

A reader asks: is life expectancy in America declining?

By Nicholas Staropoli — June 3, 2015



Reader Question: I keep seeing

this commercial made for Citi that

makes the following claim: "For the first time American kids are slated to live a shorter lifespan than their parents." This has to be false. Please investigate.

The [commercial](#) [1] in question describes [Revolution Foods](#) [2], a company that claims to be focused on fighting childhood obesity in America by providing nutritious meals to children in low income areas. According to the company's spokeswoman featured on the commercial, Citi is named as their collaborator, although it is not specified if that means anything other than financial support. One of the founders worked for Citi (which is the public logo of Citigroup and Citibank these days).

In examining their website, it remains difficult to tell where Revolution Foods falls on the food science spectrum (which spans the science-based Sci Babe through the inane, nonsense-purveying Food Babe). Their food [philosophy](#) [3] uses such superfluous health buzzwords as super foods and natural but they also don't appear to oppose GMOs nor do they push too much in the way of food fads like gluten free. They say that the meals they sell are always prepared fresh and range from sloppy joes to chicken wings.

With childhood obesity still a major problem in this country, it appears that Food Revolutions might be a positive force in the public health arena. But our reader is right: this statistic on life expectancy doesn't pass the smell test. Furthermore, they also claim in the commercial that over 20 million kids every day in our country lack access to healthy foods, which also sounds fishy.

Since they did not respond to a request for the data that back up these claims, I went looking for some: here's what I found: The earliest mention of this decreasing lifespan trend, appears to be from Yvette Cooper, a former Public Health minister in the United Kingdom. In a [speech](#) [4] from October of 2000, she explained that there is now a **risk** that the increase in life expectancy that we have seen in recent years **could** be lost for the next generation (*emphasis added*). The main

reasons she cited for this were childhood obesity, and diseases associated with obesity (e.g. heart disease, type 2 diabetes).

Similarly in March of 2004, Richard H. Carmona, then Surgeon General of the United States, [said](#) ^[5] before a Senate subcommittee on Competition, Infrastructure, and Foreign Commerce that because of the increasing rates of obesity, unhealthy eating habits, and physical inactivity, we **may** see the first generation that will be less healthy and have a shorter life expectancy than their parents (*emphasis added*).

One of the first mentions of the possible declining life expectancy in the scientific literature was published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in [March](#) ^[6] of 2005. The authors explain: we see a threatening storm obesity that will, **if unchecked**, have a negative effect on life expectancy (*emphasis added*). The authors did some calculations in their paper but did not actually calculate life expectancy. Instead they calculated the reduction in the rates of death that would occur if everyone who is currently obese were to lose enough weight to obtain an optimal BMI. The results of these calculations suggest that if very obese people lost weight, they would live longer. Not a really shocking discovery, nor one that says anything about the trend in life expectancy.

The article goes on to explain that other factors such as the possibility of an infectious disease pandemic (À la the 1918-19 influenza pandemic) and only modest medical advances in coming decades could lead us towards a decline in life expectancy. However, as the two aforementioned public health officials also did, the authors stopped short of saying it has already happened: **Unless** effective population-level interventions to reduce obesity are developed, the steady rise in life expectancy observed in the modern era may soon come to an end and the youth of today **may**, on average, live less healthy and **possibly** even shorter lives than their parents (*emphasis added*).

Through the years, many public health advocates working to raise awareness of childhood obesity have repeated this warning [too](#) ^[7]: at some point, life expectancy could decrease if the prevalence of childhood obesity were to increase.

What appears to have happened is that sometime along the way, someone changed it from this COULD happen to this HAS ALREADY HAPPENED or IS HAPPENING, and they did it without consulting any data. Two of the most infamous culprits of spreading this claim have been FLOTUS [Michelle Obama](#) ^[8] and Celebrity Chef [Jamie Oliver](#) ^[9]. The latter actually went as far to tell an audience that life expectancy for their children is already a *decade* shorter than theirs.

What the data actually say is that since the 1940 s, life expectancy at birth has steadily increased. The latest CDC figures show that life [expectancy](#) ^[10] in the USA is 78.8, while the [World Bank](#) ^[11] has it at 78.7, either way these values are the [highest in recorded history for America](#) ^[12].

What is true and troubling about our life expectancy is that it lags behind other [developed countries](#) [13], many of which have life spans well over 80 years. It is also possible that the *rate of increase in life expectancy* in America is beginning to lag, possibly because of obesity. In 2005, a Social Security Administration report estimated that American life expectancy in 2050 would reach [81.2](#) [14] years. However, a MacArthur Research Network on an Aging Society [report](#) [15] in 2009 suggested that this number was low by as many as 8 years and American life expectancy in 2050 will be close to 90, so maybe not.

The life expectancy claim is baseless. Now for their other claim that over 20 million kids every day in our country lack access to healthy foods. It is hard to pin down exactly where they got this from. It may have come from this statistic: According to a [report](#) [16], almost 20 million school children receive a free lunch through the National School Lunch Program, which provides subsidized lunches to children in low-income families. Although the program is not perfect (this is the program that defines pizza as a vegetable), it would be a stretch to say that because a child is enrolled in it they lack access to healthy food. In 2011, The Office of the First Lady released a statement that put this number at around [6 million](#) [17]. The statement also described the number of Americans lacking access to healthy foods at just over 23 million: maybe the folks at Revolution Foods think all Americans are children.

Revolution Foods appears to have a worthy mission statement and an action plan that is based on making positive strides for public health in the fight against childhood obesity. However, their data are misleading and border on fearmongering using these unethical methods can be harmful to even the worthiest of causes. It reminds me of a popular saying *A bad argument in favor of a good idea, does that idea more harm than a good argument against it.*

If you see questionable science in the world and would like it investigated, feel free to email us at morning@acsh.org [18]

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[2] <http://revolutionfoods.com/>

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[4] <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/health-news/children-likely-to-live-shorter-lives-than-their-parents-634237.html>

[5] <http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/news/testimony/childobesity03022004.html>

[6] <http://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMsr043743>

[7] <http://www.nysun.com/new-york/clinton-steps-into-fray-over-fat/27531/>

[8] <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/hey-michelle-stop-picking-on-fat-kids/>

[9] <http://dinersjournal.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/02/11/jamie-oliver-wins-ted-prize-for-obesity-efforts/>

[10] http://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/78_fig1.jpg

[11]

https://www.google.com/publicdata/explore?ds=d5bncppjof8f9_&met_y=sp_dyn_le00_in&idim=country:USA:

- [12] <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2014/10/08/us-life-expectancy-hits-record-high/16874039/>
- [13] http://gamapserver.who.int/gho/interactive_charts/mbd/life_expectancy/atlas.html
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