Global Journal of Universal Studies

Volume1:Issue2 ISSN: 3008-0509

Article History

Submitted: 26-11-2024

Revised: 12-12-2024

Accepted: 15-12-2024

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Understanding AI-Driven Cardiovascular Risk Prediction in Underserved Populations: Addressing Social Determinants of Health through Data Analytics

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Abstract

Cardiovascular disease (CVD) is a leading cause of morbidity and mortality internationally, and underserved populations bear an out sized burden of risk. In these communities, access to adequate healthcare, burdened by social determinants of health (SDOH) like socioeconomic status, education, and environmental factors, can pose a barrier to many individuals. The crucial role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning (ML) to address problems of health disparity by leveraging large scale data to predict cardiovascular risks and impact appropriate interventions is discussed. The integration of diverse sources of information, such as electronic health records (EHR) social data, and behavioral data, allows AI models to identify at risk individuals even in settings with limited resources. In this paper, we investigate the use of AI driven cardiovascular risk prediction models in underserved populations and how they can consider the effect of SDOH. The paper also addresses ethical considerations, data challenges, and opportunities for use of these prediction tools in public health initiatives to address disparities in health. The potential of combining AI and data analytics is to enhance cardiovascular health outcomes, bridging gaps in equitable access to preventive care, especially for vulnerable communities.

Key words: Cardiovascular Disease, Artificial Intelligence, Social Determinants of Health, Underserved Populations, Risk Prediction, Data Analytics, Health Disparities, Machine Learning, Public Health, Health Equity.

Introduction

Yet, cardiovascular disease (CVD) continues to be one of the leading causes of death and disability across the globe in that millions of people die to it annually. CVD affects people across all demographic groups, but underserved populations suffering increased low socioeconomic status, decreased access to healthcare and higher chronic condition rates, take a disproportionate hit [1]. Among the most common of these groups are those who are low income, racial and ethnic minorities, or live in rural or isolated areas, all of whom face substantial barriers to both prevention and effective management of CVD. The social determinants of health (SDOH) (e.g., socioeconomic status, education, housing, employment, healthcare access, etc.) define the cardiovascular health of these populations. In addition to affecting the burden of risk factors like hypertension, diabetes and smoking, such as their prevalence, these determinants also affect how people can engage with and adhere to treatments which translates into poorer health outcomes [2].

That means traditional methods of cardiovascular risk prediction based on clinical factors like cholesterol levels, blood pressure, and age, often fall short in accurately representing the real situations of people in underserved communities. But traditional approaches frequently neglect the critical role SDOH plays in health such that the risks are inaccurately estimated and interventions imperfectly implemented [3]. More nuanced and inclusive strategies are needed to address cardiovascular health needs of underserved populations that take into account broader social, environmental and behavioral determinants of disease risk.

Artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) have come of age in the last few years with new ways of tackling these disparities. Due to their ability to effectively process huge amounts of multi-dimensional data, AI driven models offer promise in improving cardiovascular risk prediction in high-risk populations [4]. By combining clinical data, like patient history and biomarkers, with social and environmental data, including income level, education, housing conditions, and access to health care, these tools offer a more complete assessment of an individual's health risks [5].

In contrast to conventional models, artificial intelligence has the capability of identifying people susceptible to CVD before clinical manifestations occur and offers potential for early, targeted interventions and the avoidance of expensive consequences later on in the disease [6]. In addition, AI's ability to process large datasets across multiple platforms enables developing personalized prediction models tailored to address particular challenges of underserved communities. Integrating SDOH into AI driven cardiovascular risk prediction offers a major opportunity to improve equity in health [7].

Through social and environmental attributes, AI can be used to fill gaps in access to health care, improve risk stratification and allocation of health care resources. For example, integrating data on environmental exposures, housing instability, or access to healthy foods could be used to predict how these factors 'intersect' with more traditional clinical risks – such as blood pressure or cholesterol – to influence the chances of a heart attack or stroke occurring [8]. Secondly, the AI models can also identify people who are at risk — but not by circumstance, say, simply due to lack of access to healthcare or a poor environment, for example — which healthcare staff can then prioritize to treat the causes of the risk, and not just the risk itself. In underserved populations, due to multiple conditions that compound cardiovascular risk, this is particularly important [9].

Using AI to identify these individuals at higher risk earlier allows healthcare providers to personalize preventive strategies that are effective and easily accessible, benefitting at risk groups. Beyond their promise of dealing with health disparities, AI driven cardiovascular risk prediction models raise multiple ethical, practical, and technical challenges that need to be contemplated [10]. Along with the endeavors for the improvement of healthcare systems, however, comes a myriad of data privacy and security issues, especially when utilizing personal and sensitive data to predict health outcomes [11]. The storage, collection and use of such data also must meet ethical standards and legal requirements in collections, such as a HIPAA in USA, to protect patient privacy.

Moreover, AI models have the potential to yield important insights that are underpinned by not so impartial data, featuring deeper meaning, that if not diverse and representative might in turn propagate or even aggravate imbalances in the equality of opportunity [12]. For example, if most of the data that AI models are trained on includes affluent or predominately white populations, then the health risks or social reality of underserved populations may not be reflected accurately. Consequently, the most critical factor in minimizing bias and providing generalizable predictions is ensuring that these models are trained on inclusive, diverse datasets. The explain ability of AI models also poses another challenge. AI can make highly accurate predictions, but many times the ‘black box’ is a disadvantage because users cannot fully understand what program is making the prediction and the decision-making process used. In order to be trusted and implemented in clinical practice, healthcare providers must know how and why particular AI recommendations are being made [13].

AI models in high stakes areas, like cardiovascular risk prediction, need to be transparent to create confidence in clinicians and to ensure patient safety. Although the journey to address cardiovascular health disparities in underserved populations through the use of AI technology appears daunting, the promise of the value is clear. With AI driven models capable of performing more personalized and accurate risk assessments, the early detection of abnormalities can be improved as well as increasing the targeted interventions to reducing the burden of CVD on vulnerable communities [14]. In addition, AI can help realize public health goals more broadly through policy decision making, resource allocation, and healthcare planning.

It will discuss the ethical issues and obstacles, as well as opportunities, for incorporating these technologies into public health initiatives in order to enhance public health outcomes and reduce health disparity. In this paper, we explore the potential of AI-driven cardiovascular risk prediction models, focusing on their ability to integrate SDOH and address health disparities [15]. We also examine the ethical considerations, challenges, and opportunities for utilizing these tools in underserved populations, ultimately aiming to improve public health outcomes.

Cardiovascular disease in underserved populations

The Burden of Cardiovascular Disease: CVD remains a major killer, with 18 million annual deaths worldwide. But the burden is not an even one. Cardiovascular diseases represent a disproportionately high burden in underserved populations, that is, those that have lower socioeconomic status, geographic location, lower educational level and limited access to health care. Given poorer outcomes, and higher mortality rates, these communities tend to have barriers to pursuing preventive care, early diagnosis and timely intervention [16]. Underserved populations are particularly susceptible to risk factors for CVD, including hypertension, diabetes, smoking and obesity, which are all heightened by other factors on underserved populations like food insecurity, substandard housing conditions and lack of education on healthy lifestyle choices [17]. Combined, these social determinants are shown to increase cardiovascular risk, and accordingly it is critical to apply adapted health intervention approaches to these communities [18].

Social Determinants of Health and Cardiovascular Risk: Health outcomes are influenced by non-medical factors known as social determinants of health, and they have distinctive impact on underserved populations. Factors such as income, education, access to social support networks and healthcare, as well as environmental factors, such as air quality and living conditions, can also affect our health. Research has demonstrated that individuals in a lower socioeconomic status do not have access to a large number of preventive services and therefore are at higher risk to develop chronic conditions, such as CVD [19]. For example, people in less economically privileged areas are more likely to experience greater stress, poor diet, inadequate physical activity, and lack of access to medical care contributing to higher level of cardiovascular disease risk. Improving these social factors along with more traditional risk factors like cholesterol levels and blood pressure is vital to seeing improvements in health outcomes in these communities [20].

The Role of AI in Cardiovascular Risk Prediction

AI in Healthcare: A Brief Overview: Recently, artificial intelligence (AI) has shown great promise in healthcare in areas including image recognition, clinical decision support and predictive modelling. With that, AI and machine learning (ML) algorithms are great at data analysis, finding patterns and predicting what will happen based on those patterns. AI is especially good at predicting such a complex condition as CVD, since so many factors play into it — genetic, lifestyle choices, environmental exposures, and clinical history [21].

With greater understanding of a patient's underlying comorbidities and environmental exposures, compounded by the potential for decreased synergistic interactions, the ability of AI models to take in data from one's electronic health records (EHR), social data, behavior factors, and environmental exposures can lead to increased accuracy in data risk assessments [22]. Leveraging on these various data sources, AI can offer unique insights that go beyond clinical and demographic factors that traditional models have to depend on. As a result, AI driven models are particularly useful in addressing cardiovascular risk in underserved populations in which social and environmental determinants of health are pervasive [23].

AI-Driven Cardiovascular Risk Prediction Models: Cardiovascular risk prediction tools have been developed using AI driven models. Current cardiovascular risk scores like the Framingham Risk Score, are based on clinical data such as age, cholesterol levels, blood pressure and smoking history. Additionally, however, the majority of these models do not account for SDOH, which can be a major determinant of a person's cardiovascular health. In contrast, machine learning models can fuse in a larger number of additional sources of data – such as clinical, social or environmental factors [24]. For instance, we can make AI models with data on housing, education and income as an example that can further give a better picture on how possible an individual will have cardiovascular disease. Using these models, we can not only characterize clinical risk factors, but understand how SDOH interact with clinical risk factors to increase risk [25].

Integrating Social Determinants of Health into AI Models: AI offers one of the most important benefits of including SDOH in the artificial intelligence models for cardiovascular risk prediction. Clinical data are necessary to evaluate cardiovascular risk but they only relate to a small number of factors responsible for health outcomes [26]. By adding in things such as access to healthcare, food insecurity, or exposure to environmental toxins, the AI model will be able to produce more accurate predictions in underserved populations. For example, AI models can leverage data from community health surveys, housing information, income, and social support networks to predict cardiovascular risk in populations that are historically underrepresented in healthcare [27]. By integrating these factors into AI driven models we can better identify individuals who may be more at risk as a result of social and environmental drivers and thereby provide more focused interventions to help them.

Ethical Considerations and Challenges: Usage of AI in healthcare can ramp up and result in data privacy and security issues, especially when social data and non – clinical information are used in combination. Adding multiple data sources to AI models comes with ethical risks of patient consent, data ownership, and privacy violations [28]. While the legal protections and regulations are insufficient in underserved populations, there is more the risk of leaking out or misusing personal and sensitive data. Finally, trust is built when confidence is guaranteed that the privacy laws (e.g., HIPAA) are followed and the active participation of patients and healthcare providers in this endeavor is prioritized [29].

Algorithmic Bias: The data that an AI is trained on is only as good as the algorithms. AI models lose the ability to predict as accurately or fairly, if the data used to train those AI models is biased or incomplete. For instance, an AI model trained mostly on affluent populations' data may not predict cardiovascular risk correctly in underserved populations who may face distinct social and environmental stressors. Therefore, addressing algorithmic bias is critical in making sure the AI powered models serve all the populations [30].

Ensuring Equity in AI-Driven Healthcare: Health disparities is the reason why artificial intelligence (AI) is being deployed in healthcare, especially among underserved populations. But unless structured to specifically serve the needs of these populations, there's also the risk that AI systems will perpetuate or even amplify existing inequities [31]. Building and validation of AI driven cardiovascular risk prediction models across diverse demographic and socioeconomic groups is therefore necessary to ensure that these artificial intelligence models can be utilized for populations who have traditionally been underserved [32].

Opportunities for Improving Cardiovascular Health in Underserved Populations

Targeted Public Health Interventions: The development of AI driven cardiovascular risk prediction models can greatly improve effectiveness of public health interventions. Early identification of high-risk individuals by these models can guide healthcare providers and public health agencies to serving the needs of underserved populations through focused resource allocation for preventive interventions [33]. It may consist of targeted screening programs, lifestyle interventions and education campaigns promoting the reduction of cardiovascular risk factors, for example smoking, unhealthy nutrition and physical inactivity [34].

Enhancing Access to Care: Financial, geographic or other systemic barriers too often mean people in underserved populations do not have access to healthcare. AI powered models that will predict cardiovascular risk help determine where healthcare systems need to allocate their resources the most. Furthermore, these models also can restrict the monitoring of those people who do not need more monitoring or specialized care, which will increase the efficiency of the health care [35].

Empowering Communities with Data: In addition, AI will be enabled to empower underserved communities through better access to data and resources managing cardiovascular health. AI powered tools can be used by community health workers to share personalized advice from using predictive models to help people understand their cardiovascular risk and take action to prevent it [36].

Application of AI in Underserved Populations

Despite being a considerable health issue, cardiovascular disease (CVD) still continues to be an issue; especially in underserved populations with limited access to healthcare, and where SDOH have a larger impact on outcomes. With AI in healthcare, we can reduce health disparities by improving early detection, delivering tailored interventions and improving ways to get to care [37].

Personalized Health Interventions: There are some immense possibilities for innovation of healthcare through AI especially for underserved populations who have difficulties getting good, timely care. AI driven models help in creating specialized health interventions at the very early stages of the disease, based upon the individual's own unique risk profile. Integrating clinical, genetic, and socio environmental data, AI can build models that determine which cardiovascular risks an individual might have, and what treatment responses they might have [38].

As an example, an AI model that works on a combination of extended data including an individual's blood pressure, cholesterol levels, family history and lifestyle factor (diet, physical activity, etc.) can offer tailored suggestions for intervention. In addition, such things as targeted advice for medication, lifestyle or behavioral changes to prevent CVD may be included [39].

Special emphasis is placed on personalized health interventions for underserved at risk population as generalized interventions are not enough effective on account of variations in risk factor distribution and health conditions [40].

Targeting High-Risk Individuals with Tailored Programs: The use of AI driven models can be utilized to identify people in high risk who would have not been indicated in traditional clinical risk assessment strategies. AI can then build whole person risk profiles, including environmental factors like housing stability, employment status, and access to healthcare, as well as clinical factors like age, cholesterol, and hypertension [41]. Monde.cima.ncsu.edu these high-risk individuals can be targeted with tailored health programs that could greatly improve outcomes. For instance, AI can inform the construction of culturally responsive interventions, through addressing socioeconomic barriers, and by enabling practical supports like transportation to medical appointments or financial support for medications. AI enables us to identify those who are at greater risk and we can better allocate resources amongst those who need those most [42].

Equity in Healthcare Delivery: Amongst the most significant of AI’s contribution to reducing health disparity is improving healthcare equity. Unfortunately, many underserved populations experience systemic barriers to care such as geography, poverty and poor or lack of healthcare infrastructure. However, whenever healthcare is inaccessible, AI can provide a helping hand by removing these barriers and making healthcare more accessible. It is possible that AI systems could promote equity in healthcare delivery by supporting remote medicine, such as via telemedicine platforms to deliver the care to underserved communities [43]. AI models can help with triaging of patients, diagnostic recommendations and even help with treatment planning enabling healthcare providers to treat number of patients with lesser resources around. Further, when applied to healthcare, AI can help identify the gaps that exist, and aide healthcare professionals to find out the ways to enhance access and efficiency of healthcare delivery. AI can play a crucial role in reducing healthcare disparities by making underserved populations better access to high quality care [44].

Reducing Barriers to Access for Vulnerable Communities: Many underserved populations face challenges when accessing healthcare because of financial obstacles, isolated geography and lack of access to health care insurance. The use of AI can fill these gaps by offering remote healthcare solutions that eliminated the need for in person visits [45]. For example, AI based diagnostic tools can be used to monitor patients remotely, to track their health metrics over time and also provide timely interventions without repeated trips to healthcare facilities. In addition, AI can help make healthcare delivery more efficient by automating administrative work so that clinicians can devote more time towards patient care [46]. With AI models that analyses patient data and provide actionable insights, health care providers can easily detect early signs of an emerging health issue before it becomes critical. AI has the potential to lower barriers by making healthcare more accessible and affordable to vulnerable communities.

Impact of Social Determinants of Health (SDOH) on AI Models

Accountability towards Efficient Performance: It is well known that social determinants of health (SDOH)—income, education, housing, and access to health care, for example—are important determinants of health outcomes. Cardiovascular disease risk is elevated for those living in socioeconomically disadvantageous contexts and those that experience high levels of exposure to adverse social and environmental conditions; these populations are the underserved [47]. However, AI can help refute these disparities by incorporating SDOH into cardiovascular risk prediction models to better holistically understand individual health risks.

Incorporating Social, Environmental, and Behavioural Factors: Replacing models that rely solely on traditional clinical risk factors with those that also incorporate social, environmental, and behavioral data will improve the accuracy and action ability of cardiovascular risk. Something such as housing instability, exposure to environmental toxins or not having access to healthy food can also lead to poor cardiovascular health [48]. With data from social programs, environmental sensors, public health records, etc., AI can do a better risk assessment of actually living in those underserved areas. By incorporating these extra layers of information, AI models can forecast how they mix with clinical information, like blood pressure or cholesterol, to influence a person's overall cardiovascular health. Such data can therefore be used to identify at risk individuals who are less likely to be identified from clinic data alone [49].

Leveraging SDOH for Comprehensive Risk Assessment: With SDOH factors included in AI driven models, healthcare providers can understand patient context of health. For example, external factors, such as living in an area with poor air quality, limited access to physical activity spaces and food deserts can increase cardiovascular risk of patients. Using AI to make sense of data from many different sources like neighborhood data, social service records and health data, clinicians can have a fuller picture of a person's health risks [50]. Further, AI can recognize at-risk populations ahead of clinical symptoms emerging, if it integrates SDOH in risk assessments. Early detection is essential for the prevention of the root causes of cardiovascular disease, and the implementation of effective prevention strategies.

Assessing the Role of Economic and Social Disparities: Health outcomes are most strongly determined by economic and social disparities in underserved populations. Cardiovascular disease does not arise, but rather is developed as a result of income inequality, a lack of education, and employment insecurity. However, AI models which take these economic and social factors into account are better able to predict the long-term cardiovascular risk posed to persons from disadvantaged backgrounds [51]. For one thing, those who are poor tend to experience chronic stress, a chronic stress which also elevates blood pressure and raises the risk of heart disease.

With economic indicators combined with clinical data, AI is able to recognize who is at high risk and suggest how to remediate that risk, for example, providing more stress management programs, financial assistance or healthcare services. Further, AI assists policymakers and public health officials to better understand the role of social and economic injustices in unequitable heart health amongst underserved communities, providing data driven insights that help guide decisions to reduce cardiovascular risk in underserved communities [52].

Case Studies: AI in Underserved Communities: Already, AI applications are showing potential for enhancing cardiovascular health outcomes in rural and low-income urban areas. In several of these communities your access to healthcare is limited, and you don't have a regular contact to a healthcare professional. Instead, telehealth platforms and remote monitoring tools leverage AI driven solutions and allow patients in underserved communities to get care from their homes, without the barrier of being geographically isolated [53]. For example, AI algorithms can monitor heart rate, blood pressure and other cardiovascular indicators remotely, while offering patients and healthcare providers real time feedback. Insofar as a national health system extends, these technologies have worked well in rural areas where healthcare facilities are few and far between. With influence in these urban areas, where socioeconomic gaps and crowded living tend to exacerbate health risk factors, AI can assist in closing the gaps in access to care and deliver personalized care to the highest risk population [54].

Addressing the Unique Needs of These Communities: We explain how the unique needs of underserved communities make AI a great fit to create bespoke solutions tailored to individual socio-economic and environmental contexts [55]. Example: An example of AI models that can help predict cardiovascular risk includes access to healthy food, housing stability, transportation availability, and other life factors that impact health outcome. By taking such an integrated approach, healthcare providers can better provide holistic care—as is crucial in communities where social determinants have such a large effect on health. Moreover, AI can be used to tailor health interventions to address the particular challenges faced by such populations [56]. For example, in communities where unemployment is high, job training or access to mental health resources may be included within the AI generated care plan aimed at addressing the stressors that also contribute to increased risk of cardiovascular disease.

Conclusion

With AI, integrative models that include SDOH will be able to better predict cardiovascular risk for underserved populations and therefore, may in fact revolutionize healthcare by providing more accurate, personalized risk assessments. These models can allow us to identify at high-risk individuals, provide early intervention, and ultimately improve public health outcomes in these communities and to diminish health disparities. However, there have to be huge challenges of data privacy, algorithmic bias, and equitable of access before these tools could be applied as they need to be used ethically. As AI technology continues to get better and better and we continue to stay committed to equitable healthcare, AI will be integral to improving cardiovascular health in underserved populations for better health equity and better outcomes for everyone.

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