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The Value of Education to Health: Evidence from Ireland

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RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- The literature presents mixed results on the link between education and health.
- A 1960s policy on public secondary fees in Ireland is used for identification.
- Hypertension and diabetes are examined, using self-report and objective measures.
- An additional year of schooling reduces hypertension and diabetes prevalence.
- Further analysis of possible behavioural mechanisms is also undertaken.

Abstract

Does education have a causal impact on health? The existing literature presents mixed results. More evidence is required from contexts that have not been explored in the literature, and using clinically-measured health outcomes. Using data from the Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA), and exploiting a policy change in the 1960s that eliminated public secondary school fees, we investigate whether additional years of schooling for those with lower socio-economic status (SES) have a causal effect on the prevalence of cardiovascular disease in later life. We find significant sizable effects of education on the prevalence of both hypertension and diabetes. An additional year of schooling decreases the probability of having hypertension by approximately 3 percentage points, and decreases the probability of having diabetes by approximately 1 percentage point, effects that are large given existing prevalence. Further analysis of possible mechanisms shows that additional schooling increases the probability of engaging in high levels of physical activity and refraining from smoking. In the context of an increasing focus on strategies to prevent chronic disease, evidence such as this provides important insights for policymakers tasked with designing public health interventions targeting risk factors for chronic disease.

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