

Neighborhood status influences older women's cognitive function, study finds

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Older women who live in a lower socioeconomic status neighborhood are more likely to exhibit lower cognitive functioning than women who live in more affluent neighborhoods, according to a new RAND Corporation study.

The study, published online by the [American Journal of Public Health](#), is the largest of its type to examine whether living in a poor neighborhood is associated with lower cognitive function.

The study found that potential confounders such as vascular health, [health behaviors](#) and [psychosocial factors](#) such as depressive symptoms explained only a portion of the relationship between neighborhood socioeconomic status and cognitive function.

"This study provides the best evidence yet that living in a neighborhood with lower socioeconomic standing can have an impact on women's [cognitive abilities](#) in late life," said Regina A. Shih, the study's lead author and a behavioral scientist at RAND, a nonprofit research organization. "More work is needed to find out whether living in a lower socioeconomic status neighborhood influences [cognitive decline](#) that may affect a woman's risk of developing dementia, and to consider ways to intervene."

Researchers analyzed information collected from 6,137 women from across the United States who were surveyed as a part of the Women's Health Initiative Memory Study, an ancillary study to the Women's

Health Initiative hormone therapy trials.

Women from 39 locations who were at least 65 years old and free of dementia were enrolled in the memory study from May 1996 to December 1999. All the women in the study were given a standard test that measures cognitive function by assessing items such as memory, reasoning and spatial functions.

Researchers found that women who lived in neighborhoods with lower socioeconomic status were substantially more likely to have low cognitive scores than similar women who lived in more affluent neighborhoods.

Unlike previous reports, the latest study did not find that older individuals are more vulnerable to the effects of neighborhood socioeconomic status because of a longer exposure to poor or declining neighborhoods.

The study also found that non-whites may be particularly vulnerable to the effects of living in a neighborhood with a lower socioeconomic status. But researchers did not find that an individual's income level or education strengthened or weakened the relationship between neighborhood [socioeconomic status](#) and their [cognitive functioning](#).

Provided by RAND Corporation

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