

# Deaths in the family can shape kids' educational attainment in unexpected ways

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A death of a family member may affect the educational life of a child in complex and, sometimes, unexpected ways, according to researchers. Credit: Pixabay

Deaths of family members may trigger ripple effects across family networks, reverberating in the lives of children in complex and, sometimes, unexpected ways.

In a study, the researchers found that deaths in the [family](#) can affect the educational attainment of children. That impact most often is negative, but, in certain cases, a family death can improve the chances that children will further their education, said Ashton Verdery, associate professor of sociology, demography and [social data analytics](#), Penn State.

"Overwhelmingly, the prior work on topics related to this focused on the many [negative impacts](#) that a death in the family can have on educational attainment, but, when we carefully thought this through, we began to wonder whether there could be ways that a death in the family could potentially benefit the educational attainment of some children," said Verdery, who is also an affiliate of the Population Research Institute and Institute for Computational and Data Sciences.

The team found, for example, that a child or adolescent experiencing the death of a grandparent in white families was associated with an increased chance that children would attend and graduate from college. The team suggests that this effect might be related to the flow of inherited wealth in the family.

"If a grandparent dies unexpectedly and leaves a child a trust, for example, that would clearly increase the chances of furthering educational attainment," said Verdery, who also worked with Sarah E. Patterson, postdoctoral fellow, Population Studies Center, University of Michigan and former doctoral student in sociology and demography, Penn State; and Jonathan Daw, associate professor of sociology and demography, Penn State.

The researchers did not find that the death of a grandparent in Black families significantly altered their educational attainment.

Besides financial impacts, deaths in the family may also change patterns

of care and attention, according to Verdery. For instance, the family may focus considerable attention and resources on loved ones who are sick. When these family members succumb to the disease or illness, those resources and attention may then shift back to children, positively changing the trajectory of their education.

Verdery said that the connection between family deaths and educational attainment is complex and can rest on many factors, including socioeconomic status, race and gender.

"A death in the family is obviously a tragedy, but there are a lot of complicated ways that family deaths can impact educational attainment," said Verdery.

Verdery said that these networks can be so complex that continued investigation into the range of ways that deaths of family members affect a child's [educational attainment](#) would be necessary. He added that raising awareness about those effects could help schools and guidance counselors better prepare interventions for impacts that a [death](#) in the family may have on a student's education.

"We need better identification of [children](#) in schools who have lost close relatives, particularly parents," said Verdery. "This needs to be a real priority area because kids who lose parents may be less likely to complete their education, and that's going to have a lifelong impact on them. This seems like a natural intervention point. I know that there are a lot of school counselors and other people who are working in this area. I just don't know if it is getting the priority attention that it needs in terms of state and federal policy."

The researchers used data from 1968 to 2013 that they gathered from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), the longest running longitudinal household survey in the United States that includes data on

about 75,252 individuals. The database includes links to decedents from the National Death Index in 2009 and close and extended family networks constructed from the PSID's Family Identification Mapping System (FIMS) data, which identify sibling, parent-child, and grandparent-grandchild ties.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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