Comments on:

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

by Anne Case and Angus Deaton

Jonathan Skinner Dartmouth College, NBER, and IFS September 28, 2023

# Victor Fuchs (1924-2023)



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**From:** Victor R Fuchs <vfuchs@stanford.edu>



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[ ... ]

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 mortalityeducation 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



#### 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 <u>the</u> primary public-health concern in the U.S.
- Two key questions:
  - Why?
  - What are the best policies to address the problem?