

Socioeconomic Status, Perceptions of Pain, and the Gradient in Disability Insurance

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Key Findings and Policy Implications

This paper examines the differential experience of pain by education, focusing on knee pain, the most common musculoskeletal complaint in population-based surveys. It uses data from the National Health Interview Survey (NHIS), National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES), the Midlife in the US study (MIDUS), and the Coronary Artery Risk Development in Young Adults (CARDIA) study. The paper finds that:

- Comparing clinical interpretation of x-rays of knees evaluated for arthritis, there are remarkably few differences in presence or clinical severity of arthritis across education groups. Less than one-quarter of the difference in pain reports by education are a result of differential rates of knee degradation.
- Both physical demands on the job and obesity help explain the education gradient in knee pain, each accounting for roughly one-third of the education gradient in knee pain.
- Other job characteristics and psychological traits related to negative affect, life satisfaction, sense of control, and psychological well-being explain almost none of the educational gradient in knee pain.

Musculoskeletal pain is the leading reason for new disability awards, and thus understanding the factors that influence its progression to a disabling condition is extremely important to Social Security policy. As physically demanding occupations like home health aides, personal service workers, janitorial services and construction are predicted to grow in coming decades, and given steady rise in obesity in the population, pain is expected to contribute to an increase in disability over time.

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