

Understanding Social Determinants of Health (SDOH)



Social Determinants of Health (SDOH) are the conditions in the environments where people are born, live, learn, work, play, and age. These factors include access to **healthcare**, **education**, **employment**, **social support**, and most importantly, **housing**. Research shows that SDOH account for up to **80%** of health outcomes, meaning addressing these factors is critical for improving overall health and wellbeing in communities.



The Vital Connection Between Housing and Health



One of the most fundamental social determinants of health is housing. Stable, affordable housing serves as the foundation of good health. Individuals experiencing homelessness face severe health risks due to exposure to environmental hazards, inadequate sanitation, and the stress of living without stable shelter. Conditions such as respiratory infections, chronic diseases, and mental health issues are often exacerbated in homeless populations, who also have limited access to medical care or preventive health measures. Without affordable, accessible, and adequate housing, health has no foundation (Health.gov).

SAMHSA's Efforts to Address SDOH for Homeless Populations

SAMHSA recognizes the link between homelessness, mental health, and substance use issues. It supports the Housing First approach, which prioritizes stable housing before mental health and substance use treatment. SAMHSA also advocates for policies that integrate housing with healthcare services, ensuring comprehensive support for long-term well-being..



Sources

SAMHSA – Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
Health.gov – U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
MDHHS – Michigan Department of Health and Human Services

How Social Determinants of Health Impact Homelessness

The experience of homelessness is both a result and a cause of poor health, intertwined with a number of Social Determinants of Health. Homelessness exacerbates existing health conditions and leads to new ones, creating a vicious cycle of poor health and instability.

1 Housing as the Foundation of Health:



Without a permanent address, individuals struggle to access healthcare, store medications, or maintain a healthy routine. The lack of stable housing increases the risk of untreated chronic conditions, mental health problems, and substance use disorders.

2 Economic Inequality and Poverty:



Economic hardship is a major driver of homelessness. People in poverty face barriers to stable housing due to high rent, low wages, and a lack of affordable housing. These financial challenges also limit access to essential services like healthcare, education, and social support, making it harder to escape homelessness.

3 Lack of Access to Healthcare:



People experiencing homelessness often struggle to access healthcare. Without a stable address, it's difficult to navigate insurance systems or maintain regular healthcare. This leads to untreated mental health issues, substance use disorders, and chronic conditions, resulting in worse health outcomes.

4 Education and Employment Barriers:



Homelessness disrupts education, especially for children, leading to lower academic achievement and fewer job opportunities later in life. For adults, unstable housing makes it hard to secure or maintain employment, reinforcing the cycle of poverty and poor health.

5 Social Isolation and Lack of Support Networks:



Homelessness often causes social isolation, which can harm mental health. Without stable housing, individuals lack family support and access to social services, making recovery and stress management more difficult. The stigma of homelessness can also discourage people from seeking help or resources.





A Call to Action

Addressing the social determinants of health is essential for improving health outcomes, particularly for those experiencing homelessness. Housing is the cornerstone of health—without it, individuals struggle to access necessary services, find stable employment, and recover from illness. By addressing SDOH in a comprehensive and integrated way, we can break the cycle of homelessness and create healthier, more resilient communities.

Sources

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