

Your partner's education shapes your survival

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People with higher levels of education tend to live longer, healthier lives. However, education is not only an individual resource – its benefits may also be shared between partners. Using Finnish data, Cecilia Potente, Lydia Palumbo and Marika Jalovaara show that mortality is shaped not only by an individual's education but also by that of their partner.

The World Health Organization recognizes the highest possible standard of health as a fundamental human right. Health disparities should therefore be studied and addressed to ensure that everyone, at all levels of society, has the same opportunities to enjoy good health and a long life. Individuals with higher levels of education tend to have better health, and the benefits of education may also spill over to the health of close others, such as spouses or partners. So, is having a highly educated partner associated with lower mortality? Has this association changed across generations? And does the distinction between marriage and cohabitation matter?

The answers to these questions are particularly timely given the major societal changes over the past century, which underscore the importance of considering the educational resources of both partners in a couple. Women's educational attainment and workforce participation have increased, while traditional marriage has ceded ground to more informal living arrangements, such as cohabitation. As a result, more couples now share similar educational backgrounds, and a growing number are choosing to live together without marrying (Schwartz 2013).

The Finnish case

In a recent study (Potente, Palumbo and Jalovaara 2025) we assessed how patterns of individual and partner educational attainment relate to mortality among men and women in Finland, and whether these relationships differ between married and cohabiting couples over time. Our analysis is based on Finland's comprehensive population data, covering individuals

born since 1932. We focused on heterosexual couples aged 50 and above, born between 1932 and 1970, and compared outcomes across various combinations of partners' educational attainment. Finland stands out for its high rates of women's education and full-time employment, as well as its pioneering embrace of non-marital cohabitation, although this form of partnership remains less associated with affluence and stability than marriage.

Why living with a partner can boost survival

Individuals in coresidential partnerships, whether married or not, tend to have longer survival rates than single individuals, whether previously partnered or never partnered. A key theoretical framework for understanding this phenomenon is the life-course theory, especially the "linked lives" principle, which highlights the interdependence of individual life paths (Carr 2018). People's lives are shaped through their social ties, especially close family relationships such as partners, children, and siblings.

In a coresidential partnership, partners exchange support and share resources and stresses, meaning that one partner's socioeconomic resources, such as education, can also shape the other partner's survival chances. This makes mortality risk partly relational rather than just individual. However, both coresidential partnership and individual experience may change such expected relationships, given the different levels of commitment and financial participation of each partner (Lindmarker, 2025). Marriage is likely to be more strongly associated with male-breadwinner equilibria than cohabitation, although these differences would have been more pronounced among earlier birth cohorts.

The educational composition of couples and men's and women's mortality

Our findings reveal that higher levels of education, both of ego and of his/her partner, are linked to lower mortality. Couples where both partners are in the high (tertiary) education group enjoy the greatest longevity, while those comprising two low-educated partners (both having only elementary schooling) fare the worst. Mixed-education couples fall somewhere in between.

Gender plays an important role. Men do best in terms of survival when both partners are highly educated and worst when both are low educated, with mixed-education couples in between. For women, the picture is more complex and varies by birth cohort. Among those born before 1950, longevity is similar for both low- and highly educated women, provided their male partners are highly educated. Surprisingly, we find a similar pattern for married and cohabiting women in the oldest cohort: in both union types, women partnered with a highly educated man have survival levels close to those of women in couples where both partners are highly educated, even when the woman's own education is low. For women born after 1950, survival differences vary according to the couple's educational makeup, increasingly resembling the pattern observed among men.

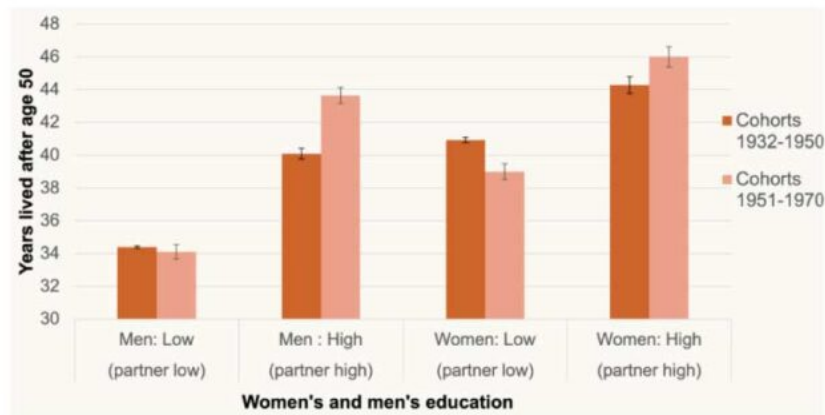
Couple mortality disparities have increased over time

Our study highlights how the gap in survival between high- and low-educated couples has grown wider across generations.

Longevity has increased particularly among married couples where both partners are highly educated (Figure 1). By contrast, those with low levels of education have missed out on these gains and, in many cases, have fallen further behind, among cohabiting couples especially

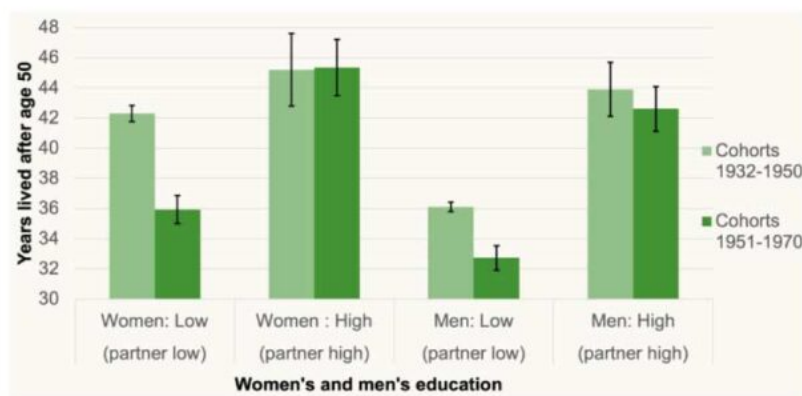
(Figure 2). As a result, the health divide linked to education is increasingly apparent, not only among individuals but also between different types of couples, with the least educated emerging as the most vulnerable group. These trends could reflect changes in how education, including the resources and opportunities it brings, is distributed within relationships, as well as changes in who chooses to marry or cohabit.

Figure 1. Estimated years lived after age 50 by educational levels of ego and partner: married couples (Finland, by groups of birth cohorts)



Note: 1) 'High' refers to a high level of education (bachelor's degree and above); 'Low' refers to a low level of education (elementary or below). 2) Analyses computed on partnered Finnish-born individuals.
Source: Potente, Palumbo and Jalovaara (2025)

Figure 2. Estimated years lived after 50 by educational levels of ego and partner: cohabiting couples (Finland, by groups of birth cohorts)



Note: 1) 'High' refers to a high level of education (bachelor's degree and above); 'Low' refers to a low level of education (elementary or below). 2) Analyses computed on partnered Finnish-born individuals.
Source: Potente, Palumbo and Jalovaara (2025)

Takeaway message

Our research highlights that the biggest risks show up in particular types of couples, especially low-educated married and cohabiting couples. The results suggest that prevention and support need to better reach low-educated couples, who seem less likely to benefit from

the improvements over time seen among highly educated married couples. These are important findings to consider in order to prevent a further widening of longevity gaps at the couple level , and a worsening of health inequalities.

References

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