



## WORK, STRESS, HEALTH AND SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

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### ABSTRACT

Socioeconomic status (SES) encompasses not just income but also educational attainment, financial security, and subjective perceptions of social status and social class. Socioeconomic status can encompass quality of life attributes as well as the opportunities and privileges afforded to people within society. Poverty, specifically, is not a single factor but rather is characterized by multiple physical and psychosocial stressors. Further, SES is a consistent and reliable predictor of a vast array of outcomes across the life span, including physical and psychological health. Thus, SES is relevant to all realms of behavioral and social science, including research, practice, education and advocacy.

**Keywords:** Socioeconomic status, Stress, Education, Work

### INTRODUCTION

Socioeconomic status (SES) is an economic and sociological combined total measure of a person's work experience and of an individual's or family's economic social position in relation to others, based on income education and occupation. When analyzing a family's SES, the household income, earner's education and occupation are examined, as well as combined income, whereas for an individual's SES only their own attributes are assessed. However, SES is more commonly used to

depict an economic difference in society as a whole.

Socioeconomic status is an important predictor of a range of health and illness outcomes. Research seeking to identify the extent to which this often-reported effect is due to protective benefits of higher SES or to toxic elements of lower social status has not yielded consistent or conclusive finding. A relatively novel hypothesis is that these effects are due to chronic stress that is associated with SES, lower SES is reliably associated with a number of important social and



environmental conditions contribute to chronic stress burden, including crowding, crime, noise pollution, discrimination, and other hazards and stressors. In other words, chronic stress may capture much in the variance in health and social outcomes associated with harmful aspects of lower social status.

Low SES is generally associated with distress, prevalence of mental health problems, and with health impairing behaviors that are also related to stress.

### **Social Determinants**

Refer to the determinants within social environment that impact on health status.

### **SES Affects our Society**

SES affects overall human functioning, including our physical and mental health. Low SES and its correlates, such as lower educational achievement, poverty, and poor health, ultimately affect our society. Inequities in health 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.

### **SES Impacts Everyone's Level of Work Stress and Health**

Work is central to the psychological health and well-being of individuals and communities (Blustein, 2008). Vocational and industrial – organizational psychology have demonstrated the importance of work and how it promotes connection to the broader social and economic world, enhances well-being, and provides a means for individual satisfaction and accomplishment (Blustein, 2006; Brown & Lent, 2005; Hall, 1996; Spector, 2005).

### **Workplace Stressors**

Multiple factors can affect the physical health and psychological well-being of workers. Research indicates that job strain and repetitive and hazardous work conditions may have detrimental effects on



physical health. Stress experienced and perceived can affect one's psychological well-being. Work stress research has examined the psychological demands of workload, workers' perceived sense of control over their performance, safety stressors, work organization, and work atmosphere Aittomäki, Lahelma, & Roos, 2003; (Clarke, 2006; Dembes, Erickson, Delbos, & Banks, 2005; Gillen, Baltz, Gassel, Kirsch, & Vaccaro, 2002; Landsbergis, Cahill, & Schnall, 1999; MacDonald, Harenstam, Warren, & Punnett, 2008).

### **Health**

- Work stress has been identified as a risk factor for hypertension, diabetes, upper extremity musculoskeletal problems, 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 SES (Landsbergis,

Schnall, Pickering, Warren, & Schwartz, 2003).

- Exposure to cumulative job strain in white collar workers revealed modest increases in systolic blood pressure (Guimont et al., 2006).
- Fatigue and sleep deprivation are correlated to mandatory and voluntary overtime and are also associated with work-related accidents in blue collar workers (Barger et al., 2005; Cochrane, 2001).
- Smoking prevalence among blue collar workers is double that of white collar workers. This difference may be explained by the additional psychological stressors low income brings (Barbeau, Krieger, & Soobader, 2004; Sorensen, Barbeau, Hunt, & Emmons, 2004).

### **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 at work and at 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 the majority are not pursuing two high-powered careers, in order to reduce stress and balance life-work responsibilities (Becker & Moen, 1999)
- Lower wage workers are more likely to work part-time, at lower hourly rates, with few to no benefits and often mandatory part-time schedules — all 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)

### **Education**

Education also plays a role in income. Median earnings increase with each level of education. As conveyed in the chart, the highest degrees, professional and doctoral degrees,



make the highest weekly earnings while those without a high school diploma earn less. Higher levels of education are associated with better economic and psychological outcomes (i.e.: more income, more control, and greater social support and networking).

### **Job Insecurity & Unemployment**

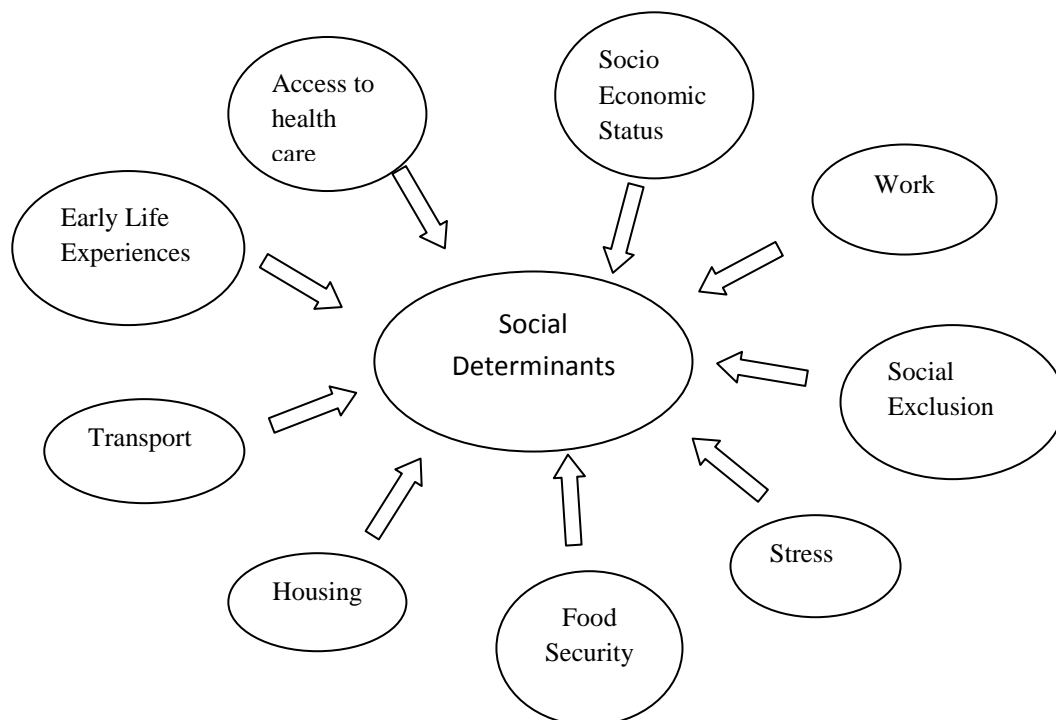
- Job insecurity is the perception of being threatened by job loss (Mohr, 2000), which can have consequences on an individual's health and well-being.
- The fear of job loss has a significant impact on physical and mental health; the effect on mental health is greater than the effect on physical health (Sverke, Hellgren, & Näswall, 2002)
- A study found that physical health decline was related to fear of job loss in blue collar workers, automobile workers in particular (Heaney, Israel, & House, 1994)
- Higher blood pressure for women and weight loss among those with higher job insecurity

was found in blue collar workers (Ferrie, Shipley, Stansfeld, & Marmot, 2002)

- Involuntary job loss for older adults was connected to health declines and even morbidity (Wilson & Mossakowski, 2009)
- Unemployment not only correlates with distress but also causes it (Karsten & Moser, 2009). The negative effects of unemployment are illustrated by declines in psychological and physical health (Wanberg, 2012)

### **Suggestion**

I feel strongly that we need to spend more money not only on educating all individuals about the ways in which diet and lifestyle can impact our health; but also on improving access to higher-quality foods for those with a lower socioeconomic status. A solid health foundation is built on awareness, information and then action.



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