

Study finds Latinos' increased dementia risk linked to lower education levels

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Findings from a study conducted by researchers at the USC Edward R. Roybal Institute on Aging at the USC Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work suggest that higher dementia prevalence among racial and ethnic minorities—particularly among Latinos—is connected to lower educational attainment.

"Our research underscores the significant role that education plays in determining the risk for dementias like Alzheimer's disease as Latinos grow older," said María Aranda, associate professor and executive director of the USC Roybal Institute who is one of the study's co-authors. "There's clear evidence that shows education confers many cognitive health benefits, but we sought to explore whether a lack of education could be detrimental to cognitive functioning and explain health disparities in [dementia](#) risk."

With increasing life expectancy in the United States, more individuals are projected to be at risk

for dementia in the coming decades. Alzheimer's disease is the most common form of dementia. It affects about 5.7 million people in the United States and is the sixth leading cause of death, according to the Alzheimer's Association.

A USC Roybal Institute and UsAgainstAlzheimer's report stated that Latinos are 1.5 times more likely to develop Alzheimer's than non-Latino whites. African Americans are also two times more likely to develop Alzheimer's than non-Latino whites.

Previous research has shown that dementia risk is particularly high for individuals with low levels of education.

Using data from the nationally representative Aging, Demographics, and Memory Study (ADAMS), the USC research team explored whether there was a connection between dementia risk and education among different ethnic groups. Data from ADAMS showed that Latinos had the lowest [educational attainment](#) compared to African American and non-Latino whites.

Education vs. other factors

Researchers found that higher dementia prevalence among African Americans and Latinos compared to non-Latino whites was associated with lower levels of education in both groups, but the extent of the impact of education was different for each population.

Findings from the study confirmed that African Americans have a higher prevalence of the APOE e4 allele—a version of a gene linked to increased risk for Alzheimer's disease.

However, among Latinos, increased risk was driven by very low levels of education. For Latinos in the study sample, those who did not complete high school had on average only three years of education.

"After adjusting for education, being Latino actually reduced the risk of developing dementia," said co-author Francisca Rodriguez, a senior research scientist at the Center for Cognitive Science at the University of Kaiserslautern and former postdoctoral scholar at the USC Roybal Institute. "Even for people with just a few years of formal schooling, every additional year of education decreased [dementia risk](#)."

Alzheimer's is the costliest disease in the United States—with an annual cost of approximately \$236 billion paid mostly through Medicare and Medicaid. In 2018, Alzheimer's and other dementias will cost \$277 billion. These costs are projected to grow to \$1.1 trillion by 2050.

"Efforts to provide opportunities to quality [education](#) for Latinos, African Americans and other disadvantaged groups could help to reduce the burden of Alzheimer's disease and related dementias on society," Aranda said.

The study was recently published online in the *American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*.

More information: Francisca S. Rodriguez et al. Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Dementia Risk Among Individuals With Low Education, *The American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jagp.2018.05.011](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jagp.2018.05.011)

Data analysis: dworakpeck.usc.edu/sites/default/files/2018-09/dementia-linked.pdf

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