Relation Between Socioeconomic Status, Race–Ethnicity, and Left Ventricular Mass

The Northern Manhattan Study

Carlos J. Rodriguez, Robert R. Sciacca, Ana V. Diez-Roux, Bernadette Boden-Albala, Ralph L. Sacco, Shunichi Homma, Marco R. DiTullio

Abstract—Increased left ventricular mass (LVM) and lower socioeconomic status (SES) are predictors of cardiovascular morbidity and mortality. Blacks and Hispanics are more likely to have higher LVM and lower SES. The relation between SES, race–ethnicity, and LVM has not been fully explored. Data were used from the NOMAS population-based sample of 1916 subjects living in Northern Manhattan. SES was characterized on the basis of educational attainment and divided into 4 categories. Echocardiography-defined LVM was indexed according to height at the allometric power of 2.7 and analyzed as a continuous variable. LVM varied by race in our cohort (blacks 48.9 g/m².7, Hispanics 48.4 g/m².7, whites 45.6 g/m².7; \( P = 0.004 \)). Using ANCOVA, there was a significant inverse and graded association between mean LVM and SES for the total cohort. Mean LVM was 48.4 g/m².7, 48.6 g/m².7, 47.1 g/m².7, and 45.3 g/m².7 for the lowest to the highest educational level category \( (P \text{ trend} = 0.0004) \). This relationship remained among normotensives \( (P \text{ trend} = 0.0005) \) and was present for blacks \( (P \text{ trend} = 0.009) \), but not for whites \( (P \text{ trend} = 0.86) \) or Hispanics \( (P \text{ trend} = 0.47) \). The difference in mean LVM between the highest and lowest categories of education was 5.3 g/m².7 for blacks, 0.0 g/m².7 for whites, and 1.0 g/m².7 for Hispanics. Lower SES is an independent predictor of increased LVM among hypertensive and normotensive blacks. \( \text{(Hypertension. 2004;43:775-779.)} \)

Key Words: socioeconomic factors ■ hypertrophy ■ epidemiology ■ race

Despite recent declines in mortality, cardiovascular disease remains the leading cause of death in the United States today.1 Blacks are known to have significantly higher rates of heart disease and stroke mortality compared with whites.1,2 The substrate for increased cardiovascular disease mortality among blacks has been inadequately defined and does not appear to be fully explained by traditional risk factors such as smoking, hypertension, hypercholesterolemia, and diabetes.

Increased left ventricular mass (LVM) is a predictor of cardiovascular morbidity and mortality independent of arterial hypertension and other traditional risk factors.3–5 Blacks are more likely to have increased LVM than whites.5,6 Increased LVM may account for part of the increased cardiovascular mortality among blacks, and little is known about LVM among Hispanics. Unfortunately, the mechanism by which increased LVM imparts an elevated cardiovascular risk and why its prevalence may be higher among minorities remain largely unknown. An association between lower socioeconomic status (SES) and poorer health, including all-cause mortality and increased cardiovascular morbidity and mortality, has been observed.7–9 Whether environmental precursors (including underlying socioeconomic factors) contribute to the differential burden of LVM has not been fully investigated. In the United States blacks are known to have considerably lower SES than whites.2,9 Lower SES is associated with increased psychological stress, increased cardiovascular reactivity, and increased incidence of hypertension,10–15 all of which may potentially contribute to the development of increased LVM. The aim of the present study is to examine the association between SES, as defined by educational level, and LVM. We will also investigate any influence of race–ethnicity on the potential relation between LVM and SES.

Methods

Subjects were participants in the Northern Manhattan Study (NOMAS), a population-based prospective cohort study designed to investigate cardiovascular and stroke incidence, risk factors, and prognosis in a multiethnic sample from northern Manhattan. The methods of subject recruitment and enrollment into NOMAS have

Received October 21, 2003; first decision November 19, 2003; revision accepted January 12, 2004.


This study was presented in part at the American College of Cardiology 73rd Scientific Session, March 2003.

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Hypertension is available at http://www.hypertensionaha.org

DOI: 10.1161/01.HYP.0000118055.90533.88
have been described elsewhere. Briefly, random digit dialing of approximately 25,000 households was performed and community participants were enrolled in NOMAS if they: (1) had never had a stroke diagnosed; (2) were older than age 40; and (3) resided in Northern Manhattan for ≥3 months in a household with a telephone. NOMAS subjects with previous myocardial infarction were excluded from this study. Ninety-one percent of those called participated in a telephone interview, and 75% of those who were eligible and invited to participate came to Columbia University Medical Center (CUMC) for an in-person evaluation (overall participation rate 68%). The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at CUMC. All participants gave consent directly or through a surrogate when appropriate. As part of NOMAS, 3,298 participants underwent extensive in-person evaluation, and transthoracic echocardiograms were performed on 203 eligible subjects. Echocardiograms that were technically adequate for analysis were obtained in 1916 subjects and are included in this study.

Blood pressure was measured with mercury sphygmomanometers and cuffs of appropriate size. Hypertension was defined as a blood pressure recording ≥140/90 mm Hg (based on the average of 2 blood pressure measurements during one sitting by a trained research assistant), the patient’s self-report of a history of hypertension, or antihypertensive medication use. Diabetes mellitus was defined by the patient’s self-report of such a history, use of insulin or hypoglycemic agent, or fasting glucose ≥126 mg/dL. Physical activity was assessed with a standardized questionnaire that recorded the frequency and duration of 14 different recreational activities during the 2-week period before the interview. These analyses used the total duration of physical activity in hours per week. Height and weight were determined by the use of calibrated scales. Assessments were conducted in English or Spanish, depending on the primary language of the participant. Race–ethnicity was based on self-identification through a series of interview questions modeled after the 2000 US census and conformed to the standard definitions outlined by Directive 15.

Transthoracic echocardiography was performed and measurements were taken by standard two-dimensional (2-D) protocols according to the guidelines of the American Society of Echocardiography (ASE). Left ventricular diastolic dimension (LVDD), left ventricular systolic dimension (LVSD), interventricular septal thickness (IVS), and posterior wall thickness (PWT) were measured in all patients. LVM was calculated with the use of the corrected ASE method: 0.8×[(1.04×[(IVS+LVDD+PWT)3−LVDD3]+0.6).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Total Cohort (N=1916)</th>
<th>Whites (N=377)</th>
<th>Blacks (N=417)</th>
<th>Hispanics (N=1081)</th>
<th>P Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>68±10</td>
<td>73±10</td>
<td>70±10</td>
<td>66±9</td>
<td>&lt;0.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMI (kg/m²)</td>
<td>27.6±5.3</td>
<td>25.8±5.1</td>
<td>27.9±5.1</td>
<td>28.2±4.9</td>
<td>&lt;0.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical activity (h/wk)</td>
<td>2.5±4.2</td>
<td>3.2±4.0</td>
<td>2.9±1.9</td>
<td>1.9±3.3</td>
<td>&lt;0.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SBP (mm Hg)</td>
<td>144±21</td>
<td>140±20</td>
<td>147±21</td>
<td>144±21</td>
<td>&lt;0.0001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Educational level:

- < High school: Women 61, Men 54, Whites 53, Blacks 18, Hispanics 12, P=0.0049
- Completed high school: Women 15, Men 24, Whites 23, Blacks 32, Hispanics 41, P=0.0001
- Some college: Women 6, Men 19, Whites 19, Blacks 19, Hispanics 6, P=0.0001
- ≥College graduate: Women 24, Men 14, Whites 25, Blacks 24, Hispanics 23, P=0.0003

Diabetes: 21 subjects are included in the total cohort who could not be classified as black, white, or Hispanic.

### Results

Demographic characteristics of the study population are shown in Table 1. On average, our cohort was elderly (mean...
TABLE 2. LVM by Socioeconomic Status and Race–Ethnicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Level</th>
<th>Total Cohort</th>
<th>Whites (N=377)</th>
<th>Blacks (N=417)</th>
<th>Hispanics (N=1081)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;High school</td>
<td>48.9±15.5</td>
<td>47.3±14.8</td>
<td>52.2±18.2</td>
<td>48.5±15.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed high school</td>
<td>48.5±15.6</td>
<td>48.0±15.5</td>
<td>48.5±16.4</td>
<td>48.9±15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>47.0±17.3</td>
<td>48.0±20.0</td>
<td>46.4±17.7</td>
<td>47.9±14.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≥College graduate</td>
<td>44.2±14.5</td>
<td>42.3±13.5</td>
<td>46.4±16.8</td>
<td>47.2±14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P trend</td>
<td>&lt;0.0001</td>
<td>0.048 (0.86)</td>
<td>0.012 (0.009)</td>
<td>0.43 (0.47)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Values in parentheses are mean left ventricular mass adjusted for age, gender, systolic blood pressure, diabetes, physical activity, and BMI.

On race–ethnic group comparison, using an adjusted multivariate analysis, SES was inversely associated with LVM in blacks (P trend=0.009) but not in whites (P trend=0.86) or Hispanics (P trend=0.47) (Table 2). The difference in adjusted mean LVM between the highest and lowest categories of education was 5.3 g/m^2.7 for blacks, 0.0 g/m^2.7 for whites, and 1.0 g/m^2.7 for Hispanics. This was equivalent to an 11% difference in adjusted mean LVM between the highest and lowest SES categories among blacks.

Table 3 shows the relationship between SES and LVM among the subgroup of 841 subjects without clinical hypertension (SBP was 152±21 mm Hg in hypertensives and 130±14 mm Hg in nonhypertensives; P<0.0001). Differences in unadjusted mean LVM showed that among normotensives, those in the highest SES category had an 11% lower mean LVM than those in the lowest SES category (P trend<0.0001). On race–ethnic-specific multivariate analyses, the inverse relationship between LVM and SES again remained significant only among normotensive blacks. Normotensive blacks in the lowest SES category had an 18% higher mean LVM compared with blacks in the highest category (P trend=0.006).

Discussion

The present study demonstrates that in a population-based sample of adults free of clinically overt cardiovascular disease, an independent inverse and graded relationship exists

TABLE 3. LVM by Socioeconomic Status and Race–Ethnicity Among Normotensives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Level</th>
<th>Total Cohort</th>
<th>Whites (N=219)</th>
<th>Blacks (N=151)</th>
<th>Hispanics (N=445)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;High school</td>
<td>45.1±13.2</td>
<td>46.9±14.1</td>
<td>46.2±16.9</td>
<td>44.9±12.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed high school</td>
<td>45.6±15.8</td>
<td>45.5±15.6</td>
<td>46.1±17.0</td>
<td>45.5±15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>41.9±14.6</td>
<td>40.5±18.3</td>
<td>41.8±13.0</td>
<td>44.7±12.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≥College graduate</td>
<td>40.0±11.6</td>
<td>39.2±10.6</td>
<td>37.6±9.2</td>
<td>45.7±16.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P trend</td>
<td>&lt;0.0001</td>
<td>0.002 (0.23)</td>
<td>0.01 (0.006)</td>
<td>0.84 (0.99)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Values in parentheses are mean left ventricular mass adjusted for age, gender, systolic blood pressure, diabetes, physical activity, and BMI.
between the level of SES, as defined by educational level, and the degree of LVM among blacks. This association remained among normotensive blacks and with adjustment for systolic blood pressure. Lack of access to care or poor medical compliance may not fully explain the observed LVM–SES differences. If low SES is a marker for lack of access to care or poor compliance, then one would expect to observe SES differences in whites or Hispanics as well, which we did not find. Blacks had greater LVM than whites only for the lowest educational category, suggesting that LVM differences by race are not a biological constant. Little is known about LVM among Hispanics, although it has been suspected that Hispanics have higher LVM than whites.19 Our study confirms that Hispanics carry a higher burden of increased LVM than whites at a level similar to that of blacks.

Explanations for the greater LVM differences among blacks remain speculative, but several different factors may play a role. Sympathetic stimulation is one mechanism through which low SES could be associated with greater LVM. Sympathetic stimulation has been shown to vary with environmental exposures, such as job stress and lower SES.12,14 Evidence suggests that lower SES is associated with a disproportionate cumulative burden of stressful life conditions.12–15 Chronic intermittent adrenergic stimulation, in the absence of overt hypertension, can cause increased LVM, and the presence of increased LVM may precede the onset of clinically overt hypertension.20–22 Lower SES, particularly among blacks, may be associated with increased psychosocial stress and adrenergic stimulation, both of which may produce increased LVM. Being black and of low SES may be a different experience than being white or Hispanic of low SES. Low SES blacks, for example, may be subjected to greater stress producing experiences than low SES whites, resulting in stronger SES patterning of LVM among blacks than among whites. Increased adrenergic receptor sensitivity to norepinephrine infusion has been shown in blacks compared with white hypertensive subjects. These pathways may be either more sensitive (requiring a lower threshold to “trigger”) or more responsive (have a higher “gain”) or both among blacks leading to increased LVM. Thus, blacks of lower SES may carry a higher sympathetic tone than whites or Hispanics of lower SES, and their LVM may also be more responsive to its effects. Regardless of the mechanisms involved, our observations raise the clinical issue of whether blacks of lower SES require more careful assessment for prehypertension/hypertension and subsequent target organ damage.23

SES may also be related to dietary behaviors. Studies have suggested that blacks retain sodium more avidly than whites,24 and increased sodium retention is associated with increased LVM by way of mechanisms involving circulating volume expansion and possibly activation of the renin-angiotensin system.25 Dietary differences (in the intake of sodium for example) may be greater by SES among blacks than among whites and could also contribute to the greater LVM differences by SES observed in blacks.

Conventional clinical assessment of blood pressure may underestimate the severity and duration of high blood pressure, particularly among subjects of lower SES. Greater LVM among blacks compared with whites is unexplained by differences either in rest or in mean daytime blood pressure.26 However, ambulatory blood pressure that remains elevated at night (non-dipping) rather than exhibiting its normal nocturnal decrease is a strong correlate for the presence of increased LVM and predictive of the LVM differences between blacks and whites.27 Because nondipping status is related to sympathetic tone, and because blacks are more likely to be non-dippers,28,29 ambulatory blood pressure measures and diurnal variation may better explain race–ethnic and socioeconomic differences in LVM. Ambulatory blood pressure may also explain the observed LVM–SES relation among normotensives. Patients with a normal clinic blood pressure may show abnormalities on ambulatory blood pressure monitoring. This phenomenon of “masked hypertension” may have more clinical relevance because ambulatory blood pressure has a stronger impact than resting blood pressure on end-organ damage and cardiovascular outcomes.30 The development of hypertension may be less well recognized or the severity of hypertension underestimated among blacks of lower SES when compared with their white or Hispanic counterparts in an urban community. These issues warrant further investigation.

Important strengths of this study are its population-based nature and the presence of a tri-ethnic sample. Several limitations exist. First is the lack of variability in educational level observed among Hispanics (nearly 80% were in the lowest educational category), which may have limited our ability to detect SES effects in this group. Income data were not available in our cohort. Educational level was used as a proxy for SES and remains a reasonable but limited measure of SES.31 Educational level may not be a good predictor of SES among an immigrant population, possibly explaining the lack of an association between SES and LVM among our predominantly immigrant Hispanic cohort. Finally, at a given educational level, race–ethnic groups may differ in terms of wealth, buying power, living conditions, or access to resources in ways that could not be fully measured.

**Perspectives**

This study is the first, to our knowledge, to demonstrate that lower SES is an independent predictor of increased LVM among hypertensive and normotensive blacks. Although our results do not establish a causative role for SES in the pathogenesis of increased LVM, they do suggest that a link between SES and LVM exists and open important avenues for further research. It is possible that conditions of lower SES more adversely affect blacks in terms of increased LVM and its sequelae. Thus, this group may warrant more aggressive cardiovascular risk monitoring and intervention.

**Acknowledgments**

This study was supported by grants from the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke RO1–29993 (RLS), General Clinical Research Center (2 M01 RR00645), Columbia Center for the Active Life of Minority Elders (NIA AG15294), and K24–NS–02241 (MDT). Dr Rodriguez is a recipient of the Association of Black Cardiologists’ Hawthorne-Searle Young Investigator Award and the American Heart Association Clinically Applied Research Award. We appreciate the constructive suggestions of Dr Olveen Carrasquillo and Dr Elizabeth Ratchford in reviewing this manuscript.
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Hypertension. 2004;43:775-779; originally published online February 23, 2004; doi: 10.1161/01.HYP.0000118055.90533.88

Hypertension is published by the American Heart Association, 7272 Greenville Avenue, Dallas, TX 75231
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Print ISSN: 0194-911X. Online ISSN: 1524-4563

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