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2021

Overview of Social Determinants of Health: Studying At-risk Populations and Human Behavior Theory

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Overview of Social Determinants of Health: Studying At-risk Populations and Human Behavior Theory

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August 2020

Introduction

In the past twenty years, researchers like Martha Nussbaum (2011) and Michael Marmot (2015) have identified an important element in the measurement of our health and well-being as individuals, families and communities. The term they've coined is Social Determinants of Health. We know that good physical, mental, and emotional health is shaped by our environments at home, school, work, and the neighborhoods where we live. The importance of taking care of ourselves by eating well, getting enough sleep and exercise, and having regular medical care is widely known, yet not everyone has access to the necessary resources that allow them to follow these guidelines. This lack of access to resources puts people at-risk of health issues including mental illness, substance abuse, obesity, diabetes, and other life limiting conditions. This vulnerability impacts not only the individual's well-being but also the well-being of those around them (systems theory).

The Centers for Disease Control (2020) describe social determinants of health or SDOH as: **“conditions in the places where people live, learn, work, and play that affect a wide range of health and quality-of life-risks and outcomes.”** The CDC developed the Healthy People 2020 guide (See Figure 1) focusing on place-based social determinants that include:

- Economic Stability
- Neighborhood and Physical Environment
- Education
- Food
- Community and Social Context
- Health and Health Care Systems

Each of these determinants are connected to outcomes that either support or deter health and well-being. Some groups or populations are more at-risk than others by having less access to resources within these social determinant categories. There are many different reasons for unequal access to services, food, education, jobs, and safe communities.

Figure 1. Social determinants of health. Adapted from Kaiser Family Publications <http://www.kff.org/disparities-policy/issue-brief/beyond-health-care-the-role-of-social-determinants-in-promoting-health-and-health-equity/>

Economic Stability	Neighborhood and Physical Environment	Education	Food	Community and Social Context	Health Care System
Employment	Housing	Literacy	Hunger	Social Integration	Health Coverage
Income	Transportation	Language	Access to Healthy Options	Support Systems	Provider Availability
Expenses	Safety	Early Childhood Education		Community Engagement	Provider Linguistic and Cultural Competency
Debt	Parks	Vocational Training		Discrimination	
Medical Bills	Playgrounds	Higher Education			Quality of Care
Support	Walkability				

Health Outcomes
 Mortality • Morbidity • Life Expectancy • Health Care Expenditures • Health Status • Functional Limitations

Kentucky’s SDOH

In Kentucky, we have one of the highest rates in the country of substance use disorders, smoking, obesity, adverse childhood experiences and poor access to healthcare (Cabinet for Health and Family Services, 2018). The American Community Survey (2007-2011) reports that 25% of Kentucky children live in poverty. We are the fifth poorest state in the nation (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017), rank 50th in health outcomes for individuals who are 60 or older (United Health Foundation, 2017) with 5.6% of the population uninsured (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). In 2017, only 22% of adults had a bachelor’s degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Clearly there are many vulnerable populations within our own state who need access to resources to support their health and well-being. These resources might include safe transportation, vocational training, healthcare access, and reliable food access.

Human Behavior Theory and SDOH

As you examine human behavior theories, think about the connection between SDOH and vulnerable populations in the United States. Research the availability of resources within neighborhoods and communities (systems theory). Explore the reasons we might have limited resources in some areas and an abundance of resources in other areas (social learning theory,

conflict theory). Think about the ways access to or limitations in resources might impact growth and development of an individual physically, mentally and emotionally (cognitive theories, moral development theories, stage theories).

At-risk populations might be based on gender, race or ethnicity, education, income, disability, geographic location and sexual orientation. SDOH are connected to elements within a person's social identity, social environment, and social position. These determinants are built upon where a person is born, lives, grows up, works, and ages. They are influenced by social policy and economics, social norms, and political systems. SDOH is a broad topic and includes issues like social justice, inequality, health inequity, poverty and human rights (Martin, 2019).



Figure 2. Social and health determinants from Dr. Greg Martin (2019)

Just a few examples of populations we consider as vulnerable include:

- Children in foster care
- Senior citizens
- Persons with disabilities
- Families living in poverty
- People experiencing discrimination
- People living in unsafe conditions including domestic violence or child abuse
- Communities in food deserts
- Individuals experiencing addiction or mental health issues

Human Diversity Project Assignments

You will select an at-risk or vulnerable population to research for our human behavior class. Then you will apply appropriate theories to the situations and circumstances that have led to this population being considered vulnerable and having poor SDOH. To get started in your understanding of the social determinants and how they impact our wellbeing, watch these two videos. References from this summary overview are also linked for you to help begin your research into a vulnerable population.

Videos to Watch

Martin, G. (2019). The social determinants of health: A public health framework. YouTube Video (8:26m) <https://youtu.be/FVTn33ralPU>

Sir Michael Marmot: Social Determinants of Health (2014 WORLD.MINDS) (22:32m) <https://youtu.be/h-2bf205upQ>

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