The Great Debate on the Outlook for Human Longevity: Exposition and Evaluation of Two Divergent Views

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Abstract

Several leading gerontologists are engaged in a spirited and even vituperous debate regarding the prospects for human longevity. The issue is what life expectancy will be just after mid-century in the industrialized countries, and, more particularly, in the United States in 2060. The debate on the future of life expectancy is closely linked to such issues as the possibilities for extending average recorded human life span, the existence of limits to human life span and life expectancy, the form of the trajectory of age-specific mortality rates at the highest ages of life and the utility of developing projections of mortality on the basis of causes of death, particularly as aggregated in the categories of intrinsic (or endogenous) and extrinsic (or exogenous) mortality.

This paper sets forth the elements of the two main positions and critically examines them. Many of the arguments on each side are cogent, and I found it hard to reconcile the two positions. I conclude, therefore, with an intermediate position that accepts the principal arguments of each side without fully embracing the conclusions of either. I illustrate some of the arguments on the basis of data for the United States.