A widely discussed paper published last year by Samuel H. Preston, the Frederick J. Warren Professor of Demography, and Jessica Ho, a Penn demography graduate student, takes issue with the popular caricature of a flawed U.S. health care delivery system that yields poor results at a high cost. In their study, Preston and Ho report significantly faster declines in mortality in the United States than elsewhere in the developed world for prostate and breast cancer—diseases that may reflect the quality of health care because effective methods of screening and treatment exist and behavioral factors are relatively less significant.

Preston is currently co-chairing a National Research Council subcommittee exploring divergent trends in longevity at older ages in developed countries. He, along with co-authors Dana Glei and John Wilmoth, have found much clearer evidence that the lower life expectancy of Americans, in comparison to their counterparts in other developed countries, is a reflection of the impact of cigarette smoking.
New research documents how the life expectancy of Americans stacks up to Europeans when smoking is taken into account.

For American women, smoking accounts for a reduction in life expectancy of nearly 2.5 years; removing the impact of smoking raises the rank of women’s life expectancy in the United States from 17th to seventh.

Other work that Preston and his collaborators published in 2009 demonstrated the impact of changing patterns of smoking among men and women on differences in mortality by gender and used this information to project sex mortality differences for the next 30 years.