
References

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Longevity of Jazz Musicians: Flawed Analysis

Spencer¹ claimed that his statistical analysis of the longevity of jazz musicians refutes the belief that jazz musicians are more likely than others to die untimely deaths. Unfortunately, his analysis is grossly flawed. He compared the age at death of 86 noted jazz musicians with the

age of death of all United States residents. This comparison is biased because noted jazz musicians have a head start of several decades of life on the representative citizen, whose longevity was counted from birth. No one is classified as a jazz musician at birth, no matter how auspicious the circumstances. Any death before the age of 20, say, would shorten the average life span considerably, but could not affect the longevity of noted jazz musicians.

The correct method is to compare age-specific mortality rates; it would be interesting to learn if Spencer can maintain his assertion in the light of a valid analysis. The same fallacy (of comparing mean age at death rather than age-specific death rates) was committed by Halpern and Coren in an analysis of the longevity of left-handed people.² Their article led to widespread discussion of the handicaps suffered by left-handers.³ Left-handers, fortunately, have no reason to expect an early demise, but the fate of jazz musicians remains unresolved. □

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Jazz Musicians: "Live Fast, Die Young" Stereotype Not Refuted

Frederick Spencer's recent letter to *AJPH* presenting data on the longevity of jazz musicians is a valuable contribution, but one that may be vitiated by ascertainment bias.¹ He analyzed data on a sample of musicians "listed in a university syllabus." He acknowledged limitations on inferences due to the size and sex distribution of his sample. But a more important limitation may be the selectivity of the sample, which could consist disproportionately of those who survived long enough to earn the necessary recognition (and enjoyed sufficient good health to endure the itinerant life of a performing artist) thereby achieving a place in the curriculum. A more powerful refutation of the "Live fast, die young" stereotype would come from analysis of a sample more representative of the universe of jazz musicians. □

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Reference

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