

# DISABILITY & 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

SES affects overall human functioning, including our physical and mental health. 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 THE LIVES OF THE PEOPLE WITH A DISABILITY

Persons with a disability are likely to have limited opportunities to earn income and often have increased medical expenses. Disabilities among children and adults may affect the socioeconomic standing of entire families. It is estimated that over 40 million people in America have some level of disability, and many of these individuals live in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Although the

Americans with Disabilities Act assures equal opportunities in education and employment for people with and without disabilities and prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability, people with disabilities remain overrepresented among America's poor and undereducated. Some data suggest causal relationships between low SES and the development of disability in late adulthood (Coppin et al., 2006). These barriers contribute to discrepancies in wealth and socioeconomic opportunities for persons with a disability and their families.

## Income and Poverty for People With a Disability

The Federal government has two major programs to assist persons with disabilities. Supplemental Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) is an insurance program for workers who have become disabled and unable to work after years of paying Social Security taxes. In this program, a higher income yields higher SSDI earnings. Supplemental Security Income (SSI) is a welfare program for individuals with low income and poor resources. Despite these and other forms of assistance, persons with disabilities are more likely to be unemployed and live in poverty. The American Association of People With Disabilities (AAPD) estimates that two thirds of people with disabilities are of working age and want to work. The high incidence of poverty among persons with a disability fuels doubts about the sufficiency of public assistance to these individuals.

- Results from the 2006 American Community Survey (ACS) reveal significant disparities in the median incomes for those with and without disabilities. Median earnings for people with no disability were over \$28,000 compared to the \$17,000 median income reported for individuals with a disability (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006).



- In an effort to investigate unemployment disparities, a recent study surveyed Human Resources and project managers about their perceptions of hiring persons with disabilities. Results indicated that these professionals held negative perceptions related to the productivity, social maturity, interpersonal skills, and psychological adjustment of persons with disabilities (Chan, 2008)
- For individuals who are blind and visually impaired, unemployment rates exceed 70% (American Psychological Association Task Force on Socioeconomic Status, 2007).
- Among older veterans living below the poverty level, over 50% have a disability (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006).

## Education Barriers for People With a Disability

- Disparities in education have been ongoing for generations. In a large study of individuals 65 years and older, 20.9% without a disability failed to complete high school, compared to 25.1 and 38.6% of individuals with a non-severe or severe disability, respectively, who failed to complete high school (Steinmetz, 2006).
- Great disparities exist when comparing the attainment of higher degrees. According to the 2006 Census, about 6% of persons aged 16-64 with a disability have obtained a bachelor's degree or higher, while 17% of individuals in the same age category with no disability have attained the same educational status (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006).

## Health and Well-Being

Lower levels of SES have consistently been correlated with poor health and lower quality of life. The existence of a disability can be the source of emotional maladjustment for individuals and the families responsible for their care. Individuals with a disability and their families are at increased risk for poor health and quality-of-life outcomes when their disability status affects their socioeconomic standing.

- Research on disability and health care suggests that individuals with a disability experience increased barriers to obtaining health care as a result of accessibility concerns, such as transportation, problems with communication, and insurance (Drainoni et al., 2006).
- Research with adults with mobility impairments indicates that health promotion interventions targeted at persons with a disability can increase quality of life and control health care costs (Ravesloot, Seekins, & White, 2005).
- Research on medication adherence for disabled Medicare beneficiaries illustrates the effects of economic strain on the health of disabled persons. Of disabled beneficiaries, 29% skipped medication, reduced the dosage, or failed to fill prescriptions because of the medication's cost (Soumerai et al., 2006).

## WHAT YOU CAN DO

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

- Measure, report, and control for SES in all research and published work with persons with disabilities. Report participant characteristics related to SES.
- Contribute to the body of research on the societal barriers experienced by persons with disabilities and the impact of these barriers on health and well-being.
- Consider how SES affects clients with disabilities' presenting problems, ways of coping, and the development and maintenance of effective treatment strategies.
- Participate in disability sensitivity training and recognize negative perceptions you may hold toward persons with disabilities. Provide this training to your students and supervisees.
- Establish practice opportunities in community settings where students have access to persons with a disability within diverse social class populations.
- Practice and advocate for the inclusion of persons with disabilities in your workplace.

### 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/>.
- 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 Office on Disability website: <http://www.apa.org/pi/disability/>

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