

CHILDREN, YOUTH, AND FAMILIES & SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS



SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

Socioeconomic status (SES) is often measured as a combination of education, income, and occupation. It is commonly conceptualized as the social standing or class of an individual or group. When viewed through a social class lens, privilege, power, and control are emphasized. Furthermore, an examination of SES as a gradient or continuous variable reveals inequities in access to and distribution of resources. SES is relevant to all realms of behavioral and social science, including research, practice, education, and advocacy.

SES AFFECTS OUR SOCIETY

Low SES and its correlates, such as lower education, poverty, and poor health, ultimately affect our society as a whole, in particular, America's children. Children in the United States face one of the highest rates of poverty within the industrialized world. Inequities in wealth distribution, resource distribution, and quality of life are increasing in the United States and globally. Society benefits from an increased focus on the foundations of socioeconomic inequities and efforts to reduce the deep gaps in socioeconomic status in the United States and abroad. Behavioral and other social science professionals possess the tools necessary to study and identify strategies that could alleviate these disparities at both individual and societal levels.

SES IMPACTS THE LIVES OF CHILDREN, YOUTH, AND FAMILIES

Research indicates that SES is a key factor that influences quality of life for children, youth, and families (CYF). SES affects human functioning in many ways, including development across the life span, psychological health, and physical health.

Psychological Health

Increasing evidence supports the link between lower SES and negative psychological health outcomes, while more positive psychological outcomes such as optimism, self-esteem, and perceived control have been linked to higher levels of SES for youth.

Lower levels of SES have been found to be associated with the following:

- Higher rates of attempted suicide, cigarette smoking, and engaging in episodic heavy drinking (Newacheck, Hung, Park, Brindis, & Irwin, 2003)
- Higher levels of emotional and behavioral difficulties, including anxiety, depression, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, and conduct disorders (Weissman et al., 1984; Goodman, 1999; Spencer et al., 2002)
- Higher levels of aggression (Molnar et al., 2008), hostility, perceived threat, and perceived discrimination for youth (Chen and Paterson, 2006)
- Higher incidence of Alzheimer's disease later in life (Fratiglioni, Winblad, & von Strauss, 2007; Karp et al., 2004; Fratiglioni & Rocca, 2001; Evans et al., 1997)

Physical Health

Research continues to link lower SES to a variety of negative health outcomes at birth and throughout the life span.

Lower levels of SES have been found to be associated with the following:

- Higher likelihood of being sedentary (Newacheck et al., 2003) and higher body mass index for adolescents (Chen and Paterson, 2006), possibly because of a lack of neighborhood resources—such as playgrounds and accessible healthy food options



- Higher physiological markers of chronic stressful experiences for adolescents (Chen and Paterson, 2006)
- Higher rates of cardiovascular disease for adults (Steptoe & Marmot, 2004; Colhoun, Hemingway, & Poulter, 1998; Kaplan and Keil, 1993)

Education

Increasing evidence supports the link between SES and educational outcomes.

- Socioeconomic status appears to create achievement gaps for Black and Hispanic children, when compared to the achievement levels of White children (Duncan and Magnuson, 2005).
- Children from low-SES families often begin kindergarten with significantly less linguistic knowledge (Purcell-Gates, McIntyre, & Freppon, 1995).
- Children from less-advantaged homes score at least 10% lower than the national average on national achievement scores in mathematics and reading (Hochschild, 2003).
- Children in impoverished settings are much more likely to be absent from school throughout their educational experiences (Zhang, 2003), further increasing the learning gap between them and their wealthier peers.
- While national high school dropout rates have steadily declined (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002), dropout rates for children living in poverty have steadily increased. Between 60 and 70% of students in low-income school districts fail to graduate from high school (Harris, 2005).

Family Well-Being

Evidence indicates that socioeconomic status affects family stability, including parenting practices and resulting developmental outcomes for children (Trickett, et al., 1991).

- Poverty is a reliable predictor of child abuse and neglect. Among low-income families, those with family exposure to substance use exhibit the highest rates of child abuse and neglect (Ondersma, 2002).
- Lower SES has been linked to domestic crowding, a condition which has negative consequences for adults and children, including higher psychological stress and poor health outcomes (Melki et al., 2004).
- All family members living in poverty are more likely to be victims of violence. Racial and ethnic minorities who are also of lower SES are at an increased risk of victimization (Pearlman, Zierler, Gjelsvik, & Verhoek-Oftedahl, 2004).

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Include SES in your research, practice, and educational endeavors.

- Measure, report, and control for SES in research activities.
- Take SES into consideration in all published work. Report participant characteristics related to SES.
- Consider how SES affects clients' presenting problems, ways of coping, and the development of effective treatment strategies.
- Establish practice opportunities in community settings where students have access to diverse social class populations.

Get involved.

- Support legislation and policies that explore and work to eliminate socioeconomic disparities. Visit the Office on Government Relations for more details: <http://www.apa.org/about/gr/pi/>
- Become an SES Key Contact! As an expert, advocate for SES-related issues.
- Join APA's SES Network to contribute to and stay abreast of current developments in SES-related activities.
- Visit APA's Office on Socioeconomic Status (OSES) website: www.apa.org/pi/ses
- Visit APA's Children, Youth, and Families office website: <http://www.apa.org/pi/families/>

References can be found at <http://www.apa.org/pi/ses/resources/publications/fact-sheet-references.aspx>.