
Why Do Educated People Live Longer?

By Editor Test *Wed, Jun 16, 2010*

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The mortality gap between males with and without a college degree has risen 21 percentage points from 1971 to 2000, so that by the last turn of the century college-educated 25-year-olds could expect to live seven longer than their peers with less schooling.

In a new research paper, "Explaining the Rise in Educational Gradients in Mortality," David Cutler and Ellen Meara of Harvard, Fabian Lange of Yale, Seth Richards of Penn and Christopher Ruhm of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, try to explain the gap.

Even after controlling for smoking and body weight, the college-educated have lower expected mortality rates than their less educated peers. The authors estimate that differential changes in smoking and obesity would have led to a 4 or 5 point decrease, not 21 percentage points. For women, patterns of smoking and obesity only can explain approximately 3 points out of the 42 percentage-point increase.

One possible explanation was that the highly educated have better access to medical care and better adherence rates to prescribed regimes. Another is that environmental and geographically based risks may have declined more over time for the highly educated.

Although they weren't sure why, the authors thought that even the complete elimination of disparities in behavioral risks across education groups would be unlikely to do away with education-differentials in mortality. A summary of the study did not mention the well-established association between education, wealth and longevity, or whether that association has strengthened over the past several decades.

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