

Northeast Ohio Medical University
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs (ORSP)

2024 Summer Research Fellowship Program Application

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I. Project Description

1. Project title, Principal Investigator name, title and location

Project title: "Social Factors Associated with Health Service Utilization, Health, and Well-being among People with Serious Mental Illness"

Co-Principal Investigators: Natalie Bonfine, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Department of Psychiatry
Stacey Barrenger, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Department of Psychiatry

Location of research: NEOMED campus, Department of Psychiatry

2. Abstract of project

Social status characteristics, including age, gender, race, and socioeconomic status, have been shown to affect health outcomes. In addition to examining the direct connections between social status and health outcomes, it is also important to assess intervening effects of stress, social support, and psychosocial coping resources on the association between social status characteristics and health outcomes. Much of the research done in these areas has focused on community samples of adults representing the general population and are not specific to people living with severe and persistent mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and major depressive disorder. This study will examine survey data collected from a community-based sample of people with serious and persistent mental illness to better understand how social factors are associated with mental health service utilization and health outcomes. Specifically, this project will examine the associations among social

characteristics and social factors, such as exposure to stress, mental health service utilization, overall health status, and psychological well-being.

3. Significance of the overall research

It is well known that social status impacts health. Social status characteristics most often studied are age, gender, race and ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, including education, income, and occupation, or may include role-based social statuses (e.g., parent, worker, partner, student). The historic Whitehall II studies documented a strong, direct link between social status and health, noting patterns of social inequality and health such that changes in social standing were associated with direct changes in a variety of health outcomes and mortality (Adler et al. 1994; Link and Phelan 1995; Marmot 2005; Marmot et al. 1991; Pearlin et al. 2005). Other research has examined how social status and social conditions impact access to and utilization of health care services, as well as the experience of patients interacting with the health care system (Hall and Dornan 1990; Hendryx, Ahern, Lovrich and McCurdy 2002; Marmot, Friel, Houweling and Taylor 2008).

Social conditions, including social status and other factors, such as social support, psychosocial coping resources, and exposure to stressful life events, have been described as social determinants or fundamental causes of health because they put people “at risk of risks” (Link & Phelan, 1995). Some social conditions may be protective factors that prevent illness or reduce disease burden, e.g., by increasing access to health-promoting resources or health services, while other social conditions may increase exposure to risk factors that can exacerbate poor health outcomes (Link & Phelan, 1995). As such, existing research has examined not only the direct connections between social factors and health outcomes but has also examined how other elements of the social environment may exacerbate or mitigate the connection between social conditions and health outcomes.

It is important to assess patterns of association between social conditions and health outcomes. However, much of this research in this area has focused on community samples of adults representing the general population and are not specific to people living with severe and persistent mental illness. This project will explore the association of social factors, social status, well-being, health services utilization, and physical and mental health outcomes among a sample of people with serious mental illness living in a community setting.

4. Goals and objectives

This research Fellowship is a student-directed exploration of social factors that relate to health and health services utilization for people with serious mental illness. The aim of this study is to complete secondary data analysis of existing survey data collected from a sample of people with serious and persistent mental disorders. The co-Principal Investigators will provide the Fellow access to the dataset and the student will develop and define specific, conceptually driven research questions. The general, guiding research objectives for this study are to:

- 1) describe the current literature on social factors that influence mental health service utilization, general physical health, and well-being for people with serious mental illness, and
- 2) analyze quantitative data to assess the association of key measures, including social status, health services, stress and psychosocial coping resources and physical and mental health among a sample of adults with serious mental illness.

5. Research methods to be used/learned

This Fellowship is a social epidemiological research project. The student Fellow will engage in multiple aspects of the research process and will complete a review of the literature, participate in the development of research questions, and will analyze existing data and summarize findings to an academic and general audience.

6. Proposed method of data analysis

This project involves quantitative data analyses, where the student Fellow will conduct descriptive statistical analyses, bivariate correlations, means comparisons and/or multivariate analyses (e.g., ordinary least squares and logistic regression). Data analyses will be completed using SPSS. The student Fellow will also participate in other aspects of the research process, including literature review and summary, interpreting results, and developing tables and figures to summarize findings. The Fellow will also gain experience preparing research results for public dissemination.

While it is possible that applicants for the student fellowship may have some experience engaging in quantitative data analysis, prior knowledge or experience is not required. The Faculty PI will provide hands-on training and instruction on how to engage in such research in a scientifically rigorous manner.

7. Significance of anticipated findings

This study will contribute to an improved understanding of how social status characteristics (e.g., gender, age, race, education, employment, parental status) and other social conditions influence health services utilization and health outcomes for people with serious and persistent mental illness. By doing this research in connection with the Health Services Research Focus Area, students will meet with other collaborators and social science researchers who are examining the role that social factors have in influencing health, quality of life and other outcomes.

II. Student Fellow Training/Mentoring Plan

This Summer Fellowship experience will involve collaborative, team-based research. The student will be supervised by Drs. Barringer and Bonfine and will also meet with other faculty in the Department of Psychiatry and the Health Services Research Focus Area. Weekly research team meetings and/or lab sessions will be scheduled between the faculty and summer research fellow. During these guided, mentored meetings or lab sessions, the student Fellow will receive experiential training on the following research activities: developing research questions informed by the literature, conducting quantitative analyses using statistical analysis software, interpreting results, and disseminating findings. The student Fellow will have access to workspace within the Department of Psychiatry Research Lab, including access to workstations with computers and appropriate data analysis software (e.g., SPSS). Students will receive training on the ethical conduct of human subjects research and will be guided to ensure that all aspects of the project adhere to IRB protocols.