

Historical and Potential Policies to Influence Social and Structural Determinants

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Abstract

Social and structural determinants of health are integral factors for neighborhoods with low or medium incomes that extend beyond biological predispositions and contribute to the health disparities witnessed in these communities. Racial biases and political marginalization that support inequities in access to proper resources and education undermine the public health of historical minorities. This literature review explores how these factors impact such communities in terms of their physical and mental health. Differences in early treatment and preventive medicine as well as food deserts are some of the effects of these disparities. Historical practices like redlining and discriminatory financial policies exacerbate the conditions that exist today in marginalized areas. The impact of the long-term health and well-being of residents is analyzed in case studies in Milwaukee's historically redlined neighborhoods to demonstrate lower survival rates and heightened disease risks. In order to address these disparities, policies that specifically address and improve social and structural determinants of health must be enacted. Successful practices on an international or state level that could be adopted for the United States as a nation include universal healthcare systems and community-based health initiatives. Improving equality in determinants serves as both a public health strategy that is financially beneficial as well as an ethical responsibility.

Introduction

Social and structural determinants make it difficult for communities with low or medium incomes to attain equal health and well-being. Beyond biological and clinical factors for the abundance of disease in communities, socioeconomic fundamental drivers of disease risk that stem from levels of income can include access to resources and education (Ray et al.). Structural factors such as racial biases and political marginalization can lead to inequities in health outcomes across populations (Radević et al.). Therefore, policies must be put in place in order to reduce such disparities and ensure equal health outcomes.

Social Determinants of Health

Disparities in access to healthcare and food security stem from variations in income and employment status; one study highlighted that individuals with lower incomes are more likely to face high deductibles and restricted access to subpar provider networks, while those with higher incomes have more diversity in terms of preventative care and insurance. Because of these inequities in access to locations for treatment or quality of health, compared to their wealthier counterparts, individuals with low incomes experience 1.5 to 2 times more risk factors for cardiovascular conditions (U. Essien et al.). Outside of differences in income, employment status overall has a similar effect, as unemployed individuals often cannot garner appropriate care due to frequently being uninsured. For instance, chronic disease rates are exacerbated by food deserts and inadequate healthcare access that originate from areas that have significant employment instability (Odoms-Young et al.).

Being essential for the management of both acute and chronic conditions, access to affordable, effective healthcare is an integral factor for social determinants of health (SDOH), particularly in areas with low-income or rural populations that face barriers in terms of healthcare access. Over 23 million individuals face limits in receiving timely treatment as they experience shortages in accessing primary care providers due to their location (R. Butkus et al.). Uninsured individuals are less likely to seek preventive care or early treatment as well, which exacerbates the disparities in healthcare beyond just access to the appropriate facilities: higher rates of preventable conditions such as diabetes and hypertension are found within Black and Hispanic populations, who have greater concentrations of uninsured individuals, as these populations are statistically more likely to report delaying or forgoing care due to costs (Moore et al.).

Disparities in health extend beyond simply physical ailments, as mental health risk factors vary as well, particularly in social networks and community support systems. Higher efficacy in health outcomes exists within strong social ties that promote healthy behavior and offer emotional support (Manchanda et al.); as with neighborhoods that showcase significant levels of trust and experience, social cohesion is linked with reduced mental health issues—lower rates of

stress and depression—due to greater capacity to open up to trusted members; the absence of these social concepts correlates with mental health difficulties that can eventually lead to physical health conditions as well: lower rates of chronic disease and mortality—especially among women—were seen in communities with robust social networks (U. Essien et al.). The management of chronic disease—most significantly diabetes—also improves in stronger communities as there is a greater likelihood of resources and encouragement provided.

Health outcomes are also shaped by the structure and environment found within the surrounding communities. Negative health outcomes correlate with poor living conditions—inadequate housing or environmental hazards. Increased risk of respiratory diseases and mental health disorders is associated with subpar housing standards, regardless of age. Studies highlight that in homes with mold or pest infestations, children are more likely to develop asthma (K. Sullivan and N. Thakur). Moreover, higher rates of cardiovascular and respiratory disease are found within low-income and minority communities that experience a disproportionate amount of air pollution. One study found that compared to their Caucasian counterparts, racial minority groups were 38% more likely to be exposed to nitrogen dioxide, a pollutant that increases the likelihood of asthma and heart attacks (R. Butkus et al.).

Structural Determinants of Health

The distribution of social determinants of health is facilitated by the presence of structural determinants, including systemic racial bias and skewed policies. Health disparities are worsening in marginalized groups because of structural determinants, as these determinants govern access to resources.

Marginalized groups experience discriminatory policies due to historical inequities that have long-term ramifications for health outcomes today. Wealth disparities and limited access to quality housing and education were originally created through the use of redlining—a policy instituted in the 1930s in the U.S. that systemically denied mortgage loans to African American residents (Egede et al.). Due to the poor conditions these individuals were limited to, higher rates of chronic diseases such as diabetes and hypertension are found in historically redlined communities (A. White et al.). However, this is not a phenomenon unique to the United States, as similar system inequities manifest in countries that experienced historical segregation policies, like Brazil and South Africa. Therefore, key drivers of unequal health outcomes are the structural determinants that stem from historical patterns of disparity.

The distribution of resources is shaped by the political and economic systems in place that can promote disparities in treatment. Accessibility to social services and healthcare institutions is facilitated by government structures; consistently better average health outcomes are reported in countries that have universal healthcare systems, such as those in Scandinavia, compared to

countries that do not have universal healthcare practices in place, including the United States. For example, compared to the 78 years of life expectancy in the U.S., Norway and Sweden hold a life expectancy of approximately 82 years (C. Cogburn). Economic policies like the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) can improve inequities by providing financial support to low-income individuals, reducing poverty, and increasing access to healthcare (E. Clark et al.). On the contrary, health disparities can be further exacerbated by the implementation of austerity measures and cuts to social services.

The organization and access to resources are also determined by the inherent institutional systems that communities are placed in. Disparities in treatment and care quality for racial and ethnic minorities result from implicit bias among healthcare providers and other discriminatory practices in care. For example, systemic racial biases are shown in primary healthcare institutions as African American patients are undertreated for nondescriptive pain compared to Caucasian patients (J. Kirkbride et al.). The contribution to long-term mental health issues and a reduction in socioeconomic mobility is seen with educational policies that disproportionately affect students of color, including zero-tolerance disciplinary practices. This reduced socioeconomic mobility accounts for poorer healthcare outcomes for a minority (Konopka et al.). Furthermore, positions that do not have access to benefits like health insurance or paid sick leave are more concentrated in racial minorities, as they are underrepresented in high-paying jobs due to the disparities caused by discriminatory educational policies (J. Kirkbride et al.).

Case Example: The Impact of Racism and Economic Inequality on Health

Analysis of the combination of structural and social determinants of health demonstrates the impact of health outcomes, especially in historically marginalized communities. A case study from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, shows this disparity through the usage and long-term effects of redlining. This practice was perpetuated by the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC), which rated neighborhoods based on the composition of the different races of individuals that resided in each respective home (Gibbons). Decades of disinvestment resulted as communities with a predominantly African American population were rated as dangerous and thus denied loans for mortgages. While the practice is no longer in place, the residual effects of redlining remain visible in the present in Milwaukee as minorities are still concentrated in those same neighborhoods (A. White et al.).

The association between redlining and breast cancer survival rates is emphasized by the Milwaukee case study. Although not a direct causation, there is a correlation between redlining and health outcomes as African American residents in Milwaukee—particularly women—experience lower survival rates for diseases compared to Caucasian residents (Beyer et al.). Factors like limited access to health institutions and environmental conditions exacerbate these disparities (A. White et al.). Higher rates of chronic diseases were seen in these redlined

areas as there are inequalities in access to treatment; moreover, raised rates of unemployment and limited access to options for healthy food are apparent as well, which exacerbate health inequities (A. White et al.).

Due to the historical lack of investment and protection for environmental hazards in previously redlined neighborhoods. Lead poisoning and other environmental toxins are concentrated in areas with high minorities, correlating with higher rates of disease for African American children. Early exposure to such environmental risks can lead to developmental delays and respiratory illnesses in the long term (A. White et al.).

Addressing the continual effects of redlining requires interventions to target the root causes of discrimination and poverty in such neighborhoods in order to improve access to healthcare. Improving neighborhood conditions and ensuring equitable access to resources to promote health would allocate a safety social net that would be beneficial (A. White et al.). Therefore, targeting interventions and systemic inequities through policies that increase access should be implemented.

Health Systems and Policy Implications

Systematic reforms in healthcare coverage and education have been implemented with high efficacy. In nations like the United Kingdom and Canada, healthcare access is not dependent on employment status or income, so the adoption of universal healthcare proved to reduce health disparities (Raittio and Suominen): in the United States, where access to healthcare is more limited, life expectancy is three years less than in Canada (C. Cogburn). Outside of health insurance, a 10% reduction in infant mortality is associated with states that adopt practices of paid family leave.

Integration of social care into existing healthcare systems would improve the health outcomes of populations and communities that are currently being marginalized. One study shows a reduction of 30% in hospitalization admittance when initiatives address SDOH through housing support programs or other initiatives of social care (D. Mohottige et al.). Furthermore, significant reductions in visits to the emergency room and overall healthcare costs for local governments were seen in U.S. cities that adopted the “Housing First” model to provide stable housing to individuals who experience chronic homelessness. According to the National Academy of Medicine, there is an approximate return of \$2.50 in healthcare savings for every dollar that is invested in social services (Arena et al.). Therefore, implementing policies to address deficits in equality for the health and well-being of residents not only fulfills shared moral obligations but also serves as a cost-effective strategy for the maintenance of public health.

While providing shelter is a priority, the quality of existing homes and neighborhoods may also be addressed to improve health outcomes. Since poor health issues—including respiratory diseases and mental health disorders—arise from inadequate housing conditions, policies to clean up neighborhoods or provide alternative housing should be implemented (Holden et al.). Policies such as rental assistance and prevention of evictions in times of significant duress could be established to increase overall public health, as eviction and forced transitions to the homeless have demonstrated links to increased morbidity and mortality (S. Palmer et al.). These initiatives have been enacted in select locations—like the Māori populations in New Zealand—but widespread adoption of such investments in community-governed health services and culturally relevant interventions must still be addressed.

Conclusion

Both social and structural determinants of health should be targeted to address not only the current disparities in health outcomes but the root causes as well. Since systematic inequities in education and housing are drivers of health inequalities, governments and institutions can enact policies that seek to rectify these specific areas of residential well-being. The ramifications of historical practices are still evident: policymakers must prioritize structural reform and establish metrics to measure success, including improvements in resources and improvements in healthcare access.

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