Comments on:

“Accounting for the Widening Mortality Gap between American Adults With and Without a BA,”

by Anne Case and Angus Deaton

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September 28, 2023
Victor Fuchs (1924-2023)
My main interest these days is low life expectancy in the U.S. relative to other high income democracies.
Adult life expectancy for Americans by college degree and for 22 rich countries (Case and Deaton, Figure 3)
The patterns we see for 2020-21 Covid-19 are shocking, but likely to moderate:

• 2021: ~245,000 deaths
• 2022: ~187,000 deaths
• 2023 (through mid-September) ~51,000 deaths
• Still, Case & Deaton show deaths of despair accelerated during 2019-21 – at least for opioid deaths, no signs of declining in 2023
Measuring mortality and life-expectancy

1. Case and Deaton earlier approach: Age-specific mortality, e.g., age 45-54, or “midlife” mortality
2. But: life expectancy is a more relevant measure of welfare loss; this paper calculates average years lived between ages 25-84
3. A single summary statistic is useful, but factors affecting early mortality (age 25-44) are likely different from those affecting later mortality (65-84)
What explains the long-term widening of the mortality-education gradient through 2019?

• A far more difficult question with many suspects
• Reasonable candidates (from Case and Deaton): Morbidity (e.g., pain), marriage rates, out-of-wedlock children, religious observance, institutional attachments, and wages/labor force participation
• To gain a foothold, I consider regional variation in mortality trends (also see Montez et al, Demography, 2019)
Non-college-graduate midlife mortality by state

Source: Couillard et al. JEP, 2021
Online Data Archive
Non-college-graduate midlife mortality by state

Source: Couillard et al. JEP, 2021
Online Data Archive
College-graduate midlife mortality by state

Source: Couillard et al. JEP, 2021
Online Data Archive
Can these patterns be explained by income?

• General consensus: Business cycles and even decades-long economic downturns don’t kill (Ruhm, 2000; Case and Deaton; Finkelstein et al., 2023).
State-level Midlife Mortality in 1968, by 1968 Income

Source: Couillard et al., JEP, 2021
State-level Midlife Mortality in 1968, by 1968 Income

Source: Couillard et al., JEP, 2021
State-level Midlife Mortality in 1968 & 2019, by 1968 Income

Source: Couillard et al., JEP, 2021
Perhaps it’s state policies

• State-level policies are consistent with these patterns: Tobacco tax, minimum wages, EITC, pollution controls, Medicaid coverage implemented only by high-income states in the 1970s-1990s (Montez et al., 2019, 2020)

• These take effect with a “long and variable lag”
Yet there’s still likely a role for “economic opportunity”

• Evidence from Pierce and Schott, 2020, Z. Cooper et al., 2023, and the “long-term deterioration in opportunities for less educated Americans” (Case and Deaton, 2020) suggest economic factors matter.

• Ongoing research – even in progressive states, low-income counties lag behind.
Summing up

• Case and Deaton have demonstrated a remarkable increase in the education-mortality gradient, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic

• The decline in life expectancy for non-college-graduates should be the primary public-health concern in the U.S.

• Two key questions:
  • Why?
  • What are the best policies to address the problem?