The Causal Impact of Educational Attainment on Self-Rated Health

There are growing health disparities across educational levels among young and middle-aged adults in the United States; however, it is not clear whether there is a causal relationship between educational attainment and health. This study examines this relationship by determining the causal impact of educational attainment on self-rated health in the United States and estimates whether this relationship is different for population subgroups, i.e., White women, White men, Black women and Black men. We use data on 17,643 individuals from five waves (1994–2018) of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health). Self-rated health is measured on a 1 to 5 scale from excellent to poor health. Educational attainment is measured both as a continuous variable of years of education and as credential milestones (e.g., high school, college, graduate degree). The functional form that best describes the relationship between educational attainment and self-rated health is determined by assessing model fit using Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC). Correlated random effects regression is used to estimate the impact of educational attainment on self-rated health using the optimal functional form for educational attainment for each population subgroup. The findings show that educational attainment improves self-rated health; however, the effect size is reduced by the correction for endogeneity. A combination of educational milestones and benefits from each additional year of education best fit the total sample, White men, and White women, while a solely continuous education model is the best fit for both Black men and Black women. More specifically, credentials are particularly important for White women and continuous education for White men. This study shows that health and education policy are connected and should include the goal of having students reach educational milestones as well as keep students in school for as long as possible in order to improve their health across the life course.