Abstract

This study examines how lower income students’ mental health compare to higher income students’ mental health. A sample of 99 undergraduate nursing students at The University of Texas at Austin School of Nursing were e-mailed to complete a Qualtrics survey. Questions pertained to their demographics (age, race, university classification, income level) as well as questions from the Duke Health Profile – a 17-question survey analyzing six health measures (physical, mental, social, general, perceived health, and self-esteem) and four dysfunction measures (anxiety, depression, pain, and disability). A total of 99 responses was received: 94.9% of students were in the 18-24 year-old age range and 50.5% of students either earned or had parents who earned > $100,000 annually. As income increased, satisfaction with income (r = 0.51, p < 0.01) and social health (r = 0.23, p <0.05) increased as well. As satisfaction with income increased, social health (r = 0.27, p <0.01) and self-esteem (r = 0.24, p <0.05) increased. The “higher” or “better” their mental health, the higher/better their social health and self-esteem, and the lower their anxiety and depression (p <0.01). Satisfaction with income can be seen as relative or absolute: absolute income equates one’s satisfaction or happiness with the amount of income they make while relative income suggests one’s happiness is dependent on their income in relation to their peers – even if they earn more in the latter scenario than the former. Both those concepts pertain to life satisfaction, which is significantly correlated to mental health problems, such as: major depression, anxiety disorder, suicidality, alcohol dependence and substance dependence. Income, life satisfaction, and mental health can be crucial to the well-being of those who are struggling financially or perhaps perceive they are struggling in comparison to others. In this study, income did have a relationship with mental health for the participants, but it was weak. The question as to whether one causes the other has yet to be answered.