

# **Despair and Dis Some Que**

**MORTAL Works**

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# Power of simple narrative

Our contribution was to link drug overdoses, suicides, and alcohol-related deaths, to show that **all were rising together**, that together they were **afflicting mostly whites**, and that among that group, the long fall in total mortality had stopped or reversed. We also chose the collective label “deaths of despair,” which helped publicize the combined epidemic and emphasize that it includes more than just drug overdose.

**Is this narrative co**

Artifact of selection?  
Due to ‘deaths of  
despair’?  
Mechanisms?

**Adult life expectancy at age  
graduates**

— Life expectancy without BA — L

60 years beyond age 25

58

56

54

52

50

48

1995

2000

**Source:** Authors' calculations using info  
certificates from the National Vital Stat



Mortality increases largely confined to bottom 10th percentile of education.

Selection bias likely explains some of the  $e_{25}$  gap increase.

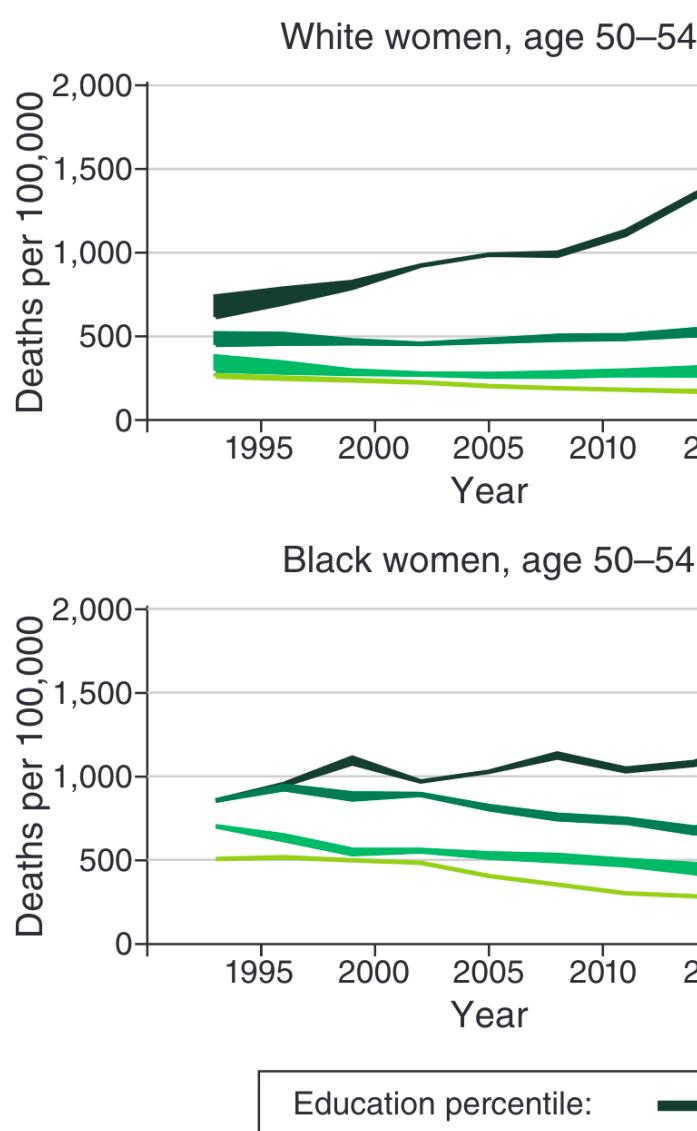
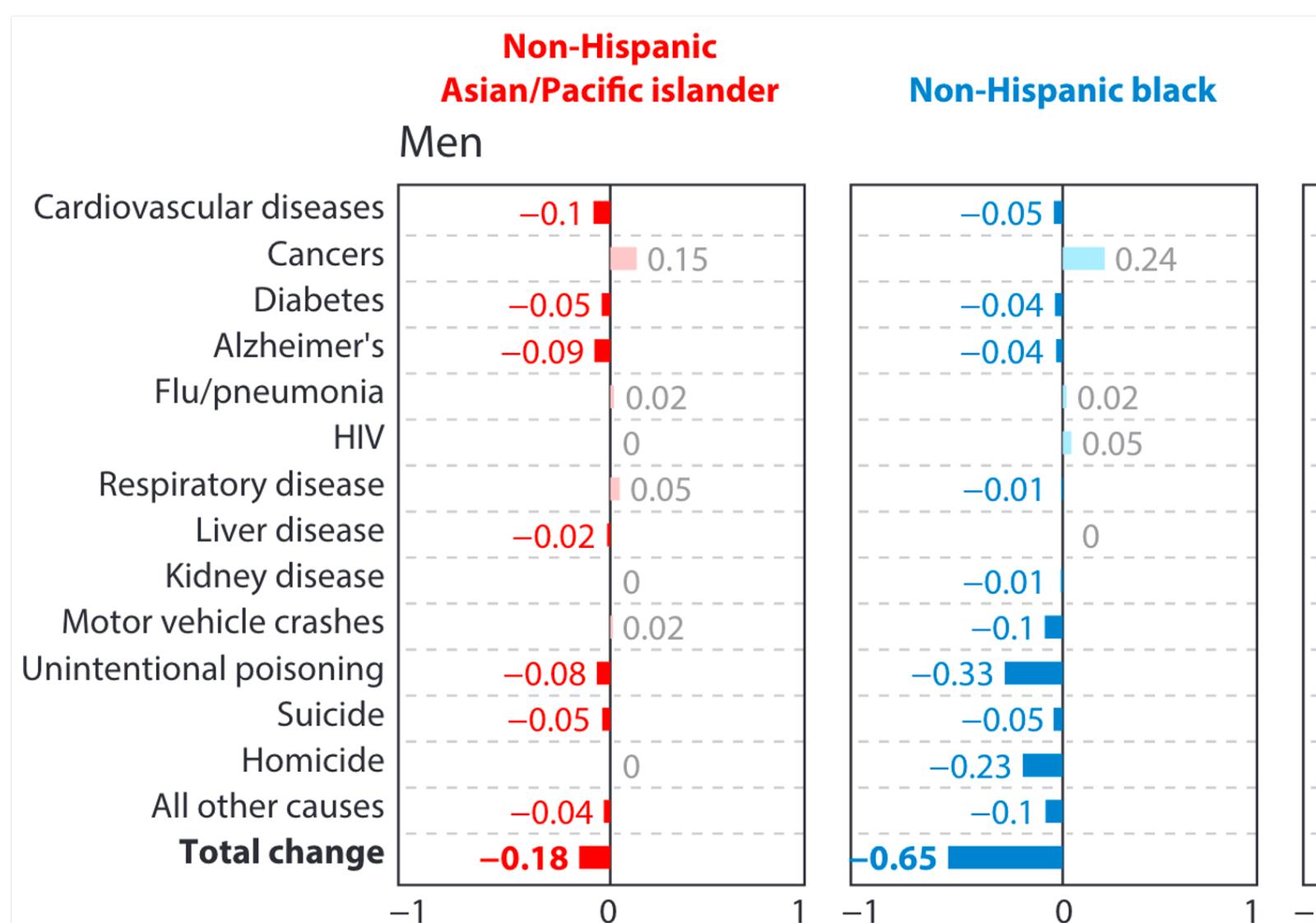


FIGURE 5. ALL-CAUSE MORTALITY RATE, AGE 50–54

# Limited evidence for ‘deaths from despair’

- Not aligned with cause-specific deaths by race, age, and place.
- Weak spatial and temporal correlations between drug, alcohol, and suicide deaths.
- Declines in CVD also important for mortality slowdowns.
- Opioid overdose deaths largely responsible for trends.

# Contributors to change in $e_0$ 2014-2017,



- Much faster increases in opioid overdoses among Blacks *and* American Indian and Alaska Natives in recent years.
- Cannot be chiefly explained by the loss of economic opportunities among NH whites.

Drug o  
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Note: All r  
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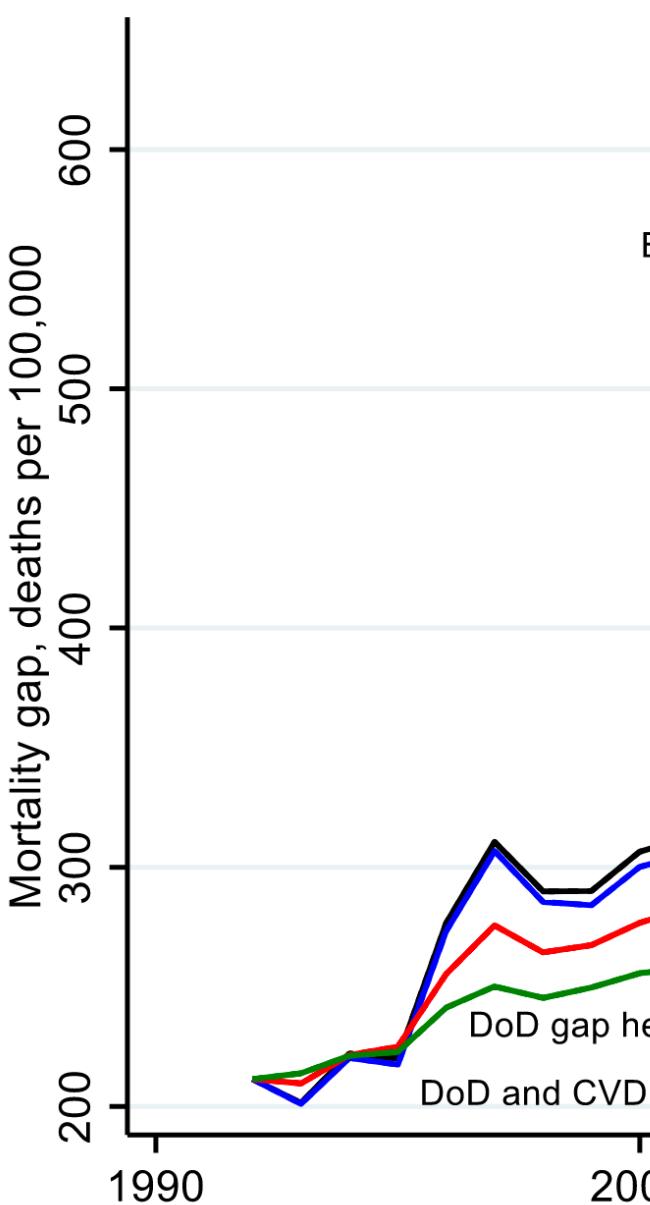
PEW RES

**Table 2.** Change in Years of Life Lost between Ages 25 and 84, by Race, Sex, Education, and Cause Files, Decennial Census, and American Community Survey.

	Non-Hispanic White Men								
	Low Ed			High Ed			Change in Gap	% Share of Total	1990
	1990	2015	Chg	1990	2015	Chg			
Opioids and other drugs	.29	1.57	1.28	.13	.63	.49	.79	24	
Non-drug suicide	.61	.82	.21	.37	.47	.10	.11	3	
Alcoholic liver	.22	.30	.07	.13	.16	.03	.04	1	
<b>Total deaths of despair</b>	<b>1.12</b>	<b>2.68</b>	<b>1.56</b>	<b>.63</b>	<b>1.25</b>	<b>.62</b>	<b>.94</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Cardiovascular disease</b>	<b>5.03</b>	<b>3.63</b>	<b>-1.39</b>	<b>4.14</b>	<b>2.13</b>	<b>-2.00</b>	<b>.61</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>5</b>
Lung cancer	1.59	1.09	-.50	1.16	.54	-.61	.11	3	1
Other cancer	2.00	2.20	.20	2.09	1.61	-.48	.68	21	2
HIV	.31	.05	-.26	.39	.03	-.36	.09	3	1
Other infectious disease	.16	.35	.19	.13	.17	.05	.14	4	
Diabetes	.27	.45	.18	.21	.26	.04	.14	4	
Lower respiratory	.67	.81	.13	.43	.36	-.07	.20	6	
Kidney disease	.09	.18	.09	.06	.10	.04	.05	2	
Other liver	.16	.19	.02	.11	.09	-.02	.04	1	
Mental/behavioral	.08	.12	.04	.04	.08	.04	.00	0	
Other internal	1.35	1.88	.52	.98	1.09	.12	.41	12	2
Accidents/undetermined	1.26	1.09	-.17	.60	.54	-.07	-.10	-3	1
Homicide	.26	.16	-.10	.08	.05	-.03	-.07	-2	2
All other causes	.02	.03	.01	.02	.02	.00	.01	0	
<b>Total</b>	<b>14.38</b>	<b>14.91</b>	<b>.53</b>	<b>11.07</b>	<b>8.34</b>	<b>-2.72</b>	<b>3.26</b>		<b>19</b>

CVD and cancers  
now part of the  
story?

Age-adjusted 25-84 mortality gaps



**What about de**

# Consequences of vague

Rising despair as fertile ground for abuse  
self-soothing...

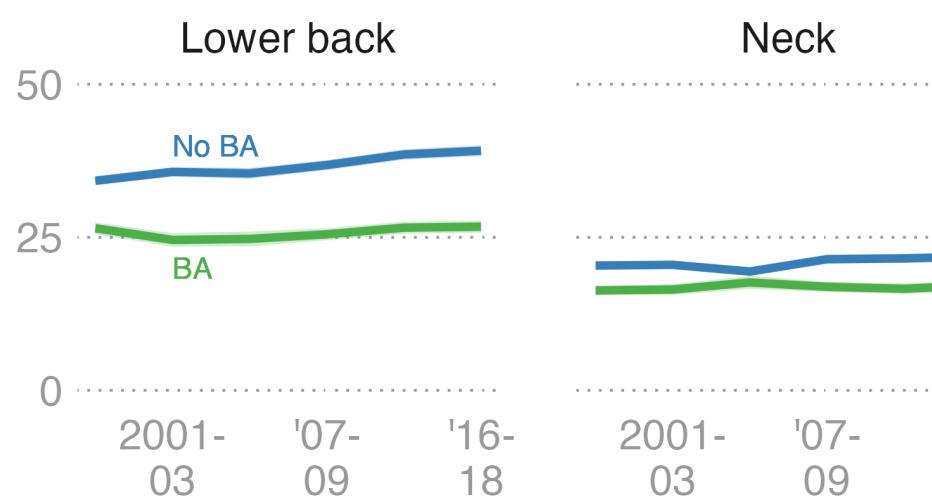
...broad consensus that [pain and despair]  
have been increasing for decades...

...an ocean of pain and distress among  
educated Americans

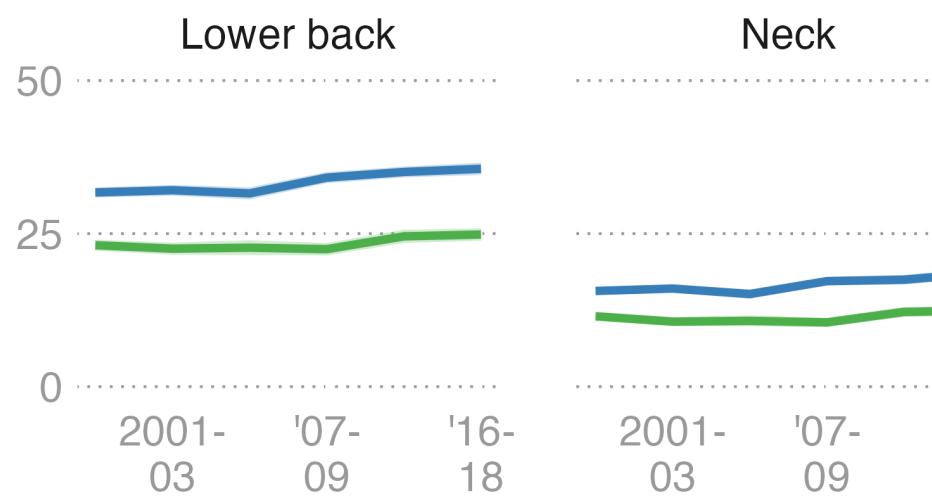
Is this an  
'ocean' of  
pain?  
Can it drive  
up mortality?

% adults ages 25+ reporting pain lasting a day

### Women



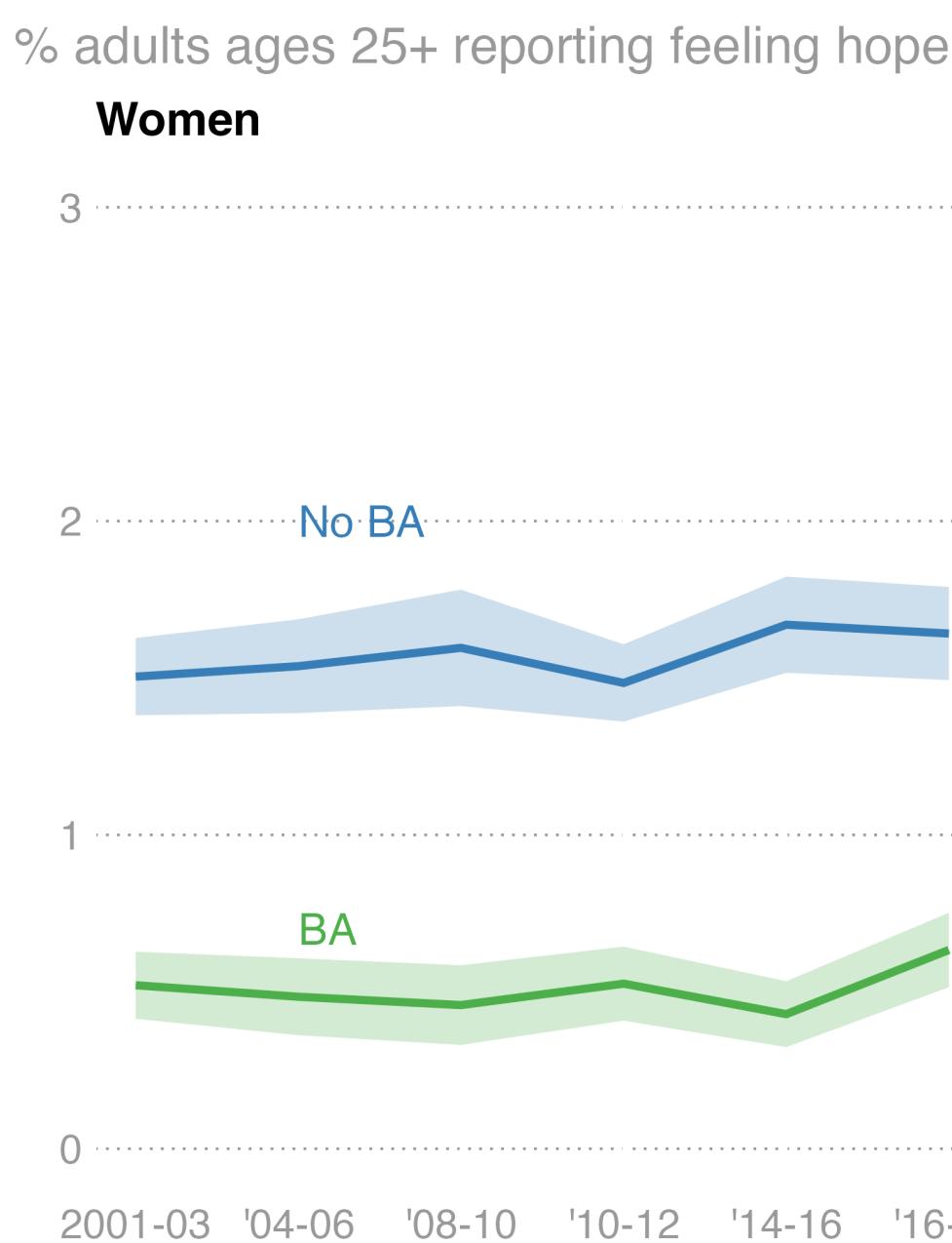
### Men



Source: Author's calculations of NHIS. See also Zaiacova et

**Similarly flat  
for ‘A little  
or some’  
hopelessness.**

**Few  
differences  
by race.**

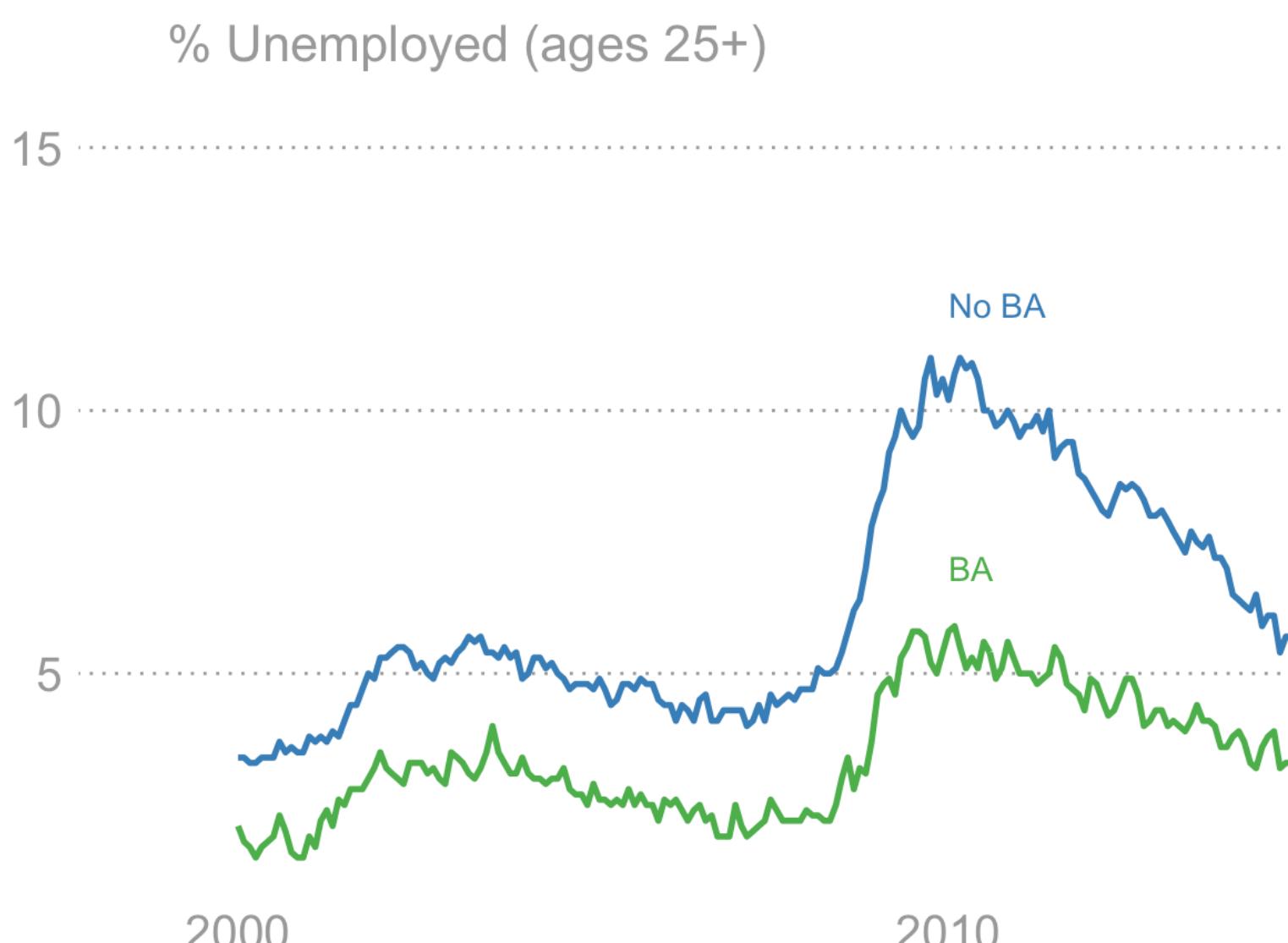


Source: Author’s calculations of NHIS.

**What about disad**

We propose a preliminary but plausible mechanism in which cumulative disadvantage from one birth cohort to the next—in the labor market, in marriage and child outcomes, and in the family—  
is triggered by progressively worsening labor market opportunities at the time of entry for **whites with low levels of education**.

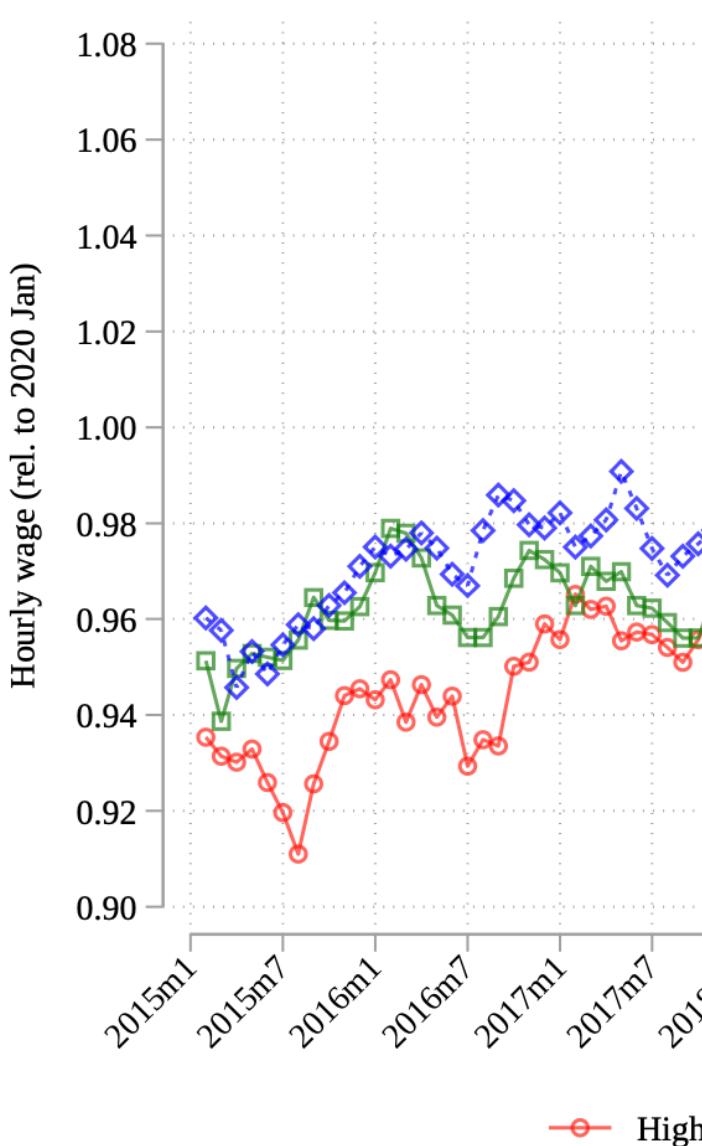
Unemployment gaps have remained large



Source: Federal Reserve Bank

# The college wage premium

- Had risen since early 1980s.
- Rapid growth at bottom of wage distribution since 2012.
- Stronger for those under age 40.



# Parting thoughts

- Economic life is demonstrably worse for those without a BA.
- Evidence linking the ‘tangle of pathology’ to limited.
- More recent work by CD reflects some of the critics.
- Excessive focus on narrative of ‘despair’ and disadvantage draws attention away from important causes, interventions, and policy groups.

**Question**  
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