

Low upward mobility linked to early mortality

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Upward mobility—the capacity to improve one's socioeconomic status—is key to realizing the American dream of a long, prosperous, and happy life, Yale researchers say. In a new study, they found a strong

relationship between the lack of upward mobility early in life and increased mortality rates in young adults, particularly among Black males.

The study, published in the journal *Health & Place*, is the first to examine disparities across race and gender in the relationship between early-life intergenerational upward mobility and early-adulthood mortality at the county level in the United States.

The researchers compared four demographic groups: [white males](#), Black males, white females, and Black females. They analyzed administrative data on upward mobility, including tax records, and mortality statistics from 3,030 U.S. counties for people born between 1978 and 1983—covering more than 40 million people nationwide. The study tracked the cohort through 2017, when its oldest members were 39 years old.

With the exception of white males, limits to upward mobility early in life closely predict higher chances of death in early adulthood, with the strongest association occurring among Black males, the analysis revealed. Additional analyses that considered education levels attained and the kinds of places where people live showed that the relationship between upward mobility and early-adulthood mortality is strongest among Black males without [college degrees](#) and those who live in cities.

"Our work shows that a lack of upward mobility—consistently being cut off from achieving the American Dream—has serious consequences on the life expectancy of Black males," said Emma Zang, assistant professor of sociology in Yale's Faculty of Arts and Sciences and the lead author of the report. "Structural racism has determined where many Black Americans grow up, affecting their chances of obtaining a college degree, getting a good job, and starting a family—all important elements of achieving the American Dream.

"Not having those opportunities reduces people's access to upward mobility, which can shorten their lives."



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The study's definition of intergenerational upward mobility captures the average income rank in national income distribution that individuals with low-income parents achieved by age 24.

To better understand the findings, Zang suggested imagining two hypothetical counties with different upward mobility rates: In county A, Black males with low-income parents can achieve on average the 39th

percentile in national income distribution by age 24 (e.g., New Haven, Connecticut), whereas their counterparts in county B can achieve the 49th percentile (e.g., Middlesex, Massachusetts). Based on the study's findings, the early adulthood [mortality rates](#) (number of deaths per 1,000 persons) for Black males in county A are predicted to be higher than those in county B by 1.146 deaths. (The mean early adulthood mortality rate for Black males is 1.96 deaths per 1,000 persons. The corresponding numbers for white and Black females are 0.452 and 0.617 deaths, respectively.)

The relationship between early-life upward mobility and young-adulthood mortality for white males is weak.

The researchers found racial disparities even in counties with high early-life upward mobility and low early-adulthood mortality.

"People from different demographic groups living in the same counties have varied experiences," Zang said. "In all the counties we studied, Black [males](#) had the lowest early-life upward mobility and the highest early-adulthood [mortality](#)."

Zang co-authored the study with her research assistant, Nathan Kim, a rising senior in Yale College.

"Our work shows that all Americans do not have equal access to upward mobility, and therefore, they have unequal opportunities to realize the American Dream," said Kim, who is majoring in statistics and data science as well as ethnicity, race, and migration. "Policymakers should consider initiatives that would reduce inequality in [upward mobility](#), such as improving access to high-quality educational opportunities and medical care, reducing people's exposure to lead and other pollution early in childhood, and building safer neighborhoods."

More information: Emma Zang et al, Intergenerational upward mobility and racial differences in mortality among young adults: Evidence from county-level analyses, *Health & Place* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.healthplace.2021.102628](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2021.102628)

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