Recession’s Hit To Health
Hardest on Least Educated

Risk for heart attack and stroke increased much more for adults who only went to high school than for the college educated during the recent Great Recession—and that widened gap in health inequality has lingered even though the recession is long over, a new study suggests.

Adults who attended college already were healthier overall than the less well educated. But after the economy tanked in 2008, feelings of economic hardship, declining personal control and stress seem to be among key contributors to the widened, persistent health gap between the less advantaged and college educated Americans. The large pre- and post-recession study will be presented today by psychologist Jennifer Moroznik Boylan, Ph.D., of the University of Colorado, Denver. She’ll release her findings at the American Psychosomatic Society meeting in Louisville, Ky.

Boylan used facts gathered as part of the Midlife in the U.S. (MIDUS) study, a long-term, federally-funded probe of the health and well-being of middle-aged Americans. The majority of adults were in their 40s to 60s at both time periods; there was information from 1,255 people just before the recession hit, and from 863 after the recession had ended, between 2012 and 2016. Study participants provided their own reports on health-related behaviors (such as smoking, diet and physical activity). Boylan then combined these with measurements of cholesterol, blood sugar levels, blood pressure and body mass index (BMI), all known to affect the risk of heart disease and stroke. The combined “Cardiovascular Health” score decreased—became less healthy—after the recession for adults at every educational level. The dip, though, was smallest among the well-educated. It fell much further for adults who had a high school or less education. With 14 an ideal health rating and 0 the worst, the pre-recession totals were 7.2 versus 8.2 for the least versus best educated; the gap grew to 6.4 versus 7.9 after the recession. There were no significant differences by race. Education seemed to matter most. The study also asked participants about hardships, stress, and their sense of control in the wake of the recession. “Part of the reason education is linked to these health disparities is that the less educated had more stress, a lower sense of control and more hardships,” says Boylan. Her findings track well with economic data showing the less advantaged have experienced a slower recovery from the recession’s hit, she adds. The gap in cardiovascular health risk potentially could grow even wider if economic polarization increases, Boylan notes. “We need to try to combat these growing disparities,” she says.