



## **The Impact of Socioeconomic Status on Healthcare Access and Outcomes in Washington State**

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Healthcare is a fundamental human right, but how much does an individual's health outcome depend on their wealth or social status? Numerous factors can influence an individual's outcome, including socioeconomic status. Inequity in access to healthcare continues to be a significant challenge in the medical field, particularly for people of color, people with disabilities, the LGBTQ+ community, and other marginalized groups. An individual's socioeconomic status influences their access to healthcare and health outcomes to a significant extent. This is due to factors such as health insurance, financial limitations, and geographical barriers. Healthcare inequity is a widespread issue across the United States; however, this research paper will specifically address and explore its impact in Washington State by reading and analyzing published literature.

Socioeconomic status (SES) refers to the position that an individual is in on a socioeconomic scale, which considers several economic and social factors. Some of these include income, education, occupation, place of residence, religious background, and ethnic origin. It is usually measured as a combination of these factors, and it plays a crucial role in determining the quality of life.

In Washington State, socioeconomic status disparities are also evident through different levels of income, education, and employment. These factors often intertwine with health outcomes, illustrating the relationship between an individual's social status and their health. In Washington state, similar to other locations, people with different SES can have differences in lifestyle, like dietary habits, leisure activities, and exposure to environmental hazards. For instance, individuals with higher SES may have better access to healthy food options and various recreational facilities; on the other hand, individuals with lower SES may be mostly restricted to processed foods and limited physical activity due to time, financial constraints, or limitations of their built environment making access challenging. These socioeconomic disparities have significant implications on not only the access to medical care but also the health outcomes of patients.

Understanding the outcomes of health requires evaluation of both the intrinsic factors that are unique to an individual and patient and extrinsic factors like their environment which both contribute to shaping these outcomes. Health outcomes are the results of treatment, or from an interaction with the healthcare system. The outcome of the patient greatly depends on the quality of care that was received. However, aside from medical care, the outcomes can also be due to factors such as genetics, environmental influences, pre-existing conditions, and social factors, for instance, lifestyle and exposure to environmental hazards. Furthermore, barriers to

accessing healthcare are obstacles that prevent patients from obtaining the medical services that they need. This ranges from geographical barriers to financial constraints and health insurance. Therefore, the quality of medical care significantly influences health outcomes, but the barriers to healthcare access provide additional challenges as well.

It is important to understand how these obstacles contribute to health inequalities and the measures that can be taken that will ensure equitable healthcare for all. Health equity is when everyone has a fair opportunity to acquire the highest quality of healthcare available, regardless of their socioeconomic background, race, gender, ethnicity, geographical location, or sexual orientation. However, systematic barriers and social biases make it very difficult to achieve health equity. Individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may not have the financial resources and ability to afford quality healthcare, or they may be living in locations where healthcare is scarce. Additionally, certain marginalized groups might face discrimination, whether it is subconscious or not, which can lead to hesitancy in accessing healthcare or poorer outcomes.

Disparities in income may significantly influence one's satisfaction with healthcare quality and ability to access medical services. A study interviewed African Americans with one or more chronic illnesses, and the results revealed that individuals with a lower income express greater dissatisfaction with the quality of healthcare received compared to those with a higher income. Acquiring basic medical care was reported as a major challenge due to the costs of medications, services, and procedures. Another possible factor could also be having less flexibility in the schedules of individuals with lower-paying jobs. The reason for this is that many of these jobs have rigid working hours, so employees might find it difficult to take time off to go for a check-up as they do not know how long it will take, or they may risk losing a day's wage by missing work. These financial constraints and inflexible work hours can prevent them from seeking medical attention when needed. The inability to access the proper medical treatment needed in time can lead to complications, resulting in health issues worsening and could cause long-term effects.

Moreover, another common barrier to accessing healthcare is insurance. King County, Washington has a wide range of economic disparities. Seattle and its surrounding areas have had rapid economic growth over the past years, which increased poverty and the overall cost of living. King County is also diverse, with a significant population of immigrants and refugees. These communities may face challenges related to healthcare access such as language barriers, cultural beliefs about health, or undocumented status. In King County, Washington, the effect of insurance coverage and income level on the accessibility to outpatient care has been a concern. A study conducted by the University of Washington and the Seattle-King County Department of Public Health analyzed the effects of income and insurance on healthcare, as well as the impact of an increase in income. It is crucial to be able to have a primary care

provider; however, poorer individuals are more likely to lack a regular source of care due to financial reasons. This is possibly due to the inability to afford regular check-ups, or the hesitance to go to the doctors when their conditions are not overly severe because of the prices of medical care. Without a regular care provider, one may not have their health monitored continuously with regular check-ups, which could result in potential health issues or signs going unnoticed until the symptoms escalate and become more severe.

Given the complexity of the healthcare system, many individuals are influenced by their economic status or insurance coverage and tend to delay or put off essential medical care to reduce costs. In the same study, it was found that those who were insured were twice as likely as the uninsured to have a regular source of care. The Seattle-King County Department of Public Health decided to survey access problems of current & potential users of its healthcare services. Respondents were asked, on a five-point scale, the difficulty for them to obtain checkups, illness care, mental health counseling, dental care, and affordable prescription drugs; they were also asked for the location where they usually sought healthcare, which includes health department clinics, community clinics, private doctors, private clinics, or emergency rooms. It was also asked whether or not they had put off seeking healthcare due to lack of insurance/money, and whether or not they have ever been denied care. The study found that individuals with lower SES and who were uninsured tended to put off their need for medical attention, and had a harder time accessing prescription drugs, mental healthcare, and dental care. These cares are harder to obtain, possibly due to lack of awareness or education, lack of specialists, or concerns about the cost. Some individuals may not understand the importance of dental and mental health, which could result in perceiving them as nonurgent or not as necessary. The cost of these services, specifically dental care, can also be relatively high and quite expensive, making it harder to individuals to afford them. Lastly, in many regions, specifically rural areas, there may be a lack of specialists like psychiatrists or dental specialists such as orthodontists. It can be seen from this study that individuals with a lower income and who are uninsured typically have a more challenging time acquiring the medical care that they need, or are more reluctant to seek it. It is evident that the healthcare system disproportionately affects those who are of lower economic status, and it is concerning the number of individuals who frequently deferred their need for healthcare.

Medical care, especially in countries without universal healthcare, is expensive. Individuals with a lower income can find it harder to afford medical bills; thus, the fear of financial burden combined with possible negative experiences with healthcare providers in the past or the stigma associated with certain conditions could explain why some may hesitate to seek help.

Furthermore, another potential reason that individuals may put off medical care is the lack of health education or awareness. Without proper knowledge about the importance of

regular check-ups and early diagnosis, individuals may delay seeking care until their condition becomes critical. This not only jeopardizes their health but also reveals the fundamental concern that a lack of consistent medical care can worsen health conditions, emphasizing the importance and need for regular check-ups and consistent access to medical care for all, regardless of their financial abilities.

Moreover, distance is one of the biggest obstacles to healthcare access. Neighborhoods or areas with lower income may not have the same level of access to higher-quality clinics and hospitals. In addition to transportation challenges, these areas often face a shortage of healthcare professionals. A study was conducted to identify the factors related to distance that impede access to medical care for veterans living in rural areas. The results found that the lack of financial resources to offer enough salaries or benefits to attract professionals, fewer opportunities for medical education and professional growth in rural areas, and the heavy workload due to the shortage of personnel can also lead to burnout. Geographical and economic factors significantly hinder healthcare access, and it is evident that individuals with lower SES living in rural or low-income areas face a greater disadvantage when receiving medical attention.

Similarly, culture and language may also play a role in healthcare access. In Washington State, with its diverse community, language and cultural barriers can also hinder individuals seeking medical attention. Those who are not fluent in English or are non-English speakers may face difficulties when attempting to explain their symptoms or when comprehending their diagnosis and following medical advice. This creates an issue with communication which can lead to misunderstandings or misdiagnoses. Patients who feel they cannot communicate effectively with their doctors may have less confidence in the care that they receive. This may lead to a weaker connection between the patients and health providers, which can also make the patients feel worse in an environment where they already feel vulnerable. While many hospitals have translators, the number of translators available may be limited due to the location; indirect communication may also result in information being lost or misinterpreted. Beyond languages, culture may also influence beliefs about health and treatment. If the healthcare providers are unaware of or do not understand these beliefs, it would lead to potential conflicts or dissatisfaction for the patient.

To ensure equitable healthcare access, policies need to be implemented and designed to the different needs of individuals from varying SES. Many individuals from populations, specifically those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, face obstacles that go beyond the medical costs. Issues such as transportation and work schedule conflicts can influence their ability to seek and receive proper health attention. A possible solution that can somewhat improve this situation is to introduce a suggestion box, or website, in local healthcare facilities. By allowing individuals to bring to attention their specific needs, such as transportation passes,



healthcare providers and policymakers can gain a direct understanding of the challenges faced by patients. Addressing these needs based on feedback will not only improve healthcare access but also contribute to a more supportive environment. Collaborative efforts between different departments, professionals, and the community in order to have a more sustainable effect. By putting in the effort to work toward equity in healthcare, we can strive for a healthier community.



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