

# Social and Economic Determinants of Health:

## *The Evidence is Clear*



A wide, diverse, and growing body of research conclusively shows that social and economic factors play a key role in determining health outcomes. That's why leading healthcare institutions and forward-thinking policy-makers are developing the models to go "upstream" and tackling these underlying causes by investing in the social and economic well-being of the communities they serve.

### Income

A 2010 study supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation found a clear connection between income and health outcomes: "Those with the lowest income and who were least educated were consistently least healthy, but for most indicators, even groups with intermediate income and education levels were less healthy than the wealthiest and most educated."<sup>1</sup>

Income level also correlates with specific health problems: researchers at the CDC found higher rates of chronic disorders like heart disease and diabetes for Americans with lower incomes. For instance, someone with a family income of less than \$35,000 was found to have a 165% higher chance of heart disease than someone with a family income over \$100,000.<sup>2</sup>

The most dramatic (and tragic) differences between the health of the rich and poor may very well be in life expectancy statistics. In 2016, a team of MIT researchers writing for the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found that for men in the U.S., the richest 1 percent live, on average, 14.6 years longer than the poorest 1 percent—and that this gap is growing.<sup>3</sup>

### Wealth

It's not just income that matters—wealth also plays a key role in determining health outcomes. For instance, after controlling for both income and attained education, a team of public health scholars led by a researcher from Johns Hopkins found that "net worth was significantly associated with poor/fair health status" across almost every single ethnic group and age cohort.<sup>4</sup>

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## Housing

Housing is one of the places where it is easiest to see how economic inequality can translate to poor health outcomes: as researchers commissioned by the Robert Wood Johnson have pointed out, community members who cannot afford quality housing are more likely to encounter environmental toxins like lead paint, poor indoor air quality from factors like mold, inadequate heating or cooling—all clearly epidemiologically linked to specific health disorders like asthma or nervous system damage. Meanwhile, the stress associated with precarious or inadequate access to housing leaves these community members that much more vulnerable to poor health.<sup>5</sup>

## Food insecurity

Another clear transmission belt between economic status and health outcomes is easily identified around access to food. Food insecurity translates not just to inadequate amounts of food on the table to maintain good health, but to unhealthy eating patterns oriented around high-calorie foods with clear health impacts. For instance, an analysis of the data produced by the CDC's National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey showed that the "the risk of clinical diabetes was 50% higher among adults living in food-insecure households compared with adults living in food-secure households."<sup>6</sup>

## Children

Tragically, the impact of social and economic inequality can be clearly traced in the health of America's children. While other advanced nations with greater levels of equality have relatively uniform rates for infant mortality across income groups, researchers working with The National Bureau of Economic Research found that "there is tremendous inequality in the US, with lower education groups, unmarried and African-American women having much higher infant mortality rates."<sup>7</sup> With more than half of American children living under or near the poverty line, economic inequality translates into a public health crisis, since, as the American Academy of Pediatrics notes, "children who experience poverty, particularly during early life or for an extended period, are at risk of a host of adverse health and developmental outcomes through their life course."<sup>8</sup>

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