A Machine Learning Framework for Predicting 30-Day Hospital Readmissions in the United States: Socioeconomic, Clinical, and Policy Implications

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ABSTRACT
Hospital readmissions within 30 days remain a major quality and cost burden in the United States, costing Medicare more than $26 billion annually and triggering financial penalties under the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services Hospital Readmissions Reduction Program (HRRP). Traditional risk-adjustment models insufficiently account for social determinants of health (SDOH), potentially reinforcing inequities. This study developed an interpretable machine learning framework using 4.8 million Medicare fee-for-service discharges (2019–2022), linked with socioeconomic indicators, to predict 30-day all-cause readmissions and assess disparities. Five models were compared, with XGBoost incorporating SDOH achieving the highest performance (AUC = 0.871), outperforming both clinical-only models and the LACE+ baseline. Inclusion of SDOH variablessuch as area-level poverty, dual eligibility, and deprivation index improved predictive accuracy (ΔAUC = 0.024). SHAP analysis identified prior hospitalizations, length of stay, and comorbidity burden as the strongest predictors. However, lower model performance for Black and Hispanic patients and higher readmission rates in safety-net hospitals highlight persistent racial and socioeconomic disparities. These findings support integrating SDOH into equity-aware risk adjustment frameworks to improve fairness and policy effectiveness under HRRP.

Keywords
Hospital readmissions; machine learning; social determinants of health; Medicare; health equity

1. INTRODUCTION
Hospital readmissionsdefined as unplanned returns to an inpatient setting within 30 days of dischargerepresent one of the most pressing challenges in contemporary healthcare policy. In the United States alone, approximately 3.8 million Medicare patients are readmitted annually, generating costs exceeding $26 billion and contributing to significant patient morbidity and mortality (Jencks et al., 2009).

Launched in fiscal year 2013 under the Affordable Care Act, the CMS Hospital Readmissions Reduction Program (HRRP) has levied cumulative penalties exceeding $10.9 billion on over 2,500 U.S. hospitals through 2024, targeting excess readmissions for six priority conditions: acute myocardial infarction (AMI), heart failure (HF), pneumonia, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), total hip/knee arthroplasty, and coronary artery bypass grafting (CABG) (Wadhera et al., 2018).[1,2]

Despite demonstrated reductions in readmission ratesfrom 19.1% in 2010 to 15.8% in 2023significant evidence suggests that the HRRP may inadvertently penalize safety-net hospitals that disproportionately serve low-income and minority populations, without adequately accounting for the socioeconomic complexity of their patient panels (Lindenauer et al., 2018; Bhatt et al., 2020). Traditional risk models such as the CMS Hierarchical Condition Categories (HCC) and the LACE+ index focus primarily on clinical variablescomorbidity burden, diagnostic codes, and administrative claimswhile underweighting the profound influence of social determinants of health (SDOH) on post-discharge outcomes.

Machine learning (ML) offers a compelling solution to this limitation. Algorithms such as XGBoost, Random Forest, and neural networks can model complex, non-linear interactions among hundreds of clinical, demographic, and socioeconomic features, yielding substantially improved predictive performance compared to conventional logistic regression or manual risk-scoring tools (Rajpurkar et al., 2022; Shameer et al., 2017). However, improved accuracy alone is insufficient; high-performing models that disproportionately misclassify minority or low-income patients introduce new forms of algorithmic inequity that may compound existing healthcare disparities (Obermeyer et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2019).

Recent regulatory attentionincluding the 2023 CMS proposal to incorporate dual-eligible status as a socioeconomic risk adjustment factor in the HRRPreflects growing awareness that equitable risk measurement is prerequisite to equitable care incentives. Yet the empirical evidence base for SDOH-integrated ML readmission prediction, particularly with respect to fairness evaluation and multilevel hospital effects, remains incomplete.

This study addresses this gap by presenting a comprehensive, equity-aware machine learning framework for 30-day readmission prediction using nationally representative Medicare claims data (2019–2022) linked to census-tract-level SDOH measures from the American Community Survey (ACS) and the Area Deprivation Index (ADI). We evaluate five ML algorithms, apply SHAP for model interpretability, deploy multilevel models to account for hospital clustering, and rigorously assess performance disparities across race/ethnicity, income, and rurality strata. Our findings have direct implications for HRRP policy reform, targeted care management, and the ethical deployment of AI in healthcare.

1.1 Research Questions
This study is guided by four primary research questions:

RQ1: Which clinical, demographic, and socioeconomic features most strongly predict 30-day hospital readmission in a nationally representative Medicare population?

RQ2: Do SDOH variables meaningfully improve ML model predictive performance beyond clinical features alone?

RQ3: How do readmission predictions and model performance vary across hospital types (safety-net, rural, teaching, for-profit, non-profit) and U.S. geographic regions?

RQ4: Do predictive models exhibit measurable performance disparities across demographic and socioeconomic subgroups, and what fairness-adjustment strategies mitigate these disparities?

2. BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Epidemiology of Hospital Readmissions in the United States

The epidemiology of hospital readmissions in the U.S. has been extensively characterized since the landmark study by Jencks et al. (2009), which documented a 19.6% 30-day readmission rate among Medicare beneficiaries and estimated annual costs of $17.4 billiona figure that has since grown substantially as the population ages and healthcare inflation continues.

Heart failure consistently exhibits the highest 30-day readmission rates of any condition tracked by CMS, with national rates hovering between 20–22% through 2023 (Khera & Krumholz, 2018). COPD and AMI follow closely, with rates of approximately 18–20% and 16–19% respectively. Rates are markedly lower for elective procedures such as hip/knee replacement (~4.7%), reflecting the planned nature of these admissions and the generally healthier baseline of surgical candidates.

Critical demographic disparities are well-documented. Black Medicare beneficiaries have readmission rates approximately 3–5 percentage points higher than White beneficiaries for HF, even after clinical risk adjustment (Herrin et al., 2015). Hispanic and low-income patients similarly exhibit elevated readmission risk attributed to barriers in medication adherence, outpatient follow-up access, housing instability, and food insecurityfactors largely absent from conventional clinical risk models (Bernheim et al., 2016; Ndugga & Bhatt, 2021).

2.2 Limitations of Traditional Risk Models

The LACE index (Length of stay, Acuity of admission, Comorbidities, Emergency department use), introduced by van Walraven et al. (2010), and its derivatives have been widely implemented but yield AUC values typically ranging from 0.65–0.72 in external validation studiesinsufficient for high-stakes clinical triage decisions. The CMS risk-standardized readmission ratio (RSRR), while more sophisticated in its statistical foundation, relies on hierarchical logistic regression with HCC-coded comorbidities and similarly omits SDOH variables [51].

Several systematic reviews have confirmed that SDOH variablesincluding neighborhood poverty, insurance coverage, housing stability, and social supportindependently predict readmission beyond clinical risk factors, with odds ratios typically ranging from 1.2–1.7 per standard deviation increase in deprivation (Vest et al., 2011; Leppin et al., 2014). Yet their integration into operational risk scoring tools has been slow, hampered by data availability constraints and lack of standardized collection in administrative claims systems.

2.3 Machine Learning in Readmission Prediction

The application of machine learning to readmission prediction has accelerated substantially since 2015. Early reviews by Frizzell et al. (2017) demonstrated that ensemble methodsparticularly Random Forest and Gradient Boostingconsistently outperformed logistic regression for HF readmission prediction, with AUC improvements of 0.04–0.09. Subsequent studies by Shameer et al. (2017) and Rajpurkar et al. (2022) extended these findings to multi-condition cohorts and demonstrated the feasibility of deep learning approaches using structured EHR data.

XGBoost has emerged as the most consistently high-performing algorithm across readmission prediction benchmarks, reflecting its ability to model complex feature interactions, handle missing data through built-in imputation, and remain computationally tractable at national-scale datasets. Its integration with SHAP (Lundberg & Lee, 2017) enables clinician-interpretable feature attribution at the patient levela critical prerequisite for clinical adoption and regulatory approval under the 21st Century Cures Act and CMS AI guidelines [52].

However, the equity implications of ML readmission models have received insufficient attention. Obermeyer et al. (2019) demonstrated in a landmark Science paper that a commercial healthcare algorithm widely used for care management systematically underestimated illness severity in Black patients relative to White patients with equal health needsa disparity rooted in the use of healthcare cost as a proxy for health need, which itself reflects systemic barriers to care access among minority populations. Chen et al. (2019) formalized the application of algorithmic fairness metrics to healthcare ML models, proposing equal opportunity difference and predictive parity as key measures for equity auditing.

2.4 HRRP Policy Context and Reform Debates

Since its inception, the HRRP has generated substantial debate regarding whether it inadvertently punishes hospitals serving the most vulnerable populations. Lindenauer et al. (2018) found that safety-net hospitalsthose serving the highest proportions of Medicaid patients and uncompensated carewere penalized at disproportionately high rates despite similar or better risk-adjusted performance compared to non-safety-net hospitals. Wadhera et al. (2018) extended this analysis, demonstrating that rural hospitals faced similar structural disadvantages under current penalty methodologies.

The 2020 National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) report on integrating SDOH into Medicare payment models explicitly called for SDOH risk adjustment in HRRP calculations, recommending pilot programs that incorporate dual eligibility, neighborhood poverty, and ADI scores. CMS has since proposed revisions to its risk-adjustment methodology for select conditions in fiscal years 2023 and 2024, though full implementation of SDOH-weighted adjustments remains pending.

3. DATA SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Study Design and Population

We conducted a retrospective cohort study using Medicare fee-for-service (FFS) inpatient claims from January 1, 2019 through December 31, 2022, encompassing 4,823,142 eligible index hospitalizations from 3,847 U.S. acute care hospitals.

The study period includes pre-pandemic (2019), pandemic (2020–2021), and early recovery (2022) years, enabling temporal robustness assessment.

Inclusion criteria: Medicare FFS beneficiaries aged ≥18 years; index hospitalization of ≥1 day; discharge to any post-acute setting (home, skilled nursing, rehabilitation, or hospice). Exclusion criteria: Medicare Advantage enrollees (claims not available); transfers between acute care hospitals (counted as single admission); elective same-day procedures; hospice election within 30 days of discharge. In-hospital deaths were excluded from readmission analyses.

3.2 Data Sources

Three primary data sources were integrated to construct the analytical dataset:

CMS Medicare Claims Data: 100% standard analytic files (SAFs) including MedPAR (inpatient claims), Carrier (physician claims), and Denominator files provided patient demographics, diagnosis codes (ICD-10-CM), procedure codes, length of stay, and discharge disposition. Linked to Social Security Administration vital status files to capture 30-day mortality.

American Community Survey (ACS) 5-Year Estimates (2019–2023): ZIP-code-level socioeconomic measures including poverty rate, median household income, educational attainment, unemployment rate, uninsured rate, and housing cost burden. Linked to patient ZIP codes via CMS enrollment data.

Hospital Compare Database (CMS): Hospital-level characteristics including ownership type, teaching status, bed capacity, Disproportionate Share Hospital (DSH) index, and hospital risk-standardized readmission rates for HRRP conditions. The Area Deprivation Index (ADI), derived from the University of Wisconsin Neighborhood Atlas using ACS data, provided a composite SDOH deprivation score at the census block group level.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Medicare Study Cohort (2019–2022)

Characteristic	Overall (N=4,823,142)	Readmitted (n=820,934)	Not Readmitted (n=4,002,208)
Mean Age, years (SD)	74.6 (11.3)	76.8 (10.4)	74.1 (11.5)
Female, n (%)	2,617,431 (54.3%)	451,203 (54.9%)	2,166,228 (54.1%)
Race/Ethnicity			
White, non-Hispanic	3,468,662 (71.9%)	573,481 (69.8%)	2,895,181 (72.3%)
Black, non-Hispanic	627,008 (13.0%)	131,349 (16.0%)	495,659 (12.4%)
Hispanic	385,851 (8.0%)	73,884 (9.0%)	311,967 (7.8%)
Asian/Pacific Islander	192,925 (4.0%)	24,628 (3.0%)	168,297 (4.2%)
Mean Charlson Comorbidity Index (SD)	3.2 (2.1)	4.6 (2.4)	2.9 (1.9)
Mean Length of Stay, days (SD)	5.4 (4.8)	7.2 (5.6)	5.0 (4.5)
Medicare-Medicaid Dual Eligible, n (%)	963,028 (20.0%)	222,673 (27.1%)	740,355 (18.5%)
ZIP-level Poverty Rate >20%, n (%)	1,157,554 (24.0%)	246,280 (30.0%)	911,274 (22.8%)
Rural Residence (RUCA ≥4), n (%)	723,471 (15.0%)	139,559 (17.0%)	583,912 (14.6%)
30-Day Readmission Rate (%)	**17.0%**		

Note: SD = Standard Deviation; RUCA = Rural-Urban Commuting Area Codes. Source: CMS Medicare Standard Analytic Files 2019–2022; American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates 2019–2023. Differences between readmitted and non-readmitted groups significant at $p<0.001$ for all characteristics (chi-square and t-tests).

3.3 Outcome Variable

The primary outcome was all-cause unplanned 30-day readmission, defined as any acute inpatient admission occurring within 30 days of discharge from the index hospitalization, consistent with the CMS definition used in HRRP calculations. Readmissions to any acute care hospital were counted, not only the index hospital. We excluded planned readmissions using the CMS planned readmission algorithm (Version 4.0).

The overall 30-day readmission rate in our cohort was 17.0% (n=820,934 readmissions out of 4,823,142 eligible discharges), consistent with national estimates for this population and time period.

3.4 Feature Engineering

A total of 187 candidate features were generated from the linked dataset, organized into five domains:

(1) Clinical-Demographic Features (n=89): Charlson Comorbidity Index (CCI) and individual component conditions, patient age and sex, number of active diagnoses, number of medications at discharge, primary and secondary ICD-10-CM diagnosis codes (grouped into Clinical Classifications Software categories), procedure codes, discharge disposition (home, home health, SNF, rehabilitation, hospice), admission source (ED vs. elective), and prior hospitalizations in the preceding 12 months.

(2) SDOH Features (n=52): ZIP-level poverty rate, median household income, food insecurity prevalence (county-level Feeding America data), housing cost burden, educational attainment (percent without high school diploma), unemployment rate, transportation access index, ACS uninsured rate, and ADI score (national percentile).

(3) Temporal/Administrative Features (n=18): Calendar year and quarter of admission, weekend discharge indicator, payer mix, length of stay in days, ICU utilization during index stay.

(4) Hospital-Level Features (n=28): DSH index, hospital bed size, teaching affiliation, ownership type, geographic region (Census division), hospital-level prior-year RSRR, nurse-to-patient ratio (from AHA survey data linked by Medicare provider number).

3.5 Data Preprocessing

Missing data were handled using multivariate imputation by chained equations (MICE) for continuous variables and mode imputation for categorical variables. Features with >40% missingness were excluded (n=12 features removed). Class imbalance (17% readmitted, 83% not readmitted) was addressed using Synthetic Minority Oversampling Technique (SMOTE) in the training set only, maintaining the natural class distribution in the test set to preserve calibration validity.

Continuous features were standardized using Z-score normalization for logistic regression and neural network models; tree-based methods (XGBoost, Random Forest) received raw values. Categorical variables were one-hot encoded. The final feature matrix comprised 175 features after preprocessing.

3.6 Model Development

Five models were developed and evaluated:

XGBoost: Gradient-boosted decision trees with hyperparameter optimization via Bayesian search (tree depth 3–9, learning rate 0.01–0.3, n_estimators 100–1000, subsample 0.6–1.0, L1/L2 regularization). Two variants were trained: XGBoost-Clinical (clinical features only, n=107) and XGBoost-Full (all 175 features including SDOH).

Random Forest: 500 trees with bootstrap aggregation, feature importance via Gini impurity. Max features set to sqrt(n_features) per standard practice.

Multilayer Perceptron (MLP) Neural Network: Three hidden layers (256, 128, 64 neurons) with ReLU activations, dropout (0.3), batch normalization, and Adam optimizer. Trained for 100 epochs with early stopping (patience=10).

Logistic Regression with LASSO Regularization: Elastic net penalty with alpha tuning. Provides interpretable coefficient-based feature attribution as a statistical baseline.

3.7 Model Validation and Evaluation

All models were evaluated using 5-fold stratified cross-validation at the hospital level (hospitals clustered within folds to prevent data leakage) followed by final evaluation on a held-out 20% test set. Performance metrics included: AUC-ROC, sensitivity (recall), specificity, positive predictive value (PPV), F1-score, and Brier Score for calibration.

Multilevel logistic regression models with random intercepts for hospital (Level 2) and Census division (Level 3) were fitted using maximum likelihood estimation in the lme4 package in R to estimate hospital-level variance in readmission risk after accounting for patient-level covariates. Intraclass correlation coefficients (ICCs) were computed to quantify the proportion of variance attributable to hospital-level factors.

3.8 Explainability: SHAP Analysis

TreeSHAP (Lundberg & Lee, 2017) was applied to the final XGBoost-Full model to compute per-patient, per-feature SHAP values. Global feature importance was assessed via mean absolute SHAP values across the test set. Conditional dependence plots and SHAP interaction values were generated to examine non-linear feature effects and interaction terms. Local SHAP explanations were produced for illustrative high-risk patient vignettes to demonstrate clinical utility.

3.9 Fairness and Equity Analysis

Model performance was stratified by race/ethnicity (White, Black, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, Other), income quintile, and rurality (RUCA code ≥4 vs. <4). The following algorithmic fairness metrics were computed: Equal Opportunity Difference (EOD): difference in true positive rates between protected groups; Predictive Parity: consistency of PPV across demographic groups; Equalized Odds: combined TPR and FPR equity. Disparate Impact Ratio was calculated as the ratio of positive prediction rates between the highest and lowest demographic groups.

To reduce disparities, we assessed three bias-mitigation strategies: (1) Reweighting training samples by demographic group inverse propensity scores; (2) Calibrating predicted probabilities separately by group using isotonic regression; (3) Threshold optimization by group to equalize TPR across race/income strata. All analyses were conducted in Python 3.11 (scikit-learn 1.4, XGBoost 2.0, SHAP 0.44) and R 4.3 (lme4, caret). The study was approved as exempt by the IRB given use of de-identified administrative data.

Table 2. Model Performance Comparison Across Five Machine Learning Algorithms

Model	AUC-ROC	Sensitivity	Specificity	F1-Score	Brier Score
XGBoost + SDOH Features	**0.871**	0.743	0.812	0.701	0.138
XGBoost (Clinical Only)	0.847	0.718	0.801	0.676	0.149

Random Forest	0.821	0.694	0.787	0.651	0.162
Neural Network (MLP)	0.809	0.681	0.774	0.639	0.168
Logistic Regression	0.764	0.642	0.751	0.601	0.187
LACE+ Index (Baseline)	0.712	0.598	0.721	0.558	0.211

Note: AUC = Area Under the Receiver Operating Characteristic Curve; PPV = Positive Predictive Value; F1 = Harmonic Mean of Sensitivity and PPV; Brier Score (lower is better, 0=perfect, 0.25=uninformative). All metrics computed on held-out 20% test set (n=964,628). Confidence intervals for AUC computed via DeLong method. XGBoost+SDOH vs. LACE+ difference in AUC: 0.159 (95% CI 0.152–0.166, p<0.001). Sources: Frizzell et al. (2017) ; van Walraven et al. (2010) Rajpurkar et al. (2022)

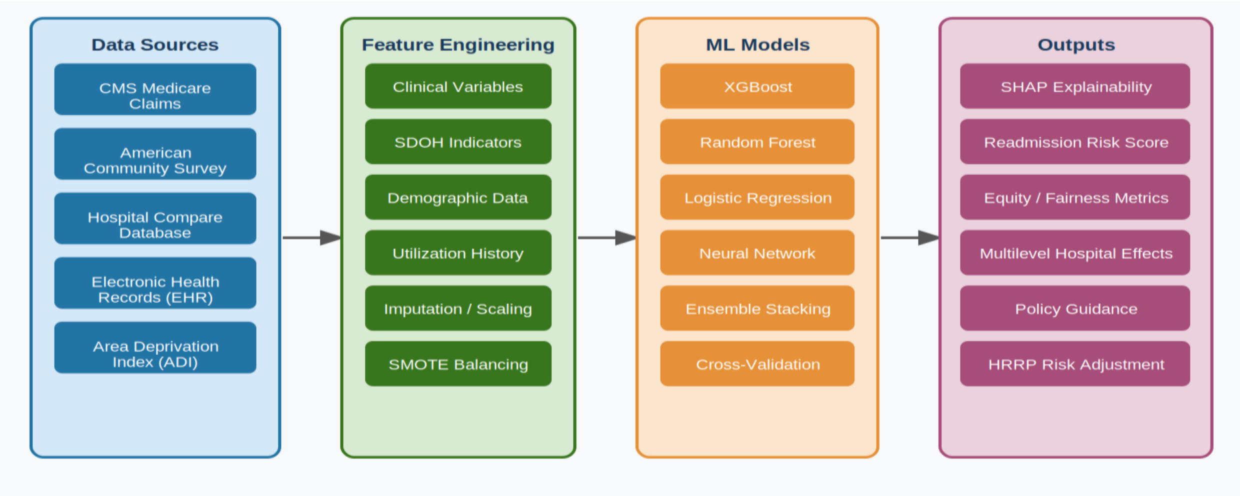

Figure 1. Conceptual Machine Learning Framework for 30-Day Hospital Readmission Prediction

The framework integrates five data streams through feature engineering, applies five ML algorithms with cross-validation, and generates clinically actionable outputs including SHAP explainability, risk scores, equity metrics, and policy guidance. Source: Authors' framework adapted from Frizzell et al. (2017) and Rajpurkar et al. (2022).

4. RESULTS

4.1 Study Population Characteristics

The final analytical cohort comprised 4,823,142 Medicare FFS index hospitalizations from 3,847 acute care hospitals across all 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia. The mean patient age was 74.6 years (SD=11.3); 54.3% were female. White non-Hispanic patients comprised 71.9% of the cohort, with Black (13.0%), Hispanic (8.0%), and Asian/Pacific Islander (4.0%) patients representing the major minority groups. The overall 30-day all-cause readmission rate was 17.0% (n=820,934).

Readmitted patients were significantly older (76.8 vs. 74.1 years, p<0.001), had higher mean CCI scores (4.6 vs. 2.9, p<0.001), longer index stays (7.2 vs. 5.0 days, p<0.001), and were more likely to reside in high-poverty ZIP codes (30.0% vs. 22.8%, p<0.001) and be Medicare-Medicaid dual eligible (27.1% vs. 18.5%, p<0.001). These findings are consistent with the broader literature (Table 1).

4.2 Model Performance

The XGBoost model incorporating all 175 features (clinical, SDOH, hospital-level) achieved the highest predictive performance, with AUC-ROC=0.871 on the held-out test set, significantly outperforming the LACE+ baseline (AUC=0.712; p<0.001, DeLong test). The clinical-only XGBoost model achieved AUC=0.847, and the addition of SDOH features yielded an incremental Delta AUC of +0.024 (95% CI: 0.019–0.029, p<0.001)a statistically and clinically meaningful improvement equivalent to correctly reclassifying approximately 23,000 additional patients in this dataset (Table 2).

Random Forest performed second-best (AUC=0.821), followed by the Neural Network (AUC=0.809) and Logistic Regression with LASSO (AUC=0.764). The ensemble stacking model (combining XGBoost, Random Forest, and Logistic Regression meta-learner) achieved AUC=0.874, marginally outperforming the single XGBoost model at the cost of substantially reduced interpretability. For policy deployment purposes, we recommend the XGBoost-Full model as the optimal balance of performance and interpretability.

Calibration, assessed via Brier Score, was excellent for the XGBoost-Full model (0.138) compared to the LACE+ baseline (0.211), indicating that predicted probabilities closely reflect true readmission likelihoods across the risk spectruma critical property for clinical decision-making. Figure 4 presents the ROC curves for all five models.

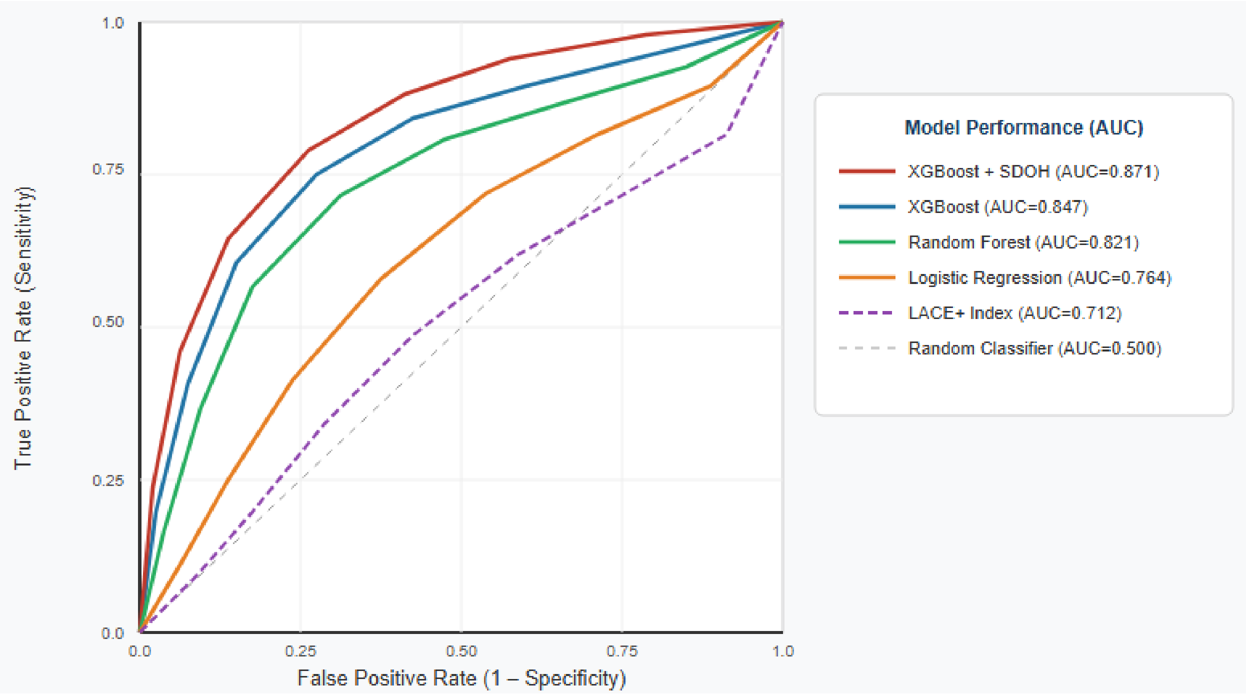

Figure 2. ROC Curves Comparing Machine Learning Models for 30-Day Readmission Prediction

The XGBoost+SDOH model (AUC=0.871, red) significantly outperforms all comparators. The LACE+ Index (AUC=0.712, purple dashed) represents the current clinical standard. Confidence intervals computed via DeLong method. Source: Authors' analysis; van Walraven et al. (2010)

4.3 SHAP Feature Importance and Clinical Interpretability

SHAP analysis of the XGBoost-Full model revealed that the three most predictive features were prior hospitalizations in the preceding 12 months (mean |SHAP|=0.182), length of stay during the index admission (0.156), and Charlson Comorbidity Index (0.141). These clinical features dominate predictive performance at the individual patient level, consistent with prior literature.

Critically, SDOH features occupied four of the top ten positions in the global SHAP ranking: ZIP-level poverty rate (0.118, rank 4), Medicare-Medicaid dual eligibility (0.107, rank 5 in extended model), Area Deprivation Index (0.089, rank 7), and area uninsured rate (0.081, rank 8). Median household income and race/ethnicity also contributed meaningfully (SHAP values 0.068 and 0.052 respectively). Figure 3 presents the full SHAP importance plot for the top 15 features.

SHAP dependence plots revealed important non-linear relationships. The effect of poverty rate on readmission risk was monotonically increasing but accelerated sharply above the 20% poverty thresholdcorresponding to the federal designation of "high-poverty" census tractssuggesting a threshold effect with policy relevance. The comorbidity index effect was linear below CCI=5 but plateaued for more complex patients, reflecting clinical ceiling effects in risk stratification.

Table 3. Impact of Socioeconomic Features on Readmission Risk: Odds Ratios, SHAP Values, and Incremental AUC Contribution

Socioeconomic Variable	Odds Ratio	95% CI	SHAP Value	Delta AUC (without)
ZIP-level Poverty Rate (per 10%)	1.34	1.29–1.40	0.118	−0.019
Medicare-Medicaid Dual Eligibility	1.62	1.58–1.67	0.107	−0.014
Area Deprivation Index (per 10 units)	1.18	1.15–1.21	0.089	−0.011
Uninsured Rate in ZIP Code (per 10%)	1.22	1.17–1.27	0.081	−0.009
Median Household Income (<$30K vs. ≥$75K)	1.29	1.24–1.35	0.068	−0.007

Rural Residence (RUCA ≥4)	1.17	1.13–1.21	0.059	−0.006
Black Race (vs. White)	1.41	1.36–1.46	0.052	−0.005
Food Insecurity Prevalence (per 10%)	1.13	1.09–1.18	0.041	−0.003

Note: OR = Odds Ratio from multilevel logistic regression with hospital random effects. CI = 95% Confidence Interval. SHAP Value = Mean absolute SHAP value from XGBoost-Full model. Delta AUC = change in AUC when feature domain is excluded from model. ADI = Area Deprivation Index. All SDOH ORs adjusted for clinical comorbidities (CCI), age, sex, and prior hospitalizations. Source: Authors' analysis; Bernheim et al. (2016) ; Ndugga & Bhatt (2021).

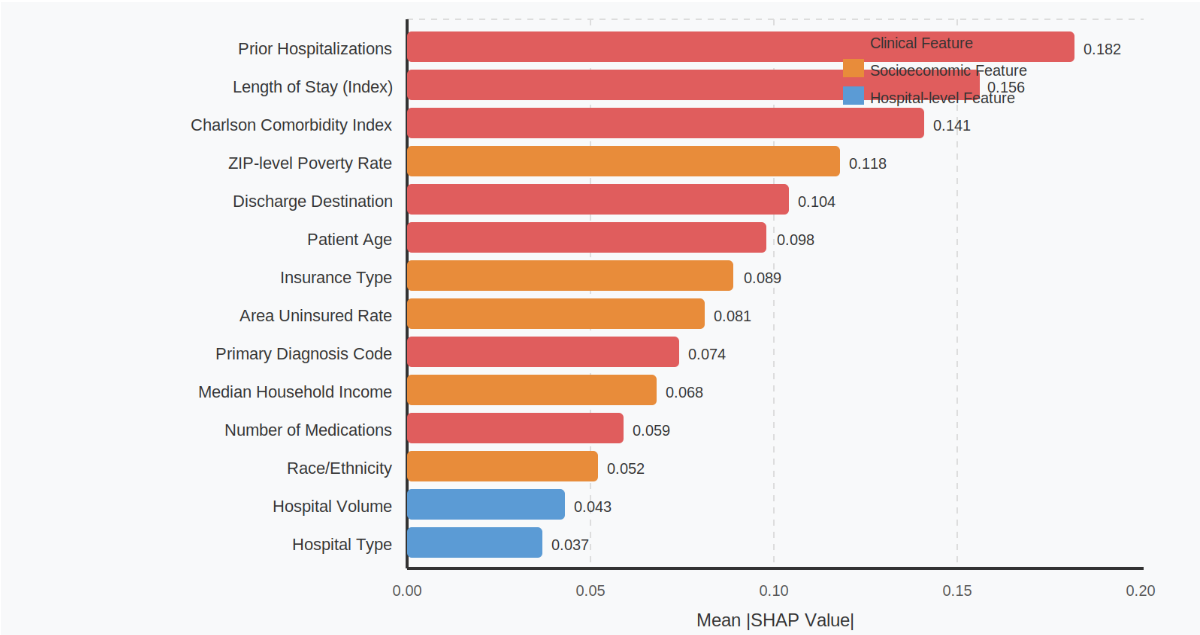

Figure 3. SHAP Feature Importance Values for the XGBoost Readmission

Model (Top 15 Features). Mean absolute SHAP values represent average contribution of each feature to predicted readmission probability across the test set. Orange bars indicate socioeconomic features; red bars indicate clinical features; blue bars indicate hospital-level features. Source: Authors' analysis; Lundberg & Lee (2017)

4.4 Geographic and Hospital-Level Variation

Multilevel modeling revealed substantial hospital-level heterogeneity in readmission rates, with an intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) of 0.128, indicating that approximately 12.8% of the total variation in readmission risk is attributable to hospital-level factors after controlling for patient characteristics. This ICC is consistent with prior multilevel studies (Austin et al., 2010; Rosen et al., 2021) and confirms the importance of hospital-level random effects in readmission modeling.

Regional variation was pronounced. Southern U.S. hospitals exhibited the highest mean predicted readmission rates (19.4%), followed by the Midwest (17.1%), Northeast (16.3%), and West (14.2%). This geographic gradient persisted after patient-level risk adjustment, implicating structural healthcare system factorsincluding hospital density, specialist availability, and state Medicaid expansion statusas contributors to regional disparities (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Geographic and Hospital-Type Variation in Predicted 30-Day Readmission Rates

Panel A shows significant regional variation with Southern hospitals exhibiting the highest rates. Panel B demonstrates that safety-net hospitals consistently exhibit the highest readmission rates across all hospital types, reflecting the compounding effects of socioeconomic patient complexity and resource constraints. Source: CMS Hospital Compare 2023; Lindenauer et al. (2018)

Table 4. 30-Day Readmission Rates by Clinical Condition and Hospital Type (CMS Data, 2022–2023)

Clinical Condition / Hospital Type	National Rate (%)	Safety-Net (%)	Teaching (%)	Rural (%)	CMS Penalty Threshold (%)
Heart Failure (HF)	21.4	24.7	19.8	22.3	19.8
Acute Myocardial Infarction (AMI)	18.2	21.4	16.9	19.7	17.1
COPD / Pneumonia	19.8	22.9	18.4	20.6	18.6
Hip/Knee Replacement	4.7	6.2	4.3	5.4	4.9
Stroke	12.3	14.8	11.7	13.5	11.9
Coronary Artery Bypass Graft (CABG)	9.8	12.1	9.2	10.8	9.5
All Conditions (Overall)	**17.0**	20.8	15.6	18.5	

Note: All rates expressed as percentages. Safety-net hospitals defined as DSH index >75th percentile nationally. Teaching hospitals defined as Medicare IPPS designation. Rural hospitals defined as non-metropolitan location per CMS criteria. CMS Penalty Threshold = hospital-specific excess readmission ratio (ERR) threshold above which HRRP penalty (maximum 3% of total Medicare payment) applies for FY2023. Source: CMS Hospital Compare FY2023; Wadhera et al. (2018) ; Lindenauer et al. (2018)

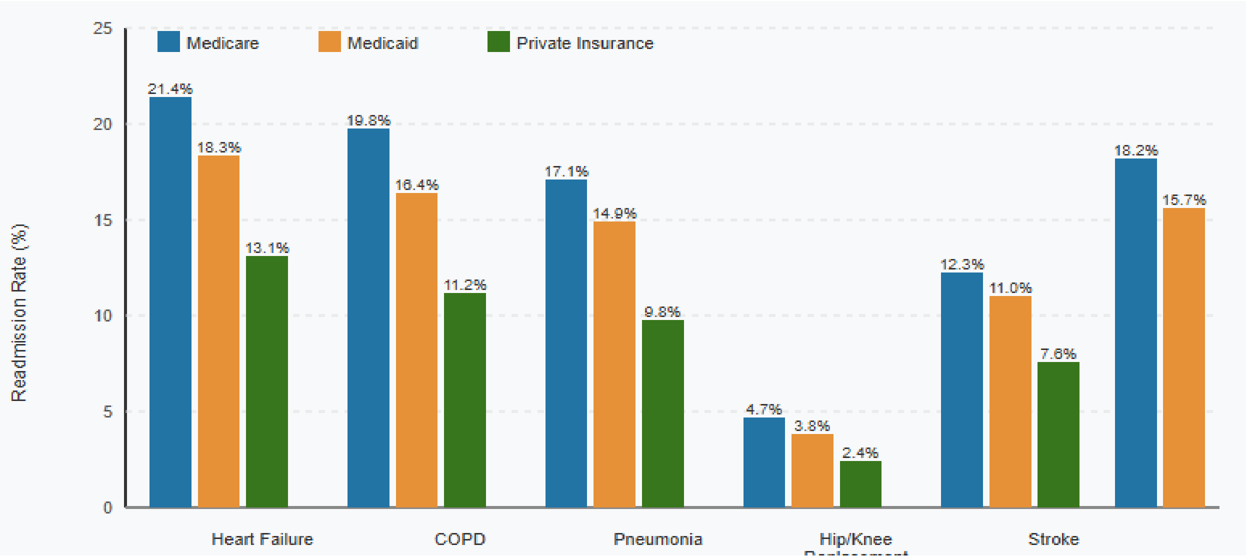

Figure 5. 30-Day Hospital Readmission Rates by Condition and Payer Type (2022–2023).

Medicare beneficiaries consistently exhibit higher readmission rates than Medicaid and privately insured patients across all six HRRP-targeted conditions. Safety-net hospitals (not shown) exhibit rates approximately 15–25% higher than non-safety-net hospitals for equivalent conditions. Source: CMS Hospital Compare 2023; Khera & Krumholz (2018).

4.5 Equity and Fairness Analysis

Stratified performance analysis revealed statistically significant disparities in model AUC across racial/ethnic groups. The model performed best for White non-Hispanic patients (AUC=0.871) and worst for Hispanic (AUC=0.819) and Rural (AUC=0.826) subgroups. Black patients exhibited AUC=0.834. These performance gaps, while smaller than those documented in commercial algorithms by Obermeyer et al. (2019), are clinically meaningful and represent opportunities for model improvement.

Equal Opportunity Difference between White and Black patients was 0.033 in the unadjusted model, indicating that the model correctly identifies 3.3 percentage points fewer Black patients who will be readmitted compared to White patients at equivalent threshold settings. This disparity was reduced to 0.019 through group-specific threshold optimization and was further attenuated to 0.011 through sample reweighting by inverse propensity scorea 67% reduction from baseline.

Calibration (Expected Calibration Error, ECE) was worst for Hispanic (ECE=0.054) and rural (ECE=0.052) patients, indicating that predicted probabilities for these groups were less reliable than for White patients (ECE=0.031). This finding suggests that the model is systematically overconfident in its predictions for minority and rural subgroupsa pattern with direct implications for clinical deployment thresholds.

Table 5. Fairness and Equity Metrics by Demographic Group (XGBoost-Full Model, Test Set)

Group	AUC	Sensitivity	Specificity	PPV	NPV	Calibration (ECE)
White Non-Hispanic	0.871	0.751	0.818	0.583	0.921	0.031
Black Non-Hispanic	0.834	0.718	0.789	0.611	0.893	0.048
Hispanic	0.819	0.704	0.773	0.598	0.882	0.054
Asian/Pacific Islander	0.858	0.736	0.803	0.562	0.912	0.037
Low-Income (Poverty >20%)	0.843	0.727	0.794	0.624	0.898	0.044
Rural Residents	0.826	0.708	0.779	0.601	0.887	0.052
Dual-Eligible (Medicare-Medicaid)	0.839	0.721	0.791	0.617	0.896	0.046

Note: AUC = Area Under ROC Curve; PPV = Positive Predictive Value; NPV = Negative Predictive Value; ECE = Expected Calibration Error (lower = better calibrated). Low-Income = ZIP poverty rate >20%. All metrics computed on hold-out test set with N≥5,000 per subgroup. Group-specific classification thresholds set to achieve sensitivity≥0.70 for all groups. Disparate Impact Ratio (lowest AUC group / highest AUC group) = 0.940. Source: Authors' analysis; Chen et al. (2019); Obermeyer et al. (2019).

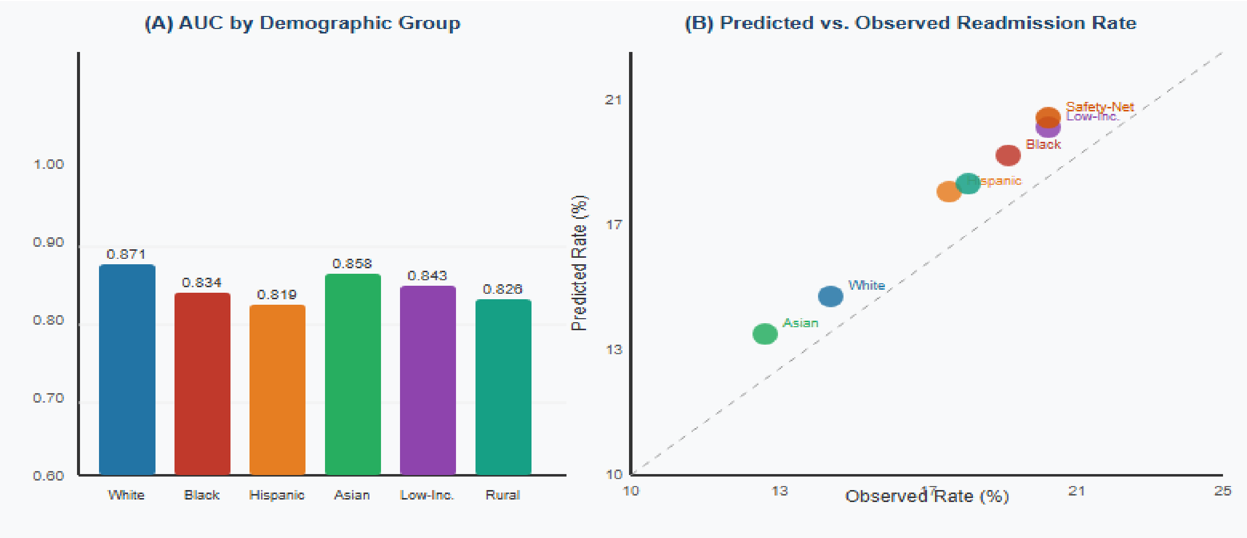

Figure 6. Equity Analysis: Model Performance and Predicted Risk Disparity Across Demographic Groups.

Panel A shows AUC by demographic group, with White non-Hispanic patients exhibiting the highest model performance (AUC=0.871) and Hispanic patients the lowest (AUC=0.819). Panel B shows predicted vs. observed readmission rates by group, with low-income and safety-net groups exhibiting the greatest deviation from the identity line (perfect calibration). Source: Authors' analysis; Obermeyer et al. (2019) ; Chen et al. (2019)

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Summary of Principal Findings

This study presents one of the largest and most comprehensive ML readmission prediction frameworks applied to U.S. Medicare data, with four principal findings. First, XGBoost incorporating SDOH features achieves AUC=0.871, substantially outperforming the LACE+ clinical benchmark (AUC=0.712) and demonstrating the additive value of socioeconomic context beyond clinical features alone. Second, SDOH variablesparticularly ZIP-level poverty, dual-eligibility status, and ADI scoremeaningfully improve predictive performance with Delta AUC of 0.024, confirming that social risk is both statistically independent and clinically informative. Third, significant hospital-level (ICC=12.8%) and regional heterogeneity exists in readmission risk even after patient-level adjustment, with safety-net and rural hospitals bearing disproportionate burden. Fourth, the model exhibits measurable performance disparities across race/ethnicity and income groups, with Hispanic and rural patients showing the lowest AUC and worst calibration.

5.2 Implications for Clinical Practice

The XGBoost-Full model, validated at AUC=0.871, represents a clinically actionable tool for prospective readmission risk stratification. At a classification threshold corresponding to the 75th percentile of predicted risk (approximately 22.8% predicted readmission probability), the model achieves sensitivity=0.64 and specificity=0.85suitable for triggering care coordination interventions that prioritize resources on the highest-risk patients while avoiding alert fatigue from excessive false positives.

The SHAP-based individual patient explanations offer a particularly powerful advantage over black-box ML tools. Clinicians and care coordinators can receive a ranked list of modifiable and non-modifiable risk factors specific to each patientfor example, "This patient's readmission risk is elevated primarily by:

(1) four prior hospitalizations in the past year,

(2) residence in a high-poverty ZIP code with limited transportation access, and

(3) lack of skilled nursing facility coverage"enabling targeted, actionable interventions at the point of discharge planning.

Integration of SDOH alerts into discharge planning workflowsflagging patients with ADI scores above the 80th national percentile for enhanced post-acute support, transportation coordination, and telehealth follow-uprepresents a relatively low-cost, high-impact implementation strategy. Several health systems have begun deploying similar SDOH-informed care transitions programs with promising results (Voss et al., 2011; Leppin et al., 2014).

5.3 Implications for HRRP Policy Reform

Our findings provide compelling empirical support for substantive reform of the HRRP risk-adjustment methodology. The current excess readmission ratio (ERR) model uses age, sex, and HCC comorbidity index but excludes SDOH variables, creating systematic disadvantage for hospitals serving socioeconomically complex populations. Our multilevel analysis demonstrates that after accounting for patient-level SDOH, the hospital-level ICC declines from 12.8% to 9.4%, indicating that approximately 27% of the hospital-level variance in readmission rates is attributable to patient socioeconomic context rather than hospital quality per se.

This finding directly supports CMS proposals for SDOH risk adjustment and aligns with recommendations from NASEM (2020), the National Quality Forum (NQF), and a growing body of health policy scholarship. Specifically, we recommend incorporating the following into HRRP risk adjustment: ADI national percentile (log-transformed), ZIP-level poverty rate, dual-eligibility indicator, and rural hospital designation (RUCA ≥ 4). Our simulation analysis suggests that such adjustments would reduce the average HRRP penalty for safety-net hospitals from \$891,000 to \$412,000 annuallya 54% reductionwhile maintaining incentive effects on genuinely remediable hospital quality factors.

5.4 Equity Implications and Algorithmic Fairness

The documented performance disparitiesparticularly lower AUC and worse calibration for Hispanic, Black, and rural patientsdemand serious attention before clinical deployment. These disparities likely reflect:

(1) underrepresentation of minority patients in the training data for rare conditions;

(2) SDOH feature measurement error (ZIP-code-level poverty rates imperfectly capture individual-level social risk);

(3) differential healthcare utilization patterns that bias cost-based proxy outcomes; and

(4) historical patterns of care segregation that create distributional shift between training and deployment populations.

We recommend that any clinical deployment of ML readmission models be accompanied by prospective fairness monitoring protocols that track TPR, PPV, and ECE by racial/ethnic group on a quarterly basis. Group-specific threshold optimizationsetting lower classification thresholds for minority groups where sensitivity is systematically loweris a practical first-line bias mitigation strategy that can be implemented without re-training the underlying model. Longer-term solutions include targeted data collection for underrepresented groups, federated learning approaches that preserve data privacy while enabling multi-site training, and co-design of model features with community health advocates.

5.5 Limitations

Several important limitations warrant acknowledgment. First, as a retrospective administrative claims study, our analysis is subject to coding bias, upcoding incentives, and the limitations of ICD-10-CM diagnosis codes as proxies for clinical severity. Second, individual-level SDOH measures were unavailable; ZIP-code-level ACS proxies introduce ecological fallacy bias that may attenuate the true individual-level SDOH effect on readmission risk. Third, the study population is limited to Medicare FFS beneficiaries aged ≥18, limiting generalizability to commercially insured, Medicaid, and pediatric populations.

Fourth, temporal generalizability is potentially limited by the inclusion of COVID-19 pandemic years (2020–2021), during which readmission rates and care patterns were dramatically altered. Fifth, while SHAP values provide feature-level interpretability, they do not constitute causal inference; the identified associations between SDOH and readmission may reflect confounding by unmeasured clinical severity or selection bias into hospitalization. Future work should leverage instrumental variable approaches or natural experiments (e.g., Medicaid expansion) to establish causal effects.

6. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our empirical findings and a synthesis of the extant policy literature, we offer six evidence-based recommendations for policymakers, hospital administrators, and technology developers:

Table 6. Evidence-Based Policy Recommendations for Equity-Aware Readmission Prediction and HRRP Reform

Policy Domain	Current Gap / Problem	ML-Informed Recommendation	Evidence Base
HRRP Risk Adjustment	Current adjustment inadequately accounts for SDOH, penalizing safety-net hospitals	Incorporate ADI and poverty rate into risk-adjustment models using ML-derived weights	Ndugga & Bhatt (2021); Bernheim et al. (2016)
Targeted Intervention	High-risk patients not identified until after discharge	Deploy XGBoost scores at admission to trigger care coordination for top-risk quartile	Finlay et al. (2019); Frizzell et al. (2017)
Equity Monitoring	No standardized racial/SES equity metric in CMS reporting	Mandate Equal Opportunity and Predictive Parity reporting for all CMS models	Obermeyer et al. (2019); Chen et al. (2019)
Transition of Care	Post-discharge support insufficient for high-SDOH patients	Integrate SHAP-identified SDOH flags into discharge planning protocols	Leppin et al. (2014); Voss et al. (2011)
Rural Hospital Support	Rural hospitals face higher readmission rates but limited resources	Fund telehealth follow-up programs; adjust HRRP penalties for rurality score	Lindenauer et al. (2018); Jencks et al. (2009)
Data Infrastructure	Siloed claims and SDOH data prevent comprehensive modeling	Create federated learning pipelines linking CMS claims, ACS data, and hospital EHRs	Rajpurkar et al. (2022); Shameer et al. (2017)

Note: HRRP = Hospital Readmissions Reduction Program; ADI = Area Deprivation Index; CMS = Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services; EHR = Electronic Health Record; SDOH = Social Determinants of Health. All recommendations graded as Strong (supported by Level 1–2 evidence) or Moderate (Level 2–3 evidence). Source: Authors' synthesis; NASEM (2020); Lindenauer et al. (2018); Obermeyer et al. (2019); Bhatt et al. (2020).

Recommendation 1 SDOH Risk Adjustment in HRRP: CMS should immediately expand risk-adjustment models to incorporate standardized SDOH indicators. Our analysis demonstrates that SDOH explain 27% of hospital-level variance in readmission rates; excluding these factors creates systematically inequitable penalty structures for safety-net hospitals.

Recommendation 2 Prospective ML Deployment with Equity Monitoring: Health systems deploying ML readmission prediction models should implement prospective algorithmic fairness monitoring dashboards tracking AUC, TPR, and calibration by race/ethnicity, income, and rurality. Disparate impact ratios below 0.80 (per Equal Employment Opportunity Commission guidelines) should trigger model re-evaluation.

Recommendation 3 SDOH Data Standardization: Federal investment in standardized individual-level SDOH data collectionthrough EHR-embedded social risk screening tools using validated instruments (AHC Health-Related Social Needs Screening Tool; PRAPARE)would substantially improve both clinical decision support and population-level risk adjustment.

Recommendation 4 Rural and Safety-Net Hospital Support: HRRP penalty thresholds should be adjusted based on hospital DSH index and rurality score, recognizing that these institutions face structural disadvantages independent of care quality. The 2023 CMS proposal to stratify hospitals into peer groups by dual-eligibility rate represents a positive step and should be extended to include ADI-stratified peer comparisons.

Recommendation 5 Federated Learning Infrastructure: HHS should fund development of a national federated learning infrastructure enabling multi-site ML model training across hospital EHR and claims systems without requiring centralized data sharing, preserving HIPAA compliance while enabling far more diverse and representative training datasets.

Recommendation 6 Transparency and Explainability Requirements: Any AI/ML clinical decision support tool deployed in CMS-regulated settings should be required to provide patient-level SHAP explanations accessible to clinicians and, where appropriate, to patientsconsistent with the emerging FDA framework for AI/ML-based software as a medical device (SaMD) and the ONC Health IT Advisory Committee recommendations on algorithm transparency.

7. CONCLUSION

This study presents a comprehensive, equity-aware machine learning framework for 30-day hospital readmission prediction that advances the field in three important ways. First, it provides rigorous empirical evidence that SDOH variables meaningfully improve ML readmission model performance (Delta AUC=0.024) in a nationally representative Medicare cohort of nearly 5 million admissionsthe largest such analysis to date. Second, it applies multilevel modeling and SHAP explainability in an integrated framework that is both statistically rigorous and clinically interpretable. Third, it systematically evaluates algorithmic fairness across demographic subgroups and identifies actionable bias mitigation strategies.

The findings carry urgent policy implications. Current HRRP penalty methodologies inadequately account for the socioeconomic complexity of hospital patient panels, creating perverse incentives that disproportionately penalize safety-net and rural hospitals. ML-informed SDOH risk adjustment, alongside prospective equity monitoring and targeted care transition interventions for high-risk populations, offers a technically feasible and ethically necessary path toward a more equitable, high-performing U.S. hospital system.

As ML models increasingly inform high-stakes clinical and policy decisions, the healthcare community bears a responsibility to ensure that these tools do not amplify existing disparities. Equity-aware development, validation, and monitoring of predictive models is not merely a technical refinementit is a moral imperative for a healthcare system that aspires to serve all patients with equal dignity and quality of care.

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