ARE NEIGHBORHOOD SOCIOECONOMIC DISADVANTAGE AND RACIAL/ETHNIC SEGREGATION ASSOCIATED WITH COGNITIVE FUNCTIONING IN LATE MIDDLE AGE?

JOURNAL of HEALTH and SOCIAL BEHAVIOR
JHSB Policy Brief

Carol S. Aneshensel¹, Michelle J. Ko¹, Joshua Chodosh¹,², and Richard G. Wight¹

RESEARCH PROBLEM & DATA

Previous research reveals links between early and mild cognitive deficits and more severe cognitive impairment later in life. Cognitive impairment in later life often leads to substantial disability and costly institutional care. This unfolding process makes it important to identify factors that may exacerbate or prevent these deficits. While it has been established that individual-level characteristics and neighborhood context are associated with cognitive functioning among the elderly, little is known about their influence in late middle age, when cognitive deficits may first emerge. The authors examine how neighborhood socioeconomic disadvantage and racial/ethnic segregation are associated with cognitive functioning in late middle age. This study links data from the Health and Retirement Study (N = 4,525), a nationally representative subsample of the urban U.S. adult population born between 1931 and 1941, with neighborhood data from the 1990 U.S. Census.

KEY FINDINGS

- For persons of lower socioeconomic status, cognitive functioning is enhanced by living in more advantaged neighborhoods.
- The poorest residents of impoverished neighborhoods have especially low levels of cognitive functioning compared to their neighbors with more financial assets.
- Among those living in predominantly African-American neighborhoods, residents with limited education exhibit relatively poor cognitive functioning, but highly-educated residents exhibit extremely good cognitive functioning.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Results support intervention strategies at the neighborhood-level that have the potential to reach large numbers of people and reduce disparities in cognitive functioning. For example, cities could promote socially-derived cognitive stimulation by investing in safe and accessible community centers where residents of poor neighborhoods can meet to discuss solutions to shared problems, obtain information about community activities, and interact with people with a wide range of life experiences. Given their especially high risk, the poorest persons in impoverished neighborhoods should have the greatest ease of access to such interventions. Study findings also underscore the need for educational reform that discourages school dropouts and provides quality instruction in hyper-segregated urban underclass neighborhoods. Investments in early childhood education could translate into long-term health and economic benefits as individuals age.


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¹University of California, Los Angeles; ²Veterans Administration Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System