

Equity and the Social Determinants of Health



Why do some individuals experience more positive health outcomes than others? The answer lies not only in genetics, personal choices, or luck, but rather a complex mix of factors within the circumstances of a person's life. These factors, termed "social determinants of health (SDOH)" are defined 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"** (World Health Organization, n.d., para 1). The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) states that by addressing SDOH, "every person [will have] the opportunity to attain their highest level of health (2024-b, para. 4). The concept of SDOH argues that some people are healthier than others not only because of individual behaviors and biology, but also because they have certain **social and environmental advantages** that allow them to achieve and maintain good health. However, while SDOH is a common working term for specified conditions, the word "determinant" does not mean that an individual has a fixed destiny.



<https://www.cdc.gov/public-health-gateway/php/about/social-determinants-of-health.html>

Social Determinants of Health include:

- **Economic Stability** – employment, food insecurity, housing instability, poverty
- **Education** – early childhood education, enrollment in higher education, language, and literacy
- **Social/Community Context** – civic participation, discrimination, incarceration, social cohesion
- **Health and Healthcare** – access to healthcare, health literacy, English language proficiency
- **Neighborhood and Built Environment** – access to healthy food, levels of crime and violence, housing quality (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024-a)

All of the above conditions may intersect to have a significant impact on a person's health. For example, an individual living in poverty may experience chronic stress that negatively affects their mental and physical well-being. Additionally, low income neighborhoods often lack safe places for children to play, parks for families to enjoy, or access to stores selling nutritious food, and other health benefits that residents of more affluent neighborhoods enjoy. Thus, though this individual may be motivated to do all the "right things" to stay healthy, such as getting regular check-ups and eating well, certain conditions in one's external environment, including **safety concerns** or **community violence**, could make these choices challenging.

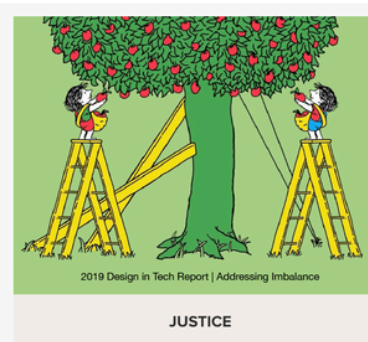
As illustrated above, not everyone has equal **same access** to conditions that contribute to good health, and many struggle to escape circumstances that contribute to poor health. For this reason, it is important to take action to increase equity among individuals and social groups. The World Health Organization (2021) defines **health equity as “the absence of unfair, avoidable and remediable differences in health status among groups of people. Health equity is achieved when everyone can attain their full potential for health and well-being.”**

As the child and family workforce aims to support family well-being, they have an important role to play in addressing social determinants of health and improving equity. To fully understand and address challenges facing families in maintaining optimal health, workers should focus not only on individual and interpersonal functioning but also on environmental and societal barriers. Utilizing their knowledge of these inequities, workers can then advocate for families and support them in advocating for themselves to increase their inclusion in the community, ability to access resources, and opportunities for growth and development.

Take Action

✓ How do the identities, circumstances, and environments of the families you serve affect their ability to improve their functioning and well-being? Identify resources and support they may need to overcome barriers and build on existing strengths with encouragement, optimism and belief in their potential.

✓ Learn strategies to advocate for families (see Resources) and provide information on these strategies to support families in advocating for themselves to promote equity. For example, support parents in organizing together to ensure safe pathways to school and lighted sidewalks.



Resources

- [The Equity Toolkit - A Guide For Teams and Organizations Looking To Live Equitably](#)
- [Understanding Equity and Inequity \(Course\)](#)
- [National Equity Project Recorded Webinars](#)

References

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