Life Expectancy Among Non–High School Graduates

S. Jay Olshansky and coauthors reported that life expectancy among non–high school graduates is decreasing among certain racial and ethnic groups (Aug 2012). We wondered if this might be due to nongraduates’ changing characteristics, as fewer Americans remain in this group—22.4 percent in 1990 compared to 13.4 percent in 2008.¹

To explore this possibility in New York City, we calculated nongraduates’ income levels and age-adjusted mortality rates over time, using US Census Bureau data and New York City vital records. As the proportion of New Yorkers not graduating from high school decreased (31.5 percent in 1990 versus 21.2 in 2008), a larger percentage of nongraduates lived in poverty: 50.2 percent had incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty level in 1990, versus 58.8 percent in 2008.

Consistent with Olshansky and coauthors’ findings, nongraduates’ mortality rates increased. In 2000 the rates per 100,000 were 627 for non–Hispanic whites and 511 for non–Hispanic blacks, compared to 666 and 747, respectively, in 2008.

We then calculated age-adjusted mortality rate trends for a fixed percentage of New Yorkers with low educational attainment (22.8 percent, the city’s proportion of nongraduates in 2008). From 2000 to 2008 this group’s mortality rate decreased, from 944 per 100,000 to 666 for non–Hispanic whites, and from 757 per 100,000 to 747 for non–Hispanic blacks.

Increasing mortality rates among nongraduates may reflect the fact that healthier people are moving into higher educational brackets, because mortality did not increase over time in a consistent proportion of people with low educational attainment.

We wonder whether a comparable reanalysis of national data would yield different results for life expectancy trends for those with low educational attainment. Nongraduates may live shorter lives now because such low educational attainment is associated with a smaller and increasingly disadvantaged population.

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