

Social Gradient

What We Know

Social differences are a part of civilization. There have always been high and low social classes. Social class is determined by income and educational level. Parents' social class generally predicts children's social class. Overall, social class, ethnicity, education, work conditions, and health behaviors all influence health and longevity.

Infant Mortality

The likelihood that an infant survives its first year is influenced by social class and race. Nationally, infant mortality rates have decreased, however, these rates have decreased at different rates among different ethnic groups. When comparing white mothers and black mothers, infant survival rates vary. Unmarried black women experienced the lowest declines in infant mortality. For both races, having a low level of education had the highest level of risk of infant mortality. Even though there have been declines across the board, educated white women are the only group expected to reach world health objectives in terms of infant mortality.

Education

A person from a family with a low social class is less likely to have access to a good education. Access to education allows people to better their lives, with higher education leading to work-related and financial success later in life^{3,4}. High quality education is not equally available in the United States, which contributes to shorter average life expectancy when compared with education and mortality in European countries⁴.

Work and Home

With less education, a person from a lower social class is more likely to have a low paying job. These jobs typically have high amounts of stress and lack autonomy (See, "Work")^{2,3} which affects an individual's ability to metabolize the stress-associated hormone, cortisol. Unremitting levels of cortisol are associated with heart disease. Low social class also influences where people may live. Neighborhoods with few financial resources are less safe than their wealthier counterparts, resulting in residents with chronic stress as well as an inability to exercise safety. Similarly, the environment in poorer neighborhoods is more likely to contribute to health problems. High rates of asthma, for example, are associated with environmental triggers in poor neighborhoods.

Mortality

Social class and financial opportunity are related to mortality⁵. High financial opportunity means that yearly salary is above the national median. People with high financial opportunity live longer lives compared to people with lower financial opportunity. This trend is especially true for African Americans, who often experience more obstacles to education and financial opportunity. People who have higher financial opportunity are also less likely to take part in poor health behaviors, such as smoking. Refraining from these activities substantially increases the life span.

Local Implications for Harrisonburg/Rockingham

Social differences are apparent locally. More people live below 100% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) in the Harrisonburg City (33.5%) than in Virginia (11.8%) suggesting significant poverty and lack of resources as well as barriers to care.⁶ The per capita income of residents is significantly lower (\$38,048) than the \$63,907 median estimated for Virginians as a whole.⁶

Of the adults aged 18 to 64, more are uninsured (18.6%) as compared to the same adults in Virginia. A recently released report from the US Census Bureau showed that 28.5% of the total Harrisonburg population did not have health insurance and that the city had the highest proportion of uninsured persons in the state (16.7%). Harrisonburg has the highest percentage of uninsured (all ages) in Virginia at 30.2% of the population.⁷

Although the median Harrisonburg City rent is less than the national median rent (\$843/month vs. 920)⁸, 43.9% of Harrisonburg residents live with high housing costs, compared to the U.S. median of 27.3%.⁹ HCC survey respondents note that there is a rich/poor gap in Harrisonburg, with limited job opportunities and low wages. Affordable housing and high cost of living were identified as priority challenges in H/R.¹⁰

Local agencies such as the H/R Free Clinic, Harrisonburg Community Health Center, and the H/R Department of Health work to provide health care for all locally, regardless of income. Blue Ridge Legal Services provides legal assistance for low income individuals. Housing initiatives such as Commerce Village apartments, in association with the Harrisonburg Housing and Redevelopment Authority, Habitat for Humanity, and Hope Community Builders work to provide affordable housing.

References

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- ⁶ US Census <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/51/5135624.html>
- ⁷ US Census Bureau and the CDC & Prevention; Model-based Small Area Health Insurance Estimates (SAHIE) for Counties and States, 2007.
- ⁸ US Census Bureau, <http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/HSG860214/51165,51660,00>
- ⁹US Department of Health and Human Services, Community Health Profile. <http://www.cdc.gov/CommunityHealth/profile/currentprofile/VA/Harrisonburg/310042>
- ¹⁰ Harrisonburg Healthy Community Council survey, 2015.