

Clarifying Concepts: Social Determinants of Health, Social Risk and Social Needs

The terms “social determinants of health”, “social risk factors” and “social needs” are related to the concept of population health. However, it is important to understand the nuances of each of these terms.

- The **social determinants of health** (SDH) are the non-medical factors that influence health outcomes (click [here](#) to view the OHA’s fact sheet on SDH). They are the conditions in the environments where people are born, grow, work, live, and age, and the wider set of forces and systems shaping the conditions of daily life¹.
 - It is important to note that the SDH affect everyone. They are not things that a person “has” or “does not have” and they are not positive or negative. SDH shape health for better or worse. For example, higher income is correlated with better health, and lower income with worse health².
- **Social factors** (e.g., community characteristics, social relationships, access to services, employment status, financial stability, education) can increase and decrease a person’s capacity to be healthy³.
- **Social risk factors** are specific adverse social conditions that are associated with poor health⁴.
 - For example, people who are homeless have higher rates of disease and disability, use emergency departments and health care services more frequently and are at an increased risk of death⁵.
- Defining and identifying individual-level social risk factors can help health systems target interventions to address them. Some health systems use **screening tools for social risk factors** to target interventions at individual people. Data from these tools may be aggregated to better understand how community-level interventions may improve health⁶.

This **Population Health** series explores the concept of population health and the role a hospital can play in producing population health. The series also offers local and international examples of health systems that have reached beyond their walls to improve the health of their communities.

Social Risks vs Social Needs

“Social risk factors” and “social needs” are not synonymous terms. A person may have many social risk factors but with some social needs more pressing than others. **Social needs** are dependent on an individual’s preferences and priorities. For example, a person may be unemployed, precariously housed and experience food insecurity. However, their most pressing social need is to find a safe place to live, away from a violent partner. An inappropriate intervention results by not understanding and appreciating the client’s perspective³.

Social Determinants of Health and Social Needs

- Some interventions that claim to address SDH may not actually be addressing the underlying social and economic conditions of a community, rather, the purpose is to mitigate the social needs of individuals in that community⁴.
 - For example, an intervention to provide food to people who cannot afford it addresses the immediate social needs of those individuals, but it falls short of addressing the underlying systemic issues that are causing food insecurity.
- Inaccurate use of these terms could potentially overstate the impact of the intervention.

Example Interventions at Various Levels⁷

Social determinants of health	Economic stability → advocate for housing stability policies, including affordability, quality, housing support services, etc.
Social risk factors	Housing insecurity → adopt screening tools in health and social care settings to identify those at risk of housing insecurity and intervene accordingly
Social needs	Housing need → refer people to social workers, community health workers, housing advocates, etc. to provide resources required

Additional Resources

The following resources may be helpful for exploring these concepts further.

- [The Social Determinants of Health: The Canadian Facts- 2nd edition](#) (2020) offers an introduction to the social determinants of health and what Canadians can do to improve the quality of the SDH.
- [Think Upstream](#): A newsroom for the SDH, a project of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA).
- The [Upstream Lab](#) develops and evaluates interventions to address social factors that impact health in collaboration with patients, health care workers, community organizations and policymakers. The lab also trains people to become “upstream” change agents.
- The Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI) asks whether it is possible to achieve the Triple Aim without addressing the SDH. Rishi Manchanda, MD, MPH, Founder and CEO of [HealthBegins](#) answers the question in this [four-minute video](#).
- The Canadian Council on Social Determinants of Health produced a communication tool to assist with developing effective messages related to the SDH: [Communicating the Social Determinants of Health: Guidelines for Common Messaging](#) (2013).
- The University of Toronto’s Dalla Lana School of Public Health hosted a four-part [Virtual Symposium on Population Health’s Past, Present, and Future](#).

- Book: [The Health Gap: The Challenge of an Unequal World](#) by Michael Marmot (2015)
- The Ontario Hospital Association’s resource page on the [SDH as it relates to COVID-19](#).

References

- 1 World Health Organization (WHO) (n.d). *Social determinants of health*. https://www.who.int/health-topics/social-determinants-of-health#tab=tab_1
- 2 Health Quality Ontario (2016). *Income and health: Opportunities to achieve health equity in Ontario*. <http://www.hqontario.ca/portals/0/documents/system-performance/health-equity-report-en.pdf>
- 3 Alderwick, H. & Gottlieb, L.M. (2019, June). *Meanings and misunderstandings: A social determinants of health lexicon for health care systems*. The Milbank Quarterly. <https://www.milbank.org/quarterly/articles/meanings-and-misunderstandings-a-social-determinants-of-health-lexicon-for-health-care-systems/>
- 4 Green, K. & Zook, M. (2019, October 29). *When talking about social determinants, precision matters*. Health Affairs Blog. <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hblog20191025.776011/full/>
- 5 Hwang, St.W. (2001). Homelessness and health. *CMAJ*, 164(2). <https://www.cmaj.ca/content/164/2/229>
- 6 Daniel, D. (2019). *Care providers are using new tools to address social determinants of health*. Canadian Healthcare Technology. <https://www.canhealth.com/2019/08/28/care-providers-are-using-new-tools-to-address-social-determinants-of-health/>