

Abstract citation ID: ckad160.831

Early life social and health determinants of higher education across three generations

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Background:

Associations of social and health disadvantages at birth with educational attainment are well-documented. Less is known about the magnitude of the associations across different historical contexts. We investigated associations between a range of early life disadvantages and higher educational attainment across three successive generations.

Methods:

The data were from the register-based Uppsala Birth Cohort Multigenerational Study in Sweden. The study samples include three generations born in 1915-1929 (G1, n = 10 587), 1933-1972 (G2, n = 6566), and 1973-1978 (G3, n = 6684). The outcome was attainment of higher education (more than senior high school) assessed at age 30+ years. Exposures were parental socioeconomic position (SEP), mother's marital status, parity, gestational age and birth weight for gestational age. Multiple logistic regression models were fitted to evaluate the associations across three generations. Results are presented as Average Marginal Effects (AME).

Results:

Low parental SEP was associated with lower probability of higher educational attainment in all three generations. The difference between low versus high parental SEP among men declined by 32 percentage points in G2 (AME: 0.32; 95% CI: 0.27, 0.38) and 27 percentage points in G3 (AME: 0.27; 95% CI: 0.21, 0.33) compared to G1. Among women, the corresponding declines in G2 and G3 were 35 and 28 percentage points. Mothers' unmarried marital status and high parity were associated with lower probability of education, with no evidence of decline across generations. The association between small for gestational age and education among men persisted across generations while showing a decline in G3 women.

Conclusions:

Associations between early life factors and education persisted across three generations. The influence of parental socioeconomic background on educational attainment appeared to level off in the youngest generation after becoming attenuated in the preceding generation.

Key messages:

- Association between small for gestational age and educational attainment persisted across generations, with an attenuation among the youngest cohort of women.
- High parity was associated with lower chance of educational attainment, with no evidence of effect attenuation across generations.