

# The direct effect of education on mortality: insights from the Cloister Study

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## **Abstract**

Education is an element of a complex network that links many factors related to socioeconomic status (SES) with health and mortality. As a consequence of this complex interaction of different factors it is unclear whether and to which extent education per se has a direct effect on individuals' survival chances or whether education is rather a proxy for other characteristics of SES and their impact on longevity. To gain further insights into this still open question we analyze the correlation between education and longevity in a cohort of Catholic nuns and monks from Western Germany in comparison to the corresponding general population. This natural experiment allows us to examine the education-mortality-relationship in a population of women and men where education does not cause any differences with regard to other typical SES characteristics such as income, assets, housing and partnership. We merged the data of the German Life Expectancy Survey (LES) with the corresponding data for female and male order members from 12 religious communities. Our study sample included all 8,477 individuals of the birth cohorts 1914-1952 who were alive at the beginning of 1984 and followed their survival until 1998. We analyzed the impact of education on the survival of the cloistered and the general population by running Cox proportional hazard regression models first separately for nuns, monks and women and men of the general population and then for the female and male populations combined. We found that mortality differences by education among female and male order members (1) are smaller than among women and men of the general population and (2) are not statistically significant. Thus, in our experimental setting we cannot confirm the existence of a direct effect of education and its determinants on mortality.

**For the actual draft of the paper please contact:**

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