

SLLS Conference 2025: Keynote Presentation

A Midlife Disrupted: Work Disability and Illness Spells in Life Course Perspective

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Midlife is a critically important time in the life course, for individuals and for society. Adults in midlife are the intergenerational linkage between their (grand)parents and their (grand)children. Many midlife adults are engaged in paid work, making them key drivers of the economy. They may be providing care upward to older relatives and simultaneously raising or supporting their children. Fundamentally, a successful midlife balancing these many demands depends on having reliably good health. Spells of ill health or degenerating conditions can place pressures on the time, money, and energy that midlife individuals need to give to their myriad roles, potentially setting off a cascade of adverse circumstances that degrade later-life well-being.

This talk has two aims. First, to situate midlife health disruptions in the life course perspective, exploring the roles of selection, linked lives, and age-graded institutions. Second, to present some preliminary findings on the prevalence, timing, order, and duration of midlife health disruptions using the Life History Survey of the *Health and Retirement Study*. I will then discuss, based on the life course principles outlined above, potential impacts of midlife disruptions on later-life social, economic, and health circumstances.