



# NATIVE HAWAIIAN LIFE EXPECTANCY INCREASES; DISPARITIES PERSIST



## KEY FINDINGS

- Hawai'i has the longest life expectancy in the US--82 years
- Native Hawaiian life expectancy has increased from 63 in 1950 to 77 in 2010
- Yet, the life expectancy for kānaka maoli is almost 6 years shorter than the average person in Hawai'i and 11 years shorter than their Chinese counterparts
- More must be done to improve Native Hawaiian Health along the life course

## Who are the kānaka maoli?

The Polynesian ancestors of Kānaka Maoli (Native Hawaiians) were seafaring voyagers from the South Pacific who sailed from their homes around A.D. 100 and settled in Hawai'i. They were a self-sufficient and self-governed population with lifestyles and social structures in harmony with their environment.

Somewhere between 400,000 to 800,000 kānaka maoli lived in relative isolation at the time of Captain James Cook's arrival in 1778. Modern scholarship estimates a devastating 90% population decline, from foreign diseases, by 1890.

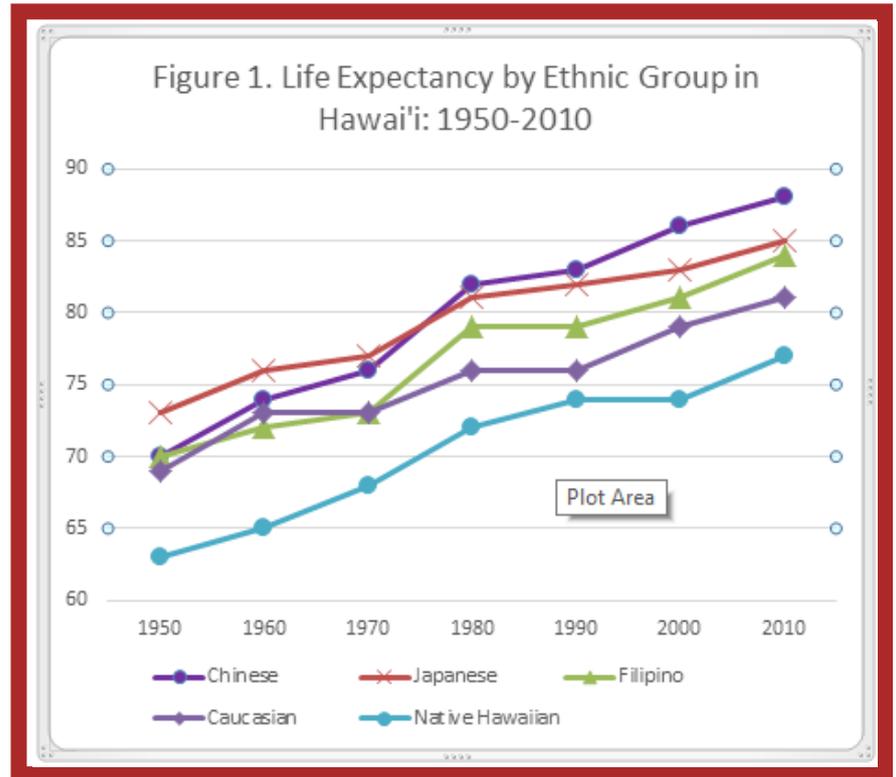
After the death of Kamehameha I in 1819 and the first arrival of Christian missionaries in 1820, Hawaiian society was in upheaval as it wrestled with drastic changes. Throughout the 19th-century, kānaka innovated ways to use new tools and skills to protect their interests. However, the mass depopulation, coupled with missionary descendants seizing land and political power, effectively disenfranchised Hawaiians. This culminated in 1893, when a group of businessmen, backed by the U.S. military, overthrew Queen Lili'uokalani -- eventually clearing the way for the illegal annexation of Hawai'i by the U.S. in 1898.

# Hawaiians Today: Increasing Life Expectancy, but continued disparities

Despite the loss of lands, rights and population, Native Hawaiians have shown great resilience in their preservation and revival of language and cultural practices.

“Life Expectancy” is a measure of population health. It can be calculated mathematically using death record and population data available through the Hawai'i Department of Health.

The life expectancy of Native Hawaiians has increased by 14 years--from 63 years in 1950 to 77 years in 2010 (Figure 1). However, the life expectancy for Native Hawaiians is still lower than that of other groups in Hawai'i. Although the gap is decreasing between Hawaiians and Caucasians, it is increasing between Hawaiians and Japanese and Chinese.



## Why these differences?

Substantial variation in socio-economic status, health behavior, and health care access exists across ethnic groups in Hawai'i. These disparities could be reduced by increasing the minimum wage to a “living” wage, expanding affordable housing options, and assuring access to good quality health care and education for all.

More research is needed to understand other possible risk factors, such as racism and adverse childhood events. Strengthening resilience-building factors is also important. More efforts are needed to improve Native Hawaiian health across the life course, which will ultimately result in life expectancy parity.



*Increasing the life expectancy of Native Hawaiians is important so that mo'opuna and kūpuna have more time together, to share stories and make memories. Photo courtesy of the 'Ohana Hughes*

*The goal of Hā Kūpuna National Resource Center for Native Hawaiian Elders is to assure the transmission of hā (breath of life; wisdom) from older to younger generations by improving access to and delivery of services to Native Hawaiian elders and their caregivers. Our research focuses on health, wellness, and resilience of Native Hawaiians.*