

Life Expectancy Timeline for the US 1901-2023

Life expectancy

Our World
in Data

Period life expectancy¹ is the number of years the average person born in a certain year would live if they experienced the same chances of dying at each age as people did that year.



Data source: Riley (2005); Zijdeman et al. (2015); HMD (2025); UN WPP (2024)

OurWorldinData.org/life-expectancy | CC BY

1. **Period life expectancy** Period life expectancy is a metric that summarizes death rates across all age groups in one particular year. For a given year, it represents the average lifespan for a hypothetical group of people, if they experienced the same age-specific death rates throughout their whole lives as the age-specific death rates seen in that particular year.

Learn more in our articles:

- [Life expectancy – what does this actually mean?](#)
- [Period versus cohort measures: what's the difference?](#)

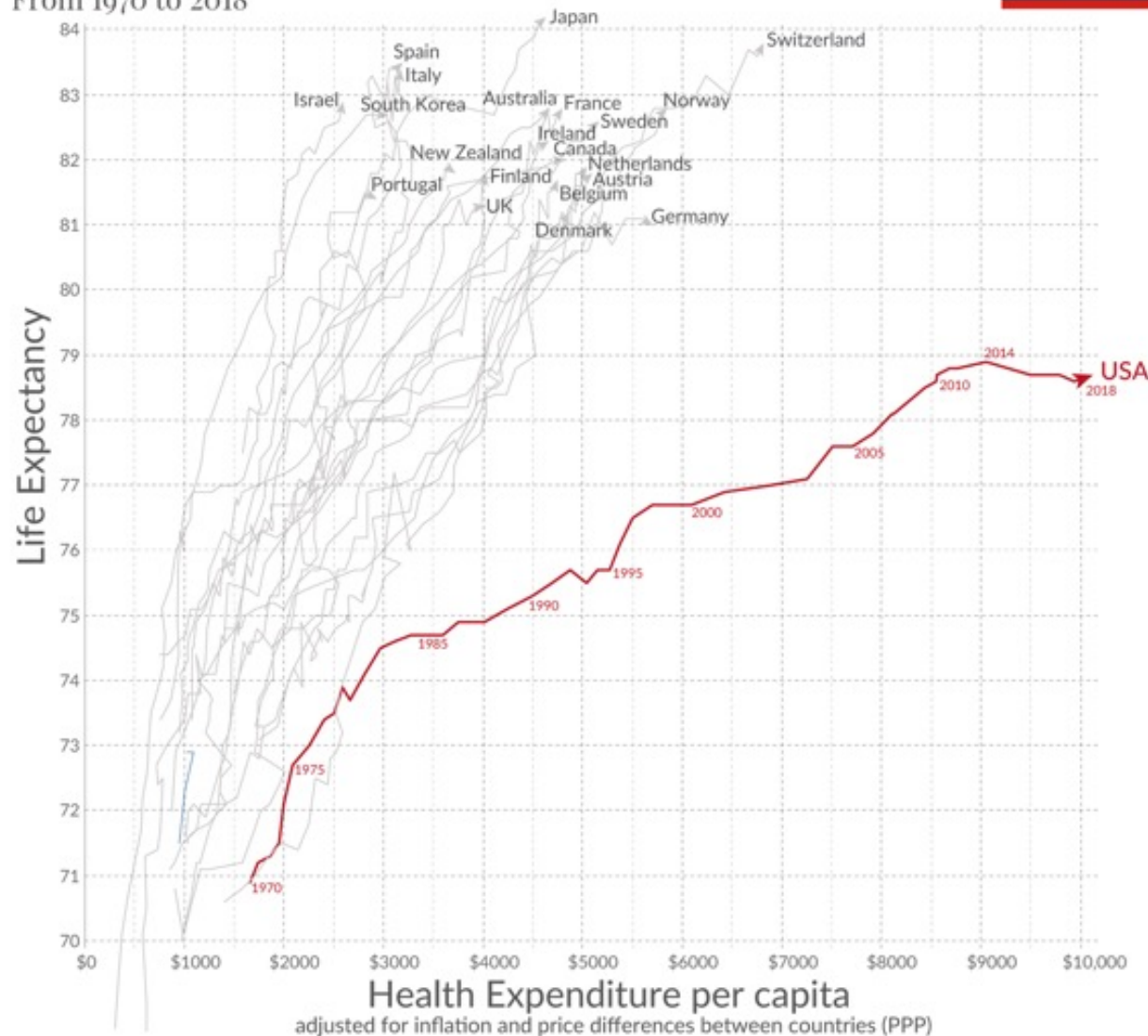
<https://ourworldindata.org/life-expectancy>

From 1901 to 2023 there were two significant declines in life expectancy. These trends reached their respective lowest points in 1918 and 2021. Both appear to be pandemic-related.

Life expectancy vs. health expenditure

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From 1970 to 2018



But this graph from “Our World in Data” shows US life expectancy already trending downwards in 2016.

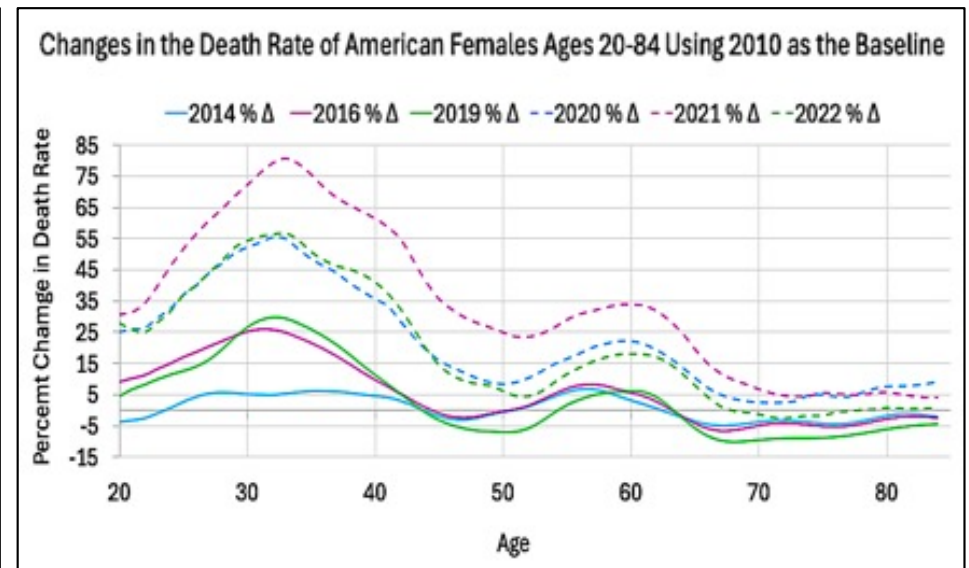
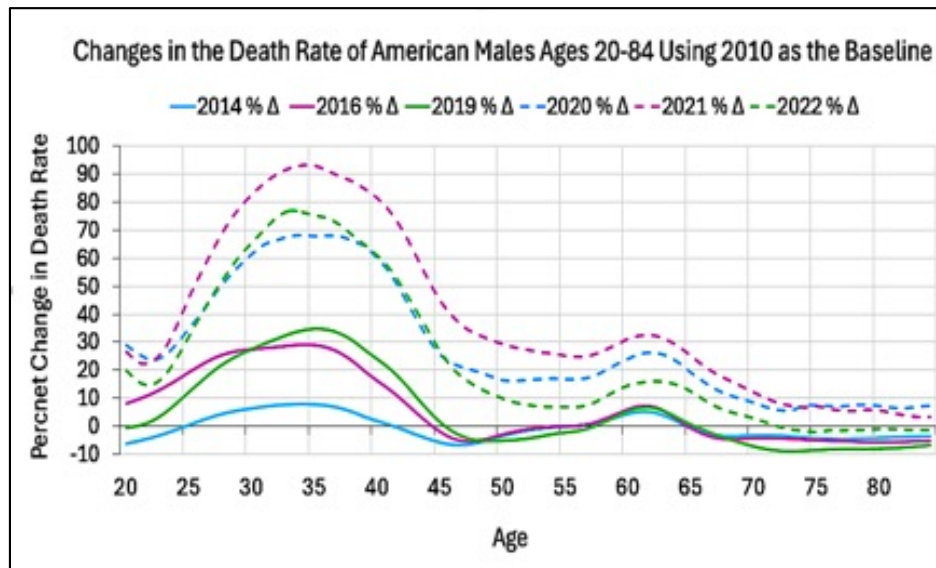
Why did life expectancy in the US decline 3-4 years before the the reported emergence of COVID-19?

Data source: OECD — Note: Health spending measures the consumption of health care goods and services, including personal health care (curative care, rehabilitative care, long-term care, ancillary services, and medical goods) and collective services (prevention and public health services as well as health administration), but excluding spending on investments. Shown is total health expenditure (financed by public and private sources). Licensed under CC-BY by the author Max Roser.

OurWorldinData.org - Research and data to make progress against the world's largest problems.

<https://ourworldindata.org/us-life-expectancy-low>

Death Rate Comparison in the US by Age and by Year



These numbers are calculated from raw data from the Actuarial Life Table of the US Social Security Administration <https://www.ssa.gov/oact/STATS/table4c6.html>

The drop in US life expectancy coincides with a near doubling of the death rate for Americans 30-40 years old in 2021.

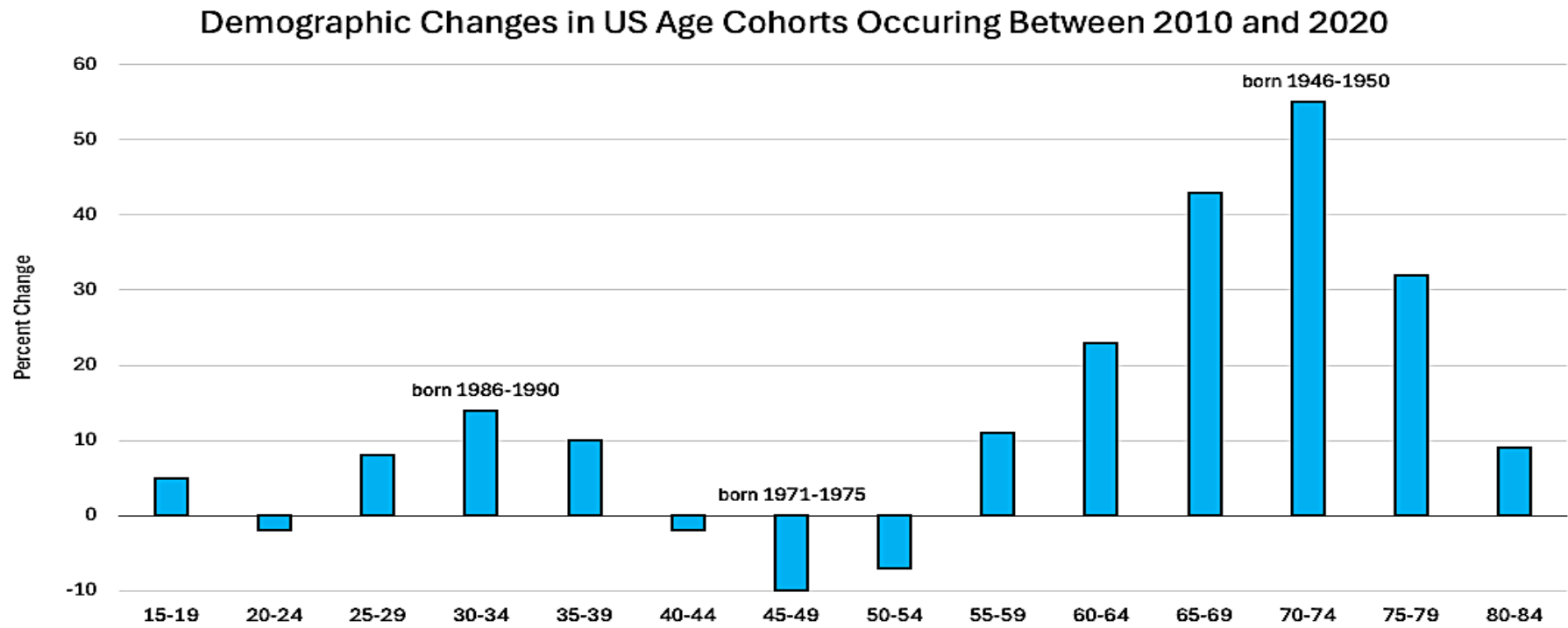
This upwards trend may have started as early as 2014.

But for Americans over 70 years, there was no increase in death rate until 2020, and even at its peak in 2021 the increase barely exceeded 10% of the baseline.

Why did death rates rise more sharply for Americans between the ages 30 and 40 during a pandemic that mainly affected the elderly?

How many of these deaths can be attributed to COVID-19?

To answer this, we must take into account this demographic transition:



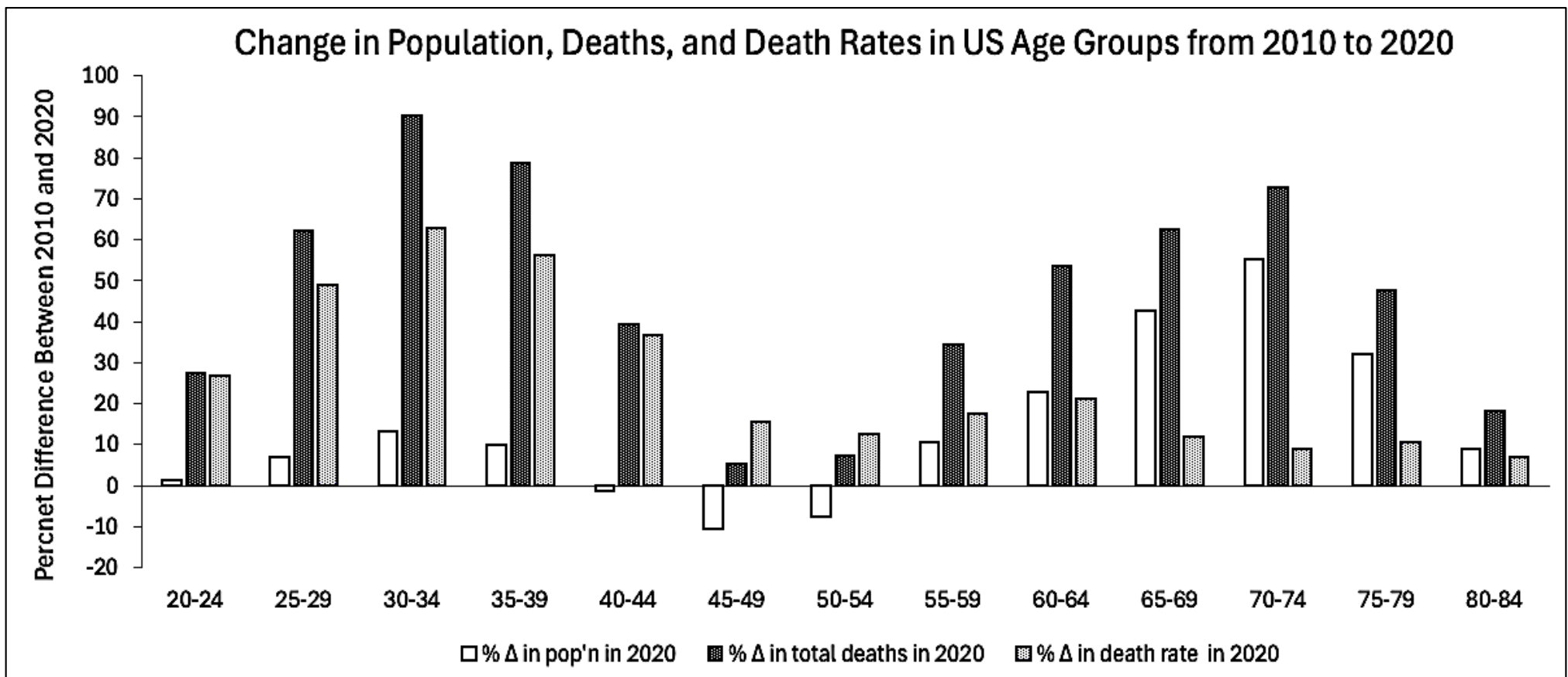
These numbers are calculated from raw data taken from Our Changing Population: United States. *USA Facts*. <https://usafacts.org/data/topics/people-society/population-and-demographics/our-changing-population/?endDate=2021-01-01&startDate=2010-01-01>

A massive spike in the population of Americans ages 60-79 increased the overall rate at which Americans were dying of old age by 2020.

This may have played a role in the perception that hospitals were “overwhelmed” during the declared pandemic.

This graph indicates how combined changes in death rate and population size affected the changes in the total number of deaths per age group.

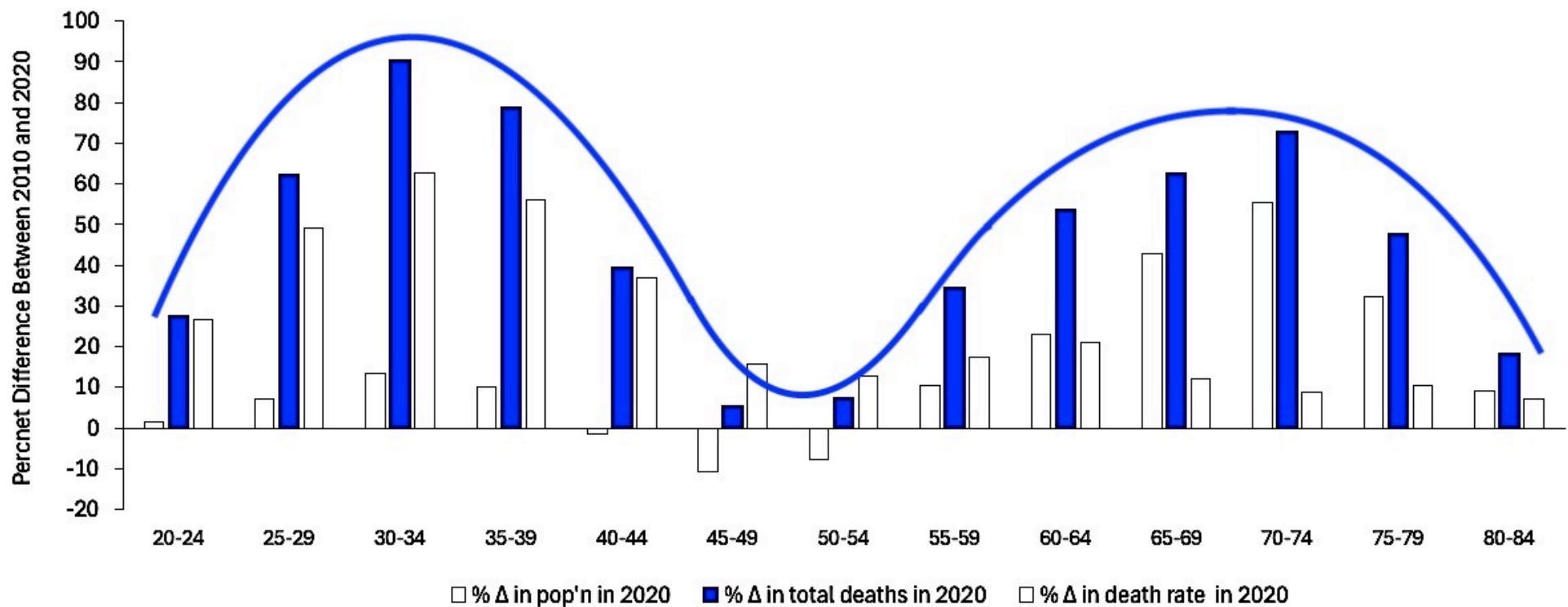
To better understand the implications of this data, we need to break it down:



The references for the original data are available at the end of this slide deck.

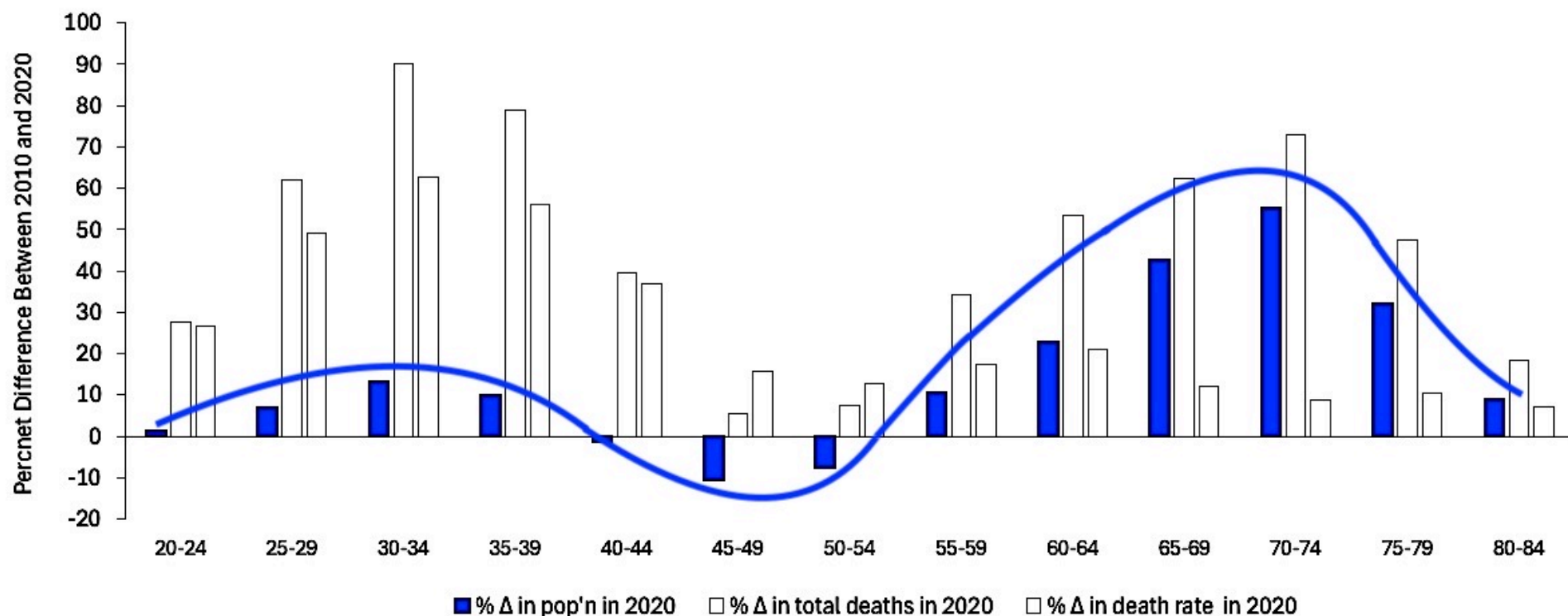
If we highlight the percent change in deaths per age group, we get a bimodal distribution with peaks between ages 25-39 and 60-79.

The age groups under these peaks (millennials and boomers) make up most of the 2020 increase in deaths.



If we highlight the percent change in population per age group, we just get the peak on the right (ages 60-79).

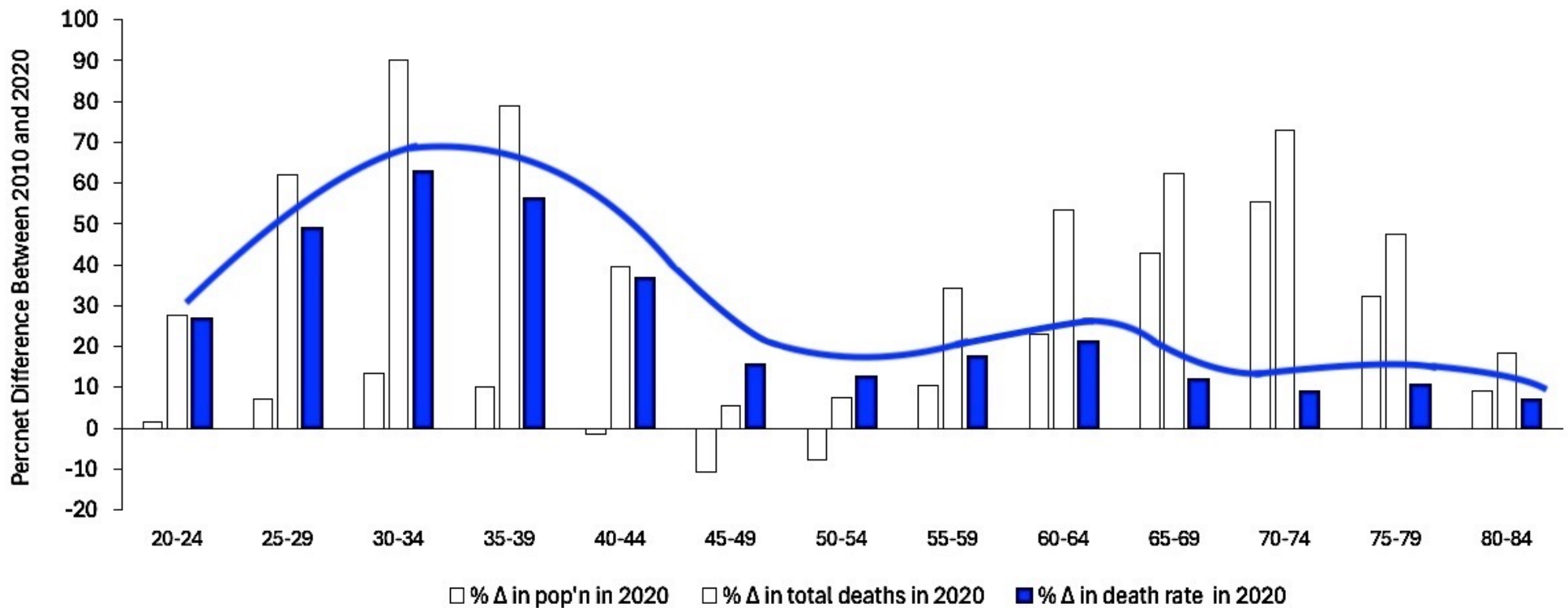
This indicates that most of the increase in deaths for this age group was caused by a surge in the population of aging boomers.

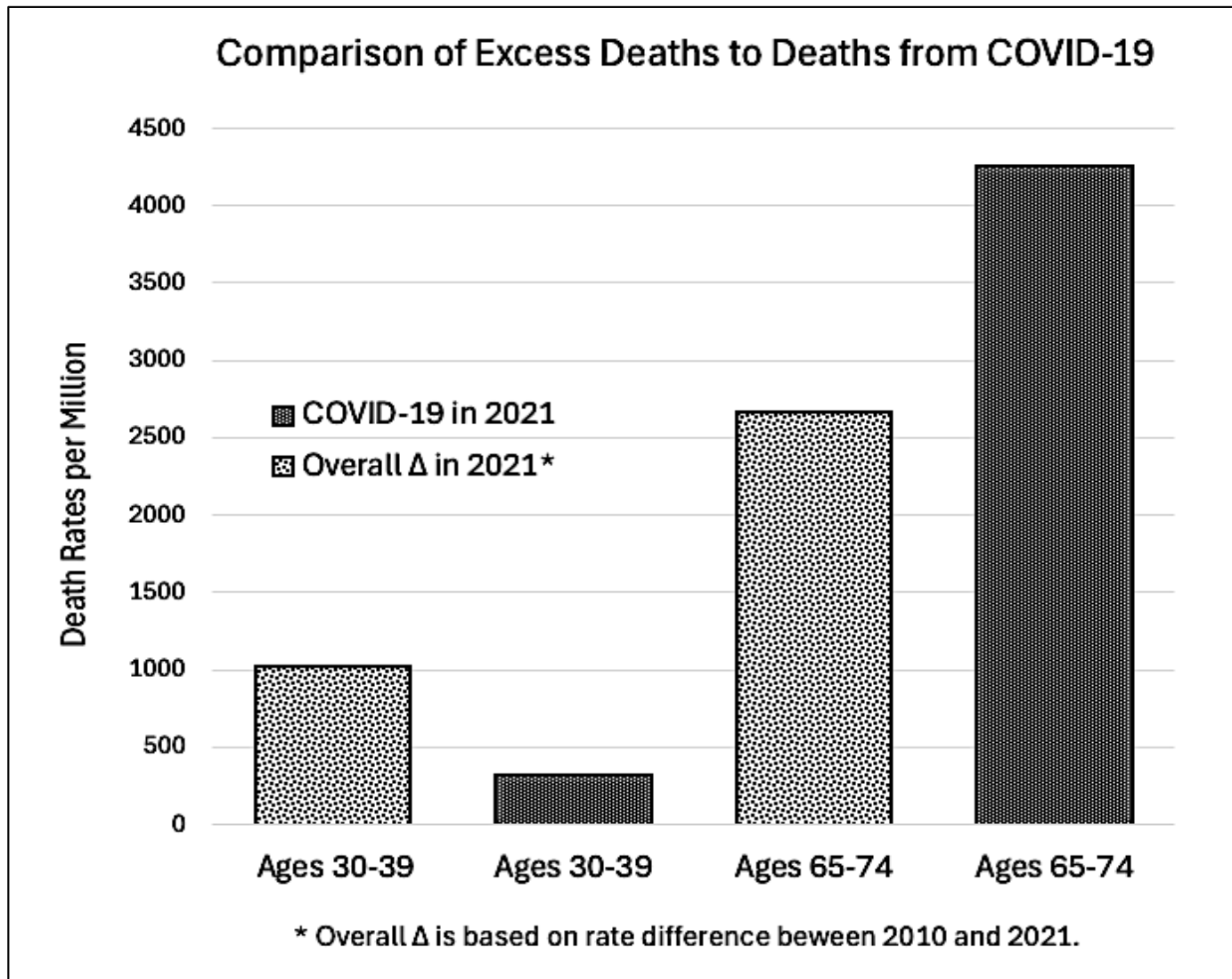


If we highlight the percent change in death rate per age group, we mainly get the peak on the left (ages 25-39).

This indicates that most of the increase in deaths for millennials was caused by the surge in the death rates indicated earlier by the actuarial life tables.

Why did Americans aged 25-39 die at such a high rate?





The references for the original data are available at the end of this slide deck.

For ages 65-74, deaths attributed to COVID-19 exceed excess deaths by 60%. This indicates that the number of COVID deaths in this group might be inflated.

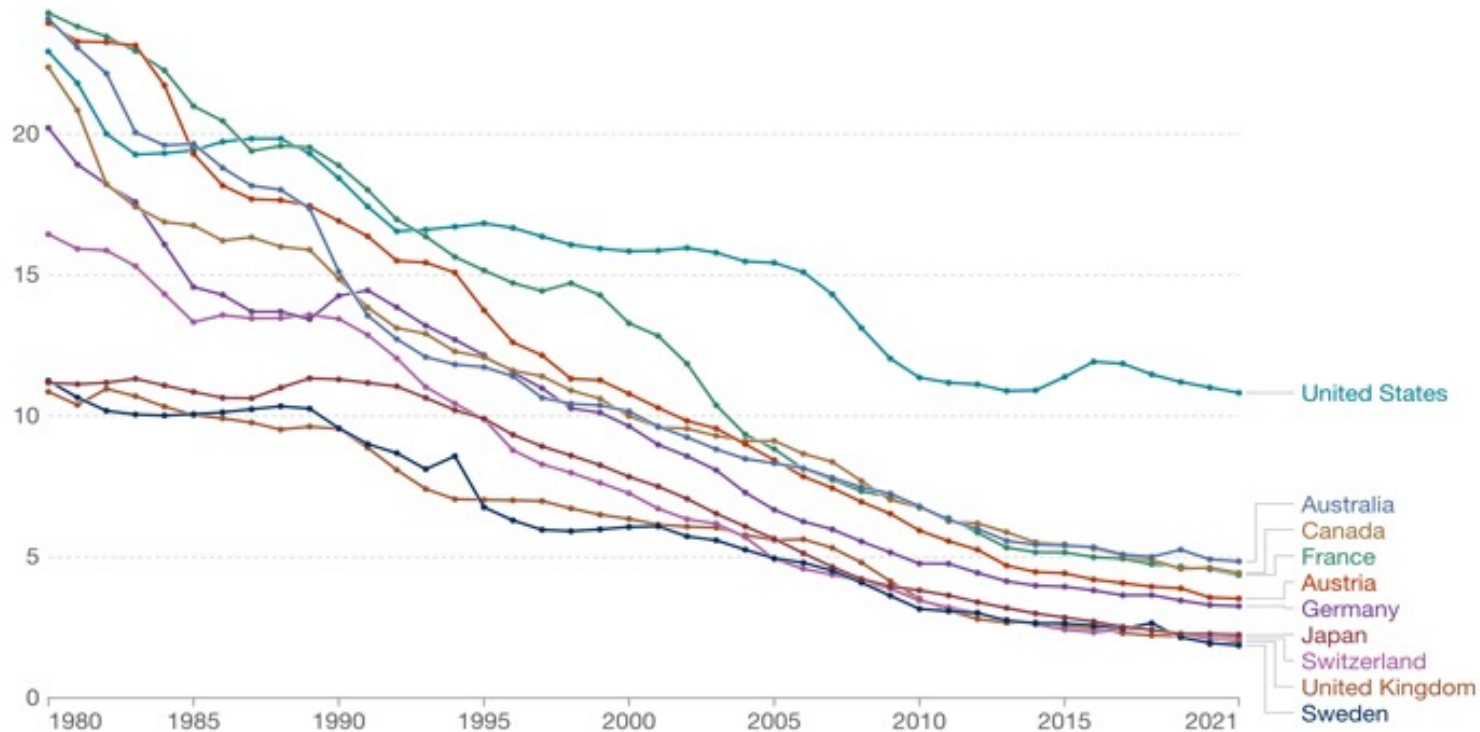
For ages 30-39 this ratio is reversed, with only 30% of excess deaths attributed to COVID-19.

What is responsible for the remaining 70% of excess deaths in ages 30-39?

Death rate from road injuries, 1980 to 2021



The annual number of deaths from road injuries per 100,000 people. Deaths include those from drivers and passengers, motorcyclists, cyclists and pedestrians.



Data source: IHME, Global Burden of Disease (2024)

OurWorldinData.org/causes-of-death | CC BY

Note: To allow for comparisons between countries and over time, this metric is age-standardized¹.

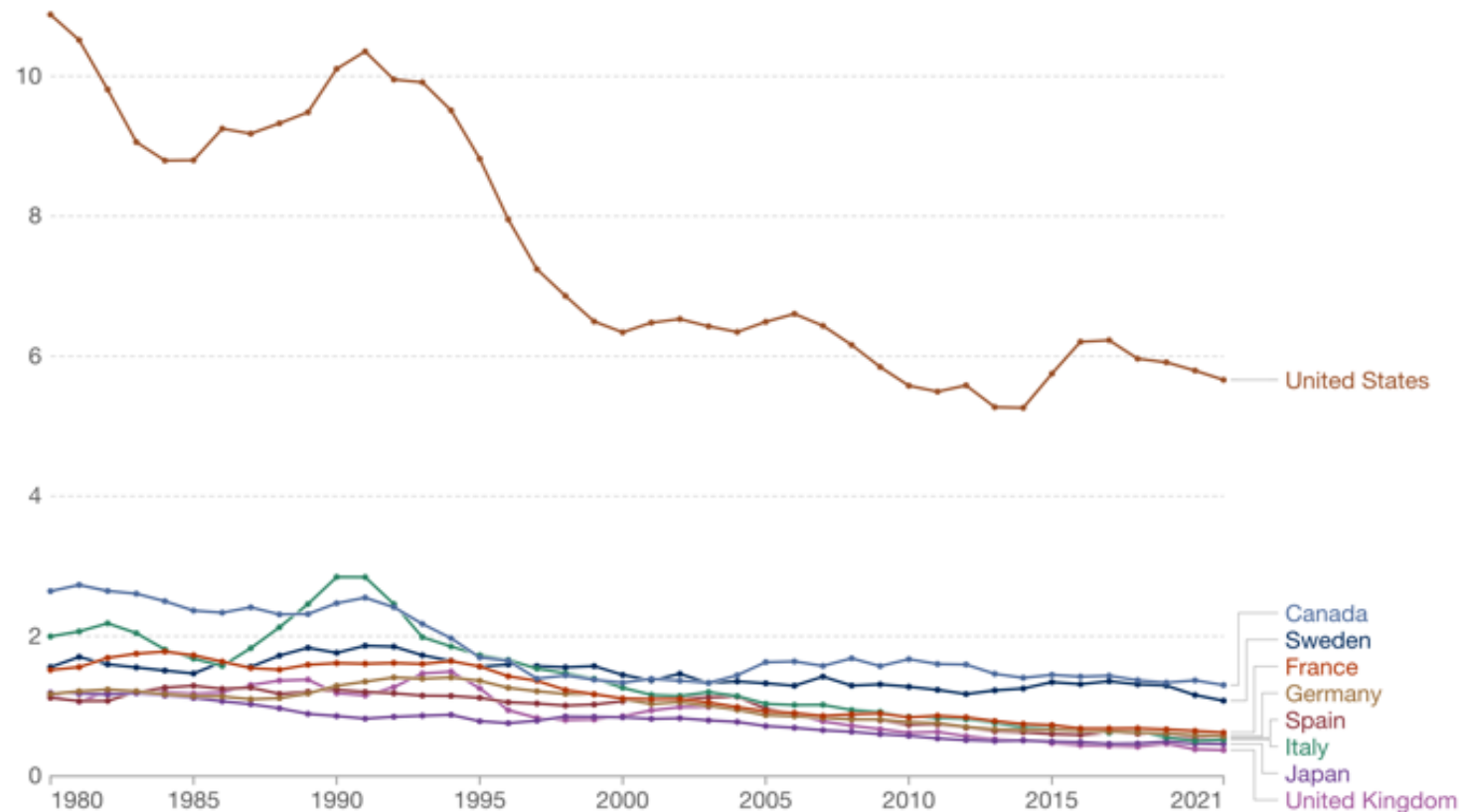
1. Age standardization: Age standardization is an adjustment that makes it possible to compare populations with different age structures, by standardizing them to a common reference population. [Read more: How does age standardization make health metrics comparable?](#)

<https://ourworldindata.org/us-life-expectancy-low>

Road injuries played a role in the life expectancy gap between the US and other affluent nations between 2000 and 2021, but this gap did not grow after 2010.

Homicide rate, 1980 to 2021

Annual number of deaths from homicide¹ per 100,000 people.



Data source: IHME, Global Burden of Disease (2024)

OurWorldinData.org/homicides | CC BY

1. Homicide: The killing of a person by another with intent to cause death or injury.

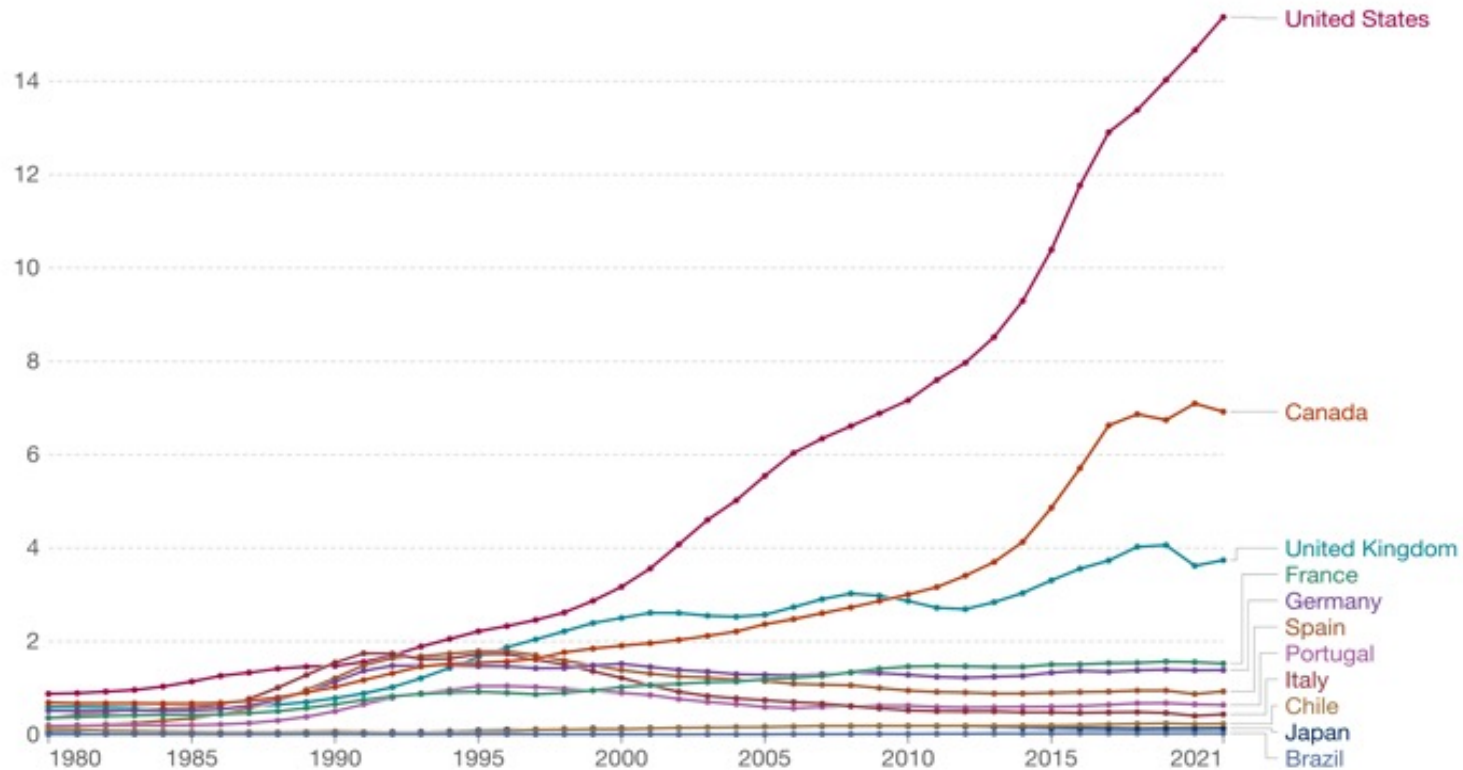
<https://ourworldindata.org/us-life-expectancy-low>

Homicides also played a role in the life expectancy gap between the US and other affluent nations, but this gap became narrower in 2000.

Opioid use disorder death rate, 1980 to 2021

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Estimated annual number of deaths from opioid use disorders per 100,000 people.



Data source: IHME, Global Burden of Disease (2024)

OurWorldinData.org/illicit-drug-use | CC BY

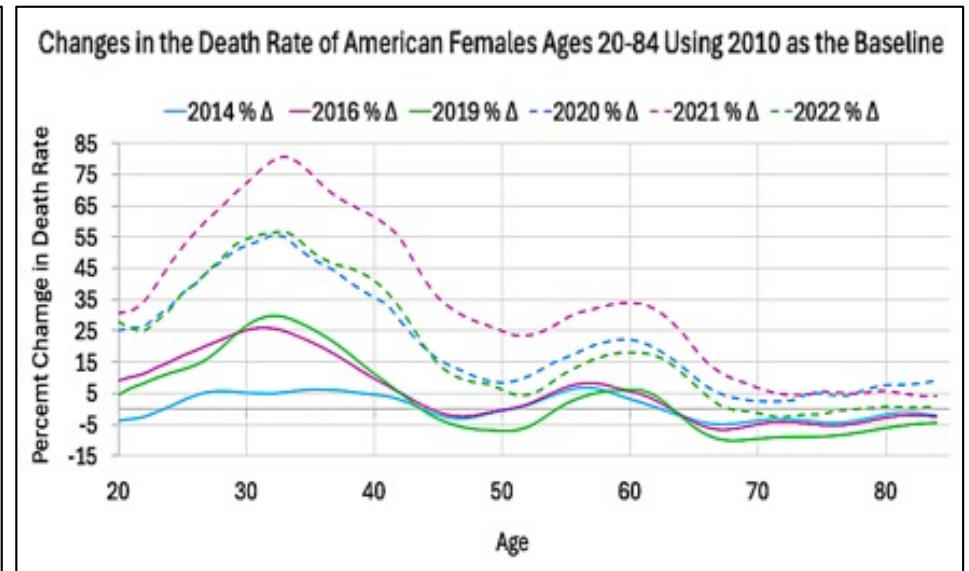
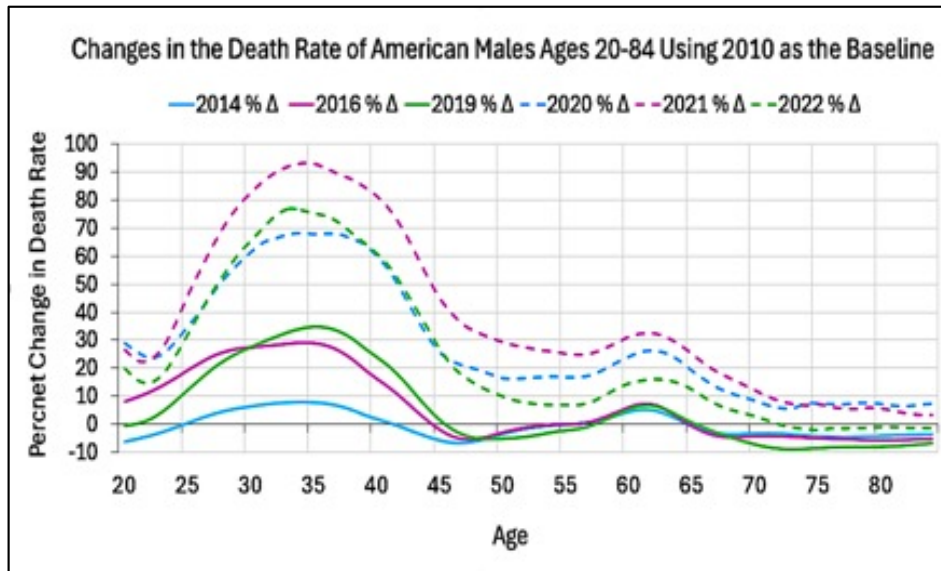
Note: To allow for comparisons between countries and over time, this metric is age-standardized¹.

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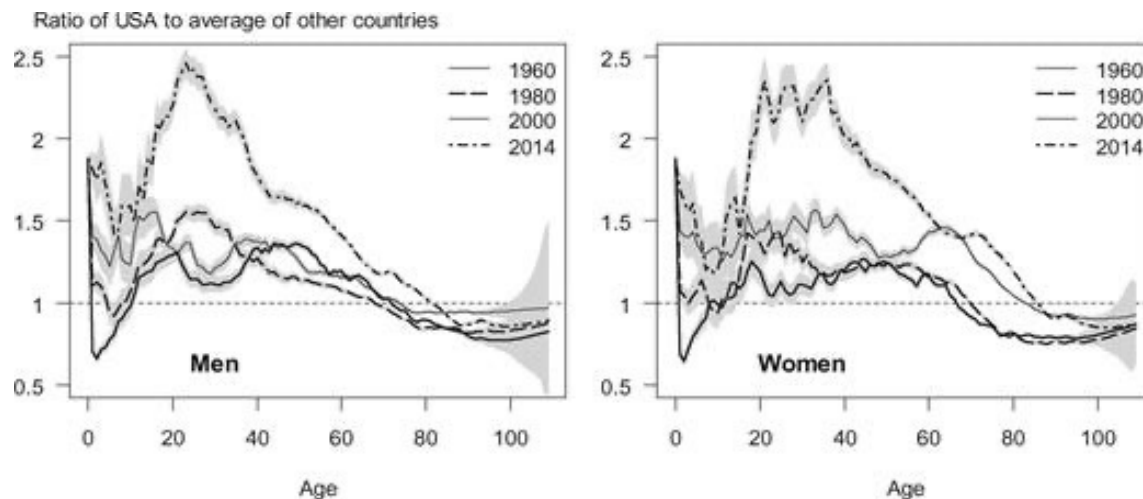
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In sharp contrast to these other causes of death, opioid overdose deaths increased exponentially after 2010...

Death Rate Comparison in the US by Age and by Year



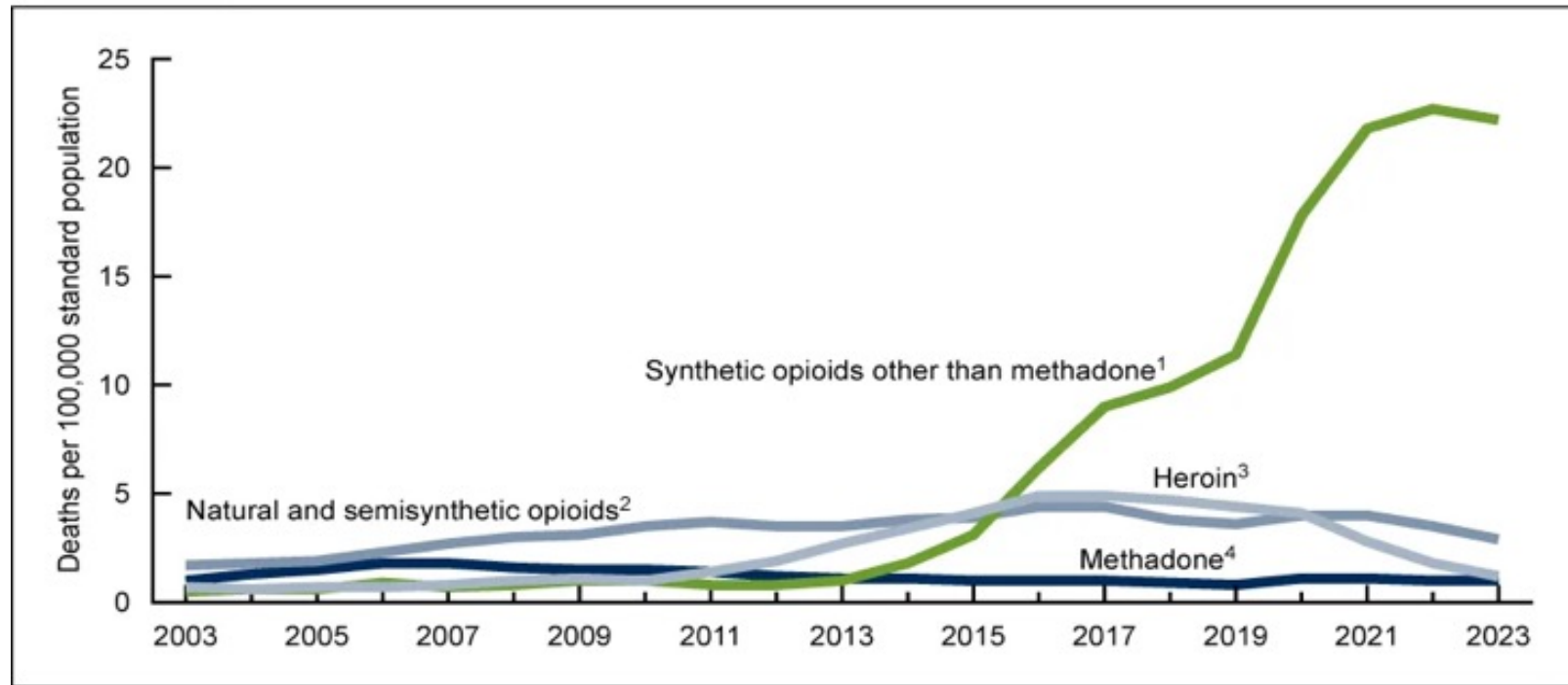
These numbers are calculated from raw data from the Actuarial Life Table of the US Social Security Administration <https://www.ssa.gov/oact/STATS/table4c6.html>



...and the increase in death rate for ages 30-40 that started in 2014 (top) coincides with a 2014 surge in drug overdose deaths for ages 20-40 (bottom).

M. Barbieri. Contribution of Drug-Related Deaths to the US Disadvantage in Mortality. *International Journal of Epidemiology*. 48(3) 2019: <https://academic.oup.com/ije/article/48/3/945/5265302?login=false>

Figure 4. Age-adjusted rate of drug overdose deaths involving opioids, by type of opioid: United States, 2003–2023



¹No significant trend from 2003 to 2013; significant increasing trend from 2013 to 2021, with different rates of change over time; no significant trend from 2021 to 2023 ($p < 0.05$). Rate in 2023 significantly lower than in 2022 ($p < 0.05$).

²Significant increasing trend from 2003 to 2010; no significant trend from 2010 to 2021; significant decreasing trend from 2021 to 2023 ($p < 0.05$).

³Significant increasing trend from 2003 to 2016, with different rates of change over time; significant decreasing trend from 2016 to 2023, with different rates of change over time ($p < 0.05$).

⁴Significant increasing trend from 2003 to 2006; significant decreasing trend from 2006 to 2017; no significant trend from 2017 to 2023 ($p < 0.05$).

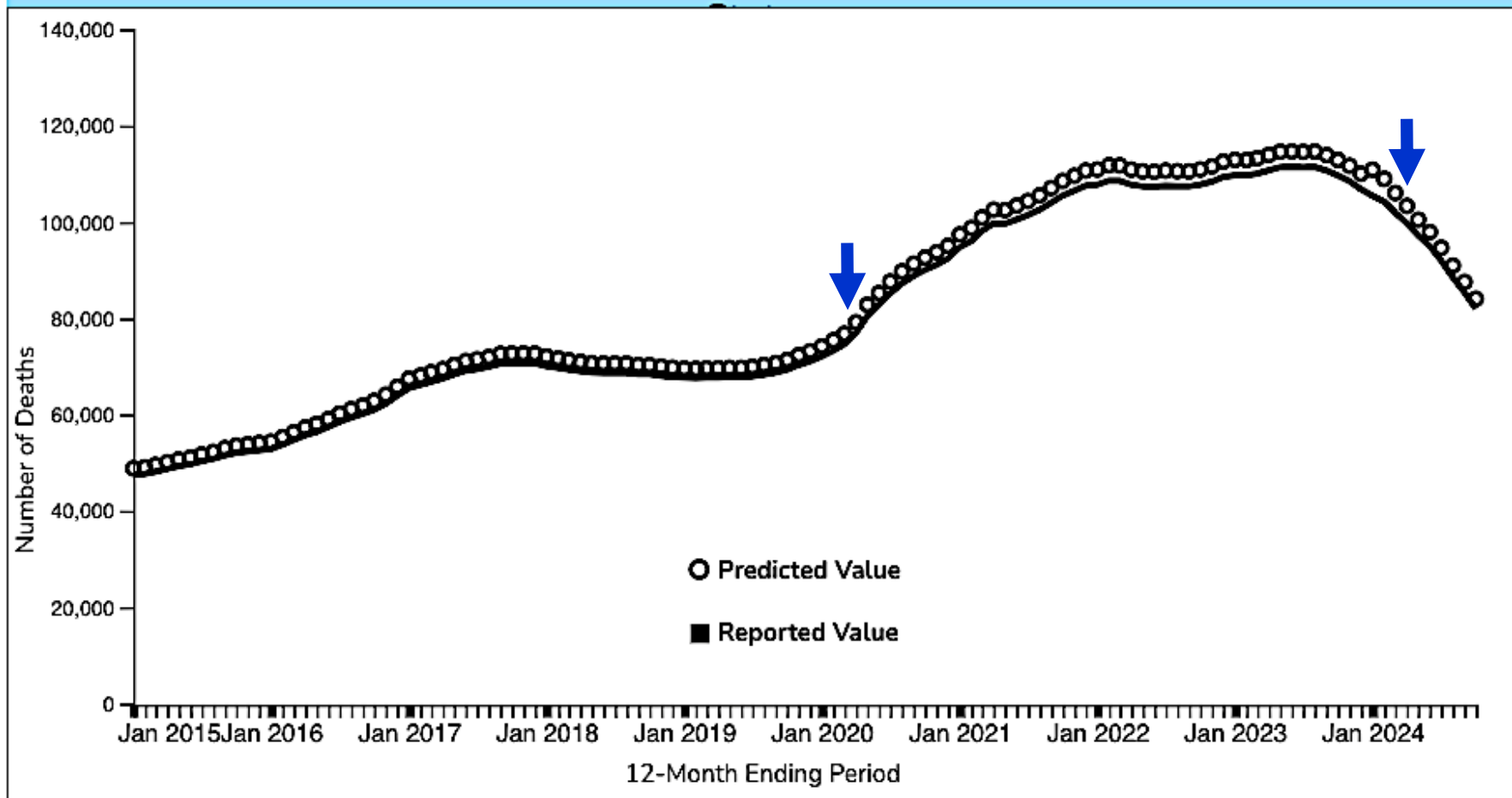
NOTES: Drug overdose deaths are identified using the *International Classification of Diseases, 10th Revision* underlying cause-of-death codes X40–X44, X60–X64, X85, and Y10–Y14. Drug overdose deaths involving selected drug categories are identified by specific multiple cause-of-death codes: heroin, T40.1; natural and semisynthetic opioids, T40.2; methadone, T40.3; synthetic opioids other than methadone, T40.4. Deaths involving more than one opioid category (such as a death involving both methadone and a natural or semisynthetic opioid) are counted in both categories. The percentage of drug overdose deaths that identified the specific drugs involved varied by year, ranging from 75% to 79% from 2003 to 2013 and increasing from 81% in 2014 to 96% in 2023. Age-adjusted death rates were calculated using the direct method and the 2000 U.S. standard population.

SOURCE: National Center for Health Statistics, National Vital Statistics System, mortality data file.

Data Briefs Number 428. December 2021. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db428.htm>

Death rates from synthetic opioids also reached their peak during the time period that is associated with the pandemic countermeasures.

Figure 1a. 12 Month-ending Provisional Counts of Drug Overdose Deaths: United

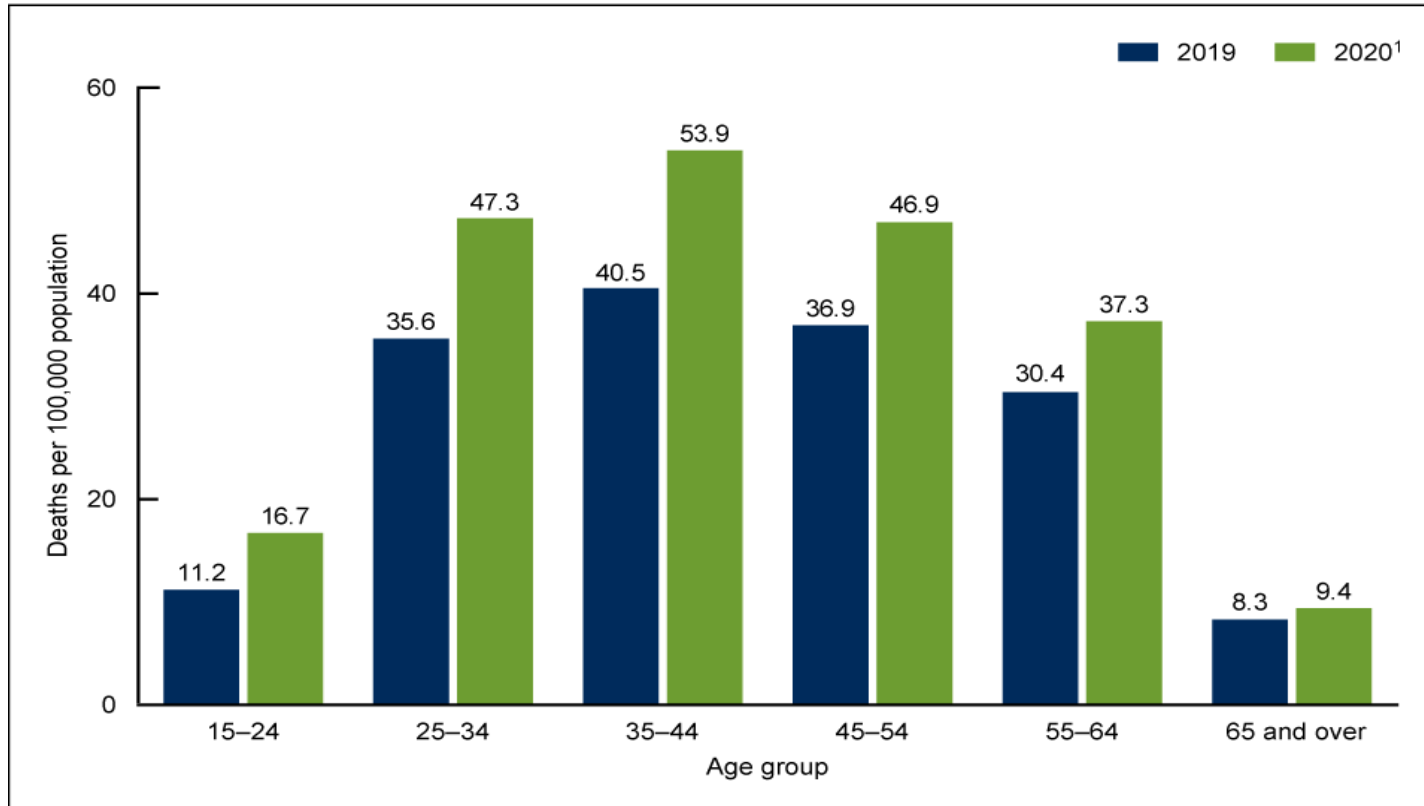


Data downloaded from the CDC: <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/vsrr/drug-overdose-data.htm>

This interactive chart from the CDC indicates that about 416,000 Americans died from drug overdoses from January of 2020 to January of 2024.

This averages to over 100,000 drug overdose deaths per year in the US during this time period.

Figure 2. Drug overdose death rates among those aged 15 and over, by selected age group: United States, 2019 and 2020



¹Rates in 2020 were significantly higher than in 2019 for all age groups, $p < 0.05$.

NOTES: Drug overdose deaths are identified using the *International Classification of Diseases, 10th Revision (ICD-10)* underlying cause-of-death codes X40-X44, X60-X64, X85, and Y10-Y14. Access data table for Figure 2 at: <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db428-tables.pdf#2>.

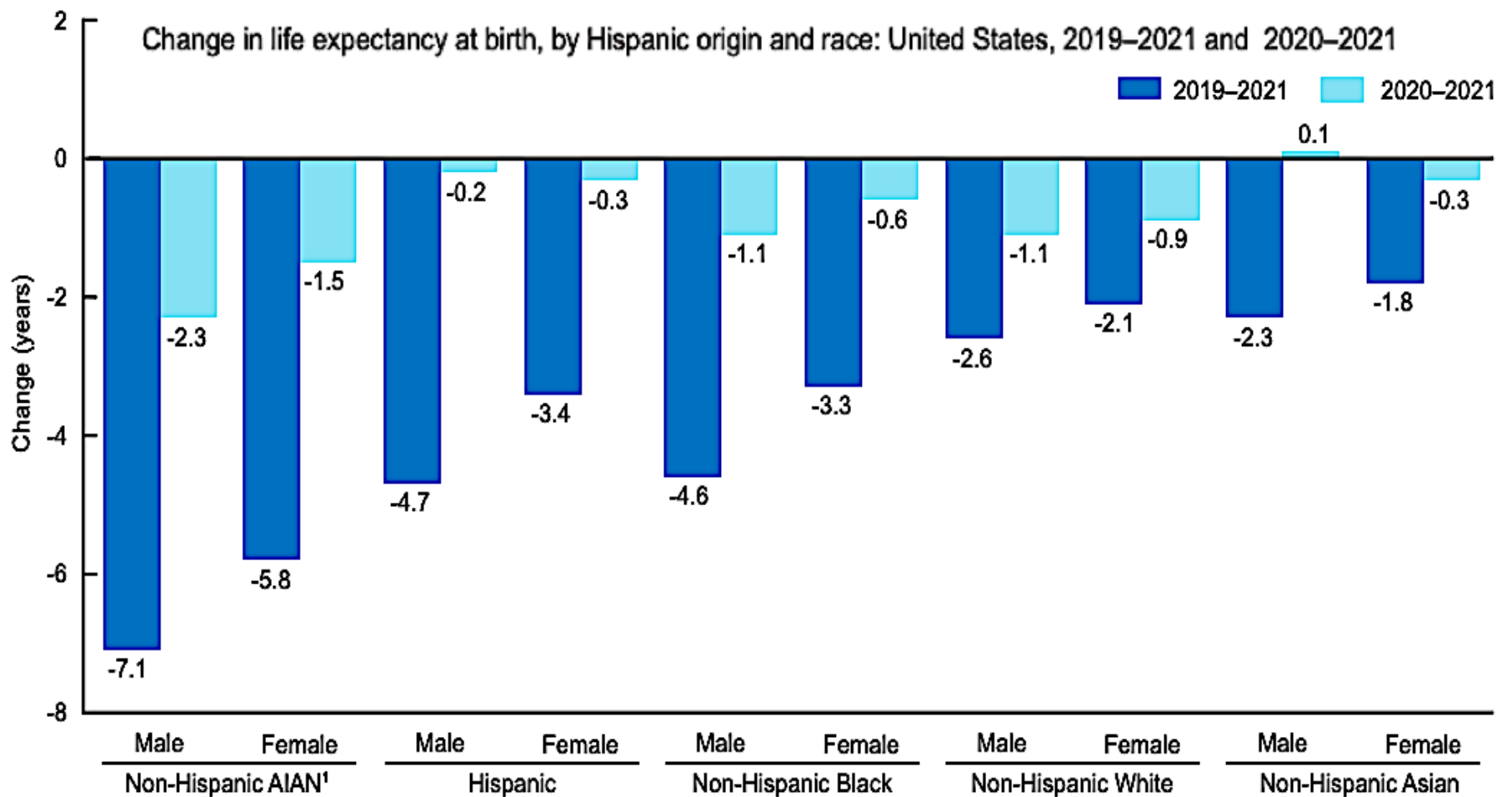
SOURCE: National Center for Health Statistics, National Vital Statistics System, Mortality.

Data Briefs Number 428. December 2021.

<https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db428.htm>

This chart from the CDC indicates that ages 25-54 were most affected by drug overdose deaths in the US during these years.

This concurs with the aforementioned spike in the death rate for ages 30-40.



¹American Indian or Alaska Native.

NOTES: Estimates are based on provisional data for 2021. Provisional data are subject to change as additional data are received. Estimates for 2019 and 2020 are based on final data. Life tables by race and Hispanic origin are based on death rates that have been adjusted for race and Hispanic-origin misclassification on death certificates; see Technical Notes in this report.

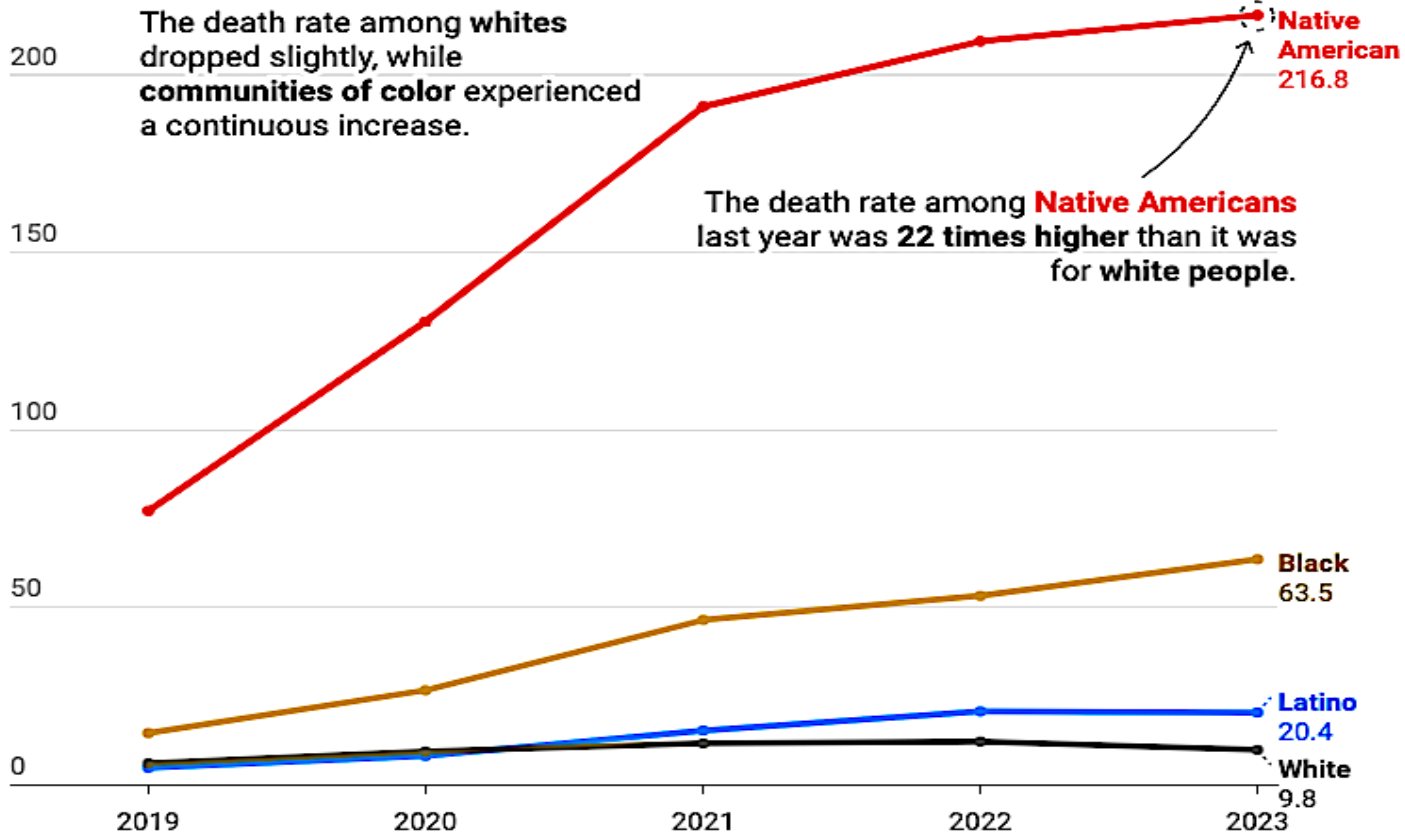
SOURCE: National Center for Health Statistics, National Vital Statistics System, Mortality.

<https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/vsrr/vsrr023.pdf>

Life expectancy for Native Americans and Alaska Natives dropped by a whopping 6.5 years from 2019-2021...

Opioids' deadly toll for Minnesotans of color

Opioid overdose death rates by race, per 100,000 people in Minnesota, 2019-2023.

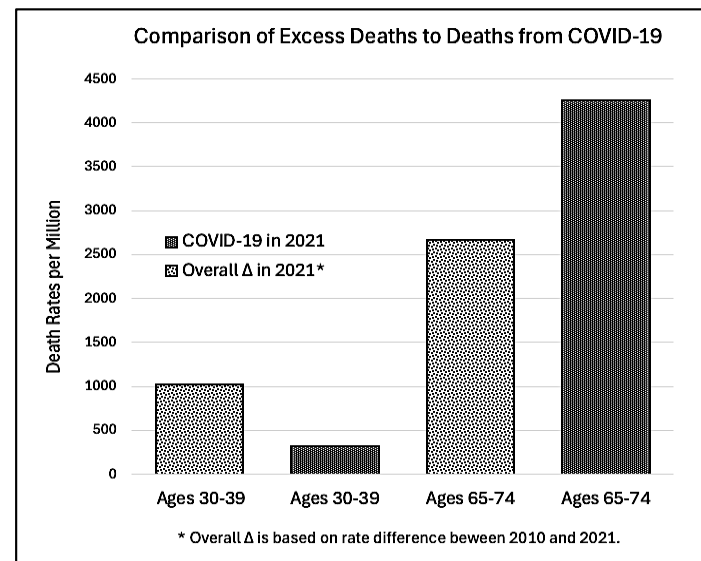
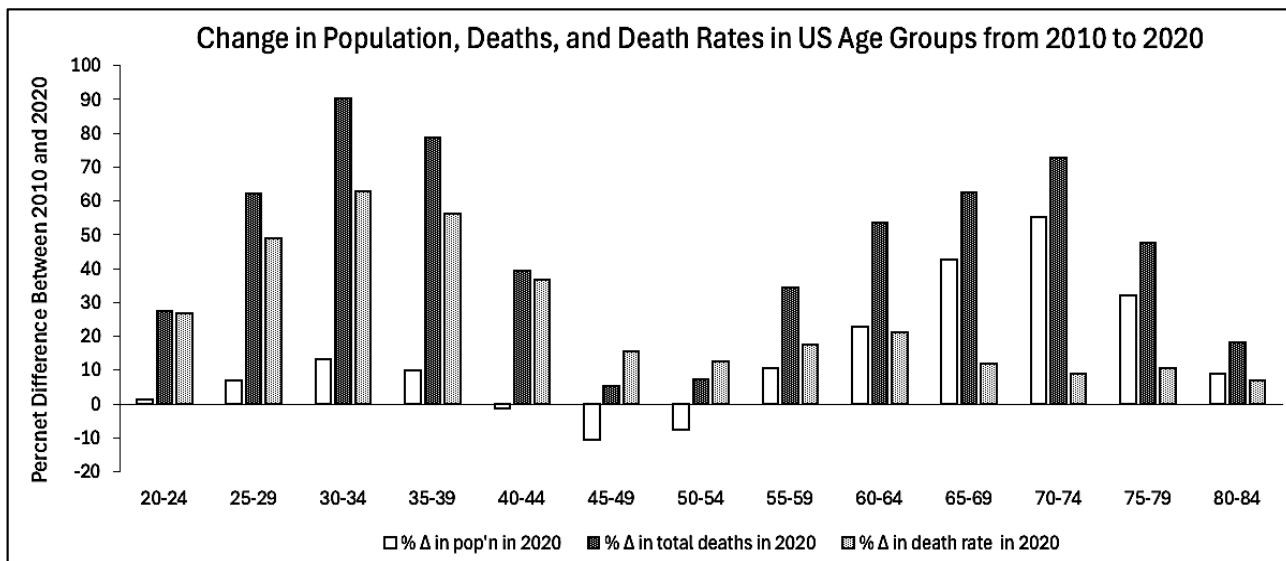


White, Black, and Native American decedents include those who are only one race and not Hispanic/Latino. Latinos are of any race. The death rate for Asians is not shown due to the low number of deaths. Data for 2023 is provisional.

Chart: Cynthia Tu, Sahan Journal • Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey; Minnesota death certificates; data analysis by Sahan Journal • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

<https://www.mprnews.org/story/2024/07/08/opioid-epidemic-minnesota-fentanyl-racial-disparities-sahan-journal>

...and this data from Minnesota shows Native Americans dying from drug overdose and 22 times the rate of white residents of Minnesota.



References for the Data Used in the Bar Graphs:

Our Changing Population: US. *USA Facts*.

[https://usafacts.org/data/topics/people-society/population-and-demographics/our-changing-population/?endDate=2021-01-01&startDate=2010-01-01,](https://usafacts.org/data/topics/people-society/population-and-demographics/our-changing-population/?endDate=2021-01-01&startDate=2010-01-01)

Annual death rate by age group, United States. *Our World in Data*.

[https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/annual-death-rate-by-age-group?time=2006,](https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/annual-death-rate-by-age-group?time=2006)

Annual deaths by age group, United States. *Our World in Data*.

[https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/annual-deaths-by-age?time=2010&country=~USA,](https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/annual-deaths-by-age?time=2010&country=~USA)

COVID Deaths by Year. *Statistics & Facts*.

<https://www.theglobalstatistics.com/covid-deaths-by-year/>

Hat tip to **Mark Kulacz** (Housatonic) for linking the opioid epidemic to the decline in life expectancy and **Jonathan Couey** (Gigaohm Biological) for linking the demographic transition to the COVID-19 body count. All of this research is follow-up to ideas conveyed on their podcasts.



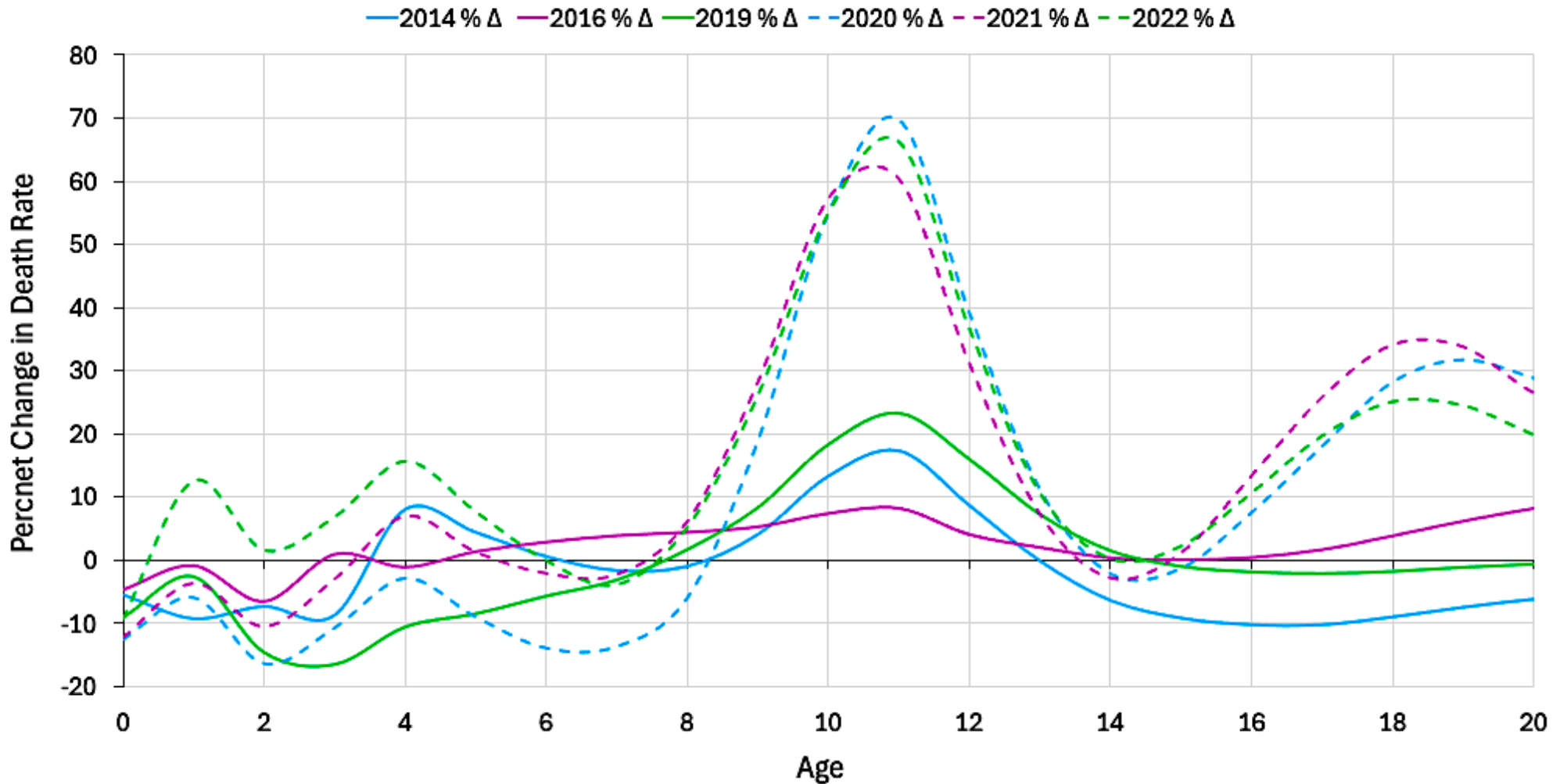
<https://rumble.com/user/Housatonic>



<https://gigaohmbiological.com/>

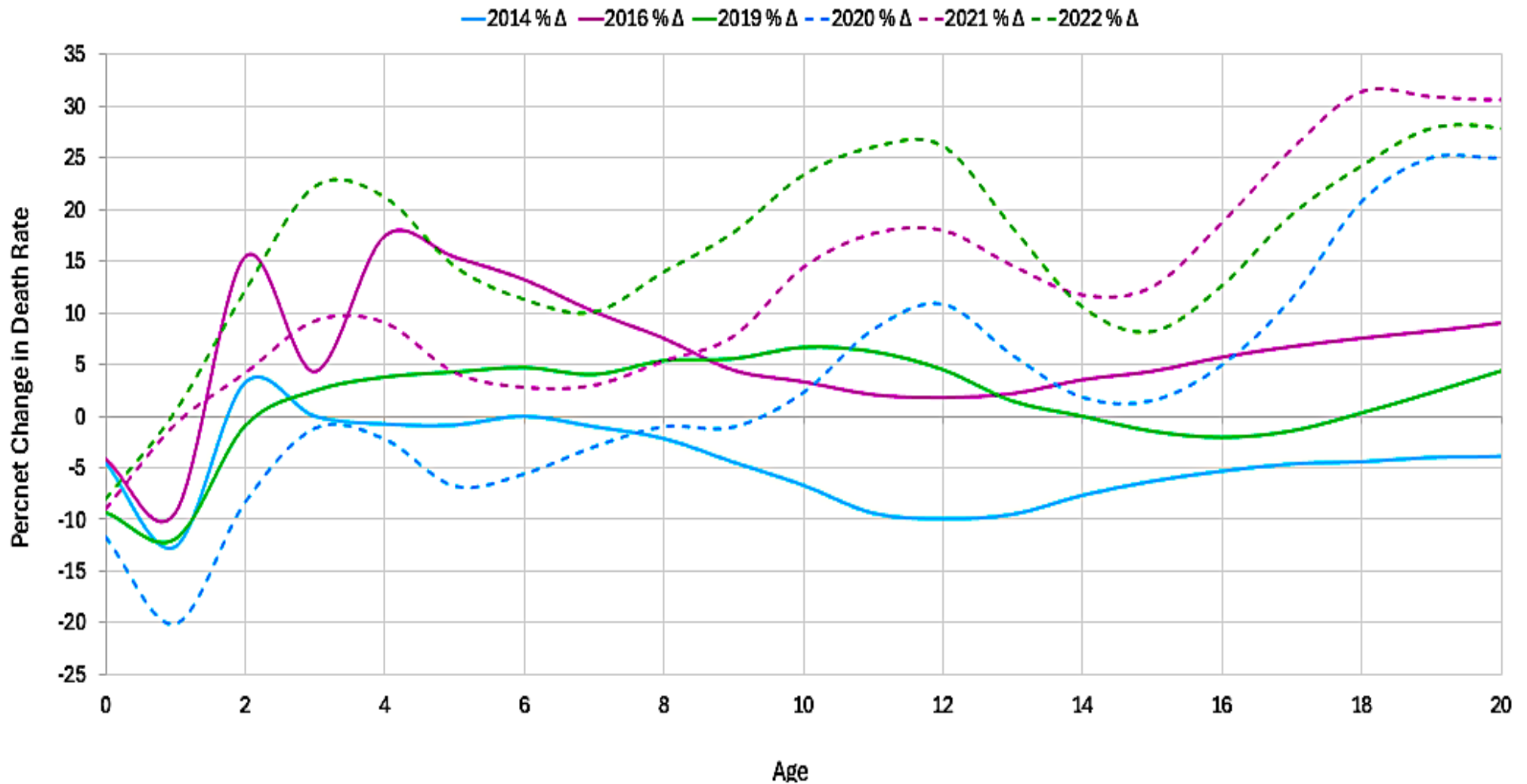
Addendum: There was an unusual surge in the death rate of American males ages 10-11.

Changes in the Death Rate of American Males Ages 0-20 Using 2010 as the Baseline



This unexplained pattern is much less evident in females.

Changes in the Death Rate of American Females Ages 0-20 Using 2010 as the Baseline



The difference is more evident when these graphs are displayed side-by-side.

