. And assurance is a joke. As long as we fail to look outside our borders nothing much will change except that it is likely our relative health standing will worsen. And as Jacob's paper points out, there are absolute declines in many mortality measures of health in a substantial part of the country.

A good example of our insular perspective is the RWJ report released last week on health disparities in Appalachia

at https://www.arc.gov/research/researchreportdetails.asp?REPORT_ID=138

It has great maps and indicators but they all stop at the U.S. borders. Such a perspective won't lead to progress.

Most people don't know about the policy relationships with health. They think health and health care are synonymous. (I talked about this in my Gelfand lecture back in May (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S7c90i1CBwU> that will also be broadcast on Alternative Radio next month).

Do people not care about their health? It is a lower priority. We spend huge amounts on health care to keep a very profitable industry laughing all the way to offshore banks (don't quote me on offshore banks as I only suspect it). What matters to them are jobs. Being able to provide for their families. Arlie Hochschild presented this very well in Hochschild, A. R. (2016). Strangers in their own land : anger and mourning on the American right. New York, New York: New Press. Joan Williams presents a useful perspective in Williams, J. C. (2017). White Working Class: Overcoming Class Cluelessness in America. Boston, Harvard Business Press. They suggest that the working class thinks

that government is doing too much for the poor. People don't recognize that we have, by far, the most poverty of rich countries.

It behooves us to recognize the Trump has created a social movement that is very effective in garnering support where most of us would least expect it. People here vote with little regard for their interests. We also have dismal voter turnout.

I look forward to more of others' thoughts.

Stephen

Stephen Bezruchka MD, MPH
Departments of Health Services & Global Health
School of Public Health
Box 357660
University of Washington
Seattle, Washington 98195-7660

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