

# WORK STRESS & HEALTH & 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. 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 EVERYONE'S LEVELS OF WORK STRESS AND HEALTH

### Workplace Stressors

Multiple factors can affect the physical health and psychological well-being of workers. Research indicates that job strain and/or repetitive and hazardous work conditions may have detrimental effects on physical health. Stress experienced and perceived can affect a person's psychological well-being. Work stress research

has examined the psychological demands of a work load, workers' perceived sense of control over their performance, safety stressors, work organization, and work atmosphere (Clarke, 2006; Aittomäki, Lahelma, & Roos, 2003; Gillen, Baltz, Gassel, Kirsch, & Vaccaro, 2002; Dembe, Erickson, Delbos, & Banks, 2005; MacDonald, Harenstam, Warren, & Punnett, 2008; Landsbergis, Cahill, & Schnall, 1999).

- Gender harassment of professional women by higher level men is associated with higher levels of stress and negative mood (O'Connell & Korabik, 2002).
- Professional nurses and corrections' officers who are women experience high rates of sexual harassment, which as been linked to anxiety, poor concentration, and burnout (Valente & Bullough, 2004; Bronner, Peretz, & Ehrenfeld, 2003; Savicki, Cooley, & Gjesvold, 2003).

### Health

Work stress has been identified as a risk factor for hypertension, diabetes, upper extremity musculoskeletal back problems, and cardiovascular disease.

- High demands and low decision control have predicted heart disease in white collar workers (Kuper & Marmot, 2003).
- Job strain has been shown to increase blood pressure in men of low socioeconomic status (Landsbergis, Schnall, Pickering, Warren, & Schwartz, 2003).
- Exposure to cumulative job strain in white collar workers revealed modest increases in systolic blood pressure (Guimont, 2006).
- Fatigue and sleep deprivation are correlated to mandatory and voluntary overtime and are also associated with work-related accidents in blue collar workers (Cochrane, 2001; Barger et al., 2005).



- Smoking prevalence of blue collar workers is double that of white collar workers. This difference may be explained by the additional psychological stressors low income brings (Sorensen, Barbeau, Hunt, & Emmons, 2004; Barbeau, Krieger, & Soobader, 2004).
- Male infertility has been associated with job burnout for persons working in industry and construction (Sheiner, Sheiner, Carel, Potashnik, & Shoham-Vardi, 2002).

### **Family vs. Work Conflict (Managing Multiple Roles)**

In addition to workplace social supports, familial support is essential to the psychological well-being of those under job strain. Those managing multiple roles may be at added risk of stress due to competing responsibilities of work and home. Higher incidence of children with chronic health conditions, learning difficulties, and child care issues create the added need for flexibility as parents try to balance these conflicting responsibilities (Richman, Johnson, & Buxham, 2006). Quality child and elder care programs are needed to help caretakers fulfill their obligations at work and at home.

- Lower wage workers are more likely to work for small businesses and, therefore, less likely to have access to health insurance, paid vacations, and sick days. They are also less likely to be allowed to use paid time off for sick child care (Richman et al., 2006).
- Higher rates of job dissatisfaction and job-related stress have been observed in workers with more frequent overtime requirements, little managerial support, and less work flexibility (Richman et al., 2006).
- A study of dual-earner middle class families revealed that to reduce stress and balance of life-work responsibilities, the majority are not pursuing two high-powered careers (Becker & Moen, 1999).
- Lower wage workers are more likely to work part time, at lower hourly rates, with few to no benefits, and, often, inflexible part-time schedules—all conditions of which create work-life challenges for families and single-parents (Richman et al., 2006).
- Research on the attitudes of employers revealed that the majority did not regard flexibility as an option for their low-wage workers and expressed little sympathy for the employees' needs (Richman et al., 2006)

## **WHAT YOU CAN DO**

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

- Take SES into consideration in all research activities and publications in the area of work stress and health. Report participant characteristics related to SES.
- Consider how SES and work stress affect clients' presenting problems, ways of coping, and the development of effective treatment strategies.
- Educate clients and supervisees on health behaviors and coping strategies to combat work stress.
- Establish practice opportunities in community settings where students have access to clients of various levels of employment.
- Consider the impact of work stress on the health and well-being of employees.
- Sponsor professional development opportunities for workers to learn coping habits to combat work stress and ways to build social support between workers.
- Practice zero tolerance for workplace harassment/bullying and unsafe practices.
- Provide scheduling flexibility to buffer the stress of multiple responsibilities.
- Promote and support healthy lifestyle practices in your workplace.
- Educate clients on healthy behaviors and coping strategies to combat work stress.

### **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/index.aspx>.
- 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](http://www.apa.org/pi/ses).
- Visit APA's Work, Stress, and Health website: <http://www.apa.org/pi/work/>.

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