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 Everyone

Variance in socioeconomic status, including disparities in the distribution of wealth, income, and access to resources, affects everyone. Inequities in wealth and quality of life are increasing in the United States and globally. Behavioral and social science professionals possess the tools necessary to study and identify strategies that could alleviate these disparities at both individual and societal levels. Low SES and its correlates, such as lower education, poverty, and poor health, ultimately affect our society as a whole. Everyone 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.

SES Affects the Lives of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Persons

Evidence indicates that individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) are especially susceptible to being placed at a socioeconomic disadvantage. Thus, SES is inherently related to the rights and well-being of LGBT persons.

Differences in Income

While LGBT persons tend to have more education on average than the general population, evidence suggests that they make less money than their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts (Factor and Rothblum, 2007; Fassinger, 2007; Egan, Edelman, & Sherrill, 2008). Studies on income differences for LGBT persons indicate that:

• Gay men earn up to 32% less than similarly qualified heterosexual men.
• Up to 64% of transgender people report incomes below $25,000.
• While 5.9% of the general population makes less than 10,000, 14% of LGBT individuals are within this income bracket.

Discrimination due to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identification

Discrimination of LGBT persons in the workplace is a significant factor in the differences in socioeconomic status for LGBT persons. In many cases, discrimination against and unfair treatment of LGBT persons remains legally acceptable (Fassinger, 2007).

• Termination of an employee based on sexual orientation remains legal in 31 American states.
• Termination of an employee based on gender identity remains legal in 39 American states.
• Up to 68% of individuals identifying as LGBT report experiencing employment discrimination.

Marginalization of LGBT Youth

A lack of acceptance and fear of persecution lead many LGBT youth to leave their homes and live in transitional housing or the streets. The consequences of youth
homelessness have many implications for the socioeconomic status of LGBT youth (Ray & National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, 2006). Studies on LGBT youth reveal the following:

• LGBT youth experience homelessness at a disproportionate rate. Studies indicate that between 20 and 40% of all homeless youth identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.
• Upon coming out to their parents, up to 50% of gay teens report a negative reaction, and 26% report being kicked out of their homes.
• Many homeless youth programs are run by faith-based organizations, which express disapproval of homosexuality. This often contributes to discrimination of LGBT youth within homeless youth shelters.
• Homeless LGBT youth are without economic support, often engage in drug use and risky sexual behaviors, and often develop mental health disorders (Cochran, Stewart, Ginzler, & Cauce et al., 2002).
• Homeless LGBT youth miss out on education and social support during critical formative years—more than half of homeless LGBT youth report experiencing discrimination from peers (Milburn, Ayala, Rice, Batterham, & Rotherham-Borus, 2006). For these reasons, LGBT youth are often at the lower rungs of the SES ladder and may have greater chances of remaining at a lower SES level in the future.

Legal Barriers to SES Equality for LGBT Persons and Families

While the number of same-sex couples grows, the legal barriers for these families continue to exist, leading to increasing SES disparities for LGBT persons and families. Very few companies offer health care benefits to same-sex couples or unmarried heterosexual couples. According to the U.S. Census Bureau 2006 American Community Survey:

• Close to 6%, or 5.5 million of all American households are headed by unmarried couples, a significant increase from the 3.2 million unmarried couple households reported in the 1990 Census.
• Of the 5.5 million unmarried couples documented, 13% were same-sex couples.

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.
• Contribute to the body of research on the educational and societal barriers experienced by the LGBT community and the impact of these barriers on physical and psychological well-being.

Get involved.

• Support legislation and policies that explore and work to eliminate socioeconomic disparities in LGBT communities. 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.