The Effects of U.S. Community Colleges on Educational Attainment and Longevity

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Abstract

More than six hundred two-year public colleges opened in the United States between 1945 and 1980, creating major differences in access to college by location and date of birth for otherwise similar people. I use the variation arising from these college openings as a natural experiment, and I create for my analysis a new longitudinal dataset, linking Census and Social Security Administration data and geocoding the exact locations of colleges and of childhood towns/townships. Using this new linked and geocoded dataset, I develop a new research design that overcomes several major threats to internal validity. These threats include substantial bias and artificially small standard errors arising from incomplete mortality data, as well as two different types of endogenous migration. I find that the college openings led to greater college attainment on average for nearby college-age men and women, "democratization" and not "diversion"—that is, to a higher probability of completing four years of college—and to a substantially greater likelihood of surviving to at least age 68. For reasons of both external and internal validity, these results are the best available evidence on the causal effect of educational attainment on longevity.

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1 Introduction

Without a college degree, life in America is staggeringly shorter.
–Anne Case and Angus Deaton[1]

Relative to Americans with a four-year college degree, the adult lifespans of Americans without a college degree are shorter by an average of eight and a half years (Case and Deaton, 2023). There are good reasons to think that college attainment causes greater longevity, such as through higher income, healthier occupations (Leigh, 1983), and/or patterns of thinking and decision-making that lead to better health (Grossman, 1972; Cutler & Lleras-Muney, 2006). But causality may run in the opposite direction, if greater longevity means higher returns to college attainment.[2] A third possibility is that causality runs in neither direction, and that the strong college-longevity correlation instead reflects pre-existing differences—such as family background—between those with and without a college degree (Fuchs, 1982). I estimate the causal effect of increased college attainment on longevity, using as a natural experiment the postwar openings of U.S. community colleges. I also specifically address the longstanding and contested question of whether four-year degree attainment is increased ("democratization") or decreased ("diversion") by community colleges.

To estimate these causal effects, I create a new linked, geocoded dataset of men and women who were college-age at the time of the postwar community college openings. Creating this dataset involves collecting information on all U.S. colleges operating between 1945 and 1980, including date of opening; geocoding the exact locations of these colleges; developing algorithms to geocode 70,000 towns/townships in the 1940 Census and over 100,000 locations of birth in the Social Security Numerical Identification System ("Numident") dataset; and linking Numident to the 1940 Census, 2000 Census and the American Community Survey.

Using this new linked and geocoded dataset, I develop and implement a new research design that overcomes several major threats to internal validity. The first two threats are substantial bias and artificially small standard errors arising from incomplete mortality data (Connolly, 2025). The third and fourth are biases from endogenous migration: the potential of a college opening to induce local individuals to migrate elsewhere ("endogenous

[1] Case, A. & Deaton, A. (2023, October 3). Without a College Degree, Life in America is Staggeringly Shorter. *New York Times*.

[2] "The major secular decline of [mortality and morbidity] rates in the United States and elsewhere probably increased the rates of return on investment in human capital [by enabling individuals to collect returns over more years], thereby encouraging such investment" (Becker, 2009, p. 86). See also Ben-Porath (1967), Hazan (2009), and Cervellati and Sunde (2013).

out-migration"; Borjas, 1987) and to attract individuals from elsewhere to the local area ("endogenous in-migration"; Drucker & Goldstein, 2007). A fifth threat to internal validity is the difficulty of assessing the exclusion restriction—the extent to which the estimated effect on longevity is a direct effect of educational attainment rather than an indirect effect of a college opening (e.g., increased local economic growth). Overcoming these and other threats to internal validity with this new research design, I obtain new evidence on the causal effects of community colleges on educational attainment and longevity.

I consider towns which, prior to the opening of a two-year public college, were at least twenty-five miles from the nearest existing college. Among those who lived in one of these towns as a child, the treatment group consists of those who were college-age or younger at the time of the opening, and the control group those from the same childhood town who were older than college-age. I estimate a treatment effect of the community college openings of about one-tenth of a year of additional college attainment, with little or no detectable effect for towns beyond five miles from the college opening. The newly opened community colleges increased college attainment by one-tenth of a year, with no detectable effect for towns more than five miles from a college opening. This increase in college attainment, occurring only among those in their mid-20s or younger at the time of the opening, also involved a one percentage point (7.4%) increase in four-year degree attainment—democratization (on net), rather than diversion.[3]

The community college openings increased the share of individuals surviving to age 68 by two percentage points (2.5%). The effect on longevity is confined, like the college attainment effect, to men and women whose childhood town was within five miles of a college opening and is larger for men than women. The point estimates imply that the community college openings increased longevity substantially, bearing out the hypothesis that college attainment causes greater longevity.

For reasons of both external and internal validity, the results in the present paper are the best available evidence on the causal effect of educational attainment on longevity. Educational attainment is "[t]he one social factor that researchers agree is consistently linked to longer lives in every country where it has been studied... It is more important than race; it obliterates any effects of income."[4] Understanding the causal relationship between

[3]In this paper I study *net* democratization/diversion. Other researchers (with data on college enrollment) have also obtained evidence on gross democratization/diversion.

[4]Kolata (2007). As Grossman (2006) puts it, "years of formal schooling completed is the most important

education and health/longevity is of great importance for determining the total rate of return to educational attainment (Cutler & Lleras-Muney, 2006; Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2011), for economic models of the demand for human capital (Ben-Porath, 1967; Becker, 2009; Hazan, 2009; Cervellati & Sunde, 2013) and health capital specifically (Grossman, 1972, 2000, 2017), as well as for understanding the demographic transition and the fundamental causes of long-run economic growth (Acemoglu & Johnson, 2007; Cervellati & Sunde, 2005, 2015; Soares, 2005; Galor & Weil, 2000; Galor, 2011). Whereas prominent null results in the education-longevity literature have called into question economic models that assume a strong causal effect of education on health/longevity, the results in the present paper suggest such models are justified.[5]

The causal effect of educational attainment on mortality has been estimated using compulsory schooling natural experiments, with mixed results.[6] These natural experiments have four important limitations in terms of external validity. First, the results are specific to the student who would drop out of school if his continued enrollment were not required by law. A primary reason for dropping out is a belief that the benefits for oneself of further education are minimal. If this belief is correct, then the results in this literature cannot be generalized to the student who stays in school voluntarily, believing (correctly) that the benefits for himself of further education are worth his time and effort.[7] Second, there are good reasons for thinking that the benefits of an additional year of educational attainment depend a great deal on student engagement. A legally compelled student may do the bare minimum academically to get by, producing a correspondingly minimal causal effect on longevity and other outcomes. In these and other ways,[8] compulsory educational attainment

correlate of good health [and longevity]." See also Grossman (2015).

[5]Clark and Royer (2013) interpret their results—no reduction in mortality from increases in compulsory schooling in the U.K.—as "suggest[ing] that economic models that assume a strong causal effect of education on health ought to be carefully reconsidered" (p. 2089). Subsequent causal evidence from compulsory schooling natural experiments (notably Meghir et al., 2018) has reaffirmed the Clark-Royer null result for the causal effect of compulsory schooling on mortality.

[6]Prominent papers in this literature include Lleras-Muney (2005), Albouy and Lequin (2009), van Kippersluis et al. (2011), Clark and Royer (2013), Meghir et al. (2018), and Malamud et al. (2023).

"An effect of education on mortality exists in some contexts but not in others, and seems to depend on (i) gender; (ii) the labor market returns to education; (iii) the quality of education; and (iv) whether education affects the quality of individuals' peers" (Galama et al., 2018).

[7]As Galama, Lleras-Muney and van Kippersluis (2018) put it, "...[A] related, but more disturbing, possibility [is] that compulsory schooling is in fact a bad experiment to assess the causal effect of education because these laws force individuals, who are not interested in staying in school longer, to do exactly that....In the absence of [a market failure], economic theory predicts that [compulsory schooling] could have negative returns" (pp. 69-70).

[8]Third, the causal effect of additional educational attainment on longevity may vary by academic ability,

may differ fundamentally from voluntary attainment. The causal effects of compulsory education, accordingly, may have minimal relevance for explaining the well-documented positive correlation between educational attainment and longevity, given that observed variation in educational attainment is mostly variation in voluntary attainment.

Whereas dozens of papers estimate causal effects of compulsory schooling on longevity, only five estimate causal effects of college attainment. There are good reasons to think that college differs in major ways from lower levels of education in how it affects health and longevity, including in the development of personality traits (such as self-directedness and an orientation to hard work), specific skills and knowledge, general cognitive skills, and real and perceived control of one's life (Ross & Mirowsky, 1999). Given that present-day variation in educational attainment is mostly variation in college attainment,[9] understanding the effects of college attainment on longevity is of great importance.

Buckles et al. (2016) study variation in college attainment arising from differences in exposure to the military draft for the Vietnam War, and find evidence that the increased college attainment reduced mortality between 1981 and 2007 by 2.1-2.6 percentage points. This result is specific to white men who enrolled in college to avoid the draft, and the effect of college may be different for other demographics and for students who enroll for other reasons. González et al. (2023) find evidence that the 1973 military coup in Chile, and the consequent reduction in access to college, led to greater mortality between 1994 and 2017, by 2.9% for women and 4.4% for men. The interpretation of this result is complicated by the fact that the military coup led to other changes at all Chilean institutions of higher education.[10] In both cases, the circumstances of the natural experiment are limiting in terms of both external validity and policy relevance. The causal effects of college attainment, though a central

interest in education, family background, or other factors that determine the educational attainment distribution. Changes in compulsory schooling laws by definition affect only individuals at the left tail of the overall distribution of educational attainment. Fourth, it may be that what matters (to some substantial extent) for longevity is *relative* level of education (Albouy & Lequin, 2009, p. 167), which is affected by the voluntary decisions of individuals to attain additional education but not by increases in compulsory schooling.

[9] Among Americans age 25 and older, 91% have completed high school and 38% have completed a four-year college degree (Digest of Education Statistics, 2023, Table 104.10).

[10] In the immediate aftermath of the military coup, members of the military were appointed to the highest leadership positions in all universities and given authority over university administration. Academic curricula became less flexible, less emphasis was given to critical thinking, and extracurricular activities were substantially restricted. Faculty, administrators and students operated in an atmosphere of political repression and in certain cases became the targets of political persecution. Twenty-four professors and 252 students were the victims of state-led killings (González et al., 2023).

consideration when policymakers decide whether to open or close a community college, have no bearing when policymakers initiate wars, impose drafts, or stage political revolutions.

The remaining three natural experiments involving college attainment (Lacroix et al., 2019; Cowan & Tefft, 2024; Fletcher & Noghanibehambari, 2024) rely on variation arising from reductions in the costs of attending college.[11] The papers in this literature estimate effects of college attainment for the student who believes that the benefits of additional college attainment are worth her time and effort, and who would attend college if it were more affordable. Of the four types of students for which educational attainment-longevity causal effects have been estimated—the student induced to vary her educational attainment by legal compulsion (e.g., Clark & Royer, 2013), by a military draft (Buckles et al., 2016), by the consequences of a military coup (González et al., 2023), and by increased affordability—the fourth type of student is most relevant for understanding present-day correlation between educational attainment and longevity, and for a large set of public policy decisions, including ones concerning tuition-free community college, Pell grants, student loans, public subsidies to state colleges and universities, and the openings and closings of local community colleges.

I advance this literature in major ways in terms of internal validity, most notably with respect to missing mortality data. Of the three papers involving reductions in the cost of attending college, Fletcher and Noghanibehambari (2024) can be considered as having the greatest degree of internal validity. This paper's mortality dataset—known as NARA Numident[12]—is commonly used to estimate mortality effects, and includes individuals who died between 1988 and 2005 with high probability, and those who died before 1988 or after 2005 with low probability. Mortality data in NARA Numident are missing not at random but in a way that depends on the outcome, longevity, a problem that I call endogenous sample selection. In the present paper I am able to use a far more complete version of the Numident mortality data.[13] At the same time, I can conduct my analysis as if I were using NARA Numident—by dropping individuals from the sample who died before 1988 or

[11] Using province-level variation in Canada in the impact of higher education subsidies for veterans of the Second World War, Lacroix et al. (2019) find that greater educational attainment reduced mortality between 1991 and 2011. Cowan and Tefft (2024), using the 1984-2015 National Health Interview Surveys, find evidence that postwar increases in states' per capita number of colleges decreased mortality between 1984 and 2015. Fletcher and Noghanibehambari (2024), linking the 1940 Census to public Social Security death records, find evidence that increases in counties' per capita number of four-year colleges increased longevity.

[12] Social Security Administration (SSA). 2007. "Numerical Identification Files (NUMIDENT), created, 1936 - 2007, documenting the period 1936 - 2007." [dataset] Washington, DC: Social Security Administration.

[13] See sections 3.1 and 3.3.

after 2005—and assess the impact of missing mortality data. I show (Figure 4) that the NARA Numident pattern of missing mortality data causes two major problems for internal validity: artificially shrinking the magnitude of the estimated effect by 83% and artificially shrinking the standard error by 67%. Had NARA Numident been used for my analysis, one would conclude that the college openings had no detectable effect on lifespans. This wrong conclusion is an artifact of missing mortality data.

With this improvement in internal validity, I advance a much larger literature that estimates casual effects of early-life treatments on older-age mortality.[14] In a separate paper I show, using two prominent natural experiments, that endogenous sample selection[15] results in substantial bias and artificially shrinks standard errors (Connolly, 2025). The severity of these two problems depends on the type of mortality outcome as well as the type and extent of missing mortality data. Treatment effects estimated on a longevity-selected sample cannot be taken at face value, but rather require a substantial upward adjustment in the standard error and a sensitivity analysis.[16] The primary results in the present paper are among the few education-longevity causal estimates that require neither the standard error correction nor the sensitivity analysis.[17]

The results of this paper have important policy implications along at least three dimensions. First, increasing the longevity of the U.S. population has been an important goal of U.S. policymakers for more than four decades (U.S. Surgeon General, 1979). More recently, U.S. policymakers have expressly adopted the promotion of educational attainment—increasing high school completion rates (by 4.2 percentage points by 2030) and college-going rates (by 4.6 percentage points)—as a means of promoting health and longevity (Pronk et

[14]This larger literature includes not just the aforementioned five natural experiments on college attainment and dozens on compulsory schooling, but also others that are education-related (e.g., Aaronson et al., 2021; Frisvold & Golberstein, 2011, 2013), and many involving non-education treatments, including military service (Bedard & Deschenes, 2006), well-baby visits (Horjt et al., 2017), modern hospitals (Hollingsworth et al., 2024) the Great Migration (Black et al., 2015), and welfare programs (Aizer et al., 2016), among many others. See Connolly (2025).

[15]The problem of endogenous sample selection is econometrically equivalent to the "bad control" problem (Angrist & Pischke, 2009, pp. 64-66), as I show in a separate paper (Connolly, 2025). Ostensibly causal estimates based on an endogenously selected sample therefore "do not have a causal interpretation" (p. 65).

[16]The sensitivity analysis consists in showing the sensitivity of the estimated treatment effect to different assumptions about the effect of the treatment on unobserved mortality. See Connolly (2025).

[17]The others, all involving compulsory schooling, include Meghir et al. (2018), a subset (the 1972 reform) of the results in Clark and Royer (2013), and a subset (the 1968 reform) of the results in Albouy and Lequin (2009). Mortality is observed through age 66, 50, and 52, respectively. In each case, the researchers are able to account for all mortality from the time of the treatment, thereby avoiding the problem of endogenous sample selection.

al., 2021). Clark and Royer (2013) interpret their null result as "cast[ing] doubt on the health returns to education policies, such as the U.S. Healthy People 2010 goal of increasing the high school completion rate to 90%" (p. 2089). The results of the present paper suggest to the contrary that health/longevity returns are strongly positive for at least some forms of educational attainment.

Second, there has been debate since at least 1960 about whether two-year public colleges increase college attainment ("democratization"; Medsker, 1960) or decrease attainment by diverting students from four-year colleges ("diversion"; Clark, 1960). While a community college could increase four-year degree attainment by substantially reducing the cost of the first two years of college, there are also reasons to think that a community college could decrease four-year degree attainment.[18] A number of researchers in the 1960s through the 1980s found evidence of diversion, providing the empirical basis for the landmark 1989 book by Brint and Karabel, *The Diverted Dream*.[19] In the years since the publication of *The Diverted Dream*, researchers have addressed the question of democratization/diversion for community colleges in the modern period (1980-present) with increasingly sophisticated methodology and found mixed results. One set of papers finds evidence of net democratization (Rouse, 1995; Leigh & Gill, 2003; Mountjoy, 2022), while another set (Doyle, 2009; Reynolds, 2012) finds evidence of net diversion. I find that the U.S. community college openings led on net to democratization.[20]

Third, starting in 2026 a "demographic cliff" will dramatically reduce overall enrollments at U.S. community colleges, with enrollments in certain U.S. regions expected to fall by an average of 20-30% between 2026 and 2029 (Grawe, 2018, Chapter 5). State policymakers are considering whether and when to close existing community colleges (Harnisch et al., 2024, Figure 1). The results in this paper provide important evidence on the potential effects of closing a local community college on educational attainment and longevity.

[18]Possible reasons include tracking into vocational degree programs, peer effects, major differences in per-student resources, a less-academic environment, and the additional obstacle of transferring for the final two years of college attainment.

[19]Brint & Karabel (1989). *The Diverted Dream: Community Colleges and the Promise of Educational Opportunity in America, 1900-1985.* See pp. 130-131 for a summary of the evidence.

[20]The results in this paper are for two-year public college openings taking place in higher education "deserts" (locations at least 25 miles from the nearest college). The democratization/diversion effect of a two-year public college may be different when another college is nearby. The two-year public college evolved substantially over the course of the twentieth century (Cohen et al., 2014), such that conclusions about democratization or diversion in the modern era may not apply to earlier eras.

2 Historical Context

In its landmark 1947 report, the President's Commission on Higher Education ("Truman Commission") wrote:

> The time has come to make education through the fourteenth grade available in the same way high school education is now available...To achieve this, it will be necessary to develop much more extensively than at present such opportunities as are now provided in local communities by the 2-year junior college...such community colleges probably will have to carry a large part of the responsibility for expanding opportunities in higher education (Zook, 1947, p. 37).

In the decades following the Second World War, there were both large expansions in the facilities of existing public colleges and a vast increase in the number of public colleges. Figure 1 is a map of the postwar college openings as well as colleges that were already in existence by 1945 (including public and private, two- and four-year colleges). Figure 2 is a line graph showing the number of colleges over time for each type of college. The majority of openings in the postwar period, over 700, were two-year public colleges, with the fastest period of growth occurring between 1960 and the early 1970s.[21] By 1958, one out of three freshmen in public colleges were enrolled in two-year public colleges (Medsker, 1960, p. 13), and by the late 1960s new two-year public colleges were opening at a nationwide rate of five per month (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1975, p. 382). By 1968 a two-year public college had opened in every state except Nevada (Medsker & Tillery, 1971, pp. 24-25).

Whereas the openings of pre-1940 two-year public colleges were mostly a matter of local funding and initiative, state governments played a major role in funding and controlling the new two-year public colleges in the postwar period. States' plans were "simultaneously efforts to respond to demand, to expand access, and to coordinate public higher education along the lines of a hierarchically segmented system..."[22] While the pre-1940 two-year public colleges were mostly upward extensions of public high schools with a curriculum dominated by the liberal arts, in the postwar period most community colleges were independent of high schools and 30-40% of the curriculum was vocational. Moreover, the majority of students enrolled in the postwar community colleges were of working-class background (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 74). Very few non-traditional students enrolled at two-year public colleges until

[21] For the purposes of this research project I exclude for-profit colleges. For more information on how I created this dataset see Section 3.1.

[22] Specifically, state plans in New York, Pennsylvania, Washington, and Georgia (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 72).

the late 1960s and 1970s, which saw a major increase in the willingness of students to enroll at ages later than their early 20s, particularly among men.[23]

3 Data and Empirical Strategy

3.1 Data Sources

My empirical analysis requires data of three kinds: Census and Social Security Administration datasets, college openings data and geographic information. Of the first kind are the decennial U.S. Censuses (1940 and 2000), the Social Security Numident dataset ("Numident"), and the 2001-2015 American Community Survey (ACS). I use the 2000 Census and the 2001-2015 ACS to observe educational attainment for those affected by the community college openings. Numident—which contains a record of every person who has ever received a Social Security number—provides information on date of birth and city/town of birth, with which I calculate the distance from one's town of birth to the nearest college. The variable "date of death" in Numident enables me to calculate the lifespan of those affected by the college openings.

The second kind of data concerns college openings. For my analysis I have compiled a dataset containing the locations of colleges in the United States for each year between 1940 and 1985. Figure 1 illustrates the colleges in the U.S. that opened during the period 1945-1985, as well as those that were already in existence in 1945. The primary data source is the 1996 Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) dataset, supplemented by the 2009 IPEDS dataset (for the latitude and longitude of many of the colleges) and the 1984 Higher Education General Information Survey (HEGIS) dataset (for information on the year coursework was first offered). As far as possible, I have geocoded the exact location of the college; when not possible, I have geocoded the town in which the college is located.

The third kind of data is geographic. In order to calculate the main treatment variable for my analysis (the distance to the nearest college from one's childhood town at the time one was college-age), I have geocoded as many towns and townships as possible in the 1940 Census and in Numident. To this end, by far the most important geographic data source is the Geographic Names Information System (GNIS), a national dataset of geographic

[23]For more information on how the two-year public college in the U.S. has evolved through the twentieth century, see Cohen et al. (2014). *The American Community College*. Ch. 1.

entities compiled from existing U.S. government maps and supplemented by state and local maps and a variety of historical documents.

3.2 Geocoding and Record Linkage Procedures

For my analysis I have developed an algorithm to geocode as many towns and townships as possible in the 1940 Census, using the Geographic Names Information System (GNIS). When it comes to geocoding "place of birth" in Numident, I adapt an algorithm by Taylor et al. (2016) that geocodes individuals from Numident to their county of birth. My adapted algorithm assigns individuals to the latitude and longitude of their "place of birth." Approximately 140,000 places of birth can be geocoded using this adapted algorithm.

I also link Numident to the 1940 Census to observe location of residence in 1940 (for those born before 1940). This linkage was carried out by Massey et al. (2018) and the resulting crosswalk from Numident to the 1940 Census has been made available to researchers at the Census Bureau. Finally, I link Numident to the 2000 Census and the 2001-2015 American Community Survey, in both cases using crosswalks provided to researchers by the Census Bureau.

3.3 Imputation of Missing Dates of Death

Numident contains date of death information for only about half of the postwar community college openings study population (born between 1921 and 1951). Many of those for whom date of death is missing are still alive in 2021; the rest are deceased and the dates of death were never recorded by the Social Security Administration. Numident date of death information is highly comprehensive for deaths occurring in 2000 or later, regardless of age at death (Finlay & Genadek, 2021, Table 1). There is some question about the comprehensiveness of Numident date of death information for deaths occurring between 1973 and 1999 to individuals who died before the age of 65.[24] Accordingly, one can impute missing dates of death using the full-count 2000 Census in the following way. If date of death is missing and the person is alive in the year 2000, it can reasonably be inferred that the

[24]See Hill and Rosenwaike (2001). Table 1. Since 2002 the Social Security Administration has collected additional date of death information for deaths occurring prior to 2000 (Finlay & Genadek, 2021), so that the results in Hill and Rosenwaike (2001) can be taken as a lower bound on the age-at-death-specific comprehensiveness of the pre-2000 Numident mortality data.

person is still alive in 2021. On the other hand, if a person's date of death is missing and he is not observed in the 2000 Census, then it can be reasonably inferred that the person died before the year 2000, and therefore likely before 1973.[25] The full-count 2000 Census has been linked to Numident at very high linkage rates, particularly for the relevant demographic (men and women born in the U.S. between 1921 and 1951).[26] This date of death imputation procedure is summarized in Appendix Figure 1.

3.4 Research Design

The basic empirical specification is a two-way fixed effects model, given by the following regression equation:

$$Y_{iyc} = \beta_1 AgeDist_{yc} + \Sigma_c \beta_{2,c} Town_c + \Sigma_y \beta_{3,y} CountyBirthCohort_y + \epsilon_{iyc} \quad (1)$$

where i indexes individuals, y childhood-county-by-birth years, and c childhood towns. The treatment variable, $AgeDist_{yc}$, is an indicator for both the distance from one's childhood town to the nearby college opening and one's age group at the time of the opening (e.g., 0-5 miles from the college opening and age 10-25 at the time of the opening). One set of fixed effects, $\Sigma_c \beta_{2,c} Town_c$, is for childhood town, which ensures that the estimated treatment effect will be orthogonal to any fixed characteristics of one's hometown (e.g., a town's long history of supporting public education). The second set of fixed effects, $\Sigma_y \beta_{3,y} CountyBirthCohort_y$, is for each childhood-county-by-birth-year, which ensure that the estimated treatment effect will be orthogonal to any trends over time in the outcome at the county, region, state or national level (such as a county-wide increase in funding for elementary school).

Using this two-way fixed effects model, the results in this paper have a causal interpretation under the assumption of conditional mean independence:

$$E(\epsilon | AgeDist, CountyBirthCohort, Town) = E(\epsilon | CountyBirthCohort, Town) \quad (2)$$

That is, conditional on one's birth cohort (or childhood-county-by-birth-year) and childhood

[25] I report results in two ways: first, assuming that Numident coverage of deaths occurring between 1973 and 2000 are highly comprehensive regardless of age at death (see Table 4, column 6), and second, without making any assumption about such comprehensiveness (Table 4, column 7).

[26] See Appendix Table 1.

town, one's age at the time of the local college opening was as good as randomly assigned. This assumption is also known as "exchangeability" and captures the idea that in a natural experiment the treatment and control groups should be otherwise similar (or "exchangeable"). While this assumption of exchangeability cannot be directly tested, one can obtain evidence on its plausibility. This assumption would be implausible given evidence that the treatment and control groups were substantially different in some way relevant to the outcome: for example, if treated men and women had substantially greater aptitude for college or had parents who were substantially wealthier or better-educated on average.[27]

When it comes to estimating the causal effect of the college openings on longevity, for most specifications in this paper at least one more assumption—about the distribution of the treatment effect and/or the pattern of missing data—is required for unbiased and consistent causal inference. When the outcome is "Lifespan in Years," there are two additional assumptions. First, one must assume that the method of projecting lifespans (see section 3.3) for those who are still alive in 2021 accurately captures the pattern of mortality for such individuals. Second, 11% of the study population are neither observed in the full-count 2000 Census nor have a date of death recorded by the Social Security Administration. The required assumption is that whether an individual is missing from the mortality dataset must be uncorrelated with the outcome "Lifespan in Years" (Stock & Watson, 2019, pp. 297-298). Under these two assumptions, together with exchangeability, the estimator of the causal effect of the college openings on the outcome "Lifespan in Years" will be unbiased and consistent.[28]

In contrast, when instead of "Lifespan in Years" the outcome variable is "Survival to (at least) Age 68," the number of required assumptions falls from three to one. The mortality dataset in this case is double-censored,[29] with survival to at least age 68 being

[27] I use covariate balance regressions (Table 2) and event study analyses (Figure 3) to obtain evidence on whether the exchangeability assumption is reasonable.

[28] The second assumption—that an indicator variable for an individual's date of death being missing from the mortality dataset is uncorrelated with the outcome "Lifespan in Years"—almost certainly does not hold, given that those with missing death data died before the year 2000 and to a large extent before 1973. However, there is good reason to think that the degree of bias and inconsistency falls with the overall comprehensiveness of the mortality dataset (Connolly, 2024). The mortality dataset used in this paper—which has high coverage of deaths occurring between 1973 and 2020, plus projections for deaths occurring after 2020—is substantially more comprehensive than the publicly available mortality datasets that have been used to estimate mortality effects such as CenSoc-Numident, CenSoc-DMF and NARA Numident. That is to say, the degree of bias and inconsistency—when the outcome is 'Lifespan in Years"—will be nonzero but substantially smaller than if one had instead used a more limited mortality dataset. See Connolly (2024).

[29] A mortality dataset is left-truncated at age 50 when individuals who died before 50 are completely

observable for every individual without requiring any lifespan projections. It follows that, under the single assumption of exchangeability, the causal effect estimator for "Survival to (at least) Age 68" will be unbiased and consistent without any assumption at all about either the distribution of the treatment effect or about missing mortality data.[30]

Finally, in order to interpret the causal mortality estimate as the effect of additional college attainment in itself and not the general effect of the college opening, an exclusion restriction must hold. That is, it must be the case that the college openings affected longevity only by means of increasing college attainment. It is conceivable that the college openings affected the lifespans of the treatment group (relative to the control group) in some other way (e.g., by creating employment opportunities that disproportionately benefited local college-age individuals). If the exclusion restriction does not hold, the estimated effect of the college openings on lifespan would not be entirely attributable to changes in college attainment arising from the college openings, and the instrumental-variables estimator—of the effect of an additional year of college on lifespan—will be biased and inconsistent. While no longer fully attributable to college attainment, the estimated causal effect on longevity would remain attributable to the general effect of college openings, and hence has importance for public policy.

4 Results

4.1 Summary Statistics

Table 1 contains summary statistics. The study population is split evenly by gender. The typical person was born in 1937, enrolled in Social Security at age 18, and attained about 1.2 years of college.[31] Three-quarters of the study population survived to at least age 65. Eleven percent have dates of death that are left-censored at 1972, and 38

unobserved, and it is left-censored at age 50 when such individuals are partially observed, showing up in the dataset but with a date of death known only to be before age 50 (i.e., the exact date of death is not observed).

[30] That is, whether an individual survived to age 68 is observed for every individual in the study population; There is therefore no missing mortality data about which an assumption is required.

[31] The fact that men and women in these birth cohorts are enrolling in Social Security in early life—typically as a teenager—is what enables the use of censored, rather than truncated, mortality data. That is, such individuals are still observed even if they died outside of the period (1973-2021) in which the mortality data is highly comprehensive, enabling the imputation of their date of death with information from the full-count 2000 Census, as explained in Section 3.3.

percent have dates of death that are right-censored at the year 2020. The overall sample size is about 81 million people. The subset most affected by the openings—those whose childhood hometown was brought within 5 miles of the nearest college by a two-year public college opening—contains about one million people, 24 percent of whom have an educational attainment observable in the 2000 Census or the 2001-2015 American Community Survey.

4.2 Covariate Balance Regressions

Table 2 contains covariate balance regressions, which provide evidence on whether the key assumption of exchangeability is reasonable. The sample is restricted to men and women whose educational attainment is observed in the 2000 Census or the 2001-2015 American Community Survey and for whom both father's and mother's educational attainment is observed in the 1940 Census. In columns 1 and 2, I find that the treatment variable does not predict either mother or father's years of college. In columns 3 and 4, I estimate the treatment effect of the community college openings on years of college and years of lifespan, respectively. In columns 5 and 6, I control for father's and mother's college attainment, and I find that the estimated treatment effect of the college openings changes by about 5% or less. In this way, Table 2 provides support for the assumption of exchangeability.

4.3 Event Study Analysis

Figure 3 contains four event study graphs. Each graph displays an outcome variable as a function of one's age at the time of the community college opening for the event study population: men and women whose childhood town was brought within 5 miles of the nearest public college by a community college opening. The event study graph plots linear regression coefficients in a two-way fixed effects model, with childhood town/township fixed effects and childhood-county-by-birth-year fixed effects. The coefficients are estimated relative to a reference group, those age 32-34 at the time of the college opening. In Figure 3.1, the outcome variable is "Years of College" (as observed in the 2000 Census/2001-2015 American Community Survey). Relative to men and women age 32-34, there is no statistical difference for men and women age age 35-40 in the mean number of years of college attained. Beginning with those age 26-28 or younger at the time of the opening, there is an increase in completed years of college of between five-hundredths and one-tenth of a year for each age

category, statistically significant at the five-percent level.[32]

In Figure 3.2, the outcome is now an indicator for completing at least a bachelor's degree, addressing the question of whether the community college openings led on net to democratization or diversion. Those 26-28 or younger were 1-2 percentage points more likely to attain a bachelor's degree relative to those age 32-34, which is evidence for net democratization. The outcome in Figure 3.3 is "Lifespan in Years," with right-censored lifespans projected on the basis of age and gender using the 2019 Social Security life tables. The point estimates in Figure 3.3 show an increase of about three-tenths of a year on average for those in their mid-20s or younger at the time of the opening, although for most age groups the effect is not statistically different from the age 31-33 reference group. In Figure 3.4, the outcome variable is the same ("Lifespan in Years") but the sample is no longer restricted to those for whom we observe educational attainment and is consequently about four times larger than the sample in Figure 3.3. In Figure 3.4, there is an increase in lifespan of about 0.5 years on average for men and women in their mid-20s or younger at the time of the opening, relative to men and women in the same towns who were age 31-32 when the local community college opened.

4.4 Regression Estimates

In the following regression tables, I keep the same two-way fixed effects model that I use in the event study analysis while consolidating the age-specific indicator variables.

In Table 3, the first explanatory variable combines the youngest five age categories from the Figure 3 event study graphs (i.e., ages 11-25), and the omitted/reference category combines the oldest five age categories (ages 26-40). The second explanatory variable in Table 3 is identical to the first explanatory variable except that it refers to those whose childhood towns were brought within 5 to 20 miles of the nearest college by a community college opening.

The outcome variables in Table 3 are "Years of College" and indicators for completing at least an associate's degree and at least a bachelor's degree. All specifications in Table 3 include childhood town and childhood-county-by-birth-year fixed effects. In column 1, the first coefficient can be interpreted as follows: Among those whose childhood town/township

[32]In these event study graphs, and indeed throughout all of the results in this paper, the standard errors are clustered at the level of childhood town/township.

was brought within 5 miles of the nearest college by a community college opening, being age 10-25 at the time of the opening is associated with about 7.4 hundredths of a year of additional college attainment on average relative to those (with the same childhood town) who were age 26-40 at the time of the opening—a 6% increase in college attainment.[33] For those whose childhood town was brought within 5 to 20 miles, the magnitude of the effect is smaller by an order of magnitude and not statistically distinguishable from zero.

In column 3 of Table 3, the outcome variable is an indicator for completing at least an associate's degree. The effect of the college openings (for those brought within 5 miles of a college by a college opening) is a 1.7 percentage-point increase in the likelihood of completing at least an associate's degree. In column 5, the effect of the postwar openings is a 1.4 percentage-point increase in the likelihood of completing at least a bachelor's degree—that is, evidence for the democratization and against the diversion hypothesis. Across all three columns in Table 3, there is no detectable effect of the college openings for towns beyond five miles from a community college opening.

There is a long-running debate, dating back to at least 1960, about whether the net effect of two-year public colleges on college attainment is positive ("democratization"; Medsker, 1960) or negative ("diversion"; Clark, 1960).[34] A number of researchers in the 1960s through the 1980s found evidence of diversion, as Brint and Karabel note in *The Diverted Dream* (1991). In the years since *The Diverted Dream*, researchers have addressed the question with increasingly sophisticated methodology and found mixed results. One set of papers, which uses distance from one's high school to the nearest two- and four-year colleges for identification, finds evidence of net democratization (Rouse, 1995; Leigh & Gill, 2003; Mountjoy, 2022). Another set of papers uses propensity score matching and sensitivity analyses (Doyle, 2009; Reynolds, 2012) and finds evidence of net diversion. Both sets of papers study two-year public colleges in the modern period (1980 onward), and in each case, the key identification assumption is either selection (only) on observable variables, or that the instrument is valid conditional on observable variables. By contrast, the community

[33] The mean of the dependent variable is 1.16, yielding a percent change of $\frac{0.0739}{1.16} = 6\%$.

[34] In this paper I address the question of net democratization versus net diversion—that is, how access to two-year college affects overall college attainment and four-year degree attainment. Other researchers (with data on college enrollment) have also addressed the question of the number of people who are "diverted" from starting college at a four-year institution by increased access to a two-year institution, as well as the number of people for whom the two-year college democratizes higher education (i.e., who are induced to attend college by increased access to a two-year college but would otherwise not attend college at all).

college openings in the present paper are part of an earlier era of the two-year public college in the U.S., the era of the the comprehensive community college (1940-1980). The two-year public college evolved considerably since its first appearance in Illinois around 1900, and the two-year college in one era may well have had a different effect on overall college attainment than in the other eras.[35]

In the primary specification of Table 3, I control for trends across county birth cohorts in college attainment by using childhood-county-by-birth-year fixed effects. In this way one can rule out any trend (at the county-level or higher) as an explanation for the observed increase in college attainment. Using childhood town/township fixed effects one can also rule out as an explanation any fixed characteristic of individual towns/townships.[36] One cannot, however, rule out in this way an upward trend in college attainment within towns/townships, a trend that would violate the key assumption of exchangeability. Elsewhere—in the event study analysis and the covariate balance regressions—I find evidence against this possible explanation.[37]

In Table 4, I estimate the effect of the postwar community college openings on longevity outcomes. In column 1, the outcome is lifespan in years, in which right-censored lifespans are projected on the basis of gender and age using the 2019 Social Security Administration period life tables.[38] The treatment group—those living in towns brought within 5 miles of the nearest college by a community college opening and age 10-25 at the time of the opening—lived an additional 0.48 years on average. An effect on longevity is not detectable for towns brought within 5-20 miles of the college opening (consistent with the geographic

[35]One important difference, for example, is the share of students enrolled in vocational programs, which was very low in the junior college era (1900-1940) and roughly 30-40% in the era of the comprehensive community college (1940-1980), but over 50% in the modern era (1980-present). Another difference is that in the modern era but not the earlier eras, one could enroll in a vocational/occupational program and then transfer with credit to a degree program at a four-year college. See Cohen et al. (2014).

[36]The inclusion of childhood town/township fixed effects in all specifications means that the observed effect is estimated relative to individuals with the same childhood town/township; in this way, one can rule out the possibility that the observed increase in college attainment can be explained by any fixed characteristics of the towns/townships near the college openings (or to be more precise, any characteristic of the townships that is fixed with respect to all of a given town's birth cohorts in the study population, the 1921-1951 birth cohorts).

[37]In particular, I find no pre-trend in college attainment across the birth cohorts (those age 26-39 at the time of the local community college opening), and I also find in covariate balance regressions that there are no differences in family background—as measured by mother's and father's college attainment—across the treatment and control groups (Table 2).

[38]Social Security Administration Period Life Table (2019). <https://www.ssa.gov/oact/STATS/table4c6.html>

pattern for college attainment observed in Table 3, column 1). As noted in Section 3.4, this treatment-effect estimator in column 1 will be unbiased and consistent under three assumptions: exchangeability, the assumption that the lifespan projections for individuals still alive in 2021 accurately capture the pattern of mortality for those individuals, and the assumption that having a missing date of death is uncorrelated with the outcome "Lifespan in Years."

In column 2, the outcome variable is now an indicator for surviving to at least age 55, and the estimated treatment effect of the community college opening is 0.5 percentage points. For ages 60, 65 and 68, the estimates are 0.77, 1.0, and 1.3 percentage points, respectively. In each case, there is again no detectable effect beyond five miles from the college opening.[39] The treatment effect estimators in columns 2-5 will be unbiased and consistent under three assumptions: exchangeability, the assumption that having a missing date of death is uncorrelated with the outcome "Lifespan in Years," and the assumption that deaths occurring between 1973 and 1999 are highly comprehensive regardless of age-at-death.

In column 6, the mortality dataset is treated as left-censored instead of left-truncated. That is, individuals whose date of death was never recorded by SSA, and who are not enumerated in the 2000 Census, are assumed to have died in 1972 or earlier. In this case, the estimated treatment effect of the college openings on survival to at least age 68 is +2.75 percentage points, an effect that is about twice as large as the effect in column 5, where the dataset is left-truncated and right-censored. The estimator in column 6 is unbiased and consistent under two assumptions: exchangeability, and the assumption that deaths occurring between 1973 and 1999 are highly comprehensive regardless of one's age at death.

In column 7, I estimate exactly the same regression as in column 6, except that I restrict the birth cohorts to include only individuals who were born between 1932 and 1951. As individuals in these birth cohorts turned 68 between 2000 and 2019, and as 2000-2019 mortality data is highly comprehensive regardless of age at death, the second assumption for the estimator in column 6 is no longer necessary. The estimated treatment effect in column 7 of the college openings on lifespan is +2.0 percentage points, and the only assumption required for unbiased and consistent inference is exchangeability.

In Figure 4, I conduct my analysis as if I had a truncated (or longevity-selected)

[39]The ages in columns 2-5 (55, 60, 65, and 68) are chosen because they can be estimated without any additional projections of lifespans. One cannot estimate age 50, for example, without making some assumption about left-censored deaths, because men and women born in 1921 with left-censored deaths are age 52 in 1973. Likewise, one cannot estimate an effect for age 70, because men and women born in 1951 were 69 years of age in 2020.

mortality dataset and compare the estimated treatment effect under censoring with the estimated effect under truncation. In the first column of Figure 4, I plot the point estimate and 95-percent confidence interval from column 1 of Table 4. In column 2 of Figure 4, I estimate exactly the same regression specification, except with a truncated dataset. Specifically, I left-truncate the mortality dataset at 1988 and right-truncate the mortality dataset at 2005, a truncation pattern corresponding to that of the CenSoc-Numident and NARA Numident mortality datasets (Goldstein et al., 2023; Hollingsworth et al., 2024). The point estimate in the second column is 0.082, with a 95% confidence interval of [-0.017, 0.181].[40] Comparing columns 1 and 2, the 95-percent confidence intervals are non-overlapping and the point estimates differ in magnitude by a factor of six. Moreover, the estimate under truncation in the second column is not statistically different from zero. In this context at least, the use of a truncated mortality dataset leads to a substantially different conclusion about the treatment effect of the college openings on longevity.

In Figure 5, I plot the estimated treatment effects (for towns within 5 miles of a community college opening) on college attainment and longevity by race and gender. The estimate on college attainment in the first row, for white women, is about one-tenth of a year and statistically significant at the five percent level. The point estimates for the three other demographics—white men, black men and black women—are all positive and between 0 and one-tenth of a year, but not statistically different from zero or from the effect for white women. In rows 5-8, the outcome is lifespan in years, and the sample is restricted to those for whom we can observe educational attainment. The point estimates for white men and white women are positive, with that of white men equal to about three tenths of a year and statistically different from zero. The point estimates for black women and men are negative but not statistically distinguishable from zero or from the point estimates for white men and women. In the last four rows, the outcome is again "Lifespan in Years," but this time I estimate effects on the full sample (i.e., without restriction to those for whom educational attainment is observed). The point estimates for black men, white men and white women are positive, with those of black and white men equal to slightly more than 0.5 years and statistically different from zero. Moreover, the effect for white men is statistically larger than the effect for white women. The point estimate for black women is negative but not

[40]Going from column 1 to column 2 in Figure 4 the sample size falls by a factor of five but the standard error actually *decreases*. In a separate paper (Connolly, 2024), I discuss the effect of truncation on mortality estimates, including how standard errors are affected.

statistically different from zero or from the estimate for white women.

In Table 5, I estimate the effect of the community college openings on college attainment and on longevity using the education subsample, and I also estimate the ordinary least squares correlation between college attainment and lifespan. The first column of Table 5 is identical to column 1 from Table 3. In the third column, I estimate a treatment effect of 0.3 additional years of lifespan on this education subsample which is 40% smaller than the estimate (0.5) on the full sample (column 1 of Table 4). In column 2, I use an alternative age grouping for the treatment and control groups—ten instead of fifteen years—so that the treatment group are those whose childhood town was within 5 miles of a two-year public college opening and age 15-24 (inclusive) at the time of the opening, while the control group is analogous, but age 25-35. The estimated treatment effect on education (column 2) is 5.9 hundredths of a year on average, while the estimated treatment effect on lifespan is 0.11 years. The implied instrumental variables (IV) effect of the community colleges on lifespan is therefore 1.9 years (with ten-year treatment and control groups) and 4.1 years (with fifteen-year treatment and control groups). In column five, I estimate the ordinary least squares relationship between college attainment and lifespan, and the estimated association is equal to 0.5 years of lifespan for each additional year of college attainment.

There are at least five possible explanations for this result, that the estimated instrumental variables effect of years of college on years of lifespan arising from the community college openings is considerably larger than the estimated nationwide ordinary least squares association. First, the estimate from the community college openings is for "compliers": those whose childhood towns previously had no college within 25 miles but which were brought within five miles of the nearest college by a two-year public college opening, and who were induced to attain additional years of college by the college opening. It follows that many of the compliers are men and women who could not afford to go to college but for the opening of the local two-year public college. The compliers stand in contrast to the average college-going individual in the national sample, who has a family background that is considerably better off in terms of parents' socioeconomic status and less likely to live in a college "desert" as a child. One important difference between the typical complier and the typical college-going individual is the counterfactual occupation outcome if the person did not attend college. For the compliers, particularly male compliers, it is conceivable that the counterfactual occupation could be much more likely to lead to a relatively short lifespan

than for the typical college-educated American male. For example, a complier in the control group may be much more likely to serve in the military, or to have a working-class occupation with an elevated risk of a relatively early death. I am not able to observe occupation or cause of death directly in the available data for the community college openings study population, so I cannot directly test these possibilities.

Second, it could be that the college openings created positive spillovers in terms of lifespan. The ordinary least squares estimate of college attainment on lifespan does not capture positive spillovers because it is estimated at the individual level. By contrast, the community college treatment varies at the level of clusters—those age 25 or younger at the time of the opening whose childhood towns were within five miles of a two-year public college opening—which means that the IV estimate of college attainment on longevity from the community college openings will capture positive spillovers within these treated clusters. If one's spouse, siblings and/or peers attain additional college, it is conceivable that they could exert an influence on one's own health behaviors that could lead to greater longevity. Lleras-Muney et al. (2020) find evidence that the association between educational attainment and longevity for men is particularly strong in U.S. states (and within birth cohorts in U.S. states) that have greater levels of educational attainment (Figures A-9 and A-10).

Third, some considerable part of the difference between the OLS estimate and the IV estimate could be a result of sampling variability. The lifespan estimates are somewhat imprecise, particularly on the education subsample (the point estimate in Table 5, Column 4 is 0.3, with a 95% confidence interval of [0.0664, 0.5638]), and one cannot rule out IV estimates of considerably less than one year of lifespan for each additional year of college. The imprecise estimates are a result of the fact that the "Lifespan in Years" outcome variable is inherently noisy with respect to educational attainment. Precise estimates of the effect of college attainment on lifespan would require a much larger first-stage effect on educational attainment than is generally observed in related papers—that is, papers evaluating natural experiments to estimate the causal effects of educational attainment using college openings (e.g., Currie & Moretti, 2003) or compulsory schooling laws (Lleras-Muney, 2005, and others).

Fourth, it is possible that at least one of the assumptions concerning the distribution of the treatment effect on mortality does not hold. As noted in Section 3.3, in order for the causal estimator to be unbiased and consistent when the outcome is "Lifespan in Years," the projected lifespans must accurately capture the pattern of mortality for individuals who

are still alive in 2021, and whether an individual is missing from the mortality dataset must be uncorrelated with the outcome "Lifespan in Years." If either or both of these assumptions do not hold, then the reduced-form treatment effect estimator, and hence the estimated IV effect—will be biased and inconsistent.

Fifth, it may be the case that the exclusion restriction does not hold. That is, the college openings may have increased lifespan for local college-age men and women in ways other than through increasing college attainment. For example, a local college opening may have led to local economic growth that disproportionately benefited those who were college-age or younger at the time of the opening, relative to those sharing the same childhood town who were older than college-age. If the exclusion restriction does not hold, then the estimated IV effect will be biased and inconsistent. Regardless of whether the exclusion restriction holds, however, the reduced-form effect (interpreted as the general effect of the college openings on lifespan), which has importance for public policy, would still be valid under the assumption of exchangeability.

I am able to rule out some violations of the exclusion restriction based on the geographic evidence that I obtain with the childhood-town research design. Consider the possibility that the typical community college opening stimulated local economic growth, and that this economic growth—not the observed increase in educational attainment—is in large part what caused longer lifespans for individuals in the treatment group (i.e., individuals who had a childhood town that was within five miles of the opening and who were college-age or younger at the time of the college opening). This scenario is possible only if the local economic growth had large effects on longevity for those whose childhood towns were less than five miles from the college opening, but zero effect for those whose childhood towns were 5-20 miles from the college opening. If the typical college opening had a substantial positive effect on local economic growth, it is reasonable to think either that the area of economic growth typically extended beyond five miles, or that individuals whose childhood towns were 5-20 miles from the college typically benefited to some extent from the economic growth, by commuting or moving to the area near the college which was experiencing economic growth. Instead, I find that the college openings had zero effect on either educational attainment or lifespan for individuals whose childhood towns were 5-20 miles from the college opening. More generally, if there is a violation of the exclusion restriction, the mechanism must operate in a way that fits the observed geographic pattern of estimated

effects on educational attainment and lifespan.

Alternatively, the estimated effect of college attainment on longevity arising from the community college openings may in part be the result of some other unobserved factor that is varying between the treatment and control groups—that is, some violation of the key identification assumption of (conditional mean) exchangeability. In this case, as in the case of any natural experiment, there is some irreducible uncertainty about this assumption. As the locations and dates of the college openings were the result not of random assignment but of political processes at the state and local level, there is no a priori guarantee of exchangeability between the treatment and control groups arising from these openings. The research design enables me to rule out exchangeability violations arising from trends at the county level or higher, as well as from any fixed characteristics of one's childhood town. I have also obtained evidence that the exchangeability assumption seems reasonable using covariate balance tables and event study regressions. However, if there is some other trend orthogonal to observed family background variables that is varying at the level of towns along with the openings of the community colleges, it may explain at least part of the estimated effect of the openings on longevity.

A number of recent papers have used natural experiments to estimate causal effects of educational attainment on longevity. One set of papers concerns the effect of additional high school attainment, using changes in compulsory schooling laws as a source of quasi-experimental variation.[41] The magnitudes of the effects estimated in these papers range from 0 to a 6.9 percentage-point reduction in mortality over a ten-year period. One published paper estimates the causal effect of increased college attainment on mortality, using state-level variation in one's risk of being drafted for the Vietnam War (Buckles et al., 2016). The estimated effect of an additional year of college attainment in this case is a 2.6 percentage point reduction in mortality over a 26-year period (starting in one's 30s). Put in comparable terms, my estimate of the effect of one year of additional college attainment is a 6.6 percentage point reduction in mortality between ages 55 and 65. This estimated effect is larger than the estimate from Vietnam draft risk and at the higher end of the range of estimates for compulsory schooling laws.[42]

[41] See Galama et al. (2018) for a review of these papers.

[42] These three types of natural experiments—compulsory schooling law changes, variation in the risk of being drafted for the Vietnam War, and community college openings—involve both different types of education (high school, general college, and community college) and different types of compliers. The complier for compulsory-schooling-law natural experiments is the high school student who would drop out at the earliest

5 Conclusion

In this paper I examine the effects of the great expansion of two-year public college in the US between 1945 and 1980. These community college openings led to about one-tenth of a year of additional college attainment for local men and women who were college-age or younger at the time of the opening, to "democratization" and not "diversion" (i.e., a higher probability of completing a four-year college degree), and to between 0.1 and 0.5 years of additional lifespan.

The results of this paper rest on the assumption of exchangeability (i.e., the assumption that the treatment and control groups are substantially the same in every respect relevant to the outcomes). As with any natural experiment, there is some irreducible uncertainty about this assumption. I am able to rule out exchangeability violations arising from trends at the county level or higher, as well as from any fixed characteristics of one's childhood town. I have also obtained evidence that the exchangeability assumption seems reasonable, using covariate balance tables and event study regressions.

The college openings may have affected a number of important life outcomes that are beyond the scope of this paper. Some relate to education, such as the institution attended and one's area of study. There are also longer-term outcomes, including income, political participation (e.g., propensity to vote), outcomes relating to culture (e.g., religiosity), criminal justice, geographic mobility, as well as inter-generational college attainment and longevity. All of these outcomes are important topics for future research.

point permitted by law and only attains additional schooling because it is legally compulsory. In the case of Vietnam draft risk, the complier is a person who is attaining additional years of college solely because he wants to reduce his risk of being drafted for the Vietnam War. By contrast, in the case of local college openings, the complier is a person who is attaining additional years of college because it has been made more affordable. As a result of these differences—the different types of education and the different compliers—it is reasonable to think that the magnitudes of the estimands (the effect of increased educational attainment on mortality that the researcher is seeking to estimate) and hence of the estimates will differ.

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Figure 1

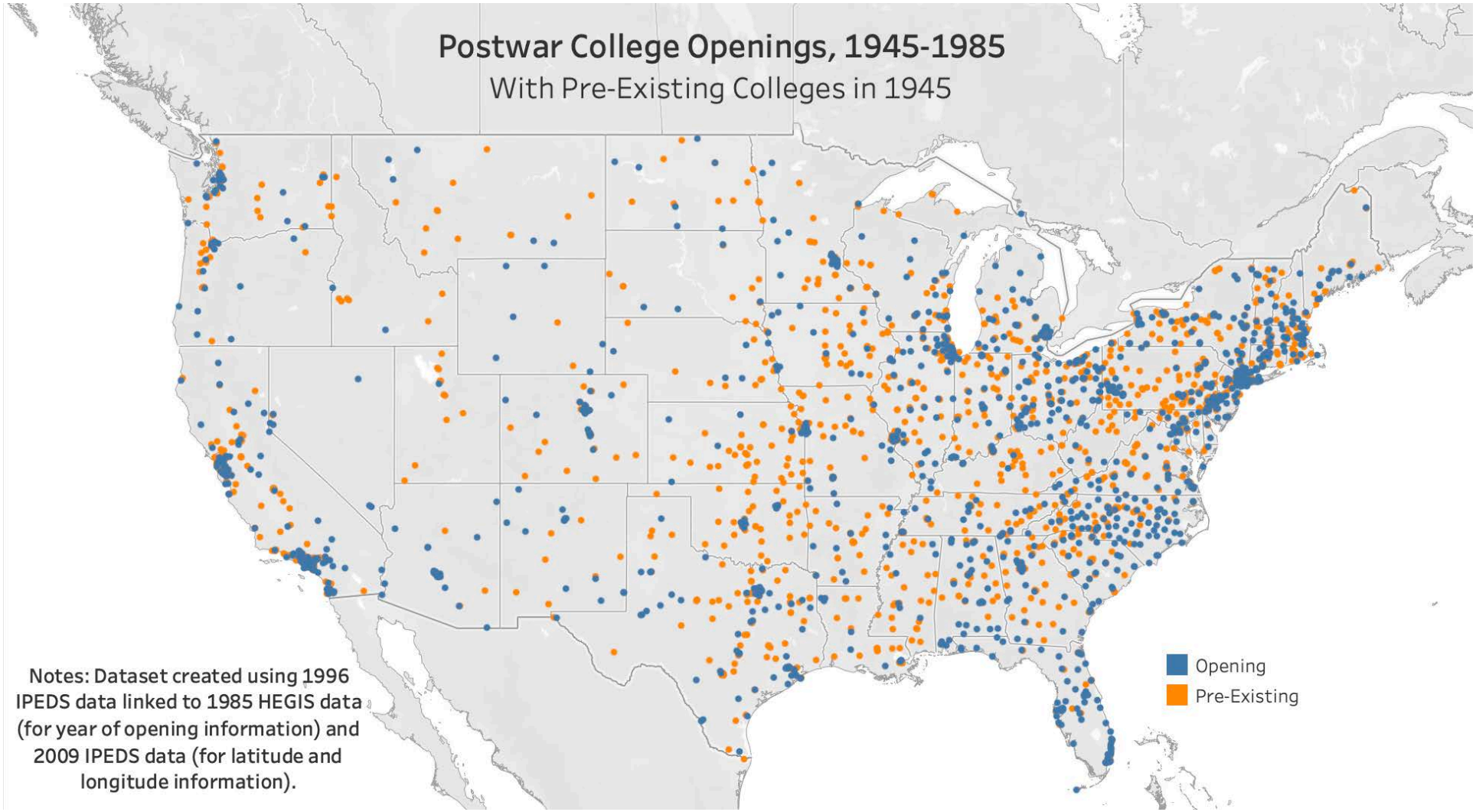
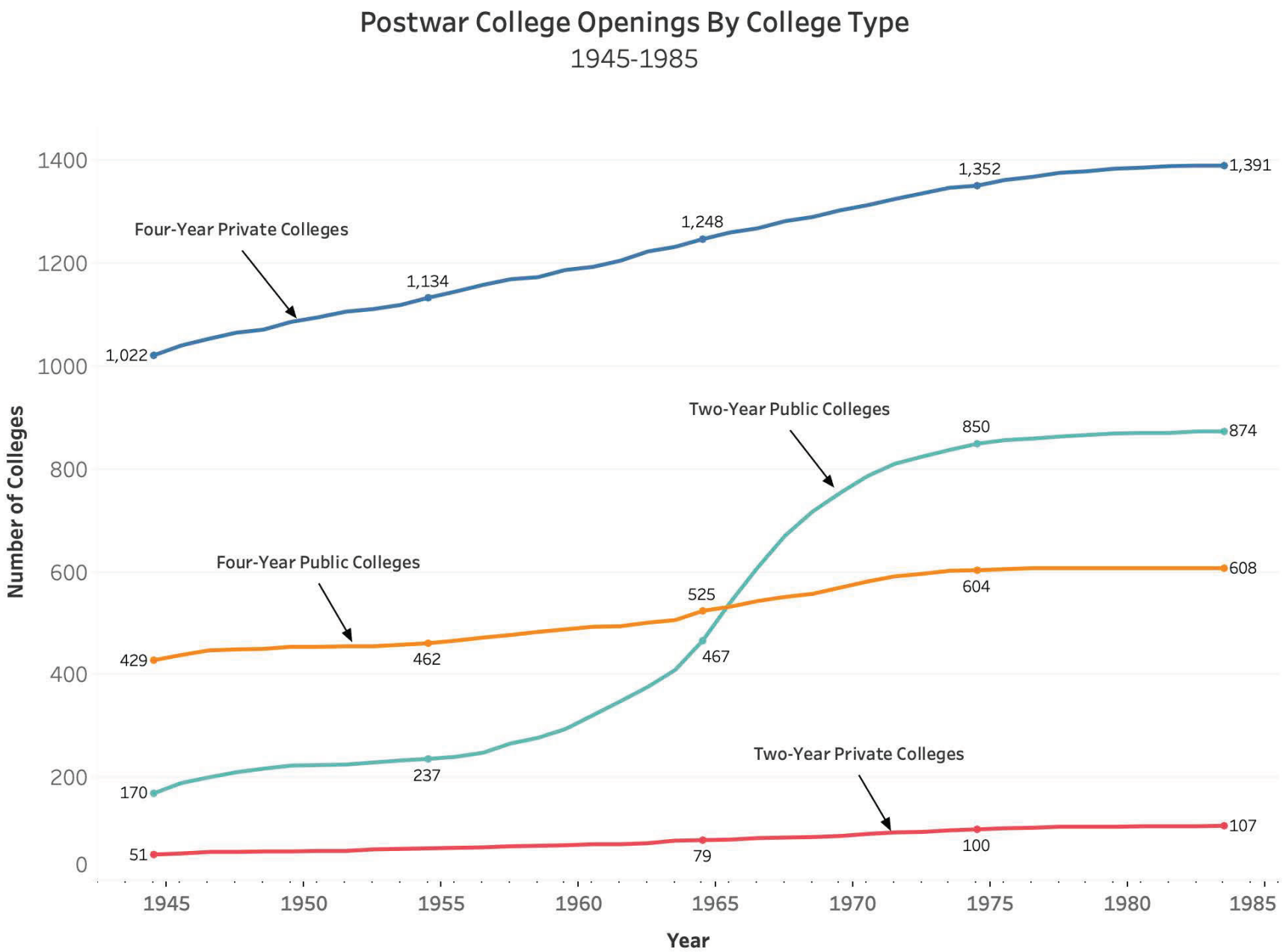
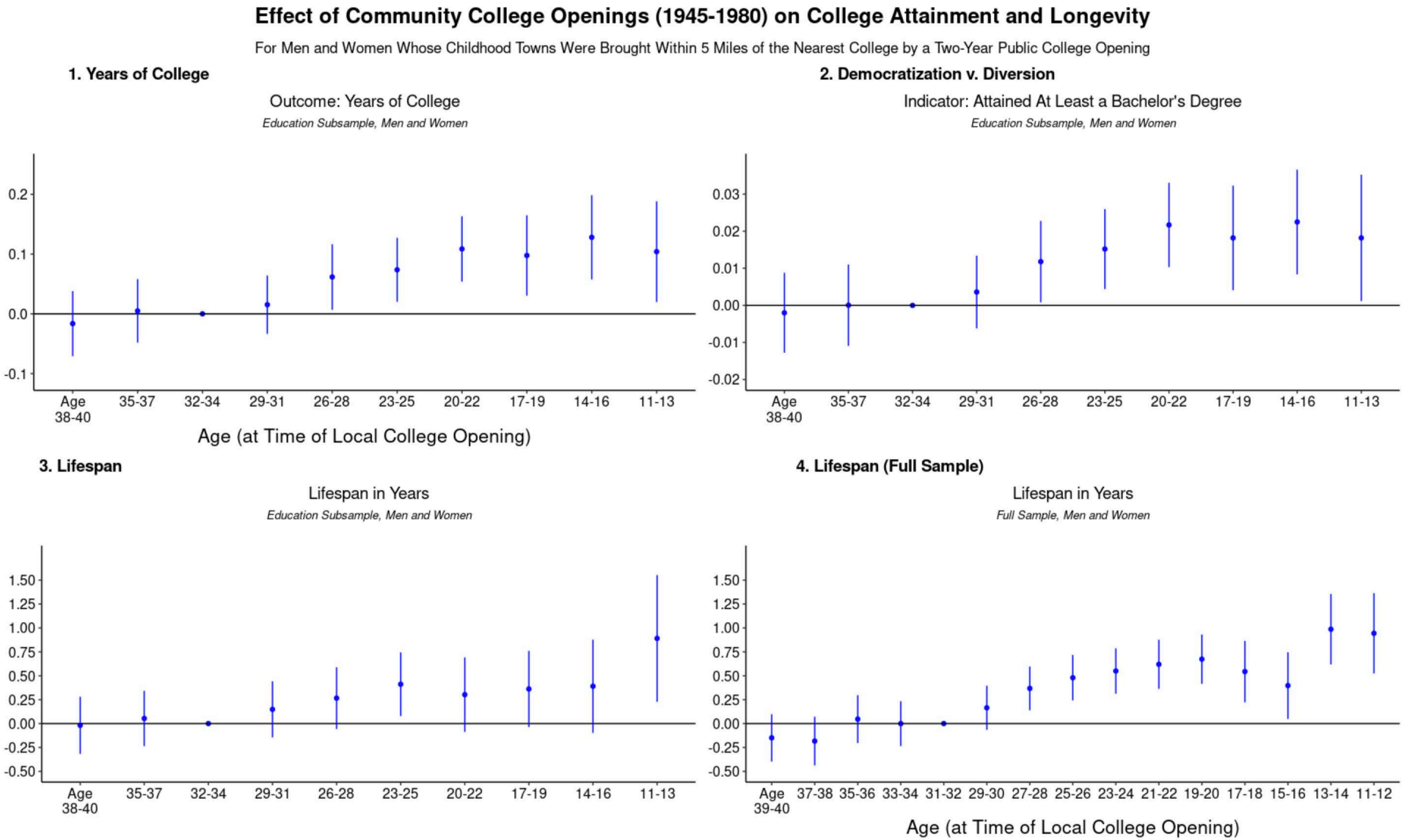

Postwar College Openings, 1945-1985
With Pre-Existing Colleges in 1945
Notes: Dataset created using 1996 IPEDS data linked to 1985 HEGIS data (for year of opening information) and 2009 IPEDS data (for latitude and longitude information).
Opening
Pre-Existing

Figure 2



Notes: Dataset created using 1996 IPEDS data linked to 1985 HEGIS data (for year of opening information) and 2009 IPEDS data (for latitude and longitude information).

Figure 3

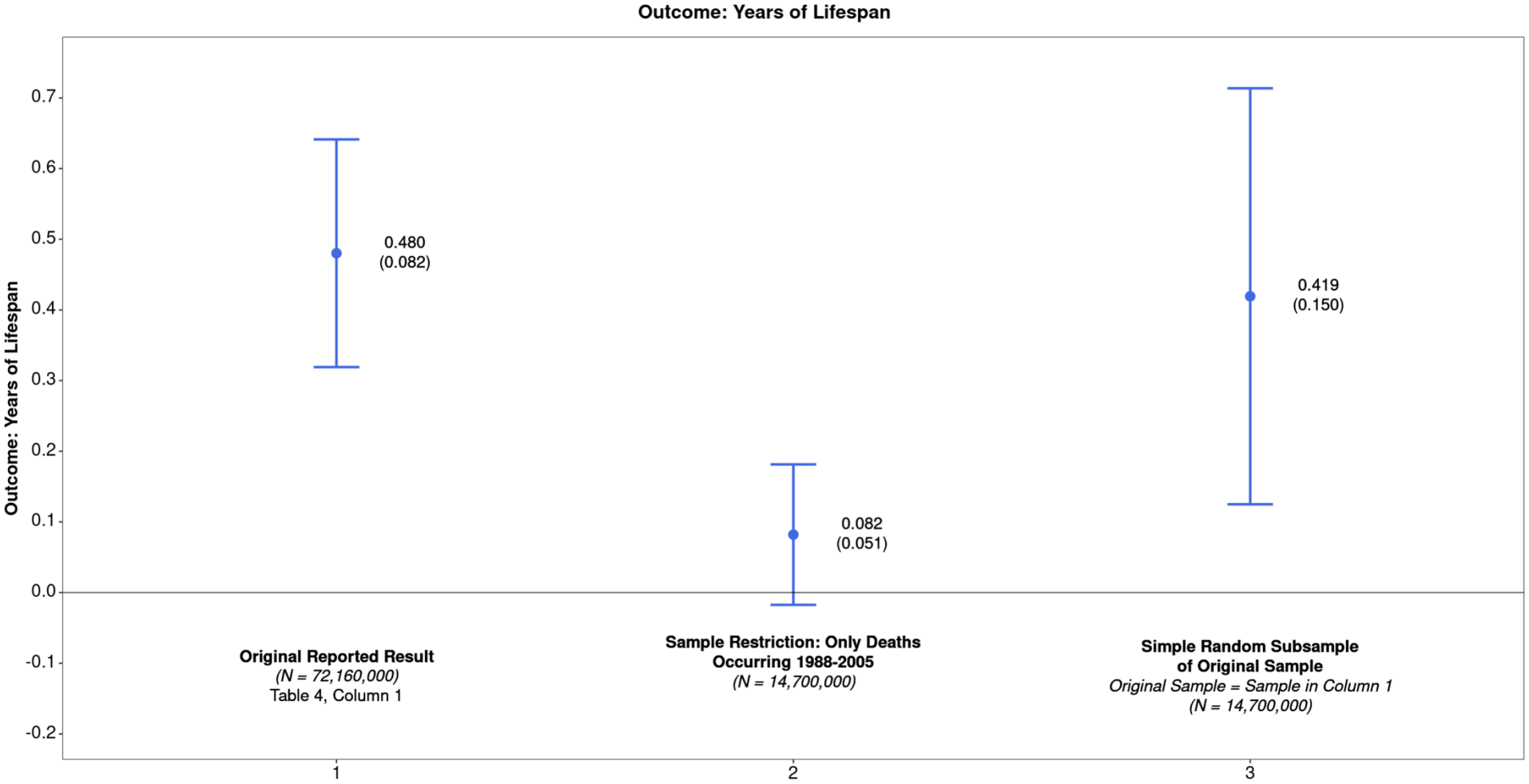


Notes: All specifications include childhood (i.e., 1940 or Numident) town fixed effects and childhood-county-by-birth-year fixed effects, with standard errors clustered at the level of childhood town. Coefficients are relative to the coefficient for age 32-34 (31-32 for full sample). Error bars are 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 4

Endogenous Sample Selection Can Cause Problems for Estimating Mortality Effects

The estimated treatment effect of the community college openings on longevity changes when the sample is restricted to individuals who died between 1988 and 2005. The magnitude of the effect shrinks by 83% (column 1 vs. column 2). The sample restriction also artifically shrinks the standard error by 67% (column 2 vs. column 3).



Notes: This figure plots point estimates and 95% confidence intervals. The only difference between the estimating equations in columns 1 and 2 is the sample, which in column 2 includes only individuals whose year of death falls between 1988 and 2005, as in Fletcher & Noghanharambari (2024) and other papers.

Figure 5

Effect of Community College Openings (1945-1980) on College Attainment and Longevity

By Gender and Race

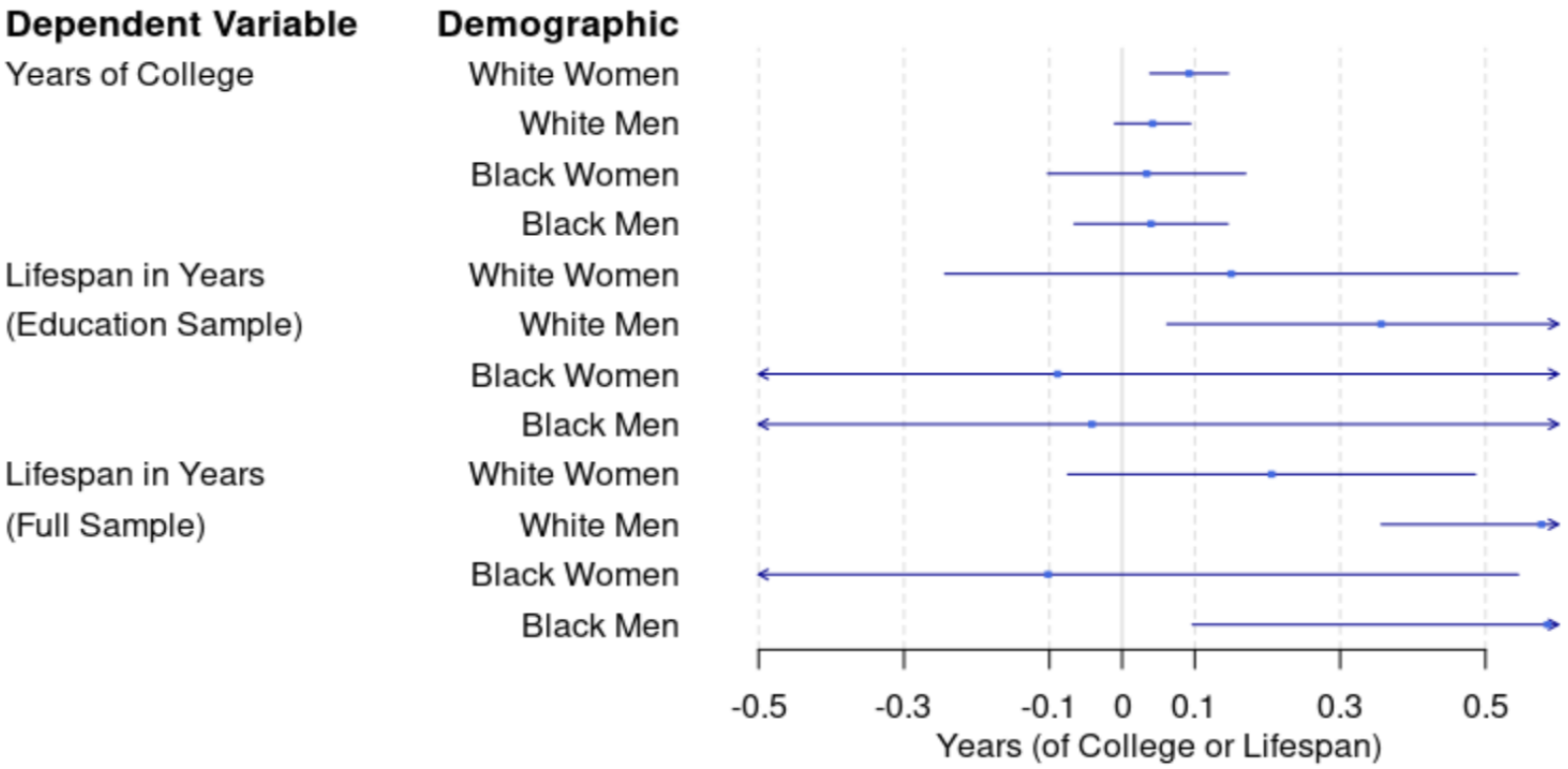


Table 1

Summary Statistics

Variable	Full Sample Mean	Full Sample Std. Dev.	Full Sample Share Nonmissing	Event Study Sample Mean	Event Study Sample Std. Dev.	Event Study Sample Share Nonmissing
Year of Birth	1937	9.4	1	1939	9.2	1
Age at Social Security Enrollment	18.32	6.8	0.98			
Race and Gender						
Male	0.51	0.5	1	0.50	0.5	1
White	0.84	0.37	0.98	0.81	0.39	0.99
Black	0.12	0.33	0.98	0.13	0.34	0.99
Other	0.03	0.16	0.98	0.05	0.21	0.99
Unknown	0.01	0.11	0.98	0.01	0.11	0.99
Location Information						
Location Observable at Birth but not in 1940	0.68	0.47	1	0.79	0.41	1
Location Observable at Birth and in 1940	0.30	0.46	1	0.20	0.40	1
Location Observable in 1940 but not at Birth	0.02	0.15	1	0.02	0.12	1
Age At Which Location is Observed	3.22	5.65	1	2.12	4.81	1
Educational Attainment						
Mother's Years of College	0.18	0.73	0.33	0.18	0.71	0.24
Father's Years of College	0.27	0.96	0.31	0.23	0.88	0.22
Years of College	1.16	1.89	0.23	1.16	1.84	0.24
Attained At Least An Associate's Degree	0.23	0.42	0.23	0.24	0.43	0.24
Attained At Least A Bachelor's Degree	0.19	0.39	0.23	0.19	0.39	0.24
Longevity						
Lived To At Least Age 55	0.84	0.37	1	0.83	0.37	1
Lived To At Least Age 65	0.75	0.43	1	0.74	0.44	1
Lifespan (Projected)	74.0	18.8	1	73.6	19.1	1
Lifespan Left-Censored	0.11	0.31	1	0.11	0.31	1
Lifespan Right-Censored	0.38	0.48	1	0.41	0.49	1
N	80,950,000			1,003,000		

Table 2

Community College Openings: Covariate Balance Table

	Parents' College Attainment				*Controlling for Parents' College Attainment*	
	Mother's Years of College	Father's Years of College	Years of College	Years of Lifespan	Years of College	Years of Lifespan
Indicator: Childhood Town Brought Within 5 Miles of Nearest College by a	-0.0034	0.0134	0.0702	0.044	0.0671	0.0422
Two-Year Public College Opening and Age 10-25 at Time of Opening	(0.0187)	(0.0197)	(0.0372)	(0.2156)	(0.0359)	(0.2147)
Indicator: ...5 to 20 Miles…	-0.0009	0.0245	0.0244	0.0136	0.0173	0.0092
	(0.0127)	(0.0151)	(0.0267)	(0.1605)	(0.0259)	(0.1605)
Mother's Years of College					0.2782***	0.1951***
					(0.0026)	(0.0068)
Father's Years of College					0.3011***	0.1845***
					(0.0025)	(0.0052)
Childhood Town of Residence FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Childhood County by Birth Year FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Clusters	67,000	67,000	67,000	67,000	67,000	67,000
Dep. Var. Mean	0.201	0.29	0.977	85.6	0.977	85.6
Observations	5,287,000	5,287,000	5,287,000	5,287,000	5,287,000	5,287,000

Notes: The underlying dataset consists of the subset of Numident born 1921-1940 that can be linked to the 1940 Census, for which father's and mother's educational attainment is observed in the 1940 census, for which own educational attainment can be observed in the 2000 census or the 2001-2015 American Community Survey, and whose childhood town is geocodable from the 1940 Census or Numident. Standard errors are clustered at the level of childhood town. The omitted explanatory variable for each distance category (0 to 5 miles, and 5 to 20 miles) consists of those who were age 26 to 40 at the time of the college opening. The college openings in this analysis are those that opened in places where the distance to the nearest college (of any kind) prior to the opening was at least 25 miles.

Table 3

Effect of Two-Year Public College Openings on College Attainment

	Indicator: Attained at Least a(n)…		
	Years of College	Associate's Degree	Bachelor's Degree
Indicator: Childhood Town Brought Within 5 Miles of Nearest College by a Two-Year Public College Opening and Age 10-25 at Time of Opening	0.0739***	0.0173***	0.0141***
	(0.0206)	(0.0046)	(0.0042)
Indicator: ... 5-20 Miles…Age 10-25…	-0.0091	-0.0008	-0.002
	(0.0114)	(0.0026)	(0.0023)
Childhood Town FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes
Childhood County By Birth Year FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes
Dep. Var. Mean	1.16	0.232	0.19
Observations	18,300,000	18,300,000	18,300,000

Notes: Standard errors are clustered at the level of childhood town. The community colleges study population consists of the subset of Numident born 1921-1951 with a geocodable town of birth (or geocodable 1940 town of residence) and which can be linked to either the 2000 Census long form or the 2001-2015 American Community Survey. The omitted explanatory variable for each distance category (0 to 5 miles, and 5 to 20 miles) consists of those who were age 26 to 40 at the time of the college opening. The college openings in this analysis are two-year public college openings that opened in places where the distance to the nearest college (of any kind) prior to the opening was at least 25 miles.

Table 4

Effect of Community College Openings on Longevity

Birth Cohorts	**1921-1951**						**1932-1951**
Truncation/Censoring Pattern	*Left-Truncated, Right Censored with Projections*	*Left-Truncated, Right-Censored*				*Left-Censored, Right-Censored*	*Left-Censored, Right-Censored*
		Indicator: Lived to at Least Age…					
	Lifespan in Years	...55	…60	…65	…68	…68	…68
Indicator: Childhood Town Brought Within 5 Miles of Nearest College by a Two-Year Public College Opening and Age 10-25 at Time of Opening	0.4802***	0.0052***	0.0077***	0.0100***	0.0132***	0.0275***	0.0201***
	(0.0822)	(0.0016)	(0.0018)	(0.0020)	(0.0022)	(0.004)	. (0.0036)
Indicator: ... 5-20 Miles…	-0.0389	-0.0009	-0.0011	-0.0014	-0.0016	-	-
	(0.0556)	(0.0010)	(0.0012)	(0.0015)	(0.0016)		
Childhood Town FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Childhood County By Birth Year FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Dep. Var. Mean	78.800	0.93600	0.89600	0.83800	0.79400	*Supp.*	*Supp.*
Observations	72,160,000	72,160,000	72,160,000	72,160,000	72,160,000	80,700,000	80,700,000
Number of Clusters	135,000	135,000	135,000	135,000	135,000	*Supp.*	*Supp.*

Notes: The underlying dataset consists of the subset of Numident born 1921-1951 with a geocodable town of birth (or geocodable 1940 town of residence) and which has a date of death in Numident or the date of death is right censored in 2020. Standard errors are clustered at the level of childhood town. The omitted explanatory variable for each distance category (0 to 5 miles, and 5 to 20 miles) consists of those who were age 26 to 40 at the time of the college opening. SEAs are the state economic areas, which are groups of counties within states. The college openings in this analysis are those that opened in places where the distance to the nearest college (of any kind) prior to the opening was at least 25 miles. "-" indicates that the sign of the coefficient is negative and the magnitude is not statistically significant; "*Supp* ." indicates the figure has not yet been released from the Census Bureau.

Table 5

Effect of Community College Openings on College Attainment and Longevity

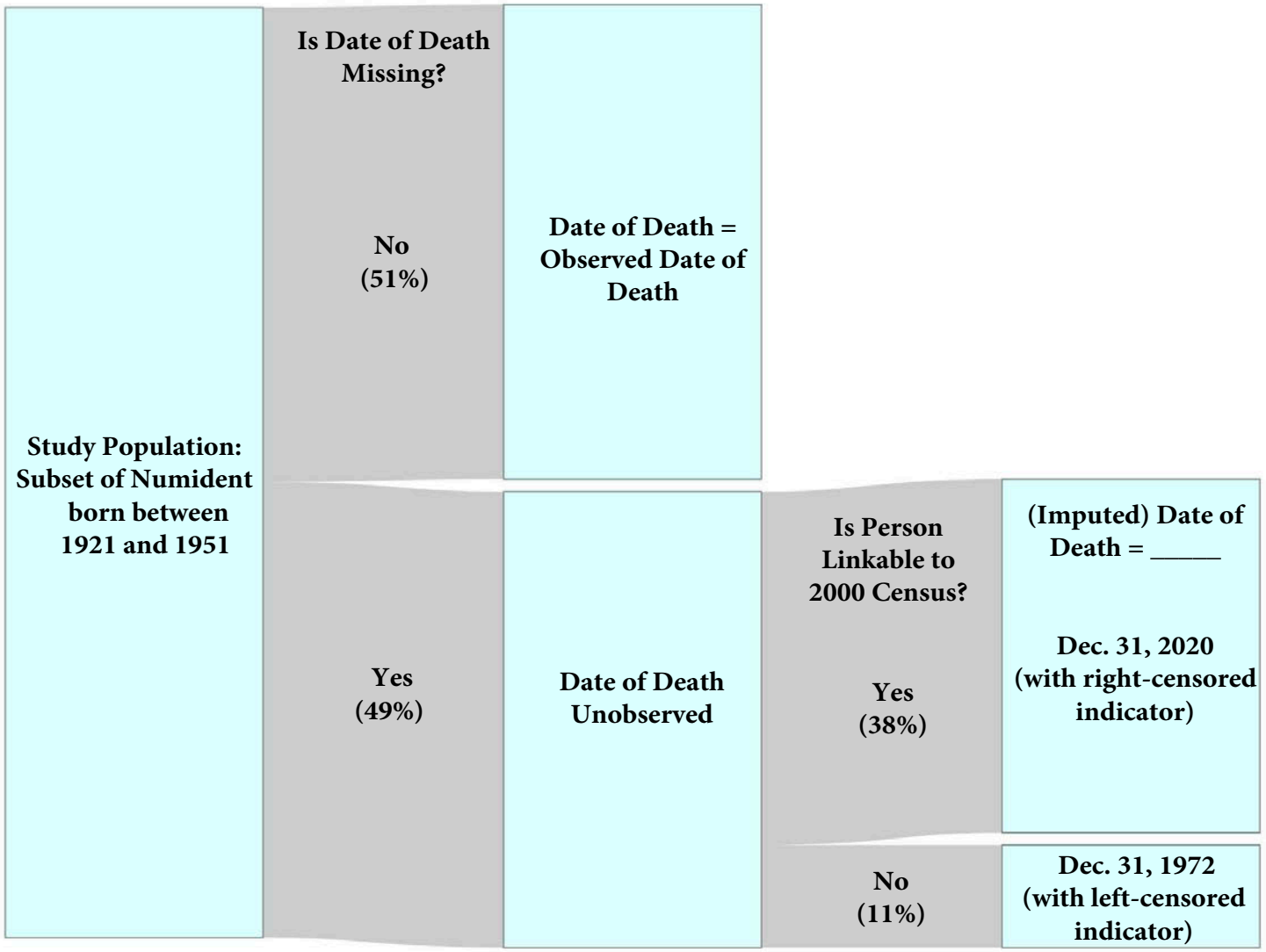
First Stage, Reduced Form, OLS

	Years of College		Lifespan in Years		
Indicator: Childhood Town Brought Within 5 Miles of Nearest College by a Two-Year Public College Opening and Age 10-25 at Time of Opening	0.0739***		0.3016*		
	(0.0206)		(0.1200)		
Indicator: ... 5-20 Miles…	-0.0091		0.0542		
	(0.0114)		(0.0818)		
Indicator: Childhood Town Brought Within 5 Miles of Nearest College by a Two-Year Public College Opening and Age 15-24 at Time of Opening		0.0586**		0.114	
		(0.0199)		(0.1171)	
Indicator: ... 5-20 Miles…		-0.0069		0.0574	
		(0.0113)		(0.0838)	
Years of College					0.4951***
					(0.0046)
Childhood Town FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Childhood County By Birth Year FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Dep. Var. Mean	1.16	1.16	83.0	83.0	83.0
Observations	18,300,000	18,300,000	18,300,000	18,300,000	18,300,000
Number of Clusters	114,000	114,000	114,000	114,000	114,000

Notes: The underlying dataset consists of the subset of Numident born 1921-1951 with a geocodable town of birth (or geocodable 1940 town of residence) and which can be linked to either the 2000 Census long form or the 2001-2015 American Community Survey. Standard errors are clustered at the level of childhood town. The omitted explanatory variable for the 10-25 age category is the 26-40 age category; the omitted explanatory variable for the 15-24 age category is the 25-35 age category. The college openings in this analysis are those that opened in places where the distance to the nearest college (of any kind) prior to the opening was at least 25 miles.

Appendix Figure 1

Imputation of Missing Death Dates



Appendix Table 1

Linkage (PIK) Rates from Numident to the 2000 and 2010 Census

	2000 Census	2010 Census
Overall PIK (Linkage) Rate	87.8%	88.4%
PIK Rates by Age (at time of Census enumeration)		
Age 45-64	*[Not Yet Available]*	93.0%
Age 65-74		94.4%
Age 75+		93.5%

Factors Affecting PIK Rate

More Likely to be PIKed:	Less Likely to be PIKed:
Taxpayers	Mobile/Transient Populations
Workers	US Residents without SSN
Persons on Medicare	Children not claimed on tax forms
Persons Receiving housing/medical/food assistance	
Men ever registered for Selective Service	

Notes: For PIK rates in upper panel, see Rastogi and O'Hara (2012), Table 12 and Masey et al. (2018), Table 4. The lower panel largely reflects a given person's presence in federal administrative data (see Appendix A of Masey et al. (2018)).

Appendix Table 2

Correlation Between Treatment Variable and Linkage to 2000 Census and American Community Survey

	Indicator: Linkable to…		
	2000 Census	2000 Census Long Form	2000 Census Long Form or 2001-2015 ACS
Indicator: Childhood Town Brought Within 5 Miles of Nearest College by a Two-Year Public College Opening and Age 10-25 at Time of Opening	0.0080***	-0.0004	-0.0012
	(0.0022)	(0.0015)	(0.0019)
Indicator: ... 5-20 Miles…	-0.0002	-0.0010	-0.0015
	(0.0015)	(0.0012)	(0.0015)
Childhood Town FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes
Childhood County By Birth Year FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes
Dep. Var. Mean	0.78000	0.13400	0.24700
Observations	72,160,000	72,160,000	72,160,000
Number of Clusters	135,000	135,000	135,000

Notes: The underlying dataset consists of the subset of Numident born 1921-1951 with a geocodable town of birth (or geocodable 1940 town of residence) and which has a date of death in Numident or the date of death is right censored in 2020. Standard errors are clustered at the level of childhood town. The omitted explanatory variable for each distance category (0 to 5 miles, and 5 to 20 miles) consists of those who were age 26 to 40 at the time of the college opening. SEAs are the state economic areas, which are groups of counties within states. The college openings in this analysis are those that opened in places where the distance to the nearest college (of any kind) prior to the opening was at least 25 miles.

Appendix Table 3

Effect of Community College Openings on College Attainment and Longevity, By Gender and Race

	Education Subset:			*Full Sample:*
	Years of College	Indicator: Competed At Least a Bachelor's Degree	Lifespan in Years	Lifespan in Years
Indicator: Childhood Town Brought Within 5 Miles of Nearest College by a Two-Year Public College Opening and Age 10-25 at Time of Opening	0.042	0.0102	0.3565*	0.5770***
	(0.0266)	(0.0057)	(0.1503)	(0.1124)
Indicator: Female X Indicator: Childhood Town…	0.0502	0.0051	-0.2063	-0.3713**
	(0.0274)	(0.0060)	(0.2010)	(0.1430)
Indicator: Black X Indicator: Childhood Town…	-0.0022	0.01	-0.398	0.0084
	(0.0539)	(0.0119)	(0.5046)	(0.2493)
Indicator: Black X Indicator: Female X Indicator: Childhood Town…	-0.0562	-0.0204	0.1591	-0.3159
	(0.0694)	(0.0149)	(0.6716)	(0.3300)
Childhood Town by Race by Gender FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Childhood County By Birth Year By Race by Gender FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Dep. Var. Mean	1.16	0.19	83.0	78.800
Observations	18,300,000	18,300,000	18,300,000	72,160,000
Number of Clusters	114,000	114,000	114,000	135,000

Notes: The underlying dataset for columns 1-3 consists of the subset of Numident born 1921-1951 with a geocodable town of birth (or geocodable 1940 town of residence) and which can be linked to either the 2000 Census long form or the 2001-2015 American Community Survey. The underlying dataset for column 4 consists of the subset of Numident born 1921-1951 with a geocodable town of birth (or geocodable 1940 town of residence). Standard errors are clustered at the level of childhood town. The omitted explanatory variable for each distance category (0 to 5 miles) consists of those who were age 26 to 40 at the time of the college opening. The college openings in this analysis are those that opened in places where the distance to the nearest college (of any kind) prior to the opening was at least 25 miles.