

Is the U.S. Population Behaving Healthier?

David M. Cutler
Edward L. Glaeser
Allison B. Rosen

National Bureau of Economic Research
April 2007

Policy Abstract

This study completes the second phase of a project that analyzes trends and projections of health risk factors, behavior and mortality. In the first phase, we compared the risk factor profile of the population in the early 1970s with that of the population in the early 2000s, using data from National Health and Nutrition Examination Surveys (NHANES). We estimated the impact of demographics, smoking, drinking, obesity, blood pressure, and cholesterol on 10-year mortality rates; and we compared the predicted 10-year mortality in the two time periods. For example, in the population aged 20-74, the 10-year probability of death fell from 9.8 percent in 1971-75 to 8.4 percent in 1999-2002. The largest contributors to these changes are reductions in smoking and better control of blood pressure. The second phase of the project, and the focus of the current study, is to look toward the future, projecting forward trends in risk factors and behavior and their implications for future health over the next 20 years. Smoking and obesity are found to be the most important, and offsetting components of the forecast. Based on an isolated forecast of continued reductions in smoking, independently, the mortality risk for the entire population aged 25 and older would decline by 0.7 percent, or 8 percent of the baseline rate. A continuation of trends in obesity, however, with current treatment rates – leads to increased hypertension and high cholesterol – and a 1.1 percent increase in mortality risk for the total population, or 13 percent of the baseline rate. This raises substantial caution about the future. While smoking reductions can be expected to have continued impacts on improved health, future changes in obesity might more than overwhelm this trend. The optimistic side of this picture is the potential for better control of hypertension and high cholesterol among those who are overweight and obese. Understanding how to improve utilization of and adherence to recommended medications are key issues.