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Public Lecture Offerings

Why Education Is Fundamentally Important in Improving our Nation's Health

Numerous studies have documented that well educated people live longer than less educated people. Yet, the benefits of education in terms of additional years of life haven't always been as great as they are now. The gap has been widening for decades. In addition, there are troubling signs that less educated people are not only experiencing a shortening of their life spans in relative terms but in absolute years as well. This lecture describes the historical and contemporary factors underlying what we increasingly think of as a highly dynamic association between education and health. I also explore whether the longer lives of well-educated persons are accompanied by more years of life in better – or worse – health. I draw on evidence to interrogate whether Black and Hispanic Americans are able to capitalize on the health benefits of education similar to White Americans. Finally, I return to the key factors driving these trends to assess what the future likely holds for Americans' health.

What is the Role of the Long Arm of Childhood for Experiencing Dementia in Old Age?

Nearly half of middle-aged Americans reports being afraid of developing dementia, which is higher than rates for other age-related chronic conditions such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes. This fear partly stems from a common perception that dementia is an inevitable consequence of old age. Yet, as this lecture will describe, there are enormous social group differences in who experiences dementia and for how long. In addition, I discuss key social factors that differentiate people's

risk of dementia and the malleability of risk based on individual's experiences over a lifetime from childhood into old age. I pay particular attention to the importance of childhood and early life factors for in setting the stage for dementia that manifests decades later in life. Recent findings are assessed for insights into what the future holds for dementia trends in the American population.

Why is U.S. Life Expectancy Falling Further Behind Other Nations and What Can We Do About It?

Relative to residents of other high-income countries, Americans look toxic. Life expectancy in high-income countries has improved dramatically, except in the United States which has fallen behind. The divergence has occurred unabated for over 40 years. What are the likely factors that underlie this trend? This lecture reviews the ways in which federal policies and the rise of New Federalism may have contributed to this adverse trend in life expectancy. I also raise the issue of how fast-growing geographic inequality of mortality of U.S. states may be dampening the overall national trend. I hypothesize that while much of the geographic divergence reflects many different policies, politics has become a growing force in increasing an array of health risks for many Americans.

Classroom Discussion Topics

Upstream policies and politics affecting Americans' health. How do federal and state policies and politics shape trends and disparities in Americans' health? Why have states become more important in driving national health trends?

Moving the needle to reduce dementia in the older population. Beyond medical interventions -- the importance of early life social conditions and education for cognitive health decades later in life.

The consequences of the opioid epidemic and the COVID-19 pandemic for shortening lives. How has the life expectancy of less educated persons and minority groups fared in an era where epidemics and pandemics have become important risks to our nation's health?