

## The Impact of Socioeconomic Status on Health Disparities

Research has demonstrated a strong relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and an increased risk of being affected by health disparities.<sup>1</sup> It has been noted that the leading causes of death and disability have a disproportionate impact on African Americans, Alaska Natives, American Indians, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Pacific Islanders.<sup>2</sup> Whether assessed by income, level of education, or occupation, SES clearly predicts the health status of an individual. A higher income level provides individuals with means to purchase health insurance and ensures access to healthcare on a consistent basis. Education has a direct impact on an individual's professional development and career opportunities, which influences access to health coverage. Occupational status has a significant impact on the health status of an individual especially since research has demonstrated that employed individuals have better health than unemployed individuals, otherwise known as the "healthy worker" effect.<sup>1</sup> These three measurements of SES indirectly influence the impact of health disparities on minority populations but it is important to consider the three main determinants of health that are influenced by SES.

The three main determinants of health include: behavior and lifestyle, environmental exposure, and healthcare. It has been noted behavior and lifestyle accounts for 80 percent of premature mortality, environmental exposure for 20 percent and healthcare for 10 percent.<sup>3</sup> Individuals of lower SES are more likely to live in poorer communities, which experience a higher degree of residential crowding, violence, and environmental pollution. Poorer housing quality further increases the risk of health conditions for individuals of lower SES. In addition, social environments have a significant impact on SES-related health outcomes in regards to risk and prevalence of chronic and infectious diseases. As mentioned earlier, SES determines the ability to purchase health coverage, which has a direct effect on access to healthcare. Research has demonstrated that uninsured individuals are less likely to receive preventive and primary healthcare services than insured individuals.<sup>1</sup> The most significant indirect pathway that influences SES is the impact of behavior and lifestyle. Tobacco use is a major behavioral risk and it has been determined that individuals with lower levels of education and income are more likely to smoke.<sup>4</sup> Lower SES is also associated with a sedentary lifestyle as well as poorer nutrition, both of which have an effect on the health status of an individual.

In sum, SES has a significant impact on the health status of individuals, especially minority populations. Reducing the burden of health disparities for minority populations can be achieved by addressing the main determinants of health as well as indirect assessments of SES (income, education and occupation) through appropriate public policy measures that include: reducing gaps in health coverage, improving economic conditions for minority populations, increasing educational opportunities for these populations, and introducing culturally sensitive health promotion efforts that will help reduce the burden of chronic and infectious diseases.

### Sources:

<sup>1</sup> Adler NE & Newman K. 2002. Socioeconomic Disparities In Health: Pathways and Policies. *Health Affairs*, 21(2):60-76.

<sup>2</sup> Liburd LC, Giles HW, Mensah, GA. 2006. Looking Through a Glass, Darkly: Eliminating Health Disparities. *Preventing Chronic Disease Public Health Research, Practice, and Policy*. 3(3):1-3

<sup>3</sup> Lee P. & Paxman D. 1997. Reinventing Public Health. *Annual Review of Public Health* 18:1-35.

<sup>4</sup> Pierce JP. Et al. (1989). Trends In Cigarette Smoking in the United States: Educational Differences Are Increasing." *Journal of American Medical Association*, 26(1): 56-60.



**Women In Government**  
2600 Virginia Avenue, NW, Suite 709  
Washington, DC 20037  
202-333-0825