

HOST: David Huang is the chief of the health promotion statistics branch at NCHS, and serves as the center's primary statistical advisor on the Healthy People initiative. Healthy People for decades now has been identifying science-based objectives with targets to monitor progress and motivate and focus action aimed at improving the health of the nation.

HOST: So there are obviously - since the beginning of the program - there've been hundreds and hundreds of objectives set. Do you have any sort of gauge of how many objectives or what percent of the objectives of we've met over the years or exceeded?

DAVID HUANG: Sure - so we look at these really decade by decade. And for Healthy People 2020, which we're closing out now, there were 985 trackable objectives, which were those with at least a baseline and one or more follow up data points. And of these 985, 334 of these - which is about a third - had met or exceeded their targets at the end of the decade. This compares with Healthy People 2010, where 172 of 733 - or about 1/4 of trackable objectives - met or exceeded their targets. Note that over the decades, the balance and composition of objectives as well as target setting methods themselves do vary, so any of these sorts of comparisons across decades should be taken with a grain of salt.

HOST: Right, so it's not a direct apples to apples comparison but your goal is always to increase the proportion that are met?

DAVID HUANG: Yes and no. I mean I think certainly we do want to say that we've met more and more of our targets, but on the flip side you know some of that is directly related to how the targets are set as well as I mentioned kind of the balance and composition of the objectives themselves, so again not an apples to apples comparison. It's certainly something that the Department and Healthy People stakeholders are paying attention to.

HOST: Now you alluded to COVID-19 - what happens when new health challenges appear on the scene, such as COVID-19?

DAVID HUANG: One of the hallmarks of the Healthy People initiative is its ability to incorporate new science and innovation as well as emerging health priorities. For example, Healthy People 2030 includes science-based objectives related to opioids and social determinants of health, which are top priorities for HHS and for the nation. The initiative itself does allow the flexibility for new objectives to be added or even dropped as the decade progresses. The new Healthy People 2030 website actually features a resource for building customizable lists of objectives that can be used to curate objectives that are relevant to specific goals. So even though there isn't anything necessarily specific on COVID-19 in Healthy People 2030, HHS has used this tool to develop a custom list of 2030 objectives that are directly related to COVID-19 and that list is actually available to the public on the Healthy People website.

HOST: Before we get into some specifics as far as progress made in these objectives, in looking at the new tables I noticed that in some cases there's more recent data than what you're referring to as far as the end point. I'll use some of the cancer death measures - I think 2017 was used and even though there was great progress made on that there's obviously more recent data than 2017. So we're just curious why you don't use the latest year of data?

DAVID HUANG: So what you're referring to is the set of progress tables that we developed for the Healthy People 2020 final review, which is our end of decade assessment of progress. And because we were dealing with so many objectives and data sources we had to choose a data cutoff and for the Healthy People 2020 final review, that cutoff was January of 2020. So yes, we certainly acknowledge we don't necessarily have the latest available data for this report, but the intention is really to be looking across all objectives which is a broad range of objectives. And certainly we would encourage folks to look to other sources, such as Healthy People 2030 as well as other indicator projects and programs to find the actual latest available data for each individual indicator.

HOST: Our thanks to David Huang for joining us on this edition of “Statcast.”

MUSIC BRIDGE:

HOST: This week the country reached a grim milestone in the fight against drug abuse. NCHS released the latest [monthly provisional numbers](#) showing more than 90,000 Americans lost their lives due to drug overdoses in the one-year period ending in September 2020. This figure was nearly 29% higher than the total observed the year before. Over 2/3 of those deaths - or nearly 67,000 - involved an opioid of some kind. As has been the case for the last several years, fentanyl and other synthetic opioids are the drugs driving this increase. Among the 50 U.S. states and DC, only South Dakota saw a decline in overdose deaths from the previous year.

NCHS also released a new [report](#) this week on flu vaccination among U.S. children. Using data from the 2019 National Health Interview Survey, NCHS determined that just over half of children six months of age up to age 17 received a flu vaccine in the past year, and that older children were less likely to receive a flu vaccine than younger children.