

Unemployment, lack of education lead to higher US mortality rate

Jake Dean
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A new report published last Thursday in the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* found that unemployment is one of the leading factors behind the growing gap in mortality rates between educated and non-educated white women.

The report, *Explaining the Widening Education Gap in Mortality Among U.S. White Women*, found that the odds of dying at a given age are drastically higher for uneducated white women than they are for educated white women.

In the period between 2002 and 2006, uneducated women had a 66 percent higher chance of death. This figure is a sharp increase from the period from 1997 to 2001 when the rate was 37 percent.

In 2006, the official unemployment rate for women stood at 4.4 percent. Seven years later and five years after the financial crash, the official unemployment rate now stands at 6.7 percent. Real unemployment and underemployment are significantly higher. The study from the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* analyzed data only up to 2006, meaning that the divergence in mortality rates between rich and poor is almost certainly higher than the study reports.

This divergence is even more severe for white women who do not have a high school diploma. Another recent report in the journal *Health Affairs* estimates that members of this group suffered a five year loss in life expectancy between 1990 and 2008.

The National Center for Health Statistics surveyed 47,000 women between the ages of 45 to 84. More than a dozen factors were taken into consideration, many of which are linked to social-psychological conditions, health behaviors, and economic circumstances such as poverty, alcohol consumption, and homeownership.

According to the study, joblessness has a significantly higher impact on mortality rates than other factors,

even when controlling for obesity, alcohol consumption, poverty, and income. In fact, joblessness is as much an indicator of the difference in mortality rates as smoking cigarettes.

“What is it about employment that has this huge impact on mortality, beyond the material resources it brings?” asked Jennifer Karas Montez, the study’s lead author.

According to the report, stable employment creates higher self-esteem, and more importantly, access to a social network. Employed people are also significantly less likely to experience unnecessary family stress.

Divorce is directly tied to unemployment. A recent study by economists Kerwin Charles and Melvin Stephens in the *Journal of Labor Economics* showed that the probability of a divorce when the husband has lost his job increases to 18 percent. When the wife loses her job, that rate is 13 percent.

In addition, those who are jobless are at a higher risk of accidents, suicide, and cardiovascular diseases.

In the US alone, suicide rates jumped from 34 to 54 percent between 1999 and 2010, according to the *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*. At nearly 60 percent, this figure is even higher for women between 60 to 64. For men in their 50s, the figure rose almost 50 percent. Suicide is now the tenth leading cause of death in the US, as 38,364 people kill themselves each year.



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