

WOMEN & 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 EVERYONE

SES affects overall human functioning, including development across the life span, physical and mental health. Variance in socioeconomic status, including disparities in the distribution of wealth, income, and access to resources, affects everyone; however, women are overrepresented among those living in poverty. Women are more often responsible for raising children and are increasingly likely to raise children alone. This fact is one of the many reasons that the socioeconomic standing of women is of great importance to the well-being of future generations. 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 IMPACTS THE LIVES OF WOMEN

Research indicates that SES is a key factor in determining the quality of life of women, with resulting effects on the lives of children and families. Inequities in wealth and quality of life for women are long standing and exist both locally and globally. Low SES among women and its correlates, such as poverty, lower education, and poor health for children and

families, ultimately affect our society as a whole. 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.

Income and Earning Ability

Historically and presently in the United States, men are paid more than women, even when they have the same level of education and are in the same occupational field. Reduced income for women coupled with longer life expectancy and increased responsibility to raise children make it more likely for women to be at an economic disadvantage.

- According to findings of the 2006 American Community Survey (ACS), salaries of American women are about 77.3% of that of American men. In some states, women make as little as 66% of men's earnings (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006).
- Findings of the ACS indicate that among individuals possessing a graduate or professional degree, on average, the women earned about 66.4% of what the men earned (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006).
- While they make less money, women are more likely to be single heads of household than men, thus bearing the responsibility of raising children with fewer economic resources. In 2006, there were about 14 million female heads of household, compared to 5 million male heads of household in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006).
- About 18% of U.S. children live below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006).
- Women with fewer economic resources may be less likely to marry and benefit from dual or higher household incomes (Edin and Kefalas, 2005).



Psychological Health

Increasing evidence supports the link between lower SES and negative psychological health outcomes for women.

- While women are more likely to be diagnosed with depression and anxiety disorders, living below the poverty line is one of the most reliable predictors of depression and other mental health disorders (Groh, 2007).
- The link between depression and low-income women can be attributed to increased stress caused by living in poverty and minimal social support often associated with low SES (Bell & Doucet, 2003).
- Welfare reform designed to facilitate the transition from welfare to work has placed limitations on benefits that many low-income women can use to ensure the well-being of their families, causing increased stress and contributing to the onset and exacerbation of psychological illness (DeAngelis, 2001).
- Low SES and material deprivation have also been linked to the presence of depression among pregnant women (Stewart, Dean, Gregorich, Brawarsky, & Hass, 2007).
- While actual occurrence rates may be similar, women in low-SES households are more likely to report domestic violence (Colten & Allard, 1997). Limitations in socioeconomic means may lead a lower SES woman to return to an abusive relationship (Gondolf & Fisher, 1988).

Physical Health

Research on women's health continues to link lower SES to a variety of negative health outcomes for women and their children.

- Results of breast cancer studies indicate that women living with breast cancer are 11% more likely to die if they live within lower SES communities (Du, Fang, & Meyer, 2008).
- Low-income women who have no insurance have the lowest rates of mammography screening among women aged 40-64, increasing their risks of death from breast cancer (Sabatino et al., 2008).
- Mortality rates for women with coronary heart disease also appear to be directly related to SES (Hemingway, 2007).
- Lower income pregnant women receive less prenatal care, experience higher levels of stress, and are more likely to deliver premature babies (Adler, 2006).
- Lower income women who give birth are also more likely to experience postpartum anemia (Bodnar, Scanlon, Freedman, Siega-Ritz, & Cogswell, 2001), a condition which has been linked to depression and deficient cognitive functioning (Beard et al., 2005).

Quality of Life

Evidence indicates that socioeconomic status affects overall well-being and quality of life for women.

- Among women aged 20-45, lower SES has been found to be related to lower energy levels and less concern with weight control. Additional studies have concluded that economic deprivation, including reduced access to healthy food, may contribute to obesity for women (Jeffrey & French, 1996).
- Women who live in lower SES neighborhoods have been found to expend more energy, but undertake less moderate physical activity compared to women in higher SES neighborhoods, thus receiving less health-promoting physical exercise (Lee, Cubin, & Winkleby, 2007).
- Poor eating habits among low SES women are not based solely on income. Research on dietary behaviors of low-income women indicate that environmental SES factors, such as convenient access to and knowledge of healthy practices, are critical in improving the eating practices of lower-SES women. Addressing these factors, along with the receipt of food stamps, is necessary to impact the dietary intake of low-income women (Condrasky & Marsh, 2005).

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 women and the impact of these barriers on physical and psychological well-being.
- 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 in women. 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.

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