

Social Determinants of Health

5 Key Elements You Need to Know

The World Health Organization describes the **Social Determinants of Health (SDH)** as “the conditions in which people are born, grow, work, live, and age, and the wider set of forces and systems shaping the conditions of daily life.”¹

These contribute to the many health inequities we see in the United States, and the myriad ways they can manifest.

According to the World Health Organization, in 2015 there was a nearly **34 year difference in average life expectancy** from birth between the healthiest and least healthy nations!²

Social determinants of health can literally mean the difference between “life and death.”

How can we as a society make a difference and help improve the things that make **EVERYONE** healthy?

Improvement will require a committed and coordinated effort from health practitioners, policy-makers and a greater understanding of the issues. It is our hope that by raising collective consciousness, we create a movement that demands change and eventually achieves improvement in overall health.

The 5 key areas of social determinants are:³

- Neighborhood and Built Environment
- Health and Health Care
- Social and Community Context
- Economic Stability
- Education

NEIGHBORHOOD AND BUILT ENVIRONMENT

Access to Healthy Foods

Approximately 2.3 million people live in low-income, rural areas that are more than 10 miles from a supermarket. Food deserts may be under-reported because the North American Industry Classification System places small corner grocery stores (which often primarily sell packaged food) in the same category as grocery stores like Safeway and Whole Foods.⁴

Environmental Conditions

The Flint Water Crisis forced the topic of municipal water quality to the top of the news cycle as the nation discovered an entire city had been exposed to toxic levels of lead. Many Americans would be terrified to discover that their water systems may be contaminated as well. As of June 2016, there were 5,300 U.S. water systems in violation of the EPA's lead and copper rule.⁵



HEALTH AND HEALTH CARE

Access to Health Care/Primary Care

52 major U.S. cities reported the number of urban hospitals has fallen from its peak of 781 in 1970 to 426 in 2010 (a 46 percent decrease).⁶ Being poor is directly associated with poor health, yet cities are closing hospitals and medical centers in urban areas at a record pace. Meanwhile, approximately two-thirds of the hospitals opened since 2000 are in wealthier, mostly suburban areas.⁶ Lack of transportation hinders access to those suburban locations.

Health Literacy

Health literacy means more than being able to read pamphlets and successfully make appointments. By improving people's access to health information and their capacity to use it effectively, we raise health literacy which is critical to empowerment.⁷

SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY CONTEXT

Discrimination

Studies show that discrimination can increase the risk of stress, depression, the common cold, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, breast cancer, and mortality.¹⁰

Incarceration

There were 693 incarcerated individuals per 100,000 U.S. residents by the end of 2014.⁹ Incarceration disrupts families and entire communities by spontaneously creating single-parent households, leaving families unprepared for the resulting emotional and financial strain.



ECONOMIC STABILITY

Food Security

12.7% of households in 2015 reported food insecurity,¹² defined as suffering from conditions including: worrying that food will run out before they are able to buy more, an adult cutting their portion size or skipping meals because they lack money for food, or the inability to afford balanced meals. Food insecurity makes it difficult for families to benefit from healthy meals, directly affecting health.

Poverty

In 2015, 13.5% of Americans were living below the poverty line, affecting their ability to live safe, healthy lives.¹¹ This number does not account for regional variances in cost of living. For a 2 adult, 2 child family unit, the poverty threshold was \$24,036 in 2015. \$24,036 goes a lot farther in Indianapolis than it does in New York City.

Employment

In November 2016 the unemployment rate among those 16 and over was 4.6%¹³ (although this is a 9 year low). Employment provides income, the ability to afford doctor visits, medicine, and healthy food.



Housing Stability

In 2013, 53% of poor renting families dedicated 70% or more of their income to housing costs.¹⁴ This leaves little for everything else and raises stress levels, negatively affecting health.



EDUCATION

Enrollment in Higher Education

In 2015, approximately 33% of adults held a bachelor's or higher degree.⁶ Education is a key factor in securing stable, higher-earning employment in order to support yourself and your family.

Sources:

- 1 http://www.who.int/social_determinants/en/
- 2 <http://www.who.int/gho/data/node.main.688>
- 3 <https://apps.healthypeople.gov/2020/topics-objectives/topic/social-determinants-of-health>
- 4 <https://www.dosomething.org/facts/11-facts-about-food-deserts>
- 5 <http://www.cnn.com/2016/06/28/us/epa-lead-in-u-s-water-systems/index.html>
- 6 <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2016/demo/p20-578.pdf>
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Focus for Health Foundation is dedicated to ensuring that every individual has access to the information necessary to make optimal health decisions for themselves and their families. We support efforts that increase public awareness of and address the social determinants of health as well as resulting inequities within populations that ultimately determine quality of life. The financial and societal costs of poor health affect us all.

For more information about social determinants of health, please visit us at: focusforhealth.org

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