

SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH

Social determinants of health refer to factors and resources that are essential to the health of communities and individuals. These include income, shelter, education, access to nutritious food, services, community norms and cohesion, and social justice. They are the circumstances in which people are born, grow up, live and work and the resources available to support their health and help them deal effectively with illness and disease. They can be described in terms of factors threatening health, promoting health and protecting health (Dahlgren and Whitehead, 1991). From the perspective of a health Charting the Course VI, the social determinants of health can provide a lens through which to view different populations and communities in terms of which social determinants are most important in impacting the population’s health and which contribute to the root causes of the negative issues impacting the population’s health.

Why treat people’s illnesses without changing the conditions that made them sick? (WHO, 2008)

Research on social determinants of health suggests there are three overarching factors (CTB, 2010), these are:

- **Income inequality** – Income inequality describes the extent to which income is distributed unevenly among residents of a region. By most measures, income inequality has increased steadily in the United States during the past four decades (Community Vitality Project, 2008).
- **Social connectedness** – Various studies indicate that “belonging,” whether to a large extended family, a network of friends, a social or volunteer organization, or a faith community, is related to longer life and better health, as well as to community participation.
- **Sense of personal or collective efficacy** – This refers to people’s sense of control over their lives. People with a higher sense of efficacy tend to live longer, maintain better health, and participate more vigorously in civic life.

Utilizing social determinants of health to help understand and solve health issues in a neighborhood or other geographic area requires an in-depth understanding of how social determinants may affect various populations living in the area of interest. The following is drawn from the materials published by Phil Rabinowitz and his colleagues at the University of Kansas Community Tool Box (CTB) and provides a brief overview of the what, why, who, when and how of addressing the social determinants of health (CTB, 2010).

First, it is important to understand that all communities and/or population subgroups are unique and many factors influence how social determinants may affect these subgroups. Their differences include:

- **Differences in exposure** – Because of economics, geography or other factors, some populations may be more likely than others to encounter particular health risks. For example, those living in

poverty are more likely to be exposed to higher levels of stress, depression, economic uncertainty and unhealthy living conditions than those with higher incomes.

- **Differences in vulnerability** – Due to poverty, exposure to stress and uncertainty, or other factors, this same population might be more vulnerable than others to health problems. Often, because of their inability to pay for regular healthcare or medical treatment, they are at an increased risk of chronic illness.
- **Differences in consequences** – Differences in wealth, social standing, connectedness and other factors can lead to very different health outcomes. For example, a minor health problem for a middle or upper-income family might be considered annoyance because of having to miss a few days of work and pay out-of-pocket for medical treatment. For a poor family, however, these same decisions can mean the difference between paying the rent and being homeless or between buying medicine and putting food on the table. Disparities in health and healthcare are the result of many factors, including discrimination and employment status.

When examining the social determinants of health, you must address 10 factors. (Solid Facts, 2003)
 These factors include:

Economic factors	Unemployment is one of the most critical economic factors impacting a person’s health. In fact, the negative health effects typically begin when an individual first feels their job is threatened. Issues related to job insecurity and unemployment include anxiety and depression, substance abuse, domestic violence, and physical illness.
Social inclusion	Social inclusion describes the connectedness and cohesion people have with their community. It has been shown to have a direct relationship to good health and lower mortality rates. As people put in more hours at work, they have less time for friends, family, volunteering, leisure and recreation. Social exclusion from participation in and access to opportunities and activities of community life is a major impact of poverty.
Education	More education means not only better jobs and more affluence, but also a greater sense of control over one’s life. People with more education have more choices in health, housing, careers and other areas that affect the quality of their lives.
Racial or ethnic bias	Racial or ethnic bias and discrimination are forms of social exclusion, often resulting in differences in levels of healthcare, education or other services. Depending on the community, discrimination may be aimed at almost any racial or ethnic group.



Community acceptance of particular behaviors or practices	Certain activities or behaviors, such as gang membership, alcohol and drug abuse, or smoking, may be an accepted part of a community's culture. Acceptance of these behaviors may result in more people adopting such behaviors.
Cultural factors	There are many facets of culture that impact the social determinants of health. These include gender roles, food preferences, religion, attitudes toward mainstream culture, beliefs about the causes of illness and disease, and language barriers.
Influence of mass media	Media, including movies, radio, magazines and TV can help or hinder health improvement efforts through the messages sent about health.
Politics	Almost all health issues are political to some degree.
Living conditions	Poor or inadequate housing, dangerous streets, noise and rundown neighborhoods impact those who experience them every day.
Geography	Location often has a great deal to do with whether people receive needed services in a timely manner. Even in urban areas, poor neighborhoods frequently have less access to affordable fresh and healthy foods when compared to higher income neighborhoods.

Why address social determinants of health?

There are a number of reasons to address the social determinants of health when attempting to solve or prevent a health related problem. Experience has shown that simply treating the symptoms of a disease or social issue will not solve the problem.

Root cause – To effectively resolve a problem, we must first identify, understand and effectively address the root cause of the problem to bring about fundamental changes. In terms of social determinants, the root causes may be found in one or more of the 10 social factors. For example, a common health issue among some populations is the lack of preventive care they receive. Some of the possible root causes for this may include low levels of education, cultural beliefs about illness and disease, poor economic conditions or geographical barriers. All of these social determinants are likely to impact an individual's willingness to participate in preventive care and must be considered and addressed, if relevant, when planning a program designed to increase access to preventive care services.

Social factors – The social ecological model provides an excellent framework for understanding how social factors may need to be addressed to effectively approach some health issues. An example of this approach is to explore the health issues related to lack of regular physical activity. When examined in the context of social determinants, barriers to regular physical activity may include low levels of

education, living conditions (unsafe neighborhoods), geography (lack of open space, parks or sidewalks), and economic factors (limited time, lack of childcare).

Addressing the social determinants of a health issue is part of the critical thinking process that is essential to understanding the issue fully, so that any strategies and tactics developed for addressing the issue correspond to reality. Strategies have a higher likelihood of failure if they do not address the root causes and social factors related to the issue.

Who should address social determinants of health?

Everyone involved in health related program development must consider the issues being addressed in the context of the social determinants of health. This includes those affected by the issue as well as those addressing the issue, to ensure that everyone knows its full context and history, as well as what various segments of the community might be willing and unwilling to do about it. Those involved may include:

- Those directly affected by the issue: This would include people at risk for, or already subject to, a particular health condition, or potential victims. For example, victims of violence might benefit from a violence prevention program. Groups that often fall into these categories are the poor, those who may feel discriminated against or marginalized, and those without a connection to power in the community.
- Policy makers, legislators, officials or others who can directly affect the issue.
- Agency staff and administrators or others who are responsible for dealing directly with the issue. Some possibilities might be health and human services personnel, police officers, teachers and other educators, coalition members, and local officials.
- Respected local figures, including community advocates, clergy and others in the community to whom people turn for support.
- Members of groups that may be asked to change or sacrifice or take action in order to address the issue. Employers, landlords and other property owners, health and human services workers, police, and teachers all might fall into this category.

When to address social determinants of health?

Social determinants of health should be looked at to determine their role in health issues impacting the individuals, neighborhoods or geographic area of interest. There are times when an analysis of these factors may be particularly important, including:

- When efforts to improve a health issue have not produced the desired change — An example of this might be the challenges presented by trying to improve the nutrition and activity levels of persons living in very low-income neighborhoods. Until some of the material conditions in these neighborhoods are addressed, i.e., lack of food outlets, crime, poverty and lack of safe open space, activities focused on changing individual behaviors will have minimal impact on the health issues.
- When advocating for legislation, policy change or funding to address an issue — The legislation, policy, or funding must address the underlying causes of the problem it is trying to solve, as well as its symptoms. Otherwise the symptoms will continue to reoccur.
- When trying to demonstrate that fundamental change is needed — Changing individual behaviors and attitudes is difficult. Trying to change the behaviors and attitudes of an entire community may seem impossible. Being able to explain how desired changes are related to positive results, both at the individual and community level, may make this process easier and increase the likelihood of success.
- When looking for long-term solutions to long-term problems — Long-term solutions are impossible without taking into account the root causes of the problems needing to be solved. Analyzing the social determinants of those problems makes it possible to address them and develop permanent solutions.
- When focusing on community wellness and prevention — Whether trying to prevent disease or chronic conditions, or trying to create a healthy community, examining the issue through the lens of the social determinants will increase the likelihood of success.

How to address social determinants of health?

There are two steps to addressing social determinants. The first is identifying how various social factors affect the issue of concern and the second is the development and implementation of an action plan based on an understanding of how to approach the issue in order to successfully make changes in a way that will resolve the problem. The following has been adapted from The Community Tool Box, Chapter 17 – Addressing Social Determinants of Health and Development, and is based on a concept paper by Steve Fawcett and colleagues, World Health Organization Collaborating Center for Community Health and Development, University of Kansas (CTB, 2010).

Step 1 – Assess the neighborhood or community in which social determinants are most impacting the issue. The purpose of this phase is to identify which social determinants of health are impacting the issue at hand. The process typically starts by talking to people:

- Neighborhood and community leaders
- Members of the group most affected by the issue
- Government officials
- Staff and volunteers of non-governmental health and community development organizations
- Community activists and organizers
- Anyone who has a stake in the issue you are trying to address

This phase can be achieved through both informal and formal methods including:

Informal

- Informal conversations
- Listening and observation at gatherings held for other purposes
- Learning about community history

Formal

- Individual interviews
- Group interviews
- Focus groups
- Community meetings

“Environmental” refers not just to the natural environment, but to the total environment of the people in question. This includes the built environment such as buildings, roads, sidewalks, parks, schools, stores and open spaces. It also includes the social environment – culture, social rules and norms, business, education, economics, etc. In the context of social determinants of health, the term “environment” encompasses all the natural and human physical, social, economic, and political structures that surround people’s lives (CTB, 2010).

Step 1 will increase the understanding of what social determinants are impacting the issue being examined. By asking the right questions, a picture of the neighborhood or community can be developed showing those most affected, how they are affected, identification of possible barriers to change, what interests are at stake, the potential costs of action and inaction, and who will pay them.

Step 2 – Addressing social determinants. Trying to change huge issues impacting health, such as economic inequality, which has existed since the beginning of time, can be almost impossible. Rather, by using elements within the social determinants of the health model, such as environmental and policy conditions, it can be possible to affect differences in the exposure, vulnerability and consequences of certain types of health issues. Examples of how to address determinants of health related to environmental and policy conditions include:

- **Knowledge and skills** – Helping people gain knowledge and skills can be an intervention in itself or it can be part of a broader intervention to provide participants with tools needed to improve their health and lives. Literacy classes are an example of type of intervention that gives people who have typically been powerless the ability to take more control of their lives and provide long-term opportunities for economic improvement.
- **Working together with others in the community** – Working together with other individuals and groups within the community to address problems can provide access to needed goods and services. By organizing and bringing groups together at the community level to advocate for their interest, groups will be able to deal more effectively with governmental agencies.
- **Success breeds success** – Because there are consequences of actions, it is critical that any actions be planned in small steps so people can easily experience success. If the process is difficult, slow and tedious, and often ends in failure, it won't be long before people stop trying. A series of small successes rather than a grand failure is more likely to develop a sense of efficacy and keep people moving ahead.
- **Policies** – Community health is impacted by a wide array of policies related to environmental issues, law enforcement, education, housing and social welfare. Changing or instituting policy is generally a matter of advocacy. Policies can, and do, affect differences in exposure, vulnerability and consequences that create less healthy conditions for populations at risk. Policy change, while difficult, is in the long run the most effective means of improving health outcomes because it can lead to real social change.

In summary, there are two critical goals of addressing social determinants. First is strengthening the ability of the community to sustain the changes that an intervention brings about. If a population is malnourished, giving them food is only a temporary solution: helping them to develop self-sufficient and sustainable farming practices, or training them for necessary and available work, on the other hand, can be a permanent fix.

The second goal is to take on tasks that can actually be accomplished. Success breeds success, and an effort is far more likely to be successful when attempting something that's challenging but doable. A task that has been accomplished forms a foundation from which to address the next issue, or the next level of issues.

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