

Better job prospects when young may pay off in better health

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(HealthDay)— Living in an area where you can quickly climb the career

ladder might pay dividends in boosting your health, a new study suggests.

The study finds a strong link between what the researchers call "economic opportunity," and [young adults'](#) physical and mental well-being.

The research "shows that opportunity may matter for public [health](#)," said lead researcher Dr. Atheendar Venkataramani, from the division of general medicine at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston.

"People living in places with higher opportunity report fewer days of poor physical and mental health, and they also appear to adopt healthier behaviors," he said in a hospital news release.

The research involved data on nearly 150,000 Americans, aged 25 to 35. The Boston team assessed county-by-county levels of economic opportunity across the United States by using data from millions of income tax returns.

This data showed, for example, how the average incomes of young adults living in particular counties compared to the incomes of their parents.

Venkataramani's team then compared those trends to health indicators from federal government surveys.

According to the study's senior author, Dr. Alexander Tsai, "Economic opportunity may affect health in a number of ways."

The team found that those living in counties within the highest 10 percent of economic opportunity —places where upward mobility was more readily achieved—had 20 percent fewer days of poor physical or [mental health](#) in the past month, compared to people living in counties within the lowest 10 percent in terms of economic opportunity.

In another example, young adults in "low-opportunity" counties were much more likely to be smokers compared to those living in counties where job success was more likely.

Also, people in low-opportunity counties were more likely to have behaviors associated with the risk of HIV transmission, including unprotected anal intercourse and injection drug use.

What's the connection between employment success and health?

"Access to better jobs both raises the importance of being healthy in order to take advantage of them, and also raises income and education, which we know from other work are strongly associated with better health," said Tsai, who is in the global psychiatry division at Mass General, and an assistant professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School.

"Greater opportunity may also raise hopes for a better future, which could directly influence health," he reasoned.

Tsai stressed that the study can't distinguish exactly why this association exists, and the study itself cannot prove cause-and-effect. There could be other factors that affect both opportunity and health, he said.

However, a prior study by the same team found a link between increased economic opportunity and decreased risk of premature death. Tsai said more study of that link might help researchers learn why this association exists.

The new study was published online Oct. 3 in *The Lancet Public Health*.

More information: The American Academy of Family Physicians offers tips for [staying healthy](#).

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