

# Education may be key to a healthier, wealthier US

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According to the United States Department of Education, the U.S. high school graduation rate will reach an all-time high this year, which is good news for both our economy and health. Policy makers often use

education policy to strengthen the workforce and boost earnings, productivity and employment. But earning a diploma may also lead to a longer, healthier life.

A new study from the University of Colorado Denver is the first to estimate the economic value of education for [better health](#) and longevity.

The study finds that the reduced disability and longer lives among the more educated are worth up to twice as much as the value of education for lifetime earnings.

The study, "The Economic Value of Education for Longer Lives and Reduced Disability," was published in *The Milbank Quarterly*.

"We often think about [health](#) insurance access or [medical procedures](#), like mammography or colonoscopy, as the most important drivers of health," said study co-author Patrick Krueger, Ph.D., associate professor in the Department of Health and Behavioral Sciences at CU Denver.

"But education could be a more substantial contributor to longevity than [medical care](#). Policy makers seldom act on that evidence, though, because researchers haven't demonstrated the value of education for longer, healthier lives in terms of dollars and cents."

Compared to adults who never finished [high school](#), adults with a high school degree live longer and with less disability. Those longer, healthier lives are worth an additional \$693,000 among men and \$757,000 among women. The incremental earnings associated with a high school degree are much smaller—amounting to an additional \$213,000 among men and \$194,000 among women.

To estimate the economic value of education for longevity, the authors used data from the National Health Interview Survey-Linked Mortality

Files, Current Population Survey-Annual Social and Economic supplement, and published estimates of the economic value of a statistical life.

"We weren't surprised that the economic value of longer lives would top lifetime earnings, but we couldn't have guessed the magnitude," said Virginia Chang, MD, Ph.D., associate professor of social and [behavioral sciences](#) at NYU College of Global Public Health. "One additional year of life is a significant change in life expectancy and has a lot of economic value. When you consider the cost of completing high school or college is significantly less than what we spend on health care, it's clear that spending on education is going to have a much greater return."

In fact, researchers found that [education](#) has a bigger impact on health and longevity than targeted behavioral or medical interventions in adulthood. That's because the benefits of new drugs, medical treatments and behavioral interventions largely go to the most educated, who are already among the most healthy. Pulling together the big picture was important to Krueger and Chang.

"It's easy to assume that if we improved life expectancy, it would lead to increased health care costs," says Krueger. "But our inability to control medical costs is what drives our excess health care spending, not living to older ages. Other high income countries have longer life expectancies and lower health care expenditures than the U.S., suggesting that we can and should improve both."

**More information:** PATRICK M. KRUEGER et al, The Economic Value of Education for Longer Lives and Reduced Disability, *The Milbank Quarterly* (2019). [DOI: 10.1111/1468-0009.12372](https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0009.12372)

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