



HOME
RESEARCH AREAS
RESEARCH LOCATIONS
PROGRAMS
PUBLICATIONS / RESOURCES
▶ Annual Report
▼ JOURNALS
• Population and Development Review
• PDR Supplements
• Studies in Family Planning
▼ WORKING PAPERS
• Poverty, Gender, and Youth Working Papers
• South and East Asia Working Papers
▼ NEWSLETTERS/SERIALS
• Population Briefs
• Momentum
• Quality/Calidad/Qualité
• SEEDS
▶ Publicaciones en español
▶ Publications en français
▶ إصدارات عربية
▶ Software

[Publications](#) > [Policy Research Division Working Papers](#) > Working Paper No. 172



No. 172, 2003

Zimmer, Zachary, Napaporn Chayovan, Hui-Sheng Lin, and Josefina Natividad. "How indicators of socioeconomic status relate to physical functioning of older adults in three Asian countries," *Policy Research Division Working Paper* no. 172. New York: Population Council. ([PDF](#))

Abstract

In developed countries, socioeconomic status has been identified as one of the most important demographic and social determinants of older adult health. The relationship has not been well studied or contrasted across much of the developing world. Yet, with population aging occurring rapidly in much of Asia, understanding the factors that distinguish between those in better and worse health becomes important. To this end, the current study has two main aims. It first examines the degree to which two measures commonly used to indicate socioeconomic status, education and income, relate to the physical functioning of older adults in three Asian societies—Taiwan, Thailand, and the Philippines. These three societies are all experiencing population aging, although to varying degrees. They are also characterized by differences in levels of national economic development, a factor that may influence the extent to which health care is available for those in varying socioeconomic positions. Second, the study explores the degree to which these associations are consistent across the three settings. The study results in both expected and unexpected findings. Socioeconomic status indicators are linked to health, but inconsistently across the three settings. Associations are strongest in Taiwan, weaker in Thailand, and almost nonexistent in the Philippines. This leads to questions regarding the universality of the relationship. The paper concludes with a discussion of the possible reasons that socioeconomic status may not influence the health of older adults in consistent ways across different societies, including the effect that economic development can have on health outcomes.


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