

Lifelong gap in health between rich and poor set by age 20

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Canadians who are less educated and have a lower income start out less healthy than their wealthier and better-educated compatriots, and remain so over the course of their lives.

"We can't buy our way out of ageing," says Nancy Ross, a McGill geography professor. "As we get older we start to have [vision problems](#), maybe some [hearing loss](#), maybe lose some mobility – ageing is a kind of a social equalizer."

Ross is the lead author of a new study about how socio-economic and educational status affects Canadians' health-related quality of life over the course of a lifetime.

"My research looks at how poverty and social disadvantage affect your health status. Our work was about using social circumstances as a lens to look at how people's quality of life changes as they [age](#)."

The good news, according to Ross, is that there is no sign of an accelerated ageing process for those who are lower on the social ladder. "The trajectories for declining health as people [age](#) look fairly similar across the social spectrum. That surprised me. I thought that there would be a bit more of a difference across social groups."

But the bad news is that [Canadians](#) who are less educated and have a lower income start out less healthy than their wealthier and better-educated compatriots, and remain so over the course of their lives.

"What we found, basically, is that people who are more educated and with higher incomes have a better health-related quality of life over their whole lifespan, and that these health "tracks" stay pretty parallel over time.

"The message there is that if you start out with a health-related quality of life deficit through early life experience and a poor educational background, it's never made up for later on," says Ross. "Poorer Canadians are in poorer health and they have lower life expectancy than their more affluent counterparts, and by age 20 the pattern for health-related quality of life as people age is already fixed."

"We might speculate that universal health insurance and other social policies directed to adults and seniors have played a role in preventing accelerated decline in health-related quality of life of the poorer and less educated Canadians. That said, we would need some comparative research in other countries to test this more fully," she adds. "But this study suggests the need for policies aimed at making sure kids and teens are given the chances early in [life](#) to even out socio-economic inequalities that will affect their [health](#) as they age."

More information: jech.bmj.com/content/early/2011/06/08/jech.2010.115378.long

Provided by McGill University

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