

More education, socioeconomic benefits equals longer life

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Despite advances in health care and increases in life expectancy overall, Americans with less than a high school education have life expectancies similar to adults in the 1950s and 1960s.

"The most highly educated white men live about 14 years longer than the least educated black men," says S. Jay Olshansky, professor of epidemiology at the University of Illinois at Chicago School of Public Health and lead author of the study. "The least educated black women live about 10 years less than the most educated white women."

The research, funded by The MacArthur Foundation Research Network on an Aging Society, examined life expectancy by race, sex and education and examined trends in [disparities](#) from 1990 through 2008.

The study is published in the August issue of the journal *Health Affairs*.

"Over the last couple of decades, almost all longevity boats have risen," said Olshansky, but there have been some subgroups that have had a drop in life expectancy."

"It's as if Americans with the least education are living in a time warp," he said. The least educated black men are living in 1954, black women in 1962, white women in 1964, and [white men](#) in 1972.

One surprising finding, according to Olshansky, is that white women with less than 12 years of education can expect to live five years less than their counterparts did in 1990 (a decline from age 78 to 73).

Black women with less than 12 years education can expect to live to age 74, up from age 73 two decades ago.

The researchers speculate that the least educated black women are experiencing high levels of

obesity which has a latent, or delayed effect, on [negative health consequences](#), while [white women](#) may be adopting more immediately lethal behaviors such as smoking, [alcohol consumption](#) and drug use.

"There are essentially two America's," said Olshansky.

One subgroup of the population is highly educated, doing well, and they are experiencing a dramatic increase in life expectancy, he said. Another subgroup of the population is less educated, doing very poorly, and experiencing a drop or only modest increases in [life expectancy](#).

The researchers conclude that education and socioeconomic status are extremely important variables that influence variations in longevity. They suggest that one of the most important ways to address these large disparities is through lifelong education.

"We must find a way to bring these subgroups of the population back into the present," Olshansky said.

Provided by University of Illinois at Chicago

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