

Stalling gap in life expectancy between western and eastern German men: the role of socioeconomic position

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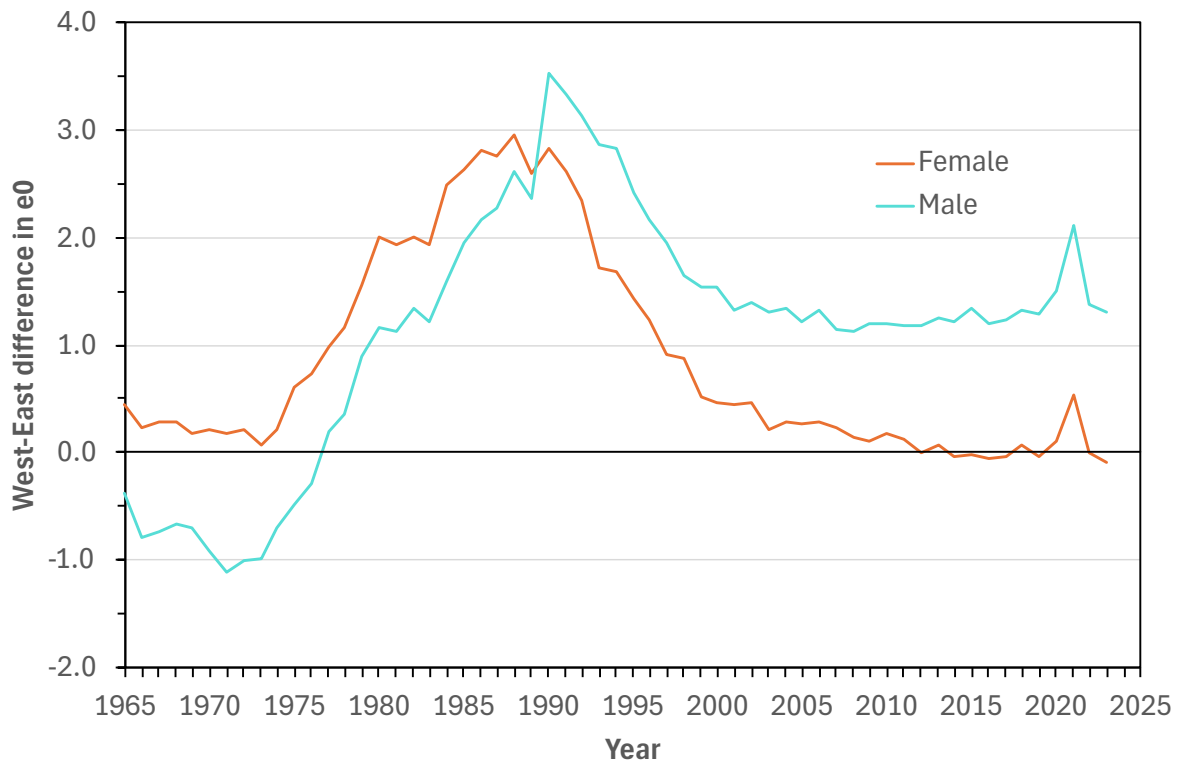
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Short Abstract

After German reunification, life expectancy in the former East and West Germany began to converge rapidly (see Figure 1). Within two decades, the substantial East–West gap that had widened during the socialist era nearly disappeared. Yet this convergence has been asymmetric across sexes: while women in East Germany have completely caught up with their western counterparts, men still lag behind by about 1.5 years — a gap that has remained virtually unchanged since around 2010. We hypothesize that this persistent male gap can be explained by educational differences in mortality. Using age-specific death rates derived from the German Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP) linked mortality data, we constructed period life tables from age 25 by sex, region (East, West), and educational attainment (low, medium, high) for the years 1995–2016. The results confirm our hypothesis. Among women, the East–West difference in life expectancy has disappeared across all educational groups. Among men, however, convergence occurred only in the medium and high education groups, while the low-education group in East Germany has shown no improvement relative to the West since 1995. In this group, the East–West gap remains large and stable with a difference of around 4.5 years. These findings suggest that the remaining male East–West life expectancy gap is not a residual of regional divergence, but the outcome of persistent social inequality. Targeted interventions addressing structural and behavioural risks among men in East Germany with a lower socioeconomic position are needed to achieve full health convergence.

Figure 1: Difference in life expectancy at birth between West and East Germany, by sex, 1965–2023.



Source: Own calculations based on data from the Federal Statistical Office of Germany.