

UNNATURAL CAUSES...is inequality making us sick?

A four-hour series airing on PBS and a national public impact campaign

Education

Background: Education is an important predictor of health because it both shapes and reflects so many other factors that affect people's life chances. In fact, many public health advocates believe investing in education is the single most effective intervention we can make to improve health outcomes and tackle inequities. One study estimated eliminating educational inequities would have saved eight times as many lives as were saved by medical advances between 1996-2002.

On average, college-educated men live 6.8 years longer than men who have not graduated from high school, women 5.1 years longer. Adults who have not finished high school are more than four times as likely to be in poor or fair health as college graduates. Babies born to mothers who did not finish high school are twice as likely to die before their first birthday compared to those born to college graduates.

Young people with less schooling are more likely to be unemployed or have unstable and unfulfilling jobs, and low literacy is linked to poverty, disadvantage, social exclusion, and ultimately poor health. In 2004, the median income of male college graduates was 60% higher than male high school graduates, and more than twice that of high school drop outs, the highest income differential ever. Those with masters and professional degrees earned even more.

Education also matters because it can provide us with the knowledge, skills, confidence, connections and opportunities we need to negotiate the world and exert greater control over our lives - what experts call the "pile up" of advantage/disadvantage. How well we do and how far we get in our schooling impact not only our future earnings potential but also our mastery of our environment and our ability to navigate institutions and gain access to power - all of which are consequential to success and wellbeing.

Studies show a clear correlation between health and learning at all ages, from early childhood through adolescence to adulthood. For the youngest learners, early reading and literacy programs stimulate brain development, analytical and communication skills, intellect and behavioral patterns. These in turn shape future opportunities and achievement. Yet we are among the few rich countries not to offer free, universal preschool.

Among adolescents, those who stay in school are less likely to engage in risky behaviors, become teen parents, and end up in dead-end jobs without career prospects. Even among adults, improving basic skills and acquiring new ones enables them to pursue better employment opportunities and gain access to other resources.

But educational resources and opportunities in the U.S. are distributed unequally, reflecting larger patterns of racial and class inequities. Differences in school quality, for example, are due in part to deep patterns of residential segregation and differences in school funding.

Dr. Tony Iton, director of Alameda County (CA) Department of Public Health argues that high school graduation rates represent a snapshot of neighborhood conditions - a lens for viewing larger problems and inequities in specific communities and our society as a whole.

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In fact, Iton claims that he can predict the life expectancy of a given neighborhood in the county from the high school drop-out rate alone

In California, for example, 90% of students in overcrowded schools are children of color, two thirds of them Latino. Schools in poor districts are notoriously under-resourced, with fewer class offerings, books, computers, enrichment activities and after-school programs. Nationwide, among youth 16 to 24, Latinos accounted for 41% of high school dropouts in 2005, even though they comprise only 17% of the total youth population. Researchers estimate that approximately 2,500 youth drop out of high school every day. In some of the largest school systems in the country - from Baltimore, MD, to Oakland, CA - half of all students are dropping out.

Although many youth later obtain a diploma or GED, the implications of dropping out of high school are enormous, including a higher risk of poverty and a shortened life span. Dr. Iton explains: "Education is huge, because it relates to people's ability to plan and have hope for the future. Without hope for the future, people tend to make short-term decisions," including engaging in riskier behaviors that endanger health.

Today, promising initiatives and ideas to improve our school systems and provide better educational opportunities for everyone abound - but not the commitment to pay for them. We all bear the societal burden of lost productivity, increased disability, higher crime, welfare and prison costs, not to mention the human cost of thwarted hopes, dreams and health.

By foregrounding the life-and-death consequences of educational inequities, perhaps we can find the commitment to create policies that invest in our schools and help forge a long, productive future for all our children.