



What is Socioeconomic Status?

Socioeconomic status (SES) is the social standing of an individual or group in terms of their income, education, and occupation. An individual's income, education, and occupational status are often closely interrelated.

Socioeconomic Status and Poverty in the U.S.

Issues of low SES and poverty affect individuals and families of all racial, ethnic and religious backgrounds in the U.S. While Non-Hispanic Whites are currently the largest single group of impoverished in the U.S., ethnic minority groups are overrepresented among those living in poverty. Estimates suggest that 26 percent of African Americans, 26 percent of Latino Americans, 13 percent of Asian and Pacific Islander Americans, and 31 percent of American Indians on reservations are living in poverty compared with 8 percent of Non-Hispanic Whites. In addition, homes with female heads of household comprise the majority of poor families (National Congress of American Indians, 2000; U.S. Census Bureau, 1999).

The Impact of Low SES on Health

Research suggests that both physical and mental health are associated with SES. In particular, studies suggest that lower SES is linked to poorer health outcomes. Poor health may in turn decrease an individual's capacity to work, thus reducing their ability to improve their SES.

- Low SES is associated with increased morbidity and mortality (Adler et al., 1994; Adler & Coriell, 1997).
- Low income individuals are 2-5 times more likely to suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder than those in the top SES bracket (Bourdon, Rae, Narrow, Manderschild, & Regier, 1994; Regier et al., 1993).
- Within families, economic hardship can lead to marital distress and disrupted parenting which in turn may increase mental health problems among children, such as depression, substance abuse, and behavior problems (Conger et al., 2002).
- Educational and employment opportunities may be hindered by mental health problems (Murray & Lopez, 1997).
- Access to health insurance and preventive services are part of the reason for socioeconomic health disparities (McGinnis, Williams-Russo, & Knickman, 2002).
- Those with low SES often experience barriers to obtaining mental health services, including lack of or limited access to mental health care, child care and transportation (McGrath, Keita, Strickland, & Russo, 1990).

APA Recommendations Related to Socioeconomic Status and Health

APA and its members work to share and disseminate resources to federal policy makers related to psychology's contribution to the understanding of SES. APA supports legislative initiatives that address issues of SES and the lives and well-being of low income individuals. Specifically, APA supports public policies that:

- Improve access to mental and behavioral health care by eliminating barriers such as limitations in health care coverage;
- Create a “safety net” that provides real protection against the harmful effects of economic insecurity;
- Intervene in early childhood to support the health and educational development of low SES children;
- Promote the employment status of people with disabilities, who are more likely to live in lower SES households than people without disabilities;
- Increase resources for public education and access to higher education; and
- Support research on SES and its relationship to health, education, and well-being.

APA Urges Congress to Support the Following Pieces of Legislation:

- **Improving Head Start Act of 2007** (H.R.1429, S.556) – to reauthorize the Head Start Act, to improve program quality, and to expand access.
- **Healthy Families Act** (H.R. 1542, S. 910) – to provide paid sick leave to ensure that Americans can address their own health needs and the health needs of their families.
- **Family and Workplace Balancing Act of 2007** (H.R. 2392) – to improve the lives of working families by providing family and medical need assistance, child care assistance, in-school and after school assistance, family care assistance, and encouraging the establishment of family-friendly workplaces.
- **Health Equity and Accountability Act of 2007** (H.R. 3014) – to amend the Public Health Service Act to improve the health and health care of minority individuals, in part through increasing positive health behavior and mental health counseling.

