

# Geography, Education, and the Widening Divide in US Midlife Mortality

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## Abstract

During the past three decades, there has been a dramatic rise in the mortality-education gradient, with the gap in life expectancy between college and non-college graduates widening from 2.6 years in 1990 to 6.3 years in 2019 (Case and Deaton, 2023). There has also been a rapid increase in regional mortality inequality, with the county-level coefficient of variation rising from 0.19 in 1992 to 0.31 in 2019. We demonstrate that these two trends are both symptoms of a fundamental shift in geographic patterns of health and mortality. First, the rise in spatial inequality is a phenomenon only for people who did not graduate from college; college graduates in all states have experienced reduced midlife mortality since 1992 as well as declining spatial inequality. By contrast, trends in non-college mortality -- and the education-mortality gradient -- depends critically on "place;" in New York the gradient has not budged since 1992 while in West Virginia, Tennessee, and Kentucky it has nearly tripled. Using county-level data, we find that state-level policies such as cigarette taxes and income support programs are somewhat protective of mortality, although their impact has diminished since 2010. Of much greater concern is the concentration of poor health behaviors -- especially smoking -- and low incomes in counties and states that account for a disproportionate share of midlife non-college mortality in the U.S. That regional variations are so much larger than what would be expected from micro-level regressions suggests strong community-level spillover effects.