

Overall and Healthy Life Expectancy among a Vanguard Population in the United States

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There is great interest in the health and longevity among vanguard populations—those groups who experience the best health and lowest mortality. A key vanguard population in contemporary societies is individuals who do not engage in risky health behaviors. Using nationally representative data from the United States, we estimate total and disability-free life expectancy for this vanguard population. We find that at age 50 vanguard men and women have an 8 (men) and 7 (women) year advantage in total life expectancy compared to non-vanguards. Strikingly, nearly this entire differential is due to time spent disability-free. These preliminary results suggest that health behaviors strongly predict the onset of disability, but have a small role on the propagation from disability to death. We contextualize our findings with the broader literature on vanguard populations and the role of health behaviors in influencing time spent in different health states.