

Causal Pathways for Social Risk Variable Selection for HWM

There is a large body of literature linking various social risk factors to worse health status and higher mortality over a lifetime^{2, 7, 19, 33}. Although some recent literature evaluates the relationship between patient social risk factors and the mortality outcome, few studies directly address causal pathways or examine the role of the hospital in these pathways^{5, 11, 18, 23, 24}. Moreover, the current literature examines a wide range of conditions and risk variables with no clear consensus on which risk factors demonstrate the strongest relationship with mortality.

The social risk factors that have been examined in the literature can be categorized into three domains: (1) patient-level variables, (2) neighborhood/community-level variables, and (3) hospital-level variables.

Patient-level variables describe characteristics of individual patients and include the patient's income or education level⁸. Neighborhood/community-level variables use information from sources such as the ACS as either a proxy for individual patient-level data or to measure environmental factors. Studies using these variables use one dimensional measures such as median household income or composite measures such as the Area Deprivation Index (ADI)^{20, 28, 31}. Some of these variables may include the local availability of clinical providers¹³⁻¹⁴. Hospital-level variables measure attributes of the hospital which may be related to patient risk. Examples of hospital-level variables used in studies are ZIP code characteristics aggregated to the hospital level or the proportion of Medicaid patients served in the hospital^{11, 16-17}.

The conceptual relationship, or potential causal pathways by which these possible social risk factors influence the risk of readmission following an acute illness or major surgery, like the factors themselves, are varied and complex. There are at least four potential pathways that are important to consider:

1. **Patients with social risk factors may have worse health at the time of hospital admission.** Patients who have lower income/education/literacy or unstable housing may have a worse general health status and may present for their hospitalization or procedure with a greater severity of underlying illness. These social risk factors, which are characterized by patient-level or neighborhood/community-level (as proxy for patient-level) variables, may contribute to worse health status at admission due to competing priorities (restrictions based on job), lack of access to care (geographic, cultural, or financial), or lack of health insurance. Given that these risk factors all lead to worse general health status, this causal pathway should be largely accounted for by current clinical risk-adjustment.
2. **Patients with social risk factors often receive care at lower quality hospitals.** Patients of lower income, lower education, or unstable housing have inequitable access to high quality facilities, in part, because such facilities are less likely to be found in geographic areas with large populations of poor patients. Thus, patients with low income are more likely to be seen in lower quality hospitals, which can explain increased risk of mortality following hospitalization.
3. **Patients with social risk factors may receive differential care within a hospital.** The third major pathway by which social risk factors may contribute to mortality risk is that patients may not receive equivalent care within a facility. For example, patients with social risk factors such as lower education may require differentiated care (e.g. provision of lower literacy information – that they do not receive).
4. **Patients with social risk factors may experience worse health outcomes beyond the control of the health care system.** Some social risk factors, such as income or wealth, may affect the likelihood of mortality without directly affecting health status at admission or the quality of care

received during the hospital stay. For instance, while a hospital may make appropriate care decisions and provide tailored care and education, a lower-income patient may have a worse outcome post-discharge due to competing financial priorities which don't allow for adequate recuperation or access to needed treatments, or a lack of access to care outside of the hospital.

Although we analytically aim to separate these pathways to the extent possible, we acknowledge that risk factors often act on multiple pathways, and as such, individual pathways can be complex to distinguish analytically. Further, some social risk factors, despite having a strong conceptual relationship with worse outcomes, may not have statistically meaningful effects on the risk model. They also have different implications on the decision to risk adjust or not.

Based on this model and that the Area Deprivation Index (ADI) and dual-eligibility variables aim to capture the social risk factors that are likely to influence these pathways (income, education, housing, and community factors) - the following social risk variables were considered for risk-adjustment:

- Dual-eligible status
 - Dual eligibility for Medicare and Medicaid is available at the patient level in the Medicare Master Beneficiary Summary File. The eligibility threshold for over 65-year-old Medicare patients considers both income and assets. For the dual-eligible (DE) indicator, there is a body of literature demonstrating differential health care and health outcomes among beneficiaries²⁷. High Area Deprivation Index (ADI)
- Area Deprivation index (ADI): The ADI, initially developed by Health Resources & Services Administration (HRSA), is based on 17 measures across four domains: income, education, employment, and housing quality^{20, 31}.

The 17 components are listed below:

- Population aged ≥ 25 y with < 9 y of education, %
- Population aged ≥ 25 y with at least a high school diploma, %
- Employed persons aged ≥ 16 y in white collar occupations, %
- Median family income, \$
- Income disparity
- Median home value, \$
- Median gross rent, \$
- Median monthly mortgage, \$
- Owner occupied housing units, % (home ownership rate)
- Civilian labor force population aged ≥ 16 y unemployed, % (unemployment rate)
- Families below poverty level, %
- Population below 150% of the poverty threshold, %
- Single parent households with children aged < 18 y, %
- Households without a motor vehicle, %
- Households without a telephone, %
- Occupied housing units without complete plumbing, % (log)
- Households with more than 1 person per room, % (crowding)

ADI scores were derived using beneficiary's 9-digit ZIP Code of residence, which is obtained from the Medicare Enrollment Database, and is linked to 2017-2021 US Census/American Community Survey (ACS) data. In accordance with the ADI developers' methodology, an ADI score is calculated for the census block group corresponding to the beneficiary's 9-digit ZIP Code using 17 weighted Census indicators. Raw ADI scores were then transformed into a national percentile ranking ranging from 1 to

100, with lower scores indicating lower levels of disadvantage and higher scores indicating higher levels of disadvantage. Percentile thresholds established by the ADI developers were then applied to ADI percentile to dichotomize neighborhoods into more disadvantaged (high ADI areas=ranking equal to or greater than 85) or less disadvantaged areas (Low ADI areas= ranking of less than 85).

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