



Americans' Changing Lives

January 2019



Director's Note—Dr. Margaret Hicken

Happy New Year! I am honored to oversee this next stage of the Americans' Changing Lives Study, one of the longest, ongoing studies of American adults. I have spent much of my career studying how our social lives impact health, with a particular focus on how the inequalities in our social and economic circumstances may result in inequalities in health. I look forward to working with you to clarify these relationships to improve the health of all Americans.

Because of your participation in the study, we have been able to show how our work, family, and social lives affect our health. In this newsletter, you will find information about some of the research we have accomplished with your help. In the coming months, you will receive information about what is happening with the study and how you can continue to participate. Your participation is critical to the success of the study — but more importantly — to our understanding of the factors that affect health. Thank you for your contribution so far and I look forward to working with you this year!



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Visit our new website to learn more about ACL and the study team:

<https://acl.isr.umich.edu/>

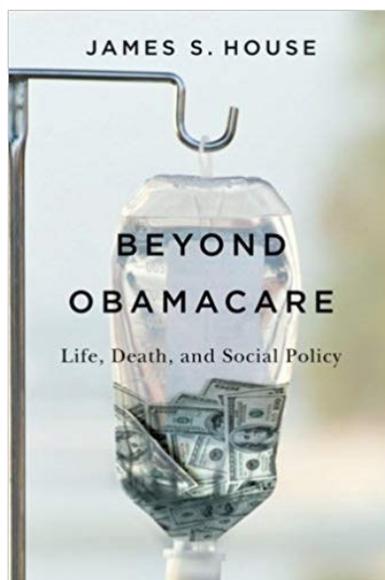
Benefits of benevolence: Volunteering and health

Nearly 25% of adults ages 55 and older volunteer their time in some way. This is important because the way we spend our free time can have important effects on our health and wellbeing.

Research using ACL data shows that older adults who spent time volunteering also experienced greater levels of physical and mental wellbeing. You may recall that the ACL interview includes questions about your volunteering activities,

including how much time you spend each week in these types of activities and whether you think that these activities are benefiting others. Researchers examined this information on volunteering from the first wave of ACL in relation to health information in later waves of ACL. They examined such health indicators as how you rated your overall health, whether you experienced various depressive symptoms, and how many physical challenges you experience with your daily activities. Even after accounting for social differences (such as age and income), those who reported greater levels of volunteering reported lower levels of depression and physical limitations and better overall health in later years compared to those who reported lower levels of volunteering.

Finding time to get involved in our communities benefits others — and ourselves!



Beyond Obamacare

In the US, when it come to policy discussions about health, we tend to focus only on health care. However, ACL Founding Director, James House, has spent his career showing that we need to focus on social policies if we want to improve the health of the nation. Using ACL data, he shows that social initiatives such as housing, education and civil rights, far beyond health care initiatives, are linked to healthy lives.

Resilience and change after the death of a parent

Many people spend one-half to two-thirds of their lives with at least one living parent. When a parent dies, feelings of distress may arise. Despite often being settled into a career or raising one's own children, the death of a parent is often a profound experience for us even well into adulthood. Using information from the ACL, along with additional interviews, Dr. Debra Umberson examined how grief and mourning are experienced by adults after the death of a parent.

She discovered that following the death of a parent, middle-aged adults experienced better relationships with their own children. As parents, we may choose to either mimic or avoid the child-rearing styles of our own parents. Dr. Umberson explored the death of a parent as an opportunity for healthy development, even as a turning point in one's adult life. Bereaved adults may transform their beliefs, goals, or their entire adult identity.

If you're interested in learning more about this research on of the processes of bereavement in adulthood, see if your local library or bookstore has: *Death of a Parent*.



Looking On the Bright Side

Optimism is the tendency to be hopeful about the future and to emphasize the positive aspects of a situation. It is a resource that has positive consequences for health and life chances. However, optimism is also related to our social circumstances, such as our educational level and our income, and traumatic events that we may have



experienced. Using ACL data, researchers have shown that optimism also changes throughout our lives — it is not something static we are born with. Because of the health benefits, ACL researchers are currently studying the factors that might increase optimism in the face of challenging circumstances. Stay tuned in the coming year for updates on this important research.



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