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Mortality trends by education in the United States and six European countries

Karen van Hedel, *Erasmus University Medical Center, Rotterdam, the Netherlands* or k.vanhedel@erasmusmc.nl

Mauricio Avendano, *LSE Health and Social Care, London, UK; Harvard School of Public Health, Cambridge, MA*

Frank van Lenthe, *Erasmus University Medical Center, Rotterdam, the Netherlands*

Johan Mackenbach, *Erasmus University Medical Center, Rotterdam, the Netherlands*

and members of the Demetriq consortium

Trends in mortality between the United States (US) and Europe have been diverging in recent times. Although mortality for the US population as a whole has been declining, there is evidence of an increasing educational gradient. The question remains whether this educational gradient is larger in the US than in other high-income countries. We used data from the US National Health Interview Survey, and census data linked to mortality registries for 6 European countries to examine international differences in trends in mortality by education over the periods 1990 to 1995, and 2000 to 2005. Poisson models were used to quantify the association between education and mortality for men and women aged 35 to 74 in the United States, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Italy (Turin), Sweden and Switzerland. Results showed that on average Americans remained to be higher educated than Europeans. However, in all countries the proportion of low educated decreased, while the proportion of higher educated increased. Mortality rates decreased over time in all countries, but less strongly in the US than in Europe. Although decreases in mortality were observed, absolute inequalities increased in the US while these decreased in the European countries. Mortality rate ratios increased over time for men and women in all countries, but these were higher in the US than in Europe. The relative index of inequality as well as the slope index of inequality were also higher in the US than in the European countries, indicating that even when the skewed educational distribution of the US is taken into account, larger educational inequalities remained to exist in the US.

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