

# Higher income linked with less concern about social problems over time, new research shows

October 30 2018, by Geoff McMaster

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University of Alberta sociologists found that over time, people with higher incomes grew less concerned with a range of social issues.

In a study of people surveyed multiple times over 25 years, from ages 18 to 43, the researchers found a decline in concern about five social problems—racial discrimination, treatment of Indigenous people, female job discrimination, unemployment and environmental pollution.

The only issue that showed no change over time was concern about poverty.

The study also showed that post-secondary [education](#) was not a significant factor in the decline in social awareness and concern.

"What our analysis showed is that the most consistent determining factor was that as people made more money, they started to care less about some of these social concerns," said family ecology researcher Matt Johnson, a co-author of the study.

"We really do think [higher education](#) makes us more enlightened, exposes us to new ideas and people, and teaches us to think more rationally," said Harvey Krahn, the study's lead author. "At the same time, higher education is a vehicle for upward mobility, which means you move into a higher strata of society, and for various reasons you might become less concerned with the things you were (once) enlightened about."

The finding is the latest insight from the comprehensive, long-term [Edmonton Transitions Study](#), in which researchers have been surveying almost 1,000 high-school seniors from working and middle-class neighbourhoods in Edmonton since 1985.

As the group came of age in the late '80s and then moved through

middle life, participants were surveyed periodically to learn about how they dealt with various life transitions in a rapidly changing social, economic and political environment.

Krahn said he was partly interested in finding out whether there is any truth to the old adage, "If you are not a liberal at 25, you have no heart. If you are not a conservative at 45, you have no brain."

He said his research group discovered the rising income that typically follows higher education—as much as age itself—is a strong indicator of a person's concern for [social issues](#).

While those with post-secondary education may be more aware than others of some social problems, "They do not necessarily support government efforts to reduce such problems," write the study's authors.

Attributing their own success to hard work rather than advantage of birth, "More educated people may come to think that the disadvantaged should help themselves and that inequality-reducing government initiatives are counterproductive."

Krahn said education in itself is not responsible for the drop in concern.

"Instead, educated people may begin to defend the status quo when their incomes rise and they begin to feel their advantaged position is threatened by efforts to reduce social inequalities," he said.

Asked whether the type of post-secondary education—professional training in engineering, business or medicine as opposed to training in the humanities and social sciences—had anything to do with such attitudes, Krahn said "it made no difference" among his cohort.

"As professors in the social sciences, we don't want to give up on the

belief that we make a difference. I think the issue is that (the study) looks at social concern with a broad brush," rather than considering the influence higher education can have on individuals.

The authors caution their paper is by no means "an argument against attempts to enlighten young people about social issues as they train for employment.

"Post-secondary institutions should and must continue to take responsibility for promoting community involvement and good citizenship, as well as progressive social change. The challenge lies in making such efforts stick."

"Enlightenment or Status Defence? Education and Social Problem Concerns From Adolescence to Midlife" was published in the *British Journal of Sociology of Education*.

**More information:** Harvey J. Krahn et al. Enlightenment or status defence? Education and social problem concerns from adolescence to midlife, *British Journal of Sociology of Education* (2018). [DOI: 10.1080/01425692.2018.1429893](https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2018.1429893)

Provided by University of Alberta

Citation: Higher income linked with less concern about social problems over time, new research shows (2018, October 30) retrieved 26 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-10-higher-income-linked-social-problems.html>

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